


Semantic Differences among *Ahl al-Kitāb*, *alladhīna ūtū al-kitāb*, and *alladhīna ātaynāhum al-kitāb* in the Qur'an: A Semantic Inquiry and Chronological Analysis of Revelation

Elham Aghadoosti ¹  Mohammadreza Sotoudehnia ² 

1. PhD Graduate in Qur'anic and Hadīth Sciences, Faculty of Theology and 'Ahl al-Bayt Studies, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran.
(Corresponding Author)

2. Associate Professor of Qur'anic and Hadīth Sciences, Faculty of Theology and 'Ahl al-Bayt Studies, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran.

Corresponding Email: e.aghadoosti@ahl.ui.ac.ir

 <https://doi.org/10.22034/jksl.2025.513676.1450>

Introduction

The expressions *Ahl al-Kitāb*, *alladhīna ātaynāhum al-kitāb*, and *alladhīna ūtū al-kitāb* appear more frequently in reference to the People of the Book than other related designations, and their distribution across Makkan and Madinan revelations is far from uniform. In Makkan verses, this group is most often addressed as *alladhīna ātaynāhum al-kitāb*, whereas in Madinan passages they are more commonly referred to as *alladhīna ūtū al-kitāb* or *Ahl al-Kitāb*. The central question of this study is: What semantic distinctions exist among these three expressions in addressing the People of the Book, why are they used differently in the two phases of revelation, and how do these differences affect the interpretation of divine intent? Adopting a descriptive-analytical method, the author examines Qur'anic discourse, the semantic components of each term, and intertextual and contextual clues to uncover and explain these distinctions.

Methodology

The study investigates the differences among *Ahl al-Kitāb*, *alladhīna ātaynāhum al-kitāb*, and *alladhīna ūtū al-kitāb* by identifying the semantic components associated with each expression and examining the contextual indicators in the verses, together with exegetical opinions. First, the collocates accompanying each expression are analyzed; next, the "social categorization" embedded in these terms is discussed—that is, which groups among the People of the Book (scholars, lay followers, or both) are referenced by each expression. The third stage traces the chronological usage of the three terms across Makkan and Madinan revelation. Through analyzing these elements, the semantic differences among the expressions are extracted and the overall findings are presented.

Findings

The study demonstrates that the Qur'an employs these designations with precision and purpose, thereby constructing a multifaceted and nuanced depiction of interreligious relations in the formative period of Islam. These subtle semantic distinctions not only deepen our understanding of Qur'anic discourse but also contribute to historical and sociological analyses of Muslim–non-Muslim interactions in early Islam.



Conclusion

The semantic features of *Ahl al-Kitāb*, *alladhīna ūtū al-kitāb*, and *alladhīna ātaynāhum al-kitāb* reveal two main layers of difference:

1. Socio-religious Layer:

Based on Qur'anic usage, *Ahl al-Kitāb* refers broadly to adherents of monotheistic traditions, including both their religious elites and common followers, whose responses to revelation range from positive to negative. *Alladhīna ūtū al-kitāb* predominantly identifies the sinful or dishonest scholars of the People of the Book who, despite their covenant with their prophets and their knowledge of the Prophet Muḥammad and the Qur'an, concealed the truth. In contrast, *alladhīna ātaynāhum al-kitāb* usually refers to the believing scholars of the People of the Book who affirmed the Prophet's message.

2. Chronological / Contextual Layer:

The exclusive Makkan use of *alladhīna ātaynāhum al-kitāb* reflects the Qur'an's largely positive engagement with this group during the Makkan period and the early phase of the Prophet's arrival in Madinah. The appearance of the other two terms in Madinan verses corresponds to the more complex and dual (positive and negative) interactions with this minority after the establishment of the Muslim community. These patterns reflect both the Prophet's changing position in the two cities and the varying responses of the People of the Book to the Islamic message.

Overall, the findings confirm that despite their apparent similarity, each expression denotes a distinct subgroup within the People of the Book and appears in specific Qur'anic contexts that highlight different dimensions of their engagement with revelation.

Keywords

Ahl al-Kitāb, *alladhīna ūtū al-kitāb*, *alladhīna ātaynāhum al-kitāb*, Qur'an, semantics.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with research ethics. The authors observed the ethical principles in conducting and publishing this scholarly research, and this is confirmed by all of them.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Funding statement

The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this manuscript.

References

The Holy Quran.

Abū Hayyān, M. (1999). *Al-baḥr al-muḥīṭ fī al-tafsīr* (Ed. M. J. Şidqī). Dār al-Fikr. [In Arabic].

Aghadoosti, E., Ahmadnejad, A., & Shukrani, R. (2024). *Historical reconstruction of the Prophet's interaction with the People of the Book in Mecca based on Qur'anic verses* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Isfahan. [In Persian].

[Ahmadnejad, A., & Kalbasi, Z. \(2017\). An exegetical study of the Prophet's interaction with the People of the Book. *Tafsīr Studies Quarterly*, 8\(29\), 19–38. \[In Persian\].](#)

Ālūsī, M. A. (1994). *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm wa al-sab' al-mathānī*. Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya. [In Arabic].

