



A Critical Comparative Analysis of the Concept of God's "Form" (*Ṣūrah*) and "Face" (*Wajh*) in the Views of Salafi and Imami Hadith Commentators

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Abstract

The study of the so-called *Khabarī* attributes has long been a subject of investigation among Muslim scholars. Accordingly, based on

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certain Qur'anic verses and narrations, God is described by the attribute of "Face" (*Wajh*), and according to some narrations, He is also described by the attribute of "Form" (*Ṣūrah*). Reliance on the literal meanings of these two attributes gives rise to ambiguities such as anthropomorphism (*Tajsīm*) and assimilation (*Tashbīh*). Therefore, examining exegetical and hadith-commentarial theories is necessary in order to clarify a view consistent with the principles of divine unity (*Tawḥīd*). In this regard, hadith commentators of the two intellectual traditions of Salafism and Imami Shi'ism, in accordance with their distinct doctrinal foundations, have offered explanations of these two attributes. Clarifying and critically evaluating these views is essential for identifying the correct position concerning the divine attributes. For this reason, the present study examines the attributes of "Form" and "Face" in the Qur'an and narrations, with a focus on the perspectives of Salafi and Imami hadith commentators. Adopting a comparative approach, it analyzes and critiques the exegetical and hadith-commentarial views of Sunni, Salafi, and Shi'i scholars, and seeks to identify the sound interpretation of these two attributes. The findings indicate that Salafis, by accepting the apparent meaning of the text in the narration "God created Adam in His form" (*Khalaqa Allāhu Ādama 'alā Ṣūratih*), refer the pronoun "His form" (*Ṣūratih*) to God and, based on the principle of adherence to the literal meaning, regard the "Face of God" as visible on the Day of Resurrection. In contrast, Imami commentators, relying on an interpretive approach, understand "Form" as the manifestation of divine attributes in the human being, and interpret "Face" either as the luminous reality of the

Prophet or as the divine essence without any literal, corporeal meaning. Consequently, the perspective of Imami hadith commentators is more consistent with Qur'anic- and Sunnah-based principles of divine unity, whereas the literalist Salafī approach leads to numerous rational challenges, such as anthropomorphism and assimilation.

Keywords: Form of God, Face of God, Salafism, Imami Shi'ism, Hadith commentators.

Statement of the Problem

The *Khabarī* attributes of "Form" (*Şūrah*) and "Face" (*Wajh*) in Islamic religious texts, especially the Qur'an and hadith, have been central topics in theological discourse. Due to their apparent indication of corporeality or resemblance between God and His creatures, they have generated extensive debates among Shi'i and Sunni exegetical, hadith, and theological schools, particularly Salafism. The significance of this research lies in clarifying the theoretical foundations of sectarian differences, contributing to a more precise understanding of religious texts through the examination of hadith-commentarial theories, and strengthening comparative inter-sectarian analysis grounded in the principles of divine unity. This study may also help resolve sectarian misunderstandings and offer a coherent interpretation consistent with divine transcendence.

Although numerous studies have addressed report-based attributes such as "Form" and "Face," including:

- Ahmad Pakatchi's article "The Hadiths on the Creation of Adam in

His Form: Challenges of Understanding in the Second and Third Hijri Centuries," which analyzes the chains and texts of the hadith and examines how theologians' views influenced its transmission by hadith scholars; however, it does not elaborate the theological and hadith-commentarial views of both sects, especially Salafi and Imami commentators, on the concept of "Form" in this narration.

- Mohammad Javad Rudgar's article "The Perfect Human as the Face of God," which examines the concept of the Perfect Human as a manifestation of the Face of God from mystical and Qur'anic perspectives; its approach is primarily theological and does not address hadith commentators' interpretations of narrations involving "Face."
- Mansour Pahlavan and Mostafa Azarkhashi's article "An Investigation of the Text and Chains of the Hadith "Indeed God Created Adam in His Form," which studies Shi'i and Sunni sources, the chains of transmission, and *Ibn 'Arabī*'s interpretation with a focus on the unity of being. While it questions the attribution of the pronoun "his form" to God, its focus remains on *Ibn 'Arabī*, and it does not comparatively evaluate other Salafi and Shi'i hadith commentators.

A review of these studies shows that no research has yet specifically compared and critiqued the views of Salafi and Imami hadith commentators on these two attributes with the aim of identifying the sound position. Therefore, the present study seeks, through a comparative analysis of exegetical and hadith-commentarial interpretations in these two schools, to answer the following

- 1) What views do Salafī and Imami hadith commentators hold regarding the report-based attributes of "Form" and "Face," and upon which intellectual and exegetical foundations are these views based?
- 2) To what extent are these views consistent with the principles of divine unity and transcendence?

Accordingly, adopting a comparative approach, this study evaluates, based on the apparent meanings of verses, narrations, and rational arguments, the views of Sunni hadith commentators from the third to the tenth centuries AH,¹ Salafī commentators from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries AH,² and prominent Imami hadith

