

A Preliminary Conceptual History of the Science of *Ta'wīl*: From the Period of the Prophet Muḥammad to al-Ghazālī

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Abstract

This article offers a preliminary conceptual history of the science of *ta'wīl* from the time of the Prophet Muḥammad to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111 CE). While *ta'wīl* has long been recognised as integral to *ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, its formal development as an independent discipline remains underexplored compared to *tafsīr*. Drawing upon both classical sources and modern analytical frameworks, this article argues that the conceptual and methodological sophistication of *ta'wīl* emerged alongside, and often within, *tafsīr*. The article employs the classical three-period periodisation of *tafsīr* while integrating Alparslan Açıkgenç's historical model of scientific development in Islamic intellectual history. Through this dual framework, the study demonstrates how *ta'wīl* progressively evolved in scope, terminology, and method, attaining its earliest systematic and scientific maturity in the works of al-Ghazālī. The survey in this article, although inexhaustive, establishes a conceptual groundwork for future research and highlights the significance of tracing the intellectual development of *ta'wīl* in safeguarding its conceptual and practical integrity.

Keywords:

Ta'wīl, *tafsīr*, conceptual history, *ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, scientific development, Islamic scientific tradition in history, al-Ghazālī.

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Introduction

In its contemporary technical usage, the concept of *ta'wīl* is defined as “the reorientation of a verbal expression from its apparent signification towards a preponderant meaning, as determined by a contextual indicator (*sarf al-kalām ‘an zāhīrihi ilā ma'nā marjūh li-qarīnah tadullu ‘alayhi*).”¹ Its more classical definition is:

the process of deflecting speech (*sarf al-lafz*) from its apparent meaning—which represents the dominant probability—to an alternative meaning that the expression can bear, provided this shift is justified by stronger accompanying evidence. This process is undertaken with the objective of actualising the intent of the Lawgiver (*sarf al-lafz ‘an al-ihtimāl al-rājiḥ bi-dalālat al-zāhir ilā ma'nā ākhar yahtamiluhu al-lafz bi-dalīl aqwā yaqtarinu bihi wa-yaj'aluhi rājiḥan taḥqīqan li-irādāt al-Shāri*).²

Both definitions exhibit a high degree of technicality, implying that the concept has been debated, elaborated, and refined extensively throughout centuries of intellectual development. Yet, when inquiring into how this sophistication emerged—specifically the history of *ta'wīl* as a scientific concept—the materials providing satisfactory answers remain scarce.³

Hence, this article offers a brief conceptual history of the development of the science of *ta'wīl*. In presenting this history, the methodological entry point follows the established three-stage periodisation of the development of *tafsīr*. Subsequently, these findings are juxtaposed with the periodisation scheme formulated by Alparslan Açıkgenç in his work, *The Islamic Scientific Tradition in History*.⁴ Açıkgenç's scheme is deliberately selected for its analytical framework in tracing the development of Muslim scientific activities. Through this lens, it becomes observable that *ta'wīl*, in terms of content and practice, was ever-present within *tafsīr*. However, regarding its formal development as a science—specifically the formulation of a formal definition (*ta'rīf*) and systematic methodologies (*qawā'id*)—*ta'wīl* only reached its first instance of systematic and scientific sophistication during the time of and with al-Ghazālī.

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1. Musā'īd al-Ṭayyār, *Maḥmūd al-Tafsīr wa al-Ta'wīl wa al-Istinbāt wa al-Tadabbur wa al-Mufasssīr* (Riyadh: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 2006), 102.
 2. Al-Ṭāhir 'Amir, *Al-Ta'wīl 'inda al-Mufasssīr al-Salaf* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2011), 67.
 3. Insofar as this article is privy, the only advanced study on the topic of the history of the science of *ta'wīl* is by al-Ṭāhir 'Amir. Even so, al-Ṭāhir still follows the standard periodical division of the three formative periods in addition to two additional periods: The Golden Period (*marḥalat al-namw wa al-izdihār*) and the Period of Reformation and Renewal (*marḥalat al-iṣlāḥ wa al-tajdīd*). Refer *ibid.*, 280.
 4. Alparslan Açıkgenç, *Islamic Scientific Tradition in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit IKIM, 2014), 83.

Another noteworthy methodological point is the selection of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE) as the terminus of the present historical survey. This choice is dictated by the article's scope: as the study focuses specifically on the formative and formal development of the science of *ta'wīl*, it does not extend into periods where the discipline had already transitioned from formation and formalisation into refinement and sophistication. A central argument of this article is that *ta'wīl* attained its first formal conceptual and methodological systematicity with al-Ghazālī; thereafter, the science progressed into a stage of refinement, beginning with Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210 CE) and others. Consequently, the timeframe observed here encompasses the period from the Prophet Muḥammad until al-Ghazālī's era in the twelfth century.

A History of *Tafsīr*

According to the established Islamic periodisation, the formal development of the science of *tafsīr* can be observed across three stages (*al-marḥalah al-thalāthah*): the period of the Prophet Muḥammad and the Companions; the period of the Successors (*Tābi'īn*); and the period of the Successors of the Successors, also known as the Period of Compilation (*ʿahd al-tadwīn*).⁵ These three stages fall into two fundamental divisions: the periods before and after compilation.⁶ Açıkgenç, conversely, designates these two divisions as the pre-scientific and scientific periods.⁷

Tafsīr in the Time of the Prophet Muḥammad and the Companions (ʿAṣr al-Nabiyy wa al-Ṣaḥābah)

The activity of *tafsīr* began during the lifetime of the Prophet Muḥammad as the Qurʾān was revealed verse by verse.⁸ The Prophet himself served as the primary commentator.⁹ While his commentaries were occasionally unprompted, they were usually elicited by the curiosity or differing understandings of the Companions, which were attributable to several factors. Firstly, the varying amount of time the Companions spent with the Prophet led to differences in

5. Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrīn* (Cairo: Dār al-Hadīth, 2012), 33; and Muḥammad ʿAbd al-ʿAzīm al-Zurqānī, *Manāhil al-ʿIrḥān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1995), 30.

6. By compilation, al-Zurqānī explains that the sciences known to and practised by the Prophet Muḥammad and his Companions were later penned down as “systematised sciences” (*al-funūn al-mudawwanah*) by succeeding scholars who were well-trained by the Companions themselves. See al-Zurqānī, *Manāhil al-ʿIrḥān*, 30; and Faḍl Ḥassan ʿAbbās, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrīn*, 3 vols. (Jordan: Dār al-Nafāʿis, 2016), 1:119.

