

## **A Chronological Study of the Interpretations of *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿa* from the Beginning to the Present**

Başlangıçtan Bugüne *el-Ḥurūfu'l-Muqattaʿa* Hakkındaki Görüşlerin Kronolojik Bir Değerlendirmesi

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## Abstract

*Al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa'a, which are at the beginnings of the 29 sūrahs of the Qur'an and consist of 14 letters, have been a subject of curiosity since the time of the Successors. About al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa'a, as they appear with a non-existent usage in Arabic language - at least within our knowledge of the language so far - more than twenty interpretations have been made. Islamic scholars who thought that they could not understand these letters, have included them in the category of Mutashābihāt, which has been beyond our limit of comprehension and have treated these letters as they were, without interpretation. These letters, which are included in the research field of linguistics, indeed have caused a problem of coherence since they have been under the same heading with the transcendental subjects of Mutashābihāt such as the attributes of God, knowledge of the future, Heaven, Hell, Angels. On the one hand, this problem has forced the commentators to interpret al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa'a out of their usual way which cannot be explained comparing their general interpretation styles. On the other hand, these letters have taken their place among the indispensable subjects of Orientalist Qur'anic studies that highlight their mysterious qualities.*

**Keywords:** *Tafsīr, al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa'a, Mutashābihāt, Ibn 'Abbās, Disconnected Letters.*

## Öz

*Kur'an-ı Kerim'in 29 suresinin başında yer alan ve 14 harften müteşekkil olan el-Hurūfu'l-Muqaṭṭa'a tabii döneminden itibaren merak konusu olmuştur. Arap dilinde -en azından bu günkü bilgilerimize göre- var olmayan bir kullanım şekliyle karşımıza çıkan el-Hurūfu'l-Muqaṭṭa'a hakkında, yirmiden fazla tevیل yapılmıştır. Bu harfleri, algı alanımızı aşan Muteşābihāt sınıfına dahil ederek anlayamayacaklarını düşünen İslam alimleri ise onları oldukları gibi, tevیل etmeksizin ele almışlardır. Dilbilim alanının araştırma sahasına giren bu harflerin, tartışmasız aşkın karakter taşıyan Allah'ın sıfatları, gelecek bilgisi, Cennet, Cehennem, Melekler gibi Muteşābihāt konuları ile aynı başlık altında yer almaları tabii bir insicam sorununa yol açmıştır. Bu sorun bir taraftan müfessirleri, el-Hurūfu'l-Muqaṭṭa'a'yı değerlendirirken genel tefsir tarzlarıyla izah edilemeyecek tasarruflara zorlamıştır. Diğer taraftan, bu harfler gizemli vasıflarını öne çıkaran Oryantalistik Kur'an araştırmalarının da vazgeçilmez konuları arasındaki yerini almıştır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Tefsir, el-Hurūfu'l-Muqaṭṭa'a, Muteşābihāt, Ibn 'Abbās, Hece Harfleri, Kesik Harfler.*

## INTRODUCTION

We can barely feel the Qur'anic influence on its direct addressee. On the one hand, we are living fourteen centuries after the environment and conditions of revelation. On the other hand, the changeable nature of 'language' is an obstacle for the true understanding of the Qur'an. People were significantly divided into categories of "believers" and "nonbelievers" in accordance with their positions on the "Qur'an / 'Khitāb' (Address)" which kept its crucial place on the agenda during the revelation process for twenty-three years. Even affinity and tribal ties could not stop them from being divided. This was, historically, not a predictable situation. All scientific data shows that the Arabs of that period placed great emphasis on affinity and tribal ties. The main discussion of this process focused simply on the source of the Qur'an. The proponents of the 'sacredness of the Qur'an' moved away from the people investigating to find a humanly source for the Qur'an.

Revolutionary content of the Qur'ān appeared instantly. Meccan aristocracy were quick to oppose this 'new address' when they noticed the possibility of its success. They would not be able to protect their interests if it succeeded. We must not overlook an aspect that makes the situation even more difficult for them. That is the manner in which this 'new address' was presented; the presentation was so attractive that even the people who decided to remain uninterested were drawn to it. It was such that no one living in Mecca and its district had the luxury of retirement and being disinterested in this debate. The Mecca aristocracy, seeing this, tried to put pressure on those following the 'new address', rather than settling it in front of everyone and carrying out a 'civilized' argument. The 'new address' was pursuing in an unexpected way, putting their interests in danger. It hurt them in their most sensitive point, challenging them literally. This historical fact was then evaluated under the title of 'Qur'ān's *Tahaddī*' in the methodology of *Tafsīr*.

