

## Prophetic Miracles from the Supernatural to Natural Events: Between Modernist and Ahmadiyya Interpretations

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**ABSTRACT:**

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This article examines the beliefs of modern Muslims regarding miracles and supernatural claims. It looks at how modern Muslims have had to interpret most of the miracles mentioned in the Qur'an metaphorically or naturally in order to avoid accusations of error. It also examines the views of Muhammad Asad, who argued that the stories of miracles adopted traditional myths as a site for teaching morals. The article further explores the interpretations of naturalists, who interpret miracles in ways that do not contradict empirical observations of naturalism. Finally, it examines the influence of European and Christian ideas on modernist Muslims, and the silence of modernist commentators on the similarity in their ideas with some Christians who wrote a few generations before them. The conclusion is that modern Muslims have had to interpret miracles in ways that do not contradict empirical observations of naturalism, and that there is no tangible evidence that modernist Muslims have been influenced by the ideas of Europeans or earlier Christians.

**KEYWORDS:** Interpretation of miracles, modernist Muslims, naturalists.

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## *1. Introduction*

At the end of the nineteenth century, colonialists, missionaries, and orientalist portrayed Islam as a rigid, superstitious religion that was incompatible with the European modern world. After studying English and visiting Europe, some Muslims responded to these offensive perceptions against Islam and argued that Islam is a religion reconciled with the philosophical changes and the Industrial Revolution that were born and spread in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These defenders of Islam published their writings through literary magazines and Arabic, Persian, and Urdu newspapers. The subject of our research is the English writings of Islamic thinkers who used the interpretation of the Qur'an as an entry point to express their opinions. Since most Muslims do not speak or use English to discuss Islamic sciences, the choice of these authors to write their papers and translate the Qur'an into English represents a break with Islamic classical modes. we can conclude from this choice that the Islamic community was not their only target audience in their writings, but rather they meant all English speakers – Muslims and others.

Based on the study of Walid Saleh (2010) on the history and trends of interpretation in the twentieth century in Egypt, interpretations of the Qur'an can be classified into three schools of thought: the Ash'aris, the Salafis, and the modernists. This study examines the interpretations of the modernists, especially their interpretations of the miracles attributed to the prophets of the Children of Israel mentioned in the Qur'an. Modernist interpretations differed from the considered interpretations of Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah in several respects. First, interpreters have often assumed that the prophetic miracles in the Qur'an are true historical facts. The miracles attributed to Solomon, Moses, and Jesus occurred on specific dates in the past, and the Qur'anic verses documented these miracles accurately and correctly. Secondly, the respected scholars assumed that impossible events could happen by God's permission and command. Since supernatural events happen with divine interventions, miracles do not need any interpretation, as they are true historical events.

As for the modernists, they interpreted miracles in ways that do not contradict the prevailing natural scientific theories, following the patterns of Christian scientists in the nineteenth century who interpreted the miracles of Jesus as empirical events that could occur. Christian modernists assumed that the apostles thought they saw Jesus walking on water, when in fact Jesus walked on stones submerged in water.

Interpretative studies of the miracles of the Bible focused on the criticism of Christians and Jews on the one hand, and a study to accept the results of scientific theories and models of the European Age of Enlightenment on the other hand. This study deals with the interpretations of modernist Muslims in the era of some Christian writers in Europe who discussed the issue of miracles in the Bible as well. In the Age of Enlightenment in Europe, some famous writers embraced the idea of a natural divinity in which supernatural divine miracles were impossible. While they embraced the principle that God is the creator of the universe and the first cause, they did not believe that God influences the works of the universe, sends down a book, upholds a religion, or performs miracles. Natural scientists believed that natural miracles, understood as historical events, should be explained as events that did not violate natural laws. Because events that violate the laws of nature were considered impossible, some scholars interpreted miracles as rare natural events or as ordinary events that occur at appropriate times.

Benedictus de Spinoza (2020) (d. 1670) and David Hume (1777) (d. 1748) argued that miracles are a violation of cosmic natural laws as they believed that nature represented God's will. Thus, actual events that are impossible to happen violate the laws of nature and divine will. Since God's will is impossible to overturn, miracles are impossible to happen. Hume also argued that the only evidence for the occurrence of supernatural miracles is hearsay, which is not sufficient evidence to prove the occurrence of extraordinary miracles of natural laws. Therefore, Hume believes that these rumours are false, and his evidence is that these miracles did not occur before or after the rumour. Then Hume took scepticism and the lack of proven rumours as a method for their abundance among different nations and sects. He said that the only evidence for the occurrence of these miracles is rumour, which is evidence that cannot be confirmed. Spinoza concluded that the miracles mentioned in the Torah or the Bible can either be interpreted as natural events or as a legend or an allegory. Hume discussed miracles theoretically and avoided discussing the Bible.

Among Christian writers, Thomas Woolston (2012) is the most famous of refusing to understand the miracles of Christ mentioned in the Bible in his writings from 1727 to 1730, which were prosecuted for his denial of the miracles of Christ, as he portrayed these miracles as natural causes or moral and symbolic interpretations.

