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Mount Qaf in Classical and Modern Exegesis: An Epistemological Analysis of the Scientific Paradigm in Qur'anic Interpretation

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Abstract

Purpose - Differences between classical and modern interpretations of Qur'anic cosmological verses are often attributed to the development of modern science. However, these differences are rooted in a deeper shift in knowledge paradigms. This study aims to explain this paradigm shift through an analysis of the letter Qaf at the beginning of Surah Qaf, examining how the narrative of Mount Qaf is understood within classical and modern exegetical cosmologies and exploring its epistemological implications for Qur'anic studies. **Methods/Approach** - This research employs a qualitative library-based approach using descriptive-analytical and comparative-paradigmatic methods. Primary data consist of *Mafatih al-Ghayb* by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi and *al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir* by Ibn 'Ashur. The analysis compares the argumentative structures of both exegetical works at the level of epistemological assumptions, particularly regarding the authority of transmitted reports, rational inquiry, and the limits of valid knowledge about the cosmos. **Findings** - The study shows that differences in interpreting the letter Qāf and the narrative of Mount Qāf are not primarily the result of scientific progress but rather stem from changes in standards of knowledge validation and shifting horizons of reality that shape exegetical perspectives. Classical tafsir operates within an epistemology grounded in transmitted tradition and traditional cosmology, whereas modern tafsir situates scientific rationality as a new interpretive horizon. **Implications** - These findings highlight the importance of an epistemological approach in tafsir studies, particularly in reading cosmological verses, enabling a more balanced and methodologically grounded dialogue between classical and modern interpretive traditions. **Originality/Value** - This study reframes the debate from a cosmological true-false dichotomy toward an epistemological analysis of how tafsir operates within different historical knowledge contexts, offering a more proportional framework for engaging both classical and modern exegetical traditions.

Keywords: Mount Qaf; Qur'anic Exegesis; Tafsir Paradigm; Al-Razi; Ibn 'Ashur.

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Introduction

The disjointed letters (*hurūf muqatta‘ah*) constitute one of the most distinctive phenomena in the Qur’an, attracting the attention of exegetes, linguists, and theologians since the earliest periods of Islamic scholarship. These isolated letters, which appear at the opening of several chapters – such as *Alif Lām Mīm*, *Ḥā Mīm*, *Yā Sīn*, and *Qāf* – do not form recognizable lexical units within the structure of the Arabic language, thereby raising fundamental questions concerning their function and meaning. In the classical exegetical tradition, this phenomenon was never interpreted in a single, definitive manner; rather, it generated a wide spectrum of interpretations, ranging from the view that these letters constitute divine mysteries (*asrār ilāhiyyah*) known only to God, to symbolic readings that associate them with divine names or attributes, oaths, or linguistic challenges directed at the Arabs [2].

Exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī generally compiled diverse reports and opinions without imposing a single conclusive interpretation, reflecting a methodological caution toward texts considered to possess a transcendent dimension [3]. At the same time, the presence of the *hurūf muqatta‘ah* was understood as part of the Qur’an’s rhetorical structure, underscoring the miraculous nature of the language of revelation: the scripture is composed of the same letters used in human speech, yet it produces meanings that transcend human capability [4]. Thus, the classical exegetical tradition positioned the *hurūf muqatta‘ah* as a linguistic-theological and rhetorical phenomenon rather than as an object of technical scientific or cosmological explanation. This approach demonstrates that the interpretation of the disjointed letters is rooted more firmly in the epistemology of revelation, transmitted tradition, and linguistic analysis than in unrestricted rational speculation. Accordingly, any focused study of a particular disjointed letter must be situated within the broader framework of this exegetical tradition so as not to lose sight of its methodological context.

Among all the *hurūf muqatta‘ah*, the letter *Qāf* at the beginning of Sūrat Qāf occupies a unique position because it appears as a single, independent letter and is associated with a specific cosmological narrative in classical Islamic literature. Numerous works of exegesis, history, and cosmography mention Mount Qāf (*Jabal Qāf*) as a cosmic mountain that encircles the earth or marks the boundary of the universe [5]. This narrative is often linked to various reports, including *Isrā‘īliyyāt* traditions and broader strands of Islamic literary culture, thereby shaping a multilayered image of the cosmos distinct from modern cosmology [6]. In some classical exegetical works, the letter *Qāf* is interpreted as an allusion or symbol related to this mountain, although the degree of affirmation varies among

exegetes [7]. Historical and cosmographical writings further reinforced the narrative of Mount Qāf as part of the cosmological imagination of pre-modern Muslim societies, combining theological, geographical, and mythological elements. This fact indicates that classical exegesis was not entirely silent regarding the structure of the universe; rather, it developed its own cosmological model rooted in the intellectual and cultural traditions of its time [8]. This uniqueness makes the letter *Qāf* an exceptional case in the study of the *hurūf muqattaʿah*, as it raises not only linguistic questions but also opens the door to broader cosmological discourse. Nevertheless, modern scholarship often treats this narrative as non-scientific or merely legendary, without examining its epistemological function within the exegetical tradition. Therefore, reexamining the position of the Mount Qāf narrative in classical exegesis is essential for understanding how traditional cosmology operated within Qurʾanic interpretation.

