

Meaning and Principles of al-Ta'wīl in al-Ghazālī's Thought

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Meaning of Al-Ta'wīl and the Associated Expressions:

Al-ta'wīl in Arabic language is from the verb *awwāla*, *yua'wwilu*, 'to return' to some thing or from *iyyālah* 'to put the things rightly', so it is verbal noun which means to clarify, or to interpret.¹ In Mu'jam it is defined as 'coming back to original meaning'.² In the Holy Qur'ān it comes: "And none knows its hidden meaning except Allah. And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge" (3:7), it also occurs in the sense of analysis of dreams,³ explanation of an incident,⁴ consequence,⁵ and concealed understanding.⁶ In a ḥadīth it comes as a prayer for Ibn 'Abbās that Allah may bestow wisdom and inculcate the ability of interpretation.⁷

Meaning of al-ta'wīl is best illustrated when compared with al-tafsīr appearing once in the Holy Qur'ān.⁸ Al-tafsīr is commonly used for the commentary of the Qur'ān and is from root *fasara* which means to clarify words.⁹ Scholars differed as regard to their meaning and relationship; whether they are synonyms or not. Al-Suyūṭī (d. 911 H.) and al-Zarkashī (d.974 H.) elaborated the opinion of those who maintained polarity, for them al-tafsīr is general as compared to al-ta'wīl, or al-tafsīr is based on al-riwāyyah and al-ta'wīl on al-dirāyyah.¹⁰ John Wansborough mentioned that al-tafsīr is *dhū wajh* and al-ta'wīl is *dhū wujūh* and one is preferred. In his categorization which accept one interpretation and which does not he linked it with al-muḥkam and al-mutashābihah. Former accepts single interpretation so falls under al-tafsīr, latter accepts multiple interpretations so comes under al-ta'wīl.¹¹ Moreover, al-muḥkam guides the interpretation of al-mutashābih particularly for the verses related to God. Methodologically ambiguous verses are explained in the light of unambiguous ones, same principle followed by al-Ghazālī as well. Thus, the dichotomy is epistemological, and arises when various dimensions are taken in consideration.

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Some early commenters used them interchangeably like al-Ṭabarī (d. 310 H.) or al-Nasafī's (d. 701H.) commentary bears the title *Madārik al-tanzīl wa Ḥaqā'iq al-ta'wīl*, but later on distinction appeared.¹² Mentioning the reasons of distinction I. Poonawala highlighted the political aspect that emergence of sectarian differences made al-ta'wīl a technical word for the symbolic readings, common among Shī'ī, Ismā'īlī, Sufis and the deviated sects.¹³ Whereas for al-Dhahabī with emergence of various disciplines al-ta'wīl became different from al-tafsīr.¹⁴ Development of al-ta'wīl reflects the al-riwāyyah :al-dirāyyah distinction. In Poonawala's opinion sectarian differences turned al-ta'wīl opposite to al-tafsīr where al-tafsīr represented Sunni orthodoxy and al-ta'wīl the deviated sects. Further, equating Sufis, Shī'ites and Ismā'īlites in esoteric explanations cannot be justified as al-ta'wīl among Sunni Sufis remained within the boundaries of tradition which would be clear from al-Ghazālī's thought. Also, to mention political differences only seems unjustified as it cannot produce rich civilization like that of Muslims in its early phase. Perhaps al-Dhahabī's claim that intellectual growth is one of the reasons of this development is more plausible. Thus, al-ta'wīl in Sunni tradition meant unveiling while not contradicting the literal sense and al-Ghazālī is an example of it. Connected to it is the pair of al-ẓāhir and al-bāṭin which is as follows.

Al-Zāhir and al-bāṭin

Al-ẓāhir is derived from *ẓahara yaẓharu* which means the outward sense and is opposite to al-bāṭin denoting obscured meaning.¹⁵ Mu'jam al-Mufradāt explains that al-ẓāhir is what is easily comprehensible whereas al-bāṭin is not, they also refer to *jalī* and *khafī'ulūm*.¹⁶ In Holy Qur'ān al-ẓāhir refers to obvious sense and al-bāṭin for unobvious one,¹⁷ or to Divine names,¹⁸ He is the manifest or is the concealed, Allah is known by His signs and unknown in His real being, Allah sees all nevertheless cannot be seen.¹⁹

Al-ẓāhir is apparent as against al-bāṭin, this corresponds to al-tafsīr: al-ta'wīl dichotomy where al-bāṭin or al-ta'wīl is the inward and al-tafsīr or al-ẓāhir is the outward. Al-Suyūṭī highlighting the difference in them considered al-ẓāhir as plain explanation in contrast to the concealed which is revealed to the *arbāb al-ḥaqā'iq* only. He also

narrates from Ibn 'Abbās that the Holy Qur'ān is a treasure with endless exoteric and esoteric meanings, metaphors, aḥkāṃ, al-muḥkam, al-mutashābih, where literal is the recitation and concealed its al-ta'wīl, and all these perspectives are important.²⁰ Prophetic tradition mentions that many levels of understanding are present in the Holy Book, there is literal, concealed, al-ḥadd and al-maṭla',²¹ where al-ḥadd refers to the boundary and al-maṭla' to attain 'ilm from above.²² It can be said that it is another expression for outward and inward knowledge, where al-ḥadd is maximization in attaining knowledge and al-maṭla' to ascend to gain it.

