

Polygamy in the Qur'an: A Thematic and Contextual Interpretation Based on Asbab al-Nuzul

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Abstract

The study of Qur'anic verses related to polygamy has long attracted scholarly attention because polygamy is not only mentioned in religious texts but is also practiced in real life. The debate surrounding the interpretation of these verses continues, as both proponents and opponents of polygamy present their own arguments and justifications. These differing views stem from the absence of a definitive text that explicitly prohibits polygamy. The Qur'an does not present polygamy as a command or obligation. Therefore, it is important to explore these verses more deeply through the approach of *asbab al-nuzul* (the circumstances of revelation) to understand the historical context in which they were revealed. This study aims to examine Qur'anic verses on polygamy through their *asbab al-nuzul* to analyze the arguments of both proponents and opponents and to assess their relevance to contemporary life. Using a qualitative method and a literature-based approach, the author provides a descriptive analysis of verses related to polygamy. The study concludes that the Qur'an does not explicitly forbid polygamy; however, the motivations for entering polygamous marriages and their consequences must be carefully considered, just as the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) did in his own practice.

Keywords: *Asbab al-Nuzul, Polygamy, Verses, Qur'an.*

Abstrak

Kajian terhadap ayat-ayat yang berkaitan dengan poligami selalu menjadi topik yang menarik. Hal ini disebabkan oleh kenyataan bahwa poligami tidak hanya disebutkan dalam teks-teks keagamaan, tetapi juga dipraktikkan dalam kehidupan nyata. Perdebatan mengenai tafsir ayat-ayat tentang poligami terus berlanjut, karena baik pendukung maupun penentang poligami memiliki argumen dan justifikasinya masing-masing. Perbedaan pandangan ini muncul karena tidak adanya teks yang secara tegas melarang poligami. Al-Qur'an sendiri tidak menyajikan poligami sebagai perintah atau kewajiban. Oleh karena itu, penting untuk menggali ayat-ayat ini secara lebih mendalam melalui pendekatan *asbab al-nuzul* (latar belakang turunnya wahyu) guna memahami konteks sejarah saat ayat-ayat tersebut diturunkan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji ayat-ayat Al-Qur'an tentang poligami melalui pendekatan *asbab al-nuzul* guna menganalisis argumen dari kedua belah pihak -baik pendukung maupun penentang- dan relevansinya dalam kehidupan kontemporer. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif dan pendekatan kepustakaan, penulis menyajikan analisis deskriptif terhadap ayat-ayat yang berkaitan dengan poligami. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa Al-Qur'an tidak secara eksplisit melarang praktik poligami. Namun, alasan dalam melakukan praktik poligami serta akibat-akibatnya harus dipertimbangkan dengan hati-hati sebagaimana yang dicontohkan oleh Nabi Muhammad SAW dalam praktiknya.

Kata Kunci: *Asbab al-Nuzul, Poligami, Ayat-ayat, Al-Qur'an*

INTRODUCTION

One of the issues that continues to spark debate across generations is the matter of polygamy. As commonly understood, polygamy refers to the practice of a man being married to more than one woman.¹ The controversy surrounding polygamy is not limited to the public; it also exists among academics, including Qur'anic exegetes (*mufasssirim*) themselves. Although references to polygamy appear in the Qur'an, their interpretation remains contested among scholars despite more than fourteen centuries of discussion. Both supporters and critics of polygamy present arguments rooted in their respective perspectives

Among those who support polygamy, it is not necessarily seen as an obligation, but rather as an option to be considered under certain conditions. Quraish Shihab analogizes polygamy to an emergency exit on an airplane, something not used under normal circumstances, but essential in times of crisis. Just as an emergency exit is opened only with great consideration, so too should polygamy be approached with careful judgment.² Conversely, those who oppose polygamy view it as a practice that contradicts the principles of gender justice and one that potentially harms women, both emotionally and socially. They argue that while the Qur'an may permit polygamy, this allowance is contextual and not meant to be applied universally or unconditionally. Opposition to polygamy is often linked to the provision in Surah an-Nisa (4:3), which states that the main condition for practicing polygamy is the ability to uphold justice. However, verse 129 of the same surah acknowledges that humans will never be able to achieve complete justice among their wives, even if they desire to do so.

This verse is often cited by critics of polygamy to argue that the Qur'an implicitly favors monogamy as the ideal form of marriage. A work by Analiansyah titled "*Polygamy and Woman's Rights: An Examination of Divorce Litigation in Sharia Court Rulings Pertaining to Revisions in Indonesian Matrimonial Legislation*" argues that polygamy often catalyzes divorce. Although this issue is recognized within Islamic law, he contends that it has not been adequately incorporated into the framework of Indonesian matrimonial legislation.³ Meanwhile, the practice of polygamy remains widespread despite the evident mismatch between social realities and the Qur'anic norms of justice, a gap that has rarely been examined through modern empirical research. For example, the

¹ Tsoaledi Daniel Thobejane and Takayindisa Flora, "An Exploration of Polygamous Marriages: A Worldview," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 5, no. 27 (2014): 1058–66, doi:10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n27p1058.

² Muhammad Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Mishbah: Pesan, Kesan, Dan Keserasian al-Qur'an*, 6th ed. (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2005).

