



## An Analysis of Esoteric Interpretation From the Viewpoint of Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd

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### Abstract

One of the principles accepted by the majority of Islamic sects is esoteric interpretation. Of the main issues common between Mu‘tazila and neo-Mu‘tazila movements is esoteric interpretation. The Mu‘tazila esoteric interpretation is based on intellect, by which they esoterically interpret the verses that are seemingly against intellect. There is another principle that has roots in Islamic legislation. This principle regards dividing the qur’ānic verses into ambiguous and non-ambiguous verses and then esoterically interpreting the ambiguous ones. In these cases, they try to accord the intellect with the narrations; however sometimes due to the lack of accurate understanding of the narrations or mistakes in the intellectual rules, they try esoteric interpretation of the narration. The neo-Mu‘tazila intellectual movement is one of the outstanding theological trends in the Islamic world. Its roots can be traced back to the old Mu‘tazila thinkers, who tried to found the basis of Islamic knowledge on intellectualism. They tried to use esoteric interpretation and figurative expression in the interpretation of texts and also use intellect in understanding Islamic knowledge and sciences. The study at hand adopts a descriptive-critical approach to analyze the viewpoints of Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār Hamdānī – an old Mu‘tazila member – and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd – the most important neo- Mu‘tazila figure. ‘Abd al-Jabbār uses a completely theological and doctrinal basis to conduct esoteric interpretation for the outward of the verses. However, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd believes that esoteric interpretation is a method or instrument for understanding the phenomena. He believes that from an ideological perspective, esoteric interpretation cannot be defined, and the esoteric interpretation of religious texts is not possible.

**Keywords:** Esoteric interpretation, Mu‘tazila, Neo-Mu‘tazila, Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd.

### 1. Introduction

One of the main discussions in Islamic sciences, especially in the study of the Qur’ān, is the discussion of esoteric interpretation. Right from the beginning of the revelation of the Qur’ān, various viewpoints have been suggested for esoteric interpretation, and the scholars have adopted different viewpoints to it, based on their different stances. Shī‘a thinkers have always had a positive viewpoint to the esoteric interpretation, while Sunni scholars have always had a negative stance to it and have taken it as equivalent to blameworthy innovation (Muṭī‘ī et al., 2020: 2).

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Compared to other interpretive schools, the Mu‘tazila interpretation school has had a more outstanding role in the expansion of using intellect in the qur’ānic interpretation. The principles of Mu‘tazila beliefs can be deemed exactly as a political-theological orientation against the traditionalists, Murji’a, and Ash‘arites. Mu‘tazilaists have accepted five principles as the basis of their religious thought and agree upon them. These five principles – forming the base of Mu‘tazila thinking – include Unity, Justice, Divine retribution, intermediary state, and the promotion of good and the prevention of evil, which entail the important issues of Mu‘tazila beliefs (Shahristānī, 1983: 108). Since Mu‘tazilaists were a minority group against the majority Sunnī scholars who were mainly traditionalists and formalists, it was natural for them to defend their opinions in order to preserve their very existence. It was exactly because of this that they went to the qur’ānic verses and interpreted them based on their own beliefs. They conducted intellectual esoteric interpretation of many verses whose outward appearance seemed to be against their beliefs, and took many of them based on their figurative meanings (Humāmī & Rajabzāda, 2009: 10).

Today, a group of religious intellectuals and contemporary reformists, mainly in Arabic-speaking countries, strain to revive this intellectual school in Islam and correspond it to the novel opinions and teachings of the modern world to find appropriate solutions and stances in the light of this important aspect of the Mu‘tazila work, i.e., the intellectual interpretation of the Divine Revelation and Islamic Law.

The study at hand entails three directions. In the first direction, this study briefly refers to the lexical and terminological meanings of “ta’wīl” (esoteric interpretation). In the second direction, it addresses the intellectual essence of Mu‘tazila and neo-Mu‘tazila stance to esoteric interpretation. In the third direction, this article analyzes the esoteric interpretation from the viewpoint of two outstanding Mu‘tazila figures, namely Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd.

In this article, the works of the great Mu‘tazila thinker, Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, on the status and role of intellect in interpretation, especially works such as *Mutashābih al-Qur’ān*, *Tanzīh al-Qur’ān ‘an al-maṭā’in*, *Al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa al-‘adl*, and *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa*, as well as the works of Naṣr Ḥāmid including *the intellectual approach to the interpretation of the Qur’ān* and *the meaning of text* are used.

Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār believes that intellect needs narration only in knowing religious rulings and does not consider it as capable of understanding those rules alone. However, in the issues related to Unity and Justice, he takes the intellect as the only factor of knowledge (Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, 2006: 238).

In the modern-day era, Abū Zayd – as a neo-Mu‘tazila thinker – deems that the correct way to understand the Qur’ān is the esoteric interpretation. He believes it is by using the esoteric interpretation that we can connect with the Qur’ān today, have a qur’ānic life, and give the Qur’ān in the modern world a new life. He writes, “Arguing based on the Qur’ān or taking it as a proof is possible only after knowing the articulator with all His attributes including Justice and Unity. The Divine Justness requires that He do not choose the vice, do not command to doing it, and do not lie when informing; if all of these issues are confirmed by pure intellectual reasons, the Qur’ān itself should also follow the intellectual reason, because the qur’ānic indication is possible only through the a priori intellectual knowledge about Unity, Justice, and other divine attributes” (Abū Zayd, 2008: 223-224).

The works that have been authored about the thoughts of these two notable figures include “An examination of the Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd’s stance toward the esoteric interpretation and Its criticism based on the viewpoint of Allāma Ṭabāṭabā’ī,” “The comparative analysis of esoteric interpretation from the viewpoints of Mullā Ṣadrā and Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār

Hamdānī,” and “The meaning and principle of the Mu‘tazila intellectualism in the interpretation of the Qur’ān.”

The study at hand examines the difference in the foundations of “esoteric interpretation” from the viewpoints of Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd as two great thinkers of traditional Mu‘tazila and neo-Mu‘tazila through intellectual analysis method. In some articles, the concept of esoteric interpretation has been mentioned from the viewpoints of various sects such as Mu‘tazila and figures such as Abū Zayd. Examples include “Evaluating the scope of esoteric interpretation from the Shī‘a and Mu‘tazila viewpoints” (Mahīn Bayrānwand, 2019), “Various viewpoints and thoughts about esoteric interpretation” (Sayyid Ibrāhīm Sajjādī, 2000), “The question of esoteric interpretation in the Qur’ān and a response to the public fault” (Sayyid Muḥtabā Mūsawī, 2013), “The examination and criticism of the opinions of doctor Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd about interpretation and esoteric interpretation” (Şafarī & Muruwatī, 2008), “Esoteric interpretation tendencies of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd in comparison to the esoteric interpretation approach of the Mu‘tazila ” (Zarnūsha et al., 2018). However, no comparative study has been done between the opinions of these two figures. In this article, we try to answer the following questions:

- What are the definitions of these two thinkers for esoteric interpretation?
- What are the results and consequences of each esoteric interpretation stance for the interpretation of the Qur’ān?

## 2. Conceptuality

The term “esoteric interpretation of the Qur’ān” refers to a source from which the Qur’ānic knowledge is construed. Esoteric interpretation is a real truth, and the Qur’ānic assertions – including its rulings, recommendations, and wise points – rely upon it. Such a truth exists in the inward of all the Qur’ānic verses, no matter if ambiguous or non-ambiguous ones. This truth is not one of the concepts that find their way to mind through words; rather, it is part of objective matters that could not be limited to the networks of words due to their high status, and if the sublime God has presented them in the form of words and verses of His Speech, He has in fact wanted to bring the human mind closer to a part of those truths (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, 1996, vol. 3: 75).

Literally, the word “ta’wīl” has the root of “awl,” meaning referring and returning to something (Rāghib Işfahānī, 1992: 27). Ibn Manẓūr in *Lisān al-‘Arab* says, “The meaning of ‘alawl’ is returning and its unaugmented first stem form is ‘āl’ which means to refer. It is the infinitive of the mode of *taf’īl*; one of the common things that the mode of *taf’īl* does is to change the intransitive verb into the transitive verb, which means referring something to its origin” (Ibn Manẓūr, 1985, vol. 11: 33).

Some have asserted that “ta’wīl” is taken from “‘Īyālah” which means policy. It has been interpreted as this because it manages the knowledge, putting it in its proper place as to its meaning (Dhahabī, 1976, vol. 1: 16).

