

# A STUDY OF JOHN WANSBROUGH THOUGHTS ON QUR'ANIC STUDIES: SOURCE AND METHODS OF SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION

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**Abstract:** *The study of Islam, particularly Quranic studies, has been shaped by various methodologies and interpretations introduced by Western scholars. Among them, John Wansbrough's provocative insights in his methodological approach stand out. Wansbrough's historical and literary analysis challenges traditional views by proposing that the Quran is a product of cultural evolution and influence. This article delves into Wansbrough's perspective, focusing on his work 'The Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation.' This study reveals Wansbrough's arguments about the possibility of Jewish-Christian traditions in the Quran, the role of cultural contexts, and the evolution of the Quranic text. Wansbrough's methods, including historical scepticism and literary analysis, have triggered both support and criticism. Wansbrough suggests that sacred texts, such as the Quran, may consist of different layers and undergo changes and revisions over time, especially due to cultural, political, and social influences. Although some scholars view Wansbrough's methods as too sceptical and controversial, others consider them to provide valuable insights into the history and development of sacred texts. Scholars such as Fazlur Rahman have criticized Wansbrough's theories, defending traditional views. However, supporters argue that Wansbrough's ideas expand the boundaries of Quranic studies. Ultimately, this article explores and demonstrates open and critical discussions within the realm of Islamic studies, acknowledging various perspectives to achieve a deeper understanding of the complex origins and interpretations of the Quran. This research uses a qualitative approach and literature analysis to understand John Wansbrough's thinking. Open and critical discussions are necessary for Islamic studies to understand the various perspectives and methods in uncovering the meaning of the Quran and the history of Islam.*

**Keywords:** *Historical, Literary Analysis, Methodology, Orientalist, Study Qur'an, Wansbrough.*

**Abstrak:** Bidang studi Islam, khususnya studi Al-Qur'an, telah dibentuk oleh berbagai metodologi dan interpretasi yang diperkenalkan oleh para sarjana Barat. Di antara mereka, pemikiran John Wansbrough menonjol dengan wawasan provokatif dalam pendekatan metodologisnya. Analisis historis dan sastra Wansbrough menantang pandangan tradisional dengan mengusulkan bahwa Al-Qur'an adalah produk dari evolusi dan pengaruh budaya. Artikel ini menggali perspektif Wansbrough, dengan fokus pada karyanya "The Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of

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Scriptural Interpretation.” Studi ini mengungkapkan argumen-argumen Wansbrough mengenai kemungkinan perpaduan tradisi Yahudi-Kristen dalam Al-Qur’an, peran konteks budaya, dan evolusi teksnya. Metode Wansbrough, termasuk skeptisisme historis dan telaah sastra, telah memicu dukungan dan kritik. Wansbrough mengemukakan bahwa teks sakral, seperti Qur’an, mungkin terdiri dari berbagai lapisan dan mengalami perubahan dan revisi dari waktu ke waktu, terutama karena pengaruh budaya, politik, dan sosial. Meskipun beberapa sarjana menganggap metode Wansbrough terlalu skeptis dan kontroversial, yang lain malah menganggapnya memberikan wawasan yang berharga dalam sejarah dan pengembangan teks suci. Sarjana seperti Fazlur Rahman mengkritik teori-teori Wansbrough, membela pandangan tradisional. Namun, para pendukung berpendapat bahwa gagasan-gagasan Wansbrough memperluas batas-batas studi Al-Quran. Pada akhirnya, tulisan ini meng eksplorasi dan memperlihatkan diskusi terbuka dan kritis dalam ranah studi Islam, mengakui berbagai pandangan untuk mencapai pemahaman yang lebih dalam mengenai asal-usul dan interpretasi kompleks Al-Qur’an. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan analisis kepustakaan untuk memahami pemikiran John Wansbrough. Diskusi yang terbuka dan kritis diperlukan dalam kajian Islam untuk memahami berbagai perspektif dan metode dalam mengungkap makna Al-Qur’an dan sejarah Islam.

