

Qur'anic Ta'wīl: Comparing the Views of Ibn 'Arabī and 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī

In this article, Shaykh Hamid Raza Fazil explores two central issues regarding the Qur'an: how do we understand the words of the Qur'an? And how do those words point us towards the ultimate goal of the Qur'an, the ethical and metaphysical realities that underlie and compose our existence? Shaykh Fazil explores these questions through the views of two major Qur'anic mufassirs in Islamic history: the 6th-century mystic, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, and the 20th-century mufassir and philosopher-sage, 'Allāmah Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī.

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Introduction

God Almighty says: "It is He who sent down upon thee the Book, wherein are verses clear that are the Essence of the Book, and others ambiguous. As for those in whose hearts is swerving, they follow the ambiguous part, desiring dissension, and desiring its interpretation; and none knows its interpretation, save only God. And those firmly rooted in knowledge say, 'We believe in it; all is from our Lord'; yet none remembers, but men possessed of minds."((Qur'an, Āl 'Imrān (3):5.))

In this brief article, we will explore the reality of *ta'wīl*, a Qur'anic concept about which there is significant disagreement among scholars. First, however, the difference between the related terms *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* needs to be clarified. Although some scholars consider these two terms to be the same, and have in fact themselves engaged more in *ta'wīl* instead of *tafsīr*, more precise scholars (*muḥaqqiqūn*) affirm a difference between the two.

Tafsīr

Dictionaries define *tafsīr* in the following way: (1) to discuss and explain something (*fassara al-bayān*); (2) to lift a veil (*kashf al-qinā'*); and (3) to lift a veil from the face of someone (*kashf al-mughatṭā*).((*Lisān al-'Arab*, s.v. "f-s-r."))In its technical usage, *tafsīr* refers to "the meaning of Qur'anic verses, and the discovering what is intended by them and what they are referring to." (*Wa-huwa bayānu ma'ānī al-ayāt al-qur'āniyyah wa-l-kashf 'an maqāṣidiha wa-madālīliha*)((*Tafsīr al-Mizān*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-A'lamī li-l-Maṭbū'āt, 1390 S.H.), p.4.))In other words, to discuss the meaning of the Quranic verses and to lift veils from its hidden purport (*madlūlāt*) is called *tafsīr*. Therefore, translation pertains to the outward meaning, whereas *tafsīr* deals with a veiled meaning.

Ta'wīl

Dictionaries define it as, “to return a thing [to its origin],” (*al-awl: al-rujū‘—awwala illayh al-shay’—raja’ahu*).((*Lisān al-‘Arab*, s.v. “a-w-l.”))From this general meaning, our discussion pertains specifically to *ta’wīl* of Qur’anic verses. Well-known exegetes and religious scholars explain its technical meaning as any act or statement taken to its finality and end. For example, if a verse has various meanings, the one that becomes the final meaning will be called its *ta’wīl*. Similarly, if a person carries out an act without clarity about its final goal and only determines its goal afterwards, it will be called *ta’wīl*.

Examples include: (1) the story of Moses (‘a) and Khidr (‘a), where, Khidr (‘a) carried out some acts in Moses’s company—acts whose goal was unclear, and faced objections from Moses (‘a). In the end, Khidr (‘a) explained his objectives, namely, that the reason for boring a hole in the boat was to protect it from an unjust and oppressive ruler. He said, “As for the ship, it belonged to certain poor men, who toiled upon the sea; and I desired to damage it, for behind them there was a king who was seizing every ship by brute force.” (Qur’an, *al-Kahf* (18):79.). (2) If a person sees a dream, and its meaning is unclear, then it is called *ta’wīl*. For example, when Joseph (‘a) saw a dream and found it occurring in the outside world (*khārij*), he said, “‘See, father,’ he said, ‘this is the interpretation of my vision of long ago; my Lord has made it true.’”((Qur’an, *Yūsuf* (12):100.))

Similarly if there are specific meanings and secrets hidden in the speech of the speaker that constitute his or her final goal and objective, they are called *ta’wīl*. This is the same meaning of *ta’wīl* that the Qur’an refers to, namely the deeper meanings of God’s words and their final aims which are disclosed to the human person.

