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REVISIONIST APPROACH TO PROPHET'S HISTORY: A METHODOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

T.C Usman Niamathullah¹¹⁹

Abstract:

In recent decades, revisionist scholars have questioned the authenticity and historical reliability of traditional Islamic accounts concerning the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This study critically examines the revisionist challenge by evaluating both their core assertions and methodological approaches concerning the origins and reliability of Islamic sources. Scholars such as John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, and Michael Cook argue that foundational texts such as the *Sīrah*, *Hadīth*, and even the *Qur'ān* were compiled long after the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) lifetime and were shaped by later theological and political agendas. In response, this article draws on the counter-critiques of re-evaluationist scholars, including Harald Motzki, Mustafa al-Azami, Fuat Sezgin, and Jonathan A.C. Brown. It examines both the central claims of revisionist scholars and their methodologies, including textual analysis and source criticism. Socio-political and comparative analysis, as well as archaeological and epigraphic readings, and identifies their frequent reliance on speculative reconstructions, selective skepticism, and externalist assumptions. The article argues that revisionist scholars often overlook the sophistication of Islamic verification systems such as *isnād* analysis, *jarḥ wa ta'dīl*, and *mutawātir* classification. By favouring non-Islamic sources over continuous Muslim tradition, they undermine the historical coherence of Islamic historiography. This study re-evaluates their critiques through classical methodologies, affirming the reliability of traditional sources and advocating a more integrated approach to the Prophet's (PBUH) life.

Keywords: *Sīrah, Hadīth, Prophetic Historiography, Revisionist Critique, Re-evaluationist Scholarship.*

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INTRODUCTION

The historiography of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has long held a foundational place in the Islamic intellectual tradition. Through core sources such as the Qur'ān, Hadīth, and Sīrah, early Muslim scholars developed a comprehensive and multifaceted system for preserving and authenticating historical knowledge. This system, which centered on isnād (transmission chains), matn (text) analysis, jarḥwata' dīl (narrator evaluation), and comparative assessment, represents one of the most rigorous historical methodologies in pre-modern scholarship. Canonical Hadīth compilations, such as those by al-Bukhārī and Muslim, were produced using stringent criteria for authenticity. Biographical works like the Sīrah of Ibn Ishāq and the Tārīkh of al-Ṭabarī provided narrative continuity within a defined epistemological framework.

In recent decades, the Revisionist School of Islamic Studies has challenged the historical reliability of these sources. Prominent figures such as John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, and Christoph Luxenberg argue that Islam's foundational texts were compiled long after the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) lifetime and reflect evolving theological or political concerns. Using methods such as textual and source criticism, archaeology, epigraphy, and comparative religion, these scholars often prioritize non-Muslim or material evidence while casting doubt on Islamic textual traditions. Their critiques typically present the Islamic narrative as a retrospective construction rather than the outcome of contemporaneous historical transmission.

The article contends that revisionist scholars often fail to acknowledge the sophistication of Islamic verification mechanisms, including isnād examination, Biographical evaluation (ʿilm al-rijāl, jarḥwata' dīl), occasions of revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl) and chronology of reports (ta' rīkh al-riwāyāt), Comparative Analysis and the classification of reports as mutawātir. Their tendency to prioritize non-Islamic or material sources over the uninterrupted Muslim tradition poses a risk to the historical coherence and internal

consistency of Islamic historiography. Through a critical reassessment of these revisionist arguments using classical Islamic methodologies, this study affirms the epistemological reliability of traditional sources and emphasizes the need for a more balanced and integrative scholarly engagement with the life and legacy of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

REVISIONIST APPROACHES AND ISLAMIC SCHOLARLY RESPONSES

The Revisionist School of Islamic Studies, which gained prominence in the late twentieth century, adopts a highly skeptical view of traditional Islamic sources. Scholars such as John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, and Michael Cook argue that core texts like the Qur'ān, Hadīth, and Sīrah were not compiled during the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) lifetime but rather developed over time, shaped by later political and sectarian influences. They often dismiss internal Islamic verification methods such as isnād analysis and 'ilm al-rijāl, viewing them as retrospective instruments formulated to legitimize the consolidation of later orthodoxy.¹²⁰

Instead, many revisionist scholars prioritise external materials, such as non-Muslim historical writings, archaeological data, and reconstructions based on historical linguistics and script analysis. These sources, however, are often limited in scope, shaped by ideological assumptions, and geographically and temporally distant from the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) lifetime. Such an approach tends to overlook the rigorous and systematic methods developed within the Islamic tradition to preserve historical authenticity.¹²¹

In response, re-evaluationist scholars such as Harald Motzki, Mustafa al-Azami, Fuat Sezgin, and Jonathan A.C. Brown have

¹²⁰ John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 119–121, Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*: 3–5.

