

Mu'tazilah and Sunnah: An Analysis of Mu'tazilite Thought on the Sunnah

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Abstract

This paper aims to explain the Mu'tazilite perspective on their perception of the Sunnah as the second source of law after the Qur'an. To achieve this, the author employs a library research method to understand the development of Mu'tazilite thought regarding the use of the Sunnah. The research findings show that the Mu'tazilah do not reject the Sunnah as a whole but rather question the legal authority of *hadith Ahad* (single transmission hadith). The implications of this research suggest that it is essential for every Ahl al-Sunnah to view Mu'tazilah as a school that uses the Sunnah, albeit with different interpretations. Understanding this, it is advisable for hadith scholars not to be averse to the works of the Mu'tazilah.

Keywords: Mu'tazilah, Sunnah, *Hadith Ahad*, Islamic law, Ahl al-Sunnah, library research, interpretation

INTRODUCTION

The Sunnah is understood as the second source of Islamic law after the Qur'an. To highlight the importance of this, there is a famous adage that says, "The Qur'an is in greater need of the Hadith than the Hadith is in need of the Qur'an." The meaning behind this is that the Qur'an cannot be interpreted without being accompanied by the Hadith. However, this does not apply to the Hadith, as the Hadith can explain itself independently.

In practice, however, Hadiths are not always held in such high regard. In fact, some groups have even denied their authenticity, leading many to question the Hadith as the second authoritative source of law after the Qur'an. Upon further investigation, it becomes clear that one such group questioning the authority of the Hadith is the Mu'tazilah. This group, which believes that the Qur'an alone should serve as a guide for future generations, is often labeled as "deniers of the Sunnah," while Ash-Shafi'i referred to them as "al-thaifat allati raddat al-akhbar" (the group that rejected the reports).

From the perspective of their beliefs, those who deny the Sunnah can be divided into three categories. First, those who reject the Sunnah entirely; second, those who reject the Hadith except for those that contain teachings explicitly found in the Qur'an; and third, those who accept *Hadith Ahad* (single-transmission hadiths) and only accept *Mutawatir* (mass-transmitted) Hadiths. According to Daud Rasyid, the groups rejecting the Sunnah can also be divided into three categories: first, those who deny the Sunnah in its entirety; second, those who reject parts of the

Sunnah; and third, those who deny the Sunnah that has an interrupted chain of narration (broken isnad).

The Mu'tazilah are a key group that only accepts certain Hadiths, particularly those that are *Mutawatir*, while rejecting *Hadith Ahad*. Although some scholars, such as Azami, note that there is confusion over whether the Mu'tazilah can truly be considered a school of Hadith rejection, it is clear that their position is rooted in rationalist thought. The Mu'tazilah, who regard themselves as rationalists, believe that '*Aql* (reason) plays a critical role in understanding the Qur'an, which they argue does not require Hadith to be comprehended. The Qur'an itself encourages the use of reason and investigation of natural phenomena to uncover the hidden secrets within, as seen in verses like Q.S. Ash-Shu'ara: 28, Q.S. Az-Zumar: 18, Al-Jinn: 4, Q.S. As-Saffat: 138 and 155, and Q.S. Al-Mudathir: 21.

Given their rationalist approach, the Mu'tazilah often reject texts that seem irrational or incompatible with reason. For example, they reject Hadiths such as the one about the Prophet Muhammad splitting the moon, or Hadiths describing water flowing from his fingers or stones glorifying him in his hand. This rationalist stance was also echoed in the 19th century by figures such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898). He asserted that only *Mutawatir* Hadiths could be accepted as valid, and even then, he accepted only five such Hadiths. At the same time, Muhammad Abduh in Egypt was similarly skeptical of Hadith, believing that only *Mutawatir* Hadiths could be considered a source of legal authority.

The views of modernist thinkers align closely with the rationalist views of the Mu'tazilah. As a result, these modernist figures are often referred to as the *Neo-Mu'tazilah*. Their positions, which diverge from those of the majority of Sunni scholars, are often seen as a rejection of the Sunnah. However, it is crucial to recognize that they do have a specific methodology in determining which Hadiths they accept as sources of legal authority. The question then arises: Can the selection of only *Mutawatir* Hadiths be categorized as a rejection of the Sunnah?

METHOD

The research method employed in this analysis is a *library research* approach. This method is used to explore historical, doctrinal, and theological sources related to the Mu'tazilah's views on the Sunnah. The research draws on a variety of classical Islamic texts, including works from the Mu'tazilah scholars themselves, as well as critiques from later Islamic thinkers who have either supported or challenged the Mu'tazilah's rationalist approach. This method allows for an in-depth understanding of how Mu'tazilah thought has evolved and how it contrasts with mainstream Sunni perspectives on the role of the Sunnah in Islamic jurisprudence.

