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To cite this article:

Ansari, Mir Sadeq. 2025. "Literalism, Metaphor, and Transformation: Maskh in the Ikhtilāf Al-Ḥadīth Tradition." *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 10 (3):e104. <https://doi.org/10.55831/ajis.v10i3.817>

LITERALISM, METAPHOR, AND TRANSFORMATION: MASKH IN THE IKHTILĀF AL-ḤADĪTH TRADITION¹

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Abstract: The topic of evolution is a divisive issue and interlocutors have disagreed about hermeneutical approaches. Metaphorical appropriation of scriptural passages can be a determining factor in whether a Muslim inclines toward a compatible view between Islam and the theory of evolution (ToE). This article studies these conflicting hermeneutical principles through the incident of the *maskh*, an event in the Qur’ān where certain Jews (and potentially Christians) were metamorphosed into monkeys and swine. Due to many scriptural passages from the Qur’an and the hadith corpus that deal with this topic with some obvious difficulties (*ishkāks*), this analysis is placed within the historical context of the *ikhtilāf al-ḥadīth* genre. *Ikhtilāf al-ḥadīth* is a genre that primarily deals with contradictory and problematic *ḥadīth* reports. It can be argued that the *ikhtilāf* genre is more in need of academic focus in regard to hermeneutics, given its closer relationship to the bulk of the *ḥadīth* corpus (as opposed to a narrow selection of legal or theological *ḥadīth*). This study analysed how two prominent early authors of the *ikhtilāf* genre, al-Ṭahāwī and Ibn Qutayba, dealt hermeneutically with the metamorphosis (*maskh*) incident. The hermeneutical rules around metaphorical/literal readings were extracted from this genre through the *maskh* case study and juxtaposed with contemporary assumptions. The article’s findings question common assumptions about who were literalists and who frequently chose metaphorical readings regarding *ḥadīth*. It also showcases early examples where a combined approach to being open to metaphorical readings can co-exist with taking the entire *ḥadīth* corpus seriously around an issue.

Keywords: *evolution, al-Ṭahāwī, maskh, metamorphosis, metaphorical, literal, ikhtilāf al-ḥadīth*

INTRODUCTION

Evolution is a key contention in the discourse of Islam and science. Thinkers have proposed various ways in which Islam and evolution can be reconciled or not. One key aspect of the

¹ This paper was presented at a conference organised by Leiden University in July 2021 on “Islam and Evolution.”

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discussion is hermeneutics. People have provided different proposals to appropriate evolution into scripture or use hermeneutics to reject the theory of evolution (ToE).

One distinguishing factor between different Muslim approaches to perceived conflicts between scriptural accounts and the ToE is the employment of metaphorical readings of scriptural texts. Modern Muslims who have embraced the ToE in its entirety often deplore the growing lack of metaphorical readings employed by some contemporary Muslim scholars who oppose evolution due to their non-metaphorical readings.² This condemnation is often juxtaposed by the increase in metaphorical readings in the West, paralleled with *their* progress in the positive sciences.

Many contemporary Muslim voices have been calling for a metaphorical reading of some scriptural passages that seem to contradict modern science. Muslim evolutionist Guessoum, for example, deplores the over-literalist tendency of scholars towards such matters. He often cries about the fall of elite Muslims to literalism as opposed to the West where it seems to be more widespread among the lesser educated. Rana Dajani, a Muslim molecular biologist claims that “the story of Adam in the Qur’an as well as other stories should not be taken literally. They are metaphors to learn lessons.”³ Others, such as Muhammad Shahrur and Abdus-Sabūr Shāhin have theorised that the Qur’ānic word for humans *bashar* could be read as referring metaphorically to pre-Adamic beings (part of the chain of evolution) while the other word for human beings used in the Qur’ān (*insān*) signals post-Adamic beings.⁴

For many Muslims, however, the above approaches are viewed as unorthodox given the explicit texts about the creation of Adam from dust in the Qur’ān, created by God’s “two Hands” and all human beings being explicitly referred to as the “children of Adam.”⁵ Regardless of these differing stances, clearly hermeneutics has a strong role to play in the conversation of evolution and Islam. When such passages of scripture can be read metaphorically and when must they be taken literally is precisely what this article aims to address.

The hermeneutical stance on metaphors and symbolisms (*majāz*) in relation to the ToE has been explored by David Jalajel in his dissertation on Islam and biological evolution. Jalajel compares some of the core tenets of the ToE with the Māturīdī, Ash‘arī and Atharī classical theological schools of Islam.⁶ According to Jalajel, “language is the decisive factor in

² Nidhal Guessoum, “The Qur’ān, Science and the (Related) Contemporary Muslim Discourse,” *Zygon* 43, no. 2 (2008): 413-15.

³ Rana Dajani, “Evolution and Islam: Is there a Contradiction?” in *Islam and Science: Muslim Responses to Science’s Big Questions*, ed. Usama Hasan, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu and Mehdi Golshani (Muslim World Science Initiative, 2016), 146.

⁴ Saeed, Sohaib. “The Shahin Affair and the Evolution of *uṣūl al-tafsīr*.” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 21, no. 3 (2019): 116.

⁵ Yaqeen Institute, “Is Darwinism Compatible with Islam? Evolution through an Islamic Lens | NJ Dawah Conference 2020,” YouTube video, 0:43:06, posted December 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=caSUG0WyOzM>.

⁶ While mainly looking at the compatibility of evolution and Islam from the theological schools, Jalajel also explores the epistemological weight of *ḥadīth (khabr wāḥid)* from works on legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*).

determining” whether a text is open to interpretation. He also explicitly states that a literal meaning is to be exhausted unless a need presents itself that forces the interpreter to a metaphorical reading, by referencing Ibn Qudāma (d. 1223).⁷ Jalajel stipulates that usage of metaphors can only be done with linguistic precedence of such use.

More recently, Malik brings more nuance to the ways of metaphorical interpretation by drawing from al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and his five levels of literal and non-literal interpretations of sacred texts in *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity (Fayṣal al-tafriqa bayna al-Islām wa al-Zanadaqa)*.⁸ Malik discusses al-Ghazālī’s methodology of hermeneutical readings ranging from the most literal ontological reading (*al-wujūd al-dhātī*) to the most metaphorical reading (*al-wujūd al-shabahī al-majāzī*) and connects it to evolution.⁹ Malik demonstrates that, according to al-Ghazālī, more metaphorical meanings of Prophetic reports are only to be resorted to when required. Al-Ghazālī argues that as long as one accepts any level of meaning (out of the five) for a given prophetic report, then that interpreter cannot be said to be belying what the Prophet is saying (although they can be viewed as falling outside orthodoxy). Overall, Malik emphasises that a Ghazālian approach to *ḥadīth* distinguishes between mass narrated *mutawātir* reports and single chain transmissions (*khabr āhād*) but stresses that such *āhād* reports are not to be rejected.

