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Muḥkam and Mutashābih: An Analytical Study of al-Ṭabarī's and al-Zamakhsharī's Interpretations of Q.3:7 / هب اشتم او مك ح م ل ا / ةي آل ل يرش خمزل او يرب ط ل ا يري س فت ل ةي ل ي ل ح ت ة س ا ر د : ن ا ر م ع ل آ ة ر و س ن م ة ع ب ا س ل ا

Author(s): Sahiron Syamsuddin and ن ي د ل ا س م ش ن ر ه ا س

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Muḥkam and *Mutashābih*: An Analytical Study of al-Ṭabarī's and al-Zamakhsharī's Interpretations of Q.3:7

Sahiron Syamsuddin

MCGILL UNIVERSITY AND IAIN SUNAN KALIJAGA

He it is Who hath revealed unto thee (Muḥammad) the Scripture wherein are clear revelations [*muḥkamāt*] – They are the substance of the Book [*umm al-kitāb*] – and others (which are) allegorical [*mutashābihāt*]. But, those in whose hearts is doubt pursue, forsooth, that which is allegorical seeking (to cause) dissension by seeking to explain it. None knoweth its explanation save Allah. And those who are of sound instruction say: We believe therein; the whole is from our Lord; but only men of understanding really heed. (Q.3:7)¹

Introduction

Verse 3:7 of the Qur'an is one of the most debated passages in *tafsīr* literature both in terms of the meaning of certain words and the grammatical questions that it raises.² In the case of the meaning of the words *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt*, for example, al-Ṭabarī records at least five different opinions³ in his *Jāmi' al-bayān*.⁴ The five opinions are as follows. First, on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās (d.87/688) and Muqātil (d.150/767), the *muḥkamāt* are defined as the abrogating verses (*al-nāsikhāt*) – an opinion later adopted by al-Farrā' (d.207/822) in his *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*⁵ – whereas the *mutashābihāt* are the abrogated verses.⁶ Second, on the authority of Mujāhid ibn Jabr (d.104/722), those verses containing pronouncements on *ḥalāl wa-ḥarām* (lawful and forbidden things) are called the *muḥkamāt*, while all others may be regarded as *mutashābihāt*, in that they resemble one another.⁷ Third, according to Muḥammad ibn Ja'far ibn Zubayr, the *muḥkamāt* are the verses which have only one interpretation, whereas the *mutashābihāt* are those that can be interpreted in many ways⁸ – a view taken up by Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī (d.303/915).⁹ Fourth, Ibn Zayd is reported to have said that the *muḥkamāt* are the verses and the stories of the previous prophets, in which God affirms His message and gives information in detail. The *mutashābihāt*, according to Ibn Zayd, are those containing stories repeated in various *sūras*, but in an obscure manner; the same story may be reported several times differently worded but having the same meaning, or with the same words but dissimilar meanings.¹⁰ The fifth and the last opinion cited by al-Ṭabarī is given on the authority of Jābir ibn 'Abd Allāh, who claimed that the *muḥkamāt* are those verses whose meanings can be understood

by *‘ulamā’* (scholars), whereas the *mutashābihāt* are known only by God, as is the case with the meaning of the *ḥurūf al-muqatta‘a* (mysterious letters) and the date of the Day of Judgement.¹¹

The grammatical problems to be found in Q.3:7, such as the singularity of the expression *umm al-kitāb* and the conjunction in the words *wa-mā ya‘lamu ta’wīlahū illā Allāhu wa’l-rāsikhūna fī’l-‘ilmi yaqūlūna āmannā bihi*, also constitute matters for dispute among Qur’an commentators.

These points were critical to discussions concerning the extent to which Q.3:7 provided justification for the practice of interpreting the Qur’an, a controversial topic in itself in the early history of Qur’anic hermeneutics. On the one hand, the verse is regarded by many as validating the exegetical tradition in Islam.¹² The Mu‘tazilite scholars, as Abū Zayd says in his *al-Ittijāh al-‘aqlī fī’l-tafsīr*, even regarded it as the foundation for practising *ta’wīl* (rational interpretation) of the *mutashābihāt* (ambiguous verses).¹³ Al-Zamakhsharī (d.538/1144), in his introduction to *al-Kashshāf*, reminds the reader of the content of the verse, saying: ‘... and He [God] revealed the Qur’an [to the Prophet] in two parts: *muḥkam* and *mutashābih*.’¹⁴ On the other hand, many Sunnī orthodox scholars differ in their view of the verse. ‘Umar’s punishment of Ṣabīgh ibn ‘Isl for interpreting certain *mutashābih* verses indicates, according to Abbott, his disapproval in principle of the practice of interpreting such verses.¹⁵ Such actions and the emergence of orthodox opposition to *tafsīr bi’l-ra’y* (interpretation based on personal opinion) during the second century AH, as Birkeland notes in his *Old Muslim Opposition*,¹⁶ indicate that the verse was not understood as a religious justification for hermeneutical exercise (*ta’wīl*). Al-Ṭabarī’s tripartite division of the Qur’anic materials, based on Q.3:7 and two other verses,¹⁷ into verses that can be interpreted only by the Prophet, those known only by God and those that can be interpreted only by experts in the Arabic language,¹⁸ suggests that the possibility of reaching a partial understanding of the Qur’an, either through the Prophet’s explanation or through linguistic expertise, was recognized. Equally, it serves to uphold the notion of the impossibility of comprehending some Qur’anic passages. The question that we must ask ourselves is why the controversy over the above points has lasted since the early history of the interpretation of the Qur’an.

In doing so, we will focus on the interpretations of the verse, particularly those of al-Ṭabarī (d.310/923),¹⁹ representative of orthodox exegesis, whose interpretation is classified as *tafsīr bi’l-ma’thūr* (interpretation on the basis of traditions),²⁰ and al-Zamakhsharī (d.467/1075),²¹ a Mu‘tazilite exegete, whose interpretation is based on *ra’y* (reason).²² The purpose of this paper is to analyse their explanations of some of the more controversial aspects of the above verse. This is not to say that Western scholars have neglected this task, for there are, at least, three works, written by Goldziher, McAuliffe and Kinberg, studying Qur’an commentators’ understanding of

the verse. Goldziher in his *Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* discusses al-Zamakhsharī's commentary on the verse in an attempt to discover his exegetical method.²³ McAuliffe, in her 'Quranic Hermeneutics', compares al-Ṭabarī's understanding of the verse with that of Ibn Kathīr.²⁴ Kinberg, in his work entitled '*Muḥkamāt and Mutashābihāt* (Koran 3/7): Implication of a Koranic Pair of Terms in Medieval Exegesis', focuses his study on the debate among Mu'tazilite, Shī'ī, Sunni and Sufī commentators concerning the problems surrounding the term *mutashābihāt*.²⁵ However, none of them traces analytically the arguments which lead Qur'an commentators to their conclusions on this subject. In this paper I will examine how al-Ṭabarī and al-Zamakhsharī build their arguments in support of their positions on these matters, and what other classical exegetes thought of al-Ṭabarī's and al-Zamakhsharī's interpretations.

