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From Transmission to Interpretation: The Epistemology of Narrative Selection in Tafsir Ibn Kathīr

Hasbullah Diman[1]*, Dzikrurrahman As-Shiddiqy[2], Sofwatun Nada[3], Asyrof Arobi[4], Bagus Aji Handriyan[5]
[1,5]Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Qur'an
[2]Al-Hassan Boarding School
[3]Islamic University 45
[4]Islamic University of Jakarta
Corresponding Author: Hasbullah Diman; hasbullahdiman86@gmail.com

A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr is a major work of tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr, yet its underlying epistemological principles remain insufficiently explored compared with its sources and interpretive methodology. This study examines how Ibn Kathīr constructs interpretive authority through the evaluation, prioritisation, reconciliation, and rejection of competing narrations. Employing qualitative library research grounded in hermeneutic inquiry, documentary analysis, and qualitative content analysis, the study analyses Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr alongside classical and contemporary scholarship on Qur'anic exegesis, ḥadīth criticism, and Islamic epistemology. The findings reveal an interconnected epistemological hierarchy involving source verification, tarjīḥ (preference among interpretations), reconciliation, and contextual interpretation. These processes underpin the proposed Epistemological Narrative Selection Model, demonstrating that interpretive authority depends on disciplined reasoning as well as textual transmission. The study conceptualises tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr as a coherent epistemological methodology, offering a theoretical contribution to contemporary Qur'anic studies, Islamic epistemology, and classical hermeneutics.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of contemporary Qur'anic studies has shifted scholarly attention from identifying the sources of classical interpretation to examining the epistemological processes through which interpreters construct authoritative interpretations (Hasyim et al., 2026). This shift reflects growing debates on textual authority, authenticity, and interpretive legitimacy amid digital access to Islamic knowledge, competing religious discourses, and renewed interest in classical intellectual traditions. In this context, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* remains a prominent work of *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr*, distinguished by its extensive use of the Qur'an, prophetic traditions, and reports from the Companions and Successors. However, its enduring authority raises a fundamental question: Did Ibn Kathīr merely transmit inherited exegetical traditions, or did he construct meaning through systematic evaluation, selection, reconciliation, and prioritisation of competing reports? Addressing this question is crucial because examining Ibn Kathīr's epistemological logic of narrative selection enhances understanding of classical Qur'anic hermeneutics while contributing to broader discussions on interpretive authority, Islamic epistemology, and the contemporary relevance of *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* (W. A. Saleh, 2004). Although *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* has long been recognised as one of the most influential works of classical Qur'anic exegesis, recent scholarship continues to focus predominantly on its descriptive dimensions, including its sources, methodological characteristics, reliance on transmitted reports (*riwāyāt*), and comparative position within the tradition of *Tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* (W. A. Saleh, 2004). These studies have significantly enhanced understanding of Ibn Kathīr's exegetical framework, yet they rarely investigate the epistemological mechanisms underlying his interpretive decisions

Consequently, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* is frequently portrayed as a repository of transmitted knowledge rather than as a dynamic interpretive enterprise grounded in systematic epistemological reasoning (Pink, 2019). This gap leaves an important dimension of Ibn Kathīr's hermeneutics insufficiently explored. Accordingly, the present study shifts the analytical focus from transmission to interpretation by examining the epistemology of narrative selection in *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*. From this perspective, the study seeks to demonstrate that the authority of Ibn Kathīr's exegesis lies not merely in the transmission of inherited reports but also in the coherent interpretive principles that govern their evaluation, prioritisation, and integration into Qur'anic interpretation (Fuad et al., 2025; Rozikin, 2026).

The objective of this study is to examine the epistemology of narrative selection in *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* by investigating the principles and criteria through which Ibn Kathīr evaluates, prioritises, reconciles, and interprets transmitted narrations (*riwāyāt*) in the process of Qur'anic exegesis (Ibn Kathīr, 1999). Specifically, this study seeks to identify the epistemological framework that underlies Ibn Kathīr's interpretive methodology and to demonstrate how the selection of transmitted reports functions as a systematic process of constructing interpretive authority rather than as a mere reproduction of inherited traditions (Fuad, 2025). This study investigates the epistemological framework underlying

narrative selection in *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*. Specifically, it seeks to analyse how Ibn Kathīr constructs interpretive authority through the evaluation of competing narrations, the application of *tarjīḥ* (preference), the reconciliation of conflicting reports, and the integration of textual evidence into a coherent model of *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr*. This study aims to investigate and evaluate the epistemology of narrative selection in *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* by examining the interpretive principles that govern Ibn Kathīr's acceptance, rejection, prioritisation, and reconciliation of transmitted narrations. Furthermore, the study seeks to develop an epistemological model explaining how these processes transform *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* from a practice of textual transmission into a systematic framework of Qur'anic interpretation and interpretive authority (Calder, 1993; Pink, 2019; W. A. Saleh, 2004).

