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Article

The Impact of Qur'anic Variant Readings on Differences in Interpretive Orientations among Qur'anic Exegetes

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Abstract: The This study examines the impact of variant Qur'anic readings (al-qirāʾāt al-Qurʾāniyyah) on interpretive orientations among Qur'anic exegetes. It addresses the core methodological problem that variations in Qur'anic readings do not yield a uniform exegetical outcome across all contexts: a variant reading may expand the semantic scope of a verse, corroborate one linguistic interpretation over another, or contribute to divergent juristic rulings (aḥkām fiqhiyyah), whereas other phonetic or performative variations produce no substantive shift in meaning. Accordingly, the study investigates the mechanisms through which a textual variation in reading transitions into an interpretive divergence, and evaluates how an exegete's linguistic, contextual, tradition-based (riwāʾī), and juristic frameworks govern this transition. Adopting an inductive, analytical, and comparative methodology, the research analyzes selected case studies of variant readings across major classical and modern exegetical works representing diverse scholarly orientations, notably al-Ṭabarī's Jāmiʿ al-Bayān, al-Ṭabrisī's Majmaʿ al-Bayān, al-Zamakhsharī's al-Kashshāf, Ibn ʿAṭiyyah's al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz, al-Qurṭubī's al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān, Abū Ḥayyān's al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ, and Ibn ʿĀshūr's al-Taḥrīr wa-al-Tanwīr.

The findings demonstrate that the exegetical impact of variant readings operates across distinct tiers—including semantic complementarity, interpretive preference (tarjīḥ), functional complementarity, and juristic inference—and that a reading never operates in isolation from textual context, Arabic grammar, transmitted reports, and legal hermeneutics (uṣūl al-istidlāl). Moreover, exegetes frequently concur on the canonical authenticity of a reading while diverging sharply in its grammatical parsing and interpretive consequences. The study concludes by establishing a rigorous methodological criterion that separates three analytical stages: the textual authentication of a reading (thubūt al-qirāʾah), its linguistic and grammatical construal (tawjīh), and the resulting exegetical or legal implication derived therefrom.

Keywords: Qur'anic Variant Readings (Qirāʾāt); Exegetical Orientation; Interpretive Divergence; Qur'anic Semantics; Comparative Exegesis (Tafsīr Muqāran).

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1. Introduction

The science of Qur'anic variant readings (ʿilm al-qirāʾāt) constitutes one of the foundational disciplines within Qur'anic sciences (ʿulūm al-Qurʾān), as it illuminates the authorized modes of reciting the Qur'anic text and reveals the linguistic, semantic, and exegetical dimensions embedded within certain textual variations. The significance of qirāʾāt is not confined to phonetic performance or chains of recitation transmission; in numerous instances, it extends to lexical morphology, inflectional vowels (iʿrāb), syntactic structures, and contextual relationships, thereby opening multiple legitimate avenues for understanding a verse and directing its meaning.

Classical and modern works of Qur'anic exegesis (tafsīr) have devoted substantial attention to variant readings, yet exegetes have not employed them according to a single uniform pattern. Rather, commentators vary markedly in the weight they assign to lexicography, syntax, textual context (siyāq), transmitted reports (maʾthūr), and juristic principles when assessing the impact of a reading. Consequently, establishing the mere existence of a variant reading is insufficient to posit an interpretive divergence: a variant reading may broaden semantic scope, reinforce an established meaning, tip the balance in favor of one interpretive option over another, or participate in deriving a legal ruling (ḥukm fiqhī), whereas other variations remain strictly within the realm of phonetic articulation without altering substantive meaning.

The complexity of this issue becomes particularly evident when comparing how different exegetes treat the very same reading. Commentators frequently agree on the canonical validity of a reading yet diverge in its grammatical construal, its degree of alignment with the surrounding context, or its probative weight when adjudicating between competing interpretations. In such cases, the resulting divergence does not stem from the variant reading alone, but from the hermeneutical framework through which it is read, the corroborative evidence (qarāʾin) brought to bear upon it, and the analytical function assigned to it within the exegete's broader interpretive architecture.

On this basis, the present study investigates the impact of Qur'anic variant readings on differences in interpretive orientations among exegetes—not merely by cataloguing or describing qirāʾāt, but by analyzing the exact mechanism through which a reading transitions from the textual level to the exegetical level. It compares how major exegetes construe identical readings and evaluates whether a given interpretive difference originates in the intrinsic structure of the reading itself or in how it is deployed in light of language, context, transmitted reports, and juristic reasoning.

In this study, interpretive orientation (al-tawjīh al-tafsīrī) denotes the methodological trajectory an exegete follows to determine the meaning of a reading, establish its connection to the verse, and derive resulting semantic expansions, interpretive preferences, or legal implications. Meanwhile, the impact of a reading (athar al-qirāʾah) refers to the degree of shift in textual comprehension produced by a variant reading, distinguishing between an effect inherent to the linguistic structure of the reading itself and an effect generated by the exegete's method of interpreting it. Through a comparative reading, this research seeks to clarify the relationship between variant readings and exegetical methodology and to establish a rigorous analytical standard for separating the authentication of a reading, its linguistic construal, and the exegetical conclusion built upon it.

1. Research Problem

The central problem addressed by this research is that variations in Qur'anic readings do not produce a uniform exegetical effect across all occurrences. While certain variant readings broaden semantic horizons, support a particular interpretive probability, or shape a juristic ruling, others remain confined to phonetic performance without generating any substantive change in meaning.

