

Thematic Qur'anic Exegesis on the Essence of Allah: A Comparative Study of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah, the Ash'ari School, and the Maturidi School

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the understanding of verses related to the Essence of Allah (Dhat Allah) in the Qur'an through a thematic exegesis approach (tafsir al-maudhu'i) and to compare the theological interpretations of three major Sunni schools: Salaf (Ahl al-Sunnah), Ash'ariyah, and Maturidiyah. Methodology: This research employs a qualitative approach based on library research. The data are derived from classical and contemporary Qur'anic commentaries, theological works, and relevant academic journals. Thematic exegesis is applied by collecting, classifying, and analyzing Qur'anic verses concerning the divine attributes, followed by a comparative analysis of the interpretative methods used by the three theological schools. Results: The findings indicate that the Salaf school adopts a textual approach by accepting the verses as they appear without interpretation (tafwid), while the Ash'ariyah employ a mediating approach by applying ta'wil to verses that may imply anthropomorphism. Meanwhile, the Maturidiyah demonstrate a stronger rational tendency by interpreting most of the ambiguous (khabariyyah) attributes to preserve the purity of monotheism (tawhid). Originality/Value: This study highlights that the differences among the three schools are methodological rather than ideological, reflecting the richness of Islamic intellectual tradition. It contributes to contemporary theological discourse by promoting a moderate and tolerant understanding of the mutashabihāt verses related to the Essence of Allah, particularly in responding to modern theological challenges.

Keywords: Essence of Allah; Thematic Exegesis; Salaf; Ash'ariyah; Maturidiyah; Ta'wil; 'Aqidah

Introduction Section

'Aqidah constitutes the fundamental foundation of Islamic teachings, as it shapes a Muslim's worldview regarding God, revelation, and the nature of existence. Within the discipline of Islamic theology, the discussion of the Essence of Allah (Dhāt Allāh) occupies a central position, as it is directly related to the principle of tawhīd and the conception of divine transcendence (Abdurrohim dkk., 2023). The Qur'an describes the Essence of Allah through verses concerning divine attributes, both essential (ṣifāt dhātiyyah) and action-based (ṣifāt fi'liyyah), such as Q.S. al-Ikhlās: 1, Q.S. Ṭāhā: 5, and Q.S. al-Faḥ: 10. These verses serve as fundamental theological references while simultaneously opening space for interpretative diversity among Muslim scholars (Husein dkk., 2022).

Historically, differences in interpreting verses related to divine attributes have emerged particularly in relation to the mutashābihāt verses, which possess multiple possible meanings. Such differences are not merely linguistic but are deeply methodological, especially concerning the relationship between textual evidence (naql) and rational reasoning ('aql) (Kamal dkk., 2023). Three major Sunni theological schools—Ahl al-Sunnah (Salaf), Ash'ariyah, and Maturidiyah—have developed distinct approaches in understanding these verses, ranging from textual acceptance without interpretation to rational interpretation (ta'wil) aimed at preserving the principles of tanzīh and the purity of monotheism (Ega Putri Handayani dkk., 2025).

Previous studies have examined the concept of divine attributes or the theological perspectives of individual schools separately. However, research that specifically analyzes Qur'anic verses concerning the Essence of Allah through the method of thematic exegesis (tafsir al-maudhu'i) combined with a comparative approach among these theological schools

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remains relatively limited. In this regard, thematic exegesis offers a comprehensive framework by systematically collecting and analyzing all relevant verses within a unified thematic structure (Moll, 2018).

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze Qur'anic verses related to the Essence of Allah using the thematic exegesis method and to compare the interpretative approaches of the Salaf, Ash'ariyah, and Maturidiah schools. This research is expected to contribute academically to the fields of Islamic theology and Qur'anic studies by demonstrating that theological differences among these schools represent methodological diversity rather than ideological conflict. Furthermore, the study is relevant to contemporary discourse in promoting a moderate and tolerant understanding of theological differences in the interpretation of divine attributes (Miolo & Arif, 2021).

Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design using a thematic exegesis approach (tafsir al-maudhu'i) combined with comparative theological analysis. This approach is considered appropriate because the study aims to examine Qur'anic verses related to the Essence of Allah and to analyze differences in theological interpretation among Sunni schools of thought (Fauzan dkk., 2020)

Research Approach and Type

The research is qualitative in nature and based on library research. It focuses on textual analysis rather than empirical field data, as the primary sources of the study consist of Qur'anic verses, classical and contemporary Qur'anic commentaries, and theological literature related to Islamic creed ('aqidah). This approach enables an in-depth exploration of interpretative methods used by different theological schools in understanding divine attributes (Tohis & Malula, 2023).

