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INTERPRETING THE QUR'AN IN THE LIGHT OF MODERN SCIENCE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RAMAḌĀN AL-BŪṬĪ AND ZAGHLŪL AL-NAJJĀR

Mohammed Rashid AT*

ABSTRACT

Modern scientific exegesis of the Qur'ān has emerged as a response to intellectual challenges posed by materialist worldviews and claims of incompatibility between revelation and empirical science. Among contemporary Muslim scholars, Dr. Zaghlūl al-Najjār is recognized for systematically relating Qur'ānic verses to established scientific findings. In contrast, Imam Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī adopts a more cautious methodology, emphasizing clear epistemological limits to prevent the Qur'ān from being interpreted through speculative or changing scientific theories. This paper examines the methodological similarities and differences between al-Būṭī and al-Najjār regarding the role of science in Qur'ānic interpretation. Using a thematic and analytical approach, it argues that both scholars seek to defend the authority and relevance of the Qur'ān in the modern intellectual context. However, they differ in the extent to which scientific knowledge should influence tafsīr. Al-Najjār frequently employs established scientific discoveries to illuminate selected Qur'ānic verses, whereas al-Būṭī maintains that scientific findings may support reflection but should never determine the intended meaning of the text. The study concludes that scientific exegesis can serve as a valuable interpretive aid when guided by sound epistemological principles and applied with methodological restraint. Such a balanced framework preserves the Qur'ān's textual integrity and primary function as divine guidance while encouraging meaningful engagement with contemporary scientific knowledge.

Keywords: *Qur'ānic Exegesis; Scientific Exegesis (al-Tafsīr al-ʿIlmī); Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī; Zaghlūl al-Najjār; Qur'ān and Science; Contemporary Tafsīr; Islamic Hermeneutics; Epistemology.*

* Lecturer, Darul Huda Islamic University (DH Bengal Campus)

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the Qur'an and empirical science has long occupied Muslim intellectual discourse, but it acquired renewed urgency in the modern period with the rise of positivism, materialism, and scientism. Conflicts between a religion's revealed claims and science seriously challenge that religion. For example, if Christianity taught that the Sun orbits the Earth or that the world is only six thousand years old, scientific evidence would show those revelations to be mistaken, undermining Christianity as a whole, not just those specific claims¹. This prompted many Muslim scholars to reengage the Qur'anic text through the lens of contemporary scientific discoveries. Out of this context emerged what is commonly termed *scientific tafsīr* (al-tafsīr al-'ilmī), an approach that seeks to correlate Qur'anic verses with established findings in the natural sciences, often with the apologetic aim of affirming the divine origin and timeless relevance of the Qur'an.

Despite its popularity, scientific tafsīr has remained a contested enterprise. Critics have cautioned against subordinating revelation to mutable scientific theories, warning that excessive correlation risks reducing the Qur'an to a scientific textbook or exposing its interpretation to future falsification. Proponents, on the other hand, argue that properly constrained scientific interpretation can serve as a powerful means of da'wah and intellectual defense, especially in an age when scientific authority shapes dominant worldviews. This approach to scientific interpretation has attracted the attention of many circles, especially in the contemporary era, where scientific discoveries such as the theory of evolution, embryology, and cosmology are often associated with the verses of the Qur'an.² These tensions have produced a spectrum of methodological positions rather than a single unified approach.

Within this spectrum, two contemporary figures stand out for their influential yet contrasting engagements with science in Qur'anic interpretation: Imam Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī (d. 2013) and Dr. Zaghlūl al-Najjār (b. 1933). Both scholars shared a common objective—defending the Qur'an against modern intellectual challenges and affirming its divine coherence—but differed markedly

¹ Weir, R. S. (2024). Science, Revelation and Biblical Dualism. Divine Revelation and the Sciences: Essays in the History and Philosophy of Revelation.p.1

² Rawanita, Mesi & Syabuddin. (2024). Scientific Interpretation and Its Significance in the Development of Science. ISTIFHAM: Journal Of Islamic Studies. 227-237. 10.71039/istifham. v2i3.70.

in their methodological assumptions, epistemological caution, and use of scientific data.

