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An Analysis of *Muqātil ibn Sulaymān's* Familiarity with the People of the Book in His *Tafsīr*

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Abstract

Muqātil's exegesis is among the oldest surviving tafsirs of Islamic scholarship and distinguished for incorporating teachings from Jewish and Christian sources according to some. This article aims to explore the scholarly environment of the 2nd century and to assess the before mentioned accusation of Muqātil's awareness of the scriptures and teachings of the People of the Book. To achieve this, two categories of Quranic verses related to the People of the Book were examined: the first concerning their sources, history, and beliefs, and the second focusing on their religious teachings. A comparative analysis of his interpretations, particularly in contrast to Tabari's accounts of early commentators' views on these verses, was conducted. The findings indicate that while Muqātil had a general awareness of the People of the Book, he lacked precise and direct knowledge of them. His understanding of biblical sources was superficial, and his grasp of their history and beliefs was inaccurate. A comparative study of his interpretations of the stories of Uriah and David (PBUH), Sarah and Abraham (PBUH), and Lot (PBUH) and his daughters reveals that, although his accounts align broadly with the Bible, they do not match its details. The resemblance of Muqātil's interpretations in explaining certain verses raises the possibility that he was merely transmitting earlier views. However, the differences in wording and details, along with his pioneering interpretations in many cases, strengthen the

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likelihood that, even if he did not directly use the Bible, he may have gained indirect knowledge through interactions with its followers.

Keywords: Muqātil bin Sulaymān, second century exegesis, people of the book., Bible.

Statement of the Problem

The second century of the Hijra represents a pivotal period in the evolution of Qur'anic exegesis, characterized by the emergence of numerous *Mufasssirūn* from the ranks of the *Tābi'ūn* and their successors. This era witnessed a significant transition from oral transmission to written documentation, culminating in the compilation of the earliest exegetical collections. Concomitantly, the development and refinement of diverse exegetical methodologies, encompassing narrative, literary, and jurisprudential approaches, alongside an increased focus on the occasions of revelation (*Asbāb al-Nuzūl*) and the utilization of *Isrā'īlīyāt* in Qur'anic interpretation, mark the distinctive features of this period. An in-depth analysis of the exegetical works from this era facilitates the identification of the processes and origins of these enduring methodologies within the Islamic exegetical tradition (For discussions on the exegesis of the *Tābi'ūn* and their successors, cf. al-Dhahabī, 1976 AD/1396 AH: 1, 99-140; Ma'rifat, 2001 AD/1380 SH: 1, 287-432; al-Khuḍayrī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: Throughout).

Among the prominent early exegetes, *Muqātil ibn Sulaymān* (d. 150 AH/767 AD, Baṣra) occupies a unique, albeit contentious, position. His *tafsīr* stands as one of the few exegetical works from this period to have survived in book

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form. Despite the potential for later interpolations, its significance and antiquity remain undisputed². Scholarly assessments of *Muqātil*, as reflected in *Rijāl* sources, diverge significantly. While *Shu'ba ibn al-Hajjāj* (d. 160 AH/776 AD), an early *Rijāl* scholar, offered unqualified praise (al-Khaṭīb, 2001 AD/1422 AH: 15, 207), *Muqātil* is generally considered unreliable in *ḥadīth* transmission, with accusations of fabrication and falsehood levied against him (al-Mizzī, 1979 AD/1400 AH: 28, 435-450). Furthermore, his views on divine attributes have been characterized as heretical and akin to those of the *Mushabbihah* (al-Khaṭīb, 2001 AD/1422 AH: 15, 207).

Despite these criticisms, his *Tafsīr* has attracted scholarly attention since its inception. *Al-Shāfi'ī* (d. 204 AH/819 CE) acknowledged *Muqātil*'s expertise in *Tafsīr*, comparing him favorably to Zuhayr in poetry and *Abū Ḥanīfah* in theology (al-Khaṭīb, 2001 AD/1422 AH: 15, 207). *Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal* (d. 241 AH/855 AD) also recognized *Muqātil*'s knowledge of the Qur'an (al-Khaṭīb, *ibid.*), while *Sufyān ibn 'Uyaynah* (d. 198 AH/813 AD) admitted to benefiting from his *Tafsīr* while refraining from citing it directly (al-Khaṭīb, *ibid.*). Conversely, numerous scholars have voiced critical opinions regarding his *Tafsīr* (for comprehensive references, cf. al-Mizzī, 1979 AD/1400 AH: 28, 435-450; al-Khaṭīb, 2001 AD/1422 AH: 15, 207), primarily stemming from prior critiques of his *ḥadīth* and theological

2 . The research of 'Abd Allāh Shaḥāta on the exegesis of *Muqātil* b. Sulaymān is one of the best and most comprehensive studies on this exegesis and its author, which has been published in the final volume of *Tafsīr Muqātil*. In addition, see *Ma'rifat*, 2001 AD/1380 SH: 2, 148-160.

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pronouncements. Notably, *al-Ṭabarī*, despite citing numerous earlier exegetes, omits any direct reference to *Muqātil* in his own *Tafsīr*.³

A particularly salient critique is offered by *Ibn Ḥibbān* (d. 354 AH/965 AD) in *al-Majrūhūn*, who identified three primary shortcomings in *Muqātil*'s work, the first being his transmission of Jewish and Christian traditions that align with the Qur'an (*Ibn Ḥibbān*, 1976 AD/1396 AH: 3, 14). This claim has been reiterated by subsequent scholars without substantial elaboration (cf. *al-Dhahabī*, 1963 AD/1382 AH: 4, 75). This purported engagement with the People of the Book in his *Tafsīr* suggests that later scholars perceived a distinctive feature in his utilization of Jewish and Christian sources for the elucidation of Qur'anic verses. This necessitates a rigorous examination to ascertain whether *Muqātil*'s incorporation of biblical teachings resulted from direct engagement with sacred texts, analogous to later figures such as *Ibn Qutaybah* (d. 276 AH/889 AD) (see *Ibn Qutaybah*, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 55; *Ibn Qutaybah*, 1990 AD/1411 AH: 178), or whether his familiarity with these traditions was acquired through oral interactions within sectarian environments such as Iraq.

