Exegesis of the *ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭaᶜa*: Polyvalency in Sunnī Traditions of Qur'anic Interpretation

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Alif lām mīm. These are letters in which there is doubt. Or rather, these are letters over which there has been persistent discussion and speculation. *A-l-m* and a number of letters similar to them, commonly called *al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭaᶜa* ('the disconnected letters'), constitute a distinct recurring feature of the Qur'an. This same distinctiveness gave way to a long and expansive tradition of exegesis. But despite the creativity and richness that emerged in exegetical discussions within this tradition, little work has been done to document and analyse the history of the exegesis of the *ḥurūf* and the limits of interpretation that it entailed. Instead, modern scholars of Islam have chosen to overlook it, preferring to formulate 'solutions' of their own. The present study investigates the nature of this scholarly oversight and then provides a historical analysis of the exegesis of *al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭaᶜa* from within the Sunnī tradition.

The recited graphemes appear at the beginning of 29 suras. Sometimes they appear as solitary letters, like *ṣ* (*ṣād*, Q. 38:1), *q* (*qāf*, Q. 50:1) and *n* (*nūn*, Q. 68:1), but more often than not they appear in groups. These groupings include pairs, *ṭ-h* (Q. 18:1), *ṭ-s* (Q. 27:1), *y-s* (Q. 36:1) and *ḥ-m* (Q. 40:1, Q. 41:1, Q. 43:1, Q. 44:1, Q. 45:1, Q. 46:1); groups of three, *a-l-m* (Q. 2:1, Q. 3:1, Q. 29:1, Q. 30:1, Q. 31:1, Q. 32:1), *a-l-r* (Q. 10:1, Q. 11:1, Q. 12:1, Q. 14:1, Q. 15:1), *ṭ-s-m* (Q. 26:1, Q. 28:1); groups of four, *a-l-m-ṣ* (Q. 7:1), *a-l-m-r* (Q. 13:1); and finally twice in groups of five, *k-h-y-ᶜ-ṣ* (Q. 19:1) and *ḥ-m-ᶜ-s-q* (Q. 42:1).[1] There is an aural distinctiveness to them as well because each letter is pronounced individually according to its proper alphabetic designation rather than altogether as a morphologic word. For instance, in the case of *ḥ-m* the letters are recited as *ḥāʾ mīm* rather than as a word like *ḥamma*. For Muslim readers and listeners, these letters are a distinctive and ingrained feature of the Qur'an.

After centuries of exposure, the letters have become a recognisable feature of scripture to Muslim audiences. Whatever these letters mean – and that has been and continues to be the predominant question – they conjure up notions of revelation. A clear example is found at the inception of the Bābī movement, the forerunner of the Bahāʾī tradition. In the 1840s, when Bābism emerged out of the Shīʿī milieu of Islamicate Persia, its founding figure, Sayyid ʿAlī Muḥammad Shīrāzī (d. 1266/1850) composed a 'commentary' of *Sūrat Yūsuf* (Q. 12) of the Qur'an called *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ*. The commentary deliberately imitates the structure of the Qur'an. Its chapters are called 'suras', its lines are called 'ayas', its style and form purposefully mimic the scripture. The *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ* has only 111 suras, but this is meant to match the 111 ayas of *Sūrat Yūsuf*. However, what is especially telling for the present study is that Sayyid ʿAlī Muḥammad adorned the beginning of *all* of his 'suras', except one, with his own sets of special letters.[2] The letters of the *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ* do not exactly match those found in the Qur'an. In fact, all but five of the suras of the *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ* bear their own sets of letters whereas the Qur'an only has 29 occurrences.[3] In spite of this, the letters of the former were clearly crafted to resonate with the distinctive nature of the letters of the Qur'an.

The great Ṣūfī master Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) also recognised the exceptionalism that the Qur'anic letters exhibited. Though spread across 29 suras, the letters were to Ibn ʿArabī intimately tied to one another. The suras containing them were somehow connected. Thus, in a special section of his *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* called *Manzil al-rumūz* ('The Abode of Symbols') he brings together all those suras and specially designates the letters as the *nūrāniyya* or 'luminous ones'.[4] However Ibn ʿArabī understood these letters, they were richly polyvalent and clearly of a special kind within the Scripture.

Historically, Muslim exegetes have referred to the distinctive letters of the Qur'an by a number of names such as the *fawātiḥ* or *awāʾil al-suwar* ('openings' or 'beginnings of the suras') and *al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭaʿa* ('the disconnected letters').[5] These names are descriptive. They are direct references to either the location of the letters in the text or the aural character of the letters when recited, i.e. separated from one another. Similarly, Neal Robinson called them the 'detached letters'.[6] In contrast, many other Islamicists have invented more fanciful designations dubbing the graphemes the so-called 'mystic', 'mystical', 'mystery' or 'mysterious' letters.[7] These interpretive characterisations have old roots. In 1734 George Sale (d. 1736) dubbed them the 'mysterious letters' and in 1786 Claude-Ètienne Savary (d. 1788) referred to them as 'caractères mysterieux'.[8] In the German orientalist tradition, Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930) likewise referred to them as 'die geheimnisvollen Buchstaben' or 'die rätselhaften Buchstaben'.[9] The custom has become so pervasive in Western studies of Islam that Brill's *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, published from 2001 to 2006, placed the discussion of these letters under an entry entitled 'Mysterious Letters'.[10]

Despite the prevalent usage, these 'mystifying' designations are problematic. They unnecessarily foist a subjective and enigmatic quality upon the letters further exoticising the Qur'an as a whole. In some cases, they allude to an undercurrent of frustration that some scholars have experienced. A case in point is Bellamy's blunt confession that 'these letters are a constant source of irritation, a nagging discontent, which is revived at each encounter'.[11] In order to circumvent the imposition of an extraneous mystique, if not critique, I will refer to the disconnected letters simply as the letters or the *ḥurūf*.

Revisionary Interpretations

The letters, as a distinctive and recurrent feature of Qur'an, have received a substantial amount of scholarly attention from both Muslims and non-Muslims. The proposed interpretations are abundant. Unfortunately, Western scholarly attempts to 'de-mystify' the letters have largely been revisionary in nature. By 'revisionary' I am not referring to the act of speculation itself. Many Muslim exegetes have speculated anew on the letters. Rather, I am applying the label 'revisionary' to how certain theories are formulated and expressed, namely in one of two ways, though some revisionary theories do both. First, many revisionary interpretations pay little to no attention to traditional Muslim interpretations of the letters, ignoring some fourteen centuries of discussion. Muslim attempts to understand the letters are largely overlooked, rejected or marginalised. A critical analysis of the historical Muslim discourse concerning the letters is generally absent from the literature.[12] I am redressing this lacuna with the present study. Second, revisionary theories disregard the Muslim theological narratives concerning the Qur'an and its compilation. Emerging out of the historical-critical milieu of Biblical scholarship, revisionists operate with significantly different presuppositions than their historic Muslim predecessors. As such, revisionary theories concerning the letters generally do not consider the letters to have been an 'original' part of the Qur'an, however that text is conceived.

But before turning to the first and primary concern, the Muslim tradition of exegesis, I will first review in brief the various revisionary interpretations that arose in contrast, if not outright opposition, to it.[13] Revisionary theories of the *ḥurūf* range widely in respect to conclusions. The earliest instance appears in the eleventh/seventeenth century with Jacob Golius (d. 1667), a Dutch scholar of Arabic. George Sale mentioned Golius' theory in the 'Preliminary Discourse' that prefaces his 1734 English translation of the Qur'an. Sale recounts that Golius believed that the letters *a-l-m* stood for *amar li-Muḥammad* or 'at the command of Mohammed'.[14] Notably, Sale precedes Golius' opinion with a recounting of several Muslims theories on the letters. In fact, the view of Golius is implicitly linked with the theories of these earlier speculators, namely those who believed the *ḥurūf* are actually abbreviations, of which

Golius' theory is a variation. But while Golius' theory resonates in form with earlier Muslim speculations, it differs significantly in substance. As Sale states, Golius' opinion is 'the conjecture of a learned Christian … who supposes those letters were set there by the amanuensis'.[15] A decisive revisionary presupposition is evident. The letters, according to Golius, are in fact the addition of a scribe or copyist rather than part of the original Qur'anic text.

In 1860, Theodor Nöldeke in *Geschichte des Qôrans* argued along similar lines. He believed each set of letters was a monogram for an individual whose Qur'an manuscript was consulted by Zayd b. Thābit in compiling the Qur'an.[16] According to this reading, *a-l-r* was actually *a-l-z*, which in turn stood for al-Zubayr, while *a-l-m-r* was shorthand for al-Mughīra. Both of these men were prominent scribal companions of the Prophet and so each set of letters was supposed to represent a prominent scribe of the early Muslim community. In 1900, Palmer praised Nöldeke's theory but also postulated that the letters 'may have been mere numerical or alphabetical labels for the boxes of scraps on which the original was written'.[17] Two years later, Hartwig Hirschfeld (1854–1934) modified Nöldeke's original notion by arguing that each individual letter, rather than each group of letters, represented a different person from the Prophet's nascent community.[18] Interestingly, each letter was not necessarily related with the first letter of a person's name but could be derived from a medial or final letter. Thus according to Hirschfeld, *k* represented Abū Bakr and *n* represented ʿUthmān. Both Nöldeke's and Hirschfeld's theories presumed several secondary extrapolations, namely that the letters indicated some sort of relationship between the suras that bore them and that these same suras were chronologically early in the Qur'an's unfolding. This latter point was emphasised by Neal Robinson when he revisited Nöldeke's speculations in addressing the 'decreasing-length rule' in explaining the ordering of the scripture. While Robinson was ultimately unconvinced by Nöldeke's theory, he did propose that the *ḥurūf* might designate blocks of suras that were commonly grouped together before the collection of the Qur'an 'and that the final editors were reluctant to break them up'.[19] Taking a different approach, Bellamy believed the letters to be abbreviations of a different kind. Rather than signifying persons, he proposed that most of the letters were actually abbreviations for the *basmala*.[20] Furthermore, he argued that the wide variations in the letters were due to corruptions of the text and hence discusses the subject in the course of his work on possible emendations to the Qur'an. Finally, Keith Massey (b. 1966), like Robinson, also acknowledged the arbitrariness of the identifications made by Nöldeke and Hirschfeld. Nonetheless, he elaborated upon their initial speculations and found that the ordering of the *ḥurūf* themselves exhibits a hierarchical structure such that certain letters always appear before others and thus argued that the letters were a 'critical textual apparatus' employed by Zayd b. Thābit for compiling the Qur'anic text.[21] To show precedence for this alleged practice,

Massey points to similar usages evident in codices of the New Testament that pre-date Islam.[22] In each of the above cases, the presumption is made that the *ḥurūf*, until the present, have been egregiously misread and misunderstood for centuries and are rather inclusions left by later editors.

