

A Critical Analysis of *Muhammad Rātīb Nabulsī's* Scientific Exegesis of Verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān*

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Abstract

Nabulsī, a contemporary āuranic scholar, is a follower of the scientific interpretation school. Among the verses he has interpreted is verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān*, which he associates with a cosmic phenomenon. In his view, this verse describes the explosion of a star, resulting in the formation of a reddish nebula resembling a rose. The image published by NASA of the "Cat's Eye Nebula," which *Nabulsī* believes resembles a flower, is his only evidence for this claim. The present study, using a descriptive-analytical method and a critical approach, aims to find *Nabulsī's* interpretation inconsistent with the apparent meaning and context of the verse; and also, examines the compatibility of such an interpretation with the verse and evaluates its validity. The results indicated that *Nabulsī's* interpretation is not inconsistent with the context of the verses and is not supported by scientific data in the field of astronomy. Recent, clearer images from NASA of the Cat's Eye Nebula reveal that the previous image was inaccurate, and this nebula is neither red nor rose-like. Furthermore,

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How to Cite: Shabanpour, M., Naghizadeh, M. H. (2025). A Critical Analysis of *Muhammad Rātīb Nabulsī's* Scientific Exegesis of Verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān*, *A Research Journal on Qur'anic Knowledge*, 15(59), 83-110. DOI: 10.22054/rjqk.2025.83243.3053

his interpretation lacks literary and linguistic support, and the etymological research conducted in this study confirms this claim. An analysis of *Nabulsī's* interpretation within the framework of conceptual metaphor theory also reveals that he neglected the source and target domains of this metaphor, leading to errors. Additionally, when examined from the perspective of the Quranic language, *Nabulsī's* interpretation faces significant challenges that cannot be justified.

Keywords: Scientific Exegesis, *Muhammad Rātib Nabulsī*, Surah *al-Raḥmān*, Astronomy.



Introduction

In verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān*, "*Fa Idhā Inshaqqat al-Samā'u Fakānat Wardatan Kaddihān*," (al-Raḥmān/37) God describes the events of the Resurrection. This verse is situated in a context that speaks about the characteristics of the Resurrection. *Muhammad Rātib Nabulsi*, a contemporary Quranic scholar from Syria, in his book "*Ayaāt Allāh fī al-Āfāq*," offers an innovative interpretation of this verse, linking it to a nebula resulting from the explosion of a star, an image of which was published by NASA. *Nabulsi* views the content of the verse as a message not intended for the people of the time of revelation but rather for the people of the 15th century AH. He considers this phenomenon as evidence of the Quran's *I'jāz*, its guidance nature, and its universality (cf. Nabulsi, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 6–20).

The exegesis presented by *Nabulsi* faces several issues, including:

1. Lack of attention to the meanings of the single words (*Mufradāt*) in the verse;
2. Failure to address potential exegeses of the verse and their validation or rejection;
3. Generalizations without providing detailed explanations;
4. Absence of images, references, or other documentation to support his claims;
5. Inconsistency between his exegesis and the context of the verses.

These issues prompted the idea of organizing this study to evaluate *Nabulsi's* exegesis of verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān* and to assess its methodological and foundational validity.

The authors have sought to evaluate *Nabulsi's* exegesis through various approaches, including astronomy, exegesis, etymology, conceptual metaphors, and the language of the Quran. Each of these approaches can be considered a sub-question of this research. Accordingly, the following questions are expected to be answered throughout the study:

1. To what extent is *Nabulsi's* exegesis of verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān* consistent with astronomical data?
2. How closely has *Nabulsi* adhered to the established principles and

rules of Quranic exegesis in his interpretation of verse 37?

3. How well does *Nabulsī's* exegesis of "*Wardatan Kaddihān*" align with the context of the verse?
4. What are the historical and semantic developments of the two key words "*Wardatan*" and "*Dihān*" in verse 37, and what were their meanings at the time of revelation? To what extent does this support or refute *Nabulsī's* exegesis?
5. What are the components of the metaphor in verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān*, and how accurate is *Nabulsī's* exegesis of these components?
6. How do *Nabulsī's* foundational principles regarding the scientific *I'jāz* of the Quran, on which his exegesis of verse 37 is based, align with the Quran, tradition, and reason?

1. Research Background

It appears that works related to the scientific interpretation of verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān*, as well as works related to *Muḥammad Rātib Nabulsī*, are the most important sources for the historiography of this study. However, based on the research conducted by the authors of this paper, no independent work specifically addressing these two areas has been found. Nevertheless, in a broader perspective on the place of this research within the geography of knowledge, its general background can be traced in fields such as the scientific exegesis of the Quran, the scientific *I'jāz* of the Quran, the discourse on science and religion, the language of religion, and similar domains.

In this regard, the pioneering works in this field, which have addressed the nature of science and religion and analyzed the basis for dialogue between these two phenomena, should first be mentioned. Perhaps Barbour can be considered the most significant figure in this area, having authored three books: "Science and Religion," "Religion and Science," and "When Science Meets Religion." These works have played a key role in formalizing and organizing this discourse (Barbour, 2018 AD/1397 SH (a)); Barbour, 2018 AD/1397 SH (b); *ibid*: 2022 AD/1401 SH).

