

Quran 41:9–12 – A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Commentary

Abstract

This commentary examines Qur'an 41:9–12 in depth, exploring its scientific, philosophical, and theological implications. It demonstrates that these verses, when properly understood, do not conflict with the modern scientific timeline (a ~13.8 billion-year-old universe and a ~4.5 billion-year-old Earth). We analyze the Arabic wording and structure of the passage – notably the use of the conjunction *thumma* ("then" or "furthermore") – which is key to understanding the sequencing of creation events in these verses. Insights from classical Islamic exegesis (tafsīr) and modern scholars (including Dr. Maurice Bucaille and Muhammad Asad) are incorporated, showing how Muslim scholarship has long reconciled the Qur'anic account of creation with scientific knowledge. Common criticisms related to these verses (such as the misconception that they imply **eight** days of creation or that the Earth was fully formed *before* the heavens) are addressed and resolved. The commentary highlights how Qur'an 41:9–12, far from being scientifically problematic, can be seen as mirroring key scientific concepts – for example, the primordial "smoke" (gaseous nebula) of the early universe – and presenting a logically ordered creation narrative. Philosophically and theologically, this analysis underscores the Quran's purposeful language that speaks effectively to a 7th-century audience yet remains remarkably relevant in the era of modern cosmology. An epilogue reflects on the broader implications of harmonizing Qur'anic revelation with contemporary scientific understanding and classical scholarship.

Introduction

Surah *Fussilat* (Chapter 41 of the Qur'an), verses 9–12, contains a concise narrative of the creation of the Earth and the heavens. In these verses, God instructs the Prophet to proclaim God's role as Creator: **"Say: Do you verily disbelieve in Him Who created the earth in two days? And do you set up equals with Him? He is the Lord of all the worlds."** It then describes God establishing firm mountains in the earth, blessing it with provisions in four days, **"in accordance with [the needs of] those who ask,"** and thereafter turning to the heaven, which was *dukhan* ("smoke" or haze), to fashion it into seven heavens in two days, adorning the lowest heaven with lights (luminaries) and ordaining the destiny of each heaven ¹ ². The passage thus outlines the creation in a total of six "days" or phases, mentioning the Earth and its features, the primordial smoky state of the heavens, and the formation of seven heavens with celestial lights.

These verses have prompted discussion – both among classical scholars and modern readers – regarding the sequence and duration of creation they imply. At first glance, one might wonder if the Qur'anic description conflicts with modern scientific knowledge. Science estimates the universe's age at about 13.8 billion years and the Earth's formation around 4.5 billion years ago. Does the Quranic phrase "six days" contradict these vast timescales? Do the verses imply that Earth was created before the rest of the cosmos, as a literal reading might suggest, and if so, is that at odds with the astrophysical reality that stars and galaxies existed long before our planet? Furthermore, critics have pointed to an apparent total of *eight* days in these verses (adding up the mentioned "two days" + "four days" + "two days") as opposed to the six days

mentioned elsewhere in the Quran, alleging a contradiction. Such questions call for a careful, in-depth analysis of the text, informed by Arabic linguistics, classical tafsīr, and modern scientific understanding.

In this commentary, we will address these issues head-on. We will first examine the Arabic structure of Qur'an 41:9–12, paying special attention to the conjunction **thumma** (ثُمَّ) and how it affects the interpretation of the chronological sequence. We will see that a proper understanding of *thumma* and the narrative style of the Quran resolves the confusion about the order of creation. Next, we will explore how early Muslim scholars understood these verses, and how they reconciled them with the Quran's consistent assertion that **Allah created the heavens and the earth in six "days"** (with "day" understood as an epoch or stage). We will incorporate insights from **Muhammad Asad's** translation and exegesis, which offers a modern, scientifically aware perspective on these verses, as well as the analysis of **Dr. Maurice Bucaille** in *The Bible, the Qur'an and Science*, who examined Qur'anic statements in light of modern cosmology. Along the way, we will address the common criticisms related to Qur'an 41:9–12 – including the **"six vs. eight days"** question and the supposed issue of the Earth being created "before" the heavens – and demonstrate that these criticisms are based on misreadings. Our exploration will show that, far from conflicting with science, these verses align with several **astrophysical realities** (such as the gaseous origin of the universe and the intertwined formation of stars and planets) ³ ⁴, and they reflect a subtlety of language that has allowed Muslim thinkers to harmonize scripture with scientific truth. Finally, from a theological and philosophical standpoint, we will reflect on how these verses underscore the **Omnipotence and wisdom of God** in creation, using language and concepts that have spoken meaningfully to audiences across centuries.

The Arabic Structure and the Question of Sequence

A close reading of the Arabic text of Qur'an 41:9–12 is crucial to understanding the intended sequence of creation events. The passage is structured as a **juxtaposition of two domains**: the Earth (with its formation and provisioning) and the heavens (with their formation into seven firmaments and adornment with celestial lights). These are knitted together in the narrative by the conjunction **"thumma"** (Arabic: ثُمَّ) which appears at the start of verse 11: *"Then/Moreover He turned to the heaven while it was smoke..."*. The term *thumma* in Arabic primarily means "then" (suggesting sequence), but it can also mean "furthermore" or "in addition" without implying a strict chronological order ⁵ ⁶.

