



An Analysis and Critique of the Orientalist Theory of the Meaninglessness of Quranic Disconnected Letters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭaʿa*)

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Abstract

The Quranic disconnected letters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭaʿa*) and their meaningfulness have garnered the attention of both contemporary and early Muslim scholars and thinkers. The notion of the disconnected letters being devoid of meaning or shrouded in mystery is a theory propagated by certain Orientalists with the intent of casting doubt on the divine origin of the noble Quran. This research aims to elucidate, analyze, critique, and refute such perspectives. By highlighting the revelatory essence of the Quran and defending it against Orientalist skepticism, this article employs a descriptive-analytical method and a critical approach to address concerns raised by Orientalist figures such as George Sale, Régis Blachère, Richard Bell, and Theodor Nöldeke regarding the purported meaninglessness of the Quranic disconnected letters. The author believes that the Quran embodies the pinnacle of eloquence, and the Orientalists' assertion of the disconnected letters' lack of meaning is rooted in their distinct objectives, intellectual frameworks, and interpretations of Islamic studies. This includes viewing the Quran as having a human origin, being influenced by its social context, and reflecting the cultural milieu of its time. Furthermore, their methodology of Quranic studies often exhibits superficiality, bias, illusionism, and a lack of understanding of the depths of those "firmly grounded in knowledge" (*al-rāsikhūn fi al-ʿilm*). Their conclusions regarding the disconnected letters are thus a product of their failure to consult all authentic Islamic sources, notably neglecting Shiite perspectives.

Keywords: The noble Quran, disconnected letters, meaningfulness of the disconnected letters, Orientalists.

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1. Introduction

The issue of the disconnected letters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa'a*) is a significant topic in Quranic studies. These letters, also referred to as “*fawāṭih al-suwar*” (openings of Quranic chapters), are Arabic characters that appear at the beginning of twenty-nine suras or chapters of the Quran. Their disconnected nature means they do not form a word, leading to their enigmatic quality. Since the early Islamic period to the present day, scholars including Quranic exegetes, philosophers, mystics, and theologians have pondered their meanings and connotations based on their respective methodologies and inclinations. Orientalists have also contributed to this discourse by presenting various theories, perspectives, and objections.

The history of attempts to decipher the meaning behind these letters dates back to the era of Prophet Muhammad, particularly in a context involving a dispute with the Jews (Suyūṭī 2000, 1:615). However, there exists no accurate and authentic report indicating whether the Prophet’s companions inquired about them or heard him discuss these letters (Encyclopaedia Islamica Foundation 2009, 13:77). Some scholars suggest that these letters belong to the category of the ambiguous (*mutashābihāt*) verses of the Quran, the knowledge of which is solely with God, beyond the grasp of human interpretation (Ṭabrisī 1993, 1:112). They argue that this ambiguity is insurmountable, with the path to understanding it closed off to humanity. Notably, Abū ‘Amr ‘Āmir ibn Shuraḥbīl al-Sha‘bī, a prominent companion of the Prophet’s companions (d. 104 AH/723 CE), is quoted as saying, “We believe in their surface, leaving knowledge of [their meaning] to God” (Ma‘rifat 2002, 335). Furthermore, Allamah Ṭabāṭabā‘ī maintains that since these letters lack a literal meaning, they fall outside the realm of both definitive (*muḥkam*) and ambiguous verses (Ṭabāṭabā‘ī 2009, 55). Some scholars suggest that the disconnected letters merely serve phonetic functions, devoid of any semantic significance



(Zamakhsharī 1986, 1:29). However, numerous Quranic exegetes and Islamic sects contend that these letters do indeed carry connotations and meanings. Ibn al-‘Arabī asserts that if the Arabs failed to comprehend a commonplace message or indication conveyed by these letters, they would have been the first to question the Prophet about them. This implies a familiarity with these letters to the extent that they did not perceive them as odd (Ibn al-‘Arabī, n.d., 527).

Quranic scholars and Islamic intellectuals also engaged in this discussion, including Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī in his *al-Burhān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, al-Suyūfī in his *al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, Ayatollah Ma‘rifat in his *al-Tamhīd fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, Fakhr al-Rāzī in his *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, Allamah Ṭabāṭabā‘ī in his *al-Mīzān*, and Ayatollah Javadi Amoli in his *Tasnīm* and other exegetical and hadith works.

