

ISSUES IN THE UNDERSTANDING MUḤKAM AND MUTASHĀBIH PASSAGES OF THE QUR'ĀN

Thameem Ushama

Introduction

It is in the firm belief of Muslims that Allah, the Almighty revealed the Qur'ān, the holistic divine guidance which expresses His will explicitly and implicitly. Serving as the criterion between the right and wrong as well as warnings and glad tidings for man, society and the universe, the Qur'ān is regarded as His grace upon humanity, for it explains a number of significant issues relating to this world (*al-dunyā*) and the hereafter (*al-ākhirah*) as compared to other scriptures in existence. In His revelation, Allah introduces essential doctrines, describes fundamental laws and illustrates the straight path to enable humanity to attain felicity and success in this worldly life. A number of passages (*āyāt*) of the Qur'ān manifest these phenomena. The Qur'ān's exegetes (*mufasssirūn*) and scholars ('*ulamā'*) hold the view that a number of passages of the Qur'ān are explicitly in the form of judgments or decisions (*muḥkamāt*) while some other passages resemble one another (*mustashābihāt*) or are subject to further explanation or interpretation or they need proper clarification to recognize the truth and objective of the divine message.¹

Over the years, this phenomenon has been thoroughly discussed by exegetes, jurists (*fuqahā'*) and some theologians (*mutakallimūn*). Although there are several interpretations and propositions in the Muslim exegetical history on this issue, yet it has been argued that in order to understand the true meaning of some of the passages that seem to be metaphorical, allegorical, ambiguous or unclear, an in-depth knowledge of the field of study of *muḥkamāt* and *mustashābihāt* is indispensable. In other words, those exegetes

1 Mannā' al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1987), 214.

who aim to produce genuine interpretations and jurists who seem to be committed to explain the legal import of the Text² must have in-depth scholarship to distinguish between the passages that are seemingly clear or unclear. It is obvious that if these passages are interpreted based on literal or lexical meanings, they will often lead to numerous contradictions or inconsistencies and sometimes heretical tendencies in Islamic thought. Despite the existence of diversified opinions, some eminent scholars of Islam have ascribed proper and acceptable meanings to the *mutashābihāt* passages of the Qur'ān.

Realizing the importance of the issues pertaining to the number of the *muḥkam* (whose meaning is manifest and perpetual) and the *mutashābih* (whose meaning is doubtful, vague, ambiguous or unclear) passages, Muslim scholars have produced numerous works. To quote a few key works, Imām al-Raghīb al-Aṣḥāhānī (d. 502 H) has authored one of the most important books entitled *Mufradāt al-Qur'ān*³ dealing with this issue. Likewise, Imām al-Kasā'ī (d. 189 H) wrote his *al-Burhān fī Tawjīh Mutashābih al-Qur'ān*.⁴ This field was further enriched by Ibn Taymiyyah's (d. 728 H) *al-Iklīl fī al-Mutashābih wa al-Ta'wīl*. In addition, scholars like Ibn Ḥabīb al-Nisābūrī (d. 238 H), Imām al-Rāzī (d. 606 H), Ibn Qayyim (d. 751 H) and many others have contributed greatly in strengthening this field which ultimately helped later jurists in understanding this science, thus paving the way for proper interpretation of the texts, especially those dealing with *aḥkām* (legal rulings).⁵

In order to resolve the differences that may occur in the minds of readers of the Qur'ān of the non-Arabic speaking world, especially in comprehending the translated text, the article attempts to provide some clarifications on the issue by referring to a number

2 The term 'Text' mentioned here as well as elsewhere in the article refers to the text of the Qur'ān.

3 Syed Anwar 'Alī, *Qur'ān, the Fundamental Law of Human Life* (Pakistan: Hamdard Publications, 1987), vol. 1, 113.

4 Ibid.

5 In addition to the scholars mentioned above, 'Ālam al-Sakhawī, Abū al-Qāsim Burhān al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, and Abū Ja'far ibn al-Zubayr compiled works on *Mutashābihāt al-Qur'ān*. See: Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (al-Qāhirah: al-Ḥalabī, 1972), 112.

of classical and contemporary exegetes' interpretations, opinions and illustrations. Thus, the article's first section discusses the lexical definition and the concept of the *muḥkam* and the *mutashābih*. The second section draws attention to both *Salafī*⁶ and *Khalafī*⁷ methodologies of explaining the *mutashābihāt* passages. The third section analyzes a number of views of both classical scholars and contemporary exegetes to depict the true picture of the issue and to avoid misconceptions that may arise as a result of various approaches adopted by scholars of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*.⁸ The fourth section studies the kinds of the *mutashābihāt* passages and explores the underlying wisdom therein. The last section highlights some of the examples of the *mutashābihāt* passages with brief analysis. It is hoped that this section will contribute to proper understanding of the true nature of the relevant passages of the Qur'ān.

Defining the terms *Muḥkam* and *Mutashābih*

The word *muḥkam* is derived from the root word *ḥa ka ma*. It refers to a decision made between two things⁹ while *ḥukm* is the division between two things. *Al-Ḥākim* judges between the right and wrong, truth and false. The term *aḥkām* is a verbal noun in plural form, which means 'judgments' or 'decisions' or 'rulings.' As a technical term, it refers to all clear passages of the Qur'ān which are related

6 It refers to 'the predecessors and the successors'; it is a name given to the first three generations and to the following generations of the Muslim community respectively. In practice, the precedence of the *salaf* is only fully displayed in regard to the generation of the Prophet's Companions. On one hand, for the majority of scholars, their quality of being reliable transmitters of the Prophet's *Sunnah* was incontestable and so did not require the testing and verification procedure, traditionally required at the outset of all transmitters.

7 As for the *Khalafis*, they are the followers of the understanding of the *Khalaf* and they are also called Innovators. A person who is not pleased or satisfied with the path of the *Salaf al-Ṣāliḥ* in knowledge and action, understanding and *fiqh* is called a *khalafī*, an innovator.

8 The people of the *Sunnah* and the Community: all people who follow the *Sunnah* of the Prophet and who hold together as a community on this basis, the main body of the Muslim Community.

9 Al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith*, 215.

to legal rulings.¹⁰ Some of the *muḥkam* passages are (Qur'ān, *Hud*: 1),¹¹ and (Qur'ān, *Yūnus*: 1).¹² In these Qur'ānic passages, the word *muḥkam* refers to the systematic arrangement of the Qur'ān as well as its meaning. In this sense, the entire Qur'ān is placed under the category of *muḥkamāt*, which means that it is used as a criterion to distinguish truth from falsehood.¹³

The term *mustashābih* is derived from the root word *sha ba ha*, which means to be doubtful or to have the likeness or resemblance of.¹⁴ The term *mutashābihāt* is in the plural verbal noun form (*maṣḍar*). It refers to uncertain or doubtful things. Technically, it refers to those passages of the Qur'ān whose meanings are uncertain or resembling one another and thus susceptible to two or more interpretations.¹⁵ In a Qur'ānic passage such as *al-Zumar*: 23,¹⁶ Allah depicts everything as *mustashābih*. This apparently indicates that some of the passages of the Qur'ān are similar to each other in narration and language. Another view is that the Qur'ān constitutes verse which are both *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt*.¹⁷ Proponents of this view quote the passage (Qur'ān, *Āl'Imrān*: 7) to strengthen their viewpoint which is regarded as authentic in the world of Qur'ānic exegesis.

