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Imam Al-Ṭabarī's Analysis of the Polemic Position of Basmala in Surah Al-Fatihah: A Study of Paradoxical Views

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Keywords

Imam al-Ṭabarī, Position of
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Abstract

The diversity of interpretations of the Holy Qur'an is inevitable, largely due to methodological differences, specifically the riwāyah method and ijtihad. In the debate over whether the recitation of the basmalah is part of al-Fatihah, some commentators consistently employ the riwāyah method. However, al-Ṭabarī approached the status of the basmalah recitation in al-Fatihah solely through ijtihad. Consequently, the author examines this issue using a qualitative approach grounded in library research. The findings indicate that al-Ṭabarī explicitly opposes the inclusion of the basmalah as part of al-Fatihah. He argues that if the basmalah were indeed a verse of surat al-Fatihah, it would result in the phrase in one Surāh without any separation, and he does not cite any riwāyah sources to support his argument. Al-Ṭabarī's perspective presents a paradox based on two aspects. First, his reliance on pure rationality contradicts the concept of the Holy Qur'an's composition, which is tawqīfī, meaning that al-Ṭabarī should depend on information from the Prophet for legitimization. Second, his rational approach in rejecting the basmalah's status as a verse of al-Fatihah contradicts al-Ṭabarī's methodological commitment to interpreting the Holy Qur'an based on information from the Prophet and the interpretations of the salaf generation

Kata Kunci

Posisi Basmalah, Imam Al-Ṭabarī,
Surah Al-Fatihah

Abstrak

Keragaman penafsiran Al-Qur'an tidak dapat dihindari, sebagian besar disebabkan oleh perbedaan metodologis,

khususnya metode riwāyah dan ijtihad. Dalam perdebatan mengenai apakah bacaan basmalah merupakan bagian dari al-Fatihah, beberapa mufasssir secara konsisten menggunakan metode riwāyah. Namun, al-Ṭabarī mendekati status bacaan basmalah dalam al-Fatihah semata-mata melalui ijtihad. Oleh karena itu, penulis meneliti masalah ini dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif yang didasarkan pada penelitian kepustakaan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa al-Ṭabarī secara eksplisit menentang dimasukkannya basmalah sebagai bagian dari al-Fatihah. Ia berargumen bahwa jika basmalah memang merupakan ayat dari surat al-Fatihah, maka ia akan menjadikan kalimat tersebut sebagai satu surah tanpa ada pemisah, dan ia tidak mengutip sumber riwāyah untuk mendukung argumennya. Perspektif al-Ṭabarī ini menghadirkan paradoks yang didasarkan pada dua aspek. Pertama, ketergantungannya pada rasionalitas murni bertentangan dengan konsep komposisi al-Qur'an yang bersifat tawqīfī, yang berarti bahwa al-Ṭabarī harus bergantung pada informasi dari Nabi untuk mendapatkan legitimasi. Kedua, pendekatan rasionalnya dalam menolak status basmalah sebagai ayat al-Fatihah bertentangan dengan komitmen metodologis al-Ṭabarī untuk menafsirkan al-Qur'an berdasarkan informasi dari Nabi dan penafsiran-penafsiran generasi salaf

Introduction

The Holy Qur'an is a sacred text that possesses multiple layers of meaning, infinite diversity, and boundless significance. This notion is affirmed within the Holy Qur'an itself: "*And if all the trees on the earth were pens, and the ocean (converted into ink) were supported by seven more oceans, the words of Allah would not come to an end...*" (Q.S. Al-Luqman [31]: 27). Consequently, it is nearly impossible to quantify the number of tafsir (interpretation) works that have been compiled, whether documented or not. Given the pivotal role of the Holy Qur'an as a sacred book for Muslims, the endeavor of tafsir not only enriches the civilization of Islamic thought but also serves as its foundation. All Islamic thought must be grounded in the interpretation of the Holy Qur'an.¹ Because of the flexibility in interpreting the Holy Qur'an, the resulting interpretations can lead to ideological diversity and differing schools of thought (madhhab), which may even contradict one another. This variability arises from the fact that each interpreter approaches the text through distinct perspectives and interests.²

¹ Walid A. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tradition: The Qur'ān Commentary of Al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035)* (Baston: Brill, 2004). 2.

² Hasan Hanafi, "Method of Thematic Interpretation of the Qur'an," in *The Qur'an as Text*, ed. Stefan Wild (Leiden: Brill, 1996). 96.

According to al-Dhahabī, methodological developments in Islamic scholarship can be traced through a chronological approach. During the initial period of bookkeeping, the *riwāyah* methodology was employed. Subsequent generations began to refine this methodology by categorizing reports from the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions concerning their interpretations of the Holy Qur'an, assessing whether these reports were authentic or weak. Consequently, they incorporated transmission traces of various narrations within their *tafsir* as evidence of the authenticity of the included narrations. The third generation emerged during the Abbasid caliphate, where Muslim intellectuals interpreted the Holy Qur'an not only based on the sayings of the Prophet and the early Muslims but also innovated through the exercise of their *ijtihad*. This evolution was driven by the increasing diversity of scientific disciplines and the rise of religious sectarianism within the Muslim community.³

However, some of the classifications mentioned above are not entirely definitive, indicating that not all interpreters adhere strictly to a single methodology without blending elements from others. Some texts that assert the use of a specific methodology may, in other sections, employ different methods, sometimes even in stark contrast to one another; this phenomenon is referred to as a paradox. Conceptually, a paradox is defined as a contradictory statement or expression that requires further explanation and context to be understood as true.⁴ A paradox can also be defined as a conclusion that, while generally deemed unacceptable, arises from reasoning and premises that appear to be valid.⁵ One notable paradox is found in the book *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an-Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'an by Imam al-Ṭabarī*. Almost all texts on 'Ulūm al-Qur'an categorize him as a leading figure in *tafsir* with a *riwāyah* methodology, often ranking him in the top position, as seen in the works of Ṣubḥī al-Ṣāliḥ,⁶ Fahd 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Rūmī,⁷ and al-Dhahabī.⁸

Al-Ṭabarī's contradiction lies in the conflict between the practice of interpretation and the principles employed. Notably, al-Ṭabarī adopts a rational approach, or *dirāyah*, when determining whether the *basmalah* is part of Surah al-Fatihah. The debate surrounding the *basmalah* continues to influence the tradition of interpreting the Holy Qur'an; each commentator expresses a position on whether the *basmalah* is included in al-Fatihah. In this discourse, most scholars rely on the *riwāyah* approach, even when employing the *dirāyah* (rational) method, as seen in the works of Fakhruddin al-Rāzī. Based on this observation, the author refers to it as al-Ṭabarī's paradox. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how al-Ṭabarī argues the position of the *basmalah* in al-Fatihah and to highlight the conflict between al-Ṭabarī's views and the general methodology of interpreters regarding the *basmalah*'s status in al-Fatihah. Additionally, it examines al-Ṭabarī's inconsistency in adhering to the interpretative commitment that relies on information from the Prophet concerning the *basmalah*'s position in al-Fatihah.