1. The most well-known Sunni hadith commentators cited in the article, such as ‘Abdullāh ibn Muslim, known as Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276 AH); Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan, known as Ibn Fūrak (d. 406 AH); Qāḍī ‘Iyād ibn Mūsā (d. 544 AH); Mubārak ibn Muḥammad, known as Ibn al-Athīr (d. 606 AH); Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī (d. 671 AH); Yahyā ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī (d. 676 AH); ‘Abd Allāh al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685 AH); Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Fayūmī (d. 770 AH); Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf al-Kirmānī (d. 786 AH); ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Aḥmad, known as Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī (d. 795 AH); ‘Umar ibn ‘Alī, known as Ibn al-Mulqin (d. 804 AH); Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī, known as Ibn Ḥajar (d. 852 AH); and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī (d. 911 AH), lived within this time span.
2. The selection of this time period for Salafism is due to the presence of the most prominent hadith commentators of the Salafī school during this era, such as: Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm, known as Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH); Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr, known as Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 751 AH); Muḥammad al-Albānī (d. 1420 AH); ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Bāz (d. 1420 AH); Muḥammad ibn ‘Uthaymīn (d. 1421 AH); Abū Zayd Bakr ibn ‘Abd Allāh (d. 1428 AH); ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Rājiḥī (d. 1432 AH); and ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Āl al-Shaykh (d. 1447 AH).

commentators from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries AH,¹ with the aim of purifying the concept of God from anthropomorphism and assimilation and clarifying the true meaning of these attributes in light of the Qur'an and Sunnah.

1. Clarification of Key Concepts

In this section, we briefly examine the lexical meanings of these two attributes from the perspective of lexicographers, and also clarify the important terms used in this study.

1.1. The Lexical Meaning of "Form" (*Ṣūrah*)

In Arabic, *Ṣūrah* denotes the shape or perceptible form of a thing. Some lexicographers define it as "The form and constitution upon which a thing exists," meaning the particular quality or configuration with which a being is created. In certain lexicons, *Ṣūrah* encompasses both sensory and non-sensory meanings, including material form as well as inner or spiritual states. It is also derived from the root (*ṣ*, *w*, *r*), meaning manifestation or disclosure; thus, *Ṣūrah* is that which reveals the reality of a thing outwardly. Consequently, while the term primarily signifies shape or form, its semantic scope extends beyond physical appearance to include abstract and non-material meanings.

1. The most well-known Imami (Twelver Shi'i) hadith commentators cited in the article, such as Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm, known as Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1045 AH); Muḥammad Taqī Majlisī (d. 1070 AH); Mullā Ṣāliḥ Māzandarānī (d. 1080 AH); Mullā Khalīl Qazvīnī (d. 1089 AH); Mullā Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī (d. 1090 AH); Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī (d. 1110 AH); Mīrzā Jawād Malikī Tabrīzī (d. 1343 AH); Rūḥ Allāh Khomeini (d. 1409 AH); and Ḥasan Ḥasan-Zādeh Āmulī (d. 1442 AH), belong to this period.

1.2. The Lexical Meaning of "Face" (*Wajh*)

The word *Wajh* derives from the root (w, j, h). Lexicographers note that its primary usage refers to the human facial organ containing the eyes, nose, and mouth, so named because of its visibility (Ibn Fāris, 1983 AD/1404 AH: 6, 88). From this meaning, the sense of "Direction" or "Orientation" developed, since a person's turning toward something occurs by means of the face (Farāhīdī, 1988 AD/1409 AH: 4, 66). Some scholars also maintain that *Wajh* is used metaphorically to denote "Essence" or "Reality," such that "The face of a thing" signifies its core or true nature. Overall, lexicographers agree that the fundamental meaning of the term is "Face or orientation," and other usages, such as side, direction, cause, honor, and essence, derive from this primary sense (Rāghib Iṣfahānī, 1995 AD/1412 AH: 855).

In general, lexicographers agree that this term has a single fundamental meaning, namely, "Form and the direction one faces," and that its other usages, such as "Side," "Direction," "Cause," "Honor," and "Essence," all ultimately derive from this same root meaning.

1.3. The Concept of Absolute Transcendence

Absolute transcendence in Islamic theology means that the divine essence is completely and unconditionally free from any resemblance, similarity, or comparison with created beings, not only from corporeal attributes, but also from any limitation, essence, quality, direction, time, or place. Accordingly, any description that implies limitation,

composition, or similarity to contingent beings is negated of God's essence (Sobhani, 2008 AD/1429 AH: 2, 189). Some exegetes hold that expressions such as "There is nothing like unto Him" (al-Shūrā: 11) entail a double negation of resemblance, indicating not merely the denial of corporeal attributes, but the negation of any ontological similarity between Creator and creation, thereby affirming God's absolute transcendence from all created characteristics (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 2010 AD/1390 SH: 18, 195).

1.4. The Concept of Anthropomorphism and Incarnation

The concept of *Tashbīh* (anthropomorphism) refers to the attribution of any kind of similarity between the divine essence, attributes, or actions and those of created beings (Qāḍī Hamadānī, 1995 AD/1416 AH: 176). In Imami thought, the negation of anthropomorphism is articulated as an epistemological principle that applies both to the divine essence and to the divine attributes. Accordingly, Shi'i theologians, by emphasizing the negation of any resemblance between God and creation, reject any attribution to God of corporeal, spatial, temporal characteristics, or psychological states that belong to created beings (Shaykh Mufīd, 1996 AD/1413 AH: 38-40; 'Allāmah Ḥillī, 2000 AD/1417 AH: 298-300).

Some Sunni scholars also maintain that anthropomorphism often arises from a simplistic reception of the apparent meanings of the texts, and that the task of the theologian is to preserve the faith of the common people while simultaneously preventing the attribution of

36 corporeal meanings to God (Ghazālī, 2001 AD/1422 AH: 54–57). On

this basis, the theologian must avoid any form of likening God to creation in theological discussions.

