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The Sunnah as Determinative over the Qur'ān: An Evaluation of Sūrah al-Nisā 4:34

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the decisive role of the Sunnah in the practical interpretation of Qur'ānic verses through the principle of "al-Sunnah qāḍiyatun ʿalā al-Kitāb" (the Sunnah is determinative with respect to the Qur'ān), a principle that has formed the basis of profound discussions within the Islamic methodological tradition, with particular focus on Qur'ān 4:34. The research argues that the act of "striking a woman" (*darb*) mentioned in the verse is directly connected to the socio-cultural context of the revelation period. Within this framework, it is maintained that the verse should be understood not as a direct legitimization of prevailing customary practices, but rather as a gradual and progressive regulatory measure aimed at protecting women's legal and human rights by restricting such practices. The study first investigates the nature of the Sunnah and the epistemological foundations of the Qur'ān–Sunnah relationship. It then examines the historical background of the principle "al-Sunnah qāḍiyatun ʿalā al-Kitāb," formulated by Yaḥyā b. Abī Kathīr (d. 129/746). Methodologically, a comparative literature analysis was conducted through the classical exegetical tradition, beginning with the earliest tafsīr texts. In addition, the Prophet's practical implementation and moral stance regarding the issue were evaluated through a text-centered content analysis. The findings reveal that the Prophet's practical example functioned as the most fundamental interpretive element, narrowing the scope of the physical intervention mentioned in the verse and seeking to render it effectively inoperative. In this regard, the article argues that the issue of physical intervention in Qur'ān 4:34 cannot be reduced to a purely literal reading; rather, no reasonable conclusion can be reached without taking into account the normative authority, practical model, and moral vision of the Prophetic Sunnah. By reassessing both classical and contemporary debates concerning the interpretation of Qur'ān 4:34 through the lens of the principle "al-Sunnah qāḍiyatun ʿalā al-Kitāb", the study offers an original contribution to the tafsīr literature. Ultimately, it demonstrates, through a concrete case study, the determining role of the Prophetic model in the practical manifestation of Qur'ānic verses and in identifying the divine intent. In doing so, it provides a holistic perspective on methodological discussions concerning the relationship between the Qur'ān and the Sunnah.

Keywords: Tafsīr; Ḥadīth; Qur'ān; Context; Nushūz; Darb; the determinative role of the Sunnah

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1. Introduction

The Qur'ān, as the founding text of the Islamic intellectual tradition, is the final divine discourse that, according to Muslims, culminated through a process of revelation to

the Prophet Muhammad over approximately twenty-three years. Possessing the quality of the 'Final Message' from an ontological perspective, this revelation embodies universal principles that address the fundamental needs of humanity throughout the historical process. In this context, from the period of its revelation to the present day, the Qur'ān has maintained its status as the primary reference source for Islamic life; with its dynamic structure, it continues to constitute the essential epistemological ground for future social and individual orientations.

In the milieu of its revelation, the Qur'ān was transformed into practice by finding concrete areas of application in the personal, familial, and social life of the Prophet Muhammad. This practical process, conceptualized in the Islamic intellectual tradition as the 'manifestation of revelation in the Prophetic life,' constitutes the essence of the Sunnah. In this respect, the Sunnah is not a mere compendium of narrations; rather, it is a religious praxis shaped under the guidance of revelation and translating its intent into life. Viewed from this perspective, the Qur'ān and the Sunnah should be regarded as two fundamental and inseparable elements that complement one another.

This study aims to examine how the Sunnah's role as an adjudicative and determinative authority over the Qur'ān provides a framework for interpreting Qur'ānic verses, with particular reference to verse 34 of Surah al-Nisā. The fundamental thesis of the article is that the element defining the horizon of meaning and the boundaries of application for the expression 'striking' mentioned in said verse is not the purely literal content of the verse, but rather the Prophet's normative practice that specified the framework of this ruling. Accordingly, the research will first address the nature of the Sunnah and the unity of the Qur'ān-Sunnah, analyzing the historical background of the principle attributed to Yahyā b. Abī Kathīr. Subsequently, the study will focus on the lexical and technical meanings of the concepts and expressions such as qawwām, nushūz, and darb mentioned in the verse, as well as on the exegesis of the verse itself; it will further examine how the Sunnah detached the relevant act (وَاضْرِبُوهُنَّ) from the phenomenon of physical violence and situated it within a legal framework.

Studies in the literature on the authority of the Sunnah over the Qur'ān have generally been shaped around the theories of 'abrogation' (naskh) and 'clarification' (bayān) (M. b. I. Shāfiī 1938, pp. 25–36, 113, 137). However, the manner in which this authority shaped the meaning of the term in a socio-politically sensitive context such as the "striking" mentioned in Qur'ān 4:34 has largely been addressed only through juristic discussions concerning when, how, to what extent, and by what means such an act may be carried out. (Tabarī 2001, vol. 3, p. 435; Zamakhsharī 1987, vol. 1, p. 507; al-Qurtubī 1964, vol. 5, p. 173; Sha'rāwī 1997, vol. 4, p. 2202; Ibn Atiyya 2002, vol. 2, pp. 47–48; Baydāwī 1998, vol. 2, p. 73; Khatīb al-Shirbīnī 1869, vol. 1, p. 300; Ibn Āshūr 1984, vol. 5, pp. 40–44). Although there are studies in the modern literature that address the issue through sociological and contemporary interpretations (Şefkatli Tuksal 2000; Çelik 2022; Kara and Aynur 2023, pp. 462–98; Kıylık 2024), the extent to which the Sunnah's status as qādī over the Book functions as a methodological 'necessity' in shattering this perception has not been sufficiently examined. For instance, Amina Wadud, in her work "Qur'ān and Woman", examines the word "darb" in al-Nisā 34 within its linguistic and historical context. She argues that the general spirit of the Sunnah, which does not permit violence against women, serves as a shield against the literal interpretation of the verse (Wadud 1999). Asma Barlas, in her work titled *Believing Women in Islam*, argues that the Qur'ān is not patriarchal, but rather that the tradition of exegesis has patriarchalized the text. She reinterprets the concepts of "qawwām" and "darb" in al-Nisā 34 in light of Allah's justice and the practices of the Prophet (Barlas 2002). In his article, Ömer Özsoy addresses the reproduction of the text in line with contemporary values and the methodological inconsistencies aris-

ing from this process (Özsoy 2002, pp. 111–24). İbrahim Karslı, on the other hand, focuses on the perception of women in exegeses and evaluates the subject as a reflection of the socio-cultural environment and traditional assumptions in which the commentators were situated (Karslı 2003, pp. 175–88). However, a large majority of these studies confine the issue to the context of exegesis hermeneutics and translation techniques.

