

JOURNAL OF INDONESIAN ISLAMIC STUDIES

<https://ejournal.iainpalopo.ac.id/index.php/jiis/index>

Milk in the Qur'an: Hamka's Interpretation of Surah An-Nahl Verse 66 in Tafsir Al-Azhar

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Articles

Information

History:

Received: February

Approved: May

Publish: May

Keywords: *Milk in the Qur'an; Tafsir Al-Azhar; Surah An-Nahl verse 66; Buya Hamka; Scientific exegesis*

Abstract

This study analyzes the concept of milk in the Qur'an through Hamka's interpretation in Tafsir Al-Azhar, with particular emphasis on Surah An-Nahl verse 66. It employs qualitative library research and combines thematic exegesis with scientific exegesis. The primary data are drawn from Hamka's commentary on Surah An-Nahl verse 66 and related Qur'anic passages, while the secondary data comprise exegetical works, hadith collections, and literature on animal biology and modern nutrition. The data were analyzed through close reading, thematic classification, interpretive reconstruction, and comparison with established scientific accounts. The findings show that Hamka understands milk as an 'ibrah that reveals Allah's creative power and wisdom through an ordered biological process. The phrase labanan khalisan emphasizes that milk emerges as a pure and palatable substance despite its physiological relationship with digested matter and blood. Contemporary biology clarifies this process through digestion, nutrient absorption, blood circulation, hormonal regulation, and mammary-gland activity. Nutritional research further identifies milk as a source of protein, calcium, phosphorus, fats, vitamins, and minerals that support growth and health. These scientific explanations clarify the natural phenomenon referenced by the verse without replacing its theological and ethical purposes. The study contributes a three-layered framework that integrates the theological, biological, and health-related meanings of milk in the Qur'an.

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Introduction

The Qur'an, as the sacred scripture of Islam, contains not only theological, ritual, and ethical teachings but also numerous references to natural phenomena that invite reflection on the signs of Allah's creative power. These cosmological verses direct attention to the heavens and the earth, plants and animals, the alternation of day and night, and the ordered processes through which life is sustained. Among these phenomena is milk, described in Surah An-Nahl verse 66 as a pure and palatable drink produced within livestock from between digested matter and blood. The verse presents milk not merely as food but as an 'ibrah—a sign and lesson through which human beings may contemplate an intricate, balanced, and purposeful process of creation (Abidin, 2016).

The Qur'anic account is significant because it shifts attention from milk as an ordinary agricultural product to the biological process underlying its formation. Feed consumed by livestock undergoes digestion; nutrients are absorbed and transported through the bloodstream; and the mammary glands synthesize these materials into milk. The expression "between digested matter and blood" therefore links a familiar human experience with a concealed physiological process. Yet the verse ultimately frames this process theologically: from bodily systems associated with digestion and circulation, Allah brings forth a drink that is clean, wholesome, and beneficial.

The interpretation of such verses depends upon an exegete's method, intellectual orientation, and sensitivity to both language and lived reality. Hamka, one of the most influential Indonesian Muslim scholars of the twentieth century, developed a distinctly contextual mode of interpretation in *Tafsir Al-Azhar*. His writing is communicative, attentive to social experience, and consistently concerned with the ethical and spiritual implications of the Qur'an. In his interpretation of Surah An-Nahl verse 66, Hamka treats milk as evidence of divine wisdom manifested through an orderly natural process. This feature makes his interpretation particularly relevant to scientific exegesis, which explores how Qur'anic references to nature may enter into a responsible dialogue with scientific knowledge (Hidayat, 2018; Syukur, 2017).

Modern nutritional science further demonstrates the importance of milk. It contains protein, calcium, phosphorus, fats, vitamins, and other micronutrients that support growth, bone health, metabolism, immunity, and neurological function. Its production also involves complex interactions among digestion, nutrient absorption, blood circulation, hormonal regulation, and mammary-gland activity. These findings do not transform the Qur'an into a scientific textbook; rather, they illuminate the natural phenomenon to which the verse directs human attention. Scientific exegesis must therefore remain proportionate: science may clarify the physical process, while revelation provides theological orientation, ethical meaning, and the imperative to reflect and give thanks (Nurhayati, 2017; Ulum, 2020).

Previous scholarship has examined the integration of science and Qur'anic exegesis, Hamka's contextual methodology, and the nutritional value of milk (Abidin, 2016; Hidayat, 2018; Nurhayati, 2017). More recent studies have discussed milk in Surah An-Nahl verse 66 through Qur'an–science comparison, holistic health, and the integration of exegesis with animal science (Asyafa et al., 2024; Rizi et al., 2025; Safitri et al., 2020). These studies establish the scientific and health-related relevance of the topic. However, they have not sufficiently centered Hamka's interpretation in *Tafsir Al-Azhar* or systematically connected his theological reading with scientific exegesis and contemporary nutritional knowledge.

