

Reinterpreting *Rā'inā*: A *Ma'nā cum Maghzā* Approach to Surah al-Baqarah [2]:104 and Its Relevance for Contemporary Communication Ethics

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Abstract

This study provides a comprehensive review of Surah al-Baqarah [2:104], focusing specifically on the prohibition of *rā'inā*. It employs a *ma'nā cum maghzā* approach to address the shortcomings of classical interpretations, which often overlook the verse's modern relevance. This research argues that the verse serves as a foundational principle for communication ethics, safeguarding prophetic dignity and preserving social harmony in Medina. The study aims to construct a holistic understanding of the verse through an analysis of its historical meaning (*al-ma'nā al-tārīkhī*) and its historical-contemporary significance (*al-maghzā al-tārīkhī* and *al-maghzā al-mutaḥarrīk al-mu'āṣir*). Utilizing linguistic, intratextual, intertextual, and socio-historical methods, this study reveals that the prohibition against *rā'inā* was not due to its inherent negative connotations or foreign origins. Instead, it constituted a divine response to the deliberate misuse and semantic distortion of the term by certain Jewish groups who sought to insult the Prophet Muḥammad. Furthermore, these findings hold significant contemporary relevance as a Quranic principle for combating hate speech and promoting *wasatiyyah* (moderation) within pluralistic societies. This research contributes to Quranic studies by offering a deeper interpretation that challenges traditional views and provides a framework for addressing modern communication challenges.

[Studi ini secara komprehensif meninjau Surah al-Baqarah [2]:104, khususnya larangan *rā'inā*. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan *ma'nā cum maghzā* untuk

mengatasi kekurangan dalam interpretasi klasik yang sering mengabaikan relevansinya di era modern. Penelitian ini berargumen bahwa ayat tersebut berfungsi sebagai dasar etika komunikasi, melindungi martabat kenabian, dan menjaga harmoni sosial di Madinah. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk membangun pemahaman holistik tentang ayat tersebut melalui analisis makna historis (*al-ma'nā al-tārīkhī*) dan signifikansi historis-kontemporernya (*al-maghzā al-tārīkhī* dan *al-maghzā al-mutaḥarrik al-mu'āṣir*). Dengan menggunakan metode linguistik, intratextual, intertextual, dan sosio-historis, studi ini mengungkapkan bahwa larangan terhadap *rā'inā* bukan disebabkan oleh konotasi negatif yang melekat atau asal-usul asingnya, melainkan sebagai respons ilahi terhadap penyalahgunaan dan distorsi semantik yang disengaja oleh kelompok-kelompok Yahudi tertentu yang bertujuan untuk menghina Nabi Muhammad. Selain itu, temuan ini sangat relevan saat ini sebagai prinsip Qur'ani untuk melawan ujaran kebencian dan mempromosikan wasatiyyah (moderasi) dalam masyarakat yang plural. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada studi Al-Qur'an dengan menawarkan interpretasi yang lebih mendalam yang menantang pandangan tradisional dan menyediakan kerangka kerja untuk mengatasi tantangan komunikasi modern.]

Keywords: Surah al-Baqarah [2]:104, *Rā'inā*, Communication Ethics, Wasatiyyah, *Ma'nā cum Maghzā*.

Introduction

The Qur'an, the holy scripture of Muslims, asserts that it is written in pure Arabic. However, long before the revelation of the Qur'an, significant cultural and linguistic interactions between Arab and non-Arab communities around the Arabian Peninsula influenced the Arabic language itself. Researchers have identified several vocabulary items in the Qur'an that are derived from Syriac, Hebrew, Nabataean, and Aramaic.¹ This phenomenon has sparked extensive discussions among Muslim scholars regarding the meaning and origin of non-Arabic words in the Qur'an. One specific term that has become a focal point of debate is *rā'inā* in Surah al-Baqarah [2]: 104, "O you who have believed, say not '*rā'inā*' but say '*unẓurnā*' and listen. And for the disbelievers is a painful punishment."

Several classical *mufassirūn* (interpreters), including Sa'labī, Zamakhsharī, Bayḍāwī, and Ibn Kathīr, following the interpretations of Ibn 'Abbās, Muqātil, and Māturīdī, assert that the term *rā'inā* is derived from Hebrew or Syriac and is

¹ Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, vol. 1 (Maktabah al-'Abikān, 1998), 303–4; Cristoph Luxenberg, "The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran," 2007; Walid Saleh, *The Etimologycal Fallacy and Qur'anic Studies: Muhammad, Paradise, and Late Antiquity*. In *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu*, ed. Nicolai Sinai Angelika Newrith and Michael Marx (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2010); John Wansbrough, "Arabic Rhetoric and Qur'anic Exegesis" 31, no. 3 (2009): 469–85.

associated with cursing (*ru'ūnah*).² Conversely, Mujāhid, al-Ḍaḥḥāk, Qatādah, 'Aṭīyyah, and Ibn Zayd contend that the term originated from Jewish expressions. Meanwhile, 'Aṭā', Abī 'Āliyah, and Ibn Jurayj attribute its origin to the speech of the Anṣār during the pre-Islamic era (*Jāhiliyyah*).³ In contrast, Abī Ḥayyān posits that *rā'inā* was a common Arabic term used by the general populace, rather than being restricted to specific groups.⁴

