

TAFSĪR IN ITS CONTEXT, OR HOW SOCIO-POLITICAL MILIEU INFORMED WHAT TO INCLUDE AND EXCLUDE IN QUR'AN COMMENTARIES

Aṭ-Ṭabariy's, Ibn Abī Ḥātim's, and al-Māturīdiy's Interpretations of Surah Al-Mā'idah (5): 51 as a Case Study

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the interpretations of Qur'an surah al-Mā'idah (5): 51 by three 10th-century exegetes: aṭ-Ṭabariy, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, and al-Māturīdiy. It argues that aṭ-Ṭabariy's commentary, though foundational, represents just one model of exegesis in the medieval period. Ibn Abī Ḥātim and al-Māturīdiy incorporate unique interpretative materials, not found in aṭ-Ṭabariy's work. Al-Māturīdiy offers three types of interpretation, while Ibn Abī Ḥātim narrates a story about Caliph 'Umar's anger at a companion hiring a Christian secretary. The study also contextualizes these interpretations within the socio-political environment of the 10th-century 'Abbasid era, where non-Muslims gained influence. This article concludes that the Qur'an commentators' decision to include and exclude certain interpretative materials in their *tafsīr* works reflects, to some degree, the socio-political environments in which they lived and authored their works. Qur'an commentaries, like any other book, were not written in a vacuum.

Keywords: Meaning-making, Socio-Political Contexts, the Interpretation of surah al-Mā'idah (5): 51.

Tafsir dan Konteksnya, atau Bagaimana Konteks Sosial-Politik Mempengaruhi Materi Yang Harus Dimasukkan dan Dikecualikan dalam Tafsir Al-Quran: Tafsir Aṭ-Ṭabarī, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, dan al-Māturīdī atas Surah Al-Mā'idah (5): 51 sebagai Studi Kasus

Abstrak

Tulisan ini menganalisis penafsiran terhadap surah al-Mā'idah (5): 51 oleh tiga mufasir abad ke-10: aṭ-Ṭabarī, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, dan al-Māturīdī. Penelitian ini berargumen bahwa penafsiran aṭ-Ṭabarī, meskipun sangat berpengaruh, hanya salah satu model ekségesis dalam periode abad pertengahan. Ibn Abī Ḥātim dan al-Māturīdī memperkenalkan materi penafsiran yang tidak ditemukan dalam karya aṭ-Ṭabarī. Al-Māturīdī menawarkan tiga jenis penafsiran, sementara Ibn Abī Ḥātim menceritakan kisah tentang kemarahan Khalifah 'Umar terhadap seorang sahabat yang mempekerjakan seorang sekretaris beragama Kristen. Penelitian ini juga mengontekstualisasikan penafsiran tersebut dalam konteks sosial-politik era Abbasiyah abad ke-10, di mana non-Muslim memperoleh pengaruh. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa keputusan para mufasir untuk memasukkan atau mengecualikan materi penafsiran tertentu ke dalam karya tafsir mereka merefleksikan kondisi sosio-politik di mana karya tafsir mereka ditulis. Tafsir al-Qur'an, sebagaimana karya-karya lainnya, tidaklah ditulis dalam ruang hampa.

Kata Kunci: *perluasan pemaknaan, konteks sosio-politik, penafsiran surah al-Mā'idah (5): 51.*

التفسير مرتبط بسياقه، أو كيف أثرت البيئة الاجتماعية والسياسية على ما يجب تضمينه واستبعاده في تفسير القرآن: تفسيرات الطبري وابن أبي حاتم والماتريدي لسورة المائدة (٥): ٥١ كدراسة حالة

ملخص

يحلل هذا البحث تفسيرات ثلاثة مفسرين من القرن العاشر لسورة المائدة (٥): ٥١: الطبري وابن أبي حاتم والماتريدي. ويدعي أن تفسير الطبري، على الرغم من كونه أساسيًا، يمثل نموذجًا واحدًا فقط من التفسير في العصور الوسطى. إن ابن أبي حاتم والماتريدي يقدمان مواد تفسيرية فريدة من نوعها لا نجدها في عمل الطبري. يقدم الماتريدي ثلاثة أنواع من التفسير، بينما يروي ابن أبي حاتم قصة عن غضب الخليفة عمر من صحابي استأجر سكرتيرة مسيحية. كما يضع البحث هذه التفسيرات في سياق البيئة الاجتماعية والسياسية لعصر العباسيين في القرن العاشر، حيث اكتسب غير المسلمين نفوذًا. وتخلص هذا البحث إلى أن قرار مفسري القرآن الكريم بإدراج واستبعاد بعض المواد التفسيرية في أعمالهم التفسيرية يعكس، إلى حد ما، البيئات الاجتماعية والسياسية التي عاشوا فيها وكتبوا أعمالهم. إن تفسيرات القرآن الكريم، مثل أي كتاب آخر، لم تُكتب في فراغ

الكلمات المفتاحية: صناعة المعنى، السياقات الاجتماعية والسياسية، تفسير سورة المائدة (5): 15.