This study addresses that gap by analyzing Hamka's interpretation of Surah An-Nahl verse 66 and assessing its relevance to scientific exegesis and modern nutrition. It asks how milk is positioned in the Qur'an as a sign of divine power, how Hamka explains the verse, and how his interpretation may be related to the biological formation and nutritional benefits of milk. The study's contribution lies in its three-layered account of milk as a Qur'anic phenomenon with theological, biological, and health-related significance.

Method

This qualitative study employed library research because its principal objects were Qur'anic texts and Hamka's interpretation in Tafsir Al-Azhar. Surah An-Nahl verse 66 served as the primary textual focus because it describes the formation and purity of milk. Surah Al-Mu'minin verse 21 and Surah Muhammad verse 15 were included to situate the theme within a broader Qur'anic account of livestock, worldly benefit, and eschatological reward.

The study combined scientific exegesis (tafsir 'ilmi) with thematic exegesis (tafsir maudhu'i). Scientific exegesis was used to examine the verse's references to milk formation, nutritional composition, and human health without treating the Qur'an as a scientific manual or forcing contemporary theories into the text (Ulum, 2020). The thematic approach involved identifying related verses, examining their linguistic and conceptual relations, and interpreting them alongside Hamka's commentary and relevant scientific literature (Harahap, 2000).

The primary source was Hamka's Tafsir Al-Azhar, particularly his commentary on Surah An-Nahl verse 66 and related verses concerning milk and livestock. Secondary sources comprised Qur'anic commentaries, hadith collections, journal articles, works on scientific exegesis, animal science, food technology, and modern nutrition. Data were collected through documentation, close reading, note-taking, and thematic classification. Qualitative content analysis was conducted by identifying the central meanings of the verses, reconstructing Hamka's interpretive claims, comparing them with supporting exegetical literature, and relating the resulting themes to established scientific accounts. The analysis was organized into theological, biological, and health-related dimensions.

Results

A Conceptual Map of Qur'anic Verses on Milk

The thematic search identified three principal verses: Surah An-Nahl verse 66, Surah Al-Mu'minin verse 21, and Surah Muhammad verse 15. Together, they present milk in three complementary contexts. Surah An-Nahl explains its formation and purity; Surah Al-Mu'minin emphasizes the many benefits of livestock in worldly life; and Surah Muhammad depicts rivers of milk whose taste never changes as one of the blessings of Paradise. Milk therefore appears as a biological sign, a nutritional provision, and an eschatological reward (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019).

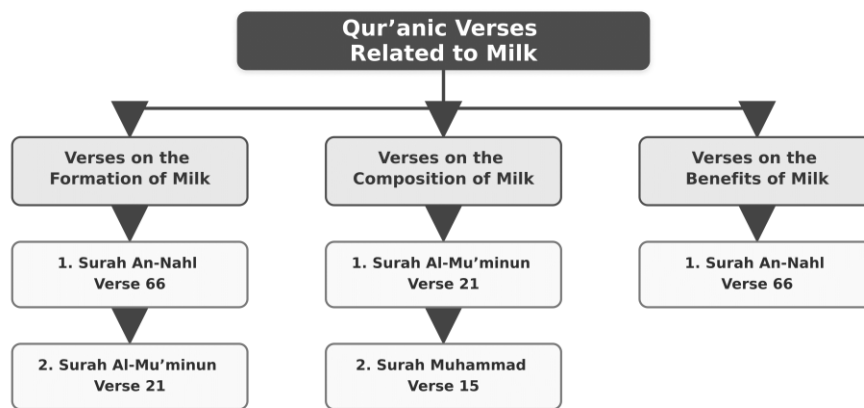


Figure 1. Conceptual Map of Qur'anic Verses on Milk

The central verse examined in this study is Surah An-Nahl verse 66:

وَإِنَّ لَكُمْ فِي الْأَنْعَامِ لَعِبْرَةً ۚ نُسْقِيكُمْ مِمَّا فِي بُطُونِهِمْ مِنْ بَيْنِ فَرْثٍ وَدَمٍ لَبَنًا خَالِصًا سَائِبِغًا لِلشَّارِبِينَ

“Indeed, in livestock there is a lesson for you. We give you drink from what is within their bellies, from between digested matter and blood: pure milk, pleasant to those who drink it” (Qur’an 16:66).

The verse explicitly presents milk as an *‘ibrah*. Its significance therefore extends beyond consumption: readers are invited to contemplate an internal process that cannot ordinarily be observed, yet produces a pure and useful substance. The phrase *labanan khalisan* (“pure milk”) emphasizes that the final product remains distinct from the digestive residues and blood associated with its physiological formation.

