


ECOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS IN THABATHABA’I’S TAFSIR: THE RELEVANCE OF THE CALIPHATE CONCEPT TO THE CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History</p> <p>Published: 10 January 2026</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords</p> <p>Hermeneutics, Thabathaba’i, Khalifah, Islamic Ecology, Tafsir al-Mizan</p> <p> Copyright © 2026 Author(s)</p> <p>This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License</p>	<p><i>The global environmental crisis demands a renewed interpretation of religious moral sources, including the Qur’an, as a foundation for ecological ethics. This study explores the hermeneutical thought of Muḥammad Ḥusain Thabathaba’i in al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur’an to examine the relevance of the Qur’anic concept of khalifah (vicegerent) in addressing contemporary ecological challenges. Methodologically, this research employs a qualitative, library-based approach with an ecological hermeneutic analysis that integrates Qur’anic self-interpretation (tafsir bi al-Qur’an), Sadrian rational philosophy, and modern environmental awareness. The findings reveal that in Thabathaba’i’s framework, humankind as khalifah is not an absolute ruler over nature but a guardian of cosmic balance, subject to divine law. His interpretation of verses such as Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]: 30, al-Rum [30]: 41, and al-A’raf [7]: 56 indicates that environmental degradation stems from humanity’s deviation from its primordial role as God’s trustee. Therefore, Thabathaba’i’s hermeneutics can serve as a conceptual foundation for developing an Islamic environmental ethics grounded in spirituality and moral responsibility. This research contributes to Qur’anic studies by expanding the scope of Qur’anic hermeneutics toward ecological praxis, enriching Islamic eco-theology discourses, and offering an alternative epistemic response to the current global ecological crisis.</i></p>

INTRODUCTION

The environmental crisis today has become one of the most serious challenges faced by humanity. Phenomena such as climate change, deforestation, water pollution, and the loss of biodiversity signify the disruption of the Earth's ecological balance. In the midst of this crisis, religions are once again seen as sources of ethical values capable of fostering new ecological awareness.¹ In the context of Islam, the Qur'an does not only speak of the relationship between humans and God (*hablun min Allah*), but also of the relationship between humans, other creatures, and the universe (*hablun min al-'alam*).² Thus, rereading the Qur'anic text through an ecological perspective becomes an important step in reintroducing the ethical dimension in the relationship between humans and the environment. Studies on Islamic ecotheology began to develop in the 1990s, especially through the works of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Richard Foltz, and Ibrahim Ozdemir. They emphasized that the roots of the ecological crisis are not only material but also spiritual and epistemological stemming from modern views that separate humans from the sacred cosmos.³ Nevertheless, most of these studies remain conceptual and have not significantly connected classical-philosophical exegetical thought with contemporary environmental problems. In fact, the Islamic exegetical tradition possesses a rich methodological heritage that holds great potential as a foundation for a new ecological ethic.

In this context, *Tafsir al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* by Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Thabathaba'i (d. 1981) becomes relevant to be reexamined. Thabathaba'i is known as an exegete who sought to integrate a rational-philosophical approach with a textual method, based on the fundamental principle that the Qur'an interprets itself (*tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an*).⁴ Through this method, he sought to uncover the unity of meaning among the verses of the Qur'an in a holistic and coherent manner. This approach opens the way for a productive hermeneutical reading of normative concepts in the Qur'an, including *khalifah* (vicegerency), *amanah* (trust), and *mizan* (balance), which carry ethical implications for the relationship between humans and nature. However, studies on *Tafsir al-Mizan* have thus far mostly focused on its metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological aspects.⁵ Meanwhile, the ecological dimension of Thabathaba'i's thought has rarely been explored. There has not yet been a study that systematically examines how the concept of *khalifah* in his exegesis can be understood as a foundation of ecological ethics that affirms human responsibility for the balance of creation. In fact, this

¹ Sajjad H Rizvi, *Mulla Sadra and Metaphysics: Modulation of Being* (London: Routledge, 2009).

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

³ Richard Foltz, *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁴ Muhammad Husayn al-Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan Fi Tafsir Al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-A'lami li al-MaTbu'at, 1973).

