

Orientalist Views on The Authenticity of The Qur'an: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract

Purposes— This article aims to analyze the process of compilation and preservation of the Qur'an from the time of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) until the codification under Caliph 'Uthman ibn 'Affan. It also seeks to address Orientalist critiques of this process through historical and rational approaches.

Design/methods— The research employs a literature review methodology. It examines classical Islamic works by scholars such as Manna' al-Qaththān, al-Suyuthi, and al-Zarkasyi, alongside the critical viewpoints of prominent Orientalists: Arthur Jeffery, John Wansbrough, and Michael Zwettler.

Findings— The study finds that the preservation of the Qur'an during the Prophet's era was maintained through two mutually reinforcing channels: memorization (*qirā'ah*) and written documentation (*rasm*). The subsequent codification under Caliph Abu Bakr was rigorously conducted with witness verification, while Caliph 'Uthman's standardization of the mushaf effectively prevented significant recitation variations. In contrast, Orientalist critiques often rely on philological and textual criticism models derived from Biblical studies, which overlook the unique and robust Islamic tradition of mass memorization (*mutawātir* transmission). The study concludes that the Qur'an's authenticity is historically and scientifically verifiable, effectively refuting Orientalist claims about an incomplete mushaf. The implications underscore the critical importance of preserving the traditions of *sanad* (chain of transmission) and *qirā'āt* (recitations) as authoritative evidence for the Qur'an's integrity against contemporary academic challenges.

Keywords: Qur'anic Authenticity, Orientalism, Mushaf Compilation

Ethical Statement: It is declared that scientific and ethical principles were adhered to during the preparation of this work, and all sources used have been properly cited in the bibliography. The article has been reviewed by at least two peer reviewers, a similarity report was obtained using Turnitin, and compliance with research/publication ethics has been confirmed.

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Article Type: Research Article

1. Introduction

For over fourteen centuries, the Qur'an has accompanied the history of human civilization; its presence has led hundreds of millions of people to read and even study it, ranging from lay Muslims to Orientalist academics. This long journey brings our attention to the events surrounding how the Qur'an came to be codified and printed as it exists among Muslims today, as well as the figures who played a role in it, until we recognize now that the Qur'an is capable of illuminating the knowledge of the world (Sa'diyah, 2021, p. 2).

The Qur'an's historical transmission has been subject to divergent academic perspectives, particularly within Orientalist scholarship. Western academic lenses often question the authenticity of the Qur'an using philological, historical, or textual critical approaches. Questions arise such as: how can a Prophet who was considered a businessman be termed *ummiy* (illiterate)? Issues regarding the completeness of the Qur'an, who wrote the Qur'an, and even allegations of modification from previous scriptures become arguments for Orientalists to cast doubt (Musyrifah Sunanto, 2007, p. 20).

These Orientalist studies have sparked prolonged debates between Muslim scholars and Western academics to this day. In the last decade, research regarding the authenticity of the Qur'an has continued to develop. For instance, Arthur Jeffery (1892-1959) criticized the Muslim belief in the history of Qur'anic revelation as a classical and unscientific excuse, arguing that the compilation of the Uthmanic *mushaf* contained political issues of Uthman, and that the Qur'an was not perfect enough to represent the previous heavenly books (Fahrizi & Zubir, 2022, p. 210).

Theodor Nöldeke (1836-1930) argued that the Qur'an is not an original text, but rather a result of the duplication of Christian and Jewish teachings performed by Prophet Muhammad. Nöldeke also developed the idea that in the process of writing the Qur'an, Prophet Muhammad incorporated elements from Jewish and Christian teachings, albeit with limited understanding due to his restricted access to those scriptures directly (Nöldeke, Theodor Schwally, Friedrich Bergsträßer, Gotthelf Pretzl, 2013, p. 55).

Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), through his various writings, criticized the Qur'an with the speculation that the text originated from written documents like the Bible, rather than from an oral tradition that was memorized and subsequently written. Goldziher assumed that the Qur'an was transcribed from written texts; he tended to regard text or manuscripts as the primary benchmark in assessing the truth of a reading (*qirā'ah*), without regarding its validity (Muawanah, 2017, p. 143).

Although many studies have discussed this topic, there is an academic gap that has not been fully filled. Some Orientalist studies only highlight historical and philological aspects without considering the rational dimensions that form the basis of argumentation in the Islamic tradition. Conversely, some Muslim studies emphasize theological arguments without comprehensively responding to Orientalist critiques using academic methods.