Many contemporary independent research endeavors have emerged to elucidate the connotations of the disconnected letters, including the following: ‘Abd al-Jabbār Sharāra’s *al-Ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa‘a fī al-Qur’ān al-karīm* (1980) (The disconnected letters in the noble Quran); Rashad Khalifa’s (1986) work on a statistical analysis of the disconnected letters; Husayn Rahmanifard’s (2015) work on exploring various perspectives on the disconnected letters; an article by Seyyed Kāzīm Ṭabāṭabā‘ī (2003) on the views of Western scholars of Quranic studies concerning the disconnected letters; an article by Amir Salmānī Raḥīmī (2010) on disputes over the reading of the disconnected letters; an article by Sayyid Muḥammad Raḍawī and Mahin Ja‘farī (2016) on the disconnected letters from the perspective of Orientalists; an article by Mohammad Ali Mohammadi (1999) concerning mystical views about the disconnected letters; Faḍl ‘Abbās Ṣāliḥ ‘Abd al-Laṭīf Abū ‘Īsā’s (2003) dissertation on the openings of Quranic chapters.

These are examples of research works on the Quranic disconnected letters. The present article contributes to the field by offering a critical analysis of the perspectives presented by some Orientalists regarding the purported meaninglessness of these letters.

2. Some Preliminaries about the Disconnected Letters

The Arabic term “ḥurūf” is the plural form of “ḥarf,” which denotes inflection, distortion, inclination, edge, or periphery (Ibn al-Manzūr 1993, 9:41; Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī 1993, 1:228; Qurashī 1992, 3:120). Quranic exegetes have also drawn upon these meanings in their explanation of its literal significance (e.g., see Ṭūsī, n.d., 3:213, 7:296; Zamakhsharī 1986, 1:516). Ibn al-Athīr asserts that “ḥarf” essentially denotes the edge or periphery of something, which is why each syllable or alphabet is referred to as a “ḥarf” (Ibn al-Athīr 1988, 1:369). The term “taḥrīf” (distortion) shares roots with “ḥarf,” signifying the diversion of words from their original meanings and their redirection toward a different interpretation (Rāghib Iṣfahānī, n.d., 229).

The term “muqaṭṭa'a” originates from “qaṭ' ,” which denotes severing and cutting parts of a physical object (Ibn al-Manzūr 1993, 8:277; Musa, n.d., 2:1354). “Al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa'a” are referred to as “muqaṭṭa'a” (disconnected) because they are read separately, one by one.

As for the terminological notion of the disconnected letters, these are the disconnected alphabetic letters at the beginning of twenty-nine Quran's suras, which are read separately, although they are written connectedly. This is why these letters are known as “disconnected letters” (*al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa'a*) or “the disconnected” (*al-muqaṭṭa'āt*), namely letters that are arranged alongside each other without forming a letter, such as “المص” (“ALMṢ,” read as alif, lām, mīm, ṣād) (Muqātil ibn Sulaymān 2002, 6:17; Ibn Qutayba 2002, 182; Ayyāshī 1960, 2:3; Ibn Abī Hātam 1998, 12:567; Ṭūsī, n.d., 1:48; Zarkashī 1989, 1:254; Ma'rifat 1989, 1:387).



3. An Objection and Reply

Semantic clarity, as opposed to verbal or semantic complexity, is a fundamental aspect of eloquence. Words that are convoluted or obscure, failing to clearly convey their meanings and making it exceedingly difficult for the audience to comprehend, undoubtedly lack eloquence.

Certain Orientalists have cited sections of the Quran, notably the disconnected letters, contending that they lack clear significance. Let us examine some of these assertions below:

George Sale, a British Orientalist, argues that the presence of puzzles and enigmas in the Quran undermines Muslims' assertion that the entire Quran is divine guidance. He posits that contemplation of the enigmatic disconnected letters at the beginning of Quran's suras, such as ALM, KHY' AS, and similar ones, reveals that they are not intended for guidance, as even those "firmly grounded in knowledge" (*al-rāsikhūn fi al-ilm*) could not decipher their meanings except Muhammad himself. Therefore, employing such letters to communicate with the audience is absurd. Sale suggests that the Prophet's scribes likely borrowed these letters from Jewish tradition, where they were used merely to signify the completion of a statement and the beginning of a new one. He concludes that reflecting on these points strongly suggests that these words are not of divine origin, as God would not address His servants with incomprehensible content (Sale 1896, 102; Sale, n.d., 47-48; Riḍwān 1992, 2:638).

