

Muqātil b. Sulaymān and Anthropomorphism^{1*}

When writing about Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d.150/767) in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, M. Plessner describes quite confidently that “the sources are unanimous in talking of his extreme anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*).”² Muslim biographers in general agree that Muqātil ascribes to an extreme view of God’s attributes to the extent that God is conceived of as having flesh and blood. Several biographers mention the report that his extreme view of God’s attributes had also reached the caliph (perhaps, al-Manṣūr), and he asked Muqātil: “I heard that you are likening (God with human’s attributes).” Muqātil answered: “I am only saying: ‘Say: God is one. God is the eternal’ (Q.112). Whoever said other than that has lied.”³ This report is significant for two unrelated reasons. First, Muqātil seems to have a close relationship with the ruler, which

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2. M. Plessner, “Mukatil b. Sulaiman,” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, eds. M. Th. Houtsma, et al., (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1936), vol. 3, p. 711.

3. Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, (Beirut: Dar al-ṣādir, 1968), vol. 10, p. 282; Yūsuf al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl fi asmā’ al-rijāl*, ed. Dr. Bishar ‘Awwād Ma’rūf (Beirut: Muassasa al-risāla, 1992), vol. 28, p. 439; al-Dhahabī, *Tahdhīb tahdhīb al-kamāl fi asmā’ al-rijāl*, eds. Mus’ad Kāmil, Aiman Salāma, and Majdi al-Sayyid Amin, (Cairo: al-Faruq al-ḥadītha, 2004), vol. 9, p. 89.

may contribute to his bad reputation in the eyes of pious Muslims. Second, he denied the accusation of being an extreme anthropomorphist. The truth of this denial must be evaluated through a close reading of his own writings, rather than relying on others' (mainly, his opponents') characterization.

The purpose of this article is to examine whether the usual accusations of anthropomorphism against the early Qur'ānic commentator Muqātil b. Sulaymān are justified. Muqātil was a controversial figure, attacked by some and praised by others. Until recently he has been accused of promoting an extreme anthropomorphism. Both Muslim and Western scholars seem to take it for granted that Muqātil had a bad reputation for one thing because he was an anthropomorphist who had no qualms in assigning to God such human attributes as bodily parts. What surprises us is that even though recent Western scholarship on the Qur'ānic exegesis pays much attention to Muqātil's *tafsīr*, there has not been a systematic study on his interpretation of the anthropomorphic expressions in the Qur'ān.⁴ This article shows that a closer reading of his *tafsīr* presents a different picture. Muqātil put forth a complex view of the anthropomorphic expressions in the Qur'ān, one that makes it difficult to simply label him an extreme anthropomorphist. In addition to examining the sources from which the anthropomorphic views were attributed to Muqātil, this article also questions the reli-

4. To mention but a few studies on Muqātil's *tafsīr*, see: K. Versteegh, "Grammar and Exegesis: the Origins of Kufan Grammar and the Tafsīr Muqatil," *Der Islam*, 67, (1990): pp. 206-242; C. Gilliot, "Muqātil, Grand Exégète, Traditionniste et Théologien Maudit," *Journal Asiatique*, 279 (1991): pp. 39-92; R. Forster, *Methoden Mittelalterlicher Arabischer Qur'ānexegeese am Beispiel von Q 53, 1-18* (Berlin: Schwarz, 2001); G.D. Nickel, "Muqātil bin Sulaimān on the Verses of 'Tampering'," *Islamic Culture: an English Quarterly*, 76 (2002): 1-25; G.D. Nickel, "Early Muslim Accusations of *Tahrīf*: Muqātil ibn Sulaymān's Commentary on Key Qur'ānic Verses," in *The Bible in Arab Christianity* (ed.) David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2007): pp. 207-223; Mehmet Akif Koç, "A Comparison of the References to Muqātil b. Sulaymān (150/767) in the Exegesis of Tha'labī (427/1036) with Muqātil's own Exegesis," *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 53 (2008): pp. 69-101.

ability of those sources in light of the theological contestation in early Islam.

1. Between Condemnation and Admiration

Muqātil was born in the city of Balkh in Khurāsān (that now comprises parts of Iran, Afghanistan, and beyond). No biographical works have mentioned the date of his birth, though they mentioned that Muqātil died at Baṣra in 150/767.⁵ He is reported to be a close ally of Sālim b. Ahwaz al-Mazīnī, the commander of the last Umayyad governor Naṣr b. Sayyār (d.131/748) in Khurāsān. Sālim nominated him as his representative to negotiate against his rival, the rebel al-Hārith b. Suraij (d.120/738).⁶ He was most likely no less than 40 years old at the time and, therefore, he was possibly born in year 80. Some biographers mention that there was a heated theological debate took place in the mosque Marw between Muqātil and Jahm b. Safwān (d.128/746) concerning God's attributes. The debate was so intense that subsequently each one wrote a book critiquing the other. Since Muqātil had highly respected position in Khurāsān and the fact that he was a close ally to Sālim, he was able to expel Jahm from Balkh to Tarmadz.⁷ It seems that the problem between Muqātil and Jahm was not merely theological, but also political one. While Muqātil represented Sālim in the political

5. Al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī, *Tarīkh al-Baghdād*, (Cairo: Maktaba al-khanji, 1931), vol. 13, p. 169; Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, 10: 284; Dhahabī, *Tahdhīb tahdhīb al-kamāl fi asmā' al-rijāl*, vol. 9, p. 91; Dhahabī, *Tarīkh al-Islām wa-wafayāt al-mashāhir wa al-a'lām* (Years 141-160), ed. Dr. Umar Abdussalām Tadmuri, (Cairo: Dar al-kitab al-'arabi, 1989), p. 649.

6. 'Abdullah Maḥmūd Shāhḥāta in his introduction to *al-Ashbāh wa al-naẓā'ir fi al-Qur'ān al-karīm* by Muqātil b. Sulaymān (Cairo: Wazāra al-thaqāfa, 1975), p. 15; Patricia Crone, "A Note on Muqātil b. Ḥayyān and Muqātil b. Sulaymān" *Der Islam*, 74 (1997): p. 245.

7. Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl fi Asmā' al-Rijāl*, vol. 28, p. 440; Dhahabī, *Tahdhīb tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 9, p. 89; Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, vol. 10, p. 280. Compare with Patricia Crone, "A Note on Muqātil b. Hayyān and Muqātil b. Sulaymān," pp.245-6.

negotiation, Jahm represented Ḥārith. In subsequent battle in year 128/746, Jahm was killed by Sālim himself.⁸

Muqātil spent his earlier life in Khurāsān, especially in two big cities: Balkh and Marw. In the pre-Islamic era, Balkh was the center of religious diversity and obviously had major impact on Muqātil's religious view. He then went to Marw where he got married. Therefore, he was sometimes referred to as "Balkhī", "Marwazī (Marw)", and "Khurāsānī." The importance of Marw can be seen from the fact that Abū Muslim al-Khurāsānī (d.138/755) chose Marw as the center of 'Abbāsīd propaganda activity against the Umayyad dynasty. In the inaugural years of the 'Abbāsīd rule, Muqātil, like many Khurāsānis, migrated to westward to centers of political power in Iraq. He settled first in Baṣra and then moved to Baghdad, whose foundation by the caliph Abū Ja'far al-Manṣūr as the capital is dated to within a decade of Muqātil's death. He returned to Baṣra until he died in 150. Some sources indicate that Muqātil frequented the 'Abbāsīd court. When visiting Manṣūr, one of the 'Abbāsīd caliphs, a fly insisted to descend on Manṣūr's face. He asked Muqātil: "Do you know why God created the fly?" Muqātil responded: "Yes, in order to humble the tyrants (*jabbārin*) with it." And Manṣūr was just quiet.⁹ He certainly liked the 'Abbāsīds better, perhaps because he was a Zaydī.¹⁰

If it is true that Muqātil had ascribed to God "flesh and blood," certainly the places where he grew and lived have a great influence on his controversial views. As mentioned earlier, Balkh was the city of diverse religions. In the eighth through tenth centuries, Khurāsān was one of the most important centers of the religious thought in Islam. Khurāsān produced a number of prominent scholars in *ḥadīth*,

8. Shāhhāta, in his study on *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān* by Muqātil, vol. 5, p. 25; see also: Shāhhāta, *al-Ashbāh wa al-naḥā'ir* by Muqātil, p. 15.