In what follows brief discussion of al-ta'wīl among major schools in al-Ghazālī's age with principles for discerning the inward side would be discussed. Valid principles are important and Muslim schools overlapped due to difference of approach to them. In his times there were two main groups, those who rejected the distinction between al-zāhir and al-bāṭin and denied al-ta'wīl, other accepted it and the rest were between them. Who accepted al-ta'wīl relied either on reason, mysticism, or theology in interpretation while Shī'ites particularly Ismā'īlites relied on the authority of Imām.

Al-Zāhirīs were extremists and considered the literal sense as the only correct one,²³ Ibn Ḥazm their eminent figure forbade al-ta'wīl.²⁴ Ḥanbalites followed them so Imām Ḥanbal's saying al-Istiḥṣā' ma'lūm wa al-ka'fiyah majhūl wa al-imān bihi wājib wa al-su'āl 'anhu bid'ah is well cited. Ibn Taymiyyah condemned it too in 'ilm al-bāṭin and al-zāhir²⁵.

Ismā'īlites were the other extreme who fully authorized their Imām to interpret. Esoteric understanding is dominant in their thought which leads to the right path.²⁶ This is well described through the explanation of prophetic saying, 'Between my tomb and the pulpit where I preach, there is a garden from among the gardens of Paradise', which he interprets as, "this saying is not to be understood in a literal sense. The pulpit for preaching is precisely this literal appearance, that is to say, positive religion with all its imperatives and dogmas. The tomb is philosophy for in it the exoteric aspect of positive religion and its dogmas must undergo the decomposition and dissolution of death".²⁷

For them al-tanzīl is not clear and the waṣī who is appointed by God clarifies it.

Other schools were between them sharing al-ẓāhir and al-bāṭin distinction but varied in interpreting al-bāṭin which is either according to madhhab or the requirements of their discipline. For jurists and theologians both literal and non-literal senses were significant. Former emphasized on the practical aspect whereas later on the theological side while considering reason and language vital. Philosophers and Sufis valued more the esoteric side but Sufis, within Sunni tradition, balanced both aspects in a way that the mysterious could be perceived through the literal side only. For philosophers esoteric sense was central with language and reason both played their role in interpretation. Further, Sufis relied on intuition, a faculty which is above reason and made their interpretation unique. They were heavily criticized for ranking intuition above reason as it was unacceptable by rationalists or literalists. Sufis believe that after fully grasping the outer aspect, truth is unveiled through intuition. It is also termed as Isharāt Khafiyyah revealed to al-sālik.²⁸ According to Quasem, intuition is two dimensional practical and cognitive. Al-a'māl al-bāṭinah works at man's innermost level to refine him while not overlooking the external deeds. Whereas rational side works on al-ma'ānī al-bāṭinah,²⁹ which is condemned by Ẓāhirīs, muḥaddithūn and Ḥanbalīs.³⁰ Point of contention here is the cognitive dimension that how knowledge is gained through supra rational faculty. As this faculty is beyond reason and is experiential so Sufis leave it to be known through al-dhawq. Unfortunately, those unqualified simply deny its possibility and in the end the gap remains unbridged.

Al-Ghazālī's Concept Of Exoteric And Esoteric :

Exoteric and esoteric concepts are central in al-Ghazālī's thought and the issues discussed in his writings are briefly as follows.³¹ It was hotly debated issue and among the trends present were those who denied al-ẓāhir, opposite to them was Ibn Ḥanbal who accepted al-ta'wīl only for three prophetic sayings.³² Those who accepted the distinction he categorized them in ascending order of al-ashā'irah, al-mu'tazilah and philosophers. Al-Ashā'irah were moderate in keeping reason and revelation on par, they interpreted the divine attributes while leaving the events of Hereafter. Al-Mu'tazilah were rational they interpreted

some happenings of the Hereafter while leaving the rest. Falāsah excessively relied on reason particularly for resurrection and events of the Last Day. In al-Ghazālī's judgment division of al-zāhir and al-bāṭin is important nevertheless proper tools to uncover al-bāṭin is also essential. Revelation and reason should be taken equally. This might reflect his factional affiliation but reason must be guarded by revelation and it helps in understanding revelation as well. Two are connected and ignoring anyone can produce undesirable results. For al-Ghazālī the conflict is methodological, improper tool leads to incorrect perception. Ignoring outer or inner aspect or using incorrect tools the interpreter is bound to proceed half way. With this now we turn to the nature or distinction of non-allegorical and allegorical expressions in his thought.

Symbolic and non-symbolic are distinctive but complementary to each other. Outer aspect is easily grasped by common people whereas symbolic is grasped by the elect. There are five levels mentioned in al-İhyā'.³³ Firstly are the concepts grasped by the prophets. Secondly information if told to common people can be harmful like the reality of predestination. Thirdly symbols which only intellectuals can comprehend. For example, 'pearls in the neck of pigs', is to spread knowledge among unworthy. Fourthly feelings which requires involvement. Finally, speaking of land or sky as stated in the Book of God (41:11) is figurative.³⁴ Thus, al-zāhir is different from al-bāṭin but completes it and both are important. With this background let us now move to definition of al-ta'wīl.

