



Methodology of Interpreting the Divine Attributes Between the *Salaf* and *Khalaf*

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Abstract

Debates surrounding divine attributes (*sifāt dzātīyah*) in Islamic thought often trigger sectarian polemics due to a literal reading of revelation. This study examines the tafsir methodology used to interpret Allah's *dzātīyah* attributes between *Salaf* and *Khalaf*, framing both not as chronological periods but as methodological orientations. Using a qualitative library research approach with a comparative analysis (*muqāran*) of classical tafsir and theological works, the discussion focuses specifically on three Qur'anic expressions: *istiwā'*, *yad*, and *wajh*. The findings demonstrate that the *Salaf* methodology affirms the textual wording of revelation (*itsbāt*), strictly rejects modal re-engineering (*takyīf*), physical resemblance (*tasybīh*), anthropomorphic modeling (*tamtsīl*), and textual negation (*ta'thīl*), while entrusting the ultimate modality (*kaiḥīyah*) entirely to Allah. Conversely, the *Khalaf* methodology employs disciplined linguistic interpretation (*ta'wīl*) driven by contextual semantical analysis whenever literal readings risk implying physical corporealism (*tajsim*). The primary contribution of this research lies in systematically mapping the internal epistemological logic of both traditions in balancing absolute commitment to divine revelation with the foundational principle of divine transcendence (*tanzīh*). Furthermore, this study explicitly demonstrates that both traditions share an identical theological objective through distinct interpretative mechanisms, establishing a rational baseline for contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics.

Keywords: Divine attributes, *Salaf*, *Khalaf*

Abstrak

Perdebatan mengenai ayat-ayat sifat dzatīyah Allah dalam pemikiran Islam sering memicu polemik sektarian akibat pembacaan lahiriah terhadap wahyu. Penelitian ini mengkaji metodologi tafsir dalam penafsiran sifat dzatīyah Allah antara *Salaf* dan *Khalaf* dengan menempatkan keduanya sebagai orientasi metodologis, bukan sekadar periodisasi sejarah. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan dengan analisis komparatif (*muqaran*) terhadap karya tafsir dan teologi klasik, pembahasan difokuskan pada tiga lafaz Al-Qur'an: *istiwa*, *yad*, dan *wajh*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa metodologi *Salaf* menegaskan lafaz wahyu (*itsbat*), menolaktakyif, tasybih, tamtsil, dan ta'thīl, serta menyerahkan kaiḥīyah kepada Allah. Sebaliknya, metodologi *Khalaf* menggunakan ta'wīl kebahasaan berdasarkan analisis kontekstual ketika makna zahir berpotensi menimbulkan kesan jasmani (*tajsim*). Kontribusi utama penelitian ini terletak pada pemetaan logika metodologis internal kedua tradisi dalam menyeimbangkan komitmen kepada firman Allah dan prinsip penyucian Tuhan (*tanzih*). Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kedua pendekatan tersebut bertemu pada tujuan teologis yang sama, yaitu menjaga tanzih melalui mekanisme penafsiran yang berbeda, sehingga memberikan pijakan rasional bagi hermeneutika Al-Qur'an kontemporer. Lebih lanjut, penelitian ini secara eksplisit membuktikan bahwa kedua tradisi bermuara pada tujuan teologis yang sama melalui mekanisme penafsiran yang berbeda, sehingga memberikan pijakan rasional bagi hermeneutika Al-Qur'an kontemporer.



Kata Kunci: *Sifat dzatiah, Salaf, Khalaf*

INTRODUCTION

The dialectic surrounding the verses of divine attributes (*āyāt al-sifāt*) occupies a foundational position within global Islamic discourse, as it directly intersects with the core epistemological structure of Muslim theological comprehension (Abrahamov, 1998). The Qur'an presents divine revelations utilizing human language constructs, incorporating anthropomorphic expressions such as *istiwā'*, *yad*, and *wajh*. When divine revelation attributes such constructs to the Creator, interpretation can no longer be approached through simplistic, uncritical lexical readings, lest one fall into the severe theological error of comparing the Almighty to creation (Mujiadi, 2026). The evolution of Islamic theology (*ilm al-kalām*) and Qur'anic hermeneutics demands a precise, integrative exegetical methodology capable of harmonizing rigorous linguistic analysis, authoritative textual transmission (*riwāyah*), and unshakeable theological axioms (*'aqīdah*).

The urgency for a clear interpretative framework has become increasingly acute amidst the widespread reproduction and digital dissemination of rigid religious literature (Mujiadi, 2026). Literature metrics indicate that literal translations and uncontextualized interpretations of anthropomorphic verses in popular media frequently cause severe cognitive and theological distortions at the grassroots level. Sacred expressions like *istiwā'*, *yad*, and *wajh*, when read purely through superficial literalism without adequate hermeneutical principles, have ignited destructive sectarian polemics. This phenomenon underscores a widespread vulnerability among lay readers who fail to distinguish between affirming textual wording (*ithbāt al-lafẓh*) and positing physical modalities (*ithbāt al-kaifiyah al-jismāniyah*) (Mohamad & Mohd Nizam, 2025).

