The Interpretation of Qur’anic Verses on the Salvation of
Religious Others by Abū Ja`far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923): Content and Method

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities

2018

Zaenal Muttaqin

School of Arts, Languages and Cultures
## Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. 5  
Declaration ............................................................................................................. 6  
Copyright Statement ............................................................................................... 7  
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................ 8  

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 9  
   A. Research Background ....................................................................................... 9  
   B. Research Questions ......................................................................................... 17  
   C. Research Significance ..................................................................................... 17  
   D. Research Methodology ..................................................................................... 18  
   E. Research Structure ......................................................................................... 20  

Chapter One: Literature Review ........................................................................... 22  
   A. Introduction .................................................................................................... 22  
   B. Works on al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr* ......................................................................... 22  
      1. Works on the General Characteristics of al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr* ...................... 22  
      2. Works on Theological Aspects of al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr* .............................. 28  
      3. Works on al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr* and its Context .......................................... 32  
   C. Works on Muslim Views on the Salvation of Religious Others ............... 35  
      1. Works on the Fate of Virtuous non-Muslims ............................................ 36  
      2. Works on the Eternity of Hell and Intercession ....................................... 40  
   D. Conclusion .................................................................................................... 44  

Chapter Two: Al-Ṭabarī: His Life and Context ..................................................... 46  
   A. Introduction .................................................................................................... 46  
   B. Biographical Sketch of al-Ṭabarī ................................................................... 48  
   C. Al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr* ......................................................................................... 56  
   D. Al-Ṭabarī in His Intellectual Environment ................................................ 65  
   E. Conclusion .................................................................................................... 77  

Chapter Three: Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 2:62 on the Fate of Virtuous Non-Muslims ................................................................. 79  
   A. Introduction .................................................................................................... 79  
   B. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 2:62 ............................................................... 82  
      1. The First Part of al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 2:62 ............................ 82  
      2. The Second Part of al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 2:62 ..................... 83  
      3. The Third Part of al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 2:62......................... 86  
      4. The Fourth Part of al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 2:62 ..................... 91
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Four: Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Qur’anic Verses on the Eternity of Hell with Special Reference to Q. 6:128, 11:107 and 78:23</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Ambiguous Verses on the Eternity of Hell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 6:128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 11:107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 78:23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of the Phrase <em>khālidūn fīhā</em> and its Variations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Putting al-Ṭabarī into Context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Five: Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Qur’anic Verses on Intercession (shafā`a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Qur’anic Verses on Intercession (shafā`a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 2:48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 6:94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 19:87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 43:86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 74:48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Other Relevant Verses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Al-Ṭabarī in Context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Al-Ṭabarī’s View of God’s Mercy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Contemporary Discourse on Intercession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Six: Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretive Strategies in the Interpretation of Qur’anic Verses on the Salvation of Religious Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretive Strategies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

This thesis investigates Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive strategies through the lens of his interpretation of Qur’anic verses on the salvation of religious others. Al-Ṭabarī’s methods of interpreting the Qur’ān are often simply described as consisting of adducing traditions and linguistic explanation. While both methods constitute his main tools, al-Ṭabarī employs specific interpretive strategies to reveal the meaning of Qur’anic verses so as to state his view on certain topics. The topic of salvation of non-Muslims is chosen since there are Qur’anic verses that literally leave open the possibility of salvation of non-Muslims. This has become a focus of contestation in Muslim views of other religious believers. Therefore, this thesis aims to examine al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of such verses, both in content and method.

The salvation of non-Muslims is examined within three sub-topics: the fate of virtuous non-Muslims, the eternity of Hell, and intercession. Regarding the first issue, Q. 2:62 states that non-Muslims will receive rewards for their righteous deeds, and they will neither fear nor grieve. Q. 11:107 indicates that God may release anyone from dwelling eternally in Hell. Finally, verse 19:87 makes intercession possible through God’s intervention. Thus, all these verses suggest that non-Muslims might attain salvation. Al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of these verses are analysed, both to determine his view and to reveal his interpretive strategies. His views are then compared to his interpretation of other relevant verses, and located within the context of the theological discourse and inter-religious relationships of his time.

Among the main conclusions of the research is that al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the relevant verses indicates that non-Muslims will not attain salvation in spite of the verses literally suggesting that they will. This opinion was the same as the contemporary mainstream Muslim theological position which eventually developed into Islamic orthodoxy. The context of third/ninth century Baghdad also influenced al-Ṭabarī in establishing his viewpoint.

As for al-Ṭabarī’s exegetical strategies, this present research demonstrates that he combines traditions, reason and the methodology of jurisprudence, all of which were influenced by the contemporary epistemology of the Islamic sciences. Thus, although the verses under discussion concerned theological issues, al-Ṭabarī approaches them using techniques that were usually employed when interpreting verses with a legal significance, techniques such as the occasion of revelation (sabab al-nuzūl), abrogation (naskh), weighing conflicting opinions (tarjīḥ), and drawing a particular meaning from general meaning (ʿāmm and khāṣṣ). This was assisted by the use of relevant exegetical traditions.
Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other institute of learning.
**Copyright Statement**

i. The author of this thesis (including any appendices and/or schedules to this thesis) owns certain copyright or related rights in it (the “Copyright”) and she has given The University of Manchester certain rights to use such Copyright, including for administrative purposes.

ii. Copies of this thesis, either in full or in extracts and whether in hard or electronic copy, may be made only in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (as amended) and regulations issued under it or, where appropriate, in accordance with licensing agreements which the University has from time to time. This page must form part of any such copies made.

iii. The ownership of certain Copyright, patents, designs, trademarks and other intellectual property (the “Intellectual Property”) and any reproductions of copyright works in the thesis, for example graphs and tables (“Reproductions”), which may be described in this thesis, may not be owned by the author and may be owned by third parties. Such Intellectual Property and Reproductions cannot and must not be made available for use without the prior written permission of the owner(s) of the relevant Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions.

iv. Further information on the conditions under which disclosure, publication and commercialisation of this thesis, the Copyright and any Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions described in it may take place is available in the University IP Policy (see http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=24420), in any relevant Thesis restriction declarations deposited in the University Library, The University Library’s regulations (see http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/about/regulations/) and in the University’s policy on Presentation of Theses.
Acknowledgements

Praise be to Allāh, the Most Gracious the Most Merciful, who has given me strength and hope to complete this study. In the process of researching my PhD, I have received abundant support from people to whom I owe a great debt of gratitude.

First and foremost, I must express my gratitude to my supervisors Dr. Ronald Buckley and Dr. Kamran Karimullah for their immeasurable support, guidance, encouragement, patience and commitment throughout my study. Dr. Buckley has always provided me with constructive advice and critical feedback, literally, word-by-word, and more importantly accepted to supervise my thesis when Dr. Youssef Choueiri, my previous main supervisor to whom I would also like to extend my gratitude, left. Dr. Karimullah’s door was always open anytime I needed him when I was stuck and got lost in this journey. The help he gave me included, but was not limited to, engaging in lively and inspiring discussions and reading Arabic and French texts together. Their supervision has certainly made me a better researcher.

I would like also to thank the Director of Islamic Higher Education in the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia for the funding of my doctoral programme. I would not have been able to do this work without this funding.

Most of all, I would like to thank my family: my parents for their ceaseless du`ā’ and riḍā, and my in-laws for their unlimited support. I am immensely grateful to my wife, Miranda Zahra Syafrika Sari, and our children, Andrea Adelphia Muttaqin and Arsa Danurendra Muttaqin, for joy and sorrow we have been through till the end of my study. They have made this journey more meaningful. Rabbanā hablanā min azwājinā wa dhurriyyātinā qurrata a`yunin wa-j`alnā lī al-muttaqīna imāman.
INTRODUCTION

A. Research Background

Written in the late third/ninth century, al-Ṭabarī’s Jāmi` al-Bayān `an Ta‘wîl Āyât al-Qur‘ān (The Complete Explanation of the Interpretation of the Verses of the Qur‘ān) is considered the first well-documented book of tafsîr to cover all verses of the Qur‘ān according to the order of its verses, not to the chronology of revelation.¹ Although Fowden argues that al-Ṭabarī’s method in his tafsîr was not entirely new, since he was influenced by pre-Islamic exegetical traditions, he still praises the tafsîr as an innovative work within the early literature of Qur’anic exegesis.² Al-Ṭabarī’s tafsîr was a milestone, in which he employed approaches and methods in the interpretation of the Qur‘ān that were different from his predecessors.³


The works of *tafsir* before al-Ṭabarī mostly dealt with the vocabulary used in the verses and discussed the interpreted verses from a linguistic perspective. Other approaches to the Qurʾān that appeared in *tafsir* works in the period before al-Ṭabarī also concern certain aspects of Qurʾānic sciences such as the occasion of revelation of Qurʾānic verses (*āṣabāḥ al-nuzūl*), the abrogation of Qurʾānic verses (*al-naskh wa al-mansūkh*), grammatical analysis, the inimitability of the Qurʾān (*i`jāz al-Qur’ān*), the virtues of the Qurʾān (*faḍā’il al-Qur’ān*), and the foreign vocabulary of the Qurʾān (*gharīb al-Qurʾān*). These genres, according to Wansbrough, served as means by which early exegetes interpret the Qurʾān. Wansbrough identifies twelve methods employed by exegetes in the interpretation of the Qurʾān, such as different lessons, poems, lexical explanation, grammatical explanation, rhetorical explanation, periphrases, analogy, abrogation, the occasions of revelation, identification, prophetic tradition and anecdote. However, Versteegh argues, all these methods do not necessarily appear in one work of *tafsir*. Early Qurʾānic exegetes might choose one of these methods based on their expertise or interest, and apply it in their *tafsir*. As we shall see, in his *tafsir* al-Ṭabarī employs most, if not all, of these methods in his interpretation of Qurʾānic verses.

---


5 Andrew Rippin, ‘Introduction’, in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *The Qurʾān: Formative Interpretation*, pp. xii-xiii. Examples of works in these genres are *Naskh al-Qurʾān* by al-Zuhārī (d. 124/742) on the abrogation of Qurʾānic verses, *Ma`ānī al-Qurʾān* by al-Farrāʾ (d. 207/822) on grammatical analysis, *Majāz al-Qurʾān* by Abū ʿUbayda (d. 210/825) on the inimitability of the Qurʾān, and *Faḍā’il al-Qurʾān* by Abū ʿUbayd (d. 219/834) on the virtues of the Qurʾān.


The most frequent method al-Ṭabarī uses in his tafsīr is the use of traditions (ḥadīth). Al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr is acknowledged to be an extensive tradition-based tafsīr, which, in contrast to the reason-based tafsīr, incorporates numerous exegetical traditions, complete with their chains of transmission (isnāds), referring to the Prophet Muḥammad, his Companions (ṣaḥāba), Successors (tābiʿūn) and sometimes the Successors of Successors (tābiʿu al-tābiʿīn). The traditions in al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr include some aspects of exegetical methods identified by Wansbrough, such as the use of poems, lexical explanation, grammatical explanation, abrogation, the occasions of revelation, and prophetic tradition. In this light, al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr also serves as ‘summative repository’ of exegetical traditions as well as Qur’anic interpretation from the generations before al-Ṭabarī. Therefore, it is not surprising that although Theodore Noldeke, a nineteenth-century prominent scholar of the Qur’ān, did not see the entire work of al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr, since the complete edition was first printed only as late as 1903, he is quoted as

---

8 There are three categories of tradition: historical, juridical and exegetical traditions. See, for instance, Herbert Berg, The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 2. Historical traditions appear in works of history such as Kitāb al-Maghāzī by al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822), Sīra Ibn Ḥishām by Ibn Ḥishām (d. 218/833), al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā by Ibn Saʿd (d. 230/845) and al-Ṭabarī’s own Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk. Juridical traditions can be found chiefly in the six canonical books of traditions including al-Jāmi` al-Ṣaḥīḥ by al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), in which al-Bukhārī divides the traditions into books (kitāb) according mainly to juridical or ritual matters such as book of prayer (kitāb al-ṣalāt), book of alms-giving (kitāb al-zakāt), book of fasting (kitāb al-ṣawm), among others. In the Saḥīḥ, however, there is also a book containing exegetical traditions; whenever possible these traditions will be compared to the traditions in al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr. For an introduction to al-Bukhārī, see J. Robson, ‘al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismā`īl’, The Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edition, Vol. I, pp. 1296-1297.

9 Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahābi, al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufassirūn, p. 207.

10 The Companions were the first generation of Muslims who lived with and saw the Prophet Muḥammad. See M. Muranyi, ‘Ṣaḥāba’, The Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edition, Vol. VIII, pp. 827-829.

remarking that, when al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* appears in the full edition, it will be unnecessary to consult any later books of Qur’anic exegesis. With its encyclopaedic information and its extensive collection of traditions, al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* has been very influential and a great number of later works of *tafsīr* refer to it.

When looking at al-Ṭabarī’s incorporation of traditions in the interpretation of the Qur’ān, however, scholars have various opinions. Some argue that al-Ṭabarī only compiles traditions and previous opinions derived from his predecessors, or that he was merely ‘an encyclopaedist’ and ‘a systematiser’ of materials. Elsewhere, however, in addition to al-Ṭabarī’s explicit opinions that appear in his *tafsīr*, such as the recurrent use of the phrase “Abū Ja`far says” (*qāla Abū Ja`far*), others argue that al-Ṭabarī uses the traditions and linguistic analysis as methods for expressing his opinion. His *tafsīr*, then, confirms al-Ṭabarī’s emphasis on the significance of independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) as well as the existence of

---


13 Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufassirūn*, p. 207. Saleh may argue that al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* had less influence on later works of *tafsīr* than al-Tha`labī’s *tafsīr*, which was written more than a century after al-Ṭabarī’s work; however, the availability of traditions in al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* is its legacy, from which later generations have benefitted. For Saleh’s argument about dealing with a comparison between al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha`labī, see Walid A. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur’ān Commentary of al-Tha`labī (d.427/1035)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).


his personal opinion (raʿy) in addition to being the repository of a great number of traditions.\(^{17}\)

Al-Ṭabarī employs specific interpretive strategies in interpreting the Qurʿān. Most scholars mention al-Ṭabarī’s reliance on traditions, yet they do not properly investigate how al-Ṭabarī presents the traditions, nor do they go into detail about how al-Ṭabarī makes his argument. For example, Berg attempts to investigate al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the term kitāb (which literally means ‘book’) by using a thematic approach. Berg collects all Qur’anic verses containing the word kitāb and then observes how al-Ṭabarī interprets those verses.\(^{18}\) On a different topic and with a different method, Syamsuddin investigates al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 3:7.\(^{19}\) He then compares al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the verse with the interpretation of the same verse by the Muʿtazilite exegete al-Zamakhshārī (d. 538/1144)\(^{20}\) to show two different methods of tafsīr. While the former comes from tradition-based tafsīr, the latter was the champion of reason-based tafsīr.\(^{21}\) Both Berg and Syamsuddin mention the use of traditions and linguistic analysis in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation. However, they do not discuss further how al-Ṭabarī makes

---


\(^{19}\) The verse reads: “He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book: In it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning); they are the foundation of the Book: others are allegorical. But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah. And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: ‘We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord:’ and none will grasp the Message except men of understanding.”


his argument by using the available traditions or linguistic analysis. As we shall see, he does not simply use traditions and grammatical explanation but employs certain strategies to determine his opinion.

The investigation of al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive strategies will be carried out through his interpretation of Qur’anic verses regarding the salvation of non-Muslims. Islam, in fact, does not have a specific doctrine of salvation. The idea of salvation in Islam, particularly in the Qur’ān, takes several forms. For example, the beginning of sūra 23, called al-Mu’mīnūn (the Believers), uses the term falāḥ (success) to describe the believers who will enter Heaven when they fulfil the criteria mentioned in the verses.\footnote{22 Q. 23:1-11. Verse 1 of the sūra reads: “Successful (aflāḥa) indeed are the believers”. The translation of this verse and those of other verses in this thesis are taken from Muḥammad Marmaduke Pickthall’s The Meaning of the Glorious Koran (New Delhi: World Islamic Publications, 1981) with little modification.} Verse 41 of sūra 40, called Ghāfir (the Forgiver), differently, uses the word najāḥ (salvation) to contrast with Hell.\footnote{23 The verse reads: “And O my people! What (strange) it is for me that I call you into salvation (najāḥ) when you call me into Hell.”} Elsewhere, the Qur’ān also employs the term ḥasana (good) to describe a prayer for gaining goodness in the world and the hereafter.\footnote{24 Q. 2:201. The verse reads: “And of them who say: ‘Our Lord! Grant us good (ḥasana) in this world and good (ḥasana) in the hereafter, and defend us from the torment of Hell’.\”} The picture of salvation in Islam, however, rests on the idea of Heaven and Hell in the afterlife, in which the inhabitants of Heaven will attain a blissful life, and the inhabitants of Hell, on the contrary, will receive torment; both are rewards for their deeds in the world.\footnote{25 The description of the blissful life of the inhabitants of Heaven and the suffering of the inhabitants of Hell in the hereafter can be found, for instance, in Q. 88: 4-16.}

Thus, this research will focus on al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses related to the salvation of religious others since there are some Qur’anic
verses that literally leave open the possibility of salvation for non-Muslims. Verse 2:62, for instance, states that Jews, Christians and Sabaeans may receive rewards for their virtuous deeds and guarantees that they should not fear and grieve.\(^{26}\) Meanwhile, verse 78:23 indicates that the inhabitants of Hell will dwell therein for ages,\(^ {27}\) implying that dwelling in Hell is not forever and there will come a time when they might be removed from Hell. As we shall see later, these kinds of verses often constitute the focus of polemics. Even al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of these verses sometimes is misunderstood.

Therefore, this present research will examine his position on the salvation of non-Muslims and how he interprets verses that literally leave open the possibility of the salvation of non-Muslims. Al-Ṭabarī is chosen because, to some, he is considered a pluralist. Goldziher, for instance, argues that al-Ṭabarī was a pluralist because he admits and embraces various and conflicting opinions in his interpretation of Qur’anic verses. These opinions include grammatical, reading, legal and theological aspects of the verses.\(^ {28}\) Furthermore, the presence of Biblical stories in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses also indicates his pluralist standpoint, including his opinion that it was Isaac who would be sacrificed by Abraham. This contradicts Muslims’ belief in general that Ishmael was the one whom Abraham would slaughter.\(^ {29}\)

---

\(^ {26}\) The verse reads: “Verily, those who believe and those who are Jews, and Christians, and Sabaeans whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does righteously surely their reward is with their Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve.”

\(^ {27}\) The verse reads: “They will abide therein for ages.”


In his *tafsīr*, al-Ṭabarī apparently works by employing certain mechanisms to clarify his thoughts and establish his position regarding the meaning of such verses. His way of argumentation arguably will lead to a comprehensive understanding of his position on the discussed issues. Moreover, according to Lawson, a study of a certain topic “according to Islam” usually disregards Muslim exegetical practise. In fact, Lawson argues, the product of Qur’anic exegesis is very extensive and has perhaps influenced the formulation of a particular Islamic concept. Therefore, *tafsīr* studies, according to Lawson, should receive greater attention in the study of Islam since *tafsīr* could represent the genuine opinions of Muslims before the products of *tafsīr* are eventually used to justify a theological doctrine or a juridical judgement.

The discussion about al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the salvation of religious others will also consider the theological and inter-religious circumstances of his time. Research on al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* usually ignores the fact that al-Ṭabarī might have been involved in the theological discussions in the second half of ninth century Baghdad. During the period of al-Ṭabarī’s life, the Muslim world, particularly in Baghdad, witnessed the intellectual dynamic of theological discourse among various Islamic schools of thought, for instance between the Muʿtazila and Ḥanbali schools. Thus, this research will also place al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* within current theological discourse.

---

31 The influence of *tafsīr* to other disciplines of Islamic knowledge can be seen, for instance, in Alexander Kynsh, ‘Multiple Areas of Influence’, in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Qurʾān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 211-234.
B. Research Questions

Based on the above background, this research will attempt to answer two broad questions:

1. What is al-Ṭabarī’s opinion regarding the issue of the salvation of non-Muslims? Why does he take that position? What influence did contemporary intellectual discourse have on his view?

2. Following on from the above question, how does al-Ṭabarī interpret Qur’anic verses that literally leave open the possibility of salvation of non-Muslims? What are the specific strategies employed by al-Ṭabarī in interpreting Qur’anic verses related to the salvation of religious others? Why does he use those strategies? How are these strategies influenced by the development of Islamic sciences?

C. Research Significance

Understanding al-Ṭabarī’s procedures for interpreting the Qur’ān will lead to discovering his opinion on the salvation of non-Muslims. The view of al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* is often over-simplified, it being characterised as a mere collection of traditions and grammatical explanations. His interpretive strategies have not been properly investigated in detail when explaining Qur’anic verses. This over-simplified view of al-Ṭabarī’s methods may result in an incorrect understanding of his thoughts and position on the issue of the salvation of religious others. Therefore, providing answers to the above research questions is important in order to reach an
understanding of al-Ṭabarī’s treatment of the materials adduced in his tafsīr. This research will specifically enrich the discussion on the issue of the salvation of non-Muslims from the perspective of Qur’anic tafsīr.

Furthermore, this present research will not isolate al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr from his intellectual milieu. An examination of al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr that connects it to its context is expected to contribute to identifying the possible relationship of his thought to the emergence of proto-Ashʿarism, which later developed to be the mainstream Muslim theological position and to be considered as the orthodoxy of Islam.

D. Research Methodology

The present work is a literary research which focuses on al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the Qur’anic verses dealing with the salvation of religious others in his Jāmi` al-Bayān. The research will begin by classifying Qur’anic verses thematically related to the topic of the salvation of religious others. Although the Qurʾān portrays a sense of both salvation in this world and the hereafter, the verses selected for consideration in this research refer to the latter. This is because the ultimate goal of human life in Islam is eschatological salvation.

Benefitting from the discussions of al-Ghazāli, Ibn `Arabī, Ibn Taymiyya and Riḍā as studied by Khalil, there are three topics which become the object of investigation in this research. These three topics are considered to be relevant in

---

32 Q. 2: 201.
33 See, for instance, Q. 4:77; Q. 87:17; and Q. 93:4.
developing a whole picture of the issue of the salvation of religious others in Islam. The first topic is the fate of virtuous non-Muslims. This is chosen because there are some Qur’anic verses which literally state that God will reward good deeds performed by non-Muslims. However, the verse that will be discussed in this research is Q. 2:62. The second topic is the eternity of Hell, particularly in the issue of the dwelling duration of their inhabitants. The verses related to this topic, among others, are Q. 78:23; 6:128; 11: 107. The third topic discusses whether or not intercession includes non-Muslims. The discussion will include verses 2:48; 6:94; 19:87; 43:86 and 74:48. These verses will be related to Q. 7: 156-157 which talk about God’s mercy.

After compiling related verses for each of the above topics, I will look at al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of those verses. His interpretation will be presented almost verbatim since it constitutes the data of the present research. Al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation will then be analysed for its methodology and, to some extent, its content. From the viewpoint of methodology, the analysis will include discussion on the use of grammatical analysis and of traditions to investigate al-Ṭabarī’s consistency as well as his leaning towards a particular school of thought. Both perspectives constitute the main methodology of al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr*.

Furthermore, I will examine al-Ṭabarī’s ideas about each topic by employing contextual analysis. At the micro level, I will compare al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses on the salvation of religious others with his interpretation of other relevant verses. At the macro level, I will investigate how contemporary Islamic society, especially the development of Islamic sciences,
might have influenced al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr. This method of analysis is used because, as scholarly works, Qur’anic tafsīrs are not produced in a vacuum; they should always be seen in relation to the socio-historical context in which they were written.

E. Research Structure

The research is organized as follows:

1. Introduction: this will introduce the background of the study, the research questions, their significance and research methodology and structure.

2. Chapter One: Literature Review. This will explore previous studies on al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr and discussions regarding the methodology he employs in its writing. It will also include a review of the literature on the concept of the salvation of religious others developed by Muslim scholars.

3. Chapter Two: this will deal with al-Ṭabarī’s life, including his intellectual background as well as his contribution to the early development of Islamic thought especially in the field of Qur’anic studies. Since this research will focus on the issue of the salvation of religious others, this chapter also discusses the theological and inter-religious circumstances during al-Ṭabarī’s time.

4. Chapters Three, Four and Five will discuss al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses that are related to the topic of the salvation of non-Muslims. Thus, Chapter Three will deal with the issue of the fate of virtuous non-Muslims by examining his tafsīr of the Qur’anic verses dealing with rewards for non-Muslims, with special reference to Q. 2:62.
5. Chapter Four will examine al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsir* on verses about the eternity of Hell (*nār*). The discussion on this topic will include the issue of the eternal nature of Hell and the eventual possibility for non-Muslims to enter Heaven.

6. Chapter Five will look at al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses which talk about intercession.

7. Chapter Six will address al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive strategies by looking at the mechanism he employs to make his argument regarding the three topics elaborated in Chapters Three, Four and Five.

8. Conclusion: this will conclude the findings of the research by identifying al-Ṭabarī’s methods of interpretation of Qur’anic verses and how these methods can be used to define his position on the issue of the salvation of religious others.
CHAPTER ONE

Literature Review

A. Introduction

This chapter surveys publications related to discussions on al-Ṭabarî’s \textit{tafsīr} that are relevant to the present thesis. It begins with the exploration of works that deal with his exegetical methods and go on to the discussion on the place of al-Ṭabarî’s \textit{tafsīr} within the development of Qur’anic exegesis. As the thesis examines al-Ṭabarî’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses on the salvation of religious others from his exegetical methods, this chapter also deals with some works on the topic of salvation of non-Muslims. By discussion on these relevant works, the chapter aims to situate the thesis within the scholarly works on al-Ṭabarî’s \textit{tafsīr}.

B. Scholarly Works on al-Ṭabarî’s \textit{Tafsīr}

1. Works on the General Characteristics of al-Ṭabarî’s \textit{Tafsīr}

According to Rippin, al-Ṭabarî’s \textit{tafsīr} became prominent among Western scholarship when Theodor Noldeke in his \textit{Geschichte des Qorāns} which was first published in 1860 says if al-Ṭabarî’s \textit{tafsīr} is available in a complete edition, it will make the works of \textit{tafsīr} coming after it unnecessary.\footnote{Andrew Rippin, ‘Introduction’ in Andrew Rippin (ed.), \textit{The Qur’ān: Formative Interpretation} (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. xi-xii. See also Ignaz Goldziher, \textit{Madhāhīb al-Tafsīr al-Islāmī}, translated and annotated by Ḥalīm al-Najjār (Egypt and Baghdad: Maktabat al-Khānijī and Maktabat al-Mithnā, 1955), p. 108.} However, it was Otto Loht in 1881 who wrote for the first time an article about al-Ṭabarî’s \textit{tafsīr} using the
tafṣīr itself.\textsuperscript{2} The tafṣīr just appeared in a complete printed edition in Cairo in 1323/1903 and 1325/1905 and then were reprinted in Beirut in 1400/1980. Another version that was edited by Maḥmūd M. Shākir and A.M. Shākir was printed in Cairo in 1961.\textsuperscript{3} Since then, al-Ṭabarī’s tafṣīr has become a subject of study of scholars, who analyse it from different perspectives and approaches.

Unlike al-Ṭabarī’s other master piece, Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk, whose all volumes have been translated into English,\textsuperscript{4} this is not the case of al-Ṭabarī’s tafṣīr. There is no complete translation of his tafṣīr yet. The only available is an abridged translation carried out by John Cooper entitled The Commentary on the Qur’ān by Abū Ja`far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī: Being an Abridged Translation of Jāmi` al-Bayān `an Ta’wīl Āyāt al-Qur’ān (1989).\textsuperscript{5} Cooper also provides an introduction to his translation which is helpful in understanding not only how he translated and edited al-Ṭabarī’s tafṣīr, but also a short biography of al-Ṭabarī and his intellectual pursuits as well as his method of interpreting the Qur’ān.\textsuperscript{6} Unfortunately, Cooper’s project of translating al-Ṭabarī’s tafṣīr has stopped. He only managed to finish one volume of translation, containing the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{2} Andrew Rippin, ‘Introduction’, pp. xi-xii.
\textsuperscript{4} Al-Ṭabarī’s Tārīkh has been translated by a number of scholars and published from 1985-1999 by State University of New York Press. The translation consists of 40 volumes including supplement and index.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., pp. ix-xxxvi.
\end{footnotesize}
interpretation of the first *sūra* the Opening (*al-Fātiḥa*) and parts of the second *sūra* the Cow (*al-Baqara*) from verses 1-103.\(^7\)

In terms of the translation, Cooper’s work has some advantages, especially for those whose native language is not Arabic. The important feature in the translation is that Cooper erases unnecessary repetition of traditions and arguments, as well as summarizes grammatical discussions which are difficult to follow for those who do not know Arabic. To some extent, the omissions or summary is beneficial since the readers can go directly to al-Ṭabarī’s points and do not need the long, redundant and tedious arguments. For instance, his summary on al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation on the verse 2:70 is valuable. Instead of reading a long discussion on the topic of ‘generality and particularity’ which is not directly related to the content of the verse, Cooper rightly summarizes the discussion.\(^8\) However, the omissions of al-Ṭabarī’s discussions sometimes reduce the importance of his comment especially for researchers who want to see the whole argument. For instance, in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of verse 1:7, Cooper summarizes how al-Ṭabarī and the Qadariyya had different opinions on the fate of Jews and Christians. It would be interesting if

---

\(^7\) Excerpt of al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* is also available in Mahmoud Ayoub’s *The Qur’ān and its Interpreters* Volume I and II.\(^7\) The first volume was published in 1984, the second one appeared in 1992. This is an ambitious compilation of the translation of Qur’anic interpretation where thirteen exegetes are consulted, including al-Ṭabarī. The work has two volumes. In the first volume Ayoub manages to deal with the first and second *sūras*: the Opening (*al-Fātiḥa*) and the Cow (*al-Baqara*). In the second volume, he treats the third *sūra*: the House of ‘Imrān (*Ālī Ḳutrān*). In both volumes, Ayoub quotes the interpretation of selected verses of these *sūras*, not all verses. Neither does Ayoub comments on the similarity or differences of the interpretation by the chosen exegetes. See Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur’ān and its Interpreters, Vol. I* (Albany: State University of New York, 1984). The second volume was published by the same publisher in 1992. Other excerpt of the translation of al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* is also available in Helmut Gatje’s book entitled *The Qur’ān and its Exegesis: Selected Texts with Classical and Modern Muslim Interpretations*, translated and edited by Alfred T. Welch (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976). Similar to Ayoub’s, this book only contains selected verses not only from al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* but also from other exegetes. Differently, Gatje’s book is arranged based on certain topics.

\(^8\) Ibid. pp. 385-387.
Cooper let readers understand al-Ṭabarī’s argument by translating the whole text since it is important to see his view on the matter.9

Nonetheless, the unavailability of English translation of al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr still provokes the production of scholarly works on it. Among the works on al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr, it is notable at the first stage to see Ignaz Goldziher’s discussion on al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr in his Madhāhīb al-Tafsīr al-Islāmī, a translation of his Die Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung which was first published in 1920. In this work, Goldziher describes general characteristics of al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr in his survey of the variants of Qur’anic exegesis.10 In addition to al-Ṭabarī’s heavy reliance on the traditions, Goldziher also mentions that al-Ṭabarī bases his argument on the consensus (ijmā`) of the Muslim community especially when he found varying and controversial opinions.11 Furthermore, Goldziher also praises al-Ṭabarī for his knowledge of variant readings (qirā’āt) of the Qur’ān and his tolerance of different qirā’āt as long as there is no change in the substance of the verse. His tolerance also appears in his use of Biblical materials (isrā’īliyyāt) in interpreting the Qur’ān. However, Goldziher remarks that al-Ṭabarī also emphasized that discussion on the details of certain Biblical materials should be left because it would not add to an understanding of the verses.12 Finally, Goldziher suggests that al-

---

9 Ibid., pp. 78-79.
10 Ignaz Goldziher, Madhāhīb al-Tafsīr al-Islāmī. Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabī’s al-Tafsīr wa al-Muṣassirān (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, 1961) and Zaghlūl’s al-Ittijāḥāt al-Fikriyya fī al-Tafsīr (Alexandria: al-Hay’a al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li al-Kitāb, 1975) are also helpful for understanding al-Ṭabarī’s position within the development of Qur’anic interpretation. For instance, al-Dhahabī places al-Ṭabarī in his first discussion (Vol. 1, pp. 205-224) on the topic of ‘tradition-based tafsīr’ in the chapter ‘Tafsīr in the Formative Period’. However, the elaboration of the characteristics of al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr by both al-Dhahabī and Zaghlūl are similar to the way Goldziher discusses al-Ṭabarī.
11 Ibid., pp. 109-110.
12 Ibid., pp. 110-115.
Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* confirms his engagement with contemporary theological discourse, and his *tafsīr* was intended both to defend the views that were agreed by Muslim majority and attack other theological schools, notably the Mu’tazila\(^{13}\) and the Qadariyya,\(^{14}\) without explicitly mentioning them.\(^{15}\)

Goldziher’s description about al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* has given a glimpse of what the *tafsīr* looks like. However, he does not discuss al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive strategies in detail, something that we will do in Chapter Six. Instead, Goldziher departs from the biography, proposes a thesis and discusses al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of some Qur’anic verses that prove his thesis correct.

An investigation on al-Ṭabarī’s method of *tafsīr* appears in Afaki’s article.\(^{16}\) Although scholars like Goldziher and al-Dhahabī place al-Ṭabarī within the category of tradition-based exegesis (*tafsīr bi al-ma’thūr*), Afaki argues that al-Ṭabarī’s method in his interpretation of the Qur’ān also includes his personal reasoning in the form of linguistic analysis. However, taking an example of al-

---

\(^{13}\) Mu’tazila was a school of theology that is generally described as rationalist in the sense that they considered most of things can be acquired by the means of intellect before, or in the unavailability of, revelation. For example, God can be known through reasoning. This movement is believed to start when Wāṣil b. ‘Atā’ (d. 130/748) withdrew (*i’tazala*) from the teaching circle of his teacher al-Hasan al- Баşрī (d. 110/728) on their disagreement regarding the fate of Muslim grave sinners. The Mu’tazila was once prominent when it became the ideology of state especially in the period of the caliph al-Ma’mūn ((r. 197-218/813-833). For a preliminary remark on this school, see D. Gimaret, ‘Mu’tazila’, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 2nd Edition, Vol. VII, pp. 783-793. See also W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), pp. 209-250 and Abū al-Fath Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa al-Nihal* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1992), pp. 38-72.

\(^{14}\) Qadariyya was a school of theology that is simplified as free will champion. Man can choose freely between good and evil and are responsible for their choice. Among its earliest prominent figure was Ma’bad al-Juhani (d. 83/703). For a preliminary remark on this school, see J. van Ess, ‘Qadariyya’, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Edition, Vol. IV, pp. 368-372. See also J. van Ess, ‘Ma’bad al-Juhani’, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Edition, Vol. V-2, pp. 935-936 and W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, pp. 82-118.


Ṭabarī’s interpretation of sūra 112, al-Ikhlāṣ (The Purity), Afaki proves that al-Ṭabarī still relies more on the traditions than on linguistic analysis.\(^{17}\) Afaki, however, does not analyse how the combination of tradition and linguistic analysis operates in al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr. Furthermore, Afaki’s examination on sūra al-Ikhlāṣ (The Purity) is simpler than the present research. There is an agreement between the literal meaning of the sūra he investigates and traditions as well as theological understanding of the community (umma).

The paper written by Devin J. Stewart under the title ‘Consensus, Authority, and the Interpretive Community in the Thought of Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī’\(^{18}\) is notable in understanding al-Ṭabarī’s method of incorporating various opinion regarding certain topics. Stewart compares al-Ṭabarī’s understanding of the word ḥujja (proof) in his tafsīr and how he uses the word in his works on jurisprudence. He then relates the use of the word ḥujja in terms of consensus (ijmā`) of the scholars. According to Stewart, there are some important differences between al-Ṭabarī and other scholars regarding consensus. While most scholars require unanimous agreement among scholars, al-Ṭabarī accepts dissidents and still considers it as consensus. This understanding according to Stewart, influences the formation of authority in Sunnī Islam.

Stewart’s argument on al-Ṭabarī’s position regarding consensus is interesting since, as we shall see later, he adduces different opinions in the interpretation of Qur’anic verses of the salvation of non-Muslims. If Gilliot argues

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 298.

that the incorporation of different opinions was meant to attack those whose opinion is different from al-Ṭabarî’s, Stewart’s argument is more plausible. The consensus can be reached amid the presence of different opinions. Although Stewart examines from the perspective of Islamic law, as we shall see later, al-Ṭabarî also applies his view on consensus in verses implying theological matters.

2. Works on Theological Aspect of al-Ṭabarî’s Tafsîr

Other valuable work on al-Ṭabarî’s tafsîr is Claude Gilliot’s Exegese, Langue et Theologie en Islam: L’Exegese Coranique de Tabari which presents a wide-ranging picture of al-Ṭabarî’s tafsîr.\(^{19}\) The book arose as a result of Gilliot’s desire to provide an accurate and comprehensive description of the tafsîr since previous works on it had mostly dealt with al-Ṭabarî’s sources of exegetical materials.\(^ {20}\) In doing this, Gilliot approaches al-Ṭabarî’s tafsîr by studying his view of “the sciences of language (sciences du langage)” and his theological position.\(^ {21}\)

Gilliot divides his book into three parts. The first part deals with al-Ṭabarî’s biography and legacy. In this, as Rippin mentions in his review of the book, Gilliot describes not only al-Ṭabarî’s intellectual journeys, but also his general aim to convey what the majority of Muslims had agreed in all of his multi-disciplinary works including law, history, language, theology and Qur’anic exegesis.\(^ {22}\)

---


\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 8.

\(^{21}\) Ibid. p. 9.

subject of al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr*, Gilliot refers to his introduction where al-Ṭabarī states that he will present all the issues which have achieved consensus regarding the Qur’ān.23 The second and lengthiest part of Gilliot’s book deals with al-Ṭabarī’s theory of language of the Qur’ān. Here, Gilliot discusses several aspects of Qur’ānic language, such as its inimitability (*i`jāz*), its foreign terms, the concept of its seven readings (*sab`a aḥrūf*), its variant readings (*qirā`āt*) and its grammar.24 He bases his analysis of al-Ṭabarī’s view on this language on the introduction of his *tafsīr*.

