



## An Analysis of the Main Presuppositions of the Orientalists' Quranic Studies

(with Emphasis on the Orientalists of the United States of America)



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### Abstract

Clarifying and analyzing non-Muslim scholars' presuppositions is one of the most essential topics in Quranic studies. The main Question of current research is what are the main bases or presuppositions of the Orientalists behind their different opinions regarding the Quran, especially its origin, which often causes serious differences in their perceptions with Islamic understanding. This research, with the method of description and critical analysis, and by ignoring topics such as the adaptation of the Quran from other religions and cultures, or being influenced by contemporary culture and the like, has highlighted the main and hidden presuppositions behind the Orientalists' works. In fact, the most important and basic presuppositions of Orientalists, in Islamic Studies in general and Quranic studies in particular, are the following: Seeing Quran as non-revealed or as human text; refuting the prophethood and mission of Prophet Muhammad; considering Islam as an ethnic religion; regarding the Islamic narrative about the history of Islam and the Quran as invalid.

**Keywords:** The Quran, Orientalists Quranic studies, the revelation of the Quran, Prophethood and Orientalists, Presuppositions of Orientalists.

### Introduction

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Before entering the process of understanding any text, there are issues that we must take a specific position on. Because this particular position is effective in our understanding of the text and is logically prior to it, and in fact, it is considered the basis of correct understanding of the text. This discussion becomes more important on religious texts because the position and perspective of the reader of religious texts, especially about the source and origin of the text, type of subject and its language, audience, and the purpose of the text are very decisive and lead to different results in understanding the text. One of the most important positions that the reader of religious texts must adopt is the discussion of his/her main bases and presuppositions regarding the text.

As the last and most complete message of God's guidance for mankind, the Holy Quran fulfills its essential role, i.e. guidance and salvation, when it is correctly and accurately understood. Therefore, the correct understanding of the Quran from the Islamic point of view has certain foundations, accepted by all Islamic sects, which are referred to as the bases of understanding the Quran, and doubting any of these foundations undermines the validity of the Quran and would disturb its correct understanding.

The presuppositions of the Orientalists' Quranic studies in this research refer to the origination foundations (*mabānī ṣudūrī*) which speak of the basic beliefs about the identity and origin of the Quran or according to the Orientalists its author, and the quality of its collection and codification, which according to this research are completely different from the accepted foundations of Muslim thinkers.

In search of the presuppositions of Orientalists in Quranic studies, one encounters several titles such as the foundations of Quranic studies (See: Rezaei Isfahani 2013: 8 (15): editor's note), sources of the Quran (See: Zamānī 2006: 256-126; Rizvan 1992, 1: 239-367) and so on, which are not clear enough and show a kind of confusion. On the basics of Quranic studies by Orientalists, we are faced with two categories: One is their main and primary foundations, which are usually hidden behind the topics



discussed without any clarification; the other is the hypotheses or ideas that Orientalists present as the result of their so-called scientific studies, under the titles of origins or sources of the Quran. In fact, considering the Quran as a non-revealed text, refuting the prophethood and mission of Prophet Muhammad, considering Islam as a special ethnic religion, and invalidating the Islamic narrations about the early history of Islam and the Holy Quran are the most basic foundations of the Quranic studies of orientalist, which paves the way for adopting other alternative origins for the Quran, such as being the product of the Prophet's genius, an adaptation of other religions and cultures, and so on. In this research, some of these foundations are explained and analysed.

### 1. Non-divinity of the Quran

In understanding the Quran, the first important thing is the basis and presupposition we use to understand it. Do we understand it as a human work, which its author composed in a certain time, place, and cultural environment, or according to the true belief of Muslims, or approach the Quran as a divinely-revealed text whose source is a unique, perfect, spaceless and All-Knowing existence?

Most orientalist encounter the Quran as a non-divine or as a human text, which is the product of the Prophet or Islamic community in a long historical process, at least two centuries (See: Ali 2004: 2-3). James A. Bellamy<sup>1</sup> states that "Non-Muslim Koranic scholars agree that Muhammad, in one way or another, composed the Koran, so they tend to lay all the problems of the text at his doorstep..." (Bellamy 1996, Vol. 116, No. 2: 203). Michael Sells<sup>2</sup> explains in more detail that there are at least three views in the West about the authorship of the Quran. The first belongs to past Orientalists who considered the Quran to be the personal authorship of the Prophet. The second, which is new and flourishing, is

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<sup>1</sup>. James A. Bellamy (1925 –2015)

