

Doctrinal Questions in Al-Maturidi's Exegesis: Divine Punishment and the Gender of Angels as a Case Study

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Abstract:

This study explores two theological questions raised by Imam al-Maturidi in his interpretation of selected Qur'anic verses: the apparent contradiction between God's attributes of forbearance and mercy with the reality of divine punishment in the Hereafter, and the attribution of femininity to the angels by polytheists. The first issue is examined through al-Maturidi's reflections on the believers' fear of the Hour and the disbelievers' denial of it, demonstrating that divine punishment does not negate God's mercy but reflects His wisdom and justice. The second issue addresses the irrational claim that angels are female, despite the absence of any revelation or rational evidence. Al-Maturidi refutes this claim on both theological and epistemological grounds. The study further compares al-Maturidi's views with those of other classical exegetes such as al-Tabari, al-Razi, al-Thalabi, and Ibn Kathir, highlighting the uniqueness of al-Maturidi's rational and doctrinal approach in interpreting these verses. The research concludes that al-Maturidi emphasizes the harmony between divine attributes and rational belief, reinforcing the foundational principles of Islamic theology.

Keywords: Al-Maturidi, Quranic Exegesis, Theological Questions, Divine Mercy, Divine Punishment.

INTRODUCTION:

The Qur'anic discourse is rich with theological themes that have long invited deep reflection and analytical engagement from Muslim scholars across generations. Among these themes are the attributes of God, the nature of divine justice, and the metaphysical realities of the unseen, including angels and the Hereafter. One of the distinguished scholars who engaged with such issues through a rational and theological lens is Imam Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 333 AH), a pivotal figure in the development of Sunni theology. His exegesis, *Ta'wilat Ahl al-Sunnah*, stands out for its integration of rational argumentation with traditional scriptural interpretation.

This study focuses on two key theological inquiries addressed by al-Maturidi in his Qur'anic commentary. The first examines the perceived tension between God's attributes of mercy and forbearance, and the reality of divine punishment in the Hereafter. Al-Maturidi responds to this challenge by emphasizing that divine punishment is not inconsistent with God's mercy, but rather is a manifestation of His wisdom, justice, and the moral order He has established. The second issue centers on the claim made by some pre-Islamic Arabs that the angels are female, a belief that al-Maturidi rejects on the basis of both rational principles and scriptural evidence.

By analyzing these two examples, the study aims to highlight al-Maturidi's methodological approach to theological questions, his use of reason and textual fidelity, and how his positions compare to those of other major exegetes such as al-Tabari, al-Razi, and al-Thalabi. Through this analysis, the paper sheds light on the intellectual rigor and doctrinal precision that characterize al-Maturidi's contribution to Qur'anic interpretation and Islamic theology more broadly.

First Section: The Apparent Contradiction Between God's Attributes of Forbearance and Mercy and the Reality of Punishment in the Hereafter:

Allah says: "Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it, but those who believe are fearful of it and know it is the truth. Verily, those who dispute about the Hour are indeed in extreme error."⁽¹⁾

¹ Surah Ash-Shura, verse 18.

Point of Inquiry: Imam al-Maturidi (may Allah have mercy on him) raises a theological question in relation to this verse, asking: “It is said: How can God be described as forbearing and merciful, when He has informed us that He will punish them in the Hereafter?”⁽²⁾

Response to the Inquiry: Al-Maturidi answers: “It is said that even if He punishes them, this does not negate His forbearance and mercy, for if He were to withhold punishment, it would be considered foolishness—since they have eternally deserved punishment due to their disbelief. Punishment, therefore, is not contrary to mercy and forbearance; rather, withholding it would be foolish and inconsistent with wisdom”.

