

Rethinking Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*: from essence to history*

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This article focuses on Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*¹⁾ – a tradition of the interpretation of the Qur'ān (*tafsīr*) associated with the Mu'tazilite tradition of thought. The Mu'tazilah, known as the 'rationalists' of Islam, were influential in the intellectual life of the Muslim world from the 2nd/8th to the 7th/13th century,²⁾ and

* This article is partially based on the research supported by Research Resettlement Fund for the new faculty of SNU. I am grateful to Professor Gerald Hawting for his valuable comments and suggestions.

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1) Transliteration of Arabic words in this article follows the American Library Association – Library of Congress transliteration scheme for Arabic (*ALA-LC Romanization Tables: Transliteration Schemes for Non-Roman Scripts*, comp. and ed. Randall K. Barry (Washington: Library of Congress, 1997), 10-19).

left an enduring mark on other theological traditions such as Shi'ism (Imāmite and Zaydī Shi'ism) and Judaism. Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* is one of the exegetical traditions or 'schools' of *tafsīr* through which the history of the interpretation of the Qur'an has traditionally been approached. This 'school' framework, however, has been revisited in several recent publications, which have critically engaged with the notion of an exegetical 'school'. Centred on the fundamental question of 'what makes an exegetical tradition a tradition?', they raise a number of related questions concerning the precise characteristics of the various exegetical 'schools', the value of this notion for the analysis of individual commentaries on the Qur'an, and its validity as an analytical tool for understanding the history of Islamic exegesis.³⁾

This article explores the implications of this discussion for Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*. It shows that the arguments advanced in the course of this critical engagement with the notion of 'school' in

2) The dates in this article are given according to Islamic calendar, followed by its Common Era equivalent after the forward slash.

3) These questions are not limited to the field of Qur'ānic exegesis; similar concerns have been raised in relation to other disciplines: see, for instance, on the notion of a 'school of law', P. Bearman, R. Peters and F.E. Vogel, eds., *The Islamic School of Law: Evolution, Devolution, and Progress* (Cambridge MA, 2005) and Bernard Haykel and Aron Zysow, "What Makes a Maḏhab a Maḏhab: Zaydī Debates on the Structure of Legal Authority," *Arabica* 59 (2012), 332-71; on the 'schools' of grammar see Monique Bernards' "The Delusion of Identification: the Term Madhhab in Arabic Grammatical Tradition," in H.L.J. Vanstiphout, ed. *All Those Nations... Cultural Encounters within and with Near East* (Groningen: Styx, 1999), 13-20, and "Medieval Muslim Scholarship and Social Network Analysis: a Study of the Basra/Kufa Dichotomy in Arabic Grammar," in Sebastian Günther, ed. *Ideas, Images, and Methods of Portrayal: Insights into Arabic Literature and Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 129-40.

Qur'ānic exegesis are fully applicable to the case of Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*. Moreover, they reveal the limitations of the traditional approach, which focuses on a single set of features deemed essential for Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*, as regards the study of this tradition. The article suggests that these limitations could be addressed if Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* is approached from a historical rather than an essentialist perspective.

The article is divided into three parts, beginning with a brief introduction to Mu'tazilite tradition. Its second part provides a summary of the discussion about the notion of an exegetical 'school', exploring its major themes and arguments, as well as suggestions put forward in response to them. This is followed by the examination of the impact these arguments have on the study of Mu'tazilite exegetical tradition, highlighting certain limitations of the traditional approach to Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* and suggesting an adaptation of the historical framework in the analysis of this tradition.

I. Introducing Mu'tazilite tradition⁴⁾

Mu'tazilism is one of the schools of Islamic speculative theology (*kalām*),⁵⁾ which played a pivotal role in the history of

4) For the overviews of Mu'tazilite thought and history, which this introduction follows, see Daniel Gimaret, "Mu'tazila," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, et al. (Brill Online, 2015), henceforth abbreviated as *EI2*; and Josef van Ess, "Mu'tazilah," in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), vol. X, 220–9.

5) On *kalām*, see L. Gardet, "Ilm al-Kalām," in *EI2*.

Islamic thought. Considered as ‘rationalists’, Mu‘tazilite thinkers did not discard revelation, but emphasised the primacy of reason, especially in epistemology (according to the Mu‘tazilah, God’s existence can be known through reason alone) and ethics (it is through reason alone that good and evil are known).

Characterised by this rationalism, Mu‘tazilite intellectual tradition naturally did not remain unchanged over the course of time. The early period of Mu‘tazilite thought was one of doctrinal diversity, and Abū al-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf (d. 235/849–50) is credited with the systematisation of the Mu‘tazilite theological doctrines, which he presented as five principles (*al-uṣūl al-khamsah*). These five principles include God’s oneness (*tawḥīd*), God’s justice (*‘adl*), the promise and the threat (*al-wa‘d wa-al-wa‘d*), the intermediate state of a sinner (*al-manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn*), and encouraging the good and forbidding the evil (*al-amr bi-al-ma‘rūf wa-al-nahy ‘an al-munkar*).⁶⁾ In the second half of the 3rd/9th century the doctrinal development of Mu‘tazilism entered into what has been termed its ‘classical period’. This phase saw further systematisation and elaboration of Mu‘tazilite doctrine, as well as the rise of various sub-schools of theology within this tradition.⁷⁾

In terms of political and social history, the Mu‘tazilites experienced changing fortunes, including both support and persecution. Mu‘tazilism originated as a religious movement in the territory of Iraq at the beginning of the 2nd/8th century, the city of Baṣra being its birthplace. By the 3rd/9th century it had developed into a school of theology which, due to support from

6) Gimaret, “Mu‘tazila.”

7) Gimaret, “Mu‘tazila.”

several 'Abbasid caliphs and courtiers, became "the first overall 'orthodox' school of theology."⁸⁾ Its fortune changed during the reign of the caliph al-Mutawakkil (reigned 232/847–247/861),⁹⁾ which saw Mu'tazilite scholars removed from the court and persecuted, at least if they openly propagated Mu'tazilism.

