

Recontextualizing *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*: From Micro-Historical Triggers to Macro-Ethical Frameworks within the Qur'anic Hierarchy of Values

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ABSTRACT

The study of asbāb al-nuzūl occupies a strategic position in Qur'anic exegesis as a bridge between the revealed text and its historical context. Classical approaches have often emphasized micro-level triggers, specific events or individuals, resulting in narrow and legalistic interpretations. In contemporary Qur'anic discourse, Abdullah Saeed's Hierarchy of Qur'anic Values calls for an integration of both micro and macro contextual approaches to produce interpretations that are more ethical and socially relevant. This study employs a qualitative methodology based on literature review and analytical hermeneutics. The analytical framework combines micro-textual analysis with macro-contextual examination, evaluated through the lens of the Hierarchy of Qur'anic Values. A case study of Surah al-Nisa' verse 3 reveals that this integrative approach enables a dynamic reading of normative verses. Specifically, the verse's apparent permissibility of polygamy is recontextualized as an ethical directive emphasizing justice for orphans and vulnerable women, rather than as a general legal sanction. The findings demonstrate that asbāb al-nuzūl should not be treated merely as historical annotations but as a hermeneutical tool for rearticulating the Qur'an's universal values, such as justice, gender equity, and protection of the marginalized, in contemporary contexts.

ABSTRAK

Kajian *asbāb al-nuzūl* memegang posisi strategis dalam studi tafsir karena berfungsi sebagai jembatan antara teks wahyu dan konteks historisnya. Pendekatan klasik yang menitikberatkan pada aspek mikro, yakni peristiwa atau individu tertentu, sering kali menghasilkan pemahaman yang sempit dan legalistik. Dalam wacana tafsir kontemporer, teori Hierarchy of Qur'anic Values yang dikembangkan oleh Abdullah Saeed mendorong perlunya integrasi antara pendekatan mikro dan makro yang lebih luas secara sosial-historis untuk melahirkan tafsir yang lebih etis dan kontekstual. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi pustaka dan analisis hermeneutika-analitis. Kerangka analisis disusun dengan mengintegrasikan pendekatan mikro dan makro, serta dievaluasi menggunakan teori Hierarchy of Qur'anic Values. Studi kasus pada Surah al-Nisa' [4]:3 menunjukkan bahwa integrasi kedua pendekatan tersebut menghasilkan pembacaan yang lebih dinamis terhadap ayat-ayat normatif. Secara khusus, ayat yang secara lahiriah membolehkan poligami ditafsirkan ulang sebagai seruan etis untuk menegakkan keadilan bagi anak yatim dan perempuan rentan, bukan sekadar sebagai izin legal untuk berpoligami. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa *asbāb al-nuzūl* tidak semata berfungsi sebagai catatan historis, tetapi juga sebagai instrumen hermeneutis yang penting untuk merumuskan ulang pesan-pesan universal al-Qur'an seperti keadilan, kesetaraan gender, dan perlindungan terhadap kelompok rentan dalam konteks masyarakat modern.

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A. INTRODUCTION

The study of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, commonly referred to as the “occasions of revelation,” remains a foundational component of *‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*. Traditionally, this genre has served as a hermeneutical device bridging the divine message with the socio-historical contexts in which it was revealed. Classical exegetes such as al-Wāḥidī and al-Suyūṭī approached *asbāb al-nuzūl* through a micro-historical lens, relying on transmitted reports *‘riwāyāt*’ that tied specific verses to particular incidents, questions, or individuals. While this atomistic approach has proved essential in constructing early jurisprudential frameworks, it often lacks engagement with the Qur'an's broader moral vision.¹

In recent decades, contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics has undergone significant methodological realignments. Scholars have increasingly advocated for interpretive frameworks that integrate historical consciousness, moral reasoning, and socio-political awareness. Among the most influential voices in this shift is Abdullah Saeed, whose theory of the *Hierarchy of Qur'anic Values* offers a stratified model for interpreting the Qur'an. This model differentiates between the core, universal values, such as justice, compassion, and human dignity, and context-dependent regulations suited for 7th-century Arabian society.² This stratification encourages interpreters to move beyond literalist readings and engage ethically with the text in ways that resonate with contemporary human realities.

Nevertheless, the role of *asbāb al-nuzūl* within such contemporary hermeneutics remains contested. While it provides vital insights into the proximity of revelation, its conventional application risks reasserting historical norms as universally binding. This becomes particularly problematic when dealing with pressing modern issues, such as gender equity, economic disparity, and polygamy, which demand value-based interpretations anchored in the Qur'an's moral universals.³ For example, the permissibility of polygamy, historically contextualized within specific legal and social frameworks, continues to provoke ethical scrutiny concerning its compatibility with modern conceptions of gender justice. Similarly, Qur'anic commands on orphans and social equity, if read without contextual sensitivity, risk obscuring the transformative moral impetus behind them.