**Kata-kata Kunci:** *Histories, Literary Analysis, Metodologi, Orientalis, Studi Qur’an, Wansbrough.*

## Introduction

The Islamic studies conducted by Western rationalists indeed have various approaches and interpretations that are not monolithic.<sup>1</sup> In the context of Orientalism, several Orientalists adopt a historical approach to studying Islam, but many of them tend to offer negative assessments of Islam, such as viewing Islam as an innovation of Christianity. On the other hand, there are also Islamologists like W. Montgomery Watt who hold a more positive understanding of Islam. The differences in viewpoints among these scholars can be attributed to various factors, including differences in worldviews, approaches employed, and interpretations made. These distinctions can also be influenced by their social and intellectual backgrounds, whether they are sociologists, secularists, humanists, or Western modernists. In this text, the focus is on John Wansbrough’s perspective on the Quran and Prophet Muhammad, as revealed in his work titled “*Qur’anic Studies: Source and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation.*” Three main issues are addressed in this writing: Wansbrough’s views on the Quran, Prophet Muhammad, and the *Isrā’ Mi’rāj* (*Night Journey and Ascension*).<sup>2</sup> In his examination of the Quran, Wansbrough perceives it as influenced by Jewish and Christian elements, seen as a synthesis of various traditions. He contends that the Quran can be seen as a creation from a time preceding prophethood. These three issues have been criticized by other Western thinkers, including orientalists, and certainly run counter to the beliefs of the Muslim community.

In conducting his study, Wansbrough employed two methods, namely the

1 Toni Pransiska, ‘Meneropong Wajah Studi Islam dalam Kacamata Filsafat: Sebuah Pendekatan Alternatif’, *Intizar* 23, no. 1 (19 December 2017): 164, <https://doi.org/10.19109/intizar.v23i1.1270>.

2 John Wansbrough, ‘*Qur’anic Studies: Source and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*’, in *The Quran in its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2008), 109.

historical method and literary analysis. The historical approach was employed to examine the content of the Quran, whereas literary analysis was utilized to analyse the stories revealed within the Quran.<sup>3</sup> However, it is important to note that Wansbrough's views on the Quran and Prophet Muhammad do not reflect the generally accepted perspectives in Islamic studies. Modern Islamic studies have produced various holistic and diverse approaches and methodologies in comprehending the Quran and the history of Islam.<sup>4</sup>

He questions the validity of the orthodox Islamic tradition that associates the writing of the Quran with the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad and argues that the Quran might have undergone a lengthy redaction process after the Prophet's death. Wansbrough emphasizes the importance of a critical approach to the sacred text and proposes a method involving linguistic analysis, social history, and contextual examination of the text to understand the Quran. Wansbrough's viewpoint is controversial and has sparked lengthy debates among scholars of Quranic studies. Some scholars support Wansbrough's critical approach and view his contributions as a paradigm shift in the study of the Quran. However, this perspective is also contested by several scholars who criticize Wansbrough's methodology and assumptions. Hence, there is a need for open and critical discussions regarding Wansbrough's methods and findings, while considering diverse viewpoints within the study of Islam.

John Wansbrough's ideas in "*Qur'anic Studies: Source and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*" present that the Quran might have undergone evolution and significant influence from oral traditions and cultural contexts before being formally written. *Evolution in Oral Tradition*: Wansbrough suggests that before its formal inscription, the early Quran was orally transmitted within Arab society. He argues that the text underwent changes and adaptations over time in terms of narrative and storytelling style, aligning with the oral habits and cultural context of Arabia during that era. *Influence of Cultural Context*: Wansbrough emphasizes that understanding the Quran should be situated within the broader pre-Islamic Arab cultural context. He posits that oral traditions, mythology, and pre-Islamic Arab religious practices potentially exerted significant influence on the composition and interpretation of the Quran. Thus, comprehending the Arab cultural context becomes pivotal in grasping the intentions and interpretations of the Quran. *Complex methods of interpretation*: Wansbrough also questions the methods of interpretation used to understand the Quran. He critiques the traditional approach, which tends to employ literal understandings and other authoritative texts as guidelines. According to Wansbrough, a more critical and interdisciplinary approach to interpretation is necessary, involving historical, linguistic, and anthropological understandings to unveil deeper meanings within