Conversely, scientific exegesis has also been viewed as a significant means of advancing Islamic thought in the modern era. In response to the intellectual challenges posed by modernity and globalization, several contemporary Muslim scholars have employed scientific interpretations to demonstrate the harmony between the Qur'ān and modern scientific knowledge. Al-Najjār is widely recognized as one of the most prominent advocates of scientific tafsīr in the contemporary Muslim world. Through extensive writings and lectures, he systematically correlates Qur'anic verses with findings in geology, cosmology, embryology, and other sciences, arguing that such correspondences testify to the Qur'an's transcendence of its historical milieu. His approach relies on what he terms "established scientific facts," which he considers sufficiently stable to support exegetical correlation. Zaghlûl published approximately eighty-five scientific papers in Geology, the majority of his research studied soil geology, soil analysis, and phosphates.³ Imam al-Būṭī had frequent engagement with scientific themes in lectures on Qur'anic inimitability and divine signs in the cosmos. Drawing mainly on linguistic precision, theological principles, al-Būṭī consistently emphasized that the Qur'an addresses humanity across all eras without being bound to any specific scientific paradigm.

This paper offers a comparative analysis of these two approaches, aiming to clarify their underlying methodological principles and assess their implications for contemporary Qur'anic studies. By examining al-Būṭī's lecture-based discourse alongside al-Najjār's written corpus, the study seeks to move beyond polarized debates and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how science can—and cannot—be integrated into Qur'anic interpretation.

UNDERSTANDING SCIENTIFIC TAFSĪR: EVOLUTION AND CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

One of the different methods of interpreting the Qur'an is the scientific tafsir, which relies on the use of religious, social, and natural sciences in interpretation. While examples of scientific tafsir can be found in classical commentaries, this method has become more widespread mainly due to scientific developments experienced worldwide in the

³ Syarifah, Umayyatus & Fahimah, Siti. (2020). Zaghlûl Râghib Muḥammad Al-Najjār's Methods and Principles of Scientific Exegesis: A Review of Tafsīr al-Āyât al-Kawniyyah fī al-Qur'ân al-Karīm. ULUL ALBAB Jurnal Studi Islam. p.290

last few centuries. Currently, numerous researchers in different countries continue to conduct studies using the scientific tafsir method.

Rapid advances in scientific knowledge have renewed interest in the scientific interpretation of the Qur'ān. Developments in both the natural and social sciences encourage scholars to revisit Qur'ānic verses from new perspectives and to explore their relevance to contemporary understanding. As Bediüzzaman Said Nursi observed, "As time grows older, the Qur'ān grows younger," suggesting that new discoveries can illuminate dimensions of the Qur'ān that were not previously recognized. At the same time, interpretations based on outdated scientific assumptions may lose their explanatory value. Consequently, ongoing scientific progress necessitates a careful reexamination of relevant Qur'ānic passages in light of reliable and established knowledge while preserving the integrity of the sacred text.

The term *scientific tafsīr* (al-tafsīr al-'ilmī) generally refers to interpretive efforts that seek to explain Qur'anic verses—particularly those related to nature, the cosmos, and human creation—by correlating them with discoveries in the natural sciences. While the Qur'an itself repeatedly invites reflection upon natural phenomena as signs (*āyāt*) of divine power, the systematic use of modern scientific knowledge as an exegetical tool is largely a product of the modern period. The development of scientific interpretation only really emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries amid the advancement of modern science and technology.⁴

Conceptual Foundations of Scientific Tafsīr

At its core, scientific tafsīr is driven by the conviction that the Qur'an, as divine revelation, cannot contradict established empirical reality. Proponents argue that references to natural phenomena in the Qur'an possess layers of meaning that unfold progressively as human knowledge advances. From this perspective, modern scientific discoveries do not impose meaning upon the Qur'anic text but rather reveal dimensions that were previously inaccessible. As Imam al-Būṭī states in one of his video series, every age carries within it numerous dimensions of the Qur'an's inimitability, and each of these dimensions is brought forth at its appointed time.⁵

⁴ Rawanita, Mesi & Syabuddin, Syabuddin. (2024). Scientific Interpretation and Its Significance in the Development of Science. *Istifham: Journal of Islamic Studies*. P228

