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Literary *Tafsīr* and Qur'anic Narratives: Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafullāh and A.H. Johns in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

Literary approaches to Qur'anic narratives are frequently characterized in contemporary scholarship as methodological responses to the predominance of historical-positivist interpretations. Nevertheless, existing research often treats literary *tafsīr* as a relatively homogeneous paradigm, paying insufficient attention to the epistemological distinctions underlying approaches that appear methodologically analogous. As a result, significant divergences concerning conceptions of revelatory truth, the role of history, and interpretive authority within literary readings of the remain inadequately examined. This lacuna is particularly evident in studies of Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafullāh and A.H. Johns, who are commonly categorized together as proponents of literary interpretation despite embodying distinct epistemological orientations. This article seeks to address this gap through a critical comparative analysis of Khalafullāh's literary–historical critique and Johns' narrative criticism in their interpretations of Qur'anic narratives. Employing qualitative library research and comparative textual analysis, the study scrutinizes their principal works, with particular emphasis on their methodological applications to the stories of the Companions of the Cave and the Prophet Job. The findings demonstrate that a shared rejection of positivist historicism does not yield a unified conception of truth. Khalafullāh locates the truth of Qur'anic narratives in their communicative purpose and moral efficacy, whereas Johns defines truth in terms of narrative coherence shaped by the processes of revelation and reader engagement. This article contends that such epistemological tension constitutes an internal boundary within literary *tafsīr* itself. The study highlights the necessity for a more epistemologically reflective framework for literary interpretation—one that harmonizes methodological innovation with theological responsibility in contemporary Qur'anic studies.

[Pendekatan sastra terhadap kisah-kisah al-Qurʾān kerap diposisikan dalam literatur sebagai respons metodologis terhadap dominasi pembacaan historis-

positivistik. Namun, kajian-kajian yang ada cenderung memperlakukan tafsir sastra sebagai kategori yang relatif homogen, tanpa menguji secara kritis perbedaan asumsi epistemologis yang bekerja di balik pendekatan-pendekatan yang secara metodologis tampak serupa. Akibatnya, perbedaan konsepsi tentang kebenaran wahyu, fungsi sejarah, dan otoritas penafsiran dalam tafsir sastra al-Qurʾān sering kali luput dari analisis sistematis. Keterbatasan ini tampak jelas dalam studi terhadap pemikiran Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafullāh dan A. H. Johns yang, meskipun sama-sama diklasifikasikan sebagai tokoh tafsir sastra, pada dasarnya merepresentasikan orientasi epistemologis yang berbeda. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap dan menganalisis perbedaan epistemologis tersebut melalui perbandingan kritis atas pendekatan sastra Khalafullāh dan kritik naratif Johns dalam penafsiran kisah-kisah al-Qurʾān. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif berbasis studi pustaka dengan analisis teks komparatif terhadap karya-karya utama kedua tokoh, khususnya dalam penerapan metode mereka pada kisah Aṣḥāb al-Kahf dan Nabi Ayyūb. . Artikel ini berargumen bahwa ketegangan epistemologis tersebut menandai batas internal tafsir sastra al-Qurʾān. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penolakan bersama terhadap historisisme positivistik tidak serta-merta menghasilkan paradigma kebenaran yang sama. Khalafullāh memindahkan kebenaran kisah Qurʾān ke ranah tujuan komunikatif dan dampak moral, sementara Johns menegaskan kebenaran melalui koherensi struktural narasi dalam dinamika pewahyuan serta interaksi pembaca dengan teks. Implikasi penelitian ini menegaskan perlunya kerangka tafsir sastra yang lebih reflektif secara epistemologis agar inovasi metodologis tidak berujung pada ambiguitas teologis dalam studi al-Qurʾān kontemporer.]

Keywords: Qurʾanic Narratives, Literary *Tafsīr*, Narrative Criticism, Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafullāh, A. H. Johns

Introduction

Stories in the Qurʾān occupy a complex yet strategically significant position within contemporary *tafsīr* studies.[1] As one of the principal modes through which divine revelation communicates meaning, Qur'anic narratives shape faith, ethical orientation, and communal moral consciousness. Nevertheless, scholarly engagement with these narratives has long been dominated by epistemological debates concerning their historical veracity and factual correspondence. This preoccupation has often framed Qur'anic narratives within a reductive dichotomy

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[1] See: L.O. Alhassen, *Qurʾānic Stories: God, Revelation and the Audience*, Qurʾānic Stories: God, Revelation and the Audience (2021), 175; Anwar Mujahidin, Muhammad Shohibul Itmam, and Ahmad Choirul Rofiq, "The Dynamic of Contextualization in Indonesian Qur'anic Tafsirs: A Comparative Study of Tafsir Al-Azhar and Tafsir Al-Mishbāh on The Story of The Prophet Moses," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis* 25, no. 2 (August 2024): 221–46, https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.v25i2.5397.

between historical fact and symbolic fiction, thereby marginalizing a more fundamental dimension of revelation: the aesthetic, rhetorical, and communicative functions of narrative within the Qur'anic discourse itself.

Recent scholarship increasingly suggests that an excessive emphasis on historicity not only oversimplifies the complexity of Qur'anic narratives but also risks obscuring their role as a divine communicative strategy that constructs authoritative meaning through language, symbolism, and narrative form.[2] Within the broader field of religious studies, this shift resonates with comparative discussions on sacred texts, particularly regarding how theological truth is generated through narrative structures rather than resting solely on claims of historical accuracy.

Against this backdrop, contemporary Qur'anic studies demonstrate a marked transition from historical-apologetic frameworks toward interpretive approaches that foreground the literary, narrative, and symbolic dimensions of the text.[3] Both the classical *ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* tradition and modern literary methodologies acknowledge that Qur'anic narratives possess sophisticated aesthetic and rhetorical architectures, functioning as integral vehicles for the communication of revelatory meaning.[4] This development has contributed to the growing legitimacy of literary *tafsīr* as an interpretive domain that understands Qur'anic narratives as divine discourses shaped by the interplay of symbolism, narrative organization, and communicative effect. In this vein, Yusoff emphasizes that the concept of *qaṣaṣ* constitutes the Qurʾān's normative narrative framework, integrating truth, beauty, and elucidation of meaning as the epistemic foundation of revelation.[5]

Within modern literary *tafsīr*, the ideas of Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafullāh, articulated most prominently in *al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣ fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*, represent a pivotal methodological intervention. Khalafullāh challenges the reduction of Qur'anic narratives to historical chronicles, conceptualizing them instead as aesthetic constructions designed to elicit moral and spiritual responses in the

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2   See: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, vols. 1–6 (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Angelika Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

3   See: Mustansir Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'an: A Study of Iṣlāḥī's Concept of Naẓm* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1986); Muhammad A. S. Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005); Michel Cuypers, *The Composition of the Qur'an: Rhetorical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

4   See: M. Nur Kholis Setiawan, *Al-Qur'an Kitab Sastra Terbesar* (Yogyakarta: Elsaq Press, 2005); Syihabuddin Qalyubi, *Stilistika Al-Qur'an: Makna Di Balik Kisah Ibrahim* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2008); Hanik Mahliatussikah, "Analisis Kisah Nabi Yusuf dalam Al-Qur'an: Pendekatan Interdisipliner Psikologi Sastra," *Journal of Arabic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2016): 65–80.