The twenty-first century has witnessed a significant transformation in Qur'anic studies, characterised by the expansion of interdisciplinary approaches that integrate hermeneutics, linguistics, intellectual history, digital humanities, and comparative religious studies. Contemporary scholarship no longer confines itself to textual interpretation alone but increasingly explores the epistemological, methodological, and socio-historical dimensions of Qur'anic exegesis. This development has broadened the scope of tafsīr studies from descriptive analyses of exegetical works toward critical examinations of how interpretive knowledge is produced, transmitted, and legitimised within the Islamic intellectual tradition (Görke & Pink, 2014; McAuliffe, 2006; Pink, 2019). Recent decades have also witnessed growing debates concerning interpretive authority, the authenticity of religious knowledge, and the legitimacy of competing interpretations of the Qur'an. The emergence of diverse hermeneutical approaches, including historical-critical, contextual, feminist, maqāṣid-based, and digital interpretations, has challenged traditional assumptions regarding authoritative exegesis. Consequently, scholars have increasingly questioned the criteria through which classical and contemporary exegetes establish interpretive validity, authenticate transmitted reports, and negotiate competing claims of religious authority (Akhtar, 2026; Ardiansyah et al., 2025; Görke & Pink, 2014; Pink, 2019). Rather than treating classical tafsīr solely as a historical record of Islamic scholarship, recent research has shifted toward investigating its epistemological foundations. This perspective seeks to understand how classical exegetes generated knowledge, evaluated evidence, exercised interpretive reasoning, and established methodological standards for Qur'anic interpretation. Such studies emphasise that classical tafsīr represents an intellectual process governed by coherent principles of knowledge production rather than a simple accumulation of transmitted reports (Görke & Pink, 2014; Pink, 2019; W. A. Saleh, 2004).

Classical Tafsīr and the Enduring Authority of Ibn Kathīr

Among the vast corpus of classical Qur'anic exegesis, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* occupies a distinguished position as one of the most authoritative and influential representatives of *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* (Anwar & Mika, 2025; Saeed, 2022). Composed by the fourteenth-century Syrian scholar Ismāʿīl ibn ʿUmar Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), the work has been widely recognised for its systematic integration

of transmitted sources and its enduring contribution to Sunni exegetical tradition (Ibn Kathīr, 1999; McAuliffe, 2006). Unlike many earlier commentaries that incorporated extensive narrative materials without sustained critical evaluation, Ibn Kathīr developed an exegetical methodology that combines rigorous textual transmission with careful scholarly assessment of evidence, thereby strengthening the reliability and coherence of Qur'anic interpretation (Calder, 1993; W. A. Saleh, 2004).

The methodological framework of *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* is characterised by a hierarchical use of authoritative sources. Ibn Kathīr consistently interprets the Qur'an through the Qur'an itself (*tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān*), followed by authentic Prophetic traditions (*ṣaḥīḥ al-aḥādīth*), the interpretations of the Companions (*ṣaḥābah*), and the opinions of the Successors (*tābiʿūn*). When necessary, he further employs Arabic linguistic analysis, historical reports, and the principles of *ʿulūm al-ḥadīth*, particularly the critical evaluation of chains of transmission (*isnād*) and textual authenticity (*matn*), in order to distinguish reliable narrations from weak or fabricated reports. This combination of textual fidelity and critical evaluation demonstrates that Ibn Kathīr's methodology extends beyond simple transmission, reflecting a systematic epistemological process for establishing interpretive authority(Ibn Kathīr, 1999; W. A. Saleh, 2004). The influence of *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* extends far beyond its historical context. It remains one of the most widely studied and translated Qur'anic commentaries in the contemporary Muslim world, serving as a primary reference in Islamic universities, pesantren, religious seminaries, and scholarly research. Its methodological emphasis on authenticated transmission, balanced interpretive reasoning, and critical engagement with earlier exegetical traditions continues to shape contemporary discussions on Qur'anic interpretation, Islamic education, and religious authority. Consequently, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* provides an important case through which the epistemological foundations of classical *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* can be examined in relation to present-day debates concerning interpretive legitimacy and the construction of religious knowledge (Görke & Pink, 2014; Pink, 2019).

Current State of the Literature

Recent scholarship on *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* has expanded contemporary understanding of the work through various perspectives. Studies from 2021 to 2026 primarily examine Ibn Kathīr's exegetical methodology, highlighting his hierarchical reliance on the Qur'an, authentic ḥadīth, reports of the Companions and Tābiʿūn, and his adherence to *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr*. Other research explores the role of *riwāyāt* as the foundation of his exegesis, the treatment of *Isrāʾīliyyāt*, the reliability of transmitted reports, and his use of ḥadīth criticism to distinguish valid from weak narrations. Further studies analyse his theological orientation, comparisons with other exegetes, and interpretations of legal verses (*āyāt al-aḥkām*), demonstrating the continued relevance of his commentary in contemporary Islamic scholarship and education. (Görke & Pink, 2014; Pink, 2019; Supriyanto & El Habib, 2026). Despite these valuable contributions, the existing literature remains largely descriptive in orientation. Most studies explain

which sources Ibn Kathīr employed, classify the types of narrations he accepted, or describe his methodological characteristics. Far less attention has examined how Ibn Kathīr selected among competing narrations, set criteria for acceptance or rejection, exercised *tarjīḥ* (interpretive preference), reconciled conflicting reports, and built interpretive authority through a coherent epistemological process. Consequently, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* continues to be understood primarily as a repository of transmitted traditions rather than as a systematic epistemological enterprise in which narrative selection functions as the central mechanism for producing authoritative Qur'anic interpretation. This unresolved issue constitutes a significant research gap that the present study seeks to address by reconstructing the epistemology underlying narrative selection in *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (Calder, 1993; W. A. Saleh, 2004).

Research Gap

Recent scholarship on *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* has substantially enriched contemporary understanding of the work from multiple perspectives. Studies published between 2021 and 2026 predominantly examine Ibn Kathīr's exegetical methodology, emphasising his hierarchical use of the Qur'an, authentic ḥadīth, reports from the Companions and Tābiʿūn, and his commitment to the principles of *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr*. Other studies investigate the role of *riwāyāt* as the primary foundation of his exegesis, the treatment of *Isrāʾīliyyāt* traditions, the authenticity and reliability of transmitted narrations, and his application of ḥadīth criticism **to** distinguish acceptable from weak reports. Additional research explores Ibn Kathīr's theological orientation, comparative analyses with other classical and modern exegetes, and his interpretation of legal verses (*āyāt al-aḥkām*), highlighting the continuing relevance of his commentary in contemporary Islamic scholarship and education (Görke & Pink, 2014; Pink, 2019; Supriyanto & El Habib, 2026).

