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Source: *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 113, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1993), pp. 562-573

Published by: [American Oriental Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/605787>

Accessed: 12/04/2013 23:12

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## SOME PROPOSED EMENDATIONS TO THE TEXT OF THE KORAN

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In this article, eleven difficult passages in the Koran which have defied the efforts of both Muslim commentators and orientalists to explain them are interpreted as corruptions resulting from faulty copying by scribes. Emendations of the text are proposed to bring it as close as possible to the form it had when first spoken by the prophet Muhammad. At the end, a few changes are made in the author's old hypothesis that the Mysterious Letters at the head of some of the surahs are old abbreviations of the *basmalah*.

A CURIOUS FEATURE OF STUDIES ON THE KORAN in the West over the last 150 years is the scant attention paid by scholars to the Koranic text as such. Orientalism has many excellent works on the Koran to its credit, but one seeks in vain for a systematic application of the techniques of textual criticism to the textual problems of the Koran, although classicists and Biblical scholars have for centuries made continuous efforts to improve the quality of the texts that are the bases of their disciplines. It is difficult to see why this should be so. Early Koran scholars such as Fleischer, Nöldeke, and Goldziher were good textual critics; they were all well educated in classical and Biblical studies, and they made good editions of later Arabic texts that are still in use today.

Whatever the reasons, Western scholarship, with very few exceptions,<sup>1</sup> has chosen to follow the Muslim commentators in not emending the text. When faced with a problem, the Westerners have resorted to etymologizing and hunting for foreign words and foreign influences. They have produced a great deal of valuable scholarship important for our study of the Koran and the origins of Islam, but where they exercised their skill on corrupt texts, they, of course, produced only fantasies.

The Arabs, on the other hand, tend to paraphrase, stating in different terms what they think the passage must mean. However, their Arabic was very good, so

we find sometimes that they sensed the correct meaning of a problematical passage, and then defined, or better said, "redefined," the crucial word accordingly even when lexically it was impossible. This is of great help to the modern textual critic, who has only to carry the process one step further and make the necessary emendation. We shall see below several instances of this sort of redefinition.

The earliest generation of Muslim commentators, although they did not emend the text, had no doubt that it did contain mistakes. Our sources list several acknowledged errors, and—if we are to believe the Arab tradition—the first textual critics of the Koran were ʿUthmān, ʿAlī, and ʿĀʾishah. The caliph ʿUthmān, when the recension of the Koran which he had sponsored was presented to him, looked it over and noticed some mistakes (*lahn*), and said, "Don't correct them for the Bedouin Arabs will correct them with their tongues." ʿĀʾishah, responding to a question about them, said that they were the work of the copyists, who had made mistakes in writing.<sup>2</sup> ʿAlī is credited with an astute emendation. In 56:29 the blessed in paradise are portrayed as strolling among heaped-up bananas (*talḥ mandūd*). ʿAlī said that this made no sense and one should rather read *ṭalʿ* "blossoms," and, like a good critic, he pointed to a parallel text in 26:148, which reads *ṭalʿ*. When asked if he would change the reading, he replied that today the Koran cannot be disturbed or changed.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In the *crucis* discussed below I have found only one proposed emendation, that of R. Bell, who wanted to read *iʿrāf* for *aʿrāf*; see section 11; this does not effect the *rasm*.

<sup>2</sup> See *GdQ*, 3:2f., for a much fuller discussion of these errors.

<sup>3</sup> Goldziher, 36.

Ibn ʿAbbās, cousin of the prophet and a famous early commentator, is credited with detecting and correcting several errors in the text. In 13:31 we find *a-fa-lam yayʿasi lladhīna āmanū*, “Have not those who believed despaired?” Ibn ʿAbbās, following Ibn Masʿūd, read *yatabayyan*, “Have they not seen clearly?” and said that the copyist must have been sleepy when he wrote *yayʿas*. In 17:23, *wa-qaḍā rabbuka allā taʿbuda illā iyyāhu*, “Your lord has decreed that you should not worship any except him”; he read *wa-waṣṣā*, “Your lord advised,” explaining that the copyist had taken up too much ink in his calamus, and that the *wāw* had flowed into the *ṣād*, turning it into a *qāf*.<sup>4</sup>

Probably none of the anecdotes cited above is really true, but they are important in that they show that about a generation after the promulgation of the Uthmanic recension, some readers noted that there were mistakes in the Koran, and suggested corrections, though they prudently did not try to alter the official text. They also show us that the Arab commentators were well acquainted with drippy pens and copyists’ errors brought on by fatigue.

In addition to the errors noted above, there are in the Koranic text many variant readings (*qirāʾāt*), which do

not involve errors, but each of which is evidence that a mistake was made in the tradition at some time or other. Otherwise we must admit that the prophet may have recited a passage in a certain way when it was first revealed, but then changed it in a subsequent recitation—not impossible, but this could not account for all the variants. Most of the *qirāʾāt* derive ultimately from the fact that the Uthmanic recension was published without diacritics—though they did exist at that time—and without vowel signs, which were not invented until some years later. They are important to us here because they prove that there was no oral tradition stemming directly from the prophet strong enough to overcome all the uncertainties inherent in the writing system.

Given the fact that the Koran contains acknowledged errors and, in the *qirāʾāt*, evidence of many more, it is impossible to deny that still more mistakes, as yet undetected, may lie hidden in the text. In this article I shall attempt to isolate several errors and then to emend the text in order to restore it as nearly as possible to its original form. In the Koran “original form” means, of course, the form the word or phrase had when it was first uttered by the prophet Muḥammad.

The first step in this process is the isolation of possible errors. The most important clue that an error may have been made is the lack of good sense in the word or passage and the resulting variety of opinion among scholars as to what it means. Another clue is when the word is transmitted in more than one form. In general, different views about the meaning and/or form of a particular word make it likely that the word is wrong. Still another clue is when the word in question is said by the lexicographers to be dialectal or foreign. Some such claims may be the result of academic pretentiousness, but others indicate that the word was not known to the Meccans and the Medinese and hence is probably a mistake.

In proposing emendations, I shall follow rules laid down by classicists. In order to be acceptable, an emendation must make good sense, better than the received text; it must be in harmony with the style of the Koran; it must also be palaeographically justifiable; and finally, it must show how the corruption occurred in the first place.

The cases examined below share a common feature; each occurs in a context of simple, everyday words, which makes it most unlikely that the difficult word represents something mysterious, arcane, or foreign. Indeed, in some cases, as noted above, the meaning required is obvious, or nearly so, so all we have to do is search for a simple, everyday word that will fill the slot and, at the

<sup>4</sup> *Itqān*, 2:275, where other mistakes are noted. The scribe who wrote *yayʿas* was probably not sleepy but confused by similar consonantal outlines. The words *yayʿas* and *yatabayyan* are so different that such a mistake could not have occurred in the oral tradition, so we have to look to the written tradition for an explanation. However, the Uthmanic *rasm* of *yayʿas* is *yʿys*, so it is equally difficult to see how it could be a mistake for *yatabayyan*, or vice versa. My guess is that *yayʿas* was originally written *yys*, and so the two words are virtually identical. Each has four minims: *yys* (probably pronounced *yayyas*) with the two *yā*’s and the first two teeth of the *sin*, and *yatabayyan* with its *ytby*. The final flourish of the *sin* was mistaken for a *nūn*, or vice versa. For the loss of *hamzah* in the Hijāzī dialect and compensatory lengthening of a preceding *wāw* or *yā* with *sukūn*, see section 5 below.