The debates surrounding the recitation of the *basmalah* at the beginning of surahs are well-known within the discourse of *tafsir* studies throughout Islam. Due to the contentious nature of this topic, various scholars have approached it from different perspectives. The following section outlines previous studies

³ Muḥammad Ḥusayn Al-Dhahabī, *Al-Ittijāhāt Al-Munkharifah Fi Tafsīr Al-Qur'an Al-Karīm: Dawāfi'uhā Wa Daf'Uha* (Kairo: Maktabah Wahbiyah, 1986). 14.

⁴ Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). 183.

⁵ R. M Sainsbury, *Paradoxes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). 1.

⁶ Ṣubḥī Al-Ṣāliḥ, *Mabāḥith Fi- 'Ulūm Al-Qur'an* (Bairut: Dār al-'Ālam li-Malāyīn, 2000).

⁷ Fahd 'Abd al-Raḥmān Al-Rūmī, *Darāsātun Fi- 'Ulūm Al-Qur'an Al-Karīm* (Riyād: Tafsir Center for Qur'anic Studies, 2005).

⁸ Muḥammad Ḥusayn Al-Dhahabī, *Tafsīr Wa- Al-Mufasssirūn* (Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 2000).

that the author wishes to present, including research conducted by Moh Zahid.⁹ The title of the discussion is Debate on the *Basmalah* and the Authenticity of the Holy Qur'an. the controversy surrounding the placement of the *Basmalah* at the beginning of Surah Al-Fatihah. This debate has significant implications for the status of the mutawatir composition of the Holy Qur'an, particularly regarding the affirmation of the *Basmalah's* position at the start of the Surah, which is supported by ahād traditions that contribute to the ongoing polemics. Nevertheless, there is a consensus that the early generations of the Islamic community did not include any text in the Mushaf unless it was a mutawatir verse, and their practice is referred to as mutawātir 'amālī.

The second research study on the *basmalah* polemic was conducted by EbRaḥīmi, Fatemeh Dastranj, and Fereidoun Rezaei.¹⁰ The study titled Review of the Narration of Silent Recitation of the *Basmalah* in the Holy Quranic Chapters by Imam Ali EbRaḥīmi et al. reveals that the *basmalah* is an integral component of the chapters of the Holy Qur'an. Consequently, the recitation of the *basmalah* during prayer is performed aloud. However, there exists a tradition from a Sunni source, which traces its chain of transmission to a Shia narrator, indicating that Imam 'Ali recited the *basmalah* silently. This raises the implication that the status of the *basmalah* is merely an addition introduced by the generation of the Companions. According to the findings of EbRaḥīm et al., the hadith in question presents two significant issues. First, several narrators associated with the hadith have faced severe criticism from Sunni scholars. Second, accepting this hadith poses a problem as it contradicts an authentic hadith narrated by a Shia source. The results of this study support the historical perspective that the Umayyad dynasty initiated the omission of the *basmalah* at the beginning of the chapters of the Holy Qur'an by fabricating traditions. Reason: Improved clarity, vocabulary, and technical accuracy while maintaining the original meaning.

Research conducted by Moh Zahid and EbRahimi et al. explores the controversy surrounding the *basmalah* in the context of its placement in the holy book of the Qur'an, without incorporating the perspectives of various interpreters. Moh Zahid employs the theory of mutawatir to affirm the position of the *basmalah*, while EbRahimi critiques the sanad, which tends to favor Sunni ideology. In contrast to these two studies, the author examines the debate regarding the position of the *basmalah* in Al-Fatihah from the perspective of an interpreter, specifically Imam al-Ṭabarī. This study utilizes a qualitative approach grounded in literature, focusing on the interpretation found in the book Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an-Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'an.

Intellectual Biography of al-Ṭabarī

Abū Ja'far Muḥammad Jarīr bin Yazid al-Ṭabarī was born in an intellectual environment during the Golden Age of Islam in the city of Qum, located in the Tarbistan province of Iran, in 224 Hijri (839 AD).¹¹ The exceptional talent of al-Ṭabarī was evident from a young age. He memorized the Holy Qur'an by the age of seven and became an imam at eight, studying the hadith of the Prophet when he was just

⁹ Moh Zahid, "Implikasi Perdebatan Tentang Basmalah Atas Kemutawatiran Al-Qur'an," *al-Ihkam* 10, no. 2 (2015).

¹⁰ Ebrahīmi, Fatemeh Dastranj, and Fereidoun Rezaei, "Analytical-Critical Review of the Narration of Silent Recitation of the Basmalah in the Quranic Chapters by Imam Ali (AS)," *A Research Journal on Qur'anic Knowledge* 15, no. 56 (2024).

¹¹ al-Sayyid Muḥammad 'Alī Iyāzī, *Al-Mufasssirūn Ḥayātuhum Wa-Manhajuhum* (Tehran: Wazārah al-Thaqāfah wa-al-Irshād al-Islāmī, 1967). 711.

nine years old.¹² Al-Ṭabarī lived during a time when Islamic scholarship had developed into various Qur'an-inspired disciplines, such as *fiqh*, *kalam*, *tafsir*, *hadith*, and others, culminating in its final form by the end of the third century.¹³ Therefore, al-Ṭabarī embarked on his first intellectual journey to the center of Islamic civilization, Baghdad, in 855 CE, shortly after the death of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, a scholar to whom al-Ṭabarī had intended to seek guidance. Although his hopes were dashed, Baghdad, as the capital of Islamic civilization at that time, was home to many esteemed scholars, including those who visited the city on their way to Makkah, eager to share their knowledge with students there.¹⁴

Not far from Baghdad, al-Ṭabarī's intellectual explorations extended to Basrah and Kufa. Some of al-Ṭabarī's notable teachers include Muḥammad 'Abd al-Mālik ibn Abī al-Shawāb, Iṣḥāq ibn Abī Isrā'īl, Muḥammad ibn Ḥamīd al-Rāzī, Muḥammad b. Mūsā al-Ḥarshī, Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-A'lā al-Ṣanā'ī, Bashār b. Mu'ad, Abī Kurayb Muḥammad b. al-'Ulā' al-Hamdānī, Hannād b. al-Sirī, and Ismā'īl b. Musā al-Sudī.¹⁵ Al-Ṭabarī's dedication to knowledge earned him the respect of his contemporaries and later scholars. His writings were frequently referenced as fatwas due to his profound understanding of the Qur'an, its rulings, reports on the sayings of the Prophet, the companions of most of the *tabi'in*, and even insights into the history of human civilization.¹⁶

After completing his intellectual odyssey, al-Ṭabarī returned to Baghdad and dedicated his life to the pursuit of knowledge. From his youth until the end of his life, al-Ṭabarī focused exclusively on teaching and writing. Remarkably, he was able to produce an average of forty pages of written work each day. Al-Ṭabarī's extraordinary creativity required not only significant intellectual capacity and a broad base of knowledge but also a degree of political and economic stability. Due to his strong connections with the ruler of Baghdad, one of his students even rose to the position of vizier. Additionally, al-Ṭabarī occasionally provided fatwas on legal matters in the ruler's courts. As a result of this favorable relationship, he often received gifts from the ruler, as well as from his engaged students.¹⁷

Over almost thirty years, al-Ṭabarī wrote in a variety of disciplines, ranging from *tafsīr*, *hadith*, *fiqh*, *nahw* and *qirā'ah*, and history. Some of his famous books include *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an-Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'an*, *Kitāb al-Taqwā*, *Kitāb al-Qirā'ah*, *Tarikh al-Rasūl wa- al-Muluk*, *Kitāb al-Risālah*, *Kitāb Adāb al-Qudāt*, *Tahzīb al-Āthār*, *al-Basir fī-Ma'ālim al-Dīn*, *Ikhtilāf al-Fuqahā'* and others.¹⁸ Especially in the field of *fiqh*, al-Ṭabarī claimed to be a follower of the Shafī'ī school of thought for more than ten years, drawing on his experiences from his visits to Egypt during his studies. However, as time progressed, his extensive mastery of *fiqh*—encompassing both *uṣūl* and *furū'*—led to distinctive *ijtihād*

¹² Samee-Ullah Bhat, "The Life and Work of Muhammad Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari," *Khazanah Pendidikan Islam* 4, no. 1 (2022), 30 <https://doi.org/10.15575/kp.v4i1.18071>.

