

# Evolution in Traditional Sunni Exegesis

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**Abstract:** Traditional Sunni commentaries of verses 33: 72, 6: 38, 24: 41, and 2: 30 of the Qur'an make it clear that Sunni exegetes endorsed the belief that creatures, imbued with consciousness, who were subject to moral law, and similar to humans, existed long before the creation of Adam. This would seem to allow creationism, human exceptionalism, and Adamic exceptionalism. However, traditional Sunni scholars dissociate the existence of creatures before and with Adam from he and his early progeny interbreeding with them. The qualifier of 'single' in Q4: 1 is taken by Sunni exegetes as textual proof of *exclusive* descent from Adam, which would preclude Adamic exceptionalism. Yet the acceptance of human-*jinn* unions by some scholars in the Islamic tradition casts doubt on whether all exegetes would have denounced Adamic exceptionalism if that option were available. On the other hand, the fact that most Sunni exegetes accept Eve was created from Adam's rib in order to affirm exclusive descent from Adam intimates that this would be their preference. The exceptionally high bar of universal scholarly agreement required for a consensus on the issue of exclusive descent cannot be claimed. Whether the more realistic bar of majority consensus is attained on this issue continues to be a vexed question. Further, it is difficult to argue that this majority consensus, even if it were attained, would be doctrinally binding since it only represents an exegetical consensus that is inherently of low evidentiary value. Therefore, all we can legitimately claim is most traditional Sunni exegetes' views would only be consistent with creationism or human exceptionalism.

**Keywords:** evolution, Sunni, Qur'an, exegesis, Adam, consensus.

**Contribution:** All aspects of the article from the research to the compilation were undertaken by Ismail Lala. This study looks at the Sunni exegetical tradition to demonstrate that it is only consistent with creationism and human exceptionalism.

**Use of AI:** AI was not used in any aspect of the article.

## Introduction

In his detailed exploration of the views on evolution adduced by Muslim scholars, and which ones may be concordant with a Ghazālian hermeneutic framework, Shoaib Malik presses into service Qur’anic verses and literature from the prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) pertinent to evolution (Malik 2021, 87–102). Predictably, he focusses on material that refers to human (especially Adam) and non-human creation (Malik 2021, 92–99). Somewhat surprisingly, however, Qur’anic verses are presented without the enormous exegetical apparatus behind them, which is integral to the manner in which the verses are interpreted (Wansbrough 1988; Berg 2000; Saleh 2004; Saeed 2006). This oversight is most conspicuously detected in the verses that are neglected for consideration because the *prima facie* reading of the text does not reveal the way in which generations of exegetes interpreted the verses and their consequent import for opinions on evolution. It is this oversight that the present study seeks to correct. For the purposes of this article, evolution is defined as “change through time as species become modified and diverge to produce multiple descendent species” (Losos 2014, 3). Nuh Keller employs the term ‘macro-evolution’ to denote this type of evolution, as opposed to the universally accepted form of ‘micro-evolution’ that refers to change within a species (Keller 2011).

This article begins by presenting the four dominant positions on evolution in the Muslim tradition, as categorised by Malik (2021). It then presents an overview of verses in the Qur’an that could illuminate whether there were sentient creatures that lived on earth before Adam, and how

Sunni commentators understood these verses. After this, Sunni exegetes' interpretation of Q4: 1, which is central to our understanding of which views on evolution Muslims could endorse (Malik 2021), is discussed. The commentary of the hugely influential Ash'arite exegete Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) (Saeed 2018) on Q4: 1 is then explored as a case study in order to take a more forensic look at a Sunni commentator who may be representative of the tradition. Finally, the issue of whether a scholarly consensus on which types of evolution Sunni exegetes would have endorsed can be claimed is discussed. We begin with the different views of Muslims on evolution.

## 1. Muslim views on evolution

Malik applies a quadpartite classification of the opinions of Muslim scholars when it comes to evolution (Malik 2021, 111). This ranges from anti-evolution creationism, which is an outright rejection of evolution; to human exceptionalism, which accepts evolution for non-humans but dismisses it for humans. And from Adamic exceptionalism, which is more permissive and accepts evolution for all creatures except Adam; to the 'no exceptions' theory, which is a full-blooded acceptance of evolution of all creatures (Malik 2021, 106, 48). Anti-evolutionism creationists, like Seyyed Hossein Nasr, argue that (1) evolution is just a theory that has been altered many times and so is not scientifically robust, (2) natural selection is antithetical to the divine intent in creation of all things, (3) the naturalistic explanation of evolution disregards the metaphysical basis of all things in the world which is an immaterial world, and (4) God recreates all things every moment, which precludes the existence of intermediates (Nasr 2006). Human exceptionalists like Keller, on the other hand, are more permissive and exclude humans from evolutionary theory based on the special creation that is attributed to them in the Qur'an, which is distinct from all other things, not to mention the Qur'anic assertion that Adam was created in heaven (Keller 2011). Nazir Khan and Yasir Qadhi agree with Keller on human exceptionalism but allow the possibility of

hominids that evolved via common ancestry at the time of Adam's descent to earth. Nevertheless, they maintain that humans have a metaphysically special rank that is not afforded hominids (Khan and Qadhi 2019).

Adamic exceptionalists like David Jalajel argue that there is nothing in the Qur'an that rules out evolution through common ancestry, notwithstanding Adam's miraculous creation, therefore a non-committal position, or "suspension of judgement" (*tawaqquf*) should be adopted when it comes to whether there were hominids in Adam's time and whether his offspring interbred with them (Jalajel 2018). Enis Doko reiterates Jalajel's position while adding another possibility: it could be that Adam was created twice. The creation of Adam in heaven was miraculous and is referred to in the Qur'an, but he was also created on earth through common ancestry. This means that Doko allows both Adamic exceptionalism and a 'no exceptions' form of evolution in which even the earthly Adam was the result of an evolutionary process (Doko 2021). Malik draws attention to an historical precedent for Adamic exceptionalism: interbreeding between humans and *jinn* (spirits)<sup>1</sup> in the Islamic tradition, and the production of viable offspring from them. He writes,

If scholars, who were well-versed in scriptural texts, affirmed the possibility that intermarriage between jinn and humans resulting in offspring might actually have occurred, then it becomes evident that they did not see the resulting children's possession of non-Adamic ancestors to contradict any scriptural text. Consequently, the same texts would not negate the possibility of the intermarriage scenarios as suggested by Adamic Exceptionalism (Malik 2023, 25).