To address this central inquiry, this study adopts a two-pronged approach:

Analysis of *Muqātil*'s Exegesis of Verses Indicating Awareness of Judaism and Christianity:

This section aims to elucidate the extent and nature of *Muqātil*'s familiarity with these religions and their sources through an examination of his exegesis of verses that broadly reflect his knowledge of their sacred texts, history, and core beliefs.

3 . He has cited several instances from *Muqātil b. Ḥayyān*. The few cases where the name *Maqātil* is mentioned without qualification do not seem to refer to *Muqātil b. Sulaymān*.

Shadi Nafisi**Comparative Analysis of *Muqātil*'s Exegesis of verses reference to Biblical Accounts:**

This section seeks to determine *Muqātil*'s knowledge of the text of the Bible scrutinizing the references of the Qur'an to the Bible in its parables and prophecies and the degree of alignment between his accounts of previous prophets and those found in the Bible, thereby shedding light on the potential influence of written sources on his work.

In most instances, *al-Ṭabarī*'s *Tafsīr* will be consulted alongside the relevant verses to provide a comparative perspective on the interpretation of these passages by early exegetes up to the late third century AH. This comparison will facilitate the identification of *Muqātil*'s originality and the extent to which he reproduced or diverged from earlier exegetical material. The absence of direct citations of *Muqātil* by *al-Ṭabarī*, likely due to the aforementioned critiques, must be acknowledged.

1. Research Background

While *Muqātil ibn Sulaymān* has been the subject of numerous studies across various languages, investigations specifically addressing the intertextuality between his *Tafsīr* and the sources of the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitāb*) are primarily confined to certain Orientalist scholarship. Muslim scholars, in their discussions of *Isrā'īliyyāt* within *Tafsīr* or in general introductions to exegetical works, have also acknowledged the presence of *Isrā'īliyyāt* in *Muqātil*'s *Tafsīr*. However, a dedicated, independent monograph focusing on this specific aspect remains absent. Notably, *Shahāta*, the editor of *Muqātil*'s *tafsīr*, identifies twelve instances of potential intertextuality within the work (*Muqātil*, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 6, 220–230), representing a significant, albeit limited, contribution.

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Orientalist scholars have engaged more deeply with the issues surrounding the People of the Book in *Muqātil's Tafsīr*. These discussions can be traced back to Goldziher's reference to *Ibn Hibbān*, wherein he highlights *Muqātil's* reliance on the teachings of *Ahl al-Kitāb*. Goldziher, however, attributes this reliance to *Muqātil's* role as a storyteller (*Qāṣṣ*) (Goldziher, 1955: 76). Nickel, in his 2006 article, "The Christians of *Najrān* in *Muqātil's Tafsīr*: "We will make peace with you"⁴, analyzes *Muqātil's* portrayal of the *Najrān* Christian delegation. In a subsequent article from 2007, "Early Muslim Accusations of *Tahrīf*: "Muqātil ibn Sulaymān's Commentary on Key Qur'anic Verses"⁵, he examines *Muqātil's* perspectives on Qur'anic verses pertaining to the alteration (*Tahrīf*) of sacred texts. Armstrong, in his book *The Qussās of Early Islam*⁶ (2017: 97–110), dedicates a section to Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, the role of storytellers (*Quṣṣāṣ*), and *Isrā'īliyyāt*. Armstrong critically evaluates the prevailing Orientalist assertion that the origins of *Isrā'īliyyāt* in *Muqātil's Tafsīr* lie in the narratives of storytellers rather than in biblical literature, contending that *Muqātil* demonstrably drew from Jewish and Christian sources (Armstrong, 2017: 106).

The closest study in terms of subject matter is Mazuz's 2016 article, "Possible Midrashic Sources in *Muqātil b. Sulaymān's Tafsīr*,"⁷ which seeks to demonstrate *Muqātil's* access to and utilization of Midrashic sources

4 . Nickel, Gordon. (2006). " 'We will Make Peace With You' : The Christians of Najrān in Muqātil's Tafsīr" in *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 3. pp. 171-188

5 . Nickel, Gordon. (2007). "Early Muslim accusations of *Tahrīf*: Muqātil ibn Sulaymān's Commentary on Key Qur'anic Verses" in *The Bible in Arab Christianity* . ed. D. Thomas. Leiden/Boston: Brill. pp. 207-225

6 . Armstrong, Lyall R. (2017). *The Qussās of Early Islam*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.

7 . Mazuz, Haggai. (2016). "Possible Midrashic sources in Muqātil b. Sulaymān's Tafsīr" in *Journal of Semitic Studies* LXI/2 . pp. 497-505

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within the Jewish tradition. Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that none of these existing studies have comprehensively examined *Muqātil*'s exegetical opinions across the full range of verses investigated in the present research.

2. *Muqātil*'s Knowledge of Jews and Christians: Their Scriptures, History, and Beliefs

The Qur'an contains numerous verses that address Jewish and Christian communities, providing brief mentions of their sacred texts, diverse classifications, theological beliefs, and historical narratives. This section aims to evaluate *Muqātil*'s interpretations of these Qur'anic verses to ascertain his level of understanding concerning these subjects.

