



## The 'Mathanian' Character of the Qur'an: An Approach for a Scientific Exegesis

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to define the 'mathanian' character of the Qur'an. It then proceeds to apply this concept as a methodology for a scientific exegesis on the cosmic and creation verses found in the Qur'an. This method is modelled from the application of al-Ghazzālī in his commentary on the secrets of al-fātihah in his book *Jawāhir al-Qur'an*. Three research questions guide this work: (i) what are the defining features of the mathanian character of the Qur'an, (ii) how was this mathanian character employed by al-Ghazzālī in synthesising revealed and scientific data and (iii) to what extent can the example provided by al-Ghazzālī's application serves as a model for a richer understanding of scientific verses (*al-āyāt al-kawniyyah*) in contemporary times? The paper concludes with an application of the mathanian character to a Qur'anic description of *al-ard* as *firāsh*. The application demonstrates how this methodology can provide a comprehensive commentary on creation and cosmic verses in the Qur'an.

**Keyword:** *Tawhid, science, methodology, integration, unity*

### Abstrak

Kajian ini adalah bertujuan untuk mendefinisikan ciri 'mathanian' Al-Quran. Ia kemudiannya menerapkan konsep ini sebagai metodologi untuk penafsiran kritis saintifik mengenai ayat-ayat kosmik dan penciptaan yang terdapat dalam Al-Quran. Kaedah ini dimodelkan dari aplikasi al-Ghazzālī dalam ulasannya mengenai rahsia al-fātihah dalam bukunya *al-Qur'an Jawāhir*. Tiga persoalan kajian menjadi garis panduan kajian ini: (i) apakah sifat fizikal yang menentukan ciri mathanian dalam Qur'an, (ii) bagaimanakah ciri mathanian ini yang digunakan oleh al-Ghazzālī dalam sintesis data ilmiah dan saintifik dan (iii) sejauh manakah contoh yang disediakan oleh aplikasi al-Ghazzālī berfungsi sebagai model untuk pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang ayat-ayat saintifik (*al-āyāt al-kawniyyah*) pada zaman sekarang? Kajian ini memberi kesimpulan dengan penerapan ciri mathanian kepada perihal *al-ard* Al-Quran sebagai *firāsh*. Aplikasi ini menunjukkan bagaimana metodologi ini dapat memberikan ulasan yang komprehensif mengenai ayat penciptaan dan kosmik dalam Al-Quran

**Kata kunci:** *Tawhid, sains, metodologi, integrasi, perpaduan*

### Introduction

This paper is a preliminary work that seeks to define an approach towards scientific exegesis (*tafsīr al-ilmī*) of the Qur'an that focuses on the cosmic or creation verses (*al-āyāt al-kawniyyah*). There have been many developments among schools of Islamization of Science for the last four to five

decades on the different approaches on making modern science to be compatible with Islam. Although some of these approaches have delineated strong philosophical and epistemological foundations, general progress towards an integration of scientific verses found in the Qur'an with new and contemporary data accumulated through scientific observations and experimentations are far from being satisfactory. The premise that the Qur'an informed scientific researches is a rhetoric that are found in academic papers or heard through religious lectures to the public. The many calls for integration of the Qur'an and modern science are not equally followed up with appropriate methodologies and processes. The actual step-by-step guide on the how this integration

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can be carried out is seldom found and if available seems inaccessible to the general public and students of Qur'an and science. An important note to this work is that it is not promoting a kind of scientism where modern science seems to occupy the pillar of truth and the Qur'an and Ḥadīth are just providing supporting evidences to these new discoveries. On the other hand, we are promoting the use of the attributes (*ṣifāt*) and names (*asmā'*) of the Qur'an to inform and promote scientific activities. This approach can be considered as an innovation in our times, although Imām Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī (d. 1111 CE) used this method in his explanation of the rationale behind the excellence and secrets of *sūrah al-fātiḥah* in his *Jawāhir al-Qur'an* (Jewels of the Qur'an). Instead of the commonly piecemeal methodology towards a couple of creation verses, this paper seek to expand one of the attributes of the Qur'an, the 'mathanian' character of the Qur'an into a methodology that produces a better knowledge outcome of a branch of the thematic exegesis (*tafsīr al-mawdū'ī*), scientific exegesis, both in terms of breadth and depth. The breadth and depth are achieved because the *mathanian* character of the Qur'an allows for a seamless integration of revealed text with data about the world of nature obtained through scientific observations and experimentation.

