



the | inimitable | qur'an

The Unique Genre of the Qur'an

By Hamza Andreas Tzortzis

Introduction

“As a literary monument the Koran thus stands by itself, a production unique to the Arabic literature, having neither forerunners nor successors in its own idiom. Muslims of all ages are united in proclaiming the inimitability not only of its contents but also of its style..... and in forcing the High Arabic idiom into the expression of new ranges of thought the Koran develops a bold and strikingly effective rhetorical prose¹ in which all the resources of syntactical modulation are exploited with great freedom and originality.”²

This statement coming from the well known Arab Grammarian Hammilton Gibb, is an apt description of the Qur’ans use of literary and linguistic elements. This genre is not simply a subjective conclusion, it is a reality based upon the use of features that are abundant in all languages. This may seem strange that the Qur’an has developed its own genre by using current literary elements. However, it should be noted that the Qur’anic discourse uses these common elements of language in a way that has never been used before.³

This unique genre is part of the Qur’an’s challenge to mankind to produce a chapter like it.⁴ Preserved and recorded historical documents have shown that many attempted to meet this literary and linguistic challenge.⁵ Modern and Classical Scholarship have proven that these challenges failed to match the linguistic and literary reality of the Qur’anic discourse. John Penrice, who authored the ‘Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran’, acknowledges the Qur’ans literary excellence:

“That a competent knowledge of the Koran is indispensable as an introduction to the study of Arabic literature will be admitted by all who have advanced beyond the rudiments of the language. From the purity of its style and elegance of its diction it has come to be considered as the standard of Arabic...”⁶

The Qur’ans Genre

The Qur’an is an independent genre in its own right.⁷ Its unique genre is realised through two inseparable elements; rhetorical and cohesive elements.⁸ From a linguistic point of view, rhetoric can be defined as the use of language to please or persuade. The term in the Arabic-Islamic tradition would more appropriately be defined as ‘the conveying of meaning in the best of verbal forms’.⁹ Cohesiveness is the feature that binds sentences to each other grammatically and lexically. It also refers to how words are linked together into sentences and how sentences are in turn linked together to form larger units in texts.¹⁰

These elements combine with each other in such a way that interlock and become inseparable.¹¹ This unique combination captivates the reader and achieves an effective communicative goal.¹² The rhetorical and cohesive components of the Qur’anic text cannot be divorced from each other.¹³ Former Professor of Arabic at Hartford Seminary and prolific author Kenneth Cragg points out that,

“...the Qur’an is understood to say what it says in an inseparable identity with how it says it.”¹⁴

When these elements are stripped off the Qur'anic text, the text ceases to be a Qur'an and does not sound like one. This may provide a reason why those who attempted to challenge the Qur'an failed, Forster Fitzgerald Arbuthnot who was a notable British Orientalist and translator states:

"...and that though several attempts have been made to produce a work equal to it as far as elegant writing is concerned, none has as yet succeeded."¹⁵

From a linguistic point of view the Qur'an employs various rhetorical features such as the use of rhythm, figures of speech, similes, metaphors, and rhetorical questions. Also, the use of irony and the repetition of words are a just a small part of the Qur'an's repertoire of rhetorical devices.¹⁶ Its cohesiveness includes various methods such as parallelistic structures, phrasal ties, substitution, reference and lexical cohesion.¹⁷ These features provide the bedrock and hang together to create the Qur'an's unique genre.¹⁸

Non-Qur'anic Arabic texts mostly employ cohesive elements¹⁹ but the Qur'an uses both cohesive and rhetorical elements in every verse.²⁰

Example 1

The following linguistic analysis is a good example to highlight the uniqueness of the Qur'anic style:

"Men who remember Allah much and women who remember"²¹

Al-dhalikirin Allaha kathiran wa'l-dhakhirati

The Qur'anic verse above, in a different word order such as the verse below,

"Men who remember Allah much and Women who remember Allah much"²²

al-dhakhirina Allaha kathiran wa'l-dhakhirati Allaha kathiran

would not deliver the same effect, as the word 'Allah' has become linguistically redundant, in other words it has become needlessly wordy or repetitive in expression. The original Qur'anic structure achieved its objective by separating the two subjects in order to sandwich the word 'Allah' and using the 'wa' particle as a linguistic bond.²³ This Qur'anic verse has a rhetorical element as the word 'Allah' is 'cuddled' and 'hugged' by the pious who remember Him a lot, which is indicated by the arrangement of the words in this verse. The central placement of the word 'Allah' in this sentence highlights the importance and focus of remembering Allah, which is substantiated by the word 'kathiran' - meaning 'much/a lot'. The repetition of the word 'Allah' in the non-Qur'anic structure loses this effect and disfigures the semantic harmony between the words produced by the Qur'anic structure. Additionally, in contrast to the non-Qur'anic structure, this arrangement provides a pleasing, sweet acoustic effect; which in linguistics is a rhetorical feature called euphony.²⁴ In the above example the Qur'an combines rhetorical and cohesive elements to produce the intended meaning.²⁵

Example 2

There are many other striking examples, for example:

“Yet they make the Jinns as associates with Allah, though Allah did create the Jinns; and they falsely, having no knowledge, attribute to Him sons and daughters. Praise and glory be to Him! (for He is) above what they attribute to Him!”²⁶

In this example the word ‘associates’ is used as a buffer word as it is placed between the two words ‘Allah’ and ‘Jinn’ to deliver a strong rhetorical linguistic protest against this claim.²⁷ Normally the word ‘Jinn’ should have appeared next to the word ‘Allah’,²⁸ but the Qur’an has specifically chosen the word order to disassociate the word ‘jinn’ with the word ‘Allah’, to exhibit this objection, namely that Allah can have no associate. The other claim made by the non-believers is they attribute children to Allah. In addition to the semantically driven arrangement of the words the other rhetorical aspect of this verse is that it achieves euphony. The cohesive element in this structure is the ‘wa’ particle which acts as a cohesive tie. This links the two claims together. Furthermore the above verse ties in with other major themes of the Chapter such as tawhid (absolute oneness of God).²⁹

Conclusion

Any change to the structure of a Qur’anic verse simply changes its meaning, style and literary effect. It is no wonder that Kenneth Cragg mentioned that, in order for humanity to deal with the challenges it faces today,

“...multitudes of mankind...will need to be guided and persuaded Qur’anically.”³⁰

Scholars, linguists and Arabists need a sound linguistic competence in Classical Arabic but also an advanced knowledge in Arabic syntax and rhetoric in order to appreciate the complex linguistic and rhetorical patterns of Qur’anic structures. Most importantly he or she must refer to the major exegeses in order to derive and provide the accurate underlying meaning of a Qur’anic expression, preposition or particle³¹.

The unique genre of the Qur’an is part of its linguistic challenge to the whole of humanity. Further research and study into the references below should provide the reader with adequate information to observe how the Qur’an achieves this unique genre and how it can not be possible for any writer to produce its like. To end and conclude, Professor of Religion Bruce Lawrence at Duke University, states:

“As tangible signs Qur’anic verses are expressive of an inexhaustible truth. They signify meaning layered with meaning, light upon light, miracle after miracle.”³²

¹ The Qur'an's literary form has been the subject of many studies from Muslim and non-Muslim academics. Due to its unique literary form, some scholars have found it difficult to describe what form the Qur'an falls in to (e.g. Prose – Mursal, Rhymed Prose – Saj or Poetry). Hence, some have simply tried to describe it as a form of rhymed prose, to illustrate this R. A. Nicholson in his book 'Literary History of the Arabs' (1930. Cambridge University Press, p. 159) states,

"Thus, as regards its external features, the style of the Koran is modelled upon saj, or rhymed prose, of the pagan soothsayers, but with such freedom that it may fairly be described as original."

This is inaccurate as the Qur'an does not fall into any of the known forms of Arabic. For a detailed discussion please see The Qur'an's Unique Literary Form. Hamza Andreas Tzortzis. 2008 which can be accessed online at www.theinimitablequran.com

² H A R Gibb. 1963. Arabic Literature - An Introduction. Oxford at Clarendon Press, p. 36.

³ See A'isha 'Abd Ar-Rahman Bint ash-Shati'. At-Tafsir al-Bayani li-Qur'an al-Karim, 3rd ed. Cairo, 1968; Hussein Abdul-Raof. Qur'anic Stylistics: A Linguistic Analysis. Lincoln Europa. 2004; S. M. Hajjaji-Jarrah. 2000. The Enchantment of Reading: Sound, Meaning, and Expression in Surat Al-Adiyat. Curzon Press; The Qur'an: An Encyclopaedia. Edited by Oliver Leaman. "Qur'anic Style". Routledge; and Hamza Andreas Tzortzis, Three Lines that Changed the World: The Inimitability of the Surah al-Kawtar (available from www.theinimitablequran.com) for a detailed analysis.