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3 Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, 'Tradisi Orientalisme dan Framework Studi Al-Qur'an', *Tsaqafah* 7, no. 1 (31 May 2011): 8, <https://doi.org/10.21111/tsaqafah.v7i1.105>.

4 Asdar Yusup, 'Metode Bibel dalam Pemaknaan Al-Qur'an (Kajian Kritis Terhadap Pandangan Orientalis)', *Hunafa: Jurnal Studia Islamika* 13, no. 1 (20 July 2016): 35, <https://doi.org/10.24239/jsi.v13i1.413.35-65>.

the Quran.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, the author will explore John Wansbrough's Thought Study on "*Qur'anic Studies: Source and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*." Categorically, this research constitutes a qualitative study aimed at understanding Wansbrough's thoughts regarding Quranic studies. The research method employed is *library research*, where the primary research objects are literary works discussing John Wansbrough's Thought Study on "*Qur'anic Studies: Source and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*." Within this research, the author will delve into the key textual sources utilized by Wansbrough and analyse the methods he employed in interpreting religious manuscripts. Through this research, it is anticipated that a deeper insight into Wansbrough's contributions to the field of Quranic studies and scriptural interpretation will be attained.

### The Night Journey of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

Beginning the journey of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) *Isrā'* (Night Journey) as mentioned in the Quran, there are controversial viewpoints put forth by John Wansbrough regarding the accuracy of information in the Quran. According to Wansbrough, this information is considered inaccurate. One of the verses often cited in this context is Surah Al-Isrā' [17]: 1, which implies an addition within the verse. This verse originally explains the night journey of Prophet Moses (AS), but it was subsequently altered by the Quranic author in such a way that it appears as if Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself undertook the night journey. This perspective contradicts the general understanding of the Quran, in which the verse should refer to the journey of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) from the Masjid al-Haram to the Masjid al-Aqsa.<sup>6</sup>

Wansbrough employed linguistic arguments by highlighting the word "*asra*" in Surah Ṭāhā [20]: 77 and Surah Ash-Shu'arā' [26]: 52 in the form of "أن أسر" (*an asri*), as well as the word "فأسر" (*faasri*) in Surah Ad-Dukhān [44]: 23. This concept guided Wansbrough to believe that there were additions made by the Quranic authors in the Arabic context. One such addition is that the Masjid al-Haram is located in Mecca. Consequently, it appears as if Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself undertook the night journey.<sup>7</sup>

However, it is important to note that this perspective solely represents Wansbrough's viewpoint and is not universally accepted by the majority of Islamic scholars. Interpretations of the Quran can vary, and these arguments remain a subject of ongoing academic debate. Therefore, a careful and objective approach is

5 Ali Masrur, 'Neo-Skeptisisme Michael Cook dan Norman Calder Terhadap Hadis Nabi Muhammad', *Jurnal Theologia* 28, no. 1 (14 September 2017): 11, <https://doi.org/10.21580/teo.2017.28.1.1188>.

6 Abd Moqsith Ghazali, Luthfi Assyaukanie, and Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, *Metodologi Studi Al-Qur'an* (Jakarta: PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama. 2009), 59.

7 Ihwan Agustono, 'Karakteristik Kesarjanaan Barat Kontemporer dalam Studi Al Qur'an' (Dissertation, Surabaya, UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, 2018): 41, <http://digilib.uinsa.ac.id/28026/>.

necessary when discussing these differences of opinion.<sup>8</sup>

However, the arguments put forth by John Wansbrough can be questioned as he did not take into account two other verses that also mention the word فأسر (faasri) directed to Prophet Luth in Surah Al-Hijr (15):65 and Surah Hūd (11):81. Thus, this word is not solely used about Prophet Moses, but also to other prophets.