Introduction

In one of his seminal studies, Walid Saleh points out how *tafsīr*, Qur'anic exegesis, has enjoyed a fundamental position in modern times. He draws attention to the rise of scriptural theology in the contemporary Islamic world, which manifests primarily in *tafsīr* literature (Saleh 2020: 693). *Tafsīr* has now become a promising vehicle by which one can reconstruct and reshape theology, which was in classical times the subject in the field of *kalām*, speculative theology. For instance, he observes how the words *ḥākimiyya* and *jāhiliyya*, which both have conceptual origins in the Qur'an, are elaborated by Abū al-A'lā al-Maudūdiy (d. 1979) and Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) respectively to articulate their ideologies. As Saleh notes, numerous modern issues that Muslims face, such as the place of women in society, the consequence of diversity, and the status of a minority, are reassessed through the Qur'anic lens, elevating *tafsīr* as a central ideological and intellectual exercise (Saleh 2020: 695).

There is an almost universal consensus among scholars that modern *tafsīr* works reflect and respond to the current socio-political issues or at least serve as an arena where contemporary discourses have been promoted or challenged. Examining exegetical works by the two twentieth-century authors, Rasyīd Riḍā (d. 1935) and aṭ-Ṭabāṭabā'iy (d. 1981), Jane Dammen McAuliffe maintains that the interpretive tradition in the modern days expands sufficiently to hint general reference to the contemporary socio-political context (McAuliffe 1991: 36). In contrast, the premodern commentators, she continues, exhibit no concern with their recent problems. She remarks, "They [premodern Qur'anic exegetes] do not seek to draw into the discourse any allusions to the current political, social, or economic environment. The reader searches in vain for such reference" (McAuliffe 1991: 35). Pink argues that direct reference to contemporary events does not distinguish modern Qur'an commentaries from their premodern counterparts because not all modern exegetical works give such a reference. She asserts, however, that there are still some distinctive characteristics, one of which is modern commentators' concern with not primarily meanings but with relevance or guidance (Pink 2010: 58). McAuliffe's and Pink's assessment of modern *tafsīr*'s allegedly unique characteristics raises some questions. Suppose it is true that the medieval commentators did not directly refer to their contemporary milieu as Pink suggests. Do their exegetical works still reflect and react to their broader context indirectly? Or do they exhibit no concern at all with their current problems, as McAuliffe believes?

There was a widespread, but now seems to be out of date, opinion among researchers that medieval *tafsīr* tradition is only repetitive, dull, irrelevant, and characterized by a tiresome, uniform appearance. In one of his studies, Harris Birkeland argues, “After aṭ-Ṭabariy, az-Zamakhshariy, and ar-Rāziy nothing essentially new has entered orthodox *tafsīr*... it is absolutely superfluous to consult other commentaries than those mentioned, to obtain exhaustive information of the history of Muslim *tafsīr*” (McAuliffe 1991: 31). This assessment comes from the fact that the *tafsīr* corpus displays repeated materials, creating an image in the mind of many people that Qur’an commentators are mere transmitters and copyists of already available materials. Scholars usually characterize the classical *tafsīr* corpus produced between the tenth and nineteenth centuries as repetitive, unoriginal, and imitative (Pink and Gorke 2014: 2). One could argue that this conviction is the main reason why the *tafsīr* corpus has long been marginalized in Islamic studies in Western academia. Saleh insists that the classical *tafsīr* will remain neglected unless we abandon the Romantic notion of what constitutes originality (Saleh 2015: 1649).

In response to the abovementioned skepticism concerning the value of *tafsīr* literature, a new trend in recent scholarship has emerged that triggers researchers and historians to treat Qur’an commentaries as a window to investigate and comprehend Islamic intellectual history. Saleh has, rather ambitiously, claimed:

“Qur’an commentaries were the vehicle whereby many intellectuals advanced novel ideas regarding many nonexegetical matters. Thus, for example, to explain the development of philosophy and theology in medieval Islam after the twelfth century without studying the Qur’an commentary of Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāziy has now been shown to be untenable. We can no longer afford to study medieval Islamic intellectual history without including tafsīr as an essential component” (Saleh 2008: 630).