The narrative method, spanning five key stages, provides a structured examination of the Mu'tazilah's stance on Hadith and their rejection of certain forms of Sunnah. The first stage focuses on the historical development of the Mu'tazilah as a theological school and their emphasis on '*Aql* (reason) as the guiding principle in understanding the Qur'an. The second stage examines their specific rejection of *Hadith Ahad*, based on their belief in the necessity of rational

verification for religious texts. The third stage explores the broader implications of their rejection of certain Hadiths, including their criticism of supernatural or miraculous reports in the Hadith literature.

The fourth stage analyzes the response from other Islamic scholars, particularly those within the Sunni tradition, to the Mu'tazilah's stance. This includes the development of counter-arguments and the eventual mainstream rejection of the Mu'tazilah as a heterodox group within Islamic thought. The final stage of the narrative method addresses the impact of modernist thinkers such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Abduh, who adopted a similar rationalist approach to Hadith. This section discusses the implications of modernism in Islam and its potential return to Mu'tazilah-style skepticism toward the Sunnah.

The paper aims to clarify whether the modern rejection of *Hadith Ahad*—by both the Mu'tazilah and modernist thinkers—can indeed be classified as a rejection of the Sunnah in its entirety. The research method seeks to answer this question by examining both historical and contemporary perspectives on the role of the Hadith in Islamic law and practice.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Sunnah

The Sunnah refers to the legacy of the Prophet Muhammad to his followers, which includes his words, actions, and tacit approvals, as recorded by his companions. This has served as the foundation for various perceptions and frameworks for thinking and acting in all matters related to religion. The Sunnah is also regarded as the second source of authority in Islam, one that cannot be replaced by any other authority, and it can only be substituted when it does not speak to a specific issue.

The position of the Sunnah is so vital that it cannot be arbitrarily replaced, changed, or diminished. However, in practice, there are contextual interpretations of the Sunnah, which are not considered as alterations or reductions. As Fazlur Rahman asserts, the Sunnah is merely a term for behavior, and its practice does not always need to be formal or textually exact, allowing for differences in application based on context. This explains why the Sunnah may vary depending on its location or situation.

As explained by Abu Zahw, the Sunnah is one of the divine revelations brought by Angel Jibril to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Abu Zahw supports his view with the Qur'anic verse: "*Nor does he speak of [his own] desire. It is not but a revelation revealed*" (Q.S. An-Najm: 3-4). Furthermore, Abu Zahw clarifies that there are two types of revelation: First, *wahyu al-iha'* (inspired revelation), and second, *wahyu al-Mûha bihi* (the revealed

words, which are of two types): 1) The revelation whose words are recited (the Qur'an), and 2) The revelation whose words are not recited (the Sunnah).

This explanation clearly refutes the total rejection of Hadith by those who deny it, because the Sunnah, in essence, is also a form of revelation that was not recited in words and can only be applied through the Prophet Muhammad's words, actions, and statements.

Mu'tazilah

The Mu'tazilah is a theological school that emerged in the first century of Hijrah in Basrah. Initially, it was a reactionary movement against the Khawarij, who were extreme and fanatical, as well as against the complacent ethical stance of the Murji'ah political group. However, as the movement developed, Mu'tazilah theology increasingly incorporated Greek logic and methodology, which led to it being regarded as a rationalist and liberal school of thought in Islamic theology, due to its emphasis on logical argumentation.

The Mu'tazilah originated due to a disagreement between Wasil bin Atha and his teacher Hasan al-Basri regarding the status of people who commit major sins. While Hasan al-Basri maintained that those who commit major sins are still considered believers, Wasil bin Atha believed that such individuals would be placed in an intermediate state in the afterlife, neither in Hell nor in Paradise (*al-manzilah bayn al-manzilatayn*).

The Mu'tazilah once became the official theological school of the government during the Abbasid caliphates, especially under the reigns of Caliphs al-Ma'mun and al-Mu'tasim. During this time, the Mu'tazilah reached its peak, but after Caliph al-Mutawakkil came to power, the school of thought lost its official status. As the state-backed school of theology, the Mu'tazilah's teachings were closely tied to political power and were used as tools to strengthen the authority and legitimacy of the ruling regime. This is evident in the implementation of *al-Mihnah* (the trial), which initially aimed to align different theological views but later evolved into an attempt to force acceptance of Mu'tazilah beliefs, particularly the notion that the Qur'an was created and not eternal.

The era of *al-Mihnah* under Caliphs al-Ma'mun (170–218 AH / 785–833 CE) and al-Mu'tasim (218–228 AH / 833–842 CE) is seen as one of the reasons for the decline in popularity of Mu'tazilah theology. During this period, many scholars were imprisoned for differing views on theology, particularly their rejection of the belief that the Qur'an is eternal. When Caliph al-Mutawakkil ascended to the throne in 847 CE, the Mu'tazilah's position as the state's official school of thought was completely revoked, and the movement had no further protection from the state. This period marked the rise of opposition against the Mu'tazilah, who were seen as politically and theologically defeated.

