

The Psychological Characteristics of the Children of Israel in the Qur'an: A Thematic Analysis of Verses Describing the Children of Israel According to Sayyid Qutb

Wanda Alifi Wirawan^{1*}, Mohammad Zakki Azani¹, Mahasri Shobahiya¹

¹ Faculty of Islamic Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Surakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

*This study aims to examine the psychological characteristics of the Children of Israel as described in the Qur'an through an analysis of Sayyid Qutb's *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*, with a focus on collective behavior patterns and historical factors that shaped their characteristics, such as rebelliousness, materialistic tendencies, racial arrogance, inconsistency in faith, and dependence on worldly power. This study uses a qualitative method with a library research approach, combining thematic analysis of Qur'anic verses and a psychological-historical approach to understand their psychological dynamics in the context of oppression and liberation. The results of the study show that, according to Sayyid Qutb, the character of the Children of Israel was the result of collective trauma caused by slavery in Egypt, which gave rise to spiritual inferiority, defiance of God's commands, and a materialistic orientation that shifted divine values. Racial and intellectual arrogance reflects a deviation in understanding the concept of the "chosen people," while inconsistency in faith represents spiritual hypocrisy that weakens monotheism. Qutb viewed this pattern as a universal phenomenon that serves as a warning to all of humanity not to get caught up in formal religious practices without spiritual depth. The main value of this research lies in its contribution to enriching thematic interpretation studies through a psychological-historical approach, emphasizing the relationship between human inner conditions and historical experiences in the formation of religious character, and encouraging Muslims to cultivate authentic, humble faith oriented towards the mandate of revelation, rather than outward symbols or claims of group superiority.*

Keywords: Psychological Character, Nature of the Children of Israel, Verses of the Qur'an

Introduction

The Children of Israel are one of the nations most frequently mentioned in the stories of the heavenly scriptures, whether in the Qur'an, the Torah, or the Gospel. Their existence is understood not only as a record of the lineage of the Prophet Jacob, but also as a representation of the dynamic relationship between humans and the Creator (Zulkarnaini et al., 2025). Historical records show that this group went through various important stages, starting from slavery in Egypt, the exodus journey to the promised land, until reaching a period of glory under the guidance of the prophets (Ezzaky, 2024). However, behind this story of grandeur lies a complex collective attitude, oscillating between staunch obedience and repeated defiance ("Jewish Perspectives on Slavery in Egypt," 2024).

In the Qur'an, Allah recounts several stories of previous nations, one of which is often repeated and becomes the center of attention: the story of the Children of Israel (Azizah & Anwar, 2025). The presence of their stories scattered throughout various surahs shows that there is a pattern of behavior that the Qur'an wants to emphasize as an eternal lesson for mankind (Afif & Widyaningrum, 2022). In the Qur'an, the Children of Israel are described as having a wide range of characteristics, from their privilege as the chosen people to their downfall due to deeply ingrained negative traits (Zulkarnaini et al., 2025).

Historically, the dynamics of the Israelites' lives reveal a recurring and consistent pattern of behavior. There appears to be an unchanging character that has not been erased by the passage of time; from their liberation from Pharaoh's rule to the period of Muhammad's prophethood, this collective character has continued to display a distinctive continuity (Rahimi, 2015). This condition indicates that this character did not merely arise as a situational response, but has become a deeply ingrained sociocultural identity, even though the political context and changes over time have undergone comprehensive transformations (Muhsinin et al., 2024).

Sayyid Qutb, in his exegesis *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*, offers a sharp perspective that contains strong criticism of the character of the Children of Israel. He argues that the characteristics of the Children of Israel are the result of a long-term psychological struggle, influenced by their historical experience of slavery in Egypt, chronic fear, and racial arrogance, which ultimately clouded their rationality (Qutb, 1992).

* Corresponding author: o100250017@student.ums.ac.id

Based on a review of previous studies, research on the Children of Israel in the Qur'an is generally still dominated by a descriptive-normative approach, which describes their characteristics as a people who often rebelled, broke agreements, and showed materialistic tendencies (Shalihah et al., 2023). This approach tends to stop at the level of moral evaluation alone, without conducting a more in-depth study of the psychological and historical roots that shape the collective character of the Children of Israel as described in the Qur'an (Zaelani, 2024).

Thus, there is a gap in research on Qur'anic interpretation that specifically integrates thematic analysis of verses concerning the Children of Israel with a psychological-historical approach as formulated by Sayyid Qutb in *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*. This research aims to fill this gap through a more in-depth and systematic study of the psychological characteristics of the Children of Israel.