Islamic scholarship has long noted this nuance. **Muhammad Asad** explicitly addresses the role of *thumma* here, observing that *"whenever the particle thumma is used to link parallel statements – statements not necessarily indicating a sequence in time – it has the function of a simple conjunction, and may be rendered as 'and'."* ⁷. In other words, in classical Arabic usage *thumma* can serve to **add a new statement or emphasize a point** rather than to denote a subsequent event in time ⁶ ⁸. In fact, commentators give examples of this stylistic usage: for instance, Qur'an 68:13 describes a sinner as *"utterly cruel – and, in addition to that (wa ba'da dhālika), base-born"* ⁹. Obviously, the person's ignoble birth did not occur *after* his cruelty; the phrase "after that" is idiomatic, emphasizing another shameful quality rather than timing his lineage after his misdeeds. By the same token, the phrase *"thumma istawā ilā as-samā"* in 41:11 can be understood to mean *"and then (furthermore) He turned to the heaven"* – a **continuation of the narrative** that need not imply that the heavenly creation came strictly *after* the completion of all earthly creation. Indeed, Dr. Maurice Bucaille notes that *thumma* in this verse can simply indicate a **juxtaposition of two accounts** (earthly and celestial creation) "without any intention of [one] following the other" ¹⁰. The Quran often employs such literary devices, shifting focus from one aspect of creation to another, *"leading man to reflect on divine Omnipotence, beginning with the Earth and ending with the Heavens,"* without necessarily spelling out a linear chronology ⁵.

Closely related to the *thumma* question is the enumeration of “days” (Arabic: **ayyām**, which in context means **periods or epochs**). Qur’an 41:9 mentions “two days” for the creation of Earth, 41:10 mentions “four days” for provisioning it, and 41:12 mentions “two days” for fashioning the seven heavens – which might appear to total 8 days. However, the **overwhelming consensus** of classical Quranic commentators is that the “four days” in verse 10 **include** the initial two days of verse 9 ¹¹. In other words, God created the Earth in two periods and in the same overall four-period span determined its features (mountains, sustenance, etc.), then completed the heavens in an additional two, yielding a total of six periods. **Muhammad Asad** follows this interpretation, interpolating the words “and all this He created” into verse 10 to clarify that the four days cover the *entire* process of forming the Earth and its provisions ¹². This resolves the apparent “eight day” problem – the Quran consistently teaches **six** phases of creation, as stated explicitly in several other verses (e.g. Qur’an 7:54, 10:3, 11:7, etc.). Indeed, the classical exegetes from as early as the Prophet’s companions have been clear on this point. For example, **Ibn Kathīr** (14th c.) writes that in Surah 41 “the two days [of creating the earth] and the four days [of furnishing it] are inclusive, making four in total, and then the two days of heaven’s creation make six”, firmly rejecting any notion of eight periods ¹¹. The supposed contradiction is thus based on a misreading; the text itself, properly understood, stays within six epochs of creation.

Furthermore, the word “**yawm**” (day) in Arabic can signify a long era or eon, especially in cosmological contexts. It “**does not necessarily denote a 24-hour earthly day**”, as Yusuf Ali notes, but rather “*very long Periods, or Ages, or Aeons*” ¹³. Muhammad Asad translates *yawm* in these verses explicitly as “aeon” ¹⁴ to avoid the mistaken impression of a literal day. The Quran elsewhere even suggests that **divine “days” are not like human days** – for example, 70:4 and 22:47 speak of days equal to 50,000 or 1,000 years by human reckoning. Classical scholars like **Abu al-Su’ud** (16th c.) had already interpreted the “days” of creation as **stages or events (Arabic: *nauba*)**, not ordinary days ¹⁵. Recognizing *yawm* as an indefinite period allows us to reconcile the Quranic account with the immense timescales of cosmic evolution. The “**six days**” can be understood as six **phases** of creation, whose lengths are not specified and can easily span billions of years. In this light, Qur’an 41:9–12 is not giving a quantitative scientific timeline but a qualitative, ordered description of creation in six distinct phases – a description that, as we shall see, can accommodate the 13.8-billion-year age of the universe and the 4.5-billion-year age of Earth with no contradiction.

Scientific Implications: Cosmos, “Smoke,” and the Stages of Creation

When read with an appreciation for its language, Qur’an 41:9–12 shows a striking consonance with **modern scientific understanding** of the origin of the universe and the formation of the Earth. The verses assert that Allah “**turned to the heaven while it was smoke (dukhan)**”, an expression that is remarkably similar to how cosmologists describe the early universe. According to astrophysics, the early universe (shortly after the Big Bang) consisted of hot, opaque **gases and subatomic particles** – essentially a **primordial “smoke”** or nebula. Dr. Maurice Bucaille highlights that the Quran’s reference to a “**predominantly gaseous**” universe origin corresponds exactly to the modern concept of the **primary nebula** from which galaxies and stars developed ¹⁶. In fact, the Quran elsewhere states, “*the heavens and the earth were [once] a single entity, and then We parted them*” (21:30), which many have seen as an allusion to the Big Bang and the common origin of all matter. While our focus is on 41:11, it is noteworthy that **the image of an initial smoke-like state** in this verse aligns with what science tells us about the early cosmos ¹⁷. **Muhammad Asad**, in his commentary on 41:11, notes that *dukhan* (“smoke”) “*obviously corresponds to the concept of the primary*

nebula put forward by modern science.” ¹⁸ It is all the more impressive considering the Qur’an expressed this over fourteen centuries ago, long before the advent of cosmology.