<sup>2</sup>. Michael Anthony Sells (1949-)



focused on the textuality of the Quran and its sacredness among Muslims, which Muslims believe was revealed in the seventh century; This group does not have a tendency to specify the author of the text. The third one, which belongs to the skeptics, considers the process of the Quran's creation and canonization in Islamic society beyond and longer than the life of a particular person, so it cannot be the product of one or more specific people (See: Sells 2001: 4-5). Wansbrough<sup>1</sup> claims that the literary tradition of the Quran is familiar with Judeo-Christian scripture, but not in the form of mere rewriting, and finally, he states, "... all suggest a strongly sectarian atmosphere, in which a corpus of familiar scripture was being pressed into the service of as yet unfamiliar doctrine" (Wansbrough 2004: 20; also see: pp. 50-51).

In fact, all of these claims, including the introduction of the Prophet as the author of the Quran, considering the Quran as a product of a monotheistic society, or adopting from other traditions and sources, are all in order to defend that main presupposition, that is, the non-divinity of the Quran (See: Ibdāh2011: 175-176).

### **Analysis**

1. One of the most important bases for understanding the Quran among Muslims, which has been proven in its place is its Divinely- revealed nature in its words and content. The result of accepting this foundation is that even the words of the Quran are treated as Allah's direct words and, as such, its text lacks any errors in words and meaning (Rashād 2010: 283-283). But the majority of Orientalists have accepted the non-revelation of the Quran, as their presupposition, and this false base forces them to create various unreal sources for the words of Allah, such as the social genius of the Prophet, adaptation, either from the culture of the time or from the traditions and sources of other religions of that period. Recently, they have tended to attractive but unrealistic titles such as apostolic dream or

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<sup>1</sup>. John Edward Wansbrough (1928 –2002)



religious experience (See: Ghanbarī Şafarī Kūchī 2016: 288-417).

This disparity of opinions first indicates the inauthenticity of these alternative sources, and secondly, points to the truth that their unspoken basis, i.e., the non-revelation of the Quran, is the main cause of all these baseless ideas. Clearly, instead of commitment to their scientific method of “not having a presupposition,” most of them in Islamic studies have the presupposition that “the Quran and Islamic teachings are not divine and revealed and are man-made,” and base all their analyses on this false presupposition (Zamānī 2006, 95).

2. The adaptation: attempting to explain the supposed Jewish or Christian origins of the Islamic religion and, accordingly, the Holy Quran, is a lasting legacy of orientalists' Quranic studies of the early 20th century, which has somehow continued until the present day. Although only a few would today claim either that Islam came into being in a predominantly Christian environment or that its foundations are predominantly Jewish, the research carried out in order to support these assertions did indeed produce much evidence for the actual relationship between the monotheistic faiths (Schöller 2004, 4:195). However, some of them still insist on the idea of adaptation (*iqtibās*) which has been criticized many times by Muslim thinkers and its invalidity has been proven (Rezaei Esfahani 2010, 175-194; Ma'ārif, and et al. 2011: 117-140). In fact, there is no historical evidence for adaptation and its implementation, because according to the Orientalists themselves, there is no evidence that all or part of the Torah and the Gospel were translated into Arabic in the era of the rise of Islam (Bowering 2001, 1: 316), and the Prophet was not familiar with the Hebrew language. In fact, the Prophet did not read any text, and there is not any historical account of numerous and detailed meetings between the Prophet and Christian priests and Jewish rabbis, especially in the Meccan period, when 85 Suras of the Quran were revealed in this period (Naşīrī and Mudabbir 2013: 142-127). This reality caused the proponents of this idea to focus on adapting oral sources to prove their hypothesis. But facts such as the sublime teachings of the Quran, clear and



fundamental distinctions between the Bible and the Quran in terms of monotheism, prophethood, scientific and rational discussions, as well as the Quran's admonition of the People of the Book for some of their beliefs, invalidate the notion of adaptation.

3. Another criticism of the Orientalists' point of view regarding the sources or origins of the Quran is their disagreement in this field. In fact, these various and scattered accusations have been raised from the very beginning of Islam by the opponents of this divine religion, which Allah in verse, has interpreted as “*marīj*” which means a (confused state): ﴿بَلْ: كَذَّبُوا بِالْحَقِّ لَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ فَهُمْ فِي أَمْرٍ مَرِجٍ﴾ “Nay, they rejected the truth when it came to them, so they are (now) in a state of confusion”(Quran 45: 5). “*Marīj*” means confused and perplexed, and the reason for describing them with this attribute is the lack of stability in their opinion (cf. Ṭabrisī 1993, 9: 212). This situation, nowadays, is observed among Orientalists; Gerald Hawting in his article “Pre-Islamic Arabia and the Qurān,” while enumerating the different opinions about the rise of Islam, acknowledges the existence of this scattering opinions (See: Hawting 2004, 4: 253-261).

