



ALAUDDIN AL-SAMARQANDI'S COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO THE CONCEPTS OF «TAFSIR» AND «TA'WIL» IN ISLAMIC HERMENEUTICS

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Abstract. *Alauddin al-Samarqandi was a preeminent Hanafi scholar of Transoxiana during the Karakhanid era, recognized for his profound contributions to Islamic jurisprudence (Usul al-Fiqh) and theology (Kalam). This article delves into al-Samarqandi's systematic methodological approach to Quranic hermeneutics, specifically his rigorous conceptual distinction between Tafsir (exegesis) and Ta'wil (interpretation). By examining his works, the article explores how al-Samarqandi resolved the epistemological tension between the necessity of rational deduction (ra'y) in jurisprudence and the Prophetic traditions that seemingly condemn interpreting the Quran through personal opinion. His framework not only preserved the orthodox Maturidi tradition but also provided a lasting criterion for distinguishing valid scholarly interpretation from heretical distortion.*

Keywords: *tafsir, ta'wil, Islamic hermeneutics, Alauddin al-Samarqandi, Hanafi school, Maturidi tradition, Quranic interpretation, ra'y, Transoxiana, Samarkand school.*

INTRODUCTION

1. Historical and Intellectual Context of the Samarkand School

Alauddin al-Samarqandi is widely acknowledged as one of the leading figures of the Transoxianan Hanafi scholars. Prominent biographers and historians have lauded his scholarly stature; Al-Sam'ani recognized him as a masterful scholar in debate, legal theory, and theology, while Al-Kasani praised him as a devout ascetic and a vanguard of *Ahl al-Sunnah*. During his era, al-Samarqandi was a pivotal representative of the Samarkand school, which harbored distinct perspectives and methodologies compared to the classical Hanafi legal and theological traditions predominant elsewhere (Günay, 2009:470).



Within the Hanafi *Madhhab* (school of thought), jurists and theologians from Samarkand – such as Abu al-Yusr al-Pazdavi, Abu al-Mu’in al-Nasafi, and Alauddin al-Samarqandi – championed an epistemological framework that elevated the Samarkand tradition. This intellectual movement culminated in what can be termed the «Maturidi Usul Tradition,» running parallel to the dominant Hanafi legal theory. Alauddin al-Samarqandi’s texts are historically significant because they best reflect this synthesis of jurisprudence and Maturidi theology, transmitting it seamlessly to subsequent generations.

2. Etymological and Conceptual Foundations of Tafsir and Ta’wil

To understand al-Samarqandi’s framework, one must first examine the linguistic and historical roots of Quranic hermeneutics. The term *Ta’wil* is a foundational subject in the science of exegesis, appearing exactly 17 times in the Quran across various chapters (including Al-Imran, Al-Nisa, Al-A’raf, Yunus, Yusuf, Al-Isra, and Al-Kahf) (Yavuz, 2012:27-28).

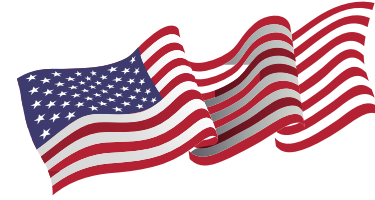
Classical exegetes generally agreed on the necessity of interpreting words that are apparent (*zahir*), concise/ambiguous (*mujmal*), or hidden (*khafti*). However, they drew sharp conceptual boundaries between *Tafsir* and *Ta’wil*:

- **Linguistic Roots:** *Tafsir* originates from the root *fusr*, meaning to open, uncover, or manifest (al-Jawhari, 1987:781). Conversely, *Ta’wil* derives from *awl* or *aala*, which means to return, divert, or direct a word back to its ultimate meaning (Ibn Manzur, 1414:32; al-Kafawi, n.d.:261).

- **Methodological Scope:** *Tafsir* deals with the direct, explicit meaning of a text, often relying heavily on transmitted narrations (*riwayah*) from the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions. *Ta’wil* relies on the rules of language and rational intellectual knowledge (*dirayah*) to understand meanings derived through implication or allegory.