Driven by this optimism, Saleh has, based on his close reading of the Qur’an commentary of the Mamluk scholar al-Biqā’iy (d. 1480), successfully shown us medieval Muslims’ attitudes toward the Bible. Pieter Coppens makes a more modest and feasible claim. After analyzing whether and to what extent several Sufi Qur’an commentaries are open to ideas formulated outside the genre, he states that “*tafsīr* is certainly still suitable as a source for intellectual history, but there are certain pitfalls in research when only focusing on *tafsīr* to understand the history of a certain idea” (Coppens 2018: 124). Saleh’s and Coppens’ statements are certainly not contradictory. Although the latter reminds us that relying on *tafsīr* solely will not provide us with a fuller record of the Islamic intellectual landscape, both agree on the potential benefits that an intellectual historian may gain from the vast

amount of *tafsīr* literature.

An increasing number of volumes, monographs, and articles on Qur'an commentators and their works published in the past few decades illustrate the growing academic interest in *tafsīr* literature (Muchlisin 2022: 289). Some scholars consider the *tafsīr* tradition as a valuable reference for understanding intellectual endeavors and currents in a particular period and region. Karen Bauer suggests that *tafsīr*, at its essence, is "each scholar's attempt to relate his world to the world of the Qur'an; it is his attempt to relate his intellectual, political, and social contexts to the Qur'an's text" (Bauer 2013: 8).

In the present article, I will examine the interpretations of surah al-Mā'idah (5): 51, a verse that has significantly impacted modern political conversations, by three relatively contemporaneous tenth-century exegetes, namely Ibn Jarīr aṭ-Ṭabariy (d. 923), Ibn Abī Ḥātim ar-Rāziy (d. 938), and Abū Maṣū'ir al-Māturīdiy (d. 944). While McAuliffe and Pink assert that no hints of socio-political contexts are to be found in the classical Qur'an commentaries, and the classical exegetes pay less attention to guidance and relevance than their modern counterparts, Bauer supports a divergent view, as we have seen earlier. My study of the three classical Qur'an commentators will engage in this ongoing academic conversation and attempt to show how medieval Qur'an commentators decided to include and exclude certain interpretative materials reflects their political, social, and cultural environments. Thus, the medieval Qur'an commentators were not isolated from their contemporary world.

Repositioning aṭ-Ṭabariy's Exegetical Work

There is no doubt that aṭ-Ṭabariy's Qur'an commentary has been, for a long time, highly celebrated as the work that provides us with a total accumulation of classical exegetical materials. As we saw earlier, Birkeland goes further to confidently assert that it is superfluous to consult any other commentaries besides the three, one of which is aṭ-Ṭabariy's, for the exhaustiveness of inherited traditions he had collected. Other commentators are viewed only as recycling the available exegetical materials. The conviction that aṭ-Ṭabariy's work has sufficiently preserved for us a comprehensive record of earlier interpretive traditions has shaded both Muslim and Western scholars.

The renowned premodern author in the *ṭabaqāt al-mufasssīrīn* genre, Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭiy (d. 1505), praises aṭ-Ṭabariy as the leader of Qur'an commentators who had gathered knowledge shared by *none* of his time. His work exceeds what came before and after him (as-Suyūṭiy no year:

95). The modern Egyptian Muslim author whose work *at-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn* has been widely read, Muḥammad Ḥusain az-Ẓahabiy (d. 1977) holds aṭ-Ṭabariy's work as the first reference and the most important commentary for the inherited materials (az-Ẓahabiy no year: 161). Similarly, Claude Gilliot credits aṭ-Ṭabariy's Qur'an commentary as a landmark work and declares it "the first to combine *fully* the various formative stages or elements of Muslim exegesis" (Gilliot 2001: 111). This view is also reflected in McAuliffe's statement that aṭ-Ṭabariy's work contains "the compilation and methodical arrangement of *the first two and a half centuries* of Muslim exegesis. It has garnered praise for its clarity and *comprehensiveness*" (McAuliffe 1991: 42). Likewise, Mustafa Shah maintains that aṭ-Ṭabariy's commentary offers "a more integrated and wide-ranging approach to the interpretation of the Qur'an" (Shah 2013: 83).