2.1. The Previous Sacred Writings

The Qur'an references several antecedent sacred texts, including the *Zabūr* of David, the *Alwāḥ* (Tablets), the *Tawrah*, the Book of *Mūsā* (Moses), and the *Injīl* of 'Īsā (Jesus), all of which hold significant canonical status within Jewish and Christian traditions. The following analysis examines *Muqātil*'s perspectives on these scriptures.

The *Zabūr*, attributed to David, is mentioned in three Qur'anic verses⁸. *Muqātil* characterizes it as devoid of legal rulings, stating, "There are no prescribed punishments, laws, obligations, permissible or prohibited matters in it." (*Muqātil*, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 1, 423) Notably, he asserts that the *Zabūr* comprises 150 *sūras*, a numerical correspondence to the Psalms in the Hebrew Bible, suggesting an awareness of the antiquity of certain biblical book divisions. A comparison with *Ṭabarī*'s *tafsīr* reveals that *Muqātil*'s description of the *Zabūr*—as a book lacking legal rulings and containing a

8 . For information on the usage of the word in the Qur'an, see *Muṣṭafawī* (1989 AD/1368 SH: 2, 135).

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specific number of sections—is unique. *Ṭabarī*, in his commentary on the three Qur'anic references to the *Zabūr*, provides no information about its nature or sectional divisions (*Ṭabarī*, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 6, 20; 15, 71; 17, 80–82).

The term "*al-Tawrāh*" appears eighteen times in the Qur'an across sixteen verses. However, *Muqātil* does not offer specific details regarding the *Tawrāh*'s structure or sectional divisions, which would indicate a comprehensive understanding of its composition. He equates the *Ṣuḥuf Mūsā* (Scrolls of Moses) mentioned in certain verses with the *Tawrāh*. Regarding the *Ṣuḥuf Ibrāhīm* (Scrolls of Abraham), he simply states, "They were lifted," offering no further elaboration (*Muqātil*, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 4, 670, 165). This remark likely implies that God withdrew these scriptures from humanity, suggesting their non-existence in the present.

The *Alwāḥ* (Tablets) constitute a significant sacred source within Jewish tradition, believed to be two stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. While some scholars posit that the two tablets were identical copies, others view them as a single unified text. Unlike the *Tawrāh*, which includes extensive narratives, laws, ethics, and wisdom, the *Alwāḥ* contained only ten fundamental commandments (cf. Hirsch & König: 4, 492–496).

Islamic exegetes, including *Muqātil*, generally equate the *Alwāḥ* with the *Tawrāh*. The Qur'an refers to the *Alwāḥ* in three instances (*Sūrat al-A'raf*/145–154), without specifying their number or content. *Muqātil*, however, asserts that there were nine tablets, five of which were lost when Prophet Moses became angry, leaving only four intact (*Muqātil*, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 2, 62, and 65). He claims that the Tablets were identical to

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the *Tawrāh* and describes them as being made of emerald and sapphire, containing six commandments:

1. *Tawḥīd* (I am Allah; there is no god but Me, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate)
2. Prohibition of *shirk* (Do not associate anything with Me)
3. Prohibition of murder (Do not kill)
4. Prohibition of adultery (Do not commit fornication)
5. Prohibition of robbery (Do not cut off the road)
6. Prohibition of insulting parents (Do not curse your parents)

This interpretation is highly distinctive, diverging from both Islamic and Jewish traditions regarding the *Alwāh*.

An examination of Ṭabarī's exegesis reveals that most of the content related to the tablets (*alwāh*) in *Muqātil* has no precedent in the earlier works of predecessors. Ṭabarī does not place significant emphasis on the number of tablets, only mentioning a few numbers incidentally within his exegetical reports. Implicitly, in a narration attributed to *Ibn 'Abbās*, Ṭabarī mentions that after the tablets were broken, only one-sixth of them remained. He reports without specifying the speaker that the Torah was divided into seven sections, and after Prophet Moses threw the tablets and they were broken, six parts of them were lost. He also mentions, without specifying the speaker, that some believe the "tablets" consisted of only two tablets, citing the usage of the plural form in *Deuteronomy*, such as in the phrase "if he has a brother" where the term refers to brothers in the plural (al-Ṭabarī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 9, 46). In this regard, *Muqātil*'s statement about the number of tablets is unique and, at the same time, in opposition to the perspective of Jews and Christians.

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In Ṭabarī's report on the tablets, the differing views of the exegetes regarding the material composition of the tablets are intriguing. He examines these differences and proposes three possibilities: *Yāqūt* (ruby), *Zamurrud* (emerald), and *Burd* (cloth). (al-Ṭabarī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 9, 46). Regarding the content of the tablets, Ṭabarī reports various opinions without categorizing them. According to *Suddī* and *Mujāhid*, the content consisted of commands and prohibitions, and *Wahab* reports that it contained prohibitions on *shirk* (associating partners with God) and swearing falsely by God's name, as well as commands to honor one's parents (al-Ṭabarī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 9, 40). In this respect, *Muqātil*'s explanations of the contents of the tablets are again unique, although they do not necessarily align perfectly with the content of the Ten Commandments. *Muqātil* makes no reference to the four canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) when discussing the *Injīl* in the Qur'an, indicating a lack of familiarity with them. His comments on the Gospels do not extend beyond the Qur'anic text, simply stating that the Qur'an's *Muhaimin* status (confirming previous scriptures) signifies its testimony to their divine origin (Muqātil, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 1, 481). He neither mentions any of the books of the Old Testament, except for the Torah, nor does he refer to Talmud or any other key Jewish book.