It changed again after a limited period during which Mu'tazilite scholars enjoyed patronage from the Buwayhids.¹⁰⁾ The rule of the Saljūqs¹¹⁾ from the middle of the 5th/11th century marked the decline of the school in the central lands of Islam, with many Mu'tazilites leaving Baghdād for other parts of the Caliphate – primarily Iran, Central Asia and Yemen. It is generally assumed that Mu'tazilism disappeared after the Mongol conquest in the 7th/13th century.¹²⁾

The 20th century saw renewed interest, however, with a number of Muslim thinkers being inspired by Mu'tazilism, in which they saw a symbol of rationality and freedom indigenous to Islamic culture.¹³⁾ One of them, the Egyptian scholar and

8) van Ess, "Mu'tazilah," 222.

9) On al-Mutawakkil, see H. Kennedy, "al-Mutawakkil 'Alā 'llāh, Abu 'l-Faḍl Dja'far b. Muḥammad," in *EI*.

10) On this dynasty, see Cl. Cahen, "Buwayhids or Buyids," in *EI*.

11) See C.E. Bosworth et al., "Saljūkids," in *EI*.

12) For this later period of Mu'tazilite history, beginning with the Saljūq rule, see Gregor Schwarb, "Mu'tazilism in the Age of Averroes," in *In the Age of Averroes: Arabic Philosophy in the 6th/12th Century*, ed. Peter Adamson (London: Warburg Institute, 2011), 251–82.

13) On the 'revival' of Mu'tazilism see relevant parts of Richard C. Martin and Mark R. Woodward with Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997); and Thomas Hildebrandt, *Neo-Mu'tazilismus?: Intention und Kontext im modernen arabischen Umgang mit dem rationalistischen Erbe des Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

advocate of social and cultural reform Aḥmad Amīn (1304/1886–1373/1954),¹⁴⁾ described the decline of Mu‘tazilism in the following terms: “In my opinion the end of the Mu‘tazilah was one of the greatest catastrophes for the Muslims, a catastrophe which, moreover, they inflicted upon themselves.”¹⁵⁾

The interest in Mu‘tazilite tradition and Islamic rationalism, especially as contrasted with traditionalism and fundamentalism, continues to increase today, and is being reinforced by the advances of recent research on this subject, made possible by the discoveries and study of Mu‘tazilite writings.¹⁶⁾ In contrast to the first studies which viewed the Mu‘tazilah as only a marginal group in Islam, closely associated with the freethinkers, this research has highlighted their leading role and contribution to Islam, and has shed light on various aspects related to the origin of this tradition, its history and thought, the variety of intellectual trends within Mu‘tazilism, and the original contributions of individual thinkers to Mu‘tazilite thought.¹⁷⁾

14) On this scholar, see H.A.R. Gibb, “Aḥmad Amīn,” in *IEJ*, and Emmanuelle Perrin, “Amīn, Aḥmad,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet, et al. (Brill Online, 2015).

15) Cited from Detlev Khālid, “Some Aspects of Neo-Mu‘tazilism,” *Islamic Studies* 8/4 (1969), 335.

16) For the study of Mu‘tazilism, see Camilla Adang, Sabine Schmidtke and David Sklare, “Introduction,” in *A Common Rationality: Mu‘tazilism in Islam and Judaism*, eds. Camilla Adang, Sabine Schmidtke and David Sklare (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag in Kommission, 2007), 11–20.

17) A series of recent publications on Mu‘tazilism was prepared within two projects coordinated by Sabine Schmidtke, *Mu‘tazilite Manuscripts Project Group* (2003–), and *Rediscovering Theological Rationalism in the Medieval World of Islam* (2008–2013); for the achievements of the former see http://www.geschkult.fuberlin.de/e/islamwiss/_media/Dateien/Mu_tazilite_Manuscripts_Project.pdf (last consulted on 22 October 2015).

An important field to which Mu'tazilite scholars made a contribution is Qur'anic exegesis. The Mu'tazilite role in the development of *tafsīr* remains insufficiently explored, however, despite the growing number of studies devoted to this topic.¹⁸⁾ This is mainly explained by the lack of sources, since much Mu'tazilite writing on the Qur'ān seems to have been lost, while some extant texts from this tradition have not been easily accessible for researchers.¹⁹⁾ To this one could add that the study of Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* forms part of *tafsīr* studies, which is relatively young as a distinct discipline, and has been gradually moving away from interest in dominant exegetical traditions to those that, like the Mu'tazilite tradition, were previously considered marginal.²⁰⁾ Being part of *tafsīr* studies, analysis of

18) See Suleiman A. Mourad, "Towards a Reconstruction of the Mu'tazilī Tradition of Qur'anic Exegesis: Reading the Introduction to the *Tahdhib* of al-Ḥākim al-Jishumī (d. 494/1101), and Its Application," in Karen Bauer, ed. *Aims, Methods and Contexts of Qur'anic Exegesis (2nd/8th–9th/15th Centuries)* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2013), 120–1, footnote 1.

19) Suleiman Mourad identifies major reasons for this situation in Suleiman A. Mourad, "The Revealed Text and the Intended Subtext: Notes on the Hermeneutics of the Qur'ān in Mu'tazilah Discourse as Reflected in the *Tahdīb* of al-Ḥākim al-Ġišumī (d. 494/1101)," in Mustafa Shah, ed. *Tafsīr: Interpreting the Qur'ān. Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), vol. II, 360–1 [originally published in Felicitas Opwis and David Reisman, eds. *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion: Studies in Honor of Dimitri Gutas* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 367–95].

20) On the development of *tafsīr* studies, see Andrew Rippin's "The Present Status of *Tafsīr* Studies," *The Muslim World* 72 (1982), 224–38, "Tafsīr," in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), vol. XIV, 236–44, and "Tafsīr," in *EL2*; see also Bruce Fudge, "Qur'anic Exegesis in Medieval Islam and Modern

Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* continues to be shaped by developments and discussions in this field. One such recent discussion, whose implications for the study of Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* are a major concern of this article, focuses on the notion of 'school' or 'tradition' in Qur'ānic exegesis.