Otto Loth, another Western scholar of Islamic studies, also believes that the disconnected letters are signs adapted from the Jews, asserting that Prophet Muhammad was owed to the Jews of Medina in his use of the disconnected letters, since he had learned them from Jews when he migrated to Medina and used them in Medinan suras of the Quran (Riḍwān 1992, 2:491; Zakzouk, n.d., 84). Of course, advocates of the possibility of Quranic verses being adaptations are not confined to these figures. It is upheld by others such as Tisdall (1911, 49), Noldeke (2017, 6), Aloys Sprenger, Michael Sells (2017, 1:176), and Uri Rubin (2001, 3:441).

The primary reasons they cite for this stance are the significant similarities they observe between the Quran and the Bible, which they consider undeniable. However, the theory proposed by Loth and others lacks credibility, as out of the twenty-nine Quranic suras that commence with the disconnected letters, twenty-seven are Meccan, meaning they were revealed in Mecca. Only two of these suras were revealed in Medina. Therefore, it is implausible to suggest that the Prophet adapted these letters from the Jews of Medina while he was still in Mecca. It would be even less absurd if they suggested that the Prophet derived these letters from the polytheists of the Quraysh in Mecca (Zamānī 2007, 147).

Henri Massé, a French Orientalist, proposes the notion of the disconnected letters as potential riddles or puzzles. He points out that all twenty-nine Quranic suras containing these letters date back to the period when the Prophet was in Medina. These letters, which have intrigued both Muslim and non-Muslim Quranic scholars, initiate wonder and speculation. While Muslim scholars have posited that these letters are enigmatic, some Orientalists have suggested they may be abbreviations. Others speculate that these letters could be acronyms of the names of the owners of Quranic manuscripts (see Naṣrī 2009, 150).

Georges-Henri Bousquet, another French Orientalist, contends that the disconnected letters are cryptic, noting that specific Quranic chapters commence with unusual letters and symbols. He states that both Muslim and European scholars have attempted to decode them, but they have yet to find a satisfactory explanation, leaving the question unresolved (ibid). Moreover, Abd al-Fadi derogatorily described these letters as “idol talk” or useless letters (Abd al-Fadi, n.d., question 1).



Analysis of the Objection

Sale and other Orientalists make a valid point when they argue that a wise being would not engage in purposeless or absurd actions. It seems incongruous for God to reveal something and expect engagement from the audience when these letters are not comprehensible even to those considered “firmly grounded in knowledge.” However, the crucial question remains whether these disconnected letters are truly meaningless even to individuals deemed “firmly grounded in knowledge.” The objections raised by George Sale, Henri Massé, and other Orientalists lack plausibility for the following reasons.

The first reason: inconsistency of the alleged meaninglessness of the disconnected letters with Quranic evidence.

To assert that the disconnected letters are entirely devoid of meaning is fundamentally inconsistent with both reason and the evidence provided by Quranic verses and hadiths transmitted from Shiite Imams.

(a) The revelation of letters that remain obscure even to the Prophet, who serves as the conduit for transmitting God’s word to humanity, contradicts the very purpose of revelation. It is incongruous for a wise being to utter such enigmatic words. Additionally, the Quran describes itself as “a Book, whose signs have been made definitive and then elaborated, from One [who is] all-wise, all-aware”³ (Quran 11:1). How could a book characterized as definitive and elaborated be revealed by God while containing nonsensical and meaningless letters?

(b) The disconnected letters are integral parts of Quranic verses, as the Islamic community believes that the book in our possession today is the same one revealed to the Prophet, safeguarded from any alterations, additions, or omissions. Moreover, the command to reflect upon the Quran

3. ﴿كِتَابٌ أَحْكَمَتْ آيَاتُهُ ثُمَّ فُصِّلَتْ مِنْ لَدُنْ حَكِيمٍ خَبِيرٍ﴾ (هود/١).

encompasses these letters as well (Jawādī Āmulī 2010, 2:102). When the Quran commands reflection upon its verses, commending those who draw inferences and deductions from it and admonishing those who fail to contemplate its message, as in “Do they not ponder the Quran, or are there locks on their hearts?”⁴ (Quran 47:24) and “those of them who investigate would have ascertained it”⁵ (Quran 4:83), it would be absurd to state that the command does not extend to include the disconnected letters?