When the word “ta’wīl” is put into the mode of *taf’īl*, it means to return. Therefore, “ta’wīl” of the ambiguous means “returning it to a source,” and the “ta’wīl” of Qur’ān means a source from which the knowledge of the Qur’ān is taken (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, 1996, vol. 3: 23).

The word “ta’wīl” has been used for seventeen times in the Qur’ān totally from which it has been used twelve times as to issues other than the Qur’ān and five times as to the Qur’ān (twice according to the unanimous opinion of interpreters, plus three times based on the dominant doctrine). Whenever it is said “ta’wīl of the Qur’ān,” it means a source from which the Qur’ānic knowledge is obtained.

### 3. Esoteric interpretation from the view of Mu‘tazila and neo-Mu‘tazila

The most vivid feature of Mu‘tazila movement in interpreting the Qur’ān is its intellectualism. The intellectualism of Mu‘tazilaists, in fact, is a particular view that they have toward the status of intellect as to interpreting the Qur’ān. In the view of Mu‘tazila, the “priority of intellect” means to make the intellect the principal and make the tradition subordinate to it. Of course, this priority of intellect in the view of Mu‘tazila is rank-based, and not real. Accordingly, the principle of accepting the religion and its teachings would follow the intellectual reason (Āriyān, 2013: 10-11).

Mu‘tazilaists preferred the intellect to the tradition. Whenever they found the narration contrary to the intellect, they let the narration go and prioritized the intellect. They deemed the intellect one of the four reasons and their top one, i.e., prior to the Qur’ān, tradition, and consensus. Based on this, they see the esoteric interpretation inevitable. To them, the esoteric interpretation based on intellect is possible because the revelation confirms the data of intellect (Rajabī, 2019: 265).

From the beginning, the view of Mu‘tazilaists about the interpretation of Qur’ān and hadith has been based on intellectualism. To them, the mission of interpretation was the esoteric interpretation of the verses that were not in agreement with their principles of intellectualism (Ṣāwī Juwaynī, 2008: 143-144).

The emphasis of Mu‘tazilaists on intellect was so strong that they held intellect prior to hadith whenever they were in disagreement. This was contrary to many jurists who considered hadith unconditioned. Moreover, they did not regard the doings and hadiths of the Companions absolute and binding (Muṭahharī, 1979: 163). However, the most basic, while the most controversial stance of Mu‘tazila was made about the complex argument of Qur’ān’s being created (contingent) or uncreated (eternal) (Zībā Kalām, 2011: 258).

Mu‘tazilaists accept the esoteric interpretation and believe in two types of it: 1) esoteric interpretation in the arena of referring the ambiguous verses to the non-ambiguous ones; and 2) esoteric interpretation in referring the topics and concepts of the verses which are in disagreement with the intellect to the concepts which are in agreement with the intellect.

To them, esoteric interpretation for the ambiguous verses of the Qur’ān is inevitable, but the non-ambiguous verses of the Qur’ān do not need esoteric interpretation. They set the intellect and intellectual principles the yardstick for identifying the non-ambiguous verses and the esoteric interpretation of ambiguous verses, and esoterically interpret the verses that are in disagreement with the intellect.

Mu‘tazilaists hold that the non-ambiguous verses of the Qur’ān are the obvious part of it. However, the ambiguous verses constitute its obscure part, and that obscure can become vivid in the light of referring them to the non-ambiguous verses. In the process of referring, the intellect is prior to everything, and it is only in the realm of rulings that the interpretation of the ambiguous verses is done with the aid of pure narration (Bahjatpūr, 2013: 161).

Although the principle of esoteric interpretation is necessary, the esoteric interpretations of Mu‘tazilaists are sometimes away from the accepted principles. Thus, regarding the methodology, it can be said that their esoteric interpretations are of two types: 1) accepted esoteric interpretations and 2) rejected esoteric interpretations which have been without indications (Subḥānī, 1996: 329).

Mu‘tazilaists have esoterically interpreted the verses contrary to their opinion. Through intellectual and verbal indications, they extensively have used various figurative expressions, which some of their esoteric interpretations are pointed out here:

In the thinking of Mu‘tazila, the word “yad” [hand] alludes to power and boon, as the verse

64 of chapter 5 alludes to it as the boon and generosity of God (Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, 2006: 116; Zamakhsharī, 1992, vol. 4: 654) and the verse 75 of chapter ٣٨ alludes to it as the power of God (Zamakhsharī, 1992, vol. 4: 335).

