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Metaphors of Prophetic Stories in the Quran: A Study of Ahmad Muhammad Khalafullah's Imagination with al-Ghazali's Epistemology

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Abstract

*This study examines the interpretation of the stories of the prophets in the Qur'an through an epistemological critique of Ahmad Muhammad Khalafullah's literary-historical approach using al-Ghazālī's theory of imagination (al-khayāl). Although there has been extensive discussion of the narratives of the prophets in the Qur'an and literary approaches, previous studies have rarely examined the epistemological implications of imagination within Khalafullah's literary-historical framework, particularly in relation to the ontological truth of revelation. Khalafullah places the imaginative dimension in Qur'anic stories as a literary element that does not depend on historical truth, thus raising debates about the ontological status of revelatory stories. Meanwhile, al-Ghazālī, through Mishkāṭ al-Anwār and Ihya' 'Ulūm al-Dīn, asserts that imagination is an epistemic medium that connects sensory reality and spiritual essence, so it cannot be reduced to fiction. This study **aims** to critically reassess Khalafullah's position by employing al-Ghazālī's hierarchical epistemology of truth. This study employs a **qualitative literature** based method with descriptive critical analysis of primary works of Khalafullah and al-Ghazālī, supported by contemporary Quranic studies. The **findings** demonstrate that al-Ghazālī's epistemology of al-khayāl offers a corrective framework to Khalafullah's reductionist tendency by situating Qur'anic narratives within a layered structure of truth encompassing literal, moral, and spiritual dimensions. This integrative framework preserves the pedagogical function of imagination without negating the ontological status of revelation. This study **contributes** to strengthening contemporary interpretation methodology by offering an integrative perspective between literary aspects and revelatory truth. At an international level, the study offers a conceptual alternative for ongoing debates on scripture, narrative, and imagination across Islamic Studies, religious, hermeneutics, and comparative theology.*

Keywords: Khalafullah; al-Ghazālī; al-Khayāl; Ontology; Revelation.

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Introduction

The Quran not only provides moral and legal guidance, but also presents a wealth of language and narratives that contain literary beauty and depth of meaning. One form of this uniqueness lies in the use of metaphors, which are linguistic expressions that are not only aesthetic, but also contain many deep symbolic meanings and are rich in theological messages and values. Metaphors in the Quran serve not only to beautify the style of delivery, but also to inspire awareness and spiritual reflection in its readers. From a rhetorical perspective, Qur'anic discourse consistently align linguistic expression with contextual demands, addressing both intellect and emotion in a manner that enables layered meanings to be conveyed through symbolic and metaphorical forms [1]. Shihab mentions that what needs to be underlined in reading the context of the stories in the Quran is that one should not only focus on the general content of the story, but it is also important to understand the meaning behind the sentences in order to draw lessons from them [2].

As a holy book rich in narrative, the Quran presents the stories of the prophets with a purpose that goes beyond mere historical records. These stories are used as a means of explaining the content and meaning of the Quran. The Quran itself repeatedly emphasizes its nature as *h}aq* and full of truth, as can be found in Surah Ali Imran [3]: 62:

إِنَّ هَذَا لَهُوَ الْقَصَصُ الْحَقُّ وَمَا مِنْ إِلَهٍ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

This is truly a true story. And there is no god but Allah. And Allah is the Almighty and Wise.

It is this character that has sparked a long debate regarding the tradition of interpretation, specifically between the approach to stories in the Quran that emphasizes historical aspects and another dimension that emphasizes moral and literary dimensions [2]. explains that the stories in the Quran should be understood as the holy words of Allah, having artistic value, and relating to historical truths that are described through carefully chosen words and beautiful style [3]. This debate does not merely concern metodological preferences, but reflects a deeper epistemological tension between historical referentiality and symbolic literary meaning in Qur'anic narratives.

Similiar concerns are reflected in modern hermeneutical approaches to the Qur'an, such as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's reading of text as a linguistic and cultural discourse that remains open to historical and contextual interpretation. Emphasizing the dynamic relationship between language, meaning, and revelation [4]. At the same time, methodological studies on Qur'anic rhetoric and contextual coherence demonstrate that attention to metaphor, style, and

narrative structure has long been grounded in systematic linguistic and foundational principles, rather than being a purely speculative or imaginative endeavor [5]. These discussions highlight the need for an epistemological framework capable of explaining how symbolic and imaginative forms in Qur'anic narratives may convey truth without undermining their theological and ontological validity.

In the development of modern exegesis studies, a new approach has emerged that attempts to understand the Qur'an from a literary perspective, one of which was initiated by Ahmad Muhammad Khalafullah, an Egyptian academic. Through his dissertation entitled *al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, this work attracted widespread attention, both in academic circles and among the general public, and made his name the subject of intense discussion. In his approach, he argues that much of the Qur'an is *Tamthiliyyah*, or imaginative narratives whose main purpose is not literal historical fact but rather to convey a moral message [6]. Khalafullah's research sparked prolonged controversy in Egypt because it did not place historical elements at the forefront of the stories in the Qur'an. Those who disagreed criticized and even reviled Khalafullah for denying the historical factuality of the stories in the Quran [7]. In addition to sparking controversy, this view also challenged the conventional understanding of the Quran's authority as factual truth [8].