If that is the case, it is indeed worthy of contemplation why a book revealed to the Prophet over a period of twenty-three years, intended to serve as “a manifest Qur’ān”⁶ (Quran 15:1) to guide humanity, conceals certain aspects, including the disconnected letters, even from the Prophet himself. This is despite Quranic verses suggesting the Prophet’s knowledge of the unseen: “Knower of the Unseen, He does not disclose His Unseen to anyone, except to an apostle He approves of”⁷ (Quran 72:26), and verses indicating that God communicated the meanings of revelation to the Prophet after delivering the Quran to him: “And when We have recited it, follow its recitation. Then, its exposition indeed [also] lies with Us”⁸ (Quran 75:18), obligating the Prophet to convey the teachings of the Quran to the people: “We have sent down the reminder to you so that you may clarify for the people that which has been sent down to them, so that they may reflect”⁹ (Quran 16:44).

4. ﴿أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ أَمْ عَلَى قُلُوبِ أَقْفَالُهَا﴾ (محمد/ ٢٤)

5. ﴿لَعَلِمَهُ الَّذِينَ يَسْتَنْبِطُونَهُ مِنْهُمْ﴾ (نساء/ ٨٣)

6. ﴿قُرْآنٍ مُبِينٍ﴾ (الحجر/ ١)

7. ﴿عَالِمِ الْغَيْبِ فَلَا يظْهَرُ عَلَى غَيْبِهِ أَحَدًا. إِلَّا مَنْ ارْتَضَى مِنْ رَسُولٍ﴾ (الجن/ ٢٦-٢٧)

8. ﴿فَإِذَا قَرَأَهُ فَاتَّبِعْ قُرْآنَهُ. ثُمَّ إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا بَيَانَهُ﴾ (القيامة/ ١٨-١٩)

9. ﴿وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الذِّكْرَ لِتُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ إِلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ﴾ (النحل/ ١٦)



It is illogical for the Prophet to teach and convey what he does not know. According to hadiths, the Prophet was the foremost and most comprehensive example of those "firm in knowledge" who comprehended all Quranic teachings, just as his authentic successors also did (see Qummī 1984, 1:96; Ḥasan ibn ‘Alī 1988, 546). In fact, those deemed “firmly grounded in knowledge” would not rightfully hold such a title if they lacked understanding of the meanings of the disconnected letters (Subḥānī 2008, 265). However, since the comprehension of these letters is restricted to those who possess firm knowledge, when people inquired about them, the Prophet would indicate that they are divine secrets beyond human interpretation, thus discouraging attempts to decipher them (Raḥmānīfard 2015, 161).

The second reason: inconsistency of the purported meaninglessness of the disconnected letters with evidence from hadiths.

The Orientalists may not have encountered the statements of those “firmly grounded in knowledge” (the Infallible leaders of Islam) regarding the disconnected letters due to limitations in resources or language barriers, among other factors. However, the absence of evidence does not necessarily indicate the absence of interpretations by the Infallibles, particularly the Shiite Imams (Ījī 1907, 8:59). Indeed, Shiite Imams have affirmed that these letters convey messages of which both the Prophet and the Imams are aware. Numerous hadiths supporting this interpretation can be found in the hadith corpus and Quranic exegeses. Furthermore, certain hadiths elucidate the meanings of these letters, including their reference to divine names and attributes, as well as the durations of the rule of specific rulers. Some of these hadiths boast reliable chains of transmission, such as the one cited by al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq: Aḥmad ibn Ziyād ibn Ja‘far al-Hamdānī narrated to us that ‘Alī ibn Ibrāhīm narrated to him from his father, from Yaḥyā ibn Abī ‘Imrān, from Yūnus ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, from Sa‘dān, from Abī Baṣīr, from Abī ‘Abd Allāh (Imam al-Ṣādiq), who said,

“ALM [alif-lām-mīm] is a letter from the letters of Allah’s Greatest Name, which is found in the Quran compiled by the Prophet and the Imam. If one includes it in their prayers, they will receive a response from God”¹⁰ (Ibn Bābawayh 1982, 23).