Along a different line of speculation, several scholars tried to connect the letters with the specific content of the suras to which they are attached. Bauer believed the letters were abbreviations for prominent 'catch-words' in the text such that the letter *n* of Sura 68 stood for *majnūn* and the *ṣ* of Sura 38 stood for *ṣāfināt*.[23] More than 50 years later, Seale presented a reformulation of Bauer's proposition believing the letters to be 'pointers to central or striking passages in the Suras'.[24] According to Seale, the letter *ṭ* of Sura 20 indicated the valley of Ṭūwā and the *h* indicated *Hārūn* or Aaron, the brother of Moses. Not far afield, Goossens argued that the letters were possibly an abbreviation of specific or alternative sura titles.[25] To bolster his argument he pointed to other suras with multiple titles like Sura 9, known as *al-Tawba* and *al-Barāʾa*, and Sura 17, known as *al-Isrāʾ* and *Banī Isrāʾīl*. Furthermore, Goossens argued that the repetition of certain sets of letters, such as *a-l-r* and *a-l-m-r*, indicate a thematically bound group of suras, such that *a-l-r* and *a-l-m-r* stood for *al-rusul* and *al-mursal* respectively and that those suras were connected because of their common discussion of the prophets. Again, with these particular theories, the *ḥurūf* are not necessarily an integral part of the original Qur'anic text. Jeffrey, who reviewed the ideas of Bauer and Goossens, makes a point of this. He states that this line of theorising would ultimately 'make them [the letters] out to be the work of man' rather than God, an idea that 'some Azhari-trained Sheikhs in Cairo' to whom he presented this line of speculation would not concede.[26]

By and large, revisionary theories have taken the *ḥurūf* to be virtually everything and anything except an authentic part of the scripture itself.[27] The theological concession necessitated here places most of the revisionist theories beyond the boundaries of acceptability within the Muslim exegetical discourse. According to the revisionists, the letters are deemed so exceptional that they cannot possibly be a part of the original text. They must be resolved or corrected. Yet, as Esack critiques, 'the "proofs" offered for these theories … also supply an insight to the arbitrariness of what passes as critical scholarship and the tenuousness of its theories'.[28] Moreover, the 'rush' to discover an – if not the – answer to the *ḥurūf* has resulted in modern scholars of Islam failing to properly account for the centuries of Muslim speculation that preceded their efforts. The larger history of the exegesis of the *ḥurūf* remains largely undocumented and unanalysed, marking a serious oversight in Qur'anic scholarship.

In response, I am asking: what have Muslims said about the *ḥurūf*? My inquiry is restricted to the historical. I am not interested in furthering the speculative discourse, nor in entertaining what these letters actually mean. I am tracing what Muslims have

said about the letters across the centuries and then analysing the contours of that tradition in respect to the larger history of Qur'anic hermeneutics in order to better appreciate the various 'rules' to interpretation at play.[29] As will be demonstrated, the *tafsīr* tradition exhibited great latitude for interpretation while also limiting the extent of such speculation. I am interested in better delineating the extent and nature of those boundaries within the Muslim exegetical tradition.

Before proceeding, two disclaimers are in order. First, I am restricting my analysis to the traditions of interpretation found in the historic exegetical discourse of the Sunnī community. Second, the current study makes no claim to comprehensiveness even within this more restricted domain. Despite the growing number of commentaries available in print, far too many works remain inaccessible, either lost or unrecognised in manuscript form. Nonetheless, a multitude of sources exists from the earliest centuries of Islam to the present, from which a number of significant exegetical threads can be delineated and unearthed.

The Status of the *ḥurūf*

Whether scrutinised by a seasoned commentator or a novice speculator, the *ḥurūf* have proven to be a perennial object of inquiry. Furthermore, the Sunnī exegetical discourse, I will argue, has treated the letters as an interpretative instance of open polyvalency within the Qur'an. A diversity of opinions is found spread across time, but no definitive solution or explanation has ever risen to widespread acceptance. In fact, at a relatively early stage, exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and Ibn Abī Hātim al-Rāzī (d. 327/938) anthologised a large collection of interpretations concerning the letters.[30] Indeed, surveying more than thirteen centuries of exegetical literature, an unceasing wellspring of intellection and imagination bubbles forth from the *ḥurūf*. There is a plurality of interpretations. Theories abound. And down to this day the letters remain a vibrant source of Qur'anic inquiry. From the earliest commentators, like Ibn ᶜAbbās (d. 68/687–8) and Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), to modern-day figures, like al-Shaᶜrāwī (1911–98) and Muḥammad Asad (1900–92), we find an organic and creative tradition of interpretation.[31] It is organic in its perpetual growth throughout the centuries. It is creative because of its expressed ingenuity and openness in the pursuit of meaning.

The polyvalency of the *ḥurūf* is facilitated by the absence of a definitive and encompassing explanation from the Prophet Muḥammad during his lifetime. No *ḥadīth* has been attributed to the Prophet that categorically explains the letters as a whole.[32] Rather, the letters appear to be a scriptural difficulty. The Qur'an itself prompts this notion of obtuseness through the seeming juxtaposition of the letters with statements proclaiming the clarity of the scripture. Immediately following several of the *ḥurūf* are verses which read: *That is the Scripture in which there is no doubt*

(Q. 2:2); *Those are the verses of the wise Scripture* (Q. 10:1, Q. 31:2); *A Scripture whose verses are perfected* (Q. 11:1); *Those are the verses of the clear Scripture* (Q. 12:1, Q. 26:2, Q. 28:2); *Those are the verses of the Scripture, a clear recitation* (*qurʾān*) (Q. 15:1); *Those are the verses of the Qur'an and a clear Scripture* (Q. 27:1) and *The revelation of the Scripture in which there is no doubt* (Q. 32:2). In other places, the Qur'an reiterates that it is a *clear Qur'an* (Q. 36:69) and in a *clear Arabic language* (Q. 16:103). How, then, did the disconnected *ḥurūf* relate to these proclamations? To the majority of Sunnī scholars, the letters were without a self-evident meaning. There was no plain-sense reading available. In response, the grammarian al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ (d. 215/830) posed the telling question, 'Can anything from the Qur'an not have a meaning?'[33]

The South Asian revivalist thinker Abū'l-Aᶜlā Mawdūdī (1903–79) interpreted the lack of a recognised, self-evident meaning as sign of the times. According to him, if these letters had really not been understood by the Arabs of the Prophet's time, surely one of them would have asked him what they meant so that Muslims today would be in possession of a Prophetic explanation. But given the fact that no such report exists, it must mean then, for Mawdūdī, that the early Arabs actually knew what the letters had meant and the meaning had become lost over time.[34] Successive generations had forgotten what was once known. It is an explanation that fits well with the topos of decline and Mawdūdī's revivalist project, but it was not the recourse for the vast majority of the Sunnī exegetes.

Alternatively, many of the commentators turned to a hermeneutical category established by the Qur'an itself. They believed that the *ḥurūf* were from among the *mutashābih* of the Qur'an. The term '*mutashābih*' is taken from Q. 3:7, in which God discusses *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* verses. The exegetes explain that the *muḥkam* are verses that are clear, definite or perspicacious, while the *mutashābih* verses are their converse, namely verses that are unclear, indefinite or ambiguous.[35] The association of the letters with the *mutashābih* in the Qur'an is found relatively early. Both al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and al-Zajjāj (d. 311/923) mention the possibility in their respective commentaries of Q. 3:7.[36] Their contemporary in Central Asia, Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), makes the identification more explicit by moving the association forward to Q. 2:1, which is the first verse where the *ḥurūf* appear in his commentary.[37] A century later, al-Thaᶜlabī (d. 427/1035) and al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) in Nīshāpūr make the same move and forward the mention of the *mutashābih* to Q. 2:1.[38] The linkage of the *ḥurūf* with the *mutashābih* endured down through the centuries until the letters eventually became a – if not *the* – paradigmatic example of the *mutashābih* in the Qur'an. Al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) discusses the disconnected letters in his chapter on *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* in *al-Itqān fī ᶜulūm al-Qurʾān*.[39] Likewise, Ibn Khaldūn (d. 780/1378–9) in the *Muqaddima* only mentions the *ḥurūf* when he comes to his treatment of the *mutashābih* in the Qur'an and Sunna.[40]

In proper works of *tafsīr* or commentaries on the Qur'an, the opinion persists. It is later mentioned by scholars like al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122), Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/ 1200), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), al-Thaʿālibī (d. 873–5/1468–71), al-Shawkānī (d. 1255/1839), Muḥammad Shafīʿ (1896–1976) and al-Shaʿrāwī (1911–98).[41]

But what exactly was the implication of the letters being *mutashābih*? The exegetes historically understood it in one of two dramatically different ways. The first way was hermeneutically narrow. In this case, the identification of the *ḥurūf* with the *mutashābih* was coupled with a specific oral report. Al-Zajjāj relates, 'It is transmitted on the authority of al-Shaʿbī[42] that: God has a secret (*sirr*) in every scripture, and His secret in the Qur'an is the letters of the alphabet mentioned at the beginning the suras'.[43] The *ḥurūf* are cast as a divine mystery. They are a matter of privileged or restricted knowledge rather than knowledge that is publicly accessible. Al-Zajjāj was not the first scholar to employ this saying. Both al-Ṭabarī and the Ṣūfī al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) also recounted it. What al-Zajjāj does tell us that his predecessors do not is that the saying is attributable to al-Shaʿbī (d. 103–110/721–8), from the generation of the Successors. In al-Thaʿlabī's commentary the chain of transmission is extended back even further to the Companion Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (d. 12/634).[44] Al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1076), al-Thaʿlabī's student, reconciled the variation by mentioning both al-Shaʿbī and Abū Bakr and adding ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661) as a third possible narrator.[45] Whatever the chain(s) of transmission, the report reinforced the inaccessibility of the letters.