¹²¹ Gerd R. Puin, "Observations on Early Qur'ān Manuscripts in Ṣan'ā'," in *The Qur'ān as Text*, ed. Stefan Wild (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 107–111.

defended the reliability and depth of Islamic historiography. Motzki's isnād-cum-matn analysis traces many narrations back coherently to the first Islamic century.¹²² Al-Azami presents substantial evidence of Hadīth documentation during the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) own lifetime.¹²³ Sezgin's bibliographic research affirms the early compilation and codification of Islamic literature.¹²⁴ And Brown highlights the analytical depth of Hadīth sciences, noting their dual focus on transmission chains and textual consistency to identify authentic reports.¹²⁵

In a nutshell, this section outlines the principal revisionist claims alongside the scholarly responses that aim to uphold the credibility of traditional Islamic methods. The following subsections will examine these debates in further detail.

REVISIONIST ARGUMENTS AND CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

Evaluating the Argument of the Absence of Contemporary External Sources

A key revisionist claim concerns the alleged lack of seventh-century non-Muslim references to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the Qur'ān, or Islam. Scholars like Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren argue that Islamic religious symbols first appear in inscriptions and coinage only during the late Umayyad period, suggesting a delayed formation of Islamic identity.¹²⁶ John Wansbrough similarly interprets the silence of Byzantine, Syriac, and Armenian sources as evidence of a gradual

¹²² Motzki, "The Muṣannaf of 'Abd al-Razzāq," 1–22.

¹²³ Mustafa al-Azami, *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1977), 30–35.

¹²⁴ Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 25–28.

¹²⁵ Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 38–43.

¹²⁶ Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), 268–271.

sectarian development rather than the immediate emergence of Islam.¹²⁷

However, this argument neglects the limitations of seventh-century historical records. As Fred M. Donner observes, early Islamic history was mainly preserved through oral tradition, which was a deeply rooted and systematic practice in Arab society.¹²⁸ Additionally, Arabia's marginal position compared to Byzantine and Sasanian centers meant it rarely featured in contemporary documentation. Therefore, the absence of external references likely reflects geographic and political marginality rather than the nonexistence of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) historically.

Even Robert Hoyland, frequently cited by revisionists, acknowledges that several non-Muslim sources mention Arab conquests and religious changes in the seventh century, indirectly recognizing the emergence of a new religious movement.¹²⁹ This challenges the argument that silence equals nonexistence. Expecting confirmation solely from external sources imposes an unrealistic standard on a historical period with scarce documentation and overlooks the strong oral tradition that maintained early Islamic memory.

Late Compilation of Islamic Texts: Argument and Critical Assessment

Revisionist scholars frequently emphasize the time gap between the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) lifetime and the formal compilation of Islamic texts, especially Ḥadīth and Sīrah. Since most Sīrah accounts and Ḥadīth compilations appeared centuries after the prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) demise, they are often cited as evidence of later theological additions. However, Mustafa al-A'zamī has shown that both oral and written records of prophetic material began during the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) life. For example, the *Ṣaḥīfat*

¹²⁷ Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*: 119–121.

¹²⁸ Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998), 29–35.

¹²⁹ Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), 564–567.

Hammām ibn Munabbih, attributed to Abū Hurayrah, predates major compilations and points to early efforts at literary preservation.

More significantly, revisionist arguments overlook the role of early transmitters and compilers. Companions such as ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ and scholars like Wahb ibn Munabbih gathered written materials that were later included in established collections. Furthermore, historical and biographical accounts attributed to ‘Urwah ibn al-Zubayr, Sa‘īd ibn Sa‘d, and Abān ibn ‘Uthmān illustrate the ongoing historiographical activity from the earliest Muslim generations.

