

A Comparative Study of the Ontological and Epistemological Foundations of the Inner Layers (Butun) of the Qur'an in the Thought of 'Allama Tabataba'i and Imam Khomeini

Seyyed Masoud Omrani¹ , Mostafa AhmadiFar² 

1. Corresponding Author, Department of Islamic Education, Farhangian University, Tehran, Iran. Email: emrani@cfu.ac.ir

2. Assistant Professor, Department of Qur'anic Sciences and Hadith, Al-Mustafa International University, Qom, Iran. Email: 0945367430@miu.ac.ir

Article Info

Article type:
Research Article

Article history:

Received
20 February 2026
Received in revised form
13 April 2026
Accepted
23 April 2026
Available online
22 June 2026

Keywords:

inner layers of the
Qur'an (butun al-
Qur'an),
Imami theology,
'Allama Tabataba'i,
Imam Khomeini,
outward and inward
(zahir wa batin),
ontology,
epistemology

ABSTRACT

This study compares the ontological and epistemological foundations of the Qur'an's inner layers in the thought of 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī and Imam Khomeini. The central question analyzes fundamental differences in understanding these inner layers' levels, providing a systematic framework for comparing both perspectives. Using a descriptive-analytical, comparative method based on a four-stage model (independent description, convergent comparison, explaining commonalities and divergences, evaluation and theorizing), it examines their key works: *Al-Mizān*, *Qur'ān dar Islām*, *Adāb al-Ṣalāt*, *Sirr al-Ṣalāt*, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Hamd*, *Chihil Ḥadīth*, and *Miṣbāḥ al-Hidāya*. Findings indicate that while both thinkers affirm the Qur'an's existential levels, multiple inner layers, and longitudinal continuity between outward (ẓāhir) and inward (bāṭin) dimensions, they differ significantly regarding the inner dimension's reality and access to it. Ontologically, 'Allāma, within transcendent theosophy, views the Qur'an as a gradational (tashkīkī) reality descended from the Kitāb Maknūn (Hidden Book) to verbal form. Conversely, Imam Khomeini's mystical approach views the Qur'an as the manifestation of the Greatest Divine Name (ism a'zam), linked to wilāya (spiritual authority) and the Perfect Human (insān kāmil). Epistemologically, 'Allāma emphasizes intra-Qur'ānic interpretation, contemplation, demonstrative reason, and traditions, treating soul purification as auxiliary. Conversely, Imam Khomeini regards soul purification and spiritual wayfaring as essential, and mystical vision as the primary means to discover inner layers. Comparatively, 'Allāma's approach is text-centered and philosophical-exegetical, showing greater methodological rigor, whereas Imam Khomeini's approach is mystical-soteriological, emphasizing existential and pedagogical dimensions of Qur'ānic understanding. Finally, evaluating both perspectives, this study proposes a synthetic stage-based theory comprising three inner levels (semantic, referential, existential) and four validity criteria (consistency with outward meaning, harmony with the Qur'ānic system, tradition-based verification, and relative transmissibility) as a novel framework for philosophical-mystical studies of Qur'ānic inner layers.

Cite this article: Omrani, S. M., & AhmadiFar, M. (2026). A Comparative Study of the Ontological and Epistemological Foundations of the Inner Layers (Butun) of the Qur'an in the Thought of 'Allama Tabataba'i and Imam Khomeini. *Theology Journal*, 13(1), 243-279. <https://doi.org/10.22034/pke.2026.23639.2079>



© Author (s) retain the copyright. Publisher: Al-Mustafa International University.
DOI: 10.22034/pke.2026.23639.2079

1. Introduction

The question of the inner layers (buṭūn) of the Qur'ān—the existence of deep layers of meaning beneath the outward expression of the verses—constitutes one of the most fundamental topics in Qur'ānic sciences within Imāmī thought, rooted in widely transmitted traditions (riwāyāt) from the Prophet (PBUH) and the Imams (AS). This theory offers a philosophical response to the challenge of the Qur'ān's eternality and universality, accounting for its capacity to address diverse audiences across time and place through multiple levels of meaning. Among contemporary thinkers, two prominent and influential perspectives exist: the philosophical-exegetical perspective of 'Allāma Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī (author of *Al-Mīzān*) and the mystical-soteriological ('irfānī-sulūkī) perspective of Imam Khomeini.

