Ibn Kathîr (d. 774/1373):
His Intellectual Circle, Major Works and Qur’ânic Exegesis

A Dissertation
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Arabic and Islamic Studies

By

Younus Y. Mirza, M.A

Washington, DC
April 20, 2012
IBN KATHĪR (d.774/1373):
HIS INTELLECTUAL CIRCLE, MAJOR WORKS AND QUR’ĀNIC EXEGESIS

Younus Y. Mirza, M.A.

Thesis Advisor: Felicitas Opwis, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on one of the most popular medieval Muslim figures in modern times, Ibn Kathīr. I argue that Ibn Kathīr’s works reflect a critical theological struggle in the history of Islam between those who emphasized the original sources of the Qur’ān and prophetic practice (traditionalists) and those who insisted on the incorporation of scholastic theology and the accumulated experience of the community (Ash’arīs). Previous scholarship considers Ibn Kathīr simply a student of the great traditionalist jurist and theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). Ibn Taymiyya was the symbolic leader of the traditionalist movement and was imprisoned multiple times because of his attempts to challenge the established Ash’arī social order. Ibn Kathīr’s ardent support of Ibn Taymiyya led many Arabic biographers to subsume Ibn Kathīr under the hagiography of Ibn Taymiyya. Modern Western scholarship builds off the Arabic biographical literature to the point that Ibn Kathīr is perceived as the mere “spokesperson” for Ibn Taymiyya and his Qur’ānic exegesis a simple implementation of Ibn Taymiyya’s Qur’ānic hermeneutic. Yet, through examining Ibn Kathīr’s intellectual circle, major works, and Qur’ānic exegesis, this dissertation demonstrates that Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr represent two different types of traditionalism. Ibn Taymiyya believed in an intellectualized traditionalism which delved deeply into philosophy and scholastic theology to argue for scripture’s rationality. Ibn Kathīr, on the other hand, subscribed to a fideist traditionalism which was content with the superiority of the
transmitted sources and the use of rational tools to analyze scripture. Ibn Kathîr’s Qur’ânic exegesis, his most famous work, was thus less a product of Ibn Taymiyya than that of his fideist traditionalism and his attempt to respond to the dominant Ash‘arism.
To My Family,
For their continuous love and support

YOUNUS Y. MIRZA
### Table Of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibn Kathīr and his Tafsīr in the Eyes of Western Scholarship</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting Ibn Kathīr to Traditionalism (Ahl-ḥadīth)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditionalism and Qur’ānic Exegesis</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Considerations</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes on Translation and Transliteration</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I. Ibn Kathīr as a Shāfi‘ī traditionalist</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibn Kathīr and the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Mizzī (654-742/1256-1341) – The Quintessential Ḥadīth Scholar</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Birzālī: (667-739/1267-1339) – The Historian of Syria</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Dhahabī (673/675-748/1274-1348) – The Historian of Islam</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibn Kathīr (700-774/1300-1373) - The Junior Scholar</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II. Moving Beyond Ibn Taymiyya: Ibn Kathīr and the Shāfi‘ī Ash’arīs</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ruling Shāfi‘ī Elite</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Zamlakānī: (666/7-727/1267/8-1327) – The Political Opportunist</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī: (683-756/1284-1355) – The Righteous Judge</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (727-771-72/1327-1370) – The Privileged Son</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter III. Making Shāfi‘ī traditionalism Shāfi‘ī orthodoxy – Ibn Kathīr’s Major Works ................................................................................................................................................................. 94

History ........................................................................................................................................................................... 94

Jurisprudence .............................................................................................................................................................. 109

Ḥadīth ........................................................................................................................................................................... 119

Contextualizing Ibn Kathīr’s works within the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists ......................................................... 123

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................................................. 124

Chapter IV. Different Traditionalisms, Contrasting Approaches to the Qur’ān ............ 126

Tension within the Traditionalism Movement ................................................................................................. 127

Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathīr’s Contrasting Traditionalism .............................................................. 128

Interpreting God’s Names and Attributes ................................................................................................... 134

Engagement with the Exegetical tradition ..................................................................................................... 143

Traditionalist Exegetes ....................................................................................................................................... 151

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................................................. 156

Chapter V. Jonah: A Sinless, Repentant or Obedient Prophet? Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathīr’s contrasting Qur’ānic hermeneutic and exegesis. ................................................................. 158

Differentiating between Hermeneutic and Exegesis .................................................................................. 159

Defining Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathīr’s Qur’ānic Hermeneutic .......................................................... 160

Defining ‘iṣma of the Prophets .......................................................................................................................... 163

Jonah: A Sinless, Repentant, or Obedient Prophet? .................................................................................. 170

Al-Rāzī: Jonah - A Sinless Prophet .................................................................................................................. 170

Ibn Taymiyya: Jonah - A Prophet of Repentance ...................................................................................... 175
Introduction:

In the year 763/1362, a young student (*shābb*) from Iran arrived in Mamlūk Damascus alleging that he memorized word for word the prophetic report (ḥadīth) collections of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, the Qur’ānic exegesis of al-Zamakhsharī, and other classic Islamic works. This was a bold claim even in a scholarly culture that excelled at memorization. To test his claim, a large group composed of commoners, notables and ḥadīth scholars gathered around the youth in the Umayyad mosque. The young man began to recite from memory the beginning of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* to the middle of the Chapter of Knowledge, two and half chapters into the text. The crowd was so impressed that they agreed to meet the following day to have the youth complete the chapter. On the second day, the audience had grown even larger, with the Chief Judge and even some of the city’s notables joining the event. Unfortunately, the youth’s memory began to fail him, and he skipped some ḥadīths and mispronounced words. Nevertheless, he was heralded as a remarkable success. Crowds gathered around him after his reading, with some even trying to kiss his hand. To show their admiration, the city’s elite and judges gifted the boy close to a thousand silver dirhams.

One scholar, the great jurist, historian and ḥadīth scholar Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), had followed the boy’s reading with expert interest. Recording the event in his history, he noted that the youth read well, except that he mispronounced some words, mixing them with his native Persian. Nonetheless, Ibn Kathīr was satisfied enough to give the young student a personal license (*ijāza*). Upon receiving this honor, the boy exclaimed, “I left my country only with the
intention of meeting you so that you might grant me this license. Your reputation (\textit{dhikrūka}) in our country is great.”

Ibn Kathīr cuts a modest figure on the Islamic intellectual landscape of the Mamlūk period. Not as outspoken or controversial as Damascene compatriots like Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), he is the detached recorder, not always seen as a participant in drama. Yet, this story reminds us that Ibn Kathīr was himself a highly respected scholar during his own lifetime, and his works spread throughout Muslim lands. Even students from as far as Central Asia sought him out and asked for his stamp of approval. Over the passage of time, however, Ibn Kathīr’s persona became subsumed under the hagiography of the great jurist and theologian Ibn Taymiyya. Even as Ibn Kathīr’s many works were read, transcribed and circulated with consistency, he continued to be associated with Ibn Taymiyya, seen as his mouthpiece and not appreciated in his own right.

This dissertation reconsiders the standard narrative of Ibn Kathīr as a “spokesperson” for Ibn Taymiyya and that his Exegesis (\textit{tafsīr}) is a product solely of his relationship with the great scholar. While Ibn Taymiyya had a significant impact on Ibn Kathīr, the latter’s Exegesis expressed a vision of Islamic theology that differed fundamentally from the former’s. Ibn Kathīr’s \textit{Tafsīr} was more the product of a theological struggle between two contrasting visions of Islam. One maintained the absolute primacy of scripture and revealed tradition over reason. The other stressed the accumulated wisdom and intellectual contributions of the Muslim community, asserting that the Qur’ānic revelation should be mediated through rational means. Ibn Kathīr sought to tie his legal school (\textit{madhhab}) to the original sources of the Qur’ān and Prophetic

\footnote{1 Ibn Kathīr, \textit{al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya}, eds. Alī Muḥammad Mu‘awwad and ‘Ādīl Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Mawjūd, 15 vols. (Lebanon: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2009), 14:286. The story also alludes to the fact that Damascus was an important hub of scholarship where scholars’ works were frequently sent to other parts of the Muslim world.}

practice but at the same time delicately negotiate his relationships with those who stressed the madhhab’s history and belief in rational disputation. To provide context to my argument, I will provide a brief overview of Ibn Kathîr within Western Scholarship, his role within the historic struggle between a scripture-based vision of Islam versus a more rational one and the role of his Exegesis within this ongoing debate.

**Ibn Kathîr and his Tafsîr in the Eyes of Western Scholarship:**

The most important Western scholar to work on Ibn Kathîr is Henri Loaust who presents Ibn Kathîr as a great historian and important ḥadīth scholar, but an uninteresting exegete. In his entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Laoust begins by stating that Ibn Kathîr was “one of the best-known historians and traditionalists of Syria” under the Mamlûks. He proceeds to discuss his Shâfi’î training but then mentions that he “next fell strongly, and very early, under the influence of Ibn Taymiyya and his school.” While Laoust notes Ibn Taymiyya’s influence on Ibn Kathîr, he does not overemphasize it, something that later scholars frequently do.

After discussing Ibn Kathîr’s relation with the Mamlûk state, Laoust comments on Ibn Kathîr’s works and contends that “by far the most important of Ibn Kathîr’s works is his great history of Islam, *al-Bidîya wa’l-nihîya*…one of the principal historical works of the Mamlûk period.” Laoust adds that *al-Bidîya*’s success is not only in its own content but that it was the basis of other historical works, such as Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalâni’s (d. 852/1449) *Inbâ’ al-ghumr bi-anbâ’ al-‘umr.*

---


4 The use of the word “school” here is not very clear, because it could be interpreted as a school of jurisprudence (madhhab) or movement.

Laoust then moves to discuss Ibn Kathīr’s contribution to ḥadīth which he remarks “is also important” and lists some of his most important ḥadīth works such as his summary of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ’s (d. 643/1245) introduction to ḥadīth. He finally mentions Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr dismissively: “his Tafsīr, essentially a philological work, is very elementary and foreshadows, in its style that which al-Suyūṭī would write later.” These are the only comments of Laoust regarding the Tafsīr suggesting that he did not look significantly at the text.

Laoust’s entry is significant because it represents the historical view that existed for most the 20th century that Ibn Kathīr was primarily a historian rather than an exegete. The biographical sources frequently note that Ibn Kathīr was a “historian” (mu’arrikh) before he was an “exegete” (mufassir). However, once Ibn Kathīr’s exegesis was abridged and made a standard part of many Islamic seminary curriculums, its popularity increased and its influence was impossible to ignore.

As Ibn Kathīr’s exegesis became more widespread it generated a variety of reactions, the most influential being that of Norman Calder who argues that Ibn Kathīr restricts the exegetical tradition to focus solely on ḥadīth to the exclusion of the polyvalent exegetical tradition of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272). He further contends that Ibn Kathīr acquires

---

6 I will speak about Ibn Kathīr’s summary of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ’s Introduction to the Sciences of Ḥadīth in Chapter Three.
8 Or Laoust could have read the Tafsīr but not found it very appealing. However, even if one disagrees with Ibn Kathīr’s Qur’ānic hermeneutic, his exegesis is essential in the history of his life and intellectual circle.
his “fundamentalism” from his teacher Ibn Taymiyya in that they both circumvent the cumulative Islamic intellectual tradition in favor of its original sources. Calder thus represents the prevailing view that Ibn Kathîr’s Tafsîr is simply one of ḥadîth and that it originates from his relationship with Ibn Taymiyya. Throughout the article, Calder’s bias of favoring more rational and speculative exegetes is apparent. For instance, he states “This grim theologian (Ibn Kathîr) could hardly have found any pleasure in the exuberant uncertainties of Qurṭubî, or in the visionary intellectualism of Râzî.” For Calder, Ibn Kathîr lacks “literary skill” and “imagination.” Nevertheless, while Calder is highly critical of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathîr, he raises important questions about Ibn Kathîr’s relationship with Ibn Taymiyya and how they both interacted with the exegetical tradition.

this article, Sands states that the “task of identifying the formal characteristics of tafsîr has been tackled with great skill by Calder”; Sands, 67.

11 As Ahmad Dallal explains, terms like fundamentalism can be “attractive in many ways, primarily because it allows the student of modern Islam to analyze and understand a complex set of variables in the context of one coherent whole”; Ahmad Dallal, “The Origins and Objectives of Islamic Revivalist Thought, 1750-1850,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 113, no. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1993), 342.

12 Calder also says that Ibn Kathîr “was an expert on ḥadîth and a disciple of Ibn Taymiyya – together adequate symbols of his intellectual affiliation”; Norman Calder, “Tafsîr from Ṭabarî to Ibn Kathîr,” 121, 124. Calder believes Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathîr are “fundamentalists” because they circumvent the intellectual tradition in favor of the original sources. In another instance, Calder calls Ibn Taymiyya a salafî because, “In all movements designated, and especially in the works of Ibn Taymiyya and his followers, there was an attempt to reject tradition in favour of a return to earliest generations.” Calder is averse to “fundamentalists” and “modernists” who he believes limit or reject tradition. See his, “History and Nostalgia: reflections on John Wansbrough’s The Sectarian Milieu,” Islamic Origins Reconsidered: John Wansbrough and the Study of Islam, ed. Herbert Berg (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 19. Calder would influence future scholars who highlight the impact of Ibn Taymiyya on Ibn Kathîr. See Roberto Tottoli, “Origin and Use of the Term Isra’iliyyat in Muslim Literature,” Arabica 46, no. 2 (1999): 193-210.


14 Calder concludes that “In Ibn Kathîr’s view, God has considerably less literary skill than the average human being, and very little imagination”; Calder, “Tafsîr from Ṭabarî to Ibn Kathîr,” 124.

Connecting Ibn Kathîr to Traditionalism (Ahl-ḥadîth):

Despite the standard narrative, Ibn Kathîr’s exegesis was less a product of his relationship with Ibn Taymiyya than a result of the larger struggle in the history of Islamic theology and hermeneutics between traditionalism and rationalism. As Christopher Melchert defines them, traditionalists were “those who would base their law and theology mainly on ḥadîth as opposed to rational speculation.” The traditionalist deemed that religion should be based primarily on the Qur’ān and Prophetic practice (Sunna) and theological vision of the early Muslim community. They insisted on the superiority of these original sources and that theology should not be mitigated by external means.

In contrast, rationalists emphasized the importance of the rational sciences, such as philosophy, logic and scholastic theology, to better understand God and His message. While they paid allegiance to scripture, they felt that the rational sciences helped give them greater insights into the Qur’ān and the essence of the Prophet’s teaching. The rational sciences were not a hindrance, as the traditionalists claimed, but a useful tool to help elucidate divine truth.

---


18 It is important to note that traditionalists did not entirely reject the use of reason, rather reason would be an important tool to analyze reports and to expand the use of the law through analogy (qiyâs). A traditionalist (salafî) is furthermore not equivalent to a ḥadîth scholar (muḥaddîth) who specializes ḥadîth. A ḥadîth scholar could very well be a rationalist or traditionalist in creed even though many ḥadîth scholars were traditionalists. For more, see George Makdisi, “The Juridical Theology of Shâfi’î: Origins and Significance of Uṣûl al-Fiqh,” Studia Islamica 59, no. 1 (1984): 5–47.
While traditionalist and rationalist composed of opposing camps, there was a wide spectrum between them and at times great overlap. Pure rationalists rejected scripture altogether while others incorporated it within their argumentation. At the opposite extreme, strident traditionalists condemned all forms of rational argumentation, while others used the rational sciences to defend their traditionalist creeds. Furthermore, even though they would not admit it, traditionalists and rationalists would frequently read one another’s works and incorporate the others’ arguments within their own writings.

A key factor separating the two camps was the use of scholastic theology or kalām. As Marshall Hodgson explains, rationalists felt compelled to create an “overall cosmology which they could claim as rational and with which they could claim that the Qurʾān was in harmony.”

Rationalists wanted to present the religion as a rational system in order to defend the creed from its opponents. This system was called kalām literally “discussion” or “discussion of points of religious belief on the basis of rational criteria.” The entire enterprise assumed that revelation had a rational basis and that rational criteria could be used to prove the religion’s validity. Traditionalists were skeptical of kalām because it increased the role of ‘reason’ to the point that it became a criterion to judge scripture. For traditionalists, scripture should always play a superior role and not be subordinated to external methods.

The development of kalām led to the second contentious issue, the use of taʾwil or the figurative interpretation. In order to bring scripture into conformity with their rational systems, rationalists interpreted certain Qurʾānic words according to their derivative, figurative meaning instead of accepting the most apparent one. Rationalists contended that their interpretations

---

20 Hodgson, 1:438.
21 Or, in the case of ḥadīths, reason became a means to authenticate scripture.
conformed to Arabic philology and to the understanding of the early Muslim community.

Traditionalists countered by claiming that rationalists resorted to *ta'wil* in order to fit scripture to their preconceived theologies. Instead of deriving theology from scripture, as traditionalist claimed that they did, rationalists manipulated the text to justify their heretical doctrines.

The difference in theology between the rationalists and traditionalists led to the formation of two distinct communities. The rationalists gave emphasis to the intellect and the rational sciences and were thus more inclined to hierarchy. They were open to work with state powers that often patronized their work and funded their madrasas. The traditionalists, in contrast, stressed morality and ethics and upheld a more egalitarian view of society. They attempted to connect themselves to the grassroots and to seek employment within independent madrasas. Traditionalists were skeptical of government participation seeing it as comprising their intellectual independence and corrupting their piety and morality. These two communities developed different cultures that translated into contrasting mannerisms, social habits and activities.

---


24 Melchert contrasts the structure of traditionalist communities to Sufi ones. As he explains, traditionalist communities have “most of the earmarks of a contractual community, whose membership is voluntary and within which there is substantial equality. Voluntary membership and equality flow from a stress on morality, which continually makes the individual choose to do one thing and not another: it also tends to demand the same choices from all individuals. By contrast, mystics tend toward an organic conception of community, accepting hierarchy and specialization, for some will be found closer to God than others”; Melchert, “Piety of the Ḥadīth Folk,” 429.

25 For example, Melchert explains how traditionalists had a serious demeanor and did not approve of leaning: “For example, it was considered excellent manners among diverse parties not to lean. (What better illustration could be asked of Islamic dignity?) To start with the Ḥadīth folk, ʿĀṣim, although ill, sat up straight when someone mentioned the Khurasani traditionalist Ibrahim ibn Tahman (d. 784- 85?)”; Melchert, “Piety of the Ḥadīth Folk,” 433.
These two different communities had many confrontations, the most famous “the mihna,” literally “the trial.” The rationalist camp, often associated with the “Mu’tazilīs,”26 allied themselves with the Abbasid caliphs to impose their views on the populace, most notably that the Qur’ān was the created word of God as opposed to the “speech of God” as the traditionalists maintained. The rationalist contended that affirming that the Qur’ān was the uncreated “speech of God” assumed that God had anthropomorphic qualities such as human speech.27 Human speech required organs, something which God did not have, so he created speech. The Mu’tazilīs, in particular, sought to affirm the absolute transcendence and unity of God and thus argued that the Qur’ān was “created” in that it was not “not created” or co-eternal with God.28 The traditionalists, led by the great Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855),29 eventually defeated the rationalists and in the process defended scripture and stood up to government attempts to impose theology upon the community.30

26 For more on Mu’tazilism see the work of George Hourani. Melchert argues that “the inquisition is to be identified less with the Mu’tazila than with the nascent Ḥanafi school of law”; Christopher Melchert, “The Adversaries of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal,” Arapica 44, no. 2 (1997): 239.
28 Wilferd Madelung expands on the Mu’tazili position in comparison to the traditionalists: “They were, on the other hand, rigorously opposed to the admission of anything co-eternal with God. They denied any independent existence to the essential attributes in God and strictly maintained the temporality of all attributes referring to his acts. They held, moreover, that the acts of God cannot subsist in his unchangeable essence, but must be created elsewhere. Since in affirming that the Koran is created they were chiefly concerned with its temporality, they accused those denying its creation of asserting its eternity and of destroying God’s unity by the admission of something co-eternal with him. That this was the thrust of the attack of those upholding the creation of the Koran at this time is confirmed by the letters of the Caliph al-Ma’mūn ordering the mihna. There the traditionalists are not charged with anthropomorphism and ascribing organs of speech to God. They are polemically accused of putting God and the Koran on an equal level, of claiming that it is eternal and primordial, and that God has not created, originated (lam...yuḥdithu), or produced it. In denying the creation of the Koran, they have obliterated the distinction between God and all other things by his bringing them forth through his power and by his priority in time (al-taqaddum ‘alayhā bi-awwaliyyatih). They are thus like the Christians who claim that Jesus was not created because he was the word of God. This was a favorite argument of the Mu’tazilees”; Madelung, 516-17.
30 M. Hinds, “Mihna,” EF.
However, the kalām methodology did not die with the Mu‘tazilīs but continued with the Ashʿarīs. The Ashʿarīs rejected the Mu‘tazilī claim that God could not have the qualities of speech and hearing. Nevertheless, they agreed with the Mu‘tazilīs that God was not confined to a particular place and could not have the anthropomorphic attributes of having human limbs. They thus employed ta‘wil to interpret scripture figuratively relating to God mounting his throne and having hands and a face. Even though the Ashʿarīs claimed to be traditionalists themselves and followers of Ibn Ḥanbal, many traditionalists argued that the Ashʿarīs were the Mu‘tazilīs in a different guise since they continued to employ the same rational tools of kalām and ta‘wil.

The struggle between the traditionalists and Ashʿarīs escalated in the 7th/13th century. Two groups of active and influential Ḥanbalī scholars, one fleeing from Mongol invasions in Baghdad and the other fleeing the Crusaders in Palestine, arrived in Mamlūk Damascus. The Ḥanbalīs slowly began to question practices that they felt were heretical and in the process challenged the city’s Ashʿarī power structures. The influx of these new immigrants changed the religious and social landscape of the city and thus caused resentment among the Shāfi‘ī Ashʿarī ruling elite. As Michael Chamberlain explains, one Shāfi‘ī madrasa endowment stipulated that “no Jew, Christian, Magian, or Ḥanbalī enter” it. Another Shāfi‘ī endowment made it a condition that no Jew, Christian or Ḥanbalī anthropomorphist (ḥanbalī ḥashwī) could enter into

---

31 For more on the Ashʿarīs see Montgomery Watt, “Ashʿariyya,” EI2.
32 I speak more about the differences between the Ashʿarīs and Mu‘tazilīs in Chapter Three.
34 Michael Chamberlain, Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190-1350 (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 169. The full quote is: “Ḥanbalī positions on theological issues varied from those of others to the extent that conflict was latent in their relations. On the issues of the created character of the Qur’an, the visitation of tombs, and the divine attributes, the Ḥanbalīs of Damascus espoused doctrines that were fundamentally incompatible with the beliefs of Shāfi‘īs and often the other madhhabas as well. Examples of the suspect status of the Ḥanbalīs appear frequently in the sources. Some Damascenes rejected the claim of the Ḥanbalīs to be Muslims. One madrasa waqf specified that ‘no Jew, Christian, Magian, or Ḥanbalī enter’ it. Shāfi‘īs who controlled madrasas in at least one instance tried to keep Ḥanbalīs from entering or benefiting from them.”
its doors. The tension between Shāfi‘īs and Ḥanbalīs intensified to the point that a death warrant was issued for the great Ḥanbalī jurist Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī (d. 620/1223), who was able to escape to Egypt before the decree was able to be carried out.

The tension between the traditionalists and Ash‘arīs climaxed in the first half of the following century, especially with the rise of the Ḥanbalī Ibn Taymiyya. Following the line of other Ḥanbalīs, Ibn Taymiyya’s family fled the Mongol invasions from Ḥarrān, Syria, when he was only seven years old and settled in Damascus. Ibn Taymiyya would gain enormous popularity with the political leaders, traditionalist scholars and the masses, a confluence that Donald Little calls the “Ibn Taymiyya phenomenon.”

The ruling Ash‘arī elite began to feel “threatened” by Ibn Taymiyya’s increasing influence to the point that they began to question his “political ambitions.” Ibn Taymiyya would be subsequently imprisoned six times between 693/1294 and 728/1328 totaling over six years. Ibn Taymiyya’s traditionalist supporters believed he was the new Ibn Ḥanbal, while his Ash‘arī critics deemed him a heretic.

---

36 As Richard Bulliet explains, madhhab s often went beyond legal or theological schools but became political parties. In speaking about the Ḥanafī/Shāfi‘ī divide in Nishāpūr, he states, “In preview, that general terms of Ḥanafī and Shāfi‘ī have a consistent double meanings. On the one hand, they denote modes of legal interpretation, as already explained, and, on the other, they stand for two political parties within the patriciate, vying for possession of key political posts within the city and ultimately for the city itself. The term political party is intended here to denote a political action group bound together by an essentially political ideology, a vision of the right ordering of society”; The Patricians of Nishāpūr: a Study in Medieval Islamic Social History (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972), 38.
37 Chamberlain, 170.
38 It is not inconceivable that the traumatic events of his childhood affected Ibn Taymiyya for the rest of his life.
39 As Little says, Ibn Taymiyya was a “virtuous personality among the soldiers and the amīrs, the merchants and nobles, and all the common people, who loved him because he always stood up for their welfare with his tongue and his pen”; Little’s “Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose?” Studia Islamica 41, no. 1 (1975): 109.
41 Little, “Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose?” 109.
42 Little, “The Historical and Histographical Significance of the Detention of Ibn Taymiyya,” 322.
Yet, the traditionalist challenge to the Ashʿarī orthodoxy was not limited to the Ḥanbalīs but extended to a large group of traditionalists within the Shāfiʿī school, Ibn Kathīr among them. As George Makdisi argues, that the biggest threat to Ashʿarism lay not with Ibn Taymiyya and the Ḥanbalīs but with “Shāfiʿī traditionalists.” Western scholars have mistakenly held that traditionalism was an insignificant minority and existed almost entirely in the Ḥanbalī school. Makdisi asserts that by focusing on the so-called Ḥanbalī traditionalist/Shāfiʿī Ashʿarī divide, scholars missed “that the great upheaval between Ashʿarism and traditionalism was taking place within the Shāfiʿite school itself.” Contrary to the standard narrative, Ashʿarism had not become the established orthodoxy by the 8th/14th century, with a large contingent of Shāfiʿīs still maintaining a traditionalist creed.

These Shāfiʿī traditionalists were caught in a difficult position - while they were traditionalist they belonged to the Shāfiʿī legal school which had a historic relationship with Ashʿarism. This “peculiar situation” led many Shāfiʿī traditionalists to be less “vocal” than Ḥanbalīs against Ashʿarism since Ḥanbalīs had no such historic relationship with the theological school. Shāfiʿī traditionalists still wanted to maintain their ties with “Shāfiʿī Ashʿarīs” who they viewed as their colleagues and friends. Shāfiʿī traditionalists further did not want to oppose the Shāfiʿī Ashʿarīs overtly since they controlled the key judicial positions and teaching posts.

---

45 Makdisi, “Part II,” 38.
47 Makdisi, “Part II,” 37.
48 The difference between the Shāfiʿī Ashʿarīs and Shāfiʿī traditionalists will be explored in Chapters’ One and Two.
While Makdisi’s insights are invaluable in shedding light on the theological landscape of the beginning of the 8th/14th, he does not differentiate between the traditionalism of Ibn Taymiyya and the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists. Ibn Taymiyya belonged to an intellectualized traditionalism which saw reason and tradition as “complementary.” Ibn Taymiyya believed in a “rationality based on revelation and tradition,” one that sought to understand the rational nature of scripture. He made this argument against Ash‘arī claims that reason could at times “triumph” over scripture or necessitate its figurative interpretation. To prove his point, Ibn Taymiyya delved deeply into the works of kalām and philosophy, even debating the works of the great Muslim philosopher Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037). Throughout his writings, Ibn Taymiyya consistently argues that the traditionalist position is rationally superior to that of the philosophers and speculative theologians.

Ibn Kathīr and the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists, on the other hand, upheld the “theology of the salaf,” a “moral theology” or “theology of praxis” that avoided speculation and disputation and focused on the more practical sciences of ḥadīth and law. Unlike Ibn Taymiyya who spent a large part of his career composing theological tracts, the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists developed the sciences of ḥadīth. The Shāfi‘ī traditionalists were more fideist than Ibn Taymiyya since they were content with affirming the superiority of scripture rather than arguing for its rationality.

---

49 George Makdisi used the term “intellectual traditionalism” but I choose the term “intellectualized traditionalism” since many fideist traditionalists were also “intellectuals” as well. For more on the term intellectual traditionalism, see George Makdisi, *Ibn ʻAqīl: Religion and Culture in Classical Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).


51 I will speak in more detail about how Ibn Taymiyya refutes Ash‘arī views of the Qur’ān in Chapter Four and Five.


Unlike Ibn Taymiyya, they strategically choose not to engage *kalām* and philosophy, believing that the harms of such a task outweighed the potential benefits.

The great Shāfi‘ī tradionalist Shāms al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), who was one of the primary teachers of Ibn Kathīr, captures the “the theology of the *salaf*” in his work *Bayān zaghl al-‘ilm wa‘l-ṭalab*, a piece of advice to a potential student on which sciences to study and which to avoid. In his Chapter on Theology (*uṣūl al-dīn*), al-Dhahabī differentiates between two types of creeds, the theology of the early community (*salaf*) and that of the subsequent one (*khalaf*).

Al-Dhahabī states that the theology of *salaf* is to believe in God, His revealed books, the Prophets, Angels, His divine characteristics and omnipotence. The *salaf* further maintain that the Qur’ān is revelation, the word of God and wished God’s pleasure on all of the Companions. The theology of the *khalaf*, in contrast, incorporated the rational sciences, such as philosophy and logic, something that the *salaf* would disapprove of. Al-Dhahabī moves to condemn the theology of the *khalaf*, explaining that the incorporation of the rational sciences created tremendous dissention within the community and bred diseases within the souls. The theology of the *khalaf* is like a dangerous sword that excommunicates (*yukaffīr*) and misguides.

Al-Dhahabī then transitions to shed light on the theological struggle of his day between the traditionalists and the Ash‘arīs. Al-Dhahabī explains that the traditionalist theologian who stands by the literal meaning of scripture is considered by his enemy (i.e. Ash‘arīs) an anthropomorphist (*mujassim*), Ḥashwiyya and innovator (*mubdi‘*). Ash‘arīs accused traditionalists of anthropomorphism because they read verses relating to God’s attributes literally, something which they believed that the early community had not done. On the

---

54 I speak more about Ibn Kathīr’s relationship with al-Dhahabī in Chapter One.


56 Ḥashwiyya was a derogatory term referring to literalist anthropomorphists; Ed(s), “Hashwiyya (Ḥashwiyya, Ḥushwiyya, or Ahl al-Ḥashw)”, *EP*. 

14
contrary, those who engage in *ta’wil*, presumably the Ashʿarīs, are considered by others (i.e. the traditionalists) to be Muʿtazīlīs, Jahmīs, and misguided. The traditionalists charged the Ashʿarīs, like the Muʿtazīlīs and Jahmiyya before them, of prioritizing reason over revelation and denying many of God’s characteristics and attributes. Al-Dhahabī asserts that it is better to remain above these debates by maintaining one’s moral integrity and well-being (*al-salāma waʾl-ʿāfiya awlā bika*). One should not get caught up within these theological arguments and lose one’s self in the process.

Al-Dhahabī then makes it a point to warn the student not to take the middle way that attempts to balance reason and revelation or the path of Ibn Taymiyya. Al-Dhahabī explains to his student that even if one excels in the rational sciences while holding firm to the Qurʾān and Sunna in the hope of piecing together (*laffaqa*) reason and revelation, then one would not even come close to the level of the great Ibn Taymiyya. For al-Dhahabī, Ibn Taymiyya was a brilliant scholar but it was not worth stooping down to the level of the rationalists and engaging in their games. Al-Dhahabī knew Ibn Taymiyya before he attempted to reconcile the sciences, and he was a guiding light, leading people to the path of *salaf*. But then Ibn Taymiyya became dark and gloomy to some; an anti-Christ, liar and disbeliever to his enemies; a brilliant, erudite scholar to a group of intellectuals; the standard bearer of Islam, the defender of the religion and the reviver of the Sunna towards his supporters.

---

57 I speak more about how the “Jahmiyya” was a code word for Ashʿarism in Chapter One.
58 Al-Dhahabī adds one more category of a theologian who affirms some of God’s attributes but then figuratively interprets others. To his opponents, he is considered to be contradicting himself. While al-Dhahabī does not say so, this group is most likely the Ashʿarīs as well.
59 Bori translates this passage as the following: “War reigns among the theologians (*usuliyya*). They declare each other unbelievers or misguided. The theologian who sticks to the plain meaning of the words and traditions is declared by his adversaries to be an anthropomorphist, a *hashwī*, and an innovator. In turn, the theologian who promotes [allegorical] interpretation will be declared by the others a Jahmī and a Muʿtazīlī and to be in error. [The theologian] who admits [the existence of] some [positive] attributes in God and rejects others and also permits [allegoric] interpretation in certain cases [and not in other cases] is called a person who contradicts himself. It would be better to go slow. You may excel in the basic principles [of religion] and its subordinated sciences
In sum, al-Dhahabī advises his student to stick to the theology of the *salaf*, which avoids disputation and dissention. While Ibn Taymiyya’s methodology of combining reason and revelation was attractive, it was also damaging and polarizing. In al-Dhahabī’s view, it was better to maintain the moral high ground of the early community (*salaf*) by remaining faithful to the original sources and not responding to one’s opponents. Delving into the theological struggle between the Ashʿarīs and traditionalism was not worth ones intellectual time, as Ibn Taymiyya had done, and it would be better to preoccupy oneself with more important questions.60

The “theology of the *salaf*” that al-Dhahabī outlines was not restricted to the Shāfīʿī traditionalists but extended to many Ḥanbalīs such as the great Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī (d. 795/1392), the student of Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), who in turn was the primary student of Ibn Taymiyya. In his work *Bayān faḍl ‘ilm al-salaf ‘alā ‘ilm al-khalaf*, Ibn Rajab explains the importance of “the theology of the *salaf*” over that of subsequent ones.61 Ibn Rajab

---

60 Thus, al-Dhahabī criticizes not only the rational sciences but the culture that it breeds and the intellectual questions that it takes up.

structures the treatise around defining “beneficial knowledge” and “non-beneficial knowledge” based on several ḥadīths in which the Prophet prays for the former and seeks refuge from the latter.62 After discussing the relative importance of studying genealogy, astronomy,63 arithmetic, and grammar, Ibn Rajab begins to speak about the rational sciences.64 He condemns kalām and philosophy, arguing that intrinsic to the sciences are values that are contrary to Islam such as disputation (jadal), argumentation (khiṣām) and showing off (mirā').65 These sciences came after the early community and it has no origins in the Qur’ān and Sunna. For instance, a ḥadīth states “A guided people will not go astray unless [they engage in] the practice of disputation.”66 The Prophet warns here against needless speculation since it may take one away from salvation. Similarly, the Qur’ān condemns disputation in verse 43:58: “They only give you the example for the purpose of disputation (jadal’un).”67 A characteristic of the disbelievers is that they provoke the believers into debate, not for the purpose of seeking the truth but rather to ridicule. Excessive speculation is further denounced in verse 17:85: “They ask you about the soul. Say that ‘the soul is the affair of my Lord.’” The Qur’ān does not give the answer to the questioner’s inquiry and implies that one should avoid asking questions relating to metaphysics.

For Ibn Rajab, the Muslim should not be concerned with disputation and speculation but rather with morality, ethics and spirituality. As Ibn Rajab elucidates, the scholars of the salaf

63 Ibn Rajab differentiates between astronomy and astrology; Ibn Rajab, Bayān faḍl ‘ilm al-salaf, 47.
64 Ibn Rajab begins by condemning excessive preoccupation with free will and predestination (qadr). For the traditionalists, qadr was a “secret” that will never be fully be understood by human beings; Ibn Rajab, Bayān faḍl ‘ilm al-salaf, 54. This is a general condemnation of kalām which discussed qadr extensively, but it could also be that of Ibn Taymiyya who devoted many of his fatāwā to qadr. For instance, volume 8 of his fatāwā is devoted to qadr; Majmū‘ fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Ahmad b. Ṭaymiyya, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Āl b. Muḥammad b. Qāsim al-‘Āṣimī, 37 vols. (Beirut: Maṭābi‘ Dār al-‘Arabiyya, 1977-78).
65 Ibn Rajab, Bayān faḍl ‘ilm al-salaf, 58.
67 Ibn Rajab, Bayān faḍl ‘ilm al-salaf, 58.
used to say that “if God wants good for his servant then he would open the door of action (‘amal) and close the door of disputation (jadal). If God wants evil for his servant he will close the door of action and open for him the door of disputation.” Disputation and speculation were the antithesis of striving towards a more moral and ethical life. Ibn Rajab further adds that showing off one’s knowledge and speaking without certainty makes the heart hard and breeds rancor (daghan). One should simply say that one does not know, as did Ibn Ḥanbal, rather than trying to conjure a response.

Ibn Rajab also makes several statements that could be perceived as critiques of Ibn Taymiyya, such as advising his students not to write long explanations and to refute the scholastic theologians. Ibn Rajab explains that the later generations (muta’akhkhirīn) thought that excessive speech, argumentation and enmity made one more knowledgeable, but this was not true. Ibn Rajab gives the example that senior Companions such as Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿAlī spoke less than more junior ones like Ibn ʿAbbās but they were still considered more knowledgeable. Similarly, the speech of Successors (tābiʿūn) was more than that of the Companions but nonetheless the Companions were thought to be more knowledgeable. As Ibn Rajab declares, “knowledge is not many narrations or excessive speech, but a light thrown into the heart [by God] that allows the servant to understand truth and to distinguish between it and falsehood, and then to express that [truth] in concise expressions that relate (mūṣila) to [higher] objectives.” Ibn Rajab could very well be disapproving of Ibn Taymiyya’s tangential prose and multivolume refutations.

---

68 I will speak further about Ibn Kathīr’s “moral theology” in Chapter Four.
69 Ibn Rajab, Bayān faḍl ʿilm al-salaf, 63.
70 Ibn Rajab also mentions that the founding Imāms responded to their questioners with concise responses (wajīz) and did not elongate their explanations (ishāb); For Ibn Rajab, verbose explanations and refutations were the style of the scholastic theologians, not that of the salaf; Ibn Rajab, Bayān faḍl ʿilm al-salaf, 60.
Towards the end of the treatise, Ibn Rajab is forthright about the signs of “beneficial” and “non-beneficial” knowledge:

Among the signs of beneficial knowledge is that its possessor does not claim that he [is knowledgeable] and does not boast over anybody else, and he does not ascribe ignorance to other than him, except those who oppose the Sunna and its scholars. He must speak [in disagreement] angry for the sake of God, not angry for himself or for the purpose of raising himself over anyone. As for the person who has unbeneﬁcial knowledge, then he does not have any occupation except boasting about (takabbur) his knowledge over others, demonstrating (izhār) the extent of his knowledge, ascribing [his opponents] to ignorance, and highlight their shortcomings to raise himself over them – This is the ugliest of qualities, the worst. 71

Ibn Rajab could once again be criticizing Ibn Taymiyya who was thought by some, such as al-Dhahabī, to be arrogant and polarizing. 72

Ibn Rajab additionally explains that the great Imams, such as Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797), Mālik, al-Shāﬁ‘ī and Ibn Ḥanbal did not engage in kalām altogether and the discourse of the science is not found in their writings. 73 Ibn Rajab relates that it is said that whoever enters into kalām will be stained by its filth. As Ibn Ḥanbal is reported to have stated, one who looks into the books of kalām only becomes a member of the Jahmiyya. 74 While Ibn Rajab’s treatise is not a direct condemnation of Ibn Taymiyya, it nonetheless advises students to avoid Ibn Taymiyya’s methodology of preoccupying oneself with the rational sciences. 75

Ibn Rajab expands his definition of the “theology of the salaf” and critiques of kalām in his Radd ‘alā man ittaba’a ghayr al-madhāhib al-arba’a. While the treatise focuses on the

71 Ibn Rajab, Bayān faḍl ‘ilm al-salaf, 83.
72 I will speak more about al-Dhahabī’s views of Ibn Taymiyya in Chapter One.
73 Ibn Rajab, Bayān faḍl ‘ilm al-salaf, 56.
74 Ibn Rajab, Bayān faḍl ‘ilm al-salaf, 70.
75 Ibn Rajab also makes another statement regarding an “individual” who broke with the legal consensus: “We have been tested with ignorance among the people who think that with some broad knowledge (tawassu’) in the sayings of the later generations that he is more knowledge than those who came before. And some of them think that [this] person is more knowledgeable than those who came before and after the Companions because of his clarifications (bayānihi) and sayings. And some of them say that he is more knowledgably than the famous authoritative jurists (al-Ṣuqūṭ al-mashhūr al-matbū‘ al-mālikīn)”, Ibn Rajab, Bayān faḍl ‘ilm al-salaf, 65. Ibn Rajab could be referring to Ibn Taymiyya’s breaks with the legal consensus. Ibn Rajab does provide a section in his Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila where he lists Ibn Taymiyya’s “unusual” legal opinions; Kitāb al-Dhayl ‘alā Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifā, 1981), 2:404.
necessity of following one of the four established Sunni madhhab[s], Ibn Rajab touches upon theology in the last part of the treatise. Similar to his Bayān faḍl ʿilm al-salaf, Ibn Rajab advises the student to refrain from responding to the rationalists with their methodology (jins), such as employing analogies and rational argumentations. Ibn Rajab explains that the leading traditionalist, Ibn Ḥanbal, disliked such a tactic. Rather the traditionalist should respond with the transmitted sources - the Qurʾān, Sunna and the sayings of the early community - otherwise it was better to remain silent. The traditionalist, in Ibn Rajab’s belief, should not enter into the game of the rationalist but hold firm to the original sources. To support his argument, Ibn Rajab cites the early ḥadīth scholar Ibn al-Mubārak: “According to us, it is not befitting for the followers of the Sunna (ahl al-Sunna) to refute the people of heretical inclinations (ahl al-hawā’), rather silence [is preferable].” The Qurʾān and Prophetic tradition were adequate for the community and there was no reason to engage those who choose the rationalist path.

Ibn Rajab concludes the treatise stating that he knows that the people of disputation (jadal) will discuss and dissect his every word and ultimately reject them. Yet, when the truth becomes evident, then it is incumbent on its followers to turn away from disputation, enmity, and dissent. The path of Ibn Ḥanbal and his followers is sufficient for those who desire to be guided by God.

---

76 Ibn Rajab, al-Radd, 88.
77 Melchert explains that Ibn Ḥanbal condemned kalām, even if it was used to defend the Sunna: “There is one report that Aḥmad shunned al-Muhāsibī simply for engaging in kalām, dialectical theological reason. Although vague, this agrees with Aḥmad’s distrust of all kalām, even apologetic: with his excluding the practitioner of kalām from Ahl al-Sunna, and forbidding a follower to sit with practitioners, even though they defend the Sunna”; Melchert, “The Adversaries of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal,” 243.
78 Bori translates this passage as “Imam Aḥmad and the leaders of the ahl-al-hadīth […] detested refuting the innovators (ahl al-bidʿa) by partaking in their opponents’ discourse (bi-jins kalāmihim), that is the use of analogy in matters of theology (al-agyisa al-kalāmiyya) and rational proofs (adillat al-ʿuqūl). They deemed refutation appropriate only by the texts of the Qurʾān, of the Sunna and by the words of the Pious Ancestors (salaf), if such were to be found. Otherwise they believed reticence (al-sukūt) to be safer”; Bori, 36.
79 Ibn Rajab, al-Radd, 89.
80 Ibn Rajab also praises silence in Bayān faḍl ʿilm al-salaf ʿalā ʿilm al-khalaf; Ibn Rajab, Bayān faḍl ʿilm al-salaf, 87.
Thus, both al-Dhahabī and Ibn Rajab reject the intellectualized traditionalism of Ibn Taymiyya that went beyond the transmitted sources and delved into philosophy and kalām. By engaging the speculative theologian (mutakallīm), the traditionalist lost the moral high ground and was sucked into the culture of disputation, argumentation and dissention. Instead of pondering how one could become more moral and spiritual, the theologian became preoccupied with proving their point and searching for others faults. Ibn Taymiyya was a case point of why traditionalists should avoid kalām, since once the great scholar engaged the science he became critical and polarizing.

While Ibn Kathīr never critiques Ibn Taymiyya, he does disapprove of the intellectualized traditionalism of another great traditionalist scholar, Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064). In his entry on Ibn Ḥazm in al-Bidāya, Ibn Kathīr found it inconsistent that while Ibn Ḥazm did not use analogy in law, he frequently engaged in taʾwil of Qurʾānic verses and ḥadīth in theology (usḥūl). Ibn Kathīr blames Ibn Ḥazm’s extensive early studies in logic (manṭiq) for betraying the original sources. Years later, towards the end of his life, Ibn Kathīr records that he had an peculiar dream where he asked the great Shāfiʿī jurist al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277) why he did not include more of Ibn Ḥazm’s works in his Muhadhdhab, one of al-Nawawī’s legal commentaries. Al-Nawawī responded that he did not like Ibn Ḥazm’s works. Ibn Kathīr approved of al-Nawawī’s response and added that Ibn Ḥazm tried (unsuccessfully) to combine two opposing elements: in

---

81 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 12:101. Goldziher demonstrates that in law Ibn Ḥazm was a literalists but in interpreting the anthropomorphic traditions he engages in taʾwil: “We have seen that in the explanation of the anthropomorphic passages of the Koran and the traditions, Ibn Ḥazm becomes unfaithful to his own system, and in his interpretation of the scripture he is guilty of the very same arbitrariness of which he ordinarily accuses the Muʿtazilites with merciless reproaches”; Ignaz Goldziher, The Zāhirīs: Their Doctrine and their History. A Contribution to the History of Islamic Theology, trans. Wolfgang Behn (Leiden, Bill, 1971), 154.

82 As Goldziher says of Ibn Ḥazm, “indeed, he himself recommends Aristotelian works as ‘sound, useful books guiding towards monotheism’ which advise jurists, as well as dogmatists, to establish correct premises, to arrive a correct deductions, to formulate the right definitions, and to execute other logical operations”; Goldziher, 143.

83 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:282.
law he stuck with the literal while in theology he was figurative. Ibn Kathīr then pointed to a barren piece of land and then exclaimed to al-Nawawī: “This is the land that Ibn Ḥazm cultivated. Do you see any tree bearing fruit or anything to benefit from it?” Ibn Kathīr notes that while he spoke to al-Nawawī he saw Ibn Ḥazm present, silent, not saying a word.

These entries make it clear that Ibn Kathīr opposed Ibn Ḥazm’s intellectualized traditionalism, which heavily engaged philosophy and logic. A close reading of Ibn Kathīr’s works demonstrates that he did not occupy himself with the rational sciences and thus fit the traditionalism of al-Dhahabī and Ibn Rajab, not that of Ibn Taymiyya. Similar to al-Dhahabī, Ibn Kathīr focused his energy on the transmitted sources especially ḥadīth and history. An examination of Ibn Kathīr’s Qur’ānic exegesis further demonstrates that he chooses to present his views rather than be engrossed by the debates of his opponents.

**Traditionalism and Qur’ānic Exegesis:**

While there have been excellent studies on traditionalism, there has been no work that studies how traditionalism carries into *tafsīr*. Similar dynamics between the traditionalists and rationalists discussed above appear in *tafsīr*, most apparently in the famous division between *tafsīr bi’l-ma’thūr* and *tafsīr bi’l-ra’y*. Traditionalists believed that the Qur’ān was best understood through the traditions of the early community. Rationalists, on the other hand, felt that while tradition was important, the Qur’ān could be understood through Arabic philology and rational methods of *kalām*. To counter the rationalist claim, traditionalists created the division.

---

84 Ibn Kathīr notes that Ibn Ḥazm was similar to the Ismāʿīlī sect the Qarmaṭa which was known to have engaged in *taʿwil*. For more on the various sects associated with the Ismāʿīlīs see W. Madelung, “Ismāʿīliyya,” *EI*.  
86 I discuss Ibn Kathīr’s major works in Chapter Three.  
87 I will demonstrate how Ibn Kathīr presents his exegetical views in Chapter Five.  
88 See for instance the works of George Makdisi, Christopher Melchert and Merlin Swartz.
between 

\textit{tafsīr bi’l-ma’thūr} and \textit{tafsīr bi’l-ra’y}, one based on reliable traditions and the other based on simple “opinion.” Walid Saleh captures the theological aim of this division: “this division of the tradition into two forms was meant to convey the notion that one part of the tradition was authority-based and hence authentic and reliable (\textit{tafsīr bi-al-ma’thūr}), and the other whimsical and capricious, using personal opinion as its guide and hence unreliable (\textit{tafsīr bi-al-ra’y}).”\(^{89}\)

Yet, what scholarship has neglected to show is how “most of the \textit{tafsīr bi-al-ma’thūr} is in reality a \textit{tafsīr bi-al-ra’y}.”\(^{90}\) Traditionalist exegetes articulated their opinion through ḥadīth and the early community. As we will see, Ibn Kathīr presents his views through ḥadīth, often choosing one variant over another or citing a particular ḥadīth to the exclusion of a second.\(^{91}\) While Ibn Kathīr’s lists of ḥadīths may appear arbitrary, they are actually meticulously constructed to portray the contrasting views within the ḥadīth tradition and his personal vision of Islam.

By constructing an exegesis based on ḥadīth, Ibn Kathīr had to balance between competing roles of a ḥadīth scholar (\textit{muḥaddith}) and Qur’ānic exegete (\textit{mufassir}). The tension between these roles is best articulated by Marston Speight:

\begin{quote}
The \textit{mufassir} was concerned primarily, if not wholly, with the elucidation of the revealed text, for whatever purpose that might serve, and to achieve that end, he was open to several possible sources of information. The \textit{muḥaddith}, on the other hand, was concerned primarily with reporting the Sunna of Muḥammad, and
\end{quote}

\(^{89}\) Saleh, \textit{Formation}, 16.

\(^{90}\) Saleh, \textit{Formation}, 16.

\(^{91}\) In another sense, all of \textit{tafsīr bi’l-ra’y} is \textit{tafsīr bi’l-ma’thūr}. As Andrew Lane states in reference to al-Zamakhsharı’i’s \textit{al-Kashshāf}, “\textit{tafsīr} flows over or around each part of the revealed text; it is characterized by multiplicity in the form of variant readings and interpretations. It is connected to its past by references to what others said, whether they are named or not – in this sense, all \textit{tafsīr}, including the \textit{Kashshāf}, is \textit{tafsīr bi-l-ma’thūr};” Lane, 230.
when the reports he brought involved the Qur’ānic text, his effort joined that of the *mufassir*.\(^\text{92}\)

Since the *mufassir*’s job was to explain the entire Qur’ān, he had to be open to a range of material that would provide greater understanding. In contrast, the *muḥaddith* was primarily concerned with authenticity of Prophetic traditions and often discounted material that was not of prophetic value or did not reach their critical standards. Ibn Kathīr presents us with a unique case where the roles of the *muḥaddith* and *mufassir* combine. Throughout this dissertation, we will see how Ibn Kathīr negotiates between his roles as a *muḥaddith* and *mufassir* to present his theological views.\(^\text{93}\)

**Thesis:**

I will begin by redefining Ibn Kathīr and the Shāfiʿī traditionalists as independent scholars with their own intellectual projects. The Shāfiʿī traditionalists are frequently presented as “disciples” of Ibn Taymiyya but a close look at the biographical sources demonstrates that the various members of the traditionalist movement drew from one another and had their own intellectual interests. Ibn Kathīr was within the Shāfiʿī traditionalist contingent of the larger traditionalist movement and his primary teacher was the fellow Shāfiʿī al-Mizzī (d. 742/1341) rather than Ibn Taymiyya.

I will then present the opposing pole within the Shāfiʿī school, the Shāfiʿī Ashʿarīs. While contemporary scholarship focuses on the traditionalist movement, it overlooks


\(^{93}\) For more on the difference between *musnad* and *tafsīr* material see Jonathan Brown, “Even if it is not True It’s True: Using Unreliable Ḥadīths in Sunni Islam,” *Islamic Law and Society* 18, no.1 (2011): 6.
that the movement represented a political minority.\textsuperscript{94} Ash'arism dominated 8\textsuperscript{th}/14\textsuperscript{th} Century Mamlûk Damascus in which all of the chief judges and directors of the major educational institutions had to ascribe to the Ash'arî creed. Unlike Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim who attacked Ash'arî figures, Ibn Kathîr fostered positive relations with many of his Ash'arî colleagues since they shared the similar Shâﬁ‘î madhhab and were fair and righteous scholars. Ibn Kathîr maintained these relations despite the fact that many of the Shâﬁ‘î Ash'arîs wrote refutations of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim and worked to imprison them.