The third part of Gilliot’s book addresses al-Ṭabarī’s position as a theologian and how his interpretation of the Qur’ān helped in the formation of Islamic orthodoxy. Here, Gilliot discusses al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’ānic verses regarding some theological issues during al-Ṭabarī’s time, including the divine attributes such as the hand of God, the face of God, the eyes of God as well as the vision of God on the Day of Resurrection, and the essence of the Qur’ān and human actions.25 Gilliot shows how al-Ṭabarī uses his interpretation of the Qur’ān to engage in theological discourse, providing the different opinions of Muslim theologians on certain issues. It is in this part that Gilliot’s findings assert al-Ṭabarī’s position as theologian; a perspective that will help my research deal with his interpretation of theological verses. Al-Ṭabarī is more described as either an exegete or an historian. Little attention is paid for his theological position. As like Goldziher’s thesis, Gilliot concludes that al-Ṭabarī’s interpretations of verses

---

regarding theological issues have two aims: first, to define the agreed position of the community; and second, to attack other theological adversaries.

One particular issue that Gilliot addresses which relates to the salvation of non-Muslims is al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 11:107 on the eternity of Hell. The verse states that (the wretched people will dwell in Hell) “so long as the heavens and the earth endure unless your Lord wills it otherwise”. In his discussion, Gilliot concludes that al-Ṭabarī is of the opinion that Muslims who committed grave sins will not dwell in Hell eternally; only the polytheists (mushrikūn) will abide there eternally. Gilliot then attempts to understand al-Ṭabarī’s position on this issue by locating it within contemporary schools of thought. Although al-Ṭabarī does not name any sect, according to Gilliot, his viewpoint is an attack against the Muʿtazilī concept of the intermediate position (al-manzila bayn al-manzilatayn). Therefore, Muslims will still go to Hell and experience torment in it but only for a finite time. Gilliot thus concludes that al-Ṭabarī’s understanding of the eternity of Hell (among other issues) constitutes part of what would eventually become orthodoxy while attacking other sectarian groups. However, Gilliot does not discuss al-Ṭabarī’s position on the salvation issue. He actually confirms that al-Ṭabarī also engaged in theological discussions although many scholars regard him mostly as an historian and an exegete. In addition to al-Ṭabarī’s works on Islamic theology such as al-

26 This concept was first proposed by Wāṣil b. ʿAtāʾ, the pioneer of the Muʿtazila, to argue that Muslims who committed grave sins are neither believers nor unbelievers, but they belong to the intermediate position. See Abū al-Fatḥ Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, al-Milal wa al-Nihal (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1992), Vol. I, p. 48
28 Ibid., p. 224.
Tabṣīr fī Maʿālim al-Dīn, his engagement in theological issues, according to Gilliot, can be found in his tafsīr.

Gilliot’s book aims to be a complete and comprehensive analysis of al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr. However, there are two important omissions. First, although Gilliot thoroughly addresses al-Ṭabarī’s ideas regarding the language of the Qur’ān - from its inimitability to grammatical aspects - his argument is not based on al-Ṭabarī interpretation of Qur’anic verses. Rather, Gilliot analyses al-Ṭabarī’s ideas by referring to his introduction to the tafsīr. It is therefore difficult to see when and where al-Ṭabarī applies his ideas when interpreting the Qur’ān. Second, when Gilliot deals with al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses regarding theological issues, he does not go further by analysing al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive strategies, an issue which is the main subject of discussion in the present research. Gilliot only looks for how al-Ṭabarī was influenced and how he reinforced the theological view of the Muslim mainstream against certain theological schools.

Al-Ṭabarī’s engagement in theological discourse also appears in Mustafa Shah’s ‘Al-Ṭabarī and the Dynamics of Tafsīr: Theological Dimension of a Legacy’. According to Shah, when interpreting Q. 2:29, al-Ṭabarī employs the grammatical perspective and refers to al-Farrāʾ (d. 207/822), a prominent Muʿtazilī grammarian whom al-Ṭabarī otherwise rarely mentions. As with Gilliot, as discussed earlier, Shah argues that al-Ṭabarī’s particular interpretation of the verse

---

is an effort to fight the Muʿtazilī position. Thus Shah’s article demonstrates that al-Ṭabarī’s *tafṣīr* is related to the theological disputes of his time.

This also appears in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 17:79 especially on the phrase “a praised estate (*maqāman mahmūdan*)”;\(^{30}\) verse 2: 255\(^ {31}\) and his discussion on the issue of *ism* (name) and *musammā* (the named). However, Shah does not deal with al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive strategies. What Shah tries to do here is to locate al-Ṭabarī’s position within contemporary theological debate. Most scholars including Shah assign him to Sunnī orthodoxy. This term, however, according to Hodgson, is problematic because there was no such orthodoxy at that time in Islam and so-called Sunnism was not yet established. However, for the sake of easy categorization and to differentiate al-Ṭabarī from the contemporary Muʿtazilī viewpoint, it is simpler to include him within the orthodox Sunnī camp. Thus, Shah’s work is relevant to this present research in its locating of the characteristics of al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation within theological debate in the contemporary intellectual milieu.

3. Works on al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr* and its Context

To achieve a comprehensive understanding on al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive strategies, it is important to see its position in the development of the science of

\(^{30}\) The verse reads, “And some part of the night awake for it, a largess for thee. It may be that thy Lord will raise thee to a praised estate.”

\(^{31}\) The verse reads, “God! There is no God save Him, the Alive, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. Unto Him belongs whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth. Who is he that intercedes with Him save by His leave? He knows that which is in front of them and that which is behind them, while they encompass nothing of His knowledge save what He will. His throne includes the heavens and the earth, and He is never weary of preserving them. He is the Sublime, the Tremendous.”
tafsīr during its formative period. Walid A. Saleh’s paper entitled ‘Rereading al-Ṭabarī through al-Māturīdī: New Light on the Third Century Hijri’ is a good work to start with in locating al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr within its context. 32 In this, Saleh compares al-Ṭabarī to a subsequent theologian and exegete, namely Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd al-Samarqandī, also known as Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944). Al-Māturīdī is a well-known Sunnī theologian who was a contemporary of Abū Ḥasan al-Ash’arī, the eponymous founder of the Ashʿariyya, whose thought represents Islamic orthodoxy. Saleh discusses al-Māturīdī’s work on tafsīr entitled Taʿwīlāt al-Qurʿān and compares it with al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr so as to contextualize the latter within the development of Sunnī tafsīr. His argument is that the assumption that al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr is the summation of early Sunnī tafsīr is not totally true. He demonstrates that some materials from early tafsīr are absent in al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr but are found in later works including al-Māturīdī’s exegesis. On some occasions, al-Ṭabarī does not mention his sources, especially in his grammatical explanations. One of these sources, according to Saleh, can be identified in al-Māturīdī’s tafsīr as al-Farrā’, a Muʿtazila exegete. This finding on al-Ṭabarī’s reliance to al-Farrā’ is similar to Shah’s argument as discussed in the previous two paragraphs.

Furthermore, Saleh also does not deal with al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive strategies, since his thesis is to show variants in the development of Sunnī tafsīr. However, Saleh’s article suggests that reading both al-Ṭabarī’s and al-Māturīdī’s

---

tafsīrs will reveal the rich endeavour of early Qur’anic exegesis especially in the third/eight century. Saleh’s article is also important for understanding the general picture of the development of tafsīr in its early period from a socio-historical perspective. As Rippin argues, the study of early tafsīr clearly illustrates the influence of religious dogma on the intellectual history of early Muslims, and also portrays the development of later Islamic thought. There must always be a connection between tafsīr and the context in which it was produced.

Claude Gilliot’s ‘The Beginning of Qur’anic Exegesis’ in a book edited by Rippin, The Qur’ān: Formative Interpretation also discusses how the specific characteristics and methods of tafsīr resulted from the challenges that it faced in the early period of its development. There was a need to understand certain difficult words or expressions when reciting the Qur’ān. Thus, a reader of the Qur’ān would stop his recital and provide the synonyms of those words or expressions. This, according to Gilliot, resulted in the paraphrastic model of exegesis, in which exegetes simply paraphrased the verses or provided “brief, often synonymic explanations of Qur’anic terms or passages.” When the need for further understanding of Qur’anic verses arose, Gilliot argues, tafsīr had developed into ‘textual exegesis’, where mufassirūn started to relate the verses they read to other Qur’anic verses, or ‘narrative exegesis’ where mufassirūn included the traditions and other materials from earlier generations, even from non-Islamic and Arabic

---

It is because of this that Saleh’s article discussed in the previous paragraphs should be understood. Different times bear different challenges and bring about different responses. Therefore, as already remarked, al-Ṭabarī is still to be considered an influential figure in the development of Qur’anic interpretation. His *tafsīr* represents methodological trend in his time, which might be different from other approaches in the interpretation of the Qur’an proposed by other Qur’anic exegetes in different contexts.

C. **Muslim Views on the Salvation of Religious Others**

Al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive strategies will be examined from his interpretation of Qur’anic verses on the salvation of religious others, in particular related to three topics: the fate of virtuous non-Muslims, the eternity of Hell and intercession. On the first issue of the fate of virtuous non-Muslims, two works will be considered: Yasir Qadhi’s article ‘The Path of Allah or the Paths of Allah? Revisiting Classical and Medieval Sunni Approaches to the Salvation of Others’ and Farid Esack’s paper ‘The Portrayal of Jews and the Possibilities of their Salvation in the Qur’ān’. Meanwhile, regarding the issues of the eternity of Hell and intercession, Mohammad Hassan Khalil’s work entitled *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question* will be consulted.

---

36 Ibid., pp. 17-20.
1. Works on the Fate of Virtuous non-Muslims

Regarding the issue of the fate of virtuous non-Muslims, Yasir Qadhi’s article ‘The Path of Allah or the Paths of Allah? Revisiting Classical and Medieval Sunni Approaches to the Salvation of Others’ represents those who argue that non-Muslims will not be saved.\(^37\) Referring to classical and medieval Sunni scholars, Qadhi argues that there is no salvation outside Islam. His main argument is based on verses Q. 3:19\(^38\) and 3:85\(^39\), that Islam is the only religion acceptable to God. The second argument is that whoever rejects Muḥammad’s prophethood is actually rejecting God as well. Among the verses Qadhi refers is Q. 7:156-158\(^40\) which describes the necessity of believing in Muḥammad, who is, Qadhi claims, mentioned in the Torah and the Gospel as the messenger of God commissioned to all of mankind. Qadhi’s third argument is that the Qur’ān has criticized the beliefs of other religions. In this case, Qadhi takes examples of Qur’anic verses which

---


\(^{38}\) The verse reads, “Verily! The religion before God is Islam. The People of the Book differed only after knowledge came unto them, through transgression among themselves. Whoever disbelieves the revelations of God (will find that) verily God is swift at reckoning.”

\(^{39}\) The verse reads, “And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, never will it be accepted from him, and he will be a loser in the hereafter.”

\(^{40}\) The verses read, “(156) And ordain for us in, this world that which is good, and in the hereafter (that which is good), verily, we have turned unto Thee. He said: I smite with My punishment whom I will, and My mercy embraces all things, therefore I shall ordain It for those who ward off (evil) and pay the poor due, and those who believe Our revelations; (157) Those who follow the messenger, the Prophet who can neither read nor write, whom they will find described in the Torah and the Gospel (which are) with them. He will enjoin on them that which is right and forbid them that which is wrong. He will make lawful for them all good things and prohibit for them only the foul; and he will relieve them of their burden and the fetters that they used to wear. Then those who believe in him, and honour him and help him, and follow the light which is sent down with him: they are the successful. (158) Say (O Muhammad): O mankind! Verily! I am the messenger of God to you all—(the messenger of) Him unto whom belongs the Sovereignty of the heavens and the earth. There is no God save Him. He quickens and He gives death. So believe in God and His messenger, the Prophet who can neither read nor write, who believes in God and in His words and follow him that haply you may be led a right.”
criticize Christian beliefs that ‘God is the Messiah, son of Mary’ and ‘God is the third of a trinity’ (Q. 5:72-73).  

When addressing Qur’anic verses such as Q. 2:62 which seems to leave open the possibility of salvation for religious others, Qadhi simply says that all classical and medieval Qur’anic exegetes comment that this verse refers to those Jews and Christians who lived before the prophethood of Muḥammad. Unfortunately, he does not deal with these conflicting verses within a comprehensive explanation of the position of Islam regarding the salvation of non-Muslims. For instance, verse 2:62 which is almost identical with verse 5:69 is not related to verse 3:115. Those verses cover a similar topic, namely that whoever from the People of the Book does righteous deeds will receive their reward before God.

On the contrary, Farid Esack’s paper ‘The Portrayal of Jews and the Possibilities of their Salvation in the Qur’ān’ represents works of those who argue that non-Muslim can attain salvation. In this paper, Esack gives invaluable insight.

---

41 The verses read, “(72) They surely disbelieve who say: Verily, God is the Messiah, son of Mary. The Messiah (himself) said: O Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord. Verily, whoever ascribes partners unto God, for him God has forbidden Heaven. His abode is Hell. For evildoers there will be no helpers. (73) They surely disbelieve who say: Verily, God is the third of three; when there is no God save the One God. If they desist not from so saying a painful doom will fall on those of them who disbelieve.”

42 The verse reads, “Verily, those who believe and those who are Jews, and Christians, and Sabaeans whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does righteously surely their reward is with their Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve.”

43 The verse reads, “Verily, those who believe, and those who are Jews, and Sabaeans, and Christians whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and does right there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve.”

44 The verse reads, “And whatever good they do, they will not be denied the reward thereof. God is Aware of those who ward off (evil).”

on how to treat Qur’anic verses on the issue of salvation for non-Muslims. He provides variant interpretation of the Qur’anic text regarding the status of Jews. According to Esack, some Qur’anic verses display positive attitudes toward Jews, for instance the acknowledgement as the chosen people such as in Q. 2:47 and Q. 44:30-32. Nevertheless, the Qur’ān also criticizes them for altering God’s words, taking usury and murdering their prophets such as in Q. 4:155 and Q. 5:13. To reconcile these two views, Esack offers a historical analysis of the text. For him, since some Qur’anic verses were revealed in certain circumstances, the understanding of these verses should be situated within those circumstances.

The severe criticism of the Qur’ān toward the Jewish people, according to Esack, should be understood within the context of the socio-political conflict between the Prophet and the Jews in Medina. The Prophet and the Muslim community accused three Medinan Jewish tribes, namely Banū Qaynuqā’, Banū Naḍīr and Banū Qurayza, of violating the Medina charter\(^{46}\) by collaborating with the Meccan Quraysh, enemies of the Prophet. Thus, Esack argues, only some, and not all, of the People of the Book, including Jews, are criticized in Qur’anic verses. Therefore, Jews who do not do what the Qur’ān has accused them of can attain salvation.

\(^{46}\) It is also known as the Constitution of Medina. The charter functioned as an agreement among the inhabitants of Medina which include Muslims (stated as ‘believers’) from Mecca (the emigrants/muhājirūn) and Medina (the helpers/anṣār), Medinan Jews and other Medinan tribes. Among the aims of the charter was to protect all Medinan inhabitants and collaborate against external attacks. The charter also acknowledges Muhammad as a leader to whom all disputes among the inhabitants of Medina were brought. See, for instance, W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), pp. 221-228.
Esack’s reading of Qur’anic verses dealing with Jews constitutes a pluralist standpoint within Islam. It gives scriptural basis for the possibility of salvation for religious others, especially for Jews. However, in terms of methodology, Esack’s historical analysis fails to deal with the Jews living after the period of the Prophet. Esack should offer a methodology to bring his historical analysis of the text into the current situation.

In addition, Esack does not discuss either how to address the abrogating (nāsikh) and abrogated (mansūkh) verses. The discussion on nāsikh-mansūkh becomes important since the commission of Muḥammad and the revelation of the Qur‘ān are considered as abrogating and replacing previous divine revelation including that of Judaism and Christianity. In this light, Qur’anic verses which give the possibility of salvation for other religious believers, especially, the People of the Book such as in Q. 2:62, according to some, are abrogated by the verses confirming Islam as the preferred religion before God such as Q. 3:85. The verses being discussed above are polemical. For instance, Q. 2:62 literally leaves open the possibility of the salvation of non-Muslims; however, verse 3:19 insists that the religion before God is Islam. The literal meaning of the verses may bear the opposite understanding of them. While Esack employs historical analysis, the present research will examine al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of such verses by looking at their contents and analyse it from the perspective of his context.
2. Work on the Eternity of Hell and Intercession

Regarding the issue of the eternity of Hell and intercession, the present thesis will consult Mohammad Hassan Khalil’s work entitled *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question*. Khalil attempts to provide a theological basis for the possibility of salvation of religious others by surveying four prominent Muslim scholars: al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1354/1935). The purpose of Khalil’s book is to provide an alternative view on the issue of the salvation of non-Muslims from the popular opinion of the Sunnī Muslim majority that non-Muslims will be eternally damned.

Khalil first examines al-Ghazālī. As he explains, in his *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa bayn al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa* al-Ghazālī focuses his argument about the salvation
of religious others on his understanding of Qur’anic verse 17:15 which part of it states that God will not punish people until He sends them a messenger.\textsuperscript{52} From this verse, al-Ghazālī argues that those who are not reached by the Islamic message, or those sincere seekers of truth who are eager to learn about that message will be saved through God’s mercy.\textsuperscript{53} However, those who are reached by Islamic teaching, whether properly taught or not, but do not want to acquire or investigate its truth, are culpable. This is because humans are already supplied with an intellect that is capable of recognizing the truth of the Islamic message. If they do not do so, then al-Ghazālī accused them of being stubborn, having ‘spiritual blindness’ and ‘disease in their hearts’.\textsuperscript{54}

The second scholar discussed by Khalil is Ibn al-’Arabī who, according to Khalil, moves beyond al-Ghazālī by stating that everyone actually will attain salvation. Khalil deals with Ibn al-’Arabī’s ideas about God’s mercy and forgiveness. According to Khalil, Ibn al-’Arabī argues that everyone will be saved because God’s mercy and forgiveness exceeds His justice. Therefore, the inhabitants of Hell, including those whom al-Ghazālī categorizes as ‘the stubborn’ or spiritually blind and sick, will eventually enter Heaven.\textsuperscript{55} Furthermore, in regards to Q. 17:15 as explained in the preceding paragraph, Ibn al-’Arabī states that the information about Islam must be correct and properly delivered. If those who are reached by the Islamic teaching do so in an inappropriate way, or they only know

\textsuperscript{52} The verse reads, “Whosoever goes right, it is only for (the good of) his own soul that he goes right, and whosoever errs, errs only to its hurt. No laden soul can bear another's load. We never punish until We have sent a messenger.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p. 32.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 37.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 63.
the bad things about Islam, they are also not damned and have the possibility of attaining salvation. Overall, Khalil concludes that Ibn al-`Arabī is more inclusive than al-Ghazālī on the basis of his view of God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Khalil next discusses Ibn Taymiyya. While Ibn al-`Arabī states that those who are reached by a corrupted version of Islam could attain salvation, Ibn Taymiyya argues the opposite and was thus in agreement with al-Ghazālī. According to Ibn Taymiyya, those who do not recognize the truth that has been delivered will not be saved. Salvation is only available for those who have never been reached by the message of Islam. However, Ibn Taymiyya, who is championed by some modern Muslim movements for his severe criticism of Judaism and Christianity, according to Khalil, also had inclusive point of view. This is because when discussing the eternity of Hell, he surprisingly argues that unbelievers will not dwell in Hell forever. His argument, as Khalil explains, is based on a sound tradition from `Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644), the second caliph and one of the closest companions of the Prophet, who is reported as saying that ‘If the People of the Fire (ahl al-nār) remain in the Fire… then theirs would be a day in which they would leave it’. As a strong defender of traditions, Ibn Taymiyya would not doubt to use the tradition from `Umar and adopt his view that non-Muslims might eventually attain salvation on the basis of the finite nature of Hell. This latter view, together with Ibn Taymiyya’s position on those who are not reached by the message

---

56 Ibid., p. 60.
of Islam, leads Khalil to describe Ibn Taymiyya’s standpoint as limited inclusivism.\(^{57}\)

The last thinker Khalil surveys is the modern reformer Rashīd Riḍā. After relating Riḍā’s short biography, Khalil begins by discussing Riḍā’s position on religious affiliation. Although Riḍā seems to be a pluralist when interpreting ‘islām’ in Q. 3:19 as ‘submission’ rather than Islam as a religion, Khalil points out that Riḍā actually favoured the view that Muḥammad’s dispensation superseded any revealed laws before it since these had been altered and distorted.\(^{58}\) However, as Khalil elaborates further, Riḍā’s position is much similar to al-Ghazālī’s in discussing the people whom the message of Islam has not reached. Like al-Ghazālī, Riḍā offered excuses for those who have not heard about Islam, but in contrast to al-Ghazālī, Riḍā claimed that the excuse is also given to those who fail to recognize the truth of the message, a position that is similar to that of Ibn al-ʿArabī. Furthermore, Khalil also puts Riḍā in the universalist group which regards Hell as having an end.\(^{59}\) Although Riḍā acknowledged that most Muslim exegetes maintain the eternality of Hell, he apparently preferred the view that God’s mercy and justice will outshine His punishment.

Khalil’s book is significant in outlining the discourses among Muslim thinkers on the issue of the salvation of religious others because Khalil not only discusses these four primary scholars but also identifies other individuals who have similar ideas to them. The first three scholars discussed here, namely al-Ghazālī,

\(^{57}\) Ibid., p. 85.
\(^{58}\) Ibid., p. 114.
\(^{59}\) Ibid., p. 127.
Ibn al-`Arabī and Ibn Taymiyya, based their argument on philosophical and mystical considerations, which makes Khalil’s presentation valuable since these considerations cannot be separated from the interpretations of related Qur’anic verses, in which this present research will benefit from. In particular, my research draws the discussion on the eternity of Hell as argued by Ibn Taymiyya and on intercession as a continuation of Ibn al-`Arabī’s argument on God’s mercy and forgiveness by examining al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive strategies from the relevant verses.

However, Khalil’s categorization of the four thinkers, namely al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-`Arabī, Ibn Taymiyya and Rashīd Riḍā, is methodologically inaccurate. He bases his argument mainly on their inclusive ideas toward religious others. Khalil fails to mention other works by the four scholars which may advance different views from those he has explored. For instance, describing al-Ghazālī’s openness towards non-Muslims by looking only at his *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa* is not enough. Khalil should also review al-Ghazālī’s *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* which describes his intellectual and spiritual journey, or consult al-Ghazālī’s masterpiece *Iḥyā` 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. By looking at such works, Khalil perhaps would not oversimplify his categorizing the four scholars as pluralist figures.

D. Conclusion

Based on the above exploration, there is no works have discussed al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive strategies. It is true to say that he relies on traditions and linguistic analysis to explain the meaning of the Qur’ān as all scholars have argued.
However, a study on specific strategies that al-Ṭabarī employs to make use of the traditions and the linguistic analysis he adduced in interpreting the Qur’ān has not been carried out. It is in this light that this thesis will scrutinize al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive strategies through his interpretation of Qur’anic verses on the salvation of non-Muslims. The thesis will employ contextual analysis to locate both his ideas on the topic and his interpretive strategies within the development of Islamic sciences.
CHAPTER TWO
Al-Ṭabarī: His Life and Context

A. Introduction

In order to obtain an understanding of al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses on the salvation of non-Muslims, this chapter will discuss the context in which al-Ṭabarī produced his ideas. By understanding his context, we are able to relate his ideas to the circumstances that might have influenced his interpretation, and vice versa. The chapter will start with a short biography of al-Ṭabarī that includes his journey in the quest for knowledge and his intellectual career. The biography will be based primarily on Rosenthal’s ‘The Life and Works of al-Ṭabarī’ in his general introduction to the translation of al-Ṭabarī’s masterpiece on history, Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk,\(^1\) from now on referred as Tārīkh. Bosworth, when writing the entry on al-Ṭabarī in The Encyclopaedia of Islam also refers to Rosenthal.\(^2\) An informative but less detailed biography of al-Ṭabarī appears in the work by Aḥmad Muḥammad al-Ḥūfī, al-Ṭabarī.\(^3\) There are some other works on the life of al-Ṭabarī, but these mostly consider his status as an historian as well as his Tārīkh. Among these is a work edited by Hugh Kennedy al-Ṭabarī: A Medieval Muslim Historian and His Work. Only one chapter of this book,


which is the first chapter written by Tarif Khalidi entitled ‘al-Ṭabarī: An Introduction’, relates to his tafsīr work.⁴ Even though the biography in the present chapter is based on Rosenthal, I compare Rosenthal’s data to that supplied by Yāqūt b. ʿAbdallāh al-Ḥamawī in his Irshād al-Arīb ilā Maʿrifat al-Adīb (Dictionary of Learned Men and Litterateurs);⁵ Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. ʿAlī al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s Tārīkh Baghdād aw Madīna al-Salām (History of Baghdad or City of Peace);⁶ and Ibn Nadīm’s al-Fihris.⁷

Despite the fact that al-Ṭabarī was a prolific writer whose works range from the field of history to law, Qur’ān commentary and others, he unfortunately did not write an autobiography. Early works on his biography, ones that were written for instance by Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. Kāmil (d. 350/961) and Abū Muḥammad ʿAbdallāh b. Aḥmad b. Jaʿfar al-Farghānī (d. 362/973), are no longer available.⁸ Historians such as Rosenthal thus refer primarily to later works such as Tārīkh Baghdād by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071), Tārīkh Madīna Dimashqī (History of Damascus) by Ibn ʿAsākir (d. 572/1176) and most importantly Irshād al-Arīb by Yāqūt b. ʿAbdallāh al-Ḥamawī (d. 626/1229), where excerpts from earlier biographies of al-Ṭabarī can be found. Despite minor flaws such as misprints of dates and awkward arrangement, Rosenthal’s work provides sufficient information about al-Ṭabarī’s life, his intellectual journey, his career, a list of all

---

⁷ Ibn Nadīm, al-Fihris (Egypt: Maṭba`at al-Raḥmāniyya, 1348 AH)
his known works, as well as a short description of each work. Rosenthal does not, however, discuss al-Ṭabarī’s circumstances, nor does he place al-Ṭabarī within the context in which he lived. He is concerned more to provide as much information as possible about al-Ṭabarī himself.

After briefly describing al-Ṭabarī’s personal life, this chapter provides a general introduction to al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr, and more importantly his primary method in writing the tafsīr. This latter part will function as a reference later in the following chapters when analysing al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the Qur’ān. Finally, the chapter discuss the context which might have had an influence on al-Ṭabarī’s thought. The discussion will analyse how al-Ṭabarī dealt with the political and intellectual circumstances of his time. Since the thesis focuses on al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses on the topic of the salvation of non-Muslims, the inter-religious relations of his time will also be examined. This will include the social relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as major interreligious discourses in al-Ṭabarī’s time. With these considerations, the chapter will place al-Ṭabarī’s ideas in his tafsīr into their proper context.

B. A Biographical Sketch of al-Ṭabarī

Abū Ja’far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī was born in 224/839 in Āmūl, the capital of Tabaristan, a region on the southern shore of the Caspian, and died in Baghdad in 310/923. The period during which al-Ṭabarī lived witnessed the flourishing of Islamic knowledge. Most cities, as we shall see in al-Ṭabarī’s quest for knowledge, had become centres of learning of various disciplines of Islamic
knowledge. The theological controversy between the rationalist and traditionalist approaches to the Qur’ān was a crucial phenomenon during the period, which positively urged scholars to engage in learned activities. Together with the political turmoil in the Abbasid caliphate in the second half of the third/ninth century, especially after the death of the caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 247/861), many scholars, including al-Ṭabarī, chose to devote their life to intellectual pursuits and avoid political involvement.

Al-Ṭabarī was a gifted child who was able to memorize the Qur’ān as early as when he was seven, and at nine years old he had started to study the Prophetic traditions (ḥadīth). It is also reported that even as a child, al-Ṭabarī had dreamt to write a book of tafsīr. He left his native city on a quest for knowledge at the age of twelve.

Al-Ṭabarī began his intellectual journey when he went to study in Rayy, a metropolis of northern Iran today. He spent five years in Rayy where he studied under some teachers including Abū `Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Ḥumayd al-Rāzī (d. 248/862). Ibn Ḥumayd was known as a transmitter of Muḥammad b. Isḥāq (d. 151/768), famous for his works on history, through Salama b. al-Faḍl (d. 190/806). From Ibn Ḥumayd, al-Ṭabarī received a basic knowledge of history.

which subsequently proved useful in the writing of his monumental work on history, *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk*.

Al-Ṭabarī then moved to Baghdad to continue his studies there. It is believed that Ibn Humayd might have suggested that al-Ṭabarī to go to Baghdad in the hope that he would study with Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855). Ibn Ḥanbal was a great traditionalist, whose school of jurisprudence emphasized the use of traditions rather than personal opinion. It is therefore not surprising that Ibn Humayd would suggest that al-Ṭabarī study with Ibn Ḥanbal, especially in the field of tradition. This was not to be realised, however, since Ibn Ḥanbal died before al-Ṭabarī’s arrival. There is no information about what and with whom al-Ṭabarī studied in Baghdad after his expectation to study with Ibn Ḥanbal failed.

This first visit to Baghdad did not last long since in 242/856 al-Ṭabarī moved to Baṣra to continue his study of Qur’anic exegesis with Ḥumayd b. Masʿada (d. 246/859-60), Muḥammad b. `Abd al-Aʿlā al-Ṣan`ānī (d. 246/859-60), Muḥammad b. Mūsā al-Ḥarashī (d. 248/862) and Abū al-Ashʿath Aḥmad b. al-

14 Ahmad b. Ḥanbal was the eponymous founder of the Ḥanbaliyya school of Sunni law. He wrote a compilation of Ḥadīth called *Musnad Ahmad b. Ḥanbal*. He was a strong opponent of the Muʿtazila rationalist school, which was proclaimed as the school of the State by the Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn. See H. Laoust, ‘Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, Vol. I, p. 272-277. The Ḥanbaliyya is one of the four major schools of Sunni jurisprudence. The other three are the Ḥanafīyya, the Mālikīyya and the Shāfī`iyya, each being named after their founders: Abū Ḥanīfa Nuʿmān b. Thābit (d. 150/767), Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), and Muḥammad Idrīs al-Shāfī`i (d. 205/820). The Ḥanbaliyya formulates its methodology of law by emphasising the Prophetic traditions, including the ‘weak’ traditions. To this school, a weak tradition is preferred to personal opinion (*raʾy*). The Ḥanafīyya is known for its preference for *raʾy* (reason) through analogy (*qiyās*). The Mālikīyya refers primarily to the Medinan tradition. The Shāfī`iyya establishes its methodology on the combination of reliable traditions and personal opinion in the form of analogy (*qiyās*). For a general introduction on the formation of Sunni jurisprudence, see, among others, Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories*; *An Introduction to Sunni Usūl al-Fiqh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Christopher Melchert, *The Formation of the Sunni Schools of Law*, 9th – 10th Centuries C.E. (Leiden, New York and Cologne: Brill, 1997). See below footnote no. 47.

Miqdām (d. 253/867), Bishr b. Muʿādh al-ʿAqādī (d. 246/860), and Muḥammad b. Bashshār (d. 252/866).

Al-Ṭabarī then continued his journey to Kūfa to study under influential scholars such as Hannād b. al-Sarī (d. 243/857) with whom he studied history, Ibn al-Sarī providing him with information from Ibn Ishāq through Yūnūs b. Bukayr, in addition to the chain from Ibn Ḥumayd through Salama. Al-Ṭabarī also received materials of Qur’anic exegesis (tafsīr) from Ibn al-Sarī. In Kūfa al-Ṭabarī also studied variant readings of the Qur’ān (qirāʾāt) with Sulaymān b. Ṭabarī. Another important teacher in Kūfa was Abū Kurayb Muḥammad b. al-ʿAlāʾ (d. 247/861), with whom al-Ṭabarī studied ḥadīth.

After a couple years travelling from Rayy to Baghdad to Baṣra and then to Kūfa, in 245/858 al-Ṭabarī returned to Baghdad. As a result of this journey, al-Ṭabarī acquired knowledge in the field of history, tafsīr, qirāʾāt and ḥadīth. On his

---

17 Ibn Nadīm, al-Fihris, p. 326.
19 Ibn Nadīm, al-Fihris, p. 326.
21 Variant readings of the Qurʾān had appeared since the period of the Prophet, due to different dialects of the Arabic language. Another factor was the absence of short vowels in written Arabic, meaning that words can be read differently depending on which vowels are inserted. See R. Paret, ‘Qirāʾa’, The Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd Edition, Vol. V, p. 127-129. For further discussion, see Chapter I of Ignaz Goldziher’s Madhāhib al-Tafsīr al-Islāmi, translated and annotated by Abd al-Ḥalīm al-Najjār (Egypt and Baghdad: Maktabat al-Khānijī and Maktabat al-Mīthnā, 1955).
second visit to Baghdad, al-Ṭabarī started to teach and he accepted the position of tutor for a son of the wazīr `Ubaydallāh b. Yaḥyā b. Khāqān.  

After residing and teaching in Baghdad for approximately eight years, al-Ṭabarī resumed his studies. In this period of his journey, he managed to deepen his knowledge in the field of qirāʿāt with al-ʿAbbās b. al-Walīd b. Mazyad al-ʿUdhri al-Bayrūṭī (d. 269/883) in Beirut. With al-ʿAbbās, al-Ṭabarī learnt the Syrian school of qirāʿ at. Al-ʿAbbās also taught al-Ṭabarī the legal principles of al-Awzāʿī, the great Syrian jurist. In his further journey to the west, al-Ṭabarī is believed to have become acquainted with scholars from Ḥims who specialised in the transmission of ḥadīth and qirāʿāt. He also studied briefly in Ramlah and ʿAsqalan, both in Palestine.

Al-Ṭabarī continued his quest for knowledge, and in around 253/867 he travelled to Egypt, where he studied with, among others, Yūnūs b. ʿAbd al-Aʿlā (d. 263/877), a prominent Egyptian scholar of ḥadīth and qirāʿ at. He also obtained a deeper understanding of legal systems, particularly of the Mālikī and the Shāfiʿī legal schools. This was done under Ibn ʿAbd al-Aʿlā and al-Rabīʿ b. Sulaymān (d. 270/884), a transmitter of al-Shāfiʿī’s works, who hosted al-Ṭabarī during his sojourn in Egypt. Al-Ṭabarī also benefitted from the Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam family

---


27 Ibn Nadim, al-Fihris, p. 326.
in the field of jurisprudence, studying with Muḥammād b. Ḥakam, the leader of the family, who was an outstanding scholar of ḥadīth and law. Muḥammad was well-known not only in Egypt but also in other areas of the Islamic world. He had the reputation of being a distinguished student of both Shāfi`ite and Mālikite jurists. From Muḥammad’s brother ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Ḥakam, al-Ṭabarī acquired further information, which aided him in the writing of his *Tārīkh* and *tafsīr*.\(^{28}\) It is when he was in Egypt that al-Ṭabarī focused on the study of Islamic jurisprudence, especially with al-Rabī’ for al-Shāfi`ī’s jurisprudence and with Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam for Mālik’s jurisprudence. Al-Ṭabarī’s expertise in Islamic jurisprudence, as we shall see later, was proven to influence his strategy of interpreting Qur’anic verses, even regarding non-juridical verses.

In addition to the subjects mentioned above, al-Ṭabarī also studied poetry with Tha’lab (d. 291/904) even though al-Ṭabarī might have been knowledgeable in Arabic poetry since his youth.\(^{29}\) Poetry was one of the devices al-Ṭabarī employed to explain a word when interpreting the Qur’ān. Another subject al-Ṭabarī might have studied was philosophy, particularly logic and dialectic.\(^{30}\) As a jurist, he would need this knowledge to systematically construct his opinion on legal matters. It is also possible that al-Ṭabarī mastered speculative theology and was involved in discussions of *kalām* (Islamic theology).\(^{31}\) He also studied arithmetic,

---


30 Ibid., p 49.

31 Ibid.
algebra and medicine. Al-Ṭabarī studied medicine with `Alī b. Rabban al-Ṭabarī, a Muslim convert, who also wrote two works on the refutation of Christianity, al-Radd `alā al-Naṣārā and Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla, which al-Ṭabarī might have read.

The year 256/870 signifies the end of al-Ṭabarī’s learning process when he returned from Egypt to Baghdad. Al-Ṭabarī’s travelling in the quest for knowledge to several cities and scholars resulted in the vast and various disciplines of Islamic knowledge he grasped and gained expertise. Other fields that al-Ṭabarī was exceptionally knowledgeable were Arabic linguistic sciences including grammar, philology, lexicography and poetry; logic, dialectic, philosophy and speculative theology; and surprisingly medicine.

Among these disciplines, however, al-Ṭabarī focused his research on three major fields: law, Qur’anic exegesis and history. These three branches of knowledge were built primarily on his mastery of ḥadīth, upon which was based his masterpieces on tafsīr and history. His major known publications were in these three fields. In law, he wrote Ikhtilāf `Ulamā’ al-Amsār fi Aḥkām Sharā’ī al-Islām (The Disagreement of the Scholars in the Major Centres regarding Islamic Laws), which often appears as Ikhtilāf al-Fuqahā’ (The Disagreement of the Jurists). In Qur’anic sciences, beside his famous book on the qirā’āt (variant readings of the Qur’an), he also authored another book on law entitled Laṣṭ al-Qawl fi Abkām Sharā’ī al-Islām.

---

32 Ibid.
35 Ibid., p. 44.
36 The original of this work is said to have consisted of 3000 pages. Among the available publications is Abū Ja’far Muhammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Ikhtilāf al-Fuqahā’ (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-İlmiyya, 1999). Al-Ṭabarī is also reported to have authored another book on law entitled Laṣṭ al-Qawl fī Abkām Sharā’ī al-Islām.

Unsurprisingly, those three major books of al-Tabarī’s works have such a similar method, which becomes his unique and excellent style. The first and foremost method employed by al-Tabarī is the incorporation of the prophetic traditions and opinions of other scholars. Although by this method he looks like a compiler, in fact, according to Rosenthal, al-Tabarī was an astonishing mujtahid who was always courageous to express his independent judgement on the issues he discussed. In his books, he usually offers his own opinion after quoting traditions and opinions of other scholars. The second general characteristic of al-Tabarī’s method is his tendency toward moderation and compromise. Instead of judging other opinions are wrong, according to Rosenthal, he suggested that different opinions might be acceptable and correct. We will talk about his method in tafsīr later.

