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The Methodology of Qur'anic Exegetes in Critiquing Fabricated Hadiths: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: This study examines the methodologies used by selected Sunni and Imami Qur'anic exegetes to criticize fabricated and intrusive reports in tafsīr. The study addresses the methodological problem created by differing documentary practices: some commentaries preserve complete chains, others abbreviate transmission, and others prioritize Qur'anic coherence, doctrine, language, context, and history. Using qualitative textual research with inductive, analytical, comparative, and applied procedures, the study examines al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī, al-Qurtubī, Ibn Kathīr, and al-Ālūsī alongside al-Ṭūsī, al-Ṭabrisī, al-Balāghī, al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, and Muḥammad Hādī Ma'rifa. Five major case clusters are analyzed: the satanic verses narrative, reports about David, Hārūt and Mārūt, Zayd and Zaynab, and fabricated virtues of Qur'anic surahs. The results show that the strongest criticism integrates source tracing, isnād evaluation, matn analysis, comparison with the Qur'an and established Sunnah, doctrinal coherence, linguistic and contextual analysis, and historical plausibility. The comparison also shows that mere inclusion in a commentary does not equal acceptance, weakness does not automatically establish fabrication, and a sound meaning does not authenticate an attribution. The study proposes an eight-stage critical model for evaluating exegetical reports and argues that proportionate judgments are essential for protecting Qur'anic interpretation from invented specifications and unsupported narrative detail.

Keywords: Qur'anic Exegetes; Fabricated Hadith; Tafsīr Reports; Isrā'īliyyāt; Hadith Criticism



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1. Introduction

The exegetical corpus developed within a scholarly environment in which transmitted reports, language, jurisprudence, theology, and history existed side by side. Hadith was one of the most important sources for explaining occasions of revelation, identifying unspecified matters, clarifying concise passages, connecting verses with the Prophet's biography, and transmitting the interpretations of the Companions, Successors, and Imams. Yet this function also made tafsīr an attractive field for weak and fabricated reports, because an exegetical report gives an opinion additional authority. [1]

Not all defects can be attributed to deliberate acceptance of falsehood by exegetes. Early compilations served different purposes. Al-Ṭabarī preserves chains and weighs transmitted opinions, whereas a later exegete may abridge the chain while retaining the text, thereby separating the report from indicators of its weakness. Through repeated transmission, a reported tradition can become a supposedly firm occasion of revelation, a Successor's statement can become a Prophetic hadith, or an Israelite story can become an explanation of a Qur'anic verse. It is therefore necessary to distinguish compilation, citation, preference, and doctrinal acceptance. [2]

Hadith scholars recognized the danger of fabrication at an early stage. They defined a fabricated report as an invented statement falsely attributed to the Prophet, prohibited its transmission without clarification, and identified indicators in the chain, the text, and the historical setting. Yet applying these rules to tafsīr is not automatic, because many exegetical reports are mawqūf, maqtūʿ, or mursāl; some were not originally attributed to the Prophet; and Israelite reports include material that may be confirmed, rejected, or left undecided. [3]

The impact of a fabricated report in tafsīr is especially serious because it can reshape the meaning of a verse. The satanic verses narrative concerns the preservation of revelation; the distorted story of David concerns prophetic impeccability; details about Hārūt and Mārūt can transform a warning against magic into a romantic legend; reports about Zayd and Zaynab can turn a legislative purpose into an emotional narrative; and reports on the virtues of surahs can create unsupported numerical rewards. Criticizing such reports is therefore part of tafsīr itself. [4]

The research problem lies in the dispersion of exegetes' criteria for criticizing fabricated reports and in the lack of a clear boundary between merely recounting earlier material and relying upon a report in interpretation. Comparison shows that judgments often arise from a network of indicators: a late source, a broken chain, a suspect transmitter, a meaning conflicting with the Qurʾān, an unsupported detail, or an evident sectarian influence. [5]

The principal research question asks how Sunni and Imami exegetes identified fabricated and intrusive reports and where their methodologies converge or diverge. Subsidiary questions concern the distinction among fabricated, weak, intrusive, and Israelite reports; the evidentiary significance of merely citing a report; the roles of source, isnād, narrator, Qurʾānic, Sunnah-based, rational, doctrinal, linguistic, contextual, and historical criticism; the treatment of the selected case studies; and the possibility of formulating a contemporary critical model that avoids premature authentication or judgments of fabrication.

The study is based on four hypotheses: first, exegetical methodologies cannot be sharply divided into isnād-based and matn-based approaches, because the strongest applications combine both; second, identifying the function of a book is essential before attributing leniency or strictness to its author; third, agreement concerning decisive criteria is broader than differences in narrator evaluation; and fourth, a judgment of fabrication should be the final stage of criticism rather than its starting point.

The study aims to clarify terminology, map the methodologies of major exegetes, test those methodologies through practical cases, and propose steps applicable to tafsīr research. Its significance derives from the continuing transmission of fabricated reports from classical books into sermons and digital platforms, where chains and scholarly evaluations are often lost.