Data Sources

The data used in this study are secondary data obtained from authoritative written sources, including:

1. **Primary Qur'anic Commentaries**, such as Tafsir Ibn Kathir, Tafsir al-Tabari, and Tafsir al-Baghawi, which represent the tafsir bi al-ma'thur tradition.
2. **Rational and Theological Commentaries**, including works by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, al-Alusi, and al-Maturidi.
3. **Classical Creedal Texts**, such as al-'Aqidah al-Tahawiyyah, al-Ibānah 'an Uṣūl al-Diyānah, and Sharḥ al-'Aqidah al-Nasafiyyah.
4. **Academic Journal Articles** related to Qur'anic studies, theology, and thematic exegesis published in reputable scholarly journals (Lubis & Milhan, 2024).

These sources provide comprehensive perspectives on both textual interpretation and theological reasoning concerning the Essence and attributes of Allah.

Data Collection Technique

Data collection was conducted through systematic documentation and textual selection. Qur'anic verses related to the Essence of Allah and divine attributes were identified and compiled using classical tafsir works and digital Qur'anic databases such as al-Maktabah al-Shamilah and TafsirWeb. The verses were then grouped according to thematic relevance, particularly distinguishing between essential attributes (ṣifāt dhātiyyah) and action-based attributes (ṣifāt fi'liyyah) (Al-Banna & Hilmi, 2022).

Data Analysis Technique

The analysis followed the methodological steps of thematic exegesis as formulated by scholars such as ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Farmawī and Muṣṭafā Muslim, which include:

1. Determining a specific theme, namely the Essence of Allah (Dhāt Allāh).
2. Collecting all Qur’anic verses relevant to the selected theme.
3. Classifying the verses based on theological categories, such as essential and action-based attributes.
4. Analyzing the verses linguistically and contextually by examining Arabic semantics, asbāb al-nuzūl, and inter-verse relationships (munāsabah).
5. Conducting a comparative analysis of how the Salaf, Ash‘ariyah, and Maturidiyah schools interpret these verses, focusing on the use of tafwīd, ta’wīl, and literal interpretation.

Through this process, a thematic synthesis was developed to identify patterns, similarities, and methodological differences among the theological schools (Ayu Novita Sari, 2023).

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this study integrates thematic Qur’anic analysis with comparative theology. Thematic exegesis serves as the primary interpretative tool to establish coherence among Qur’anic verses related to the Essence of Allah, while comparative analysis is employed to examine how different theological methodologies shape interpretative outcomes. This framework allows the study to present a systematic and balanced evaluation of Sunni theological perspectives within the broader discourse of Islamic theology (Farhan dkk., 2024)

Results and Discussion

Based on the thematic analysis of Qur’anic verses related to the Essence of Allah, the following table summarizes the key interpretative characteristics of the three major Sunni theological schools with respect to mutashābihāt verses concerning divine attributes.

Table 1. Comparative Interpretation of Verses on the Essence of Allah

Theological School	Methodological Principle	Approach to Divine Attributes	Interpretative Characteristics	Theological Objective
Salaf (Ahl al-Sunnah)	Tafwīd and bilā kayf	Acceptance without ta’wīl	Affirms the wording of the text as it appears, without metaphorical interpretation or inquiry into modality	Preserving textual purity and avoiding speculative reasoning
Ash‘ariyah	Mediation between naql and ‘aql	Selective ta’wīl	Interprets ambiguous attributes metaphorically when literal meaning implies anthropomorphism	Safeguarding tawḥīd while maintaining scriptural authority
Maturidiyah	Rational emphasis (‘aql)	Extensive ta’wīl	Interprets most khabariyyah attributes metaphorically to avoid corporeal implications	Ensuring theological coherence and divine transcendence

As shown in Table 1, all three schools share a common commitment to affirming the oneness and transcendence of Allah. However, they differ in the epistemological tools and interpretative strategies employed when engaging with verses that possess semantic ambiguity.

Discussion

The results of this thematic tafsir study on Qur'anic verses concerning Allah's Divine Being (*Dhat*) demonstrate that the Qur'an employs various expressions to explain the oneness, perfection, and uniqueness of Allah. For instance, QS Al-Ikhlās: 1 states, "*Qul huwa Allahu Ahad*" which affirms Allah's absolute oneness, categorically distinct from His creation. This verse serves as the foundation for all principles of *tawhid* and represents a point of convergence for all theological schools within Islam. However, when discussing *mutashabihat* verses such as QS Taha: 5 ("*Ar-Rahman 'ala al-'Arshi istawa*") and QS Al-Fath: 10 ("*Yadullahi fawqa aydihim*"), differences in approach become evident among the three major schools examined: Ahlussunnah (Salaf), Asy'ariyah, and Maturidiyah (Fitria dkk., 2024).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that differences among the Salaf, Ash'ariyah, and Maturidiyah schools are methodological rather than doctrinal. All three approaches affirm the core principles of *tawhid* and *tanzih*, differing only in the epistemological tools employed to interpret divine attributes. This methodological diversity reflects the intellectual richness of Islamic theology and provides a constructive framework for engaging theological plurality within Sunni Islam.

