

**AHMED DAĞISTANI'S ESOTERIC INTERPRETATIONS OF THE QURAN: LETTER
MYSTICISM IN EARLY 20th CENTURY ANATOLIA**

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā*, (*The Mysteries of the High World of Omnipotence*) an early 20th-century text by Ahmed Dağıstani who engaged with each letter of the Arabic alphabet to interpret the Quran. This interpretive approach is more about the letters and their mystical meanings. Letter mysticism (*‘ilm al-ḥurūf*) or more popularly *Hurufi* ideas from the 14th century continued to influence Islamic thought in Anatolia, particularly within Sufi orders like the Bektashis. However, these ideas were perceived heretical by the ulama in the late Ottoman period. This study investigates how and why Dağıstani engaged with the letter mysticism in the early 20th century where such Hurufi-influenced works were rare. Dağıstani’s focus on letters of the Quran and the intellectual traditions that might have informed his interpretations is a central theme for this thesis. Moreover, the thesis compares Dağıstani’s interpretation of the disjointed letters of the Quran (*huruf al-muqatta’*)² with that of Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır³, highlighting the distinctions between the mystical and rational exegeses. I believe that letter mysticism in *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā* serves as a means for Dağıstani to express his unconventional interpretations of the Quran, aligning more with Ibn ‘Arabī’s⁴ philosophy than with Hurufi ideas. This research contributes to the study of non-canonical Islamic texts and the broader history of esoteric traditions while demonstrating how much intellectual, and political changes in the late Ottoman Empire and early 20th century were influential on Quran commentaries. It also emphasizes the lasting impact of esoteric approaches to Quranic interpretation.

² *Hurūf al-muqatta’* consist of fourteen letters from the Arabic alphabet: *Alif, Ha, Ra, Sīm, Sad, Ṭā’, Ayin, Qāf, Kāf, Lām, Mim, Nūn, He, Yā’*. (ا، ح، ر، س، ص، ط، ع، ق، ك، ل، م، ن، ه، ی) Together, with their repetitions, the *hurūf al-muqatta’* form twenty-nine units, and appear at the beginning of twenty-nine suras.

³ Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır (1878–1942), a prominent Ottoman scholar and the author of *Hak Dini Kur’an Dili (The Religion of Truth, The Language of the Quran)* a state-commissioned Turkish tafsir that reflects a rationalist and linguistic approach within the framework of Sunni understanding of Islam.

⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240), a major Andalusian Sufi thinker, is known for his influential cosmological and metaphysical writings. His most important work, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Openings)*, explores divine realities, cosmology, and the esoteric meanings of letters, and will serve as a key reference in this study.

INTRODUCTION

Once a week, devoted followers, would gather around Ahmed Dağıstani⁵ (1848-1925) to learn from his profound knowledge. One of his disciples recounts a moment when someone recited the hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad describes himself as the “city of knowledge” and Ali as its gate. At that moment, Dağıstani, shedding tears of joy (*masharrah*) from his eyes, said, “And I am the key.”⁶ This anecdote, narrated by the Sufi biographer Hüseyin Vassaf (1872–1929), reflects how Ahmed Dağıstani viewed himself—as a descendant of the Prophet and a transmitter of Islamic spiritual knowledge. He emphasizes this role of being “the key to knowledge” by authoring a book that he presents as the key to understanding his Quran commentaries.⁷

Ahmed Dağıstani’s book, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A’lā*,⁸ was written between 1918 and 1923, and published in the very year the Turkish Republic was founded. In this book, Dağıstani explores

⁵ He is referred to as a *Sheikh Dağıstani Ahmed* in archival documents and *Sheikh Dağıstani Ahmed Hüsameddin* in the biography written by Hüseyin Vassaf, whereas he is mostly mentioned as *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin* in the biography authored by his son, Musa Kazım Öztürk. In his own work, he is also referred to as *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*. In this paper, I will consistently use the name *Ahmed Dağıstani* or *Dağıstani*. However, in Chapter 1, I will begin his life story by referring to him as *Ahmed*, then shift to *Ahmed Dağıstani* as he gains public recognition with the flow of the narration. I will also begin using the title *Sheikh* when discussing him through archival sources.

⁶ Hussein Vassaf, *Sefîne-i Evliya* (The Ships of Saints), ed. Mehmet Akkuş and Ali Yılmaz (Istanbul: Kitabevi Yayınları, 2011), 270.

⁷ Even though most of them were lost in the Great Istanbul Fire of 1918, some survived. In these commentaries, composed of nine different books, Dağıstani explains the meanings of 62 suras of the Quran in detail using a complex Sufi language. One of them is *Mezâhirü’l-Vücûd ‘alâ Menâbir eş-Şühûd*, which employs terms and concepts that are explained in *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A’lā*. Written in Ottoman Turkish after Dağıstani returned from Tripoli, *Mezâhirü’l-Vücûd ‘alâ Menâbir eş-Şühûd* covers the 29th and 30th *juz’* of the Quran. The work primarily addresses the truth of divine knowledge (*ḥaqīqat al-‘ilm*) and social norms. It was published in 1921 in Istanbul. See; M. Kazım Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin Hazretleri’nin Hayatı ve Eserleri* (The Life of the Works of Seyyid Hamed Hüsameddin) (Istanbul: Karakaş Matbaası, 1996):149-151.

⁸ Ahmed Dağıstani (Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin), *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A’lā* (Istanbul: Kader Matbaası, 1923). In the title of the book, *Asrār* refers to the plural form of the secret or mystery and *A’lā* means high. However, *Jabarūt* does not have a very simple meaning. It basically means a specific realm, but it is crucial to give the truer meaning aligning with the author’s concept. To do so, I also discussed the meaning of this word with Denis Mete who lives in Vienna from the third-generation disciples of Ahmed Dağıstani. He suggests that this realm specifically refers to the presence of God, his omnipotence. Aligning with his suggestion, the final translation would be “*The Mysteries of the High World of Omnipotence*.” After this conversation, I came across the word *jabarūt* in Kristin Zahra Sand’s book, *Sufi Commentaries on the Quran in Classical Islam*, Routledge, (2006): 43. Sands also translates the word *jabarūt* as “the presence of His omnipotence,” referring to the God.

the mystical meanings of each letter in the Arabic alphabet to uncover the multi-layered nature of the Quran. While this endeavor may remind us of the elements of the 14th-century Hurufi movement, Dağıstani's ideas do not align with Hurufism. Not all forms of alphabetic mysticism fall within historical Hurufi sectarianism. While Dağıstani draws on esoteric techniques to explain his unique Quranic interpretations, *Asrār al-Jabarūt al-A'lā* should not be viewed as a continuation of the Hurufi tradition. Rather, his approach traces the influence of Ibn 'Arabī's⁹ (1165–1240) 13th-century philosophy. As Mustafa Tahralı demonstrates, Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysical and esoteric thought remained influential throughout the Ottoman era, particularly within Sufi and intellectual circles.¹⁰ Ahmed Dağıstani's use of Sufi terminology aligns closely with Ibn 'Arabī's. However, there are significant differences, as well, regarding the term *ta'wīl* which defines Ahmed Dağıstani's Quranic commentaries but not those of Ibn Arabī. The concept of *ta'wīl* will be discussed in detail in the second chapter to clarify the distinction between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*, as well as their connections to the exegetical and hermeneutical dimensions of the text.

Dağıstani repositions letter mysticism (*ilm al-ḥurūf*)¹¹ as a gateway to his Quran commentaries, citing the hadith about the Quran being revealed upon seven letters¹² and thereby emphasizing the significance of Quranic letters. At this point, several questions arise: Why did he

⁹ Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240), a major Andalusian Sufi thinker, is known for his influential cosmological and metaphysical writings. His most important work, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (*The Meccan Openings*), explores divine realities, cosmology, and the esoteric meanings of letters, and will serve as a key reference in this study.

¹⁰ Mustafa Tahralı, "A General Outline of the Influence of Ibn 'Arabi on the Ottoman Era," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 26 (1999): 69–78, <https://ibnarabisociety.org/influence-of-ibn-arabi-on-the-ottoman-era-mustafa-tahrali/>.

¹¹ *Ilm al-ḥurūf*, refers to an esoteric Islamic science concerned with the ontological and cosmological meanings of the Arabic letters. In this thesis, I will use this Arabic term interchangeably with letter mysticism.

¹² M. Kazım Öztürk, *Kur'ân'ın 20. Asra Göre Anlamı, Fatiha ve Amme Cüzü* (Ankara: Ayyıldız Matbaa, 1974), 28. This work by Öztürk presents a simplified Turkish version of *Maẓāhir al-Wujūd 'alā Manābir al-Shuhūd I*, (*The Manifestations of Being upon the Stages of Witnessing*), which is one of Dağıstani's Quran commentaries. Öztürk uses contemporary language to make the original work more accessible to modern readers. I also found a printed copy of the original book, which is very rare, and checked the preface. It is almost identical to Öztürk's version. Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin, *Maẓāhir al-Wujūd 'alā Manābir al-Shuhūd* (1328/1911).

create a work based on *‘ilm al-ḥurūf* to support his earlier Quran commentaries? And why did he choose to publish it during a transitional period in the early 20th century? Was he aiming to preserve a tradition into his own century, or was he employing the concept solely for his own purposes? I believe that the esoteric focus embedded within *‘ilm al-ḥurūf* in *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā* serves as a means for Ahmed Dağıstani to articulate his metaphysical interpretations of the Quran in the 20th century—without aiming to revive Hurufi doctrines or explicitly follow the legacy of Ibn ‘Arabī. The timing of the book’s publication in 1923, further underscores the book’s significance as it emerged in a critical transitional period. This chapter situates *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā* within the esoteric Quran commentaries, while distinguishing it from the Hurufi tradition. To understand this work’s uniqueness, it is essential to first introduce its author and the context of its publication.

1. Ahmed Dağıstani’s Life and Legacy

Archival documents describe Ahmed Dağıstani as a Naqshbandi Sheikh. In a comprehensive biography written by his son, Musa Kazım Öztürk (1913–1996)¹³, however, there is no mention of any Naqshbandi affiliation. Instead, there is a strong emphasis on his identity as a Sayyid—a descendant of the Prophet and a member of the *Ehl-i Beyt*.¹⁴ I believe Öztürk avoided any association between Ahmed Dağıstani and a specific *tariqa* that might later gain a bad reputation. Since Öztürk published his book in the late 20th century, when secularization had developed in Türkiye and tariqas had gained negative associations with bigotry, he likely did not want Dağıstani to be remembered through the lens of a *tariqa* identity that could diminish his

¹³ Musa Kazım Öztürk (1913–1996) is known for his work in deciphering and translating most of his father’s Ottoman Turkish writings into clear, contemporary Turkish. His efforts have made these important historical and religious texts more accessible to modern readers and scholars.

¹⁴ The term *Ehl-i Beyt* (Arabic: *Ahl al-Bayt*) literally means "People of the House" and refers specifically to the family of the Prophet Muhammad. In Islamic tradition, particularly within Shi‘i Islam and many Sufi circles, the *Ehl-i Beyt* has a highly respected position, often seen as bearers of spiritual authority and moral perfection.

legacy. Moreover, the biography reveals how Dağıstani was remembered within the family. Öztürk mostly refers to Dağıstani as *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin Hazretleri* in the book, emphasizing his *Seyyid* identity which means a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad—a lineage recognized and registered by the Ottoman state in the *Naqib al-Ashrāf*.

On the other hand, shorter account was authored by the prominent Sufi biographer Hüseyin Vassaf,¹⁵ states that Dağıstani did not own a religious Sufi lodge (*tekke*). However, Vassaf further notes that he had a madrasa, masjidi and a house built during his residence in Bursa, and he was involved in education and teaching until 1895.¹⁶ Apparently, Dağıstani had a circle through which he conveyed his own teachings, which could be called a Sufi lodge. Vassaf links him to both the Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders and notes his status as a Sayyid.¹⁷ In the late 19th century Anatolia, before he published most of his works, Dağıstani played a public role as a preacher, delivering lectures that, according to Vassaf, were intellectually demanding and not easily comprehended by the common people.¹⁸ This makes it all the more striking that he gained a wide following so quickly.¹⁹ His growing influence even attracted the attention of the Ottoman authorities, and eventually, led to his exile to Tripoli in 1897 by order of the Sultan.²⁰

Tripoli, though distant from his followers, became a space of intellectual production for Dağıstani. There, he composed his comprehensive Quran commentaries (*Tefsir-i Kebir*)²¹ in

¹⁵ Hussein Vassaf (1862–1929) was an Ottoman Sufi, biographer, and intellectual best known for his hagiographical work *Sefînetü'l-Evliyâ* (*The Ship of the Saints*), which documents the lives of prominent Sufi figures in the late Ottoman period. He started writing this comprehensive work in 1900 and completed it in 1925.

¹⁶ Vassaf, *Sefîne-i Evliya*, 267.

¹⁷ Vassaf, *Sefînetü'l-Evliyâ*, 266. *Naqib al-Eshraf* is the title for the official responsible for documenting the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (*Seyyids*), ensuring the accuracy of genealogical records and related matters within the community.

¹⁸ Vassaf, *Sefînetü'l-Evliyâ*, 266.

¹⁹ (Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives) BOA. DH. MKT 1378/28 16 Safer 1304/ 14 November 1886.

²⁰ BOA. DH. MKT 1378/28 16 Safer 1304/ 14 November 1886; BOA. DH. ŞFR. 132/3 18. Safer 1304/ 16 November 1886; BEO. 978/73341 14 Safer 1315/ 15 July 1897.

²¹ M. Kazım Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin Hazretleri'nin Hayatı ve Eserleri* (İstanbul: Karakaş Matbaası, 1996):142; Vassaf, *Sefînetü'l-Evliyâ*, 267.

Arabic, which deepened his interest in the esoteric dimensions of the Quran. After returning to Istanbul, he wrote Quran commentaries in Ottoman Turkish as well. He also authored *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā*,²² positioning it as a companion to his hermeneutical works. In his own words, the book was written to provide spiritual insight and the most benefit from his Quranic commentaries.²³ Even though it is common for interpreters of the Quran to focus on the *ḥurūf al-muqāṭṭa‘a*—the disjointed letters at the beginning of certain suras— Dağıstani considered the whole alphabet as a cosmological system of meaning with a claim to objective validity. In this regard, his approach appears to be quite distinctive for the early 20th century. While there may be no directly comparable contemporary example, this thesis will compare his treatment of *ḥurūf al-muqāṭṭa‘a* with that of Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır,²⁴ who made the first official Quran translation into Turkish encouraged by Atatürk, highlighting the contrast between esoteric and mainstream interpretive methods.