³ Analiansyah, "Al-Istinbath" 9, no. 2 (2024): 761–86.

study “*Pragmatism of Polygamous Family in Muslim Society*” (2023) highlights pragmatic motives behind polygamy but pays little attention to the gender justice gap within this context.⁴ Thus, the debate between these two perspectives is rooted not only in normative texts but also in varying understandings of the social, historical, and ethical contexts in which these verses were revealed. For this reason, any study of Qur’anic verses concerning polygamy must be conducted comprehensively, considering the background of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), the societal conditions at the time, and its relevance to contemporary issues.

Numerous previous studies on the theme of polygamy have employed a variety of approaches, ranging from analyses centered on the thoughts of specific scholars to multidisciplinary perspectives. One such example is the study of polygamy through the lens of *Maqasid al-Shari‘ah* as proposed by Ibn ‘Ashur. In his framework, three primary reasons justify the permissibility of polygamy: as a solution to the gender imbalance between men and women, to prevent adultery, and as a strategy for increasing the Muslim population. Based on these considerations, the legal derivation (*istinbat*) applied is *al-aslu fi al-amr li al-wujub*, that is, a command generally indicates obligation. However, the limitation of a maximum of four wives in one marriage contract is interpreted through the lens of *li al-takhyir* (a matter of choice), meaning that having four wives is not obligatory; rather, one may marry between one and four women. However, research on polygamy that integrates *asbāb al-nuzūl* with a contemporary hermeneutical approach remains very limited. One notable example is the study by N. Nafisatur Rofiah, in her study *Poligami Perspektif Teori Double Movement Fazlur Rahman*, applies Rahman’s double movement theory to reinterpret Qur’anic verses on polygamy. She argues that although Surah al-Nisā’ (4:3) permitted polygamy in a specific historical context, the underlying moral intent of justice calls for re-evaluation in today’s context.⁵ Additionally, the requirement of justice in polygamous marriages becomes a central factor in legal evaluation. In this regard, the legal reasoning follows the principles of *jalb al-masalih* (promoting benefits) and *dar’ al-mafasid* (preventing harm), under the

⁴ Samani Sam’ani et al., “Pragmatism of Polygamous Family In Muslim Society: Beyond Islamic Law,” *Samarah* 7, no. 1 (2023): 321–40, doi:10.22373/sjhk.v7i1.15874.

⁵ N. Nafisatur Rofiah, “Poligami Perspektif Teori Double Movement Fazlur Rahman,” *MUKADIMAH: Jurnal Pendidikan, Sejarah, Dan Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial* 4, no. 1 (2020): 1–7, doi:10.30743/mkd.v4i1.930.

assumption that the fewer the number of wives, the greater the opportunity to uphold justice—thereby fulfilling the overarching goals of Maqasid al-Shari‘ah.⁶

The study of Qur’anic verses addressing polygamy cannot be separated from an understanding of *asbāb al-nuzūl* (the reasons for revelation). Historically, Qur’anic verses were often revealed in response to specific social issues of the time. In the development of modern interpretation, contextual approaches frequently begin with *asbāb al-nuzūl* as a foundational point, followed by reinterpretation to align with contemporary realities. A prominent example of this is the hermeneutical approach of *double movement* by Fazlur Rahman, who argues that polygamy, though once permitted, may be deemed impermissible (haram) in present times due to vastly different social conditions compared to the context of revelation.⁷

This article specifically focuses on the *asbāb al-nuzūl* of Qur’anic verses that are often used to justify the practice of polygamy. Such a study is essential, especially given the common belief that polygamy is a form of emulating the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This view raises a critical question: what is the actual origin of the legal ruling on polygamy in Islam? To answer this, a deep understanding of the historical and social contexts behind the revelation of polygamy-related verses is necessary. Through a focused analysis of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, this study aims to offer new perspectives that enrich scholarly discourse and contribute meaningfully to the ongoing debate on the legal status of polygamy, particularly in addressing its historical and normative dimensions.

This article offers a distinctive contribution by explicitly integrating *asbāb al-nuzūl* with a contemporary hermeneutical approach, particularly Fazlur Rahman’s theory of *double movement*. This combination enables a more in-depth analysis not only by revisiting the historical context behind the revelation of verses related to polygamy but also by critically reinterpreting them, considering modern social and ethical challenges. The novelty of this article lies in its methodological synthesis, which bridges the gap between classical tafsir tradition and modern reformist thought, an approach that remains largely under explored in existing literature. The article critically deconstructs the common assumption that polygamy is a sunnah that must be emulated simply because it was practiced by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). By tracing the historical context of the revelation of polygamy-related verses through *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the article

⁶ Lira Erlina, “Poligami Dalam Al-Quran Dan Konsep Maqashid Syari‘ah Ibnu ‘Asyur,” *ZAD Al-Mufasssir* 1, no. 1 (2019): 78–102, doi:10.55759/zam.v1i1.4.

