

DECONSTRUCTING THE HISTORICITY OF THE QUR'AN JOHN WANSBROUGH'S PERSPECTIVE: A HERMENEUTIC STUDY OF ISLAMIC PHILOLOGICAL SUSPICION AND CRITICISM

**Ahmad Mustakim¹, Fariha Akmaliatu Sholihah*², Amelia Mutiara Rahmah³,
Nadia Raissa Martafia⁴**

¹ Sunan Ampel State Islamic University, Surabaya, Indonesia

Mustaqimahmad875@gmail.com

^{2*} Sunan Kudus State Islamic University, Kudus, Indonesia

Farihaakmaliatusholihah@gmail.com

³ Sunan Kudus State Islamic University, Kudus, Indonesia

ameliamutiara864@gmail.com

⁴ Sunan Kudus State Islamic University, Kudus, Indonesia

raisanadia338@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article discusses John Wansbrough's radical approach to viewing the Qur'ān as a historical construction that developed in the context of sectarian polemics between Jewish, Christian and proto-Muslim communities. Through a historical-critical approach, philological and literary analysis, Wansbrough rejects the traditional narrative of Qur'ānic revelation and codification agreed upon by the majority of Muslims. He treats the Qur'ān as the discursive product of early Muslim communities living within the theological, social and political dynamics of the Levant and Iraq. Employing a hermeneutic methodology of suspicion, Wansbrough emphasizes the importance of critiquing classical Islamic sources such as hadith and sirah, and tracing the Qur'ān's intertextuality with Biblical texts. This article uses a qualitative-descriptive approach based on a desk study of the works of Wansbrough and his followers, as well as responses from Muslim scholars. The results show that although Wansbrough's approach was highly controversial and widely rejected by Muslim scholars, his contribution opened up a new paradigm in the critical study of the Qur'ān in the Western academic world. This article also emphasizes the importance of developing a Qur'ānic study methodology that is able to respond to orientalist challenges without losing the integrity of Islamic scholarship.

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas pendekatan radikal John Wansbrough untuk melihat Al-Qur'an sebagai konstruksi sejarah yang berkembang dalam konteks polemik sektarian antara komunitas

Kata Kunci:

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Yahudi, Kristen, dan proto-Muslim. Melalui pendekatan historis-kritis, filologis, dan analisis sastra, Wansbrough menolak narasi tradisional wahyu dan kodifikasi Al-Qur'an yang disepakati oleh mayoritas Muslim. Dia memperlakukan Al-Qur'an sebagai produk diskursif dari komunitas Muslim awal yang hidup dalam dinamika teologis, sosial, dan politik di wilayah Suriah dan Irak. Dengan mengemukakan metodologi hermeneutika kecurigaan, Wansbrough menekankan pentingnya kritik terhadap sumber-sumber Islam klasik seperti hadis dan sirah, serta mengeksplorasi intertekstualitas Al-Qur'an dengan teks-teks alkitabiah. Artikel ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif-deskriptif berdasarkan studi literatur karya Wansbrough dan para pengikutnya, serta tanggapan dari para cendekiawan Muslim. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun pendekatan Wansbrough sangat kontroversial dan ditolak secara luas oleh para cendekiawan Muslim, kontribusinya membuka paradigma baru dalam studi kritis Al-Qur'an di akademisi Barat. Artikel ini juga menekankan pentingnya mengembangkan metodologi untuk mempelajari Al-Qur'an yang mampu menjawab tantangan orientalis tanpa kehilangan integritas ilmu Islam.

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Introduction

The Qur'an is the main source of Islamic teachings which is not only considered as a holy book, but also as the *kalām of Allah*, the word of Allah which is eternal, absolute, and unpolluted by human elements. In the Islamic theological tradition, the belief that the Qur'an was revealed directly to the Prophet Muhammad through the intermediary of the angel Gabriel is an unshakable dogma, which underpins the entire building of faith. These revelations are believed to have occurred gradually over more than two decades, reflecting the social, political, and spiritual dynamics experienced by the early Muslim community.¹ These texts were then compiled, memorized, and written by the Companions, until finally they were officially codified in a single mushaf during the reign of Caliph Uthman bin Affan.²

This codification is not only administrative or technical, but becomes a theological-historical event that determines the direction of the development of Islamic epistemology. By compiling the Qur'an into a single mushaf, Muslims believe that the revelation has been consolidated in an authentic and complete form. The Ottoman Mushaf is not only a standard reference in reading and pronunciation, but also a symbol of religious authority that unites the ummah in one canonical text.³

However, this is studied by the west, in the Western academic tradition, especially in the study of orientalism, the narrative about the authenticity of the Qur'anic text is treated problematically.⁴ One of the most radical figures in overhauling the foundations of Islamic orthodoxy was John Wansbrough. Through his monumental works such as *Qur'anic Studies*⁵ and *The Sectarian Milieu*⁶, Wansbrough presents a deconstructive analysis of the Qur'an using historical-critical, philological, and hermeneutic tools of Biblical texts. He rejected the view that the Qur'an was an instant revelation, and instead proposed the thesis that the Qur'an was an editorial product that developed over two centuries in the context of religious communities experiencing sectarian conflict and the search for theological identity.

