Deciphering the Concept of Goodness in Islam: A Comprehensive Qur'anic Linguistic and Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

This article delves into the concept of "goodness" (al-khair) within Islamic teachings as interpreted from the Qur'an, exploring its nuanced and context-dependent meanings. Al-khair in Arabic signifies all that is good and beneficial, standing in contrast to al-syar, which represents evil and wrongdoing. This study employs a descriptive-analytical qualitative approach, utilizing a detailed examination of Qur'anic verses, Tafsir literature, and Hadiths to unravel the layered meanings of al-khair. Our findings highlight that al-khair not only encompasses moral and social virtues but also material aspects such as wealth and physical well-being. The term is comparable to thayyibun, husnun, birrun, and ma'ruffun in the Qur'an, each carrying distinct but sometimes overlapping meanings. The analysis distinguishes three key dimensions of al-khair: the ultimate good deeds chosen for humanity, the commendable acts ordained by Allah, and attributes often associated with Allah's characteristics. The study concludes that while goodness is generally perceived as desirable, its interpretation can vary significantly, leading to both positive and negative outcomes depending on the context.

Keywords: *Al-khair, Goodness, Qur'an, Tafsir*

Abstrak

Artikel ini menggali konsep "kebaikan" (al-khair) dalam Islam melalui interpretasi dari Al-Qur'an, memaparkan berbagai makna yang kompleks dan bergantung pada konteksnya. Dalam bahasa Arab, al-khair mengacu pada segala yang baik dan bermanfaat, berlawanan dengan al-syar yang melambangkan kejahatan. Penelitian ini mengadopsi pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif-analitis, menganalisis secara mendalam ayat-ayat Al-Qur'an, literatur tafsir, dan hadis untuk membongkar makna al-khair yang berlapis. Hasil studi menunjukkan bahwa al-khair mencakup kebajikan moral dan sosial serta aspek materi seperti kekayaan dan kesehatan fisik. Istilah ini memiliki kesamaan dengan thayyibun, husnun, birrun, dan ma'ruffun dalam Al-Qur'an, masing-masing dengan makna yang kadang bertumpang tindih namun berbeda. Analisis ini mengidentifikasi tiga aspek utama dari al-khair: perbuatan baik yang utama dipilih untuk umat manusia, tindakan terpuji yang diperintahkan oleh Allah, dan atribut yang sering diasosiasikan dengan karakteristik Allah. Kesimpulan dari penelitian ini adalah, meskipun kebaikan secara umum dipandang sebagai sesuatu yang diinginkan, interpretasinya bisa sangat bervariasi, menghasilkan dampak positif maupun negatif tergantung pada konteksnya.

Kata Kunci: *Al-khair, Kebaikan, Al-Qur'an, Tafsir*

A. Introduction

This article offers an interpretation of the term "goodness" in Islam, derived from the verses of the Qur'an, with the goal of capturing a holistic concept of goodness within the Qur'anic perspective. According to the Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language, 'goodness' has ten definitions, one of which is al-khair. (National, 2005, pp. 60–63). In Arabic dictionaries, al-khair has multiple meanings: primarily, it signifies the antithesis of al-syar, encompassing all forms of evil and wrongdoing, thereby al-khair pertains to all actions deemed good. Secondly, al-khairat denotes virtues encompassing all aspects fundamentally considered as goodness, akin to how a woman symbolizes good progeny.

The term الخير, derived from the root خ -ي- ر, is found in Maqayis al-Lughah and conveys the sense of ولميل العطف, which implies a tendency towards compassion and affection. This etymological insight is pivotal for interpreting al-khair within the Qur'an, emphasizing the significance of a linguistic approach in understanding its verses, given the original Arabic revelation of the Qur'an. Therefore, the linguistic dimension is crucial in unveiling the Qur'an's various secrets without overlooking other dimensions. Consequently, this study aims to elucidate the meanings of al-khair across various life aspects as interpreted in the Qur'an. (Faris & Ahmad, 1979, p. 303)

While 'goodness' is commonly understood in its basic form, the Qur'an attributes various deeper meanings related to its essence. Existing literature reveals that the Qur'an frequently employs similar terms with distinct meanings, where even a single word can encompass a range of interpretations. Hence, analyzing the nuances and similarities in the term 'goodness' within the Qur'an, known as al-khair, akin to terms like al-Makruf, al-Ihsan, at-Thayyib, al-Karim, al-Hasan, and as-shalih, is imperative. (Zakariya & bin Faris, 1994) The Qur'an itself is interpreted as embodying goodness, although scholars have debated the complexity of this term, arguing that al-khair transcends mere conventional goodness to embody an opposition to evil.