They were met with a use that surprised them and explicitly "oppressed" what they had not fully experienced before in 'new address's presentation. It was at times beginning with ungrammatical combinations consisting of the letters of their language. At least, we do not have any data indicating that they were familiar with exactly the same usage of *al-Hurūf al-Muqatta'a*.<sup>1</sup> *Hurūf al-Tahajjī*<sup>2</sup> or *Hurūf al-Hajā*<sup>3</sup> names are also given in these letters. We also see that they are evaluated under the titles of *Avā'il al-Suvar* or *Favātiḥ al-Suvar* in the books of *Tafsīr* methodology.<sup>4</sup>

29 *Sūrahs* of the Qur'ān begin with the *al-Hurūf al-Muqatta'a*. These *sūrahs* and their beginnings are as follows:

2 al-Baqara *الم*; 3 Ālu 'İmrān *الم*; 7 al-A'rāf *المص*; 10 Yūnus *الر*; 11 Hūd *الر*; 12 Yūsuf *الر*; 13 al-Ra'd *الم*; 14 İbrāhīm *الر*; 15 al-Ḥijr *الر*; 19 Maryam *كهيعص*; 20 Ṭāhā *طه*; 26 al-Shu'arā' *طسم*; 27 al-Naml *طس*; 28 al-Qaṣaṣ *طسم*; 29 al-'Ankabūt *الم*; 30 al-Rūm *الم*; 31 Luqmān *الم*; 32 al-Sajda *الم*; 36 Yāsīn *يس*; 38 Ṣād *ص*; 40 al-Mu'min *حم*; 41 Fuṣṣilat *حم*; 42 al-Shūrā *عسق*; 43 al-Zukhruf *حم*; 44 al-Dukhān *حم*; 45 Jāthiyah *حم*; 46 al-Aḥqāf *حم*; 50 Qāf *ق*; 68 al-Qalam *ن*.

*al-Hurūf al-Muqatta'a* consists of 14 letters apart from the repeating letters. These are: ا, ل, م, ص, ر, ك, ه, ي, ع, ط, س, ح, ق, ن.

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Māturidi, *Ta'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunna*, ed. Majdi Basalum (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2005), 4/352.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see al-Rāghīb al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Mufradāt fi Gharīb al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-'Azīz Basyūnī (Macca: Kullīyya al-Da'wa wa Uṣūl al-Dīn 2001), 895.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Zajjāj, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān wa I'rābuh*, ed. 'Abd al-Jalīl 'Abduh (Beirut: Ālam al-Kutub, 1988), 4/319.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fi 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl İbrāhīm (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā' Kutub al-'Arabiyya, 1957), 1/165; Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fi 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl İbrāhīm (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-Kitāb, 1974), 3/361.

Our aim in this study is not to introduce the literature dealing with the subject of *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa'a*; it is simply to present the meanings given to these letters in a plain and simple way as possible. In order to achieve a tidy presentation, we found it appropriate to convey these meanings in a chronological order. Thus, the reader will be able to follow the change and development of what is said about these letters.

### 1. *al-ḤURŪF al-MUQAṬṬA'A* IN THE TIME OF THE PROPHET

1) The Prophet says: "10 rewards are given to the one who reads one letter from the Qur'an. I do not say *الم* is one letter. 'ا' is an independent letter; 'ل' is another independent letter and 'م' is also an independent letter."<sup>5</sup>

2) Rasūl Allāh would read *alif lām mīm tenzīl* ve *hal atā 'ala'l-insāni* in morning prayers on Fridays".<sup>6</sup>

3) According to the report in Muqātil b. Sulaymān's (d.150/767) *Tafsīr*, a group of Jews approached the Prophet and raised some claims about the lifetime of the Prophet's *Ummah*, depending on the number values of the letters in *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa'a*.<sup>7</sup> Then the seventh verse of Ālu 'Imrān *Sūrah* was revealed and criticized for followers of the *Mutashābih* verses.

4) During the Trench War, Muslims used the slogan "*Ḥā Mīm* - May Polytheists not to be helped".<sup>8</sup>

5) Al-Kalbī (d.146/763) narrated that Rasūl Allāh made the explanation of "كاف, كهيعص" about the meaning of "هدا, امين, عالم, صادق".<sup>9</sup>

6) The Prophet said that "*Nūn*" is a "plate from light (*nūr*)".<sup>10</sup>

Note that none of these reports, except the third, fifth and sixth ones, focused on the meaning of the *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa'a*. These reports convey their use in a society that already knows the meaning of these letters or is familiar with their similar use, in accordance with the holy originated features of these letters, like other verses. In the third report, it is criticized that the Jews were baselessly dealing with the number values of the letters in *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa'a*. In the fifth report, there is a

<sup>5</sup> Tirmidhī, *Sunan, Abwāb al-Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān*, 16. B. *Bāb mā jā'a fī man qara'a ḥarfan min al-Qur'an mā laḥū min al-'ajr*, 5/25 (no. 2910); al-Dārimī, *Sunan*, 23 *Kitāb Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān*, B. *faḍli man qara'a al-Qur'ān*, 4/84 (no:3351).

<sup>6</sup> Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 11 *Kitāb al-Jumu'ah, mā yuqra'u fī ṣalāt al-fajri yawm al-jumu'ah* (no.891) 2/5.

<sup>7</sup> Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, ed. Maḥmūd Shihāta (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth, 1423), 1/86.

<sup>8</sup> Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, ed. Shu'ayb al-'Arna'ūt (Mu'assasa al-Risāla, 2001), 30/519.

<sup>9</sup> Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, 3: 26; Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-Manthūr fī al-Tafsīr bi al-Ma'thūr* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr), 5/478.