Ibn Kathîr’s relationship with both the Shâﬁ‘î traditionalists and Shâﬁ‘î Ash'arîs appear in his major works. Ibn Kathîr’s intellectual project was to promote the pro-\textit{ijtihād} traditionalist strain within the Shâﬁ‘î madhhab. Scholars frequently assume that Ibn Kathîr was the “spokesperson” for Ibn Taymiyya without examining Ibn Kathîr’s various works. An overview of his writings demonstrates that Ibn Kathîr drew heavily upon previous Shâﬁ‘î traditionalists, particularly that of Ibn al-Ṣalâh (d. 643/1245), al-Mizzî and al-Birzâlî (d. 739/1339). His major works must thus be seen as extension of the Shâﬁ‘î traditionalists before him rather than a product of his relationship with Ibn Taymiyya.

Although scholars have noticed that Ibn Kathîr’s writings are different from Ibn Taymiyya’s, no one has suggested that this difference derives from their contrasting traditionalisms. Ibn Taymiyya represented an intellectualized traditionalism which argued for the rational nature of scripture and maintained that reason and revelation were complimentary. Ibn Kathîr, on the other hand, held a more fideist position which argued for the superiority of the tradition and reason’s role in analyzing traditions. Their different traditionalisms resulted in two different hermeneutical approaches and engagements with the Qur‘ân. Ibn Taymiyya harshly

\textsuperscript{94} This is most likely because the traditionalist movement has become much stronger today and reads their dominance into history. For more on how the rise of the traditionalist movement affects our understanding of \textit{tafsîr} see Walid Saleh, “Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of \textit{tafsîr} in Arabic: A History of the Book Approach.”
evaluates rationalist exegetes such as al-Zamakhsharī (d. 533/1144) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) because of their extensive use of kalām and their use of ta’wīl. In contrast, Ibn Kathīr largely ignores the rational sciences and focuses his attention to works of ḥadīth and history, connecting himself with the previous generation rather than critiquing his opponents. Ibn Kathīr, in fact, incorporates al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī within his exegesis and praises their scholarship while presenting his objections.

Ibn Kathīr’s and Ibn Taymiyya’s different traditionalisms appear in their contrasting Qur’ānic hermeneutic and exegetical writings. Both exegetes argue that the best way to interpret the Qur’ān is through the textual sources, but their actual Qur’ānic hermeneutic is best discerned through a close examination of their exegetical writings. Ibn Taymiyya’s hermeneutic was to defend traditionalism from what he perceived as heretical ideologies, particular that of the dominant Ash’arism represented by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. In contrast, Ibn Kathīr built off previous traditionalist exegetes, such as that of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī, and indirectly marginalized rational commentaries. The difference between Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathīr’s hermeneutic and exegetical writings becomes clear when we examine the different ways that they interpret the story of Jonah. While Ibn Taymiyya was inspired by a Ḥanbalī tradition that stressed Jonah’s sin and repentance, Ibn Kathīr draws from an Ash’arī tradition that emphasized his worship and obedience.

Theoretical Considerations:

This dissertation will explore tafsīr as a product of larger theological movements and struggles. While the tafsīr literature frequently presents itself as timeless elucidation of God’s eternal word, the genre was intimately connected to their environments’ and authors’ intellectual
projects. I would thus like to explore Qur’anic exegesis “as part of the general intellectual climate in which tafsīr was produced.”

Tafsīrs should not simply be seen as a product of single author, but as representative of greater theological trends. As Saleh explains, “Tafsīr was part of an intellectual movement that was caught in fierce cultural wars.” Various theological movements vied over power and authority throughout Islamic history and Qur’anic commentary became an indispensable tool to promote their doctrines. In particular, Ibn Kathīr was the only scholar within his intellectual circle to write a full commentary of the Qur’ān. His exegesis thus presents us with a unique window into one of the most influential intellectual circles in Islamic history.

I will therefore not explore in great detail the “craft of commentary” in its narrative structures, genre and so forth. While this approach is no doubt beneficial, my interests lie in explaining the various theological considerations that went into the composition of Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr. It is with exploring the theological dynamics behind and within the text that I hope to provide a better understanding of the Tafsīr that plays such a prominent role in how Muslims view the Qur’ān today.

---

96 Saleh, “Marginalia and Peripheries,” 300.
97 For a similar approach that seeks to understand Mu’tazilism through tafsīr see Suleiman A. Mourad, “The Revealed Text and the Intended Subtext: Notes on the Hermeneutics of the Qur’ān in Mu’tazila Discourse as Reflected in the *Tahdhib* of al-Hākim al-Jishumī (d. 494/1101),” in *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion: Studies in Honor of Dimitri Gutas*, eds. Felicitas Opwis and David Reisman (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012), 367-395. Mourad also understands tafsīr as part of theological struggles: “A final point regarding al-Jishumī’ methodology and approach to tafsīr is that he understands Qur’ānic exegesis to be a battlefield, where the exegete fights his opponents over their misinterpretation of scripture. It is not a passive process in which the exegete simply proposes the meanings of the Qur’ānic verses. Rather, it is an opportunity to validate one’s position and point to the fallacies of one’s opponents.” As he later states, “Tafsīr is therefore used as a vehicle for legitimizing one’s beliefs and delegitimizing those of one’s opponents”; Mourad, 385-6.
98 For an example of the “craft of commentary” approach see Bruce Fudge.
Notes on Translation and Transliteration:

All my Qurʾān translations will be drawing from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem’s translation of the Qurʾān. I at times made slight modifications to his translations to help elucidate certain points.

In terms of transliteration, I follow the IJMES transliteration system.

---

Chapter I

Ibn Kathīr as a Shāfiʻī traditionalist

Introduction:

Most biographies neglect the various dynamics around Ibn Kathīr’s life and subsume him under the great Ibn Taymiyya. Ibn Kathīr is often portrayed as the “spokesperson” for Ibn Taymiyya, one who promoted his work and implemented his theories. Ibn Kathīr is more accurately described as a Shāfiʻī traditionalists or a group of Shāfiʻī ḥadīth scholars who maintained a traditionalist creed. While the Shāfiʻī traditionalists were supporters of Ibn Taymiyya, they were not simply his “students” as they are frequently portrayed in the literature. Rather they were independent scholars who subscribed to a different legal school (madhhab) than Ibn Taymiyya and maintained a more fiediest stance towards scripture. Ibn Kathīr was the most junior member within this group and was the primary student of its senior scholars, not Ibn Taymiyya. To best understand Ibn Kathīr’s theological and social position, we will trace the different members of the Shāfiʻī traditionalists and their relation with Ibn Kathīr.

---


2 Kristin Zahra Sands, Sufi Commentaries on the Qur’an in Classical Islam (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 144. As we will see, the idea of Ibn Kathīr as the “spokesperson” for Ibn Taymiyya originates within the Arabic biographical literature.

3 I will be building off George Makdisi’s use of the terms Shāfiʻī traditionalist and Shāfiʻī Ash’arī. For more, see the Introduction.

4 I define “traditionalism” in the Introduction.

5 This is similar to Walid Saleh outlying the “Nishāpūrī school” that al-Tha‘labī and al-Wāḥidī were a part of. See his, “The Last of the Nishāpūrī School of Tafsīr: Al-Wāḥidī and his Significance in the History of Qur’ānic Exegesis,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 126, no. 2 (2006): 223-243.
Ibn Kathīr and the Shāfiʻī traditionalists:

While there is no work that examines Ibn Kathīr’s intellectual circle, there is the important work by Caterina Bori that examines Ibn Taymiyya’s: “Ibn Taymiyya wa-Jamā’atuh: Authority, Conflict and Consensus in Ibn Taymiyya’s Circle.” Bori challenges the widely held notion that Ibn Taymiyya’s circle was “a cohesive unit gravitating around its charismatic center, Ibn Taymiyya.”

Through a close reading of biographical sources, Bori demonstrates that there were differences of opinion that at times led to tension within the circle among both its Ḥanbalī and Shāfiʻī members. Among the most important points of difference was theological debate of whether to stick to the transmitted sources or engage the rational sciences.

The Shāfiʻī traditionalists were among the most powerful members of Ibn Taymiyya’s circle. Traditionalist Shāfiʻīs existed since the beginning of the Shāfiʻī school. As Ahmed al-Shamsy explains, some early traditionalist Shāfiʻīs moved into the emerging Ḥanbalī school “while others became Shāfiʻī and inaugurated an enduring tradition of scholarship within the school - a traditionalist strand of Shāfiʻism - that combined Shāfiʻī jurisprudence with first-rate expertise in ḥadīth.” This traditionalist strand of Shāfiʻism would grow and wane throughout the school’s history but it had an especially strong period in the first half of the 8th/14th century in

---


7 While there are many examples of the Shāfiʻī traditionalists as supporters of Ibn Taymiyya, the most evident is an appendix dated 756/1355 to a biographical work of Ibn Taymiyya which lists his supporters and opponents. The Ḥanbalī scribe starts the list of Ibn Taymiyya’s supporters with the Shāfiʻī traditionalists: al-Dhababī, al-Mızzī, al-Bīrzālī, and Ibn Kathīr. He then moves to mention other supporters, such as Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya. The Ḥanbalī scribe may have put the Shāfiʻī traditionalists first to argue that Ibn Taymiyya was endorsed by more “mainstream” scholars; the Shāfiʻī traditionalists were widely respected, even among the Shāfiʻī Ash’arīs. The list also demonstrates that Ibn Kathīr was an important figure by 756/1355, otherwise the scribe would not have put him in the list (Ibn Kathīr was nonetheless behind al-Dhababī, al-Mizzī, al-Bīrzālī). More work needs to be done on what brought this group of Ibn Taymiyya supporters together; ‘Umar b. ‘Alī Bazzār, al-A’lām al-‘aliyya fi manāqib Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya, ed. Salāḥ al-Dīn Munajjid (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadid, 1976), 79. For more discussion on the scribe see Bazzār, 8.

Damascus. The Damascene Shāfi‘ī traditionalists were influenced by the influx of Ḥanbalīs into Damascus the century before who were escaping the Mongol invasions. The arrival of Ḥanbalīs into the city created tensions within the majority Shāfi‘īs who were torn into conflicting camps.

The Damascus Shāfi‘ī traditionalists identified with Ibn Taymiyya because they were also traditionalists and came from outside the political elite. The Shāfi‘ī traditionalists and Ibn Taymiyya both stressed transmitted sources and were critical of scholastic theology (kalām). Ibn Taymiyya and the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists were additionally migrants to the city and political outsiders. They did not come from established Damascus families, such as the al-Subkīs, who were successfully able to transmit knowledge and political positions to their offspring. Unlike the ruling Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arīs, none of the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists became part of the structures of the state with all of them teaching in independent madrasas.

Nonetheless, despite the similarities between Ibn Taymiyya and the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists, there were some important differences in terms of madhhab affiliation and creed. First and foremost the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists were Shāfi‘īs and not Ḥanbalīs like Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim. By being Shāfi‘ī, they had a different intellectual point of reference than their Ḥanbalī colleagues. The Shāfi‘ī traditionalists identified with the eponym of their school Muḥammad Idris al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820) and saw themselves in the line of the great Shāfi‘īs of the previous century, Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (d. 643/1245) and al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277). Their identification with the Shāfi‘ī school additionally made them loyal to many of their Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arī colleagues who were part and parcel of the Mamlūk political system.

A second important difference was that they were a group of ḥadīth scholars (muḥaddithūn) who ignored speculative theology (kalām) and philosophy. Unlike Ibn Taymiyya

---

10 I will speak about the al-Subkīs in the next Chapter.
who engaged extensively in the rational sciences in order to refute them, Shāfi‘ī traditionalists shied away from the sciences and focused their time on the various branches of ḥadīth—transmission, biographies and history. While Ibn Taymiyya maintained an intellectualized traditionalism that engaged in kalām, the Shāfi‘ī traditionalist subscribed to a “moral theology” which chose to focus on sciences that they believed had a concrete effect on the lives of believers. These two different types of traditionalism caused “tension” between the groups that at times became embarrassingly public.¹¹

Because of the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists’ madhhab affiliation and more fideist stance towards the tradition, they cannot be described as simply “students” of Ibn Taymiyya. While many of Shāfi‘ī traditionalists drew from Ibn Taymiyya, they subscribed to a different form of traditionalism and developed their own intellectual projects. Many of the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists were around the same age as Ibn Taymiyya and they viewed him as a colleague and friend rather than a teacher. Ibn Kathīr was the most junior member of the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists and was a product of its senior scholars. Thus to best understand Ibn Kathīr we need to examine the dynamics of the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists and how he fit within them.

Al-Mizzī (654-742/1256–1341) – The Quintessential Ḥadīth Scholar

The most influential member of the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists was Jamāl al-Dīn Abū Ḥajjāj Yūsuf al-Mizzī. Similar to Ibn Taymiyya, al-Mizzī was not from the Damascus elite but rather came from the village al-Mizza on the outskirts of Damascus. Al-Mizzī studied with great Shāfi‘ī ḥadīth scholars, such as al-Nawawī, but also studied with a large number of Ḥanbalīs.¹²

---

¹¹ I will speak about the “tensions” within traditionalism below in the biography of al-Dhahabī.
Through studying with an array of elite ḥadīth scholars, al-Mizzī would soon develop “into the greatest rijāl expert the Muslim world had ever seen.”

Al-Mizzī had an extraordinary talent in biographies and transmission, leaving behind the monumental work *Tahdīb al-kamāl fī asmā’ al-rijāl*, “a biographic lexicon linking all the transmitters of the isnāds occurring in the ‘six’ canonical collections as well as in some other minor tradition collections.”

Juynboll exclaims that “it constitutes a milestone in the ‘ilm al-rijāl in that it is the first comprehensive lexicon that aims at being exhaustive, much more so than any of its predecessors.” The popularity of the book is seen in its multiple abridgments which include those from al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), Ibn Kathīr and Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1449).

While Bori calls al-Mizzī one of Ibn Taymiyya’s “disciples” he is more accurately described as a close friend and colleague since they grew up with each other and shared many teachers. Al-Mizzī had tremendous respect for Ibn Taymiyya even going as far as to say “somebody like him has not been seen in 400 years” or since the era of the canonical ḥadīth scholars. Yet, al-Mizzī’s traditionalist leanings and relationship with Ibn Taymiyya led him to trouble with the ruling Shāfi‘ī Ash’arīs. In 705/1306, the mayor of Damascus (*nā‘ib al-ṣaltana*) al-Afram was ordered to conduct a council on the orthodoxy of Ibn Taymiyya’s theology. To

---


16 I will speak about Ibn Kathīr’s abridgement of *Tahdīb al-kamāl* in Chapter Three.

17 Bori, 39.

18 Ibn Rajab mentions that al-Mizzī, al-Birzālī and Ibn Taymiyya all studied with the same teacher; Ibn Rajab, 2:308, 316.

19 Ibn Rajab, 2:393.

the disappointment of the Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arīs, the council concluded that Ibn Taymiyya’s theology was acceptable and that it belonged to that of the pious ancestors (salaf). Shortly afterwards, al-Mizzī read a section of al-Bukhārī’s chapter of the Creation of Actions which refutes the heretical Jahmiyya, a sect which was accused of denying God’s attributes through interpreting them figuratively. Many of the Shāfi‘ī scholars in the audience became upset because they believed that al-Mizzī was implicitly attacking them. Al-Afram was absent from the city at the time, so the Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arīs complained to the chief judge Ibn Ṣaṣrā (d. 723/1323) who reacted by imprisoning al-Mizzī. On hearing the news, Ibn Taymiyya went to the jail and released al-Mizzī, demonstrating his close relationship with the great ḥadīth scholar and his immense political power. When al-Afram returned, he became upset and worried about the rising tensions within the city to the point that he decreed that if anybody discussed theology they would be killed.

The entire episode caused a tremendous amount of stress on the Shāfi‘īs to the point that one of the examiners of the trial, al-Zamlakānī (d. 727/1327), accused the leading Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arī Ibn al-Wakīl (d. 716/1317) of poor leadership. Al-Zamlakānī remarked that the Taymiyya because they were too young. I would also add that the Council could be interpreted as a generational struggle between junior and senior scholars. See Jackson, 44.

21 As Joseph Bell explains, the word “Jahmiyya” was used as a common polemic against those who denied God’s absolute power and divine characteristics and attributes: “It is true that the Hanbalite doctor ascribes many of these views to such groups as the Jahmites or the Qadarites, but long before his time these names had become little more than terms of abuse for those who denied the attributes of God or for those who advanced the doctrine of human free will respectively”; Joseph Norment Bell, Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979), 59.


23 Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, 4:283.

24 What is evident in the story is that Ibn Taymiyya did not seek anybody’s permission in releasing al-Mizzī. It seems that the guards acquiesced to Ibn Taymiyya’s demand to free him.

25 Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, 4:283.

26 I will speak about al-Zamlakānī in more detail in the next Chapter.

problems “that occurred with the Shāfi‘īs was little until you became the head of them (ra’īsahum).”28 The Shāfi‘ī chief judge Ibn Ṣaṣrā thought that al-Zamlākānī was implicitly criticizing him and resigned feeling that he now lacked confidence from the Shāfi‘ī base. Ibn Ṣaṣrā nonetheless was returned to the chief justiceship by the powerful Cairo chief justice Shaykh al-Manbijī, a noted Ash‘arī and Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) supporter.29

Ibn Taymiyya’s and al-Mizzī’s close relationship continued even as Ibn Taymiyya’s trials moved to Egypt.30 In a letter to his family, Ibn Taymiyya requests his relatives to seek al-Mizzī’s help to find a book that he wrote regarding churches in his library.31 Such a request demonstrates Ibn Taymiyya’s trust in al-Mizzī and the collegial relationship that they maintained. It further alludes to al-Mizzī’s familiarity with Ibn Taymiyya’s works and his personal spaces.

A second problem arose in 718/1319 when al-Mizzī was nominated to chair the prestigious Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya. The institute had been a Shāfi‘ī stronghold, with the great Shāfi‘ī jurists and ḥadīth scholars Ibn al-Ṣalaḥ and al-Nawawī holding the first posts.32 Ibn Taymiyya lobbied to have al-Mizzī as the director since he felt that he was the most qualified in

---

28 Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, 1:89.
30 Ibn Taymiyya was in Egypt between the years 705-712 AH.
32 Ibn al-Ṣalaḥ was the first to hold the post, while al-Nawawī was the fourth. In the late 7th/13th century, it did not seem difficult for even Ḥanbalīs to teach at the institute; Ibn Rajab, 2:307, 321, 416, 418. But this would change in the early 8th/14th century with growing anti-Ḥanbalī sentiment culminating in the trials of Ibn Taymiyya. For more on Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya see al-Nu‘aymī, 1:19-47. For more on the institutes directors see Ismā‘īl b. ‘Umar b. Kathīr, Ṭabaqāt al-ṣāḥīyya, ed. ‘Abd al-Hafīz Manṣūr, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Madār al-Islāmī, 2004), 2:814.
35
while many Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arīs argued that al-Mizzī did not live up to the endower’s stipulation that the director must uphold the Ash‘arī creed.\textsuperscript{34} To the dismay of his opponents, al-Mizzī professed Ash‘arism and was appointed as the director.\textsuperscript{35} In a display of protest, the city’s elite boycotted the inaugural ceremony causing anger among traditionalists.\textsuperscript{36} Responding to al-Mizzī’s detractors, Ibn Taymiyya boldly claimed, “that since [Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya’s] founding, no one fulfilled the endower [of the institute’s] conditions more than [al-Mizzī].”\textsuperscript{37} Al-Mizzī directed the institute for 23 years until his death (d. 742/1341) and was buried to the west of Ibn Taymiyya’s grave.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{33} Early on, Ibn Taymiyya had tremendous influence on the decision making process of who directed Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya. In 703/1303–4 the mayor accepted Ibn Taymiyya’s suggestion on who should head the institute; Ibn Kathīr, \textit{al-Bidāya}, 14:28.

\textsuperscript{34} Madrasa appointments represented intellectual trends and shifts in power within Damascus. As Michael Chamberlain explains, “Ruling households also fit themselves in to existing practices of political domination and social control. In spite of their political dominance in the city, Nūr al-Dīn, the Ayyūbis, and the Mamliūks only occasionally introduced intrusive state agencies. The \textit{dīwān}s rarely penetrated or coordinated even the ruling elite, much less the lower orders. Instead, rulers tried to gain control over the semi-autonomous (\textit{wazīf}a, pl. \textit{waṣāf} or \textit{mansiṣ}, pl. \textit{Mānsīb}) hitherto in the hands of the \textit{a’yān}. These included, in addition to the \textit{mansīb}s of the shaykh (\textit{mashyakha}) or a Dār al-Ḥadīth or the \textit{muḍāris} (lecturer) of a madrasa (place of reading or lecture), such offices as the various judges or qādis, the market inspector or \textit{muḥtasib}, the administrators of charitable foundations, the supervisor of the treasury, and the later included the administrator of the holy cities of the Hijāz. Few of these offices in Syria were integrated into the \textit{dīwān}s, through the heads of the \textit{dīwān}s were also known as the holders of \textit{mansīb}s and \textit{waṣāf}a. The social power of the \textit{mansīb} - holder was not derived from the impersonal authority of the office, but from the prestige of the office-holder. When rulers made appointments to them it was not from within the bureaucracy but from among the civilian elites who had religious prestige or political capital”; Chamberlain, 50.

\textsuperscript{35} Abū al-Fallāḥ Abū al-Hāyy b. al-‘Imād, \textit{Shahārat al-dhahab fī akhbār man dhahab}, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīda, 1966), 4:136. The Dār al-Ḥadīth was first applied to institutions reserved for the teaching of ḥadīths in Damascus in the sixth/twelfth century and then spread across the Muslim world. Dār al-Ḥadīth represented the increasingly specialized discipline of ḥadīth, that was more focused than mosque or madrasa studies. Al-Mizzī, al-Birzālī, al-Dhahabī, and Ibn Kathīr all occupied directed Dār al-Ḥadīths demonstrating their devotion to the sciences. For more on Dār al-Ḥadīth see Fuat Sezgin, “Dār al-Ḥadīth,” \textit{EI}.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{36} Ibn Kathīr, \textit{al-Bidāya}, 14:87.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibn al-‘Imād, 4:136. Ibn Taymiyya makes this statement based on the endower’s stipulation that if the institute had to choose between a scholar who specialized in transmission (\textit{riwāya}) and one who specialized in knowledge of ḥadīth material (\textit{dirāya}) then the institute should choose the specialist in transmission. Ibn Taymiyya and the Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arīs were emphasizing different parts of the endower’s stipulations, the former the requirement that the director had to be strong in \textit{riwāya} and the later in that he had to be an Ash‘arī. Ibn Taymiyya statement here leads to a footnote by the editor who says that Ibn Taymiyya’s words were “reckless” since the Institute was housed by great scholars such as Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, Abū Shāma al-Maqdašī, and al-Nawawī. The footnote demonstrates that many of the debates of the 8\textsuperscript{th}/14\textsuperscript{th} century Damascus still occur today.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibn al-‘Imād, 4:137. There are no Western studies on al-Mizzī with his \textit{Tahdīḥ} being only used as a reference work in ḥadīth authenticity. More work needs to be done on al-Mizzī’s influential role as a teacher as well as that of a writer.
Al-Birzālī: (667-739/1267-1339) – The Historian of Syria

ʿAlam al-Dīn al-Qāsim al-Birzālī was the second of the great Shāfiʿī traditionalists, a student of al-Mizzī and a colleague of Ibn Taymiyya. Similar to Ibn Taymiyya and al-Mizzī, al-Birzālī did not belong to one of the established Damascus families with his grandfather settling in Syria in the beginning of the 7th/13th century. He taught at the prestigious Nūriyya madrasa and was particularly known for his strength in transmission (riwāyat), with an exceptional grasp over the teachers of his contemporaries. Yet, unlike al-Mizzī, al-Birzālī traveled considerably, moving to Ḥalab and then journeying throughout the Muslim world. He eventually passed away in the Hijaz in a state of pilgrimage (iḥrām). Because of his travels, al-Birzālī’s impact on Damascus was considerably less than that of the others.

Unlike al-Mizzī, who was interested in transmitters, al-Birzālī was attracted to another branch of ḥadīth science, biographies and history. Al-Birzālī was known to have written a continuation (dhayl) of the biographical dictionary of the Shāfiʿī traditionalist Abū Shāma (d. 665/1268), which started in the year Abū Shāma was killed or the year that al-Birzālī was born. Much of al-Birzālī’s history has either been lost or is still in manuscript form, but nevertheless much of his writings are incorporated into other historical works. Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī (d. 795/1392), for instance, extensively quotes al-Birzālī in his biographical dictionary

40 Al-Dhahabi, Tārīkh, 53:361. Al-Birzālī studied Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhī, Sunan Ibn Majah, Musnad al-Shāfiʿī, Musnad Imām Ahmad, and the Musnad al-Ṭabarānī. This list demonstrates al-Birzālī’s expertise in ḥadīth and his familiarity with Ḥanbalī sources such as the Musnad of Ibn Ḥanbal. I speak about the importance of the Musnad to Ibn Kathīr in Chapter Three.
41 Al-Dhahabi, Tārīkh, 53:361.
42 Ibn Kathīr devotes a sizable biography to Abū Shāma, mentioning that it was said that he had reached the level of ijtihād and highlighting that he was assassinated by his opponents; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 13:251. For more on Abū Shāma see Konrad Hirschlerk, “Pre-eighteenth-century Traditions of Revivalism: Damascus in the Thirteenth Century,” Bulletin of SOAS 68, no. 2 (2005):195–214.
43 Al-Dhahabi, Tārīkh, 53:360.
44 For more on the manuscript of Birzālī’s history see Muriel Rouabah “Une édition inattendue: le Taʿrīk d’al-Birzālī,” Arabica 57, no. 2-3 (2010): 309-318. I speak more about how Ibn Kathīr draws from al-Birzālī’s historical works in Chapter Three.
on Ḥanbalī scholars. Ibn Rajab’s use of al-Birzālī not only demonstrates al-Birzālī’s great status as an historian but the connection between Ḥanbalī scholars and the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists.

Al-Birzālī’s close relationship with Ibn Taymiyya appears in his moving account of Ibn Taymiyya’s funeral procession quoted in Ibn Kathīr’s *al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya.* After describing the tremendous event, al-Birzālī concludes the account by expressing that “between [Ibn Taymiyya] and I there was a great love and companionship from a young age.” Al-Birzālī had grown up with Ibn Taymiyya, was distraught with his death and felt deep remorse that he could not attend Ibn Taymiyya’s funeral due to his travels.

Al-Birzālī’s own death caused al-Mizzī a tremendous amount of sadness. As al-Dhahabī recounts, “a group of scholars felt sad with [al-Birzālī’s] passing away, especially his companion and friend (rafīquhu) Abū Ḥajjāj (al-Mizzī), our Shaykh. He cried [thinking about] him more than once. Each one of them would praise (yu’aẓẓim) the other and knew the others stature (fadl).” Al-Mizzī would succeed al-Birzālī as the director of Nūriyya.

**Al-Dhahabī (673/675-748, 1274-1348) – The Historian of Islam**

Shams al-Dīn Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Dhahabī represented the second generation of Shāfi‘ī traditionalists. Similar to the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists before him, al-Dhahabī studied with many Hanbalis, but also studied significantly under other Shāfi‘ī traditionalists such as al-Birzālī and al-Mizzī.

---

45 See Ibn Rajab’s *Kitāb al-Dhayl ‘alā Tabaqāt al-ḥanābila.*
46 Ibn Kathīr quotes al-Birzālī’s entry of the funeral procession and prayer *(janāza)* even though al-Birzālī was not present at the actual events.
47 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya,* 14:134. Scholars have mistakenly attributed this statement to Ibn Kathīr. Ibn Kathīr is quoting here from al-Birzālī’s history.
49 Al-Nu‘aymī, 1:113.
Al-Dhahabī explains that it was al-Birzālī who first encouraged him to study ḥadīth. As al-Dhahabī recounts, “When [al-Birzālī] saw my handwriting he said ‘your handwriting resembles the handwriting of the ḥadīth scholars (muḥaddithīn).’” His words left a mark on me.”

Al-Birzālī’s interest in history is evident on al-Dhahabī who became one of the greatest historians of Islam. Al-Dhahabī composed the monumental Tārīkh al-Islām, a history that begins with the genealogy of Muḥammad and ends in Mamlūk times, and the astounding Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’, an immense biographical dictionary that covers Muslim notables throughout Islamic history.

Al-Dhahabī eventually became a student of al-Mizzī and one of his most ardent admirers. Al-Dhahabī heaps lavish praise on al-Mizzī for being both a first-rate scholar and wonderful person. Al-Dhahabī exclaims, “he was the great ḥadīth scholar (ḥāfiz) of the times, the ḥadīth scholar of Egypt and Syria, standard bearer of tradition, knower of the [different] types of reports, knower of our dilemmas (mu‘ḍilātina), the clarifier of our difficulties.”

Al-Mizzī was an “ocean with no coast” because of his tremendous knowledge of transmitters, such as the generation in which they belonged to and their strength in transmission. Al-Dhahabī spent some of his early education with al-Mizzī, studying Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī with him among other works.

---

50 Al-Dhahabī, Tārīkh, 53:361. Al-Dhahabī was born between 673-77 AH making him a good ten years younger than al-Birzālī.
51 Ibn Kathīr’s al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya is more ambitious than al-Dhahabī’s Tārīkh al-Islām since it attempts to capture the beginning of human history until his time. I will speak more about al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya in Chapter Three. More work needs to be done comparing the different historical works that were composed during the Mamlūk period.
52 Al-Dhahabī also summarized Tārīkh Baghdad and Tārīkh Damashq.
53 Egypt and Syria encompassed the domain of the Mamlūks.
54 Al-Dhahabī, Tārīkh, 53:382.
55 Al-Dhahabī, Tārīkh, 53:384.
56 Al-Dhahabī, Tārīkh, 53:385.
Al-Dhahabī’s respect and admiration of al-Mizzī led him to summarize his *Tahdīḥ al-kamāl fī asmā’ al-rijāl*, a book he says that every scholar needs.⁵⁷

But most importantly, al-Dhahabī was attracted to al-Mizzī’s personal character believing him to be modest, forbearing and tolerant, yet extremely knowledgeable and wise: “[al-Mizzī] spoke very little except when he was asked, then he would benefit, answer and accomplish.”⁵⁸ Al-Mizzī was extremely good to his students and guests, feeding them to his own detriment.⁵⁹

He further upheld the character of the *salaf* in that he “abstained in a quintessential manner from disputation (*jadal*).” Such a statement must be understood in opposition to Ibn Taymiyya, who engaged his adversaries. For al-Dhahabī, the followers of the *salaf* were confident in their creed so it was beneath them to engage in the polemics of their opponents.⁶⁰

After al-Mizzī passed away, al-Dhahabī aspired to succeed him at Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya, but it was the Shāfi‘ī Ash’arī Chief judge Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355) who secured the appointment.⁶¹ Similarly to al-Mizzī, al-Dhahabī faced the problem of convincing his colleagues that he lived up to the endower’s stipulations that the director must be Ash’arī.⁶² Al-Dhahabī was a friend of al-Subkī but being passed over for such an appointment could have caused him great disappointment. Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya was the preeminent Dār al-Ḥadīth in Damascus and it would have been a tremendous honor to succeed his teacher al-Mizzī.

As he did with his other students, al-Mizzī most likely encouraged al-Dhahabī to become further acquainted with Ibn Taymiyya.⁶³ Al-Dhahabī notes that “there was a definite

---


⁶⁰ Al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 53:384. For more on al-Dhahabī’s “theology of the *salaf*” see the Introduction.


⁶² Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Dhayl ‘alā Tabaqāt al-ḥuffāẓ* (Cairo: Wahba Book Shop, 1973), 522. Al-Suyūṭī mentions that there was “talk” (*mutakallam fī*) or doubt about whether al-Dhahabī was an Ash’arī.

companionship (ṣuhba) between Ibn Taymiyya and al-Mizzī” which lead to “studying ḥadīth (sami’a) together, discussion[s] and gathering[s], love and happiness,” It was Ibn Taymiyya, al-Dhahabī explains, who lobbied al-Mizzī to secure the position at Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya, but the appointment was delayed because of al-Mizzī’s questionable theology.

Al-Dhahabī soon became an admirer of Ibn Taymiyya, taken aback with his command of the textual tradition. Al-Dhahabī testified to Ibn Taymiyya’s extraordinary memory and declared “that every ḥadīth that Ibn Taymiyya does not know is not a ḥadīth.”

Yet, unlike al-Mizzī or al-Birzālī, al-Dhahabī was openly critical of Ibn Taymiyya believing him to be polemical and polarizing. In his entry on Ibn Taymiyya in Tārīkh al-Islām, al-Dhahabī mentions that he was among those who loved Ibn Taymiyya but saw his flaws. “I do not believe that he was sinless (had Ḱisma), absolutely not (kallā), despite his vast knowledge, extreme courage, fluidity of his mind, his regard in the sanctities of religion, he was man among men.” Al-Dhahabī felt that Ibn Taymiyya became excessively angry with his enemies causing them to become obstinate in their opposition. If Ibn Taymiyya were gentle with his opponents, al-Dhahabī believed, he would be able to bring them over to his side.

Al-Dhahabī’s most critical writing of Ibn Taymiyya is found in al-Naṣiḥa al-dhahabiyya, a piece of advice that al-Dhahabī allegedly provides Ibn Taymiyya. In the treatise, al-Dhahabī is critical of Ibn Taymiyya “specifically against his pride, his obstinacy, intolerance, captiousness, and lack of tact.” Donald Little argues that the advice is authentic based on the fact that it

64 Al-Dhahabī, Tārīkh, 53:386.
66 Al-Dhahabī, Tārīkh, 53:261.
67 Al-Dhahabī, Tārīkh, 53:261. Little translates a similar phrase found in another one of al-Dhahabī’s writings; Little, “Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose,” Studia Islamica 41, no. 1 (1975):104.
68 Al-Dhahabī, Tārīkh, 53:261. Part of al-Dhahabī’s criticisms of Ibn Taymiyya may have had to do with the fact that he saw al-Mizzī as the ideal scholar - reserved, diplomatic, modest, subtle and discreet. Al-Dhahabī does not use any of these attributes to describe Ibn Taymiyya but rather is critical of Ibn Taymiyya’s polemical tone.
69 Little, “Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose,” 100.
harbors the critical tone of al-Dhahābī’s other writings on Ibn Taymiyya. In the piece of advice, al-Dhahābī explains to Ibn Taymiyya that his engagement with philosophy led him to become exceedingly critical and obsessed with the mistakes of those before him. For al-Dhahābī, this was against the teaching of the Prophet Muḥammad who taught to speak only well of the predecessors and leave what does not concern oneself. As al-Dhahābī states, “Oh friend (rajal), you have swallowed the poison of the philosophers and their compositions repeatedly, and with the increased use of poison the body becomes addicted to it.” Al-Dhahābī contends that Ibn Taymiyya’s constant indulgences with the rational sciences made him leave aspects of the Sunna which advocated for the highest moral and ethical character. Similar to other fieriest traditionalists, al-Dhahābī believed it was better to hold firm to the Sunna than to preoccupy oneself with kalām. But despite any differences that al-Dhahābī had with Ibn Taymiyya, he was one of his supporters, abridging Ibn Taymiyya’s Minhāj al-sunna and succeeding him at Dār al-Ḥadīth Sukriyya.

---

70 Little, “Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose,” 100.
71 As Melchert explains, the traditionalists used the ḥadīth of leaving “what does not concern him” as a critique of kalām; Christopher Melchert, “The Piety of the Ḥadīth Folk,” International Journal of Middle East Studies 34, no. 3 (2002): 433.
73 For more discussion on the authenticity of the treatise see Caterina Bori, Ibn Taymiyya: Una Vita Esemplare (Pisa: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 2003),142-8, 191-4.
74 Al-Nu‘aymī, 1:78. Al-Dhahābī’s criticisms towards Ibn Taymiyya extend to his pupil Ibn al-Qayyim. Al-Dhahābī mentions in his al-Mu’jam al-mukhtaṣṣ, a biographical dictionary of his teachers and students, that Ibn al-Qayyim studied with him and that he was involved in the spread of knowledge. However, al-Dhahābī ends his entry saying “but he was self-satisfied with his opinion[s] and hasty in affairs (jarī’ ‘alā al-umūr). May God forgive him”; The entry is fascinating because it both affirms the connection between Ibn al-Qayyim and al-Dhahābī but then creates separation through the critical remark. Al-Dhahābī’s criticism of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim revolves around the personality traits of them being stubborn, arrogant and polarizing. But the root of these criticisms may have been that Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim subscribed to a different form of traditionalism and took strong stances on issues that al-Dhahābī did not fully agree with; Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dhahābī, al-Mu’jam al-mukhtass (al-Ṭā’īf, Saudi Arabia: Maktābat al-Siddīq, 1988), 269. In the footnotes, the editors mention that in the manuscript that they edited al-Dhahābī says that Ibn al-Qayyim was “sayyīʿ al-ʿaql” or poor of mind. They removed this phrase because later scholars quoting from al-Mu’jam al-mukhtass, such as Ibn Ḥajar, Ibn Ḥajar, and al-Shawkānī did not relay this phrase. The editors explain that such a phrase would not be expected of al-Dhahābī after he praised Ibn al-Qayyim in the entry. But a close reading of the entry demonstrates that al-Dhahābī does not praise Ibn al-Qayyim excessively, at least not to the extent that he does with other scholars within the dictionary, which
Western literature has difficulty categorizing al-Dhahabī, with some emphasizing his Shāfi‘ī identity while others his relationship with Ibn Taymiyya. Drawing from the Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arī Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī’s Tabaqāt al-shāfi‘īyya al-kubrā, Bencheneb presents the Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arī view of al-Dhahabī, a great ḥadīth scholar who had a problematic theology. He notes that al-Dhahabī studied with a wide range of teachers, amongst the most prominent of them was al-Mizzī. Bencheneb then mentions that al-Dhahabī was unable to succeed al-Mizzī as the director of Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya because of questionable issues regarding theology. Bencheneb concludes the entry explaining that some of al-Dhahabī’s own students were critical of al-Dhahabī for adopting anthropomorphist tendencies. What is fascinating about the entry is that it does not even mention Ibn Taymiyya and the fact that al-Dhahabī was one of his supporters.

The literature, on the other hand, highlights al-Dhahabī’s tumultuous relationship with Ibn Taymiyya, once again furthering the trend that the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists are primarily known through their connection with the great scholar. In her “Ibn Taymiyya wa-Jamā’atuhu,” Bori devotes a section on al-Dhahabī’s relationship with Ibn Taymiyya. She explains that al-Dhahabī’s attitude towards “Ibn Taymiyya vacillates between unqualified praise of his intellect gives the possibility that the phrase maybe authentic. Other traditionalist scholars coming after al-Dhahabī, could have omitted the phrase because it conflicted with what they believed of Ibn al-Qayyim. A more likely possibility is that the phrase was added by a scribe with negative feelings towards Ibn al-Qayyim. It is not inconceivable that a Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arī copied al-Dhahabī’s works and that he slipped the phrase into the entry. The phrase “poor of mind” does not fit with other criticisms of al-Dhahabī of Ibn al-Qayyim which focus on his stubbornness, not his lack of intellect. Al-Dhahabī was similarly critical of Ibn Taymiyya’s recalcitrance but never questioned his immense mind.

The view of al-Dhahabī as a great ḥadīth scholar with a questionable creed is presented by the Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arī Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī who I discuss in the next Chapter. Bencheneb does not mention the madhhab affiliation of these teachers, which would be important in situating al-Dhahabī.

Bencheneb mentions that al-Dhahabī had questionable views regarding canon law. This is not entirely correct with al-Dhahabī having similar problems to al-Mizzī in proving that he was an Ash‘arī.

We will explore al-Dhahabī’s relationship with the Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arīs in the next Chapter.

This “student” is Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī.
and sharp criticism of his public conduct.”

Bori details how al-Dhahabī was frustrated with Ibn Taymiyya’s difficult personality and inability to work with others. In particular, she highlights how much of al-Dhahabī’s criticisms were connected to Ibn Taymiyya’s theology of combining reason and revelation in theological speculation.

Despite Bori’s strong insights, she continues the theme that the members of the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists were simply students of Ibn Taymiyya. She calls al-Dhahabī a “discipline” of Ibn Taymiyya and in an earlier work, she describes al-Dhahabī as a “close pupil” of his “master” Ibn Taymiyya. Al-Dhahabī was no doubt influenced by Ibn Taymiyya but he was primarily the student of al-Mizzī. Unlike with Ibn Taymiyya, al-Dhahabī is never critical of al-Mizzī alluding to his comfort with the great ḥadīth scholar’s personality and traditionalism.

Bencheneb and Bori present different sides of al-Dhahabī, one his problematic Shāfi‘ī allegiance and the other his uncomfortable relationship with Ibn Taymiyya. More work needs to be done on the complexities of al-Dhahabī’s Shāfi‘ī traditionalist identity.

Ibn Kathīr (700-774/1300-1373) - The Junior Scholar

‘Imād al-Dīn Ismā‘īl b. ʿUmar b. Kathīr represents the youngest of the Damascene Shāfi‘ī traditionalists. Unlike the others who studied significantly with both Shāfi‘ī and Ḥanbalī scholars, Ibn Kathīr studied primarily within Shāfi‘ī traditionalist circles.

In his acclaimed universal history, *al-Bidāya wa l-nihāya*, Ibn Kathīr relays that his family belonged to the Quraysh tribe and that his father was born and lived in the outskirts of

---

82 Bori, “Ibn Taymiyya wa-Jamāʿatuhu,” 39. I will speak of Ibn Taymiyya’s attempt to reconcile reason and revelation in Chapter Four.
84 I will speak about *al-Bidāya wa l-nihāya* in Chapter Three.
Damascus. His dad’s early education consisted of studying poetry and Hanifī jurisprudence but he eventually became a Shāfī’ī, solidifying his family as a Shāfī’ī one. His father would become a noted preacher (khaṭīb) known for his eloquence, poetry and command over his audience. His father’s oratory skills led him to be appointed as an official khaṭīb in a small village. It is there that he married Ibn Kathīr’s mother who was his second wife. Ibn Kathīr’s father passed away in 703/1303-4 when Ibn Kathīr was only three. As he recounts, “I never met [my father] except as a dream.” His father did not leave behind any works except some love poetry which Ibn Kathīr quotes but feels the need to ask God’s forgiveness for.

Ibn Kathīr explains that he was named Ismā‘īl after his older brother who died in a tragic accident of falling off a roof. The older brother Ismā‘īl was studying in Damascus at the time, and already finished much of his early education, which included memorizing the Qur’ān, studying introductory grammar, Shāfī’ī jurisprudence, and the sciences of jurisprudence (uṣūl al-fiqh). When he died, Ibn Kathīr’s father was devastated and mourned over him with many verses of poetry. Ibn Kathīr was born shortly after Ismā‘īl passed away and his father named him after his late brother. Ibn Kathīr explains that “I was born to him after [the accident]; he named me Ismā‘īl after him. Thus the oldest of his children was Ismā‘īl and the last and

---

85 Ibn Kathīr devotes a sizable biography to his father most likely because one’s father dictated a scholar’s future career. As Chamberlain explains, “But the most significant nonintellectual fact contributing to the success of an academic career in Mamlūk Cairo was not weather per se, but having as one’s father a prominent scholar and teacher.” As he further explains, “To a certain degree, this may be viewed as a thoroughly natural phenomenon: the son of a scholar was more likely to be introduced early and attracted to the academic profession, and indeed, fathers are often listed in the biographical dictionaries as the first of an individual’s many teachers”; Chamberlain, 119-20. Having a father as a prominent teacher or scholar could help be a “catalyst” for a student’s career; Chamberlain, 121.

86 We can tell that Ibn Kathīr’s father either divorced his first wife or she had passed away through Ibn Kathīr’s statement that “born to [my father] were several children from [my] mother (al-wālida) and another before her (min ukhrā qablihā)”; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:32.

87 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:31.

88 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:33.
youngest of his children was Ismā‘īl.” Being named Ismā‘īl set up important familial expectations for Ibn Kathīr to live up to, most importantly continuing on the path of scholarship.

At the age of seven, Ibn Kathīr and his family relocated to the religious and intellectual center of the region, Damascus. The family was now supported by Ibn Kathīr’s full brother, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, who Ibn Kathīr was extremely close to and started his early education with. Ibn Kathīr thus did not have the benefit of growing up in an elite family, such as the ‘Asākirs or al-Subkīs, with his family being political outsiders.

Ibn Kathīr’s tremendous rise would be predicated on his ability to become one of the most prominent students of al-Mizzī. Al-Dhahabī lists Ibn Kathīr as one of the students trained by (takharraja min) al-Mizzī, a rigorous process that included the study of the Musnad of Ibn Ḥanbal, the six canonical ḥadīth collections (al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dawūd, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā‘ī and Ibn Mājah), the ḥadīth collection of al-Ṭabarānī, Mālik’s Muwatta’ and the Sunan of al-Bayhaqi. Ibn Kathīr also studied al-Mizzī’s monumental Tahdīb al-asmā’ which he later abridged. Al-Mizzī became so impressed with Ibn Kathīr that he allowed him to marry his...

---

89 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:32.
90 Ibn Kathīr studied much of the same curriculum that his brother Ismā‘īl did.
91 For more on how powerful families were able to control Damascus see Michael Chamberlain. Ibn Kathīr’s relationship with the al-Subkīs will be discussed in the next Chapter.
92 The success of Ibn Kathīr could be read as a classic “rags to scholar” story of medieval Islam. The fact that an orphan coming from an obscure family became one of the most important Mamlūk scholars would not have been possible if it were not for the fluid system of Islamic education. For more on Islamic education during the Mamlūk period see Jonathan Berkey’s The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: a Social History of Islamic Education (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).
93 Al-Dhahabī, Tārīkh, 53:385. What is interesting in this list is that it does not only contain the six ḥadīth collections but the Musnad of Ibn Ḥanbal, which demonstrates al-Mizzī’s familiarity with Ḥanbalī sources. I speak about Ibn Kathīr’s engagement with the Musnad in Chapter Three.
daughter Zaynab. Ibn Kathīr became al-Mizzī’s son-in-law and was incorporated into the family.

Ibn Kathīr developed a tremendous respect for al-Mizzī believing him to be among the greatest ḥadīth scholars in the Mamlūk era. In the year 718/1319, Ibn Kathīr records that al-Mizzī was appointed the directorship of Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya and then adds that none of the scholarly elite or city notables attended his inauguration. In a state of frustration, Ibn Kathīr states, similarly to Ibn Taymiyya, that “no one before him was more deserving of directing [the] institute than him.” This was a daring statement coming from a Shāfiʻī, since some of the most respected and influential Shāfiʻīs, such as Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ and al-Nawawī, held the initial directorships.

Ibn Kathīr’s reverence for al-Mizzī’s scholarship continues in his biographical dictionary of Shāfiʻī jurists. At one point, Ibn Kathīr goes through the list of all the directors of Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya and when he arrives to al-Mizzī’s name he praises him as a leader (imām), ḥadīth scholar (ḥafiz), proof (hujja), great scholar (jahbadha), teacher of the ḥadīth scholars (shaykh al-muhaddithīn), and ocean of benefit. He then prays for al-Mizzī to have a long life.

---

94 A student marrying his teacher’s daughter was a sign of a close personal relationship and intellectual affinity. For instance, Ibn Kathīr notes in his Ṭabaqāt al-fuqahā’ al-shāfi’iyyīn that one of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ’s (d. 643/1245) students “became a companion of Shaykh Taqī al-Dīn b. al-Ṣalāḥ, he served him, studied jurisprudence with him and married his daughter”; Ibn Kathīr, Ṭabaqāt, 2:837. In another instance, Ibn Kathīr says “he was the Shaykh of the madhhab in his time, he studied jurisprudence with Shaykh Qutub al-Dīn al-Nishaburī and married his daughter”; Ibn Kathīr, Ṭabaqāt, 2:793. For more on the importance of marriages as religious and political alliances see Richard W. Bulliet, The Patricians of Nishapur: a Study in Medieval Islamic Social History (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 40.

95 It is not inconceivable to think that Ibn Kathīr viewed al-Mizzī as a father figure, especially since his father died when he was only three.

96 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:87.

97 I speak about Ibn Kathīr’s biographical dictionary in Chapter Three.
and die in a state of good deeds. Ibn Kathîr provides none of these titles to any of the previous directors showing his tremendous respect for his teacher and mentor.

Ibn Kathîr’s deference to al-Mizzî is further demonstrated in his *Tafsîr* where he references him 19 times, the most of all his teachers. Ibn Kathîr frequently uses verbs in the first person singular, such as “I heard” (*sami’tu*) him, “I was listening” (*asma’u*) to him, and “I presented to him” (*‘aradtu ‘alayhi*) all indicating that Ibn Kathîr interacted with al-Mizzî significantly and in a variety of settings. Ibn Kathîr, for instance, mentions in the commentary of 36:69 that “I asked (*sa’altu*) our teacher the great ḥadîth scholar Abû Ḥajjâj al-Mizzî about this ḥadîth and he said it is to be rejected (*munkar*).” Here Ibn Kathîr mentions that he personally asked al-Mizzî about this ḥadîth, which demonstrates that Ibn Kathîr saw him as an important reference. In verse 38:25, Ibn Kathîr mentions that “our teacher the great ḥadîth scholar Abû Ḥajjâj al-Mizzî reported to me (*akhbaranî*) while it was recited upon him and I was listening.” The quotation alludes to an audition where a student was reading a ḥadîth to al-Mizzî and Ibn Kathîr was a participant observer.

We can also determine from the *Tafsîr* that al-Mizzî was alive for much of the work’s composition giving him the opportunity to consult his teacher. In his commentary of verse 21:104, Ibn Kathîr argues that a particular ḥadîth should be rejected “even if it is in *Sunan* of Abû Dâwûd” since a group of ḥadîth scholars have made clear that the ḥadîth is forged, “among them is our teacher (*shaykhunâ*), the great ḥadîth scholar (*ḥâfîẓ al-kabîr*) Abû Ḥajjâj al-

---

99 This quote also demonstrates that al-Mizzî was alive during Ibn Kathîr’s composition of this entry.
100 The ḥadîth in question deals with whether the Prophet engaged in poetry.
103 This is an *ijâza* setting where a student reads the entire *isnâd* of the tradition while the others in attendance also receive the license since they are participant observers. For more on ḥadîth and *ijâzas* see Eerick Dickinson’s “Ibn al-Ṣalâh al-Shahrâzûrî and the Isnâd,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122, no. 3 (2002): 481-505.
104 I will discuss Ibn Kathîr’s ḥadîth methodology further in Chapter Three.
Mizzī, may God widen (fassaha) his age, delay his death (‘ajlihi) and give him an end in the best of his deeds.” Ibn Kathīr offers high praise for al-Mizzī, calling him “our teacher” (shaykhunā) and declaring him a “great ḥadīth scholar” (ḥāfiẓ al-kabīr). He then prays for al-Mizzī to have a long life and to die in a state of good deeds, which means that al-Mizzī must have been alive during Ibn Kathīr’s commentary of 21:104, which is a little more than midway through the *tafsīr.*

It is through Ibn Kathīr’s association with al-Mizzī that Ibn Kathīr became acquainted with al-Birzālī and al-Dhahabī. It is unclear to what extent al-Birzālī taught Ibn Kathīr but his influence upon him is tremendous with *al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya* being a continuation (dhayl) of al-Birzālī’s history. Ibn Kathīr offers strong praise for al-Birzālī in *al-Bidāya* calling him a teacher (shaykh), leader (imām), great ḥadīth scholar (ḥāfiẓ) and “the historian of Syria.” He exclaims “that he had beautiful handwriting, beautiful character, he was well appreciated among the judges and teachers of the students of knowledge. I heard Ibn Taymiyya say ‘the transmission of al-Birzālī is like an engraving on stone.’ His colleagues (aṣḥābuhu) from every group loved and honored him.” Ibn Kathīr was impressed with al-Birzālī’s outstanding character which allowed him to be well-respected throughout the political and theological spectrum.