¹ In Fariha Akmalia's writing, Sholihah quoted from the opinion of Syed Naquib Al-Attas who said that "The revelation of the Qur'an is a sign that Allah communicates directly with humans, conveying concrete solutions to the problems they face." <https://tafsiralquran.id/skenario-tuhan-di-balik-pewahyuanalquran/> accessed on May 24, 2025.

² Muhammad Najib, "The Establishment of the Ottoman Mushaf," *Al-A'raf: Journal of Islamic Thought and Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (5 June 2016): 25, <https://doi.org/10.22515/ajpif.v13i1.40>.

³ Mr. Quraish Shihab, *Insight of the Quran: Thematic Interpretation on Various Questions of the Ummah* (Mizan Pustaka, 1996).

⁴ Adnin Armas, *Biblical methodology in the study of the Quran: a critical study* (Gema Insani, 2005).

⁵ John E. Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁶ John E. Wansbrough, *The sectarian milieu: content and composition of Islamic salvation history*, London oriental series, v. 34 (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

Wansbrough's approach that combines Semitic philological methods, literary analysis, and source criticism has given birth to a new wave in the study of the Qur'an in the West. Some scholars such as Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, and Andrew Rippin took inspiration from this frame of thinking to develop a similar approach.⁷ But on the other hand, Wansbrough's views also provoked strong resistance from Muslim scholars such as Fazlur Rahman and M. M. Al-A'zami, who considered his methodology too speculative and ignored traditional Islamic primary sources.⁸

This article departs from the fundamental question, to what extent is John Wansbrough's historical-critical approach to the Qur'an scientifically acceptable? What are the epistemological implications of his views on Islamic scholarship and the position of the Qur'an as a divine revelation? To answer this question, this article aims to, *first*, analyze Wansbrough's method in the study of the Qur'an, *second*, explore the influence of his thought in the academic world, and *third*, examine the criticism of his approach from both other orientalist and Muslim scholars.

This study is important not only to understand the development of contemporary Qur'an studies, but also to build the methodological awareness of Muslims in the face of epistemological challenges from outside the tradition. Through a qualitative-descriptive approach and literature study, this article is expected to contribute a more balanced perspective in mapping the scientific debate around the authenticity and historicity of the Qur'an.

Methods

This research uses a qualitative-descriptive approach, which places text as the main object of analysis to be interpreted critically and reflectively.⁹ This choice of approach is based on the nature of the study that requires an in-depth understanding of the construction of John Wansbrough's thought, as well as an examination of the literature that supports and criticizes it. This approach allows researchers to explore the conceptual nuances, epistemological assumptions, and argument structures contained in orientalist discourse on the Qur'an, particularly within the framework of Wansbrough.

The main material in this study is sourced from library research, which includes academic texts, orientalist works, and contemporary critical interpretive

⁷ Azwar Sani, "A STUDY OF JOHN WANSBROUGH THOUGHTS ON QUR'ANIC STUDIES: SOURCE AND METHODS OF SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION," *Tanzil: Journal of Quranic Studies* 6, no. 1 (October 17, 2023): 71–84, <https://doi.org/10.20871/tjsq.v6i1.304>.

⁸ Muhammad Diaz Supandi and Ihwan Agustono, "Trends in Islamic Revisionist Discourse on Qur'anic Studies (A Critical Analysis of John Wansbrough's Thought)," *Kavakib Journal* 5, no. 02 (December 30, 2024): 78–85, <https://doi.org/10.24036/kwkib.v5i02.238>.

⁹ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (SAGE, 2014), p. 185.

literature. Primary data are in the form of two major works by John Wansbrough: *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (1977) and *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (1978). These two works form the main foundation for the theoretical and methodological construction that Wansbrough developed in the study of the Qur'an.

In addition, various secondary sources are also used to expand the scope of analysis and enrich perspective. These sources include works of Western scholars who continue or adopt the Wansbrough approach, such as Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, Andrew Rippin, and John Burton. No less important are the responses and criticisms of Muslim scholars such as Fazlur Rahman and M.M. Al-A'zami, who provide an alternative view as well as a counterweight to the current of orientalist thought. Other complementary literature in the form of academic journal articles, dissertations, and relevant books is also integrated to deepen the context and strengthen the argument.