¹³ Syamsuddin Arif and Dinar Dewi Kania, "Filsafat Islam Dan Tradisi Keilmuan Islam," in *Filsafat Ilmu: Perspektif Barat Dan Islam* (Jakarta: Gema Insani, 2013), 25.

¹⁴ Franz Rosenthal, *The History of Al-Tabari: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), Vol 1, 20.

¹⁵ Abū Ja'far Muḥammad Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'an* (Kairo: Markaz li Baḥūṭ wa- al-Darāsāt al-'Arabiyah wa- al-Islāmiyah, 2001), Vol 1, 11.

¹⁶ Nor Hafizi et al., "The Personality of Al-Tabari and His Expertise in The Field of Al-Quran And Qiraat," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 10, no. 9 (2020), 976. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v10-i9/7890>.

¹⁷ Rosenthal, *The History of Al-Tabari: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood*, Vol 1, 30.

¹⁸ Abdulkadir Ayodele Sambo, "The Methods of Research Used by Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari in His Qur'anic Exegesis," *International Conference on Humanities, Literature and Management*, 2015, 153. <https://doi.org/10.15242/icehm.ed0115073>.

fiqh views that set al-Ṭabarī apart from others. Consequently, his circle of students identified themselves with a unique madhhab known as the Jaririyah madhhab.¹⁹ One interesting story involves al-Ṭabarī's omission of Imam Hambali in his book, *Ikhtilāf al-Fuqahā'*. When Hambali's followers approached al-Ṭabarī for clarification, he stated that Imam Hambali was not a faqih but rather a muḥaddith. This remark angered Hambali's followers, who accused al-Ṭabarī of being a Shiite and even plotted to kill him. However, the ruler ensured tight security for al-Ṭabarī's safety. He passed away on 28 Shawwal in the year 310 Hijri, which corresponds to 923 AD.²⁰

Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an-Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'an: Methodology and Ideology

One of the significant legacies of al-Ṭabarī's scholarship is his interpretation of the Holy Qur'an. Many scholars have praised al-Ṭabarī's work. For instance, al-Suyūṭī referred to it as the most important work of tafsir because it incorporates various perspectives from the salaf and distills the most credible opinions among them. Ibn Taymiyah even described al-Ṭabarī's tafsir as the most authentic book, as it faithfully records the words of the salaf with a reliable chain of transmission, free from heretical views.²¹

Al-Ṭabarī's methodology involves interpreting the Holy Qur'an according to the order of the Mushaf, consistent with classical interpretation practices. After describing a verse or a group of verses, al-Ṭabarī identifies any unfamiliar language or complex grammar within the Holy Qur'an, if necessary. He occasionally incorporates classical Arabic poetry to strengthen his argument and elucidate the meaning. Following this, al-Ṭabarī provides his interpretation of the Holy Qur'an, referred to in his terminology as takwīl. To support his interpretation, he includes riwayat sources. Al-Ṭabarī concludes his interpretation when a verse does not present a debate. However, if there are multiple viewpoints regarding a verse, he explains some of these opinions and may select one for further discussion.²² In another statement, al-Ṭabarī emphasizes the significance of the verse impacted by nasakh, as well as the narratives from previous nations and insightful remarks.²³

Before beginning his interpretation, al-Ṭabarī establishes a philosophical framework for understanding the Holy Qur'an, which he categorizes into three classifications. First, there is a portion of the Holy Qur'an that only God can comprehend. This includes the unseen future events mentioned in the text, such as the Last Day and the Day of Resurrection. Second, there is the specific meaning of Allah's Holy Qur'an as it pertains to Prophet Muhammad. This understanding can only be gleaned from examining how the Prophet interpreted the text. Third, there is the portion of the Holy Qur'an that is accessible to anyone who understands the Arabic language, particularly its semantics and grammar, as it was revealed. Consequently, anyone who identifies as an interpreter can uncover the truth by remaining faithful to the Prophet's interpretations or by understanding the Arabic language as it existed at the time of the Holy Qur'an. This can be achieved through research into the poetry and linguistic culture of the Arab community, provided that it does not contradict the interpretations of the earlier generations of sahabah, tabi'in, or salaf regarding the Holy Qur'an.²⁴ Explicitly, al-Ṭabarī does not reference the

¹⁹ Rosenthal, *The History of Al-Tabari: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood*. Vol 1, 64.

²⁰ Bhat, "The Life and Work of Muhammad Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari." 714.

²¹ Al-Dhahabī, *Tafsīr Wa- Al-Mufasssirūn*. Vol 1, 150.

²² Muḥammad Ḥādī Ma'rīfah, *Al-Tafsīr Wa- Al-Mufasssirūn Fi-Tawbīh Al-Qaṣīb* (Nablus: al-Jāmi'ah al-Ḍūwīyah li-al-'Ulūm al-Islāmiyah, 2005). Vol 2, 314.

²³ Rosenthal, *The History of Al-Tabari: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood*. Vol 1, 106.

²⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy Al-Qurān*. Vol 1, 67-70.

interpretations of the sahabah and tabi'in as tools for understanding the Holy Qur'an. However, if we analyze the fourth section, which states that understanding the Holy Qur'an through an Arabic lens must not contradict the interpretations of the salaf, we can infer that the salaf's understanding of the Holy Qur'an reflects the Prophet's own comprehension. This is plausible because the sahabah were directly taught by the Prophet and witnessed the revelation firsthand. The tabi'in, in turn, were students of the Companions themselves.

Explicitly, al-Ṭabarī does not reference the interpretations of the sahabah and tabi'in as tools for understanding the Holy Qur'an. However, if we analyze the fourth section, which states that understanding the Holy Qur'an through an Arabic lens must not contradict the interpretations of the salaf, we can infer that the salaf's understanding of the Holy Qur'an reflects the Prophet's own comprehension. This inference is plausible because the sahabah were directly taught by the Prophet and witnessed the revelation firsthand. The tabi'in, in turn, were students of the Companions themselves.

