

The Quran and its Message

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

POETRY FROM A QURAN'S PERSPECTIVE AND A HISTORIC SURVEY

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THE QURAN'S CRITICISM OF BARDS (POETS)

Albeit containing rhyme, the Quran **strongly** distances itself from any allegations of it being poetry and vindicates any charges against the Arabian prophet of being a poet.

SHA'IR (pl. shu'ara') - a poet

SHI'R - poetry

CHARGES

021:005 "...nay, he has invented / forged it; nay, he is a poet..."

037:036 "...are we forsake our gods for a poet possessed with the jinn / mad poet?"

052:030 "...he is a poet for whom we await a misfortune of time"

QURANIC REBUKES

026:224 "and the poets - the perverse / deviators follow them"

069:041 "And it is not the speech / word of a poet..."

036:069 "And We have not taught him poetry, and nor is it befitting for him..."

From a Quran's perspective, poets in particular seem to attract particular condemnation coupled with those who lie and on whom devils descend.

026:221-226

"Shall I inform you (of him) upon whom the devils (*Arabic: shaitan*) descend? They descend upon

every lying, sinful one. They pass on what is heard and most of them are liars. And the poets - the misguided, astray, perverse, deviators (Arabic: ghawa) follow them. Do you not see that they wander about bewildered in every valley? And that they say that which they do not do?"

A general exception is noted in verse 2:227, "*Except those who believe and do righteous deeds and remember God much and defend themselves after they were wronged...*"

However, in the style that the Quran presents this exception, there is **no certainty** that this exception particularly applies to poets, some poets or is intended to be **general** in nature given the context. However, the exception arguably does seem general considering that an exception is also noted for those that defend themselves when they are wronged.

The fact that poets have been coupled with those on whom demons descend cannot be dismissed and it seems to be tied with the fact that they are deemed to be fabricators.

The Quran also remains unequivocal, that believers are expected to speak words which are straight to the point, without seeming ambiguity or a cause for confusion.

033:070

"O you who believe! Fear God and speak words straight to the point / decisive / straightforward / appropriate / right (Arabic: Qawlan Sadidan)"

004:009


"...So let them fear God and let them speak words straight to the point / decisive / straightforward / appropriate / right (Arabic: Qawlan Sadidan)"

This stands in some contrast to the words oft spoken by poets who can be ambiguous and open to an array of interpretations. This is also hinted at by the following verse, where the Quran makes it clear that the prophet's speech is neither poetry, nor is it befitting for him to speak in poetry, but rather his message is clear and unambiguous. This apparent contrast of clear speech with poetry cannot be dismissed and one has to assume that the Quran infers poetry as anything but clear.

036:069

"And We have not taught him poetry, and nor is it befitting for him. This is no less than a message / reminder and a Quran making things clear."

Such condemnation is also found in classical Arabic literature where the term for poetry or poets is usually twinned with fabrication or lies.

 *شعري* [Of, or relating to, poetry; poetical. —
And also † False, or lying]. One says أدلة شعريّة
† False, or lying, evidences or arguments : because
of the many lies in poetry.

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [1]

شاعر *A poet* : (T, Ş, Mşb, K :) so called because of his intelligence ; (Ş, Mşb ;) or because he knows what others know not :

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [2]

— Also
† *A liar* : because of the many lies in poetry : and so, accord. to some, in the Kur xxi. 5. (B, TA.)

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [3]

JAHALIYYA (PRE-ISLAMIC) POETRY

There is much made of the existence of Jahaliyya Poetry (poetry preceding Islam - *period of ignorance*) as a possible contemporaneous source of understanding the language of the Quran. It would seem quite a fantastic assertion to on one hand, acknowledge the Quran's condemnation of poets and poetry in general and yet imply the dependency of the Quran to furnish deeper meanings / clarifications of its terms through Arabic poetry. This is especially when it is not unknown for poets to make use of 'poetic licence' to depart from the conventional rules of language for the purposes of creating an effect.

However, the purpose is not to deny outright that Arabic poetry can be useful in understanding how classical Arabs used their language, but rather, to understand the context.

There is in fact **no** Jahaliyya Arabic poetry which has been known to survive from the Quraish tribe of Prophet Muhammad ^(pbuh) **in written form**. We simply have no extant sources in **literature form**.

