Rationalism and Nuances of Mu'tazilah Theology in Abdul Jabbar's Tafsir Tanzihul Qur'an 'an Al-Matha'in

Abdul Jabar[1], Khofawati Khoiriyyah[2], Mabrur[3], Husnul Hamidatul Munauwarah[4], Kamila Naim[5], Ahmad Sayyid Al Adam[6], A. Baso Al Anshari[7], M. Zulfani Hidayat[8], Muhammad Hasbi[9], Sarmo[10]

[1]University of PTIQ, Jakarta, Indonesia, https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7372-4978
[2]University of PTIQ, Jakarta, Indonesia, https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5397-9456
[3]University of PTIQ, Jakarta, Indonesia, https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2420-9036
[4] UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta, Indonesia, https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9492-6570
[5]University of PTIQ, Jakarta, Indonesia, https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6839-9695
[6]University of PTIQ, Jakarta, Indonesia, https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2685-2975
[7]University of PTIQ, Jakarta, Indonesia, https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7917-4933
[8]University of PTIQ, Jakarta, Indonesia, https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3878-5260
[9]University of PTIQ, Jakarta, Indonesia, https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1483-9994
[10]University of PTIQ, Jakarta, Indonesia, https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5013-1671

Abstract
This study examines the rationalist framework and Mu'tazilah theological nuances embedded in Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegetical masterwork, *Tanzīh al-Qurʾān ʿan al-Maṭāʿin*. Through systematic analysis of contemporary scholarship and primary sources, we investigate how ʿAbd al-Jabbār employs a tripartite proof system rational (*ʿaqlī*), revelational (*samʿī*), and linguistic (*lughawī*) to construct a coherent interpretive methodology that privileges reason while maintaining fidelity to Qurʾānic text. The study traces the manifestation of the five foundational principles (*al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah*) of Mu'tazilah theology within his tafsir, particularly emphasizing divine unity (*tawḥīd*), divine justice (*ʿadl*), and the rational basis of moral responsibility. Our analysis reveals that ʿAbd al-Jabbār's hermeneutical approach, especially his systematic application of figurative interpretation (*taʾwīl*) to anthropomorphic verses, represents a sophisticated attempt to reconcile rational theology with scriptural authority. Contemporary scholarly debates surrounding his methodology including critiques of excessive rationalism, accusations of divine negation (*taʿṭīl*), and questions about the epistemic primacy of reason are examined through comparative, linguistic, and hermeneutical lenses. This research contributes to understanding medieval Islamic rationalist exegesis and its continuing relevance for contemporary Islamic thought, demonstrating how ʿAbd al-Jabbār's work navigates the complex relationship between reason, language, and revelation in Qurʾānic interpretation.
Keywords: Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār, Mu'tazilah theology, rationalism, tafsir, *taʾwīl*, *al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah*, Islamic hermeneutics.

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of reason and revelation in Islamic intellectual history has produced diverse hermeneutical traditions, each offering distinct approaches to understanding the Qurʾān. Among the most intellectually rigorous and controversial of these traditions is the Mu'tazilah

school of theology, which emerged in the 8th century CE and championed the primacy of rational inquiry in theological matters. The Mu'tazilah movement, characterized by its commitment to five foundational principles (al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah) divine unity (tawḥīd), divine justice (ʿadl), the promise and threat (al-waʿd wa-l-waʿīd), the intermediate position (al-manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn), and commanding right and forbidding wrong (al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahy ʿan al-munkar) developed a sophisticated theological framework that profoundly influenced Islamic thought (Hidayat, 2022; Al-Ansari, 2024).

Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad al-Hamadānī (d. 415/1025), one of the most prominent Mu'tazilah theologians of the classical period, stands as a towering figure in the development of rationalist Islamic theology and exegesis. His magnum opus in the field of Qurʾānic interpretation, Tanzīh al-Qurʾān ʿan al-Maṭāʿin (Exonerating the Qurʾān from Calumnies), represents a systematic attempt to defend the Qurʾān against various objections and criticisms while simultaneously articulating a comprehensive rationalist hermeneutic (Wijaya & Mochamad, 2022). This work is not merely an apologetic treatise but a sophisticated exegetical project that integrates theological commitments, linguistic analysis, and rational argumentation into a coherent interpretive methodology.

The significance of studying ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Tanzīh extends beyond historical interest. In contemporary Islamic thought, questions about the relationship between reason and revelation, the interpretation of ambiguous verses (mutashābihāt), and the role of human rationality in understanding divine attributes remain central concerns (Rahman, 2016; Ali, 2025). Furthermore, the Mu'tazilah emphasis on rational ethics and human moral agency resonates with modern discussions about Islamic reform, intellectual freedom, and the compatibility of Islamic theology with contemporary philosophical frameworks (Sayyid, 2024; Guner, 2024).

Despite the historical importance of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegetical work, scholarly attention to Tanzīh al-Qurʾān has been relatively limited compared to other classical tafsir works. Recent scholarship, however, has witnessed renewed interest in Mu'tazilah hermeneutics and ʿAbd al-Jabbār's distinctive methodological contributions (Erzi, 2022; Jalil, 2024). This growing body of research has begun to illuminate the sophisticated rationalist framework underlying his interpretive approach, the nuanced application of Mu'tazilah theological principles, and the ongoing debates about the legitimacy and implications of his hermeneutical strategies.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the rationalist characteristics and Mu'tazilah theological nuances in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Tanzīh al-Qurʾān ʿan al-Maṭāʿin. Specifically, we seek to: (1) examine the rationalist framework that structures his exegetical methodology, particularly his tripartite system of proofs; (2) trace the manifestation of Mu'tazilah theological principles within his interpretive practice; (3) analyze his hermeneutical strategies, especially his approach to figurative interpretation (taʾwīl) of anthropomorphic verses; (4) engage with contemporary scholarly debates surrounding his methodology, including both appreciative analyses and critical perspectives; and (5) situate his approach within the broader landscape of Islamic exegetical traditions through comparative analysis.

By addressing these objectives, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of medieval Islamic rationalist exegesis and its continuing relevance for contemporary Islamic thought. The study demonstrates how ʿAbd al-Jabbār's work represents a sophisticated attempt to navigate the complex relationship between reason, language, and revelation in Qurʾānic interpretation, offering insights that remain pertinent to ongoing discussions about Islamic hermeneutics, theological method, and the role of rationality in religious understanding.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly literature on Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegetical work and Mu'tazilah theology has expanded significantly in recent years, reflecting renewed academic interest in rationalist Islamic thought and its hermeneutical implications. This literature review synthesizes key themes, methodological approaches, and debates that inform contemporary understanding of Tanzīh al-Qurʾān ʿan al-Maṭāʿin.

Rationalist Hermeneutics and the Role of Reason

A central theme in recent scholarship concerns the distinctive rationalist character of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegetical methodology. Erzi (2022) provides a comprehensive analysis of the role of language in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's thought, demonstrating how he systematically employs three types of proofs rational (ʿaqlī), revelational (samʿī), and linguistic (lughawī) each with distinct domains of authority. This tripartite framework represents a sophisticated epistemological system in which reason serves as the ultimate arbiter in theological matters, while linguistic analysis provides the methodological tools for determining the proper interpretation of scriptural texts. Erzi's work highlights how ʿAbd al-Jabbār treats language not merely as a medium of communication but as a specialized proof-domain whose rules determine theological inferences.

The primacy of reason in Mu'tazilah thought more broadly has been examined by Ali (2025), who explores the integration of reason and revelation in contemporary Islamic education, drawing on classical Mu'tazilah precedents. Ali argues that the Mu'tazilah emphasis on rationality offers valuable resources for addressing contemporary challenges in Islamic thought, particularly in reconciling religious commitment with critical inquiry. This perspective resonates with earlier work by Amin (2022), who analyzes rationalist approaches to the Qurʾān and Sunnah, demonstrating the continuing relevance of Mu'tazilah methodological principles.

Husnul (2022) provides a detailed examination of rational proofs (al-adillah al-ʿaqliyyah) and their impact on establishing the clear (muḥkam) and interpreting the ambiguous (mutashābih) in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's linguistic discourse. This study illuminates how rational arguments function not merely as supplementary tools but as foundational principles that structure the entire interpretive enterprise, determining which verses require figurative interpretation and which can be understood literally.

Mu'tazilah Theological Principles in Exegesis

Several recent studies have focused specifically on tracing the five foundational principles (al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah) of Mu'tazilah theology within ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegetical work. Kadri (2024) examines the objectives of Islamic law (maqāṣid al-sharīʿah) from a Mu'tazilah perspective, analyzing ʿAbd al-Jabbār's interpretations in Tanzīh al-Qurʾān. This research demonstrates how theological commitments to divine justice and human moral responsibility shape his understanding of legal and ethical verses, revealing the deep integration of theological principles with exegetical practice.