Analysis of the Inquiry: To properly address this theological question, it is important to explore the linguistic and technical meanings of the terms forbearance and mercy:

1 .Forbearance Linguistically: According to Arabic lexicons, the root *ḥ-l-m* carries three primary meanings: (1) to refrain from haste, (2) the piercing or decay of something, and (3) seeing something in a dream. These meanings are linguistically diverse and reflect the complex semantic field of the root. The first meaning, which is most relevant here, refers to *ḥilm* as the opposite of impulsiveness or rashness. One says: *ḥaluntu ‘anhu*, meaning I was forbearing with him, and *fa-ana ḥalīm* I am forbearing.⁽³⁾

2 .Forbearance Technically: Technically, *ḥilm* refers to the restraint of one’s temperament and self from the agitation of anger. It is closely linked to maturity and reason. The Qur’an uses *aḥlām* to mean minds or intellects, as in:

“Or do their minds command them to say this?”⁽⁴⁾

The term is not identical with intellect, but it is one of its consequences. The Qur’an describes Prophet Ibrahim as:

“Indeed, Abraham was forbearing, tender-hearted, and often returning [to Allah].”⁽⁵⁾⁽⁶⁾

3 .Mercy Linguistically: The root *r-ḥ-m* signifies compassion, gentleness, and affection. It appears in expressions such as: *raḥimahu* he showed compassion to him. The word *raḥim* (womb) is also derived from this root, reflecting the protective and nurturing relationship associated with it.⁽⁷⁾⁽⁸⁾

4 .Mercy Technically: According to al-Raghib al-Asfahani, *raḥmah* is a tenderness that leads to beneficence toward the object of mercy. When attributed to Allah, it refers to His gracious bestowal of favor and goodness, without implying human-like emotion.⁽⁹⁾ He writes:

“Mercy from God signifies benefaction and grace; from human beings, it denotes softness and compassion.”⁽¹⁰⁾

² *Al-Maturidi’s Tafsir (Ta’wilat Ahl al-Sunnah)*, Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Mahmud, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 333 AH), edited by Dr. Majdi Basloum, published by Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah – Beirut, Lebanon, 1st edition, 1426 AH – 2005 CE, vol. 9, p. 118.

³ *Mu’jam Maqāyīs al-Lughah*, Aḥmad ibn Fāris (d. 395 AH), edited by ‘Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, published by Dār al-Fikr, 1399 AH – 1979 CE, vol. 2, p. 93.

⁴ *Sūrat al-Ṭūr*, verse 32.

⁵ *Sūrat Hūd*, verse 75.

⁶ *Al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur’ān*, Abū al-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad, known as al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, edited by Ṣafwān ‘Adnān al-Dāwūdī, published by Dār al-Qalam, al-Dār al-Shāmiyyah – Damascus/Beirut, 1st edition, 1412 AH, p. 253.

⁷ *Maqāyīs al-Lughah*, Ibn Fāris, vol. 2, p. 498.

⁸ See: *Mukhtār al-Ṣiḥāḥ*, Zayn ad-Dīn ibn Abī Bakr ibn ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ḥanafī ar-Rāzī (d. 666 AH), edited by Yūsuf ash-Shaykh Muḥammad, Al-Maktabah al-‘Asriyyah – Al-Dār an-Namūdhajiyah, Beirut-Saida, 5th edition, 1420 AH / 1999 CE, p. 120.

⁹ *Al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur’ān*, by Al-‘Iṣfahānī, p. 347.

¹⁰ *Dustūr al-‘Ulamā’ = Jāmi’ al-‘Ulūm fī Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Funūn*, by Al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Nabī ibn ‘Abd al-Rasūl al-Aḥmad Nakrī (d. early 12th century AH), edited by Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, Beirut – Lebanon, 1st edition, 1421 AH / 2000 CE, vol. 2, p. 39.

To further clarify the response to this theological inquiry, it is beneficial to present the interpretations of various exegetes regarding this verse:

First: The Exegetes Who Agreed with al-Māturīdī:

Al-Ṭabarī, in his interpretation of the verse, states: “Those who do not believe in its coming seek to hasten it from you, O Muhammad, thinking it will never happen. As for those who believe in it, they are fearful of its coming; they are anxious about its occurrence because they do not know what Allah will do to them when it arrives. And they are certain that it is the truth beyond doubt. Indeed, those who dispute the Hour are in deep error far from the path of guidance and truth”.⁽¹¹⁾

We observe here that al-Ṭabarī agrees with al-Māturīdī that God’s delay in punishing the disbelievers is not a sign of weakness, but rather an expression of His forbearance and patience.

Imam al-Tha‘labī, likewise, responded to this theological inquiry by explaining that those who hasten the Hour as mentioned in the verse are the disbelievers who mock and deny its occurrence. They used to say, mockingly, “When will this promise come to pass, if you are truthful?” God then informed us that they are in grave misguidance. As for the believers, He described them as being apprehensive about the Hour fearful of its horrors due to their belief and certainty in its reality. As a result, they strive in acts of worship.⁽¹²⁾

Imam al-Tha‘labī focused particularly on the coexistence of God’s mercy, forbearance, and patience on one side, and His inevitable punishment on the other.