This article compares the hermeneutical rules surrounding the employment of literal and metaphorical readings (highlighted by Jalajel and Malik) extracted from the theology and legal genres with hermeneutical rules extracted from a new genre: contradictory and problematic *ḥadīth*, *ikhtilāf al-ḥadīth*. The *ikhtilāf* genre is significant. First, it substantially predates the creedal and legal works quoted so far. Second, because it deals with the entire *ḥadīth* corpus, it provides wider sampling material from which to derive hermeneutical rules. Given that only a small percentage of the *ḥadīth* literature (similar to Qur’ānic verses) is legal, and an even smaller ratio can be strictly categorised as theological, this in effect prevents significant sections of the *ḥadīth* corpus from being analysed for hermeneutical principles (assuming they are significantly different). This paper thus aims to discern whether *ḥadīth* that are not strictly about the nature of God or a legal type can carry different hermeneutical principles as opposed to *ḥadīth* that are. In other words, this study explores the hermeneutics of a discussion on ToE and Islamic sacred texts with heightened epistemological emphasis on *ḥadīth* at large.

One of the primary objectives with which works of the *ikhtilāf* genre were authored was to defend the accepted *ḥadīth* body from containing contradictions and logical fallacies. This polemical objective makes it a dynamic field where clashes of scripture and faith (particularly in the form of problematic *ḥadīth*) and reason can be studied. Al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204) is credited as authoring the first text – *Contradictions in Hadith (ikhtilāf al-ḥadīth)* – in this genre, a text

From one angle, this article compares the hermeneutical rules derived by Jalajel from these works and genres to see if they match the same rules derived from *ikhtilāf al-ḥadīth* works.

⁷ David Jalajel, “Islam and Biological Evolution: Exploring Classical Sunnī Sources and Methodologies” (MA diss., University of Western Cape, 2009), 32.

⁸ Shoaib Ahmed Malik, *Islam and Evolution: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm* (Routledge, 2021), 268.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 280–82.

from which the genre gained its name. However, this work mainly deals with legal contradictions found in *ḥadīth*. The genre's scope was expanded to non-legal *ḥadīth* by Ibn Qutayba (d. 276) and his *Interpreting Hadith Contradictions (ta'wīl mukhtalif al-ḥadīth)*. The genre of problematic *ḥadīth*, however, found full maturation through al-Ṭaḥāwī's (d. 321) magnum opus *An Explanation of the Difficulties in Hadith (sharḥ mushkil al-āthār)*¹⁰ in which the entire *ḥadīth* corpus was brought under scrutiny. It has been observed that the naming of *mushkil*, as found in al-Ṭaḥāwī's *Mushkil*, alludes to this expanded goal of exploring reason-based difficulties found in the content of *ḥadīth*, beyond explicit examples of contradictions.¹¹

In the personality of Ibn Qutayba is found a polymath specialising in the Arabic language and often more closely affiliated with the Atharī ways of belief. Both polemical defenders of the *ḥadīth* corpus explicitly state in their works in this field that their aims are to show that no contradictions exist between prophetic narrations and there is inherent coherency across the entire *ḥadīth* literature. As a Ḥanafī authority and great traditionist (*muḥaddith*), al-Ṭaḥāwī uniquely combines in his personality the ideal mixture of someone known for their use of reason, *'aql* (and his Ḥanafī-ness) as well as traditions, *naql* (stemming from him being a traditionist). Al-Ṭaḥāwī's *Mushkil* being a primary *ḥadīth* collection and containing 6,179 reports make this work even more significant. His universal acceptance by all three Sunnī theological schools as a reference point adds credibility and weight for his hermeneutic to be studied.

Because the ToE was not discussed by early authors of the *ikhtilāf* genre, this study has engaged the hermeneutics surrounding the literal/metaphorical use of *ḥadīth* in these works through a prism/case study: the supernatural metamorphosis (*maskh*) incident, explicitly referenced in the Qur'ān and many *ḥadīth* in which God decreed for a rebellious community from the past to be metamorphosed into pigs and monkeys.¹² Three verses from the Qur'ān explicitly mention the *maskh* incident.

1. In Surah al-Baqara, verse 65, the Qur'ān refers to those who transgressed in relation to the Sabbath: "So We said to them, 'Be disgraced apes.'"
2. Verse 166 of Surah al-A'rāf expresses the same phenomenon with almost the same wording.
3. Verse 60 of Surah al-Māida describes those who were given the worst punishment from God as "those who earned Allah's condemnation and displeasure—some being reduced to apes and pigs."¹³

The *maskh* incident has been chosen because it displays a debate with different hermeneutical approaches being applied by early Muslim scholars and exegetes. In other

¹⁰ Referred to as the *Mushkil* in this article.

¹¹ Sadeq Ansari, "The Role of 'Aql in Determining the Rules of Matn Criticism in al-Ṭaḥāwī's Sharḥ Mushkil al-Āthār" (PhD diss., Charles Sturt University, 2022), 15–17.

¹² David Jalajel prefers to translate *qird* into simian as this word can mean monkey or ape matching the Arabic original. I have used the two words interchangeably to achieve this. See Jalajel, "Islam and Biological Evolution," 66, fn. 181.

¹³ Both words – apes and pigs – carry the definite article with them in this verse while the other two verses are in the indefinite form. Many *ḥadīth* are relevant to this incident, which will be discussed further below.

words, instead of haphazardly studying different Arabic hermeneutical principles found scattered throughout *ikhtilāf al-ḥadīth* texts, this research hones in on the hermeneutical principles through the *maskh* example. Thus, this case study was selected for the extraction of hermeneutical principles in relation to literal and metaphorical readings, not because the *maskh* phenomenon is substantially relevant to the ToE.¹⁴

This article primarily extracts hermeneutical principles of the Arabic language that can be extracted from the *maskh* case study. In particular, it deals with when the approach of al-Ṭaḥāwī and his theory of flexible Arabic interpretations contrasts with his interlocutors as well as contemporaries like Ibn Qutayba who also analysed this incident. What al-Ṭaḥāwī deems as excessive “literalism” will be unearthed through this case study as well as unsound metaphorical interpretations. The approach of earlier scholars toward the metamorphosis phenomenon will then be juxtaposed to modern calls for metaphorical readings.

The first section of this article will critically analyse al-Ṭaḥāwī’s approach in dealing with the numerous texts related to the *maskh* incident. Al-Ṭaḥāwī’s hermeneutical principles will be extracted and contrasted with those of Ibn Qutayba’s. This analysis will provide foundational hermeneutical principles in relation to literal-metaphorical readings derived exclusively from the *ikhtilāf* genre. Commentaries on the Qur’ān from the same era will be juxtaposed to add further light on the aspects of contention for the verses surrounding the *maskh* issue. Finally, an appreciation of al-Ṭaḥāwī’s and Ibn Qutayba’s impact on the generations of Qur’ānic and *ḥadīth* commentators will be arrived at by contrasting these two authors’ views with those of the classical period, namely Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) and Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 1449).

