

The application of the principle al-‘Ibrah bi ‘Umūm al-Lafz in al-Qurṭubī’s Tafsīr: An analysis of legal verses

Yoga Perdana Kusuma*, Abdul Munzir, Hidayatullah Ismail

Postgraduate Program, Sultan Syarif Kasim State Islamic University Riau, Jl. HR. Soebrantas No. Km. 15, Simpang Baru, Tampan, Kota Pekanbaru, Riau 28293, Indonesia
e-mail: perdanayogakusuma@gmail.com

Received 28 October 2025
Revised 15 December 2025
Accepted 17 December 2025

ABSTRACT

The Qur’an, as a guide for all humankind in various aspects of life and as a text with profound breadth of meaning, demands great caution in its interpretation. For this reason, Qur’anic exegesis (tafsir) has developed as a distinct discipline that functions to bridge human understanding with the divine messages contained in the Qur’an itself. One of the important principles in the tradition of Qur’anic exegesis is “al-‘ibrah bi ‘umūm al-lafz lā bi khuṣūṣ al-sabab.” This principle holds a central position because it ensures that the meaning of Qur’anic verses is not restricted by their specific occasions of revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl) but remains universally applicable across space and time. One of the exegetes widely known for the strength of his interpretations of Islamic law is al-Qurṭubī, through his tafsir work al-Jāmi‘ li Aḥkām al-Qur’ān. However, the extent to which al-Qurṭubī consistently applies this principle has been rarely examined. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the application of the principle al-‘ibrah bi ‘umūm al-lafz lā bi khuṣūṣ al-sabab in al-Qurṭubī’s tafsir, particularly in relation to legal verses. This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a library research approach. The primary data source is the classical tafsir al-Jāmi‘ li Aḥkām al-Qur’ān by al-Qurṭubī, while the secondary data consist of supporting literature such as other tafsir works, books on ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān, uṣūl al-fiqh, asbāb al-nuzūl, and studies on tafsir methodology. The findings of this study indicate that al-Qurṭubī is consistent in implementing this principle, in that he does not treat the specificity of the occasion of revelation as a limitation of the legal ruling. In contrast, he takes the generality of the wording of the verse as the main basis for establishing shar‘ī rulings, so that the resulting laws are universal and transcend their historical context, as seen in the cases of polygamy, the penal code for theft, and ḡihār.

Keywords: *al-Ibrah bi ‘Umūm al-Lafz*; al-Qurṭubī’s Tafsir; Legal Verses; Consistency.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an is the holy book of Muslims and serves as a guide for all humankind, encompassing various aspects of life, such as creed, worship, ethics, and law (Septiana et al., 2023). As a revealed text written in Arabic, the Qur'an possesses a richness of meaning, breadth of expression, and depth of linguistic structure that demands great caution in its interpretation (Musthofa, 2025). Therefore, Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) has developed as a scholarly discipline that bridges human understanding with the divine messages contained in the Qur'an (Salsabila, 2025). Exegetes have formulated various approaches and interpretive principles to ensure that the meanings of the verses are understood correctly, systematically, and in ways that remain relevant to the context of the Muslim community (Nurhidayati et al., 2025).

One of the important principles in the corpus of Qur'anic exegesis is that mentioned by Shaykh Mannā' Khalīl al-Qaththān in his work *Mabāḥith fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*:

(Al-Qaththan, 2005:78). الْعِبْرَةُ بِعُمُومِ اللَّفْظِ لَا بِخُصُوصِ السَّبَبِ.

The derivation or establishment of a legal ruling is based on the generality of the wording of the Qur'anic verse, not on the specificity of the occasion of its revelation (Elrahma, 2023). This principle holds a central position because it ensures that the meanings of Qur'anic verses are not confined by their *asbab al-nuzul* but remain universally applicable across time and space. Thus, legal verses revealed in specific contexts can be understood and applied to different social situations without losing their essence. This principle also serves as a methodological foundation for maintaining a balance between the textuality of revelation and the dynamic realities of human social life.

However, the application of this principle is not always uniform among exegetes. Some emphasize the generality of the wording as the basis for universal legal rulings, while others connect the meaning of the verse more strongly to the specific context of its revelation. This difference reflects the diversity of intellectual orientations within the classical tafsir tradition and simultaneously opens up a field of inquiry into how this principle is actually applied in a major tafsir work (al-Qaththan, 2005:103–105).