Mu‘tazilaists hold that the expression “firmly established on the throne” in the verse 5 of chapter 20 alludes to conquering, overpowering, and possessing power (Zamakhsharī, 1992, vol. 4: 335). Also, they esoterically interpret the other predicative attributes with reliance on the purification of God (Humāmī & Rajabzāda, 2009: 13).

The verses 22 and 23 of chapter 75 are the main verses propounded by Sunnis and Ash‘arites – who consider these indications for the vision of God – against Mu‘tazilaists. Zamakhsharī holds that their meaning is anticipation and hope. That is, they only are hopeful of their God’s boon and benevolence (Zamakhsharī, 1992: 622).

Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār sees the meaning of “glance” and “vision” different and states, “The meaning of ‘glance’ is turning the eyes properly toward something to see it, but ‘vision’ means comprehending what is seeable through looking. Therefore, glance is the way to vision, but that it is the same is impossible (Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, 1965: 242-244).

To Mu‘tazilaists, two things are extremely effective for understanding the Qur’ān: the non-ambiguous verses and the intellect. The ambiguous verses should be interpreted esoterically while regarding these two things. In addition to emphasizing this point, Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār has criticized the formalists, and has considered their ignorance the reason for not using the intellect in analyzing the ambiguous verses (Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, 1965, vol. 16: 394).

To Mu‘tazilaists, intellect is the benchmark for esoteric interpretation. They use tradition in understanding the verses of rulings, but as to the doctrinal issues, the only factor of recognition is the intellect. The ambiguous verses in this arena are also interpreted by the intellect (Ibid, 2006: 238). They see issues like torment of the grave, angels who examine deed in grave, criterion, path, bodily ascension of the Prophet, and so on as part of the Qur’ānic ambiguities and have interpreted them esoterically (Hūshangī, 2006, 14: 382).

As intellectualism was one of the important features of Mu‘tazila, neo-Mu‘tazila also emphasizes the overruling of intellect. As to this, Naṣr Hāmid Abū Zayd, one of the famous figures of neo-Mu‘tazila, says: the main part and the opening is the overruling of intellect, the dominance upon which the revelation itself is based. Intellect is to err, but to the same extent it can rectify its own mistakes. What is more important is that intellect is our only instrument for understanding. The only way is that we try to consolidate the intellect, not only by words but also by all the other possible instruments of confrontation.

Ḥasan Ḥanafī, who is one of the outstanding thinkers of neo-Mu‘tazila, invites to intellectualism and says: the condition of our time causes an invitation to the intellect and defense of rationality, as the history of our modern thinking implies this. Thus, Mu‘tazilaists who regard intellect the base of tradition are required due to the condition of this time.

One of the signs of neo-Mu‘tazilaists’ intellectualism is that they – like the old Mu‘tazilaists – do the intellectual interpretation of religious texts. In cases that the outward of the Qur’ān and tradition are in disagreement with the intellectual rulings, they interpret esoterically and attribute figurative and metaphorical expressions to the verses (‘Idālatnizhād, 2001: 7).

The most important theological foundations of neo-Mu‘tazila are the Qur’ān’s being influenced by the culture of revelation time and temporality of many Islamic rules. Moreover, the most important theoretical foundations of neo-Mu‘tazila are: 1) scientism, one of the most important foundations of neo-Mu‘tazilaists, which is setting the achievements of sciences by humans as the criterion for investigating the religious teachings. In fact, they delve into the Qur’ān and narrations through setting the sciences and their rules as the criterion. They seek

the interpretation of those propositions in the Qur'ān and Prophetic hadiths which are in line with the sciences prepared by humans; and 2) secularism, by adopting of which they reject the invitation for the Islamization of knowledge and oppose making the social, political, economic, and scientific issues religious-based (Gulī & Yūsifiyān, 2010: 119-121).

#### 4. Esoteric interpretation from the view of Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār

The distinguished figure of Mu'tazila, at the threshold of its reticence, was Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār Hamdānī who was contemporary with Shaykh Mufīd. At the early years of his life, he followed the denomination of Shāfi'ī in the derivatives and also the Ash'arī in the principals. Then he turned to Mu'tazila and became its axis. In Mu'tazila, he followed the school of Abū al-Ḥasan Muḥammad B. 'Alī Baṣrī (d. 436 AH). He became the dean of this school which was in rivalry with the Mu'tazila school of Āl Baghdād. Some of his important works are *Al-Mughnī*, *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa*, and *Al-Muḥīṭ bil-taklīf*.