This issue grows considerably more intricate when exegetes agree on the authenticity of a given reading yet diverge in explaining its meaning or determining its weight within the semantic structure of the verse. Such divergence may arise from differing morphological or syntactic analyses, contrasting assessments of textual context, selective reliance on transmitted traditions, or distinct legal-theoretical (uṣūlī) commitments. Consequently, it is methodologically unsound to attribute every interpretive disagreement directly to the variant reading itself without examining the mediating hermeneutical tools through which the reading is translated into an exegetical outcome.

Accordingly, the study investigates the relationship between variant readings and divergent interpretive orientations in order to disentangle the direct textual effect of a reading from the secondary effect produced by an exegete's analytical method. The core research question may thus be formulated as

follows: How do variant Qur'anic readings contribute to differences in interpretive orientations among exegetes, and to what extent is this divergence attributable to the reading itself versus the linguistic, contextual, tradition-based, and juristic methodologies governing its interpretation?

2. Research Questions

1. How do variant Qur'anic readings influence the construction of exegetical meaning, and what are the primary manifestations of this influence across semantic expansion, interpretive preference, and juristic inference?

2. How have major exegetes approached identical Qur'anic readings in terms of morphological, syntactic, contextual, and tradition-based construal, and how have their differing methodologies shaped the resulting interpretations?

3. To what extent can divergences in interpretive orientation be attributed to the intrinsic structure of a variant reading itself, as opposed to the exegete's method of integrating it within a specific textual context and scholarly framework?

3. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its systematic examination of the nexus between Qur'anic variant readings and divergent exegetical orientations, demonstrating that a reading's interpretive force does not emerge from lexical difference in isolation, but rather through its dynamic interaction with context, lexicography, syntax, transmitted reports, and the exegete's juristic methodology.

From a theoretical and methodological standpoint, the study distinguishes between distinct levels of exegetical impact—showing that variant readings may expand semantic range, corroborate a preferred meaning, or inform a legal ruling without implying that every textual variant generates a distinct interpretation. Furthermore, by comparing multiple exegetes on the exact same reading, the study offers a precise analytical criterion that separates the canonical establishment of a reading, its linguistic construal, and the exegetical implication subsequently derived from it.

4. Research Objectives

This study aims to uncover the nature of the impact exerted by variant Qur'anic readings on interpretive orientation and to delineate its tiers across semantic expansion, interpretive preference, and juristic deduction. It further seeks to analyze the methods employed by prominent exegetes in construing identical readings and to evaluate how their conclusions are conditioned by differing linguistic, syntactic, contextual, and tradition-based frameworks. Ultimately, the study endeavors to establish a disciplined methodological standard capable of distinguishing between an interpretive effect rooted in the variant reading itself and an effect arising from the exegete's mode of deploying it within an interpretive system.

2. Materials and Methods

The research adopts an inductive, analytical, and comparative methodology. It selects representative Qur'anic verses in which variant readings produce a demonstrable effect on semantics, interpretive orientation, or juristic rulings, analyzes those readings across morphological, syntactic, and semantic dimensions, and compares how exegetes construe and deploy them within their broader interpretive arguments.

The comparative analysis draws primarily upon seven landmark works of tafsīr representing major Sunnī, Shīʿī, linguistic, juristic, and modern rhetorical-contextual schools of exegesis: al-Ṭabarī's Jāmiʿ al-Bayān, al-Ṭabrisī's Majmaʿ al-Bayān, al-Zamakhsharī's al-Kashshāf, Ibn ʿAṭiyyah's al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz, al-Qurṭubī's al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān, Abū Ḥayyān's al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ, and Ibn ʿĀshūr's al-Taḥrīr wa-al-Tanwīr.

Each case study is examined according to a standardized five-step analytical protocol: (1) identifying the variant readings and the locus of variation; (2) elucidating their morphological or syntactic construal; (3) surveying the positions of the selected exegetes; (4) determining the resulting impact on meaning or legal ruling; and (5) evaluating whether that impact stems from the reading itself or from external hermeneutical factors such as context, transmitted reports, and juristic methodology. The scope of the study is delimited to case studies exhibiting clear interpretive impact, without attempting an exhaustive inventory of all canonical readings or an independent isnād-criticism of their chains of transmission, while consistently maintaining the methodological distinction between authentication, construal, and exegetical impact.

6. Literature Review and Research Gap

Previous scholarship has examined the impact of Qur'anic variant readings on exegesis from several angles, encompassing general theoretical foundations, applied studies on specific sūrahs or verses, and specialized inquiries into linguistic or juristic implications.

Among the prominent contributions in this field is ʿUmar ibn Yūsuf Ḥamzah's study, al-Qirāʾāt wa-Atharuhā fī Tawjīh al-Tafsīr ("Qur'anic Readings and Their Impact on Directing Exegesis"), which demonstrates through numerous Qur'anic examples how variant readings expand meaning, support one exegetical opinion over another, or inform juristic rulings.[1] While valuable for establishing the general categories of exegetical impact, Ḥamzah's study focuses primarily on classifying types of impact rather than comparing how different exegetes diverge in construing the exact same reading.

