

*Kalām at the Interstices of Tafsīr: Theology, Contestation, and Exegesis in the Qur'an  
Commentaries of al-Maturidī and 'Abd al-Jabbār*

Jonathan Allen  
Washington University in St. Louis  
May 11, 2012

I. *Introduction*: One of the most ubiquitous and most voluminous genres of medieval Islam was *tafsīr al-Qur'ān*—Qur'an commentary.<sup>1</sup> Ranging from the abbreviated 'madrasa *tafsīrs*' with their cursory explanations and rapid clip, to the sprawling, barely contained exuberance of a Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, the *tafsīr* 'genre' encompasses a truly wide array of texts, though for convenience's sake, we may define it as any text primarily concerned with the systematic exegesis of the Qur'an. My goal in this paper is to move towards a yet further expansion of our understanding of the wide boundaries of the genre, through an examination of *tafsīr*'s intersection with *kalām*—'theology' as it is usually translated by Western scholars.<sup>2</sup> If not quite as ubiquitous as *tafsīr*, *kalām* was still central to many forms of medieval Islam, whether as a core support of religious practice and thought, a potentially useful or potentially troubling component, or a bitter enemy of pure religious truth. The relationship between these two aspects of medieval Islam, *tafsīr* and *kalām*, has barely been scratched by modern scholarship.<sup>3</sup> It is aspects of this relationship that I hope to uncover and explicate in the course of this paper; what follows represents only an initiatory, rather heuristic foray. Besides my primary expository, narrowly analytical goal vis-à-vis the two texts analyzed here, there are two propositions for which I will argue in the course of this exposition and analysis. First, I will show how the propositions and preoccupations characteristic of two different configurations of *kalām*—'proto-Maturidī' and classical Mu'tazila—were both integrated

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<sup>1</sup> While not exactly vast, there is extensive secondary literature on medieval *tafsīr*, much of it operating here as historiographic background. For a good overview of *tafsīr* and scholarship on the field, see Jane Dammen McAuliffe's excellent *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and Claude Gilliot, *Exegese, Langue, et Théologie en Islam: L'Exegese Coranique de Tabari*. (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1990). On the parameters of *tafsīr* as a genre, see Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "The Genre Boundaries of Qur'ānic Commentary," in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> 'Dialectical theology' is perhaps a better translation of *kalām*, though clunkier I suppose. No single good introduction to Islamic theology in general or *kalām* specifically exists, but for an overview see the following: *Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. T. Winter, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> There are several works dealing with al-Rāzī, an important, if somewhat later than the exegetes covered here theologian/philosopher/exegete: Roger Amaldez, "L'oeuvre de Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī commentateur du Coran et philosophe," in *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1960); Robert G. Mourison, "The Portrayal of Nature in a Medieval Qur'an Commentary," in *Studia Islamica*, No. 94 (2002); and Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on God as al-Khāliq," in *God and Creation: An Ecumenical Symposium*, ed. David Burrell and Bernard McGinn (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990). Andrew Lane's recent monograph on al-Zamakhsharī proved to be rather disappointing: Andrew J. Lane, *A Traditional Mu'tazilite Qur'an Commentary: The Kashshāf of Jār Allāh Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144)* (Leiden: Brill, 2006). On modern permutations of *kalām* and *tafsīr*, see Gregor Sewarb, "Mu'tazilism in a 20th Century Zaydī Qur'ān Commentary," in *Arabica* 59 (2012) 371-402.

into Qur'anic exegesis *and* themselves substantially shaped that exegesis in directions it would not otherwise have gone. For alongside theological content and arguments—which we might expect—*kalām* in its methodological and formal shape, particularly through its polemical tenor and rationalizing tendency, influenced the entire fabric, not just the narrowly theological material, of the two commentaries under consideration. Second, and mirroring the previous proposition, I will argue that the particular constraints and demands of exegeting the Qur'an also modified and redirected the content and presentation of *kalām*, introducing permutations of both proto-Maturidī and Mu'tazila theology and praxis generated by engagement with direct Qur'an exegesis.

I have limited my study to two texts, both from the 'classical age' of *kalām*: first, the so-called *Ta'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunna*, attributed to the eponymous founder of the Maturidī 'school' of *kalām*, but probably the collated work of his students and hence probably dating to the mid- or late-tenth century, and second, the *Tanzīh al-Qur'ān 'an Al-Maṭā'in* of the great eleventh-century Mu'tazila theologian 'Abd al-Jabbār. These two are, as we will see, very different sorts of texts in many ways, but are nevertheless united by their 'kalāmic' nature and, of course, their exegetical preoccupation. My analysis of each will begin with an overview of the work's structure and ostensible ends, its exegetical methods, and ways in which what I am calling the 'kalāmic mode' is at work in the methodology and specific concerns of the text. I will then focus upon and analyze in greater depth some of the particular 'theological' concerns present in each commentary. Finally, in my concluding section, I will attempt a synthesis of my findings regarding the various exegetes, and consider potential directions for future study of these and other texts at the interstices of tafsīr and *kalām*. First, let us briefly consider what it is that makes these two works of exegesis 'kalāmic.'

II. *The Kalāmic Mode in Tafsīr*: The most obvious 'marker' of kalāmic distinction in the two works considered here is their engagement with 'proper' theological questions and debates, of the sort that divided and defined different groups and trends within the broad field of tenth and eleventh century *kalām*. In the case of al-Maturidī, this theological engagement comes from time to time in the course of a 'classical' lemma-by-lemma approach; for 'Abd al-Jabbār, the immediate theological content and import is much more pervasive. But there is more to the intersection of these two fields of religious knowledge than engagement with theological questions *per se*. Rather, in both works analyzed here there is in evidence an integration with the methodology or *habitus* of *kalām*, which, after all, is more of a distinctive marker of a separate field than the mere presence of theological questions. From methods of dividing arguments to concern for polemic and apologetic to a general rationalizing tendency, all of these texts, to differing degrees, exhibit what I shall call a 'kalāmic mode' of exegesis.

What I want to identify, at least provisionally, is what seems to be a particular *habitus*, expressed in practices and patterns of thought indicative of, and constituted by the field of *kalām*—a field that of course overlapped with others in the world of the medieval '*ulamā*' who created and inhabited them. I do not propose to develop a clear and transposable 'typology' of kalāmic exegesis here; rather, I hope for my examination to identify some distinctive features and 'habits of thought' that seem to underlie these two texts.<sup>4</sup> Key among these 'habits of thought' and practice is the rationalizing tendency

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<sup>4</sup> Besides the obvious influence of Pierre Bourdieu evident in my thinking here, I have in mind here, in part, ideas put forward by D. L. d'Avray concerning mendicant friars and sermon production and delivery in the

present in both of these texts. What I mean is that both eschew ‘traditional’ exegetical material in favor of what some would no doubt pejoratively label ‘tafsīr bil-ra’y,’ exegesis by personal opinion.<sup>5</sup> I prefer the less pejorative and clearer term ‘rationalizing exegesis,’ but the meaning should be clear: in lieu of reliance on hadith or other transmitted reports or opinion, both our commentators apply their reasoned speculation to the evident meaning of the text, alongside their rationalized arguments over points of doctrine, which are usually expressed in a polemical, dialectical mode—as one would expect from *mutikallimūn*.<sup>6</sup> With these initial thoughts and suppositions in mind, let us continue to our two theologians and their exegesis.