The concept of *Tajsīm* (Incarnation) refers to the attribution of corporeality, spatial location, directionality, or material characteristics to the divine essence (Shaykh Mufīd, 1996 AD/1413 AH: 34–35). Accordingly, some Imami scholars hold that any form of bodily delimitation entails contingency, and they conclude that Incarnation negates true divinity and results in change and composition within the divine essence (Sayyid Murtaḍā, 1994 AD/1411 AH: 1, 289–292). A number of Sunni theologians also explicitly state that God cannot be encompassed within the categories of body or accident; therefore, any anthropomorphic or corporeal conception of God must be rejected (Ash‘arī, 1998 AD/1415 AH: 23). Thus, it appears that, from the perspective of Muslims, accepting Incarnation with respect to God is incompatible with divine unity, and consequently, God must be negated of all corporeal conceptions.

1.5. Interpretation (*Ta'wīl*)

The concept of *Ta'wīl* is among the key notions whose interpretation varies according to the intellectual foundations of different schools of thought. From the Salafi perspective, *Ta'wīl* means diverting a word from its apparent meaning to a non-apparent meaning based on rational or subjective indications (Ibn Taymīyya, 2004 AD/1425 AH: 3, 35–37). In other words, they consider *Ta'wīl* to be a departure from the apparent indication of the text.

From the perspective of rationalist thinkers, *Ta'wīl* refers to

figurative meanings that conform to the intent of the Lawgiver. Within this framework, *Ta'wīl* does not represent a departure from the text, but rather a restoration of the text to a rationally intelligible meaning (Qāḍī Hamadānī, 1960: 7, 120).

The Ahl al-Ḥadīth also maintain that *Ta'wīl* signifies a departure from the apparent and immediately understood meaning of a word and carrying it to another meaning within the framework of the text itself, in a manner consistent with the apparent meanings of the scriptural texts (Ibn Qutaybah, 2002 AD/1419 AH: 29–31; Majlisī, 1983 AD/1404 AH: 1, 24).

Mystics consider *Ta'wīl* to be the uncovering of the inner and allusive layers of the text, which exist longitudinally alongside the apparent meaning and do not conflict with it (Qushayrī, 1966: 68).

Accordingly, the concept of *Ta'wīl* differs across the intellectual contexts of rationalism, Ahl al-Ḥadīth, and mysticism. Therefore, Shi'i hadith commentators, in accordance with their intellectual commitments, adopt a distinct understanding of *Ta'wīl*.

1.6. Salafism

Salafism refers to a school that, in belief and practice, claims adherence to the Prophet (PBUH), the Companions, the Followers (*Tābi'ūn*), and the Followers of the Followers, collectively referred to as the *Salaf al-Ṣāliḥ* (the righteous predecessors) (ʿAbd Allāh, 1994 AD/1415 AH: 106; Subḥānī, 2006 AD/1427 AH: 4, 10). Based on this definition, adherents of the Salafī movement believe in returning, both

four Sunni legal schools, and for this reason are called Salafis.

Salafis regard themselves as continuators of the path of the righteous predecessors and, with regard to the *Khabarī* attributes, emphasize the principle of affirmation without modality (Ibn Taymīyya, 2005 AD/1425 AH: 3, 391). According to this foundation, it appears that from the Salafī perspective, every attribute mentioned in the Qur'an or an authentic hadith must be affirmed without inquiry into its modality or resort to interpretive reinterpretation.

1.7. Imamiyah

Imamiyah refers to the school that believes in the imamate of twelve impeccable Imams (AS) after the Prophet of Islam (PBUH), and regards the imamate as a divine office designated through explicit textual appointment (*Nass*) (Shaykh Mufīd, 1996 AD/1413 AH: 39; Shahrastānī, 1996 AD/1413 AH: 1, 146).

In Imami thought, the report-based attributes constitute one of the most significant theological issues, as they are directly related to the question of divine transcendence and unity. For example, some theologians and hadith commentators of this school have consistently maintained that any understanding of these attributes must be compatible with the principle of divine unity and the immateriality of the divine essence, since God is a Necessary Being and is free from corporeality, spatial location, and change (Shaykh Şadūq, 1956 AD/1376 AH: 1, 68).

Based on this definition, Imami scholars have sought to resolve the ambiguities arising from the apparent meanings of scriptural texts

concerning the report-based attributes and to clarify the true intent of these expressions in a manner befitting the divine station.

2. Critical Comparative Analysis of the Attribute of "Form" (*Ṣūrah*) from the Perspective of Salafi and Imami Hadith Commentators

In this section, we first briefly examine the narrations containing this attribute in the hadith corpora of both sects, and then proceed to analyze and critique the views of hadith commentators regarding these narrations.

2.1 Examination of Narrations Attributing "Form" to God in the Hadith Corpora of Both Sects

At the outset, it should be noted that a survey of Sunni and Shi'i hadith collections reveals that all narrations in which God is described using the term "Form" are as follows:

- God manifested Himself to His Prophet during the Ascension (*Mi'rāj*) in the most beautiful form: "... From *Ibn 'Abbās*, who said: "The Messenger of God (PBUH) said: "My Lord came to me tonight in the most beautiful form." (Tirmidhī, 1996 AD: 5, 282)
- According to other narrations in Sunni hadith collections, God created Adam in His own form: "... In the hadith of *Ibn Ḥātam* from the Prophet (PBUH), he said: "When one of you fights his brother, let him avoid the face, for God created Adam in His form." (Ibn Ḥajjāj, 1954 AD/1374 AH: 4, 2017)
- According to another narration, God will appear to the people of the Hereafter in a form that they all recognize: "From *Abū Hurayrah*,

who said: ... "Then God will come to them in the form that they recognize, and He will say: "I am your Lord." They will say: "You are our Lord," and they will follow Him..." (Ibn Ḥanbal, 1995 AD/1416 AH: 13, 144)