Crucially, Qur’an 41:11–12 indicates that from this “smoke,” the **seven heavens** were formed and the nearest heaven was adorned with **luminaries (masabih)** – an Arabic term often understood to mean stars or celestial lamps. This suggests that **stars and galaxies** (the luminous bodies of the cosmos) were set in place as the heavens took shape. Modern science confirms that **stars** (including our sun) formed long before the Earth completed its formation. Stellar formation from nebular clouds is the process that eventually also gives rise to planets – a sequence the Qur’an intimates by mentioning heavenly lights in the skies. Bucaille points out that the Quranic text captures the **“interlocking of the two stages”** in the formation of a star (like the Sun) and its satellite (like the Earth) – **a single process of condensation and separation** ³ ¹⁹. In astrophysical terms, the Earth and our Sun originated from the **same nebular cloud**; the Sun formed at the center and the remaining material coalesced into planets. This harmonizes with the Quranic narrative: the Earth is mentioned as having been created, but at the point when the heaven is still “smoke,” implying the Earth’s material was present within that cosmic smoke. The subsequent completion of the seven heavens and installation of celestial lamps can be seen as the formation of structured **cosmic systems**, including stars – and only with the star (the Sun) in place could the Earth as we know it be “spread out” and filled with life-supporting provisions. There is, therefore, no scientific discrepancy in understanding these verses to mean that **the material Earth took shape alongside the heavens** in an early stage, even as the fully formed Earth (with its mountains, water, and life) emerged later, once the cosmic environment (the heavens, stars, etc.) was ready. As Bucaille observes, **modern science has revealed that star and planet formation are intertwined events**, and the Qur’an “*very clearly*” reflects this by describing a creation process starting from a unified smoky mass and then separating into heaven and earth ³ ⁴.

Another scientific aspect to consider is the Quranic mention that Allah “*placed therein (the earth) firm mountains... and apportioned its sustenance*” in four periods (41:10). Geology tells us that the Earth went through a tumultuous early phase before it became hospitable: it cooled from a molten state, water emerged to form oceans, tectonic activity produced continents and mountains, and only after millions of years did it stabilize to support continuous life. The Qur’an’s depiction of an initial creation of Earth followed by a period of shaping it (mountains) and blessing it with **sustenance (qut)* – which can be understood as everything that nourishes life, from water to vegetation – maps remarkably well onto this understanding. The text implies that** making the earth livable was a subsequent process *after its initial creation. In fact, classical commentators like al-Jalālayn explicitly noted that “He made it (the earth) flat (daḥāḥā) – for it had been created before the heaven, but without having been spread out (i.e. made fully functional)”*, and only after the heaven was completed was the earth spread out and its sustenance decreed ²⁰ ²¹. This indicates an early intuition that the Earth existed in some unfinished form prior to being “spread out” and completed – an intuition now echoed by science, which tells us that Earth’s atmosphere, rain cycle, and biosphere developed well *after* the planet’s initial formation.

Yet another point of convergence is the Quranic concept of **“seven heavens.”** While the number *seven* in Arabic can function as a symbol of completeness or plurality, many scholars (classical and modern alike) interpret the “seven heavens” as referring to **multiple layers or realms of the cosmos** ²². Muhammad Asad comments that this term “**may be taken to denote the multiplicity of cosmic systems or layers in the universe**” ²². In modern terms, one might think of the vast array of galaxies and galactic clusters as constituting “heavens upon heavens.” The Qur’an’s **cosmic pluralism** is noteworthy – unlike the Bible’s fairly geocentric, small-scale cosmos, the Qur’an repeatedly speaks of “heavens and earth” (always in the plural “heavens”) and even hints at “**earths**” plural (e.g. 65:12 mentions Allah created “seven heavens and of the

earth the like thereof"). Dr. Bucaille draws attention to this, noting that astrophysics has confirmed "the very large number" of galaxies in the universe (aptly corresponding to the Quranic plural *samāwāt*, heavens) and that the idea of multiple earth-like worlds is "*considered to be quite feasible*" by specialists today ²³ – a striking agreement with the Quran's wording, even if such worlds (exoplanets) were unknown to pre-modern people. In short, the Qur'an 41:9–12 does not present a primitive or scientifically outrageous picture of the universe; rather, when carefully interpreted, it beautifully correlates with an **expanding, evolving cosmos** full of countless stars and planetary systems, with Earth taking its place in that grand scheme at the appropriate stage.