II. The notion of 'school' in Qur'ānic exegesis

The rich history of interpretations of the Qur'ān, particularly in the pre-modern period, has traditionally been approached through the study of different traditions or 'schools' of *tafsīr*. These 'schools' usually correspond to various Islamic intellectual/sectarian traditions, and include, among others, the Twelver Shi'ite, Sunnī, Mu'tazilite and Ṣūfī *tafsīr* traditions. An underlying assumption in this division is that each of these traditions developed a distinct approach to the text of the Qur'ān, and that *tafsīr* works authored by scholars from each 'school' fall into recognisable traditions due to the manifestation of their school's approach in their texts. These manifestations might include the unique content of the commentaries, techniques and methods adopted by the commentators, as well as principles that govern interpretations of the text. These unique sets of manifestations are seen as essential for the particular traditions. The 'school' framework has been applied in the classical studies on Qur'ānic exegesis, such as the works of Ignaz Goldziher, Helmut Gätje or Mahmoud Ayoub,²¹⁾ and it continues to inform

Orientalism," *Die Welt des Islams* 46/2 (2006), 115-47.

21) Ignaz Goldziher, *Schools of Koranic Commentators*, ed. and trans. W.H.

both the analysis of the history of Islamic exegesis in general and studies on individual commentaries on the Qur'ān.

However, a number of recent publications have revisited this well-established framework, highlighting, from several perspectives, the challenges involved in defining various exegetical 'schools' and in applying the notion of 'schools' to the analysis of Islamic *tafsīr* tradition. One line of critique draws on the observation that individual commentaries emerging from particular traditions do not always seem to display the features considered essential for these traditions. Andrew Lane's study on the Qur'ān commentary of Jār Allāh al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) initiated this discussion. Al-Zamakhsharī's commentary *al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq al-tanzīl* (*The Unveiler of the Truths of Revelation*) has long been considered an example of Mu'tazilite exegesis, but Lane's reading of this text led him to conclusions that contradict this long-established view. He concluded that there was no special Mu'tazilite 'method', approach or outlook in this work, and that even its Mu'tazilite content was minimal.²²⁾ The unfulfilled expectation of finding the features deemed essential to Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* in a text by a Mu'tazilite author led to further scepticism regarding the possibility of defining "what a Mu'tazilite commentary actually is."²³⁾ Although not everyone found Lane's

Behn (Wiesbaden, 2006); Helmut Gätje, *The Qur'ān and Its Exegesis: Selected Texts with Classical and Modern Muslim Interpretations*, ed. and trans. A.T. Welch (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996); Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur'ān and Its Interpreters*, 2 vols. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).

22) Andrew J. Lane, *A Traditional Mu'tazilite Qur'ān Commentary: The Kashshāf of Jār Allāh al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144)* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2006), 229.

23) Lane, *A Traditional Mu'tazilite Qur'ān Commentary*, 229.

interpretation of al-Zamakhsharī's commentary persuasive, his study highlighted the apparent tension between the exegetical 'school' as an abstract entity and its application to the actual texts authored by commentators associated with different schools.²⁴⁾

A similar question, but in relation to the Ṣūfī tradition of Qur'ānic exegesis, was addressed in an article by Jamal J. Elias.²⁵⁾ The article aimed to challenge 'the conventional wisdom' that there existed a separate genre of Ṣūfī *tafsīr*, by examining selected examples of Ṣūfī commentaries of the pre-modern period. While not denying that some Ṣūfī exegetes considered themselves part of a distinct Ṣūfī tradition, this study emphasised the need to see Ṣūfī *tafsīr* within the overall tradition of *tafsīr*, and drew attention to the role of the individual agency of the author, taking as an example the works of 'Alā' al-Dawlah al-Simnānī (d. 736/1336).²⁶⁾

In addition to these observations, the benefits of employing the 'school' framework in the analysis of individual *tafsīr* works have been questioned. The difficulty in using this framework is that when a commentary on the Qur'ān is approached with the category of its author's 'school' in mind, this might result in a one-dimensional reading of the text, whose complexity is reduced

24) See, for example, Suleiman A. Mourad, "Review of *A Traditional Mu'tazilite Qur'ān Commentary: The Kashshāf of Jār Allāh al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144)*, by Andrew J. Lane," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 52/2 (2007), 409–11.

25) Jamal J. Elias, "Ṣūfī *Tafsīr* Reconsidered: Exploring the Development of a Genre," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 12 (2010), 41–55.

26) On al-Simnānī and his works see Jamal J. Elias, *The Throne Carrier of God: the Life and Thought of 'Alā' ad-Dawla as-Simnānī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

to the features considered essential for that 'school'. Additionally, in this framework a commentary can be approached from the perspective of only one 'school'. Walid Saleh's remarks on Goldziher's division of *tafsīr* tradition into several types highlight this line of argumentation.²⁷⁾ For Saleh, Goldziher's approach is disadvantageous since it permits the classification of a given commentary as belonging to one type only, while in reality it is more common to find a combination of traits and approaches in a *tafsīr* work, which makes it difficult to define it as a pure type.²⁸⁾

Furthermore, in this discussion over exegetical 'schools' a concern has been raised about the division into 'schools' itself (and their definitions) in the context of knowledge/power relations. Andrew Rippin identifies the struggle for definition and control over the Muslim heritage in the modern world and internal Muslim disputes as a factor that encourages rethinking and careful definitions of various sub-genres of *tafsīr*.²⁹⁾ One reason why Andreas Görke and Johanna Pink consider the traditional division of *tafsīr* traditions along ideological lines 'problematic' is its implication that mainstream Sunnī *tafsīr* represents the norm while other traditions are deviations from i

27) Goldziher distinguishes between grammatical, doctrinal, sectarian, mystical and modern traditions of exegesis (Goldziher, *Schools of Koranic Commentators*).

28) Walid A. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur'ān Commentary of al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 17.

29) Andrew Rippin, "What Defines a (Pre-modern) Shi'i *Tafsīr*? Notes towards the History of the Genre of *Tafsīr* in Islam, in the Light of the Study of the Shi'i Contribution," in Farhad Daftary and Gurdofarid Miskinzodah, eds., *The Study of Shi'i Islam: History, Theology and Law* (London: I.B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2014), 95-112.

t.³⁰⁾ In other words, following this division would mean privileging a dominant tradition over others, and effectively seeing the history of *tafsīr* through the Sunnī lens.

All these concerns highlight the limitations that an uncritical application of the ‘school’ framework imposes on the analysis of Qur’ānic exegesis. The question, however, is what are the consequences of this critical re-evaluation? Does it simply warn against the uncritical use of the notion of an exegetical ‘school’, demonstrating that constructed analytical categories cannot adequately reflect the complex reality? Does it advocate the need to revise the definitions of individual ‘schools’ on their own terms and rethink our approaches to them; or should the ‘school’ framework itself be replaced by an alternative approach to Islamic exegesis?

