

The Philosophy Of Interpretation: Saleh Al-Ghursī's Method In Interpreting Texts That Seem To Imply Anthropomorphism

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the interpretive theory of the contemporary thinker Saleh al-Ghursī regarding the reading of texts whose apparent meanings present conceptual or semantic difficulties. Al-Ghursī's work is distinguished by both methodological rigor and original interpretive insight, offering a renewed framework for addressing one of the most persistent questions in the philosophy of interpretation. Drawing upon principles of rhetoric and legal-theoretical reasoning, his approach seeks to reconcile textual language with coherent intellectual understanding. The problem of interpreting ambiguous or problematic texts has occupied scholars throughout intellectual history and continues to be a focal issue in contemporary hermeneutical debates. Al-Ghursī outlines three major historical stages in the evolution of interpretive practice: The early traditional stage, characterized by interpretation through compound metaphor, the intermediate traditional stage, marked by general interpretation or non-specific deferral of meaning, and the later scholastic stage, defined by interpretation through simple metaphor. By tracing these stages, al-Ghursī provides a critical perspective on the development of interpretive methodology in the broader context of linguistic inquiry.

KEYWORDS: Saleh al-Ghursī, Philosophy, Interpretation, Anthropomorphism, Philosophy of Interpretation

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of interpreting problematic religious texts is among the most debated topics in theology, both in the past and in the present, and discussions about it continue to this very day. It is a matter that deserves great attention due to its close connection with the oneness and transcendence of God, for tawhīd (monotheism) is the essence of the Islamic message and the highest form of worship through which a person draws near to his Creator. In this study, we analyze the views of the contemporary theologian Saleh al-Ghursī on the interpretation (ta'wīl) of problematic texts whose apparent meaning suggests anthropomorphism. We have chosen to examine al-Ghursī's position because his writings demonstrate both originality in approach and authenticity in method. Through a sound rhetorical and legal-theoretical perspective, he offers a new horizon for resolving this issue.

He distinguishes between three types of interpretation across three historical stages:

1. The Early Salaf period: interpretation through compound metaphor.
2. The Late Salaf period: general interpretation or tafwīd.
3. The Late Theologians' period: interpretation through simple metaphor.

The novelty of al-Ghursī approach lies in distinguishing between two phases among the Salaf: the first being that of the Companions and their Followers, and the second that of the later independent jurists (mujtahid imams). He corrects a common error among earlier and modern authors who failed to distinguish between these two stages, which led them to assume that all the Salaf adhered to tafwīd. In reality, general interpretation or tafwīd was the view of most late Salaf, not all of them. Moreover, the early Salaf did not explicitly address this issue, as it was self-evident to them due to their pure Arabic linguistic instinct, which enabled them to understand the meanings of Qur'anic and Prophetic texts in their proper contexts.

What also draws attention in al-Ghursī's thought is his observation that interpretation through simple metaphor became widespread among later Sunni theologians, whereas most of the early theologians preferred tafwīd as their method in dealing with problematic texts. In summary, al-Ghursī's stance, as understood from multiple passages in his works, is to receive most of the texts that seem to imply anthropomorphism as instances of figurative or representational expression (compound metaphor). He supports his view with the opinions of leading scholars of rhetoric, considering the rhetorical approach to be the most appropriate path for understanding the intended meaning of such texts.

In the following pages, we shall briefly examine the problem of interpreting problematic texts through the following elements: The meaning of ta'wīl (interpretation) linguistically and terminologically and The types of ta'wīl recognized by Sunni scholars. In short, This article aims to present al-Ghursī's views on the issue of interpreting religious texts within the Islamic context. It provides an analytical examination of these views while reviewing three significant stages in history. Through this review, the article highlights what al-Ghursī critiqued and corrected regarding those who approached the issue of interpreting problematic