7. Açıkgenç, *Islamic Scientific Tradition*, 90.

8. Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-ʿIbar wa Dīwān al-Mubtadaʾ wa al-Khabar fī Tārīkh al-ʿArab wa al-Barīr wa Man ʿAsarahum min Dhawī al-Shaʿn al-Akbar*, aw *Tārīkh Ibn Khaldūn*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 554.

9. *Ibid.*

the degrees of training and education they received.¹⁰ For instance, ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās spent much of his youth with the Prophet,¹¹ whereas ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb had fewer such opportunities due to his involvement in external affairs.¹²

Secondly, many Companions were illiterate and unfamiliar with advanced pre-Islamic poetry, which represented the pinnacle of Arabic eloquence prior to the Qur’ān. Consequently, mastery of Arabic and Qur’ānic vocabulary (*mufraḍāt al-Qur’ān*) varied.¹³ While less educated Companions understood only simple verses, their more learned peers could penetrate more complex ones. An example is when ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, while on the pulpit,¹⁴ inquired about the meaning of *al-takhawwuf* in *Sūrat al-Nahl* (16):47; a man from Banī Hudhayl clarified that, for them, “*al-takhawwuf* meant *al-tanaqqus* (diminution).”¹⁵ Thirdly, even among the educated, intellectual capabilities differed, as evidenced by the varying activities of *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) used for interpretation.¹⁶

The sources of interpretation at this time followed a systematic priority: the Qur’ān, the Prophet Muḥammad, *ijtihād* and *istinbāt* (deduction), and finally, materials from the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitāb*).¹⁷ Regarding the first two sources, personal opinion was generally absent. Interpretation via the Qur’ān was guided by the Prophet, who identified cross-referencing verses and distinguished between specific (*mubayyan*) and general (*mujmal*) meanings, abrogating (*al-nāsikh*) and abrogated (*al-mansūkh*) verses, and occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*).¹⁸ The Prophet’s own interpretations were derived from revealed knowledge. For example, he interpreted *kawthar* in *Sūrat al-Kawthar* (108):1 as “a river gifted by my Lord to me in Paradise.”¹⁹ Prophetic interpretations are categorised as direct (*mubāshir*), where the Prophet himself specified which verse serves as interpretation for the verse in question; or indirect (*ghayr mubāshir*), where later scholars matched unspecified *ḥadīths* to specific verses. It is in the latter category that the space for *ta’wīl* later emerged.

10. Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Taḥfīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 36.

11. See Abī ‘Umar Yūsuf bin ‘Abd Allāh bin Muḥammad bin ‘Abd al-Barr, *Al-Istī‘āb fī Ma’rifat al-Ashāb* (Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1992), 1009.

12. ‘Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb was always tasked with attending to political affairs of the Muslim community. Therefore, there was little time that he was able to spend with the Prophet Muḥammad in an intellectual environment. See *Ibid.*, 1144. See also Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. 1 (Riyadh: Dār al-Salām, 1997), 244.

13. Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Taḥfīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 35.

14. *Ibid.*

15. That is, the punishment sent by God reduced or annihilated the sinners to atoms. See: Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl Ayyi al-Qur’ān*, vol. 4 (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1994), 524.

16. Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Taḥfīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 35.

17. *Ibid.*, 37.

18. Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Ibar*, 1:554.

19. Narrated by al-Bukhārī. See Ismā‘īl bin ‘Umar ibn Kathīr, *Al-Miṣbāḥ al-Munīr fī Tahdhīb Taḥfīr Ibn Kathīr* (Riyadh: Dār al-Salām, 1990), 1536.

The Prophet Muḥammad did not provide an interpretation for the entirety of the Qur'ān. Consequently, this opened a path to a third source of interpretation during that period: personal reasoning (*ijtihād*) and rational deduction (*istinbāt*). These processes were facilitated by a profound knowledge of the Arabic language and customs (*luḡhat al-ʿArab wa ʿādātihim*), the socio-political conditions of the Arabian Peninsula (*aḥwāl al-jazīrah*) and its non-Muslim populations, the occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), and the Companions' own vast capacity for understanding and keen perception (*quwwat al-fahm wa al-idrāk*).²⁰ This third source resulted in varying interpretations among the Companions, which differed based on their access to the *Sunnah* and their individual degrees of comprehension. For instance, upon the revelation of *al-Mā'idah* (5):3, which pronounced the completion of the religion of Islam, many Companions rejoiced. ʿUmar, however, wept because he understood that the verse signalled not only glad tidings but also the impending challenges and corruption that would follow.²¹ While others adhered to the apparent meaning of the verse, ʿUmar perceived its ultimate significance: the conclusion of the Prophetic mission and the approaching demise of the Prophet. In this instance, the practice of *ta'wīl* by someone other than the Prophet began to manifest.

The fourth source comprised materials from the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitāb*). The Qur'ān aligns with previous Scriptures in various respects, particularly regarding accounts of ancient Prophets (*qaṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*) and the annihilated peoples of the past (*al-umam al-sābiqah al-ghābirah*). However, the Qur'ān often omits specific details, focusing instead on ethical lessons (*ʿibrah*).²² This purposeful omission piqued the interest of several Companions, particularly those of Jewish or Christian origin—such as Ka'ab al-Aḥbār, Wahb bin Munabbih, and ʿAbd Allāh bin Salām—who sought to fill these narrative gaps using *Isrā'īliyyāt* materials.²³ Nonetheless, these sources were utilised only within a limited scope. The Companions did not refer to *Isrā'īliyyāt* for matters of creed (*ʿaqidah*) or worship (*ʿibādah*).²⁴ Even in historical contexts, such materials were entertained only to enrich the Qur'ānic discourse rather than to serve as formal substantiation or proof.

20. Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Taḥfīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 54. See also Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān fī Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1990), 36–37.

21. Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Taḥfīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 55. For the narration, see al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, 9:519.

22. Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Taḥfīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 56.

23. Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Ibar*, 1:555.

24. Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Taḥfīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 57.