The development of Qurʾanic exegesis in the modern era reveals a significant paradigm shift, particularly with the emergence of approaches that seek to read the Qurʾan in light of modern scientific knowledge. Within this perspective, the revealed text is understood as containing indications of natural phenomena that can be explained through contemporary science [9]. In the context of the *hurūf muqattaʿāt*, this tendency often abandons explanations grounded in transmitted reports and classical cosmology, replacing them with symbolic or rational interpretations aligned with modern intellectual horizons. The letter *Qāf*, for instance, is no longer understood in connection with the narrative of Mount Qāf as known in the classical cosmological tradition, but is instead treated as a linguistic sign or symbol detached from traditional cosmological constructions.

This shift reflects a transformation in the epistemological horizon from pre-modern societies, which accepted the authority of transmitted tradition as a primary source of knowledge, to modern societies that place rationality and science as the standard for validating truth [10]. Consequently, modern exegesis is often perceived as more rational and scientific, while classical exegesis is viewed as less relevant to the development of modern knowledge. In reality, however, classical exegesis operated within a different epistemological framework rather than in the absence of explanation. It possessed its own cosmological model and knowledge structure, shaped by the interaction between the scriptural text, transmitted traditions, and the intellectual horizons of its time [11].

Therefore, it is essential to examine these differences fairly in order to avoid an ahistorical evaluation of the exegetical tradition. This study is important because it clarifies how shifts in paradigms of knowledge influence the

understanding of revealed texts, particularly in cosmological issues related to the letter *Qāf* [12]. By comparing the interpretations found in *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* by Ibn ‘Āshūr, the study demonstrates that their differences are not merely differences in content, but differences in their conception of the authority of knowledge. The primary objective of this research is to examine how al-Rāzī interprets the letter *Qāf* and the extent to which the narrative of Mount Qāf appears in his exegesis; how Ibn ‘Āshūr understands the letter and his position toward classical cosmological reports; and what epistemological implications arise from these differences. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the letter *Qāf* as a specific case within the phenomenon of the *muqāṭṭa‘āt*, as well as in its comparative analysis that emphasizes paradigmatic differences rather than merely divergent opinions.

Based on this background, the research questions can be formulated as follows: How does al-Rāzī interpret the letter *Qāf* at the beginning of Sūrat Qāf, and to what extent does the narrative of Mount Qāf appear in *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*? How does Ibn ‘Āshūr interpret the letter *Qāf* in *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, and how does he respond to classical cosmological reports? What paradigmatic differences underlie these two approaches? These questions aim to reveal the relationship between text, tradition, and intellectual context in the process of Qur’anic interpretation. Ultimately, this study affirms that differences in interpretation often stem from differences in epistemology rather than merely differences in data or information. Accordingly, this article seeks to analyze the interpretation of the letter *Qāf* in the exegeses of al-Rāzī and Ibn ‘Āshūr in order to understand how differences in knowledge paradigms shape cosmological constructions within the Islamic exegetical tradition.

Method

This study employs a qualitative library research design using a descriptive-analytical and comparative approach. The object of analysis is the interpretation of the letter Qāf at the beginning of Sūrah Qāf in two representative exegetical works from different intellectual periods: *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī as a model of classical rational-theological tafsīr, and *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* by Ibn ‘Āshūr as a model of modern tafsīr engaging with contemporary knowledge horizons. The data consist of textual units discussing the letter Qāf, the narratives of Mount Qāf, and the linguistic and cosmological arguments that reflect the epistemological assumptions of each exegete. Data were collected through identification of primary texts, review of supporting literature within the classical tafsīr tradition, thematic classification, and close reading to capture the structure of argumentation and the intellectual context of interpretation.

Data analysis applies qualitative content analysis combined with a comparative–paradigmatic approach. The analytical stages include a systematic reading of the interpretations of al-Rāzī and Ibn ‘Āshūr, identifying the position of cosmological narratives within each tafsīr, and comparing them at the level of epistemological assumptions regarding the authority of transmitted reports, rational inquiry, and the validity of knowledge about the natural world. The study is limited to cosmological aspects directly related to the letter Qāf and does not aim to verify or refute the narrative of Mount Qāf; rather, it examines the transformation of its function and the standards of interpretive validation in the history of Qur’anic exegesis. The synthesis of findings is directed toward revealing the shift in epistemological horizons within the exegetical tradition.

