

Verses of the Grave and the Realm of Barzah in Tafsir Fathkhul Qadir: Al-Shaukani's Hermeneutics

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine Al-Shaukani's tafsir in terms of Al-Shaukani's hermeneutics in Tafsir Fathkhul Qadir eschatological verses as well as the implications of the theory and implementation of the various categories of tafsir studies. The method of this research uses a descriptive qualitative method, it is found that Al-Shaukani's hermeneutics are applied to verses about the phenomena of the grave and the realm of barzah. The results of this study are the favors and punishments of the grave according to Al-Syauqani's view. The realm of the grave and the realm of barzah is not limited to the tomb, but more broadly wherever there is a body can be acted as the realm of the grave and the realm of barzah, even if it is in the form of ashes or in the belly of a fish. The conclusion of this research produces several findings, including: First, al-Shaukani's hermeneutics was born from the principle of convergence between *riwāyah* and *dirāyah*. Viewed from the perspective of the triadic structure in hermeneutics, "*riwāyah*" represents the authority of the author, while "*dirāyah*" represents the authority of the text. The convergence of *riwāyah* and *dirāyah* makes al-Shaukani's interpretation refer to inclusive, egalitarian, and retrospective literature. Second, al-Shaukani applies the principles of hermeneutics consistently to his interpretation of the realm of the grave and the realm of barzah in the Quran. Meanwhile, in terms of the history of hermeneutics, what al-Shaukani did was not far from the discussions that emerged in classical hermeneutics, namely in the form of interpretation theory, philological methods, or - at most - linguistic methods of understanding.

Keywords: Al-Shaukani's Hermeneutics, Realm of the Grave, Realm of Barzah

Introduction

Tafsir (Qur'anic Exegesis) as an effort to understand and explain the meaning of the Qur'an has been carried out since the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, the majority of scholars agree that he is the first exegete (al-mufassir al-awwal) for the Qur'an.¹ After his death, interpretation continued to develop from time to time, leaving behind an extraordinary diversity, both in methods, orientations, styles and tendencies, as well as writing models.

There are various factors behind this diversity. Some of these factors come from the social, political, cultural, ideological, and intellectual conditions at the time when each commentator wrote his work. But no less important are factors that come from within the interpreter himself, such as motives, interests, the focus of attention, scientific background and so on. Each commentator deals with the same sacred text and shares the same basic belief, namely that the Qur'an contains universal messages for all mankind without exception. But at the same time, the commentators are also bound to their own space and time, interpreting the Qur'an with different backgrounds, motives, perspectives, and goals. In short, each interpretation is actually an attempt to harmonize the text of the Qur'an with the context faced by each commentator. In Rippin's words:

Different mufassirūn have different concerns and goals, and this is reflected in the relative weight they place upon elements such as history, grammar, semantics, law, theology, or folklore. All commentators are concerned with the process of analysing the text in light of the "external world", however that be defined for the individual author, with the aim of resolving any apparent conflict and making the text "clear".

In that context, Walid Saleh emphasized the importance of the tafsir tradition being seen as a "genealogical" tradition. This means that each new Qur'anic interpretation always has a certain dialectical relationship with the entire tradition of the previous interpretation. An exegete cannot ignore the previous tradition of interpretation even if he has a different interpretation. In fact, when an exegete totally disagrees with previous interpretations, he is less likely to discard them altogether. What he will do is to add his own voice to the various interpretations he has inherited.

Thus, when an exegete interprets the Qur'an, he is actually referring to a set of rules, basic assumptions, procedures, and techniques some of which may differ from one another. These methodological aspects are then, by many researchers,