<sup>10</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wil Āy al-Qur'ān*, ed. 'Abd Allāh al-Turkī (Dār Hijr, 2001), 23/144.

great deal of consensus on al-Kalbī's unreliability.<sup>11</sup> Thus, nobody ascribed his report to the Prophet apart from al-Kalbī.<sup>12</sup> As for the sixth report, it is understood that Ṭabarī who narrated this *marfū'* report did not trust it. Otherwise, Ṭabarī would cite it, as he always does, using respectable expressions. He would not pass it off as "someone's opinion" as he did here.<sup>13</sup>

In the final analysis, we do not have a reliable *marfū'* report concerning the meaning of these letters and there is no evidence The Prophet was even asked about their meanings.

## 2. *al-HURŪF al-MUQATTA'A* 'A IN THE COMPANIONS' REPORTS

1) Abū Bakr (d.13/634) said: "There is a secret for every book of Allāh. And His secret in the Qur'ān is in the beginning of the *Sūrahs*. Ṭabarī (d.310/923) narrated this report with "some said..." without mentioning Abū Bakr's name.<sup>14</sup>

2) 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d.40/661) said: "There is a top for every book. And the top of this book is *Hurūf al-Tahajji*"<sup>15</sup>.

3) 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib said: "O! كَهَيْعِص and O! حَمَّ عَسَق" (prayed to Allāh in this manner)<sup>16</sup>.

4) 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib said: "O! كَهَيْعِص, forgive me" al-Ṭabarī narrated this report with *isnād* chain<sup>17</sup>.

5) 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd (d.32/652-53) narrated the following report from the group of Companions whose names were not mentioned in the *isnād* chain: "الم consists of syllable letters of Allāh's names"<sup>18</sup>.

Although the first two of these reports are included in many commentaries,<sup>19</sup> they have no *isnād* chains. They are attributed to Abū Bakr and 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib in the manner of *ta'liq*. Also, the third report comes without *isnād* chain. As for the fifth report, it clearly comes via anonymous companions.

<sup>11</sup> For example, see Ibn Abī Ḥatim, *Kitāb al-Jarḥ wa al-Ta'dil*, (Haydār 'Ābād: Majlis Dā'ira Ma'ārif al-Uthmāniyya, 1952), 2/36; 7/271.

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that this report was attributed to Ibn 'Abbās (d.68/687-88) in the book of Firūzabādī (d.817/1415), which compiled the reports of al-Kalbī from Ibn 'Abbās. See Firūzabādī, *Tanwīr al-Miqbās min Tafsiṛ Ibn 'Abbās*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya), 253.

<sup>13</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 23/144.

<sup>14</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 1/210.

<sup>15</sup> Biqā'ī, *Naẓm al-Durar fī Tanāsib al-Āy wa al-Suwar* (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-Islāmī), 1/72.

<sup>16</sup> Suyūṭī, *Nawāhid al-'Abkār wa Shawāriḍ al-'Afkār: Ḥāshiya al-Suyūṭī 'alā Tafsiṛ al-Bayḍawī* (Mecca: Jāmi'a Umm al-Qurā, 2005) 1/267.

<sup>17</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 15/451; Abū Bakr al-'Aṣamm (d.200/816) did not accept this report as a reliable one. He said that: "This is not true from 'Alī. Because this was not mentioned among the Allāh's well-known names by which can be prayed". See Mātūrīdī, *Ta'wīlāt*, 7/218.

<sup>18</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 1/208.

<sup>19</sup> For example, see Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' Turāth al-'Arabī, 1420), 2/250.

As can be seen, there are very few reports from the Companions about *al-Hurūf al-Muqaṭṭa‘a*. In fact, this is not surprise. This is because, in general, very little *Tafsīr* report comes from the companions other than Ibn ‘Abbās (d.68/687-88). In his case, as one from the companion generation, this situation suddenly changed. The reports by Ibn ‘Abbās, which focus on the meaning of *al-Hurūf al-Muqaṭṭa‘a*, are so numerous that a researcher who examines them realizes immediately that many different and alternative approaches to the subject are based on Ibn ‘Abbās. This data also covered some alternative reports of Ibn ‘Abbās concerning the meaning of *al-Hurūf al-Muqaṭṭa‘a*. This, no doubt, contains a collection for the more complex group of *Muḍṭarīb Tafsīr* reports. Ibn ‘Abbās’ reports containing *al-Hurūf al-Muqaṭṭa‘a* are the following:

1) Ibn ‘Abbās said: “*al-Hurūf al-Muqaṭṭa‘a* is the greatest name of Allāh”. (The same opinion also comes from Ibn Mas‘ūd.)<sup>20</sup>

2) Ibn ‘Abbās said: “They are the words with which Allāh swore”<sup>21</sup>

3) Ibn ‘Abbās said: “It is from the names of Allāh”<sup>22</sup>

4) Ibn ‘Abbās said: “الم means ‘I am Allāh, I know’”<sup>23</sup>

5) Ibn ‘Abbās said: “ن, ح, م are from *Muqaṭṭa‘a* names”<sup>24</sup>

6) Ibn ‘Abbās said regarding آل: “It is pointing out that Allāh is the Unique, the First, Last, the Eternal, the Forever, ل indicates that Allāh is لطيف; م indicates that Allāh is ملك مجيد منان.”<sup>25</sup>

7) Ibn ‘Abbās said about كهيعص ك, كهيعص ه; كافي, الكريم, الكبير ك indicates that Allāh is العزيز, العالم ص indicates that Allāh is هادي; ع indicates that Allāh is حكيم. 26

8) Ibn ‘Abbās said regarding المص “أنا الله أفصل”<sup>27</sup>, regarding الر “أنا الله أرى”<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘*, 1/206.