Although traces of scientific exegesis can be seen in the early

history of Quranic exegesis (for example, cf. Ghazālī, 1989 AD/1409 AH: 32; Fakhr Rāzī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 2, 337; Rafiei, 2021 AD/1400 SH: 111–141), in the modern era, with the advancement and expansion of empirical sciences and scientific discoveries, some Muslim scholars have extensively attempted to justify and interpret the propositions found in Islamic sacred texts, including Quranic verses, using modern human discoveries (for more information, cf. Rafiei, 2021 AD/1400 SH: 146).

Following the expansion of this approach, Quranic scholars have examined the relationship between the Quran and empirical science, leading to the emergence of various opinions. Some have equated the content of certain Quranic verses with the findings of empirical sciences (for example, cf. Ṭaṭṭāwī, n.d.; Ṭaṭṭāwī, 1951 AD/1371 AH; Ṭālighānī, 1963 AD/1383 GH; Hindī, 1955 AD/1334 SH; Rezaei Esfahani, 2009 AD/1388 SH; Motavvari et al., 2023 AD/1402 SH; Rouhani, 2012 AD/1391 SH; Alavi Mehr, 2013 AD/1392 SH; Rezaei Adriyani, 2015 AD/1394 SH; Ebrahimi et al., 2012 AD/1391 SH; Rouhani Mashhadi et al., 2019 AD/1398 SH), while others have rejected the relationship between modern science and Quranic verses, either in general or in specific instances (for example, cf. Khulī, 1961; Shāṭibī, n.d.; Shaltūt, 1988 AD/1408 AH; ‘Aqqād, 1947 AD/1366 AH; Zurqānī, 1996; Quṭb, 1992 AD/1412 AH; Dhahabī, n.d.; Bint al-Shāṭī, 1997 AD/1376 SH; Kharaqani, 2021 AD/1400 SH; Akhawan Sarraf, 2021 AD/1400 SH; Najafi, 2012 AD/1391 SH; Hosseini et al., 2023 AD/1403 SH).

Therefore, some scholars have approached the scientific interpretation of the Quran from a phenomenological perspective, examining the contexts, origins, foundations, and arguments for and against this trend (Rafiei, 2021 AD/1400 SH; Nafisi, 2018 AD/1397 SH; Parsa, 1995 AD/1374 SH). The present study is written in continuation of these debates and should be read within this context. It is also worth noting that the acceptance or rejection of the foundation of the scientific exegesis of the Quran is not the focus of this paper; rather, only *Muhammad Rātib Nabulsi's* scientific exegesis of verse 37 of Surah *al-Rahmān* is being evaluated.

2. *Nabulsī's Exegesis of Verse 37 of Surah al-Raḥmān*

Nabulsī interprets verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān* as a reference to the explosion of a star. He believes that the verse, revealed 1400 years ago, foretold a phenomenon that was to be discovered by scientists in modern times, and this is one of the miracles of the Quran. *Nabulsī* explains his claim by stating that on October 31, 1990, a space station released an image of space through a telescope that, at first glance, resembled a red rose with crimson petals. However, this image actually depicted the explosion of a massive star called the "Cat's Eye Nebula ('*Ayn al-Qaṭṭ*)," located 13,000 light-years from Earth.

According to *Nabulsī*, all exegeses of this verse written before the release of this image were insufficient to convince readers, and this phenomenon is the appropriate interpretation and the true example of the verse. He argues that the mention of this phenomenon in the Quran demonstrates its truthfulness, divinity, and *I'jāz* nature (cf. *Nabulsī*, 2006 AD/1385 SH, pp. 65–67).

3. Documents of *Nabulsī's* Theory

Although *Nabulsī* has not published detailed documentation or provided sufficient explanations for his exegesis of verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān* in his book, this section aims to explore the details of his theory regarding the interpretation of the verse as much as possible.

3.1. Nebulae and Supernovae

In astronomical terms, a nebula refers to clouds of gas or dense materials that are visible in telescope images of space (Ridpath, 1997: 321; Mitton, 2001: 160). Nebulae have various origins, one of which is the explosion of stars in the past, the remnants of which appear as gas-like clouds in various shapes and colors. It is said that stars are constantly engaged in a struggle between an inward gravitational force and an outward force (from space), akin to a tug-of-war. The dominance of either force can lead to the collapse and explosion of a star. However, since these inward and outward forces are usually in equilibrium, such an event does not occur unless a star ages and its internal structure weakens, allowing the outward force to prevail and

