



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

# MU‘TAZILISM AND THE QUR’AN

Conference Programme

22 July 2022

London



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Near & Middle Eastern Civilizations  
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

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### Welcome Note

I would like to welcome all the participants to this conference. It is organised with the support of The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London (IIS), and the Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations Department at The University of Toronto.

The publication of new materials, such as al-Māturīdī's and al-Jushamī's Qur'an commentaries, has made available sources that were not accessible before. This conference will bring together scholars working on various aspects of the Mu'tazilī heritage as well as its reception in Sunni, Shi'i and philosophical circles to envision what sort of questions and research topics the field of Islamic theology needs to ask.

This is the first conference on the impact of Mu'tazilī thought and theology on various aspects of scriptural commentary in the Islamic tradition. The impact of Mu'tazilī thought was clearly far more widespread and profound especially in areas we thought was immune. The various papers will discuss key Mu'tazilī notions and their relationship with the Qur'an, both as an interpreted text and as a scriptural sacred text imbued with divine authority and a miraculous nature.

**Professor Walid Saleh**

Convenor

University of Toronto



**Convenors**

Professor Walid Saleh, University of Toronto

Ms Naushin Premji, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London



## **Friday 22 July**

- 9:30 Welcome and Opening remarks: Walid Saleh
- 10:00- 11:30 **Panel I**
- Perceptions of Mu‘tazilite *tafsīr* in Western scholarship**  
Dr Alena Kulinich, University of Oxford/Seoul National University
- Mu‘tazilism and Qaraite Bible Commentary: A case of cross cultural interaction**  
Dr Gregor Schwarb, Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich
- The Forms and Motives of Abrogation (*naskh*) in Mu‘tazila Discourse**  
Professor Suleiman Mourad, Smith College
- Chair: Dr Omar Alí-de-Unzaga, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London
- 11:30-13:00 Lunch and Participant Tour/Group Picture
- 13:00- 14:30 **Panel II**
- Mu‘tazilite Theological Perspective on Prophetic Impeccability/Ineffability (*‘iṣma*): Qur’anic Exegesis and Hermeneutic Approach**  
Dr Abdulrahman al-Salimi, Independent Scholar
- An Inquiry Into *Mu‘jizāt*: A Study of Cross-Pollinization between *Kalām* Schools**  
Professor Tariq Jaffer, Amherst College
- Schools of thought on Love: Mu‘tazilī *tafsīr* and Qur’anic Love**  
Dr Karen Bauer, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London
- Chair: Dr David Bennett, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London
- 14:30- 15:00 Health Break
- 15:00- 16:30 **Panel III**
- Mu‘tazilī Theology, Qur’anic Exegesis and Historiographical Polemics**  
Professor Hussein Abdulsatar, University of Notre Dame (via Zoom)
- The Rationalist Exegete’s Sitz-im-Leben via al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s *Mutashābih al-Qur’ān***  
Professor Rodrigo Adem, Georgetown University
- The Mu‘tazilite material in al-Māturīdī’s Qur’an Commentary: a first Assessment**  
Professor Walid Saleh, University of Toronto
- Chair: Dr Toby Mayer, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London
- 16:30-17:30 Open Discussion



### Hussein Abdulsater

#### Mu'tazilī Theology, Qur'anic Exegesis and Historiographical Polemics

Early Muslim theologians developed a detailed discussion on the epistemic value of historical reports. Though later absorbed into jurisprudence, the discussion branched originally from theological considerations related to proving Muhammad's prophethood, elaborating various positions on his succession (*imāma*), and assessing the troubling events in which his companions were involved (*fitna*). In debating these themes, scholars viewed history from a perspective that suits their theoretical framework, while maintaining that this framework is itself built upon appropriate reading of reports and proper employment of theological tools.

They constructed various narratives, largely to cleanse historical material from 'impurities' or handle qur'ānic references whose message could obstruct its assimilation into a theological discourse.

This paper analyzes the handling of qur'ānic material on both the *imāma* and the *fitna* in the competing theo-exegetical discourses articulated by the Mu'tazilīs Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd (1258) and 'Abd al-Jabbār (1024) and the Imāmī al-Murtaḍā (1044). Each of the three scholars employs historical accounts, philology, literature, jurisprudence and even *realpolitik* considerations to promote an understanding of qur'ānic material compatible with the major premises of his theological discourse and historical narrative. Their arguments reveal an implicit disciplinary hierarchy in which theology occupies a privileged position, on the one hand, and functions as the primary filter used in reading qur'ānic material, on the other.

