

An Analysis of the Mysterious Letters of the Qur'an

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ABSTRACT: *As one of the articles of Faith, belief in divine scriptures is incumbent upon every Muslim. Allah (SWT) revealed His Books to His Prophets before Muhammad (SAW) and that these Books have been revealed to early Prophets as Allah (SWT) revealed the Qur'an to Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The important thing to note is that Allah (SWT) has guaranteed the Glorious Qur'an immunity with regard to its accuracy and purity from all distortions, alteration and corruption, the privilege that has not been given to other revealed Books. On the other hand, mysterious letters, being unique letter combination that begins certain chapters of the Qur'an, form one of the aspects of Qur'anic miracles. These, however, are known to be Fawatih, openers as they form the opening verse of the respective chapters in the glorious Qur'an. There are twenty nine Surahs in the Qur'an with mysterious letters, containing fourteen different letters from the Arabic alphabets. It is against this background that this article intends to study the chapters of the Glorious Qur'an with mysterious letters and views of scholars on these Huruf al-Muqatta'at.*

I. INTRODUCTION:

In the name of Allah (SWT), the Beneficent, the Merciful. All praise is due to Allah (SWT), who created mankind and revealed to them the Glorious Qur'an and made it a source of advice, healing, guidance and mercy for those who have faith. May the benedictions and salutations of Allah be upon His chosen and seal of His Prophets, Muhammad, (SAW), his noble household and all his Companions (RA). Amin. Mysterious letters, as contained in the Glorious Qur'an, are regarded as integral part of the Surahs to which they are prefixed, and recited them accordingly. These mysterious letters that are read or recited by Muslims everyday are an explicit reminder and an emphatic witness to the Qur'an's proof that it is a perspicuous and fully detailed scripture. It is against this background that this paper intends to address the following; Qur'an as a revealed scripture, distinction of Qur'an from other revealed scriptures, an analysis of mysterious letters, Qur'anic Surahs with mysterious letters, mysterious letters in fourteen combinations and then the views of scholars on mysterious letters.

QUR'AN AS A REVEALED SCRIPTURE

It is impossible for a man to have produced a book like the Qur'an; a book full of knowledge and wisdom. Muslims conviction that the Qur'an is divine and also the word of God is not a blind belief. In order to give a clear picture about the authenticity of the Qur'an, the Al-Mighty Allah says:

This Book is revealed to you; let there be no hesitation in your heart about it so that you may thereby warn the unbelievers and remind the believers¹

The Qur'an does not only confirm earlier scriptures, but, as the final revelation, it clears up all uncertainties from these scriptures and is thus, the repository of perfect truth².

It is by this fact that the Qur'an we have today is the same Qur'an that was revealed to our Noble Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and that no corruption has taken place in the transmission of its message through the ages. It therefore, survived history and is perfectly preserved³. As a response to clumsy claim of the unbelievers who assert that the Noble Prophet (SAW) used to put together words and promulgate them as revelation, Almighty Allah states in the Glorious Qur'an:

When you, O Muhammad, do not bring them a revelation, they say: "Have you not yet invented?"

Tell them: "I follow only what is revealed to me from my Rabb. This Book contains veritable insight from your Rabb, a guidance and blessing for the true believers⁴

In accordance with the words of the scripture itself, Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the timeless word of God, 'the like of which no human can produce'. This trait of the scripture called inimitability (*I'jaz*) is based on the belief in the divine authorship of the Qur'an.⁵ Qur'an, being a revealed scripture is believed by Muslims to be divine, rather than human, in origin. The wisdom behind the revelation of the divine scriptures to certain Prophets is to communicate the commandments and guidance of Allah (SWT) to humanity in order for them to get salvation in this world and the next world.

