



QiST: Journal of Quran and Tafseer Studies

ISSN (Online): 2828-2779

Received: 17-10-2025, Revised: 20-11-2025

Accepted: 26-11-2025, Published: 02-12-2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23917/qist.v4i3.13367>

Rules and Historical Sources of Asbāb al-Nuzūl: A Theoretical-Epistemological Critique

Musfiroh Nihlah Ilahiyah¹; Sanuri²

Abstract

This study aims to look at the ideas and knowledge of how to use asbāb al-nuzūl in the work of Qur'an interpretation. The main focus in this article is to explore the principles behind asbāb al-nuzūl in Islamic scholarly interpretation. The discussion aims to challenge concerns regarding the legitimacy of accounts, the categorization of texts, and the correlation between written material and its historical environment. It analyzes how traditional scholars such as al-Wāhidī, al-Suyūṭī, and Ibn Taymiyyah developed strategies to identify the motives behind certain verses; simultaneously, it will highlight how modern thinkers such as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Fazlur Rahman provide more situational and adaptive interpretive approaches that align with current movements and societal trends. The method of this study uses a form of research called literature study which involves looking at old and new books and sources. This article intends to question the belief that asbāb al-nuzūl is exclusively related to past events. Instead, it argues that certain reasons are constructs shaped by society, representing the first Muslim community's interpretive understanding of the verse that sought to adapt the verse's contested meaning to the challenges of the times. In addition, this article will also shed light on important rules in asbāb al-nuzūl studies, including al-'ibrah bi 'umūm al-lafz lā bi khuṣūṣ al-sabab and the tension between lafzi and sababī methods. The result shows that a lot of asbāb reports are more about how to read and interpret than to tell true history. The end says that today we need to put classic ideas with modern ways of understanding together.

Keywords: *Asbāb al-Nuzūl; interpretation of the Qur'an; history; historical method; Rules of Interpretation.*

¹ UIN Sunan Ampel, Surabaya, Indonesia, Corresponding Email: veramusfiroh99@gmail.com

² UIN Sunan Ampel, Surabaya, Indonesia, Email: sanuri@uinsa.ac.id

Introduction

This study starts with the idea that we need to look again at the way *asbāb al-nuzūl* is understood based on old and new ideas. The Qur'an is the holy book revealed gradually to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ over approximately twenty-three years, a process that was not merely linear or isolated but instead took place within a vibrant and dynamic historical context [1]. This protracted period of revelation was deeply interwoven with the socio-political, economic, and cultural realities of 7th-century Arabian society, which inevitably influenced the tone, content, and structure of the Qur'anic discourse [2]. The Qur'an is not merely a collection of theological dogmas or moral directives but a living document that responded continuously and effectively to the real-life conditions and challenges faced by the early Muslim community [3].

This historically grounded nature of revelation suggests that the Qur'an should not be approached solely as a transcendental or timeless message, divorced from its original context. Rather, each verse contains layers of meaning shaped by a complex interplay of historical, linguistic, theological, and sociological dimensions [4]. In essence, the Qur'anic text serves as both a divine response and a historical engagement, simultaneously addressing theological concerns and temporal issues such as tribal conflicts, legal disputes, questions of leadership, and matters of social justice [5]. This duality underscores the significance of contextual frameworks in Qur'anic hermeneutics. But even though they studied a lot, they never really studied how the *asbab al nuzul* assumptions of the old way line up with the modern way of studying the text, which is a perfect thing for this article to look at.

One such framework that plays a vital role in understanding the Qur'an's revelatory context is the study of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, or the circumstances of revelation. *Asbāb al-nuzūl* serves as a methodological bridge connecting the divine text with its historical setting [6]. It provides exegetes with tools to decode the immediate social or political triggers behind specific verses [7]. Far from being a supplementary or peripheral discipline, *asbāb al-nuzūl* is central to ensuring that the interpretation of Qur'anic verses is neither anachronistic nor arbitrary [8]. It enables scholars to appreciate the dialogical nature of the Qur'an, a text that speaks to its audience not in abstraction but through engagement with the events and crises that defined their lives [9]. but most old books on *asbāb al nuzūl* were just describing things in it, not solving the bigger question of how these stories started, spread, and were used in how they are.

Nevertheless, the study of *asbāb al-nuzūl* is anything but straightforward. Classical Islamic scholarship established various methodologies to authenticate and categorize reports related to the reasons behind revelation [10]. Exegetes

such as al-Wāhidī in his work *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* and al-Suyūṭī in *Lubāb al-Nuqūl* collected hundreds of such reports, often classifying them based on isnād (chains of transmission) to ensure reliability [11]. This methodology, heavily reliant on hadith sciences, sought to preserve the integrity of the text by identifying credible sources and narrators. However, it was not without weaknesses [12]. Critics such as al-Zarqā have noted that some classical collections incorporated weak or even fabricated reports, often introduced to provide narrative coherence or legal justification for emerging juristic interpretations.

Moreover, the terminology used in *asbāb* reports – phrases like *nazalat fī kadhā* (“it was revealed concerning this”) or *hādhihi al-āyah nazalat fī fulān* (“this verse was revealed regarding so-and-so”) – does not always indicate a literal or direct cause for revelation. Instead, such expressions may reflect interpretive attempts by early Muslims to apply Qur’anic guidance to evolving situations [13]. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd emphasizes that many *asbāb* reports are not objective historical records but socially constructed interpretations shaped by the experiences, concerns, and ideological positions of the early Muslim community Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd [1]. For Abu Zayd, these reports represent not fixed causes but dynamic mediations between text and society. This change to a more social view of *asbāb al-nuzūl* shows that we need a clearer way of studying them, and this paper provides that by a critique of the theory-epistemology.