Similarly, Aḥmad Qāsim ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad and Ṣafāʾ ʿAlī Ḥusayn, in Athar al-Qirāʾāt al-Qurʾāniyyah fī Tawjīh al-Maʿnā al-Tafsīrī ("The Impact of Qur'anic Readings on Directing Exegetical Meaning"), examine a range of examples illustrating the intersection of qirāʾāt with Arabic linguistics and legal inference.[2] However, their analysis remains centered on the readings and their direct semantic or legal outcomes without constructing an extended methodological comparison across exegetes.

In a surah-specific study, Aḥmad ʿAlī Aḥmad and Sulaymān Ḥamdān Ādam al-Raḍī's Athar Ikhtilāf al-Qirāʾāt al-Mutawātirah fī Tafsīr Sūrat al-Baqarah min Khilāl al-Juzʾ al-Awwal: Jamʿan wa-Dirāsatan wa-Tawjīhan ("The Impact of Variant Mutawātir Readings on the Exegesis of Sūrat al-Baqarah in the First Juzʾ: Compilation, Study, and Construal") surveys all mutawātir readings within the opening section of Sūrat al-Baqarah, showing that their effects range from semantic expansion to having no direct interpretive impact.[3] Although notable for its inductive breadth, the study does not make differences in exegetical methodology regarding a single reading its central axis.

In a specialized applied study, Behzad Jalalvand, ʿAbd al-Rasūl Ḥusaynī-Zādeh, and Ḥusayn ʿAlawī-Mehr investigated the accusative (naṣb) and genitive (jarr) readings of wa-arjulakum / wa-arjulikum in Q 5:6 (Sūrat al-Māʾidah) and their relationship to the syntactic and juristic construal of the ablution (wuḍūʾ) verse.[4] Their work underscores the crucial insight that a variant reading does not generate a legal ruling independently, but interacts with transmitted traditions and grammatical analysis; however, its scope is restricted to a single verse.

Finally, Muḥammad ʿAlī Ḥusayn and Muṣṭafā ʿAbbās Muqaddam, in Dirāsah fī al-Manhaj al-Tafsīrī fī Awjuh al-Qurʾān al-Karīm: al-Suyūṭī, al-Zarkashī, Āyat Allāh Maʿrifah, wa-al-Zarqānī Unmūdhajan ("A Study of Exegetical Methodology in the Aspects of the Holy Qur'an: al-Suyūṭī, al-Zarkashī, Āyat Allāh Maʿrifah, and al-Zarqānī as Models"), examine the interplay of context, lexicography, syntax, and qirāʾāt in directing semantic multiplicity, demonstrating significant variation in how scholars deploy these interpretive tools.[5] Nevertheless, its primary focus is polysemy (wujūh al-Qurʾān) rather than how a single variant reading produces divergent interpretive orientations among exegetes.

Research Gap and Scholarly Contribution

Within the bounds of the reviewed literature, prior studies have predominantly addressed the impact of Qur'anic readings either within a broad theoretical overview, within the confines of a single sūrah or verse, or from a narrowly juristic or linguistic perspective. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to treating the individual variant reading itself as a comparative unit of analysis across multiple exegetical traditions.

The research gap addressed by this study therefore lies in tracing precisely how exegetes diverge when construing the same variant reading, and determining what proportion of that divergence stems from the linguistic structure of the reading itself versus the exegete's differential weighting of interpretive instruments—specifically lexicography, textual context, transmitted reports, and juristic principles. The original contribution of this study consists in applying a unified five-stage analytical protocol—identification, grammatical construal, comparative exegetical mapping, semantic/legal impact assessment, and source evaluation—to isolate the exact locus and limits of interpretive divergence.

3. Results

Section One: Methodological and Semantic Foundations of the Impact of Variant Readings on Exegesis

Investigating the impact of Qur'anic variant readings on divergent interpretive orientations requires a rigorous theoretical foundation that defines the nature of a reading, its levels of variation, and its nexus with meaning construction. Not every variant reading carries exegetical weight, nor is the

interpretive effect of a reading determined merely by lexical difference; rather, it depends on the morphological, syntactic, or semantic transformation triggered by the variant and on how the exegete engages with that transformation.

Accordingly, this section establishes the foundational principles governing the relationship between qirāʾāt and tafsīr across three interconnected axes: (1) defining the concept of a Qur'anic reading and the criteria connecting it to exegetical meaning; (2) delineating the linguistic and semantic levels at which a reading exerts interpretive influence; and (3) examining the principal methodologies exegetes employ to construe readings and weigh their effects. These theoretical parameters establish the analytical framework tested through comparative case studies in Section Two.

1. The Concept of Qur'anic Readings and Criteria for Their Exegetical Relevance

A sound inquiry into the exegetical impact of qirāʾāt begins by distinguishing between a qirāʾah as an authorized mode of articulating the words of the Qur'an and the interpretive consequences that may arise from variations among those modes. Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī defined al-qirāʾāt as variations in the words of revelation concerning the orthography of letters or their mode of articulation—such as lightness (takhfīf), gemination (tathqīl), and the like—conceptually distinguishing qirāʾāt from the Qur'an as a unified revelatory essence while affirming their organic connection to the revealed text and its recitation.[6]

Such textual variation does not invariably entail a divergence in meaning. A substantial portion of qirāʾāt pertains exclusively to phonetic performance (adāʾ ṣawtī)—such as vowel prolongation (madd), vowel inclination (imālah), and glottal-stop softening (tashīl al-hamz)—modes that typically produce no shift in exegetical denotation.[6]

Conversely, when a variation affects the consonantal structure of a word, its inflectional case or mood (ḥarakah iʿrābiyyah), its morphological pattern (ṣīghah ṣarfiyyah), or its syntactic linkage to surrounding clauses, the reading becomes an active determinant in constructing interpretation. At this juncture, it becomes imperative to distinguish between the textual authentication of a reading and the meaning derived from it, because the canonical validity of a reading does not guarantee that all exegetes will assign it an identical interpretive effect.