Several Tafsir texts posit that the Qur'an, Islam, faith, and righteous deeds, along with all beneficial human aspects for life in this world and the hereafter, are encompassed by al-khair. (Al-Jazairi & Bakar, 2007) The term al-khair often appears relative since what is considered good for one may not necessarily be perceived as good by another. In specific contexts, al-khair can also imply abundant wealth, which can be beneficial or detrimental depending on the situation. As stated in the Qur'an, Surah Ali Imran verse 104:

وَلْتَكُنْ مِّنْكُمْ أُمَّةٌ يَّدْعُوْنَ اِلَى الْخَيْرِ وَيَأْمُرُوْنَ بِالْمَعْرُوْفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ ۚوَأُولٰٓئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُوْنَ

Translation: "And let there be among you a community that calls to goodness, advocates for what is right, and forbids what is wrong. They are the ones who are successful." (QS. Āli 'Imrān:104).

The connection between context and text is crucial in interpreting meanings, particularly in the Qur'an where al-khair varies significantly depending on the context and discourse. This issue is explored in various scholarly works, including Tafsir studies, Arabic lexicons, and other Islamic texts. Most Tafsir books, such as Tafsir Ath-Thabari (Ath-Thabari, 2009), Tafsir Ibnu Katsir, Tafsir al-Qurthubi (al-Qurthubi, 2008), Tafsir al-Mishbah (Shihab, 2005), Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Aisar (Al-Jazairi & Bakar, 2007), and many others, discuss this term extensively.

B. Method

To conduct the desired analysis of the concepts and perspectives encapsulated in the term al-khair as interpreted in the Qur'an, it is essential to undertake a comprehensive and detailed examination. The study is structured around two primary objectives: firstly, to decode the terms associated with goodness as used in the Qur'anic text, and secondly, to understand these terms from both a conceptual and contextual Qur'anic perspective. This research employs a qualitative methodology, characterized by a meticulous analysis of interrelated Qur'anic verses that convey meanings akin to al-khair. It incorporates a deep dive into synonymous verses, supplemented by the Hadiths of Prophet Muhammad. The analysis covers several aspects including the appropriateness of interpretations, the reasons behind revelations (asbab al-Nuzul), and distinctions between Meccan and Medinan revelations. The study integrates traditional (bi al-ma'tsur) and analytical (bi al-ra'yi) interpretative approaches, with a particular emphasis on rhetorical (bayani) and linguistic (lughawi) methods, especially pertaining to the Faces and Views of the Qur'an (al-Wujuh wa al-Nazhair al-Qur'an). This combination of methods aims to deliver a profound and comprehensive understanding of the term al-khair within the textual fabric of the Qur'an.

C. Results and Discussion
1. Qur'anic Verses on Goodness

The Qur'anic verses that discuss goodness using the term al-Khair are divided into four categories: First, goodness in faith towards Allah includes 12 verses that elaborate on goodness from the perspective of faith in Allah SWT. For example, in Surah ash-Shura 42:36:

فَمَآ أُوتِيتُم مِّن شَيْءٍ فَمَتَٰعُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَاۖ وَمَا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَىٰ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ

Translation: "So whatever you have been given is but a passing enjoyment for this worldly life, but that which is with Allah is better and more lasting for those who believe and put their trust in their Lord."

This verse emphasizes that worldly pleasures are temporary, whereas what lies with Allah in the afterlife is better and everlasting for those who believe and surrender to Him. According to Ibn Kathir's interpretation, this world is transient and impermanent, making the rewards from Allah SWT superior to worldly pleasures.

Second, goodness in the context of comparing previous nations includes four verses that discuss goodness by comparing previous peoples. For example, in Surah al-Ahqaf 46:11:

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَوْ كَانَ خَيْرًا مَّا سَبَقُونَآ إِلَيْهِ ۚ وَإِذْ لَمْ يَهْتَدُوا۟ بِهِۦ فَسَيَقُولُونَ هَٰذَآ إِفْكٌ قَدِيمٌ

Translation: "And those who disbelieve say to those who believe: 'If it had been good, they would not have preceded us to it.' And since they will not be guided by it, they will say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.'"

This verse highlights that the disbelievers mock the believers of the Qur'an by claiming that if the Qur'an were truly good, they (the disbelievers) would have believed in it first. These disbelievers underestimate the believers, especially slaves and the weak, who hold honorable positions in the sight of Allah SWT.

Third, goodness in the context of Allah's power includes ten verses that explain goodness within the scope of Allah's omnipotence. For example, in Surah ar-Rahman 55:70:

فِيهِنَّ خَيْرَٰتٌ حِسَانٌ

Translation: "In them (Paradise) are women limiting [their] glances, untouched before them by man or jinn."

This verse describes that in Paradise there are companions who are morally virtuous and physically beautiful. Scholars opine that these are pious women, created by Allah SWT as a reward for the faithful.

Fourth, a higher form of goodness includes seven verses discussing goodness from a superior perspective. For example, in Surah Muhammad 47:21:

طَاعَةٌ وَقَوْلٌ مَّعْرُوفٌ فَإِذَا عَزَمَ ٱلْأَمْرُ فَلَوْ صَدَقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَّهُمْ

Translation: "Obedience and good speech (are better for them). But when the matter (of fighting) is resolved, if they had been true to Allah, it would have been better for them."

