

## From Myth to Miracle on the Creation: Evaluation of Four Commentaries regarding a Verse in the Quran

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Some verses of the Quran tell us how the universe, including the heaven and the earth, was created. Most of them do not provide any detail save that the Creation was by God and hence the believers should praise Him for that. Based on the classic hermeneutic method illustrated by Friedrich Schleiermacher (d. 1834) and considering the author's intention, the commentators' mind, and the context, I evaluated thirty-five verses containing details on the subject from the viewpoints of four authoritative commentaries in the Muslim community.<sup>1</sup> Of them, one verse in the chapter of the Prophets (21:30), is more important than the others due to its content. It reads, "Have those who disbelieved not considered that the heavens and the earth were a joined entity (*ratq*) and we separated (*fatq*) them and made from water every living thing? Will they then not believe?" The verse has found two different interpretations among the Muslim exegetes, of which one deals with the subject of the Creation of the universe. Selecting four Muslim exegetes, two pre-modern and two modern, who accept that the verse has somehow a bearing on the subject of the Creation, this paper intends firstly to see how the verse is interpreted at different times under different cosmologies, and secondly to show how Muslim interpreters of the Scripture deal with a subject that also has a scientific implication. As we will see, they prefer their theological considerations to scientific ones.

### Pre-modern interpreters

#### Al-Ṭabarī, Muhammad b. Jarīr (ca. 224-310/839-923)

The tradition of interpreting the Quran has a long history but among the oldest works that contain the interpretation of the whole text is a commentary compiled by Muhammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī. He

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<sup>1</sup> The study was published as a book in Persian, *Āfarīnīsh dar Qurān* [Creation in the Quran: A Hermeneutic Study], Tehran: Nigāh Mu'āsir, 2013/1392.

was born in Āmul, northern Iran, and took many trips to Egypt, Syria, and Iraq during the ninth century to learn Islamic sciences from famous expert scholars. He then acquired mastery in many branches of Islamic knowledge and wrote works in various fields including history, Quran exegesis, *hadith*, *fiqh* and *usul al-fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence and legal hermeneutics), and Arabic poetry.<sup>2</sup> The advantage of his commentary, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl 'āy al-Qurān*, is that he concentrated on collecting early available works and oral or written citations of Islamic authorities (from ca. 50/670 to ca. 250/864). It took about ten years to be accomplished and has since attracted the attention of scholars. Methodologically speaking, his comprehensive approach justifies our referring first and foremost to this commentary. Citing each verse of the Quran, al-Ṭabarī quotes all the previous sayings, on the authority of different transmitters, and at the end sometimes prefers one of them as being the reliable commentary. On the subject of the history of creation he left no room for reason; “for, no knowledge of history of...and of events is attainable by those who were not able to observe them and did not live in their time, except through information and transmission provided by informants and transmitters. This knowledge cannot be brought out by reason or produced by internal thought processes.”<sup>3</sup> “Knowledge of this sort cannot be produced and obtained by the use of reason.”<sup>4</sup> As we will see, he consciously introduced some popular creational beliefs and myths that were common in the Middle and Near East into his commentary as traditions attributed to some of the Successors and the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad or even to the Prophet himself. Like myths, the language of these narratives does not induce discussion. It does not argue but presents. Like the opening words of Genesis, the events in this narrative happen in a time beyond any human being’s ken.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, we are dealing with a commentary which itself does not have the mode of textual analysis and rational approach to the content of the narrative. Al-Ṭabarī’s criterion for accepting a narrative is the righteousness of transmitter(s) in his view, and sometimes his own linguistic argument for why one exegetical report is rhetorically and

<sup>2</sup> See his biography based on primary sources in *the History of Al-Ṭabarī*, tr. By Franz Rosenthal, Introduction (New York: 1989), vol. 1, pp. 5-127. See also a short biography of him in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second version, s.v. “Al-Ṭabarī, Muhammad B. Jarīr”, esp. pp.12-13, by C.E. Bosworth.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *The History*, tr. F. Rosenthal, vol. 1, p. 170.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 226.