Imam al-Ālūsī also commented on the verse, saying: “The meaning is that the Hour is swiftly approaching, so follow the Book, uphold justice, and act according to the Law before the Day suddenly arrives the Day when deeds will be weighed and each soul will be given its due. Those who do not believe in it hasten its coming out of denial and mockery. They used to say: ‘Let it come so we may see whether we are right or Muhammad and his companions are.’ As for those who believe, they are fearful of it and give it due attention. *Iṣfāq* (apprehension) is a combination of care and fear; when it is followed by *min* (from), the element of fear is more prominent, and when followed by *‘alā* (upon), the element of concern is more dominant. Their concern for it stems from their anticipation of reward”.⁽¹³⁾

He further added: “Allah is Gentle with His servants a most profound form of kindness and benevolence, from which He bestows upon all His creatures blessings beyond human comprehension. This is indicated by the root of the word *luṭf*, its emphatic morphological form, and its indefinite usage, which collectively imply both quantitative and qualitative intensification”.⁽¹⁴⁾

Second: The Exegetes Who Differed with al-Māturīdī:

Al-Bayḍāwī, in his commentary on the verse, states: “Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it mockingly. As for those who believe, they are apprehensive of it, fearful of its coming while secretly desiring it due to their hope for reward. And they know that it is the truth an event that will inevitably occur. Verily, those who dispute the Hour are in profound error either because of doubt or, metaphorically, from the verb *mārā* (to extract forcefully), as in milking a camel aggressively, implying that each disputant attempts to extract what the other holds through intense argumentation. They are,

¹¹ **Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī = Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl Āy al-Qur’ān**, by Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (224–310 AH), edited by Dr. ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī, in cooperation with the Center for Islamic Research and Studies at Dār Hijr – Dr. ‘Abd al-Sanad Ḥasan Yamāmah, published by Dār Hijr for Printing, Publishing, Distribution, and Advertising – Cairo, Egypt, 1st edition, 1422 AH – 2001 CE, vol. 21, p. 520.

¹² **Al-Kaṣhḥ wal-Bayān ‘an Tafsīr al-Qur’ān**, by Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Tha‘labī, Abū Ishāq (d. 427 AH), edited by Imam Abū Muḥammad ibn ‘Ashūr, Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, Beirut, Lebanon, vol. 8, p. 312.

¹³ **Rūḥ al-Ma‘ānī fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Karīm wa al-Sab‘ al-Mathānī**, by Abū al-Faḍl Shihāb al-Dīn al-Sayyid Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī al-Baghdādī (d. 1270 AH), edited and verified by ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Bārī ‘Aṭīyya, published by Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya – Beirut, First Edition, 1415 AH / 1994 AD, vol. 13, p. 27.

¹⁴ Ibid.

indeed, far astray from the truth, for resurrection is the most perceptible of unseen matters; thus, whoever cannot grasp its plausibility is even less likely to comprehend what lies beyond it".⁽¹⁵⁾

Al-Shawkānī notes: "It is said that the Prophet ﷺ mentioned the Hour while in the presence of some polytheists. They mockingly asked, 'When will the Hour be?' Thus, God revealed this verse. His saying, 'Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it,' refers to their mockery and denial of its coming. As for 'those who believe, they are fearful of it,' this describes their apprehension and anxiety regarding its arrival".⁽¹⁶⁾

From this, it becomes evident that those who differ with al-Māturīdī in interpreting this verse do not contradict his view in the general meaning. However, they do not address the wisdom and forbearance of God in delaying punishment, while al-Māturīdī explicitly focuses on this dimension, emphasizing God's immense patience toward His servants.

After presenting the views of the exegetes, it becomes clear that Imam al-Māturīdī connects God's attributes of mercy and forbearance to the postponement of punishment for the disbelievers. He asserts that this delay is not out of weakness, but rather stems from divine wisdom and the vastness of God's forbearance may He be glorified. Several exegetes support this perspective, including al-Ṭabarī, al-Ālūsī, and al-Tha'labī, the latter of whom despite not explicitly using the same terminology indicated that the delay has a divinely intended wisdom.