This verse addresses believers who initially obeyed the command to participate in jihad but showed reluctance when it became mandatory. Allah revealed this verse to motivate them to obey the command and speak truthfully, as truthfulness to Allah SWT is better than falsehood. Overall, these Qur'anic verses depict various aspects of goodness in Islam, from faith and comparisons with previous peoples to the power of Allah and a superior form of goodness.

2. Discussion

In Arabic, the term for goodness is "al-khair," which linguistically means "that which is good." According to Al-Raghib Al-Asfahani's "Mu'jam Mufradat al-Faz al-Quran" (2013), al-khair encompasses all things desirable such as intellect, justice, virtue, and utility. Its antonym is "al-syir" (the evil). (Isfahani & Dawudi, 2011) Ibn Mandhur, in his "Lisan al-'Arab" (711H), describes al-khair as worldly pleasures, representing the best of all things (Manzhur, n.d.).

The terms al-khair, at-tayyib, and al-hasanah are commonly used interchangeably in everyday language due to their synonymous meanings relating to goodness. However, in the Qur'an, these terms should not be used interchangeably, even though they may appear synonymous in everyday use. The terms al-khair, at-tayyib, and al-hasanah carry specific lexical meanings, components, and semantic relations that are crucial for accurate translation within the Qur'anic text. Moreover, the semantic relationships and the components of meanings of al-khair, at-tayyib, and al-hasanah in the Qur'an have not been extensively explored. Hence, the author proposes to conduct research under the theme "Analysis of Semantic Components of the Terms al-khair, at-tayyib, and al-hasanah in the Noble Qur'an."

Furthermore, al-khair conveys a type of goodness that is beneficial, can be admonished, and is externally visible. The concept of goodness is bifurcated into two categories: absolute goodness, which is universally admired from all perspectives and by everyone, such as paradise; and relative goodness, where what is considered good by one may be considered bad by another. It is proposed that good and evil have dual

perspectives: initially, both are considered as nouns; secondarily, they are described as qualities, determined by actions that are more commendable than others.

Ibn Manzhur states that al-khair refers to worldly pleasures that are the best of all things. Abu Ishak further elaborates that it encompasses good moral character and physical attractiveness. The term al-khairah is attributed to a noble woman, characterized by noble lineage, good looks, and wealth, which brings joy or pleasure if she gives birth (Manzur & bin Mukram, 1993).

Al-khair encompasses all that is liked, such as intellect, justice, virtue, and utility. Goodness, according to this term, is divided into two types: absolute goodness, which is liked in every situation by everyone, like paradise; and conditional goodness, which might be considered good by one person under certain conditions, but not by others or under other circumstances (Abd al-Baqi, 1945).

Al-khair, when associated with wealth for testamentary purposes in QS. 2:180, is considered by scholars as plentiful and pure. The term can be interpreted as a noun (QS. 3:104) and as an adjective in the form "af'ala" (2:106, 197). In QS. 2:184, it can mean both. Al-syarr conveys everything that is disliked, and usually, the evil indicated by al-syarr is emphasized by mentioning al-khair and its types (QS. 12:77; 19:85; 25:34). A person inclined towards evil is characterized by their propensity for evil deeds. Meanwhile, Ibn Manzhur asserts that human evil is something that brings disgrace (Manzhur, n.d.).

The Qur'an encourages competing in al-khairat (QS. 2:148; 5:48), or hastening towards it (QS. 3:114; 21:90; 23:61). These phrases suggest that goodness must be achieved through diligent effort, showcasing superiority over others. The verses state that each has its own path deemed good towards achieving life's virtues. One form of virtue for a believer is jihad with wealth and soul (QS. 9:88). Additionally, the Qur'an emphasizes that true virtue is the inspiration provided by Allah (QS. 21:73) (Ibn & al-Dimashqi, 1998).

The term al-khair is comprehensive in suggesting something that is soothing and can have both positive or negative impacts. Al-khair is universally liked. However, the meanings of al-khair in the Qur'an are varied and multifaceted (Enoh, 2007). Starting from the spiritual meanings of al-khair, which include Islam, the Qur'an, faith, wisdom, obedience, good deeds, justice, reward, skills, power, and victory, both in this world and the hereafter. Al-khair can also refer to material aspects such as food, wealth, and gardens.

D. Conclusion

This article elucidates the concept of goodness in Islam through an in-depth analysis of the term al-khair in the Qur'an. In Arabic, al-khair signifies all that is good and beneficial, standing in contrast to al-syar, which encompasses evil and wrongdoing. The interpretation of goodness in the Qur'an is multifaceted, varying according to the context in which it is used, and includes dimensions of moral excellence, social virtue, and material benefits such as wealth. A linguistic approach is crucial for understanding this term, given that the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic. This study highlights that comprehending goodness in the Qur'an necessitates a thorough analysis of relevant verses, interpretations (tafsir), and Hadiths. Goodness can be absolute, universally admired in all circumstances like paradise, or relative, potentially beneficial for some but not for others. The Qur'an also urges the faithful to strive in acts of virtue and demonstrates that goodness can have both positive and negative impacts depending on its

context. This dual nature of goodness reflects the complex and dynamic essence of moral and ethical values as portrayed in Islamic teachings.

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