5   See: Mustansir Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'an: A Study of Iṣlāḥī's Concept of Naẓm* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1986); Muhammad A. S. Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005); Michel Cuypers, *The Composition of the Qur'an: Rhetorical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

audience of revelation. His approach has inspired a wide range of applied and comparative studies, particularly those examining specific narratives such as the story of Aṣḥāb al-Kahf and its interpretation by modern mufassirūn.[6] At the same time, Khalafullāh's literary orientation has provoked sustained theological critique, especially concerning the implications of non-historical readings for the epistemic status of revelatory truth.[7]

Parallel to this development, A.H. Johns advances a narrative and humanistic critical approach that foregrounds story structure, dialogue, intertextual resonance, and narrative coherence as central mechanisms through which Qur'anic meaning is conveyed. Johns approaches Qur'anic narratives not as isolated thematic units but as interconnected components within a broader narrative network shaped by the dynamics of revelation and inter-sūrah relations. This perspective has been employed in several studies—most notably on the stories of Prophet Yūsuf and Prophet Ayyūb—demonstrating how narrative aesthetics mediate theological experience and readerly engagement with the Qur'anic text.[8] Johns's work thus aligns with wider theoretical discussions on religious narrative in comparative sacred-text scholarship.

Despite the substantial contributions of these approaches, existing studies tend to examine Khalafullāh and Johns either in isolation or through dichotomous classifications—such as internal Islamic versus external humanistic perspectives, or Arab versus non-Arab scholarship. As a result, there remains a significant gap in research that systematically compares their interpretive projects at the epistemological level within literary tafsīr. Previous investigations have largely focused on methodological typologies or debates over historicity, often overlooking the deeper theoretical implications of how narrative aesthetics function as epistemic mechanisms for generating revelatory meaning and truth. Consequently, the relationship between aesthetics, narrative structure, and the conception of revelation remains underexplored.

This article argues that the primary distinction between Aḥmad Khalafullāh and A.H. Johns does not lie in their respective positions on historical factuality, but rather in their conceptualization of Qur'anic narrative as an epistemic medium of revelation. Khalafullāh articulates an aesthetic-functional paradigm in which

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[6] See: Ade Alimah, "Kisah dalam Al-Qur'an: Studi Komparatif antara Pandangan Sayyid Quṭb dan Ahmad Khalafullāh" (Skripsi, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, 2003); Fathul Hadi, "Kisah Ashḥāb Al-Kahf Dalam Al-Qur'an Perspektif Ahmad Khalafullāh dalam Kitab al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm" (Skripsi, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, 2010); Arina Manasikana, "Pendekatan Kesastraan terhadap Kisah-Kisah Al-Qur'an: Kajian atas al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm" (Skripsi, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, 2015).

[7] Mahdy Ashiddieqy, "Kritik atas Pemikiran Muhammad Ahmad Khalafullāh terhadap Ayat-Ayat tentang Kisah Mitos dalam al-Qur'an" (UIN Sunan Ampel, 2018).

[8] Akrimi Matswah, "Pendekatan Kritik Naratif a. H. Johns terhadap Narasi Dialog dalam Surah Yusuf," Jurnal Suhuf 11, no. 1 (2018): 133–56, https://doi.org/10.22548/shf.v11i1.308.

narrative truth emerges through moral and spiritual effects communicated by symbolic language. In contrast, Johns advances a structural-narrative paradigm that locates theological significance in the interaction between the process of revelation, textual organization, and narrative coherence. By juxtaposing these paradigms, this study contends that literary *tafsīr* constitutes a pluralistic and dynamic epistemological field, offering critical insights into how divine narratives generate meaning beyond debates centred on historicity.

Building upon this argument, the present study investigates the epistemological convergences and divergences between Khalafullāh's literary methodology and Johns's narrative criticism of Qur'anic narratives. Employing a comparative qualitative approach grounded in epistemological and hermeneutic analysis, the study examines primary texts—*al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣ fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm* and selected works by A.H. Johns—while engaging relevant secondary scholarship. Through this analysis, the article seeks to clarify the theoretical implications of aesthetic-functional and structural-narrative approaches for contemporary literary *tafsīr*, repositioning it as an interdisciplinary framework for understanding Qur'anic narratives as vehicles of revelatory truth.

Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafullāh and the Literary Conception of Qur'anic Narratives

The evolution of contemporary Qur'anic studies reveals a growing tendency to interpret the text of revelation not only as a source of theological doctrine but also as a linguistic discourse characterized by distinctive structure, style, and communicative strategies. This perspective stems from the recognition that the Qurʾān conveys divine messages through the Arabic language, which is rich in literary devices such as narrative, dialogue, symbolism, and parables. Consequently, a literary analysis of the Qurʾān does not seek to diminish its sacred nature; rather, it aims to clarify how the text constructs meaning and exerts rhetorical and pedagogical influence on its audience.[9]

In this context, Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafullāh holds a significant position as one of the pioneers of the literary approach to Qur'anic narratives within the modern *tafsīr* tradition. Born in al-Sharqiyyah Province, Egypt, he completed his primary education in public schools before pursuing further studies at Dār al-ʿUlūm. His interest in literature deepened during his undergraduate studies at the Faculty of Arts and Literature, Cairo University, from which he graduated in 1939. This interest later evolved into an academic focus on the Qurʾān, particularly its linguistic and literary dimensions. At the master's level, also at Cairo University, he authored

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[9] Yusoff and Fawwaz, "Tracing the Tracts of Qaṣaṣ: Towards a Theory of Narrative Pedagogy in Islamic Education."

a thesis entitled *al-Jadāl fī al-Qurʾān*, marking a shift in his scholarly orientation from general literature to Qur'anic studies.[10]

Khalafullāh's intensive engagement with Qur'anic studies culminated during his doctoral studies at al-Azhar University in 1947, where he was supervised by Amīn al-Khūlī. His dissertation, entitled *al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣ fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*, generated considerable controversy and faced significant opposition from certain factions within the al-Azhar scholarly community.[11] This opposition primarily arose from Khalafullāh's innovative approach, which interpreted Qur'anic narratives not as literal historical accounts but as divinely inspired literary constructs designed to convey moral and theological messages through specific narrative techniques.[12]