A minim—the term is borrowed from medieval Latin palaeography—is the shortest vertical stroke in any given hand. The word is not wholly suited to Arabic, since in good Arabic mss adjacent minims are often written with slightly differing heights to show that they belong to different letters. It is convenient, however, since it can be used of the teeth of the *sin*, the nub of the *bā*ʿ, *tā*ʿ, etc., and also of those nubs that are mistakes, even those that are omitted. Next to the omission or misplacement of dots, minim errors, that is, copying more or fewer minims than are in the original, are the most common mistakes in Arabic mss.

same time, meet the requirements for emendation listed above. The results are likely to be dull and commonplace, since they will lack the ambiguity of the mistakes which allows the imagination of scholars to soar.

#### 1. ḤAṢAB : FUEL

We shall begin with a case in which, by a lucky accident, both the original and the error have been preserved. In 21:98 we read: *innakum wa-mā ta<sup>c</sup>budūna min dūni llāhi ḥaṣabu jahannama*, “You and what you worship other than God shall be the fuel of hell.” However, Ubayy read *ḥaṭab* instead of *ḥaṣab*, as did <sup>c</sup>Alī and <sup>c</sup>Ā<sup>ḥ</sup>ishah.<sup>5</sup> Bell, p. 313, translates, “coals,” but in a note says it literally means “pebbles”; Paret, p. 269, has “Brennstoff” with a query.

*Ḥaṣab*, in the meaning of fuel, is found only here. The basic meaning of the verb *ḥaṣaba* is “to pelt with pebbles” or “to scatter pebbles.” From this sense the lexicographers redefine it to mean “to throw pebbles (i.e., fuel) on a fire”; others limit it to fuel which is thrown into an oven, or used as kindling, but they offer no *shawāhid* in support of any of these meanings. In order to explain its strangeness they hold that *ḥaṣab* is Ethiopic, or in the dialect of Nejd or the Yemen;<sup>6</sup> the word is also said to mean “the fuel of hell” in Zanjiyah.<sup>7</sup> All this only goes to show that it was not known to the Meccans and Medinese. Rabin, p. 26, apparently takes the Yemeni ascription seriously, but does not mention Nejd or Ethiopia. He relates it to the Hebrew *ḥaṣabh*, the agent noun of which, *ḥōṣēbh*, occurs in Isaiah 10:15, as the hewer or chopper with an ax. However this is the only occasion on which the word “apparently” refers to cutting wood; the other instances refer to hewing stone.<sup>8</sup> We note too that the regular Old Testament verb for cutting or gathering firewood is *ḥāṭabh* = Arabic *ḥaṭaba*.

Obviously correct is *ḥaṭab*; it is the regular word in Arabic for firewood and occurs elsewhere in the Koran (111:4 and 72:15) in that meaning. Closely parallel to 21:98 is 72:15: *wa-ammā l-qāsiṭūna fa-kānū li-jahannama ḥaṭaban*, “As for the unrighteous, they shall be fuel for hell.” It is easy to see how the mistake occurred; in copying *ḥaṭab*, the scribe forgot to write the vertical stroke of the *ṭ*, turning it into a *ṣ*. This is much like our forgetting to cross a *t* or dot an *i*, something that everyone does from time to time.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffery, *Materials*, 147.

<sup>6</sup> *Tāj*, 2:283; Lane, 581.

<sup>7</sup> *Itqān*, 2:111.

<sup>8</sup> F. Brown, et al., *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, n.d.), 345.

#### 2. UMMAH : TIME, WHILE

The word *ummah* appears twice in the Koran in the apparent meaning of “while, time”: 11:8 reads *wa-la-in akhkharnā <sup>c</sup>anhumu l-<sup>c</sup>adhāba ilā ummatin ma<sup>c</sup>dūdatin la-yaqūlunna mā yaḥbisuhu*, “And if we postpone for them the punishment for a reckoned (amount of) time, they will surely say, ‘What is holding it back?’” And in 12:45: *qāla lladhī najā minhumā wa-ddakara ba<sup>c</sup>da ummatin*, “And the one of them who was saved remembered after a time and said.”

These two occurrences have not attracted much attention from Western scholars. Paret, p. 23, in a note on 11:8 says only that here and in 12:45, *ummah* means “Frist, Weile,” thus accepting the meaning given by the majority of the commentators. Blachère, p. 433, translates 11:8 by “jusqu’à un moment compté,” and (p. 471) 12:45 by “s’amendant après réflexion,” and notes that he translates by intuition, and that the commentators take it to mean “après un temps,” which has little relation to the sense of the root.

*Ummah*, of course, cannot mean “time, while,” but this is one of the cases in which the commentators instinctively grasped the meaning necessary and went on to redefine the word accordingly. In 11:18 they all assert that the word means “time, while” (*ḥīna, zamān*), but there is some variety of opinion on 12:45. In addition to “time” some suggest *immah* “favor”<sup>9</sup> (poorly attested), and *amah* or *amh* “forgetting.”<sup>10</sup> *Ummah* makes its way into the list of dialect words in the meaning *sinīn* “years” (Azd Shanū<sup>ḥ</sup>ah) and as “forgetting” (*Tamīm*).<sup>11</sup>

The meaning plainly must be “time, while” as the majority of the commentators held, and this we can restore simply by emending *h* to *d*, and reading *amad*, which means “time, term, period of time.” The addition of the fem. ending to *ma<sup>c</sup>dūd* would occur naturally to anyone reading *ummah* for *amad*; the copyist may have thought he was correcting the text, but he may have done it instinctively without being aware of it. *Amad* occurs four times elsewhere in the Koran, 3:30, 18:12, 57:16, and 72:25.

#### 3. ABB : FODDER, PASTURAGE

In a brief passage in Surah 80:26–32 God enumerates some of the blessings—specifically foodstuffs—that He has bestowed on mankind. *Thumma shaqaqnā*

<sup>9</sup> Bayḍawī, 1:462.

<sup>10</sup> Ṭabarī, 11:135.

<sup>11</sup> *Itqān*, 2:97, 101.

*l-arḍa shaqqan* 26, *fa-anbatnā fihā ḥabban* 27, *wa-<sup>c</sup>inaban wa-qaḍban* 28, *wa-zaytūnan wa-nakhlan* 29, *wa-ḥadā<sup>ṭ</sup>iqa ghulban* 30, *wa-fākihātan wa-abban* 31, *matā<sup>c</sup>an lakum wa-li-an<sup>c</sup>āmikum* 32, “Then we split the earth and caused to grow in it grain, grapes, and clover, olives and date-palms, and luxurious orchards, and fruit and *abb*, as a benefit for you and your livestock.”

The crux in this passage is the word *abb* in v. 31, though there is some uncertainty about *qaḍb* in v. 28 as well. Blachère, p. 36, translates the latter as “canes” (canes; possibly he means sugar-cane), apparently tacitly emending *qaḍb* to *qaṣab*. Paret, p. 500, translates: “Futterpflanzen” and marks the Arabic word with a query. Neither annotates the word. I believe that *qaḍb* is correct here; the word is well attested in the dictionaries where it is defined as “clover” (*raṭbah*, *fiṣṣiṣah*), “lucern” (*qatt*), or anything that is cut and eaten while it is green. There are several *shawāhid* and several other words with related meanings derived from the same root.<sup>12</sup> It may be that Blachère preferred *qaṣab* to *qaḍb* because he felt that the needs of the livestock were taken care of by *abb*, but this is not so. They were taken care of by *qaḍb*.

