

The Mechanics of Interpretation: A Qualitative Analysis of Methodological Factors Leading to Divergence in Quranic Exegesis

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Abstract

This study investigates the intellectual and methodological determinants contributing to divergent interpretations (Ikhtilāf) of the Holy Qur'an among scholars (Mufasssīrīn). Although the Qur'anic text is the definitive source of Divine guidance, its human reception is subject to linguistic shifts, contextual frameworks, and sectarian paradigms. By systematically analyzing core causative factors – including the fragmentation of contextual flow (Siyāq-o-Sabaq), the imposition of dogmatic biases, and the uncritical integration of Isrā'īliyyāt – this research elucidates the mechanics of interpretive variance. Utilizing a qualitative-analytical approach and thematic case studies, such as the concept of Darajah in Surah Al-Baqarah, the study demonstrates how methodological rigor can mitigate error. The findings offer a strategic roadmap for harmonizing exegesis, advocating for a return to foundational hermeneutical principles and authentic linguistic standards. Ultimately, the research emphasizes that prioritizing context and scholarly neutrality is essential to preserving the objective clarity of the Quranic message for contemporary audiences.

Keywords: Tafsir Methodology, Usul al-Tafsir, Siyāq-o-Sabaq, Hermeneutics, Sectarian Bias, Isrā'īliyyāt, Quranic Exegesis, Linguistic Analysis.

Introduction

The Qur'an, as the foundational epiphany of Islamic epistemology, challenges human intellect with its unique linguistic structure and multi-layered semantic depth. While the ontological status of the divine speech is absolute, human engagement with the text – formalized through the science of *Tafsir* (exegesis) – is inherently pluralistic. The historical evolution of *Uṣūl al-Tafsīr* (Principles of Exegesis) shows that intellectual differences (*Ikhtilāf*) among commentators are not always random or destructive; rather, they often stem from structured methodologies of human reason. As explored in contemporary hermeneutical literature, these variations can be seen as "traditions of reason" where different interpretive schools use distinct logical tools to interact with the text.

However, the line between valid methodological pluralism (*Ikhtilāf al-Tanawwu'*) and harmful distortion (*Ikhtilāf al-Taḍādd*) depends on strict compliance with linguistic, historical, and rational boundaries. Classical scholar **Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328)** noted in his *Muqaddimah fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr* that early interpretive differences among the Companions were primarily differences of variety and diverse expression rather than absolute contradiction. Yet, as the Islamic world expanded and met external philosophical systems, the nature of *Tafsīr* underwent a major paradigm shift (**Dozan, 2020**).

The divergence in modern and classical commentaries generally arises from specific human and methodological factors. **Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī (d. 1505)** in his foundational manual *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* established rigid criteria for any individual attempting exegesis, warning that neglecting Arabic philology or theological discipline leads to interpretive failure. In the modern era, **Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī (2003)** systematically mapped these shifts, showing how the tension between purely narrative reports (*Tafsīr bi-al-Ma'thur*) and rational or sectarian analysis (*Tafsīr bi-al-Ra'y*) created deep ideological divisions across history.

In contemporary discourse, this tension has taken a new form: the text-context dilemma (**Rozani et al., 2025**). Modern scholars and advocacy groups often invoke the universal objectives of the text (*Maqāṣid al-Quran*) to navigate modern global realities. While classical masters like **Imam al-Shatibi (d. 1388)** in *Al-Muwāfaqāt* used macro-purposes to support the text, contemporary contextual shifts sometimes risk overgeneralizing *Maqāṣid* to set aside explicit divine commands (*Qaṭ'ī*), introducing total subjectivity into the discipline.

To maintain the text's integrity while keeping its applications relevant today, modern exegetes like **Amin Ahsan Islahi (1989)** in *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* and **Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi (2004)** in *Tafhim-ul-Qur'an* turned to structural context (*Siyāq-o-Sabaq*) and thematic unity as vital safeguards against both literal stagnation and subjective distortion. This study builds upon this rich intellectual history by analyzing the Seven Core Causes of

Interpretative Differences, tracing how these systemic areas shape both historical and modern scholarship.

Literature Review

Classical and contemporary scholars have long debated the boundaries of *Tafsir*. The literature identifies two primary categories of interpretation:

Tafsir bi-al-Ma'thur: Interpretation based on the Qur'an itself, Hadith, and the views of the Companions. However, contemporary analysis shows that even within this traditional framework, a *mufasssir's* subjectivity and rationality are actively engaged when selecting, ordering, or prioritizing specific narrations (*riwayah*).