<sup>5</sup> On the character of the language of myth, see s.v. “Myth” by Kees W. Bolle in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. by Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

theologically more correct than others.<sup>6</sup> Since al-Ṭabarī, the narratives or reports are more or less repeated in pre-modern commentaries.

Al-Ṭabarī quotes four different interpretations on the verse in question. Each is adduced by internal Quranic evidence or some narratives attributed to the Companions of the Prophet or the Successors<sup>7</sup>. The main reason for differentiation goes back to the meaning of two words *ratq* and *fatq* in the verse. The **first** interpretation is that heaven and earth were conjoined entities (*ratq*) and there was no gap between them. It was God who separated them (*fatq*). Al-Ṭabarī then quotes a few interpretive narratives mostly on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās, a cousin of the Prophet and a companion who was a major authority for the Mecca school of interpreters.<sup>8</sup> He quotes the narratives in detail under other verses (2:29, 11:7, and 41:9-12), *ad loc.*, which deal with Creation, and the narratives are not repeated under the verse in question (21:30). As far as this study is concerned, it is pertinent to quote some content of the narratives in order to clarify the first interpretation, which might have been used by other pre-modern interpreters with some modifications. The quoted narratives concern the controversy over what was the first thing God created, the Pen, His Throne, Light and Darkness, or Water. And al-Ṭabarī preferred among them those narrations regarding God as creating the Pen first to write the destiny of everything, and then creating the Water before creating the Throne. It has been said that there is a gap of one thousand years between God’s creation of the Pen and His creation of all the rest. According to the narrative quoted by al-Ṭabarī, “God then lifted up the water vapor and split the heavens off from it. Then God created the fish (*nūn*), and the back of the earth was spread out. The fish became agitated, with the result that the earth was shaken up. It was steadied by means of the mountains, for the mountains indeed proudly (tower) over the earth. So He said, and recited: *Nūn*. By the Pen and what they write.”<sup>9</sup> In another version of the narrative it is added that “The fish was in the water. The water was upon the back of a small rock. The rock was upon the back of an angel. The angel was upon a big rock. The big rock – the one mentioned by Luqmān<sup>10</sup> – was in the wind, neither in the heaven

<sup>6</sup> See some examples in his *The history*, tr. Rosenthal, vol. 1, p. 223. The method and the reports on Creation are repeated in his *Tafsīr (Jāmi‘ al-bayān)* as well.

<sup>7</sup> The second Muslim generation after the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>8</sup> See Al-Ṭabarī, Muhammad b. Jarīr, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl ‘āy al-Qurān* (Beirut: 1415/1995), vol. 17, pp. 24-5.

<sup>9</sup> See *ibid.* vol. 29, pp. 9-10. For the translation of these narratives falling under the first and second kinds of interpretation, I used Franz Rosenthal’s translation of *the History of Al-Ṭabarī* (New York: 1989), vol. 1, pp. 218, 220, and 223.

<sup>10</sup> The Quran, 31:16.

nor on the earth. The fish moved....”<sup>11</sup> Along the same line, in another narrative attributed to Qattāda b. Di‘āma (d. 118/736), a Successor, it is added that the heaven was a dome-like thing<sup>12</sup> and God separated the heaven and the earth by air. This interpretation seems to resemble that which can be found in the Book of Genesis (1:6-8).<sup>13</sup>

**The second** interpretation quoted by Al-Ṭabarī is that heaven and earth were separated first, so that each was one thing (*ratq*) but God then fashioned them into seven heavens and seven earths (*fatq*). This interpretation found some supporting evidence among the narratives as well, especially those attributed to Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 104/722), one of the interpreters from the generation of the Successors. In these narratives, “God brought forth smoke from the water when He wanted to create the heavens and the earth; the smoke hovered loftily over it, by which is meant that it was high above another thing as its *heaven*, and then He fashioned it into seven heavens. Then He spread out earth, which was water, and dried the water out. Then He split the earth, making it into seven earths.”<sup>14</sup> It is asserted that the act of God happened on Thursday to the end of Friday, and that is why Friday is called *Jumu‘a*,<sup>15</sup> which in Arabic means *putting together*. This interpretation for the Arabic equivalent of the word Friday, based on an etymological fallacy, suggests that since the creation of heavens and earth was *put together* on Friday, God named Friday *Jumu‘a*.

