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A SUFI PERSPECTIVE ON THE AQSÂM AL-ZAMÂN IN THE QUR'ÂN

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Abstract

This study examines *Aqşam al-Zaman* (temporal oaths) in the Qur'an through the lens of Sufi interpretation (*ishari tafsir*), exploring how physical time transforms into a spiritual field of experience. Unlike standard measurements, Sufi thought conceptualizes time as *waqt*, a qualitative state reflecting the seeker's spiritual condition. The research highlights the aspirant's progression from being "ibn al-waqt" (son of the moment) to "abu al-waqt" (father of time), representing a transcendence of temporal constraints through perfection. Consequently, oaths regarding specific times are viewed as symbolic of inner transformations. For instance, Sufi commentators interpret *fajr* (dawn) as the transition from ignorance to the light of *marifa* (gnosis), and *duha* (forenoon) as the station of contemplation (*mushahada*). Similarly, *asr* is regarded as the locus of divine manifestation (*tajalli*), while the cycle of night and day mirrors the internal struggle between the lower self (*nafs*) and faith. Ultimately, the study argues that the Sufi perspective redefines time not as a consumable commodity, but as a divine trust and sacred ground essential for establishing a profound connection with the Divine.

Keywords: Sufism, Aqşam al-Zaman, Ishari Tafsir, Time, Ibn al-Waqt.

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Introduction

Numerous expressions of oath (*qasam*) appear in the Qur'an. It is observed that the style of oath-taking, which was widely used among Arabs in the pre-Islamic period, was preserved in the revelation of the Qur'an (Kırca, 1989, pp. 290-291). In this vein, many works have been written regarding these expressions, and a specific heading titled "*Aqşam al-Qur'an*" has been established in the methodology of exegesis (*tafsir*) (Coşkun, 2014, pp. 37-68). The oldest known work to deal exclusively with *Aqşam al-Qur'an* is Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's (d. 751/1350) *at-Tibyan fi aymani'l-Qur'an* (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, 2008).

The concept of time is also included among the entities sworn by in the Qur'an. Although the term "time" (*zaman*) does not appear as a standalone word in the Qur'an, it is possible to encounter many terms expressing temporal dimensions. These concepts include: *asr* (*The Holy Qur'an*, 2016, al-Asr 103:1), *dahr* (al-Insan 76:1), *waqt* (an-Nisa 4:103), *hin* (al-Baqarah 2:36), *yawm* (Saba 34:30; al-Qasas 28:41), *sarmad* (al-Qasas 28:72), *baghtatan* (al-An'am 6:31), *lamhu'l-basar* (an-Nahl 16:77), *layl* (al-Layl 92:1), *fajr* (al-Fajr 89:1), *subh* (al-Qalam 68:17, 21), *duha* (al-Duha 93:1), *nahar* (al-Furqan 25:62), *shahr* (al-Baqarah 2:197), *sana* (al-Ma'arij 70:4), *ahkab* (al-Kahf 18:60), *abad* (al-Ahzab 33:64-65), *khuld* (al-Bayyinah 98:6-8), *sa'a* (al-A'raf 7:34; ar-Rum 30:12), *mawqut* (al-Nisa 4:103), *miqat* (al-A'raf 7:142, 143, 155), *muddat* (at-Tawbah 9:4), *amad* (Ali 'Imran 3:30), *al-an* (al-Nisa 4:18), and *ajal* (al-A'raf 7:34). Therefore, the phrase "*Aqşam al-Zaman*," meaning oaths taken by time, has been used to define the boundaries of our study. Therefore, the phrase "*Aqşam al-Zaman*," meaning oaths taken by time, has been used to define the boundaries of our study.

The primary objective of this study is the Sufi approach to these temporal concepts in the Qur'an. Sufis approached matters through a language they called "allusion" (*ishara*) and interpreted verses based on the inspirations that dawned upon their hearts after purifying their souls (Uludağ, 2001, p. 423). Thus, rather than the literal (*zahir*) meaning of the verses, Sufis sought to reveal their inner (*batin*) meanings (Uludağ, 1992, pp. 188-189). Consequently, this study will focus on allusive commentaries to present the oaths sworn by time from a Sufi perspective.