The epistemological complexity of anthropomorphic expressions (*āyāt al-sifāt*) stems from the intrinsic nature of divine speech communicated through finite human language constructs. In Islamic hermeneutics, the dynamic relationship between the absolute transcendent reality of the Creator (*Al-Khāliq*) and the linguistic structures of the created world (*al-makhlūq*) requires a delicate balance between textual fidelity and conceptual purification (*tanzīh*). Classical scholars recognized that language operates on multiple semantic levels, encompassing literal lexical meanings (*al-ma'nā al-zahir*), contextual idioms (*al-majaz al-lughawī*), and underlying spiritual realities (*al-ḥaqā'iq al-ilāhiyyah*). When revelation employs anthropomorphic terminology such as *istiwā'*, *yad*, and *wajh*, it engages human cognitive

registers through relatable linguistic metaphors without compromising the ontological dissimilarity asserted in QS al-Shūrā [42]: 11 (lay sa ka-mithlihi shay'). The historical progression of Islamic thought demonstrates that uncritical literalism inevitably leads to physical modeling (*tajsīm*), whereas unconstrained allegorical reinterpretation risks stripping the sacred text of its divine intent (*ta'wīl*). Therefore, examining the operational mechanisms of early and later classical exegetes provides an essential theoretical matrix for resolving contemporary hermeneutical impasses.

This intellectual tension is prominently reflected within contemporary Islamic academic environments, such as Institut Agama Islam Al-Hidayah. Severe polarization frequently emerges among students and Qur'anic scholars when engaging with *dzātīyah* attribute verses. One faction tends toward rigid textual literalism bordering on corporealism (*tajsīm*), while another prematurely forces metaphorical reinterpretations (*ta'wīl*) without establishing a sound grounding in classical Arabic lexicography and *usūl al-din* principles. This academic friction necessitates a rigorous, objective re-examination of how classical scholars systematically managed these sensitive linguistic expressions.

Institut Agama Islam Al-Hidayah serves as an ideal locus for exploring this problem, acting as an intellectual crossroads for diverse Islamic thought traditions. Religious discussions at this institution do not merely operate in theoretical vacuums; rather, they shape the foundational epistemological reasoning of Islamic studies scholars. The diversity of methodological tendencies within this academic hub mirrors the broader dynamic landscape of classical and contemporary Islamic theology, providing a realistic baseline for re-evaluating classical hermeneutical models (Romadlon et al., 2022).

While various academic strategies have been introduced through *usūl al-tafsīr* and *kalām* curricula across Islamic higher education institutions, existing pedagogical approaches exhibit significant structural limitations. Instructional modules frequently reduce the *Salaf* and *Khalaf* traditions to chronological historical eras, failing to analyze them as comprehensive, competing epistemological paradigms (Abrahamov, 1998). Consequently, students adopt rigid dichotomous views that obscure the sophisticated internal logic used by classical scholars to process sacred texts.

Prior academic literature has examined various aspects of classical exegesis. Aburrohman (2018) highlighted the traditionalist transmission (*riwāyah*) and analytical (*tahlīlī*) framework of al-Tabari. Rohman et al. (2023) and Sholeh (2018) detailed the synthesis of legal, linguistic, and textual traditions in al-Qurtubi's commentary. On the rationalist spectrum,

Tarlam (2023) and Shihadeh (2006) investigated Fakhr al-Din al-Razi's teleological and theological argumentation. Romadlon et al. (2022) explored early interpretations of anthropomorphic verses in early exegesis. Furthermore, scientific and cosmological dimensions of Qur'anic linguistic boundaries have been investigated by Setyowati and Junnifar (2024).

Despite these significant scholarly inquiries, a major academic gap remains: most prior works focus on the final exegetical outcomes rather than uncovering the underlying operational mechanisms of the interpretative process itself. The primary originality (academic novelty) of this study lies in presenting an exhaustive comparative mapping of the internal methodological logic of the *Salaf* and *Khalaf* traditions specifically applied across three pivotal expressions: *istiwā'*, *yad*, and *wajh*. Rather than applying superficial labels (*ithbāt* vs *ta'wīl*), this study deconstructs how both traditions evaluate textual status, define the functional boundary of human reason (*'aql*), delineate the limits of entrusting meaning (*tafwīdh*), and construct systematic safeguards for divine transcendence (*tanzīh*).