Methodologies of Explaining the *Mutashābihāt*

In discussing the issue of the *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt* passages of the Qur'ān, Muslim scholars and exegetes have identified two

10 Ahmad Von Denffer, '*Ulūm al-Qur'ān, An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'ān* (London: The Islamic Foundation, 19), 79.

11 Alif Lam Ra. (This is) a Book, with verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning) further explained in detail from One Who is Wise and Well-Acquainted (with all things). (Qur'ān, *Hud*: 1)

12 Alif, Lam Ra. These are the *Āyāt* of the Book of Wisdom. (Qur'ān, *Yūnus*: 1)

13 Amīr 'Abd al-'Azīz, *Dirāsāt fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'an* (n.p.: Dār al-Furqān, 1st edn., 1983), 179-80.

14 Denffer, '*Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 79.

15 Ibid.

16 Allah has revealed (from time to time) the most beautiful Message in the form of a Book, consistent with itself, (yet) repeating (its teaching in various aspects)... (Qur'ān, *al-Zumar*: 23)

17 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr, 1979), vol. 2, 2.

methodologies of explaining the subject which according to a number of other scholars seem to be valid. They are [1] the methodology of the *Salaf* and [2] the methodology of the *Khalaf*.

According to them, the *Salafī* methodology consists of providing general explanations, since the scholars of the *Salaf* believe that these passages have meanings befitting the perfection of Allah. Rather than saying what these meanings are, they juxtaposed the *mutashābihāt* and the *muḥkamāt* passages. A good example that can be cited in this regard is the statement of Imām al-Shāfī'ī (d. 204 H), who said that he believed in what Allah has revealed according to the meaning that He willed, and in what the Prophet conveyed according to the meaning that he willed. In other words, the proper befitting meanings are not according to the sensuous and physical meanings that would lead to delusions with regard to places, shapes, limbs, movements, sitting, colors, directions, smiling, laughing, or any other meanings which are not permissible to be attributed to Allah.¹⁸

Furthermore, the Arabs' understanding of their meanings was so natural and well-known, that there was no need for them to attribute specific meanings to the *mutashābihāt* passages. Instead, they argued that these passages have meanings that befit Allah and that it is impossible that they would have sensuous and physical meanings which do not befit Him. Nevertheless, it is well known that some of the scholars of the *Salaf* did attribute specific meanings to *mutashābihāt* passages.

On the contrary, the *Khalafī* methodology consists of giving specific meanings to the *mutashābihāt* passages. Living at a time when people started to lose their natural disposition for the Arabic language, the scholars of the *Khalaf* observed that the people had become weak in the language; they also feared that those with perversity in their hearts would attribute meanings to the *mutashābihāt* passages which did not befit Allah. In order to protect the creed ('*aqīdah*) of Islam, the scholars of the *Khalaf* followed the example of those scholars of the *Salaf* who offered specific meanings to the *mutashābihāt*

18 www.scribd.com/doc/16794301/Ayat-of-the-Quran-Muhkam-and-Mutashabih.

passages. Referring them to the *muḥkamāt* passages, they provided specific meanings to the *mutashābihāt* passages in compliance with the language and the Religion. In other words, they offered correct and acceptable meanings to the *mutashābihāt* passages.¹⁹

Early Islamic Views

Remarkably praiseworthy and God-conscious Companions and Successors such as Ibn ‘Abbās, Ibn Mas‘ūd, Qatādah, Ibn Ubayy Ja‘far, al-Ḍaḥḥāk, Mujāhid, Ja‘far ibn al-Zubayr, ‘Ikrimah, Muqātil ibn Ḥayyān, al-Rabī‘ ibn Anas and others have transmitted a number of traditions (*aḥādīth*) explaining the meanings of the *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt* passages of the Qur’ān. Al-Ṭabarī, one of the earliest famous exegetes, provides an in-depth discourse on this subject in his exegesis.²⁰ As the issue is extremely crucial we can see many other prominent exegetes discussing this issue following the line of al-Ṭabarī. Some of the selected exegetes include al-Rāzī,²¹ Ibn Kathīr,²² al-Shawkānī,²³ Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā,²⁴ Sa‘īd Ḥawā,²⁵ Ibn ‘Āshūr,²⁶ and others.

In general, according to those God conscious Companions (*ṣaḥābah*) and the Successors (*tābi‘ūn*) the *muḥkamāt*:

19 Ibid.

20 Refer to Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Taḥqīq: Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Bakrī wa Muḥammad ‘Ādil Muḥammad wa Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Laṭīf khalaf wa Maḥmūd Mūsā ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl Āy al-Qur’ān* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Salām, 1st edn., 2005), vol. 3, 1676-1695.

21 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* or *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1st edn., 2000), vol. 7-8, 144-154.

22 Ibn Kathīr, Taḥqīq: Sayyid Muḥammad al-Sayyid and Others, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2002), vol. 2, 6-16.

23 Al-Shawkānī, *Fath al-Qadīr al-Jāmi‘ Bayna Fannī al-Riwāyah wa al-Dirāyah min ‘Ilm al-Tafsīr* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, 1995), vol. 5, 398-406.

24 Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Ḥakīm* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr, 2nd edn., n.d), vol.3, 162-195.

25 Sa‘īd Ḥawā, *al-Asās fī al-Tafsīr* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Salām li al-Ṭibā‘ah wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī‘, 1st edn., 1985), vol 2, 707-710.

26 Ibn ‘Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Tarīkh, 2000), vol. 3, 14-28.

- [1] is obviously clear, and it leaves no room for abrogation,²⁷ and that the *mutashābih* is implicit: its meaning is neither perceived intellectually nor by transmission:²⁸ it constitutes the knowledge transmitted by God such as abbreviated letters at the commencement of the chapters,²⁹
- [2] refers to *ta'wīl* (interpretation) whereas the *mutashābih* constitutes what had been transmitted by God such as information on the day of Judgment, emergence of *Dajjāl* (Anti-Christ) and abbreviated letters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqatta'āt*) at the beginning of the chapters,
- [3] bears one guiding principle of *ta'wīl*, whereas the *mutashābih* constitutes several dimensions,
- [4] is independent and does not require any further interpretation, while the *mutashābih* is not independent in itself; but requires further explanation,³⁰
- [5] refers to perfect coherence of the Qur'ān that leads to arrive at the true meaning, whereas the *mutashābih* does not comprehend the knowledge with its desired meaning with regard to the language,³¹
- [6] is the clear meaning that does not contribute to ambiguity and obscurity, taken from the exactitude and accuracy, whereas the *mutashābih* is its opposite,³²
- [7] is a systematic arrangement according to the text and what is clearly shown, whereas arrangement of the *mutashābihāt* is based on joint names and imaginative words for anthropomorphization³³ in the truth of the Lord,³⁴ and

27 Muḥammad 'Abd al-'Aẓīm al-Zarqānī, *Manāhil al-'Irfān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (al-Qāhirah: al-Ḥalabī, n.d), vol. 2, 272.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., 273.

