

# THE REASONS FOR REVELATION ACCORDING TO THE PERSPECTIVE OF CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM SCHOLARS

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## ABSTRACT

*There are many scholars who have differing opinions in defining the reasons for revelation, including Az-Zarqani, Ash-Shabuni, Shubhi Shaleh, and Manna' Khalil Al-Qattan, among others. However, although the wording of these definitions varies slightly, they all conclude that Asbab an-Nuzul refers to the events or incidents that serve as the background for the revelation of Quranic verses, aimed at responding to, explaining, and resolving issues arising from those events. The reasons for revelation serve as a historical source that provides explanations for the revelation of Quranic verses and offers contextual understanding of its commandments. This article aims to explore the definition of the reasons for revelation from classical to contemporary muslim scholars, highlighting its significance and the importance of its study. It employs library research to examine various scholarly opinions on the reasons for revelation. This study is highly beneficial in understanding the context of revelation, applying Quranic verses to different cases and situations, and reducing the likelihood of misinterpretation, which increases when the historical background of the reasons for revelation is ignored. In conclusion, although scholars define the reasons for revelation in different ways, they all ultimately agree that it refers to the events or incidents that serve as the background for the revelation of Quranic verses.*

**Keywords:** *The reason for revelation, Classical and Contemporary Muslim Scholars.*

## INTRODUCTION

At the time the Quran was revealed, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) served as a *mubayyin* (clarifier), explaining to his companions the meaning and content of the Quranic verses, especially those that were unclear or difficult to understand. This continued until the Prophet's passing. However, it must be acknowledged that not all of his explanations have reached us, either because the reports about them were not transmitted or because the Prophet himself did not explain every aspect of the Quran.<sup>1</sup> *Asbāb al-nuzūl* serves as historical material that can be used as a reference to provide explanations for the Quranic verses. It clearly offers information about the context, making it easier to understand the commands of the Quran during the period of its revelation (*'asr at-tanzīl*).

But Quranic studies remain an ongoing discourse that continues to attract scholarly discussion among academics. Over time, these studies have undergone dynamic development in line with the evolution of social and cultural conditions, as well as human civilization. This is evident from the emergence of numerous scholarly works in the fields of *tafsir* and *ulūm al-Qur'ān*, ranging from classical to contemporary, utilizing various methods and approaches. One particularly interesting aspect is that these works are not only produced by Muslim scholars but also include critical and analytical studies conducted by Orientalist scholars who have devoted their intellectual passion to the study of the Quran.<sup>2</sup>

One of the discourses in *Ulūm al-Qur'ān* that frequently attracts academic attention is the study of *Asbāb an-Nuzūl*. This study emphasizes a historical investigation of the events that served as the background for the revelation of a verse. The study of *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* is considered essential for anyone seeking to understand the Quran comprehensively. Without adequate knowledge of the sequence of events surrounding the revelation of the Quran,

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<sup>1</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Membumikan Al-Qur'an*, Cet 1, (Bandung: PT. Mizan Pustaka, 1992), p.105

<sup>2</sup> Muin Umar, *Orientalisme dan Studi Tentang Islam*, (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1978), p.7-8

there is a risk of misinterpreting its meanings and values.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Abu al-Qasim al-Hasan ibn Habib al-Naisaburi, as cited by al-Suyuti, asserts that no one has the right to speak about the Quran without sufficient knowledge of the chronology of its revelation.<sup>4</sup>

This stems from a historical fact that the process of Quranic revelation was different from that of previous scriptures, which were revealed all at once. In contrast, the Quran was revealed gradually and periodically in response to the socio-cultural conditions of Arab society at that time. This emphasizes that the Quran is not socially detached.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, to understand the message of the Quran as a whole, it must be studied within the context of its historical background. Furthermore, adequate knowledge of *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* can serve as a fundamental tool for contextualizing the values and moral messages conveyed by the Quran.<sup>6</sup> This is because, as believed by Muslims, the Quran is a sacred scripture that contains universal values, making it relevant for all times and places.<sup>7</sup>

## RESEARCH METHOD

The qualitative research approach using the library research method is an effective way to explore and understand a topic in depth, especially when studying conceptual issues such as *Asbab an-Nuzul*. In this study, the qualitative approach allows researchers to analyze and explore the meanings, ideas, and interpretations contained in relevant literature without the need for field data collection. This research will focus on collecting secondary data, such as books, scholarly articles, journals, and other sources related to *asbabun an-Nuzul* from both classical and contemporary scholars' perspectives.

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<sup>3</sup> Rosihon Anwar, *Ulum Al-Qur'an*, (Bandung: Pustaka Setia, 2012), p.59

<sup>4</sup> Taufik Adnan Amal, *Rekonstruksi Sejarah Al-Qur'an*, (Ciputat: Alvabet, 2013), p.88.