Despite these valuable contributions, the existing literature remains largely descriptive in orientation. Most studies explain which sources Ibn Kathīr employed, classify the types of narrations he accepted, or describe his methodological characteristics. Far less attention has examined how Ibn Kathīr selected among competing narrations, set criteria for acceptance or rejection, exercised *tarjīḥ* (interpretive preference), reconciled conflicting reports, and built interpretive authority through a coherent epistemological process. Consequently, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* continues to be understood primarily as a repository of transmitted traditions rather than as a systematic epistemological enterprise in which narrative selection functions as the central mechanism for producing authoritative Qur'anic interpretation. This unresolved issue constitutes a significant research gap that the present study seeks to address by reconstructing the epistemology underlying narrative selection in *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (Calder, 1993; W. A. Saleh, 2004).

Research Problem

Despite extensive scholarship on *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, a fundamental question remains unresolved. Although recognised as a major work of *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr*, Ibn Kathīr's commentary contains diverse *riwāyāt* that vary in wording, context,

and interpretation. Rather than transmitting these reports passively, Ibn Kathīr evaluates their authenticity, reconciles contradictions, and applies *tarjīḥ* to prioritise stronger narrations. This raises an epistemological question: how does a *mufassir* grounded in transmitted evidence exercise interpretive judgment amid competing reports? Addressing this issue requires examining the principles governing narrative evaluation and selection, positioning *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* not merely as a collection of inherited reports but as a systematic interpretive framework for constructing exegetical authority.(Calder, 1993; Görke & Pink, 2014; Pink, 2019; W. A. Saleh, 2004)

Research Objective

This study aims to investigate the epistemology of narrative selection in *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* by examining the interpretive principles that govern Ibn Kathīr's evaluation of transmitted narrations (*riwāyāt*). Specifically, the study analyses the criteria by which he accepts, rejects, prioritises, and reconciles competing reports, with particular attention to the mechanisms of *tarjīḥ* (interpretive preference) employed to resolve differences between narrations. By reconstructing these methodological principles, the study further seeks to develop an epistemological model that explains how Ibn Kathīr's interpretive reasoning transforms *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* from a practice centred on textual transmission into a systematic framework for producing authoritative Qur'anic interpretation. Through this approach, the research contributes to broader discussions of Islamic epistemology, classical hermeneutics, and the construction of interpretive authority within the tradition of Qur'anic exegesis.(Calder, 1993; Görke & Pink, 2014; Halil, 2024; Pink, 2019; W. A. Saleh, 2004)

Ibn Kathīr constructs an epistemological hierarchy by assigning different levels of authority to the sources of interpretation. The highest level is the Qur'an itself (*tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi al-Qurʾān*), followed by authentic Prophetic traditions, the interpretations of the Companions, and the opinions of the Tābiʿūn. Reports that conflict with stronger textual evidence, lack reliable chains of transmission, or contradict established doctrinal principles are either qualified, considered less authoritative, or rejected. This hierarchy shows that narrative selection follows a structured epistemology rather than merely accumulating transmitted reports.

Accordingly, interpretive authority in *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* derives from the relative epistemic strength of the evidence presented, rather than from the quantity of narrations included (Ibn Kathīr, 1999; W. A. Saleh, 2004) The analysis indicates that Ibn Kathīr employs several interrelated interpretive principles. First, he evaluates the authenticity of narrations through the science of ḥadīth, considering both the reliability of transmitters (*isnād*) and textual consistency (*matn*). (Bin Muhammad Yusoff & Ismail, 2023) (Sani, 2026). Second, he prioritises interpretations supported by explicit Qur'anic evidence and the authentic Sunnah. Third, where apparently conflicting narrations can be harmonised, he attempts reconciliation (*al-jamʿ*) before giving preference to one report over another through *tarjīḥ*. Only when reconciliation is impossible does he reject narrations that are weak, isolated, or inconsistent with stronger evidence. These principles reveal that Ibn Kathīr's interpretive practice combines textual fidelity

with critical reasoning and methodological consistency, reflecting an integrated epistemological framework rather than a purely transmissive approach (Calder, 1993; Görke & Pink, 2014).

The findings suggest that narrative selection constitutes the central epistemological mechanism through which *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* functions as a systematic methodology of Qur'anic interpretation. Rather than transmitting narrations indiscriminately, Ibn Kathīr actively evaluates evidence, compares competing reports, determines which interpretation to prioritise, and constructs coherent exegetical conclusions. Consequently, *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* should be understood not merely as a repository of inherited traditions but as a disciplined interpretive system governed by explicit standards of evidence, methodological coherence, and scholarly judgment. On this basis, the study proposes an epistemological narrative selection model consisting of five sequential stages: (1) source identification**,** (2) authenticity verification**,** (3) narrative comparison**,** (4) *tarjīḥ* and reconciliation**,** and (5) construction of interpretive authority**.** This model demonstrates that Ibn Kathīr's authority as a *mufassir* rests not only on the preservation of transmitted knowledge but also on the systematic epistemological reasoning through which that knowledge is evaluated and integrated into Qur'anic interpretation (Ibn Kathīr, 1999; Jacobs, 2024; Khan et al., 2020; Pink, 2019; W. A. Saleh, 2004)

Significance and Novelty

This study makes several important contributions to the field of Qur'anic studies. Theoretically, it advances the understanding of *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* by reconstructing its epistemological foundations rather than treating it merely as a mode of textual transmission. By examining the principles through which Ibn Kathīr evaluates, prioritises, and reconciles transmitted narrations, the study demonstrates that classical transmitted exegesis embodies a coherent epistemological system grounded in methodological reasoning and interpretive judgment. In doing so, it bridges the fields of Qur'anic hermeneutics and Islamic epistemology, showing that interpretive authority in classical tafsīr emerges from systematic processes of evidence evaluation rather than from the simple preservation of inherited traditions (Görke & Pink, 2014; Pink, 2019; W. A. Saleh, 2004).

