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Examining Hermeneutical Complexity in al-Ṭabarī's Literal Hermeneutics: Rethinking the *Maʾthūr–Raʾy* Dichotomy

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Abstract

This article investigates the hermeneutical tensions present in al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, a work traditionally categorized as *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr*. Utilizing qualitative content analysis of selected theological verses (Q. 2:255; Q. 2:29; Q. 38:34), in conjunction with historical contextualization, the study explores the extent to which al-Ṭabarī consistently adheres to his three stated hermeneutical principles: reliance on transmitted ḥadīth, rejection of *raʾy*-based interpretation, and commitment to the apparent textual meaning (*ẓāhir*). The analysis uncovers significant contextual negotiation of these principles, particularly in verses addressing the divine attributes (*ṣifāt Allāh*). In such instances, al-Ṭabarī selectively evaluates competing narrations, incorporates linguistic and rational analysis, and employs a form of controlled literalism tempered by theological qualification. These findings indicate that al-Ṭabarī's hermeneutical approach reflects a principled adaptation shaped by pre-canonical ḥadīth evaluation and the socio-theological dynamics of the third-century Hijrī context, rather than a mechanical application of methodological declarations. By emphasizing exegetical practice over classificatory categories, this study challenges the analytical sufficiency of the *maʾthūr–raʾy* dichotomy and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of early Sunnī hermeneutics.

[*Artikel ini mengkaji ketegangan hermeneutik yang terdapat dalam Jāmiʿ al-Bayān karya al-Ṭabarī, sebuah karya yang secara tradisional diklasifikasikan sebagai* tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr. *Dengan menggunakan analisis isi kualitatif terhadap sejumlah ayat teologis terpilih (Q. 2:255; Q. 2:29; Q. 38:34) serta pendekatan kontekstualisasi historis, penelitian ini menelaah sejauh mana al-Ṭabarī secara konsisten berpegang pada tiga prinsip hermeneutik yang ia nyatakan sendiri, yaitu ketergantungan pada ḥadīth yang ditransmisikan, penolakan terhadap penafsiran berbasis* raʾy, *dan komitmen terhadap makna tekstual yang lahiriah (*ẓāhir*). Analisis menunjukkan adanya negosiasi kontekstual yang signifikan terhadap prinsip-prinsip tersebut, khususnya pada*

ayat-ayat yang berkaitan dengan atribut-atribut ketuhanan (ṣifāt Allāh). Dalam konteks ini, al-Ṭabarī secara selektif mengevaluasi riwayat-riwayat yang saling bersaing, mengintegrasikan analisis kebahasaan dan rasional, serta menerapkan suatu bentuk literalisme terkontrol yang dibatasi oleh pertimbangan teologis. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan hermeneutik al-Ṭabarī merefleksikan suatu adaptasi yang berprinsip, yang dibentuk oleh evaluasi ḥadīth pra-kanonik dan dinamika sosio-teologis abad ketiga Hijriah, alih-alih penerapan mekanis atas deklarasi metodologis semata. Dengan menekankan praktik eksegetis dibandingkan kategori klasifikatoris, kajian ini menantang kecukupan analitis dikotomi maʾthūr–raʾy dan berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih bernuansa mengenai hermeneutika Sunni awal.]

Introduction

The historiography of classical to modern *tafsīr* literature has traditionally employed a binary classification distinguishing between *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* and *tafsīr bi al-raʾy*.[1] Although this typology continues to exert considerable influence within *ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* studies, its adequacy in capturing the internal complexity and methodological hybridity of major exegetical works has increasingly been questioned. Walid A. Saleh, for example, argues that this binary framework oversimplifies the nature of Qurʾanic exegesis and obscures the integrative character inherent in classical *tafsīr* literature. He therefore proposes an alternative historiographical model grounded in function and content—namely, encyclopedic, madrasi, and *ḥāshiyah tafsīr*—which shifts analytical attention away from rigid source-based classifications toward the discursive structures of exegetical texts.[2] This reconceptualization not only challenges established taxonomies but also opens new analytical avenues for exploring internal hermeneutical tensions within works traditionally subsumed under a single methodological label.

Al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān* constitutes a particularly illustrative case in this regard. Canonical works in the historiography of *tafsīr* classify al-Ṭabarī's exegesis

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[1] See: M. Taha Boyalık, "Critique of the Discourse of Certainty in Tafsīr and the Reconstruction of the Tafsīr-Tawīl Distinction" *İslam Araştırmaları Dergisi*, no. 53 (January 2025): 117–54, https://doi.org/10.26570/isad.1539012; Hakan Çoruh, "Tradition, Reason, and Qurʾanic Exegesis in the Modern Period: The Hermeneutics of Said Nursi," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 28, no. 1 (January 2017): 85–104, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2017.1280915.

[2] Walid A. Saleh, "Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of Tafsīr in Arabic: A History of the Book Approach," *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 12 (2010): 6–40.

as *tafsīr bi al-riwāyah*, more commonly referred to as *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr*.[3] Within classical *ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, this category denotes Qurʾanic interpretation grounded primarily in transmitted reports attributed to the Prophet, the Companions, and the early generations (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*), and is conventionally contrasted with interpretation based on rational reasoning (*tafsīr bi al-raʾy*).[4] From this perspective, al-Ṭabarī is frequently presented as the paradigmatic exemplar of a strictly transmission-based exegetical methodology.