In terms of analytical techniques, this study uses a critical-reflective model, which is an analytical way of thinking that not only describes, but also evaluates conceptually and epistemologically.¹⁰ The first step is to dissect Wansbrough's argumentative structure and system of thought, in order to understand how Wansbrough constructed his radical view of the origin and codification of the Qur'an. Afterwards, an assessment was made of the consistency of his methodology with the Semitic philological tradition and the historical approach that developed in Western Biblical studies.

The next step is to juxtapose Wansbrough's thinking with the response of Muslim scientists and other Western academics. This pairing is important for assessing the validity, internal coherence, and theoretical reach of the approach it offers. Finally, an evaluation is made of the impact of Wansbrough's thought on the development of contemporary Qur'an studies, especially in terms of how his thinking encouraged a paradigm shift in textual studies and early Islamic history.

It is important to note that the methodology used in this study is not intended to dogmatically justify or reject Wansbrough's views. Instead, his focus is on conducting a scientific evaluation of the intellectual contributions and limitations of the approach he offers in understanding the Qur'an, both as a normative text and as a historical document. Thus, this research seeks to present an objective and proportionate reading of the controversial discourse that he has inherited in the academic world.

Result

This research has identified that John Wansbrough's historical-critical approach to the Qur'an resulted in a paradigm shift in the study of Islamic sacred texts, especially among Western academics. Such an approach has been constructed through a synthesis between philological criticism, literary reading,

¹⁰ Prof. Latipun Ph.D and Dr. Nurul Zuriah M.Si, *CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION THE STUDY OF PHILOSOPHY AND THEORY* (UMMPress, 2025), p. 7.

and the hermeneutics of suspicion, which are methodologically utilized to dismantle orthodox claims to the authenticity and chronology of the Qur'anic revelation.

It has been found that within the framework of Wansbrough, the Qur'an is not positioned as a transcendent revelation that was finally revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, but rather as the result of a historical construction that developed in the context of sectarian polemics. The text of the Qur'an is treated as the product of a lengthy editorial process, compiled by early religious communities in an attempt to form a collective identity amid the tug-of-war of Judeo-Christian influence in the region of Syria and Iraq. Thus, narratives of revelation that are linear, instantaneous, and ahistorical have been conceptually critiqued and repositioned within the spectrum of discursive genealogy. From a linguistic point of view, it has been noted that the Qur'an was analyzed as a text that showed the linguistic characteristics of the Semitic koine, which contained many elements of Aramaic, Hebrew, and Syriac. Wansbrough's philological approach suggests that key terms in the Qur'an indicate the existence of a vast network of intertextuality, linking this text to earlier Biblical narratives. Thus, it has been concluded that the language of the Qur'an cannot be considered as a representation of divine revelation in pure Arabic form, but rather as a hybrid expression of cross-tradition religious discourse.

At the structural level, the Qur'an has been mapped by Wansbrough into two main categories, legal discourse and polemic discourse. These findings reveal that the form of Qur'anic text preparation reflects the efforts of the early communities in formulating norms, maintaining authority, and building ideological unity within the framework of internal and external conflicts. The rhetorical features of repetition, fragmentation, and chronological dislocation have been interpreted as evidence that the text developed through a process of collective reconstruction, rather than as a direct and final revelation.

John Edward Wansbrough presents a very different approach from the traditional Islamic paradigm of understanding the Qur'an. As a philologist and Islamologist grounded in the tradition of modern biblical criticism, he rejects the normative assumption that the Qur'an is a transcendent revelation that came down literally to the Prophet Muhammad and was immediately codified. Instead, it offers a framework that rests on three main approaches, historical criticism, philological analysis, and literary reading, which dismantles theological narratives and reads them as historical constructions loaded with the importance of community identity.¹¹

Historical Criticism of Texts as Social Products, Not a Single Revelation

Wansbrough based his approach on historical criticism, a method commonly used in Jewish and Christian biblical studies. This criticism does not accept the text as dogmatic truth, but rather as the result of a complex historical

¹¹ Johana Salsabillah, "THE QUR'AN ACCORDING TO THE THOUGHT OF JOHN WANSBROUGH," t.t., pp. 29-30.

process.¹² In the context of the Qur'an, Wansbrough rejects the validity of the Prophetic sirah, hadith, and classical commentary as authentic historical sources, because according to him these three types of literature only emerged about one to two centuries after the prophetic period. Such literacy, in his view, is not a reflection of historical reality, but a post-factual narrative constructed to establish theological orthodoxy and political legitimacy.¹³

