

THE DISCOURSE OF USURY IN THE VIEWS OF ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

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ABSTRACT

Before the emergence of the Abrahamic religion, the population in the past experienced both economic calamity and humanitarian crises as a result of usury practices. Various historical studies reveal that the Babylonian period was an era where human civilization showed dreadful facts as a result of usury praxis. This study focuses on Islamic and Christianity views of usury in economic activities. This paper aims to examine usury starting from semantic discussions to usury practices which are closely related to economic activity from both an Islamic and Christianity perspective. The method used in this paper is a qualitative method with a literature study approach taken from various national and international sources, namely books and journals and citing explanations from the Bible and Qur'an. The results of this research reveal that in Christianity, the study and prohibition of usury practices are mostly discussed in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy, Exodus dan Leviticus, while the New Testament tends to discuss things that need to be done to avoid usury practices. Associated with the economy in general in Christianity refers to the practice of lending money (loans) to those in need without asking for interest or additional returns as a form of profit. Meanwhile, in Islam, the discourse of usury can be found in al-Baqarah, al 'Imran, al-Nissa', al-Rum and the kind of prohibited Usury in is *Riba Nasiah, Fadhl* and *Jahiliyyah* which related to purchases and loans.

Keywords: Usury; Christianity; Islam; *Riba*; *Neshek*.

ABSTRAK

Sebelum datangnya agama Ibrahim, penduduk di masa lampau mengalami krisis ekonomi dan krisis kemanusiaan akibat praktik riba. Berbagai kajian sejarah mengungkapkan bahwa masa Babilonia merupakan era di mana peradaban manusia memperlihatkan fakta-fakta mengerikan akibat praksis riba. Kajian ini berfokus pada pandangan Islam dan Kristen tentang riba dalam kegiatan ekonomi. Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji riba mulai dari pembahasan semantik hingga praktik riba yang erat kaitannya

dengan aktivitas ekonomi baik dari perspektif Islam maupun Kristen. Metode yang digunakan dalam penulisan ini adalah metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi literatur yang diambil dari berbagai sumber nasional dan internasional yaitu buku dan jurnal serta mengutip penjelasan dari Injil dan Al-Qur'an. Hasil penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa dalam agama Kristen, kajian dan larangan praktik *riba* banyak dibahas dalam Perjanjian Lama dalam Deuteronomy, Exodus dan Leviticus, sedangkan Perjanjian Baru cenderung membahas hal-hal yang perlu dilakukan untuk menghindari praktik *riba*. Dikaitkan dengan perekonomian pada umumnya dalam agama Kristen mengacu pada praktek meminjamkan uang (pinjaman) kepada pihak yang membutuhkan tanpa meminta bunga atau imbalan tambahan sebagai bentuk keuntungan. Sedangkan dalam Islam, wacana *Riba (Usury)* dapat ditemukan dalam al-Baqarah, al 'Imran, al-Nissa', al-Rum dan macam-macamnya. Dilarang *Riba* di adalah *Riba Nasiah, Fadhl Dan Jahiliyah* yang terkait dengan pembelian dan pinjaman.

Kata kunci: *Usury*; Kristen; Islam; *Riba*; *Neshek*.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the Babylonian civilization in Mesopotamia in 3000 BC, the practice of usury has become an activity that represents the economic activities of the people until the beginning of the *Anno Domini* civilization. The form of usury practice at that time was in the form of borrowing money to meet the basic daily necessities of life by the poor (Maiti & Bidinger, 2021; Ustaoglu & Incekara, 2020; Vincent, 2014). Reports from various online media, including news, working papers and journals, explain that current usury practices in Indonesia and in numerous countries in the world appear in various forms that follow the trend of modern economic life in the global community. This also does not only occur in individual communities but also in financial institutions, both bank and non-bank institutions (Andriani, 2018; Gershon, 2015; Hasan, 2021; Nashrullah, 2021; Tarmizi, 2017; Vincent, 2014; Visser & Macintosh, 1998).

