

The Historical Evolution of the Interpretation of “Sāq Allāh” in the Views of Classical and Contemporary Qur’anic Exegetes

Mina Shamkhi¹  Zohreh Babaahmadi Milani²  Aref Masoudian³ 

1. Associate Professor in Qur’anic and Hadith Sciences, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran (Corresponding Author).

2. Assistant Professor, Department of Quranic and Hadith, shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran.

3.. Master’s Student in Qur’anic and Hadith Sciences, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, , Ahvaz, Iran.

Corresponding Email: m.shamkhi@scu.ac.ir



<https://doi.org/10.22034/jksl.2025.532076.1478>

Introduction

One of the most challenging issues in Qur’anic exegesis concerns the interpretation of verses that apparently attribute corporeal characteristics to God. The expression “*On the Day when the sāq shall be uncovered*” (Q. 68:42) is among the most debated examples, as its literal wording may suggest anthropomorphism, whereas the fundamental Islamic doctrine of divine transcendence (*tanzīh*) and the Qur’anic rejection of any likeness between God and creation have led exegetes to seek alternative interpretations. This apparent tension between the literal wording of the verse and established theological principles has given rise to a wide range of, and sometimes conflicting, exegetical views throughout the history of Qur’anic interpretation. Examining the meaning of *sāq* not only clarifies the ways in which exegetes have approached ambiguous (*mutashābih*) verses but also contributes to major theological discussions, particularly the rejection of anthropomorphism (*tajsim*). Furthermore, tracing the semantic evolution of this expression offers valuable insight into the influence of intellectual, theological, and socio-historical contexts on exegetical methodology. Focusing on the classical period (first to sixth centuries A.H.) and the contemporary period (fourteenth and fifteenth centuries A.H.), the present study seeks to answer the following questions: What were the principal interpretations of *sāq* in each period? Which factors contributed to the emergence of new interpretations? Can the historical development of these meanings be modeled through statistical analysis?

Materials and Methods

This study employs a descriptive-analytical approach to investigate the historical development of the interpretation of the Qur’anic expression “*yukshafu ‘an sāq*” in the exegetical tradition. Research data were collected through library research and consist of a representative corpus of both Sunni and Shi’i Qur’anic commentaries from two major historical periods: the classical era (first to sixth centuries A.H.) and the contemporary era (fourteenth and fifteenth centuries A.H.). All selected commentaries address the verse either directly or indirectly. After data collection, the exegetical opinions were extracted, classified, and compared in order to identify common interpretive patterns as well as significant differences. To illustrate the historical evolution of the interpretations more clearly, the data were organized into tables and graphical representations. The interpretations were classified into four principal categories: literalist interpretation, eschatological allegorical interpretation, esoteric interpretation, and anthropocentric interpretation. To examine quantitative changes over time, the non-parametric **Mann–Kendall test** was employed. Based on the chronological distribution of exegetes according to their dates of death, the test calculated the frequency and relative proportion of each interpretive approach across different historical periods and evaluated the existence or absence of statistically significant trends. Since the Mann–Kendall

test is designed only to detect statistical trends rather than explain their causes, the quantitative analysis was complemented by qualitative historical and textual analyses to identify the principal factors contributing to semantic change. Statistical analyses were conducted using **XLSTAT 2019**, which provides appropriate tools for non-parametric statistical analysis. The integration of qualitative and quantitative methods thus enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the historical evolution of the meaning of *sāq*.

Results and Findings

The findings indicate that during the classical period the interpretation of *sāq* was predominantly characterized by allegorical and rational approaches. The interpretation of *sāq* as **“hardship” or “a moment of great severity”** was by far the most frequent, appearing in thirty-seven instances, reflecting the dominance of non-literal theological interpretations. In contrast, only five exegetes maintained the literal meaning of *sāq*, demonstrating that literalist tendencies represented a minority position. A comparison between Sunni and Shi‘i exegetes further reveals that Sunni scholars generally favored either literalist or conventional allegorical interpretations, whereas Shi‘i commentators, alongside the dominant interpretation of “hardship and great severity” (eight instances), occasionally proposed distinctive interpretations such as “the coming of the Hereafter” or “the caliphate of Imam ‘Alī (‘A).” Overall, the exegetical tradition of the classical period was characterized by the predominance of established theological interpretations with relatively limited semantic diversity.

The contemporary period, while preserving the predominance of the interpretation “hardship and great severity” (forty-three instances), demonstrates a noticeably broader semantic spectrum. New interpretations emerged, including **“origin and ultimate reality”** (six instances), **“divine light”** (three instances), and even interpretations such as **“the testimony of the human leg.”** This increasing diversity reflects the growing influence of modern intellectual currents, the human sciences, and contemporary theological thought upon Qur’anic interpretation. Comparative analysis indicates that contemporary Shi‘i exegetes display a stronger inclination toward innovative philosophical and mystical interpretations than their Sunni counterparts, particularly in interpretations such as “divine light” and “the leg of the Throne,” whereas Sunni exegetes generally remain more closely attached to traditional interpretations.

