

BAYḌAWI' ON THE FAWATIḤ:
A TRANSLATION OF HIS
COMMENTARY ON
"ALIF-LAM-MIM" IN SURAH 2, V. 1

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As long ago as 1829, in his *Anthologie Grammaticale Arabe*, Baron Silvestre de Sacy published a translation of Bayḍāwī's commentary on the first six verses of Sūrah 2, and part of it had already appeared in the second edition of his *Chrestomathie Arabe* (1826-7).

It is a measure of this great scholar's thoroughness and erudition that today only the comparatively small portion below needs to be re-translated.

Works of reference have proliferated since de Sacy's days. Notes on the scholars cited in the text, all of whom may be looked up in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, have therefore been reduced to a minimum. On the other hand, some attention has been given to the phonetic implications of the groups of letters discussed. In this respect, the definition of the terms used has been sought in Zamakhsharī's² Grammar, *al-Mufaṣṣal*; the reason for this is that al-Bayḍāwī's work is known to be based on Zamakhsharī's commentary, *al-Kashshāf*. And since the English work of reference that deals most comprehensively with the Arab grammarians' treatment of the subject is Howell's *Arabic Grammar* (Allahabad, 1883-1911), his terminology has been generally adopted in this translation.

It has been a privilege to be able to draw on Professor A. F. Beeston's profound and discriminating scholarship while this translation was being made. Several improvements are due to his advice, and notes 1, p. 225 and 1, p. 226 are substantially his.

¹ Nāṣir ad-Dīn 'Abd-Allāh b. 'Umar, d. 685/1286; known as Bayḍāwī after his native Bayḍā' near Shīrāz in Persia.

² Jār-Allāh Abū l-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Khwārizmī az-Zamakhsharī, Mu'tazilite theologian, exegete, grammarian, lexicologist, etc., b. 467/1075, d. 538/1144. Page references in the notes below are to his *Mufaṣṣal*, ed. J. P. Broch (Christiania, 1879).

All headings, subheadings, and numberings are the translator's. Other additions to the strict wording of the text have been placed between square brackets.

BAYDAWI¹ ON THE FAWATIḤ:
COMMENTARY ON "ALIF-LAM-MIM"
IN SURAH 2, V. 1

A. GRAMMATICAL PREDICAMENT OF THE
CONSTITUENTS OF THE FAWATIḤ

The constituents of the Fawāṭiḥ are nouns

ALIF LĀM MIM and all the other vocables used in spelling are nouns, their denominates being the letters of which words are composed. [They are nouns] because they fall within the definition of the noun and share in what is peculiar to it, i.e. in being definite or indefinite, in [that they may occur in] plural and diminutive forms, and so on. This has been affirmed by al-Khalil² and Abū 'Alī.³

They are not particles

As for the account given by Ibn Mas'ūd⁴ (God—may He be exalted—be pleased with him) that he [i.e. the Prophet] (God bless and preserve him), said: "Whoever recites one *ḥarf* from the Book of God is credited with a good deed, and each good deed is rewarded ten-fold—and I do not say that *alif-lām-mīm* is a *ḥarf*, but that the *alif* is a *ḥarf*, the *lām* is a *ḥarf* and the *mīm* is a *ḥarf*;"⁵ what is intended [by *ḥarf* therein] is not the technical [grammatical] meaning ["particle"]—for the precise association [of the word with this meaning] belongs to later usage—but its meaning in common linguistic usage [i.e. "letter of the alphabet"]; perhaps he used the name of the object denoted for the denomination itself.

¹ See above, note 1, p. 218.

² Abū 'Abd ar-Raḥmān al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī; grammarian and philologist, reputed discoverer of prosody; b. 100/718-19, d. betw. 170/786 and 175/722.

³ Abū 'Alī al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī al-Fasawī al-Fārisī, 288/900-377/987.

⁴ Abū 'Abd ar-Raḥmān 'Abd-Allāh b. Ghāfil, known as Ibn Mas'ūd; Companion of the Prophet and authority for many traditions, d. 32 or 33/652-4.

⁵ See at-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi'*; Kitāb Thawāb al-Qur'ān, Bāb 16. The work *ḥarf* may mean either "a letter" or "a particle". De Sacy took the tradition to end at "ten-fold", and the remainder to be a comment by al-Bayḍāwī. He consequently failed to see that al-Bayḍāwī is here quoting a text from which it might be inferred that *alif*, *lām*, *mīm*, etc., are particles, only to argue against such an inference.

Since the denominates [of these nouns] are single letters whereas they themselves are compounded [of several letters], each [noun] was made to start with it [i.e. the letter denominated], so that the first thing to strike the ear [when they are uttered] should be the articulation of the object denoted. The *hamḥab* was, however, used instead of the *alif* [in the word *alif*] because the *alif* cannot be used to initiate an utterance.