38 Ibid., p. 54.
39 Ibid., p. 55.
From all of his expertise in Islamic knowledge, al-Ṭabarī was first and foremost well-known as a jurist. Ibn Naḍīm in his *al-Fihrīs* also places al-Ṭabarī in the chapter about Islamic law. Even though he was known for his leaning toward al-Shāfi`ī’s legal school, he was reported to have studied different schools of law. He studied with Dāwūd b. Ṭāhira (d. 270/884), the principal of the Zāhiri school of law. When al-Ṭabarī was in Egypt, as mentioned earlier, he learnt al-Shāfi`ī’s jurisprudence under al-Rabī` b. Sulaymān. Al-Ṭabarī also studied Mālikī and Ḥanafī jurisprudence respectively under three brothers of Ibn `Abd al-Ḥakam and Abū Muqātil al-Rāzī. In his later years, al-Ṭabarī was eventually known to be a great jurist. Devin Stewart argues that al-Ṭabarī intentionally developed his own school of law. Similarly, Rosenthal also claims that al-Ṭabarī attempted to build his own school since he uses the term “our madhhab” in his *Ikhtilāf al-Fuqahā’*. However, the Jarīrī, the name that is attributed to al-Ṭabarī’s school, did not persist, as we will discuss later. Al-Ṭabarī’s legal expertise eventually played an important role in his methods of interpreting the Qur’ān, as we shall see in the chapter on his interpretive strategies.

C. Al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr*

Al-Ṭabarī started a work on Qur’anic *tafsīr* entitled *Jāmi` al-Bayān `an Ta’wīl ʿĀyā al-Qur’ān* in 271/883-4. He completed the work some time between

---

283/896 and 290/903. His intention in writing the tafsīr, as al-Ṭabarī himself states in the introduction of the tafsīr, was “setting forth its [i.e. the Qur’ān’s] interpretation and clarifying its meanings and significance”. The work, al-Ṭabarī claims, would include everything that it was necessary to know about the meaning of the Qur’ān. He further promises that the book would surpass all other books of tafsīr, a statement which implies that al-Ṭabarī already knew other previous Qur’anic tafsīrs.

Al-Ṭabari’s introduction to the tafsīr also informs us that he would employ two important methods to interpret the Qur’ān, namely adducing Prophetic traditions and employing linguistic analysis. This method, in fact, is derived from his view that Qur’anic verses are divided into three kinds. The first are verses whose meaning are only known by God. The second are verses whose meaning can be explained only by the Prophet. The third are verses whose meaning can be understood by those who have expertise in the Arabic language.

He justifies his method by referring to three Qur’anic verses: 16:44, 16:64 and 3:7. The first two verses indicate that the interpretation of Qur’anic

---

48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
51 “With clear proofs and writings; and We have revealed unto you the Remembrance that you may explain to mankind that which has been revealed for them, and that haply they may reflect.”
52 “And we have revealed the Scripture unto you only that you may explain unto them that wherein they differ, and (as) a guidance and a mercy for a people who believe.”
53 “He it is Who has revealed unto you the Scripture wherein are clear revelations - they are the substance of the Book - and others (which are) allegorical. But those in whose hearts is doubt pursue, forsooth, that which is allegorical seeking (to cause) disension by seeking to explain it. None knows its explanation save Allah. And those who are deeply rooted in knowledge instruction say: We believe therein; the whole is from our Lord; but only men of understanding really heed.”
verses has to refer to the explanation provided by the Prophet, by referring to the phrase “that you may explain to mankind (li tubayyina li al-nās)” in verse 44 and “that you may explain unto them (li tubayyina lahum)” in verse 64 of sūra 16.54 Meanwhile, Q. 3:7, according to al-Ṭabarī, suggests that those “who are deeply rooted in knowledge (rāsikhūn fi al-`ilm)” might be able to interpret the Qur’ān.55 The way these knowledgeable men interpret the Qur’ān requires knowledge of the Arabic language, which is “the language in which the Qur’ān was revealed (bi al-lisān alladhī nuzzila bihi al-Qur’ān)”.56 Al-Ṭabarī apparently felt confident that he was included among those “who are deeply rooted in knowledge” and in particular had the knowledge required to interpret the Qur’ān. Thus, for al-Ṭabarī, the interpretation of the Qur’ān by means of linguistic analysis was particularly important, in particular to give a better understanding on the meaning of the Qur’ān to non-Arabs.57

The linguistic analysis that al-Ṭabarī employs in his tafsīr is the use of lexical and grammatical explanation. It is common in his tafsīr that, when starting his interpretation of a verse, al-Ṭabarī first uses philological analysis to understand the meaning of word. After looking at the root of a word, al-Ṭabarī sometimes cites Arabic poetry to show how the Arabs use the word. In addition to both methods, he occasionally also applies a cross-referential method by referring to other Qur’anic

55 The interpretation of Q. 3:7 is nonetheless an object of dispute among Muslims, not only about the meaning of muḥkam and mutashābih, but also on whether or not the activity of exegesis is permissible. See the discussion, for instance, in Sahiron Syamsuddin, ‘Muḥkam and Mutashābih: An Analytical Study of al-Ṭabarī’s and al-Zamakhsharī’s Interpretation of Q. 3:7’, Journal of Qur’anic Studies, Vol. 1(1), 1999, pp. 63-79.
verses to help in understanding the meaning of the word. When needed, al-Ṭabarī may also provide a grammatical explanation in his interpretation of the Qur’ān. We shall see the use of the three methods and grammatical explanation in the following chapters.

This linguistic method was not al-Ṭabarī’s invention, the practice of linguistic analysis being common among the early generation of Qur’anic exegetes (mufassirūn). As Gilliot points out, the earliest tafsīr works mostly consider the vocabulary of the Qur’ān. Regardless of their questionable authenticity, Gilliot mentions the tafsīrs attributed to Mujāhid (d. 104/722),58 Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778)59 and Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna (d. 195/811)60 as works that use linguistic analysis, in which the mufassir explains the synonyms of word or term in a verse.61 Likewise, the use of grammatical explanation in the interpretation of the Qur’ān appears, for instance, in the work of al-Farra’ (d. 207/822).62

Versteegh, however, argues that even though the early tafsīr works mostly deal with linguistic analysis, other aspects of Qur’anic interpretation such as the occasions of revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl), cross-reference to other Qur’anic verses

---


and variant readings, are not absent.\textsuperscript{63} Those aspects, however, do not necessarily appear “at the same time in one and the same author”.\textsuperscript{64} This is particularly because, according to Versteegh, different exegetes had different interests, concerns, and emphases in the way they interpreted the Qur’an so that not all aspects of Qur’anic exegesis were necessarily included in their \textit{tafsir}.\textsuperscript{65} Al-Ṭabarī, different from earlier exegetes, does not limit his interpretation of the Qur’an to a certain and specific aspect, especially lexis and grammar.

In addition to the linguistic aspect, to obtain a valid interpretation of the Qur’an, al-Ṭabarī also refers to the explanation from the Prophet, as he states in the introduction of his \textit{tafsir}.\textsuperscript{66} This is what is often called \textit{tafsir al-nabī}, in which the Prophet explains certain Qur’anic verses in response to a question from his Companions or to a problem that needs to be solved by referring to a verse.\textsuperscript{67} However, \textit{tafsir al-nabī} is very limited since the Prophet did not explain all Qur’anic verses. Because of this, al-Ṭabarī added to Prophetic traditions the opinions of the Prophet’s Companions (ṣaḥāba), the Successors (tābi‘īn) and all pious knowledgeable men within the Islamic community (\textit{umma}) in general.\textsuperscript{68} This extension consequently resulted in the inclusion of opinions of Qur’anic exegetes before al-Ṭabarī. Therefore, the traditions in his \textit{tafsir} are not necessarily the Prophet’s sayings; they also include the opinion of the Prophet’s Companions, the

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid. p. 92
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
Successors, the Successors of the Successors and the scholars before al-Ṭabarī. All these materials are introduced with an isnād, a chain of transmission, which was thought to guarantee not only the trustworthiness of the transmitters but also an uninterrupted chain from one transmitter to another. In al-Ṭabarī’s word, the traditions must be acquired either through an extensive transmission (naqāl al-mustafīḍ) or righteous and reliable persons (naqāl al-īdāl wa al-ithbāt). As we shall see in the following chapters, the inclusion of traditions, not only from the Prophet but also from his Companions and the Successors, dominate al-Ṭabarī’s method in explaining Qur’anic verses regarding the salvation of non-Muslims and lead to his view on the topic.

Initially employed in the field of Islamic law, the use of tradition was subsequently applied to other fields of Islamic sciences including, most significantly, Qur’anic exegesis and history, the two branches of Islamic knowledge that al-Ṭabarī had expertise in and focused on most. As in his tafsīr, al-Ṭabarī’s Tārīkh also contains traditions complete with their isnāds. In the field of jurisprudence, the use of traditions was systematically promoted by Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi`ī (d. 205/820), who proposed that the Prophet’s traditions, especially those of sound status (ṣaḥīḥ), are as authoritative as the Qur’ān for deriving Islamic law. The validity of a tradition is determined primarily by the soundness of both the transmitters and the chain of transmission. Due to the fact that there were not

---

69 Ibid.
71 See footnote no. 9 above.
enough traditions from the Prophet to satisfy the needs of the jurists, it became common practice for scholars at the time of al-Ṭabarī to quote not only the Prophet’s traditions but also previous opinions to legitimize their own views.

Thus, according to Ahmed El Shamsy, al-Ṭabarī followed al-Shāfi`ī’s methodology in jurisprudence, which posits prophetic traditions as the valid knowledge for the elucidation of the Qur’ān. Al-Shāfi`ī, Shamsy argues, also advocated this view by determining that prophetic traditions are the second source after the Qur’ān for deriving legal judgement as well as the main means of explaining its verses. However, Shamsy only analyses al-Ṭabarī’s introduction to his tafsīr and a few verses that have juridical matters. Shamsy does not go further to analyse how al-Ṭabarī employs this method in interpreting Qur’anic verses that do not have legal implications. Furthermore, unlike al-Ṣhāfi`ī who required Prophet traditions, as discussed earlier, al-Ṭabarī also accepted traditions from the Companions, the Successors, and celebrated scholars preceding him.

Fowden argues that al-Ṭabarī’s method of Qur’anic interpretation by incorporating traditions from earlier authorities follows Aristotelian commentary which had developed earlier in the exegetical traditions of Judaism and Christianity. Al-Ṭabarī perhaps acquired the idea during his early years of study in Rayy when he learned Ibn Isḥāq’s history, as Ibn Isḥāq, according to Fowden, was the first Muslim who introduced a new model of writing history by including earlier reports into his history. It would also not be surprising if al-Ṭabarī acquired

---

74 Ibid., p. 69.
the methods of the scholars in the places he visited. In addition to acquiring the knowledge of pre-Islamic traditions during his quest for knowledge, al-Ṭabarī’s acquaintance with pre-Islamic tradition would also be plausible from the growth of Islamic philosophy in the third/ninth century.\(^{75}\) Thus, during his second spell in Baghdad (244-252/858-866), al-Ṭabarī might have got to know al-Kindī (d. 252/866), a Muslim philosopher who attempted to introduce Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic ideas into Islamic philosophy.\(^{76}\) At least, the philosophical works of al-Kindī must have been in circulation and have become a subject of discussion. Whether or not al-Ṭabarī intentionally borrowed Aristotelian idea in his method of *tafsīr* is, however, not clear.\(^{77}\)

In his treatment of previous interpretations, al-Ṭabarī claims to set forth all agreements and disagreements among his predecessors and the reasons for their disputes, and then choose the one that he believed to be correct.\(^{78}\) As Rosenthal argues, al-Ṭabarī was a reconciliatory figure, who always attempted to adopt a compromise position. Al-Khuḍayrī states that al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* contains the most consensus of all works of *tafsīr*.\(^{79}\) When he found contradictory reports, he tried to reconcile them. If this was not possible, instead of judging an opinion to be wrong, al-Ṭabarī would suggest that different opinions might be acceptable and correct.\(^{80}\)

---

\(^{75}\) On the influence of Greek tradition on Islamic thought, see, for instance, Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbāsid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th centuries)* (London: Routledge, 1998).


\(^{77}\) Garth Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad*, p. 193.


The way al-Ṭabarī deals with previous opinions, furthermore, proves that he was not merely a compiler. Among those who accuse al-Ṭabarī of this is Brockelmann who even accused al-Ṭabarī of not being inventive. Elsewhere, Cooper says that al-Ṭabarī was “an encyclopaedist” and “a systematiser” of the opinions proposing by his predecessors. Al-Ṭabarī’s critics such as Brockelmann claim that al-Ṭabarī was a compiler in his tafsīr because they consider him only from the perspective of his presentation of traditions by earlier generations of authorities. However, as we shall see, in his tafsīr al-Ṭabarī sometimes actually offers his own opinion after quoting traditions and the opinions of his preceding exegetes, or vice versa. In other cases, al-Ṭabarī’s opinion appears in his attempt to reconcile reports that seem to be contradictory. When there is agreement, he uses the term “the exegetes agree (ajma’ a ahl al-ta’wil)”. When there is no agreement, al-Ṭabarī either offers his judgement or simply leaves readers to have their own conclusion. In addition, when analysing al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 4:12 and 4:176 about laws of inheritance, Powers argues that al-Ṭabarī’s view can be detected from his selection and arrangement of materials. Elsewhere, Birkeland states that al-Ṭabarī might just adduce or omit any traditions available in circulation.

---

to indicate his opinion. Therefore, his view does not necessarily appear in an explicit and clear statement. We will have more to say about this issue when analysing al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of a verse.

D. Al-Ṭabarī in his Intellectual Environment

Having dealt with al-Ṭabarī’s biography and tafsīr, this section will explore the context of al-Ṭabarī’s life and career. This includes the political, theological and interreligious circumstances of al-Ṭabarī’s time. As for the political circumstances, focus is primarily on how al-Ṭabarī approached political offices. This will reveal al-Ṭabarī’s independence in his religious thought. The theological circumstances reveal his position within contemporary religious discourse. The interreligious circumstances will help to arrive at possible explanations for al-Ṭabarī’s position towards non-Muslims.

During his life, from 224-310/839-923, al-Ṭabarī witnessed the rule of several caliphs. Little is known about al-Ṭabarī’s political encounter with the caliphal office. However, from Rosenthal, we learn that al-Ṭabarī was once called by the caliph al-Muktafi (r. 289-295/902-908) to hear his opinion about a planned endowment. Another occasion he was involved in political matters was when he was accused of leaning toward the Jahmiyya and reported to the office of the

---

86 The term Jahmiyya was ascribed to a group who adhered to Jahm b. Ṣafwān’s thought, although there is no record of any of the names of his followers. Jahm b. Ṣafwān, who was born in Kūfā, is considered the first Muslim theologian who proposed the idea of the created Qur‘ān before the doctrine was later adopted by the Mu’tazila. His doctrines also include, among other things, the rejection of anthropomorphism and punishment in the grave. Some Mu’tazilite scholars were accused of being Jahmites, especially by their Ḥanbalite adversaries, because of some similarities in their ideas. However, in Islamic theology, Jahm b. Ṣafwān was more well-known for his doctrine of
caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 295-320/908-932). He denied the accusation. The report, however, does not explain in what way al-Ṭabarī was suspected of inclining towards the Jahmiyya. Rosenthal argues that perhaps it was the Ḥanbalites who accused al-Ṭabarī of leaning toward the Jahmiyya and reported al-Ṭabarī to the Caliph, as an effect of their quarrel against him.87 We will return to this quarrel later.

In the context of his position towards the government, al-Ṭabarī was portrayed as someone detached from any politics. The story about his encounter with al-Muktafī continues by stating that the Caliph rewarded him with a gift after listening to his view on the subject. Al-Ṭabarī at first did not want to accept it, but after being advised that to refuse such a gift was inappropriate, he accepted it. Elsewhere, al-Ṭabarī was also reported to have refused three thousand dīnārs from Abū al-Hayjā’, the founder of the Ḥamdanid dynasty.88 Previously, al-Ṭabarī had refused to accept money from the wife of Ibn Khāqān, a wazīr whose son was al-Ṭabarī’s pupil during his second spell in Baghdad. The mother was pleased with the way he taught her son, but al-Ṭabarī refused the money because it exceeded the contract he had made with the wazīr.89 When the son, al-Khāqānī, was eventually appointed as wazīr in 299/912, he sent al-Ṭabarī money as a gift, only once again to meet al-Ṭabarī’s rejection. Just as he rejected monetary gifts from political

---

88 Ibid., pp. 37-38.
89 Ibid., p. 22. 

---

extreme determinism. There is no available work by Jahm or his followers; their ideas are known from later works such as al-Ash’arī’s Maqālāt. On Jahm b. Ṣafwān and the Jahmiyya, see, for instance, Cornelia Schock, “Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 128/745-6) and The ‘Jahmiyya’ and Dirār b. ‘Amr (d. 200/815)”, in Sabine Schmidtke (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 55-80. Whether or not the Jahmiyya was a sect is a point of discussion. See W. Montgomery Watt, The Formative Period of Islamic Thought, pp. 143-148. For a preliminary remark, see W. Montgomery Watt, ‘Djahm b. Ṣafwān’, The Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edition, Vol. II, p. 388.
figures, so al-Ṭabarī was also reluctant to accept any governmental position. Al-Khāqānī, the wazīr whom al-Ṭabarī taught in his youth, twice offered him two different positions in government but al-Ṭabarī rejected them.90

The `ulamā’-ruler relationship is among the topics discussed by Qasim Zaman. Rulers were usually portrayed by the `ulamā’ as politically deceitful and most likely having a lavish lifestyle. This kind of rulers would lead to the devout `ulamā’ advocating political estrangement from the state. However, some `ulamā’ chose to cooperate with the state with in the expectation that the rulers would take action against those who deviated from religion. They also hoped that the government could intervene in disagreements about religious rites and practices.91 The portrayal of al-Ṭabarī’s reluctance toward the government apparently was intended to describe the ideal figure of a scholar, who was pious and relatively independent from rulers. This is unlike, for instance, al-Jāḥiẓ who, as we shall see, wrote a treatise about the refutation of Christianity because the caliph al-Mutawakkil ordered him to do so. Thus, it can be assumed that al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr was a product of his own initiative, not an order from a political figure.

In addition to al-Ṭabarī’s efforts to maintain his independence, Rosenthal offers another explanation for al-Ṭabarī’s refusal to hold any governmental office. This was because he wanted to be fully involved in scholarly activities.92 By avoiding public service, not only was al-Ṭabarī free to express his opinion, but he could also spend most of his time teaching, researching and writing. His large

90 Ibid., p. 36.
number of written works proves that al-Ṭabarī’s reluctant to take up public office was to the benefit of his intellectual achievements.

Furthermore, al-Ṭabarī’s occupation with academic life resulted in him becoming a scholar whose expertise extended to several branches of knowledge. In the ninth century, the Islamic world witnessed a progressive specialization in knowledge. People were increasingly accustomed to celebrate scholars according to their specialized fields, such as history, linguistics, grammar, Qur’anic recitation, Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), Prophetic traditions (ḥadīth), Qur’anic exegesis (tafsūr) and theology (kalām). From the vast range of topics he discussed in his works, however, we learn that al-Ṭabarī had encyclopaedia knowledge. He apparently benefitted from the flourishing intellectual circumstances developing during al-Ṭabarī time, providing him opportunities to become a polymath.

Before the time of al-Ṭabarī, in Islamic law, four schools of legal doctrine – the Ḥanafiyya, Mālikiyya, Shāfi‘iyya and Ḥanbaliyya – had already been formulated and become the subject of study, research and disputes. Al-Ṭabarī was at first a follower of the Shafi‘i school of law. In addition to its dependence on the Qur‘ān, the Shāfi‘iyya stressed the use of sound ḥadīth as a source of Islamic law (sharī‘a) in addition to personal judgement (ra‘y) which took the form of analogy (qiyās) in deciding certain legal issues.

Al-Ṭabarī is reported to have eventually developed his own method of jurisprudence, which made up a school of law called the Jarīriyya.93 According to Hallaq, he deserved the rank of founder of a legal school outside the four major

---

93 Ibid., p. 64.
Other scholars included in Hallaq’s list are Ibrāhīm al-Muzanī (d. 263/877), Ibrāhīm b. Khālid Abū Thawr (d. 240/854), Muḥammad b. Iṣḥāq b. Khuzayma al-Nīsābūrī (d. 310/923), Muḥammad b. Naṣr al-Marwazī (d. 293/906), and Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. al-Mundhir al-Nīsābūrī (d. 318/930). Elsewhere, Melchert also considers al-Ṭabarī’s jurisprudence as being one of the Sunnī schools of law that are no longer extant, together with the Zāhirī school which followed Dāwūd b. ʿAlī (d. 270/884) with whom al-Ṭabarī used to study.

The Jarīriyya did not last long. There is insufficient information to explain why the Jarīriyya did not survive. Rosenthal argues that the Jarīriyya was not methodologically distinctive enough from the Shāfiʿīyya, particularly since both al-Shāfiʿī and al-Ṭabarī had similar views on the use of traditions in their legal decisions. Rosenthal furthermore indicates that the lack of social and political support also contributed to the disappearance of the school. However, it seems that this is not the case. Some biographers such as al-Samʿānī and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī record that a century after al-Ṭabarī’s death some of his followers still held the office of judge (qāḍī), such as Muʿāfa’ b. Zakariyya al-Nahrawānī (d. 390/1000) and Ibrāhīm b. Makhlaḏ (d. 410/1020). Muʿāfa’ al-Nahrawānī was a judge in Bāb al-Tāq, a part of Baghdad. He never saw al-Ṭabarī but became a defender of the school. Another prominent public figure who supported and

---

94 Wael B. Hallaq, Authority, Continuity and Change in Islamic Law (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 57-61. Hallaq, unfortunately, does not discuss why these schools, including the Jarīriyya, did not survive.
95 Christopher Melchert, The Formation of the Sunni Schools of Law, pp. 179-197.
96 Ibid., p. 182.
defended the Jarīriyya after al-Ṭabarī’s death was his pupil Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. Kāmil (d. 350/961) who served as a judge in Kūfa.

While Melchert acknowledges that there are no conclusive reasons as to why the Jarīriyya did not survive, he mentions some possibilities. First, there are no literary works commenting on al-Ṭabarī’s juridical writings. Second, al-Ṭabarī’s “independent and comprehensive” works were difficult to understand for ordinary students. Third, al-Ṭabarī was quite independent and was not connected to any of the earlier celebrated scholars of jurisprudence such as Abū Ḥanīfa, Mālik or al-Shāfiʿī.99

Another possible explanation that has not discussed regarding the demise of the Jarīriyya was al-Ṭabarī’s quarrel with the Ḥanbalites from whom he faced fierce opposition until his death. It is reported that his burial was carried out at night because the Ḥanbalites prohibited it during daytime. They also disallowed people to study with al-Ṭabarī at the end of his life by blockading his house.100 All of this might have prevented the spread of the Jarīriyya. The quarrel can also be seen from the perspective of the rivalry between the Jarīriyya and the Ḥanbalites, in which, as Melchert argues, the Ḥanbalites were struggling to receive recognition on a par with the Shāfiʿi school in particular and other contemporary schools in general.101 However, there is no information regarding the Ḥanbalites’ action against al-Ṭabarī and his school after his death.

---

99 Ibid., pp. 196-197.
100 Ibid., p. 192.
The Ḥanbalites’ opposition towards al-Ṭabarī as mentioned above is also subject to speculation. Melchert offers four possible causes of the quarrel between al-Ṭabarī and the Ḥanbalites. First, the Ḥanbalites were angry because al-Ṭabarī admired Ibn Ḥanbal as merely a traditionist, not a jurist. Although Melchert doubts this reason because the account on this only appears in later biographical works, however, it is clear that al-Ṭabarī does not refer to Ibn Ḥanbal’s opinion in his work on law, *Ikhtilāf al-Fuqahā‘*.102 Second, the Ḥanbalites disagreed with al-Ṭabarī on the interpretation of Q. 17:79. Al-Ṭabarī was of the opinion that it means the privilege of the Prophet to intercede. On the other hand, the Ḥanbalites understood the verse anthropomorphically by claiming that the Prophet will be sat next to God in His throne. Third, the Ḥanbalites accused al-Ṭabarī of being a follower of the Rafīda, that is, the Shī‘ites. However, this is a baseless accusation since al-Ṭabarī was reported as saying that whoever did not acknowledge Abū Bakr and ʿUmar as rightly-guided caliphs should be killed. Fourth, the Ḥanbalites accused al-Ṭabarī of making heresy for his recitation of some Qur’ānic verses. Yet, Melchert does not provide any further explanation concerning this accusation.103 Again, another possible reason of the Ḥanbalites’ opposition toward al-Ṭabarī that Melchert does


not mention is that the Ḥanbalites might consider al-Ṭabarī as a competitor to the establishment of the Ḥanbaliyya.

Even though the Jarīriyya as a school of law does not exist anymore, al-Ṭabarī’s method of combining traditions and personal opinion survives, as we shall see, in his *tafsīr*. Since the focus of this thesis is his interpretation of Qur’anic verses on theological aspects, we will see that al-Ṭabarī also makes use of the method that initially was familiar in the field of law. The combination of traditions and personal opinion is a middle way within the intellectual battle between the rationalist Mu’tazila and the literal-traditionalist Ḥanbaliyya in the understanding of theological Qur’anic verses.

In addition to Islamic law, al-Ṭabarī must also have been acquainted with theological discourse during his time. After enjoying the privilege of being the school of theology of the State as decreed by the caliph al-Ma’mūn (r. 197-218/813-833), the Mu’tazilī school was denounced by the caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 232-247/847-861). The prominent characteristic of this school was its great emphasis on the rational examination of theological issues. At the time of al-Ma’mūn, Mu’tazilism was strongly opposed by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, the eponymous founder of the Hanbaliyya, who founded his opinion predominantly on tradition. The Mu’tazili school of thought was, however, still very much alive during al-Ṭabarī’s time, and was promoted by scholars such as ‘Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr b. Bahr al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869), father and son Abū `Alī al-Jubbā’ī (d. 302/915) and Abū Hashīm al-

---

Jubbāʾī (d. 321/933) and Abū Ḥusayn al-Khayyāṭ (d. 289/902). Al-Ṭabarī’s thought, therefore, developed during the battle for supremacy between Muʿtazilite rationalism and Ḥanbalite traditionalism. Melchert argues that al-Ṭabarī was a compromise figure, neither was he a rationalist nor a traditionist. He combined both ways of thinking. This is why Melchert considers him a semi-rationalist thinker in theology.105

The early fourth/tenth century also saw the establishment of the Ashʿariyya school of theology, but there is no account on al-Ṭabarī’s influence on the emergence of the school. It was founded by Abū Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 323/935), who was a pupil of the prominent Muʿtazilite scholar al-Jubbāʾī. The Ashʿariyya combined the rationalism of the Muʿtazila and the traditionalism of the Ḥanbaliyya and formulated what is now acknowledged to be the orthodox position of Islam.106

Since this thesis focuses on al-Ṭabarī’s Qur’anic interpretation regarding the salvation of non-Muslims, it is of singular importance to discuss interreligious relations during al-Ṭabarī’s time. In the early history of the relationship between Muslims and others, there are records of two official dialogues between Muslims and Christians, which took place before the birth of al-Ṭabarī. The first dialogue was between the caliph al-Mahdī (r. 158-168/775-785) and Timothy the Patriarch (d. 208/823) and occurred in 165/782. This dealt primarily with the issues of the Trinity, Muḥammad’s prophecy and the distortion (taḥrīf) of scripture.107

---


topics emerged in the second state-sponsored dialogue which was between Muslim theologians and Theodore Abū Qurrā’ (d. 215/830)\(^{108}\) and initiated by the caliph al-Ma’mūn (r. 197-218/813-833). It dealt with the issues of circumcision, Jesus’ humanity and divinity, the comparison between Jesus and Adam, crucifixion, and free will and predestination.\(^{109}\) It is reported that even though Abū Qurrā’ was outnumbered by Muslim scholars in the discussion, al-Ma’mūn gave him the opportunity to speak freely about his faith and religious practices, as well as his criticism of Islam. The caliph also guaranteed his safety and that of his fellow Christians in general.\(^{110}\) These dialogues constitute an early model of mutual learning between Muslims and non-Muslims.\(^{111}\)

---


\(^{109}\) A. Mingana and R. Harris, ‘The Apology of Timothy’.


\(^{111}\) Hugh Godard, *A History of Muslim-Christian Relations*, p. 54.
The dialogues might not have had any direct influence in al-Ṭabarī’s intellectual life since they took place before he was born. However, he apparently knew that interreligious discourse occurred during his time. Rosenthal mentions that al-Ṭabarī had a close acquaintance with ‘Alī b. Rabban al-Ṭabarī (d. 246/860), understandably in the last years of the latter’s life, who was a Muslim convert from Christianity with expertise in the study of medicine. More importantly, he authored two books on the refutation of Christianity entitled *al-Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārā* (The Refutation of the Christians) and *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla* (The Book of Religion and Empire).\(^{112}\) Bearing in mind their friendship, al-Ṭabarī might have known and read the books during his early years in Baghdad. Another work about Christianity that al-Ṭabarī might have been aware of was written by the Mu’tazilī theologian ‘Abū Ḫālid ‘Amr b. Bahr al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869). He was ordered by the caliph al-Mutawakkil, who was possibly seeking justification for decreeing discriminative policies against non-Muslims, to write a treatise against Christianity subsequently entitled *Risāla fi Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārā* (Epistle on the Refutation of Christianity).\(^{113}\) Two other works bearing the same title were written by al-Ṭabarī’s contemporaries al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm al-Rassī (d. 246/860) and Abū Yusuf Ya’qūb b. Ishāq al-Kindī (d. 250/864).\(^{114}\)

\(^{112}\) See footnote no. 21 of this chapter. His *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla* has been translated by A. Mingana (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1922).


\(^{114}\) David Thomas, *Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 7-9. For more information on early works on Muslim-Christian dialogue, see N.A. Newman (ed.), *The
These written works reinforce the issues discussed in the dialogues sponsored by al-Mahdī and al-Ma’mūn. Sirry states that interreligious encounters between Muslims and Christians in the early centuries of Islam revolved around three major subjects: the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus and the distortion of scripture.\(^{115}\) As to be expected, in general Muslim polemicists sought to argue for the truth of Islam while showing the weaknesses of Christian doctrines. However, an additional issue was also raised. In his work *Risāla fi Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā*, al-Jāḥiẓ mentions how to deal with non-Muslims. He discusses verses 5:82-88\(^{116}\) which state that Christians are the nearest to Muslims due to, among other things, the presence of humble and righteous priests and monks. However, according to al-Jāḥiẓ, the verses were misinterpreted as a basis for behaving well towards Christians. Muslims should still be cautious of them.\(^{117}\) This polemical and cynical approach toward other religions became the general features of inter-religious dialogue in the time of al-Ṭabarī.

---


\(^{116}\) The verses read: “You will find the most vehement of mankind in hostility to those who believe (to be) the Jews and the idolaters. And you will find the nearest of them in affection to those who believe (to be) those who say: Lo! We are Christians. That is because there are among them priests and monks, and because they are not proud. When they listen to that which has been revealed unto the messenger, you see their eyes overflow with tears because of their recognition of the Truth. They say: Our Lord, we believe. Inscribe us as among the witnesses. How should we not believe in God and that which have come unto us of the truth? And (how should we not) hope that our Lord will bring us in along with righteous folk? God has rewarded them for that saying--Gardens underneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide for ever. That is the reward of the good.”

E. Conclusion

When writing his *tafsir*, al-Ṭabarī was a knowledgeable scholar whose expertise lay not only in Qur’anic exegesis, but especially in law, and also in the fields of history, tradition (ḥadīth), variant readings of the Qur’ān, linguistics and Islamic theology and philosophy. These branches of knowledge were accumulated in some twenty years during al-Ṭabarī’s journey in his quest for knowledge. As we shall see later, his expertise in law influences his approach in interpreting Qur’anic verses, even when he deals with theological issues in the Qur’ān which become the subject of this thesis.

Based on his intellectual journey and contemplation, al-Ṭabarī authored his work of *tafsir* that provides an understanding of the meaning of the Qur’ān. Two major features in his way of interpreting the Qur’ān are linguistic analysis and the use of traditions not only from the Prophet, but also from the Prophet’s Companions alongside opinions from al-Ṭabarī’s predecessors. He believed that these two methods were the most authoritative way of interpreting the Qur’ān.

Al-Ṭabarī wrote his *tafsir* in Baghdad in the end of third/ninth century. At this time, he had become a reputable scholar who was involved in the intellectual discourse of Baghdad. His *tafsir* was produced amidst rivalry between theological views, in particular between the Muʿtazila and the Ḥanbalīyya. In addition, Muslim interreligious discourse in al-Ṭabarī’s time was dominated by the effort of Muslim scholars to invalidate other religions, especially Christianity and Judaism, and to describe how Muslims should interact with them. Subsequently, we will see
whether the current intellectual discourse had any influence on the writing of al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr*. 
Verily, those who believe and those who are Jews, and Christians, and Sabaeans whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does righteously surely their reward is with their Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve.

A. Introduction

Taken literally, Q. 2:62 appears to grant non-Muslims rewards for performing righteous deeds. However, other verses in the Qur’ān appear to make accepting Islam a necessary condition for receiving rewards for good works. Verse 2:62 and the question as to whether virtuous non-Muslims will be rewarded for their good deeds apparently did not raise much controversy in the first centuries of Islam. The interreligious discourse at that time, as, for example, in the case of the dialogue between the caliph al-Mahdī (r. 158-169/775-785) and Timothy the Patriarch (d. 208/823) as well as some works discussed in the previous chapter, appeared to focus more on polemical Qur’ānic verses against Judaism and more often Christianity, arguing about the validity of Christianity and Judaism. As we shall see later, verse 2:62 also drew little attention from early Qur’ānic exegetes.

---

With the prevalence of the idea of interreligious harmony and tolerance in the second half of the twentieth century, however, Q. 2:62 has become a point of contestation between the exclusive and the pluralist camps of Muslims in their discussion of other religious believers. The debate centres on the question of whether, from an Islamic theological perspective, virtuous non-Muslims might receive rewards for their righteous deeds and in the end attain salvation, even if an uncorrupted message of Islam reaches them. Exclusionists such as Yasir Qadhi argue that verse 2:62 only applies to non-Muslims before Muḥammad’s prophethood. They restrict the scope of this verse to events at the time of its revelation. They also claim that the verse is abrogated by verse. 3:85, which states that whoever seeks a religion (dīn) other than Islam, his or her virtuous deeds will not be accepted. On the other hand, Muslim pluralists such as Farid Esack claim that verse 2:62 has general validity and offers the possibility that non-Muslims may attain salvation. Esack also rejects the idea that verse 2:62 has been abrogated. In accordance with this pluralist idea, Mahmoud Ayoub, basing his argument on this verse, concludes that the true faith and righteous deeds mentioned in the verse could

---

2 The issue of interreligious dialogue featured, for instance, in the Second Vatican Council in 1962-1965, which restructured the relationship of Catholicism to not only the Protestant and Orthodox Churches but also to other religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. See Gerald O’Collins, S.J., The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).


apply to any religion, and that the verse, furthermore, privileges no religion. He further argues that the Qurʾān asserts the universality of faith within the diversity of religions.⁶ Reza Shah-Kazemi, who proposes the universalism of Islam, also appears to be in favour of this idea.⁷

The dispute over the understanding of Q. 2:62 as described above centres on the issue of whether or not, in defining the meaning of the text, the occasion of revelation and the abrogation of the verse are to be considered more important than the literal text. These interpretive strategies are not properly addressed in the interpretation of the verse by al-Ṭabarī’s predecessors, however, al-Ṭabarī makes use of them in his elaboration of the meaning of the verse. In this chapter, therefore, I will examine al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of verse 2:62.⁸ In the first part of the chapter, I will analyse his interpretation of the verse, while in the second part, I will compare his opinion on the issue of belief (īmān) and good deeds (ʿamal ṣālih) to other verses dealing with the same issues.

---

⁸ McAuliffe has also discussed the verse in its relation to Christians. She surveys what Muslim exegetes from the classical to the modern era, including al-Ṭabarī, say about the salvation of Christians. As a survey, however, she treats al-Ṭabarī’s view as a part of the larger discussion of the issue of Christians in the Qurʾān. Consequently, she does not go into detail about al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation. See Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Qurʾanic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Another work similar to McAuliffe’s is that of Munʿim Sirry. Sirry, however, does not specifically discuss Q. 2:62, but he places the interpretation of the verse within a larger framework of Qurʾanic attitudes towards religious others. Neither does Sirry discuss al-Ṭabarī in particular; instead he limits his discussion to six modern exegetes representing six countries with large Muslim populations: al-Qāsimī (d. 1914/Syria), Riḍa (d. 1935/Egypt), Azad (d. 1958/India), Mughniyya (d. 1979/Lebanon), Ṭabāṭabāʿī (d. 1981/Iran) and Hamka (d. 1981/Indonesia). Therefore, al-Ṭabarī’s view on the verse is only mentioned in order to trace the development of tafsīr from the classical to the modern era. See Munʿim Sirry, Scriptural Polemics; The Qurʾān and Other Religions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
B. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 2:62

In order to understand al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of verse 2:62, I will divide it into four parts. In the first part, al-Ṭabarī considers the definition of the religious communities mentioned in the verse, namely “those who believe”, Jews, Christians and Sabaeans, all of whom were promised rewards and salvation in return for their faith and righteous deeds. In the second part, al-Ṭabarī discusses the phrase “whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does right surely their reward is with their Lord”. In the third part, al-Ṭabarī explains the meaning of the phrase “and there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve”. Finally, in the fourth and last part of his interpretation, al-Ṭabarī concludes his thoughts on the verse.

1. The First Part of al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of 2:62

The first part of this section considers al-Ṭabarī’s definition of the religious communities mentioned in Q. 2:62. The relevant phrase reads “[v]erily those who believe and those who are Jews, and Christians, and Sabaeans”. Al-Ṭabarī begins by defining the first group, which is “those who believe” (al-ladhīna āmanū). According to al-Ṭabarī, “those who believe” refers to people who confirm the legitimacy of Muḥammad as the Messenger of God and also the truth he brought from God. Thus, the meaning of faith for this group, in al-Ṭabarī’s opinion, is confirmation of Muḥammad’s standing and the veracity of his message.9 As we

---

shall see, the emphasis on Muḥammad is significant in determining al-Ṭabarī’s position on the issue of salvation for non-Muslims.

