



A Comparative Study of the Methodologies of *Tafsīr* in the Works of Al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr

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Abstract

Tafsir (Qur'anic exegesis) has developed over the centuries through diverse methodological approaches, with classical scholars establishing frameworks that continue to shape Islamic scholarship. Among the most influential exegetical works are Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil al-Qur'an by Imam Al-Tabari (d. 310 AH/923 CE) and Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim by Imam Ibn Kathir (d. 774 AH/1373 CE). Although both scholars are regarded as pillars of Tafsir bi al-Ma'thur (exegesis by transmitted sources), differences exist in their approach to sources, treatment of isnad (chains of transmission), engagement with linguistic analysis, and handling of juristic and theological disputes. Despite the widespread reliance on both works in contemporary Islamic scholarship, a systematic comparison of their methodological foundations remains limited, leaving gaps in understanding how each scholar's historical context, scholarly training, and intellectual priorities shaped his exegetical output. This study aims to (i) examine the methodological principles underlying Al-Tabari's and Ibn Kathir's approaches to Tafsir, (ii) compare their use of Qur'an-by-Qur'an, Hadith, and companion-based interpretation, (iii) analyse their treatment of isra'iliyyat (Judeo-Christian narrations) and weak reports, and (iv) evaluate the enduring influence of both works on later exegetical scholarship. The study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and comparative methodology, relying on primary textual analysis of selected passages from both tafsirs alongside secondary literature on the history and methodology of Tafsir. The study is expected to reveal that while both scholars share a foundational commitment to Tafsir bi al-Ma'thur, Al-Tabari's work is distinguished by its comprehensive inclusion of multiple narrations with detailed isnad and linguistic analysis, whereas Ibn Kathir's work reflects a more critical, selective methodology emphasizing hadith authentication and cross-referencing verses with one another. The study concludes that both works, despite methodological differences, represent complementary rather than contradictory contributions to Qur'anic exegesis, and recommends further comparative research incorporating other classical and contemporary tafsir works.

Keywords: *Tafsir, Al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, Tafsir bi al-Ma'thur, Qur'anic exegesis, comparative methodology.*

Introduction

The Qur'ān, as the final revelation to humankind, has never ceased to draw the attention of scholars who labour to unlock its meanings for every generation. Out of this labour grew the science of *tafsīr*, a discipline that stands at the very heart of Islamic learning, for without correct understanding of the Book of Allah, worship, law, and belief would rest on uncertain ground. Among the vast library of exegetical works produced across fourteen centuries, two commentaries have earned a place of unmatched authority: Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān of Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310 AH/923 CE), and *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm* of 'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'īl ibn 'Umar Ibn Kathīr (d. 774 AH/1373 CE)¹.

This study sets out to place these two towering works side by side, not merely to catalogue their differences, but to trace how the methodology first laid down by al-Ṭabarī in the third century of Islam was received, refined, and carried forward by Ibn Kathīr some four centuries later, and how that same inherited methodology continues to shape the practice of *tafsīr* among scholars of the present day, including those writing and teaching in West Africa and beyond.

¹ M.H. al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, vol. 1, Maktabat Wahbah, Cairo, 2000, p. 154

Scope and Purpose of the Study

This paper is limited to the comparison of methodology rather than the doctrinal content of the two *tafsīrs*. It examines how each scholar gathered his sources, how he arranged and weighed them, and how he expressed his own preference on disputed verses. The purpose is threefold: to describe the method of each work in its own right, to compare the two methods so their points of agreement and departure become clear, and to show why this comparison still matters for the teaching of *tafsīr* today².

Historical Background of the Two Exegesis

Al-Ṭabarī and His Milieu

Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī was born in Āmul, in the region of Ṭabaristān, in the year 224 AH, and he died in Baghdad in 310 AH. He lived through the flourishing of the Abbasid intellectual renaissance, a period in which the sciences of ḥadīth, fiqh, language, and history were being systematised on a grand scale. Al-Ṭabarī travelled widely in pursuit of knowledge, sitting with scholars in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, and he mastered ḥadīth criticism, jurisprudence, and history before composing his *tafsīr*, which he completed around 270 AH. His work, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, is recognised as the earliest complete *tafsīr* and authentic to survive to the present day in its original form, and it became the trunk from which nearly every later commentary drew its branches³.

