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ORTHODOXY AS METHOD: SUNNI NORMATIVITY AND THEOLOGICAL BIAS IN AL-DHAHABI'S *AL-TAFSIR WA AL-MUFASSIRUN*

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Abstract: *Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabi's al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufassirūn is a standard reference for mapping the history and schools of Qur'anic exegesis, yet its classifications are far from neutral. This article examines how al-Dhahabi's theological-ideological bias manifests in this work and in two companion texts, al-Isrā'iliyyat fi al-Tafsīr wa al-Hadīth and al-Ittijāhāt al-Munharifah fi Tafsīr al-Qur'an. Using qualitative library research, contextualist hermeneutics, and purposive sampling of three works, the study inventories al-Dhahabi's critiques of various exegetes and tests the grounds of his judgments. Three findings emerge. First, a Sunni normative framework shapes his taxonomy: the distinction between tafsir bi al-ma'thur and bi al-ra'y, and the split between praiseworthy and blameworthy ra'y, in practice relegates Mu'tazilites, Shi'ites, Batiniyya, philosophical Sufis, and philosophers to the blameworthy category. Second, the tafsir–ta'wil dichotomy and his rejection of the five Mu'tazilite principles operate as instruments of theological delegitimization rather than purely methodological critique. Third, these standards are applied inconsistently, as seen in his leniency toward al-Rāzi's philosophically inflected commentary and al-Ghazāli's symbolic readings. These findings suggest that al-Dhahabi's historical assessment of exegetical schools is normative and polemical rather than descriptively neutral. The work should therefore be read critically, with awareness of its author's theological positionality.*

Keywords: *Theological Bias; al-Dhahabī; al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufassirūn; Tafsīr bi al-Ra'y; Mu'tazilism; Tafsīr and Ta'wīl.*

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Abstrak: *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufassirūn karya Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabi menjadi rujukan utama dalam pemetaan sejarah dan aliran tafsir, tetapi klasifikasinya tidak sepenuhnya netral. Artikel ini menelaah bagaimana bias teologis-ideologis al-Dhahabi termanifestasi dalam kitab tersebut serta dalam dua karya pendukungnya, al-Isrā'iliyyat fi al-Tafsīr wa al-Hadīth dan al-Ittijāhāt al-Munharifah fi Tafsīr al-Qur'an. Dengan metode penelitian kepustakaan kualitatif, hermeneutika kontekstualis, dan purposive sampling atas tiga karya, penelitian ini menginventarisasi kritik al-Dhahabi terhadap berbagai mufasir dan menguji dasar-dasar penilaiannya. Hasilnya menunjukkan tiga hal. Pertama, kerangka normatif Sunni membentuk taksonomi tafsir: pembedaan bil-ma'thur dan bi al-ra'y, serta pembelahan ra'y mahmud dan madhmum, dalam praktik menempatkan Mu'tazilah, Syi'ah, Batiniyyah, sufi-falsafi, dan filsuf pada kategori tercela. Kedua, dikotomi tafsir–ta'wil dan penolakan atas lima prinsip Mu'tazilah berfungsi sebagai instrumen delegitimasi teologis, bukan sekadar kritik metodologis. Ketiga, standar tersebut diterapkan secara tidak konsisten, tampak dari kelonggaran terhadap al-Rāzi yang bernuansa filosofis dan terhadap pembacaan simbolik al-Ghazāli. Temuan ini mengimplikasikan bahwa penilaian historis al-Dhahabi atas mazhab-mazhab tafsir lebih bersifat normatif-polemis daripada deskriptif-netral. Karena itu, kitab ini perlu dibaca secara kritis dengan kesadaran atas posisi teologis penulisnya., tetapi juga sebagai sumber daya epistemologis bagi penalaran etika Islam kontemporer.*

Kata Kunci: *Bias Teologis; al-Dhahabi; al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufassirūn; tafsir bi al-ra'y; Mu'tazilah; tafsir dan ta'wil*

A. Introduction

Al-Quran Studies and Qur'anic Exegesis are among the disciplines that have not yet fully matured nor reached their complete synthesis.[1] According to Shahatah, from the 4th to the 13th century AH, the science of Tafsir experienced decline and stagnation. This is believed to be caused by interpretations relying heavily on the interpreter's educational background. Ironically, Qur'anic exegesis was reduced to mere linguistic and literary rules, as well as exclusive sectarian interpretations, causing the Qur'an's message as a book of guidance for humanity to be lost.[2]

Etymologically, the word *tafsīr* is derived from the root *fa-sa-ra*, which signifies explanation (*al-bayān*), manifestation (*al-ibānah*), and disclosure (*al-kashf*) of both outer (*ẓāhir*) and inner (*bāṭin*) meanings. The term *tifsarah*, which refers to the medical diagnostic knowledge used by a doctor to examine a patient, also shares the same root as *tafsir*.[3] The word *tafsir* is often associated with *ta'wīl*, although *tafsīr* is broader in scope than *ta'wīl*.[4] Initially, the Tafsir was not an independent discipline like other sciences. Mālik ibn Anas can be considered the first figure to compile the hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad as an interpretation of the Qur'anic verses.[5]

[1] Amin al-Khuli, *Manāhij al-Tajdīd fi al-Nahw wa al-Balāghah wa al-Tafsīr wa al-Adāb* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1961), 229.

[2] Abdullah Syahatah, *'Ulum al-Tafsir* (Beirut: Dār Shuruq, 2001).

[3] Jalaludin al-Suyuthi, *al-Itqān fi 'Ulum al-Qur`ān* (Saudi Arabia: Markaz al-Dirāsat al-Qur`āniyah, 1990), 167.

[4] al-Khuli, *Manāhij al-Tajdīd fi al-Nahw wa al-Balāghah wa al-Tafsīr wa al-Adāb*, 205.

[5] al-Khuli, 206.

The factors causing differences in interpretation include; First, the interpreter's subjectivity; second, inaccuracies in guidance; third, a lack of depth in the prerequisite analytical tools that must be mastered; fourth, a lack of deep understanding regarding the subject matter covered in the verse's discussion and debate; fifth, ignoring the context, both the circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) and the interrelationships between verses, as well as societal norms; sixth, ignoring the identities of the speaker and the intended audience.[6]

Al-Dhahabi categorizes *tafsīr* into two forms based on period and source. First, *tafsīr bil al-ma'thūr* (based on tradition), which derives from Qur'anic verses and the Hadiths during the era of the Companions (*ṣaḥābah*) and the Successors (*tābi'ūn*). Second, *tafsīr bi al-ra'y* (based on logical reasoning), which relies on intellectual reasoning following the period of the Successors.

The interpretation of Qur'anic verses using Hadiths (*tafsīr bil-ma'thūr*), according to al-Suyūṭī's account, covers no more than thirteen pages[7] or a mere eighty-eight *marfū'* or authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) Hadiths.[8] This is an extremely small amount compared to the total number of Qur'anic verses. Theology, in addition to serving as a scientific or epistemological foundation, is also considered a decisive factor in interpretation. From the early development of exegesis to the present day, the interpreter has always been influenced by their own theological beliefs.