III. *Ta’wīlāt Ahl al-Sunna*: While attributed to the rather murky *mutakallim* Abū Maṣūūr al-Maturidī al-Samarqandī, eponym of the ‘second school’ of Sunni theology, recent scholarly consensus has tended to towards the argument that this multi-volume commentary is in fact the product of al-Maturidī’s students in Samarqand, who drew upon his notes, compiling the material into one cohesive text.<sup>7</sup> If this supposition is correct, it would place the text’s date of origin somewhere in the second half of the tenth century. While acknowledging the likely collaborative nature of this work, for the sake of convenience I will refer to the author as ‘al-Maturidī,’ since, even if composed by his students, the *tafsīr* draws upon his work. Al-Maturidī, like his better-known and better-documented near-contemporary al-‘Ashaarī, sought to craft a version of *kalām* more amenable, in al-Maturidī’s reckoning, towards the principles of the *ahl al-sunna wa al-ja’āma*, with the Mu’tazila theological ‘school’ representing al-Maturidī’s most prominent—though far from only—competitor and polemical interlocutor. The title that has come to be attached to this work is reflective of such an identity; like many titles, however, it reveals little about the actual nature of the work.

In approaching this text, I have focused primarily upon the commentary’s treatment of *Surah Yusuf*, a surah that has the benefit of its own apparent internal cohesion, manageable length, and possibilities for the sorts of theological reflections targeted by this study. In terms of form and methodology, this *tafsīr* was constructed along the model of continuous lemma-and-exegesis, eventually encompassing the entire text of the Qur’an. As with most such commentaries, certain verses or blocks of text receive more attention than others, though few individual lemma receive more than a couple of paragraphs of text. Overall, the clear, overt goal of this commentary is to make the ‘literal meaning’ of the text clear, to make it easily, evidently, and *rationally* legible to the reader. Secondly, and implicitly, it is to support and clarify al-Maturidī’s doctrinal commitments. The making legible function of the *tafsīr* entails grammatical and lexical explanation (though nowhere near the intricacy of, say, al-Zamakhsharī’s

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scholastic milieu of thirteenth century Paris; d’Avray argues that in examining texts from the period we must probe the ‘habits of mind’ that underlie and structure these texts: D. L. d’Avray, *The Preaching of the Friars: Sermons Diffused from Paris Before 1300* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Like the term ‘*ta’wīl*,’ which we will encounter below, ‘tafsir by personal opinion’ is a word of almost unlimited definitions and valuations.

<sup>6</sup> One cannot but note the congruence with *fiqh*; both commentators were also jurists, though for neither has the relationship between their theology, legal studies, and exegesis been studied in depth. Alas, my own investigation here largely leaves questions of *fiqh* alone, though see below concerning al-Maturidī.

<sup>7</sup> Claude Gilliot, “L’exégèse Du Coran En Asie Centrale Et Au Khorasan.” *Studia Islamica*, no. 89 (January 1, 1999), 155. On al-Maturidī, see W. Madelung, “al-Māturīdī.” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition. Brill Online, 2012, and Watt, *Formative*, 312-316.

*Kashshāf*), as well as cautious attempts at extrapolating unstated or implied meanings and significances. For many lemmas, one to several competing explanations are offered, each usually introduced with ‘it is possible,’ and often concluding with the qualifying phrase, ‘and God knows best’ (for a sustained example, see the excerpt below in Appendix I). *How* the commentator derives these possible meanings and, perhaps more importantly, how he doesn’t, will be discussed below shortly.

In terms of longer, sustained discussions precipitated by the Qur’anic text, two broad types stand out: one, extrapolation from the text of ‘indications’ linking the text under discussion with points of *kalām* or *fiqh*. The first will form the locus of our discussion below; as for *fiqh*, a few examples will suffice. At least in the portion surveyed for this study, questions directly related to matters of *fiqh* are not particularly frequent. In one of the more sustained examples, the commentator argues for the validity of *ijtihād* from the account of Joseph’s ripped shirt and the ensuing examination of it. The argument for Joseph’s innocence if the shirt was ripped from behind was allowable by the rulers of *qiyās*, for even if it is not always the case, ‘in most circumstances, is not ripped from behind unless from being pulled from behind, and not from the front unless from repelling from in front.’<sup>8</sup> Other instances of *fiqh*-based exegetical demonstrations are similar in that they tend to address points of dispute (or at the very least, Ḥanafī particularities) between the emergent legal *madhhabs*—in this case, the permissibility of *ijtihād* and *qiyās*.<sup>9</sup>

The polemical, rationalizing mode mentioned above as indicative of kalāmīc *tafsīr* is most markedly on display, however, in one of the central motifs and methodological commitments of this commentary: an unrelenting (and as far as I can tell at present, unprecedented) attempt at stripping away unsubstantiated expansions of the text and extraneous, unnecessary details that had accrued within the exegetical tradition.<sup>10</sup> In the case of *Surah Yusuf*, this means disputing expansions of the story—details added by popular story-tellers and previous exegetes that seek to either explain troubling silences in the text or simply make for a better and more complete story. These exegetical fabricators, as they are considered by our commentator, are usually introduced as *ahl al-ta’wīl*, with their exegetical opinion related and then rebuked, as in the following typical passage: ‘And as for the saying of the people of *ta’wīl* about His saying *Do not kill Joseph*, that so-and-so or so-and-so said—that information is among the things we do not know, and there is no need for us to know that, and God knows best.’<sup>11</sup> Whom does al-Maturidī have in mind when refers to the *ahl al-ta’wīl*? To begin with,

<sup>8</sup> [Abū Maṣṣūr al-Maturidī al-Samarqandī], *Ta’wīlāt Ahl al-Sunna*, ed. Majdi Baslum (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2005), 229.

<sup>9</sup> On the arguments over these legal concepts, see Wael B. Hallaq, *Authority, Continuity, and Change in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 43-56; Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunnī Usūl al-Fiqh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 83-107. This use of legal commentary is markedly different from *fiqh*-based exegesis found in the somewhat later *aḥkām al-Qur’ān* works of commentary: there, while matters of dispute and contestation are obviously included, the wider goal is the location of the *sharī’a* through extrapolation and interrogation of the Qur’anic text, as in, for example, Muhammad ibn Abd Allāh ibn al-‘Arabī, *Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, ed. Alī Muḥammad Bajāwī, ([Cairo]: ‘Isā al-Bābī al-Halabī, [1967-68]

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of much later attempts at exegetical purification, see Jane Dammen McAuliffe, “Qurānic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Tabarī and Ibn Kathīr,” in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur’an*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), esp. 57-58.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Maturidī, *Ta’wīlāt*, 212

*ta'wīl* is one of the more ambiguous and multi-valenced terms in the field of *tafsīr*; it can mean metaphorical interpretation, mystical, Sufic exegesis, interpretation in general, or, as here, it can mean exegesis a given author disapproves of. Indeed, in a single *tafsīr*—including this one, from its title on, where the term is clearly positive—the term can function both positively and pejoratively, depending on the context. Here, I think, the term is simply a reference to other exegetes, especially those drawing upon the popular stories of the *quṣṣās*, stories that would eventually come to be labeled by some critics—pejoratively—as *isrā'īliyyat*.<sup>12</sup> Yet it is not simply expansive stories and fabulous details that al-Maturidī discounts: it is any detail (or almost any detail—he does make occasional exceptions) that cannot be deduced from a rational investigation of the text as such, and that is unsupported by genuine outside authorities—such things, he solemnly intones, ‘we do not know,’ or need to know. Even when he accepts a traditional account—such as the *sabab al-anzāl* associated with this surah—he does so conditionally and alongside other explanations.<sup>13</sup>

Appeals to other authorities are few and in-between, and are mostly limited to authorities in grammar and lexicology. Hadith are occasionally introduced, but in a rather peripheral manner.<sup>14</sup> Otherwise, our exegete follows a ‘rational,’ deductive, intertextually referent reading of the Qur’anic text in order to explain uncertain points and fill out the narrative, arriving at, not certainties, but possibilities, almost always qualified with ‘God knows best.’ For instance, al-Maturidī explains that Jacob was worried about his son being fed or becoming overly stressed while away with his brothers, so they promised Jacob that Joseph would eat and play while away. This worry is implied by the text; al-Maturidī does not offer any authorities or extraneous stories to support his supposition.<sup>15</sup> In explaining the unique love of Jacob to Joseph, our commentator presents various possible explanations, all of them deducible from the text itself or from knowledge of normal human behavior which can be applied to the text; fantastic or simply extraneous details—unknowable by rational reflection and intertextual reference—are not necessary.<sup>16</sup> Such details might even be scandalous and sinful. In discussing the enigmatic phrase ‘and she [al-‘Aziz’s wife] started towards (*hammat*) him [Joseph], and he started towards (*hamma*) her,’<sup>17</sup> our commentator disapprovingly notes the interpretation of the people of *ta'wīl*: that Joseph intended to commit adultery with his master’s wife, as indicated by his loosening his trousers as she lay down before him. This story, and others like it, is sheer vileness (*fasād*) that it is impermissible to speak about in connection with a prophet. Four reasons are given, all drawn from the ‘evident meaning’ of the text:

First, his words: *She sought to tempt me from myself*: and if there had been from *him* desire and temptation, then he would not have said that about her and acquitted

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<sup>12</sup> See: Pellat, Ch.. " *Ḳāṣṣ*." Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Brill Online , 2012; and Jane Dammen McAullife, ‘Assessing the *Isrā'īliyyat*: an exegetical conundrum,’ in *Story-Telling in the Framework of Non-Fictional Arabic Literature*, (Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Al-Maturidī, *Ta'wīlāt*, 209.

<sup>14</sup> For instance *ibid.*, 218, where a hadith on hypocrisy is discussed.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Hamma*, as the exegesis makes clear, is an ambiguous term: it can imply simply the commencement of an action, or some measure of intention or desire.

himself from that. Second, His words: *Likewise, we turn away from him evil and corruption*: and if any of that which they mentioned about his loosening his trousers and sitting down between her legs had been, then evil would not have been diverted from him. Third, his words: *That is so that He may know that I did not betray Him in secret*: And if it has been as they mentioned, then he would have betrayed Him in secret. Fourth, her words: *We know nothing against him of evil*, and her words: *The truth is manifest—I sought to tempt him*. All of this indicates that what the people of *ta'wīl* say is vile, none of it permissible to speak regarding him—there is nothing in the literal meaning of the verse (*wa laysa fī zāhiri al-āyati*) of what they say, neither a little nor a lot. There is nothing in it other than that *she started towards him and he started towards her*.<sup>18</sup>

Here, a concern for prophetic *'iṣma* is certainly an operative, if unspoken, concern—though for al-Maturidī, unlike many of his Mu'tazila counterparts, *'iṣma* falls within rather tighter limits—but where we might expect an appeal to the simple impossibility of Joseph engaging in sin we find close, rational reasoning through the 'literal (or—evident) meaning' of the text, which is given precedence over other accounts and introduced details, even if they are hallowed by traditional usage. It is not only potentially theologically troubling interpretations that are negated by al-Maturidī's cautious rationalism. Following upon the above passage, al-Maturidī ultimately concludes that the exact identity of the 'sign' (*burhan*) from God that is sent to Joseph during his trial before al-'Aziz's wife is not something that anyone can in fact know. It is not reasonably deducible from the text.<sup>19</sup>

Turning now to specifically theological reflections, we find that issues of *kalām* proper are introduced in two basic ways: one, 'indications' drawn from the Qur'anic text arguing for a particular doctrinal stance; and two, introduction of doctrinal tenets to make or expand upon an exegetical argument. It should be noted that such discussions, while representing the longest sustained passages in the tafsīr, are not present for many, perhaps most, verses. Not all verses were deemed 'theologically productive,' only some. In order to get a sense of how theologically productive verses are developed upon by al-Maturidī, let us examine one particularly productive example:

His words- *So they came to their father in the evening, weeping...*: in the verse are indications: one of them: that whoever commits a minor sin, he fears chastisement, but does not become an unbeliever; and whoever commits a major sin does not depart from the faith, because Joseph's brother intended to kill him, or drop him in a well, and hide him from his father's face, to deprive him of him, and that is not expiated from them, be it a minor or a major sin. And if it were a minor sin, then they sought forgiveness for it in their saying: *They said, O our father, seek forgiveness for us for our sin*, indicating that they sought forgiveness when they feared the punishment for it. And if it was a major sin, they did not depart from the faith, in that they became prophets afterwards and became a sound people (*qawman ṣālahīn*), in that they said: *And you will be after it a sound people*. It is an indication of what we have mentioned regarding the shortcoming of the Mu'tazila regarding the perpetrator of the minor sin—[they say] that there is no chastisement upon him, and of the perpetrator of the major sin, that he departs from the faith. [It is also an indication of] the shortcoming of the Kharajites in

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 225-226.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 227.

their saying that if one commits a major sin or a minor sin, he becomes by it an unbeliever, an associator.<sup>20</sup>

In this passage, al-Maturidī confronts one of the long-standing issues in Muslim theology: what is the status of the grave sinner? Al-Maturidī's position is clear: the grave sinner is still a Muslim; he does not depart from the faith into unbelief—the position that would become standard among his followers, as evident in the excerpt from the Maturidian *Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-Akbar* provided below in Appendix II. Elsewhere in his tafsīr, al-Maturidī notes that whereas, he says, the Mu'tazila hold to three 'degrees' between belief and unbelief, the Qur'an demonstrates that only those who disbelieve in God and the Last Day are truly unbelievers.<sup>21</sup> In the passage quoted above, the proof from the text is relatively clear: it would be untenable to hold that major sins exclude one from the faith, for that would mean excluding men who were to become prophets. But al-Maturidī manages to get double work out of the passage, in congruence with his usual exegetical caution: it may be that the sins of the brothers were in fact minor sins. If this is so, it still fits within al-Maturidī's doctrinal frame, against that of the Mu'tazila, as the brothers obviously expected chastisement, linking minor sins to punishment. The Kharajites and their extreme rigorism are, *prima facie*, refuted; al-Maturidī feels no need to elaborate on their error. Finally, the implications for prophetic 'īṣma should be pointed out here: unlike, as we will see, 'Abd al-Jabbār's unwillingness to attribute sin in any way to the brothers, al-Maturidī expresses no such unwillingness. However, he notes without way of further explanation that the brothers' sins were carried out before the initiation of their prophethood. It is this presupposition that allows him to derive his rebuke of the Mu'tazila from this passage.

Before turning to the more integrative use of theological tenets, a few other instances of points of doctrine supported by exegesis should be enumerated. On the question of human capacity and human will, al-Maturidī makes several arguments in the course of this surah, both attacking Mu'tazila positions and arguing for an integrative view of human action and will. As for the former, al-Maturidī argues from the verse *Unless you turn away from me [Joseph] their wives, I will subcomb to them* that God withheld—at least before Joseph's asking—a particular grace (*lutfanan*) that would prevent Joseph's falling to the women's wives. Otherwise, he argues, Joseph's asking would have no meaning. This incapacity revealed in Joseph, he further argues, reveals the inadequacy of the Mu'tazila doctrine as he describes it: 'God has given every capacity (*qudra*), every potency (*tā'a*), every power (*quwwa*) [for the doing of] every good good, and the repelling of every evil.'<sup>22</sup> If this were the case, Joseph would have had no special need of God's aid; his inborn capacity would have sufficed. Al-Maturidī presents another iteration of this argument further along, arguing that one of the meanings inherent in *We bestow Our mercy upon whom We will* is the bestowal of prophethood and accompanying 'īṣma. This, al-Maturidī argues, goes against the proposition of the Mu'tazila, who deny specificity in God's mercy (indeed, as we will see with 'Abd al-Jabbār, the Mu'tazila tended to interpret 'mercy,' 'grace,' and 'guidance' as general things). Whatever the fairness of either of these arguments (and they do seem rather on the level of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 216-217

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 236.

character), they represent the enlistment of Qur'anic proofs in one of the fundamental disputes of *kalām*—a significant move for al-Maturidī, given his aversion to anything but the literal, evident meaning of the text.