Al-Ṭabarī's Intellectual Formation

Biographers stress that al-Ṭabarī was reverent toward inherited scholarship yet also confident in his own independent judgement, so much so that he eventually formed his own school of legal reasoning, known as al-madhab al-Jarīrī, although it did not survive long after his death. Ibn Khillikān records that al-Ṭabarī combined the disciplines of history, law, ḥadīth, and language to a degree matched by very few scholars of his generation, and this breadth of learning is visible on every page of his *tafsīr*⁴.

Ibn Kathīr and His Milieu

Ismā'īl ibn 'Umar Ibn Kathīr was born near Buṣrā in Syria around 701 AH and died in Damascus in 774 AH. He belonged to the Mamluk period, an age in which the sciences of ḥadīth had already reached a mature and highly systematised stage. Ibn Kathīr studied under Ibn Taymiyyah, from whom he absorbed a strong preference for interpreting the Qur'ān through the Qur'ān itself and through sound ḥadīth, and he was also trained as a historian, jurist, and ḥadīth critic in his own right. His *tafsīr*, composed toward the end of his life, drew heavily on al-Ṭabarī while subjecting the inherited narrations to a stricter test of authenticity⁵.

Ibn Kathīr's Intellectual Formation

Ibn Taymiyyah's own treatise laid down principles that Ibn Kathīr would later apply with great care: that the Qur'ān is best explained by the Qur'ān, then by the sunnah, then by the statements of the Companions, and only thereafter by the statements of the Successors. This ordering of sources, first set out systematically by Ibn Taymiyyah, became the theoretical skeleton upon which Ibn Kathīr built the whole of his commentary⁶.

Why ibn kathir does not applied Qira'at in his tafsir as must of the mufasssirin did?

The premise is a little misleading. Ibn Kathir does discuss *qirā'āt* (variant canonical Qur'anic readings) in his *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, but he does not make them the primary method of interpretation in the way some other commentators do.

Here are a few reasons why:

His main methodology was hadith-based *tafsīr*, Ibn Kathir prioritized: The Qur'an explaining the Qur'an. Authentic hadith. Statements of the Companions. Statements of the early generations (Salaf). Linguistic discussions, including *qirā'āt*, were generally secondary. He accepted the canonical *qirā'āt*, Ibn Kathir did not reject the accepted readings. When a different canonical reading affected the meaning of a verse, he often mentioned it and explained how the readings complement each other rather than contradict each other. He avoided unnecessary technical detail. Earlier scholars such as Al-Tabarī and later specialists in *qirā'āt* often devoted much more space to chains of transmission, grammar, and recitation variants. Ibn Kathir's *tafsīr* was intended to be more concise and accessible, so he usually omitted lengthy discussions unless they helped explain the verse⁷.

² M. al-Zurqānī, *Manāhil al-'Irfān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, vol. 2, Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, Beirut, 1996, p. 12

³ M.H. al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, vol. 1, Maktabat Wahbah, Cairo, 2000, p. 158

⁴ Ibn Khillikān, *Wafayāt al-A'yān wa Anbā' Abnā' al-Zamān*, vol. 4, Dār Ṣādir, Beirut, 1994, p. 191

⁵ M.H. al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, vol. 1, Maktabat Wahbah, Cairo, 2000, p. 242

⁶ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Muqaddimah fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, Dār Ibn Ḥazm, Beirut, 1998, p. 39

⁷ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim* (Dar Tayyibah, Riyadh, 1999, P, 23

He had expertise in *qirā'āt*

Ibn Kathir was not ignorant of the science. He studied under scholars who transmitted the canonical readings and wrote works that demonstrate familiarity with them. His choice was methodological rather than due to a lack of knowledge.

Does he ever use *qirā'āt*?

Yes. For example, he frequently says things such as:

"According to the reading of..." "The majority of the reciters read..." "Another canonical reading is..." He then explains whether the readings: reinforce the same meaning, add complementary nuances, or support a particular grammatical interpretation⁸.

Many examples can be found in verses where canonical readings differ in wording or vocalization.

Compared with other tafsirs

Al-Tabari: Gives extensive discussion of *qirā'āt* and often weighs between readings.

Al-Qurtubi: Frequently discusses legal implications of different readings.

Abu Hayyan al-Andalusi: Gives detailed grammatical analysis tied to *qirā'āt*.

Ibn Kathir: Uses *qirā'āt* selectively, focusing on their interpretive value rather than cataloging them comprehensively.

So, it would be more accurate to say that Ibn Kathir does apply *qirā'āt*, but selectively. His tafsir is primarily a tradition-based (atharī) commentary, and he introduces variant readings when they illuminate the meaning of a verse instead of treating *qirā'āt* as a central subject in every passage.