Amidst the dynamics of this debate, the epistemology of imagination (*al-khayal*) belonging to the classical thinker al-Ghazali (d. 1111 AD) provides a relevant theoretical foundation as a counterbalance [9]. This differs from the Khalafullah style, which has the potential to reduce imagination (*qissah tamthiliyyah*) to fiction, a perspective that differs from al-Ghazali's view of *al-khayal* as a power of thought that bridges the transcendent and sensory realms [10]. From al-Ghazali's perspective, imagination functions as a translator of divine truth from the abstract into images that can be understood by the human mind, without denying the spiritual and historical reality behind it.

Therefore, this article aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the concepts of imagination and *Tamthiliyyah* in the interpretation of the stories of the prophets according to Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah, as well as to describe the relevance of al-Ghazali's epistemology as a tool for critiquing Khalafullah's interpretation, especially in relation to the aspects of historicity and spiritual reality. Previous studies related to Khalafullah's thoughts have mostly focused on literary analysis or general theological criticism. Such as studies on the application of a literary approach to Quranic narratives [11],[12] etc. Meanwhile, studies on al-Ghazali have mostly examined his Sufism and philosophical aspects [10],[13], but they are still rarely directly linked as a critical analytical framework for modern thinkers such as Khalafullah in the realm of interpreting Quranic

stories. Consequently, the epistemological implications of imagination in relation remain insufficiently explored within Khalafullah's interpretive framework. Recent studies have increasingly called for a deeper epistemological examination of imagination, symbolism, and ontology in Qur'anic interpretation, particularly when engaging modern literary approaches [14],[15].

This article serves as a bridge between two different eras of thought that share strong thematic relevance. The main distinction of this article lies in its use of Al-Ghazālī's epistemology of *al-khayāl*, which is rarely used as a critical analytical tool for Khalafullah's theory of *Tamthiliyyah*. Thus, this article makes a significant contribution to the field of Qur'anic studies by: (1) Correcting the overly simplistic view of the stories of the prophets as mere fiction with a deeper epistemological perspective; (2) Enriching the understanding of the function of imagination in Qur'anic interpretation, both from classical and modern theological perspectives; and (3) Presenting a synthesis that can reduce the tension between literary and theological-historical approaches in the interpretation of Qur'anic stories. Based on this discussion, this study is guided by the following research question: (1) How does Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah conceptualize imagination in his interpretation of prophetic stories in the Quran? (2) How can al-Ghazālī's epistemology particularly his conception of knowledge, imagination (*Khayal*), reason (*'aql*) and intuition (*Kashf*) be used to critically evaluate Khalafullah's approach?

Method

This research method is qualitative research with a library research approach that focuses on analyzing the meaning of the stories of the prophets in the Qur'an according to Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah and his criticism through Al-Ghazālī's epistemology. This approach is selected to explore conceptual meanings, epistemological assumption, and interpretive implications embedded in Quranic narrative discourse.

The primary data sources consist of Khalafullah's major works related to the concepts of imagination, metaphor, and *Tamthiliyyah* in Qur'anic stories, as well as Al-Ghazālī's works related to epistemology, hermeneutics, and interpretation. Secondary data was obtained from books, journal articles, theses, dissertations, and other relevant scientific literature. Data collection was carried out through systematic literature searches, both printed and digital, to obtain authoritative texts and scientific studies in accordance with library-based research principles. This technique is consistent with the characteristics of descriptive qualitative research as described in the qualitative research methodology literature [16].

The analytical process was carried out in three stages. First, Khalafullah's conceptualization of imagination and *Tamthiliyyah* was examined through close

textual analysis of his primary works. Second, al-Ghazālī's epistemological framework particularly his theory of *al-khayal* and the hierarchy of knowledge was reconstructed from his key texts. Third, a comparative critical analysis was employed to evaluate the epistemological compatibility and tension between the two perspectives in interpreting Quranic prophetic narratives.

Data analysis uses descriptive-analytical and comparative approaches to describe and compare the ideas of both figures, followed by an analytical critical approach to examine the textual and conceptual meanings of the Qur'anic narratives that are the focus of the research, a procedure commonly used in qualitative analytical research [16],[17]. Through this methodological framework, the study aims to move beyond descriptive comparison by offering an epistemological critique of imagination in contemporary Quranic interpretation. Data validity is maintained by using only official and verified sources, as well as cross-checking between the original text and the translation when necessary to ensure accuracy of interpretation.

Result and Discussion

Stories in the Quran from the perspective of 'Ulum al-Quran

In the tradition of 'ulum al-Qur'an, the term story comes from the word *qisṣah*, the plural of which is *qisṣas* [18]. Terminologically, it is understood as the narration of revelations about the events of previous nations, the prophets, and certain events that are true, which Allah conveyed for the purposes of guidance, lessons, and purification of the soul [3]. Classical scholars emphasize that the stories of the Qur'an are not mere literary fiction, but *Akhbar Shadiqah* (true news), because they originate from Allah [19]. In line with this, al-Suyūṭī emphasized that all the stories in the Qur'an are *Haqq* (true), regardless of whether their wisdom is known directly or not, because their truth is inherent in the status of revelation itself [20]. At this analytical stage, classical 'ulum al-Qur'an perspectives are examined to establish the foundational epistemological status of Quranic stories as truthful revelation, which serves as the baseline framework for later critical comparison.