The second section will fast forward to the modern era and look at how contemporary exegetes have dealt with the *maskh* phenomenon, particularly in relation to the emphasis of metaphorical readings. The hermeneutical principles from the *ikhtilāf* genre will be contrasted to those of modern exegetes, such as their approach to literal/metaphorical readings of scripture, acceptance of miracles at large and their dealings with the *ḥadīth* corpus on such matters. Finally, I will attempt to draw parallels between modern approaches to the *maskh* and calls by Muslim evolutionists for more metaphorical readings, highlighting commonalities (such as lack of interest in dealing with the *ḥadīth* corpus) as well as differences.

¹⁴ Sometimes discussions can be found around the *maskh* incident, quoting it to somehow prove evolution in a dubious way or suggesting the reverse took place (monkeys came from humans and not the other way around). To see how *both arguments are weak* and how metamorphosis is not the same as “quadrupeds,” see Muntasir Zaman, *The Height of Prophet Adam: At the Crossroads of Science and Scripture* (Beacon Books, 2022), 166–69.

CLASSICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Al-Ṭaḥāwī's and Ibn Qutayba's Analysis of the Maskh

Al-Ṭaḥāwī discusses the metamorphosis incident and related legal matters over three chapters (526–28) of his *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*. The gist of the story is that a group of people were made to go through the process of metamorphosis (*maskh*); that is, they were turned into apes and pigs as a punishment. Most *tafsīr* sources mention this incident in relation to a group of Jewish people in the past since the three verses that cite this out-of-the-ordinary happening are in relation to the children of Israel. Some sources, however, do include the verses including a group of Christians (the deniers among those who ate from the miraculous banquet with Jesus). Al-Ṭaḥāwī does not delve into the identity of the people involved as he is only interested in chapter 526 of the *Mushkil* – whether the pigs and apes we see today are from the descendants of the former punished people. This is because al-Ṭaḥāwī is more interested in this question instead of a generic exegetical commentary that frames the stories mentioned in the three verses in a historic context.

Table 1. Ḥadīth reports analysed by al-Ṭaḥāwī in his *Mushkil*

	<i>Ḥadīth</i>	Source & versions	Implications	Reference
A.	<i>God has never destroyed a people nor have they been metamorphosed in a way so that they could have descendants. The pigs and monkeys existed before this incident</i>	<i>Ḥadīth</i> quoted from the Prophet. Two other versions (chains) are quoted.	Denies procreation of the punished people	3 <i>ḥadīth</i> from Chapter 526 (<i>Mushkil</i>) 3268-3270
B.	<i>God has not metamorphosed any people such that they have left behind them progeny. These pigs and monkeys are from the ones that existed before this incident.</i>	<i>Ḥadīth</i> is quoted from Abdullah ibn Mas'ud. Another <i>ḥadīth</i> (with similar meaning) is also quoted.	Denies procreation of the punished people	2 <i>ḥadīth</i> from Chapter 526 (<i>Mushkil</i>) 3271-3272
C.	<i>A community from Bani Israel were lost and it is not known what happened to them. I fear that they could be rats. This is because when it finds the milk of cattle, it drinks from it and when it finds the milk of camel, it does not drink from it.</i>	<i>Ḥadīth</i> quoted from the Prophet. Another <i>ḥadīth</i> implies a similar conclusion	Implies procreation of the punished people	2 <i>ḥadīth</i> from Chapter 527 (<i>Mushkil</i>) 3273-3274
D.	<i>A community from Bani Israel were metamorphosed into creatures from the earth. I fear that it is this (lizards). So empty your pots.</i>	<i>Ḥadīth</i> quoted from the Prophet. One other version is quoted.	Implies procreation of the punished people	2 <i>ḥadīth</i> from Chapter 528 (<i>Mushkil</i>) 3275-3276
E.	Similar <i>ḥadīth</i> to the above except it says the Prophet did not eat from it nor did he prohibit the eating of it.	<i>Ḥadīth</i> quoted from the Prophet. One other version is quoted.	Implies procreation of the punished people	2 <i>ḥadīth</i> from Chapter 528 (<i>Mushkil</i>) 3277-3278
F.	A few other <i>ḥadīth</i> with similar meaning to D and E from other narrators	All <i>ḥadīth</i> quoted from the Prophet	Implies procreation of the punished people	4 <i>ḥadīth</i> from Chapter 528 (<i>Mushkil</i>) 3279-3283

	<i>Ḥadīth</i>	Source & versions	Implications	Reference
G	A cluster of <i>ḥadīth</i> clearly indicating the dislike of the Prophet for cooked lizards, yet clear permissibility. Nothing in these <i>ḥadīth</i> connect the lizards to the <i>maskh</i>	All <i>ḥadīth</i> quote the Prophet	Denies procreation of the punished people (based on no connection being drawn)	5 <i>ḥadīth</i> from Chapter 528 3284-3288

Al-Ṭaḥāwī begins this section by narrating from the Prophet and Abdullah Ibn Mas'ūd that: "God has never destroyed a people nor have they been metamorphosed in a way so that they could have descendants. The pigs and monkeys existed before this incident."¹⁵ After presenting five versions of this *ḥadīth*,¹⁶ al-Ṭaḥāwī's interlocutor objects by saying: "how can you accept these narrations when they go against the verse of the Qur'ān: 'He made them into monkeys and pigs.' The definite article (*al*), is used here and that means it is the same monkeys and pigs that we see today."¹⁷

What becomes evident is that a single definite article can lead to some sort of difficulty in the content of the *ḥadīth* (*ishkāl*). The *ishkāl* is that the *ḥadīth* reports contradict the verse of the Qur'ān and, as a result, a cluster of *ḥadīth* are to be rejected.

Al-Ṭaḥāwī answers this objection put forth by the "ignorant" (*jāhilīn*) by highlighting that it is possible that pigs and monkeys existed before this metamorphosis took place, and the pigs and monkeys that were seen in his day are their descendants. It can be deduced from this that, for al-Ṭaḥāwī, the definite article does not necessarily need to point to something "present and know." However, at the time that God chose to punish the rebellious group of people, He turned them into pigs and monkeys, and these humans/animals were not permitted to procreate. Al-Ṭaḥāwī simply concludes his explanation by stating:

so it has become clear, with God's praises and blessing, the possibility of how we have interpreted the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet, God's peace and blessings be upon him, in a way such that it does not contradict the book of God (Qur'an).¹⁸

It is important to note that, if the monkeys and pigs that existed at al-Ṭaḥāwī's time were the descendants of the humans that were transformed in the past, then that would belie not only al-Ṭaḥāwī's interpretation of the cluster of *ḥadīth* around this topic but many of the *ḥadīth* mentioned (see rows A and B from the table above).