This inconsistency creates a need for research that integrates both historical and rational analyses, thereby presenting a more balanced academic response to Orientalist critiques. Based on this, the research is designed to answer several key questions: (1) What are the views of classical and contemporary Orientalists regarding the authenticity of the Qur'an? (2) How can the historical facts of transmission and codification of the *mushaf* serve as a basis for responding to Orientalist critiques? (3) What rational arguments can strengthen the authenticity of the Qur'an?

The purpose of this research is to elaborate on Orientalist views regarding the authenticity of the Qur'an, analyze historical evidence that affirms its authenticity, and present rational arguments as reinforcement. The context of this research lies within the academic discourse between the Western Orientalist tradition and contemporary Muslim scholarly studies. This article is significant as it seeks to reveal rational evidence that distinguishes it from evidence based solely on Qur'anic propositions.

2. Methodology

Through a review of articles on the history of the Qur'an, the author concludes that research on the history of the Qur'an must be continuously conducted and reiterated so that readers can always find what they need when they wish to know about it. In the same way, it is important for this article to elaborate on the issue of how Muslims maintain its

authenticity and genuineness, so that the Qur'an continues to be the primary reference for the *ummah* in acting as servants of God and as social beings. This article is a library research study. It is built upon a qualitative approach and presented in a descriptive-analytical manner, meaning it seeks to present data descriptively before analyzing it critically (Lukman Nul Hakim & Iffatul Bayyinah, 2023, p. 73). This article is expected to enhance knowledge about Islamic studies, especially regarding the perspective of Qur'anic Sciences on the horizon and verticality of human life on Earth.

3. Results and Discussion

The Compilation of the Qur'an

In the study of Qur'anic Sciences (*Ulumul Qur'an*), the subject discussing the compilation of the Qur'an is known as *Jam'ul Qur'an*, which etymologically is a phrase for the collection of the Qur'an. However, terminologically, there are two meanings: First, memorizing, preserving, or guarding. Second, writing or codifying. Explicitly, it is clear that the compilation of the Qur'an involves both memorization and writing (Az-Zarkasyi, 2006, p. 233). Thus, it can be agreed that the compilation of the Qur'an means memorizing, guarding, and preserving the Qur'an in the heart and compiling it into a single written form.

The expert in *Ulumul Qur'an*, Manna' al-Qaththān, explains that what is meant by the compilation of the Qur'an through memorization is as indicated in the word of Allah, QS. al-Qiyamah [75]:16-19. When the Prophet was eager to memorize the Qur'an, he tried to follow what Gabriel conveyed. A verse was revealed explaining that the Prophet need only listen and pay attention to what Gabriel conveyed, because it is Allah Himself who would implant it in the Prophet's chest. There was a change after this event, where the Prophet would simply listen and pay attention to what Gabriel conveyed; when Gabriel departed, the Prophet would immediately recite the revelation to the companions around him. Al-Qaththān also explains that the companions collected the Qur'an through written media comprehensively, which were then gathered with other writings until they formed a neat, unified *mushaf* in accordance with what was established by Allah (Al-Qathtan, 1973, p. 114).

Preservation of the Qur'an During the Prophet's Era

The preservation of the Qur'an was carried out through two media: memorization and writing. It was then conveyed to other companions of the Prophet. For the method of memorization, the Prophet appointed trusted individuals who were assessed to have very sharp memories, including Abdullah bin Mas'ud, Salim bin Mu'qil Maula Abi Hudhayfah, Mu'adh bin Jabal, Ubay bin Ka'ab, Zayd bin Thabit, Abu Zayd bin Sakan, and Abu Darda. This proves that the authenticity of the Qur'an was indeed guarded strictly, and memorization was a serious tradition of preservation stored in the history of the Qur'an's journey (Hifni, 2023, p. 211).

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was the first memorizer of the Qur'an (*hāfīzh*) as well as the best example for the companions in maintaining their memorization, as a manifestation of love for the source of teachings and the message of Islam. The Qur'an was revealed gradually over more than twenty years, sometimes only one verse, and sometimes up to ten verses at once. Every time a revelation came down, the companions immediately memorized it and implanted it in their hearts. This was in line with the condition of the Arab people at that time who possessed very strong memories. Since most of them could not read or write, news, poetry, and family genealogies were mostly stored in memory (Riahimehr, 2025). According to Manna' al-Qaththān, quoting a narration from al-Bukhari, there were seven main companions known as memorizers of the Qur'an with three different transmission paths. They were Abdullah bin Mas'ud, Salim bin Ma'qil maula Abi Hudzaifah, Mu'adz bin Jabal, Ubay bin Ka'ab, Zaid bin Tsabit, and Abu ad-Darda'. This is affirmed through several hadiths (Al-Qathtan, 1973, p. 152):