Methodologically, the study introduces an analytical framework for investigating narrative selection in classical Qur'anic exegesis. Instead of limiting the analysis to the identification of exegetical sources or the classification of transmitted reports, the proposed framework examines the sequential processes through which narrations are authenticated, compared, reconciled, and prioritised before being incorporated into Qur'anic interpretation. This approach moves beyond descriptive accounts of Ibn Kathīr's methodology by offering a replicable model for analysing interpretive reasoning in other works of *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* and related exegetical traditions Calder, 1993; Saleh, 2004).

Practically**,** the findings provide a conceptual model for evaluating interpretive authority within classical *tafsīr*, thereby offering scholars a systematic basis for assessing how authoritative interpretations are constructed from multiple transmitted sources. The proposed epistemological model also

contributes to contemporary Qur'anic studies by enriching discussions of interpretive legitimacy, the critical use of transmitted narrations, and the continuing relevance of classical exegetical methodologies in modern Islamic scholarship. Furthermore, it provides a foundation for future research on transmitted exegesis, comparative *tafsīr*, and the epistemology of Islamic interpretive traditions (Görke & Pink, 2014; McAuliffe, 2006; Pink, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kitab *Tafsir Al-Qur'an al-'Azhim* atau yang lebih dikenal sebagai **Tafsir Ibnu Katsir** (karya Imam Imaduddin Abul Fida' Ismail bin Umar bin Katsir Al-Qurasyi Ad-Dimasyqi, wafat 774 H) diakui secara luas sebagai salah satu rujukan tafsir *bil-ma'tsur* paling otoritatif dalam khazanah Islam klasik maupun kontemporer. Dalam sistematika penafsirannya, Ibnu Katsir menggunakan manhaj hierarkis yang sangat ketat: menafsirkan Al-Qur'an dengan ayat Al-Qur'an lainnya (*al-Qur'an yufassiru ba'duhu ba'dan*), kemudian dengan sunnah atau hadis Nabi Muhammad SAW, dilanjutkan dengan atsar dari para sahabat, dan terakhir pendapat dari kalangan tabiin. Keunggulan utama dari karya ini terletak pada kehati-hatian penulis dalam memilah validitas sanad hadis, komitmennya yang tinggi terhadap akidah Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah (Atsariyah), serta upayanya yang bersih dari dominasi riwayat *Israiliyat* yang batil. Hingga kini, meskipun memiliki keterbatasan dalam menjawab isu-isu sosio-teknologis modern secara langsung, Tafsir Ibnu Katsir tetap memegang peranan krusial sebagai fondasi utama dalam dunia pendidikan Islam, kajian akidah, serta rujukan akademis yang objektif dalam memahami makna otentik ayat-ayat suci Al-Qur'an.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative library research design grounded in hermeneutic and epistemological inquiry. (Nigar, 2020), (Dabengwa et al., 2020). Library research is appropriate because the primary object of analysis consists of classical textual sources, particularly *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, supplemented by relevant works in Qur'anic exegesis, ḥadīth studies, *uṣūl al-tafsīr*, Islamic epistemology, and contemporary scholarship. Rather than generating empirical data through fieldwork, the study systematically examines documentary evidence to uncover the interpretive logic underlying Ibn Kathīr's exegetical methodology.

A qualitative design is particularly suitable because the research seeks to understand how Ibn Kathīr constructs interpretive authority rather than to measure the frequency of narrations or quantify exegetical patterns. The focus is therefore on reconstructing the epistemological reasoning embedded in his interpretive practice. Through close textual reading, comparative analysis, and conceptual interpretation, the study investigates the criteria by which Ibn Kathīr evaluates, prioritises, reconciles, and occasionally rejects competing transmitted narrations (*riwāyāt*). These processes cannot be adequately explained through quantitative methods because they involve nuanced hermeneutic judgments, theological commitments, and principles of ḥadīth criticism (T. B. Brown et al., 2020; Krippendorff, 2018; Musa et al., 2026; Schreier, 2012). This research design

directly addresses the three research questions. First, to answer Research Question 1, the study analyses passages in which Ibn Kathīr presents multiple narrations concerning the same Qur'anic verse and examines how he establishes an epistemological hierarchy among them. Particular attention is given to the relative authority assigned to the Qur'an, authentic Prophetic traditions, reports of the Companions (*Ṣaḥābah*), statements of the Successors (*Tābiʿūn*), Arabic linguistic evidence, contextual considerations, and scholarly consensus. This analysis seeks to reconstruct the hierarchy of interpretive authority embedded in Ibn Kathīr's exegetical reasoning (Ibn Kathīr, 1999; W. A. Saleh, 2004). Second, to address Research Question 2, the study employs hermeneutic analysis to reconstruct Ibn Kathīr's interpretive reasoning. It identifies the principles governing the acceptance, reconciliation (*al-jamʿ*), preference (*tarjīḥ*), or rejection of conflicting narrations and examines how these principles shape the final exegetical meaning. The analysis combines textual interpretation with conceptual coding to identify recurring epistemological patterns. Consequently, narrative selection is understood not merely as a technical exercise in transmission but as an interpretive process informed by theological commitments, evidential reasoning, and methodological consistency. (Gadamer, 2004; Görke & Pink, 2014; Schreier, 2012). Third, to answer Research Question 3, the study synthesizes findings from the textual analysis to evaluate the broader theoretical implications of Ibn Kathīr's methodology. Rather than viewing *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* solely as the preservation of inherited reports, the research investigates whether Ibn Kathīr's systematic evaluation of evidence constitutes a coherent epistemological framework of Qur'anic interpretation. This synthesis enables the formulation of an Epistemological Narrative Selection Model, explaining the transition from textual transmission to interpretive construction within classical Sunni exegesis and demonstrating how interpretive authority is produced through structured processes of evidence evaluation and methodological reasoning (Calder, 1993; Pink, 2019; W. A. Saleh, 2004).