This study focuses on an in-depth examination of the psychological characteristics of the Children of Israel in the Qur'an through the perspective of Sayyid Qutb's *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* interpretation. The focus of the research includes a thematic description of the psychological characteristics of the Children of Israel, an exploration of the psychological and historical factors that contributed to the formation of these collective characteristics, and an analysis of the pattern of interrelationships between their long historical experiences and the emergence of negative psychological traits as described in Qutb's thinking.

Therefore, this study aims to explore more deeply the psychological characteristics of the Children of Israel as described in various verses of the Qur'an according to Sayyid Qutb's analysis. By understanding these characteristics in depth, it is hoped that readers will not only become familiar with the historical figure of the Children of Israel, but will also be able to reflect on themselves in order to avoid similar psychological illnesses that can afflict anyone who holds the trust of faith.

Research Method

This study is a qualitative study with a library research type. Qualitative research was chosen because the focus of the study was not directed at quantitative measurement, but rather at understanding meaning, interpretation, and in-depth analysis of the text of the Qur'an and works of interpretation. The approach used in this study was a thematic (*maudhu'i*) approach combined with a psychological-historical approach. The thematic approach is used to collect and examine Qur'anic verses related to the Children of Israel comprehensively, while the psychological-historical approach is used to examine the psychological character of the Children of Israel as understood in the context of their historical experiences, particularly according to Sayyid Qutb's perspective in his exegesis *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Psychological Characteristics of the Children of Israel

a. Disobedience to Divine Command

Sayyid Qutb believed that defiance (*tamarrud*) was the main source of various psychological disturbances inherent in the Children of Israel. This attitude was evident in their response to Allah's command to enter *Baitul Maqdis* with prostration and recite the phrase *hittah* as a plea for forgiveness, but they turned the command into a mocking expression. Qutb interpreted this behavior as a form of spiritual arrogance, namely a reluctance to submit completely because they felt they already "knew God" through their own rational reasoning. In *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*, Qutb asserts that this kind of defiance stems from the mental condition of "a people who have lost their spiritual orientation" as a result of being attached to the formal aspects of worship alone, rather than to its essential inner dimension.

In *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*, Sayyid Qutb positions rebellion (*tamarrud*) as the center of the psychological and spiritual degradation of the Children of Israel, which thoroughly influenced their religious patterns. In his interpretation of QS. *al-Baqarah*: 58–59, Qutb explains that Allah's command to the Children of Israel to enter *Baitul Maqdis* with an attitude of submission, expressed through prostration and recitation of the *hittah*, was not intended merely as a formal ritual, but as a process of spiritual guidance aimed at fostering awareness of servitude and humility before Allah. However, the replacement of these words with expressions that have a mocking tone indicates an inner rejection of the meaning of surrender itself (Qutb, 1992).

They often show a tendency to argue and debate, and are reluctant to obey unless under threat of punishment or torture. This attitude shows that the period of humiliation they experienced under the rule of the tyrannical Pharaoh had a profound effect on their human nature. The experience of oppression seems to have damaged their sensitivity and sincerity, making it difficult for them to accept the truth without coercion.

From a psychological-religious perspective, the defiance described by Qutb can be formulated into a number of psychological character indicators. First, the emergence of resistance to complete submission, namely the tendency to carry out religious commands partially and selectively. Second, the strengthening of the collective ego that surpasses religious consciousness, which is evident in the attitude of belittling sacred symbols. Third, the formalization of religion, which is the tendency to separate ritual practices from the process of inner transformation. Fourth, the presence of spiritual defense mechanisms in the form of ridicule or distortion of the meaning of revelation as an attempt to cover up the emptiness of faith. All of these indicators show that *tamarrud* is not merely individual behavior, but rather an internalized and recurring psychological structure in the history of the Children

of Israel, as consistently criticized by the Qur'an through the ideological and moral approach emphasized by Sayyid Qutb.

b. Materialistic and Hedonistic Dependency

Sayyid Qutb stated that one of the dominant characteristics of the Children of Israel was materialism, namely the urge to understand everything empirically. Verses such as QS. al-Baqarah: 55–61 show that they demanded visual proof of God's existence, asked for worldly food even though they had been given manna and salwa, and showed an inability to live within the framework of abstract spirituality.

In QS. al-Baqarah: 55–61, Allah describes how they repeatedly returned to their attitude of denial and demanded physical evidence when faced with His commands and blessings. For example, they asked for a tangible sign in the form of God's physical presence or demanded worldly food that was considered more “concrete” than the manna and salwa that had been bestowed upon them. As noted in classical exegesis, this attitude arose from boredom and a tendency to belittle these blessings, because they did not satisfy their lust for worldly pleasures.