⁵ Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, *al-Jadīd fī I'jāz al-Qur'ān* (الجدید فی إعجاز القرآن), YouTube playlist, accessed July 7, 2026, <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL01kYZIehH-rV0GLLuE-lPXCMGeaHJmrI>

Scientific developments necessitate the reinterpretation of the Quran in their respective fields. Scientific studies are rapidly advancing with research conducted in different countries around the world. Commentators and researchers in their respective fields need to interpret the verses in light of scientific developments. Collaborative work between theologians and scientists is likely to produce very original interpretations. On the other hand, it is also possible to conduct scientific research based on the signs in the Quran. This way, the criticism that only scientific developments determine the interpretation of the verses, rather than conducting scientific studies based on the verses, can be avoided.⁶

Historical Emergence in the Modern Period

Although pre-modern exegetes occasionally engaged with the scientific knowledge of their time—particularly in astronomy, medicine, and natural philosophy—the rise of scientific tafsīr as a distinct trend coincided with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This period was marked by European colonial expansion, the global dominance of modern science, and growing claims that religion had been rendered obsolete by empirical knowledge.

The emergence of this trend was also influenced by the intellectual encounter between the Muslim world and Western scientific progress. As modern scientific achievements became symbols of advancement and civilization, many Muslim reformers sought to demonstrate that the Qur'ān was compatible with reason and scientific inquiry. They argued that the decline of Muslim societies was not due to Islam itself but rather to a neglect of the Qur'ān's call to observe, reflect upon, and investigate the natural world. This intellectual climate created fertile ground for the development of scientific approaches to Qur'ānic interpretation.

In response, several Muslim intellectuals sought to demonstrate that the Qur'an not only accommodated scientific truths but anticipated them. Early figures such as Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī⁷ emphasized the Qur'an's encouragement of scientific inquiry, while later scholars developed more detailed correlations between verses and scientific findings. Scientific tafsīr thus emerged primarily as an

⁶ Demir, Abdullah. "The Necessity of Interpreting the Qur'an According to Scientific Developments." *Journal of Quranic Studies and Modern Science*, vol. 4, no. 7, 2023, pp.53

⁷ Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī (1862–1940) was an Egyptian Muslim scholar and reformer known for his emphasis on scientific reflection in the Qur'an. He is best remembered for his encyclopedic tafsīr *al-Jawāhir fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*

apologetic response to external intellectual pressures rather than as an organic continuation of classical tafsīr traditions.

Major Scholarly Concerns and Critiques

Despite its popularity, scientific tafsīr has attracted sustained criticism from classical and contemporary scholars alike. One major concern is epistemological instability: scientific theories are inherently provisional, subject to revision or replacement. Tying Qur'anic meaning too closely to current scientific models risks rendering interpretation obsolete or erroneous as scientific paradigms shift. Another critique focuses on methodological overreach. Critics argue that many scientific interpretations rely on linguistic stretching, selective readings, or retrofitting modern concepts into pre-modern language. This practice, they contend, undermines the integrity of the Qur'anic discourse and departs from established principles of Arabic rhetoric and exegesis.

A further concern relates to the primary purpose of the Qur'ān. Many scholars maintain that the Qur'ān was revealed principally as a source of spiritual guidance, moral instruction, and theological truth rather than as a scientific textbook. Excessive focus on scientific interpretations, they argue, may divert attention from the Qur'ān's ethical and devotional messages. Moreover, when scientific claims associated with particular interpretations are later challenged or disproven, it may create unnecessary doubts about the Qur'ān itself. For this reason, critics advocate a cautious approach that acknowledges possible points of harmony between revelation and science while avoiding definitive claims based on changing scientific knowledge.

Defining the Spectrum of Contemporary Approaches

Rather than constituting a single methodology, scientific tafsīr today exists along a continuum of approaches. At one end are those who strictly limit the use of science to illustrative or supportive roles, emphasizing caution and restraint. At the other are scholars who actively integrate scientific data into the interpretive process, proposing detailed correspondences between Qur'anic verses and empirical findings.