Distinctive Characteristics of the Time of the Prophet Muḥammad and the Companions

First, *tafsīr* activities were circumstantial rather than systematic. The Companions did not attempt an exhaustive, verse-by-verse exegesis, focusing only on verses that raised ambiguity. The motive was predominantly pragmatic and ethical rather than academic.²⁵ Second, disagreements were rare due to an epistemic attitude that favoured general understanding (*ijmālī*) for ethical guidance over minute, detailed analysis (*tafsīlī*).²⁶ Third, the limited need for intensive interpretation meant that deductive reasoning was rarely employed; the default approach was to seek clarification from other verses or the Prophet himself.²⁷ At this stage, *tafsīr* and *taʾwīl* were not yet technical terms with formal definitions, as interpretations occurred in daily conversation rather than academic study. Nevertheless, they already existed as distinctive practices. The two examples involving ʿUmar provide a glimpse of this distinction: his interpretation of *al-Nahl* (16):47 is an early example of *tafsīr* aided by external proof (*dilālah ḡāhirah*), while his reading of *al-Māʾidah* (5):3 is an act of *taʾwīl* uncovered through internal proof (*dilālah bāṭinah*).²⁸

Tafsīr in the Time of the Successors and the Successors of the Successors (ʿAṣr al-Tābiʿīn wa Tābiʿ al-Tābiʿīn)

As the Islamic Empire expanded, many Companions migrated to various regions to serve as mentors (*nuqabāʾ*), teaching the religion to newly Islamised communities. This new generation of Muslims, known as the Successors (*al-Tābiʿīn*), learned from these primary sources and eventually emerged as scholars in their own right. Regarding *tafsīr*, influential commentators among the Companions included ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbbās, Ubayy ibn Kaʿab, and ʿAbd Allāh ibn Masʿūd,²⁹ who established centres of learning in Makkah, Madinah, and Iraq respectively. Their distinctive intellectual circles and interpretive approaches then led to the formation of formal schools of exegesis (*madāris al-tafsīr*).

The School of Makkah was founded upon the teachings of ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbbās (d. 687 CE)—the “Expositor of the Qurʾān” (*Turjumān al-Qurʾān*)—which focused on explaining the ambiguities of the text. The Successors narrated his sayings and derived further implications from them.³⁰ This school was the first to

25. Ibid., 89.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 90.

28. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud. “*Tafsīr* dan *Taʾwīl* sebagai Metode Ilmiah,” in *Himpunan Karya Pilihan* (Kuala Lumpur: RZS-CASIS, 2022), 119–120.

29. Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 91; and al-Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān*, 1:37.

30. Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 93.

explore hypothetical rulings and incorporate *Isrā'īlīyyāt* materials.³¹ The former was prompted by the influx of pilgrims from newly Islamised lands bringing new issues to resolve, while the latter stemmed from Ibn 'Abbās's own interest in those sources.³² Its most defining feature was a unique linguistic approach: replacing ambiguous Qur'ānic terms with more familiar alternatives, a method that would eventually be integrated into the later Period of Compilation.³³

The School of Madinah uniquely centred around the eminence of Ubayy ibn Ka'ab (d. 649 CE), who had the greatest number of students among the expert Companions in the city.³⁴ This school strongly objected the exercise of personal opinion and did not focus heavily on interpretation. Instead, its primary activities revolved around alternative recitations (*qirā'āt*) and the clarification of the occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*).³⁵ Meanwhile, the School of Iraq was founded by 'Abd Allāh ibn Mas'ūd, who was commissioned by Caliph 'Umar as a mentor for the community in Kufah alongside Governor 'Ammār bin Yāsir. This school was renowned for its rational (*ra'y*) approach to interpretation.³⁶ Ibn Mas'ūd is credited with laying the foundation for this methodology, which was subsequently inherited by later scholars of Iraq.³⁷ In this period, a new source of interpretation was formally added: the personal interpretations of the Companions (*aqwāl ṣaḥābiyyah*),³⁸ which were gathered and preserved by their students.

Distinctive Characteristics of the Time of the Successors

The first distinctive feature of this period was the expansion of the exegetical scope (*dā'irat al-tafsīr*).³⁹ The Successors provided interpretations for many verses that had not been commented upon by the previous generation.⁴⁰ Despite this expansion, the activity of *tafsīr* retained its traditional form of oral transmission (*al-talaqqī wa al-rivāyah*). Furthermore, there was now a much heavier reliance on narrations—the *Sunnah* of the Prophet and the *akhbār* and *āthār* of the Companions—as scholars no longer had direct access to the Prophet or to the Companions living in other regions. This became the second distinctive

31. Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'ānic Exegesis: Genesis and Development* (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 149.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 150.

34. Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 104.

35. Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'ānic Exegesis*, 152.

36. Ibid., 153.

37. Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 109.

38. Ibid., 91.

39. 'Abbās, *Al-Tafsīr wa Al-Mufasssīrūn*, 169.

40. Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 117.

feature. Interestingly, while *Isrāʾ ʾilīyyāt* materials were collected,⁴¹ the motive was primarily preservation rather than critical analysis; they were gathered to enrich the discourse of *tafsīr* rather than to serve as formal substantiation.

The third characteristic was the formal emergence of the *madāris al-tafsīr* (schools of *tafsīr*) based on the dispersion of the Companions to distant regions.⁴² The School of Iraq stood out as the earliest formal proponent of *al-tafsīr bi al-raʾy*. This intellectual environment eventually gave rise to various schools of thought—including the Qadarites, Jabarites, Murjiʿites, Khārijites, and Shīʿites—leading to the fourth characteristic: the emergence of sectarian interpretation (*taʾwīl madhhabī*).⁴³ Sects began interpreting specific verses to justify their respective doctrines.⁴⁴ Consequently, *taʾwīl* began to assume a technical connotation, albeit with a negative nuance, implying the manipulation of verses to fit an ideological agenda. Yet, despite this increasing technicality, the concept had not yet reached a high level of definitional and methodological complexity.

Tafsīr in the Age of Compilation (ʿAṣr al-Tadwīn)

According to Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406 CE), this period was driven by two prevailing trends. The first was the tradition of *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* (transmissional exegesis), which ultimately paved the way for the emergence of various linguistic disciplines (*dirāsāt lughawīyah*), exemplified by the works of Abī ʿUbaydah (d. 825 CE) and al-Farrāʾ (d. 822 CE).⁴⁵ Initially, *tafsīr* works were limited to narrating reports without additional annotations. The genre then progressed to include the opinions (*aqwāl*) of the Companions and Successors, a trend that culminated in the encyclopaedic works of al-Ṭabarī, al-Wāqidi, and al-Thaʿalabī,⁴⁶ representing the whole tradition of *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr*.⁴⁷

Eventually, the inclusion of variant *qirāʾāt* and grammatical analyses (*iʿrāb*) allowed linguistic studies to become an integral part of the method of *tafsīr*.⁴⁸ This integration led *tafsīr* to transition from being a subsidiary of *ḥadīth* studies into an independent science.⁴⁹ The synthesis of transmitted reports (*maʾthūr*) and linguistic analysis (*lughah*) led to the birth of the first systematic rational exegesis (*al-tafsīr bi al-raʾy*), most famously represented by al-Ṭabarī (d. 923

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid., 92.