To Qāḍī, in interpreting the text of the Qur'ān, the non-ambiguous verses are those ones that the intellectual opinion and thinking confirms their outward at the outset. This is whereas the ambiguous verses, to him, are those ones whose outward are in disagreement with the theological opinion and thinking of Mu'tazila. His opponents referred to this in theological issues. Accordingly, he took the non-ambiguous verses (which he was able to interpret intellectually regarding his intellectual criterion) as principal in his interpretation. Also, he esoterically interpreted the ambiguous verses with overlooking the outward of them and finding intellectual indications or referring them to the other verses which he already had interpreted using his own accepted intellectual indications (Naibiyān & Pahlawānīnizhād, 2015: 156-160).

Under the interpretation of verse 7 of chapter 3, 'Abd al-Jabbār divides the text of the Qur'ān into two parts of verses: ambiguous and non-ambiguous verses. Some are called non-ambiguous because God who gives decrees has given them substantiation. That is, He has shaped them in a special way; the word is issued in a way that in its original or conventional form and regarding the intellectual evidences, it does not get any meaning other than the desired meaning, like Qur'ān 112:1. However, the ambiguous word is that God has said it with an attribute, to mistaken the addressee. Due to something installed in the original or conventional form of the word by God, the outward of the word does not imply the desired meaning, like the Qur'ān 33:57, whose outward implies something that we know it is impossible (Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, 1969, vol. 2: 19).

Qāḍī does not see any contradiction between the intellect and the religious propositions. To him, intellect is a divine gift which God has bestowed upon all humans, and based upon it He has given the humans accountabilities.

Initially, Qāḍī sees it necessary to recognize the verses of Unity and Justice intellectually. Namely, he interprets the verses based on his own intellectual foundations and his preference for the intellectual reasons of Mu'tazila. Then, he sets this recognition as the base for understanding the ambiguous verses, trying to understand the verses of the Qur'ān.

About the predicative attributes (like hearing, seeing, having hands, and so on) whose demonstration without regarding the esoteric interpretation can lead to the demonstration of God's corporeality, Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār believes that these attributes should be interpreted esoterically. He holds that one cannot attribute them to God based on their traditional outward meaning because it needs the corporeality of the sublime God, whereas He is not physical. Demonstration of corporeality for Him needs the demonstration of physical limits for Him

like length, width, depth, susceptibility, spatiality, temporality, and so on. But He is free of all these, and the intellect does not accept these limits for Him.

### **5. Esoteric interpretation from the view of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd**

Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd was an Egyptian Qur'ān thinkers and one of the open-minded and pioneer theologians in Islam. He is famous for his project, i.e., humanistic interpretation of the Qur'ān. Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd was one of the important Muslim intellectuals who was deeply familiar with the foundations of religious knowledge in the framework of tradition. His arguments are more around the axis of “text” – the Qur'ān and tradition.

He holds the language of the Qur'ān has a special system of meaning; without recognizing this system, every claim as to the recognition of the Qur'ān would lead to obsoleting and limiting it (Waṣafī, 2008: 176).

The method of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd in esoteric interpretation is related to his Mu'tazila approach. Regarding the intellectually esoteric interpretation of “text,” Abū Zayd is influenced intensely by the past Mu'tazilists. In the approach of Abū Zayd, the people of hadith and Ash'arites are deemed as opposite to the esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān and static as to the religious text and propositions, while he sees Islam of Mu'tazila in agreement with the esoteric interpretation and aligns himself with them (Ibid: 37).

### **6. The meaning of esoteric interpretation and its kinds from the view of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd**

Concerning the word “ta'wīl” (esoteric interpretation) in the Qur'ān, Abū Zayd deals with its lexicology and mentions four different meanings for it: 1) return to the root of a thing and discovery of its implication and meaning; 2) realization of the goal and end; 3) follow-up and maintenance of a thing along with its management and reform; and 4) the movement of a thing or a phenomenon.