⁷ Abd. Rozaq, “Qur’anic Hermeneutics and Its Applications by Fazlur Rahman,” *International Journal of Islamic Social Studies* 1, no. 2 (2023): 115–24, doi:10.62039/ijiss.v1i2.27.

demonstrates that the Prophet's polygamous practice was contextual rather than prescriptive and was more closely tied to social and political responsibilities than to personal license. This approach has rarely been explored in depth in previous research, which often references the Prophet's practice without linking it to the contextual background of the verses.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach employing library research. The primary data consist of Qur'anic verses related to polygamy—specifically Surah al-Nisā' verses 3 and 129—along with tafsir literature discussing their *asbab al-nuzul*. Secondary data were obtained from books, scholarly journals, and writings by Islamic scholars addressing the practice and legal rulings of polygamy. Data analysis is conducted descriptively and analytically by outlining the historical context of the revelation of these verses before examining the social and legal background surrounding them. This approach aims to provide a contextual and relevant interpretation of the verses through a thorough understanding of their *asbab al-nuzul*.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Definition of Polygamy

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, polygamy refers to the custom or practice of having more than one wife or husband at the same time. Etymologically, the term polygamy comes from the Greek words *polus*, meaning many, and *gamos*, meaning marriage; thus, polygamy literally means many marriages. In contemporary society, polygyny is the most common form, especially in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. A report by the *Pew Research Center* (2020) notes that polygamy is legal or tolerated in over 50 countries, with the highest prevalence in sub-Saharan Africa, where about 11% of women live in polygynous unions.⁸

From an Islamic perspective, polygamy refers to marrying more than one spouse within certain prescribed limits. Generally, Islam permits a man to marry up to four women. Although some opinions allow up to nine wives, the stronger and more widely accepted view sets the limit at four, based on the practice of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Polygamy has been recognized and practiced across various civilizations throughout history, including in Europe, America, Arab societies, and Ancient Greece. In Europe, although monogamy became the norm after the spread of Christianity, polygamy existed, especially before

⁸ Stephanie Kramer, "Polygamy Is Rare around the World and Mostly Confined to a Few Regions," 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/12/07/polygamy-is-rare-around-the-world-and-mostly-confined-to-a-few-regions/>.

Christianity's dominance. Germanic kings and Viking tribes in Scandinavia during the pre-Christian era were known to have multiple wives and concubines as symbols of power and social status.⁹ Another example is Charlemagne, the Frankish king and Holy Roman Emperor in the 8th and 9th centuries, who had several wives and many children despite the official ban on polygamy by the Catholic Church.¹⁰ In America, polygamy is most famously associated with the history of the Mormon Church. Joseph Smith, founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, practiced polygamy, believing it was a divine revelation. He had dozens of wives, and this practice was continued by his successors, like Brigham Young, known to have had more than 50 wives, before the U.S. government banned polygamy in the late 19th century.¹¹

Meanwhile, in Ancient Greece, monogamous marriage was the norm in cities such as Athens and Sparta, although sexual relations with concubines and slave women were common, especially among noblemen.¹² Rulers like Philip II of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great had multiple wives, usually for political alliances and consolidating power.¹³ For example, Alexander married Roxana and Stateira II as part of his strategy to integrate Greek and Persian cultures. These examples show that polygamy is not a phenomenon limited to one culture or religion, but rather a practice rooted in various social, political, and cultural motivations throughout world history.

In the Arab context, polygamy was a long-standing practice even before Islam, where men could have many wives without specific limitations.¹⁴ In Isra'iliyat literature -that is, narratives derived from Jewish and Christian traditions incorporated into Islamic exegesis- Prophet Dawood (David) is said to have had numerous wives and concubines. Although the Qur'an does not specify the number of Prophet Dawood's wives, some Isra'iliyat sources mention that he had up to 100 wives and concubines. This is found in classical tafsir such as Tafsir al-Tabari, which quotes sources from the Children of Israel regarding his life. This also parallels accounts in the Old Testament (2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles), describing King David as having many wives and children. However, scholars caution against taking Isra'iliyat stories as absolute legal evidence in Islam. Nevertheless, these accounts illustrate that polygamy existed in prophetic traditions before

⁹ Azar Gat, *The Origins of Military Thought from the Enlightenment to Clausewitz* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1960).

¹¹ Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

¹² Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).

¹³ Peter Green, *Alexander of Macedon, 356–323 B.C.: A Historical Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

¹⁴ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to A History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Islam, including in the Israelite community, often linked to status, power, and social-political needs. The teachings of Islam brought by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) then introduced a maximum limit of four wives with the condition of justice in treating them, representing a significant social reform (Qur'an, Surah An-Nisa 4:3). The Prophet himself married several women within certain social and political contexts, which helped strengthen social networks and provide protection for widows and the poor.

Asbāb al-Nuzūl of the Polygamy Verses from the Perspective of the *Mufasssirin* (Qur'anic Exegetes)

The understanding of *asbāb al-nuzūl* varies among scholars. Imam al-Suyuti defines it as the events occurring at the time when a verse was revealed, which can happen either before or after the revelation. The verse's content is related to these events.¹⁵ Al-Zarqani states that *asbāb al-nuzūl* refers to the causes for the revelation of one or more verses to address or clarify a legal ruling related to those causes.¹⁶ Manna' al-Qattan similarly defines *asbāb al-nuzūl* as the incidents that caused the Qur'an to be revealed concerning those events, which can be a single event or a question posed to the Prophet.¹⁷ Therefore, *asbāb al-nuzūl* can be defined as the reasons behind the revelation of a verse, which can stem from events, responses to questions, or clarifications. The timing can be either before or after the verse was revealed.