The second group mentioned in verse 2:62 is the Jews (ḥādū). Al-Ṭabarī explains that the Jews are called hādū (meaning “they repent”) because they said innā hudnā ilayk, which means “we have turned to You (God) in repentance”.10 The third group is the Christians (naṣārā). According to al-Ṭabarī, the Christians are called naṣārā because they give help (nuṣra) to one another. He also mentions the possibility that the Christians are called naṣārā because they lived in a land called Nāṣīra (Nazareth).11

Regarding the last group, namely the Sabaeans (ṣābiʿun), al-Ṭabarī describes them as people who take on a new religion that differs from their own. The Arabs use the word ṣābiʿ (the singular of ṣābiʿ) for anyone who leaves his or her former religion in order to practice another religion. Al-Ṭabarī explains that they are like people, for example, who apostacise from Islam for another religion.12

2. The Second Part of al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of 2:62

After defining those four religious communities, al-Ṭabarī continues with an interpretation of the clause “whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does righteously, surely their reward is with their God (man āmana bi-llāhi wa al-yawm al-ākhir wa ʿamila ṣāliḥan fā lahum ajruhum ʿinda rabbihim)”. With regard to this, al-Ṭabarī explains:

---

10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
Whoever believes in God and the Last Day means whoever accepts and avers the resurrection after death on the Day of Resurrection, and perform deeds of righteousness and obeys God. They will find their reward with their God. Their recompense awaits them with their God [meaning that] the reward for their deeds of righteousness awaits them with their God.\(^{13}\)

Referring to the verse, according to al-Ṭabarī, “those who believe”, Jews, Christians and Sabaeans will receive a reward from God under two conditions: that they have faith in God and the Last Day and that they perform good deeds. Having faith in the Last Day, according to al-Ṭabarī, means believing in the resurrection after death in the hereafter.\(^{14}\) The clause “whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does righteously, surely their reward is with their God”, thus, completes the phrase “[v]erily those who believe and those who are Jews, Christians and Sabaeans.”

Al-Ṭabarī then tackles the question of the meaning of “believes” (āmana) in the phrase “who believes in God and the Last Day” for each of the religious communities under consideration. When an anonymous person, presumably al-Ṭabarī’s pupil, asked him: “How [can] those who believe come to believe?”, he answered:

> The meaning [of āmana] with regard to “those who believe” is not the meaning you assume, [namely] of a transition from one religion to another, as when the Jew or the Christian changes to the [true] faith, although it has been said that those who are meant by this are those People of the Book who believed in Jesus and what he brought until they reached [the time of] Muḥammad and believed in him and attested him. Those who believed in Jesus and what he brought, when they reached [the time of] Muḥammad, were told: believe in Muḥammad and


\(^{14}\) Ibid.
what he brought. Yet, the meaning of the belief (īmān) of the believer here is his enduring in his faith and renouncing any change in it. As for the belief of the Jews, the Christians and the Sabaeans, it is [their] attesting [to the prophethood of] Muḥammad and what he brought. Therefore, whoever among them believes in Muḥammad and what he brought and the Last Day and does righteousness, and does not alter or change until he dies in that [faith], the reward for his deeds and his recompense awaits him with his God, as He has described.15

For “those who believe”, belief (īmān) here, according to al-Ṭabarī, connotes being steadfast in one’s faith. Al-Ṭabarī further states that ‘belief’ for “those who believe” does not mean that people leave their faith and convert to another in the way that Jews, Christians and Sabaeans might convert to the true īmān, which is understood as Islam. For members of these three religious communities, al-Ṭabarī argues, belief means confirming the prophethood of Muḥammad and believing in what he brought.16 Thus, in al-Ṭabarī’s opinion, Jews, Christians and Sabaeans must believe in Muḥammad and what he brought in addition to believing in the Last Day and performing righteous deeds if they wish their good works to be rewarded.17 This is the second time that al-Ṭabarī mentions having faith in Muḥammad and what he brought as a condition for receiving rewards for one’s righteous deeds. The verse itself, however, does not mention Muḥammad. In fact, it says “whoever believes in God and the Last Day”. At this point, al-Ṭabarī offers his own position and has not yet relied on any traditions, nor does he apply the cross-referential method to other verses when interpreting this phrase.

---

15 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
3. The Third Part of al-Ṭabarî’s Interpretation of 2:62

After explaining the rewards that the four communities will receive if they believe in God and the Last Day and perform righteous deeds, al-Ṭabarî continues by interpreting the phrase “there shall be no fear upon them, nor shall they grieve” (wa lā khawf `alayhim wa lā hum yaḥzanūn). In commenting on this part, al-Ṭabarî explains:

And no fear shall come upon them with regard to the terrors of the Resurrection they have come to, neither shall they grieve for this world and its life which they have left behind, when they witness the reward and enduring blessings which God has prepared for them with Him.18

The fear that those believers and the Jews, Christians and Sabaeans will not experience, according to al-Ṭabarî, is trepidation on the Day of Resurrection. Because of their belief and righteous deeds, al-Ṭabarî explains, these four religious communities will not be frightened. Instead they will be pleased to see their reward awaiting them with God. There is also no grief for them since they have witnessed the enduring blessings they shall attain in the hereafter.19

Al-Ṭabarî then mentions an opinion that the abovementioned phrase refers to the believers among the People of the Book who were alive at the time of Muḥammad’s prophethood.20 This statement is based on two traditions transmitted

---

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
on the authority of al-Suddī\(^{21}\) and Mujāhid\(^{22}\). According to al-Suddī, Q. 2:62 refers to Salmān al-Fārisī, a Christian monk from Jundishapur who later became a Muslim. The tradition deals with Salmān’s spiritual journey until his eventual meeting with Muḥammad.

In the meeting, Salmān told Muḥammad about his colleagues, monks who lived in churches. They were pious individuals who always prayed and fasted and even believed in the coming of Muḥammad as a prophet. Muḥammad responded that those monks would be inhabitants of Hell. Salmān was shocked to hear of their fates, and said that if they could live until they heard about Muḥammad’s prophethood, they would bear witness to Muḥammad and the truth he brought. It was on this occasion that verse 2:62 was revealed, guaranteeing that those monks would be rewarded for their faith and righteous deeds.

After finishing the tradition from al-Suddī above, al-Ṭabarī comments:

The belief of the Jews was that they held to the Torah and the tradition (sunna) of Moses until Jesus came. When Jesus came, those who held to the Torah and observed the tradition of Moses and did not abandon it and [did not] follow Jesus were doomed. [As for] the belief of the Christians, those of them who held to the Gospel and the prescriptions of Jesus were believers [whose faith] was accepted until Muḥammad came. And those of them who did not follow Muhammad and [did not] abandon the tradition of Jesus and the Gospel which they observed were doomed.\(^{23}\)

\(^{21}\) Ismā‘īl b. Ṭāhḥah b. ʿAbd al-Rahmān al-Suddī al-Kabīr (d. 127/745). Al-Suddī was a Kufan scholar whose expertise was in Qur’anic tafsīr. As a transmitter of tradition, al-Suddī’s credibility is dubious. See, for instance, The Encyclopaedia of Islam (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1979), 2nd Edition, Vol. IX, p. 762. The bulk of his traditions, however, appear in al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr.

\(^{22}\) Mujāhid b. Jabr al-Makki (d. 104/722). Mujāhid was a Qur’anic scholar from the period of the Successors (tābi`ūn). He is said to have studied with Ibn Ṭāhhal, the father of tafsīr, and with other Companions. Mujāhid’s opinion is frequently quoted by al-Ṭabarī in his tafsīr. See The Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd Edition, Vol. VII, p. 293.

It is apparently al-Ṭabarī’s position that Muḥammad’s dispensation and the Qur’ān superseded the tradition of Jesus and the Gospel, just as the tradition of Jesus and the Gospel had superseded the tradition of Moses and the Torah.

Al-Ṭabarī then proceeds to the second tradition, which narrates Salmān’s story in a shorter version. The tradition is narrated on the authority of Mujāhid, and suggests a different chain of transmission from that put forth by al-Suddī. The tradition starts directly with Salmān asking Muḥammad about his fellow Christian monks. According to the tradition, Muḥammad replied that they did not die in Islam. Feeling distressed, Salmān told Muḥammad about the monks’ devotion to God. Verse 2:62 was then revealed. Muḥammad told Salmān that the verse concerned his monk companions. He then concluded by saying that that whoever dies in the religion of Jesus and dies under the condition of ‘Islam’\(^\text{24}\) before hearing about Muḥammad, has died in a good state. But, Muḥammad said, whoever has heard about him and yet does not believe in him is doomed.\(^\text{25}\)

Unlike the case of al-Suddī, al-Ṭabarī gives no comment on the tradition from Mujāhid. Instead, he goes on to quote the third tradition, which is narrated from Ibn `Abbās.\(^\text{26}\) This tradition does not deal with the occasion of revelation, but rather concerns the abrogation of verse 2:62. According to Ibn `Abbās, after the verse was revealed, God revealed verse 3:85, which states that whoever desires any

\(^{24}\) There is a common belief in the Muslim community that all prophets before Muḥammad and their followers were Muslims, just as Muḥammad and his followers are Muslims.


\(^{26}\) ‘Abdallāh b. `Abbās (d. 68/687). Ibn `Abbās was the Prophet’s cousin and Companion. He is considered the father of Qur’anic tafsīr since he is believed to have built the foundation of Qur’anic commentary. See L. Veccia Veglieri, “`Abd Allāh b. al-`Abbās”, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Edition, Vol. I, pp. 40-41.
religion that is not Islam, his or her good deeds will not be accepted, and that on the
Last Day that person would not be among the saved. On this tradition, al-Ṭabarī
says:

This tradition shows that Ibn `Abbās was of the opinion that God
formerly promised Heaven in the hereafter to those Jews, Christians and
Sabaeans who achieved righteousness by virtue of their virtuous deeds,
but that He then abrogated this by His saying “whoever desires any
religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him.”

On this tradition, al-Ṭabarī is silent. He neither approves nor rejects Ibn `Abbās’s
opinion. He only adduces Ibn `Abbās’s tradition which argues for the abrogation of
Q. 2:62 by Q. 3:85. As we shall see later, this position actually correlates with al-
Ṭabarī’s thoughts on the concept of nāsikh (abrogating) and mansūkh (abrogated)
verses.

The presence of two traditions concerning the occasion of revelation of Q.
2:62 and another about the abrogation of the verse are perfect pieces of evidence
for Muslim exclusivists to claim that al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the verse supports
their idea that the verse deals with Jews, Christians and Sabaeans who lived before
Muḥammad’s prophethood. Yasir Qadhi, for instance, relies on the traditions about
Salmān and argues that what the Prophet says about the promise of rewards and
lack of fear and grievance in the hereafter only applies to Salmān’s colleagues along

---

with Jews, Christians and Sabaeans who believed in God and the Last Day before Muḥammad was commissioned.\textsuperscript{28}

Furthermore, even though al-Ṭabarī does not comment on Ibn `Abbās’s tradition on the abrogation of the verse, the exclusive camp also make use of the tradition to support the idea of Islamic supercession. For instance, in addition to his reference to the traditions about the occasion of revelation of the verse, Keller argues that just as Christians believe that God’s testament with Moses was abrogated by God’s new testament with Jesus, so the commission of Muḥammad has also superceded Jesus’ teachings.\textsuperscript{29} Elsewhere, McAuliffe argues that al-Ṭabarī disagrees with the abrogation of Q. 2:62 by Q. 3:85, even though al-Ṭabarī adduces a tradition from Ibn `Abbās stating that this is the case.\textsuperscript{30}

Both Qadhi and Keller, however, like other exclusivists do not consider two aspects of al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation: first, the validity of the traditions concerning the occasion of revelation; second, al-Ṭabarī’s view on the abrogation of the verse. We shall discuss this later when dealing with al-Ṭabarī’s hermeneutical principles. Likewise, McAuliffe considers al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation only as regards his disagreement with the abrogation of the verse. She does not deal with the whole interpretation, does not compare it with the interpretation of other relevant verses, and does not consider al-Ṭabarī’s contemporary context so as to conclude that al-Ṭabarī leaves open the possibility that virtuous non-Muslims may attain salvation.

\textsuperscript{28} Yasir Qadhi, ‘The Path of Allah or the Paths of Allah?, pp. 116-117.  
\textsuperscript{29} Nuh Ha Mim Keller, \textit{Sea without Shore}, pp. 338-349.  
4. The Fourth Part of al-Ṭabarî’s Interpretation of 2:62

Finally, in the fourth part of al-Ṭabarî’s interpretation of Q. 2:62 he concludes by giving his standpoint on the verse:

The interpretation of this verse is, therefore, according to what we have quoted from Mujāhid and al-Suddī: Indeed, those who believe from this community (umma) and those who are Jews, Christians and Sabaeans—those Jews, Christians and Sabaeans who believe in God and the Last Day, their reward awaits them with their Lord; and no fear shall some upon them, neither shall they grieve. [However], the first interpretation which we have given is the closest to the ostensible meaning of the revelation, because God has not specified the reward for righteous deeds together with faith for some of His creatures rather than others. And the statement (khabar) in His word “whoever believes in God and the Last Day” applies to everyone He mentioned at the beginning of the verse.31

According to the traditions from Mujāhid and al-Suddī, al-Ṭabarî states that the correct interpretation of the verse therefore is that those within the Muslim community along with those Jews, Christians and Sabaeans who believe in God and the Last Day, they will be rewarded by God and they will neither fear nor grieve. Al-Ṭabarî, however, then continues that his earlier interpretation is close to the textual meaning of the verse because, according to him, God does not restrict the reward for righteous deeds and faith to some of His creatures. Therefore, the statement (khabar) in the verse “whoever believes in God and the Last Day”, according to al-Ṭabarî, embraces members of all of the religious communities mentioned in the beginning of the verse, on the condition of believing (īmān) in Muḥammad and what he brought.32

31 Ibid., p. 257.
32 Ibid.
It is on this last paragraph of al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of verse 2:62 that the dispute occurs. While the more exclusive group rely on the occasion of the revelation and the abrogation of the verse presented by al-Ṭabarī to claim that al-Ṭabarī was in favour of there being no salvation for non-Muslims, the pluralist camp point to al-Ṭabarī’s pluralist view in the last phrase of his statement. Sirry, for instance, relies on this phrase below when he says that al-Ṭabarī appears to consider that non-Muslims can attain salvation because God’s divine justice will not discriminate against His creatures who have faith and do righteous deeds.33 Al-Ṭabarī’s statement that becomes Sirry’s argument says:

God has not specified the reward for righteous deeds together with faith for some of His creatures rather than others. And the statement (khabar) in His word “whoever believes in God and the Last Day” applies to everyone He mentioned at the beginning of the verse.

That is, the verse does not discriminate against any of the four communities mentioned in the beginning of the verse. However, referring to al-Ṭabarī’s early statement on the interpretation of the verse, it is clear that he states that Jews, Christians and Sabaeans will not be saved unless they attest to Muḥammad’s prophethood. Thus, his last statement is meant to include all those four religious communities, before and after Muḥammad, and should not be understood on the basis of its occasion of revelation where it only refers to Salmān’s Christian monk colleagues.

---

33 Munʿim Sirry, Scriptural Polemics, p. 59.
However, the statement which Sirri supplies as evidence for al-Ṭabarī’s pluralistic view is cut from al-Ṭabarī’s whole argument which is that Jews, Christians and Sabeans would be saved had they believed in Muḥammad and what he brought. As in the case of McAuliffe who relies only on al-Ṭabarī’s disagreement with the abrogation of the verse, Sirri also fails to take into account the inter-religious circumstances during al-Ṭabarī’s time, and he does not compare al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 2:62 to his interpretation of other relevant Qur’anic verses. The following will examine al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of other relevant Qur’anic verses so that we can determine al-Ṭabarī’s actual position on the fate of virtuous non-Muslims.

C. Al-Ṭabarī’s Thoughts on Belief (īmān) and Who Will be Rewarded for Righteous Deeds (ʿamal ṣāliḥ)

Having elaborated al-Ṭabarī’s exegesis of Q. 2:62, I will examine his explanations on the verse by comparing them to his interpretation on other relevant Qur’anic verses. By doing so, I aim to form a more comprehensive picture of al-Ṭabarī’s thought on the issue of the fate of virtuous non-Muslims. This step is also important in order to ascertain the consistency of al-Ṭabarī’s opinion regarding Q. 2:62 in relation to other relevant verses. As discussed earlier, two conditions on which religious communities receive rewards are belief in God and the performance of good deeds. Both topics will be assessed here.
1. Belief (īmān)

The first topic to be examined concerns the implication of the phrase “whoever believes in God” in Q. 2:62. In his interpretation of the verse, al-Ṭabarī explains that in order to be rewarded on the Last Day, Jews, Christians and Sabaeans must also believe in Muḥammad and what he brought, in addition to maintaining a belief in God. This belief (īmān) in Muḥammad and what he brought, in al-Ṭabarī’s view, must co-exist with belief in God. However, the following paragraphs show that al-Ṭabarī only asserts this in his interpretation of verses that mention other religious communities. When a verse talks about belief (īmān) in God without mentioning other religious communities, especially the People of the Book, al-Ṭabarī does not mention belief in Muḥammad and what he brought.

One verse that discusses other religious communities with regard to the topic of belief is Q. 98:6. This reads “Verily, those who disbelieve among the People of the Book and the idolaters, will abide in the fire of hell. They are the worst of created beings.” On this verse, al-Ṭabarī explains that those who disbelieve (kafarū) are people who deny belief in Muḥammad (as a prophet). In verse 7 of the same sūra, which reads “Verily, those who believe and do good works are the best created beings”, al-Ṭabarī makes it clear that those who believe (āmanū) are people who believe in Muḥammad (as a prophet).ål

Another example can be found in al-Ṭabarī’s commentary on Q. 3:110. The verse initially discusses the conditions for being the best community: “You are the best community that has been raised up for mankind. You enjoin right conduct

and forbid indecency and you believe in God.” The verse ends: “[A]nd if the People of the Book had believed it would have been better for them. Some of them are believers but most of them are transgressors.” According to al-Ṭabarī, the phrase “the People of the Book” refers to the observers of the Torah and the Gospel, namely Jews and Christians, who would do better to believe in Muḥammad as a prophet and what he brought from God. Regarding the end of the verse which says “some of them (the People of the Book) are believers, but most of them are transgressors”, al-Ṭabarī argues that the phrase “some of them are believers” refers to some of the People of the Book, either Jews or Christians who believe in Muḥammad as a prophet and what he brought from God and who follow the path of Muḥammad. Al-Ṭabarī mentions some of them by name: ʿAbdallāh b. Salām (d. 9/630), a prominent Medinan rabbi who converted to Islam, along with his brother, and Thaʿlaba b. Saʿīd and his brother.35

The stipulation of belief in Muḥammad as a prophet in al-Ṭabarī’s comments as stated above is in accord with his prioritizing of belief in the Qur’ān that was revealed to Muḥammad. This can be observed, for example, in his commentary of Q. 5:66. The verse reads: “[i]f they had observed the Torah and the Gospel and that which was revealed unto them from their Lord, they would surely have been nourished from above them and from beneath their feet.” According to al-Ṭabarī, Jews and Christians must perform what is in the Torah and the Gospel together with what God has revealed unto Muḥammad. The three scriptures, al-Ṭabarī explains, have similarities in their rules and provisions, particularly

regarding belief in all prophets and what God has revealed unto them. Consequently, according to al-Ṭabarī, Jews and Christians must also believe in Muḥammad and what God revealed to him, namely the *furqān* \(^{36}\) (the Qurʾān), and perform what the Qurʾān prescribes.\(^ {37}\)

The obligation to believe in and observe the Qurʾān along with the observance of the Torah and the Gospel is also adduced by al-Ṭabarī in his comment on Q. 5:68. The verse reads: “[s]ay: O People of the Book! You have naught (of guidance) till you observe the Torah and the Gospel and that which was revealed unto you from your Lord.” According to al-Ṭabarī, “that which was revealed unto you” refers here to the Qurʾān. Therefore, the People of the Book are to observe each of these scriptures, including the Qurʾān, because these scriptures all come from God and it is forbidden to believe only in one and reject the others. Accordingly, the People of the Book must also believe in Muḥammad because he is also a prophet from God. It is forbidden to differentiate among God’s prophets; whoever believes in some but rejects others, al-Ṭabarī states, disbelieves in all.\(^ {38}\)

The idea of belief in all of God’s prophets also appears in al-Ṭabarī’s comments on the last part of Q. 5:66, which reads: “among them (the People of the Book) are people who are moderate (*umma muqtaṣida*), but many of them are of evil conduct.” According to al-Ṭabarī, the *umma muqtaṣida* are, for instance, those Christians who believe that Jesus is God’s prophet and not His son. However, most of the People of the Book are of evil conduct which, according to al-Ṭabarī, refers

\(^ {36}\) The Qurʾān has various names including *al-furqān*, which means “the criterion” to distinguish between good and evil.


\(^ {38}\) Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 200.
to Christians who do not believe in God, deny Muḥammad as God’s prophet and
do not follow his way. In the case of Jews, those who are of evil conduct are Jews
who deny Jesus and Muḥammad as God’s prophets and do not follow Jesus’ and
Muḥammad’s ways.39

In contrast to the above, when discussing verses about īmān (belief) in God
that do not mention other religious communities, especially the People of the Book,
al-Ṭabarī does not mention belief in Muḥammad and what he brought. An example
of this is Q. 103:3. This verse, and indeed the whole sūra 103, do not mention other
religious communities. The entire sūra reads:

[1] By the declining day
[2] Verily! Mankind is in a state of loss
[3] Save those who believe and do good works, and exhort one another
to truth and exhort one another to endurance.

Verse 2 says that all mankind are in a state of loss. Verse 3 then discusses
the conditions of those who will not be in a state of loss, which are those who
believe (āmanū), do righteous deeds, and exhort one another to truth and endurance.
In commenting on this verse, al-Ṭabarī does not mention that belief (īmān) means
belief in Muḥammad and what he brought from God.40 This is probably because al-
Ṭabarī did not need to specify the conditions under which one would not be in a
state of loss since no comparison is made between different faiths or religious
communities.

39 Ibid., Vol. VI, pp. 197-198. These are some examples of al-Ṭabarī’s opinion on the
superiority of Muḥammad and his way over previous revelations. The same comment also appears,
40 Ibid., Vol. XXX, pp. 187-188.
In the verses that do mention other faiths or religious communities, however, al-Ṭabarī firmly insists on the necessity of belief in Muḥammad and what he brought. In short, throughout al-Ṭabarī’s commentary, believing in God and His prophet Muḥammad is only mentioned when a verse refers to other religious communities.

2. Who will Receive Rewards for Righteous Deeds (ʿamal ṣāliḥ)?

After elaborating al-Ṭabarī’s view on belief (īmān) by referring to verses related to Q. 2:62, the second topic to be discussed regarding al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 2:62 is that of the righteous deeds performed by non-Muslims. This is the second condition that determines a person’s state in the hereafter. In his commentary on Q. 2:62, al-Ṭabarī states that the rewarding of virtuous deeds is conditional upon belief in God combined with belief in Muḥammad and in the Last Day. This opinion is in accord with al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of, for example, Q. 3:115, which reads: “[A]nd whatever good they do, they will not be denied (their reward) thereof.” This verse builds upon the previous verses 113 and 114, which read:

[113] They are not all alike. Of the People of the Book there is a staunch community who recite the revelations of God in the night season, falling prostrate (before Him).
[114] They believe in God and the Last Day, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency, and vie one with another in good works. They are of the righteous.

These verses speak about those People of the Book who always recite God’s verses, believe in God and the Last Day, enjoin good and forbid evil, and compete in good
works such that they are categorized as righteous people. Again, in assessing Q. 3:114, al-Ṭabarī specifies that belief in God must be accompanied by belief in Muḥammad as a prophet. In al-Ṭabarī’s view, therefore, for non-Muslims to have their good deeds rewarded as in verse 115 above, they are required to believe in both God and Muḥammad as well as in the Last Day.

Other verses that discuss good deeds performed by non-Muslims include Q. 4: 122-124. In commenting upon these verses, al-Ṭabarī again clearly confirms his position regarding the necessity of believing both in God and Muḥammad. The verses read:

[122] But as for those who believe and do good works, We shall bring them into gardens underneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide for ever. It is a promise from God in truth; and who can be more truthful than God in utterance?
[123] It will not be in accordance with your desires, nor the desires of the People of the Book. He who does wrong will have the recompense thereof, and will not find against God any protecting friend or helper.
[124] And whoso does good deeds, whether male or female, and he (or she) is a believer, such will enter paradise and they will not be wronged the dint in a date-stone.

Verse 122 actually states in general that those who have faith and do good works will be placed in heaven. However, since the subsequent verses refer to the People of the Book, “those who believe” in verse 122, according to al-Ṭabarī, means “those who believe in God, Muḥammad, and Muḥammad’s prophethood”. Regarding “he who does wrong” in verse 123, al-Ṭabarī is of the opinion that the verse applies

---

41 Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 35.
to general audiences including both the believer (mu’min) and the unbeliever (kāfir). He clearly states that he favours the general meaning of the text, unless there is proof that it is an exception or in the case of any restricting tradition from the Prophet.  

In this verse, however, al-Ṭabarī argues that the believers’ sins will be forgiven when they are given difficulties in life such as illness and grief. Furthermore, in verse 124 which says in general that whoever performs good deeds, whether man or woman, will enter Paradise if he or she is a believer (mu’min), al-Ṭabarī confirms that mu’min here refers to those who believe in God and His prophet Muḥammad and what he brought. Therefore, God promises to reward every single good deed as long as those good deeds are accompanied with belief (īmān) in God and Muḥammad. Thus, good deeds are not accepted except with belief in both God and Muḥammad.

Elsewhere, rewards for good and bad deeds without reference to other religious communities are explained by al-Ṭabarī simply by using the terms “believer” (mu’min) and “unbeliever” (kāfir). An example of this appears in Q. 99:7-8. The verses read: “[a]nd whoever does good an atom’s weight will see it then. And whoever does ill an atom’s weight will see it then.” In his commentary on these verses, al-Ṭabarī does not discuss the condition of the reward for good and bad deeds; he explains only that the meaning for the believer is that he or she will be rewarded in this world and in the hereafter for their virtuous deeds. As for the unbeliever, he or she will receive goodness in the world as a reward for the

---

43 Ibid., Vol. V, pp. 188.
44 Ibid., Vol. V, pp. 188-190.
performance of good deeds, but will not receive any goodness in the hereafter. Regarding a believer’s bad deeds, the person will suffer repercussions in the world, but will be forgiven in the hereafter; whereas for the unbeliever, bad deeds will be punished in the hereafter. Here, al-Ṭabarī does not define “believer” or “unbeliever”. Therefore, good and bad deeds do not relate to any specific religious community.

In the above, al-Ṭabarī clearly confirms his position that believing in Muḥammad and what he brought is a necessary condition for receiving reward for good deeds. However, he uses different methods to support his argument. With regard to belief in God and Muḥammad and what he brought, al-Ṭabarī first states his opinion, then underpins it with several traditions. This is the case in his interpretation of verses 2:62, 3:110, 3:113, 3:199, 5:65-66, and 5:68. Elsewhere, on another topic that does not relate directly to belief in God and Muḥammad, al-Ṭabarī cites various traditions and then chooses what he considers to be the most valid.

D. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation in Context

Al-Ṭabarī’s emphasis on the importance of belief to good deeds and non-Muslims reflects the early discourse on salvation for Muslims in Islamic theology. The discussion primarily focussed on the relationship between works (`amal) to belief. It initially emerged when `Uthmān b. Affān, the third caliph, was murdered, raising the question of the status of Muslims who committed sins. On one hand, some people, such as the Kharijites, argued that Muslims who committed sins are

---

46 Ibid., Vol. XXX, p. 173.
unbelievers. On the other hand, others, such as the Murji’ites, still viewed them as believers. Yet, others, such as the Mu’tazilites, viewed sinners as occupying in an intermediate state such that they were neither believers nor unbelievers but rather fāsiq (wicked).\footnote{W. Montgomery Watt, The Formative Period of Islamic Thought (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), pp. 141-142. See also Abū Ja’far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, al-Tabṣīr fī Ma`ālim al-Dīn, `Alī b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. ʿAlī al-Sibl (Riyadh: Dār al-ʿĀṣima, 1996), pp. 177-180.}

In a later development, the question of salvation turned to whether faith alone that can save people from Hell or whether it must be accompanied by good deeds. Based on a tradition such as “no one shall enter Hell who has an atom of faith in his heart”,\footnote{Abū al-Ḥusayn Muslim b. Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī al-Naysābūrī, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (Riyadh: Dār Ṭayyiba, 2006), p. 55.} some argued that good deeds are only the perfection of faith and not necessarily a condition for salvation. Sinners might experience tortures in Hell for a while or might alternatively be totally pardoned for their sins. Others argued that the performance of good deeds is necessary for salvation, and that those who committed sins might not be saved.\footnote{W. Montgomery Watt, The Formative Period of Islamic Thought, p. 141.}

Nevertheless, Muslim theologians appeared to take for granted that non-Muslims would not receive rewards for their good deeds, regardless of the literal meaning of Q. 2:62 which indicates otherwise. There is no record of any dispute on the interpretation of Q. 2:62. Neither was there any theological debate on the fate of righteous non-Muslims in early Islamic theology. Thus, a statement such as “obedience does no benefit with disbelief” (lā yanfāʿu maʿa al-kufr ṭāʿa) became prominent.\footnote{Abū al-Fatḥ Muḥammad b. `Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, al-Milal wa al-Nihal (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1992), Vol. I, p. 42.}
Therefore, it would be historically anachronistic for al-Ṭabarī to be in
favour of a possible salvation for non-Muslims due to their virtuous deeds. Early
epistles on other religions and inter-religious dialogue did not address the issue of
the fate of virtuous non-Muslims. Thus, in the dialogue between Muslim
theologians and a Christian held by the caliph al-Ma’mūn (r. 197-218/813-833) the
issue of the fate of virtuous Christians does not appear.\footnote{Christian theologians were represented by Theodore Abū Qurrah (d. 215/830), an influential
authored books defending Christianity, such as Abū Rā’i’ta al-Taḵrīrī (d. 220/835) and `Ammar al-

From the Muslim viewpoint, there were some works which refuted Christianity, for example, the
(d. 255/869). 'Alī b. Rabbān al-Ṭabarī (d. 241/855), a Muslim convert from
Christianity, also wrote a polemical book entitled \textit{Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla}.\footnote{There is an
English translation provided by Joshua Finkel, \textit{Journal of the American
Oriental Society}, Vol. 47 (1927), pp. 311-334. The abridged and annotated version appears in Arabic
under the title al-Mukhtār fī al-Radd `alā al-Naṣārā: Ma‘a Dirāsa Taḥfīlīyya Taqwīmiyya; Taḥqīq
wa Dirāsa Muḥammad `Abdallāh al-Sharqāwī (Cairo: Dār al-Sahwah, 1984).}

Other early works on Christianity by Muslims include those by al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm
al-Rassī (d. 246/860), Abū `Īsā al-Warrāq (d. 250/864) and Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī (d.
256/870).\footnote{The book was translated by A. Mingana, \textit{Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla} (Manchester:
Manchester University Press, 1922).} However, while it is possible that al-Ṭabarī knew these works, none of
them address the issue of the fate of virtuous non-Muslims. The topics discussed
focussed more on theological issues, extending from such as the concept of the
Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, the distortion of the scriptures, circumcision, comparisons between Adam and Jesus, and to some extent how Muslims should interact with Jews and Christians.\textsuperscript{55} Considering this inter-religious situation at his time, it is unlikely that al-Ṭabarī would state that Q. 2:62 indicates that non-Muslims will be saved.

Most exegetes before al-Ṭabarī were not concerned to discuss the verse 2:62. They focussed more on dealing with its vocabulary, in particular in defining who are Jews, Christians and Sabaeans. Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 104/722), for instance, does not interpret the verse in his \textit{tafsīr}. He simply explains the definition of the word ‘Sabaeans’.\textsuperscript{56} Likewise, Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778) is merely concerned with defining the term ‘Sabaeans’.\textsuperscript{57} Elsewhere, the ninth century exegete Abū ’Ubayda (d. 213/828) only explains the meanings of the term \textit{hādū} (Jews) and Sabaeans.\textsuperscript{58} His contemporary, al-Farrā (d. 207/822), an early grammarian exegete, even passes over verse 2:62 after his explanation of verse 2:61 and proceeds to verse 2:63.\textsuperscript{59} A longer explanation comes from Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) in his \textit{tafsīr}. He explains that Jews, Christians and Sabaeans who lived before Muḥammad and believed in God and the Last Day and performed good deeds will enter Heaven.


(fa lahū al-janna). However, according to Muqātil, they have to believe in Muḥammad after his commission. Otherwise, they will be doomed.\(^{60}\)

Al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr offers a more elaborate and thorough explanation on the issue than that of Muqātil and he employs interpretive strategies such as the occasion of revelation and the abrogation of the verse. Al-Ṭabarī concludes that the verse does not only address Salmān’s Christian monk colleagues as the occasion of revelation reveals, but also refers to Jews, Christians and Sabaeans who lived either before or after the commission of Muḥammad as long as they believe in God and Muḥammad as His messenger and the Last Day and that they perform righteous deeds.

E. Conclusion

The elaboration of his exegesis on Q. 2:62 indicates al-Ṭabarī’s position on the salvation of non-Muslims, maintaining the idea that salvation belongs to those who confirm Muḥammad’s prophethood and believe in what he brought. Although the verse does not mention belief in Muḥammad as a requirement, al-Ṭabarī was of the opinion that the condition of belief (īmān) in God should be understood to include belief in Muḥammad as well. Al-Ṭabarī’s opinion about the co-existence of belief in God and Muḥammad is also confirmed by his interpretation of other verses related to belief and good deeds (ʿamal ṣāliḥ).

In proposing that virtuous non-Muslims will not receive rewards for their righteous deeds and thus will not be saved, al-Ṭabarī based his argument primarily on traditions describing the occasion of the revelation of the verse rather than on its literal meaning. Had al-Ṭabarī relied only on the literal meaning of Q. 2:62, he might have acknowledged the possibility of virtuous non-Muslims attaining salvation since the text does not require belief in Muḥammad’s prophethood. Together with al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of other relevant Qur’anic verses and given the interreligious circumstances of his time, it is historically anachronistic and methodologically inaccurate to say that al-Ṭabarī held a pluralist view towards religious others, in particular in the issue of the salvation of non-Muslims. Al-Ṭabarī’s opinion on the topic was the same as held by Muslim contemporaries.
CHAPTER FOUR

Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Qur’anic Verses on the Eternity of Hell with Special Reference to Q. 6:128, 11:107 and 78:23

A. Introduction

In his interpretation of Q. 2:62, as previously discussed, al-Ṭabarī adduces traditions, especially on the occasion of the verse, to support his belief, which he shared with most Muslim scholars, that virtuous non-Muslims will not receive rewards for their good deeds regardless of the literal meaning of the verse, which appears to leave this open as a possibility. Al-Ṭabarī made use of traditions to interpret Qur’anic verses when the literal meaning of a verse seems ambiguous and contradicts a belief that Muslims in general hold. Without having rewards, non-Muslims, in al-Ṭabarī’s argument, understandably will not enter Heaven, instead, they will dwell in Hell. The question under consideration in this chapter is whether or not Hell is eternal, and whether or not its inhabitants will dwell therein eternally. If Hell is not eternal, there will be a possibility for non-Muslims, virtuous and non-virtuous, to be saved.

While Muslims hold a consensus that Heaven is everlasting, it is not the case with Hell.¹ Discourse about the possible finite nature of Hell and its torment

started in the first flowering of Islamic theology. Among the groups involved in the early discussions were the Khārijites, who regarded grave sinners as unbelievers (kāfirūn) who would abide eternally in Hell, and the Murji’ites, who claimed that grave sinners were still believers who would, in certain circumstances, eventually enter Heaven. These theological standpoints represented the first arguments regarding the eternity of Hell.

The discussion went further as Islamic theology developed in the second and third centuries Hijri, as, for instance, was recorded by al-Ṭabarī particularly in the interpretation of verses 6:128, 11:107 and 78:23. In his interpretation of these verses, al-Ṭabarī mentions different opinions offered by the earlier generations about the eternity of Hell. Literally, those verses leave open the possibility of a limited duration of imprisonment in Hell either because of God’s will or the finite nature of Hell. In verse 6:128, God says to the jinn and their ensnared humans that

---


3 The Khawārij were an early group of Muslims, which started as political revolt against the fourth caliph ‘Ālī’s decision to accept arbitration proposed by Mu‘āwiya, who rebelled against ‘Ālī to demand justice for the murder of the third caliph ‘Uthmān. The Khawārij eventually became a theological sect. See G. Levi Della Vida, ‘Kharidjites’, The Encyclopaedia of Islam (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1979), 2nd edition, Vol. IV, pp. 1074-1077. See also W. Montgomery Watt, The Formative Period of Islamic Thought, pp. 9-37.

4 Abū al-Ḥasan Ṭabarī. Ismā‘īl al-Ash’arī, Maqālāt al-Islamiyyīn wa Ikhtilāf al-Muṣallīn (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Aṣriyya, 1990), Vol. 1, p. 168. Al-Ash’arī mentions at least one sect of the Kharijītes, the Najdiyya, do not say this. However, Watt argues that some different ideas among the Kharijītes, including the one regarding grave sinners, were not based on theological reasoning. These differences, according to Watt, were mainly intended to compromise with the ideology of their contemporary Umayyad rulers so that they were safe from political oppression. See W. Montgomery Watt, The Formative Period of Islamic Thought, pp. 18-19 and 29-30.


“Hell is your home. Abide therein for ever, unless God wills it otherwise.” Verse 11:107 reads that those “who will be wretched (on that day) they will be in Hell… abiding there so long as the heavens and the earth endure save for that which your Lord wills.” Both verses suggest that through God’s will an individual’s dwelling time in Hell might be shortened. Meanwhile, verse 78:23 implies that dwelling in Hell lasts for a limited time, saying that “Hell (is)…a home for the rebellious…they will abide therein for ages” (78:21-23).