Lastly, it must be emphasized that the Qur'an is **not a science textbook** and its primary aim is not to teach astrophysics – rather, it uses natural phenomena to **inspire reflection on God's power and wisdom**. That being said, as Maurice Bucaille famously argued, "*there is in any case absolutely no opposition between the data in the Qur'an on the Creation and modern knowledge on the formation of the Universe.*" ²⁴ This absence of conflict (and presence of intriguing parallels) is in stark contrast to certain pre-modern creation narratives. For instance, the Biblical Book of Genesis describes vegetation being created on Earth *before* the creation of the Sun, a sequence universally recognized as scientifically untenable. The Qur'anic account, by avoiding such missteps – it never places the emergence of life or mountains before the existence of heavenly "lamps" – and by couching its description in language that can accommodate scientific realities (e.g. "*smoke*" for primordial gas, Earth's development in stages), stands out as **highly consonant with scientific reasoning** ²⁵ ²⁶. This has been a point of reflection for Muslim scholars and scientists: the Quran's creation verses, including 41:9–12, encourage believers to **contemplate the natural world**, and they find that doing so strengthens their appreciation of the Quran's words rather than undermining it.

Philosophical and Theological Reflections

Beyond the scientific harmonization, Qur'an 41:9–12 offers rich **philosophical and theological insights**. The very structure of the narrative – moving from Earth to heaven – can be seen as a way to **engage the human reader's perspective**. Earth is our immediate abode, filled with the signs of God's providence (mountains, sustenance, life); by starting with Earth, the Quran anchors the discussion in what is familiar and directly relevant to us. Then, by saying "*thumma*" (moreover/then) and directing our attention to the vast heavens, the Quran expands the scope of contemplation to the entire cosmos. This **ascending gaze** from Earth to sky serves to humble the listener: "*He is the Lord of the Worlds*" (41:9) – the Lord not just of our little world, but of all worlds. It evokes a sense of proportion: if we marvel at Earth's features, how much more so the heavens? Indeed, elsewhere the Quran asks, "*Are you harder to create, or is the heaven that He built?*" (79:27). This rhetorical question, as **Zia H. Shah** notes, is meant to "*remind the skeptical audience that the God who was powerful enough to build the immense heavens can surely recreate human beings after death.*" ²⁷ ²⁸ In the context of Surah 41, verses 9–12 come as part of an address to those who doubt or deny God. The **theological message** is that the One who created all this in precise measure is alone worthy of worship and is fully capable of ultimate authority (such as resurrection and judgment, even if that is not explicitly mentioned in these verses, it is the broader Quranic theme).

The **dialogue** in verse 11 between God and the not-yet-formed heaven and earth ("*He said to it and to the earth: 'Come [into being], willingly or unwillingly.'* They said: '*We come in willing obedience.*'") is particularly profound. This exchange is not to be understood in a simplistic, literal sense of heaven and earth speaking, but rather, as the classical commentators explain, it is **metaphorical**. Asad quotes the renowned exegete **Zamakhsharī**, who said this kind of allegorical representation (*tamthīl*) illustrates that "*when God wills a thing to be, He but says unto it 'Be' – and it is*", so **all creation submits inevitably to His command** ²⁹ ³⁰.

The heaven and earth “responding” in obedience is a vivid way to express that **nature has no resistance to God’s will**. Philosophically, this can be seen as the Quran’s way of conveying *the contingency of the universe* – that is, the universe is not an independent, self-subsisting entity but one that exists and behaves as it does only by virtue of God’s decree. The image invites the reader to reflect on the **absolute sovereignty of the Creator**: even the greatest expanses of creation (the vast heavens and the broad earth) are subject to His command. This notion aligns with Islamic theological teachings on **tawḥīd** (divine unity and lordship) – everything in creation, from the largest galaxy to the smallest atom, is united in its utter dependence on and obedience to Allah.

Another philosophical point emerges from the Quran’s mention that creation took place in stages (“six days”). This implies that God’s creative act was **orderly and deliberate**, not chaotic or haphazard. It invites the question: *why* would an Omnipotent God take “time” to create, when He could create everything instantaneously? Muslim theologians and philosophers have answered that the staging of creation is for *our* understanding – to teach us that **the universe unfolded according to divine wisdom and measure**. As one reflects on this, one appreciates the **processual nature of existence**; things develop and mature over time by God’s will. This counters both a nihilistic view of a random universe and a simplistic view of an instantaneous magic-like creation. Instead, the Quran inspires a view of creation as a **systematic deployment of divine command**, reinforcing that “*He perfected everything which He created*” in due course (32:7). Modern thinkers see in this a harmony with the idea of a universe that developed from simple origins to complex forms under laws of nature instituted by God – a concept that strengthens faith in a God who not only initiates creation but sustains and guides it purposefully.

From a theological standpoint, it is also significant that Qur’an 41:9–12, like a number of other verses, pairs the **creation of Earth and heaven with Divine beneficence**. God did not merely create a raw planet; He “*bestowed blessings on it*” and “*apportioned its sustenance*” (41:10). Classical commentators like **Al-Qurṭubī** note that this phrasing encompasses all the blessings and resources Allah placed on Earth for His creatures ³¹. There is a moral lesson in this: the One who created the universe also nurtures and provides, hence He is *al-Rahman*, the Most Merciful, and humans should respond with gratitude and worship. For a Muslim audience, reflecting on these verses reinforces **tawḥīd rubūbiyyah** (the oneness of God in His Lordship) – God alone created, organized, and provided, so no other being deserves our dependence or obedience in the way He does.