1. QS. Al-Nisa' verse 3

وَأِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تُقْسِطُوا فِي الْيَتَامَىٰ فَانكِحُوا مَا طَابَ لَكُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ مَثْنَىٰ وَثُلَّةَ وَرَبْعَ فَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ
أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا فَوَاحِدَةً أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ ذَلِكَ أَذْنَىٰ أَلَّا تَعُولُوا

“And if you fear that you will not be able to deal justly with the orphan women (when you marry them), then marry other women whom you find pleasing: two, three, or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then (marry) only one, or those whom your right hands possess. That is more likely to prevent you from doing injustice.”

The revelation of this verse is closely related to the aftermath of the Battle of Uhud, where around 70 companions of the Prophet were killed. As a result, many wives of the companions became widows and their children became orphans, thus requiring protection and care. Regarding the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (circumstances of revelation) of this

¹⁵ al-Hafiz Jalaluddin Al-Suyuti, *Al-Itqan Fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* (Saudi Arabia: Wizarat al-Shu'un al-Islamiyyah wa al-Awqaf, 2019).

¹⁶ Muhammad 'Abd al-Adhim Al-Zarqani, *Manabil Al-'Irfan Fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* (Lebanon: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi, 1995).

¹⁷ Manna' Khalil al-Qattan, *Mababith Fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* (Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 2004).

verse, one narration is presented by Wahbah al-Zuhaili in his tafsir, where it is mentioned that ‘Urwah ibn Zubair once asked ‘Aisyah RA about the reason for the revelation of this verse. ‘Aisyah explained that this verse was revealed concerning an orphan girl under the care of her guardian. The guardian was attracted to her beauty and wealth and intended to marry her without giving a proper dowry. Al-Tabari’s tafsir also contains a similar narration, where ‘Urwah asked ‘Aisyah about Surah An-Nisa verse 3, and it was explained that the verse referred to an orphan girl under her guardian’s care. The guardian liked her wealth and beauty and wanted to marry her by offering a dowry less than what was usually given to women of similar status. Therefore, they were prohibited from marrying the orphan girl if they could not treat her justly and provide the full dowry. As an alternative, they were encouraged to marry other women if they could not fulfill the rights of the orphan girl fairly.¹⁸

Although these narrations come from different chains of transmission (*sanad*), most scholars consider that the strongest hadith, which is most frequently referenced in discussions of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* of Surah An-Nisā’ verse 3, is the one narrated by ‘Āisha RA:

حَدَّثَنِي أَبُو الطَّاهِرِ، أَحْمَدُ بْنُ عَمْرٍو بْنِ سَرْحٍ وَحَرْمَلَةُ بْنُ يَحْيَى التَّجِيْبِيُّ - قَالَ أَبُو الطَّاهِرِ حَدَّثَنَا وَقَالَ، حَرْمَلَةُ أَخْبَرَنَا - ابْنُ وَهْبٍ، أَخْبَرَنِي يُونُسُ، عَنْ ابْنِ شِهَابٍ، أَخْبَرَنِي عُرْوَةُ بْنُ الزُّبَيْرِ، أَنَّهُ سَأَلَ عَائِشَةَ عَنْ قَوْلِ اللَّهِ، (وَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَنْ لَا تُقْسِطُوا فِي الْيَتَامَى فَانْكِحُوا مَا طَابَ لَكُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ مَثْنَى وَثُلَاثَ وَرُبَاعَ) قَالَتْ يَا ابْنَ أُنْتِي هِيَ الْيَتِيمَةُ تَكُونُ فِي حَجْرٍ وَلِهَا تَشَارِكُهُ فِي مَالِهِ فَيُعْجِبُهُ مَالُهَا وَجَمَالُهَا فَيُرِيدُ وَلِهَا أَنْ يَتَزَوَّجَهَا بِغَيْرِ أَنْ يُقْسِطَ فِي صَدَاقِهَا فَيُعْطِيهَا مِثْلَ مَا يُعْطِيهَا غَيْرُهُ فَهَوَا أَنْ يَنْكِحُوهُنَّ إِلَّا أَنْ يُقْسِطُوا لَهُنَّ وَيَبْلُغُوا بِهِنَّ أَعْلَى سُنَّتِهِنَّ مِنَ الصَّدَاقِ وَأَمَرُوا أَنْ يَنْكِحُوا مَا طَابَ لَهُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ سِوَاهُنَّ . قَالَ عُرْوَةُ قَالَتْ عَائِشَةُ ثُمَّ إِنَّ النَّاسَ اسْتَفْتَوْا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ بَعْدَ هَذِهِ الْآيَةِ فِيهِنَّ فَأَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ (وَيَسْتَفْتُونَكَ فِي النِّسَاءِ قُلِ اللَّهُ يُفْتِيكُمْ فِيهِنَّ وَمَا يُتْلَى عَلَيْكُمْ فِي الْكِتَابِ فِي يَتَامَى النِّسَاءِ اللَّاتِي لَا تُؤْتُونَهُنَّ مَا كُتِبَ لَهُنَّ وَتَرْغَبُونَ أَنْ تَنْكِحُوهُنَّ) قَالَتْ وَالَّذِي ذَكَرَ اللَّهُ تَعَالَى أَنَّهُ يُتْلَى عَلَيْكُمْ فِي الْكِتَابِ الْآيَةُ الْأُولَى الَّتِي قَالَ اللَّهُ فِيهَا (وَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَنْ لَا تُقْسِطُوا فِي الْيَتَامَى فَانْكِحُوا مَا طَابَ لَكُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ). قَالَتْ عَائِشَةُ وَقَوْلُ اللَّهِ فِي الْآيَةِ (وَتَرْغَبُونَ أَنْ تَنْكِحُوهُنَّ) رَغْبَةً أَحَدِكُمْ عَنِ الْيَتِيمَةِ الَّتِي تَكُونُ فِي حَجْرِهِ حِينَ

¹⁸ Abū Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir Al-Tabari, *Jami Al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil Ayi al-Quran* (Cairo: Dar Hijr, 2001).