43. See ʿAbbās, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 171.

44. Ibid., 120.

45. Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Ibar*, 1:554. This opinion is corroborated by ʿAbbās. See ʿAbbās, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 1:246.

46. Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Ibar*, 1:554.

47. Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 131.

48. ʿAbbās, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 1:247.

49. Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qurʾanic Exegesis*, 137.

CE) in his *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āyi al-Qur'ān*. Al-Ṭabarī's work is considered systematic because he did not merely narrate reports, but utilised reasoning⁵⁰ and linguistic analysis⁵¹ to determine which reports were most probable (*tarjih*). Furthermore, vibrant interactions between emerging theological, jurisprudential, and political schools helped complexify and systematise these methods. While the sources remained largely the same as in previous periods,⁵² scholars in the Age of Compilation focused on the meticulous categorisation and systematisation of these sources, including *ḥadīth*, *qirā'āt*, and the reports of the Companions.

Distinctive Characteristics of the Period of Compilation

The Period of Compilation represents the longest era in the history of *tafsīr*—spanning from the end of the seventh or beginning of the eighth century to, insofar this study is concerned, the twelfth century during the time of al-Ghazālī—and is distinguished by several significant developments. First, *tafsīr* began to assume the status of an independent science (*ʿilm*). This is evident in the shifting focus of exegetical works: rather than concentrating primarily on the authenticity of the *isnād* (chains of transmission) for *aḥādīth* used as interpretive tools, the discourse transitioned toward the direct content of the Qur'ānic verses themselves. This focus on content manifested in various forms, including glossary, linguistic, and both brief and detailed paraphrastic exegesis.⁵³

Second, the genre adopted a comprehensive and systematic approach known as the *musalsal* structure, according to which the entire Qur'ān began to be interpreted verse-by-verse. The aforementioned work by al-Ṭabarī serves as a primary example of this exhaustive methodology. Third, the emergence of diverse theological schools and sects led to the production of *tafsīr* works representing specific sectarian perspectives. Notable examples include: *Al-Kashshāf* by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144), which represented the thoughts of the Mu'tazilites; the *Haqā'iq al-Tafsīr* by al-Sulamī (d. 1021) and the *Latā'if al-Ishārāt* by al-Qushayrī (d. 1074) which were some of the *tafāsīr* representing the early Ṣūfis; the *Kanz al-Irfān* by al-Muṭṭahir al-Hillī (d. 1325) representing the Shī'ites community; and others.⁵⁴

Pertaining to the demarcation between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*, the two terms remained technically indistinguishable prior to the twelfth century. Even though al-Ṭabarī's seminal work, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āyi al-Qur'ān*, uses *ta'wīl* in its

50. Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 129; 'Abbās, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 1:245.

51. Wan Mohd Nor, "Tafsīr dan Ta'wīl," 132.

52. 'Abbās, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 1:249.

53. For further details regarding the characteristics of each of the forms of exegesis, see Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis*, 137–138.

54. *Ibid.*, 140. 'Abbās made an extensive survey on some of the notable *tafāsīr* representing all the above-mentioned sects in his *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, vols. 3–4.

title and throughout the text, its contents are fundamentally *tafsīr*.⁵⁵ Thus, while *tafsīr* had developed into a systematic and exact discipline, *ta'wīl* had not yet been ascribed a specific technicality and was largely treated as a synonym for *tafsīr*.

The Formation of the Science of *Ta'wīl*

To analyse the formation of *ta'wīl* as a science, the previously discussed stages of *tafsīr* ought to be reframed using Alparslan Açıkgenç's periodisation scheme. This model consists of five stages: (1) The Stage of Worldview, (2) The Stage of Problems, (3) The Disciplinary Stage, (4) The Naming Stage, and (5) The Take-off Stage.⁵⁶ The formal development of *ta'wīl* can be measured by two criteria: technicality of definition and methodological sophistication. The former refers to the transition of the concept into a specified terminology (*ta'rif istilāhī*), while the latter refers to the complexity of the underlying rules (*qawā'id*) that substantiate said terminology.

The Stage of Worldview (610–660 CE)

In the Stage of Worldview, which corresponds to the period of the Prophet Muḥammad, knowledge activities were generally simple and driven by moral incentives, which subsequently produced a significant movement within Muslim society. According to Açıkgenç, the activities of interpreting the Qur'ān during this time were primarily motivated by moral and spiritual concerns rather than intellectual or academic curiosity.⁵⁷ Consequently, Muslims of this era did not concern themselves with the formal concepts of *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* as much as they did with the practical meanings derived from their application.

Regarding the specific term *ta'wīl*, it is found in only two primary contexts during this period: within the text of the Qur'ān and in a *ḥadīth* where the Prophet Muḥammad prayed for Ibn 'Abbās.⁵⁸ In the Qur'ānic context, the term is consistently paired with or ascribed to the Qur'ān itself,⁵⁹ the eventual unfolding of the Day of Judgment,⁶⁰ the dreams and miracles of Prophet Yūsuf,⁶¹ and the actions of Khidr in the presence of Prophet Mūsā,⁶² or the “ultimate

55. Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Taḥf wa al-Mufaṣṣirūn*, 20.

56. Açıkgenç, *Islamic Scientific Tradition*, 83–93.

57. *Ibid.*, 83.

58. See Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah, n.d.), 58, *ḥadīth* no. 166.

59. *Sūrat Āli 'Imrān* (3):7; *Sūrat Yūnus* (10):39.

60. *Sūrat al-Aḥqāf* (7):53.

61. *Sūrat Yūsuf* (12):6, 21, 36, 37, 44, 45, 100, and 101.

62. *Sūrat al-Kahf* (18):78, 82.

conclusion of things” (*‘āqibat al-ashyā’*).⁶³ All these instances carry motives and implications that are fundamentally moral in nature.