One possible response to this question is an approach put forward by Walid Saleh, who proposed seeing the Islamic *tafsīr* tradition as a genealogical tradition.³¹⁾ It implies that as a genre *tafsīr* is always dependant on the corpus of interpretative material inherited from the early period and attributed to authoritative figures. This material forms an exegetical core. A commentator on the Qur’ān is dealing with this ‘inherited’ core, while appropriating and modifying it (he/she can reject some parts of it, add to the core, or reassess it). The processes of core appropriation and modification in turn reflect the

30) Andreas Görke and Johanna Pink, “Introduction,” in Andreas Görke and Johanna Pink, eds., *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History: Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8.

31) Walid A. Saleh, “Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of *Tafsīr* in Arabic: a History of the Book Approach,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 12 (2010), 17–21.

commentator's originality and contribution to the overall tradition of *tafsīr*. They also mean that the exegetical core itself is being continuously redefined over time. Saleh suggests that using methods of statistical analysis for *tafsīr* works, especially focusing on the cited materials in *tafsīr* works and the frequency of references to various exegetes in subsequent tradition, would make it possible to assess the impact of individual commentators on the *tafsīr* tradition. The results of such analysis could lead to a revision of the generally accepted picture of the development of *tafsīr*. The focus on the exegete's measurable impact on the *tafsīr* tradition provides a significant departure from the 'school' framework, as it emphasises the role of the individual over that of traditions. However, the idea of distinct exegetical traditions is not completely rejected, and it is admitted that within the notion of a general exegetical core one could distinguish between Ṣūfī, Sunnī and Shi'ite cores that develop over time, even though these cores are not 'hermetically sealed'.³²⁾ This approach, with its suggested methodology of statistical analysis and potential to provide an alternative picture of the development of *tafsīr* tradition, however, has not yet been applied in the analysis of Islamic exegesis on a large scale.³³⁾

Alternatively, the development of *tafsīr* can be approached through the contribution of the exegetes who, although considered as belonging to different traditions, are nevertheless working within the same field of *tafsīr*. This is the focus of Andrew Rippin's analysis of the pre-modern Twelver Shi'ite *tafsīr*, which deals with the contribution of Twelver Shi'ite exegetes to

32) Saleh, "Preliminary Remarks," 18.

33) Saleh, "Preliminary Remarks," 18.

tafsīr rather than with the Twelver Shi'ite *tafsīr* as an isolated tradition. Twelver Shi'ite *tafsīr* is thus analysed as part of the history of the genre overall. Furthermore, when compared to Sunnī *tafsīr* using the criterion of exegetical authority, it becomes clear that both traditions went through several 'transition points' in their developments. Although these 'transition points' occurred at different times and might have been caused by different factors in each case, the changes that both traditions underwent with regard to the conception of exegetical authority are methodologically parallel.³⁴⁾

What is of particular importance for the following discussion on Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*, is that this comparative approach, which allows seeing Twelver Shi'ite *tafsīr* as a part of a bigger picture of the development of *tafsīr*, has benefitted significantly from the previous research on Twelver Shi'ite *tafsīr*. As a result of this research, Twelver Shi'ite *tafsīr* has been defined in historical terms rather than through reference to a single and unchanging set of features essential to this tradition. Its historical definition is reflected in the subdivision of Twelver Shi'ite *tafsīr* tradition into several periods. As distinguished by Mahmoud Ayoub, they include the formative or pre-classical period, represented by the first and second generations of Shi'ite exegetes, followed by the classical period, which lasted from the second half of the 4th/10th until the 10th/16th century, and the third phase, which began in the 11th/17th century. This third phase was distinguished by the exegetes' polemical approach to earlier *tafsīr* (especially Sunnī) and continued until the final stage – modern Imāmī Shi'ite exegesis.³⁵⁾ This periodisation of the Twelver

34) Rippin, "What Defines a (Pre-modern) Shi'i *Tafsīr*?" 104-12.

Shī'ite *tafsīr* is grounded on the qualitative changes observed in the texts written by Twelver Shī'ite exegetes of various periods; these are in turn related to the changes in the political and intellectual milieu of these Twelver Shī'ite scholars.³⁵⁾ Instead of imposing the defined 'essence' of Twelver Shī'ite *tafsīr* tradition on a variety of Qur'ānic commentaries written by the authors associated with this tradition, this approach redefines the tradition of Twelver Shī'ite *tafsīr* based on the contributions of individual Twelver Shī'ite commentators. This does not only explain the variation in the texts of Twelver Shī'ite exegetes, but offers a dynamic image of the tradition itself and allows seeing it as an integral part of the overall development of the *tafsīr* genre.

Adopting a similar approach for Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*, this article suggests, might prove beneficial for the study of this tradition. As the next section intends to show, Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* is still being defined through reference to a single unique set of characteristics that commentaries on the Qur'ān written by Mu'tazilite exegetes are expected to have. This approach, however, creates several barriers to fully appreciating the contribution of individual Mu'tazilite commentators to *tafsīr*, as well as to understanding this tradition on its own terms and assessing its place in the overall development of Islamic exegesis.

35) Mahmoud Ayoub, "The Speaking Qur'ān and the Silent Qur'ān: a Study of the Principles and Development of Imāmī Shī'ī *Tafsīr*," in Andrew Rippin, ed. *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 184–6.

36) Rippin, "What Defines a (Pre-modern) Shī'ī *Tafsīr*?" 99–101.

III. Rethinking Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*: from essence to history³⁷⁾

The argument in favour of the critical re-evaluation of the notion of exegetical 'schools' would find a strong supporting case in Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*. To the already mentioned discrepancy between an abstract idea of Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* and the texts by Mu'tazilite authors, as observed by Lane via the example of al-Zamakhsharī's commentary, further observations which endorse other arguments raised during the discussion could be added.

To begin with, the idea of Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* as a distinct category creates a certain asymmetry in the traditionally accepted division of Islamic exegetical tradition into Sunnī, Shī'ite (with various branches of Shī'ism included), and Šūfī traditions – since in so far as Mu'tazilite authors were not Shī'ites they could be considered belonging to the wider Sunnī tradition, and especially since the output of the commentators from the Ash'arite and Māturīdī theological traditions – comparable to Mu'tazilism – is usually considered within Sunnī *tafsīr*.

