

The Israelite Narratives in the Story of Ṣāliḥ (Peace Be Upon Him) in Light of the Tafsīr Heritage: A Study and Critique

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000477>

Received: 10 September 2025; Accepted: 16 September 2025; Published: 15 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This research addresses an important issue related to the Qur'an, namely the presence of Isrā'īliyyāt (Israelite reports) within exegetical works, many of which were filled with such narratives from an early stage and across different periods. These reports, transmitted generation after generation, were largely drawn from the Jewish and Christian heritage concerning the prophets, the origins of creation, the universe, and related matters, and entered Islam through certain Jews who embraced it. At the same time, another group emerged that rejected these Isrā'īliyyāt altogether, whether they agreed with Islamic teachings, contradicted them, or remained neutral. Accordingly, preachers and exegetes are urged to avoid citing weak and unsound reports in their lessons and interpretations. The study employed the inductive-analytical, deductive, and critical methods, and reached several important conclusions, the most notable being that Isrā'īliyyāt are not confined to reports with origins in the sources of the People of the Book, but rather encompass all statements and reports of non-Islamic origin that entered tafsīr; that the term Isrā'īliyyāt is applied to this bulk of narratives predominantly; and that a report may possess an authentic, good, or sound chain of transmission according to experts in 'ilm al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl, yet still contain falsehoods or myths in its content. Hence, there is no necessary link between the soundness of the chain and the reliability of the text, since a reliable chain may nonetheless transmit a flawed or irregular narrative.

Keywords: Qur'an, Isrā'īliyyāt, narratives.

INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an is the primary source of Islam, encompassing the foundations of creed, values, and concepts, the truths of the soul and life, and elucidating God's laws and signs in both the self and the universe in a miraculous style. However, the enemies of Islam sought to undermine this solid foundation by inserting Isrā'īliyyāt (Israelite reports) into Qur'anic exegesis, knowing that the strength of the Muslim nation lies in its understanding of the Book of its Lord. These narratives entered certain exegetical works through accounts of creation, the prophets, and the stories of the Children of Israel—some accepted by Companions and Successors, while others rejected them outright—thus necessitating the purification of tafsīr literature from weak and baseless reports, restricting interpretation to what is authentic and in harmony with revelation. This is crucial since Isrā'īliyyāt often contain exaggerations and myths that distort the correct understanding of the Qur'anic text and negatively affect the Islamic heritage.

From this perspective, the present research, entitled “The Israelite Narratives in the Story of Ṣāliḥ (peace be upon him) in Light of the Qur'an: A Study and Critique,” seeks to clarify the nature of these reports, highlight their dangers, and purify exegetical texts from what is unsound or fabricated. The research problem lies in the fact that many exegetes transmitted Isrā'īliyyāt without distinction, critique, or commentary—as in the case of the narrations of Muḥammad ibn al-Sā'ib al-Kalbī and others—which allowed falsehoods and doubts to infiltrate certain tafsīr works. The importance of this study is underscored by the abundance of exegetical

writings that still require careful scrutiny and cleansing from such reports, particularly those concerning the stories of the prophets.

Methodologically, the study adopts the inductive-analytical approach by tracing the relevant Qur’anic verses and comparing exegetical material with authentic sources; the critical approach to assess the reliability of narrations and identify the reasons for their acceptance or rejection; and the deductive approach to derive final conclusions consistent with sound scholarly principles.

Regarding previous scholarship, several significant works have addressed the subject of *Isrā’īliyyāt* in Qur’anic exegesis. Among these are the doctoral dissertation “The Israelite Narratives in al-Ṭabarī’s Tafsīr from Sūrat al-Fātiḥa to Sūrat al-Isrā’: Compilation and Study” by Aḥmad Najīb ibn ‘Abd Allāh Ṣāliḥ at the Islamic University of Madinah; the dissertation “*Isrā’īliyyāt* and Their Impact on Tafsīr Works” by Ramzī Na’nā’ah at al-Azhar University (1970); and Muḥammad Abū Shahbah’s influential book “*Isrā’īliyyāt* and Fabrications in Tafsīr Works.” These works laid the foundation for understanding the infiltration and impact of Israelite reports in tafsīr.