That the letters were *mutashābih* ('unclear, ambiguous') and a *sirr* ('secret') of the Qur'an came to constitute the exegetical position of consignment. According to this interpretation the *ḥurūf* were a secret known to God alone. Time and again throughout the *tafsīr* tradition, a number of Sunnī exegetes adopted the theory of consignment as their definitive position. Al-Thaʿlabī himself expresses it at the beginning of his treatment of Q. 2:1, stating 'we believe in their revelation (*tanzīl*), but we consign to God their interpretation (*taʾwīl*)'.[46] Camille Helminski has presented the same idea more recently, noting, 'though various theories as to their meaning exist, their true meaning rests in the Mysterion. As Abu-Bakr … said, "In every Divine Book there is mystery – and the mystery of the Qur'an is indicated in the openings of some of the *surah*s."'[47] Finally, Mawdūdī attuned the interpretation for a popular audience:[48]

> It is obvious, however, that deriving right guidance from the Qur'ān does not depend on grasping the meaning of these vocables, and that anyone who fails to understand them may still live a righteous life and attain salvation. The ordinary reader, therefore, need not delve too deeply into this matter.

As he explains, the letters are soteriologically nonessential. They are not key to understanding the Qur'anic message. Therefore the everyday believer should not trouble him/herself with their meaning.

But avoiding exegesis was hardly the road most traveled by the Muslim exegetes. As mentioned, the letters were not taken as a delimited and impenetrable gateway into the scripture. Even al-Thaʿlabī, who advocated consignment, went on to enumerate a host of possible interpretations. And indeed, many exegetes understood the *mutashābih* nature of the letters in a different way. The term *muḥkam* could also be construed as 'univocal' in the sense of having one possible meaning while the term *mutashābih* could be understood as 'equivocal' in that a number of meanings were equally possible. This particular conceptualisation rendered the letters into an instance of scriptural polyvalency. Their very equivocality became an exegetical opportunity. For example, while the ninth/fifteenth-century North African exegete al-Thaʿālibī acknowledged the position of consignment as a valid position, he went on to say, 'a multitude of other scholars said: "Rather, it is necessary to discuss [the letters] and to investigate the merits underlying them and the meanings that are derived from them".'[49] Instead of reducing and restricting the hermeneutical impulse, the letters could also be read as an encouragement to enumerate and contemplate different interpretations. And indeed Sunnī commentators went well beyond consignment to entertain myriad possibilities.

Given the nature of Qur'anic exegesis this turn came quite naturally to the commentators. As Saleh describes, the *tafsīr* genre is genealogical in character.[50] In order for an author to establish his authority, he had to demonstrate his familiarity with the various positions that preceded him. As previously mentioned, al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī demonstrated at an early stage the tendency to collect and anthologise an array of interpretations.[51] An exegete rarely forwarded a personal opinion without first presenting and oftentimes debating past ones. Al-Thaʿlabī, al-Wāḥidī and the Andalusian legal scholar al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) demonstrate this practice in their respective commentaries. While each of them believed in the soundness of the consignment position, they still gathered and reported the many other opinions that had been passed down to them.[52] Both the conventions of the *tafsīr* genre and the polyvalency of the *ḥurūf* themselves facilitated a historically wide range of speculation.

Early Exegesis of the *ḥurūf*

A core set of opinions attributed to some of the earliest authorities of Qur'anic exegesis rose to the fore early on. The names of such august authorities as Ibn ʿAbbās, Mujāhid (d. 100–4/718–22), ʿIkrima (d. 105/723–4), Qatāda (d. 117/735) and al-Suddī (d. 127/745) repeatedly appear. Their theories approach the letters from a

number of approaches. Some of the figures are consistently associated with a single opinion. For instance, in the commentary of ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī (d. 211/827), Qatāda is closely associated with the theory that the *ḥurūf* are different names for the Qur'an.[53] The point is made on more than half a dozen occasions. On the other hand, some of these early authorities are connected to multiple opinions. The oft-cited Ibn ʿAbbās is attached to a great number of interpretations of the letters: names for the Qur'an, titles to the suras, abbreviations for God's names and attributes, God's way of opening specific passages, divine oaths, or – by some unexplained or inexplicable means – God's greatest name when combined.[54] Whatever the case may be, the above-cited opinions sought to address the *ḥurūf* as a common collective phenomenon.[55]

Nevertheless, other early opinions exist that address specific instances of the *ḥurūf*. Again returning to opinions ascribed to Ibn ʿAbbās, the letters *a-l-m* were said to stand for *anā Allāh aʿlam* ('I am God, I know'), *a-l-r* was likewise *anā Allāh arā* ('I am God, I see') and *a-l-m-ṣ* was *anā Allāh aʿlam wa-afḍal* ('I am God, more knowing and more excellent') or *wa-afṣil* ('I am God, I know and I render').[56] Care was taken to examine each set of letters. Others believed that each letter could stand for a different name of God. Thus we find a number of possibilities: *Allāh*, *al-laṭīf*, *al-majīd* for the letters *a-l-m*; *al-ḥayy*, *al-malik* for *ḥ-m*; and *al-kāfī*, *al-kabīr*, *al-karīm*, *al-hādī*, *al-yamīn*, *al-ḥakīm*,[57] *al-ʿālim*, *al-ʿalīm*, *al-ʿazīz*, *al-ʿadl* and *al-ṣādiq* for *k-h-y-ʿ-ṣ*. Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) ascribed to al-Kalbī (d. 146/763) the view that the letters *k-h-y-ʿ-ṣ* were actually abbreviations to be applied to the Qur'an, rather than God, such that the letters meant 'a sufficient (*kāfin*), guiding (*hādin*), wise (*ḥakīm*), knowing (*ʿālim*), trustworthy (*ṣādiq*) Scripture'.[58] More imaginatively we have the persistent identification of the letter *qāf* with a mountain made of green emerald or sapphire that encircles the earth[59] and the letter *nūn* with either a celestial inkwell or an immense fish upon which the entire earth rests.[60] As these various theories evince, the early exegetes demonstrated an earnestness to make sense of this instance of Qur'anic equivocality and in doing so entertained a wide range of creative possibilities.

But the field of *tafsīr* was far from being a tradition of mere repetition. Exegetical formulations were constantly being refined and renegotiated over the centuries. Ibn ʿAjība (d. 1224/1809), adhering to the Ṣūfī doctrine of a pre-eternal Muḥammadan light, repeatedly raised the possibility that the letters were actually abbreviated invocations or references to God's beloved, the Prophet Muḥammad.[61] Before Ibn ʿAjība's time exegetes had already recognised that *ḥurūf* like *ṭ-h* and *y-s* were possible names for Muḥammad (Ṭāhā and Yāsīn respectively). What is interesting in the case of Ibn ʿAjība is that he believed the interpretation applies to all the appearances of the letters and that he gives the position pre-eminence by continually reiterating it time and again over all other interpretations. In the last century, Hashim Amir ʿAlī

(1903–87), unaware of Ibn ᶜAjība's opinion or others like it, made a similar claim touting the newness of his 'plausible solution'.[62] Both cases speak to the viability of new articulations. Each exegete started with a commonly accepted opinion, that Ṭāhā and Yāsīn were possible names for the Prophet, but then expanded it to fit their respective outlook and context. Although much had been said in the earliest centuries of Islam, exegetes continued to investigate the *ḥurūf* with each passing generation.

Contexts of Interpretations

Indeed, exegetical opinions were often refined and adapted over the centuries to meet the specific circumstances and predilections of the period. A prominent example of this is the interpretation that connected the *ḥurūf* with arguments for the Qur'an's inimitability (*iᶜjāz*). It was a theory that was to be greatly elaborated and frequently adopted by latter-day scholars. Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), citing the grammarians Quṭrub (d. 206/821) and al-Farrāʾ (d. 207/822), posed that the *ḥurūf* were there to show the disbelieving Arabs that the miraculous Qur'an before them was composed of mere letters of the alphabet.[63] The presence of the *ḥurūf* then, only served to reinforce the divine challenge (*taḥaddī*) to try and imitate the Qur'an, which was a theological impossibility for the Muslim community.

An important elaborator of this theory was al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), the famous philologist and Muᶜtazilī.[64] Despite possessing a theological affiliation, Muᶜtazilism, which became anathema to the Sunnī mainstream, al-Zamakhsharī's *tafsīr* was deemed too important and compelling to exclude. Rather, his commentary was addressed or even appropriated by exegetes in the Sunnī *tafsīr* tradition.[65] In fact, a number of Sunnī commentators expressed either critique or support of al-Zamakhsharī's opinion concerning the *ḥurūf*. Al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392) expresses his dissatisfaction on the one hand, while Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1374) voices his support on the other.[66]

Yet the *iᶜjāz* argument moved well beyond even al-Zamakhsharī's articulation. It was developed in many different ways. In fact, demonstrating the gaining currency of *iᶜjāz* arguments in respect to the *ḥurūf*, Ibn Kathīr mentions Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and al-Mizzī (d. 742/1341) as solid supporters of the idea.[67] In more recent times, a number of prominent commentators have likewise adopted the position, including thinkers such as Muḥammad ᶜAbduh (1849–1905) and Rāshid Riḍā (1865–1935),[68] Sayyid Quṭb (1906–66),[69] Muhammad Asad (1900–92),[70] Muḥammad ᶜAlī al-Ṣābūnī (b. 1348–9/1930),[71] Bint al-Shāṭiʾ (aka ᶜĀʾisha ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān, *c*. 1913–98),[72] and Ali Ünal (b. 1955).[73] But despite the surface commonality, each commentator articulated the argument in his/her own way.

The Egyptian Islamist thinker Sayyid Qutb, for example, drew on a tangible, material analogy. The *ḥurūf* are basic elements of the alphabet and so, to Qutb, are like the soil of the earth. Just as God takes soil and creates the magnificence of creation out if it, so did He take the *ḥurūf* and bequeath the majestic Qur'an. Human beings, on the other hand, try as they might, can only make bricks and tiles out of soil. Their creative capabilities fall far short. Likewise, their literary compositions using letters fall short of the 'majesty and power' of God's revelation.[74] In this way, the Qur'an is inimitable. Qutb, writing for the people, chose a concrete, visual example to make his point. His explanation is sensitive to the cultural expectations and rationalistic specificities of his audience.