Several recent studies have begun to address this tension. Dewi Malihatil Himayah and Suqiyah Musafa'ah, in their article “The Relevance and Urgency of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* in Contextual Interpretation: A Hermeneutical Perspective of the Double Movement,” underscores the importance of integrating *asbāb al-nuzūl* within contextual hermeneutics to yield more relevant understandings of Qur'anic verses.⁴ Likewise, Andi Mujahidil Ilman SM, in “*Peran Asbab Al-Nuzul dalam Kontekstualisasi Ayat Al-Qur'an*,” demonstrates how historical contexts, such as those surrounding hudud punishments, can inform more proportionate applications today, such as substituting corporal punishment with incarceration.⁵

¹Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, *Tekstualitas al-Qur'an: Kritik Terhadap Ulumul Qur'an*, Trans. Khoiron Nahdliyyin (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2002).

²Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'ān: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

³Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach* (London: Routledge, 2014).

⁴Dewi Malihatil Himayah and Suqiyah Musafa'ah “Existence and Urgency of Asbab Al-Nuzul in the Contextual Interpretation of the Perspective of Hermeneutics Double Movement,” *Al-Afkar: Journal For Islamic Studies* 7, no. 4 (November, 2024).

⁵Andi Mujahidil Ilman SM, “Peran Asbab Al-Nuzul dalam Kontekstualisasi Ayat Al-Qur'an,” *Jurnal Ushuluddin: Media Dialog Pemikiran Islam* 26, no. 1 (February, 2024).

However, few studies have explicitly explored how *asbāb al-nuzūl* can be systematically integrated into comprehensive interpretive frameworks such as that of Saeed. This article addresses that lacuna by proposing a synthetic strategy that repositions *asbāb al-nuzūl* not solely as a historiographical tool but as a dynamic hermeneutical resource. By bridging micro-historical specificities with macro-ethical reasoning, this study examines Surah al-Nisa' verse 3 as a representative case. Through this integrative approach, it argues that interpretive tensions surrounding polygamy, orphan justice, and gender dynamics can be reconciled within a value-oriented reading faithful to both the historical context and the Qur'an's ethical imperatives. In doing so, the article contributes to the evolving discourse of contemporary Qur'anic exegesis and advocates for a critically engaged yet textually grounded encounter with the Qur'an as a living scripture.

B. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research methodology based on library research, with a critical examination of both classical and contemporary sources. Primary data are drawn from authoritative works on *asbāb al-nuzūl*, such as those of al-Zarkashī, al-Suyūfī, al-Shāṭibī, al-Qāsimī, and Mujāhid, alongside modern interpretations from scholars like Abdullah Saeed and Fazlur Rahman. These sources are analyzed through a descriptive-analytical and reflective-critical lens to explore the dynamics of Qur'anic interpretation across time.

The analytical framework is grounded in Abdullah Saeed's four-stage model of contextual interpretation, which serves as a systematic tool to bridge the historical context of revelation with contemporary ethical reflection.⁶ Each stage, from understanding the textual and historical layers of a verse to articulating its moral significance for the present, supports the research goal of developing interpretations that are both contextually grounded and ethically robust. In this context, "ethical interpretation" refers to outcomes that uphold the universal moral values of the Qur'an, such as justice '*adl*', compassion '*rahmah*', and human dignity '*karāmah*', and respond meaningfully to modern challenges such as human rights, gender justice, and social equity.⁷ By integrating micro-level narratives of *asbāb al-nuzūl* with macro-level socio-historical analysis, the study offers a reinterpreted model that honors the Qur'an's revelatory intent while promoting its enduring ethical vision in a contemporary setting.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The General Discourse on *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*

Etymologically, *asbāb al-nuzūl* is a genitive construct '*tarkīb iḍāfī*' composed of *asbāb* (plural of *sabab*, meaning cause, connection, or means)⁸ and *al-nuzūl* 'descent'.⁹ Within the framework of '*ulūm al-Qur'ān*', the term refers to the conditions, events, or questions that serve as the background or impetus for the revelation of particular Qur'anic verses.¹⁰

⁶Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'ān*.

⁷Abdullah Saeed, "Some Reflections on the Contextualist Approach to Ethico-Legal Verses of the Qur'an," in *New Directions in Islamic Thought*, ed. Kari Vogt et al. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

⁸Ṭāhir Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ya'qūb, *Asbāb al-Khaṭā' fī al-Tafsīr: Dirāsah Ta'ṣīlīyah*, Vol. 1 (Dammam: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1425 AH).

