An Evaluation of Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr* from the Aspect of *Riwāyah* and *Dirāyah* Methods

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Abstract

Written in the early period of Islam by Ṭabarī, "*Al-Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*" is one of the main references for those who work in the field of Qur'ānic studies. It is generally regarded as the first work of *tafsīr riwāyah* (traditional exegesis), a methodological type of Qur'ānic commentary. In order to examine the methods with which Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* was written, this study will first define all the characteristics of *riwāyah* and *dirāyah tafsīr*. Then it will examine Tabarī's *al-Jāmi'* to investigate if the author followed a wide spectrum when determining the main subjects of the *tafsīr*, while emphasizing that the main reason for the revelation must be understood. This study mainly argues that the *al-Jāmi'* has the characteristics of *dirāyah* more than *riwāyah*.

Introduction

It is well understood that there are many multi-faceted sources available to all academic researchers. It is inevitable that researchers become best acquainted with sources that exist in those fields in which they are interested; indeed, in order to carry out a sound analysis, they must be well acquainted with such sources. The science of *tafsīr* (Qur'ānic commentary), one of the most important Islamic sciences, is one such group of sources. The commentary of *al-Ṭabarī* (d. 310/992),[1]

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[1] Known as al-Ṭabarī, the famous exegete Muḥammad bin Jarīr was born in Amul of Ṭabaristan in 224 or 225 of Hijrah (A.D. 838 or 839) and died in 310/923 in Baghdād. Despite kown as Abū Jaʿfar (Father of Jafar), he has never got married. For further information about his personality and his commentary see: Yāqūt al-Hamāwī, *Irshād al-Arīb ila' Ma'rifat al-Adīb*, (*Mu'jam al-Udabā'/Ṭabaqāt al-'Udabā'*, ed.by Aḥmad Farīd Rifā'ī (al-Qāhirah: n. p., 1355/1936), XVIII/62, 63; Ahmad bin Ali al-Khatīb al-Baghdadī, *Tarīkh Baghdād* (Bairūt: n. p., n. d.), II/163; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad bin Aḥmad bin 'Uthmān al-Dhahabī, edited by Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūṭ-Akram Būshī, *Siyar 'A'lām al-Nubalā'* (Bairūt: Mu'sasat al-Risālah, n. d.), XIV/267-282; 'Abd al-lFattāḥ Abū Ghuddah, *Al-'Ulamā' al-'Uzzāb* (Haleppo: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1403/1983), pp. 35-37.

Jāmi' al-Bayān[2] written at an early period, has become one of the basic references in studying Qur'ānic commentary.

The genre of *tafsīr* is generally divided into two categories by scholars, that of *riwāyah*[3] and that of *dirāyah*.[4] Despite claims that Ṭabarī had opened a new direction in the field of *tafsīr* with his *Jāmi' al-Bayān,*[5] we know that most scholars put it in the category of *riwāyah* and list it as the leading work.[6] However, it has been said that the aforementioned *tafsīr* is a sound work that attempts to erect a scientific structure on matters related to *dirāyah tafsīr,*[7] thus, emphasizing its *dirāyah* nature.[8]

In order to examine the methods with which Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* was written, this study will first examine all the characteristics of *riwāyah*

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[2]Known as *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*, the commentary was first published between 1322-1330/1904-1912 in Bulāq in 30 volumes. After that, this version was revised by Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir in 12 volumes (Bairut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1412/1992). The source used in this study is this edition. The commentary is called *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān* or *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*.

[3]*Riwāyah* is a *tafsīr* type which is based on the Qur'ān, *ḥadīth*, and opinions of Companians and subsequent generations. It is called as *Ma'thūr* or *al-Manqūl*. See: Jalāl al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān,*(Cairo: Al-Maṭba'ah al-Azhariyyah, 1318/1900), II/173; Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufassirūn* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī 1396/1976), I/152.

[4]*Dirāyah* is a *tafsīr* type that is also called as *ra'y* and rational which is based on the linguistic, literal and cultural analysis of the Qur'ān. See al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān,* II/81-184.

[5]See: Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān,* II/191; Tashkubrizade Aḥmad b. Muṣliḥuiddīn Afandī (d.968/1045), *Mawḍū'āt al-'Ulūm,* I/283, 509; Aḥmad Muṣṭafa' al-Marāghi, *Tafsīr al-Maraghī,* (Miṣr: Maktabat al-Ḥalabī, 1382/1962), I/19; Muḥammad Farīd Wajdī (Bairūt: Dā'irat Ma'ārif al-Qarn al-'Ishrīn (Beirūt: Dār al-Ma'rifah, n.d.,), V/678.

[6]Shams al-Dīn Abū al-'Abbās Aḥmad bin Muḥammad bin Khaliqān, *Wafayāt al-A'yān wa Anbā' Abnā' al-Zamān* (Al-Qāhirah: Al-Maṭba'at al-Maymaniyyah, 1310/1892), IV/191, 192; Tāj al-Dīn 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Subkī (771/1369), *Ṭaabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyyah al-Kubra'* (Al-Qāhirah: Maṭba'at al-Ḥalabī, 1364/1945), II/121; Subḥī Ṣaliḥ, *Mabāḥith fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Istanbūl: Derseadet, 1385/1965), p. 291; Mannā' al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Bairūt: Mu'ssasat al-Risālah, 1417/1996), pp. 362, 364.

[7]See: Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufassirūn,* I/ 256.