Crafting an interpretation for a specific audience, however, was not exclusive to modern exegetes or advocates of the *iʿjāz* theory. Ṣūfī masters, for their part, often looked to meaningfulness over meaning in approaching the *ḥurūf*. They were, after all, crafting their interpretations as meditations aimed at the adepts and young disciples who sat at their feet. Thus, in early Ṣūfī exegesis, the masters frequently connected the letters with the different stations or states of the Ṣūfī aspirant. For the Nīshāpūrī Ṣūfī al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), *ṭ-s-m* becomes the *ṭarab* ('joy') of the friends of God, the *surūr* ('delight') of the Gnostics and the *maqām* ('spiritual station') of the lovers of God.[75] The Ashʿarī Ṣūfī al-Qushayrī contemplated the nature of the letter *alif* in *a-l-m*. In one place, the *alif* may be seen as a devoted servant standing alone in worship before the God.[76] In other places, al-Qushayrī conceives of the *alif* as a sign of God's own singular uniqueness absolutely different from all the rest of creation.[77] Denis Gril recognised a similar line of interpretation in the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* of Ibn ʿArabī where the unconnected *alif* is the 'transcendent, unqualified Essence' of God.[78] The *alif*, as a single letter standing unconnected to whatever comes after it, was rendered into a conceptual paradigm for the disciples of the Ṣūfī path. Its very written character was made into a point of spiritual departure. Of course, Ibn ʿArabī's thought penetrated much deeper. He went on to explain a visionary understanding of the *ḥurūf*, particularly *a-l-m*, as the symbolic totality of existence, expressing elements of the transcendent and immanent as well as human and divine. Thus from a mystical vantage point, to meditate on the letters was a way to re-envision reality according to mystical truths.

Ṣūfī thinkers introduced other important concepts into their readings of the *ḥurūf*. Al-Sulamī equated the *n* with 'a pre-eternal light (*nūr*)' made for the Prophet Muḥammad, or more specifically a light that 'illumines the inner being of His beloved (God's peace and blessings be upon him) and the hearts of His community of *awliyāʾ*'.[79] The mystic al-Qashānī (d. 730/1329) carries on this focus, taking the *ṣ* as the complete and perfect Muḥammadan form (*ṣūra*) and the *r* as mercy (*raḥma*), which is itself, he explains, the Muḥammadan essence.[80] Rūzbihān al-Baqlī (d. 606/1209) used the different instances of the *ḥurūf* to emphasise different themes. Take for example the first two

interpretations for *a-l-m* for Q. 2:1, where each letter is respectively associated with God's essence (*dhāt*), attributes (*ṣifāt*) and the manifestation of signs (*iẓhār al-āyāt* and *ẓuhūr al-āyāt*).[81] Yet for Q. 3:1 Rūzbihān al-Baqlī offers new possibilities, such as the letter *a* standing for God's *awliyāʾ*, *l* for His *jalāl* ('glory') and *jamāl* ('beauty') and *m* for His eternal *muḥabba* ('love') for His *awliyāʾ*.[82] Interpreted within a mystical milieu, the letters were not simply an abbreviation or code; they were symbols of higher realities. In the context of Ṣūfī pedagogy, if the *ḥurūf* were cast in the right way, they could serve as heuristic windows to understanding these deeper truths. As al-Sulamī states, 'in the Qurʾan is knowledge of everything and knowledge of the Qurʾan is in the letters which are at the beginning of the suras'.[83]

In a different environment was the modern Indian scholar Daryābādī (1892–1977). He faced a palpable Christian missionary presence in British India whose viewpoint, in many respects, is a precursor to later revisionary outlooks. Generally, both the Christian proselytising and historical-critical revisionist perspective either disregarded or directly challenged Muslim theological presuppositions concerning the truth and authenticity of the Qurʾan. For apologetic purposes, Daryābādī became conversant in Biblical studies. He then brought his knowledge to bear when he composed his commentary of the Qurʾan in English. Turning to his exegesis of *a-l-m* (Q. 2:1), Daryābādī paralleled the phenomenon of the Qurʾanic letters with Psalm 119, an alphabetic acrostic poem, or what he called an 'alphabet of Divine Love'.[84] Thus for him, the ultimately mystical quality of the letters is indicated, if not reaffirmed, by another scripture, one that had acutely become part of his own religious discourse.

The Letters in Practice

The *ḥurūf* also entered popular usage given the numinous space that their polyvalency generated. For instance, a custom practiced in South Asia is to recite the letters *k-h-y-ᶜ-s* during the birth of a child. While no specific explanation is ever fixed to the letters, its significance lies in its location at the beginning of *Sūrat Maryam* (Q. 19), the sura in which Mary gives birth to Jesus. Given the letters' association with the Qurʾanic birth narrative, the letters *k-h-y-ᶜ-s* are recited as a pregnant woman goes into labour in order to ease the delivery of the child.

Similarly, the *ḥurūf* are invoked by some Ṣūfī orders in that they have been incorporated into several *dhikr* or recollection practices aimed at the remembrance of God. For instance, disciples of the Shādhilī Ṣūfī Order, which emerged in North Africa, recite the *ḥurūf* in one of their daily devotions (*awrād*, sing. *wird*). In the *Ḥizb al-baḥr* ('Litany of the Sea') the letters *k-h-y-ᶜ-s* are recited thrice between supplications for God's help.[85] Later the letters *y-s* and the verses that follow it in

Sūrat Yā Sīn (Q. 36:1–9) are recited.[86] Then, immediately following them are several lines in which the *ḥurūf* are vociferously present:

> May their faces be deformed! (æ 3)
> Let their faces be submissive before the Living, the Self-Subsistent,
> For he who is laden with wrong has already met frustration.
> *ṬS ḤM ʿSQ.*
> He has released the two seas that meet; Yet between them is a barrier [*barzakh*] that they do not overpass … (Q. 55:19–20).
> *ḤM ḤM ḤM ḤM ḤM ḤM ḤM!*
> The affair has been decreed (*ḥumma al-amr*). The triumph has come.
> Over us they shall not triumph.
> *ḤM!*[87]

Notably the letters *ḥ-m* are recited in succession seven times, possibly intended to match the number of times that those letters appear in the Qur'an. Furthermore, the phrase that follows the recitation of the *ḥ-m*s begins with those same letters but in a verbalised form: *ḥumma al-amr*. Whatever the purpose or meaning of the *ḥurūf*, they are incanted here in a devotional and invocatory mode.

An interpretation of the *ḥurūf* as found in the litany is possibly alluded to in a biography of Shaykh al-Shādhilī (d. 656/1258), the founding master of the Shādhilī Ṣūfī Order. According to the *Durrat al-asrār wa-tuḥfat al-abrār*, the Shaykh received the *Ḥizb al-baḥr* directly from the Prophet Muḥammad who instructed him to 'Guard [the litany] for it contains the greatest name of God'.[88] This reference to God's greatest name is a possible point of correspondence with the Qur'anic letters. As mentioned previously, one of the earliest interpretations of the *ḥurūf* is that the letters by some unknown configuration constitute, or at least invoke, God's greatest name.[89] The *Ḥizb al-baḥr* then, which contains many of the *ḥurūf*, represents or encapsulates in some way the invocation of this unknown divine name. The report is an interesting form of sublimated exegesis. The Sunnī tradition of exegesis has transmitted the notion that the letters may constitute God's greatest name, which is possibly being alluded to in the biographical account. However, rather than citing that historical opinion, the account transforms and elevates the source of that opinion. Rather than being rooted in the Sunnī tradition of exegesis, the true authority of this opinion is the Prophet Muḥammad himself, who invested this authoritative knowledge with Shaykh al-Shādhilī. Direct inspiration, rather than transmission, is given place of privilege in this interpretative move.

The letters could also be imparted symbolic value on a phenomenological level. As discussed earlier, many scholars mentioned that the solitary *q* found at beginning of *Sūrat Qāf* (Q. 50), which is named after it, was a great mountain made of a precious green stone that encircles the earth.[90] This mountain, which links pre-Islamic Persian

cosmology with the Islamic tradition, was reported by Muslim geographers and chroniclers to be the source of all other mountains and to be the reason for the sky's azure color. Several scholars, such as Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 626/1229), identified Mount Qāf with the Alburz mountains in Iran.[91] The solitary *Qāf* of the Qur'an was imaginatively transfigured into the visibly immense Alburz mountain range, particularly Mount Damāvand, its tallest, towering peak.[92] Through a form of cosmographic exegesis the letter *q* is rendered into a tangible *axis mundi* of the world.

The hermeneutical openness of the *ḥurūf* allowed the letters to be adopted, embodied and applied in a variety of strikingly different ways. In negotiating meaning and/or meaningfulness, the *ḥurūf* moved well beyond the sphere of philological and textual understanding. They were brought into the realm of praxis. By virtue of their polysemy, the letters became profoundly relevant, engaging and meaningful in the lives of their interpreters. As the preceding examples have shown the *ḥurūf* could be, and were, recited for blessings at the moment of birth, invoked for devotional and spiritual purposes, or mythically envisioned in the immediacy of one's surrounding geography.

The Limits of Interpretation

Nevertheless, Qur'anic polyvalency had its limits. What these limits were, however, varies with each individual exegete and arguably with each instance that he/she approaches the text. This does not mean that historical patterns and contours are not discernible. Several diachronic features are clear in the larger Sunnī exegetical tradition. While opinions were passed down with each successive generation in a genealogical fashion, this did not mean that every interpretation was tacitly accepted. Opinions were scrutinised, criticised, and, in some cases, rejected altogether. The previously mentioned dispute over al-Zamakhsharī's *iᶜjāz* theory alludes to this larger hermeneutical discernment process.

Another case is found with the explanations presented for the letter *n* that appears at the beginning of *Sūrat al-Qalam* (Q. 68). Early exegetes had reported that the *nūn* was either a celestial inkwell, by which the divine pen wrote destiny, or an immense fish, upon whose back the earth rested. Ibn Juzayy (d. 741/1340), a litterateur of Granada, dismissed these earlier views. But rather than questioning their lines of transmission or their mythic nature, he turned to linguistics. In his view, the letter *n* in Q. 68:1 cannot mean a fish or inkwell since either meaning would require the letter to be in the nominative, accusative or jussive case and have nunation (*tanwīn*), but because the letter is read with a full stop without a case ending both meanings are implausible.[93] Five centuries later, the North African Ṣūfī commentator Ibn ᶜAjība echoed the judgement of his predecessor.[94] A linguistic criterion was used to evaluate the validity of certain interpretations.

A substantially more vocal cloud of criticism coalesced around another opinion, that the letters were numeric symbols. The notion is based on *ḥisāb al-jummal* in which every letter signifies a specific numerical value, an idea similar to *gematria* within the Jewish tradition. This *ḥurūf* theory argued that the letters were a code for the number of years that the Prophet Muḥammad's community would endure and is typically presented in the form of a *ḥadīth*.[95] In some cases the opinion was related without incident or comment, as with al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058).[96] In other cases, exegetes were less kind. Al-Ṭabarī recounted the position without providing a chain of transmission or detailed report, departing from his *modus operandi*. In its place he baldly explained, 'we are loathe to mention the one who related this [opinion] because its transmission was from one whose narration and accounting are not reliable'.[97] Later generations were no more generous. Ibn Kathīr, al-Suyūṭī and Rāshid Riḍā deemed the reported explanation 'weak' (*ḍaʿīf*).[98] Bint al-Shāṭiʾ essentially drew the same conclusion by labelling the source of the opinion as *Isrāʾīliyyāt* and thus unreliable.[99] So while the opinion was indeed passed down in the Sunnī exegetical tradition, severe caveats and criticisms were attached to it in order to discredit it. It is a case of preservation with a decidedly disproving, if not hostile, nature.