Through an in-depth reading of authoritative classical tafsir and theological treatises, this study argues that the *Salaf* and *Khalaf* constitute two harmonious methodological frameworks sharing an identical commitment to divine transcendence (*tanzīh*). To substantiate this thesis, this research addresses three core inquiries:

- How are the *Salaf* and *Khalaf* established as functional methodological categories rather than mere historical periods in the interpretation of divine *dzātīyah* attributes?
- What are the precise operational steps utilized by *Salaf* and *Khalaf* methodologies when dissecting the expressions *istiwā'*, *yad*, and *wajh*?
- How do both traditions systematically balance obedience to divine revelation with the foundational imperative of *tanzīh*?

The academic implications of this research offer a vital contribution to modern Islamic hermeneutics by grounding theological debates in objective, rational, and non-sectarian methodology.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study executes a qualitative library-based research design (library research) employing a comparative hermeneutical approach. This framework was explicitly selected to unpack the internal epistemological structures of the *Salaf* and *Khalaf*, treating them as methodological categories rather than chronological historical markers. The material object

(objek material) focuses on three anthropomorphic expressions in the Qur'an: *istiwā'* (e.g., QS Tāhā [20]: 5, QS al-A'rāf [7]: 54), *yad* (e.g., QS Sād [38]: 75, QS al-Fath [48]: 10), and *wajh* (e.g., QS al-Qasas [28]: 88, QS al-Rahmān [55]: 27). The formal object (objek formal) investigates the internal logic, textual processing rules, and hermeneutical steps applied by both classical traditions.

Primary textual data was extracted directly from authoritative classical commentaries (tafsīr) and theological treatises (*'ilm al-kalām*):

- Classical traditionalist exegesis: Jāmi' al-Bayān by al-Tabari (2001), Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azhīm by Ibn Kathir (1999), and al-Jāmi' li-Ahkām al-Qur'ān by al-Qurtubi (1964).
- Rationalist/Theological exegesis: Mafāṭīḥ al-Ghayb by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (1999).
- Foundational theological works: al-Ibānah 'an Usūl al-Diyānah by al-Ash'ari (1977), al-Asmā' wa al-Sifāt by al-Bayhaqi (2002), Iljām al-'Awāmm 'an 'Ilm al-kalām by al-Ghazali (1993), and Majmū' al-Fatāwā by Ibn Taymiyyah (1995).
- Secondary literature incorporated peer-reviewed modern studies on Islamic hermeneutics, including Abrahamov (1998), Mohamad & Mohd Nizam (2025), Mujiadi, 2026, and Setyowati & Junnifar, 2024).

To ensure complete academic rigor, qualitative trustworthiness, and dependability, the primary research instrument utilized was the researcher as a human instrument (human instrument), executing structured data collection and textual analysis. Textual analysis proceeded through four systematic stages:

- Extraction and Inventory: Systematic extraction of all Qur'anic verses containing *istiwā'*, *yad*, and *wajh*.
- *Salaf* Reconstruction: Categorizing classical *Salaf* hermeneutics prioritizing *ithbāt al-lafz*, *tafwīdh al-kaifiyyah*, and strict negation of *tashbīh*, *tamthīl*, and *ta'tīl*.
- *Khalaf* Reconstruction: Categorizing *Khalaf* hermeneutics executing linguistic re-interpretation (*ta'wīl*) grounded in classical Arabic rhetoric (*balāghah*) to prevent anthropomorphic readings (*tajsīm*).
- Comparative Synthesis: Constructing comparative matrices analyzing textual status, functional role of reason, limits of *tafwīdh*, and risk prevention strategies.

Methodological validity and trustworthiness were rigorously maintained through source triangulation (triangulation of classical texts across Sunni theological schools) and

theoretical triangulation (synthesizing *usūl al-tafsīr*, Arabic linguistics, and *kalam* jurisprudence). Every analytical assertion was cross-verified across multiple classical authorities to ensure that conclusions reflect structural paradigms rather than isolated scholar opinions.

To execute a comprehensive textual analysis capable of meeting rigorous quantitative and qualitative academic standards, this study integrates classical Arabic philology (*‘ilm al-lughah*) with modern semantic field theory. The methodological procedure involves a tripartite philological deconstruction of each target expression (*istiwā’*, *yad*, and *wajh*):

First, Etymological Root Tracing (*Isytiqaq*): Every target term is tracked back to its primary trilateral or quadrilateral root within classical lexicons, specifically Ibn Fāris’s *Maqāyīs al-Lughah*, al-Fayrūzābādī’s *Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*, and Ibn Manẓūr’s *Lisān al-‘Arab*. This ensures that the primary, secondary, and metaphorical semantic ranges (*al-ma‘nā al-ḥaqīqī* and *al-ma‘nā al-majāzī*) available to classical Arab speakers are fully mapped before examining exegetical applications.

Second, Corpus-Wide Syntactical Mapping: The study maps every recurrence of the target terms across the entire Qur’anic corpus, noting contextual prepositions (*ḥurūf al-jārr*), such as the contrasting implications of *istiwā’* when paired with the preposition *‘alā* versus its standalone or transitive usages. This syntactical mapping prevents isolated, decontextualized interpretations.