Thus, the stories in the Quran differ fundamentally from the concept of story or fiction in the modern literary tradition [21],[22]. The stories of the Quran are not merely aesthetic tales or narratives, but rather a medium of revelatory truth directed toward pedagogical and spiritual goals, providing moral and existential lessons for its readers [23],[24], with the primary purpose of providing lessons, warnings, and moral guidance for humanity [25]. This distinction is analytically significant because it highlights the non-fictional epistemic status attributed to Quranic narratives within the classical tradition.

From the perspective of classical 'ulūm al-Qur'ān, the stories of the Qur'an can generally be classified into several main categories. First, *Qisṣas al-Anbiyā'*,

which are the stories of the prophets, covering their missionary journeys, the responses of their people, miracles, and the consequences of faith and disbelief. Second, *qīṣaṣ ghayr al-anbiyā'*, which are stories of figures or communities other than prophets, such as *Ashḥāb al-Kahf*, *Dzulqarnayn*, and previous peoples. Third, *qīṣaṣ al-wāqī'āt fī 'aṣr al-nuzūl*, which are events that occurred during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, such as the battles of *Badr*, *Uhud*, *Hunayn*, and the events of the hijrah [20],[26].

In addition to these historical categories, scholars of *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* also make a clear distinction between *qīṣaṣ* and *amthāl*. *Amthāl al-Qur'ān* are pedagogical parables or metaphors that are not intended as historical accounts, but rather as a means of explaining abstract meanings through concrete images [27]. This distinction is important because not all Qur'anic narratives are on the same historical level. This is without denying the truth of the revelation itself. Included in this are *ghaibiyah* stories, which are stories that cannot be perceived through the five senses, but are real and not fabricated fairy tales [28]. These stories are not human imagination or imaginative constructions, but rather revelatory information whose truth transcends the limits of empirical experience [29].

This analytical mapping of narrative categories provides the conceptual groundwork for evaluating Khalafullah's claim that certain Quranic stories function primarily as imaginative representations (*Tamthūliyyah*), and for assessing whether such a claim aligns with or departs from the epistemological assumptions of classical *'ulūm al-Qur'ān*.

Intellectual Profile of Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah

Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah was born in 1916 in the province of Sharqiyah, Lower Egypt. He was one of Egypt's contemporary Islamic thinkers, known for his contributions to the study of Quranic literature. He was a student of Amin al-Khuli and developed an *Adabi* approach to interpretation that positions the stories of the Quran as narrative structures that have rhetorical and pedagogical functions. His ideas, which sparked controversy and widespread debate because they proposed a reading of the stories of the Quran that did not always demand historical accuracy, were published in 1953 in a work entitled *al-Fann al-Qashashī fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, which represented the main points of his views in this field [30].

Categorization of stories in the Qur'an according to Khalafullah

Khalafullah's categorization of Qur'anic stories emphasize that prophetic narratives cannot be reduced to historical chronicles, but must be understood according to their rhetorical and pedagogical purposes. This view finds support

in contemporary Qur'anic narrative studies, which argue that *qasas* function as a framework for moral and theological instruction rather than the historical reconstruction. As Yussof notes, Qur'anic narratives direct "the essence of narrative pedagogy" through layered meanings that engage truth, beauty, and explanation [31]. Similarly, Hail argues that narrative variations in the Qur'an represent "purposeful theological recontextualisations," underscoring that differences in storytelling aim at conveying distinct theological objectives rather than factual historiography [32]. Khalafullah divides the narratives in the Quran into three main categories, namely:

1. *Qisas tarikhīyyah*, which are stories with historical basis, including the stories of prophets and messengers. Khalafullah emphasizes that in this regard, the Quran highlights events that are believed to have actually occurred in the course of human history [33]. Regarding this category, Khalafullah asserts that:

This type of narrative is a form of historical literature, in which the Quran takes story material from historical events and then shapes it into a literary form that not only explains the meaning but also reinforces the messages it contains in such a way as to evoke an emotional response and touch the consciousness of its readers [34].

2. *Qisas tamthīliyyah*, which are illustrative stories that are not intended as historical accounts, but rather narratives that specifically contain symbolic elements for moral teaching. Khalafullah briefly states that this type of story cannot be verified historically, but rather as a form of hypothesis, which serves to convey a particular message or value symbolically [33].

In this case, there is an issue related to the existence of *al-khayal* (imagination) in the story that is important to explain. It is true that some of the material in the stories of the Quran is imaginary [34],[35]. It should be understood that the existence of imagination in the stories of the Quran is merely to fulfill and harmonize human needs, not in its capacity as a result of Allah's imagination. It is impossible for Allah to be said to have imagined first before expressing the purpose of the stories in the Quran. This means that the element of imagination was deliberately created by Allah to help humans understand the messages of the Quran more easily, because imagination is one of the communication mediators often used by humans to explain their feelings and thoughts [34].