Two events stand out as marking the tarnishing of Mu'tazilah's status: First, the *Mihnah* trial and second, the Mu'tazilah's assertion that the Qur'an is a created entity. These two "stains" almost led to the complete erosion of the Mu'tazilah's position as a vital theological school in Islam. Had these two controversies not occurred, it is possible that the Mu'tazilah school would have been on par with the Ash'arite school of theology today.

Despite this, the Mu'tazilah played an important role in defending Islam from external attacks with their logical arguments. The spirit of the Mu'tazilah re-emerged in the 19th century, with figures such as Muhammad Abduh in Egypt and Sayyid Ahmad Khan in India-Pakistan, alongside other Western-educated Muslim intellectuals.

The Five Principles of Mu'tazilah

1. Tawhid

Tawhid, the oneness of God, is the core belief of the Mu'tazilah. It refers to the purity of the essence of God; in their view, God does not have attributes. Wasil bin Atha stated that it is impossible to ascribe attributes to God that exist independently from His essence, because God's essence is eternal (*qadim*). Therefore, attributes must also be eternal, which is why, to preserve the purity of Tawhid or the oneness of God, it cannot be said that God has separate attributes.

The Mu'tazilah firmly believe in the oneness of God, asserting that God is one. However, they differ from the majority of Muslims in their explanation of the concept of Tawhid, seeking a harmony between revelation and reason. They argue that God's attributes are not separate from His essence. In other words, God is All-Knowing because of His essence, not because He possesses knowledge as something separate from Himself. This concept of Tawhid is explained in the works of the Mu'tazilah scholar, the supreme judge, Abd al-Jabbar ibn Ahmad.

In the explanation of *al-Ushul al-Khamsah* regarding *al-Jism* (the body), it is stated that a "body" is something measurable, occupying space and time, with distinct left and right sides. Thus, God is described as non-corporeal, meaning He is not measurable, does not have weight, nor does He have left or right sides, and is not subject to the physical properties that apply to created beings.

To reinforce this explanation, the Mu'tazilah provide several arguments: First, if God were a body, there would be limitations on His abilities, as a body is restricted by the measurements of time and space, whereas one of God's attributes is *Qadir* (All-Powerful). Second, if God were *Qadir 'ala Kulli Shay'* (the determiner of everything) with a body, how could He also be *Qadir li Zatihi* (the determiner through His essence)? The Mu'tazilah

believe that this would imply the existence of two separate powers, which is impossible.

2. Al-'Adl

Al-'Adl, the principle of God's justice, is another key concept in Mu'tazilah theology. The term *al-'adl* in the Mu'tazilah understanding is categorized into two meanings. First, it refers to actions that are beneficial to the doer or others, and second, it is attributed to God, signifying that God only does what is good, and it is not befitting for Him to engage in wrongdoing. God is aware of evil but does not will it.

The Mu'tazilah reject the doctrine of *Jabariyyah*, which asserts that humans are not free in their actions. They argue that punishment for a lack of freedom is unjust, as it is meaningless to command something and then force someone to act contrary to the command. According to the Mu'tazilah, humans are responsible for their deeds, and God is incapable of weakness. Thus, it is human beings who create their actions, but God gives them the power (*qudrah*) to do so, and He alone has the perfect ability to retract what He has given.

3. Al-Wa'ad and Al-Wa'id (Promise and Threat)

Al-Wa'ad and Al-Wa'id, the principles of promise and threat, represent the belief that God's promise of reward for good deeds and the threat of punishment for evil deeds are not impossible. The Mu'tazilah believe that God's promise of reward for good deeds will surely occur, and His promise of punishment for evil will also be fulfilled.

When a believer dies after having obeyed God's laws and repented, they are entitled to reward and compensation. However, anything beyond this reward is referred to as *Tafadhdhul* (grace). On the other hand, if a person dies without repenting for major sins, they are deserving of eternal punishment, though this punishment may be less severe than that of the disbelievers.

4. Al-Manzilah Baina al-Manzilatain

Al-Manzilah Baina al-Manzilatain, also known as *Al-Ismu Baina al-Ismain* (a position between two names) or *Al-Hukmu Baina al-Hukmain* (a judgment between two judgments), refers to the position of someone who has committed a major sin but is neither classified as a believer nor a disbeliever. This principle concerns those who commit acts of disobedience and are placed in a position between the faithful and the disbelievers. The Mu'tazilah believe that such individuals can still be referred to as Muslims, not to praise or honor them, but to distinguish them from the *dhimmis* (non-Muslims under protection).