⁵ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Hossein Ziai, "Knowledge and Illumination: A Study of Suhrawardi's Hikmat Al-Ishraq BT - Islamic Philosophy and Occidental Phenomenology on the Perennial Issue of Microcosm and Macrocosm," ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Springer, 1996).

concept holds great potential to foster an environmental paradigm grounded in Islamic spirituality one that is oriented toward *amanah* (trust) and the sustainability of the cosmos.

This study aims to fill that gap by offering an ecological hermeneutical reading of Thabathaba'i's exegesis. The main focus is directed toward a reinterpretation of the concept of *khalifah* in *al-Mizan*, which is understood not only within a socio-political framework but also as an ethical mandate to preserve ecological harmony. The hermeneutical approach is employed to trace the layers of meaning within the text and to interpret the relationship between humans and nature within a cosmological framework of responsibility derived from divine revelation.⁶ Thus, this reading is expected to expand the horizon of Thabathaba'i's exegesis from the metaphysical domain toward ecological praxis. The urgency of this research also aligns with the direction of the global discourse on "religion and the environment," which seeks to build a bridge between spiritual values and modern ecological policies.⁷ By connecting classical exegesis with contemporary problems, this study is not merely historical-descriptive but also reflective and applicative. This affirms that the Qur'anic text possesses a hermeneutical vitality that remains continuously relevant in responding to the challenges of the times. The novelty of this research lies in the integration between Thabathaba'i's philosophical hermeneutics of exegesis and contemporary Islamic ecotheology. While previous studies have tended to position *al-Mizan* as an abstract metaphysical work, this study seeks to reveal its practical dimension through the concept of *khalifah* as a Qur'anic ecological ethic. Thus, this research not only broadens the understanding of Thabathaba'i's hermeneutics but also offers a new paradigm of exegesis that is relevant to the challenges of the global environmental crisis.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a hermeneutical approach to Qur'anic exegesis, focusing on a critical reading of *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* by 'Allamah Muḥammad Ḥusayn Thabathaba'i. This approach aims to uncover the patterns of thought and horizons of meaning employed by Thabathaba'i in interpreting the Qur'an. The hermeneutics referred to here is not merely a linguistic interpretive method, but an effort to trace the dialogue between the text, the interpreter, and the historical context in which the exegesis was produced. Within this framework, the researcher positions Thabathaba'i not only as an exegete who explains the meaning of the verses but also as a historical subject who interprets revelation within the horizon of Iranian modernity in the post-Qajar era and the early period of the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁸

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004).

⁷ Ziauddin Sardar, *Reading the Qur'an: The Contemporary Relevance of the Sacred Text of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸ Hasan Hanafi, *Dirasat Islamiyyah fi al-Fikr al-Hadith* (Kairo: Dar al-Fikr, 1993), hlm. 67.

This research applies a qualitative-interpretative method, relying on textual analysis and conceptual interpretation of the exegetical work. The primary data source of this study is *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, which consists of twenty volumes. Secondary sources include works that examine Tabataba'i's thought, such as those by Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Tihrani, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and other studies on contemporary Islamic hermeneutics.⁹

The data analysis technique was carried out through content analysis, with the following stages:

1. Identification of exegetical texts: selecting verses and sections of Thabathaba'i's commentary that contain hermeneutical arguments, especially those showing the dialogue between text and reason (*al-'aql*).
2. Contextualization of thought: tracing the philosophical and theological background that shaped Thabathaba'i's intellectual framework, including the influence of Sadrian philosophy and Imamiyyah rationalism.
3. Hermeneutical interpretation: elaborating on Thabathaba'i's interpretive pattern using the three-horizon approach text (*naṣ*), interpreter (*mufassir*), and reader (*qari'*) to capture the dynamics of meaning formed among them.

In addition, this research also employs a historical-philosophical approach to explain how Tabataba'i's position within the landscape of modern Shia exegesis differs from classical rational models such as that of al-Tusi and mystical wisdom models such as Mulla Ṣadra.¹⁰ Thus, this methodology is not only descriptive of the content of the exegesis but also analytical of the structure of the interpreter's consciousness operating within it.