In the contemporary context, this diversity holds significant relevance. Modern theological challenges often arise from literalist or overly rationalist readings of religious texts. The thematic and comparative approach employed in this study illustrates that a balanced understanding of the Essence of Allah—rooted in textual integrity and methodological awareness—can foster theological moderation and intellectual tolerance. Consequently, the findings contribute not only to academic discourse but also to broader efforts to cultivate a nuanced and inclusive understanding of Islamic theology.

a.) *The Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah (Salaf) School*

This school interprets these verses textually without *ta'wil* (metaphorical interpretation), adhering to the principles of *imrār* (maintaining the apparent meaning as it is) and *bilā kaif* (without discussing the modality). They do not interpret expressions such as "the Hand of Allah" metaphorically, yet they also avoid likening Allah to His creation (*tasybih*). This approach is grounded in cautiousness and complete submission to the scriptural texts (*nusus*), in order to preserve the purity of *tawhid* from speculative rational intervention. The Salaf emphasize *tafwid* (consigning the exact meaning to Allah) regarding the modality of divine attributes, affirming them while acknowledging human inability to comprehend their true nature. This methodology reflects their commitment to the theological principle that "nothing is like unto Him" (QS Ash-Shura: 11), thereby maintaining a balance between affirmation (*ithbat*) and negation of resemblance (*tanzih*) (Sari & Dewi, 2013).

b.) *The Asy'ariyah School*

The Ash'ari school develops a compromising approach between textual and rational methodologies. They do not reject these verses but employ *ta'wil* for meanings that potentially lead to *tajsim* (corporealization of Allah). For instance, the word "yad" (hand) in QS Al-Fath: 10 is interpreted as Allah's power or assistance. The Ash'aris maintain that Qur'anic texts must be understood with the aid of reason (*'aql*) and Arabic linguistic principles to prevent misunderstanding of Allah's attributes. They distinguish between essential attributes (*sifat dhatiyyah*) and informational attributes (*sifat khabariyyah*), applying *ta'wil* primarily to the latter when literal interpretation might compromise divine transcendence. This approach represents their synthesis of revelation and reason, ensuring theological soundness while respecting textual authority (Hakim dkk., 2024).

c.) *The Maturidiyah School*

The Maturidi school, while sharing roots with Ash'ariyah within the Ahlus Sunnah tradition, exhibits a stronger rationalist orientation. They tend to interpret nearly all informational attributes (*sifat khabariyyah*) through *ta'wil* to safeguard the purity of *tawhid*. For the Maturidis, verses such as "ar-Rahman 'ala al-'Arshi istawa" do not imply that Allah occupies a place; rather, they signify His sovereignty and dominion over all creation. *Ta'wil* serves as the primary

methodology in understanding divine attributes related to corporeality (*jismiyyah*), thereby avoiding anthropomorphic conceptions. The Maturidi school emphasizes the necessity of rational interpretation (*ta'wil 'aqli*) as a protective measure against literalism that could lead to *tashbih* (assimilation) or *ta'til* (negation of attributes). They argue that the Qur'an addresses humanity in a language they understand, employing metaphorical expressions (*majaz*) that require intellectual engagement for proper comprehension. This rationalist tendency distinguishes them from the Ash'aris, particularly in their greater reliance on reason as an independent source of theological knowledge alongside revelation (Arif Arif & Nunu Burhanuddin, 2023).

A deeper exploration of the epistemological character of each school, examples of *ta'wil* applied to *mutashabihat* verses, and an affirmation that this diversity of approaches remains within the framework of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah (Hafid dkk., 2024).

a). *The Salaf School (Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah)*

In this regard, the early generation of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah strictly safeguarded the purity of revelatory texts from excessive rational intervention. They maintained that human reason has inherent limitations in comprehending the essence of Allah's Divine Being (*Dhat*), thus the safest approach is *taslim* (submission) to the scriptural texts (*nusus*). This is grounded in the principle that discussing the "how" (*kaifiyyah*) of Allah's attributes constitutes *bid'ah* (innovation), as nothing is comparable to Him (QS Ash-Shura: 11) (Sutrisno, 2024).