9. Baghdādī, *Tarīkh al-Baghdād*, vol. 13, p. 160; Dhahabī, *Tahdhīb tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 9, p. 89; Dhahabī, *Tarīkh al-Islam*, p. 639; Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 28, p. 439.

10. Patricia Crone, "A Note on Muqātil b. Hayyan and Muqātil b. Sulaymān," p. 245.

tafsīr, and *fiqh*. Baṣra was also known for its diversity in terms of religious sects. Muqātil remained in Baṣra and encountered many conflicting theological views in which different groups like Shīʿa, Khawārij, Muʿtazila and others were involved in serious theological discussions. Abū Ḥātim b. Ḥibbān (d.354/965) has listed three possible reasons why Muqātil has a bad reputation: “He relied on Jewish and Christian sources in his interpretation of the Qurʾān; he was also an anthropomorphist assimilating God to His creatures; and in addition he used to forge *ḥadīths*.”¹¹

Of these three reasons, it is the last factor that has been widely discussed in biographical works (*kutub al-rijāl*), a sub-genre of biographical dictionaries designed to evaluate the truthfulness of *ḥadīth* transmitters. Many *muḥaddithūn* have discredited Muqātil for being reckless and inaccurate in his use of the *isnād* (chain of transmission). One anecdote presents him showing off about his personal acquaintance with scholars on whose authority he transmitted *ḥadīths* of the Prophet, among them is the famous al-Kalbī. Muqātil used to tell the people about the tradition from the authority of Kalbī, saying: “Abū al-Naṣr [the epithet of Kalbī], told me.” Once upon a time Kalbī confronted him by saying: “O Abū al-Ḥasan [the epithet of Muqātil]. I am Abū al-Naṣr and I’ve never said about that tradition.” Muqātil replied: “Shut up, O Abū al-Naṣr! We just adorn the tradition with people’s name.”¹² On another occasion he told the people about the tradition from the authority of Mujāhid b. Jabr, then someone in the audience stood up and said: “I am Mujāhid, but I’ve never met you!” Without blinking an eye Muqātil retorted: “That doesn’t matter, what matters is the content of the story.”¹³ Muqātil was once confronted by Ibn ‘Uyayna: “You have transmitted the tradition

11. Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, vol. 10, p. 284; Mizzi, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 28, p. 450; al-Dhahabī, *Tahdhīb tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 9, p. 91; Dhahabī, *Tarīkh al-Islam*, p. 642.

12. Baghdādī, *Tarīkh al-Baghdād*, vol. 13, pp. 163-164; Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, vol. 10, pp. 282-183; Mizzi, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 28, pp. 445-446.

13. Kees Versteegh, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought III: The Arabic Linguistic Tradition*, p. 13.

from the authority of al-Ḍaḥḥāk, but the *muḥaddithūn* claim that you have never met him.” He simply replied: “The door was closed for me and him,”¹⁴ referring to his secret meeting with Ḍaḥḥāk.

He is accused of not only transmitting *ḥadīths* from people he did not meet, but also proposing to forge the prophetic traditions. It is reported that Muqātil proposed to the ‘Abbāsīd caliph to fabricate the *ḥadīth* in his favor. For instance, he said to al-Mahdī: “If you wish, I will make up some *ḥadīths* for the ‘Abbāsīds?” Mahdī responded: “I don’t need them.”¹⁵ Once upon a time someone came to Muqātil and said that he was asked about the color of the dog of *aṣḥāb al-kaḥf* (the people of the cave whose story is mentioned in *sūra al-Kahf*). “I have no idea what I should say,” he said. Muqātil said to him: “O a fool, if you said yellow or whatever, who would refute you.”¹⁶ For some *muḥaddithūn*, this statement indicates that Muqātil was not only a liar but also taught how to lie. His prestige in the eyes of the *muḥaddithūn* is very low, and therefore his *ḥadīth* is *ḍa‘īf* (weak) and *matrūk* (abandoned).¹⁷ In light of this accusation, we need to examine the *ḥadīth* in his entire works available to us now. Since this is beyond the scope of our research, it suffices for us to refer to the very brief observation by Abdullah Shāhḥāta, the editor of Muqātil’s two major works, namely *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān* and *al-Ashbāḥ wa al-naḏā‘ir*:

I have investigated the *aḥādīth* (plural of *ḥadīth*) cited by Muqātil in his *tafsīr*, and I found that most of them have been there in the

14. Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, vol. 10, p. 280; Baghdādī, *Tarīkh al-Baghdād*, vol. 13, p. 165; Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 28, p. 441.

15. See: Baghdādī, *Tarīkh al-Baghdād*, vol. 13, p. 167; Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 28, p. 446; Dhahabī, *Tahdhīb tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 9, p. 90.

16. Baghdādī, *Tarīkh al-Baghdād*, vol. 13, p. 165; Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, vol. 10, p. 282; Dhahabī, *Tahdhīb tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 9, p. 90.

17. Dhahabī quotes the statements by Bukhārī, Yazīd b. Zurai‘, Wāqī‘, Ibn Ma‘īn, Abū Dāwūd, Abū Ḥatīm, and Nasā‘ī, all of whom accused Muqātil with the strongest condemnation, such as “*kadhḥāb*” (liar), “*matrūk al-ḥadīth*” (his *ḥadīth* abandoned), and “*ḍa‘īf*” (weak). See Dhahabī, *Tarīkh al-Islām*, pp. 640-41.

books of *Ṣaḥīḥ* [referring to *Ṣaḥīḥ* al-Bukhārī and Muslim] and the books of *Sunan*.... We rarely find the weak *ḥadīth* in his *tafsīr*.¹⁸

Shahhāta's observation obviously does not confront the huge *ḥadīth* literatures that have depicted Muqātil as a liar, but, at the very least, it shows that even though he was known as a liar in the *ḥadīth*, this phenomenon is not reflected in his *tafsīr*. The *muḥaddithūn* have characterized Muqātil as "*matrūk al-ḥadīth*" (his *ḥadīth* transmission should be rejected) and "*majhūl al-qawl*" (his opinion should be ignored) not only for his habitual telling of lies in the *ḥadīth* transmission, but also because "he used to talk about God's attributes which nobody would be allowed to transmit from him (*kāna yatakallam fī al-sifāt bimā lā yaḥillu al-riwāya 'anhu*)."¹⁹

Surprisingly, in spite of this wide range of accusations by traditionalists, a number of well-known scholars praise Muqātil's works, especially in the field of Qur'ānic exegesis. Shāfi'ī (d.204/820), the founder of the Shāfi'ī school of thought, is reported to have said: "The people who want to study the Qur'ānic commentary should rely considerably on Muqātil b. Sulaymān."²⁰ He compares Muqātil's knowledge on *tafsīr* with Abū Ḥanīfa on fiqh and Zuhayr b. Abī Sullamī on poetry. Another report on the authority of Rābi' b. Sulaymān that Shāfi'ī said: "Whoever wants to study *tafsīr* he has to rely on Muqātil; whoever wants to study *ḥadīth* he has to rely on Mālik; and whoever wants to study disputation he has to rely on Abū Ḥanīfa."²¹ Ahmad b. Hanbal (d.241/855) was asked about Muqātil, and said: "some of his works are disputed, but I myself see that he

18. Shahhāta, in his introduction to *al-Ashbāh wa al-naẓā'ir*, p. 45.

19. Baghdādī, *Tarīkh al-Baghdād*, 13: 163; Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 28, p. 445.

20. In *Tarīkh al-Baghdād*, Shāfi'ī is reported to have said: "All people depend upon three: upon Muqātil in *tafsīr*, upon Zuhayr b. Abi Salmi in poetry, and upon Abū Ḥanīfa in *fiqh*." See Baghdādī, *Tarīkh al-Baghdād*, vol. 13, p. 161. Compare with Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 28, p. 436; Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, vol. 10, p. 279; Dhahabī, *Tahdhīb tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 9, p. 88; Dhahabī, *Tarīkh al-Islam*, p. 642.