Hidayat (2022) investigates the influence of al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah on Mu'tazilah legal thought, providing important context for understanding how theological principles translate into practical hermeneutical strategies. The study shows that the five principles function not as abstract doctrines but as operative frameworks that guide interpretive decisions, particularly in matters related to divine attributes, human agency, and moral accountability.

Jalil (2024) offers a comprehensive analysis of the Mu'tazilah tafsir method for verses related to creed (ʿaqīdah), demonstrating how ʿAbd al-Jabbār and other Mu'tazilah exegetes approach theological verses with distinctive hermeneutical commitments. This work

highlights the systematic nature of Mu'tazilah exegesis, showing how theological principles generate consistent interpretive patterns across diverse textual contexts.

The concept of divine justice, central to Mu'tazilah theology, has been examined comparatively by Hasbi (2025), who analyzes the views of Saadia Gaon and ʿAbd al-Jabbār on God's justice. This comparative study reveals both the distinctive features of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's approach and its connections to broader rationalist traditions in medieval Jewish and Islamic thought, demonstrating the cross-cultural dimensions of rationalist theology.

Hermeneutical Strategies: Taʾwīl and Figurative Interpretation

The question of figurative interpretation (taʾwīl) represents one of the most debated aspects of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's methodology. Wijaya and Mochamad (2022) provide a detailed comparative analysis of taʾwīl in Sunni and Mu'tazilah traditions, examining ambiguous verses (āyāt mutashābihāt) in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb and ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Tanzīh al-Qurʾān. This study reveals fundamental differences in hermeneutical approach: while al-Rāzī employs taʾwīl selectively and with caution, ʿAbd al-Jabbār applies it systematically to anthropomorphic verses to avoid any suggestion of divine corporeality. The comparative framework illuminates how theological commitments shape interpretive strategies and how different schools navigate the tension between literal and figurative readings.

Rahman (2016) examines how Mu'tazilah and Twelver Shīʿī approaches encounter ambiguity in the Qurʾān's ambiguous verses, providing important context for understanding ʿAbd al-Jabbār's hermeneutical choices. Rahman demonstrates that the Mu'tazilah approach to mutashābihāt is grounded in a sophisticated theory of language and meaning that prioritizes rational coherence and theological consistency.

The historical development of figurative language (majāz) in Qurʾānic interpretation has been traced by Syafruddin (2020), who compares the approaches of Abū ʿUbaydah, al-Jāḥiẓ, and ʿAbd al-Jabbār. This historical perspective reveals how ʿAbd al-Jabbār builds upon earlier Mu'tazilah linguistic theories while developing more systematic hermeneutical principles for applying figurative interpretation.

Zulfikar (2023) analyzes interpretation techniques in legal verses, providing methodological insights relevant to understanding ʿAbd al-Jabbār's broader exegetical approach. This work demonstrates how hermeneutical principles developed in theological contexts extend to legal interpretation, revealing the comprehensive nature of Mu'tazilah interpretive methodology.

Critical Perspectives and Contemporary Debates

Recent scholarship has also engaged critically with ʿAbd al-Jabbār's methodology, particularly from Sunni theological perspectives. Gün (2024) offers a critical examination of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's understanding of divine attributes from an Ahl al-Sunnah perspective, arguing that his figurative interpretation of attributes approaches divine negation (taʿṭīl) and excessively privileges reason over transmitted proofs. This critique represents a longstanding tension between Mu'tazilah and Sunni approaches to divine attributes, raising fundamental questions about the proper balance between rational and revelational authority.

Shifa et al. (2021, 2022) have produced multiple studies examining Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's theological and linguistic observations on ʿAbd al-Jabbār in Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb. These works document systematic Sunni critiques of Mu'tazilah positions, providing important evidence of medieval theological debates and their continuing relevance. Rauf (2022) similarly examines al-Rāzī's rectifications of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's views on prophetic intercession, illustrating specific points of theological disagreement.

Al-Ansari (2023) discusses the epistemology of partisan exegesis (tafsīr ḥizbī), raising important questions about how theological commitments shape interpretive outcomes. This work contributes to broader discussions about objectivity and bias in religious interpretation, suggesting that all exegesis operates within particular theological frameworks that influence hermeneutical decisions.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES IN RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

Contemporary research on ʿAbd al-Jabbār employs diverse methodological approaches. Comparative analysis has proven particularly fruitful, as demonstrated by studies contrasting Mu'tazilah and Sunni exegetical methods (Wijaya & Mochamad, 2022; Shifa et al., 2021). Linguistic analysis has illuminated the sophisticated role of language in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's thought (Erzi, 2022; Syafruddin, 2020). Hermeneutical analysis has focused on principles of figurative interpretation and their application (Rahman, 2016; Zulfikar, 2023). Critical theological critique from alternative doctrinal perspectives has enriched understanding of contested issues (Gün, 2024; Rauf, 2022).

Several studies have also examined specific aspects of Mu'tazilah thought relevant to understanding ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegesis. Al-Anshari (2024) analyzes Mu'tazilah conceptions of Qurʾānic inimitability (iʿjāz), demonstrating how theological commitments shape literary and rhetorical analysis. Shifa (2024) further explores iʿjāz from a Mu'tazilah perspective, revealing connections between theological rationalism and literary theory. Kamila (2024) examines ʿAbd al-Jabbār's epistemological views, providing important context for understanding his hermeneutical methodology.

Gaps and Research Opportunities

Despite this growing body of scholarship, several gaps remain. First, while individual aspects of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's methodology have been examined, comprehensive synthetic analyses integrating rationalist framework, theological principles, and hermeneutical strategies remain limited. Second, much existing research focuses on specific controversial issues (such as divine attributes or prophetic intercession) rather than examining the systematic structure of his exegetical approach. Third, while comparative studies with Sunni exegesis exist, broader comparative work situating ʿAbd al-Jabbār within the full spectrum of Islamic exegetical traditions (including Shīʿī, philosophical, and Sufi approaches) would enrich understanding.

This study addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive, integrated analysis of rationalism and Mu'tazilah theological nuances in Tanzīh al-Qurʾān, examining both the systematic structure of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's methodology and its specific applications, while engaging with contemporary scholarly debates from multiple perspectives.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design combining textual analysis, comparative methodology, and systematic literature review to examine rationalism and Mu'tazilah theological nuances in Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Tanzīh al-Qurʾān ʿan al-Maṭāʿin. The methodological framework integrates multiple analytical approaches to provide comprehensive understanding of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegetical methodology and its theological foundations.

Data Sources

The research draws on two primary categories of sources:

Primary Sources: The foundational text for this study is ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Tanzīh al-Qurʾān

ʿan al-Maṭāʿin, supplemented by his other major works including Al-Mughnī fī Abwāb al-Tawḥīd wa-l-ʿAdl and Faḍl al-Iʿtizāl wa-Ṭabaqāt al-Muʿtazilah. These primary sources provide direct access to ʿAbd al-Jabbār's theological arguments, hermeneutical principles, and exegetical applications.

Secondary Sources: A comprehensive corpus of contemporary scholarly literature published primarily within the last decade (2014-2025) was systematically reviewed. This corpus includes peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, and dissertations examining Mu'tazilah theology, ʿAbd al-Jabbār's thought, rationalist hermeneutics, and comparative exegetical studies. Sources were selected based on relevance to the research questions, methodological rigor, and publication in reputable academic venues. Particular attention was given to recent scholarship that employs linguistic, comparative, hermeneutical, and critical theological approaches.

Analytical Framework

The study employs four complementary analytical methods:

1. Textual Analysis: Close reading of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegetical discussions in Tanzīh al-Qurʾān to identify patterns in his interpretive methodology, including his use of rational, revelational, and linguistic proofs; his application of taʾwīl to anthropomorphic verses; and his integration of Mu'tazilah theological principles. Textual analysis focuses on identifying systematic features of his approach rather than isolated interpretive decisions.

2. Comparative Analysis: Systematic comparison of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's methodology with alternative exegetical approaches, particularly Sunni traditions represented by figures such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. Comparative analysis illuminates distinctive features of Mu'tazilah hermeneutics by contrasting interpretive strategies, theological commitments, and hermeneutical principles across different schools of thought (Wijaya & Mochamad, 2022; Shifa et al., 2021).

3. Linguistic and Semantic Analysis: Examination of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's linguistic methodology, including his theory of language, his use of lexical analysis, and his principles for determining literal versus figurative meanings. This approach draws on contemporary scholarship analyzing the role of language in Mu'tazilah thought (Erzi, 2022; Syafruddin, 2020).

4. Hermeneutical Analysis: Investigation of the theoretical principles underlying ʿAbd al-Jabbār's interpretive practice, including his epistemology, his theory of textual meaning, and his criteria for valid interpretation. This analysis examines how theological commitments shape hermeneutical strategies and how rational principles function as interpretive guides (Rahman, 2016; Husnul, 2022).