⁹Abū al-Qāsim al-Ḥusain bin Muḥammad bin Mufaḍḍal al-Rāghib al-Aṣḥānī, *Mu'jam Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qur'ān* (Damaskus: Dār al-Qalam, 1430 AH).

¹⁰M. K. Ridwan, "Metodologi Penafsiran Kontekstual: Analisis Gagasan dan Prinsip Kunci Penafsiran Kontekstual Abdullah Saeed," *Millati: Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities* 1, no. 1 (June, 2016).

However, the notion of “cause” in this context should not be interpreted in a rigidly deterministic or causalistic manner as in classical logic. Rather, it should be understood as a historical indicator that illuminates both the textual and sociological context of revelation.¹¹

In classical exegetical literature, the presence of *asbāb al-nuzūl* is typically identified through specific narrative formulas, such as */nazalat hādhihi al-āyah fī kādhā/* ‘this verse was revealed concerning such and such event’, */kānat al-āyah idhā nazalat/* ‘when the verse was revealed’, or */samī‘tu Rasūl Allāh yaqūl... fa nazalat al-āyah/* ‘I heard the Messenger of God say... then the verse was revealed’. These expressions demonstrate the transmitters’ explicit attempts to link a verse to a particular occasion.¹² Nonetheless, scholars have emphasized that not every verse in the Qur’an is associated with a specific revelatory cause. Some verses were revealed independently of any particular incident, necessitating careful methodological scrutiny in their interpretation.¹³

The micro-level approach to *asbāb al-nuzūl* began to take shape in the 2nd century AH within the tradition of *tafsīr bi al-ma’sūr*, a mode of Qur’anic interpretation that relies primarily on transmitted reports from the Prophet, his Companions, and early generations. This approach emphasizes a direct correlation between the Qur’anic text and specific historical events narrated in early Islamic sources. Exegetes employing this method aimed to identify the circumstances of revelation based on individual incidents. However, many of these reports often face scrutiny due to weaknesses in their *sanad* ‘chain of transmission’, which affects their reliability and acceptance in classical scholarship. Representative definitions of this approach include al-Zarqānī’s: ما نزلت الآية أو الآيات متحدثة عنه أو مبينة لحكمه أيام

14. وقوعه. and al-Qaṭṭān’s: 15. ما نزلت الآية أو الآيات بسببه متضمنة أو مجيبة عنه أو مبينة لحكمه زمن وقوعه. Similarly,

16. ما نزل قرآن بشأنه وقت وقوعه كحادثة أو سؤال. Subḥī al-Ṣāliḥ defined it as:

From these definitions, it becomes evident that *asbāb al-nuzūl* centers on the correlative dimension between the Qur’anic text and the historical reality at the moment of revelation, not simply on a rigid cause-and-effect relationship. Based on this framework, classical scholars categorized *asbāb al-nuzūl* into two principal types: (1) *Asbāb khāṣṣah*, which refer to specific events or questions from individuals or groups that prompted the revelation of certain verses, for instance, the verse on *li’ān* related to the case of Hilāl ibn Umayyah; and (2) *Asbāb ‘āmmah*, or general socio-political conditions that led to revelations without reference to specific individuals, such as the verses on justice and equality revealed during the Medinan period in response to the evolving Muslim community. Al-Suyūṭī emphasized that even if a verse was revealed in response to a particular circumstance, its legal implications may apply universally unless a specific contextual indicator restricts its generality.¹⁷

Numerous reports on *asbāb al-nuzūl* are compiled in classical works such as *Asbāb Nuzūl al-Qur’ān* by al-Wāḥidī and *Lubāb al-Nuqūl* by al-Suyūṭī. However, the authenticity of these

¹¹Nashruddin Baidan, *Wawasan Baru Ilmu Tafsir* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2011).

¹²Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, Vol. 1 (Kairo: Dār al-Fikr, 1957).

¹³Khālid bin ‘Uṣmān al-Sabt, *Qawā’id al-Tafsīr: Jam‘an wa Dirāsah* (Khobar: Dār Ibn ‘Affān, 1421 AH).

¹⁴Muḥammad ‘Abd al-‘Azīm al-Zarqānī, *Manāhij al-Qur’ān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān* (n.p.: ‘Isā al-Bāb al-Ḥalabī, n.d.).

¹⁵Mannā’ Khalīl al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān* (Kairo: Maktabah Wahbah, n.d.).

¹⁶Subḥī al-Ṣāliḥ, *Mabāḥith fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm li al-Malāyīn, 1977).

¹⁷Jalāl al-Dīn Abū al-Faḍl ‘Abd al-Raḥmān bin Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2003).

reports is not always verifiable, especially concerning their chains of transmission. Therefore, their use in interpretation necessitates rigorous *ḥadīth* criticism, both of content '*matn*' and transmission (*isnād*), to avoid unwarranted legal or theological conclusions.