تَكُونُ قَلِيلَةً الْمَالِ وَالْجَمَالِ فَهُمْ أَنْ يَنْكِحُوا مَا رَغَبُوا فِي مَالِهَا وَجَمَالِهَا مِنْ يَتَامَى النِّسَاءِ إِلَّا بِالْقِسْطِ مِنْ أَجْلِ رَغَبَتِهِمْ عَنْهُمْ¹⁹.

"Narrated to us Abu at-Tabir, Ahmad bin Amru bin Sarh, and Harmalah bin Yahya at-Tujibiyyu -Abu at-Tabir said: Harmalah informed us- Ibn Wahb narrated to us, Yunus informed me, from Ibn Shihab, from Urwah bin Az-Zubair, that he asked Aisha about the words of Allah, "{And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphans (when you marry them), then marry other women that you please: two, three, or four}" (QS. an-Nisa: 3). Aisha said, "O my nephew, the orphan was under the care of her guardian, who divided her inheritance. Then he liked her wealth and beauty, so the guardian wanted to marry her without being just in the dowry; he gave her like he gave other women. Thus, it is forbidden to marry them unless justice is upheld towards them and the dowry reaches the sunnah's peak. And they were instructed to marry women they like other than them." Urwah said, Aisha said, "Then, indeed people asked the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, after this verse was revealed concerning them." So, Allah, the Exalted, revealed, "{And they ask you for a ruling concerning women. Say: Allah gives you a ruling concerning them, and (recall) what is recited to you in the Book (Taurat) concerning women who are not given (maintenance) which has been prescribed for them, while you desire to marry them}" (QS. an-Nisa: 127). He said, 'By Allah, what He mentioned in the Book and was recited to you in the Book is the first verse that Allah said, '{And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphans (when you marry them), then marry other women that you please}. Aisha said, "And Allah's statement in another verse, '{And you desire to marry them}' refers to the desire of one of you towards an orphan girl who is under the care of her guardian when she has little wealth and beauty, so it is forbidden to marry what you desire from her wealth and beauty among the orphan girls unless you are just because of your desire towards her."

2. QS. Al-Nisa' verse 127

وَيَسْتَفْتُونَكَ فِي النِّسَاءِ قُلِ اللَّهُ يُفْتِيكُمْ فِيهِنَّ وَمَا يُنْأَىٰ عَلَيْكُمْ فِي الْكِتَابِ فِي يَتَامَى النِّسَاءِ الَّتِي لَا تُؤْتُونَهُنَّ مَا كُتِبَ لَهُنَّ وَتَرْغَبُونَ أَنْ تَنْكِحُوهُنَّ وَالْمُسْتَضْعِفِينَ مِنَ الْوُلْدِ وَأَنْ تَقُومُوا لِلْيَتَامَى بِالْقِسْطِ وَمَا تَفْعَلُوا مِنْ خَيْرٍ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِهِ عَلِيمًا

"And they ask you for a ruling concerning women. Say, 'Allah gives you a ruling concerning them, and what has been recited to you in the Book concerning the orphan women to whom you do not give what is decreed for them, and [concerning] the children who are weak and that you maintain for orphans their rights in justice. And whatever good you do, indeed, Allah is ever Knowing of it."

According to Imam al-Suyūti, the occasion of the revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*) of this verse relates to a time when a man served as both the guardian and heir of a family that left

¹⁹ Muslim, *Shahih Muslim* (Lebanon: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1991).

behind an orphaned girl under his care. Because this man felt entitled to the orphan girl's inheritance, he consumed some of her inherited wealth, including dates from the trees that belonged to her inheritance. The man desired to marry the orphan girl so that his inheritance would not fall into the hands of another man who might become her husband in the future. Therefore, he kept the orphan girl under his control. Imam al-Suyūti's opinion is based on a hadith narrated by Imam Bukhari from the source of Aisyah (RA). In addition to narrations from Aisyah (RA), al-Suyūti also cites a narration from Jabir. It is related that Jabir had an uncle who had a daughter who was not considered beautiful. After his uncle died, his uncle's inheritance automatically belonged to his daughter. Jabir was reluctant both to marry her and to arrange her marriage because he feared that his uncle's inheritance would go to the husband who married the daughter. Jabir then came to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to ask about this issue, and subsequently, verse 127 of Surah An-Nisa was revealed.²⁰

Imam al-Wāḥidī, in his work, explains the asbāb al-nuzūl of Surah An-Nisa, verse 127, referring to narrations from Aisyah (RA). It is narrated that several people came to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) seeking legal guidance regarding the practice of withholding the wealth of orphan girls under their care, especially if the girl was not physically attractive. In response to their questions, this verse was revealed. Al-Wāḥidī also notes that Aisyah (RA) emphasized the importance of justice and fairness, warning against marrying orphan girls solely because of their beauty or wealth. According to her, guardians should treat all orphan girls equally and without discrimination. Furthermore, al-Wāḥidī highlights the connection (munāsabah) between this verse and Surah An-Nisa, verse 3, which states that if one fears they cannot be just to orphan girls, then they should marry other women.²¹