They are declinable

When [these nouns are] not under the rection of any operative, they are [to be pronounced] in pausal form, without desinence, [i.e. *alif*, etc. and not *alif^{un}*, etc.] since there is then nothing to require or demand such desinences. They are however capable of and subject to declension, for they do not belong to the category of words indeclinable in themselves.¹ This is why one pronounces “*ṣād*” and “*qāf*” with two quiescent letters [within the same syllable, the *ā* being reckoned as a quiescent letter]; they are not treated in the same way as “*ayna*” and “*hā’ulā’i*”.²

B. THE FAWATIḤ AS PART OF THE CHALLENGE
OF THE QUR’AN

Furthermore, because the denominates [of these nouns] are the elements of speech, the simplest units of which it is composed, the *sūrab* was introduced by a number of them in order to rouse those who are challenged by the Qur’ān³ and to thrust upon their notice that what is recited to them is basically a discourse composed of the same [elements] as they use to compose their own discourse; if, therefore, it came from any source other than God, they would not, to the last man, have failed to produce anything approaching it despite their pretentiousness and the power of their eloquence.

Again, [the chapter is introduced by these nouns] in order that the first thing to strike the ear should be something endowed with a peculiar kind of miraculous excellence, for to utter the nouns denoting letters of the alphabet is something usually associated with a man who can write and has read [books]; but coming from an illiterate man who has not mingled with the lettered it is considered improbable, wonderful, miraculous, even as writing and recitation would be.

¹ As against those accidentally uninflected, as when compounded with others—e.g. *Kbamsata ‘ashara*, *lā rajula*, etc.

² “A quiescent ending to uninflected words is standard; a departure from this to a movent one may be due to [any of] three causes: [the necessity of] avoiding the concurrence of two quiescent letters, as in *hā’ulā’i* . . .” Zamakhsharī, *al-Mufaṣṣal*, p. 51. See Howell, *Arabic Grammar*, pt. 1, p. 507.

³ De Sacy was strangely reluctant to accept the obvious meaning of *tubuddiya* in this context; he translated “ceux à qui ce livre est adressé” and referred to the challenge only in a note.

The significance of the letters taken singly

Especially is it so when he [i.e. this illiterate man] has observed [standards] of which an accomplished man of letters' excelling in his art would fall short. For in these *fawāṭiḥ* he mentioned fourteen nouns—that is to say, the nouns denoting half the letters of the alphabet if one excludes from it the *alif* which introduces it—in twenty-nine *sūrab*s, amounting to the same number [as the letters of the alphabet] if one includes the original *alif*.

Furthermore, these [fourteen letters] include half the components of each category [as distinguished mainly by phonetic criteria]. Thus he mentioned:

(1) Of the "mumbled" or "whispered"¹ (*mabmūsab*), i.e. those which involve little pressure at the outlet and which are grouped in [the mnemonic] *satashḥathuka khaṣafab* (Khaṣafah [name of a woman] shall beg importunately from thee) one half, namely ḥ, h, ṣ, s, k;

(2) and of the remainder, which are outspoken (*majhūrab*), the half combined in *lan yuqfa'a amrun* (no matter shall be curtailed);

(3) of the eight rigid [non-prolongable]² ones (*shadīdah*), combined in *ajadta ṭabaqaka* (thou hast made thy dish excellent), the four combined in *aqiṭuka* (I give thee sour cheese to eat);

(4) and of the remainder, the lax [prolongable] ones (*rakhwab*), the ten combined in *ḥummiṣa 'alā naṣriḥ* (he was roused to succour him);

(5) of the covered ones³ (*muṭbaqab*), which are *sād*, *ṭā'*, *dād*, and *ṣā'*, one half;

(6) and of the remainder, the open ones (*munfatīhab*), one half;

(7) of the resonant or movent ones⁴ (*qalqalab*, [lit. "agitation"]), i.e.

¹ Howell, iv, 1725-7. Howell calls the *mabmūsab* "surds" and the *majhūrab* "vocal"; but until the entire phonological classification used by the classical Arab grammarians is satisfactorily explained, such identification with modern categories must be regarded as tentative only. Zam., p. 189, defines *jabr* as "the placing of full stress upon the outlet of a letter and the inhibiting of breath from running on with it"; *hams* is the opposite. The outlet of a letter is its stop-position, i.e. the point (located in the throat, on the tongue, on the lips, or in the nose) at which the sound stops when the letter occurs at the end of a syllable. See Howell, iv, 1702-12.

