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A Probe Into The Meaning Of Ta'wil

By Husayn 'Alawi Mehr

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The Etymology Of *Ta'wil*

The word “*ta'wil*” stems from the Arabic root “*awl*” and means “reference” and “returning a thing to its source of origin”. According to Raghib Isfahani who writes in the *alMufradat*:

“The word *ta'wil* has been derived from '*awl*' and implies 'referring to the origin' and the word '*maw'il*', also stemming from the same root, it refers to the 'place' or 'point' of reference.”^{[1](#)}

He further adds:

“*Ta’wil* is 'returning a thing to the purpose for which its creation is ordained' and it can be of two kinds: theoretical *ta’wil* and applied *ta’wil*.”²

Lisan al-’Arab quotes Ibn Athir in the following words:

“*Ta’wil* has been derived from the phrase ‘*ala al-shay’u ya’ulu*’ and means 'returning to a thing'. It deals with the relation between the external form of a word and the thing which gives it sense, without which, the external form of the word would not have taken shape (and its true meaning would never be understood).”³

The book *Taj al-’Arus* under the discussion on the Arabic verb root word “*fassara*” says:

“*Tafsir* (interpretation) and *ta’wil* both imply the discovery and the elucidation of the meaning of a word and *ta’wil* is relating one of the two probable meanings to a word, based upon the external form of that word.”⁴

Dr. Muhammad Husayn Dhahabi says:

“*Ta’wil* has been derived from ‘*awl*’ and means 'reference' and 'return' and is said to have stemmed from the root ‘*iyalah*’, meaning ‘politics’ (*siyasah*).”⁵

The author of the *Qamus-i Qur’an* writes:

“*Ta’wil* is ‘causing to return’ or ‘returning.’”⁶

As per the *Maqa’is al-Lughah*:

“‘*ala al-shay’u ya-ulu*’ means 'return'. (The sentence) ‘*awla al-hukma ila ahlih: arja’ahu wa raddahu ilaihim*’ means ‘(He) returned the decree to them’; and ‘*iyalah*’ which is also from the same conjugational form (*bab*) implies ‘politics’ since it implies the ‘turning’ of the people towards the politicians while ‘*al-i rujul*’ refers to a man’s subjects and subordinates. And ‘*ta’wil*’, too is from the same conjugational form (*bab*) which is used to imply the ‘destination’ or the thing to which something returns.”⁷

According to etymologists, the 'returning to the real or original destination' and the 'ultimate fate of a thing' are also some of the meanings implied by the word *ta’wil*.

Ta’wil In The Viewpoint Of The Exegetes

The word, *ta’wil* appears seventeen times and in sixteen verses of the glorious Qur’an. There is a difference of opinion among the exegetes regarding the meaning of the word *ta’wil* and nearly twenty meanings have been ascribed to this term from among which more than ten meanings have been mentioned in *Suyuti’s al-Itqan*.

The Various Viewpoints

Although numerous viewpoints exist regarding the term *ta'wil*, we shall examine only four of those views in the present discussion.

The First Viewpoint

According to this view, the term *ta'wil* is synonymous with the term "*tafsir*" (interpretation) and refers to the explanation (*bayan*) of the Qur'anic verses. This view belongs to the older school of Islamic scholars and exegetes. The exponents of this view include Fakhr Razi,⁸ Qurtubi,⁹ and the author of the *Taj al-'Arus*. According to this viewpoint, *ta'wil* can be applied to all the Qur'anic verses since all the verses can be explained and interpreted.

However, this viewpoint is flawed and two of its major flaws are as follows:

a. According to the glorious Qur'an, the *ta'wil* of the metaphorical verses (*ayat al-mutashabih*) lies only with Allah and "those firmly grounded in knowledge" (*rasikhun fi al-'ilm*). In the words of the glorious Qur'an:

وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ

But no one knows its ta'wil except Allah and those firmly grounded in knowledge (3:7)¹⁰

Therefore, some of the Qur'anic verses are metaphorical verses whose interpretation and *ta'wil* cannot be possible at the hands of all the exegetes since the knowledge regarding them lies only with Allah and 'those firmly grounded in knowledge' (The Prophet and Infallible Imams).

Thus, if the term *ta'wil* is considered as being synonymous with the term "*tafsir*", its sense would become applicable to all the verses of the Qur'an since all the Qur'anic verses can be interpreted (*tafsir*) while the Qur'an has explicitly stated that: "No one knows its *ta'wil* except Allah and those firmly grounded in knowledge".

Based upon this explanation, the above mentioned verse "no one knows its *ta'wil* except Allah" would be rendered meaningless since according to this view, all the exegetes, too, should be able to grasp the *ta'wil* of all the metaphorical verses and it should be possible for all the metaphorical verses – just as is the case of the definitive (*mukham*) verses – to be understood by all the exegetes.

b. In presenting the second flaw it should be kept in mind that if only the literal meanings of some of the Qur'anic verses were to be taken into consideration, Allah would need to have a corporeal form, based upon the Qur'anic verses that mention:

الرَّحْمَنُ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَىٰ

The All-Beneficent settled on the Throne (20:5)

وَجَاءَ رَبُّكَ وَالْمَلَكُ صَفًّا صَفًّا

And your Lord and the angels arrive in ranks (89:22)

يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ

...the hand of Allah is above their hands (48: 10)

وَأَشْرَقَتِ الْأَرْضُ بِنُورِ رَبِّهَا

And the earth will glow with the light of its Lord (39:69)

لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ

...His seat embraces the heavens and the earth (2:255)

Therefore, keeping in view the abovementioned Qur'anic verses, if *ta'wil* and *tafsir* were synonymous, since the interpretation or *tafsir* is supposed to remove the veils or the external forms of a word covering the meaning, the mention of things like “Throne”, “seat”, “hand” and “the arriving of your Lord” would need to be understood in their literal forms and would therefore call for a corporeal existence for Allah (Immaculate is He and greatly exalted above such a concept).

