

A HEBREW-SKOPOS APPROACH TO TRANSLATING *MUQAṬṬA'ĀT* IN THE QUR'ĀNIC OATHS

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In *Qur'ān* translations, the *muqaṭṭa'āt* offer their audience a fertile ground for debate because of the absence of unanimous agreement on their meanings and function in the original Arabic text. To address the problem, this article presents a different approach to interpret the *muqaṭṭa'āt* in Arabic and then attempts to convey this meaning in the translation of the *Qur'ān*. The new translation is more intelligible than the current transliterations or ambiguous statements found in many versions. This aim is fulfilled by considering the translation studies (TS) perspective through its grounding in the skopos theory. Moreover, the Hebrew language, despite the rejection of early and recent Muslim scholars, is deemed pivotal to the elucidation of the *muqaṭṭa'āt*. It highlights the role of *muqaṭṭa'āt* in discharging the function of a thematic summary of what is to follow in a particular chapter (as introductory remarks to the entire content of a chapter). Hebrew evidences that translators of the *Qur'ān* should go beyond the literalist approach and Muslim scholars should deter inaccuracies driven from personal and intuitive attempts and contemplate resources beyond the *Qur'ān*.

Keywords: *Muqaṭṭa'āt*, *Qur'ān*, *Skopos*, *Translation Studies (TS)*, *Hebrew*, *literalist approach*.

The *Qur'ān* incorporates numerous ambiguous verses and many scholars have attempted to personally overcome their indeterminacy. Such instances are found in the *muqaṭṭa'āt* (disjoined letters), also known as *fawātiḥ* (openers). These *muqaṭṭa'āt* offer Muslims a fertile ground for debate. The situation becomes extremely confusing when these verses

are seen from the lens of *Qur'ān* translation because the ambiguity is exported to an audience whose native language is not Arabic and who seek clear information about Islam and the *Qur'ān*. Unfortunately, the *muqatta'āt* have never been paid their due attention in *Qur'ān* translations because of the absence of unanimous agreement on their meanings and function in the original Arabic text. Hence, only speculations made on personal opinions exist. In this context, the present article presents a different approach to interpret the *muqatta'āt* in Arabic and then attempts to convey this meaning in the translation of the *Qur'ān*. In so doing, the translation is likely to sound more intelligible than transliterations or ambiguous statements. Those who use *Qur'ān* translations, whether or not they are Muslims, try to achieve a viable understanding of the text; however, this aim is not fulfilled through transliteration and/or statements such as the *muqatta'āt* are only known by Allāh. The *Qur'ān* urges people to seek knowledge'... Are those who know equal to those who do not? Only those who have understanding are mindful (Al-*Qur'ān*:XXXIX:9). This paper presents the translation studies (TS) perspective through its grounding in the skopos theory that considers all translation to be an aim-oriented task. The objective of the article is to provide an intelligible translation of the *muqatta'āt* for readers of English translations of the *Qur'ān*.

The paper contends that the current translations of the *muqatta'āt* circulated in many *Qur'ān* translations are inefficient and are inconsistent with the Qur'ānic *siyāq* (context), particularly the *siyāq al-naṣṣ* (textual context). It argues that the *muqatta'āt* have not been paid their due attention in the *Qur'ān*'s commentaries per se, as well as in the English translations of the sacred text. The paper also argues that Hebrew is pivotal to the elucidation of the *muqatta'āt* although many early and recent Muslim scholars reject this premise and claim that the *Qur'ān* is a pure Arabic text that is free from any foreign linguistic elements.

Therefore, this article explores the role that may be performed by the Hebrew language in the postulation of a logical and sound interpretation of the *muqatta'āt* in the *Qur'ān* and in *Qur'ān* translations. This proposition is not arbitrary or built on speculations. Rather, evidence is provided to support this quest. The translations used in the discussion are selected on the basis of a question asked of many Islamic institutions located in English-speaking countries (See note 47). The instances of the *muqatta'āt* are extensive and they cannot all be included in the present exploration. The scope of this article is thus limited to the *muqatta'āt*

found in the Qur'ānic oaths (five cases). The article begins by exploring the background and the main concepts required for the discussion: defining the *muqatta'āt*, introducing the skopos theory, providing an overview of *Qur'ān* translations, highlighting the meanings and functions of the *muqatta'āt* from the perspective of Muslim scholars, and acquainting readers with *Qur'ān* translators and orientalists. Subsequently, the article builds the connections between Hebrew, Arabic, and the *Qur'ān*, which leads to the central discussion and the conclusions.

The *Muqatta'āt*

These letters form the opening *āyāt* (verses) of 29 *sūrahs* (chapters) in the *Qur'ān* and contain fourteen different letters that are considered to be an integral part of any chapter. The letter(s) can stand independently or as a part of the initial *āya* (verse). As written text, the letters are orthographically joined like a word(s) even though they are treated independently when the verse is recited. Thus, each letter is pronounced as if it were unconnected to the others.

