



Ahsan Al-Qasas in the Qur'an: A Comparative Analysis of al-Tabari's and Ibn Katsir's Interpretations

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Article Information:

Received April 15, 2026

Revised May 28, 2026

Accepted June 26, 2026

Keywords: *Ahsan al-Qaṣaṣ*,
Al-Ṭabari, *Ibn Kathir*,
comparative tafsir,
the story of Prophet Yusuf.

Abstract

The stories in the Qur'an serve as one of the primary means of conveying divine guidance, moral lessons, and values of life. Among these narratives, the story of Prophet Yusuf, described as *Ahsan al-Qaṣaṣ* (the Best of Stories), holds a unique position and has attracted the attention of Qur'anic exegetes throughout history. This study aims to analyze the concept of *Ahsan al-Qaṣaṣ* in the Qur'an according to Al-Ṭabari and Ibn Katsir through a comparative exegetical approach. The study is motivated by the persistence of the misconception that the story of Prophet Yusuf is merely a historical narrative, overlooking its profound theological, educational, and divine principles that are highly relevant to human life. This research employs a library research method using a comparative tafsir approach. The primary sources include the Qur'an, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān* by Al-Ṭabari, and *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓim* by Ibn Katsir, while secondary sources consist of scholarly works relevant to the topic. The findings reveal that *Ahsan al-Qaṣaṣ*, according to Al-Ṭabari and Ibn Katsir, is characterized by the beauty of its narrative structure, the coherence of its storyline, the clarity of the divine laws reflected in it, and the profound lessons it offers concerning faith, morality, patience, and steadfastness. The study also identifies both similarities and methodological differences between the two exegetes, particularly in their interpretive approaches, use of transmitted reports (*riwāyāt*), and emphasis on spiritual and ethical values. Through a comparative tafsir approach, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the Qur'anic narratives as an enduring source of guidance for all times and places.

INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an contains numerous narratives that serve not only as historical accounts but also as sources of guidance, education, and moral formation. Among these narratives, the story of Prophet Yusuf (peace be upon him) occupies a distinguished position through the phrase *Aḥsan al-Qaṣaṣ* "the Best of Stories" in Sūrah Yūsuf, a distinction further reinforced by the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ statement describing Yusuf as "the noble son of the noble, the noble son of the noble, the noble son of the noble." This designation indicates that the meaning of *Aḥsan al-Qaṣaṣ* extends beyond

How to cite:

Hasanah, Azkia, M. Buchari, Fauzi, Farid, *Ahsan Al-Qasas in the Qur'an: A Comparative Analysis of al-Tabari's and Ibn Katsir's Interpretations*, *Nida Al Qur'an: Jurnal Pengkajian Islam*, 7(1), 1-5

E-ISSN:

3032-7423

Published by:

The Institute for Research and Community Service

the literary beauty of the narrative to encompass profound theological, ethical, educational, and spiritual values that continue to be relevant for individuals and societies across generations.

The uniqueness of the story of Prophet Yusuf has attracted the attention of Muslim scholars throughout the history of Qur'anic exegesis. Classical exegetes have regarded this narrative as a comprehensive model of faith, patience, divine providence, and moral excellence. The Qur'an presents the story not merely as a sequence of historical events but as a manifestation of *sunnat Allāh* (the divine laws governing human life), illustrating that trials, perseverance, and unwavering faith ultimately lead to God's mercy, justice, and victory. Consequently, the designation *Aḥsan al-Qaṣaṣ* has become an important subject in Qur'anic studies, particularly in understanding the educational and theological dimensions embedded within the narrative.

Within the tradition of Qur'anic exegesis, Al-Ṭabari and Ibn Katsīr are among the most influential classical exegetes who interpreted this phrase through the *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* approach, relying on the Qur'an, the Prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), and the reports of the Companions and their successors. Although both exegetes employ the same interpretive methodology, they demonstrate distinctive emphases and analytical frameworks in explaining the meaning of *Aḥsan al-Qaṣaṣ*. Al-Ṭabari is characterized by his extensive compilation and critical evaluation of transmitted reports, whereas Ibn Katsīr presents a more concise and systematic exposition while emphasizing theological and moral guidance.

Previous studies have generally examined the story of Prophet Yusuf from educational, psychological, literary, or moral perspectives. However, comparatively few studies have specifically focused on the concept of *Aḥsan al-Qaṣaṣ* through a comparative analysis of Al-Ṭabari's and Ibn Katsīr's interpretations. This gap indicates the need for further investigation into how these two classical exegetes understand the designation of the story as "the Best of Stories" and how their interpretive methodologies shape their respective conclusions.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the concept of *Aḥsan al-Qaṣaṣ* in the Qur'an through a comparative examination of the interpretations of Al-Ṭabari and Ibn Katsīr. By identifying both the similarities and the methodological differences between these two exegetes, this research seeks to enrich the discourse of classical Qur'anic exegesis and provide a deeper understanding of the theological, educational, and ethical significance of the story of Prophet Yusuf. It is expected that the findings of this study will contribute to the theoretical development of Qur'anic interpretation and serve as a valuable reference for future research in the field of tafsir.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using library research with a comparative exegesis (*tafsīr muqāran*) method. The subject of the study is the interpretation of *Aḥsan al-Qaṣaṣ* in Sūrah Yūsuf as presented by al-Ṭabari in *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Ay al-Qur'ān* and Ibn Katsīr in *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*. The research data were collected through document analysis of primary sources, including the Qur'an, the two classical tafsir works, and relevant hadith collections, particularly *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. Secondary sources consist of books, scholarly journal articles, and other academic literature related to the research topic. The researcher served as the primary research instrument, supported by documentation and note-taking techniques for data collection. Data were analyzed using a descriptive-analytical approach combined with comparative analysis by identifying, classifying, comparing, and interpreting the similarities and differences between al-Ṭabari's and Ibn Katsīr's interpretations of *Aḥsan al-Qaṣaṣ*. This approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics, arguments, and implications of both exegetes' interpretations within the