In addition to explicit criticisms, the limits of interpretation were also negotiated by omissions. The starkest example lies with the opinions of the Shīʿī Imāms. From a historical perspective, we see these figures being gradually weeded out from the Sunnī exegetical tradition. In the fifth/eleventh and the sixth/twelfth centuries, the Imāmī figures of Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. *c.* 114–8/733–6) and Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) are cited in various opinions concerning the letters appearing in the commentaries of al-Sulamī, al-Thaʿlabī, al-Māwardī, Ibn al-Jawzī and Rūzbihān al-Baqlī.[100] After this period, however, the names of the two Imāms all but disappear. As the centuries wore on, the communal identities of the Sunnī and Shīʿī traditions crystallised in contrast to one another and omission served as a means of expurgating possible Shīʿī influence from Sunnī works of exegesis.

Conventions of genre or the demands of a discipline could also determine how wide the gates of interpretation were kept open. Commentaries concerned with the *aḥkam* or legal determinations of the Qurʾan generally ignored the letters, seeing no juristic value in them. For example, neither Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 370/981) or Abū Bakr Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 543/1148) ever address the *ḥurūf* in their respective works of exegesis.[101] Shorter commentaries, aimed at providing a more direct exposition of the Qurʾan, usually restricted their exegesis to one or two explanations. The concise *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* does just that and proclaims univocally in all 29 occurrences of the letters that 'God knows best what He meant by them'.[102] In a similar vein, al-Wāḥidī's *Wajīz* never offers more than one explanation whenever the *ḥurūf* appear, although the explanations vary depending on which set of letters is being addressed.[103] Nonetheless exceptions do appear. Ibn Juzayy's *Tafsīr*, which is comparable in length

to the *Wajīz* and *Jalālayn*, actually takes the time to enumerate several possibilities despite the constrained space, such that it echoes to some degree the cataloguing impulse of its larger, encyclopedic counterparts.[104] So while genre convention could play a restrictive role in respect to interpretive limitations, it was not always a sure determinant. Ultimately, the question of range and interest rested with the intentions and predilections of the author.

But perhaps the most illustrative case appears with the revisionary theories mentioned at the beginning this study. Just as Sunnī exegetes had to negotiate with Muᶜtazilī, Shīᶜī and missionary influences as well as one another, so too did they have to eventually come to terms with modern revisionary speculations that questioned the very authenticity of the *ḥurūf* themselves. As mentioned, the opinions of the early revisionist scholars mostly focused on the proposition that the letters were not originally part of the Qur'an at all. Keith Massey, as recently as 2003, perpetuated this thread of interpretation by proposing that the letters are part of a 'critical textual apparatus' for identifying and prioritising the sources of the Qur'an's compilation.[105] This exegetical outlook on the *ḥurūf* was, and continues to be, pervasive, having penetrated into the Sunnī exegetical discourse itself. Revisionary theories first gained traction with Western-influenced Arab intellectuals from the early twentieth century. The Egyptian litterateur Ṭaha Ḥusayn (1889–1973) positively entertained the possibility that these letters may have been 'symbols that were placed to distinguish different Qur'anic codices' before its definitive compilation.[106] His adoption of the viewpoint has been traced back to John Medows Rodwell (1808–1900), who mentioned the theory in his 1861 English translation of the Qur'an.[107] Ṭaha Ḥusayn's Egyptian colleague, Zakī Mubārak (1892–1952), who was a scholar of Arabic poetry and Ṣūfism, encouragingly reported the opinion of his friend Monsieur Blanchot who believed the *ḥurūf* to be 'musical signs' (*ishārāt wa-bayānāt mūsīqiyya*) akin to the letters *AOI* found in *chansons de geste* or Old French epic poems.[108]

These revisionary appropriations however, did not go unchallenged. Several Muslim commentators have since addressed emergent revisionary theories in the exegetical discourse. Farid Esack, as mentioned earlier, presented a number of these views with measured criticism in his work.[109] Bint al-Shāṭiʾ rejects revisionist suggestions based on the fact the *ḥurūf* appear after the *basmala*, implying that any actual foreign additions, like the alleged letters, would have been written before it.[110] However, the Jordanian scholar ᶜAlī Naṣūḥ al-Ṭāhir (1906–82), the subject of my last example, engaged revisionist claims most substantively.

While al-Ṭāhir would eventually go on to serve as the Minister of Agriculture and then as an Ambassador for Jordan, before 1950 he had developed his own ideas about the *ḥurūf*. His theory is similar in some ways to the often-maligned theory of *ḥisāb al-jummal*. In accordance with it, al-Ṭāhir believed the letters represented numerical

values, but he differed in that he thought the values represented the number of verses initially revealed for each sura in which a letter or set of letters appeared. For example, the letters *a-l-m-ṣ* of *Sūrat al-Aʿrāf* (Q. 7) tallies to 161 according to the *abjad* system of numerical valuation. The sura, however, has 205 verses according to al-Ṭāhir's counting. Then, al-Ṭāhir begins to eliminate verses that were revealed later in Medina by consulting the Qur'anic works of classical premodern scholars like al-Suyūṭī and, interestingly enough, the Shīʿī exegete al-Ṭabrīsī (d. 548/1154). By this process he demonstrates that the number of verses originally revealed for *Sūrat al-Aʿrāf* in Mecca was in fact 161 exactly.[111] Al-Ṭāhir proceeds to demonstrate the veracity of his theory for many other suras and sets of letters.[112]

Thus, the *ḥurūf* for al-Ṭāhir provided information about the Qur'an's original revelation. His theory was met with resistance. In 1950, the muftī of Egypt accused him of heresy.[113] The negative reaction was due in large part to the colonial context in which al-Ṭāhir operated. First, al-Ṭāhir lacked the traditional scholastic credentials of the Sunnī *ʿulamāʾ*. Instead of a *madrasa*-oriented education, he had earned a European degree in agriculture from Nancy-Université, France. He was not a religious scholar and his investigation of the *ḥurūf* was beyond his formal area of training. It is not surprising then that persons like the muftī of Egypt would have viewed al-Ṭāhir's ability to speak on matters of *tafsīr* as questionable if not illegitimate. Al-Ṭāhir's exegetical venture was a challenge to the interpretative authority traditionally wielded by the religious scholars. Second, al-Ṭāhir's theory, while saying nothing about the final arrangement of the Qur'an, cleaved too closely in form to predominantly Western revisionary claims, which were already held suspect. While it is true that Sunnī scholars had long engaged in extensive discussions concerning the ordering and compilation of the revelation, al-Ṭāhir's venture appeared in the wake of revisionary Qur'an scholarship that challenged the authenticity and integrity of the text itself. Not being from among the *ʿulamāʾ* and the recipient of a secular education, al-Ṭāhir was perceived in this (post)colonial environment to be overly indebted to the Western revisionist tradition.

In response to this ensuing storm of controversy, al-Ṭāhir first published his English article and then his Arabic book on the subject of the *ḥurūf*.[114] In both works, while countering personal polemics, he assumes the role of a classical exegete discussing and critiquing the opinions of the past (including the revisionist ones) before detailing his own. Thus, in order to demonstrate his legitimacy as an exegete, al-Ṭāhir adopts the genealogical convention of the *tafsīr* genre. In order to quell doubts concerning his frame of reference, he also makes clear his theological conformity with the larger Sunnī narrative concerning the Qur'an, its revelation and compilation. And so we see in this real and charged situation, an individual delicately trying to position himself within the expansive fold of the Sunnī exegetical tradition. Al-Ṭāhir's case is very much a microcosm of the historical tradition at large.

Stepping back, it is evident that the limits of interpretation in the Sunnī *tafsīr* tradition were perpetually being negotiated and renegotiated. Through the centuries, new positions and articulations would appear that tested the boundaries and the exegetes would accordingly respond. In fact, Sunnī exegetes are gradually dealing with modern revisionist theories with strategies similar to those used against the Muʿtazilī and Shīʿī positions centuries earlier. Opinions perceived to be beyond the normative Sunnī pale, because they are built upon different theological presuppositions or because they acknowledge an alternative set of textual authorities, are eventually silenced, refuted, appropriated or compartmentalised as 'other' in the Sunnī commentarial tradition.

Conclusions

At this juncture, it is possible to more precisely detail the limitations of current revisionist approaches in light of the Sunnī *tafsīr* tradition. For one, the revisionists do not consistently look far enough back into the history of Islam to posit their explanations. As inheritors of the textual critical tradition many of the revisionists have fixated on the post-Prophetic period of the Qur'an's written compilation. There is a noticeable reticence to entertain interpretations dependent upon various elements of the internal Muslim narrative earlier than this timeframe, even though Sunnī exegetes have shown that a field of possibilities is available if the period of supposed revelation is considered as well. Indeed, there is a seeming arbitrariness to some of the revisionists' presuppositions. They might admit that the Prophet Muḥammad existed and that he had scribes writing for him, but then they are wary to admit that the letters might actually be an authentic part of the Qur'an. Instead, there is an assumption that because these letters do not fit the expected textual norm, then they must not belong to the original text. Additionally, scant consideration is given to authorial intent, namely that the letters might be intentionally ambiguous. Driven by historical-critical approaches, the revisionists never entertain for the *ḥurūf* the spiritually contemplative possibilities that the Ṣūfīs and Daryabādī did, despite their preference for calling the letters 'mysterious' and 'mystical'. Furthermore, the revisionists, through their assorted theories, have expressed a distinct determination to unearth a solution to this textual enigma. I emphasise here the *singularity* of the sought-after solution because the revisionist framework has thus far not shown any indication of admitting the possibility of multiple simultaneously valid explanations. Instead, new theories typically begin by illustrating the shortcomings of preceding ones. The subtext of the revisionist approach is that there can only be one solution, which is best obtained through their specific methodologies and textual critical methods.