2.2. Christian Sects

Muqātil appears to possess a more nuanced understanding of Christian sects. In his discussion of Christians, he identifies three groups: the Jacobites, the Nestorians, and the Melkites. He characterizes the Nestorians as a group that referred to Jesus as the son of God, while the Jacobites regarded him as God Himself, and the Melkites considered him to be one of three divine

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entities⁹ (Muqātil, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 1, 463; 2, 628; 3, 800–801). Based on this understanding, he expresses a preference for the Nestorians over the other two groups, as they do not ascribe divinity to Jesus, and he speaks favorably of them. For instance, in his commentary on verse 22 of Surah *al-Kahf* regarding the number of the Companions of the Cave, he notes that the "few" who were aware of their number were a small group of Nestorians. He even describes them as believers, incorporating a portion of the verse: "*Wa ammā Alladhīna Ghalabū 'alā Amrihim fahum al-Mu'minūn.*" (Muqātil, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 2, 580–581) The mention of these three Christian sects is also found in *al-Ṭabarī's Tafsīr*, both in his own words and in reports from *Qatādah* (d. 118 AH/736 AD) at multiple points (al-Ṭabarī, 2000 AD/1421 AH: 6, 103, 202; 16, 63, 65)¹⁰. Given the limited nature of such reports, it appears that this type of information was not widely disseminated during *Muqātil's* time.

2.3. Destruction of the Temple and the Captivity of the Jews

Exegetes, in their commentary on the opening verses of Surah *al-Isrā'*, reference the two instances of Jewish corruption and their subsequent destruction. One interpretation regarding these two instances of corruption and destruction pertains to Jewish history, specifically Nebuchadnezzar's¹¹ domination over them, their exile from *Bayt al-Maqdis*, and their captivity in Babylon. *Muqātil* interprets the verse "*La Tufsidunna fī al-Arḍ*

9 . For information on the views of the Nestorians and their opponents, see *Hushangī* (1389 SH, throughout), and for a discussion of their position in the early Islamic society, see *ibid*: 151-175, Chapter 3.

10 . One report from *Ibn 'Abbās* has also been recorded (al-Ṭabarī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 28, 60), but the attribution of this report is subject to consideration and doubt for various reasons, which cannot be addressed here.

11 . In Islamic sources, he is referred to as "*Bukhtunnasr*."

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Marratayn " as referring to their destruction, stating that there was a 210-year gap between the two calamities. He considers the first destruction to have occurred when "*Bukhtanaṣṣar*, the Zoroastrian king of Babylon," along with his companions, attacked them, destroyed *Bayt al-Maqdis*, burned the Torah, killed the people, and took their children into captivity in Babylon. They remained in captivity for seventy years until "*Kūrūs ibn Mazdak*" of Persia returned them to *Bayt al-Maqdis*. "*Kūrūs*" may be a corrupted form of Cyrus, but his attribution to Mazdak is unclear. *Muqātil* attributes their second destruction, occurring 210 years later, to "*Anṭibākhūs ibn Sīs*, the king of the land of Nineveh," which again destroyed *Bayt al-Maqdis*, massacred the people, took the children captive, and burned the Torah. Their second captivity ended with "*al-Muqyās*," who facilitated their release and return to *Bayt al-Maqdis*. He considers all these events to have occurred before the advent of Jesus. He then refers to the verse "*Wa-in 'Udtum 'Udnā*," explaining that the Jews once again disbelieved and killed *Yaḥyā ibn Zakariyyā* (John the Baptist). Consequently, God empowered "*Ṭīṭus ibn Istātūs al-Rūmī*," or "*Iṣṭifābūs*" in another version, over them. In vengeance for the blood of John the Baptist, he killed 81,000 Jews and inflicted upon them the same calamities, including the destruction of *Bayt al-Maqdis* (Muqātil, 2002 AD/1423 AH; 2, 521–523). The editor of the book notes alternative renderings of these names in different manuscript versions, such as "*Ashbānūs wa-Istānānūs*" for the first name and "*Afaṭnābūs*" for the second. Other names also have close variants (footnote). A careful examination of these seemingly historical details suggests a lack of precise knowledge in this regard. Not only are the names of the key historical figures flawed, but the chronological gaps and even the nature of the events

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significantly diverge from established historical records. The broad similarities between these narratives and well-known events in Jewish history are in the main line of the events that Nebuchadnezzar was the first to destroy *Bayt al-Maqdis* and take the Jews into captivity. These captives were later freed by a Persian king, and *Bayt al-Maqdis* was again destroyed by Roman and other rulers. This imprecise portrayal of Jewish history suggests that *Muqātil* lacked accurate knowledge of these events (For a summary of Jewish history, cf. Sulaymānī Ardastānī, 2003 AD/1382 SH: 95–235; Pfayr, 1996 AD/1375 SH: 4, 446–453).

2.4. Rabbis (*Rabbāniyyūn*) and Scholars (*Aḥbār*)

In multiple verses of the Qur'an, God references two classes of Jews: "The *Rabbāniyyūn* and the *Aḥbār*. It is evident that these represent two distinct groups within their religious society. In his commentary on verse 44 of *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*, *Muqātil* describes the *Rabbāniyyūn* as devout followers of the Torah from the lineage of Aaron, while he identifies the *Aḥbār* as reciters and scholars." (*Muqātil*, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 1, 479) The juxtaposition of reciters and scholars suggests that his term "reciters" (*Qurrā'*) refers to those who read and are familiar with the Torah, akin to the *Qurrā'* of the Qur'ān. There is no indication in his wording that he was aware of the internal classifications of Jews, such as the Karaites and others¹². Elsewhere, in his commentary on verse 63 of *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*, he defines the *Rabbāniyyūn* as the devout and the *Aḥbār* as "*al-Qurrā' al-fuqahā' aṣḥāb al-qurbān min wuld Hārūn ('alayhi al-salām), wa-kānū ru'ūs al-Yahūd*," which is a completely different interpretation from his earlier

12 . For information on the Karaites in Judaism, see "Karaism" in *Britannica Online*: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Karaite>, last accessed on 10 September 2022.