The diversity of these approaches reflects broader questions concerning the nature of Qur'ānic interpretation and the limits of human knowledge. While proponents of a more expansive scientific tafsīr view scientific discoveries as valuable tools for uncovering aspects of the Qur'ān's wisdom and miraculous character, advocates of a more cautious approach stress the need to preserve the autonomy of

the Qur'ānic text from the changing conclusions of scientific inquiry. This ongoing debate continues to shape contemporary discussions on the relationship between Islam, science, and the methodology of tafsīr.

It is within this spectrum that Imam Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī and Zaghlūl al-Najjār must be situated. Both acknowledge the importance of engaging modern scientific discourse, yet they diverge significantly in how they conceptualize the relationship between revelation and empirical knowledge. Understanding the broader debates surrounding scientific tafsīr is therefore essential for appreciating the methodological choices made by each scholar.

IMAM AL-BŪṬĪ'S METHODOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH SCIENTIFIC PHENOMENA

Imam Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī's engagement with scientific themes in the Qur'an cannot be fully captured within the conventional framework of scientific tafsīr. While he does not reject scientific interpretation outright, he accepts it only when it corresponds unequivocally with the precise Qur'ānic wording and does not impose external meanings upon the text. For al-Būṭī, scientific insights function primarily as supportive signs (āyāt kawniyya) that affirm faith, disclose divine wisdom, and illuminate the Qur'an's linguistic and conceptual inimitability. His foremost priority remains the exact wording of the divine text (naṣṣ al-Qur'ān), which he treats as the supreme and independent source of meaning. This stance reflects a deliberate methodological caution grounded in a clear epistemic hierarchy, wherein revelation governs interpretation and science remains a secondary, corroborative tool.

Qur'anic Language as Trans-Generational Discourse

A central principle in al-Būṭī's thought is that the Qur'an addresses all categories of humanity across time—the unlettered and the learned, early audiences and later specialists—without committing semantic error at any level of understanding. He repeatedly emphasized that a human author inevitably speaks from within the confines of his historical moment, whereas the Qur'an transcends temporal horizons and anticipates intellectual developments yet to emerge.

This idea can be seen clearly in al-Būṭī's explanation of how the Qur'an speaks about the sun and the moon. The Qur'an describes the sun with words that suggest it produces its own light and heat, while it speaks of the moon as giving a borrowed or reflected light. Al-Būṭī explains that this is not meant to claim a scientific discovery. Rather, it

shows that there is no conflict between the Qur'an and science. An ordinary reader understands these verses simply, while someone with scientific knowledge later notices that they also align with physical reality. The Qur'an does not change its meaning because of science; instead, science helps reveal deeper layers of meaning already present in the text.⁸

Precision of Expression and the Impossibility of Linguistic Substitution

Al-Būṭī frequently argued that Qur'anic inimitability is revealed through the irreplaceability of its lexical choices. Certain terms, he noted, cannot be substituted without disrupting both rhetorical harmony and conceptual coherence. His discussion of the verse describing the earth as *dahāhā* ⁹exemplifies this claim. The word conveys, simultaneously, the notion of spreading and shaping—allowing the untrained reader to grasp surface extension while permitting the educated reader to infer a non-flat, non-angular form.

Crucially, al-Būṭī rejected the suggestion that such expressions should be replaced with ostensibly more “scientific” terminology. Substituting Qur'anic diction with explicit technical language would, in his view, compromise the text's universal accessibility and aesthetic unity. The Qur'an's language achieves what human discourse cannot: precision without technicality, depth without obscurity. This insight undercuts a core tendency of scientific tafsīr that seeks explicit scientific articulation where the Qur'an intentionally maintains expressive economy.¹⁰

Science, the Unseen, and Epistemic Boundaries

A defining feature of al-Būṭī's engagement with modern science is his insistence on clear epistemic boundaries. While he acknowledged remarkable scientific advances—particularly in physics, medicine, and cosmology—he consistently highlighted domains that remain inaccessible to empirical inquiry, such as the nature of the soul, the inevitability of death, and the divine laws governing human decline.

Verses that emphasize human ignorance of the soul or the inescapability of death were, for al-Būṭī, deliberate challenges to

⁸ Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, *al-Jadīd fī I'jāz al-Qur'ān*, YouTube video, accessed July 7, 2026, <https://youtu.be/dwnpDlcnvpE?si=FD66lbMZqwmVIFR1>.

