

Dr Doaa M. Baumi

Negotiating Biblical Narratives in Mu'tazilite Exegesis: Al-Zamakhshari's Epistemological Framework and the Question of Isra'iliyat

The Qur'an, as a foundational text, has been a central focus of scholarly engagement, yielding diverse interpretative traditions across different eras and theological schools. This paper contributes to the discourse by examining the Mu'tazilite school of thought's approach to Isra'iliyat (biblical narratives) within Quranic exegesis, with a particular focus on the epistemological and theological strategies employed by al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144) in his seminal commentary, *al-Kashshaf*.

The Isra'iliyat, identifiable as narratives of biblical origin that entered Islamic exegetical discourse, have long been a subject of debate among Muslim scholars. While early exegetes such as al-Tabari (d. 923) incorporated these traditions into their works as historical material or explanatory supplements to Quranic verses, the Mu'tazilite exegetes adopted a more critical stance. This paper explores how al-Zamakhshari, a prominent rationalist scholar and a leading figure of the Mu'tazilite tradition, addressed Isra'iliyat in his exegetical methodology. His approach was not one of outright rejection but rather one of categorization and epistemological scrutiny, aimed at delineating the boundaries between authentic Quranic teachings and extraneous traditions.

The study situates its inquiry within the broader debate on the origins of the term Isra'iliyat in Islamic scholarship. It examines whether this terminology was used by the Mu'tazilite exegetes or if they developed alternative frameworks for engaging with biblical narratives. Scholars often credit Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) with coining the term *ahadith isra'iliyya* to describe biblical traditions in Quranic exegesis while proposing methods for evaluating their validity. This paper investigates whether Mu'tazilite exegetes like al-Zamakhshari employed similar classifications or implicitly addressed these narratives through their rationalist theological commitments.

Through a close reading of *al-Kashshaf*, this study highlights how al-Zamakhshari engaged with Isra'iliyat while upholding the Mu'tazilite principles of rationalism and divine justice (*'adl*). It investigates his methods of categorizing Isra'iliyat as either acceptable or unacceptable, based on their coherence with Quranic hermeneutics and rational inquiry. By doing so, he created an evaluative framework that engaged with pre-Islamic traditions without endorsing them as doctrinally binding.

In tracing the historical and theological contours of Isra'iliyat in Mu'tazilite exegesis, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on the epistemological boundaries of Quranic interpretation. It underscores how figures like al-Zamakhshari negotiated complex theological and hermeneutical challenges, offering a model of critical engagement that remains relevant today.



Dr Doaa M. Baumi

University of Tübingen

Dr Doaa M. Baumi is a scholar of Islamic studies specialising in Muslim-Christian relations, scriptural reasoning, and interfaith engagement. She earned her PhD in Theology and Religion from the University of Birmingham, where her research focused on Muslim perceptions of biblical narratives between the 7th and 14th centuries. She also holds a Master's degree in Islamic Studies from the University of Chicago and a Bachelor's degree in Islamic Philosophy and Theology from Al-Azhar University.

Dr. Baumi has extensive teaching and research experience, serving as a seminar tutor at the University of Birmingham and a faculty member at Al-Azhar University. She has also worked as a research assistant on the Oral History Project at the University of Birmingham and has led interfaith dialogue initiatives through the UK-Egypt Scriptural Reasoning Project.

A recipient of multiple prestigious scholarships, including the British Council in Cairo Full Scholarship and a Fulbright Scholarship, Dr. Baumi has actively contributed to academic and public discussions on interfaith dialogue. Her forthcoming book, *Navigating Biblical Narratives in Islamic Thought* (De Gruyter, 2026), explores early Muslim engagement with biblical figures. She has also published research on scriptural reasoning, teaching Islam across cultures, and Christian-Muslim historical relations.