One of the exegetes renowned for the strength of his interpretations of Islamic law is al-Qurthubi, through his *Tafsir al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'ān*. This tafsir is recognized as a work with a *fiqhi* (legal) orientation, marked by deep attention to legal verses and accompanying *uṣūli* argumentation (Rohman et al., 2022). Within it, al-Qurthubi frequently employs principles of *uṣūl al-tafsir* such as *al-'ibrāh bi 'umūm al-lafẓ lā bi khusūṣ al-sabab* in interpreting verses that have specific *asbab al-nuzul*, such as the verse on polygamy in Q. al-Nisā' [4]:3, the verse on the penal code for theft in Q. al-Mā'idah [5]:38, and the verse on *zihār* in Q. al-Mujādalah [58]:2. This interpretive pattern indicates al-Qurthubi's tendency to affirm the universality of Qur'anic law over its historical context, as noted above.

However, the extent to which al-Qurthubi consistently applies this principle has not been examined. Much of the previous research has focused more on his *fiqhi* orientation and methods of legal reasoning (*istidlāl*), but has not yet highlighted the application of *'umūm al-lafẓ* as one of the methodological foundations of his legal exegesis. Such a study is crucial for understanding how the theories of *uṣūl al-fiqh* operate in the practice of classical tafsir and how relevant they are for the development of contemporary Islamic law, which demands a balance between the text and context.

Accordingly, this study focuses on the application of the principle *al-'ibrāh bi 'umūm al-lafẓ lā bi khusūṣ al-sabab* in al-Qurthubi's tafsir, particularly in legal verses. This inquiry is highly important because it can reveal how a classical exegete safeguards the universality of Qur'anic teachings through a solid textual-linguistic approach while simultaneously affirming the relevance of classical tafsir in addressing issues of Islamic law across different eras.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design. Qualitative research aims to understand a phenomenon in depth by studying texts and contexts (Haky et al., 2024). Descriptive research is used to depict and analyze data as they are, without manipulation, making it suitable for examining the

interpretation of Qur'anic verses in tafsir works (Adiningrat et al., 2025). This type of research is chosen because the object of study is a classical tafsir text (*al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'an*), which requires close reading of its argumentative structure, the use of interpretive principles, and the logic of legal derivation (*istinbāt al-ḥukm*) within the text.

This study uses a library research approach, in which the data are obtained from written sources such as books, journals, and other library publications relevant to the research topic, both primary and secondary (Waruwu, 2023). The data analysis method applied is content analysis, which is a systematic technique for interpreting texts by identifying particular patterns, themes, or tendencies (Sitasari, 2022). This analysis is adapted to the context of tafsir studies by emphasizing the following: analysis of the linguistic structure of the verses, analysis of the relationship between *asbāb al-nuzūl* and the wording of the verses, and analysis of the methodological tendencies of the exegete in applying the principle *al-ībrah bi 'umūm al-laḥẓ lā bi khusūṣ al-sabab*.

The primary data source of this study is the classical tafsir *al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'an* by al-Qurtubi. This work was selected because of its *fiqhi* orientation and its intensive use of *uṣūl al-fiqh* principles to understand legal verses. The secondary data sources consist of supporting literature such as other tafsir works, books on *'ulūm al-Qur'an*, *uṣūl al-fiqh*, *asbāb al-nuzūl*, and studies on tafsir methodology.

The data collection process was conducted in three steps: (a) identification of legal verses. The researcher first selects several legal verses that have clear *asbāb al-nuzūl* and are frequently used as *fiqhi* references, such as the verse on polygamy in Q. al-Nisā' [4]:3, the verse on the penal code for theft in Q. al-Mā'idah [5]:38, and the verse on *ẓihār* in Q. al-Mujādalah [58]:2. (b) Tracing al-Qurtubī's interpretation. Each verse is examined based on al-Qurtubī's explanation in his tafsir, focusing on the use of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the main focus of the interpretation, the analysis of wording and legal rulings, and the tendencies of *Fiqhi istidlāl*. (c) Classification and analysis of data. The researcher identifies whether al-Qurtubī places the generality of the wording as the primary basis of the ruling or considers the specificity of the cause in his interpretation. The collected data were then analyzed using content analysis techniques in three stages: (1) Data reduction. Selecting and extracting key information from al-Qurtubī's tafsir related to legal verses and the principle *al-ībrah bi 'umūm al-laḥẓ lā bi khusūṣ al-sabab*. (2) Data presentation. The data were organized as narrative expositions, tables, or other structured descriptions to facilitate interpretation. (3) Drawing conclusions. Assessing al-Qurtubī's consistency in applying the principle and then deriving its methodological implications for legal exegesis and its relevance to the development of contemporary Islamic law.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Concept of the Principle *al-ībrah bi 'Umūm al-Laḥẓ Lā bi Khusūṣ al-Sabab*