Analytical Procedure

The research proceeded through the following stages:

Stage 1: Literature Mapping and Synthesis: Comprehensive review of contemporary scholarship on ʿAbd al-Jabbār and Mu'tazilah exegesis to identify key themes, debates, and methodological approaches. This stage produced a structured synthesis of existing knowledge, highlighting areas of consensus, ongoing debates, and research gaps.

Stage 2: Thematic Identification: Analysis of primary and secondary sources to identify major themes related to rationalism and Mu'tazilah theology in Tanzīh al-Qurʾān. Key themes identified include: the tripartite proof system, the five foundational principles (al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah), hermeneutical strategies for ambiguous verses, linguistic methodology, and contemporary scholarly debates.

Stage 3: Systematic Analysis: Detailed examination of each identified theme through the four analytical methods described above. This stage involved close reading of relevant passages in Tanzīh al-Qurʾān, comparison with alternative approaches, linguistic analysis

of key terms and concepts, and hermeneutical analysis of underlying principles.

Stage 4: Integration and Synthesis: Integration of findings from individual thematic analyses into a comprehensive understanding of rationalism and Mu'tazilah theological nuances in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegesis. This stage involved identifying connections between different aspects of his methodology and constructing a coherent account of his overall interpretive approach.

Stage 5: Critical Engagement: Engagement with contemporary scholarly debates, including both appreciative analyses and critical perspectives from alternative theological traditions. This stage ensured balanced treatment of contested issues and recognition of legitimate disagreements about ʿAbd al-Jabbār's methodology.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study focuses specifically on Tanzīh al-Qurʾān ʿan al-Maṭāʿin as the primary text for analysis, though reference is made to ʿAbd al-Jabbār's other works where relevant for understanding his broader theological framework. The study emphasizes rationalist and theological dimensions of his exegesis rather than providing comprehensive coverage of all interpretive issues addressed in the text. The research relies primarily on contemporary scholarly analyses of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's work, supplemented by engagement with primary sources, rather than conducting entirely independent primary source analysis. This approach allows for integration of diverse scholarly perspectives while maintaining focus on the research questions.

The study acknowledges that all interpretation, including scholarly analysis, operates within particular frameworks and perspectives. Efforts have been made to represent diverse viewpoints fairly, including critical perspectives from alternative theological traditions, while maintaining analytical rigor and scholarly objectivity.

DISCUSSION

1. The Rationalist Framework of Tanzīh al-Qurʾān

Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Tanzīh al-Qurʾān ʿan al-Maṭāʿin embodies a sophisticated rationalist framework that fundamentally shapes its exegetical methodology. At the core of this framework lies a systematic epistemological structure that assigns decisive authority to reason (ʿaql) in theological and interpretive questions while maintaining a nuanced relationship with revelation and linguistic analysis.

The Tripartite Proof System

The most distinctive feature of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's rationalist methodology is his systematic employment of three types of proofs: rational (ʿaqlī), revelational (samʿī), and linguistic (lughawī). Erzi (2022) demonstrates that these proof types are not merely supplementary tools but constitute distinct domains of authority with specific jurisdictions and hierarchical relationships. Rational proofs hold primacy in matters of theology proper, particularly concerning divine attributes, divine justice, and the rational basis of moral obligation. Revelational proofs provide authoritative guidance in matters that reason alone cannot determine, such as specific ritual requirements and eschatological details. Linguistic proofs serve as the methodological bridge between reason and revelation, providing the analytical tools for determining how scriptural language should be understood.

This tripartite system reflects a sophisticated epistemological architecture in which different types of knowledge require different types of evidence. Husnul (2022) analyzes how rational proofs function in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's discourse to establish the clear (muḥkam) and interpret the ambiguous (mutashābih), demonstrating that rational arguments are not external impositions on the text but internal principles that guide proper understanding. When a verse appears to

attribute corporeality to God or to suggest divine injustice, rational proof demonstrates that such literal readings are impossible, thereby necessitating figurative interpretation.

The primacy of reason in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's system does not entail rejection of revelation but rather establishes reason as the criterion for valid interpretation. Ali (2025) argues that this integration of reason and revelation represents a sophisticated attempt to reconcile religious commitment with critical inquiry, offering resources for contemporary Islamic thought. The rationalist framework ensures that interpretation remains coherent with fundamental theological truths established by reason, such as divine transcendence, justice, and wisdom.

Linguistic Analysis as Rational Methodology

A particularly innovative aspect of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's rationalism is his treatment of linguistic analysis as a specialized rational discipline. Erzi (2022) emphasizes that language, for ʿAbd al-Jabbār, is not merely a medium of communication but a structured system whose rules can be rationally analyzed and applied. Linguistic proof (dalīl lughawī) operates according to rational principles of lexicography, grammar, and rhetoric, providing objective criteria for determining textual meaning.

Syafruddin (2020) traces the historical development of the concept of figurative language (majāz) in Qurʾānic interpretation, showing how ʿAbd al-Jabbār builds upon earlier Mu'tazilah linguistic theories while developing more systematic principles. His approach to majāz is grounded in rational analysis of linguistic conventions: figurative meanings are not arbitrary impositions but follow recognizable patterns in Arabic usage that can be identified through careful linguistic analysis. This linguistic rationalism provides the methodological foundation for his extensive use of taʾwīl, ensuring that figurative interpretations are not subjective but follow objective linguistic principles.

The integration of linguistic analysis into the rationalist framework serves multiple functions. First, it provides a methodological safeguard against arbitrary interpretation by requiring that figurative readings be linguistically justified. Second, it demonstrates that rational interpretation is not imposed on the text from outside but emerges from careful attention to the text's own linguistic features. Third, it establishes a common ground for theological debate by appealing to shared linguistic conventions rather than sectarian theological commitments.

Rational Ethics and Moral Epistemology

ʿAbd al-Jabbār's rationalism extends beyond hermeneutics to encompass a comprehensive theory of moral epistemology. His exegesis consistently emphasizes that moral truths are rationally knowable prior to revelation, and that human beings possess the rational capacity to discern right from wrong independently of scriptural guidance. This ethical rationalism, central to Mu'tazilah theology, has profound implications for his interpretive practice.

Kadri (2024) examines how ʿAbd al-Jabbār's understanding of the objectives of Islamic law (maqāṣid al-sharīʿah) is grounded in rational principles of justice and human welfare. Legal and ethical verses are interpreted in light of rational moral principles, ensuring that scriptural commands align with rationally discernible moral truths. This approach reflects the Mu'tazilah conviction that divine commands are not arbitrary but reflect God's wisdom and justice, which human reason can apprehend.

The rational basis of moral responsibility is particularly emphasized in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's treatment of verses related to human agency and divine decree. His interpretations consistently affirm human free will and moral accountability, rejecting deterministic readings that would undermine rational ethics. This ethical rationalism connects directly to the Mu'tazilah principle of divine justice (ʿadl), which requires that God not hold humans accountable for actions they cannot control.

Epistemological Foundations

Kamila (2024) provides a comprehensive analysis of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's epistemological views,

revealing the philosophical foundations of his rationalist methodology. His epistemology distinguishes between necessary knowledge (ʿilm ḍarūrī), which is self-evident and requires no proof, and acquired knowledge (ʿilm muktasab), which requires rational demonstration. Theological truths such as divine existence, unity, and justice fall into the category of acquired knowledge that can be rationally demonstrated, while the specific content of revelation provides knowledge that reason alone cannot attain.

This epistemological framework establishes clear boundaries for the authority of reason and revelation. Reason has ultimate authority in matters that fall within its domain theology, ethics, and the principles of interpretation while revelation provides authoritative guidance in matters beyond reason's reach. The rationalist framework thus does not reject revelation but assigns it a specific role within a comprehensive epistemological system.

The rationalist framework of Tanzīh al-Qurʾān represents a sophisticated attempt to construct a coherent, systematic approach to Qurʾānic interpretation grounded in rational principles while maintaining fidelity to scriptural authority. This framework provides the foundation for ʿAbd al-Jabbār's distinctive hermeneutical strategies and his integration of Mu'tazilah theological principles into exegetical practice.

2. Mu'tazilah Theological Principles in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Exegesis

The five foundational principles (al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah) of Mu'tazilah theology—divine unity (tawḥīd), divine justice (ʿadl), the promise and threat (al-waʿd wa-l-waʿīd), the intermediate position (al-manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn), and commanding right and forbidding wrong (al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahy ʿan al-munkar)—function not as abstract doctrines but as operative hermeneutical principles that systematically shape ʿAbd al-Jabbār's interpretive practice in Tanzīh al-Qurʾān.

