

## The Doctrines of the Theologians on *Majāz* and Their Impact on Arabic Rhetoric and the Interpretation of the Divine Names and Attributes

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Received : 21/07/2025 ; Accepted : 25/12/2025 ; Published : 18/02/2026

### Abstract:

Scholars of *kalām* devoted considerable attention to the study of *majāz* (figurative expression) in their writings and debates. Indeed, they were at the forefront in employing it in its technical sense as the counterpart (*qasīm*) of literal meaning (*ḥaqīqah*). What prompted this profound engagement was their involvement in discussions of Qur’anic inimitability (*i’jāz*) and in theological questions pertaining to creed and divine unity—particularly the investigations related to the Divine Names and Attributes, exalted and majestic, and their interpretation in the Book of God and the Sunnah of His Messenger (peace and blessings be upon him).

The outcome of these extended debates and sustained dialectical exchanges was the emergence of various sects and doctrinal orientations that made a significant contribution to the theoretical foundations of Arabic rhetoric and eloquence. Through their analyses and evidentiary arguments, they enriched its disciplines and produced important works from which scholars of rhetoric and legal theory drew extensively.

In this research paper, we shall attempt to shed light on the principal views of theologians and their doctrinal positions regarding *majāz*, as well as their impact on interpreting the texts concerning the Divine Names and Attributes. This will be accomplished by selecting representative examples from among the many available, presenting them to researchers in a manner that clarifies the objective and fulfills the intended purpose.

**Keywords:** *Majāz*; Scholars of *Kalām*; Rhetorical Studies; Divine Names and Attributes.

### Introduction:

*Majāz* constitutes one of the significant subjects to which scholars devoted considerable attention in their discussions and theoretical elaborations—through analysis, systematization, and comprehensive investigation. This was especially the case among theologians, rhetoricians, legal theorists, jurists, and exegetes, given the central importance that this topic assumes within these fields.

#### 1. The Concept of *Majāz*

The term *majāz* is a verbal noun derived linguistically from *jawāz*, which signifies transition, crossing, and passage. Thus, it is said: “So-and-so passed from one direction to another” when he crossed from one side to the other.

What concerns us here is the technical definition of *majāz* as formulated by scholars across their various disciplines and differing intellectual orientations. Below, the reader will find a selection of these definitions:

A. Al-Sakkākī (d. 626 AH) states: «Majāz is a word used in other than that for which it was originally designated in strict linguistic assignment, employed in a secondary sense relative to the category of its literal meaning, accompanied by a contextual indicator that prevents intending its original meaning within that category»<sup>1</sup>.

B. Zakariyyā al-Anṣārī (d. 926 AH) defines it as follows: «A word used in a secondary designation on account of a relational connection»<sup>2</sup>.

C. Al-Jurjānī (d. 471 AH) defines it as follows: «As for *majāz*, every word by which something other than that for which it was originally designated by its assigner is intended—on account of a relational correspondence between the second meaning and the first—is *majāz*. Or, if you wish: every word by which you pass beyond that for which it was originally designated by its assigner to something for which it was not designated—without instituting a new designation—due to a relational correspondence between the meaning to which it is transferred and its original meaning as established by its assigner, is *majāz*»<sup>3</sup>.

With regard to the terms “contextual indicator” (*qarīnah*), “relation” (*alāqah*), and “correspondence” (*mulāḥazah*) mentioned in these definitions, what is intended by them is the resemblance established between the primary meaning and the secondary meaning; it is by virtue of this resemblance that the mind shifts from the literal sense of the word to its figurative usage. Al-Juwaynī (d. 478 AH) states: «If it is said: Do you consider it permissible to construe a word in one sense as literal and in another as figurative? We reply: Yes; we do not deny it when accompanied by a contextual indicator.»<sup>4</sup>

Al-Āmidī (d. 631 AH) referred to this resemblance with the term *ta'alluq* (“connection” or “association”). He states: «By “connection” between the locus of literal meaning and that of figurative meaning, we mean that the locus of figurative usage resembles the locus of literal meaning either in its form and appearance—such as applying the term “human being” to a figure painted on a wall; or in an evident attribute found in the locus of literal meaning—such as applying the term “lion” to a man due to their shared attribute of courage, not due to an attribute such as foul breath, which is not manifest; or because it was formerly literal—such as applying the term “slave” to a freed person; or because it commonly leads to it—such as calling grape juice “wine”; or because it is generally adjacent to it—such as their saying: “the river flowed” or “the gutter flowed,” and the like. All modes of figurative usage, though diverse, do not depart from what we have mentioned.»<sup>5</sup>

It is worth noting that *majāz* is expansive in the Arabic language, for it constitutes «a genus that encompasses numerous types, such as metaphor (*isti'ārah*), hyperbole, periphrasis,

<sup>1</sup> Al-Sakkākī, *Miftāḥ al-'Ulūm*, p. 359. See also: Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Mathal al-Sā'ir*, vol. 1, p. 84; al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī, *Al-Ta'rīfāt*, p. 202; al-Manāwī, *Al-Tawqīf*, p. 297; Ṭabbānah (Badawī), *Mu'jam al-Balāghah al-'Arabiyyah*, p. 147; Maṭlūb (Aḥmad), *Mu'jam al-Muṣṭalahāt al-Balāghiyah wa Taṭawwuruhā*, vol. 3, p. 193 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Zakariyyā al-Anṣārī, *Al-Ḥudūd al-Anīqah*, p. 78. See also: al-Suyūṭī, *Maqālīd al-'Ulūm*, p. 65; al-Aḥmad al-Nakarī, *Dastūr al-'Ulamā'*, vol. 3, p. 151.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Jurjānī, *Asrār al-Balāghah*, pp. 351–352.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Juwaynī, *Al-Burhān fī Uṣūl al-Fiḥ*, vol. 1, p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Āmidī, *Al-Iḥkām fī Uṣūl al-Aḥkām*, vol. 1, pp. 28–29.