2. Letter Mysticism

Understanding Dağıstani’s work requires situating it within the broader intellectual and esoteric traditions that engaged with Quranic letters. One of the most well-known of these traditions is Hurufism, which had a controversial status in the late 19th century. While mainstream Islamic scholars from the ulema regarded it as heretical, Sufis had a more favorable approach toward it. What was this belief about, and what particularly attracted the attention of Sufis? In Arabic, the term *ḥarf* means “letter,” while its plural form, *hurūf*, means “letters.”. Hurufism is

²² Dağıstani mentions that he authored this book after the Great İstanbul Fire which occurred in 1918. But not a certain date is known for the production of the book. It is published in 1923. Dağıstani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā*, preface, 4.

²³ Dağıstani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā*, 1923, preface, 6.

²⁴ Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır (1878–1942), a prominent Ottoman scholar and the author of *Hak Dini Kur’an Dili (The Religion of Truth, The Language of the Quran)* a state-commissioned Turkish tafsir that reflects a rationalist and linguistic approach within the framework of Sunni understanding of Islam.

concerned with uncovering the symbolic and mystical significance of letters, exploring their hidden meanings and, at times, their relationship to cosmic and spiritual realities. When these associations are approached systematically and with a focus on knowledge, this corresponds to *ilm al-ḥurūf* in Arabic. In other words, letter mysticism can also be understood as a form of metaphysical algebra, a system of knowledge in which letters and their combinations are analyzed to reveal deeper truths about existence. In many ways, this discipline shares some conceptual and methodological parallels with Jewish Kabbalah, particularly in its exploration of the esoteric dimensions of language and its role in understanding the divine.²⁵

Given the aspects of the letter mysticism, Sufi circles provided a fertile ground for the development of this approach as Sufism is also concerned with seeking hidden truths. One of the most significant areas in which Sufi scholars studied letters was in Quranic commentary — for example, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Meccan Revelations*,²⁶ where he integrates the Arabic alphabet into his exegesis of the Quran. On the other hand, scholars mostly adhered to classical Hadith-based methods, relying on Prophetic biographies and historical accounts. However, revisionists criticized this approach, arguing that no reliable pre-Islamic sources exist and that available historical accounts tend to reinforce Islamized interpretations.²⁷ This revisionist approach is relatively more modern. Yet, among earlier Islamic scholars, there were some scholars who prioritized the language of the Quran. Ibn ‘Arabī stands out as a key Sufi figure who assigned great significance not only to the philosophical aspects of the Quran, but also to its language.

²⁵ Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Liadain Sherrard and Philip Sherrard (London: Islamic Publications for the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 1962), 309. Kabbalah is a mystical tradition within Judaism that seeks to uncover hidden meanings in the Hebrew scriptures, particularly through the study of letters and the assigned numbers to the letters.

²⁶ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fütuhât-ı Mekkiyye (al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya)*, trans. Ekrem Demirli, Litera Yayıncılık, 2007.

²⁷ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Quran in Its Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2008), 8-9.

Letter mysticism is often linked to Sufism, as both share the common aim of delving into deeper layers of meaning. As Demirli pointed out, Sufism begins with an individual's questioning of realities and values, which leads them to search for new truths and meanings²⁸ —an objective that aligns with the Hurufi method of understanding texts. Demirli suggests that the spiritual journey, often represented by separation from one's homeland, requires immense effort and a disciplined lifestyle. Upon completing this journey, the seeker returns to the world with a transformed perspective. However, communicating their subjective experiences, which often challenge ordinary reality, is a difficult task. This challenge led Sufis to develop a symbolic language rooted in the microcosm-macrocosm analogy. Although this language had existed in earlier periods, Ibn ‘Arabī was the one who systematized it.²⁹ Ibn ‘Arabī sought to comprehend the Quran and, by extension, the universe,³⁰ and employed mystical contemplation on the letters to reveal deeper meanings. He not only examined the meanings of the letters of the Quran but also connected them with the cosmos. As Ekrem Demirli argued, Ibn ‘Arabī establishes the foundation for the similarity between letters and humans, or more generally, beings, by saying “Letters compose a realm like ours.”³¹ Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophy, particularly in relation to Dağistani’s work, will be discussed in more detail in the second chapter.

Shortly after Ibn ‘Arabī passed away, in 14th-century Iran, an Islamic scholar, Fazlullah Astarabadi (1340-1394) developed a structured system centered on the mystical interpretation of letters. This system became known as Hurufism, emerging as a distinct sect. There are differing opinions on whom he was influenced by in systematizing this sect. Gölpınarlı suggests that he may

²⁸ Ekrem Demirli, “Normatif Geleneğe Karşı Sembolik Anlatım: Ibn’ül Arabi’de Harf Sembolizmi,” (Symbolic Expression Against the Normative Tradition: Letter Symbolism in Ibn Arabī), *Istanbul Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* no. 17 (2008): 226.

²⁹ Demirli, “Normatif Geleneğe Karşı Sembolik Anlatım,” 226.

³⁰ Zilola Amonova, Marifat Rajabova, Hilola Safarova, Mekhrigiyo Shirinova, and Zufnunabegim Akhrorova, “The teachings of Hurufism and Nasimi's poetic skills,” *E3S Web of Conferences* 538 (2024), 2.

³¹ Demirli, “Normatif Geleneğe Karşı Sembolik Anlatım,” 228.

have studied the works of Ibn ‘Arabī and used them as a foundation for structuring the sect.³² On the other hand, Schimmel argues that Fazlullah expanded on certain “kabbalistic speculations” about the letters,³³ drawing from Jewish mystical religious interpretations. Not only Schimmel but Birge also called Fazlullah’s philosophy as “a cabalistic system of belief in numbers and their relations to letters.”³⁴ Ultimately, Hurufism emerged in the 14th century as a “mystical-philosophical movement” developed by Fazlullah, as in Usluer’s words.³⁵ Beyond its theological aspects, Hurufism also evolved into an ideological movement with profound socio-political implications during this era. Its techniques were arguably employed to safeguard knowledge within the order and conceal it from authorities—especially after the execution of its founder.³⁶

Despite the differences, the main aim remains similar for both the scholarly approach and the sect: to uncover hidden or implied meanings and offer fresh interpretations of phrases or words by deconstructing them into their smallest components—the letters—and assigning numerical values to them.³⁷ However, there is a need to make a distinction between Hurufism and the *‘ilm al-ḥurūf* since Hurufism emerged as a distinct sect and a mystical movement that had a political facet which will be further discussed in the first chapter. Furthermore, Corbin emphasized this distinction, arguing that the Hurufi sect specifically refers to the tradition founded by Fazlullah of Astarabad, even though the ‘philosophical alphabet’ and ‘arithmosophy,’ attributed to the sixth

³² Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı, *Hurufî Metinler Katalogu* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1973), 7.

³³ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, (The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 339.

³⁴ John Kingsley Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*, Hartford Seminary Press, (1937), 58.

³⁵ Fatih Usluer, “On Hurufism and Its Periodization,” *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Cografya Fakültesi Türkoloji Dergisi* 80, no. 2 (2020), 150.

³⁶ Fazlullah proclaimed himself the Mahdi, elevating Hurufism’s significance and challenging the political order. His claims, including unveiling the secrets of *ḥurūf al-muqatta‘ah* in the *Javidanname*, led to his execution by Timur in 1394 near Nakhchivan for heresy and “spoiling the faith of the community.” His public display served as a warning, yet his martyrdom galvanized followers, solidifying Hurufism’s legacy. See, Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı, *Hurufî Metinler Katalogu*, 7-10, Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, “Seyid İmadeddin Nesimi,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 28, 2024; Fatih Usluer, “Faḍlallāh Al-Ḥurūfî and His World: Power, Religion, and Sufism,” *Belleten* 85, no. 303. (2021): 470; Hüsametdin Aksu, “Cavidanname,” <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/cavidanname>.

³⁷ Shahzad Bashir, *Fazlullah Astarabadi ve Hurufilik (Fazlullah Astarabadi and Hurufism)*, trans. Ahmet Tunç Şen, (İstanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2012), 69-70.

Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, influenced mystical thinkers throughout history.³⁸ I will explore the perception towards Hurufi ideas in the intellectual atmosphere of 19th-Anatolia, but this exploration will not take the center stage in this thesis. This is particularly important because my research focuses on Ahmed Dağıstani, a 19th-century Islamic scholar who developed a text centered on the *'ilm al-ḥurūf* rather than a work rooted in Hurufi ideas.

Hurufi ideas found a strong foothold in Anatolia through the Bektashi order, which played a central role in their transmission from the 14th century onwards. Aliyyü'l-A'lā is known to have visited the Bektashi order associated with Hacı Bektash Veli,³⁹ while Sayyid Nesimi actively propagated Hurufi thought in Anatolia until his eventual execution,⁴⁰ as followers of Fazlullah. Through the influence of figures like Aliyyü'l-A'lā and Sayyid Nesimi, Hurufi texts became part of the Bektashi literary and spiritual tradition.⁴¹ However, some members of the Bektashi order sought to distance themselves from Hurufi associations, particularly as mainstream Sunni authorities viewed these ideas as heretical. For instance, in 1873, Ishak Harputi explicitly condemned them in his *Kaşif'ül Esrar ve Dağı'ül Esrar*.⁴² Nevertheless, Birge argues that there is no evidence Bektashis accepted Hurufi doctrines as the teachings of Haji Bektash; on the contrary, they often emphasized a distinction between their order and Hurufi beliefs.⁴³

Janissaries, as “civilian Bektashis” were also exposed to Hurufi ideas,⁴⁴ and Bektashis maintained close ties with the Janissary corps, which was composed of converted Christian boys. Nevertheless, after the Janissaries were abolished in 1826, the association of Hurufism with

³⁸ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 309.

³⁹ Hasan Hussein Ballı, “Hurufilik Nedir? (What is Hurufism?),” *E-mâkâlat Mezhep Araştırmaları*, 2011, 39.

⁴⁰ Hussein Ayan, *Nesîmî: Hayatı, Edebî Kişiliği, Eserleri ve Türkçe Divanının Tenkitli Metni I* (Ankara: TDK Yayınları, 2002), 18.

⁴¹ Bashir, *Fazlullah Astarabadi ve Hurufilik*, 106.

⁴² Ishak Harputi, *Kaşif'ül Esrar ve Dağı'ül Esrar* (1873).

⁴³ Birge, *The Bektashi Order*, 60.

⁴⁴ Birge, *The Bektashi Order*, 61.

Bektashis did not diminish. This event even marked a turning point, further marginalizing the order and limiting its influence. The 19th century is therefore crucial in understanding the growing perception of Hurufi ideas as heretical during this period. Even in the 20th century, scholars such as Fuad Köprülü dismissed Hurufism as a naive system rooted in Sufi traditions, while Turkish literary historian Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı, in some of his works, described it as a false religion.⁴⁵ These views illustrate the continued negative perception of Hurufism in the 20th century as well. Moreover, Hussein Vassaf, in his biographical work on Dağıstani, notes that some people referred to Dağıstani as an *ebcedci* (numerologist) or even a *Hurufi*, likely due to a misunderstanding of his intellectual pursuits. Vassaf clarifies that such labels stemmed from ignorance of Dağıstani's true profession—his Quranic commentaries.⁴⁶ This issue will be further discussed in chapter 1.

3. Literature Review

Hurufi doctrines have been studied by eminent scholars such as Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı, Orkhan Mir-Kasimov, Fatih Usluer, and Shahzad Bashir.⁴⁷ Specifically the recent works of Fatih Usluer and Shahzad Bashir on Hurufism in the Ottoman context provide valuable insights into Hurufism and its historical development. Nevertheless, there is a lack of inquiry into the study of Quranic letters during the 20th century. This thesis aims to address how this esoteric focus on letters was transformed within the intellectual landscape of the early 20th century and how it emerged in a non-canonical hermeneutical text published in 1923 in Istanbul. *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*

⁴⁵ Balı, “Hurufilik Nedir?” 44.

⁴⁶ Hussein Vassaf, *Sefîne-i Evliya, (The Ships of Saints)* ed. Mehmet Akkuş, Ali Yılmaz, İstanbul: Kitabevi Yayınları, 2011.

⁴⁷ Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı, *Hurufi Metinler Katalogu* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1973); Orkhan Mir-Kasimov, “The Hurufi Moses: An Example of Late Medieval ‘Heterodox’ Interpretation of the Quran and Bible” *Journal of Quranic Studies* (2008): 21-49; Shahzad Bashir, *Fazlullah Astarabadi ve Hurufilik*, trans. Ahmet Tunç Şen. (İstanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2012).

al-A 'lā appears to reflect Hurufi influences while simultaneously charting a distinct intellectual trajectory in the study of Quranic letters during the period.

Considering its time of publication, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A 'lā* was a rare and unconventional text. Discussions on the canonization of religious texts within the Islamic context, including the work of scholars such as Hindy Najman, provide a useful framework for analyzing *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A 'lā* as a non-canonical text. This non-canonical position stems from its esoteric approach and its relatively obscure status within broader Islamic scholarship. Drawing on Najman's critique of canonical presuppositions, the thesis situates *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A 'lā* within a broader framework of scriptural vitality. Najman argues that non-canonical texts can embody ongoing divine encounter and theological creativity as well. Although her focus is on ancient Judaism and Christianity, her critique of rigid canonical boundaries applies to all sacred traditions. She challenges the modern presumption that 'canon' refers to a fixed and closed set of authoritative texts, emphasizing instead the generative and evolving nature of scriptural engagement.⁴⁸ In this light, the obscure position of Dağistani's work is a consequence of broader processes of institutional canon formation in his time. The esoteric treatment of Quranic letters in *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A 'lā* aligns with what Najman describes as the generative potential of scripture beyond the canon — even if it diverges from the dominant canon of its time, or indeed from canonical traditions more broadly, which have typically favored more traditional Quranic commentaries.