texts without a comprehensive understanding of its linguistic, rhetorical, and historical dimensions. Ultimately, the study seeks to arrive at the most plausible conclusion, supported by reasoned arguments and evidence.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts both inductive and deductive methodologies to arrive at valuable and substantiated conclusions. It progresses through three principal stages. The first stage—data collection—relies on primary sources within the Islamic intellectual tradition, along with an extensive review of the works of Saleh al-Ghursī. The second stage involves a thorough analysis of the collected material, employing a comparative framework alongside an interdisciplinary approach that draws from the sciences of rhetoric and Islamic studies. In the final stage, the study undertakes a rigorous methodological evaluation of the evidence related to the research topic. Through this structured and multifaceted inquiry, the study offers a significant and original contribution to this critical field within the discipline of Islamic theology (‘Ilm Uṣūl al-Dīn).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Meaning of Ta’wīl (Interpretation) in Language and Terminology

The Arabic root (‘-w-l) conveys the idea of returning to an origin. Al-Rāghib al-Aṣḥānī defines ta’wīl as deriving from al-awl, meaning “to return to the source.” He explains: “It is the act of returning something to its intended end; hence the term ma’wīl, the place to which one returns.” Linguistically, therefore, ta’wīl denotes returning something to its foundation or ultimate meaning. (Al-Asfahānī, 2010)

In the terminology of the uṣūliyyūn (principles-of-jurisprudence scholars), it refers to interpreting a text figuratively, as opposed to adhering to its apparent or literal meaning. It is well known that the revealed texts contain both definitive (muḥkam) and ambiguous (mutashābih) verses, as stated in the Qur’anic verse: “He it is who has sent down to you the Book; in it are verses that are precise—they are the foundation of the Book—and others are ambiguous.” (Āl ‘Imrān 3:7)

Proper engagement with the ambiguous verses requires understanding them in light of the definitive ones. Accordingly, the firmly grounded scholars of Islam interpreted the verses describing the perfections of God in accordance with the clear and decisive verses, thereby maintaining a balanced stance—avoiding both anthropomorphism (tashbīh) and negation (ta’ṭīl). They thus interpreted the verses that seem to suggest corporeal attributes, recognizing that their literal sense is not intended. The community of scholars agreed on this principle in a general sense, since they understood the meanings of Qur’anic expressions according to the conventions of the Arabic language, which distinguishes between literal and figurative usage. As al-Ghursī states: “Ta’wīl is nothing other than construing speech according to one of these two modes [literal or figurative]. Choosing either requires evidence. If such evidence exists and we still refuse to interpret, we would in fact be distorting the words from their proper places and deviating in the understanding of God’s names and attributes, neglecting to construe the words of God and His Messenger according to the most elegant and eloquent style.” In this statement, al-Ghursī refutes the misconception that every act of ta’wīl constitutes a deviation from the proper method of interpreting sacred texts. (al-Ghursī, 2022).

3.2. Interpretation (Ta’wīl) According to Ahl al-Sunnah

Al-Ghursī holds that the rhetorical method is a fundamental key to understanding texts that appear to imply anthropomorphism. The widespread use of figurative and metaphorical expressions in the Arabic language, he argues, is not accidental but part of the divinely established balance (mīzān) that God commanded humanity to preserve. He cites the Qur’anic verse: “That you not transgress within the balance.” (al-Raḥmān 55:8) In his view, transgressing this balance does not only refer to injustice in social dealings, but also to disturbing the balance of meaning in language—for instance, by interpreting a figurative expression literally or construing a literal one figuratively. Such distortion constitutes “altering the words from their proper places” as in the verse “They distort words from their [proper] usages.” (al-Nisā’ 4:46)

Within this framework, al-Ghursī emphasizes that recognizing stylistic diversity in Arabic is essential to correctly understanding the intent of revealed texts, especially those that are problematic. Ignoring the rhetorical dimension, he warns, leads to misinterpretation. As he states: “Before being a theological issue, this is a rhetorical one. If we adhere to these linguistic and rhetorical principles in understanding such texts, our comprehension of the Qur’an and Sunnah.” (al-Ghursī, 2023).

