

# COGNITIVE APPEALS IN IBN JARIR AL-TABARI'S EXEGESIS: A MODERN ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE ON JAMI' AL-BAYAN

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## Abstract

This paper explores the cognitive appeals embedded in the Qur'anic exegesis of Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923 CE) through his magnum opus *Jami' al-Bayan fi Ta'wil Ay al-Qur'an*. The analysis examines how al-Tabari interprets verses that call for reflection (*tafakkur*), focusing on the interplay between rhetorical style, linguistic precision, and theological depth. By comparing al-Tabari's methods with classical scholars such as al-Zamakhshari and modern exegetes like Wahbah al-Zuhayli, this study sheds light on how cognitive and reflective dimensions are central to classical *tafsir*. Relevant Qur'anic verses are cited and analyzed in both Arabic and English to underscore their intellectual and spiritual resonance.

**Keywords:** Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *tafsir*, cognitive appeal, reflection, *tafakkur*, *Jami' al-Bayan*, Qur'an, rhetoric

## Introduction

The Qur'an frequently calls upon its readers to reflect, reason, and contemplate the signs of God found in creation and revelation. These cognitive appeals are not only theological imperatives but also rhetorical devices that awaken moral and intellectual responsibility. Among the most authoritative commentaries on the Qur'an is *Jami' al-Bayan* by Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, a seminal figure whose exegesis continues to shape Qur'anic hermeneutics. This paper examines how al-Tabari interprets verses of *tafakkur* (reflection) and reveals the linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms he employs to provoke intellectual engagement.

## Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, comparative analytical approach rooted in hermeneutical and linguistic analysis. The methodology incorporates traditional Islamic scholarship frameworks alongside modern literary and cognitive interpretive tools. Primary sources include al-Tabari's *Jami' al-Bayan*, which is systematically reviewed for his interpretations of verses that emphasize reflection (*tafakkur*), using both *riwāyah* (transmission-based) and *dirāyah* (reason-based) methods.

Secondary sources such as al-Zamakhshari's *al-Kashshāf* and Wahbah al-Zuhayli's *Tafsīr al-Munīr* are employed for comparative analysis. Al-Zamakhshari's focus on *balāghah* (eloquence) and rhetorical questions provides a contrast to al-Tabari's narratively layered approach, while al-Zuhayli's thematic and ethical commentary offers modern resonance to the cognitive imperatives in the Qur'an.

Additionally, this study draws upon insights from Arabic stylistics (cf. Abdul-Raof, 2006), cognitive linguistics, and classical grammar (cf. Sibawayh, 1988) to contextualize the rhetorical force of Qur'anic diction. Relevant verses were selected based on their semantic fields involving 'aql, tadabbur, tafakkur, and basīrah, which were analyzed in terms of syntax, metaphor, and pragmatic intent. By integrating historical tafsir literature with modern interpretive perspectives, the research aims to trace the continuity and transformation of cognitive appeals in Islamic exegesis.

## Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Qur'anic Verses of Reflection and al-Tabari's Interpretive Strategy

One of the most explicit calls for reflection is found in Surah Muhammad:

"أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ أَمْ عَلَى قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَا" "Do they not reflect upon the Qur'an, or are there locks upon their hearts?" (Qur'an, 47:24)

Al-Tabari interprets the "locks" (aqfāl) metaphorically, suggesting a cognitive and spiritual barrier that prevents comprehension and reflection (al-Tabari, 2001, vol. 26, p. 109). According to him, the verse is an admonishment directed at those who receive revelation yet fail to engage it meaningfully. His emphasis on tadabbur as deliberate, deep contemplation highlights the Qur'an's intention to stimulate conscious engagement with divine discourse. Al-Ghazali echoes this view by stating, "the key to the heart is reflection (tafakkur) and remembrance (dhikr)" (al-Ghazali, 2000, vol. 4, p. 119).

Another powerful verse appears in Surah al-Imran:

"إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ لَآيَاتٍ لِّأُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ" "Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and day are signs for those of understanding." (Qur'an, 3:190)

Here, al-Tabari notes that "those of understanding" (ulū al-albāb) refers to people whose intellect is not passive but activated by observing the patterns of the universe. He highlights the functional connection between creation and cognition—asserting that these natural processes serve as didactic instruments for intellectual awakening (al-Tabari, 2001, vol. 6, p. 190). He draws attention to the syntactic construction of the verse as one that invites i'tibār (critical thought) rather than superficial awe.

Sibawayh's grammatical framework supports this interpretation, emphasizing how the Qur'an's nominal structures and rhetorical questions intensify the call to tafakkur (Sibawayh, 1988, vol. 2, p. 301). Abdul-Raof (2006) also notes that Qur'anic stylistic devices, such as contrast and ellipsis, are central in activating the cognitive faculties of the listener. For example, the use of opposition—light and dark, life and death, guidance and misguidance—is not merely literary, but instructive.