The practice of usury is not only a discussion on the Islamic religion. According to the history of the usury development, the practice of money interest had been carried out by the people of the Babylonians, long before the arrival of the Ardhi and Samawi religions. Residents in the past experienced an economic crisis and even a humanitarian crisis as a result of usury practices (Ustaglu et al., 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to realize that usury studies are discussed in almost all religions in the world, especially in the two major world religions, namely Islam and Christian. Furthermore, looking at the history of the negative consequences arising from this usury practice, this activity should no longer be carried out by anyone in the world, because usury impacts such as rising prices, debt and poverty are the antithesis of the goals of every country in general and humans in particular to live properly with a stable economic life as well as to obtain economic prosperity. Unfortunately, the practice of usury is still carried out by

most people in the world, there will always be more desires from each individual who wants more benefits than other humans. This is of course closely related to economic behavior in terms of obtaining profits in an easy way and making it difficult for other parties through usury practices.

So far, studies related to usury in Indonesia tend to look at two aspects, the first is a study that looks at aspects of banking institutions from dialogue to analysis. (Ahyani & Muharir, 2020; Furwanti & Hardiyono, 2022; Hidayatullah, 2021). The second tendency is to see usury in relation to the usury perspective from the Qur'an and Islamic economics in Indonesia (Ahyani, 2021; Jamarudin et al., 2019; Said, 2020; Sholih, 2020). Meanwhile, on an international scale, studies related to usury pay a lot of attention to aspects of trade with usury schemes practiced by traders or economic actors. (Draper, 1935; Rubin, 2009, 2010, 2011; Valeri, 1997), The focus of further study is usury in the view of Islam, Christianity and Greek scientists and economists in the early centuries of the development of economics. (Baker, 1974; Bretherton, 2011; George, 1957; Lawali, 2016; Meeks, 2011; Olechnowicz, 2011; Persky, 2007; Rutherford, 2005). From the tendency of this previous study, it can be seen that there are still very few journals in Indonesia that present writings on usury and look at the comparison between the two major religions in the world, namely Islam and Christianity. Therefore, this paper intends to complement the literature of journals in Indonesia on the study of usury which looks at the comparison of semantic analysis in an Islamic and Christianity perspective.

This paper is based on the argument that usury is not only a study of Islam, but also a study of other religions in the world, from a theoretical and practical perspective. This is indeed based on the history of economic activities carried out by the community in the past to the present, as well as the negative impacts which has caused by usury practices.

RESEARCH METHOD

Descriptive qualitative methods were used in this research with a literature study approach, namely a series of activities related to techniques or methods of collecting library data, then reading and processing research materials. Literature study aims to study various references from books, journals, Bible, Al-Qur'an, official websites and previous studies that are closely related to the issues studied in this paper. (Nazir, 2003; Sarwono, 2006; Sugiyono, 2005; Zed, 2014). The approach in this study is considered the most appropriate to be used to study semantic analysis related to usury from an Islamic and Christianity perspective. Although in general, there

are various approaches from qualitative methods that possess the possibility to be used, for example approaches such as phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, case study research, and hermeneutic (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Merriam, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, by using a literature study approach, studies from semantic analysis aspects related to usury will be more suitable, detailed and comprehensive. This reason is the background of the author to use this research method. The primary data sources used in this research are the Qur'an, Bible, books, national and international journals, while the secondary data used to disclose social facts is taken from national and international official online news. Furthermore, the technique of collecting and analyzing data in this study is by tracing studies on usury in Islamic and Christianity religious scriptures as well as related studies found in international books and journals.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Semantic Analysis of Usury in the Bible

In the Bible, the terminology of usury can be traced starting from the books in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, these words can also be found but most of them have Old Testament roots. In addition, the Old Testament contains more rules relating to loans and usury. The following are words related to usury: נֶשֶׁק (*Neshek*), מִשְׁשָׁא (*Mashsha*), תַּרְבִּיתָה (*Tarbit*), and τόκος (*Tokos*).

There are three different words in the Old Testament related to interest on loans or usury. The word *Neshek* is the word most frequently found in Old Testament texts. *Neshek* in general can be interpreted as "interest" but in everyday use the word is not only associated with money but also various forms of profit or additions obtained from borrowers. Someone can get benefits in the form of additional money, food, and materials, after charging interest to the debtor.

The word *Mashsha* is a word that substantively has the same meaning as *Neshek* but differs in terms of its application. *Mashsha* emphasizes that someone deliberately offers loans at interest to other people. Especially to poor people. Thus, the difference between *Neshek* and *Mashsha* lies in the usage of these words in the daily lives of Jews.