This possibility is discussed extensively in the exegetical tradition in the context of Bilqīs, the Queen of Sheba, who many commentators argue had a mother who was *jinn* and a father who was human. Arguably, the most influential medieval commentary, that of 'Imād al-Dīn ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) (Calder 1993, 101–40), mentions on the authority of the

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<sup>1</sup> An elucidation of the type of creation *jinn* is falls outside the scope of this study. For an exhaustive study on this form of creation, as well as their association with poets and mystics, see Amira El-Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and Intelligent World of the Jinn*.

early exegete Qatāda (d. 23/643?), “Her mother was a *jinn*, and the ends of her feet were like the hooves of an animal” (1999, 6: 186). The ubiquitous polymath, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), records this opinion from many early sources (n.d., 6: 351). The Hanafite exegete, Muḥammad Thanā’ Allāh Pānīpatī (d. 1225/1810), provides more detail on this when he says,

Her name was Bilqīs bint Sharāḥīl from the progeny of Ya‘rab ibn Qaḥṭān, and her father was a great king ... who ruled over all of Yemen, and he used to say to the kings of surrounding areas, “None of you is equal to me!” So he refused to marry anyone from among them and married a woman from the *jinn* [instead] called Rayḥāna bint al-Sakan who gave birth to Bilqīs, and he [the king] did not have any child besides her (Pānīpatī 1991, 7: 110).

Pānīpatī even traces this opinion to Prophet Muḥammad, writing that “it has also been reported in the traditions of Prophet Muḥammad (*ḥadīth*) that one of her [Bilqīs’] parents was a *jinn*” (Pānīpatī 1991, 7: 110).

Many jurists discuss the permissibility of marriage between *jinn* and humans. Al-Suyūṭī writes that it has happened many times before. One of the most influential theologians in Islam, Taqī al-Dīn ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), writes that it is well-known that humans and *jinn* have gotten married and had children. Early scholars like Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and Qatāda acknowledged that it occurred but disapproved of it. The renowned jurist Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179/795), likewise, regarded it as detestable on the basis that a woman who committed adultery could be pregnant and simply claim she was impregnated by her husband who was a *jinn*. Nevertheless, he conceded that there were no explicit texts prohibiting such a union (Al-Ashqar 2005, 22).<sup>2</sup>

The final group, ‘no exceptions’ evolutionists, give various reasons for a full-blooded defence of evolution. These range from the assertion that since the Qur’an does not mention evolution, all options, including the creation of Adam from common ancestry, is on the table (Taslaman 2020), or that the Qur’an is not a scientific work and thus to look to the

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this issue.

Qur'an on issues of scientific concern like evolution is foolish (Dajani 2012), or that reason and revelation cannot contradict and the basis of the supposed contradiction is a detrimental adherence to textual literalism (Gueoussoum 2011).

The classification Malik adopts is useful, notwithstanding the scant attention paid to the difference between Young Earth Theory and Old Earth Theory, both of which are subsumed under creationism without underscoring the ramifications for evolution if humans were deemed to have come into existence just six thousand years ago, as opposed to around a million years ago (Scott 1997, 263–89). Whilst traditional creationist theories posit the former, more recent studies, notably by S. Joshua Swamidass (2019), Stephen Schaffner (2021), and William Lane Craig (2021), put the figure between 500,000 years and one million years. Assessing the merit of each view lies outside the purview of this essay. What we can say is that scholars claim all these views are derived from the Qur'an and prophetic traditions. Whether the interpretations are valid, however, is a different matter (Malik 2021).

There are two reasons for the wide spectrum of opinions in the Islamic tradition on this issue: there is no explicit evidence on this issue that is beyond doubt. The key terms are 'explicit' (*qaṭ'i*) and 'beyond doubt.' In other words, there are no verses of the Qur'an, or prophetic traditions that are mass-transmitted (*mutawātir*) and thus beyond doubt, that make *explicit* pronouncements on this issue. Theological matters rest on the twin pillars of reliability and clarity (Brown 2017; Dogan 2014; Yusuf 2009). The Qur'an, which is beyond doubt from a Muslim perspective, itself declares that many of its verses are obscure and lie beyond the comprehension of most people: *He [God] is the One who revealed the Book to you. In it are verses that have a clear meaning (muḥkamāt), and others that are unknown (mutashābihāt)* (Qur'an 3: 7). It is precisely for this reason that interrogation of the exegetical tradition is so vital in order to decipher what these verses mean, and, therefore, what beliefs about evolution the Qur'anic text could possibly accommodate. This is due to the fact that, even though the exegetical tradition cannot be used as a basis for adoption of tenets of belief (Dogan 2014), the dearth of scriptural material should galvanise us to avail ourselves of all possible

resources, especially since the exegetical sources, by definition, enhance our understanding of the Qur’anic text.

Nevertheless, we must be cognisant of the different hermeneutic register of exegesis, and its concomitant speculative claims, which cannot compete with theological claims, or the jurisprudential claims that require absolute certainty and high probability, respectively. Theology required the absolute proof afforded only by explicit verses of the Qur’an and/ or mass-transmitted traditions because they were “concerned with eternal truths and not with everyday matters”, which were the preserve of jurisprudence (van Ess 2006, 20). Consequently, whereas differences of opinion were admitted, and even advocated, in matters of jurisprudence, such was not the case for theology. Jurisprudential disagreement was “understood in the sense of ‘diversity.’ It was something good” (van Ess 2006, 18), whereas “theological disagreement would very quickly take the form of scandal” (van Ess 2006, 21). On the interpretational plane of Qur’anic exegesis, many opinions were accommodated without any claims to absolute certainty of one particular interpretation, or even high probability of its exclusivity. Indeed, Norman Calder argues that the attempt to close down polyvalent interpretations of the Qur’an—that represented the standard *modus operandi* of early exegetes in favour of a single correct interpretation—which is adopted by Ibn Kathir, “must be recognized as a significant deviation from the norms of the [*tafsir*] genre; perhaps as a major turning-point in its development” (Calder 1993, 101).

This is all to say that we end up with different registers, each with its own epistemic threshold, the corresponding level of certainty it imparts, and the diversity it allows. The higher the epistemic threshold, the higher the corresponding level of certainty, and thus the lower the level of disagreement that is admitted. The lower the epistemic threshold, the lower the corresponding level of certainty, and thus the higher the level of disagreement that is admitted. Matters of theology are from the first, restricted and restrictive, category whilst Qur’anic commentary is from the latter, permissive one; jurisprudence lies in between. This does not mean that commentators did not attempt to make theological claims from their interpretation of the Qur’an, for “in the hands of a skilled and sensitive exegete any quranic verse may be found to have implications

ranging across the scholastic disciplines” (Calder 1993, 101). However, because theological matters were required to clear such a high epistemic threshold, “in the end, theology used other criteria. The Koran never constituted its central evidence” (van Ess 2006, 158).<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Sunni Qur’an commentaries on evolution

The verses that form the basis of any analysis on this topic may be divided into those that mention the creation of non-humans, and those that refer to human or Adamic creation. We shall only address the issue of non-human creation in the Sunni exegetical tradition. This is because Malik has already shown that verses about Adam, such as Q2: 34, Q2: 235, Q3: 33–34, and Q5: 27, provide clear proof that these verses are to be taken literally (Malik 2021, 307). Thus, Muslim scholars who subscribe to the ‘no exceptions’ theory, do so on the basis of figurative readings about the nature of Adam as a symbol, which contradicts the plain reading of the text (Malik 2021, 297–301, 305–18). Malik correctly identifies that this is operating on the thin end of the wedge and can potentially render the entire Qur’anic text metaphorical (Malik 2021, 308). Furthermore, the principles of Qur’anic exegesis dictate that figurative readings may not be adopted if they contradict the plain-sense of the text (Dhahabī n.d., 2: 297–98; Dogan 2014). These interpretations are thus dismissed as invalid according to the Sunni exegetical tradition. However, we shall look at the question of whether exclusive descent from Adam is explicitly stated in the Qur’an in our subsequent analysis of Q4: 1 (see below).