### Rodrigo Adem

#### The Rationalist Exegete's Sitz-im-Leben via al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār's *Mutashābih al-Qur'ān*

Rationalist scriptural exegesis demands a ceaseless role for the scholarly exegete in mediating normative meaning for fellow members of the religious congregation. While the Qur'an is honoured communally by Muslims as divine revelation informing normative religious formation, the rationalist exegete is a reminder to the community that revelation's authority is mediated via hermeneutic preconditions which allow for the language of holy scriptures to operate as vehicle of truth. The stance of the rationalist exegete in society as religious pedagogue thus demands a practical change from that of common practice to one of hermeneutic self-awareness in order for God's will to be known. This paper provides an exposition of key elements from the *Mutashābih al-Qur'ān* by al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025) illustrating how the Muslim rationalist exegete advances such arguments with their fellow religionists, giving us occasion to reflect on what we may learn of the lived context of the rationalist exegete in society, whose religious calling entails no less than an exposition of the contingency of the interpretive process in order to redeem a transcendent religious meaning.



### Abdulrahman al-Salimi

#### Mu‘tazilite Theological Perspective on Prophetic Impeccability/Ineffability (‘*iṣma*’): Qur’anic Exegesis and Hermeneutic Approach

It would be fair to say that the theologians’ studies on the question of prophethood and proof of its validity followed two parallel tracks: the first was an attempt to prove that prophethood was valid by starting firstly from the proof of divine revelation on the evidence of miracles and other phenomena. Then secondly by responding to the sceptics, deniers and opponents and rebutting their evidence – whether that evidence claimed to prove either the invalidity of prophethood or the invalidity of those things associated with it. In this paper we shall focus on certain aspects of prophethood, or the prophets’ missions, including the question of whether major sins can be attributed to, or committed by, the prophets. There are two theological issues involved here – prophetic infallibility, and the creation of deeds and predestination. These in turn lead to another theological issue — that is to say, *al-asmā’ wa-l-aḥkām* (names and rulings).

However, where the issue of the prophets was concerned the general problem among the Muslim theologians was over the question of whether the prophets were prone to sin, i.e. whether or not they could be guilty of major sins. Since the term or concept of ‘*iṣma*’ (infallibility) does not occur at all in the Qur’an, this study will focus on the debate over the prophets’ ‘*iṣma*’ that took place in Mu‘tazilite theology. In doing so, it will examine some early narrations on the ‘sin-proneness’ of the prophets (during which Muslims attempted to produce *ta’wīl* interpretations of the Qur’anic text) and compare them with later narrations, to help understand the Qur’anic narrative and the way the text was interpreted (using the *ta’wīl* approach) during the 2nd/8th century. We shall then discuss the Mu‘tazilites’ debates on prophetic infallibility and see how the Qur’anic text was understood, by using *ta’wīl* on the one hand and the *ẓāhirī/ḥarfī* (evident/literal) approach on the other. This will involve examining the Qur’an outside the strict limits of the text by taking a broader look at the accounts of the lives of the prophets from other sources and considering the influence of Jewish and Christian scriptures and *Isrā’īliyyāt* (extraneous narratives, particularly from Jewish sources), starting from the 3rd/9th century.

### Karen Bauer

#### Schools of thought on Love: Mu‘tazilī *tafsīr* and Qur’anic Love

The study of love as an element of piety has been confined mostly to Sufism. This paper explores how the Mu‘tazilite authors al-Jishumī and al-Zamakhsharī treat Qur’anic injunctions to believers to love God, and Qur’anic statements that God loves those who engage in certain behaviours. The approach taken by al-Jishumī and al-Zamakhsharī is compared to contemporary Sufi and non-Sufi authors to gain a more complete picture of whether there is a discernible Mu‘tazilite approach to pious love.





### **Tariq Jaffer**

#### **An Inquiry into *Mu‘jizāt*: A Study of Cross-Pollinization between *Kalām* Schools**

The aim of this study is to trace the idea of *mu‘jizāt* in the history of Islam by investigating the meaning of this term and the different senses ascribed to it by the Mu‘tazilī and Sunni school traditions (the Ash‘arites and the Maturidites). I examine the different ways that ideas cross pollinated across these school traditions by bringing into focus the ways that authors distinguish between the *ya* and figurative senses of the terms *mu‘jiz* and *mu‘jizāt*; and by bringing into focus the cosmological principles that shape definitions of key terms, including *mu‘jizāt* and *āyāt*. The texts that form the basis of this study are theological manuals, larger compendia, and *tafsīr* literature. To make a foray into the thickets of *mu‘jizāt* — a vast field of inquiry that is largely unexplored — I provide first a survey of the territory beginning with al-Ash‘arī (d. 935) and ending with Jurjānī (d. 1413). In the second part, I illustrate the pivotal role that Bāqillānī (d. 1013) played in the cross-pollination of principles, methods of reasoning, and conceptualizations of *mu‘jizāt* that took place between Mu‘tazilī and Sunni schools of thought.