The Mu'tazilah also argue that a person who commits sinful acts can still be seen as part of the "People of the Qiblah" (those who face the Ka'bah in prayer), acknowledging their intermediate status and the possibility of being rewarded if they repent, or punished if they die in defiance of God.

5. **Al-Amr bi al-Ma'ruf wa Nahy 'an al-Munkar**
Al-Amr bi al-Ma'ruf wa an-Nahy 'an al-Munkar, the principle of commanding what is good and forbidding what is wrong, asserts that all Muslims are obliged to promote and spread the teachings of Islam. The Mu'tazilah applied this principle vigorously, especially in the face of *Zindiq* (heretics) emerging during the early Abbasid period, whose aim was to undermine Islam. The Mu'tazilah also actively criticized scholars of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and Hadith using various arguments or, at times, through force and the power of the state, seeking to suppress opposing views and to promote the Mu'tazilite ideology.

Mu'tazilah Figures

The Mu'tazilah school is one of the oldest and largest theological schools in Islam, playing a significant role in the intellectual history of the Islamic world. It emerged in the early first century of the Hijrah in Basrah, a center of learning and civilization in early Islam, where foreign cultures and various religious ideas met.

The rise of the Mu'tazilah movement marked an important stage in the intellectual development of Islam. Although not a purely rationalist group, the Mu'tazilah were pioneers in systematically developing the basic teachings of Islam. Their rationalistic approach was based on the belief that reason had an equal standing with revelation in understanding religion. This approach was a natural consequence of their desire for systematic thinking. By the end of the Umayyad Caliphate, there was already a noticeable wave of Hellenistic influence among the Muslim community, and the Mu'tazilah, with their rational approach, eagerly embraced this philosophical invasion.

As the Mu'tazilah developed, various subgroups arose, including *Al-Wasiliyah*, *Al-Amiriyah*, *Al-Hindiliyah*, *Al-Nidzamiyah*, *Al-Ma'mariyah*, *Al-Basyariyah*, *Al-Hasyamiyah*, *Al-Marduriyah*, *Al-Ja'fariyah*, *Al-Aswariyah*, *Al-Askafiyah*, *Al-Khâbatiyah wal Haditsiah*, *Al-Mauyisiyah*, *Al-Sâlihiyah*, *Al-Jahidziyah*, *Al-Syahâmiyah*, *Al-Khayâthiyah*, *Al-Jabâiyah*, *Al-Ka'abiyah*, *Al-Bahisyimiyah*, and *Al-Hamâriyah*.

During the caliphates of al-Ma'mun and al-Mu'tasim, the Mu'tazilah became the official state school, leading to differences in the development of Mu'tazilite thought between the scholars of Baghdad and those of Basrah. The Mu'tazilah in Baghdad used their ideology as a political tool to gain power, while those in Basrah were more focused on the development of knowledge.

Among the prominent Mu'tazilah figures was Al-Adzamlah, a Basrah scholar, who, according to M.M. Azami, opposed the use of *hadith ahad* (single narrations), although according to Al-Hayyat, some of the reports he rejected were considered fabricated.

The Conflict Between Mu'tazilah and Ahl al-Sunnah

The reasons presented by Ibn Hanbal in defending his view are based on the use of the word *ja'ala* (to make) in the verse, instead of *khuliqa* (to create), as found in the verse of Allah: *Indeed, We have made the Qur'an in the Arabic language so that you may understand it* (Q.S. Az-Zukhruf: 3).

The Hadith also uses the word *kataba* (to write), thus explicitly there is no verse or hadith that says the Qur'an is created. However, according to the Mu'tazilah, the use of *ja'ala* (to make) implies the act of making something, which indicates that the thing made is new. If something is new, it means it is created, as stated in the verse of Allah: *No new revelation comes to them from their Lord except that they listen to it, while they are playing* (Q.S. Al-Anbiya': 2).

In the view of the Mu'tazilah, the *kalam* (speech) of Allah, which is *hadith* (created), refers to the arrangement of letters, words written in the mushaf, and the sound recited by the *qari* (reciter). Ibn Hanbal, on the other hand, considers all of this to be *qadim* (eternal). However, the Mu'tazilah acknowledge the eternal nature of the divine speech of Allah that exists beyond the physical manifestation of the written text or its meaning.

CONCLUSION

The conflict between Ahl al-Sunnah and the Mu'tazilah is not about agreeing or disagreeing with the use of the Sunnah as a source of law, but rather a theological conflict, along with the Mihnah conflict that caused significant harm to Ahl al-Sunnah. Additionally, the rational thinking of the Mu'tazilah, which led them to question the use of *hadith ahad* as a legal proof, is a normal position. Even the scholars of Hadith (Muhaddithun) always consider both *mutawatir* (mass-transmitted) and *ahad* (single-transmitted) hadiths in their deliberations.

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