3. *Qisas uṣṭūrīyyah*, which are stories quoted by the Quran from mythology or allegories known to certain social communities, and which describe events in human life symbolically [33]. These mythical elements are not

for the sake of the story, but as a medium (flavoring) to attract listeners [11].

Khalafullah's Interpretation of the Metaphor of the Prophet's Story in the Quran

According to Khalafullah, imaginative stories fall into the second category, namely *qisās tamthiliyyah* (illustrative stories). In this section, Khalafullah expresses the view that these stories are literary works resulting from the imagination of the storyteller, presented not as historical facts but as metaphors to convey universal moral messages and ethical guidance [34]. In other words, the stories told do not have to have happened, nor do the characters have to be real people, nor do the dialogues have to be based on the words of specific people. This means that a *tamthiliyyah* story only requires the use of imagination [33]. This understanding is based on the view that supernatural or extraordinary elements in these stories, such as miracles or dramatic events, must be understood symbolically, not literally. Through this approach, Khalafullah seeks to maintain the relevance of the teachings of the Quran by eliminating the tension between the narrative of the holy book and the findings of modern science, an interpretation that has sparked debate among modern and contemporary exegetes.

There are two phenomena of *tamthiliyyah* as follows: first, the analogy is usually mentioned after its meanings have been explained first. In this context, the function of the parable is to reinforce these meanings. Second, the meanings of the parable are sometimes hidden or implied in the description of the parable itself; in other words, the meaning is not stated directly [34]. Al-Jurjani explains that linguists agree that when a parable is mentioned after the intended meanings or only in the form of a brief description taken from the original portrait, its effect and influence are very powerful in stirring the hearts and souls of the listeners. And the benefits gained from this are considerable [36].

The steps taken by Khalafullah in his research include collecting verses that contain stories, then arranging them in chronological order of revelation (*tartib nuzuli*) and interpreting their meanings through an adabi or literary approach [34]. This approach positions the text of the Quran not only as a source of law and theology, but also as a work that has aesthetic value and a distinctive narrative structure. The following is an example of the application of *tamthiliyyah* storytelling imagination. .

1. (QS. Al-Maidah [5]: 112-115)

إِذْ قَالَ الْحَوَارِيُّونَ يُعِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ هَلْ يَسْتَطِيعُ رَبُّكَ أَنْ يُنْزِلَ عَلَيْنَا مَائِدَةً مِنَ السَّمَاءِ ۖ قَالَ اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ. قَالُوا نُرِيدُ أَنْ نَأْكُلَ مِنْهَا وَتَطْمَئِنَّ قُلُوبُنَا وَنَعْلَمَ أَنْ قَدْ صَدَقْتُنَا

وَنَكُونُ عَلَيْهَا مِنَ الشَّاهِدِينَ. قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ اللَّهُمَّ رَبَّنَا أَنْزِلْ عَلَيْنَا مَائِدَةً مِنَ السَّمَاءِ
تَكُونُ لَنَا عِيدًا لِأَوَّلِنَا وَآخِرِنَا وَآيَةً مِنْكَ وَارْزُقْنَا وَأَنْتَ خَيْرُ الرَّازِقِينَ. قَالَ اللَّهُ إِنَّي مُنْزِلُهَا
عَلَيْكُمْ ۖ فَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بَعْدُ مِنْكُمْ فَإِنِّي أُعَذِّبُهُ عَذَابًا لَا أُعَذِّبُهُ أَحَدًا مِنَ الْعَالَمِينَ.

Khalafullah places the story of the request for food from heaven by the *hawariyyun* as a *qisas tamthiliyyah*. To be clear, this story is not intended as a report of empirical events, but rather as a pedagogical metaphor that illustrates the relationship between faith, doubt, and the demand for evidence in human religion. He emphasizes that “food from heaven” is understood not as an empirical event but as a symbol of divine promise and a warning against the human attitude of demanding tangible proof in matters of faith [34].

This interpretation differs from that of the majority of classical exegetes, who understand the verse as a material miracle performed by the Prophet Jesus, peace be upon him. However, this difference does not negate the didactic purpose of the story, but rather indicates a shift in emphasis from the historical factuality of the verse to its ethical message [37],[38],[39].

2. (QS. Al-Baqarah [2]: 260)

وَإِذْ قَالَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ رَبِّ أَرِنِي كَيْفَ تُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ قَالَ أَوَلَمْ تُؤْمِنْ ۖ قَالَ بَلَىٰ وَلَكِنْ لِّيَطْمَئِنَّ قَلْبِي ۖ قَالَ
فَخُذْ أَرْبَعَةً مِنَ الطَّيْرِ فَصُرْهُنَّ إِلَيْكَ ثُمَّ اجْعَلْ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ جَبَلٍ مِنْهُنَّ جُزْءًا ثُمَّ ادْعُهُنَّ يَأْتِينَكَ
سَعْيًا ۖ وَعَلَّمَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

In interpreting QS. 2:260, Khalafullah refers to the interpretive dialogue quoted by Muhammad 'Abduh from al-Rāzī and Abu Muslim. The majority of classical exegetes understand this verse as a literal historical event, in which Ibrahim actually chopped up four birds as an empirical miracle to bring back to life creatures that had died [40]. However, Abu Muslim rejected this view and asserted that the verse is a *Tamthil* about Allah's ease in reviving the dead, without necessitating the occurrence of physical events as described in the text [40]. This view was later supported by 'Abduh, who considered the main focus of the verse to be Ibrahim's peace of mind, not the technicalities of resurrection [41].

