

Miraculous Elements in *Sīrah Nabawiyah*: Reassessing Qur'ānic References in the Early Islamic Literature

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Abstract

In defending the authenticity of Muḥammad's prophethood, miracles (*mu'jizāt*) were regarded as one of the main instruments to measure and verify the veracity of his prophethood. The Qur'ān has been employed as auxiliary apparatus to render this idea in early Islamic discourse. This article aims to explore the concept of miracle in early Islamic literature, and analyse Qur'ānic verses that have been utilised in *Sīrah Nabawiyah* as supporting evidence in the narratives. The study is qualitative in nature in which the researcher will focus on textual and comparative analysis. In its finding, the present study suggests that the use of Qur'ānic references in this context appears as related to the personal style and approach of each author of Islamic works.

Keywords: Miracle, *Sīrah Nabawiyah*, Qur'ānic references, Islamic literature

Introduction: Significance of the Study

In *Sīrah* literature, miracle elements have been grasped as one of the importance characters in the narratives of Prophet Muḥammad's early life. Early Muslim scholars frequently recorded in their works the connection between the Prophet's miracles and the Qur'ān. By linking the Prophet's miracle with Qur'ānic reference, the scholars appear to give a symbol of divine intervention in Muhammad's life. This aspect has been argued by modern studies. They argued that some verses that are used as references to Muḥammad's miracle seem not to have had a literal connection with the story of the Prophet's life. This is where the significance of the study lies, where it seeks to scrutinise further information about the conceptual aspect of miracle in Islam and its role with the *Sīrah* of the Prophet life and the Quran especially the Qur'ānic references that have been perceived as sources of evidence of Muḥammad's early life.

Qur'ānic Discourse on Miracle

In the Qur'ān, discourse on miracles and miraculous elements is usually associated with the term *āyāt* (sg. *āya*) (David Thomas, 2011). This literally denotes a sign, token, lesson or example (al-Ba'albakī, 1995), and the term is invoked in many places in the Qur'ān as a vessel for conveying apparently miraculous episodes, such as anecdotes of the evidentiary miracles of Moses (7:133, 17:101, 27:12), the phenomenal story of the sleepers in the cave (2:259), the

extraordinary account of Joseph's life (12:7), the miraculous gift of the camel of Šālih (7:73, 11:64), the marvellous account of Mary and Jesus (19:21, 21:91, 23:50), and the story of Noah's salvation in the flood (29:15).

The term also appears as an announcement of a great message of God's intervention in human affairs, principally in its form as an educative means, as well as in the form of an admonition, which, at the same time, illustrates that miracles comprise one of the proofs of the truth of God and His messenger. A discussion of the miracles of the prophets and saints appears in the *Fiqh al-Akbār*, in which the author maintains the same term as employed in the Qur'ān (al-Qārī, 1998; Wensinck, 1965). The term *āyāt*, however, did not last long, and was reintroduced at a later period, when Muslims started to employ a new term in the delivery of discourse on miracles. They started to use *mu'jiza* as a new term. Even though the term is not to be found in the Qur'ān, it became popular in the later period. According to Wensinck, the term *mu'jiza* was not apparent within this period. It is only al-Ījī who delivers a complete and systematic discussion of the term.

In the ninth century, the term *mu'jiza* may be traced in the work of some prominent scholars including al-Wāqidī, (al-Wāqidī, 1997), al-Jāhīz (al-Jāhīz, 1423H), Abū Bakr al-Warrāq (d. 240/854) (al-Kalābāzī, n.d) and Ibn Qutayba (al-Ḥalabī, n.d). Interestingly, al-Ṭabarī (224/839-310/923) and al-Zajjāj (855-310/923) shared a similar method and process of describing miraculous element in the Qur'ān (al-Ṭabarī, 2000). Both combine together the Qur'ānic term of *āya* 'side to side' with new popular term of *mu'jiza* in their works. It appears as the word *mu'jiza* in the earliest phase, and is used as an adjective for the term *āya*, in which as a result, it denotes 'confounding miracle'. Al-Zajjāj is even more specific when he is usually found to combine these two terms (*āya mu'jiza*) in explaining the stories about the miracles of the prophets, including the prophet Šālih, Joseph, Solomon and Moses (al-Zajjāj, 1988). The lack of a general employment of this word (*mu'jiza*) in the ninth century, and merely the briefest discussions of miracles may indicate the paucity of an ongoing theological discourse on this subject. Some sources, however, have shown a definite Muslim concern about miracles.