Based upon these two major flaws, this viewpoint would become very shaky and the contemporary exegetes, too, regard this viewpoint as null and void.

The Second Viewpoint

According to the proponents of this view, viz. Ibn Taymiyyah, Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Riza, *ta'wil* is the external and tangible form of the essences and can be witnessed.

This group of scholars endorses its viewpoint with the help of two examples. According to them:

- a. The “People of the Book” (*Ahl al-Kitab*) are fully aware of the qualities and the unique characteristics of the Prophet of Islam (S) during the time of his emergence since those

descriptions have been mentioned in their own religious scriptures. And a full recognition of these qualities and an understanding of their meanings and an appropriate awareness regarding them are based on the interpretation (*tafsir*) of those words.

However, the *ta'wil* of those words is in the form of the external manifestation of the noble Prophet of Islam (S) who has emerged on Divine appointment.

- b. When we verbally say that “the sun has risen” (*tala'at al-Shamsu*), the *ta'wil* of these words is the actual rising of the sun that can be visualized on the horizon.

As the initial proponent of this viewpoint, Ibn Taymiyyah has presented three terms for *ta'wil*, one belonging to his contemporary scholars and two belonging to the older generation of Islamic scholars.

According to scholars of his period, *ta'wil* is the conversion of a word from its literal or external meaning to its inner or esoteric meaning based upon certain reasoning.

The two explanations used by the older generation of Islamic scholars to validate their viewpoint are:

1. *Ta'wil* means the interpretation and explanation of a word irrespective of whether it appears overtly as being suitable or not;
2. *Ta'wil* is that which is meant by the actual word and if the word “seeking” is used, its *ta'wil* refers to the actual act of seeking and if the word “informing” is used, its *ta'wil* again refers to the actual act.

After presenting a few lines of commentary on this subject, Ibn Taymiyyah writes:

“*Ta'wil* implies those same tangible matters that can be found and witnessed externally whether they belong to the past or to the future. Therefore, the *ta'wil* of the phrase ‘the sun has risen’ is the very sunrise that can be witnessed across the horizon”

He further adds:

“This third meaning (which conforms to the existing norms and conditions) is what is meant by *ta'wil* in the Qur'an and the revealed Word. Therefore, an understanding of *ta'wil* is the same as the actual thing in its external manifestation that can be witnessed by man.”^{[11](#)}

A Critical Evaluation

Although this view has been supported by some reasoning it however contains certain flaws some of which shall be discussed hereunder.

- a. If *ta'wil* is exactly the same as the external and tangible manifestation of things, then we also need to keep in mind that a large part of the contents of the Qur'an like certain concepts fall in the category of contractual realities (agreements) that are intangible in the external world.

For instance, the term "*talaq*" (divorce) could not have any actual existence in the external world in the absence of the separation between the husband and the wife. Similarly, the term "*taharah*" (ritual purification) does not have any particular external form, and what actually exists in the external world are only acts like "*wuzu*" and "*ghusl*" or the washing of a part or the entire body, the outcome of which is referred to as "*taharah*" or cleanliness.

Therefore, as a consequence, many of the Qur'anic contents would need to be excluded since it would not be possible to apply *ta'wil* in their case.

- b. Moreover, if *ta'wil* dealt only with external tangible things it would not be possible to apply it in the case of some prescriptive passages containing imperative (*amr* and *nahy*), subjunctive and subjective constructions expressing wish, hope, etc. Since in prescriptive statements and those which signify hope and wish, there is no external action upon which *ta'wil* can be applied and this same argument applies in the case of all the other prescriptive passages.
- c. Another flaw in this viewpoint is that some of the verses of the glorious Qur'an speak of the qualities and actions of Allah which also transcend the confines of time, place, and matter that are beyond the comprehension of the human mind. Therefore, if *ta'wil* in those cases would indicate external tangible things it would become necessary for Allah to have a corporeal existence and carriage. Some of these verses include:

الرَّحْمَنُ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَى

The All-Beneficent settled on the Throne (20:5)

وَجَاءَ رَبُّكَ وَالْمَلَكُ صَفًّا صَفًّا

...And your Lord and the angels arrive in ranks (89:22)

يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ

The hand of Allah is above their hands (48: 10)

وَأَشْرَقَتِ الْأَرْضُ بِنُورِ رَبِّهَا

And the earth will glow with the light of its Lord (39:69)

لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ

...His seat embraces the heavens and the earth (2:255)

All these which are considered as the metaphorical verses of the Qur'an.

If the *ta'wil* of these verses is the same as their external manifestation, it would call for Allah the Almighty – and we seek His protection, against such blasphemy – to have hands, feet, eyes, and other faculties just like the rest of His creation!

Therefore, there has to be other meanings to words like the “Throne”, “seat”, “face”, “hands”, and “above” which cannot be justified under the meaning of the *ta'wil* mentioned in the viewpoint of Ibn Taymiyyah and others that cannot be applied to all the Qur'anic verses.

The Third Viewpoint

The most prominent contemporary Shi'ite exponent of this view is Ayatullah Ma'rifat. This viewpoint asserts that *ta'wil* is the interior aspect (*al-batin*) of the Qur'an or, in other words, the interpretation of the external aspect of the Qur'anic verses is *tafsir* while knowledge of the esoteric aspect of the Holy Book is *ta'wil*.

This viewpoint has gained considerable popularity among contemporary scholars. However, needless to say, there would be the need for some external proof if we wanted to apply a meaning to a verse which were different from the apparent form or sense of the words.