⁹ Qur'an 79:30

¹⁰ Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, *al-Jadīd fī I'jāz al-Qur'ān* (6): "Wa al-Ard Ba'da Dhālika Dahāhā", YouTube video, accessed July 7, 2026, <https://youtu.be/GDs2a4w0jqQ?si=MKEJHZBBJvllZ2Pu>.

scientific absolutism. They affirm that progress in knowledge does not translate into mastery over existential realities. In this respect, the Qur'an functions not as a competitor to science, but as a corrective to its potential excesses.

Būṭī's reservations regarding modern cosmological theories stem from his broader concern with the epistemological limits of scientific inquiry. While acknowledging the impressive achievements of contemporary science in describing observable phenomena, he maintained that questions concerning the origin of the universe ultimately belong to a domain inaccessible to empirical verification. Scientific theories may offer explanatory models, but they cannot provide eyewitness knowledge of the act of creation itself.

In support of this position, al-Būṭī frequently referred to the Qur'ānic verse: *"I did not make them witness the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor their own creation"* (Q. 18:51).¹¹ For him, this verse establishes a fundamental epistemic principle: human beings possess no direct knowledge of how creation occurred and therefore cannot claim certainty regarding cosmological origins. Any scientific account of the beginning of the universe remains a theoretical reconstruction rather than a definitive description of historical reality.¹²

This perspective led al-Būṭī to caution against interpreting the Qur'an through the lens of contemporary cosmological theories, including those that seek to explain the emergence of the universe through purely material processes. In his view, the Qur'an does not aim to provide a scientific narrative of cosmic origins; rather, it directs human attention to the existence of creation as a sign of divine power and wisdom. The purpose of revelation is therefore theological and spiritual rather than cosmological in the scientific sense.

The same methodological concern informed al-Būṭī's critique of evolutionary explanations that seek to account for human origins independently of revelation. While he did not oppose scientific investigation as such, he argued that theories concerning the origin of humanity must remain subject to the clear teachings of the Qur'an regarding the special creation of Adam. For al-Būṭī, scientific inquiry is legitimate within its proper sphere, but it cannot override revealed truths concerning matters that lie beyond the reach of empirical observation.

¹¹ The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Kahf 18:51

¹² Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, *al-Jadīd fī I'jāz al-Qur'ān*, YouTube playlist, accessed July 7, 2026, <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL01kYZIehH-rV0GLLuE-lPXcmGeaHJmrI>

The Danger of Subordinating Revelation to Science

A recurring concern in al-Būṭī's critique of scientific tafsīr is the tendency to make revelation dependent upon scientific verification. He argued that while scientific discoveries may occasionally illuminate aspects of Qur'ānic discourse, they should never become the primary standard by which the Qur'ān is understood. To interpret every verse through the lens of contemporary science risks subordinating revelation to human theories and transforming the Qur'ān into a text whose validity appears contingent upon scientific approval. In al-Būṭī's view, this approach compromises the epistemological authority of revelation and elevates provisional scientific knowledge above divine guidance.

Al-Būṭī illustrated this danger through examples of interpreters who hastily linked newly discovered phenomena to specific Qur'ānic verses. He observed that whenever a novel scientific observation emerges, some rush to identify it as the intended meaning of a particular verse, even when the textual evidence is weak. One notable example concern attempts to associate geological formations observed on the lunar surface with the Qur'ānic verse, "The Hour has drawn near and the moon has split" (Q. 54:1). Some writers claimed that long surface features photographed on the Moon constituted scientific proof of the miraculous splitting of the Moon mentioned in the Qur'ān. However, subsequent scientific studies explained these formations as ancient geological structures resulting from the Moon's natural geological history rather than evidence of a historical splitting and rejoining event.