Some sceptics believed that the history of the compilation of the New Testament or the Four Gospels deprives everyone who succeeded and was absent from those centuries from judging the truth about miracles and the reason for their rumours. Perhaps Christ and his disciples were fictitious or

were among the first physicians, so some stories, such as those of wellness, contain a natural and scientific interpretation, or perhaps some later Christians imagined and presented these legends. Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1704) (d. 1768) rejected the occurrence of miracles as impossible events, but he doubted whether Christ and his disciples practiced optical illusions, or that later Christians falsified some myths about Jesus, the son of Mary. It is no coincidence that both Torah-critical academics and atheist philosophers rejected the miracles mentioned in the Bible, both before and when modernist Muslims wrote their works on the Qur'an and its interpretation. For example, David Strauss (1808) (d. 1874) rejected the possibility of supernatural miracles and the validity of the natural interpretations presented by thinkers of his post-Enlightenment era together. Strauss saw that the stories of miracles attributed to Christ have no historical truth, neither in a supernatural capacity nor in a natural interpretation. Rather, these stories in the New Testament used illustrations and verses mentioned in the Old Testament to explain and clarify the truth of Christ and his status with God and to elevate his status. Rudolf Bultmann (1884) (d. 1976), the most famous New Testament scholar of the twentieth century, urges Bible readers to abstract from the miracles of Christ and to re-understand those stories and consider them as doctrines in narrative form. I mean, in Bultmann's opinion, Christians in the past centuries told stories to teach and explain their beliefs. They used stories of miracles as evidence for the validity of their beliefs. For example, if their belief is that the Lord Christ is the Son of God, they tell a story in which there is a miracle at the hands of Christ or a religious Christian, or in which there are birds or other animals that speak, or a phone from heaven, or something like that. At the end of the story, that belief is confirmed by the words of these characters in the story or the narrator.

Bultmann said that the purposes of the religion of Christianity and stories of miracles are good morals and advocacy. These moral lessons are still constant for the religion of Christianity, even if myths are stripped from the sacred texts. He said in a sense, generosity, wisdom, forbearance, mercy, and kindness are still among the virtues, while hatred, miserliness, and cruelty are still among the disadvantages after we have been stripped or given these miracles. Abdulkarim Soroush seems to have used the Strauss method and the Bultmann method in understanding miracles when he said that divine truths have no form in their essence, but language, symbols, and myths are historical factors for understanding these truths. This study compares Muslim interpretations with their European peers to formulate Muslim rejection of miracles as an extension of the pattern found in European studies.

The Muslim interpreters in this study lived under the control of the British Empire over India and came from elite families who sponsored their study of English as a second language. Different from his South Asian peers, Muhammad Asad (formerly Leopold Weiss) was Austrian and converted to Islam, but such people were fortunate to learn English. Interpretations written in English acknowledge the usefulness of the English language, which has a large readership. The British Empire and its influence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries led Muslims in South Asia to use English as a language of communication for collectible purposes, even in passionate arguments with Christian missionaries. American economic, military, and cultural influence after World War II prompted Muslims to publish in English to reach the American readership. While European and American missionaries wished to spread a good image of Christ, Muslims desired to convince and simplify Islam for Americans as well. The increase in the number of Muslim immigrants in America with the presence of Islamic movements among African Americans may have led to the spread of these interpretations.

Perhaps reading the ideas of Europeans on the issue of miracles directly or indirectly prompted modern Muslim interpreters to argue with arguments similar to the naturalistic and allegorical interpretations of miracle stories. Although Sayyid Ahmad Khan (see 1880) (Urdu) and Muhammad Abduh (see 1993) (in Arabic) provided allegorical interpretations of the Qur'an in languages other than English, modernist interpretations of the Qur'an and miracles did not remain the main trend in the Islamic community. The modernist literature dealt with in this study does not represent most of the interpretive studies on the subject either, but rather it represents the opinion of the minority among the various English interpretations in this era.

Most of the classical and new interpretations are based on traditionalist views of interpretation and accept their reading of miracles, which were considered supernatural as having occurred by God's command. Christians and Muslims believed that miracles were a tool and endorsement of God's prophets in their communities. Deleting miracles from the stories of the prophets leads to deleting the arguments and verses from God and the evidence supporting his religion.

The authors in this study include Maulana Muhammad Ali (d. 1951), Malik Ghulam Farid (d. 1977), Ghulam Ahmad Perwez (d. 1985), and Muhammad Asad (d. 1992). Each writer has students and a scholarly community through which they print and publish their expository writings. *Tafsir Muhammad Asad* (2008) enjoyed a wide readership because he is a European convert to Islam at the beginning of the twentieth century who

established relations with powerful political figures in the Islamic world. Muhammad Asad Sahib Abdulaziz bin Saud, the first king of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the poet and writer Muhammad Iqbal, who became a diplomat for the United Nations to the State of Pakistan, which granted him citizenship. Muhammad Asad was a prolific writer, gifted linguist, and journalist. In addition to his Qur'anic commentaries, his spiritual journey, *The Road to Mecca*, published in 1954, was very popular and is still in print. Asad's translation and interpretation of the Qur'an was characterized by a number of characteristics, including beautiful literary touches and moral teachings for the modern reader (who is sceptical of traditional and ancient concepts of religion), as well as metaphorical interpretations of the Qur'an and modern fatwas of Islamic rulings. Muhammad Asad also added, by interpreting his signs and religious opinions, to agree with the reformist views. Because of Asad's interpretations of rationalism, King Faisal abolished Labor's patronage. Muhammad Asad began writing his tafsīr in 1960 and published the work in 1980, but Saudi Arabia banned Asad's book in 1974.

Although Muhammad Iqbal and Muhammad Asad supported each other and shared an urgent desire for modernist reforms of Islamic thought, Iqbal inspired a group of modernist thinkers in South Asia, such as Ghulam Ahmad Perwez, an independent thinker who was sceptical of the ḥadīths of the Prophet and the domination of the scholars of the classical schools of thought over Islamic culture. However, Perwez (2010) believes that Islam is a religious, economic, and political system that solves the problems of humanity. Perwez was idealistic in his views on the religion of Islam (meaning he saw religion as the perfect solution) similar to other defenders of Islam of his period. Writers who wrote works to defend Islam in the middle of the twentieth century, especially in English, wrote outside the scope of the traditional educational circles. Perwez's writings do not show any traditional training in the science of isnāds, nor in the science of traditional Islamic studies, nor in the culture of the circles of Islamic scholars and jurists. Perwez is similar to the leftist elites in Pakistan who viewed Islam as a pure tradition that has been misled by the jurists. Despite Perwez's rejection of the Islamist movement, such as Abu Alaa al-Mawardi and others, he was influenced by their ideas and can be described as a liberal Islamist. His philosophy attempts to reconcile some Western democratic ideals with Perwez's view of the Islamic state and the history of Islam. Perwez's interpretation and treatises were published through the magazine, *Tolu-e-Islam*, and the rest of the endowments affiliated with the magazine, which were concerned with publishing and translating Perwez's works.