The results of the **Mann–Kendall** test indicate that neither the classical nor the contemporary period exhibits a statistically significant trend in the evolution of the interpretations. Kendall’s tau was calculated as **−0.041** for the classical period and **+0.083** for the contemporary period, both values being close to zero, while the corresponding **p-values** exceeded the threshold for statistical significance. These findings suggest that changes in interpretation were driven primarily by historical, theological, and social factors rather than by a consistent linear trend. Nevertheless, a slight tendency toward more innovative interpretations can be observed in the contemporary period. Overall, the results demonstrate the continued predominance of the interpretation “hardship and great severity,” accompanied by increasing semantic diversity and the emergence of more innovative allegorical interpretations in recent centuries.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that exegetical methodology has been the principal factor shaping the various interpretations of *sāq*. During the classical period, literalist interpretations grounded in transmitted reports and linguistic analysis coexisted with influential rational allegorical interpretations, particularly the understanding of *sāq* as “hardship” or “a moment of great severity.” In the contemporary period, while many traditional interpretations continued to be maintained, new meanings such as “origin and ultimate reality,” “divine light,” and “the testimony of the human leg” emerged, reflecting broader developments in philosophy, theology, and contemporary intellectual discourse.

Frequency analysis confirms that the interpretation “hardship and great severity” remains the dominant understanding throughout both historical periods. Nevertheless, contemporary exegesis displays considerably greater semantic diversity, with Shi‘i exegetes showing a stronger tendency toward

theological and esoteric interpretations, whereas Sunni exegetes generally adhere more closely to established traditional meanings. The **Mann–Kendall** test did not reveal any statistically significant trend (**p-value > 0.05**), indicating that exegetical developments have been shaped primarily by historical, social, theological, and discursive factors rather than by a uniform quantitative progression. **Keywords:** historical evolution, Sāq Allāh, classical exegetes, contemporary exegetes, Mann–Kendall test.

Keywords: historical evolution, Sāq Allāh, classical exegetes, contemporary exegetes, Mann–Kendall test.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with research ethics. The authors observed the ethical principles in conducting and publishing this scholarly research, and this is confirmed by all of them.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Funding statement

The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this manuscript.

References

The Holy Qur'an.

- Ibn Abī Ḥātim, 'A. ibn M. (1998). *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*. Maktabat Nizār Muṣṭafā al-Bāz. [In Arabic]
- Ibn al-Jawzī, 'A. ibn 'A. (2004). *Tadhkirat al-Arīb fī Tafsīr al-Gharīb*. Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah. [In Arabic]
- Ibn Ḥammūsh, M. (2008). *al-Hidāyah ilā Bulūgh al-Nihāyah*. University of Sharjah. [In Arabic]
- Ibn 'Āshūr, M. al-Ṭāhir. (1999). *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr*. Mu'assasat al-Tārīkh al-'Arabī. [In Arabic]
- Ibn 'Abbās, 'A. (1992). *Gharīb al-Qur'ān fī Shi'r al-'Arab*. Mu'assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyyah. [In Arabic]
- Ibn 'Aṭīyyah, 'A. ibn Gh. (2001). *al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz fī Tafsīr al-Kitāb al-'Azīz*. Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah. [In Arabic]
- Ibn Manẓūr, M. ibn M. (1993). *Lisān al-'Arab*. Dār Ṣādir. [In Arabic]
- Abu al-Futuh Razi, H. ibn A. (1987). *Rawḍ al-Jinān wa Rūḥ al-Jinān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. Astan Quds Razavi. [In Persian]
- Abū Dharr al-Qalamūnī, 'A. al-M. ibn Ḥ. (2009). *Mādhā Ta'rif 'an Allāh?* Maktabat al-Ṣafā. [In Arabic]
- al-Azharī, M. ibn A. (n.d.). *Tahdhīb al-Lughah*. Dār Ihya' al-Turāth al-'Arabī. [In Arabic]
- al-Bukhārī, M. ibn I. (2001). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Dār Ṭawq al-Najāh. [In Arabic]
- Boroujerdi, M. I. (1987). *Comprehensive Commentary*. Sadr Library. [In Persian]
- al-Baghawī, Ḥ. ibn M. (1999). *Tafsīr al-Baghawī*. Dār Ihya' al-Turāth al-'Arabī. [In Arabic]
- Paktchi, A. (2010). *The History of Qur'anic Exegesis*. Student Scientific Association of Theology, Imam Sadiq University. [In Persian]
- al-Taftāzānī, S. al-D. (1988). *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*. Sharīf Raḍī. [In Arabic]
- al-Jazā'irī, A. B. J. (1995). *Aysar al-Tafāsīr li-Kalām al-'Alī al-Kabīr*. Maktabat al-'Ulūm wa al-Ḥikam. [In Arabic]
- Hairi Tehrani, A. (1959). *Muqtaniyāt al-Durar*. Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah. [In Persian]
- Ḥijāzī, M. M. (1992). *al-Tafsīr al-Wāḍiḥ*. Dār al-Jīl. [In Arabic]
- Hosseini Hamedani, M. (1983). *Radiant Lights in the Exegesis of the Qur'an*. Lotfi. [In Persian]
- al-Dumayjī, Kh. ibn 'A. (2010). *Āyāt al-'Aqidah allatī Qad Yūhim Ṣāhiruhā al-Ta'āruḍ*. Dār al-Faḍīlah. [In Arabic]
- al-Dhahabī, M. Ḥ. (n.d.). *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*. Maktabat Wahbah. [In Arabic]
- Riḍā, M. R. (1993). *Tafsīr al-Manār*. Dār al-Ma'rifah. [In Arabic]
- Rezaei Isfahani, M. A. (2008). *Mehr Qur'anic Commentary*. Research Center for Qur'anic Exegesis and Qur'anic Sciences. [In Persian]
- al-Zabīdī, M. (1993). *Tāj al-'Arūs*. Dār al-Fikr. [In Arabic]