Finally, by reconciling these verses with modern science, we do more than just defend the scripture – we uncover **depths of meaning** that enhance our spiritual reflection. Recognizing that “smoke” in verse 11 points to the Big Bang state can instill a sense of awe at how scripture and science, each in its own language, speak about the same reality. Realizing that the Qur’an avoids the scientific pitfalls of earlier scriptures (e.g. not asserting impossible sequences like an Earth with life before the Sun) can strengthen a believer’s conviction in the Qur’an’s **divine origin** ²⁵ ²⁶. Maurice Bucaille famously argued that such congruence is beyond human foresight – “*How could a man, [Prophet Muhammad], living fourteen hundred years ago have made statements that science has been able to verify only in the present day?*” ²⁶ ³². The implication is that **faith and reason**, Quranic revelation and scientific inquiry, are not enemies but allies in the pursuit of truth. Theologically, this feeds into the Islamic understanding that the “**āyat**” (signs) of God are both *revealed* in the Quran and *created* in the natural world, and they will never truly contradict each other. Any apparent tension is resolved by deeper study and reflection, as we have attempted in this commentary.

Insights from Classical and Modern Exegesis

Muslim scholars across the centuries have grappled with the interpretation of Qur'an 41:9-12, and their insights show a remarkable continuity in affirming the coherence of the text. It is enlightening to see that **classical tafsīr** already contained solutions to the questions modern readers raise. For instance, regarding the issue of **sequence (Earth first or heaven first)**, classical exegetes developed a reconciliatory understanding: **the Earth was indeed created before the heavens, but only in a basic, unformed state, and then it was spread out (completed) after the heavens were made.** This view is recorded in the commentary of **al-Jalālayn** (15th c.), which states on verse 41:11, *"He made it flat, for it had been created before the heaven, but without having been spread out."* ²⁰ . Similarly, a commentary attributed to **Ibn 'Abbās** (a companion of the Prophet) explains that after the heavens were created, Allah *"spread the earth upon the water,"* and even mentions a time span of "2,000 years after that" for the earth's spreading ³³ . While we need not take the number literally, this indicates an understanding of a **temporal gap or difference** between Earth's initial creation and its later development. **Ibn Kathīr** summarizes the matter by affirming that *"the earth was created (in an initial form) before the heaven, but the spreading of the earth (its final shaping) took place after the creation of the heavens"* ³⁴ ³⁵ . This **exegetical consensus** shows that our contemporary resolution – that there is no real contradiction, as Earth's creation and heaven's creation were interwoven with Earth's completion coming last – is not a modern rationalization but has roots in classical scholarship. Even without modern science, early Muslims understood the Quran to be saying that Earth and heaven were made in a complementary process, not a contradictory one.

Another area where classical and modern tafsīr converge is on the nature of the "six days." The famous early historian and commentator **al-Ṭabarī** (10th c.) reported traditions from the Companions that interpret *yawm* in these verses as long epochs. While some literalists in history did think of six ordinary days, the more prevalent scholarly view (and certainly the only plausible one after the rotation-based definition of "day" is considered) is that these are **six heavenly periods**. **Al-Rāzī** (13th c.) mused that these could be stages known only to God, and cautioned against limiting God's power by our temporal frameworks. In modern times, Yusuf Ali and others explicitly write in their footnotes that the "days" are **"aeons or very long periods"** ¹³ , and Muhammad Asad's choice of the word "aeon" in his translation has been mentioned. Thus, classical tafsīr did not insist on a young universe – a point sometimes lost in modern discussions. The door was always open for Muslims to accept an ancient universe and Earth, as indeed many did even before the proof from modern science (for example, some medieval Muslim astronomers and philosophers posited that the "days" of creation symbolize ordered phases rather than literal time units).

Modern exegesis, building on this classical foundation and informed by scientific discoveries, continues to elucidate these verses in a way that bridges scripture and science. **Muhammad Asad (d. 1992)** provides one of the most relevant commentaries for our topic. In *The Message of the Qur'an*, aside from the translation choices we noted, Asad's **footnotes** delve into reconciling the verses with scientific concepts. He notes that the Quran's repeated reference to "six days" is "purely allegorical" and intended to **affirm that the universe had a definite beginning in time and underwent development**, countering the idea (held by some philosophers historically) of an eternal, uncreated universe ³⁶ . In explaining 41:11, Asad emphasizes that *thumma* does not always denote time sequence ⁷ , thereby aligning the verse with others like 79:27-33 which clearly imply the heavens' precedence. He also interprets *the "seven heavens" as seven cosmic systems or layers*, noting that number seven in Arabic often signifies **multiplicity or completeness** ²² . On the verse about the heavens and earth responding obediently to God, Asad (quoting Zamakhsharī) beautifully clarifies it as allegory, as we discussed, reinforcing a **theological reading** rather than a literalist misunderstanding ²⁹ .