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called “hermeneutics”, especially in the sense of pre-Heideggerian hermeneutics. In this context, as quoted from Peerwani, hermeneutics is defined as “...a general body of methodological principles that underlie interpretation as well as the epistemological assumptions of understanding”.⁴ In the last few decades, many studies have positioned the methodological tools of the commentators as part of a hermeneutic study that is specifically applied in the study of the Qur’anic Exegesis.⁵ On the other hand, the categories of tafsīr bi al-ma’t’hūr and bi al- ra’y are also criticized at the level of application. An interesting example is the case of al-Ṭabarī. For many circles, Tafsir al-Ṭabarī is one of the most prominent representations of the tafsīr bi al- ma’t’hūr. But this view has been criticized by several others. One of them is al-Fāḍil b. ‘Ashūr. In his al-Tafsīr wa Rijāluhū, he rejects the opinion which states that Tafsir al-Ṭabarī is part of tafsīr bi al- ma’t’hūr. He wrote: “People who consider al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr as a tafsīr atharī or part of the tafsīr bi al-ma’t’hūr actually only limit their views to its outward appearance which is indeed filled with hadith and sanad. They do not pay attention to the way he is taking and the goals he wants to achieve by including the arranged, organized, and selected sanad.”

Departing from the problems above, this study intends to examine the hermeneutic principles constructed by an exegete from Yemen named Muḥammad bin ‘Alī bin Muḥammad al-Shawkānī (1172 H.- 1250 AH./1834 AD). He is known as a scholar who was born from a reformist and forward-thinking background in the religious tradition in Yemen at the end of the 12th century AH (18th AD) and early 13th century AH (19th AD).¹¹ His monumental work in the field of interpretation is entitled *Faṭḥ al-Qaḍīr al-Jāmi ‘Bain Fannay al-Riwāyah wa al-Dirāyah min ‘Ilm al-Tafsīr*.

Al-Shawkānī is a challenging figure to research. First, he emphatically stated that he was trying to do something new in the tafsir. He did not want to interpret the Qur’an in the same way as other commentators before him. In the Muqaddimah section of his commentary, al-Shawkānī explained that the previous exegetes were divided into two groups, namely the proponents of the riwāyah method and the bearers of the dirāyah method. He criticized each of these groups for separating two methods that should have been used simultaneously. Then al-Shawkānī emphasized that it was precisely at the convergence effort between the two methods that he would make reforms in tafsir.¹² Therefore, he put the title “al-jāmi‘ bayna fannay al-riwāyah wa al-dirāyah” as the title of his Qur’anic commentary.

In addition to the three categorizations that put al-Shawkānī in the controversial position, there are also other categorization models that can not only be used as a reading tool to dissect, but can also be assessed and evaluated based on a search on, al-Shawkānī’s hermeneutics. The categorization model was proposed by Abdullah Saeed who divides various interpretations of the Qur’an from different time periods into three types, namely textualist, semi- textualist and contextualist.¹⁸ Although Saeed did not mention al- Shawkānī’s name, the categorization model itself was actually intended to be clear-cut and comprehensive, so it would be interesting to know where al-Shawkānī’s place in the categorization is. Meanwhile, a search on al-Shawkānī’s hermeneutics can also serve to test the limits of Saeed’s theory on the categorization of the tafsir.

In this study, al-Shawkānī’s hermeneutical principles will be studied in two aspects at once: the theory and its application. The theory will be explored, especially from the part of the Muqaddimah written by al-Shawkānī himself for his tafsīr. Although it is quite short, the introductory part of *Faṭḥ al-Qaḍīr* explains quite well the hermeneutic position of al-Shawkānī among the many other exegetes. Meanwhile, the application of this theory will be traced to al-Shawkānī’s interpretation of the Qur’anic verses on the realm of barzakh (‘ālam al-barzakh)—a part of the eschatological issues in Islam.

Result and Discussion

Eschatological issues in the theological structure of Islam are part of the sam‘iyyāt or ghaybiyyāt area. This is one of the main reasons why the realm of barzakh was chosen to be a field for exploring the application of al-Shawkānī’s hermeneutic theory. By elaborating al- Shawkānī’s theory in an area where the dirāyah usually does not get much space, the convergence method proposed by al-Shawkānī can be tested to its furthest limits. In other words, the eschatological verses in the Qur’an are a challenging area for al-Shawkānī himself to apply the hermeneutical procedures that he proposes as a theory of convergence-based interpretation.

In addition, the concept of eschatology in the Qur’an, especially the one regarding the realm of barzakh, also provides relatively adequate material to elaborate al-Shawkānī’s theory. With dozens of verses and various sub-themes and keywords covered in it, the concept of the realm of barzakh in the Qur’an can be one of the best areas to assess the consistency and relevance between al-Shawkānī’s theory and its application in the interpretation of Qur’anic verses.