- A narration similar to the above reports is also transmitted in Shi'i hadith collections; however, the Imam's companion attributes it to Sunni sources and asks the Infallible Imam about its true meaning, whereupon the Imam explains the narration: "From *Muḥammad ibn Muslim*, who said: "I asked *Abū Ja'far* (AS) about what they narrate, that God created Adam in His form. He said: "It is a created, originated form, which God selected and chose above other diverse forms, and He attributed it to Himself just as He attributed the *Ka'bah* to Himself and the Spirit to Himself, saying: "My House" and "I breathed into him of My Spirit." (Kulaynī, 1986 AD/1407 AH: 1, 134; Shaykh Ṣadūq, 1977 AD/1398 AH: 103)

2.2. Elaboration of Sunni Hadith Commentators' Views on the Narrations of "God's Form"

Some Sunni hadith commentators have interpreted these narrations according to their apparent meaning and maintain that God possesses a form without being likened to His creation (Ibn Qutaybah, 2002 AD/1419 AH: 317). Others have gone even further by removing the restriction of non-likeness, asserting that one should not strike the human face because, according to the narration, it corresponds to the form of God (Bayḍāwī, 2012 AD/1433 AH: 2, 488; Qurṭubī, 1996 AD/1417 AH: 6, 597). These commentators interpret the hadith in a

completely literal manner and consequently affirm the attribution of form to God.

Mu'tazilite scholars consider such attribution to entail corporeality for God and, while accepting the narration, interpret the attribution of form as metaphorical or allegorical, referring to divine knowledge and power (Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ, 2000 AD/1417 AH: 2, 91). A number of Ash'arite commentators have similarly subjected the narration to interpretive reinterpretation (Ibn Fūrak, 1985: 56; Nawawī, 1972 AD/1392 AH: 16, 166).

Regarding the hadith "My Lord came to me tonight in the most beautiful form," some have suggested that the meaning may be that God came to the Prophet while the Prophet himself was in his best state and condition. Another possibility is that it means: "My Lord came to me while I was in the most beautiful form and condition." Thus, the word *Ṣūrah* may denote either physical appearance or spiritual state and quality. However, it has been explicitly stated that under no circumstances can the "Outward human form" be attributed to the divine essence, since God is transcendent and exalted above such descriptions (Ibn Athīr, 1846 AD/1367 AH: 3, 58; Suyūṭī, 2003 AD/1424 AH: 3, 243).

Some Sunni commentators, with regard to the narration "Then God will come to them in the form that they recognize," explicitly state that what is meant by "Form" in this narration is not a corporeal or created form, but rather a sign that God creates in that specific situation to make Himself known to the believers, such that certain knowledge is attained (Nawawī, 1971 AD/1392 AH: 16, 3). Nevertheless, the nature

2.3. Comparative Analysis of Salafi and Shi'i Hadith Commentators' Views on the Concept of "God's Form"

According to one of the prominent Salafi commentators, the referent of the pronoun "His Form" in the narration is the very form that God chose for Adam and upon which He created him. He emphasizes that this expression never implies resemblance or equivalence between God and created beings; rather, the apparent meaning of the narration must be accepted without questioning its modality. In his view, interpreting the narration as referring to Adam's own form or returning the pronoun to someone other than God contradicts the apparent meaning of the hadith and constitutes a form of negation of the divine attributes (Ibn Taymīyya, 1975 AD/1406 AH: 5, 183; idem, 2004 AD/1425 AH: 6, 391).

Some followers of *Ibn Taymīyya*, following their teacher, emphasize that this narration is among the most important proofs of the perfection of Adam's creation and his superiority over other beings. They believe that the pronoun in *Şūrah* refers to God and that the meaning is that God has a form appropriate to His essence, upon which Adam was created (Ibn Qayyim Jawziyyah, 1995 AD/1416 AH: 3, 25). Some Salafi commentators explicitly state that this hadith, like other texts concerning divine attributes, must be accepted according to its apparent meaning (Abū Zayd, 1993 AD/1414 AH: 2, 115). Another commentary states that Adam's creation upon a form attributed to God does not entail real resemblance to created beings; **43**

rather, it merely affirms an attribute for God whose modality is unknown (Rājīhī, 2004 AD/1425 AH: 1, 241).

Regarding the narration "My Lord came to me tonight in the most beautiful form," some Hanbali commentators consider the phrase "in the most beautiful form" to belong to the category of report-based attributes and reject any interpretation that entails sensory or corporeal resemblance, while nevertheless accepting the term *Ṣūrah* itself as an attribute established by the text (Abū Ya'la, 1980 AD/1411 AH: 1, 161–163). In the same vein, some Salafi commentators maintain that "form" in this narration is an attribute whose true reality is unknown to us and whose knowledge is entrusted to God, without implying corporeal form or material composition (ibid: 5, 527).

According to further elaboration, some Salafi commentators argue that rejecting the narration on the pretext of fearing Incarnation constitutes a departure from the methodology of the Salaf, just as interpreting it into purely philosophical or metaphorical meanings is likewise inconsistent with the method of the Companions and the Followers (Ibn Qayyim Jawziyyah, 2010 AD/1431 AH: 94). Some contemporary commentators also believe that God's coming to the Prophet (PBUH) occurred in a dream, and therefore, even in this scenario, the modality of vision and the reality of the "Form" remain among the unseen matters beyond human comprehension (Albānī, 1994 AD/1415 AH: 1, 176–178).