On the other hand, those who interpreted the verse differently primarily focused on the psychological state of both the disbelievers and the believers as the Hour approaches, without delving into the reason behind the postponement of divine punishment. Therefore, the interpretation advanced by al-Māturīdī and his supporters appears more persuasive, as it better aligns with the verse's intended meaning, its broader context, and its purpose namely, refuting the deniers and highlighting the wisdom behind divine delay.

Second Issue: Denying the Attribution of Femininity to Angels Despite the Existence of Females in God's Creation:

Allah says: "And they have made the angels who are servants of the Most Merciful females. Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be recorded, and they will be questioned."⁽¹⁷⁾

Point of Inquiry: Imam al-Māturīdī (may Allah have mercy on him) raised a theological question concerning this verse. He asked:

"How is it that they were censured for attributing femininity to the servants of the Most Merciful, while Allah Himself has created some of His servants as females? Why, then, were they reproached for this attribution"?⁽¹⁸⁾

Response to the Inquiry: Scholars have presented two main explanations regarding the divine reproach in this verse. These can be examined in light of al-Māturīdī's theological method as follows:

First Perspective: They were reproached for fabricating claims about Allah without knowledge. They bore witness that Allah created the angels as females while they had not witnessed their creation, nor did they believe in the messengers whose revelation could have conveyed such knowledge.⁽¹⁹⁾

This argument is grounded in a rational principle:

Beliefs concerning the unseen must be established through either sound transmitted evidence or definitive rational proof. The pagans' claim in this context relates to the unseen and thus requires revealed evidence. However, since they denied prophethood, their claim is invalid from the outset.

¹⁵ *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta'wīl*, by al-Dīn Abū Sa'īd 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar ibn Muḥammad al-Shīrāzī al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685 AH), edited by Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mar'ashlī, Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī - Beirut, First Edition, 1418 AH, vol. 5, p. 79.

¹⁶ See: *Fath al-Qadīr*, by Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Abdullāh al-Shawkānī al-Yamani (d. 1250 AH), published by Dār Ibn Kathīr and Dār al-Kalīm al-Ṭayyib - Damascus, Beirut, First Edition, 1414 AH, vol. 4, p. 609.

¹⁷ Surat Az-Zukhruf, verse 19.

¹⁸ *Ta'wīlat Ahl al-Sunnah* by al-Maturidi, Volume 9, page 156.

¹⁹ See: *ibid.*

This perspective reflects al-Māturīdī's broader rejection of speculative beliefs, which he considers corruptive to true faith. Furthermore, bearing witness to something about God without knowledge constitutes an unjustifiable intrusion into divine matters, which is both rationally and religiously impermissible.

Second Perspective: Al-Māturīdī also offers another explanation:

He notes that the angels are described in the Qur'an as constantly devoted to God's worship, never growing weary, and continuously obedient—never disobeying even for the blink of an eye. Thus, to describe them as females implies weakness and incapacity, which contradicts their actual attributes and roles.

This interpretation emphasizes the mismatch between the stereotype of femininity (as viewed by the pagan Arabs, who considered females inferior) and the exalted, powerful nature of the angels as described in divine revelation.⁽²⁰⁾

Analysis of the Question: Imam al-Rāzī, in his commentary on the verse, stated: "The meaning of 'they made' is 'they judged them to be.' Then Allah says, 'Did they witness their creation?' a rhetorical question meant as a rebuke. That is, they did not witness the creation of the angels. And this is something that cannot be known through rational proofs. As for transmitted proofs (naqliyyah), all of them are contingent upon affirming prophethood and these disbelievers deny prophethood altogether. Hence, they have no means of establishing this claim through either rational or transmitted evidence. Therefore, their assertion is made without knowledge neither by necessity nor by proof. Then Allah threatens them by saying: 'Their testimony will be recorded, and they will be questioned' indicating that making claims without evidence is condemned and that blind imitation leads to severe blame and punishment".⁽²¹⁾

This indicates that al-Rāzī, like al-Māturīdī, bases his refutation on a rational principle: beliefs ('aqā'id) are not to be affirmed without sound transmitted reports or definitive rational evidence.

