

Chapter 10: Some Qur'anic Questions

A Question Concerning the Separate Letters that Open a Number of the Surahs of the Qur'an

Question

We know that God revealed the Qur'an to the Prophet gradually and intermittently. The sum of its verses is 6216 according to Ibn Sirin and 6218 according to Ibn Mas'ud.¹ All are agreed, however, that there are 114 *surahs*. Twenty eight of these *surahs* begin with the *separate letters* [*al-huruf al-muqatta'ah*]*—viz., alif-lam-mim, alif-lam-ra', alif-lam-mim-sad, ha-mim, ta-sin, ta-sin-mim, ka-ha-ya-'ayn-sad, ya-sin, sad, ta-ha, qaf, nun.* Now, the question is: why do they open 3 Madani and 25 Makki *surahs*? Why don't they appear at the beginning of all *surahs*?

The Qur'an was revealed in Arabic; the Prophet's Companions received it from his mouth and preserved it, some by writing, some by heart; one would expect that they understood these letters. But if they had understood the meaning of these letters they would have not given such divergent views about them. We know that these letters have meaning, but what is their meaning? Are they secret codes or acronyms or are they just intended as attention-grabbers?

I have for long been contemplating exegetic *hadiths* and the sayings of the Companions; I have mulled the explanations put forth by various exegetes and orientalist; I have considered the esoteric interpretations of the Sufis. None shed light on this enigma.

As the Qur'anologists disagree on this question, I decided to ask for your view, hoping that it would clear my doubts and answer my questions. Please give me an answer that would shed light on this matter (in which case I would be greatly beholden to you) and do not tell me they are Divine secrets known only to God: the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, a human language, for the guidance of humankind.²

Answer

I offer my most sincere greetings to you and apologize for the delay. When your letter reached Qum I was in Damavand, escaping the summer heat of Qum. It takes some time before the letters get to me in Damavand.

Let us turn to your question. Our method in understanding the Qur'an is to rely solely on the Qur'an itself. We interpret the equivocal verses with recourse to other Qur'anic verses. Of course, the exegetic *hadiths* that are *mutawatir* or have sufficient truth-indicators are, in our opinion, credible and as such are reliable sources in the enterprise of understanding the Qur'an. For, as expressed by the Qur'an, the sayings and commands of the Prophet are authoritative [*hujjah*] and binding.

The *hadiths* narrated from the *Ahl al-Bayt* possess the same authority as those of the Prophet. Our reason for this is, among others, the prophetic *Hadith al-Thaqalayn*, whose chains of transmission exceed the limit of *tawatur*. We have explained this in the introduction to the first volume of "*Tafsir al-Mizan*". (In this connection you may also refer to the third volume, where we have spoken thoroughly of the univocal [*muhkam*] and the equivocal [*mutashabih*] verses of the Qur'an.)

But as to the Companions, their Successors, and other authorities of Qur'anic exegesis where they give their independent views, they cannot be relied on—except where their views agree with the *hadiths* related from the Prophet and the *Ahl al-Bayt*. For, their views are conjectures [*ijtihad*] that are, at best, valid for themselves. We consider their conjectures [*ijtihad*] devoid of any value—as is also the case with regard to the unverifiable *hadiths* attributed to the Prophet and the Imams.

We have chosen the aforementioned method of interpretation based on a number of *hadiths* reported from the Prophet and the *Ahl al-Bayt* that explain that the Qur'an is self-sufficient in conveying its meaning. Some examples are as follows. "Indeed the different parts of the Qur'an affirm one another."³ "The different parts of the Qur'an speak through [the medium of] one another."⁴ "The different parts of the Qur'an testify to the meaning of one another."⁵ It is the right and appropriate method that has been granted to us by the blessing of the *hadiths*.