In chapter 527,¹⁹ a cluster of two *ḥadīth* narrated from Abu Hurayra are discussed. Here, the Prophet gives the opinion that rats were perhaps the descendants of rats that were the result of *maskh* before his time. Al-Ṭaḥāwī suggests the Prophet most likely said this before he was

¹⁵ Abū Ja'far Aḥmad al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār* [Explanation of Problematic Traditions], ed. Shu'ayb al-Arnā'ūt (Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 2010), 8:321.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8:323.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8:324.

¹⁹ In Case 528 of the *Mushkil*, a cluster of nine *ḥadīth* also indicate that our Prophet believed it possible for *mamsūkh* communities to procreate. These *ḥadīth* are about *dibāb* (lizards). Al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, 8:328–338.

informed by God exactly into what animals were a group from the Banī Israel transformed. Not only is this the earliest record of this opinion,²⁰ but he also briefly explains how confusion may have come about. Al-Ṭaḥāwī argues that the Companions who heard this *ḥadīth* (rows C, D and E from Table 1) did not hear the other *ḥadīth* (rows A and B from Table 1). Each group kept narrating only what they knew.²¹

Unpacking the Objection and al-Ṭaḥāwī's Response

A few hermeneutical principles for al-Ṭaḥāwī can be extracted from his response to the *maskh* objection. Other studies clearly demonstrate that al-Ṭaḥāwī abandons the primary meaning of the text for a secondary meaning when two conditions are met (coined as the *ishkāl-cum-precedent*): a logical *ishkāl* is present with the primary meaning and precedence exists for the secondary type (metaphorical) usage in the language.²² In relation to the *maskh* example, the words “monkeys and pigs” appearing in Qur’ān 5:60 in the definitive form would initially suggest the “existing and known” animals are the ones intended, i.e. monkeys and pigs today are the descendants of the punished people as the interlocutor raises. Al-Ṭaḥāwī abandons this primary meaning due to the presence of an *ishkāl* that is the explicit *ḥadīth* that states that those punished people/monkeys did not leave any progeny. Because of the overwhelming amount of *ḥadīth* evidence, al-Ṭaḥāwī finds an interpretation that can accommodate the definite article as well as the *ḥadīth* evidence (that today’s monkeys are not from the *mamsūkh* people). Contrary to common assumptions, this places al-Ṭaḥāwī, a polemical supporter of the *ḥadīth* corpus and significant primary collector of *ḥadīth*, as a non-literalist, while placing his rationalist interlocutors into that camp.

Defending the *ḥadīth* corpus from containing contradictions (a primary aim of the *Mushkil*) makes al-Ṭaḥāwī a leading figure of the traditionalist camp (*ahl al-ḥadīth*) or at the least a sympathiser. On the contrary, his interlocutors stuck to the literal meanings of Arabic words and prepositions and called for denial of any *ḥadīth* contrary to the literal meaning, a phenomena that has parallels in other bodies of literature. The tension between al-Ṭaḥāwī and his rationalist interlocutors mirrors a similar clash in the field of Qur’ānic variant readings for example. Shah discusses how the growing body of rationalist grammarians collides with the community of Qur’ānic readers (*al-Qurrā*).²³ This paradigm shift is significant to the

²⁰ Similar explanations were found in the writings of Ibn Hajr and Ibn Atiya. However, these were written centuries after al-Ṭaḥāwī.

²¹ Al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, 8:325–327.

²² Ansari names this two-fold rule as the *ishkāl-cum-precedent*. Although al-Ṭaḥāwī’s explicit usages of the terms *majāzī:haqīqī* are investigated in that study, primary meaning refers broadly to the most common usage of a word (or the first meaning) that comes to a reader’s mind. See, Ansari, “Role of ‘Aql,” 182.

²³ Mustafa Shah, “The Early Arabic Grammarians’ Contributions to the Collection and Authentication of Qur’anic Readings: The Prelude to Ibn Mujāhid’s Kitāb al-Sabca,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2004): 78–79, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2004.6.1.72>.

discussion on evolution and Islam because often those advocating for total embrace of the evolution theory accuse traditionalists of being historically and currently literalists.²⁴

It can also be safely deduced from al-Ṭaḥāwī's response to the definite article used in Qur'ān 5:60 that one of his primary objectives is to come up with an interpretation that can be reconciled with the *ḥadīth*, and what al-Ṭaḥāwī believes to be authentic *ḥadīth* not to be rejected. In doing this, for al-Ṭaḥāwī, as long as one possible interpretation exists, regardless if it is only unproven potential or established fact, then a real contradiction does not necessarily exist and no text needs to be rejected. Al-Ṭaḥāwī states the "possibility" (*iḥtimāl*) of his interpretation removing the need to reject the *ḥadīth*. In other words, al-Ṭaḥāwī does not feel the need to prove this possibility. An *ishkāl* in a *ḥadīth* may create difficulties in comprehension; however, the *ḥadīth* is only to be rejected, according to al-Ṭaḥāwī, if an inherent impossibility exists (not just a difficulty in comprehension) and no possible interpretation can reconcile the two.

Ibn Qutayba and the Maskh

Ibn Qutayba starts his discussion by an interesting *ḥadīth* (found in Bukhari), about a monkey stoning another monkey due to fornication. Ibn Qutayba quotes the questioner as "this must mean that the monkeys are following the Tawrat and Jewish in religion."²⁵ Ibn Qutayba is quick to point out that these words are a reported saying of someone from the Successor (*Tābi'ī*) generation, not from the Prophet nor the Companions. Ibn Qutayba also labels the questioner's attitude as a mockery of the religion (*istihzā*).

Al-Ṭaḥāwī and Ibn Qutayba, despite their differences, openly defend the traditionalists (*ahl al-ḥadīth*) group against the attacks of the rationalists and philosophers. However, Ibn Qutayba, like al-Ṭaḥāwī's interlocutor, uses the definite form of the words monkeys and pigs in the Qur'ān (5:60) to argue that it must mean the animals "that we see" are from this group.²⁶ Given that Ibn Qutayba wrote before al-Ṭaḥāwī, it could be reasonably assumed that al-Ṭaḥāwī was referring to him when he speaks of this view (although this would go against al-Ṭaḥāwī's usual methodology of naming his sources).

However, on closer examination it appears the "*qawm*" to which al-Ṭaḥāwī refers is not the same group as Ibn Qutayba. First, al-Ṭaḥāwī says this *qawm* denies the *ḥadīth* evidence that he presents around this issue only because of the definite article. As for Ibn Qutayba, he opines that those monkeys had procreated, unless Ibn Qutayba adds "the hadith of Umm Habība (d. 45 AH)²⁷ is authentic, in which case it would be as the Prophet has said so (they that did not pro-create)."²⁸ One could assume that Ibn Qutayba was perhaps not fully aware of the

²⁴ This will be discussed further below when modern exegetical views on the *maskh* issue are discussed. By literalists, I refer to those who strictly adopt the literal meaning of the words based on the first meaning the text imparts to the reader's mind.