Third, Exegetical Stratification Analysis: Interpretations extracted from classical commentaries are stratified chronologically and methodologically contrasting early transmission-based commentaries (*tafsīr bi-al-ma‘thūr*) like al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir with later linguistic-rational commentaries (*tafsīr bi-al-ra’y/al-dirāyah*) like al-Razi and al-Qurtubi. This stratification uncovers how exegetical priorities shifted in response to emerging theological controversies, providing a nuanced, multilayered comparative output that transcends superficial summaries.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Conceptual Delineation of *Salaf* and *Khalaf* as Methodological Categories

Epistemological clarity requires establishing "*Salaf*" and "*Khalaf*" purely as functional methodological categories rather than rigid historical eras (Abrahamov, 1998). The *Salaf* orientation is defined by a methodology that prioritizes the supreme authority of divine revelation, preserves textual wording without alteration, and restricts speculative rationalization when encountering *dzātīyah* attribute verses. Conversely, the *Khalaf* orientation

represents an interpretative framework that fully utilizes classical Arabic semantics, rhetoric, and theological reasoning to insulate the concept of the Creator from physical or corporeal connotations.

Treating these traditions as methodological orientations avoids simplistic historical fallacies. Not all early classical scholars functioned strictly within the *Salaf* model, nor did all later scholars uncritically adopt *Khalaf ta'wīl*. Classical Islamic scholarship demonstrates continuous fluidity between traditionalism and rationalism (Abrahamov, 1998). Traditionalist exegetes frequently employed deep Arabic linguistic analysis, while rationalist theologians maintained revelation as their primary argumentative anchor.

The fundamental convergence point between both frameworks is an absolute, unshakeable commitment to divine transcendence (*tanzīh*). The *Salaf* safeguard *tanzīh* by suppressing *tashbīh* (resemblance) and *tamthīl* (likening), ensuring no created entity is equated with Allah. The *Khalaf* safeguard *tanzīh* by suppressing *tajsīm* (corporealism) and spatial limitations. Both traditions meet at the identical destination of purifying the divine entity; their divergence lies solely in their operational mechanics: the *Salaf* achieve *tanzīh* through *ithbāt bila kaif* (affirmation without modality), while the *Khalaf* achieve it through *ta'wīl* (linguistic re-interpretation).

Delineation of *Dzātīyah* Attributes: *Istiwā'*, *Yad*, and *Wajh*

The concept of *sifāt dzātīyah* pertains to intrinsic divine attributes directly affixed to Allah's essence in revelation. This investigation focuses specifically on three prominent anthropomorphic expressions that historically triggered intense theological debates: *istiwā'*, *yad*, and *wajh*. These terms possess literal lexical meanings that risk evoking human corporeal imagery if read naively without rigorous hermeneutical safeguards.

The term *istiwā'* appears in key passages such as QS Tāhā [20]: 5 and QS al-A'rāf [7]: 54. In classical Arabic lexicography, *istiwā'* encompasses multiple semantic meanings including establishing, ascending, reaching perfection, turning toward, or exercising total dominion, depending on syntactical prepositional usage. The term *yad* appears in passages such as QS Sād [38]: 75, QS al-Fath [48]: 10, and QS al-Mā'idah [5]: 64; while literally denoting a physical hand, classical Arabic idiom routinely uses *yad* to symbolize sovereign power, favor, protection, and grace. The term *wajh* appears in QS al-Qasas [28]: 88 and QS al-Rahmān [55]: 27; beyond literal physical face, Arabic literary usage employs *wajh* to denote essence (*dhāt*), majesty, pleasure, or direction.

Table 1. Operational Scope of Anthropomorphic Attribute Verses

Lafaz	Example Verses	Main Methodological Issues
Istiwa	QS Taha [20]: 5; QS al-A'raf [7]: 54	Operational procedure for affirming divine <i>istiwā'</i> without validating physical space, direction, seating, or bodily movement.
Yad	QS Sad [38]: 75; QS al-Fath [48]: 10; QS al-Ma'idah [5]: 64	Operational procedure for articulating <i>yad</i> without equating the Creator with physical limbs or organs.
Wajh	QS al-Qasas [28]: 88; QS al-Rahman [55]: 27	Operational procedure for interpreting <i>wajh</i> while eliminating physical visual modeling and preserving divine majesty.

The *Salaf* Tafsir Methodology

The hermeneutical engine of the *Salaf* relies upon the foundational rule *imrārūhā kamā jā'at* passing textual revelations as they have been transmitted, believing in them implicitly, and cutting off human speculation regarding physical modality (Ibn Kathir, 1999; Ibn Taymiyyah, 1995). This operational procedure is fortified by four strict negations:

- Rejection of *takyīf* (speculating on physical 'how' or structural modality).
- Rejection of *tashbīh* (comparing divine attributes to created forms).
- Rejection of *tamthīl* (positing exact physical likeness).
- Rejection of *ta'tīl* (divesting or negating the text of its divine meaning).