## 2. Refuting the Prophethood and Mission of the Prophet Muhammad

The recognition and introduction of the Prophet in the West is one of the strange and yet tragic issues. This issue is well understood from the titles used by the West for the Prophet in different historical periods. Orientalists, insisting on their main basis, i.e. refuting the prophethood of Prophet Muhammad, have used various tricks to depict an unreal character of the Prophet, which John Tolan considers it surprising and even confusing for today's readers (Tolan 2019: 260). He has depicted the Western visualization of the Prophet from the twelfth century until the early twenty-first century very well. He states that, at first, the Crusaders introduced the Prophet as “Mahomet” as a golden idol that was overthrown by the righteous Crusaders (ibid, chapter 1: Mahomet the Idol); later, by the dominance of polemical current (*jaryān-i jadalī*), the Prophet is introduced as the leader of heretics and apostates (ibid, Ch., 2: Trickster

and Heresiarch). And in the next stage, the alternative title of the “false prophet” is promoted to depict the character of that prophet (ibid, Ch., 3: Pseudo prophet of the Moors). During the Western war against the Ottoman Turks, the title of the “Prophet of the Turks” is replaced (ibid, Ch., 4: Prophet of the Turks).

Then, With the beginning of the Enlightenment, in line with the goals of the Enlightenment movement, the Prophet is imagined as a reformer and legislator, whose aim is to reform his society (ibid, Ch., 6: The Enlightenment Prophet). At the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century, with the dominance of Romanticism, titles such as legislator, politician, and hero, replaced his real name, that is, the final prophet of God (ibid, Ch., 7: The Romantics' prophet). Finally, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, a movement emerged among Western thinkers who somehow sought a positive view of the divine role of Prophet Muhammad in God's overall plan to guide mankind, and they were forced to acknowledge his prophethood. Of course, this recognition is not in accordance with the reality and the Islamic perspective, which is based on his global mission and finality; Rather, he has been regarded as a prophet of one of the branches of the Abrahamic religions, which is specific to a certain group of people, mostly Arabs (ibid, Ch., 9: Prophet of an Abrahamic Faith).

### **Analysis**

Unfortunately, most of the above-mentioned titles in the West's attitude towards the Prophet existed in some way in the contemporary period. Denigrating and distortion of the Prophet's real personality is a key element in the propaganda of a number of evangelical movements and the Protestant sect against Islam and Muslim immigrants, in the United States and Europe (ibid, 260).

In addition, the most important critique of Orientalists' prophetology emerges from their various and contradictory descriptions of the Prophet. Because the output of these descriptions, as well as their historical course, clearly shows that the recognition and introduction of the Prophet in the



West has never been realistic and truth-seeking. Rather, it has been continuously subordinated to the West's view and interaction with the world, such as competition with the Islamic world, and internal issues of the Western society, and as a result, they made a polemical use of the personality of the Prophet and the teachings of Islam. In fact, there is a false intention in most of their praiseworthy descriptions, because behind the mask of these descriptions, they deny or neglect the reality that Prophet Muhammad is the messenger of God (Ibdāh 2011, 178-179).

According to Karl Ernst, the secret of this negative and narrow-minded attitude of Westerners toward Islam is that, in Europe and America, Islam is still viewed with the same stubborn views of the colonial era, which is often accompanied by almost complete oblivion of colonial history (Ernest 2011, 221). That is, the West has forgotten the history of colonialism, but the attitude of that period towards Islam and Muslims still remains.

### **3. Islam as an ethnic religion (Quran as the scripture of certain people)**

Some Western researchers have tried to introduce Islam and the Prophet sympathetically. Persons like William Montgomery Watt, Mrs. Annemarie Schimmel, Henry Corbin, Mrs. McAuliffe, Mrs. Armstrong, and Mr. Carl W. Ernest can be mentioned in this group. But even from their point of view, the Prophet is finally considered as one of the Jewish prophets, who belonged to a specific period and for a specific people, and as a result, the Quran is also considered divinely inspired, in its Western context, not Revelation. William Montgomery Watt (d. 2006) in his most fair view, believes that the Quran is a divine inspiration, but for a specific time and place, so its rulings are also valid for that society (Sa'īd 2018, 154). Carl Ernst is one of the researchers who try to draw a logical picture of Islam in the West; In his book "*Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*," while defending Islam as a whole by differentiating between the real Islam and the practices of some movements attributed to Islam. His explicit statement about the prophethood of Prophet Muhammad is to compare the Prophet's situation in Medina and his rule with the position of Samuel among the Children of



Israel (Ernest 2011, 110).