The attitude of the Children of Israel in the events of manna and salwa in QS. al-Baqarah: 57 is interpreted by Qutb as an illustration of how boredom with God's blessings and demands for worldly variety reflect an inner condition that is not yet ready to live in total surrender to the divine will. For Qutb, this is not merely a form of denial, but a symbol of the loss of spiritual culture, where humans view reality more from a material perspective than as a manifestation of ethical order and noble piety. This view is in line with Qutb's emphasis that devotion to God must reach the inner dimension, which cannot be satisfied with mere outward appearances or empirical evidence.

Qutb linked this to the psychological effects of Egyptian slavery: they lost their sense of spiritual freedom and replaced it with physical dependence on material things and comfort.

He wrote:

“When the human soul is shackled by materialism, it no longer recognizes spiritual values. It only demands a God that can be touched and seen.”

In Qutb's view, the materialistic attitude of the Children of Israel was not merely an ethnic trait, but an existential disease that also afflicted modern people who overly glorified science and economic power.

The consequences emphasized by Qutb are not merely historical punishments that befell the Children of Israel, but rather a warning to all of humanity. According to him, excessive dependence on sensory evidence and rejection of the spiritual dimension can lead to humiliation and inner turmoil. This condition cannot be overcome solely through material achievements or a rational approach, but requires a change in values from a materialistic orientation towards piety and spiritual acceptance.

c. Intellectual and Racial Arrogance

Qutb believed that the arrogance of the Children of Israel stemmed from their belief that they were God's chosen people. He emphasized that this arrogance arose from a misunderstanding, namely the assumption that their status as the chosen people was absolute. In Qutb's view, the term “chosen people” is not actually a racial privilege, but rather a great responsibility to uphold obedience and ethical values. However, when this responsibility is interpreted as a justification for looking down on other nations, spiritual arrogance arises, closing the heart to divine guidance. In interpreting QS. Al-Ma'idah verses 20–26, Qutb emphasized that Allah had bestowed upon the Children of Israel various great gifts, such as sending prophets, revealing holy books, and granting them the promised land as a means to test the quality of their faith. However, they instead displayed fear and reluctance to carry out Allah's command to enter the region. Qutb considers this attitude a reflection of weak faith and a deviation from the mandate of revelation. He emphasizes that when fear of worldly matters dominates the human heart, spiritual orientation fades; the privileges that should have given rise to responsibility ultimately become a source of arrogance and defiance.

In QS al-Baqarah verse 61 and QS al-Mā'idah verse 70, Qutb explains that the Israelites' rejection of the prophets, even to the point of murder, reflects the arrogance that has become deeply ingrained in their theological consciousness. They did not merely oppose commands that conflicted with worldly interests, but also rejected the moral authority of revelation that demanded total submission to Allah. Qutb assessed this attitude as a manifestation of arrogance rooted in a sense of security in social stability, so that the measure of truth was determined by the interests of the group, not by the value of submission to divine truth.

According to Qutb, the root cause of all the deviations of the Children of Israel lies in the loss of understanding of the trust in the relationship between humans and revelation. They separated the spiritual aspect from social responsibility, and viewed the gift of prophecy as a guarantee of salvation without the requirement of sincere obedience. Qutb emphasized that this pattern has been repeated throughout human history: when a group or nation feels that it has certain religious or cultural privileges, it tends to reject moral guidance that demands sacrifice and justice.

Ultimately, Sayyid Qutb interpreted the story of the Children of Israel as a general warning. All of humanity, including Muslims, should not fall into the same spiritual arrogance, namely feeling superior because of their religious heritage but neglecting the mandate of revelation. According to Qutb, true excellence lies in humility, honesty, and moral responsibility before Allah. As he emphasized in *Fi Zilāl al-Qur'an*, “racial pride that is not accompanied by responsibility will give rise to arrogance that rejects the guidance of revelation, and that is where the destruction of humanity begins.”

d. Inconsistency of Faith

Sayyid Qutb, in *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*, emphasizes the tendency of the Children of Israel to be selective in accepting revelations as stated in QS. al-Baqarah: 85. Qutb understands this verse as a description of a people who have lost their integrity of faith, because they only carry out the laws of Allah that are in line with their own interests, while ignoring provisions that require sacrifice or are contrary to their desires. Qutb asserts that this attitude cannot be viewed merely as a form of disobedience, but rather as a denial of the covenant made with Allah. He terms it spiritual hypocrisy, which is a state in which a person professes faith, but that faith does not serve as a moral and social foundation in all dimensions of life.