Harald Motzki’s combined isnād and matn analysis affirms the reliability of numerous reports that can be traced back to the first Islamic century. His research challenges the revisionist view that canonical texts are solely later inventions. The postponement in formal compilation should not be seen as fabrication but as a careful and organized effort to preserve knowledge already recognized and transmitted within the scholarly community.

Political and Sectarian Influences: Argument and Rebuttal

Revisionist scholars contend that both Sīrah and Ḥadīth traditions were shaped by political and sectarian agendas, particularly during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. They argue that certain reports were promoted or suppressed to serve theological or dynastic aims. John Wansbrough, for instance, views the isnād system not as a tool of historical verification but as a post-factum literary device to lend authority to emerging traditions.¹³⁰

While some narratives may have been shaped by such influences, classical Muslim scholars were acutely aware of these risks and responded with systematic precision. Through developed disciplines like jarḥwata‘dīl (narrator criticism), ‘ilm al-rijāl, and comparative isnād analysis, they established robust mechanisms to detect fabrication and bias. As Jonathan A.C. Brown notes, the presence of contradictory reports in canonical works, including those

¹³⁰ Wansbrough, *Qur’anic Studies*, 119–121.

critical of ruling elites, reflects a conscious effort to preserve diverse voices rather than conform to power.¹³¹

Furthermore, Islamic scholars did not accept politically convenient traditions uncritically. Reports favorable to dynasties were scrutinized and often dismissed if they failed to meet authenticity standards. This practice underscores a commitment to historical accuracy over ideological alignment. Muslim scholars were not passive transmitters of power-influenced narratives but developed a self-correcting system grounded in transparency and methodological rigor.

Narrative Contradictions and Miraculous Reports: Assertion and Rebuttal

Revisionist scholars often point to contradictions in accounts of events like the battles of Badr and Uḥud, the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) interactions with Jewish tribes, or his marriages as evidence of later editorial influence. For instance, Wim Raven suggests that the more polished literary style found in later versions indicates retrospective embellishment, especially when detailed narratives appear centuries after the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) era.¹³² Similarly, miraculous accounts such as the splitting of the moon or talking animals are frequently dismissed as hagiographic additions that do not meet modern historical standards.¹³³

However, expecting complete consistency fails to consider the nature of oral transmission, which underpinned early Islamic historiography. Classical Muslim scholars acknowledged variations and developed methods to critically assess them. Techniques like *tarjīḥ*, meaning weighing conflicting reports, *isnād* verification, and *matn* analysis were used to determine authenticity. Rather than discarding contradictory reports, multiple versions were preserved. Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī stressed that narrations should not be rejected

¹³¹ Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy*: 56–72.

¹³² Wim Raven, "The Historical Value of the *Sīra*," in *The Biography of Muhammad: The Issue of the Sources*, ed. Harald Motzki (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 308–310;

¹³³ G.H.A. Juynboll, *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature: Discussions in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 33–35.

solely for differing from others. Instead, the stronger account is preferred while others are maintained to provide context.¹³⁴

Revisionists reject supernatural narratives based on a secular epistemology that overlooks the theological foundations of early Islam. Jonathan A.C. Brown criticizes this stance, arguing that dismissing entire reports solely because they include miraculous elements shows methodological bias rather than objective historiography.¹³⁵ Traditional Islamic scholars approached such reports using established criteria, distinguishing between *mutawātir* (mass-transmitted) and *āḥād* (solitary) narrations. This enabled them to critically evaluate authenticity while maintaining theological coherence.¹³⁶

This careful method, which preserves differing accounts alongside rigorous analysis, reflects the self-correcting nature of early Islamic scholarship. Fuat Sezgin's research confirms that Muslim historians practiced serious source evaluation well before modern historical criticism emerged.¹³⁷ By ignoring these internal standards, revisionist critiques fail to recognize the intellectual rigor and epistemological consistency that support the Islamic historical tradition.