Other modern scholars echo these points. For example, **Sayyid Quṭb** in *Fi Zilāl al-Qurʾān* (20th c.) stresses the majestic power of God in these verses and does not dwell on any “conflict” with science – for him, there is none; the emphasis is on Allah’s command and the submissive response of creation. **Abul A’lā Mawdūdī** (20th c.) in his tafsīr *Tafhīm al-Qurʾān* acknowledges the stylistic use of “after that” as we saw, giving rhetorical examples ³⁷. When it comes to the **order of mention (Earth then heaven)** in 41:9–12 versus the **actual chronological order**, modern commentators often refer to Surah 79:27–33 as a clarifying passage. Mawdūdī and others note that in Surah 79 it is plainly stated that the heaven was constructed first and the spreading of the earth came “after that” – a chronological sequence using the unambiguous phrase *ba’da dhālika* (“after that”) ³⁸. Hence, they argue, **Qurʾān 41:9–12 should be read in harmony with 79:27–33**, not in contradiction. The language in 41:11 (*thumma*) is more flexible and context-driven, whereas 79:30 (*ba’da dhālika*) is explicitly sequential, indicating that whenever the Quran *intends* to specify an order, it does so clearly. This perspective, shared by Bucaille as well, concludes that **no special significance should be attached to whether “earth” or “heaven” is mentioned first in a given verse** ³⁹ ⁴⁰. The Quran uses both orders in different places, and, as Bucaille notes, “*the position of the words does not influence the order in which the Creation took place, unless it is specifically stated.*” ⁴¹.

It is worth noting that **Western critiques** or polemical claims of contradiction (for instance, the suggestion one finds on some skeptic websites that Qurʾān 41:9–12 is a “scientific error”) have been robustly answered by contemporary Muslim scholars. The *Sapience Institute*, for example, points out that “*both Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Asad make clear that...41:9–12 refers to six days, not eight, as the four days include the two*”, aligning with the traditional view. They also highlight that *thumma* can mean “moreover” ⁵ ⁷, dismantling the claim that the Quran teaches a false Earth-before-stars cosmology. In academic discourse, non-Muslim scholars of Islam have also noted the Qurʾān’s **avoidance of clear-cut sequential detail** in most creation passages. The Quran doesn’t give a step-by-step Genesis-style chronology; rather, it **alludes** to various aspects of creation in different contexts – sometimes emphasizing God’s throne over the waters (11:7), sometimes the heavens and earth “joining” and “separating” (21:30), or the “**six days**” as a sign of deliberation (7:54). This thematic and non-linear presentation actually *helps* in harmonizing with scientific truths, because it does not bind interpreters to a rigid timeline that could be falsified. The Qurʾān, in a sense, **leaves room for human discovery** to fill in the details of *how* creation unfolded, while it focuses on the foundational truth that **all of it is from a Wise Creator**. Maurice Bucaille appreciated this quality, arguing that the Quranic description of creation is “*quite different from the [Biblical] one*” and notably free of the scientific inaccuracies that plagued the latter ⁴² ³².

In summary, both classical and modern exegesis of Qurʾān 41:9–12 reinforce the idea that there is **no contradiction** either within the Quran (between these verses and others) or between the Quran and established scientific knowledge. Instead, we find a long tradition of interpretation that understands the text **holistically and metaphorically** where appropriate, yielding a coherent picture: **God created the earth and heavens in six great epochs, fashioning the cosmos from a gaseous origin and preparing Earth as a habitable domain after the heavens were set in order**. This picture, fascinatingly, is **compatible with our current scientific picture**. Such harmony has been a source of faith-strengthening reflection for Muslim scholars throughout history.

Addressing Common Criticisms

Having explored the text and its interpretations, we can concisely address the most **common criticisms** directed at Qur'an 41:9-12 and provide answers based on the aforementioned analysis:

1. **"Do these verses imply eight days of creation, contradicting the Quran's elsewhere statement of six days?"** – No, they do not. As discussed, the **"four days"** in verse 10 include the initial **"two days"** of verse 9 ¹¹. This is affirmed by virtually all classical authorities and is reflected in reputable modern translations and commentaries. When read correctly, the count is 2 (earth) + **(inclusive) 4** (earth's features) + 2 (heavens) = **6 periods** in total. The Quran is internally consistent about six epochs of creation. The mention of four after two is a literary way of emphasizing the phases of provisioning the earth, not adding them arithmetically as separate from the first two. Therefore, any claim of "eight days" stems from a superficial reading that ignores the Quran's idiomatic expression and the clarifications provided by the Prophet's companions and scholars ¹¹.
2. **"Do these verses assert that the Earth was fully formed before the heavens, and isn't that scientifically inaccurate (since we know the universe existed long before Earth)?"** – The Qur'anic text, when understood in context, does not claim a **fully formed Earth** predating the heavens. What it describes is the Earth's creation mentioned first, followed by the heaven's formation, but with the use of *thumma* (moreover) allowing for a non-sequential reading ⁵. Even if one takes it sequentially (as some classical scholars did), they clarify that it was an **initial creation** of Earth (perhaps the gathering of its matter) that occurred before the heaven was completed, but the *completion* of Earth (its spreading and furnishing) happened *after* the heaven ²⁰ ⁴³. In either case, there is no conflict with the scientific timeline:
 - In a **non-sequential (parallel) reading**, the heavens and Earth are formed concurrently or in an overlapping manner during the six periods, which is consistent with the fact that our planet's material was drawn from the same cosmic events that produced the stars.
 - In the **sequential classical reading**, Earth's raw material existence is posited early, but the **habitable Earth emerges last**, after the stars are in place – which actually aligns with the fact that heavy elements (carbon, oxygen, etc., essential for life) had to be forged in earlier stars before Earth could have its life-supporting composition. So even here, Earth's full formation awaits the heavens' development. Scientifically, while Earth as a planet formed ~9 billion years *after* the Big Bang, the *matter* that makes up Earth (elements heavier than helium) was produced by stars that lived and died before our Sun. In that sense, one could say the Earth's creation was "written in the stars" from a very early point. The Quranic notion that Earth and heaven were once a joint entity of smoke and then separated ⁴⁴ resonates with this scientific understanding. Thus, when properly interpreted, Qur'an 41:9-12 does **not** insist on a chronological error like "Earth before the universe." Instead, it can be seen as describing the Earth's formation as part of a **larger cosmic process** initiated from a primordial gas – a process wholly in line with scientific accounts ³ ⁴.
3. **"How can 'days' be interpreted as billions of years? Isn't that stretching the text to fit science?"**
 - In Arabic, the word *yawm* (day) has a broad semantic range and need not mean a 24-hour period – especially when describing cosmic events where the sun-earth day cycle wouldn't even apply. The Quran itself uses *yawm* to indicate various long spans (as noted, "*a day with your Lord is like a thousand years of your reckoning*" in 22:47). Classical scholars recognized that the "six days" of