Distinguished as an exegetical tradition in its own right, furthermore, Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* occupies only a marginal place in the development of *tafsīr*. This is a view found in Islamic sources, which are often hostile to this tradition.³⁸⁾ It appears

37) This section uses some materials from my doctoral dissertation (Alena Kulinich, *Representing 'a Blameworthy Tafsīr': Mu'tazilite Exegetical Tradition in al-Jāmi' fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān of 'Alī ibn 'Īsā al-Rummānī (d. 384/994)*, submitted to SOAS, University of London in 2012).

38) This view also seems to have affected academic scholarship on this tradition; however, Harris Birkeland acknowledged the significance of the Mu'tazilah by crediting them with the introduction of theological,

that the major mechanism through which Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*'s marginal position is justified is the classification of *tafsīr* into two types: *tafsīr bi-al-ra'y* (*tafsīr* by opinion) and *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* (*tafsīr* by tradition). Although the meanings of these two categories did not remain uncontested, the value judgment that they implied did not seem to change. *Tafsīr bi-al-ra'y*, in contrast to its counterpart – *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* – was disapproved of in Islamic tradition following several *ḥadīths* in which the Prophet Muḥammad himself was portrayed as strongly disapproving of it.³⁹⁾ Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* as a category⁴⁰⁾ was perceived as the epitome of *tafsīr bi-al-ra'y*, and this was reflected in the way the

legal and grammatical discussions into *tafsīr*: see Harris Birkeland, *The Lord Guideth: Studies on Primitive Islam* (Oslo: I Kommissjon Hos H. Aschehoug and Co. [W. Nygaard], 1956), 135.

- 39) One variant is the *ḥadīth* according to which the Prophet Muḥammad said, "Whoever speaks (*qāla*) about the Qur'ān without knowledge (*bi-ghayri 'ilm*) let him take his seat in fire," (Muḥammad ibn 'Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *Al-Jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ wa-huwa Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākīr (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmīyah, 199-), vol. V, n. 2950). On the categories of *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* and *tafsīr bi-al-ra'y* see Saleh, "Preliminary Remarks," 21–37.
- 40) While as a category Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* was disapproved of, the remarks on individual Mu'tazilite commentators and their works vary from criticism to an occasional word of praise. See, for instance, the critique of Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī's commentary by the Imāmī Shī'ite scholar 'Alī ibn Mūsā ibn Ṭāwūs (d. 664/1266) in Etan Kohlberg, "Alī b. Mūsā ibn Ṭāwūs and His Polemic against Sunnism," in *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter*, ed. Bernard Lewis and Friedrich Niewöhner (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 325–50; and appreciation of the *tafsīr* works of Abū Muslim Muḥammad ibn Baḥr al-Iṣfahānī (d. 322/934) and 'Alī ibn 'Īsā al-Rummānī (d. 384/994) by another Imāmī Shī'ite scholar Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1066–7) in Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *Al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥabīb Qasīr al-Āmilī and Aḥmad Shawqī al-Amīn (Najaf: al-Maṭba'ah al-'ilmīyah, 1957–63), vol. I, 1.

opponents of Mu'tazilism defined it. At the heart of this definition (with implied disapproval) lie two features. First, that the Mu'tazilah interpret the Qur'an in accordance with their personal opinion, that is to say according to their theological doctrines. Second, that in their commentaries on the Qur'an Mu'tazilite commentators do not follow traditional exegetical authorities, such as the Prophet Muḥammad himself, his companions and their followers.⁴¹⁾

Both these features were accepted in academic scholarship as essential to the definition of Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*. Of these, the assumption that Mu'tazilite exegetes did not rely on earlier exegetical authorities has been challenged by Rosalind Gwynne in the case of *tafsīr* of Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī (d. 303/915)⁴²⁾ and by Andrew Lane for al-Zamakhsharī's commentary.⁴³⁾ However, interpreting the Qur'an according to Mu'tazilite theological

41) For example, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324/935-6) remarks on Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*: "People of deviation and misguidance [that is to say the Mu'tazilah] explain the Qur'an according to their personal opinions, and interpret it in a way that is convenient for them, giving interpretation for which God did not reveal legitimation, and did not provide a clear evidence, and which is not transmitted from the Messenger of the Lord of the worlds, nor from the noble people of his house, nor from the predecessors – the companions of the Prophet and their followers. Thus, they invent lying against God; they are astray from the right path and are not rightly guided" (cited from 'Alī ibn al-Ḥasan Ibn 'Asākir, *Tabyīn kadhīb al-muftarī fī-mā nusiba ilā al-Imām Abī al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī* (Damascus: Maṭba'at al-tawfiq, 1347/1928-9), 138).

42) Rosalind W. Gwynne, *The "Tafsīr" of Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī: First Steps toward a Reconstruction, with Texts, Translation, Biographical Introduction and Analytical Essay*, PhD thesis, University of Washington, 1982, 36.

43) Lane, *A Traditional Mu'tazilite Qur'an Commentary*, 149-80.

doctrines and using it as a proof text has continued to be seen as the *raison d'être* of the Mu'tazilite exegetical tradition.

Starting with Ignaz Goldziher, who described Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* as 'dogmatic interpretation of the Qur'ān' representing a break with traditional exegesis (although not a conscious one), the uniqueness of Mu'tazilite exegesis has been seen as consisting in this need of the Mu'tazilite to justify their doctrines and to refute the arguments of their adversaries by invoking the authority of the Qur'ān, and this feature has been at the centre of the analysis.⁴⁴⁾ Most other characteristics considered specific for Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* are seen as being determined by and serving this ultimate goal. For Goldziher, such characteristics include metaphorical interpretations of those verses of the Qur'ān that can be read as contradicting Mu'tazilite theological doctrines (for example, 'anthropomorphic' verses of the Qur'ān), attention to a rhetorical appreciation of the Qur'ānic text (which is connected to the doctrine of the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān),⁴⁵⁾ and rationality which aimed at "unsparingly banning mythology from the realm of religious facts."⁴⁶⁾ Goldziher also mentions the priority that some Mu'tazilite commentators give to philological methods in their interpretation of the Qur'ān, which allows them to avoid recourse to allegorical interpretation as long as a controversial passage can be explained by lexicological means.⁴⁷⁾ To these essential characteristics, the attitude of Mu'tazilite

44) Goldziher, *Schools of Koranic Commentators*, 65.