On the other hand, Kristin Zahra Sands' work on Sufi commentary traditions⁴⁹ helps me situate *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A 'lā* within the broader context of Sufi interpretive practices.

⁴⁸ Hindy Najman, "The Vitality of Scripture Within and Beyond the 'Canon'," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 43 (2012), 501-508.

⁴⁹ Kristin Zahra Sand, *Sufi Commentaries on the Quran in Classical Islam* (London: Routledge, 2006).

Specifically, I will explore how *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā* contrasts with classical Quranic exegesis, commonly referred to as *tafsir*. I will emphasize the similar perspectives of Ibn ‘Arabī and Dağıstani while distinguishing them in the sense that the first one is called *ishara* and the latter is *ta‘wīl*, enlightened by Sands’ ideas on Ibn ‘Arabī and the terminology he preferred for his work. This framework is essential for understanding the text’s place within Sufi interpretive traditions, especially as *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā* revisits the focus on the Quranic letters during a relatively modern period. The literature on the perception of Ibn ‘Arabī in the 19th century will be analyzed through Pierre Lory’s and Mustafa Tahralı’s works on this topic.⁵⁰ But for the comparison between Ahmed Dağıstani and Ibn ‘Arabī will heavily be based on their own original works; respectively, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā* and *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (*Meccan Revelations*). Another important comparison will be between Ahmed Dağıstani and Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır, regarding their interpretations on the disjointed letters of the Quran (*hurūf al-muqaṭṭa‘a*). I will use the original works written by these authors; *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā* and *Hak Dili Kur’an Dili* (*The Language of Truth, the Language of the Quran*).

Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā and its author Ahmed Dağıstani have been studied in Turkish scholarship, primarily by scholars from theology departments, but remain completely unexplored in English-language literature. Turan Alptekin offered an evaluation of Dağıstani’s work, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā*.⁵¹ On the other hand, Zeynep Şeyma Özkan from Marmara University analyzed *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā* in a Sufi research journal⁵² while Harun Alkan from Çorum

⁵⁰ Pierre Lory, “The Symbolism of Letters and Language in the Work of Ibn ‘Arabī,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society* 23 (1998).

⁵¹ Turan Alptekin, “Esrâr-ı Ceberûtü’l-a‘lâ ve Bâtınî Anlam,” in *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsâmeddin Eserleri ve Nakşbendî Öğretinin Kökenleri* (Ankara: Demos Yayınları, 2007).

⁵² Zeynep Ş. Özkan “Ahmed Hüsâmeddin Dağıstani, Esrâr-ı Ceberûtü’l-a‘lâ, Kudret Matbaası, 1339 (1920),” *Tasavvuf İlmî ve Akademik Araştırma Dergisi* 29 (2012), 202-204.

University wrote a master's thesis on Ahmed Dağıstani's life, his works, and Sufi views.⁵³ These studies, along with the overall scarcity of research on this text, suggest that *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā* is one of the few surviving examples of esoteric Quranic interpretation with a focus on the Arabic letters in early 20th-century. It reveals the persistence and transformation of this esoteric approach to the Quran commentary during a time when such thought was overshadowed by dominant intellectual currents, notably the continued influence of classical *tafsīr* traditions. In light of this, I will examine *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā* as a key instance of intellectual continuity, demonstrating how esoteric approaches on the Quranic interpretation were integrated and reworked in the early 20th century—a topic that remains understudied, particularly in Quran studies, with a focus on a non-canonical text.

4. Methodology

This study employs a combination of textual analysis, archival research, and oral history. To trace Ahmed Dağıstani's life, I will draw on four different types of primary sources: one is the biography written by his son Musa Kazım Öztürk, the second is another biography written by a famous Sufi biographer Hussein Vassaf, the third is the Ottoman archives – formerly known as the Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives – mostly processing his investigation and exile, and the last is the interview I conducted with one of Dağıstani's great-grandsons. This way, it will be easier to present a more objective and comprehensive description of Ahmed Dağıstani. Biographical accounts written by his son and Hussein Vassaf will be examined to reconstruct his scholarly influences, Sufi affiliations, and interactions with Ottoman intellectual circles. Furthermore, archival documents detailing his reception by Ottoman rulers will provide insight into the political

⁵³ Harun Alkan, *Ahmed Hüsameddin Dağıstânî'nin Hayatı, Eserleri ve Tasavvufî Görüşleri* (master's thesis, Hitit University, 2015).

and theological climate that shaped the dissemination and reception of his work. Finally, an interview with Dağıstani's grandson will offer a personal perspective on his intellectual legacy, providing contemporary reflections on how his work has been preserved, transmitted, and interpreted over time. This will help bridge the gap between historical documentation and lived memory, offering a more nuanced perspective.

Aligning with his life story, I will give the historical and intellectual context concerning the focus on Arabic letters as an esoteric approach in this period, which is mostly linked to Hurufism. I will use the work written by Ishak Harputi for condemning Bektashis on their relation to Hurufi ideas. However, my research focus is more on the early 20th century and thus, I will switch to the period after 1908, where printed works increased. I will mostly use Brett Wilson's works⁵⁴ on this topic since he explicitly refers to this flourishing in print culture.

5. Structure

This thesis is divided into two chapters. The first chapter traces key moments in Dağıstani's life, shedding light on the influences that shaped his intellectual development. In addition to archival and textual sources, oral interview with his great-grandson is used to gain insight into how Dağıstani and his works have been remembered and transmitted within his intellectual and familial lineage. Secondly this chapter examines the historical and intellectual environment of late 19th- and early 20th-century Anatolia, focusing on the persistence of Hurufi ideas within Bektashi circles and their reception in Ottoman religious discourse. Additionally, it explores how Ibn 'Arabī was perceived and studied during this period, investigating the extent to which Ahmed Dağıstani

⁵⁴ M. Brett Wilson, "The First Translations of the Quran in Modern Turkey (1924-38)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009): 419-435; M. Brett, "The Twilight of Ottoman Sufism: Antiquity, Immorality, and Nation in Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu's Nur Baba," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49 (2017): 233-253.

was familiar with him. Lastly, opportunities and challenges Dağıstani might have encountered during the writing and publication process of the book is discussed. Overall, the first chapter aims to contextualize Dağıstani's engagement with the letter mysticism within the religious and sociopolitical landscape of his time.

The second chapter presents a close analysis of *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā*, situating it within its historical context and exploring its hermeneutical and exegetical dimensions in connection with the division between *tafsir* and *ta'wīl* works in Quran studies. This chapter examines the text's structure, linguistic strategies, and interpretative techniques, focusing on how Dağıstani engages with Quranic letters and whether his approach aligns with or departs from earlier esoteric interpretations such as Ibn 'Arabī. How Ibn 'Arabī's views on the Quranic letters compare to Dağıstani's, highlight points of overlap and divergence is significant. Moreover, a comparison between Dağıstani's interpretation of the disjointed letters of the Quran and that of Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır in the 20th century will provide insight into the differences between esoteric and mainstream exegetical approaches. Ultimately, this thesis argues that *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā* presents a distinct engagement with alphabetic mysticism in the context of Quranic interpretation. This research highlights how Islamic intellectual traditions can evolve and adapt within shifting historical and theological contexts.

Chapter 1 – Ahmed Dağıstani’s Life and Letter Mysticism in the 19th and 20th centuries

1. Ahmed Dağıstani’s Life and Exile to Tripoli

In the late 19th century, Ahmed Dağıstani—a Sufi Sheikh and descendant of the Prophet Muhammad—began his intellectual journey, which extended into the early 20th century and focused on Sufi interpretations of the Quran. To trace his intellectual legacy, it is crucial to situate him within the historical and intellectual currents of his time. Born in the town of *Rükkâl* (Rukel’) from the province of Ban (Dagestan) in February 1848, Ahmed received his initial education from his father Sayyid Said-i Rükkâli. Said-i Rükkâli was a very smart man with the knowledge of Sharia. He was always fasting as Ahmed narrated.⁵⁵ Seemingly, he had a further interpretation of fasting in Sharia, and he did it constantly instead of doing it only in Ramadan. Hence, he became the first influential figure for Ahmed Dağıstani about personal interpretations. After a while, his father moved the family to İstanbul since he wanted his son to be well-educated and Dagestan did not offer the most suitable environment. The region was occupied by Russian forces at the time. On the contrary, he regarded Istanbul as the center of Islam. So, Ahmed began his education in Fatih Madrasa. However, after Said-i Rükkâli saw the professors smoking water pipe and gossiping, he became disappointed with the education in Istanbul. Therefore, he decided to move to Mecca with his son. Ahmed learned Arabic and Persian in Mecca within 11 years.⁵⁶ I believe their move to Mecca played the most significant role for Ahmed Dağıstani’s journey to becoming

⁵⁵ M. Kazım Öztürk, *Işık Veren Seyyidler, (The Luminous Sayyids)*, Yenigün Matbaası (1969), 156.

⁵⁶ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 8-12.

an interpreter of the Quran. As he improved his language skills there, it enabled him to access important sources.

When his father, Said-i Rûkkâlî, passed away in 1871, Ahmed was twenty-three years old.⁵⁷ At this early age, Ahmed began his Sufi journey under Sheikh Halil Hamdi Dağıstani in Mecca. Halil Hamdi Dağıstani was a prominent Naqshbandi Sufi master known for his commitment to spiritual discipline (*seyr u sülûk*)⁵⁸. Emphasizing key Sufi practices such as remembrance of God (*zikr*), spiritual connection with the sheikh (*rabita*), companionship (*sohbet*), and adherence to the Sunnah, he articulated a structured route of inner transformation and played a vital role in preserving and transmitting Naqshbandi teachings.⁵⁹ I suppose that Sheikh Halil Hamdi was one of the central influences on Ahmed Dağıstani's own Sufi orientation. Finally, Dağıstani obtained the permission to train disciples (*'irshād*) by completing the Sufi journey.⁶⁰ After a while, he moved from Mecca to Medina on foot. He already possessed exoteric Islamic knowledge (*zahir ilim*), but he also deepened his understanding of esoteric knowledge (*manevi ilim*) while in Medina.⁶¹ Therefore, Medina was an important place where Ahmed Dağıstani's Sufi character developed.

Later, Dağıstani remembered his father's advice on going to Anatolia to find Sheikh Hadji Hasan Fevzi. I believe his journey as a Sufi Sheikh would start with his travel to Anatolia. However, Dağıstani could not afford the travel expenses due to his financial problems. Finally, he encountered the sign he had been waiting for: the governor of Yanbu invited him to Yanbu where

⁵⁷ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 12-13.

⁵⁸ In Arabic *sulûk* means "journey"; *sayr* means "travel" and *Seyr u sülûk* refers to the spiritual journey from the beginning to the end of Sufi training as in Mustafa Kara's words. Mustafa Kara, *Tasavvuf ve Tarikatler*, 56.

⁵⁹ Kadir Özköse, H. İbrahim Şimşek, *Altın Silsileden Altın Halkalar*, Nasihat Yayınları, (2017), 409-410.

⁶⁰ Mehmet Şemseddin, *Bursa Dergahları: Yâdigâr-ı Şemsî I-II*, prep. Mustafa Kara, Kadir Atlansoy, Uludağ Yayınları (1997), 345.

⁶¹ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 13.

the harbor was located. He then traveled to Yanbu and departed from there by ship on his journey to Anatolia.⁶² He got off the ship in İzmir and went to Denizli to find Sheikh Hadji Hasan Fevzi, who was a prominent 19th-century Sufi scholar and spiritual figure who served in the regions of Denizli and Yalvaç in western Anatolia. Sheikh Hasan Fevzi received his education in Konya and completed his Sufi training under Sheikh Muhammed Kudsi Bozkırî, a disciple of Mevlana Khalid al-Baghdadi.⁶³ Sheikh Hasan Fevzi gave a place to Dağıstani beside his own disciples.⁶⁴

After a while, Dağıstani went to Isparta, Uluborlu. He visited Sheikh Hadji Mustafa, who was also from Dagestan and a Sayyid, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, as Kevser Karataş noted in her work.⁶⁵ As Kazım Öztürk emphasizes, several people seeking the knowledge of truth (*ḥaqīqat ʿilmī*) gathered around Dağıstani within months. Later, he married with Sheikh Hadji Mustafa's wife's sister, Ayşe Sıdika. After they lived in Uluborlu for 11 years, Ahmed Dağıstani decided to move to Ankara, Sivrihisar with his family; upon a spiritual order.⁶⁶ Kazım Öztürk does not elaborate on this order, but it was probably related to the revelations Dağıstani had also for writing the Quran commentaries. God-inspired thoughts were considered spiritual order in Sufism. In 1882, Dağıstani arrived in Sivrihisar,⁶⁷ which became the initial center of his popularity, as archival documents about him also frequently mention this location. He settled there

⁶² Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 14.

⁶³ However, there is another figure—Hasan Feyzi Yüregil, born in 1895—who was actually connected to Said Nursi. There is often confusion between the two, and many biased sources mistakenly present Said Nursi as a disciple of Hadji Hasan Fevzi.⁶³ However, there is no sufficient evidence to support this claim. The only reliable evidence comes from Said Nursi's own writings. In the *Emirdağ Lahikası*, he refers to one of his disciples, Hasan Feyzi Yüregil, calling him his “brother.”⁶³ In this context, it is important to note that the Hadji Hasan Fevzi whom Ahmed Dağıstani met in Denizli was a different person and should not be confused with Hasan Feyzi Yüregil. See; Said Nursi, *Emirdağ Lahikası*, 1, Şahdamar Yayınları (2014): 191-202. https://www.denizlimuhabir.com/yazarlar/ibrahim-afatoglu/haci-hasan-feyzi-efendi-turbesi-ve-ferruhe-hanim-in-mezari/2239/#google_vignette

⁶⁴ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 31.

⁶⁵ Kevser Kıvanç Karataş, “Sheikh Muṣṭafā Dagestānī (1824-1909),” *Journal of the Institute for Sufi Studies*, (2023), 28.

⁶⁶ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 30-32; Vassaf, *Sefine-i Evliya*, 266.