Ibn al-Jazarī codified the three canonical criteria for an accepted reading: soundness of transmission chain (ṣiḥḥat al-sanad), conformity to the consonantal skeleton (rasm) of one of the ʿUthmānic codices, and compatibility with a valid grammatical construction of the Arabic language, emphasizing that authoritative recitation rests upon authentic transmission rather than speculative linguistic analogy.[7]

Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī reinforced this principle by citing the consensus of the masters of recitation that a canonical reading is an "established normative tradition" (sunnah muttabaʿah), whose authentication via sound transmission takes precedence over objections grounded solely in abstract grammatical analogy (qiyās naḥwī).[8]

Modern Qur'anic scholarship has further demonstrated that the interpretive impact of qirāʾāt operates across multiple degrees: a reading may elucidate another reading, complement its semantic scope, tip the balance toward a specific interpretive option, or influence a juristic ruling, rendering the relationship between qirāʾāt and tafsīr inherently multi-tiered.[1]

Consequently, the foundational methodological premise of this study is not to equate "variation in reading" with "divergence in exegesis." A reading may be canonically established without generating any new semantic content, or it may introduce a complementary nuance without creating contradiction. An exegetical impact may therefore be posited only where a demonstrable shift occurs either in semantic denotation or in the trajectory of legal-interpretive inference.

2. Levels of the Impact of Variant Readings on Semantic Construction

The interpretive weight of a variant reading varies according to the linguistic level at which the variation occurs. Where the variation is restricted to phonetic delivery, its semantic impact remains minimal; where it alters morphological form, inflectional function, or syntactic relations, it may broaden semantic scope or redirect exegetical understanding.

The morphological level (al-mustawā al-ṣarfī) represents one of the most consequential planes of influence, as an alteration in a word's morphological pattern shifts the semantic aspect foregrounded by the text. This does not imply mutual negation between two readings; rather, each morphological form frequently illuminates a complementary dimension of meaning not equally visible in the alternative reading.

The syntactic level (al-mustawā al-naḥwī) emerges when a variant reading modifies the grammatical case or mood of a word or alters coordination (ʿaṭf) and prepositional attachment (taʿalluq), thereby opening multiple possibilities for construing the relationship among sentence constituents. Here, the exegetical value of the reading lies not in the vowel shift per se, but in the resulting reconfiguration of semantic relationships within the clause.

The contextual level (al-mustawā al-siyāqī) operates as a hermeneutical constraint regulating the plausible meanings of a reading, since meaning is never extracted from an isolated morphological form but from its placement within discourse. As demonstrated in the comparative study by Ḥusayn and Muqaddam, context constitutes a pivotal determinant in specifying lexical denotation, working alongside syntactic and morphological rules to channel semantic direction.[5]

Furthermore, textual variation does not automatically entail exegetical divergence: Aḥmad and al-Raḍī distinguish clearly between variations in performative articulation (madd, imālah, tashīl), which leave the core meaning of a verse unchanged, and variations in consonantal letters or word structure, which bear directly upon interpretation.[3]

The juristic level (al-mustawā al-fiqhī) surfaces when a variant reading intersects with defining a legal condition (sharṭ), terminus (ghāyah), or modality of a ritual or legal act. Even here, however, a reading rarely functions as a standalone proof; instead, it is integrated into a composite evidentiary matrix encompassing lexicography, context, transmitted reports, and uṣūlī maxims—necessitating scholarly caution against attributing legal disagreements solely to variant readings.[9]

Scholarship in ʿulūm al-Qurʾān consistently affirms that a reading cannot be understood apart from the grammatical system of Arabic: the acceptance of a variant and the direction of its meaning depend on the interplay between transmitted text and linguistic structure, while upholding the primacy of authentically transmitted readings over preferential syntactic conventions.[8] Likewise, al-Zarkashī's taxonomy of textual variations—encompassing addition (ziyādah), omission (naqṣ), vowel alternation, and lexical substitution—demonstrates that exegetical impact scales according to the structural nature of the textual change rather than the mere presence of phonetic variation.[6]

Based on these considerations, the exegetical impact of variant readings may be classified into three primary tiers: (1) semantic expansion, which enriches meaning through complementary nuances; (2) interpretive preference (tarjīḥ), which corroborates one plausible reading of the verse over others; and (3) juristic construction, which contributes to formulating or qualifying a legal ruling. This classification rests on the functional outcome produced within the exegetical process rather than on phonetic or formal features alone.

3. Exegetical Methodologies in Construing Variant Readings and Weighing Their Impact

The interpretive outcome of a variant reading depends not solely on the nature of the textual variation, but equally on the analytical methodology of the exegete. One commentator may prioritize morphological and syntactic analysis, whereas another privileges transmitted traditions and discourse context, or focuses on juristic implications. Consequently, multiple exegetes may affirm the exact same reading while diverging considerably in the semantic or legal weight they build upon it.