45) On the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān see Richard C. Martin, "Inimitability," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, gen. ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Brill Online, 2015).

46) Goldziher, *Schools of Koranic Commentators*, 95.

47) Goldziher, *Schools of Koranic Commentators*, 74–7.

exegetes to the interpretation of the ambiguous verses of the Qur'ān (*al-mutashābihāt*) has been added.⁴⁸⁾

Suleiman Mourad's work on *al-Tahdhīb fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (*The Refinement of the Exegesis of the Qur'ān*), a commentary by a Zaydī Mu'tazilite author al-Ḥākīm al-Jishumī (d. 494/1101) which has survived in its complete form but still remains unpublished, conforms to this approach. From the perspective of al-Jishumī's text, "loaded with theological biases", for Mu'tazilite scholars the exegesis of the Qur'ān was "a battlefield where the exegete fights his opponents over their misinterpretation of scripture."⁴⁹⁾ They often approached the Qur'ānic text by deciding in advance what it means, and using various strategies to impose this meaning on the text.⁵⁰⁾

Manifestation of these features in Mu'tazilite commentaries has also been demonstrated by other studies,⁵¹⁾ and, as I have

48) On this category see Leah Kinberg, "Ambiguous," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, gen. ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Brill Online, 2015). Works entitled *Mutashābih al-Qur'ān* are ascribed to a number of Mu'tazilite scholars (see Sabine Schmidtke, "Mu'tazilah," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*). Most of them appear to be lost; on some extant texts see 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sālimī, "Al-Mutashābih fī al-Qur'ān lil-Ṭuraythīthī: dirāsah lil-kitāb wa-nusakhīhi al-khaṭṭīyah," *Journal of the Institute of Arabic Manuscripts* (Cairo, Egypt) 52/1, 2 (May–November 2008), 7–43; Marie Bernard, "La méthode d'exégèse coranique de 'Abd al-Ġabbār à travers son Mutašābih," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 50/1 (1984), 85–100; and Suleiman A. Mourad, "Ibn al-Khallāl al-Baṣrī (d. after 377/988) and His Oeuvre on the Problematic Verses of the Qur'ān *Kitāb al-Radd 'alā al-jabriyya al-qadariyya* (Refutation of the Predestinarian Compulsionists)," in *A Common Rationality*, 81–99.

49) Mourad, "The Revealed Text and the Intended Subtext," 372–3.

50) Mourad, "The Revealed Text and the Intended Subtext," 372–3.

51) For example, Mazheruddin Siddiqi, "Some Aspects of the Mu'tazili Interpretation of the Qur'ān," *Islamic Studies* 2/1 (1963), 95–120;

mentioned elsewhere, the importance of these features for Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* could hardly be denied, both in relation to the way in which theological considerations shaped the content of their commentaries and in the hermeneutical principles employed by the Mu'tazilah.⁵²⁾ However, seeing these characteristics as an 'essence' of Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* might impose limitations on the study of this tradition.

An obvious limitation is the exceptionalism of Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* that this approach implies. To state a well-known fact, Mu'tazilite exegetes were not the only ones who interpreted the Qur'ān according to their doctrines, nor were they exceptional in using it as a proof text. It is natural that for the Mu'tazilah to consider the interpretation of the Qur'ān as a 'battlefield' there must have been parties with the same goal in mind on the other side of the 'battlefield'. The parties whom various Mu'tazilite exegetes were 'fighting' and the circumstances of the 'fights' must have differed depending on the intellectual milieu of an exegete. For example, the groups whom 'Alī ibn 'Īsā al-Rummānī, the tenth century Mu'tazilite exegete living in Baghdad, tried to refute in his commentary on the Qur'ān include various opponents whom he designates as *al-mujbirah* (the Compulsionists), *aṣḥāb al-taqlīd* (the Proponents of the blind imitation [of the authorities]), *al-murji'ah* (the Murji'ites), *ahl al-ma'ārif* (People of the intuitive knowledge), *ghulāt* (Exaggerators), and *aṣḥāb*

Suleiman A. Mourad, "The Mu'tazila and Their *Tafsīr* Tradition: a Comparative Study of Five Exegetical Glosses on Qur'an 3.178," in Shah, ed. *Tafsīr: Interpreting the Qur'ān*, vol. III, 267–83.

52) Alena Kulnich, "Beyond Theology: Mu'tazilite Scholars and Their Authority in al-Rummānī's *Tafsīr*," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 78/1 (2015), 135–48.

al-tanāsukh (Those who believe in the transmigration of souls).⁵³⁾

Another limitation intrinsic to this approach is essentialism, which is twofold. On the level of individual commentaries on the Qurʾān by Muʿtazilite authors, adopting this approach could lead to one-dimensional readings of these texts, according to the single ‘essence’ of Muʿtazilite *tafsīr*, while their contribution to other aspects of Qurʾānic interpretation could be overshadowed. It has been noted even for some relatively early Muʿtazilite commentaries which are available only in ‘reconstructed’ versions, such as those of Abū Bakr al-Aṣamm (d. 201/815–6)⁵⁴⁾ or Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbāʾī,⁵⁵⁾ that besides theological and apologetic considerations both exegetes engaged with a range of Qurʾānic disciplines (*‘ulūm al-Qurʾān*).⁵⁶⁾ This is also clearly the case for the two later commentaries by al-Rummānī and by al-Jishumī. Both of them belong to an encyclopaedic type of *tafsīr*, which as its name suggests includes various types of materials;⁵⁷⁾

53) Kulinich, *Representing ‘a Blameworthy Tafsīr’*, 188–91.

54) For Abū Bakr al-Aṣamm, see Gregor M. Schwarb, “al-Aṣamm,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet, et al. (Brill Online, 2015); for his ‘reconstructed’ commentary with an analytical introduction see Abū Bakr al-Aṣamm, *Tafsīr Abī Bakr al-Aṣamm ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Kaysān*, ed. Khudr Muḥammad Nabhā (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmīyah, 2007).