field of Qur'anic exegesis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The term *Absan al-Qaṣaṣ* (the Best of Stories) appears only once in the Qur'an, namely in Qur'an 12:3 (Sūrah Yūsuf), although the word *qaṣaṣ* and its derivatives occur in several other verses. This unique designation indicates the distinguished status of the story of Prophet Yusuf among the Qur'anic narratives. The title *Absan al-Qaṣaṣ* does not merely refer to the beauty of its narrative structure but also reflects the completeness of its theological, moral, educational, and spiritual values, as well as its clear presentation of the divine laws that guide human life. Therefore, the story of Prophet Yusuf should not be understood merely as a historical account, but as a universal source of guidance and moral instruction.

The findings of this study reveal that both Al-Ṭabari and Ibn Katsir agree that the designation of the story of Prophet Yusuf as *Absan al-Qaṣaṣ* is based on the completeness of its narrative, the depth of its moral and spiritual teachings, and the richness of its lessons. According to both exegetes, the story serves not only as a source of consolation for Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the face of hardship and opposition but also as timeless guidance for humanity in confronting life's trials through the values of patience, piety, honesty, chastity (*iffah*), justice, forgiveness, and unwavering trust in Allah. Furthermore, both scholars affirm that the story of Prophet Yusuf is a divine revelation that confirms the previous scriptures and illustrates the divine law that perseverance and faith in times of trial ultimately lead to divine assistance, honor, and victory. This shared understanding reflects their reliance on the *tafsīr bi al-ma'thur* approach, which interprets the Qur'an through the Qur'an itself, the Prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), and the reports of the Companions and the Successors (*ṭabī'ūn*).

Despite these substantial similarities, the study identifies important methodological differences between the two exegetes. Al-Ṭabari interprets Qur'an 12:3 through two principal perspectives. First, he relates the verse to Allah's disclosure of the histories of previous nations to Prophet Muhammad. Second, he connects it to the occasion of revelation, when some of the Prophet's Companions requested that he narrate stories to them. Al-Ṭabari reinforces his interpretation by compiling numerous transmitted reports with different chains of narration (*isnāds*), demonstrating his comprehensive, analytical, and narration-based methodology. His approach reflects a strong commitment to preserving the diversity of classical reports while establishing the meaning of the verse through textual evidence.

In contrast, Ibn Kathir places greater emphasis on the contextual relationship between verses (*munāsabah al-āyāt*), linking Qur'an 12:3 with the preceding verse concerning the revelation of the Qur'an in the Arabic language. He discusses the occasion of revelation through reports transmitted by Ibn Jarir (Al-Ṭabari) and further strengthens his interpretation with Prophetic traditions emphasizing the sufficiency of the Qur'an as the ultimate source of guidance and discouraging reliance on the scriptures of the People of the Book. Compared with Al-Ṭabari, Ibn Katsir presents a more concise and systematic interpretation that focuses on the general meaning of the verse and highlights its universal theological and ethical values.

These methodological differences, however, do not alter the essential substance of their interpretations. Both exegetes consistently regard *Absan al-Qaṣaṣ* as a narrative embodying divine guidance, mercy, and a comprehensive educational model for human life. The story of Prophet Yusuf demonstrates not only literary excellence but also profound theological, ethical, and social dimensions that remain relevant across time and place. Its narrative illustrates that Allah's decree ultimately prevails over human planning and that steadfast faith and righteous conduct lead to success both in this world and in the Hereafter.

These findings support the theoretical framework of *tafsīr bi al-ma'thur*, which positions the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the narrations of the early Muslim generations as the primary foundations of Qur'anic interpretation. At the same time, the comparative analysis demonstrates that reliance on the same foundational sources may produce different exegetical emphases without affecting the core message of the Qur'an. Consequently, this study contributes to the field of Qur'anic exegesis by providing a deeper understanding of the interpretive characteristics of Al-Ṭabari and Ibn Katsir regarding the story of Prophet Yusuf, while highlighting the value of the comparative exegetical approach in enriching contemporary studies of Qur'anic narratives.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that both al-Ṭabari and Ibn Katsīr interpret "the Best of Stories" as a designation for the story of Prophet Yusuf peace be upon him, due to its perfect narrative structure, profound theological, moral, and educational values, and its function as divine guidance for humanity in facing life's trials. Although both exegetes employ the *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* (tradition-based exegesis) approach, they differ in their interpretive styles. Al-Ṭabari presents a more comprehensive interpretation by extensively incorporating transmitted reports and detailed analysis, whereas Ibn Katsīr offers a more concise and systematic exposition that emphasizes the overall meaning and the reinforcement of Islamic faith and moral values. These differences do not affect the substance of their interpretations; rather, they reflect the richness and diversity of methodologies within the classical tradition of Qur'anic exegesis. Accordingly, this study reinforces the understanding that the concept of *Aḥsan al-Qaṣaṣ* extends beyond the literary excellence of the story of Prophet Yusuf to represent the Qur'an's universal theological, ethical, and educational values, which remain relevant to the development of contemporary Qur'anic studies. Since this research is limited to a comparative analysis of two classical tafsir works, future studies are recommended to broaden the scope by examining interpretations from different periods and methodological approaches, including linguistic, thematic, and contemporary exegesis, in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of *Aḥsan al-Qaṣaṣ* and its relevance to addressing contemporary issues faced by Muslim societies.

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