The Qur'ān and Claims of Textual Evolution: Examining the Revisionist Perspectives

Revisionist scholars have questioned the early codification of the Qur'ān, claiming it developed gradually amid sectarian and theological debates. John Wansbrough views it as the result of literary evolution rather than immediate revelation.¹³⁸ Christoph Luxenberg argues that many Qur'ānic terms are actually misread Syriac words,

¹³⁴ Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalani, *Nuzhat al-Nazar fī Tahqiq al-Manzar*, vol. 2 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1967), 172.

¹³⁵ Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2014), 73–76.

¹³⁶ Mustafa al-Aʿzami, *The History of the Qur'ānic Text from Revelation to Compilation* (Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003), 223–229.

¹³⁷ Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte*: xv–xxi.

¹³⁸ Christoph Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran* (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2007).

suggesting an Aramaic origin.¹³⁹ Günter Lüling similarly proposes pre-Islamic Christian influences within the Qur'ānic text.¹⁴⁰ However, these theories often depend on speculative philology and overlook established principles of classical Arabic grammar and context.

Walid Saleh and Neal Robinson criticize these approaches for lacking linguistic rigor and relying on selective etymology.¹⁴¹ For instance, Luxenberg's Syriac interpretations frequently ignore the standard usage and structure of Arabic in the Qur'ān. The *Ṣan'ā'* palimpsest, frequently referenced by revisionists, reveals minor textual variants beneath the primary script.

Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi argue that these differences, which are mainly spelling, phrasing, or word order, reflect early scribal practices rather than any doctrinal inconsistency.¹⁴² Moreover, Islamic tradition has long recognized textual variation through the concept of *aḥruf*. As noted in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, the Prophet (PBUH) stated, "Indeed, this Qur'ān has been revealed in seven *aḥruf*, so recite what is easiest for you."¹⁴³ This refers to dialectal differences rather than contradictions and highlights the Qur'ān's intended accessibility.

Therefore, early manuscripts, oral transmission, and scholarly consensus all support the textual stability of the Qur'ān. Claims suggesting textual evolution are speculative and fail to consider the internal consistency and preservation methods within the Islamic tradition.

¹³⁹ Günter Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003).

¹⁴⁰ Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 90–95.

¹⁴¹ Walid Saleh, "The Etymological Fallacy and Qur'anic Studies: A Rejoinder to Luxenberg," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 7, no. 1 (2005): 76–83; Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, 2nd ed. (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 32–34.

¹⁴² Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi, "Ṣan'ā' 1 and the Origins of the Qur'ān," *Der Islam* 87, no. 1 (2012): 1–129.

¹⁴³ *Al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitāb Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān, Ḥadīth no. 4991.*

REVISIONIST METHODOLOGIES AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Revisionist scholars often seek to reconstruct early Islamic history by favoring non-Muslim sources, such as, archaeology, Greco-Roman texts, and comparative linguistics, while downplaying traditional Islamic methods. They frequently overlook internal tools like *isnād* analysis and biographical evaluation, which formed the backbone of Islamic historiography. By applying secular models without accounting for the epistemological framework of Islamic scholarship, their conclusions often rest on selective evidence and speculative reasoning. This section critically assesses the limitations of such methodologies and reaffirms the relevance of classical Islamic methods in historical research.

One major flaw lies in the disregard for the internal epistemology that shaped Islamic scholarship. Early Muslim scholars developed systematic sciences like *‘ilm al-rijāl* (biographical evaluation), *jarḥwata‘dīl* (narrator criticism), and the classification of *ḥadīths* into *mutawātir* and *āḥād*. These were not simply devotional tools but formed a historically grounded framework for authenticating transmitted knowledge.

Re-evaluationist scholars such as Harald Motzki have demonstrated that these internal methods are consistent with core principles of modern historiography. His *isnād-cum-matn* analysis shows that many *ḥadīths* can be reliably traced back to the first Islamic century, directly challenging the revisionist claim that the *ḥadīth* corpus is a late theological development.¹⁴⁴ His method examines both the transmission chain and textual coherence, reflecting a level of analytical rigor often overlooked by revisionist critiques.

Jonathan A.C. Brown also criticizes revisionist approaches for ignoring the interpretive framework through which Muslims

¹⁴⁴ Harald Motzki, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh before the Classical Schools*, trans. Marion H. Katz (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 249–265.

preserved knowledge.¹⁴⁵ By focusing primarily on external elements, such as the absence of non-Muslim corroboration or the late codification of texts, they disregard the internal criteria and scholarly consensus that governed early Islamic historiography.