The limitations of the micro-level approach in capturing the socio-political complexity of the revelatory context led to the emergence of a macro-level approach, which gained significant traction by the 8th century AH. This approach understands revelation not merely as a reaction to isolated incidents but as an integral part of a transformative process within the fabric of society. Al-Shāṭibī stressed that a comprehensive understanding of the Qur'anic context must consider the addressees '*al-mukhāṭab*', the community being addressed '*al-mukhāṭab fīh*', and the broader societal structure.¹⁸

Al-Qāsimī later expanded this approach by advocating for a holistic socio-historical mapping as a framework for interpretation.¹⁹ Fazlur Rahman enriched the macro approach further by incorporating the Prophet Muhammad's psychological context, political dynamics, and intellectual environment during the revelatory period as key factors in understanding the Qur'anic message.²⁰ Likewise, M. Quraish Shihab emphasized the necessity of going beyond textual reports to examine the social structure of pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arab society.²¹ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd critiqued classical methods for treating the text merely as a response to discrete events and proposed viewing revelation as a dialogical process between divine message and ever-evolving social realities.²²

The macro approach facilitates a reconstruction of revelation as a gradual and contextually responsive process. For instance, the prohibition of alcohol was revealed in stages.²³ From a purely micro-level perspective, these verses might appear contradictory. However, the macro perspective reveals a strategy of gradual socio-religious transformation aligned with the prevailing cultural context. The same applies to contemporary issues such as slavery, gender relations, and social justice. While the micro approach tends to capture the particular, the macro approach unveils the underlying ethical purposes and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* embedded in the text.

In contemporary Qur'anic studies, *asbāb al-nuzūl* is not merely viewed as historical documentation but as a strategic hermeneutical tool. Fazlur Rahman formulated the "double movement" method, moving from the historical context of the verse to its ethical principles and then reapplying those principles to contemporary contexts.²⁴ Within this framework, *asbāb al-nuzūl* serves not only to explain why a verse was revealed but also to facilitate the extraction of the Qur'an's universal messages.²⁵ A similar perspective is advanced by Abdullah Saeed through his contextualist approach, most notably in his formulation of the Hierarchy of

¹⁸Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī, *Al-Muwāfaqāt fī Uṣūl al-Sharī'ah*, Vol. 3 (Kairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1997).

¹⁹Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, *Maḥāsīn al-Ta'wīl* (n.p.: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah, 1357 AH).

²⁰Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

²¹M. Quraish Shihab, *Membumikan al-Qur'an: Fungsi dan Peran Wahyu dalam Kehidupan Masyarakat* (Bandung: Mizan, 1992).

²²Zaid, *Tekstualitas al-Qur'an*.

²³Labib Muttaqin, "Aplikasi Teori Double Movement Fazlur Rahman terhadap Doktrin Kewarisan Islam Klasik," *Al-Manāhij: Jurnal Kajian Hukum Islam* 7, no. 2 (July, 2013).

²⁴Ahmad Hasan Ridwan, et al., "Implementing and Interpreting Fazlur Rahman's Islamic Moderation Concept in the Indonesian Context," *JITC: Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 12, no. 2 (December, 2022).

²⁵Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Abd. Rozaq, "Qur'anic Hermeneutics and its Applications by Fazlur Rahman," *International Journal of Islamic Social Studies* 1, no. 2 (November, 2023).

Qur'anic Values, which helps distinguish between universal and contextual values. In this methodology, *asbāb al-nuzūl* becomes an entry point to a more holistic understanding of the Qur'an's ethical vision.²⁶

2. The Hierarchy of Qur'anic Values in Abdullah Saeed's Contextual Approach

Abdullah Saeed, a leading contemporary Muslim scholar, developed the contextual approach to Qur'anic interpretation as a means to bridge the divine text with the evolving realities of modern life.²⁷ This approach is grounded in the recognition that the Qur'an was revealed within a specific socio-cultural, political, and historical context, that of 7th-century Arabian society, whereas Muslims today live in societies that have undergone significant transformation.²⁸ Hence, interpretation cannot rely solely on the literal reading of the text, but must engage critically with its ethical, historical, and social relevance in light of contemporary realities.

To operationalize this hermeneutical vision, Saeed proposes a systematic four-stage methodology: (1) Encounter with the world of the text, which involves a thorough linguistic and historical understanding of the text; (2) Critical analysis, aimed at examining the structural composition of the text and the various factors shaping its meaning; (3) Meaning for the first recipients, which seeks to uncover the significance of the verse within its immediate socio-historical context, including both micro (individual) and macro (societal) levels; and (4) Meaning for the present, in which the ethical message and universal values of the verse are extracted and applied to contemporary settings.