However, al-Ṭabarī is not always uncritical of his predecessors' interpretations; at times, he critiques those that rely solely on rationality. For instance, Mujāhid's interpretation of al-Baqarah [2:25], which suggests that Allah's curse on the Saturday violators among the Children of Israel turning into apes is merely allegorical and a parable, serves as a notable example. Al-Ṭabarī rejected Mujāhid's interpretation because it contradicted the intended message of the Holy Qur'an. Additionally, al-Ṭabarī expressed disapproval of Ḍaḥāk's interpretation of al-Baqarah [2:229].²⁵

The number of interpretative sources from the Salaf is substantiated by the references in Jāmi' al-Bayān. Most of these sources originate from the Sahabah and Tabi'in, including prominent figures such as Ibn Mas'ud, Ibn Abbas, Aishah, Umar, Abu Darda, and Ubay bin Ka'ab. Interestingly, over seventy percent of the narrations (riwāyah) in Jāmi' al-Bayān are attributed to the Tabi'in generation. In contrast, the narrations directly attributed to the Prophet account for only about four percent.²⁶ As for al-Ṭabarī's guidelines on employing the linguistic approach in the Holy Qur'an, he references several experts, including 'Alī ibn Ḥamzah al-Kisā'i, a prominent qurrā' scholar well-versed in the sciences of naḥw (grammar) and ṣaraf (morphology). He also cites works by Yaḥyā ibn Ziyād, a language expert from the Kuffah community, and is guided by Abī al-Ḥasan Sa'id al-Akhfash, a distinguished scholar from the Basrah school of thought.²⁷

It is also worth mentioning al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of the classification of the content of the Holy Qur'an as muḥkamāt and mutashābihāt when analyzing Surah Al-Imran [3:7].

He is the One who has revealed to you the Book (the Qur'an). Within it, there are verses that are Muḥkamāt (of established meaning), which serve as the principal verses of the Book, while others are Mutashābihāt (whose definitive meanings are unknown). Those who harbor perversity in their hearts pursue the portions that are Mutashābihāt, seeking to create discord and searching for interpretations that align with their desires. However, no one knows its interpretation except Allah.

²⁵ Al-Dhahabī, *Tafsīr Wa- Al-Mufasssīrūn*. Vol 1, 151.

²⁶ Ismail Lala, "An Analysis of the Sources of Interpretation in the Commentaries of Al-Tabari, Al-Zamakhshari, Al-Razi, Al-Qurtubi, and Ibn Kathir," *Centre of Quranic Research International Journal* 2, no. 1 (2012). 33.

²⁷ Ṣālah al-Dīn Al-Ḥasanāwī, *Al-Ṭabarī: Ḥayātuḥu Wa-Manḥayatuḥu Fi- Al-Tafsīr* (Maroko: Chouaib Doukkali University, 2015).

*Those who are well-grounded in knowledge affirm, "We believe in it; all is from our Lord." Only the men of understanding heed this advice.*²⁸

The classification of muḥkamāt is associated with the concepts of halal and haram, promises and threats, commands and prohibitions, stories and parables, as well as moral teachings. In contrast, mutashabihāt encompasses various interpretations, some of which refer to verses that have been abrogated, verses with ambiguous meanings, or verses known only to Allah. Notably, al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of the concluding phrase of the verse is particularly intriguing, especially regarding the individual whose heart is inclined towards fitnah by seeking the interpretation of mutashabihāt verses, deliberately searching for unclear passages to validate their preconceived notions. However, unlike other commentators, al-Ṭabarī does not explicitly identify the individuals or groups who misinterpret these verses and engage in heresy, thereby affirming that the interpretation of mutashabihāt verses is known solely to Allah. The phrase al-rāsikhūn fī al-'ilmi, interpreted as those who are firmly rooted in knowledge, suggests a connection with Allah, indicating that both God and al-rāsikhūn share a portion of knowledge regarding the Holy Qur'an. Nevertheless, al-Ṭabarī and most of the commentators he references reject this interpretation. According to him, the relationship between al-rāsikhūn and the interpretation of mutashabihāt verses underscores a fundamental opposition between the two.²⁹

Based on this tafsir methodology, al-Ṭabarī remains deeply committed to tradition, and his work, Jāmi' al-Bayān, aligns closely with the ideology of ahlu al-sunnah, reflecting an orthodox perspective. This is evident in al-Ṭabarī's views, which stand in contrast to groups that advocate for rationality in religion, such as the Mu'tazilī. For instance, they question the status of the Holy Qur'an, particularly regarding the ambiguity of whether it is a created entity. A well-known statement from the Hambali school regarding this debate asserts, "Whoever claims that the Holy Qur'an was created is among the jahmī, while those who believe that the Holy Qur'an was not created are heretics. The Holy Qur'an is the word of Allah, which descended from al-lawḥ al-mahfūz." Another contentious issue is whether the human recitation of the Holy Qur'an constitutes the word of Allah or if it has been transmitted to humans. Al-Ṭabarī chose to remain silent on these two matters due to the absence of clear directives from Islamic sources and the teachings of the Salaf. Furthermore, a crucial aspect of al-Ṭabarī's stance is his rejection of the Mu'tazilite concept of the Qur'an as a fabricated miracle, which posits that humans could potentially create a text similar to the Holy Qur'an, but Allah has prevented this from occurring. The Holy Qur'an is regarded as a divine text with unique characteristics that cannot be replicated, despite human attempts to emulate it. Additionally, the Holy Qur'an is tailored to the comprehension of its audience, specifically the understanding of the Prophet and anyone proficient in Arabic, as it was revealed using Arabic symbols. Reason: Improved clarity, vocabulary, and technical accuracy while maintaining the original meaning.³⁰

Classical Exegesis Methodology: Balancing Riwayah and Dirāyah

²⁸ Muhammad Taqi Usmani, *The Meaning of the Noble Qur'an* (Karachi: Maktabah Ma'arif al-Qur'an, 2010). (3:7)

²⁹ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Quranic Hermeneutics: The Views of Al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr," in *Approaches to the History of Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Gorgia: Gorgia Press, 2013). 54.

³⁰ Ulrika Mårtensson, "Al-Tabari's Concept of the Qur'an: A Systemic Analysis," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 18, no. 2 (2016).

Simplifying the diversity of Qur'anic interpretation throughout its historical development is a complex task. However, the methodologies of interpretation can generally be classified into two categories: tafsir bi al-ma'thūr and tafsir bi al-ra'yi.

