THE METHODOLOGY OF AL-MĀTURĪDĪ’S
QUR’ANIC EXEGESIS:
Study of Ta’wīlāt Ahl al-Sunnah

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Abstract

According to Islamic theology, al-Māturīdī is one of the three prominent Muslim theologians of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah who are called aqtāb madhhab Ahl al-Sunnah wa‘l-Jamā‘ah (the leaders of Sunnite school of thought). In addition to his reputation as a theologian, al-Māturīdī actually was competent in various Islamic sciences. In Qur’anic exegesis, he has Ta’wīlāt Ahl al-Sunnah or Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān. Unfortunately, this fact isn’t known well by Islamic researchers. This article is going to elucidate the features of his work that encompass at least seven characteristics. Al-Māturīdī prefers to combine the naqīl (traditional) and ‘aqli (rational) sources. Consequently, it can be identified as tafsīr bi’l-izdiwāj or the exegesis that amalgamates tafsīr bi’l-ma’thūr (traditional exegesis) with tafsīr bi’l-ra’y (rational exegesis). He is not an interpreter who uses excessive grammatical analysis to interpret the Qur’anic verses. He sometimes presents many styles of qirā‘ah (recitation of the Qur’an) without thorough explanation. He almost never uses Isrā’i’liyyāt (the Judeo-Christian traditions and tales) to interpret the Qur’anic verses. He favors tawassut (nonaligned and independent standpoint) when he deals with different viewpoints among theologians. He tends to follow the Ḥanafite school of thought in discussing the jurisprudential Qur’anic verses. He applies asbāb al-nuzūl (the causes of revelation) loosely.

Keywords: Qur’anic studies, Qur’anic Exegesis, al-Māturīdī, Ta’wīlāt Ahl al-Sunnah.
A. Introduction

The history of Islam can be divided into three periods, the classical period (30-648 / 650-1250), the middle period (648-1215 / 1250-1800) and the modern period (since 1215 / 1800). In its history, Islam has had two golden ages, namely, the first and the second golden ages. The first golden age can be found in the classical period when the expansion and the integration of Islamic government occurred before the prophet Muhammad (may God bless and grant him salvation) died in 11/632, and continued under the administration of Rashidun (rightly guided) caliphs (13-35 / 634-661) and Ummayad dynasty (41-132 / 661-750). The second golden age took place in the middle period, marked by the Ottoman dynasty in Turkey (680-1342 / 1281-1923), Safavid dynasty in Iran (907-1149 / 1501-1736) and Mongol dynasty in India (932-1275 / 1526 -1858).  

During the first golden age, there were three prominent Muslim theologians of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah school of thought, i.e. Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘ari (d. 330/941) in Basrah, Abū Mansūr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) in Samarqand (Transoxiana) and Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭāhāwī (d. 321/933) in Egypt.  

Additionally, Jalāl Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥāmid Mūsā said that those three Islamic scholars were also called aqātāb madhhab Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah (the leaders of Sunnite school of thought) which encompassed al-Ash‘ārī, al-Māturīdī and al-Ṭāhāwī, although among the followers of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah, or most Muslim people generally, including Indonesian citizens, if there is a consensus of opinion, it is that their major theologians on kalām are al-Ash‘ārī and al-Māturīdī. It

1 For further explanation about the periods of Islamic history, see Harun Nasution, Islam Ditinjau dari Berbagai Aspeknya, vol. 1 (Jakarta: UI Press, 1978), pp. 56-89.
4 See the appendix of Ta’wilāt Aḥl al-Sunnah (Baghdad: al-Irshād, 1983), p. 693.
seems al-Ṭaḥāwī is unlucky because his name has been nearly forgotten in the study of *kālām*.

Besides his popularity in *kālām*, al-Māturīdī also has many works on different subjects. In total, his works number over 24 titles. There are two titles on *tafṣīr* (Qur’anic exegesis) and *tajwīd* (proper pronunciation for correct recitation of the Qur’an), 4 titles on *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), 12 titles on *kālām*, 1 title on *taṣawwuf* (sufism) and five titles on other various themes.⁴

Al-Māturīdī’s book on Qur’anic exegesis is entitled *Ta’wīlāt Abl al-Sunnah* (the Sunnite interpretations) that is widely known as *Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān* (the Qur’anic interpretations). The book, written by this *Imām al-Mutakallimīn* (leader of theologians) and Ra’īs Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah (mentor of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah), is found in several places, including the Turkish libraries in Istanbul, Egyptian library of Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣrīyyah in Cairo, Syrian library of Dār al-Kutub al-Zahiriyyah in Damascus, British Museum in London and Berlin library in Germany.⁵ However, comprehensive discussions of this book are rarely seen. Moreover, few Qur’anic studies mention the name of al-Māturīdī as a Qur’anic exegete.

Ahmād al-Shirbāṣi, when explaining the levels of Sunnite exegetes, did not allude to al-Māturīdī, but instead remarked on al-Ash’ārī, another theologian who lived at the time of al-Māturīdī. Drawing on the work of al-Fadl ibn al-Hāsib al-Tibrishī, a Shi’ite priest, al-Shirbāṣi gives the following explanation.