A number of Salafī commentators, with regard to the narration "Then God will come to them in the form that they recognize," (*fa Ya'tihim Allāhu fī al-Şūrati allatī Ya'rifūnah*) maintain that the believers' recognition on the Day of Resurrection is a certain and divinely granted recognition; therefore, it does not result from perceiving a corporeal form. Accordingly, the term "Form" refers to a quality whose reality lies beyond the reach of human reason (Ibn Taymīyya, 2004 AD/1425 AH: 6, 394).

In the later period, a group of Salafī commentators have preserved this same framework and emphasize that "Form" in this hadith does not signify a physical or corporeal form, but rather an attribute through which God manifests Himself to His servants on the Day of Resurrection (Ibn Bāz, 1996 AD/1417 AH: 3, 35-46). In any case, according to Salafī commentators, the modality of "Form" in these narrations remains unknown.

In contrast, Imāmī hadith commentators have explained the concept of God's "Form" only within the context of the hadith "God created Adam in His form" (*Khalaqa Ādama 'alā şūratih*). Based on their intellectual foundations, they have offered diverse interpretations of "Form." A group of rationalist Shi'i hadith commentators believe that the meaning of Adam's creation upon the divine form is the complete manifestation of the human being through divine power and knowledge. In other words, just as the human face is the primary means by which a person is recognized and through which one

appears and is identified, the human being is likewise a sign and locus of manifestation of divine perfections (Mullā Ṣadrā, 1962 AD/1383 AH: 3, 194).

However, text-oriented and traditionist Shi‘i hadith commentators hold various views on this matter. Some of them, at the outset, transmit the same explanation given by the Sixth Imam (AS) in the narration reported by Shi‘i traditionists (Mullā Ṣāliḥ Māzandarānī, 1962 AD/1382 SH: 3, 218; Majlisī, 1983 AD/1404 AH: 2, 84). Nevertheless, Mullā Ṣāliḥ Māzandarānī and Majlisī each present a different interpretation of this hadith.

The former commentator refers the pronoun "His Form" to Adam and maintains that the meaning is that God created him instantaneously and in a complete manner, without requiring passage through the stages of semen and clot (*‘Alaqa*) (Mullā Ṣāliḥ Māzandarānī, 1962 AD/1382 AH: 11, 128), a view endorsed by some hadith commentators with mystical inclinations (Fayḍ Kāshānī, 1985 AD/1406 AH: 1, 207).

At the same time, the latter commentator understands the hadith to mean creation according to divine attributes and perfections, which in no way implies corporeality for God (Majlisī, 1983 AD/1404 AH: 11, 128). In elaborating this same meaning, some other text-oriented commentators return the pronoun to God but explain that the intent is that Adam was made a manifestation of the divine names and attributes, and that a ray of divine knowledge and power was entrusted

46 within his being (Qazwīnī, 2008 AD/1429 AH: 7, 315).

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Shi'i and Salafi Commentators' Views on the Attribute of "Form"

Axis of Comparison	Salafi Hadith Commentators' View	Shi'i Hadith Commentators' View
Referent of the pronoun " <i>Şūratih</i> "	Refers to God	Some refer it to God (as the locus of divine attributes), others to Adam (as having been created complete)
Meaning of "Form"	A real attribute of God, without a known modality	Manifestation of divine perfections; locus of divine names and attributes
Method of interpretation	Acceptance of the apparent meaning of the hadith without interpretation, with emphasis on transcendence and negation of resemblance (<i>Bilā Kayf</i>)	Interpretive explanation as manifestation of divine attributes or Adam's complete creation, with emphasis on negating divine corporeality
Doctrinal implications	Affirmation of the attribute of "form" for God and rejection of interpretive reinterpretation	Emphasis on Adam as a manifestation of divine attributes (knowledge, power), negation of corporeality, and affirmation of human dignity as the locus of divine perfections

2.4. Critique and Evaluation of Salafi and Shi'i Hadith Commentators' Views on the Attribute of "Form"

At the outset, it should be noted that some scholars argue that this hadith has been interpreted by *Ibn 'Arabī* and most Sunni hadith commentators in a manner that refers the pronoun "*Şūratih*" to God and considers the human being as created upon the divine form. However, they challenge this interpretation and argue that the pronoun does not refer to God, and that aligning this hadith with the doctrine of the Unity of Being (*Waḥdat al-Wujūd*) is incompatible with the indications of Qur'anic verses and narrations. Consequently, they identify the best interpretation of this hadith as viewing the human

form as that of a distinguished created being, and therefore do not regard the hadith as implying anthropomorphism with respect to God (Pahlavan and Azarkhashi, 2010 AD/1389 SH: 18–20). The view of these authors closely resembles that of text-oriented and traditionist Imami hadith commentators.

However, the aforementioned claim is open to critique from two perspectives. First, it must be noted that this view is not exclusive to Sunni scholars, as some Imami hadith commentators with mystical inclinations also believe that this hadith signifies the creation of the human being as the vicegerent of God (*Khalīfat Allāh*). Accordingly, the meaning of "Form" in this narration is not a material or corporeal shape, but rather the manifestation of divine attributes within the human being (Fayḍ Kāshānī, 1967 AD/1387 SH: 3, 119; Hasanzadah Amoli, 1986 AD/1365 SH: 60). In other words, the human being, as the manifestation of all divine attributes, such as knowledge, power, and will, is potentially capable of actualizing these attributes.

In the same vein, some Imami hadith commentators have understood the return of the pronoun to God as indicating the manifestation of divine power and knowledge in the human being. On this basis, the human form is presented as a sign of the manifestation of divine perfections.