The methodology of tafsir bi al-ma'thūr involves interpreting the Qur'an through the Qur'an itself, the hadith, and the words of the companions. The first category is regarded as the most precise form of interpretation, as only Allah fully understands His own words. The hadith is considered second in rank, as the sayings of the Prophet serve to elucidate the Qur'an. Lastly, the opinions of the companions are utilized as a basis for interpreting the Qur'an, given that they witnessed its revelation and that it was revealed in their language. Consequently, they are believed to be the community best equipped to comprehend the meaning and context of the Qur'an.³¹ Although the material of tafsir bi al-ma'thūr, which consists of the opinions of the companions, exhibits some differences, these variations are minimal in quantity and can generally be tolerated. For instance, there are differences in expressions that convey the same essence. In the case of tafsir al-Ṣirāṭ al-Mustaqīm, some interpret it as following the Qur'an, while others interpret it as embracing Islam. These two meanings are not contradictory, as embracing Islam inherently involves following the Qur'an. Additionally, differences may arise in the form of diverse detailed explanations of general texts; however, these explanations do not contradict one another but rather serve to complement each other.³²

The second category of tafsir methodology is tafsir bi al-ra'yi, which employs a rational approach to interpretation. Its epistemological foundation is rooted in the prayer of the Prophet Muhammad for Ibn Abbas: faqqihhu fi al-dīn, wa 'allimhu fi al-ta'wīl. The phrase him (Ibn Abbas) ta'wil refers to an individual's capacity to explore the meanings of the Qur'an. However, scholars have established guidelines to ensure that interpretations derived from a rational approach are acceptable; in their terminology, these interpretations are considered commendable (mahmudah). Specifically, tafsir bi al-ra'yi must adhere to the words of the Prophet, the opinions of the companions, reference the Arabic language, and be grounded in the instructions found within the text and the provisions of sharia.³³

The classification of tafsir bi al-ma'thūr and tafsir bi al-ra'yi in the context of modern interpretative scholarship is increasingly viewed as irrelevant. This perspective arises from the belief that this classification promotes a Sunni-Salafī agenda, rooted in a radical hermeneutic paradigm introduced by Ibn Taymiyah in the 20th century. The distinction between tafsir bi al-ma'thūr and tafsir bi al-ra'yi is often regarded as a false dichotomy employed by Salafis to assert that tafsir is solely the domain of the Prophet, his companions, and the Tabi'in. However, since the time of al-Ṭabarī, scholars like Muqātil bin Sulaiman have utilized linguistic approaches, particularly drawing on poetry from the jahiliyah era, to convey the meanings of the Qur'an. Consequently, contemporary scholars of tafsir have concluded that the classification of tafsir bi al-ma'thūr and tafsir bi al-ra'yi serves primarily to delineate what is accepted and what is rejected, rather than to facilitate a comprehensive explanation of the Qur'an.³⁴

³¹ Al-Rūmī, *Darāsātun Fi-'Ulūm Al-Qur'ān Al-Karīm*. 165.

³² Mannā' Al-Qaṭān, *Mabāhith Fi 'Ulūm Al-Qur'ān* (Kairo: Maktabah Wahbah, n.d.). 338.

³³ Muḥammad 'Abd 'Ādhīm Al-Al-Dharqānī, *Manāhil Al-'Irfān Fī Ulūm Al-Qur'ān* (Bairut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arābī, 1995). Vol 2, 42.

³⁴ Walid A. Saleh, "Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of Tafsīr in Arabic: A History of the Book Approach," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 12, no. 1–2 (2010): 25.

Meaning of *Basmalah* and Its Controversies

As a monotheistic religion, Islam conceptualizes the relationship between humans and God in nearly every aspect of life. The Prophet Muhammad stated that anything that does not begin with or is due to Allah) is severed from blessings.³⁵

*With the name of Allah, the Al-Merciful, the Very-Merciful.*³⁶

The term is commonly interpreted as the name of Allah. is intriguing is the manner in which it is referenced; it is often stated indirectly rather than directly invoking Allah's name. Linguists suggest that the use of a name serves as a symbol for the entity it represents. The term or name, functions primarily as a reinforcement of that representation.³⁷ Since pre-Islamic times, people have been accustomed to invoking the names of their gods when undertaking various actions, such as saying the name of Lāta) and 'Uzza). With the advent of Islam and its teachings of monotheism, the Holy Qur'an replaced the invocation of these false gods with the name of Allah.³⁸ According to Ibn 'Āshūr, as cited by Quraish Shihab, the invocation of the name of Allah, or the *basmalah*, is integral to all Islamic activities. This principle extends to the act of slaughtering animals, which must be accompanied by the mention of Allah's name. In Surah Al-An'am (6:118), it states, "Eat from that over which the name of Allah has been mentioned, if you are believers in His signs." Furthermore, uttering the name of Allah is intended to invoke His blessings and assistance for the activity being performed.³⁹

Nurcholish Madjid interprets the *basmalah* as the name of Allah. Therefore, when someone recites the *basmalah* in their activities, it should be done with full awareness, as they will ultimately be held accountable before Allah for their actions from this world to the hereafter. This awareness necessitates careful consideration of morals, ethics, and their relationship to rewards and sins. The *basmalah* incorporates two attributes of Allah: al-raḥmān and al-raḥīm. Al-raḥmān signifies the Most Gracious, reflecting Allah's compassion that is extended without favoritism. This attribute encompasses His mercy in both this world and the hereafter, even towards those who disobey or oppose Him. For instance, the enjoyment of good health is not contingent upon a person's faith, worship, or sins; rather, it is rooted in a balanced lifestyle and an individual's understanding of health. Conversely, the meaning of al-raḥīm pertains to Allah's compassion that is based on faith, particularly in the hereafter. Al-raḥīm represents the mercy of Allah that is granted to those who believe. Reason: Improved clarity, vocabulary, and technical accuracy while maintaining the original meaning.⁴⁰

The mention of the phrase is universally recognized as a symbol marking the beginning of the pursuit of understanding the Holy Qur'an.⁴¹ The debate surrounding the *basmalah* has been contentious

³⁵ Ibn al-Dhaqīq Al-'Aydī, *Sharḥ Al-Arba'īn Al-Nawa'wī Fi- Al-Aḥādīth Al-Ṣaḥīḥah Al-Nabawiyah* (Libanon: Mu'asasah al-Riyān, 2003). 11.

³⁶ Usmani, *The Meaning of the Noble Qur'an*. (1:1)

³⁷ M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Misbah* (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2005). Vol 1, 13.

³⁸ Maḥmūd bin Umar bin Aḥmad Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashāf 'an Ḥaqāiq Ġawāmiḍ Al-Tanzīl Fi-Wujūh Al-Ta'wīl* (Riyāḍ: Jami' al-Huquq Maḥfūẓah li al-Nāsh, 1998). Vol 1, 111.

³⁹ Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Misbah*. Vol 1, 14.

⁴⁰ Nurcholis Madjid, "Menghayati Akhlak Allah," in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholis Madjid: Keislaman, Keindonesiaan, Kemoderenan*, ed. Budhy Munawar-Rachman (Jakarta: Nurcholis Madjid Society, 2020). 4401.

⁴¹ Gerhard Böwering and Yousef Casewit, eds., *A Qur'an Commentary by Ibn Barraġān of Seville (d.536/1141): Idāḥ Al-Hikmah Bi-Aḥkām al-'ibra (Wisdom Deciphered, the Unseen Discovered)* (Leiden: Brill, 2015). 79.

since the first generation of Muslims following the death of the Prophet. Scholars have long questioned whether the *basmalah* is an integral part of the verses of the Holy Qur'an or if its inclusion in the mushaf merely signifies the beginning of a Surah. This discussion extends beyond the question of whether reciting the *basmalah* is rewarded like other verses; it also encompasses the validity of a person's prayer and whether they are required to recite the *basmalah* as part of Surah al-Fatihah. There is only one instance of the *basmalah* that all scholars unanimously agree is a part of the verses of the Holy Qur'an, specifically found in Surah al-Naml [27:30]. Furthermore, scholars have reached a consensus that the *basmalah* is placed at the beginning of every Surah, with the exception of Surah al-Taubah.⁴²

The debate regarding the *basmalah* can be summarized into three distinct opinions. First, some scholars assert that the *basmalah* is an integral part of both al-Fatihah and all the Surahs of the Holy Qur'an, a view that aligns with the Shafi'i school. Second, the Imam Malik school holds that the *basmalah* is not a verse in either al-Fatihah or any of the Surahs of the Holy Qur'an. Third, the Abī Ḥanīfah school posits that the *basmalah* serves as a perfecting verse of the Qur'an, functioning to separate the Surahs, but is not considered part of the Surahs included in al-Fatihah.⁴³

The supporters' argument that the *basmalah* is part of the Qur'an is supported by various hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad, as cited by al-Rāzī in his interpretation of the book *Mafatih al-Ghaybi*.