² Zam. pp. 189-90: "Rigidity is the confinement of the sound of a letter in its outlet." The letters not listed either as rigid or lax—i.e. *lām*, *mīm*, *yā'*, *rā'*, *wāw*, *'ayn*, *nūn*, *alif*, are classed (by Zam. and others) as "indeterminate". See Howell, iv, 1727-9.

³ Zam. p. 190: "Covering is your covering the lingual outlet of a letter by the opposite part of the palate." Howell, iv, 1729-30. The "covered" would seem to correspond to emphatic consonants, the "open" to clear ones.

⁴ In the text, *ḥurūf* should be inserted before *al-qalqalab*. Howell, iv, 1733-4, calls these letters "resonant or movent" because *qalqalab* may mean either "loudness of cry" or "setting in motion". The relevance of the latter signification is that these letters are difficult to pronounce truly quiescent,

letters which are agitated when emitted and which are combined in *qad ṭubija* (it [being a hollow object] has been struck with the hand), the lesser half, because they are few;

(8) of the two soft ones (*layyin*), [the close long vowels?] the *yā'* because it is less heavy;¹

(9) of the elevated² ones (*musta'liyab*), i.e. those in [the articulation

and in the art of Qur'ānic recitation (*tajwīd*) *qalqalab* means the addition of a faint vowel sound to these same letters when they occur in pausal form. Zam., p. 190, defines *qalqalab* as "the violence of the sound rising from the chest, accompanied by urge and pressure, which you sense when you sound them [i.e. these letters] quiescent". *Ḥurūf al-qalqalab* may be identifiable with the plosives.

¹ Baydāwī is alone in restricting the "soft" letters to two. All three letters of prolongation—*alif*, *wāw*, and *yā'*—are soft, softness in fact being equated with susceptibility to lengthening. (Howell, iv, 1734-5.) Zamakhsharī makes no mention of the soft letters in the corresponding passage of *al-Kashshāf*.

It is presumably the *alif* that Baydāwī is excluding since it is distinguished from the other two in being "airy", i.e. in allowing the air to flow unrestricted either by compression of the lips as in *ā* or by raising of the tongue, as in *ī*, Howell, iv, 1736-7; furthermore, the closer kinship of the closer vowels is implicitly recognized by their interchangeability in rhyme.

"Less heavy" in this context would appear to mean either that *ī* is easier to sound than *ā*, perhaps because it involves no movement of the lips, or that it is more pleasing to the ear (see Lane, art. *ih-q-l*). The apparent association of "heaviness" with "remoteness of outlet" which one finds in discussions of *hamẓab* (Howell, iv, 1703) would be relevant if *yā'* was being compared with *alif*, not with *wāw*.

² Howell, iv, 1731-2. Zam., p. 190, defines elevation as "the tongue's rising to the palate, whether you cover or not" (cf. n. 2, p. 221). The elevated letters, together with *rā'*, when it is not pronounced with *kasrah*, are the ones which prevent *imālah* (Howell, iv, 751-2), and which make a concurrent *alif* into a back vowel instead of a front one.

This is the last of the categories which, in *al-Kashshāf*, Zamakhsharī includes in his consideration of the significance of components of the *fawātiḥ* taken singly. That is to say, he confines himself to phonetic groups of which one-half occurs in the *fawātiḥ*, and excludes those which contribute different proportions (nos. 9 and 10 below), or those which belong to a different order of classification.

In common with other grammarians, however, he recognized more groups than could be fitted into the present argument. Thus in *al-Mufaṣṣal* in the section on Incorporation (*idghām* or *iddighām*), he lists, in addition to the above (pp. 190-1)

ḥurūf as-ṣafīr, "sibilants"—*ṣād*, *ẓayn*, and *ṣīn* (Howell, iv, 1734).

ḥurūf adb-dhalāqab, "liquid", and their opposites the *muṣmataḥ*, "muted"

(Howell, iv, 1732-3 and note 5, p. 223 below).

al-munbarif, "the swerving", which is the *lām*, so called because in articulating it "the tongue swerves with the sound" (Howell, ix, 1735-6).

al-mukarrar, "the re-iterated", which is the *rā'* (Howell, iv, 1736).

of] which the sound rises to the upper palate (and they are seven: *qāf*, *ṣād*, *tā'*, *khā'*, *ghāyn*, *dād*, and *zā'*), the lesser half;

(10) and of the remainder, the depressed ones (*munkhafidab*), one half;