The Meanings of the Words *Muḥkamāt*, *Mutashābihāt* and *Umm al-Kitāb*

I: *Muḥkamāt*

Dealing with the beginning of the verse: 'It is He who sent down to you *al-kitāb* [the Book; the Qur'an] in which are *muḥkamāt* [clear verses] that are *umm al-kitāb* [the essence of the Book] and others that are *mutashābihāt* [unclear verses]', al-Ṭabarī in his *Jāmi' al-bayān*²⁶ interprets the word *muḥkamāt* as signifying the Qur'anic verses which are consolidated by explanation (*bayān*) and particularization (*tafṣīl*) and which give strong arguments and evidence for the position that they take. These often relate to questions of what is lawful and forbidden (*ḥalāl wa-ḥarām*), promise and threat (*wa'd wa-wa'd*), reward and punishment (*thawāb wa-'iqāb*), command and rebuke (*amr wa-zajr*), informational statement and simile (*ḵhabar wa-mathal*) and exhortation and admonition (*'iẓa wa-'ibar*).²⁷ There are two points in particular that can be inferred from his definition of *muḥkamāt*. First, the *muḥkamāt* consist of halakhic, haggadic, masoretic and rhetorical Qur'anic passages. The other is that the criteria by which the verses are identified as *muḥkamāt* lie not only in their clarity of expression, but also in the availability of detailed arguments and information from other sources about the subjects treated in the Qur'an. In another passage he says:

Called *muḥkam* is a verse which has one meaning, so that it does not allow for more than one interpretation. It is in no need of explanation from the explainers (*mubīn*) [God and the Prophet]. Included among the *muḥkam* is also a verse which allows several meanings and permits many ways of interpretation. But, the indication of the intended meaning (*al-ma'nā al-murād*) is derived from either God's explanation [in another verse] or the Prophet's information to his Companions [*ḥadīth*]. The knowledge of the *muḥkam* does not escape the *'ulamā'* (scholars).²⁸

It seems that these criteria are derived from his understanding of the Qur'anic usage of words that have the same root as the word *muḥkamāt*, such as in Q.11:129 where the word *uḥkimat* (being consolidated) is followed by the word *fusṣilat* (being given detailed explanation), or Q.24:18, in which the word *yubayyinu* (to illustrate) is related to the word *ḥakīm* (the Wise; God who explicates His words), or finally Q.24:58-9, wherein God gives detailed commands about good behaviour and at the end of which the words *yubayyinu* and *ḥakīm* appear. When dealing with the words *sūratun muḥkamātun* in Q.47:20, al-Ṭabarī also interprets them as '*muḥkamātun bi'l-bayān wa'l-farā'id*' (consolidated with explanation and obligations).³⁰ In short, in defining the word *muḥkamāt* al-Ṭabarī takes the Qur'anic usage of the roots *ḥ-k-m*, *f-ṣ-l* and *b-y-n* into consideration. Al-Zajjāj (d.311/923), one of al-Ṭabarī's contemporaries, supported the latter's opinion by saying that the *muḥkamāt*, or verses which are affirmed by explication (*ibāna*), do not need *ta'wīl* (deep interpretation).³¹ However, al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d.370/982) did not agree with the technique of cross-referencing the Qur'an that al-Ṭabarī employed in his search for the meaning of the term *muḥkamāt*. In his *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, al-Jaṣṣāṣ argues that the words *uḥkimat āyātuhu* in Q.11:1 and Q.10:1,³² which characterize the whole of the Qur'an as *muḥkam*,³³ do not refer to the clarity of every Qur'anic verse, but pertain rather to the correctness (*ṣawāb*) of the Qur'anic materials and the perfection (*itqān*) of the language of the Qur'an, through which the Qur'an surpasses any other speech.³⁴ Al-Jaṣṣāṣ' interpretation of these two verses, which is consonant with that of al-Baghawī (d.516/1117) in his *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl*,³⁵ tries to emphasize the idea of the Qur'an's *ījāz* (inimitability). In addition, for al-Jaṣṣāṣ, the method of cross-referencing the Qur'an (*al-Qur'ān yufassir baḍuḥu baḍan*) in order to determine the correct meaning of a Qur'anic word does not always result in the right answer.

In addition to the cross-referential method, al-Ṭabarī also considers previous opinions related to the subject, recorded in traditional reports (*riwāyāt*) attributed to earlier authorities. However, he does not take them for granted. Rather, he provides them and then chooses some which he considers to be sound in terms of their content (*mutūn*). Thus, looking at his definition of *muḥkamāt*, one can say that al-Ṭabarī's position represents a synthesis of what Jābir ibn 'Abd Allāh, Mujāhid and Ibn Zayd had to say on the issue, opinions already quoted in the introduction to this paper.

Al-Zamakhsharī for his part defines the word *muḥkamāt* as verses whose expression (*ibāra*) is affirmed (*uḥkimat*) in the sense that they are free from similarity (*iḥtimāl*) and obscurity (*iṣtibāh*).³⁶ The clarity of *muḥkam* verses, therefore, lies in their own wording. There is no need for any explanation from extraneous sources, i.e., other verses, prophetic traditions (*aḥādīth*) or linguistic investigation, in order to understand them. In this respect, he differs from al-Ṭabarī. Al-Zamakhsharī's view is very similar to those of many other interpreters, such as Muḥammad ibn Ja'far ibn Zubayr, the Mu'tazilite Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī (d.303/915),³⁷ the Ḥanafī jurist al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d.370/982),³⁸

the Shīfī commentator al-Ṭūsī (d.460/1067),³⁹ and the Sunnī interpreter Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373).⁴⁰

Unlike al-Ṭabarī, who interprets the word *muhkamāt* by means of both cross-referential and lexical approaches, al-Zamakhsharī seems to base his epistemological hermeneutics concerning the word *muhkamāt* on a purely lexical approach. Ibn Manzūr in his *Lisān al-‘arab* glosses the word *aḥkama shay’an* (a verbal use of the root of *muhkam*) with *atqanahu* (to bring something to perfection) and *mana‘ahu min al-fasād* (to protect it from decomposition or imperfection).⁴¹ In the light of this lexical meaning, al-Zamakhsharī then interprets the word *muhkamāt* (the *ism al-maf‘ūl* of *aḥkama*) as *ḥufīzat min al-iḥtimāl wa’l-ishtibāh* (the verses that are protected from ambiguity and obscurity).⁴² It is to be noted that his definition of *ḥufīza* has the same meaning as *mana‘a* (to protect). Moreover, his words *min al-iḥtimāl wa’l-ishtibāh* are placed in apposition to the words *min al-fasād*. Al-Zamakhsharī prefers not to relate the word *muhkamāt* in this verse to other words which are derived from the same root, such as *uḥkimat* mentioned in Q.11:1. Dealing with this latter verse, which reads: ‘*Alif Lām Rā’ kitābun uḥkimat āyātuḥu thumma fuṣṣilat min ladun ḥakīmīn khabīrīn*’ (Alif. Lām. Rā’. [This is] a scripture the revelations whereof are perfected and then expounded. (It cometh) from One Wise, Informed), he interprets *uḥkimat āyātuḥu* as meaning that ‘its verses are composed firmly and perfectly; there is neither contradiction nor imperfection in them’ (*nuzimat naẓman raṣīnan muḥkaman lā yaqā‘u fihā naqd wa-lā khalal*).⁴³ It would appear that he saw no relation between the word *muhkamāt* in Q.3:7 and *uḥkimat āyātuḥu* in Q.11:1. His explanation of *uḥkimat āyātuḥu* here rather refers to the idea of the inimitability of the Qur’an.⁴⁴ In this instance, al-Zamakhsharī is very much closer to the position of al-Jaṣṣāṣ. Al-Khāzin, in his *Lubāb al-ta’wīl* attempts to combine al-Ṭabarī’s definition of *muhkamāt* with that of al-Zamakhsharī, by saying: ‘*Muhkam* verses are those that are explicated (*mubayyanāt*), given detailed information (*mufaṣṣalāt*) and whose wordings (*ibāra*) are free from obscurity.’⁴⁵