²⁵ 'Abd Allāh Ibn Qutayba, *Ta'wīl mukhtalif al-ḥadīth* [Interpretation of Conflicting Hadith], ed. Salim ibn 'Id al-Hilali (Dar Ibn al-Qayyim, 2009), 473.

²⁶ Ibid., 474.

²⁷ One of the wives of the Prophet and the daughter of the Qurayshī leader Abū Sufyān.

²⁸ Ibn Qutayba, *Ta'wīl mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*, 475.

authenticity of the *ḥadīth* reports that al-Ṭaḥāwī argues for, which includes *ḥadīth* in Sahih Muslim and other famous books. It can be concluded that Ibn Qutayba arrived at the same conclusion as the rationalist interlocutors of al-Ṭaḥāwī but for different reasons. For the latter, the definite article in the Qur'ān is a strong enough reason to deny the *ḥadīth* narrations (purely based on the *matn*) whereas for the former, the narrations stand if their authenticity is proven and the definite article by itself cannot disprove those narrations.

Ibn Hajar, concurring with al-Ṭaḥāwī, also states the relied on position is that the *mamsūkh* animals did not pro-create.²⁹ However, he strangely continues to suggest that perhaps the real monkeys at the time learnt some actions from the *mamsūkh* monkeys and that has passed down to now.

It can be concluded from Ibn Qutayba's approach (as well as al-Ṭaḥāwī's) that all revelatory material needs to be consulted and radical decisions based on strict application of rules surrounding Arabic prepositional words and preposition-like-words (such as the definite article) before *ḥadīth* are deemed weak or fabricated. In fact, Ibn Qutayba leaving the door open in case the *ḥadīth* is authentic is also telling and one could assume he would have found a hermeneutical technique (perhaps similar to al-Ṭaḥāwī's) in justifying the cluster of *ḥadīth* around the issue the moment he was certain of the *ḥadīth*'s authenticity. By comparing the two authors and their treatment of this issue, differences in the matter's treatment stand out. Al-Ṭaḥāwī dedicating three chapters to this issue as well as relevant sub-issues connected with it highlights his more encyclopaedic approach to the genre of *ḥadīth* reports and *ishkāl*. Al-Ṭaḥāwī's general approach toward the *matn* as well as *sanads* of *ḥadīth* can also be argued has significant advantageous unique aspects; however, this is outside the scope of this article. Despite these differences, the importance of not denying authentic *ḥadīth* is highlighted in both their treatments of the issue.

Contemporaneous Exegetes to al-Ṭaḥāwī and Ibn Qutayba

Ikhtilāf al-ḥadīth is primarily a *ḥadīth*-based genre and the works of al-Ṭaḥāwī and Ibn Qutayba thus far analysed look at the *maskh* phenomenon from that perspective. However, given the *ishkāl* around the matter resolves around three Qur'ān verses, commentaries from the fourth century can be consulted to shed extra historical light on the hermeneutical discussions that have thus far been discussed in relation to al-Ṭaḥāwī and Ibn Qutayba.

From the fourth Hijri century (contemporaneous to al-Ṭaḥāwī) four works of *tafsīr* were chosen survey their hermeneutical discussion of the same three *maskh* verses mentioned above.³⁰ These included the great exegetical works of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310), Ibn Abi Hātim (d. 327), al-Māturīdī (d. 333) and al-Samarqandī (d. 373) (see Table 1.2 below).

²⁹ Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Fath al-Bari sharh sahih al-Bukhārī* [Fath al-Bārī: Commentary on Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī], ed. Samir ibn Amin al-Zuhri (Dar al-Maʿrifa, 1959), 7:160.

³⁰ Popular *tafsīr* from the Sunnī tradition were selected for comparing al-Ṭaḥāwī and Ibn Qutayba's analyses (from the same century). The list is by no means exhaustive; however, an attempt has been made to include *tafsīr* that are popular for their narrations (such as al-Ṭabarī's) and theological perspectives (such as al-Māturīdī's).

Table 2. Coverage of *maskh* in the 3rd/4th century *tafsīrs*

Tafsīr	A) Mujāhid mentioned	B) Mujāhid defended	C) Procreation	D) Definite article
Ibn Qutayba (d. 276)	✗	✗	✓	✓
al-Ṭabarī (d. 310)	✓	✗	✓	✗
al-Ṭahāwī (d. 321)	✗	✗	✓	✓
Ibn Abi Hatim (d. 327)	✓	✗	✓	✗
Al-Māturīdī (d. 333)	✓	✗	✗	✗
Samarqandi (d. 373)	✗	✗	✓	✗

Column A highlights whether Mujāhid's metaphorical interpretation is mentioned. Column B lists whether Mujāhid's view is defended in any way. Column C mentions whether any *ḥadīth* that remarks that the metamorphosed did not procreate is mentioned. Lastly, Column D states whether the definite article of the word in the Qur'ānic verse is discussed in the *tafsīr*.

Among the other reports found in these *tafsīr*, only one view from Ibn Abbas' famous student Mujāhid sees this verse metaphorically. That is, according to Mujāhid, the *maskh* only took place in their hearts and not bodies. In the early *tafsīr* table above, we can see three *tafsīr* mention this view. However, it is never quoted as the preferred view. In fact, in al-Māturīdī's *tafsīr*, a follower of the Ḥanafī creed like al-Ṭahāwī, and someone whose theological inclinations offer a greater role for *'aql* – he not only defends the miraculous *maskh* incident but even defends some of the details provided in the *tafsīr* literature. For example, he explains how it is rationally conceivable that metamorphosed people could still think and feel like humans after their transformation. Only in the third verse (Araf:166) does al-Māturīdī quote Mujāhid's view without naming him and simply says that “we have no need to know the reality of this last view.”³¹ Given that al-Māturīdī rationally defends and justifies the physical *maskh* throughout his *tafsīr* collection, it can be assumed that he feels no need to expand on this last view, can only be a lesser preferred view of his.

Al-Ṭabarī quotes from Mujāhid's metaphorical interpretation but strongly refutes it. Al-Ṭabarī states that Mujāhid's reading not only contradicts the apparent/explicit (*ẓāhir*) meaning of the verse³² but it also goes against the unanimous view (*al-mujma' 'alayh*) on the matter. Al-Ṭabarī's refutation includes a significant hermeneutical defence he makes against arbitrary metaphorical readings. His argument gives many extraordinary events that the Qur'ān mentions in relation to strange happenings to the children of Israel in the past. If this example of the *maskh* is interpreted metaphorically then all the other events must also be interpreted as such. However, it appears that at the time of al-Ṭabarī no one was intending to interpret all those events metaphorically. In other words, al-Ṭabarī stipulates that one must have a consistent approach towards taking a metaphorical reading and/or it must be needs-based or else

³¹ Abū Mansur al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunnah* [The Interpretations of the People of the Sunnah] (Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2005), 5:74.

³² Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* [Keys to the Unseen] (Dar Ihya al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1999), 3:541–42.

metaphorical interpretations would have to be accepted even when one sees no issue with the literal meaning of a phrase.