Thus, the exegetical force of a reading is determined not merely by its textual authentication, but by how it is integrated into an interpretive framework. Methodologies differ in their relative reliance on grammatical parsing, contextual coherence, maʾthūr reports, and legal reasoning. Recent comparative methodological research confirms that exegetes often share the same core set of interpretive instruments while differing in the hierarchy, proportionality, and analytical depth assigned to each instrument—differences that directly shape their exegetical conclusions.[5]

Specifically, four distinct methodological trajectories govern the treatment of variant readings:

• The Linguistic-Syntactic Trajectory: Focuses on analyzing morphological patterns, inflectional endings, and syntactic dependencies to map the semantic possibilities licensed by Arabic grammar. Yet grammatical possibility alone does not automatically establish a definitive interpretation, as lexical and syntactic potential remains constrained by surrounding textual indicators.

• The Contextual Trajectory: Tests the semantic viability of a reading against its immediate verse environment, the overarching thematic unity of the sūrah, and the communicative intent (maqṣad al-khiṭāb) of the discourse. Context does not merely supplement a reading; it actively validates certain interpretive probabilities while narrowing or excluding others.

• The Tradition-Based (Riwāʾī) Trajectory: Draws upon Prophetic traditions, reports from the Companions and Imams, and early exegetical authorities to specify the meaning of a reading or adjudicate among its possible construals. In this trajectory, transmitted report functions as an integral hermeneutical indicator within the construal process rather than an external appendage.

• The Juristic (Fiqhī) Trajectory: Emerges when a reading enters a legal-deductive framework aimed at establishing a Sharīʿah ruling. Here, the reading operates in tandem with lexicography, context, transmitted reports, and principles of Islamic jurisprudence (uṣūl al-fiqh), explaining why exegetes sharing the same canonical reading may arrive at distinct legal applications.

Comparative analysis confirms that divergent interpretive orientations do not always stem from differences in the underlying reading; rather, they frequently arise from differences in how exegetes rank and weight interpretive instruments during comprehension.[5] Comparing final exegetical conclusions alone is therefore insufficient; one must trace the precise analytical pathway through which each exegete moves from the textual reading to the derived meaning. To accomplish this, the present study applies a five-stage analytical standard: (1) identifying the reading and its locus of variation; (2) clarifying its morphological or syntactic construal; (3) identifying the corroborative indicators (qarāʾin) invoked by the exegete; (4) specifying the resulting semantic or juristic impact; and (5) evaluating whether that impact originates in the reading itself or in how the exegete deploys it within an interpretive system.

Section Two: Comparative Case Studies on the Impact of Variant Readings on Interpretive Orientation

Having established the methodological and semantic foundations governing the relationship between qirāʾāt and tafsīr, this section tests those principles through applied comparative case studies that trace how textual variation transitions into semantic construction. Rather than merely defining each variant reading, the analysis compares the hermeneutical approaches of major exegetes and measures the exact contribution of each reading to the final interpretive outcome.

The selected case studies represent three distinct modes of exegetical influence: (1) variation of diversity and semantic complementarity; (2) impact on divergent juristic orientations; and (3) influence on contextual orientation and epistemic-behavioral verification. Each example is examined using the uniform five-stage analytical sequence outlined above.

1. Variation of Diversity and Semantic Complementarity among Variant Readings

A variation in Qur'anic reading does not necessarily entail contradiction between two meanings; frequently, two variant readings illuminate complementary facets of a single truth, such that combining them broadens the semantic field without invalidating either reading. This category provides the clearest evidence that multiplicity of readings serves as a source of exegetical enrichment rather than textual conflict.

Case Study 1: Q 1:4 — "Maliki" vs. "Māliki" Yawm al-Dīn

In Sūrat al-Fātiḥah (Q 1:4), Māliki yawm al-dīn ("Master/Sovereign of the Day of Judgment"), the canonical traditions preserve two readings: maliki (short vowel a, meaning "Sovereign/King") and māliki (long vowel ā, meaning "Owner/Possessor"). Al-Ṭabarī presents both readings, associating malik with supreme sovereignty (sulṭān) and exclusive authority to command, and mālik with proprietary ownership (milk) and absolute disposal (taṣarruf). He then expresses a preference (tarjīḥ) for malik, arguing that affirming sovereignty inherently encompasses ownership while adding supreme authority, whereas mere ownership does not necessarily entail royal sovereignty.[10]

Al-Ṭabrisī, by contrast, avoids subordinating either reading; instead, he demonstrates that malik signifies God's exclusive sovereignty and dominion on the Day of Recompense, while mālik denotes His sole jurisdiction over judgment, decree, and disposal on that Day.[11] For al-Ṭabrisī, the two readings thus reveal two inseparable divine attributes: sovereign authority to rule and absolute proprietary disposal.

Ibn ʿAṭiyyah adopts a similar integrative stance: after reviewing the classical debate over which reading is superior, he concludes that each possesses a distinct semantic orientation, affirming that God is simultaneously "its Owner and its Sovereign" (mālikuhu wa-malikuhu), and that both readings are valid expressions of His absolute dominion and authority.[12] His approach exemplifies a methodological shift from lexical competition to semantic synthesis within a unified theological conception.