Second, attributing the doctrine of ontological unity (*Waḥdat al-Wujūd al-ʿAynī*) to Ibn ʿArabī on the basis of the hadith “God created Adam in His form” is incorrect. This interpretation, which sometimes leads to identifying the Creator with creation, is rejected both by Ibn ʿArabī himself and by Imami hadith commentators with mystical

48 inclinations. With a mystical reading of the hadith, Ibn ʿArabī

considers the referent of the pronoun "His" in "His Form" to be God, and accordingly understands "Form" as the manifestation of God in the human being (Ibn 'Arabī, n.d.: 2, 459, 490). As a result, this interpretation has no connection with identifying God with creation.

Elsewhere, he maintains that the human being is the comprehensive reality of the entire cosmos; thus, according to the hadith "God created Adam in His form," the human being is considered the locus of manifestation of divine perfections (ibid: 2, 346). Some rationalist Shi'i hadith commentators also emphasize that created beings are manifestations of divine attributes and aspects, without implying anything about the divine essence itself (Mullā Şadrā, 1958 AD/1378 SH: 41), a view likewise endorsed by some hadith commentators with mystical tendencies (Maleki Tabrizi, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 251). This distinction prevents misunderstandings regarding the Unity of Being and underscores the ontological distinction between Creator and creation.

The Salafī position, which affirms the attribute of "Form" for God through adherence to the apparent meaning of the text and rejection of any interpretive reinterpretation, implicitly leads to divine corporeality and limitation. Imami scholars argue that this approach, due to its failure to clarify the nature of "Form," falls into anthropomorphism and is incompatible with the principles of monotheism (Subḥānī, 2006 AD/1427 AH: 3, 153).

3. Critical Comparative Analysis of the Attribute of "Face" (*Wajh*) from the Perspective of Salafī and Imami Hadith Commentators

At the outset of this discussion, it should be noted that "Face" (*Wajh*) **49**

is among the attributes attributed to God in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, such as the verse "Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God," (al-Baqarah: 115) and the narration indicating vision of the Face of God:

"From *Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq* regarding the verse: "For those who do good is the best reward and more," (Yūnus: 26) he said: "The increase is gazing upon the Face of God." (Ibn Rāhawayh, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 3, 793)

Given the attribution of this attribute to God in the Noble Qur'an, after a brief lexical examination of the term, we will first examine the views of exegetes from both sects regarding the manner of its attribution to God, and then proceed to a detailed discussion of hadith commentators' perspectives.

3.1. Elaboration of Sunni Exegetes' Views on the Divine Face

This attribute is attributed to God in several Qur'anic passages, including: "Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God. Indeed, God is All-Encompassing, All-Knowing," (al-Baqarah: 115) and "Everything is perishing except His Face." (al-Qaṣaṣ: 88)

Some Sunni exegetes hold that "Face" in verse 88 of *Sūrah al-Qaṣaṣ* functions as a substitute (*badal*) for the pronoun "He," (Ṭabarī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 10, 323) while the majority interpret "Face" as referring to the divine essence itself (Bayḍāwī, 1997 AD/1418 AH: 4, 187; Qurṭubī, 1944 AD/1364 AH: 4, 17), thereby exalting God above any corporeal meaning.

50 One Ash'arite exegete, in interpreting "The Face of God,"

emphasizes the negation of corporeal meaning and presents several possible interpretations: first, that it refers to the divine essence; second, that it signifies direction and sincerity of intention in actions; and third, that "Face" refers to the attributes of perfection and signs through which God is known (Fakhr Rāzī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 25, 20–22). Thus, Fakhr al-Rāzī consistently accepts the Qur'anic expression while interpreting it in ways compatible with divine transcendence and majesty.

Mu'tazilite exegetes likewise regard "Face" as a form of rational metaphor indicating the permanence of the divine essence (Zamakhsharī, 1986 AD/1407 AH: 3, 437). Others, through mystical interpretations, understand "The Face of God" as His essence manifested within created beings (Ibn 'Arabī, n.d.: 3, 156). In other words, all existing beings are "*The Face of God*" and manifestations of the divine essence.

3.2. The Views of Salafi and Imami Exegetes on the "Face" (Wajh) of God

Salafi exegetes, in their interpretation of the verse "...Everything will perish except His Face...", (al-Qaṣaṣ: 88) maintain that all created beings will be annihilated and only God will remain; thus, the term *Wajh* (Face) here signifies divine permanence. However, they emphasize that this expression constitutes a real name and attribute of God and should not be interpreted metaphorically as meaning divine pleasure or action (Ibn Taymīyya, 1985 AD/1406 AH: 3, 25).

Salafi commentators further assert that the verse "...Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God..." (al-Baqarah: 115) indicates the all-

encompassing divine presence. That is, wherever believers may be on earth, when they face the direction determined by God, they are in fact turning toward His Face. This, in their view, signifies the greatness and omnipresence of the divine essence (Ibn Taymīyya, 2004 AD/1425 AH: 6, 32). At the same time, some exegetes of this school reject interpretive readings such as identifying *Wajh* with the Qiblah or divine pleasure, considering such interpretations characteristic of theological speculation. They argue that *wajh* in this verse is an attribute ascribed to God and must be affirmed according to its apparent meaning (Ibn Qayyim Jawzīyya, 2003 AD/1424 AH: 3, 143).