This Salafi stance gave rise to an approach called *tafwid*, which means consigning the true meaning to Allah without negating the existence of such expressions in the Qur'an. This can be understood as a form of theological precaution in protecting the community's creed (*aqidah*) from deviant思想. Although seemingly simple, this approach possesses a distinct advantage in preserving the purity of *tawhid* and avoiding the possibility of likening Allah to creation (*tashbih*) (Arif Arif & Nunu Burhanuddin, 2023).

b). *Asy'ariyah*

The Ash'ari school recognized that Muslims live within rational societies where religious textual understanding often confronts logical reasoning. Therefore, Ash'ari scholars such as Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari, al-Baqillani, and al-Juwayni adopted a middle path by performing *ta'wil* on attribute verses that potentially convey corporeal meanings. They maintained adherence to the original meaning while providing rational interpretations to prevent misunderstanding.

For instance, in interpreting QS Taha: 5 ("*ar-Rahman 'ala al-'Arshi istawa*"), the Ash'aris reject the understanding that Allah physically resides upon the Throne. They interpret it metaphorically as representing His absolute majesty and sovereignty. Similarly, verses such as "*Yadullahi fawqa aydihim*" are interpreted as symbols of support or power, not as a hand in the literal sense. Such *ta'wil* is viewed as a means of preserving the principles of *tawhid* and *tanzih* (transcendence—purifying Allah from creaturely attributes) (Dardum, 2017)

c). *Maturidiyah*

The Maturidi school—which flourished extensively in Central Asia through the thought of Abu Mansur al-Maturidi—proceeded further in the rationalization of Allah's attributes. They employ reason as the primary instrument in understanding scriptural texts, assuming that not all texts can be comprehended literally. Therefore, *ta'wil* is not merely an alternative but a necessity when the apparent meaning of the text creates theological problems. (Alif, 2019)

The findings of this study demonstrate that the differences in approach among these three schools do not constitute contradiction, but rather reflect intellectual diversity within Islam. All three remain within the framework of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah and share the same commitment to preserving the purity of *tawhid*. Their differences lie primarily in their epistemological instruments: text (Salaf), text-reason (Asy'ariyah), and reason-text (Maturidiyah).

From a practical perspective, a profound understanding of these interpretive methods and approaches can strengthen faith while enhancing tolerance. In the contemporary context, Muslims face challenges from modern and materialistic thought that often questions the oneness of God. Therefore, understanding the diversity of interpretive methods concerning

Allah's Divine Being (*Dhat*) becomes highly relevant for reinforcing the foundation of faith and presenting Islam as scientific, rational, and inclusive (Hamidah dkk., 2024).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the discussion of Allah's Divine Being (*Dhat*) in the Qur'an, particularly through attribute verses such as QS Al-Ikhlās: 1, QS Taha: 5, and QS Al-Fath: 10, constitutes an essential component of Islamic creedal discourse that is inseparable from differences in interpretive approaches among Muslims. Through the thematic (*maudhu'i*) tafsir method, this research successfully traces how three major schools within Sunni Islam—Salaf, Asy'ariyah, and Maturidiyah—approach and interpret these verses.

The Salaf school, or early generation Ahlul-sunnah, exercises extreme caution by preserving the purity of textual meaning without *ta'wil* and without questioning the "how" (*kaifiyyah*) of Allah's attributes. They adopt the *tafwid* and *taslim* approach as a form of total submission to revelation, while avoiding interpretations that liken Allah to His creation (*tashbih*).

The Asy'ariyah school pursues a middle path between scripture (*nass*) and reason (*'aql*). They maintain adherence to scriptural texts, but when confronting expressions that suggest corporeal attributes, such as "*yad*" or "*istiwa*," they employ *ta'wil* to protect them from anthropomorphic connotations. This approach aims to preserve the principle of *tanzih* (transcendence) and prevent deviant meanings that may arise from literal interpretation.

Meanwhile, the Maturidiyah school adopts a more rationalist stance by prioritizing the dominant role of reason. For them, *ta'wil* of informational attributes (*sifat khabariyyah*) is not merely permissible but necessary, especially when literal understanding contradicts the principles of divine oneness and sanctity. Despite being more rationalist, this approach remains within the framework of Ahlul-sunnah wal Jama'ah and strives to maintain balance between transmitted knowledge (*naql*) and reason (*'aql*).

This comprehensive analysis reveals that the differing perspectives of these three schools do not constitute a contradiction of principles, but rather methodological differences that actually enrich Islamic intellectual heritage. All three endeavor to protect *tawhid* from two extremes: the negation of Allah's attributes (*ta'til*) and the likening of Allah to creation (*tashbih*). Therefore, understanding these approaches in a moderate and academic manner is crucial for strengthening faith, building religious tolerance, and presenting credal discourse that is scholarly and relevant in addressing contemporary theological challenges.

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