Ibn Kathīr had a more intimate connection with al-Dhahabī who was one of his primary teachers. Al-Dhahabī mentions Ibn Kathīr in his *al-Mu’jam al-muktaṣṣ,* noting that Ibn Kathīr had an outstanding memory which allowed him to memorize many texts. He then adds, as a

---

106 Ibn Kathīr was 42 when al-Mizzī passed away giving him a full 14 years more with al-Mizzī then with Ibn Taymiyya.
107 In *al-Bidāya,* Ibn Kathīr frequently quotes al-Birzālī and then adds his own historical insights. I will speak more on how Ibn Kathīr builds off of al-Birzālī’s works in Chapter Three.
critical teacher, that he “would at times mix up (damaja) his readings.” Ibn Kathīr’s close relation to al-Dhahabī is seen in his Tafsīr where he mentions him seven times praising him as our teacher (shaykunā) and as a great ḥadīth scholar (ḥāfiz). He frequently uses the phrases “he reported to me” (akhbaranī) and “related to me” (ḥakā lī), alluding to direct contact. In his commentary of verse 4:31, which discusses major sins, Ibn Kathīr even promotes al-Dhahabī’s works by saying “and people have composed many works on major sins (kabāʿir), among them is our teacher the ḥadīth scholar Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Dhahabī, whose work reached [the number of] 70 major sins.”

Ibn Kathīr succeeded al-Dhahabī as the teacher of ḥadīth at Umm Sāliḥ and Ṣāliḥiyya and was also passed over for the important post of director of Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya. Ibn Kathīr was appointed to the institute for only a couple of weeks before it was taken away from him and given to the Shāfiʿī Ash’arī Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī.

Through his connection with the Shāfiʿī traditionalists, Ibn Kathīr was soon introduced to Ibn Taymiyya and became closely associated with him. From an early period, Ḥanbalī and Shāfiʿī Ash’arī sources overemphasize the influence of Ibn Taymiyya on Ibn Kathīr. For instance, in his entry on Ibn Kathīr, Ibn al-‘Imād al-Ḥanbalī (d. 1089/1679) stresses Ibn Kathīr’s relationship with Ibn Taymiyya and concludes stating that Ibn Kathīr was buried “next to his

---

109 Al-Dhahabi, al-Mu’jam, 74. For a more comprehensive list of Ibn Kathīr’s teachers see al-Shalash, 56.
110 Ismā’il b. ‘Umar b. Kathīr, Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿāzīm, 12 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat Awlād al-Shaykh li-Turāth, 2009), 3:1356. I found this version of Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr to be the best since it compares the two oldest extant manuscripts and evaluates (takhrīj) all of the ḥadīths.
111 Al-Nu’aymī, 1:36.
112 Al-Nu’aymī, 1:326.
113 Ibn Kathīr’s appointment to Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya demonstrates the prominence that he attained towards the end of his life. Other examples include a manuscript dated 764/1363 of Ibn Kathīr’s Ikhtīṣār ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth which introduces him as our teacher (shaykhunā), our leader (imām), exceedingly knowledgeable (‘allāma) and later states that he is the teacher of ḥadīth scholars and tafsīr specialists of Syria (shuyūkh al-muhaddithīn wa ahl al-tafsīr bi’l-Shām). The scribe must have felt that Ibn Kathīr was a great scholar, especially in ḥadīth and exegesis. This statement also suggests Ibn Kathīr’s works spread during his lifetime gaining him a large amount of notoriety and respect; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bāʿith al-ḥathīth: sharḥ ikhtīṣār ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth, ed. ‘Alī Ḥasan ‘Allī ’Abd al-Ḥamīd (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Maʿārif li’l-Nashr wa’l-Tawziʿ, 1996), 53.
114 Al-Nu’aymī, 1:36. I will speak about Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī in the next Chapter.
teacher (*shaykihi*) Ibn Taymiyya.\(^{115}\) Additionally, on a copy of Ibn Kathîr’s *Mawlad al-Rusûl Allâh*,\(^{116}\) the Ḥanbali scribe introduces Ibn Kathîr as a “leader” (*imâm*), “exceedingly knowledgeable” (*'allama*), “Shaykh al-Islâm”\(^{117}\) but also as the “student of Ibn Taymiyya” (*talmîdh Ibn Taymiyya*).\(^{118}\) Ḥanbali scholars would no doubt want to emphasize the influence that the Ḥanbali Ibn Taymiyya had on the Shâfi‘î Ibn Kathîr. Similarly, in his biographical dictionary of Damascene madrasas, al-Nu‘aymî (d. 927/1521) explains that Ibn Kathîr “took a great deal from Ibn Taymiyya” and also ends his entry noting that he was buried “next his teacher (*shaykihi*) Ibn Taymiyya.”\(^{119}\) Some Shâfi‘î Ash‘arî sources wanted to stress Ibn Taymiyya’s influence on Ibn Kathîr to argue that he did not represent the mainstream Shâfi‘î tradition.

This constant emphasis of Ibn Taymiyya’s influence on Ibn Kathîr has seeped into Western scholarship. In her brief biographical summary of Ibn Kathîr, Jane MacAullife remarks that, “Certainly the most famous of Ibn Kathîr’s teachers, and perhaps the one who influenced him the most, was the Ḥanbali theologian and jurisconsult Ibn Taymiyyah.”\(^{120}\) Norman Calder also states that Ibn Kathîr “was an expert on ḥadîth and a disciple of Ibn Taymiyyah – together adequate symbols of his intellectual affiliation.”\(^{121}\) Yet, a brief survey of Ibn Kathîr’s

---

\(^{115}\) Ibn al-‘Imâd, 4:232.

\(^{116}\) It is unclear when the manuscript was copied but it must have been after Ibn Kathîr’s passing since the scribe mentions “May God bless his soul” after mentioning Ibn Kathîr’s name. For more on the manuscript tradition of this work see Ibn Kathîr, *Mawlid Rasûl Allâh*, ed. Ṣâlâh al-Dîn Munajjid (Beirut: Dâr al-Kitâb al-Jadîd, 1961), 8-11.

\(^{117}\) This is the only instance in the pre-modern sources where I have seen Ibn Kathîr given the title Shaykh al-Islâm.


\(^{119}\) Al-Nu‘aymî, 1:36-37. I believe Al-Nu‘aymî has an Ash‘arî bias since he calls the Shâfi‘î Ash‘arî Taqî al-Dîn al-Subkî “Shaykh al-Islâm” while he does give the same epithet to Ibn Taymiyya. Many Ash‘arîs considered Taqî al-Dîn al-Subkî the Shaykh al-Islâm while traditionalists referred to Ibn Taymiyya with the same title. I will speak about these two competing Shaykhs al-Islâm in Chapter Two.


references to Ibn Taymiyya\textsuperscript{122} demonstrates that while he was no doubt a supporter he was in no way a product of Ibn Taymiyya.\textsuperscript{123}

For instance, in works written years after Ibn Taymiyya’s death, Ibn Kathîr continuously reveres Ibn Taymiyya by referencing his works and calling him “our teacher” (\textit{shaykhunâ}) and “exceedingly knowledgeable” (\textit{‘allâma}). In his \textit{Ikhtisâr ʿulūm al-ḥadîth}, Ibn Kathîr cites Ibn Taymiyya’s opinion that the community has reached consensus that the ḥadîths within al-Bukhârî and Muslim are authentic.\textsuperscript{124} Similarly, through the surviving chapters of Ibn Kathîr’s \textit{Kitâb al-Aḥkâm al-kabîr}, Ibn Kathîr cites Ibn Taymiyya’s \textit{fatwā} that it is permissible for women who are planning to go to the public bath (\textit{ḥammâm}) to combine their prayers.\textsuperscript{125} In another instance, Ibn Kathîr cites Ibn Taymiyya’s agreement with Ibn Ḥanbal that the \textit{basmala} should be recited out loud in audible prayers only in Medina. The was to inform the city’s inhabitants, who did not read the \textit{basmala} at all during Ibn Ḥanbal’s time, that reading it was sanctioned by the \textit{sharīʿa}.\textsuperscript{126} Ibn Kathîr even cites an entire \textit{fatwā} by Ibn Taymiyya that non-canonical readings of the Qur’ânic impermissible in prayer.\textsuperscript{127}

\textsuperscript{122} I will discuss Ibn Kathîr’s major works in detail in Chapter Three.

\textsuperscript{123} Ibn Taymiyya’s true “primary student,” Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), is also subsumed under the great scholar. As Birgit Krawietz complains, “there is hardly another Muslim Mamlûk polymath of such standing who at the same time is best known as the student of someone else…Even centuries later, he is still primarily known and defined by his relation and service to [Ibn Taymiyya], whose works he compiled and whose legal doctrines and hermeneutical and theological convictions he defended.” Unfortunately, Ibn al-Qayyim is not known for his own important contributions but rather “as the student of someone else”; Birgit Krawietz, “Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah: His Life and Works,” \textit{Mamlûk Studies Review} 10, no. 1 (2006): 19-65.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibn Kathîr, \textit{al-B âʿith al-ḥathîth}, 1:127.

\textsuperscript{125} Combining ones prayers before going to the public bath (\textit{ḥammâm}) is related to the idea that the bath is place of impurities and thus not suitable for prayer. For more on Ibn Kathîr’s views on public baths see his \textit{Kitâb al-Adâb waʾl-akhkâm al-mutaʾalliga bi-dukhîl al-ḥammâm}, ed. Sâmî b. Muhammad b. Jâd Allâh (Riyadh: Dâr al-Waṭan liʿl-Nashr, 1997). Ibn Taymiyya’s \textit{fatwā} on combining prayers before going to public baths is related to his larger belief in a pragmatic \textit{fiqh}. For more on Ibn Taymiyya’s legal methodology see Yossef Rapoport, “Ibn Taymiyya’s Radical Legal Thought,” in \textit{Ibn Taymiyya and his Time}, 191.


In *al-Bidāya wa'l-nihāya*, Ibn Kathīr offers one of the best sources for the biographies of the famous scholar,[128] detailing his interactions with the Mongols, the important events surrounding his trials, his numerous imprisonments and many supporters.[129] Ibn Kathīr tremendous support and love for Ibn Taymiyya best appears in his obituary of the great scholar. After quoting al-Birzālī’s entry on Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathīr recalls how he went to visit Ibn Taymiyya after he had died: “I was among those who were present with our Shaykh the great ḥadīth scholar (*ḥāfīz*) Abī al-Ḥajjāj al-Mizzī, may God have mercy on his soul (*raḥimahu Allāh*). I uncovered the face of the Shaykh (Ibn Taymiyya), gazed at him, and kissed him.”[130] Ibn Kathīr continues by describing Ibn Taymiyya’s face, “he was wearing a turban with a leather strap and that his hair had become whiter since the last time we saw him.”[131] Ibn Kathīr’s narrative is telling because it demonstrates that Ibn Kathīr was not in prison with Ibn Taymiyya, a claim that later biographical dictionaries make. Nonetheless, Ibn Kathīr was close enough to Ibn Taymiyya to visit him and among the few who was able to get close enough to kiss him. Ibn Kathīr then narrates that Ibn Taymiyya’s brother Zayn al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (d. 747/1347) explained that since their imprisonment Ibn Taymiyya and himself had read the Qur’ān eighty times (*khatma*). They had started reading the Qur’ān for the eighty first time but they had only reached the verses at the end of chapter 54, “The righteous will live securely among Gardens and rivers, secure in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.”[132] The scholars present agreed to finish the last


[131] Rather, as Ibn Kathīr and other sources make clear, it was Ibn al-Qayyim who was imprisoned with Ibn Taymiyya; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 14:138.

[132] Among the implications here is that Ibn Taymiyya was given the glad tiding of being in paradise with his Lord.
Qur’ān recitation and two of Ibn Taymiyya’s favorite Qur’ān reciters began reading from the beginning of the 55th chapter (Sūrā al-Raḥmān) to the end of the Qur’ān. Ibn Kathīr, only in his late twenties at the time, interjects and notes, “I was present, listening, and observing.”

Ibn Kathīr then explains that it was decided that they should perform the ritual cleaning (ghusl) of Ibn Taymiyya before his burial. Ibn Taymiyya was carried to a mosque where only a select few were allowed to enter, among them was “our teacher (shaykunā) al-Mizzī and a group of famous righteous and great [scholars], and people of knowledge and faith.” Ibn Kathīr was a junior scholar at the time and he was not among the handful of notables who were allowed to perform the ritual cleaning.

Even though the account is about Ibn Taymiyya, it indirectly shows Ibn Kathīr’s close relationship with al-Mizzī. Ibn Kathīr remembers the entire event in relation to al-Mizzī; Ibn Kathīr visits Ibn Taymiyya with al-Mizzī and praises him throughout the entire entry as our teacher (shaykhunā) and as a great ḥadīth scholar (ḥāfiz).

Ibn Kathīr further mentions that Ibn Taymiyya’s “hair had become whiter since the last time we saw him (fāraqnāhu).” The use of “we” indicates that Ibn Kathīr and al-Mizzī must have seen Ibn Taymiyya sometime before his death together. The picture that emerges is one of al-Mizzī and Ibn Kathīr - father and son-in-law, teacher and student - going out together on important occasions.

After highlighting the number of people present at Ibn Taymiyya’s funeral prayer and that he intended to write a biography of the great scholar, Ibn Kathīr ends the entry declaring,

---

133 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:136.
134 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:136.
135 Ibn Kathīr then adds the phrase rahimahu Allāh or may God have mercy upon him, which indicates that Ibn Kathīr wrote this account after al-Mizzī had died (d. 742/1341). This information is helpful in dating al-Bidāya, since it indicates that Ibn Kathīr wrote about events years after they occurred. In this case, Ibn Kathīr wrote this entry over 14 years after Ibn Taymiyya’s death.
136 Emphasis is mine.
137 Ibn Kathīr mentions that he planned to summarize the different works that he had written on Ibn Taymiyya. But such a work, if ever written, does not survive; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:138.
“[Ibn Taymiyya] was among the great scholars (‘ulamā’) who made mistakes and was correct, but his flaws in relation to his correctness, is like a dot in a tremendous ocean.” Even if Ibn Taymiyya was sometimes wrong, Ibn Kathîr believed, then he was still rewarded for his efforts through the ḥadîth, “if a judge (ḥâkim) rules (performs ijtihâd) and is correct then he has two rewards and if he engages in ijtihâd and makes a mistake then he has [only] one reward.” This ḥadîth is similar to the famous story of Imâm Mâlik where he points to the grave of the Prophet Muḥammad and states “every person’s words are taken and discarded except the possessor of this grave.” For Ibn Kathîr, Ibn Taymiyya made mistakes but he would eventually be forgiven.

Yet, even though Ibn Kathîr emphasizes Ibn Taymiyya’s positive attributes, his support for him was not always absolute. At times, Ibn Kathîr defends Ibn Taymiyya vigorously but in other instances is conspicuously silent. Ibn Kathîr’s ambivalent support maybe best seen in his description of the two issues for which Ibn Taymiyya was imprisoned for in Damascus, his views on divorce oaths and grave visitation.

---

138 Ibn Kathîr, al-Bidâya, 14:137.
139 Ibn Kathîr, al-Bidâya, 14:138.
140 Ibn Kathîr, al-Bidâya, 14:138.
141 Ibn Kathîr’s praise for Ibn Taymiyya follows into his admiration for Ibn al-Qayyim. In al-Bidâya, Ibn Kathîr extolls his colleague (ṣâhibunā) Ibn al-Qayyim as a teacher (shaykh), leader (i幕m), and exceedingly knowledgeable (‘allāma). Ibn Kathîr explains that when Ibn Taymiyya returned from Egypt in 712/1313 Ibn al-Qayyim “studied with him continuously (lāzamahu) until the Shaykh (Ibn Taymiyya) died and [Ibn al-Qayyim] took from [Ibn Taymiyya] tremendous amount of knowledge (‘ilm an jam’an).” Unlike al-Dhahabi, Ibn Kathîr did not think that Ibn al-Qayyim was stubborn or arrogant but rather had excellent character: “He had beautiful recitation and character, extremely loving, he did not envy anyone, did not wish them harm, did not try to find fault, and did not hate anyone.” Ibn al-Qayyim’s outstanding character led Ibn Kathîr to cultivate a great friendship with him to the point that Ibn Kathîr claimed, “I was among the closest of people to him, [among] the most beloved to him”; Ibn Kathîr, al-Bidâya, 14:66, 230. Caterina Bori translates lāzama as “constant physical intimacy that carried with it close intellectual affiliation”; Bori, “Ibn Taymiyya wa-Jamā’atu hu,” 31.
142 For more on Ibn Taymiyya and divorce oaths see Yossef Rapoport, Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 89; Divorce oaths were frequently used in Mamlûk society as an instrument to have men fulfill various contracts. Men testified that they would fulfill particular obligations or they would triply divorce their wives. According to Islamic law, a man cannot marry his wife which he divorced three times unless she married and then divorced another man. Ibn Taymiyya challenged these divorce oaths and thus the societal structures that kept them in place. Ibn Taymiyya’s main argument was that “conditional divorces and oaths on pain of divorce form two distinct legal categories. Divorce oaths should be equated with
Ibn Kathīr goes out of his way in *al-Bidāya* to defend Ibn Taymiyya’s views on grave visitation. In the year 726/1326, Ibn Kathīr responds to the Shāfi‘ī judge who contended that Ibn Taymiyya believed that visiting the grave of the Prophet Muḥammad was a sin (*maṣiyya*) by declaring, “Look now at this deliberate distortion (*tahrīf*) [of the opinion] of the Shaykh al-Islām (Ibn Taymiyya).” Ibn Kathīr explains that Ibn Taymiyya did not hold the opinion that visiting the grave of Muḥammad or any of the other prophets was a sin. For Ibn Taymiyya, there are two types of grave visitation: the first is visiting the graves without the exclusive intention of doing so, such as visiting a particular city and then visiting the graves within that location. The second was visiting of the graves with the exclusive intention of doing so, such as traveling to a place with the sole purpose of visiting a specific grave. Ibn Taymiyya did not prohibit the first type of visitation but rather encouraged it and believed it to be praiseworthy. Ibn Kathīr ends the
defense quoting the Qur’anic verse 26:227: “And soon will the evildoers know what vicissitudes their affairs will take,” implying that those who imprisoned Ibn Taymiyya were wrongdoers and that they will eventually be defeated.¹⁴⁷

However, Ibn Kathīr does not show any support for Ibn Taymiyya’s anomalous views on divorce oaths.¹⁴⁸ Drawing from al-Birzālī, Ibn Kathīr records that in the year 718/1318 the chief Hanbalī judge of Damascus suggested to Ibn Taymiyya that he should stop giving fatwās on divorce oaths, to which Ibn Kathīr adds, “So the Shaykh (Ibn Taymiyya) accepted his advice and responded to what he suggested (mā ashāra bihi) out of respect for him and a group of muftīs.”¹⁴⁹ After mentioning that an official decree was issued preventing Ibn Taymiyya from issuing fatwās on divorce oaths, Ibn Kathīr notes again that the Ḥanbalī judge and several prominent muftīs met with Ibn Taymiyya to advise him to stop giving fatwās on the issue. Here Ibn Kathīr once again highlights that Ibn Taymiyya accepted their advice and is eager to note that Ibn Taymiyya stopped giving fatwās on the dissention issue for the greater societal good. A little over a year later in Ramadan 719/ November 1319, Ibn Kathīr simply records that a council convened to support the Sultan’s decree that Ibn Taymiyya should stop giving fatwās on divorce oaths.¹⁵⁰ Several months later, in Rajab 720/August 1320, Ibn Kathīr chronicles that another council was held in which it was determined that Ibn Taymiyya had not, in fact, stopped issuing fatwās on divorce oaths and that he should therefore be imprisoned.¹⁵¹ Ibn Kathīr only adds that the various judges and muftīs from the different madhhab agreed on the issue and that

---

¹⁴⁷ Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:122-23. For more on polemics directed at Ibn Taymiyya and his view on the visitation of the Prophet’s grave see El-Rouayheb, Ibn Taymiyya and His Times, 287.

¹⁴⁸ Al-Dhahabī, similarly, does not endorse Ibn Taymiyya’s views on divorce oaths; Bori, “A New Source,” 336.


¹⁵⁰ Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:92.

¹⁵¹ Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:95.
Ibn Taymiyya was detained for five months and eighteen days. The subject of divorce oaths appears thirty years later in Ibn Kathīr’s account of the year 750/1349. Here Ibn Kathīr records that a truce (ṣulḥ) was reached between Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī and Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya on the dispute. Ibn Kathīr is more concerned here that a truce was reached than the nature of the agreement. The final time that Ibn Kathīr mentions the issue is in the biography of Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya, where he notes that “there were hostilities (fūṣūl) that are too long to expand on” between Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya and Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī regarding divorce oaths. In all the accounts of divorce oaths, Ibn Kathīr never defends Ibn Taymiyya or Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya but is rather on the side of reconciliation. The permissibility of divorce oaths and the legality of a divorce resulting from such an oath were one of the topics on which the four Sunni madhhab agreed. Ibn Kathīr leaned towards a unity of the madhhab and the Empire rather than with the controversial stance of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim.

In particular to Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr, it is evident that Ibn Taymiyya was not Ibn Kathīr’s primary teacher since he is only referenced by name six times, a third of al-Mizzī’s. Ibn Taymiyya had an indirect influence on the Tafsīr and most likely passed away before Ibn Kathīr began writing. In all the references that Ibn Kathīr gives of Ibn Taymiyya, none of them have the phrase in the first person singular, such as “I heard from” or “I presented to,” but rather in the third person past such as “Ibn Taymiyya said.” The first instance that Ibn Kathīr quotes Ibn Taymiyya is in the tafsīr’s introduction where he copies the last two chapters from Ibn

---

152 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:228. Ibn al-Qayyim continued to issue fatwās on divorce oaths long after Ibn Taymiyya’s death.
153 Al-Shalash, 483.
154 Ibn Kathīr does use the first person in regards to Ibn Taymiyya in al-Bidāya. As we recall, Ibn Kathīr says “I heard Ibn Taymiyya say that the transmission of al-Birzālī is like an engraving on stone.” This may allude to the fact that Ibn Kathīr might have begun writing al-Bidāya when Ibn Taymiyya was still alive.
Taymiyya’s “Introduction to the Science of Tafsīr.”\footnote{I will be discussing Ibn Taymiyya’s Introduction to the Sciences of Tafsīr in Chapter Four.} The near word for word copying shows that Ibn Kathīr was drawing from Ibn Taymiyya’s written sources rather than oral ones. In another instance, Ibn Kathīr cites Ibn Taymiyya in his commentary of verse 4:24 regarding a tradition where the Caliph ‘Alī allegedly allowed a man to marry the daughter of his wife since the daughter did not grow up in the man’s house.\footnote{Ibn Kathīr frequently discussed legal issues in his Tafsīr. The relationship between tafsīr and law needs to be further explored. One of the few scholars that discusses both is Norman Calder. See his Interpretation and Jurisprudence in Medieval Islam, eds. Jawid Mojaddedi and Andrew Rippin (Aldershot [England]: Burlington, VT: Ashgate/Variorum, 2006).} Ibn Kathīr has trouble with the tradition because it has a strong chain of transmission (isnād) to ‘Alī but its content goes against the consensus that a man is prohibited to marry his wife’s daughter, regardless of whether she grew up in his house or not. Ibn Kathīr then refers to Ibn Taymiyya through al-Dhahabī, “Our teacher (shaykhunā) the great ḥadīth scholar (hāfīż) Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Dhahabī related (ḥakā) to me that he presented this [tradition] to Shaykh al-Imām Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya, may God’s mercy be upon him (raḥimahu Allāh), and it caused problems for him (istashkalahu), and he suspended judgment (tawaqqafa) on that [tradition], so God knows best.”\footnote{Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 3:1310.} The quote is fascinating because it establishes Ibn Kathīr’s relationship with al-Dhahabī more than it does with Ibn Taymiyya, since it is al-Dhahabī who asks Ibn Taymiyya about the tradition and al-Dhahabī who relays the answer to Ibn Kathīr.\footnote{It is evident that both al-Dhahabī and Ibn Kathīr saw Ibn Taymiyya as a great ḥadīth scholar since they both refer to him here. Al-Dhahabī does include Ibn Taymiyya in his biographical dictionary of ḥadīth scholars. For more on his biographical dictionary of ḥadīth see Ṭabaqāt al-huffāẓ (Cairo: Maktabāt Wahba, 1973).} The quote also indicates that Ibn Taymiyya had passed away sometime before 4:24, which is one sixth of a way through the tafsīr, since Ibn Kathīr mentions “may God have mercy on his soul” after mentioning Ibn Taymiyya’s name.\footnote{Ibn Kathīr’s references of al-Mizzī and Ibn Taymiyya overlap in that he viewed both scholars as authorities of ḥadīth. However, Ibn Kathīr also saw Ibn Taymiyya as an authority on the entire Islamic tradition by calling him “Shaykh al-Islam”; Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 3:1465.}
Conclusion:

There is a constant attempt to present Ibn Kathīr as a “student” of Ibn Taymiyya when he is more accurately described as a Shāfi‘ī traditionalist. The Shāfi‘ī traditionalists were a group of ḥadīth scholars who followed Shāfi‘ī jurisprudence and focused on the transmitted sources. While they were supporters of Ibn Taymiyya, they subscribed to a different theology, a “moral theology” which focused on sciences that they believed had tangible effects on the believer’s life and avoided speculative theology (kalām). These different forms of traditionalisms at times led to public disagreements, most notably between Ibn Taymiyya and al-Dhahabī. Ibn Kathīr was thus not “the student” of Ibn Taymiyya but rather the disciple of the Shāfi‘ī traditionalist al-Mizzī. Ibn Kathīr was al-Mizzī’s son-in-law and Ibn Kathīr’s two most important works, *al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya* and his *Tafsīr*, allude to close contact and affinity between the scholars.

To better understand the struggles that the Shāfi‘ī traditionalist Ibn Kathīr went through, we must now explore the other side of the equation that is neglected in the biographies of Ibn Kathīr, his relationship with the Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arīs.
Chapter II

Moving Beyond Ibn Taymiyya: Ibn Kathīr and the Shāfiʻī Ashʻarīs

The biographies of Ibn Kathīr emphasize his relationship with Ibn Taymiyya, al-Mizzī and al-Dhahabī but do not explore his connections with the Shāfiʻī Ashʻarīs.¹ By shedding light on the relationship between Ibn Kathīr and the Shāfiʻī Ashʻarīs, we better understand Ibn Kathīr’s “peculiar situation” of being caught between two theological schools and avoid resorting to the erroneous impression that Ibn Taymiyya was Ibn Kathīr’s primary influence. This chapter will explore how Ibn Kathīr, claimed as “a zealous supporter of Ibn Taymiyya,”² could have formed relationships with those who were systematically working to discredit Ibn Taymiyya. While Ibn Kathīr was no doubt an ardent supporter of Ibn Taymiyya, he was loyal to his Shāfiʻī madhhab and viewed the Shāfiʻī Ashʻarīs as colleagues. He further maintained strong traditionalist ethical and spiritual values of personal piety, fair and just rule, and the separation between the scholar and state. Ibn Kathīr’s connection with the Shāfiʻī madhhab and commitment to traditionalist values made him form relationships beyond that of Ibn Taymiyya.

The Ruling Shāfiʻī Elite:

The ruling Shāfiʻī elite stood in contrast to the Shāfiʻī traditionalists since they came from established scholarly families who were successfully able to pass down their wealth and cultural capital to their offspring. They were almost always judges and Ash'arī which made them more inclined to kalām and philosophy. They thus were alarmed with the growing traditionalist movement that challenged the religious and social order. They began a well-orchestrated campaign to diminish Ibn Taymiyya’s appeal by challenging many of his unorthodox views and controversial stances. Yet, while the Shāfiʻī Ash'arīs began to oppose Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathîr developed his own relationship with the great scholars. To better understand Ibn Kathîr’s theological and social position, we will survey Ibn Kathîr’s and the Shāfiʻī traditionalists’ association with three of the most important Shāfiʻī Ash’arīs: al-Zamlakânî, Taqî al-Dîn al-Subkî, and Tâj al-Dîn al-Subkî.

Al-Zamlakânî: (666/7-727/1267/8-1327) – The Political Opportunist

Throughout his life, Ibn Kathîr maintained the traditionalist principle that scholars should be independent of government structures.³ By becoming part of the state, many traditionalists feared that they would lose their intellectual autonomy and simply become government mouth pieces rather than spokespersons for moral and ethical conduct and the rights of the people.⁴

---
³ The great traditionalist Ibn Hanbal reportedly rejected being a judge, even after the encouragement of his teacher al-Shâfiʻī. As Christopher Melchert explains, Ibn Hanbal had “two powerful objections to being a qāḍî. First he would not wish to identify himself with the ruling power (in the early ninth century, qāḍîs were thought to judge as deputies of the caliph himself). Second, he would not wish to renounce the prerogative of answering questions cautiously, to say ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I hope there is no harm in it,’ rather than having to make decisions with immediate and often irrevocable consequences”; Christopher Melchert, Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 4.
⁴ In his biographical dictionary, Ibn Kathîr consistently praises scholars who refused posts. For instance, Ibn Kathîr mentions that one Shâfiʻī scholar “was presented the supervisor of the treasury, prestigious directorships (mashyakat al-Shuyukh), and the chief judgship but he refused [all of them] based on his asceticism (zuhd) and piety (warî)”;
While there are many examples of Ibn Kathīr’s distaste for scholars becoming part of the state, among the most overt comes in his chronicle of the year 717/1317. Ibn Kathīr notes that a Mālikī judge was removed (‘azala) from his judgeship twenty days before his death leading him to remark, “this is from his good that he did not die as a judge.” Similar to the other Shāfi‘ī traditionalists, Ibn Kathīr lived his entire life within independent madrasas and never became a judge.

Ibn Kathīr’s belief that scholars should avoid government positions most likely led to his fall out with the great Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. al-Zamlakānī. Al-Zamlakānī was one of the most noted Shāfi‘ī jurists of his time, attaining several important government posts, most importantly the chief justice of Aleppo. Al-Zamlakānī began his career close to the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists but ended up in the Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arī camp. As Sherman Jackson explains, “Overall, al-Zamlakānī appears to have had strong traditionalist leanings but to have also been bound by an intense loyalty to the Shāfi‘ī school, home of the leading Ash‘arīs.” Ibn Kathīr mentions al-Zamlakānī in the entry on his father as one of his teachers (shaykhunā) and exceedingly knowledgeable (‘allāma). Al-Zamlakānī related to Ibn Kathīr that the Great Shāfi‘ī scholars al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277) and Ibn Firkāḥ (d. 690/1291) respected his father and informed him on

---


7 Ibn Kathīr also calls al-Zamlakānī one of his teachers in his biographical dictionary; Ibn Kathīr, Ṭabaqāt, 2:814.

8 Ibn Firkāḥ or Tāj al-Dīn al-Fazārī could also be considered a Shāfi‘ī traditionalist in that he devoted his life to teaching in the Damascus madrasas, did not take any public office, had a liking to Ibn Taymiyya and was more
the curriculum his older brother Ismā‘īl studied in his formative education. In these early accounts, Ibn Kathīr talks of al-Zamlakānī as a great scholar and family friend.

Al-Zamlakānī played an instrumental role on the 705/1305 committee in acquitting Ibn Taymiyya of charges of heresy. Ibn Kathīr relates that al-Zamlakānī examined Ibn Taymiyya without forgiveness (ghayr musāmaḥa) but eventually accepted his creed. Al-Zamlakānī would later be accused of being an Ibn Taymiyya supporter and even resigned from a position in 709/1309 based on the same accusation. Ibn Taymiyya and al-Zamlakānī further held many of the same legal opinions against religious innovation such as forbidding the long-standing popular practice of illuminating the Umayyad mosque in the middle of the Islamic month of Sha‘bān. al-Zamlakānī’s traditionalist leanings led him to praise Ibn Taymiyya in widely cited verses of poetry which extol Ibn Taymiyya’s “unrivaled learning and intelligence,” but this was before al-Zamlakānī turned his back on Ibn Taymiyya and became one of his opponents. Al-Zamlakānī eventually wrote refutations of Ibn Taymiyya’s views on divorce oaths and grave visitation, leading to several promotions.
Al-Zamlakānī was a good friend of Ibn Kathīr’s teacher al-Dhahābī who respected al-Zamlakānī tremendously. In *al-Mu’jam al-muktaṣṣ*, al-Dhahābī relates that he studied with al-Zamlakānī and praises him as one “of the remaining mujtahids and among the smartest people of his time.” In his *Ṭārīkh al-Islām*, al-Dhahābī admires al-Zamlakānī’s looks, eloquence and intelligence and then adds that “al-Zamlakānī wrote many beneficial things.” What al-Dhahābī does not mention is that al-Zamlakānī wrote one of the most widely cited refutations of Ibn Taymiyya’s views on divorce oaths. Such an omission is significant because other biographical accounts, such as those by Ibn Kathīr and al-Subkī, always mention the work. Nevertheless, al-Dhahābī relays that he and al-Zamlakānī were extremely close, “there was affection (widd) and sincerity (ṣafā’) between us.” Al-Dhahābī believed that his love for al-Zamlakānī was echoed by the masses who “were excited to hear that al-Zamlakānī was seeking the judgeship of Damascus” but unfortunately al-Zamlakānī became sick on the way to Cairo and passed away. In the end, al-Zamlakānī’s turn from a supporter to a critic of Ibn Taymiyya did not impede al-Dhahābī’s relationship with or opinion of the prominent jurist.

A contrasting account of al-Zamlakānī is provided by Ibn Kathīr, one that begins with respect but ends in disappointment. In *al-Bīdāya*, Ibn Kathīr begins his entry praising al-Zamlakānī as “the Shaykh of the Shāfi‘īs of Syria.” Ibn Kathīr was impressed with al-Zamlakānī’s classes exclaiming that he did not hear lessons better than his and that al-Zamlakānī

---

19 The issue of divorce oaths is discussed in the last Chapter.
20 These entries will be discussed below.
was extremely organized, brilliant and eloquent. While Ibn Kathîr praises al-Zamlakânî the teacher, he did not praise al-Zamlakânî the person in the same way. Ibn Kathîr considered al-Zamlakânî’s death before he attained the judgeship of Damascus to be a good thing since he suspected that al-Zamlakânî harbored intentions to use the post to harm Ibn Taymiyya. Quoting the widely known ḥadîth “actions are based on intentions” Ibn Kathîr stressed the last part, “Whoever’s migration is to benefit (yuṣīīb) from this world or to marry a woman then his migration is for that purpose,” implying that there is no reward from God. Ibn Kathîr cleverly parallels the migration (hijra) mentioned in the ḥadîth, which was narrated in the context of migrating from Mecca to Medina, with the migration of al-Zamlakânî to Cairo. Ibn Kathîr concludes declaring, “It was of his ugly intention that if he returned to Syria with this post, then he would harm Ibn Taymiyya, so it was prayed against him that his hopes and desires would not come to surface.” Such a poignantly critical remark is highly uncharacteristic of Ibn Kathîr who is rarely attacks figures in his biographies.

Ibn Kathîr’s harshness seems to be rooted in that he felt al-Zamlakânî’s quest for power led him to betray the traditionalist movement. For instance, in the year 704/1305, Ibn Kathîr notes that one of his Shâfi‘î traditionalist teachers Burhân al-Dîn al-Fazârî (d. 729/1329)

23 Ibn Kathîr, al-Bidâya, 14:130.
24 The full ḥadîth reads: “Actions are but by intention and every man shall have but that which he intended. Thus he whose migration was for Allâh and his Messenger, his migration was for Allâh and His Messenger, and he whose migration was to achieve some worldly benefit or to take some woman in marriage, his migration was for that for which he migrated”; Al-Nawawî, an-Nawawî’s Forty Hadîth: an Anthology of the Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, trans. Ezzeddin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1997), 26.
25 Ibn Kathîr, al-Bidâya, 14:130. Ibn Kathîr uses this same hadîth in the opposite way to praise a ruler who attempted to liberate Jerusalem but died before he was able to carry out the mission. As Ibn Kathîr says “Actions are by intentions, and he received the reward of what he intended”; Ibn Kathîr, al-Bidâya, 12:312.
26 Like his father Ibn Firkâh, Burhân al-Dîn al-Fazârî could be put into the Shâfi‘î traditionalist camp since Ibn Kathîr observes that Burhân al-Dîn al-Fazârî “walked on the [same] path of his father.” Like the other Shâfi‘î traditionalists, Burhân al-Dîn al-Fazârî was a supporter of Ibn Taymiyya, never joined the structures of the state and was more inclined towards ijtihâd. Ibn Kathîr relates that, in a show of support, Burhân al-Dîn al-Fazârî and a group of Shâfi‘î ‘ulamâ’ continuously visited Ibn Taymiyya’s grave for three days; Ibn Kathîr, al-Bidâya, 13:325, 14:137. Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalânî also highlights Burhân al-Dîn al-Fazârî’s relationship with Ibn Taymiyya “despite his
refused to become part of the structures of the state by turning down supervision of the treasury *(bayt al-māl).* When the same offer was given to al-Zamlakānī he accepted it. Similarly, when Burhān al-Dīn al-Fazārī was offered the position of the chief judge of Syria in 724/1324 he refused in order to focus on his teaching. Al-Zamlakānī traveled to Egypt to seek the same office before his death. In his obituary of Burhān al-Dīn al-Fazārī, Ibn Kathīr highlights how the great jurist was offered high positions but consistently turned them down: “he was offered the chief judgeship of Syria after Ibn Ṣaṣrā and the governor *(nāʾib al-Shām)* and his assistants personally insisted, but he did not accept. He was determined, he absolutely refused *(imtana’a ashadd al-imtinā’).*” Ibn Kathīr praised al-Fazārī’s principled stance by praying “May God reward his moral integrity and sense of honor *(marāʿa).*” Ibn Kathīr’s presentation of Burhān al-Dīn al-Fazārī represents his own vision of the ideal relationship between scholar and state. Ibn Kathīr himself never became a judge and praises scholars who shied away from holding posts.

**Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī: (683-756/1284-1355) – The Righteous Judge**

While Ibn Kathīr extols scholars for turning down judgeships, he nevertheless praised judges who were pious and used their positions to stand for justice and fight against state

differences with Shaykh Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya he did not disassociate [himself from him], and when he (Ibn Taymiyya) died he paid respect to him at his grave”; Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, 1:36. Laoust implies that Ibn Kathīr changed courses by first studying with Burhān al-Dīn and then moving to Ibn Taymiyya: “he had as his main teacher, in *fiqh*, the Shāfiʿī Burhān al-Dīn al-Fazārī (d. 729), but next fell strongly, and very early, under the influence of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and his school.” Studying with Burhān al-Dīn and Ibn Taymiyya may not have been mutually exclusive; Ibn Kathīr’s studies with the Shāfiʿī traditionalist Burhān al-Dīn may have led him to Ibn Taymiyya; H Laoust, “Ibn Kathīr , ’Imād al-Dīn Ismāʿīl b. ʿUmar b. Kathīr,” *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*, eds. P. Bearman , Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth , E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs (Brill, 2010).

27 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 14:34.

28 Jackson suggests that Ibn Ṣaṣrā was a Shāfiʿī Ashʿarī based on his enmity of al-Mizzī and tense relationship with Ibn Taymiyya. He also came from a well-established family; Jackson, 46. For more Ibn Ṣaṣrā’s role in the 705 AH trial see Chapter One.


corruption. Ibn Kathīr’s belief in the righteous judge led him to support one of the most vocal critics of Ibn Taymiyya, the great Shāfi‘ī jurist Taqī al-Dīn Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-Kāfī al-Subkī. Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī was from the illustrious al-Subkī family which “flourished in Mamlūk times.” He was among the most powerful Shāfi‘ī jurists of his generation, eventually securing the post of chief judge of Damascus.

Al-Subkī’s wrote a series of refutations against Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim that led him to obtain several important promotions. As Yousef Rapaport explains,

[Al-Subkī’s] refutations of Ibn Taymiyya paved his way to higher office: he was eventually appointed chief Shāfi‘ī Judge of Damascus in 739/1338, gradually acquiring several other offices in the city, many of which he was able to pass on to his sons. Compared to Ibn Taymiyya, al-Subkī, as a Shāfi‘ī Egyptian who amassed official appointments, represents the opposite end of the social spectrum of Mamlūk ‘ulamā’.

Rapaport’s comparison of al-Subkī with Ibn Taymiyya is fitting since al-Subkī was invested in the Mamlūk establishment, was a member of the powerful Subkī family, and spent the last years of his life as the chief judge of Damascus. Ibn Taymiyya, on the other hand, was an immigrant to the city, a political activist and an outside critic who spent the last years of his life in jail.

The common themes of al-Subkī’s refutations are that Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn al-Qayyim’s thought is “unorthodox” and that they represent a danger to the consensus of the community. Al-Subkī’s fear of the rising traditionalist movement appears in al-Sayf al-ṣaqīl fī radd ‘alā Ibn Zafīl, a refutation of Ibn al-Qayyim’s traditionalist creed which was in turn derived

---

31 Joseph Schacht, “al- Subkī,” EI².
32 But Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī’s tremendous legacy seems to be lost in modern times in which he is primarily known as the father of Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī or the one who refuted Ibn Taymiyya. For instance, the editors of al-Rasā’il al-subkiyya have an exceedingly brief three-page biography of al-Subkī followed by a sixty five page rebuttal of Ibn Taymiyya. The editors are less interested in understanding who al-Subkī was then refuting the influential Ibn Taymiyya; Taqī al-Dīn ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-Kāfī al-Subkī, al-Rasā’il al-subkiyya fī al-radd ‘alā Ibn Taymiyya wa-tīlmīdihī Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (Beirut: ‘Ālam al-Kutub, 1983), 9.
33 Rapaport, 101. Rapaport goes on to explain that al-Subkī had several wives while Ibn Taymiyya was “celibate.”
34 Al-Subkī resigned from the post a month before his passing in order to transfer it to his son Tāj al-Dīn; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:216.
from Ibn Taymiyya. Al-Subkī wrote the treatise in 749/1348 when he was the chief judge of Damascus and the refutation thus expresses the dominant theology of the time and the threat that the ruling elite felt from the traditionalist movement. Al-Subkī ferociously attacks Ibn al-Qayyīm repeatedly throughout the treatise, asking God to curse him, calling him ignorant and accusing him of not understanding those who he is critiquing. While the didactic poem is over six thousand verses long and covers a range of theological topics, al-Subkī focuses on the sections which he perceives are critiques of Ashʿarīs. Al-Subkī is most critical of Ibn al-Qayyīm when he believes that he is excommunicating (takfīr) those outside his group and conflating Ashʿarīs with the Jahmiyyas. Al-Subkī’s introduction to the refutation gives us an opportunity to see how he perceives the traditionalist movement and the danger he felt they posed to the social order.

Al-Subkī begins by praising the traditional sciences such as Qurʾān, Sunna, fiqh, usūl-al-fiqh, and grammar but then quickly adds that one should avoid sciences of kalām and the Greek philosophy. Al-Subkī however moves to differentiate between the two: Greek philosophy uses only reason while the scholastic theologians (mutakallīmūn) attempt to combine reason and revelation. Al-Subkī further divides the group which engages in both reason and revelation into three categories. The first group allowed reason to dominate over revelation; they were the Muʿtazilīs. The second group allowed revelation to dominate over reason; they were the Ḥashwiyya, a derogatory term referring to literalist anthropomorphists. The group that was

---

36 A year later, Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī and Ibn al-Qayyīm reached a truce on divorce oaths; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:228.
37 I define the Jahmiyya and explain how the label was a code word for the Ashʿarīs in Chapter One.
38 Taqī al-Dīn Al-Subkī, al-Rasāʾīl al-subkiyya, 83.
39 Ed(s), Ḥashwiyya (Ḥashawīyya, Ḥushwiyya, or Ahl al-Ḥashw), EJ2.
able to balance between the two was the Ashʿarīs, the theological school that al-Subkī will vigorously defend.

Al-Subkī nevertheless emphasizes that the best path is that of the Companions and Successors who were able to stay on the innate unadulterated path (*fitra salīma*). This is supported by al-Shāfīʿī (d. 204/820), the founder of al-Subkī’s school of law, who encouraged studying *fiqh* over *kalām* since *fiqh* incorporated reason with revelation. But unlike many of the traditionalists, al-Subkī did not think that *kalām* was totally worthless.⁴⁰ Al-Subkī believed that if people had remained on the creed of the Companions and Successors then it would have been best to avoid *kalām* altogether. Yet, intellectual challenges to the religion arose and *kalām* became a useful tool to refute the claims of the innovators and keep those with the correct creed on the right path.⁴¹ Al-Subkī sums up the section by endorsing the Ashʿarīs: “The Ashʿarīs are the moderates in [incorporating *kalām* and balancing between reason and revelation] and they are the majority of Shāfīʿīs, Mālikīs, Ḥanafīs and the respected and erudite (fuṭalāʾ) Ḥanbalīs.”⁴² In other words, the overwhelming majority of the Sunnis adhere to the Ashʿarism except for some intransigent Ḥanbalīs.

Al-Subkī transitions to discuss the potential danger that each one of the rival sects poses to Ashʿarism and the Muslim community. As for the Muʿtazilīs, al-Subkī dismisses their influence by explaining that they had control of a state in the beginning of the third/tenth century with the assistance of some Caliphs, but in the end they were defeated and God erased their evil.

---


⁴¹ Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, *al-Rasāʾil al-subkiyya*, 84. Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī also says that logic “is one of the best and most useful sciences for any kind of research.” He further condemns those, such as Ibn Taymiyya, who were critical of logic’s worth: “Anybody who claims that logic is unbelief or something prohibited is a fool ignorant of the actual meaning of unbelief and of what is allowed and forbidden”; Franz Rosenthal, *The Classical Heritage in Islam*, trans. Emile and Jenny Marmorstein (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, [1975]), 82.

The Muʿtazilīs no longer posed a theological threat to the Muslim community. Al-Subkī also dismisses Greek philosophy by saying that the community knows its evil and deviances and stays away from their methods, once again alluding to the fact that the philosophers were not a danger to the Mamlûk social and theological order.

Al-Subkī then focuses on the problem of his time, the Ḥashwiyya, a code word for the traditionalists. The Ḥashwiyya ascribe themselves to Ibn Ḥanbal but al-Subkī believed that Ibn Ḥanbal has nothing to do with their heresies. Al-Subkī argues that the Ḥashwiyya did not properly understand the words ascribed to Ibn Ḥanbal during his inquisition (mihna) and falsely attributed their doctrines to him. The Ḥashwiyya are further not only creating theological problems but starting social disturbances by creating alliances with members of the state, a possible reference to Ibn Taymiyya’s relationship with particular rulers. The influence of the Ḥashwiyya has grown to the point that they corrupted “an aberrant, deviant group (shadhūdh)”

---

43 Al-Subkī further explains that the Ashʿarīs were the moderates because they are the “daughter” of a sound intellect and the primarily sources of the Qurʾān and Sunna. This is in opposition to the Muʿtazilīs who prioritized reason over revelation.

44 Khaled El-Rouayheb translates this passage as the following, “As for the Ḥashwiyya, they are a despicable and ignorant lot who claim to belong to the school of Aḥmad [ibn Ḥanbal]…They have corrupted the creed of a few isolated Shāfiʿīs, especially some of the hadīth scholars among them who are lacking in reason…They were held in utmost contempt, and then towards the end of the seventh century [AH Thirteenth century AD] a man appeared who was diligent, intelligent and well-read and did not find a Shaykh to guide him, and he is of their creed and is brazen and dedicated to teaching his ideas…He said that non-eternal attributes can subsist in God, and that God is ever acting and that an infinite chain of events is not impossible either in the past or the future. He split the ranks and cast doubts on the creed of the Muslims and incited dissension amongst them. He did not confine himself to creedal matters of theology, but transgressed the bounds and said that travelling to the visit the tomb of the Prophet is a sin…The scholars agreed to imprison him for a long time, and the Sultan imprisoned him,…and he died in prison. Then some of his followers started to promulgate his ideas and teach them to people in secret while keeping quite in public, and great harm came from this.” I agree with El-Rouayheb that al-Subkī’s portrayal of the anti-Ashʿarīs gives the impression that they were a political minority rather than the “main current”; Khaled El-Rouayheb, “From Ibn Ḥajar al-Ḥaytamī (d. 1566) to Khayr al-Dīn al-Alūsī (d. 1899): Changing Views of Ibn Taymiyya among non-Ḥanbalī Sunni Scholars,” in Ibn Taymiyya and his Times, 296.

45 What is interesting here is that al-Subkī argues that he represents Ibn Ḥanbal better than the Ḥanbalī Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim.

46 Bori, 32.

47 El-Rouayheb translates shadhūdh of Shāfiʿīs as “isolated Shāfiʿīs” which fits within his larger argument that Ashʿarism was the dominant theological school at the time compared to traditionalism. I prefer to translate the phrase as “aberrant Shāfiʿīs” because there were many prominent traditionalists within the Shāfiʿī school but, for al-Subkī, they did not represent true Shāfiʿism.
of the Shāfi‘īs … in particular some of the ḥadīth scholars who have average intelligence (naqaṣat aqūluhum) and [have allowed] those who misguided them to overcome their [intellects] to the point that they think what they say is ḥadīth.”48 Al-Subkī is discussing the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists, many of whom where ḥadīth scholars and supporters of Ibn Taymiyya. For al-Subkī, the influence of the Ḥashwiyya on fellow Shāfi‘īs was an anathema since the Shāfi‘ī school was the home of Ash‘arism. Al-Subkī believed that contemporary Shāfi‘īs should take the same posture of the great Shāfi‘ī Ash‘rī Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 571/1176) who refused to engage with the Ḥashwiyya and prevented them from attending his circles.

Al-Subkī then hones in on the modern leader of the Ḥashwiyya: “Then came in the end of the 7th [13th] century a man who was intelligent and well-read (iṭṭā‘) but who did not find a teacher (shaykh) to guide him and he follows their (Ḥashwiyya) madhhab.”49 Here al-Subkī is referring to Ibn Taymiyya. For al-Subkī, Ibn Taymiyya might have been smart and exposed to many ideas, but he did not have a teacher to explain to him his errors and keep him on the correct path. Al-Subkī goes on to discuss the various aspects of Ibn Taymiyya’s unorthodox thought such as his views on divorce oaths and that visiting the grave of the Prophet Muḥammad was “a sin” (ma‘ṣiyya).50 For al-Subkī, Ibn Taymiyya’s imprisonment was a good thing “which was agreed upon by the scholars” because he represented a danger to the community. However, even after his death, his heresies continued with his students (aṣḥābihi). Al-Subkī is referring to Ibn al-Qayyim who he accuses of spreading harm to the people by teaching his heretical creed. Al-

48 Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, al-Rasā‘īl al-subkiyya, 85. Al-Subkī is referring to the fact that many ḥadīths portray an anthropomorphistic understanding of God.
50 This was a common polemic against Ibn Taymiyya in that he believed that visiting the grave of the Prophet Muḥammad was a sin (ma‘ṣiyya). I speak more in detail about Ibn Taymiyya’s views on grave visitation in Chapter One.
Subkī spends the rest of the treatise refuting Ibn al-Qayyim’s theological poem *al-Kāfiya al-shāfiyya fī intiṣār al-firqa al-nājiyya*.

What is evident from the refutation is that al-Subkī felt that Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim represented a dangerous sect which needed to be systematically refuted. They did not simply pose a theological threat but a social one as their appeal extended to the masses, state, and even members of al-Subkī’s own Shāfi‘ī *madhhab*. Yet, it is important to emphasize that al-Subkī’s critique was not only directed towards Ibn Taymiyya but his student Ibn al-Qayyim. Al-Subkī wrote the treatise twenty years after Ibn Taymiyya had died and the traditionalist threat continued primarily with Ibn al-Qayyim, not any of the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists. While al-Subkī does mention some aberrant Shāfi‘īs he is primarily targeting what he sees as the root of the problem, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim.

Yet, despite al-Subkī’s animosity towards Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim, he was skillfully able to maintain positive relations with the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists. Al-Subkī’s son, Tāj al-Dīn, recounts that his father always asked him at the end of the day who he studied with. It was only when Tāj al-Dīn mentioned al-Mizzī that he nodded his head in approval and said “yes, he is the Shaykh.” It was Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī who led the funeral prayer of al-Mizzī and succeeded him at his teaching post at the Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya.

