

Istifhām in the Phrase *Mā Khaṭbu* in the Qur'an

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Abstract

This article examines the use of the *istifhām* phrase *Mā Khaṭbu* in the Qur'an. This phrase consists of the word “*mā*,” which means “what,” and “*khaṭb*,” which refers to a major event or important matter. The method used is a qualitative approach with thematic analysis of the verses containing the phrase *Mā Khaṭbu*. The results of the study indicate that the phrase *Mā Khaṭbu* serves more than just a question to obtain an answer. This phrase is used as a rhetorical tool aimed at arousing the moral and spiritual awareness of readers, as well as encouraging deep reflection and introspection. Additionally, this phrase also functions as social criticism and satire toward certain attitudes or conditions that require attention. Academically, this research contributes to the study of *balaghah*, *tafsir*, and Qur'anic linguistics. This research also enriches understanding of the use of rhetorical questions as a spiritual educational method that can shape the inner consciousness of Muslims.

Uslub *Istifhām*, *Mā Khaṭbu*, Qur'an, Tafsir, *Balaghah*, Rhetorical Questions

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji penggunaan uslub *istifhām* frasa *Mā Khaṭbu* dalam Al-Qur'an, frasa ini terdiri dari kata “*mā*” yang berarti “apa” dan “*khaṭb*” yang merujuk pada peristiwa besar atau urusan penting. Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif dengan analisis tematik terhadap ayat-ayat yang mengandung frasa *Mā Khaṭbu*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa frasa *Mā Khaṭbu* berfungsi lebih dari sekadar pertanyaan untuk memperoleh jawaban. Frasa ini digunakan sebagai alat retorik yang bertujuan membangkitkan kesadaran moral dan spiritual pembaca, serta mendorong refleksi dan introspeksi yang mendalam. Selain itu, frasa ini juga berfungsi sebagai kritik sosial dan sindiran terhadap sikap atau keadaan tertentu yang perlu mendapat perhatian. Secara akademis, penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi pada kajian *balaghah*, *tafsir*, dan linguistik Al-Qur'an. Penelitian ini juga memperkaya pemahaman tentang penggunaan pertanyaan retorik sebagai metode pendidikan spiritual yang dapat membentuk kesadaran batin umat Islam.

Kata Kunci: Uslub *Istifhām*, *Mā Khaṭbu*, Al-Qur'an, Tafsir, *Balaghah*, Pertanyaan Retoris

INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an is the main source for people of understanding, containing thousands of pieces of knowledge, miracles, and secrets (Al-Suyūṭī, 2017) which is the greatest miracle given to the Prophet Muhammad, as guidance for mankind. The uniqueness of the Qur'an lies not only in its teachings, but also in the beauty of its language, linguistic structure, and variety of rhetorical styles, which cannot be matched by any other literary work (‘Ajībah, 2002). Therefore, studying the Qur'an from all aspects, including linguistics, is very important for understanding the profound messages and beauty of the structure of the holy text of the Qur'an (Sayyid Quṭb, 2003). Seeing this phenomenon, many people who understand the Qur'an through translations find it very

difficult to grasp the deeper meaning intended. As stated in QS Yusuf/12:2, “Indeed, We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an so that you may understand.” (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019). Ibn Kathir stated that Arabic is the most eloquent language and influences the soul of the reader (Ad-Dimasyqī, 1401). At the time of the revelation of the Qur'an, Arab society had achieved a high level of proficiency in *balaghah*, which was reflected in their literary works (Munawar & Hakim, 1994). The Qur'an, with its beautiful language, captivates them and they are unable to match the perfection of the Qur'anic language. Therefore, linguists and exegetes continue to analyze and prove the perfection of every element of language and interpretation in the Qur'an (Syirazi, 1994).

The science of *balaghah*, which studies the art of language style, is very important in understanding the beauty and depth of the messages in the Qur'an (Jidan, 2022). This science continues to develop and is studied by scholars. In *balaghah*, there are three main branches: the science of *ma'ani*, the science of *bayan*, and the science of *badi'* (Fadila et al., 2022). *Ma'ani* science focuses on analyzing the structure and meaning of sentences, which is important to avoid discrepancies between the speaker's intention and the listener's understanding (Al-Farrā', 1955).

Previous studies, such as those conducted by Ma'sum (2007), Maulana (2022), Rasyid et al (2024), and Ismirah et al (2025) it can be concluded that the author's research has a different focus but complements previous studies. This study is expected to provide additional contributions to understanding the semantic and contextual meanings of *istifhām* sentences in certain surahs, which have not been specifically discussed in previous studies.