Result and Discussion

1. The Spectrum of Interpretations of the Disjoined Letters (*Hurūf Muqaṭṭa‘ah*)

The disjoined letters that appear at the beginning of several Qur’anic chapters constitute one of the most distinctive phenomena in the exegetical tradition. They consist of separate letters that are recited but do not form words in the conventional sense. From the era of the Companions to classical exegetes, discussions of these letters never resulted in a single consensus [13]. This indicates that the topic lies at the intersection of theology, linguistics, and the rhetoric of revelation. Scholars have viewed these letters not merely as phonetic elements, but as signs containing divine intent—whether comprehensible or remaining part of the mystery of revelation.

In *Zād al-Masīr*, Ibn al-Jawzī summarizes the diversity of scholarly opinions into six principal views. This classification is significant because it demonstrates that discourse on the *hurūf muqaṭṭa‘ah* has been pluralistic and open from the outset. Accordingly, any discussion of a particular letter, including Qāf, must be situated within this broader framework of interpretive diversity.

The first view, holds that the disjoined letters belong to the category of *mutashābih* verses whose true meaning is known only to God [14]. This opinion is attributed to a number of Companions and Successors and emphasizes *tawaqquf* (suspension of judgment) as a form of reverence toward the mystery of revelation. From this perspective, the letters underscore the limitations of human reason before the divine text.

The second view, understands them as part of the divine names (*asmā’ Allāh*) [15]. The letters are seen as fragments of divine names carrying theological symbolism. In this sense, the opening of a chapter becomes an allusion to the presence and attributes of God prior to the delivery of the revelatory message.

The third view, interprets the disjointed letters as a form of oath (*qasam*), with the subsequent verse functioning as the response to that oath [16]. In Arabic rhetoric, oaths serve to emphasize the truth of a statement. If understood in this way, the letters possess a strong rhetorical function within the communicative structure of revelation.

The fourth view, interprets the letters as an indication of the Qur'an's miraculous nature [17]. The scripture is composed of the same letters used in the Arabic language of its audience, yet it remains inimitable. By presenting the fundamental letters of language at the opening of chapters, the Qur'an appears to challenge humanity to produce something comparable. This perspective highlights the dimension of linguistic *i'jāz*.

The fifth view, states that the letters function as names of the respective chapters [18]. This approach is practical and philological, without emphasizing deeper symbolic meanings.

The sixth view, regards the letters as codes or abbreviations common in Arabic communication, referring to meanings that were understood in their original context but are now difficult to reconstruct with certainty [19].

In addition to these six views, some reports connect the disjointed letters to the early preaching context of the Prophet, when the polytheists created disturbances during the recitation of the Qur'an. The unusual letters served to capture attention and arouse curiosity, thereby creating a receptive atmosphere before the main message was delivered. This perspective underscores the rhetorical and communicative function of the *hurūf muqaṭṭa'ah* in the transmission of revelation [20].

Taken together, these diverse views demonstrate that the disjointed letters have always been understood as a multi-interpretive phenomenon. The absence of a single consensus opens space for thematic studies of specific letters, including the letter *Qāf*. Within this framework, the letter *Qāf* must be examined as part of a long-standing exegetical tradition that has debated its status, function, and meaning. By situating it within this sphere of interpretive diversity, the analysis of the letter *Qāf* remains grounded in the epistemological framework underlying the broader discussion of the *hurūf muqaṭṭa'ah*.

2. The Meaning of the Letter *Qāf* in Classical Exegesis

The letter *Qāf* (ق) at the beginning of Sūrat Qāf belongs to the group of disjointed letters that have been the subject of extensive debate among exegetes since the earliest periods of Islamic scholarship. Some scholars understand this letter as part of the divine rhetorical style, not intended to convey a specific lexical meaning but rather to function as an opening sign of revelation with rhetorical

and symbolic purposes. This view is attributed to Mujāhid and a number of early scholars, and was reaffirmed by Ibn Kathīr, who regarded *Qāf* as a letter of the Arabic alphabet similar to *alif lām mīm* or *šād*, without a specific interpretation [21]. A similar stance is evident in the critical approach of Abū Ḥayyān, who considered many interpretations of the letter to lack a firm foundation and therefore refrained from elaborating upon them [22].

At the same time, some exegetes proposed possible meanings, such as interpreting *Qāf* as a name of God, a name of the Qur'an, or even an abbreviation of a particular expression, as reported from Ibn 'Abbās and Qatādah in various exegetical works [23]. This diversity demonstrates that from the outset the letter *Qāf* did not possess a single dominant interpretation; rather, it became an open field of discourse reflecting the methodological approaches of exegetes toward the disjointed letters in general.