Besides *mu'jiza*, Muslim scholars have also employed the further term '*alāmāt* (signs) as an adjectival appellation which indicates miraculous elements in Muḥammad's life. Understood literally, this term has a similar meaning to the Qur'ānic term of *āyāt*. In the works of *tafsīr*, Muqātil, Yaḥyā Ibn Salām, and Abū 'Ubayda al-Baṣrī interpret the word *āyāt* as connoting '*alāmāt* (signs) (Muqātil, 1423H). The term seems to have a specific usage in the work of ḥadīth. Miracles of Muḥammad are usually brought together under a chapter called '*alāmāt al-nubuwwa* (signs of prophethood). It is a clear indicator of how miracles were recognised by the scholars of ḥadīth as a proof of Muḥammad's prophethood. Al-Dārimī, al-Bukhārī and Ibn Abī Usāma were among ḥadīth scholars that allocated a specific chapter recounting the miracles of Muḥammad under a chapter of '*alāmāt al-nubuwwa* (signs of prophethood) (al-Dārimi, 2013).

Miracle in Sirah and Theological Review

Indeed, miracle has been considered as one of the consistent elements in the narratives of Prophet Muḥammad's early life. On this particular subject, Muslim scholars may be divided into two different camps. According to al-Ḥākim al-Jishumī (d. 494/1100), the school of Basra did not consider miraculous events of Muḥammad's early life as a part of *mu'jiza*; rather it was only recognised as *al-irḥāṣat*. Scholars of tenth century were found to classify miracle of Muḥammad (*mu'jiza*) into two types. Miracle that occurred before Muḥammad's prophetic period is called *al-irḥāṣ*. While any miracle that performed by Muḥammad after entering the prophetic office is termed as *mu'jiza*. In this regard we found that Ibn Fawrak attributed the incident of Abraha's intrusion as among the *irḥāṣ* of the Prophet. So did al-Jaṣṣāṣ when he attributed a few miraculous incident of Muḥammad's early life as *irḥāṣ* (Ibn Fawrak, 2009; al-Jaṣṣāṣ, 1994). This view is contradicted by the scholars of Baghdad's opinion who acknowledges it merely as *mu'jiza*. Due to the dispute on categorisation of the miraculous events of Muḥammad's early life, some scholars might well have decided not to include a report on the miraculous events of Muḥammad's early life, since it was not widely recognised by some scholars as a *mu'jiza*. Arguably, this could be one of the reasons for the lack of coverage on the miraculous occurrences in the Prophet's early life.

In our analysis, the finding is, however, quite different. According to al-Jishumī, the Basran scholars were the ones who hesitated to acknowledge the miraculous events of Muḥammad's early life as a *mu'jiza*. Yet based on the present study, some scholars who recount and connect Qur'ānic references to these incredible accounts at least have a tangible connection with the Basra school. Al-Jāḥiẓ for example, was born and grew up in Basra, and was among those who regarded the apparently miraculous events of Muḥammad's early life as indeed *āya* (miracle). In his *Kitāb al-Ḥujja*, he includes the incredible story of the people of the elephant (*aṣḥāb al-fīl*) as an illustration of Muḥammad's sign of prophethood (al-Jāḥiẓ, 1424H). Furthermore, al-Jāḥiẓ also explains in detail, in his *al-Ḥayawān*, the miracle of elephant (*al-āya fī al-fīl*) and how God employed the creature to protect Mecca and establish the base of Muḥammad's prophethood (*ta'sīsā li nubuwwa al-nabī*) and a medium through which to glorify this holy place (*ta'zīmā li shā'niḥ*) (al-Jāḥiẓ, 1424H).

Besides al-Jāḥiẓ, Ibn Sa'd was another scholar of Basra origin who emphasises the miraculous elements of Muḥammad's early life in his work. He gathers more than 30 various reports of incredible incidents, including a wide range of miraculous events and prophecies from the Judaeo-Christian traditions, all assembled under one specific chapter entitled 'the sign of Muḥammad's prophethood before the revelation of *waḥy*' (*'alāmāt al-nubuwwa fī rasūlillah qabla 'an yūhā ilaih*) (Ibn Sa'd, 1968). Not only does Ibn Sa'd assemble an assortment of supernatural accounts in his *al-Ṭabaqāt*, by segregating meticulously a specific episode of Muḥammad's early life and putting it under the precise chapter of 'signs of prophethood', Ibn Sa'd appears to make an effort to employ the miraculous events of Muḥammad's early life as a medium of recognition of the authenticity of his prophethood. It is also quite interesting to witness how a book that was arranged within the framework of *Ṭabaqāt/Tarājum*, (a work that

is designed to compile a biography of ḥadīth narrators), has a specific chapter concerning the signs of prophethood. It is difficult, however, to confirm whether the education or environment of Basra had influence on al-Jāḥiẓ or Ibn Sa'd in their acceptance of the miraculous elements in Muḥammad's early life as a discussion in each of their works.