Abdullah bin Amr bin al-'Ash narrated that the Messenger of Allah said: "Take the Qur'an from four of my companions: Abdullah bin Mas'ud, Salim, Mu'adz, and Ubay bin Ka'ab" (Narrated by Bukhari). Of these four, Abdullah and Salim were from the Muhajirin, while Mu'adz and Ubay were from the Ansar. Qatadah narrated that Anas bin Malik mentioned four Ansar companions who collected the Qur'an during the time of the Messenger of Allah: Ubay bin Ka'ab, Mu'adz bin Jabal, Zaid bin Tsabit, and Abu Zaid. When asked who Abu Zaid was, Anas explained that he was one of his uncles. Tsabit narrated from Anas that when the Messenger of Allah passed away, only four people had memorized the Qur'an completely: Abu Darda', Mu'adz bin Jabal, Zaid bin Tsabit, and

Abu Zaid. The hadiths above were narrated through authentic (*sahih*) chains according to the criteria of Imam al-Bukhari, as explained by Ibn Hajar. Ibn Hajar even noted that Sa'id bin Ubaid was also a memorizer of the Qur'an and was nicknamed *al-Qāri'*. The mention of seven or eight names above is not a limitation, but merely examples, because many other narrations show that the companions were very enthusiastic about memorizing the Qur'an. They even encouraged their children and wives to do the same and often recited it in night prayers until their voices sounded like the humming of bees. The Prophet (PBUH) would sometimes pass the houses of the Ansar and stop to listen to their recitation of the Qur'an.

In one hadith, the Messenger of Allah said to Abu Musa al-Asy'ari: "If you had seen me last night, when I was listening to your recitation. Indeed, you have been given a melodious voice like the flute of the family of David." From this statement, the number of Qur'an memorizers during the time of the Messenger of Allah was actually very large. This simultaneously shows that the tradition of relying on memorization in narrating something has been a primary characteristic of the Muslim community since the early period.

The second medium used was writing. All of this stemmed from the Prophet's hadith which states *la taktubu anni gair al-qur'an* (do not write anything from me other than the Qur'an); this indicates that from the beginning the Prophet instructed the companions to write the Qur'an. This is reinforced by the conversion of Umar bin al-Khattab to Islam; when he found out his family had converted and Umar wanted to kill the Prophet, upon arriving at the place, Umar witnessed his sister reading the Qur'an, Surah Taha [20], on a sheet. He then took it and read it, and without hesitation, Umar declared his Islam (Amal, 2011, p. 151).

Manna' al-Qaththān in his work explains that the Messenger of Allah appointed several key companions as scribes of revelation, including Ali bin Abi Talib, Mu'awiyah, Ubay bin Ka'ab, and Zaid bin Tsabit. Every time a verse was revealed, the Prophet immediately ordered them to write it down while indicating its placement in a specific surah. This writing did not only serve as documentation but also strengthened memorization in the heart. Furthermore, some companions independently wrote down verses of the Qur'an on simple media, such as date palm stalks, stone tablets, thin

boards, leather, wood leaves, saddles, and animal bones. This shows the magnitude of their seriousness as well as the heavy challenges they faced, considering writing materials at that time were very limited. However, it was precisely these limitations that further solidified their memorization (Al-Qathtan, 1973, p. 156).

Every year in the month of Ramadan, the angel Gabriel would recite the Qur'an to the Messenger of Allah. Abdullah bin Abbas narrated that the Messenger of Allah was known as the most generous person, and the peak of his generosity appeared during Ramadan, when Gabriel came every night to recite the Qur'an. At that moment, the Prophet's gentleness and generosity were described as like a cool blowing wind.

The companions also constantly recited their Qur'an readings to the Messenger of Allah, both in the form of memorization and writing. Nevertheless, the written Qur'an during the Prophet's time was not yet collected into a single intact *mushaf*. Usually, what was written and possessed by one companion was not possessed by another. According to scholars, several companions who memorized the Qur'an fully during the Prophet's lifetime included Ali bin Abi Talib, Mu'adz bin Jabal, Ubay bin Ka'ab, Zaid bin Tsabit, and Abdullah bin Mas'ud. Among them, Zaid bin Tsabit is mentioned as the last companion to recite the entire Qur'an before the Prophet (Al-Qathtan, 1973, p. 157).