representation, simile, and other forms in which departure occurs from the literal meaning originally designated for the intended sense.»<sup>6</sup>

## 2. The First to Employ *Majāz* in Its Technical Sense

The earliest emergence of *majāz* in its technical sense occurred at the hands of the theologians (*mutakallimūn*), particularly the Mu‘tazilites. Al-Jāhiz (d. 255 AH) was the first to employ and utilize it in its well-known technical meaning as the counterpart of literal expression (*ḥaqīqah*)<sup>7</sup>.

As for Abū ‘Ubaydah (d. 209 AH), «he occasionally employed the term *majāz* in its technical sense; however, this occurred incidentally in his work, without deliberate intent or conscious awareness of its later technical meaning. Rather, for him it signified explanation or interpretation, which was the dominant usage of the term in his book»<sup>8</sup>. Thus, *majāz* in his usage did not denote that which stands in opposition to literal meaning (*ḥaqīqah*). This contrasts with al-Jāhiz, in whose works the term *majāz* appears frequently. Commenting on the verse: ﴿إِنَّمَا يَأْكُلُونَ فِي بُطُونِهِمْ نَارًا﴾ “Indeed, they are only consuming fire into their bellies.” (Sūrat al-Nisā’: 10) he stated: «This is another instance of *majāz*»<sup>9</sup>. He likewise concluded after citing numerous examples: «All of this is varied, yet all of it is *majāz*»<sup>10</sup>.

He also described *majāz* in the following terms: «This chapter is the pride of the Arabs in their language; through it and the like of it, their language expanded»<sup>11</sup>. He made this statement -while refuting the heretics- in the course of commenting on the words of the Exalted: ﴿يَخْرُجُ مِنْ بُطُونِهَا شَرَابٌ﴾ “There emerges from their bellies a drink.” (Sūrat al-Nahl: 69) He explained: «Honey is not itself a drink; rather, it is something that becomes a drink when mixed with water, or becomes a beverage when prepared. Thus it was called a ‘drink,’ as you see, since drink is derived from it»<sup>12</sup>. He then provided examples from Arabic speech, stating: «It is found in the speech of the Arabs that they say: “Today the sky has brought forth a great matter.” And the poet said:

If the sky falls upon the land of a people,  
We pasture it, even if they are angered.

Thus they claimed that they pasture the sky and that the sky falls»<sup>13</sup>. He then emphasized that what appears in the Qur’an in terms of figurative expression is nothing other than God’s speaking in accordance with the established usage of the Arabs in their speech. This is evident from the continuation of his statement: «Whenever honey emerges from their bellies and interiors, then in the language it has emerged from their bellies and interiors. Whoever construes the language otherwise has understood little or nothing of Arab speech. This chapter is the pride of the Arabs in their language; through it and the like of it their language expanded. With such discourse He addressed the people of Tihāmah, Hudhayl, and the outskirts of

<sup>6</sup> Bouilef (Mohammed), Muntahā al-Ṭalab, p. 158.

<sup>7</sup> See: Ibn Taymiyyah, Al-Īmān, p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> Qaṣṣāb (Walīd), Al-Turāth al-Naqdī wa al-Balāghī li al-Mu‘tazilah, p. 336.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Jāhiz, *Al-Ḥayawān*, vol. 5, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 426.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 425.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 425.

Kinānah—and these are people of honey. The Bedouins are most knowledgeable about every flowing resin and fallen honeycomb. Have you ever heard of anyone who denied this usage or challenged this proof?»<sup>14</sup>.

### 3. Types of *Majāz*

Many scholars—despite their differing intellectual orientations—devoted considerable attention to the types of *majāz*, elaborating upon them and providing illustrative examples. In this context, however, we shall confine our discussion to al-Ghazālī (d. 505 AH), one of the most prominent Ash‘arite theologians. He states that *majāz* consists of three types, saying: «The first is that which is borrowed for something on account of resemblance in a well-known attribute—such as calling a brave person a “lion” and a dull person a “donkey.” But it would not be permissible to call someone suffering from halitosis a “lion,” since foul breath is not a well-known attribute of the lion»<sup>15</sup>.

As for the second type, it is «addition, as in the words of the Exalted: ﴿لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ﴾ (لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ) “There is nothing like unto Him.” (Sūrat al-Shūrā: 11) The particle *kāf* (meaning “like”) was originally established to convey meaning; thus, if it is employed in a manner that does not add new meaning, it constitutes departure from its original designation»<sup>16</sup>.

As for the third type, it is «omission that does not invalidate intelligibility, as in the words of the Exalted: ﴿وَاسْئَلِ الْقَرْيَةَ﴾ “And ask the town.” (Sūrat Yūsuf: 82) The intended meaning is: “Ask the people of the town.” Such omission is customary among the Arabs; it represents rhetorical expansion and figurative usage»<sup>17</sup>.