The signification of the *muqatta'āt* remains a mystery; indeed, these verses are usually known as the enigmatic letters of the *Qur'ān* and have frustrated and intrigued Muslims since the revelation of the *Qur'ān*. This inscrutability applies also to the original text, and not only to the translations of the *Qur'ān*. In fact, the search for an interpretation of such letters in *Qur'ān* translations results in transliterations and/or statements such as these letters are one of the miracles of the *Qur'ān* and none but Allah (Alone) knows their meanings¹. In the same vein, *Qur'ān* commentaries offer explanations such as the individual letters in the beginning of some chapters are among those things whose knowledge Allah has kept only for Himself². Over time, scholars have tried their best to penetrate the fog that surrounds the meaning of these letters but unfortunately, the general agreement is that they are mysterious³.

Muslim scholars, *Qur'ān* translators, and western orientalists have made numerous assumptions about the intended function(s) of the *muqatta'āt*. The limitations of space do not allow an extensive explanation of this topic, and only a few of the hypotheses can be mentioned. To start with, Muhammad Asad admits in his translation of the *Qur'ān*, *The Message of The Qur'ān*, that the intended function of the *muqatta'āt* has confused commentators from the earliest times. No evidence exists of the Prophet (ﷺ) explaining their purpose or of the Companions having

ever asked him for any interpretation⁴. He adds that the Companions and their immediate successors regarded the *muqatta'āt* as abbreviations of certain words relating to Allāh, and they tried to discover the meanings of the assumed contractions without success because all such interpretations are highly arbitrary and, therefore, devoid of any real usefulness⁵. Asad concluded that the *muqatta'āt* represent the inimitability and the wondrous nature of the *Qur'ān* that is beyond the human perception⁶. His comment that the *muqatta'āt* were not open to debate since the time of the Prophet (ﷺ) is striking because this absence of questioning is not observed in the *Ḥadīth* (the prophetic tradition). Put differently, it could be argued that the *muqatta'āt* were not strange to the Companions (for more elaboration on this point, see Hebrew and Arabic).

According to another famous *Qur'ān* translator Yousuf Ali, the *muqatta'āt* (in his words, the abbreviated letters) represent a case of mysticism: a Muslim has to believe in them despite the dictates of reason, and their interpretation is only known to Allah⁷. However, in a bid to offer a probable interpretation, Ali links the *muqatta'āt* to the verse that follows. In other words, Ali makes meaning based on personal interpretation to establish the relationship between the letter(s) and the textual context (the words immediately after the *muqatta'āt*)⁸. According to this article, this opinion would certainly be plausible if the proposed minor modification is applied. The present paper views the textual context as not limited merely to the words that follow the *muqatta'āt*; it posits that the mysterious letters pertain to the context of the entire chapter in terms of the main theme(s) (see the discussion). *The Qur'ān: English Meanings* by Ṣaḥīḥ International is another well-known *Qur'ān* translation. It refers to the *muqatta'āt* as a revelation made to all but known only to Allāh⁹. Abdel Haleem, a famous *Qur'ān* translator, asserts the existence of various interpretations of the *muqatta'āt*¹⁰. One of the readings claims that they indicate that the *Qur'ān* consists of such letters that signify their own language; however, people who received the letters could not decipher them. He adds another possible interpretation of a stylistic nature and proposes that these letters are used as exclamatory devices to attract the listener's attention just like an emphatic 'No!' or 'Indeed!' at a start of a poem in the manner of the voice of the archangel Gabriel who used this unusual way of calling attention, highlighting the fact that these letters are nothing like normal speech¹¹. Just like the innumerable other postulations, this opinion represents an attempt but does not yield decisive

meaning. Nevertheless, there is fair ground to accept this view, but with a modification that limiting the *muqatta'āt* merely to the exclamatory function is implausible, as will be discussed in the later segments of this paper.

It is pertinent, at this juncture to record some opinions of *Qur'ān* exegetists besides *Qur'ān* translators: Ibn Kathir elucidates that the knowledge of the *muqatta'āt* is reserved only with Allāh as nothing was reported by any of the many Companions such as Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthmān, and 'Āli (R.A.).¹² He also adds that the scholars did not agree on one opinion or explanation regarding this subject¹³. Al-Tabari's commentary on the *Qur'ān* lists many ideas with regard to the *muqatta'āt*. He starts by suggesting that the letters are used either as names for the *Qur'ān*, titles for chapters, as a secret of the *Qur'ān*, or to denote the greatest name of God¹⁴. He indicates that the letters (his personal opinion) were intentionally made discrete by Allah Who did not join them together to signify many meanings, and not just one¹⁵. Another exegetist, Alsha rāwi, does not support the quest to discover the meaning of these letters because Allāh intentionally made them discrete¹⁶.