## Methodological Analysis and Critique of John Wansbrough's Thought

### 1. Historical and Literary Analysis Method

The results of the study conducted by John Wansbrough indicate the influence of Judeo-Christian traditions in the analysis of Quranic verses. This study reveals a fusion between tradition and the Quran as a post-prophetic creation. These findings are presented by John Wansbrough in his book titled *Qur'anic Studies*.<sup>9</sup>

In conducting his study, John Wansbrough employed a historical analysis approach, frequently utilized by previous orientalists, alongside literary analysis. The historical approach was employed by Wansbrough to scrutinize the content of the Quran, revealing similarities with earlier scriptures. Consequently, John Wansbrough asserted that the Quran was influenced by preceding religions or traditions, namely Judaism and Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

John Wansbrough was a historian who questioned the early historical records of Islam. He argued that there are no reliable historical records regarding the early period of Islam, and the historical documentation of Islam only emerged in the generations after Prophet Muhammad and his companions.<sup>11</sup> This perspective was also presented by Gustav Weil. However, this viewpoint has become controversial among Islamic scholars, and there has been significant rejection of it. The majority of historians and Muslim scholars believe that there are reliable historical sources that document the early period of Islam, including the life of Prophet Muhammad and significant events in Islamic history. It's important to note that the views of John Wansbrough and Gustav Weil represent a minority perspective within the study of Islamic history, and they are not widely accepted authorities in this field. Modern Islamic historians employ various sources and methods to understand and reconstruct the early history of Islam, including written sources like hadith, historical literature, and contemporary documents.<sup>12</sup>

In the context of the *Isrā'* (*Night Journey*) story of Prophet Muhammad, it

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8 John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Source and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 67–68.

9 Muhammad Alfatih Suryadilaga, 'Kajian Atas Pemikiran John Wansbrough Tentang Al-Qur'an dan Nabi Muhammad', *Tsaqafah* 7, no. 1 (31 May 2011): 102, <https://doi.org/10.21111/tsaqafah.v7i1.109>.

10 Andrew Rippin, 'Literary of al-Qur'an and Sira the Methodology of John Wansbrough', in *Approaches to Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. Martin (USA: The University of Arizona Press, 1985), 157.

11 Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Source and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, 154.

12 Jonathan Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2014), 16.



is a part of Islamic belief that Prophet Muhammad undertook a night journey from the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca to the Masjid al-Aqsa in Jerusalem and then ascended to the heavens to receive revelation from Allah. This event is regarded as one of the miracles of Prophet Muhammad. The viewpoint suggesting that this event was merely an illusion is not recognized within the Islamic faith.<sup>13</sup>

As a suggestion, when presenting opinions or arguments about sensitive topics like religious history, it's important to seek and present diverse and scholarly perspectives. This will enrich the discussion and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the subject at hand.<sup>14</sup> According to John Wansbrough, it should be acknowledged that applying the Quran in the same manner as the Jewish and Christian religions within a historical context might not be feasible. A similar viewpoint was also expressed by Andrew Rippin:

Whether out of theological or merely unconsciously modern scholarship has approached Islam in the same way that it has traditionally treated Judaism and Christianity as a religion of history that is as a religion that has taken history.<sup>15</sup>

In terms of methodology, John Wansbrough's writings bring forth a highly relevant and crucial question within the context of Islamic studies: "*What is evidence?*" This question becomes one of the aspects that cannot be overlooked in the endeavour to deeply understand Islam.<sup>16</sup> Regarding this evidence, Andrew Rippin states:

Do we have a witness to the Muslim accounts of the formation of their community in any early, disinterested source? the Qur'an (in the form collected "between two covers" as al-Qur'an is known today) Islam good example of what is the evidence. Are there for the historical accuracy of the traditional accounts of the compilation of that book shortly after the death of Muhammad? The earliest non-Islamic source testifying to the existence of the Qur'an appears to stem from the second/eighth century...<sup>17</sup>

The approach advocated by John Wansbrough can be viewed as a form of profound scepticism that challenges trust in Islamic sources. This perspective aligns with John Burton's viewpoint, which highlights contradictions within Muslim sources regarding the compilation of the Quran.<sup>18</sup> This differs from the commonly held view in both the Western world and within the beliefs of Islam, which is that the Quran was compiled during the time of Caliph Uthman ibn Affan.<sup>19</sup>

John Wansbrough rejected the notion that the efforts of Quranic compilation by Uthman were factual, considering it to be an illusion or mere fiction. The historical

13 Rippin, 'Literary of al-Qur'an and Sira the Methodology of John Wansbrough', 156.

14 Taufik Adnan Amal, 'Al-Qur'an di Mata Barat Kajian Baru John Wansbrough', *Ulu-mul Qur'an Jurnal Ilmu dan Kebudayaan* 4, no. 1 (1990): 39.

15 Rippin, 'Literary of al-Qur'an and Sira the Methodology of John Wansbrough', 156.

16 Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Source and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, 154.

17 Wansbrough, 154.

18 Wansbrough, 152.

19 W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Quran* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 1970), 44.

approach in Islamic studies, however, holds varying significance depending on the field of study being pursued. This method has its shortcomings in that it tends to only reveal the external aspects of the investigated religious phenomena, while often failing to uncover the essential and substantial meanings. These limitations of the approach are often exacerbated by incomplete research sources and errors in the interpretation of those sources.<sup>20</sup>

To attain a deeper and scholarly understanding, it's essential to undertake more engaging and meticulous efforts in Islamic research while considering the diversity of viewpoints and methodologies present. This way, we can achieve a more comprehensive and profound comprehension of the key aspects of the history and evolution of Islam.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, the historical criticism carried out within the Quran presents the Quran as both historical and non-historical. The Quran is deemed historical due to its continuity of divine revelations from earlier times, adjusted to the context of time, place, and circumstances. From this perspective, it seems that Muhammad Abduh justifies this viewpoint by proposing the theory of the evolution of revelation, where Allah's revelations align with the level of progress of humanity, and its ultimate perfection is represented by the revelations to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).<sup>22</sup>

Hence, it's not surprising that there are similarities between the Quran and earlier scriptures. This doesn't imply imitation or that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) studied previous texts and then copied them. On the other hand, studying the Quran within a non-historical framework yields esoteric revelations that exist beyond history and originate from God. In this context, God, based on His will, can select a trusted messenger to convey His sacred mission.<sup>23</sup>

The existence of these differing viewpoints is a result of the application of *Biblical criticism*. John Wansbrough rejected the *Uthmani Mushaf* (the compilation of the Quran during the time of Caliph Uthman), suggesting that the writing of the Quran took place three hundred years later. This is equated with the codification of the Old Testament, which was written down over 900 years based on oral tradition. This is another idea put forth by John Wansbrough, in addition to his argument about the amalgamation of Jewish and Christian traditions within the Quran.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, there are scholars like Patricia Crone and Michael Cook who argue that the Quran was not delivered in the form that we have today, but was compiled over some time and under specific political circumstances. They suggest that the

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20 Muhammad Hasbiyallah, 'Paradigma Tafsir Kontekstual: Upaya Membumikan Nilai-Nilai Al-Qur'an', *Al-Dzikra: Jurnal Studi Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Al-Hadits* 12, no. 1 (30 August 2018): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.24042/al-dzikra.v12i1.2924>.

21 Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Quran*, 44.

22 Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Risālah al-Tawhīd* (Mesir: Al-Manār, 1955), 107.