Some classical exegetes also understood *Qāf* as a divine oath or as the opening of the chapter intended to emphasize the message that follows, an approach rooted in the rhetorical analysis of Qur'anic Arabic. In reports compiled by al-Ṭabarī and summarized by later commentators, *Qāf* is described as one of the names of God by which He swears, or as a name of the Qur'an itself [24]. Encyclopedic commentaries such as those of al-Qurṭubī and al-Baghawī gathered additional views, including the idea that the letter serves as a key to several divine names beginning with *qāf*, such as *al-Qadīr*, *al-Qāhir*, and *al-Qarīb*, or that it signifies the command "stop" (*qif*) as an ethical reminder to obey divine injunctions [25]. Some also interpreted it as an abbreviation of the phrase *quḍiyya al-amr* ("the matter has been decreed"), analogous to interpretations of *ḥā mīm* in other chapters, although certain exegetes considered this interpretation weak due to the absence of clear textual indicators [26]. In some reports, the letter is even regarded as the name of the chapter itself, reflecting a naming function similar to that found in several other chapters [27]. These varied interpretations illustrate the tendency of classical exegesis to accommodate multiple possibilities as long as they remained within the horizons of the Arabic language and transmitted tradition.

Among these interpretations, one of the most prominent is the understanding of *Qāf* as the name of a concrete entity within traditional cosmology – Mount Qāf, a massive mountain believed to encircle the world or the universe [28]. This view is reported from figures such as Ibn 'Abbās, 'Ikrimah, and al-Ḍaḥḥāk, and was later compiled by exegetes across different periods, including Ibn 'Aṭiyyah, al-Māwardī, Ibn al-Jawzī, and al-Shawkānī [29]. Although not all exegetes accepted these reports without criticism – as shown by Ibn Kathīr, who associated them with *Isrā'īliyyāt* – their repeated appearance

across numerous exegetical works demonstrates that this cosmological interpretation formed a genuine part of the classical exegetical heritage [30].

Thus, the meaning of the letter *Qāf* in the classical tradition cannot be reduced to a single interpretation; rather, it encompasses a broad range of meanings, from linguistic symbol and divine name to rhetorical function and representation of traditional cosmology. This diversity provides an essential foundation for understanding how this single letter would later be interpreted differently within classical and modern exegetical paradigms.

3. The Mount *Qāf* in Classical Islamic Cosmology

To understand how the letter *Qāf* became associated with a particular cosmological narrative, it is first necessary to examine how classical literature describes the concept of Mount *Qāf* within the structure of the cosmos. In classical exegetical works and early Islamic cosmological writings, Mount *Qāf* is portrayed as a colossal structure encircling the earth and marking the boundary of the human world [31]. It is not understood as an ordinary mountain located in a specific geographical region, but rather as a cosmic ring situated at the edge of the horizon, beyond the reach of human experience [32]. Reports from the Companions and Successors – later compiled in exegetical works and texts such as *al-‘Aẓamah* – depict it as a massive barrier separating the inhabited world from the realms beyond [33]. Beyond *Qāf*, a vast ocean is said to surround the earth, forming a layered cosmological model: the earth at the center, encircled by a cosmic ocean, and bounded by Mount *Qāf* as the enclosing ring. This position renders *Qāf* a kind of “edge of the world,” where habitable space ends and the inaccessible realm begins. Some reports even mention the existence of another earth beyond it, suggesting that the human world constitutes only one part of a much larger created system [34]. Mount *Qāf* thus functions as both an ontological and geographical boundary within traditional cosmology, marking the transition from the visible world to the hidden realm beyond the cosmic veil.

Classical descriptions also emphasize *Qāf*’s close relationship with the structure of the heavens and natural phenomena. The mountain is portrayed as a support for the lowest heaven, as though the sky rests upon it [35]. In certain traditions, the greenish hue of the sky is explained as a reflection of the mountain’s substance, said to be made of green emerald, positioning *Qāf* as the source of cosmic visual phenomena [36]. The structural relationship between the mountain and the earth is further illustrated through the concept of “veins” extending from *Qāf* throughout the world, binding regions of land to a central cosmic axis. When God wills an earthquake, the vein connected to a particular region is moved, causing the earth to tremble in that place without shaking the entire world. This depiction reflects the idea that the earth’s stability results from

cosmic bonds rooted in a central structure [37]. In other narratives, Qāf is said to lie behind an impenetrable veil, reinforcing its status as the boundary between the realm of perception (*‘ālam al-shahādah*) and that which lies beyond human perception. The location of the setting sun is sometimes associated with regions near this boundary, making Qāf the extreme limit of human cosmic knowledge [38]. Altogether, these portrayals present the mountain as an element regulating the balance of the natural world, rather than a mere static object within traditional cosmological imagination.