Literature Review

Classical Sunni exegetical practice exhibits several complementary critical orientations. Al-Ṭabarī preserves extensive transmission material while exercising interpretive preference in *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*. [6] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī expands Qurʾānic, theological, and rational matn criticism in *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*. [7] Al-Qurṭubī combines transmitted interpretation, jurisprudence, and doctrinal safeguards. [8] Ibn Kathīr makes narrator and source criticism especially visible within tafsīr. [9] Al-Ālūsī represents a later synthetic approach that gathers and evaluates multiple transmitted and rational positions. [10]

In the Imami tradition, the principle of testing reports against the Qurʾān is explicitly embedded in hadith literature such as *al-Kāfī*. [11] Al-Ṭūsī integrates language, theology, and transmitted material in *al-Tibyān*. [12] Al-Ṭabrisī develops a disciplined synthesis in *Majmaʿ al-Bayān*. [13] Al-Balāghī adds historical comparison with earlier scriptural traditions. [14] Al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī gives priority to Qurʾān-by-Qurʾān interpretation before narrative investigation. [15] Muḥammad Hādī Maʿrifa develops a more procedural athar-based critical model. [16] Related Imami methodological foundations are also reflected in collections on presenting reports to the Book of God [17] and in technical discussions of hadith evaluation and transmission categories. [18]

The literature on fabrication further demonstrates that attractive devotional content cannot authenticate an attribution. Al-Suyūṭī's critical treatment of fabricated reports is particularly relevant to narratives assigning unsupported rewards to individual surahs. [19] At the same time, comparison with established Sunnah requires distinguishing an authentic historical framework from later additions; canonical transmission of the prostration associated with *Sūrat al-Najm* illustrates why an established event does not automatically authenticate every detail later attached to it. [20]

Conceptual Framework for Fabricated and Intrusive Exegetical Reports

Fabricated and Weak Hadith

In hadith terminology, a fabricated report is an invented statement falsely attributed to the Prophet or to a person possessing religious authority without having actually originated from that source. A weak report is one that fails to satisfy one of the conditions of acceptance, such as continuity, uprightness, precision, freedom from anomalous transmission, or freedom from an underlying defect. Its weakness may be minor and potentially corroborated, or severe and close to fabrication; equating all degrees destroys the precision of critical terminology. [1], [3]

The exegete needs this distinction because an interrupted report concerning an occasion of revelation is not called fabricated merely because it is *mursal*; a Successor's statement does not become a Prophetic report; and an Israelite report may have a known source without claiming Prophetic origin. More precise judgments include: "not established," "its chain is weak," "its text is objectionable," "an Israelite report without corroboration," "false," or "fabricated." [1]

Intrusive Material and Israelite Reports

Intrusive material is broader than fabrication. It includes every element that enters the explanation of a verse from a source or method unsuitable for establishing the intended meaning. It encompasses fabricated reports, false Israelite narratives, sectarian interpretations imposed upon the text, popular storytelling, and strained scientific interpretations. [4]

An Israelite report is not rejected merely because of its label. Sunni scholars generally distinguish material supported by sound evidence, material contradicted by it, and material about which revelation is silent. In the Imami corpus, such material has been particularly criticized when it conflicts with prophetic impeccability or principles of monotheism. Yet silence does not make an Israelite narrative binding *tafsīr*. [4]

Exegetical Reports and Their Functions

Exegetical reports are not a single category. Some explain a word, identify an application, specify an occasion of revelation, disclose an instance of application, narrate a story, or establish a virtue of a *surah*. The evidentiary demand varies according to function. A report that confines a verse to a person, establishes a ruling, attacks a prophet, or formulates a doctrine requires stronger proof.

It is also necessary to distinguish the truth of a meaning from the truth of an attribution. A report may convey a correct meaning supported independently by another source, but this does not authenticate its chain or establish that the Prophet uttered its wording.

Inclusion in a Book Does Not Equal Reliance

Modern readers sometimes treat *tafsīr* works as collections of final judgments. Al-Tabarī presents transmitted routes and weighs them; al-Suyūṭī compiles transmitted material; al-Tha'labī emphasizes comprehensive narrative transmission; Ibn Kathīr selects and criticizes; and al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī generally distinguishes Qur'anic exposition from the narrative investigation. The reader must therefore examine the reporting formula and surrounding context rather than infer authentication from inclusion alone. [5], [6]

Historical Roots of Fabricated Material in Tafsīr

Narrative Elaboration

The Qur'an presents narratives according to their guidance-related purpose and may omit names, times, places, and numbers. Yet people tend to fill such gaps. These questions opened a door for storytellers and the People of the Book. When no sound text was found, inherited material was used to fill the gap, and the details were then transmitted in *tafsīr* until they overshadowed the ethical purpose. [4]

The danger is that such details are not neutral. Inventing a woman for David is not merely naming a person; it becomes an accusation against a prophet. Likewise, details concerning the angels may create a conception of angelic conduct inconsistent with the Qur'anic framework. The proportion between narrative detail and the Qur'an's purpose is therefore a critical criterion.

Omission of Chains and Abridgment

Preserving chains in early commentaries enabled readers to trace reports to their transmitters, but it did not prevent weak material. Later commentaries were abridged, and some authors omitted chains for brevity, leaving texts without indicators of their status. Omission of chains can transform material open to scrutiny into an unattributed statement. [2]

This does not mean that every abridged commentary is lenient; rather, it increases the responsibility to state the report's status. A commentator who omits the chain should provide an evaluation when necessary, otherwise the reader receives a conclusion without the tools needed to test it.

