



Abdullah Saeed's Interpretation of the Verses "Death and Ascension" of Prophet Isa AS in the Quran

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ABSTRACT

Secara khusus, isu-isu yang terkait dengan Nabi Isa dibahas dalam 15 surah dan 93 ayat dalam Al-Qur'an. Nama Nabi Isa disebutkan sebanyak 25 kali dalam Al-Qur'an, tersebar di lima belas surah yang berbeda. Sementara itu, istilah "Al-Masih" disebutkan 9 kali, dengan pembahasan tentang kematian, dan penyaliban secara langsung dijelaskan hanya dalam satu ayat, yaitu QS. An-Nisa ayat 157-158. Ayat-ayat tersebut sering diartikan oleh umat Islam sebagai dasar keyakinan bahwa Nabi Isa AS tidak wafat. Pandangan ini berbeda secara teologis dengan keyakinan umat Kristiani yang meyakini bahwa Yesus disalib dan meninggal untuk menebus dosa umat manusia. Pemahaman teks Al-Qur'an ini lebih lanjut dieksplorasi melalui penafsiran para Mufassir, dengan harapan dapat menghasilkan interpretasi terbaik dari Abdullah Saeed dan pemahaman yang lebih utuh terhadap teks tersebut. Jenis penelitian yang dilakukan adalah penelitian pustaka, di mana peneliti fokus pada pengumpulan data dan informasi melalui berbagai sumber di perpustakaan, termasuk buku-buku, jurnal, naskah, catatan, kisah sejarah, dan dokumen-dokumen. Abdullah Saeed mengakui bahwa Al-Qur'an adalah wahyu Tuhan yang diturunkan kepada Muhammad, dan ia yakin bahwa Al-Qur'an yang ada saat ini adalah kitab suci asli. Namun, Saeed juga mencatat kekhawatiran terhadap banyaknya penafsiran tekstual yang cenderung berhenti pada penelusuran literal saja. Melalui analisis ini, Saeed berupaya menunjukkan kompleksitas makna Al-Qur'an yang tidak dapat diatasi hanya dengan penelusuran literatur semata. Oleh karena itu, dalam konteks globalisasi saat ini, ia menganjurkan pendekatan kontekstual untuk menemukan makna sejati dari teks tersebut.

ABSTRAK

Specifically, issues related to Prophet Isa are discussed in 15 surahs and 93 verses in the Quran. The name of Prophet Isa is mentioned 25 times in the Quran, scattered across fifteen different surahs. Meanwhile, the term "Al-Masih" is mentioned 9 times, with a direct discussion of death and crucifixion explained only in one verse, namely QS. An-Nisa verses 157-158. These verses are often interpreted by Muslims as the basis for the belief that Prophet Isa did not die. This view differs theologically from the Christian belief that Jesus was crucified and died to redeem the sins of humanity. The understanding of the Quranic text is further explored through the interpretations of Mufassirin, with the hope of producing the best interpretation from Abdullah Saeed and a more comprehensive understanding of the text. The type of research conducted is literature research, where the researcher focuses on collecting data and information from various sources in the library, including books, journals, manuscripts, notes, historical stories, and documents. Abdullah Saeed acknowledges that the Quran is the revelation of God sent to Muhammad, and he believes that the Quran existing today is the original holy book. However, Saeed also notes concerns about the numerous textual interpretations that tend to stop at literal exploration alone. Through this analysis, Saeed seeks to show the complexity of the meaning of the Quran that cannot be overcome by mere

literature exploration. Therefore, in the current era of globalization, he advocates a contextual approach to find the true meaning of the text.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Quran bestows various honors upon Isa (Jesus) that surpass those given to figures of the past. Isa is presented as a “clear sign” and a symbol of “love,” a “witness,” and an “exemplar.” He is referred to by his own name, Jesus (Isa), and is bestowed with the titles Al-Masih (the Christ) and Son of Maryam. Isa is also mentioned as a Messenger or envoy of Allah, a Prophet, a servant, the Word, and the Holy Spirit. The Quran delves into various aspects of Isa’s life, including the joyful news conveyed by the angel Jibril to Maryam, his birth, death, and ascension. Specifically, events related to Isa are discussed in 15 surahs and 93 ayahs (Parrinder, 2022).

The name of Prophet Isa is mentioned 25 times in the Quran, scattered across fifteen different surahs. Meanwhile, the title Al-Masih is mentioned 9 times in the Quran, with one ayah directly addressing the process of death and the denial of crucifixion (Lawson, 2014). Indirect references to this are found in another ayah, namely Q.S. An-Nisa verses 157-158. The understanding of Muslims regarding these verses serves as the basis for their theological belief that Prophet Isa did not die but was raised, avoiding crucifixion (Saeed, 2015, p. 213).

Interestingly, this theological belief of Muslims differs from the Christian perspective, which holds that Jesus was crucified and died on the cross for the redemption of all humanity. However, it should be noted that the Islamic belief is not entirely derived from the most important Islamic text, the Quran. In other words, some aspects of the initial statement in this research still lack a basis in the Quran.