In Imami narrative exegeses (Tafsīr Ma'thūr), reports cited under verse 28:88 interpret the divine Face as the religion of God and the Imams (AS) (Abū Ḥamza Thumālī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 259; Qummī, 1983 AD/1404 AH: 2, 147). However, other exegetes, such as Ṭabarī, understand *Wajh* as a reference to the divine essence (*Huwa*) (Ibn Sulaymān, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 6, 90; Shaykh Ṭūsī, n.d.: 8, 84; Ṭabrisī, 1952 AD/1372 SH: 7, 421).

From the perspective of some Shi'i commentators, the verse "Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God" (al-Baqarah: 115) means that in every direction one faces, the true orientation and ultimate destination is toward the divine essence. According to them, *Wajh* here denotes the aspect through which beings are connected to God. On this basis, every entity represents a degree of existence, and all levels of existence ultimately culminate in Absolute Being, namely God. Thus, whichever direction one turns toward, its inner reality and truth is the divine Face (Mullā Ṣadrā, 1941 AD/1361 AH: 1, 64–65).

In a more precise explanation, these exegetes understand *Wajh* as referring to the divine names of beauty and majesty that encompass all beings. Accordingly, every existent is a mirror reflecting one aspect of the divine Face, and turning toward any being is, in reality, an encounter with the manifestation of God in that being. Hence, the verse guides its audience away from imagining God as spatially confined and toward recognizing His transcendence of space and His sustaining, all-encompassing presence (ibid: 1941 AD/1361 AH: 2, 393).

Nevertheless, some later Imami exegetes have considered it insufficient to limit *Wajh* exclusively to the divine essence. They argue that, based on its lexical meaning, *Wajh* refers to that through which one encounters another; hence the human face is called *Wajh* because people recognize one another through it. Accordingly, whatever pertains to God and through which humans encounter and know Him is considered the Face of God, such as the divine attributes through which humans come to know Him (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 2010 AD/1390 SH: 7, 101–105). In other words, God encounters His creation through these very attributes.

3.3. The Views of Sunni Hadith Commentators on the "Face"

Sunni hadith commentators believe, based on transmitted reports, that believers will certainly behold the divine Face on the Day of Resurrection (Ibn Rajab Ḥanbalī, 2008 AD/1429 AH: 1, 28; Fayūmī, 2018 AD/1439 AH: 15, 150). Others, while acknowledging the weakness of some reports concerning the vision of the Face, argue that numerous authoritative textual sources necessitate affirming this

vision; therefore, denying it constitutes a deviation from the path of *Ahl al-Sunna* (Ibn Hajar, 1959 AD/1379 AH: 8, 347).

Some Sunni commentators propose two possible interpretations of *Wajh* without committing definitively to either: first, interpreting it as the divine essence; second, understanding it in its literal sense as a Face distinct from other faces or forms (Kirmānī, 1980 AD/1401 AH: 25, 119; Ibn Mulaqqin, 2008 AD/1429 AH: 29, 621). It appears that Sunni commentators seek to affirm the apparent meaning of the term while explaining it in a manner that avoids anthropomorphism.

3.4. A Comparative Analysis of Salafi and Shi'i Hadith Commentators on the "Face of God"

Salafi hadith commentators interpret the narration "Looking at the Face of God" (*al-Nazar ilā Wajh Allāh*) in a literalist manner, grounded in the acceptance of textual evidence without allegorical interpretation. They maintain that beholding the divine Face in the Hereafter is among the greatest blessings granted to the inhabitants of Paradise and that this vision will be an objective and real event, based on definitive Qur'ānic and prophetic texts. In this interpretation, *Wajh* is understood as God's real Face, not as a metaphor for reward or blessing. Believers will see God in a manner befitting His essence, without comprehending its modality (Ibn Taymīyya, 2004 AD/1425 AH: 6, 468; Ibn Qayyim Jawzīyya, 2003 AD/1424 AH: 1, 183).

These commentators insist on affirming the apparent meaning of the hadith, even though its modality remains unknown and incomparable to the vision of created beings. They stress that seeing

the divine Face in the Hereafter is not a matter of inner unveiling or spiritual vision but an actual seeing with the eyes, which constitutes the highest honor bestowed upon the faithful in Paradise (Ibn 'Uthaymīn, 2000 AD/1421 AH: 3, 132; Ibn Bāz, 1996 AD/1417 AH: 4, 122). In this regard, they emphasize that the vision of God's Face in the Hereafter is established by mass-transmitted texts and represents one of the greatest blessings of Paradise (Āl Shaykh, 2005 AD/1426 AH: 654).

Text-centered Imami hadith commentators, drawing upon narrations interpreting the meaning of the divine Face, believe that *Wajh Allāh* refers to the prophets and the divine proofs through whom humans establish a relationship with God and are therefore called His Face (Majlisī, 1985 AD/1406 AH: 3, 263; Qazwīnī, 2008 AD/1429 AH: 2, 400). Others, like Sunni and Imami exegetes, understand *Wajh* as referring to the divine essence itself (Mullā Şāliḥ Māzandarānī, 1962 AD/1382 SH: 3, 162; Majlisī, 1983 AD/1404 AH: 1, 309).

According to one rationalist commentator, *Wajh Allāh* is the luminous reality of the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH), which constitutes the first emanation and direct manifestation of the divine essence. This light stands in relation to God as a face to an essence or as a shadow to its source, akin to the sun's illumination. Just as the sun shines everywhere through its light, the existence of God permeates the universe through this Muhammadan Light (Mullā Şadrā, 1941 AD/1361 SH: 2, 393). In other words, the Face of God is the luminous reality of the Prophet of Islam, the first divine manifestation through which all existence is connected to God.

Table 2.