The works to be utilized include Sahl al-Tustari's (d. 283/896) *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami's (d. 412/1021) *Haqa'iq al-Tafsir*, 'Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri's (d. 465/1072) *Lata'if al-Isharat*, Ibn Barrajan's (d. 536/1142) *Tanbih al-Afham*, 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani's (d. 561/1166) *Jilani Tafsir*, Ruzbihan Baqli's (d. 606/1209) *'Ara'is al-Bayan fi Haqa'iq al-Qur'an*, Najm al-Din Kubra's (d. 618/1221) *'Ayn al-Hayat*, 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Kashani's (d. 736/1335) *Ta'wilat al-Kashaniyya*, Ni'matullah b. Mahmud al-Nahjuwani's (d. 920/1514 [?]) *al-Fawatih al-Ilahiyye*, Ismail Hakki Bursevi's (d. 1137/1725) *Ruhu'l-Bayan*, Ibn

'Ajiba's (d. 1224/1809) *al-Bahr al-Madid fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Majid*, and *Rahmatun mina'r-Rahman fi Tafsir wa Isharati'l-Qur'an*, which compiles the Qur'anic interpretations found in the works of Ibn al-'Arabi. The study will first address the Sufi conception of time/moment and subsequently examine the oaths taken by time.

1. The Sufi Conception of Time/Moment (*Waqt*)

The concept Sufis use instead of chronological time is "*waqt*". Lexically, *waqt* means a portion of time; however, it also refers to anything that you can limit or designate a specific period for (al-Farahidi, 2003, v-k-t, p. 389). In Sufi literature, while various definitions exist, *waqt* is generally described as the present state (*hal*) one is in. If you are occupied with the world, your *waqt* is the world; if with the hereafter, your *waqt* is the hereafter; if joyful, your *waqt* is joy; if sorrowful, your *waqt* is sorrow (al-Qushayri, 2001, p. 90). Thus, for the Sufi, *waqt* is the state that dominates him. Sufis have likened *waqt* to a sword (al-Suhrawardi, 1939, p. 368). While *waqt* can result from one's actions, it also has a divinely bestowed (*wahbi*) aspect. States that befall the servant without his intention signify that *waqt* has overcome him. In this sense, the one overcome by *waqt* is under the manifestation (*tajalli*) of the Divine and lives in a state of perpetual contemplation (*mushahada*) (al-Kalabadhi, 1993, p. 90).

According to al-Hujwiri, *waqt* refers to the present moment that leaves no room for thinking about the past or the future. Divine inspirations (*waridat*) that reach the heart prevent the individual from dwelling on what has passed or what is to come. This is a form of spiritual union (*jam'*) (al-Hujwiri, 2007, pp. 613-614). In *Sad Maydan*, al-Harawi approaches *waqt* similarly to al-Hujwiri. To him, *waqt* is transient like a flash of lightning and purifies the Sufi. This lightning is a manifestation of reflection (*tafakkur*), remembrance (*dhikr*), spiritual audition (*sama'*), and spiritual gaze (*nazar*) (Tan, 2013, pp. 439-440). Consequently, the Sufi view of *waqt* is to fulfill the rights of the present moment (Sayin, 2012, pp. 177-190). Indeed, a Sufi is called "*ibn al-waqt*" (son of the moment). An *ibn al-waqt* is one who perfectly performs what is required in the present moment. Amr b. 'Uthman al-Makki (d. 297/910) alluded to this by stating, "A Sufi is one who is occupied at every moment with what is most appropriate for that moment" (al-Sarraj, 2018, p. 45). Taking this into account, al-Harawi in *Manazil al-Sa'irin* views *waqt* as a station to be surpassed in the spiritual journey (al-Harawi, 2007, pp. 153-154, 2008, pp. 269-274). On the other hand, the Sufi's ability to transcend the authority of moments and states and instead control them is called "*abu al-waqt*" (father of time) (Ceyhan, 2012, pp. 491-492; Tek, 2017, p. 158). According to Sufis, becoming *abu al-waqt* is possible by living the "perpetual moment" (*an-i da'imi*), which represents the continuity of states. This is directly linked to the continuous manifestations (*tajalliyat*) from the names of God (Yildiz, 2021, pp.