### **Alena Kulinich**

#### **Perceptions of Mu‘tazilite *tafsīr* in Western Scholarship**

This paper focuses on the perceptions of Mu‘tazilite *tafsīr* in Western academic scholarship. In particular, it scrutinises the widespread perception of Mu‘tazilite *tafsīr* as dogmatic exegesis, whose *raison d’être* is explained primarily by the intent of the Mu‘tazila to appeal to the Qur’an to justify their theological doctrines and refute their opponents. How did this image of an exegetical tradition reduced simply to theological apologetics emerge? Why does it endure? Engaging with these two questions, the paper examines several factors that might have contributed to this situation. It first highlights the ambivalent role of the ‘schools of exegesis’ framework, which remains a leading approach to the history of *tafsīr*. On the one hand, it is within this framework that Mu‘tazilite *tafsīr* has been identified as a distinct school of exegesis. On the other, its emphasis on a single unique set of features that defines each exegetical school, to the detriment of connections and mutual influences as well as their own internal dynamics, has resulted in essentialised and static images of these schools. Second, this paper accounts for the dominance of ‘dogmatism’ in the perception of Mu‘tazilite *tafsīr* by linking it to the legacy of suspicion towards the Mu‘tazila, inherent in the Islamic sources authored by their opponents. Finally, the limited source base for the study of Mu‘tazilite exegesis — many Mu‘tazilite works on the Qur’an appear to have been lost, while extant works are not always easily accessible to researchers — contributes to the persistence of the image of Mu‘tazilite *tafsīr* as homogenous and static. Revising this abstract image by uncovering its heterogeneity and tracing its historical trajectory, would remain an important task for future research on Mu‘tazilite *tafsīr*.



### **Suleiman Mourad**

#### **The Forms and Motives of Abrogation (*naskh*) in Mu'tazila Discourse**

In a few instances in the Qur'an, the text informs its readers about the abrogation (*naskh*) of some of its verses. For instance, verse 2:106 (*Sūrat al-Baqara*) pronounces: "For every verse we abrogate or cause to be forgotten, we bring down one better or similar." Verse 16:101 (*Sūrat al-Nahl*) also brings up the issue of abrogation: "And when we substitute one verse in place of another — and God knows best what he revealed — they say: 'You are simply lying.'" There is equally verse 13:39 (*Sūrat al-Ra'd*): "God erases what he wills and ratifies, and with him is the archetype of the Book."

In my presentation, I will focus my analysis on the way Mu'tazila scholars explained the many forms of *naskh*, and the motives that led to the abrogation of certain verses. I will also examine how certain theological tenets — especially the created nature of the Qur'an and human agency — favoured the acceptance or rejection of certain views about *naskh*. How the Mu'tazila's position on *naskh* compares or contrasts with more traditionalist Sunni and Shi'i views will also be addressed.

### **Walid Saleh**

#### **The Mu'tazilite Material in al-Māturīdī's Qur'an Commentary: A First Assessment**

The recent publication of the Qur'an commentary of al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), *Ta'wilāt al-Qur'ān* (TQ), has opened new avenues of research on Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* material. The TQ preserves a remarkable amount of material from the Mu'tazilite tradition that is not available anywhere else in the surviving Islamic literature. This early material promises to advance our knowledge of the early Mu'tazilite Qur'an commentary tradition. Two Mu'tazilite authorities are cited repeatedly: the first is Abū Bakr al-Aṣamm al-Kaysānī (d. 200/816), the second is Ja'far ibn Ḥarb (d. 236/850). In addition to these two scholars, al-Māturīdī cites anonymous scholars from the Mu'tazilite tradition. As such there are three kinds of Mu'tazilite material in this commentary. The paper will offer a preliminary assessment of the Mu'tazilite material and suggest new avenues of research.