In processing *istiwā'*, the *Salaf* affirm the occurrence of *istiwā'* as stated in revelation while completely entrusting its reality (*kaifīyah*) to Allah. Imam Malik ibn Anas articulated this methodology perfectly in his famous statement: "Istiwa' is known (*ma'lūm*), its modality is incomprehensible (*majhūl*), believing in it is obligatory (*wājib*), and asking about its physical 'how' is an innovation (*bid'ah*)" (al-Bayhaqi, 2002). The textual wording is retained, but human reason is forbidden from constructing physical spatial models. This exact consistency applies to *yad*. The *Salaf* affirm the textual instances in QS Sād [38]: 75 and QS al-Fath [48]: 10 without immediately forcing metaphorical reinterpretation, yet without ever falling into corporeal modeling (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1995). They affirm that Allah possesses a divine attribute suited to His majesty, completely free from physical organs, joints, or bodily limitations.

Regarding *wajh*, the *Salaf* affirm the divine text while entrusting its true reality to God. When QS al-Rahmān [55]: 27 proclaims the eternal presence of divine *wajh*, the *Salaf* firmly reject physical facial imagery, accepting the statement as an attribute of Divine Essence suited to His supreme glory (Al-Tabari, 2001). The strength of the *Salaf* methodology lies in its absolute fidelity to revelation text and its profound restraint against intellectual overreach. However, it presents pedagogical challenges for untrained lay readers who, lacking a firm understanding of *bilā kaif*, risk inadvertently conceptualizing divine attributes through material human imagery.

A critical epistemological nuance within the *Salaf* framework lies in the formal distinction between *tafwid al-ma'na* (delegating the comprehension of semantic meaning) and *tafwid al-kaifiyah* (delegating the comprehension of physical modality). Early classical scholars overwhelmingly maintained that the core linguistic meaning of divine speech is intelligible (*ma'lūm*) within Arabic usage, whereas the ontological reality and physical 'how-ness' (*kaifiyah*) remain completely beyond human cognitive capabilities. The rule of *imrārūhā kamā jā'at* ('pass them on as they have come') served as an intellectual buffer designed to prevent two equal theological dangers:

- Anthropomorphic Modeling (*Tashbīh/Tajsīm*): Projected when human imagination attempts to conceptualize divine attributes through physical shape, size, location, or limb structures.
- Textual Annihilation (*Ta'īl*): Projected when rationalist assumptions deny the reality of divine attributes altogether under the guise of intellectual purification.

By holding fast to *ithbāt* (affirmation of text) alongside *bilā kaif* (negation of physical modality), the *Salaf* constructed a non-reductive hermeneutical sanctuary that respected both the transcendence of God and the literal integrity of divine revelation.

The *Khalaf* Tafsir Methodology

The hermeneutical engine of the *Khalaf* rests upon disciplined linguistic reinterpretation (*ta'wīl*) governed strictly by *tanzih* (al-Ghazali, 1993; al-Razi, 1999). The *Khalaf* do not reject revelation; rather, they hold that a naive literal reading of anthropomorphic terms in ordinary human language risks conveying physical corporealism (*tajsīm*) to general believers. Therefore, the *Khalaf* shift the literal lexical meaning toward an established, authoritative Arabic metaphorical meaning that aligns with context and maintains divine transcendence. When analyzing *istiwā'*, *Khalaf* scholars reinterpret the term as sovereign control (*istīlā'*), divine dominion, or supreme authority over the universe (al-Razi, 1999). Fakhr

al-Din al-Razi argued in *Mafātīh al-Ghayb* that literal seating or physical movement implies spatial enclosure and temporal change, both of which are logically and textually impossible for the Eternal Creator (al-Razi, 1999; Tarlam, 2023). Thus, *ta'wīl* acts as a theological shield preserving divine absolute power without physical containment.

In processing *yad*, *Khalaf* exegetes utilize the flexible semantic range of classical Arabic rhetoric. The word *yad* is metaphorically interpreted as divine power (*qudrah*), divine favor (*ni'mah*), or divine protection according to verse context. In QS al-Fath [48]: 10 ("Allah's *yad* is over their hands"), *ta'wīl* articulates Allah's supreme pledge and covenant support. In QS al-Mā'idah [5]: 64 ("His *yadān* are outstretched"), it conveys unbounded divine generosity. For *wajh*, *Khalaf* scholars interpret the term as Divine Essence (*dhāt*), divine pleasure, or the ultimate direction of worship. In QS al-Qasas [28]: 88 ("Everything perishes except His *wajh*"), *ta'wīl* establishes that all creation is evanescent except the eternal Essence of Allah Himself (al-Qurtubi, 1964). The primary strength of the *Khalaf* methodology is its ability to provide explicit, rational, and conceptually clear explanations that insulate believers from anthropomorphic fallacies. However, its primary risk occurs if *ta'wīl* is applied without strict linguistic controls, potentially drifting into ungrounded textual manipulation.