55) For al-Jubbāʾī’s commentary, see Daniel Gimaret, *Une lecture muʿtazilite du Coran. Le Tafsīr d’Abū ‘Alī al-Djubbāʾī (m. 303/915) partiellement reconstitué à partir des ses citateurs* (Louvain; Paris: Peeters, 1994); Gwynne, *The “Tafsīr” of Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbāʾī*, and Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbāʾī, *Tafsīr Abī ‘Alī al-Jubbāʾī*, ed. Khudr Muḥammad Nabhā (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmīyah, 2007).

56) On the Qurʾānic disciplines, see Claude Gilliot, “Traditional Disciplines of Qurʾānic Studies,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, gen. ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Brill Online, 2015).

57) On this type of the commentary, see Norman Calder, “*Tafsīr* from

moreover, both contain in their introductions the lists of various Qur'ānic disciplines that their authors incorporated into the commentaries.

Al-Rummānī's list includes five categories: 1) comprehension of the text and its meanings (*al-fahm*); 2) grammatical syntax (*al-i'rāb*); 3) variant readings (*wujūh al-qirā'āt*); 4) knowledge of what verses of the Qur'an are considered to be proofs for theological doctrines (*al-dalālat*); 5) legal commandments (*al-aḥkām*).⁵⁸⁾ Al-Jishumī lists eight disciplines he engaged with in his commentary. They are: 1) reading (*al-qirā'ah*); 2) philology (*al-lughah*); 3) grammatical syntax (*al-i'rāb*); 4) composition (*naẓm*); 5) meaning (*al-ma'nā*); 6) occasion of revelation (*al-nuzūl*); 7) knowledge of the legal commandments and verses which have theological implications (*al-adillah wa-al-aḥkām*); and 8) messages and stories (*al-akhbār wa-al-qīṣaṣ*).⁵⁹⁾

In these lists, the discipline usually associated with the Mu'tazilite approach to the Qur'an – *al-dalālat* (knowledge of what verses of the Qur'an are considered to be proofs for theological doctrines), is only one among the disciplines. Reducing the contribution of the commentaries to this single aspect could mean overlooking these other aspects of their commentaries, as well as the intentions of their authors who, in a manner common to other exegetes, emphasise above all the need to interpret the Qur'an as a source of guidance for Muslims.

Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham," in *Approaches to the Qur'an*, ed. G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 101–40.

58) Kulinich, *Representing 'a Blameworthy Tafsīr'*, 89–90.

59) Mourad, "The Revealed Text and the Intended Subtext," 367–9.

On another level, that of Mu'tazilite exegesis as a category, defining the tradition through a single and unchanging 'essence' means that its potential complexity and dynamics, both in terms of qualitative changes over time and possible regional differences, might be overlooked. It is as yet not possible to present a trajectory of the historical development of the Mu'tazilite exegetical tradition similar to the one offered for Twelver Shi'ite *tafsīr*, as its study is still in its initial phases. The Mu'tazilite heritage in the field of Qur'anic studies is not yet even available in a catalogued form, and the boundaries of the tradition itself do not always seem clear.⁶⁰⁾ The most detailed overviews of Mu'tazilite scholars' writings on the Qur'ān to date are those offered by Sabine Schmidtke⁶¹⁾ and by Bruce Fudge.⁶²⁾ However, even at this stage of research it is natural to expect

60) Mu'tazilite manuscripts in world manuscript collections, as well as edited works of Mu'tazilite scholars and studies devoted to them, are the subject of the forthcoming publication *Handbook of Mu'tazilite Works and Manuscripts*, eds. Gregor Schwarb, Sabine Schmidtke and David Sklare (Leiden: Brill). On this work see Gregor Schwarb, "Un projet international: le manuel des oeuvres et manuscrits Mu'tazilite," *Chroniques du Manuscrit au Yémen* 2 (June 2006), available at <http://cy.revues.org/198> (last consulted on 22 October 2015). The works of the exegetes who were influenced by Mu'tazilism appear sometimes to be seen as part of Mu'tazilite exegesis; for example, Goldziher uses *al-Amālī (Lectures)* of the Imāmī scholar 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044) as a source of Mu'tazilite exegesis (Goldziher, *Schools of Koranic Commentators*, 74-7), while 'Adnān Zarzūr counts works by some Zaydī scholars in his list of Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* ('Adnān Zarzūr, *al-Ḥākīm al-Jushamī wa-manhajuhu fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Damascus: Mu'assasat al-risālah lil-ṭibā'ah wa-al-nashr, 1972), 123-50).

61) Schmidtke, "Mu'tazilah."

62) Bruce Fudge, *Qur'anic Hermeneutics: al-Ṭabrisī and the Craft of Commentary* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 114-42.

that this heritage is not homogeneous and that some variations will be encountered among the commentaries by scholars associated with the Mu'tazilah. Explaining this variation through an approach which measures a commentary by the yardstick of the 'essential' features of an abstract Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* could result in creating a hierarchy where various commentaries written by Mu'tazilite authors are classified as 'more' or 'less' Mu'tazilite. In fact, in the overview offered by Fudge the emphasis is on the exploration of the 'major' seven Mu'tazilite exegetes, including Abū Bakr al-Aṣamm, Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'i, Abū al-Qāsim al-Ka'bī al-Balkhī (d. 319/931), Abū Muslim Muḥammad ibn Baḥr al-Iṣfahānī (d. 322/934), 'Alī ibn 'Īsā al-Rummānī, al-Qādī 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadhānī al-Asadābādī (d. 415/1025), and al-Ḥakīm al-Jishumī. While, on the other hand, al-Zamakhsharī's very influential commentary is considered "at the end, if not on the margins" of this tradition, following Lane's analysis of it.⁶³⁾

As an alternative, the variations between different texts could be explained if Mu'tazilite exegetical tradition is regarded not as a homogeneous and static category, defined by a unique and unchanging 'essence', but approached from a historical perspective and seen as changing over time and interacting with

63) Fudge, *Qur'anic Hermeneutics*, 115. The criteria on which these seven figures are considered 'major' are not given by Fudge; it could be mentioned that they are the ones whose commentaries have survived either as significant fragments or in a complete form (or have been 'reconstructed' from later sources), and that they were seen as sufficiently influential in the field of *tafsīr* to be included in the biographical literature of the Qur'an commentators, their commentaries were also referred to by later exegetes, but the range of such scholars could be extended beyond these seven exegetes to include other Mu'tazilite scholars.