II: *Mutashābihāt*

In trying to define the meaning of the word *mutashābihāt*, al-Ṭabarī explains that it can be applied to passages ‘similar in wording (*mutashābihāt fi’l-tilāwa*), differing in meaning (*mukhtalifāt fi’l-ma’nā*).’⁴⁶ For the purpose of convincing the reader of this interpretation, al-Ṭabarī then mentions two verses in which the words *mutashābih* and *tashābaha* occur, although the two words are employed in different contexts. The two verses are Q.2:25⁴⁷ and Q.2:70.⁴⁸ In the first verse, which tells of God’s rewards for the pious in heaven, there appear the words *wa-utū bihī mutashābihan* (they are given things in similitude). Al-Ṭabarī comments that the word *mutashābihan* here means various kinds of fruits which resemble each other (*mutashābih fi’l-manẓar mukhtalif fi’l-ma‘am*).⁴⁹ Likewise, according to him, the statement in the second verse, namely *inna ’l-baqara tashābaha ‘alaynā* (indeed, the cow is alike for us), means *tashābaha*

‘alaynā fi’l-ṣifa wa-in ikhtalafat fi anwā’ihi (the cow is unclear to us in its characteristics, even though its types are various).⁵⁰ Although the three words (*mutashābihāt*, *mutashābih* and *tashābaha* in Q.3:7, Q.2:25 and Q.2:70, respectively) are used in different contexts, they have the same basic meaning: ‘being ambiguous and difficult to understand’. The ambiguity of *mutashābih* verses is due to the unavailability of divine clarification of other Qur’anic passages, prophetic explanation and linguistic references.⁵¹ Al-Ṭabarī then identifies the *mutashābih* with the concealed materials in the Qur’an, knowledge of which is confined only to God, such as the meaning of the mysterious letters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqatta‘a*), the arrival of the Day of Judgement, the appearance of Christ and the *Dajjāl* before the Last Day.⁵² This identification is dependent on the reports of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation) of the verse. Among these reports, there is one stating that the verse was revealed concerning Abū Yāsir ibn Akḥṭab, his brother Ḥayy ibn Akḥṭab and the Jews who argued with the Prophet about the meaning of the mysterious letters, such as *Alif Lām Mīm*, *Alif Lām Mīm Ṣād*, *Alif Lām Mīm Rā’* and *Alif Lām Rā’* in an effort to discover the fate of Muḥammad’s followers.⁵³

Compared to al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī pays less attention to defining the meaning of *mutashābihāt* than he does to the word *muḥkamāt*. He simply glosses *mutashābihāt* as a combination of *mushtabihāt* and *muḥtamilāt*.⁵⁴ He neglects to state any explicit arguments for this view. However, one might say that al-Zamakhsharī interprets the word literally. Ibn Qutayba (d.276/889) and Ibn Manẓūr (d.711/1311) mention, in *Ta’wīl mushkil al-Qur’ān* and *Lisān al-‘Arab* respectively, that *mushtabihāt* is synonymous with *mushkilāt* (difficult passages)⁵⁵ which are subject to several interpretations (*muḥtamilāt*). With regard to this point, he echoes al-Jubbā’ī, saying: ‘*al-mutashābih huwa mā yaḥtamil wajhayni fa-ṣā‘idan*’ (the *mutashābih* is the verse which permits two meanings or more).⁵⁶ In addition, al-Zamakhsharī identifies clearly what Qur’anic materials can be termed *mutashābihāt* by giving two examples of *mutashābih* verses in which theological points are mentioned, namely Q.75:22-3,⁵⁷ and Q.17:16.⁵⁸ These two verses, which convey the literal message that God can be seen in heaven and that God commands people to destroy a town seem, according to Mu‘tazilite interpreters, to contradict other Qur’anic verses, such as Q.6:103⁵⁹ and Q.7:28,⁶⁰ which are considered *muḥkamāt* and which state the converse, namely the impossibility of seeing God and the absurdity of the idea that God can command bad actions.⁶¹ From these two examples, one can say that, according to al-Zamakhsharī, the idea of *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* is limited to the theological aspects of the Qur’an. Those verses which support Mu‘tazilite doctrines are considered *muḥkamāt*, whereas those which contradict them are regarded as *mutashābihāt*.⁶² With respect to the definition of the two words, therefore, al-Zamakhsharī can be said to be reductionist, at least in the sense that by seeing the Qur’an as divided into *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt* verses, he limits its scope to theology, when in fact the Qur’an is much more than a book of theology.

Indeed, his classification of Qur'anic verses into two parts is more a reflection of Mu'tazilite doctrine than of the nature of the Qur'an itself.