Nevertheless, this characterization has not gone uncontested. Ibn ʿĀshūr, for instance, contends that *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān* exhibits sustained critical reasoning and argumentative analysis that go well beyond the mere compilation of transmitted material.[5] Similarly, while Saleh and Mehmet Akif Koç acknowledge the centrality of *riwāyah* in al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*, they underscore the methodological complexity of his exegetical practice and caution against portraying him solely as a traditionalist authority.[6] These divergent assessments suggest that an uncritical reliance on classificatory labels may obscure, rather than elucidate, the underlying logic of al-Ṭabarī's interpretive approach.

Existing scholarship on al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* may be broadly divided into two principal strands. The first comprises thematic and comparative studies that examine particular exegetical issues across multiple works. Representative examples include Devin J. Stewart's analysis of authority and interpretive communities, as well as studies by Khalil and Yusof on variant Qurʾanic readings and their juristic implications.[7] The second strand addresses epistemological and methodological questions, featuring largely descriptive accounts of al-Ṭabarī's

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[3] See: Muhammad ibn Husayn al-Dhahabi, *At-Tafsīr Wa al-Mufassirūn* (Dar al-Nawadir, 2010), 180; Ignaz Goldziher, *Mazhab Tafsir: Dari Aliran Klasik Hingga Modern* (eLSAQ Press, 2010); Manna' Khalil al-Qattan, *Mabahith Fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* (Manshurat al-'Asr al-Hadith, 1975), 501.

[4] See: 'Abd al-'Azim al-Zarqani, *Manahil Al-'Irfan Fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* (Dar al-Kutub al-'Arabi, 1995), 12; 53–54; Muhammad 'Ali al-Sabuni, *At-Tibyan Fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* (al-Bushra, 2011), 92; Musa'id ibn Sulayman al-Tayyar, *Fushul Fi Usul Al-Tafsir* (Dar al-Nasr al-Dawli, 1993).

[5] Muhammad al-Tahir Ibn Ashur, *Al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir* (Tunis: al-Dar al-Tunisiyyah li-l-Nashr, 1984).

[6] See: Mehmet Akif Koç, "On the Allegedly Overstated Importance of Al-Tabari within the Sunni Exegetical Tradition," *Zeitschrift Der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 2023; Walid A. Saleh, "Rereading Al-Tabari through al-Maturidi: New Light on the Third Century Hijri," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 18, no. 2 (2016): 180–209, https://doi.org/10.13173/ZDMG.173.2.343.

[7] See: Devin J. Stewart, "Consensus, Authority, and the Interpretive Community in the Thought of Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 18, no. 2 (2016), https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2016.0241; Mohamed Abdul Mun'im Al-Said Khalil and Nur Hafizi Yusof, "The Difference in Qur'anic Readings in The Interpretation of Al-Tabari and Its Effect on Jurisprudential Rulings: An Analytical Study" *Jurnal Islam dan Masyarakat Kontemporari* 16, no. 1 (January 2018): 111–26, https://doi.org/10.37231/jimk.2018.16.1.252.

exegetical strategies.[8] Additional studies have explored the enduring influence of al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* within the broader development of Sunnī exegesis.[9]

Despite extensive scholarship on al-Ṭabarī, the relationship between his stated hermeneutical principles and their actual application in *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān* remains insufficiently examined. Existing studies largely reconstruct his methodology from the *muqaddimah*, often assuming coherence between theoretical commitments and exegetical practice, while paying limited attention to moments of tension, particularly in the interpretation of theologically sensitive verses. This article addresses this gap by analyzing the practical application of three core principles articulated in the *muqaddimah*—reliance on *ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīth*, rejection of *raʾy*, and adherence to the literal meaning (*ẓāhir*)—and by identifying factors underlying apparent deviations from these commitments.[10]

Methodologically, this qualitative study employs content analysis to investigate hermeneutical tensions and contextual negotiations in al-Ṭabarī's exegetical practice. The analysis focuses on three Qurʾanic passages—Q. 2:255 (*kursī*), Q. 2:29 (*istiwāʾ*), and Q. 38:34 (*kursī* in a non-divine context)—selected because they involve theological terminology related to divine attributes (*ṣifāt Allāh*), have historically generated significant interpretive disputes among third-century theological schools, and allow for systematic examination of al-Ṭabarī's articulated hermeneutical principles. Each passage is examined through three complementary analytical lenses: pre-canonical ḥadīth evaluation, which assesses the narrations cited and al-Ṭabarī's criteria for their use; *raʾy–ẓāhir* analysis, which identifies rational argumentation, linguistic reasoning, and modes of textual qualification; and indicators of hermeneutical tension, which trace patterns of alignment, contextual negotiation, and methodological adaptation. These analyses are further situated through historical contextualization, placing al-Ṭabarī's interpretive choices within the formative period of ḥadīth codification, early theological contestation, and the consolidation of Sunnī doctrinal authority. Through this integrated framework, the study argues that al-Ṭabarī's exegetical practice reflects principled adaptation rather than methodological inconsistency.

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8   See: Marianna Klar, "Between History and Tafsīr: Notes on al-Tabari's Methodological Strategies," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 18, no. 2 (2016), https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2016.0240; Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Qur'anic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir," in *Qur'anic Hermeneutics* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013).

9   See: Mustafa Shah, "Al-Tabari and the Dynamics of Tafsīr: Theological Dimensions of a Legacy," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 15, no. 2 (2013), https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2013.0097; Koç, "On the Allegedly Overstated Importance of Al-Tabari within the Sunni Exegetical Tradition"; Saleh, "Rereading Al-Tabari through al-Maturidi: New Light on the Third Century Hijri."