Definition of Al-Ta'wīl:

Technically al-ta'wīl is 'turning away from the outer connotation to a possible one'.³⁵ Al-Ghazālī defines it in al-Mustaṣfā and Fayṣal al-Tafriqah. In Al-Mustaṣfā uṣūlī style is followed to categorize text what accepts al-ta'wīl and what does not. Al-naṣṣ does not accept it and al-zāhir accepts. It is a possible meaning depending on dalīl (proof) and turns non-symbolic expression to a symbolic one.³⁶ Al-Āmidī (d. 631 H.) disagreed, for him it is not 'possibility' rather is a process of carrying a word to certain meaning.³⁷ In earlier case it is ihtimāl and in latter procedure through which al-ta'wīl is done. Though in al-Ghazālī's definition it is change from non-symbolic to symbolic expression yet there is vagueness in it.

In Fayṣal al-Tafrīqah it is described according to the five levels of 'existence' to which we will turn shortly, it is a philosophical discussion and helps in understanding divine message.³⁸ Here al-ta'wīl is the process of interpretation and in Whittingham's view an implied understanding of a consequence can be noted too.³⁹ It is clear that he is not confined to one definition, reason might be that he focused on implementation than on theoretical discussion.

Moreover, whether it is the process or result, dalīl is essential.⁴⁰ Al-Ghazālī explicitly states that al-ta'wīl rests on dalīl and reason helps in understanding the text. Suitable indicator leads to inward sense otherwise outward expression is binding. Explaining in al-Mustaṣfā he pinpoints that sometimes dalīl is comprehensible and at others obscure, at times it is qarīnah, qiyās or some other sign hindering the simple sense.⁴¹ Thus, it depends on language and reason. Let us now take few examples from his writings.

Implementantion of Al-Ta'wīl:

Implementation of al-ta'wīl is present in various works,⁴² remaining within Sunni Sufi tradition he balanced the esoteric and exoteric sides.⁴³ Exoteric is 'must' to reach the esoteric as mentioned in Mishkāt, 'do not assume from this specimen of symbolism and its method that you have any license from me to ignore the outward... form.'⁴⁴ Iḥyā' is a good specimen of how literal sense is related to the inner concept. Issues discussed in it are common but 'reread' in a different fashion, fiqh is looked through the prism of spiritual values. Is such deliberation possible is not our concern we only want to look at his approach of 'rereading'. For him, this gives rise to intellectualism but it should remain within the limits of al-shar'īah.

One of the examples of rereading is the prophetic saying, 'angels of Allah enter not a house wherein is a dog'.⁴⁵ Here animal and house are crucial words. Dog is not disapproved of his shape but of his qualities. Home is man's a dwelling place which can be compared to heart. Knowledge is revealed through angels but if the heart is wicked angels do not enter it and its purification is needed. Al-Ghazālī does not deny the outer wordings of 'dog' or 'house', rather points to the inner sense⁴⁶ and emphasis on the essence of the argument.

In summary al-Ghazālī explored various senses which an expression can accept. Text is not restricted to one reading but can have multiple meanings. Here language, reason and wisdom help. Coming to the principles of interpretation they are as follows.

Al-Ta'wīl and It's Principles:

These principles as stated in al-Risālah al-Ladunniyyah are: the commentator ought to consider the Qur'ān from the point of view of the language and from the point of view of metaphor and from the point of view of the composition of the vocables: also from the point of view of the particulars of the grammar and of the usage of the Arabs and of the subject-matter of the philosophers and the doctrine of the Sufis, so that his interpretation comes near to the truth of things.⁴⁷ These principles are related to Sufism, semantics and reason in his writings.

Mystical Dimension:

Cosmology and epistemology are interconnected in Sufi interpretation. Cosmos means visible and the invisible worlds taken together where invisible has preference over the visible. Al-Ghazālī mentioned it in Mishkāṭ al-anwār and Iḥyā'. World of senses is the lower and al-'ālam al-'ulawī the above one.⁴⁸ In al-Arba'īn fī Uṣūl al-Dīn three instead of two spheres are mentioned, the middle is 'ālam al-jabarūt.⁴⁹ It is discussed less so two realm division and its relation with knowledge would be dealt here.

Prior to al-Ghazālī it is discussed by mystics and falāsifah. In Wensinck's view, foremost mystic who mentioned ulamā' al-ākīrah and 'ulamā' al-dunyā was al-Makkī (d.386 H.).⁵⁰ Former were people of qalb and could perceive knowledge from above whereas latter possessed outward knowledge and were confined in this world.⁵¹ Though he stated it explicitly but it was a general notion of Sufi thought.⁵² Muslim philosophers tried to solve the relation of 'One and many' and the interaction of human soul with the higher world through this division.⁵³ For them, the highest realm is of al-'aql al-awwal then al-'aql al-fa'āl, lower to it is al-nafs al-kulīyyāh, all of them belong to 'ālam al-malakūt whereas human soul is from 'ālam al-mulk. Active intellect is in middle between 'One and the universal soul'. For them, human soul interacts with 'ālam al-malakūt and gain knowledge if purified. In Wensinck's opinion, al-Ghazālī was inspired by them so he equated Active Intellect and Universal Soul with human reason and soul.⁵⁴ No

doubt, he was competent in philosophy but was he receptive or selective of their ideas must be discerned. He was not simple narrator and appreciated only what was religiously or logically acceptable. He valued Greek mathematics and logic but not metaphysics.⁵⁵ In fact, accepting greatness of previous civilizations gave him a wider vision.