This divergence of views extends to the overall interpretation of Surah al-Baqarah [2]:104. Ṭabarī emphasizes the *ẓāhir al-āyah* (exoteric meaning), considering the term *rā'inā* to be undesirable in the eyes of Allah and unsuitable for addressing the Prophet. For him, the change in terminology was a matter of linguistic and ethical consideration, rather than solely a reflection of the word's origin.⁵ Conversely, Qurṭubī and Ibn Kathīr approach the issue from a legal perspective, agreeing to prohibit the use of *rā'inā* because it is a Hebrew term that signifies insult (*ru'ūnah*). For Qurṭubī, this prohibition serves as a precautionary measure (*sadd al-dharī'ah*) against negative connotations and reflects a concern for tashabbuh (resemblance to another people).⁶ Similarly, Ibn Kathīr directly categorizes it as a form of tashabbuh.⁷ A more contextual approach is provided by Muḥammad 'Abduh, who views the prohibition of *rā'inā* as applicable to the believers of that time when addressing the Prophet. He argues that the term *rā'inā* encompasses a range of meanings, including both *al-murā'āh* (attention/patronage) and *al-ru'ūnah* (insult/abuse). Thus, this verse primarily aims to educate the Companions on the ethics of communication with the Prophet, encouraging them to be more civil and attentive to subtle linguistic nuances.⁸

The emergence of these differing narratives indicates an unresolved interpretative issue regarding the understanding of this verse. To address this, the present study reexamines the meaning of Surah al-Baqarah [2:104] using the *ma'nā cum maghzā* approach developed by Sahiron Syamsuddin.⁹ This approach facilitates the exploration of historical meaning (*al-ma'nā al-tārīkhī*), which includes a linguistic analysis of the terms *rā'inā* and *unẓurnā*, an intratextual study concerning the *munāsabah* (coherence) of the verse and related verses such as Surah an-Nisā'

² Al-Tha'labī, *Al-Kashf Wa al-Bayān*, vol. 1 (Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2002), 251; N. A. al-K. Al-Bayḍāwī, "Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta'wīl," ed. M. 'Abdurrahmān Al-Mar'ashyī, vol. 1 (Dār al-Iḥyā' al-'Arabī, 1998), 99–100; A. al-F. I. ibn K. Al-Dimashqī, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'an al-'Azīm*, vol. 1 (Muassasah Qurṭubah, 2000), 5; Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, 1:307–8.

³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Ay al-Qur'an*, vol. 2 (Dār Hajr, 2001), 375–76.

⁴ Al-Andalusī, *Baḥr Al-Muḥīṭ*, vol. 1 (Dār al-Kutūb al-'Ilmiyah, 1993), 508.

⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Ay al-Qur'an*, 2001, 2:379–80.

⁶ Al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'an*, vol. 2 (Muassasah al-Risālah, 2006), 293–94.

⁷ Al-Dimashqī, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'an al-'Azīm*, 1:5–6.

⁸ M. 'Abduh, *Tafsīr Al-Manār*, Jil.1 (al-Manār, 1931), 409–10.

⁹ Sahiron Syamsuddin Dkk, *Pendekatan Ma'na Cum Maghza Atas Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis: Menjawab Problem Sosial Keagamaan di Era Kontemporer*, ed. Sahiron Syamsuddin (Yogyakarta: Ladang Kata, 2020); Sahiron Syamsuddin, *Hermeneutika dan Pengembangan Ulumul Qur'an*. (Nawasea Press: Yogyakarta, 2017).

[4:46], as well as an intertextual analysis with poetic traditions and Ḥadīth. Additionally, it encompasses an understanding of the socio-historical context of Medina, both at the micro level (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) and the macro level (the dynamics of Medinan society). Furthermore, this research will identify the historical significance (*al-maghzā al-tārīkhī*) of the verse in the context of linguistic ethics, the prevention of semantic distortion, the protection of the Prophet's dignity, and efforts toward socio-political harmonization in Medina. Moreover, the dynamic contemporary significance (*al-maghzā al-mutaḥarrīk al-mu'āṣir*) of this verse will be discussed, particularly its relevance to contemporary communication ethics, combating hate speech and bullying, and promoting moderation in pluralistic societies in the modern era. Through this comprehensive approach, this research aims to complement previous studies and provide a more holistic and relevant understanding of Surah al-Baqarah [2:104].

The Semantic Complexity of *Rā' inā*

A profound understanding of a Qur'anic verse requires an exploration of its historical meaning (*al-ma' inā al-tārīkhī*), which entails a linguistic analysis of the text, as well as intratextual and intertextual studies, and consideration of the historical context. This approach seeks to capture the original meaning and initial implications of the text within the spatio-temporal framework of its revelation.

A linguistic analysis of the key lexemes in Surah Al-Baqarah [2:104], specifically the terms *rā' inā* and *unḡurnā*, reveals underlying semantic complexities. The word *rā' inā* has been a topic of discussion among scholars since the early generations, including Ibn 'Abbās, Mujāhid, Muqātil bin Sulaymān, Sufyān al-Thawrī, Abū 'Ubaydah, 'Abd al-Razzāq, al-Akhfash, Ibn Qutaybah, Ṭabarī, and al-Māturīdī. The central debate focuses on whether the term carries a derogatory connotation.