This reinterpretation opens a critical line of inquiry into the epistemological status of *asbāb al-nuzūl*: Are they historically accurate depictions of specific events, or are they retrospective interpretive devices meant to frame the text for didactic or juristic purposes? This question is especially pertinent in light of modern hermeneutic theories, which argue that texts acquire meaning not in isolation but through the lens of socio-cultural engagement [14]. Fazlur Rahman offers a complementary view by describing the Qur’an as a living response to real-life situations that arose during the Prophet’s mission. For him, “the Qur’an came down in response to actual situations and was meant to solve actual problems” [15]. This means that each verse must be situated within its socio-historical matrix to fully appreciate its function and intent.

Rahman’s view further challenges the classical paradigm that treats *asbāb al-nuzūl* as static historical anchors. Instead, he argues for a methodology that connects revelation to the broader goals of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī’ah*) and the evolving ethical consciousness of society. His emphasis on the ethical trajectory and social utility of the Qur’an necessitates a more dynamic and interdisciplinary approach—one that includes not only philological and hadith analysis but also sociology, anthropology, and even political theory.

This modern orientation does not suggest a wholesale rejection of traditional methods but rather calls for their critical enhancement. For instance, rules such as *al-‘ibrah bi ‘umūm al-lafẓ lā bi khuṣūṣ al-sabab* (“the lesson is derived from the generality of the wording, not the specificity of the occasion”) represent an early attempt to universalize the message of the Qur’an beyond its immediate context [16]. While this rule serves as a safeguard against overly literal or situational readings, it also opens space for debate about how to balance general principles with particular causes [17]. In legal and ethical interpretation, this balance is vital, as overgeneralization can obscure the Qur’an’s situational wisdom, while excessive particularization may hinder its relevance to new contexts.

Furthermore, the authenticity of *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports continues to be a subject of scholarly contestation. Questions about the reliability of transmitters (*rawī*), the textual consistency of *matn* (content), and the chronological placement of certain *surahs* have prompted modern scholars to re-evaluate the methodologies of classical exegetes [18]. This re-evaluation is not intended to delegitimize tradition but to refine it. For example, some reports attributed to early companions like Ibn ‘Abbās or ‘Ā’ishah may have been constructed or expanded upon in later periods to support emerging theological or legal positions.

This epistemological critique also foregrounds the role of power, ideology, and social negotiation in the construction of *asbāb al-nuzūl* narratives. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd insists that these narratives must be viewed within the framework of early Muslim social discourse, where competing groups vied for interpretive authority [19]. This perspective aligns with broader post-structuralist critiques of textual authority and opens new avenues for understanding the Qur’an as a participatory text—one that invites continued interpretation in light of changing realities. In this way, the current work adds a new view, bringing old and new talk face to face to relook at how *asbab al nuzul* should work today.

Thus, the study of *asbāb al-nuzūl* should no longer be confined to a closed tradition of *isnād* verification or philological analysis. It must evolve into a multidisciplinary field capable of addressing both historical authenticity and contemporary relevance. The contributions of thinkers like Abu Zayd and Rahman highlight this shift, offering models for integrating classical respect for the sacred text with critical inquiry and social awareness.

In conclusion, the examination of *asbāb al-nuzūl* as a methodological and epistemological tool reaffirms the necessity of contextual interpretation in Qur’anic exegesis. It reveals how the Qur’an engaged with the temporal

challenges of its time and, by extension, how it can continue to address new challenges through informed, dynamic, and socially responsive interpretations. The future of asbāb al-nuzūl studies lies in bridging the gap between tradition and modernity – preserving the integrity of the past while embracing the critical demands of the present.

This study addresses research questions: (1) do classical and modern scholars view the epistemology of asbāb al-nuzūl? (2) How much do social and history shape the way people form sabab stories? (3) How can a view of epistemology help people use asbāb al-nuzūl today?

Method

This study applies a qualitative method through library research, aimed at conducting a critical epistemological investigation into the rules and historical sources of asbāb al-nuzūl. A qualitative approach is chosen for its strength in analyzing textual and interpretive data, allowing a deep engagement with classical and contemporary scholarly discourses rather than relying on empirical observation or statistical analysis [20]. This method of doing things is because want to see how people think, when they say things in the past, and how they use ideas that we can't measure with tools that give us data [21]. The library research design enables the researcher to collect, evaluate, and interpret data from a wide array of primary and secondary sources relevant to the field of Qur'anic studies.

The primary focus lies on classical sources, such as *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* by al-Wāḥidī and *Lubāb al-Nuqūl* by al-Suyūṭī, both of which are foundational in the genre of revelation reports. These texts serve as key references in understanding how early Muslim scholars compiled and transmitted reports about the circumstances of revelation [22]. Their methodological reliance on isnād (chain of transmission) and matan (text content) reflects the classical epistemological assumption that the historical context of verses can be known and verified through narration [23]. These old sources are compared by looking at what they agree on, how they differ, and what methods they assume are in use behind their handling of sabab stories.