The first group of exegetes, from Muḥammad’s companions, were ʿAṭī ibn Abī Ṭalīb, ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbbās, ʿAbd Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd, Ubayy ibn Ka‘b and other companions. The second group of exegetes were ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ṭalḥah, Qays ibn Muslim al-Kūfī, Mujāhid ibn Jibyrah al-Makkī, Qatādhah ibn Drāmah al-Sadūsī, Ismā‘īl ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sidī, ʿIkrimah ibn Mawlā ibn ʿAbbās, ʿAtā ibn Abī Rabbāh al-Makkī, Ṣa‘īd ibn Abī Ṭalīb, ʿAbd Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd, Ubayy ibn Ka‘b, ʿAbd Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd, Ubayy ibn Ka‘b and other companions. The second group of exegetes were ʿAṭī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah, Qays ibn Muslim al-Kūfī, Mujāhid ibn Jibyrah al-Makkī, Qatāadhah ibn Drāmah al-Sadūsī, Ismā‘īl ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sidī, ʿIkrimah ibn Mawlā ibn ʿAbbās, ʿAtā ibn Abī Rabbāh al-Makkī, Ṣa‘īd ibn Abī Ṭalīb, ʿAbd Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd, Ubayy ibn Ka‘b, ʿAbd Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd, Ubayy ibn Ka‘b and other companions. The second group of exegetes were

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⁴ See the preface of *Ta’wīlāt Abl al-Sunnah* written by Muḥammad Mustafīd al-Raḥmān, pp. 3-4.

⁵ See the preface of *Ta’wīlāt Abl al-Sunnah* written by Muḥammad Mustafīd al-Raḥmān, pp. 3-4.

The assertion that al-Ashari is an exegete is also followed by Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabi in his al-Tafsiir wa al-Mufassirun (the exegesis and exegetes). He declared that the name of al-Ashari’s Qur’anic exegesis was al-Mukhtazin (the treasure storage).7

However, Subhi Saleh, in Mabahith fi Ulum al-Qur’an, did not include al-Maturidi’s name as an interpreter. The Qur’anic interpretations and their interpreters from Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah, according to him, are Mafatih al-Ghayb, written by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606/1210), Anwaar al-Tanzil wa Asrar al-Ta’wil, written by Nasir al-Din ‘Abd Allah al-Baydawi (d. 685/1286), Isbad al-Aqil al-Salim ilaa Maqayiib al-Qur’an al-Karim, written by Abū al-Su’ud al-Imadī (d. 982/1574), Madarik al-Tanzil wa Ḥaqiq al-Ta’wil, written by Abū al-Barakat al-Nasafi (d. 710/1310), and Lubab al-Ta’wil fi Matani al-Tanzil, written by ‘Ala’ al-Din ‘Ali al-Khazar (d. 741/1341).8 A similar attitude is shared by Jalal al-Din ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505) in Tabaqat al-Mufassirin9 and Muhammad ‘Abd al-

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6 Ahmad al-Shirbashi, Qiṣṣat al-Tafṣīr (Cairo: Dar al-Qalam, 1962), pp. 87-90.
Although al-Mātūrīdī was not well known as an exegete, there were some writers who acknowledged him. Among of them were Muḥammad ibn Abī al-Qurashi (d. 775/1373) in Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanafīyyah,11 Hāji Khalīfah (d. 1067/1654) in Kashf al-Zunūn,12 and Ṣadiq ibn Ḥusayn al-Qafūji (d. 1307/1889) in Abjad al-‘Ulūm.13

B. Biography of al-Mātūrīdī

His name was Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd Abū Maṃṣūr al-Mātūrīdī.14 He was born in Mātūrīd or Māṭūrīt, a district of Samarqand.15 His noble lineage is connected to Abū ʿAyyūb Khālid ibn Zayd ibn Kūlyāb al-Anṣārī (d. 52/672), a companion of the prophet Muḥammad, from the clan of Khazraj in Medina, when Muḥammad stopped by his house in the course of the Hegira (migration) journey from Mecca to Medina. Al-Mātūrīdī’s date of birth is still in dispute among historians, although there is a consensus that al-Mātūrīdī died in 333/944 and was buried in Samarqand.16

To make a supposition about al-Mātūrīdī’s birth, we can relate it to the years when his teachers died. For instance, the death of Nuṣair ibn Yaḥyā al-Balkhī (d. 268/881) and Muḥammad ibn Muqāṭīl al-Rāzī (d. 248/862). After that, we can presume that al-Mātūrīdī most probably was born before 248/862. Therefore, if he was ten years old when he graduated from his elementary school and then directly studied with Muḥammad ibn Muqāṭīl al-Rāzī, he presumably was born in 238/852. If this presumption is true, it can be concluded that he lived to be almost

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14 Al-Qurashi, Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanafīyyah, vol. 1, p. 130.
92 years old. In addition, he was born in the reign of al-Mutawakkil (232-247 / 846-861) and was nine years old when al-Mutawakkil was assassinated in 248/862. 17

Therefore, al-Māturīdī was born twenty-two years before the birth of al-Ashʿarī (d. 330/941), who was born in 260/873, 18 although other information says that he was born in 270/883. 19 If the former option (260/873) is chosen, it can be said that al-Ashʿarī began to support Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah in 300/912, because he left his teacher, Abu Ṭālib Muḥammad al-Jubbālī (d. 303/915), and rejected the Muʿtazilah when he was 40 years old. 20 On the other hand, al-Māturīdī advocated Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah before 300/912.

Historians do not give details about how he got his education. It is told that he studied Islamic sciences, taking supervision from four Islamic scholars in the academic tradition of Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 150/767). They were Abū Bakr Ahmad al-Juzzi, Abū Naṣr Ahmad al-ʿIyādī, Muḥammad ibn Muqātil al-Rāzī (d. 248/802) and Nuṣayr ibn Yaḥyā al-Balkhī (d. 268/881).