On the other hand, it is evident, as suggested by Martin, that discussion about prophethood and miracle have once become a heated debate among Muslim of ninth and tenth centuries (Martin, 1980). The existence of the accounts of miraculous incidents in the early phase of the Prophet's life indicates in particular the significance of these events in his biography. Azmi for example, had highlighted the work of Ibn Rabban and his approach to the elements of miracle in Sirah of Prophet Muhammad (Azmi, 2017). To understand the establishment of a connection between these events and the Qur'ān does, however, need to be examined further, in order to observe thoroughly each author's approach to and understanding of the Qur'ān and the Prophet's early life.

Analysis: Miraculous Elements in the Qur'ān and Sīrah Nabawiyah

In the Qur'ān, Prophet Muḥammad is consistently portrayed in solidly human terms, as a most humane human being. He is presented in his full human nature, and is not associated with any miraculous abilities. Every time when an adversary asks him to perform signs or miracles (*āya*), the Qur'ān asserts continually that signs can come only from God (6:109) and Muḥammad is only a 'messenger' (13:7). By contrast, the way the *sīra* presents Muḥammad's attributes seems discrepant with his attributes as depicted in the Qur'ān. He was portrayed as a normal human being in the Qur'ān, while *sīra* articulates in detail his capacity to perform miracles since the time he was in the womb of his mother. He was born circumcised (Ibn Ḥibbān. 1986) and accompanied with light, he then fell on the ground, leaning on his hands, raised his head toward Heaven and made a supplication to God immediately after he was born (Al-Bayhaqī, 1405H). On the day he was born, fourteen pillars in Kisrā's palace cracked and rolled down, the Persians' sacred fire died down and some churches on Lake Sawā sank and collapsed (al-Asbahānī, 1986).

All these extraordinary features were aspects of a convention that recurs frequently in the works of *sīra*. What is of immediate interest is the references they make to the Qur'ān in an attempt to give a solid value to the doctrine they deliver. For example, to verify the story of the opening of Muḥammad's breast by the angel, they used verse 94:1, even though Muslim exegetical scholars never applied this particular verse to this story before this time. In fact, none of the early *sīra* authors (the Prophet biographers) connected this event to any verse of the Qur'ān. In later centuries, a few *Sīra* authors, however, started to make a link between this occasion and chapter 94 of the Qur'ān. Al-Bayhaqī (d.458/1065) and al-Maqrīzī (d.845/1441), were instances of authors who connected this chapter with the remarkable event (Al-Bayhaqī, 1405H; al-Maqrīzī, 1999). In his *Dalā'il*, al-Bayhaqī commenced a discussion regarding the opening of Muḥammad's breast by citing the first verse of chapter 94.

The Qur'ān, the scripture that always seems to portray Prophet Muḥammad specifically and steadily as a human being who possessed great humanity, was used frequently by *sīra*'s authors to depict specific qualities which they deemed to have been possessed by the Prophet. The way *sīra* presents apparently unique features of Muḥammad by using the Qur'ān as its references needs to be scrutinised carefully. Many Qur'ānic references are employed by *sīra*'s authors to support their argument for Muḥammad's prophethood and his miraculous attributes. It has been suggested that, these Qur'ānic references ought to be analysed in considering how Muslims of different centuries, especially scholars of the third/ninth century, understand references from the Qur'ān that they believe to refer to Muḥammad directly. Azmi for instance, had conducted a study on the complex nature of connection between Qur'ānic references in *Sīrah Nabawiyah* (Azmi, 2016). This analysis should be conducted on the works of *tafsīr* and *sīra* in order to observe and compare the progressive development of understanding regarding particular verses used in *sīra* literature.

Discussion: Reassessing Quranic References in the Narratives of Sīrah

It is quite clear that any Qur'ānic reference to Muḥammad's early life is hard to find in Muslim classical sources produced in the ninth century. Based on our observation of the selected literature, only four references from the Qur'ān employed by the authors as an allusion to the Prophet's early life may be traced. Among these, there persists one criterion shared by them all, which is the fact of their employment in reference to supernatural aspects in Muḥammad's life. This embraces Muḥammad's pre-existence (26:219), the remarkable nature of his breastfeeding period (28:12), the opening of his breast (94:1) and the incident of Abraha's invasion (105:1-5). All of these events reveal clear evidence of elements of miracles, and at the same time implies divine intervention in Muḥammad's life.

