

A Socio-Historical Approach in Qur'anic Exegesis: Application of Fazlur Rahman's Double Movement Theory on the Whipping Punishment for Adultery Offenders

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Received: 04 Juni 2026

Revised: 15 Juni 2026

Accepted: 02 Juli 2026

Abstract:

Understanding the legal verses of the Qur'an, particularly QS. An-Nur verse 2 regarding the punishment of flogging for those who commit adultery, is often carried out literally without considering the socio-historical dimensions that underlie the revelation of these verses. The tension between the universality of the Qur'an's message and the particularity of its context in 7th-century Arab society calls for a methodology of interpretation that can bridge fidelity to the text and responsiveness to social change. The Double Movement methodology developed by Fazlur Rahman in *Islam and Modernity* (1982) emerges as a systematic response to this challenge, working dialectically through two movements: from the contemporary context to the historical context of the Qur'an to extract universal moral principles, then applying those principles back into contemporary realities. This research uses a qualitative method based on library research with content analysis employing a hermeneutic approach. The results of the study indicate that corporal punishment is a historical instrument to realize universal principles in the form of deterrent effects and the protection of socio-moral order, so that in the modern context, which already has a more comprehensive penal system, these principles have the potential to be realized through a more contextual formulation of law without neglecting its fundamental substance. This study concludes that the socio-historical approach through the Double Movement methodology provides a solid methodological foundation for the development of Islamic law that is responsive to the demands of the times while remaining rooted in the authenticity of the Qur'anic values.

Keywords: Double Movement, Fazlur Rahman, Caning Punishment, Socio-Historical, Contextual Tafsir

Abstrak:

Pemahaman terhadap ayat-ayat hukum Al-Qur'an, khususnya QS. An-Nur ayat 2 tentang hukuman cambuk bagi pelaku zina, seringkali dilakukan secara harfiah tanpa mempertimbangkan dimensi sosio-historis yang melatarbelakangi turunnya ayat tersebut. Ketegangan antara universalitas pesan Al-Qur'an dan

partikularitas konteks pewahyuannya pada masyarakat Arab abad ke-7 Masehi menuntut adanya metodologi tafsir yang mampu menjembatani antara fidelitas terhadap teks dan responsivitas terhadap perubahan sosial. Metodologi Double Movement yang dikembangkan Fazlur Rahman dalam *Islam and Modernity* (1982) hadir sebagai respons sistematis terhadap tantangan tersebut, dengan bekerja secara dialektis melalui dua gerakan: dari konteks kekinian menuju konteks historis Al-Qur'an untuk mengekstrak prinsip moral universal, kemudian mengaplikasikan prinsip tersebut kembali ke dalam realitas kontemporer. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif berbasis library research dengan analisis isi (content analysis) berpendekatan hermeneutis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa hukuman cambuk merupakan instrumen historis untuk mewujudkan prinsip-prinsip universal berupa efek jera dan perlindungan tatanan sosial-moral, sehingga dalam konteks modern yang telah memiliki sistem pemidanaan lebih komprehensif, prinsip-prinsip tersebut berpotensi diwujudkan melalui formulasi hukum yang lebih kontekstual tanpa mengingkari substansi fundamentalnya. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pendekatan sosio-historis melalui metodologi Double Movement memberikan landasan metodologis yang kokoh bagi pengembangan hukum Islam yang responsif terhadap tuntutan zaman namun tetap berakar pada otentisitas nilai-nilai Al-Qur'an.

Kata Kunci: Double Movement, Fazlur Rahman, Hukuman Cambuk, Sosio-Historis, Tafsir Kontekstual

INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest challenges faced by contemporary Muslims is how to understand and actualize the text of the Qur'an in the reality of an ever-changing life. On one hand, the Qur'an is believed to be the word of Allah, which is universal and timeless; on the other hand, it was revealed within a very specific social, cultural, and historical context, namely the Arab society of the 7th century CE. The tension between the universality of the Qur'anic message and the particularity of the context of its revelation is precisely the starting point for the development of a socio-historical approach in the study of tafsir.