Surah Al-Mu’minun verse 21 broadens this account by emphasizing the benefits of livestock:

وَإِنَّ لَكُمْ فِي الْأَنْعَامِ لَعِبْرَةً ۚ نُسْقِيكُمْ مِمَّا فِي بُطُونِهَا وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا مَنَافِعُ كَثِيرَةٌ وَمِنْهَا تَأْكُلُونَ

“Indeed, in livestock there is a lesson for you. We give you drink from what is within their bellies; in them are many benefits for you, and from them you eat” (Qur’an 23:21).

Read thematically, the two verses perform complementary functions. Surah An-Nahl foregrounds the formation and purity of milk, whereas Surah Al-Mu’minun places milk within the broader material benefits of livestock. The Qur’anic theme thus combines reflection on divine creativity with the practical contribution of animals to human nourishment.

The Formation of Milk in Hamka’s Tafsir Al-Azhar

Hamka interprets Surah An-Nahl verse 66 as both a description of a natural phenomenon and a theological summons to reflection. Milk emerges from within livestock and in close relation to digested matter and blood, yet appears as *labanan khalisan*—clean, unmixed, and readily consumed. For Hamka, this transformation discloses a creation

governed by order and wisdom: Allah brings forth something wholesome and beneficial through a process whose internal complexity remains largely hidden from ordinary observation (Hamka, 1982).

Hamka gives particular weight to the word *'ibrah*. Human beings may routinely observe livestock, milk animals, and consume dairy products without reflecting on the processes that make milk possible. The verse interrupts such familiarity by turning an everyday substance into an object of religious and intellectual attention. Milk becomes a medium of faith education: knowledge of its formation deepens recognition of divine power rather than displacing theological meaning.

Scientific literature helps clarify the physiological process invoked by the verse. Feed is digested, nutrients are absorbed through the intestines, and the bloodstream transports substrates to the mammary glands, where milk components are synthesized. The expression “between digested matter and blood” is therefore compatible with the relationship among digestion, circulation, and lactation. Milk is physiologically dependent upon these systems but remains a distinct secretion rather than a mixture of digestive waste and blood (An-Najjar, 2006; Rahman, 2007).

The analysis identified three interrelated meanings in Hamka's interpretation. The theological dimension affirms Allah's creative power and wisdom; the biological dimension concerns the ordered formation of milk; and the educational dimension lies in the Qur'anic invitation to reason, observe, and draw lessons from the natural world. Hamka's reading therefore neither reduces the verse to biology nor isolates it from empirical reality.

Nutritional and Health Significance

The results also show that the Qur'an presents milk as a divine provision with substantial human benefit. In Hamka's reading, cattle, goats, and camels are not created solely for meat, labor, or hides; their milk is part of the sustenance through which Allah maintains human life. Its purity and nutritional value therefore call not only for consumption but also for gratitude and responsible use (Hamka, 1982).

Modern nutrition identifies milk as a source of high-quality protein, calcium, phosphorus, fat, vitamins A, D, and B12, and other micronutrients. Protein supports growth and tissue repair, while calcium and phosphorus contribute to the formation and maintenance of bones and teeth. Its vitamins and minerals support vision, immune function, metabolism, and the nervous system. These properties explain the relevance of milk across the life course, although its benefits depend on individual needs and appropriate consumption (Juwita et al., 2024; Nabilah et al., 2022; Prabowo & Chondro, 2021).

The privileged status of milk is also reflected in a hadith narrated from 'Abd Allah ibn 'Abbas, in which the Prophet teaches a supplication for food and milk:

مَنْ أَطْعَمَهُ اللَّهُ طَعَامًا فَلْيَقُلْ: اللَّهُمَّ بَارِكْ لَنَا فِيهِ، وَأَطْعِمْنَا خَيْرًا مِنْهُ، وَمَنْ سَقَاهُ اللَّهُ لَبَنًا فَلْيَقُلْ: اللَّهُمَّ بَارِكْ لَنَا فِيهِ، وَزِدْنَا مِنْهُ، فَإِنَّهُ لَيْسَ شَيْءٌ يُجْزَى مِنَ الطَّعَامِ وَالشَّرَابِ إِلَّا اللَّبَنُ

“Whoever is given food by Allah should say: ‘O Allah, bless it for us and feed us something better than it.’ Whoever is given milk by Allah should say: ‘O Allah, bless it for us and give us more of it,’ for nothing suffices as both food and drink except milk.”

The report appears in Sunan Abi Dawud no. 3730 and Sunan At-Tirmidzi no. 3455, with related transmissions in other hadith collections. It portrays milk as a blessed provision capable of contributing both nourishment and hydration. This religious valuation is consistent with, though not dependent upon, contemporary accounts of milk's nutritional density (Abu Dawud, n.d.; Ahmad ibn Hanbal, n.d.; At-Tirmidzi, n.d.).