[8]For instance see: Badr al-Dīn Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad bin Bahadur bin 'Abd Allāh al-Turkī al-Zarkashī (794/1392), *Al-Burhān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* edited by Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Al-Qāhirah: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah, 1376/1957), II/164; Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān,* II, 178, 190, 191; Aḥmad bin Muḥammad al-Adnāwī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Mufassirīn,* edited by Sulaymān bin Ṣalih al-Hajjī, (Madīnah: Maktabat al-'Ulūm al-Ḥikam), p. 50; Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufassirūn,* I/147, 149

and *dirāyah tafsīr*.[9] In addition, it will examine Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* along with those that were written subsequently, as they refer to his work in a variety of ways.[10] We can see that the author investigated a wide focus of topics when determining the main subjects of the *tafsīr*, whilst emphasizing that the main reason for the revelation must be understood. In his commentary on the Qur'ān, Ṭabarī examines matters on which the explanation is known by none other than Allah, such as the exact time of the Day of Judgment.[11] Ṭabarī states that it is considered wrong, even if one is accurate, to explain these matters according to one's own opinion.[12] He goes on to state that in other matters, however, one can make interpretations and that the interpretation of the Qur'ān should not be opposed.[13] He emphasizes that those who oppose such interpretations are wrong to do so.[14] The fact that some early scholars did not involve themselves in such *tafsīr* does not mean that they rejected this approach. Their reluctance was due to their fear of failing to reach the goal that had been determined by Allah.[15] Ṭabarī states that the basic principle in interpretation is to state the obvious and that one should not deviate from this.[16] He explains that although a person is responsible for indicating the justification and sources used when making a choice between two interpretations,[17] where an overwhelming majority (*ijmāʿ*) favours one interpretation, one must put personal choices aside and go with the majority.[18]

In our study of Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* the parts that can be considered to be *dirāyah tafsīr* are greater in number than the *riwāyah tafsīr*. The *riwāyah*

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[9]The feature of *Riwāyah Tafsīr* is to interpret the verses by other verses, by the sayings of Prophet Muḥammad and by Companians. The characteristic feuture of *Dirāyah Tafsīr* is to exegete the Qur'ān not only by these traditional tools but also by language, literature, theology and other humanistic and natural sciences. See: al-Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, II/156-161; Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, II/178; Ṣubḥī Ṣāliḥ, *Mabāḥith*, p. 292; Bilmen, *Buyuk Tefsir Tarihi*, I/110; Sofuoglu, *Tefsire Giris*, p. 263, 307; Turgut, *Tefsir Usulu ve Kaynaklari*, p. 113.

[10]For instance see: Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad bin Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī (671/1272), *Al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* (Bairūt: n. p., n. d.), I/14, 15, 21, 52, 68; XV/248, 343; Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, II/190; Ṭāskubrazāda´, *Mawḍū'ā al-'Ulūm*, I/530, II/343.

[11]Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, I/56.

[12]Ibid., I/58, 59.

[13]Ibid., I/60, 61.

[14]Ibid., I/62, 63, 64, 73, III/175, II/226.

[15]Ibid., I/64.

[16]Ibid., I/299; II/57; III/563; VII/483; X/143.

[17]Ibid., I/576. II/25.

[18]Ibid., XI/438.

sections of Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* consist of *ahādīth* attributed to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and the words of the Companions and the following generations, known as the *athar*. There are a total of 38,397 *riwāyahs*[19] together with different versions. Apart from limited cases, the majority of the *riwāyah* reports can be analyzed from various aspects. In connection with this, the *riwāyah*s are separated from the *tafsīr*. While leaving the chain of narrators of the *riwāyah* outside the text, Ṭabarī examines some absolute statements of the actual text of the *riwāyah* from different aspects. Sometimes criticism is directed against the source of the text if doubts are raised about the soundness of the *riwāyah* and sometimes the text itself is criticized. As a result of such criticism, Ṭabarī makes his choice along with the reasons for his choice. Thus, Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* is more characteristically a *dirāyah* than a *riwāyah tafsīr*, and the aspect of the former makes up most of the text. We are of the opinion that this *tafsīr* does not fall into the *riwāyah* group, but rather the *dirāyah tafsīr* group.

When evaluating Ṭabarī's *riwāyah* and *dirāyah*,[20] we need to take into account the significance given to interpretation and *riwāyah*;[21] the use of Qur'ānic verses as references in matters of interpretation;[22] the fact that verses are dealt with from general and specific formations;[23] the discussion of earlier interesting interpretations;[24] the choices Ṭabarī made;[25] the fact that Ṭabarī does not have a problem with ambiguity if he is unable to make choices between words that are difficult to understand;[26] that he accepts the *mansūkh* (abrogated) verses of the

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[19]Ibid., relevant pages in the Introduction.

[20]Ibid., I/60, 62, 63, 117, 236, 238-242, 247, 251, 251, 252, 253, 260, 261, 283, 355, 359, 345, 368, 369, 409, 419, 440, 591, 592, 592, 594, 598, 161, 218, 489, 625-627; II/147-150, 339, 340; IV/46, 436, 89, 143; V/376, 383, 467, 473, 475, 518; VI/184, 316, 345, 359, 360, 329, 352, 539, 541, 607-612; VII/108, 119, 390; IX/105, 106; X/5, 276, 277, 510.

[21]Ibid., I/422.

[22]Ibid., I/143,144, 146, 157, 179; II/99, 100, 205, 206, 451; VII/510; IX/295; XII/80, 81,272, 273.

[23]Ibid., I/429, 603; II/80; VI/144, 215, 216, 243.

[24]Ibid., I/98, 99, 111, 136, 166-168, 167, 188, 192, 196, 224-226, 471, 505, 506; II/329; III/540, 541, 560; IV/375. VI/219, 335, 240, 458, 459, 459, 516, 525, 529, 535, 574; VII/40, 41.

[25]Ibid., I/68, 69, 133, 142, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 210; II/121, 123, 131, 137, 222, 278, 287, 334; III/18, 21, 219, 257, 276; VIII/3, 5,6, 16, 43, 97, 328, 329, 335, 336; IX/21, 40, 76, 93, 98, 251-252, 309; X/143, 203, 205, 253, 579; XII/78, 391, 471.