More recent contributions have expanded the discussion. These include the collective work *Marāji’ fī al-Isrā’īliyyāt: Dirāsāt Ta’šīliyyah* (2015) published by the Tafsīr Center for Qur’anic Studies; Imād ‘Aṭīyyah ‘Abd al-Rāziq’s article *al-Isrā’īliyyāt wa Dawruhā fī Kutub al-Tafsīr* in the Zagazig University Journal of Arts (2018), which analyzed the methodological implications of *Isrā’īliyyāt* in exegetical sources; and the study by ‘Awdah ‘Abd ‘Awdah ‘Abd Allāh and ‘Arsān Ghāzī Ḥajjājirah, *Manhaj al-Baghawī fī Riwayat al-Isrā’īliyyāt fī Tafsīriḥ* (Arab Democratic Center, 2021), which examined al-Baghawī’s principles in transmitting and filtering such reports.

Additionally, Khalīl Maḥmūd al-Yamānī has authored two important studies: *al-Isrā’īliyyāt fī al-Tafsīr bayna Ḍarūrat al-Tawzīf wa Imkān al-Istighnā’* (2019), which compared the methodologies of employing or avoiding Israelite narratives through an applied study on Sūrat Ṭāhā, and *Tawzīf al-Isrā’īliyyāt fī al-Tafsīr: Dirāsah Taḥlīliyyah Ta’šīliyyah* (2021/2022), which proposed a framework for their regulated use. Similarly, Muḥammad Ismā’īl Maḥrūs’s article *al-Isrā’īliyyāt fī Kutub al-Tafsīr* (Banha University Journal of Arts, 2019) presented a typological classification of such reports with practical examples. More recently, Qāsim Muḥammad Barakah’s article *Naqd al-Isrā’īliyyāt fī Tafsīr al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz li-Ibn ‘Aṭīyyah* (Arab Journal of Human Sciences, 2024) critically examined the presence and treatment of these narratives in Ibn ‘Aṭīyyah’s tafsīr.

Taken together, these studies converge in defining *Isrā’īliyyāt*, classifying their types, and underscoring their dangers for Qur’anic exegesis. Nevertheless, the present research distinguishes itself by focusing on a specific prophetic narrative—namely, the story of Prophet Ṣāliḥ (peace be upon him)—which has not previously been subjected to such focused critical analysis, thereby offering a unique scholarly contribution to Qur’anic studies.

Defining the *Isrā’īliyyāt* and Their Dangers

Definition of the *Isrā’īliyyāt*:

Linguistically, the term *Isrā’īliyyāt* is the plural of *Isrā’īliyyah*, derived from “*Banū Isrā’īl*” (the Children of Israel). *Isrā’īl* is the title of Prophet Ya’qūb (Jacob, peace be upon him), and the term was subsequently applied to all his descendants (Rashīd Riḍā, 1990, 4/4). Technically, it refers to the stories and reports that infiltrated Muslim culture through the People of the Book—Jews and Christians—both of whom are, rightly or wrongly, ascribed to *Isrā’īl* (peace be upon him) (Fā’id, n.d., p. 107).

The Danger of the *Isrā’īliyyāt* Narratives on Islamic Heritage

The danger of the *Isrā’īliyyāt* lies in their direct connection to the understanding of Qur’anic verses—the very Book that presents the complete vision of Muslim creed. Any distortion in comprehending its verses negatively affects the holistic perception of Islam, which is a grave matter. Moreover, such narratives tempted some Muslims to go beyond the limits set by the Qur’an, seeking to detail what it left general or to explain what it

left ambiguous, by resorting to corrupted and unreliable sources (al-Khālidi, 2023, p. 93). Their dangers can be summarized as follows:

1. **Corruption of Muslim creed and perception:** Since creed is the backbone of Islam, any corruption in its foundation corrupts everything built upon it. The *Isrā'iliyyāt*, full of fabrications and the fancies of their transmitters, portray God in ways unbefitting His Majesty and Perfect Attributes, and ascribe to His prophets that which contradicts their established infallibility (Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī, n.d., p. 29). If Muslims lose their correct understanding of God and His prophets, what then remains?
2. **Deterring people from Islam:** The *Isrā'iliyyāt* contain myths and absurdities that contradict established knowledge and verified findings. For example, the alleged mountain “Qāf” encircling the earth, or the fish claimed to carry the earth—narratives that may have been accepted in an age of ignorance and superstition, but are untenable today when astronauts have circled the earth and witnessed it suspended in space without pillars, mountains, or seas beneath it (Abū Shahbah, n.d., p. 303). Al-Ālūsī affirmed: “There is no such mountain, as sensory evidence testifies. They have traversed the earth, by land and sea, around the Tropic of Cancer many times, and did not witness it” (al-Ālūsī, 1415, 14/26/258).
3. **Undermining trust in early scholars:** These narratives were attributed to eminent Companions, Successors, and converts from the People of the Book such as Ibn ‘Abbās, Abū Hurayrah, ‘Abd Allāh ibn Salām, Wahb ibn Munabbih, and Ka‘b al-Aḥbār. Critics of ḥadīth recognized them all as trustworthy, yet the *Isrā'iliyyāt* became a pretext for disparaging them (Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī, n.d., pp. 55–84).
4. **Portraying the Prophet ﷺ as contradicting the Qur’an or his own ḥadīth:** Some false reports are even transmitted as *marfū‘* (attributed to the Prophet ﷺ), such as narrations about the lifespan of the world or the creation of the sun and moon. These fabrications portray him in ways unbefitting his truthfulness or his agreement with revelation (Abū Shahbah, n.d., p. 288).
5. **Distracting Muslims with trivialities:** They occupy Muslims with fruitless debates, wasting time and energy on issues with no benefit, diverting them from reflecting upon the Qur’an, drawing lessons, and applying its rulings for the rectification of religion and worldly affairs (Suwailim, n.d., p. 118). What greater calamity could there be than distracting Muslims from their Lord’s Book with such nonsense?
6. **Opening the door to missionary and orientalist attacks:** Christian missionaries and Orientalists exploited these reports to malign Islam, the Prophet ﷺ, and the Companions. They found in them material that satisfied their prejudices and animosity, and used them as tools in their intellectual crusades against Islam, which persist in various forms (al-Sa‘īd, n.d., p. 56).
7. **Orientalist distortions:** Some Orientalists, especially Jews among them, highlighted the presence of these *Isrā'iliyyāt* in tafsīr works and drew the false conclusion that Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ derived his entire religion from Jewish scholars, rabbis, and scriptures. On this basis, one of them even argued that “Muslims must reinterpret the Qur’an and subject it to historical criticism in order to realize how indebted they are to Judaism and the Children of Israel” (Āmāl, n.d., p. 54).
8. **Corrupting unprepared Muslims:** These reports caused some Muslims, lacking firm knowledge of their faith and of the alien nature of such narratives, to slip into dangerous attitudes of belittling Islam. Europe, having nurtured such individuals, turned them into its mouthpieces across the Muslim world. Their harm is even greater than that of external enemies, for Muslims are more likely to trust and be deceived by their claims (Abū Shahbah, n.d., p. 6).

The Isrā'iliyyāt Narratives in the Story of Ṣāliḥ (peace be upon him) The Isrā'iliyyāt in the Exegesis of God’s Saying:

“And to Thamūd [We sent] their brother Ṣāliḥ. He said, ‘O my people, worship Allah; you have no deity other than Him. There has come to you a clear proof from your Lord. This is the she-camel of Allah [sent] to

you as a sign. So leave her to eat in Allah's land and do not touch her with harm, lest a painful punishment seize you.'” (al-A'raf: 73).