10 Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Tafsir Al-Tabari: Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil Ay al-Qur'an* (Maktabah Ibn Taymiyyah, 2000), 67–84.

Al-Ṭabarī and the Pre-Canonical Ḥadīth Milieu

The formative period of Islamic scholarship, encompassing approximately the first four centuries of the Hijri calendar, was marked by the rapid expansion, critical examination, and gradual consolidation of Prophetic traditions. Although ḥadīth had already attained normative authority as a primary source of religious knowledge, the processes governing their transmission, evaluation, and hierarchical validation remained fluid. During the initial two centuries, transmission relied predominantly on oral circulation supported by rigorous memorization, with scholarly authority based on mastery of both the *matn* (text) and *isnād* (chain of transmission). As political fragmentation intensified and sectarian affiliations (*firaq*) multiplied, the fabrication and ideological manipulation of ḥadīth became a recognized concern, prompting scholars to develop increasingly systematic criteria for assessing transmitted reports.[11]

This historical context gave rise to what can be analytically characterized as the pre-canonical ḥadīth milieu, referring to the period preceding the full establishment of a Sunni ḥadīth canon and the normative authority subsequently attributed to collections such as the *Ṣaḥīḥayn*. Within this milieu, the processes of transmission and authentication were neither rigidly standardized nor regulated by a universally accepted textual hierarchy. Instead, oral transmission coexisted with emerging written compilations and was subject to sustained critical scrutiny. The systematic codification of ḥadīth (*ʿaṣr tadwīn al-ḥadīth*), which reached its most influential stage in the late third century AH, thus embodied not only efforts toward preservation but also ongoing scholarly evaluation concerning reliability, coherence, and interpretive utility.[12] Importantly, the lack of a stabilized canon necessitated continuous critical engagement with competing narrations.

Al-Ṭabarī was deeply embedded in the pre-canonical scholarly milieu. Historical evidence indicates that he began documenting traditions at an early age and made original contributions to ḥadīth scholarship, notably through works such as *Ṣarīḥ al-Sunnah* and *Musnad Ibn ʿAbbās*. His exegetical methodology in *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān* demonstrates the intellectual rigor of a trained ḥadīth critic rather than that of a mere compiler. For each verse, he systematically collates multiple narrations, subjects them to critical comparison, and explicitly prioritizes certain reports over others based on criteria including *isnād* reliability, linguistic plausibility, and contextual coherence. These practices illustrate that, within a pre-canonical framework, adherence to transmitted authority inherently involved interpretive judgment and rational evaluation.

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[11] Muhammad Mustafa Aʻzami, *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature* (Islamic Book Trust, 2002), 70.

[12] Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oneworld, 2009), 25–60.

This observation carries significant implications for evaluating al-Ṭabarī's stated rejection of *raʾy*. In early Sunni discourse, *raʾy* primarily functioned as a polemical and normative category, often employed to criticize speculative theological interpretation—particularly that associated with Muʿtazilī—rather than to exclude all forms of evaluative reasoning. When considered within the epistemic norms of early ḥadīth scholarship, al-Ṭabarī's rejection of *tafsīr bi al-raʾy* is better understood not as a wholesale repudiation of rational agency but rather as a delimiting strategy intended to preserve interpretive authority within the framework of transmitted knowledge.

This historical contextualization is essential for the current study. The apparent tensions between al-Ṭabarī's articulated hermeneutical principles and his exegetical conclusions—particularly regarding the interpretation of theologically significant verses—cannot be properly evaluated without recognizing that the pre-canonical assessment of ḥadīth itself involved structured modes of reasoning. Consequently, what emerges is not a contradiction between principle and practice but rather a historically situated mode of interpretive selectivity, wherein hermeneutical agency operates in accordance with, rather than in opposition to, the evaluative norms of early Sunni tradition. This dynamic establishes the fundamental framework for analyzing how al-Ṭabarī navigates literal meaning, transmitted authority, and doctrinal considerations in the specific Qurʾanic passages discussed below.

Concurrent with advancements in ḥadīth scholarship, the third and fourth centuries AH witnessed intensified theological disputes. Early political divisions facilitated the emergence of groups such as the Shīʿah, Khārijites, and Murjiʾah, while subsequent doctrinal debates led to the development of more systematized theological schools, including the Muʿtazilah, Qadariyyah, Jabariyyah, and various proto-Sunni movements. These groups articulated not only competing doctrinal positions but also distinct hermeneutical approaches to the Qurʾān, particularly concerning verses traditionally categorized as *mutashābihāt*.

A central issue in these debates was the concept of taʾwīl. In early exegetical discourse, *tafsīr*—understood in its *bayānī* sense—primarily aimed to elucidate the apparent linguistic meaning of the text, whereas *taʾwīl* referred to interpretive efforts that extended beyond the literal sense, especially when such readings gave rise to theological or doctrinal tensions. It is important to note that *taʾwīl* was not a uniform practice. While *kalām*—most notably those of the Muʿtazilah—utilized *taʾwīl* to reconcile revelation with rational theological principles, other scholars employed more moderate forms of interpretive qualification, including linguistic specification, semantic narrowing, or contextual delimitation, all while maintaining a commitment to the *ẓāhir* as a methodological foundation. As Abdullah Saeed observes, *taʾwīl* served as a mechanism for negotiating the implicit dimensions of Qurʾanic discourse

during moments of doctrinal tension, rather than representing a wholesale departure from the textual meaning.[13]

The tensions were most pronounced in verses that ascribed corporeal attributes to God—such as *yad* (hand), *ʿayn* (eye), and *wajh* (face)—which posed significant challenges to the development of theological frameworks. Certain groups, including some extreme Shīʿī factions and those described in heresiographical sources as anthropomorphists or *Mujassimah*, are reported to have affirmed a literal corporeality, thereby undermining the ontological distinction between Creator and creation.[14] In contrast, other scholars sought to uphold divine transcendence (*tanzīh*) through interpretive caution, strategic ambiguity (*tafwīḍ*), or limited semantic qualification. Importantly, these debates took place prior to the comprehensive systematization of Sunni kalām in its later Ashʿarī–Māturīdī formulations.