Sectarian and Political Partisanship

Fabrication entered reports concerning the virtues of particular persons and the defects of opponents and was then linked to verses of praise or condemnation. A report might be invented to make a general verse specific to a group, to apply a term to an Imam or ruler, or to give a political position Qur'anic legitimacy. Indicators may include vocabulary from a later period, a suspect transmitter, or conflict with the chronology of revelation. [3]

Sectarian affiliation alone, however, is not sufficient grounds for criticism. The scholarly method requires additional evidence: whether the transmitter is isolated, whether reliable transmitters contradict him, and whether the chronology of revelation permits the claim.

Preaching and the Virtues of Surahs

Fabricators found the virtues of the Qur'an an influential field. Some invented a specific reward for each surah and claimed that their purpose was to encourage people toward the Qur'an. The transmission of such reports into later commentaries does not make them authentic. A claimed good motive does not lessen the offense, because honoring the Qur'an cannot be achieved by inventing a statement attributed to the Prophet. [19]

2. Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative, library-based comparative research design. Its primary corpus consists of selected Sunni and Imami tafsir and hadith-critical works, chosen purposively because they represent distinct documentary and critical tendencies and because the original study identifies them as central to the comparison. The Sunni sample comprises al-Ṭabarī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, al-Qurṭubī, Ibn Kathīr, and al-Ālūsī, while the Imami sample comprises al-Ṭūsī, al-Ṭabrisī, al-Balāghī, al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, and Muḥammad Hādī Ma'rifa. Supporting hadith and methodological works are used to clarify terminology, transmission rules, and criteria of criticism.

Data collection was conducted through selective induction of relevant passages dealing with fabricated, weak, intrusive, and Israelite reports. The analysis focused on five applied case clusters already identified in the source manuscript: the satanic verses narrative, Israelite accounts concerning David, stories of Hārūt and Mārūt, reports concerning Zayd and Zaynab, and reports assigning specific virtues or numerical rewards to Qur'anic surahs. These cases were selected because they expose different combinations of chain problems, narrative expansion, theological implications, contextual tension, and possible motives for fabrication.

The analytical procedure combined four methods: inductive tracing of relevant exegetical reports, critical analysis of wording and transmission, comparison between Sunni and Imami approaches, and applied evaluation of the selected cases. Each report or exegetical treatment was read through a common analytical matrix consisting of source antiquity, transmission continuity, narrator status, comparison with the Qur'an, comparison with established Sunnah, doctrinal coherence and prophetic impeccability, linguistic and contextual consistency, historical or settled-knowledge plausibility, and indicators of exaggeration, contradiction, or sectarian motivation. The study distinguishes the truth of a meaning from the authenticity of its attribution and distinguishes weakness from fabrication throughout the analysis.

To increase interpretive consistency, the comparison proceeds from description to evaluation. First, the function of the report within the commentary is identified; second, the earliest available source and transmission routes are considered; third, wording variants and additions are compared; fourth, isnād and narrator issues are evaluated where the sources permit; and fifth, matn-based criteria are applied. Conclusions are then expressed in graded terms such as "not established," "weak," "objectionable," "Israelite and unsupported," "false in meaning," or "fabricated" according to the cumulative evidence. The study does not claim exhaustive coverage of all tafsir works or all fabricated reports, and doctrinal disagreement by itself is not treated as proof of fabrication.

3. Results

The comparative textual analysis produced three principal result clusters. First, the selected exegetes differ in the relative weight they give to source preservation, isnād criticism, Qur'anic and doctrinal

control, language, context, and historical analysis. Second, despite these differences, Sunni and Imami materials converge on a substantial set of critical criteria, especially the non-equivalence of citation and acceptance, the need to distinguish weakness from fabrication, and the authority of decisive Qur'anic evidence. Third, the applied cases show that the most defensible judgments arise from cumulative rather than single-factor criticism.

Sunni Exegetical Methods

Al-Ṭabarī: Preservation of Chains and Critical Preference

The *Jāmi' al-Bayān* represents a foundational stage. It gathers the statements of the early generations with their chains, analyzes language, readings, and context, and frequently concludes with a preference for the strongest view. The chains provide primary material for identifying transmission routes and possible defects, but the abundance of transmitted material does not mean that al-Ṭabarī authenticated all of it. His method is closer to constructing a critical archive accompanied by preference than to compiling a book of authenticated reports. [6]

Al-Ṭabarī combines documentation of transmission, comparison with Arabic usage and verse context, and preference for what is supported by the apparent revelation or scholarly consensus. This strength does not prevent Israelite or weak reports from appearing; the criterion of compilation is broader than the criterion of proof. [6]

Al-Rāzī: Qur'anic and Rational Criticism

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī expands matn criticism. He asks not only who transmitted a report but also what follows from it and whether it accords with the Qur'an, reason, and the principle of prophethood. In the satanic verses narrative, he rejects the report through Qur'anic, Sunnah-based, and rational arguments. His method shows that matn criticism is not personal taste; it involves deriving the implications of a report and comparing them with higher principles. [7]