[26]Ibid., I/121, 126, 128, 129, 384; II/337, 338; VII/483.

Qur'ān when making rulings;[27] that he opposes to severe abrogation; makes room for *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and the discussion of such matters;[28] makes references to some representatives from different *fiqh* schools;[29] touches on matters of *kalām* (theology);[30] makes philological[31] and literary analyses;[32] explains matters by using the question and answer method;[33] completes concepts with simple expressions;[34] opposes the views of some scholars about the Companions and later generations;[35] provides social, cultural and historical information;[36] mentions legends;[37] and makes room for folkloric elements.[38] All of these initiatives employed by Ṭabarī lead us to the opinion that *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān* is a *dirāyah tafsīr*. In order to establish our opinion on solid ground, it would be useful to give some examples illustrating the above matters from Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*.

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[27]Ibid., I/370, 537, 552; II/21, 42, 144, 145, 196, 199, 356, 366, 357, 380, 389, 390, 575, 596, 597; III/120, 608; IV/33, 34, 201, 400, 586; V/228, 368; VI/78, 133, 176, 202, 374; VII/646; X/150; XI/256, 307; XII/63, 405.

[28]Ibid., I/391, I/392, 520, 578; II/53, 86, 91, 156, 157, 160, 179, 180, 183, 185, 214, 270-271, 353, 391, 392, 393, 395, 408, 501; III/15, 16, 17, 93, 95, 387; IV/9, 14, 15, 20, 108, 130, 131, 441, 442, 449, 471; V/32, 56, 57, 107, 108; VI/242, 249, 396, 398, 400; IX/260, 269, 270; XI/500; XII/12, 37, 56,139.

[29]Ibid., I/353; IV/38; V/55;VIII/380, 429.

[30]Ibid., III/155, 156; IV/202, 203, 617; V/184, 294-298, 339, 346.

[31]Ibid., I/150, 151, 152, 155, 156, 169, 172, 184, 341, 342, 556, 566, 569; II/16, 227, 604, 638; III/589, 637; IV/245, 407, 408; V/156, 157, 450, 428, 502; VII/420.

[32]Ibid., I/342, 395, 433, 434; II/21, 57, 205; III/6; VII/203, 270, 359, 408.

[33]Ibid., I/195, 292, 361, 362, 405, 406, 434, 617-618; 212; III/602, 603; IV/292; VII/290; X/587, 593.

[34]Ibid., I/159, 161,162, 205, 295, 462, 468, 544, 610; III/506; V/334, 369, V/373, 374; IX/412.

[35]Ibid., I/199, 202-203, 205, 314, 373, 397, 417; II/47, 219, 390, 401, 403; III/70, 124, 125, 533, 571, 512; IV/81, 285, 301; VI/71, 176; VII/220, 302, 420, 644; VIII/125, 130, 134.

[36]Ibid., I/144, 286, 287, 298, 309, 311, 319, 320, 321, 363, 437, 472, 517, 546, 547, 548, 555, 613; II/210, 216, 328, 348, 407, 408, 432, 453, 454, 458, 467, 468, 495, 496, 527, 526,528, 549; III/49, 73, 523; IV/34, 282, 318, 444, 445, 489, 502, 510, 530, 535, 537; V/10, 13, 36, 451; VI/33, 408; VII/306, 308, 434-436, 551-555, 628-629; VIII/34, 46; IX/42, 56, 75, 279, 385; X/108, 244, 530; XI/332; XII/331, 332, 350.

[37]Ibid., I/336, 337, 338, 497-500, 502, 503, 504; IV/515-519.

[38]Ibid., I/212, 213, 261, 264, 315, 603; II/303, 304; III/12, 285, 286, 327, 543; IV/327, 442; VI/77; VII/242, 577.

I. *Ṭabarī's View of Riwāyah*

Although the Qur'ān was revealed in Arabic, as stated in the verse: "…We have sent down unto thee the Message; that thou mayest explain clearly to men what is sent for them…" (al-Naḥl, 16: 44), Ṭabarī points out that there are phrases in the Qur'ān which none but Allah can explain.[39] He goes on to state that the way to understand these phrases is the *riwāyahs* (*aḥādīth*/reports) of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and sets out the criteria for excepting a *riwāyah* as: "*riwāyahs* should be in line with the Qur'ān".[40] There are two types of *riwāyahs* in Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* that are based on this principle: *riwāyahs* that are directly related to *tafsīr* and *riwāyahs* that are indirectly concerned with *tafsīr*.

A. *Riwāyahs That Are Directly Related to Tafsīr*

This type of *riwāyah* is divided into following sub-types:

a. Sound and authentic narrations: Our commentator puts *dirāyah* and his own views aside when confronts such strong *riwāyahs,* stating that it is necessary to respect the *riwāyah* and the opinion of the majority.[41]

b. Riwāyahs that are known but not authentic or those that have a weak narrative chain. Ṭabarī says that this type of *riwāyahs* cannot be used as evidence for religious matters and severely criticizes rumours that have been frequently quoted.[42]

c. Riwāyahs which are quoted, but used in different ways according to preference, as in the passage: "…and to this ye can bear witness" (al-Baqarah, 2: 84). Ṭabarī is in favour of those who interpret this phrase to include the contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) as well as those to whom this is addressed. However, Ibn ʿAbbās (68/687) limits the verse to those who were living at the time of the Prophet.[43] Again, Ṭabarī does not agree with the type of *riwāyah* that interprets the word "drink" in "they had to drink into their hearts (of the taint) of the calf because of their faithlessness" (al-Baqarah, 2: 93) as actually drinking, but prefers the meaning "they took the love of the calf into their hearts"[44] and supports this preference with examples from poetry.[45]

