



SCHOLARS WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THE FIELD OF “WUJUH WA NAZAIR” AND THE WORKS PRODUCED IN IT

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Abstract. *“Wujuh wa nazair” –the Qur’anic discipline that studies the multiple senses (wujuh) a single word may carry and the different words that share one meaning (nazair) –is among the oldest branches of the Qur’anic sciences. This article traces the historical formation of the field and surveys the scholars who composed works in it from the era of the Companions onward. Particular attention is given to Muqatil ibn Sulayman al-Balkhi (d. 767), whose al-Wujuh wa-n-nazair fi-l-Qur’an al-azim is recognized as the earliest complete surviving work in the field, as well as to the testimony of Ibn al-Jawzi and later bibliographers concerning earlier and subsequent authors whose works have not survived. The article also examines the critical assessments directed at Muqatil and argues that, given the conventional structure of wujuh-wa-nazair works, an author’s doctrinal affiliation could not materially affect their content.*

Keywords: *wujuh wa nazair, Qur’anic sciences, polysemy, Muqatil ibn Sulayman, Ibn al-Jawzi, tafsir, Qur’anic lexicology, Balkh school.*

INTRODUCTION

According to researchers, the field of “wujuh wa nazair” is regarded as one of the most ancient branches within the Qur’anic sciences, and its history reaches back to periods when the Islamic sciences had not yet been classified or separated from one another. It is known that *Kashf al-zunun* records the existence of a work on “wujuh wa nazair” attributed to Ikrima ibn Abdullah (d. 723), the freedman of the Companion Ibn Abbas (Yahya ibn Salam, 1979:13).

The earliest complete extant work on “wujuh wa nazair” that has reached our time belongs to the second Hijri century; its author is Muqatil ibn Sulayman al-Balkhi (d. 767) (al-Awa, 1998:19).



MAIN PART

Ibn al-Jawzi (1116–1201), who himself authored a work in this field, also enumerated a number of authors who were active before Muqatil ibn Sulayman. According to the information he transmits, the Companion Ibn Abbas (d. 687–688) was the first to compose a work on “wujuh wa nazair,” and it was transmitted from him by the Successors Ikrima ibn Abdullah al-Madani (d. 723) and Ali ibn Abu Talha (d. 760). It may therefore be supposed that the works which some researchers list as separate compositions by Ikrima and Ali ibn Abu Talha were in fact different recensions of the work attributed to the Companion Ibn Abbas (d. 687). Even so, some researchers cite Ikrima and Ali ibn Abu Talha as independent authors.

After them, Ibn al-Jawzi also lists Muhammad ibn Saib al-Kalbi (d. 763). Al-Kalbi was one of the scholars of Kufa, recognized as an expert in genealogy (nasab), a transmitter of hadith, and a noted authority on tafsir and Arab history, and is mentioned as a representative of the *ra'y* (reasoning) school. He was the father of the famous historian Hisham ibn al-Kalbi, author of *Kitab al-asnam*. Medieval Arab biographers record that he engaged in the Qur'anic and hadith sciences and was extolled to the rank of imam in tafsir, genealogy, and Arab history. Summoned by the governor of Basra, Sulayman ibn Ali al-Abbasi (d. 759), he expounded the Qur'an in Basra and produced a commentary so complete that no exegete could object to it. Ibn 'Adi described him thus: “Al-Kalbi was a man renowned for his commentary, and no one possessed a tafsir as long and as lucid as his.” Among al-Kalbi's teachers were the above-mentioned Ikrima ibn Abdullah and Ibn Abbas's son Ali ibn Abdullah (d. 736). In this respect, his lost work on “wujuh wa nazair” may likewise have been part of the tradition transmitted from Ibn Abbas (Ibn Khallikan, n.d., 4:309; Ibn 'Adi, n.d., 6:120).

Since the works of the authors enumerated above have not survived, the earliest source belonging to this field that is recognized today is Muqatil ibn Sulayman's (d. 767) *al-Wujuh wa-n-nazair fi-l-Qur'an al-azim*.

Muqatil ibn Sulayman was born in the city of Balkh and died in Basra in 767 CE; he was a renowned Islamic theologian and exegete of the medieval period. His full name was Abu'l-Hasan Muqatil ibn Sulayman ibn Bashir al-Azdi al-Balkhi al-Khurasani. In pursuit of knowledge he left Balkh and resided in Merv, Baghdad, and Basra. He also taught and served in cultural centers such as Mecca, Damascus, and Beirut. He sided



with those who opposed the Umayyad Marwan II. His Qur'anic commentary was, in its time, among the most famous and ancient of tafsirs. Reports have also reached us that he composed a work on the abrogating and abrogated verses (nasikh and mansukh) and a refutation of the Qadarites.

At the same time, many critical opinions were expressed about Muqatil ibn Sulayman. He was accused of belonging to the Mujassima and Mushabbiha. The Egyptian scholar and philosopher Ali Sami al-Nashshar (1917–1980) gathered the conflicting views about him in his work *Nash'at al-fikr al-falsafi fi-l-islam* (The Genesis of Philosophical Thought in Islam) and stated:

“The opinions about him are contradictory. He is mentioned as a praiseworthy exegete, and he is also said to be an exegete of the Zaydis (Shia). While al-Shafi'i acknowledged him as a great exegete on whom people depended in the science of tafsir, Abu Hanifa criticized him. The books agree that he was an adherent of tajsim, that he learned from Jews and Christians, that he followed them in interpreting the Qur'an along anthropomorphist and corporeal lines, that he was weak in hadith, that he sided with the Hashwiyya, and that he remained loyal to his school” (al-Nashshar, 2008, 1:289).