Al-Ṭaḥāwī often shows that the rules of the Arabic language, whether it relates to prepositions, nominative words or phrasal sentences, are not as rigid and absolute as his interlocutors may like to think. In fact, if al-Ṭaḥāwī is compared with his rationalist interlocutors of his time, he would come across as a strong advocate for figurative readings. Al-Ṭaḥāwī reminds the reader constantly of the flexibility of the Arabic language. This does not mean, however, that he can extract any meaning he wishes from any context. He can also be observed blatantly showing his dislike for metaphorical readings when he finds them to be unnecessary.

Also unique to al-Māturīdī's *tafsīr* is that the issue of no procreation taking place with the *mamsūkh* humans (which we discussed just before in relation to chapter 526 of al-Ṭaḥāwī's *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*) is not mentioned. It appears in all the other *tafsīr*. However, al-Māturīdī quotes reports that describe the transmuted humans being able to communicate with their human relatives by sign language and then being destroyed. He seems to see no potential logical objection by the transmuted beings being destroyed after three days, and hence not leaving progeny. If one was to read more into al-Māturīdī's silence on this issue, it would mean that at his time, he saw no contradictions with pigs and monkeys existing and them not being from the progeny of the transmuted people.

Unfortunately, I saw no *tafsīr* focusing on the *definite article* (*al-ḥarf al-ta'rif*) in the sample *tafsīr* I looked up, ending in the 4th century. This can be due to the definite article of the verse not being a widely contested matter, or explanations like al-Ṭaḥāwī's may have left no need for further discussion. We can see that all these *tafsīr* took the literal meaning as the preferred one. Although al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Abi Hatim and al-Māturīdī mention the metaphorical reading, one can conclude that these are not their most preferred views, and they definitely do not mention anything toward the impossibility of the literal meaning. Recent studies in *tafsīr* have shown that the early *tafsīr* genre was polyvalent and could mention many views without feeling the need to prefer one explicitly, unlike modern ones, as we will come to see.³³

The *tafsīr* that have been tabulated are all from the 4th century of Islam. As for some of the famous *tafsīr* from the classical era, a similar pattern can be observed. A brief scan of random popular commentaries ranging from Zamakhshari (d. 1144), Rāzī (d. 1210), Ibn Atiya (d. 1146) and Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201) show a clear preference is made for the literal meaning.³⁴ From a hermeneutical perspective, I want to state that Razi mentions this view of Mujāhid – and says that despite the *tawil* not being too distant in and of itself, he says there is no need to take this view as no *ishkāl* forces one to leave the *ẓāhir* meaning. Al-Ṭaḥāwī, centuries before Razi, has also explicitly expressed his dislike for interpretations that go against the literal meanings

³³ Pieter Coppens, "The Hermeneutics of the Sublime: Reading the Qur'an in Light of Philosophy," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 23, no. 1 (2021): 33, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2021.0450>.

³⁴ Similar to the choice of 4th century commentaries, this list is not intended to be exhaustive and popular commentaries were chosen. An attempt has been made to reflect a variety of theological and legal schools so the analysis is not restricted to a particular school of thought.

without a specific need. Overall, in the classical works of exegetes, we see Razi, Ibn Atiya and Ibn Jawzi defending al-Ṭaḥāwī's position. Ibn al-Jawzī quotes the same examples as al-Ṭaḥāwī and offers the same argument. He even refutes Ibn Qutayba's interpretation without naming al-Ṭaḥāwī. We can see al-Ṭaḥāwī's opinion becoming the Sunnī dominant view.

The discussion thus far has highlighted that al-Ṭaḥāwī held a flexible understanding of the definite article in Qur'ān 5:60. However, their openness to metaphorical interpretations of the *maskh* was curbed by the existence of *ḥadīth* evidence on the matter. This article is not trying to portray al-Ṭaḥāwī as being literalist. In fact, deeper reading of his works shows that not only does al-Ṭaḥāwī make recourse to figurative readings, he can be observed to be pioneering some of the most imaginative types of *majāz* readings. However, as argued by al-Ṭabarī, there must be a consistent methodology (*uṣūl*) when using metaphorical readings of verses.

A summary of the main hermeneutical principles from the discussions above on al-Ṭaḥāwī and the *maskh* incident includes:

1. Literal meanings of texts are to be carried as much as possible.
2. Not denying well-known or authentic *ḥadīth* is a core principle. If taking an interpretive approach achieves this, then that is to be preferred over denying the *ḥadīth*. The best approach, however, is to take the literal reading to wherever possible.
3. Arabic rules are important and its normative rules must be upheld but not at the expense of revelatory material. Exceptions to Arabic rules that are justified with precedent are welcomed and highlight the flexible nature of the language.
4. *Ta'wīl* cannot ignore *ḥadīth* literature.
5. A contradiction (or rejection of a *ḥadīth*) can be avoided by the presentation of a mere possibility (*maḥmil*). Existence of *maḥmil* is enough for something to not be considered *mustaḥīl* (logically impossible) and hence not rejected.
6. *Ishkāl-cum-precedent* rule. It needs to be remembered also that al-Ṭaḥāwī's Mu'tazilī interlocutors were extremely literalistic in those days, as opposed to what is often thought of them.

MODERN INTERPRETATIONS

Maskh in Modern Tafṣīr

So far, it has been uncovered through the *maskh* example that al-Ṭaḥāwī, perhaps the most prolific author of the *ikhtilāf al-ḥadīth* genre, advocates for a flexible understanding of the Arabic language (as shown with the example of his flexible reading of the definite article). Like most of his exegete contemporaries, al-Ṭaḥāwī also calls for consistent methodology when it comes to taking metaphorical interpretations and resorts to such interpretations if Qur'ānic evidence as well as the *ḥadīth* evidence leaves room for them. This was shown with none of the exegetes in his era favouring Mujāhid's interpretation of the *maskh*. The attention of this study now turns to the modern era to see what conclusions can be drawn about modern hermeneutical influences from discussions about the *maskh*. Before connecting the findings of

section one to the hermeneutical principles that are relevant to Islam and evolution, a quick survey of how modern Qur'ānic exegetes viewed the *maskh* case study will be conducted.³⁵

Table 3. Coverage of *maskh* in 20th century *tafsīr*

Tafsīr	A) Mujāhid mentioned	B) Mujāhid defended	C) Procreation	D) Definite Article
Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935)	✓	✓	✗	✗
Elmali Hamdi Yazir (d. 1942)	✓	✓	✗	✗
Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966)	✓	✓	✗	✗
Ibn 'Āshūr (d. 1973)	✗	✓/✗	✓	✓
Muhammad Shafi (d. 1976)		✗		✗
Abul Alā Mawḍūdī (d. 1979)	✓	✗	✓	✗
Amin Ahsan Islahi (d. 1997)	✓	✓	✗	✗

See Table 2 above for column descriptions.