21. See Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 28, p. 436.

has knowledge in the Qur'ān."²² Ḥammād b. Abī Ḥanīfa (son of Abū Ḥanīfa) is reported to praise Muqātil as more knowledgeable than Kalbī.²³ The noted historian Yūsuf al-Mizzī (d.742/1341) begins his biographical note on Muqātil by mentioning the names of those from whom Muqātil transmitted and those who transmitted from him, and provides a long list of those who praised him either for his pious personality or for his knowledge in the *tafsīr*.²⁴ Undoubtedly, these well-respected scholars admire Muqātil's works, for we cannot suppose that those great scholars like Shāfi'ī would recommend the people to rely on Muqātil's *tafsīr* without knowing its content.

It is worthwhile that some biographical works that mention those accusations, also mention some possible reasons for the *muḥaddithūn*'s condemnation of Muqātil. Ibn Ḥajar and Baghdādī report the story in which al-Qāsim b. Ahmad al-Saffār asked Ibrāhīm al-Ḥarbī: "Why do the people condemn Muqātil?" Ibrāhīm replied: "Because of envy from them (*hasadan minhum*)."²⁵ Yaḥyā b. Shibl also reported that he was asked by 'Ubbād b. Kathīr: "What prevents you from Muqātil?" Yaḥyā answered: "Because the people of our country hate him." 'Ubbād then said: "No, don't hate him. No one is more knowledgeable about the Book of God than him."²⁶

2. Muqātil and His *Tafsīr*

In the last few years, Muqātil's *tafsīr* attracts the scholars' attention, perhaps because it is the earliest *tafsīr* produced by Muslims which is extant today. Kees Versteegh describes Muqātil's *tafsīr* as "by far the most independent and interesting of the early

22. Baghdādī, *Tarīkh al-Baghdād*, vol. 13, p. 161.

23. Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 28, p. 440; Dhahabī, *Tahdhīb tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 9, p. 89.

24. Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 28, pp. 434-9.

25. Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, vol. 10, p. 280; Baghdādī, *Tarīkh al-Baghdād*, vol. 13, pp. 162-63; Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 28, p. 438.

26. Baghdādī, *Tarīkh al-Baghdād*, vol. 13, p. 162; Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, vol. 10, p. 280; Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 28, p. 438.

commentaries.”²⁷ Elsewhere Versteegh calls this *tafsīr* “one of the earliest products of Qur’ānic scholarship in Islam,”²⁸ and compares its claim to authenticity favorably against other early *tafsīr* works such as those of Mujāhid (d.104/722) and Sufyān al-Thawrī (d.161/778). Regula Forster remarks that the fluency of Muqātil’s *tafsīr* comes from the fact that he did not yet need to discuss alternative interpretation, and thus could simply give his own explanation.²⁹ For modern scholars, Muqātil’s *tafsīr* provides resourceful information on anything “Islamic” before the establishment of orthodoxy. It is hardly surprising that many Western scholars use his *tafsīr* as a fascinating source of information on various themes. Versteegh uses it to analyze the development of grammatical doctrine before Sibawayh.³⁰ Gordon Nickel uses it to investigate early Muslim accusations of *tahrīf*, that is, the falsification of previous scriptures.³¹

Arguably Muqātil’s *tafsīr* is the oldest complete edited commentary in good condition. This *tafsīr* is a complete commentary as opposed to a collection of quotations from later commentaries, and Versteegh suggests that the kind of exegesis it represents belongs to the most primitive form of commentary on the Qur’ān.³² Muqātil belongs to a generation of exegetes whose main purpose is

27. Kees Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar and Qur’ānic Exegesis in Early Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), p. 130.

28. Versteegh, “Grammar and Exegesis: The Origins of Kufan Grammar and the *Tafsīr* Muqātil,” *Der Islam*, 67 (1990): p. 206.

29. Regula Forster, “Methoden arabischer Qur’ānexegese: Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, at-Ṭabarī und ‘Abdurrazzaq al-Qashani zu Q 53, 1-18,” in I.P. Michel and H. Weder (eds.) *Sinnvermittlung: Studien zur Geschichte von Exegese und Hermeneutik* (Zurich: Pano, 2000), p. 397.

30. Versteegh, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought III: The Arabic Linguistic Tradition*, especially chapter 1, (London: Routledge, 1997): pp. 11-22; Kees Versteegh, “Grammar and Exegesis,” pp. 206-42.

31. Gordon Nickel, “Early Muslim Accusations of *Tahrīf*: Muqātil b. Sulaymān’s Commentary on Key Qur’ānic Verses,” in *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, ed. David Thomas, (Leiden: Brill, 2007): pp. 207-23; Gordon Nickel, “Muqātil b. Sulaiman on the Verses on ‘Tampering’,” *Islamic Culture*, 76 (July 2003): pp. 1-25.

32. Versteegh, “Grammar and Exegesis,” p. 210.

to explain the text of the Qur'ān for the common believers. In most of the cases he supplies glosses and explanatory notes for words or expressions that might not be immediately understood by the reader. His primary device of elucidation is the simple juxtaposition of text and paraphrase, sometimes introduced by explanatory notes such as “*ya'nī*” (“it means”, “that is to say”, “e.i.”, “the intention is”) and “*yaqūlu*” (“he says”). In some cases Muqātil does not limit his comments or explanations to the individual verse, but extends his observations to the rest of the Qur'ān. In the later *tafsīr* literatures, this type of exegesis is known as “*Tafsīr Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān*”. In many cases he refers to specific parallels, mostly with the expressions “*kamā qāla*”, “*fadhālika qawluhū*” or “*mithla qawlihi*.” A fine example of reference to other parts of the Qur'ān comes in the extended explanatory section following Q.2:1-5, where quotations from Q.3:1-7 are used to support not only Muqātil's interpretation of Q.2:1-5, but also the narratives and identifications which he himself has supplied. Muqātil sometimes takes time to gloss or explain his cross references as well.³³

John Wansbrough uses Muqātil's *tafsīr* extensively as an example of what he calls “haggadic exegesis”, i.e., commentary which tells the text of the Qur'ān as one continuous story.³⁴ Muqātil endeavors to explain the disjointed words of the Qur'ān by providing a narrative framework, which takes the central place as the generator of meaning. The effect of this narrative style of exegesis, as Gordon Nickel points out, “is to give continuity and wholeness to the text of the Qur'ān.”³⁵ The use of connectives – as well as the absence of connectives – between the Qur'ānic text and exegesis clearly indicates the importance of the *narratio* in Muqātil's *tafsīr*. It is through

33. See Gordon Nickel, *The Theme of “Tampering with the Earlier Scriptures” in Early Commentaries on the Qur'ān*, (PhD dissertation: University of Calgary, 2004), p. 62.

34. John Wansbrough, *Qur'ānic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 122-48.

35. Nickel, *The Theme of “Tampering with the Earlier Scriptures” in Early Commentaries on the Qur'ān*, p. 63.

this *narratio* that he was able to smooth out the disjointed nature, incompleteness and vague references of the verses. He sometimes rephrases Qur'ānic clauses in the mood of "in other words...", but he also provides detail information to entertain the curious reader. His identification of anonymous references creates familiarity with the text and enhances the quality of the narrative.³⁶

One of the most striking characteristics of Muqātil's *tafsīr* is that he almost has left nothing unexplained. Every details, every vague references in the Qur'ān, even such general references as to the *mushrikūna*, or to *munāfikūna*, is spelled out. Nothing and nobody is left anonymous. A characteristic example is when he adds to the phrase "qālat al-yahūdu" (Q.5: 64): *ya'nī ibn Surayya wa Finhās al-yahūdiyaini wa 'Āzīr bin Abī 'Āzīr*.³⁷ Perhaps, the most absurd example of this type of exegesis is when he offers the information that the ant who talked to Sulaymān (Q.27: 18) was called al-Jarmī,³⁸ and the name of the dog of the *aṣḥāb al-kaḥf* (the people of the cave in Q.18: 18) was Qimṭīr,³⁹ apparently in all seriousness. On the creation of the heavens and the earth in six days (Q.10: 3), he says that God created the heavens on Sunday and Monday, the earth on Tuesday and Wednesday, and everything between the two on Thursday and Friday.⁴⁰ He sometimes alludes to the historical events (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) to which the Qur'ān refers, which are usually introduced by the formulas "nazalat fī..." and "wa dhālika anna..." It seems that Muqātil was well informed both about the detail of the life of

36. *Ibid.*

37. Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil bin Sulaymān*, ed. Dr. Abdullah Mahmūd Shahhāta, (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-amma li al-kitab, 1979), vol. 1, p. 490.