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one. This discrepancy suggests that while he acknowledges the special status of Aaron's descendants, he lacks a consistent understanding of these terms.¹³ Similarly, in his commentary on verses 35–36 of *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān* regarding the vow of Maryam's mother and her dedication to the temple, he again considers the *Aḥbār* to be from the descendants of Aron (Muqātil, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 1, 272). *Al-Ṭabarī*, in his *Tafsīr*, cites *al-Suddī*, who describes these two groups as two brothers known as "*Ibn Ṣūriyā*." Other interpretations identify them as Jewish scholars and jurists (*al-Ṭabarī*, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 6, 162). Elsewhere, he defines the *Rabbāniyyūn* as prominent believers and religious leaders and the *Aḥbār* as their scholars without attributing this to earlier exegetes (*al-Ṭabarī*, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 6, 192). Comparing *Muqātil*'s view with the accounts in *al-Ṭabarī*'s *Tafsīr*, it is evident that *Muqātil*'s information is generally more accurate, as he recognizes the special status of Aron's descendants within Judaism, albeit in an imprecise manner.

2.5. 'Uzayr (Ezra)

The Qur'ān critiques the Jewish perspective on 'Uzayr (Ezra), asserting in *sūrat al-Tawbah* (9:30) that Jews revere him similarly to how Christians revere Jesus. Given the absence of explicit belief in Ezra's divinity within known Jewish sects, some contemporary exegetes, such as 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī (1970 AD/1390 AH: 9, 244), posit that this belief was specific to a group of Jews contemporary with the advent of Islam, rather than a widespread Jewish tenet.

13 . However, this statement is only correct if we consider the writing of the discussed sections to be from a single author.

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‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī interprets these verses as suggesting either a ceremonial or literal belief in divine sonship, favoring the former as more contextually appropriate (ibid.). *Muqātil* (2002 AD/1423 AH: 2, 167) elucidates *‘Uzayr*'s position among the Jews by recounting that after the Israelites killed God's prophets, God removed the Torah from them and erased it from their memories. *‘Uzayr* then traveled across lands until Gabriel taught him the entire Torah. Upon *‘Uzayr*'s return with the Torah, the Jews attributed his knowledge to his being the son of God.

Biblical accounts place Ezra, or *‘Uzayr*, in the fifth century BCE, attributing to him a role in compiling and editing the Old Testament (Hux, 1397 SH, p. 610). It is important to note that differing views exist regarding the dates of his life. (cf. Britannica Online:

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ezra-Hebrew-religious-leader>,

accessed on 2/6/1401 SH.)

Al-Ṭabarī (1991 AD/1412 AH: 10, 78), in his commentary, relays a report from *Ibn ‘Abbās*, with an exceptional and familial chain of transmission which shares core similarities with *Muqātil*'s account but diverges in details.

2.6. Trinity

Regarding the concept of the Trinity, the Qur'ān addresses it and the worship of Jesus in several verses. Mainstream Christianity defines the Trinity as the Holy Spirit, comprising the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. However, the Qur'ānic verses do not explicitly identify the third component of this Trinity alongside the Father and the Son.

Early Qur'ānic exegetes have generally understood the Qur'ānic Trinity as a "Marian Trinity." *Al-Ṭabarī*, in his commentary on related verses refers only to a single interpretation—the Marian Trinity—arguing that in *sūrat*

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al-Mā'idah (5:116), God's questioning specifically addresses the worship of Jesus and his mother, without explicitly mentioning the worship of angels alongside them. He (1991 AD/1412 AH: 6, 202–203) notes that the belief in "*Allāh as the third of three*" was prevalent among Christians before their division into Jacobites, Melkites, and Nestorians. They believed in a single eternal God encompassing three hypostases: the Father, the Son, and a consort between the two, with *al-Suddī* (d. 127 AH/745 AD) identifying Jesus and his mother as the other two hypostases in this Trinity (al-Ṭabarī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 6, 26). Thus, early exegetes largely interpreted the Trinity as the Marian Trinity, possibly due to limited knowledge of Christianity or the prevalence of the Marian Trinity in Iraq and the *Hijāz*. *Muqātil* (2002 AD/1423 AH: 1, 494–495) like his peers, identifies Mary as the third hypostasis and reiterates his view on Christian sectarian divisions.

Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī (1970 AD/1390 AH: 5, 150), however, interprets the Trinity in the Qur'ān as aligning with the mainstream Christian belief of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Those interpreting the Trinity as mentioned argue that *sūrat al-Nisā'* (4:172) implicitly refers to the traditional Christian Trinity of the Holy Spirit by negating servitude for angels immediately after mentioning the Trinity, suggesting the Qur'ān addresses a Trinitarian belief including the Holy Spirit (Naqavī, 2013 AD/1392 SH: 33). Conversely, *Muqātil* (2002 AD/1423 AH: 1, 425) argues that the reference to angels highlights their superior rank to Jesus while emphasizing their continued worship of God as a lesson.¹⁴

14 . In the various exegeses written before the contemporary period, the Trinity of the Holy Spirit has not been addressed, and no such interpretation has been made from this verse. Typically, exegetes have discussed the theological disputes regarding the superiority of prophets over angels or vice versa, a topic of debate between the Mu'tazila and others. For

Shadi Nafisi**3. Interpretative Use of the Bible**

In the previous section, we examined *Maqātil*'s knowledge of Judaism and Christianity as reflected in his interpretation of certain Qur'anic verses. In this section, by analyzing his narratives concerning:

- 1) Any reference of the Qur'an to the Bible in its parables and prophecies;
- 2) The prophets' stories and instances.