Karen Armstrong, although, uses words such as the revelation of the Quran and prophethood of Muhammad, but an obvious attempt is seen in her expression to reduce the revelation to the Prophet to a normal inspiration or religious experience, the type of inspiration may happen to a poet or a thinker and genius, too. She continued that even if we consider this inspiration as divine, still the mission of Muhammad was specific to the Arabs because other peoples had their own religion and scripture and it was only Arabs who did not have a prophet and a book (Armstrong 2010: 123-129). As a result, the Quran is also a sacred text revealed to the Arabs only (Armstrong 2016: 13). without evidence, she claims that Islam was only considered an Arabic religion until one hundred years after the Prophet's death. Hence, she doubts the reality and historical authenticity of the letters of the Prophet to the leaders of the world and their invitation to Islam (ibid, 330).

### Analysis

This group can be seen as the most obvious example of the Quranic verse that condemns a person for claiming to believe in a part of the Book and disbelieving in others. «... أ فَتُؤْمِنُونَ بِبَعْضِ الْكِتَابِ وَ تَكْفُرُونَ بِبَعْضٍ...»: “Do you then believe in a part of the Book and disbelieve in the other?” (*Sūra al-Baqarah/85*). If it is proved that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah, even as they claim the prophet of a specific group of people, and the Quran is also a divine text claimed by the same prophet, then the statements of the prophet and his book should be accounted as God's real words. And we know that one of the clarifications of the Quran is that its invitation scope is not limited to specific audiences or its contemporaries, but includes all human beings, at any time and place. God says in the first verse of *Sūrat al-Furqān*: «تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي نَزَّلَ الْفُرْقَانَ عَلَى عَبْدِهِ لِيَكُونَ لِلْعَالَمِينَ نَذِيرًا»: “Blessed is He Who sent down the Furqan [Criterion] upon His servant that he may be a warner to all the nations.” This verse specifies that the Prophet was a messenger to the world (Ṭabātabā'ī 1970, 15: 173-174). Imam Sadiq also says: “God did not reveal the Quran for a specific time or people;



Therefore, the Quran is fresh and new in every era and for every nation until the Day of Judgment”<sup>1</sup> (Ibn Babawayh 1999, 2: 87, hadith 32).

#### 4. Invalidity of the Islamic hadiths about the revelation and compilation of the Quran

Among other dominant presuppositions of late orientalists, especially since Ignác Goldziher and Joseph Schacht, is the lack of validity and reliability of the Islamic view on the history of revelation, collection, and compilation of the Quran. Before the emergence of these skeptics, most Western researchers, challenging the validity of some aspects of the Islamic hadiths about the Quran, considered its entirety valid. Then, in the second half of the 20th century, Wansbrough<sup>2</sup> once again renewed the skepticism about the sources of the early Islam, especially the Islamic hadiths about the compilation and canonization of the Quran. He claims that most of the Islamic narrations and works related to the collection of the Quran were composed [forged] during the second century of Hijri (Sa’id 2018: 79-80). Wansbrough, doubting the validity of Islamic sources, considered the Quran as a literary text that is a continuation of the tradition of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and a completely man-made product (ibid, 80). He considers the traditional Muslim hadiths on the Quran as Islamic “salvation history” that was created and elaborated by the later Muslims in the Umayyad period (132-41 AH) (Wansbrough 2004 43-50, 202). Crone<sup>3</sup> and Cook,<sup>4</sup> Wansbrough’s students, also in the book “*Hagarism*” claimed that the beginning of the codification of the Quran was during the rule of Hajjāj in Iraq, around 85 AH (Crone and

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١. «إِنَّ رَجُلًا سَأَلَ أَبَاعَبِدَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ: مَا بَالُ الْقُرْآنِ لَا يَزِيدُ عَلَيَّ النَّشْرِ وَالْدِّرَاسَةِ إِلَّا غَضَاضَةً؟ فَقَالَ: لِأَنَّ اللَّهَ تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى لَمْ يَنْزِلْهُ لِرَمَانٍ دُونَ زَمَانٍ، وَلَا لِأَنَاسٍ دُونَ نَاسٍ، فَهُوَ فِي كُلِّ زَمَانٍ جَدِيدٌ، وَعِنْدَ كُلِّ قَوْمٍ غَضٌّ إِلَى يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ» (ابن بابويه قمي، عيون أخبار الرضا، ج 2، ص 87، ح 32).