### 4. Why Is Expression Diverted from Literal Meaning to Figurative Usage?

There are numerous factors and purposes that lead a speaker to depart in his speech from the literal meaning and apparent sense of words toward figurative expression. Al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685 AH) identifies the most important of these, stating: «One resorts to *majāz* due to the phonetic heaviness of the literal term—such as *al-khanfaqīq*<sup>18</sup>; or due to the lowliness of its meaning—such as referring explicitly to relieving oneself; or because the figurative expression is more eloquent in wording; or because it conveys greater grandeur in meaning—such as the term “assembly”; or because it provides increased clarity—such as calling a brave man a “lion”»<sup>19</sup>. It is also stated in *al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ fī Uṣūl al-Fiqh*: «Among its benefits—when it occurs in the Qur’an—is indirect indication of increased reward, since it calls for reflection and contemplation, much like the address through ambiguous verses. Another benefit is that the speech becomes more deeply rooted in eloquence, more forceful, and more concise»<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, p. 426.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Mustaṣfā*, vol. 3, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 32–33.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Khanfaqīq: a calamity or severe affliction.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Bayḍāwī, *Minhāj al-Wuṣūl*, p. 97.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Zarkashī, *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ fī Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, vol. 2, p. 186.

### 5. Regulating the Diversion of Speech from Its Apparent Meaning

The fundamental principle regarding words is that they are to be understood according to their apparent meanings. Scholars have emphasized the necessity of refraining from diverting expressions away from their outward sense except on the basis of scriptural evidence, rational proof, or unavoidable sensory necessity. In this regard, al-Ghazālī states: «If words are diverted from the implications of their apparent meanings without recourse to transmitted authority from the Lawgiver, and without a necessity compelling such diversion on the basis of rational proof, this would entail the collapse of trust in language. The esoteric meaning admits of no regulation; rather, thoughts therein conflict without restraint. By this path the Bāṭiniyyah succeeded in demolishing the entirety of the Sharī‘ah»<sup>21</sup>.

### 6. The Doctrinal Positions of Theologians and Other Scholars Regarding *Majāz* and Their Impact on Interpreting the Texts of the Divine Names and Attributes

Scholars of kalām, rhetoric, legal theory, jurisprudence, and Qur’anic exegesis diverged into distinct positions regarding the question of whether *majāz* occurs at all. ‘Abd al-‘Azīm al-Maṭ‘anī authored a valuable and rigorous study spanning approximately one thousand pages entitled: *Majāz in Language and the Noble Qur’an between Affirmation and Denial*. In it, he concludes that, broadly speaking, scholars’ positions on this matter fall into three general orientations: «One group maintains that it occurs in language, in the Qur’an, and in the noble ḥadīths. Another group holds that it does not occur—neither in language, nor in the Qur’an, nor in the ḥadīths. A third group denies its occurrence in the Qur’an and in the ḥadīths, while not showing the same insistence in denying it in language»<sup>22</sup>. This view is broadly correct to some extent; however, if we were to examine the relevant sources comprehensively and reflect carefully upon the primary works, we would find that the number of positions exceeds what the researcher ‘Abd al-‘Azīm al-Maṭ‘anī ultimately concluded. For example, al-Zarkashī (d. 794 AH) summarizes the positions in *al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ* as follows: «In sum, there are five positions: absolute prohibition; prohibition in the Qur’an alone; prohibition in the Qur’an and ḥadīth but not in what lies beyond them; absolute affirmation; and a fifth position—differentiating between what pertains to a legal ruling and what does not—which is the view of Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456 AH)»<sup>23</sup>. We may add to these the position of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH) and his student Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH), namely, oscillation between denial and affirmation—a view that ‘Abd al-‘Azīm al-Maṭ‘anī himself ultimately adopted in his study. In what follows, we shall present each of these positions in turn.

#### A. The First Position: The Absolute Occurrence of *Majāz*

This is the position of the majority (*jumhūr*) across the various sects and doctrinal orientations. According to this view, *majāz* occurs in language, in the Qur’an, and in the Prophetic ḥadīths. There is no alternative but to employ figurative interpretation both in ordinary speech and in the interpretation of the speech of the Lord of Might and of His Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), in a manner consistent with what God, Exalted is He, has legislated—particularly in matters pertaining to the Divine Names and Attributes.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Biqā‘ī, Maṣra‘ al-Taṣawwuf, pp. 67–68.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Maṭ‘anī (‘Abd al-‘Azīm), Al-Majāz fī al-Lughah wa al-Qur’ān al-Karīm, vol. 1, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Zarkashī, Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ fī Uṣūl al-Fiqh, vol. 2, p. 185.

Among the leading proponents of this position are, from the Ash‘arite tradition, al-Bāqillānī (d. 403 AH). In his work *I‘jāz al-Qur‘ān*, he affirms the occurrence of *majāz* in the speech of the Arabs in general and in the Noble Qur‘an in particular. Indeed, he regards figurative expression as one of the indicators of the Qur‘an’s inimitability. This is evident from his statement concerning metaphor (*isti‘ārah*): «The skillful deployment of refined metaphor may serve as a locus of inimitability, just as this may occur in literal expressions; for eloquence in both domains proceeds along a single course and follows a unified mode»<sup>24</sup>. Thus, in al-Bāqillānī’s view, eloquence and inimitability operate equally in both literal and figurative expression. He states elsewhere: «Among the metaphors in the Qur‘an are many examples, such as His saying: ﴿وَإِنَّهُ لَذِكْرٌ لَّكَ وَلِقَوْمِكَ﴾ “And indeed, it is a reminder for you and for your people.” (Sūrat al-Zukhruf: 44) meaning: that by which mention of them becomes an honor; and His saying: ﴿صِبْغَةَ اللَّهِ وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ مِنَ اللَّهِ صِبْغَةً﴾ “The coloring of God—and who is better than God in coloring?” (Sūrat al-Baqarah: 138) it is said: it refers to the religion of God; and His saying: ﴿أُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ اشْتَرَوُا الضَّلَالَةَ بِالْهُدَىٰ﴾ “Those are the ones who purchased error in exchange for guidance.” (Sūrat al-Baqarah: 16)»<sup>25</sup>. It is well known that metaphor (*isti‘ārah*) constitutes one of the principal categories in which *majāz* occurs.