Baghawī, Ḥ. (1999). *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl* (Ed. 'A. M. Mahdī). Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī. [In Arabic].

Bayḍāwī, 'A. (1997). *Anwār al-tanzīl wa asrār al-ta'wīl*. Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī. [In Arabic].

Fakhr al-Rāzī, M. 'U. (1999). *Al-tafsīr al-kabīr*. Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī. [In Arabic].

Ḥuwayzī, 'A. (1994). *Nūr al-thaqalayn*. Ismā'īliyyān. [In Arabic].

Ibn 'Aīyya, 'A. (2001). *Al-muḥarrar al-wajīz fī tafsīr al-kitāb al-'azīz*. Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya. [In Arabic].

Ibn 'Ashūr, M. T. (1999). *Al-tahrīr wa al-tanwīr*. Mu'assasat al-Tārīkh al-'Arabī. [In Arabic].

Ibn Hishām al-Ḥimayrī. (n.d.). *Sīrat Ibn Hishām*. Maktabat 'Abd al-Ra'ūf Sa'd. [In Arabic].

Ibn Hishām, 'A. M. (1936). *Al-sīra al-nabawiyya*. Maṭba'at al-Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa awlādūh. [In Arabic].

Ibn Kathīr, I. (1998). *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm* (Ed. M. Ḥ. Shams al-Dīn). Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya. [In Arabic].

Kohn, A. (2003). *A treasury from the Talmud*. Asāṭīr. [In Persian].

[Lotfī, S. M., & Mirsaedi, S. \(2015\). A semantic analysis of the Qur'anic term "Kitāb" based on collocational relations. *Qur'anic Linguistic Studies*, 4\(2\), 137–158. \[In Persian\].](#)

Mahrosh, F. (2020). "Banī Isrā'īl," *Encyclopaedia Islamica*. Encyclopaedia Islamica Center. [In Persian].

Mashhadī, M. (1989). *Tafsīr Kanz al-daqa'iq wa Baḥr al-gharā'ib*. Ministry of Culture & Islamic Guidance. [In Arabic].

Muqātil b. Sulaymān. (2002). *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān* (Ed. 'A. M. Shaḥātah). Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī. [In Arabic].

Nasafī, 'U. (1997). *Tafsīr Nasafī* (Ed. 'A. Juvaynī). Soroush. [In Arabic].

Qummī, 'A. (1984). *Tafsīr Qummī* (Ed. Ṭayyib M. Jazā'irī). Dār al-Kitāb. [In Arabic].

Qurṭubī, M. b. A. (1985). *Al-jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*. Nāşir Khosrow. [In Arabic].

Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, Ḥ. (1992). *Al-mufradāt fī gharīb al-Qur'ān* (Ed. 'A. Dāwūdī). Dār al-'Ilm. [In Arabic].

Samarqandī, N. (1995). *Baḥr al-'ulūm* (Ed. 'A. 'Amrawī). Dār al-Fikr. [In Arabic].

[Soleimani, A. \(2015\). Criteria for the scope of the People of the Book in the Qur'an. *Fiqh Studies*, 11\(2\), 389–412. <https://doi.org/10.22059/jorr.2015.55619>\[In Persian\].](#)

Suyūṭī, 'A. (1984). *Al-durr al-manthūr fī al-tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr*. Mar'ashī Najafī Library. [In Arabic].

Ṭabarānī, S. (2008). *Al-tafsīr al-kabīr: Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm*. Dār al-Kitāb al-Thaqāfī. [In Arabic].

Ṭabarī, M. b. J. (1992). *Jāmi' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. Dār al-Ma'rifah. [In Arabic].

Ṭabāṭabā'ī, S. M. (1970). *Al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. Mu'assasat al-A'lamī. [In Arabic].

Ṭabrisī, F. (1993). *Majma' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Ed. H. Rasūlī Maḥallātī). Nāşir Khosrow. [In Arabic].

Tha'labī, A. (2001). *Al-kashf wa al-bayān* (Ed. A. b. 'Ashūr). Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī. [In Arabic].

Ṭūsī, M. b. Ḥ. (n.d.). *Al-tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Ed. A. Ḥ. 'Āmilī). Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī. [In Arabic].

Wāḥidī, 'A. (1991). *Asbāb nuzūl al-Qur'ān*. Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya. [In Arabic].

Zamakhsharī, M. (1987). *Al-kashshāf ‘an ḥaqā’iq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl* (Ed. M. Ḥ. Aḥmad). Dār al-Kutub al-‘Arabī. [In Arabic].

How to cite:

Aghadoosti, Elham; & Sotoudehnia, Mohammad Reza . (2025). Semantic Differences among Ahl al-Kitāb, alladhīna ūtū al-kitāb, and alladhīna ātaynāhum al-kitāb in the Qur’an: A Semantic Inquiry and Chronological Analysis of Revelation. *Quran, Culture And Civilization* , 6 (4), 127-149.

<https://doi.org/10.22034/jksl.2025.513676.1450>