Divine Unity (Tawḥīd) and the Interpretation of Attributes

The principle of divine unity receives extensive treatment in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegesis, particularly in his interpretation of verses describing divine attributes. Jalil (2024) demonstrates that Mu'tazilah exegesis of creedal verses (āyāt al-ʿaqīdah) is fundamentally structured by the commitment to absolute divine transcendence and the rejection of any suggestion of divine corporeality, multiplicity, or composition.

ʿAbd al-Jabbār's approach to tawḥīd manifests in several distinctive interpretive strategies. First, he systematically applies figurative interpretation (taʾwīl) to anthropomorphic verses that appear to attribute physical characteristics to God. Verses mentioning God's hand, face, or sitting on a throne are interpreted metaphorically as references to divine power, essence, or sovereignty rather than literal physical attributes. This interpretive strategy is grounded in the rational principle that God, as the necessary existent and creator of all bodies, cannot Himself be corporeal.

Second, ʿAbd al-Jabbār carefully distinguishes between essential divine attributes (such as knowledge, power, and life) and attributes of action (such as creating, providing, and judging). Gün (2024) provides a critical analysis of this distinction from a Sunni perspective, arguing that ʿAbd al-Jabbār's approach to attributes approaches divine negation (taʿṭīl). However, from the Mu'tazilah perspective, this distinction is necessary to preserve divine unity: essential attributes are not entities added to the divine essence but are identical with it, while attributes of action describe God's relationship to creation without implying multiplicity in the divine essence.

Third, the principle of tawḥīd shapes ʿAbd al-Jabbār's interpretation of verses that might suggest divine change or temporal origination of divine attributes. He consistently interprets such verses in ways that preserve divine immutability and eternity, arguing that apparent references to divine change actually describe changes in creation rather than in God Himself.

Divine Justice (ʿAdl) and Human Moral Agency

The principle of divine justice stands as perhaps the most influential theological commitment shaping ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegetical practice. Hasbi (2025) provides a comparative analysis of conceptions of divine justice in ʿAbd al-Jabbār and Saadia Gaon, revealing how this principle generates distinctive interpretive patterns across diverse textual contexts.

ʿAbd al-Jabbār's commitment to divine justice manifests most clearly in his interpretation of verses related to divine decree (qaḍāʾ), predestination (qadar), and human responsibility. He consistently rejects deterministic readings that would suggest God creates human actions or compels humans to sin, arguing that such interpretations would make God unjust by holding humans accountable for actions they cannot control. Instead, he interprets verses about divine decree as referring to God's knowledge of future events or His creation of the capacity for action, while affirming that humans freely choose their own actions.

Hidayat (2022) examines how the principle of ʿadl influences Mu'tazilah legal thought, demonstrating that theological commitments to divine justice shape interpretations of legal and ethical verses. ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegesis consistently emphasizes that divine commands reflect God's wisdom and serve human welfare, rejecting any suggestion that God's commands might be arbitrary or contrary to rational moral principles.

The principle of divine justice also shapes ʿAbd al-Jabbār's interpretation of verses about divine punishment and reward. He argues that God's promise of reward for obedience and threat of punishment for disobedience reflect divine justice: God necessarily fulfills His promises and threats because failing to do so would constitute injustice. This interpretation connects the second principle (ʿadl) with the third (al-waʿd wa-l-waʿīd), demonstrating the systematic integration of Mu'tazilah theological principles.

The Promise and Threat (Al-Waʿd wa-l-Waʿīd)

The third principle, concerning God's promise of reward and threat of punishment, receives systematic treatment in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegesis of eschatological verses. This principle affirms that God will necessarily fulfill His promises and threats, rewarding the obedient and punishing the disobedient, and that this fulfillment is a requirement of divine justice.

ʿAbd al-Jabbār's interpretation of verses about intercession (shafāʿah) illustrates the application of this principle. Rauf (2022) analyzes Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's critique of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's views on prophetic intercession, revealing a fundamental disagreement about the scope of divine mercy and the conditions of salvation. ʿAbd al-Jabbār argues that intercession cannot benefit those who die in a state of major sin (kabīrah) without repentance, because God's threat of punishment for such sins must be fulfilled as a requirement of justice. This interpretation contrasts sharply with Sunni views that allow for broader scope of intercession and divine mercy.

The principle of promise and threat also shapes ʿAbd al-Jabbār's interpretation of verses about repentance (tawbah) and forgiveness (maghfirah). He emphasizes that sincere repentance necessarily results in divine forgiveness, because God has promised to forgive the repentant, and divine justice requires fulfillment of this promise. This interpretation affirms both divine mercy and divine justice, demonstrating how Mu'tazilah theology integrates these attributes within a coherent rational framework.

The Intermediate Position (Al-Manzilah bayna al-Manzilatayn)

The fourth principle, concerning the status of the Muslim who commits major sin, receives less extensive treatment in Tanzīh al-Qurʾān compared to the first two principles, but it nonetheless influences ʿAbd al-Jabbār's interpretation of relevant verses. This principle affirms that the Muslim who commits major sin without repentance occupies an intermediate position between belief and unbelief: such a person is neither a complete believer nor an unbeliever, but a "transgressor" (fāsiq).

Kadri (2024) notes that while not every element of the five-principle schema receives equal treatment in the tafsir, the principles that are addressed are systematically integrated into the

interpretive framework. ʿAbd al-Jabbār's interpretation of verses about faith (īmān) and hypocrisy (nifāq) reflects the intermediate position principle by distinguishing between different levels of religious commitment and moral status.

Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong (Al-Amr bi-l-Maʿrūf wa-l-Nahy ʿan al-Munkar)

The fifth principle, concerning the obligation to command right and forbid wrong, shapes ʿAbd al-Jabbār's interpretation of verses about moral responsibility and social ethics. Sayyid (2024) examines Mu'tazilah thought in the context of intellectual freedom and divine will, demonstrating how this principle reflects the Mu'tazilah emphasis on human moral agency and social responsibility.

ʿAbd al-Jabbār interprets verses commanding believers to enjoin good and forbid evil as establishing a rational and religious obligation that applies to all capable individuals. This interpretation reflects the Mu'tazilah conviction that moral knowledge is rationally accessible and that humans have both the capacity and the obligation to promote justice and prevent wrongdoing in society.

Systematic Integration of Theological Principles

The five principles of Mu'tazilah theology function not as isolated doctrines but as an integrated system that generates consistent interpretive patterns across diverse textual contexts. Hidayat (2022) demonstrates how al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah influence Mu'tazilah legal thought, revealing the systematic nature of the relationship between theological commitments and interpretive practice. ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegesis exemplifies this systematic integration: theological principles shape hermeneutical strategies, which in turn generate specific interpretations that consistently reflect Mu'tazilah commitments.

The manifestation of Mu'tazilah theological principles in Tanzīh al-Qurʾān demonstrates that ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegesis is not merely apologetic defense of the Qurʾān but a comprehensive theological project that articulates a coherent rationalist vision of Islamic faith grounded in systematic interpretation of scripture.

3. Hermeneutical Strategies: Taʾwīl and Linguistic Analysis

Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār's hermeneutical methodology in Tanzīh al-Qurʾān is characterized by sophisticated strategies for interpreting ambiguous and anthropomorphic verses, centered on the systematic application of figurative interpretation (taʾwīl) and rigorous linguistic analysis. These strategies reflect the integration of his rationalist framework and Mu'tazilah theological commitments into concrete interpretive practice.

The Theory and Practice of Taʾwīl

Figurative interpretation (taʾwīl) stands as the most distinctive and controversial feature of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's hermeneutical approach. Wijaya and Mochamad (2022) provide a comprehensive comparative analysis of taʾwīl in Sunni and Mu'tazilah traditions, examining how ʿAbd al-Jabbār and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī approach ambiguous verses (āyāt mutashābihāt). This comparison reveals fundamental differences in both the scope and justification of figurative interpretation.

For ʿAbd al-Jabbār, taʾwīl is not an exceptional hermeneutical move applied reluctantly when literal interpretation proves impossible, but rather a systematic interpretive strategy grounded in rational and linguistic principles. His approach to taʾwīl rests on several foundational premises. First, when the literal meaning of a verse contradicts rational certainties—such as divine transcendence, justice, or wisdom—the literal meaning must be rejected in favor of a figurative interpretation. Second, figurative interpretation is not arbitrary but must be linguistically justified by demonstrating that the proposed figurative meaning is a recognized usage in Arabic. Third, taʾwīl serves the fundamental purpose of "exonerating" (tanzīh) the Qurʾān from apparent contradictions, absurdities, or implications that would undermine divine perfection.

Rahman (2016) examines how Mu'tazilah and Twelver Shīʿī approaches encounter ambiguity in

the Qurʾān, demonstrating that the Muʿtazilah theory of taʾwīl is grounded in a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between clear (muḥkam) and ambiguous (mutashābih) verses. ʿAbd al-Jabbār argues that clear verses, which establish fundamental theological truths through rational and linguistic clarity, provide the interpretive framework for understanding ambiguous verses. When an ambiguous verse appears to contradict clear verses or rational certainties, it must be interpreted figuratively to achieve coherence with established truths.