When these reports are considered collectively, Mount Qāf emerges as part of a coherent layered cosmological model. Beyond the earth lies a cosmic ocean; beyond the ocean lies Qāf; beyond it lies another earth, followed by another ocean, and so on, forming a repeating system often linked to the concept of seven earths and seven heavens [39]. This structure indicates that the universe was understood not as infinite space, but as a closed system arranged concentrically and hierarchically. Qāf serves as a node connecting these layers and marking the boundary of each cosmic level. It is not merely a horizontal boundary at the edge of the world but also part of a vertical architecture linking the earth with the heavens. Within this framework, the human world does not stand alone but exists within a far broader, tiered network of creation. The cosmos is conceived as a divinely ordered structure in which every layer possesses its own boundary, function, and guardians. Mount Qāf thus becomes a key element enabling the layered model of the cosmos to be imagined concretely.

The connection of this cosmological imagery with Qur’an 31:27 further clarifies the concept of cosmic oceans beyond empirical seas. The verse mentions “seven seas,” which classical exegetical tradition often interpreted as indicating multiple layers of oceans surrounding the earth and other earths. Reports attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās describing an earth followed by an ocean, then Mount Qāf, and then another earth provide a narrative framework for this verse. In this context, the sea is not merely a geographical ocean but a cosmic element forming part of a recurring structure of the universe [40]. The verse is therefore understood as an indication of the vastness of divine creation arranged in layers, rather than merely the horizontal expanse of the human world. Mount Qāf functions as a boundary marker between successive cosmic systems, making it central to understanding the architecture of the layered cosmos. This model demonstrates how revelation and exegetical tradition intertwine in shaping a worldview.

This dimension of cosmic boundaries also resonates with Qur’an 55:33, which states that humans and jinn cannot penetrate the regions of the heavens and the earth except by divine authority. In classical cosmology, these regions

were understood as real boundaries enclosing the world of creatures. Mount Qāf, encircling the earth and lying beyond a veil, may be seen as one manifestation of such boundaries. It functions as a cosmic barrier preserving the order of creation and preventing creatures from surpassing the space assigned to them [41]. The verse thus reinforces not only human limitation in theological terms but also the notion of a closed cosmos found in classical literature. The world is not an edgeless space freely traversed but a domain protected by a cosmic perimeter, with Qāf symbolizing and embodying that perimeter.

Overall, Mount Qāf in classical Islamic literature does not appear as an isolated tale or a single legend, but as an integral component of a comprehensive cosmic worldview. It is connected with the concepts of seven earths and seven heavens, cosmic oceans, veils, the limits of created space, the stability of the earth, and natural phenomena such as earthquakes and sunset. The cosmos is understood as a layered, finite, and ordered system entirely under divine control. Within this framework, Mount Qāf becomes the boundary axis affirming that the human world is only one part of a far more vast and complex creation [42]. Consequently, the discussion of Qāf is not merely an exploration of a cosmological motif but a gateway to understanding how the classical exegetical tradition conceived the structure of the universe as a whole—a cosmology possessing its own internal coherence and intellectual logic.

4. Al-Rāzī's Interpretation of the Meaning of the Letter Qāf

In interpreting the letter Qāf at the beginning of Sūrah Qāf, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī presents several opinions circulating within the classical exegetical tradition. He mentions the view that understands Qāf as the name of Mount Qāf that surrounds the earth and supports the heavens, the opinion that interprets it as a single letter from the disjointed letters (ḥurūf muqatta'āt), the view that connects it with a phrase fragment such as *quḍīya al-amr*, and the interpretation that considers it a form of *ism fā'il* derived from the root *qafā-yaqfū*. However, al-Rāzī explicitly rejects the first interpretation that associates Qāf with Mount Qāf as the meaning of the verse. His rejection is grounded in linguistic and qirā'āt considerations rather than a denial of Mount Qāf as a cosmological concept within the tradition. He argues that if Qāf were truly intended as the name of a mountain serving as the object of an oath, then its orthography, the use of the oath particle, and its mode of recitation would differ from what appears in the muṣḥaf. Furthermore, he emphasizes that the report attributed to Ibn 'Abbās merely states that Qāf is the name of a mountain, not that the verse refers to that mountain. Based on these considerations, al-Rāzī prefers the view that Qāf is a single letter similar to Ṣād, Nūn, and Ḥā Mīm, without a direct lexical meaning in the context of the verse [43].