The current state of *tafsīr* studies, however, has witnessed a growing critique raised by some researchers against the conviction of the comprehensiveness of aṭ-Ṭabariy's work in preserving, compiling, and representing earlier exegetical traditions. It is Walid Saleh who first calls into doubt this widespread scholarly conviction. In his study of the formation of the classical *tafsīr* tradition, Saleh is, as he recounts, forced to conclude that aṭ-Ṭabariy was "not the major architect of the exegetical tradition he is widely believed to be" (Saleh 2004: 12). It is as-Şa'labī's (d. 1035) Qur'an commentary, Saleh argues, which turns out to be far more influential than that of aṭ-Ṭabariy in refashioning the course of the interpretive tradition (Saleh 2004: 5). In his other study that compares aṭ-Ṭabariy's and al-Māturīdiy's Qur'an commentaries, Saleh is convinced that aṭ-Ṭabariy's work does not gather all the Sunni collective memory and exegesis. Therefore, his work should not be regarded as the culmination and representation of the mainstream Sunni interpretive tradition of the period but only as *one* among other types of interpretive activities (Saleh 2016: 186). In the following section, in addition to comparing aṭ-Ṭabariy and al-Māturīdiy, I will also bring another name, Ibn Abī Ḥātim ar-Rāziy, to make the case more compelling and fruitful.

Aṭ-Ṭabariy, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, and al-Māturīdiy on Surah al-Mā'idah (5): 51¹

In his interpretation of surah al-Mā'idah (5): 51,² aṭ-Ṭabariy begins by informing us that the scholars of interpretation (*ahl at-ta'wīl*) had different

¹ It is obvious that they all offer multiple exegetical opinions, but in this study, I will only highlight how they differ in their interpretations.

² "O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians for *waliy*. They are *awliyā'* one to another. He among you who taketh them for *awliyā'* is (one) of them. Lo! Allah guideth not wrongdoing folk." The translation is Pickthall, <https://qurantools.mst.edu.au/>

accounts of the verse's contexts of revelation (*asbāb an-nuzūl*). The various reports aṭ-Ṭabariy had collected suggest that the verse was revealed to respond to either 1) 'Ubāda ibn Ṣāmit and 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, 2) a group of anonymous believers after their defeat in the Uhud war, or 3) Abū Lubāba ibn 'Abd al-Munzīr. These various reports suggest that the verse was revealed in response to a hypocrite who took a Jew or a Christian as a *waliy* in a time of uncertainty (*dawā'ir ad-dahr*) in the Prophet's era. Aṭ-Ṭabariy, nevertheless, argues that the verse should be taken in its general meaning that addresses all Muslims at every time and place, preferring what later would be formulated as *al-'ibrah bi 'umūm al-laḥẓ lā bi khuṣūṣ as-sabab*, that, it is the generality of the sentence, not the particular cause, that should be taken into account (aṭ-Ṭabariy no year: 504-506).

By taking a Jew and a Christian as a *waliy*, he means supporting them as helpers and allies *over* the community of believers. Commenting on the Qur'anic phrase, *some of them are auliya' for others* (*ba'duhum auliya' ba'd*), aṭ-Ṭabariy writes that each Jews and Christians helped their groups *against* the believers, and those who allied with them had clearly shown the war against the community of the believers. In commenting on the following segment of the verse, *whoever of you allied with them, he is among them* (*wa man yatawallā hum min kum fainnahum min hum*), aṭ-Ṭabariy writes:

فإن من تولاهم ونصرهم على المؤمنين فهو من أهل دينهم وملتهم فإنه لا يتولى
متولاً أحداً إلا وهو به وبدينه وما هو عليه راضٍ (aṭ-Ṭabariy no year: 508)

"Whoever allies with and helps them over the believers is one of the people of their religion and creed. None allies with somebody except he is with him, his religion, and what he is consent."

A further interpretation of surah al-Mā'idah (51): 5 is offered by the renowned hadith scholar Ibn Abī Ḥātim ar-Rāziy. Scholarship on Ibn Abī Ḥātim tends to focus exclusively on his expertise in hadith (Dickinson 2001 and Koc 2005), and his Qur'an commentary remains less studied. To better understand the history of Muslim exegetical tradition, there is no excuse not to consult his *tafsīr* work, which has been available to us in recent years. Comparing Ibn Abī Ḥātim to aṭ-Ṭabariy reveals that the former is not a mere transmitter of traditions. Besides collecting numerous exegetical opinions as aṭ-Ṭabariy did, Ibn Abī Ḥātim introduces to the Muslim exegetical tradition another new interpretation. After providing various accounts of the contexts of the revelation (*asbāb an-nuzūl*), he narrates a report that carries more political dimensions and implications for Muslims-non-Muslims relations. For the first time in the history of *tafsīr*, he