Therefore, it is unmistakable to conclude that a Ḥanafite education was taken by al-Māturīdī. His teachers were scholars who made a great contribution to spreading the Ḥanafite school of thought in two territories governed by the authority of the Sāmānīte dynasty, namely, Transoxiana and Khurāsān. For this reason, it is understandable that al-Māturīdī leans towards the Ḥanafite, which at that time was the most prominent trend in society. Furthermore, he almost never travelled outside Transoxiana and Khurāsān to study. He learnt from Abū Naṣr Aḥmad al-ʿIyādī in Samarqand, as well as from Abū Bakr Ahmad al-Juzzi, Nuṣayr ibn Yaḥyā al-Balkhī and Muḥammad ibn Muqātil al-Rāzī in Khurāsān. Consequently, this refutes the assumption that al-Māturīdī has been influenced by al-Ashʿarī in constructing his theological

17 ʿAlī, ʿAǧādat al-Islām, p. 265.
18 Mūsā, Nashʿat al-Ashʿarīyyah, p. 165.
thoughts, notwithstanding the resemblances between them.21
The followers of al-Māturīḍī conferred on him many special titles to show their admiration. Some of his titles are Ḳānūn al-Hudā (the leader of guidance), Ṭabqāt Abī al-Sunnah wa al-Ṯibā'ī (the model of those who follow the tradition and guidance), Ṭabqāt Abī al-Sunnah wa al-Ṯamā'ī (the upholder of Sunnite banners), Qādī Aḥḥāl al-Fīṭrah wa al-Bidʿāb (the destroyer of deviant defamation and heresy), Ḳānūn al-Muḥadābān (the leader of theologians) and Muṣḥif ʿAqīdah al-Ṯābit (the corrector of Muslims’ beliefs).22 Those honorary degrees indicate the high academic position reached by al-Māturīḍī. However, there are some writers who call al-Māturīḍī The Second Great “Father” of Sunnite Theology23 or The Second Great Theologian of the Sunnite24 because he is ranked below al-Asqarī.

C. Al-Māturīḍī’s Qur’anic Exegesis

After examining al-Māturīḍī’s Qur’anic exegesis, it can be said that his exegesis has several characteristics or features. Here are the details.

First, there is the combination of ʿnaqlī (traditional) and ʿaqīlī (rational) sources. The ʿnaqlī source consists of the Qur’an, the traditions conveyed by the prophet or his companions, whereas the ʿaqīlī source stems from his thoughts (ijtiḥād). According to this fact, it is acceptable to say that al-Māturīḍī’s Qur’anic exegesis can be called ʿtafsīr bi al-ḥizāwī or the exegesis that amalgamates ʿtafsīr bi al-maʿthūr (traditional exegesis) with ʿtafsīr bi al-raʾy (rational exegesis). This labeling is based on the categories of exegesis given by Abdul Djalal25 because his classification is more comprehensive than the classification given by other writers.

24 Ibid., p. 207.
25 Abdul Djalal, Urgensi Tafsīr Mandhu’i Pada Masa Kini (Jakarta: Kalam Mulia, 1990), pp. 64-8.
such as al-Zarqānī,26 Amīr ‘Abd al-‘Azīz,27 and M. Quraish Shihab.28

Here is the example of his commentary with the assistance of Qura’nic verses themselves.

[\(\text{master of the day of judgment; QS. 1:4}.\]

The words “\(\text{yawm al-dīn}\)” in this verse mean the day of reckoning and repayment for all our deeds or the judgment day. In this regard, its meaning resembles the spirit of QS. 37:53 and QS. 24:25.

[\(\text{When we die and become dust and bones, shall we indeed receive rewards and punishments?; QS. 37:53}.\]

The same thing is done by al-Māturīdī when he interprets the verse:

[\(\text{On that day Allah will pay them back (all) their just dues; QS. 24:25}.\)]

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26 He classifies Qura’nic exegesis into \(\text{maḥmūd}\) (praiseworthy) and \(\text{mādhmūm}\) (blameworthy). See al-Zarqānī, \(\text{Manābil al-‘Irāfān}\), vol. 2, pp. 33-34.


28 Besides classifying Qura’nic exegesis into \(\text{tafṣīr bi al-ma‘thūr}\) and \(\text{tafṣīr bi al-ra‘y}\), he also quotes ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Farmawī’s categorization that classifies Qura’nic exegesis into \(\text{taḥṣīlāt}\) (analytical), \(\text{ijmā‘}\) (general), \(\text{muqārin}\) (comparative) and \(\text{mawdū‘}\) (thematic). See M. Quraish Shihab, \(\text{Membimikan Al-Qur’an}\) (Bandung: Mizan, 1999), pp. 83-86.

29 Al-Māturīdī, \(\text{Tawbīlāt Aḥl al-Sunnah}\), p. 14.
And remember We said: Enter this town, and eat of the plenty therein as ye wish; but enter the gate with humility, in posture and in words, and We shall forgive you your faults and increase (the portion of) those who do good; QS. 2:58.

Al-Māturīdī says that the meaning of addition or increase in the word sanāzād is “al-tawfīq bi’l-ihşān min ba’d (the success granted by Allah to perform goodness on the next day). This interpretation corresponds with the verse:

[Fā‘ama minal ‘Abbād wa-‘Atā‘i, wa-sā‘id bi’l-‘Abhsāni, qāsimuruhu. Lisārīn]

[So he who gives (in charity) and fears (Allah), and (in all sincerity) testifies to the best, We will indeed make smooth for him the path to bliss; QS. 92:5-7].

Besides getting assistance from the Qura’nic verses, al-Māturīdī was also assisted by the prophet tradition. The main feature noticed by everyone who reads Ta’wilat Abl al-Sunnah is that al-Māturīdī never mentions the transmission line of tradition (sanad) when he quotes the tradition. Al-Māturīdī usually uses specific terms such as mā ruwīya ‘an al-nabiyy (the tradition that transmitted from the prophet), mā ruwīya ‘an rasūl Allāh (the tradition that transmitted from the messenger of Allāh), kaqawlih salla Allāh ‘alayh wa sallam (for instance, the saying of Muhammad PBUH), li mā ruwīya fī al-khabar (like as transmitted in the tradition), mā jāa ‘an rasūl Allāh (the tradition that comes from the messenger of Allāh), dalīlah qawwub sallā Allāh ‘alayh wa sallam (its argument is the saying of Muhammad PBUH), wa fī ba’d al-akhbār (and in some traditions), mā jāa fī al-khabar (the argument that stated in the tradition) and dhukir fī al-khabar (said in the tradition).