Such contradictory opinions inevitably cast doubt upon his works. Yet, if the conventional character of “wujuh wa nazair” works is taken into account, it becomes clear that an author's school of law or doctrinal views could not influence their content. For in such works a word to be explained is cited as a “nazir,” and when its “wujuh” (facets) are then enumerated, no room is left for extraneous commentary. Indeed, certain brief glosses found in the work show that he was neither an anthropomorphist nor a corporealist. In particular, he explained the verse “The hand of Allah is over their hands” as meaning that “the favor Allah bestowed upon them in the matter of the pledge of allegiance is superior to their own personal merits,” and he interpreted the word “fawq” in the verse “He is the Subduer over His servants” as denoting dominion and sovereignty. These are proofs that contradict the claims of the sects to which he was ascribed. It is possible that the contradictory opinions about Muqatil ibn Sulayman were spread by his opponents because he took part in certain political movements, particularly the struggles against the Umayyads (Muqatil ibn Sulayman, 2005:223-225).

Muqatil ibn Sulayman's (d. 767) *al-Wujuh wa-n-nazair fi-l-Qur'an al-azim* was studied, edited, and prepared for publication by the Iraqi scholar Hatim Salih al-Damin,



who printed it in 2005. In the introduction to the edition, al-Damin criticized the fact that the book had earlier been published erroneously under the title *al-Ashbah wa-n-nazair*, and briefly noted the passages he had corrected in his own edition. The editor likewise records that the work is the most ancient of the surviving sources belonging to this field.

The work *al-Wujuh wa-n-nazair fi-l-Qur'an al-azim* encompasses 176 words occurring in the Qur'an, the first being "al-huda" (guidance) and the last "fawq" (above, over). Because the words are not arranged in alphabetical order, al-Damin advances the hypothesis that the work has no definite organizing principle in its structure. In his view, Muqatil ibn Sulayman influenced a number of authors who came after him. In particular:

Harun ibn Musa (d. 170 AH / 787 CE) – *al-Wujuh wa-n-nazair fi-l-Qur'an al-karim*;

Yahya ibn Salam (d. 200 AH / 816 CE) – *at-Tasarif*;

Hakim al-Tirmidhi (d. 255 AH / 869 CE) – *Tahsil nazair al-Qur'an*;

Ismail ibn Ahmad al-Hiri (d. 430 AH / 1039 CE) – *Wujuh al-Qur'an*;

Husayn ibn Muhammad al-Damaghani (d. 478 AH / 1085 CE) – *al-Wujuh wa-n-nazair li-alfaz Kitab Allah al-aziz*;

Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 597 AH / 1201 CE) – *Nuzhat al-a'yun an-nawazir fi 'ilm al-wujuh wa-n-nazair*;

Ibn Imad al-Misri (d. 887 AH / 1482 CE) – *Kashf al-sara'ir fi ma'na al-wujuh wa-l-ashbah wa-n-nazair*.

Al-Damin states that he produced his edition of the work on the basis of a photocopy of the unique manuscript preserved in the Unayza National Library attached to the Grand Mosque of Saudi Arabia, the photocopy itself being held under number 4108 at the Juma al-Majid Centre for Culture and Heritage in Dubai. The edition is provided with indexes and tables. By the editor's testimony, this edition is the most complete and thorough to date (Muqatil ibn Sulayman, 2005:7-11).

Most of the authors who composed works in the field after Muqatil ibn Sulayman followed him in method. Among those who lived and worked after Muqatil ibn Sulayman, Ibn al-Jawzi enumerates such figures as Abbas ibn Fadl al-Ansari (d. 802), Matruh ibn Shakir (d. 894), Abdullah ibn Harun al-Hijazi, Abu Bakr al-Naqqash (d. 962), Abu Abdullah al-Damaghani (d. 1085), Abu Ali al-Banna (d. 1088), and Abu



Hasan al-Zaghuni (d. 1133); and he notes that, apart from these, he knows of no one who comprehended everything in the field of “wujuh wa nazair” (Ibn al-Jawzi, 1987:83-84).

At the same time, Ibn al-Jawzi did not mention the names of Harun ibn Musa (d. 787), author of the surviving work *al-Wujuh wa-n-nazair fi-l-Qur'an al-karim*; Yahya ibn Salam (d. 816), who wrote *at-Tasarif*; Hakim al-Tirmidhi, who composed *Tahsil nazair al-Qur'an*; or Ismail ibn Ahmad al-Hiri (d. 1039), author of *Wujuh al-Qur'an*.

With the exception of Abu Abdullah al-Damaghani, it is not known that the works of the scholars enumerated by Ibn al-Jawzi have survived. Their names and the subjects of their works appear only in the biographical (tabaqat and tarajim) literature devoted to the lives of scholars.

The Egyptian scholar Salwa Muhammad al-Awa notes that the books of thirteen (13) authors in the field of “wujuh wa nazair” have survived, of which seven (7) have been printed and the rest remain in manuscript; she further notes that there also exist works whose titles are known but which themselves have not survived or have not yet been found (al-Awa, 1998:20). Another researcher, Nuruddin al-Munajjid, enumerated a total of thirty-five (35) known works and authors. The most recent of them in time belongs to the fourteenth Hijri century and is attributed to Abd al-Hadi al-Anbari (d. 1888) (al-Munajjid, 1999:76-82).

CONCLUSION

It thus becomes clear that there were many scholars who composed works in the field of “wujuh wa nazair” in their time, but that their works were sometimes unknown to one another. Likewise, although some of these works have not survived to the present day, they were known within particular scholarly circles in their own time. For this reason, although Muqatil ibn Sulayman’s *al-Wujuh wa-n-nazair fi-l-Qur'an al-azim* is today regarded as the most ancient of the works on “wujuh wa nazair,” it becomes evident that other scholars also authored works in the field both before him and somewhat after.

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