---

51 Another example of the camaraderie between Shāfi‘ī traditionalists and Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arīs is the Shāfi‘ī Ibn Rāfi’ī’s continuation of al-Birzālī’s biographical dictionary. Throughout his biographical dictionary, he says that al-Mizzī and al-Dhahabī were his teachers (*shaykunā*). For one particular example where he mentions both of them as his teachers see Muḥammad b. Rāfi’ Sallāmī, *al-Wafayāt: Dhayl ‘alā wafayāt al-Birzālī*, ed. ‘Abd al-Jabār Zakkār (Damascus: al-Jumhuriyya al-‘Arabiyya al-Sūriyya, 1985), 1:165. The fact that Ibn Rāfi’, who was a student of Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, wrote a sequel to al-Birzālī’s biographical dictionary demonstrates that there was congeniality between the two theological camps within the Shāfi‘ī school.

52 Similar to the question “what did you do in school today.” Tāj al-Dīn was 15 when al-Mizzī died demonstrating that students started their studies at a young age.


54 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 14:191. Unfortunately, al-Mizzī did not leave behind a biographical dictionary of his contemporaries and much of al-Birzālī’s history is still in manuscript form so we do not have direct statements of their views of al-Subkī.
Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī also had a positive relationship based on mutual respect with al-Dhahabī. Tāj al-Dīn explains that when the chair of the Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya opened after al-Mizzī’s death, al-Dhahabī was next in line to receive the appointment.\(^{55}\) However, many scholars protested arguing that the endower’s stipulation required that the director be Ash’arī and that al-Dhahabī clearly did not fit the requirement. Al-Mizzī was only appointed as the chair until he swore and wrote with his own handwriting that he was Ash‘arī. When Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī was consulted about the directorship he suggested that al-Dhahabī was most qualified. But members of the Shāfi‘ī, Ḥanafi and Mālikī madhhab, all presumably Ash‘arī, disagreed and suggested that Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī himself take the position. Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī reluctantly accepted the nomination, most likely to quell any dissention.\(^{56}\) Al-Dhahabī’s respect for Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī is seen in that he did not protest the appointment and was even present at Taqī al-Dīn’s inaugural address.\(^{57}\)

Al-Dhahabī’s admiration for Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī is further evident in his *al-Mu’jam al-muktasṣ* where he describes him as a judge, jurist, ḥadīth scholar, leader (*imām*), and exceedingly knowledgeable (*‘allāma*). Al-Dhahabī goes on to mention Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī’s positive attributes such as that he was “truthful, reliable, good, humble and well-mannered”\(^{58}\) and that he served his office in Syria well.\(^{59}\) Al-Dhahabī notes that they studied with each other and that Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī wrote many “excellent compositions.”\(^{60}\) It was further reported that several days before al-Dhahabī’s death, he composed several lines of poetry which compared Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī’s knowledge in law, ḥadīth, argumentation and grammar with the greats in their

---


\(^{56}\) What is evident here is that while the Mamlūk social order recognized difference in law, it found unity in a shared Ash‘arī theology. Al-Dhahabī represented a threat to this theological and political solidarity.

\(^{57}\) Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 10:201.

\(^{58}\) Al-Dhahabī, *al-Mu’jam*, 166.

\(^{59}\) Al-Dhahabī, *al-Mu’jam*, 166.

\(^{60}\) Al-Dhahabī, *al-Mu’jam*, 166.
respective fields. Al-Dhahabī ends the poem exclaiming that Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī will attain salvation by being given paradise.

Despite al-Dhahabī’s and Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī’s overall cordial relationship, there was at times tension. Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī records that al-Dhahabī censured al-Subkī for making a negative remark about Ibn Taymiyya. Al-Dhahabī responded to al-Subkī praising Ibn Taymiyya’s knowledge, intelligence, sincerity and uniqueness. Al-Subkī also had reservations about al-Dhahabī, with him not totally being excited about his son’s studies with the great scholar.

Nevertheless, what is fascinating about the overwhelming majority of the reports of al-Dhahabī on Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī is that they are all positive, something that stands in contrast with his entries on Ibn Taymiyya. Al-Dhahabī could have very well been politically closer to Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī than he was with Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim. As with al-Zamlakānī, Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī’s refutations of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim did not seriously impede al-Dhahabī’s relationship with the great jurist.

Unfortunately, no statements survive of Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī’s views of Ibn Kathīr but his opinions of the great ḥadīth scholar can be deduced from other statements. Taqī al-Dīn’s son, Tāj al-Dīn, relays that his father believed that he was suitable to succeed him at Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya and “one absent from Damascus.” The statement alludes to the fact that Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī did not see other scholars in Damascus, such as Ibn Kathīr, as his successor.

Nonetheless, Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī was able to earn the admiration of Ibn Kathīr. Throughout al-Bidāya, Ibn Kathīr presents a picture of Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī as a popular, fair

---

61 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 9:106.
62 Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī, 1:95.
63 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:399.
64 See the Introduction and Chapter One for more on al-Dhahabī’s views of Ibn Taymiyya.
65 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:209.
and moral judge. When Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī was appointed as the chief justice of Syria in 739/1338-39, Ibn Kathīr records that the masses were elated and went to receive him at the gates of Damascus because of his “knowledge, [sound] religion, and trust (amāna).” Ibn Kathīr agreed with the fellow Shāfi‘ī on many of his legal opinions such as his order for the prayer-callers (mu‘adhdhins) to recite some prophetic supplications (adhkār) after the call to prayer (adhān) and killing of dogs if it was for the benefit of the community (maṣlahā).

Ibn Kathīr was additionally impressed with al-Subkī’s courage to stand up against the oppressive structures of the state. In 743/1342, al-Subkī was charged with misappropriating funds for the orphans and a fatwā was circulating to censure him. Ibn Kathīr stresses how few scholars actually signed the fatwā and how he was asked to sign but refused. When Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī was sent to Egypt to stand trial, Ibn Kathīr notes how many of the scholars and notables went out to bid him farewell, giving the impression that many within Damascus society believed he was innocent.

In a similar incident a year later, Ibn Kathīr records that the sultan’s council (dīwān al-sulṭān) asked al-Subkī for a loan from the account of those who were away from the city (ghiyāb) in order to pay back its debtors. Al-Subkī repeatedly refused to the point that the

---

66 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:183.
67 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:192.
68 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:192. There seems to have been an overpopulation of dogs that were causing trouble to the city’s inhabitants; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:223. For more on maslaha see Felicitas Opwis, Maslaha and the Purpose of the Law: Islamic Discourse on Legal Change from the 4th/10th to 8th/14th Century (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010).
69 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:202. The fact that Ibn Kathīr was asked to sign the fatwā demonstrates that he was considered to be a noted jurist at the age of 43.
70 In the same year, Ibn Kathīr records that even though al-Subkī was assigned the Umayyad sermonship, the masses wanted to have their old khaṭīb continue to give the sermons. Through a series of protests, the masses were able to pressure al-Subkī to relinquish the post to their old khaṭīb. The protests were part of the masses fondness of their old khaṭīb but also their dislike of al-Subkī. Overall, Ibn Kathīr maintains neutrality in narrating the incident and does not take sides with the protesters; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:203.
council forcibly took 50,000 dirhams from another fund devoted to the orphans. The incident caused such a commotion that Ibn Kathîr chronicles that nothing similar to it ever occurred.

Ibn Kathîr even seemed to have a personal relationship with Taqî al-Dîn al-Subkî since Ibn Kathîr recorded information from him in his biographical dictionary of Shâfiʿî scholars. Ibn Kathîr notes that the “Chief Justice Taqî al-Dîn al-Subkî mentioned to me (dhakara lî)” that the scholar ‘Abd al-Karîm b. ‘Alî b. ‘Umar al-Anşârî (d. 703/1303) was highly skilled in Qurʾanic exegesis. The quote demonstrates that Ibn Kathîr had personal communication with Taqî al-Dîn al-Subkî and that he trusted him as a reliable source.

Al-Subkî’s righteousness led Ibn Kathîr to write a positive obituary about him, something that stands in contrast with that of al-Zamlakânî. Ibn Kathîr was impressed with how al-Subkî did not allow his seventeen years as a judge to prevent him from being prolific and composing many “beneficial” compositions. Ibn Kathîr ends the entry stating that it “was mentioned to me that he used to stand up [to pray] at night. May God have mercy upon him.” Ibn Kathîr’s final statement demonstrates that he felt al-Subkî was a sincere and righteous person, even though he was a judge and may have differed politically and theologically with Ibn Kathîr.

How could Ibn Kathîr be so positive towards someone who vehemently attacked Ibn Taymiyya and his good friend Ibn al-Qayyim? First, al-Subkî was a Shâfiʿî like himself and he felt loyalty to the Shâfiʿî judge, even though he did not have the greatest admiration for judges in

---

71 Ibn Kathîr, al-Bidâya, 14:207.
72 Ibn Kathîr is exaggerating here for effect.
73 I will speak about Ibn Kathîr’s biographical dictionary of Shâfiʿî jurists in the next Chapter.
74 Ibn Kathîr, Tabaqât, 2:858. Taqî al-Dîn al-Subkî could judge ‘Abd al-Karîm’s expertise on Qurʾanic exegesis because he was himself a Qurʾanic exegete. I will speak more about Taqî al-Dîn al-Subkî’s exegetical works in Chapter Five.
75 Ibn Kathîr, al-Bidâya, 14:247. Al-Subkî’s son, Tâj al-Dîn, may have been the one who mentioned to Ibn Kathîr his father’s night prayers, since he discusses them in his biographical dictionary; Tâj al-Dîn al-Subkî, Tabaqât, 10:205.
76 It should be added that Ibn Kathîr’s obituary of Taqî al-Dîn al-Subkî is not as long or lauding as the ones that he writes of Ibn Taymiyya and al-Mizzî but it is remarkably positive nonetheless.
general. Ibn Kathīr agrees with many of al-Subkī’s legal opinions which were derived from their shared Shāfi‘ī school of the law. Secondly, Ibn Kathīr was not directly attacked by al-Subkī since al-Subkī focuses his criticism towards Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim, not Ibn Kathīr’s primary teacher al-Mizzī. Al-Subkī had the utmost respect for al-Mizzī and even encouraged his own son to study with him. But most importantly, Ibn Kathīr felt that al-Subkī was a sincere and righteous person whose morality was evident in his courage to stand up against the oppressive structures of the state. Unlike with al-Zamlakānī, there is no sense that Ibn Kathīr felt that al-Subkī was compromising his principles for professional advancement.

Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (727-771-72/1327-1370) – The Privileged Son

If Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī and Ibn Taymiyya represented opposite spectrums of the Mamluk ‘ulama’, than Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī and Ibn Kathīr represented competing sides of the Shāfi‘ī madhhab. While Ibn Kathīr was the son of a preacher, came from the outskirts of Damascus and adopted the traditionalism of his teachers, Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī was the son of the chief Shāfi‘ī judge of Damascus,⁷⁷ came from the established al-Subkī family, and was invested in Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arism. The two represented not only contrasting theological positions within the Shāfi‘ī madhhab but also social ones. Despite their differences, Ibn Kathīr felt that Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, similar to his father, was a sincere and righteous scholar which ultimately led Ibn Kathīr to publically defend him of erroneous charges.

⁷⁷ Chamberlain discusses in depth how fathers were able to pass on positions to their sons, keeping power and prestige within the family: “Yet, the acquisition of mansabs was not ‘meritocratic’ in any useful sense of the term. In understanding household strategies of survival, the question is how the a’yān inculcated into their young the disposition to acquire the social and cultural ‘capital’ that allowed them to participate in the struggle for mansabs”; Michael Chamberlain, Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190-1350 (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 68.
Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī is best known for his didactic *uṣūl al-fiqh* work *Jam‘ al-jawāmi‘*, his *Mu‘īd al-ni‘am wa mubīd al-niqam* which details trades, professions and offices of the author's own time, and most importantly his biographical dictionary of Shāfi‘ī scholars *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi‘iyya al-kubrā*. With Tāj al-Dīn, the campaign against the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists entered a new phase. Unlike the others, Tāj al-Dīn never personally encountered Ibn Taymiyya, being only a year old when Ibn Taymiyya passed away. Tāj al-Dīn nevertheless became well acquainted with Ibn Taymiyya through his father and teachers, which included al-Mizzī and al-Dhahabī. Building on his father’s work, Tāj al-Dīn began to criticize the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists, “Hanbalī sympathizers” as he calls them, within his biographical dictionary.

George Makdisi argues that Tāj al-Dīn’s biographical dictionary was an attempt to define Shāfi‘ism as an Ash‘arī theology that balanced between rationalism and traditionalism. Tāj al-Dīn thus found himself in opposition to the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists who gave “him the most trouble” since they sought to rethink Shāfi‘ism’s relationship with Ash‘arism. As Makdisi explains, these Shāfi‘ī traditionalists were “intransigent” because they were “too strongly anti-Ash‘arite to be won over the cause” and were actively bringing other Shāfi‘īs to traditionalism. Tāj al-Dīn hoped to “isolate the strong traditionalist elements within the Shafi‘ite school, by creating a psychological barrier between them and the Shāfi‘ītes who are yet uncommitted or still capable of changing camps.” Tāj al-Dīn’s biographical dictionary could be seen in the opposite spectrum of Ibn Kathīr’s historical works - while Ibn Kathīr mentions any association with Ibn Taymiyya as positive, Tāj al-Dīn states that any link was entirely negative. Tāj al-Dīn’s *Ṭabaqāt*

---

78 J. Schacht, “al-Subkī,” *EI*.
80 Makdisi, 60.
81 Makdisi, 59.
al-shāfi‘iyya al-kubrā was a response to Ibn Kathīr and the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists who represented an alternative vision of Shāfi‘ism. \(^{82}\)

Tāj al-Dīn’s intellectual project may best be seen in his biography of his father, Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī. Tāj al-Dīn devotes over two hundred pages to his father and argues that he was the Shaykh al-Islām, \(^{83}\) a title used almost always by traditionalists to refer to Ibn Taymiyya. With his father’s biography, Tāj al-Dīn was trying to create an orthodox Shaykh al-Islām for other Shāfi‘īs to follow. Aspects of al-Subkī’s biography even follow closely to those written about Ibn Taymiyya. For instance, Tāj al-Dīn says that his father was so knowledgeable that whatever science Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī spoke about, it was thought that he was a specialist in that science. \(^{84}\) A similar statement is said about Ibn Taymiyya by al-Zamlakānī. \(^{85}\) In discussing al-Subkī’s funeral, Tāj al-Dīn emphasizes the number of people present saying, “Whoever was present at [Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī’s] funeral testified that they had not seen a bigger funeral procession (janāza) than it.” \(^{86}\) For Tāj al-Dīn, the only funeral that historically equaled that of his father’s was that of Ibn Ḥanbal. \(^{87}\) Ibn Kathīr makes the same analogy between Ibn Ḥanbal’s and Ibn Taymiyya’s funeral procession in al-Bidāya. \(^{88}\) What differentiated these two Shaykhs al-Islām were their theological schools, Ash‘arism and traditionalism.

---

\(^{82}\) The Shāfi‘ī traditionalists thus played a vital role in the development of Ash‘arī orthodoxy.

\(^{83}\) Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:176. Tāj al-Dīn’s devotion to his father is also recorded by Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī who explains that Tāj al-Dīn collected many of his father’s works, especially his fatwā collection; Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, 3:39. For more on Taqī al-Dīn Subkī’s collection of fatāwas see Fatāwā al-Subkī, ed. Ḥusām al-Dīn Qudsī, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1992).

\(^{84}\) Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:196.

\(^{85}\) Al-Dhahābī mentions that he saw these words in al-Zamlakānī’s handwriting implying that they were not forged; Caterina Bori, “A New Source for the Biography of Ibn Taymiyya,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 67, no. 3 (2004): 332.

\(^{86}\) Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:316. Al-Subkī died 28 years after Ibn Taymiyya so many of those present at Ibn Taymiyya’s funeral could have been at al-Subkī’s.

\(^{87}\) Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:316.

\(^{88}\) Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:316. Ibn Kathīr compares Ibn Taymiyya’s funeral to Ibn Ḥanbal’s but notes that there were less people at Ibn Taymiyya’s funerar because Damascus was a smaller city than Baghdad; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:136.
Tāj al-Dīn further presents his father as a moral, righteous person who took courageous stands against corrupt governors. He explains that Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī had a general disinterest of the world, and at first refused the post of chief judge of Damascus but on the insistence of the sultan, eventually accepted. Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī wore modest clothes, ate sparingly and was exceedingly generous. He would be frequently seen riding a mule in the streets and upon seeing a random person walking, he would ask them if they needed a ride. Tāj al-Dīn found this astonishing in that “a chief (naqīb) and a boy” were riding together throughout the city. Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī had numerous encounters with successive governors of Damascus, the majority of which he outlasted. In one instance, Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī reminds one especially corrupt governor, Arghūn Shāh, about the hereafter by grabbing and then admonishing him: “O, leader (amīr) I will die and you will die.” Tāj al-Dīn implies that because of Arghūn Shāh’s enmity towards his father that God punished Arghūn through being assassinated.

Tāj al-Dīn does not lose any opportunity to highlight how his father successfully refuted Ibn Taymiyya. Tāj al-Dīn cites a biographical report where he exclaims that al-Subkī “made the path easier to visit the Prophet” with his refutations of Ibn Taymiyya. Tāj al-Dīn is sure to mention that his father “visited the grave of Muṣṭafa (Muḥammad)” when he went on Hajj in 716/1317 and on his return wrote his refutations of Ibn Taymiyya. In the section devoted to al-Subkī’s works, Tāj al-Dīn once again emphasizes that his father composed “the great refutation” (al-radd al-kabīr) of Ibn Taymiyya’s views on divorce oaths and then mentions that

89 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:168.
90 Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī also emphasizes al-Subkī’s asceticism by noting that he had few clothes and the ones that he did have were plain and cheap, not worth more than thirty dinars; Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, 3:39.
91 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:208.
92 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:213.
93 The assassination of Arghūn Shā is discussed in detail by Ibn Kathīr; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:226.
94 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:149.
95 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:167.
96 It is also at this time that Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī wrote many of his most famous compositions such as his Tafsīr and his commentaries on the Minhāj of al-Nawawī.
he wrote another refutation of Ibn Taymiyya’s views of grave visitation. Yet, despite the numerous refutations, Tāj al-Dīn reports from “numerous reliable sources” that Ibn Taymiyya praised al-Subkī’s work and that Ibn Taymiyya “did not praise anybody of his time (ahl al-‘aṣr) like he did for [al-Subkī].” Tāj al-Dīn claims that even Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī’s rivals, such as Ibn Taymiyya, had the utmost respect for him.

Tāj al-Dīn had a more positive relationship to al-Dhahabī who was one of his primary teachers. Much of Tāj al-Dīn’s intellectual project was a response to his Shāfi‘ī traditionalist teacher al-Dhahabī, who he debates in his biographical dictionary. As Makdisi explains, al-Dhahabī was a formidable hurdle because he was a “highly respected Shafi‘ite, and therefore a most redoubtable obstacle to the progress of Ash‘arism within the Shafi‘ite school.” Al-Dhahabī became a symbol because he was “only one Shafi‘ite among many others in the powerful traditionalist movement within the Shafi‘ite school.”

Al-Dhahabī had an intense liking for his student Tāj al-Dīn, preferring him over others and treating him like a son. Tāj al-Dīn quotes a statement from al-Dhahabī regarding his will, “I have relinquished to my son ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (Tāj al-Dīn) my directorship of al-Zāhiriyya and I know that he is deserving of it, but [his] young age prevented me from completing the transfer to him.” There were more senior scholars who would not have appreciated Tāj al-Dīn, who was a mere twenty-one at the time, receiving the appointment over them. The quote is valuable because it demonstrates that al-Dhahabī saw Tāj al-Dīn as one his successors despite him being the son of the Shafi‘ī Ash‘arī Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī and being a strident Ash‘arī himself.

---

97 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:308.
98 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:194.
99 Makdisi, 71.
100 Makdisi, 72.
101 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:209.
102 Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī also viewed Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī as a prodigy exclaiming that he wrote in fiqh, usūl al-fiqh and the Arabic sciences while he was just a youth; Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, 2:259.
In his *Mu’jam al-shayūkh*, Tāj al-Dīn details that he studied with al-Dhahabī more than anybody else. He studies with al-Dhahabī included many of his historical works such al-Dhahabī’s *al-Mu’jam al-muktaṣṣ* (which in no doubt influenced the writing of his own), large parts of al-Dhahabī’s *Siyar a’lām al-nubalā’*, and even received a license to transmit his *Tārīkh al-Islām*. He also read large parts of hadith collections such as the *Musnad* of Shāfi‘ī, *Sunan* of Ibn Mājah and *Ṣaḥīh al-Bukhārī*.

In the *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi‘iyya al-kubrā*, Tāj al-Dīn begins his entry on al-Dhahabī by praising him as one of his teachers (*shaykhunā*), the ḥadīth scholar of the age, one who had no peer, and one who was the “gold of the age, figuratively and literally.” Al-Dhahabī had a phenomenal ability in *rijāl* criticism, “As if the *umma* was gathered in one plain, he looked at them and then they began to report on who was present.” Tāj al-Dīn explains that it was al-Dhahabī who trained him and brought him up on the path of scholarship. Tāj al-Dīn was taken aback with al-Dhahabī’s intense teaching and prolific writings, “the day and night tired, but his tongue and pen did not tire. The name [*shams*] was given to him, for he was similar to the sun except that he did not fade if it rained and did not recede if it became night.” Yet, Tāj al-Dīn could not help from pointing out al-Dhahabī’s flaws in “that he leaned strongly toward the Ḥanbalīs.” Tāj al-Dīn believed that al-Dhahabī did not treat the Ash’arīs fairly in his

---

105 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, *Mu’jam*, 355. All of these studies took place before the age of 21, since al-Dhahabī passed away in 748/1348. For more on the age that scholars would start their studies in Medieval Islam see Richard Bulliet, “The Age Structure of Medieval Islamic Education,” *Studia Islamica* 57, no. 1 (1983):105-117.
biographies leading him to state that al-Dhahabī “finished Tārīkh al-Islām even though there was bias (ta’āṣṣub) in it.”¹¹⁰

But it is in the biography of al-Mizzī, which is towards the end of the dictionary, that we hear the most about Tāj al-Dīn’s views of the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists and Ibn Taymiyya. Tāj al-Dīn begins the entry praising al-Mizzī profusely calling him the “ḥadīth scholar of the time,” “one of kind in his age by consensus”¹¹¹ and stating that “there was no one¹¹² like him after Ibn ‘Asākir.”¹¹³ Tāj al-Dīn then quotes several statements of al-Dhahabī from Tadhkirāt al-Ḥuffāẓ and al-Mu’jam al-muktaṣṣ discussing al-Mizzī’s knowledge of Arabic, fiqh, uṣūl al-fiqh, the rational sciences and his expertise in narrators. Tāj al-Dīn takes issue with al-Dhahabī’s view that al-Mizzī understood the rational sciences, in particular, his statement that al-Mizzī was aware of “the shortcomings of the rational sciences.”¹¹⁴ Tāj al-Dīn responds by saying, “I do not think that our Shaykh al-Mizzī knew the rational sciences (ma’qūlāt), let alone understood its shortcomings, so may God forgive our teacher al-Dhahabī.”¹¹⁵ For Tāj al-Dīn, al-Mizzī and al-Dhahabī were great ḥadīth scholars but their knowledge did not extend to kalām and philosophy.

Tāj al-Dīn adds that he heard his teacher al-Dhahabī say that he saw no better ḥadīth scholar than al-Mizzī and he heard al-Dhahabī say, “I did not see a better ḥadīth scholar than four: Ibn Daqīq al-‘Īd, al-Dimyāṭī, Ibn Taymiyya and al-Mizzī.”¹¹⁶ Of those four scholars, Tāj

¹¹⁰ Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 9:104. Nevertheless, Tāj al-Dīn wrote a poem eulogizing al-Dhahabī. In the poem, Tāj al-Dīn praises al-Dhahabī’s ḥadīth scholarship such as his knowledge of narrators, outstanding memory, ability to critique traditions, general reliability, and absolute trustworthiness; Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 9:109. Al-Dhahabī unfortunately does not have an entry on Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, most likely because Tāj al-Dīn was only 21 when al-Dhahabī passed away.

¹¹¹ Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:396.

¹¹² Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī is probably meaning that there was no ḥadīth scholar after Ibn ‘Asākir like al-Mizzī.

¹¹³ Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:396.

¹¹⁴ Al-Dhahabī also mentions in Tārīkh al-Islām that al-Mizzī had some knowledge of the rational sciences; Al-Dhahabī, Tārīkh, 53:383.

¹¹⁵ Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:396.

¹¹⁶ Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10: 396. The list nicely demonstrates al-Dhahabī’s Shāfi‘ī traditionalist leanings since it includes many Shāfi‘ī traditionalist such Ibn Daqīq al-‘Īd and al-Mizzī but also Ḥanafīs like Ibn Taymiyya.
al-Dīn only met al-Mizzī, whom he considered to be among the greatest ḥadīth scholars of his time along with al-Dhahabī, al-Birzālī and his father. The latter three “used to praise al-Mizzī, defer to him, study with him, and recognized his superiority [in ḥadīth studies].”

After mentioning al-Dhahabī’s relationship al-Mizzī, Tāj al-Dīn begins to discuss al-Birzālī’s friendship with al-Mizzī. Al-Birzālī praised al-Mizzī tremendously, which Tāj al-Dīn felt was deserved, and their mutual respect led them to teach each other’s students. Al-Birzālī closeness to al-Mizzī is evident that he defended his appointment as the director of Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya. Tāj al-Dīn relays an incident in which al-Birzālī had just arrived into Damascus when a beloved friend, Shaykh Ṣadr al-Dīn Sulaymān al-Mālikī, visited him. In the course of the visit, Shaykh Ṣadr al-Dīn advised al-Birzālī that he should convince al-Mizzī to resign from his directorship of the Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya. Al-Birzālī exclaims that, “My skin began to tremble and my mind became absent and I said to myself, ‘[al-Mizzī] is the leader of the ḥadīth scholars (imām al-muḥaddidīn). By God, if al-Dāraqutnī lived then he would hesitate to teach in his place.’”

Al-Birzālī was so troubled by the suggestion that he could not respond to the Shaykh Ṣadr al-Dīn and prevented guests from visiting him for an entire night. He then concluded to himself “this city has a lot of fitna (kathīrat al-fitān).” The student then responds to al-Birzālī explaining that Shaykh Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Mālikī did not deny al-Mizzī’s place in terms of ḥadīth but rather was concerned with the endower’s condition which required the director to be Ash’arī. When al-Mizzī was appointed director, he wrote with his own handwriting that he was Ash’arī but the people did not believe him. Al-Birzālī replied that he knew what Shaykh Ṣadr al-Dīn was implying, “but who has the audacity to say: ‘al-Mizzī is not befitting of Dār al-

---

117 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:397.
118 I will speak more about Ibn Kathīr’s use of al-Dāraqutnī in the next Chapter.
119 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:398.
120 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:398.
Hadith [al-Ashrafiyya]? By God, my limbs (ruknī) cannot bear these words.” Tāj al-Dīn ends this story with his own declaration: “look at the stature of al-Mizzī in his (al-Birzālī’s) eyes (‘indahu)!” Tāj al-Dīn’s narration of the story, gives the impression that he, and most likely his father, were not opposed to al-Mizzī’s appointment. While Tāj al-Dīn recognized al-Mizzī’s shortcomings in the rational sciences, he affirms his strength in ḥadīth studies, making him suitable for the directorship at the Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya.

Tāj al-Dīn then transitions to provide valuable information on his personal interactions with al-Mizzī and al-Dhahabī. Tāj al-Dīn relates that he used to study with al-Dhahabī twice a day, once in the morning and then in the afternoon, but for al-Mizzī he only studied with him twice a week. Tāj al-Dīn was more inclined to al-Dhahabī since he “was exceedingly nice and loving towards me. Whoever knew my relationship with him [knew] that [al-Dhahabī] did not love anyone like he loved me.” Tāj al-Dīn was less than 15 at this time which meant, “I was a boy (shābb) and that [his love] meant a tremendous amount to me.” As for al-Mizzī, “he was gloomy (‘abūs) and intimidating (muhīb),” characteristics that were not appealing to a young student. Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī wanted things to be the other way around: “My father wished that the situation was reversed, I mean that I would accompany and study (lāzama) with al-Mizzī more than al-Dhahabī, because of the tremendous [respect] that he had for [al-Mizzī].” Tāj al-Dīn unfortunately does not go into why his father preferred al-Mizzī over al-Dhahabī but al-

---

121 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:398.
122 Studying with al-Mizzī twice a week nevertheless allowed him to finish the ḥadīth collection al-Tirmidhī with him; Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, al-Mu’jam, 511.
123 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:398.
124 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:398.
125 The fact that Tāj al-Dīn highlights that he studied with both al-Mizzī and al-Dhahabī demonstrates that his reading audience would be familiar with the great ḥadīth scholars.
126 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:398.
Mizzī was definitely the more senior scholar and he may have been less controversial than al-Dhahabī who was a known critic of Ashʿarism.

Ṭāj al-Dīn recounts that he used to review his daily lessons with his father: “Usually, when I came back from [my studies] with a shaykh he would say ‘tell me (ḥāti), what did you learn, what did you read, what did you hear’.” Taqī al-Dīn was curious to know what the other scholars were teaching and what his son took away from his lessons. Tāj al-Dīn explains then, “I would narrate to him my lesson with [the Shaykh]….whenever I came from al-Dhahabī he would say ‘You came from your Shaykh.’ When Tāj al-Dīn mentioned that he came from al-Mizzī, he would say “you came from the Shaykh.” Tāj al-Dīn even recalls how his father said the word: “He would enunciate (yafṣah) the word ‘al-Shaykh’ and raise his voice. I am certain that he used to do that to fix in my heart [al-Mizzī’s] tremendous stature (ʿaẓamatuhu) and encourage me to study with him (mulāzamatuhu).”

Ṭāj al-Dīn’s studies progressed to the point that when a teaching position opened up at the Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya, his father nominated him for the post. Being less than fifteen at the time, Tāj al-Dīn was surprised by the move since he had never held a teaching position of the sorts, only being a teaching assistant with his father, and his father never put his children forward for a position until he felt that they were ready. When Tāj al-Dīn asked his father why he

---

127 This verb samīʿa could also be referring to studying ḥadīth. For more on how the word samīʿa is used in the science of ḥadīth see Ibn Kathīr, al-Bāʾith al-hathīth: sharh ikhtisār ʿulūm al-hadīth, ed. ‘Alī Ḥasan ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, 2 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Maʿārif li’il-Nashr wa’l-Tawzi’, 1996), 1:228-46.

128 Bori calls al-Subkī a “rival” to al-Mizzī. Al-Subkī and al-Mizzī could have vied over similar posts but I am inclined to view them as colleagues based on these statements in the Ṭabaqāt and other biographical dictionaries; Bori, Ibn Taymiyya wa-Jamāʿatuhu, 39.

129 The verb lāzama does no only connote studying but also accompanying. Bori translates lāzama as “constant physical intimacy that carried with it close intellectual affiliation”; Bori, Ibn Taymiyya wa-Jamāʿatuhu, 31. For more on relationship between teacher and student in medieval Islam see Jonathan Berkey’s The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: a Social History of Islamic Education (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).
nominated him, he responded, “It is said that you are a jurist in the presence of al-Mizzī.”

When these words reached al-Mizzī, he ordered to have Tāj al-Dīn’s name written as one of the advanced teachers. When al-Subkī heard the news he felt uneasy and retorted, “No by God, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (Tāj al-Dīn) is a boy (shābb) and he does not deserve this level right now. Write his name with the beginner [teachers].” Al-Dhabābī responded to al-Subkī, “By God, he is higher than that level, he is a good ḥadīth scholar.” Tāj al-Dīn takes pride in this statement inserting into the story, “These are words of al-Dhabābī.” Al-Subkī found the entire discussion amusing: “[My] father laughed and said: ‘maybe he is among the intermediate [teachers].”

The anecdote highlights the collegial relationship between al-Subkī, al-Mizzī, and al-Dhabābī.

Tāj al-Dīn sums up the section saying that this is what he knew of al-Mizzī, a great Shāfi‘ī ḥadīth scholar. As for al-Dhabābī’s claim that al-Mizzī knew the rational sciences, Tāj al-Dīn argues that al-Dhabābī did not know the rational sciences himself so he would be unable to judge al-Mizzī in that regard, since it is only known by the specialist (ahlahu).

After detailing the relationship between the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists, Tāj al-Dīn cannot hide his displeasure of their inclination towards Ibn Taymiyya:

There was closeness (rifqa) between al-Mizzī, al-Dhabābī, al-Birzālī, and many of their followers who were clearly negatively affected by Abū Abbās Ibn Taymiyya. He carried them to the worst of matters that were not suitable. He pulled them down when it would have been better for them to distance themselves from him. He stopped them at the pits of hellfire, [so] it is hoped that God will save them (al-Mizzī, al-Dhabābī, al-Birzālī) from the hell fire and their Companions.”

---

130 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:399. Al-Mizzī was said to have only studied jurisprudence for a short time; Al-Dhabābī, Tārīkh, 53:383.
131 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:399.
132 The collegial relationship between al-Subkī and al-Mizzī is further evident in that al-Mizzī visited al-Subkī’s house; Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:204.
133 The anecdote gives us a window into the Mamlūk culture of learning. Tāj al-Dīn had a close relationship with his father to the point that he felt comfortable reviewing his lessons with him and informing him who he studied with. Conversely, al-Subkī gave Tāj al-Dīn the freedom to study with the scholars of his choice but nonetheless wanted to guide his studies and push him in the right direction.
Ibn Kathīr could have been among the “Companions” that Tāj al-Dīn mentions. Tāj al-Dīn may have been hesitant to use Ibn Kathīr’s name since he was a contemporary and also lived in Damascus.

Tāj al-Dīn closes the entry by listing Ibn Taymiyya, al-Birzālī, al-Dhahabī and his father as among the great scholars who studied with al-Mizzī and exclaims that his Tahdhīb al-kamāl was a book “which nothing like it has ever been composed.” Tāj al-Dīn notes that al-Mizzī died in the Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya but, unlike Ibn Kathīr, he does not mention that he was buried near Ibn Taymiyya.134

Tāj al-Dīn’s open criticism of the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists marks an important shift in the Ashʿarī campaign. Traditionalism took a setback with the deaths of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim and it became easier to attack the theological school. Tāj al-Dīn began to compose his dictionary after the great figures of al-Birzālī, al-Mizzī, and al-Dhahabī had passed away and he felt more open to discuss their achievements and faults.135 Yet, the fact that he needed to warn other Shāfi‘īs of their “Ḥanbalī leanings” shows that while traditionalism had declined it had not disappeared.

Throughout the biographical dictionary, Tāj al-Dīn maintained that al-Mizzī, al-Birzālī and al-Dhahabī were great Shāfi‘ī ḥadīth scholars and even mentioned them, along with his father, as the greatest ḥadīth scholars (ḥuffāẓ) of his age. Whether it was history with al-Dhahabī, narrators with al-Mizzī, or contemporary biographies with al-Birzālī, the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists distinguished themselves by composing some of the most important works of ḥadīth and history in the Mamlūk era and attracted some of the best students, such as Tāj al-Dīn.

134 Tāj al-Dīn supplements the entry by listing some answers that al-Mizzī gave to questions regarding narrators.
135 Tāj al-Dīn was a mere 21 when the last of the three, al-Dhahabī, died.
The Shāfi‘ī traditionalists were colleagues of the Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arīs who had great respect and admiration between them to the point that they publically praised and studied with one another.

What separated the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists from the Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arīs were their position on *kalām*. Tāj al-Dīn argues that his father was a specialist in *kalām* and that he studied the science with him. On the other hand, Tāj al-Dīn goes out of his way to argue that al-Mizzī did not have knowledge of rational sciences and is critical of his teacher al-Dhahabī for not totally understanding it. Tāj al-Dīn was very much aware that the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists’ antagonism towards *kalām* attracted them to Ibn Taymiyya and Ḥanbalī scholars. Tāj al-Dīn felt that Ibn Taymiyya took the group to areas which were theological dangerous and could have excommunicated them from the community. Tāj al-Dīn’s criticisms of the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists was thus to encourage his readers to excel in ḥadīth but not to neglect the rational sciences and be drawn into Ḥanbalī traditionalism.

Tāj al-Dīn unfortunately does not mention Ibn Kathīr in his biographical dictionary, most likely because he was too much of a contemporary. Yet, there is evidence that suggests that Tāj al-Dīn included information from Ibn Kathīr in his work. Tāj al-Dīn notes that “[al-Mizzī’s] students witnessed” that he would sometimes doze off while a student was reading to him. However, if the student made a mistake, al-Mizzī would suddenly awaken “as if somebody woke him up” and correct the student. Tāj al-Dīn could have received this information from Ibn Kathīr because he mentions the same trait of al-Mizzī in his *Ikhtiṣār ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth*.

---

138 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bā’ith al-ḥathīth*, 1:341. Ibn Kathīr adds that the student was amazed on how the sleepy al-Mizzī was more alert than himself and how al-Mizzī corrected him even though he did not have the text in his hand. I will speak about *Ikhtiṣār ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth* in Chapter Three.
Ibn Kathīr does mention Tāj al-Dīn several times in *al-Bidāya* praising him as exceedingly eloquent\(^{139}\) and noting that he was popular with the masses.\(^{140}\) Similar to his father, Ibn Kathīr defended Tāj al-Dīn against attacks of wrongdoing. In the year 767/1365, the Ḥanbalī and Mālikī judges brought up several accusations against Tāj al-Dīn, who had by the time become the chief Shāfi‘ī judge, which Ibn Kathīr says “were too reprehensible (*munkar*)” to mention. A council (*majlis*) of various judges and prominent scholars was set up to investigate the charges. Ibn Kathīr was one of those who were requested to attend the gathering, representing the important stature that he gained towards the end of his life. Ibn Kathīr explains that two opposing reports were composed - one critical of Tāj al-Dīn and another that supported and praised him. Ibn Kathīr backed the pro-Tāj al-Dīn report stating “in [that document] was my handwriting that I had only seen good in [Tāj al-Dīn].”\(^{141}\) What is evident in Ibn Kathīr’s support is that even though he and Tāj al-Dīn represented two different voices within the Shāfi‘ī school, he believed that Tāj al-Dīn was a moral and righteous scholar and was innocent of the charges. Ibn Kathīr’s and others act of support was instrumental in concluding the sessions without any censure of Tāj al-Dīn.\(^{142}\)

Ibn Kathīr’s admiration and affinity towards Tāj al-Dīn continues in his obituary of him\(^ {143}\) where he states that Tāj al-Dīn was among the elite scholars of Syria when he passed away. Ibn Kathīr believed that Tāj al-Dīn faced trials and tribulations that no other judge faced.


\(^{142}\) Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 14:306. Ibn Kathīr also shows respect towards the other son of Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, Kamāl al-Dīn. In Kamāl al-Dīn’s obituary, Ibn Kathīr explains that the masses mourned over him because of his forbearance, character, and selflessness. Ibn Kathīr even praises his judgeship: “He did not wish evil (*yata’addā sharrahu*) upon others, he used to rule well, fairly”; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 14:245.

\(^{143}\) This obituary is preserved by Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī in his entry on Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī in *al-Durar al-kāmina* and is most likely an excerpt from *al-Bidāya wa l-nihāya*. The surviving editions that we have of *al-Bidāya wa l-nihāya* end in 767 AH but Tāj al-Dīn died in 771 AH. This means that there was an edition of *al-Bidāya wa l-nihāya* Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī had access to that is now lost; Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, 2:260.
before. But Tāj al-Dīn was able to vindicate himself through his courage and rhetorical skills which left his opponents speechless. Tāj al-Dīn’s exemplary character was demonstrated when he returned to his post as chief judge he “forgave and pardoned those who stood against him.”

The entry shows that Ibn Kathīr consistently sided with Tāj al-Dīn against his opponents because he believed that Tāj al-Dīn was a moral and righteous scholar.

**Conclusion:**

Contemporary biographies of Ibn Kathīr emphasize his relationship with Ibn Taymiyya and his primary teachers’ al-Mizzī and al-Dhahabī. While these connections are essential for defining Ibn Kathīr’s intellectual development, exploring Ibn Kathīr’s relationship with the Shāfi‘ī Ash’arīs is necessary to understand where Ibn Kathīr fit within the political and theological spectrum of his time. The Shāfi‘ī Ash’arīs were part of the state establishment, often city or state Judges, and were “conservatives” in the sense that they defended orthodoxy and the social institutions that preserved it. While they were proponents of ḥadīth, they accepted kalām and allowed for the figurative interpretations of scripture. Ibn Kathīr maintained relations with the Shāfi‘ī Ash’arīs because they were Shāfi‘īs like himself and his respect for them made him defend them, as we see with the al-Subkīs, from outside attacks. But as we observe with al-Zamlakānī, Ibn Kathīr had a strong moral foundation which made him highly critical of Shāfi‘īs who he felt compromised their positions for political power. Thus Ibn Kathīr’s relationship with the Shāfi‘ī Ash’arīs was not defined by Ibn Taymiyya but rather was intimately connected with Ibn Kathīr’s allegiance to his madhhab and his traditionalists values. While scholars’ stances

---

144 Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, 2:260.
towards Ibn Taymiyya were important for Ibn Kathîr, it was not the only criteria in which he judged others and formed relationships.

The complexities of Ibn Kathîr’s Shâfi‘î traditionalist identity are better seen in his major works.
Chapter III

Making Shafi‘i traditionalism Shafi‘i orthodoxy - Ibn Kathir’s Major Works

Before delving into Ibn Kathir’s Tafsir, it is important to contextualize his exegesis within the author’s larger intellectual project or broader intellectual goals and objectives.¹ A brief survey of Ibn Kathir’s major works² will also allow us to understand his peculiar situation as a Shafi‘i traditionalist and recognize his legacy as more than a mere “spokesperson” for Ibn Taymiyya. Ibn Kathir’s intellectual project was to promote a Shafi‘i madhab which was traditionalist, pro-ijtihad and less in conflict with the Hanbali school. Fitting with his “moral theology,” Ibn Kathir did not compose refutations but rather focused on developing the more practical sciences of law, history and hadith. A brief survey of Ibn Kathir’s major works demonstrates that he fell within the great line of Shafi‘i traditionalists before him rather than that of Ibn Taymiyya.³

History:

Ibn Kathir’s historical works were in response to Shafi‘i Ash’aris who stressed their madhab’s historic relationship with Ash’arism and that kalâm was an accepted Islamic science. The Shafi‘i Ash’ari Ibn ‘Asakir (d. 571/1176), for instance, wrote the biographical dictionary Tabyin al-kadhab al-muftari fī mā nusiba ilā al-Imām Abī al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī to defend the Shafi‘i Ash’aris’ use of kalâm leading Tāj al-Dīn al-Subki to argue that the work was required

³ These categories are helpful in differentiating between Ibn Kathir’s works but many of his writings take on multiple genres. His Tafsir, for instance, could be considered a work of ḥadīth.
reading for the Shāfi‘ī jurists. As Sherman Jackson explains, *Tabyīn al-kadhab* was the “single most important work that had insulated Ash‘arism within the Shāfi‘ī school for over a century and a half.” Ibn Kathīr, in contrast, presents a pro-traditionalist version of Islamic history, emphasizing ḥadīth scholars over the contributions of philosophers and theologians. In opposition to Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arīs, Ibn Kathīr argued that the heart of the Shāfi‘ī *madhhab* was in fact traditionalism. Ibn Kathīr makes his case by contending that the eponym of the Ash‘arī school, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/935), actually died as a traditionalist and that a traditionalist strand can be traced in the Shāfi‘ī *madhhab* to al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820) himself.

*Ṭabaqāt al-fuqahā’ al-shāfi‘īyyīn*

Ibn Kathīr’s first major historical work was the *Ṭabaqāt al-fuqahā’ al-shāfi‘īyyīn*, a biographical dictionary of Shāfi‘ī jurists starting from Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī up to the year 700/1300. Sherman Jackson suggests that the work was composed to “counter” Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī’s pro-Ash‘arī biographical dictionary *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi‘īyya al-kubrā*. But a close examination of *Ṭabaqāt al-fuqahā’ al-shāfi‘īyyīn* indicates that Ibn Kathīr wrote the work before that of Tāj al-Dīn’s biographical dictionary. Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, in fact, may have written *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi‘īyya al-kubrā* to counter Ibn Kathīr’s biographical work.

---

8 Jackson, 53.
9 Ibn Kathīr most likely finished his biographical dictionary before Tāj al-Dīn’s since the earliest of extant manuscript of Ibn Kathīr’s *Ṭabaqāt* is dated 749/1348, when Tāj al-Dīn was only 22; Ibn Kathīr, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1:10. The
The biographical dictionary involves Ibn Katār in an ongoing Shāfī‘ī traditionalists endeavor, as it constitutes a reformulation of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ’s (d. 643/1245) and al-Nawawī’s (d. 676/1277)12 earlier biographical dictionary of the Shāfī‘ī school. Ibn Katār explains that the reason for writing the dictionary was that Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ and al-Nawawī had not sufficiently incorporated (yastaw ‘ib) the names of their contemporaries prompting him to rework the biographical dictionary. 14

Throughout his biographical dictionary, Ibn Katār emphasizes the traditionalist and pro-ijtihād wing of the Shāfī‘ī madhhab, one that favors hadīth over kalām and ijtihād over taqlīd. 15

Ibn Katār rethinks many of the major Shāfī‘ī figures in relation to traditionalism and argues that

---

10 The biographical dictionary involves Ibn Katār in an ongoing Shāfī‘ī traditionalists endeavor, as it constitutes a reformulation of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ’s (d. 643/1245) and al-Nawawī’s (d. 676/1277) earlier biographical dictionary of the Shāfī‘ī school. Ibn Katār explains that the reason for writing the dictionary was that Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ and al-Nawawī had not sufficiently incorporated (yastaw ‘ib) the names of their contemporaries prompting him to rework the biographical dictionary.


12 Frank Griffel explains that Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ and al-Nawawī “regarded Aristotelian logic as a dangerous innovation that would lead students to become receptive to the heterodox thought of the ḥalāṣīfa”; Frank Griffel, Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 81.

13 The fact that Ibn Katār started the work early in his career is evident in that he prays for Ma‘mar Sharaf al-Dīn (d. 738/1338) to have a long life, meaning that Ibn Katār must have started the biographical dictionary before he passed away; Ibn Katār, Tabaqāt, 2:833; Ibn Katār, al-Bidāya, 14:181. Additionally, there is evidence that Ibn Katār sought to write a continuation (dhayl) of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ’s biographical dictionary but then decided to rework the entire dictionary since Ibn Katār begins with the later parts of the Tabaqāt and then returns to the beginning of the work. While Ibn Katār prays for Ma‘mar Sharaf al-Dīn (d. 738/1338) to have a long life towards the end of the dictionary, he says, “may God have mercy on his soul” on al-Mizzī (d. 742/1341) (meaning that he had died) in the dictionary’s early parts: Tabaqāt, 1:206, 211, 233. Ibn Katār’s methodology of both continuing and reworking a work is also evident in al-Bidāya wa‘l-nihāya, in which Ibn Katār continues al-Bīrūnī’s Tārīkh Dimashq but amends earlier parts of the work.

14 Ibn Katār, Tabaqāt, 2:826. Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ and al-Nawawī probably did not conceive of writing a Tabaqāt work that incorporated their contemporaries.

15 As Felicitas Opwis explains, the author of a biographical dictionary is “not merely a compiler of pre-existing information. Instead, he has an important impact on shaping the identity, the doctrine, and the authority structures of the group”; Opwis, 32.
even the most strident Ash‘arīs had traditionalist leanings. In his entry of al-Ash‘arī, the eponym of the Ash‘arī school of theology, Ibn Kathīr argues that al-Ash‘arī died as a traditionalist. Ibn Kathīr explains that al-Ash‘arī went through three phases in his life. At first, al-Ash‘arī was a Mu‘tazilī but he later denounced that school’s beliefs as heretical. Al-Ash‘arī then transitioned to affirming the essential attributes of God such as his life, knowledge, power, will, hearing, listening, seeing and speaking but interpreted figuratively other active attributes such as God’s face, hands, and feet. In his third and final stage, however, al-Ash‘arī affirmed all of God’s attributes and characteristics unequivocally (literally ‘without asking how’ [ghayr takyīf]) but also without anthropomorphizing God (tashbīh). In the end, al-Ash‘arī took the path of the salaf which is encapsulated in his final work al-Ibāna. It is in al-Ibāna, Ibn Kathīr argues, that later scholars such as al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013) and al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) “leaned” towards in their own theological writings. Ibn Kathīr makes the traditionalist argument that the so-called “Ash‘arīs” of his day were actually subscribing to theological positions that al-Ash‘arī and many of his followers had disavowed. They should therefore follow the practice of the original “Ash‘arīs,” the way of the salaf.

Ibn Kathīr even argues that many of the “consummate” Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arīs had traditionalist inclinations, such as Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī. Al-Juwaynī was expelled

---

16 Ibn Kathīr, Ṭabaqāt, 1:205.
17 Ibn Kathīr closes his entry relying a tradition that presents al-Ash‘arī as not a mere mutakallim but a jurist and hadith scholar. Ibn Kathīr narrates that after al-Ash‘arī won a theological debate with some Mu'tazalīs, an observer to the debate states, “We have come to know that you are erudite in 'ilm al-kalām, but I want to ask you something on a relevant issue in fiqh.” Al-Ash‘arī replies, “Ask whatever you like.” The man says, “What do [you] say regarding the prayer without [reciting sūrat] al-fātiha?” Al-Ash‘arī answers that such a prayer in unacceptable and then cites two hadiths with full chains of transmission to bolster his argument and silence the questioner. The anecdote demonstrates that al-Ash‘arī coupled any knowledge that he had of kalām with the more acceptable sciences of jurisprudence and hadith; Ibn Kathīr, Ṭabaqāt, 1:207.
18 Makdisi captures the traditionalist argument in his, “Ash‘arī and the Ash‘arites in Islamic Religious History I.”
from Nishapur during an anti-Ashʿarī phase of the city’s Seljuk ruler and only returned under Nizām al-Mulk, who favored the theological school. Al-Juwaynī wrote “a seminal work on Ashʿarī theology entitled al-Shāmil (the Comprehensive Book) as well as another book rebutting the Muʿtazilite school.” Ibn Kathīr presents several quotes in which al-Juwaynī distances himself from kalām and publically declares himself a traditionalist. A contemporary jurist of al-Juwaynī mentions that he entered the study circle of al-Juwaynī before his death (fī maraḍihī) and heard him declare, “Bear witness, I have recanted from every statement that conflicts with the salaf.” Ibn Kathīr then emphasizes how al-Juwaynī preferred tafwīḍ over taʾwīl or leaving to God issues relating to his divine essence rather than interpreting them figuratively.

---

The text continues with references and further elaborations on the works of al-Juwaynī and the implications of his writings on the tradtionalist and Muʿtazilite schools of thought.
Ibn Kathîr takes a similar approach with al-Juwaynî’s student, the great Abû Ḥāmid al-Ghazâlî (d. 505/1111). Ibn Kathîr emphasizes al-Ghazâlî’s studies in ḥadîth, mentioning that he studied the Ṣaḥîh al-Bukhârî and parts of the Sunan of Abû Dawûd, even going as far as saying that “if [al-Ghazâlî] had lived longer he could have excelled in ḥadîth.” Ibn Kathîr, nevertheless, acknowledges that al-Ghazâlî became an expert in kalâm and that he composed many prominent works in the discipline. But Ibn Kathîr is quick to note that al-Ghazâlî “recanted all of that (kalâm) at the end of his life, turning to ḥadîth and the study of Ṣaḥîh al-Bukhârî, such that it was said that he died with it (Ṣaḥîh al-Bukhârî) on his chest.”

recanted his Muʿtazilī theology. Ibn Kathīr once again sought to stress al-Ashʿarī’s final traditionalist stage found in al-Ibāna.