1. The story of Umm Salāmah recounts that "The Prophet recited the Surah of al-Fatihah, counting 'bi-ismillahi al-raḥman al-raḥīm' as one verse, 'al-ḥamd li-llāh rabbī al-‘ālamīn' as another verse, 'al-raḥmāni al-raḥīm' as a verse, 'mālik al-yaum al-dīn' as a verse, 'iyyaka na‘budu wa-iyyaka nasta‘īn' as a verse, 'ihdina al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm' as a verse, and 'ṣirāṭ al-laḏīn an‘amta ‘alayhim ḡayr al-maḡḏūb ‘alayhim wa-la al-ḏāllīn' as a verse. This serves as a compelling argument.

2. History from Ibn Abbas: He interpreted the phrase, "Truly, We have indeed bestowed upon you seven (verses) which are (recited) repeatedly..." as referring to al-Fatihah. He then inquired, "Where is the number of seven verses?" Ibn Abbas responded, "It is with the *basmalah*."

The following argument concerns the inclusion of the *basmalah* in the Uthmanī mushaf. Any elements that are not part of the Holy Qur'an, such as the naming of surahs, quarter number signs, and similar annotations, are excluded from the mushaf. This exclusion is intended to prevent any confusion between the Holy Qur'an and non-Qur'anic elements. If the *basmalah* were not considered part of the Holy Qur'an, it would not have been included in the mushaf. Furthermore, the aesthetics of the writing and the calligraphy of the *basmalah* are consistent with those of other verses.⁴⁴ The consensus among the companions regarding the inclusion of the *basmalah* in the mushaf is referred to as *mutawātir ‘amalī*. This consensus serves as one of the key instruments for affirming the authenticity of the Holy Qur'an as the word of Allah.⁴⁵

⁴² Su‘ūd bin Abdullah Al-Fansiyan, *Ikhtilāf Al-Mufasssirin: Asbābuhu Wa Athāruhu* (Riyād: Dār Ishbiliyā, 1997). 86.

⁴³ ‘Alī Al-Ṣābūnī, *Rawā‘i Al-Bayān Tafsīr Āyāt Al-Aḥkām Min Al-Qur‘ān* (Demaskus: Maktabah al-Ghazālī, 1980). Vol 1, 47.

⁴⁴ Muḥammad Fakhruddin Al-Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ Al-Ghayb* (Bairut: Dār al-Fikri, 1981). Vol 1, 277.

⁴⁵ Zahid, "Implikasi Perdebatan Tentang Basmalah Atas Kemutawatiran Al-Qur'an." 277.

The argument that the *basmalah* is not part of the Holy Quran was initially presented by Imam Malik. Like the first opinion, this second group also has a narration to support its claim, as cited by Imam al-Qurṭubī.

1. Narrated by Imam Muslim from Abū Hurayrah, the Apostle said, "Allah says (hadith qudsi), 'I have divided the prayer (the recitation of al-Fatihah) into two parts: one for Me and one for My servant, and for My servant is what he has asked for. When he recites, I say, 'My servant has praised Me.' When he recites, I say, 'My servant has honored Me.' When My servant recites, I say, 'My servant has acknowledged My sovereignty.' When he recites, na'budu wa-iyayaka nasta'in, I say that this part is divided between Me and him, and it is what he has asked for. When he recites, al-lādhīn an'amta 'alayhim, ḡayr al-Maḡdūb 'alayhim wa-lā al-Ḍāllīn, I say that this is for My servant, what he has asked for.

2. Narrated by Anas bin Mālik: "I once prayed behind the Prophet Muḥammad, Abu Bakr, and Umar. They began the prayer with 'Alhamdulillah Rabb al-'Ālamīn,' and they did not mention the *Basmalah* at the beginning or the end."

In addition to being derived from various sources, the *basmalah* is often rejected as part of the Holy Qur'an because it is not classified as hadith mutawatir. This means it retains the status of hadith āḥād, which remains a subject of debate. Among Muslims, there is a consensus that the determination of the verses of the Holy Qur'an is based solely on hadith mutawatir, leaving no room for dispute.⁴⁶

The most compelling reason that the *basmalah* is not considered part of al-Fatihah is that, in the Medina Mosque, from the time of the Prophet until the era of Imam Malik, no Imam recited the *basmalah*, as they adhered to the sunnah. They only recited the *basmalah* during sunnah prayers.⁴⁷ This methodology, established by Imam Malik, is known as the approach of amal al-Ahl al-Madinah, which refers to the practices of the people of Medina in the establishment of law. In Imam Malik's view, the city of Medina—where the Prophet Muhammad spent his final days and the early years of Islamic civilization—holds unparalleled legitimacy. This legitimacy stems from the loyalty of the people of Medina to Islam, the historical significance of prophethood, and their commitment to preserving the heritage of Islam. In one of his letters to al-Layth ibn Sa'd, Malik stated, "If a legal case is clear and practiced in Medina, I do not believe anyone has the right to oppose it, even if people from cities other than Medina assert that this is the practice of our predecessors." It can be inferred that this practice represents a continuation of the traditions of the people of Medina, which have evolved over time while also experiencing distortion.⁴⁸ Even if there is a hadith that contradicts the practices of the people of Medina, the Mālikī school of jurisprudence asserts that the hadith has been abrogated (nasakh), and the law that supersedes it is the communal practice of the people of Medina, which has persisted since the time of the Prophethood.⁴⁹

Finally, the opinion asserts that the *basmalah* is not a verse from the Holy Qur'an but was revealed alongside it to serve as a separator between Surahs, with the exception of Surah al-Taubah. According to

⁴⁶ Abi 'Abdillah Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Anṣārī Al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmi' Al-Aḥkām Al-Qur'ān* (Bairut: Muassah al-Risalah, 2006). Vol 1, 147.

⁴⁷ Ibn Al-'Arabī, *Aḥkām Al-Qur'ān* (Bairut: Dār al-Fikri, 1972). Vol 1, 35.