What is known is the attribution of poetry to early poets such as **the well renowned Imru'al-Qais**, Tarafa, Zuhayr Abi Sulma, Antarah ibn Shaddad al-Absi, Amr ibn Kulthum, Labid, Al-Harith etc which have been '**allegedly**' **orally narrated and passed on through generations**. Some of these early poems were allegedly collected in the 8th century CE as in the 'Mu'allaqat' (hung poems) by Ar-Rawiya. The fact that Ar-Rawiya collected these odes is based on further claims by later grammarians such as 'Ahmad al-Nahhas (died 949CE). (Over 300 years after the death of the Prophet).

Therefore, the actual period of the extant sources of the Jahaliyya poetry approximately correspond to a similar period to when grammarians were producing their works into a literary form, at times citing poetry to make their claims. Both sources were taking canon at approximately the same period, many decades / centuries after the Quran was revealed and it is no secret within scholarship that **at times Jahaliyya poetry was being forged**.

As a glaring example of such false attributions, the following odes are attributed to the Arabian poet, **Imru' al-Qais** who allegedly lived in the **early 6th century** (*before the revelation of the Quran*). It is noteworthy that one finds verses in these odes which are **also found** in the Quran.

السَّاعَةُ وَأَنْشَقَّ الْقَمَرُ

Quran 54:1

دَنْتِ السَّاعَةُ وَأَنْشَقَّ الْقَمَرُ
أُحْرَقَ قَدْ حُرَّتْ فِي أَوْصَائِهِ
مَرَّيَوْمَ الْيَوْمِ فِي زِينَتِهِ
بِهِامٍ مِنْ لِحَائِلٍ فَائِلِهِ
وَإِذَا مَا غَابَ عَنِّي سَاعَةٌ
كَتَبَ الْحَسَنُ عَلَيَّ وَجَنَّتِهِ
عَادَةُ الْأَقْمَارِ يَسْرِي فِي الدَّجِيِّ
بِالْفُجْحِيِّ وَاللَّيْلِ مِنْ طُرَيْدِهِ
قُلْتُ إِذْ شَقَّ الْعِدَارُ خَدَّهُ

عَنْ غَزَالٍ مَا دَقَّ لِي وَدَقَّرَ
نَاعِيسُ الْفَرْبِ بِعَيْنَيْهِ حَرَّ
فَرْمَائِي فَتَعَالَى فَعَقَّرَ
فَتَرَكْنِي كَهَشِيمِ الْمُحْتَظَرِ
كَانَتْ السَّاعَةُ أَدَهَى وَأَمَّرَ
بِسَجِيحِ الْيَوْمِ سَطْرًا مُخْتَمَّرَ
قَرَأْتُ اللَّيْلَ يَسْرِي بِالْقَمَرِ
فَرَقَهُ نَا النَّوْرُ كَمْ شَيْءٍ زَهْرَ
دَنْتِ السَّاعَةُ وَأَنْشَقَّ الْقَمَرُ

فَتَعَالَى فَعَقَّرَ
كَهَشِيمِ الْمُحْتَظَرِ
السَّاعَةُ أَدَهَى وَأَمَّرَ
السَّاعَةُ وَأَنْشَقَّ الْقَمَرُ

كَانَتْ السَّاعَةُ أَدَهَى وَأَمَّرَ
بِسَجِيحِ الْيَوْمِ سَطْرًا مُخْتَمَّرَ
قَرَأْتُ اللَّيْلَ يَسْرِي بِالْقَمَرِ
فَرَقَهُ نَا النَّوْرُ كَمْ شَيْءٍ زَهْرَ
دَنْتِ السَّاعَةُ وَأَنْشَقَّ الْقَمَرُ

قَبَّلَ وَالْعَشَاقُ مِنْ خَلْفِهِ
وَجَاءَ يَوْمَ الْيَوْمِ فِي زِينَتِهِ
كَأَنَّهُمْ مِنْ حَدَبِ بَنِي أَدْنَ
يُؤْتِلُ ذَا فَلْيَعْمَلِ الْعَامِلُونَ

مِنْ كُلِّ حَدَبٍ يَنْسِلُونَ

لِمِثْلِ هَذَا فَلْيَعْمَلِ الْعَامِلُونَ

Quran 54:29
Quran 54:31
Quran 54:46
Quran 54:1
Quran 21:96
Quran 93:1-2
Quran 37:61

Illustration - Joseph Islam

Image Source [4]

It is **inconceivable** that the Divinely inspired Quran, would borrow from the words of **earlier poets** or that prophet Muhammad **was guilty of plagiarism from early poets**.