Throughout the dictionary, Ibn Kathīr shows his hostility towards kalām which was a standard part of the Shāfiʿī Ashʿarī curriculum of his day. In several instances, Ibn Kathīr suggests that the science should be removed all together from Shāfiʿī study circles. Quoting from the Shāfiʿī traditionalist Abū Shāma al-Maqdisī (d. 665/1268), Ibn Kathīr notes that the scholar Zakī al-Dīn Abū al-Ḥasan (d. 598/1202), “used to prevent people from preoccupying themselves (ishtighāl) with the books of logic and argumentation and banned their books in his teaching circle (majlis).” Similarly, in the entry on Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, Ibn Kathīr states, “He stayed steady on the path of the salafī creed. He hated the ways of philosophy and logic and preached against it. He did not allow studying it in [his] city and the rulers obeyed him in that.” The Shāfiʿī jurist apparently not only prevented kalām from being studied in his study circles but also recommended that it not be taught in his city.

Yet, even though Ibn Kathīr believed that kalām should be avoided, he did not leave out the possibility that someone could specialize in kalām but still maintain a traditionalist creed. In his entry on ʿAbd al-Ṣamad b. al-Murāḥṭal (d. 691/1292), Ibn Kathīr explains that he studied

---

30 Ibn Kathīr, Tābaqāt, 2:646. It is interesting to note here that Ibn Kathīr argues that the traditionalist creed is actually the “moderate one.” As we recall, Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī argues that the Ashʿarīs are the moderates because they lay between the Muʿtazalis and Hashwīya. See Chapter Two’s section on Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī.
32 Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī mentions that he studied the kalām works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, such as his al-Arbaʿīn and his Muhāṣṣal; Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Tābaqāt, 10:198.
33 Ibn Kathīr, Tābaqāt, 2:696.
34 Quoting from al-Dhahabī’s Siyār al-nubalā’, Eerik Dickinson notes that Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ dismissed logic “as pompous words which God has made superfluous for all sane people”; Dickinson, xxi.
35 Ibn Kathīr, Tābaqāt, 2:782. Ibn Kathīr emphasizes scholarly authority here in that the rulers obeyed the scholars’ position that kalām should not be taught in the study circles.
kalām and usūl al-fiqh “but despite that he held on to the way of the righteous salaf.”36 Another instance occurs in his biography of Saʿāda b. Jaʿfar al-Kawwi (d. 693/1294), in which he mentions that “he had a good insight[s] in the rational sciences (maʿqūlāt) but despite that he had a sound belief in the way of the salaf.”37 Ibn Kathīr may have been open to the idea that kalām could be studied by traditionalist scholars as a communal obligation (fard kifāya), rather than as a mandatory subject for every scholar.38

In regards to ijtihād, Ibn Kathīr emphasizes that al-Shāfiʿī was an absolute mujtahid by spending half his entry discussing how his legal opinions were unique from the other madhhab founders. Ibn Kathīr highlights the quote from the Shāfiʿī traditionalist Abū Qāsim al-Dārikī (d. 376/986-87), who declared that a ḥadīth from the Prophet “is more preferable than taking from the madhhab of al-Shāfiʿī or Abū Ḥanīfa, for disagreeing with them is easier than disagreeing with the ḥadīth.”39 Towards the end of the biographical dictionary, Ibn Kathīr calls the father of his primary fiqh teacher Burhān al-Dīn al-Fazārī (d. 729/1329), Ibn Firkāḥ (d. 690/1291), “one of the mujtahids.”40 Ibn Kathīr makes sure to highlight that the mujtahid Ibn Firkāḥ studied with the great Shāfiʿī traditionalists before him such as Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ and ‘Izz al-Dīn Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām (d. 660-1/1262.41 Ibn Firkāḥ further taught many great pro-ijtihād jurists and, in

36 Ibn Kathīr, Ṭabaqāt, 2:848.
37 Ibn Kathīr, Ṭabaqāt, 2:850.
40 Ibn Kathīr, Ṭabaqāt, 2:830. This is a unique statement for Ibn Kathīr to make regarding “post-formative” scholars. I will discuss the issues of taqlīd and ijtihād in the section dealing with Ibn Kathīr’s works on jurisprudence.
particular, transmitted his *Muʿjam al-shuyūkh* to his son Burhān al-Dīn, al-Mizzī and Ibn Taymiyya.\(^42\)

Ibn Kathīr’s interest in reconciliation between the Shāfiʿīs and Ḥanbalīs is also evident in that he includes Ibn Ḥanbal within the Shāfiʿī biographical dictionary. Ibn Kathīr emphasizes the close relationship between al-Shāfiʿī and Ibn Ḥanbal, highlighting that Ibn Ḥanbal studied with al-Shāfiʿī in Baghdad.\(^43\) Ibn Ḥanbal was quoted as saying that “on every [fiqh] issue on which I do not have evidence, I say what al-Shāfiʿī said.”\(^44\) Ibn Kathīr presents the idea here that there are only a handful of issues that separate the two madhhab and that Ibn Ḥanbal frequently deferred to al-Shāfiʿī. Ibn Kathīr also mentions the famous quote attributed to al-Shāfiʿī in which he praises Ibn Ḥanbal’s knowledge and piety: “I left Bagdad and I did not leave behind anybody more knowledgeable in jurisprudence (*afqah*), more ascetic (*azhad*) and more pious (*awra*) than Ibn Ḥanbal.”\(^45\) According to this tradition, Ibn Ḥanbal was among the greatest successors to al-Shāfiʿī rather than a rival.\(^46\) Ibn Kathīr further emphasizes Ibn Ḥanbal’s devotion to al-Shāfiʿī by quoting the statement of one of al-Shāfiʿī’s students, Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Zaʿfarānī, that “I did not study a letter with al-Shāfiʿī except that Aḥmad was present, and I did not go to a study circle (majlis) [of al-Shāfiʿī] except that I found Aḥmad.”\(^47\) The quote gives the impression that Ibn Ḥanbal was a close disciple of al-Shāfiʿī and that Ḥanbalism was a development of Shāfiʿism.

---

\(^{42}\) Ibn Kathīr, *Tabaqāt*, 2:830. Ibn Kathīr highly praises Ibn Firkāḥ and gives a prayer for him, asking God to have mercy upon him, and lighten his grave. Ibn Kathīr must have acquired most of the information for this entry from Ibn Firkāḥ’s son Burhān al-Dīn who was one of his primary fiqh teachers.


\(^{44}\) Ibn Kathīr, *Tabaqāt*, 1:117.


\(^{46}\) In contrast, the Ashʿarī Ṭāj al-Dīn al-Subkī mentions a debate where al-Shāfiʿī defeats Ibn Ḥanbal regarding Ibn Ḥanbal’s contention that the Muslim who abandons prayer is a disbeliever; Ṭāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, *Tabaqāt*, 2:61.

Ibn Kathīr ends his entry on Ibn Ḥanbal by quoting a ḥadīth that Ibn Kathīr studied with al-Mizzi in which Mālik, al-Shāfiʿī, and Ibn Ḥanbal are all in the chain of transmission in succession. The ḥadīth demonstrates that the majority of eponyms of the Sunnī madhhabs were students of one another rather than opponents and that they were more interested in narrating ḥadīth than speculation.

*Al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya*

Ibn Kathīr’s second major historical work was *al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya*. While he composed the work throughout his life, early parts of the work, such as the section on stories of the prophets, may have overlapped with his composition of Ṭabaqāt al-fuqahāʾ al-shāfiʿīyyīn. Henri Laoust considers *al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya* to be Ibn Kathīr’s “magnum opus” and “by far

---

48 This ḥadīth states: “The soul of a believer is a bird hanging in a tree of paradise until it is returned to its body on the Day of Resurrection.” Ibn Kathīr frequently cites this ḥadīth throughout his biographical works. In particular, Ibn Kathīr records that he conveyed this ḥadīth at the ceremony where he replaced al-Dhahabī as the chair of the Umm Sāliḥ madrasa. Ibn Kathīr may have decided to narrate this ḥadīth as a sign of unity after the death of the controversial al-Dhahabī; Ibn Kathīr, *Ṭabaqāt*, 14:221. While Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī lists several ḥadīths which contain Mālik, al-Shāfiʿī, and Ibn Ḥanbal in the isnāds, he does not list this particular ḥadīth; Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 2:62.

49 Ibn Kathīr further mentions here “may God have mercy on his soul” after al-Mizzi’s name meaning that al-Mizzi had died (d. 742/1341) before Ibn Kathīr had begun writing this early portion of the biographical dictionary. See footnote 13 for a more thorough discussion on dating of the biographical dictionary.

50 There are five extant manuscripts of the biographical dictionary found in various locations: Chester Beatty Library, Tunis, Princeton, and Morocco; Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 1:10. The editor of another edition of the Tafsīr, Anwar Bāz, identifies another manuscript in Mecca; Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, ed. Anwar Bāz (al-Manṣūra: Dār al-Wafī, 2004), 5. The number and different locations of the manuscripts suggests that Ibn Kathīr’s biographical dictionary was circulated in the pre-modern period and could have been an alternative to Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī’s pro-Ashʿarī Tafsīr. This finding potentially questions the idea that Ashʿarism was the only established orthodoxy after the 11th century. Khaled El-Rouayheb, for instance, supports Goldziher against Makdisi that Ashʿarism became the dominant orthodoxy after the 5th/11th century. See his “From Ibn Hajar al-Haytamī (d. 1566) to Khayr al-Dīn al-Alūsī (d. 1899): Changing Views of Ibn Taymiyya among non-Ḥanbalī Sunni Scholars,” 295. More work needs to be done on the relationship between Ashʿarism and traditionalism from the 11th century until modern times.

51 Ibn Kathīr frequently cites his biography of the Prophet (ṣīra) and *Stories of the Prophets* in his Tafsīr. Discussions surrounding the sources of Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr will be discussed in the next Chapter.

52 Laoust, “Ibn Kathīr,” EP.
the most important of Ibn Kathīr’s works.”⁵³ Laoust makes this observation based on the fact that *al-Bidāya* “is one of the principal historical works of the Mamlūk period” and its ability to influence later historical works such as those by Ibn Hijjī (d.816/1413), Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba (d. 851/1348) and Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1449).⁵⁴

The tremendous work spans 14 volumes and covers history from the creation of Adam until 773/1371-72.⁵⁵ As Ibn Kathīr explains in the Introduction,⁵⁶ he wanted to write universal history that would cover creation, the lives of the prophets, the era of the Prophet Muḥammad,⁵⁷ the important events of Islamic history and Islamic eschatology. He points out that his history will rely on the six canonical ḥadīth collections and “transmitted reports that are acceptable to the scholars who are the heirs of the prophets.”⁵⁸ Ibn Kathīr’s training as a ḥadīth scholar is evident throughout the work as he sorts through traditions, selecting reports which he finds authentic and consistent with his traditionalist view of history.

Similar to ʿTabaqāt al-fuqahāʾ al-shāfiʿīyyīn, Ibn Kathīr builds upon other traditionalist scholars’ works⁵⁹ but reformulates their writings to fit his theology and presentation style. For instance, when writing on the Mamlūk period, Ibn Kathīr incorporates the Shāfiʿī traditionalist

---

⁵³ Laoust, “Ibn Kathīr,” *EI*².
⁵⁴ Laoust also mentions that Ibn Ḥajar “continued” many of Ibn Kathīr’s works such as his commentary on *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and his universal history; Laoust “Ibn Kathīr,” *EI*².
⁵⁵ Modern editions of *al-Bidāya* end in the year 767/1366 but Ibn Ḥajar writes that his historical work *Inbāʾ al-ghumr* is a *dhayl* to *al-Bidāya* and it starts in the year 773/1371; Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Inbāʾ al-ghumr bi-anbāʾ al-ʿumr*, ed. Ḥasan Habashī, 2 vols. (Cairo: [s.n.], 1969), 1:5.
⁵⁷ Many of Ibn Kathīr’s famous historical works are taken from *al-Bidāya waʾl-nihāya* such his *Stories of the Prophets, Characteristics of the Prophet* and his *Ṣīra*.
⁵⁸ While Ibn Kathīr says “scholars” here, he most likely means “ḥadīth scholars” since they would be able to determine which narrations are acceptable.
⁵⁹ One of the most important traditionalist scholars that Ibn Kathīr builds off is al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), which will be important in our discussion of Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr*.
Abū Shāma’s *Tārīkh Dimashq* and Shāfi‘ī traditionalist al-Birzālī’s continuation of it. Ibn Kathīr considered the last portion of *al-Bidāya* to be a continuation (*dhayl*) of al-Birzālī’s work.\(^{60}\)

Unlike *Ṭabaqāt al-fuqahā‘ al-shāfi‘iyyīn*, al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya presents a general traditionalist history that goes beyond *madhhab* affiliation. Throughout the work, Ibn Kathīr supports ḥadīth scholars and distances himself from scholastic theologians (*mutakallimūn*), philosophers,\(^{61}\) monist Sufis\(^ {62}\) and Imāmī and Ismā‘īlī Shi‘īs.\(^ {63}\)

Building on his *Ṭabaqāt al-fuqahā‘ al-shāfi‘iyyīn*, Ibn Kathīr continues to promote a pro-*ijtihād* Shāfi‘ī tradition. In his biography of al-Shāfi‘ī, Ibn Kathīr presents him as a member of the *Ahl-ḥadīth*, favoring traditions from the Prophet over his own opinion or *kalām*.\(^ {64}\)

Ibn Kathīr quotes al-Shāfi‘ī declaring, “If you [find an] authentic ḥadīth from the messenger of God may peace and blessing be upon him, then take that opinion (*qūlū bihi*) and leave my opinion (*qawlī*).” Ibn Kathīr adds another tradition where al-Shāfi‘ī instructs his students not to imitate him (*lā tuqallidūnī*) but rather to follow the sayings of the Prophet. Ibn Kathīr then moves to attack *kalām*, quoting al-Shāfi‘ī as saying, “If people knew that what is in *kalām* [is from their] whims then they would run away from it as they run away from a lion.”\(^ {65}\) Ibn Kathīr bolsters this statement with a ruling from al-Shāfi‘ī, “my judgement on the devotees of *kalām* is

---

\(^{60}\) Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 14:182. Ibn Kathīr continues al-Birzālī’s work after the year 738/1337-1338. He also mentions that he finished using al-Birzālī’s work in the year 751/1350 which means that Ibn Kathīr frequently wrote about Mamālīk Damascus 10-15 years after the event occurred. For instance, Ibn Kathīr wrote his biography of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) after al-Mizzī (d. 742/1341) had passed away; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 14:136.

\(^{61}\) Ibn Kathīr is critical of al-Fārābī for holding the unorthodox view that resurrection will be spiritual rather than corporeal. Ibn Kathīr adds that, “if he died with that (belief) then the curse of the Lord of all the worlds [be upon him].” Ibn Kathīr closes the entry by stating, “I did not see the ḥāfiẓ Ibn ‘Asākir mention him in his history because of his rottenness and ugliness. And God knows best”; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 11:239.

\(^{62}\) Ibn Kathīr is critical of Fatimid rulers; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 11:305. However, Ibn Kathīr finds “truth” in Zaydism in that they do not speak ill of Abū Bakr and ‘Umar but he rejects their belief that ‘Alī is superior to the first two caliphs; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 9:342.


\(^{64}\) Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 10:269.

that they should be hit with a palm leaf (jarīd) and they should be paraded throughout the tribes (qabā‘il) and it should be called out against them, ‘This is the reward of him who leaves the Qur’ān and Sunna and accepts kalām over them.’”\(^{66}\) The devotees of kalām should not simply be avoided, but rather they should be publicly disciplined because they prioritize their reason over the original sources.

Ibn Kathīr transitions to demonstrate al-Shāfi‘ī’s preference for the specialists of ḥadīth by quoting several statements ascribed to al-Shāfi‘ī from his student, the Shāfi‘ī traditionalist al-Buwayṭī (d. 231/846).\(^{67}\) Al-Shāfi‘ī is quoted as saying, “Stick with the companions of ḥadīth, because they are the people who are the most correct.”\(^{68}\) This is in contrast to the devotees of kalām who are misguided. Another statement of al-Shāfi‘ī compares the ḥadīth scholars to the Prophet’s Companions: “If you see a man from the companions of ḥadīth it is as if you have seen a man from the Companions of the Prophet.”\(^{69}\) The ḥadīth scholars relay and preserve traditions from the Prophet just as the Companions did. Al-Shāfi‘ī is even quoted as preferring ḥadīth scholars over jurists, “may God reward them (companions of ḥadīth), they have preserved for us the source (ḥadīth), so they are (more) virtuous than us.”\(^{70}\) Here the ḥadīth scholars take preference over the jurists because of their noble tasks of preserving the teachings of the Prophet.

Ibn Kathīr sums up al-Shāfi‘ī’s position on kalām through several lines of al-Shāfi‘ī’s own poetry:

“All the sciences except the Qur’ān are a preoccupation, except ḥadīth and fiqh in religion,”

\(^{66}\) Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 10: 269. Ibn Taymiyya also cites this quotation from al-Shāfi‘ī: Ibn Taymiyya, Majmū‘, 5:119. The fact that Ibn Kathīr and Ibn Taymiyya both cite similar quotations from al-Shāfi‘ī demonstrates that traditionalists had common historical reference points.


\(^{68}\) Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 10: 269.

\(^{69}\) Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 10: 269.

\(^{70}\) Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 10: 269.
The science that does not have ‘he narrated to us,’ and similar [sayings] to the like, is [simply] whispers from Satan.”

The line “he narrated to us, and similar [sayings] to the like” refers to the methods of the ḥadīth scholars who deal with narrations. Islamic sciences that are not based on scripture, such as kalām, are deemed satanic since they have the potential of leading the believer astray.

Ibn Kathīr concludes the section by narrating from al-Shāfī‘ī’s senior students that al-Shāfī‘ī held a traditionalist creed in which he read the Qur’ānic verses and ḥadīths that discuss the attributes of God “as they were, without asking how (takyīf), without anthropomorphizing God (tashbīh), without stripping him of his attributes (taʿīl), and without distorting the divine texts (taḥrīf).” Unlike the Shāfī‘ī Ashʿarīs, Ibn Kathīr did not believe that al-Shāfī‘ī would have condoned kalām and engage in taʾwīl of scripture.

Similar to his Ṭabaqāt, Ibn Kathīr emphasizes the close relationship between al-Shāfī‘ī and Ibn Ḥanbal. After discussing Ibn Ḥanbal’s heroics in the mihna, Ibn Kathīr quotes al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066) noting that Ibn Ḥanbal studied fiqh with al-Shāfī‘ī and when Ibn Ḥanbal died among his belongings were both the Risāla that al-Shāfī‘ī composed in Iraq and the version composed in Egypt (risālatay al-Shāfī‘ī al-qadīma wa l-jadīda). The implication here is that Ibn Ḥanbal’s interest in al-Shāfī‘ī’s fiqh reached the point that he was even aware of the developments in al-Shāfī‘ī’s thought and that he built off al-Shāfī‘ī rather than opposed him.

Ibn Kathīr continues to stress ijtihād and traditionalist theology in the post-Shāfī‘ī era. In his entry of Ibn Khuzayma (d. 311/923-4), Ibn Kathīr stresses that “he was among the mujtahidīn

---

71 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 10: 269.
72 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 10: 269.
74 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 10:347.
in the religion of Islam.” He then goes on to quote from al-Shirāzī’s Ţabaqāt al-shāfi‘iyya which cites Ibn Khuzayma declaring, “I did not imitate (uqallid) anyone since I was twenty years (old).”

Ibn Kathīr further maintains that kalām was incompatible to the Islamic sciences. Ibn Kathīr notes in his entry of Ismā‘īl b. Idrīs al-Ṭāliqānī (d. 385/995) that “he used to love the sharī’a sciences (‘ulūm al-shar’iyya) and hate philosophy and what is similar to it from kalām and innovative opinions.” Here Ibn Kathīr contrasts the Islamic sciences with the rational ones and sees very little difference between philosophy and kalām. Ibn Kathīr even goes as far in stating that kalām was not a science. In his biography of the Shāfi‘ī Ash’arī Śadr al-Dīn b. al-Wakīl (d. 716/1317), Ibn Kathīr mentions that Śadr al-Dīn had attained a great amount of knowledge such as medicine, philosophy, and kalām. Ibn Kathīr then interjects and states “and [kalām] is not a science (‘ilm).”

It is also through al-Bidāya that we can trace the pro-ijtihād Shāfi‘ī strain to which Ibn Kathīr belonged. Ibn Kathīr studied fiqh with Burhān al-Dīn al-Fazārī, the son of the eminent Ibn Firkāh. Ibn Firkāh opposed the call for taqlīd and believed that ijtihād could occur within his times. Ibn Kathīr, for instance, relates that al-Birzālī reported to him that Tāj al-Dīn al-Fazārī

---

75 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 11:160.
76 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 11:160.
77 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 11:338.
78 This is different than Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī who sees kalām as separate from philosophy. See the section on Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī in Chapter Two.
79 For more on Ibn al-Wakīl see Chapter Two.
80 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:79. Ibn Kathīr’s teacher al-Dhahabī also believed that logic was not an Islamic science: “the benefit of logic is little and its harm disastrous. It is not one of the sciences of Islam.” Al-Dhahabī goes on to instruct a potential student to flee from the science since it is full of jargon, leads to unnecessary disputation and does not benefit one’s hereafter; Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Dhahabī, Bayān zaghl al-ʿilm wa l-ṭalab, ed. Muḥammad Zāhid b. al-Ḥasan al-Kawtharī (Damascus: al-Qudsī, 1928), 24.
81 It was said that Burhān al-Dīn al-Fazārī liked Ibn Kathīr a great deal and praised him considerably; Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, Inbāʿ al-ghumr, 1:39.
held that the Shāfi‘ī traditionalist Abū Shāma al-Maqdisī had reached the level of a mujtahid. They held that the Shāfi‘ī traditionalist Abū Shāma al-Maqdisī had reached the level of a mujtahid.\footnote{Ibn Kathīr, \textit{al-Bidāya}, 13:251.}

In his biography of Ibn Firkāḥ, Ibn Kathīr mentions that Ibn Firkāḥ and al-Nawawī were the “shaykh[s] of the greatest of our shaykhs.” Ibn Kathīr also notes that Ibn Firkāḥ studied with Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām and taught many of Ibn Kathīr’s Shāfi‘ī traditionalist teachers, such as al-Birzālī and Burhān al-Dīn al-Fazārī.\footnote{Ibn Kathīr, \textit{al-Bidāya}, 13:325.}

**Jurisprudence:**

Ibn Kathīr’s works on jurisprudence fall outside the trend of \textit{taqlīd} that was predominant at his time. As Wael Hallaq explains, “the preoccupations of the authors are not with the textual attestations from the Qur’ān and the Sunna, but rather with authoritative principles that have dominated the school.”\footnote{Wael B. Hallaq, \textit{Authority, Continuity, and Change in Islamic Law} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 98. For more on views on \textit{iğtīhād} and \textit{taqlīd} in his period see Norman Calder, “Al-Nawawī’s Typology of Mufīfs and Its Significance for a General Theory of Islamic Law,” \textit{Islamic Law and Society} 3, no. 2 (1996): 137-164 and Wael B Hallaq, “\textit{Iftā’} and \textit{iğtīhād} in Sunni legal Theory: a Developmental Account,” in \textit{Islamic Legal Interpretation Mufīfs and their Fatwas}, eds. M. K. Masud, B. Messick, and D. Powers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).}

Hallaq notes that in the “post-formative period” or the era after Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, jurists were not as concerned with “vindicating” the legal principles that had derived from the original sources but rather building the intellectual foundations of their legal schools.\footnote{Hallaq, 103. Nevertheless, Hallaq argues that \textit{iğtīhād} continued throughout Islamic history; Wael Hallaq, “Was the Gate of \textit{Iğtīhād} Closed?” \textit{International Journal of Middle East Studies} 16, no. 1 (March 1984): 3-41; Wael Hallaq, “On the Origins of the Controversy about the Existence of Mujtahids and the Gate of \textit{Iğtīhād},” \textit{Studia Islamica} 63, no. 1 (1986), pp. 129-141.}

However, a look at Ibn Kathīr’s \textit{fiqh} works suggests that \textit{taqlīd} was not the only legal norm after Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ. Drawing from his teacher Burhān al-Dīn al-Fazārī, Ibn Kathīr was a strong proponent of the Shāfi‘ī \textit{madhhab} but he felt that law must be taught in conjunction with the
original sources and that precedent should not be the dominant element in constructing law. Ibn Kathīr constantly demonstrates how the Shāfi‘ī madhhab has the best understanding of the Qur‘ān and Sunna. Yet, Ibn Kathīr is very willing to abandon the madhhab positions if he feels that the Qur‘ān and Sunna suggest otherwise.

Sharḥ al-Tanbīḥ

Among Ibn Kathīr’s early works is his Sharḥ al-Tanbīḥ, an explanation of the popular didactic law text of al-Shīrāzī (d. 476/1083) that was the mainstay beginning textbook in the Shāfi‘ī school at Ibn Kathīr’s time. Foregoing a traditional commentary, the Sharḥ al-Tanbīḥ lists evidences from the Qur‘ān and Sunna regarding the various authoritative Shāfi‘ī positions found in the madhhab and provides a brief commentary. Ibn Kathīr explains in the introduction that he had been blessed to memorize the Tanbīḥ and that “I saw that the benefit [of the book] is not completed without the knowledge of its proof texts.” Ibn Kathīr argues that fiqh rulings should be studied along with the evidence on which rulings were based. Like other didactic fiqh works, the Tanbīḥ relays the authoritative Shāfi‘ī positions without delving into all of the reasons why the Shāfi‘īs had agreed upon the rulings. Students would frequently memorize the text without necessarily knowing how its rulings were constructed. Ibn Kathīr believed that the

---

87 The editor Bahjat Yūsuf Ḥamad Abū al-Ṭayyib calls this work Irshād al-faqīh ilā ma‘rifat adillat al-Tanbīḥ based on how the work was later known by. I prefer to call this work Sharḥ al-Tanbīḥ following what Ibn Kathīr calls it in al-Bidāya; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 12:137. While the work does provide evidences, it also gives a brief commentary of different aspects of the textbook; Ibn Kathīr, Irshād al-faqīh ilā ma‘rifat adillat al-Tanbīḥ, ed. Bahjat Yūsuf Ḥamad Abū al-Ṭayyib (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 1996).
88 Ibn Ḥajar mentions that Ibn Kathīr wrote the work at a young age (allafa fīṣughrīhi); Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, Inbā’ al-ghumr, 39.
89 There are many examples of Shāfi‘ī scholars studying the Tanbīḥ. Al-Nawawī, for instance, reportedly studied and memorized the Tanbīḥ in an astonishing four and half months; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 13:278.
90 Ibn Kathīr, Tabaqāt, 21. Ibn Kathīr most likely studied the al-Tanbīḥ with Burhān al-Dīn al-Fazārī.
evidence, particularly ḥadīth, were essential in understanding the basis of the madhhab. Ibn Kathīr primarily provides proof texts from the six canonical collections but also draws upon the Musnad of Ibn Ḥanbal\(^91\) and the Sunan of al-Dāraquṭnī.\(^92\)

Ibn Kathīr’s opposition to strict taqlīd becomes apparent in his commentary of the famous ḥadīth of Muʿādh b. Jabal in which the Prophet asks Muʿādh before he sets out to Yemen on how he will judge. Muʿādh replies that he will judge by the Qurʾān. If the holy Book contains no evidence on the issue, then he will judge according to the Prophet’s Sunna, and if there is nothing in the Sunna, Muʿādh states, “I will do ijtihād with my opinion.”\(^93\) Ibn Kathīr comments that “this ḥadīth is good and famous. The imāms of Islam have depended on it in affirming the usūl [al-fiqh principle] of analogy (qiyyās).”\(^94\) But Ibn Kathīr also derives another point from the ḥadīth: “It is not permissible for the judge to imitate other than himself in his ruling.”\(^95\) Ibn Kathīr makes this point because Muʿādh did not say that after the Qurʾān and Sunna he will follow the sayings of the other imams; precedent is not one of the criteria that Muʿādh gives as essential for a judge. Ibn Kathīr, nevertheless, follows this statement with a

---

\(^91\) Ibn Kathīr’s Ḣanafī leanings appear in his frequent citations of the Musnad of Ibn Ḥanbal. Ibn Kathīr defends the Musnad from Ibn Ḥazm’s claim that the Musnad of Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Andalūsī was superior to that of Ibn Ḥanbal’s. Ibn Kathīr states “and in [my view] that [opinion] is questionable (naẓar). The evident is that the Musnad of Ibn Ḥanbal is superior to the [Musnad of Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Andalūsī] and more comprehensive”; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 1:62. Ibn Kathīr also mentions in his Ṭabaqāt that the Musnad of Ibn Ḥanbal, “is among the greatest books of Islam” and that he received a license (ijāza) to teach the entire work; Ibn Kathīr, Ṭabaqāt, 1:117.

\(^92\) Al-Dāraquṭnī lived at the tail end of the formative stage of ḥadīth scholarship but nevertheless felt that he had the ability to critique earlier ḥadīth collections. Many traditionists found inspiration in al-Dāraquṭnī in that they too sought to critique ḥadīths found within the authoritative collections and authenticate ḥadīths found outside of the canonical books. For more on al-Dāraquṭnī and his legacy in modern times see Jonathan Brown, “Did the Prophet Say It or Not? The Literal, Historical, and Effective Truth of Ḥadīths in Early Sunnism,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 129, no. 2 (2009): 281. For the more on the structure and content of the Musnad see Christopher Melchert, Ahmad ibn Hanbal (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 39-48.

\(^93\) Ibn Kathīr, Irshād al-faqīḥ, 2:396.

\(^94\) Ibn Kathīr, Irshād al-faqīḥ, 2:396.

\(^95\) Ibn Kathīr, Irshād al-faqīḥ, 2:396.
tradition in which ‘Umar commands one of his judges to “judge by the Book (the Qur’ān), then the Sunna, then what is agreed upon by the people, and then ijtihād.” In this last tradition, Ibn Kathīr gives more leeway to judging based on the consensus of previous scholars but not necessarily to scholars who are authoritative in a particular madhhab. Ibn Kathīr thus believed in a madhhab that was not based simply on precedent but rather on the original sources of the Qur’ān and Sunna.

Ibn Kathīr’s desire for a middle ground between the Ḥanbalīs and Shāfi‘īs is evident in his discussion on the permissibility of chess. Ḥanbalīs prohibited the game while the Shāfi‘īs maintained it was permissible. Ibn Kathīr takes an intermediate position noting that there are no authentic ḥadīths that forbid the game. The Prophet could not have commented on the game since it was introduced into the Muslim community after his death. Ibn Kathīr nevertheless cites several traditions from ‘Alī and ‘Ā’isha that either prohibit or disapprove of the game.

---

97 The editor Bahjat Yūsuf Ḥamad Abū al-Ṭayyib notes that *Sharḥ al-Tanbīh* was copied in a Ḥanbalī madrasa demonstrating that from an early time many of Ibn Kathīr’s works were appropriated by Ḥanbalī scholars.
98 In his *Tafsīr*, Ibn Kathīr mentions that ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar saw chess as worse than backgammon and that ‘Alī saw it as a type of gambling (*maysara*). He then notes that Mālik, Abū Ḥanīfa and Ibn Ḥanbal prohibited chess while al-Shāfi‘ī believed it to be only disliked; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur‘ān al-‘aẓīm*, 12 vol. (Cairo: Maktabat Awlād al-Shaykh li’l-Turāth, 2009), 5:1907. Ibn Taymiyya condemns chess in his *fatawā* and argues that many Shāfi‘īs in fact prohibit the game; Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū‘*, 32:216-246. Ibn Taymiyya’s disdain for chess’s ability to engross the believer and take him away from ritual worship led him to take direct action against the game. On his way to afternoon prayer, Ibn Taymiyya reportedly saw a group of people playing chess and could not help himself from flipping over their chessboard; Abū ʻAbd Allāh b. Ḥādī, *al-ʻUqūd al-durriyya min manāqib Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya*, ed. Abū Muṣ‘ab ʻAl’ at b. Fu‘ād al-Ḥulwānī (Cairo: al-Fārūq al-Ḥadītha), 226. It was also reported that in one of his imprisonments, Ibn Taymiyya transformed the prison cells from that of playing chess and backgammon to that of prayer, worship and study; ‘Abd al-Ḥādī, 210. As Christopher Melchert explains, traditionalists were antagonistic to chess because it contradicted their view of life being that of seriousness: “Single-minded devotion manifested itself in many ways - for example, in traditionalists’ hostility to chess”; Christopher Melchert, “The Piety of the Ḥadīth Folk,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 3 (2002): 428. Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī mentions that his father held the opinion that it is impermissible for a follower of the Shāfi‘ī school to play chess with somebody who believed it was prohibited. In other words, it was not allowed for a Shāfi‘ī to play chess with a Ḥanbalī; Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 10:258. Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī also cites his father’s opinion on a Shāfi‘ī playing chess with somebody who believed to be prohibited in his compilation of his father’s *fatawā*; Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, *Fatawā al-Subkī*, ed. Ḥusām al-Dīn Qudsī, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1992), 2:635.
**Kitāb al-Ḥkām al-kabīr**

The Kitāb al-Ḥkām al-kabīr fits into “Aḥkām al-ḥadīth works” or “the laws derived from ḥadīth.” As Jonathan Brown explains, “Aḥkām al-ḥadīth works” were “books that listed ḥadīths regularly used in deriving Islamic law along with their matns and the collections in which they are found. Aḥkām al-ḥadīth works also included discussions on the ḥadīth’s legal implication.” Early Aḥkām al-ḥadīth works were didactic, such as the famous ‘Umdat al-ḥākīm of ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Maqdisī (d. 600/1203), which consists of 500 legal ḥadīths that are found in the Ṣaḥīḥayn. ‘Umdat al-ḥākām simply lists authoritative ḥadīths associated with various rulings and provides minimal commentary. In contrast to Maqdisī’s work, Ibn Kathīr’s Kitāb al-Ḥkām al-kabīr fits into the genre of Aḥkām al-ḥadīth that were “references and teaching tools for Muslim scholars of religious law.”

The Kitāb al-Ḥkām al-kabīr is much more comprehensive than traditional Aḥkām al-ḥadīth works, since it lists extensively ḥadīths associated with different rulings, compares them to authoritative positions within the madhhab and then presents the author’s opinion.

The Kitāb al-Ḥkām al-kabīr was written towards the end of Ibn Kathīr’s career and represents a development from his Sharḥ al-Tanbīh. Unlike the Sharḥ al-Tanbīh, which

---

101 Brown, Ḥadīth, 61.
102 Brown, Ḥadīth, 61.
103 Ismā‘īl b. ‘Umar Ibn Kathīr, Kitāb al-Ḥkām al-kabīr: al-shāmil li-kutub al-adhān, al-masājid, istiqbāl al-qibla, ṣifat al-salāt, ed. Nūr al-Dīn Ṭālib (Beirut: Dār al-Nawādir, 2010). There are discussions within the biographical literature on whether Ibn Kathīr finished this work. The best solution is offered by Nūr al-Dīn Ṭālib, the editor of Kitāb al-Ḥkām al-kabīr, who proposes that Ibn Kathīr drafted large parts of the work but only finished a complete draft (bayyada) of three volumes. Nūr al-Dīn Ṭālib explains that his view is corroborated by Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī’s al-Majma’ al-mu‘assis, which mentions that only three volumes of Kitāb al-Ḥkām al-kabīr ever surfaced. Nūr al-Dīn Ṭālib explains that the third volume is the only surviving manuscript, the one that he edited and published; Ibn Kathīr, Kitāb al-Ḥkām al-kabīr, 1:34. I am inclined to Nūr al-Dīn Ṭālib’s opinion that Ibn Kathīr never finished Kitāb al-Ḥkām al-kabīr as the work is extremely detailed. Ibn Kathīr most likely passed away before completing such a monumental task. Other late works, such as Jāmi’ al-masānīd, are also unfinished.
104 We can further determine that Kitāb al-Ḥkām al-kabīr is a late work because Ibn Kathīr mentions “May God shower al-Mizzī with mercy” near the beginning of the text meaning that al-Mizzī (d. 742/1341) had already passed
presents the proof texts to explain the authoritative Shāfi‘ī position, Ibn Kathīr now presents the evidences first and then discusses how they accord with the authoritative Shāfi‘ī positions. Ibn Kathīr frequently goes into long discussions analyzing the various ḥadīths that went into constructing a ruling and then compares them to the opinions of al-Nawawī, al-Rāfi‘ī (623/1226)105 and even the Ḥanbalī jurist Ibn Qudāma (d. 620/1223).106 Analyzing the sources often leads Ibn Kathīr to the majority Shāfi‘ī position, but at times it leads him to take a minority position within the school. Ibn Kathīr’s confidence in engaging the primary sources shows that he increasingly saw himself as a mujtahid towards the end of his life.

Ibn Kathīr’s preference for ijtihād and his distaste for taqlīd appear in his discussion on the prayer direction (qibla). As Ahmed El-Shamsy explains, “fiqh debates about locating the qibla were always loaded with the broader implications of the positions taken for the theoretical topics of ijtihād and taqlīd. Discussions on the qibla often mutated into theoretical arguments devoid of any apparent connection to the practical issue at hand.”107 Ibn Kathīr explains that if a trustworthy person (thiqa) relays from substantive knowledge then it is permissible to take from their word and pray. However, if a trustworthy person relays from ijtihād then he should not be imitated (lam yuqallidhu), since “a mujtahid does not imitate another mujtahid in this (determining the prayer direction) or in another [issue of fiqh].”108 Ibn Kathīr clarifies his position by stating that there is consensus that if someone is in the land of Muslims then they

---

105 Al-Rāfi‘ī had a high standing within the Shāfi‘ī school, with al-Nawawī’s famous legal text Minhāj al-tālibīn being a compendium of al-Rāfi‘ī’s al-Muḥarrar; A. Arioli, “al-Rāfi‘ī,” EF.
106 Ibn Kathīr draws heavily from Ibn Qudāma for determining the prayer direction; Ibn Kathīr, Kitāb al-Aḥkām al-kabīr, 1:246.
107 Ahmed El-Shamsy, “Rethinking Taqlīd in the Early Shāfi‘ī School,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 128, no. 1 (2008):14. El-Shamsy continues to explain that the Shāfi‘ī school “consisted of the adoption of the opinions of the founder and subsequent generations of school members as binding interpretations of the sources, but not as sources in themselves. A consistent distinction between school opinions and the sources was maintained, and the voluminous works of positive law always argued and defended the former explicitly in terms of the latter.”
108 Ibn Kathīr, Kitāb al-Aḥkām al-kabīr, 2:221.
should pray in the existing prayer niche and not engage in *ijtihād*. Nonetheless, there is disagreement on whether one should use the existing prayer niche but then adjust themselves to the right or the left if they feel the *qibla* is not entirely correct. Ibn Kathīr leans towards adjustment except if it concerns mosques which great Companions established such as those in Kufa, Basra and Damascus.

Ibn Kathīr’s presentation of how the prayer direction should be established is symbolic of his larger position on *ijtihād* and *taqlīd*. Ibn Kathīr’s preference for following ḥadīth is evident in his statement that if a reliable person (*thīqa*) relays where the prayer direction is then he should be followed. For Ibn Kathīr, the problem arises when there is no authentic ḥadīth on a particular issue. In this scenario, Ibn Kathīr stresses that a mujtahid should perform his own *ijtihād* and not engage in *taqlīd* of another person. Ibn Kathīr implements this principle throughout his legal discussions by personally analyzing the sources and then comparing them to authoritative opinions within the Shāfiʿī school. Ibn Kathīr felt comfortable in “adjusting” the authoritative Shāfiʿī opinions or engaging in *ijtihād* within a *madhhab* if he felt the sources pointed otherwise.

---

109 El-Shamsy, 20. As El-Shamsy further explains, “the admission of ‘slight adjustments’ through *ijtihād* to the otherwise fixed *qibla* parallels the flexible boundaries that Shāfiʿī scholars saw themselves as bound by in their engagement with the opinions of their school and its founder. The possibility of *ijtihād* remained open, but within limits: on topics that had already received treatment by previous scholars (analogous to existing prayer niches), *ijtihād* could not be undertaken from scratch, but rather had to take place within the space created by established school precedent. *Al-tayāmun wa-l-tayāsūr* is thus a metaphor for *ijtihād fi al-madhhab* as practiced by the jurists of the established Shāfiʿī school at least until the seventh/thirteenth century.” Ibn Kathīr was an eighth/fourteenth century scholar demonstrating that *ijtihād* within the *madhhab* did not totally disappear after the seventh/thirteenth century. See also Hallaq, “Was the Gate of *Ijtihād* Closed.”

110 Ibn Kathīr digresses here into a special paragraph discussing the importance of Damascus. Ibn Kathīr highlights that great companions, such as Zubayr b. al-ʿAwwām, prayed in Damascene mosques. Ibn Kathīr had a special affinity towards Damascus since it was the city of his education and career.

111 Ibn Kathīr even uses the ḥadīth narrator grade of *thīqa* or trustworthy in this discussion.

Ibn Kathīr’s position on the prayer direction is not new, but it is unique for his era’s “post-formative” jurists who were expected to follow the authoritative opinions of the madhhab. Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī argues in his biography of his father, “that it is not permissible for any one [in the Shāfi‘ī school] of our time to disagree with [Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī] because that person is a master-imām (imām muṭṭallī’) in deriving [opinions] from [the books of] al-Rāfi‘ī, al-Nawawī, the texts of al-Shāfi‘ī and the sayings of [his] companions.”¹¹³ For Tāj al-Dīn, the Shāfi‘ī madhhab was built on the opinions of al-Shāfi‘ī, his Companions, al-Rāfi‘ī, al-Nawawī, and his father Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī. Since sorting through the writings of the early Shāfi‘īs was a challenging task, Tāj al-Dīn suggested that lower grade Shāfi‘īs follow the opinions of his father who was able to reconcile the various opinions of the titans within the Shāfi‘ī school.¹¹⁴ It is evident in the Kitāb al-Aḥkām al-kabīr that Ibn Kathīr viewed himself as a mujtahid,¹¹⁵ one that bordered between an independent mujtahid and mujtahid within the Shāfi‘ī madhhab. Ibn

¹¹³ Ibn Kathīr’s legal works never became mainstream and were cited sparingly by later figures. Only one incomplete manuscript of Kitāb al-Aḥkām al-kabīr survives, dating from Ibn Kathīr’s lifetime; Ibn Kathīr, Kitāb al-Aḥkām al-kabīr. 1:49. Kitāb al-Aḥkām al-kabīr most likely did not make inroads into Shāfi‘ī circles because of its Ḥanbaļi leanings. Ibn Kathīr frequently cites the Musnad of Ibn Ḥanbal and the authoritative opinions of the Ḥanbaļi jurist Ibn Qudāma. The work did not fit well within the Mamlūk legal and madrasa structure which stressed madhhab affiliation. See Yossef Rapoport, “Legal Diversity in the Age of Taqlīd: the Four Chief Qāḍīs Under the Mamluks,” Islamic Law and Society 10, no. 2 (2003): 210-228; Sherman Jackson, “The Primacy of Domestic Politics: Ibn Bint al-A’azz and the Establishment of Four Chief Judgeships in Mamluk Egypt,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 115, no. 1 (1995): 52-65. Later Shāfi‘ī scholars and scribes may have not been inclined to copy the work because it drew too heavily from Ḥanbaļi sources while Ḥanbaļi scholars did not transcribe the work because Ibn Kathīr primarily situates himself in the Shāfi‘ī madhhab. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Kuwaiti Affairs, which has distributed traditionalist works in the past, recently published Kitāb al-Aḥkām al-kabīr. Unlike Ibn Kathīr’s other works, Kitāb al-Aḥkām al-kabīr’s recent publication may have to do with the work being incomplete and designed for specialists.

¹¹⁴ Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī’s belief that Shāfi‘ī jurists should engage in taqlīd of his father is part of the reason why he spent much of his time collecting his father’s opinions; Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Aṣqalānī, al-Durar al-kāmina fī a’yān al-mi’a al-thāmina, ed. ‘Abd al-Wārith Muḥammad ‘Alī, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘İlmiyya, 1997), 3:39; Tāj al-Dīn’s belief in taqlīd of his father is further evident in that he cites a didactic poem which contains all of the legal opinions that were original to Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī; Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Tabāqāt, 10:260. Ideally, jurists were supposed to memorize this poem so they would be able to easily cite Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī’s opinions. Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī also compiled his father’s fatāwā; Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, Fatāwā al-Subkī.

¹¹⁵ It is unclear whether Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī viewed Ibn Kathīr as a mujtahid. Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī would have most likely held that all Shāfi‘ī jurists, including Ibn Kathīr, should engage in taqlīd of foundational figures.
Kathīr felt confident in directly engaging the primary sources and did not feel that he had to defer to Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī or any other scholar.\textsuperscript{116}

In terms of Ibn Kathīr’s desire to seek a middle ground between the Shāfi‘ī and Ḥanbalī schools, Ibn Kathīr argues that the ritual practices of both the Shāfi‘ī and Ḥanbalī schools are acceptable. In his discussion on whether the \textit{basmala} should be recited out loud in an audible prayer, Ibn Kathīr cites the Shāfi‘ī traditionalist Abū Shāma who argues that one can choose between reciting the \textit{basmala} out loud, which is the majority Shāfi‘ī position, or reciting it quietly, the majority Ḥanbalī position.\textsuperscript{117} Ibn Kathīr argues that both positions can be supported by authentic ḥadīths.\textsuperscript{118}

\textit{Ijtihād fī ūtalab al-jihād}\textsuperscript{119}

This short treatise was written towards the end of Ibn Kathīr’s life\textsuperscript{120} at the request of the Damascus governor Sayf al-Dīn Manjak in order to discuss the “merits of manning the military outposts (ribāṭ) on the Syrian frontier.”\textsuperscript{121} The treatise falls within the context of “the events

\textsuperscript{116} It is important to note that while Ibn Kathīr respected Taqī al-Dīn Subkī as a fair judge, I have not found an instance where Ibn Kathīr cites him as an authoritative Shāfi‘ī jurist.


\textsuperscript{118} For more on whether to read the \textit{Basmala} silently or out loud in an audible prayer see Brown, \textit{Canonization}, 257-58.


\textsuperscript{120} Ohlander, 157. Ohlander says that “there is little doubt that this short treatise represents the final independent work produced by Ibn Kathīr.”

\textsuperscript{121} ‘Abd Allāh ‘Abd al-Rahīm ‘Usaylān, the editor of \textit{Ijtihād fī ūtalab al-jihād}, notes that he was only able to locate one manuscript of the treatise which may allude to the fact that the work was not extremely popular and used only for immediate consumption against the invading Crusaders.
surrounding the sack of the Egyptian port city of Alexandria by the Crusaders in 767/1366.”

The governor wanted Ibn Kathīr to compile Qur’ānic verses, ḥadīths, and traditions on manning the frontier (murābaṭa), to encourage people to take up jihād and to defend the Mamlūk Empire. The treatise discusses the relevant Qur’ānic verses and ḥadīths that commend jihād and ribāt, outlines the history of the military relationship between Muslims and Christians and then commands believers to protect the Empire. The work nicely demonstrates Ibn Kathīr’s expertise in fiqh, ḥadīth, history and tafsīr.

Similarly to the Kitāb al-Ahkām al-kabīr, the treatise focuses on Qur’ānic verses and ḥadīths rather than prominent figures within the madhhabs. Ibn Kathīr’s emphasis on the original sources is indicative of his methodology in the latter part of his life, when he increasingly saw himself as a mujtahid. It also represents his audience who were primarily mujāhidīn who may have been more responsive to direct quotations from the Qur’ān and Sunna than citations from authoritative figures within the madhhabs. For instance, when Ibn Kathīr cites ḥadīths, he only cites the primary narrator rather than the entire chain of transmission, lists the most authoritative variant, and engages in minimal ḥadīth criticism.

The short treatise could have been read to a group of soldiers as a source of motivation and inspiration.

---

122 Ohlander notes that the work is similar to the one composed by Ibn ‘Asākir at the request of Nūr al-Dīn Zangī over a hundred years earlier; Ohlander, 157. The fact that the Damascus governor requested Ibn Kathīr to write the treatise demonstrates the increasing importance of Ibn Kathīr towards the end of his life and his influential role in Damascene politics. For on Ibn Kathīr’s relationship with various Mamluk rulers see Henri Laoust, “Ibn Katir Historien,” Arabica 2, no.1 (1955): 42-88.

123 Ibn Kathīr, Kitāb al-Ijtihād, 61.

124 Ibn Kathīr, Kitāb al-Ijtihād, 70. Ibn Kathīr mentions that he uses weak ḥadīths in the treatise but that using weak ḥadīths is acceptable in encouraging righteous behavior. For more on ḥadīth scholars using weak ḥadīths to promote righteous behavior see Jonathan Brown, “Even if it is not True It’s True: Using Unreliable Ḥadīths in Sunni Islam,” Islamic Law and Society 18, no.1 (2011): 1-52.

125 The fact that Ijtihād fī ītalab al-jihād engages in minimal ḥadīth criticism is similar to Ibn Kathīr’s, Mawlid Rasūl Allāh, ed. Šalāḥ al-Dīn Munajjid (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd). Ibn Kathīr wrote the work to be read out loud to lay audiences. Ibn Kathīr does not cite all of the isnāds of the ḥadīths that he quotes, something that he does with his other works directed at specialists such as his Taṣfīr and Jāmi’ al-masānīd. For more on Ibn Kathīr’s Mawlid see Marion Katz, The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam (London: Routledge, 2006), 54.
By the 8th/14th centuries, all of the major ḥadīth collections had been compiled, and ḥadīth scholars turned their attention to making the ḥadīth corpus more accessible, refining ḥadīth terminology and spreading the science to other fields. Ibn Kathīr’s ḥadīth works fit within this trend, focusing on composing abridgements, reference works and ḥadīth evaluations. Ibn Kathīr’s ḥadīth works further attempt to push back against a traditionalist wave that sought to limit authentic ḥadīth to the canonical collections. Ibn Kathīr argues that authentic ḥadīth can be found outside of the canonical collections through independent evaluations of the ḥadīth’s chain of transmission (isnād) and text (matn).

*Tuḥfat al-ṭālib li-mukḥtaṣar Ibn al-Ḥājib*

Ibn Kathīr’s earliest ḥadīth work[128] was most likely the ḥadīth evaluation (*takhrīj*) of the popular *uṣūl al-fiqh* text *Mukḥṭaṣar Ibn al-Ḥājib*. The *Mukḥṭaṣar Ibn al-Ḥājib* was composed by the great Mālikī scholar ‘Uthmān b. ‘Umar or Ibn al-Ḥājib (d. 646/1249) who was a colleague of transmission (isnād) and text (matn).

---

[126] Brown, *Ḥadīth*, 112. Brown calls this period one of “consolidation, commentary, and criticism.”


[128] An early date can be determined since the first surviving manuscript of the work is dated 744/1343-44 by a Shāfī’ī scribe; Ibn Kathīr, *Tuḥfa*, 59. We can also tell that the *Tuḥfa* is an early work, as Ibn Kathīr mentions the work in *al-Bidāya* in his biography of Ibn Ḥājib; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 13:178. Other works that were written later in Ibn Kathīr’s career, such as *Ikhtisār ʿulūm al-adīth*, are not mentioned in *al-Bidāya*. The *takhrīj* also shows signs of a young scholar at work since he constantly refers to al-Mizzi (d. 742/1341) and al-Dahabī (d. 748/1348), who were most likely alive during the work’s composition; Ibn Kathīr, *Tuḥfa*: 144,145,178. The *Tuḥfa* could have been one of his earliest works since he discusses the issue of selling female slaves who have borne their master a child (*umma-bal-Walād*) without referring to his early work on the subject *Juḥ ʿfī bayʿ ummahāt al-awlād*, ed. ‘Umar b. Sulaymān Ḥafṣān (Beirut: Mua’sasat al-Risāla, 2006); Ibn Kathīr, *Tuḥfa*, 144. Ohlander also dates the work as early noting, “It was compiled fairly early in his career”; Ohlander, 150. Ibn Kathīr most likely studied the text with his *fiqh* teacher Burḥān al-Dīn al-Fazārī who was believed to have written a commentary on the *Mukḥṭaṣar*; Maḥmūd b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Iṣbahānī, *Bayān al-Mukḥṭaṣar wa-huwa shariʿ Mukḥṭaṣar Ibn al-Ḥājib fī uṣūl al-fiqh*, ed. ‘Ali Jum’a Muḥammad, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 2004), 1:26. *Mukḥṭaṣar Ibn Ḥājib* was a standard part of many madrasa curriculums; Al-Nu‘aymī, *al-Dāris fī tārīkh al-madāris*, 1:247. For more on Ibn Ḥājib and the *Mukḥṭaṣar* see Maḥmūd b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Iṣbahānī, 1:15-25.
of the Shāfi‘ī traditionalist ‘Izz al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Salām. Ibn al-Ḥājib and ‘Izz al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Salām both protested the surrender of the Chateau de Beaufort fort to the Crusaders leading to their arrest and eventual expulsion from Damascus in 638/1240-41. In his Mukhtaṣar, Ibn Ḥājib simply mentions ḥadīths in relation to its content, transmitter or legal implication. A takhrīj was an evaluation of the ḥadīths present in a particular text. As Jonathan Brown explains,

> With the ḥadīth canon firmly established, ḥadīth critics turned their attention away from ḥadīth collections and towards the manner in which other areas of Islamic scholarship used ḥadīth. In books of takhrīj, a rash of which appeared during the 1300s and 1400s, a ḥadīth scholar took a book from another genre and discussed the status of the ḥadīths it contained. Since few books outside ḥadīth collections featured isnāds when they quoted ḥadīths, takhrīj books first provided all the ḥadīth collections that provided chains of transmission for a ḥadīth and then discussed its reliability.