Some people distinguish between the realm of barzakh and the realm of the grave. The realm of barzakh is the realm of the spirit, while the realm of the grave is the realm of the body. Of course, this theory is built on the dualism between the spirit and the body. Al- Shawkānī does not seem to distinguish between the two. The barzakh realm and the grave, according to him, are the same. The grave is the first gate to the afterlife, a place to wait for the next life that will be determined by Allah. In the grave or in the barzakh realm, a good spirit gets a better, wider and certainly better life facility. Meanwhile, evil and ugly spirits will get the opposite life.

The Realm of Barzakh in al-Shawkānī's *Faṭḥ al-Qadīr*

The word barzakh is mentioned several times in the Qur'an, one of which is in surah al-Mu'minūn: 99–100:

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَ أَحَدَهُمُ الْمَوْتُ قَالَ رَبِّ ارْجِعُونِ ۗ ٩٩ لَعَلِّي أَعْمَلُ صَالِحًا فِيمَا تَرَكْتُ كَلَّا إِنَّهَا كَلِمَةٌ هُوَ قَائِلُهَا وَمِنْ وَرَائِهِمْ بَرْزَخٌ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ يُبْعَثُونَ ١٠٠

“(For such is the state of the disbelievers) until, when death comes to one of them, he says, "My Lord, send me back; that I might do righteousness in that which I left behind." No! It is only a word he is saying; and behind them is a barrier until the Day they are resurrected.”

Al-Shawkānī states that the sentence “My Lord, send me back” is stated by someone who is dying as an expression of regret and sadness for what he is about. Even this person said, “irji’ū”, with a plural pronoun. The use of the plural pronoun, according to al-Shawkānī, is to explain the greatness of the interlocutor. There is also an opinion that this expression means the repetition of the verb, so that it sounds as if it reads: irji’nī, irji’nī, irji’nī. This repetition shows the seriousness of the incident. To strengthen his opinion, al-Shawkānī quotes al-Muzanī’s commentary of the surah Qāf: 24: “alqiyā fi Jahannam”, when he said that the meaning of this verse is “alqi, alqi” (the repetition of the verb “alqi”).

In addition, al-Shawkānī also quotes several poems (shi‘r) to prove that plural pronouns are commonly used by Arabs to glorify the interlocutor or to emphasize and to express the seriousness of a statement. It is said, “...wa law shi‘tu la-ḥarramtu al-nisā’ siwākumu,” even though the interlocutor is a single person. It is also said, “...alā fa-rḥamūnī ya Ilāha Muḥammad”, even though there is only one God of Muḥammad.¹⁹

The unbelievers ask to be returned to the world to do good deeds. Al-Shawkānī said that the meaning of the verse is: "I will believe in God and do good deeds when I am returned to the world." But he certainly will not do the good deeds, so Allah answered his request by saying, “No! It is only a word he is saying”. It is a rejection and an expulsion. So the meaning of this verse: if Allah grants him a return to the world then he will not fulfill his promise, as stated by Allah in al-An‘ām: 28, “wa law ruddū la-‘ādū limā nuḥū ‘anhu”.

Then al-Shawkānī explains the next part of the verse, “wa min warā’ihim barzakh ilā yawmi yub‘athūn”. The meaning of the verse is that in front of them or before their eyes there is a barzakh. Al-Shawkānī quotes al-Jauharī’s opinion that barzakh is a "barrier between two things". But Al-Shawkānī also narrates other opinions, such as from al-Ḍaḥḥāk, Mujahid, and Ibn Zaid that barzakh is a "separator between death and life", or al-Kalbī’s view that barzakh is "the death between two trumpet blasts which is 40 years apart”. Likewise, al-Suddī says that its meaning is "death until the day of resurrection".²⁰ All these data were conveyed by al-Shawkānī to explain the meaning of this verse that when a person is about to die and he rejects the prophethood of Muḥammad let alone denies it, then he will definitely regret and be sad to see what he will face after death. Another verse that contains the word barzakh is al-Furqān: 53.

