Comparative and Critical Analytical Studies of the Application of the Priority Rules of Tafsir bi al-Ma'tsûr to Tafsir bi al-Ijtihâd in the Classical and Contemporary Tafsir Tradition

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Abstract

This study examines comparatively and analytically the application of the principle of "priority of tafsir bi al-ma'tsûr over tafsir bi al-ijtihâd" in classical and contemporary tafsir traditions. This rule is one of the important methodological principles in the interpretation of the Qur'an which emphasizes the authority of history as the main source. The research uses a qualitative approach with literature studies and comparative analysis of three representative books of tafsir: Jâmi' al-Bayân by al-Ṭhabari (classical), Tafsîr Al-Qur'ân Al-'Azhîm by Ibn Kathir (medieval classic), and Al-Tafsîr al-Munîr by Wahbah al-Zuhaili (contemporary). The results of the study show that this rule is not absolute, but rather an epistemological principle that is recommended. The classical mufasir placed the tafsir bi al-ma'tsûr as the main foundation, but still made room for rational ijtihad. In contemporary traditions, its application is more flexible by integrating linguistic, historical, and maqâshidî approaches. The main finding of this study is the formulation of a new rule: "It is permissible to take precedence over tafsir with al-ijtihâd as long as it does not contradict it, even if there is a history that interprets it." This rule emphasizes that the relationship between the two approaches is complementary, not dichotomous.

Keywords: tafsir bi al-ma'tsûr, tafsir bi al-ijtihâd, methodology of tafsir, classical tafsir, contemporary tafsir.

INTRODUCTION

In the discipline of Qur'anic interpretation, one of the most fundamental rules that is referred to by scholars is the principle that tafsir bi al-ma'tsûr has priority over tafsir bi al-ra'yi or ijtihâd-based. The application of the rules of al-tafsîr bi al-ma'tsûr muqaddam 'ala al-tafsîr bi al-ijtihâd is not just a technical rule, but reflects the epistemological view that the source of knowledge that the source of knowledge that relies directly on the Prophet (peace be upon him), the companions, and the tabi'in has the most authoritative legitimacy in understanding Divine revelation (Al-Suyuthi, 2003; Ibn Taymiyah, 1988).

This rule was born from the realization that the Qur'an is a text that is open to many possible interpretations. Without epistemological control, interpretation can be highly subjective and even violate the meaning of sharia. History records that groups such as the

Khawarij and the Bathiniyyah once interpreted the Qur′an ideologically to legitimize their political interests. This is why some classical scholars strongly emphasize the priority of tafsir bi al-ma′tsûr to maintain the authority of the meaning of revelation (Adz-Dzahabi, 2000; Al-Qaththan, 1973).

However, the problem becomes even more complicated when the reality shows that not all verses of the Qur′an have an authentic or complete interpretation of bi al-ma′tsûr. Many verses are not directly interpreted by the Prophet (peace be upon him), or if they are, the narration is weak (dha′îf) or limited to certain aspects. This raises methodological difficulties: whether mufasir should only stick to the existing narration, or whether it is permissible to use ra′yi, linguistic analysis, maqâshid al-syarî′ah, and contextual approaches (Al-Suyuthi, 1996; Shihab, 2013).

On the other hand, historical facts show that the classical mufasirs who are generally classified as adherents of tafsir bi al-ma′tsûr, such as al-Ṭhabari in Jâmi′ al-Bayân and Ibn Katsir in Tafsîr Al-Qur′ân Al-′Azhîm, do not actually apply these rules consistently in every verse. Sometimes the interpretation with ijtihad (al-ra′yi) is shown before the narration, even though there is already a narration that interprets it. This inconsistency actually occurs in the books that are the main reference for Muslims, and this has not been studied much comparatively and critically.