Khalafullāh's academic training in literature profoundly influenced his interpretation of the Qurʾān. In his dissertation, he employed an inductive methodology to analyze Qur'anic narratives, aiming to reveal their aesthetic and rhetorical qualities. He argued that these stories are not intended as literal historical accounts but rather as symbolic narratives that impart *ʿibrah* (moral lessons) and serve as pedagogical tools to provide *hidāyah* (guidance) and *irshād* (instruction). This perspective aligns with the Qur'anic literary approach advanced by Amīn al-Khūlī, which emphasizes the importance of understanding the Qurʾān as an Arabic text characterized by a unique literary structure and style.[13]

The central foundation of Khalafullāh's interpretation of Qur'anic narratives lies in his reexamination of the concept of *al-ḥaqq*, which is frequently associated with the term *qaṣaṣ* in the Qurʾān. As he acknowledged, this inquiry originated from a question posed by Bint al-Shāṭiʾ regarding the meaning of expressions such as *inna hādhā lahuwa al-qaṣaṣ al-ḥaqq* (Q. 3:62) and *naḥnu naquṣṣu ʿalayka nabaʾahum bi al-ḥaqq* (Q. 18:13). Contrary to the conventional interpretation that understands *al-ḥaqq* as an affirmation of historical veracity, Khalafullāh argued that the term denotes the semantic and theological truth the Qurʾān intends to convey.

To reinforce his argument, Khalafullāh referenced verses that contrast *al-ḥaqq* with *amthāl* (parables), such as Q. 2:26. He contended that parables need not be grounded in historically factual events to be considered *al-ḥaqq*; rather, they are designated as such because of their capacity to reveal and persuade regarding certain truths. By extension, Qur'anic narratives may be regarded as *al-ḥaqq* not on the basis of their historical accuracy but because they function as vehicles for conveying theological truths.[14] Within this conceptual framework, *al-maṯal* and *al-*

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10   Setiawan, *Al-Qur'an Kitab Sastra Terbesar.*
11   Zuhairi Misrawi, *Al-Qur'an Bukan Kitab Sejarah* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 2002).
12   Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafullāh, *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm* (Kairo: Dār Sīnā li al-Nashr, 1999).
13   Khalafullāh, *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm.*
14   Khalafullāh, *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm.*

qaṣaṣ are understood to share analogous communicative roles, serving as rhetorical devices intended to elucidate issues, persuade audiences, and impart moral values.

In developing his argument concerning the meaning of *al-ḥaqq* in Qur'anic narratives, Khalafullāh draws upon Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's exegetical reflections, particularly his understanding of *al-qaṣaṣ* as a sequence of expressions intended to disclose divine signs and guide humanity toward the recognition of God's oneness, justice, and the truth of prophethood. It is important to note, however, that al-Rāzī himself does not explicitly frame Qur'anic narratives within a modern literary or anti-historicist paradigm. Rather, his interpretation of *al-ḥaqq* operates within a theological–*dalālī* framework, wherein truth refers primarily to the veracity and salvific function of the divine message rather than to the empirical factuality of narrated events. Khalafullāh appropriates this exegetical insight and recontextualizes it within his literary theory of Qur'anic narrative, employing al-Rāzī's authority to support the claim that the designation *al-ḥaqq* in *Qur'anic* narratives signifies the truthfulness of their moral and theological intent, not their conformity to historical verification in the modern sense.[15]

As a concrete example of this theoretical framework, Khalafullāh examined the narrative of *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* (the People of the Cave). He argued that the Qurʾān does not explicitly present this story as an unequivocal historical fact. Instead, the Qurʾān offers multiple versions of the account, which were known among the People of the Book, including varying details regarding the number of youths and the duration of their stay in the cave. Through an analysis of *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation), Khalafullāh demonstrated that this narrative was revealed in response to inquiries from the polytheists of Mecca—who were influenced by Jewish traditions—and was intended to test the veracity of Muḥammad's prophethood. Consequently, the apparent ambiguity in the narrative details serves a rhetorical purpose, ensuring that the Qur'anic response aligns with the epistemological framework of its contemporary audience.[16]

Based on this overarching argument, Khalafullāh concluded that the predicate *al-ḥaqq* in the story of *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* does not refer to its historical factuality but rather to its role as a vehicle for affirming the truth of the Prophet Muḥammad's message. The truth referenced is the substantive truth associated with the moral, religious, and ethical objectives that the Qurʾān seeks to convey through the narrative. Consequently, Qur'anic narratives should be interpreted as divine communicative strategies that emphasize meaning and pedagogical intent, rather than as historical accounts in the modern sense.

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[15] Fakhr al-Dīn Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr Fakhr Al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, vol. 8 (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1999).

[16] Khalafullāh, *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*.

Literary–Historical Criticism in Khalafullāh's Interpretation of Qur'anic Narratives

The literary approach developed by Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafullāh for interpreting the narrative verses of the Qurʾān represents one of the early efforts to broaden the methodological framework of modern Qur'anic studies. In his time, this approach was seen as a significant innovation because it challenged the prevailing dominance of traditional exegesis, which typically interpreted Qur'anic narratives within a historical-dogmatic context. However, from a methodological standpoint, Khalafullāh's approach did not emerge in isolation; rather, it was firmly rooted in the tradition of literary criticism and literary exegesis established earlier, particularly by Amīn al-Khūlī.[17]

Khalafullāh openly acknowledged that his approach to interpreting Qur'anic narratives was greatly influenced by al-Khūlī's concepts of literary exegesis (*al-tafsīr al-adabī*). However, al-Khūlī considered his student's work to be an original contribution, particularly because of Khalafullāh's bold focus on narrative verses as the primary subject of analysis—an area that had previously received limited attention in exegetical scholarship. As a result, Khalafullāh not only embraced his mentor's methodology but also developed it further, making it more systematic and applicable for the study of Qur'anic narratives.[18]

In his dissertation, *al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣ fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*, Khalafullāh outlined several systematic methodological stages for reading and interpreting narrative verses. The first stage, called *jamʿ al-nuṣūṣ* (text collection), involves gathering all Qur'anic narrative verses as the primary focus of study. During this phase, Khalafullāh conducted a thorough examination of Qur'anic narratives, organizing them according to specific criteria. He gave priority to stories widely recognized as *qaṣaṣ Qurʾānī* by consensus among *mufassirūn* (exegetes) and linguists. Importantly, at this initial stage, literary boundaries were not strictly enforced, as Khalafullāh's main goal was to ensure the completeness and representativeness of the textual corpus before proceeding to more detailed analysis.[19]

The second stage is known as *al-tartīb al-tārīkhī li al-nuṣūṣ*, or the historical systematization of texts. In this phase, Khalafullāh sought to analyze Qur'anic narratives from two simultaneous perspectives: internal and external. Internally, he explored the development of Qur'anic narrative expression by examining the dynamics of the Prophet Muḥammad's mission alongside the socio-cultural context of Arab society. To support this analysis, he used the chronological order of revelation as an analytical framework, while recognizing that this sequence was not

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[17] Wali Ramadhani, "Amīn Al-Khūlī dan Metode Tafsir Sastrawi atas al-Qur'an," *Jurnal At-Tibyān* 2, no. 1 (2017): 1–14, https://doi.org/10.32505/at-tibyan.v2i1.222.

