With the Name of Allah, All-Merciful, Most Merciful

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE QUR'AN

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1 *Surahs* & *Ayat* (Chapter & Verse)

The Qur'an (literally, a "Recitation") is the collection of hundreds of revelations of God's Word to the Unlettered Prophet Muhammad of Arabia, peace be upon him, between the years 610-632 CE. It comprises 114 *surahs* or chapters of widely-varying length. The shortest chapters are composed of just three verses (*ayat*: literally, "signs"), whilst the longest has 286 verses; the total number of verses is over six thousand. The revelations of the Qur'an were intertwined with the life of the Prophet and his community. When the Qur'an was compiled, in both oral and written form, towards the end of the Prophet's life and just after, the chapters and verses were arranged in an order different to that of their revelation. Roughly speaking, the order of the *surahs* is from longest to shortest, which is overall a reversal of the order of revelation of the *surahs*.

1.1 Naming and Classification – the Meccan and Medinan Surahs

In a tradition stretching back to the Prophet, the *surahs* are named after important people, events or themes that they contain, and not by numbers. Some *surahs* have more than one name, due to the variety of themes and stories that they comprise. Chapters and verses were numbered much later in Islamic history for convenience. Every *surah* except the ninth (*Tawbah* – Repentance) begins with the formula, *Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim* or "In the Name of God, All-Merciful, Most Merciful."

The main classification of the *surahs* is a binary one that is often mentioned in written copies of the Qur'an at the beginning of each *surah*: Meccan and Medinan. This classification according to the two holiest cities of Islam refers to the two eras of the Prophet's divine mission: pre- and post- the sacred emigration (*hijrah*) from Mecca to Medina, rather than the physical place of receipt of the revelation. So, for example, there were revelations in Mecca after its conquest but these are regarded as Medinan since they belong to the latter phase of the Prophet's mission. For a handful of surahs, it is disputed whether they are Meccan or Medinan, and some are partly Meccan, partly Medinan.

The Meccan *surahs* tend to be of short to medium length, as do the *ayat* within them. The subject matter tends to revolve around God and His Signs in Creation, Stories of the Prophets, the Hereafter, Heaven and Hell (or the Garden and Fire, to use Qur'anic terms), and the importance of pure monotheistic faith as opposed to polytheism.

The Medinan *surahs* tend to be of medium to long length. The themes of the Meccan *surahs* are present here as well, but more as a background whilst the foreground is occupied by community affairs: social, political, legal, economic, military and, of course, spiritual. Far more verses are devoted to an Islamic view of the Medinan "People of the Book" (primarily, Jews and Christians), than to the Meccan polytheists.

1.2 A List of the Surahs

This list will be useful for readers who are not very familiar with the Qur'an. Multiple names are given for some of the surahs.

1. The Opening
2. The Cow
3. The House (Family) of 'Imran
4. Women
5. The Tablespread
6. Cattle
7. The Heights
8. Spoils of War
9. Repentance, Dispensation
10. Jonah
11. Hud
12. Joseph
13. Thunder
14. Abraham
15. The Rock Dwellings
16. The Bee
17. The Night Journey, Children of Israel
18. The Cave
19. Mary
20. T.H.
21. The Prophets
22. The Pilgrimage
23. The Believers
24. Light
25. The Distinguishing Criterion
26. The Poets
27. The Ants
28. The Story
29. The Spider
30. The Romans (Byzantines)
31. Luqman
32. Prostration
33. The Coalition of Parties
34. Sheba
35. The Angels, Originator
36. Y.S.
37. Those Drawn Up In Ranks
38. S.
39. The Throngs
40. The Believer, The Forgiver
41. (Signs) Spelled Out, H.M. The Prostration
42. Consultation
43. Ornaments of Gold or Luxury
44. Smoke
45. Kneeling
46. The Wind-Curved Sand-Dunes
47. Muhammad, Fighting
48. Victory or Conquest
49. The Private Apartments
50. Q.
51. The Winnowing Winds
52. The Mount
53. The Star
54. The Moon
55. The Most Merciful
56. The Inevitable Event
57. Iron
58. She That Disputes
59. Exile
60. She Who is Examined
61. The Ranks of Battle Array
62. Friday
63. The Hypocrites
64. Mutual Gain and Loss
65. Divorce
66. Prohibition
67. The Kingdom
68. The Pen, N.
69. The Reality
70. The Ascending Stairways
71. Noah
72. The *Jinn* (Genies or Sprites)
73. The Wrapped Up One
74. The Cloaked One
75. Resurrection
76. Time, Man
77. Those Sent Forth
78. The Announcement
79. Those Who Tear Out
80. He Frowned!