One of the important aspects of the Qur'an that is interesting and has a special position is the phrase *Mā Khaṭbu*, which often appears in the Qur'an. Beyond its role as a rhetorical device, “*Mā Khaṭbu*” also reflects a communicative aspect where Allah, or the Prophet, prompts the addressee to explain the motives behind their actions or words. This indicates that in the Qur'an, rhetorical questions serve a dual purpose: as criticism and as an invitation to dialogue (Asyur, 1984). Therefore, the study of the phrase *Mā Khaṭbu* can contribute to enriching the study of Al-Qur'an and Tafsir, as well as understanding the use of language in sacred texts in a more dynamic and communicative way.

METHOD

This study can be categorized as qualitative research, which is a research method that aims to produce descriptive data in the form of written words from objects that can be observed and analyzed (Molein, 2001). The main objective of this study is to describe and analyze the meaning contained in the verses being studied. Additionally, this research falls under the category of library research, which is a type of research that relies on the collection of data from various relevant written sources that discuss similar themes.

This study focuses on the subject of research, namely *istifhām* in the phrase *Mā Khaṭbu* in the Qur'an. Based on this, this study uses primary data (verses from the Qur'an) and secondary data (tafsir books) collected using documentation techniques. The data obtained will be processed by identifying the phrase *Mā Khaṭbu* in the Qur'an. Furthermore, a deductive analysis will be conducted to understand the use of *adawāt al-istifhām* and the relevant tafsir context. The methodological approach applied in this study is, first, the tafsir approach because the object of study is the verses of the Qur'an. The tafsir approach refers to the perspective, paradigm, or

reference used in the process of interpreting the Qur'an ((Baidan & Aziz, 2022). This approach forms the basis for understanding the meaning of Qur'anic verses from various perspectives, namely tafsīr bi al-ma'sūr, tafsīr al-ra'yī, and tafsīr bi al-isyarah. The term “approach” is often used interchangeably with ‘method’ or “style” in the science of tafsir, and serves as a systematic foundation for achieving specific interpretive goals. Thus, this study examines verses relevant to the research theme. Second, this linguistic approach is based on narration and linguistic aspects by explaining the meaning of a verse through the analysis of words and other letters related to the text (Chalik, 2014). This approach seeks to explain the meanings of the Qur'an by applying linguistic rules, providing explanations of the Qur'an through semiotic and semantic interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Uslub Istifhām

Istifhām, which is the masdar form of the word استفهام, lexically means to ask for understanding or clarification (Manzūr, 1119). Meanwhile, according to terminology, *istifhām* is defined as an effort to obtain knowledge about something that was previously unknown, by utilizing one of a number of *istifhām* tools or devices (Al-Qazwīnī et al., 2002). It also takes the form of an understanding or knowledge to find out something that the speaker does not know (Al-Qādrī, n.d.) Thus, it can be concluded that *istifhām* is a form of sentence used to ask for clarification or information about something that is unknown or still vague to the speaker.

In this study, *istifhām* is divided into two patterns, the first being *istifhām haqiqi* (containing the meaning of a question asked by someone to another party about something that was not previously known) and *istifhām majazī* (a form of question posed regarding something that is already known). In this context, the function of the *istifhām* sentence is no longer purely to request an answer, but rather transforms into a means of conveying other meanings such as prohibition, command, denial, prayer, hope, rejection, or other rhetorical intentions (Al-Jārim & Amīn, 1999).

Istifhām is a form of question that uses certain words or nouns known as *adawāt al-istifhām*. These *istifhām* devices consist of letters, such as hamzah, mā, man, ayyu, kam, kaifa, aina, annā, matā, and ayyāna (Al-Qādrī, n.d.). Some letters have meanings depending on the context of the sentence. However, in general, they only have three meanings: tashawwur or tashdīq. However, for the letter hamzah, it only has tashdīq for the word hal, and tashawwur for letters other than hamzah and the word hal (Nurdiyanto, 2016). The difference between the two functions lies in the purpose of the question, where questions in the form of tashawwur aim to gain understanding or belief in a concept, so the answer does not use the words na'am (yes) or lā (no) (Khamim & Subakir, 2018).

The meanings and explanations of each of these *istifhām* tools will be explained as follows:

Hamzah (أ) has two original functions. First, *tashawwur* in this form is a description of a single thing (mufrad) in the sentence structure, where the letter hamzah is directly followed by the object being asked about. Generally, the object in question has a qarīnah mentioned after the word 'am. For example, in the sentence *أيو مسافر ام رمضان؟* (is it Ayu who is traveling or Ramdana?), the questioner is certain that one of Ayu or Ramdana is traveling, but the certainty is unknown. Therefore, in such an *istifhām* pattern, the answer must be specified. Then it is said, “Ramdana,” for example.