Scholars differ in their views on whether a Qur'anic verse that has a specific occasion of revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*), but whose wording is more general than that *sabab al-nuzūl*, and which can stand on its own as an answer to a question (meaning that one may begin recitation The sounder view is that of the scholars who interpret the verse based on the generality of its wording and do not confine it solely to its *sabab al-nuzūl* (Al-Harbi, 1996:545). From that verse, because its meaning is already complete and yields a general benefit), is still to be recited from the beginning. Among them are those who restrict the legal ruling of the verse to its *sabab al-nuzūl* and do not extend it to other cases. Others, however, interpret it in accordance with the generality of its wording, so that it encompasses all cases included in that *sabab al-nuzūl* as well as other similar cases (Al-Harbi, 1996:545).

In fact, its ruling extends beyond that particular cause to all other matters that fall under the wording of the verse, so long as there is no evidence indicating a specification of that general wording and no contextual indicator (*qarīnah*) that restricts its meaning. If there is such an indicator, then adopting the general meaning becomes very clear, and there should be no disagreement regarding the use of that general meaning (Al-Zarkasyi, 1992:212–213).

One of the evidences for the principle *al-‘ibrah bi ‘umūm al-lafẓ lā bi khuṣūṣ al-sabab* is that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) himself established this principle and explained to the ummah that what is taken as the criterion is the generality of the wording, not the specificity of the cause (Al-Harbi, 1992:545), as reflected in the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him):

عن عبد الله بن مسعود رضي الله عنه أن رجلاً أصاب من امرأة قبله، فأتى النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم فأخبره، فأنزل الله: (وَأَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ طَرَفِي النَّهَارِ وَزُلْفَا مِنْ اللَّيْلِ إِنَّ الْحَسَنَاتِ يُذْهِبْنَ السَّيِّئَاتِ). فقال الرجل: يا رسول الله، ألي هذا؟ قال: "لجميع أمّتي كلهم".

From ‘Abdullāh ibn Mas‘ūd (may Allah be pleased with him), it is related that a man once kissed a woman, then he came to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and informed him of what he had done. Thereupon Allah, Exalted is He, revealed the verse: “*And establish prayer at the two ends of the day and at the approach of the night. Indeed, good deeds do away with misdeeds.*” The man then asked, “O Messenger of Allah, is this verse (meant) specifically for me?” He replied, “(No), it is for all of my ummah, all of them” (Al-Harbi, 1992:545).

3.2 The Application of the Principle *al-‘Ibrah bi ‘Umūm al-Lafẓ Lā bi Khuṣūṣ al-Sabab* in Legal Verses in al-Qurṭubī’s Tafsir

The application of the principle *al-‘ibrah bi ‘umūm al-lafẓ lā bi khuṣūṣ al-sabab* in al-Qurṭubī’s tafsir can be seen very clearly through the analysis of several legal verses that have specific *asbāb al-nuzūl*, yet are understood by al-Qurṭubī in a broader scope in accordance with the generality of their wording.

3.2.1 QS. al-Nisā’ [4]:3

وَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تَقْسُطُوا فِي الْيَتَامَىٰ فَانكِحُوا مَا طَابَ لَكُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ مَثْنَىٰ وَثُلَّةَ وَرَبْعَ ۚ فَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا فَوَاحِدَةً أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ ۚ ذَلِكَ أَدْنَىٰ أَلَّا تَعُولُوا

If you fear that you might fail to give orphan women their ‘due’ rights ‘if you were to marry them’, then marry other women of your choice—two, three, or four. However, if you are afraid of failing to maintain justice, then ‘content yourselves with’ one or more ‘bondwomen’ in your possession. This way, you are less likely to commit injustice (LPMQ, 2019:104).

