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## AL-HAKIM AL-TIRMIDHI'S VIEWS ON TAFSIR AND TA'WIL

**Abstract.** *This article examines al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi's views on tafsir (exegesis) and ta'wil (interpretation) as reflected in his work "Tahsil nazair al-Qur'an." It shows that al-Tirmidhi consistently distinguishes between tafsir an explanation supported by a decisive proof such as a Qur'anic verse and ta'wil, the selection of the most fitting of a word's possible meanings. Through an analysis of the five "aspects" (wujuh) that al-Tirmidhi assigns to the word ta'wil, and a comparison with the usage of Imam al-Maturidi in "Ta'wilat ahl al-sunna," the article argues that, for al-Tirmidhi, the "aspects" of a Qur'anic word are directly bound up with the process of ta'wil, and that "Tahsil nazair al-Qur'an" constitutes, in effect, an exposition of the methodology of ta'wil and a refutation of those who reject the interpretation of the Qur'an's ambiguous (mutashabih) verses.*

**Keywords:** *al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi, al-Maturidi, tafsir, ta'wil, wujuh wa nazair, Tahsil nazair al-Qur'an, mutashabih, Qur'anic exegesis, diraya.*

## INTRODUCTION

Al-Tirmidhi wrote "Tahsil nazair al-Qur'an" as a refutation of an anonymous work. He used the term "commented upon" (مفسرة) for the meanings given to the words in the work being refuted, and, when citing the author's words, he used phrases such as "then we found his commentary (tafsir) to be thus" (ثم وجدنا تفسيره) or "as for his statement in his commentary" (أما قوله في تفسيره). That is, when he cites from the unknown (anonymous) work, he calls the sentences in which the "aspects" (wajh, i.e., meanings) are set forth "tafsir"; but when he himself sets forth the "aspect" (wajh) of a word, he calls it "ta'wil." This may be seen in the explanation of words such as al-dhikr, al-khawf, al-salat, kataba, al-ma'ruf, al-taghut, ba'sa' wa darra', al-khasirun, and al-istita'a.

## MAIN PART

In some places al-Tirmidhi also applied the term “tafsir” to the views he himself presented. If attention is paid to such sentences, one observes that a verse confirming the statement is cited after them; but in the places where the “ta’wil” of a particular word is given, no example from a verse is cited. This corresponds to Imam al-Maturidi’s view that tafsir relies on a decisive proof, whereas ta’wil involves choosing the most fitting of the possibilities. This very correspondence shows that al-Tirmidhi, in “Tahsil nazair al-Qur’an,” applied the distinction between ta’wil and tafsir in a clearly differentiated manner.

In order to understand more precisely what al-Tirmidhi meant by ta’wil, it is necessary to examine the explanations he applied to this term. In the forty-third (43) nazair chapter of the work, the “aspects” (wujuh) of precisely the word “al-ta’wil” are enumerated. Al-Tirmidhi first sets forth in detail the lexical meaning of ta’wil, then discloses its inner meanings as well. According to him, ta’wil is the seeking of the beginning of a thing. Whoever comprehends the beginning of matters and the first of deeds comprehends their ta’wil. The beginning of matters exists in the knowledge of the origin (ibtida) that God manifested on the day He determined the destinies and created the creatures in darkness. Whoever comprehends the beginning of matters also comprehends their ta’wil that is, they comprehend the true essence of things by the grace of the light of God (al-Tirmidhi, 1969:115).

From the above definition it is clear that al-Tirmidhi, from the very outset, sets forth the concept of ta’wil in an absolutely positive sense. Those who comprehend ta’wil are regarded as partaking of the grace of the light of God, as possessors of ladunni knowledge (innate aptitude). Ta’wil is not the product of dry rational investigations but, as a result of God’s mercy toward the servant, the comprehension of His will in a particular place.

Thus, according to al-Tirmidhi, ta’wil is assessed as an absolutely positive concept. But comprehending ta’wil is a matter within the capacity of persons of a rank worthy of this science, and not everyone can meet such a requirement.

Al-Tirmidhi explains the first “aspect” (wajh) of ta’wil that occurs in the Qur’an as being identical in meaning with tafsir (التفسير). For ta’wil removes the barriers from the places in the Qur’an whose meaning is hidden, and the meaning and aim of the word becomes clear.