The emergence of the *Khalaf* methodology was deeply linked to the evolving sociolinguistic environment of the expanding Islamic state. As non-Arabic speaking populations entered the Islamic fold, naive literal translations of Arabic anthropomorphic idioms created widespread theological confusion, frequently fostering anthropomorphic sects (*al-Mujassimah* and *al-Mushabbihah*). In response, Ash'arite and Maturidite scholars activated the rich tradition of classical Arabic rhetoric (*balāghah*) specifically the mechanisms of figurative expression (*majāz*), metonymy (*kināyah*), and semantic extension (*is'ṭi'ārah*).

Under the *Khalaf* framework, applying *ta'wīl* is not viewed as an arbitrary deviation from the divine text, but as an obligatory linguistic rescue operation. When literalism risks generating an blasphemous meaning (such as attributing physical containment or bodily limbs to Allah), the apparent meaning (*al-ma'nā al-zāhir*) becomes rationally and textually impossible (*muḥāl*). Consequently, the scholar must select a secondary, metaphorically valid meaning (*al-ma'nā al-marjūh*) that is fully supported by classical Arabic lexicography and strictly compliant with *tanzīh*.

Theological-Historical Evolution of Kalam and Traditionalism:

The structural divergence between the *Salaf* and *Khalaf* cannot be fully grasped without contextualizing the maturation of Islamic legal and theological institutions (*madhāhib*). During

the formative period (1st to 3rd centuries AH), early traditionalists such as Sufyan al-Thawri, Malik ibn Anas, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal fiercely resisted speculative theology (*kalām*), viewing exhaustive rational discourse on divine attributes as an unwarranted intrusion into mysteries reserved exclusively for divine revelation. Their methodological posture epitomized by the maxim *bi-lā kaif wa-lā taṣwīr* (without asking 'how' and without imaging form) was designed to safeguard religious devotion from the speculative abstractions of early philosophical factions such as the Jahmiyyah and Mu'tazilah.

However, as speculative theology became institutionalized through the emergence of the Ash'arite school (founded by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari, d. 324 AH) and the Maturidite school (founded by Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, d. 333 AH), the intellectual landscape shifted. Al-Ash'ari and his successors, while breaking away from extreme Mu'tazilite rationalism, recognized that purely relying on traditionalist silence (*tafwīd*) was insufficient to intellectually disarm sophisticated philosophical critics who utilized Aristotelian logic and dialectical reasoning (*munāẓarah*).

Consequently, the *Khalaf* developed a sophisticated system of rational theology (*uṣūl al-dīn*) that co-opted Aristotelian categories of substance (*jawhar*), accident (*ʿaraḍ*), space (*makān*), and direction (*jihah*) to demonstrate logically that physical attributes are impossible for the Creator. For instance, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, in his monumental encyclopedia *Mafāṭih al-Ghayb*, systematically deployed demonstrative syllogisms (*al-burhān al-manṭiqī*) to prove that if an entity occupies space or possesses physical dimensions, it is necessarily composite (*murakkab*) and created (*ḥādith*), thereby requiring a Creator.

Despite this apparent methodological divergence, advanced theological analysis reveals a profound underlying harmony. Ibn Taymiyyah, in his seminal works such as *Dar' Ta'āruḍ al-'Aql wa-l-Naql*, rigorously critiqued both extreme anthropomorphists and absolute allegorizers, arguing that the true position of the early *Salaf* was not absolute semantic negation (*ta'ṭīl*), but rather the affirmation of a real, non-corporeal meaning appropriate to God's majesty (*ithbāt al-ma'nā*). Thus, the historical evolution from *Salaf* to *Khalaf* represents a dialectical refinement of defensive theological strategies, where both traditions ultimately converged on the singular imperative of preserving divine majesty (*tanzīh*) against contemporary threats.

Comparative Epistemological Mapping: *Salaf* vs. *Khalaf*

Comparing the *Salaf* and *Khalaf* methodologies reveals complete alignment in ultimate theological intent alongside operational divergence in interpretative tools:

Table 2. Comparative Epistemological Framework

Aspect	<i>Salaf</i> Methodology	<i>Khalaf</i> Methodology
Operational Definition	Intellectual tendency prioritizing the acceptance of revelation wording and surrendering the modality (kaifiyyah) to Allah.	Intellectual tendency operating linguistic <i>ta'wīl</i> to preserve <i>tanzīh</i> when literal meanings risk anthropomorphism.
Status of Wording	The expressions <i>istiwā'</i> , <i>yad</i> , and <i>wajh</i> are established completely as revealed in revelation.	Revelation wording is respected, but literal meanings are shifted to metaphorical meanings linguistically valid.
Function of Reason	Reason restrains itself from conjecturing physical modalities of Allah's attributes.	Reason tests the consequences of meanings and selects alternative significations harmonious with <i>tanzīh</i> .
Primary Instruments	Ithbāt, tafwīd al-kaifiyyah, the rule of bilā kaif, rejection of <i>tashbīh</i> , <i>tamthīl</i> , and <i>ta'tīl</i> .	<i>Ta'wīl</i> , semantic analysis, verse context, and rational-theological argumentation.
Risks Prevented	<i>Ta'tīl</i> , voiding attribute meanings, and wild speculation beyond the guidance of the nash.	<i>Tajsim</i> , anthropomorphic understanding, and physical visualization toward Allah.
Convergence Point	Preserving Allah's absolute holiness and negating resemblance to created beings.	Preserving Allah's absolute holiness and negating resemblance to created beings.

Table 3. Comparison of Interpretations on the Expressions *Istiwa'*, *Yad*, and *Wajh*

Lafaz	<i>Salaf</i>	<i>Khalaf</i>	Point of Comparison
Istiwa'	Established according to the wording of revelation. The modality (kaifiyyah) is entrusted to Allah	Interpreted metaphorically (<i>ta'wīl</i>) as sovereignty, governance, or the	The <i>Salaf</i> preserve the original wording and reject <i>takyīf</i> . The <i>Khalaf</i> elaborate non-physical meanings via <i>ta'wīl</i> .

	without validating sitting or physical place.	absolute dominion of Allah over the universe.	
<i>Yad</i>	Established as an attribute befitting Allah's majesty without being likened to the hands of created beings.	Interpreted metaphorically (<i>ta'wīl</i>) as power, favor, assistance, or authority according to the context of the verse.	The <i>Salaf</i> dismiss organ visualization. The <i>Khalaf</i> choose non-organic semantic meanings.
<i>Wajh</i>	Established as an attribute befitting Allah without imagining a physical facial form.	Interpreted metaphorically (<i>ta'wīl</i>) as Allah's Essence, His pleasure, or the target of the servant's worship according to context.	The <i>Salaf</i> withhold exploration of the ultimate reality (<i>haqīqah</i>). The <i>Khalaf</i> provide conceptual-theological interpretations.

Philological Analysis of *Istiwa'*: In pre-Islamic Arabic poetry (such as the verses of Bishr ibn al-Ghiyyāth), *istiwā'* 'alā was used idiomatically to denote total political victory and supreme authority over a domain without physical contact or seating (*bi-ghayri sayfin wa-damin murāq*). The *Salaf* affirmed *istiwā'* as a divine majesty attribute without physical posture, while the *Khalaf* explicitly invoked this classical poetic idiom to interpret it as *al-istīlā'* (supreme dominion), preventing the spatial confinement implied by literal seating.

Philological Analysis of *Yad*: In classical Arabic syntax, the expression *yad* carries over twenty distinct semantic meanings, including power (*qudrah*), favor (*ni'mah*), protection (*ḥimāyah*), and direct agency. The dual form (*yadayya*) in QS Sād [38]: 75 emphasizes special divine honor in creation rather than dual physical organs. While the *Salaf* affirmed *yad* as an unexplainable divine attribute, the *Khalaf* utilized these established linguistic tropes to interpret it as divine power or grace, directly shielding believers from organ visualization.

Philological Analysis of *Wajh*: In classical rhetoric, referencing the face (*al-wajh*) routinely serves as a synecdoche (*majāz mursal*) where the noble part represents the entire essence (*al-dhāt*). When the Qur'an proclaims that everything perishes except His *wajh* (QS al-Qasas [28]: 88), the *Salaf* affirmed the attribute of *wajh* while negating facial contours, whereas

the *Khalaf* interpreted it directly as the Eternal Divine Essence (Dhāt Allah) or deeds performed exclusively for Divine Pleasure.

The novelty value of this study lies in the in-depth mapping of methodological pathways, rather than in new theological claims. Much research on the verses of attributes only presents the general conclusion that the *Salaf* hold to *itsbāt* or *tafwīd* while the *Khalaf* hold to *ta'wīl*. This research goes further by dissecting the reasoning pathways of both schools side by side across the same three expressions: *istiwā'*, *yad*, and *wajh*. This comparative mapping untangles the fundamental reasons why the *Salaf* chose to remain faithful to the original wording and why the *Khalaf* felt the necessity to perform *ta'wīl* for the sake of creedal safety. The next novelty stems from the clarification of the terms *Salaf* and *Khalaf*. This article straightforwardly positions *Salaf* and *Khalaf* not as chronological markers of scholars' lifetimes, but as epistemological categorizations and tafsir methodologies. This clarification is vital so that readers do not fall into rigid historical groupings. The research focus is directed entirely toward the interplay of reasoning pathways in processing the word of Allah.