We also do not need to concern ourselves with the anti-evolution creationist viewpoint as the ambiguity in the Qur’anic text means it could easily be concordant with creationism (Malik 2021, 325). This leaves us with human exceptionalism and Adamic exceptionalism. It is in these two categories that the Sunni exegetical tradition is most instructive as it provides details about whether non-human beings existed prior to the existence of Adam.

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<sup>3</sup> I am extremely grateful to an insightful reviewer for pointing this out.

## 2.1. Pre-Adamic beings

The Qur'an makes frequent mention of the creation of non-human beings prior to the creation of humankind. In one verse, God declares: "*Indeed, we offered 'the trust' (amāna) to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to accept it, and they were afraid of it, but humankind accepted it; surely, he is unjust and ignorant.*" (33: 72) There seems to be an intimation here that God offered 'the trust' to the heavens, the earth and the mountains before He offered it to humans. In fact, arguably the most influential exegete from the classical period, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) (Saleh 2016, 180–209), explicitly confirms this when he states,

*Indeed, we offered 'the trust' (amāna) to the heavens and the earth and the mountains [saying:] If they fulfil it, We shall reward them, and if they squander it, We shall punish them. But they did not want to [accept it], and they were afraid of accepting it, but not out of disobedience; rather, out of the enormity [of the responsibility] of [taking on] God's religion if they should not abide by it Then God turned to Adam who accepted it (Al-Ṭabarī 2000, 20: 337).*

Al-Ṭabarī makes it clear that the heavens and the earth and mountains existed before humans, and they were offered this 'trust' but refused to take it out of humility, which raises the question as to what 'the trust' was. He provides a few possibilities: "The trust' [means] obligatory responsibilities (*farā'id*) imposed on God's servants. ...[It means] obedience (*tā'a*) [to God] that was imposed on them *before it was imposed on Adam.*" (Al-Ṭabarī 2000, 20: 336–37). So 'the trust' was either a reference to general obedience to God, or it denoted the imposition of more specific moral responsibilities. One of the most celebrated Ash'arite theologians and exegetes, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) (Saeed 2018), adduces many more possibilities as to what this 'trust' could have been, but the one common denominator is that they all involved moral responsibility (Al-Rāzī 1999, 25: 187–88). This then leads to the most pertinent question for our purposes: how could the heavens, earth and mountains be in a position to bear moral responsibility? Al-Rāzī explains this by stating that here the designation of heavens, earth, and mountains refers to the beings that were *living in* those places (Al-Rāzī 1999, 25: 187).

This means that there were sentient beings, capable of assuming moral responsibility, before the creation of Adam who the Qur'an proclaims was the first human. It is possible, then, that these beings were pre-Adamic hominids (Wood 2019).

This line of reasoning is given further credence by the Qur'anic assertion that animals bear some similarity with humans. God proclaims, *There are no creatures (dābba) on the earth, nor birds flying in the sky with their wings but they are nations (umam) like you (amthālukum)* (6: 38). It is significant that the term "creature" (*dābba*) may be applied to both rational and irrational beings (Lane 2003, 3: 842). Indeed, it is applied to humans as well as animals in the Qur'an when God states that He created all creatures (*dābba*) from water (24: 45). This means that there is an intrinsic commonality between humans and *dābba*.

More significantly, in Q6: 38, God refers to animals and birds as "nations" (*umam*) like human nations. The term "*umam*" (nations) (sing. *umma*) being used for animals is especially important because, as one of the most influential Arabic lexicographers, Abu'l-Faḍl ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311?), explicates, the term has a close connection to moral responsibility, with its primary denotation being that of a mode of conduct. It is thus used to refer to broad categories of comportment, especially obedience (*tā'a*) to God, and those who adhere to this form of behaviour. He gives an example from the prophetic tradition that runs, "The Jews from [the tribe of] Banī 'Awf are a nation (*umma*) from among the Muslims" (Ibn Manẓūr 2000, 135). Here the Jews are classified as a nation from among the Muslims precisely because they adhere to similar moral conduct.

It is for this reason that exegetes of the Qur'an tried to find strained interpretations of this verse in order to mitigate the commonality that the term implies. Indeed, the political theorist and Qur'anic commentator, Abu'l-Ḥasan al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), mentions that the grammarian, Abū Zakariyya al-Farrā' (d. 207/822), rejected that the denotation is of moral responsibility (*taklīf*) even though that is the plain meaning (*ẓāhir*) of the term, as he himself concedes (n.d., 2: 111). However, many other commentators freely admit that this is what is intended, such as one of the highest authorities on Qur'anic exegesis in the Ottoman era,

Abu'l-Thanā' al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1854) (Nafi 2002, 465), who accepts that this term is employed for animals because they have similar “states” (*aḥwāl*) to humans, as well as similar “spiritual affairs” (*umūr ma'nawiyya*) (1994, 4: 136). The Persian mystic and exegete, Rūzbahān al-Baqlī (d. 606/1209), who was “critical to the development of Sufism in Iran” (Elias 1998, 601), is even more categorical when he writes in his interpretation of Q6: 38.

Surely, God, be He praised, created besides humans, angels and *jinn* (spirits), animals like birds, predators and insects, upon a ‘natural disposition’ (*fiṭra*)<sup>4</sup> [to believe] in divine oneness (*tawḥīd*), and [He created them with] a nature of cognisance (*jibilla ma'rifa*). God spoke to them to make plain the paths to knowing Him, having certainty about Him, and having faith in Him. ... and He illuminated them with the lights of rationality (*anwār al-'aql*) (Al-Baqlī 2008, 1: 354).

Al-Baqlī unequivocally states that God created animals with rationality, with the same “natural disposition” of knowing Him and believing in Him as humans, and with the same “nature of cognisance.” It is for this reason, he implies, that the term “*umam*” can be meaningfully used for them. As stated previously, these could possibly be hominids that existed prior to the creation of Adam because commentaries on Q33: 72 make it clear that beings capable of assuming moral responsibility existed before Adam.