Regarding the *asbāb al-nuzūl* of this verse, al-Wāḥidī in his *Asbāb al-Nuzūl al-Qur’ān* cites a narration from Hishām ibn ‘Urwah, from his father, from ‘Ā’ishah (may Allah be pleased with her) concerning the word of Allah, “If you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls (if you marry them) ...”. ‘Ā’ishah said, “This verse was revealed about a man who was the guardian of an orphan girl in his care. The orphan possessed wealth, and no one else shared it. Her guardian did not want to marry her off because he desired her wealth. He often wrongs her and treats her badly. Then Allah, Exalted is He, revealed: ‘If you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls (if you marry them), then marry (other) women that please you,’ meaning those whom I have made lawful for you, and leave this orphan girl” (Al-Wāḥidī, 1991:146).

Al-Qurṭubī does not treat the specificity of this cause as a limitation on the legal ruling of the verse. In his view, the wording of the verse, after mentioning “If you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls (if you marry them),” then shifts into a general expression, namely, “then marry (other) women that please you” (Al-Qurṭubī, 2006:23).

The application of this principle becomes even clearer when al-Qurṭubī affirms that the rule concerning the maximum number of wives and the obligation to act justly is not relevant only to the case of orphan girls. If polygamy were restricted solely to the context of orphans, this verse would not yield the general principle that the maximum limit for polygamy is four spouses. However, according to al-

Qurṭubī, most scholars agree that this limit is a shar‘ī ruling valid for all times. Such a consensus is only possible if the wording of the verse is understood as general and not confined to its specific occasion of revelation (Al-Qurṭubī, 2006:30–35).

Elsewhere, al-Qurṭubī states that the command “(then marry) only one, or those your right hands possess” is a universal provision for all times. It is not to be understood as a warning addressed exclusively to the guardians of orphan girls, because the justice intended here is justice in dividing time and in good companionship with the wives, not merely justice toward orphans (Al-Qurṭubī, 2006:37–38).

3.2.2 QS. al-Ma’idah [5]: 38

وَالسَّارِقُ وَالسَّارِقَةُ فَاقْطَعُوا أَيْدِيَهُمَا جَزَاءً بِمَا كَسَبَا نَكَالًا مِّنَ اللَّهِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

As for male and female thieves, their hands are cut off for what they have done—a deterrent from Allah. Allah is Almighty and All-Wise (LPMQ, 2019:104).

With regard to the asbāb al-nuzūl of this verse, Imām al-Suyūṭī in his *Lubāb al-Nuqūl fī Asbāb al-Nuzūl* cites a report from Imām Aḥmad and others, from ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Amr, that there was a woman who committed theft in the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Her right hand was amputated. She said, “O Messenger of Allah, do I still have a chance to repent?” The Messenger of Allah replied, “Yes, today you are free from your sin just as on the day your mother gave birth to you.” Then Allah, Exalted is He, revealed Q. al-Mā’idah [5]:39 (al-Suyūṭī, 2022:102).

Al-Qurṭubī does not treat the specificity of this cause as a limitation on the legal ruling of the verse. In contrast, after presenting an introduction on the history of theft in the time of the Prophet and his Companions, he moves directly to a discussion of the law, such as the conditions of theft that warrant the amputation of the hand, the minimum value of stolen property (niṣāb), an extended explanation of theft of property kept in a secure place (ḥirz), collusion in theft, theft committed by someone whose hand has already been amputated, the types of property for which the ḥadd of amputation applies, parents who steal from the property of their children, theft of a Qur’anic manuscript (muṣḥaf), and even the disagreement among jurists as to whether the right hand or the left hand is to be cut first (Al-Qurṭubī, 2006: 450–472).

This demonstrates that al-Qurṭubī applies the principle of al-‘ibrah bi ‘umūm al-lafz lā bi khuṣūṣ al-sabab. If he had treated the sabab al-nuzūl as a restriction, then the ruling of hand amputation would apply only to the specific theft case that formed its background. In reality, however, al-Qurṭubī takes the wording of the verse as a source of meaning with a broader scope, so that all categories of thieves who meet the fiqh conditions fall under the general purport of this verse.