It is not difficult to conclude that the involvement of Qur'ānic reference in these miraculous events lends a tangible value and credible solidity to the account. By connecting an event to the Qur'ān, the story appears authentic and the reader would, for this reason, certainly find it more expedient, if not also convenient, to accept the account. But one big question remains: why did not every author who relates a similar account do the same? Why is it only Ibn Hishām who adduces 28:12 when recounting Muḥammad's suckling? And why do others not follow his lead? Below is two proposition that probably contribute to the connection between the Quran and miraculous elements in *Sīrah Nabawiyya*:

(i) Idiosyncratic Approach and Interpretation of the Scholars

To begin with, one of the most obvious features in analysing Qur'ānic references in the selected works produced in the ninth century is the variety of styles and diversity of interpretation presented by authors when analysing and construing their choices of Qur'ānic references. Indeed, it would seem that each individual author consults verses that were never quoted by other scholars of the same century. Ibn Sa'd, for instance, uses 26:219 to confirm the nobility of Muḥammad's genealogy, while other authors of *sīra*, ḥadīth, *tafsīr* or *dalā'il*, despite being authors living in the same century, never employed it in their works for the same purpose, nor,

indeed, offer similar insights or interpretation. The verse was used by various author with different understandings from the one presented by Ibn Sa'd. Scholars such as Mujāhid, Muqātil Ibn Sulaymān, Yaḥyā ibn Salām, 'Abd al-Razzāq, Muslim Ibn Khālid, al-Farrā', al-Humaydī have mentioned and express their thought regarding the verse. Not one of them specifies or interprets a similar reading as adduced by Ibn Sa'd, except Muqātil alone. Muqātil offers a similar interpretation to Ibn Sa'd; but in fact, that particular reading arose while he was elucidating an interpretation of Sūra al-Aḥqāf, not Sūra al-Shu'arā', the sūra that was employed by Ibn Sa'd.

Ibn Hishām adduced 28:12 to explain the circumstances and context of Muḥammad's breast feeding period, and again, no other scholars employ it or share a comparable understanding. Al-Tirmidhī, apparently interprets 94:1 as an allusion to the event of the opening of Muḥammad's breast. During the same period, no other *sīra* or ḥadīth scholars conjure with a similar awareness or interpretation. Indeed, the individual interpretation of each scholar regarding the cited verses implies a particularly idiosyncratic understanding of each scholar approaching the Qur'ān with a view to establishing specific references to institute an accurate biography of Muḥammad.

Further analysis of Qur'ānic references used by the author of *sīra* in explaining the history of previous prophets and the condition of Arab before the emergence of Muḥammad seems to support this proposition. In the works of *sīra*, the author begins the biography of Muḥammad customarily with the histories of previous prophets, in order to illustrate the solidity of a link between Muḥammad and other prophets in history. Furthermore, the social and geopolitical context of Arabia is evoked, in order to create in reader's mind an accurate and appropriate understanding of setting in terms of its geographical, political and social framework significance, before the advent of the final prophet. In doing so, Ibn Hishām in his works adduces nineteen verses from the Qur'ān, while Ibn Sa'd produces twenty four verses from the same source, the Qur'ān as a reference to the history and biography about the previous prophets. It is interesting to note that none of the verses employed by Ibn Hishām in this section was used by Ibn Sa'd in his work for an otherwise similar introductory part. And incredibly, none of the verses used by Ibn Sa'd was selected by Ibn Hishām. Remarkably, neither author quotes same verse in his preliminary section of Muḥammad's biography, and no two identical verses appear in either work.

This heterogeneity implies that either scholar only cites Qur'ānic verses that are deemed to be appropriate to a particular historical event or biographical incident on which they intended to cast light. For example, in delineating the biography of Noah, both Ibn Hishām and Ibn Sa'd cite dissimilar references from the Qur'ān, even though the scope of discussion is very similar. For example, Ibn Hishām chooses to quote 71:23-24 to evoke a picture of Noah's people as worshippers of idols while Ibn Sa'd attaches 54:11-12 in his effort to visualise and emphasise the atmosphere and social context of the great flood. Indeed, different foci and objectives might drive the author to employ different verses; but again, it is the personal understanding,

purpose and approach of the author that controls his selection. The obvious diversity of Qur'ānic references adduced by Ibn Hishām and Ibn Sa'd at the same time, indicates the nature of self-determination and the independence of the authors in deciding the verses which they are free to define as an appropriate reference, therefore lending authority to the composition.

