

## Did the Aimmah (AS) know the deeper meaning (Ta'wil) of every verse?

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A study of the verse 3:07 and the reference of *Rasikhuna Fil Ilm*.

### Introduction

Among the oft-repeated verses of the Quran is 3:07, which covers the type of verses that Allah has revealed, and the ease with which the *Muhkam* (clear or specific) verses that form foundational matters can be understood, and also how the Ta'wil (ultimate deeper meaning) of *Mutashabih* (allegorical or unspecific) verses is known only to Allah (SWT).

*And the Rasikhuna fil Ilm (those who are firm in knowledge) simply believe in the verses, and state that all of it is from Allah (SWT).*

The verse also alludes that only those with deviation in their hearts will try and “derive” meaning from these verses or advance interpretive claims about it, seeking discord by doing so. And the *Rasikhuna fil Ilm* (those who are firm in knowledge) simply believe in the verses, and state that all of it is from Allah (SWT).

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ وَابْتِغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ ءَأَمَّنَّا بِهِ كُلٌّ مِّنْ عِنْدِ رَبِّنَا وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ (٧)

*It is He who has sent down to you, [O Muhammad], the Book; in it are verses [that are] Muhkamat (clear and precise) – they are the foundation of the Book – and others which are Mutashabihat (vague and ambiguous). As for those in whose hearts is deviation, they will pursue that of it which is vague and ambiguous, seeking to create discord and seeking an interpretation [suitable to them]. And no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allāh. But those firm in knowledge say, “We believe in it. All [of it] is from our Lord.” And no one will be reminded except those of understanding. (Quran, 3:07)*

It is sometimes suggested the the phrase *Rasikhuna Fil Ilm*, which appears in verse 3:07 is:

1. Referring exclusively to the Prophet and the Imams of Ahlul Bayt (AS); and
2. The verse is implying that the *Rasikhuna fil Ilm* know the *ta'wil* (ultimate meaning and interpretation) of the *mutashabih* verses, in addition to Allah (SWT).

This article seeks to show from the Quran, the narrations of the Aimmah (AS), and the opinions of scholars who the *Rasikhuna Fil Ilm* are, and their identifying features. It will also show how this title is not limited (exclusively) to the Aimmah (AS), and why this popular narrative may actually be conveying the exact opposite of what Allah refers to as *Rasikhuna fil Ilm*.

## Which verses are Muhkam?

As 3:07 clearly states, the verses that form the foundation of the book are considered Muhkam. These would include the verses that are necessary to understand Iman, Tawhid, jurisprudential matters, etc.

For example:

وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ

*And there is none comparable to Him (Quran, 112:4).*

These are the ayat that have only one meaning according to the rules of the Arabic language or else the meaning of the ayah is clearly known.

## Which verses are Mutashabih?

Mutashabih verses are those which talk about realities of Ghayb which humans have not witnessed, and therefore don't know the true reality of.. These verses have a surface (apparent) meaning that is clear, but the ta'wil (ultimate meaning and significance) is known only to Allah (SWT), and we should not try to 'derive' any additional meaning (doing ta'wil of the verse) as per the warning in 3:07.

These include the verses called 'Huruf-al-Muqatta'at' (disjointed letters), which occur at the beginning of some chapters. Such as "Alif Lam Mim", "Alif, Lam, Ra", etc. Now, the immediate surface and apparent meaning of these verses is not unknown in the sense that all Arabs know these are alphabets of their language. But what these alphabet combinations ultimately signify and what real meaning these alphabets convey when they are woven together in these combinations is not known to anyone except Allah (SWT) according to the Ahlul Bayt (as).

## What does the ta'wil of a verse mean?

The obvious and apparent meaning of mutashabihat can be understood by anyone who knows Arabic as mentioned previously, which is why we have complete translations of the Quran. But the ta'wil of a verse is different from the obvious apparent meaning of the verse. ta'wil means the exact knowledge of how something unfolds.