Al-Ṭabarī operated within a dynamic and contested theological environment, navigating competing interpretive demands without adhering to a fully developed doctrinal synthesis. The political context of the Abbasid Caliphate further intensified these challenges. The elevation of Muʿtazilī doctrine to state ideology under al-Maʾmūn, coupled with the enforcement of the *miḥnah*, exemplified the extent to which theological positions were institutionally imposed, leading to the marginalization and persecution of dissenting scholars such as Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. The abolition of the *miḥnah* under al-Mutawakkil marked a decisive shift toward Sunni orientations, facilitating the gradual consolidation of Sunni authority and the demarcation of acceptable theological discourse.

Within this context, al-Ṭabarī is often classified within the Sunni tradition due to the close alignment of many of his views with Sunni doctrinal principles. However, his intellectual profile demonstrates a considerable degree of methodological independence, characteristic of the formative period preceding the full consolidation of Sunni orthodoxy. This stance allowed him to approach theological disputes with interpretive flexibility, selectively employing transmitted reports, linguistic analysis, and rational evaluation. Such flexibility can be understood as a form of hermeneutical risk management: a deliberate strategy designed to minimize doctrinal, political, and epistemic vulnerabilities while maintaining fidelity to transmitted authority and ensuring textual coherence.

Collectively, the dynamics of theological contestation and Sunni consolidation elucidate why al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of verses pertaining to divine attributes occasionally reveals tensions between his stated methodological commitments and

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13 Abdullah Saeed, "Some Reflections on the Contextualist Approach to Ethico-Legal Texts of the Qur'an," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 71, no. 2 (2008): 221–22.

14 See: Abu al-Hasan 'Ali ibn Isma'il al-Ash'ari, *Maqalat Al-Islamiyyin Wa Ikhtilaf al-Musallin* (al-Maktabah al-'Asriyyah, 2006), 106; Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *Al-Milal Wa al-Nihal* (Mizan, 2004), 170–77.

the resulting interpretations. These tensions should not be viewed as mere idiosyncratic inconsistencies but rather as inherent structural features of early Sunni exegesis, in which hermeneutical principles were continuously negotiated in response to socio-theological pressures. This framework provides the essential historical context for the subsequent analysis of al-Ṭabarī's exegetical approach to interpreting the *ṣifāt Allāh* verses, as discussed below.

Method and Principles of aṭ-Ṭabarī's Literal Hermeneutics

In this study, the term is employed as an analytical construct rather than as an emic descriptor utilized by al-Ṭabarī himself. It does not signify naïve or inflexible literalism; instead, it denotes a form of interpretation that is textually constrained, privileging transmitted authority (*naṣṣ*) and established linguistic conventions while exhibiting considerable resistance to speculative semantic shifts. Accordingly, al-Ṭabarī's hermeneutical stance may be characterized as a regulated textualism that aims to delimit interpretive possibilities without entirely precluding interpretive reasoning. A similar conceptual framework is proposed by Abdullah Saeed, who differentiates among textual, semi-textual, and contextual approaches to Qurʾanic exegesis, with the textual approach emphasizing meanings derived primarily from the Qurʾanic text itself and other authoritative religious sources.[15] Al-Ṭabarī's methodology corresponds most closely with this textual orientation; however, as will be demonstrated, its practical application is neither mechanically literal nor hermeneutically inert.

Al-Ṭabarī delineates his hermeneutical framework through a hierarchical model of Qurʾanic meaning. Initially, he distinguishes meanings that are exclusively known to God and remain inaccessible to all creatures, including the Prophet. This category encompasses matters of the unseen, such as the exact timing of the Day of Judgment and the descent of ʿĪsā ibn Maryam. Subsequently, he identifies meanings that can only be apprehended through Prophetic explanation as preserved in transmitted reports (*riwāyah*). At this level, interpretive interventions based on personal opinion are categorically prohibited. Al-Ṭabarī emphasizes that any interpretation diverging from Prophetic transmission, even if deemed correct by the interpreter, constitutes speculative intrusion into divine speech and undermines the Prophet's role as *mubayyin* of Qurʾanic meaning.[16]

The third category encompasses meanings accessible exclusively to individuals who have attained mastery of the language of the Qurʾān. This level necessitates an in-depth understanding of Arabic grammar, rhetorical conventions, and literary usage, including phenomena such as *majāz*, *taqdīm*, *taʾkhīr*, and the distinctions between *ʿāmm* and *khāṣṣ*. At this stage, aṭ-Ṭabarī consistently refers to

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[15]   Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London: Routledge, 2006), 50.

[16]   al-Tabari, *Tafsir Al-Tabari: Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil Ay al-Qur'an*, 1:233.