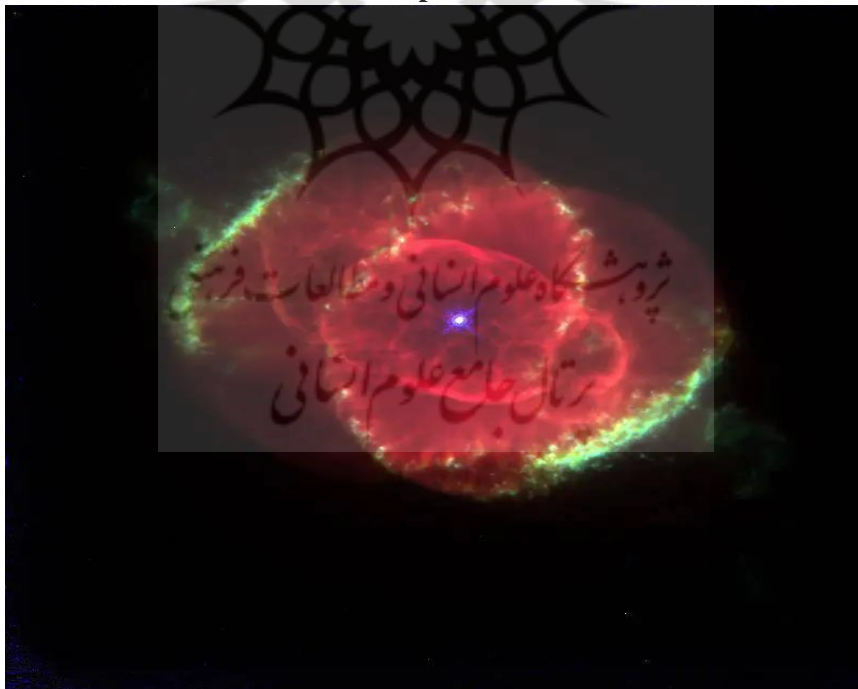
causing the star to explode. When a star explodes, its materials are scattered over vast distances and, from afar, appear as dispersed gases, which are referred to as nebulae (Wallenquist, 1962: 160; Ridpath, 1997: 321; Mitton, 2001: 160).

Some stars, due to their enormous size, produce extremely massive explosions known as supernovae. The nebulae resulting from supernovae are also very large (Wallenquist, 1962: 236; Ridpath, 1997: 462; Mitton, 2001: 392–394).

3.2. Cat's Eye Nebula

The phenomenon that *Nabulsi* uses to interpret verse 37 of Surah al-Rahmān is the "Cat's Eye Nebula" (*'Ayn al-Qitt*), which was formed as a result of a supernova. The first image of this nebula was captured in 1990 by the Hubble Telescope and later published by NASA (<https://www.nasa.gov/image-article/cats-eye-nebula/>).

The first image of the Cat's Eye Nebula captured by the Hubble Telescope in 1990



3.3. Evaluation and Critique of *Nabulsī's* View

This section aims to examine and critique the interpretation provided by *Nabulsī* regarding verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān*. In this regard, *Nabulsī's* viewpoint is evaluated from several dimensions, each of which forms a subsection of this part:

3.3.1. Astronomical Evaluation and Critique

In his interpretation of verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān*, *Nabulsī* argues that the verse refers to the occurrence of a supernova, the resulting nebula of which appears as a red rose and has become visible to humanity in modern times. The image cited by *Nabulsī* is one captured by the Hubble Telescope in 1990 of the Cat's Eye Nebula. However, the latest image of this nebula, also captured by the Hubble Telescope and published by NASA, dates back to the year 2000 (<https://www.chandra.harvard.edu/photo/2008/catseye/>).

This image has significantly higher clarity and realism compared to the previous one (<https://www.nasa.gov/image-article/cats-eye-nebula-2/>).

The second image of the Cat's Eye Nebula captured by the Hubble Telescope in 2000



As evident from the image above, the Cat's Eye Nebula is not red. According to Nabulsi's principles, the Quranic descriptions of cosmic phenomena must be such that they guarantee the scientific *I'jāz* of the Quran until the Resurrection. However, just nine years after the first image of the Cat's Eye Nebula was captured, more accurate images reveal that the nebula is not red and does not significantly resemble a rose. Therefore, Nabulsi's interpretive view regarding verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān* is problematic.

3.3.2. Contextual Examination and Critique

Verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān* is situated in a context that discusses the characteristics of the Resurrection, and the verse itself aims to depict the state of the sky at the moment of the Resurrection. If we examine the verses before and after this verse, we find that it is part of a sequence beginning from verse 31:

"*Yas'aluhū man fī al-Samāwāti wa al-Arḍi Kulla Yawmin Huwa fī Sha'n¹... Sanafrughu Lakum Ayyuha al-Thaqalān...Yā Ma'shara al-Jinni wa al-Insi in Istaṭa'tum an Tanfudhū min Aqṭār al-Samāwāti wa al-Arḍi Fanfudhū lā Tanfudhūna illā bi Sulṭān...Yursalu 'Alaykumā Shuwāz min Nārin wa Nuḥāsun falā Tantaṣirān.*" (al-Raḥmān: 29–36)

This sequence continues with the verse under discussion (verse 37) and extends to the end of the surah. For brevity, a few verses following verse 37—excluding the repeated refrain of the surah—are mentioned:

"*Fayawma'idhin lā Yus'alu 'an Dhanbihī Insun wa lā Jānn... Yu'rafu al-Mujrimūna bi Sīmāhum fa Yu'khadhu bil Nawāṣī wal Aqdām...Hādhīhī Jahannamu Allatī Yukadhibu bihā al-Mujrimūn. Yaṭūfūna Baynaha wa Bayna Ḥamīmim Ān.*" (al-Raḥmān: 39–44)

According to the majority of commentators, the verses before 37, and unanimously, the verses after 37, are situated in a context that speaks about the afterlife (for example, cf. Muqātil, 2002

1. The verse "*Fa bi Ayyi Ālā'i Rabbikumā Tukazzibān*" (Then which of the favors of your Lord will you deny?) is represented as "..." in the text and Persian translation due to brevity and its lack of significant impact on the context of the verses.

AD/1423 AH: 4, 201; Ṭabarī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 21, 83; Ṭabrisī, 1993 AD/1372 SH: 9, 311; Zamakhsharī, 1987 AD/1407 AH: 4, 450; Fakhr Rāzī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 29, 366; Quṭb, 2004 AD/1425 AH: 6, 3457; Ṭabātabā'ī, 1971 AD/1390 AH: 19, 107).

The discussion of the Resurrection becomes clearer in the verses following 37, as they describe the reckoning of deeds, the identification and punishment of sinners, the revelation of Hell, and so on—all of which are characteristics of the Resurrection. Moreover, the phrase "*Fayawma'idhin*" in verse 39 clarifies the temporal context of "*Idhā*" in verse 37, interpreting it as referring to the Day of Judgment. Therefore, there is no doubt that verse 37 discusses the state of the sky on the Resurrection, not prior to it. However, *Nabulsī* removes the verse from its context and applies it to a phenomenon that occurs in this world before the Resurrection, which is inconsistent with the Quranic discourse and is therefore unacceptable.

3.3.3. Grammatical Examination and Critique

According to *Nabulsī*'s interpretation of verse 37 of Surah *al-Rahmān*, "*Wardatan Kaddihān*" means "A red rose," and what resembles a red rose, in his view, is a star, a nebula, or a part of the sky. However, the text of the verse indicates that what is split apart and becomes "*Wardatan Kaddihān*" is the sky itself in its entirety, not celestial bodies. This is because the verb "*Kānat*" is connected to

"*al-Samā*", and its predicate is "*Wardatan Kaddihān*," which, considering the conjunction "*Fā*" before it occurs simultaneously with or immediately after the splitting. The opinions of classical and contemporary Quranic grammarians also support this view (cf. Da'ās, 2004 AD/1425 AH: 3, 293; 'Alwān, 2006 AD/1427 AH: 4, 2363; Karbāsī, 2001 AD/1422 AH: 7, 696). Therefore, the entity that experiences the phenomenon of splitting and becoming "*Wardatan Kaddihān*" is the sky itself, not celestial bodies, which poses another challenge to *Nabulsī*'s interpretation.

3.3.4. Examination and Critique in Light of Conceptual Metaphors

Research related to conceptual metaphors is based on a theory first introduced under this title in the works of Lakoff and Johnson within the field of cognitive linguistics (Lakoff, 1992; Lakoff, 1980). This theory was later developed and refined in the works of other linguists and cognitive scientists (cf. Barcelona, 2011 AD/1390 SH; Panther, 2015 AD/1394 SH; Kövecses, 2014 AD/1393 SH; A group of authors, 2014 AD/1393 SH; Day, 1992; Barcelona, 2000; Deignan, 2005; Allen, 2008; Kövecses, 2010; Trim, 2011). The findings in the field of conceptual metaphors have influenced literary and linguistic studies worldwide. In recent decades, Muslim scholars have studied religious texts within the framework of this theory, resulting in numerous works in this area (for example, cf. Pakatchi and Afrashi, 2020 AD/1399 SH; Qaeminiya, 2011 AD/1390 SH; *ibid*: 2017 AD/1396 SH¹; Alimohammadi et al., 2023 AD/1402 SH; Qaemi et al., 2016 AD/1395 SH; Hosseini Zharfa, 2021 AD/1400 SH; Mehrabi et al., 2020 AD/1399 SH; Fattahizadeh et al., 2020 AD/1399 SH; Hejazi, 2021 AD/1400 SH; Habibi et al., 2020 AD/1399 SH; Feizi et al., 2020 AD/1399 SH; Qaemi et al., 2022 AD/1401 SH; Shirzad et al., 2021 AD/1400 SH; Seyyedi et al., 2021 AD/1400 SH).

In this view, metaphor is not seen as a mere literary device limited to the realm of literature but rather as a way the human mind functions. In this definition, all terms such as metaphor, simile, metonymy, allusion, and others found in traditional literature and rhetoric can be explained and justified through conceptual metaphor.

Every conceptual metaphor consists of two components: the *source domain*—a more tangible and understandable concept—and the *target domain*—a more abstract and complex concept. The mind automatically uses elements from more concrete and tangible concepts to understand and explain more abstract concepts (Lakoff,

1. Numerous Papers are Written with this approach.

1992: 4). The establishment of a similarity relationship between the components of two concepts is referred to as *mapping* (cf. Afrashi, 2018 AD/1397 SH: 11).