Perwez's modernist views did not represent those of Iqbal and Khan, but

rather the triangle of opinions of the Ahmadiyya community of writers who published their books in English and Urdu at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The first exegetical writings of the Qur'an were completed by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's disciple Maulana Muhammad Ali in 1917. The fame of Muhammad Ali's interpretation can be attributed to its use by the Lahori Ahmadiyya community (which saw Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as a reformer, a Messiah, and the Promised Imam Mahdi, but not a prophet) and in the Nation of Islam movement in the United States, which was led by Elijah Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan. The Nation of Islam movement used Muhammad Ali's interpretation to formulate its cosmic ideology and philosophy.

Muhammad Ali studied mathematics, English and law in Lahore and used these skills throughout his life. Ali was a Doctor of Mathematics before opening a law firm in Lahore. Ali devoted his life to the Ahmadiyya movement and was highly valued in his community. Ali worked with Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, and his successor, Maulana Nur-ud-Din, and established the Lahore Ahmadiyya group which took place upon Nur-ud-Din's death. Ali publishes his books in English and Urdu.

Malik Ghulam Farid completed his translation and commentaries of the Qur'an in 1963. Farid was a member of the sect known worldwide as the Ahmadiyya Community which believed that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was a prophet and the Promised Messiah. All Ahmadis (Muhammad Ali and Fareed sects) are convinced that the personality of 'Īsā ibn Maryam has died and will not return. At the end of the nineteenth century, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad spread the idea that Jesus had escaped crucifixion, travelled east, and died in Kashmir. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad elaborated claims which he prepared as an interpolation of Messianic prophecies in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and provided metaphorical interpretations of the Qur'an and ḥadīths concerning Jesus the son of Mary. The rest of the Muslims argued with the Ahmadiyya that Jesus the son Maryam performed miracles in the past and is expected to perform miracles upon his return as a sign of his mission and prophethood. To support his Christian claims, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad had to overcome traditional assumptions and expectations regarding supernatural miracles and foreshadowings of the Day of Judgment. Thus, the doctrinal impulses of the Ahmadis led them to portray the prophets as moral reformers rather than performers of miracles and to replace their literal reading with a metaphorical reading of the Qur'an and the ḥadīths of the Prophet.

## *1.1. Questions*

This study poses some questions: What is impossible in the philosophy of these authors? What do the writers think about the definition and purpose of a miracle? How do these writers acknowledge and respond to traditional interpretations of miracles in the Qur'an? Do they consider miracles to be natural and historical facts, or do these Qur'anic verses have a metaphorical interpretation? Do these writers rely on New Testament scholars in their studies? If there is a difference, how does the Ahmadiyya sect differ from their modernist peers among the Sunnis?

## *1.2. Individual Case Studies*

Like the Bible, the Qur'an recounts some of the Qur'anic miracles that took place in the lives of the prophets. A general review of all the ways in which each writer understood the concept of a miracle is outside the scope of this study and I confine myself to individual case studies as examples. This study examines the miracles attributed to Moses, Solomon, Jesus the son of Maryam, and many miracles attributed to these prophets, which give interpreters an opportunity to apply their beliefs in the interpretation of miracles. The Qur'an provides examples of divine actions in the survival of some historical societies. Perhaps a prophet will appear in a group who will claim revelation from God and that their unbelief will lead them to their imminent destruction. In these stories, everything that happens is by God's command and will. The events that unfolded in the stories of the prophets are also attributed to God; for example, deliverance from calamity, military victory, or destruction of a group or individuals. How did the modernists understand the divine interventions in such events and to what extent their interpretations are consistent with their theories towards miracles. I review the interpretations about the nature of God's actions in those cases in order to understand the agreements and contradictions between their interpretation of the prophetic miracles and these other incidents. They understood some of them traditionally or interpreted them all as natural events and symbolic parables and reviewed the modernist interpretations of the story of Yunus (Jonah) and the transformation of humans into apes.

Ultimately, theories about miracles and terrible events in the history of nations are theories about God. This study attempts to understand the contributions of the modernists to the Islamic faith.



## 2. *Interpretation Methods*

The modernist interpreters built a set of approaches to understand the verses they are dealing with. In some cases, the modernists understood the stories of miracles at face value and in the literal sense without change. In these cases, the modernists acknowledged that God caused miraculous events in the lives of the prophets and the ways in which these events were caused remain unknown. At other times the modernists do not initiate any serious discussion about these events as if the miracles were not remarkable. In all these cases, the modernist scholars accepted the arguments of most scholars of theology and Islamic theology. In the Middle Ages, speakers in general said that these miracles in the life of the prophets took place to legitimize their message and confirm their prophethood, as well as to strengthen the faith of the public. The modernists also in some cases accepted those stories that depicted God as the protector or destroyer of a nation as a result of their faith or disbelief. The willingness of modernists to accept the possibility of divine intervention and the mystical reasons for miracles indicates that the modernists' division from the doctrinal tradition is neither pure nor complete. In contrast, some Middle-Aged philosophers seem to have split completely from the literal interpretations of sacred texts and the well-known doctrines of classical Sunni and Shi'a scholars.