81. The Overthrowing
82. The Bursting Apart
83. The Cheats, Cheating
84. The Splitting Open
85. The Constellations
86. The Morning Star
87. The Most High
88. The Overwhelming
89. Dawn
90. The City or Land
91. The Sun
92. The Night
93. The Forenoon
94. Solace
95. The Fig (Tree)
96. The Clot, Recite!
97. Power, Destiny
98. The Clear Proof, Evidence
99. The Earthquake
100. The Chargers
101. The Stunning Blow
102. Mutual Rivalry
103. The Late Afternoon
104. The Gossipmonger
105. The Elephant
106. Winter, Quraysh
107. Small Kindnesses or Almsgiving
108. Abundance
109. The Rejecters of God
110. Divine Help
111. Palm Fibre, The Flame
112. The Unity of God, Sincerity
113. Daybreak
114. Mankind

2 Oral and Written Transmission of the Qu'ran

There is essentially no variation in the Arabic text of the Qur'an, due to the practice of oral transmission that continues today with millions of *huffaz* (sing. *hafiz*, "preservers" who commit the entire text to memory); furthermore the earliest manuscripts dating back 14 centuries are identical. The Qur'an is always recited or chanted in the original Arabic, although often studied in translation by non-Arabs, who make up the vast majority of Muslims. It is regarded as the Divine Word that is in the form of neither prose nor poetry, but a "Recitation." The line-breaks in the translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872-1953) are meant to capture the spirit of this composition that is neither prosaic nor poetical.

3 Names and Attributes of the Qur'an

The Qur'an is known by many names within it, some of which are also names of surahs. Listing these names helps to appreciate how Muslims relate to the Qur'an, which permeates the life and soul of devout Muslim individuals and communities. The names include:

- *Qur'an* (Recitation – and hence its oral nature in expression and transmission),
- *Kitab* (Book or Scripture – its written form),
- *Quran* (Gatherer [of Signs]),
- *Furqan* (Distinguisher or Criterion [between Truth and falsehood]),
- *Dhikr* (Reminder or Remembrance),
- *Huda* (Guidance),
- *Rahmah* (Mercy),
- *Nur* (Light),
- *Bayan* (Clear Explanation),
- *Bayyinah* (Clear Evidence),
- *Ayat* (Signs),
- *Tanzil* (Revelation),
- *Ruh* (Spirit),
- *Haqq* (Truth)
- *Sirat Mustaqim* (The Straight Path).

The Qur'an is also given attributes alongside these names, and most if not all of these Qur'anic attributes are also Divine Attributes. So, for example, it is named in verses as:

- *al-Qur'an al-Hakim* (The Wise Recitation) - *al-Hakim* (The Wise) is a Divine attribute;
- *al-Kitab al-Mubin* (The Clear Book) - *al-Mubin* (The Clear or Self-Evident Truth) is also a Divine attribute.

The Qur'anic attributes, which give a further sense of the nature of the Qur'an and how it is revered by Muslims, include:

- *Hakim* (Wise)
- *Mubin* (Clear)
- *'Azim* (Magnificent)
- *'Aziz* (Mighty)
- *Karim* (Noble, Generous)
- *Majid* (Majestic)
- *Muhaymin* (Standard [by which to judge distortions to previous Scripture])
- *Musaddiq* (Confirmer of previous Divine Revelations)

Again, all of these are also Divine attributes except for the last one above.