Our study, rather than constructing a modern meaning, proposes a methodological (usulī) solution centered on Yahyā b. Abī Kathīr's (d. 129/746) principle of the Sunnah's status as "qādī" over the Qur'ān. This study does not aim to reject contemporary interpretations entirely, nor does it suggest that every modern interpretation is methodologically flawed. On the contrary, it seeks to explore the possibility of an interpretation rooted in the established methodological resources of the Qur'ān, the Sunnah, and the Islamic scholarly tradition, driven primarily by contemporary ethical concerns. The issue examined in this article is not merely a re-evaluation of Qur'ān. 4:34 from a modern ethical perspective; rather, it is a methodological problem concerning how a legal–moral injunction in the Qur'ān should be addressed within the framework of the Prophetic Sunnah. Therefore, the core argument of the article is grounded in an uṣūlī (methodological) dimension. However, this study does not claim to construct a comprehensive and contemporary theory of gender relations or Islamic family law. The purpose of our discussion is not to re-evaluate the general methodological stance of Yahyā b. Abī Kathīr, but rather to examine the methodological implications of the principle attributed to him and its relationship with the exegesis of Surah al-Nisā, Verse 34.

The principle of thematic coherence was taken as the basis for selecting the hadith narrations and sources. Verbal warnings (verbal Sunnah) found in core hadith collections regarding the subject and the Prophet's own domestic practices in his personal life (actual/practical Sunnah) were evaluated together. In assessing competing narrations that appear to contradict the literal meaning of the verse or leave room for the practice of violence, the general moral vision of the Sunnah and its holistic spirit that rejects violence (maqāsid) were applied as the primary criteria. The jurisprudential contradiction (ta'ārud) that seemingly emerges between the command in the verse and the Prophetic statements forbidding violence was resolved through the principle of "al-Sunnah qādiyatun alā al-Kitāb," which constitutes the main theoretical framework of our study. In accordance with this principle, the practical and moral Sunnah of the Prophet was accepted as the highest 'normative criterion' and 'binding authority' determining the application boundaries of the text and the divine intent in the face of competing narrations and literal interpretations; textual evaluations were shaped according to this methodological hierarchy.

2. The Nature of the Sunnah and the Qur'ān-Sunnah Unity

In this study, defining the nature of the Sunnah is considered essential to understanding its role in Qur'ānic interpretation. Identifying the Sunnah exclusively with the corpus of hadith reports, which are transmitted primarily through textual accounts, may not adequately reflect the broader and more dynamic dimensions of the concept. It is therefore necessary to examine the scope of the Sunnah from a broader methodological perspective. Given the discussions surrounding the authenticity (subūt) and chains of transmission (isnād) of reports attributed to the Prophet, understanding the Sunnah as a "living model" shaped by the transmission of Prophetic practices across generations offers a significant methodological perspective. In this sense, the Sunnah may be understood as a tradition whose historical continuity can be examined through practice and which contributes to the expression of Qur'ānic principles in social morality and legal traditions (Qaradāwī 1997, pp. 23–35; Fazl al-Rahmān 1982, pp. 5–7; Aʿzamī 1978, pp. 3–10). The Sunnah thus serves as a means of interpreting (tafsīr) and clarifying (tabyīn) the Qur'ān (Gelgeç 2022). Interpre-

tations detached from the Prophet's practical example may risk reflecting the commentator's subjective assumptions rather than adequately accounting for the intended meaning of the divine discourse. From this perspective, practical Sunnah can help clarify the meaning and application of Qur'ānic expressions and contribute to their elucidation (bayān). Although verbal reports may be misunderstood or inaccurately transmitted, practices repeatedly performed by the Prophet in the presence of numerous Companions may benefit from broader communal observation and transmission, thereby reducing certain risks associated with the transmission of individual reports. Practical Sunnah can therefore serve as an important means of contextualizing and interpreting the Qur'ānic text (naṣṣ) (Rahman 1965, pp. 1–31.). The Mālikī school's consideration of the practice of the people of Medina (ʿamal ahl al-Madīna) in evaluating reports (Mālik b. Anas al-Asbahī al-Yemenī 2004), together with the attention paid by Ḥanafī jurists to the principle of ʿumūm al-balwā in assessing certain reports (A. b. A. A. B. a.-R. Jassās 1994, vol. 3; p. 116), illustrates that the relationship between Sunnah and hadith cannot be reduced to the textual transmission of individual reports alone. Accordingly, this study examines solitary reports (khabar al-wāḥid) in relation to the normative framework of practical Sunnah.

The distinction between practical Sunnah (al-sunna al-'amaliyya) and solitary reports (khabar al-wāḥid) concerns not only the content of the transmitted information but also its mode of transmission and historical verifiability. Khabar al-wāḥid refers to a report that does not reach the level of tawātur (mass transmission) and may be accepted as evidence when it meets the relevant criteria of authenticity. However, accepting a report as evidence does not necessarily establish its attribution to the Prophet with definitive certainty. Practical Sunnah, by contrast, refers to practices attributed to the Prophet's lifetime that were adopted and maintained by Muslim communities across successive generations. Where a practice's widespread observance, continuity of transmission, and attestation in early sources can be established, it may provide a stronger historical basis than an individual report. This does not mean that every practice is necessarily more authoritative than every solitary report. Rather, the attribution of a practice to the Prophet and the reliability of its transmission must be assessed in light of the available evidence. A comparative evaluation of practical Sunnah and solitary reports therefore requires attention to the historical continuity of a practice, the reliability of its transmission, and the strength of the evidence supporting its attribution to the Prophet.

