A NEW INVESTIGATION INTO THE
"MYSTERY LETTERS" OF THE QURAN

BY

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One mystery that still shrouds a complete understanding of the Quran is the existence of seemingly inexplicable combinations of letters that appear at the beginning of 29 of the Surahs. Students of the Quran are versed in the many often fanciful theories about these peculiar combinations of letters.¹ In this article I will shed new light on these "Mystery Letters" and put forth a theory about their purpose.

These "Mystery Letters" themselves and the Surahs that follow them are given for reference:²

\begin{align*}
\text{alr} & \quad 10, 11, 12, 14, 15. \\
\text{alm} & \quad 2, 3, 29, 30, 31, 32. \\
\text{almr} & \quad 13. \\
\text{almš} & \quad 7. \\
\text{ḥm} & \quad 40, 41, 43, 44, 45, 46. \\
\text{ḥm'sq} & \quad 42. \\
\text{ṣ} & \quad 38. \\
\text{ṭs} & \quad 27. \\
\text{ṭsm} & \quad 26, 28. \\
\text{ṯ} & \quad 20. \\
\text{q} & \quad 50. \\
\text{ḥyʾṣ} & \quad 19. \\
\text{n} & \quad 68. \\
\text{ys} & \quad 36.
\end{align*}

My theory is an expansion of one of the older modern theories on the letters. Theodor Nöldeke argued that the mystery letters were, in fact, abbreviations of the names of people who had been used as sources for the Surahs before which the letters were found.³ Although Nöldeke himself later departed from this position, arguing that the letters were instead mystical letters with either no meaning

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² We follow the arrangement of Nöldeke-Schwally, II pp. 68-69.

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or were imitations of celestial letters, the theory did not vanish. Hartwig Hirschfeld expanded on it in his *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Quran*. Hirschfeld attempted to identify the sources themselves, suggesting that the letters stood for the following:

\[
\begin{align*}
m & \quad \text{Muğîra}^6 \\
\$ & \quad \text{Haʃâ} \\
r[z] & \quad \text{AlZubayr} \\
k & \quad \text{Abū BaKr} \\
h & \quad \text{Abū Huraira} \\
n & \quad \text{‘OtmaN} \\
\& & \quad \text{Ṭalâha} \\
s & \quad \text{Sa’ad [ibn Abī Waqqâṣ]} \\
h & \quad \text{Ḥuḍâyfa} \\
' & \quad \text{‘Umar/‘Ali/Ibn ‘Abbâs/‘Aiṣâ} \\
q & \quad \text{Qâṣîm b. Rabî‘a}
\end{align*}
\]

The principle weakness of Nöldeke/Hirschfeld’s theory, as with all the theories put forth on the issue, is that it does not—indeed, can not—prove its case. The ability to produce identifications of the letters, whether they be names or whole words, does not prove that the identifications are correct. To peruse the catalogue of identifications is to see more of a tribute to the imagination of the researchers than any solutions.

My expansion of the Nöldeke/Hirschfeld theory is based on an observation about the Mystery Letters which has hitherto gone unnoticed. Attempts to find words behind the letters or names have concentrated so hard on what the letters represent, that one key piece of evidence about their referents has not been taken into account; the letters always appear in a set ranking. Comparing the eleven different combinations in which the thirteen different letters appear quickly reveals that the order of the letters is not random or arbitrary. This would not have been expected to happen if the letters stood for sentences or words; such a system would not have been likely able to prevent violations in a ranking. The ranking of the letters is demonstrated in the following:

\[
\begin{align*}
alr & \quad \text{alm} \quad \text{a} \quad \text{h} \quad \text{i} \quad \text{k} \\
almr & \quad \text{alm} \quad \text{l} \quad \text{h} \quad \text{y} \quad \text{c} \\
alms & \quad \text{hm} \quad \text{ts} \quad \text{th} \\
alms & \quad \text{hms} \quad \text{tsm} \quad \text{th} \\
khy' & \quad \text{m} \quad \text{r} \quad \text{q}
\end{align*}
\]

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5 Pp. 141-143.
6 Hirschfeld argued that the Alîfs and Lâms found among the Ḫurûf were to be understood as the definite article.