Rather, it is more likely as **subsequently admitted** by W. St. Clair Tisdall, that these odes were concocted later or borrowed from the Quran rather than the Quran borrowing from the odes of earlier poets. Therefore, the attribution of such poetry to early poets such as Imra'ul-Qays seems extremely dubious as does its authenticity.

"There seems good reason to doubt whether Imra'u'l Qais is the author of the lines in question. They may have been borrowed from the Qur'an instead of having been inserted therein from an author who lived before Muhammad's time. On the one hand it is difficult to suppose that at any time after the establishment of Islam any one would have the daring to parody the Qur'an by taking passages from it and applying them to the subject to which these lines of poetry refer. On the other hand, it is very customary even in comparatively modern times to quote verses of the Qur'an and work them into later compositions of a philosophical or religious character, to which class, however, these Odes do *not* belong. It would be difficult to imagine Muhammad venturing to plagiarize from such a well-known author as Imra'u'l Qais..." [5]

However, these blatant fabrications have not stopped Muslims traditions from accepting the veracity such poetry. Instead, they provide more support to these fabrications by mentioning them, seemingly a part of an unrelenting desire to accept pre-Islamic poetry as being authentic. If so, fabrications are being used to provide credence to other fabrications.

As St. Clair-Tisdall writes and admits:

"I have even heard a story to the effect that one day when Fatimah, Muhammad's daughter, was reciting the verse "The Hour has come near and the Moon has split asunder" (Surah LIV., Al Qamar, 1), a daughter of the poet was present and said to her, "That is a verse from one of *my* father's poems, and your father has stolen it and pretended that he received it from God." This tale is probably false, for Imrau'l Qais died about the year 540 of the Christian era, while Muhammad was not born till A.D. 570, "the year of the Elephant." [6]

The discerning reader will no doubt appreciate that there is a huge difference between a later extant body of work **claiming to be derived** from an earlier source such as Pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and actually having that earlier source to analyze.

"Here it suffices to remark that Arabia has not yielded so far any ancient inscriptions in verses, that no old codices or papyri from the pre-Islamic period have come down to us, and that the oldest book in Arabic literature, in the usual sense of the term, is the Koran' Yet by the end of the eight century men were beginning to collect and edit, of course in manuscript, the 'works' of individual poets believed to have lived before Islam" [7]

"It is a matter of debate whether or not the Arabic of Koraish was written down in the period preceding Islam. It is notable that no written evidence survives from that period, although an oral corpus of poetry and prose was recollected and eventually written down during the first few centuries of Islam. The Qur'an, it may safely be said, is the earliest extant and complete text in the Arabic language." [8]

Whether any alleged pre-Islamic poetry has been faithfully transmitted orally is a matter of **faith** not **evidence**. Please see article **(1)** below.

This almost prevalent Muslim obsession to prove the authenticity and existence of pre-Islamic poetry seems to be tied with the question of the Quran's authenticity and its superior nature as a literary genre incapable of being imitated.

Therefore, any challenge against the existence or authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry seems to attract vehement challenges by Muslim apologists which is at times imbued with undertones of vitriol.

As noted by a Muslim source:

"It must be added that the theories advanced by Taha Husayn were by no means a novelty as far as Europe was concerned. In the same year that Taha Husayn published his *Fi'l-shi'r al-Jahili* (1925), it so happened that Professor David Margoliouth of the University of Oxford published in the *Journal Of The Royal Asiatic Society* a paper entitled "The Origins Of Arabic Poetry"^[6], in which he expressed identical views supported largely by identical reasons." [9]

"In the language of the idiot, no one submits to the fabulous conspiracy theories of Margoliouth and Husayn, save that they submit to the falsification of facts and the depravity of reasoning." [10]

"One can see the seductive appeal in fabulous conspiracy theories that can seemingly explain almost any phenomenon, as has been demonstrated by Toby Lester and his Christian counterpart, P. Newton." [11]

As intimated in the above quotations, Western scholarship has always raised doubts with regards Arabic poetry. As noted by a renowned Western scholar who whilst remaining somewhat conservatively critical of Taha Husayn's efforts by suggesting he had gone 'too far' did not dismiss his efforts outright. His criticism also admitted that there certainly existed a contingent within scholarship that were critical of pre-Islamic poetry.