This hadith boasts a reliable chain of transmission, as it involves trustworthy transmitters. The first individual in the chain, Aḥmad ibn Ziyād ibn Ja‘far al-Hamdānī, was a master of al-Ṣadūq (Khu‘rī 1992, 1:270). Next, ‘Alī ibn Ibrāhīm and his father Ibrāhīm ibn Hāshim were esteemed Shiite scholars who lived during the time of two Imams, al-Imam al-Hādī and al-Imam al-‘Askarī. Regarding Yaḥyā ibn ‘Imrān, al-Najāshī confirms his reliability and the accuracy of his hadiths (Najāshī 1986, 444). Yūnus ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān was highly regarded and respected by Shiite Imams (Ḥillī 1981, 184). Sa‘dān in this transmission chain refers to Sa‘dān ibn Muslim, from whom notable Shiite figures such as Ṣafwān ibn Yaḥyā transmitted hadiths, describing him as “the esteemed high-ranking master” (Māmaqānī 2009, 31:46). The last transmitter, Abū Baṣīr, refers to Abū Baṣīr Layth ibn al-Bakhtarī al-Murādī, a companion of Imam al-Ṣādiq, whose reliability is unanimously acknowledged (Burghei 2005, 1:55). As for its signification, the hadith is explicit that these letters are cryptic references to God’s Greatest Name.

Another hadith transmitted by ‘Alī ibn Ibrāhīm is narrated from his father, from Ibn Abī ‘Umar, from Jamīl ibn Ṣāliḥ, from al-Mufaḍḍal, from Jābir, from Abī Ja‘far (Imam al-Bāqir), who said, “ALM (alif-lām-mīm) and all disconnected letters in the Quran are letters of Allah’s greatest name, compiled by the Apostle and Imam. If one includes it in their

10. حَدَّثَنَا أَحْمَدُ بْنُ زِيَادِ بْنِ جَعْفَرِ الْهَمْدَانِيِّ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ قَالَ حَدَّثَنَا عَلِيُّ بْنُ إِبْرَاهِيمَ عَنْ أَبِيهِ عَنْ يَحْيَى بْنِ أَبِي عَمْرَانَ عَنْ يُونُسَ بْنِ عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ عَنْ سَعْدَانَ عَنْ أَبِي بَصِيرٍ عَنْ أَبِي عَبْدِ اللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ قَالَ: «الْم هُوَ حَرْفٌ مِنْ حُرُوفِ اسْمِ اللَّهِ الْأَعْظَمِ الْمُقَطَّعِ فِي الْقُرْآنِ الَّذِي يُؤَلِّمُهُ النَّبِيُّ ﷺ وَالْإِمَامُ فَإِذَا دَعَا بِهِ أُجِيبَ». (ابن بابويه، ١٤٠٣: ص ٢٣)



prayers, they will receive a response from God”¹¹ (Qummī 1984, 1:30).

This hadith also possesses a reliable chain of transmission. ‘Alī ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qummī and his father Ibrāhīm ibn Hāshim were esteemed authorities on hadith in Qom, renowned for their reliability. Jamīl ibn Šāliḥ’s credibility is affirmed by scholars of rijāl (Najāshī 1984, 127). Jābir ibn Yazīd al-Ju‘fī is regarded as free from any issues or problems by prominent scholars of rijāl such as al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (Khu‘ī 1992, 4:339), Ibn al-Ghaḍā‘irī (Māmaqānī 2009, 6:48), and Ibn ‘Uqda (Khu‘ī 1992, 4:339). Therefore, it is evident that these hadiths indicate that the disconnected letters carry meanings and messages, which can be elucidated through the teachings of the Shiite Imams.

Allameh Ṭabāṭabā‘ī also affirms the theory that these letters are enigmatic, stating:

These hadiths seem to indicate that most disconnected letters are interpreted as God’s great names, suggesting that these letters originate from divine names. They may either be acronyms, such as “M” (mīm), allegedly derived from “Malik,” “Majīd,” and “Muqtadir,” or derived from their middle letters, such as “L” (lām) from “Allāh” and “Y” (yā) from “Walīyyun.” Thus, these disconnected letters serve as cryptic references to God’s great names. (Ṭabāṭabā‘ī 1970, 18:15)

The third reason: inconsistency of the purported meaninglessness of the disconnected letters with Orientalists’ exegetical evidence.

