



**THE SELECTION OF THE PHRASE AHL AL-DHIKR IN THE
QUR'AN: A COMPARATIVE SEMANTIC STUDY OF QS. AN-NAHL:
43 AND QS. AL-ANBIYA': 7**

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Abstract

This study investigates the Qur'anic selection of ahl al-dhikr in QS. An-Nahl: 43 and QS. Al-Anbiyā': 7, where the context pertains to inquiring of knowledgeable individuals, yet the Qur'an employs dhikr rather than 'ilm. Using qualitative methodology integrating thematic exegesis, semantic analysis, and comparative examination of classical and contemporary commentaries, the study identifies four interpretive dimensions: epistemological, spiritual, moral, and methodological. Theoretical contributions include: a systematic comparative semantic analysis of dhikr (292 occurrences) and 'ilm (854 occurrences), demonstrating that dhikr encompasses cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions beyond the predominantly cognitive scope of 'ilm; articulation of methodological, theological, and historical factors producing interpretive differences between Sunni, Sufi, and Shī'ī traditions; and an integrated epistemological framework overcoming dichotomies between knowledge and spirituality. As a tentative interpretation, ahl al-dhikr constitutes a normative ideal of scholarship integrating cognitive expertise with spiritual-moral excellence. However, significant limitations are acknowledged: qualitative-only design without empirical data, scope limited to two verses, interpretive subjectivity, and absence of case studies testing contemporary effectiveness. Practical implications remain conceptual, with proposed indicators offered as a framework for future empirical research. The concept offers potentially relevant normative guidance for distinguishing authentic scholarly authority in the digital age, though empirical validation remains for future research.

Keywords: *Ahl al-Dhikr; Ahl al- 'Ilm; Qur'anic Semantics; Islamic Epistemology; Tafsiṛ*

A. Introduction

Amidst the bustling discourse of modern civilization, which exhibits an overwhelming enthusiasm for science and technology, the Qur'an presents itself with a distinctive lexicon that continually invites deep contemplation (Andi, 2024). One of these linguistic particularities is articulated in the divine statement of Allah SWT in QS. An-Nahl: 43, which affirms that prior to Prophet Muhammad, God sent only men to whom revelation was granted, and that those who lack knowledge are instructed to ask *ahl al-dhikr* (the people of remembrance) (Rohman et al., 2026; Zulfa & Al-Mahri, 2026). This verse not only underscores the continuity of prophetic revelation within human history but also establishes an epistemological principle in Islam (Syahdan et al., 2026; Zubaidillah, 2018) when confronted with matters beyond one's understanding, one is directed to turn to those who are grounded in authoritative knowledge.

At first glance, this verse appears to be a conventional injunction to consult those who possess knowledge (Ilyas, 2014; Mustafayeva et al., 2025). Upon closer examination, an important lexical nuance emerges: the Qur'an does not employ the expression *ahl al-'ilm* (people of knowledge), which might seem more immediately fitting, but instead uses the term *ahl al-dhikr* (people of remembrance). A crucial question subsequently arises regarding the Qur'anic preference for the term *dhikr* over *'ilm*. Although these two concepts are often perceived as closely related and are sometimes used interchangeably in common discourse, their semantic orientation and theological implications warrant closer examination (Qolbi, 2020; Rosyid & Idris, 2020; Shahbal & Nirwana, 2025).

This semantic observation is far from trivial. Within the tradition of Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), the selection of one word over another—particularly within divine discourse—is widely understood to embody profound wisdom and specific communicative intentions (Alfani et al., 2026). As Izutsu (Izutsu, 2002a) has demonstrated in his foundational work on Qur'anic semantics, every lexical choice in the Qur'an operates within a complex network of relational meanings, and no two terms are perfect

synonyms. This premise, while widely accepted among Qur'anic scholars, is itself an interpretive commitment that this study adopts rather than seeks to prove (Alfani et al., 2026).

Classical and contemporary exegetes have long deliberated upon the meaning of *ahl al-dhikr*. Al-Qurṭubī (Serrano Ruano, 2016), in his seminal commentary, indicates that *al-dhikr* here encompasses the meaning of the Qur'an itself as well as preceding scriptures. Scholars concerned with the linguistic dimensions of the Qur'an (*balāghah*) perceive that *dhikr* possesses deeper semantic dimensions than mere cognitive knowledge. However, as will be discussed in this study, exegetes from different interpretive traditions (Sunni, Sufi, and Shi'ī) have arrived at different conclusions about who exactly constitutes *ahl al-dhikr*, reflecting underlying methodological, theological, and historical factors. This diversity of interpretation is not a weakness to be resolved but a richness to be understood.

This discussion assumes heightened relevance in the modern era, characterized by a sharp dichotomy between science and religion, between knowledge and spirituality. The term *'ilm* is frequently understood narrowly as empirical-rational knowledge divorced from divine values (Hayani et al., 2026). Conversely, the Qur'an, through its deliberate selection of the phrase *ahl al-dhikr*, appears to emphasize that authentic knowledge is that which originates from and leads to *dhikr Allāh* (remembrance of God) (Rofiq, 2023). However, the present study does not assume that this Qur'anic emphasis directly translates into contemporary Muslim practice or belief; rather, it offers a textual and interpretive exploration of the concept as it appears in the Qur'an and classical exegetical literature.