The first part of this theological belief states that Prophet Isa did not die. However, based on the mentioned ayah, this foundation seems less accurate (Yahya, 2016). The ayah specifically states, “They (the Jews) did not kill him (Prophet Isa).” This statement cannot be the basis for concluding that Prophet Isa did not die. Therefore, someone who states that “Prophet Isa died, but not because he was killed by the Jews” cannot be judged as contradicting this Quranic ayah. The second part states that Prophet Isa was raised, seemingly based on the second mentioned ayah (Schumann, 2013). However, the ayah does not explicitly state whether only the soul, only the body, or the soul-body of Prophet Isa was raised to His presence. The third part states that Prophet Isa was not crucified, supported by the two aforementioned ayahs. Nevertheless, in linguistic debates about this ayah, some figures interpret “salabu” as dying on the cross. Using this understanding, one can state the possibility that Prophet Isa was crucified but did not die.

The process of translating this message into the present requires extensive knowledge of the original macro context and the contemporary macro context. Awareness of these contexts enables interpreters to develop an understanding of similarities and differences between the 7th-century context and the 21st-century context (Qutb, 1996). Contextual understanding of the Quran involves moving back and forth between these contexts throughout the interpretation process. Awareness of the context of Quranic revelation in the 7th century, along with an understanding of the contemporary 21st-century context, allows for interpretations of the Quranic texts that are more appropriate and meaningful, considering the limitations in reconstructing meaning in accordance with the rules (Akrim, 2021).

This article attempts to provide the best interpretation of Abdullah Saeed's work and to present a comprehensive understanding of it. The author emphasizes that while there are writings related to this theme, none specifically explain the matters of the death and ascension of Isa. The methods and steps used in this writing differ from other writings, especially in the use of classical to contemporary tafsir books to observe the development of interpretation and achieve a concrete and comprehensive understanding. By involving various tafsir books, this article seeks to reach the core issue, namely explaining the connection of values of tolerance among religious communities.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research belongs to the category of literature review, focusing on the utilization of data and information obtained from various materials available in the library, such as books, journals, manuscripts, notes, historical narratives, documents, and so forth (Kartini, 1996). The research involves activities such as writing, editing, clarifying, reducing, and presenting data related to the research object. The primary focus of this research is directed towards various forms of historical documents that align with the concept advocated by Abdullah Saeed, supplemented by linguistic critical analysis in specific sections (Sugiyono, 2008).

The primary data or sources in this research originate from the Quran, employing a contextual approach to the verses related to the death and ascension of Prophet Isa. Meanwhile, secondary data is derived from various literature sources closely related to the research theme. Tafsir books utilized as sources include Al-Tabari with his work *Jami' al-Bayan* (volume 9), Fakhrudin Al-Razi with *Mafatih al-Ghayb* (volume 11), and Zamakhsary with *Al-Kasysaf*. Additionally, historical literature is also used to support and complement the research process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Biography of Abdullah Saeed

Abdullah Saeed is a Professor of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Melbourne, Australia (Rahman, 1982). He was born in the Maldives and is of Omani Arab descent, with roots in the Maldivian islands. In 1977, Saeed relocated to Saudi Arabia to pursue his education. During his time there, he studied Arabic and attended various formal educational institutions, including the Basic Arabic Language Institute (1977-1979), the Intermediate Arabic Language Institute (1979-1982), and the Saudi Arabian Islamic University in Madinah (1982-1986). The following year, Saeed left Saudi Arabia to continue his studies in Australia, where he obtained several academic degrees and remains actively engaged as a lecturer at one of the world's leading universities (Saeed, 2005).

Saeed began his academic career as a young lecturer in the Department of Asian Languages and Anthropology, progressing to the positions of Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor, and ultimately Professor in the field of Arab and Islamic Studies. Additionally, he was elected as a member of the *Australian Academy of Humanities* (Deedat, 1999).

As an academican, Saeed is recognized for his diligence and broad insights. His research focuses on the negotiation of texts and contexts, *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and interpretation, and his support for the reform of Islamic thought. His publications cover issues such as Islam and Human Rights, the reform of Islamic law, the Muslim community in Australia, Islam and religious freedom, and Quranic hermeneutics (Saeed, 2015).

Saeed actively participates in interfaith dialogue, delivering lectures and short courses on Islam and Islamic civilization for government, business, organizations, and communities. He is involved in various national and international institutions and is well-known in international forums addressing the Quran and Islamic studies.

3.2. Abdullah Saeed's Perspective on the Verses "Death and Ascension" of Prophet Isa AS in the Quran

وَقَوْلِهِمْ إِنَّا قَتَلْنَا الْمَسِيحَ عِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ وَمَا قَتَلُوهُ وَمَا صَلَّبُوهُ وَلَٰكِنْ شُبِّهَ لَهُمْ وَإِنَّ الَّذِينَ اخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ لَفِي شَكٍّ مِّنْهُ مَا لَهُمْ بِهِ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِلَّا اتِّبَاعَ الظَّنِّ وَمَا قَتَلُوهُ يَقِينًا (157) بَلْ رَفَعَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَيْهِ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا (158)

"And [for] their saying, 'Indeed, we have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah.' And they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but [another] was made to resemble him to them. And indeed, those who differ over it are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it except the following of assumption. And they did not kill him, for certain. Rather, Allah raised him to Himself. And Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise."