The subject of the *muqatta'āt* was also tackled by non-Muslim orientalis. The German scholar Theodor Nöldeke states that the initial letters heading 29 chapters of the *Qur'ān* make no sense¹⁷. He asserts that these letters did not belong to Muhammad's text, and may represent the initials of those who were engaged in inscribing the oral revelation of the *Qur'ān* (monograms). Through negligence, they may have become incorporated into the final form of the *Qur'ān*. Nöldeke concludes on the meaning of the *muqatta'āt* that None of the efforts in this direction, whether by Muslim scholars or by Europeans, have led to convincing results (*ibid*). George Sale, the British orientalist, regards *muqatta'āt* as peculiar marks in the *Qur'ān* that function to conceal several profound mysteries¹⁸. He remarks that the meaning of these letters can be estimated by investigating their numerical value through the Jewish Kabbala art of Gematria¹⁹. Palmer, another British orientalist, did not adopt a specific hypothesis to explain *muqatta'āt*; however, his views lie between Nöldeke's theory (monograms) and the prevailing opinion of Muslim scholars (Allah alone knows what *muqatta'āt* mean)²⁰.

It may be noted that scholars, Muslims or not, do not agree about the function of the *muqatta'āt*. If an opinion must be adopted, it would be the majority's attribution of the knowledge of the letters solely to Allah. In fact, those who were the closest to the Prophet (ﷺ), the direct

source of revelation, summarised this dilemma. In the words of Ābu Bakr (R.A.), the Companion of the Prophet (ﷺ) and the first Caliph: In every divine write (kitab) there is [an element of] mystery - and the mystery of the *Qur'ān* is [indicated] in the openings of [some of] the surahs²¹. Moreover, Abdel Haleem emphasises the same point by saying that all the attempts to explain the *muqatta'āt* are just speculations and this is why statements such as 'God [Allāh] knows best' are frequently found after any interpretation is asserted²².

This article proposes a perspective that is distinguished from all the assumptions mentioned above regarding what the *muqatta'āt* are and why they are inscribed in the *Qur'ān*. The community where the *Qur'ān* was revealed was made of believers (Jews and Christians) and non believers (idolaters). Both groups spoke Arabic but the former additionally know other Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Aramaic (their scriptures were written in them) which are very similar²³. The latter group was aware of languages beyond Arabic but did not use them in everyday verbal intercourse²⁴ because of their connections with their community (Jews and Christians) and because of their profession as traders (oscillating between Arabia and the territories of the Persian and Byzantine Empires at different points of time)²⁵. Having established the linguistic awareness of the community at that time, the message of the *Qur'ān* is of an inclusive intent: We have not sent you [Muhammad] but to be a mercy for mankind (Al-Qur'ān, XXI:107). Therefore, it is proposed that the *muqatta'āt* are special exclamatory remarks to attract the specific attention of the Jews and Christians of that time. Building on this theory, the interpretation of the *muqatta'āt* should not follow the personal logic of a translator or a commentator. It should rather be rooted in the language of origin of these letters. This point about the source language must be stressed by the fact that the *muqatta'āt* are not found in usual Arabic as it was known in the past or as it is known in the present²⁶.

As discussed above, many interpretations of the *muqatta'āt* as they occur in the *Qur'ān* per se have been suggested, and none of the readings is well-supported. Most explanations are based merely on personal efforts and do not offer adequate evidence. Thus, translations of the *muqatta'āt* are executed through transliterations as may be seen in many current *Qur'ān* translations. That said, the present study proposes a novel way to disambiguate the *muqatta'āt* and to solve its mystery by resorting to investigating the role that may have been performed by Hebrew at the time of the *Qur'ān*'s original inscription. This opinion may evoke the disagreement of many, but not all, Muslim scholars who reject

the biblical account of the Israelites in general, and of Hebrew in particular, as aids through which to explain the *Qur'ān* and the *muqatta'āt*²⁷.

The *Muqatta'āt* in the *Qur'ānic* Oaths

The scope of the *muqatta'āt* is extensive as they encompass 29 chapters, an expanse that is too vast to be recounted here. Thus, this article does not treat all the *muqatta'āt* in the *Qur'ān*. The scope of this study is restricted only to the *muqatta'āt* found in the *Qur'ānic* oaths as indicated in the title as an initial step to instigate further research. The *muqatta'āt* are used five times in the *Qur'ānic* oaths and these will be discussed in later sections.

The present study limits itself to the oaths because of the few instances of the *muqatta'āt* that may be suitably delved into given the limits of the paper's word count. Further, the approach proposed in the present paper to *muqatta'āt* translation is applicable to other instances. In other words, the application of the interpretation and translation techniques²⁸ would remain identical, so oaths are used as a sample for the present study whose results can be deemed representative.

The language of the *Qur'ān* encompasses a stylistic diversity: strong and dramatic language is employed, evocative similes and vivid imagery abound, dialogues and oaths are combined with a direct divine address to the prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), to believers, and to nonbelievers²⁹. The *Qur'ān* contains copious oaths ascribed to Allāh (Q. IV:65), the prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) (Q. XV:72), the *Qur'ān* (Q. L:1), creatures (Q. LIII:1, Q. XCV:1), natural phenomena (Q. LXXXI:18), places (Q. XCV:2-3) and other phenomena. Such pledges lend force and seriousness to an utterance. This style was very common and is believed to be akin to the rhymed prose of pre-Islamic soothsayers³⁰. The context is pivotal to the understanding of the oaths in the *Qur'ān* because some of them imply nouns described by an active participle. This practice is common in Arabic: the meaning is understood by the listener or the reader without any felt need for the omitted noun³¹. For instance, *Sūrat al-Ṣāffāt* (Q. XXXVII) begins with an oath *wa-Ṣāffāti*. *Al-Ṣāffāt* is plural and its root is *ṣf* (row, line, lineup, queue, to line up). Usually, the term is translated as *By those lined up in rows* or *By the aligners aligning*; however, it is understood to denote angel seven without the addition of a specific noun as the verses that follow are taken into account.