This *mathanian* character is obtained by a Prophetic Ḥadīth in which he described the Qur'an (*Musnad al-Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, hadith no. 2205*) and also the name used to describe the opening chapter of the Qur'an, *sūrah al-fātiḥah*, as the seven often repeated verses (*sab' al-mathānī*) (*The Qur'an* 15:87). Al-Alūsī (n.d.) in his *Ruḥ al-Ma'an* said that the *fātiḥah* is given that name because for every verse recited, it is paired with an answer or reply from God (Al-Alūsī, n.d.). In addition, Al-Ghazzālī argues in his *Jawāhir al-Qur'an* that repetitions found in the Qur'an are not reiterations that do not carry any significant wisdom. Those repeated verses carry many significant secrets that contain immense benefits when proper methodologies are employed to derive them (Al-Ghazzālī, 2013). This paper attempts to define that methodology. In attempting this, this paper will be guided by three questions: (i) what are the defining features of the *mathanian* character of the Qur'an? (ii) How was this *mathanian* character employed by al-Ghazzālī in synthesising revealed and scientific data? and (iii) to what extent can the example provided by al-Ghazzālī's application serves as a model for a richer understanding of scientific verse (*al-āyāt al-kawniyyah*) in contemporary times?.

### **Tafsīr al-'Ilmī**

The validity of having a scientific *tafsīr* has occupied the discussions among scholars of Qur'anic exegesis. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a critical analysis of the various arguments that have emerged. The various positions range from those that support the validity of engaging in scientific *tafsīr* as an authentic genre of *tafsīr* within the bigger category of *tafsīr al-mawdū'ī* to those that total reject this genre. The fact that we are engaged in this research and the writing of this paper indicates our support towards this genre of *tafsīr*. What we seek do in this section is to provide a summary of the historical development of the position of this genre among the corpus of *tafsīr* and provide arguments for the obvious absence of this genre in the early period of the history of Islam.

'Awaḍ (1992) argues that the Messenger did not provide detailed explanation to verses of creation because firstly the apparent meanings of these verses did not clash with the rational and logical minds of the companions at that time, therefore they did not ask for deeper analysis of these verses. They were satisfied with the brief answers the Prophet provided them when they enquired about some of the natural phenomena mentioned. Secondly, the Prophet was well aware that the characteristic of scientific knowledge will progress and change without an end. Therefore if he were to provide detailed explanation in accordance to the availability of scientific knowledge of his time, those details could be obsolete in the future. As the versus in the Qur'an in general not just for Muslims, this could hinder further *da'wah* efforts and affect the *ijāz* (inimitability) nature of the Qur'an. Thirdly, the Prophet speaks to the level of understanding of the time and did not go beyond the capacity of the companions with regards to the creation verses ('Awaḍ, 1992). This by no means imply that the companions were irrational or incapable of deep analysis but points to the wisdom of the Prophet in recognising and matching the appropriate depth and breadth needed at each temporal geological time of his *ummah*. At the time of the companions, the dearth of this genre of *tafsīr* among the companions can be attributed to different priorities that the companions had during those times. They were engaged in the expansion of the territories of Islam through *da'wah*, expeditions and wars. Those companions who were not involved in the territorial expansion of Islam busied themselves with the dissemination of prophetic *ḥadīth* to the general public and were systematising the laws. Many non-Arabs came into Islam during the time of the rightly guided caliphs (*al-khulafā' al-rashidūn*) and the governors and scholars among the companions of the caliphs were focused on teaching these people the

reading and general *tafsīr* of the Qur'an. During this time, some deeper questions regarding the verses of creation began to surface among the 'ajam (non-Arabs). Most of the responses and *tafsīr* given were based on prophetic sayings or what is called *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* ('Awad, 1992).

Serious scientific *tafsīr* started with Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209 CE) in his *Mafātiḥ al-Ghaib* (Keys to the Unseen). Al-Rāzī took the challenge from al-Ghazzālī where the latter mentioned the importance of this form of exegesis for the purpose of *da'wah*. Al-Ghazzālī explicated this point in his *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and also in more detail in his *Jawāhir al-Qur'an*. Within *Jawāhir al-Qur'an*, al-Ghazzālī classified the knowledge of God, which comprises of knowledge of His Essence (*Dzat*), His Attributes (*Ṣifāt*) and His Works (*Af'āl*) as the highest form of knowledge (Al-Ghazzālī, 2013). For someone to reach the highest form of knowledge he must start from studying the works of God and only the specialists of the respective works of God will then understand the meanings of those related verses (Al-Ghazzālī, 2013). In short, al-Ghazzālī emphasises three important points in this books with reference to *āyāt al-kawniyyah* and to those who specialise in them. Firstly, although the number of creation verses in the Qur'an is limited, the expansion of the knowledge with regards to the deliberation of these verses will always be increasing because they are basically studying the Self-Disclosure of God through His creations. God never ceases to Create therefore the objects of study within creation never cease to become renewed. Those specialists involved in the illumination of God's creations will never be able to exhaust the knowledge that comes with creation. Secondly, al-Ghazzālī provided a definite goal for specialists of the various aspects of science to always keep in mind that these verses and the related details that the specialists derived through their study of the phenomena is guiding them towards a permanent goal and reality. Although the details are ever expanding and never cease to increase, the final destination is fixed. This point by al-Ghazzālī provides clear direction and goal for any form of scientific inquiry and curiosity. Different from contemporary scientific inquiry where the purpose of inquiry is just to feed curiosity without any definite destination, curiosity that rises from a clear vision of its destination is more guided. Al-Ghazzālī placed these specialists on a high pedestal among the seekers of knowledge, higher than the theologians and jurists. Lastly, for al-Ghazzālī, it is a communal responsibility of the specialists to provide illustrations of these verses because they are the most capable people to understand these verses as compared to the non-specialists.

