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The Qur'an: Grammatical Errors

Muslims believe that Allah revealed a book to each of Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus. "But the Book of the prophet Abraham was lost. The Books of David (the Psalms), Moses (the Torah), and Jesus (the Gospel) were changed." [1]

It is only the Qur'an that was revealed to Mohammad by the angel Gabriel that was preserved, and indeed "Not a single word of it has been changed or lost. It is found today exactly as it was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed." [2] As such it is not Mohammed's personal achievement. Rather it is a divine miracle. The prophethood of every prophet was attested to by divine miracles. It is believed that the Qur'an is God's miracle confirming the prophethood of Mohammed.

"The only miracle Mohammad claimed was the Qur'an ... The Qur'an is the only inspired scripture that has come down to us intact as revealed to the prophet. There has been no tampering of the text and the original purity of the language has stayed undefiled." [3]

Muslims do believe that the Qur'an is a literary miracle and that it is unmatched among any other literature. It is not a human masterpiece but a divine miracle, where every letter and dot was revealed from heaven, with no difference between what was revealed and what we have in our hands.

Masterpieces are the work of humans. Miracles are the work of God. A miracle, any miracle, is superior to the best of masterpieces. Also miracles cannot be "improved upon" by human efforts since that would be the same as acknowledging that the miracle, i.e. the work of God, was flawed.

A masterpiece surpasses other works in one particular area. For example, a masterpiece of engineering does not necessarily have to have an aesthetic appeal. Or a masterpiece in art doesn't have to conform to engineering standards. A masterpiece in flower arrangement does not necessarily have to smell good.

Muslims claim the Qur'an not just to be a human literary masterpiece, but a divine literary miracle. But this claim does not square with the facts. For the Qur'an which we have in our hands contains obvious grammatical errors which is plain to see for all who know Arabic.

The First Error

In 5:69

"Surely they that believe, and those of Jewry, and the Sabaeans, and the Christians, whosoever believes in God and the Last Day, and works righteousness - no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow." (Arberry)

"Innal-laziina 'aamanuu wal-laziina haaduu was-Saabi'uuna wan-Nasaaraa man 'aamana bilaahi wal-Yawmil-'Aakhiri wa 'amila saali-hanfalaah khaw-fun 'alay-him wa laa hum yah-zanuun."

There is a grammatical error in the above verse. The word *Saabi'uuna* has been declined wrongly.

In two other verses, the same word, in exactly the same grammatical setting was declined correctly.

2:62 "Innal-laziina 'aamanuu wal-laziina haaduu wan-Nasaaraa was-Saabi'iina ..."

22:17 "Innal-laziina 'aamanuu wal-laziina haaduu was-Saabi'iina wan-Nasaaraa ..."

You notice that the word was written *Saabi'uuna* in 5:69 and was written *Saabi'iina* in 2:62 and 22:17. In the last two verses the word was declined correctly because the word *inna* in the beginning of the sentence causes a form of declension called "nasb" (as in cases of accusative or subjunctive) and the "yeh" is the "sign of nasb". But the word *Saabi'uuna* in 5:69 was given the *'uu, waw* which is the sign of "raf'a" (as in cases of nominative or indicative). This then is an obvious grammatical error.

The Second Error

In 4:162

"But those of them that are firmly rooted in knowledge, and the believers believing in what has been sent down to thee, and what was sent down before thee, that perform the prayer and pay the alms, and those who believe in God and the Last Day - them We shall surely give a mighty wage." (Arberry)

"Laakinir-Raasi-khuuna fil-'ilmi minhum wal-Mu'-minuuna yu'-minuuna bi-maaa 'unzila 'ilayka wa maaa 'unzila min-qablika wal-muqiimiin as-Salaata wal mu'-tuunaz-Zakaata wal-Mu'-mi-nuuna billaahi wal-Yawmil-'Aakhir: 'ulaaa 'ika sanu'-tii-him 'ajran 'aziimaa."

The word *muqiimiin* should be *muqiimuun*. The word should be declined by the "raf'a sign" like the other nouns in the sentence. Indeed the two nouns before it (*Raasi-khuun* and *Mu'-minuun*), and the noun after it (*mu'-tuun*) are declined correctly. Some have argued that this word was declined as such to distinguish and praise the act of praying, but the scholar Ibn al-Khatib says that this is a sick reasoning. (*al-Furqan* by Mohammad M. 'abd al-Latif Ibn al-Katib, Dar al-Kutub al-'elmiyah, Beirut, p.43). Such reasoning defies logic. Why would one distinguish prayer which is a branch of religion, and not faith which is the fundamental and root of religion? Besides can this logic apply to the error of declension in the previous verse? Do we conclude that the *Saabi'iin* are more distinguished than those who believe, and the People of the Book? And why do they get distinguished in one verse and not the other as we have seen? God is much higher than this sick logic. This again is an obvious grammatical error.