⁴⁸ Umar F. Abd-Allah Wymann-Landgraf, *Mālik and Medina: Islamic Legal Reasoning in the Formative Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). 238.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 254.

the Hanafiyah school of thought, the inclusion of the *basmalah* in the mushaf indicates that it is part of the Holy Qur'an; however, it is not regarded as a verse that is written at the beginning of each Surah. This perspective is supported by several hadiths that state the *basmalah* is only recited quietly during prayer. A balanced view is that the *basmalah* is indeed part of the Holy Qur'an, functioning as a separator between Surahs. This is further emphasized in a narration by Ibn Abbas: "We do not know when a Surah ends until bi-smillah al-raḥmān al-raḥīm was revealed." According to al-Ṣābūnī, this opinion effectively reconciles the differing views of Imam Shāfi'ī and Imam Mālik. On one hand, Imam Mālik rejects the notion that the *basmalah* is part of the Surah of the Holy Qur'an, as it is not supported by hadith mutawatir. Conversely, Imam Shāfi'ī argues that the consensus among the companions regarding the *basmalah*'s inclusion in the mushaf constitutes a form of mutawatir evidence.⁵⁰ However, there is a division between those who reject the *basmalah* as part of the verse of the Holy Qur'an and those who view it merely as a separator between Surahs. Despite this disagreement, both groups concur that Surah al-Fatihah consists of seven verses. The first group considers al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm, ṣirāṭ al-ladhīn an'amta 'alayhim ghayr al-maghḍūb 'alayhim wa-la al-ḍāllīn the second group divides this into two separate verses: al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm as the sixth verse, and al-ladhīn an'amta 'alayhim ghayr al-maghḍūb 'alayhim wa-la al-ḍāllīn as the seventh verse.⁵¹

Imam al-Ṭabarī's View on *Basmalah*

Al-Ṭabarī's approach elaborates on the linguistic and historical aspects of the *basmalah*, which refers to the invocation of Allah's name. This invocation serves as a divine instruction to the Prophet Muhammad and all of Allah's servants, encouraging them to mention the exalted name of Allah before undertaking any activity. Therefore, when someone begins to read the Holy Qur'an with the *basmalah*, it signifies, "I read the Holy Qur'an in the name of Allah. The term in the context of the *basmalah*, as narrated by Ibn Abbas, refers to the essence (Dhat) that is revered by all and worshipped by every creature. The terms al-raḥmān and al-raḥīm are attributes of Allah that convey the same meaning: the Most Merciful. Linguistically, these terms follow the pattern fa'ālān (فعلان) derived from the root word raḥama (رحم). According to Arabic tradition, this pattern can also be seen in the form of the masdar, such as ghaḍbān (غضبان), which comes from the root word ghaḍaba (غضب), meaning anger, or 'aṭshān (عطشان), derived from 'aṭasha (عطش), meaning thirsty. In contrast, al-raḥīm follows the pattern fa'āl (فعليل), similar to the term 'alīm (عليم), which denotes a knowledgeable person and is derived from the root word 'alama (علم). In Arabic, the fa'āl form is typically used for expressions of praise and criticism. Thus, from the perspective of Arabic grammar, al-raḥmān and al-raḥīm do not conform to the fa'āl pattern; if they did, the appropriate term would be al-rāḥim (الراحم). Reason: Improved clarity, vocabulary, and technical accuracy while maintaining the original meaning.⁵²

The scholars agree that although the terms al-raḥmān and al-raḥīm have similar meanings, they carry distinct implications. In the Holy Qur'an, it is impossible to repeat words without a difference in meaning. In this context, al-Ṭabarī aligns with the majority of scholars; he interprets al-raḥmān as representing Allah's compassion for all His servants. In contrast, al-raḥīm signifies a manifestation of Allah's unique compassion for His devout servants. However, al-Ṭabarī diverges from these scholars by

⁵⁰ Al-Ṣābūnī, *Rawā'i Al-Bayān Tafsiṛ Āyāt Al-Aḥkām Min Al-Qur'ān*. 35.

⁵¹ Muḥammad 'Izzah Darwazah, *Al-Tafsiṛ Al-Ḥadīth Tartīb Al-Suwar Ḥasabī Al-Nuzūl* (Bairut: Dār al-Ḡarb al-Islāmiyah, 2000). Vol 1, 289.

⁵² Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy Al-Qurān*. Vol 1, 111-125.

asserting that Allah's general compassion is present both in this world and the hereafter, alongside His special compassion.⁵³

Al-Ṭabarī asserted that the *basmalah* is not considered a verse of Surah al-Fatihah. He reasoned that two identical sentences cannot be repeated within a single Surah without a separator. To elaborate, al-Ṭabarī stated:

What is the significance of reiterating Allah's attributes, al-Raḥmān and al-Raḥīm, in the second verse of Al-Fātiḥah, given that these attributes have already been mentioned in the *basmalah*? This observation leads me to assert that the *basmalah* is not part of Al-Fātiḥah. If it were, we would encounter a repetition of the same phrase with identical meaning in two consecutive verses. Furthermore, such a repetition of the same phrase and meaning is never found side by side within a single Surah. When the same phrase appears in one Surah, it must be interspersed with another verse to convey different implications of meaning. Additionally, there is no separation between the *basmalah* and the second verse of Surah Al-Fātiḥah.⁵⁴

To support his argument, al-Ṭabarī rejected the assumption that the phrase *li-llāh rabb al-‘ālamīn* a separator between the *basmalah* and the second verse of al-Fatihah. According to al-Ṭabarī, the consensus among tafsir scholars indicates that the phrase is grammatically prioritized over:

أَلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ مَلِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ

This is because the verse *yaum al-dīn* (of the Day of Judgment) affirms Allah's position as *King of the Worlds*). Examples of sentence endings that should be placed at the beginning are often found in the tradition of classical Arabic poetry and in several verses of the Holy Qur'an.⁵⁵

The Paradox of Al-Ṭabarī's View

Like other interpreters, al-Ṭabarī also engaged in polemics regarding the *basmalah* in al-Fatihah. However, what sets al-Ṭabarī apart from other interpreters is the manner in which he constructs his arguments. Unlike most interpreters, al-Ṭabarī relies solely on a linguistic approach, without incorporating the literature of the Prophet Muhammad's hadith or the opinions of his companions. This indicates that, in this critical matter, al-Ṭabarī employs pure rationality.

According to the author, al-Ṭabarī's actions represent an anomaly that can be described as a paradox for two reasons. First, the classification of the *basmalah* as part of a verse in the Holy Qur'an is a matter that requires validation through the traditions of the Prophet's hadith and the opinions of his companions. This classification is significant because it affects the authenticity of the arrangement of the Holy Qur'an, which is *tawqīfī*—meaning it is a provision that is solely the prerogative of God, conveyed through the instructions of the Prophet. According to hadith, whenever a revelation was received, the Prophet would instruct his secretary to place the verse in a specific section of the Surah. Additionally, this classification is supported by the *mutawātir* readings of the Prophet and his companions, as well as the consensus among the companions regarding the arrangement of verses in the mushaf. Based on these

⁵³ Ibid. Vol 1, 128.