⁶⁷ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 33.

with his family, and it is where his sons were born. During this period, he devoted himself to the studies of Hadith. However, according to accounts, he received a spiritual order from the Prophet Muhammad telling him to turn his attention instead to the Quran and its deeper, esoteric meanings—referred to as *‘ilm al-ladun*.⁶⁸ As I suggested before, spiritual order is used again for emphasizing the God-inspired thoughts.

Later Ahmed Dağıstani asked permission from Mufti Hasan to lecture at the mosque. His lectures drew significant public interest. However, his interpretations were quite unconventional. For instance, As Hussein Vassaf narrates as a biographer of Sufis, in the very work of Dağıstani, there were discussions on astronomy, geology, botany, zoology, medicine, and various sciences; including many points that are not yet known scientifically.⁶⁹ It is therefore not very surprising that Dağıstani also made assertions about future innovations. In Öztürk's biography, it is cited that Dağıstani said it would one day be possible to communicate with other planets—such as Mars, Venus, and Mercury—just as easily as we communicate across the globe today.⁷⁰ Another example is his prediction that people living by the waterside would refine seawater for irrigation at a very low cost.⁷¹ Considering that Dağıstani likely wrote these predictions in *Mir'ât-ı Şü'ûn ve'l Garâib* — published in the early 1870s, before his move to Sivrihisar⁷²— they appear both bold and insightful. They also reflect his approach to science within the context of Qur'anic studies. Moreover, Vassaf visited Dağıstani to hear the explanation of the first two verses of Sûrat al-Naba.

⁶⁸ *‘ilm al-ladun* means the hidden knowledge that is believed to reach directly from God, in other words, esoteric knowledge (*batinî*).

⁶⁹ Vassaf, *Sefînetü'l-Evliyâ*, 268.

⁷⁰ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 160. The book cited by Öztürk is *Mir'ât-ı Şü'ûn ve'l Garâib* (*The Mirror of Events and Wonders*), which includes many of Dağıstani's scientific predictions. It was translated into Turkish to be published in the journal *Al-Mirsad* but was later lost in the Great Istanbul Fire.

⁷¹ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 161.

⁷² Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 158.

Dağıstani's interpretation of even a single word of the sura lasted for more than one hour.⁷³ This demonstrates that Dağıstani was deeply engaged in intensive Quranic exegesis and its linguistic dimensions, which eventually prepared him to author *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā*, where he explores the letter mysticism.

The reputation of Ahmed Dağıstani went beyond Sivrihisar and eventually reached the palace. After a Friday sermon in Yıldız Mosque, someone even shouted “*Khilafat* is being lost!” indirectly addressing Sultan Abdulhamid II. Upon interrogation, it was revealed that the man was referring to the sheikh in Sivrihisar, Ahmed Dağıstani, who was gaining a following. He had never met Dağıstani but had only heard of him by name. Nevertheless, Sultan Abdulhamid became suspicious and instructed the governor of Ankara to investigate Dağıstani. Consequently, the chief justice of the Court of First Instance, *Tayyib Efendi*, was sent to Sivrihisar. After his investigation, it was determined that Dağıstani devoted himself to learning and teaching, with no interest in political matters such as the caliphate, as Öztürk argues in his biography.⁷⁴ The archival document further supports this claim, stating that there was nothing to worry about regarding Sheikh Ahmed Dağıstani, despite his disciples, according to the observations of the former governor Sırrı Pasha.⁷⁵ On the other hand, Endelman argues that “...Abdulhamid capitalized upon the claim of the Ottoman Sultan to be simultaneously Caliph, or worldwide religious leader of all Muslims.”⁷⁶ Therefore, it is evident that Abdulhamid was particularly concerned about the potential influence

⁷³ Vassaf, *Sefīnetü'l-Evliyā*, 268.

⁷⁴ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 34-36.

⁷⁵ BOA. DH. MKT 1378/28 16 Safer 1304/ 14 November 1886.

⁷⁶ Jonathan. Endelman, “Ottoman Legacies of the State: An Introduction,” *Social Science History* 42, no. 4 (2018), 795–96.

of independent religious figures like Dağıstani, whose popularity could have posed a challenge to his own authority as caliph.⁷⁷

The process of Dağıstani's displacement and eventual exile to Tripoli can be observed through the archival documents.⁷⁸ First, following an order from Sultan Abdulhamid II, information regarding Sheikh Ahmed Dağıstani –always referred to as Sheikh in official records– was collected and delivered to the grand vizier. In 1886, Dağıstani is reported to have performed rituals associated with the Khalidiyya branch of the Naqshbandi order and to have had nearly thirty thousand disciples in Sivrihisar.⁷⁹ I presume that the number of thirty thousand is likely exaggerated for that period, especially since other archival documents report lower numbers. This suggests a tendency toward overstatement in some official state records. Furthermore, the same document indicates that Dağıstani was actively seeking to expand his following by sending out invitations. Dağıstani also told his disciples to postpone their pilgrimage that year with the intention of organizing it the following year by his own companion according to the official documents. These concerns were initially reported from the province of Kastamonu, prompting a request for further information from the province of Ankara, where Sivrihisar⁸⁰ is located at the time. As a result, former governor Sırrı Pasha visited Sivrihisar and met with Dağıstani. He

⁷⁷ I made this argument in my bachelor's thesis at Boğaziçi University. Zeynep Sevgi Eriş, "A Potential Threat to Pan-Islamism During the Reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II: Dağıstani Ahmed," Bachelor's thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2023.

⁷⁸ BOA. DH. MKT 1378/28 16 Safer 1304/ 14 November 1886.

⁷⁹ BOA. DH. MKT 1378/28 16 Safer 1304/ 14 November 1886.

⁸⁰ Sivrihisar, where Dağıstani Ahmed lived, is currently located in Eskişehir, Turkey. Although some documents mistakenly refer to it as Seferihisar, the correct location is Sivrihisar, as these same documents also state that the town was part of the province of Ankara at the time. Throughout this article, the name Sivrihisar will be used consistently.

concluded that there was nothing particularly problematic about him. Nevertheless, Tayyib Efendi was dispatched to conduct a further investigation.⁸¹

The following document details the arrival of Dağıstani in Ankara, accompanied by Tayyib Efendi.⁸² It states that within approximately three years, Dağıstani had gathered around three hundred disciples in Sivrihisar. Including followers from outside the town, the number may have reached two to three thousand and was expected to increase over time. The document further notes that Dağıstani belonged to the Naqshbandi tariqa and was held in deep respect by the people. For this reason, it was decided that he should be transferred to another province. Due to his impoverished condition and to prevent him from relying on his disciples for financial support, it was considered appropriate to allocate him a salary of seven to eight hundred *kuruş*.⁸³

Sheikh Ahmed Dağıstani traveled to Ankara together with Tayyib Efendi, where the local governor, Abdi Pasha, offered them accommodation. The Sheikh's presence in Ankara quickly attracted many of his disciples, who traveled from various nearby communities to see him. This sudden gathering of followers troubled the central authorities. Official records indicate that strict controls were put in place to prevent Dağıstani from leaving his quarters at Abdi Pasha's compound.⁸⁴ The documents emphasize that appropriate action needed to be taken promptly, as the number of his disciples in Ankara was steadily increasing. Within ten days, another document was sent to the grand vizier, reiterating the urgency of implementing measures before the Sheikh's influence grew further. By May 19, 1887, five months after the initial discussions, the decision

⁸¹ BOA. DH. MKT 1378/28 16 Safer 1304/ 14 November 1886.

⁸² BOA. DH. ŞFR. 132/3 18 Safer 1304/ 16 November 1886; BOA. DH. ŞFR. 132/4 Safer 1304/ 16 November 1886.

⁸³ BOA. DH. ŞFR. 132/3 18 Safer 1304/ 16 November 1886; BOA. DH. ŞFR. 132/4 Safer 1304/ 16 November 1886.

⁸⁴ BOA. DH. MKT. 1391/34 15 Rebiyülevvel 1304/ 12 December 1886.

was made to send Dağıstanî to Syria with six hundred kuruş allocated for his support. Accordingly, a document was forwarded to the fiscal office regarding his salary and his place of residence in Syria, emphasizing the necessity of his relocation.⁸⁵ But, some of Sheikh Ahmed's disciples objected to the decision, and ultimately, he was not sent to Syria. It was not considered appropriate due to his health problems.⁸⁶ Afterward, he was summoned to Istanbul by the grand vizier after he stayed in Ankara for a while in Abdi Pasha's residence. Dağıstanî came from Ankara to Istanbul in June 1887. His case was then presented to the Yıldız Palace by Şehriyârî Süreyya, the first secretary of Sultan Abdul Hamid II.⁸⁷ Upon the Sultan's order, Dağıstanî was initially relocated to Bursa with his family, where they resided for a period.⁸⁸

The year 1897 marked the palace's decision to send Dağıstanî to Tripoli, with financial arrangements including a 250 kuruş salary increase and a 5000 kuruş travel allowance.⁸⁹ According to documents from 1900, Dağıstanî had been in Tripoli for three years and requested to be excused from his post. It was emphasized that no attempts should be made to permit his return to his house in Bursa. At that time, Dağıstanî was reportedly suffering from health problems, and his son was eventually allowed to visit him.⁹⁰ Less than a month later, another document stated that an appropriate decision should be made regarding Sheikh Ahmed's release, as he had petitioned for it and was not considered to pose any threat or act contrary to state interests (*mugayir-i merzi-i âli-i hal-ü hareket*). However, it was also recorded that Dağıstanî had

⁸⁵ BOA. DH. MKT. 1421/44. 25 Şaban 1304/ 19 May 1887; BOA. DH. MKT. 1421/66. 25 Şaban 1304/ 19 May 1887.

⁸⁶ BOA. DH. MKT. 1444/ 69. 25 Ramazan 1304/ 17 June 1887.

⁸⁷ İ. DH: 1033/81387 29 Ramazan 1304/ 21 June 1887.

⁸⁸ BOA, Y. PRK. UM. 16/76. 18 Recep 1305/ 31 March 1888.

⁸⁹ BEO. 978/73341 14 Safer 1315/ 15 July 1897.

⁹⁰ BOA. DH. MKT. 2362/67. 19 Safer 1318/ 18 June 1900.

previously been transferred from Sivrihisar to Bursa, and the reasons for this initial relocation needed to be reissued in order to assess whether a return would be suitable.

Following this investigation, it was concluded that Dağıstani had gathered a large number of followers and had expressed views that were considered heretical. For this reason, he had first been transferred from Sivrihisar to Ankara, then to Bursa, and finally to Tripoli. The document warned that, if he were released and returned, the palace would likely receive numerous petitions, as had occurred in the past.⁹¹ Thus, although he could not return earlier, he was able to go back to Istanbul in 1908—after Sultan Abdulhamid’s dethronement—following an eleven-year stay and experiences in Tripoli. It was during this exile period in Tripoli that some details of Dağıstani’s life, preserved through oral transmission within his family, provide insights into his personal worldview.

2. The Oral Transmission of Ahmed Dağıstani’s Identity

During his exile in Tripoli, Dağıstani and his second wife Gülsüm Hanım, lived with an Arab woman named Fatma Bacı who helped them with household chores. One day, Gülsüm Hanım noticed that Fatma, during her prayers, was not reciting any of the usual prayers. Instead, she simply repeated in Arabic: *“Fatma loves God, and God loves Fatma.”* When Gülsüm Hanım offered to teach Fatma the proper words in prayer, Dağıstani said, *“Do not interfere, my dear; she has already found her own way to God.”*⁹² Apparently, one of the most telling stories about Ahmed Dağıstani comes not from his published writings, but from family memory. This anecdote

⁹¹ BOA. DH. MKT. 2371/13. 10 Rebiyülevvel 1318/ 8 July 1900.

⁹² Ali Eşref Müezzinoğlu, interview by Zeynep Sevgi Eriş, Sarıyer/İstanbul, 30.08.2024.

shows one aspect of Dağıstani's worldview: prayer, like interpretation, is not about external forms but about inner resonance and direct connection with God.

I had the chance to meet one of Dağıstani's great-grandsons, Ali Eşref Müezzinoğlu. I conducted an oral interview with him to gain a deeper understanding of Dağıstani's identity and how his legacy has been preserved within his family. Living in Istanbul, Müezzinoğlu is a retired dentist and a practitioner of medical hypnosis. Our conversation provided valuable insights into the ways in which the family perceives Dağıstani's religious identity, the titles ascribed to him, and their interpretation of his spiritual outlook. For example, some archival records describe Ahmed Dağıstani as a Naqshbandi Sheikh.⁹³ However, biographical accounts written by his son and by Hussein Vassaf resist confining him to a single category. For instance, his son refers to him as *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, while Hussein Vassaf describes him as a *Cāmi 'al-asrār* — a locus of esoteric truths arising from a synthesis of the Naqshbandi, Qadiri, Chishti, and Suhrawardi orders, or more precisely, from a gnostic path that they collectively represent.⁹⁴ In my interview with his great-grandson, he acknowledged the existence of such titles in archival records but provided a different perspective on their meaning. According to him, Ahmed Dağıstani may have outwardly maintained the appearance of a Naqshi Sheikh due to social and political expectations but was more focused on a broader mystical engagement that transcended the Naqshbandi framework.

The interviewee emphasized that in family memory, his great-grandfather was remembered primarily as a Sufi — one whose authority derived from personal spiritual depth rather than

⁹³ (Ottoman Archives) BOA. DH. MKT 1378/28 16 Safer 1304/ 14 November 1886; BOA. DH. MKT. 1391/34. 15 Rebiyülevvel 1304/ 12 December 1886.

⁹⁴ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*; Vassaf, *Sefînetü'l Evliya*, 267.

institutional affiliation — and as a Sayyid, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. I also asked about Hurufism since Vassaf notes that some people called Dağıstani a Hurufi.⁹⁵ However, Müezzinoğlu, like Hussein Vassaf, preferred not to label him as such. This variation between external designation and inner practice illustrates how historical figures can be understood in different ways depending on the perspective of the source. As Alessandro Portelli emphasizes, oral history is not only about the preservation of facts but about uncovering the meanings that individuals and communities attach to their experiences.⁹⁶ The titles 'Naqshi' 'Sufi' or 'Hurufi' are not fixed labels; rather, they represent evolving interpretations of Ahmed Dağıstani's identity, shaped by archival records, family narratives, and personal perspectives. Therefore, it was especially insightful to meet and discuss with Ahmed Dağıstani's great-grandson about the various titles attributed to Dağıstani.