Ibn Kathīr also provides an explanation regarding the background of this verse's revelation. He quotes narrations from Aisyah (RA) through the chain of transmission of Ibn Abī Ḥātim, stating that the companions approached the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to seek a ruling. In response, Allah revealed Surah An-Nisa, verse 127, which contains the laws concerning women and orphans as set forth in His Book. Aisyah further explained that the ruling mentioned in this verse refers to Surah An-Nisa, verse 3. The phrase **وَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تُقْسِطُوا** relates to the verse "if you fear you will not deal justly with the orphan women, then marry other women of your choice" from Surah An-Nisa (4:3).

²⁰ Jalal al-Din al-Suyuthi, *Lubab Al-Nuqul Fi Asbab al-Nuzul* (Beirut: Kutub al-Thaqafiyah, 2002).

²¹ Abi al-Hasan 'Ali ibn Ahmad al-Wahidi al-Naisābūrī, *Asbab Al-Nuzul* (Dammām: Dār al- Aslah, 1992).

Aisyah (RA) explained this by quoting a part of Surah An-Nisa, verse 127: "and you desire to marry them not" (وَتَرْتَابُونَ أَنْ تَنْكِحُوهُنَّ). This refers to the unwillingness of some men to marry orphan girls under their guardianship due to their lack of beauty or wealth. Therefore, marrying orphan girls solely because of their beauty or wealth is prohibited unless the man is just, because the rejection is often due to the orphan girls having little wealth and being less attractive. Ibn Kathir summarized that if someone has an orphan girl under his care and wishes to marry her, Allah commands that the dowry be given to her as with other women. Sometimes, the guardian does not wish to marry the orphan girl because of her limited wealth or lack of beauty. Allah therefore forbids the guardian from preventing or holding back the orphan girl from being married by others because the guardian does not want the orphan's wealth to merge with the wealth of her husband.²² The hadith text that serves as the main reference for the asbāb al-nuzūl (reason for revelation) of this verse is narrated from Aisyah (RA):

حَدَّثَنَا ابْنُ سَلَامٍ، أَخْبَرَنَا أَبُو مُعَاوِيَةَ، حَدَّثَنَا هِشَامٌ، عَنْ أَبِيهِ، عَنْ عَائِشَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهَا، فِي قَوْلِهِ (وَيَسْتَفْتُونَكَ فِي النِّسَاءِ قُلِ اللَّهُ يُفْتِيكُمْ فِيهِنَّ) إِلَى آخِرِ الْآيَةِ، قَالَتْ هِيَ الْيَتِيمَةُ تَكُونُ فِي حَبْرِ الرَّجُلِ، فَذُ شَرَكَّتُهُ فِي مَالِهِ، فَيَرْغَبُ عَنْهَا أَنْ يَتَزَوَّجَهَا، وَيَكْرَهُ أَنْ يُزَوَّجَهَا غَيْرَهُ، فَيَدْخُلُ عَلَيْهِ فِي مَالِهِ، فَيَحْبِسُهَا، فَتَهَا هُمُ اللَّهُ عَنْ ذَلِكَ.²³

"Narrated to us by Ibn Salam, who informed us that Abu Mu'awiyah narrated to us, from Hisham, from his father, from Aisyah (may Allah be pleased with her): Regarding the saying of Allah, 'And they seek your legal instruction concerning women. Say: Allah gives you instruction about them...' (Surah An-Nisa: 127) until the end of the verse, She (Aisyah) said: 'It refers to the orphan girl who is under the guardianship of a man, and she shares in his property. The man wishes to marry her but dislikes the idea of her marrying someone else. So he takes from her wealth and then withholds her (from marriage). Allah forbade them from such behavior.'"

²² Abi Fida Isma'il ibn Umar ibn al-Kathir, *Tafsir Al-Qur'an al-Adhim* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1998).

²³ Muhammad ibn Ismail ibn Ibrahim ibn al-Mugirah al-Jūfi Al-Bukhari, *Shahih Bukhari* (Kairo: Dar al-Tasil, 2012).

3. QS. Al-Nisa' Verse 129

وَلَنْ تَسْتَطِيعُوا أَنْ تَعْدِلُوا بَيْنَ النِّسَاءِ وَلَوْ حَرَصْتُمْ فَلَا تَمِيلُوا كُلَّ الْمِيلِ فَتَدْرُوهَا كَالْمُعَلَّقَةِ ، وَإِنْ تُصْلِحُوا وَتَتَّقُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا

“And you will never be able to be just between wives, even if you strive to do so. So do not incline completely [toward one] and leave another hanging. And if you make amends and fear Allah, then indeed, Allah is Ever Forgiving and Most Merciful.” (QS. An-Nisa’: 129)