32 Ibid., 272.

33 The word anthropomorphization refers to ascribing human forms or attributes to a being or thing not human, especially a deity.

34 Al-Zarqānī, *Manāhil*, vol. 2, 272.

[8] is the one whose guidance or meaning is binding on Muslims, whereas the guidance or meaning of the *mutashābih* is not binding.³⁵

Besides this, it has been stated that the *muḥkam*:

- [1] is to be acted upon,³⁶ and the *mutashābih* is that which one need only believe in,³⁷
- [2] is comprehensive in meaning and the *mutashābih* is not, just as in the case of the number of *ṣalāh* (ritual prayer) and concessions of fasting in Ramaḍān,³⁸
- [3] is the one whose word is not repeated and the *mutashābih* is the one whose word is repeated,³⁹
- [4] is not abrogated, while the *mutashābih* is,⁴⁰ and
- [5] comprises *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām* and aspects other than that are the *mutashābih*.⁴¹

One of the famous scholars, Ibn Abī Ḥātim records by way of ‘Alī ibn Ṭalḥah on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās that the *muḥkamāt* (clear passages) refer to *nāsikh* (abrogative), *ḥalāl* (lawful), *ḥarām* (prohibited), *ḥudūd* (legal punishments), *farā’id* (lit. divine precepts, ordinance of God) and concepts or principles which are believed in and acted upon, and the *mutashābihāt* refer to *mansūkh* (what has been abrogated), *muqaddam* (antecedent or preceding something), *mu’akhkhar* (delayed, deferred or postponed), *amthāl* (parables), *aqsām* (oaths), and things which are believed and not acted upon.⁴²

35 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2002), vol.2, 7.

36 Ibn Abī Ḥātim mentions this in his exegesis, vol. 2, 592. Al-Māwardī also mentions this in his *al-Nakth wa al-‘Uyūn*, vol. 1, 369.

37 Al-Zarqānī, *Manāhil*, vol. 2, 276-277.

38 Ibid.

39 Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, vol. 3, 194.

40 Al-Firyānī records on the authority of Mujāhid. See also: Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 2, 3. See also: Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, vol. 3, 164.

41 Al-Zarqānī, *Manāhil*, 281.

42 Al-Suyūṭī mentions this in *al-Durr al-Manthūr* in (2/4). Al-Qurṭubī also mentions this in *al-Jāmi’ liAḥkām al-Qur’ān*, 4/10. See also: Al-Shawkānī, *Fath al-Qadīr*, vol. 5, 399.

Another well known author, al-Firyānī records on the authority of Mujāhid that the *muḥkamāt* refer to what is in the Qur'ān in terms of that which are lawful (*ḥalāl*) and prohibited (*ḥarām*) and anything other than these are the *mutashābihāt*.⁴³ *Al-Muḥaddithūn* (scholars of Islamic Traditions) such as al-Ḥākim and others record on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās that passages (Qur'ān, *al-An'ām*: 151-153)⁴⁴ from the last part of *sūrat al-An'ām* are *muḥkamāt*.⁴⁵ 'Abd ibn Ḥamīd records on the authority of al-Ḍaḥḥāk that the *muḥkamāt* refer to what were not abrogated out of the passages of the Qur'ān and the *mutashābihāt* refer to what had been abrogated in the Qur'ān, but still recited.⁴⁶

Later Scholars' Views

Thus, al-Suyūṭī (d. 911 H), Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 H), Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 H) and Ibn 'Abd al Wahhāb (d. 1206 H) endorsed that the *muḥkamāt* passages were the clear ones in their purpose, ostensible in terms of meaning and as clear as direct evidence without any obscurity. The passages dealing with obligatory acts such as *ṣalāh* (prayer), *zakāh* (poor-due), *ṣiyām* (fasting) and virtues such as *ṣabr* (perseverance) and *amānah* (trust), *birr al-wālidayn* (goodness to parents), *ṣilat al-raḥm* (kinship), *iḥsān* (kindness and doing good)

43 Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 2, 3.

44 Say: Come, I will rehearse what Allah hath (really) prohibited you from: join not anything as equal with Him; be good to your parents, kill not your children on a plea of want; We provide sustenance for you and for them; come not nigh to shameful deeds, whether open or secret; take not life, which Allah hath made sacred, except by way to justice and law: thus doth He command you, that ye may learn wisdom. (Qur'ān, *al-An'ām*: 151). And come not nigh to the orphans property, except to improve it, until he attains the age of full strength; give measure and weight with (full) justice, no burden do We place on any soul, but that which it can bear whenever ye speak, speak justly, even if a near relative is concerned; and fulfill the Covenant of Allah; thus doth He command you, that ye may remember. Verily, this is My Way leading straight: follow it: follow not (other) paths: they will scatter you about from His (great) Path; thus doth He command you, that ye may be righteous. (Qur'ān, *al-An'ām*: 152-153)

45 Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 2, 3.

46 Fu'ād 'Alī Riḍā, *Fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Bayrūt: Dār Iqra', 1983), 208-209. This is mentioned by Ibn 'Aṭīyyah in *al-Muḥarrir al-Wajīz*, vol. 1, 402.

to neighbors, invitation to *makārim al-akhlāq* (excellent conduct and morality), prohibition of viciousness and shameful deeds (prostitution and adultery), usury and consumption of people's wealth unjustly, especially the assets of the orphans, slander and calumny, defamation and espionage, killing another human being unjustly, falsehood and vanities, decreasing in measurement and other restrictions and forbidden things are all examples of the *muḥkamāt*. These clear *muḥkamāt* passages have their *naṣṣ* (clear text) referring to the objectives and no other interpretation is conceivable. The prohibition of vanities is obvious like the commandments on righteousness and prayer, *amānah*, etc."⁴⁷

However, meanings of the *mutashābihāt* passages are clearly different from one another. Such passages are subject to more than one interpretation. This notion even differs from one *madhhab* (school of jurisprudence) to another in terms of methodology and understanding. However, it is necessary to comprehend the correct and true interpretation as required. It is undesirable and presumptuous to distance oneself from it. The true *ta'wīl* (interpretation) or the nearness to it needs concerted efforts of contemplation, clear-sight, perspicacity and perceptivity.⁴⁸ For instance, passages that commence with *al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa'āt* like *alif lām rā*, *alif lām mīm*, *kāf hā yā* 'ayn ṣād, *hā mīm*, *yā sīn*, etc.⁴⁹ are regarded as part of the passages of the Qur'ān containing both *ta'wīl* and *tafsīr*.