The word *abb* is glossed by the commentators as “fodder, pasturage” (*mar<sup>c</sup>an*, *kala<sup>ṭ</sup>*), as “grass” (*uṣhb*), “straw” (*tibn*), and “dried fruit.”<sup>13</sup> They were doubtless influenced by v. 32, and since they could not know what *abb* really meant, “fodder, pasturage” was the best choice under the circumstances. There are hints, however, in our sources that some were not sure of the meaning and admitted their ignorance. Abū Bakr, when questioned about *abb*, exclaimed, “What heaven will cover me, or what earth will carry me, if I say about the book of God something I do not know?”<sup>14</sup> <sup>c</sup>Umar after reciting the verses remarked, “I know what *fākihah* is, but what is *abb*?” Then at once he checked himself and exclaimed that this was presumptuousness (*takalluf*). In another version of the same story he states, “Sufficient for us is what we already know.”<sup>15</sup> *Abb* was assigned by some to the dialect of the People of the West (*ahl al-gharb*), presumably the Berbers!<sup>16</sup>

Among commonplace words such as grain, olives, and date-palms, *abb* was very cryptic, so scholars felt obliged to work hard to give it similar currency. In addition to redefining the word, they invented *shawāhid*, both prose and verse, trying to show that *abb* meant

pasturage. An anonymous poet is quoted as saying: “Our tribe is Qays and our home is Najd; we have there pasture (*abb*) and a watering place.”<sup>17</sup> In the list of poetic *shawāhid* falsely ascribed to Ibn <sup>c</sup>Abbās we find another anonymous verse: “You see in it pasturage (*abb*) and gourds mingled together, on a way to water beneath which willows run.”<sup>18</sup> Zamakhsharī, p. 9, cites the following expression: *Fulānun rā<sup>c</sup>a lahu l-ḥabbu wa-ṭā<sup>c</sup>a lahu l-abbu*, which Lane, 3f., translates: “Such a one’s seed-produce [or grain] increased and his pasture became ample.” Another statement is ascribed to the legendary Quss b. Sā<sup>c</sup>idah: *Fa-ja<sup>c</sup>ala yarta<sup>c</sup>u abban wa-aṣīdu ḍabban*, “And he proceeded to graze on *abb* while I hunted for lizards.”<sup>19</sup> The prose expressions may not have been invented to deceive, but may have been coined after *abb* as pasture had been absorbed into the vocabulary of educated people. One should not underestimate the power of the Koran to generate new expressions such as these.

A. Jeffery, following earlier scholars, relates *abb* ultimately to Hebrew <sup>ṭ</sup>*bb* “to be green,” but assumes that it came into Arabic directly from Syriac <sup>ṭ</sup>*b<sup>ṭ</sup>*,<sup>20</sup> which means “fruit” = *fākihah*.

Despite these attempts at redefinition and etymologizing, the fact remains that *abb* was not understood by the first commentators on the Koran. The word is not found in Arabic literature before or after its occurrence here (except the spurious verses and the proverbial expressions cited above) and it stands in the midst of common words that everyone could understand. Stylistically it is disturbing. What could be the purpose of reminding people of God’s blessings using a word that not even the experts could understand? Everything points toward its being a word as commonplace as grain, olives, fruit, and so forth. In short, *abb* has to be a mistake.

We can restore the text with a very simple emendation, by reading *lubb* instead of *abban*. The copyist’s pen as it turned to the left after the *lām*, for a split second ceased to flow, thus breaking the connection with the following *bā<sup>ṭ</sup>* and converting the *lām* into *alif*. *Lubb* is a common word meaning “kernel” or, according to the dictionaries, anything of which the outside is thrown away and the inside eaten; specifically mentioned are pistachio nuts and almonds. Today, if one buys *libb* from a street vendor in the Near East, he gets sunflower seeds or pumpkin seeds. Stylistically, fruit and nuts go together much better than fruit and pasturage.

<sup>12</sup> *Tāj*, 4:49–52; Lane, 2538.

<sup>13</sup> *Tāj*, 2:5f.; Lane, 3f.

<sup>14</sup> *Itqān*, 2:4.

<sup>15</sup> Ṭabarī, 30:38.

<sup>16</sup> *Itqān*, 2:108.

<sup>17</sup> *Tāj*, 2:5.

<sup>18</sup> *Itqān*, 2:84.

<sup>19</sup> *Tāj*, 2:6.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffery, *Foreign Vocab.*, 43.

4. *SIJILL* : WRITER OF A DOCUMENT

In 21:104 God describes how He is going to proceed on the last day: *yawma naṭwī l-samā<sup>2</sup>a ka-ṭayyi l-sijilli lil-kutubi*, “The day on which we shall fold up the heavens as the *sijill* folds up the writings.”

The meaning of *sijill*, a well-known word in Arabic, is “document,” consequently the “document” could not do any folding or rolling up of other documents. This problem has been approached from two directions. Some of the commentators realized that *sijill* had to be the subject of the *maṣḍar ṭayy*, so they interpreted it as the name of an angel, a man’s name, or the name of the prophet’s scribe. Others, however, held that *sijill* was a sheet of vellum or papyrus (*ṣahīfah*) and redefine the phrase to mean: *ka-ṭayyi l-sijilli ‘alā mā fīhi mina l-kitāb*, “as the *sijill* is folded over the writing that is on it.” Ṭabarī prefers the latter explanation since he says *sijill* is well known, and that there is no angel or scribe known by this name.<sup>21</sup> The redefinition of the function of the prep. *li-*, however, is too drastic to be credible.

The Westerners generally follow Th. Nöldeke’s opinion that Muḥammad mistakenly took the name of the document for the writer of it.<sup>22</sup> This idea, however, is untenable. Although he may have been illiterate, the prophet was nevertheless surrounded by writing. He was a merchant and so was his wife. He dictated portions of the revelations to scribes, and he doubtless dictated his correspondence as well, and must have received letters that were opened and read before him. He had a share in the drafting of two important legal documents, the Constitution of Medina, and the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyah. In short, writing was so widely employed at that time that Muḥammad could not have confused the document with its writer.

Those commentators who saw in *al-sijill* the writer and the subject of *ṭayy* were correct, although they could not take the last step necessary for reaching the correct reading. This problem can be solved with a simple emendation, by changing *al-sijill* to *al-musjil* or *al-musajjil*. The loss of the *mim* is easy to explain. In older hands the *mim* after the def. art. does not turn back under the *lām* as it does in later hands, but is often no more than a thickening of the connecting line between the *lām* and the letter following. Here too, a leaky pen may have run the *mim* into the first tooth of the *sin*, causing the *mim* to lose its identity; and possi-

bly one of the teeth was indistinct, thus facilitating the misreading.

5. *ḤIṬṬAH* : FORGIVENESS

This and the following emendation are of mistakes which arose from the inability of the writing system to indicate all the *hamzahs* that had been lost in the Hijāzī dialect<sup>23</sup> but were added at a later time when it was decided that the Bedouin pronunciation should prevail. Usually the absence of *hamzah* is indicated by one of the consonants *alif*, *wāw*, or *yā<sup>2</sup>*, but not always. In these two cases the absence of a possible carrier for the *hamzah* had already resulted in the erroneous readings that we find, so the révisers did not suspect that *hamzahs* were etymologically justified.