Relatively, no one will be regarded as a true Muslim unless he/she believes in the divine revelation of al-Qur'an as well as other revealed scriptures; Torah, Psalm as well as the original Gospel of Jesus ('AS) and their historical role in the spiritual development of human race. Allah (the Sublime), revealed His divine Books to His chosen Prophets in their native language for easy and effective dissemination of the divine guidance. On this reason for instance, Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in Arabic, while Torah was revealed to Prophet Musa ('AS) in Hebrew e.t.c. In deed, Qur'an has many miraculous attributes proving that it is a revelation from Allah. Every Prophet was given a miracle-a sign the greatest miracle given to Prophet of Islam is the Qur'an. It has been on record that today no other miracle of the Prophets exists except the Qur'an- a living miracle-until the day of Requital⁶. Being a divine scripture, Qur'an contains a universal message for the whole of mankind irrespective of time, zone and space. For this purpose it seeks to guide man in all walks of life; spiritual or worldly, individual or collective. It however, contains directions and code of conduct for rich and poor, educated and uneducated alike⁷. To prove its divine source, the Glorious Qur'an was revealed fourteen centuries ago but up to this time no one has been able to come up with something similar to a verse or chapter of the Qur'an in the area of its beauty, eloquence, splendour, wise legislation, true information and true prophecy as well as other perfect attributes. It is more amazing to know that even the disbelieving Arabs-who made several attempts to disqualify the Prophet (SAW) from being a true Prophet from Allah and who were known for their eloquence in composing beautiful and excellent poetry –failed in their move that the Qur'an has come from other than Allah⁸. On the other hand, it has been observed and believed that the recitation of the verses and chapters of the Qur'an moves the hearts of millions of people the world over who may not necessarily know a word of Arabic language. To make it more precise, famous Egyptian *Qari*⁹ Abdul Basit recited some verses from the Qur'an before the top Soviet leaders during a meeting that he accompanied Gamal Abdul Nasir. Instantly, four among the Soviet leaders were shedding tears prudently admitting that there was some thing touching in those words¹⁰.

II. DISTINCTION OF QUR'AN FROM OTHER REVEALED SCRIPTURES

The Qur'an is an ocean of knowledge which deals with thousands of subjects, many of which have not yet been explored by men. It has direction for every person, every place and for every time¹¹. The speech of the Qur'an is harmonious, balanced and consistent and every word is irreplaceable. In spite of claims about other books, Qur'an is the most read and the only completely memorized book throughout its history. It is also the most studied book in the world. The Qur'an is distinct in the sense that Almighty Allah promised to protect it from any change, of even a single word or letter, and will continue to be so until the end of time. On the other hand, the disciples of other Divine Books had made several and great distortion, alteration and manipulation of information in their own revealed books, similar of which will never take place in respect of Glorious Qur'an. In deed, the Glorious Qur'an brought down the last and final commands of Allah (SWT) and then cancelled the many commands of the previous Books. Again, Qur'an is the only religious scripture in the world that is completely compatible with modern established scientific facts. Most of the scientific facts mentioned in the Qur'an, which was revealed more than 1400 years, have been discovered by man only in the past 100 years¹². Qur'an is also distinct in the sense that it is only the revealed Book that its language of revelation is still alive and living form of communication which no doubt remained exactly in the original form as when the Glorious Qur'an was revealed. This, indeed, gives every possible chance for millions of people to still speak, write and communicate in this Noble language same way as it was employed in Arabia. On the aspect of preservation, Qur'an is the only revealed Book whose teachings and or commandments have been preserved in action by its followers-Muslims- the status which other books lack.

Unlike other revealed Books, up to this time, there existed only one single copy of the Noble Qur'an-complete, authentically standard and collectively attested to by the whole Ummah¹³. It was from this single copy that several copies were made but interestingly, no addition or deduction of single letter was made, how great the Qur'an is! Therefore, the influence of this Book-Qur'an- on today's world is incalculable¹⁴. It has been noted that unbelievers tried to prove discrepancies in the Qur'an, an issue which has been prevalent in other scriptures, but they failed in their attempt. At this point, it is important to reveal the outcome of a research carried out in the University of Munich in this regard:The most extensive research was done in the last century in the Institute of Munich, University of Munich, Germany. Forty two thousand copies of the Qur'an including manuscripts and printed texts, produced in different parts of the world were collected. Research was carried for almost half a century and at the end, the researchers concluded that apart from copying mistakes, there was no discrepancy in the text of those forty two thousand copies; even though they were collected from different parts of the Globe and belonged to the period between the 1st century Hijra to the 14th century Hijra¹⁵. Relatively,the glorious Qur'an, which is the final revelation, is believed to have been compiled and recorded down, word for word, but in other scriptures, neither Moses nor Jesus nor Abraham had recorded Allah's teaching leading to people misinterpreting and corrupting