In this approach, Wansbrough does not see the Qur'an as a "revealed message of God," but as a discursive archive of religious communities undergoing social and ideological consolidation. The text of the Qur'an, according to him, is evidence that the early Muslim community experienced internal conflicts, identity tensions, and the search for legitimacy in the midst of a world of established monotheistic religions, such as Judaism and Christianity. He placed the Qur'an as a community document, not just as a personal revelation to the Prophet Muhammad. In this model, revelation is a collective and long-term process, not an immediate and final event.¹⁴

Philological Approach between Intertextuality and Semitic Koine

Wansbrough continues his critique of the authenticity of revelation through a philological analysis that traces the structure and origins of the Qur'anic vocabulary. He highlighted the many terms in the Qur'an that come from non-Arabic languages, such as Syriac (Syriac), Aramaic, and Hebrew.¹⁵ Examples are the words *Injil* (Gospel), *Tawrāt* (Torah), *Sakīnah*, *Malakūt*, *Rabbān*, and so on. For him, the presence of these terms shows that the language of the Qur'an is not pure Arabic, but a hybrid language or Semitic coin, which is a variant of the language that developed in the cosmopolitan cultural environment of the Middle East.¹⁶

This philological search is not just a matter of etymology, but concerns theological and epistemological implications. If the language of the Qur'an is the result of a mixture of culture and linguistics, then, according to Wansbrough, the Qur'an cannot be seen as a revelation that is "pure from God," but rather as a product of interreligious discourse formed through a process of dialogue,

¹² Muhammad Syahrul Mubarak and Erina Aolia Pangesti, "PARADIGM OF SKEPTICISM TOWARDS THE EXISTENCE OF THE HISTORICITY OF THE QUR'AN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF JOHN WANSBROUGH," *BIDAYAH: THE STUDY OF ISLAMIC SCIENCES*, December 30, 2024, pp. 202-205, <https://doi.org/10.47498/bidayah.v15i2.2264>.

¹³ *Ibid*, pp. 206-207.

¹⁴ M Kholid Muslih, Muhamad Shofwan Muttaqin, and Amir Sahidin, "The Historical Concept of the Qur'an in the Perspective of John Wansbrough: An Overview of the Islamic Worldview," *AL QUDDS : Journal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies* 7, no. 2 (August 7, 2023): p. 337, <https://doi.org/10.29240/alqudds.v7i1.5561>.

¹⁵ Fadholi, Ahmad. "A Critical Study of John Wonsbrough's Thoughts on the Historicity of the Qur'an" 8, no. 2 (December 29, 2014): 281–304. <http://journal.stainkudus.ac.id/index.php/Hermeneutik/article/download/894/830>.

¹⁶ Rose Aljanada and Aseel Alfaisal, "The Foreign Vocabulary of the Glorious Qur'an," *International Journal of Language & Linguistics* 6, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.30845/ijll.v6n2p7>.

interaction, and polemic with other religious traditions.¹⁷ This reinforces the assumption that Islam did not arise in a cultural vacuum, but rather from the dynamics of an intertwined monotheistic religious community.¹⁸

Literary Analysis of Texts as Polemics and Fragmentation

Wansbrough applies a literary approach to the structure of the Qur'an. He rejected the notion that the Qur'an has a consistent or linear narrative structure like other holy books. Instead, he identifies polemic fragments, metaphorical repetitions, and rhetorical formulas as characteristic of the Qur'an.¹⁹ This text, in his view, is rhetorical and argumentative, not historical narrative.

Wansbrough divides the content of the Qur'an into two broad categories;²⁰

1. Legal discourse that describes community efforts to standardize the legal system and social norms.
2. A polemical discourse that reflects internal and external debates, both with polytheists, Jews, Christians, and between various factions within the Muslim community itself.

By dissecting this structure, Wansbrough wants to show that the Qur'an functions as a tool for the formation of a collective identity, not just an ethical revelation.²¹ The rhetoric in the Qur'an, especially repetition and eschatological metaphors, became a medium of communication used by the elites of the early communities to assert authority and build a theological narrative that united previously scattered groups.

In Wansbrough's view, the non-linear, non-chronological, and repetitive character of the Qur'an is not a compositional weakness, but rather a sign that the text was composed through a gradual process of reconstruction, rather than being revealed at once in its entirety. This kind of composition is a trace of ideological debate and adjustment in the early Muslim community that was undergoing a transformation from a sectarian movement to a formal religious institution.