While tools like archaeology and comparative historiography can provide useful context, their revisionist application tends to favor fragmentary external sources while disregarding the coherent internal mechanisms developed by Muslim scholars. This methodological imbalance often results in speculative and sometimes ideologically motivated conclusions.

TEXTUAL AND SOURCE CRITICISM: CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Revisionist scholars often challenge the authenticity of Islamic texts through textual and source criticism. John Wansbrough contends that the Qur'ān and early Islamic literature are products of extended sectarian development rather than records from the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) own time. He interprets the isnād system as a literary device constructed retrospectively to legitimize evolving theological narratives, not as a genuine historical method.¹⁴⁶ Patricia Crone similarly argues that the diversity found in ḥadīth literature reflects doctrinal fabrication rather than authentic transmission.¹⁴⁷

Such conclusions face significant scholarly critique. Harald Motzki's isnād-cum-matn analysis has shown that many ḥadīths, particularly from early compilations like the Muṣannaf of 'Abd al-Razzāq, can be reliably traced to the first century of Islam, demonstrating both historical continuity and textual reliability.¹⁴⁸ Gregor Schoeler also affirms that both oral and written transmission

¹⁴⁵ Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 91–97.

¹⁴⁶ Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*: 119–121.

¹⁴⁷ Crone, *Slaves on Horses*: 14–16.

¹⁴⁸ Motzki, "The Muṣannaf of 'Abd al-Razzāq: 1–22.

coexisted from the earliest period, contesting the idea that hadith literature was a later literary construction.¹⁴⁹

Jonathan A.C. Brown critiques the revisionist approach for failing to account for the internal epistemological framework that governed Islamic scholarship. He emphasizes that classical scholars employed rigorous tools such as *jarḥ wa taʿdīl*, *ʿilm al-rijāl*, and classifications of *mutawātir* and *āḥād* narrations, not merely as theological categories but as historical instruments for verifying authenticity. He further observes that revisionists tend to privilege non-Muslim or partial external sources, while approaching the systematic transmission sciences of Islam with disproportionate skepticism.¹⁵⁰

Mustafa al-Aʿzamī also highlights the inconsistency of such approaches, pointing out that revisionist scholars dismiss Islamic methods of verification while accepting Greco-Roman sources that lack equivalent scrutiny. He demonstrates that documentation of Hadīth began during the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) own lifetime, as evidenced by early texts such as the *Ṣaḥīfat Hammām ibn Munabbih*.¹⁵¹ Scholars like Fuat Sezgin have also emphasized that the early recording of hadith literature challenges the claim that Islamic texts are later theological constructions.¹⁵²

In conclusion, revisionist methodologies often rest on speculative linguistic interpretations, misreading of manuscript variants, and an externalist lens that fails to engage with the depth and scholarly precision that characterize classical Islamic historiography.

Comparative Analysis and the Question of Qur'ānic Originality

Revisionist scholars often use comparative methods to argue that early Islamic thought developed through ongoing interactions with pre-Islamic Jewish, Christian, and Persian traditions. By pointing out linguistic, conceptual, and thematic similarities, they claim that the

¹⁴⁹ Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written*, 72–75.

¹⁵⁰ Brown, *Hadith*: 85–88.

¹⁵¹ Aʿzamī, *Studies in Early Hadith Literature*: 28–35.

¹⁵² Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*, vol. 1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 55–63.

Qur'ān and Ḥadīth are not unique revelations but products of a wider cultural and religious synthesis.¹⁵³

For example, Christoph Luxenberg provocatively asserts that large parts of the Qur'ān are misinterpreted Arabic texts, actually originating from Syriac Christian liturgical language.¹⁵⁴ Likewise, Patricia Crone suggests that the political and economic structures in early Islam reflect those of late antique Arabian and Persian contexts, indicating that the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) message was influenced more by regional socio-economic factors than prophetic originality.¹⁵⁵ Michael Cook extends this argument by viewing Islamic legal formulations as heavily indebted to Roman provincial codes, implying a process of legal adaptation rather than divine legislation.¹⁵⁶

Comparative methods are further developed by scholars like John Burton and Herbert Berg, who examine structural and thematic similarities between Islamic legal and scriptural traditions and those of Jewish and Christian texts.¹⁵⁷ However, such studies often overlook the internal coherence, theological consistency, and literary distinctiveness of the Qur'ānic message. While comparative analysis can provide useful context, it frequently fails to recognize the Qur'ān's unique doctrine and its clear claim of divine origin.