A crucial element in this framework is the evaluation of Qur'anic values: determining which values possess enduring universality and which are context-dependent and thus open to reinterpretation. To facilitate this evaluative process, Saeed introduces the concept of the Hierarchy of Qur'anic Values, a hermeneutical tool that categorizes Qur'anic directives based on their ethical weight, universality, and contextual applicability. Saeed identifies five levels of Qur'anic values, outlined as follows:

Table 1. Abdullah Saeed's Hierarchy of Qur'anic Values²⁹

No.	Value Category	Type of Verses	Nature	Example
1.	Obligatory Values	Core religious duties that must be observed by every Muslim.	Universal	The pillars of Islam; halal and haram designations (Surah al-Nahl [16]:116; Surah Yunus [10]:59).
2.	Fundamental Values	Foundational ethical norms such as justice and welfare.	Universal	The command to uphold justice (Surah al-Ma'idah [5]:2).
3.	Protection	Norms designed to	Universal	Prohibition of theft and

²⁶Mayadina Rohmi Musfiroh and Sahiron Syamsuddin, "Contextualization of Qiwwamah Meaning: Reflection on Abdullah Saeed, Application and Consistency," *Palastren: Jurnal Studi Gender* 13, no. 2 (December, 2020).

²⁷Solehodin and Abdul Mukit, "Nahr (River) as an Icon of Heaven: Interpretation Analysis of Q.S 47:12-15 Contextual Theory Abdullah Saeed Perspective," *International Conference on Islam, Law, and Society (INCOILS)* 2, no. 1 (January, 2023).

²⁸Abd. Aziz Faiz, "Epistemologi Tafsir al-Qur'an Kontekstual Abdullah Saeed dalam Arus Perubahan Sosial-Budaya Masyarakat Kontemporer," *Empirisma: Jurnal Pemikiran dan Kebudayaan Islam* 33, no. 2 (June, 2024).

²⁹Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'ān*.

	Values	safeguard fundamental values.		fraudulent practices (Surah al-Ma'idah [5]:38).
4.	Implementation Values	Prescribed punishments for violations of protection values.	Contextual	<i>Qisās</i> for murder (Surah al-Ma'idah [5]:33); amputation for theft (Surah al-Ma'idah [5]:38); <i>ḥadd</i> punishments for adultery and false accusation (Surah al-Nur [24]:2).
5.	Instructional Values	Social regulations addressing specific historical circumstances.	Contextual	Polygamy (Surah al-Nisa' [4]:3); male guardianship (Surah al-Nisa' [4]:34); social etiquette (Surah al-Nisa' [4]:86).

This hierarchical structure represents Saeed's original contribution to the field of Qur'anic hermeneutics, offering a nuanced refinement of Fazlur Rahman's double movement theory. While Rahman emphasizes historical reading and moral abstraction from the text, Saeed enhances this method with a detailed evaluative framework that more clearly identifies the ethical gradation of Qur'anic injunctions. As noted by Lien Iffah Na'atu Fina, an Indonesian scholar whose research offers a pioneering analysis of Saeed's approach,³⁰ his key contribution lies in formulating an explicit system of ethical stratification within the Qur'anic corpus. Moreover, Saeed integrates linguistic analysis as a core component of his methodology, an area relatively underexplored in Rahman's model. As such, his approach represents a more holistic and interdisciplinary interpretive method, encompassing ethical, historical, and linguistic dimensions in a unified framework.³¹

3. The Relevance of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* to the Hierarchy of Values in Contextual Qur'anic Interpretation

Within Abdullah Saeed's contextualist paradigm, understanding *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the occasions or circumstances of revelation, plays a vital role in the interpretive process. These reports provide insight into the historical and socio-political context in which verses were revealed, thereby assisting the interpreter in determining whether a particular ruling or directive is universal or context-bound. As previously outlined, Saeed's hierarchical model classifies Qur'anic values into five tiers, with the first three deemed universal and the last two open to contextual reinterpretation.

However, distinguishing between universal and contextual values requires a rigorous and multi-dimensional evaluative process. Saeed emphasizes several criteria to guide this

³⁰Lien Iffah Na'atu Fina, "Interpretasi Kontekstual: Studi atas Pemikiran Hermeneutika al-Qur'an Badullah Saeed," (Undergraduate Thesis, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta, 2009).

