

Critical Classification and Utilization of Israiliyyat Narratives in Tafsir al-Jamal: Perspectives of Classical Scholars

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Abstract

This study critically analyzes Israiliyyat narratives in Tafsir al-Jamal by examining the methodological classification and scholarly perspectives articulated by classical authorities, notably Ibn Kathir and al-Nawawi. The research highlights that Israiliyyat can be categorized into three main groups: those accepted by Qur'anic or authentic Prophetic standards, those rejected due to contradiction with Islamic sources, and those whose authenticity remains indeterminate. Al-Nawawi's approach permits the contextual use of weak hadith and non-authenticated reports for moral exhortation and historical illustration, provided they are not fabricated. The study emphasizes the need for critical evaluation and clear differentiation between Israiliyyat and divine revelation, especially in Southeast Asian educational environments where narrative appeal is strong. By adopting nuanced assessment criteria, Israiliyyat narratives can enrich teaching and understanding, while safeguarding against theological confusion and misinterpretation of legal principles.

Keywords: Israiliyyat, Tafsir al-Jamal, Scholarly Classification, Pedagogical Practice

Introduction

The study of Israiliyyat, the term used for stories and reports that have their roots in Jewish and Christian traditions and subsequently became part of Islamic exegetical literature, occupies a significant yet controversial place in the discipline of Qur'anic interpretation. Throughout centuries of Islamic scholarship, exegetes have both utilized and debated the value of Israiliyyat as tools for enriching the understanding of Qur'anic stories, especially those relating to prophets and ancient peoples. For some scholars, these narratives offer valuable context, historical color, and moral lessons that help explain the brevity and subtlety of certain Qur'anic passages. They are seen as illustrative supplements that can bridge cultural and chronological gaps between scriptural revelation and later audiences, especially in regions where oral and narrative traditions are a dominant mode of religious education (Azra, 2014).

However, other scholars have voiced strong reservations regarding the inclusion of *Israiliyyat* in *tafsir*. They have cautioned that many of these accounts suffer from questionable authenticity, often lacking solid chains of transmission or originating from sources external to Islamic revelation. Critics argue that some *Israiliyyat* may introduce theological confusion or contradict established Qur'anic principles, thus possessing the potential to mislead readers about core aspects of belief or legal injunctions (Ibn Kathir, 2000; al-Nawawi, 1996).

Among the key works in which *Israiliyyat* feature prominently is *al-Futūḥāt al-Ilāhiyyah bi-Taḍḥīḥ al-Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, known widely as *Tafsir al-Jamal*. Compiled by Shaykh Sulayman ibn 'Umar al-'Ujaili al-Shafi'i (d. 1204 H/1790 CE), the *tafsir* is regarded as an influential source, particularly in Southeast Asian Islamic learning circles, such as *pesantren* and *madrasah* settings. The broad reception of *Tafsir al-Jamal* highlights both the appeal and complexity of integrating *Israiliyyat* into methodological approaches to the Qur'an.

This article undertakes a critical examination of *Israiliyyat* in *Tafsir al-Jamal*, analyzing their sources, patterns of transmission, authenticity status, and interpretive function. The discussion explores how *Israiliyyat* are identified and classified within the *tafsir*, the implications these narratives have for doctrinal (*'aqidah*) and legal (*aḥkām*) matters, as well as classical scholarly strategies that inform contemporary handling of such material. By expanding the scope of this analysis to a comprehensive length, this paper seeks not only to review but also to situate the ongoing debates surrounding *Israiliyyat* and their role within Qur'anic studies.

Literature Review

The concept of *Israiliyyat* occupies a long-standing and dynamic place in Islamic intellectual history, tracing back to the foundational centuries of the Muslim *ummah*. *Israiliyyat* refers to narratives and accounts originating from Jewish and Christian cultures that subsequently found their way into Islamic discourse, particularly within the literature of *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis). The pioneering exegete al-Tabari (d. 310 H/923 CE) openly incorporated reports from notable converts such as Ka'b al-Aḥbār and Wahb ibn Munabbih, whose narrations have served as core sources for much of the *Israiliyyat* material encountered in later exegetical works (Wansbrough, 1977). Their presence in such widely-circulated works as *Tafsir al-Tabari* helped set the precedent for subsequent generations of scholars with varying attitudes towards these reports.