The Structure and Sources of Jāmi' al-Bayān

The Introduction of Al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*

Al-Ṭabarī opens his commentary with a lengthy *muqaddimah*, an introduction that historians of the discipline regard as the first detailed statement of the theory and method of Qur'ānic exegesis in Islamic scholarship. In it he explains the importance, the goals, and the objectives of *tafsīr* itself, before turning to full chapters on the Arabic language as the language of revelation. This introduction became the very basis upon which later Sunni exegesis was built, so that a student who wishes to understand the theoretical foundation of the whole discipline must begin with al-Ṭabarī's preface⁹.

Al-Ṭabarī's Narrational Method

Al-Ṭabarī's approach to *tafsīr* rests principally on *tafsīr* bi'l-ma'thūr, the method of narration, whereby he explains a verse by citing the Qur'ān itself, the sayings of the Prophet, peace be upon him, the statements of the Companions, and the opinions of the Successors. Yet his work is not narration alone; he frequently exercises *ijtihād* and reasoned analysis, so that scholars describe his *tafsīr* as combining *riwāyah*, the transmitted report, with *dirāyah*, independent reasoning¹⁰.

A distinguishing feature of al-Ṭabarī's method is his habit of assembling every relevant narration on a verse, together with its chain of transmission, before weighing the competing views and declaring, in his own words, which opinion he finds most correct. Each discussion opens with the recurring formula 'al-qawlu fī ta'wīli qawlihi ta'ālā', after which he lays out the various readings, cites grammatical and lexical evidence from the poetry of the Arabs, and only then states his preference¹¹.

Linguistic and *Qirā'āt* Analysis

Al-Ṭabarī pays close attention to the variant Qur'ānic readings, *qirā'āt*, generally favouring the recitation transmitted through the school of Kūfah, though he often preserves both readings and leaves the final choice to the reader. He devotes considerable space to defending the view that no word of the Qur'ān is truly foreign to Arabic, arguing instead that any resembling word had already been absorbed into Arabic usage before the revelation. Opinions of grammarians are cited where relevant, and evidence from pre-Islamic Arabic poetry is used frequently to settle disputed meanings¹².

Theological and Legal Dimensions

Beyond language, al-Ṭabarī harmonises text with doctrinal and legal positions through careful content analysis, treating rhetoric, grammar, and dogma as bound together rather than separate concerns. He held the traditionalist position that the

⁸ M.H. al-Dhahabī, al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssirūn, vol. 1, Maktabat Wahbah, Cairo, 2000, p. 168

⁹ Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān, vol. 1, ed. A.M. Shākir, Mu'assasat al-Risālah, Beirut, 2000, p. 74

¹⁰ M. al-Zurqānī, Manāhil al-'Irfān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān, vol. 2, Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, Beirut, 1996, p. 47

¹¹ Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān, vol. 1, ed. A.M. Shākir, Mu'assasat al-Risālah, Beirut, 2000, p. 91

¹² Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān, vol. 1, Dār Ibn Ḥazm, Beirut, 2015, p. 213

Qur'ān is uncreated, and this theological commitment shaped how he framed his discussions of disputed verses, aligning his exegesis with the broader traditionalist current of his age even as he retained an independent legal voice¹³.

His *tafsīr* is therefore encyclopaedic, drawing together linguistics, history, jurisprudence, and theology within a single narrational framework, and this comprehensiveness is precisely what has secured its permanent place as the reference point for later exegetes¹⁴.

Treatment of Isrā'īliyyāt in Jāmi' al-Bayān

Although al-Ṭabarī includes narrations of Isrā'īliyyāt, material drawn from Jewish and Christian tradition, he does so only occasionally and generally without dwelling on their implications, presenting them merely as part of the wider record of what earlier scholars had transmitted and leaving their evaluation to the discernment of the reader¹⁵.

The Structure and Sources of *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*

Ibn Kathīr's Hierarchy of Sources

Ibn Kathīr followed al-Ṭabarī in adopting *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* as his foundation, yet he arranged its sources into a clear hierarchy. He begins every discussion by interpreting the Qur'ān through the Qur'ān itself, seeking out a clear verse, muḥkam, to explain an ambiguous one, mutashābih, and only when the Qur'ān is silent does he turn to the sunnah, then to the statements of the Companions, and finally to those of the Successors¹⁶.