The main reasoning of the supporters of this view is based on the *riwayat* that have been narrated on this subject. They argue that:

Imam Baqir (‘a) was once questioned about the meaning of the following hadith of the noble Prophet (S) that says: “There is not a single verse in the Qur’an that does not carry an apparent and an esoteric meaning.” To this, the Imam (‘a) is said to have replied: “*Zahruhu tanziluhu wa batnuhu ta’wiluhu*” (Its surface is revelation, and its interior is *ta’wil*).¹²

This *riwayat* has referred to the esoteric meaning of the Qur’an as its *ta’wil*.

Therefore, if the Qur’anic verse:

قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ أَصْبَحَ مَاؤُكُمْ غَوْرًا فَمَنْ يَأْتِيكُمْ بِمَاءٍ مَعِينٍ

Say, tell me, should your water sing down (into the ground), who will bring you running water? (67:30)

Were to interpreted (*tafsir*) as meaning that “Allah sent down water from the sky and caused streams to run on the land as a result of which various kinds of vegetations grow and grant life to all the creation, and that if this water were to sink deep down into the depths of the earth because of the elimination of the impenetrable layer of the earth then no instrument or man would be able to retrieve any water”, this would be the apparent meaning and the *tafsir* of the verse.

However, if this same verse were to be explained as: “When the *Hujjah* of Allah or the Imam of the Age (‘a) goes into occultation from among your midst who then is able to grant you another Imam and *Hujjah* to guide you in your worldly life”,¹³ this would be the *ta’wil* of the verse.

From among the exponents of this view, reference may be made from among the ancient scholars to Abu Talib Taghlabi,¹⁴ and from among the contemporary scholars, Ayatullah

Ma’rifat, the author of the book, *al-Tamhid fi ‘Ulum al-Qur’an*¹⁵ can be mentioned.

Ayatullah Ma’rifat argues that the *ta’wil* of dreams is also of the same nature with reference to the Qur’anic verses 12:6, 12:21, 12:36, 12:37, 12:44, 12:45, 12:100 and 12:101 from the Surah *Yusuf*. However, *ta’wil* has also been explained as meaning the “final outcome of an issue” with reference to the verse 4:59 of Surah *al-Nisa*, the verse 17:35 of Surah *al-Isra’*, the verse 7:53 of Surah *al-A’raf*, and the verse 10:39 of Surah *Yunus*.¹⁶

Another application of *ta’wil* as per the viewpoint of Ayatullah Ma’rifat is for the “explanation of metaphorical” (*tawjih al-Mutashabih*), a standpoint applicable only to the metaphorical verses since only metaphorical expressions or any action subject to probability or metaphorical value calls for an elimination of ambiguity in favour of the true meaning.

However, it is noteworthy to mention that the most appropriate meaning of *ta'wil* according to Ayatullah Ma'rifat – today considered as a supplementary truth (*haqiqah althanawiyah*) is that it is the “esoteric meaning of the Qur'an.”

The Fourth Viewpoint (The Viewpoint of 'Allamah Tabataba'i):

According to the supporters of this viewpoint, “the meaning of the term *ta'wil* in the Qur'an comprises the truths and realities that can be grasped from the Qur'anic expressions.” 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, the author of the famous *Tafsir al-Mizan* was one the primary proponents of this view.¹⁷

The most important reasoning to support this meaning of the word *ta'wil* is based upon the Qur'anic verses in which the term *ta'wil* has been employed, all of which correspond to this meaning of the term.

According to the supporters of this view, the meaning of the verse:

وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِيهِ

But no one knows its ta'wil except Allah and those firmly grounded in knowledge (3:7)

Or in other words, no one but Allah and those firmly grounded in knowledge are aware of the truths and realities that Allah the Almighty has referred to, is in connection with the metaphorical verses.

In the account of Prophet Moses (‘a) and Khizr (‘a), to begin with, Khizr makes a hole into a boat and then slays a boy after which he reconstructs a dilapidated wall while at every step Prophet Moses (‘a) raises objections to his actions since he does not possess the knowledge of the reality behind these acts. In reply to the prophet's objections, Khizr (‘a) says:

سَأُنَبِّئُكَ بِتَأْوِيلِ مَا لَمْ تَسْتَطِعْ عَلَيْهِ صَبْرًا

I will inform you about the ta'wil of that over which you could not maintain patience (18:78)

And after informing Prophet Moses (‘a) of the truths behind all his actions, Khizr (‘a) says:

ذَلِكَ تَأْوِيلُ مَا لَمْ تَسْتَطِعْ عَلَيْهِ صَبْرًا

This is the ta'wil of that over which you could not maintain patience. (18:82)

Another instance in which the term *ta'wil* has been employed by the Qur'an is the account of Prophet Joseph (‘a) who, when his parents and brothers fall down prostrate before him exclaims:

وَرَفَعَ أَبَوَيْهِ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ وَخَرُّوا لَهُ سُجَّدًا وَقَالَ يَا أَبْتِ هَذَا تَأْوِيلُ رُؤْيَايَ مِنْ قَبْلُ قَدْ جَعَلَهَا رَبِّي حَقًّا

And he seated his parents high upon the throne, and they fell down prostrate before him. He said: O' Father! This is the ta'wil of my dream of long ago which my Lord has made come true. 18(12: 100)

Then he makes his parents sit on the throne after which everyone, in gratitude for seeing Joseph (‘a) fall into prostration while he says: “... 'Father! This (the prostrations that had now taken place) is the *ta'wil* (reality) of my dream of long ago”.