When looking at modern *tafsīr* for the same three Qur'ānic verses, we find an interesting and diverse spectrum of views not evident in the *tafsīr* literature in the millennia written before it. We can see that schools of modern *tafsīr* tend to entertain the symbolic reading of the *maskh* incident attributed to Mujāhid much more seriously than *tafsīr* written before. While many of the early *tafsīr* do not even mention Mujāhid's view (let alone accept it), all modern *tafsīr* looked at in this study mention the metaphorical view at the least, if not totally embrace and defend it.

For example, in Rashid Rida's *Tafsīr al-manār*, not only do we find a clear preference for the metaphorical interpretation of the *maskh* incident, but arguments are brought forth to show how a literal transformation would be less in line with the wisdom of the whole incident. He says, if it was a physical *maskh*, there would be no moral lesson (*'ibra*) for people today – for they know that God does not change people into monkeys and pigs. Rida's proof for this is that the usual practice (*sunnah*) of how God dealt with previous nations and how He deals with people today can only be the same, and since God does not punish sinners today, it means he must have made a spiritual *maskh*.³⁶

However, not all modern *tafsīr* fall into this category. Abu' Ala Maududi mentions the different opinions around the issue but prefers a literal one. He also opines that the wording of the Qur'an seems to imply a physical transformation. He may be justified in saying this because al-Ṭabarī and Razi see the *ẓāhir* meaning of the verse as implying a physical transformation.³⁷ Ibn Ashur gives evidence for both interpretations and, unlike Rida, says that the *'ibra* (moral

³⁵ Popular influential Qur'ānic commentaries penned in the 20th century have randomly been chosen from the Arabic, Turkish and sub-continent speaking geographies of the Muslim world. The list of *tafsīrs* is by no means exhaustive.

³⁶ Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Hakīm (Tafsīr al-Manār)* [Commentary on the Wise Qur'an] (Egyptian General Book Authority, 1990), 284–285, commentary on Qur'an 2:65.

³⁷ Sayyid Abul A'lā Mawḍūdī, *Tafhim al-Qur'ān* [The Meaning of the Qur'an] (Idara Tarjuman-ul-Qur'an, 1972), vol. 1, 94.

lesson gained) can take place in both readings. He, however, posits that the wording of the verse does not necessarily support a literal meaning. Muhammad Shāfi's *tafsīr* from the sub-continent seems to echo the traditional take of the verse in line with earlier *tafsīr* and hence a literal reading.³⁸ The famous Turkish exegete Elmali Hamdi Yazir opines (in a similar logic to that of Rida). His *tafsīr* is influential in the Anatolian lands and is relevant to the evolution topic, as it has been quoted/misquoted by other authors in Turkey to support a pro-evolution stance (such as Suleyman Ates).³⁹ Unlike Rida, Qutb, Yazir and Islahi, all modern exegetes that support a literal reading of the verses (holistically or partially) quote the *ḥadīth* evidence in one way or the other.

Discussion and Analysis

While rationalist defenses of the wisdom of the metamorphosis, such as those written by al-Māturīdī in his *tafsīr*, defend the literal one, modern advocates of a rationalistic reading of scripture see the situation differently. Rashid Rida, despite quoting al-Ṭabarī's refutation of Mujāhid's view on the matter, disregards it saying it is only "his view."⁴⁰ Al-Ṭabarī's claim that an *ijmā* exists around the literal meaning is not mentioned. Rida also denies the *ḥadīth* evidence, saying that no *marfū'* *ḥadīth* exists around the topic. Perhaps, Rida was not aware of the narration in Sahih Muslim, or he deemed it not authentic. It is not surprising that in all other modern *tafsīr* that prefer a metaphorical reading, no mention of the *ḥadīth* evidence around the issue is made (such as Islahi's) or the *ḥadīth* evidence is explicitly denied (such as Qutb saying there is no *ḥadīth* around the issue).

It is clear from our comparative analysis that modern *tafsīr* have a greater inclination towards to metaphorical readings than those of the 4th Hijri century. It can be argued that the underlying reason behind this seems not to be inherent different understandings of the flexibility of the Arabic language, but perhaps the fame of positive science. Behind the efforts of modern exegetes attempting to portray Islam as "scientific," out-of-the-ordinary-events such as the *maskh* have been interpreted metaphorically. It is no surprise that many reformist Muslim thinkers are often accused by traditionalist thinkers of having heretical ways of interpreting the miraculous events mentioned in the Qur'an from a scientific angle. This ranges from the flock of birds that destroyed the army of Abraha as it tried to demolish the Ka'ba to an attempt to completely read the beings of the unseen such as the angels and Jinn as something more metaphorical and in-line with modern science. It is beyond the scope of this article to present the range of "new" views when it comes to miracles and its reception in the modern world by Muslim reformist thinkers such as Syed Ahmed Khan and even more mainstream voices like Muhammad Abduh.⁴¹ Instead, what is being pointed out is that there is an inclination to the

³⁸ Muhammad Shāfi', *Maariful Qur'an*, trans, Muhammad Hasan Askari and Muhammad Shamim, rev. Mufti Taqi Usmani (Maktaba Darul Uloom/Maktaba e Darul Uloom Karachi, 1998-2003), 232–33.

³⁹ Elmali Muhammed Hamdi Yazir, *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili* [The Religion of Truth: The Language of the Qur'an] (Celik Yayinevi, 2025), 317–18.

⁴⁰ Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur'an al-Hakīm*, vol. 6, 371.

⁴¹ For a discussion on how Abduh interprets the "birds" in the Chapter of the Elephant as a broad category of flying agents (e.g., microbes or small insect carriers of disease) capable of causing the army's destruction,

majāz in order to portray the miraculous as something not so much as breaking the laws of nature. The modern rationalists appear to have bound God to not breaking Newton's law of physics just as the rationalists in al-Ṭaḥāwī's times thought God to be bound to the Basran school's rules of Arabic grammar.

Likening Muslim evolutionists to the early Mu'tazili rationalists seems to be a common practice by their detractors. According to Egyptian al-Mat'ani, the Azhari evolutionist Shahin indulged in arbitrary acts of interpretation (*ta'wīl*) in a manner "reminiscent of the Mu'tazilīs."⁴² This comment is interesting as it shows that the suggested link between modern Muslim evolutionists and the ultra-rationalist school of the Mu'tazilites has been observed before.

Keeping this context in mind, it is of no surprise when Muslim evolutionists⁴³ such as Guessoum, who embrace the theory of evolution without exceptions, are found to be calling Muslim theologians to a broader range of metaphorical readings of historical events, such as the miraculous creation of Adam. It is not because Guessoum has an issue with literalism per se; rather, as he phrases it, "the question of miracles constitutes perhaps the clearest bone of contention between science and religion."⁴⁴ For Guessoum, it is not just the *ḥadīth* that speak of Adam as being 60 cubits tall that are overdue for a metaphorical re-reading but even Qur'ānic verses that speak of Moses' staff turning into a snake.⁴⁵ If common philosophical grounds were to be drawn between modern Muslim exegetes (those that incline toward metaphorical readings) and Muslim evolutionists, they can be summarised in two points: first, a level of discomfort with the miracles mentioned in the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*; and second, reinterpreting passages from revelation as metaphorical that were formerly understood as more literal.