For example, some philosophers of the Ismaili sect accepted the Neoplatonic philosophy in which God represents a mysterious, indescribable, and unknowable essence because God is beyond the realm of thing and nothing. The cosmic forces responsible for the revelation of the sacred texts and the creation of the actual universe are indirectly attributed to God, who himself transcends the need for motion between stillness and activity. The Neoplatonic concept rejects any attempt to attribute any actual actions to God because it suggests that a superior being acts in a time-bound universe. Divine transcendence is that God is so transcendent and omniscient that He does not need actions dedicated to turning His will into action.

Ismaili interpretations in the Middle Ages perhaps show the first literary history in the Islamic tradition of the concept of Neoplatonism, to accept allegorical interpretations of miracles as a comprehensive system, and to reject literal understandings of miracles and even consider them absurd. Thus, Abū Maṣṣūr al-Baġhdādī (d. 429) wrote about the Ismaili philosophers: "They said that miracles that contradict customs were raised" (1928, 230).

The modernists in this study do not seem to follow the Ismailis in this

direction. The traditional concepts of God have not changed in the interpretations of the modernists. God is still intervening in the course of history, creating a universe, descending revelations, supporting the believers, and destroying the unbelieving nations. The modernists agreed with the Ismailis that the cosmic world does not seem to function by supernatural miracles and that, therefore, the miracles attributed to the prophets must be reinterpreted to understand their true meaning. Modernists rely on six hermeneutical approaches to understanding miracles:

### *2.1. Traditional*

In rare cases, the modernists agreed with the phenomena of the verses and texts and considered an extraordinary miracle. However, modernists interpret miracles in the following five ways.

### *2.2. Natural*

Naturalists interpret miracles in ways that do not conflict with practical observations of nature. Miracles are described as natural events, either rare or common, which help prophets and believers. For example, the parting of the Red Sea was interpreted as a fortunate event that helped Prophet Moses and the Israelites. The Red Sea came to Moses and his nation, but the tide that drowned Pharaoh's army hindered their attempt to capture the Israelites. The sacred texts described these events poetically and as a divine historical event in the history of the Children of Israel.

The modernists have another way to interpret miracles naturally, which is to describe the miracle as a vision or a dream of a prophet. The miracle that appears in a dream is a symbol of events that may occur in the life of a prophet or the history of his nation. In this case, the miracles that occurred in the external world outwardly are dream representations in reality. Examples of this are the story of the resurrection of a prophet after a hundred years (Q. 2:259) and the story of Abraham and the four birds (Q. 2:260). Farid (1963, 328-331) described these stories as visions experienced by Dhu al-Kifl and Ibrahim, respectively.

According to Muhammad Ali, in rare cases a nation or a group can see a vision that also has wonders and miracles. Such is the collective vision of Moses, Pharaoh, magicians, and spectators who saw Moses' staff appearing to change into a snake for Moses' victory over the Pharaoh's magicians who confronted him. It is clear that the staff of Moses did not turn into a snake in reality (Q. 4:157), as was the case with witnessing the crucifixion of Christ

(Ali 1917, 122). Similar to prophets who experience visions from God, a nation can collectively experience a vision. Muhammad Ali explained that these moments are between wakefulness and sleep.

The moral lessons from the traditional and naturalistic readings and interpretations are identical: the nation should reflect on the events and be thankful for the days when they experienced a miracle or avoided some calamity. The public learns that nations immersed in sin can be destroyed as a result of their disobedience.

In the isolated cases studied above, with the exception of Muhammad Asad, modernist interpreters rely on natural causes for miracles. Muhammad Asad employed natural interpretations in a few cases compared to his predecessors. Rather, Asad prefers a radical break from the traditional tradition (using the methods described above).

### 2.3. *Metaphorical*

Modernists interpret miracles as allegorical stories that explain the occult and moral truths. For example, the Qur'an describes Jesus, the son of Mary, as the one who revived the dead and healed the blind. According to these modernists, the Qur'an speaks allegorically of the call of Jesus, the son of Mary, and his success in helping those who experienced spiritual death and blindness, which leads to unbelief and delusion.

In one piece, Christ speaks in the first person to describe the same miracle (Q. 3:49). The modernists understood that Jesus, the son of Mary, speaks metaphorically, meaning that he will guide them and revive their faith in God so that they may be pious. In some cases, texts recount prophetic miracles in the third person and other prophets in the first person. In either case, it is not read at face value but understood metaphorically.

### 2.4. *Spiritual Poems*

The Qur'an expresses the universe poetically. The universes, galaxies, and everything on earth are described as prostrating to God and possessing a spirit, mind, and awareness, and they glorify God; for example, Q. 22:18; 33:72; 41:11; 55:6; 99:1-5.

In some cases, inanimate objects and animals are personified as people in the Qur'an and stories of the prophets. In his interpretation of the verse (Q. 21:79), Muhammad Asad said that the Qur'an expresses creation poetically to indicate the status of the universe and animals with God and that they glorify God in their presence. And what it means is that the

universe is a creature subjected to action by God's command, and it is not understood that inanimate objects have minds or souls in reality.

As for the animals, the modernists have another style. They tend to reinterpret the verses in which animals are embodied in order to understand them as references to men in the incident. It means that donkeys, pigs, monkeys, and birds in the Qur'an are allegorical symbols of different kinds of men. So, the apparent meaning of the verse is understood, which is the embodiment or humanization of animals and inanimate objects. As for the modernists, they interpret these verses in order to understand them as a discussion about the vitality of man, and that the Qur'an expresses some men and their actions as animals metaphorically and symbolically.