Coming to his two-world concept, they both are connected, 'ālam al-ghayb wa al-malakūt is real⁵⁶ and 'ālam al-shahadah is its duplicate,⁵⁷ symbol⁵⁸ or shadow⁵⁹. It is not perceived by senses but unveiled on death or to purified hearts.⁶⁰

Man is the center of creation with fundamental importance to heart. Al-Ghazālī followed mystical view of heart which consists of bodily organ and the spiritual entity and both are connected. Spiritual side is called al-qalb, al-rūḥ, al-'aql or al-nafsal-muṭma'innah, interchangeably. This entity is the essence of man which is addressed by God and held accountable. Due to its spiritual nature it is called laṭīfah rabbāniyyah rūḥāniyyah. Their relation is such that the spiritual entity is the king and bodily organ its kingdom.⁶¹ As spiritual entity is related to 'ālam al-malakūt and bodily organ to 'ālam al-mulk wa al-shahādah, a connection between man and God is made possible which is a mercy.⁶²

Further, epistemological relation is present between two worlds or man and God. Qalb when purified perceives al-'illm from Allah.⁶³ Common knowledge is gained through senses and reason but heart for Sufis is another faculty which is supra rational and not anti-rational and is more reliable. This is the eye of the heart with cleansing it is directed towards 'ālam al-malakūt. As narrated, there is an eye for every heart, when Allah bestows His blessings it is opened to what is obscure for common vision⁶⁴ revealing al-lawḥ or al-kitab al-mubīn and knowledge is gained through al-kashf.⁶⁵ As this world is an image of the upper world knowledge gained is of various levels. Prophets attain it through revelation which is clear, for rest it is figurative.⁶⁶ It is veiled and not stated literally, al-ta'wīl interprets it. The relation is present in symbols purification helps to rise above and gain knowledge of symbolic forms. Likeness existing in 'ālam al-shāhadah and 'ālam al-ghayb is called al-munāsibah and al-muwāzinah by al-Ghazālī.⁶⁷ Gairdner translated it as 'correspondence', or interconnection.⁶⁸ In its essence is significant instead of outer shape. Al-Ghazālī referred to dreams as an

example, in Arabic it means to cross from outward to inward sense while keeping their interconnection. Similarly, resemblance in 'ālam al-shahdah and 'ālam al-ghayb is uncovered through al-ta'wīl.

Reason and Revelation:

Reason and revelation are important features of al-Ghazālī's thought. Unlike the modern age, they are supportive and reason helps to understand faith. Being theologian and jurist, reason has prominent position in his intellectual edifice.

In interpretation the initial step of classification of text in literal and metaphorical categories is determined by reason and also whether the literal meaning is binding or not. In absence of rational criterion, differentiation between valid and invalid interpretation can be misleading. Rational criterion is called al-Buhān in Iḥyā' and Fayṣal al-Tafriqah and Frank Griffel translated it as 'demonstrative proof'.⁶⁹ In other writings like Mi'yār al-'Ilm, Muḥik al-Nazar, al-Qistās al-Mustaqīm, and al-Mustaṣfā al-burhān is defined as an argument leading to sure understanding⁷⁰ and is based on experience or al-khabar al-mutawātir.⁷¹ Thus, to interpret saḥr⁷² as mercy of Allah is invalid due to absence of rational proof. Its literal meaning is valid as it has continuous chain of transmitters.⁷³ Rational proof is supporting literal sense so cannot be interpreted otherwise.

In Fayṣal al-Tafriqah al-Ghazālī considers language and context to identify the nature of text. He proposes rational reading and elaborated it through concept of existence.

There are five levels of existence, first al-wujūd al-dhātī (real existence), like of animals and earth, their existence is real and perceived through senses or reason. They must be taken literally. Second is al-wujūd al-ḥissī (existence in sense) an existence in eye only and not outside it like dreams or revelation to prophets and al-ilhām to friends of Allah. Thirdly al-wujūd al-khayālī (being in imagination), like prophetic narration of seeing Yūnus bin Mattā, is imagination and 'as if' points to it, they must be interpreted. Fourthly al-wujūd al-'aqlī (conceptual existence) is universal concept like hand refers to power. Again, they are non-literal and accept al-ta'wīl. Lastly al-wujūd al-shubhī (similar existence), it is not present in reality, senses or mind, but resembles another existence. As anger or happiness cannot be

attributed to God so they are non-literal statements referring to similarity of quality. All existences fall within these categories. On the top is al-wujūd al-dhatī which are literal statements, moving down towards al-burhān determines their position and interpretation is done accordingly. Last four accepts al-ta'wīl as al-burhān prohibits literal meanings.⁷⁴

In Iljām al-'Awām an alternate classification is presented where four categories of wujūd are mentioned. Here wujūd fī al-ia'yān corresponds to outward being, wujūd fī al-iadhhān to mental wujūd, wujūd fī al-lisān to being in expression and wujūd fī al-kitābah to being in writing form.⁷⁵ Al-Ghazālī seems to be inconsistent by dividing existence in five levels in Fayṣal and four in Iljām. Comparing the two it can be seen that they are overlapping with few differences which in turn are sub divisions of a particular existence. If put side by side they are near to each other, like wujūd fī al-a'yān corresponds to wujūd al-dhātī in Fayṣal, and wujūd fī iadhhān equates wujūd al-khayālī and wujūd al-'aqlī, and wujūd fī al-lisān and wujūd fī al-kitābah are near to wujūd al-ḥissī. Thus, he is not inconsistent and as pointed by Peter Heath he changes expression according to his listeners which is not discrepancy. In Fayṣal he addressed intellectuals using philosophical terms whereas Iljām was written for common people.⁷⁶ So it is not inconsistency but written according to listeners.