The historical-critical, philological, and literary approach proposed by John Wansbrough represents a form of deconstructive hermeneutics of the Qur'an that challenges Islamic orthodoxy. Wansbrough does not simply offer textual criticism, but dismantles the conceptual foundations of the way Muslims understand the revelation and history of their own religion. This method allows for a rereading of the Qur'an in the context of ideological genealogy, cultural interactions, and more complex social dynamics.

¹⁷ A. H. Mathias Zahniser, "Language of the Qur'an," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, by A. H. Mathias Zahniser, ed. by Muhammad Abdel Haleem and Mustafa Shah (Oxford University Press, 2020), 275–93, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199698646.013.48>.

¹⁸ G.R. Hawting, "John Wansbrough, Islam, and monotheism," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 9, no. 1 (1997): 23–38, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006897X00034>.

¹⁹ Angelika Neuwirth, "Structural, linguistic and literary features," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 97–114, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521831601.006>.

²⁰ Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, pp. 119–145.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

Although this approach is controversial and rejected by the majority of Muslim scientists, it remains an important cornerstone in modern orientalist studies and opens up new possibilities for interdisciplinary study in the science of the Qur'an. The challenge lies in how Muslims respond to this approach intellectually, with a methodology that is critical but still rooted in the spiritual integrity and scientific tradition of Islam itself.

In addition, the impact of Wansbrough's thought in contemporary scientific discourse has been found to be very significant. His ideas are known to have inspired a number of great thinkers such as Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, Andrew Rippin, and Christoph Luxenberg. Although this approach has been widely criticized by Muslim scholars such as Fazlur Rahman and M.M. Al-A'zami as being considered reductionist and speculative, its influence on the formation of deconstructive methodologies in the study of the Qur'an cannot be ignored.

Thus, it has been asserted that Wansbrough's approach, although theologically problematic, still provides an important conceptual framework for remapping the discourse of the historicity of the Qur'an. These findings open up space for Muslims to develop a more critical, non-apologetic, epistemological response that remains rooted in the integrity of the Islamic scientific tradition in responding to orientalist challenges in the global academic era.

Table 1. The essence of John Edward Wansbrough's method

Aspects	Historical-Critical Approach	Philological Approach	Literary Approach
Key Focus	The historical process of the formation of the text and the early Muslim community	Origins of non-Arabic linguistic vocabulary and influences	Rhetorical structure, discourse patterns, and polemic narratives
Basic Assumptions	The Qur'an is not a single revelation, but a socio-political product of the community	The language of the Qur'an is a hybrid of Semitic koine, not pure Arabic	Texts are fragmentary, polemic, and non-linear
Criticized Objects	The Sirah Nabawiyah, hadiths, classical interpretations as post-factual constructions	The etymology of Qur'anic terms such as the Gospel, Torah, Sakinah, etc.	The internal structure of the Qur'an that contains repetition and metaphors
The Revelation Model	Revelation as a collective, indirect or final process	Revelation as interfaith cultural intertextuality	Revelation as an identity rhetoric in social and theological conflict

Hermeneutical Purpose	Uncovering the political dynamics and identity behind the formation of texts	Tracing the historical-cultural roots of the Qur'anic language	Uncovering the function of text as an integration tool and early community polemics
Methodology	Historical criticism	Etymological analysis, intertextuality across Semitic languages	Analysis of literary genres, rhetorical styles, and legal/polemic narratives
The Function of the Qur'an According to Wansbrough	Ideological archives of early Muslim communities	Cross-cultural products and monotheistic traditions of the Middle East	Instruments of orthodoxy formation and community consolidation
Implications for Revelation	Revelation = the result of history, not transcendent truth	Revelation = an intertextual product, not a direct divine communication	Revelation = ideological discourse, not final or fixed text
Criticism of Orthodoxy	Unraveling the historical and political legitimacy of classical scholars	Rejecting claims of the purity of the language of revelation	Relativizing narrative structure as a result of rhetoric, not divine narrative
Position on Islamic Tradition	Skeptical of post-factual Islamic primary sources	Challenging the purity of the Arabic language in revelation	Deconstruction of composition as a process of ideologizing, not revelation

Discussion

Sectarian Milieu and Criticism of Codified Narratives

One of John Wansbrough's most significant theoretical contributions to the study of the Qur'an was the concept of the sectarian milieu, a historical framework that placed early Muslim communities as part of the sectarian dynamics of pre-established monotheistic religions in the Middle Eastern region, particularly the Levant and Mesopotamian regions.²² This idea not only challenges

²² Aaron W. Hughes, *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion: Twenty Five Years On* (BRILL, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004257573>.