The intersection between the *tafsir* and theology became increasingly apparent in medieval interpreters, such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzi (d. 605/1209) with his work *Mafātih al-Ghayb*, 'Abd Allāh al-Qurtubi (d. 671) with his commentary *Jāmi' al-Ahkām al-Qur'ān*, as well as al-Farabī. The relationship between *tafsīr* and theology became even more pronounced at the hands of Mu'tazilite exegetes. Mu'tazilite interpreters grounded their approach on three principles of interpretation. First, the distinction between *muhkam* (clear) and *mutashābih* (ambiguous) verses, with the conviction that all evidence supporting Mu'tazilite theological doctrine is *muhkam*, and vice versa. Second, *ta'wīl* (allegorical interpretation), the logical rationale for which was to minimize the discrepancies arising between Mu'tazilite logical reasoning and the scriptural texts used for legitimacy by non-Mu'tazilite groups; and third, the negation of non-Mu'tazilite logic, namely the claim of the ability to rationally comprehend matters of the transcendent (*al-sam'iyyāt*).[9]

The Mu'tazilite scholar al-Zamakhshari, for example, was "forced" to interpret metaphorical texts that clearly contradicted Mu'tazilite theory in order to uphold the doctrine of the "impossibility" of seeing Allah SWT in the hereafter. Not only among Mu'tazilite exegetes, Shi'a commentators such as Hasan al-Askari also forced an interpretation of Surah al-Baqarah [2]: 163 to support the theory of *taqiyya*. Consequently, Shi'a groups have frequently been the target of accusations of altering the Qur'an (*tahrif*

[6] M. Quraish Shihab, *Membumikan Al-Qur`an: Fungsi dan Peran Wahyu dalam Kehidupan Masyarakat* (Bandung: Mizan, 1997), 79.

[7] Jamal al-Banna, *Tafsir Al-Qur`an* (Beirut: Dar al-Syuruq, 2008), 89.

[8] Ibn Hajar al-Athqalāni, *Fath al-Bāri Sharh Ṣahih al-Bukhāri* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1379), 743.

[9] Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *al-Ittijah al-'Aqli fi al-Tafsīr; Dirāsah fi Qadiyyāt al-Majaz fi Al-Qur`ān 'inda al-Mu'tazilah* (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi Press, 1996), 196.

al-Qur`an).[10] The Khawarij also did not hesitate to defend the doctrine that "a grave sinner is an infidel or disbeliever" (*fasiq* is *kafir*) by deploying Surah Al-Mā'idah [5]: 44. Such forced theological interpretations have persisted, with each school of thought contributing in various ways up to the present day.

According to Al-Dhahabi, *tafsir bi al-ra'y* is divided into two categories: *al-tafsir bi al-ra'y al-mahmud* (acceptable) and *al-tafsir bi al-ra'y al-madhmum* (rejected). In his view, it is precisely *al-tafsir bi al-ra'y al-madhmum* that is currently thriving. Al-Dzahabi also highlighted the works of al-Tha'labi and al-Khāzin, which frequently cite deviant *isra'iliyyat* (Judeo-Christian traditions).[11]

Al-Dhahabi was born on October 19, 1915 (Dzulhijjah 9, 1333 AH) in the Kafr district. Ever since his undergraduate studies, he focused on Qur'anic Sciences. He then pursued his master's and doctoral degrees, graduating in 1946 with a doctorate awarded by the Faculty of Theology (*Ushuluddin*) at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, with a dissertation entitled *Al-Tafsir wa al-Mufassirun*. Subsequently, he was appointed as a professor at Al-Azhar University and various other universities across the Arabian Peninsula.[12]

On July 3, 1977 (Rajab 17, 1397 AH), Al-Dhahabi was abducted from his home in Helwan, Egypt, by an extremist group known as *al-Takfir wa al-Hijrah*. However, others clarify that he was assassinated by the Egyptian government. This came as a consequence of his role as Minister of Religious Endowments (*Awqaf*), as he was the primary eyewitness to the theft and corruption of Egyptian endowment lands that were offered to Jehan Sadat at a bargain price.[13]

Al-Dhahabi strongly criticized the Mu'tazilite stance of rejecting or allegorizing (*ta'wil*) the divine attributes of Allah such as His *istiwa'* (ascending) over the Throne, as well as His hands, hearing, and sight in a literal sense (*haqiqi*) under the pretext of avoiding anthropomorphism (*tashbih*). In his view, this approach inadvertently led them into divesting Allah of His attributes (*ta'til*) and contradicted the explicit evidence from the Qur'an and authentic Sunnah.[14]

Al-Dhahabi's thought has implications for inter-school relations, particularly between the Mu'tazilites and himself, a relationship characterized by complexity and frequent tension. His Hanbali outlook often led him to criticize Mu'tazilite views as misguided and a departure from mainstream Islamic tradition, viewing their rationalist approach as a threat to the authority of the Qur'an and Sunnah.

However, not all Mu'tazilite views were condemned by Al-Dhahabi. Certain Mu'tazilite scholars, particularly those holding more moderate positions, were considered

[10] Inayat Ullah dan Saeedur Rahman, "Tafseer-ul-Hasan Al-Askari's Introduction, authenticity and Methodology: A Scholarly Study," *VFAST Transactions on Islamic Research* 7, no. 1 (2019): 19–28.

[11] Muhammad Husein al-Dzahabi, *al-Tafsir wa al-Mufasirun* (Kairo: Dar al-Hadits, 2000).

[12] al-Dzahabi, 5.

[13] Muhammad ibn Kahtan, *Ulamā' wa A'lām* (Kuwait: al-Wa'yu al-Islamī, 2011), 369.

[14] Aliyya Qothrunnada AS dan M. Sihabudin, "A Critical Analysis of Al-Dzahabi's Critique on Al-Kasysyaf's Interpretation of QS an-Nisa': 164," *Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an* 21, no. 2 (2025): 203–22.

unproblematic by Al-Dzahabi. Numerous studies on Al-Dzahabi have been conducted, including research by Mawardi and Tajudin on Al-Dzahabi's critique of al-Zamakhshari (a prominent Mu'tazilite figure). According to Al-Dzahabi, the linguistic beauty of Arabic in *Al-Kashshaf* was frequently steered to legitimize his group's theological doctrines, thereby forcing the meaning of the sacred text outside the boundaries of the *Ahl as-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* creed.[15] Additionally, research by Tri and Zulfi examined Al-Dzahabi's critique of philosophy.[16] Al-Dzahabi strongly criticized excessive rationalization and over-allegorization (*ta'wil*) that reduced the sacredness of revelation. Interestingly, this study also highlights a 'double standard' in Al-Dzahabi's approach, as he was more lenient toward Fakhr al-Din al-Razi—whose work also possessed philosophical nuances—because al-Razi was deemed to still align with Sunni theological boundaries.

Based on this background, the author formulates the central question: 'How is Al-Dzahabi's methodological-ideological subjective bias manifested in Qur'anic exegesis?' Subsequently, several sub-questions are framed: 'How does Al-Dzahabi map out the intellectual landscape and classification of Qur'anic exegesis?', 'Which aspects of Al-Dzahabi's analysis reveal a subjective inclination or theological bias toward specific groups of exegetes?', and 'What are the implications of this methodological subjectivity on the validity of his historical assessment of exegetical schools?".