Al-Qurṭubī: Jurisprudence, Prophetic Impeccability, and Verification

Al-Qurṭubī combines transmitted material, language, and jurisprudence and exercises explicit criticism when a report touches a foundational principle. In the satanic verses narrative, he discusses its rejection and connects the issue with prophetic impeccability and preservation of revelation. In the story of Zaynab, he rejects a portrayal that attributes unlawful desire to the Prophet. [8]

Ibn Kathīr: Hadith Criticism within Tafsīr

Ibn Kathīr represents the clearest presence of hadith criticism within tafsīr. He gathers transmission routes, identifies transmitters, judges reports as interrupted, weak, unusual, or objectionable, traces Israelite reports to their sources, and compares them with the apparent meaning of the Qur'an. Regarding Hārūt and Mārūt, he treats the detailed narrative as originating in Israelite material and emphasizes the absence of a sound connected Prophetic report establishing those details. [9]

In the story of David, he identifies weak transmission and treats many details as Israelite. In Zayd and Zaynab, he does not merely express dislike of the narrative; he emphasizes the lack of sound transmission while retaining the Qur'anic legislative meaning concerning adoption. This illustrates the principle of interpretive economy: where details are not established, the exegete need not invent a replacement narrative. [9]

Al-Ālūsī and the Synthetic Critical Tendency

These commentaries demonstrate that the development of criticism did not proceed in a single line from leniency to strictness. Each author combines elements of hadith, jurisprudence, theology, language, and contextual analysis. Comparison is therefore more accurate when it examines the critical process rather than assigning one fixed label to an entire exegete. [10]

Imami Exegetical Methods

The Principle of Comparing Hadith with the Qur'an

Comparing reports with the Qur'an occupies a central position in the Imami tradition. Al-Kulaynī records chapters concerning acceptance of what agrees with the Book of God and rejection of what contradicts it, and al-Ḥurr al-'Āmilī gathered traditions on this principle. Contradiction here does not mean every apparent difference that can be reconciled; rather, it means conflict with a decisive text or principle after reasonable methods of harmonization have been exhausted. [11], [17]

This principle performs a dual function: it prevents an apparently sound chain from becoming immunity for a false text, while also preventing rejection of a report merely because no identical Qur'anic verse has been found. The Qur'an is a governing criterion, but applying it requires disciplined distinctions between clear and ambiguous verses, general and specific wording, and foundational principles and incidental details. [11]

Al-Ṭūsī: Reason, the Qur'an, and Transmission Routes

In *al-Tibyān*, Shaykh al-Ṭūsī combines language, theology, and transmitted reports. He frequently presents competing views and rejects what is not supported by the apparent meaning of the Qur'an or by the principle of prophetic impeccability. His expertise in hadith and legal theory also enabled him to distinguish reports transmitted by opponents from those established through Imami routes, without treating a difference of source alone as sufficient grounds for rejection. [12]

His strength appears in refusing to burden a verse with details not indicated by its wording and in using decisive reason and clear Qur'anic principles. Yet the abridgment of some chains in *tafsīr* requires researchers to return to hadith sources; an overall expression such as "our companions reported" or "the general school reported" cannot substitute for tracing the actual transmission. [12]

Al-Ṭabrisī: Disciplined Synthesis and Doctrinal Caution

Al-Ṭabrisī organized *Majma' al-Bayān* around linguistic, recitational, argumentative, and transmitted units and benefited from the heritage of both schools. He transmitted multiple reports but tended to uphold the dignity of the prophets and reject offensive Israelite narratives. In the story of David, he rejects the portrayal that attributes desire for another man's wife and involvement in his death to David, and interprets the repentance in a manner appropriate to prophetic status. [13]

His method forms a comparative bridge because it does not isolate Imami *tafsīr* from Sunni transmitted material; rather, it tests reports through theological and methodological principles. This breadth demonstrates that using the heritage of another school does not entail accepting it, just as sectarian rejection cannot replace shared evidence. [13]

Al-Balāghī: Earlier Scripture and Historical Context

In *Ālā' al-Rahmān*, Muḥammad Jawād al-Balāghī employed historical criticism and comparison with the texts of the People of the Book, exposing contradictions and alterations. His method is useful for tracing Israelite reports to their earlier environment: verbal or narrative similarity may reveal a route of transmission, after which comparison with the Qur'an determines what revelation confirms, leaves undecided, or rejects. [14]

Finding a literary antecedent, however, does not by itself prove that a report was fabricated within Islam; it may simply be a story whose source is known. The researcher must therefore distinguish establishing an Israelite root from proving that a transmitter deliberately attributed it to the Prophet or an Imam. [14]

Al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī: Qur'an-Based Tafsīr and Organized Matn Criticism

Al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī generally distinguishes between the explanation derived from the verses and the "narrative investigation." This prevents a report from determining the meaning before that meaning is established through context and the Qur'an itself. He then tests reports against decisive conclusions and employs linguistic, historical, rational, and doctrinal evidence. [15]

In the satanic verses narrative, he maintains that decisive evidence for prophetic impeccability contradicts the report even if its chain were hypothetically assumed to be sound, because the report attributes to the Prophet an explicit failure concerning revelation and words of unbelief. In evaluating narratives concerning Idrīs, he describes certain accounts as Israelite material affected by fabrication and holds that established scholarly principles reject them. Here "fabrication" is the result of combining an Israelite origin, contradiction of principles, and narrative disorder rather than merely a weak chain. [15]