79-98). Additionally, the concept of being with God at every moment -as seen in *ibn al-waqt*- is reflected in the Naqshbandi principles of “*hush dar dam*” (awareness in every breath) and “*wuquf-i zamani*” (temporal awareness) (Günaydın, 2020, pp. 326-336).

2. “Aqsam al-Zaman” from a Sufi Perspective

It is observed that time is sworn by in various chapters of the Qur'an. In these oaths, the morning time, specific segments of the day, and the cycle of night and day come to the fore. When repetitive expressions are considered, it has been determined that various portions of time are sworn by a total of sixteen times across eight different chapters. In this context, oaths regarding the morning will be addressed first, followed by oaths related to specific times of the day and the phenomenon of night and day, particularly within the scope of allusive commentaries.

2.1. Oaths Regarding the Morning

Oaths regarding the morning occur in two different chapters of the Qur'an, and in both contexts, the oath serves to emphasize the importance of the message being conveyed. In the first instance, the oath is used in a threatening context, expressing that those who do not believe in God cannot escape divine justice: “And by the morning when it brightens” (*The Holy Qur'an*, 2016, al-Muddaththir 74:34; al-Takwir 81:18) In the other chapter, the same expression is discussed within the framework of the value of the Qur'an as revelation and the status of Gabriel, who delivered it; by swearing by the morning, attention is drawn to both the source and the carrier of the revelation. This illustrates how oaths in the Qur'an create different layers of meaning depending on the context.

According to Sufi exegetes, the phrase “And by the morning when it brightens” symbolizes the disappearance of the darkness of the lower self (*nafs*) as the light emitted from divine rays appears in the heart (al-Sulami, 2001, p. 359). When the light of the spirit shines upon the heart, the darkness within recedes (Bursevi, 2015a, p. 407), and the presence of the Truth (*al-Haqq*) manifests, causing multiplicity (*kathra*) and shadows to vanish. This is likened to the disappearance of stars with the arrival of morning (al-Jilani, 2012, p. 252). Furthermore, the brightness of the morning signifies the Sufi in the state of annihilation (*fana*) reaching the morning of subsistence (*baqa*) (al-Jilani, 2012, p. 337). Baqli interpreted this verse as the shining of the lights of truth manifested in the secret (*sirr*) of the Sufi (Baqli, 2008, p. 467). Morning is also perceived as an isthmus (*barzakh*) between the light of beauty (*jamal*) and the awe of majesty (*jalah*); it is interpreted as a symbol of the colors and states emerging in the heart during the transition from darkness to light (Kubra, 2009, p. 240). From this, it is understood that Sufis attach a symbolic meaning to the concept of morning, representing a

spiritual birth in the heart rather than a physical time period. The disappearance of darkness, identified with the gloom of the *nafs*, is only possible through the spirit's light rising upon the heart, which is understood in Sufi thought as the heart becoming open to divine truth. Thus, the word "morning" in the verse is interpreted as the moment of birth for knowledge and gnosis (*marifa*).