3. Letter Mysticism and Ibn 'Arabī in the Late Ottoman Period

In 19th-century Asia Minor, Hurufi ideas were prevalent among certain groups. The Bektashis were often regarded as key disseminators of Hurufism in Anatolia. Ishak Harputi (1801–1892), a member of the ulema, accused the Bektashis of being Hurufis, claiming they printed the works of Fazlullah Astarabadi and thus turned to heresy. In particular, *Cavidanname*⁹⁷, written by Fazlullah, who founded the order of Hurufism in 14th-century Iran, was printed and disseminated among Bektashis, as Harputi noted in his book.⁹⁸ Indeed, as Shahzad Bashir argued, Harputi wrote this polemical work in response to *Işkname*, authored by Abdülmecid b. Ferište, which engaged with Fazlullah's ideas and was published in 1871.

⁹⁵ Vassaf, *Sefînetü'l-Evliyâ*, 268.

⁹⁶ Alistair Thomson, "The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue by Alessandro Portelli," *Oral History* 29 (2001): 112.

⁹⁷ *Cavidanname*: a 14th-century work by Fazlullah Astarabadi that outlines his mystical teachings on the symbolic meanings of letters, central to Hurufi thought.

⁹⁸ Ishak Harputi, *Kaşif'ül Esrar ve Dağı'ül Esrar* (1873), 2-5.

This became one of the most prominent reasons why the Bektashis came to be seen as inheritors of the Hurufi doctrine. Mustafa Kara also highlights the historical presence and evolution of heterodox Sufi groups including Hurufis, emphasizing their varied interpretative approaches and their persistence, particularly through Bektashis after the Seljuk era.⁹⁹ In other words, Bektashis were considered the legacy-bearers of Hurufism because they printed Hurufi texts. After Harputi's accusations, Ahmet Rifat, a Bektashi author, responded with a book defending the Bektashis, emphasizing that their beliefs were fundamentally different from those of the Hurufis.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, the Bektashis had been associated with Hurufi thought for many centuries.

Engagement with the symbolic meanings of letters—especially in the tradition of Hurufi thought—was widely regarded as heretical by Ottoman Sunni religious authorities (*ulama*) in the 19th century. The understanding of Hurufism among the *ulama* at that time was shaped by its origins in 14th-century Iran, particularly through its association with Fazlullah Astarabadi, whose name had become synonymous with heresy.¹⁰¹ Therefore, any scholar engaging with letter mysticism was more likely to be considered heretical since this concept was associated with Fazlullah and his mystical-political movement. What made Fazlullah's movement political? As Bashir narrated, Fazlullah had many mystical dreams, which played a key role in his rise to popularity. He also interpreted others' dreams. In some of his dreams, as he wrote in *Nevmname*, he envisioned marrying the daughter of a sultan and having a son. Additionally, he saw symbols of swords, which symbolized him and his disciples as soldiers. Bashir argues that these signs indicate that Fazlullah saw himself as strong enough to be a sovereign, aligning with the position

⁹⁹ Mustafa Kara, *Tasavvuf ve Tarikatler*, İletişim Yayınları, (1992): 22-23

¹⁰⁰ Ahmet Rifat Efendi, *Mir'âtü'l-Mekâsıd fî Def'i'l-Mefâsîd* (İstanbul, 1876). It was written by members of the Bektashi order in the 19th century as an attempt to introduce and defend themselves.

¹⁰¹ Bashir, *Fazlullah Astarabadi ve Hurufilik*, 108.

of a messianic figure. Hence, Fazlullah was regarded as a heretic and executed by Timur, the sultan of the time.¹⁰² After his execution, two of his followers—Aliyyü'l-A'lâ and Seyyid Nesimi—arrived in Anatolia in the 15th century and helped spread Hurufi ideas, indeed.¹⁰³ Following this, even in the 19th century, Hurufism was associated with heresy and political rebellion. Not only did it conflict with Sunni Islamic doctrines, but it also contained rebellious political ideas within its legacy.

In the late 19th century, when letter mysticism was increasingly regarded as a deviation from Sunni Islam, it was unfavorable for members of the *ulema* to write about it, as discussed above. As for Ahmed Dağıstani, it remains unclear whether he wrote anything on the subject during his time in Sivrihisar, Anatolia. There is also no evidence that he was engaged with the Bektashi order. However, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, he gave speeches at the mosque that led to his being reported to the palace and Sultan Abdülhamid. This suggests that he may have interpreted the Quran in ways that were unfamiliar to others—likely including discussions of letters, which he would later explore in his writings. On the other hand, Hussein Vassaf argues that Dağıstani was not a scholar who engaged with Hurufism or the *ebced* system¹⁰⁴, despite occasionally being labeled a 'Hurufi' or '*ebcedci*'.¹⁰⁵ This suggests two things: first, that even before the publication of *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā*, Dağıstani was perceived by some as being engaged with esoteric studies within Islam; and second, that Vassaf avoided using these titles for him, as they carried highly negative connotations in the late 19th century. Hurufis were already considered heretical, so the term was dangerous at the time. Moreover, calling him a Hurufi would

¹⁰² Gölpınarlı, *Hurufilik Metinleri Katalogu*, 8.

¹⁰³ Bashir, *Fazlullah Astarabadi ve Hurufilik*, 104-110.

¹⁰⁴ Abjad is system assigning numerical values to Arabic letters, used in chronograms, numerology, and esoteric interpretations.

¹⁰⁵ Vassaf, *Sefînetü'l-Evliyā*, 268.

have undermined the originality and significance of Dağıstani's Quranic interpretation. Since Vassaf expresses admiration for Dağıstani in other anecdotes, it seems that he did not wish to portray him as a simple or ordinary figure among the Sufis.

In the 19th century, Ibn 'Arabī's works were widely reproduced and interpreted. Ibn 'Arabī, known as *al-Sheikh al-Akbar* (the Greatest Master), was a highly influential figure regarding the letter mysticism. In 1881, Al-Sayyid Muhammad Kamāl al-Dīn al-Harīrī wrote a commentary on Ibn 'Arabī's *Salat al-Akberiyya* and translated his *al-Amr al-Marbūt al-Muhkam* into Turkish. Later, in 1887, Muhammad Nūr al-'Arabī produced an interpretation of *Naqsh al-Fusūs* (The Inscription of the Fusūs)¹⁰⁶ Additionally, Ahmad Diyā' al-Dīn Gümüşhânevî authored a work in Arabic on Sufi and Akbarian terminology titled *Jāmi' al-Usūl* (The Compilations of Principles) which was published in Cairo in 1893.¹⁰⁷ Ibn 'Arabī also engaged with the philosophy of letters—especially in his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* and *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*—and he remained a popular figure in 19th-century Ottoman lands. Given that Dağıstani was in Anatolia during this period, it is likely that he had access to these sources, even if direct evidence is lacking. However, his mention of Ibn Arabī in the anecdotes,¹⁰⁸ which will be discussed further in the second chapter, suggests familiarity with and appreciation for his works.

4. *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā* in 1923: Challenges and Opportunities

After most of his Quran commentaries were tragically lost in the Great İstanbul fire in 1918, Dağıstani began to write *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā* as he explained in its preface. Composed during the final years of the Ottoman Empire, a period marked by political and social changes, and

¹⁰⁶ A summary of the *Fusūs al-Ḥikam* (The Bezels of Wisdom) written by Ibn 'Arabī.

¹⁰⁷ Tahralı, "A General Outline of the Influence of Ibn 'Arabī," 5.

¹⁰⁸ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 118; Ali Eşref Müezzinoğlu, interview by Zeynep Sevgi Eriş, Sarıyer/İstanbul, 30.08.2024. During the interview, Müezzinoğlu touched upon the story where Dağıstani compares himself to Ibn 'Arabī.

published in 1923—the very first year of the Turkish Republic—Dağıstani’s reflections on the Quranic letters emerge at a critical moment in history. This period saw the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the beginning of a new secular republic, creating a unique intellectual climate. This transition period offered both challenges and opportunities to Ahmed Dağıstani. From 1918 onwards—after the great Istanbul fire—when Dağıstani wrote *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā*, the period was already consumed by wars and political changes, making scholarly publications extremely difficult to pursue. The Ottoman sultanate was coming to an end while some groups of people were resisting occupations under Atatürk's leadership from 1919 to 1922.

Before this politically intense period, especially after the second constitution of 1908, printed materials had increased considerably due to relatively greater freedom of the press. However, as Brett Wilson argued, this also led to the emergence of 'radical ideas' against Sufi lodges.¹⁰⁹ Ahmed Dağıstani had returned to Istanbul from Tripoli during this period. His son İsmetullah published the Sufi journal *al-Mirşād* (1913-1915), which primarily featured Quran commentaries written by Dağıstani during his time in Tripoli. The journal also contained explanations of Quranic letters. However, it was published only twice a month and did not gain popularity, likely because the commentaries consisted mostly of esoteric Sufi interpretations. Although letter mysticism was not a new concept in Sufism, it was not widespread in the early 20th-century. When the wars ended and the Turkish Republic was established in 1923, the political climate became relatively calmer. I suppose that Dağıstani seized this opportunity as the ideal moment to publish a book filled with esoteric Quranic interpretations, resulting in the publication of *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā*.

¹⁰⁹ M. Brett Wilson, “The Twilight of Ottoman Sufism,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49 (2017): 239.

The date of establishment of Turkish Republic and new political developments prepared the intellectual atmosphere for various religious works. Another example would be the Turkish Quran translations published in 1924 as Wilson emphasizes in his works. Even though there was an ongoing process before the foundation of Turkish Republic, there was not a very suitable intellectual environment to release such a work. However, during the first years of the Turkish Republic, a politically more secular atmosphere began to surround the land and eventually the Quran translation was published with the indirect help of Atatürk in terms of the creation of a convenient time to publish.¹¹⁰ Similarly, Dağıstani most likely wrote his book before the republican era, but he only found the right time to publish in 1923.

On the other hand, publishing works involving esoteric interpretations of the Quran was not very easy at the time as the Republican regime progressed. The abolition of the caliphate in 1924, followed by the closure of Sufi lodges in 1925, marked a clear shift towards secularization. These changes restricted the dissemination of esoteric Sufi literature, as evidenced by the scarcity of sources with esoteric religious content from that time. Although Ahmed Dağıstani died in 1925, his determination to write and publish his works mostly on the Quran during this time demonstrates his commitment to the field, considering the publications in his final years.¹¹¹ Interestingly, according to Müezzinoğlu's interview, Dağıstani maintained contact with Atatürk and actually supported the secular direction of the new republic.¹¹² He believed that traditional religious lodges, dominated by narrow-minded scholars, disseminated harmful ideas and hindered scientific progress by condemning innovations and declaring them forbidden in Islam. Therefore, he even

¹¹⁰ M. Brett Wilson, "The First Translations of the Quran in Modern Turkey (1924-38)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009): 419.

¹¹¹ He published some of his works such as *Asrār al-Jabarūt al-A'lā*, *Mawālīd Ahl al-Bayt*, *Zubdat al-Marātīb*, and *Mazāhīr al-Wujūd 'alā Manābir al-Shuhūd*. Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 148-154.

¹¹² Ali Eşref Müezzinoğlu, interview by Zeynep Sevgi Eriş, Sarıyer/İstanbul, 30.08.2024.

suggested that such lodges should be shut down in the new Republican era.¹¹³ His openness to developments is evident in how he permitted film screenings in his home and gave a camera to his son as a gift, despite cinema and photography being viewed unfavorably by Islamic circles of the time, according to Öztürk and Müezzinoğlu.¹¹⁴ Öztürk highlighted them as examples of his father's progressive attitude toward modern innovations.

To conclude, Ahmed Dağıstani's life and intellectual journey illustrate the comprehensive framework between Sufi spirituality, and the letter mysticism during the transitional period from the late Ottoman Empire to the early Turkish Republic. His exile, driven by both the suspicion of political subversion and his growing popularity, emphasizes the challenges faced by independent religious thinkers. Yet, rather than silencing him, these hardships seemed to deepen his commitment to exploring the mystical dimensions of the Quran. Through *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā*, Dağıstani engaged in a bold hermeneutics at a moment when such interpretations were not common. By tracing the significance of letters to divine attributes and sacred knowledge, he followed a more distinct path than his contemporaries. Oral testimonies and biographical accounts together underscore that his legacy resists reduction to labels like Naqshbandi or Hurufi; instead, he emerges as a Sufi committed to the search for and convey the truth. His openness to scientific developments also aligns with his approach to Quranic interpretation, which emphasized its scientific dimensions. His story reflects not only the persistence of esoteric traditions in a changing religious landscape but also the creative ways in which mystics like Dağıstani navigated, resisted, and responded to shifting structures of authority.

¹¹³ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 120.

¹¹⁴ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 107; Ali Eşref Müezzinoğlu, interview by Zeynep Sevgi Eriş, Sarıyer/İstanbul, 30.08.2024.

Chapter 2 – Letters and Meaning in *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā*: Dağıstani’s Esoteric Quranic Vision

Ahmed Dağıstani (1848-1925) once said if he had lived in Ibn ‘Arabī’s time in the 13th century, he would have been Ibn ‘Arabī’s disciple; but if Ibn ‘Arabī had lived in Dağıstani’s time, he would have been Dağıstani’s disciple. Ahmed Dağıstani also asserted that Ibn ‘Arabī was only given the meaning Sūrat al-Ikhlāş by God while he himself was given the entire meaning of the Quran.¹¹⁵ Moreover, Öztürk notes that only certain descendants of the Prophet are capable of interpreting the Quran with deep engagement, particularly its ambiguous verses.¹¹⁶ From this point of view, it appears that Dağıstani claims to have composed his highly esoteric Quranic interpretations through divine revelations, much like Ibn ‘Arabī. After losing much of his Quran commentaries in the 1918 Fatih fire in Istanbul,¹¹⁷ Dağıstani wrote *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā* as a concise presentation of his Quranic interpretations. In particular, it allows the reader to look up specific terms or letters when the Quran commentary becomes complex and does not fully explain the meanings of certain terms. However, a simultaneous reading of both texts can help the reader better understand the commentary. *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā* demonstrates Dağıstani’s special approach to the Quranic letters, blending esoteric insight with intellectual depth. In this book, Dağıstani, presents a realm where the Quranic letters serve as a map to the divine realities embedded within the Quran. In this chapter, I forward a textual analysis of *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-*

¹¹⁵ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 118. It was also narrated by Dağıstani’s great-grandson during the oral interview.