Tafsir bi-al-Ra'y: Interpretation based on rational inquiry. While this approach is vital for keeping the text applicable across different eras, it risks devolving into "*Chashm Poshi*" (ignoring context) or dogmatic manipulation when it is disconnected from fundamental hermeneutical criteria.¹

Recent scholarship by Dhulkifli (2023), drawing on Sherman Jackson's concept of "**traditions of reason**" (inspired by Al-Ghazali's *Faisal al-Tafriqah*), bridges the artificial divide between these two modes. This framework suggests that traditionalism itself is an application of reason, and rationalism remains dependent on tradition.²

Building upon this synthesis, modern academic discourse has increasingly turned toward **Maqāṣid al-Quran** (the higher objectives of the Quran) as a comprehensive interpretative paradigm.³ As explored by Rozani et al. (2025), *Maqāṣid al-Quran* has now emerged as a distinct, evolving field that transcends the purely legalistic confines of *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*.⁴ While *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* focuses primarily on normative and juristic deduction, *Maqāṣid al-Quran* encompasses the global worldview of the entire Islamic discourse—including creed, stories, and moral reforms—thereby seeking a balanced reconciliation between textual fidelity and contemporary socio-political realities.⁵

Existing scholarship, including the works of Imam Ibn Taymiyyah and Imam Al-Razi, emphasizes that while linguistic flexibility is a feature of the Qur'an, the misuse of "*Muhkam*" (clear) and "*Mutashabih*" (ambiguous) verses often stems from sectarian (*Maslaki*) leanings rather than objective analysis.⁶

Research Design and Methodology

This study utilizes a Qualitative-Analytical framework grounded in the principles of *Usul al-Tafsir* (Foundations of Exegesis). The methodology is structured as follows:

Documentary Analysis: The research primarily utilizes a "Library Research" model, synthesizing classical and contemporary scholarly works to identify recurring exegetical challenges. This includes evaluating the dialectical shifts in *Tafsir* development—moving from the early quasi-critical reliance on narration to the ideological and reformative reasoning periods.⁷

Thematic Case Studies: To move from theory to application, the study employs a Contextual Analysis of specific verses such as Surah Al-Baqarah: 228 (the concept of *Darajah*).⁸ This demonstrates how isolating a text from its preceding or succeeding verses (*Siyāq-o-Sabaq*) can fundamentally alter legal and social rulings.⁹

Comparative Theological Inquiry: A Comparative Method is applied to the divergent interpretations of the Mu'tazilah and Ahl al-Sunnah schools regarding "Free Will" vs "Predestination," as well as eschatological debates such as the visual perception of the Divine (*Ru'yat Allah*) in Surah Al-Qiyamah: 22-23. This highlights how sectarian paradigms act as an ideological lens that tints the objective meaning of the text.¹⁰

Research Questions

What are the primary linguistic and contextual factors that lead to differing interpretations among Mufasssirin?

How do sectarian biases and the use of unauthentic historical narrations (*Isra'iliyyat*) distort the original meaning of the text?

What methodological criteria can be established to minimize conflicting interpretations?

Research Objectives

To identify and categorize the intellectual causes of differences in Tafsir.

To analyze the impact of ignoring "*Siyāq-o-Sabaq*" (contextual flow) through specific Quranic examples.

To evaluate the role of linguistic ambiguity (literal vs. technical meanings) in scholarly disagreement.

To propose a synthesis of solutions for modern Qur'anic study.

The Seven Core Causes of Interpretative Differences

1. Neglect of Context (*Siyāq-o-Sabaq*)

A foundational cause of interpretative divergence is the structural isolation of a verse from its immediate textual environment (*Siyāq*) and its overarching thematic placement within the Surah.¹¹ Classical hermeneutics (*Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*) dictates that the Qur'an explains itself, meaning a verse's true legislative or moral boundary cannot be fully decoded in isolation.¹²

Case Study (The Concept of *Darajah*): In Surah Al-Baqarah (2:228), the text states, "*And for the women is rights similar to those against them according to what is reasonable, but the men have a degree (Darajah) over them.*" Atomistic readings frequently isolate the word *Darajah* to argue for an absolute, ontological, and universal superiority of men across all socio-economic and spiritual domains.¹³

The Maqasidic Correction: When evaluated through the lens of *Al-Tafsir al-Mawdū'ī* (thematic exegesis), which is structurally designed to

uncover the universal objectives (*Maqāṣid*) of the text, a completely different conclusion emerges.¹⁴ The immediate context deals strictly with the rights of *Raj'oh* (the revocation of divorce) during the waiting period (*'Iddah*). The *Darajah* refers specifically to the husband's administrative prerogative to initiate reconciliation within that period, balanced by heavy ethical responsibilities.¹⁵ Neglecting this context distorts a highly localized marital regulation into a blanket tool for systemic gender inequality.¹⁶

2. Sectarian Bias (*Maslaki Janibdari*)

Interpretative divergence frequently worsens when an exegete approaches the text with a pre-established theological, legal, or political dogma. In these instances, the *mufassir* shifts from *exegesis* (extracting meaning from the text) to *eisegesis* (imposing meaning onto the text), treating the clear (*Muḥkam*) verses as ambiguous (*Mutashābih*) if they challenge their school's worldview.¹⁷

Theological Dialectics (Al-Zamakhsharī vs. Al-Rāzī): This ideological reasoning is clearly visible in the historical debate over Surah Al-Qiyamah (75): 22-23, which describes the righteous in the afterlife as "*Faces that day will be radiant, looking towards their Lord*" (*ilā rabbihā nāzīrah*).