[18] Khalafullāh, *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*.

[19] Khalafullāh, *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*.

entirely definitive. Nonetheless, he argued that this approach effectively clarified the role of the stories within the historical context of the prophetic mission.[20]

Khalafullāh sought to place Qur'anic narratives within the wider context of literary and artistic developments both before and after the emergence of Islam. However, this external analysis was not extensively pursued, mainly due to the limited availability of sources and the methodological difficulties in linking Qur'anic stories with pre-Islamic Arab literary traditions. As a result, the study primarily concentrated on an internal examination of the Qurʾān text. This dual methodological approach aligns with al-Khūlī's concept of combining *dirāsah mā fī al-Qurʾān* (internal textual analysis) and *dirāsah mā ḥawla al-Qurʾān* (study of the surrounding context) to achieve a more objective and comprehensive understanding of the Qurʾān.[21]

The third stage, known as *fahm al-nuṣūṣ* (text interpretation), forms the core of Khalafullāh's methodology. At this stage, he emphasized that interpreting narrative verses requires two levels of understanding: textual and literary. Textual understanding involves analyzing lexical meanings, syntactic structures, semantic relationships, and the historical context of the text. This approach demands expertise in classical disciplines such as Arabic language, *naḥw* (grammar), *ṣarf* (morphology), and *balāghah* (rhetoric), in line with the conventions of the classical *tafsīr* tradition. In practice, Khalafullāh often consulted classical *tafsīr* literature and compared the interpretations of various *mufassirūn* before arriving at the interpretation he considered most coherent.[22]

Literary comprehension requires the interpreter to grasp the logical, psychological, and aesthetic dimensions of the text. According to Khalafullāh, the interpreter encounters not only explicit meanings but also implicit ones that arise through narrative structure and linguistic symbolism. This interpretive process involves recognizing that the author—in this case, the revealed text—uses linguistic devices that often go beyond a literal interpretation. This view aligns with Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of effective history in hermeneutics, which suggests that understanding is always shaped by the interpreter's tradition, experience, and historical context.[23]

The fourth stage is *al-taqsīm wa al-tabwīb* (division and chapter arrangement). In this phase, Khalafullāh categorized narrative texts into thematic units by identifying similarities in phrases, objectives, and narrative functions. He then organized this classification into two main chapters. The first chapter explores the logical aspects of Qur'anic narratives, including their historical, social,

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[20] Khalafullāh, *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*.

[21] Amīn Al-Khūlī, *Manāhij Al-Tajdīd* (Kairo: Dār al-Maʿrifah, 1961).

[22] Khalafullāh, *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*.

[23] Sahiron Syamsuddin, *Hermeneutika dan Pengembangan Ulumul Qur'an* (Yogyakarta: Nawasea Press, 2017).

psychological, religious, and moral values. The second chapter focuses on the literary dimensions, covering types of literary works, story unity, central themes, narrative settings, story elements (such as time, events, and dialogue), plot dynamics, and the depiction of prophetic figures in relation to the linguistic beauty of the Qurʾān.[24]

The final stage concerns *al-aṣālah wa al-taqlīd* (originality and imitation). Khalafullāh argues that thorough literary analysis must be able to trace a text's origins and distinguish between elements that are original and those borrowed or adapted from earlier traditions.[25] In Qur'anic studies, this methodological approach is essential for differentiating the revelation as a sacred text from human interpretations, such as *tafsīr* and other Islamic scholarly disciplines. Khalafullāh maintains that failing to make this distinction often results in polemics and misunderstandings within Islamic discourse.

Although Khalafullāh's literary-historical critical method has significantly contributed to the study of Qur'anic narratives, it faces certain epistemological challenges. First, its strong emphasis on literary elements risks equating the Qurʾān with human literary works, which creates tension with the theological doctrine that views the Qurʾān as *kalām ilāhī* (divine speech). Second, by focusing primarily on the immanent aesthetic and moral aspects of the text, the method limits its ability to address transcendent and metaphysical theological meanings. Third, from a contemporary perspective, the relevance of Khalafullāh's approach requires reassessment in light of developments in Qur'anic studies since 2000, which have increasingly adopted interdisciplinary hermeneutic frameworks that integrate literature, theology, history, and sociology. Therefore, Khalafullāh's method should be recognized as a foundational contribution that calls for ongoing critical engagement alongside more recent methodologies in the field.

A.H. Johns and the Narrative Paradigm of the Qurʾān: Revelation as Process and Event

During the latter half of the twentieth century, Qur'anic studies in the Western academic context underwent a significant shift, moving from a primarily philological-historical approach to one that highlights the literary, narrative, and hermeneutic dimensions of the text. Within this evolving framework, Antony Hearle Johns—commonly known as A.H. Johns—emerged as a prominent scholar striving to bridge modern literary studies with Qur'anic scholarship. Johns is was a senior professor at the Australian National University and a leading figure in the development of Southeast Asian and Islamic Studies at the Australian National

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[24] Khalafullāh, *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm.*
[25] Khalafullāh, *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm.*

University (ANU) in Canberra, and his scholarly work is highly regarded internationally in the fields of Islamic studies and religious literature.[26]

A.H. Johns was born in London in 1928 into a devout Catholic family. His passion for literature developed early, demonstrated by his deep engagement with both classical and modern English works, including the poetry of John Keats, Edmund Spenser, Geoffrey Chaucer, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and T.S. Eliot.[27] This strong foundation in the humanities greatly shaped Johns's aesthetic sensibility and provided a vital framework for his interpretative approach to religious texts, particularly the Qurʾān, which he later explored through the lenses of literature and narrative.