In the case of verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān*, a metaphor is used whose source and target domains are not clear, leading to numerous disagreements in the field of exegesis. Addressing this issue can be highly significant and enlightening in evaluating *Nabulsi's* exegesis of this verse.

According to this study, Quranic commentators can be divided into two groups based on their approach to the metaphor in the verse under discussion:

3.3.4.1. Single-Metaphor Exegesis

In single-metaphor interpretations, verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān* contains only one conceptual metaphor—or, in traditional terms, a simile. This means that the sky on the Resurrection is seen as the target domain, an abstract and difficult-to-understand concept, which is described using a more tangible and concrete concept, namely "*Wardatan Kaddihān*."

Among commentators who have interpreted this verse with a single-metaphor approach, there is disagreement about what the source and target domains of the metaphor are. The authors of this study have categorized single-metaphor interpretations based on differences in the source and target domains as follows:

1) First View: Emphasis on the Changing Color of the Sky

Some interpretive opinions emphasize the changing color of the sky on the Resurrection. However, there are various views on how this change occurs and what it is compared to. For example, some commentators liken the redness of the sky to oil (cf. Ibn Qutaybah, 1990 AD/1411 AH: 379; Ibn Abī Zamanayn, 2003 AD/1424 AH: 378), others compare it to rosewater (cf. Muqātil, 1923 AD/1342 AH: 4, 200), and some describe the color change as resembling horsehide (cf. Samarqandī, 1995 AD/1416 AH: 3, 385).

2) Second View: Sudden Flow Like Oil

This view interprets "*Wardatan*" as meaning "Flowing" and suggests that the sky begins to flow on the Resurrection, with its movement compared to "*Dihān*," meaning oil. A detailed version of this view can be found in *Fakhr Rāzī's* commentary on the phrase "*Wardatan kaddihān*":

"... The third possibility regarding "*Dihān*" is that it refers to molten oil that pours out suddenly and melts; ... as if the sky suddenly and unexpectedly pours out like molten oil." (Fakhr Rāzī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 29, 366)

3.3.4.2. Dual-Metaphor Interpretations

The vast majority of commentators adopt a dual-metaphor approach in interpreting verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān*. This means that the sky is seen as the target domain, and each of the two words "*Wardatan*" and "*Dihān*" is considered an independent source domain used to explain the sky on the Day of Judgment. For example, *Ṭūsī* in his commentary *al-Tibyān* states:

"The sky becomes like a rose in redness, and then flows like oil (*Dihān*), which is the plural of oil (*Duhn*)." (Ṭūsī, n.d.: 9, 476)

Lexical sources, as the most influential resource for commentators in the interpretation process, provide various meanings for each of these two words. For instance, the word "*Wardatan*" is derived from the root "*Ward*" and carries meanings such as "Rose," (cf. Farāhīdī, 1988 AD/1409 AH: 8, 65; Azharī, 2000 AD/1421 AH: 14, 116; Fayyūmī, 1993 AD/1414 AH: 2, 655; Madani Shirazi, 2005 AD/1384 SH: 6, 115) "A color name," (cf. Farāhīdī, 1988 AD/1409 AH: 8, 65) "Watering place," (cf. Farāhīdī, 1988 AD/1409 AH: 8, 66; Ibn 'Abbād, 1993 AD/1414 AH: 9, 349) "Fever," (cf. Farāhīdī, 1988 AD/1409 AH: 8, 66; Rāghib Iṣfahānī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 865; Zamakhsharī, 1979: 671) "Opposite of chest," (cf. Farāhīdī, 1988 AD/1409 AH: 7, 94; Ibn Manzūr, 1993 AD/1414 AH: 4, 446) "Vein," (cf. Farāhīdī, 1988 AD/1409 AH: 8, 67) and so on. Similarly, "*Dihān*" is derived from the root "*D-H-N*" and carries meanings such as "Softness, ease, and

smoothness," (cf. Farāhīdī, 1988 AD/1409 AH: 4, 27) "Oil and molten substance," (cf. Ibn Fāris, 1983 AD/1404 AH: 2, 308) "Red and dark leather," (cf. Ibn Manẓūr, 1993 AD/1414 AH: 13, 162), and so on.

These differences are reflected even more prominently in interpretations. For example, the various meanings of "*Wardatan*" and "*Dihān*" give rise to a large number of dual-metaphor interpretive possibilities, many of which are mentioned in exegetical works (for example, cf. Farrā', 1980: 3, 117; Makarem Shirazi, 1992 AD/1371 SH: 23, 154; Ṭabarī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 27, 82; Abū 'Ubaydah, 1961 AD/1381 AH: 2, 245; Ibn 'Āshūr, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 27, 244; Yazīdī, 1984 AD/1405 AH: 361; Samarqandī, 1995 AD/1416 AH: 3, 385; Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1971 AD/1390 AH: 19, 107; Abū 'Ubaydah, 1961 AD/1381 AH: 2, 245; Ālūsī, 1994 AD/1415 AH: 14, 113; Ibn Kathīr, 1998 AD/1419 AH: 7, 460; Māturīdī, 2005 AD/1426 AH: 9, 476). However, examining all of these is beyond the scope of this study.