Allah's word as the teachings were handed down orally from one generation to the other¹⁶. It is high time to know that, the Glorious Qur'an is the only religious Book in the world that has been memorized by a great number of Muslims around the globe since the time of the Prophet, and has been carried down as a common practice throughout the world to this day. Those people who memorize the Qur'an are known as *Huffaz-al Qur'an*. They know the Qur'an word by word, syllable by syllable; hence if the world ever decided to obliterate the Qur'an from the face of this earth, the Huffaz will be able to reproduce the Qur'an in no time - thus making the Qur'an indestructible, and imperishable¹⁷.

By way of analysis, a lot of differences can be identified particularly between the Qur'an and the Bible. The former had been assured of being preserved and protected till the end of time, whereas the latter had undergone distortion and various editions something that makes it lose the original and divine messages contained therein. Therefore, the Qur'an, unlike Bible, does not blame women for the mistake committed by Adam and Eve (May the mercy and blessings of God be upon him) in disobeying God in the Garden of Eden as enunciated in verses of the Glorious Qur'an¹⁸. The Qur'an also emphasizes that Adam and Eve repented to God and were forgiven by Him instantly¹⁹. It also mentions that the eventual dwelling of Adam and Eve on Earth was already part of God's plan even before He created them²⁰ and not a sort of punishment²¹.

The Bible, in fact, is completely silent on historical information- the information that had been mentioned by the Qur'an in a very clear manner. This information include among others the stories of the people of 'Ad and Thamud, and their Prophets, Hud and Saleh; the dialogue between Prophet Noah and his son before the flood,²² the dialogue between Abraham and his father²³, as well as between he and a king²⁴, and between he and his people²⁵ and that of Jesus' miracles of speaking from the cradle²⁶, and his producing (by God's will) a bird from clay²⁷. The Bible describes the Great Flood as covering the entire Earth whereas the Quran describes the flood as a local event only, a description which is more consistent with scientific evidence²⁸ and lastly a critical difference is the Qur'an's insistence that Jesus (AS) was never truly crucified²⁹. One final note, the Quran is very different from the Bible. There are no human contributions to the Quran; it is only the revelation from God. In other words, you will not find any stories about the Prophet written by his Companions (RA) in the Qur'an.

In fact, you will not even find in the Quran any of the Prophet's speech outside of what he stated to be the revelation of the Qur'an³⁰. The Prophet's own words have been kept completely separate from the Qur'an. This no doubt presents the divine protection of the Glorious Qur'an. One may at this point ask as to why it is that God allowed His earlier revelations to be distorted and not preserved. We must understand that the earlier prophets, such as Moses and Jesus, were not sent to all mankind. Their messages were clearly for the Tribe of Israel and for their particular times. Actually, God teaches us that all people had received messengers who were sent to them and whose missions were limited³¹. The Prophet Muhammad (SAW), and therefore his revelation, is meant for all of humankind from his time until the Day of Judgment³². Again, if their revelations were preserved, their followers could use that as a reason for continuing to follow their prophets and refusing to follow the Prophet Muhammad³³.

Since it is very clear via many means, such as historical evidence, contradictory statements within the text and so on, that their scriptures have not been preserved in detail and that they cannot claim to be following what is purely God's religion—not mixed with human interpolation—they have no valid excuse not to abandon their non-preserved revelation for the true, complete and exact revelation from God found in the Quran.