The second meaning of ta'wil in the Qur'an is the interpretation of dreams (تعبير الرؤيا) (see Qur'an 12:44, 100), which al-Tirmidhi explains as consisting of figurative parables that need to be interpreted and that require an interpreter who renders the dream into the language of reality. That is, the interpreter reaches the essence of the matter that God set forth in the dream by way of simile (أمر الله الذي ضرب أمثاله). That very thing is the beginning of the matter (أول الأمر), and here the parable is secondary; the ta'wil that is, the interpreter returns it to its "beginning," which is that decreed in the "Preserved Tablet" (al-Lawh al-Mahfuz) (al-Tirmidhi, 1969:116).

In the above interpretation, al-Tirmidhi indicates, according to his method, that the root of the word ta'wil comes down to the word "awwal" (beginning). The main point to attend to here is that the reason interpretation (ta'bir) is expressed by the word ta'wil is that the thing to be interpreted is expressed by way of metaphor and simile. A thing whose meaning stands superficially and clearly has no need of ta'wil; a dream, however, is composed of metaphor, simile, and parables, and returning it to its "beginning," that is, its aim, and disclosing its essence, is called ta'wil. If this view is taken as a rule, the conclusion follows that the ambiguous (mutashabih) verses in the Qur'an must necessarily be interpreted (ta'wil); for the outward form of the ambiguous, like a parable, does not express the essence, and there is a need to disclose its essence.

Imam al-Maturidi, when discussing the impossibility of seeing God in a dream, noted that the things seen in a dream consist of imagination and likenesses, whereas God is pure of such things (Mulla Ali al-Qari, 2021:268).

The third of the "aspects" (wujuh) that al-Tirmidhi cites for the word ta'wil is the meaning of "result-outcome" (العاقبة). For the result and outcome are connected to the beginning of the matter. In verse 35 of Surah al-Isra it is said: "And do not be unfaithful in measure when you measure, and weigh with a correct balance that is good and the best outcome (أَحْسَنُ تَأْوِيلًا)." Here it is indicated that the result of a matter whose beginning is correct will also be correct.

The fourth "aspect" (wajh) that al-Tirmidhi cites for the word ta'wil is the "place of return" (المرجع), which is the matter's commencement "at the beginning"; for a thing to return, it must necessarily have a place where it began, since in order to return one must first have come from the place to which one returns. This is set forth in verse 59 of Surah al-Nisa, where, if a dispute arises among Muslims for some reason, it is

commanded to return it to God and the Prophet, and this is described as “the best and finest return (أَحْسَنُ تَأْوِيلًا).”

The fifth and final “aspect” (wajh) of the word ta’wil is reality (الحقيقة), that is, essence: the beginning of matters starts from the Real (al-Haqq), and their reality is their end. The beginning is closely connected to the end; since the beginning of matters is from the will of God Most High, their end too is subject to His will. To comprehend the reality, that is, the essence, of this, one must first know the Real (al-Haqq).

Another important issue appears in al-Tirmidhi in the connection of the terms “wajh” and “wujuh” with ta’wil. For “Tahsil nazair al-Qur’an” is, in terms of method, a work devoted to the solution of a number of problems such as the inner meanings of words, and the way the richness of meaning of Qur’anic vocabulary, and of the Arabic language, arises from the root characteristics of words and directed toward disclosing the essence. By “wajh” al-Tirmidhi understands and explains precisely the essence, which corresponds fully to his explanations of the word ta’wil. That is, according to al-Tirmidhi, “wajh” is the ta’wil of a word, and ta’wil, according to him, is the disclosure of the reality of the metaphor, the essence of the simile, and the aim of the matter.

To comprehend the essence of the issue still more precisely, if one turns to the work “Ta’wilat ahl al-sunna” of Imam al-Maturidi who created the greatest fundamental work on Qur’anic ta’wil one observes that the words “wajh” and “wujuh” are used there exceedingly often. Imam al-Maturidi, when explaining the difference between tafsir and ta’wil, also pointed to the issue of “wajh” as the decisive factor:

فالتفسير ذو وجه واحد والتأويل ذو وجوه

“Tafsir has a single ‘aspect’ (wajh), while ta’wil has many ‘aspects’ (wujuh)” (al-Maturidi, 2005, 4:85).