4 Translations and Commentaries in English

The main commentaries on the Qur'an may be divided into the following categories: linguistic, traditional, rational, legal and mystical. The most interesting juxtapositions and comparisons tend to be those of the extremes that give us a wide spectrum in between: traditional/rational and legal/mystical. There are a number of English-language materials that give us a flavour of traditionalist and rationalist commentaries, but very few for legal and mystical ones. Here are some recommended materials:

1. *The Holy Qur'an – Text, Translation and Commentary*, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Amana, Maryland, USA, 1983.[1]
2. *The Meaning of The Holy Qur'an (Complete Translation with Selected Notes)*, 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 2002/1423.
3. *The Meaning of The Holy Qur'an* [Revised Translation], Abdullah Yusuf Ali / Amana Corporation, Maryland, USA, 10th ed., 2004.
4. *The Message of the Qur'an*, translated and explained by Muhammad Asad, Dar al-Andalus, Gibraltar, 1980.[2]
5. *The Commentary on the Qur'an*, by Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari; being an abridged translation of *Jami' al-bayan 'an ta'wil al-Qur'an*, with an introduction and notes by J. Cooper, general editors, W.F. Madelung, A. Jones. Oxford University Press, 1987.[3]
6. *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* (abridged), by Shaykh Safiur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, trans. 10 vols., Dar as-Salam, Riyadh, 2000.[4]

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[1] The first edition of this translation was published in 1934. Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872-1953) was an Indian scholar of literature who was fluent in both Arabic and English. He died in London and is buried in Surrey. The only real biography written about him is the excellent *Searching for Solace* by M.A. Sherif, 1994. His translation and commentary carries the unmistakable imprint of the multi-faceted influence of British India. The original translation has, quite properly, the term "God" for *Allah* wherever it occurs. Later editions replaced this with "Allah," for the benefit of Muslim readers although confusing to non-Muslims.

[2] The first nine surahs of this translation were published in 1964. Muhammad Asad (1900-1992, born Leopold Weiss), was an Austrian Jew who converted to Islam after visiting the Muslim world and falling in love with it. Other influential works by him are *The Road to Mecca*, *Islam at the Crossroads*, and *This Law of Ours*. He was also a remarkable diplomat, serving as personal advisor to King Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia and as Pakistan's ambassador to the UN after the partition of India. His translation and commentary are characterised by a strong Mu'tazilite (rationalist) influence, drawing heavily on commentaries such as the greatest Mu'tazilite commentary of them all, that of Zamakhshari (1075-1144).

[3] The late author, Prof. John Cooper (1947-1998) did not carry this beyond the first volume. The Commentary by Tabari (838-923) is regarded as the best of tradition-based commentaries on the Qur'an, although it is extremely voluminous by modern standards.

[4] The commentary by Ibn Kathir of Damascus (1301-1373), a student of the great Hanbali jurist and theologian Ibn Taymiyyah, is in many ways an abridgement of Tabari. Due to its accessible size (only four volumes compared to Tabari's twelve or thirty volumes, depending on edition) and authentic scholarship, it has become one of the most authoritative traditionalist commentaries in Sunni Islam. The one-volume abridgement of Ibn Kathir by Mubarakpuri filled ten volumes when translated into English! There is an online version of this English-language commentary available at www.tafsir.com, although this website is often unavailable.

5 The Mysterious, "Stand-Alone Letters" (*Huruf Muqatta'at*)

A number[5] of *surahs* begin with mysterious, some would say cryptic, "stand-alone letters." When reciting the Qur'an, these surah openings are recited as such, with each letter spelled out with its name. So, for example, A.L.M. is recited, "Alif Lam Mim." The openings are as follows:

A. L. M. - This is the Book, no doubt! In it is guidance for the righteous. (2- The Cow)

A. L. M. - God! There is no god except He, the Living, the Self-Subsisting. (3- The House of Imran)

A. L. M. S. – A Book that has been revealed to you … (7- The Heights)

A. L. R. – Those are the Signs of the Wise Book. (10- Jonah)

A. L. R. – A Book, whereof the Signs have been Commanded, then Explained … (11- Hud)

A. L. R. - Those are the Signs of the Clear Book. (12- Joseph)

A. L. M. R. - Those are the Signs of the Book … (13- Thunder)

A. L. R. – A Book, that We have revealed to you … (14- Abraham)

A. L. R. – Those are the Signs of the Book and a Clear Recitation. (15- The Rock Dwellings)

K. H. Y. '. S. – Remembrance of the Mercy of your Lord upon His servant, Zachariah. (19- Mary)

T. H. – We have not revealed the Qur'an to you that you may be miserable. (20- Ta Ha)

T. S. M. - Those are the Signs of the Clear Book. (26- The Poets)

T. S. - Those are the Signs of the Recitation and a Clear Book. (27- The Ants)

T. S. M. - Those are the Signs of the Clear Book. (28- The Story)

A. L. M. – Do people reckon that they shall be left alone … ? (29- The Spider)

A. L. M. – The Romans have been defeated. (30- The Romans)

[5] Twenty-nine, to be exact, a prime, odd number that is one more than the number of letters in the Arabic alphabet.

A. L. M. – Those are the Signs of the Wise Book. (31- Luqman)

A. L. M. – Revelation of the Book, in which there is no doubt, from the Lord of the Worlds. (32- Prostration)

Y. S. – By the Wise Qur'an! (36- Ya Sin)

S. – By the Qur'an, Full of Remembrance! (38- Saad)

H. M. – Revelation of the Book from God, the Mighty, the Knower. (40- The Forgiver)

H. M. – A Book, whereof the Signs are Spelled Out … (41- Ha Mim, the Prostration)

H. M. '. S. Q. – Thus did He inspire to you, and to those before you … (42- Consultation)

H. M. – By the Clear Book! (43- Ornaments of Gold)

H. M. – By the Clear Book! (44- Smoke)

H. M. – Revelation of the Book from God, the Mighty, the Wise. (45- Kneeling)

H. M. – Revelation of the Book from God, the Mighty, the Wise. (46- The Wind-Curved Sand-Dunes)

Q. – By the Majestic Qur'an! (50- Qaf)

N. – By the Pen, and what they write! (68- The Pen)

6 Meanings of the Mysterious, Stand-Alone Letters

Not surprisingly, commentators devote much time and many pages to these mysterious letters, and there is a very wide range of opinions and approaches to the subject. It is easily-noted that almost all the mysterious letters are followed by references to the Qur'an, the Book or Revelation. Thus, the mysterious letters seem to be intimately related to the Holy Recitation itself. The following are some of the approaches found in the *tafsir* literature.

6.1 An Extremely Conservative View

"Only God knows what is meant, and we cannot know. We merely recite the letters, and avoid speculation or conjecture, entrusting the meaning to God." A variation of this view is that the letters here are purely mystical symbols and thence it is futile to discuss their meaning using verbal logic.

6.2 The "Abbreviation" View

The letters are abbreviations. In keeping with the nature of Arabic, the letters may be the first or last of the words they represent. For example, A. L. M. (*Alif Lam Mim*) may be an abbreviation for, "Allah, Gabriel, Muhammad," representing the chain of transmission or revelation of the Qur'an; Y. S. (*Ya Sin*) may mean, "*Ya Insan*!" (O Man!), etc.

Another view is that the letters are all abbreviation for different names of Allah, e.g. A. L. M. (*Alif Lam Mim*) stand for *Allah Latif Majid* ("God, the Subtle, the Majestic").[6]

6.3 A Functional View

The meaning or significance of the individual letters or groups of letters aside, the import is that the inimitable, miraculous Qur'an is composed of individual letters or sounds that are known to every speaker. We are able to repeat the basic sounds, but not to compose a Qur'an like it – this is a frequently-repeated challenge within the Qur'an itself. This view is supported by the next one, and by the fact that the letters are nearly always followed by a reference to the Qur'an itself.

This view is that of leading linguists and commentators such as Mubarrad, Farra', Zamakhshari, Ibn Taymiyyah and Mizzi.[7]

6.4 A Linguistic View

The letters occur singly or in groups of two, three, four or five, but no more. This mirrors the nature of the Arabic language, where all words are derived from root words that have one, two, three, four or five root letters. The vast majority of Arabic words have, of course, precisely three root letters, and three-letter groups are by far the most common amongst the mysterious letters.[8]