The methodological distinction between the Qur'ān's interpretation through the Sunnah and the evidentiary role of transmitted reports can also be illustrated by accounts from the early Islamic period. One such example is the advice attributed to ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib concerning the use of the Sunnah in disputes over the interpretation of the Qur'ān. During the Battle of Ṣiffīn in 37 AH, the Khārijites withdrew from ʿAlī's army, arguing that ʿAlī, Muʿāwiya, and the arbitrators had fallen into disbelief by agreeing to arbitration. According to the account cited here, when ʿAlī sent Ibn ʿAbbās to engage with the Khārijites who had left his army, he advised him: "Do not argue with them using the Qur'ān as evidence, for the Qur'ān is susceptible to many meanings. You will say one thing, and they will say another. Instead, argue with them using the Sunnah, for they will find no way out or escape from it." (Suyūtī 1974, vol. 2, p. 145). The words attributed to the Companion ʿImrān b. Ḥuṣayn likewise emphasize the role of the Sunnah in explaining the practical details of Qur'anic injunctions: "…You are an ignorant man. Can you find in the Qur'ān that the noon prayer (ẓuhr) is four units (rakʿahs) and that the recitation is to be done silently?… You cannot find the details of these in the Qur'ān. For the Book of Allah is concise (mujmal) regarding such matters. Only the Sunnah has provided their detailed explanation (tafṣīl)." (Shātibī 1997, vol. 4, p. 344).

The importance of transmitted practice is also evident in the classical Mālikī legal tradition. During the period of Imām Mālik (d. 179/795), legal reasoning drew not only on written texts but also on ʿamal, the established practice inherited and maintained by the community of Medina (Dutton 2002, pp. 17–18). The Mālikī tradition's attention to this practice demonstrates the role that communal transmission could play in legal reasoning alongside textual evidence. This approach is relevant to understanding the historical and methodological background of the principle al-Sunnatu qāḍiyatun ʿalā al-Kitāb ("The Sunnah is authoritative in determining the interpretation of the Book"). The precise meaning and scope of this principle, however, require consideration of the relevant textual and jurisprudential contexts.

The role of practical knowledge also warrants consideration in relation to the Ḥanafī legal tradition. Ḥanafī jurists developed criteria for evaluating solitary reports that included considerations beyond the apparent wording of an individual report, although the application of these criteria varied according to the type of report and the legal issue under discussion. In this connection, Imām al-Māturīdī's discussion may offer a relevant perspective on the epistemic significance of established practice and its relationship to verbal transmission (Māturīdī 2005, vol. I, pp. 333–34). Where a practice is widely known and continuously maintained across generations, its transmission may provide corroborating evidence and help assess the reliability or interpretation of individual reports. The extent to which al-Māturīdī's specific statements support this conclusion should, however, be established through close examination of the cited passage.

3. The Principle of al-Sunnatu Qādiyatun 'alā al-Kitāb and Its Historical Background

Among the jurists of the classical period, debates conducted on the epistemological value of the sources have intensified around the point of determining the position of the Sunnah in relation to the Qur'ān. In this context, the principle "as-Sunnatu qādiyatun 'alā al-Kitāb (The Sunnah is authoritative/determinative over the Book)," formulated by Yahyā b. Abī Kathīr, one of the jurists of the Tabi'ūn era (Dārimī 2000, vol. 1, p. 474; Shātibī 1997, vol. 4. p. 345) proposition is noteworthy. The term "al-Kitāb" (The Book) in this context directly refers to the Qur'ān within the framework and argument of the current study. Although the concept of "Kitāb" is not necessarily limited to the Qur'ān in every usage or historical context, its articulation with the definite article (al-/alif-lām) and its positioning in contrast to the Sunnah clearly demonstrate that the Qur'ān is definitively intended in this text. Although this proposition is susceptible to being perceived at a literal level as a radical claim that upends the hierarchy between sources, an in-depth analysis demonstrates that this statement points toward a methodological necessity. In the literature, it is possible to encounter similar expressions that support Yahyā b. Abī Kathīr's approach and attribute an ontological weight to the Sunnah's interpretive function. As a matter of fact, the statement attributed to Makḥūl (d. 113/731), "The Qur'ān is in greater need of the Sunnah than the Sunnah is of the Qur'ān," (al-Qurtubī 1964 vol. 5, p. 39; Shātibī 1997, vol. 4, p. 345) is another reflection of this methodological continuity. This expression, which may be prone to being perceived as a hierarchical displacement and thus met with disapproval at first glance, is, in our opinion, not a literal exaggeration but rather a pointer to the indispensable functionality that the Sunnah possesses in translating the theoretical content of the Qur'ān into practice. Makhūl's determination underscores the fact that the semantic world of the text can only materialize through a living model, thereby elevating the Sunnah to the position of the Qur'ān's 'living embodiment'. The role-model mission of the Prophet is also pointed out in the Qur'ān, "There is certainly a good example for you in the Prophet for those who hope for the grace of Allah and the Last Day, and remember

Allah much," (Ahzāb 33, v. 21) and Imam al-Shāfi'ī's (d. 204/820) statement, "Everything the Prophet ruled is what he understood from the Qur'ān," (Ghazālī 1993, p. 175; Andalusī 2000, vol. 7, p. 14) and his methodological principle, "…provides an epistemological basis for the Sunnah's 'determinative' quality over the Qur'ānic text.

When the primary sources in the literature that address this principle are examined, it becomes evident that these approaches largely emerged as responses to the socio-political and theological crises of the period. In this context, the exegete al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273) emphasized the Sunnah's determinative role, particularly against movements such as Kharijism and Rafidism, which marginalized the normative authority of the Sunnah (al-Qurtubī 1964, vol. 5, pp. 31–39; Erbaş 2007, pp. 111–39). Consequently, al-Qurṭubī's reference to this principle can be evaluated not merely as a theoretical rule of methodology (usūl), but also as a defense and a ground of legitimacy developed against literalist or subjective schools of interpretation that marginalize the Sunnah.

Another source where these views are found is al-Shāṭibī's famous book of legal methodology, al-Muwāfaqāt. Shāṭibī characterizes the Tābi'ūn dictum that "the Sunnah is authoritative (qādī) over the Book" not as the Sunnah marginalizing the Qur'ān, but as a level of explanation that determines the intent of the text (nass) (Shātibī 1997, vol. 4, p. 312).