In Surah 2:58 God recalls that He told the children of Israel to enter the village and eat from it wherever they wished in ease, and then says: *udkhulū l-bāba suj-jadan wa-qūlū ḥiṭṭatun naghfir lakum khaṭāyākum*, “Enter the gate prostrating yourselves and say ‘*ḥiṭṭatun*’ and we shall forgive your sins.” In 7:161 we find essentially the same phrase repeated.

Bell, pp. 9, 153, and Paret, pp. 12, 137, leave the word untranslated, but Bell says it may come from Hebrew *ḥēṭ<sup>2</sup>* “sin,” and Blachère, pp. 645, 742, translates “dites, Pardon!” On p. 645 he refers it to the Hebrew *ḥaṭṭā*, “sinners.” Of the translators Blachère comes closest to the Muslim exegetes, who take the word to mean “forgiveness,” that is, a “pulling down” of the burden of sin. Some commentators say that *ḥiṭṭah* means “Speak the truth” (imptv., masc. pl.) in Zanjiyah.<sup>24</sup>

The word, however, must surely be the Arabic *khiṭṭah*, the Hijāzī form of the Classical *khiṭṭah*, which is a *maṣḍar* of *khaṭi<sup>2</sup>a*, “to commit a sin.” The spelling is like that of *shṭh* = *shaṭ<sup>2</sup>ahu*, “its sprout, shoot” (47:29); cf. *GdQ*, 3:43. The people, of course, are appealing for forgiveness but to obtain this they must first confess their sins. *Khiṭṭatan* < *khiṭ<sup>2</sup>atan* with the implied omission of the verb *khaṭinā* < *khaṭi<sup>2</sup>nā* is the equivalent of “We have sinned!” The word may have been pronounced *khiṭṭatan*, since some readers read *al-marri* for *al-mar<sup>2</sup>i* (8:24) and *juzzun* for *juz<sup>2</sup>un* (15:44).<sup>25</sup> Usually, however, this doubling is limited to *wāw* and *yā<sup>2</sup>* (see note 2 above).

<sup>23</sup> This feature of Hijāzī Arabic is discussed at length by Rabin, 130ff.

<sup>24</sup> *Itqān*, 2:111.

<sup>25</sup> Rabin, 134.

<sup>21</sup> Ṭabarī, 17:78f.

<sup>22</sup> Nöldeke, 27; cf. Jeffery, *Foreign Vocab.*, 164.

We note finally that *ḥiṭṭah* is the only word in the Koran derived from the root *ḥṭṭ*, which means basically “put down,” i.e., from a higher to a lower level. There are 22 words, however, derived from *khṭ*<sup>26</sup>, all of which have some meaning related to sin.

6. *ṢURHUNNA ILAYKA* : INCLINE THEM  
(THE BIRDS) TOWARD YOU

In 2:260 Ibrahim asks God to show him how He raises the dead. At first God doubts that Ibrahim really believes, but he insists that he wants to see the process only to ease his heart, so God gives him the following instructions: *fa-khudh arba<sup>c</sup>atan mina l-tayri fa-ṣurhunna ilayka thumma j<sup>c</sup>al<sup>c</sup> alā kulli jabalīn min-hunna juz<sup>2</sup>an thumma d<sup>c</sup>uhunna ya<sup>2</sup>tinaka sa<sup>c</sup>yan*, “Take four birds and incline them towards yourself, then put a part of them on each mountain, then call them, and they will come to you flying.”

The crux lies in the words *fa-ṣurhunna ilayka*, which is the reading of the seven canonical readers without exception, but one finds also *ṣir*; rare and late seem to be *ṣurrahunna* “tie them,” and *ṣirrahunna* “shout at them.”<sup>26</sup>

Blachère, p. 309, translates: “et serre-les contre toi (pour les broyer),” and says that he translates by intuition. Bell, p. 39, has “incline them to thyself,” noting that the sense is uncertain. Paret, p. 39: “richte sie (mit dem Kopf?) auf dich zu (und schlachte sie?).” In *Komm.*, p. 56, he notes that the commentators either read “incline them,” which is not understandable, or “cut them up,” with which the following “to yourself” does not fit. In short, neither of the accepted readings makes good sense. The meaning “cut up” is said to be Nabataean; others take it to be Greek.<sup>27</sup>

Ṭabarī, 3:36f., devotes several pages to these words. He cites the two major views on the meaning of *ṣur*, “incline” and “cut up,” and decides emphatically for the latter, because the overwhelming majority of the exegetes hold this opinion, and he takes issue with a few Kufan lexicographers who insist that *ṣāra*, *yaṣūru* never means “cut up” in the language of the Arabs.

Both these groups are right, each in its own way. The lexicographers are right in denying that *ṣāra* means “cut up”; the *shawāhid* are late or suspicious, so it looks as if the exegetes had redefined the word in the way we have noted before. However, the context clearly demands that the phrase read “cut to pieces,” so

the exegetes are “right” as well. One of them even goes so far as to insist that the pieces of the birds are all mixed up: “The wing of this one is with the head of that one, and the head of that one is with the wing of this one.”<sup>28</sup> Others say that the flesh and feathers are mingled.<sup>29</sup>

Since the meaning must be: “Cut them to pieces and mix them up,” we can restore the text as follows: *fa-jazzihinna (wa-)lbuk*, which, not surprisingly, means, “Make them into pieces and mix (them) up.” The emendation of *ṣād* to *jīm* is no problem since the two letters resemble each other closely enough for such a misreading to occur. *Jazzi*, of course, is the Classical *jazzi*<sup>2</sup>; the change of final-hamzated verbs to final-*ya*<sup>2</sup> verbs is well known, and was doubtless universal in the Hijāzī dialect, where, as noted above, all the *hamzahs* had been lost. The meaningless *ilayka* is removed by reading *ulbuk* without any change in the *rasm* at all; the *wa-* was dropped when the word was misread as *ilayka*. Another possibility is that this phrase originally read *wa-labbik*, which has the same meaning, on the assumption that the *wāw* was mistaken for an *alif*. This is not impossible if the handwriting was small.

7. *SAB<sup>c</sup>AN MINA L-MATHĀNĪ* : SEVEN MATHĀNĪ(?)

This and the following two emendations are of especial interest since, in addition to correcting the text, they depend on assuming the same mistake. One could argue from this that all three were copied by a single scribe with a certain peculiarity in his handwriting.

The mysterious word *mathānī* occurs twice in the Koran, first in 15:87: *wa-la-qad ātaynāka sab<sup>c</sup>an mina l-mathānī wal-qur<sup>2</sup>āna l-<sup>c</sup>aẓīm*, “We have given you seven *mathānī* and the mighty Koran.” It is found in a group of verses (86–97) in which God comforts the prophet in his disappointment at the doings of those who pay no attention to his message. The verse seems to be a reminder that God has favored him above all others with these special gifts.

*Mathānī* is also found in 39:23: *Allāhu nazzala aḥsana l-ḥadīthi kitāban mutashābihan mathāniya taqsha<sup>c</sup>irru minhu julūdu lladhīna yakhshawna rab-bahum thumma talīnu julūduhum wa-qulūbuhum ilā dhikri llāh*, “God has sent down the best account, a book alike (in its parts), *mathānī*, at which the skins of those who fear their Lord creep, then their skins and hearts become soft to the remembrance of God.”