Departing from these problems, this study aims to examine comparatively and analytically critically: (1) how the concept and limitations of this rule are understood in the scientific treasures of interpretation; (2) how this rule is applied in three representative tafsir books, namely Jâmi′ al-Bayân by al-Ṭhabari as a representation of early classical commentary, Tafsîr Al-Qur′ân Al-′Azhîm by Ibn Kathir as a representation of the medieval period, and Al-Tafsîr al-Munîr by Wahbah al-Zuhaili as a representation of contemporary commentary. Thus, this research is expected to be able to clarify how epistemological and methodological paradigm changes occur in the tradition of interpretation from time to time, as well as assess the extent to which the principle of historical priority is still relevant in the context of modern Qur′an interpretation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method with a library research approach. Data were collected through critical reading of primary texts in the form of classical and contemporary tafsir books, recording the content of tafsir, and identifying patterns of application of priority rules of tafsir bi al-ma′tsûr. The primary data source consists of three representative tafsir works selected based on considerations of narration authority, contemporary relevance, and availability of academically accessible literature: Jâmi′ al-Bayân ′an al-Ta′wîl Ay Al-Qur′ân by Ibn Jarir al-Ṭhabari (d. 310 H), Tafsîr Al-Qur′ân Al-′Azhîm by Ibn Kathir (d. 774 H), and Al-Tafsîr al-Munîr fî al-′Aqîdah wa al-Syarî′ah wa al-Manhaj by Wahbah al-Zuhaili (d. 2015 A.D.).

Secondary data sources include authoritative literature on interpretation and hadith, which serve as tools for analysis and comparison. Among them are the works of ′ulûm al-Qur′ân such as al-Itqân fî ′Ulûm al-Qur′ân by al-Suyuthi, Manâhil al-′Irfân by al-Zarqani, as

well as works of contemporary interpretation methodology. The analysis was carried out using descriptive-comparative methods and critical analysis, comparing classical and contemporary approaches in interpreting certain verses. The focus of the analysis is directed at the legitimacy of the narration, the role of al-ijtihâd, and the conformity with maqâshid al-syarî'ah. The validity of the data is ensured through triangulation of sources and techniques, including comparisons between original texts, classical interpretations, and contemporary interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Concept and Limitations of the Priority Rule of Tafsir Bi Al-Ma'tsûr

Etymologically, the word al-ma'tsûr comes from the root word atsara-ya'tsiru which means something that is narrated or quoted from the previous generation. Terminologically, tafsir bi al-ma'tsûr is a method of interpretation that relies on history, namely the information contained in the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet, and the words of the companions that function to explain the meaning of the verses of the Qur'an (Al-Zarqani, 1995; Al-Qaththan, 1973). Scholars such as al-Dzahabi, Manna' al-Qaththan, al-Shabuni, and al-Suyuthi agree that this method is the most authentic form of interpretation because it maintains the purity of the meaning of the verse in accordance with the intention of Allah SWT., without being contaminated by the subjectivity of the interpreter's reason.

The hierarchy of sources in tafsir bi al-ma'tsûr includes four levels: first, the Qur'an is interpreted with the Qur'an; second, the Qur'an is interpreted with sahih hadiths; third, the Qur'an is interpreted with the atsar of the companions; and fourth, the Qur'an is interpreted by the interpretation of tabi'in. Ibn Taymiyah in Muqaddimah fî Ushûl al-Tafsîr affirms that the most valid method of interpretation is to interpret the Qur'an with the Qur'an. If it is not found, the next reference is the Sunnah, because the Sunnah serves as a practical and authoritative lecture on the Qur'an (Ibn Taymiyah, 1988).

The legitimacy of this rule is strengthened by a number of fundamental arguments. Historically, the Companions are the generation that lived at the time of revelation, understood classical Arabic very well, and witnessed firsthand the social and cultural context of revelation. From an epistemological perspective, the interpretation that comes from the Prophet (peace be upon him) is considered the second revelation, namely the Sunnah, so its authority cannot be ignored. Al-Syathibi in al-Muwâfaqât states that any interpretation of the law in Islam must be based on an understanding that is in accordance with the meaning of revelation and the Sunnah, which cannot be separated from the saheeh narration (Al-Syathibi, 1997).