The determination of the instances of oaths that include the

muqatta'āt for discussion in this paper is not arbitrary. A review of some books dedicated to Qur'ānic *i'rāb* (parsing) reveals specific cases where oaths are combined with the *muqatta'āt*³². These occurrences are found in chapters *Yā-Sīn* (Q.XXXVI), *Ṣād* (Q.XXXVIII), *Al-Zukhruf* (Q.XLIII), *Qāf* (Q.L), and finally, *Al-Qalam* (Q.LXVIII).

Hebrew and Arabic

The connection between Arabic and Hebrew must be established before discussing the *muqatta'āt* in the Qur'ānic oaths to justify why and how Hebrew may be utilised as a basis for the interpretation of the *muqatta'āt*. Hebrew, like Arabic, is a Sematic language, though the two languages do not share identical features. Hebrew comprises 22 letters while Arabic has 28 *letters*. Hebrew alphabets are pictographic: each letter represents a picture (as examined in the archaeological records of ancient Semitic inscriptions). Pictographs have names and convey a meaning whose relationship to the pictograph is established by function, and not by appearance³³. For instance, the Hebrew letter (Fig. 1) ('shin') is a pictograph of teeth (the appearance) (Fig. 2) and the functional meaning thereof is teeth, sharp, or press (chewing)³⁴. The same pictographic process is applicable to Arabic which shares the same Semitic roots and was evolved from other Sematic languages like Syriac and Aramaic, including Hebrew³⁵.



Fig. 1:
Shin



Fig. 2

However, Arabic and Hebrew unlike in terms of the meanings of the letters that form the two alphabets. If an Arabic dictionary is consulted for a letter, there would be no separate entry stating the meaning(s) of the particular letter. Conversely, Hebrew letters are accorded independent entries that record all the possible meanings, direct or indirect, of the letter as it stands alone. In fact, every Hebrew letter signifies a direct meaning based on its pictogram, and an indirect connotation on the basis of its use by the users of the language. For example, the Hebrew letter (Fig. 3) (beth) means house or tent (direct), and healthy, fat, to scatter, to blow, to sew, to turn, or to bring (indirect)³⁶.



Fig. 3:
Beth

Apart from this distinctive feature of Hebrew, languages tend to have foreign linguistic elements imported from other tongues. The foreignness of some linguistic elements found in languages results from the linguistic interactions between users of different languages. This type of inter communication causes loan words that are adopted from one language (the donor) and added and incorporated into another with no or very little modification³⁷. For example, the Arabic word *istabraq* (thick silk) is originally Persian but it found its way into Arabic and is used by Arabs. The concept of *istabraq* was a totally foreign notion with no extant word that could reference this unfamiliar object. Thus, Arabic speakers had to coin new vocabulary or to just use the readily available *istabraq* without any modification.³⁷ Another example is the English word *Abracadabra* which bears great similarity to the term used in Arabic (*ābrakadābra*). This Aramaic origin word is used in magical texts or in spells cast by wizards in medieval Europe and signify There has come to what was spoken³⁸. Borrowing or lending words is a natural phenomenon that does not degrade a language or value one language over another. In fact, borrowing enriches languages and provides a new word-stock for a variety of purposes.

By linking the distinctive meaning of Hebrew letters and the foreign elements found in languages, it may be said that the *Qur'ān* correspondingly contains words that originated in non-Arabic languages, particularly Hebrew. This assertion does not discredit the status of the *Qur'ān*. In fact, the task of interpreting some of the verses in the *Qur'ān* is difficult, especially if the commentator is not familiar with the linguistic and poetic Arabic protocols used before the advent of Islam, the *Al-Jāhiliyyā* (the pre-Islamic period)³⁹. While the language of the *Qur'ān* was not strange to Arabs, the way this language was employed was unique. To cite just one example, Ibn Ḥayān draws the Qur'ānic word *firdaus* (garden) in an attempt to interpret the *Qur'ān* by making use of Arabic poetry⁴⁰. He states that this word is not Arabic and is derived, in his words, from the Roman language, meaning Latin or Greek. He mentions several potential significations such as garden, paradise, grapes or valleys full of trees. By resorting to several pre-Islamic poetic verses, he settles on the meaning of garden. It is believed that at the time of the revelation, Arabic was a hybrid language that drew its vocabulary from varied roots, particularly the Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Aramaic⁴¹. This historical truth underscores the present assumption of the *muqatta'āt* having Hebrew origins that permeated into the text of