<sup>26</sup> *Tāj*, 12:361f.

<sup>27</sup> *Itqān*, 2:114.

<sup>28</sup> Ṭabarī, 3:37ult.

<sup>29</sup> Ṭabarī, 3:38.

The problem of the *mathānī* has generated much scholarly writing, most of which shall be ignored here. For a summary and extensive bibliography, see Paret, *Komm.*, 279f.; also Jeffery, *Foreign Vocab.*, 257. Paret, p. 215, translates 15:87: "sieben Erzählungen," Blachère, p. 223, "Sept des répétitions," Bell, p. 243, "Seven of the repetitions."

Muslim authorities derive the word from the root *thny*, and most of them assign it the meaning of something repeated, as can be seen in two of the translations above. However, the verb *thanā* means "to double, to fold, to make something twofold by adding a second element to the first," but the idea of repetition easily follows. One of the meanings ascribed to Form II of the verb is "repeat, iterate."<sup>30</sup> Others suggest that it comes from the Form IV verb *athnā* "to praise."

An early suggestion by A. Geiger that the word is derived from the Hebrew Mishnah, or, as preferred by Nöldeke, the Aramaic *mathnithā*, has been accepted by many Western scholars, but the word as used in the Koran does not reflect the character of the Mishnah.

The number seven has caused as much trouble as the word *mathānī* itself. The exegetes say that the seven *mathānī* are the seven longest surahs of the Koran, or the seven verses of the Fātiḥah, which is the most popular view, or they are the surahs that have less than a hundred verses but more than the shortest, which are called *al-mufaṣṣalāt*; all of these definitions reflect the idea of repetition in some way. We note further that *sabʿan* is a masc. numeral, so it demands a fem. singular. The only word that approaches the idea of repetition would be the pass. part. of Form II, *muthannāh*, but this would take a pl. *muthannayāt*, not *mathānī*.

Western scholarship has mostly accepted the theory that they are seven punishment-stories that are scattered throughout the Koran because of the effect they have on the hearers. This is only speculation, but it is not refuted by our emendations.

I believe that the word in 15:87 should be emended to read *al-matāliyi*, and in 39:23 to *matāliya*, meaning "recitations," literally, something that has been, or is to be, recited. This is the broken pl. of *matlūwun*, as in *maktūbun*, *makātibu* "writings" and *mazmūrun*, *mazāmīru* "psalms," and others. The copyist mistook the *lām* for a *nūn* because it was too short; having accepted *nūn* the only other word that could be formed from the *rasm* was *mabānī*, which could not be right, so he had to decide for *mathānī*, and so initiated the idea of redoubling or repeating.

<sup>30</sup> Lane, 360.

One reason that the scribe failed to read *matāli* is that the word does not appear in the Koran nor does the sg. *matlūw*. The verb *talā*, "recite," however, is very common, occurring more than sixty times in a variety of forms both active and passive, so the pass. part. is surely possible. It is likely that the verb *talā* was not much used in the common speech of Mecca, but came suddenly into extensive use only in the Koran, so the copyist was not alert to the possibility here. In the dictionaries, the space allotted to *talā* in this meaning is quite small and there are no *shawāhid*. Additional evidence that the word was little used is provided by a *mukhaḍram* poet, Khufāf b. ʿUmayr al-Sulamī, who in describing his beloved's campsite misuses the agent noun under the impression that it means "scribe": *kaʿannahā ṣuḥufun yakhuṭṭuhā tāli*, "as if they were pages written by a *tāli*."<sup>31</sup>

*Talā* is usually used with *āyāt* "signs" as its object or passive subject, but we find it with other words as well, including *kitāb* (seven times, see concordance), so there is no discrepancy in 39:23 in equating the *kitāb* and the *matāli*. The distinction, however, between *kitāb* and *qurʿān* (15:87) is found elsewhere in the same Surah (v. 1): *tilka āyātu l-kitābi wa-qurʿānin mubin*, "Those are the signs of the book and (of) a clear Koran."

It is also necessary to emend *sabʿan*, which I believe should be read *shayʿan*. The mistake occurred when the scribe carelessly wrote a small loop resembling an *ʿayn* instead of the minim of the *yāʿ*. This is comparable to our writing a small *e* when we intend to make the shaft of an *i*. The next copyist, seeing *sʿ*, could hardly do anything other than add the *bāʿ*. Seven was also doubtless congenial to him; it is virtually a sacred number in the Near East, and many things come in sevens. Since he did not know what *mathānī* meant, he must have felt that the number seven was appropriate for such a mystery.

So 15:97 should read: *wa-laqaḍ ātaynāka shayʿan mina l-matāliyi wal-qurʿāna l-ʿazīm*, "We have given you some recitations and the mighty Koran."

8. TAMANNĀ; FĪ UMNIYATIHI : TO DESIRE; IN HIS DESIRE

In 22:52 God points out that Satan distorts the message brought by messengers and prophets: *wa-mā arsalnā min qablīka min rasūlin wa-lā nabīyin illā idhā tamannā alqā l-shayṭānu fī umniyatīhi fa-yansaḥku llāhu mā yulqī l-shayṭānu thumma yuḥkimu llāhu*

<sup>31</sup> Abū Ghālib b. Maymūn, *Muntahā l-ṭalab*, ms Laleli 1941, facsim. ed. by F. Sezgin. (Frankfurt am Main, 1986) 23.

*āyātihi*, “We have not sent down before you any messenger or prophet but that when he desired, Satan injected (something) into his desire, but God cancels what Satan injects, then God makes his signs strong.”

*Tamannā* and *ummiyatīhi* in the meaning “desire” (verb and noun) have caused problems for the translators. Bell, p. 322, has “but when he formed his desire Satan threw (something) into his formulation,” with a note saying that the meaning is doubtful. Paret, p. 276, has “ohne dass ihm, wenn er etwas wünschte, der Satan (von sich aus etwas) in seinen Wunsch unterschoben hätte.” Blachère, p. 1043, has “sans que le Démon jetât [l’impurité (?)] dans leur souhait, quand ils (le) formulaient.” All three rely on the dictionary definition of *tamannā*, but none of them annotates the passage.

Ṭabarī, 17: 131–34, devotes most of his commentary on this verse to the reason for its revelation; it was sent down as a comfort to the prophet for having inadvertently, because of Satanic interference, spoken favorably of the pagan goddesses Allāt, ʿUzzā, and Manāt. But on p. 113f. he quotes from exegetes who hold that *tamannā* here means *qaraʿa*, *talā*, and *ḥad-datha*. Ibn Hishām, pp. 370f., reports on the authority of Abū ʿUbaydah that the Arabs used *tamannā* in the meaning of *qaraʿa*, and cites two *shawāhid*, obviously spurious since both refer to the recitation of the book of God.