Ibn Kathīr’s takhrīj gave scholars a reference work to see where a particular ḥadīth was found in authoritative collections, what their complete isnād was and their general grade. Similar to Sharḥ al-Tanbīh, the work primarily references ḥadīths within the six canonical collections. The work also represents Ibn Kathīr’s larger theme that fiqh should be studied in conjunction with its proof texts.

**Al-Takmīl fī ma‘rifat asmā’ al-thiqāt wa’l-ḍu‘afā’ wa’l-majāhīl**

This important work remains in manuscript form. The work is an abridgement of al-Mizzī’s Tahdhīb al-kamāl fī asmā’ al-rijāl and also incorporates many of al-Dhahabī’s

---

131 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 13:158.
132 Brown, Ḥadīth, 112.
133 Later works, such as his Tafsīr and Jāmi’ al-masānīd, look at a larger range of collections.
134 Tuhfat al-tālib li-mukhtaṣar Ibn al-Ḥājib seems to be more popular than Ibn Kathīr’s other fiqh works. Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī cites this text frequently in his own takhrīj of Ibn al-Ḥājib’s work; Ibn Kathīr, Tuhfa, 56. There are also two complete extant manuscripts of the takhrīj compared to a partial one of his Kitāb al-Ahkām al-kabīr; Ibn Kathīr, Tuhfa, 57.
135 Ibn Kathīr, Jāmi’ al-masānīd, 1:49.
insights. Ibn Kathīr constantly refers his readers to the Takmīl in his Bidāya for more extensive biographies of ḥadīth scholars and narrators. The work most likely never gained wide readership because of more popular abridgements of al-Mızzī’s Tahdhīb, such as Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī’s Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb.\(^{137}\)

\*Ikhtīṣār ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth*\(^{138}\)

Ibn Kathīr’s second major ĥadīth work\(^ {139}\) is his summary of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ’s famous introduction to ĥadīth sciences the Muqaddima li-ʿulūm al-ḥadīth. Ibn Kathīr was once again drawn to the Shāfiʿī traditionalist Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, with the Ikhtīṣār ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth being his second engagement with the scholar’s works.\(^ {140}\) Ibn Kathīr presents a faithful summary of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ’s Introduction but does make some important amendments to his ḥadīth methodology.\(^ {141}\) Ibn Kathīr disagrees with Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ regarding the definition of a ṣaḥīḥ (authentic) ḥadīth.\(^ {142}\) Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ argued that, “If we find some report in a ḥadīth notebook that seems to have a ṣaḥīḥ isnād but is neither in the ṣaḥīḥayn nor indicated as ṣaḥīḥ in a book of the relied-upon, well-


\(^{139}\) Ikhtīṣār ʿulūm al-ḥadīth was most likely written after his Tafsīr and much of al-Bidāya waʾl-nihāya, since he does not mention the abridgement in either of the two works. In his entry on Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ in al-Bidāya, Ibn Kathīr notes that Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ “composed many benefic books in the ḥadīth sciences” which alludes to the idea that even though Ibn Kathīr liked Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ’s ṣaḥīḥ works, he did not conceive of writing a summary of his Muqaddima at the time; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 13:170. A later composition is further supported by a surviving manuscript of the work signed by Ibn Kathīr himself that notes that he finished composing the text in 752/1351-2; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bāʿith al-ḥathīth, 1:49.

\(^{140}\) Ibn Kathīr’s first engagement of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ’s work was Tabaqāt al-fuqahāʾ al-ṣaḥīḥ ʿiyūn. See above.

\(^{141}\) This demonstrates the importance of studying commentaries and abridgements since the commentator or abridger at times redirects the content of the work. For more on the importance of studying commentaries see Mohammad Fadel, “Ibn Ḥajar’s Hady al-sārī: A Medieval Interpretation of the Structure of al-Bukhārī’s al-Jāmi’ al-ṣaḥīḥ: Introduction and Translation,” Journal of Near Eastern Studies 5, no. 3 (1995): 161-197.

\(^{142}\) As we will see, Ibn Kathīr uses much of the terminology standardized by Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ throughout his Tafsīr.
known scholars, we do not dare insist that it is authentic.”

Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ was thus hesitant to declare ḥadīths not found within authoritative collections as authentic since the era of the great canonical ḥadīths scholars had passed and scribal error could have increased through the passage of time.

Ibn Kathīr, on the other hand, fit within the scholarly tradition that maintained that there were many authentic ḥadīths that were not found in the canonical ḥadīth collections. Through an independent evaluation of the ḥadīth’s matn and isnād, scholars could determine the different degrees of a ḥadīth’s authenticity. Ibn Kathīr did agree with Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ that the collection a ḥadīth was found helped determine the ḥadīth’s authenticity but stressed that the process of ḥadīth criticism should continue. For instance, in regards to the Musnad of Ibn Ḥanbal, Ibn Kathīr argues that there are many ḥadīths within it that are equal in authenticity to the ḥadīths found in the six canonical collections. Similarly to his fiqh works, Ibn Kathīr was inclined to a type of ijtihād within ḥadīth scholarship that rejected a strict taqlīd of previous ḥadīth scholars.

**Jāmi‘ al-masānīd**

Ibn Kathīr’s final major ḥadīth work fits into a type of “mega collection” that makes an effort to capture canonical and non-canonical ḥadīths into a single

---

143 Brown, *Canonization*, 244.
144 Brown, *Canonization*, 244.
148 The editor ‘Abd al-Malik b. ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Duhaysh convincingly argues that the work was most likely one of Ibn Kathīr’s later works since it is incomplete; Ibn Kathīr, *Jāmi‘ al-masānīd*, 1:40. There are also other aspects of the work that allude to a later date. First, Ibn Kathīr’s son transmits the manuscript saying, “I transmit this from my...
work. *Jāmi‘ al-masānīd* attempts to provide a brief biography of all the Companions who narrated ḥadīths and then lists the ḥadīths that they transmitted from the six canonical collections, the *Musnad* of Ibn Ḥanbal, Abū Bakr al-Bazzār, Abū Ya‘lā al-Mawṣilī, and the *Mu‘jam al-kabīr* of al-Ṭabarānī.151 In the *Jāmi‘ al-masānīd*, we see a development from the *Mukhtaṣar Ibn Ḥājib*, which primarily deals with the six canonical collections, to a collection that incorporates non-canonical ḥadīth collections. Ibn Kathīr never finished the work, probably because of its enormous scope and the fact that he began it late in his career. Like the *Kitāb al-Aḥkām al-kabīr*, the work did not have a wide circulation; it was incomplete and designed for specialists.

**Contextualizing Ibn Kathīr’s works within the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists:**

Ibn Kathīr’s works clearly fit within the Shāfi‘ī’s traditionalist contingent of the traditionalist movement. Ibn Kathīr’s interests in history can be traced back to al-Birzālī and al-Dhahabī who both wrote major historical works on Damascus and the history of Islam. Ibn Kathīr’s historical works, nevertheless, differed from these great historians in that his books focused more on the history of Shāfi‘ism.152 Ibn Kathīr’s ḥadīth works are connected to his studies with famous ḥadīth scholars al-Mizzī and al-Dhahabī, who wrote standard reference

father, May God have mercy upon him, from his (own) handwriting’; Ibn Kathīr, *Jāmi‘ al-masānīd*, 1:55. There is no other work of Ibn Kathīr that I have seen that has one of his sons transmit the text suggesting that his sons were now older and scholars themselves. Secondly, in the introduction, Ibn Kathīr refers his readers to three other of his works - his *Tafsīr, Kitāb al-Aḥkām al-kabīr*, and the *Takmīl*; Ibn Kathīr, *Jāmi‘ al-masānīd*, 1:60. These works were all written in the middle to the late part of Ibn Kathīr’s career suggesting that *Jāmi‘ al-masānīd* was one of his last major works.

Brown, Ḥadīth, 59.

150 *Jāmi‘ al-masānīd* lists the Companions in alphabetical order instead of other *musnads* which cite certain Companions first. For more on *musnads* see Brown, Ḥadīth, 28.

151 Ibn Kathīr uses this group of ten ḥadīth collections extensively in his *Tafsīr*.

152 Ibn Kathīr was the only Shāfi‘ī traditionalist of his generation to produce a Shāfi‘ī *Ṭabaqāt* work. Al-Birzālī and al-Dhahabī produced general historical works that were not tied to *madhhab* affiliation but broader categories such as ḥadīth specialists, Damascene scholars, and Muslim notables. The fact that Ibn Kathīr was the only one to produce a Shāfi‘ī *Ṭabaqāt* work suggests that Ibn Kathīr was more “Shāfi‘ī” than the others.
works in the science. Ibn Kathīr frequently refers to these ḥadīth masters when he comes upon an unclear ḥadīth or unknown transmitter. Ibn Kathīr’s expertise in jurisprudence can be traced to his early studies with Burhān al-Dīn al-Fazārī. The pro-ijtihād Shāfi’ī madhab that Ibn Kathīr promotes drew from both Burhān al-Dīn al-Fazārī and his father Ibn Firkāḥ. While Ibn Taymiyya’s influence is apparent, it does not dominate Ibn Kathīr’s intellectual project. Ibn Kathīr does not write an abridgement (mukhtasar), continuation (dhayl), or commentary (sharh) of any Ibn Taymiyya’s works. Furthermore Ibn Taymiyya’s interests in theology, spirituality and Ḥanbalī fiqh do not appear in Ibn Kathīr’s writings.

**Conclusion:**

A brief survey of Ibn Kathīr’s major works demonstrates that his intellectual project was to promote a pro-ijtihād Shāfi’ī traditionalist madhab. In his historical works, Ibn Kathīr sought to emphasize the traditionalist strand within Islamic history and rethink the Shāfi’ī school’s historic relationship with Ash’arism. His jurisprudence works call for ijtihād that engages both the original sources and the authoritative opinions of the madhab. Ibn Kathīr speaks out against taqlīd yet cites opinions of foundational figures and builds off their views. In the subject of ḥadīth, Ibn Kathīr also maintains a type of ijtihād which argues that the process of ḥadīth criticism should continue since authentic ḥadīths were not only found in the canonical collections. Throughout Ibn Kathīr’s works, the influence of Ibn Taymiyya is present but indirect and does not drive Ibn Kathīr’s intellectual project. Ibn Kathīr’s major works are more in line with the great Shāfi’ī traditionalists before him than that of the Ḥanbalī Ibn Taymiyya.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Ohlander makes a similar observation in that Ibn Kathīr “seems to have envisioned himself as following in the footsteps of a line of great ‘conservative-leaning’ Shāfi’īs to whom he saw himself as an heir: al-Bayhaqī (d. 1066), Ibn al-Ṣafāḥ, al-Nawawī (d. 1277) and, of course, his teachers al-Dhahabī and al-Mizzī”; Ohlander, 153.
We will now turn to the work that Ibn Taymiyya most likely had the greatest influence on, Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr.*
Chapter IV

Different Traditionalisms, Contrasting Approaches to the Qur’ān

The strongest argument for the theory that Ibn Kathīr was the “spokesperson” for Ibn Taymiyya is that he copies the last two sections of Ibn Taymiyya’s *Mqaddima fī ẓ̱īl al-tafsīr* in the introduction to his exegesis. Ibn Kathīr himself suggests that his *Tafsīr* is an implementation of Ibn Taymiyya’s Qur’ānic hermeneutic. Yet, this chapter will argue that Ibn Kathīr was not the spokesperson for Ibn Taymiyya because they both represented two different types of traditionalism. Ibn Taymiyya represented an intellectualized traditionalism which sought to argue for the rational basis of the transmitted sources. Ibn Taymiyya believed that reason and revelation were complementary and was influenced by the great Ḥanbalī authorities before him such as Qāḍī Abū Ya’lā (d. 458/1066) and Ibn ‘Aqīl (d. 513/1119) who attempted to incorporate rationalism within traditionalism. Ibn Kathīr, on the other hand, represented a fideist traditionalism that deferred to revelation and preferred not to delve into issues relating to

---

1 For a lucid summary of Ibn Taymiyya’s *Mqaddima fī ẓ̱īl al-tafsīr* treatise please see Walid Saleh, “Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of an Introduction to the Foundations of Qur’ānic Exegesis,” in Ibn Taymiyya and his Times, eds. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 123-162. I will be drawing on this article throughout this Chapter.


God’s essence. Ibn Kathīr maintained a “moral theology” or “theology of praxis” that engaged sciences which he believed had influence over righteous conduct rather than kalām which he thought to be fruitless speculation. In this regard, Ibn Kathīr was influenced by the great Shāfi‘ī traditionalists such al-Mizzī (d. 742/1341) and Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (d. 643/1245). Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathīr’s different traditionalisms overlap in that they both interpret the Qurʾān on its literal and not figurative level but their interpretations and engagement with the exegetical tradition differ based on their contrasting intellectual backgrounds. Thus, while Ibn Kathīr copies parts of Ibn Taymiyya’s treatise in his Tafsīr, he interprets it based on the Shāfi‘ī traditionalist intellectual circle that he was a part of.

**Tension within the Traditionalist Movement:**

In her insightful article “Ibn Taymiyya wa-Jamā’atuhu,” Caterina Bori keenly notices that there was a “plurality of voices” within the traditionalist movement that did not lead to universal support for Ibn Taymiyya. Among these differences was the theological debate over whether to engage in kalām or to focus solely on the transmitted sources. Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī (d. 795/1392) captures this debate in his biography of Ibn Taymiyya in his Dhayl ‘alā Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila. Ibn Rajab explains that many traditionalists did not approve of Ibn Taymiyya’s forays into kalām: “There was a group of ḥadīth scholars and jurist, among the imāms of ḥadīth, who loved the Shaykh and used to praise him (yu’azzimūnahu). But they did not love [his] preoccupation with the specialists of kalām and philosophy.”

---

4 I attempted to demonstrate this in Chapter Three.
6 ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Ahmad Ibn Rajab, Kitāb al-Dhayl ‘alā Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila, 2 vols. (Beirut, Lebanon: Dār al-Ma’rifā, 1981), 2:394. Bori also quotes this passage; Bori, 34. She translates al-huffāz as “the most learned among them” but I am inclined to translate the word as “ḥadīth scholars.”
that these traditionalist ḥadīth scholars and jurists preferred that Ibn Taymiyya take the road of al-Shāfi‘ī, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, Ishāq b. Rāhawayh and others who did not engage in the rational sciences altogether.

Ibn Kathīr fit within the traditionalist group that chose not to engage in kalām and philosophy but rather focused on the transmitted sources, most notably ḥadīth. While Ibn Kathīr is never openly critical of Ibn Taymiyya in his writings, he most likely did not approve of Ibn Taymiyya’s engagement with the rationalist sciences. Ibn Kathīr only quotes Ibn Taymiyya in law, ḥadīth and history, but never in theology. The difference between Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathīr’s traditionalisms becomes clearer when we look more closely at their exegetical writings.

**Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathīr’s Contrasting Traditionalisms:**

While scholars have noticed the stark difference between Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathīr’s exegetical writings,⁷ there has been no work that traces these differences to the two exegetes’ contrasting traditionalisms. Ibn Taymiyya’s engagement with kalām and philosophy turned many of his engagements with the Qur’ān into theological tracts in which he proves the irrationality of his opponents. Ibn Taymiyya consistently argues that heretical sects are not faithful to the Qur’ānic text since they engage in ta‘wīl. In comparison, Ibn Kathīr’s extensive studies in ḥadīth influenced his Qur’ānic commentary to be one that evaluated (takhrīj) the exegetical tradition before him. Ibn Kathīr is not concerned with theological refutations as much with presenting authentic traditions that help elucidate the Qur’ān.

---

⁷ For instance, Ismā‘īl Sālim ʻAbd al-ʻĀl compares Ibn Kathīr’s and Ibn Taymiyya’s exegetical writing and expresses admiration for Ibn Kathīr’s straightforward and concise writing style compared to Ibn Taymiyya’s tangential prose, which discusses random topics and unnecessarily delves into kalām. ʻAbd al-ʻĀl even goes to the point of saying that he fears “that it could be said about [Ibn Taymiyya’s] Tafsīr what is said about al-Rāzī’s: ‘in it is everything except tafsīr.’” ʻAbd al-ʻĀl concludes his comparison by stating that Ibn Kathīr implements Ibn Taymiyya’s Qur’ānic hermeneutic better than Ibn Taymiyya does; Ismā‘īl Sālim ʻAbd al-ʻĀl, *Ibn Kathīr wa-manhajuhu fi al-Tafsīr* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Malik Faysal al-Islāmiyya, 1984), 268-276.
Ibn Taymiyya’s Qur’ānic hermeneutic revolved around his traditionalist belief that the literal meaning of the Qur’ān should be the source of theology. A major theme of Ibn Taymiyya’s *Muqaddima fī usūl al-tafsīr* is that an exegete has to be correct about the language of the Qur’ān (*al-dalīl*) and its meaning (*al-madlūl*). Ibn Taymiyya believed that many exegetes “foisted” their theology on the Qur’ān making it a justification for their views rather than the foundation. In his *Muqaddima*, Ibn Taymiyya attacks Shīʿī, Ṣūfī and even Sunnī Qur’ānic interpretations that he did not believe corresponded to the Qur’ānic text.

While Ibn Taymiyya affirms the validity of the transmitted sources he nevertheless advocated an intellectualized traditionalism which saw reason and tradition as “complimentary.” Ibn Taymiyya believed in a “rationality based on revelation and tradition,” one that sought to understand the rational nature of scripture. In arguing that reason and tradition were “complimentary,” Ibn Taymiyya was debating against the philosophers, Mu’tazilīs and particularly late Ash‘arīs who at times prioritized reason over revelation. Ibn Taymiyya’s strong emphasis on rationality is one of the reasons why his exegesis frequently delves into deep theological and philosophical discussions. Ibn Taymiyya repeatedly argues that the traditionalist position is rationally superior to those who employ so-called “rational” methods.

---

8 Saleh, “Rise of Radical Hermeneutics,” 140.
9 Saleh, “Rise of Radical Hermeneutics,” 140.
10 Among most the “colourful” of these examples is a supposed Shīʿī interpretation of verse 2:67 “God commands you to slaughter a cow,” which supposedly means to slaughter ‘Ā’isha, the wife of Muḥammad. I have not found a Shīʿī tafsīr that interprets this verse in this manner. The interpretation that “God commands you to slaughter a cow” being that of ‘Ā’isha may have been a rare Shīʿī one that Ibn Taymiyya heard orally rather than read. Nonetheless, the interpretation does play a useful Sunni polemical role in accusing Shīʿīs of wanting taʿwil; Saleh, “Rise of Radical Hermeneutics,” 141.
12 This will be discussed further below.
Ibn Taymiyya’s belief that tradition and reason were complementary appears on the onset of his *Muqaddima* where he defines knowledge as “that which is truthfully transmitted from an infallible [individual] or a statement that can be defended by an accepted [logical] proof.”\(^{14}\) Knowledge can either be transmitted from a prophet\(^ {15}\) or deduced through rational deductions. As a traditionalist, Ibn Taymiyya consistently affirms the validity of the transmitted sources but as an intellectualist he stresses that revelation was rational. Ibn Taymiyya’s stress on reason continues throughout the treatise as he consistently employs analogies. For instance, one of the major arguments of his *Muqaddima* is that the Qur’ān should be interpreted through understanding, practice and interpretations of the early Muslim community. The Companions had an essential exegetical role since the revelation was explained to them by the Prophet. To support his thesis, Ibn Taymiyya presents the rational argument that it is not possible for someone to study medicine or arithmetic without the science being explained to them, so how could the words of God not been explained when its meaning is essential to a believer’s religion and salvation?\(^ {16}\) Here Ibn Taymiyya argues against the dominant philological approach which holds that the Qur’ān should be interpreted primarily through the Arabic language.\(^ {17}\)

To further support his belief that the Companions’ opinions and interpretations should be a source of exegesis, Ibn Taymiyya contends that the differences between the Companions’ interpretations are one of “variation of a theme” rather than that of substance.\(^ {18}\) The Qur’ānic word *dhikr*, for example, could mean the Qur’ān, divine books or remembering God.\(^ {19}\) For Ibn


\(^{15}\) The term maṣūm will be discussed further in the next Chapter.


\(^{17}\) For more on the argument that the Qur’ān should be interpreted primarily through the Arabic language see Saleh, “Rise of Radical Hermeneutics,”

\(^{18}\) Saleh, “Rise of Radical Hermeneutics,” 133.

\(^{19}\) Saleh, “Rise of Radical Hermeneutics,” 133.
Taymiyya, all of these interpretations are correct because they are “variations of the same theme” of dhikr rather than mutually exclusive. Ibn Taymiyya gives the logical example “that the sound mind (al-‘aql al-salīm)” comprehends (yatafaṭṭan) variety just as it understands that a loaf is a type of bread.  

Similarly, many of the Companions’ interpretations were variations of Qur’ānic words. Ibn Taymiyya thus rejects Ash’arī claims that the Prophet did not explain the Qur’ān to the Companions and that their interpretations were not authoritative because they were contradictory.

In contrast, Ibn Kathīr maintains a fideist traditionalism that held that religious knowledge should be based on scripture. Reason plays a subordinate role to tradition but it nonetheless plays a role in analyzing traditions. Ibn Kathīr’s fideism is apparent in that he spends a far greater time than Ibn Taymiyya in sorting through reports, listing different variants and presenting his evaluation. Even though Ibn Kathīr was aware of theological and philosophical discussions, his “theology of the salaf” led him largely to ignore theological debates undertaken by Ibn Taymiyya.

Ibn Kathīr’s fideism appears in his interpretation of verse 7:12, in which God questions Satan why he did not prostrate to Adam: “God said: ‘What prevented you from bowing down as I commanded you?’ and He said, ‘I am better than him: You created me from fire and him from clay.’” Regarding Satan’s declaration “you created me from fire and him from clay,” Ibn Kathīr cites two statements from al-Ṭabarī’s Tafsīr, the first from the famous successor Ḥasan al-Baṣrī...

---

20 Ibn Taymiyya, Muqaddima, 44.
21 Ibn Taymiyya, Muqaddima, 44. Ibn Taymiyya also presents the ḥadīth scholars’ rationality that if a report comes from multiple directions and it is evident that the various parties did not conspire, then the report should be accepted as certain knowledge; Ibn Taymiyya, Muqaddima, 62.
23 For more on the “theology of the salaf” see the Introduction.
(d. 110/728) that Iblīs “performed analogy (qāsa)” and he was the first to do so. It would have been better for Satan to follow God’s orders rather than to engage in theological speculation. Ibn Kathīr follows Ḥasan al-Baṣrī’s statement with the remark “the isnād is authentic,” which means that Ibn Kathīr determined that there is an unbroken chain of transmission from al-Ṭabarī to Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. Ibn Kathīr also included the tradition because he believed that text of the tradition is theologically sound. The second tradition is from the Successor Ibn Sīrīn (d. 110/728) in which he explains, “the first one to perform analogy (qāsa) is Iblīs, the sun and moon would not have been worshiped if it was not through analogy (qiyās).” According to this tradition, polytheism is a result of unnecessary use of reason in theological affairs. Ibn Kathīr once again mentions after the tradition that “the isnād is authentic.” In both instances, Ibn Kathīr voices his belief that qiyās had no place in theology by presenting authentic traditions from prominent Successors that state that Satan should have simply obeyed God’s command.

While Ibn Kathīr did not go as far as Ibn Taymiyya in asserting that reason was equal to that of tradition, he nonetheless employs rational methods in evaluating traditions. For instance, a long standing debate within the tafsīr tradition was how to evaluate the “occasion of revelation” (asbāb al-nuzūl) literature. Occasion of revelation traditions helped “historicize” the Qurʾān by providing context to when and why particular verses were revealed. Yet, the traditions were problematic because they did not always reach the standards of ḥadīth scholars such as having incomplete chains of transmission (isnād) and containing anachronisms. They

26 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 7:2215.
27 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 7:2215.
were further often multiple traditions associated with each verse that were inconsistent to the point of being contradictory.²⁹

Ibn Taymiyya addresses the *asbāb al-nuzūl* in his *Muqaddima* arguing that they are important exegetical source since they provide the context of revelation. Fitting with his overall theory of elevating the position of the early community, Ibn Taymiyya contends that *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports should be considered at the same level of other ḥadīth rather than just simply “exegetical traditions.”³⁰ Ibn Taymiyya even cites al-Bukhārī as a scholar who considers *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports as “musnad traditions” or those that can be traced back to the Prophet.³¹ In terms of the problem of numerous *asbāb al-nuzūl* traditions associated with a Qur’ānic verse, Ibn Taymiyya claims that the verses could have been revealed several times for different reasons. Verses could have multiple *asbāb al-nuzūl* traditions associated with them, because they were revealed in variety of contexts.³²

Ibn Kathīr takes a more critical approach to *asbāb al-nuzūl* traditions and at times rejects them based on “anachronism and logical inconsistency.”³³ For example, Ibn Kathīr takes issue with traditions relayed by al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 327/938) that the verse 26:224, “only those lost in error follow the poets” was revealed concerning the poets of the Anṣār such as Ḥasan b. Thābit and ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Rawāḥa. In the tradition, the Poets come crying to the Prophet because they believed the Qur’ān was chastising them. The Prophet assures them by reciting the last verse of the *sūra*, “Except those who believe and do righteous

---

³⁰ Saleh, “Radical Hermeneutics,“135.
deeds.” The Prophet Muḥammad explains that this last verse refers to them. Ibn Kathīr agrees that these poets are the righteous poets but asks: “This sūra was revealed when the Prophet resided in Mecca (Makkiyya) so how could this verse’s reason of revelation be [related to] the poets of the Anṣār?” Ibn Kathīr concludes that these traditions are questionable since their chains are incomplete and they do not corroborate one another.

In verse 23:14, Ibn Kathīr criticizes another of Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s traditions in which Zayd b. Thābit narrates that the Prophet was dictating to him the beginning of verse 23:14, which discusses how God created the various stages of the human being. As he reached the end of the verse, the Companion Muʿādh b. Jabal proclaimed “Glory be to God, who is the best of creators.” The Prophet began to laugh, leading Muʿādh to ask, “What are you laughing about Oh Messenger of God?” The Prophet responded that what Muʿādh had uttered was how the verse ended. Ibn Kathīr first criticizes one of the ḥadīth’s narrators declaring that he is “very weak” (ḍaʿīf jiddan). He then adds that in this tradition there is a severe objection (nakāra shādīda), in that the sūra is Makkiyya but that Zayd b. Thābit wrote the revelation in Medina and that Muʿādh b. Jabal converted in Medina as well. For Ibn Kathīr, this tradition is questionable because of anachronisms. He also may have had a theological objection to a Companion preempting the revelation.

Interpreting God’s Names and Attributes:

Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathīr’s contrasting traditionalism may be best seen in the perennial challenge of interpreting God’s names and attributes. Ibn Taymiyya belonged to a tradition that affirmed (iṭḥābi) the attributes of God believing that figurative interpretations

---

34 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 8:4382.
35 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 8:4382.
36 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 7:4034.
undermine the *sharī’a* and lead to heretical theologies. Ibn Taymiyya critiques a host of sects which he believed engaged in unnecessary *ta’wīl* of God’s characteristics and in the process rejected God’s true essence. On the other hand, Ibn Kathīr’s traditionalism consistently preferred to read “over” God’s attributes without engaging in interpretation (*imrār*). Unlike Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathīr’s traditionalism contended that delving into the meaning of God’s names and attributes was pointless speculation and did not warrant one’s intellectual time.

Ibn Taymiyya’s position on the divine attributes stems from his criticism of the dominant Ash’arī position that did not locate God in a particular location (*jiḥa*). As the famous Shāfi‘ī Ash’arī Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) details in his interpretation of 7:54, it is impossible for God to mount his throne because that would entail that He has a body and is thus imperfect because He would be subjected to the conditions of time and space. The idea of God actually mounting his throne further led to the charge of anthropomorphism since the action of mounting and sitting is similar to those of humans. Al-Rāzī’s belief that it was rationally impossible for God to be a body led him to declare in his interpretation of verse 20:5 ([God] the Most Merciful, established on the throne [al-Rahmān ‘alā al-‘arsh istawā]): “the rule (qānūn) is that it is necessary to take every word transmitted in the Qur’ān on its literal value (*ḥaquqatuhu*) except if there is a certain rational indicate (*dalāla ‘aqliyya qaṭ’iyya*) that requires a departure from [the

---

37 As Racha El Omari describes Ibn Taymiyya’s intellectual and political environment: “Ibn Taymiyya’s theological opponents included the Mu’tazilites, the Jahmites and the Twelver Shi’a, to name but a few, but it was the Ash’arites who were his most immediate intellectual and political opponents. Unlike the Mu’tazilites, whose doctrines represented a threat to Ibn Taymiyya only in so far as they survived among the Twelver Shi’a, most importantly in the works of al-Hillī (d.726 /1325), the Ash’arites were the most vibrant, independent, and influential theological school in 13th and 14th-century Egypt and Syria. They included followers of the prominent late Ash’arite Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.606/1209), as well as of the monist Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), and were among the members of the tribunal assigned to conduct the Damascus trail. The most noteworthy of the Ash’arites on this tribunal was Najm al-Dīn Ibn Ṣaṣrā (d. 723/1323) who studied under Maḥmūd al-Iṣfahānī (d. 688/1289), himself a student of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. The Ash’arites were not only powerful opponents, but they also made equal claims to orthodoxy, namely to being themselves *ahl al-sunnā*; Racha el Omari, “The ‘Theology of the Sunna’ and his Polemics with the Ash’arites,” in *Ibn Taymiyya and his Times*, 102.

rule].” The Qur’ān should be read literally except if there are particular verses that clearly contradict reason. Similar to Ash‘arīs before him, al-Rāzī believed that reason was not only an important criteria to accept scripture but also to evaluate it.

Ibn Taymiyya condemns the idea that reason could trump tradition, since it opened a dangerous window of ta’wīl in which Qur’ānic verses could be interpreted figuratively if they did not accord to one’s definition of “reason.” The entire sharī‘a, which was based on the literal word of the Qur’ān, could potentially be undermined because increasingly more and more Qur’ānic verses could be interpreted contrary to their face value.

Ibn Taymiyya expands on how heretical groups use ta’wīl to circumvent the sharī‘a in his al-Risāla al-tadmariyya. Ibn Taymiyya lists three groups in relation to how they interpret traditions relating to God’s characteristics and the Day of Resurrection. The first group is the salaf, who affirm both verses concerning resurrection and the characteristics of God while maintaining that he is distinct from creation. The second group is that of ahl al-kalām,

---


40 ‘Abd Subhan summarizes al-Rāzī’s position as, “Thus, the long and short of the discourse of al-Imām ar-Rāzī is that God is above space”; ‘Abd Subhan, “Relation of God to time and space as seen by the Mu'tazilites,” in The Teachings of the Mu'tazila, ed. Fuat Sezgin (Frankfurt: Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, 2000), 1:240. For more on al-Rāzī’s theological and ethical views see Ayman Shihadeh, The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2006).


42 Ibn Taymiyya was critical of scholars and sects that placed reason over revelation. As Racha el Omari explains, Ibn Taymiyya “objects to the possibility of a conflict between reason and scripture and of the superiority of the former over the latter. Indeed, this objection lies at the heart of his disagreement with the later Ash’arites, and it prompted him to write Dar’ ta’āruḍ al-‘aql wa l-naql, dedicated to refuting the general law (al-qānūn al-kullī) of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.” Racha el Omari moves to explain the Ash’arī “reason over scripture” principle: “It not only places reason ahead of scripture as a source for religious knowledge but also at its foundation, so that whenever there is a conflict between the former and the latter, reason must have the upper hand and scripture has to be interpreted allegorically so as to correspond to it”; Racha el Omari, 107. For more on the traditionalist roots for Ibn Taymiyya’s argument see Racha El Omari, “Kitāb al-Ḥayda: The Historical Significance of an Apocryphal Text,” in Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion: Studies in Honor of Dimitri Gutas, eds. Felicitas Opwis and David Reisman (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012), 419-51.
presumably the Ashʿarīs, who may affirm verses regarding the afterlife but then deny many of God’s characteristics. The third group is composed of the philosophers, Ismāʿīlīs and others who deny both revelation concerning the hereafter and God’s characteristics. This last group concerns Ibn Taymiyya the most because their method leads to “esoteric interpretations (taʾwīlāt bāṭiniyya) which contradict what Muslims know of the [the sharīʿa]” such as ʿhajj being a travel to visit one’s spiritual master rather than to Mecca. Yet, while Ibn Taymiyya is primarily against this last group, he understood that the Ashʿarīs employed the rational methods of taʾwīl and their methods could eventually lead them to deny other verses that set the moral and ethical underpinnings of the sharīʿa.

Moreover, Ibn Taymiyya contended that not locating God in a particular place could be exploited by monists Sufis, such as Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), who claimed that they had united with God (ittiḥād). Some of Ibn Taymiyya’s greatest enemies, such as Shaykh Naṣr al-Manbijī, were Ibn ʿArabī supporters and had enormous political influence. Ibn Taymiyya saw the danger in monism in that when someone claimed that God was within them, they were effectively transferring the authority of the sharīʿa and the scholars who upheld it to themselves.

As Alexander Knysh summarizes, “Ibn Taymiyya bemoans the spread of the doctrine of oneness/monism (wahda) and unificationism (ittiḥād) among his contemporaries, many of

---

43 Ibn Taymiyya will ask in other instances why the Ashʿarīs choose to interpret verses relating to the hereafter literally and then interpret figuratively many of God’s names and attributes.
45 Ibn Taymiyya returns to discuss the importance of the sharīʿa later in the treatise, “the law (sharʿ) is that which distinguishes between actions that benefit and actions that harm. It is God’s justice in his creation and his light among his servants. It is not possible for humans (al-ādamiyyīn) to live without the law which determines how they should act and what they should abandon.” For Ibn Taymiyya, the sharīʿa represents the moral and ethical principles of how to live a righteous life; Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿ, 3:114.
47 Ibn Kathīr records that in the year 707/1308 a council was held against Ibn Taymiyya because of complaints of Ibn ʿArabī supporters; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:45. Alexander Knysh speaks more about Shaykh Naṣr al-Manbijī and those who worked to imprison Ibn Taymiyya; Alexander Knysh, Ibn ʿArabī in the Later Islamic Tradition: the Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 92.
whom, in his view, are deluded by the smoothly speaking Sufi elders who claim to have received their knowledge directly from God. Ibn Taymiyya felt that when monist Sufis believed that their speech was divine then they would claim that their power was absolute.

Ibn Taymiyya proposes his own solution to God’s names and attributes, especially the difficult anthropomorphic ones: God does in fact mount his throne but his mounting is distinct from anything humans engage in. To argue his position, Ibn Taymiyya delves into philosophy and uses terminology that previous traditionalist did not use. As Sherman Jackson explains, Ibn Taymiyya claimed that God’s attributes were connotative (mutawāṭi’) in that they have the ability to have “several mutually distinct entities.” Thus, God could mount on his throne or have a hand but that his mounting on the throne or his hand was not like anything analogous to human beings. Ibn Taymiyya’s position differed from other traditionalists in that he argued that God’s attributes had “concrete” instead of “abstract” meanings. God did in fact mount his throne or descend but these attributes existed in the believers’ mind and did not extend to the outside world. Ibn Taymiyya’s belief that God’s attributes were connotative allowed him to read literally verses that Ash’arīs found problematic. It also allowed Ibn Taymiyya to argue

---

48 As Knysh later summarizes, “In a word, the crux of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teaching, as seen by Ibn Taymiyya, lies in its failure to distinguish between the Creator and his creature”: Knysh, 101.
49 Ibn Taymiyya’s interpretation no doubt drew charges of anthropomorphism. Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī remarks that Ibn Taymiyya was accused of believing God actually sits on his throne and literally has a hand, foot, calf and face; Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī, 1:93.
50 I have not seen Ibn Taymiyya use the term mutawāṭi’ in his early theological treatises such as al-Aqīda al-wāṣītiyya and al-Fatwā al-hamawiyya al-kubrā.
51 Jackson continues to discuss how Ibn Taymiyya explains how God’s immanence exists within the mind of the believer. As he says, “meanwhile, God’s transcendence is preserved in that this relationship between Creator and created exists only in the mind and does not extend to the outside world. In other words, God remains transcendent in that there are not existential likenesses to Him, while He is immanently conceived of in the mind of the believer via these mental associations”; Sherman Jackson, “Ibn Taymiyyah on Trial in Damascus,” The Journal of Semitic Studies 39, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 56. Jon Hoover also discusses Ibn Taymiyya’s views of the divine attributes; Jon Hoover, Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 47.
52 Jackson, 55. Ibn Taymiyya makes this argument in the context of debating Greek logic and the philosophers of Aristotle, Plato and Ibn Sīna; Ibn Taymiyya, Majmū’, 5:203.
53 Ash’arīs also claimed that they affirm scripture even though they interpreted certain verses figuratively.
that God was not only transcendent but immanent. By claiming that God actually descended from his throne (in the mind of the believer), Ibn Taymiyya could argue that God was close and accessible to his servant and therefore there was no need to seek intermediaries in the cult of saints that was rampant during his time.

However, even though Ibn Taymiyya advocated for the “literal” reading of anthropomorphic passages, he also believed that they should be read in their contexts. In his al-Fatwā al-ḥamawiyya al-kubrā, Ibn Taymiyya interprets the end of verse 54:4 “[God] is with you wherever you are” as God being knowledgeable over his servants actions, witnessing them, knowing their every deed. This interpretation fits with the beginning of the verse which discusses God creating the universe and knowing what occurs on earth and what descends from the sky. Ibn Taymiyya further narrates that in the 705 AH council he was asked by the Ash’arī examiners regarding verses that the salaf read figuratively such as 2:115, “The East and West belong to God: wherever you turn, there is the face of God (wajh Allāh).” The examiners relayed to Ibn Taymiyya that the Successor Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 104/722) and al-Shāfi‘ī interpreted “the face of God” as “the direction to pray to God (giblat Allāh).” Ibn Taymiyya

---

54 Jackson, 53. As Jackson further explains, “For him (Ibn Taymiyya), right theological belief had at once to safeguard God’s transcendence while at the same time providing for His immanence.” Ibn Taymiyya’s affirmation of the anthropomorphic attributes should be seen as part of the Ḥanbalī school’s more accepting stance towards anthropomorphism. See Wesley Williams, “A Body Unlike Bodies: Transcendent Anthropomorphism in Ancient Semitic Tradition and Early Islam,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 129, no.1 (2009): 29-44.

55 For more on grave visitation in Mamlūk times see Christopher S. Taylor, In the Vicinity of the Righteous: Ziyāra and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Medieval Egypt (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 1999).

56 Ibn Taymiyya, Majmū’, 5:103. Ibn Kathīr interprets this verse in a similar manner; Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 11:5966. For more on how Ibn Taymiyya deals with the literal and metaphorical see Baraka, 155-62.


58 I speak about the 705 AH council in Chapter One and Two.

agreed with the scholars and added that the “face of God” should be read in the context of the first part of the verse which discusses direction, the East and the West.\footnote{Ibn Kathîr presents a similar interpretation that the “face of God” means the “direction to pray to God”; Ibn Kathîr, \textit{Tafsîr}, 2:435.}

Ibn Kathîr, in comparison, maintains a “moral theology” or “theology of praxis” that was not interested in delving into the debates around God’s attributes but rather focusing on divine responsibilities placed on the believer. As opposed to Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathîr simply “passes over” anthropomorphic verses without engaging in philosophical discussions. In verse 7:54, “Who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and mounted the throne (\textit{istawâ’ \‘alâ al-\‘arsh}),” Ibn Kathîr begins his commentary by explaining that “the people on this issue (\textit{maqâm}) have many opinions and this is not the place to expand on them.”\footnote{Ibn Kathîr, \textit{Tafsîr}, 4:2261.} Even though Ibn Kathîr discusses theological material in his \textit{Tafsîr}, Ibn Kathîr did not see his \textit{Tafsîr} as a theological treatise and seeks to avoid such discussions. Ibn Kathîr continues that, in interpreting this verse, he chooses to adhere to the theological school of the \textit{salaf}, one that includes the traditionalists Mâlik b. Anas, al-Awzâ‘î, al-Shâfi‘î, Ahmad b. Hanbal, Ishâq b. Râhaway and others,\footnote{This group of scholars is almost identical to the list that Ibn Rajab presents as the traditionalist scholars who Ibn Taymiyya should have followed.} which is “passing over it (\textit{imrâruhâ}) as it is (\textit{kamâ jâ’at}) without asking how (\textit{takîyif}), anthropomorphizing God (\textit{tashbîh}), or stripping Him of his attributes (\textit{ta’\‘îl}).”\footnote{Ibn Kathîr, \textit{Tafsîr}, 4:2261. In \textit{al-Bidâya wa l-nihâya}, Ibn Kathîr argues that al-Shâfi‘î held an almost identical position; Ibn Kathîr, \textit{al-Bidâya}, 10: 269. “Passing over” these verses was also the opinion of Ibn Abî al-Faraj b. al-Jawzî; Ibn Abî al-Faraj b. al-Jawzî, \textit{Kitâb al-quṣṣâs wa l-mudhakkîrîn}, ed. Merlin Swartz (Beirut: Dâr al-Mashriq, 1971), 142.} Ibn Kathîr stresses the importance of “passing over” (\textit{imrâr}) over that of affirmation (\textit{ithbât}) of Ibn Taymiyya.\footnote{Ibn Rajab states almost the exact same opinion in his treaties on the methodology of the \textit{salaf}; Ibn Rajab al-\‘Hanbali, \textit{Bayân faḍl \‘ilm al-salaf \‘alâ \‘ilm al-khalaf}, ed. Muhammad b. Nâṣir Ajamî (Beirut: Dâr al-Bashâ‘îr al-Islâmiyya, 1995), 55.} While Ibn Taymiyya stresses affirming the literal meaning of God’s attributes, Ibn Kathîr is content with leaving their exact meaning to God. Yet, even though Ibn Kathîr says that he supports \textit{imrâr}, he is
nonetheless hesitant to affirm the literal meaning of this verse, which would confine God to the throne: “the apparent and evident meaning of this verse, according to the anthropomorphist, is denied by God who is not similar to anything of his creation.” Ibn Kathīr backs up his argument by citing often quoted section of verse 42:11, “and there is nothing like Him.” While Ibn Kathīr affirms the text, he does not go as far as Ibn Taymiyya in claiming that God sits on his throne but his sitting is unlike anything of human beings. Ibn Kathīr closes his interpretation by situating himself squarely with the traditionalists such as the teacher of al-Bukhārī, Na‘īm al-Ḥammād al-Khuzā’ī, who declares:

whoever likens God to his creation has disbelieved. And whoever rejects (jaḥada) how God has described himself has disbelieved. And whatever God and his messenger have described [God with] is not anthropomorphism. And whoever affirms God [in terms of] what has been transmitted from him, of clear verses and authentic reports, on the way that they are deemed suitable by God’s majesty, and refuses [to ascribe to] God imperfections - verily he has treaded the path of guidance.

Like many of the great ḥadīth scholars before him, Ibn Kathīr takes the less controversial path of reading over anthropomorphic passages (imrār), without delving into their exact meanings. Thus, Ibn Kathīr discusses in a paragraph an issue that Ibn Taymiyya spends tens of pages on and takes up in multiple works.

Ibn Kathīr’s minimal comments on the divine attributes are thus more in line with a “moral theology” or a “theology of praxis.” As Makdisi explains, “Whereas the Rationalists

---

65 I.e. that God sits on a throne like human beings.
66 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 4:2261.
67 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 4:2261.
concentrated on philosophical theology, *kalām*, the Traditionalists concerned themselves with law; and law and legal theory, being normative, were closer to ethics.” As discussed in the previous chapter, Ibn Kathīr focuses most of his time on history and law, sciences he believed translated into righteous conduct. Makdisi further elaborates that traditionalism “shies away from speculation about God, considering it man’s fruitless attempt to acquire a knowledge that could never be adequate to its object.” *Kalām* was considered a waste of time since the mystery of God’s essence would never be solved. Ibn Kathīr’s traditionalism is thus similar to traditionalists before him, such as Ibn Qudāma (d. 620/1223), who in his *Tahrīm al-nażar fī kutub ahl al-kalām* states, “We have no need to know the meaning which God intended by His attributes; no course of action is intended by them, nor is there any obligation attached to them, except to believe them, and it is possible to believe them without the knowledge of the intended sense. For indeed faith, with ignorance, is sound.” Ibn Qudāma stresses that there is no moral “obligation” attached to knowing God’s essence and faith does not require knowing God’s particulars. Ibn Qudāma later closes his book with a statement from Mālik b. Anas, “As for [speculative] speech (*kalām*) in our religion, I dislike it. The scholars of our city continue to abhor it, and I do not like speech (*kalām*) except when beneath it is action (‘*amal*).” Mālik, as

---

70 Makdisi, “Ethics,” 47.
71 Makdisi, “Ethics,” 47. There is no surprise then that Ibn Qudāma’s “moral theology” produces one of the most authoritative Hanbali legal reference work. See Muwaffaq al-Dīn ibn Qudāma, *al-Muḥni fi fiqh al-Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal al-Shaybānī* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1984-1985).
72 Makdisi nevertheless demonstrates in his article “Ethics in Islamic Traditionalist Doctrine” that traditionalism incorporated “philosophical theology” into its ranks.
73 Mālik b. Anas most likely meant his hometown of Medina.
well as other traditionalists, were not interested in theological speculation but rather law and praxis, which were tied to morality and ethics.

Engagement with the Exegetical tradition:

Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathir’s different traditionalisms and madhhab affiliations influenced how they interacted with the exegetical tradition. Ibn Taymiyya’s intellectualized traditionalism drove him to be more critical of scholars that practiced kalām and engaged in ta’wil. Ibn Taymiyya frequently refutes rational exegetes for not accepting scripture at face value and resorting to figurative interpretations. In comparison, Ibn Kathir has a more moderate evaluation of rational exegetes, citing them in his Tafsīr but also pointing out their flaws. Ibn Kathir’s Shāfi‘ī background further made him try to redeem fellows Shāfi‘īs who he felt overindulged in the rational sciences.

Ibn Taymiyya takes aims at the exegetical tradition used by the dominant Ash‘arī elite, which was more inclined to engage in rational and philological tafsīr rather than that of ḥadīth. Ibn Taymiyya is critical of the foundational exegete al-Tha’labī (d. 427/1035) who, as Walid Saleh summarizes, “was a man of righteous conduct; unfortunately he collected anything and everything that came his way in previous tafsīr works, just like a nocturnal wood gatherer (ḥāṭib al-layl) unable to distinguish between the good and the bad.” For Ibn Taymiyya, al-Tha‘labī’s Tafsīr was problematic because it incorporated traditions that were unsound, especially those in relation to virtues of reading particular sūras. In terms of al-Tha‘labī’s students, al-Wāḥidī (d.469/1076), Ibn Taymiyya notes that he “was far more knowledgeable in philology than his teacher al-Tha‘labī, but al-Wāḥidī was less sound in his theological outlook and more unlike the

---

75 As we saw in last Chapter, Ibn Kathir tried to reclaim Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arīs by arguing that they repented for their forays into kalām.
76 Saleh, “Radical Hermeneutics,” 139.
Similar to his teacher, al-Wāḥidī cites problematic theological material into his *Tafsīr* making it also unacceptable to traditionalist circles.

But the harshest evaluation of the philological *tafsīr*s goes to the Muʿtazilī al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), whose *al-Kashshāf* was a standard work in the Ashʿarī madrasa curriculum. Ibn Taymiyya believed that *al-Kashshāf* should be completely avoided because its readers would not be able to identify its heretical views. As Saleh translates, “Some of these exegetes have a nice turn of phrase, and are possessed of eloquence, and they insinuate their heretical views in their writing imperceptibly, such that most of the readers are unaware of this. An example of this is the author of *al-Kashshāf* (al-Zamakhsharī) and people of his ilk.” Ibn Taymiyya was concerned that al-Zamakhsharī’s “eloquence” would overtake his readers and they would unknowingly start advocating his heretical doctrines. Ibn Taymiyya was further aware that the Ashʿarīs were attracted to Muʿtazilism, since they also employed rationalist methods such as engaging in *ta’wil* of “problematic” verses. In a telling section of the *Muqaddima*, Ibn Taymiyya mentions that “a group of ahl-kalām,” by which he means the Ashʿarīs, share the basic rational methodology of the Muʿtazilīs. Even though Ibn Taymiyya believed that the Ashʿarīs were closer to the Sunna than the Muʿtazilīs, he still maintains that they share in their heresies because they both foist a particular meaning on the text, a methodology which is not consistent with the *salaf*.

---

77 Saleh, “Radical Hermeneutics,” 139.
79 Saleh, “Radical Hermeneutics,” 141.
80 Ibn Taymiyya, *Muqaddima*, 90. Ibn Taymiyya repeats the idea that the Ashʿarīs are the best Muslim sect throughout his writings; Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ*, 3:103. Ibn Taymiyya was thus more moderate than other Ḥanbalīs, such as Abū Naṣr al-Wāʿilī (d. 444/ 1052) who considered Ashʿarīs worse than Muʿtazilīs because they claimed to
In terms of rationalist *tafsīrs*, Ibn Taymiyya presents an entire chapter in his treatise attacking *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*, or interpretation based on personal opinion. Reading between the lines, it can be assumed that Ibn Taymiyya was condemning Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. In this chapter, Ibn Taymiyya presents a host of traditions from the Prophet and Companions regarding being wary of interpreting the Qur’ān without sound knowledge or the transmitted sources. Ibn Taymiyya was most likely referring to *kalām* theologians, such as al-Rāzī, who interpret the Qur’ān based on their “opinion” rather than that of the authoritative sources of the Qur’ān and Sunna.

Ibn Kathīr, in contrast, presents a more moderate evaluation of the philological and rational exegetes, one that fits his “peculiar situation” of a traditionalist within the Shāfi‘ī madhhab. In his entry on al-Tha‘labī in *al-Bidāya*, Ibn Kathīr notes that the fellow Shāfi‘ī was a famous *mufassir* who wrote a “gigantic *tafsīr*” and a book on the Stories of the Prophet. Ibn Kathīr had a more positive view of al-Tha‘abī’s knowledge of ḥadīth than Ibn Taymiyya by noting that al-Tha‘labī “knew a great amount of ḥadīth (*kathīr al-ḥadīth*)” and studied with a wide variety of ḥadīth scholars. Nevertheless, Ibn Kathīr quickly adds that “found in his works are a lot of odd things (*gharā’ib*).” Unfortunately, Ibn Kathīr does not elaborate but we can only assume that he means unreliable ḥadīth. Ibn Kathīr returns to being positive and cites a tradition from al-Ḥākim’s *History of Nishapur* which praises al-Tha‘labī as a trustworthy

---


81 The traditions in the last two chapters of the *Muqaddima* contain complete chains of transmissions, something that contrasts with the traditions in the first four chapters. This suggests that the first four chapters could have been written while Ibn Taymiyya was in jail where he did not have access to his notes and the last two chapters written when he was released. Another theory is that the two sections were written at different times and then combined together by himself, his students or later editors. Saleh also notes the discrepancy in the first four chapters and the last two and argues that the *Muqaddima* can be divided into two parts; Saleh, “Radical Hermeneutics,” 127.

82 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 12:44.