The asbāb al-nuzūl (background of revelation) for this verse is narrated by Imam Ibn Kathir, based on a hadith of Aisyah RA recorded by Imam Bukhari. Aisyah said that there was a man who had an elderly wife who could no longer bear children. He intended to divorce her, but the woman said, *“I give up my turn (with you) for your sake.* Ibn Kathir adds that this verse was also revealed concerning the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who accepted the transfer of nightly turn rights from his elderly wife, Saudah bint Zum‘ah, to his younger wife, Aisyah RA.²⁴ In another narration, it is told that it was Saudah herself who willingly gave up her turn with the Prophet to Aisyah. In response to her request, the Prophet (PBUH) agreed to spend those nights with Aisyah instead. This is supported by the hadith which says:

حَدَّثَنَا زُهَيْرُ بْنُ حَرْبٍ، حَدَّثَنَا جَرِيرٌ، عَنْ هِشَامِ بْنِ عُرْوَةَ، عَنْ أَبِيهِ، عَنْ عَائِشَةَ، قَالَتْ مَا رَأَيْتُ امْرَأَةً أَحَبَّ إِلَيَّ أَنْ أَكُونَ فِي مَسَاحِلِهَا مِنْ سَوْدَةَ بِنْتِ زَمْعَةَ مِنْ امْرَأَةٍ فِيهَا حِدَّةٌ قَالَتْ فَلَمَّا كَبُرَتْ جَعَلْتُ يَوْمَهَا مِنْ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ لِعَائِشَةَ قَالَتْ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ قَدْ جَعَلْتُ يَوْمِي مِنْكَ لِعَائِشَةَ فَكَانَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَقْسِمُ لِعَائِشَةَ يَوْمَيْنِ يَوْمَهَا وَيَوْمَ سَوْدَةَ.²⁵

“Zubair bin Harb narrated to us, Jarir narrated to us from Hisham bin Urwah, from his father, from Aisyah, who said: ‘I have never seen any woman whom I would love to be in her place more than Saudah bint Zam‘ah, who had traits like other women.’ Aisyah said: ‘When Saudah grew older, she gave up her day with the Prophet to Aisyah.’ Aisyah continued: ‘O Messenger of Allah, I have given up my turn with you to Aisyah.’ So the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him) would divide his time: one day for Aisyah and one day for Saudah.”

This narration relates to another report connected to Surah An-Nisā’ (4:129), where the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) made every effort to treat his wives justly. This narration was reported by Aisyah (RA):

²⁴ ibn al-Kathir, *Tafsir Al-Qur’an al-Adhim*.

²⁵ Muslim, *Shahih Muslim*.

حَدَّثَنَا مُوسَى بْنُ إِسْمَاعِيلَ، حَدَّثَنَا حَمَّادٌ، عَنْ أَيُّوبَ، عَنْ أَبِي قَلَابَةَ، عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ يَزِيدَ
الْخَطْمِيِّ، عَنْ عَائِشَةَ، قَالَتْ كَانَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَقْسِمُ فَيَعْدِلُ وَيَقُولُ اللَّهُمَّ هَذَا
قَسَمِي فِيمَا أَمْلِكُ فَلَا تَلْمَنِي فِيمَا تَمْلِكُ وَلَا أَمْلِكُ يَغْنِي الْقَلْبَ²⁶.

“Narrated by Musa bin Isma’il, who said: Hammad narrated to us, from Ayyub, from Abu Qilabah, from Abdullah bin Yazid al-Khatmi, from Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her), who said: ‘The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him) used to divide the spoils of war justly, and then he would say: ‘O Allah, this is my division with regard to what I possess, so do not blame me concerning what You possess and I do not.’ What he meant was the heart.”

The Analysis of the Asbāb al-Nuzūl Theory Concerning Polygamy Verses

As is well known, *asbāb al-nuzūl* refers to the events or circumstances that serve as the backdrop for the revelation of specific verses of the Qur’an. In many cases, *asbāb al-nuzūl* is understood as a response to questions or issues that required an answer from Allah SWT through revelation. The events in question may have occurred either before or after the verse was revealed. Based on this understanding, the writer aims to study and analyze the *asbāb al-nuzūl* of the polygamy-related verses discussed earlier, to better understand the limitations and principles of polygamy as regulated in the Qur’an.

One of the key verses examined is Surah An-Nisa (4): 3. The context of this verse’s revelation is closely tied to the aftermath of the Battle of Uhud, in which many Muslim men were martyred, leaving behind wives and orphaned daughters. These orphan girls inherited the property of their deceased fathers and were placed under the guardianship of male relatives. Some of these guardians were inclined to marry the orphan girls due to their beauty and wealth, but without offering them a fair dowry. This behavior was condemned by Allah SWT through Surah An-Nisa (4): 3, as it reflected injustice. Even though the orphans were under their guardianship, they still had the right to receive a fair dowry in marriage.²⁷ The verse emphasizes that if one cannot act justly in a polygamous marriage, it is better to marry only one woman.²⁸

The writer believes that the context behind the revelation of Surah An-Nisa (4): 3 indicates that this verse was not intended as a command to practice polygamy. Rather, it serves as a reprimand against unjust practices in marriage. The injustice mentioned here is not limited to the marriage itself but also includes the pre-marital stage. This is illustrated in a narration from Aisha

²⁶ Abu Dawud Sulaiman Ibn al-Ash’ath al-Sijistani Al-Azdiy, *Sunan Abi Dawud* (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 1997).

²⁷ al-Wahidi al-Naisābūri, *Asbab Al-Nuzul*.

²⁸ Al-Tabari, *Jami Al-Bayan ‘an Ta’wil Ayi al-Quran*.