Prophetic interpretation as a comparative and corrective framework, while also consulting pre-Islamic and early Arabic poetry to establish linguistic norms.[17] This third tier is particularly significant, as it constitutes a hermeneutical domain wherein linguistic reasoning and evaluative judgment become indispensable, despite the normative rejection of *raʾy*. The resulting tension between linguistic analysis and anti-speculative rhetoric provides a critical context for the interpretive dynamics explored in this article.

A fundamental element of al-Ṭabarī's hermeneutical framework is his distinction between *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* verses, which he articulates most explicitly in his exegesis of Q. 3:7. Al-Ṭabarī defines *muḥkamāt* as verses with determinate meanings that are clearly delineated and readily accessible through their apparent wording. These verses generally include legal rulings, ethical injunctions, promises and threats, and narrative exempla, allowing for interpretive plurality only within boundaries already clarified by God and the Prophet.[18] In contrast, *mutashābihāt* are verses characterized by semantic multiplicity, whose ultimate meanings are known solely to God; these include topics such as the apocalypse, the appearance of the Dajjāl, and the significance of the disjoined letters (*aḥruf al-muqaṭṭaʿāt*).[19]

At the normative level, al-Ṭabarī asserts that *mutashābihāt* should not be subjected to speculative interpretation. Nevertheless, this prohibition primarily targets *taʾwīl* understood as doctrinally motivated or essence-altering reinterpretation, rather than all forms of interpretive clarification. In practice, al-Ṭabarī engages with such verses through linguistic analysis, comparative transmission, and contextual reasoning. The distinction between the proscribed speculative *raʾy* and the permissible evaluative judgment—both grounded in the norms of language and transmission—is crucial for comprehending how his stated principles function within concrete exegetical contexts.

From the *Muqaddimah* of *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, several fundamental principles underlying al-Ṭabarī's approach to textual hermeneutics can be discerned. These principles constitute his own normative self-articulation and function as a standard against which his exegetical practice may be critically evaluated.[20] First, interpretation should neither restrict nor extend meaning except when supported by Prophetic explanation or compelling evidence. Second, the Qurʾān must not be subjected to distorted or ideologically motivated readings, a concern that al-Ṭabarī explicitly links to sectarian misuse of both *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt*. Third, interpretation based on *raʾy*—understood here as speculative, non-transmitted, and

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17   al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, 1:223.
18   al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, 1:44.
19   al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, 5:29.
20   al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, 5:70.

doctrinally driven opinion—is categorically rejected, a stance reinforced by the citation of eight prophetic traditions condemning such interpretive practices.[21]

Fourth, interpretation must conform to the apparent meaning of the text as determined by common Arabic usage. Al-Ṭabarī warns against abandoning widely attested linguistic meanings in favor of rare or forced interpretations, contending that resorting to hidden meanings is unwarranted when established usage is sufficient.[22] Fifth, general expressions should maintain their generality and should not be restricted to specific meanings without strong and acceptable evidence. Sixth, claims of abrogation (*naskh*) should not be made hastily when interpretive tension arises, as premature recourse to abrogation risks speculative displacement of Qurʾanic rulings. Finally, consensus (*ijmāʿ*) serves as a decisive interpretive principle in cases of disagreement, particularly the consensus of the Companions, the *tābiʿūn*, and the early generations.

Collectively, these principles establish a rigorous normative framework intended to limit interpretive excesses and preserve transmitted authority. Their application—especially in verses addressing divine attributes—inevitably produces hermeneutical tension. The interaction of anti-speculative rhetoric, linguistic analysis, selective transmission, and theological sensitivity renders al-Ṭabarī's hermeneutical approach a particularly rich context for exploring the tension between methodological assertion and exegetical practice. In the subsequent analysis, these principles will serve as the normative baseline against which al-Ṭabarī's interpretive methods are systematically assessed.

Ḥadīth Authority and Pre-Canonical Evaluation in Aṭ-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*

Al-Ṭabarī's insistence on grounding Qurʾanic interpretation in Prophetic ḥadīth and the narrations of the *salaf al-ṣāliḥ* constitutes one of the most prominent features of *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*. This commitment is repeatedly emphasized in the *muqaddimah* of his *tafsīr*, where he positions transmitted authority (*naql*) as the primary epistemic foundation of interpretation and explicitly warns against speculative engagement with the Qurʾān independent of reliable *riwāyah*.[23] On this basis, later *tafsīr* historiography has frequently classified his work as *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* or *tafsīr bi al-naql*.

A closer examination of al-Ṭabarī's exegetical practice reveals that his reliance on ḥadīth operates within a pre-canonical evaluative framework, rather than adhering to the rigid criteria of post-*Kutub al-Sittah* ḥadīth criticism. In the third century AH, standards for assessing transmission had not yet fully stabilized, and the evaluation of narrations involved an integrated consideration of *isnād* reliability, linguistic plausibility, and theological coherence. Therefore, al-Ṭabarī's interpretive

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[21] al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, 1:157–60.
[22] al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, 3:763.
[23] al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, 1:67–84.

choices must be understood within this fluid epistemic environment, where transmitted reports were not treated as epistemically uniform but were subject to selective assessment.

This dynamic is particularly evident in his interpretation of the term *kursī* in Q. 2:255. Al-Ṭabarī records multiple competing interpretations and explicitly acknowledges that disagreement over this term is deeply intertwined with sectarian theology. He summarizes three principal views: first, that *kursī* refers to God's knowledge; second, that it denotes a literal seat; and third, that it signifies the divine *ʿarsh*, or dominion. Although each interpretation is supported by transmitted reports, al-Ṭabarī does not assign equal interpretive weight to these narrations.