Without doubt, the Qur'an has, like any other work of literature, its peculiar order and structure that render it intelligible. The only instances in the Qur'an that have proven inscrutable to our understanding are the *separate letters*. From this, we may infer that, unlike all the other verses of the Qur'an, the meaning they convey is enigmatic and is not based on the rules of the Arabic language. On the other hand, these letters definitely have a purpose, for the Qur'an affirms that God's word is free of nonsense:

إِنَّهُ لَقَوْلٌ فَصْلٌ

وَمَا هُوَ بِالْهَزْلِ

“It is indeed a decisive word and it is not a jest.”⁶

Therefore, the insertion of these letters at the beginning of some *surahs* has a purpose. The explanations offered by the Companions, Successors, and other authoritative exegetes regarding these letters are, however, unconvincing.

I have deferred a discussion of these letters to *Surah Ha-Mim-‘Ayn-Sin-Qaf (Surah al-Shawra)*, in the hope that by then God will have unraveled this secret for us—that is of course if death permits. But why did we choose that *Surah*? It is because that *Surah* treats of the nature of Revelation and Divine inspiration and is thus related to the topic in question.

Nonetheless, what has been dawned upon us in regard to these letters up to the present is that there is a peculiar connection between these letters and the content and purpose of the *surahs* they open. For instance, there seems to be a common thread running through the *surahs* that begin with *Alif Lam Mim*. The same holds true in regard to the *surahs* that share, for instance, the opening letters *Alif Lam Ra* or *Ha Mim*. The *surahs* that share common separate letters have a discernible similarity in content that does not exist among other *surahs*. An interesting observation in this relation is that *Surah al-A‘raf*, beginning with the separate letters *Alif Lam Mim Sad* bears unmistakable similarities in content to both the group of *surahs* beginning with *Alif Lam Mim* and those beginning with *Sad*. This is what we have come to so far; the details are, however, still unclear. We hope that God would unveil for us the truth.⁷

Desecrating the Qur’an

Question

Recently, there has been a trend among publishers in Iran to print certain figures and symbols as spells along with the Qur’an. Furthermore, they attribute amazing qualities to them, claiming that they have been established by the Prophet and the Imams. Are these figures based on authentic Islamic sources?

Do they really bring about the effects that are claimed for them? Let me also ask you about the pictures that are purportedly of the Prophet and the Imams: is it right to print them with the Qur’an (as publishes these days seem to find appealing)?

Answer

Such figures and symbols, whether printed along with the Qur’an or separately, are unfounded and lack religious sanction. The effects claimed for these formulas are either false—as in the case of looking at the “seal of prophethood”—or based on unverifiable sources. Thus, to print such falsehoods along with

the Qur'an is a desecration and a great sin. The same is true of the purported pictures of the Prophet and the Imams.

The fundamental issue here is that the Qur'an is the word of God; it is the central source of Islamic doctrine. It is a living testament to the prophethood of Muhammad, the Divine miracle in which all Muslims take pride. Bearing this in mind, the Muslim believer should never set any other book, though true, on a par with the Qur'an; nothing merits the privilege of being printed with the Qur'an.

This is in relation to writings and books that are true. In regard to such superstitious charts and figures as *muharramnameh*, *nawruznameh*, or "the rules of *kusuf* [lunar eclipse] and *khusuf* [solar eclipse]" and, even worse, the false and imaginary pictures assumed to be of the Prophet and the Imams, to include these with the Qur'an is to belittle the word of God. Thus, if publishers wish to disseminate books on hagiography and other doctrinal or Qur'anic matters, they should print them separately but then offer them to their customers along with the Qur'an.

-
1. The difference in numbering is solely a matter of pagination. In other words, the disagreement between Ibn Sirin and Ibn Mas'ud revolves around their respective opinions as to the intervals at which the numbers of the verses should be placed. Otherwise, they both agree on the exact content of the Qur'an. [trans.]
 2. This question was placed by Dr. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kiyali.
 3. *Ihtijaj* vol. 1, p. 389.
 4. *Bihar al-Anwar* vol. 89, p. 22.
 5. *Ibid*.
 6. Surah al-Tariq 86:13-14.
 7. 'Allamah Tabataba'i's reply to Dr. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kiyali is dated 21 Rabi' al-Awwal 1389 AH.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/islam-and-contemporary-man-muhammad-husayn-tabatabai/chapter-10-so-me-quranic-questions>