An example: Imagine reading Surah Yusuf the first time. You read the verse of Prophet Yusuf's dream: "*I saw eleven bright celestial bodies together with the sun and moon prostrating before me*" (Quran, 12:4). Now, the apparent linguistic meaning of this sentence is crystal clear and can be translated to any language.

But what is the ta'wil of this verse? How exactly did this sentence come true? Not even the greatest scholar of Arabic can guess or predict this until he reads Allah's Revelation about how it actually unfolded.

Later on in Surah Yusuf, the dream comes true, but in the form of the eleven brothers falling into prostration. And Yusuf (as) says:

يا أبت هذا تأويل رؤيائي

*O Father, this is the Tawil of my dream... (Quran, 12:100)*

Hence, ta'wil in the Arabic of the Quran refers to how a news/prediction about ghayb (unseen) actually unfolds in real life/reality as that is when its real meaning and significance gets unraveled.

The Quran provides us with a lot of news and information about things that will happen or have happened in ghayb (the unseen realm), and every verse that carries such information is a mutashabih verse. We can all understand the surface, obvious meaning, because such verses use Arabic words with known meanings. But the true ta'wil is ONLY known to Allah. When Allah wishes, we will also become privy to the ta'wil, and like Yusuf (as), we will also be able to say:

هذا تأويل قول ربنا سبحانه

*This is the ta'wil of the saying of our Lord, the Sublime.*

For example, if the Quran says the pious will drink from Salsabil, no one knows the details of what it will be like (eg. its taste, color or smell of it.). All that is part of the ta'wil of the verse which only Allah knows right now. But on the day of judgment, if and when Allah makes us see it and taste it, we shall know the ta'wil.

So most of the ta'wil will become known on the day of judgment as Allah Himself says:

وَلَقَدْ جِئْتَهُمْ بِكِتَابٍ فَصَّلْنَاهُ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ هُدًى وَرَحْمَةً لِّقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ (52)

هَلْ يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَّا تَأْوِيلَهُ يَوْمَ يَأْتِي تَأْوِيلَهُ يَقُولُ الَّذِينَ نَسُوهُ مِنْ قَبْلُ قَدْ جَاءَتْ رُسُلُ رَبِّنَا بِالْحَقِّ فَهَلْ لَنَا مِنْ شُفَعَاءَ فَيَشْفَعُوا لَنَا أَوْ نُرَدُّ فَنَعْمَلْ غَيْرَ الَّذِي كُنَّا نَعْمَلُ قَدْ خَسِرُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ وَضَلَّ عَنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا يَفْتَرُونَ (53)

*And We had certainly brought them a Book which We detailed by knowledge – as guidance and mercy to a people who believe. Do they await anything except its ta'wil (i.e. its actual occurrence*

*and unfolding)? The Day its ta'wil comes, those who had ignored it before will say, "The messengers of our Lord had come with the truth, so are there [now] any intercessors to intercede for us or could we be sent back to do other than we used to do?" They will have lost themselves, and lost from them is what they used to invent. [Surah Al-A'raf: 52-53]*

Thus when Allah says:

استوى على العرش

*He Ascended the throne... (Quran, 7:54)*

We know just the surface meaning, which is that this, in the language of the Arabs, is a metaphor for having firm control and authority, but the true manner in which this transpired is only known only to Him because only He was a witness to it.

## Punctuation, Linguistics & Grammar of Verse 03: 07

The verse has a crux interpretum: meaning it can be read in two ways. However, the meaning of both the readings is such that only one can be correct.

### FIRST READING:

It is He who has sent down to you the Book; in it are verses which are clear and precise – they are the foundation of the Book – and others which are vague and ambiguous. As for those in whose hearts is deviation, they will follow that of it which is vague and ambiguous, seeking discord and seeking a Ta'wil (i.e. advancing an interpretation for it).. And no one knows its interpretation except Allah. But those firm in knowledge say, "We believe in it. All is from our Lord." And no one will be reminded except those of understanding.

