

Meaning of Alif Laam Meem

1. Abbreviated Letters

Alif Laam Meem, Ya Seen, Ha Meem', etc. are known as Al-Muqattaat i.e. the abbreviated letters. There are 29 letters in the Arabic Alphabet (if hamza and alif are considered as two letters) and there are 29 surahs i.e. chapters in the Glorious Qur'an that have the abbreviated letters prefixed to them. These abbreviated letters some times occur alone, sometimes in a combination of two letters and sometimes in a combination of three, four or five letters.

a. Three surahs are pre-fixed with only one letter:

- (i) Surah Sad chapter 38 with Sad
- (ii) Surah Qaf chapter 50 with Qaf
- (iii) Surah Nun or Qalam chapter 68 with Nun

b. The combination of two letters occurs in 10 surahs:

Three of them occur only once each:

- (i) Surah Ta Ha chapter 20 has Ta Ha
- (ii) Surah Al Naml starting with chapter 27 has Ta Seen
- (iii) Surah Ya Seen chapter 36 has Ya Seen

Ha Meem occurs in seven consecutive Surahs from Surah 40 to Surah 46:

- (i) Surah Ghafir or Al-Mu'min chapter 40
- (ii) Surah Fussilat or Ha Meem chapter 41
- (iii) Surah Al Shura chapter 42
- (iv) Surah Al Zukhruf chapter 43

- (v) Surah Al Dukhan chapter 44
- (vi) Surah Al Jathiyah chapter 45
- (vii) Surah Al Ahqaf chapter 46

c. There are three combinations of three letters each occurring in 14 surahs:

Alif Laam Meem occurs in six surahs

- (i) Surah Al Baqarah chapter 2
- (ii) Surah Ali 'Imran chapter 3
- (iii) Surah Al 'Ankabut chapter 29
- (iv) Surah Al Rum chapter 30
- (v) Surah Luqman chapter 31
- (vi) Surah Al Sajdah chapter 32

Alif Laam Ra occurs in six consecutive surahs: Surah 10 to Surah 15:

- (i) Surah Yunus chapter 10
- (ii) Surah Hud chapter 11
- (iii) Surah Yusuf chapter 12
- (iv) Surah Al Rad chapter 13
- (v) Surah Ibrahim chapter 14
- (vi) Surah Al Hijr chapter 15

Ta Seen Meem occurs in two Surahs:

- (i) Surah Al-Shura chapter 26
- (ii) Surah Al-Qasas chapter 28

d. Combination of four letters occurs twice:

- (i) Surah Aaraf chapter 7: Alif Laam Meem Sad
- (ii) Surah Anfal chapter 8: Alif Laam Meem Ra

e. Combination of five letters occurs twice:

- (i) Surah Maryam chapter 19 begins with Kaf Ha Ya Ayn Sad
- (ii) Surah Al-Shura chapter 42 begins with Ha Meem Ayn Seen Qaf

Surah Al-Shura chapter 42 has a double combination of abbreviated letters one set of two letters followed by one set of three letters.

2. Meanings of these abbreviated letters

The meaning and purpose of these letters is uncertain. There have been a variety of explanations offered by Muslim scholars through the ages. A few among them are:

- (i) These letters might be abbreviations for certain sentences and words for instance, Alif Laam Meem means Ana-Alahu -a'Laam or Nun meaning Noor (light), etc.
- (ii) These letters are not abbreviations but symbols and names of Allah or something else.
- (iii) These letters were used for rhyming.
- (iv) These letters have some numerical significance as the semitic letters also have numerical values.
- (v) These letters were used to attract the attention of the Prophet (and later his audience).

Several volumes have been written on the significance of these abbreviations.

3. Best explanation of abbreviated letters:

Of all the explanations given by various scholars, the one which is authentic and also supported by Tafsir of Ibne-Kathir, Zamakshari and Ibne-Taiymiyah is the following:

The human body is composed of various fundamental elements that are found in nature. Clay and dust are composed of the same fundamental elements. Yet it would be absurd to say that a human being is exactly the same as the dust.

We can all have access to the elements that are found in the human body, and add a few gallons of water, which is the constitution of the human body. We know the elements in the human body and yet we are at a loss when asked the secret of life.

Similarly the Qur'an addresses those people who reject its Divine authority. It tells them that this Qur'an, is in your own language, and over which the Arabs took pride. It is composed of the same letters that the Arabs used to express themselves most eloquently.

The Arabs were very proud of their language and Arabic was at its peak when the Qur'an was revealed. With the letters Alif Laam Meem, Yaa Seen, Ha-Meem, etc., (in English we would say A, B, C, D) the Qur'an challenges mankind to produce a Surah at least somewhat similar to the Qur'an in beauty and elegance, if they doubt its authenticity.

Initially, the Qur'an challenges all the men and jinn to produce a recital like the Qur'an and adds that they would not be able to do it even if they backed each other. This challenge is mentioned in Surah Isra chapter 17 verse 88 and in Surah Tur chapter 52 verse 34.

Later the Qur'an repeats the challenge in Surah Hud chapter 11 verse 13 by saying produce ten surahs like it and later in Surah Yunus chapter 10 verse 38 produce one surah like it and finally the easiest challenge is given in Surah Al-Baqarah chapter 2 verses 23 and 24.

"And if ye are in doubt as to what We have revealed from time to time to Our servant, then produce a Surah like thereunto; and call your witnesses or helpers (if there are any) besides Allah if your doubts are true.

But if ye cannot – and of a surety ye cannot – then fear the fire whose fuel is men and stones – which is prepared for those who reject faith."

[Al-Qur'an 2:23-24]

To compare the skill of two artisans, they must be given samples of the same raw material and their performance evaluated in performing the same task. If they are tailors they must be provided with the same fabrics. The raw materials of the Arabic language are these letters Alif Laam Meem, Ya Seen (in English it is A, B, C, D, etc.) The miraculous nature of the language of the Qur'an does not lie only in the fact that it is the Word of Allah, but also in the fact that although made up of the same letters in which the pagan Arabs took pride, it has not been rivalled.

The Arabs are noted for their rhetoric ability, eloquence and meaningful expression. Just as the constituents of the human body are known to us and can be obtained by us, the letters comprising the Qur'an, such as Alif Laam Meem are known to us, and used frequently to formulate words. Life cannot be created by us, even if we possess knowledge of the constituents of the human body. Similarly we cannot capture the same eloquence and beauty of expression that we find in the Qur'an, despite knowing the letters that constitute the Qur'an. The Qur'an thus proves its Divine origin.

4. Miraculous quality of Qur'an mentioned immediately after these broken letters

Therefore immediately after these broken letters are mentioned in the Qur'an, the following verses speak about the miracle of the Qur'an, and its authority e.g. in Surah Baqarah Chapter 2 verse 1-2:

"Alif Laam Meem.

This is the Book; in it is guidance sure, without doubt, to those who fear Allah."

[Al-Qur'an 2:1-2]