Al-Rāzī met this challenge that was mooted by his predecessor *par excellence*. He did not just provide scientific explanations to the creation verses but he also included many other dimensions like language, theology and philosophy in his *tafsīr*. Al-Rāzī also transferred his methods, principles and ideas across disciplinary boundaries – from his works of philosophy and theology – and assembled them into his *magnum opus*, the thirty-two volumes of approximately ten thousand pages of *tafsīr* (Al-Rāzī, 1981). This made his *tafsīr* work one of the richest sources within the *tafsīr* tradition. Jaffer (2015) pointed out the well-known comments by Ibn Taymiyyah that is, as the *tafsīr* of Al-Rāzī to “contain everything but *tafsīr*” tended to diminish the efforts of al-Rāzī, it demonstrates the plurality of ideas that are placed in this work. In relation to scientific verses, al-Rāzī did not confine his commentaries to just the scientific verses but uses scientific data as a means to bring greater understanding towards other verses. For example, in the beginning of *sūrah al-fātiḥah* he explained that in order for human beings to praise and say thanks to the blessings that God has bestowed onto them, they need to know those blessings. But the human mind is incapable of knowing all the blessings. Even by trying to understand the blessings within the human body will be overwhelming to the mind. He continued in his commentary of the twin attributes of Mercy by utilising the relevant scientific knowledge of his time to illuminate the nature of the attributes of Mercy which encompasses the realms of creations. Al-Rāzī, through his commentary, attempted to counter the different superstitions that have engulfed the mind of Muslims in the field of earth science. In particular, he provided scientific explanations for the nature of thunder (*al-ra'd*) and lightning (*al-barq*) dispelling the superstitions of the presence of death and bad omens during the occurrences of these natural phenomenon (Al-Rāzī, 1981). Al-Rāzī also did not just skilfully use scientific knowledge of his time to provide deeper understanding of the verses, he also dispelled some long standing scientific arguments based on his reflections of the Qur'anic verses.

### **Defining Mathānian**

The approach that we are using in defining and developing the *mathanian* concept into a methodology for a thematic scientific exegesis of the Qur'an is to look at the lexical root of the word and its various occurrences within the Qur'an. We would therefore avoid a reductive or definitive classification in order to try and maintain the diversity of perspectives and meanings which allow one to contemplate on the relational dynamic of correlative

meanings. Osman Bakar says with regards to the Arabic root-word system:

“...through its [Arabic language] unique “algebraic” root-word system, it is able to capture in the widest sense possible the semantic field of each word as well as to offer the clearest explanation possible of the relationship between a “name” and the corresponding “named.” (Bakar, 2016b)

Before we describe the meanings of the term *mathanian*, let us first reproduce the Qur'anic verse that describes this character of the Qur'an. The Qur'an says,

“God has sent down the most beautiful discourse, a Book consimilar [sic] (*mutashābihan*), paired (*mathāniya*), whereat quivers the skin of those who fear their Lord. Then their skin and their hearts soften unto the remembrance of God. That is God's Guidance, wherewith He guides whomsoever He will; and whomsoever God leads astray, no guide has he” (The Qur'an 39:23)