Al-Ṭabarī devotes great attention to these three verses Q. 6:128, 11:107 and 78:23. To acquire a general understanding of his method, this chapter will begin by discussing al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the ambiguous three verses introduced above. After elaborating al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation, I will compare them with his understanding of the vast majority of Qur’anic verses relating to the description of eternal dwelling of the inhabitants of Hell. This section will include al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of verses containing the word *khuld* (eternal) and its variants, mostly in the forms of *khālidīn fīhā* or *hum fīhā khālidūn* both of which have the meaning “they shall abide therein”. Finally, I will situate al-Ṭabarī’s view within the context of discourse on the issue during his time.

B. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Ambiguous Verses on the Eternity of Hell

There are three verses in the Qur’ān which I will focus on in this section: Q. 6:128, 11:107, and 78:23. As stated earlier, the first two verses indicate that through God’s will the inhabitants of Hell might be exempted from dwelling eternally in it. Meanwhile, the third verse states that dwelling in Hell is only for ages, not forever. Al-Ṭabarī provides a suitably long explanation when dealing with
these three verses by elaborating previous opinions, adducing a number of traditions, giving his judgement on those traditions and, finally, offering his own opinion.

1. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 6:128

The first verse in the Qur’ān indicating that the inhabitants of Hell might be removed from there appears in Q. 6:128. In its entirety, the verse reads:

And on the day when He will gather them together, [He will say:] “O ye assembly of the jinn! Many of humankind have you ensnared!” And those of the humans who were close to them will say: “O our Lord! We did enjoy one another’s fellowship; but we have reached the end of our term - the term which You have laid down for us.” [But] He will say: “Hell will be your dwelling-place, to dwell therein, unless God wills it otherwise. Verily, your Lord is wise, all-knowing.”

Part of the verse contains a premise: “He (God) will say: “Hell will be your dwelling-place, to dwell therein, unless God wills it otherwise.” The statement is directed at humans whom the jinn have seduced and misled. The indication that the Hell might cease is found in the phrase “to dwell therein unless God wills it otherwise (khālidīn fīhā illā mā shā’a allāh)”. If God willing, He is able to remove anyone from Hell.

At the beginning of his interpretation of this verse, al-Ṭabarī simply explains that khālidīn fīhā means “to abide therein (lābithīn fīhā)”. He interestingly does not take the meaning of khālidīn fīhā as “dwelling therein forever”. He was

---

aware that the triliteral Arabic root \textit{kh-l-d} does not necessarily mean forever. It also has the meaning “to dwell”.

Afterwards, in commenting on the exception “unless God wills it otherwise (\textit{illā mā shā’a allāh})”, al-Ṭabarī appears to be arguing that there is a possibility that humans will stay in Hell for a certain period before being removed from it. The period they might dwell in Hell is approximately similar to the period between their resurrection from the grave until the time when they enter Hell.\footnote{Ibid.} However, al-Ṭabarī does not provide any supporting argumentation for this estimated duration from either the Qur’ān or tradition, nor does he provide any linguistic explanation.

At the end of his comment on Q. 6:128, however, al-Ṭabarī quotes a tradition from Ibn `Abbās regarding the phrase “unless God wills it otherwise”. In the tradition, Ibn`Abbās states, “This verse is an indication that it is inappropriate for anyone to judge God’s creation [whether or not] He will place them in Heaven or Hell.”\footnote{Ibid.} Based on this tradition, al-Ṭabarī says that Ibn `Abbās understands that God’s will will determine the amount of torment for the inhabitants of Hell.\footnote{Ibid.} The adducing of a tradition from Ibn `Abbās, however, closes the discussion on the duration of Hell; al-Ṭabarī avoids further discussion on the duration of the inhabitants’ dwelling in Hell. Rather, he introduces a new theological perspective: God’s sovereignty and will in determining whether He will place humans in Heaven or Hell and the amount of punishment for the inhabitants of Hell.

\footnote{Ibid.}
2. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 11:107

Al-Ṭabarī provides a more thorough explanation of the possibility of the cessation of Hell in his interpretation of Q. 11:107. Verse 106 of this sūra states that wretched people will dwell in Hell. However, according to verse 107, their eternity in Hell depends on God’s will. Q. 11:107 reads:

Abiding there so long as the heavens and the earth endure unless your Lord wills it otherwise. Verily, your Lord is Doer of what He wills.

In my discussion of al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 11:107, the verse will be divided into two parts. The first part is al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of “abiding there so long as the heavens and the earth endure (khālidīn fīhā mā dāmat al-samāwāt wa al-ard)” The second part of the verse to be discussed is the phrase “unless your Lord wills it otherwise (illā mā shā’a rabbuk)”.

According to al-Ṭabarī, the phrase khālidīn fīhā means “to abide therein (lābithīn fīhā)”. This meaning is consistent with his explanation of the same phrase in verse 6:128, in which al-Ṭabarī does not interpret the phrase as “forever”. However, the phrase “as long as heavens and earth endure (mā dāmat al-samāwāt wa al-ard)”, according to al-Ṭabarī, is an idiom that the Arabs use to connote eternity. Also, al-Ṭabarī provides a tradition narrated from Ibn Zayd\textsuperscript{11} explaining that the use of the idiom is to describe permanence. Therefore, the first part of the

verse, al-Ṭabarī concludes, indicates that the inhabitants of Hell will abide therein eternally.\textsuperscript{12}

When faced with the phrase “unless your Lord wills it otherwise (illā mā shā’a rabbuk)”, al-Ṭabarī presents four opinions before proposing his own. The first opinion is that this exception applies to Muslims (ahl al-tawḥīd)\textsuperscript{13} whom God will remove from Hell should He so will it. The second opinion agrees that the exception applies to Muslims (ahl al-tawḥīd), but it gives a slightly different explanation. The third opinion is that the exception applies to all inhabitants of Hell. The fourth opinion is that the phrase “unless your Lord wills it otherwise” applies only to the inhabitants of Heaven and not to the inhabitants of Hell. These four opinions, in fact, represent the discourse on the topic of the eternity of Hell at the time of al-Ṭabarī, which was based on the traditions that al-Ṭabarī could find.

The first opinion that the exception in Q. 11: 107 applies to Muslims (ahl al-tawḥīd) was apparently the view held by the majority of Muslims at that time. Al-Ṭabarī adduces six traditions which support this first opinion. The term ahl al-tawḥīd that al-Ṭabarī uses to refer to the group that may receive the exception comes only from two traditions. There is no explanation what the term ahl al-tawḥīd refers to. As we shall see later, however, it might be meant to distinguish Muslims from those who associate God with others and polytheists (ahl al-shirk). Of the six, three

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi` al-Bayān, Vol. XII, p. 70.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Gimaret explains that ahl al-tawḥīd was a common term used to define “the totality of Muslims”. However, early Mu`tazilites called themselves ahl al-tawḥīd wa al-`adl, referring to one of their core doctrines. See D. Gimaret, “Tawḥīd”, The Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition, Vol. X, p. 389. Al-Ṭabarī obviously does not use the term ahl al-tawḥīd with reference to the Mu`tazilites. Indeed, he mentions this term to refer to those who “confess God’s oneness, witness Muḥammad (as His prophet), accept Islamic shari`a, and believe in (angels) Gabriel and Michael.” See Abū Ja’far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, al-Tabṣīr fī Ma`ālim al-Dīn, annotated by `Alī b. `Abd al-`Azīz b. `Alī al-Sibl (Riyadh: Dar al-`Āṣima, 1996), p. 179.
\end{itemize}
traditions are narrated from Qatāda b. Di`āma’ (d. 117/735). In the first tradition, Qatāda initially declares that only God knows the exception. However, Qatāda heard that people will be burnt in Hell because of their sins, and then they eventually will be brought into Heaven. The second tradition from Qatāda replicates the first tradition literally, adding that those who are burnt in Hell will be brought into Heaven as a result of God’s mercy. In the third tradition, Qatāda narrates from Anas b. Mālik (d. 90/709), who is reported to have heard Prophet Muḥammad say that some people will exit from Hell. However, al-Ṭabarī does not explain why he concludes that these three traditions from Qatāda concern the ahl al-tawḥīd, since they do not explicitly mention this group. The fourth tradition is from Abū Sanān, who says that the exception in the phrase illā ma shā’a rabbuk applies to ahl al-tawḥīd. The fifth tradition is from al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (d. 97/716), who stated that the people to whom the exception applies will exit Hell and enter Heaven. The sixth tradition is narrated from Khālid b. Mi`dān (d. 95/714), who also regarded the exception as applying to the ahl al-tawḥīd.

The second opinion agrees that the exception applies to the ahl al-tawḥīd. However, supporters of the second opinion differ in that they see the exception in a different light. The phrase “unless your Lord wills it otherwise”, according to this

---

16 His full name is al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim al-Hilālī Abū al-Qāsim, also known as Abū Muḥammad al-Khurāsānī. He belonged to the generation of the Successors and was a legal scholar (faqīh) in Shām (Greater Syria). Ibid., Vol. 4, pp. 453-454.
view, means unless God intends to pass over those Muslims who are wretched and does not plunge them into Hell. Thus, the exception concerns whether He will plunge Muslims into Hell, and not whether they will abide therein eternally. This second opinion then understands the verse to mean “as for those who will be wretched (on that day) they will be in Hell unless your Lord wills it otherwise”. When reading the verse, they refrain from reading the phrase “dwelling therein (khālidīn fīhā)” that lies between “(they) will be in Hell (fa fī al-nār)” and “unless your Lord wills it otherwise (illā mā shā’a rabbuk)”.19 This view is based on a tradition narrated from Abū Sa`īd al-Khudrī (d. 74/693) and an anonymous Companion of the Prophet.

The third opinion is that the exception applies to all inhabitants of Hell. In this regard, al-Ṭabarī first adduces a tradition narrated from Ibn `Abbās in which he said that the inhabitants of Hell will neither die nor exit from it as long as the heavens and the earth endure unless the Lord should will it otherwise. The exception in the phrase “unless the Lord should will it otherwise”, according to Ibn `Abbās, means that God orders Hell to consume them so that they will perish and not dwell as long as the heavens and the earth endure.

Al-Ṭabarī, however, goes on to mention `Abdallāh b. Mas`ūd (d. 29/650)20 who is said to state that there shall come a time when the doors of Hell collapse and no one is to be found in Hell. That time, according to Ibn Mas`ūd, will come after

---

19 Ibid., Vol. XII, p. 70-71.
20 His full name was `Abdallāh b. Mas`ūd. He was among the most celebrated Companions of the Prophet and was an expert in the reading of the Qur’ān. He compiled what is known as Muṣḥaf Ibn Mas`ūd, which was popular in Kūfa before the codification of the Muṣḥaf `Uthmān. See J.C. Vadet, ‘Ibn Mas`ūd’, The Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edition, Vol. III, pp. 873-875.
the inhabitants of Hell have dwelled therein for ages (lābithīn fīhā aḥqāban). Ibn Masʿūd’s words suggest a more positive perspective on the exception regarding the inhabitants of Hell. Al-Ṭabarī quotes another tradition dealing with the possibility of the termination of Hell narrated from al-Sha’bī (d. 110/728).²¹ In the tradition, al-Sha’bī states that Hell was faster than Heaven in its construction, and will also be faster than Heaven in its destruction.²² Al-Sha’bī’s tradition can be read within two perspectives. When combined with the tradition from Ibn `Abbās, it can be understood that the inhabitants of Hell will be destroyed alongside the destruction of Hell. However, when al-Sha’bī’s tradition is read together with Ibn Masʿūd’s tradition, the destruction of Hell implies the removal of its inhabitants before it since, according to Ibn Masʿūd’s tradition, all of Hell’s inhabitants will leave it after certain periods of dwelling therein.

The fourth opinion argues that it is unsuitable to relate the phrase “unless your Lord wills it otherwise” to the inhabitants of Hell. Those who hold this opinion understand that the exception in the verse actually refers to the inhabitants of Heaven. This group relates God’s will (mashī’atuh) to the last part of verse 11:108. The verse speaks of “a gift without break (ʿaṭāʾan ghayr majdhūdḥ)” when describing Heaven as a reward for “those who will be glad (alladhīna suʿīdū)”.

Thus, the exception contained in the phrase “unless your Lord wills it otherwise”, according to this view, is a reference to further rewards for the inhabitants of Heaven in addition to the rewards they have been given in the period during which


the heavens and the earth endure. God’s will, however, may result in the addition or the reduction of rewards.\(^{23}\) This view refers to a tradition narrated from Ibn Zayd.\(^{24}\)

Of the four opinions considered, al-Ṭabarī follows those of Qatāda and al-Ḍaḥḥāk in the first group, finding them more compatible with the truth. Al-Ṭabarī states:

[...] the exception is for grave sinners among Muslims [ahl al-tawḥīd]. God puts them in Hell [where] they abide forever unless He wills them to leave Hell in a lesser time. God then removes them [from Hell] and brings them into Heaven.\(^{25}\)

Al-Ṭabarī clearly proposes the idea that Hell is a temporary place for Muslims to redeem their evil acts committed during their lives. They will suffer God’s torment before they can go to Heaven. He continues:

We consider this opinion more compatible with the truth in that matter because God has threatened polytheists (ahl al-shirk) with eternity in Hell. Ḥadīths from the Prophet demonstrate that it is not permissible to apply the exception to the polytheists… that God will place a group among the believers (ahl al-īmān) in Hell because of sins they have committed. God then will remove them from Hell and put them in Heaven.\(^{26}\)

To attain a better understanding of al-Ṭabarī’s view, I will divide his words above into two parts: a) “We consider this opinion more compatible with the truth in that matter because God has threatened polytheists (ahl al-shirk) with eternity in

\(^{23}\) Ibid.
\(^{26}\) Ibid.
Hell. Ḥadīths from the Prophet demonstrate that it is not permissible to apply the exception to the polytheists”; b) “that God will place a group among the believers (ahl al-īmān) in Hell because of sins they have committed. God then will remove them from Hell and put them in Heaven.”

The first part (part a) of al-Ṭabarī’s opinion clearly rejects the notion that the exception applies to polytheists (ahl al-shirk). Al-Ṭabarī argues that the ahl al-shirk, those who associate God with others, will be excluded from the exception, for God has prescribed for them an eternity in Hell. Al-Ṭabarī refers to Q. 4:48 and 4:116, which literally state that associating God with others (shirk) is unforgiven. Q. 4:48 reads “Verily, God forgives not that a partner should be ascribed unto Him. He forgives (all) save that to whom He will. Whoso ascribes partners to God; he has indeed invented a tremendous sin.” Meanwhile, Q. 4:116, in an almost identical fashion, reads “Verily, God forgives not that partners should be ascribed unto him. He forgives (all) save that to whom He will. Whoso ascribes partners unto Allah has wandered far astray.” In this regard, it is understandable why al-Ṭabarī uses the phrase ahl al-tawḥīd to refer to Muslims since he wants to distinguish them from those who associate God with others (mushrikūn), whom God will never forgive. The inhabitants of Hell who will possibly leave it thus refers only to Muslims, who never associate God with others.

After rejecting that the exception applies to the polytheists, al-Ṭabarī leaves open the possibility that the inhabitants of Hell will exit from it. In the second part (part b), Al-Ṭabarī explains that God will place believers (ahl al-īmān) in Hell for their sins. However, God will then remove them from Hell and take them to
Heaven. Here, al-Ṭabarī obviously refers to grave sinners among the believers. They will suffer torments in Hell because of the sins they committed during their worldly life, but they will eventually exit from it because they still have faith (īmān). Al-Ṭabarī apparently argues that dwelling in Hell is a prerequisite before they can enter Heaven.

3. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 78:23

The third verse that contains an indication of the limitation of Hell is Q. 78:23. It reads:

They will abide therein for ages.

This verse continues the explanation regarding the condition of Hell, as mentioned in the preceding verses (78:21-22), which read: “Truly Hell is as a place of ambush. For the transgressors a place of destination.”

The focus of discussion in this verse is the word aḥqāb (literally meaning “ages”, singular ḥuqb), which suggests that Hell will endure only for a limited period of time, not forever. Based on several traditions, al-Ṭabarī offers three opinions on the duration of a ḥuqb. The first opinion is that a ḥuqb lasts for “three hundred years, each year is three hundred and sixty-five days, and each day is a thousand years.”²⁷

---

²⁷ Ibid., Vol 30, p. 8. The period of a day in the hereafter equalling a thousand years of the world is based on Q. 32:5, which reads: “He rules (all) affairs from the heavens to the earth: then it ascends unto Him in a Day, whereof the measure is a thousand years of that you reckon.”
According to the second opinion, a *huqāb* lasts for eighty years. This is based on some traditions from `Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), Abū Hurayra (d. 61/681), Ibn `Abbās, and Sa`īd b. Jubayr (d. 86/705). In addition to informing us of the duration of a *huqāb*, a tradition from Qatāda explains that the phrase “they dwell therein for ages (*lābithīna fīhā ahqāban*)” means that there would be no cessation of *ahqāb*, “whenever a *huqāb* is finished, another will come afterwards”.

The last tradition that al-Ṭabarī quotes is narrated from al-Rabī’ b. Anas and states that only God knows the duration of the *ahqāb*, but a *huqāb* is a period of eighty years.

The third opinion is that a *huqāb* is a period of seventy thousand years. This view is based on a tradition quoted by al-Ṭabarī which states that the plural term *ahqāb* has no limitation; rather, it refers to an everlasting period. However, the singular term *huqāb* is understood as a period of seventy thousand years in which each day equals a thousand years of earthly life. Another tradition adduced by al-

---

28 Ibid.
29 `Alī b. Abī Ṭālib is one of the most celebrated figures in Islam. `Alī was the Prophet Muḥammad’s cousin and son-in-law. He was married to Muḥammad’s daughter, Fāṭima, which gave him a special relationship with Muḥammad. Together with Khadīja, Muḥammad’s wife, and Abū Bakr, a close companion and Muḥammad’s father-in-law, `Alī was among the first to have faith in Muḥammad. He replaced `Uthmān b. Aḥfān to become the fourth caliph. See L. Veccia Vaglieri, ‘`Alī b. Abī Ṭālib’, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, Vol. I, pp. 381-386.
Ṭabarī also asserts that no one knows the exact duration of the aḥqāb, but that a huqb lasts for seventy thousand years.\footnote{Ibid.}

Regarding these various opinions, al-Ṭabarī regards that of Qatāda and al-Rabī` b. Anas (d. 131/749) as the soundest (aṣaḥḥ). As mentioned earlier, Qatāda understands that the statement “they will abide therein for ages (lābithīn fīhā aḥqāban)” means that there will be no termination of a huqb because one huqb will come continuously after another. To confirm his position, to answer the question as to whether disbelievers will receive God’s torment only for a certain period, al-Ṭabarī argues that there is no completion or termination for the disbelievers, and he refers again to Qatāda and al-Rabī` b. Anas.\footnote{Ibid. Vol. XXX, p. 9.}

Having explained the meaning of aḥqāb and demonstrated his preference for the everlasting duration of Hell, interestingly, al-Ṭabarī offers his own opinion about Q. 78:23, which is totally different from the other explanations he has previously quoted. Al-Ṭabarī states:

It is likely that the meaning of “they dwell therein for ages [lābithīna fīhā aḥqāban]” in this topic is a kind of punishment. (The punishment) is “Therein they taste neither coolness nor [any] drink save boiling water and paralysing cold”.\footnote{Q. 78:24-25.} When the periods [of punishment] have concluded, there will come other types of punishment different from that [which they suffered before]. This accords with God’s saying in His book, “And verily, for the transgressors, there will be an evil journey’s end. Hell, where they will burn, an evil resting place. Here is a boiling and an ice cold draught, so let them taste it. And other [torment] of the kind in pairs [the two extremes]”.\footnote{Q. 38:55-58.} And to me, this opinion conforms more closely (ashbah) to the meaning of the verse.
The above statement seems to indicate that al-Ṭabarī avoids the argument on the limited duration of Hell. Taken literally, Q. 78:23 offers the possibility that the inhabitants of Hell, that is, those who have been transgressors in their earthly lives, may dwell therein only for a certain period of time. However, al-Ṭabarī intentionally shifts the meaning of *aḥqāb* as the duration of dwelling in Hell to a term indicating types of punishment. By diverting the meaning of *aḥqāb*, al-Ṭabarī shows his compromising standpoint by avoiding discussing the possible limited duration of Hell; a topic that might raise controversy because Muslims generally hold the view of the eternity of Hell, as stated in the beginning of this chapter. Thus, by proposing that the term *aḥqāb* refers to types of punishment in Hell rather than a duration of time, al-Ṭabarī takes a mainstream theological position. He apparently was convinced that the punishment of Hell is eternal for non-Muslims, but he knew that the outward purport of verse 78:23 leaves open the possibility of a finite torment in Hell.

From his interpretation of the first two verses above, it is apparent that al-Ṭabarī was of opinion that the inhabitants of Hell principally will dwell in it forever. However, there will be a group who will exit from it should God will it as indicated in the exception contained in verse 6:128 and 11:107 mentioned above. Based on some traditions he quotes in his interpretation of these verses, al-Ṭabarī argues that the exception only applies to grave sinners among Muslims. Thus, according to al-Ṭabarī, Muslims who commit grave sins during their lives will experience God’s torments. After a certain period of punishment, God will remove them from Hell.
Consequently, the exception does not apply to non-Muslims since, referring to al-Ṭabarī, they will dwell in Hell forever. Furthermore, they will experience different types of punishment, as al-Ṭabarī understands in his interpretation of Q. 78:23, during their eternal dwelling in Hell.

C. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of the Phrase Khālidīn fīhā and its Variations

In order to fully understand al-Ṭabarī’s view on the topic of the eternity of Hell, in this section I will compare his interpretation of the three verses above with that of other related verses. In discussing the eternity of Hell, the focus of scrutiny is on verses which contain the phrase “they shall abide therein (khālidīn fīhā)”, including some variations such as “therein shall they abide (hum fīhā khālidūn), and “he shall abide therein (khālidan fīhā)”. While the phrase khālidīn fīhā appears fourteen times in the Qur’ān, the phrase hum fīhā khālidūn and khālidan fīhā are found fifteen and three times respectively. Other variations are khālid, khālidayn and yakhlud, which each appear once, and al-khuld, which is found in two verses in the Qur’ān. These terms are commonly found in verses that are related to Heaven and Hell. However, I will examine al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of only those terms that are related to the words Hell (the Fire/al-nār) or Gehennam (jahannam) because, as stated earlier, there is no dispute among Muslim scholars as to the meaning of these terms referring to Heaven, that is, Heaven is eternal.

The first verse containing such a phrase is Q. 2:39, in which the expression “therein shall they abide (hum fīhā khālidūn)” appears. The whole verse reads:

But those who disbelieve, and belie our signs, they shall be companions of the Fire, and therein shall they abide.
The last section of the verse “therein shall they abide (hum fīhā khālidūn)”, al-Ṭabarī explains, means that they will abide in Hell forever (abadan) without any limit or end, since two traditions from Saʿīd b. Yazīd with different chains of transmission state so. Al-Ṭabarī, however, does not quote the content (matn) of either of the traditions. The last tradition he adduces in interpreting the phrase comes from the Companion Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī, which he narrates from the Prophet who said that the people of Hell will neither die nor live therein. Yet, some people whom the fire strikes because of their wrongdoings and sins, God will then make them die a death until when they have become charcoal they are allowed to receive intercession.40

Unfortunately, al-Ṭabarī stops here and does not give his judgement on al-Khudrī’s tradition which, literally, leaves open the possibility that the people of Hell (ahl al-nār) may exit from it. In the case of the two traditions from Saʿīd b. Yazīd, al-Ṭabarī offers his own opinion that the people of Hell will abide in Hell forever (abadan) without any limit or end. He then claims that his opinion is consistent with Saʿīd b. Yazīd’s traditions, thus justifying his view on that basis. On the other hand, he remains silent regarding the tradition from Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī, which literally contradicts his view. This is typical of al-Ṭabarī’s encyclopaedic approach by including any traditions available, even those which

39 His full name was Saʿīd b. Yazīd b. Maslama al-Azdī. He was also known as Abū Maslama al- Баṣrī. He narrated traditions from Anas b. Mālik, Hasan al- Баṣrī, and others. He was among the generation of Successors. See Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb, Vol. 4, pp. 100-101.

contradict his view. The inclusion of different traditions might also demonstrate his way of argumentation, by which al-Ṭabarī systematises all possible explanations of a Qur’anic verse before he offers his opinion, remains silent, and agrees or disagrees with a tradition. It is unclear, though, why he does not comment on the tradition from Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī. However, as we have seen earlier, al-Ṭabarī argues that the possible exit of the people of Hell as stated in the tradition applies only to great sinners (ahl al-kabā’ir) among Muslims.

The second verse in the Qur’ān that contains the phrase “therein shall they abide (hum fīhā khālidūn)” is Q. 2:81. It reads:

Nay, but whosoever has done evil and his sin surrounded him; such are the companions of the Fire; they will abide therein.

Al-Ṭabarī explains that the word khālidūn means “residing (muqīmūn)”. He then adduces two traditions narrated on the authority of Ibn `Abbās and al-Suddī, respectively. Ibn `Abbās’ tradition explains that “therein shall they abide (hum fīhā khālidūn)” means abiding forever (abadan). Similarly, the tradition from al-Suddī understands “therein shall they abide (hum fīhā khālidūn)” as meaning that they will fail to get out of Hell forever (abadan). The traditions from both Ibn `Abbās and al-Suddī use the term abadan to refer to the eternity of Hell.

42 Ibid.
From his interpretation of these two verses, it appears that al-Ṭabarī was of the opinion that Hell is endless. However, there is also some ambiguity in his position on the interpretation of verses on the eternity of Hell. On the one hand, he is convinced that Hell is eternal and has no end, yet, on the other hand he is also aware of the tradition from Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī which leaves open the possibility that Hell could terminate. His comments tend to approve of the former, but he must reconcile his opinion with the latter. As we have seen earlier, the compromise position that al-Ṭabarī takes is that the termination of Hell’s torment applies only to Muslims who have committed grave sins (ahl al-kabāʾir) as long as they did not associate God with others (shirk), while for the polytheists (mushrikūn) and unbelievers, Hell is eternal.

Having quoted some traditions in dealing with Q. 2:39 and 2:81, al-Ṭabarī then interprets phrases similar to “they shall abide therein (khālidīn fīhā)” and its variants in later verses by means of short explanations and paraphrastic\(^\text{45}\) expressions, without offering further argumentation. Thus, he clearly expected readers of his commentary to refer to his discussion of verses 2:39 and 2:81.

Such short explanations and paraphrastic expressions without any quotation of traditions to support his argumentation appear in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the verses listed below. Al-Ṭabarī commonly makes statements related to the amount of time the inhabitants of Hell will remain there as well as their condition whilst in Hell. With regard to the duration of an inhabitant’s time in

Hell, al-Ṭabarī uses expressions that he reiterates with some variations in several verses as follows:

a. “without any limit nor end (min ghayr amadin wa lā nihāya)”: 2:217, 46:28.47
c. “without limit (ilā ghayr ghāya)”: 2:257.53
d. “without cessation nor termination (lā fanā‘a lahu wa lā zawāl)”: 10:52.54
e. “permanently therein (bāqiyan fīhā)”: 4:93.55
f. “continuously therein (dā‘iman fīhā)”: 2:162, 5:80.57
g. “they will not move from it (lā yanqilūn `anhā)”: 39:72.58

49 Ibid., Vol. XIX, p. 29.
50 Ibid., Vol. XXII, p. 35.
51 Ibid., Vol. XXVIII, p. 17.
52 Ibid., Vol. XXIX, p. 76.
53 Ibid., Vol. III, p. 16.
54 Ibid., Vol. XI, p. 85.
56 Ibid., Vol. II, p. 36.
57 Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 206.
58 Ibid., Vol. XXIV, p. 23.
60 Ibid., Vol. XVIII, p. 43.
61 Ibid., Vol. XXIV, p. 56.
63 Ibid., Vol. XXVI, p. 32.
64 Ibid., Vol. III, p. 68.
65 Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 38.
66 Ibid., Vol. XI, p. 78.
67 Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 23.
68 Ibid., Vol. XIV, p. 69.
69 Ibid., Vol. XXVIII, p. 34.
Meanwhile, in addition to explaining the phrase “(they) shall abide therein (khālidīn fīhā)” with its variations referring to the amount of time the inhabitants of Hell shall abide therein, al-Ṭabarī indicates the conditions under which Hell’s inhabitants will suffer. Common expressions that appear (also with slight variations) in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the relevant verses include:

a. “neither alive nor dead (lā aḥyā’an wa lā amwātan)”: 9:17.70
b. “neither do they live therein nor die (lā yaḥyawn fīhā wa lā yamūtūn)”: 9:68.71
c. “they will not die therein nor will they exit from it (lā yamūtūn fīhā wa lā yakhrujūn minhā)”: 4:14,72 7:36,73 13:5,74 98:6.75

From the above, we can conclude that al-Ṭabarī was of the opinion that Hell is eternal and its inhabitants will dwell in it eternally. His interpretation of several verses above confirms the position al-Ṭabarī takes when he interprets verse 78:23, in which he alters the meaning of aḥqāb, literally meaning “ages” from its singular ḥuqb, into “different types of punishment”. However, if we include his interpretation of Q. 6:128 and 11:107, it is clear that in al-Ṭabarī’s opinion, dwelling eternally in Hell only applies to non-Muslims. Muslims, even though they have committed grave sins (ahl al-kabā’ir) in their life in the world, will eventually enter Heaven. God, according to al-Ṭabarī will forgive them and remove them from Hell after they receive punishment for their wrongdoings.

---

70 Ibid., Vol. X, p. 66.
71 Ibid., Vol. X, p. 121
72 Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 197.
73 Ibid., Vol. VIII, p. 124.
74 Ibid., Vol. XIII, p. 70.
75 Ibid., Vol. XXX, p. 170.
D. Putting al-Ṭabarī into Context

Al-Ṭabarī’s view, especially as seen in his interpretation of Q. 11:107, where he elaborates different opinions on the duration of Hell, conforms to contemporary discourse on the topic. Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī in his *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa Ikhtilāf al-Muṣallīn*, an early work on Islamic schools of thought, discusses different opinions regarding the eternity of Heaven’s grace for the People of Heaven (ahl al-janna) and of Hell’s torture for the People of Hell (ahl al-nār).

The first opinion is that Heaven’s grace for the People of Heaven is eternal and there is no interruption in it. Likewise, the torments for unbelievers (kuffār) in Hell are eternal. Al-Ashʿarī claims that the majority of Muslims uphold this position.

The second opinion is from Jahm b. Ṣafwān, the eponymous founder of the Jahmiyya. According to al-Ashʿarī, Jahm b. Ṣafwān argued that both Heaven and Hell will perish and cease to be, thus, the people in Heaven and Hell will not abide therein eternally. The third argument, according to al-Ashʿarī, was proposed by Abū al-Hudhayl al-ʿAllāf (d. 235/850), a prominent Muʿtazilī theologian. His opinion is quite similar to the first opinion that Heaven and Hell “will come to a standstill” and both the People of Heaven and Hell will stay therein forever, and there will be

---

76 The Jahmiyya was a minor theological school in Islam. The name was derived from its eponymous founder Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 147/764). He was involved in a rebellion against the Umayyad caliphate and was captured and executed in 147/764. Among the main doctrines of this school were predestination and the createdness of the Qur’an. See about him in footnote 68 of Chapter Two.

no movements among them. The last opinion, according to al-Ashʿarī, is actually not directly related to the topic of the eternity of Heaven’s grace and Hell’s torment. It is that the People of Heaven will take pleasure therein just as the People of Hell will suffer therein.\(^78\)

However, when the argument concerning the eternity of Heaven’s grace and Hell’s torment is compared to questions about the eternity of Heaven of Hell, there is an apparent inconsistency. Dealing with the question whether Heaven and Hell are already created, al-Ashʿarī provides two opinions. The people of Tradition and righteous (ahl al-sunna wa al-istiqāma) say that both are already created. Many of the people of innovation (ahl al-bidʿa), according to al-Ashʿarī, argue that both are not already created. Consequently, coming to the next question, if both have been created, will they then perish? Al-Ashʿarī says that some argue that both will perish, while other groups reject the idea.\(^79\) Nevertheless, al-Ashʿarī does not discuss their argument, nor does he mention which group holds which opinion. Similarly, al-Ashʿarī also does not deal with a further possible question, that is, if both Heaven and Hell are already created and will perish, will their grace and torture perish too? Based on their concept of tawḥīd, the Muʿtazila and the Jahmiyya firmly held that God is unique and everything will perish save Him, as He was alone before creation.\(^80\)

Al-Ṭabarī’s position, as discussed earlier, is that non-Muslims will abide in Hell eternally. Accordingly, he says that Muslims who committed grave sins will

\(^{79}\) Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 168
\(^{80}\) A.J. Wensinck, *Muslim Creed*, p. 121.
not dwell in Hell eternally, they eventually enter Heaven as long as they do not
associate God with others. Furthermore, in his treatise in theology *al-Tabṣīr fī
Maʾālim al-Dīn*, al-Ṭabarī confirms that grave sinners among Muslims still will
experience torment in Hell before entering Heaven. Al-Ṭabarī says:

…if (God) put them in Hell and punish them (Muslim sinners) in it, He
will not eternize them in it. Instead, God will punish them due to their
sins, and He will then remove them (from Hell) after their punishment … and put them in Heaven. This is because God promises rewards for
obedience (to Him) and threats chastisement for sin, and promises to
erase evil with good as long as it is not *shirk*.  

Al-Ṭabarī, however, seems to have difficulty in dealing with the question
as to whether or not Hell is already created and thus will perish. In his interpretation
of Q. 28:88,  

82 The verse reads: “And cry not unto any other god along with God. There is no God save
Him. Everything will perish save His countenance. His is the command, and unto Him you will be
brought back.”


84 The verse reads: “The Creator of the heavens and the earth. He has made for you pairs of
yourselves, and of the cattle also pairs, whereby He multiplies you. There is nothing whatever like
unto Him; and He is the Hearer, the Seer.”
nothing whatever like unto Him”), al-Ṭabarī only explains the grammatical aspects of the phrase and does not address its theological aspects. Indeed, he appears to be reluctant to discuss theological issues in his interpretation of Q. 28:88 and 42:11, and does not even choose between two opinions when dealing with verse 28:88. Considering al-Ṭabarī’s usual preference to adopt the Muslim mainstream position, it is possible that the issue as to whether everything, including Hell, will perish except God was not yet settled. Thus, al-Ṭabarī probably intentionally avoided any potential controversy by simply not discussing the problem.

E. Conclusion

From the above discussion regarding the eternity of Hell, we can conclude that al-Ṭabarī affirms that Hell is eternal and that its inhabitants will dwell there eternally. With regard to the first two verses (Q. 6:128 and 11:107), which offer a possible exception according to which Hell’s inhabitants may be released, al-Ṭabarī argues that the exception applies only to Muslim sinners. They will dwell in Hell and receive punishment for committing sins during their lives. After experiencing God’s punishment in Hell, God will forgive them, remove them from Hell and place them in Heaven. In this argument, Hell is a temporary place for Muslim sinners before they eventually enter Heaven. Unbelievers and those who associate God with others (mushrikūn), however, will be damned eternally. This position is also seen in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 78:23 according to which the inhabitants of Hell will abide there for ages (aḥqāban); the word “ages” here implying a finite duration.

The literal meaning of the verse is thus that Hell’s inhabitants will dwell in it only for a certain time, not forever. However, according to al-Ṭabarī, and confirming his interpretation of 6:128 and 11:107, the word *aḥqāban* is not to be understood as “ages” as its literal meaning suggests, but it rather refers to different types of punishment. The verse, then, means that Hell’s inhabitants will dwell there eternally, but will experience different types of punishment; after one type of punishment is finished, there will come other types of punishment. Therefore, although the three verses mentioned above appear to be ambiguous and to conflict with other Qur’anic verses that explicitly refer to the eternity of Hell and eternal dwelling in it, al-Ṭabarī posits that through God’s will He might eventually remove Hell’s inhabitants and place them in Heaven. However, this exception applies only to Muslim sinners who have received punishment for their wrongdoings. This position confirms al-Ṭabarī’s earlier opinion on the fate of virtuous non-Muslims: that non-Muslims will not be saved in the hereafter.
CHAPTER FIVE

Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Qur’anic Verses on Intercession
(Shafā`a)

A. Introduction

As has been shown in his interpretation of Q. 2:62, al-Ṭabarī argues that non-Muslims will not be rewarded for their virtuous actions, and thus will not be saved in the hereafter. Elsewhere, in his interpretation of Q. 11:107 he mentions an opinion that the inhabitants of Hell might be saved for two reasons; first, because Hell is not eternal and will eventually be destroyed with no one remaining there, including non-Muslims; second, Hell’s inhabitants will possibly be released because of God’s mercy and forgiveness through intercession. The present chapter continues to investigate whether or not al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses about intercession includes non-Muslims among those who can receive intercession and thus be saved.

The doctrine of intercession is closely related to the eschatological aspect of Islamic theology.¹ The debate about intercession had started as early as the discussion about the fate of grave sinners. Abū Ḥanīfa² (d. 150 /767) asserts that intercession in the hereafter is true. Those who can intercede are all prophets, including Muḥammad, who will intercede on behalf of grave sinners among his


followers.\(^3\) Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal\(^4\) (d. 241/855) reiterated the belief that intercession is a reality and believed that people can intercede for others, and that some inhabitants of Hell would be released from Hell by intercession.\(^5\) Both views were later transformed into a Sunnī mainstream theological position at the hands of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘ārī (d. 327/939) who confirms that grave sinners will come out of Hell by the virtue of the Prophet Muḥammad’s intercession.\(^6\)

While the concept of intercession was relatively well-established in early Islamic theology, the relevant Qur’anic verses are apparently contradictory. Verses like 2:48, 2:123, and 2:254 literally refute intercession. Thus, verse 2:48 states “nor will intercession (ṣafā‘a) be accepted”, while verses 2:123 and 2:254 say “nor shall intercession be of any use to them” and “there will be no bargaining, and no friendship, and no intercession” respectively. However, verse 39:44, for instance, confirms that “Unto God belongs all intercession,” which makes intercession possible. Other verses open the possibility of intercession by whom God permits, such as 20:109, which states that on the Day of Judgement “… no intercession avails save (that of) him unto whom the Beneficent has given leave and whose word He accepts”; verse 34:23, where God says, “No intercession avails with Him save for him whom He permits”; or verse 19:87 that allows intercession by those have


\(^4\) Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal was a great traditionalist and the eponymous founder of the Ḥanbali school of Sunni law. He wrote a compilation of traditions called Musnad Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal. He was a strong opponent of the Muʿtazila rationalist school which was proclaimed as the school of the State by the Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn. See H. Laoust, ‘Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’, The Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd Edition, Vol. I, pp. 272-277.