In the exegesis of this verse, several *Isrā'iliyyāt* reports are mentioned by Imām Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, al-Ṣan'ānī, and others. It was Reported by al-Ṭabarī and al-Ṣan'ānī, from *Isrā'īl*, from 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Rufay', from Abū al-Ṭufayl, who said: “Thamūd said to Ṣāliḥ: ‘Bring us a sign if you are truly among the truthful.’ Ṣāliḥ said to them: ‘Go out to a mound of land.’ So they went out, and behold, it trembled like a pregnant she-camel in labor, then it split open, and from its midst emerged the she-camel. Ṣāliḥ then said to them: {This is the she-camel of Allah, [sent] to you as a sign. So leave her to graze in Allah's land and do not touch her with harm, lest a painful punishment seize you} (al-A'raf: 73).” (al-Ṭabarī, 2000, 15/372).

Judgment on the chain: This isnād is authentic; its transmitters are trustworthy. However, it is *mawqūf* (halted) at Abū al-Ṭufayl.

The *Isrā'iliyyāt* in the Exegesis of God's Saying: “But they hamstrung her, so he said, ‘Enjoy yourselves in your homes for three days. That is a promise not to be denied.’” (Hūd: 65).

It has been reported in the exegesis of this verse that many exegetes cited *Isrā'iliyyāt*. Among the most significant are the following:

First Report:

Imām 'Abd al-Razzāq narrated from 'Abd al-'Azīz, who said: “And another man told me that Ṣāliḥ said to them: ‘The sign that punishment will befall you is that on the next morning your faces will turn red, on the second day yellow, and on the third day black.’ He said: ‘Then the punishment came upon them. When they saw this, they perfumed and shrouded themselves in preparation.’”

Judgment on the chain of transmission: This isnād is weak because it contains an anonymous narrator.

Second Report:

From Ma'mar, who said: “Someone who heard al-Ḥasan told me: When the people of Thamūd hamstrung the she-camel, her calf fled until it ascended a hilltop and said, ‘My Lord, where is my mother?’ Then it gave out a loud cry, and the punishment descended upon them and extinguished them.”

Judgment on the chain of transmission: This isnād is weak because it contains an anonymous narrator.

Third Report:

Imām 'Abd al-Razzāq narrated from Ma'mar, from Qatādah: “When they hamstrung the she-camel, Ṣāliḥ said to them: ‘Enjoy yourselves three more days—the remainder of your lifespans. The sign of your destruction is that your faces will turn yellow the next morning, red on the second day, and black on the third day.’ And so it came to pass. On the third day, when they realized their destruction was certain, they shrouded and perfumed themselves, then the cry seized them and extinguished them” (al-Ṣan'ānī, n.d., 2/231).

Judgment on the chain of transmission: This isnād is weak, despite the narrators being generally reliable, due to Ma'mar's weakness in narrating from Qatādah. Moreover, it is *mawqūf* (halted) on him.

Analysis of the Content of the Reports:

What Imām 'Abd al-Razzāq transmitted here concerning Ṣāliḥ's she-camel—how it emerged, his foretelling to his people of the sign of their destruction, and what the calf of the she-camel supposedly did—does not go beyond being *Isrā'iliyyāt* (al-Bayḍāwī, 1418: 3/37). This is evident for several reasons:

1. The Qur'an did not mention any description of the she-camel, nor did the sound Sunnah. All that was revealed in the Qur'an is God's statement: “*The she-camel of God*”. It may not have been different

from other she-camels in its natural kind, but it was attributed to God as an honour and distinction, making it a sign of truth deserving of reverence (al-Khaṭīb, n.d., 4/423). Hence Imām al-Rāzī said: “Nothing is mentioned in the Qur’an except that the she-camel was a sign and a miracle; as for specifying in what manner it was a miracle, there is no detail about it” (al-Rāzī, 1420: 8/561).