<sup>1</sup>. John Wansbrough (1928-2002)

<sup>2</sup>. Patricia Crone (1945-2015)

<sup>3</sup>. Michael Cook (1940-)



Cook 1977, 18).

Unfortunately, these types of doubts about the Islamic narrations on the history of the Quran are common even among moderate Quran scholars. Fred Donner claims:

Muslim tradition, of course, provides great detail on the presumed historical context in which the Quran appeared ... but it is deemed wanting by most Western scholars for at least two reasons. One is because it is a literary tradition of later – sometimes much later- date, and hence likely contains much anachronistic and idealizing material. The second reason the traditional origins story has been problematic for Western scholars is because of the way it presents Muhammad's, and the Qur'an's, relationship to Judaism and Christianity. For, in the traditional origins narrative, Jews are presented as hostile to Muhammad, certainly not a source of inspiration to him, and Christians are entirely absent from the context in which Muhammad lived and worked. One gets the sense that the tradition is not presenting us with an accurate picture of Muhammad's relations with the earlier monotheisms .... (Donner 2011, 26)

Recently, some of them, rejecting the Islamic hadiths, consider the origin of the Quran as a secret and its creation as one of the most enduring mysteries of late antiquity and claim understanding of the Quran based on its historical context and conditions, rather than through history and the definition provided by (very) late collective memory of Islamic tradition (See: Shoemaker 2022: Introduction). Jane D. McAuliffe has also pictured these disagreements among Orientalists on the origin of the Quran and its compilation (See: McAuliffe 1991: 24-26).

### **Analysis**

Western Scholars have a serious disagreement regarding the validity of early Islamic sources on the emergence of Islam and the formation of the Quran. Some, like Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren, talk about two main approaches, i.e. the traditional approach and the revisionist approach (See: Nevo, and Koren 1991: 87-107). The source of the problem is believing in



the myth of the oral transmission of the Islamic tradition over a long period of time; Patricia Crone states “Muslim knowledge of the Muslim past was transmitted orally for about a century and a half” (Crone 2003, 3); “The religious tradition of Islam is thus a monument to the destruction rather than the preservation of the past” (ibid, 7). But this presupposition has been seriously criticized by other Scholars, and the theory of the development of oral and written transmission simultaneously is closer to reality. Thus, the view of skeptics is too scanty to provide a credible alternative vision against the Islamic one (See: Hoyland 2012: 1056). The noteworthy point in this matter is the interference of politics and religion and the influence of the political issues and positions of the Orientalists in their view of Islam (See: ibid: 1056-1057).

In addition to the Islamic tradition, many Orientalists also insist on the early compilation of the Quran; for example, among many, we can mention John Burton, Fred McGraw Donner, Estelle Whelan, and so on (See: Donner 1998: 60-63). Schoeler points out, “The fact, however, that within the Koran itself, the term *kitāb* began to be used in increasing measure to describe the sum total of the revelation, effectively replacing the term *Qur’ān*, shows that the idea of a scripture, in book form, like those possessed by the ‘people of the book,’ namely a lectionary, gained more and more prominence” (Schoeler 2010: 200).

## **Conclusion**

In discussing the bases or presuppositions of Orientalists in Quranic studies, especially on the origin and source of the Quran, we witness multiple alternative sources such as the Prophet’s genius, adaptation and influence from other traditions, revelation as religious experience, and so on. This research, ignoring these cases, mentioned and analyzed four main presuppositions. Examining these presuppositions makes it clear that the main problem of most Western scholars in Islamic studies, in General, and Quranic studies, in particular, can be found in two points; First, their studies and researches, despite claiming realism without presuppositions, are based on presuppositions such as the non-divinity of the Quran,

unreality of prophethood of Prophet Muhammad and invalidity of the Islamic hadiths on revelation and collection of the Quran and the emergence of Islam. Second, their studies and judgments about the nature of Islam have been constantly affected by the internal and external intellectual-social status of Western societies and the quality of their interaction with other cultures, as well as influenced by the hegemony of the scientific-intellectual paradigms in Western scientific societies; hence, except for very few cases, their research hardly could have counted as a fair knowledge of Islam and the Quran.

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