It is observed that Shāṭibī, while describing the relationship between the Qur'ān and Sunnah within a structural integrity, also assumes a corrective role against approaches in the literature that over-interpret the issue of the 'authority of the Sunnah over the Book.' The author subjects to critical scrutiny those radical tendencies that, by citing certain Tabi'ūn-era dictums based on a literal reading, ontologically equate the Book and the Sunnah in the determination of rulings or attribute an absolute priority to the Sunnah.

According to Shāṭibī, such approaches carry the risk of damaging the hierarchical order of the texts. By coding the Sunnah's status as "qādī" as an act of "bayān" (clarification) faithful to the spirit of the text, he aims to rescue the subject from a methodological drift and pull it toward a reasonable ground. In this context, Shāṭibī redefines the function of the Sunnah not as an independent will that precedes the Qur'ān, but on the contrary, as a form of guidance that is subordinate to the Book by virtue of embodying the universal principles of the Qur'ān (Shātibī 1997, vol. 4, pp. 335–340, 347–350). In this way, while consolidating the authority of the Sunnah, he constructs a balanced procedural paradigm that simultaneously preserves the Qur'ān's status as the 'origin' (asl). In this direction, it can be argued that while al-Qurṭubī developed critical responses against approaches that reject the binding authority of the Sunnah, al-Shāṭibī sought to fortify the Sunnah's position as a legal proof (dalīl shar'ī) within a methodological framework against individuals and tendencies that elevate the Sunnah over the Qur'ān.

The proper interpretation of the expression concerning physical sanction in Qur'ān 4:34 depends on taking into account the family structure of Arab society at the time and its perception of violence.

4. Sūrah al-Nisā, Verse 34 and the Context of Revelation (Nuzūl)

In the Hejaz-Arab society, which constituted the environment of the Qur'ān's revelation, the family structure was built upon a rigid patriarchal hierarchy based on "asabiyyah" (tribal solidarity). In "Jāhiliyyah" society, a man's use of physical force over his spouse was viewed as a part of domestic discipline (ta'dīb) rather than a legal crime. However, although this violence was widespread, it was subject to a limitation directly proportional to the strength of the tribe to which the woman belonged. If a woman belonged to a powerful tribe, severe physical violence against her could be considered a cause for inter-tribal war (Ali 1993, vol. 5, pp. 534–38).

In the pre-Qur'ānic period, a woman's disobedience to her husband or her disruption of the domestic hierarchy was considered an assault on the man's honor. In the poems of the poets and the proverbs of the period, there was a widespread conviction that "a woman could only be managed through toughness and authority." While this violence was not subject to any limitations regarding enslaved women in particular, it was legitimized as a "disciplining" tool over free women (Ibn Habīb n.d., pp. 320–25). It is understood that within this socio-cultural structure, domestic violence was often perceived as a part of social norms. This historical background provides an important context for understanding the Qur'ān's regulations regarding family relations.

The translation of the verse is as follows:

"Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, and (last) beat them; but if they return to obedience, seek not against them Means (of annoyance): Allah is Most High, great (above you all)."

The verses preceding al-Nisā 34 emphasize the innate differences between men and women and stress that these differences should not be turned into a "competition for superiority". In verse 32 of the same surah, it is requested that the blessings Allah has bestowed more abundantly on some than others should not be envied. By stating, "For men is a share of what they have earned, and for women is a share of what they have earned," the separation of economic and legal personalities is registered. Again, in verse 33, a general framework regarding inheritance law is drawn. Leading into verse 34, the Qur'ān positions men and women not as rivals to one another, but as independent individuals with their own rights and responsibilities. The attribute "qawwām" in verse 34 is a practical consequence of the expression "some are made to excel others" mentioned in verse 32. Verse 35, which immediately follows al-Nisā 34, describes the "institutional" process that comes into play if domestic unrest (nushūz) cannot be resolved within the family: "If you fear a breach between the two, appoint an arbiter from his family and an arbiter from her family." This internal context is significant in terms of whether the act of "darb" in verse 34 indicates an absolute authority for violence or not. If Verse 34 had granted men the right to 'oppress' or 'inflict violence' upon women, there would be no institutional need for an 'arbitration committee' (arbitrators) in Verse 35. In this case, as it were, Allah commands the matter to transition from an individual show of power into a process of social and legal reconciliation.

In Surah al-Nisā, verse 34, woman's behaviors that harm family integrity and a three-stage process to be followed against them are mentioned as follows: 1. Advising them in a beautiful manner; 2. separating the beds; and 3. striking them.

According to the narration of Ibn Abbas, this verse was revealed concerning the daughter of Muhammad b. Maslamah and her husband, Sa'd b. al-Rabī'. According to this, Sa'd slapped his wife, leaving a mark on her face. Immediately after the incident, the woman came to the Prophet and complained that her husband had slapped her. Thereupon, the Prophet said, "Seek retaliation (qisas) from him," and later added, "Be patient, I am awaiting revelation regarding this matter." It was then that the verse in question was revealed (Rāzī 2000, vol. 10, p. 70). According to another report, the verse was revealed concerning Sa'd b. al-Rabi' and his wife Habībah, the daughter of Zayd b. Khārijah b. Abi Zuhayr. Habībah had acted defiantly toward Sa'd, and he had slapped her. Habībah's father said, "O Messenger of Allah, I gave my daughter to him in marriage, and he went and slapped her", whereupon the Prophet said, "Let her take retaliation against her hus-

band." However, immediately afterward, he said, "Turn back; Gabriel has just come to me," and recited the verse (Muqātil b. Sulaymān 2003, vol. 1, p. 370; Zamakhsharī 1987, vol. 1, pp. 505–6; Ibn Atiyya 2002, vol. 2, p. 47; al-Qurtubī 1964, vol. 5, p. 168; Baydāwī 1998, vol. 2, pp. 72–73). There are also other reports concerning the occasion of revelation of the verse in question. However, the common element among these reports is that a husband had beaten his wife, the matter was brought to the Prophet as a complaint, and the verse was subsequently revealed.