¹¹⁶ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 137.

¹¹⁷ The Fatih fire of 1918 was a large urban fire that broke out in the Fatih district of Istanbul, destroying thousands of homes and displacing many residents during the final years of the Ottoman Empire.

A 'lā, a work rooted in *'ilm al-ḥurūf* through which Dağistani offers hidden meanings within the Quran.

But why did Dağistani adopt this approach to Quranic interpretation at a time when esoteric texts were rare? Rather than using *'ilm al-ḥurūf* solely as a hermeneutical tool, I suggest that Dağistani positions it as the epistemological foundation of both his earlier Quran commentaries and his cosmological vision. In the following chapter I explain why this particular work written by a Sufi Sheikh is important and what makes this work unique. I continue with exploring the hermeneutical and exegetical methods that inform Dağistani's work as a Sufi text. *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A 'lā* starts with introducing individual letters—each treated as a bearer of esoteric significance. I examine this initial section in which Dağistani elaborates on the metaphysical properties of the letters, echoing ideas from the 13th century, especially from Ibn 'Arabī's cosmological writings. Finally, I turn to the 20th century, exploring Dağistani's indirect engagement with the disjointed letters in the Quran (*ḥurūf al-muqatta'a*) comparing his interpretations with those of Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır. Throughout, I present Dağistani's intellectual world through a textual analysis, emphasizing its comparative, interpretive, and cosmological dimensions.

1. What makes Dağistani's Work Distinct?

What makes Ahmed Dağistani's work particularly distinct is both its content and the historical context in which it was written and published. In terms of content, it embodies an esoteric approach to Quranic interpretation. Dağistani repositions letter mysticism in the early 20th century as central to his Quranic commentaries. In *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A 'lā*, he offers detailed explanations for each letter of the Arabic alphabet, following a Sufi tradition. As Irene Mélikoff argues, Hurufi Sufism

gained more popularity in Iran, where the majority of the population was Shi'i, and Shi'i is believed that Ali holds the key to the mysteries of the Quran. She refers to the hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad says, "I am the city of knowledge, and Alí is its gate,"¹¹⁸ which echoes Dağıstani's statement about being the key to that knowledge.¹¹⁹ While this statement reflects a strong sense of spiritual authority, I suggest that this does not indicate political ambition, as there is no additional written or oral evidence demonstrating any desire on his part to assume a prominent political or religious leadership role. Rather, he points out to a divine duty to transmit Quranic knowledge. Dağıstani positions himself as a transmitter of the Quran's message in the 20th century. In this sense, his work is worth studying as an effort to remind certain audiences of a deeper understanding of the Quran, regardless of political motivations.

As discussed in the first chapter, while the focus on letters might suggest a continuity with the Iranian Hurufi movement in Anatolia, Dağıstani's philosophy diverges from Hurufism. At its core, Dağıstani's aim differs from that of the Hurufi tradition, which emerged in 14th-century Iran. Whereas the founder of Hurufi movement, Fazlullah Astarabadi initiated a political movement, declaring himself a messianic figure through mystical analyses of his dreams and the Quran, Dağıstani's work remains disengaged from political ambitions. Although Dağıstani was exiled during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II, it was due to the esoteric nature of his work and the number of the people gathered around him—rather than any intentional political activism.

Yet, Dağıstani was writing in the early 20th century, at the beginning of reforms and secularization. The very act of producing a deeply esoteric text in such a period can be a radical statement, distinguishing the work by its uncommon approach. Furthermore, Dağıstani combines Ottoman Turkish linguistic frameworks with Arabic metaphysics, constructing a hybrid

¹¹⁸ Irene Melikoff, *Uyur idik Uyardılar*, trans. Turan Alptekin, Cem Yayınevi (1893), 183.

¹¹⁹ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 66.

philological work that differs from Ibn ‘Arabī’s purely Arabic or the Persian-inflected Hurufi writings. Although Ibn ‘Arabī’s and Fazlullah’s works existed in the 19th century, they were rare and likely difficult to access. This may suggest that Ahmed Dağıstani was localizing esoteric knowledge within the Ottoman intellectual milieu, making it more accessible to an educated Turkish-speaking audience. While Dağıstani wrote his Quran commentaries in Arabic during his exile in Tripoli, he authored his further Quran commentaries and *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā* in Ottoman Turkish when he returned to Istanbul. This linguistic and geographic shift is a key reason why the text should be situated within Ottoman intellectual history—as a significant example of an esoteric engagement with the Quran written in Turkish.

The composition of *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā* coincides with the last years of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Dağıstani began writing the text after 1918, during a time when the acceptance of esoteric works was in decline. Mystical and Sufi ideas, including the study of Quranic letters, had lost much of their influence, and Dağıstani’s earlier efforts to publish similar content, particularly through the journal *al-Mirşād* (1913–1915), had limited success. Although Sufi lodges were officially closed later in 1925, the rise of secular and reformist ideas in the early years of the Republic had already made it more challenging for such works to gain attention. Despite this, Dağıstani remained determined to share his spiritual reflections on the Quran. He published most of his Turkish works in the 1920s—arguably the most convenient period of his life—after losing the majority of his Quran commentaries in a fire and before his death in 1925. *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā* is one of these works, and thus, it is not only important for its content but also for its timing: it connects an ancient tradition of esoteric approach to the Quranic interpretation with a society that was about to be modernized leaving less space for these kinds of ideas.

2. Exegetical (*tafsir*) and Hermeneutical (*ta'wīl*) Dimensions of *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā*

While an exegetical approach may imply an underlying hermeneutical framework, and a hermeneutical lens can incorporate exegetical techniques, it is crucial to understand their distinct roles within a text. Hermeneutics primarily serves as a theoretical framework concerned with how meaning is generated—emphasizing interpretive principles, historical context, and the philosophical underpinnings of reading.¹²⁰ Exegesis, in contrast, is more practical and content-specific, aiming to explain a text in detail. *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā*, while it can be considered a form of exegesis, diverges from traditional Quranic *tafsīr* in that it does not follow the typical structure of verse-by-verse interpretation. Instead, it details the esoteric meanings of Qur'anic letters in their alphabetical order (*abjad*), focusing on their symbolic and mystical significance rather than their literal or contextual interpretation. Although this approach is rooted in Dağistani's intent to use the work as a key to his earlier Quran commentaries, it raises important questions about its interpretative methodology and its place within the broader Islamic intellectual tradition. In this section, I will analyze the hermeneutical and exegetical dimensions of *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā*, examining how its methods of interpretation shape both its meaning and reception. To frame this analysis, I will clarify the distinction and interplay between hermeneutics, exegesis, and non-canonical aspects of the text.

In the Islamic context, this distinction is particularly evident in the tradition of *tafsīr* (exegesis) and *ta'wīl* (hermeneutics). The word *tafsīr*¹²¹ is derived from the Arabic root *fassara*, meaning

¹²⁰ Jérôme David, "The Four Genealogies of "World Literature," trans. Mary Claypool, *Louisiana State University Press* (2006): 24.

¹²¹ Britannica explains *tafsīr* as "the science of explanation of the Quran, the sacred scripture of Islam, or of Quranic commentary." <https://www.britannica.com/topic/tafsir#ref269119>

"exegesis, explanation, and actual corpora of interpretation."¹²² *Tafsīr* seeks to clarify the meanings of Quranic verses through detailed analysis, often line by line, considering linguistic, theological, and historical elements. I argue that, while Dağıstani's work draws upon this exegetical tradition, his reliance on *'ilm al-ḥurūf* and emphasis on symbolic and metaphysical interpretation mark a departure from classical *tafsīr* works. Therefore, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā* becomes more an example of *ta'wīl*.¹²³ Significantly, the simplified Turkish version of the book prepared by Dağıstani's son is also titled *Tevīl* rather than its original name.¹²⁴ Interestingly, Dağıstani also refers to his earlier Quranic interpretations as *ta'wīl* in the preface of the book, as well.¹²⁵ *Ta'wīl*, "derived from the root 'awl—meaning "to return" or "to come back"—refers to the process of interpreting a statement by examining and deducing its intended meaning, transferring a word from its primary to a secondary meaning in religious texts based on evidence."¹²⁶ Islamic scholars frequently debated the distinction between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*, not only linguistically but epistemologically: *tafsīr* was seen as based on transmitted knowledge from the Prophet, whereas *ta'wīl* involved rational deduction and interpretive expertise.¹²⁷ The term *ta'wīl*, referring to esoteric interpretation, corresponds more closely to hermeneutics. Therefore, Dağıstani's book—a concise presentation of his Quranic commentaries—should be regarded primarily as a hermeneutical work.

¹²² Carol Bakhos, "Interpreters of Scripture," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Abrahamic Religions*, ed. Adam Silverstein and Guy G. Stroumsa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 242.

¹²³ *Ta'wīl* is also commonly used in Shi'i commentary. This is not surprising in this case, given that descendants of the Prophet might tend to align more closely with Shi'i philosophy due to the historical context—being descendants of Hasan and Hussain, who were killed by Muawiya and Yazid, and who are regarded by Shia Muslims as the most important figures and rightful authorities after the Prophet.

¹²⁴ M. Kazım Öztürk, *Tevīl*, (*The Turkish adaptation of Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā*) (Izmir: Karınca Matbaacılık, 1987).

¹²⁵ Dağıstani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā*, 1.

¹²⁶ I translated this sentence from the Encyclopedia of Islam. <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/tevil>

¹²⁷ John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004), 154.

Instead of engaging directly with the Quran's textual content, Dağıstani offers a method of understanding its language—beginning with the letters and, by extension, the words. His approach reflects a philological sensitivity that resonates with Edward Said's conception of philology as an active and dynamic engagement with language.¹²⁸ Philological examination involves uncovering hidden meanings, moving beyond passive signification to reveal deeper meanings that may have been overlooked by Hadith-based interpretations. Similarly, Dağıstani's treatment of Quranic letters uncovers meanings that remain hidden from classical Quran commentaries. This interpretive strategy underscores the strong hermeneutical dimension of the text, where meaning emerges through the interaction between the reader, the text, and the symbolic power of language—ultimately offering a deeper, more esoteric engagement with the Quran. This emphasis on hidden meaning is indeed common to all esoteric (*bāṭinī*) interpretations. As Carl Ernst argues, the endeavor to reveal the hidden meanings of the Arabic alphabet is central to Sufism as an esoteric approach to Quranic interpretation.¹²⁹

To comprehend *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'ālā*, it is crucial to situate both the work and its author within the historical moment of its production. As discussed in previous parts, the text was published in 1923, during the transitional period from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, just as the secularization process was beginning. The publication of this book during this specific period highlights another important aspect: its non-canonical position. In addition to analyzing its hermeneutical and exegetical dimensions, it is necessary to examine how these elements contribute to its non-canonical status. While all *bāṭinī* interpretations might generally be considered non-canonical, it is important to recognize that historical context also influences the

¹²⁸ Edward W. Said, *The Return to Philology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 59.

¹²⁹ Carl W. Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* (Boston: Shambhala, 2007), 91.

reception of such works. The conditions of the time can make a work more obscure. However, Ernst provides the example of Ibn ‘Arabī, whose works are regarded as some of the most important, in contrast to the more marginal works within Sufism.¹³⁰ Yet, the 20th century is not primarily remembered for such esoteric Sufi traditions.

Quranic exegesis drawing on the historical settings of Mecca and Medina and the life of the Prophet to situate meaning; a similar awareness is essential here. The hermeneutical approach also emphasizes how meanings evolve across time. In *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā*, Ahmed Dağıstani aims to show how the Quran communicates with people in the early 20th century through the mystical significance of its letters. He does not focus on the early Islamic historical context. In his Quran commentary *Mezâhirü’l-Vücûd ‘alâ Menâbirü’s-Şuhûd*, he discusses contemporary developments and connects them to the meanings of the suras. For example, in Sûrat al-Fîl, he interprets the birds, throwing stones as a metaphor for nuclear weapons.¹³¹ Furthermore, As Sinai argues, scriptural texts are not solely understood within their original historical framework but are regarded as having enduring relevance. They are considered foundational and normatively significant for contemporary believers, offering guidance on divine understanding, morality, and spiritual development.¹³² This perspective aligns with Dağıstani’s treatment of the Quranic letters, which he presents not as relics of a distant past but as living signs that continue to reveal truths in the 20th century.

¹³⁰ Ernst, *Sufism*, 92.

¹³¹ Öztürk, *Kur’ân’ in 20. Asra Göre Anlamı, Fatiha ve Amme Cüzü*, 107-109.

¹³² Nicolai Sinai, “Historical-Critical Readings of the Abrahamic Scriptures,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Abrahamic Religions* (2015), 3.

3. The Metaphysical Significance of Quranic Letters in *Asrār al-Jabarūt al-A‘lā*

In this section, I will present the analysis of Dağıstani's interpretations of the 28 Quranic letters, which he lists and elaborates on as symbols of metaphysical and spiritual significance. I employ Edward Said's notion of close reading, which emphasizes attentiveness to textual detail because the focus on the letters requires close analysis—even though it was not developed specifically for religious texts. In Dağıstani's text, each letter is not merely a linguistic element but a key to understanding various aspects of the divine and the cosmos. Dağıstani's exploration delves into themes such as prophethood (*nubuwwah*), sainthood (*wilāyah*), and the spiritual realm (*malakūt*) offering insights into the relationship between human existence and the divine order. Throughout his analysis, Dağıstani addresses the connection between the material and metaphysical realms, viewing the letters as bridges between the physical world and the divine truths that underlie it. This approach highlights the role of the letters as vehicles for the transmission of divine knowledge, as well as the dynamic processes of cosmic order.