Theological propositions are also integrated into the commentary as exegetical aids, seemingly in better alignment with al-Maturidī's larger project. For instance, al-Maturidī refutes the idea that Joseph's words to the liberated cupbearer, *Mention me to your lord*, represent Joseph's forgetting of God and his seeking deliverance from someone else. Rather, he argues, Joseph was simply resorting to acceptable means (*asbāb*) through which God operates in the world. Use of these means does not preclude trust in God or the knowledge that it is truly God who is at work in and through them.<sup>23</sup> When God commands the believers to *Prepare for them as you can through strength*, 'whoever does this has not taken refuge in other than God, or thought that victory and salvation is from that thing or means; rather, he has thought that the thing, all of it, is from and by God.' Likewise with Joseph: his appeal to one of the means of God's providence did not mean his disavowal of God's aid.<sup>24</sup> While there is little of the more subtle theological speculation evident in more genre-specific works of *kalām*, the question of causality and God's action in the world is dealt with here as a means of clearing Joseph of possible blame and of explicating his request.

What are we to make of al-Maturidī's commentary as a whole? What relation does it have to his work and legacy as a theologian? Throughout, theology works under the driving force of exegesis; this is quite different from 'Abd al-Jabbār, for whom theological questions are a primary concern in selecting sites of exegesis and carrying exegesis out. Yet, as we have seen, what at first appears to be a very 'traditional' commentary in terms of arrangement and subject-matter, is in fact operating in a 'kalāmīc mode' of its own: besides the occasional (but often lengthy) direct engagements with questions of *kalām* and allusions and brief uses of theological language, al-Maturidī's rationalizing tenor is what drives this *tafsīr* and sets it apart from others. Not only does it lack a strong and visible apparatus of hadith-reports and 'traditional' exegetical material, it directly challenges many of these things (a full five centuries before ibn Taymiyya and ibn Kathīr, one might note), rejecting them in favor of an exegetical style that moves cautiously and rationally through the text. This commitment to rational analysis and to doctrinal precision is, I want to contend, generated at least in part, and perhaps in full, by al-Maturidī's practices of *kalām* and his theological commitments.<sup>25</sup> That said, as I hope

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's quite similar discussion of the 'means' in his magisterial Sufi tome, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb fī mu'āmalat al-mahbūb wa-waṣf ṭarīq al-murīd ilā maqām al-tawḥīd*, 1st ed., ([Cairo]: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣrīyah al-Āmmah lil-Kitāb, 2005), 30: 'His is the rule: that is, of all of what is visible, and His is the praise in all of what He gives and withholds, deserving of all praise. And no one else is deserving of the praise, and He is over every thing powerful, that is, in creating and in commanding. So the power- all of it- is His, and creating- all of it- is His. He decrees in His creation, by His command, what He wills, how He wills. And the means (*mithl al-awsāt*) are like tools in the hand of the craftsman. Or do you not see that one does not say: the knife crafts the shoe, and one does not say the whip [of itself] strikes the slave? Rather, one says: the craftsman crafts the shoe, and so-and-so strikes his slave *with* the whip. And one only says that these means are the physical cause of actions in so far as they are tools in the hands of their user.

<sup>24</sup> Al-Maturidī, *Ta'wīlāt*, 243.

<sup>25</sup> After all, as any perusal of Maturidian or 'Asha'ri works of *kalām* will make clear, for all the claims of better representing the ahl al-sunna, these theologians were firmly committed to a rationalistic project, albeit not to the same degree as their Mu'tazila opponents.



my analysis has made clear, the entirety of this fascinating work requires further and deeper analysis than what I have provided here.

IV. *Tanzīh al-Qur'ān 'an Al-Maṭā'in*: If al-Maturidī is a somewhat shrouded figure to history, the author of our second text is much better known and much more extensively dealt with in secondary literature.<sup>26</sup> 'Abd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad al-Asadābādī stands out as one of the most prominent and certainly productive of all Mu'tazila theologians, or of any *mutakallimūn* of the 'classical' period. While they have not received the scholarly attention that works such as the monumental *Mughnī* has, 'Abd al-Jabbār produced some fairly substantial exegetical works. Besides the work treated here, 'Abd al-Jabbār wrote at least one such work, focused on the so-called 'ambiguous verses' of the Qur'an.<sup>27</sup> In the *Tanzīh al-Qur'ān 'an Al-Maṭā'in* he deals with a variety of exegetical (and otherwise) topics—more than the title would indicate. While much of 'Abd al-Jabbār's exegesis is, as promised, a defense of the Qur'an from the potential calumnies of gainsayers, the work does much more than that. Indeed, its primary purpose is not so much a defense of the text of the Qur'an or the explication of obviously difficult or problematic passages as it is the claiming, and indeed reshaping of the Qur'anic text for Mu'tazila theology and praxis. In so doing, 'Abd al-Jabbār develops an exegetical style that is both markedly different from al-Maturidī while sharing some of his methodology and general tenor. The 'kalāmīc mode' is unmistakably present in 'Abd al-Jabbār, both in the actual content and in his methodology and exegetical commitments. My examination, after briefly examining the basic exegetical methodology of the *Tanzīh*, will focus upon two major, indeed constitutive, themes present in the text: first, the clarification of ambiguous or potentially problematic verses; and second, and most significantly (and substantively), the defense or elaboration of Mu'tazila theology and praxis—obviously a multifaceted endeavour. Finally, a word about my own site-selection and methodology for this text: I analyze here the sections dealing with *Surah al-Baqara*—the longest chapter in the *Tanzīh*—and, as with al-Maturidī, *Surah Yusuf*.

Unlike al-Maturidī's commentary, the *Tanzīh* does not cover the entire text of the Qur'an. Rather, as is the case with 'Abd al-Jabbār's other extant exegetical work, only certain verses and blocks of verses, chosen for their particular exegetical possibilities, are commented on. The commentary proceeds in one of two ways: most frequently, the verse in question is introduced by one of the following formulas: 'They say,' 'If they say,' 'Perhaps it is said,' followed by the verse, which is then followed by the particular question or objection, often raised by pitting a Mu'tazila position against the apparent sense of the verse. While some of these questions run to several lines of elaboration, most are short, and give way to 'Abd al-Jabbār's response, introduced by 'Our reply.' The reply, as with al-Maturidī (and the emergent tafsīr tradition more broadly) often includes several possible exegetical answers to a given problem. This overall format is, of course, 'classic' *kalām* methodology, though the dialectical process here is usually limited to a single question and answer. Less frequently, 'Abd al-Jabbār engages in blocks of

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<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Richard C. Martin, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol*. Oxford, England: Oneworld, 1997; J. R. T. M. Peters, *God's Created Speech: A Study in the Speculative Theology of the Mu'tazilī Qādī L-GudāT Abūl-Hasan 'Abd Al-Jabbār Bn Ahmad Al-HamadāNī*. Leyden: Brill, 1976.

<sup>27</sup> 'Abd al-Jabbār ibn Ahmad al-Asadabadi, and 'Adnan Muhammad Zarzur. *Mutashabih al-Quran*. al-Qahirah: Dar al-Turath, 1969.

continuous exegesis, lemma by lemma; I examine one such block below in my discussion of the commentary's treatment of epistemology and praxis. Within his explanations, 'Abd al-Jabbār operates with a methodology not unlike that of al-Maturidī. He prefers to interpret 'the Qur'an with the Qur'an' when possible, adducing one or several other verses to argue for a particular meaning. Grammatical and lexical explanations and arguments are frequently resorted to, particularly in the category of ambiguous or problematic verses. Whereas for al-Maturidī overt appeals and integration of theological doctrine are resorted to only occasionally, 'Abd al-Jabbār employs concepts and arguments of Mu'tazila doctrine frequently. Finally, as with al-Maturidī, outside authorities are relatively few; while 'Abd al-Jabbār does not usually engage in al-Maturidī's sharp combat with dubious exegetical accretions, neither does he generally incorporate it. When he does, it is usually through an elliptical 'it is said.' Hadith, while not entirely absent, are scarce.<sup>28</sup> On the whole then, as noted above, our commentator's objective is to make the Qur'an rationally legible, not unlike his predecessor al-Maturidī, and to do so firmly within the context of Mu'tazila doctrine and praxis.