3.5. Critical Evaluation of Salafi and Shi'i Hadith Commentators' Views on the "Face of God"

Some researchers argue that Sunni scholars interpret *Wajh Allāh* as the absolute divine essence, viewing all beings as determinations and manifestations of that single essence, such that multiplicity is merely conceptual and illusory, and no real distinction exists between Creator and creation. They maintain that the verse cited by Sunnis, "Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God," (al-Baqarah: 115) is ambiguous (*Mutashābih*) and cannot serve as a basis for asserting ontological identity, as it conflicts with definitive verses affirming divine transcendence and the distinction between Creator and creation, such as "There is nothing like unto Him." (al-Shūrā: 11) (Jalaliyan Sedaqati, 2023 AD/1402 SH: 29–31)

However, in critiquing this claim, two points must be considered. First, interpreting the attribute of *Wajh* as the divine essence is not exclusive to Sunni thought; some Shi'i hadith commentators with mystical inclinations likewise hold that *Wajhullāh* denotes the absolute divine essence. According to this view, *Wajh* does not imply a material or corporeal form but rather the divine essence or perfect attributes that are present and attentive everywhere (Khomeini, 2004 AD/1383 SH: 66; Hasanzadeh Amoli, 1999 AD/1378 SH: 73). This interpretation emphasizes the distinction between God and creation and categorically rejects anthropomorphism.

56 Second, the concept of the unity of existence (*Waḥdat al-Wujūd*)

has been understood in various ways. In one sense, it is taken to mean union, whereby the existence of God and that of creatures are imagined as two distinct realities that converge at a certain point (Jawādī Āmulī, 2018 AD/1398 SH: 2, 338–345). In another sense, it denotes identity between God and created beings, such that the entities of the world are considered identical with the divine essence (ibid: 3, 112–123). A third interpretation understands it as divine indwelling within created beings (Subḥānī, 2006 AD/1427 AH: 5, 287–290). According to yet another understanding, beings are manifestations and disclosures of divine attributes (Ibn ʿArabī, n.d.: 2, 123).

As discussed earlier, *Ibn ʿArabī* and some Shiʿi hadith commentators with rational or mystical inclinations do not uphold the identity or union of Creator and creation. Rather, they maintain that beings are manifestations of divine attributes, which does not entail ontological identity or union with the divine essence. This distinction refutes misconceptions surrounding *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* and affirms the existential separation between Creator and creation.

From another perspective, accepting the Salafi commentators' view, due to their lack of explanation regarding the nature of *Wajh*, implicitly leads to attributing corporeality or limitation to God. Imami scholars argue that this position contradicts the principles of monotheism, as the rejection of interpretation necessarily entails accepting a form of corporeality for God (Subḥānī, 2006 AD/1427 AH: 2, 126).

Thus, while Salafi hadith commentators emphasize affirming the apparent meaning and the actual vision of the divine Face in the

Hereafter, Imami hadith commentators, adopting an interpretive approach, understand *Wajh* either as the luminous reality of the Prophet and the divine friends or as referring back to the divine essence itself. Accordingly, the fundamental difference between the two approaches lies in the Salafī adherence to the literal sense of the texts and the Imami inclination toward interpretive readings of the divine attributes.

Conclusion

The main findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Salafī hadith commentators, relying on the principle of "*Bilā kayf*" (affirmation without asking how) and adhering to the apparent meaning of the textual sources, interpret the pronoun *Ṣūratihī* in the hadith "God created Adam in His image" (*khalaqa Ādam ‘alā ṣūratihī*) as referring to God. They regard *Wajh* as a real divine attribute whose modality is unknowable. According to this view, Adam was created upon an image befitting the divine essence, without resemblance to created beings. Regarding the attribute of "Face," Salafī scholars affirm the literal and ocular vision of the divine Face in the Hereafter and consider it a real and concrete blessing for the inhabitants of Paradise. The foundations of this position are strict adherence to the apparent meaning of hadith texts and the avoidance of allegorical interpretation. In contrast, Imami hadith commentators, adopting an interpretive approach, understand *Ṣūrah* as the manifestation of divine attributes in the human being or as referring to the unique mode of Adam's creation. They sometimes

return the pronoun *Şūratihī* to Adam (in the sense of instantaneous and direct creation) and at other times to God (in the sense that Adam is the locus of manifestation of divine names and attributes), while consistently rejecting any notion of corporeality. With regard to *Wajh*, Imami commentators interpret it as either the luminous reality of the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) or the divine essence itself, stripped of any literal or physical meaning, and present it as the mediating means through which creation relates to the Creator. The epistemological basis of this approach lies in interpreting ambiguous texts (*Mutashābihāt*) in light of definitive Qur'ānic verses (*Muḥkamāt*) and the narrations of the Infallible Imams.

2) A comparative analysis of Shi'i and Salafi hadith-commentary approaches demonstrates that the Imami position grounded in Qur'ānic interpretation, the tradition of the Infallibles, and rational principles, exhibits a deeper coherence with the doctrines of divine monotheism and transcendence. By rejecting literalist readings and interpreting the attribute of *Şūrah* as the manifestation of divine attributes in humanity and the attribute of *Wajh* as the divine essence or the divine representatives, this approach remains safeguarded from the pitfalls of anthropomorphism and Incarnation.

Conversely, the Salafi method, while faithful to the literal wording of hadith texts and cautious about interpretation, faces significant challenges due to the absence of a systematic theological and rational explanation. This lack renders it vulnerable to corporealist or limiting interpretations that conflict with the principle of divine transcendence.

Therefore, from a scholarly and theological perspective, the Imami interpretive approach emerges as more coherent and more consistent with both revealed texts and rational foundations.

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