III. AN ANALYSIS OF MYSTERIOUS LETTERS IN THE QUR'AN

Mysterious letters are unique letter combination that begins certain chapters of the Qur'an. They literary mean abbreviated or shortened. They are also known as *Fawatih*, openers as they form the opening verse of the respective chapters³⁴. About one-fourth (1/4) of the Qur'anic Surahs are preceded by mysterious letter-symbols called *Muqatta'at* (disjointed/disconnected letters) because of their appearance at the beginning of the relevant chapters. However, out of the twenty-eight (28) letters of the Arabic alphabet, exactly one-half (1 ½) i.e. fourteen (14) occur in this position, either singly or in varying combinations of two, three, four, or five letters³⁵.

IV. QUR'ANIC SURAHS WITH MYSTERIOUS (DISCONNECTED) LETTERS

As twenty-nine (29) letters are found in the Arabic alphabet (*hamza* and *alif* are counted as two letters) so also there are twenty-nine Surahs with mysterious/disconnected letters in the Glorious Qur'an. By this, fourteen (14) different letters from the Arabic alphabets have been prefixed to twenty-nine (29) Surahs, while fifteen (15) letters have not been used³⁶. These fourteen (14) letters are: *Alif, 'Ain, Ha, H, Lam, Mim, Nun, Qaf, Ra, Sin, Sad, Ta, and Ya*³⁷. The Surahs that contained these letters are: Surahs 2,3,7,10,11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20,

26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 36, 38, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 50 and 68³⁸. All the Surahs above mentioned with disconnected letters are Makkan with the exception of three Surahs, i.e. Surahs 2, 3 and 13³⁹.

V. MYSTERIOUS LETTERS IN FOURTEEN (14) COMBINATIONS

These letters have been used in fourteen combinations as illustrated below:

1. **Three (3) Surahs have one letter only:**
 - (A) Nun as it appeared in Surah Qalam
Nun. By the Pen and by the (Record) which (men) write⁴⁰
 - (B) Qaf as it appeared in Surah Qaf
Qaf. By the Glorious Qur'an (Thou art Allah's Apostle)⁴¹
 - (C.) Sad as it appeared in Surah Sad
Sad. By the Qur'an full of Admonition: (this is the Truth)⁴²
2. **Ten (10) Surahs have two (2) letter combinations:**
 - (A) H.M as they appeared in Surahs Ghafir
Ha Mim⁴³
H.M as they appeared in Surah Fussilat
Ha Mim⁴⁴
H.M as they appeared in Surah Shura
Ha Mim⁴⁵
H.M as they appeared in Surah Zukhruf
Ha Mim⁴⁶
H.M as they appeared in Surah Dukhan
Ha Mim⁴⁷
H.M as they appeared in Surah Jathiyah
Ha Mim⁴⁸ and then
H.M as they appeared in Surah Ahqaf
Ha Mim⁴⁹
 - (B) T.H as they appeared in Surah Ta ha
Ta Ha⁵⁰
 - (C) T.S as they appeared in Surah Naml
Ta Sin⁵¹
 - (D) Y.S as they appeared in Surah Yasin
Ya Sin⁵²
3. **Thirteen (13) Surahs have three (3) letter combinations:**
 - (A) A.L.M as they appeared in Surah Baqarah
A.L.M⁵³
A.L.M as they appeared in Surah Ali 'Imran
A.L.M⁵⁴
A.L.M as they appeared in Surah Yunus
A.L.M⁵⁵
A.L.M as they appeared in Surah Hud
A.L.M⁵⁶
A.L.M as they appeared in Surah Yusuf
A.L.M⁵⁷
A.L.M as they appeared in Surah Ibrahim
A.L.M⁵⁸
A.L.M as they appeared in Surah Hijr
A.L.M⁵⁹
A.L.M as they appeared in Surah Ankabut
A.L.M⁶⁰
A.L.M as they appeared in Surah Rum
A.L.M⁶¹
A.L.M as they appeared in Surah Luqman
A.L.M⁶²
A.L.M as they appeared in Surah Sajdah
A.L.M⁶³
 - (B) T.S.M as they appeared in Surahs Shu'ara'
Ta Sin Mim⁶⁴