Etymologically, the term *rā' inā* originates from the root letters *rā' - ayn - nūn*. According to Abū Manṣūr, this root can form several words: *ra'ana*, which means something that becomes a concern or tendency; *ra'una*, meaning frivolous or foolish; and *ru'ina*, meaning confused. In a derogatory context, *rā' inā* is associated with the derivation *ru'ūnah* from the root *ra'una*.¹⁰ However, the word *rā' inā* can also be derived from the root *ra'ā*, which is the *fi'il amr* (imperative verb) form of *murā'āh*, *ra'āh*, and *ir'ā'*. This derivation conveys the meaning "to pay attention, to guard, or to hold onto." Therefore, in the context of the verse, *rā' inā* can be

¹⁰ Al-Ḥamzānī, *Al-Kitāb al-Farīd fī l'rāb al-Qur'an al-Majīd*, ed. M. N. al-D. Al-Fatīh, vol. 1 (Dār al-Zamān li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī', 2006), 353–54; Al-Rāzī, *Mu'jam Muqāyis Al-Lughah* ed. 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, vol. 2 (Dār al-Fikr, 1979), 408; Muḥammad bin Aḥmad bin al-Azhārī, *Tahzīb Al-Lughah*, ed. Muḥammad 'Auḡ Mar'ab, 1st ed., vol. 2 (Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2001), 206; Zaynuddīn Abī 'Abdillāh Muḥammad bin Abī Bakr 'Abd al-Qādir al-Ḥanafī al-Rāzī, *Mukhtār Al-Ṣaḥḥāh*, 5th ed. (Maktabah al-'Iṣriyyah al-Dār al-Mūzījīyyah, 1999), 125.

interpreted as *isma* ‘*minnā ḥattā nafhamaka, wa tafham* ‘*annā* (listen to us, so that we may make you understand, and you may understand us).¹¹

In comparison, the lexeme *unẓurnā* is derived from the root letters *nūn-zā-rā*, which fundamentally means "to look, both physical and introspective meanings. The Qur'an employs this term 131 times.¹² Occasionally, *unẓurnā* is also interpreted as *al-intizār* (to wait), as illustrated in Surah Al-Baqarah [2:104], An-Nisā' [4:46], and Al-Ḥadīd [53:13]. In the context of Surah Al-Baqarah [2:104], it can convey the meanings of *işbir ḥattā nufahhimaka mā naqūl* (be patient until we make you understand what we are saying) or *unẓur ilaynā* (look at us), thereby shifting its attributive meaning.¹³ The prohibition against using *rā 'inā* (*lā taqūlū rā 'inā*) and the directive to substitute it with *unẓurnā* indicate an issue of communication ethics. This concern is further underscored by the subsequent phrase *wa-sma'ū* (and listen), which in the Qur'anic context often signifies a disregard for a command. Additionally, the threat *wa lil kāfirīna 'adhābun alīm* (and for the disbelievers, there will be a painful torment) at the conclusion of the verse strongly reinforces that Allah disapproves of the use of *rā 'inā* due to its negative connotations.

Interpreting Through Intra-Qur'anic Connections

Understanding the coherence and semantic unity among verses in the Qur'an is fundamental to intratextual study, based on the principle that the Qur'an elucidates its parts through other parts (*yufassiru ba'duhū ba'dā*). This analysis encompasses both a syntagmatic aspect, which examines word meanings through their linear relationships with surrounding words, and a paradigmatic aspect, which seeks to comprehend concepts and symbols by associating them with similar or contrasting concepts or symbols.

The linear network (*munāsabah*) of Surah Al-Baqarah [2:104] is integrated into the sequence of verses 97 to 105. The preceding verses, specifically Surah Al-Baqarah [2:97-98], illustrate the animosity of the Jews towards Jibrīl, whom they regarded as a harbinger of violence and bloodshed, prompting Allah to designate them as His enemies.¹⁴ Subsequently, Surah Al-Baqarah [2:99-101] emphasizes the disbelief (*fāsiq*) of the Jews, who violated their commitment to accept the truth of the Qur'an and the prophethood of Muḥammad, despite it being foretold in their sacred texts. Furthermore, in Surah Al-Baqarah [2: 102-103], it is recounted that the Jews chose

¹¹ Al-Ḥamzānī, *Al-Kitāb al-Farīd fī I'rāb al-Qur'an al-Majīd* 353-54; Muḥammad bin Aḥmad bin al-Azhārī, *Tahzīb Al-Lughah*, ed. Muḥammad 'Auḍ Mar'ab, 1st ed., vol. 3 (Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2001), 103.

¹² Z. F. al-Ḥusnī. *Al-Maqdisī, Faḥ al-Raḥmān Li-Ṭālib al-Āt al-Qur'an* (tp., 1905), 451-52.

¹³ Al-Wāḥidī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Basīṭ*, ed. M. bin 'Abd al-'Azīz Al-Khuḍayrī, vol. 3 (Al-Musahim, 2010), 215.