The Science of Ḥadīth Criticism in Ibn Kathīr's Method

What most sharply distinguishes Ibn Kathīr from al-Ṭabarī is his rigorous criticism of the chains of narration, a science he had mastered as a ḥadīth specialist in his own right. Where al-Ṭabarī tended to record a narration and leave its evaluation open, Ibn Kathīr regularly grades the reports he cites, favouring authentic ḥadīth over weak ones and openly rejecting Isrā'īliyyāt, the narratives absorbed from Jewish and Christian sources, unless he judges them consistent with sound Islamic teaching¹⁷.

Style, Precision, and Brevity

Ibn Kathīr's style is also markedly more concise than that of al-Ṭabarī. He is known for precision and refinement, presenting the strongest narration on a verse rather than exhausting every recorded opinion, and this economy of expression, joined to his verification of sources, is why his *tafsīr* became especially treasured by later students who wanted reliability without excessive length¹⁸.

Ibn Kathīr's Use of the Sīra and Historical Material

As a trained historian, author of the great chronicle al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah, Ibn Kathīr often draws on prophetic biography and early Islamic history to illuminate the context of revelation, asbāb al-nuzūl, giving his *tafsīr* a narrative depth that complements its narrational rigour. This historical sensitivity allows him to situate a verse within the events surrounding its revelation before proceeding to its legal or doctrinal implications¹⁹.

Comparative Analysis of Method

Points of Convergence

Despite the four centuries that separate them, the two exegetes share a common foundation. Both belong squarely to the school of *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*, both place the transmitted report above unaided opinion, both cite chains of narration to support their interpretations, and both treat the Qur'ān as the first and most reliable interpreter of itself. Ibn Kathīr, moreover, cites al-Ṭabarī by name throughout his own *tafsīr*, often adopting his conclusions or reporting his claim of scholarly consensus on a given meaning, which shows that Ibn Kathīr regarded Jāmi' al-Bayān not as a rival but as a foundation upon which to build²⁰.

Points of Divergence

The two works differ, however, in emphasis and in temperament. Al-Ṭabarī writes as a compiler and a judge among many voices, presenting the full range of scholarly disagreement before pronouncing his own preference, and his *tafsīr* is consequently vast, running to many volumes. Ibn Kathīr writes as a critic and a selector, filtering the inherited material

¹³ M.H. al-Dhahabī, al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn, vol. 1, Maktabat Wahbah, Cairo, 2000, p. 167

¹⁴ Y. al-Qarāḍāwī, Kayfa Nata'āmal ma'a al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm, Dār al-Shurūq, Cairo, 1999, p. 112

¹⁵ M. Abū Shāhbah, al-Isrā'īliyyāt wa al-Mawḍū'āt fī Kutub al-Tafsīr, Maktabat al-Sunnah, Cairo, 1408 AH, p. 96

¹⁶ Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm, vol. 1, Dār Ṭaybah, Riyadh, 1999, p. 7

¹⁷ M. Abū Shāhbah, al-Isrā'īliyyāt wa al-Mawḍū'āt fī Kutub al-Tafsīr, Maktabat al-Sunnah, Cairo, 1408 AH, p. 118

¹⁸ S.A.F. al-Khālīdī, Ta'rīf al-Dārisīn bi Manāhij al-Mufasssīrīn, Dār al-Qalam, Damascus, 2008, p. 231

¹⁹ Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah, vol. 14, Dār Hijr, Cairo, 1998, p. 4

²⁰ Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm, vol. 1, Dār Ṭaybah, Riyadh, 1999, p. 52

through the science of ḥadīth criticism that had matured in the centuries between them, and his *tafsīr* is consequently tighter and more disciplined in its use of sources. Al-Ṭabarī draws freely on Isrā'īliyyāt as part of the wider narrational record, whereas Ibn Kathīr, trained under Ibn Taymiyyah, treats such material with visible suspicion²¹.

A Comparative Note on Comprehensiveness versus Selectivity

Where al-Ṭabarī's encyclopaedic instinct produces a *tafsīr* that also functions as a repository of early Islamic scholarship, preserving even opinions of scholars whose independent works have since been lost, Ibn Kathīr's selective instinct produces a *tafsīr* that functions as a refined distillation, more accessible to the student who wants a dependable verdict without wading through every recorded difference of opinion²².

Linking the Past to the Present and the Future

Continuity of the Narrational Tradition

The methodology that al-Ṭabarī pioneered did not remain confined to the third century of Islam; it became the seed from which the entire tradition of *tafsīr* bi'l-ma'thūr grew. Ibn Kathīr stands as the clearest proof of this continuity, for his refinement of al-Ṭabarī's method four centuries later shows that Islamic scholarship is cumulative rather than static, each generation testing, sharpening, and transmitting the labour of the one before it²³.