On the contrary, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324 H) observed that those who had versatile knowledge of the Religion perceived the meaning of the *mutashābihāt*. However, Abū Iṣḥāq al-Shirāzī (d. 476 H) claimed that there was no knowledge of which Allah has reserved for Himself; He has made known everything to scholars or knowledgeable people (*rāsikhūn fī al-'ilm*). To substantiate his point of view, he quotes the passage 'Āl 'Imrān: 7.⁵⁰ He further emphasized that if they (scholars) did not know the meaning of the

47 Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 2, 3.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book: in it are passages basic or fundamental (of established meaning); they are the foundation of the Book:

mutashābihāt, there would not have been any difference between them and the common people.⁵¹

Twentieth century Muslim scholar of the sciences of the Qur'ān, al-Zarqānī, classifies the *mutashābihāt* into three.⁵² They are:

- [1] the entire humanity is not at all capable of accomplishing the secrets of God as the knowledge of the Self (*dhāt*) of God and His realities and characteristics, as well as the knowledge of Doomsday and other divine secrets belong to God as He states in passages (*al-An'ām*:59)⁵³ and (*Luqmān*: 34),⁵⁴
- [2] human beings are able to acquire some knowledge of the universe by way of research and
- [3] the knowledge of scholars as distinguished from other common people. It implies that some are acquainted with it and others are not. Therefore, many examples fill the hearts of the people with clarity and *ijtihād*. According to scholars, those passages that are related to the attributes of God are one type of *mutashābihāt* and their meanings are not perceptible to man.

Al-Zarqānī, and al-Raghīb also admit that the *mutashābihāt* are of three types. The first refers to the impossibility of anybody knowing the meaning of the Final Hour, emergence of *dābbah* and other metaphysical and eschatological issues. Second, there is a way

others are allegorical. However, those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say:

We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord; and none will grasp the Message except men of understanding.

51 Anwar Ali, *Qur'ān the Fundamental Law*, vol.1, 89.

52 Al-Zarqānī, *Manāhil*, 281

53 With Him are the keys of the Unseen, the treasures that none knoweth but He... (Qur'ān, *al-An'ām*: 59)

54 Verily the knowledge of the Hour is with Allah (alone). It is He Who sends down rain, and He Who knows what is in the wombs. Nor does anyone know what it is that he will earn on the morrow; Nor does anyone know in what land he is to die. Verily with Allah is full knowledge and He is acquainted (with all things). (Qur'ān, *Luqmān*: 34)

for human beings to acquire its knowledge such as strange words and their legal injunctions, which are difficult to comprehend. Third is irresolution between two matters to be discerned by some versatile people of knowledge which is imperceptible to others. This issue of comprehension by versatile people is justified by citing the *du'ā* (supplication) of the Prophet for Ibn 'Abbās: *Allāhumma faqqihhu fī al-dīn wa 'allimhu al-ta'wīl* (O Allah! make him (Ibn 'Abbās) an expert of religion and teach him the art of interpretation).⁵⁵

Al-Rāzī's Views

Al-Rāzī reiterates that the Qur'ān itself portrays that everything in it is *muḥkam*; it indicates that everything in it is *mutashābih*; it also suggests that some of it is *muḥkam* and others *mutashābih*. For the proposition that everything in it is *muḥkam*, he quotes passages from *sūrah Yūnus* (1) and *sūrah Hūd* (1). In these two passages, God mentions that everything in it is *muḥkam*. This implicitly refers to the formulation of words in the real sense with a superlative degree of eloquence. Every passage of the Qur'ān shows that the Qur'ān is superior to other literatures in terms of eloquence of words and profundity of meaning and no one can compete with this inimitable nature of the Qur'ān. For the proposition that everything in it is *mutashābih*, he quotes a passage (*al-Zumar*: 23)⁵⁶ which means that the Qur'ān's parts resemble each other in goodness and truth and are oft-repeated. Also some of its parts serve to testify other parts. He quotes a passage (*al-Nisā*: 82)⁵⁷ that affirms that there is no discrepancy in the divine text.⁵⁸ Al-Rāzī provides a comprehensive discussion on the subject stretching over ten pages in his *tafsīr*.

55 Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 2, 2.

56 Allah has revealed (from time to time) the most beautiful Message in the form of a Book, consistent with itself, (yet) repeating (its teaching in various aspects): the skins of those who fear their Lord tremble thereat; then their skins and their hearts do soften to the celebration of Allah's praises. Such is the guidance of Allah: He guides therewith whom He pleases, but such as Allah leaves to stray, can have none to guide.

57 Do they not consider the Qur'ān (with care)? Had it been from other than Allah, they would surely have found therein much discrepancy.

58 Al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, vol. 7-8, 145.

Contemporary Exegetes' Opinions

While commenting on the passage (Qur'ān, *Āl'Imrān*: 7), twentieth century Austrian Jewish convert-cum-Qur'ānic exegete, Muhammad Asad (d. 1992 A.D), remarks that the field of study of *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* passages may well be regarded as a key to understanding the Qur'ān. He refers to al-Ṭabarī who identifies the *āyāt muḥkamāt* (messages that are clear in and by themselves) with what the philologists and jurists describe as *naṣṣ*- namely, ordinances or statements which are self-evident (*ẓāhir*) by virtue of their wording. Consequently, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310 H) regards as *āyāt muḥkamāt* only those statements or ordinances of the Qur'ān which do not admit more than one interpretation (which does not, of course, preclude differences of opinion regarding the implications of a particular *āyah muḥkamah*).⁵⁹

However, in Asad's opinion, "it would be too dogmatic to regard any passage of the Qur'ān which does not conform to the above definition as *mutashābih* (allegorical), for there are many statements in the Qur'ān which are liable to more than one interpretation but are, nevertheless, not allegorical formulation, [that] reveal to the searching intellect only one possible meaning."⁶⁰ For this reason, Asad deliberates that "the *āyāt mutashābihāt* may be defined as those passages of the Qur'ān which are expressed in a figurative manner, with a meaning that is metaphorically implied but not directly, in so many words. The *āyāt muḥkamāt* are described as the "essence of the divine writ" (*umm al-kitāb*) because they comprise the fundamental principles underlying its message and, in particular, its ethical and social teachings, and it is only on the basis of these clearly enunciated principles that the allegorical passages can be correctly interpreted."⁶¹

Another twentieth century subcontinent translator of the Qur'ān, 'Abd Allah Yūsuf 'Ali (d. 1953 A.D), perceives that "this passage (Qur'ān, *Āl 'Imrān*: 7) provides an important clue to the

59 Mohamed Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān* (Great Britain: Redwood Burn Limited, 1984), 66.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

interpretation of the Qur'ān. According to him, it refers to [1] the nucleus or foundation of the Book, literally “the mother of the Book”, [2] the part which is not of well established meaning; it is very fascinating to take up the latter and exercise our ingenuity about its esoteric meaning, but it refers to such profound spiritual matters that human language is inadequate to express it, and though people of wisdom may get some insight, no one should be opinionated, as the final meaning is known to Allah alone.”⁶²

According to ‘Abd Allāh Yūsuf ‘Alī, “the commentators usually understand the passages of *muḥkam* to refer to the categorical orders of the *Sharī‘ah*, which are plain to everyone’s understanding. The meaning is wider: the “mother of the Book” must include the very foundation on which all laws rest on the essence of Allah’s Message, as distinguished from the various illustrative parables, allegorical descriptions, and ordinances.”⁶³

According to Pakistani twentieth century exegete, Mawdūdī (d. 1979 A.D), “the *muḥkam* is that which is precise, exact, clear and decisive, and as such the *muḥkamāt* refer to those passages of the Qur’ān which have been so couched as to make their meaning quite plain without any shade of ambiguity.”⁶⁴ They have been purposely so worded as to make their meaning definite and precise leaving little room for misinterpretation. These passages constitute the fundamental principles of the Book. They invite the world to Islam, teach morals and give warnings; they refute wrong beliefs and practices and lay down the way of right living; they expound the fundamentals of religion and state beliefs and practices, morals and duties, commandments and prohibitions.”⁶⁵

In Mawdūdī’s opinion, the *mutashābihāt* refer to those passages in which there is a possibility of more than one meaning. According to him, “their objective is to give a certain minimum

62 ‘Abd Allah Yūsuf ‘Alī, *The Holy Qur’ān: Text, Translation and Commentary*, (Maryland, U.S.A: Amana Corporation, New Revised edn., 1989), 127.

