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Obscured References to Writing?

A focus on the Qur'an's general emphasis on written forms of communication and on its images of writing may lead to the reconsideration of several features of the Qur'anic text, casting them in new light. This section presents several examples regarding which the commentarial tradition either ignores or downplays what may be references to writing. While some examples are subject to alternative interpretations, and some may be simply suggestive, they, in combination with those features of the text mentioned above, support the general contention that the Qur'an contains a rich discourse revolving around writing.

Al-Ḥurūf al-Muqatta'a

Al-ḥurūf al-muqatta'a, "the discrete letters," often termed "the mysterious letters" in Western scholarship, are combinations of letters of the alphabet that open 29 of the Qur'an's 114 sūras. They have provoked much speculation, but most of the theories regarding their meaning and function connect them with writing in some fashion.⁴² Within the Islamic tradition, one popular set of interpretations sees that they are abbreviations of God's epithets: *alif-lām-rā* stands for *al-Raḥmān* "the Merciful," *qāf* stands for *al-Qādir* "the Omnipotent" or *al-Qāhīr* "the Overpowering," *kāf hā yā 'ayn ṣād* stands for *al-Kāfi al-Hādī al-'Alīm al-Ṣādiq* "the Sufficient, the Guide, the Knower, the Truthful," and so on.⁴³ In another interpretation, each set of letters stands for an entire sentence: *alif-lām-mīm* stands for *anā llāhu a'lām* "I, God, know best"; *alif-lām-mīm-ṣād* means *anā llāhu afḍal* "I, God, am superior"; and *alif-lām-rā* means *anā llāhu arā* "I, God, see."⁴⁴ Especially if they are considered abbreviations of entire sentences, the mysterious letters would imply focus on the written text and not oral transmission. James BELLAMY suggested that the letter-combinations arose from copyists' errors in recording the *basmala* at the heading of sūras.⁴⁵ Several scholars, including NÖLDEKE in the first edition of *Geschichte des Qorans*, suggested

42 For a general overview and bibliography, see A. T. WELCH, "al-Kur'an," *EF*, Leiden, 1986, 5:400–432, here 412–414; A. KAPLONY, "Comparing Qur'anic Suras with Pre-800 Documents," *Der Islam* 95.2 (2018): 312–366, here 388 n. 38.

43 Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fi 'ulūm al-Qur'an*, 2 vols., Beirut, 1995, 2:17–18.

44 Or perhaps the *afal* pattern is intended: *ar'ā* "seeing better," in parallel with *a'lām*. Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 2:16.

45 J. A. BELLAMY, "The Mysterious Letters of the Koran: Old Abbreviations of the *Basmalah*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93 (1973): 267–285; J. A. BELLAMY, "Some Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113 (1993): 562–573, here 572–573.

that the letters were the initials of the Companions of the Prophet who had gathered collections of sūras that were then used in putting together the 'Uthmānic codex of the Qur'an.⁴⁶ Andreas KAPLONY has recently espoused a version of this last view, arguing that the letter-combinations refer to the names of owners or compilers of sūras or to the names of the places of origin of those sūras.⁴⁷

Other views of the mysterious letters nevertheless connect them with writing, although in a different fashion. Another set of interpretations stresses the idea that the mysterious letters represent the alphabet and so serve as emblems of sacred writing in general or the celestial source of the Qur'an's revelations. Keith MASSEY has pointed out that, with only a few exceptions, the order in which the letters appear in their various combinations – such as *alif lām mīm*, *alif lām rā*, *alif lām mīm rā*, *ṭā sīn*, *ḥā mīm* – conforms with the order of the letters in the *abjad* alphabet (*abjd hwx ḥty klmn sḥs qrsh tthkhdh dzgh*), suggesting that they are meant to represent the alphabet in its entirety.⁴⁸ In a later study, I espoused this view, suggesting as well that the mysterious letters may be intended to represent an archaic version of the *abjad* alphabet, given that they do not include any of the *rawādīf*, that is, the six extra letters *th kh dh ḍ z gh* that appear at the end of the Arabic alphabet but do not appear in the Hebrew or Aramaic alphabets. This interpretation corroborates views expressed earlier by scholars who suggested that the letters allude to the celestial book, the heavenly source of the Qur'an.⁴⁹

Wahy

The Qur'anic term *wahy* has usually been rendered "inspiration" and has been conceived of as an abstract process occurring through invisible means. Scholars have argued about the exact mode by which *wahy* occurred, whether it was visual, auditory, or mental.⁵⁰ James MONTGOMERY has pointed out, however, that *wahy* in pre-Islamic poetry often refers to writing; the visible signs found among traces

46 NÖLDEKE, *Geschichte des Qorans*, Göttingen, 1860, 215–216; H. HIRSCHFELD, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran*, London, 1902, 141–143.

47 A. KAPLONY, "Comparing Qur'anic Suras with Pre-800 Documents," 340–341.

48 K. MASSEY, "A New Investigation into the 'Mystery Letters' of the Quran," *Arabica* 43 (1996): 497–501.

49 NÖLDEKE, *Orientalische Skizzen*, Berlin, 1892, 50–51; D. J. STEWART, "The Mysterious Letters and Other Formal Features of the Qur'an in Light of Greek and Babylonian Oracular Texts," in: Gabriel S. Reynolds, ed., *The Qur'an in Context*, London, 2011, 321–348, here 339–347.

50 LOYNES, *Revelation in the Qur'an*, 71–74, 76–82.