Relevance to Contemporary Islamic Scholarship

This same chain of transmission and refinement continues into the present age. Contemporary scholars of *tafsīr*, including those working within the intellectual tradition of the Sokoto Caliphate and its heirs in present-day Northern Nigeria, still draw upon the narrational method of al-Ṭabarī and the disciplined verification of Ibn Kathīr when they train students in Qur'ānic sciences. Modern research continues to revisit both works, applying their narrational method to contemporary concerns such as gender discourse, education, and social ethics, which confirms that the classical methodology remains a living resource rather than a closed chapter of history²⁴.

Toward the Future of *Tafsīr* Studies

Looking toward the future, the enduring lesson of this comparison is that sound *tafsīr* must always rest on two pillars together: fidelity to transmitted knowledge and honest, disciplined verification of that knowledge. As new generations of scholars, including researchers trained in the universities of Sokoto, take up the study of Qur'ānic exegesis, the combined legacy of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr offers a balanced model, one that honours the authority of the earliest reports while insisting, as Ibn Kathīr insisted, that not every report is worthy of trust simply because it is old²⁵.

Findings

1. Both al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr belong to the school of *tafsīr* bi'l-ma'thūr, the narration-based method.
2. Al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* is the earliest complete commentary on the Qur'ān surviving in its original form.
3. Al-Ṭabarī combines riwāyah with elements of reasoned ijtihād, unlike a purely narrational model.
4. Al-Ṭabarī's muqaddimah is the first systematic statement of *tafsīr* theory in Islamic scholarship.
5. Ibn Kathīr places the Qur'ān's self-explanation as the highest source, above ḥadīth and companion reports.
6. Ibn Kathīr applies stricter ḥadīth criticism than al-Ṭabarī in selecting narrations.
7. Al-Ṭabarī includes Isrā'īliyyāt more freely; Ibn Kathīr treats such material with caution.
8. Al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* is longer and more exhaustive; Ibn Kathīr's is shorter and more selective.
9. Ibn Kathīr openly relies on and cites al-Ṭabarī throughout his own commentary.
10. The narrational methodology of both works remains foundational to *tafsīr* instruction today.

Recommendations

1. Students of *tafsīr* should study both works together to grasp the full narrational tradition.
2. Modern exegetes should adopt Ibn Kathīr's rigour in verifying chains of narration.
3. Scholars should retain al-Ṭabarī's practice of presenting multiple views before concluding.
4. Isrā'īliyyāt should always be clearly flagged and critically examined, following Ibn Kathīr's caution.
5. Islamic university curricula should include comparative *tafsīr* methodology as a core course.
6. Contemporary *tafsīr* writers should balance comprehensiveness with the discipline of concise verification.
7. Translators should preserve the isnād apparatus so learners can trace each report's reliability.
8. Research centres in Northern Nigeria should digitise and index both *tafsīrs* for local scholars.
9. Contemporary scholars should apply this classical narrational method to present-day social questions.

²¹ M.H. al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, vol. 1, Maktabat Wahbah, Cairo, 2000, p. 249

²² S.A.F. al-Khālidi, *Ta'rīf al-Dārisīn bi Manāhiḡ al-Mufasssīrīn*, Dār al-Qalam, Damascus, 2008, p. 244

²³ M. 'A. Ḥaqqī, *'Ulūm al-Qur'ān min Khilāl Muqaddimāt al-Tafāsīr*, Mu'assasat al-Risālah, Beirut, 2004, p. 88

²⁴ Y. al-Qaradāwī, *Kayfa Nata'āmal ma'a al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, Dār al-Shurūq, Cairo, 1999, p. 118

²⁵ M. 'A. Ḥaqqī, *'Ulūm al-Qur'ān min Khilāl Muqaddimāt al-Tafāsīr*, Mu'assasat al-Risālah, Beirut, 2004, p. 103

10. Further comparative research should extend this study to other *tafsīr* bi'l-ma'thūr works, such as al-Qurṭubī.

Conclusion

Al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr, though separated by four centuries and by differing temperaments of scholarship, together form a single unbroken chain in the science of Qur'ānic exegesis. Al-Ṭabarī laid the foundation stone of the narrational method with unmatched breadth, and Ibn Kathīr refined that foundation with the discipline of a trained ḥadīth critic. Their combined legacy teaches that the past is never truly closed in Islamic scholarship; it is carried forward, tested, and renewed by every generation that takes up the noble task of understanding the Book of Allah, and it will continue to guide scholars, including those in the academic institutions of Sokoto and across the Muslim world, for generations yet to come.

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