4.1. Conceptual Framework of Surah al-Nisā, Verse 34: Qawwām, Nushūz, and Darb

The concepts in Surah al-Nisā, verse 34, which carry a heavy semantic load-such as "qawwām," "nushūz", and "darb"-face the risk of becoming tools for all kinds of ideological or cultural preconceptions unless they are confined within precise boundaries from the perspectives of linguistics, custom (urf), and the Sunnah. Establishing these conceptual boundaries not only protects the ontological ground of the wording but also makes visible the layers of practical meaning that the Sunnah has attributed to these concepts. By doing so, it transforms the activity of exegesis from being a mere "conjecture" into a "scholarly determination."

4.1.1. Qawwām

The term "Qawwām" is etymologically based on the verb (قام/يقوم). In classical dictionaries, this verb is explained through fundamental meanings such as "to stand up, to straighten, to be erect, and to rise". The infinitive of this root, "kıyām," does not merely denote physically standing up; it also expresses moving towards a specific goal, putting forth effort for a targeted task or action, and striving by assuming responsibility (Isfahānī 1412, pp. 690–91).

The commentator Abū Ḥayyān (d. 745/1344), while explaining Surah al-Nisā, Verse 34, states that the word "qawwām" refers to someone who undertakes a task, manages it, and protects it. This word is an intensive adjective (mubālaghah), signifying the responsibility of maintaining order and assuming leadership within the family. Furthermore, this expression of "qawwām" indicates that men have been favored over women in certain areas. However, this superiority is not based on power or tyranny, but on the fact that specific responsibilities and duties have been assigned to men (Andalusī 2000, vol. 3, p. 622). Therefore, the "qawwām" mentioned in the verse does not denote an absolute superiority of men over women; rather, it expresses that they are equipped with specific duties within the framework of protecting the family order and fulfilling social responsibilities.

4.1.2. Nushūz

Derived from the root (نشز), the term "nushūz" literally means "high", "lofty", "a place elevated from the ground", or "a mound" in the dictionary (Ibn Fāris 1979, vol. 5, p. 430; Ibn Manzūr 1414, vol. 5, p. 418). The expression "nushūz" occurs five times in the Qur'ān across four different verses, twice as a noun and three times as a verb. In the verses where this expression appears, it conveys meanings such as a wife's rebellion against her husband, her desire to separate from him, her defiance of her husband's invitation to the marital bed, her attempt to dominate or assert superiority over him, her harboring resentment toward him, her turning away from him, her interest in another person, or, more generally, either spouse developing aversion toward the other (Muqātil b. Sulaymān 2003, vol. 1, p. 371; Tabarī 2001, vol. 3, p. 430; Zajjāj 1988, vol. 2, p. 47; Ibn Fāris 1979, vol. 5, pp. 430–31; Isfahānī 1412, p. 806; Ibn Manzūr 1414, vol. 5, p. 418; Ḥamīdullāh 2000, p. 231; see also Bahar 2025, pp. 75–93).

This semantic framework of the concept is closely related to the socio-historical environment during the advent of Islām and the legal traditions of the existing Abrahamic

religions in the Arabian Peninsula. Indeed, when the socio-historical research and legal practices of the period are examined, it becomes clear that nushūz and the subsequent disciplinary steps prescribed do not merely consist of an abstract patriarchal hierarchy. In this context, Saqib Hussain, in his study reading Qur'ān 4:34 alongside Jewish legal traditions, demonstrates that the hierarchy, obedience, and punitive mechanisms in the verse present a remarkable parallelism with the practices of the "rebellious wife" and sotah in Jewish law (Hussain 2021, pp. 66–111). However, this dimension of infidelity inherent in the term nushūz does not preclude its connotation of "severe marital discord" that fundamentally undermines the marital bond and ultimately leads to a desire for separation; on the contrary, this concept can also signify a broader and more practical form of incompatibility that drives the relationship to the brink of dissolution.

4.1.3. Darb

At this point, it is necessary to briefly mention the subject of polysemy (wujūh) in the methodology of exegesis (tafsir). The fact that a term has more than one meaning is not a quality that grants the exegete the freedom to make subjective choices; on the contrary, it is a responsibility that compels them to determine the most accurate one within the framework of the text's internal consistency and the integrity of the Qur'ān. The semantic narrowing or semantic shift that concepts undergo over time can sever the bond between the wording (lafz) and the meaning (ma'nā). In this context, penetrating the primary layers of meaning that a given expression carried during the period of revelation is indispensable for a sound exegetical undertaking. The fundamental task of the subject attempting to understand the Qur'ān is to strip away the secondary meanings the concept has acquired in the historical process, and to reveal its original value of usage in the environment of revelation and how this value was put into practice by the Sunnah.

The term "darb" is derived from the verb (ضرب) and possesses a highly polysemous field of usage in Arabic. While the primary meaning of the verb is generally recorded in dictionaries as "to hit" or "to strike," it is evident in classical lexicons that the semantic framework of this root is quite extensive. Indeed, depending on the context, "darb" and its infinitive form "darben" can be used to mean: hitting or flogging, minting money, inserting or placing something, inflicting pain, creating a mark or line with a sword or paint, setting out on a journey or preparing for a campaign, seeking one's livelihood, performing a task, moving quickly or running, holding or fixing something in place, reaching an agreement, partitioning, preventing or depriving, and demanding or earning (Ibn Fāris 1979, vol. 3, pp. 393–399; Ibn Manzūr 1414, vol. 1, pp. 543–551). İbn Fāris points out that the primary meaning of the word is "to hit," and that other meanings were acquired later through the use of metaphors (Ibn Fāris 1979, vol. 3, p. 398). Within this framework, when the usage of the term in the Qur'ān is examined, it is observed that it falls under four main semantic categories: "striking with the hand", "setting out on a journey" (with the preposition fi), citing an example" (darb-i mathal), and "making manifest/explaining" (Dāmaghānī 2000, p. 309). This classification reveals the semantic diversity of the root within the Qur'ānic context and demonstrates the decisive role of context in determining meaning.