The socio-historical approach is not an innovation that emerged without traditional roots. Since the classical era, scholars have been aware of the importance of understanding the background of the revelation of verses through the study of asbab al-nuzul. Imam al-Qaththan defines asbab al-nuzul as events or questions that become the reason for the revelation of a verse (Al-Qaththan, 1973). Meanwhile, al-Suyuthi in *al-Itqan fi Ulum al-Qur'an* emphasizes that knowledge of the reasons for the revelation of verses is a prerequisite for accurate interpretation (al-Suyuthi, 2004). However, the modern socio-historical approach goes beyond the study of classical asbab al-nuzul by considering not only the micro events behind the revelation of a single verse, but also the macro context that encompasses the overall socio-cultural conditions of society at the time the revelation was sent down.

The urgency of this approach becomes increasingly apparent when Muslims are faced with contemporary legal issues that have never been encountered before. The legal verses of the Qur'an, including the verse concerning the punishment for adultery in QS. An-Nur verse 2, are often understood literally without considering their socio-historical dimensions. As a result, the legal products produced often

conflict with the values of justice and humanity, which are essentially the main objectives (maqasid) of Islamic law itself. (Saeed, 2006).

This is where the significance of the Double Movement methodology developed by Fazlur Rahman lies. As a Muslim intellectual who masters both the classical Islamic scholarly tradition and modern Western philosophy, Fazlur Rahman offers a methodology capable of bridging fidelity to the text and responsiveness to social change. This methodology works hermeneutically through two main movements: the first movement is to understand the historical and social context at the time of the revelation to uncover the original intent of the Qur'an, while the second movement is to apply that understanding in the current social and cultural context, taking into account the developments of the times. (Zahra et al., 2024) This approach allows Islamic law to adapt to modern social dynamics without losing its transcendental moral essence, while at the same time opening up space for progressive and contextual *ijtihad* in responding to various new challenges of the Muslim community. (Zumaroh et al., 2025)

This article specifically examines three main issues: first, how the socio-historical context influences the understanding of the legal verses of the Qur'an; second, how the modern contextualization paradigm responds to the challenges of the relevance of interpretation; and third, how Fazlur Rahman's Double Movement methodology can be concretely applied to the verses concerning the punishment of flogging for adulterers. This study is expected to provide a methodological contribution to the development of contextual interpretation in Indonesia while remaining rooted in the authentic values of the Qur'an.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative research type, namely research that seeks to find and process data so that the core problem can be answered. This study represents a part of library research. The approach used is descriptive analysis, with primary data obtained from the works of Fazlur Rahman, especially *Islam and Modernity*, as well as the text of the Qur'an and classical and contemporary exegesis works that are relevant. Secondary data includes scientific journals, academic books, and previous studies that discuss the socio-historical approach, contextualization methodology, and contemporary exegesis thought.

The analysis technique used is content analysis with a hermeneutic approach. The collected data is analyzed systematically through three stages: first, a conceptual description of the socio-historical approach and the Double Movement methodology; second, a critical analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of this methodology; and third, the application of the Double Movement methodology to the verse on whipping punishment (QS. An-Nur [24]: 2) as a case study. An interdisciplinary approach combining exegesis, hermeneutic philosophy, and Islamic law studies is applied to produce a comprehensive and balanced analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-Historical Context as the Foundation for Qur'anic Interpretation

The social context in the interpretation of the Qur'an refers to the overall

societal conditions underlying the revelation of a verse, including social structures, customs, economic systems, gender relations, and power dynamics prevailing in 7th-century Arab society. Understanding this social context is not merely an additional insight, but an essential methodological component in producing accurate and relevant interpretations, because understanding the historical background and asbab al-nuzul helps interpreters interpret religious texts more accurately while avoiding rigid or contextually detached interpretations. (Rambe & Samosir, 2026)