Moreover, we also have the account of Prophet Joseph (‘a) and his two fellow-prisoners, one of whom had dreamt that he was extracting the juice from a bunch of grapes while the other had dreamt that he was carrying a basket of bread on his head while some birds were pecking on that bread and who, after becoming aware of the knowledge possessed by Joseph (‘a), had requested him to explain the meaning of the dreams; in the Qur'anic words:

نَبِّئْنَا بِتَأْوِيلِهِ

Inform us of its ta'wil (12:36)

Prophet Joseph (‘a) responds with the words:

لَا يَأْتِيَكُمَا طَعَامٌ تُرْزَقَانِهِ إِلَّا نَبَّأْتُكُمَا بِتَأْوِيلِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ يَأْتِيَكُمَا

Before the meals you are served come to you I will inform you of its ta'wil (12:37)

Or in other words, “I shall inform you of the true message of your dreams”.

Yet another Qur'anic account in which the term *ta'wil* has been employed is the story of the King of Egypt's dream. The king asked Prophet Joseph (‘a) for his view on this dream. In the dream, the king had seen seven lean cows devouring seven fat and stout cows and seven green being vines sucked up by seven dried ones. He had initially asked all the scholars of Egypt to explain the meaning of his dream and to elucidate its true message, to which they had replied in the words:

قَالُوا أَضْغَاتٌ أَحْلَامٍ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِتَأْوِيلِ الْأَحْلَامِ بِعَالَمِينَ

(These are) confused nightmares, and we do not know the ta'wil of nightmares (12:44).

In another instance from the Surah al-Isra', Allah says:

وَأَوْفُوا الْكَيْلَ إِذَا كِلْتُمْ وَزَنُوا بِالْقِسْطَاسِ الْمُسْتَقِيمِ ذَلِكَ خَيْرٌ وَأَحْسَنُ تَأْوِيلًا

When you measure observe fully the measure, (and) weigh with an even balance. That is better and fairer in outcome (ta'wila) (17:35).

In this above verse, the term *ta'wil* has been employed to refer to a universal truth that is endorsed and verified by this Divine command.

In another verse, Allah says:

هَلْ يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَّا تَأْوِيلَهُ يَوْمَ يَأْتِي تَأْوِيلَهُ يَقُولُ الَّذِينَ

Do they wait for anything but its fulfilment (ta'wiluh)? The day when its fulfilment (ta'wiluh) comes... (7:53)

The term *ta'wil* here implies the actual manifestation of realities on the Day of Resurrection, albeit not quite like the manifestation of realities in this worldly existence. There is yet another Qur'anic verse that says:

لَقَدْ كُنْتَ فِي غَفْلَةٍ مِنْ هَذَا فَكَشَفْنَا عَنْكَ غِطَاءَكَ فَبَصَرُكَ الْيَوْمَ حَدِيدٌ

You were certainly oblivious of this. We have certainly removed your veil from you, and so your sight is acute today (50:22)

This verse irrefutably proves that the news brought by the true Prophets and the Divine Books regarding the events of the Day of Resurrection shall not be witnessed by the physical eyes and are not of the same kind as the senses of this physical world, in the same manner as the events of the Day of Resurrection and details regarding the system of that realm, are nothing like the ones of the events of this world and its system. Both the actual events as well as the system that will govern that realm are of a different nature. [19](#)

In a similar context, we can refer to the Qur'anic verse that says:

بَلْ كَذَّبُوا بِمَا لَمْ يُحِيطُوا بِعِلْمِهِ وَلَمَّا يَأْتِهِمْ تَأْوِيلُهُ

Rather they deny that whole knowledge they do not comprehend and whose explanation has not yet come to them (ta'wiluh). (10:39)

Unaware and mischievous elements deny the reality of the Day of Resurrection and its events mainly

because they have not accessed their truth.

Therefore, by contemplating on this verse, it becomes clear that *ta'wil* means 'reaching back to the reality of things' which are mentioned in the Qur'an and this explanation is totally commensurate with the etymology of the word *ta'wil* as well as the explanation elucidated through the Qur'anic verses.

'Allamah Tabataba'i says: "The truth regarding the explanation of the term *ta'wil* is that *ta'wil* is a reality and truth that is testified and contained by the Qur'anic contents, including its religious laws, counsel, and stories. And this applies true to all the Qur'anic verses, whether definitive or metaphorical."²⁰

Another explanation is that *ta'wil* is not something that can be grasped by the mind through the means of words but is instead a lofty reality that cannot be contained within the framework of words and if Allah Almighty has presented them in the form of words it is out of lack of choice since He wishes to bring the human mind closer to a glimpse of those truths and His words work as parables so that the matter becomes comprehensible as per the level of the receiver since the Qur'an says:

نَا جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

We have made it an Arabic Qur'an so that you may apply reason (43:3)

وَإِنَّهُ فِي أُمِّ الْكِتَابِ لَدَيْنَا لَعَلِّي حَكِيمٌ

and indeed, it is with Us in the Mother Book (and it is) surely sublime and wise. (43:4)

Other Qur'anic verses, too, provide proof to verify this explanation.²¹

A Comparative Study Of The Views Of Ayatullah Ma'rifat And 'Allamah Tabataba'i

There are certain similarities and differences between the views of Ayatullah Ma'rifat (the view of the esoteric aspect of the Qur'an) and 'Allamah Tabataba'i (the view holding that the Qur'anic truths are beyond the confines of language) some of which shall be discussed below:

A. Similarities

1. In most cases, both views refer to the same truths that need to be sought out from beyond words and their apparent meanings like the case of the *ta'wil* of the "dreams" in the story of Prophet Joseph ('a), and terms like "sovereign," etcetera.

2. Both views hold that the path to accessing *ta'wil* is through the language and words of the Qur'anic verses or, in other words, both believe that the esoteric meanings and truths of the verses should be accessed with the help of the words.
3. Both views believe that *ta'wil* implies the “hidden” or “esoteric” aspects that are veiled by words.
4. Even though 'Allamah Tabataba'i does not regard *ta'wil* as the inner aspect of things, there is, however, a consensus between the views of both the scholars as regards the relationship between the overt (*zahir*) and esoteric (*batin*) aspects of truths since both views hold that the relationship between the overt and hidden aspects are based on language and indications.