5. The Issue of Wife-Beating in the Context of Classical and Contemporary Interpretations

In the classical tradition of exegesis, according to Surah al-Nisā, verse 34, if a woman persists in her defiance and disobedience toward her husband, leading to severe incompatibility, and if other methods prove ineffective, the method of striking may be resorted to. However, the striking here is a symbolic one, similar to that used in teaching religion to children (al-Qurtubī 1964, vol. 5, p. 173), and without humiliating the woman (Sha'rāwī

1997, vol. 4, p. 2202), for the purpose of discipline (Ibn Atiyya 2002, vol. 2, p. 47; al-Qurtubī 1964, vol. 15, p. 213; Ibn Āshūr 1984, vol. 5, pp. 40–44), without being injurious (Tabarī 2001, vol. 3, p. 435; Zamakhsharī 1987, vol. 1, p. 507; Ibn Atiyya 2002, vol. 2, p. 48; al-Qurtubī 1964, vol. 15, p. 213; Baydāwī 1998, vol. 2, p. 73), without breaking bones, without leaving marks on the body (Tha'labī 2015, vol. 10, p. 293) and without being destructive (Khatīb al-Shirbīnī 1869, vol. 1, p. 300), while excluding the face (Zamakhsharī 1987, vol. 1, p. 507; Khatīb al-Shirbīnī 1869, vol. 1, p. 300), with a handkerchief (Ibn Atiyya 2002, vol. 2, p. 48), or a miswak (Tabarī 2001, vol. 3, p. 435; al-Qurtubī 1964, vol. 15, p. 213) and other such items; it may be performed without going to extremes (see also Çelik 2022).

In the contemporary period, some have proposed interpretations of the verb "darb" based on the wide range of meanings the word possesses in the Arabic language. Within the framework of these approaches, "darb" is seen as a symbolic or communicative act rather than a physical one, such as "citing an example" in order to persuade the interlocutor (Okuyan 2007, p. 122; Karakuş 2019, p. 1368) as a psychological sanction, it has been associated with meanings such as "sending away from home" or "taking her on a journey" to allow her to reflect by changing her social environment (Eyüpoğlu 2007, p. 261).

In this regard, some have also made a noteworthy distinction regarding the target audience of the commands in the verse. According to this view, the first two stages of the verse, namely "admonition" (waʿẓ) and "separation in beds" (hajr), constitute individual obligations addressed directly to spouses. By contrast, the command pertaining to darb in the third stage is directed not to private individuals but to public authority and judicial institutions. Accordingly, the authority to administer punishment is removed from the discretion of individuals and transferred to the supervision of legal authorities and the control of governing institutions. This interpretation is substantiated through reference to practical applications during the Prophetic period. Proponents of this view maintain that there is no recorded instance in the Prophet's lifetime in which a husband resorted to physical violence against his wife on the basis of this verse. They further argue that the imposition of punishment acquires legitimacy only when exercised through public authority. Thus, the act of darb is removed from the realm of an individual right to employ violence and relocated to the framework of legal adjudication and public enforcement (Ekinci 2021, pp. 251–54).

Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas are the two most prominent figures in the literature of "Islamic Feminism" or "Woman-Centered Quranic Readings" who reinterpret Surah al-Nisā, verse 34. Both authors argue that the expression "darb" in the verse has been misunderstood in the classical tradition of jurisprudence and exegesis, or that a male-dominated culture has been imposed upon the text.

Wadud states that the expression 'darb' in the verse was a transitional phase aimed at restricting and gradually abolishing unrestricted violence during the period of revelation. However, she argues that in a modern context, this literal application (beating) is no longer legitimate, as it contradicts the Qur'ān's general principles of "partnership" and "ma'rūf" (kindness/equity). Wadud asserts that if the literal meaning of a verse undermines social justice, a believer has the right to say "no" to that historical literalism or to "transcend" it while remaining faithful to the higher spirit of the Qur'ān (Wadud 1999, pp. 74–78).

Asma Barlas fundamentally rejects the claim that the Qur'ān is a patriarchal text. According to her, the problem lies not in the text itself, but in the exegetical tradition under male hegemony that interprets it. She emphasizes the polysemy of the Arabic verb da-ra-ba. She argues that the expression "واضْرِبُوهُنَّ" in the verse does not mean "beat them", but rather "separate from them" or "leave them (to their own devices)". Barlas reminds us that in other verses of the Qur'ān, the relationship between spouses is established upon the foundations of "mawaddah" (affection) and "rahmah" (mercy) (Rūm 30, v. 21), who are

"garments" for one another (Baqarah 2, v. 187). She argues that it is impossible in terms of textual consistency for God to permit violence between spouses. According to Barlas, this verse is a continuation of the process of "living separately for a while" or "separating homes/beds" as a final stage before divorce, rather than a physical intervention (Barlas 2002, pp. 184–89). Accordingly, Barlas's interpretation is distinguished by its attempt to reconceptualize the literal meaning of the verse. By contrast, Wadud's approach appears to be more consistent with the historical reality and the context of revelation, insofar as it evaluates the relevant ruling within the framework of the principle of gradualism (tadarruj) and the broader process of social transformation.