For al-Būṭī, such examples demonstrate the methodological risks of grounding Qur'ānic interpretation in speculative scientific claims. When these claims are later revised or disproven, critics may mistakenly assume that the Qur'ān itself has been refuted, whereas the error lies only in the interpretation imposed upon the text. He therefore maintained that the truth of revelation should not be made dependent upon the fluctuating conclusions of scientific investigation. Scientific observations may assist reflection upon the signs of God in creation, but they cannot serve as the ultimate criterion for determining the meaning or validity of divine revelation. By preserving the distinction between the certainty of revelation and the provisional nature of scientific theories, al-Būṭī sought to protect the Qur'ān from being unnecessarily entangled in changing scientific paradigm

ZAGHLŪL AL-NAJJĀR'S METHODOLOGY OF SCIENTIFIC TAFSĪR

Renowned for his prolific writings, lectures, and television programmes, Dr. Al-Najjar became known as the “Pioneer of Scientific Miracles”, inspiring generations to view science as a means to understand the Divine signs in the universe. He taught in numerous Arab and international universities, excelling in the field of geology and advancing research in earth sciences while dedicating his academic career to proving that there is no contradiction between authentic scientific knowledge and the Qur’anic worldview.¹³

Dr. Zaghlūl al-Najjār¹⁴ represents one of the most systematic and influential contemporary proponents of scientific tafsīr. Trained in the natural sciences and deeply engaged with modern scientific literature, al-Najjār approaches the Qur’an with the conviction that its references to the natural world constitute a deliberate invitation to empirical reflection. For him, the Qur’an’s engagement with cosmic, geological, and biological phenomena is neither incidental nor purely rhetorical, but an integral dimension of its evidentiary discourse aimed at affirming divine authorship in an age shaped by scientific authority.

Zaghlūl’s deep interest in science led him to study geology at the Faculty of Science, Cairo University, which was relatively new at the time. He completed his Bachelor of Science degree in 1955, graduating with first-class honors, and was awarded the Muṣṭafā Baraka Prize in Geology. Shortly after graduation, however, his involvement in political demonstrations against the government resulted in his arrest, though he was later released. Due to these political circumstances and his perceived affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn), his prospects for an academic leadership position were curtailed.

Consequently, Zaghlūl pursued further studies at the University of Wales in the United Kingdom, where he obtained both his Master’s degree and PhD in geology in 1963. In 1972, he was appointed Professor of Geology, and in 1977 he received academic recognition at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). At the age of 67, he was elected Rector of the Markfield Institute of Higher Education in England. He also served as Chairman of the Commission for the Scientific Miracles of the Qur’an and Sunnah under Egypt’s

¹⁴ Dr. Zaghlūl al-Najjār (1933–2022) was a prominent Egyptian geologist and Islamic thinker, widely known for promoting the study of scientific signs in the Qur’an (al-*i’jāz al-‘ilmī*).

Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, a position he held for many years.¹⁵

Defining Scientific Tafsīr in al-Najjār's Thought

Al-Najjār defines scientific tafsīr as an interpretive effort that seeks to uncover the harmony between Qur'anic statements and established scientific facts, while explicitly rejecting reliance on speculative or provisional theories. He repeatedly emphasizes that the Qur'an is not a textbook of science; rather, it is a book of guidance that nonetheless contains precise references to natural realities that were inaccessible to human knowledge at the time of revelation. These references, when illuminated by modern discoveries, function as signs of the Qur'an's transcendence of historical context.

Central to this definition is al-Najjār's insistence on methodological discipline. Scientific tafsīr, in his view, must operate within clearly defined limits: linguistic plausibility, scientific certainty, and consistency with the broader objectives of the Qur'an. Only findings that have attained a high degree of empirical confirmation qualify for exegetical correlation.

Science as an Explanatory Tool in Tafsīr

Najjār assigns science as a direct explanatory function within tafsīr. He argues that many Qur'anic verses pertaining to creation, cosmology, and the natural order carry meanings that become fully intelligible only in light of modern scientific knowledge. Consequently, scientific discovery is not merely a post-textual reflection but a key to understanding dimensions of Qur'anic discourse that would otherwise remain latent.

This approach is evident in al-Najjār's extensive discussions of geological formations, astronomical phenomena, and biological processes, where he aligns Qur'anic expressions with contemporary scientific models. For him, such correspondences are neither forced nor coincidental; they reflect intentional divine precision expressed through language that is concise yet capacious enough to accommodate future knowledge.