**The third** interpretation is that the meanings of the two words *ratq* and *fatq* do not have any relevance to the creation of the universe and they deal with changes in the conditions of heaven and earth. According to this, the heaven was not pluvial and the earth did not yield fruit; it was God who made the heaven pluvial and the earth to yield fruit. This interpretation is adduced by the following part of the same verse which reads, “We made from water every living thing.” Ironically, preferring here this third interpretation, al-Ṭabarī argued that it is more consistent with the subsequent part of the verse since the preceding stage, creating living things from water, requires that the heaven would already have been made pluvial. “There are two verses in another chapter

<sup>11</sup> See Al-Ṭabarī (1415/1995), *ad loc.*, the Quran, 2:29.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *ibid.*, vol. 24, p. 125, tradition no. 23499.

<sup>13</sup> *The Bible*, Genesis: “And God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’<sup>7</sup> So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so.<sup>8</sup> God called the dome Sky.”

<sup>14</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, vol. 1, pp. 278-282, *ad loc.* the Quran, 2:29.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, vol. 17, pp. 25-26.

(86:11-12)<sup>16</sup> in which God had sworn by the pluvial heaven and by the earth splitting with the growth of plants. This may be considered as further evidence for the third interpretation,” added al-Ṭabarī.<sup>17</sup> This preference does not mean that al-Ṭabarī, broadly speaking, did not take the narratives mentioned in the first and second interpretations into consideration; it means that his acceptable interpretation for the verse is the third one. In explaining other related verses, however, he himself preferred the first interpretation.

**The fourth** interpretation quoted by al-Ṭabarī is that some early exegetes held that since the night (the darkness) was prior to the day (the light), God created the day in the midst of the night; God brought out the heaven and the earth from the darkness to the light. This option again found some supporting narratives attributed to yet another group of the Successors and finally, ironically, to Ibn ‘Abbās.<sup>18</sup> This interpretation also resembles that part of *Genesis* which reads, “And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.” (1:4)

#### **Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Muhammad b. ‘Umar (543-606/1149-1209)**

The second pre-modern interpreter here is Muhammad b. ‘Umar known as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, henceforth Rāzī. He was born in Ray, located near what is now Tehran. It is generally accepted by Islamic scholars that Rāzī was the most celebrated theologian, philosopher, jurist, and exegete of the Sunni Ash‘arīte School. He criticized many theological doctrines and popular beliefs formed on the basis of traditions attributed to the Companions and the Successors. In spite of his rational attitude and in contrast to the Mu‘tazilīte School, who applied rhetorical methods in the interpretation of the Quran, he insisted on the literal meaning of the text *verbatim* and believed that the metaphorical meaning prevents the reader from attaining the true or real meaning. He was a prolific writer and biographers have listed his works in thirteen categories. Most are theological, even his great exegetical work *Mafāṭīḥ al-ghayb* or *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* of the Quran, which is

<sup>16</sup> وَالسَّمَاءِ ذَاتِ الرَّجْعِ وَالْأَرْضِ ذَاتِ الصَّدْعِ

<sup>17</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, vol. 17, pp. 26-28.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, vol. 17, p. 27. Concerning the problem of how it is possible that one authority may become a source for two opposite ideas in Islamic traditions”, see Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: n.p., 1967), p. 155. Schacht believed that most of the traditions in which conflicting doctrines are ascribed to the same authority are favorite devices to create counter-traditions borrowing the name of the main authority for or transmitter of the opposite doctrine. It means that both ideas are fabricated under the fame of the authority.

published in 32 volumes. These features are briefly mentioned here to justify the selection of his work as the second interpretation in this study.<sup>19</sup>