(RA), which explains that guardians of orphan girls would often want to marry them due to their beauty and wealth, yet were reluctant to provide the proper dowry. However, when marrying other women, they would offer fair dowries. This discrepancy in treatment is deemed unjust, and the verse was revealed to correct such behavior and to affirm the protection of the rights and dignity of women—especially orphans.

Meanwhile, Surah An-Nisa (4): 127 has a similar background, as explained by several Qur'anic commentators. This verse was revealed in response to a situation where the guardian of a beautiful and wealthy orphan girl refused to marry her off to others, unwilling to part with her wealth, yet also did not intend to marry her himself.²⁹ In another case, a companion named Jabir was the guardian of his deceased uncle's daughter. The girl was not physically attractive, though she inherited wealth from her father. Jabir did not want to marry her, nor did he want anyone else to marry her, as he was unwilling to let her wealth fall into the hands of another man. When Jabir brought this issue to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), Surah An-Nisa (4): 127 was revealed in response. Thus, both verses stress justice and the protection of orphan girls, rather than promoting polygamy as a general practice.

In the writer's view, when seen through the lens of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the primary emphasis of the verse is on the command to treat women justly, not on advocating polygamy as the main topic. In fact, the verse contains a strong prohibition against marrying women unjustly, especially by withholding their rightful dowries. Furthermore, Allah also forbids guardians from preventing their orphaned wards from marrying simply to retain control over their inheritance.³⁰

When related to the concept of polygamy -marrying more than one woman- this verse becomes highly relevant as an early warning to men considering polygamy. As explained by al-Wāḥidī through the narration of Aisha (RA), a person should not marry solely out of desire for beauty or wealth.³¹ In this regard, the writer agrees that both monogamy and polygamy should not be driven by base desires alone. Given the strong link between Surah An-Nisa (4): 127 and verse 3, the writer concludes that if a man fears he cannot act justly, then it is better for him to marry only one woman.³² The connection between these two verses is further emphasized in Aisha's narration, and based on the context of revelation, it can be understood that the purpose of polygamy is not the gratification of personal desire, but rather it must be grounded in the principle of justice.

²⁹ ibn al-Kathir, *Tafsir Al-Qur'an al-Adhim*.

³⁰ al-Wahidi al-Naisābūri, *Asbab Al-Nuzul*.

³¹ Ibid.

³² ibn al-Kathir, *Tafsir Al-Qur'an al-Adhim*.

As for Surah An-Nisa (4): 129, its context relates to the story of a man who had an elderly wife he was no longer attracted to and planned to divorce her. However, the aging wife pleaded not to be divorced and was willing to forgo her turn (for companionship or support) in favor of the other wives. In another narration, this verse was revealed concerning the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his two wives: Saudah bint Zam'ah, who was older, and Aisha (RA), who was younger. Saudah gave her turn to Aisha, and following this incident, Surah An-Nisa (4): 129 was revealed to highlight the importance of fairness among wives in a polygamous marriage.

Based on its *asbab al-nuzul*, the writer concludes that polygamy is not an easy matter to undertake. Even the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), the most just of men, acknowledged that he could not be entirely equitable among his wives. Therefore, Allah revealed a verse as a warning and reminder of the importance of justice in a polygamous household. So, what then of ordinary people, who are far from the Prophet's level of perfection? The Qur'an does not explicitly forbid polygamy, nor does it make it obligatory as a binding aspect of Islamic law. Considering the verse's context, it can be concluded that if a person chooses to pursue polygamy, he must accept the heavy responsibility of being just—without discriminating based on the conditions or circumstances of each of his wives.

CONCLUSION

Based on an in-depth examination of the *asbab al-nuzul* (occasions of revelation) of the Qur'anic verses related to polygamy, there is no indication—either explicit or implicit—of any command that obliges or promotes the practice of polygamy. On the contrary, these verses serve primarily as forms of protection and honor for women. For instance, when viewed in light of its historical context, Surah An-Nisa (4): 3 reveals that orphaned girls under the guardianship of male relatives were often treated unfairly, sometimes even regarded as having little value, which led some guardians to believe they were not obliged to provide them with a proper dowry upon marriage. This verse was thus revealed to affirm that marriage must be conducted justly, proportionately, and with full respect for women as individuals with rights.

Similarly, Surah An-Nisa (4): 127 was revealed in response to the phenomenon of guardians seeking to control the wealth of the orphan girls under their care, without any sincere intention of treating them fairly or marrying them for noble reasons. In some cases, less attractive orphan girls were denied their rights, while the more beautiful ones were desired purely for their wealth. Therefore, this verse emphasizes the importance of justice as a non-negotiable requirement in

marriage, including in polygamous relationships. If the motive behind such marriage is purely driven by lust or material gain, then the act contradicts the principle of justice that the verse upholds.

Finally, Surah An-Nisa (4): 129 reinforces the preceding messages by stressing that anyone who chooses to engage in polygamy must be prepared to bear a significant responsibility: the obligation to act justly in all aspects—whether in providing financial support, attention, or affection. Even the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), the ultimate role model in justice, acknowledged the difficulty of maintaining equal emotional treatment among his wives and prayed to Allah SWT for the ability to be just. This underscores that polygamy is not merely a right, but a grave responsibility requiring both moral and spiritual readiness.

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