A further proof of this assertion may be found in Q24: 41 where God affirms, “*Do you not see that everything that is in the heavens and the earth, and the birds with wings extended, glorify Him? Each one knows its prayer and form of glorification (tasbīḥ). And God knows everything they do.*” The well-known Central Asian theologian and exegete, Abū Ḥafs al-Nasafī (d. 537/1142), observes that the pronoun (i.e. *its prayer* and *its form of*

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<sup>4</sup> This is an immensely significant and contested term in Islamic intellectual thought. I have chosen to translate it as “natural disposition.” Nevertheless, there are many facets to this term which a simple translation cannot capture. It is for this reason that Camilla Adang chooses not to translate the term (Islam as the Inborn Religion of Mankind: The Concept of Fiṭra in the Works of Ibn Ḥazm 2000, 260). Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, nevertheless, opts for the same translation I have chosen (*Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation: A Study of Dar' al-ta'arud al-'aql wa-l-naql* 2020, 260).

glorification) can refer to the birds and all other creatures, or it can refer to God (i.e. God knows each prayer and form of glorification about God) (Al-Nasafī 1998, 2: 510). Naturally, the latter interpretation would preclude any intimation of sentience to pre-Adamic animals and birds. However, in defence of the first interpretation, Al-Nasafī remarks, “It is not far-fetched that God inspires (*yulhim*) birds to supplicate to Him and praise Him, just as He inspired [humankind with] knowledge of arcane sciences (*al-‘ulūm al-daqīqa*) that even the intelligent [among them] would hardly have known [by themselves].” (Al-Nasafī 1998, 2: 510)

Al-Nasafī, thus, openly countenances the possibility that animals, which may be pre-Adamic, could be given sentience and rationality, and on the basis of this they can praise God. Al-Rāzī seems to struggle with this verse: on the one hand, he admits that if animals are able to praise God then it means they are sentient beings, which he denies (even though this is a natural corollary of his analysis of Q33: 72). At the same time, he cites the revered imam, Muḥammad ibn Ja‘far al-Šādiq (d. 203/818),<sup>5</sup> as having asked his companion, “Do you know what these birds say before sunrise and after sunrise?” When his companion replied that he did not know, Muḥammad revealed, “They glorify their Lord, and ask for their daily provision” (Al-Rāzī 1999, 24: 402). This indicates that birds, and by extension other animals (as shown by the verses above) have consciousness, which at least leaves the door open for pre-Adamic sentient beings.

Perhaps the most perspicuous verse on this issue is Q2: 30, which runs: “*And when your Lord said to the angels, ‘I will place on earth a vicegerent,’ they responded, ‘Will put therein those who will sow sedition and cause bloodshed, while we hymn your praises and glorify you?’ He [God] declared, ‘I know that which you do not.’*” There are many points of interest that exegetes raise here, all of which indicate the existence of corporeal,

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<sup>5</sup> Reference to the Shi‘ī imam in Al-Rāzī’s commentary naturally raises questions about evolution in Shi‘ism. While this study focusses on the Sunnī tradition, Karim Kocsenda assesses the Shi‘ī tradition, especially the commentaries of Ṭabāṭabā‘ī and Ḥaydari in “Shi‘ī readings on human evolution.” He concludes that both of these exegetes adhere to anti-evolution creationism due to various reasons. This is in contradistinction to the Ismā‘īlī tradition which accepts macroevolution without any exceptions (Andani, 2022).

pre-Adamic beings imbued with consciousness and charged with a moral law. Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273), whose multiplicity of meanings represents the pinnacle of polyvalent exegesis (Calder 1993, 101–40), writes that the only reason the angels reacted this way to the declaration of God to place a vicegerent (*khalīfa*) on earth was:

The angels had *seen* and knew the havoc that *jinn* had wrought and how they spilled blood. This is because *jinn* lived on earth *before* Adam was created and they spread sedition and spilled blood so God sent Satan (Iblīs)<sup>6</sup> to them with an army of angels, and they [i.e. the *jinn*] killed them and stuck them (*alḥaqaḥum*) to the sea [coasts] and the tops of mountains (Al-Qurṭubī 1964, 1: 274).

Al-Qurṭubī gives a couple of indications here that there were corporeal pre-Adamic beings that resided on earth:

1. The angels had seen them.
2. Satan and the angels killed them and attached their bodies to the tops of mountains and to the coasts of seas.<sup>7</sup>

Further, the fact that God sent Satan and an army of angels to punish them means that they were imbued with consciousness and subject to a moral law that they violated; the reference to “spilling blood,” too, strongly insinuates that it was each other’s blood that they spilled, adding further credence to the assertion that they had physical forms. Indeed, Pānīpatī states that these beings “remained on the earth for a long time, then envy and injustice became prevalent amongst them so they sowed sedition and fought” (Pānīpatī 1992, 1: 48).

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<sup>6</sup> In the Islamic tradition, there is a difference of opinion as to whether or not Satan was an angel. Al-Nasafi (d. 537/1142), for instance, mentions the same story but just says that God sent a group of angels to destroy the pre-Adamic beings (*Tafsīr Al-Nasafi*, 1:77). Abū Muḥammad al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122) is much more unambiguous, saying clearly that Iblīs was an angel (*Tafsīr Al-Baghawī*, 1:78). Al-Suyūṭī states that Satan was a special kind of angel that was not made of light like the others (*Al-Durr al-manthūr fī tafsīr bi’l-ma’thūr*, 1: 111). Whereas Abū Ishāq al-Tha‘alibī (d. 427/ 1035?) writes that he was not from among the angels (*Al-Kashf wa’l-bayān*, 17: 169).

<sup>7</sup> ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Tha‘alibī (d. 873/1468) states explicitly that it was the coasts of seas in his commentary of this verse (*Al-Jawāhir al-ḥisān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 1: 205).

Ibn Kathīr provides strong proof, not only that pre-Adamic beings had physical forms and were subject to moral law, but that they were actually like humans when he claims that the reason the angels protested about humans being placed on earth was because “they were analogising them from those who had gone before him” (*qāsūhum ‘alā man sabaq*) (1999, 1: 124). The Abbāsīd era Ash‘arite exegete, Al-Rāghib Al-Iṣfahānī (d. 502/1108?), is even clearer when he states that the *jinn* that existed before Adam “were the closest (*aqrab*) to humankind” (1999, 1: 138).

Finally, the term “*khalīfa*” (vicegerent) in this passage also allows the possibility that Adam and his progeny were successors of the beings that existed before them. Al-Rāzī writes, “*Khalīfa* refers to he who succeeds someone else and takes his place ... because He [God], be He exalted, expelled them [i.e. the *jinn*] from the earth and allowed Adam to reside on earth. Adam, peace be upon him, was thus the *khalīfa* of those *jinn* who came before him.” (Al-Rāzī 1999, 2: 388–89) The possibility that Adam was the next evolutionary manifestation of *jinn* who were rational beings and “were the closest to humankind” in their physical form, thus, cannot be ruled out based on the textual evidence from Sunni commentaries.

The Sunni exegetical tradition is clear that pre-Adamic creatures, imbued with consciousness, who were subject to moral law, and similar to humans, existed long before the creation of Adam. These could have been hominids, and it is this idea of which David Solomon Jalajel is a strong proponent (Malik 2021, 134–35; Jalajel, 2022). This allows Jalajel to simultaneously assert that the creation of Adam was a miracle, something that scripture and classical Sunni theologians support, whilst maintaining that it is possible for there to have been human-like creatures before Adam, and with whom his progeny could have procreated, thus still allowing the prospect that all humans today can trace their lineage back to Adam (Malik 2021, 134–35; Jalajel 2022). However, Keller classifies this belief as falling beyond the pale of Islam (Malik 2021, 121–24) (see below).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The legal ramifications of holding differing beliefs about evolution is not the focus of this study. Malik *et al.* offer a detailed response to Keller’s juristic ruling in “Accepting Evolution Entails Kufr?: A Critical Appraisal of Nuh Ha Mim Keller’s Fatwa.”