In case of contradiction in reason and revelation what will be the standard of judgement, is discussed in Qānūn al-Ta'wīl. On one side were those who considered revelation as principle even if reason literally opposes it. Others considered reason a valid criterion and if revelation contradicts reason it is to be interpreted figuratively. Rest accepted both equally, al-Ghazālī was among them. While balancing them he suggests that al-ta'wīl should be in limits as all cannot be grasped rationally, secondly rational argument should not be denied as revelation is known through it, thirdly interpretation based on speculations might lead to false results.⁷⁷

Thus, reason is important in his thought and revelation being sacred requires careful reading. Al-Ghazālī proposes clear principles for al-ta'wīl, correct categorization of text is essential for proper interpretation. After identifying text, he prefers first the outward

meaning only when reason invalidates it, he moves for the inward meaning and both are equally important.

Semantics :

Language and al-ta'wīl are interconnected, language directs the reading of the text and interpretation. In any language understanding of wordings is determined by numerous factors. Language helps in correct understanding of text, as explained in al-Mustaṣfā, Muḥikal-Nazar and Mi'yār al-'Ilm. He compared language with stairs, as climbing to a roof without stairs is unthinkable so is the case of understanding text. True understanding requires knowing language, grammar, literature of pre-Islamic age, and so on.⁷⁸

Due to limited space, we will deal in language what is relevant to al-ta'wīl. Relation of words to their meaning and do they have one meaning or more is discussed in Mi'yār al-'ilm, Muḥik al-nazar, al-Mustaṣfā and Mi'rāj al-Sālikīn. So, words have dual face as to their dalālah (signification), they point to the outer shape and to the crux.⁷⁹ This helps in comprehension of text and its interpretation. For example, the word 'hand' has a physical form and its inner essence is 'power', when attributed to God its inner essence is appropriate.⁸⁰

Figurative expressions are termed majāz, according to Jurjānī it is from the verb jāz meaning to go beyond the apparent sense because of a likeness present for example brave man is called lion. Majāz is a borrowed expression and likeness can be in form of word, features or a closeness present.⁸¹ Some of its sub-divisions are isti'ārah (metaphor), maqlūb (inversion), ḥadhf (ellipsis), tiktār (repetition), ishārāh (allusion) and idiom.⁸²

Historically majāz developed gradually⁸³ and is best understood in light of its opposite ḥaqīqah. Difference in them has been a debated issue, zahārīs, ḥanbalīs and malikīs rejected it arguing that it shows failure on the part of Allah to express.⁸⁴ Others accepted it, as it beautifies the expression. Commenting on it Wolfhart Heinrich pointed that there are metaphorical phrases which requires 'uncovering' and factors like jāhili literature, poetry, and personal opinion work in it.⁸⁵ As personal judgment was unaccepted by them so majāz was rejected. While al-Ghazālī accepted and outlined rules for it, still he was criticized.

Majāz in al-Ghazālī's view is related to ontology. Those who accepted it two trends are seen due to difference of opinion in their worldviews. Some considered physical world real and tried to understand the non-physical through it. As theologians stated 'to evaluate the unseen on the basis of seen' (qiyās al-shāhid 'alā al-ghā'ib). They followed reason, in their view majāz symbolizes the unseen realm. Other opinion is of Ibn 'Arabī and his school, for them unseen world is real, and the seen is to be comprehended in the light of unseen. Physical world is to be crossed as majāz is from jāz, yajūz meaning to go beyond.⁸⁶ Though al-Ghazālī and Ibn 'Arabī followed the same line of thought, understanding seen through unseen but al-Ghazālī merged kalāmī features as well. Undoubtedly, he was exceptional and could beautifully merge diverse notions which ranked him high.

Thus, language and its rules are indispensable in uncovering the text. Considering one aspect, literal or non-literal, and ignoring other produces undesirable results which is why al-Ghazālī criticized literalists for their narrowness and others for overlooking the apparent side, with this we turn to its status.

Status of al-Ta'wīl

Faced with strong criticism al-Ghazālī justified al-ta'wīl by providing proofs from religious sources and reason. For him, Qur'ān cannot be confined to one particular meaning, there are levels present, like al-ẓāhir, al-bāṭin, al-ḥadd and al-maṭla'. Similarly, prophets addressed people according to their level of understanding.⁸⁷ The Holy Qur'ān is an unfathomable sea, whosoever confines it to the literal sense is revealing his own ignorance.