In the analytical practice, the hermeneutical framework used follows the model of the "hermeneutic circle," which holds that the meaning of a verse cannot be fully understood without understanding the entirety of the Qur'an, and conversely, the overall meaning of the Qur'an is formed through the understanding of its individual verses. This principle is highly consistent with Tabataba'i's method, famously known as *tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an*, which means interpreting one verse through another that carries a corresponding meaning.¹¹

This hermeneutical approach allows the reading of Tabataba'i's exegesis to move beyond the textual dimension, penetrating its epistemological and ontological layers. Thus, this study seeks to reveal not only what is interpreted, but also how and why the interpretation itself is constructed.¹²

⁹ Henry Corbin, *En Islam Iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, vol. 4 (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), hlm. 141–143.

¹⁰ Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters: The House of Imran* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), hlm. 9-10.

¹¹ Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan Fi Tafsir Al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-A'lami li al-MaTbu'at, 1997).

¹² Mahdi Bakhshi, "Hermeneutics of the Qur'an According to Allameh Tabataba'i," *Religious Inquiries* 5, no. 9 (2016).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thabathaba'i's Hermeneutical Framework: Between Ontology and Meaning

The exegetical thought of 'Allamah Muḥammad Ḥusayn Thabathaba'i (1903–1981) represents a significant milestone in the history of philosophical and hermeneutical interpretation in Islam. Thabathaba'i rejected the dichotomy between rational and transmitted (*naqli*) exegesis, for he believed that understanding the Qur'an must be integrative combining the dimensions of revelation, reason, and spiritual intuition.¹³ In Thabathaba'i's view, the sacred text does not stand as a static entity but is living and interacts with the horizon of its reader. He regarded the Qur'an as an "organism of meaning," in which each part is interconnected with the whole. This idea forms the foundation of his method of *tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an*, where the meaning of one verse is explained by another. This approach closely parallels the concept of the hermeneutic circle in Western philosophical tradition, as articulated by Schleiermacher and Gadamer.¹⁴

However, the main difference lies in the ontology of revelation: for Thabathaba'i, the Qur'anic text is not merely a historical product but a direct manifestation of *al-wujud al-ḥaqq* (Divine Reality). Thus, the process of understanding the sacred text is, in essence, an ontological journey from the human toward God. Exegesis is not merely a linguistic interpretation but an "existential unveiling" of Divine truth in the form of words.¹⁵ From this point, Thabathaba'i's hermeneutics is theocentric: the center of meaning does not lie in the interpreter as a subject, but in the Divine Reality that reveals itself through the text. The position of the human interpreter is participatory, not dominative. True understanding can only be achieved when a person purifies the soul from worldly desires and follows the internal structure of meaning within the Qur'an.¹⁶

This hermeneutical framework forms the foundation that distinguishes Thabathaba'i from contemporary exegetes who prioritize a historical-linguistic approach. For Thabathaba'i, history is indeed important, but it is not sufficient, because the meaning of the Qur'an transcends historical context and operates within a horizon of meaning that is transhistorical.¹⁷ Therefore, historical analysis must not close off the possibility of deeper meanings that emerge from the internal coherence of the verses. The

¹³ Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan Fi Tafsir Al-Qur'an*.

¹⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

¹⁵ Arthur Saniotis, "Muslim Environmentalism: Between Revelation and Ecology," *Nature and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2012).

¹⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (Chicago: ABC International, 2007).

¹⁷ Mahmoud Ayoub, "The Speaking Qur'an and Its Silent Interpretation," *Islamic Studies* 42, no. 2 (2003).

al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an method serves to maintain objectivity and prevent interpretations driven by the exegete's ideology.¹⁸

Thabathaba'i emphasized that the relationship between verses is not mechanical but organic like the relationship between organs within a body.¹⁹ One verse can unveil layers of meaning in another, so that the entire Qur'an forms an interconnected network of meanings that support one another. For instance, when he interprets verses about *tawhid* (Divine Unity), he always connects them with verses on creation and eschatology to reveal their coherent structure. At the same time, Thabathaba'i places spiritual experience as an important epistemological instrument, as long as it remains within the boundaries set by the Qur'an. He does not reject *kashf* (inner unveiling), but he insists that every spiritual intuition must be grounded in the text and must not contradict the Qur'an's internal system of meaning.²⁰ Thus, spirituality does not replace reason; rather, it purifies reason from human subjective distortions.