Islam's exclusive narrative of its "universal and original" emergence, but also offers a reinterpretation of the formation of the Qur'an as a social and theological product of a community seeking identity in the midst of sectarian conflict.²³

In this framework, Wansbrough views that early Islam was not a spontaneous movement, much less a new religion that broke away from the roots of previous religious history. Instead, he claims that the early Muslim community was part of the mutation or evolution of Judeo-Christian groups, especially those with apocalyptic and reformist characteristics. Some of the groups mentioned in his study include the Nestorians (Eastern Syrian Christians), the Ebionites (Jewish Christian communities that reject the divinity of Jesus), and the apocalyptic forms of Judaism scattered around the regions of Syria, the Hejaz, and Iraq.

According to Wansbrough, in this context, the Qur'an should be read as a theological and ideological reaction to the identity struggles of these communities. He rejected the notion that the Qur'an came from the Prophet Muhammad's singular spiritual experience, and instead placed it as a collective document that arose from polemics between competing sects in an attempt to establish religious orthodoxy.

A. Criticism of the Ottoman Codification Narrative

Departing from the idea of this sectarian milieu, Wansbrough makes a sharp criticism of the traditional narrative of the codification of the Qur'an during the time of Caliph Uthman bin Affan. In the classical Islamic narrative, it is said that during Uthman's time, about two decades after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an was collected and recorded in a standard mushaf called the Ottoman Mushaf, to prevent differences in qir'āt in various regions of Islam. Wansbrough methodologically rejects this narrative. He argued that the Ottoman codification claim could not be verified historically, since all the sources that informed it including the hadiths and the sirah records were only written at least a century after the event.

Wansbrough states that the process of codification of the text of the Qur'an actually took place gradually and in layers, and only reached the final canonical form in the 8th or 9th century AD, precisely in the early days of the Abbasid Dynasty. During this period, there was a massive consolidation of Islamic law, theology, and religious institutional structures, including the standardization of the text of the Qur'an. In this view, the codification of the mushaf is not the result of an act of gathering revelation in authentic form, but is an ideological project of the state to standardize a single version of the Qur'an that can be used as a source of political and religious legitimacy by the ruling caliphate.

Thus, codification is not understood as a collection of sacred texts that have been fully available, but as the result of the filtering, selection, and

²³ Farhad Daftary, "Varieties of Islam," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, ed. by Robert Irwin, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 105–41, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521838245.005>.

standardization of religious texts that were spread in oral and written form in various early Muslim communities. The text of the Qur'an, in this approach, represents the triumph of one discursive variant over other discourses that are not documented in official history.

Epistemological and Historical Implications

The implications of this approach are profound, both theoretically and ideologically. If what Wansbrough said is true, then the traditional narrative of the purity and continuity of revelation from the time of the Prophet to the first generation of companions must be revised. The Qur'an is no longer seen as a complete instant revelation, but as a narrative construction formed in the polemic space of sectarian communities.²⁴ It also means that the canonization of the Qur'an is not historically neutral, but is part of a hegemonic project undertaken by early Islamic religious and political elites. Sacred texts are a tool for defining the boundaries of orthodoxy, silencing opposition groups, and affirming certain doctrines as the sole truth.

This approach also opens up space for a more dynamic and inclusive study of the history of Qur'anic texts. Within this framework, modern researchers can trace the ideological, linguistic, and theological traces of the Qur'anic texts, as well as understand how the process of its formation reflected the power dynamics, identity conflicts, and ideological battles in early Islamic societies.²⁵

The Influence of Wansbrough's Thought in the Study of the Qur'an

The influence of John Wansbrough's radical thought has been the epistemological foundation for a new wave of critical study of Islam and the Qur'an in the West, particularly in the 1970s to the early 21st century. The historical-critical, philological, and literary approach he offers not only challenges the assumptions of Islamic orthodoxy, but also influences the methodological direction and thematic focus of a number of prominent scholars who then develop new ideas in order to unravel the early history of Islam and the formation of the Qur'anic text.

One of the most obvious influences of Wansbrough can be seen in Patricia Crone and Michael Cook's *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (1977). This book, which is often considered a highly controversial work, explicitly adopts Wansbrough's theoretical framework for understanding early Muslim communities not as established Islamic entities, but as the result of the evolution and synthesis of Jewish-Arab communities.²⁶ Crone and Cook even state that Islam was initially a Jewish theocratic project aimed at building a new political-

²⁴ Rahel Fischbach, "The Silent Qur'an and the Speaking Qur'an: Scriptural Sources of Islam between History and Fervor," *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 9, no. 2 (December 1, 2018): 179–87, <https://doi.org/10.5325/bustan.9.2.0179>.

