



AL KITAB
The Renaissance Project

Chapter 15

What the Quran Got Wrong?



Mohamed Al Qadhi

Criticism

Over the course of this book, we have travelled to space, investigated the Earth's environment and met the wonderful organisms living on our planet all in a bid to provide evidence that the Quran, written 14 centuries ago, had accurately described scientific facts that have only been discovered in modern times. By doing so, I hoped to show that the Quran and Science are aligned and thus debunk myths of their contradiction. I also hoped to strengthen the argument that the Quran has a divine author as the knowledge displayed in this book was not known to any man during the time of its composition.

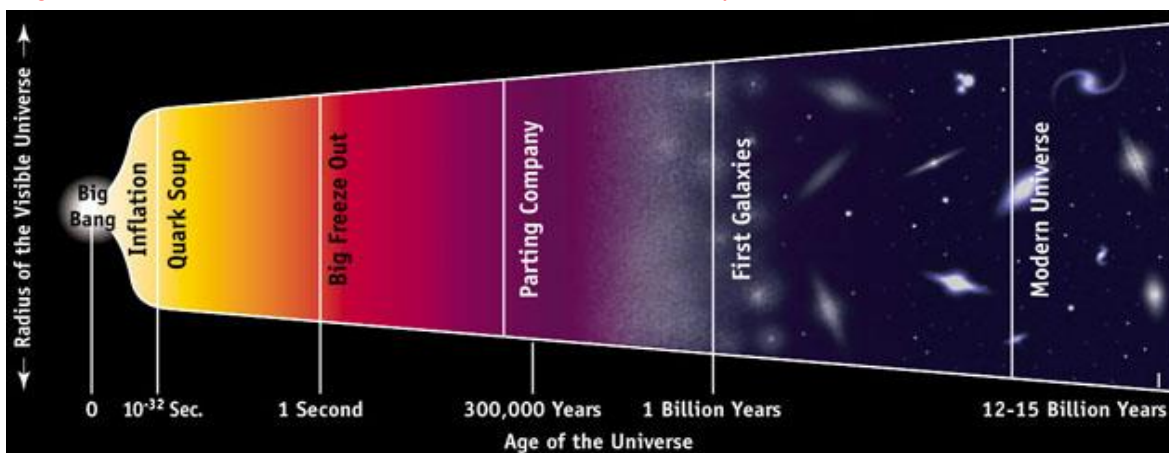
However, though the book has highlighted plenty of such instances, it still has not achieved its primary aims. This is because highlighting the Quran's advanced knowledge of our world does not necessarily mean that the Quran and science are aligned:

The book thus far has focused on what the Quran had observed accurately but has not investigated whether the Quran has made any false observations. In other words, we've seen what the Quran has "gotten right" but what if it got other things "wrong"? Surely, if the Quran has made other scientific observations that were proven to be false then we cannot claim alignment between religion and science. In such a case, the Quran would not be viewed as the work of the divine as God is infallible.

Thus, in order to show that the Quran's observations on nature and its surroundings are not at odds with modern science, we must also be able to prove that the Quran hasn't made any false observations. In this chapter, I will investigate some of the key scientific criticism levied against the Quran and display why such criticism is unwarranted. You will notice that much of the criticism mirrors the criticism levied against the Bible and Torah⁽¹⁾ but is, in fact irrelevant to the Quran. Let us start with the universe once again.

1 Was the universe created in six days?

Figure 15.1: Illustration - The Universe's Timeline Since Inception



One of the biggest criticism of monotheistic religions (Islam, Christianity and Judaism) is the fact that all three holy books of the Torah, Bible and Quran seem to claim that the Universe was created in six days. As seen in Chapter 2, we now know that the number is closer to 13.7 billion years. This fact seems to discredit all three religious scriptures and puts the argument of alignment between religion and science to rest. While I am not qualified to assess the case for the Torah or the Bible, I can very much say that such criticism towards the Quran is unfounded. To understand why, consider the following two points:

Criticism

First, as we have seen in Chapter 6, the Quran and Islamic literature has heavily featured the idea of the relativity of time. During several instances, the Quran had stated that a day in heaven or hell or according to different observers like angels and God could equate to an astronomical number of years here on Earth. This is also mentioned in the Prophet's sayings "Hadeeth". The verses in the Quran describing the creation of the universe in six days are not referring to days as observed by humans on Earth, but as days counted by God. Based on the relativity of time idea, six days could equate to billions of earth years, which does not contradict scientific findings.

Second, while the word "Yawm" in modern Arabic language is used to signify one day (a period of time between sunrise and sunset), it was not always used as such. "Yawm" in classical Arabic and in the Quran's verses was also used on occasions to describe fixed periods of time unrelated to sunrise and sunset. These time periods could stretch for years and were used to describe the time for a particular cycle or process in question.