creation are **metaphorical periods** ¹³ . Therefore, understanding these as vastly long epochs (even billions of years) is not a forced modern re-reading but a well-grounded interpretation. It allows us to appreciate that the **Qur'an foreshadowed the concept of an evolving universe unfolding over eons**. By not specifying the length of these creation "days," the Quran leaves it open – thus accommodating whatever durations reality turns out to have. As Maurice Bucaille observes, the Quran *"allows for long periods of time numbering six...compared to which 'days' as we conceive them would be ridiculous"* ⁴⁵ ⁴⁶ . The focus is on *order and intentionality*, not on literal time spans, so interpreting the days as long eras is both textually and theologically sound.

4. **"Why does the Quran mention Earth first here if in reality the heavens (cosmos) came first?" –**

The Quran's choice of emphasis is guided by context and purpose. In 41:9–12, as in 2:29, the Earth is mentioned before heaven likely because the discussion is directed to human listeners to draw their attention immediately to the **bounty and signs of God on Earth** (which they directly benefit from), before pointing to the grander cosmological framework above them. It's a rhetorical technique, not a chronological assertion ³⁹ ⁴⁰ . Meanwhile, in many other verses (e.g. 79:27–33, 7:54, 10:3), the heavens are mentioned before Earth, especially when emphasizing God's cosmic majesty or the logical order of creation ⁴⁰ ⁴⁷ . The Qur'an thus uses both orders in different contexts. As Bucaille notes, apart from the clear sequential wording in Surah 79, *"there is not a single passage in the Qur'an that lays down a definite sequence"* between the creation of heavens and earth ⁴⁸ . Where sequence matters (as a point against doubters of Resurrection in Surah 79), the Quran says "after that." Where it doesn't, it freely says "and" or uses *thumma* in a loose way. Therefore, one should not insist that 41:9–10's order implies a contradiction with science; the **textual evidence within the Quran as a whole suggests flexibility** in expression, with the understanding that ultimately heaven and earth were a simultaneous creation (as explicitly stated in 21:30). Classical scholars like Ibn Kathīr have commented that there is **"no special significance"** to earth being mentioned before heaven in such verses, other than the contextual reason, because the actual creation was intertwined ⁴¹ . In summary, mentioning Earth first in this passage is a matter of perspective and emphasis, not a literal chronological claim that would conflict with the fact that the cosmos existed long before Earth.

5. **"If the Quran's account is so compatible with modern science, why wasn't this obvious earlier? Are we reading science into the Quran after the fact?" –**

This question goes beyond the text to how we approach scripture. The Quran *is* a timeless message, and it states truths in a way that people of various times can grasp at different levels. Early Muslims did understand key points correctly (no eight-day creation, epochs not days, Earth not fully formed before heaven, etc.), even if they lacked modern terminology. What modern science has done is **amplify our awe** at the precision and wisdom of those Quranic statements. For instance, pre-modern scholars praised the term "smoke" (*dukhan*) as eloquent, but only modern science can fully appreciate just how spot-on that term is for describing the primordial universe ¹⁷ . Rather than reading science *into* the Quran, we might say science has allowed us to read the Quran *with fresh eyes*, uncovering dimensions that were always there. The Quran has a remarkable way of articulating facts in a concise, accessible manner that does not become outdated. It spoke of the heavens and earth originating from one mass, of water as the basis of life (21:30), of orbits in space (21:33, 36:40), and of the sky as a protective canopy (21:32) – all truths that resonate strongly today. So, when we highlight the correspondence between Qur'an 41:9–12 and scientific concepts, we are *confirming* the text's integrity, not forcing it. As Maurice Bucaille concluded after extensive study, *"there is absolutely no opposition between the Qur'an and modern knowledge"* in the matter of creation ²⁴ , which is something that cannot be said about other ancient accounts. This lack of contradiction itself is

presented in the Quran as a sign of its divine origin (see 4:82). Therefore, a Muslim reader finds it natural, not contrived, to reconcile and indeed mutually illuminate the Qur'an and scientific facts. The process of understanding revelation is continuous; Allah invites us to ponder His signs endlessly, and each era of knowledge can enrich our understanding without changing the Quran's message.