²⁵ Fred M. Donner, "A Historian's View of the Qur'ān: IQSA Presidential Address – Palermo, Italy – September, 2022," *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association* 9, no. 1 (November 11, 2024): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1515/jiqsa-2024-0020>.

²⁶ Patricia Crone, M. A. Cook, and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (CUP Archive, 1977).

religious order in the Arabian Peninsula, and only later developed its identity as a distinct religious tradition.

Although this theory of "Hagarism" has drawn sharp criticism even from Western academics themselves, it is undeniable that it is a reflection of the influence of Wansbrough's idea of a sectarian milieu and a slow and polemical codification process. The idea that the early history of Islam needs to be reconstructed with non-Muslim sources and a skeptical approach to the internal traditions of Islam became Wansbrough's main methodological legacy. Wansbrough's influence is also strongly felt in John Burton's work, especially his book *The Collection of the Qur'an* (1977). In this work, Burton follows in Wansbrough's footsteps by rejecting the traditional narrative of the codification of the Qur'an carried out during the time of Uthman bin Affan. He argues that many statements in the hadith literature and commentaries on codification are inconsistent and tend to reflect post-factual theological and juridical needs.²⁷ Although differing in the final conclusion, Burton methodologically agrees that the narrative of the preparation of the Ottoman mushaf is not a neutral historical record, but rather a product of a narrative developed in the context of the standardization of Islamic law and the articulation of orthodoxy.

Meanwhile, Andrew Rippin, one of Wansbrough's most influential intellectual pupils, took a more literary approach. In many of his writings, such as in *The Qur'an and Its Interpretative Tradition*, Rippin developed a literary analysis of classical interpretations of Islam in the spirit of the hermeneutics of suspicion inherited from Wansbrough. He treats tafsir not only as an attempt to explain the verses of the Qur'an, but also as a form of negotiation of discursive meaning and legitimacy in the Islamic tradition.²⁸ Tafsir, in this view, is not value-free, but is loaded with historical, political, and theological interests of the community of its readers.

Wansbrough's influence is also felt in the development of an intertextual approach in the study of the Qur'an. Two important names in this regard are Christoph Luxenberg and Angelika Neuwirth. Christoph Luxenberg, in his work *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*, uses an extreme philological approach that also traces the roots of the Syriac language in the Qur'anic text. He even claimed that many parts of the Qur'an could only be understood by rereading the text in a Syrian, not Arabic, context.²⁹ Although his approach is highly debated, Luxenberg explicitly builds his argument on the philological foundations first proposed by Wansbrough.

As for Angelika Neuwirth, although not as radical as Luxenberg or Wansbrough, she still adopts the spirit of intertextuality and historicity in her

²⁷ John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'an* (CUP Archive, 1977).

²⁸ Andrew Rippin, *The Qur'an and Its Interpretative Tradition* (Taylor & Francis, 2022).

²⁹ Christoph Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (Verlag Hans Schiler, 2007).

project to understand the Qur'an as a living text in the culture of Late Antiquity.³⁰ Neuwirth views the Qur'an as a literary and religious document that reflects the intellectual and spiritual struggles of pre-Islamic and post-Prophetic Arab societies. He rejected the ahistorical reading of the Qur'an and emphasized the importance of placing the text in a landscape of cultural interaction and discourse across religious traditions.

From the above description, it is clear that John Wansbrough's thought not only provided *an epistemological shock* to the study of the Qur'an in the Islamic tradition, but also shaped a new methodological paradigm in Islamic studies in the West.³¹ His successors developed textual, intertextual, historical, and philological approaches with a sharper and more specific approach, albeit with varying results and conclusions. As a pioneer, Wansbrough has shifted the focus of study from theological assumptions to historical-critical approaches, from belief to reconstruction, and from orthodoxy to deconstruction. Its influence not only created a new current in Islamic studies, but also forced Muslim scholars to reformulate their approach to the history of sacred texts with greater methodological depth and scientific resilience.

Criticism of the Wansbrough Approach

Despite its influence, Wansbrough's approach drew sharp criticism. Fazlur Rahman, in *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, rejects a reductionist approach that makes the Qur'an merely a product of history, without considering the spiritual dimension and prophetic experience. He considered that orientalist such as Wansbrough failed to understand the Qur'an in the context of the real life of the Prophet Muhammad and the Arab society at that time.³² M.M. Al-A'zami, in the *History of the Qur'an Texts*, strongly refutes the claim that the Qur'an is the result of a post-prophetic reconstruction. He showed documentary evidence from old mushafs, memorization traditions, and the existence of early manuscripts that showed the stability of the Qur'anic text since the time of the Prophet.³³

Even among Western academics such as Issa Boullata, Wansbrough's approach was considered too speculative and lacked enough archaeological or documentary evidence to support his radical claims. He called Wansbrough's work more theoretical than empirical, and relied too much on the assumptions of biblical criticism that were not necessarily suitable for the Islamic tradition.³⁴

The author's criticism of John Edward Wansbrough's thinking on the origins of the Qur'an, which places great emphasis on an empirical and

³⁰ Andrew G. Bannister, *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur'an* (Lexington Books, 2014).