It must be emphasized that, even if the verb daraba in Qur'ān 4:34 is understood within its context as referring to a form of physical intervention, this does not necessarily require the expression to be construed as an absolute command or a binding obligation. In Islamic legal methodology, it is a well-known rule that the imperative mood (command form) does not always denote vujubiyyah (obligation). Within the framework of the rich semantic structure and rhetorical nuances of the Arabic language, imperative forms can signify many different meanings depending on the context, such as nadb (recommendation), ibāhah (permissibility), ta'dīb (discipline), threat, or ta'jīz (demonstrating incapacity) (A. A. M. b. I. Shāfiī 2002, p. 4; A. b. A. A. B. Jassās 1994, vol. 1, p. 236; Ghazālī 1993, pp. 202–204; Bāqillānī 1998, p. 423; Basrī 1403, vol. 1, p. 226; al-Qurtubī 1964, vol. 5, p. 174). Therefore, external and internal evidence (contextual clues) are required to determine the legal status—whether it be "fard" (obligatory), "wājib" (necessary), "mubāh" (permissible), or "rukhsah" (concession)—of a command phrased as "do this" within the Quranic text. In this context, while determining the nature of the expression in the verse, the practical applications of the "Sunnah of the Prophet" must be accepted as the most fundamental "decisive evidence"; the mere fact that the word appears in the imperative mood should not lead to the conclusion that the act is ontologically commanded. For instance, many commentators have argued that the act of "beating" mentioned in Surah al-Nisā, verse 34 should be evaluated within the category of "permissibility" (mubah) rather than necessity (Tabarī 2001, vol. 3, p. 435; Māwardī n.d., vol. 1, p. 482; al-Qurtubī 1964, vol. 5, p. 174; Rāzī 2000, vol. 10, p. 72). According to this approach, the expression in question is directly related to the socio-cultural reality and the dynamics of custom (urf) of the period of revelation, rather than being a universal and absolute command (Ibn Āshūr 1984, vol. 5, p. 41). Consequently, this concession in the verse should be read as a product of a historical milieu in which physical intervention against women was accepted as a social norm. In cases where violence is coded as a disgrace or a criminal element within contemporary legal conceptions and social customs, the applicability of this literal ruling of the verse ceases to exist. In this context, in accordance with the principle that rulings are dependent on changing conditions of time and place, the legitimacy of the act of "darb" must be considered limited only to the established moral and legal perceptions of that specific society.

The incident of Sa'd b. ar-Rabī' and his wife Habība bint Zayd, narrated regarding the revelation context of Surah al-Nisa, verse 34, is critical in terms of showing the reflection of the Jahiliyya perception of violence in the early years of Islam. The fact that the Prophet initially intended to rule for qisas (retaliation) after Sa'd slapped his wife (Tabarī 2001, vol. 3, p. 435; Wāhidī 1992, p. 146–47) is actually the first step of a radical mental revolution against the existing privilege of violence in Arab custom. The fact that this process was disciplined with specific boundaries and stages (admonishment, separating beds) through the expression "darb" upon the revelation of the verse should be read as a transitional form aimed at the gradual liquidation of absolute violence. Indeed, as Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) pointed out, for a thought to be effective, it must speak within the possibilities of its era (Hegel 1991, p. 27). The Qur'ānic approach in this verse can also be evaluated as

an intervention aimed at transforming the existing social practice rather than completely ignoring it.

6. The Determinatıve/Decisive Function of the Sunnah (al-Qādī)

The most concrete historical data confirming the determinative role of the Sunnah is the Prophetic attitude in the incidents mentioned in Surah al-Ahzāb 33:28–29, al-Tahrīm 66:1–5, and al-Nūr 24:11–20. The relevant verses of Surah al-Ahzāb mention the worldly demands made by the wives of the Prophet. According to the narration, they pushed these demands to the point of overwhelming the Messenger of Allah; in response, he left his wives' quarters and moved to his private room, where he remained for a month. Following this, the verses in Surah al-Ahzāb were revealed (Tabarī 2001, vol. 7, p. 650). In Surah al-Taḥrīm, on the other hand, it is mentioned that the Prophet confided a secret to one of his wives, Ḥafṣah, and upon Ḥafṣah sharing this secret with 'Ā'ishah, the Prophet left his home and his wives for a period of one month (Tabarī 2001, vol. 23, pp. 87–90). Similarly, in the Incident of Ifk (the Slander Incident) (al-Māturīdī 2005, vol. 7, pp. 529–34) even during the most severe moment of crisis targeting the honor and dignity of a prophet, it is striking that the Messenger of Allah managed the situation through consultation and legal principles rather than emotional reaction sending Aisha, who had fallen ill from grief, to her father's house.

The common denominator of these three different crisis scenarios is that, despite the heavy psychological strain he endured, the Prophet never resorted to any physical violence or verbal abuse that could serve as a basis for the expression "darb" in Surah al-Nisā, verse 34. On the contrary, his recourse to temporary separation or distance in certain situations, in order to de-escalate tension and allow the parties an opportunity for reflection, suggests that physical intervention was not his preferred approach to resolving domestic disputes. His practical Sunnah provides an important criterion against interpreting Qur'ān 4:34 as granting an unrestricted or absolute right to use physical force. Rather than establishing violence as an approved practice, his example points to the importance of mercy, restraint, and reconciliation in family relations. This constitutes one of the clearest pieces of evidence that the determinative role of the Prophetic Sunnah in relation to the Qur'ānic text transforms the text into an ethical and humane model of implementation.

Furthermore, in the Holy Qur'ān, even a husband who catches his spouse in the act of adultery—a scandalous offense—but cannot support this with legally valid means of proof is not granted permission to use violence; instead, a specific procedure to be followed has been established (see. Nūr 24/6-9; Köse 2015, p. 329). Likewise, the following conversation between the Prophet and Sa'd b. Ubādah, narrated by Abū Hurairah on this subject, is noteworthy: when Sa'd asked, "O Messenger of Allah! If I find a man with my wife, am I not to do anything to him until I bring four witnesses?" the Prophet replied, "Yes, that is so," to which Sa'd exclaimed, "Never! By Allah, who sent you with the true religion, I would certainly put him to the sword without waiting at all!" whereupon the Messenger of Allah turned to his companions and said, "Look at what your chief is saying! He is indeed very jealous, but I am more jealous than he is, and Allah is more jealous than I." (Muslim 1955, "Li'ān", h. no. 16). Here, the Prophet is essentially saying, "You wish to kill the man you caught in the act of adultery with your wife because of your jealousy, but Allah and His Messenger —who know how jealous you are—forbid this." As can be seen, it is impossible to suggest that the Holy Qur'ān and the Prophet, who do not permit violence or murder even in the case of adultery—an extremely severe and scandalous crime of honor—would leave the door open for such actions in far simpler disagreements (Köse 2015, p. 330). The Sunnah, rather than completely rejecting an existing custom, subjects it to one of three processes: "ibqā" (preservation), "islāh" (reform), or "ilghā" (abolition). In the society where

the Prophet lived, the physical discipline of a wife by her husband was an established custom. Instead of creating a social upheaval by banning this custom outright, the Sunnah first pulled it within "legal boundaries" (non-injurious) and subsequently excluded this practice from the "ideal" through the Prophet's own personal conduct.