At that time, the Qur'an was indeed memorized and written, with an arrangement of separate verses, surahs standing alone on sheets, and in the form of the seven readings (*sab'atu ahruf*). However, the Qur'an had not yet been codified into a single complete *mushaf*, because every time a revelation came down it was immediately memorized by the *qurrā'* and written by the scribes of revelation according to the Prophet's direction. Its arrangement did not follow the order of revelation but was placed according to the Messenger of Allah's instructions. This was because revelation came down gradually, sometimes with verses that abrogated the laws of previous verses. Therefore, the *mushaf* could not be compiled finally if the Prophet was still alive.

Az-Zarkasyi asserts that the Qur'an was not written in a single *mushaf* during the Prophet's time so that the possibility of changing the arrangement remained open every time a revelation came down. Therefore, the complete compilation of the *mushaf* was only carried out after revelation ceased, namely after the Messenger of Allah passed away. This statement aligns with the narration of Zaid bin Tsabit which mentions that the

Messenger of Allah passed away in a state where the Qur'an had not yet been collected in one *mushaf*. Al-Khattabi adds that the Messenger of Allah did not codify the *mushaf* completely because he was always waiting for the descent of verses that functioned to abrogate some previous readings or laws. After the descent of revelation ended, Allah inspired the Rightly Guided Caliphs (*Khulafā' al-Rāsyidīn*) to compile the *mushaf* completely, as a manifestation of His promise to preserve the purity of the Qur'an for this *ummah*.

The Question of Mushaf Formation

Orientalist groups are not convinced of the fact of the Qur'an's existence which could be preserved only through oral and written forms (Shehab, 2023). They reject the compilation that occurred during the time of the Prophet and Abu Bakr and accept what occurred in the time of Uthman. That acceptance is also driven by doubt; between the Qur'an in the time of the Prophet and Uthman there was a time difference of fifteen years, so that becomes the basis for doubt and even assumptions of errors within it (M. Watt, 1970, p. 3).

Historical facts can prove that the group of *huffaz* (memorizers), whose numbers were quite large, received direct guidance in knowledge from the Prophet. They obtained that knowledge through a chain of *sanad* whose truth is undoubtedly certain. So, until the Prophet died, the Qur'an was essentially already implanted in the chests of the companions. That is why, after many of these *huffaz* fell in battle, Caliph Abu Bakr strove to codify the Qur'an in one *mushaf* based on *mutawātir* narration from the Prophet (PBUH).

A team of experts was formed to record and re-correct all existing *qira'at* and examine the validity of the narrators to avoid errors. Abu Bakr even asked all *huffaz* to attend not only bringing the verses they possessed but adding two witnesses so that the codification was carried out strictly and seriously. Thus, historically, the journey of Islam in guarding the authenticity of the Qur'an to be in accordance with what the Prophet brought was indeed very strict and serious.

The Qur'an as the Perfecter of Previous Scriptures

The Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, yet by some Orientalists and critics, it is considered merely ordinary human language. This view arises because their translations place the Qur'an on par with human works, so its content is deemed to need review. However, the Qur'an itself rejects such accusations, even affirming that it is untrue if there is an assumption that it was taught by a non-Arab (*'ajam*) to Prophet Muhammad (Shihab, 2014, pp. 93–94). Allah (SWT) says in the Qur'an, Surah An-Nahl verse 103:

And We certainly know that they say, "It is only a human being who teaches the Prophet." The tongue of the one they refer to is foreign, and this Qur'an is [in] a clear Arabic language.

The language of *'Ajam* is understood as a language other than Arabic, or also Arabic that is considered less fluent. The selection of Arabic as the medium of the final revelation was certainly not without reason. Many factors underlie it, among them related to the unique characteristics of the Arabic language itself and its suitability for the mission of spreading the message of Islam. The Qur'an is not merely a collection of scattered verse fragments, but encompasses its entire arrangement, ranging from verses, surahs, *juz*, to the meanings and teachings contained in every utterance, phrase, and sentence. According to al-Suyuthi, the structure of the Qur'an arranged in this way is a distinct privilege not found in Arabic literary works in the Jahiliyyah period. History even records that linguists who dared to appear in the literary arena were never able to rival the Qur'an. Anyone who tried to do so ended up in humiliation and failure (Al-Qathtan, 1973, p. 332).