6.5 A "Phonetical-Etymological" View

Arabic letters have individual meanings, as found by a process of induction with one-letter or two-letter words. For example, the Alif (A or "a" sound) is used for asking questions; M similarly, as in *ma* (what) and *man* (who) but also denotes plurality at the end of many pronouns; L is often used for negation, as in *la* (no), *lam* (not) and *lan*

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[6] Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, Maktabah Dar al-Fayha', Damascus/Beirut, 1413/1992 (4 vols.), vol. 1, p. 39 under Qur'an 2:1

[7] Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, Maktabah Dar al-Fayha', Damascus/Beirut, 1413/1992 (4 vols.), vol. 1, p. 40 under Qur'an 2:1

[8] As may easily be verified from the list of "mysterious-letter" openings given earlier, the number of occurrences of the letters in groups of size 1-5 are, respectively: 3, 9, 13, 2 and 2 (total: 29).

(never). Considerations of the basic nature of Arabic words can thus help to illuminate the mysterious letters. "A. L. M." might thus refer to a process of interrogation, negation and assimilation or asking questions, saying no to some matters and finally reconciling opposing ideas.

6.5.1 Shah Waliullah of Delhi's explanation of the "Phonetical-Etymological" view

Shah Waliullah of Delhi (1703-1762) ends his short but valuable treatise *Al-Fawz al-Kabir fi Usul al-Tafsir* ("The Great Success in the Principles of Exegesis") with the following section on the "Abbreviated Letters":

One of the sciences of the Qur'an, the revelation of which has been made to me, is the solution of the meanings underlying the abbreviated letters of the Qur'an. This, however, is subject to the preparation of an introduction.

Let it be remembered that the letters of the alphabet are the principles of the words of the Arabs, and each one of them has its own simple meaning, extremely fresh and modern. They cannot be interpreted without a general hint. It is here that many of the approximate words (i.e. those with similar letters) either agree in meaning or are approximate in it.

For example, the scholars in literature have mentioned that where in a word, N and F come together, their combination gives an indication of the meaning of going out (*khuruj*) in some respect like *nafara* (to go out in a group), *nafatha* (to blow with spittle), *nafaha* (to blow or breathe out), *nafakha* (to blow or breathe out), *nafaqa* (to tunnel), *nafada* (to disperse) and *nafadha* (to escape).

Also for example, where F and L combine, the combination indicates the meaning of "opening up," such as *falaq* (to break open), *falah* (to cleave), *falaj* (to split), *faladh* (animal liver or buried treasure, found by opening up a carcass or the earth) and *falad*.

It is from here that masters in literature know that many a time the Arabs use one word in different shades of meaning by substituting similar letters as is found in *daqq* and *dakk* (to knock), and in *lajj* and *lazz* (to insist).

In short, there is much evidence for this aspect of meaning. Our intention is simply to alert the reader, and nothing else. This is the language of all Arabs, even though the pure Arabs may not be able to ascertain it and the grammarians may not be able to understand it, just as, for example, they do not know the meaning of the definition of the genus and the peculiarities of the constructions. If you ask the pure Arabs to explain what they actually are, they will not be able to explain, even though they are using the same constructions in their conversation. Then, even those who are engaged in ascertaining the speech of the Arabs are not of one and the same rank. Some are more sharp-minded than others, and besides, there are certain meanings which some of them understand thoroughly, while others do not. This also is the science of the language of the Arabs.

Many of those who have studied it in minute detail have fallen short of understanding its intended meanings.

The abbreviated letters are the names of the chapters (*surahs*) in the sense that they summarily indicate what the chapters consist of in detail. This is just like the name they fix for a book, so that its gist may become clear before the mind of the reader. For example, Imam Bukhari named his book: *al-Jami' al-Sahih al-Musnad fi Hadith Rasulillah* ("The Authentic Collection with Chains of Transmission of the Traditions of the Messenger of Allah").

The meaning of A.L.M. is that the unspecified unseen is specified in relation to the visible world which is defiled. The reason is that both A and H give the meaning of the unseen, except that H is the unseen of this world whilst A is the unseen of the abstract world. It is, therefore, that at the time of interrogation and conjunction the Arabs say *aw* or *am* (both meaning, "or"). The reason is that an affair set right is disturbed, and it is the unseen in relation to the specified. In the same way, what makes them hesitate in it is an unseen. They add an interrogative A at the beginning of a question so that it may indicate that the picture is gained in their minds, the details of which are such and such. They choose H … because it is an unseen of this world, and the specified is summarised, since L gives the meaning of specification.[9] It is, therefore, that at the time of making a common noun proper, the L of introduction (*ta'rif*) is added. When L and M meet, their combination gives an indication of the defiled matter in which various realities are collected and have become restricted. And because of the requirement of the abstract, they are subjected to restriction and space.