Al-Ṭabarī ultimately favors the interpretation that understands *kursī* as divine knowledge, citing a report transmitted from Ibn ʿAbbās via Jaʿfar ibn Abī Mughīrah through Saʿīd ibn Jubayr (al-Ṭabarī 2000, commentary on Q. 2:255). This preference is reinforced through intertextual corroboration with Q. 40:7, as well as through Arabic linguistic usage, in which *kursī* may function metaphorically as a repository or locus of knowledge. Al-Ṭabarī further adduces poetic evidence to establish the plausibility of this semantic range. Linguistic reasoning thus functions not as a secondary embellishment but as a substantive criterion of *tarjīḥ*, operating alongside transmitted authority.

At the same time, al-Ṭabarī records another narration from Ibn ʿAbbās, transmitted via Muslim al-Baṭīn, which defines the *kursī* as "the place of the two feet" (*mawḍiʿ al-qadamayn*), a formulation that carries more explicit anthropomorphic implications. Significantly, al-Ṭabarī does not explicitly declare this narration weak or forged. Rather, his rejection of this interpretation operates through preference and contextual exclusion (*tarjīḥ*), not through formal *taḍʿīf*. This mode of evaluation reflects pre-canonical practice, in which narrations could be marginalized on hermeneutical grounds without being technically invalidated.

The choice of the first narration cannot be adequately explained by *isnād* analysis according to later critical standards. Jaʿfar ibn Abī Mughīrah occupies an ambivalent position within the biographical tradition: early authorities such as Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn regarded him as reliable,[24] while later critics, including Ibn Mandah and Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, classified him as *ṣadūq yahim*.[25] The inclusion of his report in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* in *muʿallaq* form further indicates that his transmissions were not categorically dismissed within early evaluative frameworks. These data underscore that al-Ṭabarī's preference reflects hermeneutical prioritization rather than a definitive judgment of authenticity.

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[24] See: Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Al-ʿIlal Wa Maʿrifat al-Rijal* (Dar al-Khani, 2001); Ibn Muhriz, *Maʿrifat al-Rijal ʿan Yahya Ibn Maʿin* (Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1985), 1:436.

[25] See: Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalani, *Tahdhib Al-Tahdhib* (Dar al-Fikr, 1984), 2:165; Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalani, *Taqrib Al-Tahdhib* (Dar al-Rashid, 1986), 960.

This hermeneutical strategy becomes even clearer when considering al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of *kursī* in Q. 38:34. In this verse, where *kursiyyihi* refers to the throne of the Prophet Sulaymān, al-Ṭabarī adopts a straightforward, literal interpretation, identifying it unproblematically as a physical seat or resting place.[26] The absence of interpretive hesitation here underscores that non-literal interpretation is not the default approach but is specifically employed in relation to divine attributes.

The contrast between these two treatments of the same lexical item demonstrates that al-Ṭabarī does not apply either literalism or transmission-based interpretation mechanically. Instead, he sharply differentiates between references to the Creator and to created beings, applying distinct hermeneutical considerations in accordance with theological necessity. The preference for a non-anthropomorphic interpretation of divine attributes reflects a principled commitment to *tanzīh*, operating within a transmission-centered framework.

Analytically, this evidence clarifies how al-Ṭabarī's professed rejection of *raʾy* functions in practice. The evaluative reasoning employed here—linguistic comparison, contextual correlation, and theological sensitivity—does not constitute *raʾy* in the polemical sense condemned in the *muqaddimah*. Rather, it exemplifies a form of disciplined judgment embedded within the norms of *riwāyah*. Al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*, therefore, cannot be reduced to strict traditionalism. It operates within a pre-canonical epistemology in which transmitted authority is filtered through structured evaluation, revealing the complexity of early Sunnī exegetical reasoning, where fidelity to transmission coexists with contextual discrimination and doctrinal constraint.

Rational Deliberation and the Rejection of *Raʾy*: Polemics and Practice in al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*

One of the most frequently cited aspects of al-Ṭabarī's hermeneutical self-positioning is his explicit rejection of Qurʾanic interpretation based on *raʾy* (personal opinion). In the *muqaddimah* of *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, he devotes an extensive discussion to condemning interpretations grounded in individual judgment, reinforcing his position by citing multiple Prophetic reports that caution against engaging with the Qurʾān independently of transmitted authority (*riwāyah*).[27] At the normative level, this rejection is expressed in categorical terms and serves as a definitive boundary-setting gesture.

When examined through the lens of exegetical methodology, al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* reveals a consistent and systematic rational inquiry. Rather than merely compiling narrations, he methodically compares differing opinions, evaluates their evidentiary

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26 al-Tabari, *Tafsir Al-Tabari: Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil Ay al-Qur'an*, 2:197.
27 al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, 1:157–60.

foundations, and explicitly expresses preference through *tarjīḥ*, often identifying what he considers *al-awlā* (the most appropriate or compelling interpretation). Al-Ṭabarī himself emphasizes that sound exegesis requires clarifying the basis of disagreement before endorsing the view most strongly supported by evidence, reflecting a reflective and analytical approach rather than passive transmission.

This analytical process is exemplified by his extensive use of linguistic reasoning, contextual indicators (*qarāʾin*), syntactic analysis, and causal explanation (*taʿlīl*) to evaluate competing interpretations. From the perspective of later classificatory frameworks, such procedures might be categorized as *tafsīr bi al-raʾy*. However, retroactively applying this later binary risks conceptual distortion. The category of *raʾy* employed by al-Ṭabarī does not denote disciplined reasoning per se, but rather speculative interpretation that asserts epistemic independence from Prophetic transmission and the inherited authority of the early Muslim community.