This study also engages with the views of Ibn Taymiyyah, who stressed the importance of interpreting the Qur'an in light of its historical context. His moderate skepticism toward fabricated or weak narrations offers insight into early critical awareness of the limitations in some asbāb reports, particularly those used to justify later legal or theological positions. His contribution helps bridge classical and critical approaches in the epistemological evaluation of revelation-related narrations.

In addition to classical perspectives, this research incorporates contemporary scholarship to examine how modern thinkers reframe the function and reliability of *asbāb al-nuzūl*. The study closely analyzes the thoughts of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Fazlur Rahman, who argue for a contextual and dynamic reading of the Qur'an. Abu Zayd, through his hermeneutical approach, views many *asbāb* reports not as neutral historical accounts but as socio-political constructs shaped by early Muslim community dynamics. Meanwhile, Rahman's double-movement theory encourages reading revelation in its historical specificity and then extracting universal moral and legal principles, shifting the emphasis from rigid literalism to purposive interpretation. These new ideas about theories are an important part of what this work looks at through a more modern way of thinking.

The study employs a critical analysis of epistemological assumptions embedded in both classical and modern methodologies. It examines the role of interpretive rules such as *al-‘ibrah bi ‘umūm al-lafẓ lā bi khuṣūṣ al-sabab*, which emphasizes general meaning over specific causes, and how this impacts legal derivation and exegetical plurality. It also considers debates around the authenticity of narrations, including issues of sanad reliability, matan coherence, and contextual logic. To make this analysis, the study takes these steps in order: (1) find the good main and side texts; (2) sort classical and modern points of view; (3) compare reading assumptions; (4) check the quality of the epistemology; and (5) bring the idea together with a hermeneutic critique. By combining textual analysis with historical and hermeneutical tools, this study aims to illuminate the epistemic challenges and interpretive strategies involved in the transmission and usage of *asbāb al-nuzūl*. This approach allows for a more critical, reflective, and context-sensitive understanding of revelation in both classical and modern frameworks. In general, the type of methodological design contains as well descriptive, comparative and critical-analytical steps to allow a profound understanding of *asbāb al-nuzūl*.

Result and Discussion

Definition and Scope of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*

In Etymologically, *asbāb al-nuzūl* derives from the words "asbāb" (causes or reasons) and "al-nuzūl" (the descent of revelation), which terminologically refer to specific events, questions, or situations that prompted the revelation of Qur'anic verses. Al-Suyūṭī, in *al-Itqān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, explains that *asbāb al-nuzūl* is information that clarifies the historical context or background behind the revelation of a verse, thereby making its meaning clearer and more precise in interpretation. This understanding aligns with the definition offered by al-Zarkashī in *al-Burhān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, who considers *asbāb al-nuzūl* an

essential part of Qur'anic sciences as it provides a historical dimension to the revealed text [24]. Without doubt, though classical definitions, resting mainly on the notions transmission and documentation are foundational to reportage studies, they lack a sufficient analytical dimension concerning interpretive motivations as well as social-political dynamics underpinning the production of such reports. This lacuna is particularly notable in recent scholarly work which challenges both the neutrality and historical objectivity of sabab stories.

Methodologically, the scope of asbāb al-nuzūl studies includes two main forms: first, explicit reasons (*ṣarīḥ*), where reports clearly state that a verse was revealed due to a specific event; and second, implicit reasons (*ghayr ṣarīḥ*), which are conclusions drawn by exegetes based on the correlation between the verse and particular historical contexts [25]. This shows that asbāb al-nuzūl is not always absolute textual information but is often open to interpretation and reconstruction by exegetes throughout different eras. This also stresses a methodological tension between descriptive compilation and analytic reconstruction, thereby elaborating on the call for a framework which is able to show whether these assumed causes really resonate with early historical memory or rather with later exegetical rationalisation.

The scope of asbāb al-nuzūl is not limited solely to verses explicitly responding to particular historical incidents but also includes verses offering solutions to various social, political, and cultural dynamics faced by the early Muslim community. In other words, asbāb al-nuzūl acts as a bridge between the divine text and the social reality surrounding it, enabling more contextual and applicable interpretations of the societal issues of that time. Therefore, research on asbāb al-nuzūl covers a very broad area, spanning multiple disciplines – from early Islamic historiography that documents important events in the Prophet's life and his community, hadith studies as the primary source of reports on reasons for revelation, to tafsir (exegesis) that seeks to deeply explore the meanings of verses, and modern socio-religious sciences employing multidisciplinary approaches to study the influence of revelation on contemporary social dynamics.

This interdisciplinary approach illustrates the complexity and depth of asbāb al-nuzūl studies as a field that is not merely historical but also hermeneutical and sociological. This is emphasized by Angelika Neuwirth, who includes asbāb al-nuzūl as a crucial pathway for understanding social discourse in the formation of the early Muslim community, where revelation functioned not only as sacred text but also as an instrument for shaping social norms and community identity [26]. Such an approach is highly relevant in current research that demands a Qur'anic understanding capable of addressing present-day challenges without neglecting the text's historical roots. Consequently, the range

of *asbāb al-nuzūl* should be understood dynamically: both as a record of events long past and also as an unfolding hermeneutical tradition molded by changing historical backdrops and intellectual exigencies.