Discussion

The findings establish that the Qur'anic representation of milk operates at several levels simultaneously. It identifies a material blessing, directs attention to a concealed physiological process, and transforms an everyday drink into a sign of divine power. Surah An-Nahl verse 66 therefore does not offer a technical account of lactation; it frames natural order as a source of knowledge, faith, and gratitude. This reading supports the broader view that Qur'anic cosmological verses may stimulate scientific reflection without surrendering their theological purpose (Abidin, 2016).

Hamka's contribution lies in preserving this integration. His interpretation of *labanan khalisan* treats purity as a physical description and a spiritual sign. The fact that milk is produced through systems associated with digestion and blood circulation, yet emerges as a wholesome substance, demonstrates order, measure, and balance in creation. His communicative presentation also reflects a characteristic strength of Indonesian Qur'anic exegesis: scriptural meaning is connected with ordinary experience so that readers can move from familiarity to reflection (Hidayat, 2018; Syukur, 2017).

Scientific exegesis clarifies, but does not exhaust, this interpretation. Modern animal science confirms that milk production depends upon digestive processes, nutrient absorption, circulation, mammary-gland metabolism, physiological condition, feed, hormonal regulation, and lactation. Studies of dairy colostrum and oxytocin-mediated milk release further illustrate the complexity and regularity of lactation (Atabany et al., 2022; Purnamasari & Hindiarti, 2021). Such findings make the Qur'anic wording intelligible in contemporary biological terms, but they should not be used to claim that the verse supplies a complete scientific model.

A proportionate relationship between revelation and science is therefore essential. The Qur'an is a book of guidance rather than a manual of biology or nutrition. Scientific explanations remain revisable, whereas the interpretive function of the verse is to orient human beings toward recognition, reflection, and gratitude. The value of scientific exegesis lies in dialogue: science explains aspects of the observable mechanism, while exegesis preserves the verse's theological, ethical, and spiritual horizons (Shihab, 2013; Ulum, 2020).

The health-related dimension likewise extends beyond basic nutrition. Research on goat-milk casein has identified antioxidant bioactive peptides, while probiotic fermentation may enhance digestive benefits and inhibit pathogenic microorganisms. Broader reviews associate appropriate dairy consumption with nutrient adequacy and bone health, although effects vary by product, individual, and dietary context (Hidayat, 2017; Lestari et al., 2020; Thorning et al., 2016). These developments expand the discussion from milk as food to its potential as a functional food, without altering the Qur'an's primary emphasis on benefit and gratitude.

Compared with earlier studies that emphasize Qur'an–science correspondence, holistic health, or animal science, this study places Hamka's Tafsir Al-Azhar at the center of the analysis (Asyafa et al., 2024; Rizi et al., 2025; Safitri et al., 2020). Its distinctive contribution is the identification of three interdependent layers of meaning: theological, because milk signifies divine power; biological, because its formation involves coordinated physiological systems; and health-related, because its nutrients support human well-being. Taken together, these layers demonstrate how a contextual Indonesian exegesis can mediate a disciplined dialogue among revelation, nature, and contemporary knowledge.

Hamka's interpretation thus remains relevant to both scientific exegesis and modern nutrition. His commentary supplies the theological and spiritual framework, while scientific literature clarifies aspects of milk formation, composition, and health value. The two modes of knowledge need not compete: when their epistemological limits are respected, they deepen understanding of milk as an 'ibrah and encourage a form of scientific inquiry grounded in humility and gratitude.

Conclusion

Milk in the Qur'an is not presented merely as a consumable drink but as a sign of Allah's creative power with theological, biological, and health-related meaning. Surah An-Nahl verse 66 describes milk as emerging from between digested matter and blood while remaining pure and pleasant to drink. Hamka interprets this phenomenon as an 'ibrah that invites reflection on an ordered and purposeful system of creation.

Hamka's interpretation is relevant to scientific exegesis and modern nutritional knowledge. Contemporary biology explains milk formation through digestion, nutrient absorption, blood circulation, hormonal regulation, and mammary-gland activity. Nutritional science further identifies protein, calcium, phosphorus, fats, vitamins, and minerals that support growth and health. These explanations enrich the empirical understanding of the verse while its principal function remains theological and ethical.

This study is limited by its concentration on Tafsir Al-Azhar as the principal exegetical source. Future research should compare Hamka with classical and contemporary exegetes and extend the analysis through animal science, public health, food technology, or halal-food studies. Such work could test and refine the three-layered framework proposed here while maintaining a critical distinction between scientific explanation and Qur'anic guidance.

Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge all individuals and institutions that provided guidance, support, and assistance during the preparation of this article. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the continuing development of Qur'anic studies and the dialogue between Islamic scholarship and science.

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