Ibn ʿĀshūr situates both readings within the broader rhetorical architecture of Sūrat al-Fātiḥah, observing that the mention of maliki/māliki yawm al-dīn follows the attributes of Lordship (rubūbiyyah)

and Mercy (raḥmah) in order to introduce the themes of supreme authority and eschatological requital. He distinguishes malik as denoting sovereign governance (sulṭān wa-tadbīr) and mālik as signifying exclusive possession and disposal (ikhtiṣāṣ wa-taṣarruf).[13] Here, the impact of the variant readings extends beyond lexical nuance to structuring the overarching thematic purpose (maqṣad) of the opening chapter.

Case Study 2: Q 2:259 — "Nunshizuhā" vs. "Nunshiruhā"

Another clear instance of semantic complementarity appears in Q 2:259 (Sūrat al-Baqarah): wa-unẓur ilā al-ʿiẓāmi kayfa nunshizuhā ("And look at the bones—how We raise/assemble them"), which is read both with a zāy (nunshizuhā, "We raise/assemble them") and with a rāʾ (nunshiruhā, "We revive/resurrect them"). Al-Ṭabarī explains nunshizuhā as elevating the bones and joining them together one upon another, and nunshiruhā as bringing them back to life after death, concluding that the two meanings converge closely through their shared reference to resurrection and re-creation.[10]

Ibn ʿAṭiyyah offers a more nuanced morphological construal of nunshizuhā: moving beyond the general sense of lifting bones together, he notes that the lexical root n-sh-z denotes gradual elevation—defining nushūz as "rising little by little" (al-irtifāʿ qalīlan qalīlan)—thereby depicting the progressive emergence and anatomical reassembly of the skeletal frame. Meanwhile, nunshiruhā derives from inshār/nashr, signifying revivification after death.[12] Taken together, the two readings do not conflict; rather, they portray two sequential, complementary stages of resurrection: the gradual structural reassembly of the bones, followed by the restoration of life.

These two case studies confirm that textual variation alone does not equate to interpretive contradiction. In malik/mālik, the concepts of sovereign authority and proprietary disposal complement one another; in nunshizuhā/nunshiruhā, semantic scope is distributed across structural reassembly and revivification. The decisive factor is therefore not lexical difference in itself, but the harmonious semantic dimension each reading contributes to the context without negating the other. Under this study's analytical framework, both cases exemplify semantic complementarity among variant readings (al-takāmul al-dalālī lil-qirāʾāt), whereby multiple readings construct a richer composite meaning than either reading conveys alone.

2. The Impact of Variant Readings on Divergent Juristic Orientations

The exegetical sensitivity of variant readings intensifies when textual variation moves beyond semantic enrichment into the domain of Sharīʿah rulings (aḥkām sharʿiyyah), where a shift in morphological pattern or inflectional vowel can alter the scope of a legal condition, terminus, or object of obligation. Even in legal verses, however, juristic disagreement cannot be reduced to the variant reading alone, as exegetes interpret readings within an integrated framework comprising lexicography, context, transmitted reports, and legal theory (uṣūl al-fiqh).

Case Study 3: Q 2:222 — "Ḥattā Yaṭhurna" vs. "Ḥattā Yaṭṭahharna"

In Q 2:222 (Sūrat al-Baqarah), wa-lā taqrabūhunna ḥattā yaṭhurna ("And do not approach them until they become pure"), the verb is read both with a light ṭāʾ (yaṭhurna, Form I) and with gemination (yaṭṭahharna, assimilated Form V). Al-Zamakhsharī differentiates the two morphologically: he assigns the light reading (yaṭhurna) to the cessation of menstrual bleeding, and the geminated reading (yaṭṭahharna) to performing ritual purification (ightisāl), linking this distinction to the immediately following clause, fa-idhā taṭahharna ("and when they have purified themselves"), so that both readings inform the analysis of the legal terminus ending the prohibition.[14]

Al-Qurṭubī brings out the juristic implications even more explicitly by connecting the semantic distinction between the two readings to the classical juristic dispute over when marital intimacy becomes permissible following menstruation—detailing the positions of jurists who stipulate the cessation of bleeding alone versus those who require ritual bathing (ghusl) in addition to the cessation of bleeding.[15] His exposition illustrates how the impact of a variant reading extends beyond lexical definition to delineating the legal terminus of a prohibition, thereby serving as an active component in juristic deduction.

Case Study 4: Q 4:43 — "Aw Lāmastum" vs. "Aw Lamastum" al-Nisāʾ

A second juristic case study appears in Q 4:43 (Sūrat al-Nisāʾ), aw lāmastum al-nisāʾ ("or you have contacted/touched women"), which exhibits the variant readings lāmastum (Form III, mufāʿalah) and lamastum (Form I). Exegetes and jurists diverged over whether the verb denotes physical skin-to-skin contact or serves as a Qur'anic euphemism for sexual intercourse. A tradition transmitted from Imam

Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (peace be upon him) provides an explicit hermeneutical determination of the term as intercourse: "It means sexual intercourse (al-jimāʿ), but God is Concealing (sittīr) and loves concealment, so He did not name it explicitly as you name it."[16] This report is methodologically significant because the transmitted tradition does not merely attest to a reading; it directly governs its semantic specification within the interpretive debate.