Among the Ash‘arites who likewise affirmed the absolute occurrence of *majāz* is al-Ghazālī. He defended his position in his writings, particularly in his work *Iljām al-‘Awām*, wherein he refuted the anthropomorphists (*mujassimah*), the assimilationists (*mushabbihah*), and the literalist traditionalists (*hashwiyah*) concerning the interpretation of the Divine Attributes. He maintained that the position of the early generations (*salaf*) in this matter rests upon figurative interpretation and the diversion of expressions from their apparent meanings otherwise, suspension of judgment. In his view, the doctrine of the *salaf* consists of interpretive reservation and suspension. This may be understood from his statement: «The true doctrine of the *salaf*—which we hold to be correct—is that whenever a report from among these reports reaches a member of the general public, seven matters are incumbent upon him: sanctification (*taqdīs*), affirmation (*taṣdīq*), acknowledgment of one’s incapacity, silence, restraint, refraining, and entrusting the matter to those endowed with knowledge»<sup>26</sup>. He then proceeds to discuss each of these matters individually. Concerning “sanctification,” he explains: «By sanctification I mean declaring the Lord, Exalted is He, free from corporeality and from its attendant implications»<sup>27</sup>.

Thereafter, he provided examples within the framework of *sanctification* in which he resorted to figurative interpretation considering it, in his view, to be the doctrine of the *salaf*, thereby acknowledging the role of *majāz* in this regard. For instance, commenting on the words of the Exalted: ﴿وَهُوَ الْغَايُ الْقَوُّمُ عِبَادِهِ﴾ “And He is the Supreme over His servants.” (Sūrat al-An‘ām: 18) and: ﴿يَخَافُونَ رَبَّهُمْ مِنْ فَوْقِهِمْ﴾ “They fear their Lord above them.” (Sūrat al-Nahl: 50) he states: «It must be known that the term *fawq* (“above”) is a homonymous expression applied to two meanings: one of them is the relation of one body to another, such that one is physically higher and the other lower—that is, the higher one is situated above the head of the lower. Yet it may

<sup>24</sup> Al-Bāqillānī, *I‘jāz al-Qur‘ān*, p. 284.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Iljām al-‘Awām*, p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

also be used for a different meaning; thus it is said: the caliph is above the sultan, and the sultan above the minister; or it is said: so-and-so entered upon the prince and sat above so-and-so; and likewise: knowledge is above action, and goldsmithing above tanning. The first sense necessitates corporeality in order for one body to be related to another; the second does not require this. Therefore, the believer must firmly hold that the first meaning is not intended, and that it is impossible with respect to God, Exalted is He, for it belongs to the attributes of bodies or to the attributes of bodily accidents»<sup>28</sup>.

Thus, al-Ghazālī's position (d. 505 AH), in accordance with his understanding of the doctrine of the *salaf* regarding the interpretation of the Divine Attributes, is either suspension (*tawaqquf*) or figurative interpretation—namely, diverting the expression from its apparent meaning to a sense befitting the majesty of God, Exalted is He.

Among the Mu'tazilites who affirmed the absolute occurrence of *majāz* is al-Rummānī (d. 384 AH). This is clearly evident in his work *al-Nukat fī I'jāz al-Qur'ān*. For example, commenting on the words of God, Exalted is He: ﴿الرَّ كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ لِتُخْرِجَ النَّاسَ مِنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ﴾ (Alif Lām Rā'. A Book We have revealed to you so that you may bring mankind out of darkness into light." (Sūrat Ibrāhīm: 1) he states: «Every instance in the Qur'an in which the phrase "from darkness into light" appears is metaphorical; its literal referent is from ignorance to knowledge. The metaphor is more eloquent because it conveys meaning by transferring it to something perceptible to sight»<sup>29</sup>.

He also states, commenting on the words of the Exalted: ﴿وَالصُّبْحُ إِذَا تَنَفَّسَ﴾ "And by the dawn when it breathes." (Sūrat al-Takwīr: 17) «The expression "breathes" here is metaphorical; its literal meaning is when its spreading begins. The term "breathes" is more eloquent than that, for although both convey the sense of beginning, the notion of breathing is more expressive because it suggests relief and expansion of the soul»<sup>30</sup>. There are numerous other instances in which he affirms the occurrence of *majāz* in the Qur'an and maintains that its inimitability is realized in its figurative expressions just as in its literal ones.