Classical approaches to *asbāb al-nuzūl* studies typically emphasize normative and authoritative aspects, focusing primarily on transmitting reports deemed authentic as the basis for establishing the cause of revelation. This method relies on *sanad* (chain of transmission) and *matan* (text) as measures of a report's truthfulness, with little questioning of its historical value. In contrast, modern approaches stress a historical-critical perspective, prioritizing social, cultural, and political contextualization behind the revelation alongside rigorous source criticism. This juxtaposition highlights an epistemological disjunction: whereas early sources intended to maintain the interpretive authority of their archaic intermediaries, modern scholars question the perimeters which manifest and construct such authority. Understanding this division is crucial to the argument of the article. Therefore, discussing the definition and scope of *asbāb al-nuzūl* must consider the epistemological differences between classical and modern approaches, which is the main focus of this article.

Types of Report Wording and Their Validity

In *asbāb al-nuzūl* research, how the wording of reports is presented plays an important role in determining the level of validity and the strength of arguments used to define the cause of revelation. Narratives recorded in classical works can generally be classified into two main types: explicit wording (*ṣarīḥ*) and implicit wording (*ghayr ṣarīḥ*).

Explicit wording refers to reports that clearly and unequivocally use phrases such as "*ṣabab nuzūl hādhihi al-āyah*" (the cause of this verse's revelation) or similar expressions that indicate a direct link between an event and the revelation, as frequently found in authentic narrations collected by al-Bukhārī and Muslim from companions including Ibn Mas'ūd and 'Ā'ishah [27]. Meanwhile, implicit wording involves reports that do not explicitly state the cause of revelation but provide contextual indications or background that allow inferential interpretation of the cause. It is important that we do so, because the form of wording adopted by the narrator determines to a large extent his or her intention (to narrate a historical event, to enlighten the audience etc.) and thus, how later exegetes construe the relationship between an event and a verse. Distinguishing between these two types is important because it impacts how exegetes assess the authenticity and relevance of reports in constructing verse interpretations, as well as how classical and modern scholars apply critical methods in evaluating these sources [28]. Thus, explaining the wording of *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports is not just about accepting historical narratives but also involves

deep textual and epistemological study to ensure the quality and function of the reports in Qur'anic exegesis.

Implicit wording is characterized by narratives that recount a particular event followed by the mention of a Qur'anic verse without explicitly stating that the event caused the revelation. In such cases, the relationship between the event and the verse must be analyzed contextually, using both historical and thematic exegetical approaches. This type is commonly found in tafsir works like Tafsir al-Ṭabarī and al-Durr al-Manthūr, which often compile reports without always critically affirming their authenticity based on sanad or matan. This kind of language cries out for careful methodological reflection, as the tacit wording obscures the distinction between historical memory and exegetical inference.

Regarding validity, hadith and tafsir scholars hold differing views on the conditions a report must meet to serve as a basis for determining asbāb al-nuzūl. Most scholars require the report to be authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) with a continuous chain reaching the companion, as only they were direct witnesses to the revelation event. This view is upheld by al-Suyūṭī and al-Zurqānī, who consider reports from the *tabi'īn* (the generation after the companions) not independently authoritative unless supported by corroborating evidence [29],[30]. On the other hand, a more lenient approach exists among some modern exegetes, accepting *mursal* reports (those not naming the companion) in certain contexts if supported by narrative consistency and historical compatibility [31]. And in this way, implicit reports often take center stage in contemporary scholarly discussions, particularly for scholars who entertain the idea that these stories are a product of early interpretive sensibilities as opposed to a straightforward historical impetus.

However, it is important to note that most asbāb al-nuzūl reports derive from individual, fragmentary narratives. Hence, their validity depends not only on sanad but also on matan analysis, sociological context, and intertextual criticism between the reports and the verses concerned. This corresponds with the modern hermeneutical approach advocated by Fazlur Rahman, emphasizing the need to understand both the historical context of the verse's revelation and its meaning within the normative structure of the Qur'an as a whole [32].

Therefore, the discussion of report wording types and their validity is not merely a technical matter in the science of narration but also opens the door for epistemological re-examination of how scholarly authority is formed within the heritage of tafsir and Qur'anic studies. Within this framework, critique of both classical and modern approaches to asbāb al-nuzūl becomes relevant for further exploration in the subsequent parts of this article

General Rule of the Wording and the Specific Cause

One important principle in understanding *asbāb al-nuzūl* is the rule of “*al-‘ibrah bi ‘umūm al-lafẓ lā bi khuṣūṣ al-sabab*”, which means that the legal ruling is based on the generality of the wording of the verse, not the specificity of the cause of its revelation. This principle serves as a hermeneutic foundation widely accepted by scholars of *usul fiqh* and *tafsir*. According to them, although a verse was revealed due to a particular event, its meaning applies generally as long as there is no strong indication limiting its application solely to that cause. Al-Shāṭibī in *al-Muwāfaqāt* explains that the generality of the wording is part of the wisdom of legislation, so that legal rulings are not confined to a particular historical context alone [33]. This rule reflects an attempt to balance historical contextualization with the universality of divine guidance, a tension that becomes increasingly relevant in modern interpretive discourse.