By addressing these critiques, we see that the apparent problems dissolve under careful scholarly examination. The **theological consistency** and **scientific plausibility** of the Quran's words shine through. Accusations that the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) copied or plagiarized earlier creation stories are rendered implausible, because the Quranic account corrects key errors in those stories and presents a uniquely **accurate and elevated portrayal** of creation ²⁶ ³². As Dr. Bucaille rhetorically asked, if the Quran were merely borrowing from available lore, *"how could a man living fourteen hundred years ago have made corrections [to the Biblical narrative] to such an extent that he eliminated scientifically inaccurate material and made statements that science has verified only in the present day?"* ⁴² ³². This rhetorical question underlines a faith conviction: that the harmony between the Quran and reality is not coincidental, but intentional – a sign of the Quran's divine source.

Epilogue

In contemplating Qur'an 41:9–12 through the lenses of science, philosophy, and theology, we arrive at a deeper appreciation of the Quran's miraculous eloquence and wisdom. These four verses, succinct in wording yet rich in meaning, bridge the gap between **ancient scripture and modern scientific cosmology**. They exemplify how the Quranic revelation speaks to humankind across time: providing **spiritual guidance and inspiration** to its first listeners, and simultaneously containing layers of insight that become evident as our collective knowledge grows. For a Muslim audience, the exercise of reconciling Quranic descriptions with scientific understanding is not merely an apologetic endeavor; it is a form of worship through reflection (tafakkur) on the "signs of Allah" in the universe and in the Quran. In doing so, one's conviction in the unity of all truth – that the Creator of the heavens and earth is also the revealer of this Book – is strengthened.

The scientific age has given us grand vistas of the universe: a 13.8-billion-year-old cosmos expanding across billions of light years, stars born out of cosmic smoke, and planets coalescing around those stars, with Earth being a tiny but precious blue dot teeming with life. How humbling and thrilling it is to find that the **Qur'an's words encompass all these realities** in a majestic sweep: *"He is the Lord of all the worlds"* (41:9) – worlds far beyond our own; *"the heaven was smoke"* (41:11) – a truth of cosmic origins; *"He ordained them seven heavens"* (41:12) – hinting at the vast multiplicity of cosmic structures; *"He spread out the earth and placed firm mountains and bestowed blessings on it"* (41:10) – capturing the careful preparation of our world for life, a process we now understand in geological and biological terms. Such correspondences invite not arrogance, but **awe**. They prompt us to say *"SubhānAllāh"* (Glory be to God) with even greater understanding. As our knowledge expands, so too does our appreciation of what the Qur'an has been saying all along.

Philosophically, this investigation reaffirms that **faith and reason are complementary**. The Qur'an encourages us to use our intellect ('aql) and to observe the natural world; it never asks us to turn a blind eye to empirical reality. In the story told by verses 41:9–12, we saw that classical scholars did not shy away from reasoning about the order of creation or the meaning of "days." They employed the intellectual tools of their times, just as we use the tools of modern science today, to understand God's creation. The enduring message is that truth is coherent: the same God who authored the "book of nature" authored the book of

revelation. Any seeming discrepancies compel us to study more deeply, as opposed to creating an unbridgeable divide. In our era, Muslims who are scientists, scholars, and thinkers continue this tradition of inquiry, finding that the Quranic narrative holds up exceedingly well. In fact, it often **precedes human discovery**, offering hints that only later generations can fully appreciate – a phenomenon that many, like Maurice Bucaille, have described as a **source of faith-renewing astonishment** ²⁶ ³² .

Theologically, Qur'an 41:9–12 and our analysis of it reinforce the core Islamic belief in **tawhīd**. God is shown as the sole creator, sustainer, and ordainer of the universe. The verses refute any notion of associating partners with God (“do you set up equals with Him?” is asked rhetorically in 41:9) by highlighting that no other being shares in this creative act. The universe itself, in its obedient emergence at God’s command, testifies to the One-ness of its Maker. For Muslims, reflecting on this bolsters a sense of **trust in Allah** – the One who fashioned the stars and the Earth surely has power over our lesser affairs and our destiny. It also instills a sense of **responsibility**: the Earth, with all its provisions and stability (mountains as pegs, etc.), is an **amanah** (trust) from the Creator. Understanding that it was deliberately prepared for life, we are impelled to honor and care for it as part of our spiritual duty.

In conclusion, the journey through Qur'an 41:9–12 shows that when science, language, and tafsīr are brought together, a harmonious picture emerges. There is a profound **philosophical elegance** in how the Qur'an conveys truths – accessible yet not mundane, flexible yet not ambiguous. These verses exemplify that elegance: they accommodated the understanding of people in the 7th century, and they continue to challenge and fascinate the thinkers of the 21st century. Far from being a source of doubt, they become an invitation to deeper faith. As we wrap up this commentary, we echo the sentiment of countless believers and scholars: *the more we discover about the universe, the more we discover the timeless wisdom of the Quran*. In the words of the Quran itself, “We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that this [Qur'an] is the Truth” (41:53). Indeed, in the horizons of the cosmos and in the depths of these verses, signs abound for any who reflect. ²⁴ ³²

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