(11) of the letters of substitution (*badal*),¹ i.e. [those which take the place of others in word-variants], which in the view expressed by Sibawayh² and adopted by Ibn Jinnī³ are eleven, combined in *ajid tuwīta minhā* (do well—mayst thou be destroyed for it!), the six commonest and best known combined in *ahṭamayni* (two with great powers of digestion). Some, however, have added [to this category] another seven letters, namely, the *lām* in *uṣaylāl* [variant of *uṣaylān*, an irregular diminutive of *uṣlān*, pl. of *aṣīl*, "evening"], the *ṣād* and *zāyn* in [the two variants] *ṣirāṭ* and *zīrāṭ* [also *sirāṭ*, "way"], the *fā'* in *ajdāf* [variant of *ajdāth*, "graves"], the *'ayn* in *a-'an* [for *a-'an* "is it that . . ." in the dialect of Tamīm], the *thā'* in *thurūgh* [variant of *furūgh*, pl. of *fargh*, the side of the bucket whence water is poured out], and the *bā'* in *bā' smuka* [for *mā' smuka* "what is thy name?"], making their number up to 18. Of these, nine are mentioned, the six already enumerated, and the *lām*, *ṣād*, and *'ayn*;

(12) [of the non-assimilable ones, i.e.] of those which may be incorporated into their likes, but not [converted and then incorporated] into their approximates⁴—and these are 15, namely *hamzāb*, *hā'*, *'ayn*, *ṣād*, *tā'*, *mīm*, *yā'*, *khā'*, *ghāyn*, *dād*, *fā'*, *zā'*, *shīn*, *zāy*, and *wāw*—the lesser half;

(13) of those which may be [converted then] incorporated in both [likes and approximates]—and these are the remaining thirteen—the greater half, namely *hā'*, *qāf*, *kaṣf*, *rā'*, *sīn*, *lām*, and *nūn*, [preference being given to this latter group] because of the lightness and linguistic excellence (*faṣāḥah*) of incorporation; and

(14) of those which are not incorporated into their approximates, but whose approximates may be incorporated into them—and these are *mīm*, *zāy*, *sīn*, and *fā'*—one half.

(15) Because the liquids⁵ (*dhalaqiyyah*) in [the articulation of] which *al-hāwī*, "the airy", which is the *alif* (Howell, iv, 1736–7 and note 4, p. 221 above).

al-mahtūt, "the gabbled", which is the *tā'*, so called because of its weakness and faintness" (Howell, iv, 1737–8).

¹ Of these there are various lists, as authorities differed in the exact criteria they adopted (Howell, iv, 1182–1203). In Zamakhshari's reckoning (*Mufaṣṣal*, p. 172) they are 15.

² Abū Bishr 'Amr b. 'Uthmān b. Qanbar, known as Sībawayh, celebrated Baṣrī grammarian, d. between 177 and 188/793–804.

³ Abū l-Faṭḥ 'Uthmān b. Jinnī, Baghdādī grammarian, disciple of al-Fārisī; d. 392/1002 or 393/1003.

⁴ Approximates are letters whose outlets are close to each other or which belong to the same phonetic category. (Howell, iv, 1672.)

⁵ There is confusion in the terminology here. Zam., p. 190, calls these letters *hurūf adb-dhalāqab*, and defines *dhalaqab* as "reliance therein upon the

reliance is placed on the tip of the tongue—these are six, combined in *rabbun munaffalun* (a lord who has been given booty)—and

(16) the gutturals¹ (*halqīyyah*)—which are *ḥā'*, *kbā'*, *'ayn*, *ghayn*, *hā'* and *hamẓab*—are frequently used in speech, he mentioned two-thirds [of each category].

(17) Since augmented forms [of nouns and verbs] never have more than seven letters, of the ten letters of augmentation—which are combined in *al-yawma tansābu* (to-day thou shalt forget it) he mentioned seven, to draw attention to the fact. [In fact] if all words and their combinations were examined, it would be found that the letters of each category which have been omitted [from the *fawātiḥ*] are outnumbered by those which have been mentioned.

Significance of the numbers in which the letters are combined

Furthermore, he mentioned these [letters] in combinations of one, two, three, four, and five, thus proclaiming [to those challenged] that the instrument of the challenge [i.e. the Qur'an] is made up of their own words, which in their radical [unaugmented] formations either consist of one letter or are compounded of from two to five letters.

dhalq of the tongue, which is its tip". Baydāwī paraphrases this definition, incidentally transposing the prepositions *bi* and *'alā*. So defined, however, the term can apply only to the linguals *nūn*, *lām*, and *rā'*, by other authorities (see also the following note) more specifically called *adb-dhawlaqīyyah*, from *dhawlaq*, "the tip of the tongue". The *bā'*, *fā'*, and *mīm* are labials (*shafabiyyah* or *shafawīyyah*, which term, however, also covers *wāw*). The six letters may, on the other hand, be grouped together—as *ḥurūf adb-dhalaq* or *adb-dhalāqah*, or *al-ḥurūf adb-dhulq*, the association being with "profuseness of speech", hence "quickness of articulation" or "liquidity". See Lane, art. *dh-l-q*, and Howell, iv, 1732.