Based on this framework, Khalafullah emphasizes the presence of *al-takhyīl al-fannī* (artistic imagination) in the Qur'an in the scene of selecting, cutting up, and then calling the birds. This narrative is understood as a visual dramatization that transforms rational beliefs into emotional experiences. Faith is not only understood, but also experienced psychologically. Thus, this verse works pedagogically through its imaginative power, not as a historical account

that demands empirical truth [34]. In religious discourse, metaphor operates as an epistemic and imaginative tool that translates abstract theological meanings into symbolic form accessible to human cognition and emotional experience [42].

This approach differs from the views of classical exegetes such as al-Tabari, al-Qurtubī, and al-Rāzī, who assert that the event was a historical miracle that actually happened to the Prophet Ibrahim and relate it to an increase in faith from *'ilm al-yaqīn* to *'ayn al-yaqīn* [38], [40], [43]. al-Rāzī discusses this at length within the framework of rational theology. He explains that there are two levels of faith, namely *'Ilm al-Yaqīn* (faith based on knowledge) and *'Ayn al-Yaqīn* (faith based on direct vision), and Prophet Ibrahim's request falls into the category of *'Ayn al-Yaqīn*, which is to witness firsthand the truth that has been believed [40]. This difference shows a shift in emphasis in the reading of the Quranic story, namely from historical narrative to symbolic pedagogy in line with the concept of Khalafullah, which positions the Quranic story as a medium for communicating values and shaping human religious consciousness.

3. QS. Al-Maidah [5]: 28-31

لَبِئْسَ بَسَطْتُ إِلَيَّ يَدَكَ لِتَقْتُلَنِي مَا أَنَا بِبَاسِطٍ يَدِيَ إِلَيْكَ لِأَقْتُلَكَ إِنِّي أَخَافُ اللَّهَ رَبَّ
الْعَالَمِينَ. إِنِّي أُرِيدُ أَنْ تَبُوءَ بِإِثْمِي وَإِثْمِكَ فَتَكُونَ مِنْ أَصْحَابِ النَّارِ وَذَلِكَ جَزَاُ
الظَّالِمِينَ. فَطَوَّعْتُ لَهُ نَفْسَهُ قَتَلَ أَخِيهِ فَقَتَلَهُ فَأَصْبَحَ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ. فَبَعَثَ اللَّهُ
غُرَابًا يَبْحَثُ فِي الْأَرْضِ لِيُرِيَهُ كَيْفَ يُوَارِي سَوْءَةَ أَخِيهِ ۖ قَالَ يُوزِلْتِ أَعْجَزْتُ أَنْ
أَكُونَ مِثْلَ هَذَا الْغُرَابِ فَأُوَارِيَ سَوْءَةَ أَخِي فَأَصْبَحَ مِنَ النَّادِمِينَ ۖ

In reading QS. Al-Maidah [5]: 28-31, Khalafullah quotes Muhammad 'Abduh's interpretation in the al-Manar tafsir, which understands the story of Habil and Qabil not merely as a historical story, but as a *tamthil* about human inner conflict. According to Abduh, the essence of the story of Qabil's murder is an internal struggle between the instinct of brotherhood and the urge for domination caused by jealousy. Through this story, the Qur'an presents two opposing attitudes: obedience to divine law, represented by Habil, and the domination of lust, which caused Qabil to fall into crime and moral loss. The evidence of the war between the instinct of love and affection for his brother and Qabil's desire to defeat and surpass his brother, or his desire to be the only one whose sacrifice is accepted, is in the words of Allah: "Then Qabil's lust made him think it easy to kill his brother, so he killed him, and thus he became one of the losers." The depiction of Qabil's attitude of prioritizing his desires, which were motivated by feelings of envy and jealousy, is a warning from the Qur'an about the consequences of such an attitude [41].

In line with this framework, Khalafullah highlights the element of *al-takhyil al-fanni* in this narrative story. First, the omission of the characters' names shifts the story from an individual biography to a typology of human characters. Thus, the conflict between Cain and Abel can be developed in any context of human life. Second, the dialogue presented in the Qur'an is structured like a dramatic scene depicting an inner struggle between the voice of faith and the voice of desire, so that the moral message has a greater psychological impact [34]. Third, the presence of a crow as a teacher of how to bury the dead is a powerful moral symbol: humans who fail to control their desires must learn moral values from creatures considered lower than themselves. In Khalafullah's perspective of Qur'anic literary art, the symbol of the crow serves an imaginative function in the story as a medium for conveying moral messages. Thus, the literary and pedagogical aspects of the story are given greater priority than the emphasis on its historical accuracy, without compromising the message of truth that the Qur'an wishes to convey [34].

