

An outline of the recent western academic trends in the historical study of the Quran

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Abstract

The Quran, being the nub of Muslim society, is a source of moral and religious inspiration for Muslims. However, the interest of the western scholar in the Quran has mainly been historical. They approach the Quran in the light of western modern methodological developments. The present paper intends to highlight the recent western academic approaches to the history of the Quran or in other words, the collection of the Quran. Through a descriptive study, the paper concludes that the approaches and findings of western scholars represent a paradox. Moreover, a brief critical analysis demonstrates a dearth of sound evidence in western discourses.

Key Words: Quran, history, West, academic, collection

Introduction

In medieval times, Christian scholars engaged with the Quran in the course of prolonged political and religious confrontations. Though western scholars or historians divide the historical phases of the quranic studies in the west quite differently, their consensus on the starting point shows its grave significance. Hence, the first Latin translation of the Quran in the twelfth century is always considered a momentous landmark in the history of western Quranic studies that paved the way for further advancements.

The second phase of interest stretches from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. This period saw the emergence of more scholarly and intellectual works that primarily focused on multiple themes of quranic studies, including the source origin, chronological order, variant readings, and foreign vocabulary.

In the twenty-first century academic world, a surge of literature is being produced on the Quran. Several globally reputed publishers such as Brill, Cambridge, Ashgate, Oxford, and Routledge are contributing to the present academic bustle.

The contemporary western quranic studies is characterized by a diversity of interests and a multiplicity of trends and methodological platforms. In the words of Devin Stewart, quranic studies has experienced an explosion of interest over the last few decades.¹

New trends such as Qur'anic hermeneutics, contextualist approach to the Qur'an, thematic interpretations of the Qur'an, and literary analysis appeared in this genre. Moreover, a sharp rise in publications of encyclopedias, companions, and journals indicates a huge number of scholars and academicians working jointly in academic investigations on the Quran.

Collection of the Quran

The history of the quranic text and its development into textus receptus is one of the most contested issues in the scholarly field of Quranic studies in the west. The issue of codification and collection drew the attention of western intellectuals to the extent that they could not go beyond to study its contents, themes, and ideas.² Thus, according to a Muslim scholar, this attitude resulted in stagnation in their works.³

The collection or preservation of the text is considered a core question in the genre of Quranic studies since all other matters are subordinate to it. Hence, hardly ever one

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finds a western treatise on Qur'ānic sciences devoid of the reference to this theme. From Noldeke, Bell, Blachere, and Wansbrough to Andrew Rippin and Fred Donner every single scholar has sought to uncover the historical kernel in this regard.

The approaches concerning the issue of the compilation of the Quran divide western scholars into two groups, namely traditionalist and revisionist.

The term traditionalist signifies the standpoint that views the birth and development of Islam like that presented in the literary writings produced by early Muslim historians.⁴ The traditionalists build their research on the premise that the Muslim accounts related to the collection of the Qur'an, are helpful to some extent in tracing the historical information. Hence, their acceptance does not indicate their confidence in these reports as they frequently express their distrust by declaring the existence of discrepancies in the original Quranic text.

The seminal treatise that served as the foundation of all the subsequent works was Theodore Noldeke's monograph on the history of the text of the Qur'ān. The award-winning book, later revised by many scholars in the field, was based on Primary Muslim sources. Yet, it did not accept the authenticity of the traditional Muslim point at its par value.

In 1970, a wave of new approaches appeared rejecting the old traditionalist western view regarding the compilation of the Quran. It tried to expose the weaknesses of the traditional view that accepted the Muslim narratives at their face value. To enlist the works of the renowned British scholar John Wansbrough's Qur'anic Studies (1977) and The Sectarian Milieu (1978) suffices in this regard. In 1977, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook published their challenging book Hagarism. In the same year, John Burton published The Collection of the Qur'an. Either work was inspired by Wansbrough's methodology in building up its hypothesis.