¹⁴ Ibn 'Ashūr, *Al-Taḥrīr Wa al-Tanwīr*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (Dār al-Tunisiyah li al-Nashr, 1984), 620.

to embrace magic as their guide, even distorting the records of Sulaymān's scribes and learning sorcery from Hārūt and Mārūt for nefarious purposes.¹⁵

Ultimately, through Surah Al-Baqarah [2]: 104-105 serves as a warning from Allah to the believers regarding the reprehensible behavior exhibited by some Jews towards Prophet Muḥammad. They distorted the meaning of the word *rā 'inā*, transforming it into an insult and thereby prohibiting Muslims from using that term in reference to the Prophet. The verses surrounding Surah Al-Baqarah [2]: 104 provide a comprehensive illustration of the negative attitude displayed by these individuals towards Prophet Muḥammad and his teachings, while simultaneously cautioning believers to avoid similar conduct. This interpretation aligns with Ibn 'Āshūr, who compares the Jews' insult directed at the Prophet through the term *rā 'inā* to the actions of a camouflaged sorcerer. They concealed the true meaning of *rā 'inā* that they intended, opting for a word that could be wielded as an attack against the Prophet while simultaneously shielding themselves from accountability.¹⁶

To gain a deeper understanding of the prohibition of *rā 'inā*, Surah An-Nisā' [4:46] serves as a crucial paradigmatic verse. This verse states: "The Jews, there are those who alter words from their proper places. They say, 'We hear, but we disobey,' and they also say, 'Listen,' while you, Muḥammad, hear nothing. They say, 'Rā 'inā,' twisting their tongues and insulting the religion. Had they said, 'We hear and obey, and listen, and look at us,' it would have been better for them and more appropriate. However, Allah has cursed them for their disbelief, and they do not believe except for a few."

This verse provides essential additional information regarding the prohibition of the term *rā 'inā* in three aspects. First, Allah describes the wicked behavior of the Jews, who often altered words from their original contexts. Al-Naḥḥās opines that this alteration applied not only to the Torah but also to their daily activities. Second, they twisted their tongues and used the word *rā 'inā* with the intention of insulting the religion. Some early exegetes, such as Qatādah, al-Ḍaḥḥāk, Ibn 'Abbās, and Ibn Zayd, interpreted the phrase *layyan bi alsinatihim* as distorting the meaning of a word to insult the Prophet or the teachings he conveyed.¹⁷ Third, Allah offers a more suitable expression as a substitute for *rā 'inā*, namely *unẓurnā*. This indicates that replacing *rā 'inā* with *unẓurnā* reflects proper linguistic etiquette when interacting with the Prophet. Thus, the term *rā 'inā* is prohibited when addressed to the Prophet, but its use is not prohibited in the context of ordinary interactions with others.¹⁸

¹⁵ Al-Wāḥidī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Basīṭ*, 29; Al-Baghawī, *Ma'ālim Tanzīl*, vol. 1 (Dar Thayyibah, 1988); Al-Dimashqī, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'an al-'Aẓīm*, 1:514; Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Ay al-Qur'an*, 2001, 2:313, 361.

¹⁶ Muḥammad Ṭāhir Ibn 'Āshūr., *Al-Taḥrīr Wa al-Tanwīr*, 1:651.

¹⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Ay al-Qur'an*, vol. 7 EDN-1 (Dār Hijr, 2003), 108.

¹⁸ Al-Tha'labī., *Al-Kashf Wa al-Bayān*, 1:323.

External Textual Evidence: Poetry and Ḥadīth

Intertextual analysis examines the connections between the Qur’anic text and external texts, such as poetry and Hadith, to enhance the understanding of the term *rā’inā* in Surah Al-Baqarah [2: 104]. Ibn ‘Abbās highlighted the importance of poetry as a tool for interpreting the *gharīb* (unfamiliar) verses in the Qur’an, and he is noted for utilizing Jahiliyya poetry to elucidate no fewer than 200 issues of exegesis.¹⁹ Although the term *rā’inā* is prohibited in Surah Al-Baqarah [2: 104], early Islamic poets continued to incorporate this word into their verses. Jarīr (28-110 AH), a poet from the Tamīm tribe, recited the following verse while hosting a blind man:²⁰

Fama rā’inā illā biḍāḥik nārinā # ‘Arīḍ afā’i al-ḥālibīna ḍarīr

(What we see is only the smile of our fire, which brings peace. Meanwhile, around us, there is a large invisible snake)

Abū ‘Ubaydah explained that the term in that verse meant “to pay attention,” referring to Jarīr’s admiration for the emaciated blind man and his behavior, which resembled that of dangerous desert snakes.²¹ Other poems by Abū Ismā‘īl al-Tirmidhī (d. 280 AH) and Aḥmad bin Yaḥyā also convey similar meanings.²²

Wa idhā qīla māta fulānun # Rā’anā dhāka sā’ata mā naḥīr
Nadḥkurul-mawta ‘inda dhāka wa nansāhu # Idhā ghayyabathu ‘annal-qubūru

(When it is said that someone has died, reveal to us, if only for a moment, that which perplexes us. So that we may remember death at that moment, only to forget it again once the grave distances him from us)

Wa mā rā’anā illā yasīru bi-shurṭatin # Wa ‘ahdī bihi fīnā yafushshu bakīr

(We only take notice when he walks with the police, and if my agreement with him were to become known, it would spell trouble for us)

¹⁹ Abī al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī., *Asbāb Al-Nuzūl al-Qur’an*, vol. 1, 1991, 143–44, <https://doi.org/10.21608/bfdm.1981.34617>.