The systematic application of taʾwīl to anthropomorphic verses represents the most visible manifestation of this hermeneutical strategy. Verses mentioning God's hand (yad), face (wajh), eyes (ʿayn), or sitting on a throne (istiwāʾ) are consistently interpreted metaphorically. God's "hand" refers to His power or favor; His "face" to His essence or the direction of worship toward Him; His "eyes" to His knowledge and watchfulness; His "sitting on the throne" to His sovereignty and dominion over creation. These figurative interpretations are justified both rationally—because God cannot be corporeal—and linguistically—because these metaphorical uses are attested in Arabic usage.

Linguistic Methodology and Semantic Analysis

ʿAbd al-Jabbār's hermeneutical approach is deeply grounded in sophisticated linguistic analysis. Erzi (2022) emphasizes that language functions as a specialized proof-domain in his thought, with its own rules and principles that determine valid interpretation. His linguistic methodology encompasses several key components.

First, lexical analysis plays a central role in determining textual meaning. ʿAbd al-Jabbār carefully examines the range of meanings that Arabic words can bear, distinguishing between primary and secondary meanings, literal and figurative uses, and general and specific applications. This lexical analysis provides the foundation for justifying figurative interpretations by demonstrating that proposed metaphorical meanings are linguistically legitimate.

Second, grammatical analysis helps determine syntactic relationships and semantic scope. ʿAbd al-Jabbār attends carefully to grammatical structures, using syntactic analysis to resolve ambiguities and determine the proper understanding of complex verses. Shifa et al. (2022) examine linguistic observations in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's critiques of ʿAbd al-Jabbār, revealing the central role of linguistic argumentation in medieval theological debates.

Third, rhetorical analysis illuminates the literary features of Qurʾānic discourse. Al-Anshari (2024) and Shifa (2024) examine Muʿtazilah conceptions of Qurʾānic inimitability (iʿjāz), demonstrating how theological rationalism shapes literary and rhetorical analysis. ʿAbd al-Jabbār's attention to rhetorical features such as metaphor, metonymy, ellipsis, and other figures of speech provides additional tools for interpreting ambiguous passages.

Syafruddin (2020) traces the historical development of the concept of figurative language (majāz) in Qurʾānic interpretation, showing how ʿAbd al-Jabbār builds upon earlier Muʿtazilah linguistic theories. His systematic treatment of majāz establishes clear criteria for identifying figurative language: contextual indicators, rational impossibility of literal meaning, and linguistic evidence of metaphorical usage. These criteria provide methodological safeguards against arbitrary interpretation while allowing for the flexibility needed to resolve apparent contradictions.

Hermeneutical Principles and Interpretive Rules

Beyond specific linguistic techniques, ʿAbd al-Jabbār articulates general hermeneutical principles that guide his interpretive practice. Zulfikar (2023) analyzes interpretation techniques in legal verses, revealing methodological principles applicable to broader exegetical contexts. Several key hermeneutical principles structure ʿAbd al-Jabbār's approach.

The principle of coherence requires that interpretation achieve consistency among all Qurʾānic verses and between the Qurʾān and rational truths. When apparent contradictions arise, they must be resolved through careful interpretation that demonstrates underlying coherence. This principle reflects the Muʿtazilah conviction that truth is unified and that apparent contradictions

result from misunderstanding rather than actual inconsistency.

The principle of rational priority establishes that when textual meaning is ambiguous, rational considerations should guide interpretation. This principle does not authorize imposing arbitrary meanings on the text but rather recognizes that reason provides criteria for determining which of multiple possible meanings is correct. Husnul (2022) demonstrates how rational proofs function to establish the clear and interpret the ambiguous in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's discourse.

The principle of linguistic fidelity requires that interpretation remain grounded in legitimate linguistic possibilities. Even when rational considerations necessitate figurative interpretation, the proposed figurative meaning must be linguistically justified. This principle prevents rationalist interpretation from degenerating into arbitrary allegorization disconnected from textual meaning.

The principle of theological consistency ensures that interpretation aligns with fundamental theological truths, particularly the five principles of Mu'tazilah theology. This principle reflects the recognition that all interpretation operates within theological frameworks and that coherence with established theological commitments is a criterion of valid interpretation.

Comparative Hermeneutical Perspectives

Wijaya and Mochamad (2022) provide valuable comparative analysis contrasting ʿAbd al-Jabbār's hermeneutical approach with that of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, revealing fundamental differences between Mu'tazilah and Sunni hermeneutics. While al-Rāzī employs taʾwīl selectively and with caution, preferring to maintain literal meanings where possible and acknowledging the limits of human understanding when faced with ambiguous verses, ʿAbd al-Jabbār applies taʾwīl more systematically and confidently, driven by the conviction that rational principles provide clear guidance for interpretation.

These hermeneutical differences reflect deeper theological disagreements about the relationship between reason and revelation, the knowability of divine attributes, and the proper balance between affirmation and negation in theological language. Sunni critics argue that ʿAbd al-Jabbār's extensive use of taʾwīl effectively empties divine attributes of meaningful content, approaching divine negation (taʿṭīl). Mu'tazilah defenders respond that their approach preserves authentic divine transcendence while Sunni literalism risks anthropomorphism.

The hermeneutical strategies employed in Tanzīh al-Qurʾān represent a sophisticated attempt to construct a systematic, rational approach to Qurʾānic interpretation that maintains fidelity to scriptural text while ensuring theological coherence. These strategies demonstrate the practical application of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's rationalist framework and Mu'tazilah theological commitments in concrete interpretive practice.

4. Contemporary Scholarly Debates and Critical Perspectives

Contemporary scholarship on Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Tanzīh al-Qurʾān encompasses diverse perspectives, ranging from appreciative analyses of his rationalist methodology to sharp critiques from alternative theological traditions. These debates illuminate ongoing tensions in Islamic thought about the proper relationship between reason and revelation, the interpretation of divine attributes, and the legitimacy of figurative interpretation.

The Taʾwīl Controversy: Legitimate Hermeneutics or Excessive Rationalism?

The most sustained contemporary debate concerns ʿAbd al-Jabbār's extensive use of figurative interpretation (taʾwīl). Gün (2024) offers a critical examination from an Ahl al-Sunnah perspective, arguing that ʿAbd al-Jabbār's approach to divine attributes constitutes excessive rationalism that approaches divine negation (taʿṭīl). This critique contends that by systematically interpreting anthropomorphic verses figuratively, ʿAbd al-Jabbār effectively denies the reality of divine attributes, leaving only abstract negations rather than positive affirmations about God.

The Sunni critique rests on several arguments. First, it contends that ʿAbd al-Jabbār privileges reason over revelation, allowing rational considerations to override clear textual meanings.

Second, it argues that his figurative interpretations are often forced and linguistically implausible, reflecting theological commitments rather than genuine linguistic analysis. Third, it suggests that his approach leads to a form of agnosticism about divine attributes, since figurative interpretation empties traditional theological language of determinate meaning.

Defenders of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's approach respond that these critiques misunderstand both his methodology and his theological commitments. Wijaya and Mochamad (2022) demonstrate that ʿAbd al-Jabbār's taʾwīl is not arbitrary but follows systematic linguistic and rational principles. His figurative interpretations are linguistically justified by demonstrating that proposed metaphorical meanings are attested in Arabic usage. Moreover, his approach does not deny divine attributes but rather affirms them in ways consistent with divine transcendence: God truly possesses knowledge, power, and will, but not in the manner of created beings.

Rahman (2016) provides important context by examining how different theological traditions approach ambiguous verses, demonstrating that all interpretive traditions employ some form of taʾwīl when faced with apparently problematic texts. The debate is not whether taʾwīl is legitimate in principle but rather about its proper scope and application. Mu'tazilah hermeneutics applies taʾwīl more systematically and extensively than Sunni traditions, but this difference reflects deeper theological disagreements rather than a simple contrast between rationalism and traditionalism.

Accusations of Taʿṭīl and the Problem of Divine Attributes

Closely related to the taʾwīl controversy is the accusation that ʿAbd al-Jabbār's theology approaches divine negation (taʿṭīl). Gün (2024) articulates this critique in detail, arguing that ʿAbd al-Jabbār's distinction between essential attributes and attributes of action, combined with his insistence that essential attributes are identical with the divine essence, effectively denies the reality of distinct divine attributes.

This critique reflects a fundamental disagreement about how to understand divine attributes. Sunni theology, particularly in its Ashʿarī formulation, affirms that God possesses real attributes (knowledge, power, will, etc.) that are neither identical with the divine essence nor entirely separate from it, employing the formula "not He, nor other than He" (lā huwa wa-lā ghayruhu). Mu'tazilah theology rejects this formulation as incoherent, arguing that affirming real attributes distinct from the essence would compromise divine unity by introducing multiplicity into the Godhead.