the *Qur'ān*. The *Qur'ān* is indeed the first book ever written or compiled in the Arabic alphabet.⁴² Since Arabic is a phonetic language whose written form is correlated with the pronunciation of the words, the *muqatta'āt* were transcribed into Arabic letters during the process of the compilation of the *Qur'ān*. This transcription was executed by combining all the sounds of the *muqatta'āt* into Arabic as individual letters or words. But when they are recited, they are treated as independent sounds, which is unusual for Arabic. To illustrate, two Qur'ānic verses (Q II:1) and (Q XCIV:1) start with the same word *الم*; however, they are not read in the same manner because the former is a *muqatta'āt* and read as *'alif lām mīm*, while the latter is an ordinary word read as *alam* (as the initial word in a rhetorical question). Moreover, the unique treatment of the *muqatta'āt* is highlighted by the prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) as he demonstrated the rewards of reciting the *Qur'ān*: for every letter that is recited exists a reward; *'alif lām mīm* is not a letter with a reward, but three letters with three rewards⁴³. In sum, since the objective of *Qur'ān* translations is to communicate its message clearly rather than to create an ambiguous rendering, *muqatta'āt* are to be addressed as if they are components that hold meanings whenever a translation is initiated.

The Qur'ān and Qur'ān Translations

A *Qur'ān* translation cannot equal the *Qur'ān*. It is a fact that translations of the *Qur'ān* are merely its interpretations in different languages. It must also be acknowledged that the *Qur'ān* is sacred only in Arabic. It is worth remembering here that the eloquent Arabs to whom the *Qur'ān* was revealed were unable to produce anything similar to this holy text. This quality of being unmatched renders translation a complicated task if the rendition intends to imitate the original text. Fischer remarks: A Koran translation is no easy task. The renowned Arabists, scholars such as Reiske, Sacy, Fleischer, De Goeje, Nöldeke and Goldziher, among others, have avoided it, at least partially because they knew of its great difficulties⁴⁴. The belief that the *Qur'ān* is the literal word of Allah in Arabic prevents many translators from taking anything other than the literal approach to the Qur'ānic text, causing numerous unintelligible and ambiguous occurrences in the target language⁴⁵. One such case pertains to the *muqatta'āt*. These letters are already complicated in the original text, but their inscrutability is exacerbated by the general resistance to venturing into this scholarship. This reluctance probably dates hundreds of years back as the majority of Muslim scholars such as *Al-Shāfi'i*, *Ibn*

Jarīr or *Abu 'Ubaidah* did not accept the idea that the *Qur'ān* contains foreign elements⁴⁶. Therefore, the present paper attempts to provide a translation of the *muqatta'āt* rather than a transliteration from the TS perspective. This process begins with the interpretation of the *muqatta'āt* in the original text and then communicating those interpreted ideas into English. However, some points and concepts concerning the topic at hand must be clarified through TS.

In the TS approach, the same text can have varied translated versions into the same target language (TL) to meet specific objectives or to serve particular audiences. This view forms the core of the functionalist school of TS. According to this viewpoint, translation is a process of communicating meaning as understood within its context rather than delivering linguistic correspondence, which is the principal objective of the linguistic school of thought in TS. In other words, the functional school regards translation not as a match of linguistic items between two languages, but as the meaning that is understood within a context and by means of extra-textual resources. Out of this school emerges the *skopos* theory to help translators accomplish this mission to transfer meaning from one linguistic universe to another.

Etymologically, the word *skopos* is borrowed from Greek and indicates the sense of purpose or aim. In TS, this word becomes a technical term denoting a type of translation commissioned for a specific purpose. Hans J. Vermeer introduced the notion of *skopos* in the late 1970s, asserting that the final shape and form of a translation in the TL is governed by the *skopos* assigned to it. Put differently, Vermeer views translation as an action, and every action has a purpose⁴⁷. The work ability of *skopos* vests in supplying information about the target text in terms of the function it is intended to serve, the expected audience, time, place and other relevant details. Having received the requisite information, the translator then determines suitable approaches or techniques to fulfil this aim. *Skopos* does not propose that a specific mechanism should be adopted by the translator. Any means of translation is justified as long as it serves the *skopos* assigned to the translation task. Besides, a text may be translated in myriad ways depending on the number of *skopoi* (plural) assigned to the commission translation commission.

The *muqatta'āt*, as has previously been noted, offer fertile ground for controversy in terms of their vastly different possible interpretations. The situation is different for the translation of the *muqatta'āt* because *Qur'ān* translations offer transliterations and/or statements such as 'Only

Allāh knows what they mean'. In this context, the skopos of this paper is to interpret the *muqatta'āt* as found in the oath instances through the consideration of the Hebrew language and to place the outcome of such deliberation as a translation that may be served to English speakers. This task necessitates the provision of a new method of interpretation to extract the meaning of the original and to subsequently transform the obtained signification into English.

