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## ‘Abd al-Majīd al-Zindānī’s *i’jāz ‘ilmī* Approach: Embryonic Development in Q. 23:12–14 as a Scientific Miracle

Melanie Guénon

UNIVERSITY OF HAMBURG

### Introduction

Since the 1970s, there has been a trend for reassessing traditional interpretations of the Qur’anic passages mentioning embryonic development in light of modern medical knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, models of embryonic development are relevant with regard to bioethical issues such as in vitro fertilisation, prenatal diagnosis, embryo research, abortion, and the like. The invention and development of new medical technologies and procedures during the twentieth century requires consideration from the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Moreover, nation states have to define legal frameworks for the application of certain technologies. Thus, questions relating to embryonic development have been the focus of high profile discussions by both religious scholars and experts from different scientific fields in three decisive international boards for contemporary Muslim legal thought: the so-called *fiqh* academies.<sup>2</sup> The majority of Muslim scholars who have participated in these discussions consider the three main stages of embryonic development mentioned in Q. 23:12–14 to take place within 120 days of conception.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, this view has been considered the majority Muslim view in academic research.<sup>4</sup> The discussions in the *fiqh* academies are, in fact, the prevailing focal point of academic research when it comes to the assessment of Muslim bioethics and Islamic legal rules regarding modern biotechnology. This is significant, since the academies’ statements are influential in Islamic legal thought and are regularly referred to in *fatwās* or legal commentaries by Muslim scholars.<sup>5</sup>

While the 120 days of embryonic development may rightly be regarded as the majority view within the *fiqh* academies, scholars in the West have neglected an alternative discourse on embryonic development. Outside the specialised discussions of the academies, a second discourse exists that is based mainly on the so-called Ibn Mas‘ūd

*ḥadīth*, canonised by Muslim, supporting the view that these three stages take place in 40 consecutive days. Hence, this article aims to create a more comprehensive picture of Muslim perceptions of embryonic development in the context of interpreting Q. 23:12–14. I assert that this view has been well-known and widespread since the 1980s, as can be seen from several publications both in the popular and the (semi-) academic sphere. A key figure in this alternative discourse is the Yemeni preacher and politician, ‘Abd al-Majīd al-Zindānī (b. c. 1942). His reference to natural science as an exegetical resource has enabled him to redefine the stages of embryonic development indicated in the Qur’anic text. Contrary to the participants of the *fiqh* academies, al-Zindānī does not pursue a legal or normative approach, but rather what can be called the *i’jāz ‘ilmī* approach. That is, his intention is to demonstrate and verify the presence of scientific knowledge in the Qur’an and the Sunna. By following this exegetical trend, al-Zindānī seeks to reveal the concurrence of Qur’anic passages with modern science and thus demonstrate the divine nature of the Qur’an. Although al-Zindānī’s engagement in the discourse on embryonic development and his personal connections in this sphere have not gone unnoticed in current scholarship, they have not, thus far, been so closely analysed.<sup>6</sup>

I call his approach *i’jāz ‘ilmī* since he seeks to establish harmony between the Qur’an and the modern science of embryology.<sup>7</sup> Commonly, the term *i’jāz* refers to the inimitability of the Qur’an and thus denotes its miraculous nature.<sup>8</sup> *I’jāz ‘ilmī* can be translated as the ‘scientific miracle’ of the Qur’an, thus indicating a ‘scientific inimitability’.<sup>9</sup> Exegetes engaging in *i’jāz ‘ilmī* thus ‘identify a correspondence between some passages of the Qur’an and (what they perceive or present as) “scientific data” or “facts” to argue that such correspondence is proof of the divine origin of the Qur’an itself’.<sup>10</sup> Even though another term, *tafsīr ‘ilmī*, is often used interchangeably, the two expressions must be distinguished: *tafsīr ‘ilmī* is a kind of Qur’anic exegesis that refers to science in order to explain natural phenomena that are mentioned in the Qur’an, whereas *i’jāz ‘ilmī* seeks to illustrate scientific ‘facts’ that are described in the Qur’an but have only recently been recognised by science. In other words, science helps to interpret the Qur’an in *tafsīr ‘ilmī*, whereas in *i’jāz ‘ilmī*, the Qur’an is understood to outline scientific facts.

The most prominent advocate of the concept of *i’jāz ‘ilmī* was the French surgeon, Maurice Bucaille (1920–1998).<sup>11</sup> He gained a reputation in the Muslim world with his book, *The Bible, the Qur’an and Science: The Holy Scriptures Examined in the Light of Modern Knowledge*,<sup>12</sup> in which he strives to prove harmony between the Qur’an and contemporary science. More specifically, he stresses that several Qur’anic passages concur with science and states that this can only be explained by regarding the Qur’an as being of divine origin.<sup>13</sup> Since the publication of his book in 1978, many more books discussing the relationship between Islam and science have been published, particularly by Muslim authors who regularly refer to Bucaille.<sup>14</sup> As Stenberg points out, this genre



MADE YAYINLANDIKTAN  
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN

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