38. *Tafsīr Muqātil bin Sulaymān*, vol. 3, p. 299. The editor of the *Tafsīr Muqātil* notes: "God has not mentioned the name of the ant, because there is no benefit of mentioning it. And it is not known unless with a transmission (of the prophetic traditions), and there is no such a tradition for the name of this ant. Therefore, it is clear that the source of the ant's name must be either from *isrā'iliyyāt* (biblical stories) or *mawdū'āt* (fabricated traditions)."

39. *Tafsīr Muqātil bin Sulaymān*, vol. 2, p. 578.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

the Prophet and about the biblical stories to which the Qur'ān refers, especially with regard to the stories of the previous Prophets. We know that he had at his disposal Jewish and Christian sources, and one of the criticisms that are directed to him is that he put his trust completely in what later tradition called the "*isrā'iliyyāt*".⁴¹

Muslim scholars often consider Muqātil's use of *isrā'iliyyāt* as one of the most obvious defects ('*uyūb*) of his *tafsīr*.⁴² Since a number of theological points had not yet been entirely fixed at the time of its composition, certain positions are discernible in his *tafsīr* that must have shocked later orthodox sentiment. Muqātil was apparently not interested in some issues which for latter generations of exegetes become controversial. For example, he deals with foreign words in the Qur'ānic extensively without any hesitation. He states,

41. *Isrā'iliyyāt* is a term that is often mentioned in the Qur'ānic exegesis to refer to Biblical stories which was collected in medieval *tafsīr* and *tarīkh* collections. Calder suggests that the term *isrā'iliyyāt* entered into exegetical terminology with Ibn Kathīr to designate material collected by previous generation of exegetes to which objections were raised. See Norman Calder, "*Tafsīr* from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the description of a genre, illustrated with the reference to the story of Abraham," in eds. GR Hawting and Abdul-Kader A Shareef, *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, (London, 1993), p. 137. Andrew Rippin deals with this issue in the same book, says: "the rise and employment of this term *isrā'iliyyāt* deserves a special study; my impression is that it comes into wide circulation as a pejorative term is *tafsīr* – material which is not to be accepted as valid in interpretation – only with ... Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr." See Rippin, "Interpreting the Bible through the Qur'ān, in *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, 258. For a more discussion, see M.J. Kister, "Ḥaddīthū 'an banī isrā'īla wa-la ḥaraja," *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972): pp. 215-239; see also Shahhāta in his introduction to *al-Ashbāh wa al-naẓāir*, 64; Kees Versteegh, "Grammar and Exegesis," p. 214.

42. See: Shahhāta in his introduction to *al-Ashbāh wa al-naẓā'ir*, p. 64. In his lengthy study on Muqātil's *tafsīr*, Shahhāta provides some examples where Muqātil used the Christian and Jewish sources; he also mentions the views of some scholars of the *tafsīr* concerning the *isrā'iliyyāt*. What is interesting to note is that although many scholars have warned against the use of the *isrā'iliyyāt* sources, Shahhāta observes that many of them in fact used it extensively in their *tafsīr*, like Ṭabarī, Baghawī, al-Khazīn, Ibn Kathīr, Qurṭubī, and others. See: Shahhāta in his "Dirāsa wa Taḥqīq, in *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, vol. 5, pp. 215-41.

for instance, the Qur'ānic word *qisṭās* derived from Greek to mean "scales" (*mīzān*),⁴³ *istabraq* from Persian "brocade" (*dībāj*),⁴⁴ and points to the Hebrew origin of the word *yamm* "sea" (*bahr*) in Egypt⁴⁵ or the Syriac origin of *tāhā* "Oh man" (*yā rajul*).⁴⁶ For orthodox Muslims who believed the Qur'ān as God's literal spoken word, it is impossible to accept that the Qur'ān could contain any loanwords or neologism, since that would imply a change in the divinity. Therefore, they spent a lot of efforts on proving that words like *qisṭās* or *istabraq* belonged to an Arabic root, or, at the very least, that these words had already existed in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. Claude Gilliot argues that Muqātil's remarks on a number of Hebrew figures represent a period prior to the development of the doctrine of the infallibility (*'isma*) of prophets. His discussion of the thoughts of Joseph in Q.12:24, the behavior of David with Bathsheba, and the story of Solomon and the statue, for example, shows a freedom of interpretation that was not open to Muslim scholars of a later period.⁴⁷

Another example is with regard to the meaning of anthropomorphic passages in the Qur'ān. Muqātil makes no effort to emphasize or de-emphasize their meaning except by paraphrasing and glossing them the same way as other verses. As will be discussed in more detail later, it seems that Muqātil had no problem at all with either the literal or metaphorical interpretation of such verses. Gilliot remarks, "Muqātil's recently published commentaries do show traces of anthropomorphic thinking, although not to the extent ascribed to him."⁴⁸ Unfortunately, Gilliot has not gone far enough to thoroughly examine Muqātil's approach to the anthropomorphic expressions in

43. *Tafsīr Muqātil bin Sulaymān*, vol. 2, p. 530.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 584.

45. *Ibid.* p. 59.

46. *Ibid.* p. 20.

47. Gilliot, "Muqātil, Grand Exégète, Traditionniste et Théologien Maudit," pp. 70-72.

48. Gilliot, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān: Classical and Medieval," in ed. Jane McAuliffe, *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. 1, p. 107.

the Qur'ān. It is my contention that the case of Muqātil needs further examination, because it demonstrates the unreliability of the sources where we learn about his views.

3. Was Muqātil an Extreme Anthropomorphist?

In this section, we will examine closely Muqātil's interpretation of the seemingly anthropomorphic expressions in the Qur'ān. To begin with, the Qur'ān describes the divine attributes of God in a very interesting way. On the one hand, the Qur'ān states that there is nothing that equals God, and that He has no like (Q.42:11; 112:4), but on the other hand, it describes Him as having a face, hand, and eyes, and as talking and sitting on the throne and as having feeling. Many prophetic traditions also support the claim that God has a body. The striking thing is that although this fairly moderate application of anthropomorphism by the Qur'ān compared to, for instance, the Bible, the Muslims prove to be puzzled by those divine analogies of human nature found in the Qur'ān. The first question comes to mind is: What is the proper way of looking at them? Are they to be taken literally, or do they ask for a figurative or metaphorical interpretation, or is a mediatory position on this point conceivable? Muqātil's discussion of the anthropomorphic expressions in the Qur'ān is complex in the sense that although he seems to take them at face value, he also interprets them metaphorically. He approaches the apparently anthropomorphic verses in rather interesting way as he interprets them differently according to different contexts.

On God's Face

Among the verses used by anthropomorphists (*mushabbihūn*) to support their position is the expression “*wajhuhū* (His face)” or “*wajh rabbika* (the face of your God)”, and other similar expressions that apply “the face” to God. For an extreme anthropomorphist, the word “*wajh* (face)” should be understood as a bodily organ

like our face. For anthropomorphists in general, the expression of “*wajh*” should be taken literally to mean an attribute (*Ṣifa*) added to the essence of God, without asking how (*bilā kayf*).⁴⁹ The Mu‘tazila who deny the *tashbīh* interpret it metaphorically as God’s essence.⁵⁰ Muqātil’s position on this issue, as on other issues of the anthropomorphic expressions, is not monolithic in the sense that he interprets them metaphorically in one place and literally in another. In what follows we provide a full citation of Muqātil’s commentary on some Qur’ānic passages related to the face of God, and followed by some general discussions. (Please note that the Qur’ānic passages will be italicized and put in brackets the same way they appear in his *tafsīr*.)

On sūra al-Kahf (18) 28

(*Keep yourself patient with those who call on their God*) means: they worship their God, that is, with the prayer to Him, (*at the morning and the evening*), the two sides of the day, (*they want the face of God*) means: by their prayer and fasting they seek the face of their God.⁵¹

On sūra al-Qaṣaṣ (28): 88

(*There is no god but He, everything perishes except His face*) He says: every living thing will die, He then makes an exception of Himself the greatest, that God the most high is living eternally and will not die, so God said: (*except His face*) means: except Him.⁵²

49. Abū Ya‘lā, *Kitāb al-Mu‘tamad fi uṣūl al-dīn*, ed. W.Z. Haddad, (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1974), p. 51.