This means that from the four views on evolution, the Sunni exegetical tradition seems to permit three of them, notwithstanding the ‘no exceptions’ opinion. This is the same conclusion Malik reaches by employing Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s (d. 505/1111) hermeneutic agenda (2021, 296–330). He writes, “It seems al-Ghazālī’s framework is hermeneutically compatible with creationism, human exceptionalism, and Adamic exceptionalism. He would reject the no exceptions stance because of hermeneutic problems they encounter” (2021, 330). Malik argues that the theological notion of “human” (*insān*) must not be conflated with the biological notion, which may have included hominins. Put otherwise, there may be multiple biological referents to the theological term “*insān*”, such as *Homo sapiens*, *Homo neanderthalensis*, or other hominins.<sup>9</sup> This “*insān*” could have interbred with the hominids that possibly existed at the time. In a recent work, Malik, Elvira Kulieva, and Ayub Ayub (2021) discuss the distinction made by Nidhal Guessoum between the terms “*bashar*” and “*insān*” where the former refers to earlier hominids and the latter to *Homo sapiens*. The existence of hominids, thus, allows the possibility of interbreeding with them.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> I am extremely thankful to an astute reviewer who pointed out this nuance.

<sup>10</sup> Malik’s analysis of this interbreeding, and, specifically, his assessment of incest (2021, 327–38) requires unpacking. He writes, “If Adam and Eve were the first couple of humankind, and if there were no other humans at the time, it entails that Adam’s immediate descendants must have practised incest” (2021, 327). His response to this is the Ash‘arite assertion that God can command whatever He wills to previous nations. While this is true, it is also worthy of note that, according to many exegetes, incest *did* exist for Adam’s immediate descendants, it is just that the definition of incest was different. This is because some scholars, like Ibn Kathīr, maintain that whenever Ḥawwā’ (Eve) was pregnant, she would give birth to twins (a boy and a girl). These twins were not allowed to marry one another because that was incest. Brothers and sisters who were not twins were allowed to marry because that was not regarded as incest. Indeed, this was the very reason Qābil (Cain) murdered Hābil (Abel): he wanted to marry his twin sister but was not permitted to do so. Ibn Kathīr relates on the authority of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd (d. 32/653?) and other companions of the Prophet Muḥammad that “Adam’s [wife] did not give birth to a boy except there was a girl with him, so the boy from one pregnancy would marry the girl from another, and the girl from one pregnancy would marry the boy of another” (Ibn Kathīr 1999, 3:82). Ibn Kathīr also reports that the traditionist Ibn Abū Ḥātim (d. 327/939?) transmits the opinion of the exegete *par excellence* ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687) who remarked, “It was forbidden for a woman to marry her twin brother, and he was commanded to marry another one of his sisters, and for her [i.e. Eve], after each pregnancy, she gave birth to a boy and a girl” (Ibn Kathīr 1999,

### 3. Is the possible existence of hominids enough?

Traditional Sunni exegesis widely acknowledges the existence of pre-Adamic creatures, imbued with consciousness, who were subject to moral

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3:82). Ibn Kathīr, who designates himself the arbiter of what is reliable and what is derived from what he deems to be unreliable Jewish sources (*isrā'īliyyāt*) (Calder 1993; Tottoli 1999), designates the chain of transmission (*isnād*) of this report as “good” (*jayyid*) (Ibn Kathir 1999, 3:83).

Indeed, this opinion has wide support in the Sunni exegetical tradition. Baghawī writes that “Eve used to give birth to a boy and a girl in each pregnancy with Adam. She had a total of forty children through twenty pregnancies, the first of them was Cain and his twin Aqlima, and the last of them was ‘Abd al-Mughīth and his twin Amat al-Mughīth” (Baghawī 1997, 3:41). Qurṭubī adds that the only exception to Eve’s having twins every time she was pregnant was when she had Seth, who was born on his own to compensate for the murder of Abel so that each boy would still have a girl to marry (Qurṭubī 1964, 6:134). Tha‘labī and Ibn ‘Ajība (d. 1224/1809) also mention this, as well as stating that Eve had forty children from twenty pregnancies, presumably excluding Seth from this equation (Ibn ‘Ajība 1998, 2:29; Tha‘labī 2015, 4:48).

There are also many traditionists who endorse the opinion that Eve always gave birth to twins (‘Alī al-Qārī 2002, 1:294; Al-‘Irāqī and Ibn al-‘Irāqī n.d., 7:65; Al-Nawawī 1972, 10:59; Al-Ṭibī 1997, 11:3631). However, others attribute this opinion to Ka‘b al-Aḥbār (d. 32/652?), the Jewish rabbi who converted to Islam and was one of the main authorities on the *isrā'īliyyāt* (Anwar et al. 2020), suggesting that it is from Jewish traditions (Al-Sā‘ātī n.d., 20:31). Indeed, Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) declares that most of what pertains to the story of Cain and Abel is from the *isrā'īliyyāt* and there are no traditions about it that come directly from Prophet Muḥammad (Riḍā 1990, 6:283). Nevertheless, the majority opinion appears to be that the notion that Eve always gave birth to twins is not from the *isrā'īliyyāt*, as attested by Ibn Kathīr’s authentication of the tradition (Ibn Kathir 1999, 3:83). Be that as it may, because this opinion is from the exegetical literature, which imparts the lowest level of certainty as stated (see above), the notion of twin-pregnancies must be viewed as popular, but ultimately non-binding.

A related issue Malik raises is what he calls “the genetic bottleneck problem” (2021, 328). He summarises the problem thus: “If humanity started with a single couple, i.e. Adam and Eve, as suggested by Qadhi and Khan, this makes for the improbable scenario of having successful, i.e. healthy, offspring through which humanity came about” (2021, 328, see below). However, this postulates that the original DNA of Adam and Eve was already full of harmful mutations that could be passed on to their progeny. Incest is harmful precisely because there is an accumulation of injurious recessive traits (Stoltzfus, *Mutation, Randomness, and Evolution*). Surely, if one maintains that the creation of Adam was a miracle, as do Qadhi and Khan, they would not think God would create this miracle with deleterious genes. It would be far more plausible to assert that random, deleterious mutations occurred later on in the progeny of Adam and Eve. Later generations were thus commanded to avoid incest in order to mitigate homozygosity.

law, and similar to humans. These could have been hominids. But this does not establish whether Adam’s early progeny interbred with them. While interbreeding with them would still preserve Adam’s status as the father of humanity, the question is whether the Qur’an makes Adam the *exclusive* father of humanity or whether he is the father of humanity in the sense that all humans existing today descended from him, but his early progeny could have interbred with hominids. Put otherwise, are humans just descended from Adam, or *exclusively* descended from Adam? (Rashid 2024, 45). In order to answer this question, it behoves us to consult the same traditional Sunni authorities that maintained that pre-Adamic creatures, imbued with consciousness, who were subject to moral law, and similar to humans, existed. In this way, it becomes clear whether their assertion that such creatures existed commits them to the assertion that Adam is not the exclusive father of humanity.