Second, *tashdiq* indicates a sentence that does not use comparison (*mu'adil*) and does not contain “am.” For example, in the sentence *أسافر علي؟* (Is Ali traveling?). In this sentence, an explanation is needed regarding whether something is constant or not. In this case, the answer is either “yes” or “no.” (Al-Rifāʿī, 1992).

In this study, it can be concluded that interrogative sentences using the letter *hamzah* and intended for *tashdiq* do not include a comparative phrase, unlike the *tashawwur* interrogative form, which includes a comparative phrase. If the word 'am follows the *hamzah tashdiq*, it is categorized as 'am *munqaṭi'ah* and interpreted as *bal* (but).

Hal (هل) functions to express *tashdiq*, as it only asks about the occurrence or non-occurrence of an action. Therefore, this device is not accompanied by 'am, because the meaning that begins with *hal* is still general or not yet specific (Harjum, 2020). For example, in the sentence *هل هذا أبوك؟* (is this your father?), the sentence is only “yes” or “no.” *Istifhām* with the particle *hal* has two types: *bashithah* (to ask about the existence or non-existence of something) and *murakkabah* (to ask about the existence of something). In this rule, *istifhām* *hal* cannot be used in sentences such as those preceded by a negative particle, a present tense verb indicating an ongoing process, a sentence preceded by the letter *inna*, preceded by *isim sharath*, containing the letter 'athaf, or a noun followed by a verb (Nurdiyanto, 2016).

Mā (ما) This device is used to ask about something that is not rational. (Al-Qādrī, n.d.) It is used to ask three things. First, to ask about the clarity of something: *ما العسجد؟* (What is 'asjad? The answer is, 'asjad is gold. Second, to ask about the essence of something: *ما الإنسان؟* أَلإنسان هو حيوان الناطق (What is a human being? A human being is an animal that can speak). Third, to ask about a condition, *ما أنت؟* (How are you? The answer is, I am healthy). *Man* (من) This particle is used to ask about something rational. (Al-Qādrī, n.d.) For example, in the sentence *من هو أستاذ؟* هو أستاذ إبراهيم (Who is the teacher? He is Teacher Ibrahim). *Matā* (متى) is used to ask about the future or past. (Al-Qādrī, n.d.) As in the words of Allah *SWT.*, QS al-Baqarah [2] verse 214.

...حَتَّى يَقُولَ الرَّسُولُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَعَهُ مَتَى نَصُرُ اللَّهَ ۚ أَلَا إِنَّ نَصْرَ اللَّهِ قَرِيبٌ ۚ ٢١٤

“... so the Messenger and those who believed with him said, “When will Allah's help come?” Remember, indeed, Allah's help is near” (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019).

In this verse, the question using the *matā* device is asked by the Messenger and the believers who are facing trials and difficulties. The question “when will Allah's help come” reflects hope for a future event. Therefore, in this context, *matā* functions as a form of *istifhām* that refers to an event that has not yet occurred but is eagerly awaited.

Ayyāna (أيان) is a device used to ask about the future, and in this sentence, it carries the meanings of *tahwīl* (to instill fear) and *taʿzīm* (to show greatness or reverence), as in the words of Allah *SWT.*, QS al-Qiyamah [75] verse 6

يَسْأَلُ أَيَّانَ يَوْمَ الْقِيَمَةِ ۚ ٦

He asked, “When will the Day of Judgment be?” (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019).

From the explanation above, it should be understood that although questions are generally asked by someone who wants to know something, in reality not all questioners truly do not know the answer to the question being asked. Therefore, there is a discussion about the various purposes behind the use of questions.

The *istifhām* style is closely related to *balāghah*, a branch of knowledge that studies the beauty of the Arabic language. In this case, Arabic is known to have high aesthetic characteristics. In the field of *Ma'ānī*, the style of *istifhām* is not only understood as a request for information about something unknown to the questioner, as is the basic function of *istifhām*. However, the meaning of *istifhām* is highly dependent on the *ṣiyāq* (context) of the accompanying sentence. From the perspective of *balaghah*, *istifhām* is not always intended to elicit an answer, but can also signify a command (*amr*) falling under the category of *uslūb talab*, and may contain other rhetorical meanings. Therefore, the variety of meanings contained within the *istifhām* style introduces its own complexity in interpretation (Nurdiyanto, 2016).

When the *istifhām* pattern no longer functions according to its basic meaning as a form of question to obtain information, but instead undergoes a shift in meaning to become diverse and different from its original function, that is where the aesthetic beauty of the *istifhām* sentence begins to appear. The Qur'an, as the word of Allah, which possesses a linguistic structure of extremely high aesthetic value, employs the *istifhām* style in numerous verses to convey various messages both explicit and implicit through a rhetorical and profound linguistic style.