The only difference being that 'Allamah Tabataba'i believes that the relationship between the two is based on reasoning and a vertical hierarchy (*maratib-i tuli*)²² while Ayatullah Ma'rifat considers the relationship to be one of a non-evident denotation based on inference (*dilalat-i iltizami ghayr-i bayyin*),²³ and both forms of indication are literal in nature.

B. Differences

1. One of the most significant differences between the views of 'Allamah Tabataba'i and Ayatullah Ma'rifat lies in the form of reasoning of the two scholars. Ayatullah Ma'rifat bases his reasoning on the *riwayat* and particularly the famous *riwayat* of Imam Baqir ('a) that says: “*Zahruhu tanziluhu wa batnuhu ta'wiluhu* (Its surface is revelation, and its interior is *ta'wil*)”.

While 'Allamah Tabataba'i considers the criteria for the induction of *ta'wil* in the Qur'anic verses to be the Qur'anic truths that go beyond their apparent meanings.

2. Another difference in the views of the two scholars is over the categorization of the term *ta'wil*. Ayatullah Ma'rifat regards *ta'wil* as the explanation of esoteric aspects (*batn*) of the verses according to him the most appropriate explanation for *ta'wil* – which he regards as different from the “*ta'wil*” of the definitive verses.

However, 'Allamah Tabataba'i, on the other hand, considers all cases of *ta'wil* as reference to the truth and realities that are beyond the realm of mere words which the Qur'an is replete with, both in the definitive verses or in the metaphorical verses.^{[24](#)}

Ayatollah Marifats Critique Of 'Allamah Tabataba'i's View

Ayatullah Ma'rifat, in volume 3 of his work, *al-Tamhid fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an*, endorses the third viewpoint on the meaning of the term *ta'wil* that has been presented earlier in this discussion and says:

“The term, *ta'wil* in its Qur'anic context has yet another meaning which is the secondary meaning of the term which has been referred to as the '*batn*' or the esoteric aspect, as opposed to the first meaning which has been referred to as '*zahr*' or the apparent meaning.”

After presenting and rejecting Ibn Taymiyyah's view, he says:

“The view of our master, the 'Allamah Tabataba'i, too is the same as Ibn Taymiyyah's view according to which *ta'wil* is not based on linguistic reasoning.”

He then concludes that 'Allamah's views on *ta'wil* is the same as Ibn Taymiyyah's view, as *ta'wil* being the “essence that becomes manifest and can be witnessed”.

After citing four different meanings for the term *ta'wil*, Ayatullah Ma'rifat adds: “None of these meanings of *ta'wil* refer to it as the “external manifestation” and there is no lucid (*latif*) and precise justification for the 'Allamah's view. It is based merely on gnostical experiences without any rational proof and it is rather uncharacteristic for the 'Allamah to have held such a view.”^{[25](#)}

A Critical Evaluation

Although it may apparently seem that there are similarities between the views of 'Allamah Tabataba'i and Ibn Taymiyyah, there are however a number of fundamental differences between the two views, two of which shall be discussed below:

Both these scholars have presented different definitions on the term *ta'wil* since according to Ibn Taymiyyah.^{[2627](#)}

All the instances of *ta'wil* in the glorious Qur'an as external manifestation and tangible realities and believes that this is the same principle upon which the Qur'an has descended. Although the 'Allamah regards *ta'wil* as the “truth” and a “return to the truth of things” he however believes there are various forms of returning to the truth and, thus, classifies the *ta'wil* verses into four categories. According to him:

1. At times, *ta'wil* is returning to the reality of a thing, like the return of an example (*mithal*) to the object of comparison (*mummathal*), like the employment of the word *ta'wil* in several places of the account of Prophet Joseph ('a). The Qur'anic verse mentions:

إِذْ قَالَ يُوسُفُ لِأَبِيهِ يَا أَبَتِ إِنِّي رَأَيْتُ أَحَدَ عَشَرَ كَوْكَبًا وَالشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ رَأَيْتُهُمْ لِي سَاجِدِينَ

When Joseph said to his father, 'Father! I saw eleven stars, and the sun and the moon: I saw them prostrating themselves before me' (12:4)

This was a dream that Prophet Joseph ('a) had seen as a child, which then transformed into a *mummathal* and a reality that manifested as the *ta'wil* of this noble verse, in which the glorious Qur'an says;

وَرَفَعَ أَبَوَيْهِ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ وَخَرُّوا لَهُ سُجَّدًا وَقَالَ يَا أَبَتِ هَذَا تَأْوِيلُ رُؤْيَايَ مِنْ قَبْلُ قَدْ جَعَلَهَا رَبِّي حَقًّا

And he seated his parents high upon the throne, and they fell down prostrate before him. He said, 'Father! This is the fulfilment (ta'wil) of my dream of long ago which my Lord has made come true.' (12:100).

The same applies to the *ta'wil* of the other dreams that have been mentioned in this surah of the glorious Qur'an, like:

وَمَا نَحْنُ بِتَأْوِيلِ الْأَحْلَامِ بِعَالَمِينَ

And we do not know the interpretation of nightmares. (12:44)

أَنَا أَنْبِئُكُمْ بِتَأْوِيلِهِ فَأَرْسِلُونِ

I will inform you of its ta'wil (12:45)

نَبِّئْنَا بِتَأْوِيلِهِ

Inform us of its ta'wil. (12:36)

وَيُعَلِّمُكَ مِنْ تَأْوِيلِ الْأَحَادِيثِ

And teach you the ta'wil of dreams. (12:6)

وَلِنُعَلِّمَهُ مِنْ تَأْوِيلِ الْأَحَادِيثِ

And that We might teach him the ta'wil of dreams. (12:21)

وَعَلَّمَنِي مِنْ تَأْوِيلِ الْأَحَادِيثِ

And taught me the ta'wil of dreams. (12: 101)

All these have appeared in the account of the dreams of the King of Egypt and the two fellow-inmates of Prophet Joseph ('a).