This study offers a textual and interpretive investigation into the Qur'an's selection of the phrase *ahl al-dhikr* in QS. An-Nahl: 43 and QS. Al-Anbiyā': 7. Employing a thematic exegetical approach (*al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī*) and semantic analysis (Naguib, 2015), it explores the meanings of the terms

dhikr and *‘ilm* within the Qur'anic worldview and examines how various exegetes have understood the phrase *ahl al-dhikr*. Beyond linguistic analysis, the study aims to explore the conceptual implications of this lexical choice for understanding the nature of knowledge, the criteria for scholarly authority, and the relationship between epistemology and spirituality in Islam.

This study does not claim that its interpretation is the only valid reading of the verse. Alternative interpretations, including strictly historical-contextual readings that identify *ahl al-dhikr* exclusively with the People of the Book, remain legitimate and are discussed in the findings. The study also does not claim empirical validity for its proposed applications; any relevance to contemporary challenges is conceptual and tentative, pending further empirical research. The findings are shaped by the researcher's interpretive commitments and source selection, and scholars from different traditions may reach different conclusions. The research is grounded in the recognition of a unique linguistic phenomenon in QS. An-Nahl: 43 and QS. Al-Anbiyā': 7, where the phrase *ahl al-dhikr* is used despite the contextual emphasis on consulting knowledgeable individuals, which might intuitively align more with *ahl al-‘ilm*. Based on the premise that every lexical choice in the Qur'an carries specific meaning, the study hypothesizes a significant semantic distinction between *dhikr* and *‘ilm*.

The analysis is expected to reveal such distinctions, thereby clarifying the criteria of *ahl al-dhikr* as not entirely identical to *ahl al-‘ilm* in its conventional sense. This has potential implications for the Islamic concept of knowledge, including sources of knowledge, the ethical dimensions of a scholar (*‘ālim*), and the integration of epistemology with spirituality. The study acknowledges limitations: it is based on qualitative analysis of two verses without empirical data, and its claims about contemporary relevance remain conceptual. The findings are offered as a contribution to ongoing scholarly discourse on Qur'anic semantics and Islamic epistemology.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative library research design, relying exclusively on authoritative written sources without field observation or interviews (Creswell, 2009). The primary objects of analysis are QS. An-Nahl: 43 and QS. Al-Anbiyā': 7, complemented by other verses related to *dhikr* and *'ilm*. The research integrates four complementary approaches: thematic exegesis (*al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī*) (Abdul Hayy, 2002), semantic analysis (*al-dirāsah al-dilāliyyah*), linguistic-rhetorical analysis (*al-dirāsah al-lughawiyyah wa al-balāghiyah*), and contextual analysis through *asbāb al-nuzūl* (Izutsu, 2002a). Primary sources include classical and contemporary exegetical works, while secondary sources comprise Arabic lexicons, works on *'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, and relevant scholarly literature (Alfani & Mafaza, 2026).

Data collection was conducted through systematic documentation using concordances to identify relevant verses, cataloguing exegetical opinions, and compiling lexicographical and scholarly materials. Data analysis followed a content analysis approach in five stages: describing textual and exegetical data, interpreting through semantic and rhetorical examination, comparing perspectives across exegetical traditions, critically evaluating based on *uṣūl al-tafsīr* and Arabic linguistics, and synthesizing findings to formulate conclusions regarding the Qur'an's selection of *ahl al-dhikr* and its epistemological implications.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Results

a. Description of the Verses and Their Contexts of Revelation

This research focuses on two Qur'anic verses that explicitly employ the phrase *ahl al-dhikr*, namely QS. An-Nahl: 43 and QS. Al-Anbiyā': 7. Both verses feature identical wording.

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ إِلَّا رِجَالًا نُوْحِي إِلَيْهِمْ ۖ فَاسْأَلُوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

And We sent not before you [O Muhammad] except men to whom We revealed knowledge; so ask the people of the message [ahl al-dhikr] if you do not know.

Based on a thorough examination of exegetical works, it is ascertained that these verses were revealed in response to the polytheists of Mecca who denied the prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him). They objected to accepting Muhammad as a messenger on the grounds that a divine envoy should originate from the angelic realm, rather than being an ordinary human being who eats, drinks, and walks through marketplaces seeking livelihood. Allah SWT refuted their skepticism by affirming that all messengers before Muhammad were likewise ordinary human beings who received revelation. To substantiate this, Allah commanded them to consult *ahl al-dhikr* if they indeed lacked knowledge (Al-Suyuti, 2002).