As the title would indicate, part of this commentary's purpose is to defend against potential attacks—presumably from non-Muslims—on the accuracy or correctness of the Qur'an. Concurrent with that goal is the clarification of some difficult passages due to uncertain vocabulary or apparent absences within the text. Such a goal is congruent with the Mu'tazila emphasis upon the 'inimitability' of the Qur'an—one of several doctrines picked up and developed by the later 'orthodox' Sunni mainstream.<sup>29</sup> What sorts of issues does 'Abd al-Jabbār latch onto as problematic and in need of defense and explanation? One common category is the Qur'an's use of (apparently) metaphorical language. For instance, if someone asks: 'How can people be described as 'deaf and blind' in the Qur'an, when they are not really so?' 'Abd al-Jabbār answers: 'deaf and blind' is meant analogically, in that one who is not benefited by what he hears or sees is comparable to one blind and deaf. The same principle of comparison is found throughout the Qur'an.<sup>30</sup> A similar principle might also be applied to what would appear to be more troubling passages for most (though not all) monotheists, Muslim or otherwise, those in which God is described with anthropomorphic features. For instance God is described as being 'near' someone, which might seem to imply spatial location and presence. In lieu of allowing for some such spatial presence of God—clearly problematic—'Abd al-Jabbār argues instead for a more metaphorical, analogical meaning to the phrase: similar to a man's 'presence' with his servant by way of that man's 'knowledge of him and delegation of him' on his master's business, God is present through His all-encompassing knowledge and His regulation of all the affairs of the world in every place. Otherwise, 'Abd al-Jabbār contends, God will have to be in various places at once in the sense of being in a place [ie as a body]; He is far from that, being the creator of 'place' itself.<sup>31</sup>

In another group of problematic passages, 'Abd al-Jabbār must cautiously expand upon the evident meaning of the Qur'an in order to make sense of the problemati

<sup>28</sup> For a usage see for instance 'Abd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad al-Asadābādī. *Tanzīh Al-Qur'ān 'an Al-Maṭā'in*. Al-Ṭab'ah 1. Dirāsāt Ḥawla al-Qur'ān 2. (al-Jizah: Maktabat al-Nāfidhah, 2006), 217.

<sup>29</sup> On 'ijāza, see for instance Issa J. Boullata, "I'jāz and Related Topics," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Tanzīh*, 33.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 61. For other instances of metaphorical reinterpretation of spatial imagery of God, see: 51-2, on *Where ever you turn, God's face is there*; 71, on the metaphorical interpretations of God's throne.

material. In the story of Joseph, when Joseph is presented to the group of women they cut their hands. Someone might ask, our commentator writes, ‘Why would rational women deliberately cut their hands in such a way?’ ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s explanation is prosaic and reasonable, expanding only slightly upon the narrative: the women, he says, had fruit before them and knives in their hands. Upon hearing of al-‘Aziz’s wife’s great desire and passion for Joseph, their hands slipped and they accidentally cut themselves. As for further details—the number of women, whether it occurred to all of them or only some, and so on—the Qur’an is silent, he tells us, and, in an echo of al-Maturidī, such things cannot be known.<sup>32</sup> Not unlike this case—in which the *Tanzīh* ‘fills out’ details to make sense of the text—is another short question-and-answer, this time about the verse *They say: None will enter the Garden unless he is a Jew or a Christian*. An opponent might point out that no one would actually say this: a Jew would restrict the Garden to Jews, and Christians to Christians. Our commentator replies: the intended meaning is not that they would say this about both groups, but that Jews and Christians would declare their exclusivity for their respective religious community. Given the known exclusivity of each community, he argues, there was no need for the Qur’an to further specify.<sup>33</sup>

While clarification and defense of the Qur’an is certainly important within the *Tanzīh*, what really lies at the heart of ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s exegesis is the defense (and sometimes simple exposition) of Mu’tazila doctrine through its incorporation within the text and meaning of the Qur’an. Rather than attempt to broach all of the points of doctrinal defense and exposition that ‘Abd al-Jabbār engages in, I have limited my analysis to three points, each central to Mu’tazila theology as well as the content of this commentary: human capacity and determination; epistemology and related praxis; and ‘*īṣma*, prophetic (and angelic) immunity or protection from sin. For each one I will examine how ‘Abd al-Jabbār employs his exegesis to defend or clarify these doctrines, either ‘with’ or ‘against’ the apparent grain of the text.

*a. Divine Determination and Human Responsibility and Capacity:* The question of human capacity and divine determination was one of the key flashpoints between the Mu’tazila and their opponents. Some verses would seem to mesh well with Mu’tazila positions. For instance, in a passage dealing with the envy of certain Jews towards Muḥammad, ‘Abd al-Jabbār argues that the phrase *Envy from themselves* ‘is an indication that their envy was towards the Prophet and the believers, and that it was not created by God—otherwise, He would not have attributed it to themselves.’<sup>34</sup> Here, where the lexical meaning is clear and congruent with Mu’tazila doctrine, there is no need for further interpretation. However, opponents could point to multiple verses whose apparent literal meaning seemed to imply God’s determination of human salvation or damnation, or of all human acts, apart from human volition or capacity. For instance, as in the following passage, an opponent points to God’s ‘leading astray’ as proof of God’s determination of human actions. ‘Abd al-Jabbār replies:

We deny that God leads astray from religion or creates unbelief or disobedience and desire for them, just as we deny that He commands those things or wants them. But we

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 215

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 50. For ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s much more extensive engagement with Christianity, see ‘Abd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad al-Asadābādī. *Critique of Christian Origins: A Parallel English-Arabic text*. 1st ed. Islamic Translation Series. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2010.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Tanzīh*, 49.

do not deny that He leads astray one who *deserves* leading astray by his unbelief and corruption. And God has established what we say in the interpretation of this verse, indicating it in His saying: *And none is led astray by Him save the corrupt*. So He shows by that regarding His words *Many are laid astray by Him* He intends by it many are led astray by disbelief in Him... It is clear that He leads them astray by this characteristic, *not* that He initiates going astray in them.<sup>35</sup>

In this passage our author first lays out the Mu'tazila position: God does not cause (or command or desire) unbelief or any form of disobedience; hence, 'leading astray' cannot mean pre-determined action on God's part unpredicated upon human action. Rather, 'leading astray' is an action (if it is that at all) of God predicated upon their prior corruption which they effected of themselves, as implied in 'Abd al-Jabbār's introduction of a supporting verse: *none is led astray by Him save the corrupt*, the implication of course being that they were already corrupt. If, then, God is not actively responsible for their going astray, what does it mean to predicate 'leading astray' upon him at all? Shortly after the above passage, our commentator tells us: it means *punishment* for going their unbelief, and 'deflection from the path to the Garden,' and the non-bestowal of 'kindnesses' bestowed upon the rightly guided. In sum, and leading us to the flipside of this problem—right guidance—'God says *Many are led astray by Him*, meaning, unbelief is punished by Him, *And many are guided by Him*, that is, many are rewarded by Him for faith.'<sup>36</sup> An objector might argue that the Mu'tazila position does violence to the apparent lexical meaning: 'Abd al-Jabbār has effectively redefined God's 'leading astray' as 'punishing for having gone astray,' turning to metaphor terms that do not immediately appear to call for. Demonstrating the possibility, if not necessity, of this 'metaphorization' is the key exegetical move that 'Abd al-Jabbār must make to justify his interpretation. The lexical-exegetical 'logic' established in this case appears throughout the *Tanzīh*; its permutations are slightly different in regards to God's 'rightly guiding' and strengthening of believers, as in the following passage:

*God takes those who believe from darkness to light*: does not this indicate that Islam is an act of God in them? We answer: It is like His words *The oppressors took them out of light into darkness*: it is not that the oppressors [themselves] brought about unbelief in them, but that they enticed them and called them to it. So the meaning here is that God took them from darkness to light through kindnesses which He did in this respect. Besides, [physical] extracting from unbelief and belief is in reality impossible, rather what is mentioned is in the aspect of metaphor and similitude to the transmission of bodies.<sup>37</sup>

Again, the apparent meaning seems clear enough: God actively transfers humans from 'darkness'—unbelief—to 'light'—belief. Yet here and elsewhere where similar language is used, our author works to reinterpret the text to bring it in line with Mu'tazila theology. As in the previous example, he does this by adducing a similar passage, but in this case about action attributed to humans. An opponent would be unlikely to argue—for several reasons—that 'oppressors' *caused* unbelief; that the statement is in some way metaphorical would seem more appropriate. Likewise, 'Abd al-Jabbār argues, God's action in this case is to offer 'kindnesses' and a general form of 'guidance' which humans

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 71.

may, or may not, take advantage of. In other iterations of the concept, these ‘kindnesses’ are interpreted as rewards for faith and right action—a more common interpretation in the *Tanzīh*. No longer, then, do the verse in question imply God’s determination of human action; rather, *His* actions are either general manifestations of grace or responses to prior human actions. Whether or not we find all of ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s exegetical moves convincing in regards to this vital issue, his general exegetical approach is generally internally consistent and cohesive across a range of passages like those examined above.

b. *Epistemology and Meditative Praxis*: ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s *Kitāb al-Usūl al-Khamsa* opens with an explanation of the first of human duties: ‘speculative reasoning which leads to knowledge of God.’<sup>38</sup> For the Mu’tazila, reflective thought was not a luxury for philosophers, but a core duty for all humans. It should not surprise us, then, that questions of epistemology and related praxis are central to the *Tanzīh*; these questions primarily have to do with the necessity of human reflection on divine truth, the importance of meditating on the Qur’an as a spur to right belief and practice, and the practice of the remembrance of God. One of the most significant discussions of these issues in the sections analyzed here is an extended lemma-by-lemma discussion emanating from a question and answer on Q. 2:159 (part of this extended block is translated below as Appendix I). In this discussion, ‘Abd al-Jabbār emphasizes several things: first, the importance of not suppressing the truth (about God) and the penalties of doing so (and the possibility for repentance); second, the basic parameters of true belief: confession of the oneness of God, which can be understood through consideration of the creation of the heavens and earth; third, the obligation upon all rational people to continually have God and His creative power in mind, ‘meditating upon them in all their states.’ This latter obligation, we learn, is always incumbent, unlike, say, the ritual prayer and fasting, which only apply sometimes. We thus see one of the basic Mu’tazila propositions expanded upon into a prescription for daily praxis: once speculative reason has led to knowledge of God, it is not to be ‘turned off’ or diverted, but is to be continually applied in the remembrance of and meditation upon God, His acts, and His revelation.<sup>39</sup> This emphasis upon ‘active meditation’ is quite beautifully drawn out in even greater depth in ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s ‘prologue’ (*muqaddima*) to Surah Yusuf, which, our commentator tells us, is a veritable gold mine of things worthy of consideration and contemplation, from patience during trial to the promise of salvation. ‘If, ‘Abd al-Jabbār promises, ‘the reader contemplates it and grasps all or part of it, then the occurrence of those things will occur both in his worldly and religious affairs.’ To begin the process, he lists eleven points of contemplation and reflection.<sup>40</sup>

Opposed to rational reflection on divine truth in the Mu’tazila scheme is *taqlīd*, ‘blind imitation.’<sup>41</sup> ‘Abd al-Jabbār finds a powerful argument against *taqlīd* in the story of Abraham’s attempt at persuading Nimrod of the truth of monotheism. By way of defending Abraham’s apparently initially unsuccessful attempt at persuasion, our commentator outlines the logic of Abraham’s arguments, suggesting that Abraham’s main purpose, as a prophet, was to summon Nimrod to the truth by guiding him through

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<sup>38</sup> ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Kitāb al-Usūl al-Khamsa*, trans. in Martin, *Defenders*, [?-page numbers missing in the scan!].

<sup>39</sup> ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Tanzīh*, 57-59.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 211-212.

<sup>41</sup> See Calder, N.. " Taqlīd." Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Brill Online , 2012.

arguments amenable to Nimrod's understanding. 'Abd al-Jabbār sees in this narrative two proofs of Mu'tazila doctrine: one, when God, through His prophets, demonstrates signs and proofs, He obligates humans to reflect on them. Second, Abraham's use of demonstration and argument points to the rejection of *taqlīd*: for if the prophets did not rely on their own authority, but used rational arguments with their disputants, then how is *taqlīd* allowable to anyone—particularly those not privy to direct contact with a prophet—in religious matters?<sup>42</sup> Significantly, both here and the previous instances, avoidance of *taqlīd* and emphasis on reflective reasoning do not vitiate or marginalize prophetic messages or the Qur'an itself; rather, they arguably heighten both the importance of the Qur'anic text and urge constant calling to mind and reflection upon revelation.

*c. The 'Īsma of Prophets and Angels:* Much like the doctrine of the inimitability of the Qur'an, the doctrine of prophetic and angelic immunity from sin in time came to be Sunni 'orthodoxy.' While not as central an item of discussion in 'Abd al-Jabbār's more properly theological works, questions about the immunity or protection from sin of angels and prophets occupies a considerable amount of space in these two chapters of the *Tanzīh*. The parameters and nature of that 'īsma, as well as 'Abd al-Jabbār's exegetical handling of it, is the focus of this final block of analysis. Let us begin with the question of angelic 'īsma. When, in Q. 2.30, God informs the angels that He is going to make man, and that man will commit less than pleasant things upon the earth, the angels question him about it. On the face of this passage, it would appear that the angels committed a sin in gainsaying the decree of God; this would seem to violate the doctrine of angelic 'īsma. Our commentator replies:

God made known to them ... that He would make to inhabit the earth one who would commit sin and killing, and when God said that He had formed Adam, created him, and placed him on the earth as a *khalifa*, the angels spoke in the aspect of questioning and seeking of knowledge... and on this aspect it is proper. And so God answered them: *I know what you do not know*, making clear that He is the knower of future good...<sup>43</sup>

The angels' actions are reinterpreted, not as the gainsaying of God's will, but honest, and blameless, acts of inquiry. God responds by informing them of the limitations of their knowledge, and then manifests the prophethood and glory of Adam; He does not punish them for insolence. The prophetic parallel of this interpretation is in the account of Abraham in which he asks God about life, death, and resurrection; while this questioning could be interpreted as doubt, our commentator sees it as curious, and blameless, inquiry.<sup>44</sup> Extracting angels from blame for sin could prove more difficult, however, as the story of Harut and Marut reveals. To shorten a long and involved discussion of the two angels, their relationship to sorcery, and the nature and ramifications of sorcery in general, 'Abd al-Jabbār's argument is that Harut and Marut intended for the knowledge of sorcery they shared to be as a warning against its evil—not for its use. Alas, as with mice and men, the best laid plans of angels can also go awry, and in time people misused

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<sup>42</sup> 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Tanzīh*, 72.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

the knowledge, applying sorcery to the dividing of husband and wife. But the two angels were not to blame—they were only messengers, and are hence relieved of wrong-doing.<sup>45</sup>