The Third Error

In 20:63

"They communed secretly saying, 'These two men are sorcerers!'" (Arberry)
"Qaaluuu inna haazaani la-saahiraani ..."

The word *haazaani* should be *haazayn*.

The word *haazaani* was declined incorrectly because the word *inna* in the beginning of the nominal sentence causes a form of declension called "nasb" to the nominative and the "yeh" is the "sign of nasb". This is the third grammatical error.

The Fourth Error

In 2:177

"It is not piety, that you turn your faces to the East and to the West. True piety is this: to believe in God, and the Last Day ... to give of one's substance ... and to ransom the slave, to perform the prayer, to pay the alms. And they who fulfil their covenant ... and endure with fortitude." (Arberry)

"Laysal-birra 'an-tuwalluu wujuuhakum qibalal-Mashriqi wal-Maghrib wa laakinnal-birra man 'aamana billaahi wal-Yawmil-'Akhiri wal-malaaa-'ikati wal-Kitaabi wan-nabiyyiin: wa 'aatal-maala 'alaa hubbihii zawilqurbaa wal-yataamaa wal-masaakiina wabnas-sabiili was-saaa-'iliina wa fir-riqaab: wa'aaqamas-Salaata wa 'aataz-Zakaata; wal-muufuuna bi'ahdihim 'izaa 'aahaduu was-Saabiriina fil-ba'-saaa'i wazzarraa-'i ..."

In the above verse there are five grammatical errors. In four of them the wrong tense was used, as the sentence begins in the present tense with the verb *tuwalluu*, while the other four verbs were written in the past tense:

'*aaman* should be *tu'minuu*;

'*aata* should be *tu'tuu*;

'*aaqama* should be *tuqimuu*;

'*aata* should be *tu'tuu*.

The above verse when translated into English as it appears in Arabic would be: "It is not righteousness that ye **turn** your faces to the East and the West; but righteousness is he who **believed** in Allah and the Last day and the angels and the Book and the Prophets; and **gave** his wealth, ... and **performed** prayer and **paid** the alms."

But the English translators have observed the tense, and the verbs "believed", "gave", "performed", and "paid" were corrected and written in the present tense. (For example see Arberry, Pickthall, Yusuf Ali and Rodwell's translations).

The fifth error is the wrong declension of the word *saabiriina*. It should be declined *saabiruuna* like the preceding word *muufuuna*.

The Fifth Error

In 3:59

"the likeness of Jesus, in God's sight, is as Adam's likeness; He created him of dust, then said He unto him, 'Be,' and he was." (Arberry)

"Inna massala 'Isaa 'indal-laahi ka-masali 'Adam; khalaqahuu min-turaabin-sum-ma qaala lahuu kun fa-yakuun."

The above verse when translated into English as it appears in Arabic would be: "The likeness of Jesus with Allah is as the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, then He said to him 'Be,' and he is." The above is Pickthall's translation. Please note that he translated *yakuun* (is) as it appears in Arabic, i.e. in the present tense.

The word *yakuun* ("is" in English) should be *kana* ("was") to be consistent with the past tense of the previous verb "said" as it was corrected by Arberry, Rodwell and Yusuf Ali in their translations of that verse. This is the fifth error.

The Sixth Error

In 21:3

"The evildoers whisper one to another ..."

"Laahiyatan - quluubuhum. Wa 'asarrun-najwallaziin zalamuu..."

The word *'asarru* should be *'asarra*. The above is a verbal sentence, and the rule for such a sentence, where the verb comes before the (masculine) subject, is that the verb must be in the third (masculine) singular form, if the active subject of the verbal sentence is stated in the sentence. (The same rule holds for substituting the two mentionings of "masculine" by "feminine".) But the verb in the above Qur'anic verse came in the plural form. See how the above rule was observed in the following Qur'anic verses: 3:52, 10:2, 16:27, 16:35, 3:42, 49:14.

The Seventh Error

In 22:19

"These are two disputants who have disputed concerning their Lord." (Arberry)

"haazaani Khismani 'ikhtasamuu fi rabbihim ..."