Methodologically, al-Rāzī's position reflects an important shift within the classical exegetical tradition: from the dominance of cosmological reports toward the authority of linguistic analysis as the primary basis of interpretation. He does not deny the existence of traditions about Mount Qāf, but he rejects their use as the meaning of the verse because they are not supported by the linguistic structure of the Qur'ānic text. In other words, al-Rāzī distinguishes between "what has been narrated" and "what the verse intends." This approach reflects the character of classical rational exegesis that remains within the framework of Islamic scholarship rather than adopting a modern approach that dismisses earlier traditions as mere myth. He continues to acknowledge transmitted reports while positioning Arabic language, the orthographic system of the muṣḥaf, and linguistic principles as the ultimate determinants of meaning. Within the map of classical exegesis, this stance places al-Rāzī among exegetes who sought to balance the authority of transmission (*naql*) and reason (*'aql*), while also showing a tendency to interpret the disjointed letters as part of the Qur'ān's rhetorical structure rather than as references to specific cosmological objects. His preference for the meaning of a "single letter" is therefore not a simplification but the result of a rigorous interpretive method.

The implications of al-Rāzī's approach are highly significant for understanding the diversity of classical exegesis. He demonstrates that differences among exegetes do not always lie in the acceptance or rejection of cosmological traditions, but rather in the criteria used to determine the meaning of a verse. By rejecting the Mount Qāf interpretation as the meaning of Qāf in the verse, al-Rāzī does not invalidate the existence of that cosmology in Islamic literature; instead, he limits its relevance within the linguistic interpretation of the Qur'ān. This stance further affirms that classical exegesis is not a monolithic block that is either entirely literal or entirely symbolic, but rather a complex field of discussion with diverse methods and priorities. Ultimately, al-Rāzī's position shows that the letter Qāf is better understood as part of the system of disjointed letters serving rhetorical and structural functions, rather than as a direct reference to Mount Qāf. This conclusion does not erase the cosmological narratives that developed within the tradition, but situates them outside the intended meaning of the verse. In this way, al-Rāzī's exegesis becomes an important example of how a classical exegete could acknowledge the existence of cosmological traditions while simultaneously rejecting their use as a basis for interpreting the Qur'ānic text. His position thus represents a key point in mapping the debate between transmission-based and linguistic approaches in the interpretation of the disjointed letters.

5. Ibn 'Āshūr's Interpretation of the Meaning of the Letter Qāf

In interpreting the letter Qāf at the beginning of Sūrah Qāf, Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn 'Āshūr begins by placing it within the category of the disjointed letters (ḥurūf muqatta'ah) that appear at the opening of several other sūrahs. He states that his discussion aligns with the general explanation of these letters, namely that they are letters of the Arabic alphabet (ḥurūf hijā') recited by pronouncing their letter names. The writing of Qāf in the muṣḥaf follows the form of the alphabetic letter as recognized in the Arabic orthographic tradition, and the scholars of qirā'āt agree to pronounce it by articulating the full name of the letter and reciting it in a state of sukūn, both in continuous recitation (waṣl) and when pausing (waqf). At this basic level, Ibn 'Āshūr does not position Qāf as a word carrying lexical meaning, but rather as an independent letter functioning within the structure of the verse. He then mentions reports attributed to Ibn 'Abbās that understand Qāf as the name of a great mountain encircling the earth; in some versions, it is even described as the name of seven mountains surrounding the seven layers of the earth. According to him, such reports originate from certain historians and transmitters who lack a reliable chain of transmission. For this reason, he does not treat them as the meaning of the verse, but merely as accounts of opinions circulating in the exegetical literature [44].

Rather than merely mentioning and leaving these reports aside, Ibn 'Āshūr provides a critical evaluation of the narrative character surrounding Mount Qāf. He describes the portrayal of a mountain encircling the earth as the result of extended imagination lacking precision in transmission. According to him, the narrative is intertwined with ancient cosmological views and misunderstandings of the earth's geographical structure, which was imagined as flat expanses separated by seas and mountains. He maintains that such discussions should not be the main concern of Qur'anic exegesis, even though some earlier exegetes recorded them. This statement demonstrates his distinction between narratives circulating within tradition and meanings that can be supported by textual analysis. Within this framework, the Mount Qāf report is not treated as an alternative meaning equivalent to the interpretation of the disjointed letters, but rather as a narrative element situated at the margins of exegetical discussion. Thus, Ibn 'Āshūr's position goes beyond rejecting the content of the report; it also establishes methodological boundaries regarding its relevance to the Qur'anic text.