¹ Zam., pp. 190-1, cursorily surveys a classification of letters according to their "beginnings" (*mabda'*) ascribing it to the author of *Kitāb al-'ayn*, i.e. al-Khalīl (n. 2, p. 219). This includes:

- The uvular (*lahawīyyah*), which begin from the uvula: *qāf* and *kāf*;
- The orificial (*shajariyyah*) which begin from the orifice of the mouth: *ḥīm*, *shīn*, and *dād*;
- The apical (*'asaliyyah*) which begin from the apex of the tongue: *ṣād*, *ẓāy*, and *sīn*;
- The ante-palatal (*niṣṣ'iyyah* or *niṣṣa'iyyah*), which begin from the anterior part of the upper cavern of the mouth: *ṭā'*, *dāl*, and *tā'*.
- The gingival (*liṭhawīyyah*), which begin from the gum: *ẓā'*, *dhāl*, and *thā'*;
- The tippy (*dhawlaqīyyah*), which begin from the tip of the tongue: *rā'*, *lām*, and *nūn*;
- The labial (*shafawīyyah* or *shafabiyyah*): *wāw*, *fā'*, *bā'*, *mīm*;
- The hollow (*jawfā'*): the letters of prolongation and softness.

The gutturals would appear to have a place in this classification (Howell, iv, 1739), but Zam. makes no mention of them.

Thus he mentioned:

(1) Three monoliterals in three *sūrah*s, because such occur in the three parts of speech, viz. the noun, the verb, and the particle.

(2) Four biliterals, because such occur (a) in the particle, without suppression, as in *bal* "rather"; (b) in the verb, with suppression, as in *qul* "say!"; (c) in the noun without suppression, as in *man* "who", and (d) with suppression, as in *dam* "blood" [root *d-m-y*]. These [biliterals] occur in nine *sūrah*s because they may be found in each of the three parts of speech with three ways [of vowelising]: thus, among nouns are *man*, "who", *idb*, "when", and *dbū*, "possessor"; among verbs are *qul*, "say", *bi*, "sell", and *kbaf*, "fear"; and among particles are *min*, "from", *an*, "that", and *mudb*, "since"—this last in accordance with the usage of those who make it govern the genitive.¹

(3) Three trilaterals, because such occur in the three parts of speech, in thirteen *sūrah*s, drawing attention to the fact that the number of radical formations in [standard] use is thirteen, ten for nouns and three for verbs.²

(4) Two quadrilaterals and

(5) two quinqueliterals, to draw attention to the fact that either may be radical—as in *ja'far*, "brook" [also a man's name], *safarjal*, "quince"—or co-ordinate—as in *qardad*, "rugged hills" and *jahanfal*, "thick-lipped".³

¹ It may also govern a nominative, and is then considered a noun (Howell, I, 748-52). *Idb* is usually reckoned a noun because it has no government and has the sense of the noun. In some usages, however, it may be said to be a particle (Howell, I, 752-78). *Mudb* when followed by a nominative is considered a noun (see Howell, I, 748-52). Howell is, however, inaccurate in speaking of it as *governing* a noun in the nominative: the operative in such a construction is not *mudb* but *al-ibtidā'* (inception).

² De Sacy was in error when he took these formations to be the modifications expressing "[les] idées accessoires principales", namely the tenses of verbs and derivatives such as the infinitive noun, the participles, the instrumental noun, etc.; indeed the latter cannot be made out to number exactly ten without some arbitrary selection. The reference is clearly to the combinations of movent and quiescent letters encountered in unaugmented trilateral verbs and nouns. For the verb, these are indicated by the measures *fa'ula*, *fa'ala*, and *fa'ila*; for the noun, the measures are *fa'l*, *fi'l*, *fu'l*, *fa'al*, *fi'il*, *fu'ul*, *fa'il*, *fa'ul*, *fi'al*, and *fu'al* (Zam., pp. 105 and 126; Howell, I, 1761-70, and II, 245). Two other formations exist for the noun, but one—*fi'ul*—is neglected and the other—*fu'il*—rare (Howell, I, 1766-7); it is to exclude these that Baydāwī restricts the formations to those "in use".

³ A co-ordinate formation is one that contains an augmentative letter—either one of the radicals repeated or one of the letters of augmentation—but conforms in measure with a radical one (Howell, I, 1770-1).