Quraish Shihab emphasizes that the Qur'an is present as *hudan li al-nas* (guidance for mankind), and the function of this guidance can only be optimally understood when the reader has adequate knowledge about the condition of the humans addressed by the revelation. (Shihab, 1994) Without an understanding of context, readers are likely to misinterpret the message of revelation or even apply it inappropriately in a different context; for interpretation models that ignore the socio-historical context tend to produce rigid interpretations detached from reality. (Aisyah, 2025) In line with this, Nasruddin Baidan warns of two fatal mistakes that can occur without an understanding of the socio-historical context: first, absolutizing laws that are essentially temporary; and second, relativizing laws that are essentially universal and permanent. (Baidan, 1998)

Classical scholars have paid great attention to the social context through the study of asbab al-nuzul. Imam al-Qaththan defined it as something because of which the Qur'an was revealed, whether in the form of events that occurred or questions posed to the Prophet (Al-Qaththan, 1973). Al-Suyuti in al-Itqan emphasizes that knowing the asbab al-nuzul is a prerequisite for correct interpretation, because knowledge of the cause will help determine the ruling, wisdom, and purpose of the revealed verse. (al-Suyuthi, 2004).

Nevertheless, the modern socio-historical approach goes beyond the classical study of asbab al-nuzul in two fundamental aspects. First, it does not limit itself to a micro study of the specific events underlying a verse, but also considers the macro context encompassing the overall socio-cultural conditions during the Prophet's time. Second, it does not merely record historical facts, but conducts a hermeneutical analysis of how that context shapes the language, idioms, and legal logic in the Qur'anic text. (Azhari, 2023). It is this distinction that positions the modern socio-historical approach as a more comprehensive and reflective methodology compared to the traditional asbab al-nuzul study.

Legal verses in the Qur'an cover various areas of life, ranging from worship, transactions, marriage, inheritance, criminal law (*jinayat*), to interfaith relations. The Qur'an contains legal verses that encompass these various aspects of life, and these verses are divided into two main categories: *qath'i* law, which is certain, and *zhanni* law, which requires further interpretation. (Aziba et al., 2025) Scholars of the principles of Islamic jurisprudence identify around 500 verses that are directly related to legal matters. Each of these legal verses did not descend into a vacuum, but rather appeared as a concrete response to the actual problems faced by Arab society at that time; because a number of Qur'anic verses have specific contexts that affect the way they are interpreted and applied, including in addressing contemporary social dynamics. (Mufadhol & Nuraeni, 2025)

As an illustrative example, the verse about polygamy (QS. An-Nisa [4]: 3) was revealed in the post-Battle of Uhud context when many orphans lost their fathers. The permission for polygamy was granted not as a legitimacy of male biological desire, but as a solution for social protection for vulnerable orphans and widows. Likewise, the verse about leadership in the household (QS. An-Nisa [4]: 34) should be understood in the context of the economic-social structure of 7th-century Arab society, where men bore full financial responsibility, not as a statement about the ontological superiority of men over women. (Wadud, 1999). Understanding the socio-historical dimensions of verses like these becomes the key to producing interpretations that are just and in harmony with the maqasid al-shariah.

Modern Contextualization in the Interpretation of the Qur'an

Amin Abdullah in **Study of Religion: Normativity or Historicity?** develops a paradigm that becomes the epistemological foundation for modern contextualization. According to him, religion, including the Qur'an, has two inseparable dimensions: a normative dimension that is ideal, universal, and timeless; and a historical dimension that is factual, particular, and time-bound. The failure to understand the dialectic between the normative and the historical is what gives rise to two chronic diseases in Islamic thought: fundamentalism, which absolutizes the historical, and secularism, which discards the normative. (Abdullah, 1996).

Modern contextualization seeks to take a middle path between these two extremes. It maintains normative values that are universal while critically examining the historical dimensions that are particular. With this approach, the Qur'an is not treated as a historical document frozen in the context of the 7th century, but it is also not treated as if it has no context at all. Abdullah Saeed (2006) calls it a contextualist approach, which is an approach that treats the text of the Qur'an as a message revealed in a specific context but intended for all times. (Saeed, 2006).