The *istifhām* style used in the Qur'an often falls under the category of *istifhām majāzī*, which are questions intended to obtain information, but which contain certain rhetorical meanings according to their context. Some of the primary functions of metaphorical questions found in the verses of the Qur'an include affirmation (*taqrīr*), informing (*ikhbar*), comparison (*al-taswīyyah*), guidance (*al-irshād*), and reminder (*al-tadhkir*), providing understanding (*ifham*), motivating (*tashwīq*), commanding (*al-amr*), negating (*nafī*), expressing an impossible hope (*al-tamannī*), prohibiting (*nahī*), reproaching (*taubikb*), glorifying (*ta'ẓīm*), rejection (*inkār*), amazement (*ta'ajjub*), and threat (*tahdād*), all of which demonstrate the richness of meaning and depth of rhetoric in the structure of Qur'anic sentences (Al-Hāsyimī, n.d.). Thus, the *istifhām* style in the Qur'an is more than just a question form; it contains deep and diverse rhetorical meanings. Its use involves a high degree of linguistic artistry, evoking emotional and intellectual responses in readers and encouraging them to reflect on the moral and spiritual messages in their lives.

Istifhām in the Phrase Mā Khaṭbu

Linguistically, *khaṭbu* refers to an event or matter, whether small or large, and is also said to be the cause of a matter. Thus, the question مَا خَطْبُكَ أَيُّ أَفْرَكَ (what is your business/what is your matter) is asked. *Khaṭbu* is also said to be a matter in which a conversation takes place (Manzūr, 1119). *Al-Khaṭbu*, *mukhaṭbah*, and *attkhaṭbu* all mean “to repeat a statement.” Among the uses of these terms are *khuṭbah* and *khiṭbah*. However, *khuṭbah* is specifically used for a statement whose content is advice. Meanwhile, *khiṭbah* is specifically used for a speech whose essence is to propose marriage to a woman. The word *khaṭbu* means a major matter that is widely discussed (Ar-Raghib Al-Ashfahani, 1996). According to Ibn ‘Āsyur in his commentary *Al-Taḥrīr wa Al-Tanwīr*, *khaṭbu* is an important matter in a situation or event, named *khaṭbu* because it requires a person to speak

to their friend by asking about it. It is also said that *khaṭbu* is derived from the word *khaṭbah*, which refers to something that is discussed. However, *khaṭbah* is a matter of great importance (ʿAsyur, 1984).

In the encyclopedia, *khaṭbu* means encouragement (motivation) (QS Thāhā/20:95), in this verse it also means affair (QS Al-Hijr/15:57), *khaṭbu* is also used in the sense of “intention” (QS Al-Qaṣaṣ/ 28:23) and is sometimes used in the sense of “condition,” such as the statement made to Zulaikha when she tempted Prophet Yusuf to submit to her (QS Yūsuf/12:51). *Khaṭbu* also means “discourse” that is given (QS Shād/38:20 and QS An-Naba’/78:37) (Shihab, 2007). The word *khaṭb* is used to describe a major event that attracts attention and becomes a topic of general discussion. From the same root word comes the word *khaṭbah*, which refers to important explanations that should be heeded by the listeners.

More broadly, it can be concluded that *khaṭbu* covers all forms of (important) issues that motivate a person to discuss all kinds of issues facing the community in order to improve the quality of their worship, improve their morals, and establish good relationships with others. In the Qur'an, there are many verses that contain *khaṭbu*, both in the form of direct commands and exhortations to do good deeds.

a) Prophet Ibrahim's Question to the Angels

QS Al-Hijr [15] verse 57

قَالَ فَمَا خَطْبُكُمْ أَيُّهَا الْمُرْسَلُونَ ٥٧

He (Ibrahim) asked, “What is your important business, O messengers?” (Kementeriaan Agama RI, 2019)

In this verse, the interrogative style *Mā* (مَا) is used in this context to indicate a genuine question, that is, a question intended to find out something that is not yet known to the questioner, in this case Prophet Ibrahim. He asked because he was amazed by the arrival of the guests (who turned out to be angels) in large numbers, while if it were merely to convey the good news of the birth of a child, one angel would suffice. Therefore, he concluded that their arrival must have a greater purpose. Thus, the question *فَمَا خَطْبُكُمْ أَيُّهَا الْمُرْسَلُونَ* (What is your important matter, O messengers?) indicates that Prophet Ibrahim wanted to know the main mission of the angels. The word *خطب* is used to denote a major or important matter, not just an ordinary one (Al-Zamakhsharī, 1407).