\(^5\) W. Montgomery Watt, The Formative Period of Islamic Thought, p. 293.

“made a covenant with his God”. Thus, these latter verses leave open the possibility of God’s intervention to save the inhabitants of Hell from dwelling in it eternally. In addition to the issue of al-Ṭabarī’s position on intercession for non-Muslims, it is also interesting to see how he reconciles the apparent contradictions in the verses mentioned above.

This chapter, then, begins with a discussion on al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the Qur’anic verses about intercession, starting from the verses that literally deny intercession to verses that allow it and which mention whose intercession will be accepted. Due to the large number of verses dealing with intercession and al-Ṭabarī’s overlapping interpretation of these, the chapter primarily focusses on al-Ṭabarī’s understanding of verses: 2:48; 6:94; 19:87; 43:86 and 74:48. However, a summary of his interpretation of other verses containing the word shafāʿa and its derivatives will be provided in order to attain a comprehensive picture of al-Ṭabarī’s ideas on intercession. Following this, al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation will be put into context: first, by comparing his understanding of intercession with verses referring to God’s mercy; and second, by analysing theological discourse on intercession during his time.

B. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Qur’anic Verses on Intercession (Shafāʿa)

Before discussing al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses on intercession, this section begins with the etymological meaning of the word shafāʿa and its appearances in the Qur’an. Shafāʿa is derived from the triliteral root sh-f-', which has several meanings, such as “to double”, “to grant”, “to plead”, “to
intervene”, “to intercede”, and “to mediate”. While etymologically there are different meanings of sh-f-`, most of the Qur’anic verses containing the root talk about intercession. Thus, in the Qur’ān, the root sh-f-` occurs 31 times in 26 verses with different forms. In 24 of these verses, the root has the meaning of intercession. Of the remaining two verses, Q. 4:85 talks about what people will receive when they do good or bad deeds, while in Q. 89:3 God uses the word shaf` (“even”) to swear an oath.

As stated earlier, this section will only discuss five verses where al-Ṭabarī employs specific interpretive strategies. These verses are 2:48; 6:94; 19:87; 43:86 and 74:48. In all the other verses, he either paraphrases the verses or provides a brief explanation.

1. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 2:48

Al-Ṭabarī elaborates his position on the issue of intercession in his interpretation of Q. 2:48, which happens to be his first encounter with the topic. The verse reads:

7 Of the 24 verses talking about intercession, ten of them use the root sh-f-` in the form of subjects both in the singular and the plural: shaf’ (intercessor) and its plural shufa`ā` and shāfi`īn, that is verses 6:51; 6:70; 6:94; 10:3; 10:18; 26:100; 30:13; 32:4; 39:43 and 40:18. Another ten verses use a noun in the form of shafā`a (intercession), which is found in Q. 2:48; 2:213; 2:254; 19:87; 20:109; 34:23; 36:23; 39:44; 43:86 and 53:26. Two verses use verbs in the form of yashfa`u and yashfa`ūn; both meaning “to intercede” (Q. 2:255 and 21:28). One verse uses two words forming a subject and a verb in the form of shufa`â` and yashfa`u (Q. 7:53), while another verse uses two words consisting of a noun and a subject in the form of shafā`a and shafī`ūn (Q. 74:48).

8 The verse reads: “Whoever intervenes (yashfa`) in a good cause (shafā`a) will have the reward thereof, and whoever intervenes (yashfa`) in an evil cause (shafā`a) will bear the consequence thereof. God oversees all things.”

The verse reads: “And the Even (shaf`) and the Odd.”
And guard yourselves against a day when no soul will in aught avail another, nor will intercession (shafā`a) be accepted from it, nor will compensation be received from it, nor will they be helped.

Al-Ṭabarī starts the interpretation of this verse by explaining the lexical meaning of shafā`a in the phrase “nor will intercession (shafā`a) be accepted from it.” According to al-Ṭabarī, the word shafā`a means a plea from someone who is in need of another person to act on his/her behalf regarding his/her needs. The person who acts on someone’s behalf is the intercessor (shāfi` or shafī`). The one interceded for and the intercessor thus become a pair (shaf’).10

Al-Ṭabarī goes on to explain that the verse relates to other verses where the Jews claim to be God’s sons, His beloved ones, and His prophets’ sons11 and wish their Father (God) would intercede for them. Verse 2:48, al-Ṭabarī argues, is an answer to their desire where God confirms that no intercession will be accepted for them nor will their wish be fulfilled.12 He says:

So God makes them despair …of being saved by the intercession of their forefathers and all other people from God’s punishment because of their denying the truth that they have known and their resistance to God’s command to follow Muḥammad and what he brought from God. God then told them that nothing is beneficial for them before God except their repentance to God for their disbelief along with their returning from error.13

11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
Al-Ṭabarī then makes the generalisation that the verse does not deal only with the Jews. There will be, according to him, no intercession for whoever disbelieves in God and Muḥammad and what he brought. Al-Ṭabarī also clearly confirms that God’s mercy will not avail these disbelievers nor those who take a similar path to them.¹⁴

Furthermore, although verse 2:48 literally denies intercession, al-Ṭabarī specifies its general meaning by stating that intercession is possible for believers. He bases this opinion on two of the Prophet’s traditions that he adduces in his explanation of the verse. The first tradition quotes the Prophet as saying, “My intercession is for grave sinners from my people (umma).” In the second tradition the Prophet said, “Every prophet has a right to make a supplication to God and I conceal my supplication (as) intercession for my people, they will receive it as long as they do not associate God with others.” These two traditions, in al-Ṭabarī’s view, are evidence that although the verse “has a general statement in (its) recitation, in (its) interpretation its intention is specific”,¹⁵ that is, intercession is possible for believers. Thus, the phrase “no intercession shall be accepted from it”, al-Ṭabarī believes, only applies to those who disbelieve in God and die in their disbelief.¹⁶ He says:

It is evident from these (traditions) that God will pardon His believing servants (‘ibādihi al-mu’mīnīn) through the intercession of our Prophet Muḥammad for them from severe punishment for the sins they have committed against God and each other. Meanwhile, His words “and no

---

¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶ Ibid.
intercession shall be accepted for it” apply only to he who dies in his disbelief without repenting to God (māta `alā kufrihī ghayr tāʾib).\textsuperscript{17}

The issue of intercession involves two fundamental questions: who can intercede and who will receive intercession. From al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of verse 2:48, an initial answer to the first question is that it is the Prophet Muḥammad who can intercede. As we shall see later in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of other relevant verses, there are some other figures who can intercede in addition to the Prophet. As for those who will receive intercession, al-Ṭabarī explains that only believers (muʾminūn) have this privilege, even though they might have committed grave sins in their life. As long as they do not associate God with others, the Prophet will intercede for them in the hereafter. Regarding those who disbelieve in God and associate Him with others without repenting before they die, there will be no intercession for them.

2. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 6:94

Al-Ṭabarī widens his elaboration of the topic of intercession by putting it in a different context when he interprets Q. 6:94. He uses the verse to reject the claim of the Arab idolaters that what they worship will intercede for them. The verse reads:

\begin{quote}
\textit{(And God shall say:) “And now, indeed, you have come unto Us in a lonely state, even as We created you in the first instance; and you have left behind you all that We bestowed on you (in your lifetime). And We do not see with you those intercessors of yours whom you supposed to}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
have a share in God’s divinity with regard to yourselves! Indeed, all the bonds between you (and your earthly life) are now severed, and all your former fancies have forsaken you!”

In his interpretation of this verse, al-Ṭabarī adduces a tradition about the occasion of revelation. The tradition is from Ḵ İlkrima al-Barbarī, the slave of Ibn Ḵ Abbās, who reported that al-Naḏr b. al-Ḫarth, an Arab pagan, said that al-Lāt and al-ʿUzza will intercede for him with God in the hereafter. Al-Ṭabarī states that another tradition reports that actually all idolaters say that al-Lāt and al-ʿUzza will intercede for them. He also cites a further tradition from al-Suddī, who stated that the idolaters claimed that they worshipped idols because they are the intercessors who will intercede for them with God and that these idols are God’s associates. Al-Ṭabarī rejects this claim and insists that the idols whom the idolaters worshipped cannot intercede.21


19 Al-Lāt and al-ʿUzza were among three deities worshipped by idolaters in pre-Islamic times by Arab tribes. The other is Manāt. These three deities are mentioned in Q. 53:19-20 where God describes them as “nothing but empty names which you have invented - you and your forefathers” (Q. 53:23). Al-Lāt was worshipped by the Banū Thaqīf, al-ʿUzza was the deity of the Quraysh, and Manāt was the idol of the people of Aws and Khazraj. For preliminary remarks on these three idols, see T. Fahd, “al-ʿLāt”, Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd Edition, Vol. V, pp. 692-693; M.C.A. MacDonald and Laila Nebme, “al-ʿUzza”, Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd Edition, Vol. VI, pp. 967-968; T. Fahd, “Manāt”, Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd Edition, Vol. VI, pp. 373-374.

20 Ismāʿīl b. Ḵ Abd al-Rahmān al-Suddī al-Kabīr (d. 127/745) was a Kufan scholar whose expertise was in Qurʾanī taḥfīz. As a transmitter of tradition, al-Suddī’s credibility is dubious. See, for instance, G.H.A. Juynboll, The Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd Edition, Vol. IX, p. 762. The bulk of his traditions, however, appear in al-Ṭabarī’s taḥfīz.

3. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 19:87

In addition to the Prophet Muḥammad, God’s permission to intercede also extends to those who have made a covenant with God. This is indicated in Q. 19:87 which reads:

They will have no power of intercession, save he who has made a covenant with his Lord.

In his interpretation of this verse, al-Ṭabarī argues that disbelievers (kuffār) are unable to intercede on the Day when believers intercede for one another. Those who have made a covenant with God, he says, include those who believe in God and Muḥammad and what he brought, and perform what Muḥammad has ordered.22

Al-Ṭabarī adduces four traditions in dealing with this verse, especially concerning what constitutes a covenant (‘ahd). The first tradition comes from Ibn ʿAbbās where he understood that covenant (‘ahd) means bearing witness that there is no god but God, repudiating any power and strength but God’s, and making no associates to God. The second tradition is from Ibn Jurayḥ23 who understood that the verse explains that believers will intercede for each other in the hereafter. He also said that the word covenant (‘ahd) means righteous deeds (‘amal ṣāliḥ). Al-Ṭabarī also adduces another tradition from Qatāda who explained that the word covenant (‘ahd) means obeying God (bi țā’atih). Qatāda furthermore cites verse 20:109, which reads, “On that Day no intercession avails save (that of) him unto whom the Beneficent has given leave and whose word He accepts”. He then

22 Ibid., Vol. XVI, p. 97.
explained that believers will intercede for each other in the hereafter. The fourth
tradition is from ʿAwf b. Mālik24 who narrated that the Prophet said that “my
intercession is for those from my people who die without associating God with
another.”25 Al-Ṭabarī does not make any judgement about which of the four
traditions he prefers, nor does he make any comment about them.

4. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 43:86

Other figures who have God’s permission to intercede appear in al-
Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 43.86. The verse reads:

And those whom some invoke beside God have it not in their power to
intercede (on Judgement Day) for any but such as have (in their
lifetime) borne witness to the truth, and have been aware (that God is
one and unique).

Al-Ṭabarī focusses on the phrase “but such as have (in their lifetime) borne witness
to the truth, and have been aware (that God is one and unique)”. He provides two
traditions on this verse. The first tradition from Mujāhid b. Jabr al-Makki (104/722)
and ʿĪsā b. Maymūn26 states that Jesus, Ezra and the angels, all of whom the
idolaters have worshipped, are not able to intercede with God for anyone unless that
person bears witness to God’s oneness and obeys God and His commands brought
by His prophets. The second tradition from Qatāda (d. 117/735-6) states that the

24 His name is ʿAwf b. Mālik b. Abā (d. 73/693). On him, see Ibid., Vol. 8, p. 168.
26 His full name is ʿĪsā b. Maymūn al-Jurashī al-Makki. He was known as a scholar of tafsīr.
No date of birth or death is known. However, he was from the generation of the Successors of the
Successors. He transmitted traditions from, among others, Mujāhid. See Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī,
idols whom the idolaters have worshipped other than God cannot intercede. Those who can intercede include Jesus, Ezra and the angels who bear witness to the truth and really understand the truth they testify to.\textsuperscript{27} Thus, while the first tradition argues that the phrase “but such as have (in their lifetime) borne witness to the truth, and have been aware (that God is one and unique)” refers to those for whom Jesus, Ezra and the angels can intercede, the second one emphasizes the ability of Jesus, Ezra and the angels to intercede because they have “borne witness to the truth, and have been aware (that God is one and unique)”.

After introducing the two opinions, al-Ṭabarī offers his own opinion. He says:

The closest opinion to the truth on that (matter) is that God the Almighty says that those whom the idolaters have worshipped other than God have no power to intercede with Him for anyone unless that person bears witness to the truth … a declaration of God’s oneness, meaning that he believes in God and truly understands the essence of His oneness … those who do not have the power to intercede are the idols who are worshipped other than God, (which include) all those whom the people of Quraysh worshipped other than God when this verse was revealed, … including the angels and others. These all then are included in His saying that those whom the Quraysh and all the Arabs worship other than God have no power to intercede. God then makes an exception with His saying “but such as have (in their lifetime) borne witness to the truth, and have been aware (that God is one and unique)”, that is, those who bear proper witness and worship God alone…will have the power to intercede with God’s permission, as God says “and they cannot intercede except for him whom He accepts”… so God establishes for angels, Jesus and Ezra their power of intercession…\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
Al-Ṭabarī thus combines the opinions of Mujāhid and Īsā b. Maymūn and Qatāda, that is, God may authorise all those who “bear proper witness and worship God alone” to intercede on behalf of he who “believes in God and truly understands the essence of His oneness.” Those who will receive God’s permission to intercede, according to al-Ṭabarī, include angels, Jesus and Ezra.

5. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretation of Q. 74:48

In his interpretation of verse 74:48, al-Ṭabarī identifies other obstacles that prevent people from receiving intercession. The verse reads:

And so, of no benefit to them could be the intercession of any that would intercede for them.

In dealing with this verse, al-Ṭabarī cites some traditions. The first is from ʿAbdallāh b. Masʿūd (d. 29/650) who said:

Angels, prophets, martyrs, and pious people will intercede so that God will receive their intercession. God then says, “I am the Most Merciful of the merciful!” God removes from Hell most of His creatures… and says, “I am the Most Merciful of the merciful!” One of God’s servants then asks, “O you unbelievers, what has brought you into Hell-fire?” They will answer: “We were not among those who prayed; and neither did we feed the needy; and we were wont to indulge in sinning together with all (the others) who indulged in it; and the Day of Judgement we were wont to call a lie.”

The second half of the tradition refers to four transgressions which are also mentioned in Q. 74:42-46. These four transgressions are likewise repeated in the
second tradition, which is also attributed to Ibn Mas`ūd who said, “No one remains in Hell except (because of) four (things).” Ibn Mas`ūd then mentioned the four transgressions that ensure that the wrongdoers remain in Hell and unable to receive intercession as stated in verse 74:48. The third and fourth traditions that al-Ṭabarī adduces come from Qatāda. However, neither tradition addresses the issue of who will receive intercession, but rather only confirm the possibility of intercession in the hereafter for believers, as discussed earlier.

6. Al-Ṭabarī's Interpretation of Other Relevant Verses

Al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the remaining 19 verses are dominated by repetition and paraphrases of the interpretation of the five verses above, as well as short additional explanations. The following section will summarize his interpretation of these verses. The discussion will be divided into subtopics of intercession such as the possibility of intercession for believers, God’s permission for intercession, who can intercede and those who will not receive intercession.

a. The possibility of intercession for believers even though the verse denies intercession appears in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of verses 2:254 and 39:43-44.32

---

31 The verse reads: “O you who have attained to faith! Spend (in Our way) out of what We have granted you as sustenance ere there comes a Day when there will be no bargaining, and no friendship, and no intercession. And they who deny the truth - it is they who are evildoers!” See al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation in Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi` al-Bayān, Vol III, p. 3-4.

32 The verses read: (43) “And yet, they choose (to worship), side by side with God, (imaginary) intercessors! Say: ‘Why - even though they have no power over anything, and no understanding?’ (44) Say: ‘God’s alone is (the power to bestow the right of) intercession: His
b. That intercession is possible due to God’s sovereignty appears in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of verse 32:4. As a part of God’s sovereignty and will, intercession needs His permission to happen. God may grant permission to intercede to whomever He pleases as in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 10:3.

In the interpretation of verse 34:23, al-Ṭabarī includes God’s friends (awliyā’) among those who may have God’s permission to intercede, as well as all His prophets and obedient servants in his interpretation of Q. 2:255, and fellow believers in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of verse 39:43-44. Elsewhere, al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of verse 53:26 puts angels among those whom God gives permission to intercede.

Those who cannot intercede include the deities, whom people worshipped other than God, as in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 36:23.

(alone) is the dominion over the heavens and the earth; and, in the end, unto Him you will all be brought back.”

33 The verse reads: “It is God who has created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six aeons, and is established on the throne of His almightiness. You have none to protect you from God, and none to intercede for you (on Judgement Day): will you not, then, bethink yourselves?” See, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi` al-Bayān, Vol. XI, p. 57.

34 The verse reads: “Verily, your Lord is God, who has created the heavens and the earth in six aeons, and is established on the throne of His almightiness, governing all that exists. There is none that could intercede with Him unless He grants leave therefore. Thus is God, your Lord: worship, therefore, Him (alone); will you not, then, keep this in mind?” See al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation in Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi` al-Bayān, Vol. XI, p. 60.

35 The verse reads: “No intercession avails with Him save for him whom He permits. Yet, when fear is banished from their hearts, they say: What was it that your Lord said? They say: The Truth. And He is the Sublime, the Great.” See, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi` al-Bayān, Vol. XXII, p. 61.

36 Ibid., Vol. III, pp. 6-7.

37 The verse reads: “For, however many angels there be in the heavens, their intercession can be of no avail at all (to anyone) - except after God has given leave (to intercede) for whomever He wills and with whom He is well-pleased.”


39 The verse reads: “Should I take to worshipping (other) deities beside Him? (But then,) if the Most Gracious should will that harm befall me, their intercession could not in the least avail me, nor could they save me.” See, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi` al-Bayān, Vol. XXII, p. 103.
The idols that can neither harm nor benefit, according to al-Ṭabarī, cannot intercede either in the hereafter as he explains concerning Q. 10:18.  

c. Regarding those who will not receive intercession, al-Ṭabarī is clear that unbelievers (kāfirūn) and idolaters (mushrikūn) are included in this group, as appears in his interpretation of Q. 40:18; Q. 6:51; Q. 7:53; and Q. 6:70.  

Al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 2:123 and 30:13 include Jews among those who will not receive intercession.

---

40 The verse reads: “And they worship other than God that which neither harms them nor benefits them, and they say: ‘These are our intercessors with God!’ Say: ‘Do you (think that you could) inform God of anything in the heavens or on earth that He does not know? Praised be He and high exalted above anything to which men may ascribe a share in His divinity!’” See, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi` al-Bayān, Vol. XI, p. 6.

41 The verse reads: “Hence, warn them of that Day which draws ever nearer, when the hearts will chokingly come up to the throats: no loving friend will the evildoers have, nor any intercessor who would be heeded.” See, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi` al-Bayān, Vol. XXIV, p. 35.

42 The verse reads: “And warn hereby those who fear lest they be gathered unto their Lord with none to protect them from Him or to intercede with Him, so that they might become (fully) conscious of Him.” See, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi` al-Bayān, Vol. VII, p. 127.

43 The verse reads: “Are (the unbelievers) but waiting for the final meaning of that (Day of Judgement) to unfold? (But) on the Day when its final meaning is unfolded, those who had been oblivious before thereof will say: ‘Our Lord’s apostles have indeed told us the truth! Have we, then, any intercessors who could intercede on our behalf? Or could we be brought back (to life) so that we might act otherwise than we were wont to act?’ Indeed, they will have squandered their selves, and all their false imagery will have forsaken them.” See Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi` al-Bayān, Vol. VIII, p. 146.

44 The verse reads: “And leave to themselves all those who, beguiled by the life of this world, have made play and passing delights their religion; but remind (them) herewith that (in the life to come) every human being shall be held in pledge for whatever wrong he has done, and shall have none to protect him from God, and none to intercede for him; and though he offer any conceivable ransom, it shall not be accepted from him. It is (people such as) these that shall be held in pledge for the wrong they have done; for them there is (in the life to come) a draught of burning despair and grievous suffering awaits them because of their persistent refusal to acknowledge the truth.” See Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi` al-Bayān, Vol. VII, p. 127.


46 The verse reads: “For they will have no intercessors in the beings to whom they were wont to ascribe a share in God’s divinity, seeing that (by then) they themselves will have ceased to believe in their erstwhile partners.” See Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi` al-Bayān, Vol. XXI, p. 19. One may think that those who harm prophets refers to Jews, who in the Qur’an are condemned for murdering their prophets wrongfully. See, for example, Q. 2:61; 3:112.
Al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the verses dealing with intercession indicates that he is convinced that intercession is possible despite the fact that literal meaning of some of the verses indicate otherwise.\(^47\) He also states that it is the Prophet Muḥammad who will intercede on behalf of believers (\textit{mu'minūn}) in the hereafter. In addition to the Prophet, there are also some other figures whom God permits to intercede. Meanwhile, others who might receive permission to intercede include all prophets, angels, Jesus, Ezra, God’s friends (\textit{awliyā’}), obedient servants and even believers who can intercede for each other.

In addition to identifying who can intercede, al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the verses mentioned above identifies those who will receive intercession. He is of the opinion that only believers can receive intercession. Even though they have committed grave sins in their life, believers can receive intercession as long as there is still a speck of faith in their hearts. In addition, they must not attribute partners to God.

Intercession, however, is not available for unbelievers and idolaters who associate God with others. The criteria that al-Ṭabarī uses to describe them are disbelieving in God and the Prophet Muḥammad and what he brought from God. Unsurprisingly, learning that Jews, Christians and Sabeans after Muḥammad’s

\(^{47}\) Al-Ṭabarī, in fact, confirms the possibility of intercession in the interpretation of Q. 17:79. The verse reads: “And some part of the night awake for it, a largess for thee. It may be that thy Lord will raise thee to a praised estate.” Al-Ṭabarī discusses intercession when he deals specifically with the phrase “\textit{maqāman mahmūdan} (a praised estate)”. According to al-Ṭabarī, there are two opinions regarding this phrase, which refers to a special rank that the Prophet will acquire in the hereafter. The first opinion is that “\textit{maqāman mahmūdan}” means \textit{shafā`a} (intercession); that the Prophet will have the power to intercede. The second opinion argues that “\textit{maqāman mahmūdan}” means that the Prophet will be seated next to God on His throne (\textit{`arsh}). Of these two opinions, al-Ṭabarī argues that the first opinion is the correct one, on the basis of both the validity of the traditions talking about this topic and the theological argumentation. See Ibid., Vol. XV, pp. 97-100.
prophethood will not receive rewards for their good deeds, as discussed in Chapter Three, they are not included within the group of those who will receive intercession either. The exclusion from intercession for Jews, Christians and Sabaeans can be deduced from al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of verse 43:86. By mentioning that there are people who worship Jesus, Ezra and angels, al-Ṭabarī implicitly refers to Christians who are accused of worshipping Jesus, Jews who claim Ezra is the son of God, and Sabaeans who are described as worshipping angels. Although he does not mention any verses regarding this, al-Ṭabarī seems to connect the accusation to Qur’anic verses which blame Christians for worshipping Jesus, and Jews and Sabaeans for worshipping Ezra and angels respectively.48 Al-Ṭabarī does not explicitly state that Jews, Christians and Sabaeans are categorized as unbelievers. However, his recurrent emphasis on believers being those who believe in God and Muḥammad’s prophethood and what he brought from God necessarily excludes Jews, Christians and Sabaeans from the category.

The Arabs fall into the category of those who associate God with others when they worship idols such as al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā and Manāt. This group appears in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of verse 6:94. The Arab idolaters argue that what they worship will make them closer to God, but this argument, according to al-Ṭabarī, makes them idolaters (mushrikūn) whom God will not forgive, as God says in verses 4:48 and 4:116.49

---

48 For Qur’anic accusations against Christians worshipping Jesus, see Q. 5:17, 5:72 and 5:73. As for Jews worshipping Ezra, see Q. 9:30. For Sabaeans, see al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of 2:62 dealt with previously in Chapter Three.
49 Verse 4:48 reads, “Verily, God does not forgive the ascribing of divinity to aught beside Him, although He forgives any lesser sin unto whomever He wills: for he who ascribes divinity to aught beside God has indeed contrived an awesome sin.” Verse 4:116 reads “Verily, God does not
Al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses on intercession confirms his theological view that non-Muslims will not attain salvation. In his interpretation of Q. 2:62, discussed in Chapter Three, al-Ṭabarī explains that Jews, Christians and Sabaeans will not be rewarded for their righteous deeds and thus will not attain salvation, even though the verse states otherwise. Accordingly, in the interpretation of Q. 11:107, al-Ṭabarī is of the opinion that Hell is eternal even though there is a tradition stating that Hell will be terminated and all its inhabitants will be removed from it. The removal of its inhabitants from Hell, according to al-Ṭabarī, is only possible through intercession. However, his interpretation of Qur’anic verses on intercession demonstrates that intercession is only available for believers: that is, those who believe in God and Muḥammad’s prophethood and what he brought from God. Those who do not believe in God and the Prophet Muḥammad, associate God with others and worship other than God will not receive intercession.

C. Al-Ṭabarī in Context

In order to acquire a broader understanding of al-Ṭabarī’s view on the topic of intercession, this section will situate him within two contexts, internal and external. The internal context is his interpretation of Qur’anic verses which talk about God’s mercy. This has a bearing on intercession, since intercession only occurs when God pleases. The external context is theological discourse on forgive the ascribing of divinity to aught beside Him, although He forgives any lesser sin unto whomever He wills: for those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God have indeed gone far astray.”
intercession at the time of al-Ṭabarī, which arguably influenced him in establishing his position.

1. Al-Ṭabarī’s View on God’s Mercy

In the discussion of intercession, there are still questions that need to be answered. If God is the Most Merciful of the merciful, why does He not accept intercession on behalf of unbelievers? Why does He not forgive them by His mercy and rescue them from Hell? To answer these questions and ascertain al-Ṭabarī’s position, it is necessary to examine his interpretation of the Qur’anic verses dealing with God’s mercy.

A verse from which al-Ṭabarī’s view on God’s mercy can be elicited is Q. 7:156, which contains the phrase, “But My mercy encompasses everything.” Al-Ṭabarī starts his interpretation of this phrase by stating that it means God’s mercy extends to all of His creatures. He then quotes some traditions containing different opinions on the interpretation of the phrase. The first opinion is that although the phrase literally indicates generality, it actually has a specific meaning: that God’s mercy is only for the followers of Muḥammad. Al-Ṭabarī draws this opinion from one tradition from Abū Bakr al-Hudhlī,50 one tradition from Ibn Jurayj, one tradition from Qatāda, and three traditions from Ibn ’Abbās. One of the traditions from Ibn ’Abbās clearly states that God’s mercy is only for this umma (those who believe in Muḥammad’s prophethood). The traditions from al-Hudhlī, Qatāda and

Ibn Jurayj mention the wish of Satan, Jews and Christians to be included in the word “everything” (kulla shay'). However, referring to the verse following 7:156, these three interpreters, according to al-Ṭabarī, argue that Satan, Jews and Christians are excluded from God’s mercy.\(^52\)

The second opinion is that the phrase “My mercy encompasses everything” applies in the world for both the pious and the unbelievers, but in the hereafter for the pious only. This opinion is expressed in a tradition from the Successors Qatāda and Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. The third opinion is that the word “mercy” means repentance, which relates to the event described in the previous verse when Moses asks for forgiveness.\(^53\) This opinion is expressed in a tradition from Ibn Wahb.\(^54\)

Regarding these three opinions, al-Ṭabarī agrees with the first opinion that God’s mercy is only for the followers of Muḥammad. In addition, al-Ṭabarī refers to the conditions that are mentioned in verse 7:156-157 regarding those who will receive God’s mercy, that is “those who are conscious of Me and spend in charity,”

---

\(^{51}\) Verse 157 of sūra 7 reads: “those who shall follow the (last) Apostle, the unlettered Prophet whom they shall find described in the Torah that is with them, and (later on) in the Gospel: (the Prophet) who will enjoin upon them the doing of what is right and forbid them the doing of what is wrong, and make lawful to them the good things of life and forbid them the bad things, and lift from them their burdens and the shackles that were upon them. Those, therefore, who shall believe in him, and honour him, and succour him, and follow the light that has been bestowed from on high through him - it is they that shall attain to a happy state.”

\(^{52}\) Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi` al-Bayān, Vol. IX, pp. 54-55.

\(^{53}\) Verse 7:155 reads: ‘And Moses chose out of his people seventy men to come (and pray for forgiveness) at a time set by Us. Then, when violent trembling seized them, he prayed: ‘O my Lord! Had You so willed, You would have destroyed them ere this, and me (with them). Will You destroy us for what the weak-minded among us have done? (All) this is but a trial from You, whereby You allow to go astray whom You will, and guide aright whom You will. You are our Guardian: grant us, then, forgiveness and have mercy on us, for You are the best of all forgivers!’”

and who believe in Our messages” (verse 156) and “those who shall follow the (last) Apostle, the unlettered Prophet” (verse 157).

From the above, it is seen that al-Ṭabarī’s position on the topic of intercession is in accordance with his opinion on God’s mercy. As intercession in the hereafter, according to al-Ṭabarī, is only for those who believe in God and Muḥammad and what he brought from God, God’s mercy is also only available for those who believe in His messages and follow the Prophet Muḥammad.

2. Contemporary Discourse on Intercession

The third/ninth century when al-Ṭabarī wrote his tafsīr was a flourishing period of Islamic thought; a time when Muslim scholars from different schools of thought exchanged their ideas. In particular, al-Ṭabarī lived during a period when there was still an intellectual battle between the Mu`tazila and the Traditionists. While the Mu`tazila championed rationalist thinking, the Traditionists advocated the authority of traditions over reason (ra’y).

One well-known event that occurred

55 Ibid., pp. 55-56.
56 For practical reason, I follow Nimrod Hurvitz in calling the group which opposed the Mu`tazila the “Traditionist”. See Nimrod Hurvitz, The Formation of Hanbalism: Piety into Power (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002). Elsewhere, Abrahamov distinguishes between scripturalists, traditionists and traditionalists as rationalist adversaries. See Binyamin Abrahamov, “Scripturalist and Traditionalist Theology”, in Sabine Schmidtké (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 263-264. Other names used include orthodox Muslims, Shari’a-minded or Jama’i-Sunni. See Marshall Hodgson, The Venture of Islam, Vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 350-351. In short, there was no specific name of the group who opposed the Mu`tazila, nor was there only one group which disagreed with Mu`tazili thought. These groups put the authority of revelation (wahy), be it the Qur’an or the Prophet’s traditions, ahead of reason. Before al-Ash’ārī came to prominence and formulated what later is called Sunnism, these groups are said to have been dominated by the thought of the Hanafites and Hanbalites. See W. Montgomery Watt, The Formative Period of Islamic Thought, pp. 142.
57 There were, of course, different views within the Traditionist camp on the use of tradition and reason, for instance, between al-Shafi’i and Ibn Ḥanbal and their followers. Al-Shafi’i used reason in the form of analogy (qiyyūs) when there were no relevant Qur’anic verses or tradition. Ibn Ḥanbal, however, was more reluctant to use reason. On this, see, for instance, Nimrod Hurvitz, The
before the time of al-Ṭabarî was the *miḥna* (inquisition) instituted by the Abbasid caliph al-Maʿmūn in 215/830. The *miḥna* targeted those who disagreed with Muʿtazila doctrines, especially regarding the doctrine of the created nature of the Qurʾān. Aḥmad b. Hanbal was among the prominent scholars who were imprisoned for his refusal to accept the doctrine.

Likewise, although on a lesser scale of tension, there was also a disagreement between the Muʿtazila and the Traditionists on the issue of intercession. The Muʿtazilites denied intercession since it contradicted the concept of divine justice which was one of their principal doctrines. To Muʿtazilites, following the Qadarites (a Muslim sect which advocated free-will), humans are granted free will and freedom of action, and as a consequence, they are responsible for their deeds. They will receive reward for their good deeds and punishment for their bad ones. Intercession is not compatible with divine justice since it is obligatory for God to reward good doers and to punish evil doers. By means of intercession, wrongdoers will escape punishment, and this conflicts with God’s justice.\(^5^8\) However, according to al-Ashʿārī in his *Maqālāt*, not all Muʿtazilites rejected intercession. Some Muʿtazilites argued that the intercession of the Prophet on behalf of believers (muʿminūn) is possible. Yet, it is not in the form of

---

forgiveness for sinners or removal from Hell, but in the form of the increasing grace for the believers.⁵⁹ Later Mu’tazilites, as one of its authoritative theologians Qāḍī `Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1024) states, also accepted intercession in the case of sinners who repented before death.⁶⁰

The Traditionists, however, held a different view on intercession. They maintained that intercession is possible for Muslims, even for those who have committed grave sins, under two conditions: as long as there is still faith in their hearts and they do not associate God with others.⁶¹ As stated in the introduction of this chapter, included in this group were the Hanafites, the Hanbalites, the Murji’ites and the Muslim mainstream, which eventually was called Sunnism.⁶²

Furthermore, the Traditionist’s idea of intercession, according to Wensinck, also functioned to defend their preference of predetermination against the attack of the Mu’tazilites, which favoured free will. When the Traditionists found it difficult to respond to the question of the fate of predestined sinners, the intercession, according to Wensinck, was an answer from the Traditionists in which, by the intercession, God can “fix the course of … the fate of each individual” because He

---

⁶⁰ Qāḍī `Abd al-Jabbār b. Aḥmad, Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Khamsa (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 1996), p. 691. Furthermore, `Abd al-Jabbār disagrees with the authority of the tradition about intercession for grave sinners since it is not a sound tradition. Even if it were a sound tradition, it comes from an isolated (aḥad) transmission, which, according to him, does not count as a good argument (ḥujja).

The tradition, according to `Abd al-Jabbār, also contradicts other traditions of the Prophet saying that certain wrongdoers will be eternally in Hell. Thus, the meaning of the tradition “my intercession is for grave sinners from my umma”, he says, is for those who repent. See Ibid., pp. 690-691.

⁶¹ This doctrine, for instance, appears in Abū Ḥanīfa’s al-Fiqh al-Akbar and Abū al-Hasan al-Ash’arī’s al-Ibāna. See footnote no. 4 and 7. See also Abū al-Ḥasan ’Alī b. Ismā’īl al-Ash’arī, Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyin, Vol. 2, p. 166. Al-Ash’arī calls those who have this opinion the “People of Tradition and Righteous” (ahl al-sunna wa al-istiṣqāmā).

⁶² W. Montgomery Watt, The Formative Period of Islamic Thought, pp. 138, 141, 269, 293. Watt further argues that Sunni doctrine on intercession, and some other issues on faith (īmān), was influenced by Abū Ḥanīfa and the Ḥanafites. See, Ibid., p. 138.
may remove the sinners from Hell. However, this mainstream group did not talk about the possibility of predestined non-Muslims receiving intercession on this basis, as well as on the basis of God’s mercy and forgiveness.

There was another extreme position held by the Khawārij, who totally rejected intercession. This rejection is due to their basic doctrine that those who commit sins are unbelievers and are excluded from the *umma*. Since they are unbelievers, there is no possible intercession for them. They will be placed in Hell and abide therein eternally.

Al-Ṭabarī’s position on intercession is similar to that of the Traditionists. As we have seen, al-Ṭabarī holds the opinion that Muslim sinners will receive intercession in the hereafter; however, polytheists (*mushrikūn*) and unbelievers (*kuffār*) will not. In his treatise on theology *al-Tabṣīr fī Ma`ālim al-Dīn*, al-Ṭabarī confirms that the Prophet will intercede on behalf of his *umma* to God, reiterating a tradition he mentions in his interpretation of Q. 2:48 in which the Prophet said, “My intercession is for grave sinners from my *umma*.” Moreover, al-Ṭabarī maintains that those who may act as intercessors are Muslims as well as authorised figures such as the Prophet Muḥammad, angels and friends of God.

The inclusion of figures other than the Prophet Muḥammad as possible intercessors by the Traditionists and al-Ṭabarī as well has similarity in the concept of intercession in Christian tradition. Early Christian literature, according to Wensinck, states that angels, prophets, patriarchs, apostles and martyrs will be able

64 W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, pp. 15 and 140-141.
to intercede on behalf of those who committed sins in their life.\textsuperscript{66} Wensinck also mentions traditions on the possibility of angels, martyrs and prophets to intercede can be found in al-Bukhārī’s \textit{Ṣaḥīḥ}.\textsuperscript{67} However, Wensinck is not clear whether this similarity was influenced by Christian traditions. Likewise, it is also difficult to ascertain that al-Ṭabarī’s idea of intercession was influenced by external traditions such as Judaism or Christianity although it is plausible given the fact that the verse 2:48, for instance, describes the Jews’ wish to receive intercession from their ancestors. Even though al-Ṭabarī was also quite familiar with Jewish and Christian traditions through his acquaintance and incorporation of Biblical stories (\textit{isrāʾīliyyāt}) in his \textit{tafsīr}, however, it is suffice to say that al-Ṭabarī might have taken his view from the Traditionists rather than from other religious traditions.