<sup>5</sup> Atang badul Hakim dan Jaih Mubarak, *Metodologi Studi Islam*, (Bandung: Rosda Karya, 2010), p.73

<sup>6</sup> Rosihon Anwar, *Ulum Al-Qur'an*, p.59

<sup>7</sup> Abdul Mustaqim, *Epistemologi Tafsir Kontemporer*, (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2010), p.1

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 1. The Reasons for Revelation According to The Perspectives of Classical Scholars

Al-Wahidi said: "It is not permissible to express opinions about the reasons for revelation of the Book except based on narration or by directly hearing from those who witnessed its revelation, knew its causes, discussed its meaning, and diligently sought its understanding."<sup>8</sup> And al-Wahidi opposed the scholars of his time for their negligence regarding the narrations of the reasons for revelation. He even accused them of being liars and warned them of severe consequences, saying: "Nowadays, everyone likes to fabricate and lie, they place themselves in ignorance without considering the grave warning for those who do not know the reasons for the revelation of a verse."<sup>9</sup>

According to Al-Zarkashi, *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* refers to a cause that sometimes takes the form of a question or certain events related to the revelation of the Quran.<sup>10</sup> A similar opinion on the definition of *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* was also expressed by Subhi Ash-Shalih, who stated that *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* refers to matters closely related to other factors that caused the revelation of a verse or multiple verses. It may also refer to a question that prompted the revelation of a verse as a response or explanation at the time a specific event occurred.<sup>11</sup>

Manna Khalil Al-Qattan, in his book *Mabahith fi Ulum al-Qur'an*, provides indicators of *asbabun nuzul* (reasons for revelation). They are: First, an event occurs, followed by the revelation of a verse. And second, a companion asks the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) about a

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<sup>8</sup> Ahmad al-Wahidi an-Nisaburi, *Asbab an-Nuzul*, (al-Mamlakah al-Arabiyah al-Su'udiyah, Dar al-Islah, 1992), p.10

<sup>9</sup> Ahmad al-Wahidi an-Nisaburi, *Asbab an-Nuzul*, p.11

<sup>10</sup> Badr al-Din az-Zarkasyi, *Al-Burhan fii Ulum Al-Qur'an* juz.1 (Riyadh: Dar Ihya Al-Qutb, 1957), p.31

<sup>11</sup> Subhi Shalih, *Mabahits fii Ulum Al-Qur'an*, (Beirut: Dar al-Qalam li al-Maliyyin, 1988), p.132.

particular issue, and then a Quranic verse is revealed to explain its ruling.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Manna Al-Qattan also cites the opinion of As-Suyuti, who emphasizes that the event must occur within the same timeframe as the reason for the revelation. Therefore, verses related to the Prophet and his people in the past are not considered *asbabun nuzul* (reasons for revelation) as they do not belong to the same period as the revelation of the Quranic verses. However, Manna Al-Qattan does not elaborate further on this matter.<sup>13</sup>

According to Al-Zarqani, *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* must be reflected in the Quranic verses. The term "something" as defined by Al-Zarqani refers to events or occurrences surrounding the Prophet at the time a verse or multiple verses were revealed, either as a response to a question or as explanations related to a specific event.<sup>14</sup>

Imam Jalaluddin As-Suyuti, in his book *Al-Itqan fī Ulum al-Qur'an*, cites the opinions of several earlier scholars who discussed *asbabun nuzul*, namely Al-Ja'bari said: first, explains the wisdom related to the legislation of laws (*tasyri' hukum*). Second, specifies rulings for those who hold the view that consideration (*al-'ibrah*) is based on the specificity of the cause (*khusus as-sabab*). Third, if a revealed expression is general (*'am*) and there is evidence specifying it (*takhsis*), then the specification applies only to what is outside the described context, and it is not valid to exclude it. This is because including the cause within the general expression is *qath'i* (definitive), and it cannot be excluded through *ijtihad*, as *ijtihad* is *zanni* (speculative). This principle is affirmed by Abu Bakr in his book *At-Taqrīb*. And fourth, knowing the reason for the revelation of a verse is the best way to understand the meanings of the Quran. It helps uncover uncertainties related to certain verses and clarifies their interpretation, especially in cases where the cause of revelation is unknown.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, he was very cautious in providing a definition, stating that *Asbāb*

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<sup>12</sup> Manna Khalil al-Qathan, *Mabahis Fii Ulum Al-Qur'an*, (Kairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 1995), p.73

<sup>13</sup> Manna Khalil al-Qathan, *Mabahis Fii Ulum Al-Qur'an*, p.75

<sup>14</sup> Muhammad Al-Zarqani, *Manāhil Al-Irfān fī 'Ulūm Al-Qur'ān*. (Libanon: Dar Al-Kutub, 1995), p.89.