incorporates into the pool of Qur'anic exegesis a story of the conflict between the Caliph 'Umar and a senior Companion, Abū Mūsā al-Asy'ariy, which was previously not part of the *tafsīr* tradition. The story tells us that Abū Mūsā employed a Christian secretary, and when the Caliph was aware of this, he was angry and commanded Abū Mūsā to discharge his secretary from his office. The Caliph is told to recite this verse to support his argument (Ibn Abī Ḥātim 1439 AH: 136-140).

For his part, al-Māturīdiy, unlike both aṭ-Ṭabariy and Ibn Abī Ḥātim, does not cite any report describing the occasions of revelation (*asbāb annuzūl*) of this verse. However, he goes further by offering us three different possible interpretations of the verse, which ban Muslims from pledging an alliance with Jews and Christians in one of the following three areas: 1) religious affairs (*la tattakhiḏū auliyā' fī ad-Dīn* – do not take [them] as allies in religious matters), 2) aid and help [e.g. over the Muslims] (*an-naṣr wa al-ma'ūnah*), or 3) gaining economic profits and worldly interests (*al-maksab wa ad-dunyā*). While his first interpretation markedly distinguishes him from his two predecessors, his second and third interpretations show, to some degree, some resemblances with aṭ-Ṭabariy's and Ibn Abī Ḥātim's, respectively. In illuminating the third possible interpretation, al-Māturīdiy says that if Muslims allied with non-Muslims to gain financial profits and worldly affairs, the former would incline toward the latter and adopt their opinions on some issues. Muslims, thus, will depend on the authority of others (al-Māturīdiy 2005: 248).

Comparing these three luminaries' interpretations of the verse reveals how its meanings expanded substantially. While aṭ-Ṭabariy understands that the verse discards a supportive coalition between Muslims and non-Muslims in general, Ibn Abī Ḥātim alludes it to a political position and al-Māturīdiy to economic and worldly affairs, among others. We can better understand the development of these meanings once we take the socio-political milieu of the tenth-century Islamic kingdom into consideration.

The Political Roles of Non-Muslims during the 'Abbasids Time

Stephen Humphreys begins his chapter by insisting that Islamic history is not a history of Muslims alone. He further says, "From the beginning, the non-Muslim elements of society have been at the very center of life. Without attention to their role, it is hard to imagine a sound history of crafts and commerce, of science and medicine, even of governmental administration" (Humphreys 1991: 255). Similarly, Sidney Griffith observes that many Christians enjoyed a high public profile in the 'Abbasid era. Some of them were physicians, philosophers, logicians, mathematicians, copyists,

translators, and theologians (Griffith 2003: 129). One of the most influential Christian figures is the renowned translator, Ḥunain ibn Ishāq (d. 873), who rendered works by Galen, Aristotle, and Plato to Arabic for his Abbasid patrons (Sharkey 2017: 31). To this, we can also add the Christian philosopher Abū Bisyr Mattā ibn Yūnus (d. 940), whose class in Baghdad was attended by, among others, the Muslim philosopher al-Fārābiy (d. 950) and the Syriac Christian philosopher Yaḥyā ibn ‘Adiy (d. 974). The latter is known to have written a book on morals and ethics called *Kitāb Tahzīb al-Akhlāq* (Griffith 2003: 129).³ Among the Jews who played important public roles were Abū Ya‘qūb Ishāq ibn Sulaimān al-Isrā‘īliy (d. 932), the tenth-century Jewish doctor who wrote an influential book about dietetics (Sharkey 2017: 51) and later Jewish philosopher Moses ibn Maymun (d. 1204), commonly known as Maimonides.

Non-Muslim activities during the ‘Abbasids were not limited to knowledge production and exchange, but some actively engaged in politics and state administration. Mun’im Sirry notes that non-Muslims secured their prominent positions during the governmental transition from the Umayyads to the ‘Abbasids because they were able to maintain administrative stability within the unstable state. Although the Caliphs planned to remove Christians from their offices, mainly due to objections raised by religious scholars, in reality, they still needed their non-Muslim employees to handle a variety of state affairs. The Caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754-775), for example, is reported to have decided to remove his Christian colleagues from their office of public treasury but was later compelled to return them to their initial positions due to their professional expertise (Sirry 2011: 192).