The angels' response, “They said, ‘Indeed, we have been sent to a sinful people’ (to punish them),” indicates this meaning. However, the family of Prophet Lot was exempted from this punishment, except for his wife, who was designated as part of those who perished (Al-Rāzī, 1420).

In the continuation of this verse, al-Zamaksyārī explains the phrase *إِلَّا آلَ لُوطٍ* (except for the family of Lot). In this phrase, there are two possibilities: whether it is a connected (*mutashil*) or disconnected (*munqat'i*) exception, each of which has its own implications. If the exception is continuous, then the decree encompasses the entire people of Lot, whether they were saved or destroyed. If it is disconnected, then only the sinful people are the objects of the decree, while the family of Lot is outside its scope. As for the exception of Prophet Lot's wife, it is not an exception

from the exception, but rather an exception related to a different context, namely salvation, not the sending of punishment. The phrase *فَدَّرَبَا إِنَّمَا لَمِنَ الْعَرَبِينَ* emphasizes that the destruction of Prophet Lot's wife was Allah's decree, even though it was conveyed by the angels as a form of their closeness to the divine command. This entire verse reflects the balance between justice and mercy in Allah's decision regarding humanity (Al-Zamakhsharī, 1407).

When Ibrahim realized that they were angels, because they conveyed extraordinary news, namely the glad tidings of the coming of a child, he said, “What is your important business (other than that), O messengers?” The matter is very important. That is, what is your business or what is your interest, and what has brought you here? (Abū 'Abdillāh, 1384).

From this explanation, it can be concluded that Prophet Ibrahim's question to the angels was a form of genuine inquiry to understand the purpose of their unusual visit. The phrase *مَا خَطْبُكُمْ* indicates that there was a significant matter behind their arrival, not merely to deliver good news. QS Al-Zāriyāt [51] verse 31

﴿ قَالَ فَمَا خَطْبُكُمْ أَيُّهَا الْمُرْسَلُونَ ۝ ٣١ ﴾

He (Ibrahim) asked, “What is your important business, O messengers?” (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019)

In the previous verse, Allah *SWT* revealed the words of Prophet Ibrahim's guests to Sarah, informing her that a learned child would be born, which surprised Sarah (as narrated in the story that Sarah was barren). This was undoubtedly good news for both of them. After receiving this joyful news, Prophet Ibrahim asked his guests, “What is your business, O messengers?” Prophet Ibrahim shifted the conversation by asking, and the messengers then explained (Abū Ja'far, n.d.).

When they realized that the visitors were angels and that angels do not descend except with the permission of Allah, as messengers in certain matters, they asked, “What is your business?” The meaning is, what is the reason for your coming and what is your request to that sinful people, namely the people of Prophet Lot, by bringing clay stones (the ones referred to are *sijjil*, which are clay stones heated until they become hard like stone, marked with the names of those who will be punished with them). Some say the stones were marked so they could be identified as stones of punishment. Others argue the markings indicate the stones were not ordinary stones from this world.

They referred to that people as “those who transgressed” (*musrifin*), just as they referred to the people of 'Aad, because of their greed and injustice in their deeds; they were never satisfied with what was permitted to them. The pronoun “in it” (*fīhā*) refers to the village or city, but it is not mentioned explicitly because it is already known. In that verse, there is also evidence that faith and Islam are one entity, and both are praiseworthy qualities. It is said that they were Prophet Lot and his two daughters. Some say that Prophet Lot and his family who were saved numbered thirteen people. Qatadah said that if the number of those saved were greater than that, they would also be saved, as this demonstrates that faith is something that is preserved and does not disappear from its people in the sight of Allah. This verse serves as a sign for those who fear severe punishment, as a warning for those with tender hearts. Ibn Jurayj said: The stone was a tightly packed stone there. Some also said the stone was black water with a foul odor (Al-Zamakhsharī, 1407).

This sentence explains the arrival of God's angels to the people of Prophet Lot to deliver punishment by bringing marked stones of torment, and the question “فَمَا خَطْبُكُمْ” as an expression of asking for the reason for their arrival. In this verse, the sentence functions as a genuine question, demanding a real answer and direct explanation of the purpose of the angels' arrival.

b) Prophet Moses' Question to Samiri

QS Thāhā [20] verse 95

قَالَ فَمَا خَطْبُكَ يَا سَامِرِيُّ ٩٥

He (Moses) said, "What prompted you (to do so), O Samiri?" (Kementeriaan Agama RI, 2019)

In this verse, the question is posed using (*mā*), which is used in its original meaning, namely as a genuine question. The questioner, in this case Prophet Moses, truly wanted to know the real reason, aiming to demand a clear explanation from the person being questioned, in this case Samiri. When Prophet Moses left Aaron and went to Samiri, he asked, “What is your business, O Samiri?” This question aimed to investigate the reasons and hidden motives behind Samiri’s major act of misleading the Children of Israel by making a calf statue to be worshipped. The word *خَطْبُكَ* carries the meaning of requesting an explanation for an important matter, so this expression means “what prompted you to do this?” or “what is your purpose behind all this?” (Al-Zamakhsharī, 1407).