Rāzī mostly interpreted the verses containing certain reports on natural phenomena as signs which may lead the reader of the Quran to the majesty and the grace of God and enrich his/her belief in Him. His main purpose in writing the interpretation is to enhance a rational attitude in support of the teachings of the Quran. As there exist many different kinds of materials in his interpretation, with or without a close relation to the Quran, some critics hold that one can find everything in his commentary save the interpretation of the Quran.<sup>20</sup> In principle, he disregarded the narratives attributed to the Companions and regarded some of them as myths or as ‘Stories of the Israelites’ (*isrā’īlīyyāt*), pejoratively meaning “stuff made up by the Israelites”. One can thus rarely find the narratives quoted by al-Ṭabarī in his interpretation, except when he cites them to criticize them. Nonetheless, concerning the verse in question, he quoted four viewpoints in decreasing importance and he did not suggest any new interpretation himself. The **first three** of these viewpoints are the same as the three interpretations mentioned by al-Ṭabarī. Rāzī, in spite of his rationalist attitude, took the first interpretation as the best one like al-Ṭabarī, according to which the heaven and the earth were conjoined entities and God separated them. To prove this preference, he analyzes the content of the verse instead of relying on quoting narratives. He adds, however, “This viewpoint requires that the earth should have been created before heaven since when God separated them, He gave up the earth and raised the elements of the heaven.”<sup>21</sup> This position is in contrast with the one he had already taken on the priority of creating heaven before the earth in accordance with most verses of the Quran, in which the story of the Creation is reported in a way that the word *heavens* comes before the word *earth*.<sup>22</sup> To understand his rationalist approach better, it is pertinent to review his argument on the priority of creating the heavens. He argued, “The heaven is like a circle and the earth is the center. If we suppose a circle, it is easier and more reasonable ~~and easy~~ to define a center for it than if there is first a point as the center and then infinite circles are to be drawn around it. Thus, we should say that heaven is created first and there is only one center, the earth.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See more in s.v. “Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī”, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second version) by G.C. Anawati.

<sup>20</sup> See al-Khulī, Amin, s.v. “al-Tafsīr”, in *Dā’ira al-Ma’ārif al-Islāmiyya [Islamic Encyclopaedia]*, Cairo: n.d. p. 355.

<sup>21</sup> See al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* or *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Beirut: 1421/2000), vol. 22, p. 140-141.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, *ibid*, vol. 27, p. 91.

<sup>23</sup> See, *ibid*, vol. 12, p. 123.

As to the narrations quoted under the verse in question (Q, 21:30), he believed that their content was familiar to the audience of the Quran in Arabia and they had already heard them from the Arab Jews.”<sup>24</sup> In his opinion, the narratives and popular beliefs as such are not of importance but the point is that the act of gathering and separating needs an actor, and the actor is God, who deserves great praise.<sup>25</sup> One can guess that he chose the first interpretation as the best one not because of his tendency towards the narratives which resembled myths but because of the fact that that interpretation would have helped him most to attain and to present his theological conclusions.

**The fourth** viewpoint mentioned by Rāzī and attributed to the Muʿtazilī scholar Abū Muslim Isfahānī (d. 322/934) takes *ratq* to mean nonexistence and *fatq* to mean existence. Thus the verse in question means: it is God who brought the heaven and the earth from nonexistence into existence. Rāzī is silent on this interpretation.<sup>26</sup>

As mentioned above, he puts the second interpretation second in the order of importance, saying nothing more on interpreting the verse in question. However, as may be concluded from other places of his work, he identifies the seven heavens with the seven spheres and with seven celestial bodies: Mercury, Venus, the Moon, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, which are visible to the naked eye and were thought to revolve in the heavens around a fixed earth and among fixed stars.<sup>27</sup> Pursuing his circle-center analogy, he adds that the number of the heavens is not limited to seven and we do not know the exact number; if the Quran mentioned the number *seven*, it should be understood that the Quran addressed the audience at the time of revelation according to their own level of knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, vol. 22, p. 140.

<sup>25</sup> It should be mentioned that in the works of Muslim theologians, where they present famous proofs to verify the existence of God, one cannot find any argument for the premise that the actor in the world or the creator of the world is identified with the concept of God mentioned in religions.

<sup>26</sup> See Rāzī, vol. 22, p. 141.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, *ibid*, vol. 2, p. 144-145.

<sup>28</sup> See Rāzī, vol. 2, p. 146.