In Edward William Lane (1968) *Arabic-English Lexicon*, the word *mathānī* is the plural form of the word *mathnan* which comes from the root word *thanā* which means to fold into two. *Mathnā* can signify a few situations like (i) two and two [or] two and two together [or] two and two at a time and two and two at a time or (ii) repetition of the word but not the meaning (Lane, 1968). *Mathānī* is one of the irregular plurals which are of the second declension. This type of irregular plural preserves the *tanween* in the nominative and genitive but rejects it when they are in the accusative. When it is used as in the above verse in the accusative form, the meaning can be rendered as “double or repeated portions” (Penrice, 1991). *Mathānī* understood within the context of the Qur'an can refer to the Qur'an as a whole because the reward and punishment are mentioned repeatedly, mercy and punishment are placed together or “...because one peruses it repeatedly without being wearied... or which is repeated...time after time” (Lane, 1968). As one of the names of the Qur'an, *mathānī* indicates that God made dual in the *sūrah* proverbs, experiences and lessons (al-Dūsarī, 2005), and the Qur'an illustrates the stories found in previous revealed books for the second time (al-Zarkashiyyi, 2006). This term can also mean that the rules, sermons and stories are repeated within itself (Majma' al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah, 1989). *Mathānī* also refers to a group of *sūrah* in the Qur'an that are “...less than those containing a hundred verses or that are less than the long ones... [or]... occupying the second place after

those verses containing a hundred verses” (Lane, 1968). As-Suyūfī describes that these chapters are grouped under the category of *mathānī* because they followed immediately after the long chapters (al-Dūsarī, 2005).

In the verse quoted above, Yusuf Ali (2009) alludes to the word *mathānī* which has been paired with the term *mutashābih* in describing the characteristic of the revealed book. *Mutashābih* was paired with *muḥkamāt* in an earlier verse to indicate the nature of the Qur'an that contains verses that have established meanings that those which are open for us to exercise our ingenuity about their inner meanings although no one should be dogmatic in proclaiming that they have arrived at the exact and final meanings of the *mutashābih* verses (Ali, 2009). Yusuf 'Ali argues that in the context of the verse quoted above, *mutashābih* provides a different meaning due to the pairing that it has with *mathānī*. The root meaning of *mutashābih* gives different shades of idea like “...having something similar [or] working by analogy or allegory or parable [or] having its parts consistent with each other”. But in this context, the meaning it provides points to the Qur'an having consistency with each other even though it was revealed in stages at various situations and parts (al-Dūsarī, 2005). Al-Rāzī in giving his commentary on the quoted verse alludes to the point that the Qur'an has four attributes (*ṣifāt*). *Mathānī* is the third attribute of the Qur'an and this is due to pairing of ideas, concepts and statements that are repeated throughout the Qur'an like paradise and hell, matters of the heavens and earth, angels and devils, hope and fear, permitted and forbidden matters, the 'arsh and the *kursiyy*, the general and the specific and light and darkness. According to al-Rāzī, the explanation and reality of an idea or concept can be known through the explanation of its opposite because the only true One belongs to God (Al-Rāzī, F. (1981). Muhammad Asad in his translation of the Qur'an, *The Message of the Quran*, translates *mutashābih* and *mathānī* in this verse, among others, to mean “fully consistent within itself [*mutashābihan*], repeating each statement of the truth in manifold forms [*mathāniya*]...” (Asad, 2011) as the Divine Writ onto all. According to him, this is the best meaning based on the explanation provided by Zamakhsharī's commentary of this verse. Asad clarifies that the repetitions in manifold forms found throughout the Qur'an are all consistent with one another. The Qur'an reiterated its internal consistency in another verse (Asad, 2011). In this other verse, he explains that the concise phrase *rattalnāhu tartīlan* has two important concepts embedded within it. These are, (i) the idea of putting the component parts of a thing together and arranging them well and (ii)

endowing them with inner consistency. In other words *kitāban mutashābihan mathāniya* in the above verse can be translated to mean "... a book conformable to itself in (or as to its) repeated portions or twofold qualities" (Penrice, 1991). *Mathāni* in this verse also indicates that the repetition is due to the changing situation of the things being repeated and this repetition is an indication of the presence of great news (Al-Tuwanjī, 2003). In this case, Sayyid Qutb said that this character of *mutashābihan mathāniya* gives "...consistent directives and varying the ways it presents its images and stories" where the changing situations makes the use of repetition the most ideal way to reach the intended purpose. Nevertheless, as Sayyid Qutb said, these repetitions at different places for different purposes do "...not detract from the harmony and consistency of the basic truth stated throughout the Qur'an" (Quthb, 2012).