In Surah al-Rum, another verse echoes this call:

"وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلْقُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافُ أَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَالْوَبَائِكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّلْعَالَمِينَ" "And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your languages and your colors. Indeed in that are signs for those who know." (Qur'an, 30:22)

Al-Tabari emphasizes that the diversity of languages and appearances among people is not a reason for division but a divine prompt for reflection on unity within variety (al-Tabari, 2001, vol. 21, p. 49). He interprets 'ālimīn as those who are not only educated, but spiritually perceptive—those who derive moral lessons from observed diversity.

Thus, across multiple verses, al-Tabari frames tafakkur not as abstract theorizing, but as an actionable, purposeful engagement with divine reality, grounded in language, creation, and social phenomena.

### 3.2 Comparative Analysis: al-Zamakhshari and al-Zuhayli

While al-Tabari focuses on transmitted reports (riwāyah) supported by linguistic exegesis, al-Zamakhshari in his al-Kashshāf privileges rhetorical analysis and semantic nuance. For instance, al-Zamakhshari views the rhetorical question in 47:24 as a stylistic provocation designed to trigger moral self-examination and spiritual unease—a deliberate use of Qur'anic eloquence (balāghah) to incite inner reflection (al-Zamakhshari, 1998, vol. 4, p. 128). He asserts that such rhetorical devices are not ornamental but integral to the Qur'an's persuasive force. His reliance on grammatical analysis, particularly in parsing particles such as afalā (أفلا), reinforces the urgency and immediacy of divine exhortations. He further argues that the Qur'an's use of antithesis, metaphor, and gradation aims to activate both emotional and rational faculties, aligning with classical Arab rhetorical theory as outlined by al-Jurjani in Asrār al-Balāgha (al-Jurjani, 1959).

In contrast, Wahbah al-Zuhayli, in Tafsīr al-Munīr, extends the interpretive horizon by embedding cognitive appeals in modern ethical and social contexts. Commenting on Qur'an 39:42:

اللَّهُ يَتَوَفَّى الْأَنْفُسَ حِينَ مَوْتِهَا... إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ "God takes the souls at the time of their death... Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought." (Qur'an, 39:42)

Al-Zuhayli interprets tafakkur here as a moral imperative to recognize the temporality of life and the inevitability of divine judgment (al-Zuhayli, 1991, vol. 5, p. 432). He expands the meaning of reflection to include socio-political awareness, ethical accountability, and spiritual preparedness. In doing so, al-Zuhayli bridges the traditional exegetical model with contemporary pedagogical concerns. His methodology resonates with modern hermeneutical theories such as Gadamer's emphasis on the fusion of horizons between text and reader (Gadamer, 1989).

Moreover, both al-Zamakhshari and al-Zuhayli, despite their historical distance, converge on the notion that Qur'anic discourse actively shapes the moral consciousness of its audience. Their approaches, while distinct from al-Tabari's more narratively anchored method, highlight the Qur'an's rhetorical versatility and cognitive sophistication. Al-Ghazali's insight that "reflection is the lamp of the heart" (al-fīkr sirāj al-qalb) underscores this point, showing how the act of tafakkur serves as both illumination and obligation (al-Ghazali, 2000, vol. 3, p. 151).

While al-Tabari remains rooted in early Islamic epistemology, his tafsir shares with both al-Zamakhshari and al-Zuhayli a commitment to the Qur'an as a living text—one that speaks not only to the past but to all epochs through its multifaceted rhetorical and moral layers. The

comparison shows how tafakkur operates across disciplines: as grammatical sophistication (Sibawayh), rhetorical intensity (al-Zamakhshari), spiritual obligation (al-Ghazali), philosophical metaphor (al-Jurjani), and contemporary introspection (al-Zuhayli), all converging in the dynamic hermeneutics of the Qur'an.

### Conclusion

Al-Tabari's exegesis articulates a model of cognitive engagement rooted in both divine authority and linguistic clarity. His interpretation of tafakkur verses aligns spiritual insight with rational inquiry, balancing traditional religious reverence with active intellectual exploration. Through his emphasis on precise language, layered narrative structure, and reliance on both transmitted reports and reasoned interpretation, al-Tabari positions reflection as a theological necessity rather than an optional exercise.

Moreover, his interpretation recognizes that divine guidance necessitates human contemplation, a view corroborated by scholars like al-Ghazali, who emphasized the importance of fikr (reflection) as the gateway to ma'rifah (spiritual knowledge). By comparing his approach with classical exegetes such as al-Zamakhshari who favored rhetorical elegance and modern ones like al-Zuhayli who contextualized Qur'anic reflection in contemporary moral discourse one sees how al-Tabari's tafsir preserves the cognitive function of the Qur'an as both a sacred guide and an intellectual challenge. The Qur'an's cognitive appeals thus function not merely as theological prompts but as sustained and multilayered calls to awaken the human conscience, grounded in linguistic, moral, and metaphysical reflection.

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