2. At times, the term *ta'wil* is used to indicate the transformation of a thing to its true form and meaning, instances of which can be found in the account of Prophet Moses ('a) and Khizr ('a), in the acts of Khizr ('a) like drilling a hole into the boat, killing the youth, and straightening the dilapidated wall.

Prophet Moses ('a) could not comprehend the inner aspects of these acts and he was unaware of their reality and, in fact, had even misunderstood them and, as a consequence, kept on expressing his objections to Khizr ('a), until Khizr ('a) said to him:

سَأُنَبِّئُكَ بِتَأْوِيلِ مَا لَمْ تَسْتَطِعْ عَلَيْهِ صَبْرًا

I will inform you about the ta'wil of that over which you could not maintain patience. (18:78)

The truth that had prompted the actions of Khizr ('a) have been explained in the glorious Qur'an in the following words:

أَمَّا السَّفِينَةُ فَكَانَتْ لِمَسَاكِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ فِي الْبَحْرِ فَأَرَدْتُ أَنْ أَعِيبَهَا وَكَانَ وَرَاءَهُمْ مَلِكٌ يَأْخُذُ كُلَّ سَفِينَةٍ غَصْبًا

As for the boat, it belonged to some poor people who work on the sea. I wanted to make it defective, far behind them was a king seizing every ship usurpingly. (18:79)

وَأَمَّا الْغُلَامُ فَكَانَ أَبَوَاهُ مُؤْمِنَيْنِ فَخَشِينَا أَنْ يُرْهِقَهُمَا طُغْيَانًا وَكُفْرًا

As for the boy, his parents were faithful (persons), and We feared he would overwhelm them with rebellion and unfaith (18:80)

فَأَرَدْنَا أَنْ يُبَدِّلَهُمَا رَبُّهُمَا خَيْرًا مِنْهُ زَكَاةً وَأَقْرَبَ رُحْمًا

So, we desired that their Lord should give them in exchange one better than him in respect of purity and closer in mercy. (18:81)

وَأَمَّا الْجِدَارُ فَكَانَ لِغُلَامَيْنِ يَتِيمَيْنِ فِي الْمَدِينَةِ وَكَانَ تَحْتَهُ كَنْزٌ لَهُمَا

As for the wall, it belonged to two boy orphans in the city. Under it there was a treasure belonging to them... (18:82)

Seeking out the truth and the actual aspects of the committed acts of Khizr ('a) was the same as the *ta'wil* of Khizr ('a) acts and, thus, we see that it is not necessary for these real aspects and the true forms of a word to have a tangible external manifestation in exactly the same form as its truth and in fact, it is like using the Arabic root word “zaraba” (to strike) to denote the intention of “ta'dib” (to discipline), thereby making the act of “ta'dib” the *ta'wil* of “zaraba”.[28](#)

In other words, the same principle that makes “ta'dib” the *ta'wil* of “zaraba” applies to these Qur'anic verses and it is not as if the *ta'wil* of the word “zaraba” manifests itself in an actual act of striking that can be witnessed in the same exact form in the external world.

3. Sometimes, the term *ta'wil* is also employed to describe the condition or situation of something, as it is used in the following noble verse that says:

وَأَوْفُوا الْكَيْلَ إِذَا كِلْتُمْ وَزَنُوا بِالْقِسْطَاسِ الْمُسْتَقِيمِ ذَلِكَ خَيْرٌ وَأَحْسَنُ تَأْوِيلًا

When you measure, observe fully the measure, (and) weigh with an even balance. That is better and fairer in outcome (ta'wil) (17:35)

In this verse, Allah has commanded mankind to observe fully the measure and to weigh with an even balance and that that is better and fairer in outcome (*ta'wil*).

Therefore, the term “*ta'wil*” in this verse is not the same as the external and tangible “measure” or “scales” but it in fact implies that if this “measure” and “even balance” is observed fully, it can lead a society to welfare and economic integrity. Here, the social welfare and the economic integrity is the *ta'wil*

of Allah's commands. Therefore, Allah's commandment urges the “measure” and “balance” to be observed fully while the full observance of “measure” and “even balance” lead to social welfare and economic integrity.

Thus, the *ta'wil* of the verbal commandment of Allah (in which He says: “measure” and “weigh”) is in fact actually the economic integrity and social welfare that have been appeared in the form of “weigh” and “measure”.²⁹

4. Occasionally, the term “*ta'wil*” is also employed to indicate the manifestation of certain realities. However, not a tangible manifestation that can be witnessed by the physical eye or the sensual or worldly witnessing, but in fact referring to the truths that are of a completely different nature than those of the material and physical realms.³⁰ This kind of *ta'wil* has been indicated in the Qur'anic verses that say:

هَلْ يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَّا تَأْوِيلَهُ يَوْمَ يَأْتِي تَأْوِيلَهُ يَقُولُ الَّذِينَ نَسُوهُ مِنْ قَبْلُ قَدْ جَاءَتْ رُسُلُنَا بِالْحَقِّ فَهَلْ لَنَا مِنْ شُفَعَاءَ
فَيَشْفَعُوا لَنَا أَوْ نُرَدُّ فَنَعْمَلْ غَيْرَ الَّذِي كُنَّا نَعْمَلُ

Do they (the unbelievers) await anything but its fulfilment (ta'wilah)? The day when its fulfilment comes, those who had forgotten it before will say, 'Our Lord's apostles had certainly brought the truth. If only we had some intercessors to intercede for us'... (7:53)