The Holy Qur'ān narrates about God, His attributes and acts which is the essence of knowledge. There are ishārāt unveiled through contemplation or else the person will remain on the boundary only. To substantiate it, al-Ghazālī quoted Ibn 'Abbās that the verse "He grants Hikmah to whom He pleases, and he, to whom Hikmah is granted, is indeed granted abundant good" (2:269) refers to knowledge of the Holy Qur'ān. In Jawāhir al-Qur'ān comes:

The principles of those sciences which we have enumerated and of those which we have not specified, are not out side of the Qur'ān, and all of these sciences are drawn out of one of the seas of knowledge of God (may He be exalted),The Qur'ān is (like) a sea which has no shore...⁸⁸

As narrated in the Holy Qur'ān "Say (O Muhammad...): "If the sea were ink for (writing) the Words of my Lord, surely, the sea would be exhausted before the Words of my Lord would be finished, even if We brought (another sea) like it for its aid." (18:109). It comes in the prophetic tradition, 'read the Qur'ān and seek to know its (deep) strange meanings (by eliciting and understanding)'.⁸⁹

Rationally looking to deny personal opinion in interpretation is impossible. The description for the Holy Qur'ān as narrated by the messenger of Allah is less in volume as compared to what is narrated by Ibn 'Abbas, Ibn Mas'ud or other companions. Undoubtedly, this is a collection of their own views. Secondly companions differed in their explanations to the Holy Qur'ān which reflects their effort to comprehend it. And supposing interpretation and revelation both were the wordings of the Book of God then there was no need for the prayer for Ibn 'Abbas. Fourthly deducing meanings from the Book of God comes in āyat "the proper investigators would have understood it from them (directly)." (4:83) And this is not just to hear and narrate from the experts, rather it involves contemplation and use of reason.

Thus, al-Ghazālī disagreed simply narrating the traditions as the Holy Qur'ān is an ocean and requires expert to dive. Those who refused personal opinion in understanding the Qur'ān show their own ignorance. At the same time, it is not a free land that anybody enters it, only who fulfills its requirements are allowed to interpret.

Qualities Required In This Field :

Due to importance of al-ta'wīl, al-Ghazālī, discussed the qualities required for an interpreter highlighting whether it may be allowed for all or for few people. In a categorical manner he allowed it for a trained person only and restricted for others. No explicit term is mentioned to designate them, they are called the 'chosen ones', 'scholars', 'far-sighted' etc. and can be known on the basis of their competency.⁹⁰ Their hearts must be purified, enlightened by al-dhikr and are true followers of al-sharī'ah. With self-discipline they attain knowledge from above and can easily reflect on it.⁹¹ In other words their internal eye is opened and linked with the spiritual world. As mentioned "By Nafs (Adam,...), and Him Who perfected him in proportion; Then He showed him what is wrong for him and what is right for him." (91:7-8)

Purification or tasfiyah in Margaret Smith's translation is 'making sound of the soul and its return to its original disposition'. There are stages in it: firstly, to have sound knowledge, secondly deep contemplation connects with the 'Spiritual Realm',⁹² helps in acquiring 'ilm. Through it the two worlds are related and helps in interpretation.

Returning to the 'elected people', they are on the high risk. Few are saved may be one among many. Scholars of letters, grammarians, of ḥadith, tafsir, jurists, theologians are untrained for it and are not allowed to interpret.⁹³ Regarding symbolic verses the common people must believe that this knowledge is with God, His messengers, and sincere lovers of Allah. Level of understanding among commoners and intellectuals varies, they must be treated like children while explaining any profound idea.⁹⁴ It is evident from above that al-Ghazālī, permitted al-ta'wīl for 'the elected ones' only.

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- 2 See al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Mu‘jam Mufradāt al-fāḥ al-Qu’rān*, ed. Nadīm Mar‘shīlī (n. p.: Maṭba‘ah al-Taqaddum al-‘Arabī 1972), p. 27.
- 3 See Yūsuf 6, 21, 36, 37, 45, 44, 100, 101.
- 4 See al-Kahaf 78, 82, and Yūnus 39.
- 5 See al-Nisā’ 59, al-Isrā’ 35, al-A‘rāf 53 (twice).
- 6 See Āl-‘Imrān 7 (twice).
- 7 See Ḥākim, *al-Mustadrak ‘alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1990), vol. 3, p. 618.
- 8 See al-Furqān 33.
- 9 See Rohi Baalbaki, *al-Mawrid* (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm lil malāyy in 1990), art. Fasara.
- 10 See al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol.4, pp. 192-195; Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur’an and its interpreters* (Albany: University Press New York n. d.), vol.1, pp. 20-21.
- 11 See John Wansborough, *Quranic Studies sources and methods of scriptural interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977), pp. 155-157.
- 12 See al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, p. 192.
- 13 See I. Poonnawala, *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, (Leiden: Brill 2000), art. Ta’wīl, vol. x, p. 391.
- 14 See Muḥammad Ḥussāin al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssirūn*, (Beirut: Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī 1396/1976), vol.1, pp. 17-18.
- 15 See Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab* vol. 4 & 13.
- 16 See al-Aṣfahānī, *Mu‘jam Mufradāt*, p.328.
- 17 See Ghāfir 26, al-An‘ām 151, al-A‘rāf33, al-Kahf 22, al-Rūm 7, 41, al-Ḥadīd 13.
- 18 Al-Ḥadīd 3.
- 19 See al-Aṣfahānī, *Mu‘jam Mufradāt*, p.50.
- 20 See al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 4, pp. 225-227.
- 21 Qāsim bin Sallām, *Faḍā’il al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathir, 1420), p. 98.
- 22 See Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Nihāyah fī Gharīb al-Ḥadīth*, vol.1, p. 353, and vol. 3, p. 132.
- 23 See Ignaz Goldziher, *The Zāhirīs: Their Doctrine and Their History*, ed. and tr. Wolfgang Behn (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1971).
- 24 See Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Fiṣal fī al-Mīlāl wa al-Ahwā’ wa al-Niḥāl* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr 1317 H.), vol. 2, p. 140.
- 25 See Ibn Tamiyyah, *Risālah fī ‘Ilm al-bāṭin wa al-zāhir* <http://www.almeshkat.net/books/open.php?book=1557&cat=25> (accessed on 15/6/10).