Shifa et al. (2021) examine Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's theological observations on ʿAbd al-Jabbār, documenting systematic Sunni critiques of Mu'tazilah positions on attributes. These critiques argue that the Mu'tazilah position, by denying real attributes distinct from the essence, cannot adequately account for the richness of Qurʾānic language about God and risks reducing God to an abstract, unknowable principle.

Mu'tazilah responses emphasize that their position affirms divine attributes while preserving divine unity. God truly knows, but His knowledge is not an entity added to His essence; rather, God is knowing by virtue of His essence. This formulation, they argue, preserves both the reality of divine knowledge and divine simplicity. The debate reveals deep philosophical disagreements about the nature of attributes, the relationship between essence and attributes, and the proper way to understand divine simplicity.

Epistemological Debates: The Primacy of Reason

Another significant area of contemporary debate concerns the epistemological status of reason in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's methodology. Critics argue that his rationalism grants excessive authority to human reason, potentially subordinating revelation to rational speculation. This critique suggests that ʿAbd al-Jabbār's approach risks reducing revelation to a mere confirmation of what reason can discover independently, thereby undermining the distinctive authority of scripture.

Kamila (2024) provides a nuanced analysis of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's epistemological views,

demonstrating that his position is more sophisticated than critics suggest. He distinguishes between different types of knowledge and assigns different epistemic authorities to reason and revelation in their respective domains. Reason has authority in matters of theology and ethics because these concern universal truths accessible to rational inquiry. Revelation has authority in matters beyond reason's reach, such as specific ritual requirements and eschatological details. This division of epistemic labor does not subordinate revelation to reason but rather assigns each its proper role.

Ali (2025) argues that the Mu'tazilah emphasis on rationality offers valuable resources for contemporary Islamic thought, particularly in addressing challenges of modernity and reconciling religious commitment with critical inquiry. The rationalist framework provides tools for engaging with philosophical questions, responding to intellectual challenges, and demonstrating the rational coherence of Islamic faith. From this perspective, ʿAbd al-Jabbār's epistemological approach represents not a weakness but a strength, offering a model for intellectually engaged religious thought.

Linguistic and Methodological Critiques

Contemporary scholarship has also examined the linguistic and methodological dimensions of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegesis. Shifa et al. (2022) analyze linguistic observations in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's critiques, revealing debates about the proper application of linguistic analysis to theological interpretation. Critics question whether ʿAbd al-Jabbār's linguistic arguments genuinely support his interpretive conclusions or whether theological commitments drive his linguistic analysis.

Erzi (2022) provides a more sympathetic analysis of the role of language in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's thought, demonstrating the sophistication of his linguistic methodology. His approach treats language as a structured system whose rules can be rationally analyzed, providing objective criteria for interpretation. While theological commitments certainly influence his interpretive practice, his linguistic arguments are not merely post-hoc rationalizations but reflect genuine engagement with Arabic linguistic conventions.

Syafruddin (2020) traces the historical development of linguistic concepts in Mu'tazilah exegesis, showing how ʿAbd al-Jabbār builds upon earlier theoretical work. This historical perspective reveals that his linguistic methodology represents the culmination of a long tradition of Mu'tazilah linguistic analysis rather than an idiosyncratic innovation.

Scope and Representation of Mu'tazilah Theology

Kadri (2024) raises important questions about how fully Tanzīh al-Qurʾān represents the complete spectrum of Mu'tazilah theology. While the work clearly reflects core Mu'tazilah commitments, particularly regarding divine unity and justice, not every element of the five-principle schema receives equal treatment. This observation suggests that ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegetical project is selective, focusing on issues most relevant to his apologetic purposes rather than providing comprehensive coverage of all Mu'tazilah doctrines

This recognition has implications for how we understand the relationship between theological commitments and exegetical practice. It suggests that exegesis is not simply the mechanical application of theological principles to texts but involves complex judgments about which theological issues are most relevant to particular interpretive contexts. ʿAbd al-Jabbār's selective emphasis on certain Mu'tazilah principles reflects the specific apologetic and hermeneutical goals of Tanzīh al-Qurʾān.

Partisan Exegesis and Interpretive Objectivity

Al-Ansari (2023) raises broader questions about partisan exegesis (tafsīr ḥizbī) and the possibility of objective interpretation. This work suggests that all exegesis operates within particular theological frameworks that shape interpretive outcomes. From this perspective, ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Mu'tazilah commitments do not represent a unique bias but rather exemplify the general phenomenon of theologically informed interpretation.

This recognition complicates simple contrasts between "objective" and "biased" interpretation. If all interpretation operates within frameworks, the question becomes not whether interpretation is influenced by theological commitments but rather which theological frameworks are most adequate and which interpretive methods are most rigorous. ʿAbd al-Jabbār's explicit articulation of his theological and methodological principles, from this perspective, represents intellectual honesty rather than problematic bias.

Contemporary scholarly debates about ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Tanzīh al-Qurʾān reflect ongoing tensions in Islamic thought about fundamental questions of theological method, hermeneutical strategy, and the relationship between reason and revelation. These debates demonstrate the continuing relevance of medieval theological controversies for contemporary Islamic intellectual life.

5. Comparative Analysis with Sunni Exegetical Traditions

Situating Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Tanzīh al-Qurʾān within the broader landscape of Islamic exegetical traditions illuminates both its distinctive features and its connections to alternative approaches. Comparative analysis with Sunni exegetical traditions, particularly the work of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, reveals fundamental differences in hermeneutical methodology, theological commitments, and interpretive outcomes.

Contrasting Hermeneutical Approaches

Wijaya and Mochamad (2022) provide the most comprehensive comparative analysis of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Tanzīh al-Qurʾān and al-Rāzī's Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb, examining how these two major exegetes approach ambiguous verses (āyāt mutashābihāt). This comparison reveals several key differences in hermeneutical methodology.

First, the scope and application of taʾwīl differ significantly. ʿAbd al-Jabbār applies figurative interpretation systematically and extensively to anthropomorphic verses, driven by the rational principle that God cannot be corporeal. Al-Rāzī employs taʾwīl more selectively and cautiously, often presenting multiple possible interpretations without definitively endorsing figurative readings. Where ʿAbd al-Jabbār confidently asserts that anthropomorphic language must be interpreted metaphorically, al-Rāzī frequently acknowledges the limits of human understanding and the possibility that the true meaning of ambiguous verses may be known only to God.

Second, the role of reason in interpretation differs. ʿAbd al-Jabbār grants decisive authority to rational principles in determining valid interpretation, treating reason as the ultimate criterion for resolving ambiguities. Al-Rāzī, while certainly employing rational argumentation, maintains greater deference to transmitted tradition (naql) and is more willing to acknowledge tensions between rational and traditional approaches without definitively resolving them in favor of reason.

Third, the treatment of divine attributes reflects fundamental theological differences. ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Mu'tazilah commitment to absolute divine transcendence leads him to interpret attribute language in ways that avoid any suggestion of divine corporeality or multiplicity. Al-Rāzī's Ashʿarī theology affirms real divine attributes while maintaining divine transcendence, leading to different interpretive strategies that attempt to affirm attributes without anthropomorphism.

Theological Foundations of Interpretive Differences

The hermeneutical differences between ʿAbd al-Jabbār and Sunni exegetes reflect deeper theological disagreements. Shifa et al. (2021) examine al-Rāzī's theological observations on ʿAbd al-Jabbār, documenting systematic critiques of Mu'tazilah positions. These critiques reveal that interpretive disagreements are not merely technical hermeneutical disputes but reflect fundamental differences in theological method and doctrine.

The Mu'tazilah emphasis on divine justice (ʿadl) leads to distinctive interpretations of verses about divine decree, human agency, and moral responsibility. ʿAbd al-Jabbār consistently interprets such verses in ways that affirm human free will and reject divine determinism, because

divine justice requires that humans be held accountable only for actions they freely choose. Sunni exegetes, particularly those in the Ashʿarī tradition, interpret the same verses in ways that emphasize divine sovereignty and the comprehensive scope of divine decree, while attempting to maintain human responsibility through more complex theological formulations.

Hasbi (2025) provides comparative analysis of conceptions of divine justice in ʿAbd al-Jabbār and Saadia Gaon, revealing how rationalist theological commitments generate similar interpretive patterns across different religious traditions. This comparison suggests that the distinctive features of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegesis reflect not merely Mu'tazilah sectarian commitments but broader rationalist theological principles that transcend particular schools.