This distinction becomes clear only when al-Ṭabarī's hermeneutical statements are understood within the socio-theological context of the third-century ʿAbbāsid period. During this era, Muʿtazilite theology—particularly under the patronage of al-Maʾmūn—advocated an interpretive model in which rational coherence served as an independent criterion, often taking precedence over transmitted reports in cases of conflict. Within this framework, al-Ṭabarī's rejection of *raʾy* functions primarily as a polemical boundary marker. It situates his *tafsīr* within Sunnī commitments to transmitted authority (*naql*) and distinguishes his methodology from the rationalist epistemologies characteristic of Muʿtazilī *kalām*.

Within this framework, the coexistence of anti-*raʾy* rhetoric and rational deliberation is no longer seen as contradictory. For al-Ṭabarī, reason functions as an internal evaluative tool rather than as an autonomous source of meaning. Rational analysis is employed to assess the coherence, plausibility, and relative strength of transmitted material, rather than to generate interpretations independent of *riwāyah*. Thus, rational deliberation is hierarchically subordinate to transmitted authority and operates in its service.

Later *tafsīr* historiography has recognized this methodological complexity. Muḥammad al-Fāḍil ibn ʿĀsyūr notes that al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* represents a significant advancement in the history of exegesis, moving beyond simple compilation to systematic scholarly evaluation.[28] Although al-Ṭabarī maintains a clear commitment to transmitted authority, he incorporates sustained comparative reasoning that effectively transforms the exegetical endeavor from a mere collection of reports into a critical academic discipline.

From this perspective, al-Ṭabarī's rejection of *raʾy* is more accurately understood as a repudiation of epistemic autonomy rather than a dismissal of

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[28] Muhammad al-Fāḍil ibn ʿĀsyūr, *At-Tafsīr Wa Rijāluhu* (Kairo: Majmaʿ al-Buḥūṯ al-Islāmiyyah al-Azhar, 2009), 36.

rationality itself. His *tafsīr* exemplifies an early Sunnī paradigm in which *ʿaql* (reason) and *naql* (transmitted knowledge) function as complementary epistemic tools, arranged hierarchically and mutually regulating one another. Rational deliberation is not only permitted but mandated, provided it remains grounded in transmitted knowledge and is circumscribed by the theological principles of Sunnī orthodoxy.

The hermeneutical tension arising from this configuration is thus productive rather than problematic. Al-Ṭabarī's exegetical approach reveals that the denunciation of *raʾy* primarily functions as a polemical response to contemporary rationalist excesses, while his actual methodology incorporates disciplined reasoning as an essential element of transmission-based exegesis. This analysis further challenges rigid binary classifications, such as *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* versus *tafsīr bi al-raʾy*, advocating instead for a more nuanced understanding of early Sunnī hermeneutics as an evaluative and historically situated practice.

Controlled Literalism, *Ẓāhir*, and Theological Qualification in Divine Attributes

Al-Ṭabarī's adherence to the apparent meaning (*ẓāhir*) of the Qurʾanic text constitutes a fundamental component of his hermeneutical methodology. In the *muqaddimah* of *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, he explicitly critiques interpretive approaches that forsake the literal sense of the revelation in favor of implicit, esoteric, or ideologically driven meanings, especially when such interpretations are employed to advance sectarian objectives.[29] According to al-Ṭabarī, valid interpretation must remain grounded in the linguistic conventions of the Arabs and in widely attested semantic usage, except when compelling transmitted or linguistic evidence requires limitation or specification.

The commitment to the apparent (*ẓāhir*) meaning is most rigorously challenged in verses addressing divine attributes (*ṣifāt Allāh*), where affirming the literal sense risks anthropomorphic interpretations. Al-Ṭabarī's exegesis of the term *istiwāʾ* in Q. 2:29 serves as a paradigmatic example for analyzing how the literal meaning is simultaneously affirmed and theologically constrained. In his commentary on this verse, al-Ṭabarī initially surveys a spectrum of interpretive opinions held by earlier authorities. He identifies several principal interpretations, including *istiwāʾ* as turning toward the heaven (*iqbāl ʿalayhā*), as assuming dominion or authority, as directing or arranging creation, and as rising or elevation (*ʿulūw* and *irtifāʿ*).[30]

Prior to asserting his own interpretive preference, al-Ṭabarī conducts a comprehensive semantic analysis of the term *istiwāʾ* within Arabic usage, identifying several attested meanings, including completion, uprightness, approach, mastery, and elevation. Drawing upon linguistic conventions, poetic evidence, and

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29 al-Tabari, *Tafsir Al-Tabari: Jamiʿ al-Bayan ʿan Taʾwil Ay al-Qurʾan*, 5:70.
30 al-Tabari, *Jamiʿ al-Bayan*, 1:428–29.

established precedents, he ultimately favors the meanings of *ʿulūw* (elevation) and *irtifāʿ* (height) as the most appropriate interpretations. This preference is not limited to Q. 2:29 but is consistently applied to other verses describing divine *istiwāʾ*, such as Q. 7:54, 10:3, 13:2, 20:5, 25:59, 32:4, 41:11, and 57:4.