The Mu'tazilī master Al-Zamakhshari (*Al-Kashshāf*), bound by his school's strict rationalist paradigm of *al-tanzīh* (the absolute transcendence of God beyond physical attributes), argues that a physical viewing of God is rationally impossible. He uses intricate Arabic grammatical re-routing to claim that *nāzīrah* does not mean physical looking, but rather "waiting in hope for divine rewards".

Conversely, the Ash'arī theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (*Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*) counter-attacks using literal linguistic frameworks to validate the Sunni orthodox stance that believers will indeed see God in a manner befitting His majesty. Both scholars transform objective linguistic inquiry into a polemical tool to defend their respective sectarian "truth-claims".¹⁸

3. Confusion of Linguistic (*Lughwī*) vs. Technical (*Iṣṭilāhī*) Meanings

The semantic evolution of the Arabic language presents a complex challenge. Divergences surface when an interpreter mistakenly substitutes a word's broad, classical literal meaning (*Lughwī*) for its specialized, institutionalized Sharia meaning (*Iṣṭilāhī*), or vice versa.¹⁹

The Semantic Range of *Zikr*: The term *Zikr* possesses multiple layers of meaning across the Qur'anic corpus. Literally, it denotes the act of remembrance, mention, or psychological mindfulness. Technically, however, it is explicitly deployed by the text to signify the Qur'an itself ("*Indeed, it is we who sent down the Zikr...*" - 14:9), previous divine revelations (the Torah and Gospel), or formal communal prayers. When an interpreter applies a generalized literal meaning to a verse that demands a technical, legal, or cosmic definition, the legal boundaries (*Ahkām*) derived from that verse

become deeply flawed.²⁰

4. Synonym Ambiguity and Semantic Nuance

A widespread misconception in superficial readings is that different words in the Qur'an that share a general translation are absolute synonyms. Classical language masters, such as Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, established that true synonymy does not exist in the Qur'an; every micro-variation in vocabulary carries distinct theological and legal weight.

Conceptual Examples: For example, the words *Al-Inṣāf* (mathematical or literal splitting of shares) and *Al-'Adl* (the cosmic, moral, and divine principle of absolute justice) are often translated interchangeably. Similarly, *Khawf* (instinctive, psychological fear) and *Khashyah* (reverence grounded in intellectual awe and knowledge) represent entirely different internal states. Misinterpreting these subtle distinctions leads to an analytical flatlining of the text, muddying the precise legal or moral message intended by the Author.

5. Uncritical Reliance on *Isrā'iliyyāt*

The integration of unverified Judeo-Christian, Biblical, and extra-biblical folkloric narrations (*Isrā'iliyyāt*) into early Islamic commentaries remains a primary source of narrative confusion. While early *mufassirūn* (such as Al-Ṭabarī) recorded these accounts primarily to fill in historical gaps, genealogies, or dramatic details left intentionally brief by the Qur'an, later generations mistook these records for definitive truths.²¹

The Hermeneutical Cost: The Qur'an routinely omits precise dates, geographical names, and secondary details (such as the exact number of the Companions of the Cave or the structural layout of Noah's Ark) to focus the reader entirely on the moral, spiritual, and ethical weight of the narrative. Introducing elaborate, unverified external myths distracts from this purpose, turning a text meant for spiritual and social reform into a canvas for historical speculation.²²

6. Symbolic and Esoteric (*Bāṭin*) Overreach

While classical mainstream scholarship acknowledges that the Qur'an possesses deep spiritual layers, a major cause of deviation is *Bāṭin* overreach—where the apparent, literal meaning (*Zāhir*) is completely cast aside in favor of speculative, hidden realities.²³

The Balance of Esoteric Exegesis: Classical Sufi commentators like Al-Qushayrī (*Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*) and Sahl al-Tustarī defended the validity of inner layers by citing Abdullah ibn Mas'ūd's famous dictum that every verse has an outer dimension (*zahr*) and an inner dimension (*baṭn*).²⁴

The Boundary of Deviancy: However, as contemporary critics warn, this approach easily slides into radical *eisegesis* when it lacks strict linguistic justification. When esoteric *Tafsir* detaches itself from the Arabic language to impose external philosophical or mystical frameworks—such as Neo-Platonic

emanationism or extreme pantheism—it violates objective interpretive boundaries. It strips the text of its legislative reality, converting the divine law into an entirely subjective playground for the interpreter's mystical imagination.

