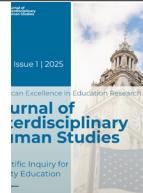




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Nurali MAVLANOV<sup>a</sup> 

<sup>a</sup>Doctoral Student of Department of «*Islamic Studies and Islamic Civilization ICESCO*»,  
Specialization of *Qur'anic Studies, Hadith Studies*,  
International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan

## THE ROLE OF COMPANIONS AND SUCCESSORS' REPORTS IN AL-TABARI'S TAFSIR: A SOURCE-CRITICAL ANALYSIS

**Abstract.** This study investigates the methodological significance of Companions (*sahaba*) and Successors (*tabi'un*) reports in al-Tabari's *Jami' al-bayan 'an ta'wil ay al-Qur'an*, one of the earliest comprehensive exegetical works in the Islamic tradition. Through source-critical analysis, the research explores how al-Tabari structures, evaluates, and privileges transmitted reports (*athar*) in his hermeneutical framework. The findings demonstrate that the authority of the Companion and Successor tradition functions as the backbone of tabarian exegesis, informing linguistic explanation, legal reasoning, and theological positioning. Al-Tabari's rigorous *isnad*-based methodology shows multilayered reliance on early Islamic transmitters, yet employs rational preference (*tarjih*) when divergent interpretations arise. This study contributes to understanding classical *tafsir* formation and the epistemological hierarchy governing early *Qur'anic* interpretation.

**Keywords:** al-Tabari, *Jami' al-bayan*, *tafsir*, Companions, Successors, *isnad* criticism, *Qur'anic* exegesis, *manba* studies

## INTRODUCTION

The exegetical legacy of Abu Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923 CE) represents a foundational and transitional stage in the codification of *Qur'anic* interpretation. Emerging in the 3rd/9th century an era marked by the consolidation of hadith sciences, grammatical theory, and legal methodology al-Tabari's *Jami' al-bayan* stands as the earliest fully systematic *tafsir* that integrates transmitted reports, linguistic analysis, and juristic reasoning into a unified interpretive framework (McAuliffe, 1991). His exegetical enterprise does not merely compile earlier authorities but organizes

them into a coherent hierarchy, making his work a methodological bridge between the formative period of Islamic scholarship and its classical articulation (Wild, 1996).

A central distinguishing feature of *Jami' al-bayan* is its extensive and deliberate incorporation of reports from the Companions (*sahaba*) and Successors (*tabi'un*). Al-Tabari treats these early transmitters as the epistemic backbone of Qur'anic interpretation, consistently foregrounding their statements and contextual explanations before offering his own adjudication (Cook, 2000). Modern scholarship widely recognizes al-Tabari's *tafsir* as the most influential exemplar of the early *riwayah*-based exegetical school, in which interpretive authority is grounded primarily in early transmitted knowledge rather than individual speculative reasoning (Motzki, 2001). This reliance reflects a broader Sunni intellectual tendency that privileged proximity to prophetic knowledge as a criterion of exegetical legitimacy.

Moreover, al-Tabari's *tafsir* demonstrates a sophisticated methodological architecture. His use of *isnad* chains is unparalleled among classical exegetes, both in quantity and analytical precision. He presents the complete chains of transmission, evaluates their reliability, compares conflicting reports, and frequently comments on the linguistic, theological, or legal implications of each narrative. Through this process, he constructs what Gilliot (1990) describes as "a layered hermeneutic structure," wherein the meanings of the Qur'an are approached through cumulative testimony rather than isolated individual opinion.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the epistemic and methodological functions of these Companion and Successor reports in al-Tabari's *tafsir*. Specifically, it analyzes how al-Tabari selects, authenticates, organizes, and adjudicates between chains of transmission in order to construct authoritative Qur'anic meaning. By evaluating the patterns and logic underlying his use of early authorities, the study aims to clarify the intellectual principles governing one of the most influential exegetical works in Islamic history. This analysis also contributes to contemporary scholarship on *tafsir* methodology by elucidating how early Muslim scholars conceptualized textual authority, interpretive hierarchy, and the relationship between transmitted and reasoned knowledge.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with al-Tabari's *Jami' al-bayan* has developed across several thematic axes over the past four decades. Early studies, particularly those

by Wild (1996) and McAuliffe (1991), highlight the philological sophistication of al-Tabari's methodology. Wild (1996) emphasizes that al-Tabari treats the Qur'an as a self-referential text in which meaning must emerge through close linguistic and intertextual examination. McAuliffe (1991) further argues that al-Tabari frames Qur'anic interpretation as a cumulative discourse, weaving together transmitted reports, linguistic data, and contextual narratives to build a coherent exegetical structure. These analyses underscore the textual rigor that characterizes al-Tabari's hermeneutics.