Al-Ya'qūbī, another historian of the same century has utilised a different approach when creating an introduction to the history of Muḥammad's life. He does not make any specific Qur'ānic reference when delivering the subject about previous prophets and the condition of Arabia. Indeed, the first Qur'ānic reference adduced by him is 96:1, the verse that is popularly identified as the first revelation to Muḥammad. It seems, according to al-Ya'qūbī's work, that there is no Qur'ānic reference to any event before the revelation of the first verse of the Qur'ān. This implies unambiguously that the verses employed as allusions to the introductory events before Muḥammad's life were probably the result of the author's personal interpretation alone. That is probably the reason that al-Ya'qūbī only starts to cite the Qur'ān after the event of the first revelation. Some Qur'ānic elements, however, may be traced in his composition about Muḥammad's early life, and the social and geopolitical context delineating Arabia. For instance, when describing the religions of the Arabs before Islam, al-Ya'qūbī narrates the history of the existence of idols in the Arabian Peninsula. Some of the words used in the dialogue between the Arabs and the Quraysh seem to resemble 39:3 (al-Ya'qūbī, 2010). Moreover, in recounting the event of Muḥammad's birth, al-Ya'qūbī describes the situation of how the devil was prevented by fire as a means of preventing his entry into heaven. This is reminiscent of 67:5 and 72:9 (al-Ya'qūbī, 2010).

(ii) Different Focus and Objective of Composition

Besides personal styles and somewhat idiosyncratic and highly individual interpretations of the Qur'ān, different foci, objectives and emphases in the original compositions might have similarly influenced the existence of Qur'ānic references in the story of Muḥammad's life. Ibn Hishām models his story of Muḥammad's life to focus solely and specifically on the related material that fits his own personal interests, and presents it in the framework of *sīra*. His approach, focus and objective is not the same as Ibn Sa'd's, whose al-Ṭabaqāt is modelled in a '*tarājum*' framework. Al-Ṭabaqāt is composed in order to introduce the personality of the transmitter of the ḥadīth or fiqh. His work is known or categorised in the branch of *tarājum* literature instead of being categorised within the group of *sīra* works. But as a result of the immense information about Muḥammad's life provided by him in his al-Ṭabaqāt, the work is also regarded as one of the important Islamic source of the story of Muḥammad's life. Both works are apparently not in accordance with the style, focus or objective of composition aimed for and structured by al-Tirmidhī's Sunan, the work that emphasises the material concerning *fiqh*, the discussion on Islamic law.

As a compiler of a biographical dictionary, Ibn Sa'd sought to gather all possible material to provide the fullest possible source of biographical information, not only from the Qur'ān and the ḥadīth, but from a plethora of sources available with him. It is no wonder then, that we find

that the author employs such a diversity of sources in his work, since his perspective and focus is primarily as an expert of *tarājum* (the knowledge of the biographies of Islam's transmitter's biography) to offer possible information of one's background. The arrangement of his work clearly and definitively indicates his focus, as he organizes it according to the name of the transmitter whose biographical information follows. Naturally, it is the Prophet himself who is the first figure who Ibn Sa'd seeks to introduce. He begins the first chapter, therefore, with a report of the Prophet's ancestry by providing a material link between Muḥammad and previous prophets. And in this respect, it is the Qur'ān, the book of God, which supplies the most apposite references for consultation; and since there is a ḥadīth that connects 26:219 with the nobility of Muḥammad's genealogy, Ibn Sa'd includes it not only to supply information about Muḥammad's lineage, but also to create an implicit and irrevocable connection between Muḥammad and the previous prophets.

Conclusion

It is beyond doubt that discussion on miracle occurred among the scholars of early formative period. The term might be traced in the work of some prominent scholars including al-Wāqidī, al-Jāhīz, Abū Bakr al-Warrāq, Ibn Qutayba, al-Ṭabarī and al-Zajjāj. The lack of a general employment of this word (*mu'jiza*) in the ninth century, and merely the briefest discourses of miracles may indicate the paucity of an ongoing theological discourse on this subject. Some sources, however, have shown a definite Muslim concern about miracles. The present study propose that the reason is probably related to the personal style and approach of each author of Islamic literature; but since the nature of narratives in Sirah Nabawiyah has a far greater connection with elements of miracles, it is seems productive to suggest a further examination and analysis on the epistemological view of Islamic miracles of the early century of Islam.

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