<sup>15</sup> Jalaluddin As-Suyuthi, *Al-Itqan fī Ulum Al-Qur'an* jil.1, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1951), p.29

*an-Nuzūl* refers to events that occurred on the days when the Quranic verses were revealed.<sup>16</sup>

According to Ali as-Shabuni, *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* (reasons for revelation) refers to events or incidents that led to the revelation of a verse or multiple verses, which are related to those events or incidents. This may include questions posed to the Prophet or occurrences related to religious matters.<sup>17</sup> Although the wording of the definition varies slightly, it can be concluded that *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* refers to events or incidents that serve as the background for the revelation of Quranic verses. These verses were revealed to respond to, explain, and resolve issues arising from those events. *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* serves as a historical source that provides explanations for the Quranic text and offers context for understanding its commandments. Naturally, these historical sources only pertain to events that occurred during the period when the Quran was still being revealed (*‘Asr at-Tanzīl*).<sup>18</sup>

According to Ibnu Taimiyah, adopted a critical stance toward numerous *asbāb an-nuzūl* reports on methodological grounds. He argued that many of these narrations suffer from weak or unreliable chains of transmission (*isnād*), and some even contradict one another. Furthermore, it is not uncommon to find multiple, differing causes attributed to the revelation of a single verse, whereas logically, there should be one primary and authentic occasion of revelation. Moreover, Ibn Taymiyyah emphasized that the interpretation of a Qur’anic verse should not be confined to the *particularity of the cause (khusūṣ as-sabab)*, but rather should be guided by the *generality of the wording (‘umūm al-lafz)*. In his view, the textual expression carries broader implications that transcend the immediate historical context in which the verse was revealed.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jalaluddin As-Suyuthi, *Al-Itqan fii Ulum Al-Qur’an* jil.1, p.31

<sup>17</sup> Muhammad Ali al-Shobuni, *al-Tibyan fi ‘Ulum al-Qur’an*, (Damaskus: Maktabah al-Ghazali, 1988), p.22

<sup>18</sup> Rosihon Anwar, *Ulum Al-Qur’an*, p.61

<sup>19</sup> Ibnu Taimiyah, *Muqaddimah fii Ulum al-Tafsir*, (Damaskus: University of Damaskus, 1972), p.48

The events that served as the background for the revelation of the Quran were highly diverse. These included: Social conflicts, such as the tensions between the *Aws* and *Khazraj* tribes. Major mistakes, such as when a companion led prayer while intoxicated. Questions posed by the Prophet's companions, whether related to past, present, or future events.<sup>20</sup> The question of whether every Quranic verse has an *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* has been a subject of controversy among scholars. Some, like Abu Syuhbah, argue that not all Quranic verses have an *Asbāb an-Nuzūl*.<sup>21</sup> Some were revealed without any specific background (*Ibtidā'*). Meanwhile, other verses were revealed in response to particular events (*Ghayr Ibtidā'*).<sup>22</sup>

## 2. The Reasons for Revelation According to The Perspectives of Contemporary Scholars

According to Quraish Shihab, citing Al-Zarqani, *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* refers to an event that causes the revelation of a verse or multiple verses or an incident that serves as a legal indication for the revelation of a verse.<sup>23</sup> According to him, the definition of *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* can be expanded to include the social conditions at the time of the Quran's revelation. Its understanding can also be developed through principles established by earlier scholars, particularly by expanding the concept of *qiyās* (analogical reasoning).<sup>24</sup>

Hamka stated that *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* (the reasons for the revelation of verses) provide a clear and tangible path for interpretation. Once the reason for a verse's revelation is understood, it is also recognized that the verse remains applicable as long as the same underlying cause (*'illah*) persists. Hamka emphasized that *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* is fundamentally important in aiding the understanding of Quranic texts and deriving their meanings. The sequence of *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* also contributes to comprehending the wisdom of *at-tashrī'*

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<sup>20</sup> Rosihon Anwar, *Ulum Al-Qur'an*, p.61

<sup>21</sup> Muhammad Abu Syuhbah, *al-madkhal li Dirasah al-Qur'an al-Karim*, (Riyadh, Dar al-Liwa 1987), p.132.