In contemporary quranic studies, the prototype of scholarship presented by Wansbrough and others is sometimes termed as skeptics. Many of the revisionist theories are dismissed by other western scholars because of the scarcity of sound evidence. The revisionist approach does not reflect a solitary form of knowledge, but rather in itself is diverse.⁵ Moreover, as the revisionists themselves could not present satisfactory alternatives, these approaches led to what Neuwirth believes as 'paralysis in research'.⁶

A succinct survey of both approaches concludes that traditionalists and revisionists operate with two diverse and mutually exclusive paradigms and that there is little hope of one side satisfying the other as Herbert Bert indicates.⁷

Contemporary western views

As mentioned earlier, the question of codification of the quranic lies among the most addressed issues in western academia. Nearly all the publications including encyclopedias, companions, and journals, refer to this subject in one way or the other. At present as well, it is one of the major concerns of western academicians.

Recently, western scholars are investigating this subject by applying multiple approaches such as the historical-critical method, isnad investigation, and literary approach. Moreover, they represent broadly differing presumptions signifying both traditionalist and revisionist approaches.

Building their research on a variety of methods, most western scholars conclude multiple findings that epitomize a paradox. Mostly, the attempt is made to depreciate the historical value of the Muslim tradition on this issue and replace them with their theories and models.

Some significant names who contributed to the historical investigations of the Quran by implementing diverse methods include John Burton, Andrew Rippin, Fred M. Donner, Claude Gilliot, G.H.A Joynboll, and Herald Motzeki.

John Burton, a British scholar, completely contradicting his teacher, John Wansbrough, believes the Quran was collected in the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Mainly, he offered his theory in his book “Collection of the Quran” which was published in 1977. His fresh ideas found their place in encyclopaedia of the Quran. Burton presented a diverse theory that is considered quite radical in the term that none of the scholars has ever offered. He believed that the Prophet himself compiled and collected the Quran and it existed in its inclusive form in the time of the Prophet before his death.⁸

Moreover, he asserts that collection reports are nothing except the fabrication of later generations specifically the jurists who invented the idea to secure their interpretations.⁹ He views all relevant traditions as a part of the drama that was designed to support abrogation theory.¹⁰

To strengthen his claim, Burton articulates that, internal inconsistencies and discrepancies in the collection reports are, an indicator of fabrication.¹¹ Although, he did not visibly mention the time when the Muslim traditions concerning the collection of the Qur'an came into being. However, his idea concerning the jurists' points to a time from the beginning of the 3rd century AH onwards as Motzeki explains¹².

The methodology of John Burton is criticized for the scarcity of historical dimensions. In the words of Herald Motzeki, he did not try to check whether his scheme of evolution is historically confirmed by the traditional Muslim sources or not.¹³

Moreover, he referred to very late sources such as al Itqan fi Uloom Ul Quran and Fatul Bari fi Sharh Sahih al Bukhari without asking himself whether some of the traditions may already be cited in prior works and can be dated more accurately, perhaps to the end of the first century.

Another contemporary scholar, Fred Donner, expresses his discomforts regarding the collection reports. Despite his critical stance toward the revisionists, his theory does not accord with the traditional Muslim sources too. He states that the Muslim sources offer contradictory and divergent reports on the process of collection. Some reports emphasize the oral nature of the Quran, while others highlight the process of writing. Thus, it can be concluded that sections of revelations were known by heart at the time of the Prophet's death while other segments were preserved in the written form.¹⁴

While doing so, Donner does not establish the above-mentioned finding on sound evidence. Moreover, he is highly skeptical about the second collection as well. He very often reiterates that the history of the text after the Prophet's demise is not clear. In addition, he articulates that many questions remain there regarding the third collection as well. Donner, alternatively, suggests that the parts of the Quran go back to older written texts that predate Prophet Muhammad's career.¹⁵ The tendency to attribute the Quranic text to older texts extant in Arabia at that time and declare it a borrowed text is quite evident in his article.