III: *hunna ummu 'l-kitābi*

In Q.3:7 we find the statement *hunna ummu 'l-kitābi*, which is literally translated as 'they [the *muḥkam* verses] are the mother of the Book.' This Qur'anic expression raises questions about its meaning and grammatical aspect. In relation to its meaning, al-Ṭabarī holds the view that *umm al-kitāb*⁶³ means 'the essence of the Qur'an (*aṣl al-kitāb*) which incorporates the pillars of faith (*ʿimād al-dīn*), obligations (*farā'id*), limits (*hudūd*) and other religious matters of which human beings are in need.'⁶⁴ In equating *umm al-kitāb* with *aṣl al-kitāb* (the essence of the Book),⁶⁵ al-Zamakhsharī is in agreement with al-Ṭabarī. However, they differ in the reasons they give why *muḥkamāt* verses are called *umm al-kitāb* or *aṣl al-kitāb*. According to al-Ṭabarī, *muḥkam* verses are called *umm al-kitāb* because they constitute the majority of Qur'anic passages and the source of assistance for those in need of it (*mauḍi' mafza' ahlih 'ind al-ḥāja*), just as the phrase *umm al-qawm* (literally 'the mother of society') is employed by the Arabs to indicate 'the flag which unites people in troops'.⁶⁶ His interpretation of *umm al-kitāb*, which is adopted by Abū Ḥayyān in his *al-Baḥr al-muḥīt*,⁶⁷ therefore represents a philological interpretation only. He does not refer to any other usage of the word *umm al-kitāb* elsewhere in the Qur'an, such as in verses Q.13:39⁶⁸ and Q.43:4.⁶⁹ Al-Zamakhsharī, on the other hand, points out that the reason why *muḥkam* verses are called *umm al-kitāb* is because they are there to serve as a basis for interpreting *mutashābih* verses (*tuḥmal al-mutashābiha 'alayhā wa-turadd ilayhā*).⁷⁰ Such an interpretation, according to al-Jaṣṣāṣ and al-Ālūsī, is also supported by an *a fortiori* argument (*fahwā al-khiṭāb*) derived from the implicit tenor of Qur'anic speech in the same verse: 'But, those in whose hearts is doubt pursue, forsooth, that which is allegorical, seeking (to cause) dissension by seeking to explain it.' For them, this sentence implies the necessity of referring *mutashābih* verses to *muḥkam* ones.⁷¹ This opinion was then adopted by, for example, al-Ṭūsī and Ibn Kathīr. The former says in his *al-Tibyān*: 'Ma'nāhu [*umm al-kitāb*] *aṣl al-kitāb alladhī yustadall bihi 'alā al-mutashābih wa-ghayrihi min umūr al-dīn*' (the meaning of *umm al-kitāb* is the foundation by which the *mutashābih* is given meaning).⁷² The latter says in his *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ʿaẓīm*: '[*Mutashābihāt*] *tuḥtamal dalālatuhā muwāfiqata al-muḥkam*' (the meaning of *mutashābih* verses must be understood in accordance with the *muḥkam*).⁷³

Al-Zamakhsharī then gives two examples illustrating how a *muḥkam* verse can provide the foundation of a *mutashābih* one. Q.75:23, which he considers a *mutashābih* verse, must be interpreted in the light of a *muḥkam* verse, Q.6:103. Similarly, Q.17:16 must be understood in accordance with Q.7:28.⁷⁴ It can be inferred from these examples that, according to al-Zamakhsharī, every *muḥkam* verse may be regarded as *umm al-kitāb*. This view might be problematic, however, if the word *hunna* in Q.3:7 is understood as the *mubtada'* (subject) and the word *umm al-kitāb* as

its predicate, an issue on which al-Zamkhsharī remains silent. We will consider this problem in more detail below.

Grammatical synchronism between the subject of the sentence (*mubtada'*) and its predicate (*khabar*) in terms of their syntactic forms is, according to the rules of Arabic grammar, imperative.⁷⁵ However, asynchronism might occur if there is a special meaning involved. In relation to this, the grammatical structure of the word *hunna*, (which refers to *muḥkamāt*), with the *mubtada'* in plural form and its predicate, *umm al-kitāb*, in the singular, is unique. Al-Ṭabarī sets forth the reason for this syntactic incompatibility by saying that God means all *muḥkam* verses as a whole, not each verse in particular, to be the mother of the Book (*umm al-kitāb*).⁷⁶ If the meaning, he argues, was that each of them is *umm al-kitāb*, then clearly God would have said: '*hunna ummuhāt al-kitāb*' (they are the mothers of the Book).⁷⁷ Al-Ṭabarī supports his opinion, later followed by al-Baghawī,⁷⁸ by quoting Q.23:50 in which the same grammatical problem occurs. This verse, which reads: '*wa-ja'alnā 'bna maryama wa-ummahū āyatan*' (And We made the son of Mary and his mother a portent), rather than '*...āyatayni*' (two portents), implies the divinely miraculous state of the two beings as a whole.⁷⁹ He disagrees with those Baṣran grammarians who said that the singular form of *umm al-kitāb* constitutes a literal quotation of the very word (*'alā wajh al-hikāya*);⁸⁰ almost as if the question had been asked: 'Which one is *umm al-kitāb*' (the essence of the Qur'an)? The answer to this being '*hunna ummu 'l-kitābi*' (*muḥkam* verses are the essence of the Qur'an).⁸¹ Al-Ṭabarī's disagreement is based on the fact that there is no reason to believe that God's use of *umm al-kitāb* is itself a quotation.⁸² Al-Ṭabarī's consideration of *muḥkam* verses as a whole to be the essence of the Qur'an is intended to respond to the Muṭazilite principle that each of the *muḥkam* verses can serve as the foundation for interpreting each of *mutashābih* verses. On the basis of this, I agree with Gilliot's and Smith's conclusion that al-Ṭabarī was an orthodox theologian who was opposed to the Muṭazilites.⁸³ Unfortunately, al-Zamakhsharī does not elaborate on his opinion concerning this problem of syntax to counter al-Ṭabarī's view, in spite of the fact that the former was a leading grammarian. It might be that he considered it sufficient to support his opinion concerning the meaning of *umm al-kitāb* by glossing the word *umm* as 'something that is referred to'.⁸⁴

The problem of justifying the interpretation of the *mutashābih*

The debate over whether or not Q.3:7 justifies the practice of interpreting *mutashābih* verses is closely related to Muslim understandings of the word *ta'wīl* and the particle *wāw* between the words *Allāh* and *al-rāsikhūn* in the Qur'anic statement '*wa-mā ya'lamu ta'wīlahu illā Allāhu wa'l-rāsikhūna fi'l-'ilmi yaqūlūna āmannā bihi kullun min 'indi rabbina*.' The word *ta'wīl* in the verse is interpreted by early scholars differently: as the end of the lives of Muḥammad's followers, according to Ibn 'Abbās; as the end of the Qur'an (*'awāqib al-Qur'ān*), according to al-Suddī and as the interpreta-

tion (*tafsīr*) of the Qur'an, according to Muḥammad ibn Ja'far ibn al-Jubayr.⁸⁵ Al-Ṭabarī identifies the term with *inqiḍā' al-mudda* (the end of time).⁸⁶ In his treatment of the Qur'anic condemnation of those who followed the *mutashābih*, desiring dissension (*fitna*) and *ta'wīl* (*fa-ammā 'l-ladhīna fī qulūbihim zayghun fa-yattabī'ūna mā tashābaha minhu 'btighā'a ta'wīlihi*), al-Ṭabarī says that Ibn 'Abbās' and al-Suddī's definitions are closer to the true meaning (*awlā bi'l-ṣawāb*).⁸⁷ Commenting on the same verse, he says:

No one knows the date of the Day of Resurrection, the end of the life of Muḥammad and his people and everything that is known only to God, but not to human beings, who seek to obtain knowledge of it by the use of chronograms (*hisāb al-jummal*) and soothsaying. As for those who are firm in knowledge they say: 'We believe in that. All is from our Lord.' They do not know it. Nevertheless, their dignity over others is their knowledge that God is the only one who knows.⁸⁸

Al-Ṭabarī's position, which is also in agreement with al-Samarqandī's,⁸⁹ supports those of Ibn 'Abbās and al-Suddī, partly on the basis of *asbāb al-nuzūl*. In other words, for him, there is nothing in the word *ta'wīl* that justifies undertaking the interpretation of the *mutashābih*.