2. The sound Sunnah also contains no account of its description. Thus, the author of *Tafsīr al-Manār* stated: “Nothing authentic can be used as evidence for the she-camel being created from a rock or a mound of earth, as was narrated from Abū al-Ṭufayl” (Rashīd Riḍā, 1990: 4/8/447).
3. The reports cited in this story stem either from weak narrators such as Muḥammad b. Ishāq b. Yasār, al-Suddī, and al-Kalbī, or from transmitters well-known for narrating *Isrā’īliyyāt* such as Wahb b. Munabbih, Ka’b al-Aḥbār, and others (al-Tha’labī, n.d.: 2/175).
4. These narratives contain exaggerations and additions not mentioned in the Qur’an and are consistent with the Israelite spirit in constructing such texts.
5. They also include elements contrary to God’s established way (*sunnat Allāh*) in His creation. For example, the reports state that when Ṣāliḥ informed them of the sign of their destruction—that their faces would turn red, then yellow, then black—they supposedly shrouded and perfumed themselves. Yet God has ingrained in human nature, whether believer or unbeliever, the impulse to turn to Him and seek refuge in times of calamity. As Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān observed: “This indicates that all creatures are disposed to return to God in times of distress” (Rashīd Riḍā, 1990: 7/11; Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān, 1992: 4/249). But these reports depict the people of Ṣāliḥ as being above this innate disposition.

In summary, the true lesson concerning this she-camel does not lie in how it was created, nor in the cry of its calf, nor in other details supplied by these narratives and their likes. Rather, the lesson is in the trial it represented: it was placed before the people as a test of obedience to God’s command. It was not necessary for it to have extraordinary physical traits distinguishing it from other she-camels. It was sufficient that it was a she-camel by which they were tried in whether they would honour God’s command regarding it (al-Khaṭīb, n.d., 6/1168).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that the presence of *Isrā’īliyyāt* in Qur’anic exegesis constitutes both a methodological challenge and an intellectual responsibility. The classification of a narration as *Isrā’īlī* does not, in itself, render it false; some reports find corroboration in authentic Islamic sources and may thus be accepted, while others clearly contradict revelation and must be rejected. In cases where revelation remains silent, suspension of judgment is the most prudent stance. Moreover, the scope of *Isrā’īliyyāt* is broader than materials originating in the scriptures of the People of the Book; the term applies more generally to all foreign elements that entered *tafsīr* from non-Islamic sources. A further complication lies in the disjunction between the reliability of a chain of transmission and the soundness of its content: a narration may be transmitted with a strong *isnād* yet still contain mythical or spurious elements in its text. This duality underscores the necessity of careful scrutiny and critical engagement.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Enhance scholarly engagement with the phenomenon of *Isrā’īliyyāt*. Researchers and students of *tafsīr* should systematically analyze their presence, classification, and impact within the exegetical tradition.
2. Encourage advanced academic research—particularly at the postgraduate level—aimed at uncovering the falsehood of spurious reports and safeguarding the Islamic intellectual heritage from their influence.
3. Produce accessible scholarly tools for readers of classical *tafsīr*, such as annotated booklets or indices that identify *Isrā’īliyyāt* within each work, thereby preventing uncritical acceptance.

4. Integrate critical awareness of Isrā'īliyyāt into curricula of Qur'anic studies and Islamic scholarship, equipping students with methodological rigor in evaluating extra-Islamic reports.
5. Develop counter-narratives in da'wah and academic discourse that expose the dangers of uncritically reproducing Isrā'īliyyāt, especially given their exploitation by Orientalist and secular critiques to cast doubt on the integrity of Islam.

By pursuing these recommendations, Muslim scholars and institutions can more effectively protect the Qur'anic sciences from distortion, strengthen methodological precision in tafsīr, and preserve the authenticity of the Islamic heritage. In sum, addressing the challenge of Isrā'īliyyāt is not a marginal scholarly pursuit but a vital task for safeguarding the intellectual integrity and spiritual credibility of Islamic civilization.

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