## 2.5. *Refuting Myths*

Ghulam Ahmad Perwez said in his interpretation that the Qur'an sometimes mentions myths and false beliefs that have gained acceptance in the Arab region in order to reject them. Well-known examples are that angels are daughters of God, the names of Arab idols such as Al-Lāt and Al-'Uzza, and the accusation of Prophet Solomon of teaching and practicing magic. Perwez said that early Muslims and later traditions misunderstood some of the myths and false beliefs such as history and true and confirmed beliefs in the Qur'an. Perwez uses this type of argument when he discusses the story of the two kings who taught magic, viz., Hārūt and Mārūt. Perwez said that the Qur'an rejected the whole story rather than confirming it (Perwez 2010, 55). It means that neither magic nor these beliefs are true. Therefore, Perwez rejects the story of angels descending to teach magic as a myth, just as the Qur'an rejects Solomon's accusations in that verse (Q. 2:102).

## 2.6. *Reliance on Popular Beliefs*

Between the two modernities, the most radical split from the classical doctrines was Muhammad Asad, the last of them to write his interpretation. In some places, Muhammad Asad says that the Qur'an recounts folklore or shared stories in order to teach good manners (Asad 2008, 642; Q.21:82). Folklore is folklore, or popular sayings that children take from their ancestors, which may lose historical credibility. Saying this differs from the metaphorical interpretation (mentioned previously in the second style) in several respects.

From the metaphorical interpretations, it is understood that the

miraculous stories, such as the treatment and revival of Christ for his people, have a historical reality, which is that he was the doctor of faith who treated people from moral and spiritual diseases such as hypocrisy, disbelief, fumes, and arrogance. These examples are based on historical moments in the call of Jesus, the son of Mary. Although he was not regarded as the healer of his contemporaries for physical ailments, he was still their symbolic physician. The reader still asserts that the Qur'an describes the historical person Jesus, the son of Mary, although the description of his actions is symbolic.

As for Muhammad Asad's comments on some stories, such as Prophet Solomon and the ants hearing him talking about his army, the author says that it is events without historical rules. Rather, these stories are legends, and the prophets play the main roles. The Qur'an does not tell these stories to reject or confirm a historical moment, but rather to teach ethics. Some traditions, such as the story of Yūsuf and Zulaykhā, may be told for other purposes outside the Qur'an, but the Qur'an uses these stories as parables and educational sites (Asad 2008, 642; Q. 21:82). Thus, Muhammad Asad understands the prophetic miracles from three steps:

One: Take the stories literally as moments in the lives of the prophets.

Two: Understanding stories metaphorically, referring to moments in the lives of prophets and the history of nations.

Three: Understanding stories as proverbs, folklore, and prophets as roles. There is no historical approach or factual basis for it.

There is a similar event in the adoption of cultural symbols and practices prevailing in the seventh century in the Arab region to issue some Islamic rulings and rituals. The rituals of Ḥajj and other acts of worship such as prayer and fasting undoubtedly contain pre-Islamic precedents. The scholars said that the Messenger of God restored the legitimacy of these acts of worship by restoring them to their Abrahamic origin and as God wanted them to be. As for secular historians, they do not acknowledge the existence of God, nor that the Ka'bah is in its origin from the buildings of Prophet Abraham and Ismail, but they see it as an ancient relic of the polytheists. Rather, the role of the Messenger of God was to take these rituals and customs that are widespread in the Ḥijāz and remove them from their origins and the myths associated with them, and then link them to the stories of the prophets of God and the family of Abraham in a new way. In his recitation of the Noble Qur'an and his teaching of the stories of the prophets, the Messenger of God may have been the first to relate the story of the building of the Ka'bah and the rituals of Ḥajj to Prophet Abraham and his descendants.

Therefore, if there is no Abrahamic origin for a specific ritual of Ḥajj, its

legitimacy is completed by the Messenger of God himself. I mean, if the Messenger of God adopted that ritual, it would be sufficient to change its consideration of any importance it had for the polytheists. Perhaps Muhammad Asad's hypothesis about the adoption of tradition is understood in a similar way. The Qur'an has adopted and considered the famous stories of the prophets by drawing the reader's attention to the timeless truths and moral lessons inferred and learned from the stories. Thus, the Qur'an becomes a book of proverbs, not a book of history. For Muhammad Asad, the proverbs that feature the prophets of the Israelites show the spiritual journey that all human beings must take: each person must grapple with the evil nafs, the sins that deceive, and the challenges of drawing near to God. The question of the origins of these proverbs and whether they contain similar historical stories is outside the scope of investigation and is unimportant to the explanations they provide regarding human beings' spiritual journey. These parables show the psychological makeup of everyone who embarks on this spiritual journey to understand God and to live a religious and righteous life. Given that the prophets embarked on the same spiritual journeys, each parable could apply universally to all prophets.

### 3. A Comparison of Modernist Interpretations of the Qur'an

#### 3.1. Verses on Moses

فَأَلْقَى عَصَاهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ ثُعْبَانٌ مُّبِينٌ \* وَنَزَعَ يَدَهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ بَيْضَاءُ لِلنَّاظِرِينَ

So he cast his staff; and behold, it was a serpent manifest And he drew forth his hand, and lo, it was white to the beholders (Q. 7:107-108).

فَأَلْقَاهَا فَإِذَا هِيَ حَيَّةٌ تَسْعَى ... وَاضْمُمْ يَدَكَ إِلَى جَنَاحِكَ تَخْرُجُ بَيْضَاءَ مِنْ غَيْرِ سُوءٍ آيَةً أُخْرَى

And he cast it down, and behold it was a serpent sliding ... Now clasp thy hand to thy arm pit; it shall come forth white, without evil That is a second sign (Q. 20:20 & 22).

Muhammad Asad seems to accept miracle stories in their traditional and sometimes literal form (Asad 2008, 526-527). A quick look at the explanations of Asad indicates that he left the narratives and stories of miracles unchanged in his initial writings, especially in the narratives related to our master Moses. For example, when Moses miraculously struck the stone with his staff (Q. 2:60), Asad accepted this account without any comment (Asad 2008, 20).