This is another example of the redefinition by the exegetes and/or lexicographers of the crucial word in a problematical passage in which the redefinition is correct. One should emend *tamannā* to read *yumlī* “dictates” and *fi ummiyatīhi* to *fi imlāʿīhi*, “in his dictation”; the latter was originally written *ʿmlyh*, with no *alif* for the long *ā*, a common feature of Koranic spelling. The *nūn* was written for *lām* because the latter was too short, as in *mathānī*, and one of the minims was lost. The word was probably pronounced *imlāyihu* or *imlāyhu*.<sup>32</sup> After reading *tamannā*, *ummiyatīhi* was, of course, inevitable. The copyist may have felt more comfortable with the perfect *tamannā*, since *idhā yumlī* does not appear in the Koran; *idhā tutlā*, however, is found a number of times, and the two words mean much the same thing.

#### 9. ILLĀ AMĀNĪYA : EXCEPT DESIRES

Surah 2:74–79 is a polemic against the Jews but directed to Muslim listeners. The Jews are denounced for

pervverting the true scriptures and for pretending to believe when they really do not. In v. 78 we read: *wa-minhum ummiyūna lā yaʿlamūna l-kitāba illā amāniya wa-in hum illā yazunnūna*, “And among them are *ummiyūna* who do not know the book except desires and they can only guess.” The passage then ends with an imprecation against those who write a book with their own hands and say that it is from God just to make a small profit.

The meaning of *ummiyūna* has been much discussed by scholars and need not delay us here, since in this context it must mean ignorant people who do not know the scriptures. The problem for us is the meaning of *illā amāniya*. Bell, p. 11, translates, “except as things taken on trust, and who only cherish opinions,” and notes that the meaning of the word is uncertain. Blachère, p. 748, has “qui ne connaissent point l’Écriture [mais] seulement des chimères, et [qui] ne font que conjecturer.” Paret, p. 14, translates “Unter ihnen [i.e., the Jews] gibt es Heiden (*ummiyūn*), die die Schrift nicht kennen, (ihren Ansichten und Behauptungen) vielmehr (eigene) Wünsche (zugrunde legen) und nur Mutmassungen anstellen.” It is very unlikely that this one word can carry all the nuances that are heaped on it in the last translation.

Some exegetes define *amāniya* as lies (*kadhib*), talk (*aḥādīth*). Others cite the phrase *yatamannā ʿalā llāhi al-bāʿiḥa wa-mā laysa lahum*, which seems to mean “and they want to get vain things from God and what is not due them.” Ṭabarī himself prefers the meaning “lies, falsehood” and in arguing for it has to maintain that *tamannā* here cannot mean *talā* (= *amlā*), which as we have seen, was derived from 22:52, nor have its usual meaning “desire,” but must mean *takhallaqa*, *takharraṣa*, and *iftaʿala*, all of which mean “falsify, fabricate.” He accuses the *ummiyūna* of committing such sins because of their ignorance of the book, that is, the Torah.<sup>33</sup> It seems, however, that the meanings other than “to desire” and “to ask, i.e., someone to satisfy one’s desire” all derive from this passage in the Koran. Here we get more help from the lexicographers than the exegetes, since the former redefine the word as “recitation.” Abū Ishāq al-Zajjāj (d. 311/923), in discussing this verse, says plainly: *maʿnāhu l-kitāba illā tilāwatan*, “its meaning is: (they do not know) the book except by recitation.”<sup>34</sup>

I believe that *amāniya*, like *mathānī* and *tamannā*, is a result of the copyist’s mistaking *lām* for *nūn*, and should be emended to read *amāliya* “dictations.” So

<sup>32</sup> For the Ḥijāzī suffix *-hu*, where Classical Arabic has *-hi*, see Rabin, 99, 151; for the loss of *hamzah* in Ḥijāzī, see above, p. 566.

<sup>33</sup> Ṭabarī, 1:297f.

<sup>34</sup> *Lisān*, 15:294.

the passage should run: "And among them are *ummiyūna* who do not know the book except dictations (from it) and so they can only guess." These poor ignorant people know of the scriptures only what the evil perverters of the word and the forgers mentioned in the following verse will let them know. They are victims to be pitied and not reproached. Since they had no scriptures at all, they could not be the perverters of it, nor could such ignorant people be so effective as forgers as to write out the book with their own hands, as mentioned in v. 79. The perverters and the forgers must be the same group and the people they deceive are the *ummiyūna*, certainly not the Muslims, who now have the true scriptures.

#### 10. *ṢIBGHAT ALLĀH*: GOD'S RELIGION

Surah 2:134–41 is a segment in which God answers the Christians and Jews who urge people to be Christian or Jewish in order to be rightly guided: *qul bal millata Ibrāhīma ḥanīfan wa-mā kāna mina l-mushrikīna* 135, *qūlū āmannā billāhi wa-mā unzila ilaynā . . .* 136, *fa-in āmanū bi-mithli mā āmantum bihi fa-qadi htadaw wa-in tawallaw fa-innamā hum fi shiqāqin fa-sa-yakfīkahumu llāhu wa-huwa l-sami'ū l-ʿalīm* 137, *ṣibghata llāhi wa-man aḥasanu mina llāhi ṣibghatan wa-naḥnu lahu ʿābidūn* 138. "Say (sg., addressed to Muḥammad), no, rather the community of Ibrāhīm, a *ḥanīf*, for he was not one of the polytheists. Say (pl. addressed to the Muslims), we believe in God and what has been sent down to us . . . (here follow the names of all the prophets whose messages the Muslims believed in) . . . And if they believe in the same things you believe in, they are rightly guided, but if they turn away, they are in schism, but God will take care of them for you (sg.), for He hears and knows; the *ṣibghah* of God! and who is better at *ṣibghah* than God? so we worship Him."

Bell, p. 18, translates: "The savour of Allah, and in savour who is better than Allah? Him are we going to serve," and notes that the exact meaning is uncertain. ("Savour" is singularly ill chosen.) Blachère, p. 767, has "Onction (?) d'Allah! Qui donc est meilleur qu'Allah en [Son] onction? [Dites] Nous sommes Ses adorateurs." In a note he rejects the explanations offered by the exegetes (see below), but admits that "onction" is not satisfactory, and suggests it might mean: "L'allure procurée par Dieu à l'homme converti au Monothéisme d'Abraham." Paret, p. 21, translates: "Das baptisma (? ṣibga)"; in *Komm.*, p. 34, he cites the commonly held views, and adds the opinion of E. Beck (from *Le Muséon* 65 [1952]: 92) that the word, which means

baptism (Taufe) is used here in a more general sense for religion, which agrees with the exegetes' views. Jeffery, *Foreign Vocab.*, 192, derives it from the Syriac but does not discuss its meaning in the Koran.

The word gave considerable trouble to the exegetes. They knew it meant the Christian baptism, but because in the passage the Jews are referred to as well, some of them expanded its meaning to include circumcision.<sup>35</sup> However, it is the Muslims who receive the *ṣibghah* of God and so neither baptism or circumcision can apply—the Jews and the pagan Arabs already practiced circumcision. The exegetes therefore redefine the word as *fiṭrah*, *dīn* "religion," *imān* "faith," or they equate it with the *millata Ibrāhīm* in v. 135, which they take to mean Islam. Thus Ṭabarī paraphrases: *bali ttabi'ū millata Ibrāhīma ṣibghata llāh*; and Qatādah says: *wa-inna ṣibghata llāhi l-Islām*.<sup>36</sup> With this interpretation, however, the comparison at the end makes little sense; can one really ask, "Who is better at Islām or *imān* than God?" Other redefinitions of *ṣibghah* are *shari'ah* "law" and *khilqah* "constitution, make-up."<sup>37</sup> Grammatically most of the commentators take *ṣibghah* to be in apposition with *millah*, even though the two are rather far apart. Those who take *ṣibghah* to mean *imān* take it as the acc. internal object of *āmannā* in v. 136.