B. Method

These four analytical dimensions guide the inventory process of Al-Dzahabi's critiques regarding the methods of various exegetes. A contextualist hermeneutical analysis is employed because the primary focus of this study is the fundamental factor causing the exegete's subjectivity.[17] From this perspective, explanatory criticism serves as the domain where the development of published Islamic works is discussed to form a specialized methodology in contemporary interpretation. Therefore, the hermeneutical method provides an appropriate analytical tool to historically trace texts in relevance to their respective contexts. This approach is combined with established principles of Qur'anic Sciences (*'Ulum al-Qur'an*), such as *Asbab al-Nuzul* (occasions of revelation) and other related theories. This critique examines three purposively selected works concerning Al-Dzahabi's dialogues and the methodologies of various exegetes. The selected works encompass published books as well as documented dialogues with the commentators.

These works were selected using a purposive sampling technique because they represent the author's critiques within the framework of hermeneutical theory. Data adequacy was ensured through a critical analytical process, guaranteeing that the selected

[15] Udi Mufradi Mawardi dan Tajudin Tajudin, "KRITIK HUSEIN AL-DZAHABI TERHADAP TAFSIR AL-KASYSYAF," *Al-Fath* 8, no. 2 (2014): 215–44.

[16] Zulfi Fadhlurrahman dan Tri Nurcahyani Sari Tanjung, "Kritik Al Dzahabi Terhadap Tafsir Falsafi: Studi Kitab Al-Tafsir Al-Mufassirūn," *Mukaddimah: Jurnal Studi Islam* 10, no. 2 (2025): 466–86.

[17] Hasbi Maulana, "ALIRAN HERMENEUTIKA, PENERAPANNYA DALAM ULUMUL QUR'AN, DAN TIPOLOGI PENAFSIRAN KONTEMPORER," *Dirasat: Journal Islamic Studies* 2, no. 2, Oktober (2025): 39–55.

works are comprehensive enough to capture the subjective aspects of Al-Dzahabi. This analysis was conducted in four stages. The first stage began by examining Al-Dzahabi's criticisms scattered across his works. The second stage explored how hermeneutical theories detect an interpreter's subjectivity. The third stage investigated how Al-Dzahabi's own subjectivity influenced subjective bias in his interpretation. Finally, these findings were synthesized to formulate a contextual interpretation method, which serves as the primary theoretical contribution of this article.

Work	*The criticized work*	*Focus of criticism*	*Dominant concept*
Al-Tafsir wa al-Mufassirun	*Lubab Ta`wil fi Ma'ani al-Ta`wil* by 'Ala'uddin al-Baghdadi al-Khazin (w.741 H.)	A Critique of the Domination of Blameworthy *Tafsir bi al-Ra'yi* and the Subjective Standard of Scientific Authority	*Tafsir* is the antithesis of *ta`wil*.
Al-Israiliyat fi al-Tafsir wa al-Hadith	*Jami' al-Bayan fi Tafsir Al-Qur`an* by al-Tabari and *Tafsir al-Qur`an al-Karim* by Ibn Kathir	A Critique of the Unselective Use of *Isra'iliyyat* Narratives and the Use of Extreme Esoteric *Ta'wil*	The Delegitimization of Infiltration in Tafsir
Al-Ittijah al-Munharifah fi Tafsir Qur`an Dawafi'uha wa Daf'uha	*Al-Kasyaf* by al-Zamakhshari (Jilid 1 page. 397-398) وَكَلَّمَ ٱللَّهُ مُوسَىٰ تَكۡلِيمًا and *al-Kashf wa al-Bayan 'an Tafsir al-Qur`an* by Abu Ishaq al-Naysaburi (w.427 H)	A Critique of the Mu'tazilite Interpretation That Prophet Moses Spoke to Allah as a Rejection of the Anthropomorphic Doctrine and The Legitimation of the Doctrine of Theoretical Sufism (*Wahdat al-Wujud*)	The Rejection of Anthropomorphism

C. Result

1. The Exegete's Subjective Bias: The Primary Factor In The Stagnation Of Exegesis

Theoretically, 'bias' is caused by three factors: First, the subjectivity of the interpreter, in that an interpreter never exists in a vacuum, but is shaped by cultural factors, socio-political conditions, ideology, and their own linguistic limitations. Second, the distinction between historical meaning (the meaning that emerged in the 7th century) and contemporary significance (*maghza*), which represents a dynamic meaning derived from the diverse perspectives of commentators. Third, the ideologization of the text, namely the forcing of the text to justify varying ideological interests.[18]

[18] Izzuddin Washil, "Problem Subjektifitas Dalam Tafsir Bi Al-Ma'tsur, Tafsir Bi Al-Ra'yi, Dan Tafsir Bi Al-Isyarah," *Jurnal Diya al-Afkar: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an dan Hadis* 4, no. 1 (2016): 1–18.

The dominance of Al-Dzahabi's Sunni ideology is evident in three primary arguments: First, the axiom of the probity of the Companions (*'adalah al-sahabah*), wherein he rigorously applied narrator criticism to generations following the *Tabi'un* but exempted the Companions, even though some among them were involved in major political conflicts such as the Battle of Siffin. Second, the stigmatization of the Shi'i category (*tashayyu'*); in evaluating Hadith narrators, for instance, he downgraded the credibility of narrators with Shi'i inclinations, a judgment that was at times swayed by how far the narrator's political orientation strayed from the boundaries of Sunni orthodoxy. Third, a confrontational stance toward Mu'tazilite theologians and philosophers, as seen in his fierce criticism of figures like Ibn Sina, al-Farabi, and others.[19]

The Sunni theological influence is clearly evident when Al-Dzahabi outlines the essential steps for an exegete engaging in *tafsir bi al-ra'y* (rational exegesis), which include: (1) Interpreting verses accurately and proportionally, (2) Observing literal (*haqiqi*) versus metaphorical (*majazi*) meanings, (3) Paying attention to sentence structure and the higher objectives (*maqasid*) of a verse. (4) Considering intertextual connections (*munasabah*) between verses, explaining their relationships, and linking preceding and succeeding verses. (5) Taking into account the occasions of revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*). (6) Conducting rigorous linguistic analysis, (7) Minimizing repetitive interpretations of verses, (8) Minimizing overly detailed discussions on Arabic grammar (*ilm al-nahw*), jurisprudence methodology (*usul al-fiqh*), legal issues (*masa'il fiqhiyyah*), and detailed theological matters (*masa'il usul al-din*), (9) Minimizing the reliance on weak (*da'if*) traditions regarding occasions of revelation, virtues of verses (*fada'il*), and Judeo-Christian narratives (*isra'iliyyat*), (10) Exercising discernment when selecting between conflicting interpretations in accordance with the rules of textual preference (*qawa'id al-tarjih*).