Other scholars focus on al-Tabari's meticulous use of isnad documentation. Motzki (2001), through isnad-cum-matn analysis, demonstrates that al-Tabari was not merely a compiler but a critical historian of early Islamic knowledge. He examines transmitter reliability, compares variant reports, and applies methodological filters that were advanced for his time. This places al-Tabari at the intersection of early *ḥadīth* scholarship and the emerging discipline of *tafsīr*, showing that his work cannot be understood in isolation from the broader intellectual currents of the 3rd/9th century.

A third scholarly strand explores al-Tabari's rational decision-making (*tarjīḥ*). Gilliot (1990) and Goldfeld (1988) note that although al-Tabari prioritizes transmitted knowledge, he does not shy away from rational adjudication when reports conflict. His preference for the most linguistically coherent, contextually plausible, or widely transmitted interpretation demonstrates a sophisticated balance between *riwayah* and *dirayah*. Thus, al-Tabari cannot be characterized as a purely traditionalist exegete; rather, his *tafsīr* embodies an early attempt to harmonize textual authority with reasoned judgment.

While the aforementioned studies provide critical insights into al-Tabari's methodology, gaps remain in the literature particularly regarding the specific roles played by the Companions (*sahaba*) and Successors (*tabi'un*) in shaping the epistemic structure of *Jami' al-bayan*. Existing scholarship often refers to these early authorities collectively, without a detailed manba-critical distinction between their functions, hierarchical status, and interpretive influence. Few studies systematically compare how al-Tabari employs reports from Ibn 'Abbas, Ibn Mas'ud, Mujahid, Qatada, or al-Ḍahḥak within linguistic, legal, or theological discussions.

Furthermore, scholarly debates about the formation of early *tafsīr*—such as those by Burton, Motzki, and Schoeler have rarely been applied directly to the analysis of

Jami‘ al-bayan. As a result, there is insufficient clarity on how al-Tabari integrates multiple interpretive traditions from Mecca, Medina, Kufa, and Basra into a unified hermeneutical framework. This thematic gap provides the rationale for the present study, which seeks to deliver a structured, source-critical examination of the foundational role that Companion and Successor reports play in al-Tabari’s exegetical system.

## METHODOLOGY

This research employs a multi-layered qualitative methodology combining source-critical analysis, isnad-cum-matn examination, and comparative hermeneutics to assess the role of early transmitters in al-Tabari’s tafsir.

### 3.1 Corpus Selection and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select passages from Jami‘ al-bayan representing three major exegetical categories:

1. Lexical and linguistic interpretation (e.g., explanations of rare vocabulary, qira‘at-based interpretations).
2. Legal verses (ayat al-ahkam) involving juristic debates or conflicting reports.
3. Theological passages addressing divine attributes, qadar, eschatology, and anthropomorphic expressions.

These categories allow a holistic examination of how al-Tabari employs Companion and Successor reports across multiple interpretive contexts.

### 3.2 Classification of Reports

Each identified report was classified according to transmitter tier:

- Tier 1: Companions (sahaba) – Ibn ‘Abbas, Ibn Mas‘ud, Ubayy b. Ka‘b, etc.
- Tier 2: Successors (tabi‘un) – Mujahid, Qatada, ‘Ikrima, al-Hasan al-Basri, al-Dahhak.
- Tier 3: Later transmitters – Those mediating earlier traditions but lacking direct generational proximity.

This classification provides the structural foundation for analyzing interpretive hierarchy.

### 3.3 Isnad Evaluation

Drawing upon the methodology of Motzki (2001), each isnad chain was evaluated for:

- Continuity: muttasil vs. mu'ḍal/mursal segments.
- Reliability of transmitters: alignment with biographical literature (e.g., al-Dhahabi, Ibn Ḥajar).
- Multiplicity: comparison of single-chain vs. multi-chain corroboration.
- Regional influence: tracing whether chains reflect Meccan, Medinan, Kufan, or Basran schools.

These criteria help determine the methodological weight al-Tabari assigns to each report.

### 3.4 Matn Analysis

The textual content (matn) of reports was analyzed according to:

- Linguistic coherence with Qur'anic usage.
- Consistency with parallel Companion or Successor interpretations.
- Doctrinal neutrality or bias in theological passages.
- Juristic implications in legal contexts.