In line with this, Thabathaba'i's hermeneutics also rejects the relativism of meaning that develops in some modern hermeneutical theories. For him, the text of revelation possesses a stable structure of meaning, even though readers may grasp different levels of depth.²¹ Therefore, he views exegesis that relies too heavily on the personal experience of the exegete as a perspective that obscures the objectivity of revelation. Thabathaba'i also restores the relationship between philosophy and exegesis not by making philosophy a source of meaning, but as an analytical tool that clarifies the conceptual structure within the Qur'an.²² Philosophical rationality serves as a means to understand the order of the cosmos as presented by the Qur'an, yet it remains subject to the authority of revelation. In a broader framework, Thabathaba'i's hermeneutics can be understood as an effort to demonstrate that the Qur'an is a living text capable of dialoguing with modern realities without losing its essence. He seeks to show that the depth of the Qur'an's meaning will never be exhausted, yet it remains preserved within the axis of the singular meaning willed by God. Therefore, reading the Qur'an is not merely an intellectual activity but an existential experience that requires awareness, sincerity, and inner openness.

The Concept of *Khalifah* in *Tafsir al-Mizan*: Between Trust (*Amanah*) and the Cosmos

One of Thabathaba'i's significant interpretations related to the relationship between humans and nature is his commentary on *Q.S. al-Baqarah* [2]:30, which reads:

¹⁸ Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan Fi Tafsir Al-Qur'an*, vol. 1 (Qum: Mu'assasah al-Nashr al-Islami, 1997).

¹⁹ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966).

²⁰ William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).

²¹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

²² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).

Meaning: “*And [remember] when your Lord said to the angels, ‘Indeed, I will make upon the earth a vicegerent (khalifah).’ They said, ‘Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood?’*”

Thabathaba'i interprets the term *khalifah* not merely as Adam's "successor" to previous creatures but as the Divine representative on earth. He writes that humans become *khalifah* because they possess the potential to manifest *asma' Allah* the Divine attributes in worldly life.²³ In this sense, the duty of vicegerency is not limited to managing the earth but to upholding the Divine order in all aspects of existence, including humanity's relationship with nature. Thabathaba'i emphasizes that human existence on earth must be accompanied by ethical awareness. If humans abuse their power and violate the laws of natural balance, they betray the very essence of their *khalifah* role. This interpretation reveals a profound ecological dimension: humans are not the owners of nature but the guardians of a cosmic trust (*amanah ilahiyyah*).

From Thabathaba'i's perspective, all of creation is subject to God's laws and possesses its own form of spiritual consciousness, as affirmed in *Q.S. al-Isra'* [17]:44:

Meaning: “*The seven heavens, the earth, and all that is in them glorify Allah; there is nothing but that it glorifies Him with praise, but you do not understand their glorification.*”

This verse shows that the universe is not a passive inanimate object but an active entity that praises God. Thus, to destroy nature is to disturb the harmony of this cosmic *dhikr* (remembrance).

When examined more deeply, Thabathaba'i's interpretation of the *khalifah* concept rests on the metaphysical assumption that the human being is a creature positioned at the intersection between the material and spiritual realms. Humanity possesses a *jasadiyah* (physical) dimension that situates it within the earthly ecosystem, but also a *ruhaniyah* (spiritual) dimension that connects it to the source of transcendence. Therefore, *khalifah* is not merely a social status or theological position but an ontological structure of humanity that requires maintaining balance between these two poles of existence.²⁴ Thabathaba'i also emphasizes that the dialogue of the angels in the verse does not represent opposition, but rather serves as the Qur'an's way of showing that the trust of vicegerency carries ethical risk. The angels were aware of the destructive potential of humanity, yet Allah knew of its creative potential. In other words, the human capacity to bring about destruction comes as part of the same potential that enables the building of civilization. Hence, *khalifah* requires *tazkiyat al-nafs* the purification of the self

²³ Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan Fi Tafsir Al-Qur'an*.