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[39]Ibid., I/56; VIII/171; XII/415, 416.
[40]Ibid., XI/226.
[41]Ibid., III/339, 340, 560; IV/46, 108; IX/105, 106; XI/228, 280, 438.
[42]Ibid., I/252, 253, 283; II/218; III/62.
[43]Ibid., I/440.
[44]Ibid., I/467.

d. Riwāyahs that contradict one another. Ṭabarī deals with *riwāyahs* that are completely opposed to one another and decides between them. For example, the tribe of Prophet Moses (ﷺ) was responsible for sacrificing a cow but they hesitated to do so by giving some excuses. One of the excuses given was that the price of cattle was very high. Ṭabarī provides narrations related to this. He then brings to our attention a *riwāyah* that is totally opposed to this excuse, stating that they also said that the price of cattle was only three gold pieces.[46]

e. Riwāyahs that are beneficial when making choices: We can see that Ṭabarī uses this type of narration when making explanations. For example, when interpreting ambiguous words, he tries to support his choice with a *riwāyah*, such as, in "will you exchange the better for worse?" (al-Baqarah, 2:61), he uses the word *adnā* from *danāyah*, i.e. *akhass* (low) or *aṣghar* (low in position). However, some people derive this word from *dunuww* and find the meaning *'aqrab'* to be closer. Thus, our commentator tries to make his thesis stronger by inserting a *riwāyah* at this juncture.[47]

f. Riwāyahs that are mentioned in the text, but not included: In the matter of magic, Ṭabarī states that magic transforms the nature of things and he strongly criticizes those who say that it is possible to create physical beings with magic. Although he is opposed to such superstitious stories,[48] he mentions the *riwāyah* of a magician's trick that turned a person into a donkey.[49]

g. Different *riwāyahs* between which Ṭabarī does not make a choice: Concerning this sub-type of *riwāyah* Ṭabarī says that all of these or some of these can be what was intended. However, none can make a definite judgment that 'With this *riwāyah* this meaning was intended'. In order to do so, one should have evidence.[50] It is not permissible to connect *riwāyah*s to one another.[51] From the aspect of logic and linguistics, one should not make a preference between views before

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[45]Ibid., I/468. For the other examples see: Ibid, I/534; III/147-150. VI/359, 360; VIII/390.

[46]Ibid., I/368, 369.

[47]Ibid., I/138, 139, 140, 142, 353.

[48]Ibid., I/505; For the other examples see: Ibid, VI/345.

[49]Ibid., I/505, 506.

[50]Ibid., I/576.

[51]Ibid., I/598; II/625-627; VII/308.

arriving at a conclusion. Ṭabarī states that in such a case it is not correct to prefer one view thus showing the other to be weak.[52]

h. Riwāyahs that are compiled and evaluated together: An example of this is the word *īmān* (belief) which appears in the phrase *"those who believe"* (al-Baqarah, 2: 3). This is interpreted as a) "to confirm," b) "to feel awe," or c) "an act of faith." After saying that faith is "confirmed," and that awe, in the meaning of belief, is confirmed with verbal practices, Ṭabarī says that the believer acknowledges Allah, His books and Prophets, and that this acknowledgment is the action of confirming. Thus, he states that the interpretation of the verse in this way is more appropriate for the attributes of the believer, as these attributes confirm the words, belief and actions of the *ghayb* (unknown). He goes on to say that Allah does not speak of belief in only one sense; rather, He gives this phrase as a summary.[53]

i.Riwāyahs concerning the reason for the revelation of a *sūrah* or verse: The commentator infrequently deals directly with the reason for revelation or an associated *riwāyah*.[54] Ṭabarī does not take into account the events that led to the revelation, stating the idea which confirms the view: "the fact that any verse was revealed under special circumstances does not prevent it from being generalized."[55] Ṭabarī does not make preferences about the reasons given for a revelation.[56]

B. *Riwāyahs and Reports That Are Indirectly Concerned with Tafsīr*

This type of *riwāyah* is divided into following sub-typies:

a. Weak *riwāyahs* that are concerned with historical events. For example, one is a *riwāyah* from Ibn ʿAbbās as to why Christians were called 'al-Naṣāra'.[57] There are also different *riwāyahs* about how many years passed between Prophet Joseph's (ﷺ) dream and when its interpretation was made; some say forty years,[58] some eighty, while others say eighteen.[59] In the same way, there are *riwāyahs* about two preachers who stood up to make a speech; one was Satan while the other was Prophet Jesus (ﷺ). In addition, the *riwāyah* that Qārūn came out

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[52]Ibid., II/629; VII/636, 637.
[53]Ibid., I/133.
[54]Ibid., XI/332; XII/733.
[55]Ibid., V/5, 13, 36; VI/220; X/244.
[56]Ibid., IX/356; XII/7, 56.
[57]Ibid., I/359.
[58]Ibid., VII/304, 305.
[59]Ibid., VII/306.

dressed in red in front of his tribe[60] is of a similar nature.[61] In the interpretation of words that are not clear in the *riwāyah*, Ṭabarī turns to the words of historians. For example, in the interpretation of *al-Raqīm* historians prefer to interpret this as a plaque or a stone, or something written on a stone, giving the words *ahl al-ahkbār* as evidence.[62]

b. Superstitions, like people who allow children to pass in front of them when they pray as children are without sin.[63]

c. Reports that have social content, like well-known personalities criticizing one another.[64]

d. Folkloric *riwāyahs*: These consist of reports that are spread among the people – although there are only a few of this sub-type. For example, the story of Prophet Joseph (ﷺ) and Zulaykhā, the wife of Aziz, being married after Prophet Joseph achieved a prominent status. Their conversations are of this type of *riwāyah*.[65]

e. *Riwāyahs* that are concerned with the blessings of verses.[66]

f. *Riwāyahs* that are concerned with legends, like that of a man filled his sleeve with the 12 ambassadors of Prophet Moses (ﷺ)/or put them in a sack[67] and took them on his back.[68]