The authors of this study argue that verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān* does not support the existence of two metaphors. If the phrase "*Fakānat Wardatan kaddihān*" contained two metaphors, either the letter "*Ka*" (like) should not exist at all, and the phrase would be "*Fakānat Wardatan wa Dihānan*," or the letter "*Ka*" should apply to both words explicitly or conjunctively, such as "*Fakānat ka Wardatin wa Dihānin*." However, the phrase "*Fakānat Wardatan kaddihān*" does not follow this structure. In this phrase, "*Wardatan*" is the predicate of "*Kāna*" and relates to "*Samā*" (sky), meaning:

"The sky will become Wardatan."

Regardless of the meaning of "*Wardatan*," the phrase "*Kaddihān*" describes the quality of the sky becoming "*Wardatan*," resulting in:

"The sky will become **Wardatan**, and its becoming *Wardatan* is like the becoming *Wardatan* of *Dihān*." In other words, the sky is compared to "*Dihān*" in its transformation into *Wardatan*.

Based on this, the source domain in the verse, to which the sky is compared, is the word "*Dihān*" which comes after the word "*Ka*" (like), not the word "*Wardatan*." Therefore, *Nabulsi's* claim that the source domain of this metaphor is "*Wardatan*," meaning a rose, is invalid.

It seems that the confusion among many Quranic commentators in identifying the source and target domains of the metaphor in this verse stems from the ambiguity of the key words in the verse, especially the word "*Wardatan*."

3.3.5. Etymological Examination and Critique

The meaning of verse 37 of Surah *al-Rahmān* has always been shrouded in ambiguity and disagreement, and this lack of clarity dates back to the earliest history of Quranic exegesis. The author of this study believes that this ambiguity and disagreement stem from the semantic opacity of the word "*Wardatan*" as one of the key words in this verse, and any clarification of the meaning of this word will lead to a clarification of the meaning of the entire verse.

In Afro-Asiatic languages, there is a word in the form of "*Rawad*," meaning "To descend," "To flow," or "To pour down" (descend). In ancient Semitic languages, this word underwent an etymological shift and took the form "*W-R-D*" continuing its existence with an expanded meaning: the original meaning was preserved, and the meaning "To come" was added. This word also exists in some sub-branches of this language family, with minor changes in form but retaining the same meaning. Words in ancient Arabic are usually closest to their forms in ancient Semitic languages. This is also the case with the word in question; the only change in the Semitic form when transferred to Arabic is that it became a trilateral root in Arabic, taking the form "*W-R-D*" with the meanings "To descend," "To pour down," and "To flow." (Orel, 1995: 446)

This root is a forgotten root in Arabic, but there is ample evidence that its forgetting dates back to the post-revelation period, and traces of its presence in Arabic during the time of

revelation exist. For example, *Abū 'Ubaydah Ma'mar ibn Muthannā*, in his commentary, cites a poem praising Imam Ali (AS) as follows:

"Amir al-Mu'minin is on a straight path, even if the paths are crooked." (Abū 'Ubaydah, 1961 AD/1381 SH: 1, 25)

He attributes this poem to *Jarīr ibn 'Aḏīyyah*, a poet from the first century AH, who lived close to the time of the Quranic text (ibid.). Since the word "*Mawārid*" here means "Paths," it can be inferred that the meaning of "*Warada*" as "Flowing" or "Moving" was present during the time of revelation.

Another piece of evidence for the presence of this meaning during and after the time of revelation is the word "*Warīd*," which refers to the jugular vein. This meaning is also derived from the concept of flowing, as the jugular vein is a tangible conduit for the flow of blood, and it is also used in the Quran:

"... *Wa Naḥnu Aqrabu Ilayhi min Ḥabl al-warīd.*" (Qāf/16)

However, what led to the forgetting of this original Semitic root and the assumption of the root "*Ward*" as meaning "Rose" in Arabic is the existence of a word in ancient Avestan as "*Wardh*," which in Old and Middle Persian took the form "*Ward*" and meant "Flower." Today, traces of this word can be seen in Iranian place names such as "*WardāWard*" and "*Suhriward*." Based on the rules of Iranian linguistic transformation, this word first became "*Val*"¹ and then "*Gol*," which is common in Persian today (cf. Farahvashi, 1968 AD/1347 SH, throughout; Ibn Khalaf Tabrizi, 2001 AD/1380 SH: 794). This word in Middle Persian, which was "*Ward*," was transferred to many languages worldwide, including European and Asian languages, with Arabic being one of them. The Persian word "*Ward*" and the Semitic root "*Ward*" both became established in Arabic, and later generations of Arabic

1. For example, a verse from Baba Tahir demonstrates the existence of this word in a period of the Persian language:

"You have disheveled, chain-like tresses / You have jasmine and hyacinth intertwined." (Hamedani, n.d., Couplet 332)

speakers forgot this convergence and assumed both to have the same meaning, leading to numerous semantic deviations in the understanding of this word to this day.