The example of *‘āqibat al-ashyā’*, along with the aforementioned *ḥadīth*, represents the only cases where the term *ta’wīl* is not semantically contextualised and is permitted to convey its basic literal meaning, which signifies the “ultimate conclusion of things.”⁶⁴ Therefore, these two instances are the only examples in which *ta’wīl* was used in a manner approaching technical terminology. At this point, which predates the beginning of its formal development as a science, *ta’wīl* possessed very little technicality and lacked methodological sophistication. Nevertheless, its conceptual contents provided the raw material from which later formal definitions and methodologies were eventually derived.

The Stage of Problems (660–750 CE)

As the Stage of Worldview concluded, it coincided with the beginning of the Stage of Problems, a period during which the younger generation of the Companions lived and *ta’wīl* began to acquire a higher degree of formalisation. This era represents the first half of the Stage of Problems. Where previously the latent conceptual contents of the term were not manifest, they now began to surface. During this stage, *ta’wīl* came to signify the correct contextual application of Qur’ānic verses, as the primary intellectual preoccupation was addressing emerging societal and theological problems.

Ibn ‘Abbās, a prominent member of the aforementioned generation, emphasised this growing formalisation when he urged learned Muslims to learn *ta’wīl* before others interpreted the Qur’ān and Sunnah through an incorrect *ta’wīl* (*yata’awwalūnahu ‘alā ḡhayri ta’wīlihi*).⁶⁵ Ibn ‘Abbās practised this himself; for example, in interpreting *Sūrat al-An‘ām* (6):122, he equated the concepts of “light” (*nūr*) and “the living” (*ḥayy*) with guidance (*hudā*) and the guided (*muḥtadīn*), while “darkness” (*ẓulm*) and “the dead” (*mayyit*) were equated with unbelief (*kufr*) and the erroneous unbeliever (*kāfirān ḍāllān*).⁶⁶ Through this method, he applied the principles of one verse to others pertaining to faith and disbelief.

Similarly, ‘A’ishah described the Prophet Muḥammad’s specific actions during prayer as being a *ta’wīl* of the Qur’ān. She recounted how the Prophet would say, “Glory be to Thee, O God, our Lord, and praise be to Thee. O God, forgive me,” while bowing and prostrating, thereby complying with (*yata’awwalū*)

63. *Sūrat al-Nisā’* (4):59; *al-Isrā’* (17):35.

64. Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 20.

65. Muqātil bin Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil bin Sulaymān*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth, 2003), 26; and C. H. M Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar and Qur’ānic Exegesis in Early Islam* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1993.), 64.

66. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Durr al-Manthūr*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dār al-Ma’rifah, n.d.), 45.

the command in *Sūrat al-Naṣr* (110):3.⁶⁷ This usage echoes the meaning expressed by Ibn ‘Abbās, identifying *taʾwīl* as being “in compliance with” or a “correct application” of a Qur’ānic verse.⁶⁸ At this stage, the concern for *taʾwīl* as a correct application remained largely limited to practical matters ranging from creed (*‘aqīdah*) to jurisprudence (*fiqh*), though in the work of scholarly inclined individuals like Ibn ‘Abbās, the scope occasionally broadened.⁶⁹

The Disciplinary Stage (700–750 CE)

During the second half of the Stage of Problems, which overlapped with the beginning of the Disciplinary Stage, Muslim thinkers were guided by the newly formed worldview as an ideal perspective for understanding and solving a diverse range of issues. This period saw the emergence of various schools of thought, extending from the principles of religion (*uṣūl al-dīn*) and creed (*‘aqīdah*) to jurisprudence (*fiqh*).⁷⁰ It was during this era that *taʾwīl madhhabī* became prevalent. This was marked by a vibrant intellectual culture of discussion and debate among newly established schools of thought, where scholars would frequently critique an opponent’s application of a verse with phrases such as “you have applied it incorrectly” (*akhta ʾa al-taʾwīl*) or “you have applied the Book of Allah otherwise than it was intended” (*taʾawwalta kitāb Allāh ʿalā ghayri taʾwīlihi*).⁷¹ However, the specific methods of “application” intended by *taʾwīl* during this stage were not yet formally or systematically outlined. This lack of formalisation is consistent with Açıkgenç’s framework, which suggests that a standardised set of methods had not yet been established during the Disciplinary Stage. Instead, scholars from different schools were still engaged in the process of deriving methodologies from the Qur’ān and the *Sunnah*, proposing their own understandings of what constituted acceptable methods of *taʾwīl* to be reviewed and critiqued by their peers.⁷²

By the conclusion of this stage, a standard formal and technical definition of *taʾwīl* had yet to be formulated. Scholars remained focused on addressing, cataloguing, and organising problems involving the implementation of *taʾwīl*. For

67. *Muttafaq ʿalayh*. See Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Tabrīzī, *Mishkāt al-Maṣābīh*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār Ihya’ al-Turath, 2004), 522.

68. Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar*, 64.

69. *Ibid.*, 63. Al-Duraynī explains that, at the time, *taʾwīl* as a correct application of the verses of the Qur’ān assumed three forms of practice: (a) specifying the meaning of a general verse (*takhsīs*); (b) taking the agreeable aspects of meaning from apparently contradicting verses (*sūrat al-tawfīq bayna al-mutaʿaridayn*); and (c) *ijtihād* based on the *maqāsid* of the verses (*ijtihād maqāsidī*). See Fathī al-Duraynī, *Al-Manāhij al-Uṣūliyyah fī al-Ijtihād bi al-Raʾyi fī al-Tashrīʿ al-Islāmī* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risālah al-Nāshirūn, 2020), 141–143.

70. Açıkgenç, *Islamic Scientific Tradition*, 198; al-Tāhir ‘Amir, *Al-Taʾwīl*, 88–109.

71. Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar*, 63.

72. Açıkgenç, *Islamic Scientific Tradition*, 88.

example, they began organising verses of the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* into categories of those that could and could not be interpreted through *ta'wīl*. This systematic organisation of problems eventually served as the necessary catalyst for the upcoming formal organisation of methods.