Johns's initial exposure to Islam did not come through academic study but through lived experience during his compulsory military service in Malaysia. His interactions with the Malay community and engagement with local Islamic literary traditions sparked his intellectual curiosity about Islam as both a religious and cultural phenomenon. This growing interest eventually developed into a committed academic pursuit, leading him to study at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. Despite having no formal background in Islamic studies and facing the complexities of Malay-Islamic culture, Johns completed his undergraduate degree and earned a doctorate with a dissertation titled *Sufism in the Malay World.* This work established his reputation as a pioneering scholar in Islamic studies.[28]

Johns engages with earlier Muslim scholars who addressed the narrative dimension of the Qurʾān, including Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafullāh and Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, particularly in their efforts to rethink Qur'anic narratives beyond literalist readings. Rather than directly participating in debates over the historical factuality or ontological status of these narratives, Johns redirects the discussion toward their narrative form, rhetorical strategies, and functional role within the Qur'anic discourse. His approach emphasizes how meaning is generated through narrative configuration, thematic recurrence, and intertextual resonance in the canonical text. Subsequent scholarship has interpreted this methodological shift as an implicit distancing from ontological debates that tend to dominate discussions of Qur'anic historicity, suggesting that such debates risk obscuring the literary and communicative dynamics of the Qurʾān itself.[29]

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[26] ANU College of Asia & the Pacific, "Order of Australia Award for Emeritus Professor A. H. Johns," April 4, 2025, https://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/content-centre/article/news/order-australia-award-emeritus-professor-ah-johns.

[27] Wardatun Nadhiroh, "Memahami Narasi Kisah Al-Qur'an dengan Narrative Criticism," *Jurnal* 12, no. 2 (2013): 219–35.

[28] Peter Riddell and Street, eds., *Islam: Essays on Scripture, Thought and Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

[29] See: Khalafullāh, *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*; Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, *al-Madkhal Ilā Al-Qurʾān al-Karīm* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-ʿArabiyyah, 2006).

Building on this critique, Johns developed a distinctive approach to Qur'anic narratives. Unlike Khalafullāh and al-Jābirī, who primarily presented their ideas in monographic works, Johns's perspectives are spread across multiple journal articles that explore both methodological frameworks and specific applications of narrative analysis to the Qur'anic text. Publications such as "Narrative, Intertext and Allusion in the Qur'anic Presentation of Job" and "Holy Ground: A Space to Share" exemplify Johns's consistent interpretation of the Qurʾān as a narrative text that creates meaning through its structure, symbolism, and intertextual resonance.[30]

Johns's approach is fundamentally based on his conceptualization of the Qurʾān as having two modes of existence: the Qurʾān as a process and the Qurʾān as an event. This view arises from the understanding that one's perspective on the Qurʾān greatly shapes both the methodology and outcomes of its interpretation. By distinguishing between these two modes, Johns seeks to avoid reductionism—whether it involves focusing exclusively on the historical-chronological aspect or concentrating solely on the canonical text as compiled.

Within a process-oriented understanding of revelation, Johns approaches the Qurʾān as a form of divine address that unfolds progressively within concrete historical circumstances, emphasizing its communicative and situational character rather than treating it as a static textual artifact. Although Johns does not formulate a systematic theory of revelation comparable to those proposed in later hermeneutical discourses, his emphasis on the dynamic interaction between text, audience, and historical context allows his approach to be read as resonating with broader discussions in modern Qur'anic studies that conceptualize the Qurʾān as a living discourse. In different but related ways, Fazlur Raḥmān underscores the ethical and contextual responsiveness of the Qur'anic message to concrete social realities,[31] Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd foregrounds the Qurʾān's character as a historically embedded linguistic discourse open to interpretive negotiation,[32] and Angelika Neuwirth situates the Qurʾān within the evolving communicative milieu of Late Antiquity, highlighting the diachronic development of its rhetoric and themes during the period of revelation.[33] While Johns remains more restrained in his theoretical articulation and avoids the explicit hermeneutical claims advanced by these scholars, the convergence lies in their shared refusal to view the Qurʾān as a

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[30] See: Anthony H. Johns, "Holy Ground: A Space to Share," *Hamdard Islamicus* 33, no. 2 (2010): 64; Anthony H. Johns, "A Humanistic Approach to Iʿjāz in the Qur'an: The Transfiguration of Language," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 13, no. 1 (2011): 79–99, https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2011.0005.

[31] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

[32] Naṣr Ḥāmid Abu Zayd, *Mafhūm Al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsah Fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2006).

[33] Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage*.

self-contained, ahistorical text, instead recognizing its formative engagement with the lived experience of the early Muslim community.[34]

Johns argues that understanding the Qurʾān requires looking beyond its developmental process. He stresses the importance of viewing the Qurʾān as an event—that is, as a text canonized in the form of the *mushaf*, which consists of 114 *sūrahs* and 30 *juzʾ*, arranged not in chronological order of revelation. At this stage, the Qurʾān becomes a textual event defined by its own internal structure, thematic coherence, and canonical logic. This view aligns with Neuwirth's distinction between the pre-canonization and post-canonization Qurʾān; however, Johns takes a different position regarding the canonization process.

Neuwirth tends to view the arrangement of the *mushaf* as the result of editorial processes shaped mainly by technical and external factors. In contrast, Johns adopts a hermeneutically respectful stance toward the canonical order, such as al-Suyūṭī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, who argue that the *mushaf*'s arrangement is *tawqīfī*—that is, divinely guided by the Prophet Muḥammad. Accordingly, Johns contends that the canonical form of the Qurʾān is inseparable from the authority of the revelation itself and should be regarded as an integral part of the Qurʾān's internal structure.

Johns's effort to integrate the historical-chronological and canonical paradigms reflects his methodological aim to move beyond the dichotomies that often characterize contemporary Qur'anic studies. He metaphorically likens these two modes of the Qurʾān's existence to a pair of "lungs," which together enable the revelatory text to function optimally. The Qurʾān is best understood when approached simultaneously as a historical process and as a complete textual entity. Therefore, Qur'anic verses, including narrative passages, should be interpreted both within the context of their original revelation and their canonical placement within the *mushaf*, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple layers of meaning.[35]

Within this framework, Johns interprets the narratives of the prophets in the Qurʾān as accounts that affirm the continuity of the prophetic mission throughout human history. The prophets are portrayed not merely as historical figures but as exemplary models for the Prophet Muḥammad in delivering his message. Although each prophet appears within a distinct context, their stories collectively form a moral and spiritual drama that highlights universal themes such as monotheism, the truthfulness of the message, patience in the face of rejection, and warnings about resurrection and retribution. Therefore, in Johns's narrative reading, Qur'anic prophetic stories are not primarily intended to reconstruct historical events in a historiographical sense, but to shape the ethical and religious consciousness of their audience.

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[34] Johns, "Holy Ground: A Space to Share".
[35] Johns, "Holy Ground: A Space to Share".