Some Orientalists’ statements provide evidence against the above claim of the meaninglessness of the disconnected letters. Despite their varied opinions, many Orientalists have demonstrated a keen interest in uncovering the meanings of these letters. Guided by their own assumptions

11. أَبِي عَنْ ابْنِ أَبِي عُمَيْرٍ عَنْ جَمِيلِ بْنِ صَالِحٍ عَنِ الْمَفْضَلِ عَنْ جَابِرٍ عَنْ أَبِي جَعْفَرٍ عليه السلام أَنَّهُ قَالَ: «الْم وَكُلُّ حُرُوفٍ فِي الْقُرْآنِ مُنْقَطِعَةٌ مِنْ حُرُوفِ اسْمِ اللَّهِ الْأَعْظَمِ الَّذِي يُؤَلِّفُهُ الرَّسُولُ صلى الله عليه وسلم وَالْإِمَامَ عليه السلام فَيَدْعُو بِهِ فَيَجَابُ». (قمي، 1363ش: ج 1، ص 30)

regarding the Quran's origin, they have adopted certain interpretations of the meaning and significance of these letters. Thus, the theory of meaninglessness has been contested by other Orientalists who have diligently sought to decipher their meanings. For instance, Theodore Noldeke and Hartwig Hirschfeld proposed a theory suggesting that the disconnected letters are not part of the Quranic text but are instead acronyms or abbreviations of the names of the owners of Quranic manuscripts. Examples include "ALR" (alif-lām-rā) as a reference to al-Zubayr, "ALMR" (alif-lām-mīm-rā) to al-Mughīra, "Ṭ" to Ṭalḥa or Ṭalḥa ibn 'Ubayd Allāh, "ḤM" (ḥā-mīm) to 'Abd al-Raḥmān, and "KHY' AṢ" (kāf-hā-yā-'ayn-ṣād) where the middle letter may refer to "Ibn" and the latter two letters to al-'Āṣ, and so forth (Noldeke 2017; Abū Layla 2002, 230). According to Hirschfeld, "M" (mīm) refers to al-Mughīra; "Ṣ" (ṣād) to Ḥafṣa; "R" (rā) or "Z" (zā) to Zubayr; "K" (kāf) to Abū Bakr; "H" (hā) to Abū Hurayra; "N" (nūn) to 'Uthmān; "Ṭ" (ṭā) to Ṭalḥa; "S" (sīn) to Sa'd b. Abī Waqqās; "Ḥ" (ḥā) to Ḥudhayfa; "'A" ('ayn) to 'Umar or 'Alī or Ibn 'Abbās or 'Ā'isha; "Q" (qāf) to Qāsim ibn Rabī'a (Massey 2003, 475-76).

However, the theory proposed by Noldeke and Hirschfeld failed to gain acceptance among Muslims and even among other Western scholars of Quranic studies. For example, scholars such as Blachère, Loth, and Boyer firmly rejected this interpretation. Blachère, for instance, argued that it is entirely implausible that manuscript compilers knowingly preserved disconnected letters that they recognized as abbreviations or acronyms of their contemporaries (Blachère 1995, 170). Additionally, such an unfounded assumption does not align with the known names of manuscript owners during the Prophet's time (Massey 2003, 476). Richard Bell, who has also rejected this theory, writes:



Some European scholars have regarded these letters as abbreviations of the names of persons who had previously, for their own use, collected, memorised, or written down certain suras, and from whom, then, Zaid obtained them. Thus, the *hawāmīm* would have been obtained from somebody whose name was abbreviated to “*ḥā*” (H) and “*mīm*,” (M) and so on. It seems a plausible theory, but the difficulty is to suggest names of possible persons who might be so indicated. No one has satisfactorily solved that problem. Hirschfeld, for instance, who tried to work it out, takes “*ṣād*” (S) as denoting Ḥafṣah, (K), Abu Bakr, (N), ‘Uthmān. Again, it is difficult to see why, for important suras such as *al-Baqarah* and *Āl-i ‘Imrān*, the collectors should have been dependent apparently upon one person, denoted by (ALM) (*alif, lām, mīm*) whom Hirschfeld takes to be al-Mughirah; while other suras of lesser importance should have no specific attribution, signifying their communal ownership [meaning multiple versions of them were available to the public]. (Bell 1953, 56)