Concerning the grammatical problem of *wāw*, al-Ṭabarī points out that in this sentence it is not a conjunctive particle (*wāw al-ṣatf*) linking the word *Allāh* and *al-rāsikhūn fī'l-ilm*. It is rather *wāw al-isti'nāf*, marking the beginning of the sentence.⁹⁰ Actually, there are two views concerning this point, both of which are recorded by al-Ṭabarī. The first opinion, which is attributed to 'Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr, Ibn 'Abbās in one report, 'Urwa, 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-ʿAzīz and Mālik, is that the particle does not link the two words. On this basis, the meaning of the Qur'anic statement is that God himself knows the meaning of *mutashābih* verses.⁹¹ According to the other opinion, which is attributed to Ibn 'Abbās in another report, Mujāhid, al-Rabī' and Muḥammad ibn Ja'far ibn al-Zubayr, the *wāw* here is a conjunctive particle (*ḥarf al-ṣatf*) that links the two words, so that the meaning of the sentence is that not only does God have knowledge of *mutashābih* verses, but also that 'those who are firm in knowledge' (*al-rāsikhūn fī'l-ilm*) can interpret them.⁹² Al-Ṭabarī supports the first opinion by giving corroborative evidence, showing that, in the *qirā'āt* (readings) of Ubayy ibn Ka'b and 'Abd Allāh, the sentence says: '... *wa yaqūlu 'l-rāsikhūna fī'l-ilmī āmannā bihi*' (...And those who are firm in knowledge say: 'We believe in it [the *mutashābih*]') and '... *In ta'wīluhu illā 'inda Allāhi wa'l-rāsikhūna fī'l-ilmī yaqūlūna āmannā bihi*...' (...There is no interpretation of the *mutashābih* except by God. And those who are firm in knowledge say: 'We believe in it'...).⁹³ In addition to this, al-Ṭabarī's support for the first opinion is also influenced by his definition of the word *mutashābihāt* as

concealed materials known only by God, concerning matters such as the Day of Judgment and the re-emergence of Jesus, as mentioned above. This opinion was later accepted by, for example, al-Samarqandī,⁹⁴ al-Baghawī⁹⁵ and al-Suyūṭī.⁹⁶ In short, for al-Ṭabarī, there is nothing in this verse justifying the interpretation of *mutashābih* verses. Al-Zamakhsharī, by contrast, agrees with the view that the verse may be regarded as justification for performing interpretation. He interprets the Qur'anic condemnation of those who followed the *mutashābih* in which he uses the word *ta'wīl*, by saying:

Those whose hearts are perverted: they are the *ahl al-bida'*... [they] follow the *mutashābih* that permits what the *mubtadi'* wishes which does not conform to the *muḥkam* and that [*mutashābih*] which conforms to what the *ahl al-ḥaqq* hold ... for the sake of turning people away from their religion ... and to seek the interpretation they desire.⁹⁷

The *mutashābih*, according to him, can be understood not only by God, but also by those who are firm in knowledge (*al-rāsikhūn fī'l-ʿilm*). The argument for this notion is based on his interpretation of the particle *wāw* as a conjunctive element. He says: 'God and those who are firm in knowledge can guide us to the true interpretation of the *mutashābih*.'⁹⁸ However, when al-Zamakhsharī mentions the *qirā'at* of Ubayy ibn Ka'b and ʿAbd Allāh ibn Mas'ūd, on which al-Ṭabarī bases his position, the former does not comment on them at all.⁹⁹ This attitude seems unconvincing, especially in view of the controversial nature of the subject. Regardless of his insufficient elaboration, we can say that, according to al-Zamakhsharī, this verse tells us that *mutashābih* verses can be understood by those who are 'firm in knowledge'. In other words, a religious justification for interpreting them is derived from the meaning of the very verse.

This debate inspired other interpreters of the classical period to join the discussion. Abū Ḥayyān, for example, after quoting the two opposing opinions, held that al-Ṭabarī's position is more sound than that of al-Zamakhsharī. Using a 'semiotic'¹⁰⁰ approach to the Qur'anic text, he argues in his *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ* that the Qur'anic condemnation of those who seek to interpret the *mutashābih*, and the praise for those who are firm in knowledge, who say: 'We believe in it', indicate that the *mutashābih* is known only to God.¹⁰¹ Long before Abū Ḥayyān, al-Jaṣṣāṣ did not agree with these arguments, even though his opinion did not quite coincide with that of al-Zamakhsharī. Al-Jaṣṣāṣ says in his *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* that the reproach against those who follow the *mutashābih* does not signify that it is impossible to interpret these verses. Rather, it means it is necessary to interpret the *mutashābih* in the light of the *muḥkam*. They are faulted only because they fail to do so. It is not possible, he says, that the verse, on the one hand, should point to the necessity of this kind of interpretation and yet on the other hand deny the possibility of understanding the *mutashābih*.¹⁰²

However, al-Jaṣṣāṣ was of the opinion that not all of the *mutashābih* can be interpreted by Qur'anic exegetes; the Qur'an in his view does conceal some of its messages. When commenting on the particle *wāw*, he states that those who consider it to be *ḥarf al-isti'nāf* understand that some of the *mutashābih* cannot be known by humans, whereas those who regard it as a conjunctive particle (*ḥarf al-ʿatf*) understand the phrase to say that some of the *mutashābih* can be interpreted in the light of the *muḥkam*.¹⁰³ This moderate position was also held by Ibn Kathīr, who says in his commentary that the *mutashābih* may be interpreted, although its real meaning (*ḥaqīqat al-mā'nā*) is known only to God.¹⁰⁴ In short, al-Jaṣṣāṣ and Ibn Kathīr, to some extent, regard the verse as a religious justification for the interpretation of the *mutashābih*.

Conclusion

From our discussion we can draw several conclusions. First of all, in defining the words *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt*, al-Ṭabarī and al-Zamakhsharī utilized different methods. Unlike al-Zamakhsharī, who relied on lexical materials, al-Ṭabarī sought an approach that combined a lexical method with cross-referencing the Qur'an in a search for internal clues. However, al-Jaṣṣāṣ did not regard al-Ṭabarī's method as sound, because he was not aware of the different contexts of words that may have the same root but express different meanings, as in the case of the terms under discussion: *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt*. Al-Zamakhsharī, on the other hand, can be considered reductionist in defining the two words, because he referred them only to the Qur'an's theological aspects, when in fact the Qur'an speaks of them not only in terms of theology, but also in other aspects, such as *halakha* and *haggada*. In addition, the different definitions result from their different beliefs. Al-Ṭabarī is concerned to support the Sunnī orthodox position, whereas al-Zamakhsharī expresses the rationalist views of the Mu'tazilites.

The other point concerns the problem of the verse justifying interpretation of the *mutashābih*, on which al-Ṭabarī and al-Zamakhsharī express two widely divergent positions. Relying on the reports of the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the former does not regard it as justifying the practice. On the other hand, according to al-Zamakhsharī, the verse clearly signifies that one is justified in interpreting such verses. Al-Jaṣṣāṣ and Ibn Kathīr see these positions as only partial understandings of the verse. Accordingly, they seem to attempt to reconcile the two opposing opinions.