According to Qutb, this spiritual hypocrisy stems from a compromising attitude towards divine truth. He emphasizes that revelation demands complete acceptance, because in Islam there is no dichotomy between worldly life and the hereafter, nor between ritual worship and social reality. When the Children of Israel began to sort the laws of the Torah according to their interests, it was at that point that their spiritual bond with Allah was severed. Qutb explains that this behavior made them a people who only glorified religious symbols without understanding their substance. As a result, they experienced moral decline and lost the spiritual power that had previously elevated them as the chosen people.

Sayyid Qutb linked this phenomenon to the reality of contemporary Muslims. He believed that some Muslims today have fallen into a new form of spiritual hypocrisy, namely professing faith in the Qur'an, but not making it the basis of law, social order, and guidance in life. In *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*, Qutb emphasizes that the separation between religion and social life is a fundamental deviation from the principle of tawhid. For Qutb, Islam is a comprehensive system of life that demands the practice of divine values in all spheres, including politics, economics, culture, and education.

2. The Psychological Correlation between Historical Experience and Collective Character

Sayyid Qutb stated that the formation of the collective character of the Children of Israel cannot be separated from their long history of oppression and the social and religious conditions they faced. In *Fi Zilal Al-Qur'an*, Qutb viewed the story of the Children of Israel not merely as a historical record, but as a series of processes that continued to shape their collective psychology. According to him, historical experiences play a major role in shaping the mindset, emotional structure, and spiritual direction of a community; therefore, the theological and moral deviations that arose among the Children of Israel are understood as the result of accumulated trauma that was never healed internally.

Characteristics such as selective defiance of revelation, dependence on material symbols and worldly authority, racial arrogance, and inconsistency of faith demonstrated by the Children of Israel reflect the pattern of extrinsic religiosity as defined by Gordon W. Allport, namely religiosity that makes religion a means of psychological and social interest, rather than a value that is fully internalized in the personality. Qutb's criticism of the formalization of religion, the loss of integration between faith and behavior, and the failure to achieve mature spiritual submission is in line with Allport's concept of "immature religion," which is characterized by weak moral integration and the dominance of the collective ego. According to Gordon W. Allport, "immature religion" is an extrinsic, non-reflective, and self-centered approach to faith that is often driven by fear and insecurity.

a. The Slavery Phase in Egypt: Inferiority and Spiritual Trauma

In interpreting QS. al-Baqarah: 49 and QS. al-A'raf: 137, Sayyid Qutb describes the period of slavery of the Children of Israel under Pharaoh's rule as a phase of the collapse of human dignity. The systematic forms of oppression, such as the slaughter of male children, the practice of slavery, and legalized violence, according to him, created a depressed psychological condition or what he called a "defeated soul." The humiliation they experienced over a long period of time instilled a slave mentality in them, namely obedience and submission when under threat of punishment, defiance when the pressure was gone, and arrogance when they obtained pleasure.

b. The Canaanite Phase: Arrogance and Religious Distortion

When the Children of Israel entered a period of stability and gained authority in the Land of Canaan, Qutb assessed that there was a change in character from low self-esteem to arrogance. In his interpretation of QS. al-Baqarah: 85 and QS. al-Ma'idah: 12–13, he emphasized that the awareness of being the "chosen people" shifted to justification for violating Allah's provisions. Religion then became narrowed in meaning to merely a symbol of identity and a means to an end, rather than a system of values that binds moral behavior. For Qutb, this phase was the most dangerous stage, because unresolved trauma from the past, when combined with power, did not lead to obedience, but rather to systematic religious deviation.

c. Residual Slave Mentality in QS. al-A'raf: 138–141

The peak of Qutb's psychological study is seen in his interpretation of QS. al-A'rāf: 138–141, when the Children of Israel asked for an idol to be made for them to worship after successfully crossing the Red Sea. Qutb understood this event as a sign that physical freedom had not yet reached their spiritual dimension. He explains that souls long accustomed to living under the domination of symbols of material power—such as Pharaoh and the Egyptian idols—still need visual forms as a source of security. The demand for idols not only indicates a deviation from faith, but also reflects the remnants of a slave mentality that has not been freed internally.