The next occurrence of the term *mathānī* is with the definite article 'the' (*al-*) in the verse,

*"And We have indeed given thee the seven oft-repeated [sab'an min al-mathānī], and the Mighty Quran" (The Qur'an 15:87).*

*Al-Mathānī* in this verse can also refer to the Qur'anic verses that are constantly and often recited (Majma' al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah, 2004). Many classical *mufasssirūn* indicate that the above usage of *mathānī* specifically refers to the opening chapter which is *sūrah al-fātiḥah*. There have been many explanations to this term (Al-Tuwanjī, 2003). All the respective expositions on this *lafẓ*, according to al-Rāzī point towards the concept of pairing (Al-Rāzī, 1981). Among the most important points in those diverse discussions is the act of making "...an item into a two one after another [*mā thunnī marrah ba'da marrah*]" (Al-Tuwanjī, 2003) or within the discussion of *sūrah al-fātiḥah*, it follows immediately with every unit of prayer [*raka'ah*]. In other words, the recitation of this chapter is followed immediately when a unit of the prayer starts. The recitation of *al-fātiḥah* cannot be delayed or placed in a later sequence when a new unit of prayer starts. Some say that the reason of this name given to the opening chapter is due to the presence of seven disciplines that the *sūrah* indicates as each verse points towards a particular disciple (Bamba, 2009). In that sense, each verse of the *fātiḥah* is paired with a discipline and the whole Qur'an repeatedly expounds on those seven disciplines. The *fātiḥah* is also named the mother of the book (*al-umm al-kitāb*) which indicates the centrality of this chapter to the whole Qur'an. Adding to this point is the saying of the Prophet that the *fātiḥah* contains the whole meaning of the Qur'an ,

the name seven oft-repeated verses describes completely its nature.

Putting together the ideas of *mathānī* discussed above, we can summarise and say that the *mathanian* character highlighted by the verses above point towards a methodology that can be employed by a researcher who is carrying out a thematic exegetical work of the Qur'an. The researcher must look out for the different types of pairings and the repetitions of that particular concept or idea that occur throughout the Qur'an and assemble these different explanations and contextual occurrences. While doing all that he must bear in mind the internal consistencies that these pairings, repetitions and explanations have with one another.

### **Al-Ghazzālī's Integration of Revealed and Scientific Data**

Imām al-Ghazzālī in his *Jawāhir al-Qur'an* did not use the term *mathānī* to describe the methodology he used in explaining the secrets of the twin attributes of Mercy (*al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm*) being repeated. But he emphasised that the repetition of these twin attributes that were separated by a verse in between is not an ordinary repetition because "...there is no repetition in the Qur'an" as "...repetition does not contain any additional benefit" (Al-Ghazzālī, 2013). Therefore he indirectly points towards the characteristics of *mathānī* where the mentioning of the same idea are carried out with purpose, reflecting the presence of immense secrets, ready to be divulged to those who seek them. In order to benefit from this repetition, we must analyse within the context of the verses that contain it. The purpose to demonstrate the encompassing nature of God's twin attributes of mercy in all realms and times of His creations is achieved through this repetition. Imām al-Ghazzālī says,

"If you see anything that appears to be repeated in it [the Qur'an], look at what precedes it and what follows it so that the additional benefit of its [apparent] repetition may be revealed to you."  
(Al-Ghazzālī, 2013)

The mentioning of the twin attributes of Mercy immediately after mentioning the 'Lord of all worlds' (*The Qur'an* 1:2) and before the verse the 'Master of the Day of Judgement' (*The Qur'an* 1:4) demonstrates that Mercy is the defining attribute that operates within both the temporal world and the world to come. In discussing the relation between the two attributes with the temporal world, al-Ghazzālī argues that every single entity that fills the universe has been

created "...to the most perfect and best of its kind and [He] has given it everything it need[s]" (Al-Ghazzālī, 2013). Expanding on this point, al-Ghazzālī brought into the discussion current scientific data of his time to show how the physical features of some of the insects were created to such perfection that they matched their habitats and served the physical needs of the smallest insects known in his time. These were the mosquito, the fly, the spider and the bee. He described the functions of the proboscis of the mosquito as to guide this tiny insect to its food and also to suck the blood of the human being. The pair of wings was created for the mosquito to flee from danger or to arrive at the place of its food. As for the fly, the eyes are without eyelids because the head is too small to accommodate the eyelid. Nevertheless, in replacement of the eyelid, the purpose of which is to cleanse the pupils from dirt and dust, two superfluous hands were created for the purpose of cleansing dust from its eyes upon landing. The spider was taught how to get food despite not having wings. Scientific observations of insects were able to determine the mode of how spiders hide at the corner of their web and pounced upon their prey when they are stuck in the web. The spider weaves their web into geometrical proportion that helps them in the wrapping and woofing of their preys. God's perfect intention and purpose in fulfilling the needs of the bee reflect the Divine Mercy permeating through the well-planned and designed shape of the bees and their hive because "...the one by whom the needs of the needy are fulfilled will not be called merciful if that is accomplished without intention, violation or concern for the one in need" (Al-Ghazzālī, 1995). With the limited space available for the bees in making their hives coupled with the large amount gathering in a narrow area, God guided the bees to build hexagonal entrance and exits which approaches the circular hive in contiguity, leaving no empty and useless space in and outside of the hives.