An example of this principle is found in the verses about *li‘ān* in Surah al-Nūr (24:6–9), which according to some reports was revealed in the case of Hilāl ibn Umayyah. Although the cause is specific, the ruling on *li‘ān* contained in the verse applies universally to any husband-wife pair in similar circumstances. Similarly, the verse prohibiting *riba* in Surah al-Baqarah (2:275) was revealed responding to a specific Jewish practice, but its legal content applies comprehensively to anyone involved in usury transactions [34]. It is important that we do so, because the form of wording adopted by the narrator determines to a large extent his or her intention (to narrate a historical event, to enlighten the audience etc.) and thus, how later exegetes construe the relationship between an event and a verse.

However, not all scholars accept the rule of “general wording and specific cause” absolutely. While this rule is widely used in *tafsir* and *usul fiqh* methodology to affirm that rulings in Qur’anic verses apply generally regardless of the cause of revelation, some *fuqaha* and *mufasssirun* propose a more contextual and restrictive approach. Figures like al-Sarkhasī in *Uṣūl al-Sarkhasī* emphasize that in some cases, the specificity of the cause (*khuṣūṣ al-sabab*) can be the primary determinant for limiting the meaning and application of the ruling in the verse, especially if there are *qarā’in* (contextual indicators) in the text that clarify the exclusivity of the ruling [35]. This view confirms that *asbāb al-nuzūl* is not merely a historical note, but also an essential element in legal analysis determining the universal scope of wording. This kind of language cries out for careful methodological reflection, as the tacit wording obscures the distinction between historical memory and exegetical inference. In this context, *asbāb al-nuzūl* becomes an epistemological tool that not only helps understand the context of revelation but also shapes normative interpretative boundaries,

particularly in deriving shar'ī rulings from the text. Therefore, the tension between general wording and specific cause is not merely a linguistic issue but is closely related to methodological approaches in understanding the authority and relevance of Qur'anic law.

In the modern context, this principle has become a battleground between textual-normative and contextual-historical approaches. Scholars like Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Abdullah Saeed stress that overly literal readings of the generality of wording without considering social-historical contexts can distort the moral message of the Qur'an. Abu Zayd, for example, argues that meaning cannot be detached from the context of production and reception, so asbāb al-nuzūl holds an important position in interpreting the limits of the generality of verses.[36] Hence, it is time to revisit the maxim from a modern hermeneutical perspective so that such universal claims do not lose their moral validity by becoming vacuous abstractions.

Thus, the rule of "general wording and specific cause" is not only normative but also open to reevaluation within an epistemological critique framework. It demands a balance between textual authority, historical context, and the moral objectives of the revelation, especially in the modern era where social realities are vastly different from the time of revelation. This wider evaluative perspective is what allows the principle to still operate as hermeneutical and ethical significance, rather than a fixed formula for interpretation.

Case Study: Surah al-Ikhlāṣ and Two Different Causes of Revelation

Surah al-Ikhlāṣ (Qur'an 112) is a short but fundamental chapter in Islamic creed, as it firmly asserts the concept of pure monotheism: that Allah is One, has no offspring, nor is He born, and nothing is comparable to Him. This surah is often a primary reference in theological debates, especially explaining the oneness of Allah in Sunni tradition and in confronting non-Islamic ideologies. Interestingly, in hadith and tafsir literature, there are two authentic reports explaining the cause of revelation of this surah, each coming from very different contexts—namely the Meccan and the Medinan phases. The first report states that the surah was revealed in response to the Quraysh polytheists' question about the lineage of the God of Prophet Muhammad (al-Tirmidhī, n.d.), ﷻ, while the second places it in the context of interaction with the People of the Book in Medina [37]. The very existence of these opposing contexts serves to emphasize the difficulty in constructing an exact historical timeline of Qur'anic revelation.

Both reports explicitly state (*ṣarīḥ*) the cause of revelation of Surah al-Ikhlāṣ but reflect significant geographical and chronological differences. This raises epistemological questions about their historical validity and narrative consistency: do these two reports describe two different events but carry the same substantive message, or is there a developing narrative construction interpreting the theological function of this surah in various contexts? Researchers like Harald Motzki and Andrew Rippin emphasize the importance of isnād-cum-matn analysis and literary criticism to examine the authenticity of such reports, as these narrations might reflect interpretative traditions rather than literal historical facts [38],[39]. Therefore, the case of *Surah al-Ikhlāṣ* is an important example to study the dynamics between asbāb al-nuzūl reports and their surrounding socio-theological constructions. Such methodological issues are crucial for understanding to what extent these accounts can be seen as history or whether they are exegetical instruments, that is defined in later periods by the respective communal hermeneutic character.

The first report comes from Ibn Abbas who narrates that the Quraysh polytheists in Mecca came to Prophet Muhammad and asked about the lineage and nature of the God he worshipped. They posed the question mockingly: “*Ṣif lanā rabbaka, a min dhahab huwa am min fidḥah?*” (“Describe to us your Lord! Is He made of gold or silver?”). This question reflected their materialistic and anthropomorphic view. Thus, Surah al-Ikhlāṣ was revealed as a firm response to emphasize the oneness and incomparability of Allah’s attributes [40],[41]. What these narratives disclose is the way polemical engagements acted as triggers for revelatory clarification.

Meanwhile, the second report arises in the Medina context when a group of Jews questioned the Prophet ﷺ about the attributes of his God as a form of theological test. This narration is mentioned by al-Bayhaqī and is also considered authentic by some hadith scholars. According to them, the Jews said: “*Ṣif lanā rabbaka alladī ta’budu?*” (“Describe to us your Lord whom you worship!”). Then Surah al-Ikhlāṣ was revealed as a theological response to that question [42]. This variation of setting shows that the surah’s monotheistic theme was employed in various contexts between religions.