The foundational verse on this question is Q4: 1 in which God says, “*O humankind! Be mindful of your Lord who created you from a single soul (nafs wāhida), and He created from it its mate, and spread many men and women from the two of them.*” The reference to a “single soul” (*nafs wāhida*), mentioned in other verses, too, such as Q7: 189, is explicit proof that God created humankind from this one soul. The qualifier of “single” seems to affirm exclusive descent from Adam. In his exhaustive analysis of this verse, Rashid gives the example of inheritance (Rashid 2024, 56). Consider the statement: “you all inherited from a *single* person.” This statement precludes the possibility that you inherited from anyone else in addition to that one person. It is the qualifier “single” that is doing the heavy lifting here. The question is: is this how the aforementioned exegetes understood the term?

Al-Ṭabarī writes in his commentary that “God indicates in this [verse] that *all* of them [i.e. humans] are children of one man and one mother” (2000, 7: 512). Al-Ṭabarī, therefore, asseverates that the exclusive descent of *all* humans is from Adam and Ḥawā’ (Eve). Al-Māwardī and Al-Rāghib Al-Iṣfahānī simply identify the first soul as Adam and its mate as Eve without elaborating further (n.d., 1: 446; 1999, 3: 1072). Al-Baqlī does the same thing, but he entertains the possibility of two Adams (Al-Baqlī 2008,

1: 230–31).<sup>11</sup> Al-Nasafī is extremely explicit in his exegesis of this verse writing, “your branches/divisions (*farʿ*) are from *one* root/source (*aṣl*), and that is the soul of Adam, your father” (1998, 1: 326). Al-Nasafī leaves no doubt that all the branches of humankind that diverge come from just *one* source: Adam.

Al-Qurṭubī follows in the footsteps of his predecessors in underscoring exclusive descent from Adam stating that *all* humans, whether male or female, or hermaphrodites (*khunthā*) are from the progeny of Adam and Eve (1964, 5: 2). Pānīpatī explains that even though the verse refers to the people who are present with Prophet Muḥammad specifically, “*all* people” (*al-nās ajmaʿūn*) are included in it, thus, when God says that He created Adam and created people from him, it signifies *exclusive* descent from him (1992, 2: 2). Al-Ālūsī begins his analysis with this point, explaining that it includes every person until the Day of Resurrection (1994, 2: 390). He then digresses into a disquisition about whether there was one Adam or many Adams, which leads him to young verses old earth creationism (1994, 2: 390–91). But he dismisses the existence of prior Adams because, according to him, it goes against the consensus of Sunni Muslim scholars (*ijmāʿ*), even though there were other creatures before Adam (1994, 2: 391). Al-Ālūsī also rejects the notion that Eve was not created from Adam but just from the same clay as him as was asserted by Abū Muslim al-Isfahānī (d. 322/934) because that goes against the explicit wording of the text, and it would mean that the *exclusive* descent of humankind was not from one soul (1994, 2: 391–92). This highlights that for Al-Ālūsī, the meaning of the Qurʾan is only of *exclusive* descent from Adam and he believes any intermingling would violate this. Let us now narrow the focus and take a forensic look at the exegesis of Q4: 1 in one specific commentary from arguably the most influential theologian in Islamic intellectual history, Al-Rāzī (Saeed 2008), in order to excavate more nuances of this debate.

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<sup>11</sup> Amina Inloes discusses the issue of multiple Adams and evolution in Twelver Shiʿism in her article: “Other “Adams”: Twelver Shiʿism and Human Evolution.”

#### 4. Al-Rāzī's commentary of Q4: 1

Al-Rāzī begins his analysis by stating on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās that even though the verse says “*O humankind!*” and the immediate audience is the people of Mecca, specialists in the principles of exegesis (*al-uṣūliyyūn min al-mufasssīrīn*) all agree (*ittafaqū*) that it is addressing all of humankind (1999, 9: 475). Al-Rāzī then mentions that humankind is instructed to inculcate “God-awareness” only because He created everyone from “a single soul.” In other words, that is the “cause” (*‘illa*) of “God-awareness,” and it proves the “perfection of His power” (*kamāl qudratih*) (Al-Rāzī 1999, 9: 476). Thus, it is *exclusive* descent from Adam that proves God’s omnipotence and is the only reason humankind is commanded to be conscious of God. He then proclaims unequivocally that “God created us from *only one* soul” (Al-Rāzī 1999, 9: 476). Indeed, for Al-Rāzī this point is crucial, he repeats that

it is the specialness of His creating us from one soul that makes obedience to Him and abstinence from sins incumbent on us. ... He created *all human people* (*jamī‘ al-ashkhāṣ al-insāniyya*) from *one human* (*min al-insān al-wāḥid*), which indicates the perfection of His power, for if the matter was left to nature and his [i.e. Adam’s] characteristics (*khāṣiyya*), those descended from (*mutawallad*) one human would only ever resemble him in attributes (*mutashākila fi’l-ṣifa*) and be similar to him in physical appearance (*mutashābiha fi’l-khilqa*). So when we see that people are white, black, red, tanned, beautiful, ugly, tall, and short, it indicates that the One who arranges it (*mudabbir*) and creates it this way is a voluntary Agent (*fā’il mukhtār*), [and it is] not [through] natural effects (Al-Rāzī 1999, 9: 476–77).

Al-Rāzī seems to be a vociferous advocate for *exclusive* descent from Adam. He even offers his take on what would come to be known as ‘the genetic bottleneck problem,’ or the notion that, due to only being descended from Adam and Eve, there would not be enough genetic variation in their offspring to survive (Malik 2021, 328). He explains that, were it based on natural causes, the genetic diversity that is seen in Adam’s offspring would not occur; it is only because God planned it this way that such variation is observed, reinforcing the notion that his creation and exclusive descent

from him is miraculous. Over a century later, Ibn Kathīr alludes to the same point highlighting that the immense diversity in terms of the “types, characteristics, colours, languages” that are spread “across the world” come from just one couple (Ibn Kathīr 1999, 2: 206).

It is the creation of all of humankind from one soul, says Al-Rāzī, that should galvanise us to look after orphans, women, and the weak, which is why God mentions them, for our descent from a single soul is “a reason for the increase in compassion (*shafaqa*) between us” and why we should forsake pride and arrogance on account of our lineage (Al-Rāzī 1999, 9: 477). Al-Rāzī is even clearer when he follows up this point with the argument that this verse is a proof for resurrection on the Day of Judgement because if God “has the power to extract so many different people (*ashkhāṣ mukhtalifīn*) from the loins of *one person* (*shakhṣ wāhid*),” then God has the power to resurrect all things (Al-Rāzī 1999, 9: 477). Significantly, Al-Rāzī rejects the possibility that the creation of humankind from just one soul is something that makes sense with, or could be derived from, intellectual proofs: “There is no proof for the intellect that the creation [of all humankind] has to be from one soul; rather, that is known from revealed proofs” (Al-Rāzī 1999, 9: 477). It is for this reason that he regards it as a proof for the veracity of Muḥammad’s prophethood since there is no way he could have come to this conclusion without being informed of it by God (Al-Rāzī 1999, 9: 477).