63 Yūsuf ‘Alī, *The Holy Qur’ān*, 127.

64 Abu’l A’lā al-Mawdūdī, *The Meaning of the Qur’ān* (Lahore: Islamic Publications Ltd, 4th edn., 1983), vol. 2, 14

65 Ibid.

knowledge about the universe, its beginning and end, the position of man therein and such other basic things, for these things are essential for the formulation of any system of life.”⁶⁶ Mawdūdī further asserts “that no human language contains words, expressions, and idioms to depict clearly those supernatural elements or issues, which have not yet been understood or grasped by human senses, nor seen nor heard nor smelt nor touched nor tasted by human beings.”⁶⁷ That is why such supernatural elements have to be described in terms of human life. That is why, Mawdūdī believes, the Qur’ān uses ambiguous passages in human language which are liable to give rise to more than one meaning.

Elaborating further, Mawdūdī emphasizes that “the key benefit of such *mutashābihāt* passages is that they help a person approach the Reality and formulate a conception of it. Hence, the more a person attempts to determine their precise meanings, the more he gets involved in doubts and ambiguities. But, it is impossible for him to discover the Reality; rather the exercise will lead him to deviate from it and eventually cause mischief. Therefore whoever searches the Truth and does not hanker after superfluities is contented with the simple idea of Reality he gets from the *mutashābihāt* passages, which is enough for him to understand the Qur’ān. And whosoever is obsessed with superfluities he wastes his energy in producing arbitrary interpretations to the *mutashābihāt* passages.”⁶⁸

Wisdom behind the *Mutashābihāt* Passages

As described above, the Qur’ān constitutes a good number of *mutashābihāt* passages. Muslim scholars and exegetes declare that there is some wisdom behind it; Allah alone knows its purposes including its mysteries. However, according to them, it is possible to envision some wisdom. First, the *mutashābihāt* components motivate the ‘*ulamā*’ to exert every conceivable effort to discover the truth and explore the esoteric dimensions of God’s message.⁶⁹ Second,

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Riḍā, *Fī ‘Ulūm*, 208-209.

Allah revealed the *mutashābihāt* passages in order to test the hearts of His servants and through their belief in it to establish the firm and deep-rooted *īmān* (faith; belief) in their hearts so that they devote themselves for the cause of God and completely surrender to His will, follow His commandments and forbid what is unlawful.⁷⁰

Those who do not understand the purpose and message of Islam and its origin hurl several allegations while referring to this issue. Observing this phenomenon in the Qur'ān, they assume that there are a number of conflicting statements. Thus, such people attributed the Revelation to the Prophet and sometimes to poets, magicians and sorcerers, but the Qur'ān posed severe challenges to them in all circumstances refuting their claims and conjectures. Hence, they resorted to casting doubt on the perfection of the Qur'ān, its inimitability and its legal injunctions as examples of perfect organization. As it has been asserted a number of times through historical and scientific evidences, the Qur'ān is infallible from controversy, discrepancy and contradiction; there is no inadequacy, conflict, inconsistency, incompatibility, deficiency, fuzziness and prolixity in it, which Allah testifies in a passage. (Qur'ān, *al-Nisā*: 82)⁷¹

Articulating this issue, al-Zarkashī in his *al-Burhān* insists that the wisdom behind God's inclusion of the *mutashābihāt* passages in the Qur'ān was to make Muslims not only confined to the *muḥkamāt*, rather through the understanding of the *mutashābihāt*, they should make concerted efforts to acquire the knowledge of arts and human sciences and explore profoundly the realities and the objectives of the message of the Qur'ān.⁷²

Nevertheless, some of the opponents, adversaries and even slanderers of various backgrounds read and study the Qur'ān through

70 Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, vol. 3, 170.

71 Do they not consider the Qur'ān (with care)? Had it been from other than Allah, they would surely have found therein much discrepancy.

72 Anwar 'Alī, *Qur'ān the Fundamental Law*, vol. 1, 91. It is taken by him from *al-Burhān* authored by al-Zarkashī, vol. 2, 75. He also quotes it on the authority of Ṣāliḥ's, *Mabāḥith fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 409-410.

preconceived ideas and notions and mislead people to disregard the divine origin of the text of the Qur'ān by presenting distorted information, especially on the issue in discussion. Owing to their absolute ignorance of the meaning of the Arabic terms, idioms, phrases and styles of intellectual expressions, they pass judgments as though there are discrepancies and contradictions in it. However, any sensible person free from malice, rancor and aversion would be in a position to observe that these passages are in harmony with one another.⁷³

The *Mutashābihāt* Passages in the Qur'ān

Muslim scholars feel that some confusion could arise concerning the issue of the *mutashābihāt* in the Qur'ān if it is left as it is without further clarifying the issue. According to them, it may even mislead and cause great confusion and generate intellectual dissension leading to dispute amidst the scholars and people. Therefore, it is appropriate to identify the passages that refer to this issue to dispel the misunderstandings and ambiguities that may arise as a result of different interpretations. From the classical exegetes' viewpoints of exegesis, it can be inferred that elements or passages of the *mutashābihāt* in the Qur'ān are [1] abbreviated letters,⁷⁴ [2] Allah's attributes,⁷⁵ [3] invisible creatures,⁷⁶ [4] metaphysical dimensions,⁷⁷ [5] eschatological issues⁷⁸ and [6] miracles.

Abbreviated Letters

The Qur'ān employs abbreviated letters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqatta'āt*) in twenty-nine chapters. It has been affirmed that the abbreviated letters prefixed to a number of chapters were in common use predominantly in Arabic literature during the period when the Qur'ān was revealed.

73 Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol.1, 2-4.

74 Al-Zarqānī, *Manāhil*, vol. 2, 272.

75 Al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, vol. 7-8, 144-154.

76 Al-Zarqānī, *Manāhil*, vol. 2, 272.

77 Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 2, 2.