This phenomenon raises a problem in establishing the historical cause of revelation. How can one surah have two valid asbāb al-nuzūl from two different times and places? In the classical approach, some scholars explain that it is possible for a verse or surah to be revealed more than once in similar contexts. This is known as the concept of *tukrār al-nuzūl* (repetition of revelation), although not all scholars accept it absolutely [43]. This explanation still leaves an unanswered question as to whether this process resulted in any retrospective

narrative shaping, something that current scholars believe could not be avoided within oral interpretive traditions.

However, it should be noted that the modern approach in asbāb al-nuzūl studies tends to reject the understanding that the cause of revelation is always a direct causality based on a specific historical event (event-centered causality). Instead, it introduces the concept of later exegetical rationalization, meaning explanations or narratives that emerged later as interpretative efforts to understand and clarify the meaning context of the verse in a broader dimension. In the case of Surah al-Ikhlās, these two different asbāb al-nuzūl reports are likely not direct historical records but reflections of how the early Muslim community articulated the meaning of monotheism in response to two different ideological challenges: Quraysh polytheism and the concept of the Trinity or anthropomorphism in Jewish-Christian thought. Angelika Neuwirth emphasizes that this variation in reports is part of a complex interpretative process reflecting social and theological dialogue in the formation of early Muslim religious identity [44]. This hermeneutical dynamism serves as an indication that reports of asbāb should be read not simply as snapshots of events, but as works in progress produced by the community's act of meaning making.

The study of Surah al-Ikhlās raises an important question: should asbāb al-nuzūl be considered as actual historical facts occurring at the time of revelation, or is it more appropriate to understand them as joint interpretations by the early Muslim community in addressing their social and religious issues? This is crucial because many reports on causes of revelation differ in versions, with some appearing after the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ passed away, indicating processes of editing and interpretation. Therefore, relying solely on the chain of narration without considering the social context and underlying intent can lead to a narrow understanding. Asbāb al-nuzūl should also be seen as a way the early Muslim community understood the revelation according to their circumstances. Hence, its validity as a source for tafsir and Islamic law needs to be assessed both from the perspective of transmission and social context. This view aligns with thinkers like Fazlur Rahman who emphasize the importance of understanding the social and moral background of the revelation dynamically (Fazlur Rahman, 2009), and Nasr Abu Zayd who regards asbāb al-nuzūl as a product of culture and interpretation by the early Muslim community [36]. hence this case study illustrates how the classical criticism of imāmī hadith must be supported by epistemological and sociological considerations to arrive at a full evaluation of asbāb narratives.

Critical Analysis: Asbāb as a Social Construction

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, a progressive thinker in Qur'anic studies, offers a reinterpretation of the tradition of asbāb al-nuzūl using a critical and historical hermeneutical approach. He argues that many asbāb al-nuzūl reports are not factual historical records that chronologically and objectively narrate the circumstances of a verse's revelation. Instead, they are social and interpretative reflections by the early Muslim community—especially the companions (ṣaḥābah) and the followers (tābi'īn)—attempting to understand the revelation within the social, political, and cultural challenges they faced. According to Abu Zayd, editorial forms such as *nazalat fī kadhā* (revealed concerning this) or *hādhihi al-āyah nazalat fī fulān* (this verse was revealed concerning so-and-so) often do not literally indicate the historical cause of the verse's revelation but rather show an effort to connect the divine message with contemporary situations faced by Muslims after the revelation. He emphasizes that such structures reflect a social interpretive process on the text rather than a pure documentation of the historical event of revelation. Therefore, Abu Zayd suggests that the study of asbāb al-nuzūl should be directed toward a critical reading of the construction of meaning and interpretive authority within the social discourse of the early Muslim community. This approach aligns with critiques of philological positivism that treats all reports as literal representations of the past. Through his critical hermeneutics, Abu Zayd opens space for a more reflective, contextual, and socially responsive methodology of Qur'anic interpretation [36].

From this perspective, the tradition of asbāb al-nuzūl should not be understood merely as passive records of events behind the revelation of the Qur'anic verses. It is part of a dynamic social interpretive practice whereby the majority of the early Muslim community negotiated the meaning of the verses in response to ongoing real issues. Hence, approaches relying solely on isnād (chain of transmission) authority or classical philological analysis are insufficient. A hermeneutical approach that takes into account sociological, ideological, and historical dynamics of the emergence of various asbāb al-nuzūl narratives is required.

This idea is further supported by Fazlur Rahman, who views the Qur'anic revelation as an interactive and responsive process to the social, political, and cultural dynamics encountered by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and his community. Rahman emphasizes that the Qur'an was not revealed in a vacuum or detached from historical realities, but within a dialectical relationship with the socio-economic and cultural conditions of 7th-century Arab society. Therefore, the study of asbāb al-nuzūl should be understood as an effort to actualize the

meaning of the revelation according to the context and issues of the time. Rahman explicitly states that “the Qur’an came down in response to actual situations and was meant to solve actual problems”[15], meaning each verse is directly connected to real issues requiring solutions. Consequently, Qur’anic interpretation should not be trapped in a literal understanding of the cause of revelation but must integrate *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*—the objectives of Islamic law—while considering ongoing social changes to keep its meaning relevant and applicable in modern contexts.