In Arabic, like English words are declined or conjugated with respect to number. In English there are two numbers: singular and plural. So in English two men are treated as plural. But in Arabic there are three numbers: singular, dual, and plural. So in Arabic the verbs and nouns are treated according to the singular or the dual or the plural. The verb in that verse was conjugated as if the subject is more than two. But the verse speaks only of two. So the rules of the dual should be followed and the word *'ikhtasamuu* should be *'ikhtasamaa*. So this is yet another error.

The Eighth Error

In 49:9

"If two parties of believers fight, put things right between them." (Arberry)

"wa 'in-taaa-'ifataani mi-nal-Mu'-miniinaq-tatalu fa-'aslihuu baynahumaa."

This error in this verse is like the previous one. The number again is dual but the verb was conjugated as if the subject is plural. So the verb *'eq-tatalu* should be *'eqtatalata*.

The Ninth Error

In 63:10

"O my Lord, if only Thou wouldst defer me unto a near term, so that I may make freewill offering, and so I may become one of the righteous." (Arberry)

"... Rabbi law laaa 'akhartanii 'ilaaa 'ajalin-qariibin-fa-'assaddaqa wa 'akum-minas-salihiin."

The verb *'akun* was incorrectly conjugated. It should be *'akuuna*, i.e. the last consonant must have the vowel "a", instead of being vowelless, because the verb *'akun*, is in the subjunctive. Indeed the previous verb (*'assaddaqa*) has been correctly conjugated and is in the subjunctive. The reason is that in Arabic the present tense is placed in the subjunctive mood if it is preceded by certain words (huruf nasebah). One of such words is the "causative fa".

The Tenth Error

In 91:5

"By the heaven and that which built it." (Arberry)
"was-samaaa-'i wa maa ba-naahaa."

The word *ma* in the Arabic language is used for the impersonal. But the subject of the above verse is God. So the word which should be used is the Arabic word *man* (meaning "him who"). Arberry translated that verse as follows: "By the heaven and that which built it" meaning God. Pickthall however corrected the impersonal (*ma*, that which) and translated the verse as follows: "By the heaven and Him Who built it."

Indeed Pickthall also corrected the two verses that follow:

And the earth and Him Who spread it. Q. 91:6.
And a soul and Him Who perfected it. Q. 91:7.

Yusuf Ali, to get out of the problem, translated the above verse as follows: "By the firmament and its wonderful structure". So the subject 'God' does not appear at all in his translation of that verse. He gives his reason for his translation in a footnote saying: The *ma masdariya* in Arabic, in this and the subsequent clauses, is best translated in English by nouns." But the word *bana* in *banaha* is not a noun but a verb in the past tense as translated correctly by Arberry and Pickthall. The word *ma* should have been *man* (meaning "who") and in that context it should have been "Who" with a capital W.

The Eleventh Error

In 41:11

"Then He lifted Himself to heaven when it was smoke, and said to it and to the earth, 'come willingly, or unwillingly!' They said, 'we come willingly.'"
"... faqal laha wa lel-Arad 'iteya taw'aan aw karha qalata atayna ta'e'een."

Heaven and earth in Arabic are feminine nouns, the verb said in "they said" is accordingly feminine and dual (*qalata*), but the adjective "willing" at the end of the verse is masculine and plural (*ta'e'een*), being at variance with the rule that the adjectives should match their nouns in number in gender, thus *ta'e'een* which is used for plural, should be *ta'e'atain* which is used for feminine dual.

The Twelfth Error

In 7:56

"The mercy of God is near."
"... inna rahmata Allahi qaribun min al-mohseneen."

The above verse is a nominal clause. In such a clause the predicate should match the subject (*rahmata*) of the nominal clause in gender. The word *qaribun* (meaning "near") is the predicate of *rahmata Allahi* ("mercy of Allah"), they should match each other in gender. But this is not the case in the Arabic text. *Rahmata* is feminine in Arabic and so the word *qaribun* (which is masculine) should instead be *qaribah* (its feminine form).

This rule was correctly observed in other Qur'anic verses. For example, in 9:40 we read: "Kalamat ul-llah heya al-'ulya." Here both *Kalamat* and *heya* are feminine. To say instead: "Kalamat ul-llah howa al-'a'la" would never be correct. That would be just as wrong as saying: "... inna rahmata Allahi qaribun min ..."

Error 13

In 7:160

"We divided them into twelve tribes."
"wa qata'nahom 'ethnata 'ashrata asbatan."

Instead of *asbatan* it should read *sebtan*.