Muhammad Asad described the transformation of Moses' stick into a snake in a footnote as a "real transformation", while the transformation of magicians was an illusion. The white hand of Moses shone with "a

transcendent brightness peculiar to his prophecy” (Asad 2008, 249-250). It is not clear why Asad accepts the miracles of Moses in their traditional understanding. Perhaps he accepted the historicity of these events as a result of his upbringing and training in reading the Hebrew Bible and the rabbinic tradition. His Jewish upbringing and religious education may have provided a basis for certainty that the stories about Moses’ life were more historical than parable. Asad published his commentaries on nine chapters of the Qur’an through the support of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia and the participation of the World Muslim League (Kramer 1999, 225-247). Perhaps the initial support Asad received made him avoid allegorical interpretations of some of the stories that appeared in his initial writing. Another possibility is that Asad’s ideas changed to a radically civil and skeptical direction in the two decades that he worked on his explanations. Asad’s acceptance of miracles as the paranormal at times remains ambiguous.

Muhammad Ali explained the miracles of the staff of Moses naturally by interpreting the incidents as visions (Ali 1917, 351). In our time his theory is considered strange that in rare cases nations may experience collective vision. But this theory was popular with sociologists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Secular academics who have sought to discover and theorize the primary cause of world religions have claimed that all nations can collectively experience altered states and visions. A group can witness the same vision (of an animal, spirit, etc.) which gives rise to a certain type of belief or ritual that then develops. Ali reminds the reader that the stories of Moses’ stick and the white hand have a symbolic significance (Ali 1917, 627). The stick represented the group that would triumph over its enemies, while the white hand represented Moses’ rational arguments that “shine brightly” (Ali 1917, 352). It is important to point out that the fundamental position is to consider the entire language of the Qur’an a symbolic language. Perwez seems to argue this position, while Muhammad Ali tries to provide historical foundations for the images used in the verses, which is that the Children of Israel and Pharaoh and his people saw a collective vision. Farid follows Muhammad Ali in denying the actual transformation of the stick into a snake and explains the events as a collective vision with symbolic significance as well (Farid 1963, 815-816, 1627-1628). Muhammad Ali and Farid said that Moses faced deceitful men who had the ability to deceive people’s eyes with many miracles. This is the meaning of verse 116 of Surat Al-A’raf<sup>1</sup> that means that they misled the people with the art of illusion, which is an ancient art in the Pharaonic civilization. This art relies on deluding viewers with a set of supernatural abilities through the use

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1- فَلَمَّا أَفْقَا سَحَرُوا أَعْيُنَ النَّاسِ وَاسْتَرْهَبُوهُمْ وَجَاءُوا بِسِحْرِ عَظِيمٍ (الاعراف/116)

of optical illusions and sleight of hand. The verse does not mean that magicians had the ability to actually violate natural laws.

Pervez understood the miracles of Moses as symbols of da‘wah (Parwez 2010, 241-242, 430-431). The ability of our master Moses to argue logically in the court of Pharaoh represents the white hand and the stick that turned into a snake. Perwez said that Pharaoh’s magicians were priests who spread false religion.

### 3.2. Interpretations of Verses on Solomon

وَوَرَّثَ سُلَيْمَانَ دَاوُدَ وَقَالَ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ عَلَّمْنَا مَنْطِقَ الطَّيْرِ وَأَوْتَيْنَا مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ إِنَّ هَذَا لَهُوَ الْفَضْلُ الْمُبِينُ \* وَحَشِرَ  
لِسُلَيْمَانَ جُنُودَهُ مِنَ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسِ وَالطَّيْرِ فَهُمْ يُوزَعُونَ \*... \* وَتَقَعَّدَ الطَّيْرَ فَقَالَ مَا لِيَ لَا أَرَى الْهُدُودَ أَمْ كَانَتْ مِنَ الْغَائِبِينَ

And Solomon was David’s heir and he said, Men, we have been taught the speech of the birds, and we have been given of everything surely this is indeed the manifest bounty. And his hosts were mustered to Solomon, jinn, men and birds, duly disposed ... And he reviewed the birds; then he said, How is it with me, that I do not see the hoopoe? Or is he among the absent? (Q. 27:16-17 & 20)

For Muhammad Ali, the presence of the bird in Solomon’s army alludes to several possibilities, and he is hesitant in his interpretation of the verses. To interpret verse Q. 27:16, it says that Solomon used carrier birds to carry messages “from one place to another” (Ali 1917, 746). Then it is possible in another situation that the birds in Solomon’s army may be understood as a quick fortress.

Muhammad Ali understands the jinn as allegorical references to “men belonging to mountain tribes under Solomon’s control” (Ali 1917, 746). In the story of Solomon and the hudhud, Solomon was angry at the absence of the hudhud and declared that he would torture or kill the bird if it was absent without an acceptable excuse. When the hudhud came, it was revealed that it had been delayed by an exploratory operation in the Kingdom of Sheba. The hudhud described the citizens as polytheists and described their polytheism according to its belief in God and monotheism (Q. 20:27-26).

Muhammad Ali, Farid, and Perwez understood “the hudhud” as the name of the intelligence policeman in Solomon’s army. Muhammad Ali explained that “throwing a small bird into severe torment with a great royal power like Solomon, and a bird’s witness to monotheism is inconceivable” (Ali 1917, 351; Farid 1963, 1970-1972). For these three authors, it is inconceivable to understand the hudhud story at face value.

Like Muhammad Ali, Farid hesitated to interpret the birds in Solomon’s army. It is possible that they were men who were metaphorically described as birds or carrier birds (Farid 1963, 1966). If they are understood as men,



then they are righteous men who have reached the highest heavens and the highest paradise with their piety. It is possible that birds can be interpreted as chivalry as well. As for the jinn in Solomon's army, Farid says that they are men of great size.