So much for angels. Regarding prophets and their *'iṣma*, we may examine two important examples in which the doctrine of *'iṣma* seems fatally compromised: Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden, and the nefarious actions of Joseph's brothers. In the first, 'Abd al-Jabbār argues that after eating of the forbidden tree, God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden, but not as a 'punitive penalty,' which would imply the commitment of a major sin—something our commentator is of course unwilling to attribute to them, noting the immunity of prophets from such things. But did they not sin in violating God's command? 'Abd al-Jabbār does not deny their mistake, but rather downgrades it and excuses it: in short, Adam and Eve were confused about the command and failed to interpret it correctly. After their expulsion, God no longer held this slip against them. The two are thus absolved of potentially troubling blame (though the also apparently troubling implication that they were incapable of proper understanding vis-à-vis God's command is left untouched).<sup>46</sup>

In the case of Joseph's brothers, absolution from major sin seems rather hard to derive: after all, the brothers did speculate on killing their brother, not to mention their actions that actually transpired. Yet they are all reckoned to be among the prophets, and hence under the protection of *'iṣma*. In response to this problem, 'Abd al-Jabbār offers a solution similar to al-Maturidī's above, though here elaborated and defended. The answer is quite simple, if not entirely satisfactory: all that transpired among the brothers occurred before their attainment of full legal responsibility (*taklīf*); that is, while they were still children. In support of this contention, the theologian argues that the brothers' talk of Joseph 'feasting and frolicking' attests to their state of immaturity, as those things would not be said about adults. Once having established this argument, 'Abd al-Jabbār reiterates it where necessary, referring the reader to his prior conclusion. Finally, one more example of defense of prophetic *'iṣma*—a more satisfactory defense, perhaps—will suffice to conclude our examination of the *Tanzīh*. How is it right, a questioner might ask, that Joseph praise himself in saying *Place me over the treasures of the land; I am a preserver and knowing*, when God has forbidden such self-aggrandizement? 'Abd al-Jabbār answers: Joseph's intention was not self-praise, but rather for a greater good, knowing that his appointment would rebound to the common good.<sup>47</sup>

V. *Conclusion*: This study of the exegesis of al-Maturidī and 'Abd al-Jabbār has only scratched the surface of these two *mutikallimūn*'s contributions to the field *tafsīr* and their engagement with the Qur'an and its exegesis. Much more is necessary, just in regards to the texts considered here: full studies of both texts in all their complexity and details, as well as study of the transmission and afterlives of both texts. For each theologian, a study of their wider exegetical methods and engagement with the Qur'an, within and without genre-specific exegetical literature, is in order. Beyond these two theologians, the field of kalāmīc *tafsīr*, and the intersection of kalām and *tafsīr* beyond that, is certainly in order. To give one rather obscure example from the post-classical era, in an early fourteenth century *tafsīr* by one 'Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Khazīn al-Baghdadī,

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 217.

questions from the field of kalām appear over and over again, from the ‘*īṣma* of angels,<sup>48</sup> to the perennial issue of human capacity and determinism,<sup>49</sup> to defense of the ‘*īṣma* of Joseph’s brothers.<sup>50</sup> What are the genealogical links between a text such as that and the early kalāmīc tafsīr examined here? How did the exegetical conventions and questions and concerns—what I have identified as falling under the ‘kalāmīc mode’—find their way into other configurations of tafsīr, especially those that—like al-Khazīn’s—cannot be considered the product of *mutakallimūn* per se?

Obviously these questions cannot be answered here. What we have uncovered, at least in part, is the following: for both al-Maturidī and ‘Abd al-Jabbār, the preoccupations, concerns, and particularly intellectual patterns and practices typical of kalām have deeply marked their commentary on the Qur’an, albeit in different ways and through different methodologies. For both, a rationalizing, even polemically rationalizing, approach concerned especially with the evident meaning of the text is crucial; at the same time, both are willing to effectively reshape the meaning of the text in concordance with specific doctrinal demands, bringing exegesis into line with theology. Alongside this process of reconfiguring exegesis to meet kalāmīc interests, both commentators introduce permutations of their theological ‘systems’ (applicable in ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s case, perhaps less so for al-Maturidī) that would not otherwise appear: the demands of both the Qur’anic text and the tafsīr genre generate this transformation. This migration of kalām to tafsīr meant many things, but I wish to conclude with one easily overlooked possibility. The migration and translation of theology into Qur’an commentary has resulted, at least in these two cases, in theology rendered more legible and more accessible, in more ways than one. It is generally easier to read and comprehend; the *Tanzīh* is much less dense than, say, the *Mughnī*. Finally, through being linked directly to the Qur’an, kalāmīc theology was, in some ways, rendered more ‘legitimate’ and more metaphorically legible to Muslims for whom, otherwise, kalām was a distant, and perhaps threatening, preoccupation of difficult, obscure theologians. Tafsīr

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<sup>48</sup> ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad Khāzin al-Baghdādī, *Tafsīr Al-Khāzin Al-Musammá Lubāb Al-Ta’wīl Fī Ma’ānī Al-Tanzīl* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr), 1.69-70: To summarize al-Khāzin’s discussion here: All Muslims are agreed that in terms of reception and transmission of prophetic message, both angels and prophets are infallible. However, beyond this, there is disagreement. Some people of truth and all Mu’tazilites say that *all* angels are immune from sin and disobedience, arguing through revelation and reason. Another group argues that angels who are not sent as messengers are not without sin, also arguing through revelation and reason, including the story of Harut and Marut as transmitted through a wide number of transmitters and included in tafsīr like al-Tabarī’s. The proponents of the first party, however, answer by saying that the stories (as there are variants) are not sound, but come from Jewish sources, and that the Jews have lied about the angels. Furthermore, the stories are unsound on particular points, which leads al-Khāzin to reject them as “weak.”

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.63.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.6: In short: One may ask: of all of the things Joseph’s brothers did—their envy, their misguidedness, their disobedience—these are all major sins, and none of them are congruent with prophethood. Yet they are supposed to be prophets? Why were they not immune to these sins? Answer: All of these actions of the brothers of Joseph sprang out of them before the establishment of prophethood in them. ‘*Isma* does not become activated in the prophets before the time of the realization of their prophethood. It is said that at the time of these things they were still adolescents, before the attainment of maturity, hence before the assumption of legal responsibility. Hence this is not a degradation of their prophethood.



such as these brought theology down to the rich earth of the Qur'an, and opened for it a new means of flourishing and spreading beyond its former bounds.

*Appendix I: Sample Tafsīr Texts:*<sup>51</sup>

**a. [al-Maturidī?], *Tafsīr al-Maturidī*, 209-211:** And His words, strong and mighty is He—*There is in Joseph and his brother a sign for those who ask...*: a sign for the questioner when the questioner is seeking right guidance, and like the entirety of the Qur'an [is thus], it is an argument and a sign for those seeking right guidance, and as for the obstinate, it is a sign *against* him.

Then His words, *A sign for those who ask*, could mean the questioners who asked, according to what was mentioned in one of the stories (*fi ba'd al-qisṣa*) that the Jews asked the Prophet about the affair of Joseph and his tidings, so he related to them by the truth regarding what happened, so it is a sign for them if that is established [i.e., if the tradition about the Jews asking about Joseph is established].

His words, *A sign for those who ask*, could mean the questioners who ask about the tidings of Joseph, from before to the end of the age—all who ask about the report of him and tidings of him—it is a sign for them.

Then an aspect whereby He makes it as a sign could mean several things: The first of them: That He made the story of Joseph and his tidings a *sura*, and this *sura* is the signs of the Book, according to what was mentioned—*this sign of the clear writing*, making the story of Joseph and his tidings signs from the Book. And it is also possible that He made it a sign, that is, an argumentative proof (*hujja*) for the prophethood of His Messenger and his message, because his story and his tidings were in their books which he [Muḥammad] could not understand, without translation or explanation, then he related to them according to what was in their books without expansion or diminishment, indicating that he was taught by God—exalted is He—not that he took it from their books. And it is what is mentioned in the story that the Jews heard the Prophet reciting the *sura* of Joseph, so they said: 'O Muḥammad! Who taught you that?' He said: 'God taught me.' So they marveled about his recitation of what was in their books, indicating that he was taught it by God, exalted is He. Then it is possible that it is a sign for he who asked about the argumentative proof of his message, or it is a sign for one who is asked about it. And God knows best.