Qatādah said that Samiri was a prominent figure from the Children of Israel, from the tribe of Sanirah. Although he was initially among those who accompanied Prophet Moses when they crossed the sea, he turned out to be a hypocrite. When the Children of Israel saw idol worshippers on their journey to worship idols, their old tendencies resurfaced, as was their old tradition. Samiri recognized this tendency and exploited it. He made a statue of a calf, knowing that his people were prone to falling into idolatry. When Prophet Moses returned from his prayer, he questioned Samiri's actions. Samiri replied, “I saw what they did not see,” (I know something they do not know), namely that the angel Jibril was riding a horse of life. He claimed to have been inspired to take a handful of soil from the horse's hoofprints, believing that the soil had the power to bring inanimate objects to life. When the soil was thrown onto the calf statue, it emitted a sound, as if it were alive and possessed a spirit. Samiri also spoke the words he heard from Moses, as if manipulating the revelation to deceive his people (Abū 'Abdillāh, 1384).

In the explanation above, the phrase *فَمَا خَطْبُكَ يَا سَامِرِيُّ* in this verse contains a genuine question from Prophet Moses to explore Samiri's hidden motives in misleading the Children of Israel by creating a calf statue. The word *خَطْبُ* indicates a demand for accountability regarding a major matter and the deeper purpose behind the action, revealing a desire to uncover the reality behind the deception that threatens the faith of his people.

c) Prophet Moses' Empathetic Question

QS Qaṣaṣ [28] verse 23

وَلَمَّا وَرَدَ مَاءَ مَدْيَنَ وَجَدَ عَلَيْهِ أُمَّةً مِّنَ النَّاسِ يَسْكُنُونَ ۖ وَوَجَدَ مِنْ دُونِهِمْ امْرَأَتَيْنِ تَذُودَانِ ۚ قَالَ مَا خَطْبُكُمَا هَٰئِلَتَا لَا نَسْقِي حَتَّى يُصْدِرَ الرِّعَاءُ وَأَكُونَا شَيْخَ كَبِيرٍ ٢٣

When he arrived at the water source in Madyan, he found a group of people watering their livestock, and behind them he saw two women keeping their livestock away from the water source. He (Moses) said, "What do you mean by doing that?" The two women replied, "We cannot water our livestock until the shepherds have returned their livestock, and our father is an elderly man." (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019).

When Prophet Moses arrived at the waters of Madyan and saw two women holding back their livestock, he asked, مَا خَطُّكُمَا "What is the matter with you two?" This sentence was not only meant to obtain information, but also to show concern, empathy, and admiration for the unusual situation: two women tending livestock amidst a crowd of men. In ar-Rāzī's commentary, it is explained that Moses' action reflects his social sensitivity and noble character. He noticed the unusual nature of the situation and, with kindness and wisdom, asked without judgment. Ar-Rāzī notes that the word "تَدْوَدَانِ" indicates that the two women were holding back their livestock to prevent them from mixing or competing with the herds of other men. Their response that they would not give water until the shepherds had finished, and that their father was an elderly man, revealed their social and economic circumstances, which forced the two women to directly engage in hard labor. Moses' seemingly simple question was actually an empathetic means, not merely an information-gathering tool, and it opened the door to a series of kindnesses and assistance that Moses provided to them. Thus, the phrase "مَا خَطُّكُمَا" is not merely a question, but an expression of the Prophet's concern for the weak, using a gentle style of language that is inspiring without being patronizing, as ar-Rāzī emphasizes that this question arises from a sense of decorum, concern, and readiness to help, not merely ordinary curiosity (Al-Rāzī, 1420).

Ibn Athiyah said, "The interrogative sentence using the phrase *al-khaṭbu* is used for a conversation partner who has suffered a misfortune, been oppressed, or for someone who is pitied or for a perpetrator of wrongdoing. It is generally used for an unpleasant matter that has befallen someone." (Abū 'Abdillāh, 1384).