78 Al-Zarqānī, *Manāhil*, vol. 2, 272.

Poets and rhetoricians adopted this style and instances of this can even be found in pre-Islamic poetry. No one objected to or questioned their use, because it was no enigma to them. Even the bitterest opponents and adversaries who never missed an opportunity to criticize the Qur'ān found nothing objectionable in the use of the abbreviated letters. However, as their use was abandoned with the passage of time, it became difficult for the exegetes to determine their exact meaning and significance. An ordinary reader, however, need not worry about their meanings because they make no difference as far as the guidance is concerned.⁷⁹

It seems that there is no precise meaning to these letters and thus the message conveyed by them is uncertain. Muslim scholars and exegetes offer a variety of explanations.⁸⁰ According to them, these letters may refer to:

- [a] the names of God,
- [b] the abbreviations or symbols of something else,
- [c] the names of the chapters of the Qur'ān,⁸¹
- [d] the initials of the Companions who wrote the chapters,
- [e] the abbreviation for certain sentences and words,
- [f] the parts of the names of God,
- [g] the abbreviation for certain numerical significance,
- [h] the Semitic letters, which contain numerical value,
- [i] the names of the Qur'ān,
- [j] the part of the Qur'ānic message relevant to the Prophet,
- [k] the secrets between God and the Prophet which have not been disclosed to anybody,
- [l] the category of the *mutashābihāt* whose meaning is known to God alone,
- [m] the abbreviations or code words common to other languages of the world, and
- [n] the abbreviations of lengthy passages that were common to Arabs.

79 Mawdūdī, *The Meaning*, vol. 1, 53.

80 Ibid.

81 Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1996), vol. 1, 37.

It is appropriate to record the wisdom behind God's prerogative of having the knowledge of the *mutashābihāt* in the Qur'ān. It is impossible even for knowledgeable people to delve into the exact meaning of the *mutashābihāt*. Perhaps, Allah wishes to test the intellect of human beings just as He tests their intellect's endurance. Allah tests man's endurance through such obligatory acts as *ṭawāf* (circumambulation of the *ka'bah* as part of the pilgrimage ceremonies), *sa'ī* (the ceremony of running seven times between Ṣafā and Marwah performed during the pilgrimage), *wuqūf* (halting) at 'Arafah and Muzdalifah, throwing stones on al-Shayṭān (Satan) in Minā and so on. Similarly, the conditions of *ṭahārah* (purification) for *ṣalāh* are also a trial. Hence, human beings are required to follow the orders of practicing '*ibādah* willingly and submissively.⁸²

Likewise, the intellect is also put to test in order to understand the *mutashābihāt* in the Qur'ān as the truth without any skepticism. The human beings do not have the ability to accomplish the meanings of this dimension on their own, for its knowledge belongs to Allah alone. They should know that in the presence of the Lord, they are incapable and feeble and are given very little amount of knowledge, a fact we can derive from the message of one of the passages of the Qur'ān, though not directly. They should further know that they are always in need of Him.⁸³

Allah's Attributes

On the issue of the attributes (*ṣifāt*) of Allah, it is not possible to reach true understanding (of the power of Allah) for it is beyond man's intellectual ability and comprehension. It is remarked that the attributes mentioned in the Qur'ān are not *mutashābihāt* but, according to some scholars, only the language used to delineate them fall under this category due to the lack of clarity of meaning.⁸⁴ It has been indicated that the literal meaning of the attributes may not be relevant for they lead to enormous misunderstanding. For

82 Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, vol.1, 37.

83 Ibid.

84 Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, vol. 3, 194.

instance, the Qur'ān uses the term '*arsh* {Throne (of authority)}' in passages (Qur'ān, *al-A'raf*: 54),⁸⁵ (Qur'ān, *Yūnus*: 3),⁸⁶ (Qur'ān, *al-Ra'd*: 2),⁸⁷ (Qur'ān, *ṬāHā*: 5),⁸⁸ (Qur'ān, *al-Furqān*: 59),⁸⁹ (Qur'ān, *al-Sajdah*: 4),⁹⁰ and (Qur'ān, *al-Ḥadīd*: 4).⁹¹ It seems difficult to arrive at the most appropriate, accurate and precise meaning for this word. Likewise, the Qur'ān uses God's hand in passages *Āl Imrān*: 26⁹² and

85 Your Guardian-Lord is Allah, Who created the heavens and the earth in six Days, and is firmly established on the Throne (of authority): He draweth the night as a veil o'er the day, each seeking the other in rapid succession: He created the sun, the moon, and the stars, (all) governed by laws under His command. Is it not His to create and to govern? Blessed be Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds!

86 Verily your Lord is Allah, Who created the heavens and the earth in six Days, and is firmly established on the Throne (of authority), regulating and governing all things. No intercessor (can plead with Him) except after His leave (hath been obtained). This is Allah your Lord; Him therefore serve ye: will ye not celebrate His praises?

87 Allah is He Who raised the heavens without any pillars that ye can see; is firmly established on the Throne (of Authority); He has subjected the sun and the moon (to His law)! Each one runs (its course) for a term appointed. He doth regulate affairs, explaining the Signs in detail that ye may believe with certainty in the meeting with your Lord.

88 (Allah) Most Gracious is firmly established on the Throne (of authority).

89 He Who created the heavens and the earth and all that is between, in six days, and is firmly established on the Throne (of authority): Allah, Most Gracious: ask thou, then, about Him of any acquainted (with such things).

90 It is Allah Who has created the heavens and the earth, and all between them, in six Days, and is firmly established on the Throne (of authority): ye have none, besides Him, to protect or intercede (for you): will ye not then receive admonition?

91 He it is Who created the heavens and the earth in six Days, and is moreover firmly established on the Throne (of authority). He knows what enters within the earth and what comes forth out of it, what comes down from heaven and what mounts up to it. And He is with you wheresoever ye may be. And Allah sees well all that ye do.

92 Say: O Allah! Lord of Power (and Rule), thou givest Power to whom Thou pleasest, and Thou strippest off power from whom Thou pleasest, thou enduest with honor whom thou pleasest, and thou bringest low whom Thou pleasest; in Thy hand is all Good. Verily, over all things thou hast power.

73,⁹³ *al-Mā'idah*: 64,⁹⁴ *al-Fath*: 10,⁹⁵ *al-Ḥadīd*: 29,⁹⁶ *Yā Sīn*: 83,⁹⁷ *Ṣād*: 75,⁹⁸ and *al-Mulk*: 1.⁹⁹ Another example is the use of God's eyes in passages *Hūd*: 37,¹⁰⁰ *al-Mu'minūn*: 27,¹⁰¹ *al-Ṭūr*: 48,¹⁰² and