Thus, A.L.M. alludes to the simple grace which has come down into the world of space according to the customs of people, and in consequence, their sciences (*'ulum*) became specified. It fought against the hardness of their hearts by means of reminding, and struck against their corrupt sayings and useless actions by show of love with the prescription of the limits of virtue and vice. The whole chapter[10] is the explanation of it.

A.L.R. is like A.L.M., except that R indicates hesitation, namely that the unseen which is specified by defilement has again come with defilement and become specified.

M also gives the same sense and alludes to the sciences which are frequently striking hard against the foul acts of the people, and that is true, as is seen in the stories of the Prophets and their discourses time after time and in their repeated questions and answers.

T (*Ta*) and S (*Sad*) both suggest an upward movement from the defiled world to the higher world, except that T points to greatness and glory or to the ugliness and dirtiness of the moving thing whilst S gives the meaning of purity (*safa'*) and fineness.

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[9] Shah Waliullah is referring to the fact that sentences can be turned into questions in Arabic simply by adding the interrogative "a" or "hal" to the beginning of the sentence. He is arguing that "a" is for abstract matters, whilst "hal" is for more specific, tangible questions.

[10] i.e. Surahs *al-Baqarah* (The Cow, 2), *Al-'Imran* (The Family of Imran, 3) and other surahs prefixed by A.L.M.

S (*Sin*) gives the sense of penetration and its disappearance and dispersion throughout the world. Thus, T refers to the stations of the Prophets, which are the marks of their paying attention to the higher world, so that an unseen picture may be created. In this world, they are mentioned in the Divine Books and their account is given in general terms.[11]

T.S.M. signifies the stations of the Prophets which are the marks of their upward movement and which have penetrated and spread throughout the dirty world.

The guttural H is similar to the airy H, the meaning of which has already been given. In addition, when the H sound possesses shining light, appears and discriminates, it is manifested as the guttural H. Thus, the meaning of H.M. is a brightly-shining generality which is connected to attributes of a world defiled by false beliefs and corrupt actions. This is an allusion to the rejection of people's wicked actions. It also gives the meaning of the appearance of the Truth in places of doubt and disputation and in their customs.

'A ('*Ayn*) points to the appearance of the shining light and its specification.

Q is like M and indicates this world but from the aspect of power (*quwwah*) and severity.[12]

M, because of the collection and the piling up of forms in it,[13] signifies the brightly-shining love of the Real that pervades the ugly world.

N means light (*nur*) which penetrates the darkness and is dispersed like a state that is seen at the time of true dawn or near the time of the setting of the sun.

Y is similar to N, save that there is less light in it and it is specified less than the guttural H.

Thus, Y.S. (*Ya Sin*)[14] is an allusion to meanings which are spread (and dispersed) in the world.

S (*Sad*) signifies an aspect which appeared near the time of concentration by the Prophets upon their Creator, both by nature and acquisition by deeds.

Q conveys the meanings of power, severity and force that are specified in this world. It is like one who says that the object of his intention is the aspect which is created in the world by force and stroke.

K is like Q, save that its power is understood to be less than what is implied in Q.

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[11] This paragraph indicates the surahs prefixed by T.H., T.S. and T.S.M., all of which recount stories of the Prophets.
[12] This paragraph and the previous two help indicate the meanings of the combination H.M.'.S.Q., which prefixes Surah *al-Shura* (Consultation, 42).
[13] A reference to the common use of M to denote plurality (*mim al-jam'*).
[14] This is both the name and prefix of Surah no. 36.

Thus, K.H.Y.‘.S. (the prefix to Surah Maryam or Mary, 19) conveys the meaning of an ugly, dark world in which the sciences (‘*ulum*), some shining brightly and others dimly, are specified at the time of their return to the Creator.