The aforementioned prerequisites indicate that exhaustive discussions on fundamental religious sciences are restricted. Al-Dzahabi implicitly accuses Mu'tazilite exegetes of constantly detailing the meanings of ambiguous verses (*ayat mutashabihat*); however, within Sunni circles themselves, in-depth elaboration on the foundational sciences of religion (*usul al-din*) is frequently undertaken. A notable example is al-Ghazali, who interpreted the Qur'an through symbolic meanings (semiotics)—an approach designed to uncover the hidden gems contained within the Qur'an, as he posited that Qur'anic verses encompass seven layers of meaning. Furthermore, al-Ghazali argued that the symbolic meaning of a verse represents its transcendent dimension (*ma'ani ruhaniyyah malakutiyyah*).[20]

Al-Ghazali exemplifies this through the symbolic interpretation of several Sufi terms, such as *Kibrit Ahmar* (red sulfur) to symbolize *ma'rifatullah* (gnosis/knowledge of God), and *Tiryaq Akbar* (the supreme antidote/shield) as a symbolic representation of *Tawhid* (monotheism). The pattern employed by al-Ghazali in these symbolic readings lies in connecting the realm of meaning with the transcendent realm, whereas the textual expression itself remains grounded in the physical world. The study examining symbols that emerge from a verse's context is known as Qur'anic semiotics. The principles of

[19] Tsabitah Aulia Hasan dkk., "TAFSIR AL-QUR'AN: KAJIAN TERHADAP TAFSIR BIL MA'TSUR, TAFSIR BIL RA'YI, DAN TAFSIR BIL ISYARI," *Didaktik: Jurnal Ilmiah PGSD STKIP Subang* 12, no. 02 (2026): 158–65.

[20] Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Jawahirul Qur`an* (Beirut: Dar IhyaUlum, 1986).

Qur'anic semiotics can be found, among others, in Sufi exegesis (*tafsir tasawwuf*) which abounds with symbolic interpretations of verses, such as *Tafsir al-Jaylani* and *Mishkat al-Anwar* by al-Ghazali.

Beyond symbolic interpretation, the application of linguistics in Qur'anic studies is not unique to the Mu'tazilites; rather, it is employed almost universally across most theological schools. Due to the integration of linguistics into Qur'anic scholarship, structural linguistic analysis is accorded added weight. Stylistics (*'Ilm al-Uslub*) represents a branch of microlinguistics utilized in Qur'anic analysis, which subsequently evolved into Qur'anic stylistics (*Uslub al-Qur'an*). The study of Qur'anic stylistics focuses on how the Qur'an employs language—examining its distinctive characteristics and the effects of *al-mustawayat al-uslubiyyah* (stylistic analytical levels) on Qur'anic verses.[21]

His view was in fact explicitly articulated by al-Jurjani, who asserted that the nature of the challenge (*tahaddi*) issued by the Qur'an to the Arabs was fundamentally distinct from the Mu'tazilite understanding regarding words (*lafz*) and meanings (*ma'na*). In the author's view, the sole point of convergence in the debate between the *Ahl as-Sunnah* and the Mu'tazilites lies in Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar's breakdown of the literary elements (*fasahah*) of a sentence into three components: word selection (*ibdal*), word placement (*mawqi'*), and inflection/syntactic endings (*i'rab*). These elements can, at the very least, serve as a standardization in Arabic literature to delineate the distinction between Qur'anic diction and other forms of Arabic literary works. This explains why even an figure like Musaylimah al-Kadhdhab was incapable of matching the literary phrasing of the Qur'an.

The inimitability (*i'jaz*) of the Qur'an is divided into three dimensions: extra-textual inimitability (originating outside the text), intra-textual inimitability (including the textual codification phase), and the linguistic inimitability of the text (syntactic structure of the verses). These three elements constitute an integrated whole that must be demonstrated to reveal the Qur'an's inimitability (*i'jaz*). According to him, the difference between the Qur'an and Arabic literature is that Qur'anic rhetoric (*balaghah*) is an intrinsic genre within Arabic literature itself (Abu Zayd, 1987). Consequently, he argues that a divergence in perspective arises when understanding the secret of the Qur'an's inimitability (*i'jaz*) and the Arabs' inability (*'ajz*) to match it.[22]

2. Tafsir Is Not Ta`Wil: The Dominant Sunni Narrative In *Al-Tafsir Wa Al-Mufassirun*

In his work, Al-Dzahabi clearly articulates a narrative distinguishing exegesis (*tafsir*) from allegorical interpretation (*ta'wil*); in his view, a valid interpretation of a Qur'anic verse constitutes *tafsir* rather than *ta'wil*.

Yet, the art of interpreting texts as signs (*semiotics*) has undergone significant development, as has the interpretation of the sacred text (the Qur'an). Principles of symbolic (semiotic) interpretation were historically practiced by Sufi exegetes, though their methodology remained quite rudimentary; these mystical commentators employed intuitive methods in their exegesis, while occasionally incorporating symbols into their allegorical readings (*ta'wil*). Semiotic analysis can also be identified in metaphorical verses

[21] Syihabuddin Qalyubi, *Stilistika Bahasa dan Sastra Arab* (Yogyakarta: Karya Media, 2013).

[22] Nashr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Mafhum al-Nash: Dirasah fi Ulum Al-Quran* (Cairo: Dar al-Turas, 1987).

(*amthal*). The significance of symbolic interpretation lies, among other things, in advancing the field of Qur'anic Sciences (*'Ulum al-Qur'an*), since in linguistic theory, meaning can either experience semantic stagnation (synchronic) or undergo dynamic evolution (diachronic). It is precisely this evolving, diachronic meaning that semiotic analysis seeks to uncover. In the structuring of his work, Al-Dzahabi divides it into three chapters. The first two chapters address the definitions of *tafsir* (exegesis) and *ta'wil* (allegorical interpretation).[23]

The second chapter comprises three sub-chapters that examine the evolution of exegesis (*tafsir*) during the era of the Successors (*Tabi'un*, following the Companions). First, it reveals the backgrounds of the prominent exegetes among the *Tabi'un*. Second, it outlines the sources of *tafsir* during the Successors' period. Third, it analyzes the writing styles and methodologies of key figures such as 'Ata' ibn Abi Rabah, al-Hasan al-Basri, Sa'id ibn Jubayr, Mujahid, 'Ikrimah, and Masruq.

The third chapter discusses exegesis during the period of codification (*tadwin*). This era comprises eight sections, spanning from the Abbasid era to the modern period. It begins with an examination of the processes of *tafsir bi al-ma'thur* (tradition-based exegesis), *tafsir bi al-ra'y* (reason-based exegesis), and *tafsir bi al-ra'y al-madhmum* (blameworthy rational exegesis). It also addresses the commentaries of heterodox groups, including the Mu'tazilite, Ithna 'Ashariyyah, Isma'iliyyah, Baha'iyyah, Zaydiyyah, Babiyyah, and Khawarij schools. Furthermore, it outlines methodologies for understanding philosophical, jurisprudential (*fiqhi*), and Sufi exegesis.