In the Arabic it literally says "twelve tribes". That is correct in English but not correct in Arabic. In Arabic it should say twelve tribe because the noun that is counted by a number above ten should be singular. This rule is observed correctly for example in 7:142, 2:60, 5:12, 9:36, 12:4.

The Qor'an contains sentences which are incomplete and not fully intelligible without the aid of commentaries; foreign words, unfamiliar Arabic words, and words used with other than the normal meaning; adjectives and verbs inflected without observance of the concords of gender and number; illogically and ungrammatically applied pronouns which sometimes have no referent; and predicates which in rhymed passages are often remote from the subjects ... To sum up, more than one hundred Qur'anic aberrations from the normal rules and structures have been noted... ('Ali Dashti, 23 Years: A Study of the Prophetic Career of Mohammad, Mazda Publishers, Costa Mesa, California, 1994, pages 48,50)

Hence, the above are just a small sample and more are to come.

Some of the above errors are not a new discovery by modern critics. They were known from the first century of Islam by the closest followers of Mohammad. It is reported that 'Uthman, after viewing the first standard copy of the Qur'an, said, 'I see grammatical errors in it, and the Arabs will read it correctly with their tongues.' [4] The Muslim scholar Ibn al-Khatib who quoted the above report in his book *al-Furqan*, went on to mention another report on the authority of 'Aa'isha, one of Mohammad's wives, saying, 'There are three grammatical errors in the Book of Allah, they are the fault of the scribe:

In 20:63

"Qaaluuu inna haazaani la-saahiraani ..."

And in 5:69

"Innal-laziina 'aamanuu wal-laziina haaduu was-Saabi'uuna wan-Nasaaraa man 'aamana bilaahi wal-Yawmil-'Aakhiri wa 'amila saali-hanfalaah khaw-fun 'alay-him wa laa hum yah-zanuun."

And in 4:162

"Laakinir-Raasi-khuuna fil-'ilmi minhum wal-Mu'-minuuna yu'-minuuna bi-maaa 'unzila 'ilayka wa maaa 'unzila min-qablika wal-muqiimiin as-Salaata wal mu'-tuunaz-Zakaata wal-Mu'-mi-nuuna billaahi wal-Yawmil-'Aakhir: 'ulaaa 'ika sanu'-tii-him 'ajran 'aziimaa.'"[5]

Two comments need to be made.

First: Muslims claim that the Qur'an we have in our hands today is what was originally revealed to Mohammed, with no change to even one letter. However, there are grammatical errors in today's Qur'an. In facing these errors, we must decide between one of two choices. Either, the original Qur'an was revealed containing these errors, or the errors resulted from mistakes by human scribes as they were copying the Qur'an. There exist no other possibilities. As the first choice is unthinkable, the second is the only logical explanation. But that also means that it is not true that the Qur'an we have in our hands is the "only inspired scripture that has come down to us intact as revealed to the prophet. There has been no tampering of the text and the original purity of the language has stayed undefiled."

Second: If the above errors were found in an article to be published, these errors would be corrected. The article, with these errors remaining in it, could not be hailed as a masterpiece.

The Qur'an, because of these errors, is not even a masterpiece. If, humanly speaking, the Qur'an cannot be called a masterpiece, can anyone honestly call it a divine literary miracle?

The following notice accompanied a very respectable piece of Islamic software called the Alim, 1992.

NOTICE!!!

The Arabic Qur'an has some errors which will be remedied very shortly in a maintenance release.

....

NOTICE !!!

The Arabic Qur'an referred to in the above notice is the one provided in the Alim software package.

No doubt many learned people have gone over this Arabic Qur'an to check it for mistakes, like any good publisher would do. If even with the advanced technology they have, there are still errors in it, how can we have any confidence that the first edition of the Qur'an in a time when very few people can read and write Arabic, was written down error free? Mohammad himself said "we are a nation that does not know how to write or do accounting." And the Muslim in early Islam used to set free some Jews among their war captives if they would in turn teach a few Arabs how to read and write Arabic.

References:

1. Teaching of Islam, Islamic Council of New South Wales, p.15.

2. Teaching of Islam, Islamic Council of New South Wales, p.18.
3. Introduction to Pickthall's translation with transliteration, the Burney Academy, Hyderabad, p.xxiv.
4. Al-Furqan by Mohammad M. 'abd al-Latif Ibn al-Katib, Dar al-Kutub al-'elmiyah, Beirut, p.90
5. Al-Furqan by Mohammad M. 'abd al-Latif Ibn al-Katib, Dar al-Kutub al-'elmiyah, Beirut, p.91