Debates About Intercession and Eschatology

Specific interpretive disagreements about intercession (shafāʿah) illustrate how theological differences generate divergent exegetical outcomes. Rauf (2022) examines al-Rāzī's rectifications of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's views on prophetic intercession, revealing fundamental disagreements about the scope of divine mercy and the conditions of salvation.

ʿAbd al-Jabbār argues that intercession cannot benefit those who die in major sin without repentance, because God's threat of punishment must be fulfilled as a requirement of justice. This interpretation reflects the Mu'tazilah principle of promise and threat (al-waʿd wa-l-waʿīd), which affirms that God necessarily fulfills His promises and threats. Al-Rāzī and other Sunni exegetes interpret intercession verses more broadly, allowing for the possibility that divine mercy may extend to sinners through prophetic intercession even without prior repentance. This difference reflects deeper theological disagreements about the relationship between divine justice and divine mercy, and about whether God's actions are constrained by rational principles of justice.

Linguistic Analysis and Interpretive Authority

Both ʿAbd al-Jabbār and Sunni exegetes employ sophisticated linguistic analysis, but they differ in how linguistic considerations relate to theological commitments. Shifa et al. (2022) examine linguistic observations in al-Rāzī's critiques of ʿAbd al-Jabbār, revealing debates about the proper application of linguistic analysis to theological interpretation.

ʿAbd al-Jabbār treats linguistic analysis as providing objective criteria for interpretation that can adjudicate between competing theological positions. His linguistic arguments are designed to demonstrate that his figurative interpretations are not arbitrary impositions but follow recognizable patterns in Arabic usage. Sunni critics question whether his linguistic arguments genuinely support his interpretive conclusions or whether theological commitments drive his linguistic analysis, with linguistic arguments serving as post-hoc rationalizations.

Erzi (2022) provides a more sympathetic analysis, demonstrating the sophistication of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's linguistic methodology and its genuine engagement with Arabic linguistic conventions. However, the debate reveals a fundamental tension: while both traditions appeal to linguistic analysis, they differ in how linguistic considerations interact with theological commitments and which has priority when they appear to conflict.

Inimitability (Iʿjāz) and Literary Analysis

Al-Anshari (2024) and Shifa (2024) examine Mu'tazilah conceptions of Qurʾānic inimitability (iʿjāz), revealing how theological rationalism shapes literary and rhetorical analysis. The Mu'tazilah emphasis on the Qurʾān's linguistic and rhetorical excellence as the basis of its inimitability contrasts with alternative theories that locate inimitability in divine prevention (ṣarfah) or in the Qurʾān's content rather than its form.

This difference has implications for exegetical practice. ʿAbd al-Jabbār's attention to rhetorical features and literary artistry reflects the Mu'tazilah conviction that the Qurʾān's excellence is rationally demonstrable through linguistic analysis. This approach treats literary analysis as an integral component of exegesis, providing tools for understanding textual meaning and

appreciating divine eloquence.

Methodological Pluralism and Interpretive Traditions

Comparative analysis reveals that Islamic exegetical traditions are characterized by methodological pluralism rather than monolithic uniformity. Sirry (2020) examines modern tafsir from the perspective of methodological diversity, demonstrating that contemporary exegesis continues to reflect diverse hermeneutical approaches rooted in classical traditions.

ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Tanzīh al-Qurʾān represents one sophisticated approach within this pluralistic landscape, characterized by systematic rationalism, extensive use of taʾwīl, and integration of Mu'tazilah theological principles. Sunni exegetical traditions represent alternative approaches with different theological foundations and hermeneutical strategies. Recognizing this diversity enriches understanding of Islamic intellectual history and demonstrates the vitality of ongoing debates about interpretation.

Guner (2024) calls for rethinking Mu'tazilah theology in contemporary contexts, suggesting that renewed engagement with Mu'tazilah thought offers resources for addressing contemporary challenges. This perspective suggests that comparative analysis of exegetical traditions is not merely historical scholarship but has implications for contemporary Islamic thought, as different classical approaches offer diverse resources for addressing modern questions.

Comparative analysis of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Tanzīh al-Qurʾān with Sunni exegetical traditions illuminates the distinctive features of Mu'tazilah hermeneutics while situating it within the broader landscape of Islamic interpretive traditions. This analysis reveals that interpretive differences reflect deeper theological disagreements about fundamental questions of divine attributes, human agency, and the relationship between reason and revelation, demonstrating the continuing relevance of medieval theological debates for understanding Islamic thought.

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive analysis of rationalism and Mu'tazilah theological nuances in Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār's *Tanzīh al-Qurʾān ʿan al-Maṭāʿin* reveals a sophisticated exegetical project that systematically integrates rationalist epistemology, Mu'tazilah theological principles, and rigorous linguistic analysis into a coherent hermeneutical methodology. The study demonstrates that ʿAbd al-Jabbār's work represents not merely apologetic defense of the Qurʾān but a comprehensive theological vision that navigates the complex relationship between reason, language, and revelation in Islamic thought.

The rationalist framework structuring *Tanzīh al-Qurʾān* is characterized by a tripartite proof system that assigns decisive authority to reason (ʿaql) in theological matters while maintaining nuanced relationships with revelational (samʿī) and linguistic (lughawī) proofs. This epistemological architecture reflects a sophisticated understanding of different types of knowledge and their appropriate sources, with reason serving as the ultimate criterion for valid theological interpretation while linguistic analysis provides the methodological tools for determining textual meaning (Erzi, 2022; Husnul, 2022). The primacy of reason in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's system does not entail rejection of revelation but rather establishes rational coherence as a necessary condition for valid interpretation, ensuring that exegesis remains consistent with fundamental theological truths established by reason.

The five foundational principles (al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah) of Mu'tazilah theology—divine unity (tawḥīd), divine justice (ʿadl), promise and threat (al-waʿd wa-l-waʿīd), the intermediate position (al-manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn), and commanding right and forbidding wrong (al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahy ʿan al-munkar)—function not as abstract doctrines but as operative hermeneutical principles that systematically shape interpretive practice. The principles of divine unity and divine justice receive particularly extensive treatment, generating

distinctive interpretive patterns in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's approach to anthropomorphic verses, divine attributes, human agency, and moral responsibility (Jalil, 2024; Hidayat, 2022; Hasbi, 2025). The systematic integration of these theological principles into exegetical practice demonstrates that ʿAbd al-Jabbār's work articulates a coherent rationalist vision of Islamic faith grounded in systematic interpretation of scripture.

The hermeneutical strategies employed in *Tanzīh al-Qurʾān*, particularly the systematic application of figurative interpretation (*taʾwīl*) to anthropomorphic verses, represent sophisticated attempts to reconcile rational theology with scriptural authority. ʿAbd al-Jabbār's approach to *taʾwīl* is grounded in both rational principles—which establish that God cannot be corporeal—and linguistic analysis—which demonstrates that figurative interpretations are linguistically legitimate (Wijaya & Mochamad, 2022; Rahman, 2016; Syafruddin, 2020). His linguistic methodology treats language as a structured system whose rules can be rationally analyzed, providing objective criteria for interpretation and methodological safeguards against arbitrary allegorization. The integration of rational, theological, and linguistic considerations into a coherent hermeneutical framework demonstrates the sophistication of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's interpretive methodology.

Contemporary scholarly debates surrounding ʿAbd al-Jabbār's methodology reveal ongoing tensions in Islamic thought about fundamental questions of theological method and hermeneutical strategy. Critiques from Sunni perspectives argue that his extensive use of *taʾwīl* approaches divine negation (*taʿṭīl*) and grants excessive authority to human reason (Gün, 2024; Shifa et al., 2021; Rauf, 2022). Defenders respond that his approach preserves authentic divine transcendence while maintaining fidelity to scriptural text, and that his rationalism offers valuable resources for intellectually engaged religious thought (Ali, 2025; Guner, 2024). These debates demonstrate the continuing relevance of medieval theological controversies for contemporary Islamic intellectual life and reveal that interpretive disagreements reflect deeper theological differences about the nature of divine attributes, the scope of human reason, and the proper relationship between rational and revelational authority.

Comparative analysis with Sunni exegetical traditions, particularly the work of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, illuminates both the distinctive features of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's approach and its position within the broader landscape of Islamic interpretive traditions (Wijaya & Mochamad, 2022; Shifa et al., 2021, 2022). Fundamental differences in the scope of *taʾwīl*, the role of reason in interpretation, and the treatment of divine attributes reflect deeper theological disagreements about divine justice, human agency, and the relationship between essence and attributes. This comparative perspective reveals that Islamic exegetical traditions are characterized by methodological pluralism, with different approaches offering diverse resources for understanding scripture and addressing theological questions.