وَهُوَ الَّذِي مَرَجَ الْبَحْرَيْنِ هَذَا عَذْبٌ فُرَاتٌ وَهَذَا مِلْحٌ أُجَاجٌ وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَهُمَا بَرْزَخًا وَحِجْرًا مَّحْجُورًا ٥٣

“And it is He who has released [simultaneously] the two seas [i.e., bodies of water], one fresh and sweet and one salty and bitter, and He placed between them a barrier and prohibiting partition. (Q. al-Furqān [25]: 53).”

The word “barzakh” in this verse is interpreted by al-Shakani as follows. Barzakh is a barrier that Allah has made with His power between two things to separate one from the other, prevent the two from mixing. Furthermore, al-Shawkānī said that the word barzakh explains the existence of a dividing factor between two objects, as well as hints at the difference between the two. Regarding the "two seas" in the verse, there are those who argue that the first sea is a river that contains fresh water, while the second sea is a real sea with salty water. Great rivers, such as the Nile, Furat, Jihun, and salty seas like the famous seas. Barzakh is in between the two to separate them. The water does not mix because of the power of Allah. Al-Shawkānī also cites several narrations in this regard. One of them comes from Ibn Jarīr, that the "two seas" can be mixed, but will not destroy each other between the fresh and the salty.²¹

Religious Inquiry in the Barzakh

In the barzakh, people who have died will get some trials. The test takes the form of several questions that determine his fate: happiness or suffering. Who can answer correctly, then he will be happy. Meanwhile, whoever cannot answer, then he will be miserable until the Day of Resurrection. Allah says in surah Ibrāhīm: 27,

يُنَبِّئُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِالْقَوْلِ الثَّابِتِ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَفِي الْأَجْرَةِ وَيُخْبِلُ اللَّهُ الظَّالِمِينَ وَيَفْعَلُ اللَّهُ مَا يَشَاءُ ٢٧

“Allah keeps firm those who believe, with the firm word, I in worldly life and in the Hereafter. And Allah sends astray the wrongdoers. And Allah does what He wills.”

Al-Shawkānī said that “al-qawl al-thābit” means “clear evidence”, namely good sentences (al-kalimāt al-ṭayyibah). It has been mentioned in al-Ṣaḥīḥain that what is meant is the creed that there is no god but Allah and that Muḥammad is the Messenger of Allah.

Al-Shawkānī further said that this incident occurred when the believers were seated in their graves. The Prophet said that this is what is meant by the word of Allah: “yuthabbit Allāh al-ladhīna āmanū bi al-qawl al-thābit”. Another opinion

says that the believers will be destined to always (*mudāwamah*) say those firm words. What is meant by “*al-ḥayāt al-dunyā*” is that they will continue to say these words throughout their lives in this world.

Another scholars have said that what is meant by life on earth in this verse is "life" in the grave. While the meaning of “*al-ākhirah*” is when they are judged in the hereafter. Al-Shawkānī also cites the opinion that what is meant by “*al-ḥayāt al-dunyā*” is when they are questioned in the grave, while “*al-ākhirah*” is when they are questioned on the Day of Resurrection. That is, when they are asked about their creed and religion, they explain it with firm speech without stuttering, hesitating, going back and forth, like the words of people who do not receive *tawfīq* from Allah.

The Pleasure and Punishment of the Grave

One of the verses that are often used by exegetes as a proof about the punishment of the grave surah Ghāfir: 45–46,

فَوَقَّهَ اللَّهُ سَيِّئَاتِ مَا مَكَرُوا وَخَاقٍ بِآلِ فِرْعَوْنَ سُوءِ الْعَذَابِ ٤٥ النَّارُ يُعْرَضُونَ عَلَيْهَا غُدُوًّا وَعَشِيًّا وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ أَدْخِلُوا آلَ فِرْعَوْنَ أَشَدَّ الْعَذَابِ ٤٦

“So Allah protected him from the evils they plotted, and the people of Pharaoh were enveloped by the worst of punishment; they are exposed to the Fire ‘in their graves’ morning and evening. And on the Day the Hour will be established ‘it will be said’, “Admit Pharaoh’s people into the harshest punishment ‘of Hell’.” (Q. Ghāfir [40]: 45–46).