84 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 12:44. Ibn Kathīr could also be using the term *gharīb* in the sense that al-Tha‘labī cites ḥadīths that are not cited by others. For more on how the term “*gharīb*” is used in the science of ḥadīth see Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bā’ith al-ḥathīth*, 2:460.
transmitter." Ibn Kathīr ends the entry asking God to have mercy upon al-Tha‘labī and notes that many people had positive dreams (manāmāt ṣāliha) about him after his death, meaning that he was believed to be in paradise.

Ibn Kathīr only cites al-Tha‘labī once in his Tafsīr when critiquing a ḥadīth that al-Tha‘labī includes in his introduction to sūra Yūsuf. The Prophet reportedly says, “Any Muslim that recites sūra Yūsuf or teaches it to his family, or slaves, then God will make easy for him the stupors of death and give him the ability not to envy any Muslim.” Ibn Kathīr rejects the tradition explaining that all of the transmissions are weak with some of the narrators unknown or known to have a bad reputation (matrūk). Thus, while Ibn Kathīr did not necessarily endorse Ibn Taymiyya’s evaluation of al-Tha‘labī as a “nocturnal woodcutter (ḥāṭib al-layl),” he would nonetheless agree that some of the traditions that al-Tha‘labī relates in the beginning of sūras are inauthentic.

Ibn Kathīr also had a more positive evaluation of al-Tha‘labī’s student, al-Wāḥidī. In al-Bidāya, Ibn Kathīr constructs a favorable entry of al-Wāḥidī with quotations from the historian Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282). Ibn Kathīr quotes from Ibn Khallikān that al-Wāḥidī wrote three tafsīrs: al-Basīṭ, al-Wasīṭ, and al-Wajīz. Ibn Kathīr does not elaborate on these tafsīrs which most likely means that he did not have much exposure to these works. After noting that al-Ghazālī drew from al-Wāḥidī, Ibn Kathīr lists some of al-Wāḥidī’s most famous compositions such as his Asbāb al-nuzūl and his commentary on God’s beautiful names. But, as Ibn Kathīr

85 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 12:44. Despite highlighting al-Tha‘labī’s studies in ḥadīth, it is important to note that Ibn Kathīr does not call al-Tha‘labī an ḥadīth scholar (ḥāfiz) nor does he praise him like he does al-Ṭabarī. Nevertheless, Ibn Kathīr respects al-Tha‘labī’s ḥadīth studies and does not critique him in this entry for citing any weak narrations.
86 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 6:2931.
explains, al-Wāhīdī is most famous for his commentary on Diwān al-Mutanabbī since “there is none like it despite the many commentaries on [the Diwān].” Ibn Kathīr ends the entry with the quotation that al-Wāhīdī’s writings were popular and, “that the people have come to consensus that [the works] are of good quality (ḥasan), and that instructors reference [his works] in their lessons.” Unlike Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathīr does not add any polemical notes but rather focuses on praising al-Wāhīdī. Similarly to his teacher al-Tha’labī, Ibn Kathīr quotes al-Wāhīdī once in his Tafsīr, noting that “‘Alī b. Aḥmad al-Wāhīdī in his famous Tafsīr” says that al-Salā al-wusṭā is the ‘ishā’ prayer. Despite praising al-Wāhīdī’s Tafsīr as famous, Ibn Kathīr does not draw from it significantly confirming that his Tafsīr did not build off al-Tha’labī’s and al-Wāhīdī’s school of exegesis.

The most surprising difference between Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr comes in Ibn Kathīr’s use al-Zamakhsharī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, two of the most popular exegetes in the Mamlūk period. In a brief entry in al-Bidāya, Ibn Kathīr lists al-Zamakhsharī’s Tafsīr first of all of his works by mentioning that he was the author of al-Kashshāf and the grammar work Mufṣal, among other “beneficial works.” Ibn Kathīr then remarks that al-Zamakhsharī had some ḥadīth training, since he “heard (sami’a) ḥadīths transmitted.” But like Ibn Taymiyya, he found al-Kashshāf problematic because of its Muʿtazilī leanings which are “explicit in his Tafsīr.”

---

88 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 12:125.
89 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 12:125.
90 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 2:816.
91 Al-Tha’labī’s and al-Wāhīdī’s “Nishapūrī School” contrasts greatly with the Shāfī’ī traditionalists. Al-Wāhīdī, for instance, studied all of the diwāns of poetry before starting his Tafsīr, while Ibn Kathīr studied all of the canonical ḥadīth collections. For more on the “Nishapūrī School” see Walid Saleh, “The Last of the Nishapūrī School of Tafsīr.”
92 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 12:125.
93 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 12:125. For more on how the word sami’a is used in the science of ḥadīth see Ibn Kathīr, al-Bā’ith al-ḥadīth, 1:228 - 46.
94 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 12:125. Ibn Kathīr’s biographical entry is similar to how other Sunni historians reconciled themselves to al-Zamakhsharī. As Andrew J. Lane explains, “scholars, then, on the whole seem to have steered a middle course when it came to al-Zamakhsharī. They had the highest praise for him as an upright human being and
Yet, Ibn Kathīr does not subscribe to Ibn Taymiyya’s position that al-Zamakhsharī should be completely avoided because readers would be unaware of his heretical views. In fact, Ibn Kathīr quotes al-Zamakhsharī several times in relation to Qur’ānic recitations (qirā’āt), additional exegetical information and Arabic grammar and language. Ibn Kathīr, for instance, notes that al-Zamakhsharī “mentions in his Kashshāf” that the sūra al-fātiḥa (opening) is also named the sūra of prayer and treasure. A little later in verse 1:4, Ibn Kathīr lists al-Zamakhsharī’s preference for the Qur’ānic reading mulk over that of mālik. In verse 2:37, Ibn Kathīr cites al-Zamakhsharī as one of the scholars who held that Satan spoke to Adam and Eve from the earth rather than in the Heavens. Such an interpretation would solve the problem of how Satan could have encouraged them to eat from the forbidden tree after he was expelled from paradise.

Nonetheless, Ibn Kathīr criticizes the Mu’tazilī al-Zamakhsharī’s use of ta’wil. In verse 2:7, “God sealed their hearts and their hearing, and on their eyes is a veil,” Ibn Kathīr explains that al-Zamakhsharī interprets the verse figuratively (ta’awwala) because of his Mu’tazilī belief that God sealing a person’s heart would prevent him from being able to realize truth. If God did not allow his servants the opportunity to realize the truth, then this would be a violation of justice and be reprehensible (qabīḥ). Ibn Kathīr refutes this argument by explaining that sealing the

---

95 Sa’ūd b. ‘Abd Allāh Fanisan notes that Ibn Kathīr cites al-Zamakhsharī 22 times in his Tafsīr; Sa’ūd b. ‘Abd Allāh Fanisan, Mawārid al-ḥāfiẓ ibn Kathīr fī tafsīrihi (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Tawba, 2006), 129.
96 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 1:40.
97 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 1:84. The editor notes here that the scribe of the Azhari manuscript drops this quotation of al-Zamakhsharī from his manuscript. The scribe consistently edits out long quotations from al-Zamakhsharī’s Kashshāf since he was most likely in line with Ibn Taymiyya’s Qur’ānic hermeneutic that al-Kashshāf should completely be avoided. The scribe seems to support a Qur’ānic hermeneutic that emphasizes ḥadīth at the expense of philology. For more on the reception of Ibn Taymiyya’s Muqaddima see Saleh, “Radical Hermeneutics,” 153.
98 Ibn Kathīr also mentions this opinion in al-Bīdāya but entertains the idea that the garden that Adam and Eve inhabited was not the “eternal garden”; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bīdāya, 1:104-5.
disbeliever’s heart is an appropriate recompense for their disbelief, since they persisted in falsehood and intentionally left what was right. As Ibn Kathīr declares, “This is justice from [God], the most high, good (ḥasan), not reprehensible (qabīh).” Thus, similar to Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathīr is concerned with al-Zamakhsharī promoting his heretical Mu‘tazilism in his *Tafsīr*. But, nonetheless, Ibn Kathīr feels *al-Kashshāf* is valuable enough to reference. Ibn Kathīr is also critical of *tafsīr bi’l–ra’ya* quoting in his introduction Ibn Taymiyya’s chapter condemning the practice but avoids censuring the fellow Shāfi‘ī Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. In his entry in *al-Bidāya*, Ibn Kathīr identifies with al-Rāzī as an exegete and jurist highlighting that he wrote a gigantic (ḥāfil) *tafsīr* and over 200 *fiqh* works. Ibn Kathīr then adds that al-Rāzī had “some odd [opinions] that were not agreed upon and there are ascribed to him things that are peculiar (‘ajīb).” Ibn Kathīr could be referring to al-Rāzī’s endless indulgences with *kalām*. Nevertheless, Ibn Kathīr redeems al-Rāzī by saying that in his will (waṣiyya) he denied the methodology of the theologians and returned to the way of the *salaf*. Al-Rāzī’s repentance is captured in several lines of poetry where he admits that the best way of knowledge is that of the ḥadīth scholars: “I have not benefited in my scholarship my whole life, except when I gather in ‘what was said and they said (qīla wa qālū).” The last line “What is said and they said” refers to the methods of the ḥadīth scholars who deal with narrations.

Ibn Kathīr concludes the entry with an alleged quote from al-Rāzī, “I have tested the methods of the philosophers and I did not

---

99 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 1:143. The scribe of the Azhari manuscript once again drops this quotation from al-Zamakhsharī.

100 The different approaches of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr towards al-Zamakhsharī represent a larger debate within traditionalism on how to deal with his *al-Kashshāf*. Andrew J. Lane captures this ambivalence towards *al-Kashshāf* in his summary of Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī’s entry on al-Zamakhsharī: “Ibn Ḥajar says basically that the *Kashshāf* is off limits to all who wish to study it, whether such a student is cognizant of the author’s intrigues (‘ārif bi-dāsā ‘isīhi) or not. A little later, after commenting on a number of al-Zamakhsharī’s other works, Ibn Ḥajar returns to the *Kashshāf* but this time he seems to allow some leeway, saying that those who have their feet planted firmly in the *Sunna* and who are aware of the *Kashshāf*’s dangers may study it”; Lane, XX.


find it quenching a thirst, nor healing an ailment.” Al-Rāzī then continues to explain that he now affirms (al-ithbāt) Qur’ānic verses such as 20:5 or the same verse in his Tafsīr where he presents his reason over revelation principle.

Yet, while Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī represented the opposite spectrum of the al-Shāfi‘ī school, Ibn Kathīr quotes him multiple times. Ibn Kathīr calls Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī a religious leader and great scholar (imām) and exceedingly knowledgeable (‘allāma) in his commentary of verse 2:23, “If you have doubts about the revelation We have sent down to Our servant then produce a single sūra like it.” Ibn Kathīr then cites al-Rāzī and this verse as part of his larger argument that both the long and short chapters are miraculous. Several verses later in 2:41-42, Ibn Kathīr refers his readers to al-Rāzī’s Tafsīr by explaining that previous prophets foretold the coming of Muḥammad: “At this point [in his Tafsīr], Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī lists many premonitions of the prophets, may peace be upon them, of the coming of Muḥammad, may peace and blessing be upon him.” Ibn Kathīr also supports al-Rāzī’s effort to interpret the Qur’ān literally. In his commentary of verse 2:74, “For there are rocks from which streams spring out, and some from which water comes when they split open, and others which fall down in awe of God,” Ibn Kathīr sides with the Ash‘arīs al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013) and al-Rāzī against the figurative interpretation that the last part of the verse “other [rocks] which fall down in awe of God” relates to snow falling from the sky. As al-Bāqillānī and al-Rāzī both state, “This

---

104 See above.
105 The Shāfi‘ī Ash‘arī al-Rāzī’s exegesis frequently turns into lists of syllogisms while the Shāfi‘ī traditionalist Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr often reduces into hadīths.
106 Sa‘ūd b. ‘Abd Allāh Fanisan says that Ibn Kathīr quotes al-Rāzī 73 times; Fanisan, 129. Readers should be aware though that when Ibn Kathīr mentions “al-Rāzī” in his Tafsīr it is usually the great hadīth scholar Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 322/933-4) not the famous theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. Sa‘ūd b. ‘Abd Allāh Fanisan notes that Ibn Kathīr cites Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī 1744 times in his Tafsīr, almost as much as al-Ṭabarī who is cited 2039 times; Fanisan, 129.
107 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 1:181.
[interpretation] is departing from the literal meaning of the verse without any evidence.” Ibn Kathīr voices his agreement with the Ash’arī theologians who prefer the literal meaning of Qur’ānic verses to unnecessary ta’wīl.

Nonetheless, Ibn Kathīr is critical of al-Rāzī for quoting heretical opinions within his Tafsīr. Ibn Kathīr disapproves of al-Rāzī for citing the idea that worship is more honorable than prophecy (al-risāla) because worship goes from the creation to God (min al-khalq ilā al-ḥaqq) and that prophecy goes from God to the creation (min al-ḥaqq ilā al-khalq).

Ibn Kathīr rebuffs the idea that worship could somehow be superior to prophecy stating, “this saying is incorrect, and its reasoning is also weak, no substances [does this argument hold].” Similar to Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathīr believed that exegetes should not simply quote inauthentic ḥadīths and heretical opinions without refuting them.

Traditionalist Exegetes:

Ibn Taymiyya lists a variety of traditionalist exegetes in his treatise but only provides a positive evaluation of two exegetes who were popular during his time. Ibn Taymiyya provides a lukewarm praise of al-Baghwā (d. 516/1122) whose Tafsīr was an abridgement of al-Tha‘labī’s but was able to guard itself from fabricated ḥadīths and heretical opinions. The only tafsīr that Ibn Taymiyya endorses is al-Ṭabarī’s (d. 310/923) declaring that it is “The most exalted of the tafsīr tradition and the greatest in worth.” Yet, over four centuries had elapsed since al-

---

109 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 1:320. The scribe of the Azhari manuscript edits out this quotation from al-Rāzī’s Tafsīr.
110 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 1:89.
111 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 1:89.
112 Ibn Taymiyya, Muqaddima, 101.
113 Ibn Taymiyya, Muqaddima, 79.
114 Ibn Taymiyya, Muqaddima, 76.
115 Ibn Taymiyya, Muqaddima, 90. Ibn Taymiyya also mentions his preference for al-Ṭabarī’s Tafsīr in his fatāwā; Ibn Taymiyya, Majmū’, 13:385–8. After discussing the Tafsīrs of al-Tha‘labī, al-Wāhidī, al-Zamakhshārī, al-
Ṭabarî’s time, and Ibn Taymiyya envisioned a more complete tafsîr that incorporated the tremendous development of ḥadîth studies.\textsuperscript{116}

Ibn Kathîr similarly does not identify with al-Baghawî and provides only a brief biography of the Shâfi‘î mentioning that he was a mufassir, a commentator on the Sunna, and a jurist. Al-Baghawî also wrote ḥadîth works related to al-Bukhârî and Muslim and the ḥadîth categories of authentic (ṣaḥîh) and good (ḥasan).\textsuperscript{117} Al-Baghawî fit a similar profile to Ibn Kathîr except that he had a more restrictive ḥadîth methodology. In his Ikhtiṣār al-ʻulûm al-ḥadîth, Ibn Kathîr devotes a chapter to the terminology that al-Baghawî uses in defining an authentic ḥadîth. Ibn Kathîr explains that al-Baghawî advanced a theory that a ṣaḥîh ḥadîth was one that was derived either by al-Bukhârî and Muslim.\textsuperscript{118} A ḥasan ḥadîth is one found within the less canonical collections such as Abû Dâwûd and al-Tirmidhî. In other words, the source of the ḥadîth becomes an instrument to determine its reliability as opposed to its chain of transmission (isnâd).\textsuperscript{119} Al-Baghawî’s ḥadîth methodology is thus at odds with Ibn Kathîr’s which allowed an authentic ḥadîth to be derived through independent evaluations of not only the six canonical collections but any of the great sunan collections. Like al-Baghawî, Ibn Kathîr had great reverence for the collections of al-Bukhârî and Muslim, often mentioning that a ḥadîth is agreed upon by the two scholars or that it was found in one of the collections. However, Ibn Kathîr did

\textsuperscript{116} What is fascinating in Ibn Taymiyya’s choice of al-Ṭabarî is that early Ḥanbalîs persecuted al-Ṭabarî to the point that he was buried in his house because the Ḥanbalî masses did not allow him to have proper burial. As time passed, there seems to have been a change of opinion regarding al-Ṭabarî within Ḥanbalî circles, a topic that deserves more research.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibn Kathîr, al-Bidâya, 12:211.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibn Kathîr, al-Bâ‘ith al-ḥathîth, 1:138.

\textsuperscript{119} Jonathan Brown, Canonization, 246. Brown summarizes the contents of al-Baghawî’s work Maṣâbîḥ al-sunnah: “The author divides the ḥadîths in each chapter into two sections, ‘authentic (ṣaḥîh)’ and ‘good (ḥisân).’ The authentic section consists only of reports from al-Bukhârî and Muslim, while the less reliable ’ḥisân’ ḥadîths come from the collection of al-Tirmidhî, Abû Dâwûd, al-Nasâ‘î and other respected compilers. The reader thus relies on the source of ḥadîths to know their reliability. Those coming from the ṣaḥîḥayn are considered automatically authentic, whereas al-Baghawî states that he will alert the reader to any weaknesses in the ḥadîths in the good section”; Brown, Canonization, 246.
not limit an authentic ḥadīth to the Ṣaḥīhayn (al-Bukhārī and Muslim) and most likely for this reason did not draw heavily from al-Baghwā’s works.

Ibn Kathīr does occasionally cite al-Baghwā in his Tafsīr. Ibn Kathīr references al-Baghwā to support his argument that it was Ishmael, not Isaac, who was supposed to be slaughtered by Abraham. Ibn Kathīr also quotes an opinion from al-Baghwā that Satan uttered the “Satanic verses,” not the Prophet Muḥammad.

Ibn Kathīr had a much stronger connection to al-Ṭabarī who fit a similar profile to himself since he was also a jurist, historian, and ḥadīth scholar. Ibn Kathīr identified with al-Ṭabarī’s pro-ijtihād stances in jurisprudence and his inclusion of a wide range of traditions that were not confined to canonical collections. Ibn Kathīr built upon al-Ṭabarī’s methodology by evaluating his various traditions, corroborating them with other narrations, and critiquing their interpretation.

Ibn Kathīr’s identification with al-Ṭabarī is evident in his generous entry on him in al-Bidāya. Ibn Kathīr exclaims that al-Ṭabarī wrote a tremendous (ḥāfil) history and a tafsīr “which has nothing like it.” Al-Ṭabarī further wrote beneficial fiqh works in both the

---

120  Saʿūd b. ‘Abd Allāh Fanisan notes that al-Baghwā is quoted 59 times in Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr; Fanisan, 1:129.
121  Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 9:5101.
122  Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 7:3998. I will discuss the Satanic verses and the issue of infallibility (‘isma) of the Prophets in the next Chapter.
123  Saʿūd b. ‘Abd Allāh Fanisan notes that al-Ṭabarī is the most quoted exegete in Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr with 2039 citations; Fanisan, 1:129. It is my belief that Ibn Kathīr modeled himself after al-Ṭabarī by emulating his immense contributions to history, tafsīr and jurisprudence.
125  A cursory reading of al-Ṭabarī’s Tafsīr demonstrates that ḥadīth collections were not as authoritative or canonical as they were in Ibn Kathīr’s time. For more on al-Ṭabarī’s ḥadīth methodology see Brown, Canonization, 145.
126  I will speak in more detail on how Ibn Kathīr engages al-Ṭabarī’s exegesis in the next Chapter.
127  Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 11:156.
128  Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 11:156.
methodology of deriving law as well as its application. To emphasize al-Ṭabarî’s Tafsîr, Ibn Kathîr quotes two statements from Khaṭîb al-Bagdâdî (d. 463/1071) that “it would be worth travelling to China just to look at Ibn Jarîr al-Ṭabarî’s Tafsîr.” The second records that an Imâm Abû Bakr b. Khuzayma (d. 311/923) spent years reading the Tafsîr of al-Ṭabarî and once he finished declared, “There is no one on the face of this earth (adîm al- ‘ard) more knowledgeable than Ibn Jarîr (al-Ṭabarî).”

Ibn Kathîr then criticizes lay Ḥanbalîs and their “mob” (ra’ā’ahum) for wronging al-Ṭabarî by accusing him of being a Shī’î and some, out of their ignorance, charging him with disbelief (ilḥâd). Ibn Kathîr declares that al-Ṭabarî is innocent of these accusations and that he was one of the Imāms of Islam, combing knowledge and praxis, and following the Qur’ân and Sunna. Nevertheless, the Ḥanbalîs prevented students from gathering around al-Ṭabarî and he was even buried in his house because they did not allow him to have a proper burial. The Ḥanbalîs believed al-Ṭabarî to be a Shī’î since he allegedly adopted several Shī’î juridical positions, such as wiping the feet in ablution (wuḍû’) instead of washing them. Ibn Kathîr vigorously defends al-Ṭabarî by stating that “those that have looked over his words in his Tafsîr know that he requires washing the feet.” Ibn Kathîr explains that al-Ṭabarî requires one to wash his feet by rubbing it (dalk) but instead of using word for rubbing (dalk) he used the word

---

129 Ibn Kathîr does not include al-Ṭabarî in his biographical dictionary of Shâfi‘î jurists, but it is clear that he identifies with him tremendously within his Tafsîr and al-Bidâya wa’l-nihâya.
130 This quote is from the jurist Abû Ḥâmid Aḥmad b. Abî Ṭâhir al-Isfarâyînî.
131 Ibn Kathîr, al-Bidâya, 11:156.
134 Ibn Kathîr, al-Bidâya, 11:158.
135 Ibn Kathîr, al-Bidâya, 11:158.
“mahsh” which also connotes wiping: “many people did not understand what he intended and those who did understand transmitted from him that he requires washing with wiping (mahsh), which is rubbing (dalk).”

Ibn Kathīr continues his defense of al-Ṭabarī in his Tafsīr of verse 5:6 by stating that those who did not reflect on his words misunderstood his position and “this issue confused [al-Ṭabarī’s detractors] but [al-Ṭabarī] is excused.”

Ibn Kathīr’s strong defense of al-Ṭabarī is related to the fact that al-Ṭabarī is the most quoted exegete in Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr. The frequency that Ibn Kathīr cites al-Ṭabarī has led many scholars to view his Tafsīr as a ḥadīth evaluation (takhrīj) of al-Ṭabarī or as Saleh says “turning al-Ṭabarī into a figure of the salaf.” Much of Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr is a takhrīj with his methodology similar to his other takhrīj works such as Tuḥfat al-ṭālib li-muktaṣar ibn al-Ḥājib. Yet, as we will see, Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr is closer to al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya in that it builds off previous works but also adds a great degree of originality.

---

138 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 11:158. What is fascinating here is that Ibn Kathīr cites al-Ṭabarī’s Tafsīr to clarify one of al-Ṭabarī’s legal positions. For many medieval exegesis, tafsīr was not understood simply as literature but also as law. The most famous example of how tafsīr and law overlap is that of al-Qurṭubi’s al-Jāmiʿ li-ahkām al-Qurʿān. While Ibn Kathīr conceived of tafsīr as a separate discipline from law, as shown in his frequent referral of his readers to his Kitāb al-Aḥkām al-kabīr when legal discussion become complex, he nevertheless conceptually viewed tafsīr and law as overlapping.

139 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 5:1709. The accusation of being a Shiʿī was a serious charge within Mamlūk society since it was associated with the invading Mongols. Ibn Kathīr records in al-Bidāya that a man was executed in the year 744/1343 for making pro-Shīʿī statements, such as accusing Abū Bakr and ‘Umar of disbelief, slandering the wives of the Prophet ‘Ā’isha and Hafṣa, and believing that the Angel Gabriel should have been sent to ‘Alī instead of Muhammad; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 14:208.

140 I believe the popularity of Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr may have led to the idea that al-Ṭabarī’s Tafsīr was historically the most important Qur’ānic exegesis. With the proliferation of Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr, scholars may have noticed how often Ibn Kathīr quotes al-Ṭabarī and then assumed that al-Ṭabarī played a central role in the development of Qur’ānic exegesis. For more on questioning the historic role of al-Ṭabarī see Saleh, Formation.


142 I speak about Tuḥfat in Chapter Three.

143 Ibn Kathīr wrote his Tafsīr and al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya around the same time.
Conclusion:

Ibn Kathîr cannot be described as the “spokesperson” for Ibn Taymiyya because they each represented different forms of traditionalism. Ibn Taymiyya believed in an intellectualized traditionalism which saw reason and revelation as “complimentary” and sought to prove the rationality of scripture. Ibn Taymiyya’s elevated view of reason led him into intense theological debates with various Islamic sects, especially that of the dominant Ash‘arîs. Ibn Taymiyya criticized the Ash‘arîs for not affirming verses of God mounting his throne because of their rational concerns that God could not be a body. Ibn Taymiyya held that not locating God within the heavens made it challenging for the believer to connect with God and allowed for the spread of monist Sufism and antinomianism. Rather, Ibn Taymiyya argued that God did in fact mount his throne or had hands, but that these characteristics were not comparable to that of human beings. In this way, Ibn Taymiyya felt that he was able to affirm the Qur’ânic text while avoiding charges of anthropomorphism. Ibn Kathîr, in contrast, represented a fideist traditionalism that deferred to revelation and drew from the great Shâfi‘î traditionalists before him. Ibn Kathîr upheld a “moral theology” that deferred issues relating to God’s essence and sought to focus on sciences that he believed had concrete effect on human action. Ibn Kathîr’s fiediesm led him to avoid speculative theology and focus on traditions which he believed had tangible implications for the believer. Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathîr’s contrasting traditionalisms appear in their different engagements with the exegetical tradition. While Ibn Taymiyya criticizes the exegesis of the Ash‘arî elite, especially that of al-Zamaksharî and Fakr al-Dîn al-Râzî, Ibn Kathîr incorporates them within his Tafsîr. Both Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathîr endorse al-Ṭabarî, but Ibn Kathîr’s identification with al-Ṭabarî is far greater because he was also a historian, exegete and jurist.
The differences between Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathīr’s Qur’ānic hermeneutic becomes clearer when we look more closely at their exegetical writings.
Chapter V

Jonah: A Sinless, Repentant or Obedient Prophet?
Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathîr’s contrasting Qur’ânic hermeneutic and exegesis.

Scholars frequently do not differentiate between Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathîr’s Qur’ânic hermeneutic and exegetical writings. In his influential article “Tafsîr from Ṭabarî to Ibn Kathîr,” Norman Calder contends that Ibn Kathîr acquires his ‘fundamentalism’ from his teacher Ibn Taymiyya.1 Calder thus describes the prevailing view that Ibn Taymiyya was the teacher and original thinker and Ibn Kathîr the student and implementer. This chapter will argue that Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathîr’s hermeneutic and exegetical writings are in fact distinct from each other, constituting two different responses to the great exegete Ash’arî Fakhr al-Dîn al-Râzî (d. 606/1209). Ibn Taymiyya’s hermeneutic and exegesis were based on his intellectualized traditionalism that sought to refute what he considered heretical ideologies, in particular the dominant Ash’arism represented by al-Râzî. In contrast, Ibn Kathîr’s Qur’ânic hermeneutic and exegesis built on the traditionalist exegetes before him, such as al-Ṭabarî (d. 310/923), and functioned by marginalizing rationalist commentaries such as al-Râzî’s.

1 Calder also says that Ibn Kathîr “was an expert on ḥadîth and a disciple of Ibn Taymiyya – together adequate symbols of his intellectual affiliation”; Norman Calder, “Tafsîr from Ṭabarî to Ibn Kathîr: problems in the description of a genre, illustrated with reference to the story of Abraham,” Approaches to the Qur’ân, ed. G.R. Hawting and A.A. Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993): 121, 124.
Differentiating between Hermeneutic and Exegesis:\(^2\)

Both Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathîr argue that the best way to interpret the Qur’ān is through the Qur’ān itself, and then through the traditions associated with the Prophet, the Companions, and the Successors.\(^3\) Ibn Taymiyya outlines this approach towards the end of his *Muqaddima fi uṣūl al-tafsīr*, and Ibn Kathîr copies these chapters into the introduction to his exegesis. Yet, one must be careful in assuming that both of the scholars actually followed this hermeneutic in their *Tafsîrs*. As Walid Saleh observes, there is at times a “dissonance” between the aims laid out in the introduction and the actual exegesis that the exegete produce. Speaking about al-Tha‘labî (d. 427/1035), Saleh explains,

The reason to this dissonance lies in the inescapability of the Islamic exegetical tradition. Original and innovative as his works are, al-Tha‘labî was confined by the heavy weight of the previous exegetical corpus which all exegetes were bound to revere and follow. Thus the aims announced in the introduction, ambitious and audacious though they are, are tempered by the already-established course of the tradition.\(^4\)

Similar statements could be made about Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathîr. Regardless of what they state as their hermeneutic, they both had to engage the exegetical tradition that they inherited.\(^5\)

Thus, to understand their Qur’ānic hermeneutics better, we need to take a closer look at Ibn

---

\(^2\) Jame Dammen McAuliffe defines exegesis and hermeneutic: “The practice of interpretation was equated with what we now term ‘exegesis’, while the term ‘hermeneutics’ was used to denote the aims and criteria of that practice”; Jame Dammen McAuliffe, “Qur’ānic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Ṭabarî and Ibn Kathîr,” *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur’ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York, 1988):47.

\(^3\) This approach has been detailed by Walid Saleh, “Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of an Introduction to the Foundations of Qur’ānic Exegesis,” in *Ibn Taymiyya and his Times*, eds. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 123-162. Also, see Jame Dammen McAuliffe, “Qur’ānic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Ṭabarî and Ibn Kathîr,” 46-62.


\(^5\) Saleh further explains that if scholars did not engage the tradition, then their work was “discarded”: “Modifications and innovations could only succeed if they permitted a sense of continuity and harmony with the old way of doing exegesis. One could not afford to completely break away from the tradition totally, for the tradition would have certainly retaliated. To those adventurous scholars who did depart from the tradition, like the author of the British Library manuscript Or. 8049, the punishment came swiftly. Their work was simply discarded”; Saleh, *Formation*, 101.
Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathīr’s exegetical writings in order “deduce” the rules implicit in their approach.⁶

**Defining Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathīr’s Qur’ānic Hermeneutic:**

Ibn Taymiyya’s hermeneutic was to defend his intellectualized traditionalism from what he perceived as deviant ideologies, particularly that of the dominant Ashʿarism represented by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.⁷ Yet, many Qur’ānic scholars notice that Ibn Taymiyya’s exegetical writing resembles al-Rāzī’s, both in terms of style and content.⁸ Saleh, for instance, observes that “Ibn Taymiyya’s approach can only be compared to the master whom he rarely mentions, al-Rāzī.”⁹ Such a comparison is apt because even as Ibn Taymiyya refutes al-Rāzī in many of his works, he adopts much of his kalām terminology and writing style. Ibn Taymiyya’s exegetical writing is full of logical proofs and analogies and resembles more the writing of a theologian than a ḥadīth scholar. Many of Ibn Taymiyya’s works are polemical and his exegetical writings carried out similar aims.¹⁰ Thus, Ibn Taymiyya’s call to interpret the Qur’ān through the salaf,

---

⁶ Saleh further expands on the importance of comparing a scholar’s hermeneutic with his actual Tafsīr. Speaking once again about al-Thaʿlabī, “Moreover a theory of interpretation with no textual corollary, which al-Thaʿlabī presented in his introduction, is impossible to assess. He never gives an example of how he intends to interpret a given verse. The converse is also true in the body of his commentary. He never explains how his theory is directing any particular explanation he is offering. Thus we are left to deduce the rules that are implicit in his approach”; Saleh, *Formation*, 102.

⁷ In the 705 AH council set up to evaluate Ibn Taymiyya’s creed, one of the chief Ashʿarī examiners references Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī; Abū ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbd al-Hādiṣ, *Uqūd al-durriyya min manāqib Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya*, ed. Abū Muṣʿab Ṭalʿat b. Fuʿād al-Ḥulwānī (Cairo: al-Fārūq al-Ḥadīth, 189). For more on the council see Chapter One and Two.

⁸ ʿAbd al-ʿĀl even goes to the point of saying that he fears “that it could be said about [Ibn Taymiyya’s] Tafsīr what is said about al-Rāzī’s Tafsīr ‘in it is everything except tafsīr.’” See Ismāʿīl Sālim ʿAbd al-ʿĀl, *Ibn Kathīr wa-manhajuhu fī al-Tafsīr* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Malik Faysal al-Islāmiyya, 1984), 268-276.


which he details in his *Muqaddima*, was not as much aimed at limiting Qur’ānic interpretation to the early generation as it was defending the theology that he believed that they represented. For Ibn Taymiyya, Ḥanbalī theology was the creed of the early Muslim community.

Ibn Kathīr’s Qur’ānic hermeneutic, on the other hand, *built off* traditionalist exegetes before him, particularly that of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 327/938).11 Fitting with his moral theology and larger intellectual project,12 Ibn Kathīr sought to promote a pro-ijtihād Shāfi‘ī traditionalism in the line of other traditionalist scholars, such as Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (d. 643/1245) and al-Mizzī (d. 742/1341). Ibn Kathīr valued and identified with al-Ṭabarī since the great tenth-century scholar promoted novel Qur’ānic interpretations by quoting a wide variety of traditions not confined to the mainstay ḥadīth collections. Thus, Ibn Kathīr’s view of interpreting the Qur’ān through the Qur’ān, the Sunna, the Companions, and Successors was mediated by his engagement with tradition-based exegetes before him.


11 Al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī are the most quoted exegetes in Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr*, with Sa‘ūd b. ‘Abd Allāh Fanīṣān recording that al-Ṭabarī is directly quoted 2039 times and Ibn Abī Ḥātim 1744 times; Sa‘ūd b. ‘Abd Allāh Fanīṣān, *Mawārid al-Ḥāfiẓ ibn Kathīr fi tafsīrihi* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Tawba, 2006), 129.

12 I attempt to define Ibn Kathīr’s intellectual project in Chapter Three.
538/1144) drew heavily on al-Tha’labī to construct his philology based *tafsīr* while al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) also pulled from al-Tha’labī but removed his pro-Shi‘ī material. Ibn Taymiyya also notes that Baghawī’s (d. 516/1122) exegesis was more or less an abridgement of al-Tha’labī’s. However, no scholar had reworked the exegesis of al-Ṭabarī and cross-referenced his traditions within authoritative ḥadīth collections.

Western scholars have been critical of Ibn Kathīr’s approach dismissing it as simply lists of ḥadīths. Yet, what these scholars may not realize is that Ibn Kathīr’s lists of ḥadīths are carefully crafted to present particular theological messages. As Jane MacAullife clarifies, “While the *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm* contains much traditional material, it is not simply a collection uncritically accumulated. Rather it is most thoughtfully ordered and evaluated.” Ibn Kathīr devotes a considerable amount of time in selecting ḥadīths that represent the range of the ḥadīth tradition and the theological message he wants to convey.

To elucidate the difference between Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Kathīr’s hermeneutic, we will compare their exegetical writings regarding an important theological debate in 8th/14th century Mamlūk Damascus, the infallibility (*‘ismā*) of the prophets. We will then demonstrate how their different definitions produce contrasting interpretations of the Prophet Jonah.

---

13 Saleh, *Formation*, 209-15. As Saleh says of al-Zamaksharī’s engagement with al-Tha’labī, “The relationship is one of dialectical conversation, of adding, adapting, refuting and excising material from al-Tha’labī.”


15 This may be because al-Ṭabarī did not occupy such a central role in the history of *tafsīr*. For more on questioning the historic role of al-Ṭabarī see Saleh, * Formation*.

16 Calder, 129.

17 McAuliffe continues to state, “As such it bears fitting testimony to a period in Islamic history that was conservative in the positive sense of the term - an era that sought to identify and preserve the best of its received tradition, albeit an era that, in modern times, has often been dismissed as mechanical and uninspired, repetitive and routine, if not actually verging on decadence.” See her *Qur’anic Christians: an Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 76.

18 For more on how *muhaddiths* articulate their legal opinions through ḥadīth see Christopher Melchert’s “Traditionist-Jurisprudents and the Framing of Islamic Law,” *Islamic Law and Society* 8, no. 3 (2001): 383-406.
Defining ‘īṣma of the Prophets:

Both Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr deal significantly with prophets within their writings but differ substantially regarding the concept of the ‘īṣma of the prophets. To contextualize their positions, it is necessary to present some background regarding the dominant Ashʿarī definition of ‘īṣma represented by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī with which both Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr had to contend.

Al-Rāżī discusses ‘īṣma in a variety of works, but he most explicitly defines the term in his al-Arbaʾīn, or forty theological principles. Al-Arbaʾīn was an important didactic text in Mamlūk Damascus. The great Shafiʿī Ashʿarī chief justice of Damascus Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355), for example, taught the work to his son Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370) and his relative Bahāʾ al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 777/1375). Ibn Taymiyya even wrote a commentary on parts of the text and taught it to some of his students. Many of the arguments in al-Arbaʾīn appear in al-Rāżī’s tafsīr, which was the most dominant exegesis of the era. Al-Rāżī devotes the 32nd principle to the ‘īṣma of the prophets and takes the position that it is not possible for the prophets to commit minor or major sins intentionally, but they are allowed to commit mistakes.

---

21 ʿAbd al-Hādī, 37, 58, 256.
22 In his chapter on the science of tafsīr, al-Dhahabī observes that in his day the Qurʾānic exegesis with the widest readership was Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāżī’s. He then goes to criticize the Tafsīr saying that the work contains theological problems and unnecessary speculation; Muḥammad b. Ahmad al-Dhahabī, Bayān zaghl al-ʿilm waʾl-ṭalab, ed. Muhammad Zāhid b. al-Ḥasan al-Kawtharī (Damascus: al-Qudsī, 1928), 19.
unintentionally (sahū). Prophets are essentially free of sin (dhanb), since they had to perform their mission of conveying their message which required them to be models of righteousness and moral conduct.

After presenting his definition of 'iṣma, al-Rāzī spends the rest of the chapter focusing on ambiguous issues (shubha) relating to the “sins” of the prophets. He reinterprets Qur’ānic verses that highlight Prophetic imperfection by arguing that the “sins” of the prophets were actually leaving the preferable (tark al-afḍal) rather than engaging in acts of disobedience (ma'ṣiyya).

Throughout these entries, al-Rāzī is concerned with the prophet’s ability to deliver their message, so he takes the opinion that ‘iṣma is not necessary before prophecy and allows for transgression to occur before they are officially anointed as prophets.

In the next century, the Ash‘arī Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī takes al-Rāzī’s definition a step further and argues that prophets did not commit minor or major sins intentionally or unintentionally. In his commentary of Solomon’s prayer 38:36, “Oh my Lord, forgive me,” Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī states, “what we believe (nakhtār) is that the prophets, may peace be upon them, are protected from major and minor sins [which are committed] intentionally or

24 Al-Rāzī, ‘Iṣma, 40. Al-Rāzī structures the chapter around presenting all of the views within Islamic theology regarding ‘iṣma, putting forward his own definition of ‘iṣma, outlining 15 arguments in favor of this principle, and then confronting ambiguous issues related to the ‘iṣma of the prophets.
25 Al-Rāzī does allow for minor sins (saghā’ir) for prophets. See his interpretation of verse 48:2. Al-Rāzī, however, does not discuss in detail minor sins of the prophets in his discussion of ‘iṣma.
26 For instance, al-Rāzī argues that Adam committed the sin of eating from the forbidden tree before his Prophecy; Al-Rāzī, ‘Iṣma, 50.
27 Al-Rāzī, ‘Iṣma, 40. Al-Rāzī’s definition is thus slightly different than al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād’s who believes that prophets are protected (ma’ṣūm) from sin before their Prophecy; al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād, 2:171. It is important to note that al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād is primarily speaking about the Prophet Muhammad in his work al-Shifā but generalizes Muhammad’s sinless state before prophecy to the other prophets. Al-Rāzī also argues that the Prophet Muḥammad was never a disbeliever (kāfir), even before revelation. See his commentary of verse 93:7.
28 For more on Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī and his relationship with the Shāfi‘ī traditionalists see Chapter Three.
29 Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī’s definition of ‘iṣma is thus more in line with that of al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād who argues that the prophets “are free of every imperfection (‘ayib)”; Al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād, 2:219. I could not find an instance where Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī speaks about the state of prophets before their Prophecy.
unintentionally.” Taqī al-Dīn explains that this is part of the proper etiquette that the prophets use in addressing God, part of their humility or politeness. Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī’s son, Tāj al-Dīn, further added that his father did not believe that Jacob became blind. This was a related topic because, for Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, prophets were not only spiritually superior but also physically sound.

Drawing from an established Ḣanbalī tradition, Ibn Taymiyya takes aim at the above Ashʿarī definitions of ‘īṣma arguing that they distort Qurʿānic verses that clearly state that the prophets sinned (dhanb). Ibn Taymiyya believed that, in this case, the Ashʿarīs distorted (taḥrīf) the true meaning of the Qurʿān just as they distorted the meaning of God’s names and attributes. As Ibn Taymiyya emphatically declares, “This opens the door for distortion of a word from its proper meaning (taḥrīf al-kalim ‘an mawāḍiʿiḥi). One of them intends to praise the prophets, but he ends up denying them. He wants to believe in them but he ends up disbelieving in them.” Ibn Taymiyya felt that the Ashʿarīs imposed their view of the prophets

---

30 Taqī al-Dīn Subkī, Fatāwā al-Subkī, ed. Ḥusām al-Dīn Qudṣī, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1992), 2:106. Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī repeats this opinion of ‘īṣma in his biography of his father, Ṭabqāt, 10:295. Unfortunately, only parts of Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī’s Tafsīr are published so we are unable to make a full comparison between him and Ibn Taymiyya. For more on his exegetical writings see Taqī al-Dīn Subkī, Fatawā al-Subkī, 2:1-125.


32 Jacob was thought to have lost his sight out of his sorrow for missing Joseph (verse 12:84) but it was miraculous restored when his face touched Joseph’s shirt (verse 12:94); Andrew Rippin, “Jacob,” ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān (Brill, 2012).

33 Tāj al-Dīn Subkī, Ṭabqāt, 10:307. Al-Rāzī maintains a similar interpretation that Jacob did not become literally blind contending that verse 12:94 “and returned to him sight (baṣīr)” actually meant that Jacob’s sorrow ceased and his excitement began to increase since he would be soon reunited with Joseph. Al-Rāzī notes that this interpretation is preferable to him since it removes any doubts of imperfection (nuṣṣān) being associated to Jacob.

34 See Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī, Kitāb al-tawwābīn, ed. George Makdisi (Damascus: Institut français, 1961). Ibn Qudāma structures the work by first discussing the repentance of the Angels and the prophets and then that of other creations (men and jin). Ibn Qudāma shows no hesitation to include prophets in the category of those who sin and plead to God for forgiveness.

35 Ibn Taymiyya wrote a treatise on the ‘īṣma of the prophets which does not survive; ‘Abd al-Hādī, 43.

36 In the Arabic text, Ibn Taymiyya uses the word Jahmiyya here as a code word for Ashʿarīs.


38 It is important to note that Ibn Taymiyya critiques two different forms of ‘īṣma, the Ashʿarī ‘īṣma which he takes up primarily in this treatise and the ‘īṣma of the Shiʿīs which he attacks in Minhāj al-sunna. For Ibn Taymiyya, the
on the Qur’ānic text and in the process rejected who the prophets really were. By foisting their rationality on the text, the Ash’arīs were in effect denying part of revelation.

In opposition to al-Rāzī and Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, Ibn Taymiyya defines ‘ishma as that “prophets were protected (ma’ṣūm) from remaining, continuing or persisting in sin and error once they had committed it.” Ibn Taymiyya believed that prophets could sin, but what made them different than others was that they were protected from persisting in sin. God would not allow his messengers, whom he trusted to convey his message, to continue to commit sins but would eventually correct their mistakes. Ibn Taymiyya asserted that his definition of ‘ishma was more consistent with Qur’ānic verses and ḥadīths in which the prophets admit their transgression (ẓulm) and ask for forgiveness.

Ibn Taymiyya also directly refutes al-Rāzī’s claim that the prophets should be free of sin because they are models of emulation by arguing that prophets should be followed only in the actions that they affirm. This follows the usūl al-fiqh principle that prophets should be obeyed in the actions that they consistently perform rather than those that were abrogated. Ibn Taymiyya stresses that sins followed by sincere repentance (tawba) should not be frowned upon. Rather, they should be seen as part of an individual believer’s spiritual development. The prophets who repented after they sinned had advanced to a spiritual state superior than the one they occupied

‘ishma defined by the Shi‘īs is more extreme and problematic but he his keen to highlight that the Ash‘arī and Shi‘ī definitions overlap.

39 Ibn Taymiyya repeats this claim that the Jahmiyya or Ash‘arīs distort Qur’ānic texts later in the treatise such as interpreting the verse 48:2 “so God may forgive you” as not relating to the Prophet Muḥammad but to Adam and the Prophet’s umma; Ibn Taymiyya, Majmū‘, 10:313. Al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād also mentions this interpretation in his al-Shifā‘; Al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād, 2:233. Ibn Taymiyya additionally wrote on the issue of the status of a prophet before his prophecy; ‘Abd al-Hādī, 61.


41 As Wilfred Madelung observes, “Scholars with traditionalist leanings were more reserved in affirming the sinlessness of the prophets, since this conflicted with a literal acceptance of passages in the Kurʾān and Ḥadīth.” See W. Madelung, “‘Iṣma,” Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. Van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs (Brill, 2011).
before their mistake. In contrast to al-Rāzī, Ibn Taymiyya maintained that the prophets’ sinless state should not be a source of emulation as much as their sincere repentance and striving to become better believers.

Ibn Taymiyya’s and al-Rāzī’s definition of ‘iṣma overlaps in that they both allow for prophets to commit sins and mistakes before Prophecy but do not allow prophets to engage in major sins after they began their prophethood. However, they differ greatly in terms of emphasis – al-Rāzī argues that prophets did not sin since that diminished their ability to convey their message and be models of righteousness, while Ibn Taymiyya stresses that they did sin so they could be examples of repentance.

While al-Rāzī’s and Ibn Taymiyya’s definition of ‘iṣma overlap, it is Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī’s definition of ‘iṣma that is completely at odds with Ibn Taymiyya’s. While Ibn Taymiyya believed that prophets were protected (maʾṣūm) in conveying their message, Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī held that the prophets were protected (maʾṣūm) in their essence. Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī does not give any rational reason as to why prophets were maʾṣūm other than that they were prophets. Ibn Taymiyya may have been compelled to write on the ‘iṣma of the prophets because of prominent Ash‘arīs, such as Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, contending that prophets were essentially perfect.

42 Ibn Taymiyya, Majmū‘, 10:293.
43 Ibn Taymiyya, Majmū‘: 10:289.
44 I have not found an instance were Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī explains why prophets were maʾṣūm.
45 The discussions over the definition of ‘iṣma was not a philosophical exercise but had real implications in Mamlūk society. In Minhāj, Ibn Taymiyya begins critiquing the Shi‘ī definition of ‘iṣma but then subtly moves to condemning grave worship; Minhāj, 2:440. For Ibn Taymiyya, the issues of ‘iṣma and grave worship were intimately connected since he felt that those who held that humans were protected by God from sin were more likely to engage in practices of visiting tombs and seeking intercession. Ibn Taymiyya’s final imprisonment in which he passed away was a result of his view that it was prohibited to travel with the exclusive intention of visiting a tomb, even that of the Prophet Muhammad. Ibn Taymiyya’s views of ‘iṣma could have very well cost him his life. For more a more in depth discussion on Ibn Taymiyya’s view of grave visitation see Chapter One.
Fitting with his “moral theology,” Ibn Kathîr never composed a tract on the theological issue of ‘iṣma of the prophets. Ibn Kathîr does define ‘iṣma in his Tafsîr, and his definition is closest to al-Râzî’s in that he believes that the prophets were essentially free of sin because they were constantly aided by God. Nevertheless, Ibn Kathîr does define ‘iṣma in his Tafsîr, and his definition is closest to al-Râzî’s in that he believes that the prophets were essentially free of sin because they were constantly aided by God. In verses 21:78-80, the Qur’ân narrates that David and Solomon both judged on an agriculture dispute in which a shepherd’s cattle destroyed his neighbor’s crop. The Qur’ân then states that “we made Solomon understand” implying that Solomon’s judgment was more just than David’s. After narrating the details of the story behind the verse and a ḥadîth regarding whether a judge who rules incorrectly will go to the hellfire, Ibn Kathîr interjects and states, “I hold (aqûl) that the prophets are protected (ma’ṣumûn) [and] aided by God, the most powerful and majestic, and there is no disagreement in this in terms of the true scholars (muḥaqiqîn) from the early scholars (salaf) to the later day ones (khalaf).” Ibn Kathîr then continues that “for other than” the prophets there is the ḥadîth, “If a judge rules correctly then he is rewarded twice, but if he rules and is incorrect then he has one reward.” Ibn Kathîr argues that this ḥadîth refutes those who claim that if a judge rules incorrectly then he will go to the hellfire. But citing this in ḥadîth in reference to “other than the prophets” suggests that Ibn Kathîr believed that prophets do not make mistakes.

46 Unlike al-Râzî and Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathîr did not write extensively on theology. For more on Ibn Kathîr’s “moral theology” see Chapter Four.

47 Ibn Kathîr is hesitant to say that the prophets engaged in repentance (tawba) since that implied that they had sinned.


49 I have not found an instance where Ibn Kathîr discusses whether prophets were protected from sin before their prophecy. In his commentary of verse 93:7, which mentions that the Prophet went astray (ḍâlî) before his Prophecy, Ibn Kathîr only comments that the Prophet was not theologically astray but rather lost his way when he was a child; Ibn Kathîr, Tafsîr, 12:6649. For more discussion on verse 93:7 see Walid Saleh, “The Last of the Nishapuri School of Tafsîr: Al-Wâhidî and his Significance in the History of Qur’anic Exegesis,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 126, no. 2 (2006): 223-243. Ibn Kathîr also takes the position in his biography of the Prophet (ṣîra) that the Prophet did not worship idols before his Prophecy; Ibn Kathîr, al-Bidâya wa’l-nihâya, eds. ‘Ali Muḥammad Mu’awwâd and ‘Ādil Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Mawjûd, 15 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmîyya, 2009), 2:311-312.

50 In his commentary of verse 66:10, Ibn Kathîr even goes as far as saying that the wives of the Prophet are ma’ṣûm from committing adultery even if they were disbelievers; Ibn Kathîr, Tafsîr, 11:6212. We also see through his Tafsîr
There is no doubt that Ibn Kathīr’s intellectual milieu and relationship with his Ash‘arī colleagues influenced his definition of ‘iṣma. Ibn Kathīr quotes Ash‘arī sources in his discussions of ‘iṣma such as al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād’s (d. 544/1149) influential Kitāb al-Shifā’ ʿfi ḥuqūq al-Muṣṭafā. Ibn Kathīr, for instance, cites al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād’s opinion that verse 3:39 did not mean that the Prophet John was impotent, as other exegetes claim, but rather protected (maʾṣūm) from committing adultery. Yet, what differentiates Ibn Kathīr from al-Rāzī is that he does not make it a point to argue for the sinless nature of the prophets but rather presents narratives of the prophets as models of righteousness. Unlike al-Rāzī and Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathīr is not interested in the questions of prophetic sin and does not get drawn into the theological debates of his opponents. Rather, Ibn Kathīr focuses on conveying what he believes is the true image of the prophets, one of righteousness and obedience.

The scholars’ definitions of ‘iṣma were not only connected to their intellectual tradition but their social and political contexts. Ibn Taymiyya was part of a Ḣanbalī minority that sought to rethink Mamlūk society. By arguing that prophets made mistakes, Ibn Taymiyya could contend that the great Companions and authoritative scholars were also at times in error and that their opinions needed to be revised. Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, in contrast, was the chief judge of Damascus and he wanted to maintain the institutions that preserved Shāfi‘ī orthodoxy. Through that ‘iṣma is an important principle that differentiates Sunnis from other sects and religions. Ibn Kathīr affirms that the Sunnī principle that the Umma of the Prophet Muḥammad is protected (laḥum ‘iṣma) from agreeing on error; Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 3:1534. This makes Sunnis in conflict with extremist Shī‘is who maintain that their leader has to be maʾṣūm; Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 3:1534. Christians, additionally, hold their leaders to have ‘iṣma and are thought to follow them in whatever they say; Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 3:1622. By maintaining that only the prophets are maʾṣūm, Ibn Kathīr further marginalizes other types of knowledge, such as biblical traditions, since they do not come from a reliable source; Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 7:3851.

