

Research Paper

Esotericism and Literalism in the Interpretation of the Verse of I'tiṣām: An Analysis of Two Conflicting Exegetical Traditions

Reza Molazadeh Yamchi^{*1} 

¹ Postdoctoral Researcher, Quranic and Hadith Studies, Faculty of Theology, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran



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Extended Abstract

1. Problem Statement and Research Objectives

Verse 103 of Surah Āl 'Imrān (وَاعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا) stands as one of the most fundamental texts in the Holy Qur'an, explicitly calling for **Islamic unity** and freedom from disunity (**Tafarruq**). This verse introduces the core concept of "I'tiṣām bi-Ḥabl Allāh" (holding fast to the Rope of God) as the essential mechanism for achieving this unity. However, this very foundational concept, *Ḥabl Allāh*, has ironically become the focal point of a deep-seated conflict within the history of Islamic exegesis. Throughout history,

exegetes from both major schools (Sunni and Shi'a) have gravitated toward two distinct general exegetical traditions in identifying the precise meaning and application of the verse: one tradition applies *Ḥabl Allāh* to **universal and textual concepts** (such as the Qur'an or Islam) or **institutional ones** (such as the *Jamā'ah* or community), while the other tradition applies it to **personified, infallible, and living referents** (such as the **Wilāyah** of the Ahl al-Bayt).

This research goes beyond a mere descriptive account of divergent opinions, seeking instead to **explore the methodological roots** and **theological foundations** of this profound conflict. The primary

***Corresponding Author:** Reza Molazadeh Yamchi

Address: Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran.

Email: reza.mollazadehyamchi@alumni.um.ac.ir

objective of the study is a comparative and content-based analysis of the two exegetical traditions: “**Literalism (Zāhirgarā’i)**” and “**Esotericism (Ta’wīl-garā’i)**” in interpreting the Verse of *I’tiṣām*. The core question of the research is: Based on which epistemological principles have these two traditions arrived at two contradictory conclusions regarding the interpretation of *Ḥabl Allāh*, and how does the mechanism of inference operate within each to justify its perspective?

2. Research Methodology

The current research is fundamental in nature and employs a **qualitative content analysis** approach within a **comparative-analytical** methodology. Key and foundational *Tafsīr* works from both schools (such as *Jāmi’ al-Bayān*, *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* from the Sunni tradition, and *Al-Tibyān*, *Majma’ al-Bayān*, *Al-Mīzān* from the Shi’a tradition) have been subjected to in-depth scrutiny to identify the pattern of inference governing each tradition. This method allows the focus to shift from merely discussing the referent (*Miṣdāq*) to analyzing the overriding pattern of interpretation and justification that characterizes the thought of the exegetes.

3. Findings and Detailed Discussion

The research findings indicate that the difference in interpreting the verse is a manifestation of two distinct approaches regarding the issue of **Religious Authority (Marja’iyyat Dīnī)**:

The Literalistic Exegetical Tradition (The Sunni Approach)

This tradition, predominantly evident in Sunni exegeses, relies on the pattern of **Literalism (Zāhirgarā’i)** in understanding the religious text. The intellectual foundations and mechanisms of inference for this approach are as follows:

- **Primacy of the Salaf and Exoteric Meanings:** This viewpoint emphasizes the originality of the understanding of the **Pious Predecessors (Salaf Ṣāliḥ)** and adherence to the **exoteric meaning (Zāhir)** of the text, approaching any form of **Ta’wīl** (esoteric interpretation) that deviates from the primary lexical meaning with caution or even rejection.
- **Textual and Institutional Authority:** In this approach, religious authority is centered on **textual, general, and institutional** concepts. The exegete seeks *Ḥabl Allāh* in referents that have a **social and public** dimension, capable of averting the danger of disunity within the Islamic community.
- **Mechanism of Inference:** This tradition interprets the verse by relying on: a) **General and absolute traditions** (such as narrations indicating the necessity of holding fast to the Qur’an), b) **Sayings of the Companions and Successors** (as primary references for understanding), and c) the principle of “**The necessity of adhering to the Community (Wujūb Luzūm al-Jamā’ah)**”.
- **Final Interpretation:** The outcome of this approach is the interpretation of *Ḥabl Allāh* as concepts such as the **Holy Qur’an, the Religion of Islam, the Covenant of God, or the Muslim Community**. These are impersonal and non-infallible referents, considered

guarantors of the *Ummah's* socio-political unity.

4. The Esoteric Exegetical Tradition (The Shi'a Approach)

This tradition, prominent in Twelver Shi'a exegesis, is based on the pattern of **Esotericism (Ta'wīl-garā'i)** in understanding the verse. The intellectual foundations and mechanisms of inference for this approach can be summarized as follows:

- **Primacy of Guardianship and Infallible Authority:** The foundation of this approach rests on the theological principle of the **Imamate**. Accordingly, *Ḥabl Allāh* is a concept that requires a **living, infallible, and Divinely designated authority** for the **inner interpretation (Ta'wīl Bāṭinī)** of the text to prevent deviation.
- **Mechanism of Inference:** This tradition relies on: a) **Specific and explanatory traditions (Mufasssīr)** from the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) which explicitly interpret *Ḥabl Allāh* as **Wilāyah (Guardianship)**, b) Appealing to **rational evidence** such as the **necessity of infallibility (Iṣmah)** for the authority of *I'tiṣām* (due to the absolute guarantee against disunity), and c) considering the verse as an **esoteric**

interpretation (Ta'wīl) and inner meaning (*Bāṭin*).

- **Final Interpretation:** The outcome of this approach is the interpretation of *Ḥabl Allāh* as the referent of the **Guardianship and Imamate of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.)**. This referent is **personal, infallible, and Divine**, guaranteeing **doctrinal inner unity**. In this view, the "Qur'an" itself is conditional upon this "Wilāyah."

5. Conclusion

The present research concludes that the conflict in understanding the Verse of *I'tiṣām* is not merely a difference in identifying a specific referent; rather, it reflects a deeper tension between two different patterns in **religious epistemology** and the **theory of authority**. The Literalistic tradition adheres to a **textual/social** authority, while the Esoteric tradition adheres to a **personal/infallible** authority. These two traditions ultimately outline two different functions for the verse: one seeks **socio-political unity** through general, exoteric meanings, and the other seeks **doctrinal inner unity** through specific *Ta'wīl* and adherence to the divinely appointed Imam. Paradoxically, the Verse of *I'tiṣām*, whose ultimate purpose is to call for unity, has itself become a mirror reflecting a profound intellectual division due to divergent exegetical methodologies.

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