The Naming Stage (750–950 CE)

In Açıkgenç's scheme, the Naming Stage spans approximately from 750 to 950 CE. However, Açıkgenç notes that different sciences progressed at varying paces.⁷³ Regarding *ta'wīl*, which belongs to the tradition of Qur'ānic exegesis, the concept began to be treated more independently in standalone works during the ninth century, such as *Ta'wīl Mukhtalif al-Ḥadīth*⁷⁴ and *Ta'wīl Mushkil al-Qur'ān*⁷⁵ by Ibn Qutaybah (d. 885 CE). In the latter work, Ibn Qutaybah sought to resolve allegations of grammatical and linguistic errors or interpretational problems arising from Qur'ānic ambiguities. Meanwhile, in the former, he defended and reconciled numerous *ḥadīths* that the Mu'tazilites had dismissed as contradictory or irrational. In both works, the primary methods adopted by Ibn Qutaybah were based on the linguistic sciences, cross-referencing between the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, and logical reasoning, all of which often employed simultaneously.⁷⁶

The methodological formulation of *ta'wīl*, by contrast, was only introduced in the closing decades of the Naming Stage during the tenth century by al-Māturīdī (d. 944 CE),⁷⁷ who distinguished between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* in his *Ta'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunnah*.⁷⁸ His distinction, however, focused more on the qualifications of their respective practitioners than on the definitions and methods of the terms themselves. According to him, *tafsīr* is the domain of the Companions because they witnessed the occurrences of revelation firsthand, an experience inaccessible to others.⁷⁹ This categorisation of *tafsīr* automatically relegated subsequent generations of scholars to the category of *ta'wīl*, which he described as the attempt to “explain the ultimate conclusion of a thing” (*bayān muntahā*

73. Ibid., 90.

74. Ibn Qutaybah, *Ta'wīl Mukhtalif al-Ḥadīth* (n.p.: al-Maktabat al-Islāmī, 1999); and Che Amnah Bahari, *Ta'wīl Mukhtalif al-Ḥadīth: An Annotated Translation* (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2007); and idem, “An Analysis of Ibn Qutaybah's Positive Synchronisation Methodology of *Mukhtalif al-Ḥadīth*,” *TAFHIM: IKIM Journal of Islam and the Contemporary World* 14, no. 1: 69–91. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.56389/tafhim.vol14no1.4>.

75. Ibn Qutaybah, *Ta'wīl Mushkil al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, 1973).

76. Che Amnah Bahari, *Ta'wīl Mukhtalif al-Ḥadīth*, 24.

77. Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar*, 64.

78. Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunnah*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2005), 349.

79. Ibid. Al-Māturīdī describes, “*tafsīr* is for the Companions...[because] the Companions witnessed [the occurrence of revelation] as an [immediate] witness (*shahadū al-mushāhid*), and it is not a privilege except for those who knew [it].”

al-amr).⁸⁰ This distinction led to *ta'wīl* being used exclusively for interpreting ambiguous verses of the Qur'ān, as such verses require more profound research and expertise.⁸¹ Additionally, *ta'wīl* was used as the antonym to interpretive deferment (*tafwīd*), which refers to accepting the external expression of Qur'ānic verses while deferring their actual and exact meanings to God.⁸²

According to 'Abd al-Jalīl, the earliest and only methodological instrument available during this time was the *muhkamāt–mutashābihāt* distinction. This was derived from the Qur'ān (*Sūrat Āli 'Imrān* 3:7) by figures such as al-Qāsim al-Rassī (d. 860 CE) and the theologian al-Jāhīz (d. 868 CE).⁸³ Within this framework, *ta'wīl* was practised exclusively within the domain of the ambiguous (*mutashābihāt*), while the clear verses (*muhkamāt*) remained a forbidden domain for such interpretation.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the domain of *mutashābihāt* verses varied depending on how different sects and schools determined which verses were considered ambiguous.⁸⁵ Therefore, in the Naming Stage—as the name implies—scholars began to derive the “names” of categories, such as *muhkamāt* and *mutashābihāt*, to catalogue verses and facilitate their discussions. While the foundation of a formal methodology was established during this period, a formal technical definition of *ta'wīl* was yet to be articulated.

One noteworthy observation is that, at this stage, the principal contributors to the concept of *ta'wīl* were not strictly exegetes. Unlike the earlier stages, in which figures in Qur'ānic exegesis—such as Muqātil, Mujāhid, Zayd b. Aslam, al-Ṭabarī, and others—were primarily recognised as exegetes, the contributors in this period were predominantly associated with the disciplines of *kalām* and *falsafah*. This development indicates the dominant playing field in which the term *ta'wīl* was employed and illustrates how adjacent disciplines (*kalām* and *falsafah*) contributed to the formalisation of a concept within another field (*ulūm al-Qur'ān*).

80. Ibid.

81. Nevertheless, that *ta'wīl* as *ṣarf al-kalām* is already clearly implied when al-Māturīdī describes it as “directing the speech towards what it is intended for” (*tawjīh al-kalām ilā mā yatawajjah ilayh*), which perhaps served as one of the precedents in the technical definition of *ta'wīl*. See *ibid*.

82. Carl Sharif el-Tobgui, “*Sahih al-Manqūl*, or What Is Revelation?” in *Ibn Taymiyyah on Reason and Revelation: A Study of Dar' Ta'arūḍ al-'Aql wa-l-Naql* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 209.

83. 'Abd al-Jalīl bin 'Abd al-Karīm Sālim, *Al-Ta'wīl 'inda al-Ghazālī* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfah al-Diniyyah, 2004), 20.

84. In *uṣūl al-fiqh*, the *muhkamāt* is divided into the *qaṭ'iyyāt* and *zanniyyāt*. The former does not allow room for *ijtihād*, while the latter usually requires *ijtihād* to arrive at rulings. However, *ta'wīl* can be utilised as a form of *ijtihād* on *qaṭ'iyyāt* verses when the apparent rulings contained in them seemingly contradict the principles of the *Sharī'ah* (*al-mabādi' al-shar'iyyah*) or its universal methods (*al-qawā'id al-kullīyyah*). See al-Durayni, *Al-Manāhij al-Uṣūliyyah*, 138 and 146.