In view of Al-Ghazzālī, perfect mercy is the "...pouring out [of] benefaction to those in need and directing them, for their care..." (Al-Ghazzālī, A.H. (1995) and He looks "...after the one receiving mercy for the sake of the one receiving mercy" (Al-Ghazzālī, 2013). God's Mercy is both perfect and inclusive (*tāmma wa 'amma*) in His Governance as *rabb* of the worlds. The twin attributes, when mentioned at the beginning of *sūrah al-fātiḥah* points towards how human beings can familiarise themselves with the Creator through the attributes of Mercy. Al-Ghazzālī says that the characteristics of *al-Raḥmān and al-Raḥīm* requires "...all other attributes such as knowledge, power and [others]" (Al-Ghazzālī, 2013). So the first encounter of human beings with the

Creator is through Mercy which will instil longing into the hearts in their quest of searching and obeying Him because if anger was mentioned instead, fear and grief would be the defining factors and that would not be a delight of the creation. Al-Ghazzālī says,

This is a sample [the mosquito, fly, spider and bee] from the wonders of God's works and His kindness and mercy to His creation, for the lowest constitutes an evidence of the highest. Even in the long lifetimes of many men it is impossible thoroughly to study these strange events, i.e. that part of them which is revealed to man, and that is surely small in relation to that part which is not revealed. (Al-Ghazzālī, 2013)

The second mentioning of the attributes describes the perfect and inclusive nature of Divine Mercy both in the temporal and during the return of all beings to Him. It describes the operating principles of God's *af'āl* in the universe. The Divine Mercy precedes the mentioning of God as the *Mālik* (Owner, Master), in another canonical reading *Malik* (King), of the upcoming destiny of all living creatures. In this al-Ghazzālī says that the elaboration of the granting of favours in exchange of belief and worship on this day would take a long time. In his other work, *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa bayna al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa* (The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity) (AL-Ghazzālī, 2002), al-Ghazzālī argues that damnation in the afterlife is the exception (Khalil, 2012). This means that God's Mercy works in ways which are mysterious and unknown to us and He will not be questioned on how He Works and Decides but we will be questioned (*The Qur'an* 88:21-26).

In an earlier chapter of *Jawāhir al-Qur'an* with the title of 'Sciences of Ancients and Moderns from the Qur'an (*The Qur'an* 1:4) (*fī inshī'āb sār al-'ulūm min al-qur'an*), Imām al-Ghazzālī pointed out that the secrets of the verses that deal with God's *af'āl* that are made manifested to the senses of human beings can only be known to those who are specialised in that particular field. To illustrate, he chose three sciences, the science of medicine, astronomy and anatomy to explain the importance of a specialist to be able to receive the fullest benefits from revelation. The *af'āl* of God, as al-Ghazzālī describes, is a shoreless sea where the boundaries cannot be imagined through rationality. There is nothing in existence except all are attributed to God and His Works because all that exists beside Him is His Work. Therefore, the progression of a servant in his knowledge of God should begin from His *Af'āl*, into His *Ṣifāt* and then only could he understand His *Dhāt* although the servant can never understand His Essence in totality (Al-Ghazzālī, 2013). Returning to al-Ghazzālī's

application, he says that the real meaning of the respective movements of the celestial objects like the sun and the moon with the phenomenon of eclipse (*The Qur'an* 36:38 and 55:5), the merging of the night into the day and the wrapping of one onto the other (*The Qur'an* 35:13) can be comprehensively explained and appreciated by the specialist who studies this science of astronomy deeply. The specialist in the human anatomy would appreciate the wisdom behind God's Words "O mankind! What has deluded you with regard to your noble Lord, who created you, then fashioned you, then proportioned you, assembling you in whatever form He willed" (*The Qur'an* 82:6-8). The specialist who knows the aspects of diseases together with their symptoms and the cure would understand the saying (Al-Ghazzālī, 2013), "...and Who when I am ill, heals me". At the end of the chapter he summarises his points by saying:

*Reflect, then on the Qur'an and seek its wonderful meanings, so that by chance you may encounter in it confluence of the sciences of the ancients and the moderns [ilm al-awwalīn wa ākhrīn] and the sum total of their beginnings. Reflection of the Qur'an is intended only for reaching from the brief description of these sciences to their detailed knowledge which is like an ocean that has no shore. (The Qur'an 26:80)*