Therefore, it is understandable if there are many questions about the reasons why al-Māturīdī does not mention any ascription of transmission line (sanad) in his commentary, although he surely knows that sanad is one of the important elements that should not be abandoned.

30 Ibid., p. 150.
31 Ibid., pp. 8, 9, 226, 322, 385, 417, 479, 526, and 634.
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in checking the reliability of tradition. Moreover, according to al-Dhahabî, the discarding of sanad, the customary practice among exegetes, has a negative effect on al-wad’ (falsifying tradition) in interpretation and creates many amalgamations between sahips (reliable tradition) and mawdû’ (counterfeit tradition). Furthermore, it also makes Isra‘iliyyât (the Judeo-Christian traditions and tales) spread out widely.32

Perhaps the question above cannot be answered exactly, except by al-Mâturîdî himself. However, it is tolerable if we make a presumption on his motivation. Presumably al-Mâturîdî intends to abandon the sanad because he does not want the attention of his commentary readers to be focused on the insignificant things and then not remember the most considerable ones. Besides, al-Mâturîdî surely has known that there were many Islamic scholars who had not only paid attention to the traditions of the prophet but also collected and written them in specific books, such as Abû ‘Abd Allâh Muhammad al-Bukhârî (d. 256/869) and Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjâj al-Nisâbûrî (d. 261/874), whose residence, namely, Bukhârâ and Nishapur, by coincidence is not far from Samarqand, the birthplace of al-Mâturîdî.

Here is an example of his commentary assisted by the tradition of the prophet.

\[\text{Divorced women shall wait concerning themselves for three monthly periods; QS.2:228.}\]

The words “thalâthab qur‘î” above, according to al-Mâturîdî’s interpretation, are similar to thalâthab hayd (three periods of menstruation). Even though it also can be interpreted as thalâthab atbar (three periods of cleanness), but the appropriate meaning is thalâthab hayd because this meaning is the same as mentioned in the tradition that the prophet Muhammad PBUH said, “The waiting period for a slave widow is two periods of menstruation”. Two periods of menstruation in that tradition are a part of the waiting period for a free widow. Hence, the proper

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interpretation for this verse is three periods of menstruation.\textsuperscript{33}

He also supports his commentary with the tradition when he explains the following verse:

\[\text{
الَّذِيَ اذْهَبَ مَرَّتَانَ فَإِلَّا مَسَّاكَ بِعَرَوْفٍ أَوْ تَسْرِيحٍ بِإِحْسَانٍ}\\
\]

\[\text{[A divorce is only permissible twice; after that, the parties should either hold together on equitable terms, or separate with kindness; QS. 2:229].}\]

According to his point of view, the words “\textit{tasrīḥ bi-ihṣān)” (separate with kindness) in that verse can be interpreted with “\textit{taťlīqah thalithah)” (the third divorce) based on the saying of prophet Muḥammad: \textit{huwa al-taťlīqah al-thalithah} (it is the third divorce).\textsuperscript{34}

In addition to the tradition, al-Māturīdī also refers to the statements of the prophet’s companions. One of those companions, whose statements were frequently quoted by al-Māturīdī, is ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbaṣ (d. 68/687). For example, when al-Māturīdī interprets the following verse.

\[\text{
الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ}\\
\]

\[\text{[Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds; QS. 1:2].}\]

The words \textit{al-ḥamd li-Allāh} (praise be to Allah) cannot be only interpreted as Allah praising Himself to show His right of admiration in front of all His creatures, but also can be interpreted that Allah orders, “\textit{Say: Praise be to Allah!}” Because the word \textit{al-ḥamd} is attributed to Allah, it contains implicitly the obligation for us to express gratitude to Allah, the Almighty. ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās says that \textit{al-ḥamd li-Allāh} means \textit{al-shukr li-Allāh bi ma sāna’ ila khalqih} (all gratitudes are to Allah for His


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bestowal to His creatures). Besides, the command to express gratitude can be found in the tradition that talks about how the prophet expressed his gratitude by doing the prayer thoroughly until the soles of his feet became puffy. Therefore, those who submit and obey Allah’s orders are akin to those who express gratitude to Allah.35

The other companions and followers whose viewpoints and outlooks are also alluded to by al-Māturīdī are Abū Bakr (d. 13/634),36 ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/643),37 ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān (d. 35/655),38 ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/660),39 ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd (d. 32/652),40 Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘ārī (d. 44/664),41 ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar (d. 73/692),42 Ubayy ibn Ka‘b (d. 31/651),43 ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr (d. 73/692),44 Abū Hurayrah (d. 59/678),45 Ḥasan ibn ‘Ali (d. 50/670),46 Ḥāfṣah binti Abī Bakr (d. 58/677),47 Ḥāfṣah binti ‘Umar (d. 45/665),48 Anas ibn Mālik (d. 93/711),49 al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728),50 Qatādah ibn Di‘āmah (d. 117/735)51 and so on.