The part about the punishment of the grave in this verse is “they are exposed to the Fire morning and evening” (*al-nār yu’raḍūna ‘alayhā ghuduwwan wa ‘ashiyyan*). The majority of scholars state that the fire is shown in the *barzakh*. There are a small number of other scholars who state otherwise: that this event will take place in the hereafter. Al-Shawkānī chose the first opinion. He quoted the opinion of al-Farrā’ who stated that this sentence structure contains *taqḍīm wa ta’khīr*. It means: "Enter you, O family of Pharaoh, in the severity of the torment whose fire is shown every morning and evening." There is no return from this torment, because the next part of the verse (*wa yawma taqūm al-sā‘ah adkhillū āla Fir‘awn ashadda al-‘adhāb*) shows a very clear argument that this fire is shown in the *barzakh*.²⁵

Al-Shawkānī also narrated several hadiths to strengthen his interpretation, such as a narration from al-Bukhārī, Muslim, and others from Ibn ‘Umar, that the Messenger of Allah said:

إِن أَدَخَلْتُمْ إِذَا مَاتَ عُرِضَ عَلَيْهِ مَقْعَدُهُ بِالْغَدَاةِ وَالْعَشِيِّ، إِنْ كَانَ مِنْ أَهْلِ الْجَنَّةِ فَمِنْ أَهْلِ الْجَنَّةِ، وَإِنْ كَانَ مِنْ أَهْلِ النَّارِ فَمِنْ أَهْلِ النَّارِ، يُقَالُ لَهُ هَذَا مَقْعَدُكَ حَتَّى يَبْعَثَكَ اللَّهُ إِلَيْهِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ

“Indeed, if one of you dies, he will be shown his seat every morning and evening. If he is from the inhabitants of Paradise, then he will see his place in Paradise. If he is a resident of Hell, he will be shown his place in Hell and it will be said to him, "This is your seat until Allah raises you up on the Day of Resurrection."

From the explanation above, we can conclude al-Shawkānī’s concept of the favors and punishments of the grave. According to him, people who are dead and have been buried, regardless of what the funeral is like, then he will get some of the pleasures of heaven, such as a comfortable transit place, given all the facilities of a comfortable life like in this world. On the other hand, if he is a resident of Hell, then he will get an unpleasant atmosphere such as hot, cramped, squeezed by the ground every morning and evening.

Another verse describes the existence of torment in the grave is Surah al-An‘ām: 93,

وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنْ افْتَرَى عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا أَوْ قَالَ أُوحِيَ إِلَيَّ وَلَمْ يُوحَ إِلَيْهِ شَيْءٌ وَمَنْ قَالَ سَأُنزِلُ مِثْلَ مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ وَلَوْ تَرَى إِذِ الظَّالِمُونَ فِي غَمَرَاتِ الْمَوْتِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ بَاسِطُوا أَيْدِيَهُمْ أَخْرِجُوا أَنفُسَكُمُ الْيَوْمَ تُجْزَوْنَ عَذَابَ الْهُونِ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَقُولُونَ عَلَى اللَّهِ غَيْرَ الْحَقِّ وَكُنْتُمْ عَنْ آيَاتِهِ تَسْتَكْبِرُونَ ٩٣

“And who is more unjust than one who invents a lie about Allah or says, "It has been inspired to me," while nothing has been inspired to him, and one who says, "I will reveal [something] like what Allah revealed." And if you could but see when the wrongdoers are in the overwhelming pangs of death while the angels extend their hands, [saying], "Discharge your souls! Today you will be awarded the punishment of [extreme] humiliation for what you used to say against Allah other than the truth and [that] you were, toward His verses, being arrogant." (Q. al-An‘ām [6]: 93).

Al-Shawkānī explains the word "*al-zālimūn*" in the sense of “all those who do wrong”, including those who oppose what Allah has revealed to them, those who claim to be prophets, and those who lie on the name of Allah. Al-Shawkānī mentions people such as Musailamah al-Kadhdhāb, al-Aswad al-‘Ansī, and Sujakh. Al-Syawkānī also explains the word "*ghamarāt*" as a plural form of the word “*ghamrah*” which means “great difficulty or pain”.