Here Imām al-Ghazzālī points to readers a way on how the revealed text and accumulated scientific data can be integrated. His one possible application of the *mathanian* concept to understand recurring verses on creation provides a possible framework for contemporary scholars of text and context in explicating and extracting greater wisdom from revelation. Maurice Bucaille, in a way applied this same way as al-Ghazzālī when he opined that modern science can clarify and give full meanings to certain verses of the Qur'an. A point to clarify here is that we are not advocating a form of scientism where modern science is elevated to being the arbitrator of truth and falsehood, while revelations are used as supporting evidence to that 'truth'. In our view, al-Ghazzālī's application demonstrates that Islamic tradition contains the drive to acquire scientific knowledge.

### **Synthesising the Mathanian Concept: Qur'anic Descriptions of *al-ard***

In this section of the paper we will attempt to apply this *mathanian* concept to understand the descriptions of *al-ard* in the Qur'an. There are a few descriptions that the Qur'an provides in delineating the functions and roles of the earth. We will focus on one of the

descriptions which is *firāsh* (a couch). Before we proceed to the application, let us list down the major characteristics of the *mathanian* concept based on the linguistic and Qur'anic descriptions that were discussed in the previous sections. Among the most important points discussed are the concepts of (i) pairing, (ii) repetition and (iii) internal consistency. Each of the three major concepts can be described with several characteristics individually and in terms of their inter-relatedness. For example, within the concept of pairing, the pairing done may or may not be with the same two items when they are repeated. The pairing takes numerous varieties whether in terms of their parts, elements features or even forms. The repetitions of the pairs are carried out with specific intent where this intention can only be achieved through the form of that particular repetition. Another important feature of this pairing is the immediacy that is attached to the pairing. What we mean here is that the pairing of the items are done immediately without delay or the second item comes immediately as a result of the existence of the first. This is like the recitation of *al-fātiḥah* coming immediately when the start of a new unit of prayer occurs. For the purpose of this paper, we will limit the application of *mathanian* concept to the description of *al-ard* as *firāsh* and the concept of pairing to illustrate a methodology of gaining deeper meanings to the Qur'anic verses.

The earth has been described as *firāsh* in the noun form (*The Qur'an* 51:48) of *f-r-sh* only once in the Qur'an and occurs immediately in the second chapter of the Qur'an (*The Qur'an* 2:22.). It is also preceded by a verse that calls the attention to the whole of mankind to the descriptions of earth the important life-supporting features in her (*The Qur'an* 2:21). It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the significant of this sequence and the preceding verse in relation to the concept of *al-ard*. The usual pair that is used for the earth is the heavens and the repeated imagery of the rain coming down from the sky and the coming out of fruits from the earth for the sustenance of human beings were used to describe this planetary object. Here, we want to expand this concept of pairing to pairing that occurs within the description of *al-ard* as *firāsh*. What we mean here is that instead of the usual pair of heavens and earth, we look at the pair of *al-ard* as the object intended to be described and *firāsh* as a description of that object which followed immediately after its object. In other parts of the Qur'an, *al-ard* is paired with other descriptions like *zalūl* (*The Qur'an* 67:1), *mustaqarr* (*The Qur'an* 2:36) and others indicating the major concepts of pairing and repetitions with manifold forms. *Firāsh* as a description of the earth brings out

another pair of concepts, the permanent and the transient dimensions of a couch. Lexicographically, the root word *f-r-sh* means "to spread" (Lane, 1968) where in this context, *firāsh*, refers to "a thing that is spread upon the ground ... for one to sit or lie upon... particularly a bed upon which one sleeps" (Lane, 1968). The permanent dimension of a couch lies in its function as an image of a comfortable place to lie and sleep or a place where we can rest comfortably after a long day of work. It gives an image of a home that provides serenity and tranquillity to the occupants. The transient idea lies in the type of couch, its brand, its size, its maintenance so that the couch always remains comfortable when we need it, are details that changes with geographical space and time. The permanent idea, borrowing Osman Bakar's phrase "a comfortable human home" (Bakar, 2016a) sets an unchanging image of what the functionality of *al-arḍ* is as established by revelation. The transient items then provide detailed descriptions and other elements that support the realisation of this permanent image is obtained through scientific observations and experimentations.