<sup>21</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘*, 1/207; 15/451.

<sup>22</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘*, 1/207.

<sup>23</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘*, 1/207.

<sup>24</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘*, 1/208.

<sup>25</sup> Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib*, 2/253.

<sup>26</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘*, 15/443-446, 448-450; Suyūṭī, *al-Durr*, 5/478.

<sup>27</sup> Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib*, 2/253; Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 3/24. The phrase “أنا الله أفصل” is “أنا الله أفضل” in the *Tafsīr* book of Ṭabarī. (See Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘*, 10/52). Given that the explanation here is about “المص”, the transmission of the Rāzī (d.606/1210) is more reasonable than Ṭabarī’s. Because establishing an interest between “المص” and “أفصل” is more suitable for the tradition of interpretation that has existed since the time of Successors. This is the way of interpretation based on the common letters between *al-Hurūf al-Muqaṭṭa‘a* and “interpretation” as seen in the examples “أنا الله أعلم” and “أنا الله أرى”. (For example, see Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib*, 2/253). The common letters (ص and ل) are more between “المص” and “أفصل” than “أفضل” and “المص”. Accordingly, the meaning “أنا الله أفصل” is “أنا الله أفضل”. It is not difficult to assume that the word “أفصل” is misspelled as “أفضل” in the historical process. As it is known, a “dot” in Arabic can transform a word completely into another word, which is among the most frequent writer (*nāsikh*) errors.

9) Ibn ʿAbbās said: “*al-Hurūf al-Muqattaʿa* are the words of praise that Allāh has blessed Himself with”<sup>29</sup>

10) Ibn ʿAbbās said: “It is not true to make a ‘*jummal* account’ about *al-Hurūf al-Muqattaʿa*”<sup>30</sup>

11) Ibn ʿAbbās said: “‘*Ulamāʿu* have been unable to comprehend it (*al-Hurūf al-Muqattaʿa*)’.”<sup>31</sup> Naturally, we cannot say that this last report is compatible with the other 10 Ibn ʿAbbās reports mentioned above.<sup>32</sup>

### 3. *al-HURŪF al-MUQATTAʿA* IN THE SUCCESSORS’ AND THE POST-SUCCESSORS’ REPORTS

Generally, *Tafsīr* was not needed in the period of the Prophet and the Companions. Most likely, they already understood the Qur’an. *Tafsīr* was increasingly required with the disappearance of eyewitnesses of the revelation process. Successors made the Qur’an as a whole the matter of *Tafsīr*. Then, *al-Hurūf al-Muqattaʿa* was naturally covered by *Tafsīr*. The following data, sorted chronologically, supports this view:

1) Abū al-ʿĀliya al-Riyāhī (d.90/709) thinks that: “Every letter in *al-Hurūf al-Muqattaʿa* gives information about the lifetimes of the nations. And also said: “Each of them could have many meanings”.<sup>33</sup>

2) a. Saʿīd b. Jubayr (d.94/713) said: “الم means ‘I am Allāh, I know’”<sup>34</sup>

b. Saʿīd b. Jubayr said: “الر، حم، ن are abbreviated form of الرحمن. But we do not know which words are abbreviated with the other *al-Hurūf al-Muqattaʿa*.”<sup>35</sup>

3) a. Mujāhid (d.103/721): “They are only the letters of the alphabet”.<sup>36</sup>

b. Mujāhid: “These are (the words) that Allāh started”<sup>37</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, 12/103.

<sup>29</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātīh*, 2/253-254.

<sup>30</sup> Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 3/30.

<sup>31</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātīh*, 2/250.

<sup>32</sup> According to some reports from Ibn ʿAbbās, طه and يس which entered Arabic from a foreign languages, are not from *al-Hurūf al-Muqattaʿa*, and mean “O human”. See Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, 16/5, 19/98. Again, Ibn ʿAbbās said that it means “fish (whale)” and “well” in two different reports about ن. See Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, 23/140-142, 143. Again, about a letter ق Ṭabarī said without reference to anyone, “Some said it was the mountain that surrounded the earth.” See Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, 21/400.

<sup>33</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātīh*, 2/253.

<sup>34</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, 1/208.

<sup>35</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātīh*, 2/253. According to the report from Saʿīd b. Jubayr طه entered Arabic from a foreign language. Its meaning is “O human”. See Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, 16/6.

<sup>36</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, 1/209.