In terms of sound, the words *Neshek* and *Mashsha* (both of which are nouns) soundly the two words have phonetic similarities if they are changed to verb forms. The verb used to refer to lending activities is the word *Nashak*. It can be said, the words *Neshek* and *Mashsha* are rooted in the same word which is *Nashak*.

Interestingly, if traced from a semantic perspective, the word *Nashak* is not always related to the practice of charging interest to borrowers. This word can also be translated as “to bite”. As in the book of Numbers 21:8 it is written like this: *kāl-hannāšūk*, in translation: anyone who is bitten. In the context of this verse, it is the snake that bites. Thus, both *Neshek*, *Mashsha*, and *Nashak*, can be interpreted as actions that can misery and even kill other people's lives.

In contrast to the word *Tarbit* which does not directly refer to loan interest or usury. This can be seen from the root word *Tarbit* which is rooted in the word *rabah* which means "to increase or multiply". This word is not used too much in relation to usury. In the Old Testament, this word is only used in the book of Proverbs and the book of Ezekiel.

In the New Testament, the word used in connection with loan interest or usury is the word *tokos*. All words related to usury in the Old Testament, namely *Neshek*, *Mashsha*, *Nashak*, and *Tarbit*, are translated in the Septuagint/LXX as *tokos*. This word was used in everyday life by the Greeks associated with interest on loans. There is no difference in meaning between *Tokos* and the Hebrew words *Neshek*, *Mashsha*, *Nashak*, and *Tarbit*.

Usury and Dehumanizing: Understanding the Context of Usury in the Bible

Many texts allude to usury, especially in the Old Testament, but in this article only the text in the Torah, namely Exodus 22:25-27, is explained to understand the meaning of usury. Other texts in the Old Testament, such as Leviticus 25:35-38 and Deuteronomy 23:19-20, have the same substance as Exodus 22:25-27. These texts are the texts that underlie the Christianity's ethical attitude towards usury. However, unlike the Old Testament, the New Testament texts do not implicitly talk about usury (Brand, 2015). This does not mean that the New Testament does not have a theological basis for talking about usury, but rather that the New Testament texts allude to things that need to be done to avoid usury, including Matthew 5:42.

Exodus 22:25-27 contains God's command to the Israelites which was conveyed by God when the Israelites were walking in the desert towards Canaan. This text talks about the rules and norms in the Israeli community (Meyers, 2005). God sets rules and norms for His people so that they are ready to build their civilization in the land promised by God.

God strictly commands (Exodus 22:25):

אִם-כִּסְפוֹ תַלְוֶה אֶת-עַמִּי אֶת-הָעֲנִי עִמָּךְ לֹא-תִהְיֶה לּוֹ כְנִשָּׂה לְאִתְּשִׂימוֹן עָלָיו נֶשֶׁךְ:

In the translation of the New International Version (NIV): “If you lend money to one of my people among you who are needy, do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest.” Whereas

in the Indonesian-Terjemahan Baru (TB) version: “*Jika engkau meminjamkan uang kepada salah seorang dari umat-Ku, orang yang miskin di antaramu, maka janganlah engkau berlaku sebagai seorang penagih hutang terhadap dia: janganlah kamu bebaskan bunga uang kepadanya.*” Interestingly the phrase לֹא-תִהְיֶה לְךָ כְּנֹשֶׂה לְאֶת-שִׂמְיוֹן עָלְיוֹ גַּשְׁתָּ is translated differently by the NIV and TB. NIV translation: “do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest.” while the TB version: “do not act as a debt collector against him: do not charge him interest.” The TB version is closer to the literal meaning of the Hebrew, especially for the word כְּנֹשֶׂה (*kānōšeh*) which means “like a creditor/moneylender”. The NIV translation, with the same substance, further emphasizes that lending money is not the same as a profitable business.

In the Septuagint/LXX, the word used to translate *kānōšeh* is κατεπίγων (*katepeigōn*) which means “to press much” or “to press down. This word has a deeper meaning semantically than *kānōšeh*. *Katepeigōn* refers to the act of deliberately causing something or someone to be cornered or depressed. Of course in the context of borrowing money, *katepeigōn* is an implication of this practice (Gurtner, 2013). This will make it more difficult for the person who borrows money to return the money borrowed, especially if the loan is charged with interest.