Apologetic Objectives and Intellectual Context

¹⁵ Syarifah, Umayyatus & Fahimah, Siti. (2020). *Zaghlūl Rāghib Muḥammad Al-Najjār's Methods and Principles of Scientific Exegesis: A Review of Tafsīr al-Āyāt al-Kawniyyah fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*. ULUL ALBAB Jurnal Studi Islam. p.294

Al-Najjār's methodology must be understood within its broader apologetic and intellectual context. Writing in an era where scientific discourse often functions as the ultimate arbiter of truth, he seeks to challenge claims that religion is inherently incompatible with reason or empirical inquiry. Scientific tafsīr, in this sense, becomes a strategic response to materialist and atheistic narratives that portray revelation as obsolete.

By demonstrating concordance between the Qur'an and scientific discovery, al-Najjār aims to reinforce faith among believers and provide intellectual reassurance to those unsettled by the perceived authority of modern science. His work thus prioritizes engagement with skeptics and scientifically educated audiences, addressing doubts that arise specifically from contemporary epistemic frameworks.

Strengths of al-Najjār's Approach

One of the principal strengths of al-Najjār's methodology lies in its clarity of purpose and accessibility. His writings translate complex scientific concepts into language intelligible to non-specialists, while grounding these discussions in Qur'anic verses that encourage reflection on creation. This has contributed significantly to the popularization of scientific tafsīr and its appeal across diverse audiences.

Moreover, his insistence on correlating the Qur'an only with well-established scientific facts reflects an awareness of the risks associated with scientific volatility. By attempting to filter out speculative claims, al-Najjār seeks to preserve the Qur'an's credibility and avoid interpretive embarrassment resulting from future scientific revision.

Methodological Risks and Scholarly Critiques

Despite these strengths, al-Najjār's approach has attracted critique from scholars who question whether the boundary between "established fact" and "theory" can ever be drawn with sufficient certainty. Scientific knowledge, even at its most robust, remains subject to refinement, and critics argue that anchoring exegetical meaning too closely to scientific models risks conflating provisional human understanding with divine intent.

Additionally, some scholars caution that repeated emphasis on scientific correspondence may inadvertently shift the Qur'an's authority from its moral and spiritual guidance to its perceived alignment with external disciplines. From this perspective, scientific tafsīr—when applied expansively—risks transforming the Qur'an into

a repository of scientific validation rather than a normative guide for belief and conduct.

The contrast between al-Najjār's confident integration of science into tafsīr and al-Būṭī's epistemically cautious engagement reveals two distinct responses to the same modern challenge. While both scholars affirm the Qur'an's harmony with reality and its immunity to contradiction, they diverge fundamentally in how science is permitted to function within the interpretive process. This divergence forms the basis for the comparative analysis that follows.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: DIVERGENT METHODOLOGIES, SHARED OBJECTIVES

Although Imam Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī and Zaghlūl al-Najjār approach the relationship between the Qur'an and science in markedly different ways, their efforts are united by a common objective: defending the Qur'an against modern intellectual challenges and affirming its divine coherence in an age shaped by scientific authority. The divergence between them lies not in purpose, but in methodology, epistemology, and the role assigned to science within Qur'anic interpretation.

Epistemological Hierarchy: Certainty and Provisional Knowledge

A fundamental difference between the two scholars concerns their epistemological hierarchy. Al-Būṭī consistently maintains a strict distinction between definitive revelation (*qaṭ'ī al-thubūt wa-l-dalāla*) and provisional human knowledge. For him, the mutability of scientific theories necessitates interpretive restraint; science may illuminate aspects of Qur'anic meaning, but it can never delimit or determine that meaning.

Al-Najjār, while acknowledging the provisional nature of scientific inquiry, operates with a more optimistic assessment of scientific stability. By restricting interpretation to what he terms "established scientific facts," he seeks to mitigate epistemic risk and justify a more assertive correlation between scientific knowledge and Qur'anic verses. This difference reflects contrasting evaluations of how securely empirical knowledge can be integrated into exegetical discourse. The example could be seen in the acception and rejection of Big Bang theory from the both.