²⁴ Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*.

so that the human intellect can reflect Divine values rather than distort or exploit them for egoistic purposes.²⁵

The ecological dimension that emerges from Thabathaba'i's interpretation is not an additional discourse but a logical consequence of his theocentric hermeneutical framework. If all verses explain one another and all creation submits to the laws of God, then the relationship between humanity and nature is not one of exploitation or domination but of interconnectedness. Nature was not created to be treated as an object but as a collection of *ayat* signs of God that must be read, respected, and preserved.²⁶ Thabathaba'i also views the duty of *khalifah* as intertwined with the moral structure of humanity. Ethics in the Qur'an are not merely guidelines for individual behavior but a cosmic framework that requires humans to maintain the harmony of life. Therefore, environmental destruction is not only a moral violation but also a theological transgression that damages the sacred structure of the universe. From this perspective, ecology is not merely an environmental issue but an integral part of spirituality and worship.²⁷ Furthermore, Thabathaba'i asserts that all movements in nature are forms of obedience to God. Hence, humans, who have been endowed with reason and will, must not place themselves outside the natural order. Rather, they must learn from the order and harmony of other creations. When humans destroy the earth, they in fact position themselves as an exception within the cosmos whereas the Qur'an repeatedly affirms that destruction arises only from human wrongdoing itself (*Q.S. al-Rum* [30]: 41).²⁸

Ultimately, the concept of *khalifah* in Thabathaba'i's interpretation cannot be understood in a partial manner. It represents an inseparable unity between human ontology, spiritual ethics, and the interconnectedness of humanity with all creation. Thabathaba'i presents a reading that situates the human being as a morally conscious creature, not merely as the ruler of the earth. Thus, the duty of vicegerency requires human beings to continually refine themselves, protect nature, and make their lives a reflection of the Divine values that must be manifested in the world.

Thematic Analysis of Ecological Verses in Thabathaba'i's Perspective

In addition to *Q.S. al-Baqarah* [2]: 30, Thabathaba'i also provides relevant interpretations of other verses that discuss the relationship between humans and nature, including *Q.S. al-Rum* [30]: 41 and *Q.S. al-A'raf* [7]: 56.

1. *Q.S. al-Rum* [30]: 41

ظَهَرَ الْفَسَادُ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ أَيْدِي النَّاسِ لِيُذِيقَهُمْ بَعْضَ الَّذِي عَمِلُوا لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ

²⁵ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*.

²⁶ Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*.

²⁷ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*.

²⁸ Ayoub, "The Speaking Qur'an and Its Silent Interpretation."

Meaning: “Corruption has appeared on land and sea because of what the hands of men have earned, so that Allah may let them taste part of (the consequence of) what they have done, that perhaps they will return (to the right path).”

In *Tafsir al-Mizan*, Thabathaba'i explains that the corruption (*fasad*) referred to in this verse is not only moral but also material namely, the disruption of nature's balance as a result of human greed.²⁹ He views this verse as a form of “ecological warning,” reminding humanity not to violate the cosmic order established by God. Thus, environmental destruction is a reflection of the spiritual corruption of humankind.

2. Q.S. al-A'raf [7]: 56

وَلَا تُفْسِدُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ بَعْدَ إِصْلَاحِهَا وَادْعُوهُ خَوْفًا وَطَمَعًا إِنَّ رَحْمَتَ اللَّهِ قَرِيبٌ مِّنَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

Meaning “And do not cause corruption on the earth after it has been set right; and call upon Him with fear and hope.”

Tabataba'i interprets that “to set right the earth” (*iṣlah al-arḍ*) encompasses not only the social order but also the ecological order. A well-ordered nature is a manifestation of the Divine will; therefore, violating the harmony of nature means rejecting Divine mercy. This interpretation shows that environmental ethics have been integrated into the Qur'anic cosmological vision from the very beginning.³⁰ Through his interpretation of these two verses, Tabataba'i essentially offers a framework of Qur'anic Ecological Hermeneutics a reading of the Qur'an that places humanity, nature, and God within a single interconnected ontological system.