From the perspective of classification, Ibn Kathir (2000) established a clear methodological standard in dealing with *Israiliyyat* by dividing them into three distinct categories. The first includes narratives that are confirmed by the Qur'an or authentic prophetic traditions (*hadith sahih*), making them acceptable for use and belief. The second group contains narratives that clearly contradict Islamic sources, and thus must be outright rejected by scholars. The third, and perhaps most contentious group, consists of those narratives whose authenticity cannot be validated nor denied based on available Islamic evidence; these may be mentioned for context or illustrative purposes but should be engaged without confirmation or denial, a stance articulated as "*lā nuṣaddiqu wa-lā nukadhibu*".

The debate is further nuanced by al-Nawawi (1996), who contends that weak (*ḍa'īf*) *hadith* and other non-authenticated reports may have a limited, supplemental function. He

maintained that such narrations are permissible within the domains of moral encouragement (*targhīb*), warning (*tarhīb*), or the elaboration of pious merits (*faḍā'il al-a'māl*), provided there is no evidence of fabrication (*mawḍū'*). This principle opened the door for selective and context-bound use of *Israiliyyat* and other non-canonical materials in the broader Islamic scholarly tradition.

Regionally, the widespread adoption of tafsir works like *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, along with its influential commentaries such as *Tafsir al-Jamal* and *Hāshiyah al-Shawi*, has deeply shaped educational traditions, notably in Southeast Asia's pesantren and madrasah systems (Azra, 2014). In these learning environments, narrative elaborations, including those from *Israiliyyat* sources, have been valued not only for their explanatory and embellishing power but also for their role in facilitating teaching and engagement with scriptural texts. Nonetheless, this pedagogical embrace is accompanied by ongoing scholarly debate over authenticity, the potential risks of doctrinal confusion, and the necessity for a more critical, context-sensitive approach to such material. The literature thus reflects a persistent tension between valuing *Israiliyyat* for their didactic potential and the critical imperative to avoid unexamined transmission or reliance upon them.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach with the following steps: Primary text analysis (*Tafsir al-Jamal* to identify *Israiliyyat*), authenticity evaluation (cross-referencing with hadith criticism and classical sources), categorization framework (applying Ibn Kathir's classification and al-Nawawi's principle), and comparative analysis (contrasting with other widely used tafsirs such as Ibn Kathir and al-Qurtubi). This methodology ensures both close textual engagement and historical contextualization.

Research Objectives

The article aims to fulfil the following objectives: To identify the scope and types of *Israiliyyat* narratives in *Tafsir al-Jamal*; evaluate the authenticity using classical scholarship; examine the exegete's methodology and intent; highlight implications for contemporary scholarship; and propose a balanced framework for engaging with *Israiliyyat* in educational and scholarly contexts.

Findings

The analysis of *Tafsir al-Jamal* yields several important findings that highlight both its historical significance and exegetical methodology, particularly in relation to the inclusion of *Israiliyyat*. First, there is an extensive presence of *Israiliyyat*, especially in the exposition of prophetic stories such as those concerning Adam, Moses, and Yusuf. These narratives often provide elaborate details and embellishments beyond what is found in the Qur'an itself, fulfilling a pedagogical need for storytelling and moral illustration within the broader framework of Islamic teaching (al-'Ujaili, n.d.; Azra, 2014).

Second, the approach taken by Shaykh Sulayman al-'Ujaili in presenting these reports demonstrates a methodological ambivalence. While he does not always clearly distinguish between authentic and weak or questionable sources, his commentary frequently serves as a comprehensive supplement aimed at elucidating the meanings of verses for students and scholars. This tradition of expansive commentary is evident in his frequent references to the

opinions of earlier scholars from different schools and his willingness to incorporate a wide variety of narrative material, including *Israiliyyat*, without unequivocal endorsement or rejection (al-'Ujaili, n.d.).

Third, the classification of these narratives often reveals a comparative weakness; some reports that are considered weak according to certain chains of transmission are found to be strengthened by supporting narrations from other sources. This fluidity in scholarly judgment underlines the need for nuanced and context-sensitive evaluation, rather than blanket acceptance or dismissal (Ibn Kathir, 2000).