Contemporary Muslim scholars have developed various methodological instruments for the purpose of contextualization. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd developed the method of *ta'wil* that distinguishes between *ma'na* (meaning related to a historical context) and *maghza* (significance that can be actualized in a new context). For Abu Zayd, the task of the *mufasssir* is to move from *ma'na* to *maghza* by considering contextual differences methodically, not arbitrarily. (Saprudin, 2025). Abdullah Saeed developed the graduated priority method, which classifies Qur'anic verses on a continuum from those most context-bound, such as verses responding to specific events, to those most universal, such as verses about monotheism, justice, and mercy. The more contextual a verse is, the greater the room for reinterpretation; the more universal, the more it is bound to the literal substance. This approach provides a more structured and operationalizable framework for the purposes of contextualization. (Saeed, 2006).

Modern contextualization is not a limitless process. Muslim scholars agree that there are areas that must not be touched by contextualization, namely matters included in the category of *qath'iyyat* (absolute certainty), both in terms of transmission certainty (*qath'iy al-wurud*) and meaning certainty (*qath'iy al-*

dalalah). Within the framework of ushul fiqh, qath'iy al-dalalah refers to texts that contain a single meaning and cannot be understood other than what the wording indicates, so ijtihad must not be performed on texts that explain the law in such clear and definite terms. (Aziba et al., 2025) Thus, contextualization only operates in the areas of technicalities, implementation, and form adjustments, not in the elimination of obligations whose substance is certain; because the effort of contextualization is essentially a necessity that works in the realm of zhanni, not to invalidate texts that are already certain. (Fariduddin, 2022)

Within this framework, Khaled Abou El Fadl adds that responsible contextualization must be carried out with full awareness of the hierarchy of values in the Qur'an. (El Fadl, 2001) Islamic law that speaks on behalf of God must be based on moral values such as justice, equality, and human rights, which are in accordance with maqashid al-shari'ah. Higher principles in that hierarchy, such as justice, equality of dignity, and the prevention of harm, can indeed serve as a basis for reinterpreting technical provisions that are at a lower level in that hierarchy. (Hishom & Rofiq, 2025)

Fazlur Rahman's Double Movement Methodology

Fazlur Rahman Malik was born on September 21, 1919, in Hazara, West Punjab (now Pakistan). He completed his undergraduate education at the University of Punjab, then earned a doctorate from the University of Oxford with a dissertation on the philosophy of Ibn Sina under the guidance of Prof. S. van den Bergh. (Malik, 2025) His intellectual journey led him to master the traditions of classical Islamic philosophy as well as modern Western philosophy, especially hermeneutics from Schleiermacher to Gadamer, which ultimately became the foundation for his efforts to make the Qur'an the core of a contemporary Muslim interpretive framework.

Fazlur Rahman served as the Director of the Islamic Research Institute in Pakistan, tasked with interpreting Islam in rational and scientific terms to meet the progressive needs of modern society. However, his reformist thinking brought him pressure from conservative circles, leading him to leave Pakistan and join the University of Chicago as a Professor of Islamic Studies until his death in 1988. (Malik, 2025) It was here that he developed his systematic methodology of interpretation, especially in *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (1982). (Rahman, 1982) His unique intellectual background, moving between the traditions of classical Islamic scholarship and the demands of modern intellect, makes Fazlur Rahman a figure capable of positioning the Qur'an as a source of universal moral values, not merely a static book of law. (Tibri et al., 2026)

Fazlur Rahman's Double Movement Methodology is built on two solid epistemological assumptions. First, the Qur'an is a coherent unity, where each part explains one another and forms an organized structure of teachings. The implication of this assumption is that the interpretation of one verse should not be done in isolation from the overall message of the Qur'an. Secondly, the Qur'an has two inseparable dimensions: a historical dimension that is particular and a normative dimension that is universal. Fazlur Rahman explicitly states in *Islam and Modernity* that the failure of contemporary Islamic thought stems from the

inability to distinguish between the Qur'an's commands that are specific and temporal and its moral objectives that are general and permanent. (Rahman, 1982). From this premise, he developed the two-movement method as a middle way between rigid literalism and liberalism that loses textual footing.