According to al-Ghursī, the early Sunni predecessors (Salaf)—the Companions and their Followers—understood the texts that appear to imply anthropomorphism as examples of representational expression (tamthīl), a common rhetorical device among Arabs for conveying meaning vividly. The Followers continued in this understanding. However, as Islam expanded and non-Arabic speakers entered the faith, some began to interpret these texts literally, leading to notions of corporealism (tajsīm). In response, the later Salaf scholars defended the purity of Islamic creed, affirming that the attributes mentioned in such texts are indeed divine attributes but must not be understood as bodily organs or resemblances to created beings, in light of the verse: “There is nothing like unto Him, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing.” (al-Shūrā 42:11) This stance of the later Salaf came to be known as the doctrine of tawfīd (consigning the meaning to God) or what it called general interpretation (ta’wīl ijmālī). Over time, however, most of the later Sunni theologians adopted the legitimacy of specific interpretation (ta’wīl through simple metaphor)—that is, interpreting figuratively in accordance with Arabic rhetorical norms and the principles of the Sharī‘ah.

3.2.1. Interpretation through Compound Metaphor (al-Majāz al-Murakkab)

One of the distinguishing aspects of Saleh al-Ghursī’s approach to the problem of interpretation is his clear distinction between interpretation through compound metaphor and interpretation through simple metaphor. He holds that the compound metaphor—known among rhetoricians as representative metaphor (al-isti‘ārah al-tamthīliyyah) or analogy (tamthīl)—is the most eloquent

form of metaphor, as it is the domain of rhetorical mastery. (al-Tahānawī, 1996).

Any scholar well-versed in rhetoric, he explains, does not treat a compound metaphor as a collection of separate metaphors when it can be understood as a single, unified expression. (Al-Isfārāyīnī, 2015; Kocabişik, 2025).

From this standpoint, al-Ghursī maintains that the early generations of the Salaf, namely the Companions and the Followers, interpreted most of the texts that appear to imply anthropomorphism according to this representational rhetorical mode, which aligns with the supreme eloquence of the Qur'an. He emphasizes that the Companions and Followers were pure Arabs, who understood the intent of the Lawgiver naturally. They comprehended the revealed texts as they were—with their varied rhetorical styles—recognizing literal expressions as literal, figurative expressions as figurative, and euphemisms as euphemistic. This linguistic and rhetorical awareness, according to al-Ghursī, forms the methodological basis of what later scholars called *ta'wīl* (interpretation). The Companions, may God be pleased with them, did not treat all revealed texts as figurative expressions, nor did they interpret all of them literally. In modern terms, they can be described as interpreters (*mu'awwilah*), who would return some expressions their intended meanings based on contextual indicators, rather than clinging to the surface meaning in every case. (al-Ghursī, 2023).

Al-Ghursī notes that it is a common misconception to claim that the Companions did not ask the Prophet ﷺ about the meanings of such texts because they understood them literally. He clarifies that their lack of questioning was not due to reliance on literalness, but because they already understood the intended meaning through their pure linguistic instinct and awareness of the context of speech. Hence, they had no need to inquire or seek clarification. (al-Ghursī, 2023).

This deep understanding possessed by the Companions and the Followers is what later scholars referred to as *ta'wīl*. Thus, they may be considered interpreters in this qualified sense. However, this does not mean that they construed all Qur'anic and Prophetic texts as figurative or metaphorical. Rather, it suffices to say that whenever evidence or context required, they diverted certain texts from their apparent meanings to other intended ones—just as the majority of learned interpreters among the scholars have done.

Al-Ghursī holds that the Companions and Followers — the earliest generations of the Salaf — interpreted the problematic texts through compound figurative representation (*al-majāz al-murakkab al-tamthīlī*). This means that such texts were understood metaphorically, representing abstract meanings through sensory imagery. For instance, in the verse “In His hand is the dominion” (al-Mulk: 1), the intended meaning is God's absolute authority and unrestricted control over the universe. This understanding is derived from the context, which aims to affirm God's supreme sovereignty and kingship. (al-Ghursī, 2006)