NOTES

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1 The translation of this verse and those of other verses in this paper are taken from Muḥammad Marmaduke Pickthall's *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (Delhi, World Islamic Publications, 1981).

2 Wansbrough in his *Qur'anic Studies* explores the opinions held by early exegetes on some of these issues. See John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, London Oriental Series, 31 (Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 148-70.

3 Abū Ḥayyān (d.754/1344) in his *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ* lists more than twenty opinions concerning the meanings of *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt*. For more detailed information about this, see Abū Ḥayyān, Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ* (Riyād, Maktaba wa-Maṭābī' al-Naṣr al-Hadītha, n.d.), 2:381-2.

4 See al-Ṭabarī, Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr, *Jāmi' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Beirut, Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1986), 3:113-7.

5 See al-Farrā', Abū Zakariyyā Yahyā ibn Ziyād, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Yūsuf Najātī and Muḥammad 'Alī al-Najjār (Beirut, Dār al-Surūr, n.d.), 1:190.

6 See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:114; Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Kitāb tafsīr al-khams mi'at āya min al-Qur'ān* (Dār al-Mashriq, 1980), p. 275; al-Baghawī, al-Ḥusayn ibn Mas'ūd al-Farrā', *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl*, ed. Khālīd 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-'Akk and Marwān Suwār (Beirut, Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1986), 1:279; al-Jaṣṣāṣ, Aḥmad ibn 'Alī al-Rāzī, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* (Beirut, Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, n.d.), 2:3; al-Jawzī, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Alī, *Zād al-masīr fī 'ilm al-tafsīr* (Beirut, al-Maktab al-Islāmī li'l-Ṭibā'a wa'l-Naṣr, 1964), 1:350-1; al-Ṭūsī, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan, *al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Shawqī al-Amin and Aḥmad Ḥabīb Qaṣīr (Najaf, Maktabat al-Amin, 1957), 2:395; al-Ṭabarsī, al-Faḍl ibn al-Ḥasan, *Majma' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Beirut, Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, 1957), 3:15; al-Khāzin, 'Alī ibn Muḥammad, *Lubāb al-ta'wīl fī ma'ānī al-tanzīl* (Cairo, Maṭba'at al-Taqaḍḍum al-'Ilmiyya, 1955), 1:269; Abū Ḥayyān, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, 2:381; al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr, *al-Durr al-manthūr fī'l-tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* (Beirut, Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1990), 2:6; al-Ālūsī, Shihāb al-Dīn, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm* (Beirut, Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), 3:82; Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, p. 150.

7 See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:115; al-Baghawī, *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl*, 1:278-9; al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*, 2:395; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 3:15; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr*, 2:7; al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī*, 3:82.

8 See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:115-6; al-Baghawī, *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl*, 1:279; al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*, 2:395; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 3:15.

9 See al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*, 2:395; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 3:15; Daniel Gimaret, *Une Lecture Mu'tazilite du Coran: le tafsīr d' Abū 'Alī al-Djubba'ī (m. 303/915) partiellement reconstitué à partir de ses citateurs* (Paris, Peeters, 1994), p. 167.

10 See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:116; al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*, 2:395.

11 See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:116; al-Baghawī, *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl*, 1:279; al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*, 2:395.

12 Andrew Rippin, 'Tafsīr' in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York, Macmillan, 1987), 14:238.

13 Naṣr Ḥamid Abū Zayd, *al-Ittijāh al-'aqlī fī'l-tafsīr: dirāsa fī qaḍīyyat al-majāz fī'l-Qur'ān 'ind al-mu'tazila* (Beirut, Dār al-Tanwīr, 1982), p. 164 and p. 180.

14 Al-Zamakhsharī, Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar, *al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl wa-'uyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-ta'wīl* (Beirut, Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, n.d.), 1:2.

15 Nabia Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri II: Qur'ānic Commentary and Tradition*, University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications, 76 (Chicago University Press, 1967), 2:110. See also Fred Leemhuis, 'Origins and Early Development of the *tafsīr* Tradition' in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 16-18.

16 See Harris Birkeland, *Old Muslim Opposition Against Interpretation of the Koran* (Oslo, I Kommissjon Hos Jacob Dybwad, 1955), p. 30.

17 Q.16:44 says: 'With clear proofs and writings; and We have revealed unto thee the Remembrance that thou mayst explain to mankind that which hath been revealed for them, and that haply they may reflect.' The other is Q.16:64 saying: 'And We have revealed the Scripture unto thee only that thou mayst explain unto them that wherein they differ, and (as) a guidance and a mercy for a people who believe.'

18 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 1:25-6. See also Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 'Quranic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr,' in Rippin (ed.), *Approaches*, pp. 49-50.

19 Born in 224 or 225/839 in Āmūl in northern Iran, in the region then known as Tabaristān, twelve miles south of the Caspian Sea, Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr ibn Yazīd ibn Kathīr al-Ṭabarī was a prolific writer. He was also a great exegete of the early period. In GAL Brockelmann includes al-Ṭabarī among the great historians, whereas Sezgin in GAS emphasizes that he was a theologian. He was also classified as the founder of the Jarīriya school of law that was disbanded after his death. He wrote many books, among them are the vast collection of annals called *Tārīkh al-rusul wa'l-anbiyā' wa'l-mulūk wa'l-khulafā'* (History of the Messengers, Prophets, Kings and Caliphs), *Jāmi' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (The Comprehensive Exposition of the Interpretation of the Qur'an), *Kitāb al-qirā'āt wa-tanzīl al-Qur'ān* (The Book of Recitations and of the Revelation of the Qur'an) and *Ikhtilāf al-fuqahā'*. He died in 310/923 in Baghdad. For detailed information about his life and works, see, e.g., Ibn Khallikān, Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr, *Wafayāt al-a'yān wa-anbā' abnā' al-zamān*, ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās (Beirut, Dār Ṣādir, n.d.), 4:191-2; al-Dāwūdī, Muḥammad ibn 'Alī, *Ṭabaqāt al-mufasssīrīn*, ed. 'Alī Muḥammad 'Umar (Cairo, Maktabat Wahba, 1972), 2:106-14; Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1937-49), i: 143, S I 217; Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1967), i: 327; J. Cooper, in his introduction to his translation of *Jāmi' al-bayān* entitled *The Commentary on the Qur'an* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 1:ix-xxxv; Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Quranic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 38-45; R. Paret, 'Al-Ṭabarī' in M. Th. Houtsma (ed.) *E. J. Brill's First Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1987), 8:578-9.

20 See, e.g., al-Dhahabī, Muḥammad Ḥusayn, *al-Tafsīr wa'l-mufasssīrūn* (Cairo, Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥaditha, 1961), 1:207; Ignaz Goldziher, *Madhāhib al-tafsīr al-islāmī*, translation of his *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* by 'Abd al-Ḥalīm al-Bakḥkhār (Cairo, Maktabat al-Khānaji, 1955), pp. 116-7; Jane I. Smith, *An Historical and Semantic Study of the Term 'Islām' as Seen in a Sequence of Qur'an Commentaries* (Missoula, Scholars Press, 1975), p. 62.