D. Conclusion

As in the case of the fate of virtuous non-Muslims and the eternity of Hell, al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses dealing with intercession further confirms his opinion that non-Muslims cannot be saved in the hereafter. From the above study, we can conclude that although there are some verses which literally deny intercession, al-Ṭabarī confirms that intercession is possible but only with God’s permission. By adducing two traditions from the Prophet, the literal meaning of verse 2:48, which denies intercession, is understood to allow intercession by the Prophet for grave sinners among believers (\textit{muʾminūn}). Al-Ṭabarī introduces

\textsuperscript{66} A.J. Wensinck, \textit{The Muslim Creed}, p. 180.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., p. 182.
various contexts for the interpretation of other verses on intercession by citing some traditions indicating the possibility that Jesus, Ezra and angels will intercede. Arguably, these various contexts introduced by al-Ṭabarī have a wider implication, that is, negating the possibility that non-Muslims, namely Jews, Christians, Sabaeans and pagans, will receive intercession. Only believers (muʾminūn) can receive intercession, according to al-Ṭabarī, as long as they do not associate God with others. Unbelievers and polytheists will not be able to receive intercession. Furthermore, al-Ṭabarī explains that those whom God allows to intercede include the Prophet Muḥammad, all His prophets, angels, Jesus, Ezra, God’s friends (awliyāʾ), His obedient servants, and all believers. Idols whom unbelievers and pagans worshipped will not be able to intercede, neither will unbelievers.
CHAPTER SIX
Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretive Strategies in the Interpretation of Qur’anic Verses on the Salvation of Religious Others

A. Introduction

As discussed in the preceding three chapters, al-Ṭabarī’s position in the topic of salvation for non-Muslims is clear. He was in favour of the idea that non-Muslims will not be saved, an idea which conforms to Sunnī mainstream belief at the time. This can be observed from his view that non-Muslims will not receive rewards in the hereafter for their righteous deeds, even though verse 2:62 literally opens the possibility of non-Muslims being saved. The other possible way of non-Muslims being saved is related to the topic of the eternity of Hell. Verses 6:128 and 11:107 indicate that Hell might cease if God wills. When it ceases, the people of Hell could be removed from it. In addition, verse 78:23 shows that the inhabitants of Hell might dwell therein for a finite time. However, al-Ṭabarī insists that Hell is eternal and its inhabitants will abide eternally. The last topic that was discussed regarding the salvation of non-Muslims is whether or not non-Muslims will receive intercession. Even though Q. 2:48 says that there will be no intercession, verse 2:255 indicates that intercession is possible with God’s consent. Thus, there is a hope that God’s mercy and forgiveness will win over His anger and allow non-Muslims to receive intercession. In this regard, al-Ṭabarī holds the idea that only Muslims who will receive intercession.
Since a literal reading of the verses mentioned above generally opens the possibility that non-Muslims might attain salvation, al-Ṭabarī employs certain strategies to support his contrary view. This chapter will discuss these interpretive strategies. It will also locate them within the development of Islamic scholarship, especially the field of Qur’anic exegesis, so as to identify any influences this scholarship had on al-Ṭabarī’s methodology.

B. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretive Strategies

In his interpretation of the Qur’anic verses regarding three avenues of possible salvation for non-Muslims, there are certain strategies that al-Ṭabarī employs. These are philological analysis, the occasion of revelation (sabab al-nuzūl), abrogation (naskh), silence expressing an opinion, weighing conflicting opinions (tarjīḥ), diverting lexical meaning, making a case from the literal meaning of a verse (ʿamm wa khāṣṣ), presenting different contexts of interpretation, and the incorporation of traditions. These are dealt with in what follows.

1. Philological analysis

One of the features of al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr is his use of lexical and philological analysis.1 An example of this occurs in his interpretation of Q. 2:62, where he elucidates the meaning of the names of religious groups mentioned at the beginning of the verse – especially the Jews, the Christians and the Sabaeans - by

tracing the roots of the names. Thus, for the Jews, al-Ṭabarī states that the word 
*hādū* is synonymous with *tābū*, which means ‘they repent’. For the Christians, al-
Ṭabarī explains that the word *naṣārā* is a plural form of *naṣran* which etymologically is derived from the word *naṣara* meaning ‘to help’. For the Sabaeans, al-Ṭabarī says that the word *ṣābiʿūn* is a plural form of *ṣābiʿ* which is the active participle of the verb *ṣabaʿa*, which means ‘to turn’.

Al-Ṭabarī employs eighteen traditions to explain the definition of the names of the three religious groups. Of these eighteen traditions, one deals with the name of the Jews, stating that they are called Jews (*yahūd*) because of their saying “*innā hudnā ilayk*” (we have turned unto You).² Al-Ṭabarī quotes four traditions about the Christians that support the notion that they are called *naṣārā* because they inhabited a land called Nāṣira (Nazareth). Thirteen traditions mention the Sabaeans and contain definitions of who they are: people who leave their religion for another or who do not belong to any religion; people who worship angels, pray facing certain directions (*qibla*) and recite the Psalms; and people who belong to a religious group among the People of the Book.

Other philological analyses also appear in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of verses about the eternity of Hell and about intercession. In his interpretation of verse 78:23, for instance, al-Ṭabarī elaborates the meaning of *ahqāb* (ages). Here, he mentions three opinions on the meaning of *ḥuqb*, the singular form of *ahqāb*. The

² This phrase is a part of Q. 7:156, which reads: “And ordain for us in this world that which is good, and in the hereafter (that which is good) we have turned unto You. He said: I smite with My punishment whom I will, and My mercy embraces all things, therefore I shall ordain it for those who ward off (evil) and pay the poor due, and those who believe Our revelations.”
first opinion is that a *huqab* is a period of three hundred years. The second opinion says a *huqab* lasts for eighty years. The third opinion is that a *huqab* is a period of seventy thousand years. These three meanings of *huqab* are derived from several traditions that al-Ṭabarī adduces.

Elsewhere, in the interpretation of verses dealing with intercession, al-Ṭabarī employs philological analysis in his interpretation of verse 2:48. This analysis is used to elaborate the meaning of the word *shafā`a* (intercession). However, in contrast to his elaboration of the meanings of the names of the three religious groups in Q. 2:62 and *ahqāb* in Q. 78:23, al-Ṭabarī does not adduce traditions when explaining the word *shafā`a* but rather employs a purely linguistic approach.

Philological analysis was not new by the time al-Ṭabarī started to write his *tafsīr*. As discussed earlier, for instance, in Chapter Three on the fate of virtuous non-Muslims, Qur’anic exegetes before al-Ṭabarī had applied this method. Even this method was the major tools in the interpretation of the Qur’an. As mentioned earlier, al-Ṭabarī’s predecessors such as Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 104/722), Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778), and al-Farrā (d. 207/822) applied this method. In these

---

3 Abū Ja’far Muhammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān `an Ta`wil Āyāt al-Qur’ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1987), Vol XXX, p. 8. The period of a day in the hereafter being equal to a thousand years of the world is based on Q. 32:5, which reads: “He rules (all) affairs from the heavens to the earth: then it ascends unto Him in a day, whereof the measure is a thousand years of what you reckon.”

4 Ibid.


works, exegetes mostly focus on explaining the vocabularies of Qur’anic verses. This philological interpretation was a result of the contemporary need of community (umma) to understand the words used in the Qurʾān. The geographical spread of Islam to include non-Arabic-speaking areas brought about a requirement for exegetes to explain Qur’anic verses mainly from the perspective of lexical issues.\(^8\)

In fact, philological interpretation of the Qurʾān had already started during the period of the Prophet Muḥammad when he explained the meaning of some Qur’anic terms such as \textit{ẓulm} (wrongdoing) in Q. 6:82. This verse, which reads “Those who believe and obscure not their belief by wrongdoing (\textit{ẓulm}), theirs is safety; and they are rightly guided”, apparently caused some alarm among the Companions of the Prophet since they were not convinced that their belief was not mixed with wrongdoing. The Prophet thus explained that \textit{ẓulm} in Q. 6:82 is \textit{shirk} (ascribing partners to God) by referring to verse 31:13.\(^9\) The practice of explaining the vocabulary of the Qurʾān continued to be commonly applied by early exegetes from the period of the Companions (ṣaḥāba), the Successors (tābiʿūn) and the Successors of Successors (tābiʿ al-tābiʿīn).

What is new in al-Ṭabarī’s \textit{tafsīr}, however, is that he adduces several traditions to justify his philological analysis. His use of traditions is arguably due

---


to the influence of contemporary mainstream Islamic scholarship, which saw the employment of traditions in the fields of law, history and theology. The compilation of traditions reached its culmination in the third/ninth century and eventually resulted in the six canonical collections. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that al-Ṭabarī also employed traditions in his tafsīr, even when only explaining Qur’anic vocabulary. As we have seen earlier, when he finds a tradition, either about the meaning of a term in a verse, the meaning of the verse itself or about anything related to the verse, he will adduce the tradition into his interpretation.

However, al-Ṭabarī does not only use grammatical analysis whenever he finds a tradition regarding a particular verse. For example, when interpreting 2:62, as we shall see, he bases his opinion on a tradition dealing with the occasion of revelation. Indeed, if al-Ṭabarī restricted himself only to linguistic analysis, he would be obliged to accept the possible salvation of non-Muslims since the literal meaning of verses often indicates this.

2. The occasion of revelation (sabab al-nuzūl)

The second strategy employed by al-Ṭabarī in his interpretation of Qur’anic verses dealing with the salvation of non-Muslims is his inclusion of the occasion of revelation. This strategy appears in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 2:62 on the fate of virtuous non-Muslims; and his interpretation of Qur’anic verses on intercession, in particular in verse 6:94.

In dealing with Q. 2:62, al-Ṭabarī adduces two traditions transmitted from al-Suddī and Mujāhid respectively. The traditions, as we have seen in Chapter
The two traditions are considered to mark the occasion of the revelation of Q. 2:62 on the basis of the statements they contain. The first statement is “this verse was revealed concerning Salmān al-Fārisī’s colleagues” (nazala hādhihi ‘l-āya ‘an aṣḥābi Salmān al-Fārisī), which is found at the beginning of al-Suddī’s tradition and followed by the story. The second statement occurs at the end of the story of Salmān, “Then God then revealed this verse” (fa anzala l-llahu hādhihi al-āya), which appears in response to Salmān’s distress at Muḥammad’s judgement that the Christian monks would suffer in Hell. This second statement appears in both al-Suddī’s and Mujāhid’s traditions.

Turning now to the topic of intercession, al-Ṭabarī adduces a tradition at the end of his interpretation of verse 6:94, narrated by al-Qāsim on the authority of Ḥikrima al-Barbarī (d. 105/724). It states that the verse was revealed concerning al-
Naḍr b. al-Ḥarth who reportedly said that al-Lāt and al-‘Uzzā would intercede for him. The verse was revealed to reject his expectation.¹⁰

In the case of al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 2:62, the occasion of revelation serves to validate al-Ṭabarī’s position on the fate of non-Muslims. It limits the general meaning of the verse to a specific understanding. The occasion of revelation concerning the story of Salmān and his former monk colleagues offers al-Ṭabarī a device with which to justify his conviction that belief (īmān) in God must also include attestation to Muḥammad’s prophethood and adhering to what he brought. Hence, those Jews, Christians and Sabaeans who knew about Muḥammad would not be doomed but rather could attain salvation should they believe in his prophethood and what he brought.

Less significant is the function of the occasion of revelation in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 6:94. As with Q. 2:62, verse 6:94 does not contain any legal matters. More importantly, al-Ṭabarī’s position on the topic of intercession had already been determined in his interpretation of Q. 2:48, where he explains that although intercession is possible for Muslims who commit grave sins it is not possible for non-Muslims. The adducing of the occasion of revelation of Q. 6:94, merely provides al-Ṭabarī with a different context in which to reveal those who will not receive intercession. In other words, the occasion of revelation in Q. 6:94 functions as an informative statement.

Interestingly, the traditions on the occasion of revelation in both verses present problems to al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation. The traditions about Salmān in the

interpretation of Q. 2:62 which justify al-Ṭabarī’s position are not “sound” (ṣaḥīḥ) traditions. According to Zaghlūl, who annotated al-Wāḥidī’s Asbāb Nuzūl al-Qur’ān, the traditions from al-Suddī and Mujāhid are considered mursal, that is, their chains of transmission (isnād) are interrupted since both al-Suddī and Mujāhid were Successors and they fail to mention a transmitter from among the Prophet’s Companions linking them to the Prophet. Although there are various opinions about the acceptability of such traditions, mursalḥadīths are considered to be weak (ḍa`īf).

Equally questionable is the tradition narrated by `Ikrima and concerning al-Naḍr b. al-Ḥarth which al-Ṭabarī claims to be the occasion of the revelation of Q. 6:94. First, it does not have any connection to the Prophet, does not state that the tradition comes from the Prophet, and does not indicate how the Prophet was involved in the story. Indeed, it is probably just `Ikrima’s opinion. Second, the source of tradition is unknown. Al-Ṭabarī gets the tradition on the authority of `Ikrima. He was Ibn `Abbās’ slave and transmitted traditions from, among others, Ibn `Abbās, `Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, Ḥasan b. `Alī and Abū Hurayra. However, `Ikrima did not transmit the tradition concerning al-Naḍr b. al-Ḥarth from any of these Companions; there is no information where `Ikrima received the tradition from. Third, `Ikrima was a divisive figure. Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī in his Tahdhib devotes

---


almost seven pages to recording numerous opinions about ʿIkrima without reaching a clear conclusion. Some accused him of telling lies against Ibn ʿAbbās and having been inclined towards the Khawārij, while others simply said he was trustworthy.\footnote{Ibid. p. 267-273.}

Indeed, al-Ṭabarī appears not to care overly about the validity of the traditions he presents. He makes use of traditions available to him, chooses what he considers relevant, and whenever possible uses them to justify his own opinions. Al-Ṭabarī was arguably influenced by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) in his use of weak ḥadīths. Living in the Abbasid era that once made Muʿtazilism the state ideology especially in the reign of al-Maʿmūn, Ibn Ḥanbal was prominent in rejecting the unlimited use of reason (raʿy) that was proposed by the Muʿtazilites. He shared a similar view to al-Shāfiʿī on the importance of ḥadīth, however, in the event of there being no sound ḥadīth to use in extracting a law from the text, while al-Shāfiʿī chose analogical reasoning (qiyyās), Ibn Ḥanbal preferred weak ḥadīths rather than reason.\footnote{On this, see Marshal Hodgson, \textit{The Venture of Islam} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), Vol. 1, p. 319. See also Wael B. Hallaq, \textit{A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunni Uṣūl al-Fiqh} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 32. See also H. Laoust, ‘Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’, \textit{The Encyclopaedia of Islam}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition, Vol. I, p. 275. For further discussion on the relationship between al-Shāfiʿī and Ibn Ḥanbal, see Nimrod Hurvitz, \textit{The Formation of Hanbalism: Piety into Power} (London: Routledge/Curzon, 2002), pp. 103-112.} Al-Ṭabarī appears to follow the same procedure. As long there is a tradition, regardless of its authenticity, he will use it in interpreting a Qur’anic verse.\footnote{Regardless of the brutal treatment he experienced from Ibn Ḥanbal’s followers, al-Ṭabarī is not reluctant to follow Ibn Ḥanbal’s method in treating traditions. For an account of the conflict between al-Ṭabarī and the followers of Ibn Ḥanbal, see our discussion in Chapter Two. See also Franz Rosenthal, ‘The Life and Works of al-Ṭabarī’, pp. 63 and 69-78. Even though focusing only on traditions from Ibn ʿAbbās that al-Ṭabarī adduces in his \textit{tafsīr}, Berg concludes that most of these traditions are of questionable validity. He follows the path of previous scholars who were sceptical about the traditions used in the field of law such as Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht. See Herbert Berg, \textit{The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam}.}
Al-Ṭabarî’s acceptance of weak traditions also confirms Birkeland’s argument that the requirements to authenticate exegetical traditions is less rigorous than legal ones.\footnote{Harris Birkeland, \textit{The Lord Guideth: Studies on Primitive Islam} (Oslo: I Kommisjon Hos H. Aschehoug & Co., 1956), p. 9.} Birkeland observes this issue from two perspectives: first, the reliability of transmitters is less significant in the exegetical traditions than the legal ones. Second, the chains of transmission (\textit{isnād}) is not required to be perfect, that they must reach the Prophet or Companions.\footnote{Ibid.} Therefore, we find, for instance, in al-Ṭabarî’s \textit{tafsīr} a bulk of traditions traced back only to the Successors or even the Successors of Successors. Even more radical is Berg’s argument that most traditions in al-Ṭabarî’s \textit{tafsīr} which are attributed to Ibn `Abbās are not originally from him. His conclusion is deduced from the analysis of the \textit{isnād} which assumes that they are fabricated to connect later exegetes’ opinion to the Prophet through the authority of Ibn `Abbās.\footnote{Herbert Berg, \textit{The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam}, pp. 226-229.}

3. Abrogation (\textit{naskh})

An important strategy that al-Ṭabarî employs in the interpretation of Q. 2:62 is adducing a tradition about the abrogation of the verse. The tradition mentions Ibn `Abbās’ statement that Q. 2:62 has been abrogated by Q. 3:85 which reads: “[a]nd whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and he will be a loser in the hereafter.” Interestingly, he mentions Ibn `Abbās’ opinion that Q. 2:62 is abrogated by Q. 3:85, but he does not discuss it. As we shall
see, al-Ṭabarī seems not to be in favour of the idea of the abrogation of the verse that emerges in the tradition from Ibn `Abbās.

Elsewhere, however, when commenting on verse 3:85, al-Ṭabarī simply says that whoever seeks a religion other than Islam will not be accepted. He states that there are two opinions about this verse. The first is that Q. 3:85 relates to the verse about the ḥajj (pilgrimage). Before the obligation of ḥajj, every religious community in the time of Muḥammad claimed to be Muslim. God then revealed the obligation of the ḥajj to test their commitment to Islam. The second opinion is that this verse abrogates verse 2:62. Al-Ṭabarī does not choose either version and leaves the decision to the reader.²⁰

Al-Ṭabarī’s decision not to discuss Ibn `Abbās’ tradition on the abrogation of Q. 2:62 by Q. 3:85 is consistent with his stance on the abrogation of Qur’anic verses in general. This is implied in his interpretation of Q. 2:106 which reads: "[s]uch of Our revelations as We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring (in place) one better of the like thereof. Do you not know that God is able to do all things?" This literally states that any revealed verse which is to be abrogated or forgotten will be replaced with a better or similar one. In his comment on this verse, al-Ṭabarī states that no Qur’anic verse is better than another and that they are all equal. In so doing, al-Ṭabarī claims that the phrase “[w]e bring (in place) one better of the like thereof” in Q. 2:106 means the replacement of ruling (tabdīl al-ḥukm),

---
not the replacement of verse (tabdīl al-āya).21 This implies that there is no verse replacing one to another, but a ruling of a verse might change.

Al-Ṭabarī further comments that the replacement of a ruling might occur in connection with what is considered “lawful (ḥalāl) becoming unlawful (ḥarām) or vice versa, or [what once was legally] unregulated becoming prohibited or vice versa.”22 One example confirming his opinion that abrogation only applies to verses relating to legal matters is his maintaining that the obligatory status (fard) of performing the night prayer (tahājud) for all Muslims as verse 17:79 states23 is now eased and that it is only a voluntary practice (sunna). He explains that the reason for this replacement is to ease and reduce the burdens of Muslims.24 Therefore, according to al-Ṭabarī, abrogation only applies to verses relate to legal issues or convey commands or prohibitions.25

The verses that contain narrative statements (khabar), according to al-Ṭabarī, can neither abrogate nor be abrogated.26 He does not, in fact, explicitly say that Q. 2:62 has not been abrogated, but he clearly asserts that the verse contain a

---

21 There is no unanimous agreement among scholars, especially in the field of Islamic jurisprudence, as to what the word nasakha means. According to different scholars, the word could mean removal, replacement, alteration or withdrawal. Each has consequences, from the perspectives of the createdness of the Qur’ān, the applicability and durability of Qur’anic laws, the loss of some Qur’anic verses, and so on. On this issue, see, for example, John Barton, “Those are the High-Flying Cranes” in Andrew Rippin (ed.), The Qur’ān: Formative Interpretation, pp. 354-366.


23 The verse reads: “And some part of the night awake (and pray) for it, a largess for thee. It may be that thy Lord will raise thee to a praised estate.”


narrative statement. Since it contains narrative statement, Q. 2:62 thus cannot be abrogated. This might explain why al-Ṭabarī refrains from discussing Ibn `Abbās’ opinion on the abrogation of the verse and neither supports nor rejects it. Why al-Ṭabarī should cite the tradition from Ibn `Abbās, though, is uncertain.

Another consideration related to the abrogation of verse 2:62 is that al-Ṭabarī also declines to elaborate further on verse 5:69, which is almost identical to verse 2:62 but with small differences in structure and content. Verse 5:69 reads:

Verily! Those who believe, and those who are Jews, and Sabaeans, and Christians; whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does right, there shall no fear come upon them, neither shall they grieve.

In his commentary on this verse, al-Ṭabarī writes that ‘those who believe’ believe in God and Muḥammad, namely Muslims. Regarding the Jews, the Christians and the Sabaeans, al-Ṭabarī only states that they must believe in God and the Last Day, (interestingly without mentioning the requirement to believe in Muḥammad), and perform good deeds in order not to fear their fate on the Day of Judgement or regret their past deeds in the world. However, in fact, he states that he has sufficiently explained the issue in the previous verse. It is understood that al-Ṭabarī here is referring to his comments on verse 2:62.

However, the question remains as to why he does not further elaborate on Q. 5:69. Al-Ṭabarī might have been aware that verse 5:69 was revealed after verse 3:85 and this might explain his apparent lack of support for the tradition from Ibn

---

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 201.
‘Abbas which says that verse 2:62 is abrogated by verse 3:85. Al-Ṭabarī also
chooses not to explain the repetition of verse 2:62 in verse 5:69, since this might
raise the question as to why a topic that had already been abrogated appears again
in a verse that was revealed later. Al-Ṭabarī apparently would rather argue on the
basis of the occasion of revelation, as he explains in his interpretation of Q. 2:62,
rather than on the basis of the abrogation of the verse.

4. Silence expresses an opinion

One of the Western scholar’s critiques of al-Ṭabarī is that he was merely a
compiler of exegetical traditions. As mentioned in the chapter on his biography,
Brockelmann claims that nothing new appears in al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr because he was
simply a compiler of previous interpretation. Similarly, Cooper characterizes al-
Ṭabarī as “an encyclopaedist” and “a systematiser” of the opinions proposed by his
predecessors. Other scholars oppose this idea and claim that al-Ṭabarī does indeed
offer his own opinions. Although he might not explicitly state his opinion, this can
be discerned from his selection and arrangement of traditions, as Powers argues,

29 McAuliffe simply states that al-Ṭabarī rejects the abrogation of Verse 2:62 without,
unfortunately, giving any argument showing how she concludes this and where she derives al-
Ṭabarī’s rejection from. See Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Qur’anic Christians, p. 119. Sirry,
meanwhile, concludes that al-Ṭabarī rejects Ibn ʿAbbās’ opinion of abrogation. Sirry only refers to
al-Ṭabarī’s last statement on the interpretation of the verse that “God does not discriminate among
His creatures” who perform righteous deeds. According to Sirry, this means al-Ṭabarī believes on
divine justice which leaves the possibility of salvation of non-Muslims open. However, Sirry ignores
al-Ṭabarī’s statement on al-Suddī’s tradition regarding the requirement of non-Muslims after Muḥammad to believe in him and what he brought. See Mun’im Sirry, Scriptural Polemics, p. 59.
30 Carl Brockelmann, Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1943), I:142,
31 John Cooper, The Commentary on the Qurʾān by Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-
32 David Powers, “The Islamic Law of Inheritance Reconsidered: A New Reading of Q.
4:12b”, Studia Islamica, 55, 1982, p. 71. A similar strategy also appears in al-Ṭabarī’s Tārīkh, where
or it can be inferred from his silence regarding interpretations of his preceding exegetes, as Birkeland proposes.\footnote{Harris Birkeland, *The Lord Guideth*, p. 41.}

Al-Ṭabarî’s silence regarding certain tradition that he adduces can also be found in his interpretation of Q. 2:62. As discussed earlier, three traditions adduced by al-Ṭabarî deal directly with the interpretation of the verse. The first two traditions deal with the occasion of revelation. Al-Ṭabarî first adduces a tradition transmitted by al-Suddî which contains the story about Salmān and his Christian companions and which concludes that those who know of Muḥammad but do not believe in him as a prophet are doomed. After adducing al-Suddî’s tradition, regardless of its validity, al-Ṭabarî continues to argue that the Jews, the Christians and the Sabaeans who have heard about Muḥammad but deny him and the truth he brought are not included in the group whose righteousness will be rewarded. After giving his opinion on this tradition, al-Ṭabarî adduces another tradition transmitted from Mujāhid. This tradition is almost identical to al-Suddî’s tradition, but offers a more condensed version of it. Though he discusses the tradition from al-Suddî, al-Ṭabarî does not comment at all on Mujāhid’s tradition. However, the adducing of Mujāhid’s tradition is most likely intended to reinforce al-Suddî’s tradition and to underpin al-Ṭabarî’s view that non-Muslims must believe in Muḥammad in order to be saved.

After presenting Mujāhid’s tradition, al-Ṭabarî adduces the third tradition on Q. 2:62. As we have seen earlier, the tradition is transmitted from Ibn `Abbās.
and argues that Q. 2:62 has been abrogated by Q. 3:85. As with his treatment of Mujāhid’s tradition, al-Ṭabarī does not offer any comment on Ibn ʿAbbās’ tradition. He simply states that Ibn ʿAbbās was of the opinion that Q. 2:62 has been abrogated, meaning that the Jews, the Christians and the Sabaeans mentioned in the verse would not be saved. However, al-Ṭabarī’s silence on Ibn ʿAbbās’ tradition is arguably different in character from his silence on Mujāhid’s tradition. Al-Ṭabarī appears not to agree with Ibn ʿAbbās. This can be seen in his statement that Q. 2:62 is a narrative (khabar) verse, and according to al-Ṭabarī’s view on the concept of abrogation (naskh), a khabar verse cannot be abrogated.

The above discussion would seem to confirm that al-Ṭabarī’s opinion is obtainable not only from his direct, explicit statements, but also from his selection and arrangement of the materials available to him. He presents two traditions dealing with the occasion of revelation that explicitly state that non-Muslims must believe in Muḥammad if they have heard about him. These traditions are placed before the third tradition dealing with the abrogation of the verse. One might argue that al-Ṭabarī’s inclusion of this third tradition shows that he approves of it. However, considering his arrangement of the traditions, as well as his opinion on the abrogation of the verse, it is clear that al-Ṭabarī does not agree with the tradition. Had he agreed with it, he would have commented on it, as he does with the first tradition dealing with the occasion of revelation. This indicates his preference to remain silent on the subject of a tradition with which he does not agree.
Weighing conflicting opinions (*tarjīḥ*)

In the early period of *tafsīr*, the process of revealing the meanings of Qur'anic verses was carried out in a very simple way, with most early exegetes doing this by providing synonym(s) for the key words in the verse. Subsequently, however, some exegetes, including al-Ṭabarī, adduced traditions to relate the linguistic understanding of a verse to the ways in which the Prophet and earlier generations of scholars had understood it. Both linguistic and tradition-based methods were intended to allow readers to easily understand the meaning of the verse. However, al-Ṭabarī went further: he not only provided linguistic clarifications and traditions as tools for the understanding of Qur'anic verses, but he also introduced differing and even conflicting opinions on their interpretation. He then weighed these opinions against one another and chose the one that he considered the most appropriate.

Al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 11:107 is representative of this strategy. As we have seen in Chapter Four, in his interpretation of Q. 11:107, al-Ṭabarī pays great attention to the phrase “unless your Lord wills it otherwise (*illā mā shā’a rabbuk*)” in an effort to comprehend the topic of Hell’s eternity. He introduces four opinions on the meaning of the phrase, basing them on traditions extending back to the Companions. The first opinion, which is deduced from six traditions, is that the exception applies only to Muslims (*ahl al-tawḥīd*) who have committed sins during their lifetimes. The second opinion is that the exception is not about whether the inhabitants of Hell will abide therein eternally, but whether or not God will plunge Muslims into Hell. The third opinion is that the exception applies to all inhabitants
of Hell, including non-Muslims. The last opinion is that the phrase “unless your Lord wills it otherwise” applies only to the inhabitants of Heaven since it is related to the end of verse 11:108 which speaks of “a gift without break (ʾaṭāʾan ghayr majdhūdh)”.34

Having outlined these four opinions, al-Ṭabarī uses the strategy of tarjīḥ, or weighing conflicting opinions and giving preference to one of them. In explaining the exception in Q. 11:107, al-Ṭabarī examines the first opinion that the exception only applies to Muslim sinners. In particular, he refers to the traditions from Qatāda and al-Ḍaḥḥāk as the most truthful (awlā al-aqwāl bi al-ṣawāb).35 This opinion, according to al-Ṭabarī, is in accordance with Q. 4:48 and 4:116, which state that God will not forgive those who associate Him with others but He will forgive the other lesser sins of whomever He wills. This implies that Hell is eternal and that some of its inhabitants will dwell there eternally.

In addition, al-Ṭabarī usually places the opinion that he considers correct first. As we may recall, Hodgson argues that al-Ṭabarī’s opinions might be obtained from the way he arranges his explanations. This is with reference to al-Ṭabarī’s Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk in which Hodgson specifically analyses his method of narrating the death of the third caliph ʿUthmān.36 Elsewhere, Klar finds al-Ṭabarī’s arrangement of traditions in his Tārīkh different from the arrangement of the same traditions in his tafsīr for the same event, namely Adam’s Fall in the creation story. She argues that al-Ṭabarī intentionally arranged traditions in a

35 Ibid.
particular way in order to create a different emphasis between the ones in his *Tārīkh* and those in his *tafsīr*. However, Klar does not state whether the arrangement of traditions in al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* indicates something. In the interpretation of Q. 11:107, al-Ṭabarī first introduces the view that Hell is eternal for non-Muslims in order to indicate his preference for this opinion. As we shall see later, he also adduces more traditions conforming to the first opinion than he does with regard to the other three opinions.

It is also interesting to consider why al-Ṭabarī includes these different opinions in his interpretation of Q. 11:107. Goldziher suggests that the introduction of conflicting opinions in al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* represents an open and pluralist attitude toward different opinions. Elsewhere, Gilliot argues that the inclusion of different opinion, especially in verse 11:107 on the eternity of Hell is meant by al-Ṭabarī to attack other religious sects, although he does not name what the sects are. Gilliot says these sects are the Muʿtazila and the Qadariyya.

However, since the aim of *tafsīr* is to reveal the meaning of Qur’anic verses, providing different and conflicting opinions does not simplify the task of reaching an understanding of the verse; it may well even confuse a general readership. Al-Ṭabarī appears not to consider this issue; rather, he seems to want to signal his openness to other interpretations. Additionally, he may want his readers to understand and consider various opinions on the topic of the eternity of Hell.

---

This confirms what al-Ṭabarī states in his introduction to his *tafsīr* that he will present both agreement and disagreement among scholars concerning the interpretation of Qur’anic verses.\(^{40}\) Where there is disagreement, al-Ṭabarī will choose the ones he considers correct,\(^{41}\) or may leave it unsolved when he does not find any proof either to judge it correct or wrong.\(^{42}\) Yet, as Rosenthal argues, the position to leave it undecided might imply al-Ṭabarī’s openness to the possibility of any opinion correct.\(^{43}\)

Indeed, the variety of opinions given in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of a verse renders his *tafsīr* a basis on which to portray the development of early Muslim thought,\(^{44}\) not only in the discipline of *tafsīr* but also in related disciplines such as law, theology, linguistics, and others.

Given his incorporation of different opinions on certain verses, al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* was most likely intended for well-informed readers. Adequate knowledge of Islamic sciences such as linguistics, tradition, law and theology is needed in order to reach a sound understanding of its content as well as to comprehend the sophisticated explanations al-Ṭabarī provides.

6. Diverting lexical meaning

Although al-Ṭabarī determines which traditions he considers to be most acceptable, he sometimes also offers his own view. This appears in his

\(^{41}\) Ibid.
\(^{44}\) Ignaz Goldziher, *Madhāhib al-Tafsīr al-Islāmi*, p. 130.
interpretation of Q. 78:23. After presenting three opinions on the duration of a ḥuqb, al-Ṭabarî gives preference to the tradition from al-Rabî’ b. Anas who said that only God knows the duration of the aḥqāb, and to another tradition from Qatāda who said that a huqb has a duration of eighty years and that “whenever a huqb has finished, another will come afterwards”. However, although al-Ṭabarî regards both traditions as the soundest (aṣaḥḥ) he does not use either of them as the basis for understanding the meaning of the verse. Rather, at the cost of altering the lexical meaning of the term ḥuqb, he offers his own opinion that aḥqāban here refers to different types of punishment. Therefore, the inhabitants of Hell, according to al-Ṭabarî, will still dwell forever in Hell and suffer different types of punishment.

In reaching his own opinion, al-Ṭabarî employs the strategy of intertextuality. This method attempts to interpret a verse by using other verses, and in classical Qur’anic studies is expressed as al-Qur’ān yufassiru ba`ḍuhu ba`ḍan (different verses of the Qur’an interpret each other). According to al-Ṭabarî, the verse “they dwell therein for ages (lābithīn fīhā aḥqāban)” is not about the duration of dwelling in Hell; rather, huqb in this context is a kind of punishment. The inhabitants of Hell, according to al-Ṭabarî, will therefore suffer different types of punishment. He justifies his opinion by relating verse 78:23 to verses 24 and 25 of the same sūra. In addition, he relates these verses to Q. 38:55-58, which also speaks about the torments that Hell’s inhabitants will face. Thus, by choosing verses 78:24-25 and 38:55-58 as the context within which he offers his opinion, al-Ṭabarî is

obviously attempting to confirm that Hell is eternal. In other words, verse 78:23, which literally leaves open the possibility of a finite Hell, is interpreted using other verses in order to legitimize al-Ṭabarī’s opinion.

The diversion of the lexical meaning of the word *aḥqāb* poses the question why al-Ṭabarī adduced various opinions on its meaning supported by several traditions and then eventually proposed his own interpretation. The inclusion of various opinions may confirm al-Ṭabarī’s intention to include different points of view as he states in his introduction to his *tafsīr*. He chooses to present the readers with alternative understandings and does not force them to follow his opinion. This shows that his *Jāmi` al-Bayān* was intended for a knowledgeable readership who had to comprehend various opinions. However, al-Ṭabarī was apparently aware that the opinions about *aḥqāb* he presents could lead to an understanding that Hell is not eternal. This, of course, conflicts with his theological standpoint. Therefore, al-Ṭabarī offers his own opinion regarding the meaning of *aḥqāb* which is different from its lexical meaning.

7. Making a case from the literal meaning of a verse (*ʿāmm* and *khāṣṣ*)

In his attempt to understand Qur’anic verses, al-Ṭabarī sometimes makes a specific case by offering an interpretation which is different from the literal meaning of the verse. In his interpretation of verse 2:48 two traditions from the Prophet are employed to deny the literal meaning of the verse which is that there is no intercession in the hereafter. According to al-Ṭabarī, the ḥadiths indicate that

---

intercession is possible under certain circumstances, and that it applies specifically to Muslim sinners.

Al-Ṭabarī does not present the chains of transmission of the two ḥadīths. However, the first ḥadīth, which is “my intercession is for grave sinners from my people (umma)” appears, for example, as ḥadīth number 4739 in Abū Dāwūd’s Sunan on the authority of Anas b. Mālik, ḥadīth number 2435 also on the authority of Anas b. Mālik and ḥadīth number 2436 on the authority of Jābir b. Ṭabbarī in al-Tirmidhī’s Sunan, and ḥadīth number 4311 in Ibn Mājah’s Sunan on the authority of Jābir b. Ṭabbarī. The second ḥadīth which reads “every prophet has a right to make a supplication to God and I conceal my supplication (as) intercession for my people, they will receive it as long as they do not associate God with others”, appears, for example, as ḥadīth number 7474 in the “Book of Monotheism” in al-Bukhārī’s Šaḥīḥ on the authority of Abū Hurayra. Both traditions are categorised as “sound” (ṣaḥīḥ), which suggests that the issue of intercession had been adequately addressed by the Prophet and in general there was no dispute about it.

52 Apart from these two traditions, there are numerous other traditions recorded in, for instance, the six major compendia of traditions (al-kutub al-sitta). Al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) cites traditions on intercession in the “Book of Monotheism” (tawḥīd) in his Šaḥīḥ. In his Šaḥīḥ, Muslim (d. 261/875) includes them in the “Book of Belief” (ʿimān), while al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892) adduces traditions about intercession in the “Book of the Day of Judgement” (qiyāma) in his Sunan, and Ibn Mājah (d. 273/887) puts them in the “Book of Asceticism” (zuhd) in his Sunan. By the time al-Ṭabarī wrote his tafsīr, these traditions were already in circulation and available to access. However, al-Ṭabarī does not bother to adduce them all.
The function of tradition to specify the general meaning of the verse also appears in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 43:86. Unlike the presence of the Prophet’s traditions in the interpretation of 2:48, in the interpretation of 43:86 al-Ṭabarī adduces traditions representing opinions from preceding exegetes, namely Mujāhid, ʿĪsā b. Maymūn and Qatāda who all belong to the generation of the Successors. Mujāhid and Qatāda were well-known pupils of Ibn ʿAbbās, while ʿĪsā b. Maymūn was a scholar of tafsīr and transmitted traditions from Mujāhid.\footnote{Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, \textit{Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb}, Vol. 8, pp. 235-236.}

The three exegetes argue about the phrase “but such as have (in their lifetime) borne witness to the truth, and have been aware (that God is one and unique)”. Qatāda was on one side, saying that the phrase refers to angels, Jesus and Ezra. Meanwhile, Mujāhid and ʿĪsā b. Maymūn were on the other side, arguing that the phrase is about the requirements for receiving intercession. After citing the traditions al-Ṭabarī offers his own opinion, which is closer to Qatāda’s. Thus, the traditions function to provide a basis for al-Ṭabarī’s argument that Jesus, Ezra and angels can intercede. However, he does not mention that his preference for Qatāda is due to the validity of the chain of transmission (isnād) or the credibility of the transmitters.\footnote{One of the general principles agreed in Sunnī science of ḥadīth (ʿulūm al-ḥadīth) is that in order to assign a ḥadīth to the categories of “sound” (ṣaḥīḥ), “good” (ḥasan) or “weak” (daʿīf) is its transmitters and chain of transmission should be examined. In general, for a ḥadīth to be “sound” its transmitters must be reliable and trustworthy, and its chain of transmission must be uninterrupted.}

Rather, al-Ṭabarī probably agrees with Qatāda’s view on the basis of his own theological position. As we have seen in his interpretation of a number of verses about intercession, al-Ṭabarī was of the opinion that believers might be given the power to intercede for their fellow believers.
In addition, the formula that al-Ṭabarī uses in commenting on the differences in opinions in the traditions is “awlā al-aqwāl fī dhālika bi al-ṣawāb (the closer opinion to the truth)”. This formula implicitly refers to the soundness of argument rather than the validity of transmission. Therefore, it can be fairly concluded that al-Ṭabarī’s argumentation when dealing with different opinions is most likely based on his personal theological preference.