Ayatollah Jawādī Āmulī also dismissed this theory as unfounded, asserting that such a remark is evidently baseless. Firstly, it rests on the false claim that these letters are not part of the Quran but have been added to the Quranic text. This contradicts the consensus among Muslims, who firmly believe that the current Quran is precisely what was revealed to the Prophet, word by word. Secondly, historical records and numerous hadiths attest to the Prophet reciting these letters. Thirdly, those individuals mentioned in these accounts were not scribes of the Quran nor were they owners of the original Quranic manuscripts. The Quran that was frequently transmitted from the Prophet was safeguarded in his own house and with many of his companions. The well-known *Hadith al-Thaqalayn*, which establishes the Quran and the Prophet’s Household as the authority for Muslims, along with the hadith from the Prophet declaring that every hadith is valid only if it aligns with the Quran, indicate that the Quran was already compiled during the Prophet’s lifetime. This contradicts the notion

of the Quran being merely scattered verses and suras written on various materials such as wood, animal skins, and sheets, as such fragmented forms could not serve as a comprehensive authority or a criterion for evaluating hadiths. Fourthly, if the disconnected letters referred to the names of manuscript owners, they would logically be inscribed on the front or back covers of the manuscripts, rather than appearing after the verse “In the name of Allah...” Given that the disconnected letters immediately follow this verse, it contradicts the notion that they signify the names of manuscript owners. Finally, proponents of this view only apply it to certain disconnected letters, not all of them (Jawādī Āmulī 2010, 2:96).

The fourth reason: inconsistency of the purported meaninglessness of the disconnected letters with historical evidence

The Quran is revealed in Arabic, and its expressions are rooted in the structures and rules of this language. It is through this linguistic feature that the Quran stands as the ultimate evidence, rendering its opponents incapable of producing anything comparable to it. Hence, if the Arabs contemporary with the Prophet were unable to grasp any ordinary meanings from these letters, they would have been the first to challenge the Prophet. However, we observe that the Prophet recited letters such as “HM” (ḥā-mīm) and “Ṣ” (ṣād) to them without encountering objections or denials. On the contrary, they acknowledged the Quran’s eloquence, while they sought to find flaws in its words and teachings. This indicates their familiarity with the disconnected letters, viewing them as integral components rather than anomalies (Ibn al-‘Arabī, n.d., 157).

Another point is the wisdom behind the inclusion of these letters in the Quranic verses which indicates that the Quran, with all its grandeur and eloquence, which has impressed both Arab and non-Arab orators and left scholars unable to match its excellence, is composed solely of these letters that are readily available to everyone. While the Quran consists of these alphabets and common words, its prose is so rhythmic and profound that



it reaches the depths of people's hearts and souls, evoking praise and admiration, and compelling minds to acknowledge its magnificence (Makārim Shīrāzī 2003, 1:37). While humans possess these alphabets and words, they lack the ability to devise styles and combinations as seen in the Quran.

Hence, given the absence of historical evidence indicating any denial or questioning by the Prophet's companions regarding these letters, it can be inferred that they held meaning for them.

Conclusion

After examining the Orientalists' perspectives on the disconnected letters, it becomes apparent that their views are objectionable for several reasons:

1. If these letters were truly meaningless, Muslim scholars would not transmit statements from those considered "firmly grounded in knowledge" regarding the messages behind these letters. Shiite Imams, regarded as such figures, have provided interpretations for these letters.

2. If these letters held no meaning, Muslim scholars would not reference over twenty accounts of the meanings of these letters in their Quranic and exegetical works.

3. Additionally, some Orientalists have attempted to assign meanings to these letters, indicating that not all scholars within their field endorse the notion of their meaninglessness.

4. If the Arabs were unable to grasp any ordinary meaning or significance from these letters, they would have been the first to challenge the Prophet. However, as we have observed, the Prophet recited letters such as "ḤM" (ḥā-mīm) and "Ṣ" (ṣād) to them without encountering objections or denials. On the contrary, even the Prophet's adversaries acknowledged the eloquence of the Quran, while they constantly sought opportunities to find flaws in its words and teachings. This indicates that the disconnected letters were familiar to them, presenting no anomalies.

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