Al-Rāzī then asks the question: “How can it be correct that all humans were created from one soul, despite how many there are, and the paltriness of that one soul?” (Al-Rāzī 1999, 9: 477). He responds by stating,

God has made it clear that the meaning is: since the partner of Adam was created from some [part] of him (*min ba‘ḍih*), then their progeny was created from the seed of both of them, and that carried on, it was permissible to attribute all humans to Adam (Al-Rāzī 1999, 9: 477).

This leads Al-Rāzī to discuss the creation of Ḥawwā’ (Eve). Al-Rāzī writes,

There are two opinions about Eve’s being created from Adam: the first, which is the opinion of the majority, is that after God created Adam, He made him fall asleep, then He created Eve from one of his left ribs, so when Adam woke

up and saw her, he inclined towards her and was fond of her because she was one of his parts (*juz' min ajzā'ih*). They [the majority] argue [for this opinion] on the basis of the saying of the Prophet, peace be upon him, “Surely woman is created from a crooked rib (*dil' a'waj*), so if you try to straighten it, you will break it, and if you leave it crooked, you will be able to enjoy it” (1999, 9: 477).

Caner Taslaman, who is an advocate for ‘no exceptions’ evolution (see above), asserts that “the Qur’ān does not imply anything about the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib. This belief snuck into the Muslim world from the Judeo-Christian tradition [Isrāīliyāt]” (Taslaman 2020, 65). Malik notes that other scholars have also made the same assertion (Malik 2021, 320). Taslaman goes on to assert that this tradition is the basis of misogynistic interpretations about the status of Eve, and about women by extension (Taslaman 2020). Malik correctly observes that this is a “socio-political argument and problem, not a hermeneutic one” (Malik 2021, 320). Nevertheless, it behoves us to scrutinise the validity of Taslaman’s claim that the rib tradition does not have any reliable basis.

The ‘left-rib’ tradition is mentioned, with slight variations, in many compilations of prophetic traditions, including the two compilations most highly regarded by Sunni Muslims: *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Brown 2007). In his commentary of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, the incredibly influential traditionist Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 853/1449) writes that in this tradition, “there is an allusion to Eve being created from the left rib of Adam, and it is said that she was created from his shortest rib” (1959, 6: 368). Few could argue that this tradition has been conscripted by many scholars to promulgate sexist interpretations and denigrate the status of women. Mūsā Shāhīn Lāshīn writes in his commentary of *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* that woman is created crooked and “it is not easy to straighten her out” (Lāshīn 2002, 6: 45). Nevertheless, the sexist interpretations of the traditionists do not detract from the authenticity of the tradition itself, for Ibn ‘Abbās said that this tradition referred to the creation of Eve from Adam (Lāshīn 2002, 6: 45). Further, Karen Bauer, who undertakes an extensive analysis of this tradition in the Islamic and Judeo-Christian traditions, writes that “it is unclear whether the ‘left-rib’ interpretation is really Jewish in origin” (2015, 116).

Al-Rāzī then mentions the second interpretation regarding Eve’s creation, which is that God “created her from the same type (*jins*)” as Adam (1999, 9: 478). Bauer observes that in at least three places in the Qur’an (Q16: 72, Q30: 21, and Q42: 11) “the mates of the believers/humankind are described as ...‘of the same type’” (Bauer 2015, 109). Al-Rāzī cites an opinion that the first interpretation (i.e. that Eve was created from Adam’s rib) is stronger “so that God’s saying ‘*He created you from one soul*’ would be correct, for if Eve was created at the start [with Adam], humankind would have been created from two souls, not just one” (Al-Rāzī 1999, 9: 478). However, Al-Rāzī sees a flaw in this argument:

It is possible to respond by saying that the word ‘from’ (*min*) refers to the very beginning. Thus, since the start of creation and generation began with Adam, peace be upon him, it is correct for Him to say, ‘*He created you from one soul*’. In addition, as it has been proven that God, the Exalted, has the power to create Adam from clay (*turāb*), He also has the power to create Eve from clay, so if the matter is like that, what is the benefit in creating her from one of the ribs of Adam? (Al-Rāzī 1999, 9: 478)

Al-Rāzī here critiques the argument that a necessary entailment of the creation of Eve from the same type of clay as Adam is that it violates the clause of “*one soul*” because then it would be that humankind was created from two souls. His first response is that Eve could still have been created from Adam, even if she was created from the same type as him, so it does not contradict the phrase “*one soul*.” His second response is that there is nothing to stop God creating Eve from clay, just like Adam, so the argument that this could not have been the case from a logical standpoint is untenable. It is noteworthy that Al-Rāzī is not casting doubt on the tradition that states Eve was created from Adam’s rib. He is only criticizing the argument that the term “from” (*min*) necessarily entails that Eve was created from Adam’s rib. His criticism of the latter does not commit him to abandoning the former.

Given Al-Rāzī maintains that the majority opinion is Eve was created from Adam’s left rib, as well as the prophetic tradition being included in the canonical works for Sunnis, it is reasonable to assume that this interpretation, which is central to human exceptionalism, is endorsed by

most Sunni exegetes. But what is the legal weight of a majority opinion? This leads us to whether a consensus (*ijmāʿ*) can be claimed on *exclusive descent* from Adam.

## 5. Consensus (*ijmāʿ*) and exclusive descent

Al-Ālūsī's use of scholarly consensus (*ijmāʿ*) to rule out multiple Adams raises the issue of the reliance/ rejection of beliefs based on consensus. Jalajel allows Adamic exceptionalism because he pays scant attention to theological issues that are established through consensus, which are matters on which all independent scholars (*mujtahids*) agree (Hallaq 2005, 1; Kamali 2013, 230). It is only the core beliefs that require explicit and irrefutable proof. For matters like evolution, which is not a foundational belief, consensus is sufficient to establish what position should be adopted, and it is inappropriate to suspend judgement on it according to some scholars (Ali 2023; Rashid 2024, 11). The vast majority of Sunni exegetes considered, agree on *exclusive* descent from Adam, even if some articulate it more clearly than others.

Nevertheless, other scholars argue that invoking consensus on this issue is anachronistic. Malik rightly notes that historians of Islamic intellectual history must safeguard against anachronistic attributions of opinions on evolution to pre-modern scholars who had no notion of it (Malik 2023). Yet this seems to be just the most explicit form of anachronism that most historians avoid. More insidious is the form of anachronism that attributes opinions to exegetes when they did not have the opportunity to refine their position on an issue due to inexistence of the concept or idea (henceforth 'implicit anachronism'). In his seminal work, Daniel Boyarin points out that "research ought to be based on the categories recognized in the language(s) of the objects of our research and not on anachronistic terms applied a priori" (Boyarin 2019, xii). In the language of our subjects, since the different categories of evolution did not exist, is it fair to attribute an opinion to them that *they seem to endorse* based on *what seems to be their analysis* of the Qur'anic text? Put more succinctly, even though the exegetes considered here

affirm exclusive descent from Adam, given that the specific bifurcation of human exceptionalism and Adamic exceptionalism did not exist for them, is it implicitly anachronistic to assume they would have rejected Adamic exceptionalism if that option would have been presented to them?