In short, the meanings of these letters have been explained to me by way of spiritual taste (*dhawq*). It is not possible to say more than these words which have been recorded in this book in general meanings. These words are not sufficient to explain their depth and how they differ from each other in one respect or the other.

God knows better the truth of everything.[15]

6.6 A Numerological View

Arabic letters traditionally have numerical equivalents, and this gives rise to the science of numerology, usually regarded as heretical by orthodox Muslims if pursued excessively. Numerical equivalents of the groups of mysterious letters as well as Qur’anic word groupings have been used to speculate about historical and future events, including the date of the Day of Judgment! Needless to say, all such commentary appears to be totally subjective and highly-speculative, not to mention extremely controversial!

6.6.1 An example of numerology – Ibn Barrajan’s prediction of Saladin’s conquest of Jerusalem

An interesting example is given with precisely the same wording by both Ibn Kathir (in *al-Bidayah wa l-Nihayah*, his history of the world) and Suyuti (in his *Tarikh al-Khulafa'* or *History of the Caliphs*, Mu’assasah al-Kutub al-Thaqafiyyah, Beirut, 2nd ed., 1417/1996, p. 394 under the section on Al-Nasir li Din Allah who lived 553-622 and ruled 575-622, his reign including the reconquest of Jerusalem by Saladin in 583/1187).

The verbatim reproduction by Suyuti suggests that he took this from Ibn Kathir:

[15] Adapted from *Al-Fauz al-Kabir fi Usul al-Tafsir – Th ePrinciples of Quran Commentary* by Shah Waliyullah, trans. G.N. Jalbani, National Hijra Council, Islamabad, 1405/1985, pp. 81-85

One of the strange matters [connected to the reconquest of Jerusalem] is that Ibn Barrajan[16] mentioned in *tafsir* of "*Alif Lam Mim:* The Romans have been conquered" [Qur'an, 30:1-2] that Jerusalem would remain in the hands of the Crusaders (*al-Rum*) until the year 583, when they would be vanquished. Jerusalem would be conquered and remain a Land of Islam until the end of time. He derived all this from the arithmetic of the *ayah*, and it is precisely what happened.

Abu Shamah said: What Ibn Barrajan mentioned is a wondrous coincidence, for he died ages before the event, his death having occurred in the year 536.

(End of quote from Ibn Kathir and Suyuti)

Now, Ibn Barrajan's arithmetic is puzzling. Here are the Abjad values of the first two ayahs of Surah al-Rum:

1. *Alif Lam Mim*: 71

2. *Ghulibat al-Rum*: 1432, 277

The question is, how did he arrive at the year of the reconquest of Jerusalem?

If one uses ayah 2 only, plus the Surah number (30) and the ayah number, then:

1432 - 277 + 30 + 2 = 1187, the CE date of the reconquest of Jerusalem which can be converted to the equivalent Hijri year.

Note that the subtraction at the beginning might be justified from the words that literally translate as, "Conquered - The Romans."

Notes for further study

(1) Was this indeed Ibn Barrajan's arithmetic?

[16] Abu l-Hakam Ibn Barrajan (d. 536 H) was a chief representative of the "Almeria school" of Western (Andalusian) Sufism during the Almoravid period that was one of the influences upon Ibn 'Arabi (560-638 H). According to Sha'rani, Ibn Barrajan had been proclaimed "imam" in 130 villages in the region of Seville. His disciples included Ibn al-'Arif and the hadith-master 'Abd al-Haqq al-Ishbili [i.e. of Seville, d. 581/1185], a teacher of Ibn 'Arabi. Ibn Barrajan's books included the *Kitab al-Hikma* (Book of Wisdom), which Ibn 'Arabi studied at Tunis in 590/1194 under the direction of 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Mahdawi. The popularity and doctrines of the Almeria school led to the trial of Ibn Barrajan, Ibn al-'Arif and Mayurqi at Marrakech in 536 H, at the order of the Almoravid Sultan 'Ali b. Yusuf b. Tashfin. The first two defendants both died in the same year. (Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur – The Life of Ibn 'Arabi*, The Islamic Texts Society, 1993, pp. 52-55) Addas (p. 55) says that Ibn Barrajan's prediction of Saladin's reconquest of Jerusalem was based on astrology (*'ilm al-falak*). A plausible basis is given above for Ibn Kathir and Suyuti's assertion that it was based on numerology. Perhaps the prediction was made based on both astrology and numerology.