²⁰ Jarīr, “Dīwān Jarīr Bi-Sharḥ Muḥammad Bin Ḥabīb,” ed. Nu‘mān Muḥammad Amīn Ṭahā, vol. 2 (Dār al-Ma‘ārif, n.d.), 377.

²¹ Abū ‘Ubaydah Ma‘mar bin al-Muthannā al-Taymī al-Baṣrī, *Sharḥ Naqā’id wa Al-Farazdaq*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Ḥūr wa Maḥmūd Khālīs, 1st ed., vol. 2 (al-Majma‘ al-Thaqāfī, 1998), 198.

²² Abū Bakr Aḥmad bin Marwān bin Muḥammad al-Daynūrī al-Qādī al-Mālikī., *Al-Mujālasah Wa Jawāhir al-‘Ilm*, ed. Abū ‘Ubaydah Mashhūr bin Ḥasan Āl Sulaymān, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1998), 141; al-Ḥasan bin Aḥmad bin ‘Abd Gaffār al-Fārisī., *Kitāb Al-Shi‘r Aw Sharḥ al-Abyāt al-Mushkilah al-I‘rāb*, ed. M. M. Al-Ṭanāhī, 1st ed. (Maktabah al-Khānjī, 1988), 498.

These three poems consistently illustrate that *rā'inā* was commonly used at that time to mean “to pay attention” (from the root *ra'ā*). Conversely, there is no evidence of the term *rā'inā* being used to convey the meaning of insult (*ru'ūnah*) in poetic tradition. The word *ra'na* and its derivatives, however, do carry a derogatory connotation, as demonstrated in two verses by al-Mujāshī'ī (d. 134 AH), which imply foolishness.²³

Meanwhile, in the Hadith tradition, the term *rā'inā*, meaning “to pay attention,” is also found in the narration of Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal (d. 241 AH): “Abū Kāmil narrated to us, Zuhayr narrated to us, and Abū Hammām narrated to us from 'Uthmān bin Ḥassān, who reported that Fulfulah Al Ju'fī stated, was among those who were startled and rushed to 'Abdullāh bin Mas'ūd regarding various Muṣḥafs. Man, then remarked, did not come to visit, but because this matter caught our attention (startled us). Ibn Mas'ūd responded, the Qur'an was revealed to your Prophet from seven doors with seven letters, and the book preceding the Qur'an was revealed from seven doors with one letter.”

The expressions in those poems and Hadith indicate that the term *rā'inā* was still commonly used by Arabs, including the Muslim community, after the Prophet, to mean “to pay attention”. Furthermore, there is no evidence of *rā'inā* being used with the connotation of insult (*ru'ūnah*); that meaning is instead conveyed through direct derivations from the root *ra'ana*. This further strengthens the argument that *rā'inā* in Surah Al-Baqarah [2:104] and An-Nisā' [4:46] originates from the root *ra'ā*.

Situating the Revelation: Micro and Macro Contexts

The historical context surrounding Surah Al-Baqarah [2:104] can be analyzed through two aspects: micro-context (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) and macro-context (the dynamics of Madinan society). First, the micro-context of Surah Al-Baqarah [2:104] is recorded in the *asbāb al-nuzūl* narrations, which can be categorized into two main scenarios. The first scenario indicates that the term *rā'inā* was initially used by the Companions when addressing the Prophet and was subsequently echoed by the Jews with the intent of *ru'ūnah* (insult). The term *ru'ūnah* is claimed to be a Hebrew expression known only to the Jews, who openly employed this phrase to deride the Prophet: “Previously, we secretly mocked Muḥammad, but now we can mock him openly—because this expression, *rā'inā*, is used in their language to insult. Therefore, when they approached the Prophet, they confidently said, ‘O Muḥammad, *rā'inā*,’ and then laughed. A man from the Anṣār named Sa'd ibn 'Ubādah, who was proficient in the Jewish language, understood the reason for their laughter. He admonished them, saying, ‘O enemies of Allah, may Allah curse you. By the One in whose hand is the soul of Muḥammad, I will sever the head of anyone among you who utters this expression—*rā'inā*’. Upon hearing Sa'd's words, they

²³ Ibn-Manzūr, *Lisān Al-'Arab*, vol. 13 (Dār Ṣādir, 2000), 182.

objected, exclaiming in astonishment, 'Don't you also say the same thing?' Subsequently, Allah revealed this verse".²⁴

The second scenario, based on the accounts of al-Ḍaḥḥāk, 'Aṭiyyah, Qatādah, and al-Suddī, indicates that the term *rā'inā* was directly spoken by two Jews, Mālik bin al-Sayf and Rifā'ah bin Zayd, to Prophet Muḥammad. Upon hearing this, the believers also adopted the phrase, mistakenly believing it to be the way the People of the Book praised their prophets. Following this incident, Surah Al-Baqarah [2:104] was revealed.²⁵

However, the *asbāb al-nuzūl* narrations mentioned above, according to Ṭabarī, exhibit issues with their chains of transmission (*sanad*). Furthermore, from a linguistic perspective, these narrations appear incoherent. This incoherence arises from the implication that the Muslim community was unaware that the word *rā'inā* could carry an insulting connotation (*ru'unah*), even though the term *rā'inā*—both in its insulting sense (derived from *ra'una*) and its neutral sense (from *ra'a*)—was commonly used in Arab society, as demonstrated through intertextual analysis. This finding simultaneously refutes the assertion that *rā'inā* was exclusively a term from the Jewish lexicon. Nevertheless, the linguistic convergence between Arabic and neighboring languages, including Hebrew (Jewish) and Syriac (Christian), is undeniable. Even prior to the advent of Islam, Christians utilized Arabic for everyday communication while employing Aramaic for liturgical purposes,²⁶ reflecting the social interconnectedness within the Arabian Peninsula. The resistant behavior of the Jewish community towards the Prophet can be understood not only in terms of religious belief but also through various other factors that underlie their animosity.