³¹Lien Iffah Na'atu Fina, "Interpretasi Kontekstual Abdullah Saeed: Sebuah Penyempurnaan terhadap Gagasan Tafsir Fazlur Rahmān," *Hermeneutik* 9, no. 1 (June, 2015).

differentiation. First, exegetes must assess whether a directive is repeatedly emphasized across different textual locations and contexts, which often signals a universal ethic. Second, they must consider the underlying moral rationale ‘*illah*’ of the text, particularly whether it aligns with overarching Qur’anic objectives such as justice ‘*adl*’, compassion ‘*rahmah*’, and human dignity ‘*karāmah*’.³² Third, the interpreter must evaluate the degree to which the form of the directive is contingent on specific socio-historical conditions that are no longer operative.

For instance, the directive of amputation for theft in Surah al-Ma’idah [5]:38 was historically situated within a seventh-century Arabian legal context where institutional penal systems did not exist.³³ Within Saeed’s framework, this directive is classified as an implementation value, contextual and potentially modifiable in light of contemporary penal philosophies that prioritize rehabilitation and restorative justice. Similarly, the law of *qisās* (retaliatory justice) in Surah al-Baqarah [2]:178 sought to replace the endemic tribal vendettas of pre-Islamic Arabia with structured legal retribution.³⁴ While the principle of justice it upholds remains universal, its literal legal form may be reinterpreted in light of modern criminal justice systems.

Moreover, verses concerning polygamy (Surah al-Nisa’ [4]:3) and male leadership in the household (Surah al-Nisa’ [4]:34) were revealed in a context marked by post-war social instability, wherein protecting widows and orphans was a moral and social imperative. Contemporary exegetes, applying Saeed’s evaluative model, would classify such verses under instructional values, reflecting their historically specific functions and allowing for flexible reinterpretation consistent with modern notions of gender equity and social justice.

Ultimately, the integration of *asbāb al-nuzūl* into this hierarchical framework facilitates a nuanced engagement with the Qur’an that maintains fidelity to the divine text while permitting responsiveness to contemporary ethical and social concerns. By distinguishing between immutable moral imperatives and contextually-bound directives, this methodology equips Muslim scholars and communities to uphold the Qur’an’s universal vision of justice, compassion, and human welfare, in ways that resonate meaningfully across diverse historical and cultural landscapes.

4. Reinterpreting Surah al-Nisa’ [4]:3 through Abdullah Saeed’s Contextual Approach

Allah said in the Qur’an Surah al-Nisa’ verse 3:

وَأِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تُقْسِطُوا فِي الْيَتَامَىٰ فَانكِحُوا مَا طَابَ لَكُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ مَثْنَىٰ وَثُلَّةَ ۖ فَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا فَوَاحِدَةً أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ أَدْنَىٰ ۖ أَلَّا تَعُولُوا ۚ

And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one or those your right hand possesses. That is more suitable that you may not incline [to injustice].³⁵

³²Saeed, “Some Reflections.”

³³Abū al-Fidā’ ‘Imād al-Dīn Ismā’īl ibn ‘Umar ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, Vol. 3 (n.p.: Dār Ṭayyibah li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī’, 1999 M / 1420 H).

³⁴Muhammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2003).

³⁵Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Qur’an Kementerian Agama RI, *Qur’an Kemenag in Word* (2019). Surah al-Nisa’ [4]:3.

a. Stage 1: Encounter with the World of the Text

Surah al-Nisa' [4]:3 is part of a series of Madinan verses revealed during the formative phase of the Muslim community in Medina, specifically in the aftermath of the Battle of Uhud. At the macro level, the social context of this period was marked by the devastating consequences of war, including the loss of approximately 65-70 companions. This led to a sharp rise in the number of widows and orphans left without guardianship or economic protection.³⁶ The absence of a formal state infrastructure capable of safeguarding vulnerable populations meant that these burdens fell directly on the shoulders of the community. Understanding this historical backdrop is essential, as it frames the verse as part of the Qur'an's normative intervention in the face of social and economic dislocation caused by war.

This verse directly responds to the injustices perpetrated against orphans, as indicated in the preceding verse (Surah al-Nisa' [4]:2). On the micro level, exegetical reports (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), such as those compiled by Ab al-Ḥasan 'Alī al-Naysābūrī in *Asbāb al-Nuzūl al-Qur'ān*, narrate instances in which male guardians married orphan girls under their care due to their beauty or wealth, often without providing a fair bridal gift '*mahr*'. A tradition reported by al-Bukhārī (no. 4206), transmitted from 'Ā'ishah (r.a.), recounts how one man married an orphan girl solely to gain access to her date palm orchard. This verse thus serves as a critique of exploitative motives in marriage, especially when they involve orphans.³⁷

Accordingly, the Qur'anic permission for polygamy in this verse does not emerge in a vacuum. It is a targeted response to both the broader post-war societal crisis (macro) and individual injustices (micro). The integration of these two dimensions of *asbāb al-nuzūl* is crucial at this stage, as it opens a historical window into the world of the verse, revealing it as a moral intervention during a period of acute social vulnerability.

b. Stage 2: Critical Analysis

A close reading of Surah al-Nisa' [4]:3 reveals three interconnected segments: (1) a warning against injustice toward orphans, (2) a conditional allowance for marrying up to four women, and (3) a strong recommendation for monogamy if justice cannot be upheld. The conditional particle */fa-in khiftum/* 'if you fear' is pivotal here, it clearly indicates that polygamy is not a categorical command but a contingent option predicated on the ability to act justly. Should that justice be doubtful, the verse advocates monogamy, expressed by the phrase */fa-wāḥidah/* 'then [marry] only one'.