Al-Ṭabarī, in his seminal work *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, relates from Qatādah that the intended meaning of *ahl al-dhikr* in this verse refers to the People of the Book—those who possess the Torah and the Gospel. They were instructed to inquire of the Jews and Christians who held scriptures, for within these books is contained the information that previous prophets also originated from among ordinary human beings. Thus, the polytheists' argument that a messenger must be an angel is refuted by the historical facts recorded in earlier scriptures (Ṭabarī, 1954). Al-Qurṭubī, in his exegesis, reinforces this interpretation by affirming that the contextual framework of the verse indeed addresses the substantiation of Muhammad's prophethood by referencing information contained in prior scriptures (Al-Qurthubi, 1971).

It is important to acknowledge that while the immediate historical context (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) points specifically to the People of the Book, classical and contemporary exegetes have offered varying opinions on whether the verse's applicability remains confined to this original context or extends more broadly. Al-Ṭabarī himself allows for broader interpretation by noting that the verse applies generally to anyone possessing knowledge of Allah's

scriptures. The principle of *al-'ibrah bi 'umūm al-lafẓ lā bi khuṣūṣ al-sabab* (consideration is given to the generality of the wording, not the specificity of the occasion) has been invoked by many scholars to justify a universal reading. However, as noted by some contemporary critics, this expansion of meaning requires careful justification to avoid disregarding the original historical setting. This study acknowledges this tension and proceeds with the understanding that while the verse has universal implications, its specific historical reference to the People of the Book remains an essential layer of its meaning.

b. The Meaning of *Ahl al-Dhikr* in the Perspective of Qur'anic Exegetes: A Critical Comparative Analysis

Based on an analysis of the opinions of exegetes (*mufasssīrūn*) from various periods and schools of thought, a rich tapestry of meanings emerges concerning the phrase *ahl al-dhikr* that cannot be reduced to a single interpretation. Each exegete contributes a distinct understanding shaped by their particular scholarly perspective. However, beyond merely presenting these diverse views, this section offers a critical examination of the methodological reasons underlying their differences.

Al-Ṭabarī, as a representative of tradition-based exegesis (*al-tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr*), tends to interpret *ahl al-dhikr* specifically as the People of the Book, referencing the narratives that elucidate the context of the verse's revelation. His methodological commitment to transmitted reports (*riwāyāt*) from the Companions and Successors leads him to prioritize the historical-literal meaning. Nevertheless, he also allows for broader interpretation by noting that this verse applies generally to anyone possessing knowledge of Allah's scriptures (Ṭabarī, 1954). This dual tendency—adherence to transmitted reports alongside openness to broader applicability—reflects a methodological tension within tradition-based exegesis itself.

Al-Zamakhsharī, in his renowned work *al-Kashshāf*—celebrated for its rhetorical analysis (*balāghah*)—explains that *al-dhikr* here signifies knowledge and understanding, rendering *ahl al-dhikr* as those who possess

knowledge of past events. Al-Zamakhsharī's emphasis on the linguistic dimension opens the door to a more universal understanding (Az-Zamakhshari, 2006). However, it must be noted that al-Zamakhsharī's Mu'tazilī theological orientation influences his interpretive choices, particularly his tendency to prioritize rational-linguistic analysis over transmitted reports when the two appear to conflict. This observation is not a dismissal of his contribution but rather a recognition that all exegesis is shaped by underlying theological commitments.

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, in his comprehensive commentary *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, systematically synthesizes at least four meanings inherent in the phrase *ahl al-dhikr*. First, it signifies the people of the Torah, wherein *al-dhikr* denotes the Torah itself. Second, it refers to those who are expert in interpreting the meanings of past scriptures, through which expertise it becomes known that previous prophets were also ordinary human beings. Third, it indicates those who are knowledgeable about past events generally, for one who is learned about something necessarily remembers it and is capable of transmitting it. Fourth, it denotes those who engage in remembrance (*dhikr*) through knowledge and rigorous investigation (*tahqīq*), indicating that knowledge must be accompanied by contemplation and verification (Ar-Razi, 1993). Al-Rāzī's pluralistic approach – refusing to reduce the verse to a single meaning – offers a methodological model for accommodating interpretive diversity without claiming absolute finality for any single reading.

Exegetes with Sufi orientations, such as al-Qushayrī in *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt* and Ismā'īl Ḥaqqī in *Rūḥ al-Bayān*, introduce even deeper dimensions of meaning. They understand *ahl al-dhikr* not merely as people possessing knowledge, but as those whose knowledge has elevated them to the station of *ma'rifah* – profound spiritual knowledge of Allah. Al-Qushayrī explicitly states that *ahl al-dhikr* are scholars who believe in the Prophet and are experts in their respective fields, whether in religious or worldly matters, with the crucial condition that their expertise does not render them heedless of remembering Allah (Al-Qushayrī, 1989). This interpretive approach,

while rich in spiritual insight, raises methodological questions about the relationship between esoteric meaning (*ishārah*) and exoteric meaning (*'ibārah*). Sufi exegesis does not typically claim to replace the literal meaning but rather to add layers of spiritual signification accessible to those with advanced spiritual training.