Overall, the qualitative library research design is well suited to the objectives of this study because it facilitates an in-depth examination of classical exegetical texts while allowing the reconstruction of the intellectual processes underlying Ibn Kathīr's interpretive authority. By integrating documentary research, textual criticism, hermeneutic interpretation, qualitative content analysis, and epistemological evaluation, the study provides a rigorous analytical framework for explaining how narrative selection functions as a central mechanism in classical Qur'anic interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012).

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative library research design grounded in hermeneutic and epistemological inquiry because its primary object of analysis comprises classical textual sources, particularly *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, complemented by authoritative works on Qur'anic exegesis, ḥadīth studies, *uṣūl al-tafsīr*, Islamic epistemology, and contemporary scholarship. Rather than generating empirical data through fieldwork, the research systematically analyzes documentary evidence to reconstruct the interpretive logic underlying Ibn Kathīr's exegetical

methodology. A qualitative library-based approach is particularly appropriate because the study seeks to explain how Ibn Kathīr constructs interpretive authority through the evaluation and selection of transmitted narrations rather than to quantify the frequency of reports or identify statistical patterns of exegesis. Accordingly, the analysis emphasizes close textual reading, hermeneutic interpretation, comparative examination, and conceptual analysis to uncover the epistemological reasoning embedded within Ibn Kathīr's interpretive practice (Almaani et al., 2026; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gadamer, 2004; Musa et al., 2026; Zed, 2008).

The research design is explicitly structured to address the three research questions. To answer the first research question, the study examines Qur'anic passages in which Ibn Kathīr cites multiple narrations concerning the same verse and investigates how he establishes an epistemological hierarchy among them. Particular attention is given to the relative authority assigned to the Qur'an, authentic Prophetic traditions, reports of the Companions (*Ṣaḥābah*), statements of the Successors (*Tābiʿūn*), Arabic linguistic evidence, contextual considerations, and scholarly consensus. This analysis seeks to reconstruct the hierarchy of interpretive authority that governs Ibn Kathīr's exegetical reasoning (Calder, 1993; Ibn Kathīr, 1999; W. A. Saleh, 2004).

To address the second research question, the study employs hermeneutic and qualitative content analysis to identify the interpretive principles governing the acceptance, reconciliation (*al-jamʿ*), preference (*tarjīḥ*), and rejection of competing narrations. Through systematic coding and comparative textual analysis, the research explores how Ibn Kathīr evaluates evidential strength, applies principles of ḥadīth criticism, resolves apparent contradictions, and formulates coherent exegetical conclusions. These analytical procedures demonstrate that narrative selection is not merely a technical process of transmitting reports but a sophisticated interpretive activity shaped by epistemological reasoning, theological commitments, and methodological consistency (Görke & Pink, 2014; Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012).

The third research question is addressed by synthesizing the findings of the textual and hermeneutic analyses to evaluate the broader theoretical implications of Ibn Kathīr's methodology. Rather than viewing *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* solely as the preservation of inherited traditions, the study investigates whether Ibn Kathīr's systematic evaluation of evidence constitutes a coherent epistemological framework for Qur'anic interpretation. The synthesis culminates in the development of an Epistemological Narrative Selection Model, which explains the transformation of *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* from a mode of textual transmission into a structured methodology of interpretive reasoning. The proposed model demonstrates that interpretive authority in *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* is established through sequential processes of evidence verification, narrative comparison, *tarjīḥ*, reconciliation, and conceptual integration rather than through the uncritical reproduction of transmitted reports (Görke & Pink, 2014; Pink, 2019; W. A. Saleh, 2004). Overall, the qualitative library research design provides a rigorous methodological framework for investigating the epistemology of narrative selection in *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*. By integrating documentary research,

textual criticism, hermeneutic interpretation, qualitative content analysis, and epistemological evaluation, the study reconstructs the intellectual processes that underlie Ibn Kathīr's interpretive authority. This design not only answers the three research questions but also contributes a systematic analytical model that advances contemporary scholarship on classical Sunni exegesis and the epistemological foundations of *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gadamer, 2004; W. A. Saleh, 2004).

RESULTS

Documentary analysis of *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* demonstrates that the exegete does not merely compile transmitted narrations (*riwāyāt*) but actively evaluates, compares, and prioritises them before arriving at an interpretive conclusion. Across numerous passages, Ibn Kathīr presents several reports concerning a single Qur'anic verse and subsequently comments on their authenticity, coherence, and compatibility with other textual evidence. Rather than reproducing all narrations indiscriminately, he frequently identifies stronger reports, dismisses weak traditions, reconciles apparently contradictory evidence, or suspends judgment where certainty cannot be established. These findings indicate that *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* in Ibn Kathīr's work functions as an interpretive methodology rather than a passive repository of inherited traditions (Ibn Kathir, 1999; W. A. Saleh, 2004). One of the clearest indicators of this epistemological process is Ibn Kathīr's repeated application of *tarjīḥ* (interpretive preference). When confronted with competing narrations, he evaluates their chains of transmission, examines textual consistency with the Qur'an and authentic Sunnah, considers the opinions of the Companions, and frequently explains why one report possesses greater evidential value than another. His interpretive authority therefore emerges from critical reasoning rather than simple textual preservation (J. A. C. Brown, 2009; Calder, 1993; Sani, 2026).