4. QS. Al-Baqarah [2]: 30-33

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً ۖ قَالُوا أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَنْ يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا وَيَسْفِكُ الدِّمَاءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ ۗ قَالَ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ. وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى الْمَلَكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنْبِئُونِي بِأَسْمَاءِ هَؤُلَاءِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ. قَالُوا سُبْحَنَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلَّا مَا عَلَّمْتَنَا ۚ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ. قَالَ يَادُمُ أَنْبِئُهُمْ بِأَسْمَائِهِمْ ۖ فَلَمَّا أَنْبَأَهُمْ بِأَسْمَائِهِمْ قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُلْ لَكُمْ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ غَيْبَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَأَعْلَمُ مَا تُبْدُونَ وَمَا كُنْتُمْ تَكْتُمُونَ.

Khalafullah categorizes the story of Prophet Adam in this verse as *Qishah Tamthiliyyah*, which is a narrative that serves as a symbolic representation to convey a moral message without having to be understood as a chronological-historical account. In reading this verse, he follows the view of Muhammad Abduh, who positions this story as a pedagogical parable [34]. According to Khalafullah, the structure of the dialogue between God, the angels, Adam, and Satan is constructed through narrative and symbolic devices that lead readers to an understanding of the nature of humans as caliphs, rather than a detailed explanation of the technicalities of human creation itself [34].

Within this framework, teaching Adam the names can be understood as indicating the intellectual and spiritual capacity of humans to recognize, understand, and utilize nature for good. The angels' inability to mention these names illustrates the awareness of the limitations of beings other than humans in

grasping the complexity of the meaning of the universe. Meanwhile, the angels' prostration before Adam is understood as a symbol of the submission of cosmic potential to humans, who are equipped with reason and knowledge. Meanwhile, the devil's refusal to prostrate reflects the dark side of humans who are reluctant to subdue their desires and selfish impulses, which, if left unchecked, can lead to conflict, hatred, and social destruction.

This symbolic approach is not unfamiliar in the classical interpretation tradition. Al-Tabari, for example, acknowledges that the story of Satan's refusal to prostrate himself before Adam serves as a parable to rebuke groups who reject the truth out of arrogance, including some Jews and polytheists in Mecca [44]. However, unlike Khalafullah, Al-Tabari continues to assert that this symbolic element is based on historical reality that actually occurred. In other words, symbolism in classical exegesis serves as an additional layer of meaning without negating the factuality of the creation of Adam and Satan's rebellion as part of the history of revelation.

From the four examples above, it can be seen that Khalafullah consistently places imaginative elements as literary devices that have pedagogical, psychological, and ethical functions. Imagination is understood as an effective medium of communication of meaning for humans, so that the truth of the story does not depend on historical proof of the events narrated, but rather on its transformative power in shaping attitudes of faith and morality. The effectiveness of imaginative narratives lies in their capacity to shape moral consciousness and religious attitudes through symbolic dramatization rather than factual verification, a feature widely recognized in contemporary studies of sacred texts [42],[45]. This approach successfully explains the rhetorical function and educational value of the stories in the Qur'an, but at the same time raises a fundamental epistemological question, namely, to what extent can the imaginative elements in revelation be separated from the claim to truth attached to them. It is at this point that a tension arises between Khalafullah's symbolic reading and the traditional view that places the stories of the Qur'an as narratives that, in addition to containing symbolic meaning, are also rooted in a reality of truth believed to originate from divine revelation.

The Epistemology of *al-khayal* in the Hierarchy of Meaning according to al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 AD)

Within al-Ghazali's epistemological framework, revelation occurs through a gradual process, following the ontological structure of reality and human cognitive abilities. Al-Ghazali divides reality into two major realms, namely: *alam shahadah* (the visible world) and *alam malakut* (the unseen world), which

are interconnected through a system of *tamsil* established by Allah. In *Mishkat al-Anwar*, al-Ghazali mentions that reality has gradual levels:

المملك-الخيال-الملكوت

“physical realm-imaginary realm-spiritual realm”

Al-Ghazali asserts that nothing in the sensory realm exists except as an example of the essence in the higher spiritual realm. Thus, the symbolic forms in the Quran are not merely rhetorical ornaments, but objective representations of a metaphysical reality that cannot be perceived by the senses [46]. Contemporary interpretations of al-Ghazali's epistemology affirm that *al-khayal* functions as a legitimate epistemic mediator, bridging sensory perception and higher metaphysical realities without reducing symbolic form to illusion or subjective fiction [47].

From his point of view, every verse has layers of meaning that are equally valid, as long as they are supported by strong arguments and do not negate divine teachings [46],[48]. The following diagram represents Al-Ghazali's epistemological hierarchy of the spirit in interpreting the metaphor in QS. Al-Nur :35.