Second, the macro-context of Surah Al-Baqarah [2]:104 can be understood through the complex dynamics of Yathrib (Madinah), the location where the verse was revealed. Prior to the arrival of Prophet Muḥammad, Yathrib was beset by intricate socio-political conflicts, including disputes between the Jewish coalitions of Naẓīr and Qurayzah and the Jewish Qaynuqā' in the al-awālī (southern) region, which prompted the Qaynuqā' to relocate to the al-asāfil (central and northern) areas. Additionally, internal strife between the Aws and Khazraj tribes (Banī Qaylah) had persisted for 120 years, further exacerbated by their alliances with Jewish communities (the Aws allied with Qaynuqā', while the Khazraj allied with Naẓīr and Qurayzah).²⁷ The culmination of this conflict was the Battle of Bu'āth in 617 CE, which resulted in the deaths of leaders from both factions and triggered a significant crisis in Yathrib. It was within this context that Prophet Muḥammad emerged as a

²⁴ Al-Wāḥidī., *Asbāb Al-Nuzūl al-Qur'an*, 1:36.

²⁵ Al-Suyūṭī., *Lubāb Al-Nuqūl Fī Asbāb al-Nuzūl*. (Muassasah al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyah, 2002).

²⁶ E. El-Badawi, *The Qur'an and The Aramaic Gospel Traditions* (Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2014), 27.

²⁷ Y. Gaḍban, *Madīnah Yathrib Qabla Islām* (Dār al-Basyir, 1993), 107.

mediator, successfully resolving the conflict through the Pledges of Aqabah 1 and 2.²⁸

The arrival of Prophet Muḥammad and the Muslims marked a pivotal moment in addressing social conflicts in Yathrib. After uniting the Aws and Khazraj tribes, the Prophet was appointed as the supreme leader of Yathrib, tasked with establishing a peaceful governance structure in a diverse society. He subsequently drafted the Charter of Madinah (the Medinan Charter), which aimed to unite the various tribal and religious communities based on principles of mutual support, cooperation, and the development of the city of Madinah. This agreement fostered harmony among Muslims (Anṣār and Muhājirīn), Jews, and other groups (Misrawi, 2009).

Two years after the Prophet's arrival, the political dynamics of Madinah revealed the complexity of inter-communal relations. The Jewish community, which initially accepted the Prophet's leadership for pragmatic reasons, sought to elevate their status.²⁹ However, the Muslim victory in the Battle of Badr (624 CE) became a significant turning point that ignited tensions between the Jewish and Muslim communities. Concerns about losing influence prompted some Jewish groups to resist, disseminate controversial issues, and even plan subversive actions. The escalation of tensions peaked when several Jewish communities—Naẓīr, Qurayẓah, and Qaynuqā'—systematically violated the agreements outlined in the Charter of Madinah.³⁰ Their actions constituted not merely administrative violations but a fundamental betrayal of the social construct that had been established. Their efforts, which included assassination attempts, anti-Islam propaganda, and external alliances with enemies of Islam, marked the transformation of the conflict from mere tension to open confrontation. This reality underscores the complex challenges of building a peaceful and just multicultural society in Madinah.

From Meaning to Significance: The Ethical, Semantic, and Political Lessons of Surah al-Baqarah [2]:104

The preceding exploration of the historical meaning (*al-ma'na al-tārīkhī*) of Surah Al-Baqarah [2: 104] offers a profound understanding of its historical significance (*al-maghzā al-tārīkhī*). This significance can be derived from several key points. Firstly, the linear network of Surah Al-Baqarah [2: 104], as analyzed in the preceding intratextual discussion, illustrates the reprehensible behavior of the Jews, who were prone to distorting words. In connection with the prohibition of the term *rā'inā*, Allah imparted linguistic ethics to the Companions to prevent them from emulating

²⁸ A. J. ibn M. ibn J. al-Ṭabarī, *Al-Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Dār al-Ma'ārif, n.d.), 355–68.

²⁹ M. Sirry, *Kemunculan Islam Dalam Kesarjanaan Revisionis EDN - 3* (Suka Press, 2021), 202.

³⁰ I. Hishām, *Sīrah Al-Nabawiyah*, ed. U. 'Abd al-S. Tadmurī, vol. 2 EDN-3 (Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1990), 143; M. Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Inner Traditions International, 1983), 127.

the undesirable behavior of the Jews when interacting with Prophet Muḥammad (Surah An-Nisā' [4: 46]). Through this verse, Allah firmly prohibited the believers from using the term *rā'inā* when addressing Prophet Muḥammad and provided an alternative, namely *unẓurnā*. This aligns with Ibn Kathīr's interpretation, who categorized the verse as a prohibition against *tashabbuh* (resembling or imitating a people). It is important to note that this prohibition applies only when the term is directed at the Prophet, as the word *rā'inā* continued to be used by early generations in poetic traditions and everyday conversation, as evidenced by a Companion's statement regarding the issue of Muṣḥaf in the Hadith narrated by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal.