- al-Zubaydī, M. N. (2007). *al-Taysīr fī al-Tafsīr li-l-Qurʾān bi-Riwāyat Ahl al-Bayt*. Dār al-Maḥajjah al-Bayḍāʾ. [In Arabic]
- al-Zuhaylī, W. (1990). *al-Tafsīr al-Munīr fī al-ʿAqīdah wa al-Sharīʿah wa al-Manhaj*. Dār al-Fikr. [In Arabic]
- al-Zamakhsharī, M. ibn ʿU. (1986). *al-Kashshāf ʿan Ḥaqāʾiq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl wa ʿUyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Taʾwīl*. Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī. [In Arabic]
- Subhani, J. (n.d.). *Uṣūl al-Ḥadīth wa Aḥkāmuḥ fī ʿIlm al-Dirāyah*. Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī. [In Arabic]
- al-Saqqāf, ʿA. ibn ʿA. (2005). *Ṣifāt Allāh ʿAzza wa Jalla al-Wāridah fī al-Kitāb wa al-Sunnah*. Dār al-Hijrah. [In Arabic]
- al-Samarqandī, N. ibn M. (1995). *Tafsīr al-Samarqandī*. Dār al-Fikr. [In Arabic]
- Shah Abdolazimi, H. (1984). *Tafsīr-e Ithnā ʿAsharī*. Miqat. [In Persian]
- al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, M. ibn Ḥ. (1985). *Talkhīṣ al-Bayān fī Majāzāt al-Qurʾān*. Dār al-Aḍwāʾ. [In Arabic]
- Shamkhi, M. (2012). Literalist Schools in Qurʾanic Exegesis. *Linguistic Researches in the Qurʾan*, 1(1), 95–116. <https://dor.isc.ac/dor/20.1001.1.24233889.1391.1.1.6.3> [In Persian]
- Shamsoddini Motlagh, K., Badashti, A., & Soltani, M. (2019). An Analysis of the Implications and Consequences of the Salafi View in the Semantics of Predicative Attributes. *Journal of Islamic Denominations*, 12, 56–74. [In Persian]
- al-Ṣābūnī, M. ʿA. (2000). *Ṣafwat al-Tafāsīr*. Dār al-Fikr. [In Arabic]
- Sadeqi Tehrani, M. (1998). *al-Balāgh fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi-l-Qurʾān*. Maktabat Muḥammad al-Ṣādiqī al-Ṭihrānī. [In Arabic]
- Ṣāfī, M. (1997). *al-Jadwal fī lʾrāb al-Qurʾān wa Ṣarfih wa Bayānih maʿa Fawāʾid Naḥwiyyah Hāmmah*. Dār al-Rashīd. [In Arabic]
- Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān, M. Ṣ. (1999). *Fath al-Bayān fī Maqāṣid al-Qurʾān*. Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah. [In Arabic]
- al-Ṣanʿānī, ʿA. ibn H. (1990). *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAzīz*. Dār al-Maʿrifah. [In Arabic]
- Ṭabāṭabāʾī, M. Ḥ. (1970). *al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*. Muʾassasat al-Aʿlamī lil-Maṭbūʿāt. [In Arabic]
- al-Ṭabarī, M. ibn Jarīr. (1991). *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*. Dār al-Maʿrifah. [In Arabic]
- al-Ṭanṭāwī, M. S. (1997). *al-Tafsīr al-Wasīṭ lil-Qurʾān al-Karīm*. Nahḍat Miṣr. [In Arabic]
- al-Ṭūsī, M. ibn al-Ḥasan. (n.d.). *al-Tibyān fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*. Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī. [In Arabic]
- Tayyeb, A. (1990). *Aṭyab al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*. Islam Publications. [In Persian]
- Ameli, I. (1981). *Tafsīr-e Ameli*. Ṣadūq Bookstore. [In Persian]
- al-Farrāʾ, Y. ibn Z. (1980). *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*. Egyptian General Book Organization. [In Arabic]
- al-Fīrūzābādī, M. ibn Yaʿqūb. (2005). *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*. Muʾassasat al-Risālah. [In Arabic]
- al-Qāsimī, J. al-Dīn. (1997). *Maḥāsīn al-Taʾwīl*. Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah. [In Arabic]
- Qorashi Bonabi, A. A. (1996). *Tafsīr-e Aḥsan al-Ḥadīth*. Biʾthat Foundation. [In Persian]