Narrative Criticism in A.H. Johns's Reading of Qur'anic Narratives

A.H. Johns' background as a literary scholar has significantly shaped his approach to interpreting the narrative verses of the Qurʾān. His extensive familiarity with the Western literary tradition fostered a literary sensitivity that led him to regard Qur'anic narratives not simply as historical records but as deliberately crafted stories that employ specific structures, styles, and storytelling techniques. Accordingly, Johns consistently applied narrative criticism as his principal analytical framework in Qur'anic studies to examine the function and meaning of these narratives.

Narrative criticism constitutes a subfield of literary criticism that developed within the study of Christian scriptures, with particular emphasis on the analysis of Biblical narratives. Its fundamental principle is encapsulated by the concept of "scripture as story," which regards sacred texts as narratives that construct their own story worlds. The principal objective of this approach is not to reconstruct the historical context surrounding the text but rather to elucidate meaning through a close reading of the text itself. Within New Testament studies, narrative criticism is employed in the examination of texts such as the Four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and the Book of Acts, interpreting them as coherent literary narratives. Nevertheless, for an extended period, this narrative aspect was frequently neglected by scholars due to the dominance of the historical-critical method.[36]

Prior to the development of narrative criticism, the analysis of sacred texts—including the Bible and other religious writings—was predominantly conducted through historical criticism. This methodology interprets the text as a lens into the historical context from which it emerged, positing that meaning can be discerned only by investigating the historical setting, the author's social milieu, and the circumstances surrounding the text's composition. As a diachronic approach, it seeks to reconstruct both the process of the text's formation and the historical reality it represents. Consequently, the text is primarily regarded as a source of information about the past rather than as an autonomous realm of meaning.[37]

In contrast, narrative criticism conceptualizes the text as a mirror that reflects reality through its inherent story structure. Within this framework, meaning is derived not from external factors but from the narrative world constructed by the text itself. This approach is text-centered, prioritizing the text as the primary source of meaning rather than emphasizing the author's biography or historical context. Through the narrated story, the text invites readers to engage with their own

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[36] Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

[37] Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

existential and ethical realities, as narrative is understood to convey truth through the organization of events, characters, and plot.[38]

Within the framework of narrative criticism, interpretive focus shifts from the historical author and actual reader to the concept of the text world or story world. Meaning is conceived as emerging from the interaction between the narrative structure and the reader who engages with that story world. Accordingly, narrative criticism introduces the notions of the implied author and the implied reader as conceptual constructs that mediate communication between the text and its meaning. The implied author embodies the voice and values articulated by the text, whereas the implied reader represents the idealized reader figure presupposed by the text, intended to respond to the narrative in a particular manner.[39]

This approach necessitates repeated and meticulous reading, as a profound engagement with the text is essential for fully realizing the story world. The analysis centers on narrative components, including events, characters, setting, plot, and narrative style. Methodologically, narrative criticism distinguishes between two interrelated dimensions: story, which pertains to the content of the narrative, and discourse, which concerns the manner in which the story is presented. These dimensions collectively constitute an inseparable unity in the construction of textual meaning.

In the domain of Qur'anic studies, Johns employs the framework of narrative criticism while maintaining sensitivity to the Qurʾān's distinct nature as a revealed text. By analyzing the narrative verses as stories that establish a particular moral and theological framework, Johns seeks to elucidate how the Qurʾān directs its audience through storytelling techniques, thematic repetition, and linguistic symbolism. This methodology facilitates an interpretation of Qur'anic narratives that transcends discussions of historicity, focusing instead on the function of narrative in shaping the religious and ethical consciousness of its readers.

From an epistemological standpoint, narrative criticism entails several important implications. First, although this approach is primarily text-centered, it does not entirely neglect the socio-historical context; comprehending the reality presupposed by the text can enrich its interpretation. Second, narrative criticism is characterized by openness and dynamism, allowing for a variety of contextual interpretations to arise depending on the reader's perspective in different historical periods. Third, this approach emphasizes the transformative potential of narrative, proposing that Qur'anic narratives function not only as aesthetic compositions but also as ethical and existential instruments that guide readers toward modifications in attitude and behavior.

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[38] Nadhiroh, "Memahami Narasi Kisah Al-Qur'an dengan Narrative Criticism."
[39] Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?*

Applying Literary and Narrative Approaches to Qur'anic Narratives: Khalafullāh and Johns in Comparison

The application of literary methodology to the study of Qur'anic narratives is most prominently exemplified in the works of Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafullāh and A.H. Johns. Both scholars oppose the reduction of Qur'anic narratives to mere historical accounts; however, they employ distinct methodological approaches to literary analysis. Khalafullāh critiques the historicist paradigm, while Johns concentrates on the analysis of narrative structure and storytelling techniques. This divergence is distinctly evident in their respective interpretations of Qur'anic verses.

In his dissertation, *al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣ fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*, Khalafullāh adopts a historical literary-critical methodology, positing that the Qurʾān should not be regarded as a historical text but rather as a guide that employs narratives to impart messages of faith and morality. To demonstrate his approach, he conducts an analysis of the story of *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* as depicted in *Sūrat al-Kahf*. His initial step involves compiling all verses pertinent to the narrative, with particular attention to Q. 18:22, Q. 18:25, and Q. 18:26. Subsequently, he investigates the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation) reports to elucidate the social context and religious debates that informed the revelation of these verses.

According to reports referenced from al-Naysābūrī's work, the narrative of *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* was revealed in response to a challenge issued by the Quraysh—prompted by the counsel of a Jewish monk in Medina—who tested the prophethood of Muḥammad through three questions, one of which pertained to the youths residing in the cave. Within this framework, Khalafullāh contends that the primary objective of the story is not to furnish a historical or empirical account but to affirm the veracity of the prophetic message and underscore the significance of faith. The ambiguity regarding the number of youths and the duration of their stay in the cave is interpreted as a deliberate literary device rather than a deficiency of information. This ambiguity is intended to evoke the reader's introspective emotions and direct attention toward the spiritual message rather than factual particulars.

According to Khalafullāh, the concept of "truth" (*al-ḥaqq*) in Qur'anic narratives is not contingent upon their correspondence with historical facts but is instead grounded in the purpose of the narration and the moral effect it engenders. Accordingly, efforts to authenticate Qur'anic narratives through positivist historical methodologies are misguided, as such approaches impose a logic incongruent with the nature of literary texts. In the account of *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf*, the narrative's efficacy derives from its evocative language, the construction of a mysterious atmosphere, and the employment of imaginative dialogue, all of which function to impart values of faith and perseverance. Thus, Qur'anic narratives ought to be interpreted within

the aesthetic framework of revelation, wherein language, symbolism, and imagination collectively shape the religious consciousness of the audience.[40]

In contrast to Khalafullāh's approach, A.H. Johns utilizes narrative criticism, focusing on the story's structure and the interrelationships among its narrative components. This methodology elucidates the manner in which the narrative is constructed and how meaning emerges from the organization of events, characters, plot, and point of view. Johns employs this approach to interpret the prophetic narratives in the Qurʾān, with particular emphasis on the story of Prophet *Ayyūb*, which he analyzes comprehensively in his article "Narrative, Intertext and Allusion in the Qur'anic Presentation of Job."