Al-Ghursī follows the leading rhetoricians, such as 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī. The latter explains, regarding the verse “The earth entirely will be His grasp on the Day of Resurrection” (al-Zumar: 67), that “the essence of the meaning is power. We do not permit that ‘grasp’ be taken as a synonym for power, but we reach the meaning of power through interpretation and representation. The meaning — and God knows best — is that the earth, in its total subjection to God's will and control, is like an object within the grasp of one's hand. Likewise, His saying ‘folded in His right hand’ should be understood in this manner. It means that God creates in the earth the quality of folding so that it appears as a scroll held in one's right hand; the mention of the right hand conveys majesty and exaltation.” (al-Jurjānī, 2010; Kocabişik, 2025)

Thus, the view of the scholars of insight is that such expressions are representations (*tamthīlāt*). Al-Bakkī describes this as the method “of those whose inner vision has been enlightened by the sciences of meaning and eloquence — a method ingrained in the hearts of the Salaf, before the intrusion of foreign linguistic influence. They interpreted such ambiguous expressions as figurative representations that depict intellectual meanings in sensory images for the sake of perfect clarity.” (al-Bakkī, n.d.).

Al-Ghursī also supports his view with the statement of al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī: “Whoever possesses a firm grounding in the science of rhetoric interprets most of the Qur'anic verses and prophetic reports that seem ambiguous as instances of representation and imagery, some as metonymy, and some as metaphor, all while maintaining the grandeur and nobility of the intended meaning.” (al-Jurjānī, 2010)

This, according to the me, is a sound view — one that I inclines to and considers the most accurate understanding of the problematic texts.

3.2.2. General Interpretation (Tafwīd)

This is the view of the later Salaf, known as general interpretation or *tafwīd* — that is, affirming the scriptural texts as they are, without ascribing to them their literal meanings, while refraining from determining the intended meaning and leaving its knowledge to God. They believe in these texts and pass them on as they have come, while denying the real, physical sense of the expressions.

Al-Ghursī draws attention to an important point concerning *tafwīd*. He states: “We must point out a major scholarly error that most scholars have fallen into — failing to distinguish between the early and the later Salaf, and attributing the doctrine of *tafwīd* to all of them, even though the earliest Salaf did not address the issue at all.” (al-Ghursī, 2023). According to him, as mentioned earlier, *tafwīd* is the stance of the majority of the later Salaf, not of all of them, as indicated by statements such as: “Its interpretation is its recitation,” “Pass them on as they have come,” “God knows best what is meant by them.”

It is reported that Imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal was asked one day before his death about the ḥadīths concerning divine attributes.

He said: "They are to be passed on as they have come, and one must believe in them. Nothing among them should be rejected if it has authentic chains of transmission. God is not to be described with more than what He described Himself — without limit and without end." (al-Tamīmī, 2001). The distinguished Ḥanbalī scholars followed their Imam in this tafwīd approach, though some later groups that claimed affiliation with him deviated from it.

During the time of the Salaf, some mujassimah (anthropomorphists) emerged who sought to affirm these attributes in their literal, physical sense. This inevitably leads to tajsīm (corporealism), which the Salaf strongly denounced. The literal sense of such expressions implies limbs and bodily parts, which cannot be ascribed to the One of whom it is said: "There is nothing like unto Him, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing" (al-Shūrā: 11). Interpreting metaphorical and figurative texts as literal realities is, therefore, a grave error.

Al-Gharsī attributes the emergence of anthropomorphism to two causes: Linguistic foreignness ('ujmah), and Influence of non-Islamic ideas. He explains that when people from other religions entered Islam, remnants of their previous beliefs mixed with Islamic thought, giving rise to certain innovations and doctrinal deviations. (al-Gharsī, 2023).

The Salaf called for following the path of tafwīd or general interpretation (ta'wīl ijmālī) regarding most of these texts. Refraining from specifying the intended meaning was, for them, an act of pious caution — avoiding definitive claims about God's intent or judgment upon His words. Another reason was their fear that unqualified people might enter the domain of interpretation, leading to distortion and alteration of divine meanings. For that reason, they chose silence and denied kayf (modality) in God's attributes, since kayf pertains only to created things. The doctrine of the Salaf was not to affirm a "how" and then claim ignorance of it, as some ignorantly allege. In this context, al-Gharsī holds that the authentic report from Imām Mālik indicates negation of modality, and that the correct expression is that narrated from Sufyān ibn 'Uyaynah: "al-kayf ghayr ma'qūl" "the how is inconceivable". (Al-Bayhaqī, 1986; Kocabiyık, 2024).