Fourth, he elaborates on the school of *tafsir bi al-ra'y al-madhmum* or commentaries originating from heretical groups (*bid'ah*). The Mu'tazilites, Shi'i factions, and their offshoots are examined in the second volume. Six specific texts and various approaches to Shi'i interpretation are analyzed in detail within a dedicated discussion on the Rafidah Shi'a, also known as the Ithna 'Ashariyyah: *Al-Safi fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Karim* by Mulla Muhsin al-Kashi, *Mir'at al-Anwar wa Mishkat al-Asrar* by Maula 'Abd al-Latif al-Kazzarani, *Tafsir al-Hasan al-'Askari*, *Majma' al-Bayan fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* by Abu 'Ali al-Fadl al-Tabarsi, *Tafsir al-Qur'an* by Sayyid 'Abdullah al-'Alawi, and *Bayan al-Sa'adah fi Maqamat al-'Ibadah* by Sultan Muhammad al-Khurasani..

He discusses the Qur`anic interpretations of the Isma'iliyyah (Batiniyyah) and Zaydiyyah groups, along with his conclusions. There is only one work of exegesis representing the Khawarij tradition, namely *Hayman al-Zad ila Dar al-Ma'ad*, authored by Muhammad Yusuf Atfayyish, a Kharijite exegete from the Mi'zab Valley in the Algerian mountains.

Fifth, he examines Sufi methodologies and interpretations, including the framework employed by Ibn 'Arabi. This section highlights several works and explores mystical/allusive exegesis (*tafsir ishari*) alongside general Sufi commentaries, such as: *Al-Ta'wilat al-Najmiyyah* by Najm al-Din Dayah and 'Ala' al-Dawlah al-Simnani; *'Ara'is al-Bayan fi Haqa'iq al-Qur'an* by Abu Muhammad al-Shirazi (al-Sulamite/Ruzbihan); and *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim* by al-Tustari.[24] In this section, Al-Dzahabi criticizes Ibn 'Arabi for his *ishari* (allusive) and *batini* (esoteric) exegesis. For Al-Dzahabi, authority in Qur'anic

[23] Muhammad ibn Yusuf Itfisy, *Hamyan al-Zad ila dar al-Ma'ad* (Cairo: Wazarat al-Turats al-Qaumi wa al-Tsaqafah, 1994).

[24] Itfisy, 349.

exegesis relies on the principles of *ma'thur* (transmitted tradition) and *ma'qul* (textual rationality). He rejects interpretive approaches grounded in mystical experiences, viewing them as containing elements of *ta'wil batini* (esoteric allegory) that cross the boundaries of the text's apparent (*zahir*) meaning. In Al-Dzahabi's view, an exegete must not subject the text to intuition or personal spiritual experience, as doing so opens the door to unmeasurable claims of meaning that cannot be verified by the scholarly community.[25] Al-Dzahabi also criticizes the exegesis of the Ikhwan al-Safa (brethren of purity), who frequently explain history and metaphysical matters based merely on conjecture—such as in their interpretation of Paradise and Hellfire in Surah al-A'raf: 50. Furthermore, he rejects the Ikhwan al-Safa's assertion that the concept of the devil (*shaytan*) differs philosophically from its religious explanation. In other words, according to them, devils and jinn represent reincarnated entities originating from physical bodies.

Sixth, he examines the methodology of philosophical exegesis and its practical applications. He outlines and exemplifies the philosophical views of Ibn Sina and al-Farabi, along with their respective methodologies. In this context, al-Farabi's philosophical-theological interpretations are subjected to critique by Al-Dzahabi. Specifically, he criticizes al-Farabi's reading of 'the First' (*al-Awwal*) and 'the Last' (*al-Akhir*) in Surah al-Hadid: 3, wherein al-Farabi interprets the term 'the Last' as signifying that the ultimate destination of all things eventually returns to God, given that He is the final end. Furthermore, al-Farabi contends that revelation refers to the scriptures inscribed by God directly to humanity without an intermediary—termed as *kalam haqiqi* (true speech). He asserts that the potential to receive revelation is not exclusive to Prophets, but is accessible to humans in general. Al-Dzahabi counters this by arguing that such an interpretation merely adheres to Platonic philosophy.[26]

Seventh, he examines the interpretive approaches of jurists (*fuqaha*). This section analyzes how each school of jurisprudence (*madhhab*) developed its respective exegesis regarding legal matters and Islamic law (*fiqh*). Six jurisprudential works are examined: *Ahkam al-Qur'an* by al-Jassas al-Hanafi, *Ahkam al-Qur'an* by Kiya al-Harrasi al-Shafi'i, *Ahkam al-Qur'an* by Ibn al-'Arabi al-Maliki, *Al-Jami' li-Ahkam al-Qur'an* by al-Qurtubi al-Maliki, *Kanz al-'Irfan fi Fiqh al-Qur'an* by Miqdad al-Suyuri al-Rafidi from the Imami Ithna 'Ashariyyah school, and *Al-Thamarat al-Yani'ah wa al-Ahkam al-Wadihah al-Qati'ah* by Yusuf al-Thala'i al-Zaydi from the Zaydiyyah branch. In the realm of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Al-Dzahabi highlights several deviations committed by reformist thinkers concerning the verse on amputating the hands of thieves in Surah al-Ma'idah: 39. Al-Dzahabi critiques 'Abd al-Muta'ali al-Sa'idi, who argued that the imperative verb (*fa-qta'u*) found in the amputation verse can be understood and interpreted as merely expressing permissibility (*ibahah*).[27]

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[25] Zulfi Fadhlurrahman dan Tri Nurcahyani Sari Tanjung, "Kritik Al Dzahabi Terhadap Tafsir Falsafi: Studi Kitab Al-Tafsir Al-Mufassirūn," *Mukaddimah: Jurnal Studi Islam* 10, no. 2 (2025): 466–86.

[26] Abdurrahman Rusli Tanjung, "Analisis terhadap corak tafsir al-adaby al-ijtima'i," *Journal Analytica Islamica* 3, no. 1 (2014): 162–77.

[27] Abdul Muta'ali al-Sha'idi, *al-Tasyri al-Misri wa Silatuhu bi al-Fiqh al-Islami* (Beirut: Dar Kutub, 2012).

D. Discussion

Disagreements among scholars on how to interpret the *muhkam* and *mutasyabihat* verses constitute another basis for the argument regarding whether or not *mutasyabihat* verses can be comprehended. Those who make a pause (*waqf*) at the word 'Allah' (لا يعلمها إلا الله) argue that only Allah is able to understand verses of this kind. On the other hand, those who make a *waqf* at the phrase (والراسخون فى العلم) argue that individuals with profound understanding, or *al-rasikhun fi al-ilm*, are also capable of understanding the meaning of these *mutasyabihat* verses.

Regarding the *mutasyabihat* verses, Sunni scholars—followed by al-Dzahabi—approach these verses in three different ways. First, in matters of faith principles, they consistently adhere to the literal meanings without providing detailed explanations regarding what can or cannot be attributed to Allah. Second, when uttering words in a manner that infringes upon the sanctity of Allah's essence and attributes, people are required to be steered away from the belief that the literal meaning of such words is what Allah intended. Third, the ambiguous (*mutasyabihat*) parts must be expressed through consensus (*ijma'*) if there is only one interpretation (*ta'wil*) for them. If there are multiple interpretations, some individuals (the *mu'awwilah* group) attempt to interpret them, while others choose to leave their meanings unchanged (*mufawwidhah*).