The application of comparison with the Qur'an nevertheless requires caution. A meaning may be absent from the Qur'an without contradicting it, and a report may provide a legitimate specification or explanation. Accordingly, Persian studies distinguish three situations: agreement, which strengthens a report; established contradiction, which rejects it; and absence of either agreement or contradiction, in which case the investigation moves to the chain and other evidence before suspension of judgment. [15]

Muḥammad Hādī Maʿrifa: The Critical Athar-Based Method

In *al-Tafsīr al-Atharī al-Jāmiʿ*, Muḥammad Hādī Maʿrifa sought to combine transmitted material with critical evaluation and gave content criticism a role alongside chain criticism. His criteria include comparison with the Qurʾān and established Sunnah, settled historical facts and certain knowledge, examination of the report's style and resemblance to the language of the infallible authority, and investigation of mural transmission, anonymity, anomaly, and contradiction. [16], [18]

His distinctive contribution is the transformation of principles into practical steps: he first explains the verse, then collects reports, presents the views of exegetes and critics, and identifies the source of the defect. In this way he avoids two dangers: rejecting all exegetical reports because of common weakness in chains, and accepting them merely because they are attributed to the early generations or the Imams. [16]

Shared Critical Criteria

Source Criticism and Antiquity

The first question is: Where did the report first appear? If it is found in a late book without a chain and is attributed to an early commentary in which it cannot be located, this may indicate interpolation or textual corruption. If dozens of later citations can be traced to one source, their number does not constitute multiple independent routes. Source criticism includes examining the title and attribution of a book, its manuscripts and textual variants, and whether its author was compiling material or presenting it as proof. [5], [6]

The critic should also trace movement between generations. A report may first appear as a statement of Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, then become a statement of Ibn ʿAbbās in an abridgement, and finally be raised to the Prophet. Such "upgrading of attribution" is a strong warning sign, particularly when the elevated version is absent from the major musnad collections.

Isnād and Narrator Criticism

The critic examines continuity, *tadlīs*, *irsāl*, confusion, agreement with reliable transmitters, and sectarian motives associated with solitary transmission. Biographical sources from both traditions are used according to each school's methodological rules. A weak chain alone, however, does not establish fabrication unless it contains a proven liar who deliberately fabricated reports or is accompanied by additional evidence. [1], [2], [18]

Routes should be collected before judgment. A transmitter who initially appears isolated may have an independent corroborating route, while multiple chains may ultimately turn out to revolve around one source. Likewise, multiple fabricated chains do not strengthen a report when the fabricator copied the text and constructed several routes for it.

Comparison with the Qurʾān

The Qurʾān is the highest criterion for an exegetical report because the report claims to explain the Qurʾān and therefore cannot destroy its clear meaning. Comparison may involve an explicit verse, a repeatedly established meaning, a decisive principle derived from the totality of the Qurʾānic text, or the context and rhetorical direction of the verse. [11], [15]

Yet every addition must not be treated as contradiction. The Sunnah may explain concise wording and specify a general statement. The relevant criterion is contradiction that cannot reasonably be reconciled linguistically or methodologically, not merely the Qurʾān's silence concerning a detail.

Comparison with Established Sunnah

When a report contradicts a mass-transmitted Sunnah or a meaning firmly established through numerous sound routes, this may constitute a defect in its content. Conversely, a sound report should not be rejected merely because of a weak opposing report. The exegete must trace the relevant traditions and avoid treating an allegedly famous but unsupported narration as a decisive criterion. [20]

The satanic verses narrative illustrates the distinction: the established report concerns the prostration of the polytheists during the recitation of *Sūrat al-Najm*, whereas the fabricated wording is an additional element. The existence of the authentic framework does not authenticate the dangerous addition.

Doctrinal Principles and Prophetic Impeccability

Exegetes of both traditions employ prophetic impeccability as a governing criterion, although they

differ regarding its scope and details. A report attributing alteration of revelation or gross moral misconduct to a prophet cannot be treated as a harmless historical detail. The doctrinal principle must nevertheless be demonstrated from evidence; otherwise sectarian premises become a mechanism for rejecting every report that conflicts with prior assumptions. [7], [8], [12], [15]

The criterion is strongest when combined with other evidence: the weakness of David's report, its scriptural origin, its conflict with the Qur'anic portrayal of prophets, and the weakness of some details together provide a stronger case than an appeal to sanctity alone.

Language, Context, and the Purpose of the Surah

Context may reveal that a report answers a question the verse never raises. In the story of Zayd and Zaynab, the context concerns legislation abolishing the effects of adoption, whereas a weak narrative shifts the center of the story toward personal desire. In Hārūt and Mārūt, the context condemns following magic and disbelief by devils; it does not require the elaborate story of the two angels' fall. [7], [9]

The critic also examines the report's vocabulary: Does it employ terminology unknown in the period? Is its structure awkward? Does it contain excessive numerical exaggeration or stylistic weakness unlike concise Prophetic speech? These are supporting indicators, not independent verdicts, because reports may be transmitted by meaning and a narrator's explanatory material may enter the text.