Thus *qardad* is related to the trilateral *qarad*, "matted wool refuse, etc.", has the third radical repeated, and is of the same measure as the unaugmented *ja'far*; *jahanfal* is related to the radical quadrilateral *jahfalab*, "lip [of a hooved

It may be that the letters were distributed over several *sūrah*s and not enumerated all together at the beginning of the Qur'ān to serve this [last] purpose [of bringing out the significance of the various combinations] as well as to reiterate the challenge, repeatedly draw attention [to these points made], and emphasize them. The burden is that the instrument of the challenge [i.e. the Qur'ān] is made up of [units of] the same class as these letters, or as [the words] thus [i.e. in the various manners described above] compounded of them.¹

OTHER VIEWS CONSIDERED²I *The Majority View*

The Fawātiḥ are names given to chapters of the Qur'ān

It has also been said—and in this the greater number concur—that these [*fawātiḥ*] are names given to the chapters to draw attention to the fact that they are words of known formation, so that had they not been

animal]”, has an additional *nūn*, and is of the same measure as the unaugmented quinqueliteral *safarjal*. For the various formations of unaugmented quadrilaterals and quinqueliterals see Howell, I, 1796–1800 and 1808–13.

¹ De Sacy's reading of *ka-dhā* here, “comme par exemple, le mot *dhā*”, seems irrelevant; *dhā* is best taken as depending on the verbal idea of *al-mu'allaf*.

² The somewhat involved discussion of these views may be outlined as follows:

- I. The majority view is that the *fawātiḥ* are names of *sūrah*s.
 - A. Exponents of this view argue for it as follows:
 1. The *fawātiḥ* must have been intelligible;
 2. If so, only one of the following alternatives is possible:
 - (a) They are names given to *sūrah*s; or
 - (b) They are something else, and this “something” can be only one of two inadmissible alternatives:
 - (i) that they retain the common signification they have in Arabic, and this we know that they do not;
 - (ii) that they were words not in use among Arabs, and this conflicts with the assertion that the Qur'ān is eloquent Arabic throughout.
 - B. Exponents of the majority view debate rival theories.
 1. These alternative theories are:
 - (a) that the *fawātiḥ* are intended to indicate the introduction of a new discourse;
 - (b) that they are abbreviations;
 - (c) that their significance lies in their numerical values;
 - (d) that they are oaths.
 2. The upholders of these theories raise objections to the majority view on several grounds.
 - (a) that the one object is denominated by several names;
 - (b) that the name is identified with its denominate;
 - (c) that it implies the part is inferior to the whole.

a revelation from God, they [the opponents] would not have proved incapable of emulating them

I.A *The Argument for the majority view*

The argument put forward in favour of this view is that (I.A.1) if these words were not intelligible, then employing them in addressing others would be like employing words which are not in usage, or like speaking to an Arab in negro language; the Qur'ān would not then be eloquence and guidance in its entirety, and it would not be possible to make it an instrument of challenge.

I.A.2 If they are [words whose meaning is] intelligible, then they are meant to stand either (a) for the chapters at the outset of which they appear, being distinctive names for them, or (b) for something else. The second alternative, however, is invalid because what was intended was either (i) the common signification they have in the Arabic language [namely, letters of the alphabet]—and it is obvious that it is not so—or (ii) something else, and this is invalid because the Qur'ān was revealed in their language, for He (may He be exalted) said: “in an eloquent Arabic tongue” [26: 195]; it cannot therefore be interpreted in accordance with what is not in this language.

I.B *The majority's rejection of rival views:*

It cannot be said [for reasons to be given two paragraphs below] why should it not be

(a) as Qutrub¹ held—that these letters were added to premonish and to indicate that one discourse has come to an end and another is beginning;

3. Exponents of the majority view argue against the alternative theories expounded in B. 1.

4. They rebut the objections levelled against their own.

C. Bayḍawī nevertheless considers his own theory superior.

1. It can be more positively established;

2. It is more subtle;

3. It does not necessitate the transference of words from one class to another;

4. It does not entail giving one object several names derived from one source.

II. There are yet other possibilities:

A. That the *fawātiḥ* are names of the Qur'ān;

B. That they are names of God;

C. That they are an allusion to the believer's duty to praise God constantly;

D. That they are a mystery.

The numbering used in this outline is reproduced in the full translation.

¹ Abū 'Alī Muḥammad b. al-Mustanīr, Baṣrī grammarian, disciple of Sībawayh, d. 206/821-2.