Meanwhile, tafsir bi al-ijtihâd or bi al-ra'yi refers to an interpretation that uses reason and ijtihad when the narration is not available or inadequate to answer a problem. Terminologically, it refers to a serious rational/reasoning attempt to produce a legal opinion when the nash does not provide explicit provisions. Scholars divide it into two categories: al-ra'yi al-mahmûd (praiseworthy reasoning) which is based on the rules of the Arabic language, balâghah, and the correct principles of shari'i, and al-ra'yi al-madzmûm (reprehensible

reasoning) which is built on the basis of lust, speculation, or the imposition of meaning without the support of evidence (Al-Qaththan, 1973; Adz-Dzahabi, 2000).

Application of the Rules in the Book of Jâmiʹ al-Bayân (Al-Ṭhabari)

Al-Ṭhabari (d. 310 AH) was the first mufasir to codify tafsir in the form of a complete and systematic book. In Jâmiʹ al-Bayân ʹan al-Taʹwîl Ay Al-Qurʹân, al-Ṭhabari presents a very critical and scientific methodology: he presents various narrations from the companions and tabiʹin for a single verse, performs tarjih based on the strength of the sanad and the content of the meaning, and then gives the conclusion that he thinks is closest to the truth. This pattern shows that the tafsir bi al-maʹtsûr in Jâmiʹ al-Bayân is not just a collection of atsar, but a riwâyah tafsir accompanied by scientific analysis (al-Suyuthi, 2003).

In its practical application, al-Ṭhabari does not always consistently apply the rules of al-tafsîr bi al-maʹtsûr muqaddam ʹala al-tafsîr bi al-ijtihâd. In the verses that demand linguistic explanation and iʹrab, al-Ṭhabari emphasizes more on the aspect of linguistic analysis than on referring to the narration. For example, in interpreting QS. Al-Baqarah verse 185, al-Ṭhabari elaborates more on the origin of the words syahr and Ramadhân according to linguists, cites Mujahidʹs view of the prudence of pronouncing Ramadhânʹs name, and discusses various grammatical possibilities whether the word syahr is read marfûʹ or manshûb, complete with the consequences of its meaning. This lugawiyyah analysis precedes the presentation of history, which is actually available.

The same thing is seen in the interpretation of the verses of the Qurʹan. An-Naba, in which al-Ṭhabari used classical Arabic poetry to strengthen the understanding of the words libâs (clothing) and the word al-bard (cold), through linguistic and analogous reasoning. This is a form of tafsir bi al-raʹyi that is corroborated with Arabic verse. But after that, al-Ṭhabari continued to quote the narration of his companions and tabiʹin as reinforcements. From this it is clear that the interpretation of Jâmiʹ al-Bayân shows an integrative character: the narration is still given priority, but rational ijtihad is also used when the explanation of the history is considered inadequate. This means that the application of the rules of al-tafsîr bi al-maʹtsûr muqaddam in the tafsir of al-Ṭhabari is flexible, not rigid (al-Suyuthi, 2003; Ilyas, 2004).

One of the typical methods of al-Ṭhabari is al-ikhtiyâr, which is to choose one opinion that is considered the strongest after presenting a number of different narrations. The considerations he uses are not only the strength of the sanad, but also the consistency of the meaning, the conformity with the rules of classical Arabic, and its relevance to the context of the verse. In this way, al-Ṭhabari shows that even though the narration takes precedence, ijtihadi reasoning is still necessary to filter, corroborate, and direct the commentary so as not to get caught up in a pile of narration that may confuse the reader.