On the other hand, according to the Shiite view, verses classified as *mutasyabihat* can be understood by relating them to other verses classified as *muhkamat*. A verse is considered *muhkamat* if it is a foundational verse (*ushul*) that can be understood without referring to other verses. A verse is also considered *muhkamat* if it is a prescriptive or directional verse that can be understood without referring to other verses.

Meanwhile, a verse is considered *mutasyabihat* if its meaning can only be understood through the verses that serve as its foundation (*ushul*). This means that a *mutasyabihat* verse becomes *muhkamat* through *muhkamat* verses, whereas a *muhkamat* verse is *muhkamat* in its own right. In Shia tradition, this is referred to as the dependence of *mutasyabihat* verses on the verses that serve as *muhkamat*.[28]

According to the Shiite, there is no contradiction between the literal meaning and other meanings. This differs from the understanding held by the adherents of the *Batiniyah* sect. Followers of the *Batiniyah* only comprehend what is internal, which sometimes even contradicts what is external. According to Shiite scholars, the house represents the esoteric (*batini*) meaning, while the body represents the exoteric (*zahir*) meaning. The exoteric aspect in this case serves to communicate ideas that can be understood by the majority of individuals. According to the Shiites, this means that anyone with language proficiency can know that there is no evidence for their statement and that the meaning of the Quran differs from the meanings of its well-known expressions. It is this line of thought that al-Dzahabi opposes.

Regarding figurative language (*majaz*), the Shiite group also accommodates it extensively in their interpretations—for example, in the word *khalifah* found in QS. Al-Baqarah: 30, which is directed solely at Ali bin Abi Thalib and his descendants, as recorded in *Tafsir al-Qummi* from Abu Abdullah as.: 'Indeed, this verse portrays the Commander

[28] Amaruddin Amaruddin, "MENGUNGKAP PENAFSIRAN AL-QUR'AN VERSI SYIAH Kajian Tafsir Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an Karya at-Tabataba'i," *SYAHADAH: Jurnal Ilmu al-Qur'an dan Keislaman* 6, no. 2 (2018): 91–114.

of the Faithful (*Amir al-Mu'minin*); thus, *baudhah* refers to the Commander of the Faithful (Ali bin Abi Thalib), while *wama fauqaha* refers to the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him. [29]

For the Shiites, the term *khalifah* has been recognized for a long time, and they interpret it definitively as referring to Ali bin Abi Thalib and his descendants. Meanwhile, Sunni scholars do not interpret it definitively as referring to any specific individual, but rather apply it to anyone capable of implementing the principles of justice and public welfare (*maslahah*).

Furthermore, there is a difference regarding divine sovereignty in governance. As explained by Ali Abd Raziq, the legitimacy of power is derived not solely from religion (Allah SWT), but also from the Muslim community. [30] This view is embraced by Sunni groups, who put it into practice through democratic leadership selection processes. In contrast, the Shiite group—as seen in the Islamic Republic of Iran with its system of *wilayat al-faqih*—restricts political legitimacy exclusively to the religious scholars (*mullahs*).[31]

The rule applied by the Mu'tazilah in their *bi al-ra'yi* (rational) exegesis is that they established their core creed upon five principles (*al-ushûl al-khamsah*). It was these fundamental principles of the Mu'tazilah school that were heavily criticized by Al-Dzahabi, who categorized their interpretation as flawed (*syadz*).

On the other hand, this principle of the Mu'tazilah gained acceptance among Muslims. They then attributed their interpretation to the Qur'an; however, the primary basis they relied upon was common sense (*al-'aql al-mujarrad*) detached from the textual context of the Qur'anic verses. That is, a Qur'anic text or verse was used merely to legitimize their underlying logic. For verses that did not align with their core principles (*al-ushûl al-khamsah*), they drew from other disciplines. In other words, they made the Qur'anic verses subordinate to their rationalist doctrines—one method being the negation of alternative interpretations that contradicted their fundamental rules, even those originating from authentic (*sahih*) Hadith traditions.[32]

Regarding the vision of Allah (*ru'yat Allah*), the Mu'tazilah initiated the debate by presenting arguments on the impossibility of seeing Allah (Q.S. Al-An'am [6]:103). They claimed this argument to be definitive (*muhkam*), while accusing the arguments of non-Mu'tazilite groups of being ambiguous (*mutashabih*), employing metaphor (*majaz*) and allegorical interpretation (*ta'wil*) as their analytical tools.

(1) *Tauhîd:* One of the Mu'tazilite principles regarding monotheism (*tawhid*) is reflected in their interpretation of Q.S.al-Qiyamah/75: 22-23: وُجُوه يَوْمَئِذ نَّاضِرَةٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهَا نَاظِرَة (*[Some] faces, that Day, will be radiant. Looking at their Lord.*)

The Mu'tazilah applied allegorical interpretation (*ta'wil*) to this verse by denying the belief in seeing God on the Day of Resurrection. Their argument was that vision implies directing the eyes toward an object to behold it, a concept applicable only to physical forms. Since Allah SWT does not possess a physical form, seeing Him is logically impossible.

[29] Abu Hasan al-Qummi, *Tafsir al-Qummi* (Qumm: Dar Ahl Bayt, 2000).

[30] Ali Abdul Raziq, *Al-Islam WaUshul al-Hukm* (Cairo: Matba'ah Mishr, 1925).

[31] Abd Kadir, "Syiah dan Politik: Studi Republik Islam Iran," *Jurnal Politik Profetik* 3, no. 1 (2015), https://journal3.uin-alauddin.ac.id/index.php/jpp/article/view/820/789.

[32] Fahd bin Sulaiman al-Rumi, *Manhaj al-Madrasah al-Aqliyah al-Hadisah fi Tafsir* (Riyadh: Maktabah Imam al-Haramaini, 1983).

Consequently, they interpreted the verse as referring to divine reward (*al-thawab*). On the other hand, 'Ali al-Murtada interpreted *'ila rabbiha* (إِلَىٰ رَبِّهَا) as the favor or blessing of her Lord, meaning that she does not betray her Lord's favor.[33]

This rejection is considered to be in direct contradiction with *mutawatir* texts (mass-transmitted scriptures), both from the Qur'an (such as Surah Al-Qiyamah, verses 22–23) and authentic *mutawatir* Hadiths. Al-Dzahabi asserts that the Mu'tazilah denied scriptural texts merely to preserve their own rational logic. Conversely, Ahl al-Sunnah affirms the occurrence of *Ru'yatullah* (the vision of Allah) in the Hereafter without *takyif* (speculating on 'how') and without *tashbih* (anthropomorphism or comparing Him to creation).