On the other hand, the order in which the letters are presented in the book already shows the esoteric approach to a religious text as it can be found in other religions such as Judaism. This order is based on the numerical values assigned to letters; a system known as *abjad* in Arabic and as *ebced* in Turkish. Though not explicitly, but Dağıstani makes most of his explanations based on the *abjad* system. For instance, he starts with *alif*, and *ba* and continues with *jim* which implies the numerical order in *abjad* system.¹³³ On the other hand, the explanations of certain letters are related to their numerical values. In particular *jim*, as a letter in third row, represents three fundamental necessities of human life which are “food and drink, dwelling and clothing, and women, as a means

¹³³ I would like to thank to Professor Carsten Wilke because we discussed this concept, and he explained the numerical system in Judaism, which is called *gematria* and very similar to *abjad* system in Sufism.

of preserving the human lineage.”¹³⁴ Moreover, *dāl* is in the fourth row and represents four elements (*anāṣir al-arba ‘ah*) of which the human body is composed. These are earth, water, air, and fire.¹³⁵ Similarly, the letter in the fifth row, *hā’* represents the five presences (*ḥaḍarāt al-khamsa*): the physical realm (*mulk*), the spiritual realm (*malakūt*), the human realm (*nāsūt*), the divine intellect (*lāhūt*), and the realm of omnipotence (*jabarūt*).¹³⁶ However, the significance here lies not only in the numerical position of the letter, but also in the fact that it represents a concept – the level of existence (*ḥaḍarāt*) – that itself begins with the letter *hā’* in Arabic.

I have found ten recurring concepts that appear throughout Dağistani’s interpretations of the letters which are crucial to understand the significance of the text: a cosmological framework; the use of duality; spiritual and prophetic hierarchy; numerical significance; the ascension of the letters; interconnection; stages of human and soul development; Quranic references; the notion of being beyond human comprehension; and the divine names (*esmâ*) and attributes (*sifât*). Firstly, in *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A ‘lā*, letters are not treated only as linguistic units but as entities embedded within a broader cosmological framework. Each letter is positioned within a system that reflects various levels of existence—ranging from the tangible to the transcendent. These realms are not presented as separate compartments but as interconnected dimensions that each letter can simultaneously reflect or traverse. As mentioned above, Dağistani describes the letter *hā’* as encompassing all five presences, suggesting its capacity to link the entirety of creation with the divine order.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Dağistani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A ‘lā*, 6.

¹³⁵ Dağistani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A ‘lā*, 6.

¹³⁶ Dağistani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A ‘lā*, 6-7.

¹³⁷ Dağistani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 6.

The second recurring feature in the work is the use of duality to interpret individual letters. The author often positions letters within opposing but complementary poles, exploring how their meanings shift depending on their context or spiritual function. For instance, *alif* is described in terms of its “corporeal configuration” and its “spiritual configuration,”¹³⁸ reflecting a tension between material embodiment and spiritual essence. *Bā’* is read as signifying both servitude (*ubûdiyyet*) and lordship (*rubûbiyet*),¹³⁹ pointing to the dynamic relationship between human submission and divine authority. *Wāw* appears in two forms: the exalted *wāw* (*wāw -ı müsta’le*), associated with spiritual ascent, and the inclined *wāw* (*wāw -ı mu’tele*),¹⁴⁰ which evokes humility. Similarly, the letter *‘ayn* is said to have both a dark and a luminous side, reflecting upon the themes of concealment and revelation that run throughout the text.¹⁴¹

Beyond cosmology and duality, the letters are also embedded in a spiritual and prophetic hierarchy. Certain letters are explicitly linked to different levels of spiritual authority. *Nūn*, for instance, is associated with prophethood (*nubuwwa*)¹⁴² while *mim* corresponds to messengership (*risalet*),¹⁴³ emphasizing a distinction between prophetic presence and the act of transmission. *Wāw* is aligned with sainthood (*walāya*) representing a connection to divine intimacy.¹⁴⁴

The numerical significance of the letters is not explicitly mentioned for each letter, although some letters are presented by their numerical values. For example, the numerical value of the letter *‘ayn* is given as 70, which equals the sum of *lām* (30) and *mîm* (40).¹⁴⁵ Kazım Öztürk emphasizes the numerical value of the letters in his translation of *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A’lā*, in

¹³⁸ Dağıstani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 5.

¹³⁹ Dağıstani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 5.

¹⁴⁰ Dağıstani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 7-8.

¹⁴¹ Dağıstani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 11.

¹⁴² Dağıstani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 10.

¹⁴³ Dağıstani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 10.

¹⁴⁴ Dağıstani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 7.

¹⁴⁵ Dağıstani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 11.

Tevil, even including a chart to demonstrate them. Öztürk explains that he created a chart to show all the numerical values of the letters on a single page to make it more accessible to readers.¹⁴⁶ Since the numerical value of each letter is not explicitly mentioned, it is clear that Öztürk studied his father's work carefully, making inferences to create the chart. Moreover, the numerical values of the letters can change depending on certain conditions, where letters ascend and transform into other letters. This is referred to as the ascension of the letters (*urûc*). However, this concept is somewhat difficult to comprehend from the text alone. In this regard, Öztürk's chart provides a clearer perspective on the transformations of letters into one another.

As can be seen from the transformative power of the letters, they are not isolated; rather, they present an interconnection throughout the text. Their interaction is evident not only in their transformation into one another through ascension but also in other symbolic ways. For example, the letter *alif* is described as the axis (*medar*) of *wāw*, although the text does not explicitly explain how it serves this function. Furthermore, the *wāw* of sainthood is considered the axis of prophethood, which is represented by the letter *mîm*,¹⁴⁷ based on earlier interpretations of *mîm*.

At times, the letters represent stages of human development and the soul. This concept is every important since stages of the soul have a central role in Sufism as well. In Dağistani's text, the letter *zāy* primarily symbolizes the 'seven stages' of the soul (*nefs*),¹⁴⁸ while *sîn* represents human perfection.¹⁴⁹ Many of the concepts Dağistani discusses are also found in the Quran. Therefore, he occasionally makes Quranic references connecting his explanations to Quranic verses and words. This is evident in the interpretation of the letter *alif* through the word "*Iqra*"

¹⁴⁶ Öztürk, *Tevil*, 9.

¹⁴⁷ Dağistani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 7-8.

¹⁴⁸ Dağistani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 8.

¹⁴⁹ Dağistani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 10.

which can be translated as “Recite,”¹⁵⁰ which is a word from Sūrat al-‘Alaq. It is also reflected in his explanations of the disjointed letters (*hurūf al-muqatta‘a*) of the Quran. For example, the letter *rā’* in this word “*Iqra*” is discussed in relation to the set of letters ‘*alif lām rā’*’ which appears at the beginning of several suras in the Quran and represent *mevâkı’-ı nücûm* – celestial markers. In other words, the idea is that the divine truths of the Quran reach a person by being internalized in the heart through language.¹⁵¹ Thus, the word ‘*Iqra*’ here not only means ‘Recite,’ but also refers to reciting from the heart and the person’s own self-reading, that is, reading oneself, rather than just loud vocal recitation.

Some letters—particularly *shīn*, *ghayn*, and *sīn*—are described as being beyond human comprehension, and thus no further explanation is provided. For example, Dağistani asserts that “‘*Thā’* is the most important of the truths. It is a sublime reality that the human mind cannot reach, and we are not responsible for manifesting it into existence.”¹⁵² Similarly, the letter *shīn* is described by Dağistani as “the ultimate level of prophecy...” and he further argues “...the matters related to it and the messages imagined within this context are far beyond ordinary understanding.”¹⁵³ In addition, many letters are connected to the divine names (*esmâ*) and attributes (*ṣifât*) in Dağistani’s interpretations. The letter *qāf* is described as ‘the root of the names,’¹⁵⁴ and *yā’* as ‘the bestowal of names.’¹⁵⁵ This demonstrates that the letters are not only associated with prophets and humanity, but also with God Himself.

¹⁵⁰ Dağistani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 5.

¹⁵¹ Dağistani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 17.

¹⁵² Dağistani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 14.

¹⁵³ Dağistani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 13.

¹⁵⁴ Dağistani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 11.

¹⁵⁵ Dağistani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 8.

Through his mystical-philosophical readings of the Quranic letters, Ahmed Dağıstani offers a metaphysical system in which language becomes a medium for divine truth. The letters bridge realms — between *vücut* and *sübût*, humanity and divinity, material and spiritual. They are not just exegetical tools but ontological realities that map the spiritual structure of the cosmos. Dağıstani's approach, grounded in Islamic mysticism, transforms Quranic letters into a symbolic language of divine order, suggesting that understanding the universe and the self requires an intimate engagement with the very building blocks of revelation. This profound view of the Quranic letters as spiritually and ontologically charged symbols finds a parallel in the teachings of Ibn 'Arabī, whose work, despite the seven centuries that separate them, also centers on the deeper, mystical dimensions of letters. Their terminology also shows similarities despite the time difference.

4. The Tradition Across Centuries: The Letter Mysticism in Ahmed Dağıstani and Ibn 'Arabī

A comparison between Dağıstani's and Ibn 'Arabī's philosophies can reveal how esoteric Sufi traditions traveled across the centuries. This is significant because Dağıstani described himself as someone who would have been Ibn 'Arabī's master if they both had lived at the same period in the 20th century. This gives us a clue about how Dağıstani saw his place within the wider Sufi tradition up to his own era. Therefore, it is important to analyze what is similar and what is different between the ideas of these two Sufi masters. I utilized *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā* by Dağıstani and *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* by Ibn 'Arabī as main sources. Both figures acknowledge the Quran as a mystical text, and they attempt to interpret it in ways that reflect a shared esoteric sensibility. Particularly, Ibn 'Arabī believed that the Quran remains an eternal mystery whose meanings

cannot be fully comprehended by human intellect.¹⁵⁶ Similarly, as discussed above, Ahmed Dağıstani attributes this impenetrability through the certain letters (*shīn*, *ghayn*, and *sīn*) that he did not give a long explanation.

However, a key distinction is in their interpretive terminology. Ibn ‘Arabī does not use the term *ta’wīl*, as he regards it as a rational interpretation, which he avoids, as Sands argues in her work.¹⁵⁷ Rather, Ibn ‘Arabī prefers the term *ishāra* (allusion) instead of *tafsīr* for his esoteric commentaries on the Quran, since *tafsīr* works suggest exoteric interpretations.¹⁵⁸ In contrast, Dağıstani explicitly refers to his Quran commentaries as *ta’wīl*.¹⁵⁹ This terminological distinction may represent one of the most important differences between the two authors’ approaches to interpreting the Quran. While the term *ta’wīl* is used in Sufi circles to suggest an esoteric approach, Ibn ‘Arabī sees it as primarily rational rather than mystical and therefore avoids it. Dağıstani, on the other hand, embraces the term *ta’wīl* for his writings. Considering Ibn Arabī’s perspective, a possible reason for this could be that Dağıstani viewed his interpretations as both mystical and rational. He emphasizes in the preface of his book that “The Quran does not accept what the situation, time, and human intellect do not accept.”¹⁶⁰ Therefore, he does not appear to have a problem with combining rationality and Quranic interpretation.

To elaborate on the concepts shared by Ibn ‘Arabī and Ahmed Dağıstani, it is striking that many of the ideas discussed above also appear in Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, though expressed in different terms. For instance, regarding the cosmological framework frequently

¹⁵⁶ Atif Khalil, “Review of *Sufism and Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn ‘Arabi*, by Ian Almond,” *Sacred Web* 39 (2017): 166.

¹⁵⁷ Sand, *Sufi Commentaries on the Quran*, 39-40.

¹⁵⁸ Sand, *Sufi Commentaries on the Quran*, 38.

¹⁵⁹ He refers to *ta’wīl* for his Quran commentaries, in the preface of his book. Dağıstani. *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A’lā*, 1.

¹⁶⁰ Öztürk, *Tevîl*, 4.

referenced by Dağıstani, Ibn ‘Arabī extensively discusses letters in relation to the celestial spheres (*falak*) and their origins from these spheres, along with their associated natural properties. Ibn ‘Arabī explains that letters carry elemental properties – hot, cold, dry, wet – and that their power is not limited to pronunciation or meaning but is also embedded in their visual forms.¹⁶¹ In this sense, Fazlullah’s Hurufi thought is more similar to that of Ibn ‘Arabī, as both emphasize the shape of letters, in contrast to Ahmed Dağıstani’s approach. As Mir-Kasimov infers from the Fazlullah’s book *Jāwīdān-nāma*, “Letters (*hurūf*), the graphical expression of the first phonemes, are the first elements of Form (*şūra*). Just as the phonemes compose the names of objects, the corresponding Letters compose their external shapes.”¹⁶² Hence, the core idea—that letters are not merely abstract symbols but possess inherent properties tied to their form and are fundamental to the manifestation of reality— aligns with Fazlullah’s doctrines, differing from Ahmed Dağıstani.

Another similarity between Ibn ‘Arabī’s and Ahmed Dağıstani’s treatment of letters is their use of duality. However, while Dağıstani frequently applies the concept of duality to individual letters, Ibn ‘Arabī applies it to groups of letters. For example, Dağıstani describes the letter *alif* in two often contradictory ways -- presenting a dualistic interpretation. In contrast, Ibn ‘Arabī uses duality as a method of classification, referring to 'pure' (*khālīş*) and 'mixed' (*muḥtalaḥ*) letters, as well as 'complete' (*kāmil*) and 'incomplete' (*nāqīş*) letters.¹⁶³ These examples indicate the presence of dualistic concepts in both thinkers, though applied in slightly different ways.

¹⁶¹ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fütuhât-ı Mekkiyye* 2, 95-96.

¹⁶² Orkhan Mir-Kasimov, “The Hurūfī Moses: An Example of Late Medieval ‘Heterodox’ Interpretation of the Quran and Bible,” *Journal of Quranic Studies*, (2008): 24.

¹⁶³ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fütuhât-ı Mekkiyye* 1, 225.

Ibn ‘Arabī links specific letters to divine, human, and jinn ranks. He also states that the study of letters is considered the "study of saints," suggesting a spiritual hierarchy.¹⁶⁴ Saints (*awliyā’*) were believed to be granted special knowledge by God, and this knowledge was secret. This secrecy aligned with the character of Sufism. Ernst cites a tenth-century source emphasizing the esoteric knowledge embedded in Sufism as a mystery between “God and His friends,”¹⁶⁵ referring to the saints. A similar hierarchical categorization appears in Dağistani’s work. He associates the letters *nūn*, *mīm*, and *wāw* with prophethood, messengership, and sainthood, respectively, as the corresponding Arabic words indeed begin with these letters. Although the specific categorizations differ, both scholars assign a hierarchical structure to the letters. On the other hand, the discussion of letters originating from different "ranks" or levels of celestial spheres implies a concept of their ascent or hierarchical arrangement – even if it is not as explicitly defined as the ascension of letters in Dağistani’s work.