He holds that the excessive use of the word “ta'wīl” shows this word has been popular in the pre-Islamic culture, having connection with the interpretation of dreams (ta'wīl al-aḥādīth). He infers that “ta'wīl al-aḥādīth” is done through a medium by which the interpreter discovers the hidden implication of the dream (‘Alīakbarzāda, 2014: 4-5).

There is another type of “ta'wīl” that does not need any medium. It is to know an occasion that will happen in the near future, but has not yet happened. Namely, “ta'wīl” in this sense is a kind of prediction of events that will happen. Therefore, it is called “ta'wīl al-Af'āl.”

This meaning of “ta'wīl” has been taken from the story of Moses and Khidr (a) and the doings of Khidr and his answers to Moses. In fact, it can be said that “ta'wīl” means mentioning the hidden implications of acts that are not discoverable unless through the intuitive knowledge which is given to a particular person (like the Prophet) (Abū Zayd, 2008: 379-380).

Three meanings mentioned by Naṣr as to the literal meaning of “ta'wīl” (return to the root of a thing, realization of the goal and end, and follow-up and maintenance of a thing along with its management and reform) are also mentioned in the famous books of lexicology (Ṣafarī, 2008: 6).

Abū Zayd regards the real meaning of “ta'wīl” synonymous with interpretation and attribute it to the Muslims from the first century to the fifth century (AH) as well as Sūyūṭī (tenth century AH) (Waṣafī, 2008: 50). He sees discovering the purposes and implications of the Qur'ān as the first goal of “ta'wīl” (Ibid: 49), and sometimes considers “ta'wīl” as

overlooking the exoteric meaning of the Qur'ān's verses and attributing figurative meanings to them (Ibid: 37). He holds that "ta'wīl" is trying to understand the meaning of the Qur'ān's verses with reliance on their context in the groundwork of tradition and with the use of the sciences of the Qur'ān. Also, he prioritizes "ta'wīl" (esoteric interpretation) to interpretation because it has been used more than ten times in the Qur'ān, whereas the word interpretation has been used only once. Abū Zayd sees esoteric interpretation of two types:

First, the ideological esoteric interpretations that interpret the Qur'ān based on political, economic, scientific, and philosophical goals (Abū Zayd, 2001: 38), like the esoteric interpretations done by the contemporary religious discourse which are not intellectual (Waṣafī, 2008: 51).

Second, the non-ideological esoteric interpretations accepted by Abū Zayd. He sees the reading mode of the Qur'ān by Amīn al-Khūlī from the type of non-ideological esoteric interpretations (Ibid: 40). He states that with a literary school for the interpretation of the Qur'ān, the religious texts can be freed from the ideologically political, economic, scientific, and philosophical functions (Abū Zayd, 2001: 38). To Abū Zayd, attaining the textual meaning should be based on the main meaning of the text in the past. He believes that the fixed meaning which is already determined causes one not to achieve the proper reading mode and esoteric interpretation of the text (Ibid: 40).

He repeatedly emphasizes not to do an ideological esoteric interpretation and asks for a non-ideological esoteric interpretation, regarding the latter stance true and facilitative (Abū Zayd, 2008: 388-389).

Moreover, Abū Zayd gives the esoteric interpreter a key role, and does not see every person right for esoteric interpretation. To him, esoteric interpretation has an important status and, thus, believes that the esoteric interpreter should possess sciences that are required of an informed interpreter. These sciences include inflexions and syntax as well as rhetoric comprising of semantics, eloquence, and prosody. In addition to these sciences, an esoteric interpreter should have the ability of mind or intellect movement for discovering the deep implied dimensions of the Qur'ānic text. Of course, this ability is phrased as Ijtihād (scholarly investigation).

As to this, Naṣr Ḥāmid writes, "Scholarly investigation in the arena of rulings and the esoteric interpretation of jurisprudential verses of Qur'ān does not differ from the esoteric interpretation in the other parts of the Qur'ān because both rely on the movement of mind and intellect to attain the interior layers of the text (Ibid: 395).

He believes the esoteric interpreter should know the science of interpretation in order to attain an acceptable esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān. The "ta'wīl" which is based on mere interpretation is false and unacceptable, and the inference cannot be based on supposition. Inference should be based on the textual facts of the Qur'ān and language data of the Qur'ān, but one cannot put forward a meaning which is in contradiction with the textual meaning of the Qur'ān (Abū Zayd, 2001: 381).