The following words mentioned by the Prophet also reject the logic of violence: "How can one of you beat his wife like a slave during the day and then lie with her at night?" (Bukhārī 1971, "Kitāb al-Nikāḥ", ch. "Bāb mā yukrahu min ḍarb al-nisāʾ", h. no. 5204) This hadith reveals that violence is not merely a physical assault, but an ontological contradiction that destroys the atmosphere of "affection and mercy" (mawaddah and rahmah) which is the essence of marriage. The Prophet's practice—which normatively limits physical violence, withholds approval from it, and demonstrates a strong moral inclination toward its abandonment—is embodied in his warning: "Do not beat God's female servants (wives) (Abū Dāwūd n.d., "Kitāb al-Nikāḥ", "Bāb fī ḍarb al-nisāʾ", hadith no. 2146)." His management of the tension between this command and the literal meaning of the verse with the aim of reducing violence to a minimum level clearly demonstrates the reformative and restrictive power of the Sunnah against established customs.

The fact that the Prophet granted a temporary permission (rukhsah) for striking in the aforementioned Abū Dāwūd narration—upon Umar's request based on the grounds that domestic and social order had been disrupted—might at first glance appear to contradict our claim regarding the restriction of violence. However, when a text-centered content analysis is deepened, it becomes clear that this development precisely reveals the Sunnah's transformative strategy against established customs. Indeed, immediately after the abuse of this permission, the Prophet's implementation of a normative barrier by stating, "Those are not the best among you" (لَيْسَ أُولَئِكَ بِخِيَارِكُمْ), demonstrates that the initial concession was not a 'legitimization' that absolutely approved striking, but rather a pedagogical 'gradualism' confronting social reality. The Sunnah drew a legal boundary to prevent a vacuum during an immediate social crisis, yet established the complete abandonment of violence as the ultimate moral objective and the primary criterion of 'being the best'. Consequently, rather than containing a literal contradiction, this dynamic process methodologically confirms the reformative character of the Sunnah, which aims to reduce violence to a minimum and progressively exclude it from normative conduct.

Indeed, in response to Muāwiyah al-Qushayrī's question regarding the rights of wives, immediately after mentioning fundamental rights such as maintenance and clothing, the Messenger of Allah stated in no uncertain terms, "Do not beat them and do not revile them" (Abū Dāwūd n.d., "Kitāb al-Nikāḥ", "Bāb fī ḥaqq al-marʾati ʿalā zawjihā", h. no. 2144), and by emphasizing that they should not be excluded except within the house, he effectively dismantled the pre-Islamic tradition of physical and psychological abuse.

In short, the Prophet's stance on this matter exemplifies a high ethical standard. The narration in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim stating that "The Messenger of Allah never struck a woman or a servant with his hand" (Muslim 1955, "Kitāb al-Faḍāʾil", "Bāb mubāʿadatihī ṣallā Allāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam lil-āthām wa-ikhtiyārihi min al-mubāḥ ashalahu wa-intiqāmihi lillāhi ʿinda intihāki ḥurumātih", h. no. 2328), together with the report that he did not strike anyone with his hand except in fighting in the way of Allah, provides an important interpretive perspective on the Qur'ānic text. This living example clearly indicates that the Sunnah aims for a social structure where physical discipline is entirely abandoned in favor of mutual respect and compassion (Tirmidhī 2008, "Radā'", ch. 11, (h. no. 1196)). And by so doing, he defined domestic violence as the greatest obstacle to the quality of "being good". In light of these data, the Sunnah—while consigning the literal expression in the verse to its historical context—carried the Qur'ānic text to a moral pinnacle by substituting the principles of "ihsān" (excellence/kindness) and "ma'rūf" (kindness/the common good)

for "darb" in a universal sense. This restrictive and morally transformative role of the Sunnah over the expression "ضرب" (darb) in the aforementioned verse is not merely a historical practice; it also offers a universal methodology for contemporary discussions on jurisprudence (fiqh) and family law. The Prophet's composure during moments of crisis and his consistent preference for non-violent responses suggest that the Qur'ānic text should not be interpreted as granting an unrestricted or absolute permission to use physical force; rather, his example supports an interpretation that emphasizes restraint, the reduction in harm, and the pursuit of reconciliation.

7. Conclusions

This study concludes that Qur'ān 4:34 formed part of a reformative strategy aimed at normatively limiting the unrestricted and uncontrolled practices of violence prevalent in seventh-century Arabian society and demonstrating a strong moral inclination toward their abandonment. From this perspective, the primary objective of the verse is the preservation of the family institution and the management of domestic crises within the framework of the principle of proportionality. This objective possesses the character of a universal principle that transcends its historical context and remains applicable to the present day.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that evaluating the literal meaning of the expression "darb" as an immutable ruling to be directly implemented in every time and context is not accurate. On the contrary, it has been determined that this expression must be understood as an exceptional and highly restricted form of intervention dependent upon specific sociological conditions. Therefore, the literal and practical application of the verse is of a nature that can only be meaningful in situations where similar historical and social circumstances arise.

The principle of "as-Sunnatu qādiyatun alā al-Kitāb", which forms the basic theoretical framework of this study, positions the role of the Sunnah over the Qur'ānic text not merely as an explanatory element, but also as a normative authority that determines the boundaries of the text's application. Accordingly, Qur'ān 4:34 may be understood as part of a process of regulating and transforming forms of physical intervention that were socially accepted in pre-Islamic Arabian society. The Prophet Muḥammad's practical example further supports an ethical orientation that discourages violence and emphasizes restraint, mercy, and the preservation of human dignity in family relations.

Consequently, the decisive element of the model Islam envisions for intra-family relations is not the literal regulations addressing a historical context, but rather the "Prophetic Sunnah" that carries these regulations to a moral pinnacle. This perspective offers a holistic, morality-centered approach to contemporary domestic violence debates, not only on a jurisprudential or theological level but also on a human one. Ultimately, it is concluded that the intent of the Qur'ān is not to legitimize a form of physical intervention, but to construct a vision of family and society based on mercy, affection, and human dignity, as embodied in the example of the Prophet.

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