<sup>37</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, 1/205.

c. Mujāhid thought that they are the names of the Qur'ān<sup>38</sup>

4) a. Al-Sha'bi (d.104/722): "There is a secret for every book. And the secret of the Qur'ān is at the beginning of the *Sūrah*s. Leave it. Ask other things about the Qur'ān"<sup>39</sup> Thus, we see that a similar report mentioned before, attributed Abū Bakr and 'Alī b. Abī Ṭalīb was also attributed to al-Sha'bi.

b. Al-Sha'bi: "They are the names of Allāh"<sup>40</sup>

5. 'Ikrima (d.105/723): "الم is oath. "<sup>41</sup>Also 'Ikrima said: "كَيْبِصُ الْكَبِيرُ الْهَادِي : كَيْبِصُ".<sup>42</sup> "عَلِيٌّ أَمِينٌ صَادِقٌ"

6) Al-Ḍaḥḥāk (d.105/723): "ا from Allāh; ل from Gabriel; م from Muḥammad"<sup>43</sup>

7) Abū Rawq ('Aṭīyya b. al-Ḥārith: d.105/723) said: "Qur'ān used these letters to catch attention of the addressees towards the Qur'ān".<sup>44</sup>

8) Muḥammad b. Ka'b el-Quraḏī (d.108/726) said: "الم means acts of Allāh فالألف الألف من الله والميم من الرحمن المص ; "الرحمن" from الألف، واللام لطفه، والميم مجده<sup>45</sup>; والر الصاد من الصمد<sup>46</sup>

9) Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d.110/728) said " طسم (These) are (the words) that Allāh started"<sup>47</sup>

10) Qatāda (d.117/735), al-Kalbī and Ibn Jurayj thought that they are the names of the Qur'ān.<sup>48</sup>

11) a. Al-Suddī (d.127/745) thought that they are the names of the Qur'ān.<sup>49</sup>

b. Al-Suddī thought that they are the names of Allāh.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 1/204. According to the reports coming from the *ta'liq* method Mujāhid and Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/767) said that meaning of طه is "O human". See, Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 16/6

<sup>39</sup> Suyūṭī, *al-Durr*, 1/59; Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 3/24.

<sup>40</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 1/206.

<sup>41</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 1/207.

<sup>42</sup> Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 3/26. According to the some reports from 'Ikrima طه and يس mean "O human". See Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 16/6, 19/98.

<sup>43</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, 2/253. According to the one report Ḍaḥḥāk said that meaning of طه is "O human". See Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 16/7.

<sup>44</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, 2/253.

<sup>45</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, 2/253.

<sup>46</sup> Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 3/25.

<sup>47</sup> Ibn Abī Ḥatīm, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, ed. As'ad Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib (Saudi Arabia: Maktaba Nizār Muṣṭafā' a al-Bāz, 1419), 8/847 (no: 15519). According to the report by Ṭabarī, Ḥasan did not accept the letter ص at the beginning of the chapter Ṣād as from *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa'a*. He made ص the imperative form of the verb صَادَى (means عَارَضَ) reading it as *Ṣādi*(صَادِي). It means "Present your deeds to the Qur'an (ص وَالْقُرْآن)". See Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 20: 5-6. According to the one report Ḥasan again said that meaning of طه is "O human". See Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 16/7.

<sup>48</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 1/204; Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, 2/253. Qatāda also said that ن means "well". Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 23/143-144

<sup>49</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, 2/253.

<sup>50</sup> Suyūṭī, *al-Durr*, 1/57.

**12)** They are the names of the *Sūrahs* according to Zayd b. Aslam (d.136/754), Khalil b. Aḥmad (d.175/791), Sibawayh (d.180/796) and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd b. Aslam (d.182/798).<sup>51</sup>

**13) a.** Al-Rabīʿ b. Anas (d.139/757): “They are the rewards and exams of Allāh. Some of them are the names of Allāh; and the others are the names of other beings.”<sup>52</sup>

**b.** Al-Rabīʿ b. Anas: “there is no letter from it (*al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿa*) except it is a period of people and their nations”.<sup>53</sup>

**14)** Al-Farrāʿ (d.207/822) and al-Mubarrad (d.286/900) think that *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿa* is a part of challenge of the Qurʾān (*taḥaddī*) intended for the ʿArabs of *jāhiliyya*.<sup>54</sup>

**15) a)** Quṭrub (d.210/825) thinks that *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿa* is a part of challenge of the Qurʾān (*taḥaddī*) intended for the ʿArabs of *jāhiliyya*.<sup>55</sup>

**b)** Quṭrub said: “Qurʾān used these letters to catch attention of the addressees towards the Qurʾān”.<sup>56</sup>

**16)** Al-Akhfash (al-ʿAwsaṭ: d.215/830): “They are very special expressions that Allāh intended to swear with”.<sup>57</sup>

**17)** ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Yaḥyā al-ʿUwaysī (d.220/835) said: *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿa* is this message: “You (the Arabs of *jāhiliyya*) learn the simplest words first -as a little child do- and then deal with the Qurʾān.”<sup>58</sup>

**18)** Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā b. Thaʿlab (d.291/904) thinks that they are the end of one sentence and the beginning of the other sentence.<sup>59</sup>

**19)** Al-Qaffāl (al-Shāshī: d.365/976) thinks that Arabs express some words in letters and these letters are used to express *some* words.<sup>60</sup>

The data above shows that a feature seen in the reports of Ibn ʿAbbās continued after him: The problem/case of alternative reports coming from a “same person” is also valid for this subject.