This is in sharp contrast to the opinions presented by Sunnī scholars where multiplicity prevails, in spite of the previously discussed limits of the exegetical discourse. As long as Muslim scholars generally conformed to the conventions and

methods of the *tafsīr* genre and adhered to the accepted theological positions concerning the Qur'an's divine integrity, they could entertain a range of possible interpretations or build the case for a particular exegetical opinion, whether it was a new formulation, the rearticulation of a previous one, or simply its re-emphasis. Differing circumstances based on history and location inspired different approaches to the question of the *ḥurūf*. Yet through it all, the space for speculation remained largely open.

The allowance for diversity is no doubt due in part to the Sunnī exegetes' understanding of the letters as from among the *mutashābih* of the Qur'an. Equivocality lends itself to multiple possibilities. Of course, the exegetical polyvalency of the *mutashābih* cannot be fully appreciated until the present hermeneutical inquiry is extended beyond the *ḥurūf* to investigate how Sunnī exegetes dealt with other *mutashābih* passages of the scripture, especially those verses interpreted with more theological divisive meanings. With doctrinally sensitive issues at stake, the spectrum of exegetical possibilities for such cases will invariably be more restricted. But at least when looking at the letters alone, all the different threads of interpretation attest to the acceptance of a relative plurality of interpretations. The textual density of the *ḥurūf* encouraged inquiry, interpretation and meaning-making rather than deflecting them.

But I must stress that it is not simply that a multiplicity of explanations was tolerated. The Sunnī exegetes entertained with historic consistency the possible simultaneity of mutually valid interpretations for the letters. Perhaps, al-Ṭabarī's final statement on the matter best captures this hermeneutical disposition towards equivocality. After enumerating a dozen possible interpretations, he concludes, 'the correct position, in my opinion … is that [God] (glorified is His mention) meant by His utterance [of these letters] to indicate *many* meanings with each letter; not according to one meaning'.[115] It was acceptable, if not desirable, for the Sunnī exegetes to entertain a plethora of positions for this particular area of Qur'anic exegesis. And as promised, I offer in the end no definitive answer to the question 'what do these letters mean?' But while we cannot fix what these letters actually signify, we also cannot deny that within the Sunnī *tafsīr* tradition there has been, and continues to be, space for interpretive plurality in respect of the *ḥurūf*.

NOTES

1 Commentators have discussed the possibility that the letters *ḥ-m-ʿ-s-q* are actually two separate sets of letters, *ḥ-m* and *ʿ-s-q*. Furthermore, a variant was often presented on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās that the letter *ʿayn* did not belong leaving the letters as *ḥ-m s-q*. For examples of each case see the discussions provided by al-Thaʿlabī and al-Māturidī (al-Thaʿlabī, Abū Isḥāq Aḥmad, *al-Kashf wa'l-bayān al-maʿrūf Tafsīr al-Thaʿlabī*, ed. Abū Muḥammad b. ʿĀshūr and Naẓīr al-Sāʿidī, 1st edn (10 vols. Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2002),

vol. 8, p. 301; al-Māturīdī, Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Samarqandī, *Taʾwīlāt al-Qurʾān*, ed. Aḥmad Wānlīʾūghlī (18 vols. Istanbul: Dār al-Mīzān, 2005–), vol. 13, pp. 159–60.

2 I am grateful to Todd Lawson for drawing my attention to this interesting feature of the Bābī text and providing me with an excerpt from one of the manuscripts. See Todd Lawson, *Gnostic Apocalypse and Islam: Qur'an, Exegesis, Messianism, and The Literary Origins of the Babi Religion* (London: Routeledge, 2011), p. 36.

3 According to one manuscript, the *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ* has 59 distinct letter combinations. Thirteen letter combinations appear more than once. The most frequent letter combination is *a-l-m-r-a*, appearing nine times, which is not found in the Qur'an. The next three most frequently occurring letter combinations are also found in the Qur'an and are *a-l-m* (seven times), *ṭ-h* (seven times), *a-l-m-ṣ* (six times) and *k-h-y-ʿ-s* (six times). The majority of the letter combinations, however, have no precedent in the Qur'an. Also, solitary letters never appear. For a more extensive treatment of the text and its letters see Stephen Lambden's work upon which these tabulations are based (Stephen Lambden, *Hurqalya Home Page*, http://www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/).

4 Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn Arabi, The Book, and the Law* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 66.

5 Muhammad Asad (1900–92) and Ahmad von Denffer (b. 1949) use the related term *muqaṭṭaʿāt*, which Asad translates as 'disjointed letters', remaining descriptive in his language. Von Denffer, on the other hand, provides a more interpretive translation with 'abbreviated letters', which assumes the letters to be some variety of abbreviation. See Muhammad Asad (tr.), *The Message of the Qur'an: The Full Account of the Revealed Arabic Text Accompanied by Parallel Transliteration* (Bristol: The Book Foundation, 2003), p. 1,133; Ahmad von Denffer, *ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qurʾān* (Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation, 2000), p. 83.

6 Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, 2nd edn (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003), p. 203, p. 261.

7 See Arthur Jeffrey, 'The Mystic Letters of the Koran', *The Moslem World* 14 (1924), pp. 247–60; Alan Jones, 'The Mystical Letters of the Qurʾān', *Studia Islamica* 16 (1962), pp. 5–11; W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an, Completely Revised and Enlarged* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), pp. 61–5; James A. Bellamy, 'The Mysterious Letters of the Koran: Old Abbreviations of the Basmalah', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93:3 (1973), pp. 267–85; M.S. Seale, *Qur'an and Bible: Studies in Interpretation and Dialogue* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), pp. 29–46; A.T. Welch, art. 'al-Ḳurʾān' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn; Keith Massey, 'A New Investigation into the "Mystery Letters" of the Quran', *Arabica* 43:3 (1996), pp. 497–501.

8 George Sale (tr.), *The Koran, Commonly called The Alcoran of Mohammed … to Which is Prefixed a Preliminary Discourse* (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1734), p. 46 of the 'Preliminary Discourse'; Savary (tr), *Le Koran* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1960), p. 114, n. 1.

9 Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorâns* (Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1860), p. 215; Theodor Nöldeke and Friedrich Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns: Zweite Auflage* (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1919), p. 68–78; Rudi Paret (ed.), *Der Koran* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), p. xxi.

10 Keith Massey, art. 'Mysterious Letters' in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*. Some Muslim scholars have adopted it as well: see Hashim Amir 'Ali, 'The Mysterious Letters of the Qurʾān: A Plausible Solution to a Thirteen Hundred Years Old Problem', *Islamic Culture: An English Quarterly* 36:1 (1962), pp. 3–4.

11 Bellamy, 'The Mysterious Letters of the Koran', p. 267. Admittedly, a common interpretation found in the Muslim *tafsīr* tradition explains the letters as a secret (*sirr*) of the Qur'an. This explanation is described in detail below. However, the vast majority of the Muslim exegetes studied here never apply this notion of secretiveness as an operative designation or as the normative one for the letters. In other words, that the letters are a secret was treated as one possibility of many and not a starting point.

12 Seale does provide a lengthy 'review of past attempts' but the treatment is derived purely from al-Suyūṭī's summative discussion in the *Itqān*, which is also the only 'primary' source used by Massey in his encyclopedia entry (Seale, *Qur'an and Bible*, pp. 37–46; Massey, art. 'Mysterious Letters').

13 Jeffrey, Welch and Massey have previously covered the major Western theories in circulation that were current at each scholar's respective time. Nonetheless, a review focused on specifically revisionist trends is instructive for the present study (Arthur Jeffrey, 'The Mystic Letters of the Koran', *The Moslem World* 14 (1924), pp. 249–60; Welch, art. 'al-Ḳurʾān'; Massey, art. 'Mysterious Letters').

14 Sale cites the appendix to the new edition of the *Grammatica Arabica* of Erpenius (1584–1624) prepared by Golius. Erpenius, or Thomas van Erpe, was Golius' teacher and held the chair of Arabic at Leiden University, which Golius assumed upon Erpenius' death. See Sale, *The Koran*, p. 60, n. 3.

15 Sale, *The Koran*, 'Preliminary Discourse', p. 59–60.

16 Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorâns*, pp. 215–16.

17 E.H. Palmer (tr.), *The Koran* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 1, n. 1.

18 Hartwig Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902), pp. 141–3.

19 Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, pp. 261–3. The issue of 'final editors' aside, Islam Dayeh has recently pursued the issue of chronology and the *ḥawāmīm*, or suras containing the letters *ḥ-m*, through the application of formula criticism and the identification of 'thematic complimentarity'. Dayeh does not speculate on the *ḥurūf* or question their authenticity. Rather he takes them, or at least the letters *ḥ-m*, as a possible indicator of Qur'anic intertextuality. Islam Dayeh, 'Al-Ḥawāmīm: Intertextuality and Coherence in Meccan Surahs' in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds), *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 461–98.

20 Bellamy, 'The Mysterious Letters of the Koran', pp. 267–85; James A. Bellamy, 'Some Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113:4 (1993), pp. 562–73, esp. p. 572–3.

21 Massey, 'A New Investigation', pp. 497–501; Massey, art. 'Mysterious Letters'.

22 Massey, 'A New Investigation', p. 500.

23 Jeffrey, 'The Mystic Letters', pp. 252–3; Hans Bauer, 'Über die Anordnung der Suren und über die geheimnisvollen Buchstaben im Qoran', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 75 (1921), pp. 1–20, reprinted in Paret, *Der Koran*, pp. 311–35.

24 Seale, *Qur'an and Bible*, pp. 31–7.

25 Jeffrey, 'The Mystic Letters', pp. 253–60; Eduard Goossens, 'Ursprung und Bedeutung der koranischen Siglen', *Der Islam* 13 (1923), pp. 191–226, reprinted in Paret, *Der Koran*, pp. 336–73.

26 Jeffrey, 'The Mystic Letters', p. 260.

27 Nonetheless, there are notable exceptions to the trend. Notably, Nöldeke later revised his position in his article on the Qur'an in the ninth edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, arguing

that it is 'more probable that [the letters] are to be traced to the Prophet himself'. Likewise, Alan Jones and Devin Stewart have made different arguments in favour of their authenticity. Jones posits that the letters were from 'the middle period of the revelation' given that the letters *ḥ-m* were used as a battle cry during the Siege of the Trench (*al-khandaq*). This argument largely depends on a reference made in the *sīra* literature. Stewart, looking to the integral place of *sajᶜ* ('rhymed prose') in the Qur'an, argues against suggestions that they are not an original part of the text given their rhyming correspondence with the verses that follow them. See Theodore Nöldeke, art. 'Mohammedanism: The Koran' in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9th edn (25 vols. New York: Samuel L. Hall), vol. 15, p. 904; Jones, 'The Mystical Letters', pp. 5–11; Devin J. Stewart, 'Notes on Medieval and Modern Emendations of the Qurʾān' in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qurʾān in its Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 234.