From within the classical Islamic paradigm, the Qur'ān consistently presents itself as both a confirmation and a rectification of earlier revelations: "It is He who has sent down to you the Book in truth, confirming what came before it" (Q. 3:3). The Qur'ān openly acknowledges its connection to previous scriptures while emphasizing their shared divine source. At the same time, it openly critiques what it identifies as distortions (*tahrīf*) introduced by previous religious

¹⁵³ R. Puin, "Observations on Early Qur'ān Manuscripts in Ṣan'ā'," in *The Qur'ān as Text*, 107–111.

¹⁵⁴ Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading*: 34–37.

¹⁵⁵ Crone, *Roman, Provincial, and Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 15–17.

¹⁵⁶ Michael Cook, *The Origins of Islamic Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁵⁷ John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'ān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 145–151, Herbert Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000) 88–91.

communities: “They distort words from their [proper] places...” (Q. 5:13). Thus, where the New Testament elevates Jesus to divine status, the Qur’ān counters this by declaring: “They have certainly disbelieved who say, ‘God is the Messiah, son of Mary’...” (Q. 5:72), reaffirming his role as a prophet and servant of God.

Fred M. Donner acknowledges that while the Qur’ān reuses certain elements from earlier biblical material, it does so within a distinct theological structure that separates it from both Judaism and Christianity.¹⁵⁸ This understanding is affirmed by the entire body of classical Muslim scholarship, which holds that the Qur’ān references earlier narratives not to borrow from them, but to correct distortions and reaffirm tawḥīd (divine oneness). Exemplifying this view, commentators such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Ibn Kathīr argue that the Qur’ān clarifies theological errors introduced in earlier scriptures and reestablishes the original monotheistic message. Thus, what revisionist scholars often interpret as cultural borrowing is, in the Islamic tradition, seen as divine correction and restoration of previously altered truths.¹⁵⁹

In conclusion, although comparative studies may offer useful context for understanding the late antique religious environment, they often overlook the Qur’ān’s theological autonomy and its deliberate rhetorical strategy. Islamic tradition recognizes a shared Abrahamic background, yet asserts that Islam, through the Qur’ān, reclaims and redefines that heritage in a uniquely divinely revealed articulation of monotheism.

Socio-Political Analysis and Its Critical Evaluation

Revisionist scholars often approach early Islamic texts through a socio-political framework, interpreting the Qur’ān, Ḥadīth, and Sīrah not as theologically anchored sources but as reflections of tribal dynamics, class struggles, and imperial influences in late antique Arabia. Patricia Crone challenges the classical view of Mecca as a

¹⁵⁸ Fred M. Donner, *Narratives*: 115–117.

¹⁵⁹ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 1:141; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Aẓīm*, ed. Sāmī b. Muḥammad al-Salāmah (Riyadh: Dār Ṭayyibah, 1999), 1:69–71.

commercial hub, proposing instead that it held little economic or agricultural significance. This reinterpretation reframes the emergence of Islam, portraying it as a response to shifting material conditions rather than a purely prophetic mission.¹⁶⁰

Fred M. Donner, while recognizing the sincere spiritual impulse of early Muslims, argues that the rise of Islam also involved processes of state formation shaped by tribal cohesion and administrative imperatives.¹⁶¹ Michael Cook advances a similar reading by suggesting that Islamic legal formulations were not solely divine directives but were equally responses to the needs of political governance.¹⁶²

Based on such assumptions, revisionist scholars argue that religious authority, including the prominence of the Quraysh and the evolution of the Caliphate, was shaped through political negotiation. They maintain that the compilation of Ḥadīth and Sīrah literature took place during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods in order to legitimize dominant theological and dynastic positions. John Wansbrough and others claim that isnād traditions were literary devices constructed to authorize sectarian orthodoxies.¹⁶³

However, this perspective often ignores the internal mechanisms of critique and preservation embedded within the Islamic scholarly tradition. As early as the first Islamic century, figures like ʿUrwah ibn al-Zubayr, Saʿīd ibn al-Musayyib, and al-Zuhrī were actively evaluating transmissions, deliberately avoiding politically influenced reports and preserving alternative versions. Later scholars, including Imām al-Bukhārī and Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, established stringent standards for authenticity, rejecting narrations, regardless of their political alignment, if they failed to meet established criteria.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*: 9–12.