The Hermeneutical Dialogue of Tabataba'i with Contemporary Thinkers

Tabataba'i's thought resonates strongly with the discourse of eco-theology in modern philosophy of religion. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, for instance, asserts that the modern ecological crisis originates from a spiritual crisis in which humanity has separated itself from the sacredness of nature.³¹ In this view, ecological solutions must begin with the reconstruction of metaphysical consciousness, not merely with reforms in technical policy. Both Thabathaba'i and Nasr reject the reduction of nature to an economic object. For both thinkers, nature is the second book of God (*al-kitab al-takwini*), which contains the signs of Divine existence. Thus, the relationship between humans and nature is both spiritual and moral.

²⁹ Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan Fi Tafsir Al-Qur'an*.

³⁰ al-Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan Fi Tafsir Al-Qur'an*.

³¹ Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*.

This view is also in line with Zainal Abidin Bagir's concept of spiritual ecology, namely the restoration of the human–nature relationship through an integral religious consciousness.³² Even in more recent studies, A. S. Musa states that exegetical models such as Tabataba'i's support the paradigm of eco-theocentrism, which places God rather than humanity at the center of ecological ethics.³³

Thus, Tabataba'i's hermeneutics serves as a bridge between the classical Islamic tradition and contemporary global issues. He emphasizes that solving the environmental crisis requires the re-sacralization of nature restoring nature as a sacred space where the Divine will is present and experienced. Upon closer examination, Tabataba'i's hermeneutical dialogue with contemporary thinkers actually stems from the way he positions revelation as the center of Islamic cosmology. He views all reality, including the physical world, as hierarchically structured and deriving its meaning through its relationship with its transcendental source. This is why Tabataba'i's perspective easily resonates with the discourse of perennialist philosophers such as Nasr and Henry Corbin. Both emphasize the necessity of reading nature as a spiritual symbol that leads humanity toward deeper spiritual experience. In this context, Tabataba'i's exegesis not only offers a semantic approach but also opens a contemplative space for modern readers.

On the other hand, the relevance of Tabataba'i's thought to ecological issues becomes increasingly apparent as the modern world faces ever more complex environmental degradation. Rational and technical approaches have proven insufficient to halt the patterns of consumption and exploitation that damage the earth. Therefore, eco-theological scholars argue that the ecological crisis is essentially a crisis of meaning a crisis that arises when humanity loses its sacred view of nature.³⁴ Within this framework, Tabataba'i's contribution is highly significant, for he restores humanity to its position as a responsible *khalifah*, not merely a consumer of natural resources.

Furthermore, Tabataba'i's idea of cosmic order (*nizām takwini*) opens a dialogue with the thought of environmental philosophers such as Holmes Rolston III, who emphasizes the intrinsic value of nature. Although they come from different intellectual traditions, both converge on a shared view that nature possesses its own dignity, independent of human utility. Thus, the dialogue between Qur'anic hermeneutics and contemporary environmental philosophy is not only possible but mutually enriching. Indeed, several modern exegetical scholars have begun to see Thabathaba'i as a figure who provides a theoretical foundation for the development of ecological exegesis. This is because he does not merely read cosmological verses descriptively but connects them to the structure of human ethics and

³² Zainal Abidin Bagir, *Krisis Ekologis Dan Etika Islam: Upaya Membangun Spiritualitas Lingkungan* (Bandung: Mizan, 2019).

³³ William C Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

³⁴ Ja'far Sobhani, "The Qur'anic Exegesis of Allameh Tabataba'i: A Critical Study," *Message of Thaqalayn* 2, no. 4 (2001).

spirituality. His view that all creation glorifies God (*yusabbiḥu*) provides the foundation for understanding that nature possesses spiritual subjectivity. From this arises the idea that preserving the environment means preserving the harmony of cosmic remembrance (*dhikr*), a concept now widely used in studies of Islamic ecotheology.³⁵

In addition, Tabataba'i's contribution can also be read within the context of interdisciplinary hermeneutics. He not only interprets the text but also opens a dialogue between the Qur'an, philosophy, and the human sciences. This approach is relevant to contemporary exegetical paradigms that emphasize the need to read the Qur'an in dialogue with the challenges of the modern age climate change, the loss of biodiversity, and ecological injustice. Thus, Tabataba'i's thought can be situated within the global movement advocating for an ethics of sustainability grounded in spiritual values.