Among the Mu'tazilites as well is al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538 AH), who affirmed the occurrence of *majāz* in both language and the Noble Qur'an. Evidence for the first lies in his authorship of his well-known lexicon *Asās al-Balāghah*. It is well recognized among specialists and those of refined linguistic taste that he constructed this dictionary on the basis of figurative usages occurring in Arabic speech. As for the second, it is evident in his celebrated Qur'anic commentary *al-Kashshāf*, which is replete with the employment of figurative interpretation in explicating the verses of the Noble Qur'an. However, his Mu'tazilite theological commitments led him in *al-Kashshāf* to adopt Mu'tazilite interpretations in explaining certain verses. Among these is the denial of the literal attribution of certain acts to God, on the grounds that—according to Mu'tazilite doctrine such acts constitute moral evil, and God is exalted above committing evil. Thus, in his commentary on the words of the Exalted: ﴿فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ مَرَضٌ فَزَادَهُمُ اللَّهُ مَرَضًا﴾ "In their hearts is a disease, and God increased them in disease." (Sūrat al-Baqarah: 10) he states: «The meaning of God's increasing them in disease is that whenever He revealed revelation to His Messenger and they heard it, they disbelieved in it, thereby increasing in

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>29</sup> Al-Rummānī, *Al-Nukat fī I'jāz al-Qur'ān*, p. 92.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

disbelief upon their disbelief. Thus it is as though God increased them in what they themselves increased, attributing the act to its cause—just as it is attributed to the *sūrah* in His saying: ﴿فَزَادْتُهُمْ رُجْسًا إِلَىٰ رُجْسِهِمْ﴾ “It increased them in defilement upon their defilement.” (Sūrat al-Tawbah: 125) because it was the cause»<sup>31</sup>. In other words, according to al-Zamakhsharī, the act in this example is attributed to the Name of God figuratively, whereas in reality it belongs to another (namely, the disbelievers themselves).

Among the leading figures of the Imāmī Shī‘ah who affirmed the absolute occurrence of *majāz* is al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 406 AH). He authored two important works in this field: *Talkhīṣ al-Bayān fī Majāzāt al-Qur’ān* and *al-Majāzāt al-Nabawiyyah*. The examples he presents in both works demonstrate that he was among the foremost proponents of the permissibility and occurrence of *majāz* in Arabic speech, in the Noble Qur’an, and in the Prophetic Sunnah. Here, dear reader, are some of the examples he cited:

Al-Sharīf al-Raḍī states, commenting on the words of the Exalted: ﴿مَنْ ذَا الَّذِي يُقْرِضُ اللَّهَ﴾ “Who is it that will lend to God a good loan so that He may multiply it for him many times over?” (Sūrat al-Baqarah: 245) He writes: «This is a metaphor, for it is not conceivable that the Self-Sufficient would literally borrow. However, since in common usage the lender is one who gives another wealth on the condition that its equivalent be returned, He—Glorified be He—established His fulfilling the recompense in the position of repaying the loan»<sup>32</sup>. As previously noted, metaphor (*isti‘ārah*) is among the most prominent categories in which *majāz* occurs.

He affirmed the same principle in his other work entitled *al-Majāzāt al-Nabawiyyah*. Among the examples he cites is his commentary on the statement of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him): «Whoever draws near to God by a handspan, He draws near to him by a cubit; whoever draws near to God by a cubit, He draws near to him by a fathom; and whoever comes to God walking, He comes to him running». He comments: «This statement is metaphorical. What is intended is that whoever performs a small act of righteousness, God recompenses him with a great reward. Thus, he—peace and blessings be upon him—portrayed drawing near in terms of deserving reward as though it were drawing near to the One who grants the reward, by way of metaphor and rhetorical extension. According to this meaning, all that appears in the Qur’an and in speech concerning drawing near to God, Glorified and Exalted be He, is to be understood; for He -Majestic is His Glory<sup>33</sup>- is not described as near in the sense of spatial proximity, but rather in the sense that His reward is near to the one who deserves it, and His beneficence close to the one who seeks and hopes for it. Thus, the attribute of nearness pertains to His beneficence and His reward, not to His Essence or His Being»<sup>34</sup>.

We shall suffice with this selection of prominent scholars who upheld the absolute occurrence of *majāz*. As we have noted, this position represents the view of the majority, notwithstanding the diversity of scholars’ theological doctrines and their juridical, theological, and linguistic schools of thought.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, vol. 1, p. 46.

<sup>32</sup> Al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, *Talkhīṣ al-Bayān fī Majāzāt al-Qur’ān*, p. 120.

<sup>33</sup> That is, His effusion (*fayḍ*); it has also been said: His majesty.

<sup>34</sup> Al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, *Talkhīṣ al-Bayān*, p. 337.

## B. The Second Position: Absolute Denial of the Occurrence of *Majāz*

The proponents of this position maintain that *majāz* does not occur—neither in language, nor in the Noble Qur’an, nor in the Prophetic ḥadīths. This view has been attributed to Abū Ishāq al-Isfarāyīnī (d. 418 AH), and more than one scholar has explicitly ascribed it to him. Among them is al-Isnawī (d. 772 AH) in his commentary on al-Bayḍāwī’s *Minhāj*, where he states: «This line of reasoning leads to the absolute prohibition of *majāz*, and this is the view of the master Abū Ishāq al-Isfarāyīnī and a group [of scholars]»<sup>35</sup>.

Al-Suyūṭī (d. 911 AH) also reports al-Isfarāyīnī’s argument for adopting this view. In *al-Muzhir*, he writes: «The master Abū Ishāq al-Isfarāyīnī said: There is no *majāz* in the language of the Arabs (...). The foundation of the master’s argument is that the definition of *majāz*, according to those who affirm it, is that it is any expression by which one departs from its original designation to another designation on account of some form of association between them—either in essence or in meaning. As for association in meaning, this is like describing bravery or dullness; as for association in essence, this is like calling rain “sky,” or calling excrement “ghā’iṭ” or “‘adhirah.” The term “‘adhirah” originally referred to the courtyard of a house, and “ghā’iṭ” to a low-lying place in the land, which they used to seek out when relieving themselves; when that usage became frequent, the name was transferred to the excrement itself. This presupposes something transferred from (the original designation) that is prior, and something transferred to (the secondary designation) that is subsequent. Yet in the language of the Arabs there is no chronological precedence or succession; rather, at any time one assumes the Arabs uttered the word in its literal sense, they also uttered it in what is called its figurative sense»<sup>36</sup>. Al-Suyūṭī clarifies that what al-Isfarāyīnī intended by this argument is that it has not been preserved from the Arabs that they first established literal meanings and only thereafter transferred them to figurative meanings.