In this case I believe that the exegetes were far off track. It is to me inconceivable that one should find in the Koran the name of a Christian sacrament used—even metaphorically—for Islām or *imān*. The whole idea runs counter to the general attitude toward Christianity and Judaism in the Koran, and is so disturbing that the word practically announces itself as a mistake.

Neither the exegetes nor the orientalisks have considered that *ṣibghata llāh* might refer simply to the words immediately preceding: *fa-sa-yakfīkahumu llāh*. Taken thus, *ṣibghah* is an exclamatory acc., used in praise of God's action in sparing the prophet the trouble of dealing with his own enemies. There are two emendations that would give this sense. The first is to read *ṣani'ah*, "favor." This emendation can be effected without altering the *rasm* at all if we assume that the original *ṣād* did not have the little nub on the left—this is often omitted in MSS—but that the next copyist took the *nūn* to be the nub. Otherwise we can add a minim to the *rasm*, a minor change which is easily acceptable.

The second possibility is to read *kifāyah*, the *maṣdar* of *kafā*, which would have been spelled *kfyh*, the long *ā* without *alif*. In older MSS and inscriptions the initial

<sup>35</sup> *Lisān*, 8:438.

<sup>36</sup> Ṭabarī, 1:444.

<sup>37</sup> *Lisān*, 8:438.

*kāf* is often written without the diagonal stroke that we add separately. The line of the letter runs parallel to the line of writing so that it sometimes closely resembles *šād* and *dāl*. The copyist first misread *kāf* as *šād*, and then carelessly took the loop of the *fā* as a minim. *Ki-fāyah* is what we should most likely expect grammatically, given *fa-sa-yakfikuhum* above, but on the whole I prefer *šanīah* since fewer changes are required to bring it into line. Both “favor” and “sufficiency” are stylistically better in this position than any of the other meanings proposed, and the comparison at the end of v. 138 makes good sense with either of them.

#### 11. AŞĤĀB AL-A<sup>c</sup>RĀF : THE PEOPLE OF THE HEIGHTS

Surah 7:46 and 48 speak of a group of men who are situated in some coign of vantage from which they can observe both the blessed in heaven and the damned in hell: *wa-baynahumā ḥijābun wa-<sup>c</sup>alā l-a<sup>c</sup>rāfi rijālun ya<sup>c</sup>rifūna kullān bi-simāhum wa-nadaw aṣḥāba l-jannati an salāmun <sup>c</sup>alaykum lam yadkhulūhā wa-hum yaṭma<sup>c</sup>ūna* 46, “Between them is a curtain and on the *a<sup>c</sup>rāf* are men who know each by their mark and they call to the people of heaven, Peace be with you; they have not entered it but they hope to.” However, these same men, when they look at the people of hell, pray to God not to put them with the sinners, and we then read: *wa-nadā aṣḥābu l-a<sup>c</sup>rāfi rijālan ya<sup>c</sup>rifūnahum bi-simāhum qālū mā aghnā <sup>c</sup>ankum jam<sup>c</sup>ukum wa-mā kuntum tastakhbirūna* 48, “and the people of the *a<sup>c</sup>rāf* call to men whom they know by their mark; they say, Your collecting (of money) has not helped you nor has your arrogance.”

The word *a<sup>c</sup>rāf* is the pl. of *urf*, which means “mane” or “comb of a cock,” so if correct here it must be used metaphorically. Bell, pp. 141f., however, translates “men of recognition,” reading *i<sup>c</sup>rāf* instead of *a<sup>c</sup>rāf*. However *i<sup>c</sup>rāf* does not mean “recognition” but only “inform someone of his misdeeds and forgive him,” and “to have a sweet odor” (from *urf*), and “to have a long mane” (from *urf*).<sup>38</sup> Bell’s *i<sup>c</sup>rāf* is rejected by Blachère, pp. 618f., who leaves the word untranslated, but has a long note in which he reviews the opinions of some of the exegetes; he makes no suggestion as to the lexical meaning of the word. Paret, pp. 126f., translates simply, “auf den Höhen” and “die Leute der Höhen.” For further bibliography on this much discussed point, see Paret, *Komm.*, 160 and Jeffery, *Foreign Vocab.*, 65.

The problem in this passage is both textual and eschatological. The eschatological problem concerns who the *aṣḥāb al-a<sup>c</sup>rāf* really are. Some orientalist, notably Bell and Tor Andrae, think that they are the inhabitants of the highest realm of heaven, but in order to get this out of the text they have to take the people of heaven as the subject of *lam yadkhulūhā wa-hum yaṭma<sup>c</sup>ūna* 46. This results in very clumsy Arabic and the exegetes are doubtless correct in keeping the *aṣḥāb al-a<sup>c</sup>rāf* as subject here and in the following verse (47). The *aṣḥāb al-a<sup>c</sup>rāf* are men who are not yet sure whether they are going to heaven or to hell.

I would first point out that *a<sup>c</sup>rāf* may not be incorrect. The word might be used here metaphorically of some high place on which these observers are located. What makes it a bit suspicious is that the metaphor does not appear to have been used in Arabic either before or after the revelation of this passage. Furthermore, if the word refers to the top of the *ḥijāb*, as some think, one would expect *alā a<sup>c</sup>rāfhi*. We can propose two emendations here, neither of which has to be metaphorical, though the second one may be.

The first is *ajrāf*, pl. of *juruf* or *jurf*, which means “bank,” specifically of a wadi that has been undercut by the current, or simply, “a bank or ridge that rises abruptly from the bed of a torrent or stream.”<sup>39</sup> Such a position would allow the observers an unimpeded view of what was going on below. Palaeographically there is no difficulty. Sometimes in early MSS and papyri initial *ḥā* begins with a lead-in line like a small arc with the concavity facing right, which then continues downward to the right completing the main body of the letter. If this arc is exaggerated, the whole letter can easily be taken for an *ayn*.

The other suggestion is *aḥruf*, pl. of *ḥarf*, which means, among many other things, “point, ridge, brow, ledge, of a mountain.”<sup>40</sup> The same emendation, *ayn* to *ḥā*, is needed here as in *ajrāf*, and the *alif* presents no problem. It might have been introduced at the time of the Uthmanic recension, or it could have been added by Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād, who, during his governorship of Kufah (53–59/673–679), instituted a reform in Koranic orthography which consisted of the introduction of about two-thousand *alifs* into the text.<sup>41</sup> Taken this way, *aḥruf* is not metaphorical, but we find the sg., *ḥarf*, used metaphorically in Surah 22:11: *wa-mina l-nāsi man ya<sup>c</sup>budu llāha <sup>c</sup>alā ḥarfīn fa-in aṣābahu khayruni ṭma<sup>c</sup>anna bihi wa-in aṣābahu fitnatuni nqalaba <sup>c</sup>alā*

<sup>39</sup> Lane, 411.

<sup>40</sup> Lane, 550.

<sup>41</sup> *GdQ*, 3:255f.

<sup>38</sup> Lane, 2014.