<sup>22</sup> Manna Khalil al-Qathan, *Mabahis Fii Ulum Al-Qur'an*, p.78

<sup>23</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Membumikan Al-Qur'an*, p.89

<sup>24</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Membumikan Al-Qur'an*, p.90

(legislation), particularly in legal verses.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Hamka asserted that the foundation for *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* is derived from the accounts of the Prophet's companions and subsequent generations, who can be trusted to have received this knowledge from Prophet Muhammad himself, the recipient of divine revelation. As for the generations following the companions, such as the *tābi 'īn* and their successors, they can also be considered reliable, as they took their knowledge from the Prophet's companions. Referring to these sources is highly reasonable, as they directly witnessed or closely followed the circumstances, locations, and contexts in which the verses were revealed.<sup>26</sup>

Hasbi Ash-Shiddiqy defines *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* as something that causes the revelation of a verse or multiple verses, which contain that cause, provide an answer regarding it, or explain its ruling at the time the event occurred.<sup>27</sup> Muhammad Chirzin explains in his book "*Al-Qur'an dan 'Ulum Al-Qur'an*" that knowledge of *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* provides several benefits: *first*, one can gain insight into the hidden wisdom behind the *shariah* through verses that were revealed for specific reasons. *Second*, one can identify the individuals involved or the actors in the events that preceded the revelation of a Quranic verse. *Third*, one can determine whether a verse conveys a general or specific message and in what context it should be applied. *Fourth*, one can conclude that Allah SWT constantly showed full attention to the Prophet Muhammad and remained ever-present with His servants.<sup>28</sup>

According to Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Asbāb an-Nuzūl* is a highly ambiguous concept. As a logical consequence of the lack of precise determination and careful attention to its establishment, this has become one

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<sup>25</sup> Buya Hamka, *Tafsir Al-Azhar* juz.1 (Jakarta: Pustaka Panjimas, 1983), p.30

<sup>26</sup> Buya Hamka, *Tafsir Al-Azhar* juz.1, p.30

<sup>27</sup> M. Hasbi ash-Shiddiqy, *Ilmu-ilmu Al-Qur'an: Media-media pokok dalam Menafsirkan Al-Qur'an*, (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1988), p.17

<sup>28</sup> Muhammad Chirzin, *Al-Qur'an dan Ulumul Qur'an*, (Jakarta: Dana Bhakti Prima Yasa, 1998), p.30

of the reasons for the confusion experienced by interpreters (*mufasssirūn*) and scholars of various religious sects when dealing with Quranic texts.<sup>29</sup>

Fazlur Rahman is a prominent contemporary Islamic thinker who adopts a critical stance toward the use of *asbāb al-nuzūl* in Qur'anic exegesis. He argues that excessive reliance on *asbāb al-nuzūl* may obscure the Qur'an's universal moral and ethical message. In his view, many of the narratives associated with *asbāb al-nuzūl* are speculative and lack solid historical authenticity. Consequently, while he does not entirely reject the concept, Rahman is highly selective and critical regarding the validity and authority of such reports.<sup>30</sup>

Mohammed Arkoun, a contemporary Islamic thinker, adopts a highly critical stance toward traditional approaches in Qur'anic exegesis, including the use of *asbāb al-nuzūl*. From his perspective, much of the classical Islamic literature *asbāb al-nuzūl* included should be understood as a product of post-revelation socio-historical construction. As such, Arkoun methodologically rejects the validity of many *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports that cannot be substantiated through historical or empirical verification.<sup>31</sup>

Amina Wadud, a central figure in contemporary feminist Qur'anic hermeneutics, underscores the significance of a thematic and ethical approach to interpreting the Qur'an one grounded in the principles of justice, equality, and human dignity, particularly for women. Within the feminist interpretive framework she advocates, Wadud avoids excessive dependence on *asbāb al-nuzūl*, especially narratives that exhibit gender bias or misogynistic tendencies. Implicitly, she challenges the absolute authority of *asbāb al-nuzūl* when such reports contradict the universal ethical values upheld in Islam.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Tekstualitas Al-Qur'an: Studi Kritis Terhadap Ulum Al-Qur'an* terj. Khoiron Nahdliyyin, (Yogyakarta: LKIS, 2001), p.131

<sup>30</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p.56

<sup>31</sup> Mohammad Arkoun, *pour une critique de la raison islamique* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1984), p.79

<sup>32</sup> Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p.54

## CONCLUSION

The discussion above can be concluded that there are many tools to understand the verses or series of verses in the Qur'an, one of which is reasons for revelation. Reasons for revelation is among the most important methods in understanding and interpreting the Qur'an. As established by scholars, the Qur'an was revealed in two parts. One part was revealed directly, and this constitutes the majority of the Qur'an. The second part was revealed in response to a particular event or request, accompanying the revelation process for thirteen years. This second part will be discussed based on the reasons for its revelation. This is because knowing the reasons for revelation and the circumstances surrounding the text will aid in understanding and determining the intended meaning of the text. Regardless of the pros and cons among experts in Qur'anic sciences regarding the existence of reasons for revelation and its functional urgency, it is certain that 'reasons for revelation have become an integral part of Qur'anic sciences as a whole. Its existence does not in any way hinder interpretation; instead, it enriches the process of interpretation.

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