Ultimately, the hermeneutical dialogue between Tabataba'i and contemporary thinkers shows that the intellectual heritage of Islam holds great potential to contribute to modern problems. He proposes that ecological change will never occur unless humanity transforms its existential paradigm: from ruler to guardian, from consumer to cosmic custodian. In this way, Tabataba'i's thought becomes relevant not only as an intellectual tradition but also as an ethical offering for the future of the earth.

Relevance and Conceptual Contribution to the Global Environmental Crisis

In a world marked by climate change, resource exploitation, and ecosystem degradation, Tabataba'i's hermeneutics provides both a philosophical and spiritual foundation for an Islamic environmental ethic. He rejects the modern anthropocentric paradigm that places humanity at the center of power, replacing it with a theocentric and cosmocentric worldview.

Tabataba'i's hermeneutics presents a profound relevance to the increasingly urgent global ecological crisis. In a world marked by climate change, resource exploitation, and ecosystem degradation, his thought provides a philosophical and spiritual foundation for an Islamic environmental ethic. He rejects the modern anthropocentric paradigm that places humanity at the center of power, replacing it with a theocentric and cosmocentric paradigm. As *khalifah*, human beings must understand themselves as part of the web of life (interconnectedness). Nature is not merely an instrument but a spiritual partner in humanity's journey toward God. Thus, preserving the environment is not merely an ecological act but a form of worship (*'ibadah al-bi'iyah*), a devotion to God through the preservation of His creation.³⁶

Thabathaba'i's main contribution in this context lies in his ability to integrate philosophical hermeneutics with Qur'anic ecotheology. He offers a reading that not only interprets the text but also

³⁵ Zainal Abidin Bagir, "Spiritual Ecology and the Ethics of Environmental Care," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 26, no. 3 (2015).

³⁶ Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, *Text, Authority, and Community: Hermeneutics in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

transforms human consciousness toward nature. Through this approach, the Qur'an emerges not merely as a book of law but as a book of life, guiding humankind toward harmony with all creatures. Tabataba'i does not stop at the linguistic explanation of verses; rather, he connects them with the cosmic relationships encompassing humanity, nature, and God as an inseparable whole. At this point, his exegesis possesses transformative power it cultivates an awareness that ecological destruction is not merely a moral violation but a disruption of the cosmic order established by God.³⁷

Within this framework, the idea that humanity is part of the web of life finds its theological grounding. Tabataba'i interprets *khalifah* not as a legitimization of domination, but as a mandate of stewardship. He emphasizes that all forms of greed, excessive exploitation, and destructive behavior not only betray the trust of stewardship but also distort the very meaning of human existence. This interpretation aligns with Qur'anic verses that admonish humankind for corrupting the earth, such as Q.S. al-Rum [30]: 41, which states that *corruption has appeared on land and sea because of what people's hands have done, so that God may let them taste some of what they have done, that they might return (to the right path)*. Tabataba'i's commentary on this verse underscores that ecological destruction is a reflection of humanity's inner corruption (*fasad al-baTin*), which manifests itself in social and environmental behavior.³⁸

This ecological interpretation becomes even stronger when connected with Tabataba'i's view of the sacredness of all creation. He affirms that nature is a manifestation of God's signs (*ayat Allah*), and therefore, every form of human interaction with nature must be framed by an ethos of sanctity. He views every element of nature as bearing the imprint of divine presence (*athar al-rububiyah*), meaning that to harm or destroy it is equivalent to violating the ongoing cosmic testimony that continuously glorifies God. This idea resonates with Zainal Abidin Bagir's concept of spiritual ecology, which asserts that the relationship between humans and nature must be restored through an integral and unfragmented religious consciousness.³⁹ In many parts of *al-Mizan*, Tabataba'i suggests that cosmic order is part of the *sunnatullah* the divine law governing existence. When humans transgress boundaries (*Tughyan*), the continuity of the ecosystem becomes threatened, and this is the logical consequence of humanity's deviation from God's law. Therefore, the re-sacralization of nature becomes a key principle in the framework of a Qur'an-based environmental ethic: restoring nature as a sacred space where the Divine will is present and operative. This endeavor cannot be achieved merely through technocratic policies; it requires a paradigm shift a return of humanity to its ontological position as both servant (*'abd*) and trustee (*amin*) of the Divine mandate.