In addition to his critique of the source and content of these reports, Ibn 'Āshūr advances a linguistic argument as the basis of his rejection. He asserts that if Qāf were intended as the name of a specific mountain, its written form in the muṣḥaf should follow the orthographic pattern of a complete noun rather than a single alphabetic letter. In the Arabic language system, alphabetic letters as

phonetic symbols are not normally used to directly designate the names of specific entities without a full lexical structure. Therefore, interpreting the letter Qāf as a reference to a mountain does not accord with linguistic principles or the writing system of the Qur'an. Through this argument, Ibn 'Āshūr places the Arabic language, the rasm al-muṣḥaf, and the fundamental function of letters as the primary foundations for determining meaning. This position reflects a modern exegetical tendency that is more selective toward cosmological reports and places stronger emphasis on linguistic consistency and modern scientific knowledge as parameters in interpretation.

6. Comparative Analysis of al-Rāzī and Ibn 'Āshūr on the Letter Qāf

After outlining each exegete's interpretation of the letter Qāf, this section places both within a single comparative methodological framework. The focus of the analysis is not merely the content of interpretation, but how each scholar receives, manages, and rejects reports concerning Qāf—especially the cosmological reports about Mount Qāf encircling the earth. Here the difference in epistemic horizons between classical and modern tafsir becomes visible:

Table 1. Meaning of the Letter Qaf

Aspect	Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī	Ibn 'Āshūr
General position	The letter Qāf belongs to verses with multiple opinions; he prefers that it is an Arabic alphabet letter	Disjointed letters are alphabet letters understood in linguistic and rhetorical function
Mode of explanation	Collects and discusses various scholarly opinions	Explains concisely and directly
Direction of meaning	Leaves room for symbolic and theological possibilities	Emphasizes opening and discourse-affirming function
Style of discussion	Lengthy, argumentative, dialogical	Concise, systematic, focused

Table 2. *Attitude Toward the Mount Qāf Reports*

Aspect	al-Rāzī	Ibn ‘Āshūr
Mentioning the reports	Mentions them as part of exegetical tradition	Mentions them as reports requiring scrutiny
Method of engagement	Discussed within the framework of interpretive possibilities	Re-evaluated using rational considerations
Tone of evaluation	Open and analytical	Selective and critical
Aim of discussion	To place the reports among interpretive opinions	To determine the degree of their acceptability

Table 3. *Attitude Toward the Cosmology of Mount Qāf*

Aspect	al-Rāzī	Ibn ‘Āshūr
Understanding cosmological imagery	Managed within a theological framework	Considered in dialogue with modern geography
Basis of evaluation	Rational-theological consistency	Compatibility with modern physical reality
Relation to science	Empirical science not the main standard	Empirical knowledge considered in evaluation
Model of approach	Rational-metaphysical	Rational-empirical

Table 4. *Epistemological Comparison*

Dimension	al-Rāzī	Ibn ‘Āshūr
Primary authority	Arabic language, tafsir tradition, kalām	Arabic language, tafsir tradition, modern knowledge
Validation of tafsir	Logical and theological testing	Logical testing plus empirical reality
Scope of tafsir	Mainly internal to the tradition	Engages with external knowledge systems
Overall character	Classical-rational	Modern-dialogical

Table 5. *Epistemological Implications*

Level	al-Rāzī	Ibn 'Āshūr
Level of meaning	Does not reject classical cosmology but rejects irrelevant interpretation	Rejects classical cosmology and interpretations conflicting with modern knowledge
Methodological level	Selection of reports based on theological rationality	Selection involving modern scientific considerations
Level of authority	Tradition as primary reference	Tradition remains reference but evaluated alongside modern science
Direction of development	Stable within classical system	Expanding epistemic horizon

Comparatively, the difference between classical and modern tafsir in the case of the letter Qāf does not lie in the final meaning reached, but in how interpretive diversity is viewed and filtered. In classical tafsir, as represented by al-Rāzī, differing opinions are managed within the framework of the tradition itself. Reports about Mount Qāf are presented and evaluated through linguistic, theological, and rational-theological considerations. The layered cosmology prevalent in that period remained compatible with the available knowledge structure and therefore did not require correction from outside the tradition. As long as a report did not contradict creed or linguistic principles, it could remain within the range of possible interpretations.

By contrast, in modern tafsir such as Ibn 'Āshūr's, diversity is still acknowledged, but evaluation involves a broader knowledge horizon. Cosmological reports are reconsidered in light of geographical knowledge and scientific understanding of the earth. Cosmological imagery once acceptable in classical contexts becomes difficult to maintain within modern scientific frameworks because it appears inconsistent with physical reality and contemporary knowledge systems. Here we see a fundamental shift in the criteria for accepting exegetical opinions. Whereas classical evaluation largely occurred within the internal framework of tafsir tradition, modern evaluation becomes more open, incorporating knowledge beyond the tradition as part of exegetical consideration. Thus, the difference between the two reflects a change in authority and verification methods in tafsir, indicating a broader paradigm shift in how interpretation is validated.