The Double Movement methodology works through two complementary interpretive movements carried out dialectically. The first movement moves from the present context to the time of the Qur'an's revelation, where the interpreter explores the socio-historical situation, customs, social structure, as well as the problems of Arab society in the 7th century. (Arsyad, 2023) This process is not linear and mechanical, but rather a hermeneutic dialectic between text and reality, between the past and the present, between the particular and the universal, in which understanding of the historical context is formulated into universal moral principles before being applied back to contemporary situations. (Zahra et al., 2024)

First Movement: From the Present to the Time of the Qur'an. The first movement is a hermeneutical journey from the situations and problems faced by contemporary Muslims to the historical context of the Qur'an. This process involves two sub-movements: the first sub-movement is understanding the meaning of the Qur'anic text in its specific historical context, including the study of *asbab al-nuzul*, the social conditions of pre-Islamic Arab society and early Islam, as well as the prevailing legal and moral traditions. The second sub-movement is generalizing from those specific answers to formulate moral principles that transcend their historical context. Fazlur Rahman emphasizes that the Qur'an generally provides reasons for every law it establishes (*'illat al-hukm*), and from these *'illat*, universal principles can be extracted. (Rahman, 1982; Sutrisno, 2006).

Second Movement: From the Qur'an to the Present. The second movement is the journey back from the general principles that have been extracted to contemporary situations. This process demands a deep understanding of the actual conditions and issues faced by today's Muslim society, and then applying the universal principles of the Qur'an to that context. (Saleh, 2007). Ahmad Syukri Saleh explained that in this second movement, interpreters are required to have strong social analysis skills so as not to apply universal principles mechanically and inaccurately. Imron Rosyadi added that these two movements must be carried out simultaneously and dialectically: understanding the contemporary context also helps clarify understanding of the historical context, and vice versa.

Although the Double Movement methodology has received widespread acclaim from progressive Islamic thinkers, it has also faced criticisms that deserve attention. There are at least three main criticisms that are often raised. First, the practice of double movement relies on the interpreter's ability to establish the boundary between 'general principles' and 'specific contexts'; this line is not always clear and is prone to manipulation. Second, this methodology is considered to place too much trust in modern critical reasoning, which potentially positions interpretive authority solely in the hands of the intellectual elite. Third, a question of authority arises: who is entitled to determine which principles are universal and which provisions are temporal. (Arsyad, 2023)

Nevertheless, Double Movement remains one of the most important

methodological contributions in the history of contemporary exegesis. Its strength lies in its ability to bridge fidelity to the text and responsiveness to social changes, two demands that are often perceived as conflicting. Syamsuddin himself acknowledges that despite existing criticisms, Double Movement provides the most systematic epistemological framework among the existing contemporary exegesis methodologies. (Syamsuddin, 2009).

Aplikasi Double Movement terhadap Hukuman Cambuk bagi Pelaku Zina

QS. An-Nur ayat 2 menyatakan:

الرَّانِيَةُ وَالزَّانِي فَاجْلِدُوا كُلَّ وَاحِدٍ مِّنْهُمَا مِائَةَ جَلْدَةٍ وَلَا تَأْخُذْكُمْ بِهِمَا رَأْفَةٌ فِي دِينِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَلْيَشْهَدْ عَذَابَهُمَا طَائِفَةٌ مِّنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

"Female adulterers and male adulterers, flog each one of them with a hundred lashes, and let not compassion for them prevent you from (carrying out) the religion (law) of Allah if you believe in Allah and the Last Day. Let (the execution of) the punishment be witnessed by a group of the believers."

This verse is the only verse in the Qur'an that explicitly mentions the punishment for those who commit adultery, namely one hundred lashes. (Mubarrok et al., 2025) In a socio-historical context, this verse was revealed in a society that had not yet been familiar with a modern penal system. 7th-century Arab society did not have correctional institutions, prison systems, or structured rehabilitation programs. In such a context, physical punishment was an available instrument to provide a deterrent effect (*al-zajr wa al-tarhib*) as well as protection for moral and social order. The imposition of one hundred lashes should also be understood in a comparative context: it is a moderation of pre-Islamic customary punishments that were much more brutal, where perpetrators of adultery could be killed, exiled, or enslaved arbitrarily. (Zumaro et al., 2025)