23 Suryadilaga, 'Kajian atas Pemikiran John Wansbrough tentang Al-Qur'an dan Nabi Muhammad', 94.

24 Suryadilaga, 97.

Quran was influenced by the cultural and religious environment of the time and that it was shaped by the needs and interests of the early Islamic community. On the other hand, some scholars strongly reject such views and affirm the traditional Islamic accounts of the Quran's revelation and preservation. They argue that the Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in its final form and that it was preserved by written and oral means from the very beginning of Islam.

Substantiate the presence of a fusion of traditions, John Wansbrough attempted to criticize the Quranic verses concerning the story of Prophet Shu'aib found in Surah Al-A'rāf [7]: 85–93, Surah Hūd [11]:84–95, and Surah Ash-Shu'arā' [26]: 176-190. In these three chapters, there are differences in the presentation of the story. Only in Surah Al-A'rāf does John Wansbrough consider the account to be complete. Conversely, in Surah Ash-Shu'arā', he finds an incomplete narrative.<sup>25</sup>

Due to such differences, John Wansbrough concluded that there was an intervention of prior traditions, where the Quran copied existing traditions and motifs from the Bible. Another idea expressed by John Wansbrough pertains to the expression of "two gardens" (*jannatāni*) in Surah Ar-Rahmān [55]: 46–61 and 62–77.<sup>26</sup>

From what John Wansbrough expressed above, it seems that he utilized a literal analysis in understanding the Quran. The Quran is regarded as a literary work and does not possess transcendent value. Hence, the Quran is considered an ordinary book, subject to individual judgment, especially since John Wansbrough lacked theological commitment in regarding the Quran as a sacred scripture. Some key points of Wansbrough's historical method are as follows:

- a. **Questioning Traditional Narratives:** Wansbrough's method involves questioning the traditional narratives and assumptions about the origins and development of religious texts, including the Quran.
- b. **Analysis of Linguistic and Textual Elements:** He focuses on linguistic and textual analysis of the Quranic verses, looking for patterns, repetitions, and variations that might suggest multiple sources or later modifications.
- c. **Contextualization:** Wansbrough places the Quranic text in the historical, social, and cultural context of its time to understand how it may have been influenced by pre-existing traditions.
- d. **Comparative Approach:** He compares Quranic texts with earlier religious texts, especially Jewish and Christian scriptures, to identify similarities and differences.

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25 Amal, 'Al-Qur'an di Mata Barat Kajian Baru John Wansbrough', 40.

26 Sulaiman Ibrahim, 'Sejarah Teks Al-Qur'an: Studi Atas Pemikiran John Wansbrough,' *Jurnal Farabi* 13, no. 2 (2016):195.



- e. **Evolution of Text:** Wansbrough suggests that the Quran might have evolved through a process of oral transmission, redaction, and adaptation.
- f. **Challenging Traditional Views:** His approach challenges the traditional view of the Quran as a complete, singular revelation and instead proposes that it might have undergone gradual development.
- g. **Interplay of Traditions:** He proposes that the Quran might have been influenced by various oral and written traditions present in the Arabian Peninsula during the time of its revelation.
- h. **Historical-Critical Lens:** Wansbrough's method applies historical-critical methods commonly used in studying other religious texts to the study of the Quran.

Wansbrough's historical method approach has indeed sparked numerous debates and criticisms within academic and theological circles. Some scholars view it as a valuable contribution to gaining a deeper understanding of the origins and development of sacred texts, while others question the validity of certain aspects of his methodology.