Perwez interprets animals and jinn in the Qur'an allegorically as references to different people (Parwez 2010, 579-580). Perwez understands "birds" as a reference to horses and their riders, or potentially a group of tribes called "birds". Then the hudhud is understood as the name of the chief of the cavalry or the master of a tribe in the army of our master Solomon. Some modernists pointed to the Arab customs of naming individuals and tribes after animals as evidence for this interpretation.

Muhammad Asad regards the stories about Solomon's life and the animals as the folklore used in the Qur'an to teach moral truths (Asad 2008, 642). But he does not attempt to interpret the verses metaphorically. Rather, he interprets the verses about the hudhud according to the apparent meaning, and the reader says, "This story reminds us that the smallest animal can possess knowledge that Solomon, with all his wisdom, was ignorant of" (Asad 2008, 646).

### 3.3. Verses on Christ

أَتَىٰ أَخْلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنَ الطَّيْرِ كَهَيْئَةِ الطَّيْرِ فَأَنْفَخُ فِيهِ فَيَكُونُ طَيْرًا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ وَأُبْرِئُ الْأَكْمَهَ وَالْأَبْرَصَ وَأُخْبِي الْمَوْتَىٰ

To be a Messenger to the Children of Israel saying, I have come to you with a sign from your Lord I will create for you out of clay as the likeness of a bird; then I will breathe into it, and it will be a bird, by the leave of God I will also heal the blind and the leper, and bring to life the dead, by the leave of God I will inform you too of what things you eat, and what you treasure up in your houses Surely in that is a sign for you, if you are believers (Q. 3:49).

إِذْ قَالَ اللَّهُ يَا عِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ اذْكُرْ نِعْمَتِي عَلَيْكَ وَعَلَىٰ وَالِدَتِكَ إِذْ أَبَدْتُكَ بِرُوحِ الْقُدُسِ نَكَّحْتُكَ النَّاسَ فِي الْمَهْدِ وَكَهْلًا وَإِذْ عَلَّمْتُكَ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَالتَّوْرَةَ وَالْإِنْجِيلَ وَإِذْ تَخْلُقُ مِنَ الطَّيْرِ كَهَيْئَةِ الطَّيْرِ بِإِذْنِي فَتَنْفُخُ فِيهَا فَتَكُونُ طَيْرًا بِإِذْنِي وَ تُبْرِئُ الْأَكْمَهَ وَالْأَبْرَصَ بِإِذْنِي وَإِذْ تُخْرِجُ الْمَوْتَىٰ بِإِذْنِي وَإِذْ كَفَفْتُ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ عَنْكَ إِذْ جِئْتَهُمْ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ فَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْهُمْ إِنْ هَذَا إِلَّا سِحْرٌ مُّبِينٌ

When God said, "Jesus Son of Mary, remember My blessing upon thee and upon thy mother, when I confirmed thee with the Holy Spirit, to speak to men in the cradle, and of age and when I taught thee the Book, the Wisdom, the Torah, the Gospel and when thou create out of clay, by My leave, as the likeness of a bird, and thou breath into it, and it is a bird, by My leave and thou heales the blind and the leper by My leave and thou bring the dead forth by My leave and when I restrained from thee the Children of Israel when thou came unto them with the clear signs, and the unbelievers among them said, This is nothing but sorcery manifest"(Q. 5:110).

Modernists agree that the miracles attributed to Christ were allegorical

symbols of his calling (Ali 1917, 156-158; Asad 2008; Farid 1963, 401-402; Parwez 2010, 117-118, 195). Modernists are sure, as a result of some religious texts and the universal human experience, that no one returns from death (Ali 1917, 157; Farid 1963, 402-403). The meaning of Jesus Christ reviving the dead is his role in reviving faith and remembering God for those who suffer from spiritual sluggishness or whose faith has been lost. As for the blind, they are those who did not see the truth and strayed from it, so the Lord Christ healed them with his call. Farid said: “The leper is he who did not complete his faith” (Farid 1963, 402). Perwez said that they are individuals who have been denounced for their bad personalities and vile being, so they were metaphorically described as lepers (Parwez 2010, 117-118).

### 3.4. Verses on Yunus

وَإِنَّ يُونُسَ لَمِنَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ، إِذْ أَبَى إِلَى الْفُلِّكَ الْمَشْحُونِ، فَسَاهَمَ فَكَانَ مِنَ الْمُدْحَضِينَ، فَالْتَقَمَهُ الْخُوْتُ وَهُوَ مُلِيمٌ، فَلَوْلَا أَنَّهُ كَانَ مِنَ الْمُسَبِّحِينَ، لَلَبِثَ فِي بَطْنِهِ إِلَى يَوْمِ يُبْعَثُونَ

Jonah too was one of the Envoys. When he ran away to the laden ship. And cast lots, and was of the rebuffed. Then the whale swallowed him down, and he blameworthy. Now had he not been of those that glorify God. He would have tarried in its belly until the day they shall be raised (Q. 37:139-144).

فَاصْبِرْ لِحُكْمِ رَبِّكَ وَلَا تَكُنْ كَصَاحِبِ الْخُوْتُ إِذْ نَادَى وَهُوَ مَكْظُومٌ

So be thou patient under the judgment of thy Lord, and be not as the Man of the Fish (Yunus), when he called, choking inwardly (Q. 68:48).