7. Methodological Divergence in Reasoning (The Text-Context Dilemma)

This cause represents the most volatile debate in modern Islamic thought: the methodological clash between traditional literalism (*riwayah*) and radical contextualism (*ra'y* or unchecked *maqāṣid*).

The Binary Trap: Over-reliance on *riwayah* (the mechanical copying of historical reports) risks freezing Islamic thought into a static framework that cannot handle evolving global and technological realities. Conversely, an absolute monopoly of unchecked *ra'y*—seen in extreme scientific *Tafsir* (like Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī's attempts to map modern medical jargon directly onto the text)—violates the linguistic nature of the scripture.²⁵

The Contemporary Crisis of Maqāṣid Overreach:

this divergence has reached a critical peak in modern social discourses. Advocacy groups such as the Joint Action Group (JAG) and Sisters in Islam (SIS) utilize a generalized framework of *Maqāṣid al-Quran* to argue that definitive, clear textual injunctions (*Qaṭ'ī*) regarding mandatory Hijab (Surah An-Nūr: 31) or the allowance of polygamy should be set aside. They claim these explicit commands conflict with macro-objectives like 'justice', 'fairness', and 'gender equality'.²⁶

The Epistemological Error: This approach commits a major methodological error by prioritizing humanly defined, shifting contextual ideals over explicit divine commands. By overgeneralizing *Maqāṣid* without a disciplined, standardized hierarchy, it introduces total subjectivity into the discipline. It demonstrates how contemporary contextualism, when detached from traditional linguistic rules, fragments the unity of the text and turns *Tafsir* into an echo chamber for modern political ideologies.²⁷

Key Findings: Primary Drivers of Divergence

The research identifies six critical factors that contribute to interpretive differences:

Contextual Fragmentation: Interpreting verses as isolated units rather than parts of a cohesive narrative thread (*Siyāq*).

Dogmatic Preconception: Approaching the text with the intent to "prove" a sectarian position rather than "discover" the Divine intent.

Semantic Shifting: The failure to distinguish between the **Linguistic** (*Lughwi*) meaning of a word at the time of revelation and its later **Technical/Legal** (*Istalahi*) definition.

Nuance Neglect: Treating near-synonyms as identical, thereby losing the specific theological precision intended by the Choice of Words.

External Contamination: The uncritical integration of *Isra'iliyyat*

The Mechanics of Interpretation: A Qualitative Analysis of Methodological Factors Leading to Divergence in Quranic Exegesis

(unverified historical traditions), which often clouds the Quranic message with external mythology.

Esoteric Overreach: Prioritizing hidden (*Batin*) meanings to the point of delegitimizing the clear, apparent (*Zahir*) linguistic message.

Recommendations for Harmonious Interpretation

To ensure a balanced and authentic engagement with the text, the following standards are recommended:

Holistic Synthesis: Every verse must be read through the lens of the "Total Message," ensuring that the *Sabab al-Nuzul* (Reason for Revelation) and the surrounding verses are fully integrated.

Philological Rigor: Commentators must possess a deep mastery of Classical Arabic to avoid projecting modern linguistic shifts onto the ancient text.

Intellectual Neutrality: Scholars should strive for "Exegetical Humility," prioritizing the *Muhkamat* (clear, foundational verses) over personal or political leanings.

Strict Narratorial Filtering: A rigorous vetting process must be applied to secondary sources, rejecting any narrations that contradict the core ethics or established logic of the Qur'an.

Conclusion

The diversity of interpretation within *Tafsir* is rarely a reflection of ambiguity in the Divine Word itself; rather, it is a testament to the complexities of human language, historical context, and the cognitive biases of the reader. This study has demonstrated that while "difference of opinion" (*Ikhtilaf*) can be a source of intellectual richness, it becomes a barrier to clarity when it stems from contextual oversight or sectarian rigidity.

As emphasized by both the "traditions of reason" framework and modern Maqasidic research, tradition and reason, text and purpose, must be viewed as complementary forces rather than binary opposites. Over-emphasizing tradition traps exegesis in historical stagnation, while over-emphasizing unchecked *ra'y* or generalized macro-objectives exposes the text to human manipulation and ideological biases that distort the divine intent.

To preserve the scholarly rigor and continuity of Quranic exegesis, contemporary Islamic scholarship must develop a unified, structured methodological framework. Such a framework must integrate classical philological and historical analyses with modern problem-solving strategies, potentially utilizing digital tools and data-driven analysis to minimize individual subjectivity. By re-centering the *Siyāq* (context) within the boundaries of the *Muhkamat* (explicit texts), *Tafsir* can successfully remain both textually authentic and contextually relevant, serving as dynamic guidance for contemporary global realities.



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