50. Zamakhsharī explains the expression “*everything perishes except His face*” (Q.28: 88) as meaning “except Him”, and then adds “the face is expressed to mean the essence (*al-wajh yu‘abbar ‘an al-dhāt*).” See Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ‘an Haqāiq ghawāmid al-tanzīl wa ‘uyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-Takwīl*, eds. ‘Adil Ahmad Abdul Mawjud and Ali Muḥammad Mu‘awwaz, (Riyadh: Maktabah al-‘ubaykan, 1998), vol. 4, p. 531.

51. *Tafsīr Muqātil bin Sulaymān*, vol. 2, p. 582.

52. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 360.

On sūra al-Insān (76): 9

(*We are feeding you solely for the face of God*) means: for the satisfaction of God, the highest, (*we don't want compensation from you nor thanks*) means that you praise us with it.⁵³

On sūra al-Layl (92): 19-20

(*Without favor to be paid to anyone*), and that is that Abū Bakr passed on Bilāl the *muazzin* and his master Umayya b. Khalaf al-Jamhī... [Muqātil explains the historical context of this verse], (*only seeking the face of his God the highest*), the high over His creation.⁵⁴

The above passages represent the whole ranges of his approach to the Qur'ānic verses concerning the face of God, either he uses a figurative interpretation or takes it literally, and in most of the cases he leaves the term unexplained. There is no single hermeneutic method, all he does is follow the text and explain anything that may be unclear to the reader. Muqātil interprets "*yurīdūna wajhahu*" (Q.18: 28) to mean "seeking the face of their God" the same way he interprets 6: 52. But there is no pattern since he chooses not to explain the same phrase in 30: 38 "*yurīdūna wajh Allah*". The most interesting thing is his interpretation of 28: 88 in which he employs a figurative method the same way as the Mu'tazila do, that is, by interpreting *illā wajhahū* as "*illā huwa* (except Him)." The same method he applies to 2: 115 in which he interprets *fa aynamā tuwallū fathamā wajh Allah* (wherever you turn, there is the face of God) as means "*fa thamā Allah* (there is God)." In this context, Muqātil is obviously in line with the Mu'tazila who state that God's face indicates His essence. The Mu'tazila reject the view that God has a face based on the argument of the unity of God. God is one and has no parts, therefore it is inconceivable that part of Him should

53. *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 525.

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 723-24.

remain. The third quotation from the *Tafsīr Muqātil* on sūra al-Insān (76): 9 shows clearly that Muqātil interprets “*wajh Allah* (the face of God)” metaphorically as “*marḍāt Allah* (the satisfaction of God),” which also does not support the accusation that Muqātil was an anthropomorphist, let alone an extreme one. The last quotation above shows another example of his method of explicating the Qur’ānic passage. As for the Qur’ānic phrase: “*illā ibtighā’ wajh rabbiḥī al-a’lā* (only seeking the face of his God the highest), Muqātil chooses to explain the term “*a’lā* (the highest),” rather than “*wajh rabbiḥī* (the face of his God).” In fact, he does not give his explanation for the same phrase “*ibtighā’ wajh Allah*” in 2: 272 and 13: 22.

On God’s Eye

The Qur’ān also describes God as having “*‘ayn* (eye).” The term “*‘ayn*” and its plural form (*a’yun*) assigned to God appears five times in the Qur’ān, which has been interpreted differently by different exegetes along the line of their theological orientation. Zamakhsharī (d.538/1144), a Mu’tazilī exegete, interprets the Qur’ānic expression “*And build an ark under Our eyes*” (Q.11: 37; 23: 27) to mean “under Our protection and guidance as if there were God’s guards with him that guide him with their eyes so that nobody would destroy his work.”⁵⁵ Al-Qāḍī Abū Ya’lā (d.458/1066), a Hanbali traditionalist, says that “God has ascribed to Himself two eyes.... They are two attributes added to the sight and seeing.”⁵⁶ Here again on the question of God’s eye, Muqātil presents a complicated view taking it literally on the one hand, and interpreting it metaphorically on the other.

On sūra Hūd (11): 37

[*And build the ark*] means: the ship and work on it, [*through Our eyes*] means: through Our knowledge, [*and Our revelation*] like

55. Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, vol. 4, p. 226.

56. Abū Ya’lā, *Kitāb al-mu’tamad fi uṣūl al-dīn*, p. 51.

what We have ordered you. Then Noah worked on it for four hundred years and that ship was made from teak-tree.⁵⁷

On sūra Tāhā (20): 39

(*And you might be brought under My eye*), when the box was cast on the sea, and when it was found, and when he was nourished, all of that was through the eye of God. When Pharaoh found Moses, God made him do not accept the breast of a woman.⁵⁸

On sūra al-Qamar (54): 14

(*Coursing under Our eyes*) He says: the ship is coursing in the water through the eye of God, and then God drowned the people of Noah, and that drowning is (*a recompense for one who has been rejected*), means: Noah the rejected one.⁵⁹

From the above passages we might have better insight how a complex is Muqātil's approach to the anthropomorphic passages in the Qur'ān. The first example clearly shows that he uses a figurative method to interpret "*bi a'yūninā* (through Our eyes)" as "*bi 'ilminā* (through Our knowledge)." Muqātil puts an emphasis on the interplay between "God's knowledge" and "God's order" in such a way to guard Noah in his creation of an ark. However, the last two quotations seem to suggest that Muqātil uses no hermeneutical device to interpret "*alā 'aynī*" (Q.20: 39) and "*bi a'yūninā*" (Q.54: 14, and see also: 52: 48). These passages open for the possible reading of Muqātil as an anthropomorphist in the sense that everything that happened to Moses (he was cast off, then found and nourished) in 20: 39 and to Noah (he was safe on the ark) in 54: 14, all that took place in the eyes of God (which I took to mean by virtue of the eyes of the Lord). In other words, the events in the life of Moses and Noah took place under, and thanks to, the observing gaze of

57. *Tafsīr Muqātil bin Sulaymān*, vol. 2, p. 281.

58. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 27.

59. *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 179.

the Lord. A closer look, however, reveals another possible reading of Muqātil as non-anthropomorphist. One should note, for instance, that the first and last quotations refer to the same story of Noah in which God instructed him to build an ark to save his family and every two species on earth from a great flood. It is in this context that the phrase “*bi a’yuninā*” occurred in both verses. Since he has interpreted it in the first verse metaphorically, one might ask why we should take on the second verse literally. In other words, looking at Muqātil’s approach to both verses leads us to question his apparent anthropomorphism.

On God’s Hand

In the same category are the following verses: “*The Jews say the hand of God is bound. Their hands were bound, and they were accursed by what they said. But God’s two hands are extended, openly giving at will*” (Q.5: 64); “*O Iblis, what has prevented you from bowing to what I have created with My own two hands*” (Q.38: 75); and “*God’s hand is over their hands*” (Q.48: 10). In his *al-Ashbāh wa al-naḡā’ir*, Muqātil explains three different meanings of the hand. First, the hand is understood anthropomorphically as “the hand itself (*al-yad bi ‘aynihā*),” such as the verse “*what has prevented you from bowing to what I have created with My own two hands*” (Q.38: 75), which means, according to Muqātil, “with the hand of the Merciful the most high. He created Adam with His hand.” Muqātil explains further that “God created Adam with His hand with which He held (*qabaḡa*) the heavens and the earth.” In *sūra al-Mā’ida*: 64 “*But His two hands are extended*”, he interprets it as “the hand itself.”⁶⁰ Second, the hand is understood as a metaphor in the sense of providing sustenance, not a real hand, such as the verse: “*The Jews say the hand of God is bound. Their hands were bound*” (Q.5: 64). Muqātil interprets this verse to mean “they said: God restrained His hand from providing sustenance for us, so the sustenance was not increased like

60. Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *al-Ashbāh wa al-naḡā’ir*, p. 321.