85. See 'Abd al-Jalīl, *Al-Ta'wīl 'inda al-Ghazālī*, 20.

The Take-Off Stage (900–1200 CE)

The Take-Off Stage, which commenced around 950 CE and reached its zenith in the 1500s, saw the formal definition of *ta'wīl* beginning to take concrete shape due to the increasingly clear methodology established in the preceding stage. Scholars of this period generally offered similar definitions that captured the conceptual essence of the term. Al-Ṭayyār categorised these as “the later terminology of the notion of *ta'wīl*” (*al-mustalaḥ al-muta'akkkhir fī maḥmūm al-ta'wīl*),⁸⁶ as these formal definitions were based on a specific literal linguistic meaning: “the existent to which the speech refers, that is, manifesting that which is spoken of to the tangible reality” (*al-mawjūd alladhī yu'awwalu ilayhi al-kalām, ayy zuhūr al-mutakallam bihi ilā al-wāqi' al-mahsūs*).⁸⁷

Consequently, the formal definition of *ta'wīl* at this juncture became the act of “deflecting a speech from its outward (meaning) to another more probable (inward) meaning” (*sarf al-kalām 'an zāhirihi ilā wajhin yahtamiluhu*).⁸⁸ This involved shifting the signification of words, phrases, or sentences from their original referent to an alternative one. Prominent scholars who proposed definitions along these lines included Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064),⁸⁹ Abū al-Wālid al-Bājī (d. 1081),⁹⁰ al-Juwaynī (d. 1085),⁹¹ and Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201).⁹² Given the consensus among these figures, it can be concluded that the technicality of the term reached its ultimate formalisation relatively early in the Take-Off Stage, specifically by the eleventh century.

86. Al-Ṭayyār, *Maḥmūm al-Tafsīr wa al-Ta'wīl*, 102.

87. *Ibid.*, 91.

88. *Ibid.*, 103. See also Abū al-Wālid al-Bājī, *Al-Hudūd fī al-Uṣūl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2003), 109.

89. *Ta'wīl*, according to Ibn Ḥazm, is “the transference of speech from what is dictated by its *zāhir* and from what is set down by language to a different meaning. If the transference [of speech] is verified by evidence, and if obedience is compulsory to the one who transfers it, then it is true. If otherwise, it is rejected. And [such a] transference is considered void.” (*naql al-lafẓ 'an mā iqtadāhu zāhiruhu wa 'an mā wudi'a lahu fī al-lughah ilā mā nā ākhar, fa in kāna naqluhu qad saḥha bi burhān, wa kāna nāqiluhu wajīb al-tā'ah, fa huwa haqq. wa in kāna naqluhu bi khilāf dhālika, uṭuriha wa lam yultafat ilayhi, wa ḥukma li dhālika al-naql bi annahu bāṭil*). See Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Ihkām fī Uṣūl al-Ahkām*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Afāq al-Jadīdah, 1983), 42.

90. Al-Bājī, *Al-Hudūd fī al-Uṣūl*, 109.

91. Al-Juwaynī defines *ta'wīl* as: “a deflection of the apparent [meaning] towards that to which the claim of the person exercising the *ta'wīl* points, and it is taken into practice if it (i.e., the meaning) is related to what meets the expression in utterance and understanding [i.e., the *zāhir*]” (*al-ta'wīl radd al-zāhir ilā mā ilayhi mā lahu fī da'wā al-mu'awwil, wa innamā yusta'malu idhā 'alīqa bimā yatalaqqā min al-alfāz manlūqan wa maḥmūman*). See al-Juwaynī, *Al-Burhān fī Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1997), 193.

92. With regard to *ta'wīl*, Ibn al-Jawzī states that: “There are two opinions, firstly: commentary; and secondly, the transferring of the outer [expression] to its original position to something the establishment of which requires an indicator; otherwise, outer expression would not be abandoned” (*ahaduhumā: annahu al-tafsīr; wa al-thānī: anna al-ta'wīl naql al-zāhir 'an wad'ihi al-aṣliyy ilā mā yahtaju fī iḥbāthi ilā dalīl lawlāhu mā turika zāhir al-lafẓ*). See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Gharīb al-Ḥadīth*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1985), 37.

Despite this terminological progress, the underlying methodology still largely adhered to the basic *muḥkamāt–mutashābihāt* formulation. Further elaboration on this framework remained scarce until al-Juwaynī (d. 1085 CE), who, in his *Al-Burhān fī Uṣūl al-Fiqh*,⁹³ further subdivided the *muḥkamāt* category into *naṣṣ*, *mufassar*, *mujmal*, and *musharak*—none of which was considered open to *taʿwīl*. While his practice of *taʿwīl* is evident in works such as *Kitāb al-Irshād*⁹⁴ and *Risālah fī Ithbāt al-Istiwāʾ*,⁹⁵ he did not explicitly formulate positive formal methods in either. Instead, he proceeded directly to practical applications, such as arguing for the divine incorporeality and the impossibility of ascribing bodily organs to God. Essentially, al-Juwaynī defined the boundaries of what should not be done when exercising *taʿwīl* but left the constructive methodology unexplored.

True formal methodological sophistication only emerged in the following century with al-Ghazālī. It was al-Ghazālī who established a metaphysical hierarchy of existence (*marātib al-wujūd*) as the underlying ontology, coupled with apodictic demonstration (*al-burhān*) as the systematic methodology to navigate through said ontology. This synthesis of ontology and logical methodology provided a definitive criterion (*fayṣal*) to distinguish theological conformity to the Sharīʿah from innovation (*bidʿah*), and true belief (*īmān*) from disbelief (*kufī*).

Taʿwīl in the Time of al-Ghazālī

By the era of al-Ghazālī, *taʿwīl* had been established with a consensually agreed-upon formal definition, yet the specific methodology and the standards for determining acceptable meanings had not yet received the same level of recognition. Consequently, various groups flourished during this period, each exercising *taʿwīl* through its own distinct methodologies, scopes, and interpretive products. In his accounts, particularly in *Fayṣal al-Taʿfriqah* and *Qānūn al-Taʿwīl*, al-Ghazālī recurrently describes these groups in two separate descriptions. These included Aḥmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855 CE) and his followers, who resorted solely to transmitted narrative authority (*manqūl*) without granting authority to

93. Al-Juwaynī, *Al-Burhān*, 193–215. Later, this categorisation developed further, with the development of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, into the two types of speeches (*aqsām al-alfāz*): clear speeches (*al-alfāz al-wāḍiḥah*) and unclear speeches (*al-alfāz ghayr al-wāḍiḥah*). The clear speeches are divided into *al-zāhir*, *al-naṣṣ*, *al-mufassar*, and *al-muḥkam*—only the last one does not admit *taʿwīl*. As for the unclear speeches, they are divided into *al-khafīyy*, *al-mushkil*, *al-mujmal*, and *al-mutashābih*—all of which require *taʿwīl*. From here it can be seen that the practice of *taʿwīl* is most prevalent in *uṣūl al-fiqh*. See al-Ṭāhir ‘Amir, *Al-Taʿwīl ʿinda al-Mufasssīrīn al-Salaf*, 103–109.