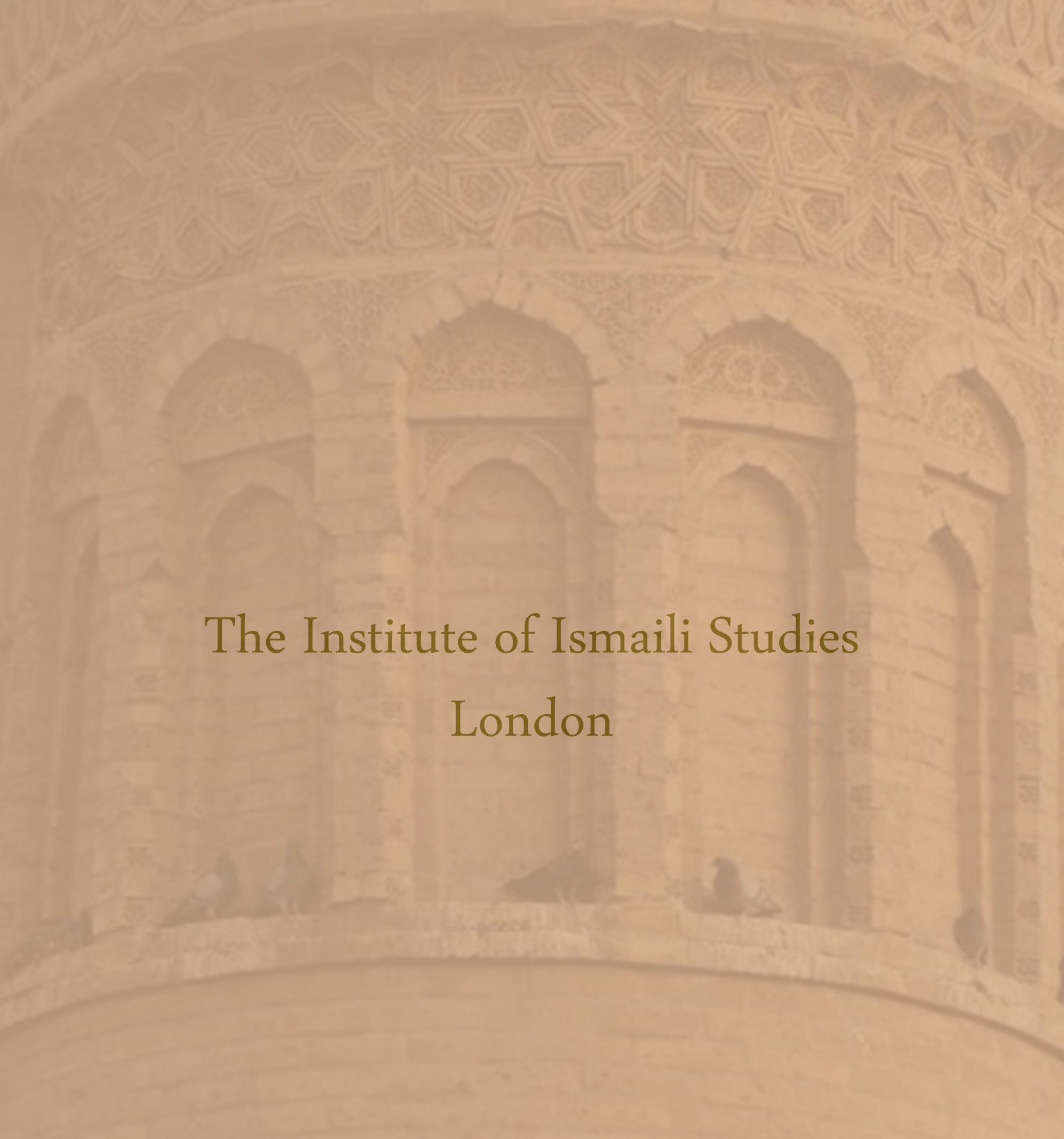
### **Gregor Schwarb**

#### **Mu'tazilism and Qaraite Bible Commentary: A Case of Cross Cultural Interaction**

Mu'tazilī *tafsīr* literature does not only comprise commentaries on the Qur'an, but also several extensive commentaries on the Torah authored by eminent Jewish savants. While the Jewish reception of Mu'tazili thought can be traced to the 9th century, the pinnacle of a full-fledged Jewish Mu'tazilism dates to the 2nd half of the tenth and the eleventh centuries. At the forefront of this Jewish Mu'tazilism was a group of Qaraite scholars who studied and taught at the community's academy (*dār al-ilm*) in Jerusalem.

My paper will introduce two Mu'tazili-style commentaries on the Torah by two figureheads of the Qaraite academy, David ben Bo'az ha-Nasi (late 10th c.) and Yeshu'ah ben Yehudah (mid-11th c.). The focus will be on the introduction to the latter's commentary. I shall also explore cross-connections with contemporary Mu'tazili commentaries on the Qur'an by Shaykh al-Ṭā'ifā Abū Ja'far al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067) and al-Ḥākim al-Jushamī (d. 494/1101).





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Cover image:

Detail of the restored minaret  
of the mosque of Imam 'Ali, Basra.  
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