Furthermore, in interpreting Q.S.Thâha/20:5: ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنُ عَلَى ٱلۡعَرۡشِ ٱسۡتَوَىٰ (*The Most Merciful [who is] above the Throne established.*) The Mu'tazilah allegorized (*ta`wil*) this verse, arguing that the word *istawa* is a figurative expression (*kinayah/majaz*) for power and sovereignty (*al-qudrah/al-sulthan*). Also, when interpreting Q.S.al-Fath/48:10: يَدُ ٱللَّهِ فَوۡقَ أَيۡدِيهِمۡ *(...The hand of Allah is over their hands.....).* They allegorized (*ta'wil*) it by arguing that the word *yad* (hand) is a form of figurative representation (*takhyil*). This implies that making a pledge to the Prophet (peace be upon him) is equivalent to making a pledge to Allah, and that Allah SWT is far exalted above physical form or corporeality (*ajsam*).

In order to absolutely purify Allah from any resemblance to His creation (anthropomorphism/*tashbih*), the Mu'tazilah contend that Allah is One without distinct attributes. For them, Allah's attributes—such as All-Hearing, All-Seeing, All-Knowing, and All-Willing—are identical to His Essence (*'Ayn al-Dhat*). They reject the existence of eternal attributes (*sifat qadimah*) coexisting alongside Allah's Essence, fearing that such a concept would lead to a plurality of eternal entities (*ta'addud al-qudama*).

This stance of the Mu'tazilah was criticized as a form of *ta'til* (divestment or negation of Allah's divine attributes of perfection). Al-Dzahabi emphasized that affirming attributes for Allah—as asserted by the Qur'an and Sunnah—does not imply likening Him to His creation (*tashbih*). On the contrary, rejecting Allah's attributes ultimately leads to denying His perfection and attributing deficiency to Him (such as conceiving an essence devoid of actual knowledge, power, and will.

(2) *'Adl:* The second Mu'tazilite principles regarding justice is reflected in their interpretation of Q.S.al-Furqan/25: 31: وَكَذَٰلِكَ جَعَلۡنَا لِكُلِّ نَبِيٍّ عَدُوّٗا مِّنَ ٱلۡمُجۡرِمِينَ (*And thus have We made for every prophet an enemy from among the criminals*).

Al-Jubba`i interpreted this verse allegorically (*ta'wil*), asserting that Allah SWT explained to every Prophet the identity of his enemies so that they (the Prophets) would remain cautious. They deliberately employed this allegorical interpretation to align with one of their core principles: the obligation of divine justice and optimal good (*wujub al-salah wa al-aslah*).

On the other hand, the Mu'tazilah deliberately chose to remain agnostic regarding certain actions (*af'al*) of Allah, claiming that they did not know what wisdom or benefit (*maslahah*) was inherent in Allah's actions. Such in Q.S.al-Taghâbun/64: 2: هُوَ ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَكُمۡ فَمِنكُمۡ كَافِرٞ وَمِنكُم مُّؤۡمِنٞۚ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ بَصِيرٞ (*It is He who created you, and among you is the disbeliever, and among you is the believer. And Allah, of what you do, is Seeing*). "If we argue that it is

[33] Ali bin Husain bin al-Musawi al-Alawi al-Murtadha, *Amali Al-Murtadha Ghurar al-Fawa`id wa Durar al-Qala`id.* (Cairo: Isa al-Babi al-Halabi wa Syirkah, 1953).

humans who commit disbelief, even though Allah possessed prior knowledge (*'ilm*) of this matter, where then lies the wisdom (*maslahah*) in creating humanity? Especially when Allah already foreknew it? Al-Zamakhshari responded: Allah SWT possesses an aspect of goodness—and concealing His goodness from us does not diminish His good acts, nor does it diminish the good deeds of His creation—it is simply that we do not seek to know the reasons and wisdom behind its creation.

In refuting the opinion of the Mu'tazilah group regarding good and evil (*al-hasan wa al-qabih*) being two distinct entities, as illustrated in Q.S. Al-Nisa [4]:165: رُّسُلا مُّبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنذِرِينَ لِئَلَّا يَكُونَ لِلنَّاسِ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ حُجَّةُۢ بَعدَ ٱلرُّسُلِ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيما (*[We sent] messengers as bringers of good tidings and warners so that mankind will have no argument against Allah after the messengers. And ever is Allah Exalted in Might and Wise*).

Al-Dzahabi viewed this perspective as a denial of Allah's absolute lordship (*Rububiyyah*). This doctrine frequently led to the Mu'tazilah being equated with the Qadariyah school. Ahl al-Sunnah affirms that all things—whether good or evil, obedience or disobedience—exist within Allah's decree, creation, and divine will (*mashi'ah*), while human beings still possess free choice (*ikhtiyar*) and moral acquisition (*kasb*) over their actions. Denying Allah's creation of human actions is equivalent to positing 'minor creators' alongside Allah in the universe. "How could humans have a plea or excuse prior to the sending of the Prophets simply because they were granted reason to distinguish between good and evil, as you believe? They replied: the function of the Prophets is merely to serve as a reminder against heedlessness and to re-motivate awareness; thus, the sending of the Prophets is solely to fulfill a formal obligation.

Third is the Promise and the Threat (*al-wa'd wa al-wa'id*): The Mu'tazilah contended that it is not obligatory to express gratitude to Allah for admitting Muslims into Paradise. According to them, this is because entering Paradise has become their rightful due in accordance with what was promised to them. The opinion above constitutes an allegorical interpretation (*ta'wil*) of Q.S. Saba' [34]:1: ٱلحَمدُ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِي لَهُۥ مَا فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِي ٱلأَرضِ وَلَهُ ٱلحَمدُ فِي ٱلأٓخِرَةِ وَهُوَ ٱلحَكِيمُ ٱلخَبِيرُ *([All] praise is [due] to Allah, to whom belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth, and to Him belongs [all] praise in the Hereafter. And He is the Wise, the Acquainted).* According to the Mu'tazilah, expressing gratitude in the Hereafter is not an obligation for blessings that were already rightfully due to the Muslims.

For the Mu'tazilah, because Allah is Absolutely Just, He must and is obligated to execute His divine threat (*al-wa'id*) in the Hereafter. Allah cannot revoke the threat of punishment for a perpetrator of grave sins (*kabair*) who dies without repenting. If Allah were to forgive them without repentance, He would be considered untruthful or unjust—something impossible for God.

Al-Dzahabi evaluated this view as a restriction on the absoluteness of Allah's mercy and divine will (*mashi'ah*). Ahl al-Sunnah adheres to the creed that Allah may forgive any sin for whomever He wills (apart from *shirk*, or including major sins below *shirk*), as Allah states in Surah An-Nisa, verse 48. Making the punishment of a perpetrator of grave sins an 'obligation' upon Allah means placing limits on the vastness of Allah's forgiveness and power.