When al-Māturīdī interprets the Qur’an, he often mentions various viewpoints, sometimes over ten viewpoints,52 regardless of whether their

35 Ibid., pp. 7-9;
36 Ibid., p. 450.
37 Ibid., p. 213.
38 Ibid., pp. 488-9.
39 Ibid., p. 412.
40 Ibid., pp. 155 and 398.
41 Ibid., p. 439.
42 Ibid., p. 245.
43 Ibid., p. 374.
44 Ibid., p. 404.
46 Ibid., p. 563.
48 Ibid., p. 302.
49 Ibid., p. 370.
50 Ibid., pp. 79-80.
51 Ibid., pp. 99-100.
52 See his commentary on the meaning of [ٍأُلُمُ] in QS. 2: 1. Ibid., pp. 33-36.
opinions are similar or dissimilar to his opinion. Presumably, this attitude stems from his standpoint that the meanings of the terms *tafsîr* and *ta'wil* are not the same. *Tafsîr*, he argues, is the effort to define the meaning of Qur’anic verses precisely, whereas *ta'wil* is only the effort to pick out one of many alternative meanings without defining exactly which one is the truest meaning. Relying on this sharp differentiation, we can understand why al-Mâturîdî deliberately entitles his work *Ta’wilat Ahl al-Sunnah* or *Ta’wilat al-Qur’ân*, not *Tafsîr Ahl al-Sunnah* or *Tafsîr al-Qur’ân.*

Consequently, as said by al-Mâturîdî, every word in the Qur’an has many probable meanings whose truth are tentative and uncertain because no one knows the truest meaning of the Quranic verses, except Allah, the Omniscient. Therefore, al-Mâturîdî often closes his quotations with the following statements: *wa bi Allâh al-tawfîq* (and the assistance is from Allah), *wa Allâh musta’ân* (and Allah is the only One whose help is sought), *wa là quwwah illâ bi Allâh* (and there is no power, except from Allah), *wa Allâh a’lam* (and Allah is the Omniscient), *wa Allâh a’lam bi mâ arâd* (and Allah is the Omniscient on its meaning), *wa bi Allâh al-mu’âlnah wa al-’îsmah* (and both the assistance and protection are from Allah), *wa Allâh al-muwa’îfîq* (And Allah is the helper) and *wa bi Allâh al-’îsmah* (and the protection is from Allah).

Al-Mâturîdî is usually critical towards dissimilar opinions and views. Sometimes he follows the truest view, but sometimes he rejects the most false view, depending on his best analysis.

Besides basing his interpretations on the Qur’an, the traditions and the sayings of companions and followers, al-Mâturîdî also bases his interpretations on his own thoughts (*ijtihâd*). For example, there is his commentary on the meaning of “*al-ḥayy al-qayyûm*” in the following verse.

\[
\text{Allah! There is no god but He, the Living, the Self-subsisting, Eternal; QS. 2:255}.
\]

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The word “al-ḥayy” means that Allah is the Living. He will never die, He is different from His creations who cannot avoid death. The person who really lives (fulān ḥayy) is the one who has both glory and esteem. In this sense, the earth of Allah is called ḥayyah because it is not static, but always dynamic, fertile and productive. It yields bountiful crops and harvests, hence it has a high position and rank in the sight of all creatures. Therefore, Allah is worthy of His title “al-ḥayy” because of his great honor.

Whereas, Allah was called al-qayyūm (the Self-subsisting and the Everlasting) because He will never forget or overlook anything and there is nothing that can free itself from the stare of Allah. In this respect, it is similar to the Arabic sentence “fulān qa’im ‘ala marr fulān” which means somebody who always stares at another person in all of his matters.55

Second, al-Māturīdī is not an interpreter who uses excessive grammatical analysis to interpret the Qura’nic verses. His linguistic scrutiny is not disproportionate because it corresponds to the necessity required to utilize grammatical analysis without excessiveness. Besides, he also almost never bases his argumentation on the poems that are usually used in grammatical analysis. Perhaps, the main purpose of his attitude is to prove to the readers that such grammatical exegesis is acceptable for interpreting the Qura’nic verses. The following verses are examples.

And behold, We said to the angels: “Bow down to Adam!” and they bowed down, not so Iblis. he refused and was haughty, he was of those who reject faith; QS. 2:34.

The composition “fa-sajadū illā iblīs” which is not arranged with istithnā’ (the exception) from mustathnā minh (the word that is used as the source of exception) is tolerable from a syntactical viewpoint. This is similar to the sentence “The citizens of Kufa enter this house except the man from Medina”. Consequently, God’s command to bow down

55 Ibid., pp. 587-8.
to Adam is not only aimed for all angels and but also for Iblis, the Satan.56

\[\text{The parable of those who reject faith is as if one were to shout like a goat-herd, to things that listen to nothing but calls and cries; deaf, dumb, and blind, they are void of wisdom;}\text{ QS. 2:171}.\]

Al-Māturīdī says that the word \textit{yan’iq} has two meanings, i.e. \textit{[1] yashūṭ} (to call( and \textit{[2] yun’aq} (to be called) because the active form (\textit{fa’īl}) in this verse means the passive form (\textit{maf’ūl}). This grammatical case is similar to the meaning of ‘\textit{‘ayshah rādiyyah} or ‘\textit{‘ayshah mardīyyah} which means pleasant life.57

\[\text{And well ye knew those amongst you who transgressed in the matter of the Sabbath; We said to them: “Be ye apes, and rejected.” QS. 2:65}.\]

Al-Māturīdī explains that although the word \textit{khaṣī’} (despised) means \textit{ṣāgīr} (trifle), \textit{dbālī} (humble) and \textit{ba’īd} (distant), its meanings actually refer to the same connotation, i.e. despicable or contemptible.58

\textbf{Third}, al-Māturīdī sometimes presents many styles of \textit{qira’ah} (recitation of the Qur’an) at a glance and without thorough explanation. He also does not assess the category of each \textit{qira’ah}. Besides, he rarely mentions the people who are considered as the sources of \textit{qira’ah}. Among of them are ‘\textbf{Abd Allāh} ibn Mas’ūd (d. 32/652), ‘\textbf{Abd Allāh} ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687), Ubayy ibn Ka’b (d. 31/651), al-\textbf{Ḥasan} al-\textbf{Baṣrī} (d. 110/728) and Muqāṭil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767). Here is an example of his interpretation.

57 \textit{Ibid.}, p. 320.
58 \textit{Ibid.}, p. 164.
The word “fūm” in the verse above can be understood as “ibūm” (garlic) because ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd reads “wa fūmīhā” with “wa thūmīhā”. Besides, it also can be interpreted as “burr” (wheat).59 We can read another example of al-Māturīdī’s commentary of the following verses.