### SECOND READING:

It is He who has sent down to you the Book. Parts of it are definitive verses, which are the mother of the Book, while others are metaphorical. As for those in whose hearts is deviance, they pursue what is metaphorical in it, courting temptation, and seeking its interpretation. But no one knows

its interpretation except Allah and those firmly grounded in knowledge; they say, 'We believe in it; all of it is from our Lord.' And none takes admonition except those who possess intellect.

## OVERVIEW:

Addressing the Prophet , Allah says that He is the one who has revealed or sent down the Book (كتاب) to him and then Allah goes on to categorize the verses of قرآن into two types – محكمات and متشابهات. The word “محكمات” is plural for “محكم”, which is translated as definitive, precise or clear. The word “متشابهات” is plural for “متشابه” which is translated as vague, ambiguous, unspecific, metaphorical, allegorical, or resembling.

## THE CRUX INTERPRETUM:

The following part of the verse has two different readings:

وما يعلم تأويله إلا الله والراسخون في العلم يقولون

First: “And none knows its تأويل except Allah. And those firmly rooted in knowledge say...”

Second: “And none knows its تأويل except Allah and those firmly rooted in knowledge, they say...”

According to the first reading, the knowledge of تأويل is restricted to Allah only. That means no one except Allah knows the تأويل of the متشابهات. According to the second reading, the knowledge of تأويل is not restricted. That means Allah and راسخون في العلم both know the تأويل, i.e., this knowledge is shared.

Obviously, out of the above two claims, only one is true. Either only Allah knows, or those people that are firmly rooted in knowledge know along with Allah.

The first reading takes the و to be استئنافية, while the second reading takes it to be of عطف. This is so because if you take the Waw to be Waw Atf, and therefore meaning “and”, then that would mean Allah then joins the Rasikhuna fil Ilm in saying: we believe in it (i.e. the mutashabihaat verses), all of it is from our Lord, and **that is impossible as Allah has no Lord over Him.**

Thus, to avoid this theologically incorrect and blasphemous reading, you have no option but to treat the Waw (و) before Rasikhuna as Waw Isti'naafiyyah which is the Waw used to indicate the

end of the previous sentence (the grammatical equivalent of a full stop) and the beginning of a new sentence. Therefore, the meaning becomes: **“No one knows its ta’wil except for Allah. And those who are deeply entrenched in knowledge say: we believe in it, it is all from our Lord.”**

This is the only sound translation and interpretation of the verse, and this is why if you go back to the Mushaf, you will see the scholars of Tajweed have placed a *وقلى* sign after Allah to indicate *الوقف* (stopping is in order), because if you don’t stop at Allah, you end up reading the verse in a manner that is blasphemous because you give the impression that Allah also has a Lord above Him.

Thus the correct reading is to stop at *Allah*, and then read *wal-rasikhuna* as a new sentence.

## Who are the *Rasikhuna fil Ilm*?

This verse refers to the *Rasikhuna fil Ilm*. There are two opinions presented here:

1. It refers *exclusively* to the Imams of the Ahlul Bayt (AS) who, in addition to Allah (SWT), know the ta’wil of the mutashabihat verses.
2. It refers in the generic sense to all those who are firmly rooted in knowledge (including the Aimmah (AS)), who do not claim ta’wil of Mutashabih verses, and simply say: *“We believe in it. All [of it] is from our Lord.”*

Which of these two (apparently opposite and mutually exclusive meanings) is the correct understanding as per the Quran and the Ahlul Bayt (AS)?

## CLUE FROM USAGE OF THE SAME PHRASE ELSEWHERE IN THE QURAN

In 04:162 Allah uses the term *Rasikhuna fil Ilm* to refer to the learned and deeply knowledgeable scholars from the Jews.