In his study, Johns identifies four primary pericopes concerning the story of Prophet *Ayyūb*: Q. 38:41–44, Q. 21:83–84, Q. 6:83–87, and Q. 4:163–165. He organizes these passages according to the chronological order of their revelation rather than their arrangement in the *muṣḥaf*, aiming to establish a more coherent narrative flow. The first two sūrahs are Meccan, with *Ṣād* being the earliest; consequently, Johns positions it at the center of the narrative. He contends that the account of *Ayyūb* in this *sūrah* is the most dramatic, as it features a direct dialogue between *Ayyūb* and God, thereby depicting suffering, patience, and restoration as a complete narrative arc.[41]

Subsequently, Johns analyzes the narrative components—including events, characters, setting, and plot—by posing questions such as who *Ayyūb* is, the nature of the trial he endures, and the significance of his deliverance. Given that the Qur'anic text does not always furnish complete details, Johns supplements his narrative analysis with classical *tafsīr* sources, such as al-Ṭabarī, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the story. This phase is not intended to function as historical verification but rather as an attempt to reconstruct the story world in order to fully appreciate its moral message.[42]

Johns subsequently connects the narrative of *Ayyūb* to the broader structure of *Sūrat Ṣād*, which also encompasses the stories of Prophets *Dāwūd* and *Sulaymān*. Within this framework, *Ayyūb*'s patience is presented as a spiritual exemplar for Prophet Muḥammad in enduring opposition from the Quraysh. Johns highlights two central motifs in the sūrah: the term *nadāʾ* (to call), representing prayer, and the divine attribute *al-Wahhāb* (The Bestower). These motifs serve to contrast the ineffectual calls of the disbelievers with the prayers of the righteous servants, which are answered.

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40 Khalafullāh, *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm.*

41 Anthony H. Johns, "Narrative, Intertext and Allusion in the Qur'anic Presentation of Job," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1999): 1–25, https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.1999.1.1.1.

42 Johns; Anthony H. Johns, "Three Stories of a Prophet: Al-Ṭabarī's Treatment of Job in Sūrah al-Anbiyāʾ 83–84(Part i)," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2001): 39–61, https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2001.3.2.39.

Johns' application of narrative criticism is grounded in his dual conceptualization of revelation: the Qurʾān as both a process and an event. As a process, the Qurʾān is interpreted through the perspective of historical revelation, which informs the evolution of its themes and narratives. As an event, it is understood as a divine act of communication that remains dynamic through the continuous engagement of the community with the text. Within this framework, God is positioned as the omniscient implied author, while the implied reader varies—initially, Prophet Muḥammad during the original revelation, and subsequently, the Muslim community during the canonization of the *muṣḥaf*. Accordingly, the narrative of Prophet *Ayyūb* functions not only as a prophetic account but also as a source of spiritual reflection across successive generations.

The application of the methodologies proposed by Khalafullāh and Johns offers two distinct models of literary analysis that underscore the moral and spiritual functions of Qur'anic narratives, albeit with differing emphases. Khalafullāh focuses on the aesthetic qualities of language and the intent behind narration, while Johns prioritizes narrative structure and the coherence of the story. Collectively, their approaches enhance the study of Qur'anic narratives by establishing an interpretive framework that transcends debates concerning historicity, thereby affirming that these stories function as theological and ethical media operating through the aesthetic and rhetorical power of narrative.

Table 1
Epistemological and Narrative Comparison between Khalafullāh and Johns

Aspect	Ahmad Khalafullāh	A. H. Johns
Epistemological Foundation	Literature as the medium of revelation; rejection of historical verification.	Narrative criticism; focus on structure and the chronology of revelation.
Object of Study	The story of the Companions of the Cave (Q. al-Kahfi).	The story of Prophet Job (Q. Ṣād, al-Anbiyāʾ, al-Anʿām, al-Nisāʾ).
Analytical Method	Analysis of rhetorical style, symbolism, and psychological effect.	Analysis of plot, characters, point of view, and narrative motifs.
Interpretive Aim	To uncover moral and spiritual messages through linguistic aesthetics.	To identify narrative unity and theological meaning through story structure.
Conception of Revelation	Revelation as an aesthetic text that inspires faith.	Revelation as a process and event of divine communication.

Truth Value of the Narrative	Moral–spiritual rather than historical.	Structural–theological, mediated through narrative construction.
Theological Implications	Narrative as a medium for the internalization of faith-based values.	Narrative as a reflection of prophetic experience and divine–human communication.

Source: Author's analysis

Comparative-Critical Analysis: Epistemological and Hermeneutical Implications

Although Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafullāh and A.H. Johns both developed literary interpretations of Qur'anic narratives, the distinctions between their approaches extend beyond mere technical or methodological differences. Rather, these differences arise from fundamental epistemological assumptions. The selection of methodology in literary *tafsīr* (interpretation) not only affects the manner in which the text is read but also shapes the conceptualization of the authority of revelation, the role of history, and the boundaries of legitimacy in interpreting the Qurʾān within a diverse interpretative tradition.[43]

Khalafullāh's methodology aims to reconceptualize *tafsīr* within the Islamic scholarly tradition by framing Qur'anic narratives as the aesthetic vehicle of revelation. By eschewing historical verification as the standard for assessing the veracity of these accounts, Khalafullāh redirects attention from empirical accuracy to the communicative intent and ethical influence of the narratives. Within this paradigm, history is not entirely negated but is positioned as a rhetorical context that underpins the message of faith.[44] This approach facilitates the interpretation of Qur'anic narratives without imposing the anachronistic limitations of contemporary historiography on the revelatory text.[45]

From a hermeneutical standpoint, Khalafullāh's emphasis on the literary function and aesthetic attributes of language indicates an expansion of interpretative possibilities. Qur'anic narratives are interpreted not as literal historical accounts necessitating empirical validation, but as narrative constructs intended to shape the religious consciousness of the audience (Khalafullāh, 1999; al-Khūlī, 1961).[46] Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that such an expansion may risk relativizing meaning if it is not anchored by well-defined epistemological parameters. When the veracity of a narrative is exclusively linked to its moral and psychological effects, the relationship between revelation and historical reality

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[43] Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices, Volume 2: The Contemporary Period* (n.d.); McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, vols. 1–6.