Application of the Rules in the Book of Tafsîr Al-Qurʹân Al-ʹAzhîm (Ibn Kathir)

Ibn Kathir (d. 774 H) is known as an important figure in the tradition of tafsir bi al-maʹtsûr who emphasized the importance of interpreting the Qurʹan based on authoritative sources. As a disciple of Ibn Taymiyah, he believed that the correct interpretation should start from the Qurʹan with the Qurʹan, followed by authentic hadiths, as well as the views of the

companions and tabi′in (Ibn Katsir, 1999). Ibn Kathir showed a selective attitude in assessing the history, by avoiding the use of weak hadith and rejecting the stories of isrâ′îliyyât that had no solid foundation, so that his interpretation became one of the important references in the study of the Qur′an based on the authenticity of the source.

In his Tafsîr Al-Qur′ân Al-′Azhîm, Ibn Kathir clearly emphasizes the hierarchy of interpretation: first the Qur′an with the Qur′an, the second the Qur′an with the Sunnah, the third the Qur′an with the explanation of the companions, and the fourth explanation of tabi′in. An example of a strong application of tafsir bi al-ma′tsûr is seen in his interpretation of QS. Al-Ahzab verse 35, where he quotes saheeh hadiths from various narration lines to explain the characteristics of the believers mentioned in the verse. The entire explanation is based on the narration of the Prophet (peace be upon him), the companions, and the tabi′in, without relying on speculative reasoning.

However, Ibn Kathir also applies tafsir bi al-ra′yi when dealing with verses that require linguistic elaboration. In his interpretation of QS. Al-Fâtihah verse 7, he begins with an analysis of nahwu to explain the position of the phrase shirâth al-ladzîna an′amta ′alayhim, whether as badal or ′athaf bayân, before reinforcing it with another verse of the Qur′an. This is the tafsir bi al-ra′yi because it prioritizes rational explanation before presenting evidence from the Qur′an. Likewise in his interpretation of QS. In An-Naba verse 10, Ibn Kathir uses Arabic verses to strengthen the understanding of the word libâs, in addition to quoting a narration from Qatadah.

From the study of this book, it is clear that Ibn Kathir was indeed more selective than al-Ṭhabari in terms of narration. The peculiarity of its methodology lies in the combination of fidelity to historical tradition and sharpness in linguistic analysis and creed considerations. He did not just repeat history, but integrated history and critical reasoning to maintain consistency, rationality, and relevance of interpretation throughout the ages. Thus, Ibn Kathir actually practiced a model of tafsir that integrates bi al-ma′tsûr with bi al-ra′yi methodically and responsibly (Maliki, 2018).

Application of Rules in Al-Tafsîr al-Munîr (Wahbah al-Zuhaili)

Al-Tafsîr al-Munîr fî al-′Aqîdah wa al-Syarî′ah wa al-Manhaj by Wahbah al-Zuhaili (d. 2015 AD) is one of the most comprehensive contemporary commentaries that combines tafsir bi al-ma′tsûr and tafsir bi al-ijtihâd. This book consists of 15 volumes and analyzes the verses of the Qur′an from various aspects: language, cause of descent, content of faith, and legal implications by paying attention to maqâshid al-syarî′ah in the determination of law (Al-Zuhaili, 2013). In his methodology, al-Zuhaili compares the sources of the history of ma′tsûr and ma′qûl, making this book a representation of the balance between the authority of tradition and the needs of modern ijtihad.

The application of tafsir bi al-ma′tsûr is clearly seen in his interpretation of QS. Al-Baqarah verse 221 is about the prohibition of marrying polytheistic women. Al-Zuhaili relates the meaning of this verse with other verses of the Qur′an (Al-Baqarah: 105 and Al-Bayyinah: 1) to explain the context and meaning of the word polytheist. He also presents a history and explanation of the reasons for the shari′a prohibition based on the principle that polytheists

invite to hell while Allah invites them to heaven through His book. This interpretation is entirely derived from the narration of the Qurʹan and the hadith of the Prophet PBUH.