⁵⁴ Ibid. Vol 1, 147.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Vol 1, 149.

facts, all scholars agree that the arrangement of the verses in the Holy Qur'an is indeed *tawqīfī*.⁵⁶ A belief holds that the arrangement of verses and chapters in the Qur'an has been determined by Allah.⁵⁷ This means that a verse or several verses were not revealed unless the Angel Gabriel instructed the Prophet on where to place them within a chapter. After the verse was revealed, the Prophet memorized it and conveyed it to his companions. He then instructed his secretary, "Place this chapter next to this chapter, and position this verse alongside this verse."⁵⁸ Based on the nature of the arrangement of the Qur'an, which is *tawqīfī*, the placement of the *basmalah* in Al-Fatiha must be determined by the Prophet's decision, as it falls under the prerogative of revelation. Since it is the prerogative of revelation, any approach that employs rationality to determine the components of the Qur'an is not permitted.

Al-Ṭabarī's contradictions become increasingly evident when compared to other classical commentators regarding the placement of the *basmalah* in Al-Fatiha. Notably, al-Qurṭubī rejects the inclusion of the *basmalah* in Al-Fatiha. Following Imam Malik's perspective, al-Qurṭubī cites a hadith narrated by Siti Aishah in the Muslim Ṣaḥīḥ, which states that the Prophet began his prayer with takbir and the recitation of "al-hamdu lillāh rabb al-'ālamīn." In addition to referencing Aishah's hadith, Imam al-Qurṭubī also quotes a hadith from Anas bin Malik: "I once prayed behind the Prophet, Abu Bakr, and Umar; they commenced the prayer with the recitation of al-hamdu lillāh rabb al-'ālamīn."⁵⁹ Another perspective from interpreters who assert that the *basmalah* is an integral part of the verse from Al-Fatiha is supported by several hadiths attributed to Umm Salamah, Abu Hurairah, Ibn Abbas, and Ali bin Abi Ṭalib. A notable point is the statement of the Prophet Muhammad, as narrated by Abu Hurairah: "Surah Al-Fatiha is Umm al-Kitāb, and the *basmalah* is one of its components."⁶⁰ Likewise, mufasssirun who are renowned for their rational approaches, such as in Tafsir al-Manār, argue that the *basmalah* is an integral part of the Holy Qur'an. Rasyid Ridha contends that the *basmalah* represents the first verse revealed to the Prophet, as found in Surat al-'Alaq (96:1): "Read in the name of your Lord who created!" This implies that one should read this Surah in the name of Allah, emphasizing that the Qur'an is revealed by Allah, not by the Prophet. This reflects Allah's love for humanity, as He provides guidance toward happiness in both this world and the hereafter. Reciting the *basmalah* while reading the Holy Qur'an is not merely an act of seeking blessings in Allah's name; it should embody a deeper intention. Rashid Riḍā, in constructing his argument, also cites a hadith narrated by Ibn Abbas to support his viewpoint.⁶¹ The paradox of al-Ṭabarī lies in his perspective on the position of the *basmalah*. He employs a rational approach overall, leading to a conclusion that many may find unacceptable. Despite this, al-Ṭabarī constructs his argument using premises and ideas that seem convincing.

The second anomaly in al-Ṭabarī's decision to reject the *basmalah* portion of al-Fatihah primarily involves a rational and linguistic approach. This stands in contrast to his methodology, which emphasizes interpreting the Holy Qur'an based on the hadith of the Prophet and the opinions of his companions. He also adheres to the prohibition against interpreting the Holy Qur'an solely through rational means, as

⁵⁶ Muḥammad Abū Shuhbah, *Al-Madākhil Li Dirāsah Al-Qur'ān* (Kairo: Maktabah al-Sunnah, 2003). 314.

⁵⁷ 'Alī Al-Ṣābūnī, *Al-Tibyān Fi-'Ulūm Al-Qur'ān* (Kairo: Dār al-Iḥsān, 2003). 53.

⁵⁸ Muḥammad Sālim Muḥaysin, *Tārikh Al-Qur'ān Al-Karīm* (Alexandria: Mu'assasah Shabāb al-Jāmi'ah, 2007).

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⁵⁹ Al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmi' Al-Aḥkām Al-Qur'ān*. Vol 1, 146.

⁶⁰ Al-Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ Al-Ghayb*. Vol 1, 202.

⁶¹ Muḥammad Rashid Riḍā, *Tafsīr Al-Manār* (Kairo: Dār al-Manār, 1979). Vol 1, 44.

highlighted in the hadith narrated by Ibn Abbas: “Whoever speaks about the Holy Qur’an using his own logic, let him prepare his seat in hell.” This sentiment is further supported by the words of Abu Bakr: “Which earth do I tread upon, and which sky shelters me if I speak about the Holy Qur’an in a manner that I do not know?” These various hadith serve as al-Ṭabarī’s justification for asserting that the interpretation of the Holy Qur’an can only be achieved through information from the Prophet or through indications of the Prophet’s teachings.⁶² The contradiction between al-Ṭabarī’s stance on the position of the *basmalah* is striking when compared to the principles of his interpretative methodology, which emphasizes the citation of hadith, companions, and earlier interpreters. Al-Ṭabarī’s commitment to the tradition of *riwayah* is evidenced by his citation of 38,397 hadith in *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, leading some scholars to refer to him as a compiler.⁶³ Seeing these facts, al-Ṭabarī’s perspective is quite paradoxical due to the conflict between his methodology and the reputation associated with him regarding the placement of the *basmalah* in al-Fatiha.

Conclusion

Al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the *basmalah* emphasizes the invocation of the name of Allah, the Almighty, al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm. When associated with the Holy Qur’an, it signifies the act of reciting the Holy Qur’an in the name of Allah. The term al-Raḥmān refers to Allah’s love, which is manifested to all of His servants in this world through blessings such as health, sustenance, intellect, and countless other gifts. In the afterlife, al-Raḥmān represents Allah’s justice in addressing the affairs of His servants. Conversely, the term al-Raḥīm denotes Allah’s love specifically bestowed upon believers, providing them with peace of mind in this world and eternal bliss in the afterlife. Al-Ṭabarī firmly rejected the notion that the *basmalah* is part of al-Fātiḥa based solely on rational grounds. He argued that if it were included in surah al-Fātiḥa, it would result in a redundancy of the same phrase and meaning—al-Raḥmān, al-Raḥīm—within a single surah without any verse separators.

Al-Ṭabarī’s rejection of the *basmalah* as part of al-Fatiha is not supported by sources from the traditions of the Prophet’s hadith or the opinions of his companions; this presents a paradox based on two aspects. First, the determination of whether the *basmalah* is part of the verse of al-Fatiha must be grounded in sources that originate from the Prophet, as this provides legitimacy. The placement of the *basmalah* in the Holy Qur’an suggests that the arrangement of the Holy Qur’an, which scholars have unanimously agreed upon, is *tawqīfī*, meaning that there is no room for *ijtihād* in determining its structure. Consequently, nearly all scholars of interpretation, even the most rational among them, consistently reference the hadith of the Prophet when assessing the position of the *basmalah* in the Holy Qur’an. Second, al-Ṭabarī’s opposition to the status of the *basmalah*, which relies solely on rationality, contradicts his commitment to a methodology of interpretation based on the statements of the Prophet and the early generations of the *salaf*. Furthermore, al-Ṭabarī himself cites a hadith that condemns anyone who interprets the Qur’an based purely on rationalism.

⁶² Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl Āy al-Qurān*. Vol 1, 72.

⁶³ Herbert Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005). 124.

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