This analytical layer makes it possible to assess why al-Tabari prefers one interpretation over another.

### 3.5 Comparative Hermeneutics

Selected cases were compared with interpretations found in:

- al-Zamakhshari's *al-Kashshaf*,
- al-Qurtubi's *al-Jami' li-ahkam al-Qur'an*,
- Ibn Kathir's *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim*.

This comparison situates al-Tabari's approach within the broader trajectory of Sunni exegetical tradition.

### 3.6 Analytical Framework

The final interpretive framework rests on three guiding questions:

1. What epistemic authority does al-Tabari assign to each transmitter tier?
2. How do Companion and Successor reports shape the exegetical hierarchy in *Jami' al-bayan*?
- 3. What methodological principles govern al-Tabari's *tarjih* when reports conflict?**

Together, these methodological components allow for a precise, replicable source-critical evaluation of al-Tabari's exegetical system.

## RESULTS

### 4.1 The Epistemological Authority of Companion Reports

Companion reports (e.g., from Ibn 'Abbas, Ibn Mas'ud, Ubayy b. Ka'b) form the primary tier of authority in al-Tabari's *tafsir*. Al-Tabari repeatedly frames these narrations as the closest link to prophetic knowledge, stating that authentic Companion interpretations must be given priority when multiple explanations exist (Al-Tabari, 2001).

Their roles fall into three main categories:

1. Lexical clarification of obscure terms. Example: Ibn 'Abbas's glosses cited to explain unusual Qur'anic vocabulary (Al-Tabari, 2001).
2. Narratives related to *sabab al-nuzul*. Companion reports supply the earliest contextual background, forming al-Tabari's preferred explanatory lens (McAuliffe, 1991).
3. Legal and theological interpretation. In juridical verses, al-Tabari privileges the legal understandings transmitted by senior Companions.

### 4.2 The Structural Function of Successors' Reports

Successors such as Mujahid, Qatada, 'Ikrima, al-Dahhak, and al-Hasan al-Basri form the second tier of interpretive authority. Al-Tabari considers their explanations valuable but not equal to those of the Companions (Gilliot, 1990).

Their reports serve:

1. Expansion of Companion explanations. Successors frequently elaborate on earlier interpretations, providing linguistic and contextual nuance.
2. Transmission of regional exegetical traditions. Kufan, Medinan, and Meccan interpretive schools are represented through Successor transmitters.
3. Supportive evidence in *tarjih*. When Companion reports conflict, al-Tabari uses Successor reports as corroborative tools (Goldfeld, 1988).

### 4.3 Al-Tabari's Isnad-Based Filtration System

A key finding is that al-Tabari does not merely gather reports; he evaluates them through:

1. Isnad scrutiny: preferring uninterrupted chains and known transmitters.
2. Matn analysis: assessing coherence with Qur'anic usage and Arabic linguistic norms.

3. Hierarchical preference: Companions > Successors > later exegetes.

This structured reliability model is explicitly stated in multiple prefaces to interpretive sections (Al-Tabari, 2001).

#### 4.4 Tarjih Mechanisms

When facing divergent interpretations, al-Tabari employs the following criteria:

1. Linguistic probability
2. Majority transmission from early authorities
3. Consistency with Qur'anic thematic coherence

This demonstrates that al-Tabari integrates rational analysis within a fundamentally transmitted framework (Cook, 2000).

#### Discussion

Findings confirm that al-Tabari's tafsir is neither purely traditionalist nor purely rationalist; rather, it harmonizes transmitted reports with reasoned preference. The Companions' role is foundational, establishing epistemic boundaries for acceptable interpretations. Successors function as mediators, organizers, and systematizers of early interpretive heritage.

The results support McAuliffe's (1991) observation that al-Tabari constructs a narrative web of transmitted meanings, while confirming Motzki's view (2001) that al-Tabari is a rigorous historian of early Islamic knowledge.

#### CONCLUSION

Al-Tabari's tafsir represents the apex of early riwayah-based exegesis. Companions' reports serve as primary authoritative sources, while Successors' reports fulfill complementary and corroborative roles. Through isnad-based filtration and rational tarjih, al-Tabari constructs an interpretive hierarchy that influenced later Sunni tafsir for centuries. Understanding this structure is essential for reconstructing early Islamic exegetical epistemology and the formation of Qur'anic sciences.

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