³¹ Jordan Pascoe and Mitch Stripling, *The Epistemology of Disasters and Social Change: Pandemics, Protests, and Possibilities* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2024).

³² Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an: Second Edition* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

³³ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā A'zamī, *The history of the Qur'anic text from revelation to compilation: a comparative study with the old and new testaments* (Gema Insani, 2005).

³⁴ Issa J. Boullata, *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an* (Psychology Press, 2000).

materialistic approach, shows serious limitations in understanding the nature of revelation in Islam. Wansbrough, through a historical-philological approach, tries to reduce the Qur'an to the product of the socio-political construction of the newly formed early Muslim community, rather than as a divine revelation. This paradigm clearly ignores the transcendental dimension of the Qur'an as *kalām Allāh* (the word of God), which in Islamic tradition is believed to have been revealed purely to the Prophet Muhammad PBUH through the intercession of the angel Jibril. By basing his entire argument on textual evidence and historical speculation alone, Wansbrough fails to grasp that the Qur'an is not just a historical text, but rather a spiritual reality that shapes the life of humanity across the ages.

Furthermore, Wansbrough's argument that denies the authenticity of the Qur'an by accusing it of being the result of recent editorial developments, is contrary to the existence of *riwayah mutawatir* in the Islamic tradition. Mutawatir news, which is information narrated by many people in various generations so that it is impossible to falsify or fabricate, is one of the rational-transcendental proofs that guarantee the authenticity of this sacred text. In the context of Islamic epistemology, the existence of mutawatir not only became the basis for scientific validity, but also distinguished between speculative information and truth that was collectively and consistently accepted by the early Muslim community.³⁵ The author's criticism of Wansbrough must be emphasized here, doubts stemming from Western methodological assumptions cannot be used to obscure the legitimacy of the Islamic epistemic tradition rooted in collective witness and the continuity of sanad.

If we talk about the truth of the Qur'an as revelation, then the debate should not be confined to the framework of absolute truth in the style of Western positivism that demands purely empirical proof.³⁶ In the context of Islam, the Qur'an is not only true because it comes from God, but also because its transmission can be verified through authentic historical and spiritual testimony. Thus, Wansbrough's approach that relies too much on textual analysis alone without including the dimensions of faith, spirituality, and the authority of Islamic sciences becomes reductive. In this case, the criticism of Wansbrough is not only about epistemology, but also about academic ethics in understanding the sacred texts of other religions, that the text of revelation cannot be treated as a historical manuscript, but as an authoritative source that has sacredness, continuity, and transformational function in the history of human civilization.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the research, it can be concluded that John Wansbrough's historical-critical approach has positioned the Qur'an as an

³⁵ Banner Adam M.H S. Sy, *Islamic Law: Concepts, Philosophy and Methodology* (Sinar Grafika, 2021).

³⁶ Dr. Waston M.Hum, *A Critique of Positivism's Philosophy: An Investigation of the Roots of the Humanities* (Muhammadiyah University Press, t.t.).

editorial product born from the dynamics of the early Muslim community in the midst of sectarian conflicts with the Judeo-Christian tradition. Through a combination of methods of philological criticism, literary analysis, and hermeneutics of suspicion, the Qur'an is no longer understood as a transcendent revelation that was revealed instantly to the Prophet Muhammad, but rather as a historical construct compiled collectively and gradually. Wansbrough dismantles the legitimacy of the orthodox narrative regarding Ottoman codification and questions the authority of classical sources such as hadith and sirah, emphasizing aspects of intertextuality and the influence of non-Arabic Semitic languages in the linguistic structure of the Qur'an.

While the Wansbrough approach offers a significant analytical framework in Western academic studies, the findings of this study also confirm the fundamental limitations of the model. The historical assumptions and textual skepticism used tend to ignore the spiritual dimension, the tradition of mutawattir memorization, and the epistemic legitimacy of Islam that have been maintained for centuries. Thus, Wansbrough's approach is considered important as a methodological critique, but it is not sufficient to represent the complexity of the Qur'an's essence as a sacred text. This research encourages the need to develop a methodology of interpretation that is able to have a critical dialogue with orientalist studies without losing the theological roots and integrity of Islamic science.

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