The significant application of tafsir bi al-raʹyi can be seen in his interpretation of QS. An-Nisâʹ verses 33-35. Here al-Zuhaili is very detailed in the analysis of iʹrab, balâghah, and mufradât lugawiyyah. For example, he explains the word qawwâmûn as shîghah mubâlaghah which means emphasis, and describes the various possibilities of the iʹrab of the word mimmâ taraka. This is linguistic reasoning (raʹyi lugawi) that precedes the explanation of the substance of the law. Al-Zuhaili also performs qiyâs in a contemporary context, such as analogizing the prohibition of riba to various forms of modern transactions that have the same ʹillat (Zuhaili, 2013).

In the context of contemporary methodology, al-Zuhaili shows an integrative model of interpretation. He makes history an authoritative foundation, but in practice he makes a lot of use of raʹyi elements such as linguistic analysis, social contextualization, and legal approaches. Al-Zuhaili acknowledges that the development of the times demands a broader elaboration of the tafsir raʹyi, but he still insists that the tafsir bi al-maʹtsûr is the main reference that should not be ignored. With this approach, Al-Tafsîr al-Munîr represents a balance between a commitment to history and an openness to contemporary contexts.

Comparative Analysis: An Epistemological Paradigm Shift

From the study of the three books of tafseer, it appears that none of them purely applies tafsir bi al-maʹtsûr or purely bi al-ijtihâd. All three exhibit an integrative character that combines both approaches, albeit with different emphasises. Al-Ṭhabari emphasizes the method of al-ikhtiyâr, which is to choose the strongest narration and strengthen it with classical Arabic analysis. Ibn Kathir was stricter in the selection of history, rejecting isrâʹîliyyât, and using qawâʹid lugawiyyah as a complement. While al-Zuhaili developed the most integrative model, combining history, cross-sectarian fiqh analysis, and maqâshidî considerations.

The epistemological paradigm shift that occurred can be examined in three dimensions. First, in terms of historical legitimacy: the classical tradition places sanad as the main benchmark, while the contemporary tradition places more emphasis on historical and contextual validation. Second, in terms of the role of ijtihad: in classical interpretation, ijtihad is treated as an alternative when history does not exist, while in contemporary interpretation ijtihad becomes an adaptive instrument that allows the Qurʹan to speak in various modern social contexts. Third, in terms of social relevance: classical interpretations emphasize normative stability, while contemporary interpretations focus on responses to modern social and legal needs (Saeed, 2006; Rahman, 1919).

In the discourse of modern tafsir methodology, Wahbah al-Zuhaili refers to tafsir bi al-maʹtsûr as qâidah asâsiyyah (basic rules), but it is not the only one. Muhammad Husain al-Dzahabi also mentioned tafsir bi al-maʹtsûr as an important pillar in tafsir, but acknowledged the role of tafsir bi al-raʹyi in answering new challenges (Adz-Dzahabi, 2000). Critical analysis shows that the relationship between the two approaches is not dichotomous, but complementary in an effort to comprehensively understand the message of the Qurʹan.

It should also be noted that the rules of bi al-maʹtsûr muqaddam essentially have a dual function. First, as an epistemological fence that prevents speculative interpretation and protects the authenticity of the meaning of revelation. Second, as a methodological starting point that ensures that interpretation remains connected to the authentic Islamic scientific tradition. In the contemporary context, these two functions are increasingly urgent given the development of various hermeneutical approaches that have the potential to shake the authority of the text of revelation if not controlled by the framework of bi al-maʹtsûr (Al-Syathibi, 1997; Ibn Taymiyah, 1988).