## **7. Analyzing and criticizing the views of Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd**

Text is the arena wherein Qāḍī deals with the esoteric interpretation. Like the other Mu'tazilaists, due to linguistic viewpoints, he explores the esoteric interpretation of the ambiguous verses of the Qur'ān. That the convention in the Divine Word is term-related and human-made and also that there are figurative expressions in the Qur'ān are the themes to which Qāḍī resort. He believes the text of the Qur'ān, like the texts by humans, contains linguistic elements, and through exploring them with the intellect, one can recognize the real meaning.



Defining the ambiguous and non-ambiguous, Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār says, “If the speech is issued in a way that the very word, the convention, or the intellectual evidences do not accept any meaning except the desired one, then that speech is non-ambiguous; but if it is in a way that it causes the addressee to mistake and its outward does not imply the desired meaning – due to the element related to the very word or the convention – and needs referring to the non-ambiguous and intellectual reasons, then it is ambiguous (Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, 1969: 19).

To Qāḍī, the reality of divine verses becomes clear through intellectual reasons or it becomes approved through the reason of narrations that the intellect confirms them. In other words, he interprets the non-ambiguous verses based on his own intellectual meanings, and esoterically interprets the ambiguous verses based on the intellectual evidences or the interpretation of non-ambiguous verses (which are themselves in line with his own intellectual benchmarks). In this manner, he opens the way for an intellectual interpretation of all verses of the Qur’ān based on his own intellectualism. Qāḍī sees esoteric interpretation one of the acquired sciences which one can comprehend through the exploration of linguistic subtleties of the text and also the aid of his own intellect (Naibiyān & Pahlawānīnizhād, 2015: 156-160).

His main failing is transgressing the general regulations and using them in a maximum way. In addition to observing the general principles and regulations for understanding the text, in these cases other things should be considered not to entangle with extreme esoteric interpretation. The important point in the esoteric interpretation of ambiguous verses is that this approach does not suggest any change in the implication of the verses to be certain or speculative (Rajabī, 2019: 269).

However, Abū Zayd has an instrumentalist view of esoteric interpretation, and holds that to understand the verses of the Qur’ān in today’s world, one should use esoteric interpretation. Regarding that Abū Zayd belongs to the movement of neo-Mu‘tazila, he sees the opposites of esoteric interpretation serving the political rulers (Muṭī‘ī et al., 2020: 18). Naṣr Ḥāmid considers the esoteric interpretation a different perception of the Qur’ān. Esoteric interpretation, in the view of Abū Zayd, is making the meaning of the Qur’ān up-to-date whose text is fixed. He holds that the text of the Qur’ān should be understood in a way that it becomes compatible with what in this day and age is accepted (Abū Zayd, 2008: 84-88).

Through looking precisely at the works of Abū Zayd, it can be concluded that the main goal and the keyword of all discussions of esoteric interpretation by him is proving the temporality of the noble Qur’ān. To reach this goal, he resorts to various theories that the most important of which are the following three theories: 1) creation of Mu‘tazila Qur’ān; 2) hermeneutics of Gadamer; and 3) semiotics of Saussure (Zarnūsha et al., 2018: 29). Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd holds that the Qur’ān is not related to the contemporary life of the human, and through esoteric interpretation this relation can be made. However, he never provided a mechanism for the attainment of esoteric interpretation as well as a benchmark for the authenticity of an esoteric interpretation.

No matter how hard they search, readers of his works cannot actually find an instrument to deal with the esoteric interpretation of the verses of the Qur’ān (text). They cannot esoterically interpret the text in a way which is acceptable. Works of Abū Zayd always give injunctions to the esoteric interpreters.

Moreover, the esoteric interpretation of the Qur’ānic text should not be dependent on the whims and wishes of the esoteric interpreter. Abū Zayd does not mention how to achieve this. He does not state what the features of non-ideological esoteric interpretation are. To him, esoteric interpretation means individuals’ perception of the Qur’ān. He thinks that esoteric interpretation has no special mechanism, and that every reciter of the Qur’ān and every thinker of its verses can be the esoteric interpreter of the Qur’ān (Muṭī‘ī et al., 2020: 1-22). If

esoteric interpretation is deemed to be available to everybody, then no word has a certain value from the aspect of implication and every meaning can be attributed to every word. This is the very subjective interpretation which is prohibited in the narrations (Subhānī, 2001: 205). To interpret the verses esoterically, there should be intellectual and legal aspects. If the outward of the verse can be justified without an esoteric interpretation in a way that is not in contradiction with the Islamic Law and intellect, then there would be no reason for esoteric interpretation (Ibid: 207).