94. Al-Juwaynī, *A Guide to Conclusive Proofs for the Principles of Belief: Kitāb al-Irshād ilā Qawāʿid al-Adillāh fī Uṣūl al-ʿItiqād*, trans. Paul E. Walker (Reading: Garnet Publishing Limited, 2000), 25–26 and 88–91.

95. Idem, *Risālah fī Ithbāt al-Istiwāʾ wa al-Fawqīyyah wa Masʾalat al-Ḥarf wa al-Sawf fī al-Qurʾān al-Majīd* (Riyadh: Dār Ṭawīq li al-Nashr, 1998), 74–77.

rational authority (*ma'qūl*),⁹⁶ as well as the Philosophers and Bāṭinites, who relied exclusively on *ma'qūl* while disregarding *manqūl*.⁹⁷ Additionally, he identified the Mu'tazilites, who prioritised and delved deeply into the rationalist approach,⁹⁸ the common folks,⁹⁹ and the Ash'arites, who sought to reconcile the claims of both *ma'qūl* and *manqūl*.¹⁰⁰

There was, however, another group—the Ṣūfīs—to whom al-Ghazālī devoted considerable attention in various writings, though he did not include them in his typology in the above. The Ṣūfīs are different in that their approach to *ta'wīl* is symbolic rather than purely allegorical, as they did not interpret a verse based on its outward impossibility. Instead, they asserted that a deeper meaning exists beneath the outward expression to which the external form ultimately signifies.¹⁰¹ Critically, their mode of *ta'wīl* did not abolish or nullify the outward meaning; on the contrary, the inner meaning is seen to enrich and perfect the apparent meaning.¹⁰²

In these same works, al-Ghazālī discussed five levels of interpretation (*darajāt al-ta'wīlāt*) based on the five degrees of existence (*al-wujūd al-khamsah*), which are categorised as concrete (*dhāṭiyy*), sensorial (*ḥissiyy*), imaginal (*khayālīyy*), intellectual (*'aqliyy*), and analogical (*shabahīyy*).¹⁰³ The first level represents the apparent (*ẓāhir*) aspect, while the meanings become increasingly hidden (*bāṭin*) toward the lower levels. Al-Ghazālī contended that any *ta'wīl* interpretation of the Qur'ān must observe these five degrees of existence. The methods used to work through this ontology were twofold: demonstrative (*burhānī*), which nullifies the outer meaning in favour of more probable inner ones, and illuminative (*kashfī*), which posits inner meanings without nullifying the outer form.¹⁰⁴

This brief exposition reveals how al-Ghazālī's conception of *ta'wīl* represents a paradigm shift from his predecessors. While earlier scholars were often “productional”—focusing on the final output or specific doctrinal products of interpretation—as seen in the activities at the Disciplinary Stage, al-Ghazālī focused on the epistemological and ontological foundations that made such interpretations possible or impossible. By establishing the *qawānīn al-ta'wīl*,

96. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, “Qānūn al-Ta'wīl” in *Majmū'at Rasā'il al-Imām al-Ghazālī* (Cairo: Dār al-Imām al-Shāṭibī, 2010), 554; and idem, *Faysal al-Tafrīqah bayna al-Islām wa al-Zandaqah* (Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2017), 67.

97. Al-Ghazālī, “Qānūn al-Ta'wīl,” 555 and idem, *Faysal al-Tafrīqah*, 79.

98. Idem, “Qānūn al-Ta'wīl,” 555 and idem, *Faysal al-Tafrīqah*, 70fn2.

99. Idem, “Qānūn al-Ta'wīl,” 555 and idem, *Faysal al-Tafrīqah*, 70fn2.

100. Idem, “Qānūn al-Ta'wīl,” 556.

101. Idem, *Faysal al-Tafrīqah*, 32.

102. Ibid.

103. Ibid., 57.

104. For a more elaborate study on the conceptual and metaphysical structure of *ta'wīl* according to al-Ghazālī, see Muhammad Yusra bin Ahmad Hulaimi, “Al-Ghazālī's Metaphysical Framework of *Ta'wīl*,” Master's thesis, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2025.

he provided a systematic canon that could distinguish between legitimate interpretations and heretical manipulations. Consequently, *taʿwīl* reached its first instance of systematic and scientific maturity, as it was no longer just a practice of “explaining” but a formal science governed by a metaphysical hierarchy and logical parameters.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

The preceding discussion demonstrates that while *taʿwīl*, in practice and content, was always present within *tafsīr*, its formal development and systematisation as a science—complete with formal definitions and methodologies—only reached systematic and scientific maturity with al-Ghazālī. Al-Ghazālī’s formative contribution was the incorporation of a metaphysical foundation—specifically Ṣūfī metaphysics—which provided an ontology governing the realms and entities of existence. This foundation informed a set of logical parameters that differed from Aristotelian or ordinary reason, widening the domain of possibility for things that exist and, consequently, the parameters of *taʿwīl*.

Under these parameters, interpretations that were impossible for other groups such as the Muʿtazilites became possible for the Ṣūfis. For instance, regarding the physical existence of the Balance (*al-mīzān*) in the Hereafter, the Muʿtazilites consider it impossible. The Ashʿarites consider it possible but analogise the deeds themselves, viewing them as accidental (*aradī*) and thus not subject to physical weighing; they suggest instead that it is the books of deeds that are actually weighed.¹⁰⁶ The Ṣūfis, while accepting both interpretations as valid, do not consider it necessary to analogise the *mīzān* and are able to accept the apparent meaning just fine by virtue of their metaphysics.

The significance of outlining the history of *taʿwīl* is to identify its roots in authentic Islamic teachings. Safeguarding its conceptual integrity from misappropriation is crucial; in the absence of such a history, an intellectual vacuum is created that invites foreign interpretations. This resonates with the warning of Ibn ʿAbbās concerning those who would interpret the Qurʾān with meanings not of its own.

105. See Ibn Taymiyyah, *Darʾ Taʿarūf al-ʿAql wa al-Naql*, vol. 1 (Madinah: Wuzarāt al-Taʿlīm al-ʿĀlī, 1991), 5.

106. Al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-Tafrīqah*, 69–70.

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