The important context of the book of Exodus is related to the rule of lending money or other objects to people in need without being charged interest to make a profit. This book was written for the people of Israel so that they can continue to learn from the history of the Israelites and continue to reflect on the goodness of God who has freed them from slavery in Egypt (Houtman, 1993). As a result of slavery, the Israelites experienced suffering and poverty. This experience is also highlighted in the book of Exodus so that the Israelites continue to care for one another. The existence of people who suffer because of poverty, including those who are foreigners, widows and orphans must be considered so that they are free from suffering (Sin, 2014). This caring attitude of life is an attitude of life that reflects God's love for the Israelites who has freed them so that they can experience a prosperous life in the promised land.

God's command in Exodus 22:25-27 confirms that the life of the Israelites, who have been saved by God, must bring other people to life. If there are poor people who need help, they must be helped, by giving loans, without being burdened with loan interest. Setting interest on loans (*Neshék*) to debtors will “kill” (*Nashak*) the person who actually needs help. This same rule can be found in Leviticus 25:36 and Deuteronomy 23:19.

In the New Testament the rules regarding usury are not implicitly written down, but teachings about how to behave toward someone who needs help, in this case borrowing money, are written in the stories of Jesus' teachings and the writings of the apostles. For example, Matthew 5:42 contains Jesus' teaching to His disciples about giving loans to people who need loans. Jesus says: τῷ αἰτοῦντί σε δός, καὶ τὸν θέλοντα ἀπὸ σοῦ δανίσασθαι μὴ ἀποστραφῆς or in the NIV translation: "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you".

Jesus' teaching did not mention whether the loan must be accompanied by interest or not. This does not mean that Jesus did not give clear teachings, but rather that the rules for lending money to people in need do not need to be burdened with interest. This principle is rooted in the rule in Exodus 22:25-27. In addition, Jesus is also a figure who hates extortion and corrupt practices like those of the Pharisees (Luke 16).

The emphasis in the New Testament regarding lending money or other objects is on a loving attitude to life. The context of the community of Jesus in the first century AD is also similar to the context of the Jewish nation during slavery and post-slavery in Egypt. The community of Jesus also suffered under the Roman empire. Many poor people need help. Thus, it is not permissible to burden loan interest for those who borrow, but rather the attitude of helping one another which Jesus taught His disciples.

Another source also explicitly stated the same discourse of usury on the Biblical statement in the book of Deuteronomy, which reads, "You must not lend on interest (*neshekh*) to your brother, whether the loan be of money or food or anything else that may earn interest" (23:19–20). Followed by Exodus, "If you lend money to any of my (i.e. Yahweh's) people, to any poor man among you, you must not play the usurer with him: you must not demand interest (*neshekh*) from him" (22:24–25), 2 as well as one from Leviticus, "If your brother who is living with you falls on evil days and is unable to support himself with you, you must support him as you would a stranger or a guest, and he must continue to live with you. Do not make him work for you, do not take interest from him; fear God, and let your brother live with you. You are not to lend him money at interest (*neshekh*), or give him food to make a profit out of it" (25:35–37).

Semantic Use in the Qur'an

Talking about usury or interest in the Qur'an, the crucial concept is that of *ribā*. Following the evidence of Arabic lexicography, *ribā* means the increase in capital (Al_Zubaydi, n.d.) not

qualifying it as interest on loans or usury. The interdiction of *ribā* is quite clear in Sura 2, *al-baqara*, 275-280. Other verses relevant are Sura 3, *al 'imran*, 130, Sura 4, *al-nisa* ', 161, and Sura 30, *al-rum*, 39 (Nasr, 2015). While, there are also other resource which discuss about this term, namely from Hadith literature can be found. Many examples of this interdiction may be provided that have been discussed in the Islamic schools of law. The interpretation oscillates between the general interdiction of interest and the interdiction of usury (Lohlker, 1999).