This research also asserts precise boundaries for the study. The exploration is intentionally allocated specifically to the expressions *istiwā'*, *yad*, and *wajh*, without expanding into the entire scope of *mutashābihāt*. This delimitation makes the research novelty more measurable because the methodological comparison is tested directly on the three expressions that constitute the focal points of theological debate. The contribution of this research is thus methodologically, structurally, and substantively useful for the development of modern Qur'anic studies.

Relevance to Contemporary Qur'anic Hermeneutics

This study possesses a high degree of relevance because debates surrounding the verses of attributes continue to circulate in educational spaces, preaching pulpits, social media discourses, and academic forums. Religious discussions frequently shift into mutual cornering and identity clashes, where one faction is accused of rejecting Allah's attributes and the other of likening Allah to created beings. This sectarian tension can be mitigated if the research focus is shifted toward an understanding of tafsir methodology. By outlining the hermeneutical logic of the *Salaf* and *Khalaf*, the public can understand that differences in interpretive pathways do not necessarily reflect creedal deviation.

Within the realm of higher education in tafsir, this comparative mapping equips students with the awareness that the Sunni theological tradition possesses a wealth of scholarly strategies in reading revelation. Learners are not merely presented with final interpretive outcomes, but are invited to understand the epistemological foundations behind the scholars'

decisions. The *Salaf* tradition teaches profound etiquette before the nash and the importance of restraining reason, whereas the *Khalaf* tradition demonstrates the necessity of conceptual explanation to protect the public's creed from physical interpretations. Both methodologies should be positioned as mutually enriching intellectual treasures.

At the academic level, this research underscores the importance of precision in employing religious terminology. The *Salaf* must not be accused of interpreting God physically, because the rule of *bilā kaif* serves precisely to dismantle the visualization of form. Conversely, the *Khalaf* must not be judged as a group that abandons revelation, because their *ta'wīl* procedure is strictly guarded by linguistic discipline and the principle of *tanzīh*. Thoroughness in reading these two methodological frameworks serves as the primary key to building healthy academic discourse free from unproductive polemics.

In the modern digital era, the reproduction of religious texts across social media and automated AI translation algorithms has exacerbated the risk of crude literalism and theological polarization. Machine translation models frequently map Arabic anthropomorphic terms directly into literal physical equivalents in target languages without incorporating necessary hermeneutical footnotes or classical *tanzīh* safeguards. This technological disruption underscores the imperative of integrating comparative classical methodologies into modern digital literacy frameworks. By understanding that both *Salaf* and *Khalaf* methodologies represent rigorous, valid attempts to uphold divine transcendence, contemporary Islamic thought can construct resilient digital content guidelines, foster healthy inter-sectarian academic dialogue, and insulate public religious discourse from destructive polemics.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the *Salaf* and *Khalaf* are not two mutually exclusive historical periods of theology, but rather two comprehensive epistemological categorizations and hermeneutical paradigms responding to anthropomorphic texts (*sifāt dzātīyah*). The primary conclusion of this research asserts that the operational differences between the *Salaf* and *Khalaf* in interpreting the expressions *istiwā'*, *yad*, and *wajh* do not stem from doctrinal conflict, but from distinct methodological instruments designed to address different hermeneutical risks in their respective historical contexts. The *Salaf* tradition enforces the principles of *itsbāt* and *tafwīd al-kaifiyah* to safeguard human reason from the dangers of *ta'fīl* (divesting textual meaning) and speculative modal conjectures beyond human comprehension. Conversely, the *Khalaf* tradition employs measured linguistic *ta'wīl* driven by contextual analysis to prevent the risk of *tajsim* (corporeal anthropomorphism) among the general public. Both approaches

ultimately converge at an identical theological objective: preserving the principle of *tanzīh* and exalting the absolute transcendence of Allah from any resemblance to created beings.

The reintegration of *Salaf* and *Khalaf* methodologies carries profound implications not only for academic theology but for the broader architecture of contemporary Islamic education and social harmony. In an era marked by resurgent sectarian polarization and digital fundamentalism, the false dichotomy pitting literalist traditionalism against rationalist modernization has fractured Muslim intellectual unity. By establishing through rigorous comparative hermeneutics that both traditions share an identical foundational commitment to *tanzīh*, this study provides an intellectual antidote to sectarian factionalism.

Academically, these findings challenge higher education institutions across the Islamic world to overhaul their theological curricula. Exegetical pedagogy must transition away from dogmatic indoctrination toward critical epistemological literacy, training future scholars to analyze how classical thinkers navigated complex textual challenges under varying historical constraints. Practically, state religious authorities and publishing houses must move beyond simplistic translations of sacred texts, implementing robust, annotated translation methodologies that honor both textual fidelity and transcendent theological interpretation. Ultimately, bridging the methodological divide between *Salaf* and *Khalaf* revitalizes classical Islamic intellectual heritage, rendering it a vibrant, rational, and cohesive framework capable of guiding contemporary believers through the complex hermeneutical dilemmas of the modern world.

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