However, some scholars expressed hesitation regarding the correctness of attributing this opinion to al-Isfarāyīnī. Among them is al-Juwaynī (d. 478 AH), who states: «One who lacks thorough investigation has claimed that there is no *majāz* in the Book of God. If this person affirms the existence of *majāz* in language, then he must concede that the Book of God contains it, for its examples therein are countless and beyond enumeration. If, however, he denies *majāz* in language altogether, then he has erred. This view has been attributed to the master Abū Ishāq (d. 418 AH), yet we presume that such an attribution to him is not sound»<sup>37</sup>.

Al-Ghazālī likewise adopted al-Juwaynī’s cautious stance regarding the attribution of this opinion to al-Isfarāyīnī. He states: «Language comprises both literal and figurative usage. The master (d. 418 AH) said: there is no *majāz* in it (...) Yet we do not think it plausible that the master would deny metaphorical expressions, given their abundance in both poetry and prose»<sup>38</sup>.

This position has likewise been attributed to al-Fārisī (d. 377 AH). However, it appears that this attribution is not sound, as some scholars have clarified. Al-Zarkashī (d. 794 AH) states: «I saw in the handwriting of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (d. 643 AH), in the notes from his travels, that

<sup>35</sup> Al-Isnawī, *Nihāyat al-Sūl*, p. 128. See also: Ibn Taymiyyah, *Al-Īmān*, p. 75.

<sup>36</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Muzhir*, vol. 1, pp. 364–365.

<sup>37</sup> Al-Juwaynī, *Al-Talkhīṣ fi Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, vol. 1, pp. 190–191.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Mankhūl*, p. 75.

Abū al-Qāsim ibn Kajj (d. 405 AH) reported from Abū ‘Alī al-Fārisī (d. 377 AH) a denial of *majāz*, similar to the view of the master—meaning al-Isfarāyīnī (d. 418 AH). This is a strange claim, contrary to the position of his student Ibn Jinnī (d. 392 AH), and it warrants scrutiny. For his student, Abū al-Faṭḥ Ibn Jinnī, was more knowledgeable of his teacher’s doctrine, and he transmitted in *al-Khaṣā’iṣ* from him that *majāz* constitutes the greater part of language—just as this is the position of Ibn Jinnī himself»<sup>39</sup>.

### **C. The Third Position: Exaggeration in Affirming the Absolute Occurrence of *Majāz***

The proponents of this position maintain that the majority of language is figurative—or even that all of it is figurative. It is stated in *Mukhtaṣar al-Ṣawā’iq al-Mursalāh*: «Another group went to excess in this direction, claiming that most of language is *majāz*, indeed that all of it is so»<sup>40</sup>. Among the most prominent advocates of this view is Ibn Jinnī, who states: «Know that most of language—upon careful reflection—is *majāz*, not literal truth»<sup>41</sup>.

What led him to this exaggeration in affirming *majāz*—as he conceived it—was the theological imperative of declaring God, Glorified and Exalted be He, free from creating certain acts, in accordance with Mu‘tazilite doctrinal principles—of which we have seen fragments when discussing al-Zamakhsharī’s position (d. 538 AH). Ibn Jinnī states: «Likewise with the acts of the Eternal—Glorified be He—such as: “God created the heavens and the earth,” and similar expressions. Do you not see that—Exalted is His Name—He was not thereby the creator of our actions? For if this were literal rather than figurative, He would be the creator of disbelief, aggression, and other such acts of ours—Exalted and Majestic is He»<sup>42</sup>.

Ibn Jinnī was followed in this view by his student ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mattawayh. Al-Zarkashī (d. 794 AH) states: «Ibn Jinnī went to excess, claiming that the predominant aspect of language is *majāz* (...) and his student ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mattawayh said: all of it is *majāz*»<sup>43</sup>.

### **D. The Fourth Position: Denial of *Majāz* in the Qur’an but Not in Language**

It is well known that denying the occurrence of *majāz* in the Noble Qur’an does not necessarily entail denying it in language more generally. Scholars have identified several prominent figures who adopted this position. Among them are<sup>44</sup>:

From the Ḥanbalite school: Abū al-Ḥasan al-Jazarī (4th century AH), Abū ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Ḥāmid (d. 403 AH), and Abū al-Faḍl al-Tamīmī (d. 410 AH), among others.

From the Mālikite school: Muḥammad ibn Khuwayz Mindād (d. 390 AH) and Mundhir ibn Sa‘īd al-Ballūṭī (d. 355 AH).

From the Shāfi‘ite school: Ibn al-Qāṣṣ (d. 335 AH)<sup>45</sup>.

From the Zāhirite school: Dāwūd ibn ‘Alī (d. 270 AH) and his son Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Dāwūd (d. 297 AH).

From the Mu‘tazilites: Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī (d. 322 AH).

<sup>39</sup> Al-Zarkashī, *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ fī Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, vol. 2, pp. 180–181.