It becomes clear that by tafsir is understood an explanation having a particular decisive meaning, with no possibility of its denoting several meanings; ta’wil, however, may denote several meanings, and which meaning is fitting (rajih) for a particular place is selected (tarjih) through ijtiḥad. On this issue Imam al-Maturidi also gives the meaning of ta’wil as the exposition of the end of the matter (منتهى الأمر), and cites the words of Abu Zayd al-Ansari (743–830) a representative of the Basra school of language, known as

the imam of the science of language and letters who said: “If it is the speech of another than oneself, directing the ‘aspects’ (الوجوه) toward this or that (توجه), it (that is, ta’wil) is the directing of the speech (توجيه الكلام) toward whichever side the speech is directed” (al-Maturidi, 2005, 3:84).

Generalizing from the examples cited above, one may say that “wajh” and “wujuh” in the Qur’anic sciences are a concept directly connected with the process of ta’wil. The “aspects” (wujuh) in the Qur’anic words encompass all the “possibilities” that can be interpreted. The interpreter, not relying on his own opinion but as a result of selecting one of the existing “aspects” of the word, discloses the original meaning and intent of the verse. Correct ta’wil may be assessed precisely as the selection of the correct and fitting meaning from among the existing “aspects.” The importance of knowing the “nazair” and “wujuh” in the Qur’an is considered the most important factor in carrying out ta’wil correctly.

Al-Tirmidhi’s work “Tahsil nazair al-Qur’an” may be assessed as a work that precisely discloses the methodology of ta’wil. The reason is that al-Tirmidhi, unlike the authors before him, does not merely present the various meanings of the Qur’anic words as a statement of fact, by way of example, from the standpoint of verbal homonymy, but rather urges reaching the deep essence of each word, attending to its root, and extracting the meanings given from the inner characteristics of the word. His method of ta’wil rejects simple and formal resemblance and teaches one to accept naturally that words may have many meanings. According to his theory, “guidance” (hidaya) is not a synonym for “exposition” (bayan); nor is “guidance” one of the many-meaning homonyms; rather, the characteristic of exposition is in the word “guidance” itself, in its root. In the process of the working of “guidance,” exposition clarity, manifestness arises; and because exposition is the result of “guidance,” “guidance” may in some places be understood as “exposition.” This same rule operates in the remaining words too: no word acquires another meaning of itself and absolutely without cause.

Accepting the polysemy of words as a natural characteristic of the word teaches one to accept naturally the ta’wil of the ambiguous (mutashabih) verses. This forms the characteristic of giving the most powerful intellectual refutation against the currents and groups that strive to promote a literal and superficial interpretation of God’s ambiguous attributes and that deny ta’wil with a radical approach.

***Al-Tirmidhi firmly affirms the place of reason in ta'wil:***

وأهل الأهواء بسوء التأويل ضلوا لم يعقلوا اللغة ولم يفهموا المعاني ولهم نفوس مظلمة يحرفون الكلم عن مواضعه بظلمة أهوائهم وقلوبهم ومن قل فهمه أو عزب عنه في وقت ساء تأويله

“The people of caprice went astray through their evil ta'wil, their reason not reaching the language and not understanding the meanings. Their souls being dark, out of the darkness of their caprices and their hearts they alter words from their proper places. Whoever's understanding is scant, or has departed from him at a given time, his ta'wil becomes evil” (al-Tirmidhi, 1990:34-35).

## CONCLUSION

Although ta'wil, according to its source, is “diraya” that is, the product of reason and reflection it is not a baseless, fabricated interpretation of the text, but rather a natural characteristic that cannot be a cause for Shari'a objection. This characteristic has been assessed by the scholars of Islam as one of the signs of the miraculousness (i'jaz) of the Qur'an, and it can serve as a proof that nullifies the claims of the groups that deny ta'wil. Al-Tirmidhi's work “Tahsil nazair al-Qur'an” discloses precisely these aspects of his theory of ta'wil.

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