During the Caliph al-Mu‘taṣim’s reign (833-842), two Christian brothers were appointed to very high-standing positions. One of them, Salmuyah, served as the secretary of state, and it is said that no royal documents were valid until he signed them. His brother, Ibrāhīm, was set over the Bayt al-Māl, or public treasury, a position that might be expected to be occupied by Muslims. The most influential Christian politician at the time, however, was the vizier Faḍl ibn Marwān ibn Māsarjis (d. 865). Ibn Nadīm (d. 955) recounts that Faḍl ibn Marwān served al-Ma‘mūn and al-Mu‘taṣim as vizier and showed great expertise in the service of the caliphs. Aṭ-Ṭabariy, in his *Tārīkh al-Umam wa al-Mulūk*, narrates a conversation between al-Mu‘taṣim

3 It is interesting to note that the *Tahzīb al-Akhlāq* genre was first written by a Christian philosopher who lived amid Muslim communities. In a later period, we found a Muslim philosopher, Ibn Miskawaih (d. 1030), also wrote a book with the same title. For the similarities and differences between Yaḥyā ibn ‘Adiy’s and Ibn Miskawaih’s *Tahzīb al-Akhlāq*, see Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam*, (Leiden: Brill, 1994), especially chapter five and six.

and his close friend Ibrāhīm al-Haftī where the latter shared his concern about Faḍl ibn Marwān's excessive power and performance as if he was the real caliph (Sirry 2011: 194-195). Christians continued to occupy central positions in the state administrations in subsequent eras. In his *Wuzarā' an-Nasrāniyya wa-Kuttābuhā fī al-Islām*, Louis Cheikhu lists seventy-five Christian viziers and 300 secretaries under the Islamic empire up to the year 1517 (Sirry 2011: 192). The discussion above intends to demonstrate how notable Christian figures played noticeable political roles and authority in medieval Muslim society, and this fact, in turn, triggered Muslim intellectuals, including Qur'an commentators, to respond to their socio-political condition.

Tafsīr as a Genealogical Tradition vis-à-vis *Tafsīr* in Its Context

In his splendid monograph on the eleventh-century Qur'an commentator aš-Ša'labiy, Saleh has drawn scholarly attention to the genealogical nature of the *tafsīr* tradition. By "genealogical," he means "a certain dialectical relationship that each new commentary, and hence each exegete, had with the previous tradition as a whole." A Qur'an commentator stands before the sea of interpretive traditions that he cannot dismiss and escape from but is compelled to respond to in various ways, either by recycling, omitting, or adding his voice, among many others. This genealogical mode of *tafsīr* activity, however, Saleh regrets, has been frequently misread. Many scholars tend to consider repetitiveness as the *tafsīr*'s essence. However, the rationale behind an exegete's choice of a particular interpretation and his inclusion and exclusion of certain exegetical materials has remained a mystery that holds no interest to many modern scholars (Saleh 2004: 15-16). However, if one wants to read a sufficiently wide range of *tafsīr* texts and compare them, behind their seeming repetition lies some interesting dynamics and shifts. Coppens emphasizes that the genealogical character of *tafsīr* does not imply that no innovation and novelty have entered the Muslim's exegetical tradition. He argues that genealogy and originality are not mutually exclusive categories" (Coppens 2018: 123).

As we saw earlier, aṭ-Ṭabariy attempted to collect numerous older interpretive materials, such as different accounts of the verse's contexts of revelations (*asbāb an-nuzūl*) and its different possible meanings offered by earlier exegetes, despite his preference to understand the verse as addressing all Muslims in general. Unlike Ibn Abī Ḥātim, aṭ-Ṭabariy did not include in his *tafsīr* the story of the dispute between Abū Mūsā and 'Umar. To be sure, aṭ-Ṭabariy might be well aware of the story as he knows various objections raised by some individuals against the appointment of non-Muslims by the

caliphs. His exclusion of the story from his Qur'an commentary suggests that for him, the story was not part of the *tafsīr* tradition. Until we have earlier evidence, we are compelled to hold a hypothesis that Ibn Abī Ḥātim was the first to introduce and incorporate this story of dispute into the Qur'an interpretative tradition. His inclusion of the story reflects his deep concern about the growing power and influence of non-Muslim elites within the Muslim world. Ibn Abī Ḥātim wants the verse to be understood as discouraging or prohibiting Muslim rulers from appointing non-Muslims to serve in vital governmental positions who, in turn, will have greater authority over Muslim individuals and communities.