Each interpreter understands the story of Yunus (Jonah) and the whale differently. No one among the modernists agrees with the classical interpretations of the Bible or the Qur'an. In a natural way, Perwez says that the whale did not swallow Yunus, but rather took his leg with his mouth before leaving him (Parwez 2010, 742, 1006). Muhammad Ali similarly says that the whale did not devour Yunus, but rather drew its heels to its mouth (Ali 1917, 876). The Qur'an describes Yunus in a conditional sentence meaning that if Yunus was not among those who glorify God, the belly of the whale would have been his grave and he would have remained in the sea until the Day of Resurrection.<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Ali interpreted the verses as hypothetical conditional statements that do not imply comprehensively or explicitly that Yunus entered the belly of the whale. In a surprising and inconsistent style, Muhammad Ali interpreted the ton as a metaphor for the tribe. Thus, the Qur'an is interpreted to say that if Yunus

2 - فَلَوْلَا أَنَّهُ كَانَ مِنَ الْمُسَبِّحِينَ، لَلَبِثَ فِي بَطْنِهِ إِلَى يَوْمِ يُبْعَثُونَ

had not been one of those who mentioned God, “he would have remained an ordinary man in his tribe” and would not have become a prophet (Ali 1917, 876).

Farid offered a traditional interpretation of Yunus' events, but added, “The story of Yunus as presented in the Qur'an may be a description of his spiritual ascension and may be read allegorically and interpreted accordingly” (Farid 1963, 2235). This final commentary on the story of Yunus opens doors for readers to understand the story of Yunus as an example of his spiritual ascent and ascension to God.

As a starting point, Muhammad Asad posits that the whole story of the whale is an allegorical one. When Yunus is charged by a whale, the event “symbolizes the deep darkness of a troubled spirituality” (Asad 2008, 778). Asad broke radically when describing the story of the whale as a “widespread story” and a “myth”. The author does not assume the existence of Yunus or the whale at all. For Asad, the Qur'an adopts traditional examples to bring the reader's mind to the virtue of frequent remembrance of God and repentance in times of spiritual darkness. The Legend of Yunus does not need to be based on historical events in order for the teachings of the text to be accurate and correct. The example of Yunus and the whale tells a universal story that describes the spiritual journey of everyone who embarks on it.

### 3.5. Divine Intervention

وَجَعَلْ مِنْهُمْ الْفَرْدَوَةَ وَالْحَنَازِيرَ وَعَبَدَ الطَّاغُوتِ أُولِيكَ شَرٌّ مَكَانًا وَأَضَلُّ عَنِ السَّبِيلِ

And made some of them apes and swine, and worshippers of idols they are worse situated, and have gone further astray from the right way (Q. 5:60).

فَلَمَّا عَتَوْا عَنْ مَا نُهُوا عَنْهُ قُلْنَا لَهُمْ كُونُوا قِرَدَةً خَاسِئِينَ

And when they turned in disdain from that forbidding, We said to them, Be you apes, miserably slinking! (Q. 7:166)

There is agreement among the interpretations of the modernists to understand these verses metaphorically (Ali 1917, 38; Asad 2008, 181, 260; Farid 1963, 132, 636; Parwez 2010, 47, 185). In their disobedience to God, the men of this group displayed animal-like hearts and minds and were neither believers nor rationalists. Thus, in the unseen, they are considered animals with God, but they continue as people in the life of this world. All the interpretations except Perwez carefully relied on narrations from the predecessors, such as Mujāhid, the student of Ibn ‘Abbās, who interpreted the ḥadīth metaphorically. This may lead the reader to believe that the famous interpretations understood the verse allegorically, but the opposite

is true. Most of the interpreters believed that a group of the Children of Israel were transformed after they disobeyed God's commands to observe the Sabbath. This event was not considered impossible and agreed with all the assumptions of the pre-modern era regarding religious beliefs, magic, and unseen matters. Since Perwez gives brief explanations, he often dispenses with reference to pre-modern interpretations or narratives.

#### *4. Conclusion*

After the Enlightenment, scientists discovered that no one confirmed any supernatural claims in the scientific way. Rather, the basis of all claims of a miracle is belief in the claims of a religious sect or its books. Similar to naturalistic Christians, some Muslims believed that since God created the natural world according to his will, the supernatural contained interruptions to the will and creation of God and they refused to believe that it occurred. Because secularists and atheists consider belief in the paranormal absurd, modern Muslims have had to interpret most of the miracles mentioned in the Qur'an metaphorically or naturally so as not to accuse the Qur'an of error. They said the Qur'an uses symbols and metaphors to anchor moral lessons.

Muhammad Asad said – especially among the modernists – that the stories of miracles adopted traditional myths as a site for teaching morals. The Qur'an sometimes rejects the historicity of myths, and sometimes it is silent about them. In both cases, the moral teachings are learned. Muhammad Asad says that proving the historicity of events is not the main goal of telling these stories. Some interpreters interpret a miracle metaphorically and then naturally in another case. Naturalists are the ones who interpret miracles in ways that do not contradict empirical observations of naturalism. In these cases, the texts described in poetic and symbolic form the natural and ordinary phenomena in the life of a prophet or his group. In other cases, they viewed miracles as rare, but nonetheless natural events resulting from natural processes. A major contradiction did not seem to exist between interpretations of Ahmadiyya and other modernists.

None of the modernist Muslims admit to being influenced by the ideas of Europeans or earlier Christians who discussed the subject of miracles in the seventeenth century. There is no tangible evidence that the Muslims in this study read the writings of the Christians who preceded them by two centuries, except perhaps Muhammad Ali. Muhammad Ali referred to the Encyclopedia of the Jews and some academic articles in the New Testament to clarify the validity of the conclusions and substantiation of his beliefs offered by non-Muslim scholars. However, Muhammad Ali did not claim to

follow the methodology or assumptions of these writers. In an era of Europe's political ascent and domination of Islamic countries, these modernists will be at a loss to spread the charge of their conservative Muslim peers and imitators of the scholars of Islamic schools of thought that they are influenced by Western thought. This perhaps explains the silence of the modernist commentators on the similarity in their ideas with some Christians who wrote a few generations before them.

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