[44] Khalafullāh, *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*.

[45] Abu Zayd, *Mafhūm Al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsah Fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*.

[46] Khalafullāh, *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*; Al-Khūlī, *Manāhij Al-Tajdīd*.

becomes problematic—especially within Islamic theology, which asserts God's active involvement in human history.[47]

In contrast to Khalafullāh, A.H. Johns proposes a narrative criticism approach predicated on the notion that the meaning of Qur'anic narratives emerges from their structural composition and the dynamics of narration, which are intricately linked to the process of revelation. By conceptualizing the Qurʾān as both a process and an event, Johns sustains a productive tension between the historical context of revelation and the canonical coherence of the *muṣḥaf*.[48] This methodology permits Qur'anic narratives to be interpreted simultaneously as responses to particular historical circumstances and as theological narratives that maintain their relevance for readers across successive generations.

Johns's narrative criticism carries significant epistemological implications. By emphasizing intertextuality, allusion, and narrative dynamics, it enables readers to actively participate in the construction of meaning, despite Johns's own affirmation of the canonical authority of the Qur'anic text. These hermeneutic implications become more apparent when his work is examined in relation to modern interpretative theories, such as those proposed by Ricoeur.[49] Within this contemporary hermeneutic framework, the meaning of Qur'anic narratives is not fixed but is negotiated through the interaction among the text, tradition, and reader. Although this approach is academically productive and consistent with developments in contemporary literary criticism, it simultaneously challenges the classical Islamic *tafsīr* paradigm, which prioritizes the authority of transmission (*riwāyah*), consensus (*ijmāʿ*), and the restriction of meaning within defined theological parameters.[50]

A critical comparison between Khalafullāh and Johns demonstrates that their principal divergence lies in the manner in which they situate history and the reader within the process of meaning construction. Khalafullāh tends to subordinate history to the literary objective of revelation, whereas Johns integrates the history of revelation as a fundamental component of the narrative framework that informs meaning.[51] Likewise, whereas Khalafullāh somewhat restricts the reader's role

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[47] Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition.*

[48] See: Johns, "Narrative, Intertext and Allusion in the Qur'anic Presentation of Job"; Johns, "Three Stories of a Prophet: Al-Ṭabarī's Treatment of Job in Sūrah al-Anbiyāʾ 83–84(Part i)."

[49] See: Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Johns, "Narrative, Intertext and Allusion in the Qur'anic Presentation of Job."

[50] See: Norman Calder, *Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Claude Gilliot, "Exegesis of the Qurʾān: Classical and Medieval," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 59–81.

[51] See: Khalafullāh, *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī Fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*; Johns, "Three Stories of a Prophet: Al-Ṭabarī's Treatment of Job in Sūrah al-Anbiyāʾ 83–84(Part i)."

through the text's moral orientation, Johns permits a more expansive role for the reader as a hermeneutic agent, consistent with reader-oriented critical approaches in the study of religious texts.[52]

In contemporary Qur'anic studies, the interplay between Khalafullāh's and Johns's methodologies facilitates the development of a more integrative framework for literary *tafsīr*. Khalafullāh's approach establishes a normative foundation that upholds theological orientation and faith-based objectives within the literary interpretation of the Qurʾān. Conversely, Johns's narrative criticism provides analytical tools for the systematic and dynamic examination of narrative structures.[53] By selectively synthesizing these two approaches, it is possible to formulate a mode of Qur'anic literary *tafsīr* that circumvents historical reductionism while preserving a robust epistemological basis for understanding the interrelations among revelation, history, and the community of interpreters.

This critical-comparative analysis reveals that literary *tafsīr* of the Qurʾān constitutes not merely an alternative methodological approach but also a domain of epistemological inquiry that engages with fundamental questions concerning the veracity of revelation, the function of history, and the authority of interpretation. Acknowledging these implications is crucial for the advancement of Qur'anic narrative studies that are simultaneously academically innovative and theologically conscientious within the broader context of global Qur'anic scholarship.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the fundamental distinction between Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafullāh's literary methodology and A.H. Johns's narrative criticism extends beyond their respective approaches to interpreting Qur'anic narratives. It engages with a more profound issue concerning the positioning of revelation in relation to both historical context and the interpreting subject. The principal finding is that, although both scholars reject positivistic historicist reductionism, they articulate epistemologically divergent conceptions of the truth of revelation. Khalafullāh situates the truth of Qur'anic narratives in their communicative function and moral significance, whereas Johns conceives of truth as grounded in narrative coherence, shaped by the revelatory process and the reader's interaction with the text. This distinction becomes apparent only through a critical comparative analysis of the two approaches, rather than through their mere juxtaposition.

The findings of this study indicate that the literary interpretation of the Qurʾān should not be regarded as a singular, uniform paradigm. Instead, it comprises a spectrum of approaches characterized by internal tensions between normative-

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[52] Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*; McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, vols. 1–6.

[53] Angelika Neuwirth, *Studying the Qurʾān in the Context of Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

theological perspectives and structural-hermeneutic analyses. Within the broader field of contemporary Qur'anic studies, this research contends that discussions concerning Qur'anic narratives must transcend the limited historical versus non-historical dichotomy. Rather, they should address more productive inquiries into how the meaning of revelation is generated, negotiated, and how its authority is maintained across diverse interpretive contexts. By incorporating the perspectives of Khalafullāh and Johns, this article contributes to expanding the methodological framework of Qur'anic studies, proposing a model of cross-traditional dialogue that bridges modern Islamic exegesis and Western religious literary criticism without compromising the theological complexity of the Qurʾān.

This study acknowledges certain limitations. The analysis predominantly centres on the principal works of Khalafullāh and Johns, alongside selected narrative examples, and thus does not encompass the full spectrum of literary Qur'anic interpretation present in global discourse. Furthermore, this research has not empirically investigated the application of these approaches within broader contemporary exegetical traditions, both within the Islamic world and Western academic contexts. Nevertheless, these limitations offer avenues for future research to examine the integration of literary and narrative-critical methodologies across a more diverse array of Qur'anic narratives, as well as to assess their influence on theories of interpretive authority and Qur'anic interpretive practices in the modern era.

This study demonstrates that analyzing Qur'anic narratives through literary methodologies constitutes not only a methodological innovation but also an epistemological inquiry necessitating a well-defined theoretical framework and hermeneutic accountability. Acknowledging this complexity is crucial for the progression of Qur'anic studies that are both academically pioneering and significant within the context of global scholarly discourse.

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