فَإِنْ أَمَنُواْ يَمْثِلُ مَا ءَامَنَ مِنْهُ، فَقَدْ أَهْتَدَوْاْ وَإِنْ تُوْلَءْ فَإِنَّمَا هُمْ فِي شَقَايِ فَسِيْكَتِكْفِيْحُهُمُ اللَّهُ وَهُوَ الْمُتَقَدِّمُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ

[So if they believe and ye believe, they are indeed on the right path; but if they turn back, it is they who are in schism; but Allah will suffice thee as against them, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing; QS. 2:137].

Al-Māturīdī says that ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās and ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd recite “fa in āmanū bi-mithl mā āmantum bib” with “fa in āmanū bi’l-ladbi āmantum bib”. Hence, it is acceptable if the verse laytha kamithlih shay’ (QS. 42:11) is recited as laytha mitbīl shay’ because the letter “ka” is regarded as za‘īdah (additional letter).60

كانَ النَّاسُ أَمَّةٌ وَحِيدَةٌ فَعَبَتَ اللَّهُ الْنِّسَائِ ٌ مُّشَرِّبَاتٌ وَمُدْرَبٌ

وَاتَّلَّ مَعَهُمُ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ لِيَحْكُمَ بَيْنَ النَّاسِ فِيْهَا أَخْتَلِفَوْاْ

[So beseech thy Lord for us to produce for us of what the earth groweth its potherbs, and cucumbers, its garlic, lentils and onions; QS. 2:61].


Mankind was one single nation, and Allah sent messengers with glad tidings and warnings; and with them He sent the Book in truth, to judge between people in matters wherein they differed; QS. 2:213.

Al-Māṭūrīḍī explains that the word liyahkum in this verse can also be recited as litahkum, hence Muḥammad will be the person who judges between people in their matters. But if we recite it with liyahkum, it is more appropriate with the verse:

And before this, was the Book of Moses as a guide and a mercy; and this Book confirms (it) in the Arabic tongue; to admonish the unjust, and as glad tidings to those who do right; QS. 46:12. ⁶¹

Fourth, al-Māṭūrīḍī can be categorized as a cautious exegete who seldom uses Isrā‘īliyyāt (the Judeo-Christian traditions and tales) ⁶² to interpret the Qura‘nic verses. When he deals with the verses that contain the ancient and old stories, such as the stories of messengers, he occasionally mentions those stories based on several sources, but at the end of his quotations he often declares his hesitation about the truth of them. Hence, he does not believe in their accuracy because of their uncertainties.

Moreover, al-Māṭūrīḍī always says that the desire to know those stories in more detail is an exaggerated viewpoint and unusable attitude that should not be adopted by the interpreter. In his opinion, the appearance of such sketchy stories in the Qur‘ān actually can become evidence to show clearly that the words of God given to Muḥammad are truthfully the revelation of Allah. Indeed, Muḥammad definitely could not know anything about all of these stories mentioned in the Old Testament and the Gospel, if he did not receive true guidance and revelation from Allah.

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⁶¹ Ibid., p. 441. Al-Ṭabari doesn’t mention this recitation, but he mentions another recitation, i.e. “fi ma ikhtalafu fi ‘anh” is recited by Ibn Mas‘ūd with “fi ma ikhtalafu ‘anh”. See al-Ṭabari, Jāmi‘ al-Bayān, vol. 2, 349.
The following verses elucidate and support al-Māturīdī’s point of view. Al-Māturīdī confirms his attitude towards Isra‘īliyya‘ by interpreting the verse:

وَقُلْنَا يَتَقَادَمُ أَسْكُنَ أَنَّ وَزُوُجُكَ أَجْحَةٌ وَكَلِامُكَا رَغَدًا حِيْثُ َشَنَّمَا وَلَا تَقْرَبُوهَا هَذِهِ ِمِنِّ الشَّجَرَةِ فَتَكُونَا مِنْ أَطَالُهٖنَ

[We said: “O Adam! Dwell thou and thy wife in the garden; and eat of the bountiful things therein as (where and when) ye will; but approach not this tree, or ye run into harm and transgression.” QS. 2:35].

According to al-Māturīdī, the real meaning and essence of jannah (garden) and shajarah (tree) are unknown and we do not have to know them precisely.63 A similar attitude is also seen when al-Māturīdī explains the verse:

فَنَذَاكَ يُحْيِي الَّذِي أَمْتَأَوَّلَ وَتَرِيَّكُمْ َءَابَيْتِهِ مَعَكُمْ تَعَلَّمُونَ

[So We said: “Strike the (body) with a piece of the (heifer).” Thus Allah bringeth the dead to life and showeth you His signs; perchance ye may understand; QS. 2:73].

After talking about several commentaries that interpret the meaning of “ba’diha” (a piece of it) to be the right thigh, al-Māturīdī utters what is obviously the truth, that those interpretations cannot be validated exactly. The factual information that should be taken is only from the Qura’nic verse above, although it seems to be very pithy and asserted in brief.64

62 According to the number of Isra‘īliyya‘ tales that mentioned in the exegesis, there are two groups of exegetes, namely, [1] the exegetes who mention Isra‘īliyya‘ a lot, such as Muḥammad ibn Ja‘rī al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), and [2] the exegetes who almost never mention Isra‘īliyya‘, such as al-Ḥāfīẓ Ismā‘īl ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1372). See Abd al-Wahhāb Fāyḍ, Manḥaj Ibn ‘Atṭiyyah fi Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm (Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Āmmah li-Shu‘ūn al-Maṭābi’ al-Amīriyyah, 1973), p. 181.