28 Farid Esack, *The Qurʾān: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), p. 63.

29 Norman Calder, in an important study, has provided a similar analysis of the *tafsīr* tradition concerning the stories of Abraham. However, rather than focusing on the particularities of seminal exegetes as he did, I am more concerned with the larger trends and limits of the tradition as a whole. While specific exegetes are highlighted, they are mentioned to illustrate larger movements in play (Norman Calder, '*Tafsīr* from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham' in G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (eds), *Approaches to the Qurʾān* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 101–40).

30 See their respective treatments of Q. 2:1 where the *ḥurūf* first appear (al-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad b. Jarīr, *Jāmiᶜ al-bayān ᶜan taʾwīl al-Qurʾān al-maᶜrūf Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, ed. Maḥmūd Shākir, 1st edn (30 vols. Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ᶜArabī, 2001), vol. 1, pp. 100–11; Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ᶜaẓīm*, ed. Asᶜad Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib, 1st edn (14 vols. Riyadh: Maktabat Niẓar Muṣṭafā al-Bāz, 1997) vol. 1, p. 32–3).

31 Likewise, a number of recent Qur'an translators admit a multiplicity of interpretations in their annotations rather than selecting a single interpretation. See M.M. Khatib (tr.), *The Bounteous Koran: A Translation of Meaning and Commentary* (London: Macmillan Press, 1986), p. 3, p. 396; M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (tr.), *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 4, n. a; Ali Ünal (tr.), The Qurʾān with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English (New Jersey: The Light, Inc., 2006), pp. 10–11.

32 Nonetheless, Prophetic sayings and accounts do exist for particular sets of the *ḥurūf*. For instance, Jones relates a report concerning the letters *ḥ-m* being used as a battle cry (Jones, 'The Mystical Letters of the Qurʾān', p. 5).

33 Al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ, Abū'l-Ḥasan Saᶜīd b. Masᶜada, *Kitāb maᶜānī al-Qurʾān*, ed. Hudā Maḥmūd Qurrāᶜa, 1st edn (2 vols. Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1411/1990), vol. 1, p. 21.

34 Mawdūdī, Sayyid Abū'l-Aᶜlā, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an: English Version of Tafhīm al-Qur'ān*, tr. Zafar Ishaq Ansari (8 vols. Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1988), vol. 1, p. 45.

35 A number of studies have examined the significance of Q. 3:7 in greater detail. Amongst these are the following select works: Leah Kinberg, '*Muḥkamāt* and *Mutashābihāt* (Koran 3/7): Implication of a Koranic Pair of Terms in Medieval Exegesis', *Arabica* 35 (1988), pp. 143–72; Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 'Quranic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr' in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *Approaches to the History of Interpretation of the Qurʾān* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 46–62; Sahiron Syamsuddin, '*Muḥkam* and *Mutashābih*: An Analytical Study of al-Ṭabarī's and al-Zamakhsharī's Interpretations of Q.3:7', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 1:1 (1999), pp. 63–79; Stefan Wild, 'The Self-Referentiality of the Qurʾān: Sura 3:7 as an Exegetical Challenge' in Jane McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish and Joseph W. Goering (eds), *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism,*

Christianity, and Islam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 422–36; Kristin Zahra Sands, *Ṣūfī Commentaries on the Qurʾān in Classical Islam* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 14–28.

36 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 3, p. 205; al-Zajjāj, Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. al-Sarrī, *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān wa-iʿrābuhu*, ed. ʿAbd al-Jalīl Shiblī, 1st edn (5 vols. Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1994), vol. 1, p. 318.

37 Al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt al-Qurʾān*, vol. 1, p. 28.

38 Al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 136; al-Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt: tafsīr Ṣūfī kāmil li'l-Qurʾān al-karīm*, ed. Ibrāhīm Basyūnī (6 vols. Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1968), vol. 1, p. 65.

39 Al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn, *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* (4 vols. Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, n.d.), vol. 3, p. 21–30.

40 Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn*, ed. ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Wāḥid Wāfī (3 vols. Cairo: Nahḍat Miṣr, 2004), vol. 3, pp. 978–80; Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, tr. Franz Rosenthal (3 vols. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1958), vol. 3, pp. 55–9.

41 Al-Baghawī, *Tafsīr al-Baghawī: Maʿālim al-tanzīl*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh al-Nimr, 4th edn (8 vols. Riyadh: Dār al-Ṭībah, 1997), vol. 1, p. 58; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr fī ʿilm al-tafsīr*, ed. ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Mahdī, 1st edn (4 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 2001), vol. 1, p. 25; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr aw mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, 1st edn (33 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2000), vol. 2, pp. 4–5; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Ḥafnāwī and Maḥmūd Ḥāmid ʿUthmān (10 vols. Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2002), vol. 1, p. 155; al-Thaʿālibī, *al-Jawāhir al-ḥisān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, ed. ʿAmmār al-Ṭālibisī (5 vols. Algeria: al-Muʾassasa al-Waṭaniyya li'l-Kitāb, 1985), vol. 1, p. 45; al-Shawkānī, *Fatḥ al-qadīr: al-Jāmiʿ bayn fannī al-riwāya wa'l-dirāya min ʿilm al-tafsīr*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿUmayra, 1st edn (6 vols. Cairo: Dār al-Wafāʾ, 1994), vol. 1, p. 86; Maulana Mufti Muhammad Shafi', *Ma'ariful-Qur'an*, tr. Muhammad Hasan Askari and Muhammad Shamim, rev. Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani (8 vols. Karachi: Maktaba-e-Darul-Uloom, 1996), vol. 1, pp. 98–9; al-Shaʿrāwī, *Tafsīr al-Shaʿrāwī: khawāṭir faḍlat al-Shaykh Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Shaʿrāwī ḥawl al-Qurʾān al-karīm* (97 vols. Cairo: Akhbār al-Yawm, 1991–3), vol. 1, p. 109.

42 Al-Shaʿbī, Abū ʿAmr ʿĀmir b. Sharāḥīl b. ʿAbd al-Kūfī (d. 103–10/721–8) of Kufa was from the generation of the Successors (*tābiʿūn*) and was a famous legal expert and transmitter of *ḥadīth*.

43 Al-Zajjāj, *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*, vol. 1, p. 60.

44 Al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 136.

45 Al-Wāḥidī, Abū'l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Aḥmad, *al-Tafsīr al-basīṭ*, ed. Muḥammad b. Ṣāliḥ b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Fawzān (25 vols. Saudi Arabia: Jāmiʿat al-Imām Muḥammad ibn Saʿūd al-Islāmiyya, 1430/2009), vol. 2, pp. 13–14; al-Wāḥidī, Abū'l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Aḥmad, *al-Wasīṭ fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-majīd*, ed. Ādil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd, ʿAlī Muḥammad Muʿawwaḍ, Aḥmad Muḥammad Ṣīra, Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Jamal and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿUways (4 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1994), vol. 1, p. 75.

46 Al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 136. Al-Wāḥidī also echoes the sentiment in both *al-Basīṭ* and *al-Wasīṭ* (al-Wāḥidī, *al-Basīṭ*, vol. 2, p. 13; al-Wāḥidī, *al-Wasīṭ*, vol. 1, p. 75).

47 Camille Adams Helminski (tr.), *The Light of Dawn: Daily Readings from the Holy Qur'an* (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications, 1998), p. 52, n. 40.

48 Mawdūdī, Towards Understanding the Qur'ān, p. 45.

49 Al-Thaʿālibī, *al-Jawāhir al-ḥisān*, vol. 1, p. 45.

50 Walid A. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 14–16.

51 Al-Ṭabarī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-bayān*; Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, ed. Asʿad Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib, 1st edn (10 vols. Riyadh: Maktabat Nizār Muṣṭafā al-Bāz, 1997).

52 Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, vol. 1, pp. 155–8.

53 ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾan*, ed. Muṣṭafā Muslim Muḥammad, 1st edn (4 vols. Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd 1989), vol. 1, p. 39; vol. 2, p. 225; vol. 3, p. 3; vol. 4, p. 73, p. 79, p. 97, p. 178, p. 190 and p. 236. The association is also made with different degrees of emphasis in the commentaries of al-Ṭabarī, al-Thaʿlabī, al-Māwardī, Ibn al-Jawzī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Ibn Kathīr and al-Suyūṭī, among others.

54 For a relatively early example of the prominence of Ibn ʿAbbās, see al-Ṭabarī's commentary on Q. 2:1 where Ibn ʿAbbās is cited for five different opinions (al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 1, pp. 101–2).

55 Notably, all the revisionary theories presented earlier approached the *ḥurūf* along the same line of thinking.

56 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 102; vol. 8, p. 138; vol. 11, p. 93; vol. 13, p. 110; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 3, p. 21.

57 For its medial *yāʾ*.

58 Ibn Qutayba, ʿAbd Allāh b. Muslim, *Taʾwīl mushkil al-Qurʾān*, ed. al-Sayyid Aḥmad Ṣaqr, 2nd edn (Cairo: Dār al-Turāth, 1393/1973), p. 299.

59 See for example al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 26, p. 169; al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, vol. 9, pp. 92–3; al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa'l-ʿuyūn: tafsīr al-Māwardī*, ed. Khaḍr Muḥammad Khaḍr and ʿAbd al-Sattār Abū Ghudda (4 vols. Kuwait: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa'l-Shuʾūn al-Islāmiyya, 1982), vol. 4 p. 79; al-Wāḥidī, *al-Wasīṭ*, vol. 4, p. 162; al-Wāḥidī, *al-Basīṭ*, vol. 20, p. 375; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr*, vol. 4, pp. 156–7; al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn, *Tafsīr al-durr al-manthūr fī'l-tafsīr al-maʾthūr*, 1st edn (8 vols. Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, 1403/1983), vol. 7, p. 589; Ibn ʿAjība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-majīd*, ed. ʿUmar Aḥmad al-Rāwī (8 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1999), vol. 5, pp. 443–4; al-Shawkānī, *Fatḥ al-qadīr*, vol. 5, p. 71.

60 See for example al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 29, pp. 19–21; al-Samarqandī, Abū'l-Layth Naṣr b. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad, *Tafsīr al-Samarqandī al-musammā Baḥr al-ʿulūm*, ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad Muʿawwaḍ, ʿĀdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd and Zakariyyā ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Nawutī, 1st edn (3 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1413/1993), vol. 3, pp. 391–2; al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, vol. 10, p. 5; al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa'l-ʿuyūn*, vol. 4, p. 277; al-Wāḥidī, *al-Wasīṭ*, vol. 4, pp. 332–3; al-Wāḥidī, *al-Basīṭ*, vol. 22, p. 69–70; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr*, vol. 4, pp. 318–19; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr*, vol. 8, pp. 240–2; Ibn ʿAjība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 6, pp. 221–2; al-Shawkānī, *Fatḥ al-qadīr*, vol. 5, p. 265.

