Review of Isra Yazicioglu, *Understanding the Qur’anic Miracle Stories in the Modern Age.*

*Shifa Amina Noor*

*University of Virginia*

Anyone glancing at the title of this book before reading it could reasonably infer that it would offer a selective treatment of miracle narratives from the Qur’anic scripture. This assumption might have been strengthened by perusing Part 1, which opens with Qur’anic quotations referencing miracles, or by noting Yazicioglu’s own admission in the Introduction that this “book was born out of a casual conversation that first puzzled and then intrigued me” on the subject of the intelligibility of a virgin birth (1). However, a careful reading of Yazicioglu’s work reveals that she is not directly concerned with the “Qur’anic miracle stories,” but primarily with modes of understanding, i.e., with a number of methods that have been employed historically to understand not just Qur’anic miracle references/miracle-stories, but also to comprehend the phenomenon of a “miracle” in general. As such, the scope is much broader than a cursory glance may suggest. Yazicioglu offers a useful primer for anyone interested in the ways that prominent philosophers, mystics, and exegetes have interpreted accounts of miracles, both within the medieval and the modern period, and also within the Islamic and non-Islamic intellectual traditions.

The book opens by noting that there is, minimally, a triadicity of meanings associated with the term “miracle” in an Islamic scriptural context: “the Arabic term *mu’jiza*” has the sense of an act of God intended to overwhelm miscreants and opponents, the Qur’anic word *aya* is employed in the sense of God’s “signs” including everyday natural phenomena, and finally, there is the “supranatural” sense of “miracle” as a departure from the regular course of events (4-5). By drawing attention to these crucial distinctions at the outset, Yazicioglu invites readers to re-consider the ways in which they approach the Qur’anic text and to be attentive to those idioms within which Qur’anic miracle-talk could be most organically placed. In this vein, Chapters 1 and 2 present two Islamic interpretive approaches: that of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd, respectively. Chapter 1 presents Al-Ghazali as a “literalist” with regard to the interpretation of Qur’anic miracle accounts, but not a “thoroughgoing” or “exclusivist” one; Ghazali’s emphasis is that metaphorical readings of scripture should not be privileged over literal ones, but that both may be valid (24-25). Yazicioglu highlights the epistemological anxiety which spurred Ghazali’s intellectual and spiritual maturation in order to describe Ghazali’s contributions towards demonstrating the empirical un-verifiability and the rational non-entailment of causality (26-29). Ghazali, therefore, sees the predictability of events not as a “logical given but a gift” from the Divine Will (41). “Miracles” are thus de-escalated by Ghazali. They are as noteworthy as ordinary natural phenomena, and they become evidentiary signs towards proving the authenticity of a prophet only when certain social, contextual conditions are met by the claimant to prophecy (39).

In contrast, Chapter 2 presents Ibn Rushd’s position as the adoption of a more “cautious approach to miracle stories” (43). Although Ibn Rushd’s commentary and criticism of Al-Ghazali are well-known in the Islamic intellectual tradition, Yazicioglu does well to emphasize that, in their preference for a balance of metaphorical and literal approaches, both thinkers are actually more similar scriptural interpreters than they are generally held to be (48). Their difference lies, rather, in the ways in which they construe “metaphorical” or “literal” readings to be meaningful. Yazicioglu
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departs from her carefully balanced treatment of both thinkers in order to contrast Ghazali’s “more open approach to the text” with Ibn Rushd’s “more limited” project of integrating Aristotelian philosophy and scripture (49). Ibn Rushd’s trust in the Divine wisdom imbued in the natural order does not seem to be so problematic for Yazicioglu as his clear demarcation of intellectual classes (51), an approach which she understands to revolve around “the principle of not giving “meat to babes” (50). What remains unclear in Ibn Rushd is the meaning and interpretation of miracle stories for the demonstrative, philosophically trained class, against the common person who is given the leeway to interpret miracles literally (67).