II. *An Examination of Commentaries Based on Dirāyah*

Ṭabarī gives room to *riwāyahs* that support the *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān.[69] He draws our attention to the verse: "Here is a Book which We have sent down unto thee, full of blessings, that they may meditate on its signs and that men of understanding may receive admonition" (Ṣād, 38: 29), and other similar verses that order human beings to think. Ṭabarī states that thinking depends on understanding and that in order to think, one should first understand the meaning. He says that it is unreasonable to say to

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[60]Ibid., X/108, 117.

[61]Ibid., VII/434-436. For the other examples see: Ibid, I/437, 546, 548; III/49, 285, 286; V/318, 451, 530, 535, 537; VI/77, 89, 186, 226, 228, 264, 408, 420, 605; VII/300, 434-436; VIII/34; IX/42.

[62]Ibid., *A.g.e.*, VIII/182. For the other examples dealing with the subject see: Ibid, I/437, 547; II/348; VII/159, 160; VII/290

[63]Ibid., IV/130, 131. For further examples see: Ibid, IV/515-519, 605; VIII/34; IX/56, 75; X/571.

[64]Ibid., II/216, 407, 454; IV/444, 445.

[65]Ibid., VII/242. For the other examples see: Ibid, I/603; VI/77; VII/576, 577.

[66]For instance see: Ibid, III/440; VI/60.

[67]Ibid., IV/515-519.

[68]For the other examples see: Ibid, I/320, 321, 502, 503, 504.

[69]Ibid., I/60.

one who does not understand Arabic: "Tell me a *qaṣīdah* (couplet) in Arabic that includes lessons and advice and I will heed that advice."[70] Thus, if we are to say to one who does not know the Qur'ān, "Take advice and lessons from the Qur'ān," that person must be aware of what is included in the Qur'ān, because the orders that are concerned with the lessons in the verses are directed towards those who understand the meanings of the verses. This shows that those who unjustly opposed the *tafsīrs* of the commentators[71] along with those critics who stated their views about explanations of the Qur'ān are incorrect in their interpretation of *riwāyah* on this matter.[72] It is reported from 'Ā'ishah that *"The Prophet interpreted a limited number of verses."*[73] The fact that the Prophet interpreted a limited number of verses strengthens this thesis.[74]

Ṭabarī was not content with dry philological analyses in the *tafsīr*; he focused on the important messages that were contained in the verses;[75] he opposed forced interpretations and refused to take up such interpretations;[76] and maintained that it is not enough to simply know Arabic to interpret the Qur'ān.[77] He warned us that *"The dilemma is very clear if you do not rely on a sound foundation in your opinion."*[78] He also reflects important points[79] when making choices about the meaning of a word.[80] For example, the word *al-ḥikmah* used in the Qur'ān, is always used in the meaning of Sunnah: "With *ḥikmah* Allah Almighty bequeathed, through the Prophet, the path of the Sunnah to be followed by the believers."[81] Ṭabarī frequently emphasizes that the common meaning among Arabs of a word that is used by Allah – unless there is evidence to the contrary – should be preferred in commentaries of the Qur'ān.[82]

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[70]Ibid., I/61.
[71]Ibid., I/61.
[72]Ibid., I/62.
[73]Ibid., I/62.
[74]Ibid., I/63, 64.
[75]Ibid., V/467, 473, 475, 518; X/203, 205; XI/5.
[76]Ibid., VII/578.
[77]Ibid., II/253; VII/231.
[78]Ibid., I/87.
[79]Ibid., VII/604.
[80]Ibid., I/205.
[81]Ibid., III/506. For the other examples see: Ibid, I/555.
[82]For instance see: Ibid, VIII/116; IX/260.

III. *Methods in Commentaries*

When interpreting verses Ṭabarī turns to other verses to explain the meanings of words;[83] making etymological, syntactical and literary analyses.[84] In addition to this, he turns to folk expressions.[85] When desiring to emphasize the actual meaning of a word, he draws attention to the names of objects that have been derived from that word. For example, when explaining the phrase: "…And We shall forgive you your faults…" (al-Baqarah, 2: 58), he mentions the word *mighfar* (helmet), which is derived from the word *ghafara* (pardon). He interprets this as *"The All Merciful will cover your errors, He will hide them and He will not embarrass you because of them."*[86] Ṭabarī interprets words that have different meanings in a variety of ways; preferring those that are most appropriate to the verse. He explains that the word *ḍuribat* has meanings like *furiḍat* (made obligatory) and *wuḍı'at* (settled), and gives a variety of examples concerning such meanings in Arabic, although sometimes he chooses a different meaning.[87] For example, he gives *riwāyah* concerning the fact that the word *sayyi'ah,* which means evil or sin, is used in sūrat al-Baqarah, verse 81, to mean *shirk* (polytheism).[88] Some commentaries, which Ṭabarī approves of, quotes them without any interpretation. For example, he gives Ibn 'Abbās' statement: "In the same way that I would like a woman to dress up for me I too desire to dress up for her*"* as evidence for: "And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable…" (al-Baqarah, 2: 228).[89] Logic holds an important place in Ṭabarī's commentaries. For example, he interprets the word *al-kitāb* (the Book) in "Hast thou not turned thy vision to those who have been given a portion of the Book*?"* (Āl-'Imrān, 3: 23) as referring to the Old Testament. In support of this Ṭabarī presents the view: "This is because they denied the Qur'ān and they confirmed the Old Testament against this (the Qur'ān). Thus the Qur'ān was evidence of the lies they presented against the truth."[90]

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[83]Ibid., I/143.