The central research question of this study is: What are the fundamental differences in the ontological and epistemological foundations of the "inner layers of the Qur'ān" in the intellectual systems of these two thinkers, and what implications do these differences have for the methodology of Qur'ānic exegesis? The significance of this research lies in its clarification of the conceptual confusion between "inner layer" (baṭn), "exegesis" (tafsīr), and "hermeneutical interpretation" (ta'wīl), while revealing the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective. By presenting a synthetic theory, it creates a bridge between philosophical rationality and mystical spirituality in understanding the Qur'ān. The innovation of this article is its systematic focus on ontological and epistemological foundations and its presentation of a practical three-stage model for understanding the inner layers.

2. Methodology

This research is fundamental-theoretical in purpose and descriptive-analytical in nature, employing a comparative approach. Data collection was conducted through library research, consulting the principal works of the two thinkers, including *Al-Mīzān* and *Qur'ān dar Islām* (for 'Allāma), and *Ādāb al-Ṣalāt*, *Sirr al-Ṣalāt*, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ḥamd*, *Chihil Ḥadīth*, and *Miṣbāḥ al-Hidāya* (for Imam Khomeini). The method of content analysis is qualitative, based on a four-stage comparative model: (1) independent description of each thinker's perspective in the domains of ontology and epistemology; (2) comparison based on homologous components; (3) explanation of commonalities and divergences; and (4) evaluation and presentation of a synthetic theory.

3. Findings

The findings are organized into two main sections:

3.1. Fundamental Commonalities

Both thinkers share agreement on the following principles: (1) acceptance of the principle of inner layers for the Qur'ān; (2) the existential reality of the Qur'ān (not merely a textual composition); (3) the multiplicity of levels of

inner layers; (4) the longitudinal (tūlī) continuity between the outward and inward (absence of contradiction); (5) the necessity of passing beyond the outward to reach the inward; (6) the non-invalidity of the outward by the inward; (7) the conditionality of understanding the inner layer; (8) the use of contemplation (tadabbur), reason (‘aql), and traditions (riwāyāt); (9) the central role of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS) in discovering the inner layers; (10) the non-absolute exclusivity of understanding inner layers to the infallibles; and (11) the rejection of applying a single word to more than one meaning (istimāl al-lafz fī akthar min ma‘nā).

3.2. Fundamental Divergences

In Ontological Foundations: ‘Allāma, within the framework of transcendent theosophy (al-ḥikma al-muta‘āliya), regards the Qur’ān as a "gradational existential reality" (ḥaqīqat-i wujūdī-yi tashkīkī) that has descended from the level of the Kitāb Maknūn (Hidden Book) to Arabic words. In contrast, Imam Khomeini, with a mystical (‘irfānī) approach, regards the Qur’ān as the "manifestation of the Greatest Divine Name" (tajallī-yi ism a‘zam-i ilāhī) and a reality connected to the "station of absolute spiritual authority" (maqām-i wilāyat-i muṭlaqa) and the "Perfect Human" (insān kāmil). ‘Allāma regards the inner dimension as the more intense level of the Qur’ān's existence in the world of the Divine Command (‘ālam al-amr), while Imam Khomeini identifies the ultimate inner dimension of the Qur’ān as the reality of wilāya itself. Furthermore, in ‘Allāma's thought, the human being is the "discoverer" (kāshif) of the Qur’ān's reality, whereas in Imam Khomeini's thought, the Perfect Human is the "manifestation" (maẓhar) of the Qur’ān's reality.