<sup>51</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, 1/206; Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, 2/252.

<sup>52</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, 1/209; Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, 2/253.

<sup>53</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, 1/209.

<sup>54</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, 2/253.

<sup>55</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, 2/253.

<sup>56</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, 2/253.

<sup>57</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, 2/254.

<sup>58</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, 2/253.

<sup>59</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, 2/254.

<sup>60</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, 2/252.

As for the next centuries, throughout the history of *Tafsir*, the approaches of the first three centuries have been repeated in general.

In the Shiite tradition, there can be found almost all of the narrations reaching the period of the Companions and Successors that we have mentioned above. On the other hand, in some sources, it is observed that the titles that Shiism emphasizes a lot, such as *imāmate*, *karbalā'*, and the "awaited *mahdī*" are associated with *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqatta'a*.<sup>61</sup> Ṭabāṭabā'i (1904-1981), one of the contemporary Shiite scholars, also concentrates on the contents of the *sūras* at the beginning of *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqatta'a*. He states that the same *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqatta'a* takes place at the beginning of the *sūras* whose contents are similar.<sup>62</sup>

Recently, we encounter new beliefs also in orientalist works about *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqatta'a*.

#### 4. GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE WESTERN CURIOSITY ABOUT *al-ḤURŪF al-MUQATTA'A*

Those who have been mentioned thus far show that *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqatta'a* have been among the most interesting subjects of the history of *Tafsir*. Western scholars are especially noteworthy in the modern period. However, what is interesting is that they do not need to base their claims on the relevant data. The average subjectivity observed in orientalist Qur'anic investigations has been overcome with respect to the *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqatta'a*. Perhaps the reason for this is that they have had great curiosity towards these letters. The translation to "Mysterious Letters" found in Orientalist studies is a basic indication of this curiosity.<sup>63</sup>

Bellamy (1925-2015) has summarized orientalist literature about *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqatta'a*.<sup>64</sup> Accordingly, those who think like Nöldeke (1836-1930), believe that *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqatta'a* is a special abbreviation for *Muṣḥaf* owners among the *Ṣaḥāba*<sup>65</sup>; and those who think like Loth (1840-1881), believe that they may be abbreviations of some of the words in the relevant *sūras*.<sup>66</sup> The latter group of thought is closest to the general Muslim considerations. Bellamy also develops a theory that these letters may be an abbreviation for *'basmala'*. He proves this approach by making entirely speculative explanations. So much so as to claim that 9

<sup>61</sup> For example, see Ḥūzī, *Tafsir Nūr al-Thaqalayn*, ed: Hāshim al Rasūli (Kum: al-Matbaa al-Ilmiyya), 3/320.

<sup>62</sup> Ṭabāṭabā'i, *al-Mizān fī Tafsir al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Muassasa al-Alemi li al Maṭbū'āt 1973), 18/8-9.

<sup>63</sup> For example, see Keith Massey, "Mysterious Letters", *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 3/471-477.

<sup>64</sup> James A. Bellamy, "The Mysterious Letters of the Koran: Old Abbreviations of the *Basmalah*", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 93/3 (1973), 267-285.

<sup>65</sup> Nöldeke, Theodor, Fr. Schwally, G. Bergsträsser, O. Pretzl, *Geschichte des Qorāns* (Leipzig: 1909-1938) (Reprint Hildesheim, 1961), 2/72 (Reciter: Bellamy, "The Mysterious Letters", 268).

<sup>66</sup> O. Loth, "Ṭabarīs Korankommentar", *ZDMG*, 35(1881), 35 (Reciter: Bellamy, "The Mysterious Letters", 268).

*al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿa* 'a, which cannot verify his theory, is wrongly written.<sup>67</sup> Islam Dayeh, on the other hand, makes remarkable evaluations that the contents of the *sūrahs* which started with 'Hā Mīm' and their style of expression are very close to each other.<sup>68</sup> Such studies, however, are not sufficient to remove the mystery of these letters.

##### 5. INCOMPATIBLE PARTITION IN THE LIST OF *MUTASHĀBIHĀT*: *al-ḤURŪF al-MUQATTAʿA* 'A

Summarily, *Mutashābih* verses, without any classification, are beyond human perception from the point of one approach. That is why human beings cannot comprehend *Mutashābih* verses. Transcendental topics are reduced to the level of human beings by using human language. That is *mutashābih* language which is full of similes.<sup>69</sup> This approach is summarized in the answer given by Imām Mālik (ö.179/795) to someone who asks him about "*istivā*". Imām Mālik says: "*istivā*' is well known (in Arabic), but (When used for God) is not known to us. It is not good to ask about this topic. Go away!" I wonder whether Imām Mālik gave a hard answer to this question because he thought the answer would be a dangerous view in the context of "believing-denying" or "O friend asking the question! Yes, you came from a village; maybe you cannot read or write. I am an unquestionable authority on religion. However, you and I are human beings; we are equal to know the answer to this question. This is not a matter of knowledge, but a human capacity. There is an existential problem. That's why; nobody can understand *istivā*' of God."