We aim to determine the extent to which he incorporates *Isrā'īliyyāt* and whether these narratives are based on the Bible or oral storytelling traditions. Given the vastness of Qur'anic narratives on the stories of the prophets, we focus on three cases that, while present in the Bible, are well-known and subject to critique: the story of Abraham and Sarah, Lot and his daughters, and the story of David and Urīyā's wife.

3.1. Parables and Prophecies

The Qur'ān references passages from the Torah, Gospel, and Psalms in various verses. In none of these instances does *Muqātil* explicitly cite the referenced passages from these scriptures. For example, in *Sūrat al-Anbiyā'* (21:105), God states:

"And We have certainly written in the *Zabūr* after the *dhikr* (mention) that My righteous servants shall inherit the land."

Muqātil interprets "*Zabūr*" as referring to divine scriptures in general, stating: "It means the Torah, the Gospel, and the Psalms," and understands

example, see *al-Ṭabarsī* (1993 AD/1372 SH: 3, 225); *al-Fakhr al-Rāzī* (1999 AD/1420 AH: 11, 273-274); *al-Ālūsī* (1994 AD/1415 AH: 3, 212-215), and others.

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"the mention" as the Preserved Tablet (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*) (Muqātil, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 3, 96).

Al-Ṭabarī, in his exegesis, reports three different opinions regarding the meaning of "*Zabūr*" and "the mention," the first being that "*Zabūr*" refers to the books of the prophets and "the mention" to a heavenly book. Scholars such as *Sa'īd ibn Jubayr* (d. 95AH/714 AD), *al-A'mash* (d. 148 AH/765 AD), and *Mujāhid* (d. 104 AH/722 AD) support this view, which *al-Ṭabarī* also prefers (*al-Ṭabarī*, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 17, 80-81). However, *Muqātil's* exact wording does not appear in their interpretations, though his view aligns with earlier scholars.

In the concluding verse of *Sūrat al-Faṭḥ* (48:29), the Prophet and his companions are praised, and their characteristics are said to be mentioned in the Torah and the Gospel. One would expect commentators to identify these references in the Bible, but *Muqātil* does not attempt to correlate them with specific passages, merely explaining the verse's wording. Likewise, *al-Ṭabarī* and the scholars he cites do not seek to identify these biblical parallels (*al-Ṭabarī*, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 26, 71-73).

Another relevant topic is Qur'ānic prophecies. In *Sūrat al-A'rāf* (7:157), the Qur'ān speaks of the mention of the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) in the Torah and the Gospel. *Muqātil* does not provide any explanation for this verse (Muqātil, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 2, 67). However, in his commentary on *Sūrat al-Ṣaff* (61:6), where the Prophet is mentioned as "*Aḥmad*," he states that "*Aḥmad*" in Syriac is *fārqlīṭ* (Paraclete) (Muqātil, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 4, 316). This indicates that, by the mid-2nd Islamic century, the identification

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of "Paraclete" with the Prophet Muḥammad was already in circulation.¹⁵ Interestingly, *Muqātil* does not repeat the term "Paraclete" elsewhere in his exegesis. Notably, *al-Ṭabarī* does not mention the term *fārlīṭ* (Paraclete) or any of its variations *fārlīṭā/ bārlīṭ/ bārlīṭā* in his commentary on *Sūrat al-Ṣaff* (61:6) or elsewhere, suggesting that this interpretation might have been a later addition to *Muqātil*'s exegesis.

It is noteworthy that *Muqātil* identifies five words as Syriac. In his commentary on *Sūrat al-A'raf* (7:189) regarding the creation of Adam and Eve, he recounts a biblical-like story in which Eve was created from Adam's rib on a Friday while he was asleep. Upon awakening, Eve spoke to him in Syriac, saying she was a "woman." Adam asked her why she was created, and she replied that it was for his companionship (*Muqātil*, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 2, 79). *Muqātil*'s assumption that their dialogue was in Syriac suggests his familiarity with the Syriac Bible and Eastern Christian culture, leading him to believe that the prophets spoke Syriac.

He also interprets "*Ṭā Hā*" in *Sūrat Ṭā Hā* (20:1) as a Syriac phrase meaning "O man!" (*Muqātil*, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 3, 20). Interestingly, according to *al-Ṭabarī*'s reports, most early commentators agreed with this meaning but debated whether the root was Nabataean or Syriac, with the former view being more widely accepted. *Sa'īd ibn Jubayr* (d. 95 AH/714 AD) and *Qatāda* (d. 118AH/736 AD) were among the few who considered it Syriac. *Al-Ṭabarī* cites examples from Arabic poetry to argue that "*Ṭā Hā*" was a recognized expression among Arabs (*al-Ṭabarī*, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 16, 102-103).

15 . One of the earliest hadith sources in which this name is used is in the debates of *Imām 'Alī al-Riḍā* in *Uyūn Akhbār al-Riḍā: al-Ṣadūq* (1958 AD/1378 AH: 1, 161).

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As previously mentioned, *Muqātil* interprets "Paraclete" in *Sūrat al-Ṣaff* (61:6) as a Syriac term (*Muqātil*, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 4, 316). He also states that "*Nūḥ*" in Syriac means "the one to whom the earth found tranquility" (*Muqātil*, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 4, 449). Additionally, he interprets *Sūrat al-Infīṭār* (82:11) to mean that angels record human deeds in Syriac, judgment is also conducted in Syriac, but once believers enter Paradise, they will speak Arabic, the language of the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) (*Muqātil*, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 4, 614).