The findings also reveal that Ibn Kathīr consistently applies an epistemological hierarchy of evidence. The Qur'an functions as the primary interpretive authority, followed by authentic Prophetic traditions, statements of the Companions, reports of the Tābiʿūn, Arabic linguistic evidence, and contextual considerations. This hierarchy demonstrates that narrative selection is governed by explicit methodological principles rather than **by** arbitrary preference, thereby transforming transmitted exegesis into a coherent framework of interpretive reasoning (Görke & Pink, 2014; Ibn Kathir, 1999).

The literature review reveals considerable diversity in scholarly assessments of Ibn Kathīr's exegetical methodology. Classical Sunni scholars generally regard Ibn Kathīr as one of the foremost representatives of *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr*. They emphasise his commitment to authentic narrations, his reliance on the Qur'an and Sunnah, and his expertise in hadith criticism. These characteristics have established *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* as one of the most authoritative commentaries within the Sunni exegetical tradition (Ahmad & Greer, 2022)

Modern scholars broadly acknowledge these strengths while offering more nuanced interpretations. Saleh (2004) argues that Ibn Kathīr should not be understood merely as a transmitter of earlier authorities but as an exegete who actively constructs interpretive meaning through selective engagement with

inherited traditions. Similarly, Calder (1993) demonstrates that classical *tafsīr* is characterised by intellectual reasoning and literary organisation rather than by mechanical compilation. Görke and Pink (2014) further emphasise that Qur'anic exegesis represents a dynamic intellectual tradition in which interpretive authority is continually negotiated through scholarly reasoning. Contemporary scholarship therefore increasingly recognises Ibn Kathīr's interpretive agency. Rather than functioning as a passive compiler of narrations, he emerges as an exegete who systematically evaluates competing evidence according to identifiable epistemological principles. The documentary evidence identifies two principal scholarly positions. The first position supports the view that *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* represents a highly critical and methodologically rigorous form of *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr*. Scholars within this perspective argue that Ibn Kathīr's extensive use of ḥadīth criticism, evaluation of narrators, and preference for authentic reports demonstrate a sophisticated epistemology of interpretation rather than mere transmission (Calder, 1993; Görke & Pink, 2014; W. A. Saleh, 2004)

The second position offers a more critical assessment. Some scholars argue that Ibn Kathīr remains fundamentally dependent upon earlier authorities such as al-Ṭabarī and that his methodological originality should not be overstated. From this perspective, Ibn Kathīr primarily refines inherited traditions rather than constructing an entirely new interpretive paradigm (Calder 1993). Other scholars observe that despite his critical stance, Ibn Kathīr occasionally includes weak narrations for historical completeness before commenting on their reliability, illustrating the complexity of classical exegetical practice .

These differing perspectives suggest that the central issue is not whether Ibn Kathīr employed transmitted narrations, but how he exercised interpretive judgment in selecting among them.

The synthesis of documentary evidence demonstrates a clear shift within contemporary scholarship. Earlier studies predominantly described Ibn Kathīr's sources, methodology, and theological orientation, whereas more recent scholarship increasingly investigates epistemological questions concerning interpretive authority, evidence evaluation, and scholarly reasoning.

This study identifies five recurring epistemological mechanisms underlying Ibn Kathīr's narrative selection:

1. Hierarchical evaluation of sources.
2. Authentication through hadith criticism.
3. Comparative examination of competing narrations.
4. Application of *tarjīḥ* and reconciliation.
5. Construction of authoritative Qur'anic interpretation.

Collectively, these findings support the argument that *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* should be understood as a systematic interpretive methodology governed by explicit epistemological principles rather than as a simple collection of transmitted reports.

Table 1. Submmary of Research Findings

Research Aspect	Documentary Evidence	Scholarly Consensus	Research Implication
Transmission of Narrations	Ibn Kathīr cites multiple reports for the same verse	Accepted by nearly all scholars	Demonstrates richness of transmitted tradition
Narrative Selection	Preference among competing narrations through tarjīḥ	Increasingly emphasised by recent scholarship	Indicates interpretive reasoning
Hadith Criticism	Evaluation of isnād and matn	Strong consensus	Strengthens interpretive authority
Epistemological Hierarchy	Qur'an → Sunnah → Companions → Tābiʿūn → Language → Context	Strong consensus	Reveals structured methodology
Reconciliation (al-jamʿ)	Harmonisation before rejection	Supported by many scholars	Minimises interpretive contradiction
Rejection of Weak Reports	Weak reports evaluated and sometimes rejected	General agreement	Demonstrates critical methodology
Interpretive Authority	Produced through evidence evaluation	Growing consensus in recent scholarship	Supports epistemological reconstruction
Overall Finding	Shift from textual transmission to interpretive construction	Central contribution of this study	New epistemological model