The interrogative word مَا in the sentence مَا خَطُّكُمَا functions as an *istifhām* haqīqī or a genuine question seeking clarification about an unusual situation, namely two women performing arduous tasks such as herding and fetching water, which are typically done by men. However, the use of مَا here is not merely a literal question but also conveys astonishment and empathy toward the unique situation. Thus, the question simultaneously expresses curiosity and reasonable surprise, in line with ar-Rāzī's interpretation, which explains that the sentence expresses concern and a desire to understand their condition. Thus, although it is predominantly a real question, the word مَا in this context has a nuance beyond a simple question, namely an expression of astonishment and empathy.

d) The King's Question that Reveals the Truth of the Case of Prophet Yusuf

QS Yūsuf [12] verse 51

قَالَ مَا خَطُّكَ إِذْ رَأَوُكَ يُوسُفَ عَنْ نَفْسِهِ قُلْنَ حَاشَ لِلَّهِ مَا عَلِمْنَا عَلَيْهِ مِنْ سُوءٍ فَقَالَتْ امْرَأَتُ الْعَزِيزِ إِنَّ حَصْحَصَ الْحَقِّ أَنَا رَأَوْتُهُ عَنْ نَفْسِهِ وَإِنَّهُ لَمِنَ الصَّادِقِينَ ٥١

He (the king) said (to the women), "How were you when you tempted Joseph to submit himself?" They said, "Allah is Perfect. We know of no evil in him." The wife of al-Azīz said, "Now the truth is clear. I was the one who tempted him, and indeed he is among the righteous." (Kementeriaan Agama RI, 2019)

In this verse, the question is posed using (*mā*), which serves the original meaning of a question, as the speaker wants to know the truthful answer, and therefore an answer is expected. The style of the question is مَا خَطْبُكَ إِذْ رَاوَدْتُنَّ يُوسُفَ عَنْ نَفْسِهِ (how were you when you tempted Prophet Yusuf to submit himself). In this verse, the speaker is the king, while the addressees are the Egyptian women who had previously seen Prophet Yusuf in the Egyptian palace (Al-Bayḍāwī, 1418).

The question posed by the king in this verse is a genuine question that demands a real and honest answer from the women involved in the incident. In this context, the King acts as an upholder of justice and seeks to uncover the truth objectively, particularly regarding the accusations previously leveled against Prophet Joseph. Thus, the question مَا خَطْبُكَ (what is your matter) functions as an *istifhām* taḥqīq an integrative question aimed at uncovering facts, not merely for clarification. In response to this question, the women answered with a statement that contained both an acknowledgment and a defense of Prophet Yusuf's integrity, namely حَاشَ لِلَّهِ مَا عَلِمْنَا عَلَيْهِ مِنْ سُوءٍ (God is Perfect. We know of no wrongdoing on his part). Looking at the previous verse, when Prophet Yusuf was asked by the King to leave the prison, Prophet Yusuf refused to leave unless he received a guarantee of freedom from the King regarding the charges against him and that he was imprisoned without cause. Because he was afraid of leaving prison while the community misunderstood him, he explained that he had never wronged (committed adultery with) those women (the general reference to women was intended to include Al-Aziz's wife, but it was implied rather than stated explicitly). Thus, it was proven that Prophet Yusuf was right and that the women were the ones who had wronged him (Abū 'Abdillāh, 1384).

Then in the next verse, when the king asked the women, "What is your situation?" He meant, "What have you done?" In this verse, it is narrated that the women had wronged Prophet Yusuf by attempting to commit adultery (to satisfy their lustful desires) (Abū 'Abdillāh, 1384).

In this verse, the question word مَا in the sentence مَا خَطْبُكَ functions as *istifhām* ḥaqīqī, which is a real question that aims to ask for a direct and concrete explanation about a situation or event. The style of *istifhām* used is taḥqīq, meaning that the question is asked to explore the facts and obtain an objective and clear answer. Thus, the use of مَا here is not merely a common question form, but carries the meaning of a serious and in-depth request for information, in line with the context of the verse, which demands clarification of an important accusation. This shows that the question has a strong communicative function in the process of revealing the truth.

The Wisdom and Message of the Phrase *Mā Khaṭbu* in the Qur'an

Questions in the Qur'an consistently utilize the question form (*istifhām*) as an educational tool that transcends the function of merely gathering information. Rather, these questions actively encourage humans not to passively accept reality, but to use reason (*'aql*) and the heart (*qalb*) synergistically to uncover the hidden meanings behind every life event. This approach is at the

core of tadabbur (deep reflection) and tafakur (reflective thinking) emphasized in Qur'anic discourse. By posing rhetorical questions, the Qur'an encourages readers to engage critically and actively in the process of understanding revelation, sparking introspection and exploration of deeper meanings, rather than merely accepting messages dogmatically (Al-Smadi, 2022). This concept is in line with the view that the Qur'an facilitates the use of intellect and reflection as keys to understanding not only the text but also its implications for human existence (Rahman, 1980). Thus, Qur'anic questions serve as catalysts for developing holistic and transformative intellectual and spiritual awareness.