Similarity between the Qur'an and previous scriptures is a natural thing and easily found. However, the existence of vocabulary similarities with other languages does not mean that the Qur'an was influenced by those languages. Islam brings new meaning, as the Qur'an corrects Jewish and Christian teachings that have undergone deviation (Halil, 2025).

Prioritizing Written Text (*Rasm*) over Oral Transmission (*Riwayah*)

The Qur'an differs from the sayings or actions of the Prophet documented in Hadith, which linguistically means news, report, or narrative. A fairly objective Orientalist, Michael Zwettler, asserts that in the past, when the tradition of writing was rarely used,

memorization and oral transmission developed very strongly. Therefore, most of the revelation was easily memorized by the early Muslim community. This shows that Zwettler acknowledges the existence of an oral narration tradition that was more dominant than the written tradition (Andrews & Zwettler, 1979, p. 14).

Over time, Orientalists influenced by Western social sciences and Biblical study methods have tended to rely only on empirical facts that are physical, while other evidence outside of that is ignored. Because of their experience in researching the history of Biblical texts based on manuscripts, their attention is excessive towards the history of the Qur'an's compilation. John Wansbrough, for example, assesses the Qur'an as a historical product or reflection of Arab culture in the 7th–8th centuries AD (Wansbrough, 2004, p. 9). Similarly, Arthur Jeffery assumed the current *mushaf* is incomplete and different from the original text, although he never showed what that original form was. He even compiled a *critical edition of the Qur'an* based on manuscripts he found without regarding the existing transmission paths (Jeffery, 1937, p. 228).

The Orientalist textual approach, while rigorous in manuscript analysis, operates within an epistemology incompatible with Qur'anic preservation. For instance, Wansbrough's theory of the Qur'an as a 7th–8th century cultural product neglects *mutawātir* transmission as a historically verifiable phenomenon. Similarly, Jeffery's reconstruction of a "critical edition" dismisses *riwāyah* as secondary evidence, violating the Islamic principle of *al-rasm tābi' li al-riwāyah* (writing follows recitation). This methodological divergence—not factual deficiency—underpins Orientalist claims of incompleteness. From this assumption, they then apply philological methods commonly used in Biblical studies, such as historical criticism, source criticism, form criticism, and textual criticism. Consequently, the Qur'an is viewed as the result of the interaction of Arab society in the 7th–8th centuries AD with its environment. Furthermore, they accuse the current *mushaf* of not being the same as the original text and try to reconstruct it in the form of a critical edition or new text based on existing manuscripts.

In the Islamic perspective, the Qur'an is not solely writing (*rasm*) but recitation (*qirā'ah*) conveyed through speech and memorization. Since the beginning of revelation, delivery, teaching, and narration took place orally. Reading the Qur'an essentially means

reading from memory. Writing on media such as bone, wood, or paper was merely a tool to store the memorization of the reciters. This memorization is what has been inherited through *mutawātir* means from generation to generation until today, exactly as taught by the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet. Therefore, scholars affirm the rule “*al-rasm tābi’ li al-riwāyah*” (writing follows narration/recitation) (Zarkasyi, 2011, p. 15).

The *sahabah* and scholars applied the method of *mutawātir isnad* which was mutually tested between one reciter and another to maintain the authenticity of Qur’anic memorization. There are at least three conditions that must be met for a reading to be recognized as part of the Qur’an: 1) the *qira’at* must be narrated widely through many continuous paths back to the Prophet, thereby closing the opportunity for error; 2) the reading must be in accordance with the Uthmanic Mushaf; and 3) its pronunciation must align with correct Arabic grammatical rules (Al-Azami, 2005, p. 224).

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Qur’anic authenticity is verifiable through a distinct preservation paradigm: *mutawātir* memorization and *sanad*-based documentation constitute a self-correcting system historically prioritized over written texts. By repositioning *sanad* as a rigorous epistemological tool—rather than a theological premise—the research offers a methodological bridge between Islamic and Western academic traditions. This framework transcends reactive apologetics, providing a proactive model for analyzing oral-textual synergy in sacred textual studies. The findings counter Orientalist claims of alteration or incompleteness, which lack substantiation within Islamic historical tradition. The *sanad*-based memorization tradition, unique to Islamic scholarship, provides robust evidence of textual integrity. By integrating classical narratives with contemporary manuscript studies, this research bridges Muslim and Orientalist perspectives, emphasizing that philological analysis alone is insufficient without considering Islam’s internal preservation mechanisms. The study underscores the continued relevance of *sanad*, *qirā’āt*, and memorization traditions in modern scholarship to maintain an authoritative foundation amid academic and ideological challenges.

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