Interpreting and Translating the *Muqatta'āt*

This article is an attempt to establish an understanding of the *muqatta'āt*. This perception is built by making use of Hebrew to penetrate the controversial meaning of the *muqatta'āt*. It is a fact that many efforts have already been made in this regard but such efforts do not prevent the continuance of further endeavours. The present study proposes a new insight that is supported by evidence to mitigate the influence of personal explanations that are found in many extant instances. Some Hebrew dictionaries are consulted to effect the interpretation of the *muqatta'āt* and to determine the meaning of the corresponding letter in Hebrew. In other words, as the *muqatta'āt* represent separate and independent letters when they are recited, these letters have equivalents in Hebrew. The meaning of the Hebrew equivalents is researched to their semantic potentials and they are compared with the Qur'ānic *siyāq* (context). *Siyāq* performs a fundamental role in building the comprehension of the Qur'ānic meaning and therefore, in the translation of such signification. *Siyāq al-naṣṣ* (textual context) is particularly of great importance to the present paper. It denotes the linguistic parts that appear before and after a given term or phrase and that influence and limit the meaning of that word or expression⁴⁸. Put succinctly, words may have shades of meaning when they stand alone as they are read in dictionaries; however, their meanings become more specific once they are used in phrases or sentences. The application of componential analysis (CA) to isolate the semantic component of a word thus becomes vital. The present attempt to decipher the meaning of the Hebrew letters and to limit the shades of meaning takes into account the context or the recurrent theme of the entire chapter rather than merely the surrounding words or phrases.

The article uses three *Qur'ān* translations to highlight the current status of the *muqatta'āt*. These translations were not selected randomly.

A question was posed to a number of Islamic institutions and their responses were analysed to choose the three⁴⁹: *The Qur'ān: A New Translation* by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'ān: English Meaning* by Ṣaḥīḥ International, and *Translation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'ān in the English Language* by Al-Hilali and Khan. Further, as described above, it was decided to investigate the instances of the *muqatta'āt* is used in the oaths.

Cases of the *Muqatta'āt* in the Oaths

Yā-Sīn (Al-Qur'ān:XXXVI)

Yā-Sīn is the first chapter that contains the case of an oath where the *muqatta'āt* are used. The *muqatta'āt* are *yā* and *sīn* and the chapter is named after them. They are written as one word standing alone as the first independent verse. They are translated as follows in the translations adopted here:

- a. Yā-Sīn⁵⁰.
- b. Yā-Sīn (these letters represent one of the miracles of the *Qur'ān*, and none but Allāh (Alone) knows their meanings)⁵¹.
- c. Yā, Seen (the letters) *yā* and *seen*⁵².

These 'translations' are merely transliterations and sometimes a short note added to them. Reading the translation does not communicate anything valuable other than a sense of mystery. That said, the proposed new insight through Hebrew letters described in detail above divulges that *Yā* and *sīn* correspond respectively to the Hebrew letters, (Fig. 4) (*yud*) and (Fig. 5) (*sāmikh*). Without any context, (Fig. 4) (*yud*) could mean: hand, handle, place, power, strength, share, portion, make or throw⁵³. Similarly, the letter (Fig. 5) (*sāmikh*) could be: support, rely on, trust in, aid, assist or encourage. These are numerous possibilities and therefore, the thematic context becomes crucial. We see in (Q.XXXVII:2) an oath (surely made by Allāh as these are His literal words) made by the *Qur'ān*; and the one being addressed is the prophet Muhammad as seen in (Q. XXXVI:3). In other words, the context is: I, Allāh, swear by the *Qur'ān*, the Book of wisdom, that you, Muhammad, are indeed one of the messengers who follows the right way (preaching monotheism) and so on. The subject matter and the main theme of this chapter refer to

the antagonistic attitude adopted by the disbelievers toward Muhammad (ﷺ) and his message. Moreover, Allāh consoles the prophet and exhorts the believers to remain steadfast on the path of Allāh to be rewarded in the after life⁵⁴. This being the case and in light of the possible semantic meanings, it can be suggested that *yā* and *sīn* respectively mean power/authority and support. In other words, the *muqatta'āt* can be interpreted as divine support. This reading supports the view that the *muqatta'āt* act like thematic summaries of the entire chapter.



Fig: 4
yud



Fig: 5
sāmikh

Ṣād (Al-Qur'ān:XXXVIII)

The second chapter considered for this paper and containing an oath is Ṣād. The *muqatta'āt* in this chapter pertains to one letter, *Ṣād*, which occurs as a part of the first verse, and the entire chapter is named after it. In orthographic and oral representation, the letter stands alone and the three English translations read:

- Ṣād By the *Qur'ān* with its reminding⁵⁵.
- Ṣād [These letters (Ṣād etc.) represent one of the miracles of the *Qur'ān* and none but Allah (Alone) knows their meanings]. By the *Qur'ān* full of reminding⁵⁶.
- Ṣād. By the *Qur'ān* containing a reminder⁵⁷.

The same comment as made in the previous case is applicable here. The translation yield no meaning except to underscore the enigma.