Another scholar, Claude Gilliot, after mentioning the Muslim view about the collection of the Quran articulates that the analysis of the Muslim traditions does not leave the scholars with certainty.¹⁶

Furthermore, he suggests that some of the Uthmanic codices contained mistakes. While doing so, he indicates the tradition that informs about the statement of the third caliph Uthman who noted several incorrect words in copies and said, do not change them, the Arabs will change them.¹⁷ He establishes his view on a narration that is announced by the Muslim scholars as unauthentic.¹⁸

Both scholars perceive the Islamic historical accounts as speculative and unsatisfactory to verify the process of collection. Rather, they both try to put forward their theories completely disregarding the classical Muslim tradition with a behavior symptomatic of epistemological hierarchy.

Another alternative account concerning the collection is suggested by Daniel Madigan.¹⁹ The author has implicitly discussed the theme by applying the literary approach. In his article for encyclopaedia of the Quran, he deals with one aspect of the Qur'ān that can be regarded as the most momentous facet of the preservation and collection process. His present work is an abridgment of his doctoral research that is

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related to the study of the terminology 'Book'. Furthermore, he presented a detailed extensive examination of this term in his treatise "The Qur'ān's self-image in which he argued that the Qur'an recognizes itself not as a completed book, but as a continuing course of divine writing.

Through his semantic analysis of the Qur'ān to understand the word 'Book', the writer endeavored to reveal that the Muslim understanding of Kitāb as a written document and its interconnection with the process of preservation is not compatible with the Qur'ān's understanding of this term. To grasp the notion of 'Book', he believed, it is better to comprehend it as the Qur'ān itself does. He advanced his research by discussing the meaning of Kitāb in its various contexts. According to him, the word expresses purely a Divine activity in the sense of Divine knowledge, Divine authority, and revelation and is very rarely used for human writing.

While discussing the notion of the Qur'ān as Kitāb, he presented a summary of the western views with disapproval as most of them have taken the meaning of Kitāb as a written book despite their reservations and doubts.²⁰

He also criticized the collection notion saying that although the Muslim tradition holds that the Prophet intended the written collection of the Quran, the reports in this regard are paradoxical and inconsistent. He further elaborates that among these traditions some inform that the manuscript tradition is unbrokenly authenticated by the Prophet. While others state that this process was imperfect and was dependent on oral tradition.

According to him, when the Qur'ān speaks about itself as Kitāb, it seems to be talking not about the form in which it is sent down but rather about the authority it carries as a manifestation of the Knowledge of God.²¹

A glimpse of the author's sources reveals that he did not consult a single primary source while discussing the technical meaning of the Arabic term Book. His entire sources of information are in either English or German languages that are auxiliary and do not provide reliable ground for literal analysis of Arabic terminology. Rationally, it looks weird for a researcher to conduct semantic research on the Arabic term without using a single Arabic reference.

Isnad analysis is another substantial approach applied by contemporary scholars to investigate the collection process. This is important to note that the issue of codification has a close connection with the ḥadīth sciences. Accordingly, the apprehension of the entire matter is based on the collection of the narratives in the canonical anthology. By and large, western scholars in their discourses referring to the case of compilation have discussed these reports and expressed their skepticism and doubts.

In the present century. Western scholars have developed a new discourse in dealing with ḥadīth reports titled dating of hadith through investigation of the chain and text of the narration.

Among the eminent scholars in this regard lies G.H.A Joynboll. Joynboll, building his methodology on Schacht's approach in the treatment of ḥadīth chains, attempts to find out the real originator of the traditions. Though, his approach is quite different from Schacht's as the latter presented the Common Link theory to date the tradition with the possibility that someone else might have used the name of the supposed common link.²² But, in the case of Joynboll, he attempts to seek the date of that tradition with the assumption that the common link is the fabricator himself.²³

In his entry for the encyclopaedia of the Quran titled hadith and the Quran, he specified a section to scrutinize the collection reports. He believes that the Muslims generally cite two reports in this regard without questioning the authenticity of the sources. With a detailed study of the chains of the collection narrations, he concludes the collection reports to be fictitious.²⁴

The treatment of the writer with Ḥadīth chains and more significantly his Common Link theory is criticized by the western scholars and the Muslim intellectuals alike such

as SC Lucas, Herald Motzaki, and Jonathon Brown. Many others as well critiqued him because of his extreme skeptical look for traditions and over-generalization of the conclusions while relying on few sources.²⁵

Furthermore, in his analysis of the chains of the Hadith and more specifically, collection reports, he has depended on the work of Jamaluddin Al Mizzi(d. 742) neglecting earlier voluminous Hadith- analysis works such as Ibn Abi Hātim al Rāzī (d. 327/938) and Ibn ‘Adi (d. 365/ 975).