<sup>40</sup> Ibn al-Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-Ṣawā’iq al-Mursalāh*, vol. 2, p. 699.

<sup>41</sup> Ibn Jinnī, *Al-Khaṣā’iṣ*, vol. 2, p. 447.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 449.

<sup>43</sup> Al-Zarkashī, *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ fī Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, vol. 2, p. 181.

<sup>44</sup> See: Ibn Taymiyyah, *Al-Īmān*, p. 74.

<sup>45</sup> See: Al-Zarkashī, *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ fī Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, vol. 2, p. 182.

This position has also been attributed to the Rāfiḍah (Imāmī Shī‘ah)<sup>46</sup>, and al-Ghazālī ascribed it to certain literalist traditionalists (*hashwiyyah*)<sup>47</sup>.

#### **E. The Fifth Position: The Occurrence of *Majāz* in the Qur’an and the Sunnah on the Condition that It Be Supported by Evidence**

This is the position of Ibn Ḥazm al-Zāhirī (d. 456 AH), who diverged from the view of the founder of his school, Dāwūd al-Zāhirī, and his son Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Dāwūd. Ibn Ḥazm’s stance represents a departure within the Zāhirite tradition from the earlier position that categorically denied the occurrence of *majāz* in the Noble Qur’an. Ibn Ḥazm states: «If we ascertain through the evidence of a textual proof, consensus, or empirical necessity that a term has been transferred from its original linguistic designation to another meaning, then it becomes obligatory to adhere to that transferred meaning»<sup>48</sup>. He also writes: «Every address with which God, Exalted is He, or His Messenger (peace and blessings be upon him) addresses us is to be understood according to its linguistic designation and customary usage, unless there is a text, consensus, or sensory necessity demonstrating that God or His Messenger has transferred the term from its original designation to another meaning. If such evidence is found, we adopt it in accordance with the meaning to which it has been transferred»<sup>49</sup>.

It is also worth noting that Ibn Ḥazm spoke strongly against those who denied the occurrence of *majāz* in the Qur’an and the Sunnah. He undertook a vigorous refutation of their arguments and proofs.

#### **F. The Sixth Position: Oscillation Between Denial and Affirmation**

This position is associated in particular with Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH) and his student Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH). It has become widely circulated among researchers that Ibn Taymiyyah was among the most prominent figures to deny the occurrence of *majāz* absolutely—whether in language, in the Qur’an, or in ḥadīth. However, the researcher ‘Abd al-‘Azīm al-Maṭ‘anī, after a serious and comprehensive examination of the subject, arrived at an important conclusion -with which we concur- having grounded his claim in strong evidence that, in our view, cannot easily be refuted. What the researcher ultimately concluded is that Ibn Taymiyyah and his student Ibn al-Qayyim held two distinct positions regarding *majāz*:

The first is denial: this is their theoretical and polemical stance, in which they arrived at rejecting *majāz* not only in the Qur’an, but in it and in language -or languages- more generally.

The second is affirmation: this is their practical and applied stance, in which they employed *majāz* in their own discourse and adopted it in numerous passages of their writings as a means of uncovering the subtleties and rhetorical beauty of the Qur’anic verses<sup>50</sup>.

Al-Maṭ‘anī’s evidence for the first position lies in what Ibn Taymiyyah wrote in his work *al-Īmān*, where he launched a forceful critique against those who permitted *majāz*, particularly those who employed it in interpreting certain Divine Attributes. Likewise, Ibn al-

<sup>46</sup> See: Al-Maṭ‘anī (‘Abd al-‘Azīm), *Al-Majāz fī al-Lughah wa al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*, vol. 2, p. 633.

<sup>47</sup> See: Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Mankhūl*, p. 76.

<sup>48</sup> Ibn Ḥazm, *Al-Iḥkām fī Uṣūl al-Aḥkām*, vol. 4, p. 28.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 28.

<sup>50</sup> See: Al-Maṭ‘anī (‘Abd al-‘Azīm), *Al-Majāz fī al-Lughah wa al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*, vol. 2, p. 881; vol. 2, pp. 952–953.

Qayyim, in his book *al-Ṣawā'iq al-Mursalāh*, denounced *majāz*, even going so far as to describe it as a “*tāghūt*” (an object of false authority).

As for the researcher's evidence for the second position, it consists in the actual usage of *majāz* by Ibn Taymiyyah and his student Ibn al-Qayyim in their own writings, their acknowledgment of it in practice, and their employment of it within their discussions. Moreover, they often transmitted the statements of those who affirmed *majāz* without offering any objection something that suggests their implicit acceptance of it.

Among the examples illustrating this point is Ibn Taymiyyah's criticism of those who were ignorant of the division of speech into literal and figurative usage, and who were unaware of its semantic implications. While explaining the meaning of *istiwa'* (divine “establishment” or “rising”), he states: «Whoever supposes that this *istiwa'*, if understood as literal, necessarily entails something of the attributes of created beings -despite the text having specified it uniquely to God- is profoundly ignorant of the semantic indications of language and of the distinction between literal and figurative usage»<sup>51</sup>.

Among further examples is Ibn Taymiyyah's own employment of figurative interpretation (*ta'wīl*) and *majāz* within his discussions. For instance, commenting on the words of the Exalted: ﴿أَمْ يَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّا لَا نَسْمَعُ سِرَّهُمْ﴾ “Or do they think that We do not hear their secret discourse?” (Sūrat al-Zukhruf: 80) he states: «What is intended by His seeing and hearing is the affirmation of His knowledge thereof—that He knows whether it is good or evil, and thus rewards for good deeds and punishes for evil deeds»<sup>52</sup>. Here, the attribution of hearing is interpreted as denoting knowledge and accountability, which reflects the employment of figurative interpretation in explicating the verse.