Grammatically, *Riba* is a noun derived from the word *yarbu-rubuwwan-riba'n*. Raba (past simple verb) means: increase and grow. *Arbaytuhu* is an inflection (including first person pronoun and purpose) which means, "I increase it." In the Qur'an, "*yurbe* the charity" means, "to increase charity". This is where usury, which is forbidden, is taken. God Almighty said, "The usury that you do (*leyarbuwa*) to increase people's money does not *yarbu* (grow) in the sight of God." Abu Ishaq said, "*yarbu* means that humans pay something to obtain compensation more than what they pay" as in *riba nasiah* or borrowing money. He said, "usury is of two kinds: one is forbidden. Any loan that is returned with an increase, or that generates a profit, is prohibited. *Riba* that is permissible is donating money, asking God for more than the money you give, or giving it as a gift so that you will be given more and simply expecting more from God. The usury that is meant here is *Riba Nasiah* usury in terms of loans (Thomas, 2006). There is also forbidden *Riba* in Islam namely *Riba fadhl* (Samad & Sugeng, 2022), which means that it is accompanied by an addition, either in the form of money or in the form of food. In terms of its prohibition, the Shari'a has decreed in six respects this item, namely: gold, silver, white flour, red flour, dates, and salt. If the six types of goods are transacted in the same way with additions, then the law is haram. As the hadith of the Prophet SAW: "Gold uses gold, silver uses silver, white wheat uses white flour, red flour uses red flour, dates with dates, (in trading them), those who commit usury cannot stand as they stand. People who are possessed by Satan because are likened to people who are drunk. Then Allah will put them into a hell that never dies. As the word of Allah in Surah al-Baqarah verse 275: with the same size, and accepted personally" (HR Ahmad and Muslim). And there is also *Riba Jahiliyyah* (Zaid, 2011). *Riba Jahiliyyah* occurs in purchases and loans. Muhammad bin Jarir from Abu Ja'far ath-Tabari narrated a hadith about usury which is forbidden by Allah swt. from Muhammad bin Jabir, from Abu al-Haijai, he said, "During the time of pre-Islamic, there was someone who had a debt to another person. Then the creditor said to him „The amount owed by you is like this and like this and you may delay payment“, then the debtor

postpone it. Narrated by ath-Tabari also from Qatadah bin Da'amah as-Sudaisi, "Riba Jahiliyah occurs when someone makes a sale and purchase transaction of an item and then he gives a grace period for payment to the buyer. However, if the time for payment comes and the buyer has not been able to pay off the debt, the seller will give an additional grace period but the interest will also increase.

The social context

The interdiction of *ribā* is marking the attempt to control profit emerging from markets in a non-market economy like the early Islamic one. Thus, the additional provision of alms (*zakāt*) may be read as an attempt to balance the potential harmful effects of markets with mechanisms helping people affected by *ribā*-related practices. Thus, interest or usury is understood as a practice threatening social coherence, esp., of rural communities based on non-market social relations. Charging interest is understood as gains without any active participation in economic life, not producing tangible goods that may be consumed. Hence, this may be understood as the confrontation between economic activities based on pecuniary means and activities producing goods of any kind. This confrontation was solved during colonial rule by the emerging colonial economic sectors dominating traditional economy and society. Further developments meant increasing attempts to circumvent the interdiction of *ribā* and establishing a sector of commercial banks not inaccessible to the colonized people. Since the 1940s plans for establishing an Islamic finance sector appeared (Lohlker, 1999).

Islamic Finance

Since the establishment of the first Islamic Savings Bank in the Egyptian city of Mit Ghamr in 1963 and the surge of oil revenues in the 1970s, a diversified sector of Islamic Finance (IF) emerged. Following some estimations, the Islamic Finance market will be worth 3.5 trillion US\$ in 2024 (Khan et al., 2022). Highly diverse types of financial instruments have been created called sharia-compliant. The most recent developments are the creation of Islamic bonds (*sukuk*) (Mohamad et al., 2014). This emerging market marks the closest move to a re-engineering of conventional finance products in Islamic terms moving away from the original aims of IF as a tool to promote productive investments to participation in the new financial-economic regime (Vogl 2017). The last step is the implementation of blockchain technology in IF based on the tokenization of Islamic bonds (Khan et al., 2022). The development of IF may be read as a

successful integration into the global financial markets. If it is keeping its promises of supporting a more productive economy the future will reveal.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the study and prohibition of usury practices are mostly discussed in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy, Exodus dan Leviticus, while the New Testament tends to discuss things that need to be done to avoid usury practices. Associated with the economy in general in Christianity refers to the practice of lending money (loans) to those in need without asking for interest or additional returns as a form of profit. Meanwhile, in Islam, the discourse of usury can be found in al-Baqarah, al 'Imran, al-Nissa', al-Rum and the kinds of prohibited Usury in is *Riba Nasiah*, *Fadh*l and *Jahiliyyah* which related to purchases and loans.

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