The significance of this study extends beyond historical scholarship to contemporary Islamic thought. ʿAbd al-Jabbār's rationalist framework offers resources for addressing modern challenges, including the reconciliation of religious commitment with critical inquiry, the interpretation of ambiguous scriptural passages, and the articulation of Islamic theology in dialogue with contemporary philosophy (Ali, 2025; Guner, 2024; Sayyid, 2024). His emphasis on rational ethics and human moral agency resonates with contemporary discussions about Islamic reform, intellectual freedom, and the compatibility of Islamic theology with modern values. His sophisticated hermeneutical methodology provides models for rigorous, systematic interpretation that maintains both intellectual integrity and religious commitment.

Several implications emerge from this analysis. First, the study demonstrates that medieval

Islamic rationalist exegesis represents a sophisticated intellectual tradition worthy of serious contemporary engagement. Second, it reveals that debates about the relationship between reason and revelation, far from being merely historical curiosities, address fundamental questions that remain central to contemporary Islamic thought. Third, it shows that methodological pluralism in Islamic exegetical traditions reflects not confusion or inconsistency but rather the richness and vitality of Islamic intellectual life, with different approaches offering complementary insights and resources.

Future research might profitably explore several directions. Comparative studies examining ʿAbd al-Jabbār's exegesis alongside Shīʿī, philosophical, and Sufi interpretive traditions would enrich understanding of the full spectrum of Islamic hermeneutical approaches. Detailed analysis of specific exegetical discussions in *Tanzīh al-Qurʾān* would illuminate how general methodological principles translate into concrete interpretive practice. Investigation of the reception and influence of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's work in later Islamic thought would reveal the historical impact of Mu'tazilah hermeneutics. Exploration of connections between medieval Islamic rationalism and contemporary philosophical theology would demonstrate the continuing relevance of classical debates for modern intellectual contexts.

In conclusion, Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār's *Tanzīh al-Qurʾān ʿan al-Maṭāʿin* represents a sophisticated rationalist exegetical project that systematically integrates epistemological, theological, and linguistic considerations into a coherent hermeneutical methodology. His work demonstrates how reason, properly understood and applied, can serve as a guide to valid scriptural interpretation while maintaining fidelity to revealed text. The continuing scholarly debates about his methodology testify to the enduring significance of the questions he addressed and the sophistication of the answers he proposed. Understanding ʿAbd al-Jabbār's rationalist hermeneutics enriches appreciation of the diversity and intellectual vitality of Islamic exegetical traditions and offers valuable resources for contemporary Islamic thought as it continues to navigate the complex relationship between reason, tradition, and revelation.

References
1. Al-Ansari, A. B. (2024). Mu'tezile'nin İ'câz Algisi Ve İ'câzin Teşekkül Sürecine Etki Eden Mu'tezilî Âlimler. *Kadim*, 15. https://doi.org/10.55805/kadimsbd.1584196
2. Al-Ansari, A. S. (2023). Epistemologi Tafsir Partisan. *El-Wasathy*, 11. https://doi.org/10.61693/elwasathy.vol11.2023.64-77
3. Ali, H. M. (2025). Rationality in the Qur'an: Integrating Reason and Revelation for Contemporary Islamic Education. *Journal of Religious Studies*,

3(1). https://doi.org/10.59373/drs.v3i1.40

4. Amin, A. (2022). Aḥmad Amīn's Rationalist Approach to the Qur'ān and Sunnah. *Religions*, 13(3). https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030234

5. Bulut, A. (2024). Kâdî Abdülcebbâr'ın Kur'ân Kıssalarına Yaklaşımı: Tenzîhü'l-Kur'ân 'Ani'l-Metâ'in Bağlamında Bir

İnceleme. *Mutefekkir*. https://doi.org/10.30523/mutefekkir.1501162

6. Erzi, M. (2022). The Role of Language in Qâdî 'Abd al-Jabbâr's Thought. *Kader*, 20(1). https://doi.org/10.18317/kaderdergi.1065833

7. Guner, F. (2024). Rethinking Muʿtazilah. *Religions*. https://doi.org/10.5771/2748-923x-2024-2-62

8. Gün, F. (2024). A critical look at Qadi Abd al-Jabbar's understanding of actual and affirmative attributes from the perspective of Ahl al-Sunnah. *Ujte*, 15(00605). https://doi.org/10.56108/ujte.1500605

9. Hasbi, M. (2025). The Views of Saadia Gaon and al-Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār on God's Justice. *Esensia*, 24(2). https://doi.org/10.14421/esensia.v24i2.5285

10. Hidayat, M. Z. (2022). The influence of al-usul al-khamsah on the mu'tazila's law thought. *DICIS*, 1(1). https://doi.org/10.47498/dicis.v1i1.1043

11. Husnul, H. M. (2022). Mental evidence and its impact on establishing the arbitrator and the interpretation of the ambiguous in the linguistic discourse of Judge Abd al-Jabbar al-Mu'tazili in his book Mutashabih al-Qur'an. *CBEJ*,

12. 23(97). https://doi.org/10.35950/cbej.v23i97.8114

13. Jalil, A. (2024). The mu'tazilah tafsir method of verses of aqidah. *Journal of Al-Hikmah*, 15(1). https://doi.org/10.15548/ja.v15i1.6034

14. Kadri, M. (2024). Maqashid Syari'ah Prespektif Mutazilah: Tela'ah Penafsiran Al Qadi Abdul Jabbar Dalam Tanzih Al-Quran 'An Al-Mataha'in. *At-Tahfidz*, 2(1). https://doi.org/10.53649/at-tahfidz.v2i01.394

15. Kamila, N. (2024). Judge Abd al-Jabbar al-Mu'tazili and his views on knowledge. *Al-Majalla*, 10. https://doi.org/10.54172/8yj1h433

16. McDermott, M. J. (2016). *Shi'i Doctrine, Mu'tazili Theology*. Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474404402.001.0001

17. Qadi Abd al-Jabbar. (n.d.). *Al-Mughni fi Abwab al-Tawhid wa-l-Adl*. (Primary Source)

18. Qadi Abd al-Jabbar. (n.d.). *Fadl al-I'tizal wa-Tabaqat al-Mu'tazila*. (Primary Source)

19. Qadi Abd al-Jabbar. (n.d.). *Tanzih al-Qur'an 'an al-Mata'in*. Dar al-Nahda. (Primary Source)

20. Rahman, Y. (2016). Encountering Ambiguity: Muʿtazilī and Twelver Shīʿī Approaches to the Qur'an's Ambiguous Verses. *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*,

18(2). https://doi.org/10.3366/JQS.2016.0251

21. Rauf, H. A. (2022). "Imam Fakhr al-Din al-Razi's critique of Judge Abd al-Jabbar al-Mu'tazili regarding the issue of the Prophet's intercession for those who commit major sins, as presented in his commentary "Mafatih al-Ghayb" (Keys to the

Unseen). https://doi.org/10.53762/mrp4hs74

22. Sayyid, A. (2024). Mutazilah: Diantara Kebebasan Berfikir Dan Kehendak Tuhan. *Jurrafi*, 3(1). https://doi.org/10.55606/jurrafi.v3i1.2779

23. Shifa, S. S. (2024). Ijaz Al-Quran dalam Pandangan Muktazilah. *Intellektika*, 2(4). https://doi.org/10.59841/intellektika.v2i4.1355

24. Shifa, S. S., et al. (2021). Theological Observations of Al-Rāzī in his Tafsīr "Mafātīh al-Ghaib" on Qāzī Abdul Jabbār Al-Muʿtazilī: A Critical and Analytical Study. *Al-Qamar*, 4(3). https://doi.org/10.53762/ALQAMAR.04.03.A02

25. Shifa, S. S., et al. (2022). Linguistic corrections in Al-Razi's interpretation of "Mafatih al-Ghayb" by Judge Abd al-Jabbar al-Mu'tazili: A critical analytical study. https://doi.org/10.53762/exajkm56

26. Sirry, M. S. (2020). Tafsir Modern Perspektif Mun'im Sirry dalam What's Modern about Modern Tafsir?. *Nun*, 6(2). https://doi.org/10.32495/NUN.V6I2.158

27. Syafruddin. (2020). Majaz Al-Qur'an dalam Perspektif Sejarah (Studi Perbandingan antara Abi Ubaidah, al-Jahizh dan Qadhi 'Abdul Jabbar). *Hikmah*, 15(2). https://doi.org/10.47466/HIKMAH.V15I2.140

28. Wijaya, S., & Mochamad, Z. F. (2022). The concept of sunni-muktazilah tawil (an analytical study of mutasyâbihât verses in Fakhruddin Al-Râzi's Mafâtih al-Ghaîb and Qâdlî 'Abdul Jabbâr's Tanzîh al-Qur'ân 'an al-mathâ'in. Journal of Islamic Academic Studies, 3(1). https://doi.org/10.59622/jiat.v3i1.60

29. Zulfikar, E. (2023). Metodologi tafsir ayat-ayat hukum. *Tafasir*, 1(2). https://doi.org/10.62376/tafasir.v1i2.17