In the contemporary era, Sayyid Quṭb, in his influential work *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*, understands *ahl al-dhikr* more broadly as knowledge specialists in general. He emphasizes that this verse teaches a methodology for attaining truth, namely the necessity of consulting those who possess recognized scholarly authority within their respective disciplines (Quṭb, 1950). This aligns with the perspective of M. Quraish Shihab in *Tafsīr al-Mishbāh*, who maintains that *ahl al-dhikr* encompasses anyone possessing knowledge, whether from among the People of the Book during the Prophet's era or Islamic scholars in subsequent periods. Quraish Shihab further emphasizes that the use of the term *al-dhikr* contains an indication that beneficial knowledge is that which is continually remembered, contemplated, and practiced, rather than mere information that passes fleetingly (Shihab, 2002).

While the Shī'ī interpretation – which identifies *ahl al-dhikr* with the *Ahl al-Bayt* (the Prophet's household) – is presented separately below, it is worth noting here that the differences between Sunni and Shī'ī readings are not merely doctrinal but also methodological. Sunni exegetes generally prioritize either transmitted reports (*riwāyah*), linguistic analysis (*dirāyah*), or a combination of both. Shī'ī exegesis, in addition to these methods, incorporates the principle of Imamic authority, whereby the sayings of the infallible Imams are considered authoritative sources of interpretation. This methodological divergence explains why Shī'ī exegetes such as al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī arrive at a more restricted identification of *ahl al-dhikr* with the *Ahl al-Bayt*, while still acknowledging the broader applicability of the verse to other knowledgeable individuals. Acknowledging this methodological difference allows for a more productive comparative analysis than simply

noting the divergence in conclusions. To facilitate comprehension of the diversity of interpretations, the following comparative table summarizes the perspectives of the exegetes.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Exegetical Interpretations of *Ahl al-Dhikr*

Exegete	Exegetical Work	Meaning of <i>Ahl al-Dhikr</i>	Exegetical Orientation	Methodological Basis
al-Ṭabarī	<i>Jāmi' al-Bayān</i>	People of the Book (Torah and Gospel) and People of the Qur'an	Tradition-based (<i>al-tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr</i>)	Transmitted reports from Companions and Successors
al-Zamakhsharī	<i>al-Kashshāf</i>	People of the Book who possess knowledge of past events	Rhetorical (<i>balāghah</i>)	Linguistic-rhetorical analysis with Mu'tazilī theological orientation
al-Qurṭubī	<i>al-Jāmi' li Aḥkām al-Qur'ān</i>	Believing People of the Torah and Gospel, also People of the Qur'an	Juridical and linguistic	Integration of legal reasoning and linguistic analysis
Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī	<i>Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb</i>	1. People of the Torah; 2. Those knowledgeable of past events; 3. Experts in meanings of scriptures; 4. Those who engage in <i>dhikr</i> through knowledge and <i>tahqīq</i>	Philosophical-theological	Rational inquiry and systematic synthesis

al-Qushayrī	<i>Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt</i>	Scholars who believe in the Prophet, experts in their fields (religious and sciences)	Sufi-esoteric	Esoteric indication (<i>ishārah</i>) alongside exoteric meaning
Ismā'īl Ḥaqqī	<i>Rūḥ al-Bayān</i>	People of the Qur'an plus elite scholars possessing <i>ma'rifah</i> (spiritual knowledge)	Sufi-esoteric	Spiritual unveiling (<i>kashf</i>) and transmitted reports
Sayyid Quṭb	<i>Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān</i>	Knowledge specialists in general, referring to those who possess information	Literary and socio-cultural (<i>adabī ijtimā'ī</i>)	Contemporary literary and civilizational analysis
M. Quraish Shihab	<i>Tafsīr al-Mishbāḥ</i>	People of knowledge, whether from among the People of the Book or Islamic scholars	Contextual	Contextualization for contemporary Indonesian society

To unveil the mystery underlying the selection of the term *dhikr* over *ilm*, this research conducts an in-depth semantic analysis of both terms by consulting classical Arabic lexicons and examining their usage within the Qur'an. This analysis is essential because, within the Arab linguistic tradition, there exist no pure synonyms that can be arbitrarily interchanged without semantic consequences.

The term *dhikr* derives from the root *dhakara*, which carries the fundamental meaning of remembering, mentioning, contemplating, or preserving something in memory (Fuad 'abd al Baqi, 1986). Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, in his monumental work *Al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur'ān*, explains that *al-dhikr* encompasses several interrelated levels of meaning (Al-Ashfahani, 1999). The first level is remembering in the heart, wherein an individual brings something into their consciousness. The second level is mentioning with the tongue, expressing what resides in the heart through utterance. The third level is preserving knowledge by practicing it, for knowledge that is not acted upon is, in essence, forgotten even if it remains stored in memory.

Meanwhile, the term *'ilm* derives from the root *'alima*, which signifies knowing, understanding, or recognizing something according to its true nature. Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī distinguishes between *al-'ilm* as knowledge of the essence of something and *al-ma'rifah* as knowledge preceded by ignorance. In its usage, the term *'ilm* predominantly refers to the cognitive aspect—the endeavor to unveil the truth of objects through processes of thinking and reasoning (Al-Ashfahani, 1999).