And His words, mighty and powerful is He: *Then they said: Joseph and his brother are more loved by our father than we are, and we are a band ('uṣbatun)*: In the verse is an indication that it is alright that a man single out one of his children by being favorably disposed towards him and inclining towards him, *if* there is something about him not present in anyone else, and because of this our authorities say: it is alright that a man single out one of his children with a present or charitable gift to him if he does not intend by that injustice against the other children.

Then it is possible that the singling out by Jacob of Joseph and his brother with love towards them was of several aspects: the first of them: when he saw in them weakness in their souls, and incapacity in their bodies, so he increased his compassion to them and inclined it towards them because of that, and this is from what is common among people. Or that [singling out] was from him to them due to their youth, and this also is known among people that the younger of the children are more beloved, and their hearts are more inclined to them, and towards them they are more favorably disposed, they are more merciful towards them than to the older children. Or, he singled them out by that due to the special virtue that was theirs in the way of religion (*al-dīn*), or knowledge (*al-'ilm*), or something else, God having commanded him with that due to that, unlike the others. Or, when Jacob rejoiced at the prophethood of Joseph he preferred him over all his other children, so he honoured him over them because of that. Moreover, their saying *Joseph and*

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<sup>51</sup> These are obviously rough translations; my apologies for their unfinished nature.

*his brother are more loved by our father than we are* is through honours evident to them, otherwise the reality of the love would not have been known.

**b. ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Tanzīh al-Qur’ān ‘an Al-Maṭā’in*, 57-9:** They say regarding His words: *Those who are struck by something say: We are God’s, and to Him we will return:* how is it correct to say that one ‘returns to God’ when He is not in a place?

Our answer: the intended meaning by ‘return to God’ is that no judgment is operative save by the command of God, as one says concerning two disputants—the matter of the two ‘returns’ to the judge or the emir, and the intention here is that he [the judge or emir] becomes the one legally responsible for that. It is the custom in this world that other than God possess affairs in that God has assigned him [them], but in the Other World that will be different.

...

God issued a very stern rebuke concerning suppression of the truth through His words: *Verily, those who suppress the proofs and the guidance which We revealed, after We had made it clear to mankind in the Book: they are cursed by God and by the cursers.* It is said that the intended meaning of ‘the cursers’ is the angels, and that is the outermost limit of rebuke for the suppression of the truth. Then He indicated that this curse ceases with repentance, saying: *Except those who repent, do well, and make clear what they suppressed/* And God calls notice through His words: *Those who disbelieve and die, they are unbelievers, upon whom is the curse of God and of the angels,* that whoever repents from unbelief departs from this judgment.

And He makes clear through His words: *Your God, He is one God, there is no god save He:* that the thing necessary in terms of worship is that one attribute to Him oneness. And He makes clear the indication of Him and upon His oneness through His words: *Verily, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the division of day and night.* The mention of these verses is indication of God, and that He is unique in divinity, and He makes [this] clear elsewhere in saying: *In that is a sign for people who comprehend (ya’qilūn).*

The obligation is upon the rational that they think upon these things in all of their states, as God said: *Those who remember God standing, sitting, lying on their sides, meditating on the creation of the heavens and the earth. Our Lord—You made nothing in jest!* It is known that worship consists of the prayer and the fast and other things which are necessary for them in a state (ḥāl) to the exclusion of [other] states. But worship through remembrance of God, knowledge of Him, meditation on His graces, and thanksgiving for His munificences—these are necessary in all states!

And upon this aspect He said: *Have they not reflected upon the domain of the heavens and the earth and what God created, and that their appointed time is near?* So He blames those who do not reflect on two things: one of them is meditation on all that God has created in order to establish by that His oneness. The other is meditation on the closeness of the appointed time (*al-ajal*), for the cautioning of the one who abandons repentance and preparation. So He points out the necessity of remembering these two things in every state.

**Ibid., 213-214:** And perhaps it is said about His words, exalted is He: *They said: Joseph and his brother are more loved by our father than we are, and we are a band; verily, our father is clearly astray:* How is that permissible to them, they being prophets or candidates for prophecy?

We reply: The proper place of the son in relation to his father is that [the father] rank him in a rank equal to all his sons, so their words are not evil if by verily, our father is clearly astray, their meaning is his dwindling from their condition this state [of equality]. Otherwise, if [what they said is evil], then it was before the state of legal responsibility (*al-taklīf*) according to what His words indicate: *Send him with us tomorrow and he will feast and frolic,* because these words do not apply save to the state of the child and the absence of the perfection of reason. And their words, *Let us kill or mislay Joseph,* are likewise sound because of the state of the child and the absence of the perfection of reason, and likewise all that they did to Joseph when Jacob sent him with them.

Then if it is said: How is the state the state of the child when He said afterwards: *We inspired in him [Joseph's brother]: you will notify them of this their affair; they do not know.*

We reply: It is possible that this was of a piece with His words: *And your Lord inspired the ant:* and that is by the way of instinctual inspiration or the manifestation of a sign. It is also possible that this inspiration was given to Jacob, due to the previous mention of Jacob.

**Ibid., 217:** And perhaps it is said: how is it permissible on Joseph's part that he praised himself, saying *Place me over the treasuries of the land; I am a preserver and knowing:* for praising one's self is reprehensible and forbidden in accordance with God's words, *Do not commend yourselves.* And how is it permissible for the prophet that he be appointed to an office from an unbeliever?

We reply: Praise of self in time of need is acceptable—the intention is not praise [for its own sake], rather, the intention is an aspect which brings about benefit, and it is in accordance with this aspect that Muhammad said: 'I am the lord (*sayyid*) of the son of Adam, but not proud.' He pointed out through his words 'and not proud' that his intention was not self-praise. So also Joseph manifested that when during his officeholding the treasuries were for designated for the common good during the harsh years. And as for his appointment before an unbeliever, that is allowable in so far as it is not prohibited by the law—if the king is an unbeliever, it is allowable, and if he is a believer, then there is no question about it.

## *Appendix II: Selected Passages from Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-Akbar:*

**a. On the first article of *al-Fiqh al-Akbar: 6-7:*** When you [the Mu'tazila] speak and argue by this verse ['Whoever intentionally kills a believer, his reward is forever/a long time (*khāladan*) in the Fire'] it is due to your obstinate foolishness, and your collective disagreement. If happiness favored you, you did not follow, and what you innovated in and disagreed with the Companions and those after them among the people of tafsīr—all of them agreed that the meaning of this verse is the regarding as lawful of killing, as ibn 'Abbās, the interpreter of the Qur'an, said. On this regard, we do not grant that the staying (*al-khulūd*) should be interpreted as being eternal, but rather as long duration of time. The masters of language and of clear proofs have argued for this sense, in that one says: 'So-and-so remained a long time in prison' when he was imprisoned for a long time. And God, exalted is He, said: 'But he remained in the land a long time,' that is, he inclined towards [the land] and was secure in it.

Then if it is said: it is related about the Prophet that he said: 'Whoever intentionally abandons ritual prayer has committed unbelief,' and in another hadith: between belief and unbelief is the abandonment of ritual prayer.' We say: the interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of the report is like the interpretation of the verse according to what we have [already] clarified.

Among the indications that faith (*al-īmān*) is not removed due to major sins is God's saying: 'If there comes to you a corrupt person with a notification, then announce [it],' commanding the establishment of the notification of the corrupt person—and if he had become an unbeliever, then the reception of his testimony would be prohibited. And the story of Mā'iz ibn Mālik is also an argument, wherein he confessed adultery before the Prophet: if he had become an apostate, then [the Prophet] would have ordered his killing or his returning to Islam.

The meaning in it is that faith's substrate (*maḥalluhu*) is the heart, while acts of disobedience have their substrate in the limbs—the two substrates are different, so they do not cancel each other out.