- **Structural Application:** *Tafsir* is often viewed as the process of breaking down verses into parts to make them comprehensible, whereas *Ta’wil* provides the holistic, conclusive meaning of the text. Furthermore, *Tafsir* can apply to both divine and secular texts, while *Ta’wil* is strictly reserved for the exegesis of divine scriptures.

Because of its critical nature, *Ta’wil* became the subject of extensive independent literature in Islamic scholarship. Notable works exploring this conceptual boundary include Al-Ghazali’s *Qanun at-Ta’wil*, Ibn Qudama’s *Zamm at-Ta’wil*, and Ibn Furak’s *Mushkil al-Hadith*, indicating the widespread theological debate surrounding the limits of interpretation (Yavuz, 2012:27-28).



3. The Hermeneutical Dilemma: Hadith vs. Scholarly Practice

Al-Samarqandi initiates his discourse on Quranic meanings by addressing a severe theological bottleneck that every scholar of *istinbat* (deduction) must face. This is encapsulated in the Prophetic Hadith: «*Whoever interprets the Quran by his own opinion (ra'y), let him take his seat in Hellfire*» (al-Tirmidhi, n.d., Tafsir, no. 1).

Simultaneously, the historical reality of early Islam demonstrates that the Companions (*Sahaba*) and the Successors (*Tabi'un*) frequently spoke about the meanings of the Quran using intellectual deduction. It was practically impossible to find a directly elevated (*marfu'*) Prophetic hadith for every single verse. To establish the branches (*furu'*) of Islamic law, early jurists had to derive rulings from foundational texts (*usul*) using their intellect. This widespread practice essentially constitutes interpreting the Quran via *ra'y*.

Therefore, an apparent contradiction emerges between the explicit prohibition in the hadith and the unanimous practical consensus (*Ijma'*) of the early Muslim community allowing rational deduction.

Al-Samarqandi documents two primary scholarly methods to resolve this contradiction:

First: Some scholars outright rejected the authenticity or binding nature of the hadith because it contradicted the established, practical consensus of the *Ummah*. In Islamic legal theory, an isolated report (*khabar al-wahid*) yields probabilistic knowledge, while consensus (*Ijma'*) yields absolute certainty. When a solitary report contradicts a definitive consensus, the report is set aside (al-Samarqandi, 2017:630-634; al-Bukhari, 1997:370).

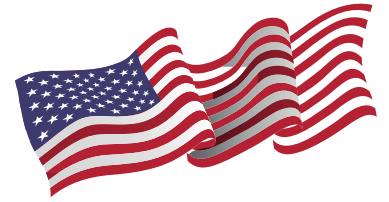
Second: Other scholars accepted the hadith (due to its transmission by just and reliable narrators) but engaged in rigorous epistemological categorization to harmonize the hadith with the practice of the Companions.

4. Al-Samarqandi's Categorical Resolution: The Maturidi Synthesis

Following the tradition of Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, al-Samarqandi utilizes the *Tafsir-Ta'wil* dichotomy to harmonize the texts. He cites al-Dabusi and other Hanafi scholars who argued that the Prophet's severe warning applies specifically to *Tafsir* by opinion, not *Ta'wil*.

The Epistemological Divide:

According to this view, *Tafsir* is the act of providing absolute historical and divine



context. It involves declaring, «*This is exactly what Allah intended, and this is the specific reason the verse was revealed.*» Such absolute certainty can only belong to the Companions who physically witnessed the circumstances of the revelation. If later generations make such definitive claims without witnessing the revelation or possessing a *mutawatir* (mass-transmitted) report, they are engaging in forbidden *Tafsir bi al-ra'y* because they are testifying about Allah without certain knowledge (al-Maturidi, 1971:3-4; al-Bukhari, 1997:45).

Ta'wil, on the other hand, deals with probability. If a word possesses multiple linguistic meanings (*mushtarak*), *Ta'wil* is the scholarly act of steering the word toward one of those meanings based on contextual evidence, while leaving the ultimate truth to Allah. The scholar says, «*The word implies this meaning, and based on the evidence, this meaning is preferred,*» without claiming absolute divine certainty. This epistemological humility is why Imam al-Maturidi deliberately titled his magnum opus *Ta'wilat al-Qur'an* (Interpretations of the Quran) rather than a *Tafsir*, avoiding the risk associated with the hadith's warning.