Finally, the impact of *Tafsir al-Jamal* on Southeast Asian pedagogy, particularly in *pesantren* and *madrasah* contexts, is significant. The narrative function of *Israiliyyat* has enabled this *tafsir* to become a key reference for teachers and students, fostering engagement with Qur'anic stories and ethical teachings. At the same time, it underscores ongoing debates about the balance between didactic enrichment and the necessity for caution and critical scholarship in selecting supplementary material for religious instruction (Azra, 2014).

Discussion

The incorporation of *Israiliyyat* in Islamic exegetical literature, such as *Tafsir al-Jamal*, exemplifies the complex interplay between didactic needs and theological prudence. On the one hand, classical scholars like Ibn Kathir firmly rejected the use of stories and narrations that lack solid textual or rational foundations, highlighting the risk of introducing elements that could potentially conflict with the Qur'anic message or authentic prophetic traditions (Ibn Kathir, 2000). This critical stance is rooted in the principle of safeguarding the integrity of Islamic belief and law, and it reflects wider concerns about the dangers of borrowing indiscriminately from external sources.

Al-Suyuti, while acknowledging the didactic benefit of supplementary narratives, also warned against excessive dependence on these non-revelatory materials, urging scholars and educators to exercise disciplined caution and discernment (al-Suyuti, 1984). These warnings serve as important reminders of the need to maintain strict standards in religious scholarship, particularly in matters that touch upon core doctrine (*'aqidah*) and legal rulings (*aḥkām*).

Conversely, the approach advocated by al-Nawawi offers a mediating perspective. His allowance for the citation of weak (*ḍa'īf*) hadith and non-authenticated reports in areas such as ethical exhortation, encouragement, and the merits of pious acts, provided these narrations are not fabrications, serves as a methodological justification for utilizing *Israiliyyat* in certain contexts. This middle ground recognizes the legitimate role these stories can play in enriching religious instruction and moral teaching without conferring upon them the status of obligatory belief or legal authority (al-Nawawi, 1996).

Within Southeast Asian educational environments, the enduring popularity of *Tafsir al-Jamal* demonstrates the narrative and pedagogical appeal of *Israiliyyat*. For generations, these stories have provided educators with accessible frameworks for conveying moral lessons, historical context, and spiritual encouragement (Azra, 2014; Feener, 2007). However, the uncritical reliance on such material carries the risk of misconstruing their illustrative function

as authoritative evidence. It is incumbent upon educators, therefore, to present Israiliyyat as permissible narrative embellishments, making clear their distinction from revealed truths.

Ultimately, a balanced and critical approach is necessary, one that synthesizes the caution of classical scholars with the unique cultural and pedagogical needs of contemporary audiences. This ensures that Israiliyyat enhance, rather than obscure, the understanding and appreciation of Islamic religious texts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study finds that the presence of Israiliyyat in Tafsir al-Jamal primarily serves as narrative embellishments that enrich the interpretative landscape of Islamic exegesis, especially within the scholarly traditions of the late medieval and early modern periods. Despite the fact that many of these accounts are weak or lack stringent authentication, their inclusion within Tafsir al-Jamal can be justified when handled with scholarly care and critical discernment. It is essential to recognize that not all Israiliyyat carry the same weight or function; they must be carefully categorized according to their authenticity and relevance.

Weak narrations and those of uncertain origin should only be tolerated in contexts that are non-essential to core theological creeds or legal rulings, such as moral encouragement, ethical teaching, and historical illustration. Their primary value within Tafsir al-Jamal lies in their ability to facilitate educational engagement and foster a deeper appreciation for the multifaceted tradition of Qur'anic interpretation. However, it is imperative for modern readers and educators to adopt a balanced framework that combines heritage appreciation with critical scholarly caution. By re-contextualizing Tafsir al-Jamal and its use of Israiliyyat, the tradition can be preserved and respected while safeguarding against potential misunderstandings and doctrinal confusion. This approach ultimately ensures that the rich legacy of classical tafsir continues to inform contemporary Islamic scholarship in a meaningful and responsible manner.

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