By considering the word "*Wardatan*" as meaning "Flowing" or "Liquid," the meaning of the verse becomes:

"The Day when the sky will be split apart, and become like molten oil, flowing."

In this case, the source and target domains of the metaphor also align perfectly with the apparent meaning of the verse.

The concept of the sky flowing on the Resurrection is also mentioned in other verses, such as:

"*Yawma Tamūru al-Samā'u Mawrā.*" (al-Ṭūr/9)

Lexicographers have various opinions on the meaning of the root "*M-W-R*," with meanings such as "Movement," "Flow," "Wave," "Rotation," "Fluctuation," and similar concepts mentioned by lexicographers (cf. Farāhīdī, 1988 AD/1409 AH: 8, 292; Ibn 'Abbād, 1993 AD/1414 AH: 10, 286). All these meanings are related to the semantic field of movement and flow, as Rāghib, *Ibn Fāris*, and *Muṣṭafawī* have considered this meaning as the primary one for this root (cf. Ibn Fāris, 1983 AD/1404 AH: 5, 284; Rāghib Iṣfahānī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 783; *Muṣṭafawī*, 1989 AD/1368 SH: 11, 204).

However, *Nabulsi* has overlooked the various possibilities in the meaning of this verse, and his claim is based solely on one of the possible meanings, the invalidity of which has already been discussed. Therefore, *Nabulsi's* claim is one with weak and shaky foundations.

4. Examination and Critique of *Nabulsi's* View in the Context of Quranic Language

Nabulsi, in the early parts of his book "*Āyāt Allāh fil Āfāq*," argues that proving the truth of the prophethood of prophets requires a supernatural act of divine origin (miracle) (cf. *Nabulsi*, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 6). According to him, the miracles of the prophets before the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) were sensory in nature and

limited to the people of their time. However, the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH), who carried the final and most complete divine religion, must have had a miracle whose *I'Jāz* nature would endure until the Resurrection (cf. Nabulsi, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 8). He states:

"Our Prophet, who was sent to all people until the end of time, must have a miracle that endures until the end of the world; thus, verses referring to scientific truths based on definitive knowledge are miracles." (Nabulsi, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 8)

Such a perspective on the Quran and its language forms the basis of *Nabulsi's* interpretations of various Quranic verses, including verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān*, as recorded in his encyclopedia "*Mawsū'at al-I'jāz fil Quran wa al-Sunnah*". However, the validity of such interpretations depends first and foremost on the validity of *Nabulsi's* foundational principles regarding the language of revelation. In other words, if sufficient reasoning cannot be provided for such a foundation and perspective, the interpretations based on it will also be invalid.

Some of the challenges facing this perspective on the Quran are highlighted in this section: One issue is whether it is possible for God to reveal verses in the Quran that the people of that era, as the immediate audience, would not understand, but which would become understandable to future generations. However, the Quran explicitly states that its language aligns with its contemporary audience,¹ describing the Quran as clear Arabic² free from any ambiguity³.

Moreover, the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) never provided such unusual interpretations of the verses, nor did he even hint that some cosmological verses of the Quran were incomprehensible to his contemporaries and would only be understood in future eras.

1. "And We did not send any messenger except [speaking] in the language of his people to state [the message] clearly for them..." (Ibrahim/4)

2. "...In a clear Arabic language." (al-Shu'arā'/195; al-Nahl/103)

3. "[It is] an Arabic Qur'an, without any crookedness, that they may become righteous." (al-Zumar/28)

This is despite the fact that God has described the Prophet (PBUH) as the explainer of the Quran for the people.¹ How is it possible that the Quran contains such meanings, yet the Prophet (PBUH), who was tasked with conveying and explaining the Quran, never mentioned them during his lifetime? Accepting the existence of such purposes in the revelation while acknowledging that the Prophet (PBUH) did not address them would imply a deficiency in his conveyance of the message.

Another issue is that, assuming *Nabulsi's* claim is valid how would future generations know that a newly discovered phenomenon in their era is precisely what the Quran refers to? What definitive proof can be provided for such a correlation? Given the falsifiability of empirical scientific findings, how can the absolute correspondence of new discoveries with reality be guaranteed? The falsification of empirical findings after their correlation with Quranic verses would undermine the sanctity of the Quran.

Another issue is that what is expected of an *I'jāz* is astonishment and persuasion of the audience. Miracles are defined as supernatural acts accompanied by a challenge (cf. Khomeini, 2007 AD/1386 SH: 53). However, contemporary empirical findings, since they are often not directly perceived by the senses, are viewed with skepticism and thus cannot be considered within the scope of miracles. The claims of proponents of scientific miracles have not gained significant attention or impact in the modern era.