- or (b) that they stand for words of which they are a part and which have been abbreviated to these letters, as was done by a poet when he said: "I told her: 'Stop,' and she said, 'qāf' [for *waqaftu*,¹ I stop]"—it being related of Ibn 'Abbās² that he said that *alif* [stands for] God's favours (*ālā*), *lām* for His graciousness (*luṭf*), and *mīm* for his sovereignty (*mulk*); according to him also, *alif-lām-rā* and *ḥā-mīm* and *nūn* together make up *ar-Raḥmān* (the Merciful); according to him also *alif-lām-mīm* means "I am God the all-Knowing" (*anā Allāhu a'lamu*), and there are similar meanings to the other *fawātiḥ*; according to him also, the *alif* is taken out of Allāh, the *lām* out of Jibril, and the *mīm* out of Muḥammad, meaning that the Qur'an was sent down by God on Jibril's tongue to Muḥammad;
- or (c) that these letters indicate by the total of their numerical values the length of time that certain nations lived, or their allotted spans, as was contended by Abū 'l-Āliyah,³ basing himself on the Tradition that [the Prophet] (upon whom be peace), when the Jews came to him, recited to them "*alif-lām-mīm*" and [the rest of] *sūrat al-baqarab*. They reckoned up [the numerical equivalents] then said, "How are we [expected] to accept a religion the duration of which is 71 years?" The Apostle of God (peace be upon him) smiled, so they asked, "Are there other [combinations]?" He replied, "*alif-lām-mīm-ṣād*; *alif-lām-rā*; *alif-lām-mīm-rā*"⁴. So they said, "You confuse us; we do not know which one to go by". His recitation of the combinations in that order [of ascending numerical value] and their persistence in their deduction is an indication of the fact [that the significance of these letters lies in their numerical value]; and although this denotation [of numbers by letters] is not Arab [in origin], yet it is so widely known among nations, including the Arabs, that it may be appended to Arabized words [used in the Qur'ān], such as *mishkāb* (niche for a lamp), *sijjīl* (stone of baked clay), and *qistās* (or *qustās*: balance);
- or (d) that they stand for isolated letters and are sworn by, for they are exalted since they are the component elements of God's fair names (may He be exalted) and the substance of which His speech is compounded.

¹ Or, according to de Sacy, *qif* (stop!).

² 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abbās, cousin of the Prophet and ancestor of the 'Abbāsids.

³ Rafī' Riyāḥī b. Mahrān, a *tābi'*, d. 90/708-9 or 93/711-12.

⁴ *alif-lām-mīm* (*Sūrats* 2, 3, 29, 30, 31, 32) 1+30+40=71; *alif-lām-mīm-ṣād* (*Sūrab* 7) 1+30+40+90=161; *alif-lām-rā* (*Sūrats* 10, 11, 12, 14, 15) 1+30+200=231; *alif-lām-mīm-rā* (*Sūrab* 13) 1+30+40+200=271. The tradition is not found in any of the authoritative collections.

I.B.2 *Consideration of objections to majority view*

At the same time [as is argued by objectors to the majority view] to say that [these *fawātiḥ*] are names of the chapters (a) makes them incompatible with linguistic usage among Arabs, for they deem it a solecism to give anything three or more names; (b) [it also] implies the identity of the name with the denominate [since these letters are themselves part of the chapter], and (c) it results in making a part inferior to the whole, since the name is of a lower natural order than the denominate.¹

I.B.3 *The majority's arguments against rival views*

[Of the views in the last paragraph but one, we say they are untenable] because: (a) we say that these terms are not known to have been used additionally to premonish or to indicate the interruption [of a discourse]; there is indeed a resumption [of the discourse] with them as with other terms by virtue of the fact that they are the beginnings of chapters, but it does not follow that they should have no meaning within their own limits. (b) Nor were they used as abbreviations of particular words in the language of the Arabs. As for [the occurrence of such abbreviations in] poetry, it is exceptional. As for the views of Ibn 'Abbās (God be pleased with him), they [do no more than] draw attention to the fact that these letters are the source of [the divine] names and the elements of speech, and they give good illustrations of this—indeed, do you not see that he has reckoned each letter as part of different words? They do not interpret these terms or associate them with any particular meaning to the exclusion of others, for there is nothing to particularize them, in respect either of sound or of meaning. (c) Nor [is their significance to be sought] in the reckoning of their sums, thus appending them to Arabized terms; the Tradition [quoted] gives no indication [that they are to be so regarded], for it may be that he [the Prophet] smiled out of wonder at their ignorance. (d) As for making out that they are objects of an oath, although not impossible, the view necessitates the subaudition of elements of which there is no indication.

I.B.4 *Rebuttal of the objections raised to the majority view*

[One may further say that] (a) giving anything three names is condemned only if the three are compounded and made into one name in the same way as Baalbek [has been formed by the fusion of two nouns]; if, however, they are kept separate as is done with numerals, then the practice is not condemned. Sufficient is [the authority of]

¹ De Sacy translates *muta'akkbir* as "postérieur" and notes: "Cette supposition seroit contraire à l'opinion orthodoxe qui regarde l'Alcoran comme éternel." *Ta'akkbir bi r-rutbah* does, however, denote inferiority in rank.