Guessoum's frustration with Muslim views on science can be understood to a certain level. They are constantly confronted with pseudo-scientific claims often made by Muslim populist authors such as Harun Yahya (Adnan Okta), who appear to merely plagiarise Christian creationist narratives. However, even when serious academic theological studies on the topic are made by the likes of David Jalajel, someone who is arguing for the most part of his dissertation on biological evolution and Islam that, with the exception of Adam and his progeny, the rest of the ToE does not contradict major Sunnī theological schools, Guessoum seems to not be pleased with the level of emphasis paid to the literal meaning. This article found that most of the hermeneutical principles highlighted from the theological texts in Jalajel's study are supported by the discussions on the *maskh* from the *ikhtilāf al-ḥadīth* texts of al-Ṭaḥāwī and Ibn Qutayba. This places Guessoum at complete odds with the *ikhtilāf*.

Another feature where Guessoum and Muslim evolutionists mirror modern *tafsīr* scholars is that they seem to rely far less (or not at all) on *ḥadīth* evidence. In fact, throughout the whole

see Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Tafsīr juz' 'ammā* [Commentary of *juz' 'ammā*] (al-Maṭba'ah al-Amīriyyah, 1904), 157–58.

⁴² Saeed, "The Shahin Affair," 129.

⁴³ I am referring to Muslims who embrace the ToE without any exceptions.

⁴⁴ Guessoum, "The Qur'ān, Science," 330.

⁴⁵ Nidhal Guessoum, *Islam's Quantum Question: Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science* (I.B. Tauris, 2011), 330.

chapter when Guessoum discusses the ToE in his book on Islam and quantum science, we do not see a single *ḥadīth* being referred to. The same phenomenon was observed with those arguing for a metaphorical reading of the *maskh* verses. Either the *ḥadīth* evidence was explicitly denied, e.g. about the metamorphosed peoples not procreating, or not mentioned at all.

Perhaps the differences between al-Ṭaḥāwī's interlocutors and today's "rationalists" are that they are speaking in different cosmological worlds.⁴⁶ The "new" science back then may have been the Arabic language – and those well-versed in the new science confidently called for denials of the *ḥadīth* when evidence appeared to go against the strict rules they had discovered in the language. Today, it is the modern hard sciences and Muslim evolutionists are calling for scripture to be read accordingly to those sciences then either metaphorical readings are to be applied or the *ḥadīth* evidence is to be denied.

While modern rationalists, or as some may describe, neo-Mu'tazilites of today may incline towards a total metaphorical interpretation of these verses – which in effect would deny 16 *ḥadīth* only from al-Ṭaḥāwī's *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār ḥadīth* collection – the rationalists of al-Ṭaḥāwī's time were only calling for the denial of five *ḥadīth* reports.

CONCLUSION

This article sought to identify the Arabic hermeneutical rules that early *ḥadīth* scholars employed (from the *ikhtilāf al-ḥadīth* genre) in relation to the literal and metaphorical readings of scripture. This was conducted through the prism of the *maskh* example as analysed by *ḥadīth* scholars al-Ṭaḥāwī and Ibn Qutayba, two significant authors of the *ikhtilāf* genre. Other works that have addressed the *majāz:haqīqī* in relation to the ToE have relied predominantly on works of Muslim theologians and jurist scholars (*kalām* specialists and *uṣūl al-fiqh* works). The results from the *maskh* prism highlight that core rules, such as maintaining the literal meaning of texts, was not only also applied in the *ikhtilāf* works, further nuances were also identified. This is significant as the *ikhtilāf* texts used for this paper predate the *kalām* texts.

It could be argued that Arabic hermeneutical principles derived from the *ikhtilāf* genre are more relevant to the ToE from a few vantage points. First, the genre deals with the *ḥadīth* corpus holistically, as opposed to a restricted sample that only deal with the nature of God and law (as is the case with *kalām* and jurisprudence, respectively). Given the scriptural significance of *ḥadīth* as well as the earlier timeframe in which its scholars wrote (regardless of whether they were commentators (like Ibn Qutayba) or primary *ḥadīth* collectors and commentators (like al-Ṭaḥāwī)), they enjoy a wider level of acceptance across the different interpretations of Islam today as opposed to *kalām* scholars like al-Ghazali or al-Razi.

⁴⁶ I was inspired of this notion by Arnold Yasin Mol's presentation at a conference on Islam and Evolution. Arnold Yasin Mol, "Where Text and Cosmology Meet: Tafsīr and Dialogical Hermeneutics of Science and Theology" (paper presented at the "Islam and Evolution" conference, Leiden University, 2021).

The findings from the *maskh* prism challenges the assumptions held by many commentators (Western and Eastern) about who were the literalists and who made more recourse to metaphorical readings. In the example of al-Ṭaḥāwī, it was demonstrated that his belief in the inherent flexibility of the Arabic language allowed him to venture into metaphorical readings more frequently than his rationalist Muʿtazilī interlocutors. This not only shifts the paradigms of modern discourse about the *ahl al-ḥadīth* and Muʿtazilites, but can significantly impact the debate on the ToE and Islam. The findings remind conservative sceptics of the ToE to be open to metaphorical readings and that literalism does not necessarily always equate to orthodoxy. To those calling for metaphorical readings, such as the likes of Guessoum, it reminds them that the *ahl al-ḥadīth* were not literalists but instead the literalists were those who claimed to give a higher role to reason and logic (i.e. the Muʿtazilite). Besides this paradigm shift, the findings from the *maskh* paradigm provided a balanced rule that al-Ṭaḥāwī was observed to apply consistently in relation to metaphorical:literal readings. Al-Ṭaḥāwī's *ishkāl*-cum-precedent rule emphasises that metaphorical readings are to be taken if, first, an unresolvable difficulty (*ishkāl*) is present with a scriptural text. The second half of the rule postulates that any type of metaphorical reading needs to have a precedent.

This study has highlighted that, from a methodological standpoint, being pro-*majaz* and relying heavily on a *ḥadīth* approach toward a contentious area of study are not mutually exclusive. The Tahawian approach champions combining them. Modern discussions on Islam and evolution need to be aware of these two extremes that al-Ṭaḥāwī highlights in relation to Arabic hermeneutics and take the *ḥadīth* corpus seriously. Overreliance on the science of the day (or any cosmological worldview) should not lead one to deny the *ḥadīth* evidence around a matter. This study was primarily focused on the Arabic hermeneutical approaches to the ToE and future studies can apply these hermeneutical techniques to direct Qurʾānic verses as well as prophetic *ḥadīth* reports that deal with the ToE.

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