Considering these arguments, it becomes clear that the classical approach, which emphasizes *asbāb al-nuzūl* as historical facts verified by *sanad* and *matn* methodologies, needs to be methodologically critiqued. This approach should be complemented by historical-critical and sociological readings capable of unveiling the ideological and normative dimensions behind the emergence of *asbāb* narratives. This critique is not meant to reject the validity of all *asbāb* reports but rather to reassess them historically by asking: in what social context did a *sabab* report emerge, and for whose interpretive interests was it constructed?

Therefore, *asbāb al-nuzūl* should be understood not merely as absolute historical facts but as part of a living construction of meaning within the history of Islamic interpretation. This approach allows appreciation for classical tradition while enabling more critical and contextual readings. Thus, we can interpret Qur’anic verses more relevantly in line with social developments and evolving challenges, without losing their essential originality.

Conclusion

There The study of *asbāb al-nuzūl* underscores the importance of historical, critical, and contextual approaches in understanding the Qur’anic text. In terms of definition and editorial form, *asbāb al-nuzūl* is not just a historical record but also a representation of interpretive dynamics within the early Muslim community. Variations in reports demonstrate the need for in-depth analysis of *matn* (content) and *sanad* (chain of transmission) to avoid erroneous legal derivations. Classical principles such as “*al-‘ibrah bi ‘umūm al-lafz*” (considering the generality of wording) and “*al-‘ibrah bi khuṣūṣ al-sabab*” (considering the specificity of cause) reveal the complexity in determining the scope of verses, which must be read according to contextual clarity, linguistic strength, and the objectives of Islamic law. Case studies of QS. al-Ikhlāṣ and QS. al-Dukhān show that the relationship between *sabab* and verses can be multiple and not necessarily linear.

Contemporary analyses by Nasr Abu Zayd and Fazlur Rahman contribute significantly by unpacking classical assumptions and expanding the space for

ijtihād (independent reasoning) in understanding revelation. Their approaches encourage us not to accept asbāb reports solely as historical facts but to reread their meanings through historical and sociological lenses. Thus, understanding asbāb al-nuzūl is not only crucial as a tool in Qur'anic exegesis but also serves as an epistemological foundation for developing interpretation that is more critical, dynamic, and relevant to modern contexts.

Author Contributions

Musfiroh Nihlah Ilahiyah: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Dr. Sanuri:** Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank God, prophet Muhammad, my parents, my lecturer, and to the reviewers for providing valuable input on these papers.

Bibliography

- [1] Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought: A Critical Historical Analysis*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006.
- [2] H.-T. Tillschneider, "The Asbab an-nuzul: A branch of prophetic tradition," *Stud. Islam.*, vol. 108, no. 2, pp. 175–188, 2013, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/19585705-12341284>.
- [3] M. Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- [4] M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- [5] M. J. Elmi, "The Views of Ṭabāṭabā'ī on Traditions (aḥādith) and Occasions of Revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl) in Interpreting the Qur'an," *J. Shi'a Islam. Stud.*, vol. 15, no. 1–2, pp. 45–66, 2022, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/isl.2022.a925782>.
- [6] A. Rippin, "The exegetical genre ASBĀB AL-NUZŪL: A bibliographical and terminological survey," *Bull. Sch. Orient. African Stud.*, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 1–15, 1985, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X00026926>.
- [7] A. Rippin, "The function of asbāb al-nuzūl in Qur'ānic exegesis," *Bull. Sch. Orient. African Stud.*, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 1–20, 1988, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X00020188>.

- [8] F. Shuayb, "Asbab al-Nuzul," in *Islam: A Worldwide Encyclopedia: Volumes 1-4*, vol. 1, Jamaica, NY, United States: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2017, pp. 179–182. [Online]. Available: <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85205493106&partnerID=40&md5=3ed0d9d212dbeb1517909114e2295583>
- [9] K. Cragg, "The Historical Geography of the Qur'an: A Study in asbāb al-nuzūl," *J. Qur'anic Stud.*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 81–92, 1999, doi: <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.1999.1.1.81>.
- [10] S. R. Burge, "Evidence of self-editing in al-suyūṭī's tahrīr and itqān: A comparison of his chapters on asbāb al-nuzūl," in *Islamic History and Civilization*, vol. 138, G. A., Ed., Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, United Kingdom: Brill Academic Publishers, 2017, pp. 143–181. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004334526-010>.
- [11] Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *l-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*. Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1953.
- [12] M. Zarqā, *Al-Asbāb al-Nuzūl*. Dar al-Qalam.
- [13] A. Ragab, "Asbāb al-Nuzūl: The (Good) Occasions of Revelation," in *The Routledge Companion to the Qur'an*, Johns Hopkins University, United States: Taylor and Francis, 2021, pp. 211–222. doi: 10.4324/9781315885360-23.
- [14] R. Tottoli, "Asbab al-Nuzul as a technical term: Its emergence and application in the Islamic sources," in *Texts and Studies on the Qur'an*, vol. 11, D. M. and S. W.A., Eds., Brill Academic Publishers, 2017, pp. 62–73. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004337121_005.
- [15] F. Rahman, *Major Themes of The Qur'an*. Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- [16] A. Nirwana AN, D. Mustofa, and S. Akhyar, "Contextualization Review of the Interpretation of the Verses of the Fathul Qulub Book at the IMM Sukoharjo Regeneration Program," *J. Ilm. Al-Mu ashirah*, vol. 20, no. 1, p. 146, Feb. 2023, doi: <https://doi.org/10.22373/jim.v20i1.16939>.
- [17] A. Nirwana, I. P. Sari, S. Suharjianto, and S. Hidayat, "Kajian Kritik pada Bentuk dan Pengaruh Positif al-Dakhil dalam Tafsir Jalalain tentang Kisah Nabi Musa dan Khidir," *AL QUDS J. Stud. Alquran dan Hadis*, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 717, Nov. 2021, doi: <https://doi.org/10.29240/alquds.v5i2.2774>.
- [18] Mugoya Bashir, Ndizaawa Joash Paul, Akurut Patricia Ocom, and A.-O. S. Bolatito, "The Influence of Islamic Culture on Organizational Performance in Islamic University In Uganda: A descriptive Study," *Bull. Islam. Res.*, vol.