7. The Shift of Knowledge Horizons and the Validation of Modern Tafsir

Comparative findings indicate that the primary shift in interpretation does not occur at the level of the Qur'anic text itself, but rather in the mechanisms used to validate interpretation. Within the classical framework, the acceptance of tafsir operated within an internal system of authority grounded in the Arabic language, transmitted reports, and rational-theological considerations. Cosmological reports such as Mount Qāf were evaluated according to their coherence with the exegetical tradition and the cosmological horizon of their time [45]. In the modern period, this horizon expanded. Knowledge outside the tafsir tradition—particularly modern geography and cosmology—entered as additional parameters of evaluation. What changed, therefore, was not the meaning of the text, but the epistemic standards used to determine whether an interpretation is considered acceptable [46].

This shift is closely related to the transformation in how modern humans understand reality and cannot be separated from the formation of modern intellectual consciousness. Contemporary exegetes grow within educational systems that position empirical science as the dominant model of rationality. From early childhood, they become familiar with modern world maps, satellite imagery of the earth, and scientific cosmological models that present particular representations of the universe. These visual and conceptual representations gradually shape standards of what is considered real and reasonable. In this context, what changes is not merely scientific information, but the very structure of perception concerning what is possible and what is impossible. The dominance of the modern scientific paradigm within global knowledge systems reinforces specific cosmological models as legitimate representations of reality. Consequently, interpretations that do not align with these models tend to be viewed as problematic even before undergoing linguistic analysis—not solely due to internal weaknesses, but because they do not correspond to an internalized horizon of reality [47].

Nevertheless, history shows that neither classical nor modern traditions have ever been entirely uniform. Within classical literature, some scholars transmitted particular cosmological narratives, while others—such as al-Rāzī—adopted a critical stance based on internal textual considerations and rational analysis. Similarly, in the modern context, although many exegetes consider scientific findings as part of their evaluative framework, there are also contemporary scholars who reject attempts to harmonize Qur'anic cosmology with modern scientific models on linguistic or methodological grounds. Thus, the change that has occurred is better understood as a shift in the structure of knowledge legitimacy rather than a change in the meaning of the text itself.

Conclusion

The differences between classical and modern tafsir of Qur'anic cosmological verses are not merely the result of changing textual meanings, nor are they solely caused by the development of scientific data. Rather, they reflect a transformation in the standards of knowledge validation and in the horizon of reality that shapes how interpreters understand the world. In other words, what has changed is not simply scientific information, but the structure of perception regarding what is considered possible, rational, and legitimate as truth.

Based on these findings, this article shifts the focus of the debate from the question of whether interpretations are "cosmologically correct or incorrect" toward an epistemological analysis of how tafsir operates within different historical contexts of knowledge. This approach allows for a more balanced reading of the classical exegetical tradition without placing it in a defensive position against modern science. At the same time, modernity is not positioned as an adversary, but as a horizon of knowledge with its own logic and limitations.

The implication is that tafsir studies need to become more aware of the epistemic conditions underlying the interpretive process. Dialogue between tafsir and science remains possible and productive, but it requires clear methodological boundaries in order to avoid reducing the meaning of revelation to a specific scientific framework. The meaning of the Qur'anic text is not identical to any single cosmological model, as it operates in a language whose theological and pedagogical functions transcend particular scientific representations.

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- ¹³ Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, 55–57.
- ¹⁴ This opinion is attributed to several Companions and Successors, including Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, al-Sha'bi, Abū Ṣāliḥ, and Ibn Zayd. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr fī 'Ilm al-Tafsīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2002), 1:32.
- ¹⁵ This view is associated with 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, Abū al-'Āliyah, and Rabī' ibn Anas. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr*, 1:32–33.
- ¹⁶ This opinion is attributed to Ibn 'Abbās, 'Ikrimah, and Ibn Qutaybah. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr*, 1:33.
- ¹⁷ This interpretation was proposed by al-Farrā' and Quṭrub, who regarded the letters as an affirmation of the Qur'an's linguistic inimitability. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr*, 1:33.
- ¹⁸ This opinion is attributed to Zayd ibn Aslam and several other scholars. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr*, 1:33.
- ¹⁹ This view was advanced by al-Akhfash, al-Zajjāj, and Ibn al-Anbārī, who understood the letters as codes or abbreviations in the Arabic linguistic tradition. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr*, 1:34.
- ²⁰ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr fī 'Ilm al-Tafsīr*, 1:32–34.
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- ²⁶ al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa al-'Uyūn*, 5:352; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr*, 7:349.
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- ²⁸ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, 22:431–432; al-Baghawī, *Ma'ālim al-Tanzīl*, 4:242.
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