History and Settled Knowledge

Historical comparison can reveal that a transmitter could not have met the person from whom he supposedly transmitted, that a verse was revealed concerning someone who had not yet been born, or that a name or institution did not exist in the claimed period. Comparison of places and dates may also expose narratives assembled from distant elements. Historical evidence should be treated carefully, especially when the chronology itself is disputed. [14]

Scientific knowledge should not be used as a fixed criterion when based on a changing theory. Rejection should rest on certain knowledge or stable observation. Intellectual humility is essential: a report may be improbable without being fabricated, and its language may be metaphorical rather than a scientific assertion.

Motives for Fabrication and the Effects of Reports

The critic asks who benefits from the report. Does it praise a city, sect, ruler, or reciter? Does it promise extraordinary reward for a trivial act? Does it demonize an opponent? Motive alone does not prove falsehood, but it becomes stronger when combined with isolation, contradiction, disordered wording, and conflict with established principles. Classical critics identified political, sectarian, devotional, commercial, and personal motives. [3], [19]

The practical effect of a report also determines the required level of disclosure. A report that attacks a prophet, establishes a religious practice, or incites hatred toward a group requires an explicit judgment; it should not be buried in a footnote. A weak historical report without doctrinal consequences may simply be labeled according to its degree and left without a definitive verdict.

Findings from Comparative Applications

The Satanic Verses Narrative

The narrative claims that Satan placed praise of idols into the Prophet's recitation during Sūrat al-Najm and that the statement was subsequently abrogated. Some exegetes transmitted it through *mursal* routes, but Ibn Kathīr observed that its routes are all *mursal* and that he did not find a sound connected chain. Al-Rāzī judged it false and fabricated and combined Qur'anic, Sunnah-based, and rational arguments. Al-Qurṭubī transmitted its rejection by Ibn Ḥazm and others and connected the criticism with preservation of revelation. [7], [8], [9], [12], [13], [15], [20]

In the Imami school, al-Ṭūsī and al-Ṭabrisī rejected it on the basis of prophetic impeccability and preservation of the Qur'an, while al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī went so far as to state that decisive evidence for impeccability contradicts the text even if its chain were hypothetically sound. The comparison reveals three mutually reinforcing lines: discontinuity of transmission, decisive Qur'anic principles, and theological implications.

The example also demonstrates the need to distinguish an established event from a fabricated addition. The prostration of the polytheists during the recitation of Sūrat al-Najm is transmitted in

authentic reports, whereas the “satanic verses” wording is an independent addition. A fabricator may therefore use an authentic event as the framework for an invented statement; authentication of the framework does not authenticate the addition.

David and the Two Contestants

Some Israelite narratives claim that David desired a commander’s wife, sought the commander’s death, and connected the story to the parable of the sheep. Ibn Kathīr refused to build the interpretation on these details because most are Israelite and no obligatory sound hadith establishes them, while he criticized the route involving Yazīd al-Raqāshī. Al-Rāzī and Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ rejected attributing such a crime to a prophet, and al-Tabāṭabā’ī rejected the biblical portrayal because it conflicts with Qur’anic principles and prophetic impeccability. [7], [9], [13], [15]

The strength of the argument is that the Qur’an establishes trial and repentance without establishing the alleged crime. Silence therefore cannot be transformed into permission to fill the story. An exegete may interpret the rebuke according to what the text supports—such as haste in judgment, leaving what is preferable, or another matter known to God—without relying on a narrative that distorts prophetic dignity.

Hārūt and Mārūt

The story of the two angels expanded into details involving a woman, wine, murder, idol worship, and punishment in Babylon. After collecting the statements of the Successors, Ibn Kathīr concluded that these details return to Israelite reports and that no sound connected Prophetic hadith establishes them, while the apparent Qur’anic wording presents the story concisely. Critical Imami exegetes likewise tend to reject material that conflicts with angelic impeccability or exceeds the verse’s indication. [9], [15]

The case teaches the principle of controlling the amount of proof. The verse mentions teaching, trial, and warning against disbelief; the exegete is not required to deny every detail beyond it, but neither is he entitled to affirm those details without evidence. For many details the appropriate judgment is “Israelite and unsupported”; some may be objectionable, while a report explicitly raised to the Prophet requires investigation of its attribution.

Zayd and Zaynab

Some reports state that the Prophet saw Zaynab, admired her, concealed his attraction, and later married her. Ibn Kathīr rejected the transmitted reports because they were not sound and set aside an unusual narration, interpreting the verse according to its legislative purpose: removing the difficulty of marrying the divorced wife of an adopted son. Al-Qurṭubī discussed the narrative in light of prophetic impeccability and the legislative context. Modern Imami commentaries generally reject the sensational narrative and interpret the hidden matter as the Prophet’s knowledge that Zaynab would become his wife and his concern about people’s reactions. [8], [9], [15]

The comparison shows that matn criticism here is more than saying “this is inappropriate.” It reads the structure of the surah: the preceding verses abolish the legal effects of adoption, and the verse itself states the legislative rationale. The weak narrative diverts attention from the stated legal purpose toward a sensational story, which is a characteristic sign of intrusive narrative material.