## 2. Literary Analysis Method

John Wansbrough employed a literary analysis method to examine the stories conveyed in the Quran. For him, the presence of differing narratives in the Quran indicates the amalgamation of traditions within it. Further elaboration on this issue can be found in the explanations below.<sup>27</sup> The literary analysis method of Wansbrough encompasses several main principles:

- a. **Division of Sacred Texts into Layers:** Wansbrough argued that sacred texts, like the Bible and the Quran, couldn't have originated from a single writing but might consist of various layers. He separated these texts into layers generated during different historical periods.
- b. **Literary and Historical Aspects within the Texts:** This method emphasizes the significance of understanding the literary and historical aspects within the sacred texts. Wansbrough contended that comprehending these texts should be viewed in the context of the history and culture in which they were written, and how these influences shaped the meaning of the texts.
- c. **Oral and Written Traditions:** Wansbrough approached sacred texts as

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<sup>27</sup> Syamsul Wathani, 'John Wansbrough: Studi Atas Tradisi dan Instrumen Tafsir Alqur'an Klasik', *Al-A'raf: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam dan Filsafat* 15, no. 2 (31 December 2018): 298, <https://doi.org/10.22515/ajpif.v15i2.1247>.

products of oral traditions eventually transmitted into written form. He argued that many stories within these texts were initially conveyed orally before being written down. This led to variations and changes in the narrative across generations.

- d. Textual Changes Over Time:** Some view Wansbrough's approach as overly sceptical of the authenticity and unity of the sacred texts, while others consider it to offer valuable insights into the history and development of these texts.<sup>28</sup>

From the discussion above, it's evident that the method used to study the Quran will also yield varying results. Therefore, in the following discussion, we will explore the existence of methodologies that can clarify and eliminate biases when examining something.

### Pro Arguments in Favor of John Wansbrough

Among the Muslim scholars who offered sharp criticism of John Wansbrough was Fazlur Rahman. He responded to four of his writings: *Some Recent Books on the Qur'an by Western Authors*, *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies: Review Essays*, *Major Themes of the Quran*, and *Islamic Studies and the Future of Islam*.<sup>29</sup> In his study, Fazlur Rahman regarded John Wansbrough's research as a threat to the future of Orientalism and conflicting with dogmatic prejudices among Muslims. This Pakistani scholar attempted to categorize Western studies of the Quran into three groups, works inclined towards discovering Jewish-Christian influences in the Quran, works aiming to re-examine the chronology of the Quran, and works depicting the content of the Quran either wholly or partially. Among these three categories, Rahman focused more on the first category, into which John Wansbrough's study fell.

John Wansbrough's main thesis to be proven is that the Quran is replete with traditions due to its creation in an environment rife with Jewish-Christian sectarian debates. He posits that the Quran is a fusion of various traditions and that it was composed after the time of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).<sup>30</sup>

Another criticism that Rahman directed towards John Wansbrough pertains to the use of literal analysis. Wansbrough, in his analysis of the Quran through literary analysis, identified four key Jewish traditions: reciprocity, allegory, expulsion, and covenant. Rahman disputes the existence of these elements in the Quran, stating

28 Muhammad Alwi, 'Kritik Atas Pandangan William M. Watt Terhadap Sejarah Penulisan Al-Qur'an', *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Hadis* 21, no. 1 (30 January 2020): 91, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.2020.2101-05>.

29 Ahmad Ghozali and Muhammad Azka Noor, 'Epistemologi Pemikiran Andrew Rippin dan Implikasinya Terhadap Fungsi Asbabun Nuzul (Analisis Atas Artikel The Function of Asbab An-Nuzul in Qur'anic Exegesis)', *Mafatih* 2, no. 1 (29 June 2022): 89, <https://doi.org/10.24260/mafatih.v2i1.806>.