The process of narrative selection in *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* can be observed through his interpretation of Qur'an 2:102 concerning the narrative of Hārūt and Mārūt. In explaining this verse, Ibn Kathīr presents several transmitted reports (*riwāyāt*) regarding the identity and actions of these two figures. Some narrations describe Hārūt and Mārūt as angels who experienced temptation and committed moral transgressions, whereas other interpretations reject such portrayals because they contradict the theological principle that angels consistently obey divine commands. Ibn Kathīr does not treat these reports as equally authoritative; rather, he evaluates their theological coherence and compatibility with broader Qur'anic principles. He rejects narratives that attribute major sins to angels because such accounts conflict with the Qur'anic depiction of angels as obedient servants of God who do not disobey His commands (Ibn Kathir, 1999). This interpretive practice demonstrates that Ibn Kathīr's engagement with transmitted narratives is not limited to preservation but involves critical assessment based on epistemological criteria. The authority of a narration is therefore determined not merely by its existence within earlier traditions but by its compatibility with stronger textual and theological foundations. A similar pattern appears in Ibn Kathīr's interpretation of Qur'an 18:83–98 regarding Dhū al-Qarnayn. In this discussion, Ibn Kathīr incorporates various historical reports concerning the identity of Dhū al-Qarnayn, his journeys, and the construction of the barrier against Yaʾjūj and Maʾjūj. However, these reports are not accepted without evaluation. Ibn Kathīr differentiates between narrations that possess stronger evidential foundations and those influenced by Isra'iliyyat materials that lack sufficient reliability. His approach demonstrates a balanced methodological position: historical reports may contribute to Qur'anic interpretation, but they cannot override established Qur'anic principles or authentic prophetic traditions. Therefore, Ibn Kathīr neither completely excludes historical narratives nor accepts them uncritically; instead, he places them within a hierarchical framework of evidence where Qur'anic texts and authentic Sunnah remain the primary interpretive authorities (Ibn Kathir, 1999). This finding reinforces the argument that *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* represents a structured interpretive methodology in which transmitted knowledge is continuously evaluated and contextualised rather than mechanically reproduced.

Further evidence of Ibn Kathīr's interpretive reasoning can be identified in his explanation of Qur'an 3:7 concerning the interpretation of *mutashābihāt* verses. Ibn Kathīr presents different opinions transmitted from earlier scholars regarding whether the knowledge of the interpretation of ambiguous verses belongs exclusively to Allah or whether certain scholars may also possess understanding of their meanings. Instead of simply listing these opinions, Ibn Kathīr examines their textual foundations, linguistic implications, and relationship with reports from earlier authorities. Through this process, he applies *tarjīḥ* by giving preference to the interpretation that demonstrates stronger evidential support and greater consistency with the principles of Qur'anic interpretation (Ibn Kathir, 1999). This example illustrates that Ibn Kathīr's methodology combines textual transmission with interpretive judgement, showing that the production of exegetical authority occurs through a dynamic interaction between inherited knowledge and scholarly reasoning.

Taken together, these textual examples demonstrate that Ibn Kathīr's methodology cannot be understood merely as the collection of transmitted traditions. Instead, the analysis reveals a systematic epistemological process involving identification of available narrations, evaluation of authenticity, comparison of competing interpretations, reconciliation of differences, and preference for the strongest evidence. This finding supports previous arguments that classical tafsīr should be understood as an intellectual practice shaped by methodological choices rather than as a passive preservation of earlier materials (Calder, 1993; W. A. Saleh, 2004). Consequently, the authority of *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* emerges from the interaction between transmission (*riwāyah*) and critical interpretation (*dirāyah*), where narrative selection becomes a central mechanism in constructing Qur'anic meaning.

Table 2.Textual Evidence of Narrative Selection: Evaluating Competing Reports in Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr

Qur'anic Passage	**Competing Narrations**	**Ibn Kathīr's Method**	**Epistemological Finding**
Q. 2:102 (Hārūt and Mārūt)	Angels committing sin vs alternative interpretations	Rejection (*radd*) of weak/inconsistent reports	Theological coherence regulates narrative acceptance
Q. 18:83–98 (Dhū al-Qarnayn)	Different historical identifications and Isra'iliyyat reports	Evaluation and reconciliation	Historical reports require evidential control
Q. 3:7 (*Mutashābihāt*)	Different interpretations from Companions and scholars	Tarjīḥ based on textual evidence	Interpretive authority emerges through methodological reasoning

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DISCUSSION

This study challenges the view that *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* primarily preserves inherited interpretations. Evidence from *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* shows that transmitted reports (*riwāyāt*) undergo systematic evaluation, comparison, reconciliation, and *tarjīḥ* before exegetical conclusions are established. Thus, Ibn Kathīr's methodology rests not merely on transmission but on epistemological reasoning, positioning *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* as a disciplined interpretive process rather than passive preservation of tradition (Halil, 2024; Ibn Kathīr, 1999; W. Saleh, 2004). This finding extends Saleh's argument that classical *tafsīr* reflects deliberate scholarly choices rather than passive accumulation of inherited authorities. Supporting this view, the study identifies the epistemological mechanisms through which Ibn Kathīr evaluates evidence, establishes source authority, and resolves conflicting narrations. Thus, narrative selection constitutes a central epistemological activity in *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr*. (Bin Muhammad Yusoff & Ismail, 2023; W. A. Saleh, 2004). These findings reinforce Calder's view that classical *tafsīr* represents sophisticated scholarly construction rather than mere transmission of earlier traditions. While Calder emphasised its literary formation, this study identifies the epistemological hierarchy underlying Ibn Kathīr's interpretive decisions, demonstrating that narrative selection is a systematic process through which interpretive authority is established (Calder, 1993). These findings support Görke and Pink's view that *tafsīr* is a dynamic intellectual tradition in which authority emerges through scholarly evaluation rather than transmission alone. Analysis of *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* shows that interpretive legitimacy rests on comparing narrations, assessing *isnād* and *matn*, reconciling conflicting reports, and formulating reasoned exegetical conclusion (Görke & Pink, 2014; Shahzad et al., 2024). These findings align with Brown's account of ḥadīth criticism as an epistemological process integrating *isnād* and *matn* evaluation. Ibn Kathīr similarly assesses narrations through transmission chains, Qur'anic coherence, authenticated Prophetic traditions, theological consistency, linguistic usage, and earlier scholarly consensus. Thus, ḥadīth criticism becomes an integral component of exegetical reasoning rather than merely historical verification (Rozikin, 2026; Takim, 2026; Vahedi, 2020).