قُلْ كَمْ لَبِثْتُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ عَدَدَ سِنِينَ (112) قَالُوا لَبِثْنَا يَوْمًا أَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ فَسَلِ الْعَادِينَ (113) (23, 112-113)

He will say: "What number of years did you stay on earth?" (112) They will say: "We stayed a Yawm or part of a Yawm: but ask those who keep account."

An example of this is the verse above which describes an instance during Judgment Day where God asks human beings how much time they had spent on Earth to which the people reply - we have only spent a Yawm or less. In this case, a large number of years are described as a "Yawm" which in this context, signifies the time period equivalent to humanity's entire life span.

How is this fact relevant? Allah describes the creation of the Universe in 6 "Ayam" which is the plural of Yawm. Even if one were to discredit the relativity of time argument previously discussed, it is clear that Yawm as used in this context could be describing time periods or cycles unrelated to earthly days as seen in the previous example. "Yawm" here could signify a particular stage in the creation of our universe that could equate to large or small time periods. Thus, the creation of the world in six "days" could be read as "the world was created in six stages/ cycles".

In conclusion, while the creation of the Universe in six earthly days is preposterous, the two points above show that the Quran does not propose this as days counted by Allah can equate to billions of earthly years and also, because the word "Yawm" could be describing time periods that are completely unrelated to the Earth's sunrise and sunset.

2 Is the Earth Flat?

وَالْأَرْضَ مَدَدْنَاهَا (19) (15, 19)

"And the Earth, We have stretched it out (19)

Another criticism levied against the Quran is related to its description of Earth. Critics claim that the Quran describes our planet as flat. This is false and all indications show that the opposite is true; that the Quran had made strong hints of its spherical nature. Historically speaking, Muslims had accepted that the Earth was round and measured its exact circumference by the 9th century⁽¹⁾, and Muslim scientists and people had never viewed this fact as a contradiction to the Quran's teaching. So what is the basis of the criticism?

Criticism

There are numerous verses that describe the morphing of our planet to suit human needs. God has used several words to describe this process such as “madaha”, “dahaha”⁽²⁾, and “basataha”. As always, such words are very difficult to capture in the English language. The most commonly used and accurate translation for all three words is to “stretch out”. Thus, the Quran mentions that God has “stretched out” Earth for its inhabitants. Critics have interpreted this as proof to their claims. They point out that “stretching out” the Earth would make our planet flat giving little consideration to whether these verses are describing Earth the planet, or earth the element (Ground or soil – see chapter 10 for more details).

Even if the verses are referring to the planet as a whole, a stretched out planet does not indicate that it is flat. As a matter of fact, a “stretched out” Earth from an inhabitant’s perspective (which is the context of the verses in question) can only be accomplished if the Earth had a round shape. To explain this further, consider a hypothetical flat Earth and Bob’s journey to explore it.

From Bob’s initial perspective, the flat Earth looks “stretched out”. Bob can walk for thousands of miles on even land and the ground would look “stretched out” and “flat” as far as his eyes can see. But what happens if Bob keeps walking in the same direction? Eventually, he will reach a point where the flat Earth would presumably end. If Bob were to walk further, he would ridiculously “fall” off earth and drift into space. Thus, if Bob was standing at the edge of our planet, he would no longer see a “stretched out” Earth in front of him; only the dark space that he has grown accustomed to.

Figure 15.2: Artist Illustration of a Flat Earth – End of the World



Bob realizes that the only way the Earth would look consistently “stretched out” for an inhabitant of the planet is if the planet was round. On a round planet such as our own, land and sea are always stretched out in front of us (they never end). Thus, stretching out the Earth for its inhabitants can only be interpreted as morphing it into a roundish nature which would allow this phenomenon.

3

The Sun orbits the Earth?

Other criticisms claim that the Quran holds the view that the Sun and Moon orbit around the Earth:

(36, 37) (37) وَالشَّمْسُ تَجْرِي لِمُسْتَقَرٍّ لَهَا ذَلِكَ تَقْدِيرُ الْعَزِيزِ الْعَلِيمِ

“And the sun runs on its fixed course for a term (appointed). That is the Decree of the All-Mighty, the All-Knowing. (37)

The verses in question state that the Moon and Sun drift in their own orbits. Critics have sighted this as proof that the Quran promotes the false idea that Earth is orbited by the Sun (that the Earth is at the center of the solar system).

Criticism

The criticism has no basis. The Quran only mentions that the Sun and Moon move according to their own orbits which is scientifically accurate⁽³⁾; it does not state that the Sun orbits around the Earth. Furthermore, the verse above clearly describes the rising and setting of the sun from an inhabitant's point of view.