- al-Qushayrī, ‘A. ibn H. (2000). *Laṭā’if al-Ishārāt*. Egyptian General Book Organization. [In Arabic]
- Qomi, A. ibn I. (1984). *Tafsīr-e Qomi*. Dār al-Kitāb. [In Persian]
- al-Māturīdī, M. ibn M. (2005). *Ta’wīlāt Ahl al-Sunnah*. Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah. [In Arabic]
- Mardini, F. (2009). *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*. Bayt al-Ḥikmah. [In Arabic]
- al-Māwardī, ‘A. ibn M. (n.d.). *al-Nukat wa al-‘Uyūn*. Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah. [In Arabic]
- al-Muḥtasib, ‘A. al-M. ‘A. (1982). *Ittijāhāt al-Tafsīr fī al-‘Aṣr al-Rāhin*. Maktabat al-Nahḍah al-Islāmiyyah. [In Arabic]
- Mohammadi Sheikhi, Q., & Fereydounpour, T. (2018). Examining the Effectiveness of the Principles of Transcendent Philosophy in Explaining the Predicative Divine Attributes. *Modern Religious Thought*, 48, 77–95. [In Persian]
- al-Mudarrisī, M. T. (1998). *Min Hudā al-Qur’ān*. Dār Muḥibbī al-Ḥusayn. [In Arabic]
- Muṣṭafā, I., Zayyāt, A., ‘Abd al-Qādir, Ḥ., & al-Najjār, M. (1989). *al-Mu’jam al-Wasīṭ*. Dār al-Da’wah. [In Arabic]
- Ma’rifat, M. H. (2000). *Exegesis and Exegetes*. Al-Tamhid Cultural Institute. [In Persian]
- Mughnīyah, M. J. (2003). *Tafsīr al-Kāshif*. Dār al-Kitāb al-Islāmī. [In Arabic]
- Muqāṭil ibn Sulaymān. (2002). *Tafsīr Muqāṭil ibn Sulaymān*. Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī. [In Arabic]
- Makarem Shirazi, N. (1993). *Tafsīr-e Nemuneh*. Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah. [In Persian]
- Maybodi, A. al-F. R. al-D. (1993). *Kashf al-Asrār wa ‘Uddat al-Abrār*. Amīr Kabīr. [In Persian]
- al-Maydānī, A. al-R. Ḥ. (1982). *Ma’ārij al-Tafakkur wa Daqā’iq al-Tadabbur*. Dār al-Qalam. [In Arabic]
- al-Nawawī, M. (1997). *Marāḥ Labīd li-Kashf Ma’nā al-Qur’ān al-Majīd*. Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah. [In Arabic]
- Nahavandi, M. (2007). *Nafahāt al-Raḥmān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*. Mu’assasat al-Bi’tḥah. [In Persian]
- Muslim al-Naysābūrī. (n.d.). *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī. [In Arabic]
- Hawwārī, H. ibn Muḥakkam. (2005). *Tafsīr Kitāb Allāh al-‘Azīz*. Dār al-Baṣā’ir. [In Arabic]
- al-Yazīdī, ‘A. ibn Yaḥyā. (1985). *Gharīb al-Qur’ān wa Tafsīruh*. ‘Ālam al-Kutub. [In Arabic]

How to cite:

Shamkhi, Mina & Babaahmadi Milani, Zohreh & Masoudian, Aref. (2025). The Historical Evolution of the Interpretation of “Sāq Allāh” in the Views of Classical and Contemporary Qur’anic Exegetes. *Quran, Culture And Civilization*, 7 (2), 73-98. <http://doi.org/10.22034/jksl.2025.532076.1478>