Accordingly, the well-known phrasing attributed to Imām Mālik — "al-kayf majhūl" ("the how is unknown") — is, in al-Gharsī's view, incorrect both in transmission and in meaning. Supporting this view, al-Zabīdī in his commentary on Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn quotes Ibn al-Labbān explaining Mālik's statement "kayf ghayr ma'qūl" as: "'How' belongs to the qualities of created beings, and since anything that belongs to created qualities contradicts reason when ascribed to God, it must be decisively negated from Him." (al-Zubaidi, n.d.)

Al-Gharsī also discusses the designation of such texts as khabarī attributes (report-based attributes) in contrast with 'aqlī attributes (rationally known attributes). He argues that this terminology is both partly correct and partly mistaken. It is correct in the sense that those who used it denied any real, corporeal meaning of these expressions and delegated their true intent to God. However, it is mistaken because these expressions were never presented in the Qur'an as attributes in the technical sense.

To illustrate, al-Gharsī cites an example from Arabic usage: when an Arab says, "al-amr bi-yad Allāh" ("the matter is in God's hand"), he does not mean to affirm "hand" as an attribute of God, but rather intends by this expression that God alone possesses absolute authority and control, and that all matters belong to Him. (al-Gharsī, 2006).

3.2.3. Interpretation through Simple Metaphor (al-Majāz al-Mufrad)

The majority of later scholars (khalaf) allowed specifying the intended meaning of problematic texts, interpreting most of them through simple metaphor, according to the rules and styles of the Arabic language, and by following the conditions of interpretation using contextual clues, surrounding words, preceding and accompanying expressions, but without asserting the meaning with certainty; rather, it is a matter of probability and preference. Al-Ghazālī's Qānūn al-Ta'wīl contains a summary of what the Ahl al-Sunnah required for detailed interpretation. (al-Ghazālī, 2017).

Interpretation through simple metaphor, then, is an explanation of these texts in meanings that can properly be attributed to God, while observing specific conditions. Al-Gharsī summarizes the conditions set by the theologians of Ahl al-Sunnah as follows:

The meaning assigned must be established for God.

It must not contradict the norms of the Arabic language.

It must fit the context of the text and not oppose it.

The meaning must convey grandeur and majesty, not deficiency.

An example of simple metaphor is interpreting "hand" as power or authority, or other meanings indicated by the language according to context. Al-Gharsī critiques some later Ash'arites for excessive reliance on simple metaphor, accusing them of, due to this overextension, agreeing with the Mu'tazilites in many interpretations that the Salaf considered innovations and criticized. (al-Gharsī, 2006).

CONCLUSION

From examining al-Gharsī's views on the interpretation of problematic texts in his works, his position can be summarized as follows:

1. Methodical distinction between two stages of the Salaf: the early Salaf and the later Salaf.
2. Interpretation by the Companions was innate, based on Arabic linguistic instinct.
3. Interpretation among the early Salaf was through compound metaphor (al-majāz al-murakkab), using the method of representation (tamthīl).
4. General interpretation (tafwīd) was the doctrine of most of the later Salaf.

5. Simple metaphor interpretation (al-majāz al-mufrad) was practiced by most of the later scholars, according to its proper conditions.
6. Rejection of uncontrolled extension in simple metaphor interpretation by later theologians.
7. Returning texts to rhetorical methods is the best way to understand them.
8. Focusing solely on literal meanings and denying metaphor leads to anthropomorphism and comparison (tajsīm and tashbīh).

In conclusion, it is essential for those engaged in modern doctrinal studies to give due attention to the rhetorical approach in understanding scriptural texts, as it harmonizes the objectives of Sharia with the principles of Arabic eloquence. This approach can also inform curricula for teaching Islamic creed, promoting correct, balanced understanding while avoiding both excess and neglect.

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