Part 2 of the book “detours” into the philosophies of David Hume and Charles Sanders Peirce. Yazicioglu reads Hume as a (re-)incarnation of the debate between Ghazali and Ibn Rushd (68), in that Hume’s demonstration that “causal inferences are not logically necessary” mirrors Ghazali’s epistemological sensitivity (75). His “solution” also mirrors Ghazali’s, whereby he does not simply appeal to the demands of practicality to counter an obsessive skepticism but rejects the skeptical demand that one must have reasons in order to continue to hold one’s natural beliefs (80). However, Hume’s rejection of miracles is, in Yazicioglu’s view, inconsistent with his critique of necessary and natural causality and, ultimately, based in a caution against radical skepticism (89).

Charles Sanders Peirce, on the other hand, offers a “fallible epistemology” that sees “value in miracle narratives for the purposes of scientific inquiry” (91). Peirce’s critiques of Cartesian universal “paper doubt” of individual certainty and of singularly inferential reasoning all appear to be sympathetic to Hume and Ghazali’s observations about the limits of human individual knowledge (95). Peircean pragmatism (i.e., pragmaticism) instead admits that human beings begin from assumptions about the world, and it “defines” concepts in terms of their experimental and experiential consequences, “preclud[ing] many meaningless discussions on ontology and metaphysics” in Yazicioglu’s view (97). There are “real patterns” in the natural world, but these patterns are not rigid. They cannot be held as inviolable agents in and of themselves, but as descriptions of regular events (118). Such a “humble” Peircean epistemology paves the way for a contemporary Muslim exegete, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, whose mode of scriptural interpretation “agrees” with the Peircean framework (119).

Part 3 outlines Nursi’s exegetical contributions. Yazicioglu describes Nursi’s fourfold framework for Qur’anic interpretation—i.e., speaker, audience, purpose and context—to highlight that “approaching the Qur’an as God’s speech to humanity for the purpose of their guidance directly influences its interpretation” (130). The Qur’an speaks, for Nursi, in two registers of revelation and inspiration; the former is addressed to God’s intimate associates, like prophets, and the latter is universally addressed to all creation. The availability of these two registers in the Qur’an, particularly that of inspiration, means that “the excuse that the divine is too complicated for human beings to understand is unfounded” and that human beings must “read the Qur’an and the universe in light of each other” because the scripture is intended for human comprehension (131-132). In Yazicioglu’s reading of Nursi, one of the ways in which the Qur’an speaks to humanity is by rendering the universe unfamiliar and re-casting natural events as “miracles” in the sense of being “beyond the capacity of the apparent natural cause” which produced them. Moreover, the Qur’anic preference for the word aya rather than mu’jiza is significant in that both regular and irregular natural events are unified under the rubric of Divine semiotics, rather than being a jarring miracle vs. nature dichotomy (136). Nursi, therefore, reconciles Ibn Rushd’s emphasis on the order of the natural world with Ghazali’s epistemological concerns. His move is to interpret “the
commonsensical notion of causality as a stepping-stone … to be employed in reaching for a deeper awareness of the sustainer of the universe” (142). Ultimately, the pragmatic implications of this move are far-reaching for Yazicioglu. Nursi’s hermeneutics pave the way for “apparently irrelevant scriptural texts” to be re-discovered in their layers of richness and meaning and to be able to both challenge and affirm human assumptions about commonsensical natural causality (176).

A number of critical points arise in reading this book, some of which were indicated in the foregoing summary. First, there is the breadth of its scope; although only 176 pages in length (excluding endnotes, bibliography and index), its range is remarkably vast, from the medieval to the early and late modern and from the Islamic to the non-Islamic. In describing each of the five thinkers’ interpretations of miracles, Yazicioglu attempts to provide a brief historical overview which situates them within their milieu and to weigh the merits and demerits of each position as she sees them. However, a fruitful set of methodological and comparative questions may have been missed in the choice to treat no less than five highly influential thinkers within one project. One example is on p. 90, where Yazicioglu claims, “Indeed, Hume, Ghazali and Ibn Rushd are all uncomfortable with a view of miracles that undermines science.” Later, in the section on Nursi, she continues this thread by describing Nursi’s “pro-science” interpretation of scripture. In this case, the implications of significantly different understandings of “science” for all four thinkers are left unexplored. This matters because, on the one hand, Yazicioglu’s work draws out the different miracle-interpretations of these thinkers by reference to their significantly different metaphysics, but on the other hand, she adopts a less explicit method in describing what is meant by “science” and “nature” as common to all four.