other trends of Islamic exegesis. The changes in its development (and that of other traditions, for that matter) might be caused or influenced by a range of historical factors and circumstances, such as religious policies at a particular time, patronage, the originality of individual exegetes, relations with other schools of exegesis and mutual influences.⁶⁴⁾ In relation to the individual *tafsīr* works written by Mu'tazilite authors, this perspective would mean that they are not judged in accordance with an ideal template but are considered on their own terms. Their contributions redefine the tradition itself by shaping the trajectory of its development. Al-Zamakhsharī's commentary in this case would be seen not as either 'major' or 'marginal' to the tradition, but as reflecting a certain stage of its development. This perspective could also allow accommodating potential texts by Mu'tazilite authors that, like al-Zamakhsharī's commentary in the interpretation of Lane, might not display the features of the ideal template of Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*. One example is a commentary by Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan Abū Bakr al-Naqqāsh (d. 351/962), who according to 'Adnān Zarzūr belonged to the Baghdād school of Mu'tazilism,⁶⁵⁾ although he does not seem to be mentioned in

64) For the influence of Mu'tazilite commentators on exegetes of other traditions, see, for example, Suleiman A. Mourad, "The Survival of the Mu'tazila Tradition of Qur'anic Exegesis in Shī'ī and Sunnī *Tafsīr*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 12 (2010), 83-108; less appears to be known about the influence of other traditions on Mu'tazilite exegetes as well as the origin of Mu'tazilite exegesis.

65) Zarzūr, *Al-Ḥākim al-Jushamī*, 134. However, al-Suyūṭī, who included Abū Bakr al-Naqqāsh in his *Ṭabaqāt al-mufasssīrīn*, does not make any connections between him and Mu'tazilism. Al-Naqqāsh, according to al-Suyūṭī, was the *imām* of Irāqī people in the readings of the Qur'an (*al-qirā'āt*) and in its interpretation (*al-tafsīr*). Al-Suyūṭī mentions three other works on the Qur'an authored by al-Naqqāsh: *al-Qirā'āt*, *al-Ishārah*

Mu'tazilite *ṭabaqāt* works. His commentary entitled *Shifā' al-ṣudūr* (*The Cure of the Hearts*) has survived in several manuscript copies⁶⁶) and Zarzūr's preliminary investigation of one such copy showed that this *tafsīr* displayed almost no explicit leaning towards Mu'tazilism nor any attempts to discuss the opinions of their opponents, but is mainly devoted to the language, eloquence (*al-balāghah*) and variant readings of the Qur'ān (*al-qirā'āt*).⁶⁷) If these conclusions and the author's affiliation are confirmed, this text could present another incentive for rethinking Mu'tazilite exegetical tradition.

To conclude, the above arguments concerning the notion of an exegetical 'school' have considerable implications for Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*. Not only are they applicable to the case of Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*, but they also reveal some of the limitations of the traditional approach to Mu'tazilite exegesis that defines this tradition based on a unique and unchanging set of essential features. Shifting the focus from an essentialist to a historical framework could help to address these limitations and might prove beneficial for the study of Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*. It could challenge the perception of it as a homogeneous, static and

fī gharīb al-Qur'ān, and *al-Muwaḍḍiḥ fī ma'ānī al-Qur'ān* (Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Ṭabaqāt al-mufasssīrīn* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmīyah, 1403/1983), 80–1).

66) Two copies of *Shifā' al-ṣudūr* are mentioned by Zarzūr. One of them is Ms 140 *tafsīr* from the Dār al-kutub collection; according to Zarzūr, this partly defective copy consists of 275 folios and includes commentaries from the middle of the sūra *Maryam* to the sūra *al-Nās* with some gaps. The other manuscript is part of the British Library's collection, Ms. Or8453 (Zarzūr, *Al-Ḥākīm al-Jushamī*, 135).

67) Zarzūr, *Al-Ḥākīm al-Jushamī*, 135.

marginal tradition, while highlighting the contribution of Mu'tazilite authors to Islamic exegesis, thus bringing the study of Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* in line with advances made in research on other aspects of Mu'tazilite intellectual tradition.

Key words: Islamic exegesis, interpretation of the Qur'ān, *tafsīr*, Mu'tazilah

원고접수일: 2015년 11월 9일

심사완료일: 2015년 12월 7일

게재확정일: 2015년 12월 14일

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Abstract

Rethinking Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*: from essence to history

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It has been common to approach the history of the interpretation of the Qur'ān (*tafsīr*) through the study of different traditions or 'schools' of *tafsīr*. These 'schools' usually correspond to various Islamic intellectual/sectarian traditions and include, among others, the Twelver Shi'ite, Sunnī, Mu'tazilite and Šūfī *tafsīr* traditions. An underlying assumption in this division is that each of these traditions developed a distinct approach to the text of the Qur'ān, and that *tafsīr* works authored by scholars associated with these 'schools' fall into recognisable traditions due to the manifestations of this approach in their texts. The 'school' framework has been applied in the classical studies on Qur'ānic exegesis and continues to inform both the analysis of the history of Islamic exegesis and studies on individual commentaries on the Qur'ān. Several recent publications, however, revisited this well-established framework. Centred on the fundamental question of 'what makes an exegetical tradition a tradition?', they raised a number of related questions concerning the precise characteristics of the various exegetical 'schools', the value of this notion for the analysis of individual commentaries on the Qur'ān, and its validity as an analytical tool for

understanding the history of Islamic exegesis. This article explores the implications that this critical engagement with the notion of an exegetical ‘school’ has for Mu‘tazilite *tafsīr*. It shows that the arguments advanced in the course of this engagement are not only fully applicable to the case of Mu‘tazilite *tafsīr*; they also reveal the limitations of the traditional approach to Mu‘tazilite *tafsīr* which defines this tradition through reference to a single unique set of characteristics that the commentaries on the Qur‘ān written by Mu‘tazilite authors are thought to have. The article highlights some of these limitations, focusing on the exceptionalism and essentialism implied in this approach. It further suggests that the study of Mu‘tazilite *tafsīr* could benefit from an adaptation of a historical rather than an essentialist framework. This historical framework implies that Mu‘tazilite exegetical tradition is regarded not as a homogeneous and static category, defined by a unique and unchanging ‘essence’, but approached from a historical perspective and seen as changing over time, and interacting with other trends of Islamic exegesis.

Key words: Islamic exegesis, interpretation of the Qur‘ān, *tafsīr*, Mu‘tazilah