[84]Ibid., I/98, 99, 341.

[85]Ibid., I/144.

[86]Ibid., I/342.

[87]Ibid., I/355.

[88]Ibid., I/428.

[89]Ibid., II/467. For the other xamples see: Ibid, II/580; III/73.

[90]Ibid., III/219. For the other examples in this regard see: Ibid, II/337, 338, 356, 366, 380, 389, 390.

Ṭabarī does not immediately reject the interpretations of other commentators, sometimes even forces himself to adopt their choices.[91] Etymology and syntax play an important role in the commentaries he does criticize.[92] In the areas where Ṭabarī cannot make up his mind he quotes interpretations and for each interpretation he says: "and there is a motive, a direction that is not far from the truth for all of these views."[93] Acting from philological data, he sometimes compares his personal interpretations with that of others, while sometimes he concurs with the motive for the commentary, drawing attention to the fact that his commentary is sounder.[94] And yet at other times he criticizes the other view, bringing his own preference to the fore.[95]

If there are different interpretations for a verse, Ṭabarī neither remains under the effect of one interpretation, nor does he automatically prefer the universal interpretations, but opts for the more reasonable and self-sufficient interpretation. If there are interpretations with which Ṭabarī does not agree he does not refrain from criticizing the interpretation or its motive. For example, in the phrase 'اهدِنَا' he takes into account the interpretation "increase our spiritual guidance (hidāyah)," listing the possibilities for making this interpretation and then refuting them.[96]

When Ṭabarī does not approve of an interpretation he accuses it of being stupid, idiotic, or foolish. For example, he opposes interpreting *al-Ṣirāṭ* as "the right path," "that leads the followers to heaven." He states that the attribution of the direction "the right path" is due to the straightness of the path and that it contains no bends. He goes on to state that the opinion of all the commentators who interpret in this way should be sufficient evidence.[97] Moreover, after reporting the view of the commentators about the matter of charity, Ṭabarī states that the most suitable interpretation of pious charity covers both charity to others and the sustenance of one's own family.[98] What he says in connection with other interpretations about the Day of Judgment '*al-yawm al-'ākhir*' (the Last Day), is as follows: *"That day is the last of the concept of "day;"*

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[91]For instance see: Ibid, VI/240.
[92]Ibid., IV/81.
[93]Ibid., IV/375.
[94]For instance see: Ibid, III/540, 541, 589.
[95]Ibid., IX/76, 250, 251-252.
[96]Ibid., I/102, 103.
[97]Ibid., I/106.
[98]Ibid., I/137.

after that there will be no other days.[99] The Arabic word *'yawm'* means a day and (this time period) starts during the night before; if there is to be a night after that day, that day cannot be called *al-yawm al'ākir*- 'the Last Day;' there is no other night from the morning of the Day of Judgment other than the night of the Day of Judgment. Therefore, that day is the Last Day."[100]

a. Interpretations That Rely on Siyāq and Sibāq (Inner-Textual Context)

Ṭabarī gives great importance to *siyāq* and *sibāq*, that is, the connection to the preceding and subsequent verses, and makes interpretations based on this.[101] For example, when examining "...for each (such person) there are (angels) in succession, before and after him" (al-Ra'd, 13: 11), Ṭabarī states that the word *'mu'aqqibāt* (in succession) indicates that there are those who protect the world leaders and those who are being protected. The latter are protected from the front and back. In the same way, he states that it is more suitable to interpret according to the preceding and following verses.[102]

b. Approach to The Matter of Abrogation (Naskh)

The commentator states that *naskh* can only be a matter of order or prohibition and one cannot speak of *naskh* in *riwāyah* or *aḥādīth*.[103] Although he accepts the existence of *naskh* in the Qur'ān,[104] Ṭabarī does not think that it is a common practice. He does not approve of the random judgments of *naskh*.[105] He opposes and criticizes this view along with expressions like "this verse is abrogated by that verse." For example, Ṭabarī sides with those who do not accept that the 180th verse of al-Baqarah was abrogated by the verse related to inheritance.[106] He says: "There needs to be a record in order to be able to say that a verse

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[99]Ibid., I/150.

[100]Ibid., I/151. For his personal understaning see: Ibid, I/125, 126, 129, 132, 166-168, 196, 210, 224-226, 236, 286, 287, 307, 338, 341, 429, 499, 500, 566; II/80; III/21, 387, 533, 571; IV/459; V/246; VI/77, 219, 516, 535, 574; VII/302, 643; VIII/328, 329, 335, 336; IX/21, 40; X/145; XII/471.

[101]Ibid., II/451; VII/408; VII/510; IX/295; XII/80, 81; XII/272, 273.

[102]Ibid., VII/352.

[103]Ibid., I/521; XII/405.

[104]Ibid., I/199, 370, 524, 525; II/145, 356, 366, 575, 596, 597; IV/201; V/228, 368; VII/646; XI/256.

[105]Ibid., II/380, 389, 390; III/120, 147-150, 608; IV/33, 34, 400; VI/133, 176, 202, 249, 374; VII/665, 666; X/150; XI/307; XII/63.