In other words, “are the unbelievers awaiting for the Divine *ta'wil* (those truths that shall be manifested on the Day of Judgment)?” On the Day that shall the *ta'wil* (when the truths of the Divine signs shall become apparent and manifest) and the outcome of actions can be witnessed, those who had forgotten that Day (with great regret) will say: “The Divine apostles had brought us the truth; if only we had them to intercede for us’...”³¹

Elsewhere, in the *Surah Joseph* ('a), the glorious Qur'an mentions:

بَلْ كَذَّبُوا بِمَا لَمْ يُحِيطُوا بِعِلْمِهِ وَلَمَّا يَأْتِهِمْ تَأْوِيلُهُ كَذَّابَ الَّذِينَ مِنَ الْقَبْلِهِمْ

Rather, they deny that whose knowledge they do not comprehend, and whose explanation has not yet come to them. Those who were before them denied likewise (10:39)

In other words, the *mushrikin* (those who take other lords besides Allah) and the *kuffar* (unbelievers) deny (the true faith and the Qur'an) about which they are unaware and the *ta'wil* of what they deny has not yet gained true manifestation and the truth behind the Divine commandment has not become

apparent to them; and their ancestors, too, had denied (the Truth) in the same manner.

Conclusion

After presenting the four meanings that have been given for the term *ta'wil* and after a critical examination and analysis we could say that *ta'wil* comprises the following fundamental features:

1. The term *ta'wil* carries within itself the implication of “returning”;
2. “Returning” means “coming back to the source of the actual origin” even if it is generally referred to as the esoteric or inner aspect (*batn*);
3. The truth or reality of the word is hidden behind the external form of the word;
4. *Ta'wil* has a truth and reality (and is not merely mental imagination);
5. There are different kinds of “returning to reality” and the “truth of things”, only one kind of which can have an external manifestation;

The different kinds of *ta'wil* are:

- a. Returning to the reality and truth of things through examples and objects of comparison;
- b. Retuning of a thing to its real and true form and aspect;
- c. Returning to the reality and truth of things by means of a description of its state or condition;
- d. The manifestation of a truth or reality (not however a manifestation observable by the physical or corporeal eye).

In any case, if we were combining the meaning of the term *ta'wil* as indicating the truths of the Qur'an that lie beyond the confines of words which the Divine Book is replete with, with the etymological explanation of the word *ta'wil*, i.e. "return", this viewpoint could gain further strength.

A Critical Evaluation Of The Viewpoint Of Ayatullah Ma'rifat

Ayatullah Ma'rifat's viewpoint, too, contains what appear to be certain flaws, some of which are discussed hereunder:

- a. Ayatullah Ma'rifat's description of "*batn*" or the inner or esoteric aspect can only be applied to one kind of verses or the metaphorical verses and the *ta'wil* of such verses implies the explanation of the metaphors since according to the *riwayah* of Imam Baqir ('a), the "*batin*" of the Qur'an is referred to as the *ta'wil*, as based upon the Qur'anic verse that says:

وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِيهِ

But no one knows its ta'wil except Allah and those firmly grounded in knowledge (3:7)[32](#)

Upon which Ayatullah Ma'rifat has based his view.

Therefore, the *riwayat* pertaining to "*batn*" only include one of the various applications of the term *ta'wil* in the glorious Qur'an which is related to the metaphorical verses. The other cases of the application of *ta'wil* include the *ta'wil* of dreams[33](#), the full observance of "measure" and "even balance"[34](#), the manifestation and actualization of deeds on the Day of judgment[35](#), referring to the decrees of Allah and His Messenger (S) in matters of dispute[36](#), etcetera.

Thus, the application of the term *ta'wil* as the "*batn*" or inner aspect of the Qur'an does not include all its applications.

- b. In contrast to some *riwayat* relating to "*batn*" that have described *ta'wil* as the inner aspect of the Qur'an, there are other *riwayat* that have also referred to the inner aspect of the Qur'an as relating to the models of the manifested signs and personality types.

For instance, Imam Baqir ('a) says: "The external form (*zahir*) of the Qur'an relates to the reasons for which the verses were revealed while the inner aspect of Qur'an refers to the models of the manifested signs and personality types (that would come in the future) and behave like their predecessors"[3738](#)

- c. 'Allamah Tabataba'i critically evaluates this view in the following words: "If we were to accept this viewpoint, we would also need to concede that there is a contradiction in the verses of the Qur'an because any kind of "turning towards the esoteric aspect" indicates the presence of verses in the Qur'an that have been presented in a manner that contradicts their real meaning.

As a result, these verses would end up contradicting the definitive verses of the Qur'an which would evoke *fitnah* (mischief) in *din* (religion), in turn indicating that there are contradictions in the Qur'anic verses that cannot be resolved unless one were to overlook their overt (*zahir*) aspects and would make them indicate meanings opposing their apparent forms that would fall beyond the comprehension of the common man."

According to 'Allamah Tabataba'i, such an argument would only be tantamount to nullifying the verse

أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ وَلَوْ كَانَ مِنْ عِنْدِ غَيْرِ اللَّهِ لَوَجَدُوا فِيهِ اخْتِلَافًا كَثِيرًا

Do they not contemplate the Qur'an? Had it been from (someone) other than Allah, they would surely have found much discrepancy in it (4:82)

While this verse clearly indicates that there are no discrepancies whatsoever (in the Qur'an). And if one were to suggest that wherever any discrepancies were to emerge among the verses of the Qur'an they could be resolved by explaining them in a manner that would contradict their overt meanings – which no one but Allah comprehends – the very presence of the (aforementioned) verse would be rendered redundant since such discrepancies are not confined only in relation to the Qur'an and could, in fact, become applicable to any book.