63 Ibid., p. 104.

64 Ibid., p. 170.
Fifth, in relation to the study in his *Ta’wilāt Ahl al-Sunnah* and *Kitāb Tawhīd*, it can be concluded that al-Māturīḍī is not just a theologian, but also an exegete who prefers *tawassŭt* (nonaligned and independent standpoint) in dealing with many different viewpoints among theologians. Hence, this neutral attitude categorizes the Māturīḍites as a moderate Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah school of thought. Although this position looks like the Ashʿarites, another group of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah, in fact there are several minor differences between the Māturīḍites and the Ashʿarites that do not belong to the main theological problems.\(^65\)

For instance, the Muʿtazilites believe that Allah does not have any attributes such as *‘ilm* (knowledge), *qudrah* (power), *samʿ* (listen), *baṣar* (seeing), *ḥayāh* (life), *baqāʾ* (eternity) and *iraḍah* (wish). On the contrary, the Ḥashwites believe that Allah really has those attributes as well as His creatures. On the other hand, the Ashʿarites believe that Allah has those attributes, but His attributes differ from those of His creatures.\(^66\) Like the Ashʿarites, al-Māturīḍī conveys his point of view that Allah surely has the attributes which are not similar to the attributes of His creatures because Allah has declared that nothing is like Him (*Laytha ka mithlih shay‘*).\(^67\)

The Ḥashwites say that Allah will be seen on the resurrection day just as we see His mankind. The Muʿtazilites and the Jahmites have faith in the impossibility of seeing Allah on the judgment day. Then al-Māturīḍī and the Ashʿarites state that we will see Allah on the judgment day, but we do not know exactly the real nature of how we will see Allah. Al-Māturīḍī argues that Allah must have forbidden Moses and his adherents when they proposed to see Allah, or Muḥammad must have prohibited his companions when they asked about *ruʿyah* (seeing) Allah.\(^68\)

Both are examples of his moderate standpoint toward the distinctions of theological views. Probably, whoever wants to know more details about his views should read his *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* which specifically

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\(^65\) See the preface of *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, pp. 11-3.


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explains a lot about many theological problems. In addition to his work, we also can read two comprehensive dissertations, ‘Aqidat al-Islam wa al-Imam al-Maturidi (the Belief of Islam and al-Imam al-Maturidi) by Ayyub ‘Ali and Imam Abl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah: Abu Mansur al-Maturidi wa Ar’ah al-Kalamiyyah (the Leader of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah: al-Imam al-Maturidi and his theological views) by al-Maghribi.

Sixth, al-Maturidi tends to follow the Hanafite school of thought in dealing with the jurisprudential Qura’nic verses. This tendency is apparent when his legal views are compared with the views of Hanafite followers, such as Abu Bakr Ahmad al-Razi al-Jassas (d. 370/981). This comparison shows that there are many similarities between their jurisprudential thoughts, despite the fact that Ahkam al-Qur’an has a broader scope than Ta’wilat Abl al-Sunnah in discussing the jurisprudential problems. Perhaps al-Maturidi’s inclination relates to his academic training in the tradition of Abu Hanifah (d. 150/767), as depicted previously.

By basing arguments on fairly similar sources, al-Maturidi and the Hanafite scholars assert the following claims. The words “bismillah al-rahanman al-rahim” are regarded as a Qura’nic verse, but they are not part of al-Fatiha, and so, performing prayer without the recitation of al-Fatiha does not break the prayer and the prayer is still legitimate. The sorcerer who refuses to apologize for his sins is classified an infidel and can be killed because he is considered an apostate from Islam. Performing sa’i (running between the hills of Asa and al-Marwah) and tawaf (circumambulation of the Ka’bah seven times) is an obligation for pilgrims, although they are not essential principles of pilgrimage. Therefore, it must be changed with dam (fine) if it is not done. Performing ’umrah (pilgrimage to Mecca that is not during the pilgrimage season by omitting some of the ritual, e.g. the visit to the fields of Arafah) is favorable (sunnah). Performing ihram (consecration for use in the pilgrimage) before the months of pilgrimage come is allowable,

but it is unfavorable (makrüh).⁷⁴

Seventh, al-Māturīḍī has an independent and brave standpoint when he interprets the Qur’anic verses. This standpoint is that he applies asbāb al-nuzūl (the causes of revelation) loosely and slackly. Hence, he utilizes the situations and phenomena surrounding revelation, including the context and factual circumstances in which each verse was revealed, proportionately and does not ignore them. He takes into account the principle “al-‘ibrah bi ‘umūm al-lafz lā bi khusūṣ al-sabab” (the focused concern is the general statement and not the specific cause). The following verses are examples.

[When ye divorce women, and they fulfil the term of their ‘iddah, do not prevent them from marrying their (former) husbands, if they mutually agree on equitable terms; QS. 2: 232].

Talking about the sentence “fa la ta’dulubunn an yankihUna azwajabunn” (do not prevent them from marrying their former husbands), al-Māturīḍī says that this verse explicitly explains to us to not disallow divorced women from marrying both their former husbands and new husbands, regardless of the fact that its revelation was specifically related to the sister of Ma’qil ibn al-Muzānī who had been divorced by her husband. After her iddah (legally prescribed period of waiting during which a woman may not remarry after being widowed or divorced) had ended, her former husband wanted to marry her again, but her family prohibited this. Hence, this verse was finally revealed.⁷⁵

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⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 514. This occurrence is mentioned in the prophet traditions such as by al-Bukhārī:

حَثَّنَا عَبِيدُ اللَّهِ بِنِ سُعِيدٍ حَثَّنَا أَبُو عَامِرٍ العَقَدِي حَثَّنَا عَبْدُ بَنِ رَاشِدٍ حَثَّنَا الْحَسَنٌ قَالَ حَثَّنَا مَعِيْلٌ بَنِ يِسَارٍ قَالَ كَانَتْ لَهَا تَخْطِبٌ إِلَى وَقَالَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ قَالَ يُونُسُ قَالَ الْحَسَنٌ قَالَ كَانَتْ مَعِيْلٌ بَنِ يِسَارٍ قَالَ حَثَّنَا أَبُو الْوَارِثِ حَثَّنَا يُونُسُ قَالَ الْحَسَنٌ قَالَ مَعِيْلٌ بَنِ يِسَارٍ قَالَ حَثَّنَا زَوْجَهَا قَالَ فَكَرَكَهَا حَتِّي انتَفَضَتْ عَدَتُهَا فَخْطَبَهَا فَأَبَى مَعِيْلٌ فَنَزَلَتْ فَلا تَعْضُلُونَهُ أَنْ يَنْكَحَنَ أَزَوَاجِهَنَّ.