2.2. Oaths Regarding a Portion of the Day

Fajr (dawn) (al-Fajr 89:1), *duha* (forenoon) (ad-Duhâ 93:1), *shafaq* (twilight) (al-Inshiqâq 84:16), and *asr* (afternoon) (al-Asr 103:1) are among the primary time segments sworn by in the Qur'an. Lexically, *fajr* means to split something wide; it takes this name because the morning splits open and emerges (Raghib al-Isfahani, 2015, p. 731). In traditional commentaries, it refers to the early hours of the morning (Işık, 1995, pp. 290-291). In allusive commentaries, various meanings are attributed to *fajr*. According to Ibn 'Ata, it expresses the emergence of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh); when the light of his message appeared, the darkness of disbelief (*kufir*) and polytheism (*shirk*) vanished (al-Sulami, 2001, p. 394). Qushayri describes *fajr* as the spiritual illumination occurring in the hearts of the gnostics (*'arifun*), signifying the divine manifestation that appears as they reach gnosis (al-Qushayri, 2007, p. 419). Baqli also provides an allusive meaning, stating that *fajr* represents the emergence of the lights of divine artistry and power in the hearts of gnostics (Baqli, 2008, p. 505). In this sense, *fajr* is related to the manifestations occurring in the heart during the spiritual journey. The Sufi, through the purification of the heart (*tasfiya*), clears away negative egoistic emotions, making the heart ready for divine manifestation; this process is symbolically evaluated as the rising of a *fajr*.

Another time segment sworn by is *duha*, which encompasses the spreading of the sun, the lengthening of the day, and the forenoon (Raghib al-Isfahani, 2015, *Ara'is al-Bayan*). This chapter begins with an oath by the forenoon, symbolizing the rise of Islam, and by the night, representing the period of disbelief and polytheism that is about to end (Işık, 1994, p. 546). According to al-Tustari, *duha* refers to the spirit (*ruh*) (al-Tustari, 2022, p. 402). This is because just as the sun makes the day meaningful, the spirit gives life to the body. Furthermore, *duha* is the subtle grace of beauty (*jamali latifa*) placed as a trust within the spirit (Kubra, 2009, p. 319). According to Junayd al-Baghdadi (d. 297/909), *duha* is the station of contemplation (*mushahada*) (al-Qushayri, 2007, p. 429; al-Sulami, 2001, p. 400). *Duha* implies that the heart is constantly vigilant and ready for divine truths. It also points to the manifestations of God being known through God's own Essence (al-Jilani, 2012, p. 454). In this way, created things are seen as paths and signs leading to the Truth (*al-Haqq*). Additionally, the concept of *duha* symbolically expresses the birth and mission of the Prophet; Ibn 'Ajiba interpreted his

commissioning as the illumination of his heart with divine truth and the shining of his spirit with the sun of reality (Ibn 'Ajiba, 2011, p. 41).

Shafaq (twilight), meaning the time when the brightness of the day mixes with darkness as the sun sets (Raghib al-Isfahani, 2015, p. 521), is another time sworn by. This is the time when night and day intermingle (Ibn Barrajan, 2013, p. 472). Baqli views *shafaq* as a reflection of the spiritual journey, suggesting it refers to what remains of the reflection of God's own lights of majesty (*jâlâl*). These lights manifest in the hearts of gnostics and lovers; the twilight seen after sunset is evidence of these lights. Symbolically, darkness refers to the Sufi's state of contraction (*qabd*), while the rising sun brings a state of expansion (*bast*). In a state of expansion, the Sufi loves the Beloved and turns toward Him with his entire being (Baqli, 2008, p. 497). *Shafaq* is likened to the light at the beginning of faith; it is like the white of the twilight, not yet strong, but gaining strength through worship and obedience (Ibn 'Ajiba, 2011, p. 640). According to al-Kashani, *shafaq* is defined as a true isthmus (*barzakh*) between the darkness of the night of unity (*wahda*) and the light of the day of multiplicity (*kathra*) (Bursevi, 2015b, p. 185). This reflects the *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of being) perspective central to al-Kashani's thought.

Another period sworn by is *asr*. Commentators have interpreted *asr* as "afternoon time," "afternoon prayer" (Ibn Barrajan, 2013, p. 540; al-Qushayri, 2007, p. 446; al-Tustari, 2022, p. 419), "absolute time," "the era of the Prophet," and "the end of times". Through this oath, they emphasize the value of time in human life (Eroğlu, 1991, p. 502). The most valuable time for a human is that spent in obedience and remembrance (*dhikr*) of God (Ibn 'Ajiba, 2011, p. 136). According to Bursevi, because *asr* is the last segment of time sworn by, it is the locus of divine manifestations. God manifests through His attributes and actions within time (Bursevi, 2015b, p. 493). In this sense, time is seen as the theater of the Truth's manifestations. Ultimately, time is not just a passing process but a spiritual ground where meaning is gained as the servant deepens his connection with God.