Al-Ṭabarī’s procedure in deriving a specific meaning from a general reading and vice versa apparently follows the methodology of jurisprudence in Islamic law. At the time of al-Ṭabarī, there were no specific rules and regulations regarding how to interpret the Qur’an. What did already exist was the method jurists used when dealing with Qur’anic verses concerning law (āyāt al-ahkām). For instance, in Islamic jurisprudence (uṣūl al-fiqh), there are principles for dealing with al-naṣṣ al-‘ām (the general text) and al-naṣṣ al-khāṣṣ (the particular text) in deriving the law (istinbāṭ al-ḥukm) from the Qur’an and the Prophet’s traditions.55

In a later development, the principles of ʿāmm and khaṣṣ in Islamic jurisprudence were adopted in the science of the Qur’ān (ʿulūm al-Qur’ān). One prominent principle, particularly when dealing with the general meaning of the text and the specific occasion of revelation in the science of the Qur’ān, is that the meaning of the text is derived from its general reading rather than its specific occasion of revelation (al-ʿibra bi ʿumūm al-lafz lā bi khusūṣ al-sabab). The contrary principle is that the meaning of the text is derived from the specific

---

55 The principles of Sunnī Islamic jurisprudence were first formulated systematically by al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/815) in his book al-Risāla, long before al-Ṭabarī’s time. On the principles of dealing with ʿāmm and khaṣṣ, see Muḥammad Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī, Al-Risāla, annotated by Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (Egypt: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1938), pp. 53-73.
occasion of revelation rather than its general reading (al-`ibra bi khuṣūṣ al-sabab lā bi `umūm al-lafẓ). There is, however, no unanimity of opinion as to how the two principles work.\footnote{On the argumentation of this disagreement, see for instance Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī `Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, pp. 73-74 and Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh al-Zarkashi, *al-Burhān fī `Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, pp. 340-341 and 455-459.}

In the case of al-Ṭabarī, in his interpretation of Q. 2:62 on the fate of virtuous non-Muslims he uses the specific occasion of revelation about Salmān al-Fārisī’s monk colleagues to say that the general meaning of verse 2:62 only applies to non-Muslims – be they Jews, Christians or Sabaeans - before Muḥammad’s prophethood. However, in his interpretation of Q. 2:48 dealing with intercession, al-Ṭabarī denies the literal meaning of the verse which rejects intercession. Therefore, the reason for such interpretations is primarily the particular theological standpoint to which al-Ṭabarī subscribes.

8. Presenting different contexts of interpretation

Another function of the traditions in al-Ṭabarī’s commentary on intercession is to present different contexts of interpretation. While numerous verses address the theme, al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation provides a different context regarding whom the verses talk about even though the verses have a similar topic. These contexts are based on traditions that he adduces, and they situate the interpretation within both a general understanding and a specific explanation.

In his interpretation of verse 2:48 that literally denies intercession for the Children of Israel, al-Ṭabarī puts the verse into a general context that extends
beyond the Children of Israel. As the verses before and after it indicate, the verse
refers to the Children of Israel who will not receive intercession. However, by citing
two traditions from the Prophet, al-Ṭabarī is able to broaden the specific context of
the verse into a general understanding of who may receive intercession. According
to al-Ṭabarī, the verse refers not only to the Children of Israel, but also to all human
beings. Thus, those who will not receive intercession are not only the Children of
Israel, but also those who unbelieve in God and Muḥammad as His prophet and
those who associate God with others. Intercession, in al-Ṭabarī’s view, is only
possible for believers. Thus, his interpretation moves from the context of the
Children of Israel to the general context of all people.

Another context is also provided in the interpretation of Q. 43:86 which
talks about who will receive permission to intercede.57 Here, al-Ṭabarī elicits a
particular case from the general meaning of the verse. The context of the verse
appears early in verse 74, where God speaks of sinners who will abide in Hell.
However, the presence of three traditions from Mujāhid, ʿĪsā b. Maymūn and
Qatāda allows al-Ṭabarī to relate the verse to Jews, Christians and Sabaeans even
though there is no mention at all of these from verse 74 to the end of the sūra at
verse 89. The possible relations are verses 77 and 81. Verse 77 refers to the sinners

---

57 The verse reads: “And those whom some invoke beside God have it not in their power to
intercede (on Judgement Day) for any but such as have (in their lifetime) borne witness to the truth,
and have been aware (that God is one and unique).”
in Hell requesting the angel to ask God to end their punishment,\textsuperscript{58} while verse 81 talks about their intention to worship the son of God had God had one.\textsuperscript{59}

Here, with the help of the three traditions as mentioned earlier, al-Ṭabarī seems to specify that “sinners” (\textit{mujrimūn}) is a reference to Jews, Christians and Sabaeans. This relates to the accusation of the Qur’an that Jews claim Ezra as God’s son as Christian do Jesus, and that Sabaeans worship angels.

As for the interpretation of verse 6:94,\textsuperscript{60} al-Ṭabarī also elicits the specific case of Arab pagans. The subject of the verse was indicated in verse 92 where God talks about the Book (the Qur’ān) that was revealed to people to whom Muḥammad was commissioned.\textsuperscript{61} These people must include not only the Arabs at the time of Muḥammad since Muḥammad was the last prophet to be commissioned until the Day of Judgement. However, al-Ṭabarī makes the verse refer to the Arabs at the time of the Prophet by adducing a tradition concerning their wish that the idols al-\textit{Lāt} and al-‘Uzzā whom they worshipped will intercede for them. This strategy of relating the verse to a specific context by referring to particular traditions enables

\textsuperscript{58} Verse 43:77 reads: “And they will cry: ‘O you (angel) who rules (over Hell)! Let your Lord put an end to us!’ He will reply: ‘Verily, you must live on (in this state).’”

\textsuperscript{59} Verse 43:81 reads: “Say (O Prophet): If the Most Gracious (truly) had a son, I would be the first to worship him!”

\textsuperscript{60} The verse reads: (And God shall say:) “And now, indeed, you have come unto Us in a lonely state, even as We created you in the first instance; and you have left behind you all that We bestowed on you (in your lifetime). And We do not see with you those intercessors of yours whom you supposed to have a share in God’s divinity with regard to yourselves! Indeed, all the bonds between you (and your earthly life) are now severed, and all your former fancies have forsaken you!”

\textsuperscript{61} Verse 6:92 reads: “And this, too, is a divine writ which We have bestowed from on high - blessed, confirming the truth of whatever there still remains (of earlier revelations) - and (this) in order that thou may warn the foremost of all cities and all who dwell around it. And those who believe in the life to come do believe in this (warning); and it is they who are ever-mindful of their prayers.”
al-Ṭabarī to identify different types of people whom he claims will not receive intercession as well as those who will.

9. The incorporation of traditions

As already seen in the preceding discussion, the incorporation of traditions is a prominent feature of al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr*, as it is in *Tārīkh*. Many scholars talking about al-Ṭabarī often simply regard his *tafsīr* as a tradition-based *tafsīr* without delving further into his complex interpretive strategies, especially in his treatment of the traditions he adduces. Thus, in al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 2:62 he employs twenty-one traditions. All but three of these contain an explanation of the three religious groups, namely the Jews, Christians and Sabaeans, mentioned at the outset of the verse. Two traditions refer to the occasion of revelation of Q. 2:62 when Salmān al-Fārisi met the Prophet Muḥammad and told him about his Christian monk companions who did not have chance to see Muḥammad and confirm the truth he brought. The last tradition, transmitted from Ibn `Abbās, talks about the abrogation of Q. 2:62 by Q. 3:85.

As regards the traditions about Salmān, al-Ṭabarī uses these to justify his opinion that belief (*īmān*) in God implies attesting to Muḥammad’s prophethood and believing in what he brought. Therefore, the Jews, Christians and Sabaeans who already knew about Muḥammad must believe in him, follow his way and leave the path of Moses or Jesus. As for the last tradition from Ibn `Abbās dealing with the

---

abrogation of Q. 2:62, al-Ṭabarī merely introduces it without stating clearly whether he agrees with it or opposes Ibn `Abbās’ view.

Likewise, in his interpretation of the Qur’anic verses dealing with the eternity of Hell, he also adduces several traditions to help explain the topic of the verses, especially 11:107 and 78:23. In his interpretation of Q. 6:128, with regard to the phrase “unless God wills it otherwise (illā mā shā’a allāh)”, al-Ṭabarī adduces only one tradition, which is narrated from Ibn `Abbās. However, the tradition does not relate directly to the meaning of the phrase, but rather discusses God’s sovereignty. In it, Ibn `Abbās forbids human beings from making presumptions as to where God will place a person in the hereafter.63 However, al-Ṭabarī refrains from comment and leaves his readers to reach their own conclusions about the tradition.

Elsewhere, the focus of al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 11:107 which deals with the eternity of Hell is the phrase “unless your Lord wills it otherwise (illā mā shā’a rabbuk)”. Here, al-Ṭabarī offers four opinions on the meaning of the phrase, each supported by traditions. Six traditions are adduced to support the first argument that the exception applies only to Muslims (ahl al-tawḥīd), two traditions support the notion that God’s will shall determine each human’s fate, three traditions state that Hell is finite in nature, while one tradition states that the exception only applies to the inhabitants of Heaven.64
In another place, al-Ṭabarî adduces sixteen traditions in his interpretation of five out of twenty-four verses dealing with intercession. Of these sixteen traditions, two are prophetic traditions while the other fourteen are from the generation of the Successors. Al-Ṭabarî makes use of these traditions, especially in the interpretation of Q. 2:48, to deny the general meaning of the verse which is that there is no intercession in the hereafter. In addition, there are also some traditions that are employed by al-Ṭabarî to clarify his general position on intercession.

Having said that, one thing is similar in al-Ṭabarî’s approach to traditions when dealing with a large number of Qur’anic verses on the same topic. As with the eternity of Hell discussed in the previous chapter, the topic of intercession is also referred to in numerous verses. In this situation, al-Ṭabarî adduces traditions for some verses but leaves others unsupplied with traditions. He does not explain why he does this, but most likely he simply wants to avoid repetition. Unfortunately, al-Ṭabarî does not always direct the readers to the verses where he provides a longer explanation complete with traditions to support his interpretation.

Unlike his interpretation of Qur’anic verses on the eternity of Hell, al-Ṭabarî does not mention contradictory opinion on intercession. In his interpretation of Q. 11:107, he provides some traditions which disagree as to whether or not Hell will terminate and its inhabitants will be removed from there. In the case of intercession, there was also dispute, at least between the Mu’tazilites and other Muslim scholars, on whether or not grave sinners will receive intercession and thus will be saved. There is no certain answer for this inconsistency. Presumably, he might not find any exegetical tradition supporting the Mu’tazili opinion regarding
intercession. Elsewhere, although he addresses differences among Muslim groups regarding the status of Muslim grave sinners, al-Ṭabarī does not mention any other opinion among different schools of thought regarding intercession in his theological work *al-Tabṣīr fī Maʿālim al-Dīn*. As discussed in Chapter Four, the presence of two traditions from the Prophet regarding intercession may have convinced al-Ṭabarī that there should not be any dispute on the possible intercession for Muslim grave sinners.

C. The Context of al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretive Strategies

When al-Ṭabarī was writing his *tafsīr*, Qur’anic exegesis still followed its traditional method. Even though works of *tafsīr* had appeared in the first half of the second/eight century, Gilliot points out that the early exegetes engaged mainly with the vocabulary of the Qur’an. He calls their methodology “paraphrastic exegesis”, in which exegetes provide only “brief, often synonymic explanations of Qur’anic terms or passages”. This type of interpretation was a result of the contemporary needs of the Muslim community to understand the vocabulary of the Qur’ān. Exegetes responded to this need by explaining Qur’anic verses mainly from the perspective of lexical issues. Early exegetes such as Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 104/722) with his *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778) with his *Tafsīr Sufyān al-

---

Thawrī, and al-Farrā (d. 207/822) with his Maʾāni al-Qurʾān followed this method.

Another type of early Qur’anic tafsīr is what Gilliot calls “narrative exegesis”. This is where exegetes offer an interpretation of Qur’anic verses using longer explanations, sometimes assisted by biblical sources or pre-Islamic traditions. Gilliot only mentions one tafsīr that falls into this category, that is, the Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān.

Beside these two categories, there were several other works on the Qurʾān which Rippin also counts as tafsīrs. These discuss certain aspects of what later became part of the so-called Qurʾanic sciences. They include such as al-Nāsikh wa al-Mansūkh by al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742) which deals the abrogation of Qurʾanic verses; Mutashābih al-Qurʾān by al-Kisāʾī (d. 187/803) which deals with the allegorical verses in the Qurʾān; Majāz al-Qurʾān by Abū ʿUbayda (210/825) which deals with the metaphorical verses in the Qurʾān; Faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān by

---

71 Given the fact that Muqātil used foreign sources in his tafsīr, later Muslim scholars after the generation of al-Shāfiʿī accused him of being an anthropomorphist, an assimilationist and untrustworthy. Ibid., pp.17-18.
Abū `Ubayd (224/838) which deals with the virtues of the Qur’ān;۷۵ Gharīb al-
Qur’ān by Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889)۷۶ which deals with the foreign vocabulary in
the Qur’ān. According to Rippin, all these works may be considered as tafsīrs even
though they do not explain all verses of the Qur’ān systematically according to the
order of sūra in the Uthmani muṣḥaf.۷۷

As we have seen, al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses on the
salvation of religious others contains all the characteristics included in the three
categories mentioned above. He discusses the linguistic aspects of Qur’anic verses,
gives a narrative explanations of the verses, and includes aspects of what later
became parts of the science of Qur’ān, such as the occasion of revelation, the
abrogation of verses and weighing opinions. For instance, al-Ṭabarī uses linguistic
approaches in his interpretation of verses 2:62, 78:23 and 2:48, as well as explaining
verse 2:62 using the occasion of revelation of the verse.

It can therefore be said that al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr represents a milestone in the
development of Qur’anic exegesis, bringing together all the tools required for the
interpretation of Qur’anic verses. Indeed, with his tafsīr al-Ṭabarī inaugurated a
new era and provided the basis for subsequent Sunnī commentaries on the Qur’ān.

In addition to including all these aspects of Qur’anic sciences, al-Ṭabarī’s
tafsīr shows the influence of the contemporary trend within Islamic scholarship to

۷۵ Abū `Ubayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām al-Harawī, Faḍā’il al-Qur’ān, annotated by Wafā’ Taqīy
al-Dīn (Damascus and Beirūt: Dār Ibn Kathīr, n.d.)
۷۶ Abū Muḥammad `Abdallāh b. Muslim b. Qutayba, Tafsīr Gharīb al-Qur’ān, annotated by
۷۷ Andrew Rippin, “Introduction”, in Andrew Rippin (ed.), The Qur’an: Formative
Interpretation (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. xii-xiii. Another study of the Qur’ān that is not
included in Gilliot’s categorization of tafsīr is qirā‘at (variant readings). Goldziher considers this as
the earliest mode of tafsīr since different readings might bear different meanings. See Ignaz
make use of traditions together with their chains of transmission. Certainly, before al-Ṭabarī traditions were considered as tools to understand the meaning of Qur’anic verses, but this was mostly the case with verses which had legal implications. Although some early jurists such as Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767), Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795) and Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778) had already used traditions in their legal thought, it was al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/815) who championed the importance of traditions in Islamic jurisprudence. The use of traditions influenced other fields of Islamic science, most importantly the monumental works on Qur’anic exegesis and history written by al-Ṭabarī. Indeed, al-Ṭabarī was once regarded a Shāfi‘ite. Although he later initiated a no longer extant school of jurisprudence, the Jarīriyya, it is unavoidable to conclude that al-Ṭabarī was influenced by al-Shāfi‘ī’s legal method, not only in the Islamic law but also in the interpretation of the Qur’ān.78

However, al-Ṭabarī seems to have been less than rigorous in his choice of traditions, and some of them do not meet the requirements that legal and ḥadīth scholars employed to validate legal traditions.79 As we have seen, this in the case in the traditions on the occasion of revelation used to interpret verses 2:62 and 6:94. Whether this less strict requirement applies to all the traditions that al-Ṭabarī adduces in the interpretation of Qur’anic verses on theological issues is a subject that needs further inquiry. However, within the context of the still-developing Islamic theology in al-Ṭabarī’s era, discourse on theological issues was probably less significant than legal enquiries for ordinary Muslims. While legal issues had

---

79 Herbert Berg, The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam, p. 228.
important implications for the daily life of the community, people were not directly affected by theological discourse. Therefore, whenever sound traditions were unavailable, it was acceptable to employ questionable ones in the field of theology, as we have seen in al-Ṭabarî’s commentary.

Al-Ṭabarî was probably aware of ḥadîth compilations such as that by al-Bukhârî (d. 256/870) and Muslim b. al-Ḥajjâj (d. 261/875), which it was claimed only contained sound ḥadîths. Al-Ṭabarî was also a contemporary of other prominent ḥadîth compilers such as Abû Dâwûd (d. 276/889), Ibn Mâjah (d. 276/889), al-Tirmîdhî (d. 279/892) and al-Nasāʾî (d. 303/915) who had their own methods of validating ḥadîths. However, the use of unsound ḥadîth in al-Ṭabarî’s tafsîr can perhaps be understood from the perspective of the growing influence of the Ḥanbali school in Baghdad established by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855). Part of Ibn Ḥanbal’s legacy was to give preference to weak traditions rather than rely on individual reasoning (raʾy).80

Al-Ṭabarî’s use of traditions in his tafsîr also differs from the Muʿtazili thought on the function of tradition. Known as rationalist thinkers, Muʿtazîlî scholars tended to avoid the use of traditions. Qâḍî Ṭabd al-Jabbâr (d.415/1025), a prominent Muʿtazîlî theologian summarizes the practice of Muʿtazîlî theologians before him who used reason to deduce the meaning of the Qurʾān through a knowledge of the Arabic language. Since the Qurʾān was revealed in Arabic, an expert in that language, according to Ṭabd al-Jabbâr, has the ability to understand

---

the meaning of the Qurʾān. Furthermore, ‘Abd al-Jabbār discouraged the Qurʾanic commentator from referring to his predecessors since every exegete has his own particular viewpoint which should form the basis of his interpretation. Previous interpretation, according to ‘Abd al-Jabbār, should only be resorted to when the literal meaning of a Qurʾanic verse is unknown. This is, of course, contrary to what al-Ṭabarī does in his *tafsīr*, where he adduces a large number of previous interpretations as the basis of his commentary.

Unfortunately, there is no works on *tafsīr* by al-Ṭabarī’s contemporary Muʿtazilī scholars are available so a comparison can be made. The procedure recommended by Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār was applied by the later Muʿtazilī scholar, arguably the last prominent one and a well-known grammarian, al-Zamakhshārī (d. 538/1144). Two centuries after al-Ṭabarī’s death, al-Zamakhshārī wrote a seminal Qurʾanic commentary entitled *Tafsīr al-Kashshāf ‘an Ḥaqāʾiq al-Tanzīl wa ‘Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Taʿwīl* in which he relies on grammatical and rational explanations. In the interpretation of Q. 2:48 dealing with intercession, for instance, Zamakhshārī explains that the verse is a rejection of the Jews’ wish that their prophet forefathers intercede for them. However, in contrast to al-Ṭabarī, he goes on to explain that intercession is also not possible for Muslim sinners. In line with the Muʿtazilī doctrine on intercession and divine justice, Zamakhshārī bases

---

82 Ibid., p. 361.
his argument on the notion that every person is solely responsible for his or her own deeds. According to this it is maintained that good deeds will certainly be rewarded and bad ones will inevitably be punished. Thus, al-Zamakhsharī adheres to the way the Muʿtazilites interpreted the Qurʾan, by referring to the literal meaning of the text and employing Muʿtazilī theological reasoning. He does not take into consideration the traditions on which al-Ṭabarī bases his argument.

Not only was al-Ṭabarī influenced by the development of tradition. As discussed earlier, the use of tradition in al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr should also be seen within the context of its use in Islamic law (fiqh). Thus, an examination of his interpretation of Qurʾanic verses on the salvation of non-Muslims reveals that his tafsīr employs some procedures that are commonly used in fiqh to develop a law from certain sources. These procedures include presenting the occasion of revelation (sabab al-nuzūl), the abrogation of a verse (naskh), determining a meaning by the method of weighing an opinion (tarjīḥ), and using the principles of the general (ʿāmm) and the specific (khāṣṣ). For example, al-Ṭabarī uses the occasion of revelation to conclude that non-Muslims will not receive rewards for their good deeds in his interpretation of Q. 2:62, which happens to be a khabar verse that has no legal implications. Adducing the occasion of revelation circumvents the literal meaning of the verse that non-Muslims might attain salvation as long as they believe in God and the Last Day and perform righteous deeds, and introduces the specific conditions that they must also believe in Muḥammad and what he brought. Elsewhere, al-Ṭabarī

employs the weighing of an opinion (tarjīḥ) when eliciting different views on the eternity of Hell in his interpretation of Q. 11:107.

Therefore, it is not only that his tafsīr gives influence on the formulation of certain Islamic law as Khalil argues, but as discussed earlier, his interpretive strategies in tafsīr was as well affected by the methodology of fiqh. Khalil’s argument looks for how the “historicization” of al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of sūra 8 (al-anfāl/the spoils of war) has influenced on the distribution of spoil share. In the interpretation of verses on salvation of non-Muslims, however, al-Ṭabarī utilizes juridical tools to develop his argument. More precisely, al-Ṭabarī was influenced by al-Shāfi`ī’s method of fiqh, as Shamsy argues, especially on the use of tradition to elucidate the meaning of the Qur’ān.

All of these procedures in al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr that are familiar in the field of fiqh are, however, assisted by traditions. The presence of abundant traditions has led later scholars to include al-Ṭabarī’s Qur’anic commentary into the category of tradition-based tafsīr. However, this is not to say that al-Ṭabarī does not use individual reasoning in his tafsīr. On the topic of the salvation for religious others, we see his individual judgement on several occasions. For instance, al-Ṭabarī’s preference for some traditions rather than others in his interpretation of Q. 11:107 is a kind of personal judgement. He also offers his own interpretation of the

---

meaning of *ahqāb* (ages) in Q. 78:23, saying that it refers to different types of punishment, rather that accepting the import of the traditions he adduces which mostly refer to durations of time.

**D. Conclusion**

Although al-Ţabarī’s commentary is included in the category of tradition-based *tafsīr* (*tafsīr bi al-ma’tūr*), the citation of traditions is not the only way in which he elicits the meaning of Qur’anic verses dealing with the salvation of religious others. Indeed, a number of other procedures have been identified and discussed, these being philological analysis, the occasion of revelation, abrogation, silence expressing an opinion, weighing conflicting opinions, diverting lexical meaning, making a case from the literal meaning of a verse, and presenting different contexts of interpretation.

It has also been suggested that in employing these procedures al-Ţabarī was influenced by contemporary developments in the Islamic sciences, especially in Islamic law and ḥadīth studies. His inclusion of tradition in his *tafsīr* corresponds with the rise in importance of tradition, especially in the wake of Mu’tazilī rational thinking. Furthermore, both the occasion of revelation and the abrogation of verses were vital instruments for deriving a rule in Islamic law as well as in the interpretation of Qur’anic verses that have legal implications. However, al-Ţabarī applied these procedures to Qur’anic verses dealing with theological issues rather than those relating specifically to law. Other procedures employed within the field of Islamic law were also adopted by al-Ţabarī and applied to verses dealing with
theological issues, such as the application of `āmm (generality of text) and khāṣṣ (particularity of meaning) and tarjīḥ (weighing different opinions). All these procedures were used in his Qur’anic exegesis. Since al-Ṭabarī was the first to employ all these procedures in a single work of tafsīr, his Jāmi` al-Bayān became a model for later commentaries, as well as a reference in the formulation of the science of the Qur’ān.
CONCLUSION

This present thesis attempts to investigate al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses that leave open the possibility of salvation of religious others. There are two main research questions addressed in this thesis. First, the thesis aims to discern al-Ṭabarī’s opinion on the salvation of non-Muslims, observed from the three sub-topics: the fate of virtuous non-Muslims, the eternity of Hell and intercession; and located within contemporary intellectual and interreligious discourse. Second, since the verses discussed literally leave open the possibility that non-Muslims will attain salvation, the thesis sets out to examine how al-Ṭabarī interprets these verses by looking at his specific interpretive strategies and how these strategies were influenced by the development of Islamic sciences. Based on the discussion in the preceding chapters, the findings of the research are as follows:

A. Will non-Muslims be Saved?

In polemical discussions on the universality of Islam, both exclusivist and pluralist Muslims have based their arguments on Qur’anic verses. Some of them also base their opinions on early works of tafsīr including al-Ṭabarī’s Jāmiʿ al-Bayān. The verses which are utilized to argue for the possible salvation of non-Muslims, however, are understood by al-Ṭabarī to indicate the contrary. Thus, in his interpretation of Q. 2:62 regarding the fate of virtuous non-Muslims, al-Ṭabarī maintains that salvation is only attainable by those who confirm Muḥammad’s prophethood and believe in what he brought. Although the verse does not mention
belief in Muḥammad as a requirement, al-Ṭabarī considers that the condition of belief (īmān) in God should be understood to include belief in Muḥammad as well. Al-Ṭabarī’s argument is based primarily on the presence of the occasion of revelation of the verse, although the tradition regarding its occasion is mursal.

Elsewhere, on the issue of the eternity of Hell, al-Ṭabarī confirms that Hell is eternal and that its inhabitants will dwell there eternally. With regard to verses 6:128 and 11:107, which offer a possible exception according to which Hell’s inhabitants may be released, al-Ṭabarī argues that the exception applies only to Muslim sinners. They will dwell in Hell and receive punishment for the sins they committed during their lives. After experiencing God’s punishment in Hell, God will forgive them, remove them from Hell and place them in Heaven. Thus, according to this argument, Hell is a temporary place for Muslim sinners before they eventually enter Heaven. Unbelievers and those who associate God with others (mushrikūn), however, will be damned eternally. Al-Ṭabarī concludes his view by weighing the available opinions and chooses the one that he considers correct. His position is confirmed in his interpretation of Q. 78:23 where he explains that the word aḥqāban is not to be understood as “ages” as its literal meaning suggests, but rather as different types of punishment. Al-Ṭabarī diverts the lexical meaning of huqūb to come to his conclusion. The verse, then, means that Hell’s inhabitants will dwell there eternally, but will experience different types of punishment; after one type of punishment is finished, there will come other types of punishment.

The last issue regarding the salvation of non-Muslims is intercession. Al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses dealing with intercession further confirms
that non-Muslims cannot be saved in the hereafter. Although there are some verses that literally deny intercession, according to al-Ṭabarî, intercession is possible but only with God’s permission. However, only believers (muʿminūn) can receive intercession as long as they do not associate God with others. Unbelievers and polytheists will not be able to receive intercession. Included in this category are those who do not believe in God and the Prophet Muḥammad. Al-Ṭabarî employs traditions to particularise the general meaning of verses regarding intercession. Thus, non-Muslims will not be saved by means of intercession.

Even though al-Ṭabarî seems to be a pluralist for his acceptance and use of Biblical stories in his tafsīr, it is not surprising that al-Ṭabarî was of the opinion that non-Muslims will not be saved. The context in which al-Ṭabarî lived was theologically hostile to non-Muslims. It is true that non-Muslims freely participated in the public domain, including holding some administrative posts in the caliphate. They also freely engaged in intellectual endeavours and economic enterprises. However, current religious views did not permit them to achieve equal status with Muslims let alone affording them eschatological salvation. Therefore, it is historically anachronistic to propose that al-Ṭabarî viewed the salvation of non-Muslims as possible, as some pluralists argue.

There is no evidence of any discussion regarding the fate of virtuous non-Muslims among theologians at the time of al-Ṭabarî. However, the eternity of Hell and intercession were among the issues discussed by Muslim scholars from various schools, notably between the Muʿtazila, the Qadariyya, the Murjiʿa, the Jahmiyya, the Ḥanafiyya, the Ḥanbaliyya, among others. Al-Ṭabarî’s opinion on these two
latter issues represents the Muslim mainstream view which eventually was established by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī and subsequently considered as Islamic orthodoxy. As for interreligious dialogue at that time, this was dominated by the issue of the validity of religions, in which Muslim theologians attacked their Christian counterparts on topics such as the Trinity, the status of Jesus, and the alteration of scripture (taḥrīf).

B. Al-Ṭabarī’s Interpretive Strategies

Al-Ṭabarī employs certain interpretive strategies when dealing with Qur’anic verses that literally leave open the possibility of the salvation of non-Muslims. These strategies are philological analysis, the occasion of revelation (sabab al-nuzūl), abrogation (naskh), silence as an expression of opinion, weighing conflicting opinions (tarjīḥ), diverting lexical meaning, making a case from the literal meaning of a verse (ʿāmm and khāṣṣ), providing a different context of interpretation, and the incorporation of traditions.

In the interpretation of Q. 2:62 regarding the fate of virtuous non-Muslims, al-Ṭabarī depends on traditions dealing with the occasion of revelation of the verse. However, he ignores the mursal status of the traditions since these traditions are needed to counter the grammatical explanation which confirms the literal meaning of the verse and which conflicts with his theological position. Although there is another tradition indicating the abrogation of the verse with Q. 3:85, al-Ṭabarī ignores this since he was convinced that the abrogation only applies to legal verses.
On the eternity of Hell, al-Ṭabarî relies on exegetical traditions from the Successors to determine that the exception in Q. 6:128 and 11:107 only applies to Muslims. Since there are conflicting opinions represented in numerous traditions on the eternity of Hell, al-Ṭabarî employs the method of *tarjīḥ*, weighing one opinion over another. However, his method of *tarjīḥ* does not deal with the status of the traditions nor their chronology as applied in juridical matters. In fact, al-Ṭabarî ponders on the theological aspects of the traditions to draw his selection. Accordingly, al-Ṭabarî diverts the lexical meaning of the word *ahqāban* to types of punishment to establish his theological position that Hell is eternal.

Finally, al-Ṭabarî makes a case from the literal meaning of verse 2:48 which denies intercession. He adduces traditions from the Prophet which indicate that intercession is possible for Muslim sinners. Al-Ṭabarî also employs other traditions to provide different contexts of interpretation for verses 6:94 and 43:86, which is meant to deny that non-Muslims will receive intercession.

Together with the above interpretive strategies, al-Ṭabarî was also assisted by exegetical traditions along with their chains of transmission (*isnads*). Traditions had previously become prominent in the field of Islamic law, at the hands of the great jurist al-Shāfi‘ī, the eponymous founder of the Shāfi‘ī school of law. Al-Ṭabarî was influenced by al-Shāfi‘ī’s jurisprudence that he learnt during his journeys for intellectual enlightenment. Indeed, in general the use of traditions was a significant trend in the development of Islamic knowledge in the third/ninth century, starting with law and spreading to Qur’anic exegesis and history. This
century also witnessed the establishment of the sciences of ḥadith (ʼulūm al-ḥadīth) and the production of the six canonical Sunnī ḥadīth collections.

Although adducing traditions in his tafsīr, al-Ṭabarī cannot be simply included among the traditionist group of scholars. Indeed, al-Ṭabarī does rely heavily on traditions, and the introduction to his tafsīr clearly states that the interpretation of the Prophet (tafsīr al-nabī) constitutes his primary source in revealing the meaning of the Qurʾān. Moreover, whenever the Prophet’s interpretation is unavailable, al-Ṭabarī refers to traditions from the Companions, the Successors, and the Successors of the Successors. However, al-Ṭabarī was not only a compiler of traditions. As we have seen, he also presents his own opinion. One example of this concerns the meaning of aḥqāban in Q. 78:23. Furthermore, al-Ṭabarī also makes a judgement regarding the conflicting opinions in the interpretation of Q. 11:107. Similarly, his silence regarding the abrogation of verse 2:62 also expresses an opinion. It is therefore clear that al-Ṭabarī is not simply a traditionist and that his tafsīr also contains his personal opinion (ra’y). His incorporation of traditions excludes him, however, from the rationalist camp. Some scholars call al-Ṭabarī a semi-rationalist thinker; I would prefer to call him a traditionist-cum-rationalist.

In addition, al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive strategies were also influenced by the methodology of Islamic jurisprudence. Thus, we find in his tafsīr methods such as abrogation, the occasion of revelation, tarjīḥ and the application of ʿāmm and khāṣṣ. These methods were already used in interpreting Qur’anic verses, but only regarding verses that have juridical implications. Al-Ṭabarī, however, employs
these methods in the interpretation of Qur’anic verses dealing with theological issues. The application of juridical methods became a standard practice in the field of Qur’anic exegesis and were later to be formulated as part of the science of the Qur’ān (‘ulūm al-Qur’ān).

C. Contribution to Knowledge

After presenting the discussion on al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses regarding the salvation of non-Muslims, in this section I will state the contribution of the present thesis to knowledge, as follows:

First, the topic of the salvation of religious others has not been thoroughly discussed from the perspective of al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr. Among the three subtopics, al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 2:62 becomes a frequent subject of argument between those who propose either exclusivism or pluralism, as we have seen in Chapter Three. Gilliot does deal with al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of Q. 11:107 on the eternity of Hell, but his argument revolves around al-Ṭabarī’s presentation of different opinions.

Second, the discussion in this thesis of al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr identifies and analyses the specific strategies he employs in the interpretation of Qur’anic verses. This is an advance on research conducted by other scholars who have focused on al-Ṭabarī’s opinions and have generalised his methodology merely in terms of the adducing of traditions and linguistic analysis. There has been no detailed discussion of his interpretive strategies. Furthermore, while discussions concerning al-Ṭabarī’s method of tafsīr often focus merely on the introduction to his Jāmiʿ al-Bayān, this
thesis goes further and investigates his interpretive strategies from his treatment of a number of Qur’anic verses, which deal with the salvation of non-Muslims.

Third, from an investigation of his interpretive strategies, it has become clear that al-Ṭabarī was heavily influenced by the methodology of jurisprudence. It was common to use such a methodology when dealing with Qur’anic verses of a legal nature in order to derive legal rulings. Yet, as has been shown in this thesis, al-Ṭabarī employs this methodology in the interpretation of theological verses. The argument here is that al-Ṭabarī does so because the literal meaning of the verses contradicts his own theological view. Al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive strategies were to become established as common principles in the interpretation of the Qur’ān.

Of course, this thesis is not without its limitations. Methodologically, it deals only with Qur’anic verses on the salvation of non-Muslims which is divided into three sub-topics: the fate of virtuous non-Muslims, the eternity of Hell, and intercession. There are other issues that can be further investigated to gain a broader understanding regarding the topic of salvation of non-Muslims, such as Islamic supercession, God’s mercy, the People of the Heights (aṣḥāb al-a’rāf), people who have not been reached the Islamic mission (da’wa), among others. In order to confirm and further illustrate our conclusions on al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive strategies, other Qur’anic verses could be consulted. This task can be carried out either by investigating his interpretation of a specific topic or by focusing on a single sūra. Al-Ṭabarī’s voluminous Jāmiʿ al-Bayān is a repository of his unique approach to the Qurʾān and it portrays, among other things, the great development of third/ninth century Muslim intellectual endeavour which was proven decisive in the
formulation of the Islamic sciences and the establishment of Islamic orthodoxy.

Thus, research on different aspects of al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* will surely continue.
### Appendix: List of Qur’anic Verses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qur’anic verse</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Qur’anic verse</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2: 39</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>9: 63</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: 48</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>9: 68</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: 62</td>
<td>78, 37fn</td>
<td>10: 3</td>
<td>147fn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: 81</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>10: 18</td>
<td>148fn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: 123</td>
<td>148fn</td>
<td>10: 27</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: 162</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>10: 52</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: 201</td>
<td>14fn</td>
<td>11: 107</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: 217</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>13: 5</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: 254</td>
<td>146fn</td>
<td>16: 29</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: 255</td>
<td>32fn, 147fn</td>
<td>17: 79</td>
<td>32fn, 149fn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: 257</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>19: 87</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: 275</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>20: 101</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: 19</td>
<td>36fn</td>
<td>23: 1</td>
<td>14fn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: 85</td>
<td>36fn</td>
<td>23: 103</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: 110</td>
<td>93-94</td>
<td>25: 69</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: 113-115</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>28: 88</td>
<td>131fn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: 115</td>
<td>37fn</td>
<td>30: 13</td>
<td>148fn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: 116</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>32: 4</td>
<td>147fn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: 14</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>33: 65</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: 48</td>
<td>120, 150fn</td>
<td>34: 23</td>
<td>147fn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: 93</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>36: 23</td>
<td>147fn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: 116</td>
<td>120, 150fn</td>
<td>39: 43-44</td>
<td>146-147fn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: 122-124</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>39: 72</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: 169</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>40: 18</td>
<td>148fn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: 66</td>
<td>94-95</td>
<td>40: 76</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: 68</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>40: 41</td>
<td>14fn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: 69</td>
<td>37fn</td>
<td>41: 28</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: 72-73</td>
<td>36fn</td>
<td>42: 11</td>
<td>131fn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: 80</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>43: 74-75</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: 51</td>
<td>148fn</td>
<td>43: 86</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: 70</td>
<td>148fn</td>
<td>47: 15</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: 94</td>
<td>140-141</td>
<td>53: 26</td>
<td>147fn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: 128</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>58: 17</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: 36</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>72: 23</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: 53</td>
<td>148fn</td>
<td>74: 48</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: 155</td>
<td>153fn</td>
<td>78: 23</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: 156</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>98: 6</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: 157</td>
<td>153fn</td>
<td>98: 6-7</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: 156-158</td>
<td>36fn</td>
<td>99: 7-8</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9: 17</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>103: 3</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Khalil, Mohammad Hassan. ‘A Closer Look at al-Ṭabarī’s Accounts of the Khaybar Spoils, or the Intersection of Law, Historiography, and Exegesis’. Comparative Islamic Studies, 3 (2007): 5-21.