3. Implications

The story of the Children of Israel serves as a means of reflection for Muslims in building character and spiritual awareness so that they do not fall into the same mistakes. From an educational perspective, this narrative emphasizes the urgency of comprehensive faith development through a combination of rationality, revelatory guidance, and moral values, as well as the importance of a learning process that instills spiritual responsibility, honesty, and a simple lifestyle. Meanwhile, morally, the story warns of the negative effects of defiance against divine truth, materialistic tendencies, and intellectual arrogance that have the potential to destroy human spiritual integrity. Therefore, education is not solely directed at developing intellectual intelligence, but also at forming a personality that is honest, humble, and obedient to divine values, in line with Sayyid Qutb's view that the essence of true faith is not determined by status or outward symbols, but by sincerity in carrying out the mandate of revelation.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the psychological characteristics of the Children of Israel as described in the Qur'an and interpreted by Sayyid Qutb in *Fi Zilāl al-Qur'an* are the product of a long historical journey and spiritual experience. Traits such as opposition to God's commands, materialistic orientation, racial and intellectual arrogance, instability of faith, and a tendency to fear worldly power reflect a psychological condition shaped by experiences of oppression under Pharaoh's domination and unresolved social trauma. According to Qutb, these attitudes signify a disturbance in spiritual balance, where reason and worldly pleasures are prioritized over complete surrender to Allah. As a consequence, a formalistic and superficial pattern of religiosity emerges, which emphasizes outward aspects without accompanying spiritual deepening. In Qutb's view, the story of the Children of Israel in the Qur'an has universal significance as a means of reflection for all of humanity. Through the representation of their characters, the Qur'an emphasizes that spiritual superiority is not determined by racial identity, religious symbols, or material achievements, but rather by humility, honesty, and moral responsibility toward divine revelation. This study confirms that the essence of true faith is comprehensive—encompassing aspects of creed, morals, and society—and requires the integration of faith and deeds in real life. Therefore, the lessons from the story of the Children of Israel are not limited to the historical dimension alone, but serve as an ethical and spiritual foundation for Muslims in shaping a personality that is faithful, humble, and oriented towards divine values in all aspects of life.

Acknowledgement

All praise and gratitude are offered to Allah SWT for His mercy and assistance in completing this article. The author would like to express his deepest gratitude to his parents for their prayers, love, and unwavering support, as well as to his beloved wife for her patience, understanding, and motivation throughout the process of writing this article. The author would also like to thank the lecturers and supervisors for their guidance, knowledge, and valuable advice, as well as his fellow students for their support and companionship. May all the kindness that has been given be rewarded by Allah SWT.

References

- Afif, M. N. H., & Widyaningrum, A. (2022). Kisah-kisah al-Qur'an (Qashash al-Qur'an) dalam Perspektif Pendidikan Islam. *MASALIQ*, 2(2), 324–337. <https://doi.org/10.58578/masaliq.v2i2.357>
- Azizah, A., & Anwar, A. (2025). Kisah-Kisah Dalam Alqur'an. *Journal of Health Education Law Information and Humanities*, 2(1), 352–361. <https://doi.org/10.57235/helium.v2i1.5136>
- Ezzaky, A. (2024). History of the Children of Israel Between the Noble Qur'an and the Book of Exodus. *Journal of the Sociology and Theory of Religion*, 16(1), 187–208. <https://doi.org/10.24197/jstr.1.2024.187-208>
- Jewish perspectives on slavery in Egypt. (2024). In *Slavery and Dependence in Ancient Egypt* (pp. 176–210). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139506809.005>
- Muhsinin, M., Tobroni, T., Yazid, S., & Wahab, A. (2024). Character Education Values in the Story of Prophet Moses and the Israelites in the Qur'an: A Hermeneutic Study. *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, 7(06). <https://doi.org/10.47191/ijsshr/v7-i06-32>
- Qutbh, S. (1992). *Fi Zhilalil Qur'an*.
- Rahimi, B. (2015). *The Exodus in Islam: Citationality and Redemption* (pp. 377–385). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-04768-3_28
- Shalihah, N., Waharjani, W., & Perawiranegoro, D. (2023). Dosa Bani Israel pada QS Al Maidah Ayat 72-78 dalam Perspektif Self Awareness Goleman. *Lathaif: Literasi Tafsir, Hadis Dan Filologi*, 2(1), 53. <https://doi.org/10.31958/lathaif.v2i1.9424>
- Zaelani, A. A. (2024). The Essence of Isra'iliyyat Story in Tafsir Al-Qur'an. *Jurnal Iman Dan Spiritualitas*, 4(3), 201–208. <https://doi.org/10.15575/jis.v4i3.33049>
- Zulkarnaini, Z., Marhaban, N., & Nurdin, N. (2025). Narration the Jews in the Qur'an. *International Journal of Social Service and Research*, 5(9), 1190–1199. <https://doi.org/10.46799/ijssr.v5i9.1316>