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[It is no virtue if ye enter your houses from the back; it is virtue if ye fear Allah. Enter houses through the proper doors; and fear Allah, that ye may prosper; QS. 2:189].

Al-Māturīdī states that Arabs usually went home after accomplishing *ibram* (consecration for use in the pilgrimage) and did not enter their houses through the appropriate doors, but from the back. But some say that Arabs customarily prefer to enter their houses through the back doors because they do not want to be unsuccessful again after doing their activities fruitlessly. Therefore, righteousness is by performing devotion, submission, obedience to Allah and by entering houses through the proper doors. Besides, this verse can be interpreted as *tamthīl* (exemplification or likening) and *ramz* (allegory), not by its literal meaning. This verse is similar to the verses:

وَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ رَسُولُ مُنْبِئًا مِّنْ عَنْبِ اللَّهِ مُصْدِقًا لَا يَعْلَمُ كُلُّ فَرِيقٍ مِّنَ الْيَهُودِ أُوْتِيَ الْكِتَابُ صَيْحَتُ اللَّهِ وَزَائَرُهُمْ نَبِيُّهُمْ أَلَمْ يَعْلَمُوا

[And when there came to them a messenger from Allah, confirming what was with them, a party of the people of the Book threw away the Book of Allah behind their backs. As if (it had been something) they did not know!; QS. 2:101].

وَإِذْ أَحَدَ اللَّهُ مُبِينَ عَلَيْهِ أُوْتِيَ الْكِتَابُ لِتُبَيَّنَهُ لِلنَّاسِ وَلَا تَكْتُمَنَّهُ فَتَبَيَّنَوْهُ وَأَشْتَرَوْاْ بِهِ مَثَانَ قَلِيلًا فَيُبَيِّنُهُ

[And remember Allah took a covenant from the people of the Book, to make it
The meaning of nabadha (to throw) in these verses can be understood without using its literal meaning because its actual meaning is that the people of the Book disregarded and paid no attention to the Book of Allah. Hence, real piety is not obtained by disobeying the teachings of Muḥammad, but by following his teachings.\[^{76}\]

D. Concluding Remarks

In accordance with the elucidation above, we can conclude that there are seven obvious characteristics or features of Taʿwīlāt Abl al-Sunnah, which was written by al-Māturīdī, who lived around the time of Muḥammad ibn Jaʿīr al-Ṭabari (d. 310/923), a famous Muslim historian and exegete.

These characteristics are the following. [1] Al-Māturīdī brings together naqūl (traditional) and ‘aqli (rational) sources. The naqūl sources consist of the Qur’ān and the tradition conveyed by the prophet or his companions, whereas the ‘aqli source stems from his thoughts. Thus, it is justifiable to say that al-Māturīdī’s Qur’ānic exegesis can be called taṣfīr bi al-izdiwāj or the exegesis that amalgamates taṣfīr bi al-ma‘thūr (traditional exegesis) with taṣfīr bi al-raʿy (rational exegesis). [2] Al-Māturīdī is not an interpreter who uses excessive grammatical analysis to interpret the Qur’ānic verses. His linguistic scrutiny is not disproportionate because it corresponds to the necessity required to utilize grammatical analysis without excessiveness. [3] Al-Māturīdī sometimes presents many styles of qirāʿab (recitation of the Qur’ān) at a glance and without thorough explanation. He also does not assess the category of each qirāʿab. Besides, he rarely mentions the people who are considered as the sources of qirāʿab. [4] Al-Māturīdī can be categorized as a cautious exegete who seldom uses Israʿīliyyāt (the Judeo-Christian traditions and tales) to interpret the Qur’ānic verses. [5] Al-Māturīdī is not just a theologian, but also an exegete who prefers tawassut (nonaligned and independent standpoint) in dealing with the many different viewpoints.

\[^{76}\] Ibid., pp. 388-9.
among theologians. [6] Al-Māturīdī tends to follow the Ḥanafite school of thought when he deals with the jurisprudential Qura’nic verses. This tendency appears most clearly when his legal views are compared with the views of Hanafite followers, such as Abū Bakr ʿAḥmad al-Rāzī al-Jaṣṣāṣ. [7] Al-Māturīdī has an independent and brave standpoint when he interprets the Qura’nic verses. That standpoint is that he applies ʿashāb al-nuzūl (the causes of revelation) loosely and slackly. Hence, he utilizes the context and factual circumstances in which each verse was revealed.

At last, those seven characteristics undoubtedly can demonstrate the competency and proficiency of al-Māturīdī in Qura’nic exegesis. Therefore, after discussing this reasonable fact, it is right to conclude that al-Māturīdī is not only a foremost theologian, but also a skillful and dexterous exegete. In line with this assessment, it will be wise for us to suggest to all writers on Qura’nic interpretation to acknowledge al-Māturīdī’s expertise and to cite his considerable methodology in their works, especially when they explain the early Sunnite exegetes. Besides, it will be more useful, perhaps, if we can broaden our study on the reliability of traditions that are mentioned in Taʾwīlāt Abl al-Sunnah.
The Methodology of al-Māturīdī’s Qur’anic Exegesis

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