Ta’wīl According to Ibn ‘Arabī

In Ibn ‘Arabī’s view, *ta’wīl* can be of two types:

2. *Blameworthy*: When theologians and philosophers attempt to explain away the outward aspects of a verse when it appears contradictory to reason. This is blameworthy *ta’wīl* because they employ their deficient reason to explain the verse.
4. *Praiseworthy*: The way of the folk of Allah and the gnostics (‘*urafā’*’), which he also names a “sign” (*ishārah*). Gnostics employ their unveiling (*kashf*) and witnessing (*shuhūd*) to understand Qur’anic verses; the hidden meaning (*ma‘ānī bāṭiniyyah*) that is bestowed to them by Allah, the Most Exalted, through inspiration is called *ta’wīl*. For Ibn ‘Arabī, it is this *ta’wīl* that is praiseworthy.

The first type of *ta’wīl* is the way of the theologians and philosophers. Ibn ‘Arabī does not deem it valid. Attempting to avoid the term “people of *ta’wīl*” (*ahl al-ta’wīl*) for himself, he instead calls them [i.e., theologians and philosophers] the people of *ta’wīl*. [That said], he ascribes the particular *ta’wīl* to

gnostics, referring to the verse, “[A]nd none knows its interpretation (*ta’wīl*), save only God. And those firmly rooted in knowledge say, ‘We believe in it; all is from our Lord’; yet none remembers, but men possessed of minds.” ((Qur’an, *Āl ‘Imrān* (3):7.))

For Ibn ‘Arabī, “those firmly rooted in knowledge” are the gnostics, because human thinking does not intervene in their teachings. He also calls them “people of signs.” In his view, just as the descent of the Qur’an is from God, the Most Exalted, similarly, the understanding of the Qur’an also descends from God, the Most Exalted, upon the hearts of the believers. Hence understanding also comes from God. However, the text of the Qur’an is not limited by these esoteric meanings. Rather, new meanings are always found. ((Muḥyi al-Dīn ibn al-‘Arabī, “Ma‘rifat al-Ishārāt,” in *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, vol. 10 (n.p., n.d.), p. 279. See also, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Falsafat al-Ta’wīl* (al-Markaz al-Thiqāfī al-‘Arabī, 2014), p. 267-8.))

Ta’wīl According to ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī

‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī, in his book, *Tafsīr al-Mizān*, mentions the following regarding the reality behind *ta’wīl*:

الحق في تفسير التأويل أنه الحقيقة الواقعية التي
تستند إليها البينات القرآنية من حكم أو موعظة أو
حكمة... وأنه ليس من قبيل المفاهيم المدلول
عليها بالافاظ

The reality behind explaining the *ta’wīl* (*tafsīr al-ta’wīl*), is that it is true (extra-mental) reality, and the Qur’anic verses, whether those that convey Islamic laws, exhortations, or some intellectual wisdom, all are based and sourced in that reality...this reality is not a purely conceptual one that can be referred to by words. ((*al-Mizān*, vol. 3, p. 49.))

المراد بتأويل الآية ليس مفهوما من المفاهيم تدل
عليه الآية...بل هو من قبيل الأمور الخارجية...

What is meant by the *ta’wīl* of a verse is not a type of concept that can be completely indicated by or contained within that verse...rather it is of a type

that refers to an external reality.((*al-Mīzān*, vol. 3, p. 46-7.))

وتأويل القرآن هو المأخوذ الذي يأخذ منه معارفه

The *ta'wīl* of the Qur'an is derived. From it, in turn, is derived profound understanding and knowledge.((*al-Mīzān*, vol. 3, p. 23.))

For 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *ta'wīl* is not a question of words and meaning, but instead refers to an objective reality. Words, after all, provide signification (*dalālah*) to bring the mind closer to this reality. But it is not possible for words to encompass and exhaust that reality's scope. Words only indicate. The reality of the Qur'an is contained in the protected tablet (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*), which is with us in the form of words in the book. These words and their meanings are not *ta'wīl*; rather *ta'wīl* is that true objective reality from which all knowledge/gnosis, Qur'anic prescriptions, injunctions, and wisdom draw their life. The words of the Qur'an are reflections of this reality, which is the esoteric Qur'an; access to this reality and *ta'wīl* is for God, the Most Exalted, and the Pure Infallibles.