This raises another issue with the argument that there is an *ijmā'* of scholars on the illegitimacy of Adamic exceptionalism: is this an unsuitable application of *ijmā'*? The reason for this is that *ijmā'*, by its very nature, is the principle of change in the Islamic tradition. It enables scholars to adopt a position on a hitherto unknown issue, as Mohammad Hashim Kamali explains,

*Ijmā'* is ... an instrument of tolerance and of the evolution of ideas in such directions as may reflect the vision of the scholars in light of the fresh educational and cultural achievements of the community (Kamali 2013, 232).

If that is the case, then a consensus on the illegitimacy Adamic exceptionalism can only be reached by scholars who have a full understanding of it, and of the difference between it and human exceptionalism.

While these are important issues, an argument can be made that the inexistence of the contrast between Adamic exceptionalism and human exceptionalism may not be consequential. This is primarily because of the qualifier “single” in Q4: 1. The literalism of the exegetes may commit them to exclusive descent from Adam predicated on this qualifier, which they regard as explicit proof in the text itself. However, as Malik points out, the widescale acceptance of human-*jinn* interbreeding in the Islamic tradition (Malik 2023, 25) casts doubt on whether consensus can be appealed to in this case. Human-*jinn* unions, and the fact that many renowned scholars accepted its occurrence, even if they had doubts about its permissibility (Al-Ashqar 2005, 22), clearly accommodate Adamic exceptionalism. Rashid argues that this does not impinge on the consensus of scholars on this issue:

The position of *ijmā'* is clear: interpreting “*nafsin wāḥidah*” as allowing for relative descent, where intermixing with other creations is possible, contradicts the established consensus. Such an interpretation would imply a descent thro-

ugh two lineages (*nafsayn*), which is inconsistent with the notion of a single origin (Rashid 2024, 73).

The clause of “one soul” means that there could only have been exclusive descent from Adam, and this rules out Adamic exceptionalism as a legitimate position in the Sunni tradition. Rashid gives numerous examples of scholars who were highly sceptical about human-*jinn* unions (2024, 85–88). However, it must be noted that most of the examples he gives refer to the *permissibility* of such unions and not to their *occurrence*. The fact that scholars freely discuss the permissibility of such unions suggest that many accepted their occurrence. Yet it may have been the case, as is common practice in some legal schools, to discuss these cases as hypothetical legal exercises (Nasir 2009). These discussions on human-*jinn* unions do not violate the consensus on this issue according to Rashid:

Even if there are a few individuals who entertain the possibility of progeny between jinn and humans, no matter how far-fetched, it does not detract from the widely accepted understanding that the modern human lineage traces back exclusively to Ādam without any mixing with lineages of other species (Rashid 2024, 89).

It may be observed that Rashid’s language is a little more nuanced here. He states that exclusive descent to Adam is “widely accepted” among traditional scholars. From the foregoing, it is difficult to argue with this assertion. But whether this is enough to establish a consensus on the issue is another matter. Kamali writes that

The classical definition and the essential requirements of *ijmā’*, as laid down by the ‘*ulamā’* [scholars] of *uṣūl* [principles of Islamic law], are categorical on the point that nothing less than a universal consensus of the scholars of the Muslim community as a whole can be regarded as conclusive *ijmā’* (2013, 228).

But this is where theory and practice widely differ, since this is practically impossible to obtain, which means that “*ijmā’* has often been claimed for rulings on which only a majority consensus had existed” (Kamali 2013, 229). This is because

the notion of a universal *ijmā'* was probably inspired by the idea of the political unity of the *ummah*, and its unity in faith and *tawhīd*, rather than the total consensus on juridical matters (Kamali 2013, 228).

This means that theological consensus would be restricted to doctrinal issues like *tawhīd*, or the oneness of God, that are central to Islam. Further, when it came to juridical issues, *very few* issues would be able to clear the extremely high bar of universal agreement. Thus,

A universal *ijmā'* can only be said to exist, as al-Shāfi'ī has observed, on the obligatory duties, that is the five pillars of the faith, and other such matters on which the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* are unambiguous and decisive (Kamali 2013, 228–29).

But the problem with this is that, in the face of such evidence, one would not need the *ijmā'* anyway. Thus, theological consensus, juridical consensus, and exegetical consensus—if we were to apply the stipulation of universal agreement—would be redundant. It is only in the absence of universal agreement—derived from explicit verses from the Qur'an and the mass-transmitted traditions—that we would need consensus, which must now be understood to denote the majority opinion.

The designation of the type of consensus is also paramount because theology, jurisprudence, and Qur'anic exegesis have different epistemic thresholds that impart different levels of certainty, as stated previously. A theological consensus is therefore far more binding and powerful than a juristic consensus than an exegetical consensus. This is because numerous scholars, including “Shāfi'ī consider *ijmā'* an additional confirmation and not an independent criterion. ... the word generally means only agreement among specialists on the interpretation of a text” (van Ess 2006, 167). Since *ijmā'* is only piggy backing on theological, jurisprudential, or exegetical texts, and does not operate independently, the certainty of its conclusions must be proportional to the level of certainty derived from its parent hermeneutic register. In the case of Sunni exegesis, then, this restricts how binding the claims of exegetical consensus can be. Nevertheless, the majority opinion from the Sunni exegetical perspective is of exclusive descent from Adam, whether that

entitles one to claim a scholarly consensus on this issue is debatable.<sup>12</sup> But even if one claims that there is a consensus on this issue, and the consensus must be understood to be a “qualified” consensus that denotes the majority opinion and not a ubiquitous one due to the possibility of human-*jinn* unions as mentioned above, there is also the problem that this qualified consensus is only of Qur’anic exegetes, which cannot be said to have the same evidentiary value as a theological or a jurisprudential consensus.

## Conclusion

Traditional Sunni exegesis of Q33: 72, Q6: 38, Q24: 41, and Q2: 30 makes it clear that Sunni exegetes endorsed the belief that creatures, imbued with consciousness, who were subject to moral law, and similar to humans, existed long before the creation of Adam. This would seem to pave the way for compatibility of Sunni exegesis with all views on evolution, notwithstanding the ‘no exceptions’ view. However, traditional Sunni scholars dissociate the existence of creatures before and with Adam from he and his early progeny interbreeding with them. The qualifier of “single” in Q4: 1 is taken by Sunni exegetes as textual proof of exclusive descent from Adam, which would preclude Adamic exceptionalism. Nevertheless, the acceptance of human-*jinn* unions by some scholars in the Islamic tradition casts doubt on whether all exegetes would have denounced Adamic exceptionalism if that option were available. On the other hand, the fact that the majority of Sunni exegetes accept that Eve was created from Adam’s rib in order to affirm exclusive descent from Adam intimates that this would have been their preference. The exceptionally high bar of universal scholarly agreement required for a consensus on the issue of exclusive descent cannot be claimed. Whether the more realistic bar of majority consensus is attained on this issue continues to be a vexed question. Further, it is difficult to argue that this majority consensus would be doctrinally binding since it only represents an exegetical,

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<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this nuance.

qualified consensus. What we can conclude from the foregoing is that most traditional Sunni exegetes' views would only be consistent with creationism or human exceptionalism.

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