The Qur'an establishes a very strict standard of proof for cases of adultery, namely four witnesses who have directly observed it (QS. An-Nur [24]: 4). In Islamic legal studies, this requirement is understood not merely as a technical-procedural condition, but as an indication that hudud punishments can only be applied in conditions where there is genuine evidence to implement such severe punishment. Islam sets a very strict standard of proof that is almost impossible to meet without the perpetrator's confession. This nearly impossible standard of proof indicates that the 'illah or ratio legis of the punishment for adultery is more directed towards the function of prevention and protection of social order rather than merely the execution of physical punishment. (Mubarrok et al., 2025)

By applying the first movement of the Double Movement methodology, we can identify several universal principles contained in the imposition of corporal punishment. First, the principle of proportional and deterrent sanctions: behavior that damages social order and moral values must receive strict sanctions and provide a deterrent effect. Second, the principle of protecting social order: the law must protect family institutions and moral values that are the foundation of society. Third, the principle of moderation and procedural justice: establishing strict standards of proof indicates that the law must be applied with high caution, not recklessly.

These universal principles are extracted from the 'illah that can be read from

the text: the punishment of whipping is established because adultery damages the social order and family institutions, not because the physical punishment specifically is a requirement of faith. In other words, the physical punishment is a *wasilah* (instrument), not *ghayah* (the goal itself). (Rahman, 1982). The second move requires us to deeply understand contemporary reality before applying the principles that have been extracted. The modern context has significant differences from the 7th-century context in terms of penal systems. Modern countries, including countries with a majority Muslim population, have developed comprehensive penal systems: correctional institutions, rehabilitation programs, fines systems, probation, and various forms of social sanctions that have been proven more effective in rehabilitating offenders and preventing crime.

By applying the universal principles that have been extracted to this modern context, Double Movement opens a discursive space to consider legal formulations that differ from the literal text yet remain faithful to their fundamental substance. The question is not 'should corporal punishment be applied?' but rather 'how can the principles of deterrence, protection of social order, and procedural justice be realized most effectively in the context of modern society?' This is a shift from the means (*kaifiyyah*) to the ends (*ghayah*), which is the core of Double Movement hermeneutics.

This approach does not mean rejecting or nullifying the provisions of the Qur'an, but rather is an effort to understand why a provision was established, and then seek the best way to realize that objective in a different context. As emphasized by Amin Abdullah, normativity and historicity should not be contrasted, but should be understood as two complementary dimensions so that Islam can become more inclusive and comprehensive in responding to the dynamics of the times. In the case of caning punishment, its normative value is the protection of social order and moral justice, and this value must continue to be realized in every context. (Makiyyah et al., 2024)

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the socio-historical approach is an inseparable methodology from responsible and relevant Qur'anic interpretation. The social context has a significant influence on the understanding of legal verses, and ignoring this contextual dimension has the potential to produce distorted interpretations that conflict with the values of justice which are the spirit of Islamic law. Fazlur Rahman's Double Movement methodology emerges as one of the most systematic methodological responses to this challenge of contextualization. By working through two dialectical movements – from the current context to the historical context of the Qur'an to extract universal moral principles, and then back from these universal principles to contemporary reality – this methodology successfully bridges fidelity to the text and responsiveness to social change. The application of this methodology to QS. An-Nur verse 2 shows that the punishment of whipping can be understood as a historical instrument to realize universal principles in the form of deterrent effects and the protection of socio-moral order. In a modern context with a more comprehensive penal system, these universal principles have the potential to be realized through a more contextual formulation of the law, without denying its

fundamental substance. This approach provides a solid methodological foundation for the development of Islamic law that is responsive to the demands of the times while remaining rooted in the authenticity of Qur'anic values. Ultimately, the development of a socio-historical approach in Indonesia with scholars such as Amin Abdullah, Quraish Shihab, and Sahiron Syamsuddin shows that this contextual interpretation methodology has found fertile ground in the Indonesian Islamic scholarly tradition, which is moderate and inclusive. In the future, further development of this methodology, especially in operationalizing more measurable criteria to distinguish universal principles from temporal provisions, is an urgent agenda that requires serious attention from Indonesian interpretation scholars.

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