This structural reading is closely linked to the micro-context of revelation, which exposes the exploitative practices of guardians marrying orphan girls unjustly. The macro-context reinforces that the permissibility of polygamy served as a social regulatory mechanism in response to the urgent need to care for widows and orphans in the post-war period. The phrase */fa-in khiftum allā tuqṣitū fī al-yatāmā/* 'if you fear that you will not be just with orphans' underscores that the central concern of this verse is not merely the legal permissibility of polygamy but the imperative of upholding justice in dealing with orphans.³⁸

³⁶Karel Armstrong, *Muhammad Sang Nabi: Sebuah Biografi Kritis* (Surabaya: Risalah Gusti, 2011), 271.

³⁷Ahmad E. Souaiaia, *Contesting Justice: Women, Islam, Law, and Society* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 52.

³⁸'Abd al-Wahīd al-Sayhūlī, *Balāghah al-Qur'ān al-Karīm fī al-I'jāz*, Vol. 2 (n.p.: Maktabah Dandisār, 2001), 275.

The imperative verb */fankihū/* 'then marry', though grammatically a command '*fi'l amr*', is more accurately interpreted in this context as a permissive expression '*ibaḥḥah*', not an absolute normative directive, in line with established principles of *uṣūl al-fiqh*.³⁹ At this stage, integrating *asbāb al-nuzūl* enables a pragmatic and ethical interpretation of the verse's structure, rather than a rigidly legalistic one, thus facilitating a contextual understanding of its legal and moral messages.

c. Stage 3: Meaning for the First Recipients

For the early Muslim community in Medina, this verse conveyed a powerful moral and social message, particularly within the broader post-war context. Polygamy was not conceived as an expression of male dominance, but as a practical response to the crisis of social protection. In seventh-century Arabian society, it was not uncommon for male guardians to marry orphan girls under their care. However, these practices often involved abuses of power and violations of the girls' economic rights, especially regarding dowries and inheritance. Such realities, documented in the micro-level *asbāb al-nuzūl*, are directly addressed in this verse through a firm emphasis on justice.

Early exegetes, such as Mujāhid ibn Jabr (d. 104 AH), as cited in *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, interpreted this verse as a limitation on guardians who could not act justly towards orphan girls. In such cases, they were advised to marry other women to avoid injustice or even illicit behavior.⁴⁰ Polygamy, in this sense, was a temporary, functional instrument designed to address a crisis in social care, not a normative blueprint for gender relations within Muslim society.

This verse, therefore, not only restricted exploitative marriages with orphans but also promoted more equitable relationships that upheld the dignity of women. The integration of both micro and macro dimensions of *asbāb al-nuzūl* at this stage helps illuminate how the early Muslim community understood the Qur'ānic message in moral and functional terms, directly related to their socio-historical context.

d. Stage 4: Meaning for the Present

In contemporary contexts, the meaning of Surah al-Nisa' [4]:3 must be translated from its historical setting into a broader ethical framework. Abdullah Saeed underscores the importance of the Hierarchy of Qur'anic Values, wherein universal values such as justice and protection of the vulnerable are prioritized over contextual norms like the permissibility of polygamy. Here, the continued relevance of both micro and macro *asbāb al-nuzūl* is evident. Understanding that this verse was revealed in response to post-war societal needs (macro) and to condemn exploitative marriage practices (micro) clarifies that polygamy was contextually conditioned.

In modern societies with established legal systems and comprehensive social welfare structures, the rationale that justified polygamy in seventh-century Arabia no longer holds the same normative weight. Instead, the verse's enduring moral imperatives, justice, the protection of orphans, and the dignity of women, remain universally applicable. Within this

³⁹Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Āmidī, *Al-Iḥkām fī Uṣūl al-Aḥkām*, Vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 2003), 62.

⁴⁰Mujāhid bin Jabr, *Tafsīr Mujāhid* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Islāmīyah al-Ḥadīthah, 1989).

framework, reinterpretation of the verse today should emphasize an ethical reading that upholds monogamy as a morally responsible and just form of gender relations.