- 3, no. 4, pp. 595–614, May 2025, doi: <https://doi.org/10.69526/5pgtmm30>.
- [19] Abdulrohim E-sor *et al.*, “Islamic Communication in the 21st Century: Principles, Methods, Practices, Digital Transformation and Contemporary Applications,” *Bull. Islam. Res.*, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 571–594, May 2025, doi: <https://doi.org/10.69526/bir.v3i4.354>.
- [20] U. Lathifah, Andri Nirwana, and Muhammad Zakir Husein, “Qualitative Analysis of the Concept of Tabdzir in the Qur’an: A Study of Al-Azhar Tafsir and Its Contribution to Good Asset Management,” *Bull. Islam. Res.*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 249–266, Feb. 2025, doi: <https://doi.org/10.69526/bir.v3i2.329>.
- [21] A. Nirwana AN, F. Arfan, F. Dolles Marshal, C. Maulana, and N. Fadli, “Methods of Qur’an Research and Quran Tafseer Research its implications for contemporary Islamic thought,” *Bull. Islam. Res.*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 33–42, Jun. 2024, doi: <https://doi.org/10.69526/bir.v2i1.34>.
- [22] A. I. Hartafan and A. N. AN, “A Study Between Tawhid And Pluralism In Buya Hamka And Nurcholish Madjid’s Interpretation Of Kalimatun Sawa In A Comparative Review,” *AL-AFKAR J. Islam. Stud.*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 159–173, 2024, doi: <https://doi.org/10.31943/afkarjournal.v7i1.921.Abstract>.
- [23] F. Aliyatul, Y. Dahliana, A. Nirwana, A. Azizah, and U. M. Surakarta, “STUDI KITAB TAFSIR TANWIR AL-MIQBAS MIN TAFSIR IBNI ‘ABBAS OLEH AL-FAIRUZABADI,” *Subst. J. Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 15–25, 2024, doi: [10.22373/substantia.v26i1.22695](https://doi.org/10.22373/substantia.v26i1.22695).
- [24] Badruddin Muhammad bin Abdullah bin Bahadir Az-Zarkasyi, *Al-Burhan fi Ulum al-Qur’an*. Dar Ihya Al-Kutub Al-Arabiyyah, Isa Al-Babi Al-Halabi wa Syurakah, 2006.
- [25] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Muqaddimah fi Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*. Riyadh: Maktabah al-Rushd, 2000.
- [26] A. Neuwirth, *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community: Reading the Qur’an as a Literary Text*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- [27] J. al-D. al-Suyūṭī, *Lubāb al-Nuqūl fī Asbāb al-Nuzūl wa al-Nasakh wa al-Nasīkh*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2006.
- [28] H. Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur’anic Exegesis: Genesis and Development*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
- [29] M. ‘Abd al-‘Azīm al-Zurqānī, *Manāhil al-‘Irfān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dār al-Fikr, 1995.
- [30] J. al-D. al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dār al-Kutub

al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2003.

- [31] M. M. al-A‘zamī, *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature*. Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1977.
- [32] Fazlur Rahman, “Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition,” Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 140–145.
- [33] Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī, *al-Muwāfaqāt fī Uṣūl al-Sharī‘ah*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1997.
- [34] Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Lubāb al-Nuqūl fī Asbāb al-Nuzūl*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dār al-Fikr, 1992.
- [35] Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Sarkhasī, *Uṣūl al-Sarkhasī*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dār al-Ma‘rifah.
- [36] Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Maḥmūd al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsah fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*. Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-‘Arabī, 1990.
- [37] al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā’il al-Nubuwwah*.
- [38] Harald Motzki, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh Before the Classical Schools*. Brill, Leiden, 2001.
- [39] Andrew Rippin, “The Present Status of Tafsir Studies,” *Muslim World*, vol. 75, No. 3–, pp. 224–238, 1985.
- [40] Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Lubāb al-Nuqūl fī Asbāb al-Nuzūl*. Kairo, Egypt: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 2000.
- [41] Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl Āy al-Qur’ān*. Kairo, Egypt: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 2000.
- [42] Aḥmad ibn Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā’il al-Nubuwwah*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1985.
- [43] Muḥammad ‘Abd al-‘Azīm al-Zurqānī, *Manāhil al-‘Irfān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Fikr Beirut, 1996.
- [44] A. Neuwirth, *The Qur’an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

Copyright

© 2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.