## Modern Interpreters

### Ṭantāwī, Jawharī (1862-1940)

Knowing, more or less, about scientific developments on the subject of the origins of the universe, some modern interpreters of the Quran deal with the verse in question to find appropriate interpretations. Among them, some are concerned with the relationship between Islam and science. Ṭantāwī, an Egyptian interpreter, makes heavy use of scientific material in his commentary lest Muslims, as he said, would become backward with regard to modern scientific development. He repeatedly speaks of this motivation in his commentary and hopes that Muslims, by reading his work, will come to know scientific achievements which are not contradictory to Islamic teachings.<sup>29</sup> Thus, he enthusiastically considers the verse in question as one of the scientific miracles which the Quran definitely reported fourteen centuries ago.

Ṭantāwī was born in a village in the south-east province of Zagazig in Egypt. He studied at al-Azhar and at Dar al-‘Ulūm between 1889 and 1893. After his graduation, he worked as a school-teacher at various primary and secondary schools until his retirement in 1922, except for the period between 1908 and 1914 when he taught ethics, *tafsīr*, *hadith*, and grammar at the college of Dar al-‘Ulūm in the University of Cairo. He is the author of an impressive body of nearly thirty books and numerous articles on a variety of subjects published in different periodicals throughout the Islamic world. The majority of his writings constitute an effort to show, as he argued, how Islamic teachings, in particular the Quranic ones, are in consistency with human nature and with the methods, theories, and findings of modern sciences. Mainly through popular accounts in English he had familiarized himself with the sciences of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His principal work is his Quran commentary, *al-Jawāhir fī tafsīr al-Qurān al-karīm*, in 26 volumes. Throughout his commentary, he is preoccupied with the problem of the relationship between religion and science. Because of his profound commitment to Sufism, his writings were criticized and shunned by al-Azhar circles but no formal action was taken to prohibit any of his books. Outside Egypt, however, his works were forbidden for some time at the end of the 1920s by the

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<sup>29</sup> Ṭantāwī, Djawharī, *al-Djawāhir fī tafsīr al-Qurān al-karīm* (Cairo: 1923-35), vol. 1, p. 51.



Dutch censor in the Netherlands Indies, while his unconventional Quran commentary did not attract favourable attention in Islamic countries and was even banned in Saudi Arabia.<sup>30</sup>

On the verse in question (Q, 21:30) Ṭantāwī had two clear claims. **First**, he moved quickly to identify the content of the verse with the prevailing scientific cosmologies. He thought that the verse indicated the expansion and the process of early developments which scientists had recently come to know. According to him, the Quran says that the universe had singularity and then expanded rapidly. He then quotes the scientific theory, as he knew it, that there was a gaseous and condensed globe for millions of years, from which the earth and other planets, including the Sun, derived. Many suns and planets were then separated from the gaseous globe in such a way to be released in the atmosphere and became rigid. Our solar system was one of those systems separated from that gaseous world. This means that the process of separation is still going on. Had Ṭantāwī been alive in 1962, when the theory of Big Bang was presented by scientists, he would probably have identified the content of the verse with that theory. An assessment as to the validity of his interpretation would require interdisciplinary research to take different cosmologies into consideration in order to define the extent to which the scientific findings may be identified with the Quranic interpretations.

An assessment of this sort is beyond the scope of this article, but three points should be mentioned about the first claim. Firstly, when Ṭantāwī explains the early developments as he finds them reflected in the Quran, he expresses a certainty that contrasts with the language of scientists. The language of science explains such developments in terms of hypotheses for which some evidence might be found. Secondly, he considers the earth to be a part of the gaseous world in accordance with the prevailing scientific findings, but the Quran says that the earth was separated from heaven, not from the gaseous world or from the Sun.<sup>31</sup> Thirdly, Ṭantāwī expected to be able to reconcile the scientific findings with the content of the hadiths indicating that the earth was created from water.

<sup>30</sup> See more in s.v. “Djawharī, Ṭantāwī”, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second version), Supplement, vol. 12, pp. 262-263, by F.De Jong. I quoted this short biography mostly from this article.

<sup>31</sup> See Ṭantāwī, vol. 1, pp. 49-50, vol. 19, pp. 90-91. He insisted that there is no saying in the Quran involving any contradiction with scientific findings.