Another point refuting *Nabulsi's* claim about scientific *I'Jāz* is that the Quran, from the time of its revelation, issued a challenge and the result of this challenge was the inability of disbelievers and polytheists to meet it:

"Wa in Kuntum fī Raybin mimma Nazzalnā 'alā 'Abdinā Fa'tū bi Sūratin min Mithlihī ... Fa in lam Taf'alū wa lan Taf'alū Fattaqū

1 . And We have sent down to you the Reminder that you may make clear to the people what was sent down to them, and that they might give thought. (al-Nahl/44)

al-Nār ..." (al-Baqarah/23–24)

And in another verse:

"*Qul la 'in Ijtama'at al-Insu wa al-Jinnu 'alā an Ya'tū bi Mithli Hādhal Quran lā Ya'tūna bi Mithlihī wa law Kāna Ba'dhum li Ba'din Zahirā.*" (al-Isrā'/88)

Given the universality of the latter verse in negating the ability of humans and jinn to produce anything like the Quran, the Quran's *I'jāz* nature is valid both at the time of revelation and in all subsequent eras. Therefore, *Nabulsī's* claim that the realization of the Quran's *I'jāz* nature in future eras depends on empirical discoveries after the revelation is invalid.

Such issues are challenges facing proponents of the theory of scientific *I'jāz* —in the sense intended—and no adequate responses have been provided by its followers to any of them.

Conclusion

Nabulsī's evidence for his exegetical view regarding verse 37 of Surah *al-Rahmān* is an image of the Cat's Eye Nebula captured by the Hubble Telescope in 1991. Since the nebula in this image appears reddish and, in *Nabulsī's* view, resembles a rose, he equates this phenomenon with the verse by assuming that the phrase "*Wardatan kaddihān*" refers to a red rose. However, a clearer image captured by Hubble nine years later shows that this nebula is neither red nor rose-like.

According to the consensus of commentators, verse 37 of Surah *al-Rahmān* is situated in a context discussing the Resurrection. However, *Nabulsī's* interpretation of this verse completely removes it from its context and places its fulfillment before the Resurrection.

The apparent meaning of verse 37 of Surah *al-Rahmān* indicates that the entity experiencing the phenomena of splitting and becoming "*Wardatan kaddihān*" is the sky itself, not celestial bodies. Yet, *Nabulsī* applies this phenomenon to a star.

In the verse under discussion, there is no doubt that the word "*Samā'*" (sky) is the target domain and the word "*Dihān*" is

the source domain of the conceptual metaphor, while "*Wardatan*" only indicates the point of similarity. The grammatical and rhetorical rules of classical Arabic also support this understanding of the components of the metaphor in the verse. However, in *Nabulsi's* exegesis, the sky of the Resurrection is explained through "*Wardatan*," implying that "*Wardatan*" is the source domain of the metaphor, which contradicts the apparent meaning of the verse.

Nabulsi, in his interpretation, does not consider the various meanings the verse could convey. The etymological investigation in this study reveals that the root "*W-R-D*" in Arabic is a homonym resulting from an etymological convergence. A Semitic root "*W-R-D*" meaning "To flow" or "To pour" and an Iranian word "*Vard*" meaning "Flower" both entered Arabic and, due to the forgetting of their origins, were subsumed under a single root. However, the Iranian-origin word has over time overshadowed its Semitic counterpart. Nevertheless, there are many traces of the Semitic root's presence in Arabic during and even after the time of revelation. If we interpret the word "**Wardatan**" in the verse according to its Semitic meaning, the meaning of the verse becomes much clearer and more acceptable:

"And when the sky is split apart and flows like oil."

Nabulsi's interpretation of verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān* is based on specific principles regarding the scientific miracles of the Quran. He believes that contemporary empirical discoveries unveil phenomena that the Quran has referred to, and this ensures the continuity of the Quran's miraculous nature until the Resurrection. Verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān* is one such verse. However, this claim and its foundational principles face several challenges. For example:

1. The Quran emphasizes the alignment of the language of revelation with its contemporary audience and the comprehensibility of the revelation for its immediate audience;
2. Such a foundation has no basis, even as a hint, in the Quranic

verses or the narrations of the Prophet (PBUH), who is described as the explainer of the revelation;

3. Humans have no means to ensure the absolute correspondence of empirical findings with external reality, so they cannot establish an identity relationship between these findings and Quranic verses. Many empirical findings initially considered certain have since been falsified;

4. Divine miracles have always astonished people and led to their persuasion, but the claims of proponents of the scientific *I'jāz* of the Quran have so far not had a significant impact;

5. According to verse 88 of Surah *al-Isrā'*, the Quran's miraculous nature is based on the inability of humans and jinn to produce anything like it, and this *I'jāz* nature is valid both at the time of revelation and in all subsequent eras. The realization of the Quran's *I'jāz* nature in future eras is not contingent on human empirical discoveries.

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How to Cite: Shabanpour, M., Naghizadeh, M. H. (2025). A Critical Analysis of *Muḥammad Rātīb Nabulsī's* Scientific Exegesis of Verse 37 of Surah *al-Raḥmān*, *A Research Journal on Qur'anic Knowledge*, 15(59), 83-110. DOI: 10.22054/rjqk.2025.83243.3053



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