Reports on the Virtues of Surahs

A chain attributed to Ubayy ibn Ka’b became widespread, assigning a particular virtue to every surah. Critics identified transmitters who admitted fabrication as a means of encouraging people toward the Qur’an. Ibn al-Jawzī included a number of these reports in his work on fabrications, and al-Suyūṭī continued the investigation while discussing some of his judgments. Their transmission in tafsīr works does not authenticate them. [3], [19]

A sound approach disaggregates the subject. Authentic virtues exist for certain surahs, including al-Fāṭihah, al-Baqarah, al-Ikhlās, and the two protective surahs, so the entire category should not be rejected. However, the repeated pattern assigning each surah a numerical reward proportionate to its theme requires independent verification. In the Imami school, the principles of comparison with the Qur’an and criticism of exaggeration apply; “leniency concerning virtues” cannot authenticate an attribution or establish a specific reward.

Sectarian Reports Identifying Specific Applications

A report may interpret a general expression as referring to a member of the Prophet's household, a Companion, or an opponent. Some such reports are applications rather than restrictions; some are sound and others fabricated. The error is to treat every identification as an occasion of revelation or legal specification. The report should be asked whether "was revealed concerning" means application, or whether it claims a specific historical event; whether the chronology of the surah permits the claim; and whether the transmitters are associated with exaggeration or hostility. [5], [18]

Comparative methodology helps overcome selectivity. A researcher should not criticize the fabrications of an opponent while accepting reports that serve his own group. The same standard should be applied to reports of virtues and defects on both sides, while respecting differences in biographical methodology.

Digital Transmission of Fabricated Material

In the digital age, a report is often extracted from a commentary, its chain and the critic's comments are removed, and the text is placed on an image with an assertive caption. A report thus moves from "research material" to "religious instruction." The exegete may have cited and rejected it, but the digital publisher reproduces only the text. Consequently, criticism of fabricated material now includes tracing digital context, examining images, returning the report to its source, and stating its status in language accessible to the public.

A hyperlink alone is insufficient. The communicator should state, for example, "reported by X through a weak chain," "an unsupported Israelite story," or "critics judged it fabricated." Greater precision is required when the report concerns doctrine, personal honor, or public worship.

4. Discussion

The results confirm the first hypothesis that the strongest exegetical criticism cannot be reduced to a strict division between isnād-based and matn-based methods. The selected Sunni and Imami commentators repeatedly combine transmission evidence with higher-order tests of meaning. This finding also supports the second hypothesis: the documentary function of a commentary must be identified before the presence of a report is interpreted as endorsement. The comparative evidence further supports the third and fourth hypotheses, because shared criteria are broader than sectarian differences in narrator evaluation and because a judgment of fabrication emerges most responsibly at the end of cumulative analysis rather than at the beginning.

Convergence and Divergence between Sunni and Imami Approaches

Scholars from both traditions agree on the prohibition of lying about the Prophet and the Imams, rejection of reports contradicting the clear Qur'an, refusal to build doctrine on weak stories, caution toward Israelite material that defames prophets, and distinction between a transmitted report and an evidentiary proof. Both also employ language, context, history, and narrative disorder as critical indicators. [1], [11]

The cases show that the names of the criteria may differ while their structure is similar: comparison with the Qur'an in Imami scholarship corresponds to reliance on clear Qur'anic principles in al-Rāzī and al-Shanqīṭī; prophetic impeccability appears in al-Qurṭubī and al-Rāzī as well as al-Ṭūsī and al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī; and narrator criticism is explicit in Ibn Kathīr and in Imami biographical sources. [7], [8], [12], [15]

The schools differ in their biographical systems, the status of the Companions' integrity, the authority of a Companion's statement, the position of reports attributed to an Imam, and the scope of solitary reports in tafsīr. Some Imami exegetes, particularly al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, tend to prioritize Qur'anic structure and matn criticism outside jurisprudence, whereas detailed isnād analysis is more visible in Ibn Kathīr. [18]

These differences do not create absolute boundaries. Al-Rāzī is Sunni but uses a strongly rational matn-based method in the satanic verses case, while Muḥammad Hādī Ma'rifa is Imami and pays substantial attention to isnād and narrators. It is therefore more accurate to speak of cross-school tendencies: the comprehensive compiler, the critical hadith scholar, the Qur'anic theologian, the contextual exegete, and the integrative method. [7], [16]

Doctrinal commitments affect the identification of “decisive contradiction.” An exegete may reject a report because it conflicts with a conception of prophetic impeccability that another scholar does not share. The solution is not to remove doctrine from interpretation but to disclose the reasoning: What verse or decisive evidence is being used? Is the report explicitly contradictory? Can it be interpreted? Is its chain strong? When these premises are stated, disagreement becomes open to examination.

A fair comparative method does not equate all doctrinal premises, but it prevents a judgment from becoming a sectarian accusation. A researcher may say that a report is rejected according to a particular doctrine of impeccability and is also weak in transmission according to both schools, thereby separating shared grounds from disputed premises.

The Value of Integrating Isnād and Matn Criticism

Isnād criticism alone may reject a sound meaning that arrived through another route, while matn criticism alone may rely on changing taste. Combining both produces more precise judgments. Four situations can be distinguished: [1], [16], [18]

Four evaluative situations follow from this integrated approach. A strong chain with a text consistent with decisive evidence can be accepted after hidden defects are considered. A weak chain with a meaning supported by general principles may preserve a sound meaning without establishing the attribution. An apparently strong chain whose text contradicts decisive evidence requires re-examination of both transmission and meaning. Where a suspect chain, objectionable text, plausible motive for fabrication, and late historical emergence converge, the evidence for fabrication becomes substantially stronger. This graded matrix explains why suspension of judgment can be methodologically superior to a premature binary verdict.