**Second**, Ṭantāwī claims that it is the Quran which describes the early developments for the first time, with no precedence in Arab intellectual history. As to this claim, we have already heard from Rāzī that the motif of the narratives on the Creation was familiar to the audience of the Quran and they had already heard them from the Arab Jews. Even while Ṭantāwī commented on another verse (10:5), he himself believed that the audience of the Quran was familiar with the idea that God created the universe in six days and that was why the Quran used the idea.<sup>32</sup> However, he is deliberately rather silent about the narratives quoted by al-Tabari on the story of the Creation and perhaps regarded them as Jewish traditions or lore (*isrā'īlīyyāt*). He should have clarified his view on these narratives which a modern mind can, in principle, hardly accept in their literal sense. Furthermore, it is reported in some Roman as well as Middle and Near Eastern mythologies that a god, for example Marduk, the chief Babylonian god, separated heaven from the earth.<sup>33</sup> Such beliefs then appeared in the subsequent scriptures with some changes. Even though we do not have enough supporting documents to prove the process of such borrowings, it can be guessed that themes of this kind had already existed and the Quran was not the first to describe the story of the Creation in narrative. It may be true that, hermeneutically speaking, the Quran mentions the story in a new form to enrich the faith of believers, but the description cannot be considered as the first explanation, and needs not to be considered as a scientific miracle, as Ṭantāwī and some Muslim intellectuals eagerly wish to.

### **Tabātabā'ī, Sayyid Muhammad Hussein (1902-1981)**

Tabātabā'ī is the second modern interpreter selected here. In contrast to Ṭantāwī, he was generally cautious in using scientific materials in his commentary. Born in Tabriz, he devoted much of his life to Islamic studies, especially exegesis, theology, philosophy, and mysticism, at the theological Seminary (*Hawza*) of Najaf and then of Qum. For several years, he held a professorship at the Seminary of Qum. As the curricula of the seminaries are focused on legal theory and jurisprudence, his contributions to the field of exegesis of the Quran, philosophy, and mysticism represent an

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, vol. 6, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> See Samuel Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology* (Baltimore & Maryland: Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 105-115; see more on the description of different god's act concerning the Creation in, *The Mythology of All Races* (13 Vol.), esp. vol. V, Semitic, written by Stephen Herbert (London & New York: INC, 1964).

intellectual revitalization of *Hawza*. In spite of the opposition by some authoritative jurists in the seminary, he continued teaching philosophy and mysticism as an inspiring teacher to his students. Even though he himself was not involved in political matters, many of his students were among the ideological founders of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

He was a prolific writer on different subjects in Islamic studies. Most of his works have a philosophical tint, even his exegesis on the Quran, *al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qurān*, written in 20 volumes in Arabic. The description of his exegetical method requires an independent article but here I can briefly say that his interest in the philosophy and the cosmology of Plato, Aristotle, and especially Plotinus, regarding different subjects like pantheism and the problem of evil, is reflected in his exegesis in a way that the reader can easily find the influences of these philosophers in his interpretation of some verses. On the other hand, relying on hadiths attributed to the Twelver Shiite Imams and rejecting those attributed to the Companions and the Successors of the Prophet, he shows his Shiite tendency in his commentary. More important, he applies a literal method to interpret most verses *verbatim* and in this he is influenced by Rāzī. Even though he lived in modern times, he did not mix the scientific findings with his theological ideas. He regarded the Quran in a different light as a miracle and did not have Ṭantāwī's extreme tendency to use scientific materials in exegesis. Thus, as to the verse in question (21:30) he did not mention any scientific development but rather interpreted the verse in a way that it is generally compatible with the main gist of scientific theories as far as he knew them.

Tabātabā'ī firstly regarded the verse as addressing the Arab unbelievers who made a distinction between the two attributes of God: Creator and Manager. To reject the distinction, he believes that the Quran, addressing the Arabs, says that heaven and earth were created as a singular unified entity and were then separated in accordance with divine providence. Thus it is not allowed to make a distinction between these two attributes of God.<sup>34</sup> Tabātabā'ī then proposes the rule that "there are many separations in our world among different entities, such as the separation of plants from the earth, of animal from animal, and of man from man. In these developments, each separation causes new forms of entities to appear, with new qualities which had not already existed in the previous forms. Nonetheless, these new forms potentially exist in that thing and the potentiality becomes an