61 Ibn ʿAjība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 1, p. 51; vol. 2, p. 195, p. 507; vol. 3, p. 5, pp. 317–18; vol. 4, p. 173, p. 229, p. 323, p. 359, p. 385, p. 555; vol. 5, p. 109, p. 160, p. 193, p. 233, p. 277, p. 299 and p. 323. The position is found in earlier commentaries, but without the same degree of insistence. See for instance Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, *Tafsīr ʿarāʾis al-bayān fī ḥaqāʾiq al-Qurʾān*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd al-Mazīdī, 1st edn (3 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2008), vol. 1, p. 28.

62 'Ali, 'The Mysterious Letters of the Qur'ān', pp. 3–4.

63 Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr*, vol. 1, p. 25.

64 Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ʿan ḥaqāʾiq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl wa-ʿuyūn al-aqāwīl*, ed. ʿĀdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd and ʿAlī Muḥammad Muʿawwaḍ, 1st edn (6 vols. Riyadh: Maktabat al-ʿUbaykān, 1998), vol. 1, pp. 128–41.

65 At one point al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286), a Sunnī scholar, repackaged al-Zamakhsharī's commentary in an attempt to cleanse it of its Muʿtazilī theology (see al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-taʾwīl*, ed. Maḥmūd ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Arnāʾūṭ, 1st edn (2 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Ṣadr, 2001)).

66 Al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, ed. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā, 1st edn (4 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1988), vol. 1, p. 215; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, ed. Yūsuf ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Marʿashlī, 1st edn (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 2003), p. 34.

67 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, p. 34.

68 Muḥammad Rāshid Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ḥakīm al-mashhūr bi-Tafsīr al-manār*, ed. Ibrāhīm Shams al-Dīn, 1st edn (12 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1999).

69 Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī ẓilāl al-Qurʾān*, 30th edn (6 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 2001), vol. 1, p. 38; Sayyid Quṭb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, tr. M.A. Salahi and A.A. Shamis (18 vols. Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1999–2004), vol. 1, pp. 26–7.

70 Asad (tr.), *The Message of the Qur'an*, pp. 1,133–4.

71 Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Ṣābūnī, *Ṣafwat al-tafāsīr*, 1st edn (3 vols. Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2004), vol. 1, p. 24.

72 Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, ʿĀʾisha ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī li'l-Qur'an al-karīm*, 6th edn (2 vols. Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 2005), vol. 2, p. 42.

73 Ali Ünal (tr.), *The Qur'an with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English* (Somerset, NJ: The Light, Inc., 2006), pp. 10–11.

74 Quṭb, *Fī ẓilāl al-Qurʾān*, vol. 1, p. 38; Quṭb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol. 1, pp. 26–7.

75 Al-Sulamī, *Tafsīr al-Sulamī: ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, ed. Sayyid ʿImrān, 1st edn (2 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2001), vol. 2, p. 71.

76 Al-Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt*, vol. 1, pp. 65–6.

77 Al-Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt*, vol. 1, p. 230; vol. 2, pp. 212–13; vol. 5, p. 86.

78 Ibn al ʿArabi, *The Meccan Revelations, Volume II*, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz, tr. Cyrille Chodkiewicz and Denis Gril (New York: Pir Press, 2004), p. 114.

79 Al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, vol. 2, p. 343; al-Sulamī, *Ziyādat al-ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, ed. Gerhard Bowering, 2nd edn (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1997), p. 205.

80 (Pseudo-)Ibn ʿArabi, *Tafsīr Ibn ʿArabi*, ed. Samīr Muṣṭafā Rabāb, 1st edn (2 vols. Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2001), vol. 1, p. 277; vol. 2, p. 185.

81 Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, *ʿArāʾis al-bayān*, vol. 1, pp. 27–8.

82 Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, *ʿArāʾis al-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 162.

83 Al-Sulamī, *Ziyādat al-ḥaqāʾiq*, vol. 1, p. 219, p. 294.

84 ʿAbdul Mājid Daryābādī (tr.), *The Glorious Qur'an: Text, Translation & Commentary* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2001), p. 4, n. 12.

85 Abū'l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, *Awrād al-ṭarīqa al-Shādhiliyya, Blue Book, Naskh Script* (Nūḥ Ḥā Mīm Keller, 1427/2006), p. 20; Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *Invocations of the Shadhili Sufi Order: Full Arabic Texts with English Translation* (Amman: Abul Hasan Books, 1998), p. 15.

86 Al-Shādhilī, *Awrād*, pp. 21–2; Keller, *Invocations*, p. 16.

87 The translation, which has been slightly modified, is taken from Ibn al-Sabbagh, *The Mystical Teachings of al-Shadhili: Including His Life, Prayers, Letters, and Followers*, tr. Elmer H. Douglas (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 77; al-Shādhilī, *Awrād*, p. 22; Keller, *Invocations*, pp. 16–17.

88 Ibn al-Sabbagh, *The Mystical Teachings of al-Shadhili*, p. 75.

89 See for example al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 136; al-Wāḥidī, *al-Basīṭ*, vol. 2, pp. 15–16.

90 See note 59.

91 Yāqūt b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān* (5 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Ṣādir, 1397/1977), vol. 4, p. 298.

92 For more on Mount Qāf, see M. Streck, art. 'Ḳāf' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn.

93 Ibn Juzayy, *Tafsīr Ibn Juzayy* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1983), p. 782.

94 Ibn ʿAjība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 8, pp. 104–5.

95 The opinion is frequently attributed to Muqātil b. Sulaymān, though it does not appear in his extant *tafsīr*. Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh Maḥmūd Shiḥāta (5 vols. Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li'l-Kitāb, 1983).

96 Al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa'l-ʿuyūn*, vol. 1, pp. 61–2.

97 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 103.

98 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, pp. 34–5; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr*, vol. 1, pp. 57–8; Rāshid Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ḥakīm*, vol. 1, p. 106.

99 Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī*, vol. 2, p. 41.

100 Al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, vol. 1, p. 86, p. 171; al-Sulamī, *Ziyādat ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, p. 7, p. 169; al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 140; vol. 6, p. 236; vol. 7, p. 156; al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa'l-ʿuyūn*, vol. 3, p. 476; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr*, vol. 3, p. 334; Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, *ʿArāʾis al-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 28.

101 Abū Bakr Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭāʾ (4 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.); al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, ed. ʿAbd al-Salām Muḥammad ʿAlī Shāhīn (3 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya 1994).

102 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Marʿashlī, 1st edn (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1999).

103 Al-Wāḥidī, *al-Wajīz fī tafsīr al-kitāb al-ʿazīz*, ed. Ṣafwān ʿAdnān Dāwūdī, 1st edn (2 vols. Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1995), vol. 1, p. 90, p. 386, p. 489, p. 512, p. 538, p. 564, p. 577, p. 588; vol. 2, p. 675, p. 691, p. 786, p. 896, p. 918, p. 960. Q. 68:1 is the exception since al-Wāḥidī says *n* is God vowing by the fish upon which the Earth rests (vol. 2, p. 1,120).

104 Especially Q. 2:1, Q. 19:1, Q. 38:1, Q. 50:1 and Q. 68:1. See Ibn Juzayy, *Tafsīr Ibn Juzayy*, p. 11, p. 403, p. 607, p. 707 and p. 782.

105 Massey, art. 'Mysterious Letters'.

106 Muḥammad Aḥmad ʿArafa. *Naqd al-maṭāʿin fī'l-Qurʾān al-karīm*, 2nd edn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Zahrāʾ, 1986), pp. 7–8.

107 ʿAlī Naṣūḥ al-Ṭāhir, 'Abbreviations in the Holy Qur'an (al-Huruf al-Muqatta'at)', *The Islamic Review* 38:12 (1950), p. 9; ʿAlī Naṣūḥ al-Ṭāhir, *Awāʾil al-suwar fī'l-Qur'an al-karīm* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat wa-Maktabat al-Taḥrīr, 1986), pp. 12–13; This opinion is found in Rodwell's footnote for Q. 68:1 (J.M. Rodwell, *The Koran: Translated from the Arabic* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1861), p. 17, n. 2).

108 Zakī Mubārak, *al-Nathr al-fannī fī'l-qarn al-rābiʿ*, 2nd edn (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tijāra al-Kubrā, n.d.), p. 41, n. 1; al-Ṭāhir, *Awāʾil al-suwar*, pp. 15–17; al-Ṭāhir, 'Abbreviations in the Holy Qur'an', p. 9.

109 Esack, *The Qur'an,* p. 63.

110 Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī*, vol. 2, p. 41.

111 Al-Ṭāhir, *Awāʾil al-suwar*, pp. 23–4; al-Ṭāhir, 'Abbreviations in the Holy Qur'an', p. 11.

112 A few decades after al-Ṭāhir, Rashad Khalifa (1935–90), an Egyptian biochemist who became a naturalised citizen of the United States, developed a theory for the letters that also made use of *ḥisāb al-jummal* or 'gematrical values'. Tallying and calculating the different *ḥurūf* in various ways, Khalifa argued that the resulting values, all multiples or derivatives of the number nineteen, were further proof for the mathematically-based miraculous nature of the Qur'an. His findings in turn were used to bolster his claim of being the third prophetic messenger after Abraham and Muḥammad, or more specifically 'the purifying and consolidating messenger who delivered the religion's authenticating proof'. He and his movement, United Submitters International, were marginalised by the broader Muslim community in large part because of this claim to prophetic messengership. See Rashad Khalifa, *Qur'an: The Final Testament, Authorized English Version with Arabic Text, Revised Edition II* (Fremont: Universal Unity, 2000), pp. 609–36, p. 693.

113 Al-Ṭāhir, 'Abbreviations in the Holy Qur'an', p. 8. The muftī in question was either Ḥasanayn Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Makhlūf (1890–1990), who held the office until 7 May 1950, or ᶜAllām Naṣṣār (1891–1966), who began his appointment on 21 May 1950. Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwas of the Dār al-Iftā* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 170–2.

114 Al-Ṭāhir, 'Abbreviations in the Holy Qur'an', pp. 8–12; al-Ṭāhir, *Awāʾil al-suwar*.

115 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiᶜal-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 220, emphasis mine.