¹⁶¹Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

¹⁶²Cook, *The Origins of Islamic Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁶³Wansbrough, *Qurʾānic Studies*: 119–122

¹⁶⁴Al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, ed. Awwāma (Dār al-Mīnāj: Jeddah, 1997), muqaddima, vol. 1, Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, ed. al-Bājī (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2000), muqaddima, vol. 1.

Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalānī stressed the importance of consistency, narrator reliability, and freedom from political bias, establishing an ethical backbone for the science of Ḥadīth.¹⁶⁵ Re-evaluationist scholars such as Harald Motzki and Mustafa al-Aʿzamī confirm that early Ḥadīth critics were fully aware of political influence. Rather than dismiss historical material, they developed refined methods to protect sound reports and filter out unreliable ones.¹⁶⁶

In a nutshell, the early Islamic historiography cannot simply be dismissed as a byproduct of political agendas. Traditional Muslim scholars recognized these influences and responded with methodological rigor, employing standards that surpass those of many other ancient historiographical traditions. The Islamic scholarly enterprise maintained a verification structure rooted in *isnād*, *jarḥwataʿdīl*, and communal cross-examination, offering a principled model for assessing reports over successive generations.

ASSESSING THE REVISIONIST USE OF MATERIAL EVIDENCE IN ISLAMIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

Archaeological and Architectural Claims: Analysis and Reassessment

Revisionist scholars frequently appeal to archaeological data, such as city layouts, religious structures, and early monuments, to argue that Islam arose within the cultural and political continuities of Late Antiquity rather than as a distinctive religious break. Cities like Fustāt and Kūfa are cited by Fred Donner for their administrative patterns that resemble Byzantine and Sasanian models.¹⁶⁷ The Dome of the Rock (691 CE), combining Qurʾānic inscriptions with Greco-Roman

¹⁶⁵ Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb*, ed. Ahmad Shākir (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1984), vol. 1, 34–38.

¹⁶⁶ Motzki, “The Musannaf of ʿAbd al-Razzāq: 1–22; al-Aʿzamī, *Studies in Early Hadith*: 45–60.

¹⁶⁷ Fred M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 84–91.

decorative elements, is interpreted by some as an evolving symbol of identity that had not yet crystallized into a fully Islamic expression.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, the architectural design of early mosques in Syria and Jordan retains pre-Islamic features, prompting claims that early Islamic material culture reflects functional adaptation more than religious originality.

In response, re-evaluationist scholars argue that such continuities are to be expected in a nascent community. Fred Donner himself points out that the adoption of familiar forms does not undermine the Qur'ānic foundation of Islam but rather reflects administrative necessity in a culturally diverse setting.¹⁶⁹ The continued use of regional materials and styles, while developing distinct religious meanings, corresponds with the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) model of gradual transformation. Far from indicating theological dependence, these architectural choices demonstrate the formative and adaptive dynamics of early Islamic society.

Epigraphic Interpretation and Its Limits

Revisionist scholars often highlight early Arabic inscriptions on milestones, buildings, and monuments to argue that Islamic theology developed gradually. Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, for example, note that some early inscriptions omit explicit references to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), interpreting this absence as indicative of an evolving religious identity.¹⁷⁰ The Dome of the Rock, completed in 691 CE, features Qur'ānic inscriptions affirming monotheism but lacks prominent mention of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), which revisionists suggest reflects theological ambiguity.¹⁷¹

However, scholars such as Fred Donner and Robert Hoyland advise caution in interpreting these omissions. Donner points out that

¹⁶⁸ G.R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661–750* (London: Routledge, 2000), 45–48.