"In 1926 another book was published which raised a considerable storm. This was a work on 'Pre-Islamic Poetry' (Fi sh-shi'r al-jahili) by Taha Husayn. Using Western methods of literary criticism the author maintained that most pre-Islamic Arabic poetry was a later fabrication; in this he showed himself **even more sceptical than most European critics of this poetry**, and certainly **went too far**. Although the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry cannot be said to be an essential part of the standard Islamic world-view, the religious institution attacked him, probably because it felt that the implicit approval of Western critical methods was dangerous. In the end, the book had to be withdrawn, but Taha Husayn was supported by his colleagues in the Egyptian University (a Western-type institution) on the grounds that academic freedom was being threatened. In 1929 he became the first Egyptian Dean of the Faculty of Arts, then after many ups and downs was Minister of Education from 1950 to 1952. **He never recanted his views about pre-Islamic poetry**, but when the book was reissued in 1927 under the title 'Pre-Islamic Arab Literature' (changing *shi'r* to *adab*) he removed the passages in which he had applied the term 'myths' to Qu'ranic stories about Abraham and Ishmael" [12]

However, the fact that the Quran **never claims to be poetry**, nor in any way **associated with poetry** often goes amiss. If as the Muslim thought seems to suggest that great poets were ubiquitous during the prophetic ministry, then the reader of the Quran is confronted with a slight paradox as the Quran clearly challenges the claim of the day that the Quran was indeed poetry.

A legitimate question arises, would not the poetic giants that allegedly roamed during the prophetic ministry, not have known that the Quran was not poetry? If so, then why were such claims made?

CLAIMS

021:005 "...nay, he has invented / forged it; nay, he is a poet..."

026:224 "and the poets - the perverse / deviators follow them"

037:036 "...are we forsake our gods for a poet possessed with the jinn / mad poet?"

052:030 "...he is a poet for whom we await a misfortune of time"

This lends some credence to the thought that the picture painted by later traditional sources of the presence of a myriad of great poets who would have been dumbfounded by the Quran's literary excellence is **somewhat exaggerated**. It is noteworthy that challenges made against the Quran have been recorded such as the somewhat foreign language in which it is transmitted which is subsequently rebuked.

016.103

"And certainly We know well that they say: Only a man teaches him. The speech / tongue of one at whom they refer to him is foreign, while this is a clear Arabic language"

However, **no challenges** against the Quran's poetic style are found. Rather, explicit claims by the disbelievers of the Quran being poetry and its alleged author, Muhammad, a poet have been rebuked in no uncertain terms.

069:041 "And it is not the speech / word of a poet..."

036:069 "And We have not taught him poetry, and nor is it befitting for him..."

FINAL THOUGHTS

As noted, the Quran **strongly** distances itself from any allegations of it being poetry and vindicates any charges against the Arabian prophet of being a poet (21:5, 37:36, 52:30, 26:224, 69:41, 36:69).

The Quran also in the main, condemns poets (26:221-226) and likens their speech to deliberate ambiguity (36:69) and those that follow them are deemed as being '*ghawa*' (misguided, astray, perverse, deviators). In contrast, believers are instructed to engage in clear, straightforward speech (33:70; 4:9).

Much is made of the existence of pre-Islamic poetry, but other than alleged oral narrations passed on from generation to generation, there is absolutely no tangible / written evidence that any such poetry has survived from the prophetic ministry or before it. Whether any alleged pre-Islamic poetry has been faithfully transmitted orally over decades and centuries is a matter of **faith** not **evidence**.

It has also been argued that poetry was oft forged, especially in the name of great poets of old.

Related Articles:

- (1) [Grammatical Errors in the Quran - A Baseless Assertion](#)
- (2) [Is Arabic a Holy or Superior Language?](#)

REFERENCES

[1] LANE. E.W, *Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 4, Page 1560*

Highlights marked in red on the lexicon excerpt are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[2] LANE. E.W, *Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 4, Page 1562*

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Image Source of Ode: New World Encyclopedia [online] http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Imru'_al-Qays [Accessed] 9th March 2014*

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- [5] TISDALL. St. CLAIR, The Original Sources of the Qu'ran, Published SPCK, London 1905, Appendix to Chapter II, [online] <https://archive.org/details/TheOriginalSourcesOfTheQuran> [Accessed] 9th March 2014
- [6] Ibid.
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- [8] KASSIS. H E, A Concordance of the Qur'an, University of California Press: Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, xxvi
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- [9] ISLAMIC AWARENESS, Qasim Iqbal & M S M Saifullah, On Pre-Islamic Poetry & The Qur'an, [Online] <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Polemics/poetry.html> [Accessed] 9th March 2014
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Ibid.
- [12] WATT. W.M, Islamic Fundamentalism and Modernity, II The Religious Institution and Its Decline, Routledge Library Editions: Politics of Islam, Pages 31-32

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