Ibn Kathīr, in his commentary, said: "As for His saying, 'And they made the angels who are servants of the Most Merciful females,' it means: they believed this claim. Allah, Exalted is He, denounced this statement, saying: 'Did they witness their creation?' that is, did they observe them when Allah created them as females? Then Allah says, 'Their testimony will be recorded and they will be questioned' a clear and stern threat".

Ibn Kathīr explains that their claim is false and a fabrication, since they did not witness the angels' creation to make such assertions.⁽²²⁾

Al-Zuḥaylī commented similarly: "Among the fabrications of the polytheists alongside attributing daughters to Allah is their claim that angels are female. Allah refutes this, saying: 'Did they witness their creation?' and continues: 'Their testimony will be recorded and they will be questioned.' Meaning: did they actually see God creating the angels as females? Their testimony will be recorded in their book of deeds so that they may be held accountable for it on the Day of Judgment".⁽²³⁾

This reinforces the point that their claims are baseless, irrational, and constitute slander against the unseen.

From this, it becomes clear that Allah reproached the polytheists for their ignorance and for attributing femininity to the angels without knowledge despite not believing in them nor having witnessed them. Their assertion represents a false claim about the unseen, which is unacceptable both rationally and

²⁰ *Ta'wilat Ahl al-Sunnah* by al-Maturidi, Volume 9, page 156

²¹ *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr), by Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn 'Umar ibn al-Ḥasan ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Taymī al-Rāzī, known as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606 AH), 3rd edition, Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī - Beirut, 1420 AH, vol. 27, p. 625.

²² *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, by Abū al-Fidā' Ismā'īl ibn 'Umar ibn Kathīr al-Qurashī al-Dimashqī (700-774 AH), edited by Sāmī ibn Muḥammad al-Salāmah, Dār Ṭayyibah for Publishing and Distribution, Riyadh - Saudi Arabia, 2nd edition, 1420 AH / 1999 CE, vol. 7, p. 223.

²³ *Al-Tafsīr al-Munīr fī al-'Aqīdah wa al-Sharī'ah wa al-Manhaj*, by Wahbah al-Zuḥaylī, Dār al-Fikr (Damascus - Syria), Dār al-Fikr al-Mu'āssir (Beirut - Lebanon), 1st edition, 1411 AH / 1991 CE, vol. 25, p. 123.

religiously. Furthermore, assigning the trait of femininity to the angels according to their cultural view implies deficiency and weakness, which contradicts the divine depiction of angels as tireless, ever-obedient servants of Allah. Thus, their reasoning collapses entirely.

It is evident that these polytheists attributed a particular form to the angels without evidence. Therefore, it is impermissible to describe angels as either male or female. The Qur'anic and prophetic texts contain no valid evidence affirming that the angels are female or that they are daughters of Allah. Allah rebuked and disproved their claim.

As for the believers, they affirm the existence of angels without delving into details of their nature since they are part of the unseen realm and constitute one of the pillars of faith. Given that the disbelievers neither believed in revelation nor accepted divine guidance, their claim has no truth, merit, or value it is purely false.

CONCLUSION:

Through the analytical study of the two interpretive questions raised by Imam al-Māturīdī in his exegesis, it becomes evident that his methodology is rooted in harmonizing sound reason with authentic revelation, providing responses that align with the principles of creed and the logic of faith.

In the first question concerning the apparent contradiction between God's forbearance and mercy and the punishment of disbelievers al-Māturīdī demonstrated a methodological ability to show the coherence of divine attributes, emphasizing that delaying punishment is not weakness, but a manifestation of God's wisdom and mercy. Many exegetes agreed with this interpretation.

In the second question regarding the rejection of labeling angels as female al-Māturīdī clarified that such a claim is invalid both rationally and scripturally, as it lacks definitive evidence and contradicts the unseen reality known only through revelation. Attributing unbecoming characteristics to the angels stands in clear opposition to how they are described in the Qur'an.

Key Findings:

- 1_ Imam al-Māturīdī employs rational methodology in his exegesis to establish theological doctrines and refute misconceptions.
- 2_ The divine attributes do not contradict but complement one another within a broader divine wisdom.
- 3_ Speaking on matters of the unseen without knowledge is among the gravest forms of forbidden claims in religion.
- 4_ Rational interpretation grounded in revealed texts is one of the distinguishing features of al-Māturīdī's exegesis.

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