It is not difficult to guess that if Imām Mālik is asked about "God and His attributes, angels, hereafter, heaven, hell, destiny ..." his answer will be the similar one. Thus, *Mutashābih* items in the probable list of Mālik are also revealed. As a matter of fact, the commentator of the al-Zamakhsharī's (d.538/1144) *Tafsīr*, al-Ṭībī (d.743/1342) directly linked Imām Mālik's abovementioned statement with Q 3/7 which was the subject of the *al-Mutashābih* discussion.<sup>70</sup> According to some interpreter, Q 3/7 allows very knowledgeable people (*al-Rāsikhūn*) to interpret the

<sup>67</sup> Bellamy, "The Mysterious Letters", 283-285.

<sup>68</sup> Islam Dayeh, "al-Ḥawāmim: Intertextuality and Coherence In Maccan Surahs" in *The Qur'ān in Context, Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Mīliu* ed. Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, Michael Marx (Leiden-Boston, 2010), 6/461-498.

<sup>69</sup> By dividing the "*tafsīr*" into three, Ṭabarī admits that one of them can only be known by God. see Ṭabarī, *Jāmi*', 1/87-89.

<sup>70</sup> Ṭībī, *Futūḥ al-Ghayb fī al-Kashf 'an Qimā' al-Rayb (Hāshiyā al-Ṭībī 'alā al-Kashshāf)*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥīm and the others (Dubai: Jā'iza Dubai al-Dawliyya, 2013), 4/25.

*al-Mutashābih* verses.<sup>71</sup> This view dominates the modern Muslim world now. However, al-Ṭabarī's opinion is on the contrary.<sup>72</sup>

Imām Mālik's answer is not short-sightedness as the abovementioned polemic in "believing-denying". Yet then, the following reasonable question comes to mind: "Why did Allāh address to human being with the verses that could not be perceived?" With this question, the opposite side concluded that it is meaningless for Allāh to address human beings with incomprehensible verses. In their approach they have fallen into the error of acting independently of the system that Islam organized for this world and the Hereafter.<sup>73</sup>

Actually, the *Mutashābih* language is an inevitable consequence of the Qur'an being a book of a *Samāvi* religion. *Samāvi* religions must make it possible to deny for the testing of faith. Otherwise, denial would become a pathologic option with *Muḥkam* expressions of Allāh, angels and hell...The test would become meaningless in this case. That is, *Mutashābih* language ensures reasonable and fair conditions of the examination. Here, the first approach was dependent on the refined sensibility. At the same time, it had closed the door to exploitation by interpreting the incomprehensible verses subjectively.

*Al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa'a*, in general, falls into the *Mutashābihāt* lists of both approaches. However, the first approach in particular brings a more difficult situation, because *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa'a* is inconsistent with the other items in its *Mutashābihāt* list. It is needless to say that *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa'a*, as a linguistic phenomenon, is incompatible with the transcendental topics like "Allāh and His attributes, destiny, paradise, hell, hereafter...". This disharmony may have forced some scholars to act against their general opinions. Indeed, Ṭabarī unquestionably behaves like a *mufassir* of *dirāya* about *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa'a*:

On the one hand, saying that *Mutashābihāt* cannot be interpreted,<sup>74</sup> al-Ṭabarī accepted that *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa'a* are also from *Mutashābihāt*.<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, he did not hesitate to actively participate in their interpretation activities. It is noteworthy that Ṭabarī tolerated all views; including *bāṭinī* approaches based on the *jummāl* account of *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa'a*.<sup>76</sup> We do not know the reason of this strained tolerance. It is more striking that Ṭabarī bases this tolerance on the "hom-

<sup>71</sup> For example, see Nahnās, *Kitābu I'rāb al-Qur'an*, ed. 'Abd al-Mu'min Khalil (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 1421), 1/144. This view goes back to Ibn Abbas. See, Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 5/220.

<sup>72</sup> This view, which al-Ṭabarī also accepted, goes back to 'Ā'isha binti Abī Bakr (d. 58/678). See Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 5/218.

<sup>73</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *Aḥkām al-Qur'an*, ed: Muḥammad Ṣādiq al-Qamḥāwī (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1405), 2/283.

<sup>74</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 5/218.

<sup>75</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 5/220.