Fourth The Intermediate Position (*al-manzilah baina al-manzilatain*): The Mu'tazilah contend that the status of the grave sinner (*fasik*) lies in an intermediate position between that of a believer and an disbeliever (*al-manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn*). They base their

view on an allegorical interpretation (*ta'wil*) of Q.S. Al-Insan [76]:3 إِنَّا هَدَيْنَٰهُ ٱلسَّبِيلَ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا وَإِمَّا كَفُورًا (*Indeed, We guided him to the way, be he grateful or be he ungrateful*). According to them, a person who expresses gratitude remains a thankful person, regardless of whether they possess faith and piety.[34]

Al-Zamakhshari further elaborates his explanation through an allegorical interpretation (ta'wil) of Q.S. Al-Isra [17]:9–10: إِنَّ هَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ يَهْدِي لِلَّتِي هِيَ أَقْوَمُ وَيُبَشِّرُ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ٱلَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا كَبِيرًا وَأَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱلْأٓخِرَةِ أَعْتَدْنَا لَهُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا (*9. Indeed, this Qur'an guides to that which is most suitable and gives good tidings to the believers who do righteous deeds that they will have a great reward. 10. And that those who do not believe in the Hereafter - We have prepared for them a painful punishment.* If you ask, how is it that those who believe and do good are mentioned, whereas the disbelievers are not termed grave sinners (*fasiq*)? Al-Zamakhshari replies that humanity initially consists of either a godfearing believer or a polytheist; however, thereafter, a person becomes caught in a position between the two positions.[35]

Al-Dzahabi and Ahl al-Sunnah believe that perpetrators of grave sins (other than shirk) remain believers, albeit with diminished faith (*naqis al-iman*), or are defined as believers by virtue of their faith and transgressors (*fasiq*) due to their major sins. They will not abide eternally in Hellfire and can ultimately exit Hell through Allah's mercy, the intercession (shafa'ah) of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), or the intercession of the righteous. In his view, this Mu'tazilite doctrine is considered highly dangerous because it drives Muslims into despair regarding divine mercy (*ya's min rahmah*) and brings them dangerously close to the ideology of the Khawarij.

Fifth, *Amr Ma'ruf Nahi Munkar*:The Mu'tazilite school briefly served as the official state ideology during the reign of several Abbasid caliphs (such as Al-Ma'mun, Al-Mu'tasim, and Al-Wathiq). They enforced their own version of the principle of enjoining good and forbidding wrong (amr bi al-ma'ruf wa nahi 'an al-munkar) by imposing the doctrine of Khalq al-Qur'an (the createdness of the Qur'an) upon scholars and the general public. Anyone who refused was imprisoned, tortured, or dismissed from office through the state apparatus.

This dark chapter of history—known as the *Mihnah* (Inquisition)—drew the harshest condemnation from Al-Dzahabi. In his view, the Mu'tazilah abused the principle of enjoining good and forbidding evil to silence the truth, intimidate the scholars of the pious predecessors (such as Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal), and forcibly impose theological innovation (bid'ah) through state-sponsored coercion. This demonstrates that their concept of commanding right was authoritarian and destructive to both academic freedom and genuine faith.

Various responses to the Sunni theology of Al-Dzahabi have emerged. Among them are two works by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd that support the *ta'wil* (figurative interpretation)

[34] al-Qadhi Abdul Jabbar, *Tanzih Al-Qur`an 'an al-Matha'in.* (Cairo: al-Mathba'ah al-Jamaliyyah, 1329).

[35] Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Zamakhsyari, *Tafsir Al-Kasyaf* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 2009).

of Ibn Arabi[36] and the *majaz* (metaphorical interpretation) of the Mu'tazilah.[37] which Al-Dzahabi considered to be a rejected (*mardud*) source of exegesis. The subsequent response comes from Hadith experts: according to them, Al-Dzahabi was heavily biased by his theological school (*aqidah*) in evaluating narrators. Narrators who possessed high expertise and academic honesty, but held political or theological affiliations deemed 'deviant' by Al-Dzahabi, received sharper criticisms or a proportion of *jarh* (critical evaluation) influenced by the label of *bid'ah* (innovation) attached to them.

Al-Dzahabi is also considered to be very inconsistent in applying the standards of *Jarh wa Ta'dil* (objectivity in evaluation), in that he was sometimes very lenient (*tasahul*) toward narrators who shared his theological alignment, yet very strict (*tasyaddud*) toward narrators from other groups who had similar flaws. Observers of Islamic intellectual history note that Al-Dzahabi was heavily influenced by the methodology and perspective of his teacher (Ibn Taymiyyah). Consequently, in several historical accounts or biographies within *Siyar A'lam al-Nubala*, his defense of certain figures or his harsh criticism of some extreme Sufis, philosophers, or *kalam* theologians strongly reflect the current of his teacher's school of thought rather than the standards of a neutral historian.

Al-Dzahabi is also considered to have engaged in information reduction and subjective selection when summarizing books. In the summarization process, the choice of which information to discard and which to retain rested entirely in Al-Dzahabi's hands. Modern scholars assess that this selection process was not free from subjectivity—he frequently omitted reports that, in his personal view, were unimportant, weak, or contrary to his theological principles, which at times even eliminated the complete historical context of the figure being discussed

E. Conclusion

According to al-Dhahabi, *tafsir bi al-ra'yi* (exegesis by opinion/logic) is divided into two categories: *al-tafsir bi al-ra'yi al-mahmud* (accepted) and *al-tafsir bi al-ra'yi al-madhmum* (rejected). However, al-Dhahabi's rejection is largely based on his own subjectivity, as his theological framework differs from that of the other exegetes. This subjectivity is evident when al-Dzahabi criticizes works such as: (1) *Lubab al-Ta'wil fi Ma'ani al-Ta'wil* by Alauddin al-Baghdadi al-Khazin (d. 741 AH); in this work, al-Dzahabi criticizes the dominance of reprehensible exegesis by opinion (*tafsir bi al-ra'yi al-madhmum*) and subjective standards of scholarly authority. (2) *Al-Kashshaf* by al-Zamakhshari; here, al-Dzahabi criticizes the Mu'tazilite interpretation stating that it was Prophet Moses who spoke to God, as a rejection of the doctrine of anthropomorphism (comparing God to His creation). (3) *Jami' al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* by al-Tabari; in this work, al-Dzahabi criticizes the unselective use of *Israiliyat* narratives and extreme esoteric interpretation (*tawil batini*).

Overall, al-Dhahabi's critique of the Mu'tazilite and Shiite schools is largely based on his adherence to the Hanbali tradition and his belief in the importance of preserving

[36] Nashr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Falsafah al-Ta`wil Dirasah fi Ta`wil al-Qur`an inda Muhyiddin Ibn Arabiy* (Beirut: Dar al-Tanwir, 1983).

[37] Abu Zayd, *al-Ittijah al-'Aqli fi al-Tafsir; Dirasah fi Qadhiyyat al-Majaz fi Al-Qur`an 'inda al-Mu'tazilah*.

traditional Islamic understandings of theology and law. His works frequently present a negative portrayal of Mu'tazilite scholars and their ideas.

In terms of methodology, al-Dhahabi's subjective bias has the potential to distort historical records. Regarding scholarly objectivity, he is prone to making subjective and prejudice-based biographical assessments, particularly when dealing with figures from competing schools of Islamic thought. This leads al-Dhahabi to the conclusion that: first, *tafsir* (exegesis) is the antithesis of *ta'wil* (figurative interpretation); second, infiltration into exegesis is totally rejected; and third, the principles of other groups, such as anthropomorphism and its implications, are rejected.

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