- 26 See Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-Nūbakhtī, *Firaq al-Shī'ah* (Istanbul: Maṭba'ath al-ḥawlah 1931), pp. 63-64.
- 27 Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, tr. Liadain Sherrard, (London: Kegan Paul International & The Institute of Ismaili Studies London, n. d.), p. 78; see also Ismail K. Poonawala, "Ismā'īlī ta'wīl of the Qur'ān", in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 206-207.
- 28 See al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, p. 224.
- 29 See Muḥammad 'Abdul Quasem, "al-Ghazālī in Defense of Sufistic Interpretation of the Qur'ān", in *Islamic Culture*, vol. LIII no. 2 (April, 1979), p.63.
- 30 See Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' al-Ta'āruḍ* ed. Muḥammad Rishād Sālīm (Riyāḍ: Dār al-Kunūz al-Arābiyyah 1391 H.) http://www.islamport.com/isp_eBooks/tym/ (accessed on 12/6/10).
- 31 See al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr 1991), vol.1, pp.119-122, 347; *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, ed. Lajnah Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī (Beirut: Dār al-Afāq al-Jadīdah 1981), pp. 18-21.
- 32 The first one is, 'al-Hajr al-aswad yamīn Allah fī arḍih, Abd al-Razzāq, *Musannaf Abd al-Razzāq* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1403), vol. 5, p. 39, second is, 'Qalb al-mū'minīn bayna uṣbu'in min āṣābī' al-raḥmān' (Ahmad, *Musnad Ahmad*, 4/182), Muslim, and third, 'Innī la ajidnafas al-raḥmān min jānīb al-yaman', (al-Ṭabarānī, *Musnad al-Shāmiyyīn* (Beirut: Muassasat al-Risalah, 1984), vol. 2, p. 149.
- 33 See al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, vol.1, p. 120; Nabih Amin Faris's translation of *Qawā'id al-'Aqā'id*, *The Foundations of the Articles of Faith* (Lahore: Ashraf Printing Press Lahore 1999), p.39.
- 34 See al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, vol.1, pp. 120-123.
- 35 Syed Muḥammad 'Amīn al-Iḥsān, *Majmū'ah Qawā'id al-Fiqh* (Karachi: Maktabah Mīr Muḥammad n. d.), p. 218.
- 36 See al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustaṣfā min 'Ilm al-Uṣūl* (Qum: Maṭba'ah Amīr 1364 H.), vol. 1, p. 387.
- 37 See 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Āmidī, *al-Iḥkām fī uṣūl al-Aḥkām* ed. Syed al-Jamīlī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī 1986), vol. 3, p.59.
- 38 See al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-Tafriqah* in *Majmū'ah Rasā'il*, ed. Muḥammad 'Alī Bīḍūn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutūb al-'Ilmiyyah n. d.), pp.75-84.
- 39 See Martin Whittingham, *Al-Ghazālī and the Qur'ān*, pp. 26-27.
- 40 See al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-Tafriqah*, in *Majmū'ah Rasā'il*, p.85.
- 41 See al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustaṣfā*, vol.2, p. 387.
- 42 Like in *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, *Iḥyā'*, *al-Qistās al-Mustaqīm*, *Iljām al-'Awām*, *Fayṣal al-Tafriqah*, *Qānūn al-Ta'wīl*, *al-Iqtisād fī al-'Atiqād*, *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*, *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*.