Another example is found in her reading of Ibn Rushd vs Ghazali. Ibn Rushd is presented, largely accurately, as an Aristotelian Islamic scholar who was concerned with the differing intellectual capacities of those exposed to different modes of philosophical and ethical training. However, the parallel social epistemology in Ghazali is not discussed or developed. Does not Ghazali’s biography, now a treasure of Islamic civilization, show a narrative of progression from “speculation” to “mystical experience”? One possible answer to this question may have been to show how Ghazali’s framework resists such a dichotomy. However, by leaving open and unaddressed the issue of Ghazali’s possibly hierarchical arrangement of modes of knowing and unknowing in comparison to Ibn Rushd, Yazicioglu misses an opportunity to develop her own insight regarding the ways that Ibn Rushd and Ghazali may be more harmonious than might be expected.

A different set of unaddressed comparative questions is more directly methodological. Although Yazicioglu does not explicitly state that the purpose of her work is comparative, it is a comparative work insofar as it juxtaposes five different thinkers on the common themes of miracles and natural causality. Only in the conclusion of Yazicioglu’s work do we find a statement about the relative merits of the various thinkers she surveys: “While this book has offered a fair-minded and emphatic reading of each figure, I trust that it is clear to my readers that I find the overall approaches of Ghazali, Peirce, and Nursi to be more insightful and coherent than Ibn Rushd’s and Hume’s” (167). An exposition of this at the outset would have clarified, for the reader, what roles these interpretive tools, metaphysics, and philosophies of Ghazali, Peirce, and Nursi are more
coherent than Ibn Rushd and Hume for Yazicioglu’s project is simply left re-asserted at the end. Yazicioglu notes in the conclusion:

Few books today combine a close analysis of classical Islamic texts with that of early and late modern Western material. With such an exciting innovation, this book has brought into sharp relief the issues at stake in interpreting miracle stories in the modern age. David Hume and Charles Peirce acted as our translators, so to speak, rendering for us in modern terms the challenges and promises lurking beneath a classical Muslim debate (166-167).

Yet, in many ways, the insight that some of the best comparative works offer to their readers is precisely the difficulty of taking one thinker, placed in a specific social and cultural context, as a “translator” of another into a sharply contrasted milieu. Yazicioglu correctly remarks about natural causality that “[f]amiliarity is risky” (164), but this distrust of familiarity does not translate into the degree of methodological self-reflection that is necessitated by her comparative work.

In the first paragraph of this review, the reader had the option of understanding the Qur’an’s miracle-talk not just as “story” but also as “reference.” There are many other registers in which miracle-talk could be framed. “Story” is a prominent word in the title of Yazicioglu’s book, yet the genre of narrative as a distinctly useful/problematic mode for Qur’anic miracle-talk is insufficiently explored. Yazicioglu distinguishes between the evidentiary value of miracles for those witnesses situated in the same historical time-frame as the miraculous event, and the “logical possibility of an event” post-miracle, “across the ages” (40). It seems like narrative, and the re-telling of the miracle-event as a tale, are also important phenomena for Yazicioglu. But if the logical non-entailment of natural causality is a common theme across Yazicioglu’s argument, and if this non-entailment at least opens up the possibility of a literal reading of miracles, why employ the register of “narrative” at all? Yazicioglu admits, in one place, that a full treatment of Qur’anic miracle stories would require engaging Sufi exegetes and thinkers like Rumi and Ibn al-Arabi (174). This admission seems to be quite perceptive, because a reading of Mawlana Rumi’s poetic-narrative Mathnawi would reveal that “story” and “veracity” need not be mutually exclusive terms. However, even if there is not enough space within the saturated intellectual terrain of this book for an exploration of Sufi exegesis, an account of why story-telling as a distinct genre matters within and for the understanding of Qur’anic scripture is needed. Warranted if the term “miracle stories” is to be employed repeatedly as Yazicioglu’s preferred mode of referencing Qur’anic miracle-talk.

This book is a valuable contribution to the field of contemporary scriptural interpretation. It is ambitious and written in a refreshingly engaging style that is balanced in its claims. In offering us the space to begin discussing the pressing issues of comparison in religious studies from within the study of scriptural exegesis, Yazicioglu has provided an inroad to promising future avenues for cross-disciplinary and cross-traditional work within scriptural interpretation and reasoning.