The contents of which are not compatible with each other and could even be full of falsehood but can be explained to mean things that are opposite to the overt forms in order to get rid of such discrepancies. Therefore, an absence of discrepancies in this kind of sense (by referring to some esoteric aspects) does not in any way prove that this Book is of Divine origin and, in fact, it could be possible for anyone to write such a book.

In a nutshell, this holy verse clearly specifies that, firstly, it is possible for the common man to understand the Qur'an and that everyone can contemplate on its verses and, secondly, that there is no verse which contains an esoteric meaning that contradicts its apparent meaning or contains purely poetic or enigmatic aspects.[39](#)

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1. Raghīb Isfahānī, al-Mufradāt, researched by Nadīm Mar'ashlī, al-Maktabah al-Murtazawīyyah, the word "awl", p. 27
 2. Raghīb Isfahānī, al-Mufradāt, researched by Nadīm Mar'ashlī, al-Maktabah al-Murtazawīyyah, the word "awl", p. 27
 3. Ibn Manzūr, Lisan al- 'Arab, the word "awl", vol. 1, p.264.
 4. Zubaydī, Taj al- 'Arus, the word "fassara", vol. 7, p. 349.
 5. Muhammad Husayn Dhahabī, al-Tafsīr wa al-mufasssīrūn, vol. 1, p. 13.
 6. Sayyid 'Alī Akbar Qurashī, Qamus-i Qur'an, Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyyah, 1352, vol. 1, p. 141.
 7. Sayyid Hasan Mustafawī, al-Tahqīq fī Kalamat al- Qur'an, vol. 1, p. 174.
 8. Fakhr Rāzī, Tafsīr al-Kabīr, vol. 4, p. 176.
 9. Qurtubī, al-Jamī ' li-Ahkām al-Qur'an, vol.4, p. 174.
 10. In this verse the knowledge of ta'wil could be attributed to "those firmly grounded in knowledge" only if the letter "waw" in the term "wa al-Raskhun" refers to the word ta'wil.
 11. Ibn Taymiyyah, Majmu 'ah al-Rasā'il al-Kubra, vol. 2, pp. 17-18.
 12. 'Ayyashī Samarqandī, Tafsīr-i al- 'Ayyashī, vol. 1, p. 11.
 13. Muḥammad Ḥadī Ma'rīfat, al-Tahmīd fī 'Ulum al Qur'an, vol. 3, p. 28.
 14. Jalāl al-Dīn Suyūṭī, al-Itqān, vol. 4, p. 161, and its translation vol. 2, p. 550.
 15. Muḥammad Ḥadī Ma'rīfat, al-Tahmīd fī 'Ulum alQur'an, vol. 3, p. 28. He presents another meaning for ta'wil in the metaphorical verses which is the "elimination of any ambiguity". Also see Muḥammad Ḥadī Ma'rīfat, 'Ulum-i Qur'an, p. 274.
 16. Muḥammad Ḥadī Ma'rīfat, 'Ulum-i Qur'an, p. 33.
 17. Sayyid Muḥammad Husayn Tabataba'ī, al-Mīzan .fī Tafsīr al-Qur'an, vol. 3, p. 49.
 18. As a child, Prophet Joseph (a) had seen in a dream that eleven stars, the Sun and the Moon were prostrating before him. See Surah Yusuf, Verse 12:4.
 19. Sayyid Muḥammad Husayn Tabataba'ī, al-Mīzan, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 30.
 20. Sayyid Muḥammad Husayn Tabataba'ī, al-Mīzan, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 23.
 21. He has made reference to the verses "The day when its fulfilment comes" (7:53), and "... and whose explanation has not yet come to them" (10:39) where ta'wil has been added to the Book and the Qur'an thereby arguing that ta'wil relates to all the Qur'ānic verses and is not confined merely to metaphorical verses.
 22. Al-Mīzan, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 64, and also Sayyid Muḥammad Husayn Tabataba'ī, Qur'an dar Islam, p. 28.
 23. Muḥammad Husayn Dhahabī, al-Tafsīr wa al- Mufasssīrūn, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 30-31.
 24. Al-Mīzan, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 23.
 25. Al-Tamhīd , op. cit., vol. 3, p. 30.
 26. Risālāh al-Akhlī al-Matbu'ah Zīmīn al-Majmu 'ah al-Thānīyah min Rasā'ilah, pp. 17-18 .
 27. Al-Mīzan, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 49 and vol. I 0, p. 66.
 28. Al-Mīzan, op. cit., vol. I 0, p. 67.
 29. Sayyid Muḥammad Husayn Tabataba'ī, Qur'an dar Islam, p. 60.
 30. Al-Mīzan, op. cit., vol. 7, p. 310.
 31. Al-Mīzan, op. cit., vol. 8, p. 135.
 32. Muḥammad Baqir Majlisī, Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 92, p. 97.
 33. Surah Yusuf, Verses 12:6, 12:21, 12:36, 12:37, 12:44, 12:100, and 12:101.
 34. Surah al-Isrā' Verse 17:35.
 35. Surah al-A 'raf, Verse 7:53.
 36. Surah al-Nisā ' , Verse 4:59.
 37. Tafsīr al-'Ayyashī, vol. 1, p. 11.
 38. Besides, the Prophet of Allāh (S) is quoted in the "Musnad" of Ahmad bin Hanbal (vol. 1, p. 266) to have prayed for Ibn 'Abbas, in the words: "O Allāh! Make him a scholar in religion and teach him the knowledge of ta'wil". In this riwayat, "ta'wil" means "tafsīr" (interpretation) and cannot be taken as the inner meaning of Qur'an as against its overt connotations.
 39. Al-Mīzan, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 47.

[1] [1]

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