[106]Ibid., II/121.

has been abrogated. However, it is unlikely that the rule of this verse and the rule of the verse of inheritance can be related."[107]

c. *Reasons for Preference*

Ṭabarī sometimes accepts different interpretations of a verse as being possible[108] and he sometimes makes a choice between them. When making a choice, Ṭabarī gives his reasons,[109] criticizing opposing ideas with logical arguments.[110] He also makes a choice among the different meanings of a concept and shows his reasons for doing so.[111]

d. *The Use of The Question and Answer Method in Interpretation*

From time to time Ṭabarī uses the method of asking questions and giving answers through the voice of his audience.[112] He lays down the matter from different perspectives by using the phrase "if someone says," answering the questions with the phrase "it is said."[113] For example, a person says:

> They have examined all the optional deeds and prayers and have discovered there is a compulsory deed for all optional deeds. In the same way that performing *'umrah* (minor pilgrimage) is, to some extent, a compulsory prayer, the optional *'umrah* should be compulsory as well because it is in the position of acting as a leader for optional deeds in all compulsory deeds.

Now, one should ask: "Solitude is optional. What is the leading compulsory deed of this action?" Then it is asked again: "Is solitude a compulsory deed or not?" If one says it is compulsory, then they are not in agreement with the Muslim community. If they say it is optional, then one would say: "Then what makes *'umrah* compulsory, while solitude is optional?" Whoever is asked, it is unavoidable that he will be silenced.[114]

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[107]Ibid., II/123. For the other examples see: Ibid, I/552; II/115, 131, 137, 196; IV/586.
[108]Ibid., VIII/91.
[109]Ibid., I/172, 173, 176, 177, 419; II/99, 100; V/339; VII/40, 41, 607-612; VIII/3, 97; IX/77, 93; X/253; XII/78.
[110]Ibid., IV/301, 530, 535; VII/644.
[111]Ibid., V/373, 374; VI/144; VII/539, 541; VIII/43; IX/98.
[112]Ibid., II/100; III/602, 603; VI/177.
[113]Ibid., I/99. For the other examples see: Ibid, I/100, 101, 113, 114, 617-618.
[114]Ibid., II/219.

e. *The Opposition and Criticism of Some Famous Commentators*

Ṭabarī quotes from the famous *tafsīr* scholar Mujāhid (103/721), but he neither refrains from criticizing him,[115] nor does he abstain from objecting to Ibn ʿAbbās.[116] He also opposes some views of al-Suddī (127/745).[117] He does not agree with some interpretations of ʿUmar (23/644)[118] and he criticizes some views of great personalities like al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (110/718),[119] ʿIkrimah (107/725),[120] Saʿīd b. Jubayr (d. 95/713),[121] ibn Jurayj,[122] Saʿīd bin Al-Musayyab (93/712),[123] Qatādah (d. 118/736),[124] and Ibn Masʿūd (d. 32/652).[125]

IV. *Jurisprudential Evaluations*

Ṭabarī sometimes, deals with jurisprudential matters[126] and deducts rulings from the verses.[127] For example, in the matter of the payment system to charity collectors, he claims that payment of 1/8 of the collected amount should be based on the performance and should not be a set fee.[128] He also makes jurisprudential definitions.[129] He defines the poor as "one who is needy but does not ask for anything from the public and who is not oppressed," and the beggar as "the one who is in need and asks people to help for his needs."[130] From time to time Ṭabarī refers to the rulings of other scholars that are based on verses.[131] He makes a note of the points with which he does not agree, and he makes choices

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[115]Ibid., I/199, 200, 202-203, 373; II/47; V/400; VII/194; VIII/130, 134, 268, 269.
[116]Ibid., I/417, 591; II/222, 287, 357; IV/14, 15, 89, 143, 512; VII/329, 344; XII/391.
[117]Ibid., I/603.
[118]Ibid., II/157, 159, 160, 390.
[119]Ibid., I/88; III/70; VI/78; VII/420; VIII/268, 269.
[120]Ibid., III/276.
[121]Ibid., V/452; VIII/268, 269.
[122]Ibid., VI/71.
[123]Ibid., VI/176.
[124]Ibid., VI/78; VII/220.
[125]Ibid., VII/116; VIII/125.
[126]Ibid., V/57; VI/400; VIII/209.
[127]Ibid., I/520; II/25, 53, 183, 391, 501; IV/471; V/56.
[128]Ibid., VI/398.
[129]Ibid., I/610.
[130]Ibid., VI/396.
[131]Ibid., II/185; III/366; IV/20, 441, 442; VII/562, 563.

between the rulings[132] and recommends that the sources be consulted for details.[133]

V. *Accommodation of Theological Subjects*

In the same way that jurisprudential matters are rarely touched on, the rejection of a verse of the Qur'ān[134] of theological matters like when will the Day of Judgment occur[135] and related arguments, are sometimes dealt with. An example is the event of the *Miʿrāj*. Ṭabarī says that the Masjid Ḥarām was a *masjid* that was spoken of and known and recognized by the people. "*Al-Masjid al-Aqṣaˮ*" was the *Masjid* of *Bayt al-Maqdis* (house of blessed prayer). He presents *riwāyahs* and draws attention to the dispute among scholars about the nature of the event of the *Isrāʾ*; the debate about whether it happened with the soul or with the body and the soul, quoting the longest *riwāyahs* concerned with this issue.[136] After presenting all the relevant materials he says the truth of the matter is as follows: **a)** Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) went from the *Masjid Ḥarām* to the *Masjid Aqsaˊ* on *Burāq* (a horse that carried Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ); **b)** he led the other prophets in prayer and displayed his miracles; **c)** the claim that "He made the journey with his soul, not his body" is meaningless because if that were the case then this would not have been a miracle. If this event had been proof of his prophethood then the non-believers would not have been able to deny it; **d)** He refers to the authentic *aḥādith* that mention a creature called *Burāq,* if the Prophet had made this journey with his soul then this animal would not have been mentioned because animals do not carry abstract souls but objects;[137] **e)** finally, interpretations that do not agree with authentic reports cannot be accepted.[138]