Who are these Infallibles? Allah has mentioned them in *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*: "People of the House, God only desires to put away from you abomination and to cleanse you." Therefore, only *Ahl al-Bayt* can carry out the *ta'wīl* of the Qur'an. It is this meaning of *ta'wīl* that helps us understand the Qur'anic verse, "All that is wet and dry is within the Qur'an,"((Qur'an, *al-An'ām* (6):59. "Not a grain in the earth's shadows, not a thing, fresh or withered, but it is in a Book Manifest.))and that is possible only when we place the *Ahl al-Bayt* alongside the Qur'an. It is so because according to the Qur'an and hadith-reports the Noble Prophet (ﷺ) and his *Ahl al-Bayt* are the only Holy Beings (*dhawāt muqaddasah*) that have access to the Qur'an. This also clarifies those *aḥādīth* that declare, "Without us, the *Ahl al-Bayt*, you cannot understand the Qur'an."((Comparable *aḥādīth* include the following hadith from Imam al-Bāqir ('a): "Only a liar will claim to have collected the entire Qur'an as it was revealed [other than the *Ahl al-Bayt*.] None have compiled, memorized, and preserved [the Qur'an] exactly as Allah revealed except for 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the Imams after him." (Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, 1407), hadith #1, p. 228) And: "...only he who is addressed by the Qur'an truly knows it." (Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, vol 8, hadith #485, p. 311.) For more such *aḥādīth*, see Muḥsin al-Fayḍ al-Kāshānī, "[Towards the Sacred Text: The Importance and Value of the Qur'an in the Life of a Believer](#)," translated by Azhar Sheraze.))Therefore, *Ahl al-Bayt* are needed in every era to understand the Qur'an. The reality of the Shi'i interpretive tradition is also made clear through this meaning of *ta'wīl*. They claim that they derive religion and its teachings from *Ahl al-Bayt*. No companion of the Prophet, other than the *Ahl al-Bayt*, has claimed a special access to the true reality of the Qur'an. This claim is only made in the Shi'i tradition, whose source is the teachings of *Ahl al-Bayt*.

Synthesis and Conclusions

There are three stages to understanding the Qur'an: (a) *tarjamah* (translation), relating to the outward words and their meaning; (b) *tafsīr*, explaining the meanings of the verses; and (c) *ta'wīl*, about which

three views have been presented. They are:

2. The popular view, that some meanings of [particular Qur'anic] words and/or the ultimate meaning sought is *ta'wīl*;
4. Ibn 'Arabi's view, that the hidden meaning that is bestowed by God Almighty is *ta'wīl*;
6. 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī's view, that Qur'anic words and meanings are derived from reality and that reality is *ta'wīl*.

According to the popular view, *ta'wīl* is not related to the whole of the Qur'an, but only to certain verses, namely, those that are ambiguous. According to Ibn 'Arabi's view *ta'wīl* is possible for the whole of the Qur'an, regardless of whether they are ambiguous or clear verses. This is so because the whole of the Qur'an has hidden meanings that are bestowed from God, the Most Exalted. According to 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī as well, *ta'wīl* of the Qur'an belongs to the entire Qur'an, because the reality of all verses exists independent of their words.

According to the popular view and that of 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, knowledge of *ta'wīl* is with God and those firmly rooted in knowledge (i.e., *Ahl al-Bayt*). However, according to Ibn 'Arabi, those rooted in knowledge are all gnostics, whether they are of *Ahl al-Bayt* or not.

According to the popular view and that of Ibn 'Arabi, *ta'wīl* is related to Qur'anic words and their meaning. However, according to 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *ta'wīl* is not related to words, but rather to reality and objective existence.

The meaning of the Qur'anic verse, "nor is there a single grain in the darkness of the earth, or anything, fresh or withered, that is not written in a clear Book"((Qur'an, *al-An'ām* (6):59.)) is best understood if we accept 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī's view. That is to say, in every age and era the reality of the words of the Holy Qur'an can only be explained by *Ahl al-Bayt*. It is so because only these personalities are truly deserving of the title, "those who have knowledge of the Book."((Qur'an, *al-Ra'd* (13):43.)) Hence, in every age, *Ahl al-Bayt* are needed to understand the Qur'an, regardless of whether the particular science in question regards legal rulings, wisdom, or exhortations. Only *Ahl al-Bayt* can explicate the Qur'an's true meaning and purpose, for only they fully know the reality of things.