Table 1. The Epistemological Hierarchy of the Spirit in the interpretation of Revelation according to al-Ghazali

Ruh	Function	parable of revelation	Role in Obtaining Truth
<i>hissi</i> (sensory)	Capturing physical form	<i>Mishkat</i> (light niche)	Entry point of information
<i>khayali</i> (imaginative)	Storing and processing images	<i>Zujajah</i> (clear glass)	Clarifying the meaning so that it makes sense
<i>aqli</i> (rational)	Capturing universal significance	lamp	Shining the light of knowledge
<i>Fikr</i> (thought)	Analyzing and breaking down meaning	<i>Shajarah zaytunah</i> (olive tree)	Source of scientific energy
<i>Nubuwwah</i> (prophecy)	Absorbing truth directly from God	Self-igniting oil	Revelation and inspiration

Through this structure, it can be understood that: *al-khaya* has an important position, because it serves as an epistemic bridge between outward form and inner meaning, further transforming physical examples into *aqli* (rational) understanding, thereby maintaining the order of reasoning in meaning so that it does not collapse. Here, *al-khayal*(imagination) is not a source of

falsehood, but rather a divine means of gradually conveying the essence of truth to humans [46]. From an epistemological perspective, al-Ghazali's interpretative theory maintains that rational necessity and symbolic mediation operate together, ensuring coherence between sensory perception, imaginative representation, and intellectual apprehension without collapsing the hierarchy of meaning [49].

Thus, it can be understood that the representation of *al-khayal* (imagination) does not diminish the degree of truth, but rather elevates humans towards a meaningful understanding. Al-Ghazali asserts that the truth of the Quran is not only found in its literal layer, but also in its inner meaning [46],[50]. Thus, the inner meaning does not invalidate the outer meaning, nor do the truths of the verses contradict each other. As Al-Ghazali states:

الحق لا ينكر بعضه ببعض

What is true does not invalidate what is also true [46].

Thus, the implication for the interpretation of stories in the Quran, even if the stories take the form of narratives and symbols, is that they are all rooted in the reality of *malakut* that actually occurred at a higher level of existence. This principle reflects al-Ghazali's interactive hermeneutics, in which rational, symbolic, and spiritual dimensions of meaning coexist without mutual negations, reinforcing a non reductionist structure of truth in Qur'anic interpretation [49].

This epistemological framework directly tests Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullah's *qishshah tamthiliyyah* approach. If Khalafullah assesses the imaginative elements in the stories of the Quran as persuasive aesthetic devices and not historical realities that must have occurred, then according to al-Ghazali, these metaphorical elements are a guarantee of the objectivity of the truth of revelation. Imagination is not a reason to deny the truth but a divine medium that allows metaphysical reality to be conveyed gradually in accordance with human cognitive capacity. Thus, al-Ghazali's approach does not reject the function of literature in the stories of the Quran, but corrects aesthetic reduction by returning it to the epistemological and ontological foundations of revelation.

Critical Analysis: Al-Ghazali's Epistemology as a Correction to Khalafullah's Historical Literature

Based on al-Ghazali's hierarchical epistemological framework, it can be seen that Khalafullah's criticism of the literary-historical approach is not directed at rejecting the literary value of the stories in the Quran, but rather at its tendency to reduce the status of revelatory truth to a mere rhetorical and pedagogical

function. Khalafullah's approach to the stories of the Quran departs from the assumption that some of the stories of the Quran, especially those he categorizes as *qishash tamthiliyyah*, do not always reflect historical truth, but rather convey moral messages through the power of linguistic imagination. According to him, this type of story cannot be verified historically and functions as a narrative hypothesis that works through the power of linguistic imagination.

Within this framework, Khalafullah acknowledges the existence of *al-khayal*(imagination) in some of the stories in the Quran. However, he emphasizes that this imaginative element should not be understood as "God's fantasy," but rather as a form of communication tailored to human psychological needs. *Al-khayal*(imagination), in his view, is deliberately presented so that the message of revelation can be understood by humans, given that imagination is one of the common and customary means of communication used by humans. Thus, imagination is positioned as a literary and pedagogical device, not as a representation of a particular ontological reality.

It is at this point that al-Ghazali's epistemology offers a more complex conceptual correction regarding the role of imagination (*al-khayal*). In *Mishkat al-Anwar*, al-Ghazali explains that reality is structured in levels, starting from the sensory realm (*shahadah*) to the transcendent realm (*malakut*). *Al-khayal* or imagination here functions as an epistemic instrument that bridges the two levels of reality. Everything in the realm of *shahadah* has a counterpart (example) in the realm of *malakut*, so that symbols and parables do not negate reality, but rather indicate the articulation of meaning at a higher level of existence [46].

Based on this framework, al-Ghazali's epistemology can be used to correct several assumptions in Khalafullah's approach as follows:

1. The Qur'anic imagination cannot be reduced to a mere literary instrument, but rather functions as a medium for revealing spiritual reality.
2. *Tamthil* is not synonymous with the denial of facts, because symbols do not negate existing realities, but rather articulate them gradually.
3. The stories of the Prophets still have a historical basis at the level of *shahadah* while also containing a symbolic dimension at the level of *khayal* and a true meaning at the level of *haqiqah*.
4. The meaning of the Qur'an is hierarchical (*zahir-bathin-haqiqah*), so symbolic reading should not decide between literal and ontological meanings. This framework prevents the reduction of revelation to merely ethical or aesthetic discourse.
5. The truth of the Qur'anic stories does not stop at moral-psychological effectiveness, but is also rooted in ontological reality that originates from

the realm of the unseen. Through al-Ghazali's epistemology, it can be understood that the truth of the Qur'an is ontological, rooted in the reality of the unseen, not merely in the ethical impact or suggestive power of a narrative. The moral effect is a consequence of the truth, not a substitute for it.