3.2.3 QS. al-Mujadalah [58]: 2

الَّذِينَ يُظَاهِرُونَ مِنكُم مِّن نِّسَابِهِمْ مَا هُنَّ أُمَّهَاتِهِمْ إِنْ أُمَّهَاتُهُمْ إِلَّا اللَّيُ وَلَدَنَّهُمْ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَيَقُولُونَ مُنْكَرًا مِّنَ الْقَوْلِ وَزُورًا وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَعَفُورٌ غَفُورٌ

Those who declare zihār to their wives (declaring them to be like their own mothers)—their wives are not their mothers. Their mothers are the ones who gave birth to them. Indeed, they have made objectionable and false statements. Yet truly, Allah is Ever-Pardoning, All-Forgiving (LPMQ, 2019:801).

This verse on zihār was revealed in connection with a specific case that befell Khaulah bint Tha‘labah, when her husband, Aws ibn Ṣāmit, uttered words of zihār to her (Az-Zuḥaylī, 2013:385). However, al-Qurṭubī does not confine the ruling of zihār to this historical context to this historical context. Instead, he expands the scope of its legal application based on the verse’s general wording.

One of the clearest indications of this appears in al-Qurṭubī’s discussion of the phrase nisā’ihim in this verse. In his tafsir, he emphasizes that zihār does not apply only to a free wife, but includes all women lawfully married to a man, including female slaves (Al-Qurṭubī, 2019,288). He asserts that female slaves

are also encompassed by the general expression *min nisā'ihim*. This stance shows that al-Qurṭubī does not confine the ruling of *zihār* to Khaulah, who was a free wife.

Likewise, in his discussion of the forms of *zihār*, al-Qurṭubī does not restrict *zihār* to the classical formula “You are to me like the back of my mother,” as was the case at the time of the revelation. He explains that *zihār* takes place whenever a husband likens his wife to the body of his mother or to any other woman who is a *maḥram* to him, and that this still falls under the category of *zihār* (Al-Qurṭubī, 2019:286–287). This explanation shows that al-Qurṭubī understands *zihār* as a form of comparison that simultaneously expresses veneration toward the *maḥram* and denigration of the marital bond, such that the ruling of *zihār* applies whenever that meaning is realized, regardless of the wording.

Thus, it becomes clear that al-Qurṭubī does not treat the *sabab al-nuzūl* as a boundary that narrows the scope of legal rulings. He positions it merely as information about the initial context, while the *shar'ī* ruling is determined based on the generality and breadth of Qur'anic wording.

4. CONCLUSION

In his *tafsir al-Jāmi' li Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, al-Qurṭubī consistently applies the principle *al-'ibrah bi 'umūm al-lafz lā bi khuṣūṣ al-sabab*. He treats the *asbāb al-nuzūl* merely as contextual background, whereas the determination of *shar'ī* rulings is grounded in the generality and expansiveness of Qur'anic expressions. This consistency is evident in his exegesis of legal verses such as the verse on polygamy in Q. al-Nisā' [4]:3, the verse on the punishment for theft in Q. al-Mā'idah [5]:38, and the verse on *zihār* in Q. al-Mujādalah [58]:2 (see below). He develops a universal legal scope that transcends the specific cases that occasioned the revelation of these verses. The application of this principle underscores al-Qurṭubī's firm methodological approach to safeguarding the universality of Qur'anic teachings.

Ethical Approval

Not Applicable

Informed Consent Statement

Not Applicable

Authors' Contributions

YPK contributed to the conceptualization of the study, theoretical framework, and supervision of the research process. He also coordinated the manuscript preparation and served as corresponding author. AM contributed to the methodology design, data analysis, and validation procedures, including reliability and construct validity testing. HI was responsible for data collection, literature review, and assisting in drafting and revising the manuscript.

Disclosure Statement

The Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author for privacy.

Funding

This study did not receive any external funding.

Notes on Contributors

Yoga Perdana Kusuma

Yoga Perdana Kusuma is affiliated with Postgraduate Program, Sultan Syarif Kasim State Islamic University Riau, Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia.

Abdul Munzir

Abdul Munzir is affiliated with Postgraduate Program, Sultan Syarif Kasim State Islamic University Riau, Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia.

Hidayatullah Ismail1

Hidayatullah Ismail is affiliated with Postgraduate Program, Sultan Syarif Kasim State Islamic University Riau, Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia.

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