In the expression of an eminent Hadith specialist, to dismiss the classical Muslim scholarship of ḥadīth and rely on Ṭuḥfah is just like calling the whole society disorganized by simply looking at its well-ordered and complex phonebook. Moreover, it can be considered a methodological collapse of his approach.²⁶

Quite different in this regard is the approach and methodology of herald Motzeki, a German scholar of Islam, who discussed the issue in his treatise ‘the Collection of the Qur'an, A Reconsideration of Western Views in Light of Recent Methodological Developments.

Motzeki is renowned for his isnad and Matan analytical techniques in hadith studies.²⁷ While applying this method, he rejects many of his predecessor’s views regarding the dating of a specific narration. Many recent scholars admired his reverence for the Muslim standpoint.²⁸

In the present paper concerning the analysis of the collection reports, he presented a thorough review of the findings of his precursors such as Joseph Sachet, John Wansbrough, Schwally, and John Burton. While doing so, he brilliantly declared these works based on axiomatic assumptions for the lack of historical dimensions and soundness of the evidence.

Furthermore, he proceeds with his analysis of the collection narratives in light of the recent methodological developments. For this purpose, Motzeki collected all extent narrations on the collection process from various textual hadith sources dated till the fourth century. Through his matan-cum-isnad analysis, he proposed that the Muslim accounts are much earlier than the time of the alleged events of collection than hitherto assumed by the western scholars.²⁹

Though few flaws are indicated in his methodology as well, his overall conclusion is unlike general western perceptions regarding the collection of the Quran.

Conclusion

This paper is not meant to critically evaluate the contemporary western approaches to the history of the quranic text. Rather, it intended to present a survey of alternative accounts presented by western scholars to the collection of the Quran. However, a few points regarding the methodology and efforts of western scholars can be highlighted as follows.

1. A huge increase in the academic publications in quranic studies indicates the untiring efforts of the western intellectuals. The publication of encyclopedias, journal launching, generation of academic works, the foundation of international chairs of quranic studies, and promotion of biennial conferences and workshops, are an indication of the astounding status of the genre of quranic studies in western academia. Yet, there is an intense need to initiate joint projects in the Muslim world as well to satisfy the thirst of intellectuals and researchers.
2. Regarding the subject of the collection of the Qur’ān, the western writers, generally, show a unanimous approach by affirming their doubts about the Muslim traditions. With minor variances in the approaches, Western scholars mostly agree to reject the collection reports of the Muslim accounts with multiple reservations.
3. Moreover, it seems that the old tendency of ‘we know better is still working in western academia. On the contrary, the writers, in general, have adopted a complementary position concerning western scholars.

A researcher should let his sources speak for themselves. Sometimes, the western authors speak louder than the sources by declaring their sources uncertain and

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problematic or misrepresenting them. In this regard, they frequently use cynical phrases. One can discover very easily the wording such as ‘perhaps’, ‘it is not clear it is highly probable’ ‘it’s problematic’, ‘it remains doubtful’ in contemporary individual and joint works alike.



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- ²⁷ Motzki's isnād cum matn analysis of a tradition starts with a discussion consisting of a critique of selected contemporary western studies on the subject followed by his arrangement of instances of the same tradition as they appear in different collections, differences in the isnāds considered and plotted. See Ahmad, Bilal. *The Isnād Cum Matn Analysis Of Zakāt Al-Fiūr Traditions: An Analysis Of Harald Motzki's Method in Hamdard Islamicus* Vol. XLIV, No. 4 (2021), 59
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