لَكِنَّ الرِّسْخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ مِنْهُمْ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ إِلَيْكَ وَمَا أَنْزَلَ مِنْ قَبْلِكَ ۗ وَالْمُقِيمِينَ الصَّلَاةَ ۗ وَالْمُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ  
بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ ۗ أُولَٰئِكَ سَنُؤْتِيهِمْ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا ١٦٢

*But those firm in knowledge among them [the Jews] and the believers believe in what has been revealed to you, [O Muḥammad], and what was revealed before you. And the establishers of prayer [especially] and the givers of zakāh and the believers in Allāh and the Last Day – those We will give a great reward. (Quran, 4:162)*

Furthermore, there is nothing in the Arabic construction of the word Rasikhuna fil Ilm that confines its meaning to just the Ahlul Bayt (as). Rather, it's a term that encompasses all truly deeply learned people, including Ahlul Bayt, Sahaba, learned scholars of the Ummah, and it can even refer to non-Muslim learned scholars as we have seen from its usage in the Qur'ān. Confining it to the Ahlul Bayt is therefore an untenable interpretative leap that cannot be justified by the Quran's usage of this term.

## DESCRIPTION OF RASIKHUNA FIL ILM IN NAHJUL BALAGHA

The reading we have shown to be correct is also further supported by Sermon No. 91 of Imam Ali (as) in Nahjul Balagha in which he clearly emphasizes that the Rasikhuna fil Ilm don't have knowledge of the ta'wil of the mutashabihaat, and their admission of not having such knowledge is the main reason why Allah praises them and considers to be deeply entrenched in knowledge, because the more knowledgeable a person is, the more they are prepared to admit how little they know, and the greater their willingness to admit what they don't know, and the more acute their realization of the vastness of what they don't know.

*Know and understand that the Rasikhuna fil Ilm (those firm in knowledge and deeply entrenched in it) are those who refrain from opening the curtains that lie against the unknown, and their acknowledgement of their ignorance about the details of the hidden unknown prevents them from further probe.*

Nahjul Balaagha, Sermon #91

Here is the excerpt from the sermon of Imam Ali (as) Khutba No. 91 of Nahjul Balaagha where he talks about this:



وَأَعْلَمَ أَنَّ الرَّاسِخِينَ فِي الْعِلْمِ هُمُ الَّذِينَ أَغْنَاهُمْ عَنِ اقْتِحَامِ السُّدِّ الْمَضْرُوبَةِ دُونَ الْغُيُوبِ، الْإِقْرَارُ بِجُمْلَةِ مَا جَهِلُوا تَفْسِيرَهُ مِنَ الْغَيْبِ الْمَحْجُوبِ، فَمَدَحَ اللَّهُ - تَعَالَى - اعْتِرَافَهُمْ بِالْعَجْزِ عَنْ تَنَاوُلِ مَا لَمْ يُحِيطُوا بِهِ عِلْمًا، وَسَمَّى تَرْكَهُمُ التَّعَمُّقَ فِيهَا لَمْ يَكْلِفَهُمُ الْبَحْثَ عَنْ كُنْهِهِ رُسُوخًا، فَاقْتَصَرَ عَلَى ذَلِكَ، وَلَا تُتَقَدَّرُ عَظَمَةُ اللَّهِ سُبْحَانَهُ عَلَى قَدْرِ عَقْلِكَ فَتَكُونَ مِنَ الْهَالِكِينَ

*“Know and understand that the Rasikhuna fil Ilm (those firm in knowledge and deeply entrenched in it) are those who refrain from opening the curtains that lie against the unknown, and their acknowledgement of their ignorance about the details of the hidden unknown prevents them from further probe. Allah praises them for their admission regarding their inability to delve into matters which are beyond their knowledge. They do not go deep into the discussion of what is not enjoined upon them about knowing Him and they call it firmness. Be content with this and do not limit the Greatness of Allah after the measure of your own intelligence, or else you will be among the destroyed ones.”*

Nahjul Balaagha, Sermon # 91, also known as Khutbatul Ashbaah.

This further proves that the Rasikhuna fil Ilm don't have knowledge of the mutashabihat, and that the main reason they are praised in the Quran as being people deeply entrenched in knowledge is because their deep knowledge had induced in them humility to admit what they don't know, and, as a result, they recognize the boundaries of their knowledge, and return the knowledge of things beyond their purview to Allah (SWT)—who alone has complete knowledge of all things, known and unknown.