T.S.M as they appeared in Surah Qasas
Ta Sin Mim⁶⁵

4. **Two Surahs have four (4) letter combinations:**

(A) A.L.M.R as they appeared in Surah Ra'ad
Alif Lam Mim Ra⁶⁶

(B) A.L.M.S as they appeared in Surah A'raf
Alif Lam Mim Ra⁶⁷

5. **Two Surahs have five (5) letter combinations:**

(A) K.H.Y.'A.S as they appeared in Surah Maryam
Kaf. Ha. Ya. `Asin. Sad⁶⁸

(B) H.M. 'A.S.Q as they appeared in Surah Shurah Ha Mim. `Ain Sin Qaf⁶⁹

Views of scholars on these mysterious letters

Despite the fact that only Allah (SWT) knows the actual meaning of these disjointed letters, scholars (who were the commentators of the Glorious Qur'an) have tried their best to give meaning to these letters over the time for the importance attached to them as the integral part of the Surah to which they are prefixed, but nothing of significance has been forthcoming. The general agreement on these letters therefore, is that they are mysterious. According to M. Asad, one must content himself with the finding that a solution to the lack of actual meaning of these letters still remains beyond our grasp⁷⁰. He supported his view with the statement of the first Caliph, Abu Bakr (RA) that in every divine writing there is (an element of) mystery and the mystery of the Qur'an is (indicated) in the opening of (some of) the Surahs⁷¹. As for Yusuf Ali, the *Muqatta'at* are mystic symbols, about whose meaning there is no authoritative explanation⁷². He explained that some commentators are content to recognize them as some mystic symbols, of which it is unprofitable to discuss the meaning by mere verbal logic⁷³. On the other hand, the western orientalis are of the view that these letters are no more than the initials to the scribes who wrote down the individual revelations at the prophet's dictation or of the companions who recorded them precisely at the time of the final codification of the Qur'an during the reign of the first three caliphs⁷⁴. Fakh al-Din al-Razi, a classical commentator of the Qur'an has noted some twenty (20) opinions regarding the mysterious letters, and mentioned multiple opinions that these letters present the names of the Surahs as appointed by God⁷⁵. All explanations given have failed to satisfactorily explain the actual meaning of the mysterious letters and with that the knowledge must be vested upon Allah (SWT) who revealed the Qur'an and who knew the meaning and the contents therein.

VI. CONCLUSION:

It is believed that the Glorious Qur'an is the Divine revealed Book from Allah and occupied the highest position unlike other books revealed to other Prophets and that its status is unique. In fact, no corruption has ever taken place in its transmission and it is the only Divine Book that survived history and therefore, remained perfectly preserved. It is convinced that mysterious letters formed part of the contents of the Glorious Qur'an and thus, became the miracle of the Qur'an. More so, it may be concluded that these letters were used to challenge the disbelieving Arabs and the world to use them and produce something similar to that of Qur'an, yet, all efforts proved abortive despite their eloquence as far as Arabic language is concerned.

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- ¹⁹ Qur'an 7:23 and 2:37
- ²⁰ Qur'an 2:30
- ²¹ Genesis 3:17-19
- ²² Qur'an 11:42-43
- ²³ Qur'an 6:74
- ²⁴ Qur'an 2:258
- ²⁵ Qur'an 22:70-102, 29:16-18, 37:83-98 and 21:57
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- ⁴⁹ Qur'an 46:1
- ⁵⁰ Qur'an 20:1
- ⁵¹ Qur'an 27:1
- ⁵² Qur'an 36:1
- ⁵³ Qur'an 2:1
- ⁵⁴ Qur'an 3:1
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- ⁵⁹ Qur'an 15:1
- ⁶⁰ Qur'an 29:1
- ⁶¹ Qur'an 30:1
- ⁶² Qur'an 31:1
- ⁶³ Qur'an 32:1
- ⁶⁴ Qur'an 26:1
- ⁶⁵ Qur'an 28:1
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- ⁶⁸ Qur'an 19:1
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