Another possible pair falls within the object, *al-arḍ*, which has been described. This pair is the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of *al-arḍ*. Quantitative dimension of the earth refers to the study of the earth in as much as the earth can be measured by instruments for the purpose of scientific observations and experimentations. For example, the size of the earth, her age, the different layers of sediments that make up the ground, the chemical compositions of the soil and other observable and measurable items that different branches of physical science and geology studies delve into. The amount of information obtained from this quantitative studies will always be expanding because the focus of the studies is on the changing aspects of the earth. Logically, updated information and new hypothesis and theories will be obtained from these different aspects of studies but the common denomination of all these studies is that the data obtained comes from the study of the earth's physical dimensions which are always in a state of flux. The study on the qualitative dimension of the earth focuses on the unchanging reality that governs the physical change of the quantitative study. This dimension arises through the Qur'anic perspective that every creation is a sign or a symbol of a higher reality. This does not mean that the qualitative study must be carried out using 'supernatural instruments'. These qualitative messages can be achieved through sustained observation with the purpose of finding permanence within the changes. What we mean by qualitative aspects is in reference to the spiritual and symbolic messages that nature continuously gives to

us but we are oblivious to them. One of these messages is the message of values (Lane, 1968). To illustrate this we provide an example of the apple which received its initial existence from the desire of the gardener, who wanted an apple to the final realisation of the physical apple that came from planting the apple tree.

The physical realisation of the apple starts with the planting of one seed that comes from the apple. This one seed has inherent potential to sprout vertically. From it two vertical shoots will burst the outer layer of the seed, where one goes down into the soil to form the foundation and also the source of life of what will be above and the other pushing its way out of the soil in search for sunlight to blossom into a useful tree which gives what was desired by the gardener at the end of the process. From the idea in the gardener's mind to the final realisation of the apple describes the qualitative forms and finality of essence of the object of study, which is the actualisation of the potentials of the seed in the soil. The soil or earth converts the seemingly useless seed into useful products for human being. The earth converts unwanted and dirty waste into useful and edible items for all living creatures. The earth gives more than what she gets. These extras that the earth gives cover both the quantity and the quality. The earth demonstrates a great deal of generosity (*karīm*), an *asmā'* (Name) that describes God. Being *karīm* means to exceed "...the limit one could hope for when [s]he gives [and] no[t] concerned [on] how much [s]he gives or to whom [s]he gives" (Al-Ghazzāli, A.H. (1995). The earth reproves the bad deeds human beings have been doing onto her "...but does not pursue it" (Lane, 1968).

## Conclusion

We have just scratched the surface of the *mathanian* concept and its application within scientific exegesis in the above application. The sample we gave only used one major characteristic, which is pairing, and paired it with a description of *al-arḍ* as *firāsh* in the Qur'an. Pairing occurs between the intended object and the functional description provided by the Qur'an. The functional description from the revealed text provides some form of permanent image or message that the Qur'an wants readers to consciously have while carrying our scientific observations and experimentations to provide detailed explanations of the permanent image. The object, on the other hand, can be studied through a pairing of quantitative and qualitative dimensions. The quantitative provides the space and room for the expansion of scientific research whereas the qualitative dimension gives the immutable principles that always govern the object irrespective of geographical location and terrestrial

time. Through the application above, we could see how a possible integration between the revealed text and scientific data can happen. This method is not just simply hunting for Qur'anic verses to support any new findings in science. It provides a wider application for deeper and broader integration between revealed text and scientific data. It has also showed a way of integration, integration of data, from the various forms of integration.

As demonstrated by al-Ghazzālī and al-Rāzī, this method was used by them in their expositions and commentaries of the Qur'an. This method was a reality without name, because they were seamlessly using them without the need to mention and inform their readers. We can attribute this approach by our Muslim sages of the past to their internalisation of the Qur'an and Sunnah to the extent that their thoughts, life and works were based on the spirit of revelation. In our time, we need to be reminded of these treasures and therefore these treasures must be discussed extensively and demonstrated in their applications explicitly. This is due to our own unfamiliarity with our intellectual traditions to a point that we are not able to think other than the contemporary secular-progressive-humanist way. We have been drowned in the methodology developed from an alien vision of reality to an extent that we sometimes doubt the actual relevance of our own vision of reality that could provide a more comprehensive and holistic way in research.

Overall, this approach in understanding the various descriptions of a particular component of the world of creation provides deeper and more comprehensive meanings to the various descriptions of the particular phenomena or creation that the Qur'an describes. It is not a new methodology in providing commentaries of the Qur'an but a reminder of the great potentiality it has in contemporary times. The *mathanian* approach to scientific exegesis is also synthetic because it allows for a harmonious synthesis between revealed data with empirically acquired scientific data. Inspired by Islam's holistic (tawhīdic) epistemology, the *mathanian* methodology of providing scientific exegesis can provide a more comprehensive vision of creations that include both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the world of nature and seamlessly integrate revealed text with scientifically obtained data.

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