⁴ The Qur'an challenges humanity to produce a single chapter like it, please see Qur'an chapter 2 verse 23. As a result of the inimitability of the Qur'anic discourse, there is a consensus amongst Modern and Classical Scholars such as al-Baqillani and al-Rafi'i that the Qur'an is the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) eternal miracle. This view has also been supported by many non-Muslim Qur'anic Scholars and Arabists. For more information see The Qur'an's Unique Literary Form. Hamza Andreas Tzortzis. 2008 which can be accessed online at www.theinimitablequran.com.

⁵ Please see The Encyclopedia Of Islam, 1971, Volume 3, E J Brill, Leiden, p. 1019; A F L Beeston, T M Johnstone, R B Serjeant and G R Smith (Ed.), Arabic Literature To The End Of The Umayyad Period, 1983, Cambridge University Press, p. 212 & 127-128; Gustave E Von Grunebaum, A Tenth-Century Document Of Arabic Literary Theory and Criticism, 1950, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. xiv; Abdul Aleem, I'jaz ul Qur'an, 1933, Islamic Culture, Volume VII, Hyderabad Deccan, p. 221 & 232; Ignaz Goldziher, Ed. S M Stern, Muslim Studies (Muhammedanische Studien) II, 1971, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, pp. 363.

⁶ John Penrice. 2004. Preface of "A Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran". Dover Publications.

⁷ H Abdul-Raof. 2003. Exploring the Qur'an. Al-Maktoum Institute Academic Press, p. 60-110.

⁸ H Abdul-Raof. 2001. Qur'an Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis. Curzon Press, p. 137

⁹ I Boullata. 1988. The Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur'an: I'jaz and Related Topics in A Rippin (ed.), Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 143.

¹⁰ For more details about the definition of cohesion see H Abdul-Raof. 2003. Exploring the Qur'an. Al-Makhtoum Institute Academic Press, p. 261-281 & 341-344; M Mir. 1983; and H Abdul-Raof. 2003. Conceptual and Textual Chaining in the Qur'anic Discourse. In Journal of Qur'anic Studies. Vol. V, Issue 11, p. 72-94.

¹¹ Qur'an Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis, p. 137.

¹² H Abdul-Raof. 2000. The Linguistic Architecture of the Qur'an. In Journal of Qur'anic Studies. Vol. II, Issue II, p. 37-51.

¹³ Qur'an Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis, p. 137.

¹⁴ K Cragg. 1994. The Event of the Qur'an. 2nd Edition. Oxford: One world, p. 46

¹⁵ F. F. Arbutnot. 1885. The Construction of the Bible and the Koran. London, p 5

¹⁶ See Please see H, Abdul-Raof. 2003. Exploring the Qur'an. Al-Maktoum Institute Academic Press, p. 265-398; H. Abdul-Raof. 2000. Qur'an Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis. Curzon Press, p 95-137; F Esack. 1993. Qur'anic Hermeneutics: Problems and Prospects. The Muslim World, Vol. 83, No. 2. p. 126 -128.

¹⁷ H Abdul-Raof. 2003. Exploring the Qur'an. Al-Makhtoum Institute Academic Press, p. 261-281

¹⁸ Qur'an Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis, p. 107.

¹⁹ Ibid p. 108

²⁰ Ibid p. 107-108

²¹ Qur'an Chapter 33 Verse 35

²² The Linguistic Architecture of the Qur'an. In Journal of Qur'anic Studies. Vol. II, Issue II, p. 37-51.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Qur'an Chapter 6 Verse 100

²⁷ H Abdul-Raof. 2003. Exploring the Qur'an, p. 70

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ For a list of the major themes for this Qur'anic chapter please see www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/quran/maududi/mau6.html

³⁰ K Cragg. 1994. The Event of the Qur'an, p. 23

³¹ H. Abdul-Raof. Qur'an Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis, p. 2.

³² Bruce Lawrence. 2006. The Qur'an: A Biography. Atlantic Books, p. 8