Proposed Eight-Stage Critical Model

1. Define the Claim

The researcher should state precisely what the report establishes: a lexical meaning, occasion of revelation, specific referent, story, doctrine, ruling, virtue, or defect. The degree to which the commentary depends on it should then be determined. A report that does not change the meaning is less consequential than one that reverses the verse’s purpose.

2. Return to the Earliest Source

Locate the earliest book, verify the attribution of the book, distinguish the original text from later marginal material, and distinguish printed pagination from digital pagination. Then trace the report’s transmission into later commentaries. If all later citations return to one source, the illusion of multiple independent routes disappears.

3. Collect Routes and Wording Variants

Collect chains and texts and record additions. A report may have a sound concise core followed by fabricated details, as in the prostration event and the added satanic wording. The entire block should not receive one judgment before it is decomposed.

4. Critique Narrators and Continuity

Examine each route according to the sources of its school, distinguishing the liar, abandoned narrator, weak narrator, and unknown narrator, and distinguishing raised, suspended, and mural reports. Identify the actual common link. A report should not be called fabricated merely because one weak narrator appears unless there is evidence of invention.

5. Apply a Network of Matn Criteria

Test the report against eight measures: the clear Qur’an, established Sunnah, demonstrated doctrine, decisive reason, language, context, history, and settled knowledge. A probabilistic criterion should not be treated as decisive. The result of each test should be recorded independently so the reader can review it.

6. Analyze the Origin of the Report

Examine similarities with the texts of the People of the Book, sectarian and political interests, preaching patterns, numerical exaggerations, and the environment in which the report emerged. These indicators are rarely sufficient alone, but they can explain how and why a report was produced or expanded.

7. Weigh the Evidence

Evidence should not be counted mechanically; one decisive indicator may outweigh many probabilities. The researcher should distinguish: sound or good; weak but possible and non-probative; severely weak or objectionable; Israelite and undecided; false in meaning or contradictory to decisive evidence; and fabricated when the evidence is sufficient.

8. State the Judgment and Preserve Reporting Integrity

The judgment should appear near the report rather than being buried in the conclusion. The language should match the strength of the evidence: "not established," "its chain is disconnected," "its text is objectionable," "it has an Israelite origin," "X judged it fabricated," or "the more likely view is that it is fabricated." If critics disagree, their disagreement and evidence should be presented rather than selecting only the judgment that supports the researcher's position.

Methodological Errors and Practical Implications

Equating Weakness with Fabrication

This error leads to accusations of lying against transmitters and authors without sufficient evidence and deprives research of gradations of probability. The judgment should correspond to the reason for rejection. [1], [3]

Treating Mere Presence in a Tafsīr as Proof

The exegete may be compiling material or transmitting it in order to refute it. The introduction, reporting formula, and context must be read. "Al-Ṭabarī mentioned it" does not mean "al-Ṭabarī authenticated it." [5], [6]

Authenticating a Report because Its Meaning Is Good

An acceptable meaning may be derived from the Qur'an or wisdom, but that does not establish the attribution. "Soundness of meaning" must be separated from "soundness of the hadith."

Rejecting a Report on Personal Taste or Changing Science

Strangeness is not a technical judgment of objectionability, and a scientific theory is not necessarily certain. The researcher should explain the precise impossibility or contradiction.

Sectarian Selectivity

Criticizing an opponent's fabrications while justifying one's own destroys scholarly credibility. The criterion must remain the same even when documentation systems differ.

Omitting Disagreement over the Judgment

One exegete may judge a report fabricated while another may consider its mural routes evidence of an underlying historical core. The disagreement should be reported and then evaluated by evidence, especially in famous cases.

The digital environment intensifies these methodological risks because reports are frequently detached from their chains, source contexts, and the evaluative comments of the exegete. For public-facing communication, source tracing should therefore be accompanied by a concise status statement that distinguishes weak, unsupported, objectionable, and fabricated material. This is particularly important where the report affects doctrine, the reputation of prophetic figures, communal relations, or devotional practice.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the criticism of fabricated hadith in tafsīr is an integrative discipline in which source history, transmission analysis, narrator criticism, Qur'anic and Sunnah-based comparison, doctrinal coherence, language, context, and historical plausibility function as a cumulative network rather than as isolated tests. The comparison of selected Sunni and Imami exegetes shows that their emphases differ, but substantial common ground remains: inclusion in a commentary does not equal acceptance, a weak report is not automatically fabricated, and the correctness of a meaning does not authenticate its attribution. The applied cases further demonstrate that the strongest judgments arise when transmission defects, objectionable content, contextual tension, historical development, and possible motives for fabrication reinforce one another, while incomplete evidence warrants a graded judgment or suspension rather than categorical certainty. The proposed eight-stage model therefore offers a practical framework for contemporary tafsīr research and digital verification. Future work should

develop searchable maps of transmission routes, compare Sunni and Imami biographical judgments on shared transmitters, and extend applied analysis to occasions of revelation, virtues of surahs, and other narrative materials; critical editions and public communication should also place the status of disputed reports close to the text, use precise graded terminology, and avoid treating changing scientific theories or sectarian preference as decisive evidence.

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