51 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 2:988.
52 Ibn Taymiyya, Majmū‘, 10:294. Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Аṣqalānī records that the famous grammarian Abū Ḥayyān (d. 745/1344) recalls that when he was in a debate with Ibn Taymiyya on the Arabic language, he cited the acclaimed Arab grammarian Sībawayhī. Ibn Taymiyya retorted that Sībawayhī “was not a prophet in grammar nor was he protected from error (maʾṣūm)” but rather he made 80 mistakes in his grammar textbook al-Kitāb; Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Аṣqalānī, al-Durar al-kāmina fī a’yān al-mī’a al-thāminâ, ed. ‘Abd al-Wārith Muḥammad ’Alī, 4 vols. (Hyderabad: Majlis Dâ‘irat al-Ma‘ārif al-Uthmânîyyah, [1929-32]), 1:153. Walid Saleh also mentions this story; Saleh, “Radical Hermeneutics,” 123.
arguing for the potential perfection of man, al-Subkī could argue that scholars who upheld Shāfi‘ism were divinely guided and protected. Even though Ibn Kathīr was part of a traditionalist political minority, he was nonetheless part of the majority Shāfi‘ī school. His views could also represent a desire to preserve the social order.

**Jonah: A Sinless, Repentant, or Obedient Prophet?**

To illustrate how the Exegetes define ‘isma, we will examine how they apply their definitions to the Prophet Jonah. The story of Jonah provides an ideal opportunity to see how the scholars deal with prophetic infallibility since he was one of the few prophets who was explicitly punished by God.

**Al-Rāzī: Jonah - A Sinless Prophet**

Al-Rāzī structures his interpretation of the story of Jonah as a rebuttal of seven claims that Jonah was a sinful prophet.53 He emphasizes throughout his commentary that Jonah was most likely swallowed by the whale before his Prophecy, which would put the scope of transgression outside of his prophetic message.54 Nonetheless, al-Rāzī contends that any wrongdoing (ẓulm) that Jonah committed was not disobedience (ma’ṣīyya) but rather leaving what is preferable (tark al-afḍal).55

---

54 Al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād also suggests that Jonah’s transgression was before he was a Prophet; al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād, 2:164.
55 Al-Rāzī seems to be drawing from al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād’s *al-Shifā‘* in his commentary of Jonah; al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād, 2:163-4, 240-41.
Al-Rāzī begins his refutation by putting forward seven claims that Jonah was a sinful prophet.\(^{56}\) He starts with the dispute on whether Jonah left his people upset at God, noting that the majority of early exegetes take this opinion, including the Companion ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd, ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abbās and the Successors al-Ḥasan al-BASHIR. He also adds that the later exegete al-Ṭabarī also adopts this opinion.\(^{57}\) If Jonah left upset with God, al-Rāzī asks, this would make his transgression amongst the greatest of sins since he directly disobeyed God. Second, there is the problem of Jonah not believing that God was capable of punishing him which relates to the next part of verse 21:87, “and he did not think that God was capable of (punishing) him (lan naqdira ‘alayhi).”\(^{58}\) According to al-Rāzī, a prophet would not doubt the power and capability of God. Third, Jonah was a wrongdoer (zālim) based on his plea to God in last part of 21:87, “Verily I am among the wrong doers (zālimīn).”\(^{59}\) If Jonah committed zulm then he deserved the curse of God, which is deduced through a reading of verse 11:18, “Verily the curse of God is upon the wrongdoers” (alā la‘natu Allāh ‘alā al-zālimīn).\(^{60}\)

Fourth, if Jonah did not commit any sin then why did God punish him by having the whale swallow him? God punished Jonah exactly because he committed a transgression. Fifth, Jonah was “blameworthy” (mulīm) based on verse 37:142 “the whale swallowed him while he (Jonah) was blameworthy (mulīm).” Jonah could not be blameworthy (mulīm) if he did not commit any sin. Sixth, God directly instructs the Prophet Muḥammad not to emulate Jonah in verse 68:48, “Do not be like the Companion of the whale.” God provides this instruction to Muḥammad for the precise reason that Jonah was a sinful prophet. Seventh, Jonah is not

\(^{56}\) Al-Rāzī, Tafsīr, 25:200.
\(^{57}\) Al-Rāzī, Tafsīr, 25:200. Al-Ṭabarī does not argue that Jonah left upset at his lord but lists some narrations to this affect.
\(^{58}\) Al-Rāzī, Tafsīr, 25:200.
\(^{59}\) Al-Rāzī, Tafsīr, 25:200.
\(^{60}\) Al-Rāzī, Tafsīr, 25:200.
included in the select category of prophets who persevered (ūlū al-‘azmi min al-rusul) such as the Prophet Moses.

Al-Rāzī refutes these claims arguing that Jonah was a sinless prophet and that any mistake he committed was not disobedience but rather leaving what was better. Al-Rāzī rejects the idea that Jonah left his people upset at his Lord since that implied him being ignorant of God’s essence and neglectful of His role as a legislator. Being upset with one’s Lord is not befitting for a believer let alone a prophet of God. For al-Rāzī, a prophet cannot disobey a divine command since several verses state that messengers must obey God, such as 33:36, “It is not fitting for a believing man or believing woman, when God and His Messenger judge on a matter, to have any decision in the matter.” Instead al-Rāzī argues that Jonah must have been angry at something “other than God” such as his own people. Al-Rāzī resorts to philology and argues that the verb (ghāḍaba) could also imply that Jonah made his people angry when he departed from them. Drawing on al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī supports this interpretation by citing a reading that Jonah left in a state of making others angry (mughḍi‘an) rather than being angry himself.

But even then, some may protest, Jonah should not have given up on his people. Jonah should have been more patient, a sense supported by 68:48: “and do not be like the Companion of the whale (ṣāḥib al-hūt).” Al-Rāzī rhetorically asks, does this verse not suggest that Jonah engaged in something prohibited (maḥḍūra)? Al-Rāzī responds that Jonah was not explicitly commanded to stay with his people:

God ordered [Jonah] to convey the message to [his people]; He did not order him to stay with them forever. For the apparent meaning of [God’s] order [to convey

---

61 Al-Rāzī does not systematically refute all of the seven points but rather the ones that he feels are most problematic.
63 Al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād makes a similar argument that Jonah left angry at his people, not his lord; Al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād, 2:163-4.
the message] did not necessitate repetition and continuity. Thus his leaving [his people] was not disobedience (maṣiyya). As for his anger, we do not concede that it was disobedience because [leaving the city] was not prohibited to him so he thought it was permissible. Whereas he only [left the city] angry on the behalf of God the most high, pride for his religion, repulsed of disbelief (kufr) and his people. It would have been more preferable for him to be patient and wait for permission from God, the most high, in abandoning them. As for the verse, “and do not be like the Companion of the whale” it was as if God wanted for Muḥammad the most virtuous and highest of positions.64

Al-Rāzī stresses that Jonah’s anger was not directed towards God, but rather his people. Jonah performed his duty of conveying the message but was frustrated with the town’s disbelief causing him to depart prematurely. By leaving early, Jonah did not commit an act of disobedience but left what was preferable (tark al-afdal). As for the verse “and do not be like the Companion of the whale,” God wanted the Prophet Muḥammad to have the highest stature and thus the verse is not a condemnation of Jonah.65

As for rebutting the second claim, that Jonah believed that God did not have the ability to punish him, al-Rāzī declares that, “We say that whoever believes God to be incapable (‘ajaza), is a disbeliever. There is no disagreement that it is not permissible to ascribe that [belief] to any of the believers, so how about the prophets, may peace be upon them? Thus, it is necessary to engage in ta’wil.”66 Al-Rāzī rejects the contention that Jonah believed that God was not capable of acting against him since this would mean that a prophet did not comprehend the nature of God. Similar to al-Rāzī’s interpretation of the anthropomorphic divine attributes,67 the literal meaning of verse 21:87 “and he did not think that We were not capable of (punishing) him (lan naqdira ‘alayhi)”68 is problematic so it is necessary to move to a secondary meaning through

---

64 Al-Rāzī, Tafsīr, 25:200.
67 I discuss al-Rāzī’s interpretation of istawā’ ‘alā al-‘arsh in Chapter Four.
ta’wil. Al-Rāzī cites several verses that allude to a different meaning of qadara such as verse 30:37, “God expands his wealth to whoever he wills of his servants and restricts (yaqdir)” and verse 65:7 “whosoever wealth has been restricted (qudira).” Al-Rāzī explains that these verses all demonstrate that meaning of naqdir here means to restrict (nuḍayiq) in that Jonah thought he had the choice to stay and continue to warn his people or the right to leave. Jonah did not believe that God would hold him accountable for leaving early even if it was better to remain and warn his people.

Al-Rāzī then moves to the final issue of Jonah being a wrongdoer (ẓālim) based on the ending of the verse, “Verily I am one of the wrong doers (ẓālimīn).” Al-Rāzī contends that “if we hold that this [prayer] was before revelation then there is no issue (fa lā kalām), but if we maintain that this was after [Prophecy] then it is necessary to engage in ta’wil.” Here, we see al-Rāzī’s bias that Jonah was swallowed by the whale before his prophecy since a prophet could not engage in wrongdoing (zulm) for the reason that those who commit zulm deserve the curse of God. Nonetheless, al-Rāzī’s solution is that if Jonah was swallowed by the whale after his Prophecy, then he left what was preferable: “there is no doubt that [Jonah] abandoned (tārik) the most virtuous with the ability to attain the most virtuous (act), in that way it was injustice (zulm).” Jonah did not commit zulm in the sense of committing a sin but rather leaving the superior act of staying and warning his people. As for the claim that Jonah was swallowed by the whale as a punishment (‘aqūba) from God, al-Rāzī believes that prophets are not punished

---

69 Al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād makes a similar argument that naqdir here means nuḍayiq: Al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād, 2:163.
72 Al-Rāzī, Tafsīr, 25:200. Al-Rāzī does use the words repentance (tawba) in reference to Jonah but does not emphasize the word. Al-Rāzī’s argumentation regarding “zulm” is similar to that of al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād: Al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād, 2:241.
but rather put through a trial (mihna). God punishes disbelievers but tests believers in order to enhance their spiritual state.

In sum, al-Rāzī presents Jonah as a sinless prophet, one that either committed his transgression before his prophecy or abandoned the preferable by leaving his people. Al-Rāzī argues his points through the science of kalām which includes citing Qur’ānic verses, employing philology, using rational arguments and resorting to ta’wīl. While al-Rāzī cites ḥadīths throughout his Tafsīr, they are not given same priority as theological disputation or philology.

**Ibn Taymiyya: Jonah - A Prophet of Repentance**

Ibn Taymiyya discusses Jonah in a lengthy treatise entitled Kalām ‘alā da‘wat Dhū al-Nūn devoted to his Qur’ānic prayer found in the last part of 21:87, “There is no god but You, glory be to You, verily I am one of the wrongdoers.” While Ibn Taymiyya does not directly

---

73 Al-Rāzī, Tafsīr, 25:200. Al-Rāzī does not address the seventh claim implicitly recognizing that Jonah was not one of the persevering Prophets (jīlū al-‘azmi min al-rusul).

74 Unfortunately, al-Rāzī does not expand on this point.

75 ‘Abd al-Hādī specifically mentions Kalām ‘alā da‘wat Dhū al-Nūn as one of Ibn Taymiyya’s many works; ‘Abd al-Hādī, 56.

76 Ibn Taymiyya, Majmū‘, 10:238-335. Shahab Ahmad looks at this same treatise in his influential and meticulous article “Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses.” While the Satanic Verses is mentioned in the treatise, it is only directly dealt with in 2 pages of the 100 page fatwā. Proving the validity of the Satanic verses was not an end goal of Ibn Taymiyya as much as encouraging the believer to engage in repentance (tawba). As Ahmad mentions, he had to ‘reconstruct’ the story of the satanic verses through Ibn Taymiyya’s various writings because there is no single work dedicated to it. Ibn Taymiyya, however, devoted many treatises and fatwā to the importance of tawba and its implications to the believer. Thus, Ahmad’s final statement in his article should be modified, “to the orthodoxy of Islamic modernity, the Satanic verses incident poses a fundamental problem; to Ibn Taymiyya it was a fundamental part of the solution.” For Ibn Taymiyya, it was not the satanic verses as such that was a “fundamental part of the solution” but rather the need for believers to realize their shortcomings and repent for their sins. Ahmad further argues that “For Ibn Taymiyya, then, the Satanic verses incident constituted the prime example of the process of prophetic transgression and subsequent repentance. For him this incident, more than any other, proves that there is no basis for objecting to the idea of a prophet who is susceptible to sin and error”; Ahmad, 98. I am inclined to believe that story of Jonah was Ibn Taymiyya’s “prime example of prophetic transgression and subsequent repentance” since Ibn Taymiyya devotes an entire treatise to Jonah’s call and cites the satanic verses as part of his larger argument that Jonah was a great prophet. Nonetheless, Ibn Taymiyya’s prime example of prophetic transgression is not as important as his larger belief in the imperfection of man and his need to consistently repent.
take up al-Rāzī in the treatise, Ibn Taymiyya shows great awareness of al-Rāzī’s argumentation and refutes many of his points.\textsuperscript{77}

Ibn Taymiyya begins the treatise admiring the way in which Jonah praises God and disassociates Him of any negative qualities. The treatise reaches its climax when it discusses the last part of Jonah’s prayer “verily I am among the wrongdoers (ẓālimīn).” Unlike al-Rāzī, who finds Jonah’s admission of ẓulm problematic, Ibn Tamiyya affirms Jonah’s prayer as one of repentance that should be followed by every believer.\textsuperscript{78} Ibn Taymiyya argues that through his prayer of repentance Jonah became a better person and that his station with God increased.\textsuperscript{79} Ibn Taymiyya justifies this argument through 68:48-50, “Be patient with the decree of your Lord and do not be like the Companion of the whale (Jonah) when he called out in agony. Had the Grace of his Lord not reached him, he would indeed have been cast off on the shore, in disgrace. [But] his lord chose him and made him among the righteous.” Unlike al-Rāzī, who has trouble with the first section “do not be like the Companion of the whale,” Ibn Taymiyya stresses how the verses end, “God chose Jonah and made him among the righteous.” Ibn Taymiyya points out that after his transgression and subsequent repentance God enhanced his spiritual state and made him among the elect.

Ibn Taymiyya further argues that the Qur’ān states that when Jonah was swallowed by the whale he was \textit{mulīm} or blameworthy.\textsuperscript{80} But when he was “thrown upon the shore” God does

\textsuperscript{77} Ibn Taymiyya may have been in jail during the composition of this treatise and not been able to access al-Rāzī’s works. Nevertheless, it is evident throughout the treatise that Ibn Taymiyya was well-aware of al-Rāzī’s argumentation.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibn Taymiyya had an intellectual interest in prophetic wrongdoing (ẓulm). ‘Abd al-Hādī notes that Ibn Taymiyya wrote a treatise on the prayer that the Prophet Muhammad taught Abū Bakr, “Oh my Lord, I have wronged (ẓalantu) myself tremendously (ẓulmu’un kathūrūn’);” ‘Abd al-Hādī, 69.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibn Taymiyya, \textit{Majmū’}, 10:294. Ibn Taymiyya does not focus on the first part of the verse and thus does not discuss the issues relating to the meaning of \textit{lan naqdira} ‘alayhi.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibn Taymiyya, \textit{Majmū’}, 10:299.
not say he was *mulīm* but rather *saqīm* or sick. Ibn Taymiyya contends that Jonah was not *mulīm* following his release from the whale because he had already repented through his prayer, “There is no god but You, glory be to You, verily I am one of the wrongdoers.” This prayer raised Jonah’s spiritual state and made him into a model of emulation. For Ibn Taymiyya, Jonah should not be judged by his initial sin but by his final position; “consideration should go towards the completeness of the end not the deficiency in the beginning.”

Ibn Taymiyya gives many examples of how imperfection should not be seen as a deficiency; among them is the rational example of human development. Just as humans develop physically from a sperm, to a blood clot and so forth, humans develop spiritually. It was wrong to judge a human through its early developmental stages; rather, one should judge a human when he has “attained completeness.”

Ibn Taymiyya’s tremendous belief in repentance (*tawba*) leads him to assert that Jonah’s call of repentance was *after* he became a Prophet. Ibn Taymiyya rejects the idea that Jonah’s sin came before Prophethood, which implies that sin and prophecy are inconsistent. Ibn Taymiyya dismisses this opinion declaring, “[We] do not need this (*lā yahtāj ilā hādhā*).”

---

84 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū’*, 10:300. Ibn Taymiyya also gives the example of how the Companions are considered better than the Successors even though Companions were at one time disbelievers while the Successors were raised as Muslims. Ibn Taymiyya argues that the person who experienced both good and evil is potentially better than the person who only knows good. Since the later never experienced evil, he is not in a position to identify what is incorrect, and may inadvertently fall into it or not be able to stand up against it.
Instead, Ibn Taymiyya maintains that Jonah’s actions are in harmony with the other prophets who, “did not delay repentance (tawba), but hastened towards it.”

Similar to al-Rāzī, Ibn Taymiyya uses Qur’ānic verses, rational arguments and philology to argue his positions. Yet, Ibn Taymiyya questions the reasoning that a Prophet could not be a wrongdoer (zālim) or be blameworthy (mulīm). He further rejects his use of ta’wīl, which for Ibn Taymiyya, implicitly accepts the notion that there is something “problematic” with the speech of God. Rather, Ibn Taymiyya strives to affirm the Qur’ānic text and argue for its rational value.

**Ibn Kathīr: Jonah - A Prophet of Obedience**

Unlike the theologians al-Rāzī or Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathīr does not structure his exegetical writings as a kalām style refutation. Instead, Ibn Kathīr presents tafsīr as a type of ḥadīth evaluation (takhrīj) that reworks the traditionalist exegetes before him, most notably al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī. Through his evaluations, Ibn Kathīr uses traditions to construct a narrative of Jonah as a prophet of worship and obedience.

In contrast to al-Rāzī and Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathīr views the story as one of worship in which Jonah was released from the whale because of his prior obedience. He begins his commentary on 21:87 by giving a brief historical background to the story, such as mentioning

---


89 Ibn Taymiyya’s writing style is similar to al-Rāzī’s except that al-Rāzī is more focused. Ibn Taymiyya frequently goes off into tangents and then returns back to his original argument after several paragraphs or pages. Nevertheless, al-Rāzī and Ibn Taymiyya both employ kalām style refutations that seek to expose the irrationality of their opponents. For complaints on Ibn Taymiyya’s tangential prose see Ibrahim Baraka, *Ibn Taymiyya wa-juhūduhu fī al-tafsīr* (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-Islamiyya, 1984), 112.

90 Ibn Kathīr had written earlier takhrīj works such as *Tuḥfat al-tālib li-mukhtaṣar Ibn Ḥājib*. Ibn Kathīr’s expertise in ḥadīth appears throughout the *Tafsīr* in that he uses specialized hadīth terminology and cites traditions outside of the canonical collections. For more on Ibn Kathīr’s ḥadīth works see Chapter Three.

91 In this way, Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr* resembles *al-Bidāya wa l-nihāya* in that he draws on a several key sources, abridges their writings and adds his own material.

92 Ibn Kathīr’s use of traditions to argue his theological points demonstrates that “most of the tafsīr bi’l-ma’tūr is in reality a tafsīr bi’l-ra’y”; Saleh, *Formation*, 16.
Jonah’s full name, the name of people he was sent to, and how he was thrown into the ocean. Here we see Ibn Kathīr’s expertise as an historian, something which is absent in al-Rāzī and Ibn Taymiyya.

Ibn Kathīr then moves to comment on 21:87. He cites only one of al-Ṭabarī’s traditions in which Jonah left his people angry at them. Ibn Kathīr thus omits several of al-Ṭabarī’s traditions that report that Jonah abandoned his people because he was angry with God. Ibn Kathīr, for instance, forgoes a biblically inspired tradition that Jonah became upset with God because God rescinded his promise to Jonah that he would punish his people. The people of Nineveh eventually repented after Jonah had left the city, leading God to forgive them. On hearing that God did not punish his people after his promise, Jonah became upset and declared “by God I am never going to return to my people a liar.” Ibn Kathīr most likely did without these traditions because of theological issues of God not fulfilling his promise and a prophet showing his displeasure with God.

Ibn Kathīr transitions to interpret lan naqdira ‘alayhi and argues, similarly to al-Rāzī, that these words mean lan nuḍayyiqa (not to restrict). To back up the opinion, he cites the Companions and Successors Ibn ‘Abbās, Mujāhid b. Jabr and Ṭabhair b. Muzāhim. Ibn Kathīr records that al-Ṭabarī prefers this later opinion and gives evidence that naqdir means nuḍayyiq based on the verse 65:7, one of the verses that al-Rāzī also uses to support his argument. While Ibn Kathīr’s opinion here is similar to al-Rāzī’s, Ibn Kathīr situates the authority for the meaning

---

93 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 7:3879.
94 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 7:3880. Ibn Kathīr is explicit in his Stories of the Prophets that Jonah left upset at his people; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 1:275.
96 Al-Ṭabarī, 17:61. See Book of Jonah 3:10 for the biblical roots of this tradition.
97 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 7:3880.
98 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 7:3880.
99 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 7:3880.
of *naqdir* first with Companions and Successors and then with philology. While Ibn Kathîr uses philology as an interpretative tool throughout his *Tafsîr*, the transmitted sources are given priority. Ibn Kathîr’s use of philology is further apparent in that Ibn Kathîr cites an opinion from ‘Atiyya al-‘Awfî, which is not found in al-Ṭabarî,\(^{100}\) that *naqdir* means to judge (*naqdiya*) and follows with a verse of poetry to support this argument. Ibn Kathîr cites these verses of poetry despite the fact that his preferred opinion is that *naqdir* means to restrict (*nudayyiq*), which demonstrates that Ibn Kathîr was open to various readings of the text.\(^{101}\)

After citing traditions about the meaning of Jonah calling out in the darkness (*ẓulamāt*), Ibn Kathîr presents several traditions that all emphasize Jonah’s obedience and worship. In the first tradition, Jonah enters the belly of the whale and thinks that he is dead.\(^{102}\) He then moves his leg and realizes that he is still alive. He immediately prostrates supplicating, “O, God! I have made a place of worship (*masjid*) in a place where no one ever has.”\(^{103}\) This tradition portrays Jonah as a ‘spiritual pioneer’ since he is the first to worship God in a belly of a whale! This tradition is not found in any of the canonical ḥadîth collections and is briefly mentioned by al-Ṭabarî. Yet, Ibn Kathîr includes the tradition because it demonstrates Jonah’s worship and obedience.

Ibn Kathîr then cites a ḥadîth from Abû Hurayra that narrates that when God decided to confine Jonah in the belly of the whale, he instructed the whale not to eat from Jonah’s flesh or break his bones.\(^{104}\) When the whale settled in the bottom of the ocean, Jonah heard some noise

---

\(^{100}\) Scholars have argued that Ibn Kathîr’s work is simply a *takhrîj* of al-Ṭabarî. However, Ibn Kathîr does not limit himself to al-Ṭabarî and uses a plethora of sources throughout his commentary. For more on many sources that Ibn Kathîr draws on in his *Tafsîr* see Sa’úd b. ʿAbd Allâh Fanîsân, *Mawârid al-Ḥâfîẓ ibn Kathîr fi tafsîrihi* and Samîr Muhammad Ismâ’il, *al-Miftâh al-kabîr li-Tafsîr Ibn Kathîr* (Cairo: Dâr al-Muḥaddithîn, 2008).

\(^{101}\) Calder implies that Ibn Kathîr does not employ exegetical tools other than ḥadîth; Calder, 121. For a discussion on Calder’s article see the Introduction.


\(^{103}\) Ibn Kathîr, *Tafsîr*, 7:3880.

\(^{104}\) Ibn Kathîr, *Tafsîr*, 7:3880.
and he began to ask himself what it was. God inspired Jonah that this was the supplication (tasbīḥ) of the sea creatures, leading Jonah to reflect and make his own prayer. The Angels then hear Jonah’s prayer and say, “Oh God, we hear a weak voice from a strange land.” God responds, “That is from my servant Jonah, he disobeyed me so I kept him in the belly of a whale (in the ocean).” They exclaim, “He is a righteous servant whose good deeds rose to you every day and night!”

God replies in the affirmative and then orders the whale to release Jonah. Ibn Kathīr then tries to demonstrate the authority of this tradition by noting that it is cited by al-Ṭabarī and is found in the Musnad of al-Bazzār. Ibn Kathīr is once again unable to locate this tradition within the canonical collections but he nevertheless cites the story because it promotes his view that Jonah was a prophet of obedience.

Ibn Kathīr adds another ḥadīth that emphasizes Jonah’s obedience in which the Prophet instructs: “It is not permissible for a servant to say: ‘I am better than Yūnus b. Matta (Jonah), he praised (sabbāha) God in the darkness.” Ibn Kathīr notes that there are traditions that do not have the addition “he praised God in the darkness” but nonetheless he chooses to quote this version because it emphasizes Jonah’s devotion.

Ibn Kathīr ends his commentary with another tradition that supports the idea of the Angels interceding on behalf of Jonah, this time from Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī. This ḥadīth switches the dialogue in which God asks the Angels if they recognize the voice of Jonah. They reply questioning, “Who is it?” God responds, “It is my servant Jonah.” They respond in

---

105 Al-Rāzī cites this same ḥadīth in his commentary of 37:145 but unlike al-Rāzī, Ibn Kathīr cites the entire chain of transmission and locates it within authoritative collections. Ibn Kathīr distinguishes himself from other exegetes in that he cites the source of prophetic traditions, includes their full chains of transmission and lists variants.

106 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 7:3881. Ibn Kathīr notes that only this first tradition has a complete chain of transmission back to the Prophet. Nonetheless, the editors of the Awtād al-Shaykh edition grade this tradition as weak.

107 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 7:3881.

108 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 7:3881. Ibn Kathīr includes a section in his Stories of the Prophets that lists variants of this ḥadīth; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, 1:278-79.

109 Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 7:3881. This tradition only goes back to Mālik b. Anas, not to the Prophet Muḥammad.
astonishment, “Your servant Jonah, whose deeds were continuously accepted and prayers always answered?” The Angels then intercede on his behalf pleading, “Will you not have mercy on the one who did good (in a time of ease) so we can save him in hardship?” God responds, ‘Yes, absolutely’ and orders the whale to release Jonah.\(^{110}\)

These traditions all acknowledge that Jonah made a mistake: he should have obeyed God and not fled his people. Yet, they all emphasize Jonah’s obedience and worship. The Angels exclaim that Jonah is a righteous servant whose good deeds were well known before his transgression and the Prophet declares that no one should condemn Jonah because he praised God in a time of difficulty.

Ibn Kathīr’s story of Jonah continues in his *Qaṣṣ al-anbiyā’*.\(^{111}\) In his explanation of verse 37:143, Ibn Kathīr does mention that if it were not for Jonah’s “repentance and return to God” then he would have stayed in the whale until the Day of Judgment. But Ibn Kathīr does not dwell on this point. Rather he emphasizes the first part of the verse, “If he were not one of those who praised God (*musabbiḥīn*).” For Ibn Kathīr, Jonah was one of the *musabbiḥīn* because he was one of the “obedient (servants), worshipers, and remembers of God.” Ibn Kathīr supports this interpretation through the ḥadīth from Ibn ‘Abbās where the Prophet says, “Oh my Son, let me teach you a few words, preserve (the rights) of God and God will preserve you. Preserve (the rights) of God and you will find him guiding you, acquaint yourself with God in times of goodness, then he will remember you in times of hardship.”\(^{112}\) The implication is that Jonah’s prayer was answered because he was a devote servant before his act of transgression.

Similarly to al-Rāzī, Ibn Kathīr is hesitant to use the word sin (*dhanb*) to describe prophets and he views them as models of righteousness and obedience rather than that of


repentance. However, unlike al-Rāzī and his Ash‘arī colleagues, Ibn Kathīr does not prioritize philology nor resort to *ta‘wīl* in difficult exegetical situations. Rather, Ibn Kathīr attempts to locate ḥadīths in authoritative collections that support his theological stances. Ibn Kathīr is similar to Ibn Taymiyya in that he emphasizes the transmitted sources and avoids *ta‘wīl*. Yet, Ibn Kathīr presents his theology through ḥadīth evaluation (*takhrīj*) rather than the rational argumentative style of Ibn Taymiyya.

**Conclusion:**

Through an analysis on al-Rāzī’s, Ibn Taymiyya’s, and Ibn Kathīr’s exegetical writings we see both similarities and differences in terms of their style and content. First, al-Rāzī and Ibn Taymiyya overlap regarding style, they both structure their writings as theological refutations and deal with similar issues of whether Jonah was swallowed before or after he was a prophet and how a prophet could be a wrongdoer (*ẓālim*) and blameworthy (*mulīm*). Al-Rāzī has trouble accepting Jonah as a wrongdoer (*ẓālim*) and blameworthy (*mulīm*) since that would affect his ability to be a model of righteousness. He thus argues that Jonah’s transgression was before his Prophethood or he left the preferred in staying and warning his people. Ibn Taymiyya, on the other hand, affirms Jonah’s “sin” arguing that it was part of his spiritual journey, intimately connected with the importance of repentance (*tawba*).

In contrast, Ibn Kathīr structures his exegesis as a ḥadīth evaluation (*takhrīj*). Ibn Kathīr carefully sorts through al-Ṭabarî and Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī selecting traditions which can be corroborated through the authoritative ḥadīth collections and he feels are authentic and theologically sound. In terms of issue of *‘iṣma* of the prophets, Ibn Kathīr is closer to al-Rāzī’s position in that prophets do not sin because they are constantly aided by God. He presents
Jonah as an obedient prophet who was released from the whale because of his prior worship. However, fitting his moral theology, Ibn Kathîr does not engage in *kalām* style debate and avoids being drawn into theological discussions of how Jonah could be a wrongdoer (*zâlim*) or blameworthy (*mulîm*). Ibn Kathîr is not interested in the issue of prophetic sin but rather focuses on presenting a compelling narrative on how Jonah is a model of righteousness and obedience.
Conclusions:

“Of all of the many times that I meet with [Ibn Kathīr], I always learned (akhadhtu) something from him.”

So said Ibn Ḥajjī b. Mūsā al-Sa‘dī (d. 782/1380-81), one of the students of Ibn Kathīr. Something similar could be said of myself. On the many instances that I engaged Ibn Kathīr’s works, I always learned something from him and he helped me reach important conclusions regarding the study of Islamic history, theology, and *tafsīr*.

**Islamic History:**

This dissertation contests the framework that views Islamic history as the product of a handful of charismatic and erudite individuals. This theory proposes that, if we study the major Muslims scholars then we have understood the larger Islamic intellectual tradition. As George Makdisi explains,

> We tend to represent religious movements in Islam as monolithic entities, juxtaposed to each other like blocks of stone, and thus opposed to all other movements. We then set about looking for the characteristics of each movement based on the attitudes and views of a number of its representatives. The results are dubious at best, for they tend to violate the individuality of Muslim scholars who, like all thinkers, refuse to be reduced to a common denominator.

To better understand the “*salafī*” or the Islamic “fundamentalist” movement, Western scholars have made Ibn Taymiyya into its chief “representative.” Other great Muslim scholars within this movement, such as Ibn Kathīr, are then reduced to Ibn Taymiyya’s “student” or “spokesperson.” These labels give the impression that Ibn Kathīr was simply an extension of Ibn Taymiyya, promoting his views and scholarship. This dissertation demonstrates that Ibn Kathīr was his own

---


scholar, with his unique intellectual project and important contributions to Islamic history, ḥadīth and exegesis. Ibn Kathīr’s life and works should be continued to be studied on their own terms. ³

The “master-discipline” paradigm further ignores the fact that scholars were part of intellectual circles and broader political and theological movements. These circles had their own dynamics that extended beyond simple hierarchies; junior scholars studied with several senior ones, and senior scholars drew from one another. The fluid system of classical Islamic education, especially that of the Mamlūk period, encouraged students to study with a variety of teachers which led to the creation of independent thinkers rather than “spokespersons.” Many scholars did have one primary teacher, but they often studied with a host of other scholars that influenced the direction of their work. In short, a student did not always extend a teacher’s intellectual project.

Ibn Kathīr, in particular, did read much of Ibn Taymiyya’s works and most likely attended many of his public lectures.⁴ Ibn Kathīr cites information from Ibn Taymiyya in al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya and consistently references him in his legal and ḥadīth works. Ibn Kathīr could thus be seen as “a student” of Ibn Taymiyya. Yet, this did not mean that Ibn Kathīr continued Ibn Taymiyya’s intellectual project, especially his controversial theological doctrines or legal rulings. Ibn Kathīr never quotes Ibn Taymiyya in theology and preferred reconciliation over Ibn Taymiyya’s dissentious stances on divorce oaths. In fact, Ibn Kathīr is best described as the primary student of al-Mizzī, praising him the most and referencing him more than any other teacher. But even then, there were important differences between Ibn Kathīr and al-Mizzī. Ibn Kathīr shared al-Mizzī’s interest in ḥadīth, but his specialization extended to tafsīr, history and

---

³ This project does not claim to be a comprehensive study of Ibn Kathīr and hopes that more studies are written on Ibn Kathīr’s life, major works and tafsīr. The same should go for the other great scholars discussed in this dissertation such as al-Dhahabī, al-Mizzī, al-Birzālī, Ibn al-Qayyim, and the al-Subkīs.

⁴ I have not found an instance where Ibn Kathīr says that he studied a particular book with Ibn Taymiyya.
law. Ibn Kathīr was more of a jurist and historian than al-Mızzī and was significantly influenced by other Shāfi’ī traditionalists such as al-Dhahabī and al-Birzālī.

Theology:

This dissertation confirms Makdisi’s contention that Ashʿarism was not the undisputed orthodoxy by the 8th/14th century. While Ashʿarīs dominated the key political and educational posts of Mamlūk Damascus, the traditionalist movement posed a serious threat to the social and political order. Ibn Taymiyya was imprisoned several times because of his growing influence which drew popular appeal as well as attracted the inclination of Mamlūk rulers. Additionally, a number of the major educational institutions, such as Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya and Umm Sāliḥ, were directed by traditionalists like al-Mızzī, al-Dhahabī, and Ibn Kathīr.5

Makdisi is further correct that traditionalism stretched beyond the Ḥanbalī school. The simple Ḥanbalī/Shāfiʿī divide does not capture the complexities of the theological struggle between traditionalists and rationalists. Traditionalism appealed to members of a variety of legal schools, most importantly the dominant Shāfiʿī madhhab. Furthermore, as Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī alludes to, many Ḥanbalīs were Ashʿarīs and did not subscribe to the creed of Ibn Taymiyya. Thus, the struggle of 8th/14th Damascus was less a rivalry between madhhab than of competing theologies.6

The dissertation further challenges our usage of the categories of “traditionalism” and “rationalism.” While these terms are beneficial in marking distinct theologies and communities, it is important to realize that there was great overlap between the groups and diversity within them. “Traditionalists” and “rationalists” often formed different social-intellectual groups, but

---

5 See Chapter One.
6 Despite Makdisi’s strong insights, he at times overemphasizes the importance of madhhab. My research suggests that while madhhab were important, the primary debates were theological.
they lived within similar societies and were aware of one another’s argumentation. They regularly read each other’s writings and incorporated the other’s ideas and methodologies within their own works. Moreover, there were debates within “rationalism” and “traditionalism” that continuously sought to redefine theological boundaries. These inner community struggles were at times more intense and had greater implications than those between groups.

Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr, in particular, are categorized together as “fundamentalists” or “traditionalists,” but there were significant differences between them. Ibn Taymiyya’s intellectualized traditionalism saw reason and revelation as complimentary, and he believed in the rationality of tradition. To prove his belief, Ibn Taymiyya delved deeply into theology and scrutinized *kalām* and philosophy for the roots of heretical ideologies. Ibn Taymiyya felt that if he exposed the weakness of the rational sciences, he would defend traditionalism and potentially bring his adversaries over to his side. Yet, in the process, Ibn Taymiyya adopts much of the writing style, methodology and even mannerisms of his adversaries. His writing style and methodology are frequently more similar to the “rationalist” al-Rāzī rather than the “traditionalist” Ibn Kathīr.

In contrast, Ibn Kathīr held a fideist stance towards scripture. Unlike Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathīr did not feel that he had to rationalize the transmitted sources and was content in using rational tools to analyze them. Ibn Kathīr’s “theology of the *salaf*” further led him to present his views without directly engaging his opponents. This was not part of a lack of intellect or “imagination” on Ibn Kathīr’s part but rather because his theology maintained that responding in the discourse of one’s opponents legitimated their methodology. Ibn Kathīr believed that delving into the rational sciences could gradually lead even the most sincere traditionalist to apply the rational tools of *ta’wīl*. It was therefore strategically better to ignore the theologians and to
marginalize them by promoting the Sunna. However, even though Ibn Kathīr’s approach is similar to that of ḥadīth scholars, he agrees with the theologian al-Rāzī on the issue of prophetic infallibility (‘īṣma).

Ibn Kathīr further contrasts with Ibn Taymiyya in that ethics plays a more important role than theology. Ibn Kathīr’s “moral theology” focused on the practical sciences of ḥadīth and law and he judged people often on their character rather than their creed. Ibn Kathīr was willing to praise Ashʿarīs, such as Taqī al-Dīn and Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, because he felt they stood by traditionalist principles. The Subkīs’ spirituality, fairness and morality made Ibn Kathīr identify with rather than oppose them. For Ibn Kathīr, as well as the other Shāfiʿī traditionalist, theology was important but not always the determining factor in evaluating others.

The categories of “rationalism” and “traditionalism” become increasingly complicated when we examine the outcome of the 8th/14th century theological struggle between the Ashʿarīs and traditionalists. While traditionalist biographical literature presents Ibn Taymiyya as the new Ibn Ḥanbal and his imprisonments as another “miḥna,”7 there was too much overlap between the groups to cause a rift similar to that of the Muʿtazilīs and traditionalists before.8 Ashʿarī scholars such as Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī were scholastic theologians (mutakallimūn), but they were also respected ḥadīth scholars who were able to portray themselves as traditionalists and followers of Ibn Ḥanbal. Similarly, the Ashʿarī Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī studied with al-Mizzī and was one of the favorite students of the Ashʿarī critic al-Dhahabī. Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī’s monumental Ṭabaqāt al-shafiʿiyya al-kubrā reflects his expertise in ḥadīth as well as his commitment to many traditionalist principles.

---

7 Ibn Kathīr, for instance, compares Ibn Taymiyya’s funeral to Ibn Ḥanbal’s. See Chapter Two.
8 For more on the Muʿtazilī and traditionalist struggle see t Ientroduction.
On the other side, traditionalists were not always in full support of Ibn Taymiyya. While many rallied to his cause, others were suspicious of his aims and skeptical of his controversial views. Al-Dhahabī, for instance, contended that Ibn Taymiyya betrayed traditionalist principles by becoming polemical and polarizing. Al-Dhahabī was most likely personally closer to strident Ash’arīs, such as Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, than to Ibn Taymiyya. Similarly, Ibn Kathīr avoids engaging Ibn Taymiyya’s theological works and prefers reconciliation over his contentious views on divorce oaths.

In sum, drawing the line between “rationalists” and “traditionalists” is not always entirely clear.

**Tafsīr:**

*Tafsīr* is consistently neglected in the study of Islam, seen as unoriginal, repetitive and a barrier to the Qur’ānic text. Yet, if we understand *tafsīr* as an extension of other Islamic sciences, than it becomes an essential genre to better understand the various intellectual debates that raged throughout Islamic history. As Walid Saleh argues, *tafsīr* is an invaluable means to study intellectual history since it does not only represent individual scholars but intellectual circles and movements. Ibn Kathīr was the only scholar within the Damascene traditionalist movement to write a complete Qur’ānic commentary, and his exegesis thus gives us a unique opportunity to understand one of the most influential intellectual circles in Islamic history.

Scholars have generally dismissed Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr* as simply a list or evaluation of ḥadīths. But a close reading demonstrates that Ibn Kathīr meticulously sorts through traditions to present his personal vision of Islam. Ibn Kathīr delicately negotiates between his role as an exegete (*mufassir*) and ḥadīth scholar (*muḥaddith*), elucidating the Qur’ān through the
boundaries of ḥadīth science. Ibn Kathīr supports traditions by citing similar narrations, authenticating the chain of transmission and cross referencing them within authoritative collections. On the other hand, Ibn Kathīr critiques traditions that he finds problematic by detecting anachronisms, locating questionable theological material or identifying questionable narrators. Ibn Kathīr, nevertheless, attempts to be a balanced ḥadīth scholar and often critiques traditions that he agrees with or admits that certain traditions that he is uncomfortable with are authentic.

The fact that Ibn Kathīr presents his views through ḥadīth substantiates Saleh’s claim that *tafsīr bi ’l-ma’thūr* is a type of *tafsīr bi ’l-ra’y*.9 Traditionalists situated their opinion within the authority of ḥadīth giving them the ability to criticize others as “whimsical and capricious.” In the struggle for interpretative authority, traditionalists attempted to marginalize rational *tafsīrs* by pointing out their deficiencies in the transmitted sources. Yet, it is important to stress that while traditionalists employed ḥadīth to articulate their opinions, the accumulated tradition of ḥadīth science influenced the direction of their work. Ibn Kathīr had to operate within the boundaries of ḥadīth criticism for his work to be accepted as scholarly and objective.

Furthermore, while much of the literature suggests that Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr* was a product of his relationship with Ibn Taymiyya, this dissertation argues that Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr* was an outcome of a larger theological struggle between Ashʿarīs and traditionalists and the increasing specialization of ḥadīth. Many of Ibn Kathīr’s works were in response to Shāfiʿī Ashʿarīs who argued for the practical value of the rational sciences and incorporated them within madrasa curriculums. Within this new framework, Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr* could be seen less as a product of Ibn Taymiyya than a response to the Shāfiʿī Ashʿarī Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. As al-Dhahabī notes,

---

al-Rāzī’s *Tafsīr* was the most popular exegesis of his time, referenced by teachers and taught within madrasas. Ibn Kathīr most likely wanted to replace the dominance of al-Rāzī’s *Tafsīr* with that of his own.

Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr* was also a product of a general trend of *takhrīj* or ḥadīth evaluation. Ibn Kathīr lived after the canonical ḥadīth collections in which scholars worked to make the ḥadīth corpus more accessible and expand the science to other fields. Ḥadīth scholarship had already evaluated al-Tha’labī’s and al-Zamakhsharī’s exegesis and it was a matter of time before scholars moved to al-Ṭabarī’s. However, Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr* was not a simple ḥadīth evaluation but a reworking of much of the material found in al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī. Similar to *al-Bidāya wa’l al-nihāya*, Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr* draws on previous authorities but then revises them to fit his traditionalist understanding of Islam.

**Areas of Further Research:**

One of the major questions left unanswered in this dissertation is why the traditionalist movement revived in Mamlūk Damascus during 8th/14th century. A possible reason for the traditionalist revival could be the “crises” of the Crusades and Mongol invasions which resulted in the Mamlūk Muslim community’s return back to the foundational sources. Damascus faced both the incursions of the Crusades from the West and the Mongols in the East making it more susceptible to feelings of siege. As a result, more Muslims may have been inclined to renew Islam by emphasizing the Qur’ān and the legacy of the Prophet Muḥammad.11

In terms of theology, more work must be done on the history of the Ash‘arī/ traditionalist conflict. It is evident that Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 571/1176) wrote his *Tabyīn al-kadhab al-muftarī fī mā

---

11 A similar traditionalist revival could have occurred in modern times with the advent of colonialism.
nusiba ilā al-Imām Abī al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī in response to traditionalists who argued that kalām was an illegitimate science and did not belong within Shāfīʿī madhhab. As Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī alludes to, Ibn ʿAsākir prevented “Ḥashawīs” from attending his circles. Yet, the full dynamics of the early Ashʿarī and traditionalist conflict and why it climaxed in the 8th/14th century needs further investigation.

After the 8th/14th century, initial research suggests that Ashʿarism was not displaced by traditionalism. A clear leader of the traditionalist movement did not appear following the death of Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Kathīr was not able to secure the prestigious post of Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyya. Later historical works and biographical dictionaries, such as Ibn Ḥajar’s al-Durar al-kāmina, allude to a pro-Ashʿarī bias. The Ottoman period saw the rise of Ashʿarī/Maturidī theology and the studies of logic and philosophy continued. Nevertheless, a traditionalist strand continued throughout the pre-modern period and was eventually revived in modern times. Yet, exactly how traditionalism existed after the 8th/14th century and by what means it was renewed requires further study.

Even though Ashʿarism continued, it would forever carry the influence of traditionalism. Taqī al-Dīn’s and Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī’s influential works came in response to the traditionalist movement and they exhibit a strong expertise in ḥadīth. The al-Subkīs were not like earlier

---

12 See Chapter Two.
14 Ibn Ḥajar al-ʻAsqalānī, for instance, contains stories within his entry on Ibn Taymiyya that are quite critical of the great scholar. See Chapter Five.
scholastic theologians, such as Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hindī (d. 715/1315), who were experts in kalām but had limited knowledge of the traditional Islamic sciences of law and ḥadīth. Rather, the al-Subkīs were jurists and ḥadīth scholars themselves who had trained with the best ḥadīth scholars of the field. How Ashʿarism was able to claim the traditionalist mantle demands more examination.

Specifically, more work needs to be done in understanding the genealogy and reception of the works of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr. Ibn Taymiyya had to ground his intellectualized traditionalism within the broader traditionalist movement for it to be legitimate. Recent scholarship suggests that Ibn Taymiyya sought to find examples of his intellectualized traditionalism within the miḥna itself, such as with Ṭabd al-ʿAzīz al-Kīnānī (d. 221/836) who critiqued the theologians with their own arguments. How Ibn Taymiyya connects with other intellectualized traditionalist scholars such as Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), Qāḍī Abū Yaʿlā (d. 458/1066) and Ibn ‘Aqīl (d. 513/1119), warrants more study.

Nevertheless, while many traditionalists were critical of Ibn Taymiyya’s approach, others saw him as the Shaykh al-Islām. Traditionalists up until the modern period continued to view Ibn Taymiyya as the figure head of their movement and representative of Islamic orthodoxy. Ibn Taymiyya was able to appeal to both intellectualized traditionalists, such as al-Shawkānī (d. 1255/1839), but also many fideist traditionalists as well. Particular attention should be played to which of Ibn Taymiyya’s works were cited and copied. His early theological works such as Aqīda al-wāṣiṭiyya promote more of a fidiest traditionalism, while his later works such as Darʾ al-taʿāruḍ demonstrate an intellectualized traditionalism. As the writings of Calder and others

---

suggest, Ibn Taymiyya is frequently understood more as a fideist traditionalist rather than a philosopher and theologian.

In regards to Ibn Kathīr, it is evident that he drew from his teachers’ al-Mizzī and al-Dhahabī who in turn pulled from al-Nawawī, Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ and Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām. Yet, the history of Shāfiʿī traditionalism from Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām to early traditionalists such as al-Buwayṭī (d. 231/846) remains vague. How this Shāfiʿī traditionalist strand waxed and waned throughout the school’s history should be the subject of additional research. Furthermore, it is uncertain whether the Shāfiʿī traditionalist strand continued after Ibn Kathīr’s life or whether it died out after his death. Was Ibn Kathīr the last Shāfiʿī traditionalist or was he able to inspire others to follow a similar path?²⁰

Most importantly, much more work needs to be done on how Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr was received by later generations and how it has reached near canonical status. It is evident that Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr was well-received by the traditionalist movement during his lifetime. A manuscript of Ibn Kathīr’s Ikhtiṣār ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth dated 764/1363 introduces Ibn Kathīr as the “teacher of the teachers of the ḥadīth scholars and tafsīr specialists of Syria (shaykh al-shuyūkh al-muḥaddithīn wa ahl-al-tafsīr bi-Shām).”²¹ By 764/1363, Ibn Kathīr was in his early 60’s and his Tafsīr was most likely in circulation for several years. In al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya, a student of Ibn Kathīr chronicles that in the year 767/1366 the Damascene mayor endowed a chair of tafsīr studies in Ibn Kathīr’s honor. The chair stipulated scholarships for 15 students as well as a

salary for a teaching assistant and scribe. The inaugural lecture at the Umayyad mosque was well-attended with many chief judges and government officials present at the event. These examples establish that Ibn Kathīr received accolades as a mufassir and that his Tafsīr gained wide-range appeal.

Yet, it is uncertain how the Tafsīr fared after his death. In a recent article, Walid Saleh argues that Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr was not part of the pre-modern Ashʿarī madrasa curriculum. My preliminary archival research confirms Saleh’s claim and suggests that while Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr continued to be relevant it was by no means dominant. In a recent trip to the Suleymaniye mosque in Turkey, I counted 13 manuscripts of Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr, five of which were complete. This is a stark difference to the 250 manuscripts that Andrew J. Lane examined of al-Zamakhsharī’s al-Khashshāf in the same library. The difference in number suggests that al-Zamakhsharī’s Tafsīr was part of the Ottoman madrasa curriculums while Ibn Kathīr’s was used as a ḥadīth reference. Ibn Kathīr, in fact, designs his Tafsīr as an “encyclopedic tafsīr,” one designed for ḥadīth specialists since it includes full isnāds, lists multiple variants, and locates ḥadīths within authoritative collections. Ibn Kathīr additionally never summarized his “encyclopedic tafsīr” into a “madrasa tafsīr” as other exegetes had done. Ibn Kathīr did compose didactic works, such as his Ikhtiṣār ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth, but it is clear that his Tafsīr was not one of them.

---

22 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya, eds. Alī Muḥammad Muʿawwad and ‘Ādil Ahmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd, 15 vols. (Lebanon: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2009), 14:311. The scribe highlights how the students were “from all the legal schools (madhāhib).”
24 Andrew J. Lane, A Traditional Muʿtazilite Qurʾān Commentary: the Kashshāf of Jār Allāh al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2006), 61.
25 These terms were coined by Walid Saleh; Saleh, Formation, 16.
As Saleh details, Ibn Kathīr only began to become more mainstream when Rashid Rida published the *Tafsīr* in 1924 from the funds of the aspiring Saudi King al-Imām ʿAbd Allāh b. Saʿūd. The edition was “luxuriously printed” with the ḥadīth-based *Tafsīr* of al-Baghawī. The *Tafsīrs* of both al-Rāzī and al-Ṭabarī had to wait years before being published in a similar manner. Saleh convincingly argues that “one of the major aims of the Salafī movement was the reclamation of the Qur’ān from the scholastic Ashʿarī Sunnī tradition.”27 The early publications of Ibn Kathīr was a concerted effort by the traditionalist movement to supplant the prominence of Ashʿarī *tafsīrs* and to rethink Islamic orthodoxy itself.

Yet, more emphasis needs to put on the abridgements of Ibn Kathīr’s commentary, starting with that of Ahmad Shakir’s (d. 1958), that propelled the *Tafsīr* into a household name.28 Shakir played an instrumental role in transforming Ibn Kathīr’s “encyclopedic *tafsīr*” into a “madrasa *tafsīr*” by removing the *isnāds* and summarizing the content. Although Shakir never finished the project, his work spurred several other abridgements and translations.29 With the new abridgements, Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr* would be incorporated into madrasa and university curriculums, something that never had occurred before.

While scholars have been critical of Ibn Kathīr’s lack of speculation, it maybe for this exact reason why his *Tafsīr* gained so much appeal. Ibn Kathīr’s presentation of compelling narratives instead of complex syllogisms made his *Tafsīr* relatively easy to abridge and translate. The new abridgements and translations made the *Tafsīr* accessible to lay audiences who could connect to its ḥadīths and understand its straightforward prose. With the power of globalization, Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr* has arguably become the most popular *tafsīr*. Yet, the exact trajectory of how

---

this process occurred, especially with the rise of Islamic book market, needs to be further explored.
Select Bibliography:

Primary Arabic Sources


**Secondary Sources**


- “How We Know Early Ḥadīth Critics Did Matn Criticism and Why It’s So Hard to Find.” *Islamic Law and Society* 15, no. 2 (2008): 143-184.