This verse can indeed give the impression that the wrongdoers will only get punishment in the grave. But it is not. They were tortured from the moment they left the world to *barzakh*. Regarding the verse “*al-malā’ikah bāsītū aydīhim*”, al-Shawkānī said that the angels beat them with their hands to take the life of the disbeliever. This verse is in line with the verse 50 in Surah al-Anfāl. Al-Shawkānī also cites several narrations to support his opinion.

In the verse “*al-yawma tujzawna ‘adhāb al-hūn*”, the meaning is that on the day your life is taken, you will be punished. The beginning of the torment is in the grave. They will have a humiliating torment after they had previously been arrogant and considered themselves the most honorable.²⁶

From the explanation above, it is clear that al-Shawkānī believed that the punishment of the grave would be given to the *zālim*. Included in the word *zālim* are people who oppose revelation and people who claim to be prophets, as state in

the *sabab nuzul* of the verse. In addition, al-Shawkānī also explained that the torment in their graves begins when their souls are separated from their bodies by being beaten by angels with whips made of iron. Furthermore, al-Shawkānī explained that Allah will make them humiliated, weak, suffering and miserable, as opposed to their life in the world, which is decorated with glory and pride.

Al-Shawkānī gave the commentary of the verse above based on the meaning of the Arabic language and then he strengthened it with narrations that explained the meaning of the verse. So, it can be concluded that, as long as there is no conflict between the sources of interpretation, al-Shawkānī's hermeneutic method is to explain the verse with lexical meaning and then strengthen it with supporting narrations.

Conclusion

Al-Shawkānī's hermeneutics is constructed on a set of principles and methods that are based on efforts to converge between *riwāyah* and *dirāyah*. In the hermeneutic triadic structure, *riwāyah* represents the authority of the author, while *dirāyah* represents the authority of the Qur'anic text itself. The results of the search and analysis of al-Shawkānī's interpretation of the verses about life in *barzakh* show that he applies these principles fairly consistently.

The most fundamental part of al-Shawkānī's hermeneutics is the principle of convergence. His interpretation relies heavily on deduction of the literal meaning of the Qur'an which is carried out linguistically, plus the use of authentic hadiths as support. In cases where hadith and linguistic reasoning reinforce each other or add information to each other, both will be used equally. But in the case when the two are in conflict, priority will be given to one of the two based on certain considerations.

At first glance, these considerations are actually not much different from what many other exegetes have put forward. However, theoretically, al-Shawkānī actually gives a relatively more significant position to the *dirāyah* or tradition of linguistic meaning in Arabic. *Dirāyah* does not only function as a complement to *riwāyah*, but also as a confirmation for invalid narrations or judges in the midst of the confusion of various opinions in interpretation.

Al-Shawkānī's hermeneutics is also a "literal hermeneutics" in its classical sense. He tries to make his interpretation of the verses of the Qur'an as literal as possible. Literalism must be interpreted as a very thorough process of linguistic analysis by taking into account all levels of meaning and all semantic nuances and considering the possibilities of using words or phrases in the Qur'an itself and outside it. To defend the principle of literalism, al-Shawkānī repeatedly rejected the narrations that came from the Companions, or *Tābi'īn*, or the opinions of other exegetes.

But on the other hand, al-Shawkānī's literalism also tends to be inclusive. It opens the possibility to understand the verses of the Qur'an in the broadest sense as long as this is possible by the text of the Qur'an itself and as long as there are no arguments that limit it. Because of that, al-Shawkānī's interpretation is encyclopedic by including various opinions in the interpretation.

In the hermeneutical structure of al-Shawkānī, the Prophet Muhammad is the representation of the author. Therefore, the traditions of the Prophet occupy a central position. If the hadith is valid based on the criteria generally applied by the hadith scholars, then it is given top priority. Valid hadith can serve as an explanation of the meaning of a verse, or a limiter for the generality of the verse's editorial, or a judge for the diversity of opinions in interpretation. In addition to the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, which is valid, none of the other sources are considered conclusive by al-Shawkānī. Included in this principle is the interpretation of the earliest generations of Islamic history. All opinions must be judged based on two criteria, namely their harmony with the specific meanings desired by the *Shari'ah* and their conformity with linguistic rules.

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