*wajhihi khasira l-dunyā wal-ākhirata*, “And among the people there are those who serve God on a *ḥarf*, and if good comes to them they are at ease with it, but if trouble comes to them, they turn back to their (old) ways. They lose both this world and the next.” These people who serve God “on a ridge” are fence-sitters and summer soldiers who are not sure which way they will jump, since circumstances can vary. The same is true of the *aṣḥāb al-a<sup>c</sup>rāf*, who are not sure whether they will end up in heaven or hell, since it depends on God’s will, which they do not yet know. The two usages are not exactly parallel since *al-a<sup>c</sup>rāf* is pl. and def. and *ḥarf* is sg. and indef.; nevertheless, the similarity is striking. In general, I prefer the reading *aḥruf*, but would suspend judgment on whether it should be taken metaphorically or not.

## 12. AGAIN THE MYSTERIOUS LETTERS

Some years ago I wrote an article<sup>42</sup> in which I argued that the Mysterious Letters (the *fawātiḥ al-suwar* or *al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa<sup>c</sup>ah*) of the Koran were old abbreviations of the *basmalah*. The argument was based on the assumption that these abbreviations, like the words studied above, had been corrupted through copyists’ errors, so it is not inappropriate here to add a few additional observations on the *fawātiḥ*, and, in particular, to record a change of opinion with regard to some of them.

At that time I was anxious to avoid any suggestion that the emendations proposed might be arbitrary, so I left out of account those groups of letters that might, as they stood, be considered abbreviations of the *basmalah*. In so doing I relegated ḤM to a footnote (no. 72, p. 280), although I was convinced that it derived from an original BM or BSM. I think now that I was somewhat overcautious, since ḤM—to be read BSM and not BM—is the best evidence in favor of the hypothesis.

The derivation is well supported palaeographically. The *bā<sup>ʿ</sup>* of the *basmalah* often begins with a flourish, which in some cases, especially in carelessly written mss and papyri, starts above the line to the left, proceeds to the right and then turns under to form the rest of the letter, giving it a form that can easily be mistaken for *ḥā<sup>ʿ</sup>*. Today in printed texts the *bā<sup>ʿ</sup>* is written taller than usual and bends slightly to the left. This practice probably descends from the ancient practice, which in handwriting could be exaggerated.

The *sin* of the *basmalah* is often flattened out to such an extent that it appears to be omitted altogether. Tradition tells us that Zayd b. Thābit disapproved of writing the *bsm* of the *basmalah* without the *sin*, and Ibn Sirin did not like people to stretch the *bā<sup>ʿ</sup>* to the *mim* until the *sin* had been written. The caliph <sup>c</sup>Umar is said to have beaten a scribe for omitting the *sin* from the *basmalah*.<sup>43</sup>

These anecdotes date from a time when interest was growing in how the Koran should be written, and in which the Kufic hand was in the course of development. In fact, Ibn Sirin (d. 110/728) might well have taken an interest in such matters.

Tables 3 and 4 (p. 282) can now be largely ignored since they make the process of corruption much more complicated than it really was. In ḤM <sup>c</sup>SQ, I would now keep the two “words” separate as they regularly appear in the Koran. Both segments I believe represent an original BSM. The first to be written was the second segment, which was eventually corrupted to read <sup>c</sup>SQ; this was not understood by a subsequent copyist or editor who added at the beginning another BSM, which was later misread as ḤM. The copyist may have been the same one who wrote BSM (> ḤM) in all the surahs where the latter appears.

The original BS was misread as <sup>c</sup>S by the Uthmanic editors and as simple S by Ibn Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd because of uncertainty as to the number of minims. The first two were probably badly written as well since they resembled an initial <sup>c</sup>ayn. Ibn Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd’s SQ is closer to the original than the Uthmanic <sup>c</sup>SQ.

KHY<sup>c</sup>Ş turns out to be less of a problem than I had originally thought. The real crux is in the *hā<sup>ʿ</sup>*, but this can be solved by dividing the letters into two segments, KH and Y<sup>c</sup>Ş, following the example of ḤM <sup>c</sup>SQ.

In discussing the word *kifāyah* (p. 570 above) we pointed out how *kāf* closely resembles *dāl* and *ṣād* in some early hands; it may also resemble the carelessly written *bā<sup>ʿ</sup>* that we have seen in ḤM. I believe that this *kāf* was originally a *bā<sup>ʿ</sup>*, and with this reading all the other difficulties vanish. The resulting BH—which could have been an original BSM—is a good abbreviation of the *basmalah*, and in Y<sup>c</sup>Ş we can see how the *yā<sup>ʿ</sup>* and the open-topped <sup>c</sup>ayn were miscopied from an original *sin* in which the teeth were not clearly written. There may even have been a fourth minim representing *bā<sup>ʿ</sup>*, which could have been swallowed up when the two segments were combined later on. The original form was like Ibn Mas<sup>c</sup>ūd’s variant SQ (= SM < BSM).

<sup>42</sup> “The Mysterious Letters of the Koran: Old Abbreviations of the *Basmalah*,” *JAOS* 93 (1973): 267–85.

<sup>43</sup> *Itqān*, 4:159.

Similarly, I conclude that Y<sup>c</sup>Ş was written first, then not understood by a later copyist, who added BH or BSM (> KH) to represent the *basmalah*.

The final point concerns those abbreviations in which the letter *ṭā*<sup>2</sup> is found. In the article referred to (p. 280), I assumed that these *ṭā*<sup>2</sup>'s all went back to an original BA. This, however, is not satisfactory, for since the *basmalah* in 27:30 at the head of Solomon's letter to the Queen of Sheba is spelled without *alif*, it is not likely that any abbreviation of the phrase would contain that letter. I now believe that the vertical strokes of the *ṭā*<sup>2</sup>'s were originally cancellation marks, added by some copyist when he went through his old surahs to write out the *basmalah* in full. The vertical cancellation mark is well known from later MSS and there is no reason why it should not have been employed here. One should keep in mind that the Arabs at the time of Muḥammad were not an ignorant people struggling toward literacy; writing was widely used, though not for literature apparently, especially in urban centers such as al-Ḥirah, where a chancery style must have been employed. The heads of the *ṭā*<sup>2</sup>'s, now unencumbered by *alifs*, become simple *bā*<sup>2</sup>'s, written in the same careless way as the others that are concealed under ḤM, and the resulting BS, BSM, and BH are all good abbreviations of the *basmalah*. Although it is not necessary for the argument, I believe further that BS and BH also go back to an original BSM. The final

flourish of the *sin* and the final *hā*<sup>2</sup> could both easily have been miscopied from a *mim*.

I am now more than ever convinced that the *fawātiḥ* are indeed old abbreviations of the *basmalah* that suffered corruption at the hands of later copyists. And, after all, what can more properly stand before a surah than the *basmalah*?

\* \* \* \* \*

It should not be assumed that in making these emendations I am in any way trying to diminish the remarkable achievement of Zayd b. Thābit and his colleagues in producing the Uthmanic recension of the Koran. When one considers that the Arabs at that time had no literary culture based on written texts, their accomplishment becomes truly monumental, and one can readily believe that Zayd really said when ordered to do the editing, "By God, if they had charged me with carrying a mountain, it could not have been heavier for me than this." Without any experience of editing or, indeed, of reading a book of similar size and content, they were able to publish a work which has taken its place as one of the three or four greatest books that mankind has produced. It remains for modern scholarship to correct the few mistakes that they overlooked, and to restore the text to the form it had when first spoken by the prophet Muḥammad.

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