The term *dhikr* and its derivations appear 292 times in the Qur'an across various contexts (Pracoyo, 2008). The term *'ilm* and its derivations appear 854 times. While these raw frequencies are informative, their methodological implications require careful interpretation. *First*, the higher frequency of *'ilm* does not necessarily indicate its greater conceptual importance. Frequency counts must be interpreted in light of distribution across *sūrahs*, collocation patterns, and semantic fields. *Ilm* and its derivatives appear in a wider range of contexts (legal, cosmological, eschatological, narrative), while *dhikr* appears more concentrated in contexts related to worship, revelation, and spiritual consciousness. *Second*, frequency data alone cannot determine hierarchical relationships between concepts. The fact that *dhikr* appears fewer times than *'ilm* does not imply that *dhikr* is subordinate to *'ilm*. Rather, the two terms operate in different but overlapping semantic fields. *Third*, the frequency of *dhikr* (292

occurrences) is still substantial enough to indicate its centrality within the Qur'anic worldview. Key concepts such as *īmān* (faith) appear approximately 250 times, *taqwā* (piety) approximately 250 times, and *ṣalāh* (prayer) approximately 70 times. With 292 occurrences, *dhikr* ranks among the more frequently occurring theological terms in the Qur'an.

A methodological limitation of this frequency analysis must be acknowledged: raw counts depend on how one defines "derivations" and whether one includes proper names, particles, or only nominal and verbal forms. Different concordances may yield slightly different numbers. The figures presented here are drawn from *Al-Mu'jam al-Mufahras li Alfāz al-Qur'ān* (Fuad 'abd al Baqi, 1986) and are offered as approximate indicators rather than absolute measurements.

Beyond frequency, the qualitative semantic distinction between the two terms becomes increasingly evident when tracing their usage within the Qur'an. Significantly, in numerous instances, *dhikr* is consistently associated with the dimension of the heart and spirituality. The Qur'an refers to itself as *al-dhikr*, prayer is designated as *dhikr*, and knowledgeable people are described as *ulū al-albāb* (people of understanding) who continually remember Allah in all circumstances. Indeed, in QS. Al-Ra'd: 28, Allah affirms that only through the remembrance of Allah (*bi dhikr Allāh*) do hearts find tranquility. This demonstrates that *dhikr* has a direct impact on an individual's psychological and spiritual condition (Al-Daim, 1996).

Conversely, the term *ilm* and its derivations appear with a broader scope. The Qur'an employs this term for various objects of knowledge, whether worldly or otherworldly, material or immaterial (Pracoyo, 2008). The narrative of Prophet Moses seeking knowledge from Prophet Khidr in QS. Al-Kahf teaches that certain types of knowledge cannot be acquired through conventional learning processes but rather through direct guidance from Allah. Nevertheless, the term *ilm* itself does not explicitly contain the spiritual dimension inherent in the term *dhikr*. To clarify the

semantic comparison between these two terms, the following table presents a comparative analysis.

Table 2. Semantic Comparison of the Terms *Dhikr* and *Ilm* in the Qur'an

Aspect of Comparison	Term <i>Dhikr</i>	Term <i>Ilm</i>
Root Meaning	Remembering, mentioning, contemplating	Knowing, understanding the essence
Dimension	Cognitive + affective + spiritual	Predominantly cognitive
Primary Object	Revelation, scripture, divine messages	Material and immaterial objects
Relationship with the Heart	Explicit (heart as the center of <i>dhikr</i>)	Implicit
Ultimate Purpose	Remembrance of Allah (<i>dhikr Allāh</i>) and tranquility of heart	Unveiling the truth of objects
Consequence	Produces God-consciousness and noble character	Produces information and understanding
Frequency in the Qur'an	292 occurrences	854 occurrences

c. The Secrets Underlying the Selection of the Phrase *Ahl al-Dhikr*: Findings with Tentative Conclusions

Based on the synthesis of semantic analysis and exegetical investigation, four principal interpretive dimensions emerge underlying the Qur'an's selection of *ahl al-dhikr*. These findings represent one plausible interpretation among several, not an absolute or final reading of the verse. The term *al-dhikr*, which in numerous verses refers to the Qur'an and preceding scriptures, signifies that divine revelation is the most authoritative source of knowledge. This reading does not deny empirical and rational sciences but argues they must operate within revelatory guidance. Alternative epistemological frameworks emphasizing reason (*'aql*) as an independent source also deserve acknowledgment.

Dhikr encompasses a spiritual dimension not explicitly present in *'ilm*. An *ahl al-dhikr* is not merely a repository of information but one whose knowledge has permeated the soul and shaped perpetual remembrance of Allah (Al-Qushayrī, 1989). Observable indicators from exegetical literature include *taqwā* (piety), *tawāḍu'* (humility), *khushū'* (reverence), *adab* (proper conduct), and *zuhd* (asceticism). While not yielding quantitative measurability, these provide a framework grounded in Islamic scholarly tradition.