Ibn al-Qayyim likewise followed the path of his teacher in employing *majāz*. Indeed, he authored a work in the science of rhetoric entitled *al-Fawā'id al-Mushawwiq ilā 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān wa 'Ilm al-Bayān*, in which he affirms the occurrence of *majāz* in the Noble Qur'an. In his discussion of the categories of *majāz*, after enumerating them and illustrating them with examples from the Qur'an, he states: «The fifth: its categories, which are many. The first: a figurative usage whereby the expression referring to that which is connected is used in place of that to which it is connected, and its categories are numerous (...) The number of categories encompassed by the Noble Book has reached twenty-four»<sup>53</sup>. All of this constitutes clear indications that Ibn al-Qayyim acknowledged the occurrence of *majāz* in the Qur'an.

One might ask: why this apparent contradiction in the views of the two shaykhs? Why did they not settle upon a single, consistent position?

'Abd al-'Azīm al-Maṭ'anī responds to this question by stating: «The two men do in fact acknowledge *majāz*; they only denied it in certain incidental and non-essential contexts when they perceived a benefit in doing so. They sought to curb the chaos of interpretation that, among some groups, had reached the point of obscurity and enigma. Certain leading figures of those groups tampered with the sanctity of the texts and nearly caused people to lose confidence in the apparent meanings of words, structures, and their semantic indications»<sup>54</sup>. Thus, the shift

<sup>51</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū' al-Fatāwā*, vol. 5, p. 208.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, p. 232.

<sup>53</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, *Al-Fawā'id al-Mushawwiq ilā 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān wa 'Ilm al-Bayān*, pp. 11–12.

<sup>54</sup> Al-Maṭ'anī ('Abd al-'Azīm), *Al-Majāz fī al-Lughah wa al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, vol. 2, p. 1003.

from the position of permissibility to that of denial was motivated by the desire to prevent the harm resulting from excessive interpretive speculation particularly in matters concerning the Divine Names and Attributes.

### Conclusion:

The essence of what we have elaborated in this research paper may be summarized as follows:

- *Majāz* is a subject addressed by scholars of kalām, rhetoric, legal theory, jurisprudence, and Qur’anic exegesis, owing to its profound importance within these disciplines.
- *Majāz* is expansive in Arabic discourse, encompassing numerous forms such as metaphor (*isti’ārah*), hyperbole, periphrasis, representation, simile, and other instances in which departure occurs from the literal meaning originally designated for the intended sense.
- The first to treat *majāz* in its technical sense were the theologians, particularly the Mu‘tazilites. Indeed, scholars are nearly unanimous that al-Jāhiz (d. 255 AH) was the first to employ it in its established technical meaning.
- Departure from literal meaning to figurative usage may occur for several reasons: the phonetic heaviness of the literal term; the baseness of its meaning; the rhetorical elegance of the figurative expression; the grandeur of its signification; the attainment of greater clarity; or the suggestion of increased reward, and the like.
- The root of the disagreement concerning the occurrence or non-occurrence of *majāz* lies in discussions surrounding the Divine Names and Attributes.
- The doctrinal positions of theologians and other scholars regarding *majāz* amount to six:
  1. **Absolute affirmation** of *majāz*—in language, the Qur’an, and the Sunnah; this is the position of the majority.
  2. **Absolute denial** of *majāz*—in language, the Qur’an, and the ḥadīths; attributed to Abū Ishāq al-Isfarāyīnī (d. 418 AH), though some scholars have questioned the soundness of this attribution.
  3. **Exaggerated affirmation**—that most or all of language is *majāz*; this is the position of Ibn Jinnī (d. 392 AH) and his student ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mattawayh.
  4. **Denial of *majāz* in the Qur’an but not in language**; this was the position of a number of scholars, including:
    - From the Ḥanbalites: Abū al-Ḥasan al-Jazarī (4th century AH), Ibn Ḥāmid (d. 403 AH), and Abū al-Faḍl al-Tamīmī (d. 410 AH), among others.
    - From the Mālikites: Muḥammad ibn Khuwayz Mindād (d. 390 AH) and Mundhir ibn Sa‘īd al-Ballūṭī (d. 355 AH).
    - From the Shāfi‘ites: Ibn al-Qāṣṣ (d. 335 AH).
    - From the Zāhirites: Dāwūd ibn ‘Alī al-Zāhirī (d. 270 AH) and his son Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Dāwūd (d. 297 AH).
    - From the Mu‘tazilites: Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī (d. 322 AH). In addition to certain Rāfiḍī and Ḥashwī groups.

5. **Conditional affirmation**—the occurrence of *majāz* in the Qur'an and Sunnah provided that it is supported by decisive evidence; this is the position of Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456 AH), who diverged from the earlier Zāhirite stance that categorically denied *majāz* in the Qur'an.
6. **Oscillation between denial and affirmation**—the position of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH) and his student Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH). Through careful examination of their writings, it may be concluded that they adopted two approaches:
  - A theoretical and polemical stance of denial.
  - A practical and applied stance of affirmation, as evidenced by their own free usage of figurative expression in their works.

This oscillation between denial and affirmation appears to have arisen from the necessity of curbing excessive interpretive speculation concerning the Divine Names and Attributes on the part of certain sects and theological schools.

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