This epistemological stance is further substantiated by contemporary research concerning al-Ghazālī's semiotic-sufi analysis of the Qur'an, with particular emphasis on his interpretation of the Light Verse (QS. al-Nūr [24]:35) as presented in *Mishkāt al-Anwār*. Such investigations underscore that, in al-Ghazālī's perspective, symbolic language serves as an essential conduit for articulating spiritual truths that elude direct expression through empirical or strictly rational frameworks. The intrinsic connection between esoteric (*bāṭin*) and exoteric (*ẓāhir*) significances in his exegesis illustrates that symbolism does not undermine ontological veracity; rather, it enhances access to such truths in accordance with human cognitive and spiritual faculties. In this regard, imagination (*al-khayāl*) functions not merely as a fictional construct, but rather as an epistemological and spiritual conduit that retains the objectivity of revelation while facilitating its profound comprehension [51].

Through this epistemological framework, verses that Khalafullah understands as imaginative need not be treated as non-historical narratives, but rather as symbolic representations of a transcendent reality that has manifestations at the empirical level. Thus, the story of the dialogue between the angels and Adam (QS. Al-Baqarah [2]: 30-33), the incident of the birds being chopped up and Prophet Ibrahim (QS. Al-Baqarah [2]: 260), the story of the feud between the sons of Prophet Adam, Qabil and Habil (QS. Al-Maidah [5]: 28-31), and the story of the feast from heaven (QS. Al-Maidah [5]: 112-115) can be understood symbolically without losing their factuality, in accordance with al-Ghazali's hierarchy of reality.

In line with al-Ghazali, Jumbuh scholars emphasize that the stories contained in the Qur'an are factual events that actually happened. Manna' al-Qatṭān in *Mabahith fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* provides a critical note on the tendency of Khalafullah to be overly influenced by modern literary studies, thereby positioning the stories of the Quran as if they were equivalent to fictional narratives [3]. Al-Qatṭān's criticism reinforces the position that the imaginative elements in the Qur'an should not be understood as a substitute for reality, but rather as a meaningful bridge between the sensory realm and the transcendent realm. Thus, its non-historicity is only relevant to parables (*amthal*), not to the stories of the Prophets, which remain historical and rich in symbolic meaning.

From this critical analysis, several implications for contemporary Qur'anic studies can be drawn. This study demonstrates that literary and imaginative interpretations of Qur'anic narratives do not necessarily negate their ontological truth, provided that imagination (*al-khayal*) is situated within a hierarchical epistemological framework. By employing al-Ghazali's conception of layered reality, this research offers an integrative perspective that helps reconcile literary approaches with theological commitments to the truth of revelation, thereby contributing to methodological discussions in modern Qur'anic interpretation.

Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations. The analysis is primarily theoretical and library-based, focusing on a textual comparison between Khalafullah and al-Ghazali without extending to a broader survey of exegetical traditions or empirical studies on the reception of Khalafullah's ideas. In addition, this research concentrates mainly on prophetic narratives, leaving other Qur'anic genres such as legal discourse or eschatological descriptions outside its scope. Future research may build upon this framework by applying al-Ghazali's epistemology of imagination to other modern Qur'anic interpreters or by examining how hierarchical conceptions of truth operate across different genres of Qur'anic discourse.

Conclusion

This study addresses its main research problem by examining Ahmad Muhammad Khalafullah's conception of imagination (*al-khayal*) in Qur'anic prophetic narratives through al-Ghazali's hierarchical epistemology. The findings indicate that while Khalafullah's literary-historical approach generally reveals the rhetorical, aesthetic, and pedagogical functions of Qur'anic stories, it tends to reduce revelatory truth when imagination is understood as an indication of the non-historicity. Al-Ghazali's epistemology of *al-khayal* offers a corrective by positioning imagination as an epistemic mediator between sensory reality (*shahadah*) and transcendent reality (*malakut*), rather than a mere literary device. Within this framework, symbols and *tamthil* functions as a mode of disclosure that allows Qur'anic narratives to operate simultaneously at historical (*zhahir*), symbolic (*khayal*), and ontological (*haqiqah*) levels. Theoretically, this study demonstrates the compability of literary interpretation and ontological truth within al-Ghazali's epistemology; practically, it offers an interpretive alternative for engaging Qur'anic metaphors without undermining revelatory authority. This study is limited to conceptual textual analysis, and future research may extend this framework to other modern interpreters or comparative theological and narrative studies.

Author Contributions

Salisa Wardah Kumala: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Abdul Kadir Riyadi:** Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

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Conflict of Interest

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