Ahl al-dhikr possess ethical qualities not necessarily inherent in *ahl al-'ilm* generally. As their knowledge increases, their piety deepens and heart refines. They are not ostentatious or harsh, refrain from insulting differing views, embody *haybah* (dignified awe), and address complex issues with profound insight (Wibowo, 2021). However, this claim is contested: some exegetes argue the verse simply commands consulting experts without moral claims about them.

Dhikr possesses a broader semantic range than *'ilm*, encompassing remembering, contemplating, mentioning, and practicing. Al-Rāzī describes *ahl al-dhikr* as "those who engage in remembrance through knowledge and verification (*tahqīq*)," indicating knowledge must be accompanied by contemplation and substantiation. Thus, *ahl al-dhikr* does not merely know but contemplates, articulates, and practices what they know.

d. The Hierarchical Relationship Between *Ahl al-Dhikr* and *Ahl al-'Ilm*: A Tentative Conclusion

This research suggests, as a plausible interpretation, that *ahl al-dhikr* constitutes a higher level of scholarly attainment than *ahl al-'ilm* in the generic sense. Every *ahl al-dhikr* is necessarily *ahl al-'ilm* (since one cannot engage in meaningful remembrance without knowledge), but not every *ahl al-'ilm* attains the rank of *ahl al-dhikr*. However, this hierarchical claim requires several qualifications. First, the relationship is not necessarily linear; one could argue that authentic *'ilm* already includes remembrance, contemplation, and practice, making *ahl al-dhikr* the full realization of what

ahl al-‘ilm ought to be rather than a separate category. Second, the claim is more securely grounded in the normative tradition (what scholars should be) than in descriptive historical analysis (what scholars actually were). Third, alternative interpretations are possible; some exegetes argue the verse makes no hierarchical claim at all, simply identifying *ahl al-dhikr* as the people to consult without comparing them to *ahl al-‘ilm* as a separate category.

The hierarchical reading is one plausible interpretation among several, not a necessary conclusion from the textual evidence. The Qur'an invites humanity not merely to pursue knowledge cognitively, but to strive to become part of *ahl al-dhikr*—those whose knowledge enlivens the heart, draws them nearer to Allah, and brings mercy to the universe. This is presented as one model of the true scholar in the Qur'anic perspective, not as the only possible model.

e. Specific Finding: *Ahl al-Dhikr* in Shī‘ī Perspective with Comparative Analysis

The Shī‘ī tradition identifies *ahl al-dhikr* with the *Ahl al-Bayt* (the Prophet's household). Al-Kulaynī, in *Al-Kāfī*, asserts that the Imams are the inheritors of the Prophet's knowledge and preserved from error (Al-Kulaini, 2005). Al-Ṭabāṭabā‘ī explains this interpretation does not negate the general meaning of the verse but sees the *Ahl al-Bayt* as the most perfect embodiment of *ahl al-dhikr*, possessing knowledge derived directly from the Prophet through an authentic chain of inheritance (al-Ṭabāṭabā‘ī, 1997).

The comparative analysis reveals significant divergences between Sunni and Shī‘ī interpretations. Sunnis primarily identify *ahl al-dhikr* as the People of the Book and scholars, based on transmitted reports and linguistic analysis, with no doctrine of infallibility beyond prophets. Shī‘īs primarily identify *ahl al-dhikr* as the *Ahl al-Bayt*, grounded in Imamic teachings as authoritative sources and presupposing Imamic infallibility (*iṣmah*). While the Shī‘ī interpretation does not negate the Sunni reading, it adds the dimension that those with a special connection to revelation carry particular authority in elucidating divine messages. This study does not

adjudicate between or harmonize these interpretations but offers the comparative analysis as a contribution to understanding the diversity of Islamic exegetical traditions.

f. Limitations of the Present Study

Several limitations of this research should be acknowledged. First, the findings are based solely on qualitative analysis of exegetical texts without empirical data (surveys, interviews, or case studies), so claims about relevance to contemporary challenges remain theoretical suggestions rather than empirical demonstrations. Second, the interpretation is shaped by the researcher's own intellectual commitments; while alternative views have been presented fairly, readers from different scholarly traditions may reach different conclusions. Third, the frequency analysis of *dhikr* (292 occurrences) and *'ilm* (854 occurrences) is approximate, as different concordances may yield different figures. Fourth, the proposed indicators for the spiritual and moral dimensions of *ahl al-dhikr* have not been empirically validated and are offered as a framework for future research rather than definitive measurements. Fifth, the study's scope is limited to two specific verses (QS. An-Nahl: 43 and QS. Al-Anbiyā': 7); a more comprehensive study would examine all occurrences throughout the Qur'an and ḥadīth literature. Sixth, the contemporary applications suggested (e.g., addressing "instant preachers" in Indonesia) are illustrative rather than exhaustive, as concrete implementation strategies require interdisciplinary collaboration beyond this study's scope.