2.3. Oaths Regarding Night and Day

In the Qur'an, oaths are taken not only on absolute time but also on specific times that constitute it, with night and day being prominent. Although time is ontologically an indivisible whole, human experience -including worship and daily life- is shaped around specific moments. Temporal oaths link the flow of life to divine meaning, signaling that moments should be evaluated with consciousness and responsibility (Gedik, 2022, p. 80; Özdemir, 2017, pp. 220-224). In oaths regarding night and day, all events occurring within these periods are included (Yılmaz, 2010, p. 141). The Qur'an swears by "the day when it manifests" (al-Shams 91:3) and "the day when it brightens" (al-Layl 92:2). According to al-Tustari, day represents the spirit, which carries the light of faith,

dispels the darkness of ignorance, and has the quality of extinguishing the fire of hell (Bursevi, 2015b, p. 335; al-Tustari, 2022, pp. 398-399). Day is also described as the brightness of the gnostics' hearts and secrets, and the "day of gnosis" (Kubra, 2009, p. 314). Nothing remains hidden from a gnostic whose heart is bright like the day (Ibn 'Ajiba, 2011, p. 22). It also refers to the Truth manifesting through His names and attributes to the world and the spirits of the people of unity (Nahjuwani, 1907, p. 512). In allusive commentaries, day represents the spiritual existence of man; it is the state where the light of faith shines in the spirit and the heart opens to divine truth.

Night is the most emphasized time segment, sworn by seven times in different chapters. These oaths refer to the night departing (al-Muddaththir 74:33), darkening (al-Takwir 81:17), encompassing what it contains (al-Inshiqaq 84:17), its flow, covering the sun (al-Fajr 89:4), enveloping (al-Shams 91:4), and its stillness (al-Duha 93:2). While some commentaries remain literal, Baqli evaluates the night as a symbol of darkness where divine secrets are hidden (Baqli, 2008, 3/467). Night is a spiritual veil and a manifestation of God's majesty (*jalah*) (Kubra, 2009, p. 240). Phrases like "the night enveloping" are interpreted as persistent sins covering the light of faith in the heart (Baqli, 2008, p. 510; al-Sulami, 2001, p. 400; al-Tustari, 2022, p. 398) and point toward the lower self (*nafs*) (al-Tustari, 2022, p. 399). Conversely, "the stillness of the night" is perceived as the *nafs* reaching a state of harmony and peace with the spirit through constant remembrance (*dhikr*) (al-Tustari, 2022, p. 403).

Conclusion

Oaths by time in the Holy Qur'an are not merely reminders of the cosmic order but contain deep allusions encompassing the process of man's spiritual evolution. This study has shown that these oaths, examined under the title "*Aqsam al-Zaman*," are carried beyond a physical and chronological perception in Sufi allusive commentaries. They are transformed into a multi-layered spectrum of spiritual meaning on the levels of heart, spirit, and soul. In the Sufi perspective, time is not a commodity consumed quantitatively; rather, it is a superior field of experience where the servant's connection with the Truth intensifies, and every moment is valued by a divine manifestation. This investigation reveals that oaths regarding times like *fajr*, *duha*, *shafaq*, and *asr* are symbolic expressions of the spiritual changes experienced during the spiritual journey. In this context, morning and *fajr* represent the transition from ignorance to gnosis, while *duha* symbolizes the station of contemplation and the spirit being enlightened by divine graces. Concepts like *shafaq* and night have become fundamental symbols expressing the struggle with the *nafs*, states of contraction and expansion, and the processes of trial and purification where secrets are hidden. Ultimately, the Sufi conception aims for the seeker to rise from being an "*ibn al-waqt*" (son of the

moment) to an “*abu al-waqt*” (father of time). The Qur’anic oaths by time reinforce the stations of man on this spiritual path. Thus, time is freed from a linear flow and gains its true meaning as a divine trust where the secret of eternity (*an-i da’imi*) is sought.

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