He did at the time of the children of Israel.”⁶¹ Third, the hand means “act/work (‘amal).” Muqātil particularly mentions two verses in this category: “Haven’t they seen that We created for them animals from what Our hands had worked on” (Q.36: 71) and “the hand of God is over their hands” (Q.48: 10). Muqātil explains the meaning of the last verse as follows: “God’s generous action for them is better than their act in the *bay’a* (contract of loyalty) in the day of Hudaybiyya.”⁶² In what follows we shall compare the above three interpretations of the hand with what Muqātil has said in his *tafsīr*:

On sūra al-Mā’ida (5): 64

(*And the Jews said*) means: Ibn Sūriyya and Finhās, the two Jews, and ‘Āzir b. Abī ‘Āzir, (*the hand of God is bound*) which means restricted. God restricted His hand from us, so he did not extend His hand to us with sustenance, and He was not generous. And that is because God has previously extended the sustenance to them, but when they disobeyed and deemed lawful what was forbidden, God prevented the sustenance from them. Therefore, they said: the hand of God is prevented from extension. God said (*their hands were bound*), means: their hands were restricted from anything that is good, (*and they were accursed by what they have said. But His two hands are extended*) with everything that is good (*giving for whoever He wanted*), if God willed He extended the sustenance, and if He willed He bared it. They are only His creation and servants in His hold.⁶³

On sūra Yāsin (36) 71

(*Haven’t they seen that We created for them from what Our hand has made*) from Our work (*animals*) camel, cow, and sheep (*so they are the possessors of those animals*) they have control over them.⁶⁴

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Tafsīr Muqātil bin Sulaymān*, vol. 1, p. 490.

64. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p.584.

On sūra al-Fath (48): 10

(*The hand of God*) by keeping His promise to provide them with anything that is good (*is over their hands*) when they told the Prophet, peace be upon him: “We make an agreement with you that we will not escape and will fight, so please consider that for us.”⁶⁵

The comparison between his *al-Ashbāh wa al-naẓā'ir* and his *Tafsīr* on this theme reveals somewhat contradictory accounts. Before proceeding to this comparison, the following observation is in order. First, Muqātil comments on “God’s hand” only in the three places cited above. Second, every prepositional phrase of “hand” such as *bi yadihi*, *bi yadika*, *bi-yadayya*, or *bayna yaday Allah* and *bayna yadayhi* is not followed by explanatory notes. Therefore, the verse 38: 75: “*mā mana‘aka an tasjuda limā khalaqtu biyadayya* (*what has prevented you from bowing to what I have created with My own two hands*)” is not followed by any explanation of what “*My own two hands*” means for him, in spite of the fact that Muqātil himself claims in the *al-Ashbāh* that this “*My own two hands*” should be understood anthropomorphically as “the hand itself (*al-yad bi ‘aynihā*).” Another striking comparison is that the second part of the verse 5: 64 “*bal yadāhu mabsūtātān* (*but His two hands are extended*)” is also not explained in the *Tafsīr*, while in the *al-Ashbāh* it is said to be understood figuratively. What seems to be contradictory is the way Muqātil explains the first part of verse 5: 64 “*yad Allah maghlūlah* (*the hand of God is bound*)” which, according to him, it means “God restrained His hand (*amsaka Allah yadahū*)” in literal sense, while in the *al-Ashbāh* he refers to this phrase as metaphor of providing sustenance. However, this seemingly contradictory account can be resolved by arguing that Muqātil understands the phrase “*amsaka Allah yadahū*” as an Arabic idiom: “He prevented Himself to help”. For, it becomes an Arabic idiom that *masīk* means miser (*bakhīl*). In the *Lisān al-‘Arab*, Ibn Manẓūr writes: *rajulun*

65. *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 70.

*masīkun ay bakhīlun amsaka mā fī yadayhi lā yu'tīhi ahadan (rajulun masīkun means a miser who restricts what is in his hands and does not give it to anyone).*⁶⁶

On God's Sitting on the Throne

The Qur'ān mentions God's throne twenty two times out of which seven occurrences are related to God's sitting on the throne. Generally the Qur'ān depicts God, after creating the heavens and the earth, seated upon His throne and guiding the universe. But, as will be seen later, Muqātil goes to the reverse: He seated on His throne before creating the heavens and the earth. The imagery of God sitting on the throne has been at the center of much discussion in classical Islamic theology, for it raises the question of whether and to what degree one ought to interpret the Qur'ān literally. Taken literally, the text conjures up anthropomorphic pictures of God: there is a throne and God actually sits upon it, and so forth. Taken metaphorically, the text becomes a colorful reference to divine sovereignty and transcendence. Zamakhsharī explains "God's sitting on the throne" as a figurative equivalent of "he is king" (*kināyah 'an al-mālik*).⁶⁷ Muqātil's take on this theme can be represented by two citations bellow:

On sūra Yūnus (10): 3

*(Surely it is your God, Allah, who created the heavens) on Sunday and Monday (and) created (the earth) on Tuesday and Wednesday, and created whatever between the two on Thursday and Friday (in six days, then He seated on the throne), there is "taqdīm" in this verse (then He seated on the throne), then He created the heavens and the earth.*⁶⁸

66. Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dar ṣādir, 1956), vol. 10, p. 488.

67. Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, vol. 4, p. 67.

68. *Tafsīr Muqātil bin Sulaymān*, vol. 2, pp. 225-26.

On sūra Tāha (20): 5

(*The Merciful seated on the throne*) “taqdīm” (in advance) before the creation of the heavens and the earth, which means: He resided/settled.⁶⁹

While the meaning of the “God seated on the throne” verses has been a source of contention throughout the history of Islamic thought, Muqātil treats this issue very slightly. Among the seven verses dealing with “*istiwā ‘alā al-‘arsh* (God’s sitting on the throne),” he only provides the explanation of verse 10: 3, in which he states that the meaning of *istawā* is *istaqarra* (to reside, to establish oneself, to settle). What concerns Muqātil most is the logical order of creation that the Qur’ān tells us, that is, that God seated on the throne after He has created the heavens and the earth. Muqātil insists in his explication of all the seven verses that God seated on the throne before He created the universe. The technical term he uses in this context is “taqdīm”. For later grammarians, the term “taqdīm” is used only in the sense of “transposed order in the sentence,”⁷⁰ while Muqātil uses it in its original sense of “putting one thing before the other.” It is understandable because the term “taqdīm” was not yet a technical term at the time of Muqātil.⁷¹ So, the motif for pointing out *taqdīm* in the verse is, apparently, that the logical order of the actions mentioned in the verse has been reversed.

What makes Muqātil argue this way? It is difficult to ascertain why Muqātil goes to the reverse, since all the seven verses that speak about God’s sitting on the throne depict that God seated on His throne after the creation of the heavens and the earth. One possible reason for this is because of his understanding of sūra Hūd (11): 7 which implies – not explicitly -- that the creation of the throne was before the creation of the heavens and the earth. Sūra Hūd (11): 7: “*And it is God who created the heavens and the earth in six days*

69. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 20-21.

70. Kees Versteegh, “Grammar and Exegesis,” p. 231.

71. *Ibid.*

while His throne was upon the water, to test which of you is best in conduct.” It seems that there is no specific prophetic tradition that supports Muqātil’s view that the creation of the throne was before the heavens and the earth. Another possible reason is that Muqātil intends to deny a statement many early Muslims attributed to the Jews that God, after working at the creation of the universe from Sunday to Friday, lays back on the throne to rest on Saturday. Here Muqātil says that God seated on the throne before the creation of the universe, so there is no question that He took a rest on the throne after creating the heavens and the earth.

Let us come back to the question of God’s sitting on the throne. The word Muqātil uses for *istiwā* is *istiqrār*. Was Muqātil an anthropomorphist in this regard? The answer is obviously “yes.” Having said that, we have no justification whatsoever to call Muqātil as an “extreme” anthropomorphist, since he does not explain how God resided or settled on the throne. In fact, he treats this issue and on other similar issues discussed above almost in the same way as orthodox Muslims who accuse Muqātil of holding an extreme view of God’s attributes. Both Muqātil and orthodox Muslims treat this issue using the formula “*bi lā kayfa*”, that is, “the doctrine that we are justified in using mundane predicates of God *bi-lā kayf*, without explaining exactly how they apply to Him.”⁷² The doctrine of “*bi lā kayfa*” is usually referred to Mālik b. Anas (d.179/795), who is reported to say: “*istiwāuhū ma’lūm wa al-kayf minhu ghairu ma’qūl wa al-suāl ‘anhu bid’a wa al- imān bihi wājid (istiwā is known, the modality is unreasonable, questioning it is innovation, and believing in it is duty).*”⁷³

72. Montgomery Watt, “Some Muslim Discussions of Anthropomorphism,” *Transactions*, 13 (Years 1947 to 1949): p. 4. On this doctrine of *bi-lā kayfa*, see Abrahamov, “The *Bi-lā Kayfa* Doctrine and Its Foundations in Islamic Theology,” *Arabica* 42/3 (1995): pp. 365-379.

73. Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna said that a person asked Mālik: “God’s *istawā* on the throne”: How God *istawā* on the throne, O Abū Abdullah?” Mālik kept salient, and then he said: “*istiwāuhū ma’lūm wa al-kayf minhu ghairu ma’qūl wa al-suāl ‘anhu bid’a wa al- imān bihi wājid.*” See: Dr. Aḥmad ‘Alī Tāhā Rammān,

To sum up, based on the above analysis of his commentary of some anthropomorphic passages, we can conclude that Muqātil has different notions concerning anthropomorphic expressions in the Qur'ān. He is obviously anthropomorphist on the question of God's sitting on the throne. A closer look at his *tafsīr* reveals that he also inclines toward anthropomorphic interpretation on the question of God's chair [*kursī*] (Q.2: 255), His right side [*yamīn*] (Q.39: 67), and the vision of God in the hereafter (Q.75: 23). The Mu'tazila associated this last issue with anthropomorphism, arguing that since God is neither a body nor an accident, He cannot be seen either in this world or in the hereafter. If God is a body, as the anthropomorphist maintain, He can be seen.⁷⁴ On the questions of God's face, eyes, and hands, Muqātil interprets them figuratively in one place and anthropomorphically in another.

4. Some Possible Explanations

The above discussion on Muqātil's interpretation of the seemingly anthropomorphic expressions calls into question the accusation of Muqātil as being an extreme anthropomorphist. The question remains: Why was Muqātil accused of promoting an extreme anthropomorphism by both the *mutakallimūn* and *muḥaddithūn*, in spite of the fact that he himself denied such an accusation when he was confronted by the 'Abbāsīd caliph and our investigation into his *Tafsīr* also reveals that he is far from being a proponent of extreme anthropomorphism? In spite of Plessner's observation mentioned in the beginning of this article, it is possible to question the reliability of those sources, for a simple reason that there is no reliable source to prove that Muqātil himself has stated such anthropomorphic views in his own works. What we have so far is the sources, other than Muqātil's own works, that attribute the statement of extreme anthro-

Mālik bin Anas Imām dār al-hijra (Cairo: Dar al-i'tisham, 1987), p. 75.

74. Binyamin Abrahamov, "Introduction to *Kitab al-Mustarshid*," pp. 15-16.

pomorphism to him, especially in the *kalām* works. What makes us question the reliability of these sources is twofold. Firstly, the early theologian who accuses Muqātil of being an extreme anthropomorphist is Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d.324/935). In his *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, he ascribes to Muqātil the following statement:

God is a body and corpse in the form of a man: flesh (*lahm*), blood (*damm*), hair (*sha'r*), bone (*'aẓm*), and He has limbs (*jawāriḥ*) and organs (*a'da'*), including hand (*yad*), foot (*rijl*), mouth (*lisān*), head (*ra's*), and two eyes (*'aynani*). Nonetheless, He does not resemble anything else, nor does anything resemble Him.⁷⁵

The problem with this characterization is that there is a gap of 175 years between Muqātil's death and Ash'arī's death, and no one has been able to explain the historical accuracy of such attribution. There is no indication that Ash'arī acquired it from any of Muqātil's works, since he juxtaposed Muqātil with other person, e.g. Dāwūd al-Jawāribī, who said the same statement (*qāla Dāwūd al-Jawāribī wa Muqātil bin Sulaymān: "inna Allah jism..."*). Possibly he acquired it from what people talked in his days about Muqātil, which is difficult to verify. Unfortunately, this statement has had been repeated again and again by people from generation to generation without being confronted with what Muqātil himself has said in his written works. Mutahhar b. Tāhir al-Maqdisī (d.355/966) wrote: "Muqātil b. Sulaymān claimed that God is a body of the bodies (*jasm min al-ajsām*), flesh, blood, and He is seven spans measured by his span."⁷⁶ Ibn Ḥazm (d.456/1064) expressed a similar view: "Muqātil used to say that God is body, flesh, and blood in the hu-

75. Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa ikhtilāf al-muṣallīn*, ed. H. Ritter, (Visbadin: Dar al-nashr, 1963), p. 209. Even scholars who wrote extensively on anthropomorphism in Islam, such as Wesley Williams, are prone to associating the above oft-quoted statement to Muqātil as if it came from Muqātil's own mouth. See Wesley Williams, "A Body unlike Bodies: Transcendent Anthropomorphism in Ancient Semitic Tradition and early Islam," *Journal of American Oriental Society* 129/1 (2009): p. 35.

76. Mutahhar b. Tahir al-Maqdisi, *Kitāb al-bad' wa al-tarīkh* (Paris: Irnist li-Ru, 1919), p. 141.

man form.”⁷⁷ Nashwān b. Sa‘īd al-Ḥimyārī (d.573/1178) ascribes to Muqātil what seems to be the reason of his anthropomorphic view, namely, “because we cannot see something marked with hearing, sight, understanding, knowledge, life, and power, unless it is flesh and blood (*illā mā kāna laḥman wa daman*).”⁷⁸

Secondly, the fact that this statement is found in the *kalām* works poses another problem, because such a statement put forth by theologians who disagree with Muqātil’s theological view. Those who are familiar with the *kalām* works would understand that many theologians used to exaggerate when they came to address and criticize their rival, or attribute to someone a thing he did not say in order to frighten people away from him. An accusation of anthropomorphism, as Abrahamov points out, “seems to have been an efficient weapon in Islamic theological struggles.”⁷⁹ Josef van Ess also recognizes the complexity of Muqātil’s characterization in the heresiographical works, and hence “The rusticity of the argumentation may, to a certain extent, be attributed to the heresiographers: we do not have any original texts.”⁸⁰

It is interesting to note that there are no biographical works or historical documents that have ever attributed anthropomorphic claims to Muqātil.⁸¹ The *muḥaddithūn* alluded to this issue vaguely as we have discussed earlier. Even if we take the *kalām* works as reliable sources from which we can discern Muqātil’s anthropomorphic views, we found that their depiction of Muqātil is not

77. Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Faṣl fi al-milal wa al-aḥwā’ wa al-niḥal*, eds. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Naṣr and Abdurrahman Umayrah, (Jiddah: Sharika al-maktaba ‘ukaz, 1982), vol. 5, p. 74.

78. Nashwān b. Sa‘īd al-Ḥimyārī, *al-Ḥur al-‘īn*, ed. Kamal Mustafa, (Egypt: Maktabah khanja, 1948), p. 149.

79. Binyamin Abrahamov, “Introduction to *Kitāb al-Mustarshid*,” p. 5.

80. Josef van Ess, *The Youthful God: Anthropomorphism in Early Islam* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University, 1988), p. 4.

81. See Baghdādī, *Tarīkh al-Baghdād*, 13: 160-69; Dhahabī, *Tahdhīb Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 9, pp. 87-91; Dhahabī, *Tarīkh al-Islam*, pp. 639-42; Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 28, pp. 434-51; Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, vol. 10, pp. 279-85.

monolithic in the sense that there are other works that portray his views on God's attributes differently, including the famous theologian Shahrastānī (d.548/1153). In his *Milal wa al-nihal*, Shahrastānī places Muqātil at the same level as Mālik b. Anas on the question of God's attributes, and calls him among the imams of *salaf* (the pious Muslims of the early generations). Shahrastānī says, "Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal and Dāwūd b. 'Alī al-Asfahānī and a group from the imams of *salaf*, they all followed the method of *salaf* before them among the people of *ḥadīth* (*aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth*), including Mālik b. Anas and Muqātil b. Sulaymān."⁸² Unfortunately, the scholarship on Muqātil has been driven by Ash'arī rather than Shahrastānī. It is striking that some scholars use a very harsh language against him. Dr. Muḥammad Ḥusein al-Dahabi, a prominent scholar of *tafsīr*, states "Muqātil's learning embodies more evil than good, and is much more harmful than beneficial."⁸³ The author of the famous textbook *al-tafsīr wa al-mufasssīrūn* makes this observation after he – as he claims – has "carefully examined Muqātil's *tafsīr*" and concludes that "adherents of heretical and noxious doctrines such as anthropomorphists could find the material most conformable to their prejudices and passions, which they readily and eagerly copied."⁸⁴ How could he come to such a conclusion? Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Dāwūdī (d.945/1538) in his *Ṭabaqāt al-mufasssīrīn*, admits that "Muqātil was defamed (*lutikha*) with anthropomorphism, in spite of the fact that he was among the vessels of knowledge in the *tafsīr* like an ocean."⁸⁵

82. Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa al-nihal*, eds. Amir Ali Mahana and Ali Ḥasan Fa'ur, (Beirut: Dar al-ma'rifa, 1995), vol. 1, pp. 118-19.