This case illustrates that while *tafsīr* is a genealogical tradition in which an exegete interacts with previous exegetical materials, the tradition is also open to materials, ideas, concerns, and historical phenomena outside the genre. After Ibn Abī Ḥātim, however, the story did not fully enter the *tafsīr* tradition yet, as we encounter the fact that another major architect of medieval *tafsīr*, aṣ-Ṣā'labiy, does not narrate it in his interpretation of the verse (aṣ-Ṣā'labiy 2004: 464). Perhaps the story was, for him, never an element of the *tafsīr* genre; thus, there is no need to refer to it in his exhaustive *tafsīr* work. Nevertheless, the story was pushed back again and made reappeared by aṣ-Ṣā'labiy's most brilliant student, Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Wāḥidiy (d. 1076), in his both Qur'an commentaries entitled *al-Wasīṭ* and *al-Basīṭ* (al-Wāḥidiy 1994: 197, no year 418-419, Saleh 2006: 223). The story of the dispute since then has entered the tradition more successfully and was reused by subsequent great medieval exegetes, such as az-Zamakhshariy (d. 1143) (az-Zamakhshariy 2009: 294), Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāziy (d. 1209) (ar-Rāziy 1981: 17-18), and Abū Ḥayyān al-Garnāṭiy (d. 1344) (al-Garnāṭiy 2010: 317), whose commentaries were widely read in the medieval period. The fact that the story is also retold in Ibn Kaṣīr's (d. 1373) commentary (Ibn Kaṣīr 2000: 628), which now has enjoyed significantly increasing authority and popularity in the modern era, makes the story more apparent today. Many modern exegetes, such as Jamāl ad-Dīn al-Qāsimiy (d. 1914) (al-Qāsimiy no year: 2024), Abū Zahrah (d. 1974) (Abū Zahrah 1987: 2239-2240), Sa'īd Ḥawwā (d. 1989) (Ḥawwā 1985: 1426), and Muḥammad Sayyid Ṭaṇṭāwiyy (d. 2010) (Ṭaṇṭāwiyy 1987: 249-251) felt it was necessary to recount the story of the dispute in their interpretation of surah al-Ma'idah (5): 51. Although the story was once not considered as part of *tafsīr* tradition by the two prominent medieval Qur'an commentators, aṭ-Ṭabariy and aṣ-Ṣā'labiy, the story has eventually managed to enter the tradition. The inclusion and re-inclusion of the story into the *tafsīr* tradition reflect the concern of many medieval Muslims about the growing authority

that non-Muslims secured in the government.

While the story of the conflict between Abū Mūsā and ‘Umar, which carries weightier political dimensions, endures longer and finally becomes a necessary part of the *tafsīr* tradition, it is interesting to note that al-Māturīdiy’s interpretation that the verse prohibits pledging an alliance with non-Muslims in gaining economic profits (*al-maksab*) does not. The fourteenth-century Qur’an commentator and Māturīdiy theologian, ‘Abd Allāh ibn Aḥmad an-Nasafiy (d. 1310), who relies heavily on al-Māturīdiy’s *tafsīr*, appears to omit the latter’s last two interpretations of the verse and only reuses his first interpretation, namely, that the verse prohibits Muslims from pledging an alliance with non-Muslims only in religious affairs. In his *Madārik at-Tanzīl wa Ḥaqā’iq at-Ta’wīl*, an-Nasafiy goes further by opposing al-Māturīdiy’s warning on economic exchange, saying that cultivating the company (*aş-şuhbah*) with non-Muslims to have transactions (*mu‘āmalah*) or buy something from them (*syirā’*), or request a job from them (*talab ‘amal minhum*), without giving consent to their beliefs and religious matters, should not be included in this verse’s prohibition. Intriguingly, he afterward recounts the dispute story between Abū Mūsā and ‘Umar (an-Nasafiy 1998: 453). This survey illustrates that for some medieval Muslim intellectuals, giving non-Muslims political authority to rule over the Muslim communities poses a greater threat than their collaboration in the economic exchange where the two parties stand in an equal position.

Table.1: Comparison of three interpretations of surah al-Mā’idah (5): 51

Aṭ-Ṭabariy (d. 923)	Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 938)	Al-Māturīdiy (d. 944)
After narrating different accounts of the verse’s contexts of revelation (<i>asbāb an-nuzūl</i>), aṭ-Ṭabariy argues that the verse should be understood in its general meaning, which addresses all Muslims in every place and time.	Ibn Abī Ḥātim narrates a story of how the Caliph ‘Umar was angry at Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī for he employed a Christian secretary. ‘Umar is told to recite Q 5:51 to support his argument.	According to al-Māturīdiy’s interpretation, Q 5:51 prohibits Muslims from pledging an alliance with Jews and Christians in three areas: 1) religious affairs, 2) giving aid and help in general, and 3) economic affairs.