Carefully placing rhetorical questions such as this creates a dynamic learning space in which readers play an active role as researchers of the meaning of the text. Abdulaziz Sachedina asserts that the Qur'anic *istifhām* technique builds an imaginary dialogue between the text and the reader, motivating them to refer to tafsīr, discuss, or conduct further research to find valid and contextual answers to the questions posed by the Qur'an (Al-Smadi, 2022).

Within the framework of contemporary education, this question-and-answer model can be adapted to create an interactive classroom environment, where teachers encourage students to ask “why” and “how” about every concept, so that learning becomes a process of independent discovery rather than the reception of raw information (Rahman, 1980).

Many questions found in the Qur'an contain a deep contemplative dimension, inviting humanity to reflect on themselves, examine their intentions, actions, and the existential meaning of life. Having a clear purpose in life is a fundamental aspect in providing direction and motivation in one's life journey. With a deep understanding of the meaning and purpose of life, individuals can not only become more focused but also face challenges with a more positive perspective (Nurhasanah & Noviani, 2024). A meaningful life purpose can encompass various aspects, such as contributing to others, playing a role in society, and achieving personal development.

One interesting example is the phrase *Mā Khaṭbu*, which literally means “what is your business?” or “what major events are happening to you?” This phrase is used in certain contexts to encourage reflection and introspection. The value and function of this phrase include the following.

This phrase does not explicitly refer to the content of the event or incident being discussed, but rather aims to encourage the individual being asked to reflect and analyze the deeper meaning of their experiences (Enghariano, 2019). In this context, the question serves as a tool to stimulate reflective thinking, which not only asks for a direct answer but also invites individuals to explore the hidden dimensions of their lives.

Thus, questions that contain elements of reflection play an important role in guiding individuals to explore further the purpose, motivation, and existential understanding underlying certain actions or events, as well as forming a deeper awareness of themselves and the world around them.

These questions are not merely verbal interactions but also open up space for more reflective inner dialogue (Ilhami et al., 2024). It is as if, through these questions, Allah *SWT* or His angels are guiding humans to question the experiences they are facing, with questions such as, “What am I actually experiencing right now?” or “What message does life want to convey?” This encourages

individuals to reflect on the deeper meaning of events and promotes a broader understanding of themselves. The urge for deep reflection calls on humans to review their attitudes, decisions, and beliefs in facing major events that affect their lives both internally and externally.

Another lesson is that the educational method in the Qur'an is more guiding than instructive, allowing readers to discover meaning slowly but surely. The questions in the Qur'an provide space for readers to think independently. In addition, questions and answers are one way to measure the extent of a person's understanding of the material that has been studied (Juanda et al., 2024). The Qur'an does not provide explicit answers but encourages readers to actively seek meaning through reflection and critical thinking. (Irwansyah et al., 2023). Thus, this process respects individual thinking capacity and fosters spiritual discovery through critical reflection.

The thinking process triggered by Qur'anic questions not only sharpens logic but also touches on emotional and spiritual dimensions. By combining both, the Qur'an creates a holistic understanding, making a person intellectually intelligent and emotionally and spiritually sensitive (Irwana, 2024). Understanding gained through personal reflection is deeper and more enduring than information received dogmatically. The reflection process allows an individual to engage directly in the search for meaning and truth, resulting in a more robust and lasting understanding within the individual (Taylor, 1978).

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the questions in the Qur'an, including the phrase *Mā Khaṭbu*, are extraordinary educational tools in shaping human consciousness in a holistic manner, involving the mind, heart, and spirit. They open the way to critical thinking, existential reflection, and a deeper divine consciousness. By emulating this method, we not only educate but also nurture individuals who are conscious, wise, and open to the meaning behind every life experience.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the analysis of Uslub *Istifhām* in the Qur'an shows that questions are not only used to elicit information, but also have complex and profound rhetorical meanings. In the science of balaghah, *istifhām* serves as a tool to affirm truth, give warnings, issue commands, and invite readers to engage in deep reflection. The phrase *Mā Khaṭbu*, in particular, serves more than just a literal question; it is used to convey important messages in the context of major events and leave a deep impression on readers. Thus, *Mā Khaṭbu* acts as an educational tool that encourages introspection, intellectual and spiritual awareness, and a more holistic understanding of life and divine destiny. The Qur'an employs this question format to encourage believers to think critically, deepen their understanding, and awaken their awareness of the meaning of life.

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