83. M. Ḥusein al-Dahabi, "Israelitic Narratives in Exegesis and Tradition," in *The 4th Conference of the Academy of Islamic Research*, (Cairo: Al-Azhar Academy of Islamic Research, September 1968): p. 659.

84. *Ibid.*

85. Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Dāwūdī, *Ṭabaqāt al-mufasssīrīn*, ed. 'Ali Muḥammad Umar, (Cairo: Maktaba wahba, 1972), p. 331.

On the other different spectrum, we find Ibn Taymiyya (d.728/1328) who attempt to question the usual accusations leveled at Muqātil. For instance, he problematizes Ash‘arī’s characterization of Muqātil for two reasons. Firstly, Ash‘arī ascribes the statement of “God is flesh, blood...” to both Muqātil and Dāwūd al-Jawāribī, as mentioned earlier. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, this is problematic because Dāwūd al-Jawāribī was known to have said that statement, while Muqātil “only God knows the truth of his situation (*fa Allah a‘lam bi haqīqati ḥālihi*).”⁸⁶ In other words, there is no reliable source whatsoever from which we can confidently ascribe that statement to Muqātil. Secondly, Ibn Taymiyya argues that it is possible that “Ash‘arī took these statements from the works of Mu‘tazila, in which they falsified Muqātil.”⁸⁷ He prefers to open different possibilities, because “The Mu‘tazila might have added something in their transmission from Muqātil, or they transmitted from him, or transmitted from unreliable persons.”⁸⁸ Therefore, Ibn Taymiyya’s position on Muqātil is moderate one: Muqātil is not reliable in the *ḥadīth*, but “he is undoubtedly reliable in his knowledge of *tafsīr* and others.”⁸⁹ To the best of my knowledge, the earliest scholar who based his Qur’ānic commentary on Muqātil was Abū al-Ḥusayn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Multī (d.344/987), a Shāfi‘ī jurist, who, for instance, used the term “*taqdīm*” with regard to the “*God’s sitting on the throne*” verses.⁹⁰ It is noteworthy that Multī is a contemporary of Ash‘arī, but he said nothing about such

86. Ibn Taymiyya, *Minhāj al-sunna al-nabawiyya*, ed. Dr. Muḥammad Rashad Sālim, (Saudi Arabia: Jāmi‘a al-imām Muḥammad bin Sa‘ūd al-Islāmiyya, 1986), vol. 2, p. 618.

87. *Ibid.*

88. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 619.

89. *Ibid.*

90. Abū al-Ḥusein Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Multī, *al-Tanbīh wa al-radd ‘alā ahl al-ahwā’ wa al-bida’*, ed. Muḥammad Zāhid b. Ḥasan al-Kautharī, (Beirut: Maktaba al-ma‘ārif, 1867), 69-71. Kautharī, the editor of this work, notes: “The author’s relying on Muqātil b. Sulaymān in his *tafsīr* put him in the delusion with some superfluous opinions such as the interpretation of *istiwā* to mean *istiqrār*.”

accusations. Zarkashī (d.794/1392), as reflected in his *al-Burhān*, is another noted scholar of the science of the Qur'ān who benefited from Muqātil's works and often mentioned him by name.⁹¹

Even if we grant that Muqātil stated such anthropomorphic views, the fact that his major works available to us present him in a different way needs further explanations. One possible explanation is that Muqātil has said that statement at the earlier time of his life and then he changed his mind. Another possibility is that those who transmitted his works had dropped it from his *tafsīr*, or he stated it during his debate with Jahm and did not record it in his works. Indeed, some scholars prefer the last possibility. Ahmad Amīn (d.1954), for instance, argues that Muqātil's extremity was in response to the extreme position of Jahmiyya and Mu'tazila in negating the attributes of God.⁹² Already before Amīn, Abū Hanīfa is reported to compare the extreme position of Jahm in denying God's attributes with the other extreme of Mutaqil in affirming the human attributes of God.⁹³ As discussed earlier, there has been a reported disputation took place between Muqātil and Jahm, and both held their views in contrast to one another.⁹⁴ If it was the case, then such an incident must have taken place early in his life at least before year 128 when Jahm died.

91. Shahhāta notes: "Muqātil's explanations on the creation of Adam and the synchronization of those seemingly contradicted verses have influenced Zarkashi in his *al-Burhān*." Shahhāta, *Tafsīr Muqātil bin Sulaymān*, vol. 5, p. 71.

92. Ahmad Amin, *Fajr al-Islām*, (Cairo: Maktabah al-nahda al-Misriyya, 1964), p. 297.

93. Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, vol. 10, p. 281; Baghdādī, *Tarīkh al-Baghdād*, vol. 13, p. 166; Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 28, pp. 442-43; Dhahabī, *Tarīkh al-Islām*, p. 641.

94. Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, vol. 10, p. 280; Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 28, p. 440; Dhahabī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 9, p. 89.

5. Concluding Remarks

From the above discussion we can conclude that Muqātil was not an extreme anthropomorphist contrary to the report by the later sources. Our investigation of his own writings presents us with a different picture. In a number of instances, he provides a metaphorical interpretation of apparently anthropomorphic passages, while in other cases he interprets them literally or gives no explanation at all. Unfortunately, it is difficult to ascertain when his *tafsīr* was written, for it is possible that he was holding an anthropomorphic view of God earlier in his life, and then he changed his mind at the time when he wrote his Qur'ānic commentary. Based on what has been discussed above, I would argue that Muqātil cannot simply be labeled as an extreme anthropomorphist or against anthropomorphism. The fact that these accusations are not found in any of Muqātil's works available to us makes it reasonable to suspect the reliability of the sources from which the anthropomorphic views are ascribed to him. Our suspicion becomes unavoidable because the attribution of these views to Muqātil is only found in the works of the rationalist theologians who seem to oppose Muqātil's theological stance. Some theologians tested religious views against their own theological teachings. Thus, Muqātil who seems to take anthropomorphic passages at face value, was rejected and characterized with the worse possible accusations.

There are of course a number of political and theological reasons why he was accused of promoting an extreme anthropomorphism. On the one hand, Muqātil seemed to be "too close" to the political power that most theologians and traditionalists tended to avoid. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, Muqātil used to visit Baghdad which was the capital of the caliphate at the time, and where he was frequently consulted by the caliphs and local authorities. There are some reports that portrayed Muqātil to have at-

tempted to approach the 'Abbāsīd caliphs by offering to fabricate traditions in their favor. These reports seem to reflect traditionalists' perception of an ideal 'ālim (scholar) who should not attach to a political ruler. On the other hand, Muqātil's theological views, to a certain extent, represent a kind of openness to the influence of other religious community. He relied heavily upon Biblical stories in his interpretation of the Qur'ānic passages and he openly acknowledged that the Qur'ān contains some foreign words. These two issues later on prove to very controversial. It goes without saying that Muqātil's relations with the political ruler and his reliance on Biblical literatures add a significant fuel to his being accused of bad reputation. One Muslim author describes "the innovations (*bida'*) of Muqātil in assigning human attributes to God are too extreme to the extent that he holds a bodily description of the Almighty (*jassama*)."⁹⁵ This accusation is, of course, based on what has been said by earlier theologians, rather than on a careful examination of Muqātil's own writings.

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95. Muḥammad b. Abd al-Rāḥmān al-Maghrāwī, *al-Mufasssirūn bayn al-ta'wīl wa al-ithbāt fi āyāt al-ṣifāt*, (Riyadh: Muassasa al-risāla, 2003), vol. 1, p. 297.