New Findings: Formulation of Integrative Rules

Based on the study of the three books of tafsir, a new rule can be formulated that has never been explicitly formulated by classical scholars, but in practice has been applied by a number of mufasir, especially al-Ṭhabari. The rules are: Yajûzu taqdîmu al-tafsîr bi al-ijtihâd ʹalâ al-maʹtsûr mâ lam yukhâlifhu, wa law wujida al-maʹtsûr (it is permissible to take precedence over tafsir with al-ijtihâd over tafsir al-maʹtsûr as long as it does not contradict it, even if there is a narration that interprets it).

This rule develops the classic principle of al-tafsîr bi al-maʹtsûr muqaddam ʹala al-tafsîr bi al-ijtihâd by emphasizing that ijtihad can be prioritized as long as it does not contradict the saheeh history even though there are other narrations that interpret it. Ijtihad is seen as able to present contextual meaning, answer contemporary problems, and maintain the relevance of the Qurʹan. This practice is in line with the method of al-ikhtiyâr al-Ṭhabari and Ibn Kathirʹs prudence in filtering isrâʹîliyyât and using qawâʹid lugawiyyah (Ilyas, 2004; Maliki, 2018).

The methodological implications of these findings can be formulated in three main points. First, the rule of al-tafsîr bi al-maʹtsûr muqaddam functions as an epistemological principle that gives priority to history, not as an absolute rule that denies reason. Second, this rule demands a balance between narration and raʹyi, where raʹyi serves as a consummation in explaining the linguistic aspects, maqâshid, and context. Third, its relevance for contemporary interpretive studies lies in its role as a methodological filter that is able to integrate tradition with the needs of the times. With such a framework, the study of interpretation can continue to develop dynamically, but it is maintained within a valid methodological corridor.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the rule of ʺpriority of tafsir bi al-maʹtsûr over tafsir bi al-ijtihâdʺ is not absolute or mandatory to be applied in all verses when interpreting, but only as an encouragement as a form of prudence to avoid deviations in interpretation and to better maintain the authenticity of the meaning of the verses of the Qurʹan. This rule remains a very important place in the tradition of interpretation of the Qurʹan, both in the treasures of classical interpretation and in contemporary contexts.

Based on a study of three books of tafsir—Jâmiʹ al-Bayân al-Ṭhabari, Tafsîr Al-Qurʹân Al-ʹAzhîm Ibn Kathir, and Al-Tafsîr al-Munîr Wahbah al-Zuhaili—it can be concluded that the three tafseers are not pure in their entirety maʹtsûr and not pure in their entirety in ijtihad or raʹyi. These three books show an integrative character that blends both approaches, albeit

with different emphasis and gradations. The main finding of the study is that the relationship between the tafsir bi al-maʹtsûr and bi al-ijtihâd is not a mutually negating relationship, but rather complementary dialectical and integrative.

In addition, this study succeeded in formulating a new rule that had not previously been explicitly formulated by classical scholars: "It is permissible to take precedence over the tafsir of al-maʹtsûr as long as it does not contradict it, even if there is a history that interprets it." This rule affirms the role of ijtihad in tafsir without denying the authority of history as the main foundation. Methodologically, the best order of interpretation is: first, the interpretation of verses with saheeh verses or narrations that are strengthened by ijtihad; second, the interpretation of verses with ijtihad which is strengthened by verses or narrations; third, the interpretation of verses with saheeh verses or narrations; fourth, the interpretation of the verse with ijtihad al-raʹyi al-mahmûd; and fifth, interpretation that is contrary to the evidence of saheeh, maqâshid al-syarîʹah, or the rules of tafsir, which are forbidden interpretations.

The relevance of this research for the development of contemporary interpretation studies lies in its affirmation that the classical principle of al-maʹtsûr muqaddam needs to be integrated with modern methodologies, so that tafsir can be more relevant, applicative, and contributory in responding to evolving humanitarian and social problems. For academics, this research opens up space for further studies involving more books of interpretation from various shades, both philosophical, sufistic, and thematic, so that the mapping of the application of this rule becomes more comprehensive.

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