5. The Contribution of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* to Contemporary *Tafsīr*

In contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics, *asbāb al-nuzūl* play a critical role as a bridge between text and context. They enable interpreters to go beyond literal meanings and gain insight into the social, cultural, and historical settings in which the verses were revealed. Thus, *asbāb al-nuzūl* are a vital methodological tool for avoiding rigid and textualist readings and instead promoting dynamic and contextually relevant interpretations.

First, *asbāb al-nuzūl* help elucidate the historical and societal conditions surrounding the revelation of verses. This insight prevents misinterpretation of the text by grounding its message in the reality of its original audience.⁴¹

Second, *asbāb al-nuzūl* serve as a safeguard against narrow literalism. By understanding the revelation's background, interpreters can distinguish between situational, context-bound values and universal principles with transhistorical relevance. This distinction is especially significant in contextualist approaches such as Abdullah Saeed's, which prioritize Qur'anic values like justice and equity.⁴²

Third, *asbāb al-nuzūl* assist in determining the scope of legal rulings through the principle of *khusūṣ al-sabab wa 'umūm al-lafz* 'specific cause, general wording'. While a verse may have been revealed for a specific incident, its wording can have broader applications. Understanding the cause of revelation is essential to discern whether a legal directive applies universally or remains context-specific.⁴³

Fourth, within critical *tafsīr* frameworks, *asbāb al-nuzūl* offer a means to read the text historically and dynamically. Scholars like Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd have emphasized that the Qur'an is the product of a dialogue between divine revelation and the socio-cultural reality of the early Muslim community. As such, *asbāb al-nuzūl* create space for reinterpretation aligned with contemporary ethical demands.⁴⁴

Fifth, *asbāb al-nuzūl* strengthen interdisciplinary approaches to *tafsir*, particularly in addressing issues of social justice, gender, and human dignity. When a verse is known to have been revealed in response to social inequities, that context provides the foundation for a humanistic interpretation. This is evident in feminist readings such as Amina Wadud's, which utilize revelatory context as a basis for ethical exegesis concerning women.⁴⁵

Thus, *asbāb al-nuzūl* function not merely as historical annotations but as strategic epistemological tools in developing *tafsīr* that is contextual, ethical, and relevant to modern realities. They facilitate a creative dialogue between text and context, revelation and social change, essential for the advancement of contemporary Qur'anic interpretation.

⁴¹Al-Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān fī 'Ulūm*.

⁴²Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an*.

⁴³Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm*.

⁴⁴Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsah fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabī, 1990).

⁴⁵Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

D. CONCLUSION

The evolution from micro to macro approaches in the study of *asbāb al-nuzūl* represents not merely a shift in analytical focus but a fundamental methodological transformation within the field of Qur'anic exegesis. While the micro approach offers valuable insight into the immediate historical circumstances surrounding specific revelations, it often remains confined to reconstructing isolated textual contexts. By contrast, the macro approach expands the exegetical horizon to include the broader socio-political, ethical, and cultural landscape of the Qur'anic world, thus enabling a more comprehensive and ethically nuanced interpretation. Within Abdullah Saeed's contextualist framework, the synthesis of micro and macro dimensions provides a robust hermeneutical strategy that preserves historical specificity while facilitating the ethical actualization of the Qur'an's message in contemporary settings.

In particular, this article has explored Surah al-Nisa' as a case study demonstrating how micro-historical triggers, such as disputes over inheritance, family law, and the protection of vulnerable groups, can be reinterpreted through a macro-ethical framework grounded in the Qur'anic hierarchy of values. Rather than being confined to the specific socio-tribal structures of seventh-century Arabia, the moral imperatives embedded in Surah al-Nisa', especially those concerning justice '*adl*', compassion '*rahmah*', and human dignity '*karāmah*' of marginalized populations, emerge as enduring principles capable of guiding contemporary ethical reasoning and legal reform. By applying this layered hermeneutic, Surah al-Nisa' can be revisited to promote gender equity, social justice, and human rights in ways that are both theologically faithful and ethically responsive.

However, this study is not without its limitations. Its primary focus on a conceptual and theoretical rearticulation of *asbāb al-nuzūl* within the contextualist paradigm leaves room for further empirical validation. The interpretive models proposed here have yet to be systematically tested across the full range of Qur'anic material, particularly in relation to verses addressing penal codes, economic regulations, and interfaith relations. Future research should explore comparative applications of this macro-ethical approach to other *suwar* (chapters), analyze its reception among diverse Muslim communities, and critically assess its efficacy in informing contemporary Islamic legal and ethical discourses. In doing so, scholars can further refine the integration of historical consciousness with ethical actualization, ensuring that the Qur'an's transformative spirit continues to resonate in the complexities of the twenty-first century.

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