There are several notes regarding the narrative presented in the table above. The story of a conflict between the Caliph ‘Umar and Abū Mūsā al-Asy‘ariy, once brought by Ibn Abī Ḥātim into the exegetical tradition, is not incorporated by another great architect of medieval *tafsīr* tradition, aṣ-Şā‘labiy (d. 1035), into his Qur’an commentary. Nevertheless, this story was reused by his prominent student, al-Wāḥidiy (d. 1076), and has been re-

narrated afterward by many later Qur'an commentators up to the present day. Although relying heavily on al-Māturīdiy's commentary, an-Nasafiy (d. 1310) decided to omit al-Māturīdiy's interpretation that surah al-Mā'idah (5): 51 prohibits Muslims from cooperating with non-Muslims in economic sectors. Instead, an-Nasafiy argues that economic transactions between Muslims and non-Muslims are lawful. This shows that for medieval Muslim Qur'an commentators, offering non-Muslims political authority to rule over the Muslim communities poses a greater threat than their collaboration in the economic exchange where the two parties stand in an equal position. This discussion reveals that medieval Qur'an commentators were aware of their political, economic, and cultural environments and that their exegetical works responded to their contemporary contexts.

Conclusion

While this survey seems to match with Pink's assessment that no direct reference is found in the classical *tafsīr* works to their contemporary events, it does not mean that the Qur'an commentators were not aware of their socio-political milieu and their exegetical works do not reflect their contexts indirectly. Like any other book, *tafsīr* was not written in a vacuum. An exegete's choice of what he should include and exclude in his Qur'an commentary illustrates his concerns about several issues prevalent in his time. By looking at the socio-cultural and political contexts in which a Qur'an commentary was penned, we can gain a better understanding of how an exegete intervenes, often in a very subtle manner, in the genealogical tradition of *tafsīr*. The findings of this study contradict McAuliffe's generalization that medieval exegetes exhibit no concern with their contemporary problems (McAuliffe 1991: 35).

Tafsīr studies have just begun receiving considerable scholarly attention in Euro-American academia. The vast number of exegetical materials in voluminous Qur'an commentaries, written from the eighth century to the modern day, has waited for further studies. While some older scholars insisted that repetitiveness is the main feature characterizing the Qur'anic exegetical tradition, a new generation of *tafsīr* historians asserts that behind the repetitiveness lies some fascinating dynamics and tensions. While previous scholarship finds no noticeable links between Qur'an commentaries and their historical contexts, some recent works problematize this opinion. It is true that a younger exegete, because of the genealogical nature of the *tafsīr* tradition, would recycle an older exegete's work; the former also exercises his intellectual intervention by selecting what to include and exclude in his Qur'an commentary from the older

materials. Future research might, for instance, examine how an-Nasafiy reworks al-Māturīdiy's interpretation. Both scholars belong to the same theological school, and the former makes extensive use of the latter's exegetical materials. However, at the same time, an-Nasafiy also omits some of al-Māturīdiy's interpretative views and substitutes them with his own understanding, illustrating how an intellectual intervention operates within the genealogical tafsīr tradition.

Finally, the tafsīr tradition is never a one-man show; it is a culmination of countless exegetical efforts made by all commentators across ages and geographical areas. While aṭ-Ṭabariy and aš-Ša'labiy are often celebrated as the influential architects of medieval *tafsīr* tradition, this study shows that, at least in the case of *surah al-Mā'idah* (5): 51, Ibn Abī Ḥātim and al-Wāḥidī played equally important roles in shaping Muslim's interpretation of the Qur'an. Ibn Abī Ḥātim was the first to introduce the story of the conflict between 'Umar and Abū Mūsā al-Asy'ariy into the Qur'anic exegesis, and al-Wāḥidī pushed this story until it enjoyed more popularity and has been normally adopted by later commentators. Likewise, although al-Māturīdiy is a great theologian whose name became the eponym of the Maturidi school of theology, his Qur'anic interpretation is challenged even by his follower named an-Nasafiy. This shows that although Qur'an commentators, as a rule, transmitted older exegetical materials from earlier authorities, they could also contest them, allowing a *tafsīr* work to be a valuable arena for fascinating intellectual debates.[]

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