Language, Universality, and Audience

Al-Būṭī's approach places particular emphasis on the universality of Qur'anic language. He repeatedly highlights the Qur'an's ability to

communicate meaningfully with both the uneducated listener and the scientific specialist without semantic contradiction. For him, this linguistic elasticity constitutes a primary dimension of Qur'anic inimitability and explains why the text avoids technical or temporally bound expressions.

Al-Najjār, while affirming the Qur'an's universality, directs his exegetical efforts primarily toward scientifically literate audiences. His work responds explicitly to doubts arising within modern epistemic frameworks, particularly those shaped by materialism and scientism. As a result, his interpretive strategy prioritizes intellectual persuasion over linguistic universality, addressing the concerns of a specific historical moment.

Risk Management and Interpretive Caution

Another critical axis of comparison concerns risk management. Al-Būṭī's methodology is deliberately conservative: by refusing to anchor Qur'anic meaning to scientific models, he insulates interpretation from future scientific revision. His approach minimizes the risk of exegetical obsolescence and preserves the Qur'an's autonomy as a source of guidance.

Al-Najjār accepts a calculated degree of risk in exchange for rhetorical and apologetic effectiveness. Although he seeks to avoid speculative theories, critics argue that the boundary between settled fact and revisable understanding is often difficult to maintain. Consequently, his methodology exposes interpretation to a higher degree of vulnerability should scientific paradigms shift.

Complementarity Rather Than Contradiction

Despite these differences, the approaches of al-Būṭī and al-Najjār should not be understood as mutually exclusive. Rather, they represent two complementary responses to the same modern challenge. Al-Būṭī provides a framework of epistemic discipline and linguistic depth that safeguards the integrity of Qur'anic interpretation, while al-Najjār offers a proactive engagement with scientific discourse that speaks directly to contemporary doubts.

Seen together, their methodologies illustrate the breadth of legitimate scholarly responses to scientific modernity within Islamic thought. The tension between caution and correlation, restraint and engagement, reflects not confusion but intellectual vitality within contemporary tafsīr studies.

This comparative analysis highlights that debates over scientific tafsīr are ultimately debates over method, authority, and the limits of interpretation, rather than over the compatibility of Islam and science per se. The concluding section will synthesize these findings and reflect on their implications for future Qur'anic scholarship.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the methodological approaches of Imam Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī and Dr. Zaghlūl al-Najjār toward scientific tafsīr, highlighting both their convergences and divergences. Both scholars share a commitment to defending the Qur'an against modern intellectual challenges and affirming its divine coherence. Yet, they diverge fundamentally in their epistemological assumptions, the role of science in interpretation, and their strategies for engaging contemporary audiences.

Al-Būṭī exemplifies a cautious, principle-driven approach. He emphasizes the Qur'an's trans-generational, universally comprehensible language, its inimitable precision, and the epistemic limits of human knowledge. Science, for him, is a subsidiary tool that may illuminate meaning but must never govern or redefine it. This approach safeguards the Qur'an's interpretive integrity and ensures its applicability across all historical contexts, irrespective of shifting scientific paradigms.

Al-Najjār, in contrast, exemplifies a proactive, correlational approach. By integrating established scientific knowledge into the interpretive process, he seeks to make Qur'anic guidance intelligible to scientifically literate audiences and to provide reassurance against materialist critiques. While this methodology carries greater interpretive risk, it demonstrates the potential of scientific tafsīr to engage contemporary epistemic frameworks and enhance the Qur'an's apologetic resonance.

The comparative analysis reveals that these approaches are complementary rather than contradictory. Al-Būṭī offers methodological discipline, linguistic rigor, and epistemic caution, whereas al-Najjār offers engagement, correlation, and relevance to modern scientific discourse. Together, they illustrate the spectrum of legitimate responses to the challenge of integrating scientific understanding with Qur'anic interpretation.

Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of methodological clarity, epistemic humility, and fidelity to the Qur'anic text in contemporary tafsīr. It contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations by demonstrating that scientific engagement need not

compromise the Qur'an's spiritual, ethical, or linguistic authority. Future research may further explore how these complementary approaches can inform educational strategies, interfaith dialogue, and public understanding of the Qur'an in a scientific age.

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