At first glance, this interpretive approach appears to embody a strict and potentially anthropomorphic literalism. However, al-Ṭabarī promptly introduces theological qualifications. He explicitly rejects interpretations that redefine *istiwāʾ* as mere "approach," "organization," or abstract control solely to circumvent theological difficulties, contending that such reinterpretations constitute an unwarranted distortion of established linguistic meaning. Concurrently, he emphatically denies that divine *istiwāʾ* involves bodily motion, spatial displacement, or change. Instead, he affirms the semantic notion of elevation while reserving the precise modality (*kayfiyyah*) of this attribute exclusively to God.[31]

This maneuver does not constitute a full metaphorical *taʾwīl* in the later *kalām* tradition, nor does it represent an unequivocal affirmation of a corporeal interpretation. Instead, it exemplifies what can be termed a theological qualification of the literal sense (*taqyīd al-ẓāhir*). Al-Ṭabarī maintains the core linguistic meaning of the term while simultaneously negating anthropomorphic implications through epistemic restraint. The mode of divine action is neither defined nor reinterpreted but is instead bracketed as beyond human comprehension.

A comparison with other exegetical approaches further elucidates the distinctiveness of this method. For instance, Muqātil ibn Sulaymān interprets *istiwāʾ* as denoting physical settling and positional establishment (*istiqrār* and *tamakkun*), an interpretation that readily supports *tajsīm*.[32] In contrast, later theologians such as al-Māturīdī reframe the term to signify abstract concepts of sovereignty and governance, thereby seeking to eliminate any potential anthropomorphic resemblance between God and creation.[33] The position of al-Ṭabarī does not entirely align with either of these interpretive trajectories.

Instead of assuming a later Salaf–Khalaf dichotomy, it is historically more accurate to consider al-Ṭabarī's method as an early formative framework that subsequent theological discourse would later systematize retrospectively. His approach prefigures what later Sunnī theologians conceptualized as affirmation without modality (*ithbāt bi-lā kayf*) or undetailed consignation (*tafwīḍ ijmālī*), though he did not explicitly formulate these positions as formal doctrinal tenets. Thus, theological restraint in his *tafsīr* functions as a hermeneutical practice rather than as a fully developed theological doctrine.

From this perspective, al-Ṭabarī's approach to divine attributes should not be characterized simply as naive literalism or as an implicit metaphorical

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[31]   al-Tabari, *Jamiʿ al-Bayan*, 1:431.
[32]   Muqatil ibn Sulayman, *Tafsir Muqatil Ibn Sulayman* (Dar Ihya' al-Turath, 2008), 21.
[33]   Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, *Ta'wilat Ahl al-Sunnah* (Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2005), 3:410–12.

interpretation. Rather, his method exemplifies a form of controlled literalism: a disciplined affirmation of the textual meaning that is bounded by linguistic conventions, transmitted authority, and theological transcendence. The resulting hermeneutical tension does not indicate inconsistency but represents a principled endeavor to maintain the integrity of Qurʾanic language while upholding the concept of divine incomparability (*tanzīh*).

This analysis demonstrates that al-Ṭabarī's commitment to *ẓāhir* interpretation is neither absolute nor simplistic. Rather, it functions within a meticulously regulated framework wherein linguistic accuracy, transmission integrity, and doctrinal restraint are mutually reinforcing. The case of *istiwāʾ* exemplifies how early Sunnī exegetes addressed the interpretive challenges associated with divine attributes, avoiding both anthropomorphism and unrestrained metaphorical *taʾwīl*.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates hermeneutical tensions between al-Ṭabarī's declared principles and his interpretive practice when addressing verses concerning divine attributes (*ṣifāt Allāh*). The analysis identifies three primary loci of contextual negotiation: (1) flexible engagement with competing narrations in the interpretation of *kursī* (Q. 2:255), where al-Ṭabarī prioritized reports that preserve divine transcendence within the fluid evaluative framework of pre-canonical ḥadīth scholarship; (2) the strategic employment of rational analysis, linguistic examination, and comparative evaluation, integrated with—rather than opposed to—his reliance on transmitted authority; and (3) the adoption of controlled literalism with theological qualification (*taqyīd al-ẓāhir*) in explaining *istiwāʾ* (Q. 2:29), affirming semantic content while safeguarding transcendence through epistemic restraint and consignment of modality (*tafwīḍ*).

These hermeneutical tensions reflect not methodological failure but principled adaptation shaped by the socio-theological conditions of third-century Hijri Islam. Operating within a contested intellectual environment, al-Ṭabarī navigated between resistance to Muʿtazilite rationalism, opposition to anthropomorphic tendencies, and alignment with emerging Sunni theological orientations. His exegetical practice demonstrates that in early Sunni *tafsīr*, transmission (*naql*), rational deliberation (*ʿaql*), and theological concern operated within an integrated evaluative framework rather than as mutually exclusive domains, with communal norms and doctrinal sensitivities shaping—but not overriding—the application of methodological principles.

By foregrounding exegetical practice over inherited classificatory labels, this study challenges the conventional *maʾthūr–raʾy* dichotomy and exposes the analytical limitations of models that presume a strict separation between transmitted and rational authority. It contributes to contemporary *tafsīr* studies by

demonstrating a historically grounded methodological approach that avoids anachronistic projections of later coherence; by illustrating how pre-canonical ḥadīth evaluation integrated transmission quality, theological consideration, and interpretive context; and by clarifying controlled literalism and theological qualification as legitimate strategies within early Sunni hermeneutics. Future research may extend this framework through comparative analysis of other classical exegetes in order to refine our understanding of the context-dependent relationship between declared methodology, interpretive practice, and socio-theological formation in the history of Qurʾanic exegesis.

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