In his interpretation method of the Qur'ān, i.e., open esoteric interpretation, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd only focuses on the Qur'ān. This is whereas, to Muslims, the Islamic tradition has a high status in the explication of the religion as does the Qur'ān. If it is accepted that the Qur'ān is the Prophet's (s) perception of the Archetypal Book and not the direct Divine Word, then it should be accepted that the traditions by his Holiness which are to complete and elucidate the religion are also his own understanding. At least, these two should not be too much different to Abū Zayd. However, Abū Zayd has suspended this part of the religion, and interprets the Qur'ān without regarding the external indications, using the method of esoteric interpretation. By this, he interprets Islam according to his own wish, which is to make Islam compatible with the modernity (Khayrjūy, 2020: 164).

## Conclusion

Mu'tazila was a group who entered intellect into the arena of religious thinking. However, their extensive use of the intellect and its dragging to the occulted and supernatural topics caused the provision of unacceptable ideas. Most of the interpretive ideas of Mu'tazilaists were to defend the religion and their own doctrinal principles. Mu'tazilaists' complete knowledge of literary and rhetorical sciences also causes them not to face difficulty in the esoteric interpretation of the verses based on their own denomination. But what is reprimanded has been Mu'tazilaists' overconfidence in intellect and the extensive use of esoteric interpretation which has caused the denial of many facts accepted by the opponents. Compared with the other Islamic sects, Mu'tazila has used the esoteric interpretation extremely. Mu'tazilaists set non-ambiguous verses and the intellect as the only benchmark to understand the Qur'ān, and assess the ambiguous verses using these two gauges. Of course, they mainly understand the ambiguous verses and also particularly the predicative attributes of the sublime God with reliance on the intellect, and interpret most of the verses esoterically in these arenas. Even in some cases, they have esoterically interpreted the verses related to the hereafter, heaven, and hell contrary to the trend of both the Qur'ān and the narrations. Esoteric interpretation of the verses cannot be done without regulations, and cannot attribute every esoteric interpretation to the divine verses. Verses of the Qur'ān have deep and extensive meanings to which the wise individuals and the men of understanding have access. True understanding of the Divine Book is possible with the approach of esoteric interpretation. The main problem with Mu'tazilaists was their transgressing the conditions and regulations of esoteric interpretation. Accordingly, they have gone too far and have provided esoteric interpretations which are almost subjective.

Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd is a neo-Mu'tazila who tries to reform the concept of revelation and the way of understanding and, thus, uses the new scientific methods to make the tradition compatible with the modernity. Abū Zayd strives to provide a new method which is compatible with the innovations of the West in literary studies, linguistics, and semiotics in order to explore the text of the Qur'ān and the religious texts. Therefore, he considers the method of literary analysis suitable for the understanding and esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān.

Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd puts an emphasis on the esoteric interpretation in his entire works. It should be noted that the most intellectual reason of Abū Zayd for the intellectually esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān is based on the temporality of the concepts of the Qur'ān. He holds that the concepts of the Qur'ān were as a result of the culture of revelation time, and this is an evidence for the Qur'ān to be reliant on that culture. In the generality of Abū Zayd's thinking, two conspicuous bases can be mentioned: first is the Mu'tazila intellectualism which has encircled his entire thinking. He sees the principles of Mu'tazila epistemology useful for the intellectual understanding of the divine revelation and, thus, looks for an intellectual definition of the esoteric interpretation. Second is the temporality of revelation, particularly of the Qur'ān. What is meant of the temporality by Abū Zayd is that the revelation of the Qur'ān is made in history and is bound to the intellect of the audience and compatible with the culture of the revelation time.

This is whereas Qāḍī sees the discursive intellect the benchmark for the perception of the text, and from the beginning he sets to impose his theological opinions on the text. Qāḍī considers the approach of esoteric interpretation based on the revelation as well as the gradation of revelation verses a blamable innovation by the heretics and the occultists. He regards the discursive intellect as the only benchmark for true understanding, and bases his esoteric interpretation on the judgment of the outward intellect.

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