Comparing this transmitted report with morphological analysis underscores the interplay of exegetical instruments: while the Form III pattern lāmasa linguistically admits the connotation of reciprocal action (mushārakah), determining the intended legal referent in the verse cannot rest on morphology alone, but depends decisively on discourse context and maʾthūr reports. Thus, the impact of the reading on ritual purity rulings passes first through lexical-contextual interpretation before entering juristic construction.

Case Study 5: Q 5:6 — "Wa-Arjulakum" vs. "Wa-Arjulikum"

Q 5:6 (Sūrat al-Māʾidah), wa-arjulakum ilā al-kaʿbayn ("and your feet to the ankles"), offers a paradigmatic example of the intersection between variant readings and Arabic syntactic analysis, as the noun is canonically read in both the accusative (wa-arjulakum) and the genitive (wa-arjulikum). Abū Ḥayyān analyzes the genitive reading as a syntactic coordination (ʿaṭf) to bi-ruʾūsikum ("your heads"), while critiquing grammatical attempts to explain away the genitive case as mere syntactic attraction (al-jarr ʿalā al-jiwār), which he characterizes as weak according to rigorous Arabic grammatical standards.[17] He likewise examines the accusative reading and its potential coordination either with the syntactic locus (maḥall) of bi-ruʾūsikum or with the previously enumerated washed limbs (wujūhakum wa-aydiyakum). This analysis reveals that inflectional variation opens multiple grammatical pathways without by itself resolving the juristic dispute.

Al-Ṭabrisī similarly highlights the canonical alternation between accusative and genitive in wa-arjulakum/wa-arjulikum, presenting the syntactic arguments supporting each grammatical construal and linking them to the verse's legal specification of the mode of ritual purification in wuḍūʾ.[11] Together, these treatments demonstrate that while the variant reading opens distinct avenues for legal reasoning, the final juristic ruling depends on how the exegete synthesizes the reading with syntax, Prophetic and Imāmī traditions, and broader uṣūlī principles.

Across all three juristic case studies, the evidence refutes reducing legal divergence to variant readings alone. A reading creates a semantic or deductive opening, yet the definitive legal ruling emerges from the interaction of that opening with grammatical construal, textual context, maʾthūr reports, and the juristic principles adopted by the commentator. Accordingly, the juristic effect of a reading generally operates not as an autonomous cause of a ruling, but as one constituent within a complex evidentiary system. Attributing juristic disagreement solely to qirāʾāt therefore represents an oversimplification that obscures the multi-layered structure of Islamic legal reasoning.

4. Discussion

The Impact of Variant Readings on Contextual Orientation and Epistemic-Behavioral Verification

Beyond altering lexical meaning or syntactic attachment, a variant reading may govern how Qur'anic discourse is received and enacted in social behavior. This pragmatic and contextual dimension is vividly illustrated in Q 49:6 (Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt): yā ayyuhā alladhīna āmanū in jāʾakum fāsiqun bi-nabaʾin fa-tabayyanū ("O you who believe, if a wicked person brings you a report, verify/ascertain it"), where the imperative verb is read both as fa-tabayyanū ("ascertain/seek clarity") and fa-tathabbatū ("exercise deliberation/verify carefully"). Ibn al-Jazarī attributes fa-tathabbatū to Ḥamzah, al-Kisāʾī, and Khalaf, and fa-tabayyanū to the remaining canonical readers—a variation directly affecting the verb that defines a believer's ethical and epistemic response to unverified reports before acting upon them.[7]

Al-Ṭabarī presents both readings, glossing fa-tabayyanū as pausing until the veracity of the report is known, and treating fa-tathabbatū as closely synonymous. He concludes that both readings are well-established and semantically proximate, so that a reciter adopting either reading is entirely correct.[10] Al-Ṭabarī's treatment reflects a harmonizing tendency that minimizes lexical divergence in order to foreground their shared pragmatic function: restraining haste in accepting reports.

Al-Ṭabrisī draws a sharper analytical distinction between the two readings: he defines fa-tabayyanū as actively seeking to distinguish the truth of a report from its falsehood, whereas he interprets fa-tathabbatū as exercising restraint, patience, and deliberate pause until the reality of the matter becomes

clear, linking both directly to the danger of harming people out of ignorance.[11] In his reading, the first variant governs the epistemic process of investigation, while the second regulates behavioral restraint prior to action.

Abū Ḥayyān reinforces this functional dimension, arguing that the dual command for tabayyun and tathabbut prohibits relying upon the report of an untrustworthy person or passing judgment prior to verification, explicitly connecting this imperative to the subsequent purpose clause, an tuṣībū qawman bi-jahālah ("lest you harm a people out of ignorance")—that is, to prevent action based on an unsubstantiated claim.[17] Consequently, the variation here transcends lexical synonymy and directly regulates decision-making under uncertainty.

Ibn ʿĀshūr adds a vital socio-contextual dimension by situating the verse within the ethical norms governing the believing community's handling of public information. He defines tabayyun as seeking the clear manifestation of the matter, and tathabbut as careful investigation and seeking confirmation and veracity, concluding that while the two readings differ in immediate lexical nuance, they converge in ultimate teleology (maʾāl): both prevent precipitous action that leads to error and remorse.[13] Within the structure of the discourse, the two readings thus operate as complementary mechanisms: one defines the cognitive objective (epistemic clarity), while the other disciplines conduct prior to attaining that objective (deliberate restraint).