VI. *Interpretations Relying on Philological Investigations*

Ṭabarī examines words, according to their syntactical positions. He puts different possibilities in order, makes explanations, and after the syntactical studies are quoted he states which of these is preferable,

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[132]Ibid., II/401, 403, 489; V/32, 107, 108; IX/269, 270, 309; XI/500; XII/12, 37, 139.
[133]Ibid., I/552, 555, 558; II/54, 389, 434, 486; IV/10, 406; V/44, 295, 329; VII/290, 564.
[134]Ibid., I/37.
[135]Ibid., I/133.
[136]Ibid., VIII/5, 6.
[137]Ibid., VIII/16.
[138]For the other examples see: Ibid, I/56, 113, 114, 132, 205, 218; IV/617; V/339; VI/458, 459; VIII/382.

whilst stating his justifications.[139] He tries to confirm the justifications by referring to other verses.[140] If the word in one verse has a few different meanings, Ṭabarī states that without any documentary evidence that leads you to choose one over the other, it is not possible to choose between possible meanings.[141] He is of the view that some words, when used outside their normal form, take on poetical meanings.[142] He supports his analysis with couplets explaining the parts in question giving importance to the poetical use of words[143] and taking into account poetical emphasis.[144] Ṭabarī sometimes does not give the names of the poets who wrote the poems he uses as evidence.[145]

Ṭabarī claims, by using logic, that some literary texts are not original.[146] He gives the example of some literary texts about which the reader has no doubts.[147] If the author thinks the listener is able to understand what is being omitted then the obvious is not stated.[148]

Ṭabarī touches on syntactical[149] and grammatical rules.[150] In justifying syntactical preferences he explains the relationship with other verses[151] and is confident enough in his knowledge to oppose linguists.[152] In places where there are very different interpretations, Ṭabarī philologically[153] takes the verse from a wide angle and shows the logical justifications.[154] In verses that have very different and opposing commentaries he examines the importance of the words from an etymological aspect;[155] draws attention to the nuances in the explanation

[139]Ibid., I/92, 109, 110, 131, 341, 458, 531, 581; II/340, 341, 593; VII/299, 472, 594, 650; VIII/346; IX/330, 332, 369; 651.
[140]Ibid., I/169.
[141]Ibid., I/172.
[142]Ibid., I/156.
[143]Ibid., I/216; II/328.
[144]Ibid., I/352; VI/33; VII/596.
[145]Ibid., IX/432; XII/331, 332, 350.
[146]Ibid., VII/203.
[147]Ibid., I/97, 184; III/25, 167; V/55, 195, 219, 244, 400, 276; IX/437; XI/249, 250, 461.
[148]Ibid., I/91.
[149]Ibid., I/342, 362, 420, 475; II/21, 78, 79; IV/373, 409, 431; VII/26; X/385.
[150]Ibid., I/179, 400; III/205, 220, 221, 258; IV/30, 309, 404; V/189,358; VI/367; IX/251.
[151]Ibid., III/550, 551; VII/121, 123.
[152]Ibid., I/314; III/338; IV/555, 556. VI/44; VII/198; IX/499, 510.
[153]Ibid., IV/8.
[154]Ibid., VII/523; X/53, 54.
[155]Ibid., V/502.

that are concerned with the dictionary meanings of words and descends to the origin of the word.[156] He gives reasons for his preferences in language;[157] however, he is opposed to random dictionary meanings.[158] Ṭabarī reacts to the claims that there are redundant, useless letters in the Qur'ān, criticizes those who claim this, stating that there is nothing meaningless in the Qur'ān.[159] Sometimes he has difficulty in making a preference between intensely different views. He makes his preference but does not make this absolutely clear; stressing that in each view there is something of the truth.[160]

Additional evidence that Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* is not just a *riwāyah tafsīr* is his interpretation from the viewpoint of the differences of *qirā'āt* (readings of the Qur'ān). He discusses the matter of *qirā'āt* in his *tafsīr* thoroughly and in great detail.

Conclusion

In this study we have seen that Ṭabarī has put his own views aside where there is a unification of views, but other than this he does not refrain from struggling within a literary circle even when there is a dispute between *riwāyah* of *aḥādīth*. He presents deep philological studies, opens debates, presents different references and uses classic Arabic expressions to refute contending views. He makes his preferences by focusing on the meanings of *riwāyah* that have come from the Companions and following generations. He sometimes sees the interpretation of *riwāyah* as inadequate and thus applies new interpretations or chooses between the interpretations that he approves of. In order to achieve this, Ṭabarī exerts his utmost intellectual efforts.

In this research, the component we have identified that increases the volume of Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* is not merely the *riwāyah,* but matters that are touched on in connection with the *riwāyah* and the presentation of many different aspects of the matter. Moreover, when reporting a text of one line, Ṭabarī gives versions that have come from a variety of channels of this *riwāyah*. A one-line *riwāyah* sometimes takes up two pages, and the *riwāyah* is analyzed from different aspects.

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[156]Ibid., I/435; II/77; IX/391.
[157]Ibid., II/410, 41; III/356, 637; IV/245, 348, 407, 408; V/156, 157; VI/236, 237, 316, 335; VII/257, 425, 426; VIII/174; IX/107, 117, 376.
[158]Ibid., II/16.
[159]Ibid., I/233, 234, 440, 487; II/218; III/29, 39; V/450; VII/419; XII/182.
[160]Ibid., VII/618-620; VIII/54.

While applying this degree of logic, Ṭabarī uses comparisons that go far beyond what is required for a *riwāyah tafsīr*. However, to classify this *tafsīr* as a *riwāyah tafsīr* without examining the content of the *tafsīr* or passing judgment on the amount of *riwāyah* contained therein, does not seem to be justified. Rather, it appears that his is the first example of a *dirāyah* style of *tafsīr*.