The Usuli (Jurisprudential) Dimension:

Al-Samarqandi also highlights discussions within Hanafi legal theory regarding the authoritative weight of a Companion's *Ta'wil* versus their *Ijtihad* (legal deduction). Al-Sarakhsi noted that while a Companion's *Ijtihad* carries massive weight due to their proximity to revelation, their *Ta'wil*—which is primarily an exercise in linguistics and semantics—does not unconditionally bind later scholars. Later linguists and jurists can explore different probabilistic meanings (*Ta'wil*) of a verse without violating consensus, proving that *Ta'wil* is a dynamic, continuous scholarly endeavor.

5. Praiseworthy vs. Blameworthy Ra'y (Opinion)

Beyond the *Tafsir/Ta'wil* distinction, al-Samarqandi clarifies that the concept of *ra'y* itself is divided into two categories: the condemned and the praised (al-Zarqani, n.d.:49).

Blameworthy Ra'y:

The hadith targets scholars who interpret the Quran merely to validate their preconceived sectarian or philosophical dogmas, abandoning the explicit or generally accepted meanings of the text. Al-Samarqandi points directly to the Mu'tazilites as practitioners of this forbidden *ra'y*. For example, the Mu'tazilites believed that Allah



cannot create «ugly» or «evil» acts (such as human sins). Consequently, when confronted with the explicit Quranic verse, «Allah is the Creator of all things» (Qur'an 13:16), they twisted the text's general applicability to exclude human actions. They did the same with the verse, «And whoever He wills to misguide, He makes his breast tight and constricted» (Qur'an 6:125). Twisting the Quran to fit a corrupt personal rationale is the exact sin condemned by the Prophet.

Praiseworthy Ra'y:

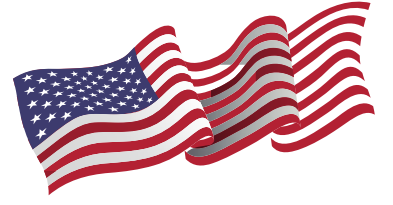
Conversely, praiseworthy opinion is an evidence-based deduction rooted in foundational Islamic principles (*usul*). It requires the scholar to subjugate their personal intellect to the apparent meaning of the Quran, accompanied by a profound fear of error. Al-Samarqandi quotes the famous statement of the Companion Abdullah ibn Mas'ud regarding his own intellectual legal ruling: «If it is correct, it is from Allah; and if it is wrong, it is from me» (Ibn Hanbal, 2001:308). This methodology of utilizing a «preponderant belief» (*ghalib al-zann*) is not only praised but practically mandatory in deriving rulings from the Quran (Ahmet, 2021:61-63).

Furthermore, some scholars argued that the prohibition of interpreting by *ra'y* strictly applies to the *Mutashabihat* (highly ambiguous, allegorical verses) regarding the essence of Allah, which humans are not required to act upon or fully comprehend (al-Zarkashi, n.d.:163). Interpreting verses containing practical rulings, however, is a necessity.

CONCLUSION

In his foundational works, Alauddin al-Samarqandi provided a highly sophisticated, structured framework distinguishing *Tafsir* from *Ta'wil*, heavily expanding upon Abu Mansur al-Maturidi's earlier theological postulates. By defining *Ta'wil* as an evidence-based, probabilistic interpretation rooted in linguistic mastery – rather than a dogmatic assertion of absolute divine intent – al-Samarqandi successfully reconciled the necessity of rational deduction (*Ijtihad*) with the strict theological caution demanded by Prophetic traditions.

Today, as various contemporary ideological movements often mistranslate, misappropriate, or entirely reject the concept of *Ta'wil*, Alauddin al-Samarqandi's classical distinctions offer a vital corrective lens. His exhaustive explanations serve as a robust academic refutation against both rigid literalism and unchecked, agenda-driven textual manipulation.



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