These limitations do not invalidate the findings but should be kept in mind when evaluating the study's conclusions. The interpretation presented here is one plausible reading among several, offered as a contribution to ongoing scholarly conversation rather than as a final or definitive statement.

2. Discussion

The research findings presented in the previous section suggest that the selection of the phrase *ahl al-dhikr* in QS. An-Nahl: 43 and QS. Al-

Anbiyā': 7 encompasses four principal interpretive dimensions: the epistemological indication concerning the authentic source of knowledge, the spiritual dimension and internalization, the moral qualification and character, and the broader semantic scope. However, it is essential to acknowledge from the outset that these findings represent one plausible interpretation among several, not a definitive or final reading of the verse.

This discussion section adopts a critical stance toward the findings themselves, examining their limitations, considering alternative interpretations, and engaging with contemporary academic debates that may challenge or refine the conclusions reached. It is possible that the research design, which began with the hypothesis that a significant semantic distinction exists between *dhikr* and *ilm*, has inadvertently shaped the analysis toward confirming that hypothesis. Alternative readings, such as those that minimize the distinction between the two terms or those that argue the verse is purely contextual with no universal implications, have been given less space than they might deserve.

This discussion attempts to redress this imbalance by explicitly engaging with counterarguments and alternative frameworks (Al-Daghistani, 2022). Before proceeding, it is important to clarify what this study does not claim. It does not claim that *ahl al-dhikr* is a Qur'anic term that appears elsewhere beyond these two verses. It does not claim that the spiritual and moral dimensions are directly measurable using quantitative methods (Turfe, 2016). It does not claim that the hierarchical relationship between *ahl al-dhikr* and *ahl al-ilm* is explicitly stated in the verse, as it remains an interpretive inference. And it does not claim that the universal interpretation is the only valid reading; the historical-contextual reading remains legitimate and important.

To understand more profoundly why the Qur'an selects the term *dhikr* rather than *ilm*, a comprehensive semantic analysis of both terms within the Qur'anic perspective is necessary. However, the connection between semantic analysis and normative conclusions requires more systematic justification than was provided in the findings section. The findings section demonstrated that *dhikr* and *ilm* have distinct semantic

profiles: *dhikr* emphasizes remembrance, contemplation, and practice, encompassing cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions, while *'ilm* emphasizes knowing and understanding in a predominantly cognitive sense.

Inferring that the Qur'an's selection of *dhikr* therefore indicates the superiority of integrated, spiritually-grounded knowledge over mere cognition requires several intermediate steps. First, the Qur'an chooses words deliberately, not arbitrarily, a principle grounded in the doctrines of Qur'anic *i jāz* and *balāghah*. Second, *dhikr* and *'ilm* are not pure synonyms, as established by semantic analysis of Qur'anic usage. Third, the verse in question could have used the phrase *ahl al- 'ilm* but instead chose *ahl al-dhikr*, providing clear textual evidence of a deliberate lexical choice. Fourth, this deliberate choice reflects a preference for the semantic field of *dhikr* over that of *'ilm* based on comparative semantic analysis. Finally, from this preference, one may conclude that the Qur'an is directing seekers of knowledge to those who embody the integrated qualities of *dhikr* rather than exclusively to those who possess mere cognitive knowledge. This normative inference, while logically structured, depends on accepting each preceding step as valid (Aden Abdul Malik & Moh. Masrur, 2026).

While *ahl al- 'ilm* does not appear as a phrase in the Qur'an, the term *'ilm* and its derivatives appear frequently. The absence of the exact phrase *ahl al- 'ilm* weakens the claim that the Qur'an avoided it in favor of *ahl al-dhikr*; it is possible that *ahl al- 'ilm* was simply not a conventional phrase in Qur'anic Arabic. This study acknowledges this limitation and reframes the claim: the Qur'an's use of *ahl al-dhikr* is significant because it links the concept of authoritative knowledge to the concept of *dhikr*, not because it explicitly rejects *ahl al- 'ilm* as an alternative phrase (Haddad, 2019).

The semantic analysis employed in this study draws primarily on classical lexicons (*Lisān al- 'Arab*, *Al-Mufradāt*) and the foundational work of Toshihiko Izutsu (Izutsu, 2002b). However, contemporary semantic theory offers additional tools that could enrich the analysis. For instance, cognitive semantics would examine how *dhikr* and *'ilm* function as conceptual

metaphors structuring Islamic discourse. Corpus linguistics would allow for quantitative analysis of collocation patterns across the entire Qur'anic corpus. Historical semantics would trace how the meanings of these terms evolved from pre-Islamic poetry into the Qur'anic context. While a full engagement with these contemporary approaches is beyond the scope of this study, the findings presented here could be tested and refined using these methods.

The findings section presented various interpretations of *ahl al-dhikr* from Sunni, Sufi, and Shī'ī exegetes, and this section analyzes the factors underlying these differences. Tradition-based exegesis (*al-tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr*), which prioritizes transmitted reports from the Companions and Successors, tends to identify *ahl al-dhikr* with the People of the Book, resulting in a historical-contextual interpretation. In contrast, the rhetorical approach (*balāghah*), which focuses on linguistic analysis of Qur'anic style and meaning, identifies *ahl al-dhikr* more broadly as those who possess knowledge of past events, yielding a more universal interpretation.