Interestingly, *Muqātil* does not apply similar linguistic analysis to non-Arabic languages other than Syriac. Unlike later lexicographers, he does not investigate Persian or other foreign origins of words. Likewise, he makes no mention of Ethiopian or Coptic roots. The only non-Arabic word he attributes to another language is "*Yām*" (sea) in *Sūrat al-A'rāf* (7:136), which he identifies as Hebrew (*Muqātil*, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 2, 59). According to *al-Ṭabarī*'s reports, none of the early commentators attempted to trace the etymology of "*Yām*" (*al-Ṭabarī*'s exegesis on all relevant verses). Later lexicographers debated its linguistic origin (Jeffery, n.d.: 400).

3.2. The Story of Sarah and Abraham

One of the stories in the Holy Scriptures is that of Prophet *Ibrāhīm* and his wife, *Sārah*. It is said that *Sārah* was an exceedingly beautiful woman, and in order to protect her from the lust of those in power when entering Egypt, Prophet Abraham told her to introduce herself as his sister so that the powerful would not kill her husband to seize her (Genesis 12:11-20). This story also found its way into the Islamic exegetical tradition. In *Sūrat al-Shu'arā'*, Prophet Abraham describes God to his father and his people, saying:

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"And the One in whom I hope that He will forgive my sin on the Day of Judgment." (al-Shu'arā'/82).

Commentators, interpreting this verse, have identified three instances considered as the errors of Prophet Abraham, for which, according to this verse, he sought forgiveness from God. These three instances include his statement that he was ill in the event of breaking the idols, his claim that the largest idol had committed the act, and his declaration that *Sārah* was his sister. Of these three instances, the first two are mentioned in the Qur'ān, whereas the third is a report from the Torah.

Muqātil also discusses the errors for which Prophet Ibrāhīm hoped for forgiveness, stating that he told three lies as mentioned before (*Muqātil*, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 2, 524). Apparently, *Muqātil* only alludes to the story of *Sārah* in his interpretation of this verse without elaborating on it. His brief reference to this story suggests that it was familiar to his audience at the time.

Al-Ṭabarī reports this statement solely from *Mujāhid* (d. 104 AH/722 AD), indicating that this interpretation of the verse existed before *Muqātil*, although it was not widely accepted by other exegetes. However, *Mujāhid*'s statement in this regard is similar in content to *Muqātil*'s but differs in phrasing (*al-Ṭabarī*, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 19, 53-54).

3.3. The Story of Prophet *Lūṭ* and His Daughters

Prophet *Lūṭ* is mentioned twenty-seven times in fourteen *sūras* of the Qur'ān, with the main references to the deviation of his people and their punishment appearing in eight *sūras*: "*al-A'rāf*, *Hūd*, *al-Hijr*, *al-Anbiyā'*, *al-Naml*, *al-'Ankabūt*, *al-Ṣāffāt*, and *al-Qamar*. In many cases, *Muqātil* does not add information beyond what the Qur'ānic verses state." Unlike later

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exegetes, he does not recount the *Isrā'iliyyāt* traditions found in the Torah regarding Prophet Lūṭ's drunkenness and his incest with his daughters. Nevertheless, he goes beyond the Qur'ānic text by mentioning the names of his daughters and the geographical regions of his people.

In his commentary on the verses of *Sūrat al-Ḥijr*, *al-Naml*, and *al-Şāffāt*, Muqātil names two daughters of Lūṭ as *Rīthā* and *Za'ūthā*, which appear in some versions as *Rīthā wa Za'ūthā*, *Za'rata*, *Zaghūtha*, *Zītā wa Za'unā*, or *Za'ūtā* (Muqātil, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 2, 433; 3, 313; 3, 618). In his commentary on *Sūrat al-'Ankabūt*, he states that Prophet Lūṭ had two daughters before the destruction of his people and two afterward, without specifying the mother of the latter two (Muqātil, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 3, 382).

Regarding Lūṭ's lineage, Muqātil describes him as *Lūṭ ibn Ḥarāz ibn Āzar* and identifies him as the brother of *Sārah*, the wife of *Ibrāhīm* (Muqātil, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 3, 277). In his commentary on *Sūrat al-Şāffāt*, he also lists four cities, each with a population of 100,000: *Sadūm*, *Dāmūrā*, *Āmūrā*, and *Şābūrā* (Muqātil, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 3, 618). The phonetic similarity of these names raises the possibility that they were fabricated.

The Torah recounts the story of Prophet Lūṭ and his people in Genesis, introducing Lūṭ as the son of *Hārān* and the nephew of Abraham (Hawks, 1397 AH, p. 771). Given the phonetic resemblance between *Ḥarāz* and *Hārān*, it is plausible that Muqātil's lineage for Lūṭ is a distorted version of *Hārān*. However, this explanation does not account for the names attributed to Lūṭ's daughters. The Torah does not mention their names (Genesis 19:30-38; Hawks, 2017 AD/1397 SH: 771-772). However, the Torah does mention places such as Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:20), and the *Dictionary of*

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the Bible adds *Admah*, *Zeboim*, and *Bela* (Hawks, 2017 AD/1397 SH: 771).

While *Āmūrā* could be a distorted form of *Gomorrhah*, names like *Dāmūrā* and *Šāmūrā* do not appear in Islamic geographical sources.¹⁶

Al-Ṭabarī does not use the names *Dāmūrā*, *Āmūrā*, *Šābūrā*, nor does he record *Lūṭ*'s lineage as *Lūṭ ibn Ḥarāz*. However, he does mention two of *Loṭ*'s daughters, *Rīthā* and *Zagharta*, citing *al-Suddī* (d. 127 AH/745 AD), suggesting that these names were prevalent in the oral culture of that period (*al-Ṭabarī*, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 12, 50).