21 He was Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Umar al-Zamaksharī. Born in 467/1075 in a small town in Khawārizm called Zamakshar, he was a philologist, theologian, exegete and geographer. He wrote many books, among them are *al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq al-tanzīl*, *Kitāb al-unmūdḥaj fī'l-naḥw*, *Asās al-balāgha*, *Kitāb al-amkina wa'l-jibāl wa'l-miyāh* and *al-Minhāj fī uṣūl al-dīn*. The latter has been edited and translated by Sabine Schmidtke under the title *A Mu'tazilite Creed of az-Zamahsari (d.538/1144)*. Al-Zamaksharī died in 537/1144 in his home town. For detailed information about his life and works, see, e.g., Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-a'yān*, 5:168-74; Lutpi Ibrahim, 'Az-Zamaksharī: His Life and Works', *Islamic Studies*, 19 (1980), pp. 95-110; Andrew Rippin, 'Al-Zamaksharī', in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 15:554-5; McAuliffe, *Quranic Christians*, pp. 49-54; Schmidtke's introduction to his translation of al-Zamaksharī's *al-Minhāj fī uṣūl al-dīn*, tr. as *A Mu'tazilite Creed of az-Zamahsari (d. 538/1144)* (Stuttgart, Deutsche Morgenlandische Gesellschaft & Franz Steiner, 1997), pp. 7-11.

22 See, e.g., al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa'l-mufasssīrūn*, 1:432; Goldziher, *Madhāhib al-tafsīr al-islāmī*, p. 140; Smith, *An Historical and Semantic Study*, p. 89.

- 23 See al-Dhahabī, *al-Taḥfīr wa'l-mufaṣṣirūn*, 1:454-5; Goldziher, *Madhāhib al-tafsīr al-islāmī*, pp. 151-2.
- 24 See McAuliffe, 'Qur'anic Hermeneutics,' pp. 49-50.
- 25 See L. Kinberg, 'Muḥkamāt and Mutashābihāt (Koran 3/7): Implication of a Koranic Pair of Terms in Medieval Exegesis', *Arabica*, 37 (1988), pp. 143-72.
- 26 In Egypt this commentary has been printed several times. It was published for the first time in 1903 at al-Maṭba'ā al-Maymūniyya. It was printed a few years later at al-Maṭba'ā al-Amīriyya, again in 1954 at Mustafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī and again in 1969 at Dār al-Ma'ārif. See J. J. G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1974), pp. 56 ff.
- 27 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:113. See also McAuliffe, 'Qur'anic Hermeneutics,' 51.
- 28 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:117.
- 29 The verse reads: 'Alif Lām Rā, kitābun uḥkimat āyātuḥu thumma fuṣṣilat min ladun ḥakīmīn 'alīm.'
- 30 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 26:34.
- 31 Al-Zajjāj, Abū Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm ibn al-Sarī, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān wa-īrābuhū*, ed. 'Abd al-Jalīl 'Abduḥ Shalabī (Beirut, 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1988), 1:376.
- 32 The verse reads: 'Alif Lām Rā', tilka āyātu 'l-kitābi 'l-ḥakīm' (Alif. Lām. Rā'. These are verses of the wise Scripture).
- 33 See al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 2:2; al-Khāzin, *Lubāb al-ta'wīl*, 1:268; and Abū Ḥayyān, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, 2:381.
- 34 See al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 2:2; al-Khāzin, *Lubāb al-ta'wīl*, 2:268; and Abū Ḥayyān, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, 2:381.
- 35 See al-Baghawī, *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl*, 1:278.
- 36 Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:337-8. See also Goldziher, *Madhāhib al-tafsīr al-islāmī*, p. 151.
- 37 Al-Jubbā'ī said: 'Par muḥkam, il faut entendre ce qui ne peut se comprendre que d'une seule façon.' See Gimaret, *Lecture*, p. 167.
- 38 He says: 'Fa-inna 'l-murād bihi (muḥkam) al-lafū alladhī lā ishtirāka fīhi wa-lā yaḥtamīlu 'inda sāmi'īhi illā ma'nān wāḥidan.' See al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 2:2.
- 39 He says in his *al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*: 'Fa'l-muḥkam huwa mā 'ulima al-murād bi-zāhirihi min ḡayri qarīnatin taqṭarinu ilayhi wa lā dalālatin tadullu 'alā al-murād bihi li-wuḍūḥihi.' Al-Tūsī, *al-Tibyān*, 2:394. See also al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 3:14.
- 40 Ismā'īl ibn Kathīr al-Dimashqī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ʿaẓīm*, ed. Yūsuf 'Abd al-Raḥmān (Beirut, Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1987), 1:352. He says: 'Yukḥbiru ta'ālā anna fi'l-Qur'āni āyāt muḥkamāt hunna umm al-kitāb ay bayyināt wādīḥāt al-dalāla lā iltibāsa fīhā 'alā aḥad...' See also McAuliffe, 'Qur'anic Hermeneutics', p. 59.
- 41 Muḥammad ibn Mukarram ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab al-muḥīṭ*, rearranged in alphabetical order by Yūsuf Khayyāt (Beirut, Dār Lisān al-ʿArab, 1988), 1:289.
- 42 Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:338.
- 43 Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 2:377.
- 44 According to Boullata, al-Zamakhsharī often comments on Qur'anic verses in the light of the idea of the Qur'ān's *ījāz* mostly in relation to its eloquence. See Issa J. Boullata, 'The Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur'ān: *ījāz* and Related Topics' in Rippin (ed.), *Approaches*, p. 147.