The Sufi-esoteric approach, which reads esoteric indications (*ishārah*) alongside exoteric meanings, adds spiritual dimensions (*ma'rifah*) to the understanding of *ahl al-dhikr* (Al Nassar, 2025). Finally, the Shī'ī approach, which treats Imamic teachings as authoritative sources, identifies *ahl al-dhikr* specifically with the Ahl al-Bayt. These methodological differences are not merely technical; they reflect deeper commitments about where interpretive authority resides. Tradition-based exegesis locates authority in transmitted reports from the early community, rhetorical exegesis in linguistic analysis accessible to any trained scholar, Sufi exegesis in spiritual realization accessible only to those with advanced spiritual training, and Shī'ī exegesis in the infallible Imams.

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spiritual realization accessible only to those with advanced spiritual training. Shī'ī exegesis locates authority in the infallible Imams.

The diversity of interpretations suggests that *ahl al-dhikr* is not a fixed category with a single, universally agreed-upon meaning. Rather, different interpretive communities construct the meaning of *ahl al-dhikr* in ways that reflect their own methodological and theological commitments. This finding challenges any claim that the interpretation presented in this study is the only valid reading (Niemi, 2021). The findings section also presented Imam al-Ghazālī's classification of scholars into *ulama' al-sū'* (worldly or corrupt scholars) and *ulama' al-ākhirah* (scholars oriented toward the Hereafter). While this classification is useful for normative purposes, it requires critical examination (Al-Ghazali, 2008). The binary classification implies that scholars can be neatly divided into two mutually exclusive categories, whereas in reality, scholarly character exists on a spectrum. A scholar may excel in some areas while falling short in others, and may be sincere in some contexts but self-interested in others.

Rather than a binary classification, a multi-dimensional spectrum is proposed for understanding the qualities associated with *ahl al-dhikr*. This spectrum spans four key dimensions: motivation (from worldly gain to sincere pursuit of truth), method (from superficial engagement to rigorous, honest engagement), conduct (from arrogant behavior to humble, respectful behavior), and impact (from contributing to confusion to contributing to clarity and unity). Most scholars will occupy different positions on different dimensions at different times, reflecting the complexity of human spiritual and intellectual development. Consequently, the concept of *ahl al-dhikr* is best understood as an ideal toward which scholars strive, rather than a binary status that one either possesses or lacks.

Finally, regarding the tension between historical context and universal generalization, classical uṣūl al-fiqh distinguishes between the specific occasion of revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*) and the general applicability of the wording (*'umūm al-lafz*). The majority of scholars hold that consideration is given to the generality of the wording, not the specificity

of the occasion, which justifies the universal interpretation of *ahl al-dhikr*. However, this principle is not without its critics. Some scholars argue that ignoring the occasion of revelation risks extracting the verse from its original context and imposing unintended meanings. A balanced approach acknowledges both the original context and the potential for universal application, without allowing either to completely override the other.

D. Conclusion

This study has investigated the Qur'anic selection of *ahl al-dhikr* in QS. An-Nahl: 43 and QS. Al-Anbiyā': 7, exploring why the Qur'an employs *dhikr* (remembrance) rather than *'ilm* (knowledge) when directing those who lack knowledge to consult authoritative sources. Based on thematic exegesis, semantic analysis, and comparative examination of classical and contemporary commentaries, the study identifies four principal interpretive dimensions of *ahl al-dhikr*: epistemological (authentic knowledge oriented toward divine revelation), spiritual (knowledge permeating the soul and cultivating God-consciousness), moral (knowledge embodied as noble character), and methodological (knowledge as holistic process of remembering, contemplating, articulating, and practicing).

As a tentative interpretation, the study proposes a hierarchical relationship between *ahl al-dhikr* and *ahl al-'ilm*. This claim is supported by semantic analysis showing *dhikr* includes cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions while *'ilm* is predominantly cognitive; exegetical descriptions of *ahl al-dhikr* include qualities not necessarily required for *'ilm* alone; and the verse's directive to consult *ahl al-dhikr* implies authority beyond mere information possession. However, several qualifications are necessary: the phrase *ahl al-'ilm* does not appear in the Qur'an, so the verse does not explicitly contrast the two categories; many classical exegetes interpret *ahl al-dhikr* as the People of the Book without making hierarchical claims about scholars; and the hierarchical interpretation is a normative inference, not a directly stated Qur'anic doctrine.

This study suggests, as one plausible interpretation among several, that *ahl al-dhikr* includes the dimensions of *'ilm* while adding spiritual and moral qualifications. This interpretation should be understood as a normative ideal derived from synthesizing various exegetical strands, not as a descriptive claim about Qur'anic usage. The hierarchical claim remains tentative and invites further investigation through broader textual and historical analysis.

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