(2) Is there another explanation, perhaps involving a different version of the Abjad numbering (there were two different schemes in use historically: Eastern & Western) ?

(3) Did Ibn Barrajan really make this prediction, or was it interpolated into his manuscript after the event?

(4) The prediction as stated was fulfilled and remained true for almost eight centuries, but is no longer true ever since the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem in 1967.

(5) In the end, this is no more than a mathematical distraction, for the Qur'an is primarily a collection of Signs and Guidance for humanity in our journeys towards God.

6.6.2 Another example of numerology – Jews under Muslim rule

Ibn Kathir quotes from the early authority Abu l-'Aliyah that the mysterious letters may denote lifetimes of nations: "*Alif* is one year; *Lam* is thirty years; *Mim* is forty years."[17]

He also quotes a narration that he dismisses as not authentic, to the effect that some Jews at the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) speculated that the Prophet's followers would rule over them for periods denoted by the mysterious letters. The narration specifically mentions the following groups of letters: ALM, ALMS, ALR and ALMR, for which the numerical equivalents add up to 734 years of rule. Ibn Kathir then remarks, "If this method is correct, one would have to add up the values of all fourteen of these letters, which would equate to a large figure. If you calculate taking into account repetition [of groups of letters at the beginning of different surahs], the value will be even greater, and Allah knows best."[18]

6.7 Mystical Approaches

Most of the following material is suggested by contributions in the series of "Islamic Spirituality" volumes edited by Prof. S.H. Nasr.

The letters have different phonetic properties, as studied in orthodox ways, but these have reflections in Divine mysteries. For example, the guttural *alif* is pronounced by "stopping" the breath, followed by an explosion of sound from the throat as the breath is released. This may mirror the Divine process of creation *ex nihilo*, where the Archetypal Possibilities or Potentialities build-up to bursting point, and the "Divine Breath" releases them into physical manifestation. Other letters can be pronounced whilst continuing to breathe, and these correspond to the sustenance of existence and continuous creation by the Divine. The "m" is pronounced by bringing the two lips completely together, and this mirrors the act of drawing plurality together, achieving unity in multiplicity.

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[17] Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, Maktabah Dar al-Fayha', Damascus/Beirut, 1413/1992 (4 vols.), vol. 1, p. 39 under Qur'an 2:1

[18] Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, Maktabah Dar al-Fayha', Damascus/Beirut, 1413/1992 (4 vols.), vol. 1, p. 41 under Qur'an 2:1. Note that Ibn Kathir miscalculates the value of ALMS, forgetting the L, so he gives the total as 704. The results of the calculations he suggests at the end are 1757 and 3385, respectively.

Of the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet, precisely 14 occur as mysterious letters whilst the other 14 do not. This corresponds to the Divine Names, *al-Zahir* ("the Apparent, Manifest or Outward") and *al-Batin* ("the Hidden or Inward"). It is even said that the act of raising the hands with palms facing outwards during the daily prayer (*salat*), also refers to this mystery. Although the five fingers on each hand appear to have three partitions of skin each resulting in a total of 15, the thumbs actually have only one joint in their middle, rather than the two in each finger. Thus, the raising of the hands displays 14 finger-joints per hand, corresponding to the 14 "Manifest" Letters and the 14 "Hidden" Letters and thus to the above Divine Names.

There is again a link here with the act of creation: in the Qur'anic account, God favoured Adam by creating him with his own "Two Hands" (38:75): one explanation of this again involves the Divine Names of Outwardness and Inwardness, for Adam and all of humanity are the isthmus (*barzakh*) between Earth and Heaven, Outwardness and Inwardness, Matter and Spirit.

One of the indications that mystics cite to support such explanations is the *ayah*, "Then, by the Lord of the Heaven and Earth, it is surely the Truth, similarly to the way you speak!" (51:23) This *ayah* also supports the "phonetical" view given above.

God knows best!