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- 93 And believe no one unless he follows your religion. Say: True guidance is the guidance of Allah; (fear ye) lest a revelation be sent to someone (else) like unto that which was sent unto you. Or that those (receiving such revelation) should engage you in argument before your Lord. Say: All bounties are in the hand of Allah: He granteth them to whom He pleaseth; and Allah careth for all, and He knoweth all things.
- 94 The Jews say: Allah's hand is tied up. Be their hands tied up and be they accursed for the (blasphemy) they utter. Nay, both His hands are widely outstretched: He giveth and spendeth (of His bounty) as He pleaseth. But the revelation that cometh to thee from Allah increaseth in most of them their obstinate rebellion and blasphemy. Amongst them We have placed enmity and hatred till the Day of Judgment.
Every time they kindle the fire of war, Allah doth extinguish it; but they (ever) strive to do mischief on earth. And Allah loveth not those who do mischief.
- 95 Verily those who plight their fealty to thee do no less than plight their fealty to Allah: the Hand of Allah is over their hands: Then anyone who violates His oath, does so to the harm of his own soul, and anyone who fulfills what he has covenanted with Allah, Allah will soon grant him a great Reward.
- 96 That the People of the Book may know that they have no power whatever over the Grace of Allah that (His) Grace is (entirely) in His Hand, to bestow it on whomsoever He wills. For Allah is the Lord of Grace abounding.
- 97 So glory to Him in Whose hands is the dominion of all things; and to Him will ye be all brought back.
- 98 (Allah) said: O Iblis! What prevents thee from prostrating thyself to one whom I have created with My hands? Art thou haughty? Or art thou one of the high (and mighty) ones?
- 99 Blessed be He in Whose hands is Dominion: and He over all things hath Power.
- 100 But construct an Ark under Our eyes and Our inspiration, and address Me no (further) on behalf of those who are in sin: for they are about to be overwhelmed (in the Flood).
- 101 So We inspired him (with this message): Construct the Ark within Our sight and under Our guidance: then when comes Our command, and the fountains of the earth gush forth, take thou on board pairs of every species, male and female, and thy family except those of them against whom the Word has already gone forth: and address Me not in favor of the wrongdoers; for they shall be drowned (in the Flood).
- 102 Now await in patience the command of thy Lord: for verily thou art in Our eyes: and celebrate the praises of thy Lord the while thou standest forth.

al-Qamar: 14.¹⁰³

In this category of the *mutashābihāt*, as an example, we take the word *istawā*’ which appears in *sūrah ṬāHā*: 5 for discussion. A famous linguist Abū Bakr ibn al-‘Arabī (al-Mālikī) reports “that the word *istawā*’ contains fifteen meanings in the Arabic language. Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī explains the term *al-istawā*’, as *al-istilā*’, which means subjugating. When *al-istilā*’ is used to explain this passage, it implies that Allah has subjugated the ‘*arsh*’ with a subjugation that is without a beginning, like all the attributes of Allah. If the passage is explained in this form, it means that Allah has been attributed with subjugating the ‘*arsh*’ before it was created in the same way that Allah was attributed with being the Creator before He created the world of creations. In this context, the scholars use the term *al-azal*, which means the status of existing without a beginning. Thus, it can be said that Allah subjugated the ‘*arsh*’ without a beginning. Yet, the *mutashābihāt* insist on taking the literal meaning, whereby to say *istawā*’ means that Allah sits on the throne and firmly establishes Himself on it.”¹⁰⁴

In his *al-Mu‘taqad*, al-Bayhaqī narrates, with a chain (*sanad*) traceable back to al-‘Awza‘ī, Imām Mālik, Sufyān al-Thawrī, and al-Layth ibn Sa‘d that “when they were asked about the passages (*āyāts*) and the prophetic traditions (*aḥādīth*) which belonged to the category of the *mutashābihāt*, they replied to unconditionally accepting them as they were revealed without asking the question ‘how’ about them. This was because if anyone asked the question ‘how?’ the answer would be, ‘like this or that.’ Everything in the universe other than Allah is a creation. Thus, to interpret ‘like this or that’ would imply ‘like this or that created thing’ and Allah is not created, nor begotten. Anything a person can imagine, Allah is different from it. When it was said: “...without asking a question ‘how’ to them,” they implied that Allah was clear of being attributed with sitting, resting, moving, limbs, bodies, and parts. They did not mean that His *istawā*’ of the Throne (‘*arsh*’) has a ‘how’ of which we

103 She floats under Our eyes (and care): a recompense to one who had been rejected (with scorn)!

104 www.scribd.com/doc/16794301/Ayat-of-the-Quran-Muhkam-and-Mutashabih

are ignorant. On the contrary, the scholars completely negated that a 'how' could be applied to Allah. So the statement of those who say "Allah sits on the Throne, but we do not know how," is rejected on the basis of what these scholars have stated. Anyone with a sound mind knows that sitting, no matter how it is, is an attribute of human bodies. Occupying places necessitates a 'how' and applies to human bodies. Furthermore, color and touching are attributes of bodies and 'how' applies to them. Therefore, it is improper or irrational to apply all these human actions to Allah. For, He is not a human nor has a human body."¹⁰⁵

In this context, Imām al-Ḥaramayn (d.478 H) and other scholars recommend that the word *istawā* 'alā *al-ʿarsh* which refers to the personality of Allah should be understood through the medium of *taʿwīl*.¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, when Imām Mālik was asked with regard to the above word, he replied that 'we know *istawā*' but we do not know its reality and to discuss this further will lead to innovation (*bidʿah*).¹⁰⁷

Invisible Creatures

The Qur'ān refers to invisible creatures in a number of passages. As stated above, the passages dealing with such creatures are regarded as an integral part of the issue of the *mutashābihāt*. The two invisible creatures that the Qur'ān refers to are [1] *malā'ikah* (angels) and [2] *Jinns* (unseen beings). The Qur'ān briefly speaks about angels without much elaboration except that they serve God in His dominion and administration eighty-eight times. They carry out the commandments of God. By nature, they do not disobey. They, like human beings worship and serve God.¹⁰⁸ The Qur'ān also draws attention of man to *jinns* forty four times. They are created out of fire.¹⁰⁹ They are responsible and accountable for their deeds. Iblīs,

105 Ibid.

106 Ibid.

107 Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 2, 8.

108 I have only created jinns and men, that they may serve Me. (Qur'ān, *al-Dhāriyāt*: 56)

109 And He created Jinns from fire free of smoke. (Qur'ān, *al-Raḥmān*: 15)

the greatest enemy of man who influenced Ādam, the very first man was a *jinn*.¹¹⁰ Apart from these brief descriptions, the Qur'ān does not contain any other detail about them.

Metaphysical Dimensions

The Qur'ān also refers to the metaphysical world or the world of the unseen (*al-‘ālam al-ghaybiyyāt*). It is not possible for human beings to comprehend the reality and nature of the metaphysical world that the Qur'ān refers to, though some interpretations are available based on conjectures. Even the most advanced and highly sophisticated scientific experimentations and observations cannot help understand these metaphysical phenomena. In this regard, the Qur'ān draws human being's attention to celestial things such as *al-samā'* (sky), *al-dukhān* (smoke) and *shihāb* (a flaming fire). The term *al-samā'* is mentioned one hundred and twenty times in the singular form and one hundred and ninety times in the plural form. Since these statements seem to be vague, they require further explanation. However, Muslim scholars argue that it is not easy to understand what they exactly refer to. The term *al-dukhān* is mentioned twice in passages (Qur'ān, *Fuṣṣilat*: 11¹¹¹ and *al-Dukhān*: 10).¹¹² The term *shihāb* (a flaming fire) is mentioned four times in the Qur'ān. In passages, *al-Hijr*: 18, *shihābun mubīn* (a flame clear to see),¹¹³ *al-Ṣāffāt*: 10, *shihābun thāqibun* (piercing flame),¹¹⁴ *al-Jinn*: 8, *shuhban* (flaming

110 Behold! We said to the angels, "Bow down to Adam": they bowed down except Iblis. He was one of the Jinns, and he broke the Command of his Lord. Will ye then take him and his progeny as protectors rather than Me? And they are enemies to you! Evil would be the exchange for the wrongdoers! (Qur'ān, *al-Kahf*: 50)

111 Moreover He Comprehended in His design the sky, and it had been (as) smoke: He said to it and to the earth: "Come ye together, willingly or unwillingly. They said: "We do come (together), in willing obedience."