The signification of Ṣād is not attainable whether it stands alone or is placed within a context. However, the riddle is solved by resorting to Hebrew. Ṣād in Arabic is equivalent to the Hebrew letter (Fig. 6) (*tsādi*). Without a context, (Fig. 6) (*tsādi*) could mean fishing-hook, side (of something), hunting, chasing, righteousness, humility. Of course, the context of the occurrence of the term would influence the final and most plausible meaning. An important matter with regard to oaths in Arabic must be highlighted before an interpretation is proposed. An oath consists of the *adāt al-qasam* (participle), the *ism al- qasam* (the name by which an oath is made), and the *jawāb al- qasam* (the answer to the oath). To illustrate, *wallāhi la'drussana* (I swear I will study) is an oath; *wa* is

the participle, *allāhi* is the name of the oath), and *la'drussana* is the answer. In (Q.XXXVIII:1), the oath only consists of the participle and the name, and the answer is omitted, and yet the oath is clearly understood: it [the *Qur'ān*] is miraculous⁵⁸, or it is the true book⁵⁹. Returning to the context, Allāh begins the chapter with an oath made on the *Qur'ān*, a book that serves as a reminder to the people. The arrogance and defiance of the disbelievers form the subject matter and the overall theme of this chapter: they do not want to heed the preaching of the prophet (ﷺ), whom they consider to be inferior. Other stories such as David and Solomon are mentioned to underline the theme of power and authority and how they affect people, who should repent and recall what they are meant to be. Besides, the chapter contains the story of the Devil who arrogantly refused Allāh's commands and thought he was superior to humans. The idea of humility and cautioning against arrogance form the recurrent themes of the chapter⁶⁰. Thus, in accordance with the Hebrew equivalent letter the meaning of *Ṣād* could be held as humility; and again, the letter *Ṣād* would perform the function of summarising the chapter's theme.



Fig: 6
tsādi

Al-Zukhruf (Q. 43)

In the third chapter, Al-Zukhruf, the *muqatta'āt* are represented by two letters that are orthographically joined but separated in oral recitation. These letters are *ḥā* and *mīm* which occur together in an independent verse. They are found in the above mentioned translations as follows:

- a. Ha Mīm⁶¹.
- b. Ḥā-Mīm. [These letters represent one of the miracles of the *Qur'ān* and none but Allah (Alone) knows their meanings]⁶².
- c. Ḥā, Meem (Ṣaḥīḥ International, 2004, p. 487)⁶³.

Again, only a transliteration is offered. Using Hebrew, *ḥā* and *mīm* are found to be equivalent to (Fig. 7) (*ḥet*) and (Fig. 8) (*mīm*) respectively. The meanings of (Fig. 7) (*ḥet*) include fence, wall (protection), string, life, divide. On the other hand, (Fig. 8) (*mīm*) could be understood as water, waves, mighty, perfection, completion. Of course, these significations

embody semantic options in the absence of a context. A consideration of the context would limit the meanings to “water” and “divide” because as has been previously asserted, one of the assumptions concerning the *muqatta'āt* pertains to their underlining of the inclusiveness of the message of the *Qur'ān*, particularly for the Jews and Christians. Thus, the *muqatta'āt* are created in Hebrew to attract the attention of these groups and they function as thematic representations of the entire chapter that follows. The chapter Al-Zukhruf's theme concerns mischiefs, stubbornness and superstitions of people and the message that Allah never held back from sending His prophets. It also mentions the destruction of the wicked who opposed any religion prescribed by Allah, and the chapter specifically recounts the history of the Pharaoh and Moses. Having mentioned the theme and taking into consideration the function of inclusiveness of the *muqatta'āt*, “water divide” may be posited as an allegory, just as the many others used in the *Qur'ān*, to the biblical narrative of the Exodus (crossing the Red Sea by parting the water). *Hā* and *mīm* may then be interpreted to allude to the Exodus (the splitting of the sea).



Fig 7:
het



Fig 8:
mīm

Qāf (Al-Qur'ān:L)

In terms of its structure, the fourth chapter *qāf* which is almost similar to case 2, *Ṣād*. It encompasses an oath and a one-letter of *muqatta'āt*, *qāf*. The letter is not independent; it is a part of the first verse, and the entire chapter is named after it. In writing and reciting, this letter is separated and is translated in the following manner by the three selected translations:

1. Qaf. By the glorious *Qur'ān*⁶⁴.
2. Qāf [These letters (Qāf, etc.) exemplify one of the miracles of the *Qur'ān* and none but Allah (Alone) knows their meanings]. By the glorious *Qur'ān*⁶⁵.
3. Qāf. By the honoured *Qur'ān*⁶⁶.

As usual, the translations offer merely transliterations and sometimes append a statement void of any meaningful interpretation. Nevertheless,

Hebrew can help provide an explanation of *qāf*'s denotation. The Hebrew letter (Fig. 9) (*quf*) is equivalent to *qāf* and its dictionary meaning includes back of the head, circle (repetition), revolution (of the sun), sun, horizon, growth or holiness. Before beginning the interpretation, the context of the oath in the first āya (Q. L:1) must be considered: it consists of *adāt al-qasam* (participle) and *ism al-qasam* (the name by which an oath is made) but the answer is omitted. The answer is expected to be understood based on the basis of the verse that follows. The context covers the theme of the afterlife, particularly the idea of resurrection after death (a dead body turning into dust and scattered bones to be reassembled after years to be raised up as a living body). Accordingly, arguments about the possibility of the resurrection are made, and the records of deeds are presented before everyone, and Hell and Heaven are described⁶⁷. Generally speaking, the theme of after life and resurrection are central to this chapter and considering the Hebrew meaning based on this context, the meaning of *qāf* can be assumed in the sense of growth and revolution, or the idea of resurrection.