- 45 His own words are '[*muḥkamāt*] *ya'nī mubayyanāt mufaṣṣalāt uḥkimat min iḥtimāl al-ta'wīl wa'l-ishtibāh.*' Al-Khāzin, *Lubāb al-ta'wīl*, 2:268.
- 46 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:114. See also McAuliffe, 'Quranic Hermeneutics', p. 51.
- 47 The verse reads: 'And give glad tidings (O Muhammad) unto those who believe and do good works; that theirs are Gardens underneath which rivers flow; as often as they are regaled with food of the fruit thereof, they say: This is what was given us aforetime; and it is given to them in resemblance. There for them are pure companions; there for ever they abide.'
- 48 The verse reads: 'They said: Pray for us unto thy Lord that He make clear to us what (cow) she is. Lo! cows are much alike to us; and lo! if Allah wills, we may be led aright.'
- 49 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 1:136; and 3:114. See also Kenneth Cragg, *The Mind of the Qur'an: Chapters in Reflection* (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1973), p. 41.
- 50 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 1:274-5 and 3:114. See also Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, 3:266.
- 51 This idea is what I infer from al-Ṭabarī's division of Qur'anic materials, as outlined in my introduction to this paper, into three parts: (1) those which can be understood through the Prophet's explanation (2) those which are known only by God (3) those that can be comprehended by experts of Arabic language. For more detailed information about this point, see al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 1:25-6.
- 52 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:120. See also al-Samarqandī, *Baḥr al-ʿulūm*, 1:246-7; al-Khāzin, *Lubāb al-tanzīl*, 1:270.
- 53 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:118. See also al-Khāzin, *Lubāb al-tanzīl*, 1:270; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr*, 2:8.
- 54 Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:338.
- 55 See Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, 3:266 and Ibn Qutayba, *Ta'wīl mushkil al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Ṣaqr (Cairo, Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-ʿArabī, n.d.), p. 75.
- 56 Gimaret, *Lecture*, p. 167.
- 57 The verses read: 'That day will faces be resplendent, Looking toward their Lord;...'
- 58 The verse reads: 'And when We would destroy a township We send commandment to its folk who live at ease, and afterward they commit abomination therein, and so the Word (of doom) hath affect for it, and We annihilate it with complete annihilation.'
- 59 The verse reads: 'Vision comprehendeth Him not, but He comprehendeth (all) vision.'
- 60 The verse reads: 'And when they do some lewdness they say: We found our fathers doing it and Allah hath enjoined it on us. Say: Allah, verily, enjoineth not lewdness. Tell ye concerning Allah that which ye know not?'
- 61 See Abū Zayd, *al-Ittijāh*, pp. 139 ff.
- 62 See, e.g., al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa'l-mufasssīrūn*, 1:455; Kinberg, 'Muḥkamāt and Mutashābihāt', p. 160.
- 63 The word *kitāb* and its plural *kutub* are employed in the Qur'an 261 times. The word is literally translated as 'book'. However, it has various meanings. In his article 'Ṭabarī's Exegesis of the Qur'anic Term *al-Kitāb*', Berg studies al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of the word. Berg records that, according to al-Ṭabarī, the meanings of *kitāb* is comprised of a marriage contract, any piece of writing, a record of deeds (*kitāb al-ʿmāl*), Allah's knowledge (*ʿilm*), the Qur'an, the Torah and the Bible. The word *al-kitāb*, particularly used in Q.3:7, refers to the Qur'an. For more information, see Herbert Berg, 'Ṭabarī's Exegesis of the Qur'anic Term *al-Kitāb*', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 63:4 (1995), pp. 761-74. I do not see any disagreement among the classical interpreters about the reference of the word *kitāb* in this verse of the Qur'an. See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:113; al-Samarqandī, *Baḥr al-ʿulūm*, ed. ʿAlī

- Muhammad Mu'awwad, 'Ādil Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mawjūd and Zakariyyā 'Abd al-Majīd (Beirut, Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1993), 1:245; al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 2:2; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:338; al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*, 2:394; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 3:14; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr*, 2:6; al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī*, 3:81.
- 64 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:113. See also Berg, *JAAR* 63:4 (1995), p. 765; Kinberg, 'Muḥkamāt and Mutashābihāt', p. 151.
- 65 Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:338.
- 66 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:113.
- 67 Abū Ḥayyān, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, 2:382.
- 68 The verse reads: 'Yamḥu Allāhu mā yashā'u wa-yuthbitu wa'indahū ummu 'l-kitāb.' (Allah effaceth what He will, and establisheth (what He will), and with Him is the source of ordinance).
- 69 The verse reads: 'Wa-innahu fī ummi 'l-kitābi ladaynā la-'aliyyun ḥakīmun'. (And lo! in the Source of Decrees, which We possess, it is indeed sublime, decisive.)
- 70 Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:338. See also Schmidtke, *Mu'tazilite Creed*, pp. 44 and 82.
- 71 Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 2:3; al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī*, 3:82.
- 72 See al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*, 2:395. See also al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 3:14.
- 73 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm*, 1:352.
- 74 Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:338.
- 75 Ibn Mālik (d. 672/1274) says in his *Alfiyya*: 'Muḥtada'un zayḍun wa'ādhīrun khabar in qulta zayḍun 'ādhīrun man 'īṭadhar' (the subject is [the word] *Zayd*, and [the word] *'ādhīr* if you say: 'Zayḍun 'ādhīrun man 'īṭadhar.' The words *Zayd* and *'ādhīr* are consonant with one another in terms of their singular (*mufrad*) and masculine (*mudhakkār*) forms. See Ibn 'Aqīl, *Kitāb sharḥ Ibn 'Aqīl 'alā Alfiyyat Ibn Mālik*, ed. Ramzī Munīr Ba'labakī (Beirut, Dār al-'Ilm li'l-Malāyin, 1992), p. 94.
- 76 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:113.
- 77 Ibid.
- 78 Al-Baghawī, *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl*, 1:278.
- 79 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:114. See also al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*, 2:395; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 3:15. Al-Ṭabarsī adds in his *Majma' al-bayān* that there is no portent in Mary without Jesus, and conversely there is no sign in him without her.
- 80 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:114. See also al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*, 2:395.
- 81 Al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*, 2:395.
- 82 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:114.
- 83 See Claude Gilliot, *Exégèse, langue et théologie en Islam: l'exégèse coranique de Tabari* (Paris, J. Vrin, 1990), p. 281; Smith, *An Historical and Semantic Study*, p. 61.
- 84 See Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab al-muḥīṭ*, 1:104.
- 85 See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:121; al-Samarqandī, *Baḥr al-'ulūm*, 1:247; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 3:15-16.
- 86 See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:121; and 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Aṣbahānī, *Kashf al-mushkilāt wa-īdāḥ al-mu'dīlāt*, ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Dālī (Damascus, Maṭbū'at Majma' al-Lughā al-'Arabiyya, n.d.), 1:216.
- 87 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:121.
- 88 Ibid., p. 122.
- 89 Al-Samarqandī, *Baḥr al-'ulūm*, 1:247.

- 90 See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 3:123; al-Samarqandī, *Baḥr al-ʿulūm*, 1:247.
- 91 See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, 3:122; al-Samarqandī, *Baḥr al-ʿUlūm*, 1:247.
- 92 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 3:122. See also al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, 2:4; al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-maʿānī*, 3:83; Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Naḥḥās, *Frāb al-Qurʾān*, ed. Zuhayr Ghāzī Zāhid (Baghdad, Maṭbaʿat al-ʿĀnī, 1977), p. 310.
- 93 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 3:123.
- 94 See al-Samarqandī, *Baḥr al-ʿulūm*, 1:247.
- 95 See al-Baghawī, *Maʿālim al-tanzīl*, 1:280.
- 96 See al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr*, 2:10-1.
- 97 Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:338.
- 98 Ibid.
- 99 On this, al-Naḥḥās comments in his *Frāb al-Qurʾān* that the *qirāʾa* of Ubayy and ʿAbd Allāh is not authoritative, because it is not consonant with the ʿUṭhmānī *mushaf*. See al-Naḥḥās, *Frāb al-Qurʾān*, p. 310.
- 100 This term is derived from the Greek *semiotikos*, meaning ‘mark’ or ‘sign’. Derrida said that a text signifies full meaning, and even that there is nothing outside the text. See William L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* (New Jersey, Humanities Press, 1996), pp. 167 and 696.
- 101 Abū Ḥayyān, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, 2:384.
- 102 al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, 2:4.
- 103 Ibid.
- 104 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, 1:335.