The two verses are often understood by Muslims as the theological basis for their belief that Prophet Isa (Jesus) did not die (Saeed, 2015, p. 213). Instead, his soul-body was raised to the presence of God, and therefore, he was not crucified. This theological belief significantly differs from the Christian perspective, which holds that Jesus was crucified and died on the cross to redeem the sins of humanity. Interestingly, the Islamic belief is not entirely based on the most important Islamic text, the Quran. In other words, some aspects of the first statement in this study have not found their basis in the Quran.

The first part of this theological belief asserts that Prophet Isa did not die. However, based on the verse, this assertion seems inaccurate. More precisely, the verse states, "And [for] their saying, 'Indeed, we have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah.' And they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him." This

statement cannot be the basis for concluding that Prophet Isa did not die. Therefore, someone stating that 'Prophet Isa died, but not by the hands of the Jews' cannot be judged as contradicting this Quranic verse (Saeed, 2006).

The second part states that Prophet Isa was raised soul-body to the presence of God, based on the second mentioned verse. However, the verse does not explicitly mention whether only the soul, only the body, or the soul-body of Prophet Isa was raised to the presence of God (Syadili, 1993).

The third part states that Prophet Isa was not the one crucified, supported by the two preceding verses. Nevertheless, in linguistic debates on this verse, some figures interpret "crucifixion" as dying on the cross. If using this understanding, one can state the possibility that Prophet Isa was crucified but did not die.

Furthermore, looking at it diachronically (development over time), the comprehensive understanding of these three aspects of the theological belief did not emerge in the first generation of Islam. This study does not aim to argue for the correctness of Muslim or Christian beliefs or defend the Christian belief but seeks to trace the footsteps of the Islamic theological belief about Isa, which intersects with the Christian perspective (Saeed, 2013).

Seen in a broader context, these verses reflect the Quran's stance towards the Jews at that time. During that period, there were political tensions and religious strife between the early Muslim community and the Jews (Ridho & Muhammad, 1947). The Quran's criticism of some Jewish figures needs to be understood in that context. The Quran criticizes what is perceived as "disloyalty" in Jewish history, such as the killing of their prophets without just cause, slandering Maryam (Mother of Isa) by degrading her honor, and boasting that they had killed Prophet Isa (Saeed, 2017).

This understanding should be contextualized, meaning that it should be contextualized. The question is not 'how can the theological belief about Prophet Isa be extracted from these verses as part of the Quran's attitude towards the Jews?' but 'what is the Quran's attitude towards followers of other religions when it provides an example of its attitude towards the Jews regarding Prophet Isa?' as a form of Muslim awareness that they live in the modern era (Qalyubi, 2009).

A characteristic of the modern era is globalization, where people can interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds, including religions (Saeed, n.d.). In this context, the boundaries and differences among people should not be obstacles to interaction (Qalyubi, 1997). The need to live together and coexist harmoniously through shared understanding is the dream and goal of the present era. Respecting diversity in traditions and appreciating differences is a necessity for humans in this context. People in the modern era should not exaggerate differences that ultimately lead to political tension and religious strife (Saeed, 2005).

A shift towards a broader understanding of interfaith relations must be built through cooperation and dialogue among followers of various religions (Saeed, 2013). This is reflected in statements by several prominent religious leaders regarding the importance of interfaith understanding. Theologians and religious leaders, both from Christianity and Islam, often engage in various debates and discussions in a friendly atmosphere through limited or open seminars. In the pre-modern era, at least in the context of interfaith understanding, humans were more focused on displaying their own identity, ultimately heightening differences and sparking hostilities (Al-Thabari, 1994).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Many consider that this discussion is no longer relevant and important because the concept of crucifixion mentioned above is not explicitly present in the Quran. References to crucifixion only emerge as a response to the claims of the Jews, and the Quran does not explicitly reject the death or crucifixion of Isa, as discussed earlier. This is more based on the claims of the Jews who stated that they had killed Isa.

Through this discussion, Saeed seeks to demonstrate that meaning is not something simple and cannot be adequately addressed through mere literature exploration. Therefore, in the current era of globalization, the use of a contextual approach is considered appropriate and wise to uncover the true meaning. Exploring the meaning of a text essentially can only reach the realm of estimation or conjecture, and therefore, it is naive to consider and enforce one interpretation as the only correct interpretation. According to Saeed, multi-understanding or multi-interpretation will not weaken or damage the sanctity of the holy scriptures. On the contrary, it shows that the essence of the holy scriptures can be fully and correctly found in various temporal and spatial contexts.

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