30 Fazlur Rahman, 'Historical versus Literary Criticism', in *An Anthology of Islamic Studies*, ed. Issa J. Boullata (Canada: McGill Indonesia IAIN Development Project, 1992), 198.

that they cannot be used as evidence of Jewish-Christian influences within the Quran.<sup>31</sup>

Herbert Berg supports Wansbrough's ideas and is highly critical of those who "oppose" Wansbrough's thinking. For instance, Berg rejects the response given by Fazlur Rahman, stating, "My disagreements with Wansbrough are too numerous to be addressed by just reading my book"<sup>32</sup> and his book." In more detail, Herbert Berg further writes: Many scholars openly attack Wansbrough's ideas; some intentionally ignore them. When invited to participate in a seminar on Wansbrough's thought, all of them declined.<sup>33</sup>

The radical criticism against the historical implications of Wansbrough's thought can be understood as a way to reject the proposed methodologies, and these attacks on the methods are conducted to reject the resulting implications. We also find that a number of these attacks, such as those carried out by Fazlur Rahman, Alford T. Welch,<sup>34</sup> and others, appear internally consistent, but in essence, their arguments stem from less careful readings of Wansbrough's thought.<sup>35</sup> Fundamentally, the critical arguments directed at Wansbrough's thought are based on misunderstandings or "unclear arguments".

Undoubtedly, the scope of Wansbrough's theory and method goes far beyond the theories and methods proposed by several scholars before. Ignaz Goldziher's theory and method, for instance, are limited to the sayings of the Prophet.<sup>36</sup> Joseph Schacht.<sup>37</sup> Richard Bell studies the arrangement and chronological order of verses and chapters in the Quran. John Burton delves into linguistic errors in the Quran. Patricia Crone addresses the status of Mecca during the time of the Prophet by asking: was Mecca a trading city during his time or not? Maxim Rodinson and Michael Cook utilize it to reconstruct the history of the Prophet's life.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

The Western rationalist study of Islam, as exemplified by figures like John Wansbrough, encompasses diverse approaches and interpretations that have stirred controversy. Wansbrough's perspective on the Quran and Prophet Muhammad, as outlined in his work *Qur'anic Studies Source and Methods of Scriptural*

31 Rahman, 201.

32 Fazlur Rahman, *Major Theme of the Qur'an* (Chicago: Biblioteka Islamica, 1989), xiv.

33 Herbert Berg, 'The Implications of, and Opposition to, the Methods and Theories of John Wansbrough', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 9, no. 1 (1997): 3–22.

34 Alford T. Welch, 'Qur'anic Studies: Problems and Prospects,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47 (1980): 34.

35 Berg, 'The Implications of, and Opposition to, the Methods and Theories of John Wansbrough', 14.

36 Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies (Mubammedanische Studien)*, vol. 2, trans. C.P. Barber dan S.M. Stern (New York: Atherton, 1971), 48.

37 Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Mubammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), 3.

38 Richard Bell, 'The Qur'an,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 117.

*Interpretation*, includes the concept that the Quran was influenced by Jewish and Christian elements and might have undergone a lengthy redaction process after the death of Prophet Muhammad. Historical methods and literary analysis were employed by Wansbrough to examine the Quran. However, his viewpoints have not always been universally accepted within Islamic studies. Many Islamic scholars criticize Wansbrough's methodology and assumptions, viewing the Quran as a sacred text that has remained unchanged since its inception.

Criticisms of Wansbrough's ideas stem from various perspectives, both within the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Some consider his critical approach as a paradigm shift in Quranic studies, while others critique it for not reflecting the more holistic and diverse views present in modern Islamic scholarship. This study also underscores the debate surrounding the *Isrā' Mi'rāj* narrative in the Quran, particularly within the context of Wansbrough's perspective. Wansbrough questioned the accuracy of the Quranic account of these events, a viewpoint that contradicts the beliefs of the Islamic community.

In the broader discourse, it is crucial to acknowledge that modern Islamic studies have given rise to a multitude of diverse approaches and methodologies for comprehending the Quran and Islamic history. The viewpoint of Wansbrough represents one perspective among many within the realm of Islamic studies, and open and critical discussions are necessary to understand the various viewpoints and contributions within this field. The conclusion should serve as a response to the overarching research question or objective, aiming to generalize the findings. It is advisable to present this in paragraph form, rather than using an itemized list or numbering. If there is a need for itemized points, they should still be presented in paragraph format.

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