<sup>76</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 5/223.

onymic words in the Qurʾān”. This is because, as Ibn Kathīr (d.774/1373) objected, the homonymic words in the Qurʾān may have a lot of meanings in the dictionary; but naturally, the truth is that the context is confirmed in a certain verse.<sup>77</sup>

It does not require much explanation for the position of pro-*dirāya* commentators. Their *Mutashābihāt* list contains vague expressions in the verses, and even some verses that cannot be fully understood without knowing ‘conditions of revelation’. *Al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿa* ‘a, which is much more incomprehensible than these verses, allows for even *batınî/şūfî* interpretations,<sup>78</sup> as can be seen clearly in al-Rāzī.<sup>79</sup>

The second half of the first volume and a part of the second volume of Ibn ‘Arabī’s (d.638/1240) work called *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* are dedicated to the “realm of letters” in his own words. As can be easily guessed, *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿa* ‘a has found a wide place here. There are narrations based on various “realms”, “secrets” and “mysteries”. In fact, he often uses the phrase “from the point of secrets” at the beginning of his comments.<sup>80</sup>

## 6. ABBREVIATIONS IN THE POETRY OF JĀHILIYYA

It may be appropriate to theoretically consider looking at the first possible reactions to revelation.

This consideration must explain the attitudes of two sides: believers and nonbelievers. It is illogical to think that one of the companions was not willing to understand any statement in the Qurʾān. Also, it is not logical that nonbelievers kept silent about any strange statement in the Qurʾān in a setting where they seek excuse to attack this new religion and its founder. Ṭabarī narrates the usage that can contribute indirectly to answer the question “were the first addressees familiar with *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿa* ‘a?”. According to this, Arabs in the period of *Jāhiliyya*, especially in their poetry, used the words by ruling out one letter or more. Ṭabarī’s following example<sup>81</sup> was quoted by many commentators:<sup>82</sup>

لَا تُحْسِبِي أَنَا نَسِينَا الْإِجَافَ      قُلْنَا لَهَا قَفِي لَنَا قَالَتْ قَافَ

We told him to wait (wait for us); he said he stopped

<sup>77</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm*, ed. Sāmī Ibn Muḥammad Salāma (Dār Ṭiba, 1999), 1/158.

<sup>78</sup> Soner Gündüzöz has studied the subjective interpretations of the letter *Nūn* and the esoteric character of this letter. See, Soner Gündüzöz, “Geleneksel Harf Sembolizminin Bir Yorumu Olarak Nūn Harfî”, *Ondokuz Mayıs Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 30 (2011), 43-58.

<sup>79</sup> Rāzī, *Mafātih*, 2/250-256.

<sup>80</sup> For example, see Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, ed: ‘Uthmān Yaḥyā (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Arabiyya 1985), 1/256, 264, 266, 267, 274, 276, 283, 291.

<sup>81</sup> Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, 1/216-217.

<sup>82</sup> For example, see Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 1/159.

Do not suppose we forgot to run the animal (which we travelled on)

The *فان* in the poetry was used in the sense of *وقف* (the word in the poem was abbreviated in the sense that everyone who listened could easily understand it). Arabs could also abbreviate the word *حارث* as *حار*; and *مالك* as *مال* in the poetries. In addition,

ما للظلم عال كيف لا يا      ينقدّ عنه جلده إذا يا  
بالخير خيراتٌ وإن شراً فا      ولأريد الشر إلا تا

How fast the ostrich is running.      Running fast will crack his skin

(If you want) goodness, (okay) goodness, (if you want) badness, (okay) badness.

I do not want badness; but if you want (insistently badness, okay)

*يفعل* was abbreviated as *يا*; *فشرا* was abbreviated as *فا*; *تشاء* was abbreviated as *تا* in this couplet.

Not only abbreviation, but also addition of letters due to the rhyme takes place in the poetry of *Jāhiliyya*. Ṭabarī gives some examples for this category.<sup>83</sup>

## CONCLUSION

What kind of stance we prefer in regard to *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa‘a* is important. We cannot deny the on-going curiosity about it. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Muallim Naci (1850/1893), the Ottoman literary writer, elaborates on this curiosity via the name of his book “The Holy Mystery or *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa‘a* in the beginning of some chapters of the Qur’ān”.<sup>84</sup> As Alan Jones mentioned by transmitting from Nöldeke, the limited mystery expected from a sacred text is also thus met by the Qur’ān.<sup>85</sup>

Personally, it seems very reasonable to me that *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa‘a* can come to mean ‘attention’. In fact, my students frequently hear my voice “الم: Attention Please!”. They know the meaning of *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa‘a*. However, unfortunately, their teacher (me) does not know the meaning of these letters. Again, I would like to point out that I could not rely on any example in this meaning that was supported by *Jāhiliyya* poetry. But the narration from al-Zarkashī (d.794/1392) gives a little support to this meaning. Thus, nonbelievers did not listen to the Qur’ān. Their attention was caught with the revelation of *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭa‘a*. So, they started to pay attention to listening to the Qur’ān.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>83</sup> See Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘*, 1/216-217.

<sup>84</sup> Muallim Nāci, *Muammā-yi İlahî* (İstanbul, 1302).

<sup>85</sup> Alan John, “The Mystical Letters of The Qur’ān”, *Studia Islamica* 16 (1962), 11.

<sup>86</sup> Zarkashī, *Kitāb al-Burhān* 1/175.

The strongest use of Arabic poetry, which can contribute to the meaning of *al-Hurūf al-Muqatta'a*, suggests that these letters are abbreviations of some words. Arabs would omit some letters of the words in the poetries and even add some letters to the words according to the rhyme scheme in the poetry of the *Jāhiliyya*.

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