These conclusions align with recent Qur'anic scholarship. Supriyanto and El Habib (2026) show that Ibn Kathīr evaluates *Isrāʾīliyyāt* through transmission and content criticism, accepting reports only when consistent with the Qur'an, authentic Sunnah, and established theology. This supports the view that narrative selection is an epistemological process rather than mechanical transmission. Similarly, Nasrullah, Murtadho, and Umami (2026) argue that contemporary scholarship should reassess *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* not merely as a traditional Salafi reference but as a coherent exegetical methodology possessing continuing relevance for modern Qur'anic studies (Supriyanto & El Habib, 2026). Their analysis emphasises that Ibn Kathīr's interpretive authority derives from methodological discipline and evidential reasoning rather than unquestioned reliance on inherited reports (Nasrullah et al., 2026). This recent reassessment reinforces the central thesis of the present study that *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* represents a systematic interpretive enterprise whose authority depends upon epistemological evaluation rather than textual transmission alone.

Taken together, these dialogues suggest a paradigm shift in Qur'anic scholarship: tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr is not merely the preservation of authoritative narrations but a process of knowledge production in which interpretation constitutes the epistemological core. Ibn Kathīr transforms transmitted reports into coherent exegetical knowledge through evidence evaluation, tarjīḥ, reconciliation, and conceptual integration. Accordingly, this study proposes an Epistemological Narrative Selection Framework comprising five stages: (1) identifying available narrations; (2) verifying authenticity through transmission and content criticism; (3) comparing competing evidence; (4) reconciling differences or applying tarjīḥ; and (5) constructing an authoritative interpretation. This framework reconceptualises tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr as a systematic methodology of knowledge production, bridging Qur'anic hermeneutics and Islamic epistemology while illuminating the intellectual foundations of classical Sunni exegesis.

CONCLUSION

This study examines narrative selection in *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, focusing on the acceptance, rejection, prioritisation, and reconciliation of transmitted narrations (*riwāyāt*). Findings reveal that Ibn Kathīr's interpretive authority rests on systematic evidential reasoning, ḥadīth criticism, *tarjīḥ*, *al-jamʿ*, and contextual analysis, establishing his tafsīr as an epistemologically structured methodology rather than merely a repository of inherited traditionA. C. Brown, 2009).

The study contributes to contemporary Qur'anic studies by demonstrating that *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* is defined not merely by the transmission of authoritative reports but by the epistemological processes through which they are evaluated and integrated into coherent interpretation. The analysis identifies five stages in Ibn Kathīr's methodology: (1) identification of narrations, (2) authenticity verification, (3) comparative evaluation of evidence, (4) reconciliation and *tarjīḥ*, and (5) construction of interpretive authority. These findings lead to the

epistemological narrative selection model, which explains how narrative selection functions as a mechanism for producing authoritative interpretation and shifts scholarship from descriptive accounts toward reconstructing its underlying epistemological logic (Calder, 1993; Görke & Pink, 2014; Pink, 2019). This study advances Qur'anic studies by showing that *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* involves not only transmitting authoritative reports but also evaluating and integrating them epistemologically. It identifies five stages in Ibn Kathīr's methodology: narration identification, authenticity verification, evidential comparison, reconciliation and *tarjīḥ*, and construction of interpretive authority. These stages underpin the Epistemological Narrative Selection Model, explaining how narrative selection produces authoritative interpretation. (J. A. C. Brown, 2009; Görke & Pink, 2014).

Several recommendations emerge from this study. Future research should apply the proposed epistemological narrative selection model to other classical exegetes, such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, al-Baghawī, Ibn al-Jawzī, and Ibn ʿĀshūr, to explore variations in narrative selection approaches. Comparative studies may further examine the development of *tarjīḥ*, reconciliation, and evidential hierarchy across exegetical traditions. Additionally, integrating this framework with digital humanities, computational *tafsīr*, and AI-assisted Qur'anic studies may strengthen the dialogue between classical exegetical methodologies and contemporary hermeneutical approaches. (Pink, 2019). In conclusion, this study argues that the enduring significance of *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* lies not merely in preserving the legacy of earlier authorities but in demonstrating how transmitted knowledge is transformed into authoritative interpretation through disciplined epistemological reasoning. By reconstructing the logic of narrative selection, the study contributes a new theoretical perspective for understanding *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr* and offers an analytical framework that may inform future research on Qur'anic interpretation, Islamic epistemology, and the development of classical and contemporary tafsīr studies.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has three limitations. First, as qualitative library research based on documentary analysis, its findings rely on textual interpretation rather than empirical validation through fieldwork or quantitative methods. Thus, the proposed epistemological model represents a reconstruction of Ibn Kathīr's interpretive reasoning that may be refined through empirical research. Second, the analysis focuses exclusively on *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, limiting the generalisability of its findings to other representatives of *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr*, whose approaches may vary across historical, theological, and methodological contexts. Third, the study examines narrative selection without comprehensively addressing other aspects of Ibn Kathīr's methodology, including linguistic, legal, rhetorical, and socio-historical dimensions. These limitations define the study's scope rather than diminish its contribution to Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic epistemology.

Future research should pursue two directions. First, comparative studies should apply the proposed Epistemological Narrative Selection Model to major

classical exegetes, including al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, al-Baghawī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, and Ibn ʿĀshūr, to assess its applicability across the *tafsīr* tradition. Second, integrating digital humanities, computational text analysis, network analysis, and AI-assisted methods with classical hermeneutics could reveal patterns of narrative selection and interpretive reasoning within *tafsīr bi al-maʾthūr*, while testing the robustness of the proposed framework.

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