³⁷ Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan Fi Tafsir Al-Qur'an* (Mu'assasat al-A'lami, 1973).

³⁸ A S Musa, "Eco-Theocentrism in Contemporary Qur'anic Interpretation," *Journal of Islamic Environmental Studies*, 2022.

³⁹ Zainal Abidin Bagir, *Ilmu, Etika, Dan Agama: Menyambut Dialog Sains Dan Agama* (Mizan, 2014).

Tabataba'i's perspective also carries practical implications for the discourse on sustainability. He supports a worldview that regards sustainability as an integral part of moral integrity. When public policy, lifestyle, and economic activity are not grounded in the principles of spiritual sustainability, ecological destruction becomes inevitable. In this context, his exegesis serves as a significant conceptual contribution to global discussions on environmental ethics, particularly in formulating an approach that integrates spirituality, ecological awareness, and social responsibility.⁴⁰ Thus, the relevance of Tabataba'i's hermeneutics to the global environmental crisis does not lie in practical ecological activism, but in providing a theologically grounded foundation for shaping a new worldview toward nature. He reminds us that resolving the environmental crisis is not merely a matter of technical engineering, but a process of restoring human consciousness as part of a living cosmos one that glorifies and manifests the presence of God. Through this approach, Tabataba'i's exegesis stands as a significant contribution to enriching the discourse of Islamic eco-theology in the modern era.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the hermeneutical framework of exegesis developed by 'Allamah Muḥammad Ḥusain Tabataba'i through *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* not only offers a rational approach to the sacred text but also provides an ontological foundation for Islamic environmental ethics. Through the concept of *khalifah* (God's vicegerent on earth), Tabataba'i positions humanity as a cosmic agent endowed with both spiritual and moral responsibility for the continuity of the universe. Tabataba'i's interpretation of verses such as Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]: 30, Q.S. al-Rum [30]: 41, and Q.S. al-A'raf [7]: 56 affirms that the environmental crisis is a consequence of humanity's deviation from its true function of vicegerency to uphold balance, not exploitation.

The ecological hermeneutic approach built upon the principle of *tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an* opens a space for interpretation that integrates spirituality, rationality, and environmental ethics. In the contemporary context, Tabataba'i's ideas are highly relevant for developing an Islamic eco-theological paradigm that places humanity not as the center of nature (*anthropocentric*), but as an integral part of the cosmic system that submits to Divine will. Thus, Tabataba'i's hermeneutics can be reread as a conceptual framework for cultivating ecological consciousness rooted in the values of revelation not merely within the constructs of secular ethics.

Scientifically, this research offers a new contribution in two major aspects. First, on the methodological level, it expands the scope of hermeneutical exegesis from a purely epistemic domain to a practical ecological praxis. Second, on the theoretical level, it proposes a framework of eco-theological hermeneutics grounded in Islamic exegesis, which serves as an alternative to modern

⁴⁰ Sardar, *Reading the Qur'an: The Contemporary Relevance of the Sacred Text of Islam*.

Western ecological paradigms. By rereading the concept of *khalifah* through Tabataba'i's approach, we not only gain a more contextual understanding of the sacred text but also uncover a normative foundation for environmental ethics in Islam one that is capable of addressing the current global ecological crisis.

Ultimately, this study asserts that building ecological awareness is not merely an ethical issue, but an inherent religious duty embedded within the human role as *khalifah* (vicegerent). Nature is not a passive object to be exploited, but a set of divine signs (*ayat Allah*) that demand interpretation and reverence. Thus, an ecological exegesis in the spirit of Tabataba'i represents an essential step toward restoring the relationship between humanity and nature to the primordial balance (*fiTrah*) intended by divine revelation.

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