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- 43 See al-Ghazālī, *Iljām al-‘Awaām ‘An ‘Ilm al-Kalām*, in *Majmū‘ah Rasā’il*, p. 49.
- 44 Al-Ghazālī’s *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, tr. W. H. T. Gairdner (Lahore: Ashraf Press Lahore 1952), pp. 136-137.
- 45 Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (Cairo: Dar al-Sha‘b, 1987), vol.4, p. 138.
- 46 See Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, vol.1, p. 62.
- 47 Margaret Smith, “Al-Risālat Al-Luduniyya by Abū Hāmid Muhammad al-Ghazālī”, in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3(July, 1938), p. 355.
- 48 See Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār* in *Majmū‘ah Rasā’il*, p. 17.
- 49 See al-Ghazālī *al-Arba‘in fī Uṣūl al-Dīn* ed. ‘Abdullah ‘Arawānī (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam 2003), p. 64.
- 50 A. J. Wensinck, *On the Relation Between Ghazālī’s Cosmology and His Mysticism* (Amsterdam: Uitgevers Maatschappij Amsterdam 1933), p. 191.
- 51 See Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūṭal-Qulūb*, pp. 207-209.
- 52 See Abū Naṣr al-Sirāj al-Ṭūsī, *al-Luma’*, pp. 148-149; al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Ri‘āyah li ḥuqūq Allah*, p. 80.
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- 54 See Wensinck, *On the Relation Between al-Ghazālī’s Cosmology and His Mysticism*, p. 10, although he admits that al-Ghazālī’s terminology is different, see p.6.
- 55 See al-Ghazālī, *Maqāsid al-Falāsifah*, ed. Sulaymān Dunyā (Egypt: Dār al-Ma‘ārif 1961), pp. 31-32.
- 56 See al-Ghazālī *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān*, p. 28.
- 57 See al-Ghazālī *Iḥyā’*, vol. 3, p. 23.
- 58 See al-Ghazālī *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān*, p. 28.
- 59 See al-Ghazālī *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, in *Majmū‘ah Rasā’il*, p.9.
- 60 See al-Ghazālī *Iḥyā’*, vol. 4, pp. 536-538.
- 61 *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 4-5, it is termed as *al-nafs al-nāṭiqah* by philosophers, *al-nafs al-muṭma’innah* and *al-rūḥ* in the Holy Qur’ān, and *al-qalb* by Sufis; all point to same meaning.
- 62 See al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, in *Majmū‘ah Rasā’il*, pp. 17-18.
- 63 See al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, vol. 1, p.62, vol. 3, pp.10, 14, 15, 20-26., vol. 4, p. 537.
- 64 See al-Ghazālī, *al-Risālah al-Ladunnīyyah*, in *Majmū‘ah Rasā’il*, p.62.
- 65 See, al-Ghazālī *Iḥyā’*, vol. 4, p.537.
- 66 See al-Ghazālī, *al-Risālah al-Ladunnīyyah*, in *Majmū‘ah Rasā’il*, p.70.
- 67 See al-Ghazālī *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān*, p. 28; *Miskāt al-Anwār*, tr. W.H.T. Gairdner, pp. 125-126.
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- 70 See al-Ghazālī, Mi'yār al-'Ilm, ed. Sulaymān Dunnyā (Egypt: Dār al-Ma'ārif 1961), p. 70.
- 71 See al-Ghazālī, Fayṣal al-Tafriqah, in Majmū'ah Rasā'il, p. 86.
- 72 Prophetic tradition which says, "Go, eat the daybreak meal (saḥr) for therein lies blessing" al-Tirmidhi, al-Jami al-Sahih (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabi n. d.), vol. 3, p. 88.
- 73 See al-Ghazālī, Iḥyā', vol. 1, p. 49.
- 74 See al-Ghazālī, Fayṣal al-Tafriqah, in Majmū'ah Rasā'il, pp. 79-85.
- 75 See al-Ghazālī, Iljām al-'Awām, in Majmū'ah Rasā'il, p.76.
- 76 See Peter Heath, "Reading al-Ghazālī: The Case of Psychology", in Reason and Inspiration in Islam, p.191.
- 77 See al-Ghazālī, Qānūn al-Ta'wīl in Majmū'ah Rasā'il, pp. 123-128.
- 78 See al-Ghazālī, al-Risālah al-Ladunniyyah in Majmū'ah Rasā'il, pp. 64-65; see Muḥammad Abul Quasem, The Jewels of the Qur'ān al-Ghazālī's theory (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1977), p. 34.
- 79 See al-Ghazālī, Mi'rāj al-Sālikīn in Majmū'ah Rasā'il, p. 59.
- 80 See al-Ghazālī, al-Iqtisād fī al-'Itiqād (Ankara: Nur Matbaasi 1962), p.86.
- 81 See 'Alī bin Muḥammad bin 'Alī al-Jurjānī, al-Ta'rīfāt www.al-mostafa.com (accessed on 5/1/09), p. 109.
- 82 See al-Ghazālī, al-Mustaṣfā, vol. 1, pp. 341-342.
- 83 See Wolfhart Heinrichs, "On the Genesis of the ḥaqīqa-majāz Dichotomy", in Studia Islamica, No. 59(1984), p.111.
- 84 See al-Suyūṭī, al-Itqān, vol. 3, p. 120; John Wansborough, Quranic Studies, p.228.
- 85 See Wolfhart Heinrichs, "On the Genesis of the ḥaqīqa-majāz Dichotomy", p. 129.
- 86 See Nasr Abu Zayd, "Muraqabah 'al-Majāz': Man Yaqūduha? Wa Ilā Ayna"? in Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics, No. 12 (1992), p.51.
- 87 See al-Ghazālī, Iḥyā', vol.1, pp.119, 341.
- 88 Muḥammad Abul Quasem, The Jewels of the Qur'ān, p.46.
- 89 Al-Ghazālī, Iḥyā', tr. Quasem, p.88.
- 90 See al-Ghazālī, Iljām al-'Awām, in Majmū'ah Rasā'il, p.49-50.
- 91 See al-Ghazālī, Fayṣal al-Tafriqah, in Majmū'ah Rasā'il, p. 76.
- 92 Margaret Smith, "Al-Risālat Al-Luduniyya, pp. 372-373.
- 93 See al-Ghazālī, Iljām al-'Awām, in Majmū'ah Rasā'il, p.49; Iḥyā', vol. 1, pp.15-98, vol.3, pp.14-29.
- 94 See al-Ghazālī, Iljām al-'Awām, in Majmū'ah Rasā'il, pp. 42-45.