Secondly, the prohibition of the word *rā'inā* serves as a preventative measure against the semantic distortion perpetrated by the Jews against Prophet Muḥammad, as explained in Surah An-Nisā' [4:46]. They exploited the phonetic similarity of the word *rā'inā* in Arabic with a similar term in Hebrew that carries a derogatory connotation. This manipulative behavior is described by Allah in the verse with the phrase *layyan bi alsinatihim*, which means their tongues or the existence of Allah's prohibition against the use of the word *rā'inā* by believers in Surah Al-Baqarah [2:104] serves as a mechanism to protect the dignity of Prophet Muḥammad as a Messenger of Allah. This prohibition aims to prevent believers from engaging in actions that could be misinterpreted as insults by the Jews, thereby closing the loophole that would allow them to disparage Prophet Muḥammad under the pretext of using the same word as the believers.

Thirdly, there is a significant correlation between Surah Al-Baqarah [2:104] and its historical context, particularly regarding Allah's response to prevailing circumstances. During the Meccan period, various instances of insults directed at Prophet Muḥammad were met with persuasive responses from Allah, as reflected in Surah Al-Muzzammil [73:10], Surah Al-Ḥijr [15:95], Surah Al-Qalam [68:44-45], Surah Al-An'ām [6:33-34], and Surah Al-Mu'minūn [23:96]. These responses illustrate a gentler and more sagacious approach. However, during the Medinan period, Allah adopted a more proactive stance in defending Prophet Muḥammad, as evidenced by Surah Al-Baqarah [2:104]. This verse serves as concrete evidence of Allah's resolute response in safeguarding him from all forms of insult.

This response reflects the increasing prominence of Islam during that period. The prohibition was not solely confined to communication ethics with the Prophet; it also conveyed a message with ethical and theological implications for the integrity of Islam. The Companions' unawareness or inadvertent use of the term *rā'inā* in reference to Prophet Muḥammad—regardless of whether it was intended in the same manner as by the Jews—could have provided an opportunity for the Jews to disparage Islam, as Allah revealed their intentions at the conclusion of Surah An-Nisā' [4]:46. Furthermore, Prophet Muḥammad's strong position as a political and social leader meant that any action that demeaned him would have significant

political repercussions for the integrity of his leadership within the diverse society of Madinah. Consequently, the existence of Surah Al-Baqarah [2]:104 is also part of the effort to maintain social harmony in Madinah.

The Significance of Dynamic Phenomena (al-Maghzā al-Mutaharik al-Mu'asir)

The historical insights gleaned from Surah al-Baqarah [2]:104, particularly its linguistic, ethical, and socio-political dimensions, offer a profound basis for understanding its dynamic contemporary significance (al-maghzā al-mutaharik al-mu'asir). This verse, revealed in a specific historical context to address certain challenges, continues to resonate with pressing issues faced by modern pluralistic societies.

The prohibition against using the word *rā'inā* in Surah Al-Baqarah [2:104] underscores the importance of ethical communication with Prophet Muḥammad. The term *rā'inā*, which translates to *isma' minnā hattā nufahhimaka, wa tafham annā* (listen to us, so that we may make you understand, and you may understand us)³¹, does not inherently carry a negative connotation. However, believers were instructed to refrain from using it due to its phonetic similarity to a Hebrew word that conveys an insult. This phonetic resemblance was exploited by some Jews to subtly insult Prophet Muḥammad (Surah An-Nisā' [4:46]). Consequently, this verse serves to educate the Companions on the importance of ethical discourse with Prophet Muḥammad while simultaneously closing the loophole that allowed for covert insults under the guise of using the same term as the believers.

This verse carries profound ethical implications, emphasizing the importance of linguistic sensitivity in communication, particularly regarding word choice and diction. It conveys a universal ethical principle that underscores the necessity of maintaining decorum, clarity, and honesty in all forms of communication. This principle is applicable not only to interactions with Prophet Muḥammad but also to all Muslims in various contexts, ranging from personal interactions to public discourse, and from interfaith dialogue to international diplomacy. The strong response of Companion Sa'd ibn 'Ubādah to the Jewish insult directed at Prophet Muḥammad, using the term *rā'inā*, serves as concrete evidence that carelessness in communication can lead to disharmony and even social conflict.

In the contemporary context, Indonesia, as a pluralistic nation, faces increasingly complex challenges related to communication ethics, such as hate speech and bullying. Data indicate that from 2011 to 2014, there were 369 reported cases of verbal bullying and cyberbullying.³² This statistic illustrates that both public and digital spaces can often be unwelcoming, causing harm to individuals and specific groups through harmful language, and can even incite social conflict within

³¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Ay al-Qur'an*, 2003, 7 EDN-1:374-76.

³² Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia, "KPAI: Kasus Bullying Dan Pendidikan Karakter," 16 Oktober, 2014, kpai.go.id.

society. These are precisely the issues that Surah Al-Baqarah [2:104] seeks to address. This verse emphasizes the importance of avoiding ambiguous, provocative, and insulting language while promoting the use of polite, courteous, and constructive communication. It implicitly encourages individuals to be sensitive to issues of communication ethics and simultaneously fosters respectful behavior towards others. Virtuous speech will undoubtedly have a significant impact on all aspects of life, creating a comfortable, harmonious, peaceful, and tranquil living environment. In a pluralistic society, the ethics of communication serve as the primary pathway to achieving the desired harmony.

Ultimately, this verse emphasizes a message of moderation within a pluralistic society, particularly regarding communication ethics. Communication ethics is a crucial aspect of promoting the values of moderation, which are essential for safeguarding the integrity of a nation. The value of moderation in Surah Al-Baqarah [2:104] is highlighted through the terms (*kāfir*), as well as the geographical context of Madinah, which serves as the backdrop for the verse's revelation. This indicates that the Qur'an, through this verse, affirms that Islam does not alienate other religious communities with differing beliefs. Islam does not antagonize the understandings they hold; rather, it opposes and condemns attitudes and behaviors that involve harmful social interactions, such as insulting, fighting, and killing. This signifies that Islam is open to diverse religious perspectives and does not intimidate the beliefs held by individuals. Islam advocates for freedom in theological matters while guiding its followers to live justly, upholding camaraderie and harmony. This message is clearly conveyed through this verse, which reflects the social context of Madinan society's pluralism, characterized by its diverse religions and ethnicities. Therefore, being a Muslim who is mindful of their speech is an integral part of embodying a moderate Islamic identity.

Instead of antagonizing differing understandings or beliefs, Islam, as reflected in this verse, fundamentally opposes and condemns attitudes and behaviors that lead to harmful social interactions, such as insulting, fighting, and killing. The shift from *rā'inā* to *unẓurnā* is a practical manifestation of this principle: it is not the existence of differences that is problematic, but the malicious exploitation of those differences to sow discord and disrespect. This signifies that Islam is inherently open to diverse religious perspectives and does not seek to intimidate the beliefs held by individuals. Islam advocates for freedom in theological matters while guiding its followers to live justly, upholding camaraderie and harmony in social dealings. This message is clearly conveyed through this verse, which reflects the social context of Madinan society's pluralism, characterized by its diverse religions and ethnicities. Therefore, embodying a Muslim identity that is mindful of speech and committed to ethical communication is an integral part of living out the values of moderation (*wasatiyyah*) and fostering a truly inclusive society.

Conclusion

This study, employing Sahiron Syamsuddin's *ma'nā cum maghẓā* approach, meticulously re-examines Surah al-Baqarah [2]:104 to uncover its historical meaning (*al-ma'nā al-tārīkhī*) and its multifaceted historical and contemporary significance (*al-maghẓā al-tārīkhī* and *al-maghẓā al-mutaḥarrik al-mu'āṣir*). Our historical analysis reveals the dual semantic potential of *rā'inā*. A crucial finding that challenges some classical interpretations is the compelling intertextual evidence from poetic and Ḥadīth traditions, which demonstrates that *rā'inā* was commonly used in its neutral sense even after the Qur'anic prohibition. This strongly indicates that the prohibition was not due to an inherent negative meaning of the term itself, but rather a direct divine response to its malicious appropriation and semantic distortion by certain Jewish groups to insult Prophet Muḥammad, as elucidated in Surah an-Nisā' [4]:46. This reframes the interpretive problem from one of linguistic origin to one of ethical communication and deliberate misrepresentation. Consequently, the historical significance of this verse is manifold: it instills linguistic and communication ethics, protects the Prophet's dignity from calculated semantic attacks, and marks a strategic shift in divine defense, ultimately contributing to socio-political harmonization in Madinah's pluralistic society.

The contemporary significance of Surah al-Baqarah [2:104] remains profoundly relevant. The divine instruction to avoid *rā'inā* resonates powerfully today, emphasizing the universal importance of ethical communication, linguistic sensitivity, and responsible discourse. This verse provides a foundational Qur'anic principle for combating harmful speech, hate speech, and bullying, urging individuals and communities to prioritize respectful and constructive language. Ultimately, it serves as a timeless call to mainstream moderation (*wasatiyyah*) and fostering inclusivity in diverse societies, demonstrating that a true Islamic identity embraces mutual respect and actively rejects communication that seeks to insult, distort, or sow discord.

This study makes a significant contribution to Qur'anic studies by offering a nuanced interpretation that transcends mere classical compilation. By providing robust intertextual evidence for the common usage of *rā'inā*, we challenge interpretations that attribute the prohibition solely to a foreign origin or an inherent negative connotation. Instead, we highlight the Qur'an's emphasis on combating deliberate linguistic manipulation within a dynamic social context. While this research offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The precise nature of the purported Hebrew or Syriac derogatory term that phonetically resembles *rā'inā* remains a subject of ongoing scholarly debate. Additionally, reliance on *asbāb al-nuzūl* narrations, despite their issues with sanad, means our interpretation emphasizes a pattern of linguistic manipulation rather than an unequivocally singular event. Future research could further explore the practical applications of Qur'anic communication ethics in diverse cultural contexts and conduct

comparative studies with other religious traditions regarding similar ethical communication frameworks.

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