112 Then watch thou for the Day that the sky will bring forth a kind of smoke (or mist) plainly visible.

113 But any that gains a hearing by stealth, is pursued by a flaming fire, bright (to see).

114 Except such as snatch away something by stealth, and they are pursued by a flaming fire, of piercing brightness.

fires),¹¹⁵ and *al-Jinn*: 9, *shihāban raṣadan* (a flame lying in wait for him)¹¹⁶ are mentioned. The exact import of the term is unclear.

Eschatological Issues

The Qur'ān refers to a number of eschatological issues. Among them, the life after death is paramount and it draws the concern of many scholars in terms of its real meaning. Some of the significant terms found in the text of the Qur'ān are *barzakh*, *jannah*, *jahannam* and *ākhirah*. The term *barzakh* (partition) appears once in a passage (Qur'ān, *al-Mu'minūn*: 100).¹¹⁷ It explains that there is a barrier or partition (*barzakh*) between this physical and the other spiritual worlds. However, it is difficult to discern the true nature of the world of the barrier as there are no details in the Text.

Then, the Qur'ān contains the term *jannah* (paradise or heaven) which is used one hundred and forty times. It literally means Garden. Even though *jannah* is described as the place of pleasure, happiness and comfort for those who will be rewarded with this after death, it is still somewhat difficult to comprehend other dimensions including its nature, structure and form. The term *al-ākhirah* (Last day or Doomsday) is used one hundred and fifteen times. It refers to another world which is different from this physical world. Again, it seems quite difficult to understand its nature. The term *jahannam* (hell-fire) appears seventy seven times. It is the place for evil doers of this world. Even though all these terms convey a certain meaning and understanding, yet they are considered ambiguous as far as the exact meaning is concerned.

Miracles

The Qur'ān refers to a number of miracles. The prophets and messengers of God performed such miracles to strengthen the Divine

115 And we pried into the secrets of heaven; but we found it filled with stern guards and flaming fires.

116 We used, indeed, to sit there in (hidden) stations, to (steal) a hearing; but any who listens now will find a flaming fire watching him in ambush.

117 In order that I may work righteousness in the things I neglected. By no means! It is but a Lord he says, before them is a Partition till the Day they are raised up.

claim that God is All-Powerful and their respective institution of prophethood as the divinely ordained one. For instance, the Qur'ān mentions miracles performed by prophets with the help of God such as the emergence of She-camel in passages (Qur'ān, *al-A'rāf*: 73¹¹⁸ and 77,¹¹⁹ *Hūd*: 64,¹²⁰ *Banī Isrā'īl*: 59,¹²¹ *al-Shu'arā'*: 155 and others).¹²² The Qur'ān also mentions the fire that could not burn prophet Ibrāhīm (peace be upon him) in a passage in *al-Anbiyā'*: 69,¹²³ conversion of the stick of prophet Mūsā (peace be upon him) into a snake in a passage in *ṬāHā*: 20,¹²⁴ the white and shining hand of prophet Mūsā (peace be upon him) in a passage in *ṬāHā*: 22,¹²⁵ and the miraculous birth of prophet 'Īsā (peace be upon him) without any biological father in a passage in *Āl 'Imrān*: 45-47.¹²⁶

118 To the Thamud people (We sent) Salih, one of their own brethren: he said: "O my people! Worship Allah; ye have no other god but Him. Now hath come unto you a clear (sign) from your Lord! This she-camel of Allah is a sign unto you: so leave her to graze in Allah's earth, and let her come to no harm, or ye shall be seized with a grievous punishment.

119 Then they ham-strung the she-camel, and insolently defied the order of their Lord, saying: "O Ṣāliḥ! Bring about thy threats, if thou art a messenger (of Allah)!

120 And O my people! This she-camel of Allah is a symbol to you: leave her to feed on Allah's (free) earth, and inflict no harm on her, or a swift Penalty will seize you!

121 And We refrain from sending the Signs, only because the men of former generations treated them as false: We sent the She-camel: to the Thamūd to open their eyes, but they treated her wrongfully: We only send the Signs by way of terror (and warning from evil).

122 He said: Here is a she-camel: she has a right of watering, and ye have a right of watering, (severally) on a day appointed.

123 We said, "O Fire! be thou cool, and (a means of) safety for Abraham!

124 He threw it, and behold! It was a snake, active in motion.

125 Now draw thy hand close to thy side: it shall come forth white (and shining), without harm (or stain) as another Sign.

126 Behold! The angels said "O Mary! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a Word from Him: his name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, held in honor in this world and the Hereafter and of (the company of) those nearest to Allah." "He shall speak to the people in childhood and in maturity, and he shall be (of the company) of the righteous." She said: "O my Lord! How shall I have a son when no man hath touched me?" He said: "Even so: Allah createth what He willeth; when He hath decreed a Plan, He but saith to it 'Be', and it is!

In the series of information about miracles performed by prophets and messengers, elevation of prophet 'Īsā (peace be upon him) to Heaven alive referred to in passages *al-Nisā*: 157-158¹²⁷ and prophet Muḥammad's (peace be upon him) experience of the night journey (*isrā'* and *mi'rāj*) are among the miraculous events. According to the Qur'ān, they occurred and Muslims believe in their occurrence indisputably. Nonetheless, a number of human beings were unable to perceive the mysteries behind them. Eventually, they (unbelievers) rejected them. This is mentioned in a passage in the Qur'ān (*Banī Isrā'il*: 1).¹²⁸

Conclusion

The above discourse leads us to infer and state unequivocally that the concept of *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt* passages exists in the Qur'ān. Muslim scholars have defined them and advanced interpretations based on a number of examples from the Text and other historical sources of exegetical history. Having gone through the complications of the issue under discussion, a reader may raise a question as to how one can believe in the truth of the *mutashābihāt* passages as explained above. The probable answer is that a proper and comprehensive study of the innumerable *muḥkamāt* passages will convince a sensible person in his belief that the Qur'ān contains the Words of Allah and nothing else, in addition to other relevant logical arguments in support of the theory of the authenticity of the Text, both historically and scientifically. Upon conviction and dynamic faith in the concept of revelation and its origin that it has

127 That they said (in boast), "We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah;" but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow for of a surety they killed him not. Nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is exalted in Power, wise.

128 Glory to (Allah) Who did take His Servant for Journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts We did Bless in order that We might show him some of Our Signs: for He is the One Who heareth and seeth (all things).

come down from the Creator, it can be asserted that the concept of *mutashābihāt* passages will not create any suspicion in his mind and he will accept simple meanings which are within his ability and comprehension. Hence, it may be concluded that the understanding of the ambiguous passages may not arise if the views of scholars and exegetes of different periods are taken into account sincerely with a positive, unbiased, constructive and neutral mind, which is in line with the Islamic approach to knowledge.