3.4. The Story of David and Uriah

One of the most significant instances of *Isrā'īliyyāt* concerning Prophet David is based on the Biblical narrative, which claims that he desired the wife of one of his commanders, Uriah. According to this account, David sent Uriah to the front lines, where he was killed, and then took his wife as his own. This story is generally reported under verses 23 and 24 of *Šād*.

Muqātil attributes this event to a request made by Prophet David to God, asking for a rank similar to that of Prophet Abraham, who was granted the title "*Khalīl*," and Prophet Moses, who was known as "*Kalīm*." God conditioned the attainment of this rank on a test, akin to the trials faced by these prophets. David accepted this condition.

At that time, while engaged in worship, a beautiful bird caught his attention. As he followed the bird, he saw a strikingly beautiful woman, was astonished by her beauty, and sent his servant to find her residence. He then

16 . The basis for the search is the geographical books and the software "Geography of the Islamic World, Version 2." In the sources, *Āmur* and *Šābur* are used as names of individuals, just as *Dāmūr* is introduced as a name for a geographical point in Khūzestān and Boir-Ahmad. Similarly, *Āmur* is used as an alternative for "*Āmūr*," a name of an ancient people who lived in the region of *Āmūr* between Palestine and the two rivers (Mesopotamia). See: *Ḥamīdī* (2002 AD/1381 SH: 25).

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discovered that she was the wife of *Idrīyā* (*Urīyā*) b. *Ḥanān*, who was at that time fighting in *Balqā'* in Syria against *Nawāb* b. *Ṣūriyā*, the nephew of David. David commanded his nephew to send *Idrīyā* to the front lines so that he would either be victorious or be killed. The commander was killed in battle, and after the completion of her *'idda*, David married his widow. The offspring of this marriage was Prophet Solomon (Muqātil, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 3, 640).

Muqātil also refers to this incident under verse 38 of *al-Aḥzāb*. After mentioning that God gave Zaynab, the wife of Zayd, in marriage to the Prophet Muḥammad, he states that this was a divine precedent set before the Prophet, just as God granted the wife David desired to him. Similarly, He granted the Prophet Muḥammad the woman he desired—Zaynab (Muqātil, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 3, 496).

This indicates that the story of Prophet David and Uriah spread very early in the Islamic community. The narration attributed to Imām 'Alī concerning the punishment of the storyteller who reported the story of Uriah further confirms this reality (Sharīf Murtaḍā, *Tanzīh al-Anbiyā'*: 92).

The story of David and his military commander Uriah is also reported in the *Second Book of Samuel* (2 Samuel 11:1-27). The general outline of the narrative in *Muqātil's tafsīr* aligns with the Biblical account, though there are major differences in details, which appear to be Islamic additions to the story—such as the completion of *'idda*. The following is a comparison of the two versions:

1. The Reason for the Trial:

- *Muqātil* attributes David's trial to his request for a rank similar to the great prophets before him—Abraham and

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Moses—which, in a way, challenged their status. God, in order to determine his worthiness for a higher divine rank, tested him with the temptation of a beautiful woman.

- The Bible does not mention a reason for David's trial.

2. Time and Place of the Encounter:

- In *Muqātil*'s account, Prophet David was engaged in worship in his *Mihrāb* when he was tempted by a bird. As he pursued it through a window into a garden, he saw a woman bathing.
- The Bible states that David saw the woman bathing while he was on the roof of his palace.

3. Relationship with Uriah's Wife:

- According to *Muqātil*'s version, David married Uriah's wife only after his death and the completion of her *'idda*.
- In the Biblical account, the woman became pregnant from David after their first encounter, which led David to orchestrate Uriah's death in battle.

4. Other Characters and Locations:

- *Muqātil*'s story refers to a battle against "*Ahl al-Balqā*" in Syria and introduces "*Nawāb b. Šūriyā*," the nephew of Prophet David.
- The Bible mentions that Uriah's superior was "Joab," and the battle was against the Ammonites.

Ṭabarī also narrates the story of Uriah in his *tafsīr* under the verses of *Sūrat Šād*, citing figures such as *Ibn 'Abbās* (d. 68 AH/687 AD), *Mujāhid* (d. 104 AH/722 AD), *Ibn Ishāq* (d. 151 AH/768 AD), and even a Prophetic narration from *Anas b. Mālik*. Although *Ṭabarī*'s account is broadly similar

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to *Muqātil*'s, there are differences in details, indicating that he obtained the story from an independent source (Ṭabarī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 23, 92-96)

Conclusion

An analysis of *Muqātil*'s *Tafsīr* suggests that he had a general awareness of the teachings of Jews and Christians. However, the discrepancies between his narration and the Biblical account indicate that he did not have direct knowledge of the Bible. While some of his interpretations are merely retransmissions of earlier traditions, certain elements in his account have no clear precedent in earlier sources. Despite lacking precision, his overall narrative aligns with Bible's perspective. Therefore, his role cannot be reduced to that of a mere transmitter of previous storytellers' accounts, as suggested by Rippin (Rippin & Plessner: 7, 509 (a)). A more precise evaluation of his interactions with Jewish and Christian communities requires a deeper examination of his exegesis on verses concerning Jewish and Christian laws and beliefs. Nevertheless, given his unique contributions and the specific information highlighted by Mazuz (Mazuz, 2016: 497-505) regarding his knowledge of Jews, it becomes more plausible that his information about Jews and Christians was not merely derived from storytellers (*Qāṣṣ*) or general public knowledge. Instead, it appears to have stemmed from direct interactions with Jewish or Christian communities in Iraq. His particular attention to the Syriac language and his appreciation of the Nestorians suggest that he may have had closer ties with individuals from this community, which requires further studies.

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