Sibawayh when he equates the use as names of a sentence, of a line of poetry, or of a group of letters of the alphabet. (b) [To the second objection it may be countered that] the denominate is the whole of the chapter and the name would be a part of it; there is therefore no identity; (c) [and to the third, that] the *fātiḥah* would be considered superior in itself, inferior only in so far as it is a name; there is therefore no logical interdependence.

I.C *Bayḍāwī's preference*

Yet the first way [of taking the *fawāṭiḥ*] is more nearly determinable [than is the majority view], more in keeping with the subtleties of revelation, freer from the objections that it necessitates the [arbitrary] transference of words from one predicament to another and that it implies [—since several *sūrah*s have the same *fātiḥah*—] the sharing by several objects of proper nouns given by the one designator—a practice which frustrates the purpose pursued in the giving of proper nouns.

II *Other Possibilities*

It has also been said (A) that they are names of the Qur'ān, and that for this reason the words *al-kitāb* and *al-Qur'ān* have been predicated to them. And it has been said (B) that they are names of God (may He be exalted), this being indicated by the fact that 'Alī (God be pleased with him) used to say, "O *kāf-hā'-yā'-ayn-ṣād*" and "O *hā-mīm, 'ayn-sīn-qāf*"; but perhaps he meant, "O Thou that hast revealed them". It has also been said (C) that the *alif* is emitted from the back of the throat, which is the first of the outlets, the *lām* from the tip of the tongue, which is the middle outlet, and the *mīm* from the lip, which is the last; and that they were grouped together to hint that to the worshipper the beginning, the middle, and the end of his speech should be the mention of God (may He be exalted). It has also been said (D) that it [i.e. the meaning of the *fawāṭiḥ*] is a mystery, the understanding of which is restricted to God (may He be exalted); something of the kind has been attributed to the four Caliphs and to other Companions of the Prophet, but perhaps they meant secrets between God (may He be exalted) and His apostle (God bless and preserve him), symbols which no one else was intended to understand, for it is improbable that one should utter what can convey no meaning.

SYNTAX

If you take them to be (1) names of God (may He be exalted) or of the Qur'ān or of the chapters, then they have a place in inflectional syntax. They are either: (a) in the nominative, being inchoative or enunciative;¹

¹ In the present instance, the *fātiḥah* would be inchoative if one read: "*Alif-lām-mīm* is that book..." It would be enunciative if one read: "[This is] *alif-lām-mīm*, that book..."

or (b) in the accusative by subaudition of a verb expressing an oath, as in *Allāha la-af'alanna* ([I swear by] God that I shall do so) where—as has been said—“Allāh” may be in the accusative or in another case;¹ or (c) in the genitive by subaudition of a jurative particle. [If they fall within inflectional syntax, then] utterance in inflected form and [in pausal form as if a] citation are both permissible if the *fātiḥah* consists of a single letter or is of the same measure as a single word—as in *ḥā-mim*, which is commensurable with *Hābil*; in other combinations, only the [the pausal form on the ground of] citation is permitted. A more detailed exposition of this will be given later,² God willing.

If, however, (2) you take them to retain their meaning [in common usage], then: (a) if they are understood to stand for “what is made up of these letters”, they are in the nominative case, being inchoative or enunciative, as above; but if (b) you consider them objects of oaths, then each word therein is in the accusative or the genitive as in the two variants *Allāha* or *Allāhi la-af'alanna*, and together with the verb understood they form a jurative sentence.

And if (3) you consider them abbreviations of words or sounds used as premonitory particles, they have no place in inflectional syntax, but are like inceptive propositions or separate words in an enumeration.

If they are taken to be independent of what follows, they are to be read in the pausal form found at the end of sentences.

THEIR NUMBERING IN QUR'ANIC VERSES

Except among *Kūfans*, none of them is reckoned as a verse. According to the *Kūfans*, *alif-lām-mim* wherever it occurs, *alif-lām-mim-ṣād*, *kāf-hā-yā-ayn-ṣād*, *ṭā-hā*, *ṭā-sin-mim*, *ḥā-mim*, *yā-sin* are each one verse; *ḥā-mim 'ayn-sin-qāf* are two verses, and the others are not verses. This is a matter of punctuation in which there is no scope for [reasoning by] analogy.

¹ The alternative to the accusative is the genitive. The grammarians ascribe the accusative not to the regimen of the verb (which is intransitive), but to the suppression of the particle—see Howell, iv, 915–20. This particular construction is *not* discussed earlier in Bayḏāwī's work, but there is a brief mention of nouns put into the accusative by suppressed verbs in his commentary on *al-ḥamd li-llāh*, 1: 1.

² See commentary on *ṣād*, in *Sūrah* 38.