Fig 9:
quf

Al-Qalam (Al-Qur'ān:LXVIII)

As in *Ṣād*, the fifth chapter, Al-Qalam, contains an oath in its first verse and demonstrates one of a *muqatta'a* 'āt consisting one letter, *nūn*. However, unlike *Ṣād*, the entire chapter is not named after the *muqatta'a* 'āt. Orthographically and orally, this letter is treated independently, and it has been translated as follows:

1. Nun. By the pen! By all they write!⁶⁸.
2. Nūn [These letters (Nūn, etc.) denote one of the miracles of the *Qur'ān* and none but Allah (Alone) knows their meanings]. By the pen and by what they (the angels) write (in the Records of men)⁶⁹.
3. Nūn. By the pen and what they inscribe⁷⁰.

Repeating the same pattern, neither the context nor the transliteration defogs the meaning of this letter, which may again, be reasonably interpreted through the intervention of Hebrew. The Hebrew letter equivalent to Arabic *nūn* is (Fig. 10) (Nun). Without context, it may

symbolise fish, continue, offspring, heir, perpetuation, emergence, propagate or shine. To elucidate the context, the chapter presents as a consolation to the prophet who was accused of being mad by disbelievers. The disbelievers also tried to intimidate him and sought to make him compromise with them⁷¹. In light of the context, the most suitable meaning is continue, meaning that you, Muhammad, should continue in your mission no matter the resistance you face as you are the divine representative chosen to propagate the message of Allāh and to make His religion flourish. As a result, *Nūn* is interpreted as keep propagating the message or keep up.



Fig 10:

Nun

Conclusion

The present paper has described seen how many scholars regard the *muqatta'āt* to be mysterious and ambiguous phenomena in the *Qur'ān* and has alluded to the vast numbers of assumptions that have been made about their meanings and functions. The majority of the extant scholarship tends to attribute the knowledge of the *muqatta'āt* solely to Allāh, believing this to be the best resolution to the disagreements on the *muqatta'āt*'s problematic nature in terms of interpretation. This attitude has led *Qur'ān* translators, academics, and exegetists to largely neglect other possibilities of understanding the text of the *Qur'ān*. The scholars have particularly disregarded the potential role of Hebrew in the elucidation of some parts of the *Qur'ānic* text. Indeed, the present article ignites a small spark in this regard that may develop into a full-fledged research interest. Adopting the linguistic intervention of Hebrew would offer two-fold benefits for Arabic and non-Arabic ones: Hebrew would help the former group understand the *muqatta'āt* in their own language, and the latter would be able to obtain a more logical understanding from the *Qur'ān* translations. In other terms, the translation of the *muqatta'āt* is examined in this paper from the aim-oriented perspective: the skopos to offer a translation that makes sense in English. The handling of the subject of this study is sometimes controversial as many early and current Muslim scholars have refused to admit the intervention of foreign languages in attempting a more comprehensive understanding of the *Qur'ān*. It must be noted, however, that elements of borrowed linguistic terms are used in religious

rituals every day, including the word *āmīn* (Amen), which is of Hebrew origin and means so be it⁷². In addition to natural and human linguistic interactions, the inclusiveness of the message of Islam helps to pave the way for the assumption that the *muqatta'āt* were deliberately comprised of non-Arabic origins to attract the attention of the Jews and Christians and to specifically address these groups of people. The examination conducted in this paper yields the understanding that the *muqatta'āt* may be genuinely and reasonably held to discharge the function of a thematic summary of what is to follow in a particular chapter. In other words, both the placement and the signification of the *muqatta'āt* (as introductory remarks to the entire content of a chapter) match the principal theme of the chapter in which they are used. This approach evidences that Hebrew may be linguistically influential in arriving at cogent, bolstered and determinate interpretations of the *muqatta'āt* rather than conjectures made on hypothetical and personal bases. The value of Hebrew is attained by considering the role of the *siyāq* in accentuating the exact sense of the Hebrew meanings, or the CA. Put succinctly, Hebrew, the *siyāq* and the componential analyses are combined in this study to offer very strong evidence that the *muqatta'āt* are Hebrew in their linguistic origins and that they act to provide overviews of the themes of the chapters they head.

Therefore, translators of the *Qur'ān* should not restrict their efforts to the literalist approach in the mistaken belief that such a method would maintain respect for the *Qur'ān* as the literal word of Allāh. Indeed, it is highly recommended to contemplate resources beyond the *Qur'ān* to avoid illogical statements from appearing in *Qur'ān* translations and to deter inaccuracies driven from personal and intuitive attempts at effecting translations. Many speculations regarding the interpretation of the *muqatta'āt* already exist; why should we not add the linguistic possibility of Hebrew as a means of understanding them as long as the requisite evidence can be tendered? The *Qur'ān* consists of many verses that urge Muslims to seek knowledge and truth. More research, on this proposal or others that endeavour disambiguation, is thus mandated. The absence of such scholarship would help to refute the claim that Islam and the *Qur'ān* encourage the pursuit of knowledge and the advancement of understanding.

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