In Epistemological Foundations: ‘Allāma establishes the primary means of accessing the inner layers as "interpretation of the Qur’ān through the Qur’ān" (tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi-l-Qur’ān), "contemplation" (tadabbur), and "demonstrative reason" (‘aql-i burhānī), regarding the purification of the soul (tahārat-i nafs) as a facilitating and preparatory factor. Imam Khomeini, however, identifies "purification of the soul and spiritual wayfaring" (tahdhīb-i nafs wa sulūk-i ma‘nawī) as essential conditions and "mystical vision" (shuhūd-i ‘irfānī) as the primary means of discovering the inner layers. Reason in ‘Allāma's view is an essential tool and the primary criterion of understanding; in Imam Khomeini's view, reason is preparatory and only opens the way to the threshold of mystical vision. The ultimate objective in ‘Allāma's view is the discovery of the system of knowledge and guidance of the Qur’ān; in Imam Khomeini's view, it is spiritual transformation and the attainment of monotheism (tawḥīd).

3.3. Comparative Evaluation of Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths of ‘Allāma's Perspective: ‘Allāma's view is stronger in terms of methodological rigor, scholarly coherence, rational explanation, and evaluability. It does not neglect the soteriological dimension and spiritual experience, though

in practice, a conceptual confusion has occurred between "semantic inner layer" (baṭn-i ma'nā'ī) and "referential inner layer" (baṭn-i muṣdāqī).

Strengths of Imam Khomeini's Perspective: Imam Khomeini's view is distinguished by its spiritual depth, emphasis on the pedagogical dimension, and the connection between the Qur'ān and human spiritual wayfaring. However, it is weaker in terms of objective criteria, practical applicability (particularly the ambiguity in applying the seven levels of descent to specific verses), and the risk of subjective interpretations (tafwīhāt-i dhawqī).

4. Conclusion and Synthetic Theory

The outcome of the comparative analysis demonstrates that the two perspectives are not in complete contradiction but rather operate at two different levels of analysis (philosophical-exegetical versus mystical-soteriological), and they possess the capacity for integration. On this basis, this article presents a stage-based synthetic theory (naẓariya-yi tarkībī-yi marḥala-yī) comprising three successive levels for the inner layers of the Qur'ān and four criteria of validation:

The Three Stages of Understanding Inner Layers:

Stage One (Semantic Inner Layer — Baṭn-i Ma'nā'ī): The discovery of longitudinal layers of meaning through the tools of contemplation, interpretation of the Qur'ān through the Qur'ān, and demonstrative reason (derived from 'Allāma's method).

Stage Two (Referential Inner Layer — Baṭn-i Muṣdāqī): The application of verses to inner referents throughout history, relying upon authoritative traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS) and scholarly reasoning (ijtihād) (complementing 'Allāma's view).

Stage Three (Existential Inner Layer — Baṭn-i Wujūdī): The mystical vision of the Qur'ān's reality in the higher levels of existence as the manifestation of divine names, through the purification of the soul, spiritual wayfaring, and unveiling (kashf) (derived from Imam Khomeini's view).

Four Criteria for Validating Inner Layers:

Every claimed inner layer must be measured against:

Consistency with the outward meaning (sāzgārī bā zāhir-i āya);

Harmony with the overall system of the Qur'ān (hamāhangī bā niẓām-i kullī-yi Qur'ān);

Verification or non-contradiction with authoritative traditions (ta'yīd yā 'adam-i mukhālifat bā rawāyāt-i mu'tabar);

Relative transmissibility (qābilīyat-i intiqāl-i nisfī) — that is, the capacity to be explained to others.

This synthetic model, while preserving 'Allāma's exegetical methodological rigor, also encompasses the existential and pedagogical dimension

emphasized by Imam Khomeini, and may serve as a novel framework in the philosophical and mystical studies of the inner layers of the Qur'ān.

Declarations

Authors' Contributions: This article is single-authored.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: The author expresses gratitude to the esteemed editor and reviewers of the journal for their guidance. Thanks are also extended to the respondents who shared their perspectives during the preliminary stage. No other individual or institution played a role in resource provision or research execution.

Ethical Considerations: Not specified.

Funding: This article received no financial support from any organization or institution. All costs were covered by the author.

Conflict of Interest: Not specified.

Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies Statement: Artificial intelligence (OpenAI's GPT-4o) was used in a limited capacity for translation, language editing, and formatting. AI played no role in the production of original content, philosophical analysis, inference of findings, or presentation of the synthetic theory. All scholarly content is the result of the author's independent reasoning and writing.