<sup>34</sup> See Tabātabā'ī, *al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qurān* (Qum: 1412/1991), vol. 14, p. 278-9.

actuality by the process of the separation.”<sup>35</sup> In his view, heaven and earth are not exempted from this rule and modern science accepts the rule of *dynamic separation*, the rule of *separation as transformation*. As far as I have seen in his commentary, this is one of the rare cases where he shows his concern about the relationship between religion and science. After his own explanation, nonetheless, Tabātabā’ī preferred the third interpretation quoted by Al-Ṭabarī on the verse in question. According to this, the two words *ratq* and *fatq* do not concern the Creation of the universe but rather they deal with the change of the condition of heaven and of the earth; the heaven was not pluvial and the earth did not yield fruit, and it was God who changed their conditions. He supports this interpretation by the rest of the very verse, “We made from water every living thing” since when their conditions are changed, the production of water and then of every living thing can be possible. Tabātabā’ī also supports his preference by a *hadith* attributed to the fifth Shiite Imam, Muhammad b. Ali al-Bāqir (d. between 114-118/732-736), which endorses the view that God changed the condition of the heavens and the earth.

## Conclusion

If one accepts the idea that the understanding of Creation has gone through three steps of mythological, philosophical, and scientific cosmology, one can categorize Muslim commentaries of the Quran along the same lines. Pre-modern interpreters, irrespective of observation and experience, mainly relied on available narratives, while the authenticity of narrators and linguistic analysis were their devices for accepting ideas about the early developments in the process of creation. Al-Ṭabarī’s works, including his commentary on the Quran and his history, could be considered as works reflecting some popular beliefs, Jewish i.e. Israelite lore, and mythologies regarding the story of the Creation which existed at that time. Al-Ṭabarī’s aim in quoting these narratives was probably to enrich Islamic literature. Some scholars<sup>36</sup> have attempted to show that certain reports coming from Hebrew sources can be found in his works, but what is more important here is that in his commentary one can find a mythological representation of creation. Rāzī then presents the rational or philosophical attitude among Muslim interpreters, but prefers al-Ṭabarī’s

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> See more information in: Muhammad Abd-al Rahman Rabī’, *al-Isrā’īlīyyāt fī Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: dirāsātun fī al-lughā wa al-mašādir al-‘ibrīyya* (Cairo: Majlis al-A’lā, 1422/2001); H. Horst, “Zur Überlieferung im Korankommentar al-Ṭabarī”, *ZDMG*, 1953, vol. CIII, pp. 293ff.

first interpretation which is close to some mythological narratives since this interpretation probably better suits his theological aims.

At the eve of the modern period, we see two approaches from Muslim interpreters regarding the relationship between religion and science, especially regarding the story of creation. On the one hand, Tabātabā'ī insists on the traditional method for interpreting the verses and disregards scientific achievements. One may speculate on several reasons for his position. Firstly, Muslim commentators in general are not familiar enough with modern scientific cosmology to compare and relate it to what is cited in the Quran and the exegetical narratives. Secondly, he took this position since either he was not concerned with the relationship between science and religion or he thought that the disciplines of religion, philosophy, and science should be distinguished, each with its own particular language and method for verification of its own claims. The confusion or amalgamation of their several realms and methods will not necessarily bring about a benefit for religion. On the other hand, Ṭantāwī enthusiastically identified scientific achievements with what is read in the Quran on the Creation, and he mentioned a lot of scientific discussions in his commentary. He believed that Muslims should not be backward and negligent regarding the developments of science. His position, which was indeed theological, was an attempt to reconcile religion with science. He claims that the Quranic description of the Creation fourteen centuries ago is incredibly close to what modern science says and should be regarded a scientific miracle. It can be said that Ṭantāwī also sought to strengthen the belief of Muslims in the Quran, but the way he chose to do it did not have sufficient force to uphold his view. He did not pay attention to the three stages that cosmology had undergone and wanted to synthesize the mythical and scientific stages artificially. From the point of view of scientific cosmology, the narratives found in the Scriptures may be regarded, at best, not as certainties but as hypotheses, the validity of which should be examined by experimental methods.

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