¹⁶⁹ Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 105–108.

¹⁷⁰ Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*: 3–32.

¹⁷¹ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, pp. 487–504.

early inscriptions often served administrative or symbolic purposes, and the absence of specific religious figures does not necessarily indicate a lack of reverence.¹⁷² Hoyland observes that by the late 7th century, Qur'ānic phrases and Islamic symbols began to appear in inscriptions, signaling a clear religious identity even as formal codification was ongoing.¹⁷³ Jonathan A.C. Brown critiques the revisionist focus on epigraphic silence, arguing that it overlooks the robust isnād-based transmission traditions that underpin Islamic historiography.¹⁷⁴

Numismatics and Trade Artifact: A Critical Examination

Coins from the Umayyad period are a key focus of revisionist interpretations. Early Islamic coinage-maintained Sasanian and Byzantine imagery until 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān's reforms, which introduced Qur'ānic inscriptions and removed figural representations. Revisionists such as Crone argue that this gradual change in coin design reflects a fluid, regionally diverse Islamic identity still developing in the late 7th century.¹⁷⁵ Pottery and trade-related inscriptions are similarly cited to support claims of cultural continuity with pre-Islamic traditions.

However, re-evaluationist scholars like Fuat Sezgin and Mustafa al-A'zami contend that the retention of older motifs by early Muslim administrations was a strategic choice, not a theological compromise.¹⁷⁶ Coins, alongside inscriptions and architecture, addressed multiple audiences and evolved as Muslim political authority solidified. The inclusion of Qur'ānic verses on currency and the growing uniformity in design by the late 7th century indicate a purposeful move toward a defined Islamic identity, rather than its absence.

¹⁷² Donner, *Narratives*, 80–85.

¹⁷³ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 276–281.

¹⁷⁴ Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*: 123–132.

¹⁷⁵ Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 38–43.

¹⁷⁶ Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 19–24; Mustafa al-A'zami, *Studies in Early Hadith Literature* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1978), 91–102.

The revisionist Methodology, while introducing alternative historical methods, often relies on fragmented sources and external assumptions, overlooking the internal coherence and epistemic depth of Islamic tradition. Its focus on textual skepticism, socio-political reductionism, and comparative borrowing tends to marginalize the disciplined methodologies developed by classical scholars. Tools such as isnād verification, jarḥwataʿdīl, and matn analysis were applied not as blind religious rituals but as historically grounded practices to preserve authenticity. Rather than dismissing Islamic historiography through selective material evidence and speculative critique, a balanced scholarly perspective must consider the intellectual rigor embedded within the Islamic sciences.

CONCLUSION

This study critically evaluated the revisionist approach to the historiography of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), analyzing its key arguments, sources, and methods. It responded by highlighting the depth and integrity of traditional Islamic scholarship, particularly its use of isnād verification, narrator evaluation, and content analysis to preserve historical authenticity.

Revisionist claims, such as the late compilation of the Qurʾān, Ḥadīth, and Sīrah, and their supposed theological or political shaping, were examined in light of re-evaluationist scholarship. Works by Harald Motzki, Mustafa al-Aʿzami, Fuat Sezgin, and Jonathan A.C. Brown demonstrate the methodological sophistication of Islamic historiography and the presence of early documentation practices. Their research challenges the view that Islamic sources are late inventions shaped solely by later sectarian agendas.

While revisionists employ methods like textual criticism, archaeology, and comparative religion, this study has shown that applying such tools without acknowledging the internal mechanisms of Islamic knowledge leads to partial and speculative reconstructions. Ignoring sciences like jarḥwataʿdīl and mutawātir classification underestimates Islamic tradition's built-in safeguards for historical transmission. Uncritical reliance on external frameworks risks

marginalizing the Islamic scholarly legacy. Any credible study of the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) life must take seriously the self-correcting systems embedded in classical Islamic historiography. Traditional methods remain indispensable, not only for religious continuity but also for sound academic inquiry.

In conclusion, this research reaffirms the coherence, methodological rigor, and enduring value of Islamic historiography as a reliable foundation for understanding the life and legacy of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), offering a substantive response to revisionist critiques by grounding historical inquiry in both scholarly integrity and epistemological depth.

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