As for the numerical values of the letters, this concept — a very important element of letter mysticism — is certainly found in both Ibn ‘Arabī’s and Dağistani’s works. The numerical values assigned to the letters by both authors are generally the same. However, there are interesting differences concerning certain letters. For instance, Ibn ‘Arabī mentions the letter *ghayn* and says that it corresponds to 900 according to “us,” while it corresponds to 1000 according to the enlightened ones (*ahl al-nūr*).¹⁶⁶ Similarly, he mentions the letters *qād* and *shīn*,¹⁶⁷ assigning different numerical values depending on the interpreter. More interestingly, the values Dağistani uses for these letters are those that Ibn ‘Arabī attributes exclusively to the enlightened ones. This

¹⁶⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fütuhât-ı Mekkiyye* 2, 95.

¹⁶⁵ Ernst, *Sufism*, 62.

¹⁶⁶ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fütuhât-ı Mekkiyye* 1, 183.

¹⁶⁷ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fütuhât-ı Mekkiyye* 1, 186-187.

shows that there are different hermeneutical levels emphasizing a hierarchy of knowledge in Sufi and mystical thought, and that Dağistani's position aligns with that of the enlightened ones according to Ibn 'Arabī.

The description of letters, their cosmic origins, elemental properties, and their relationship to various realms (divine, human, jinn) indicates an interconnected system of existence in Ibn 'Arabī's work. It is the same for Dağistani's work since he also includes this interconnection through making connections among letters. Therefore, the two are quite similar in their conceptual approach to this aspect. In general, both Ibn 'Arabī and Ahmed Dağistani attribute to letters a profound ontological and spiritual significance that transcends their linguistic function. Both authors integrate letters into a broader metaphysical system in which each letter functions not only as a linguistic unit but also as a portal to deeper spiritual realities. While Ibn 'Arabī emphasizes the enduring physicality and presence of letters, Dağistani focuses more on their symbolic function in representing spiritual states. Nonetheless, both affirm the central role of letters in accessing mystical knowledge and understanding the cosmos.

As for the disjointed letters (*huruf al-muqatta'a*), both Ibn 'Arabī and Dağistani view them as having deep, spiritual meaning that connects us to the divine. Ibn 'Arabī sees these letters as keys that unlock God's many names, with the letter *mīm* being especially important. He believes these letters help us understand God's infinite nature, moving through different levels like breath, spirit, and heart.¹⁶⁸ Dağistani shares a similar view, but focuses more on how these letters are essential for understanding the Quran. For him, the letters are not just symbols of divine names, but important tools for interpreting the meanings of the words of the Quran. While Ibn 'Arabī

¹⁶⁸ Ibn 'Arabī, *Fütuhât-ı Mekkiyye* 7, 40-41.

looks at the letters as a way to access spiritual realms, Dağıstani is more concerned with how they help uncover hidden meanings in the Quran itself. Both see the disjointed letters as a way to understand God's essence. This understanding of the letters takes on a new dimension in the 20th century with the work of Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır, whose more traditional approach to Quran commentary offers a distinct interpretation, especially when compared to the mystical perspectives of Ibn ‘Arabī and Dağıstani. While Elmalılı draws on classical sources such as Tabari’s *tafsīr* from the 9th century, the distinction lies in the differing viewpoints—where Elmalılı’s traditional approach contrasts with the more mystical, Sufi-oriented interpretations of Ibn ‘Arabī and Dağıstani.

5. The Views on *Hurūf al-Muqatta‘a*¹⁶⁹: Ahmed Dağıstani and Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır

Dağıstani’s and Elmalılı’s Quranic interpretations in the early 20th century, occupy distinctive positions that do not fit easily into traditional categories. While both scholars acknowledge the significance of the disjointed letters (*hurūf al-muqatta‘a*), their interpretive approaches diverge, reflecting different methodological and theological priorities. This comparison, therefore, offers a more comprehensive understanding of Dağıstani’s work by situating it alongside a more mainstream exegetical voice. Whereas Dağıstani’s interpretive method draws on Sufi traditions that prioritize metaphysical associations, Elmalılı, while not dismissing the mystery of the *hurūf al-muqatta‘a*, approaches them within a more rationalist and theological framework. Elmalılı’s commentary offers structured and modern insights aligning with Sunni understanding of Islam that situate the letters within broader Quranic themes. For instance, in addressing the hadith in which the Prophet said, “The Quran was revealed according to seven letters,” Elmalılı makes a concise

¹⁶⁹ Disjointed letters that appear at the beginning of some suras in the Quran.

and pragmatic point: even if the hadith is authentic, its usefulness is limited, as the meaning of the "seven letters" remains uncertain and has been the subject of various, often speculative, interpretations.¹⁷⁰ He supports this position by referencing Abū Bakr Ibn al-‘Arabī, who also noted the lack of definitive sources regarding the meanings of the seven letters, emphasizing that interpretations have largely been subjective.

While Dağıstani treats all letters equally and does not initially emphasize the *ḥurūf al-muqatta‘a*, his biographical account suggests that he assigned special significance to them. Referring to these disjointed letters as *mevâkı‘-ı nücûm* – celestial markers – Dağıstani dedicates an entire chapter to their explanation in this section.¹⁷¹ I will compare Dağıstani’s mystical exegesis to Yazır’s systematic interpretation of the letters *Alif, Lām, Mim*—part of the *ḥurūf al-muqatta‘a*. These three letters are the first ones appear in the Quran, at the beginning of the Sūrat al-Baqarah. Moreover, they are the most common repeated letters among the *ḥurūf al-muqatta‘a*. Therefore, I chose them as exemplary letters to show how each scholar engages with the ambiguity of these letters, their theological implications, and their place within the broader tradition of Quranic interpretation.

Both *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā* and *Hak Dini Kur’an Dili* emerged during a time of significant intellectual, political transformation in the late Ottoman and early Republican periods. However, the contexts and intentions behind these two works—and the intellectual trajectories of their authors—differ. Dağıstani, presents more esoteric interpretations as a Sufi Sheikh in the early 20th century and *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A‘lā* reflects this, as it delves into the metaphysical meanings

¹⁷⁰ Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır, *Hak Dili Kur’an Dili*, ed. Asım Cüneyd Köksal and Murat Kaya (Ankara: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı Yayınları, 2021), 110-111.

¹⁷¹ Öztürk, *Seyyid Ahmed Hüsameddin*, 155.

of the *ḥurūf al-muqattaʿa*, treating them as gateways to divine mysteries. This mystical and symbolic reading of the Quran contrasts with the more rationalist and scholarly approaches emerging in the early Turkish Republic.

Following the 1924 Quran translation controversies, the Turkish government, under Atatürk, initiated a state-sponsored project to produce an accurate Turkish translation and commentary of the Quran. Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır, tasked with this effort, argued that true translation was impossible due to the Quran's inimitable Arabic form, emphasizing instead the need for careful commentary.¹⁷² Moreover, operating within a rationalist framework, Yazır remained loyal to classical tafsir traditions while also engaging with modern theological concerns. Such divergences between Dağıstani and Yazır reveal how early 20th-century Islamic thinkers navigated modernity while reworking inherited esoteric frameworks, often through unconventional interpretive choices.

This distinction is immediately evident in the first chapter of *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-Aʿlā*, where Dağıstani begins with the explanation of the letter *alif*. He interprets *alif* as having two facets. The first corresponds to the material, outward dimension of existence, while the second refers to the spiritual, inward dimension that reveals the deeper, metaphysical realities of existence.¹⁷³ It shows how Dağıstani assigns multilayered meanings to certain letters. On the other hand, *lām* is defined as the means through which the human mind comprehends good and bad deeds. Dağıstani also suggests that letters can ascend and express different meanings. For instance, when the letter *lām* ascends, it turns into *shīn*.¹⁷⁴ *Shīn* represents the distinction between *halal* and

¹⁷² M. Brett Wilson, "The First Translations of the Quran in Modern Turkey (1924-38)," 428-431.

¹⁷³ Dağıstani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 5.

¹⁷⁴ Dağıstani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 9.

haram (good deeds and sins). It also signifies a higher realm compared to the mundane world.¹⁷⁵ Another letter, *mīm*, is described as the letter of prophethood. *Mim* has two facets: one that relates to *lām*, and another that symbolizes the human body.¹⁷⁶ These definitions demonstrate that Dağıstani adopts a highly esoteric approach, which is difficult to understand without Sufi knowledge. Even with Sufi knowledge, it remains difficult to comprehend it completely.

In the section where Dağıstani explores the relationship between letters and the cosmos — *mevâkı‘-ı nücûm*, which he links to the *hurûf al-muqatta‘a* — he describes the human heart as a station for the Quran, and the Quran itself as stars (*nücûm*).¹⁷⁷ The Quran through the language appears in the heart of a human according to his concept. He explains some of the Quranic letters in this part, too and divides them into two different categories: vowelless (*mutaḥarrik*) or vowelless (*sâkin*) letters. However, interestingly, he mentions fifteen letters in this part including the ascensional versions of some letters even though not all of them belong to *hurûf al-muqatta‘a*. He additionally touches upon *jīm*, *tā‘*, *dāl* and *zāy* letters and excludes *qāf*, *ayn*, *ṣād* and *sīn* from the *hurûf al-muqatta‘a*, as Kazım Öztürk noted.¹⁷⁸ This suggests that Dağıstani views all letters as interconnected, believing that a comprehensive understanding of the special Quranic letters requires familiarity with the entire alphabet. In contrast to traditional exegesis, which focuses only on the *hurûf al-muqatta‘a*, Dağıstani attempts to explain every letter and its interrelations.

Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır, in his work *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili*, approaches the *hurûf al-muqatta‘a*, with a blend of traditional exegesis and rational inquiry. He acknowledges the longstanding scholarly debate surrounding these letters, which appear at the beginning of 29 suras

¹⁷⁵ Dağıstani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 13.

¹⁷⁶ Dağıstani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 9-10.

¹⁷⁷ Dağıstani, *Asrār al-Jabarūtī*, 17.

¹⁷⁸ Öztürk, *Tevîl*, 26-36.

in the Quran and emphasizes that their ultimate meanings may be known only to God. While recognizing their mystery, Elmalılı encourages readers to engage with them thoughtfully, considering linguistic, contextual, and theological perspectives. For instance, in interpreting the opening of Sūrat al-Baqarah, which begins with "*Alif, Lām, Mim*" – included in *ḥurūf al-muqattaʿa* – he discusses various scholarly opinions without asserting a definitive interpretation. Particularly, he argues that some scholars view these letters as a means to highlight the miraculous nature of the Quran, demonstrating that it is composed of the same letters used in everyday language, yet remains inimitable, while others suggest they serve as divine secrets.¹⁷⁹

Elmalılı leans towards the understanding that, although the exact meanings are uncertain, these letters underscore the Quran's uniqueness and invite reflection on its profound message. His commentary also references earlier scholars, like al-Ṭabarī, who proposed that the letters could represent abbreviations of divine attributes or serve as markers of the suras. This aligns with his broader view that the *ḥurūf al-muqattaʿa* are not arbitrary but contain mysteries that require profound contemplation to understand. Furthermore, the discussion of ambiguous verses (*mutashābihāt*) suggests that these letters, as part of a broader theological tradition, may contain meanings that are not immediately clear, thus necessitating a deeper spiritual insight. Overall, Elmalılı's approach reflects a balance between deference to classical tafsir traditions and an openness to rational exploration, embodying a scholarly modesty that acknowledges the limits of human understanding in the face of divine revelation.¹⁸⁰

In brief, this comparison—focused on *Alif, Lām, and Mim*—between *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-Aʿlā* and *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili* highlights the interpretive diversity surrounding the *ḥurūf al-muqattaʿa* in early 20th-century Ottoman religious thought. While Elmalılı treats the letters with

¹⁷⁹ Yazır, *Hak Dili Kur'an Dili*, 270-284.

¹⁸⁰ Yazır, *Hak Dili Kur'an Dili*, 270-284.

caution and limits his commentary to rational analysis and established theological frameworks , Dağıstani's approach in *Asrār al-Jabarūtī al-A'lā* remain more mystical and metaphysical. This divergence not only demonstrates the intellectual plurality of the time but also highlights how differing conceptions of language and meaning shaped contemporary understandings of the Quran. By examining these two works side by side, it is possible to gain insight into broader tensions between mainstream and esoteric approaches in the interpretation of sacred texts in a modern era.

Conclusion

Ahmed Dağıstani's text, written in esoteric Sufi terms for the readers of his earlier Quranic commentaries, represents a continuation of the Sufi interpretive tradition from as early as the 13th century into the early 20th century – a time of significant transition in Anatolia from empire to republic. This work is notable not only for its distinctive approach to letter mysticism—extending beyond the disjointed letters (*hurūf al-muqatta'a*) to include all letters—but also for the timing of its production. It was written after 1918, during the Turkish War of Independence, and published in 1923, the year the Turkish Republic was founded.

Although Dağıstani was not politically active during this time, the text suggests he was focused on recovering the essence of his Quranic commentaries, which had been lost in the Great Fire of Istanbul. Despite its lack of popularity then and now, the work deserves close analysis—what it says, how it says it, and why—because non-canonical texts in Islamic intellectual history can provide valuable insights into the period and the continuity of certain traditions. Dağıstani's exile, subsequent return, and decision to publish his work also reflect the historical conditions that first hindered and later enabled such an alternative religious voice to emerge. The 1923 publication date is meaningful when viewed in light of the other periods of the author's life. Rare works like this deserve scholarly attention as they help reconstruct the intellectual landscape of their time,

even if they remained obscure. Moreover, given Dağıstani's influence and his extensive writings on the Quran, he should be recognized within the broader field of Quranic commentary literature. This text, therefore, contributes not only to intellectual historiography but also to Quranic studies of the early 20th century.

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