Comparative analysis shows that none of these exegetes treated fa-tabayyanū and fa-tathabbatū as contradictory; rather, they differed in how they articulated the relationship between them—al-Ṭabarī emphasizing semantic convergence, al-Ṭabrisī differentiating their respective functions, Abū Ḥayyān linking both to the suspension of judgment prior to verification, and Ibn ʿĀshūr expanding their scope into a social ethic of information verification.

This case study exemplifies a distinct mode of exegetical impact that may be termed functional complementarity (al-takāmul al-waẓīfī): fa-tathabbatū regulates the pre-judgment stage through restraint and deliberation, whereas fa-tabayyanū specifies the cognitive goal of ascertaining objective truth. Rather than merely adding a lexical synonym, each reading performs a distinct, sequential role within a single moral-epistemic trajectory—disciplining conduct first, and then securing verified knowledge upon which sound action may be grounded. Here again, the decisive factor is not morphological variation alone, but how each exegete integrates the reading into the ethical and social context of the verse.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the relationship between variant Qur'anic readings and divergent interpretive orientations among exegetes is far more complex than a simple correspondence between lexical variation and exegetical disagreement. Across the examined case studies, the interpretive value of a reading is shown to emerge through its dynamic interaction with the exegete's analytical instruments and corroborative indicators—most notably lexicography, syntax, textual context, transmitted reports (maʾthūr), and juristic methodology.

Comparative analysis reveals that variant readings do not perform a single uniform exegetical function: they may complement one another to expand semantic range, contribute to divergent pathways of juristic inference, or distribute complementary behavioral and epistemic functions within discourse, as demonstrated in fa-tabayyanū/fa-tathabbatū. Accordingly, not every textual variation in reading should be labeled an interpretive divergence in the same sense; rather, the precise nature and degree of exegetical impact must be identified in each instance.

Furthermore, disagreements among exegetes do not always originate in the variant reading itself, but frequently stem from differing grammatical construals and differing weights assigned to accompanying contextual and tradition-based indicators. Thus, the central question in comparative exegesis is not merely "Which reading did the exegete adopt?" but rather: "How did the exegete construe the reading, through which hermeneutical tools, and what semantic or legal conclusion was built upon it?" Establishing a rigorous methodological separation between the canonical authentication of a reading, its linguistic construal, and its resulting exegetical impact therefore provides the most reliable standard for understanding interpretive divergence in Qur'anic exegesis.

Key Findings

1. Multi-Tiered Nature of Exegetical Impact: The impact of variant Qur'anic readings on exegesis

does not operate on a single plane; rather, it spans semantic expansion, interpretive preference (tarjīḥ), contribution to juristic rulings, and shaping how Qur'anic discourse is understood and enacted.

2. Primacy of Complementarity over Contradiction: A substantial proportion of canonical variations operate through complementarity rather than conflict—whether semantic complementarity, as in malik/mālik (Q 1:4) and nunshizuhā/nunshiruhā (Q 2:259), or functional complementarity, as in fa-tabayyanū/fa-tathabbatū (Q 49:6), where each reading fulfills a distinct role within a unified discourse structure.
3. Role of Hermeneutical Hierarchy in Exegetical Divergence: Divergences among exegetes when construing the exact same reading do not always stem from the linguistic structure of the reading itself, but are heavily conditioned by how commentators rank and weight exegetical tools—specifically lexicography, syntax, context, transmitted reports, and uṣūlī principles.
4. Non-Autonomous Character of Readings in Legal Deduction: While a variant reading serves as an important evidentiary element in juristic exegesis, it rarely produces a legal ruling independently; its final juristic force is determined through its interaction with lexical semantics, context, transmitted traditions, and principles of Islamic jurisprudence.
5. Decisive Regulatory Role of Context: Textual context plays a decisive role in determining the exegetical validity of a reading: formal grammatical possibility alone is insufficient to establish a sound exegetical meaning unless it aligns with the discourse context and communicative intent of the verse, as clearly illustrated in Q 49:6.
6. Three-Stage Methodological Standard: Distinguishing systematically between (a) the canonical authentication of a reading, (b) its linguistic construal, and (c) its derived exegetical impact constitutes the most essential methodological criterion in comparative tafsīr, as it isolates whether an interpretive outcome arises from the reading itself or from the exegete's analytical deployment of it.

Recommendations

1. Expanding Comparative Exegetical Studies: Future research on the impact of qirāʾāt should encompass a wider range of exegetical works and interpretive schools while adopting the individual variant reading as the core unit of comparison, thereby illuminating how differing hermeneutical frameworks shape the construal of identical readings.
2. Refining Taxonomies of Exegetical Impact: Scholars should employ a more granular classification of the exegetical effects of variant readings—distinguishing explicitly among semantic complementarity, functional complementarity, preferential impact (tarjīḥ), and juristic impact—since subsuming all phenomena under a single undifferentiated heading obscures vital qualitative differences.
3. Maintaining Methodological Separation in Future Analyses: Subsequent studies should consistently separate effects rooted in the intrinsic linguistic structure of a reading from those generated by an exegete's interpretive method by systematically tracing accompanying grammatical construals, contextual indicators, transmitted reports, and uṣūlī principles.
4. Developing a Structured Digital Database: A specialized scholarly database should be constructed cataloging Qur'anic verses in which variant readings yield demonstrable exegetical impact, recording the reading type, grammatical construal, comparative exegetical positions, and classification of semantic or juristic effect.

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