



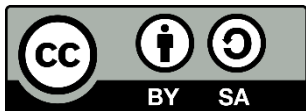
Verstehen: Journal of
Qur'anic Studies and
Exegesis

p-ISSN : xxxxxxxx

e-ISSN : xxxxxxxx

Vol. 01, No. 1 (June
2026), p. 41-66

DOI : xxxxxxxxxx



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ANGELIKA NEUWIRTH'S PRE-CANONICAL READING: Implication for Qur'anic Studies

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Abstract: This study examines the pre-canonical reading approach in Qur'anic studies, addressing the tendency of scholarship to focus exclusively on the finalized *mushaf* while neglecting the revelatory process of prophetic communication. Angelika Neuwirth's framework offers a new perspective by viewing the Qur'an not as a static text but as a dynamic process of growth. Through structural analysis, each surah is interpreted as part of a sequential episode of revelation, shaped by and responding to preceding surahs. Intertextual analysis further reveals the Qur'an's dialogue with earlier Jewish and Christian traditions. Using a qualitative library-based method, this study reviews Neuwirth's major works to analyze the theoretical foundations and assess the relevance of pre-canonical reading. This study aims to analyze the theoretical and methodological foundations of pre-canonical reading and to assess its relevance within Qur'anic studies. The findings demonstrate that this approach uncovers the Qur'an as a gradually developing discourse, responsive to shifting social, political, and theological contexts, while affirming its autonomy as a text engaged in interreligious dialogue. Consequently, pre-canonical reading contributes to situating the Qur'an within its historical milieu and enriches our understanding of the formation of early Muslim communal identity.

Keywords: Pre-Canonical Reading, Qur'anic Studies, Angelika Neuwirth, Intertextuality, Revelation History

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji pendekatan pembacaan pra-kanonik (pre-canonical reading) dalam studi Al-Qur'an dengan menyoroti kecenderungan para sarjana yang hanya berfokus pada mushaf yang telah final, sementara mengabaikan proses pewahyuan sebagai bentuk komunikasi kenabian. Kerangka pemikiran Angelika Neuwirth menawarkan perspektif baru dengan memandang Al-Qur'an bukan sebagai teks yang statis, melainkan sebagai proses perkembangan yang dinamis. Melalui analisis struktural, setiap surah ditafsirkan sebagai bagian dari rangkaian episode pewahyuan yang berurutan, yang dibentuk oleh dan sekaligus merespons surah-surah sebelumnya. Analisis intertekstual lebih lanjut mengungkap dialog Al-Qur'an dengan tradisi Yahudi dan Kristen yang lebih awal. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan, penelitian ini menelaah karya-karya utama Neuwirth untuk menganalisis landasan teoretis serta menilai relevansi pendekatan pembacaan pra-kanonik. Penelitian ini juga bertujuan untuk mengkaji dasar-dasar teoretis dan metodologis pembacaan prakanonik serta menilai relevansinya dalam studi Al-Qur'an. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan ini mampu mengungkap Al-Qur'an sebagai wacana yang berkembang secara bertahap dan responsif terhadap perubahan konteks sosial, politik, dan teologis, sekaligus menegaskan otonominya sebagai teks yang terlibat dalam dialog antaragama. Oleh karena itu, pembacaan pra-kanonik memberikan kontribusi penting dalam menempatkan Al-Qur'an dalam konteks historis kemunculannya serta memperkaya pemahaman mengenai pembentukan identitas komunitas Muslim awal.

Kata Kunci: Pre-Canonical Reading (Pembacaan Pra-Kanonik), Studi Al-Qur'an, Angelika Neuwirth, Intertekstualitas, Sejarah Pewahyuan

Introduction

In recent years, Qur'anic studies and their interpretation have developed significantly, both in terms of the increasing number of publications and the diversity of approaches employed by researchers. Qur'anic studies are often regarded as "*the crown of Islamic studies*," since the Qur'an represents the earliest written document accompanying the emergence of Islam in historical records. For historians of early Islam, the Qur'an functions not only as a religious text but also as an important historical source that reflects the formative period of the Muslim community.¹ This growing academic attention demonstrates the continued relevance of the Qur'an in shaping both religious understanding and scholarly discourse.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Western scholarship on Qur'anic studies was dominated by skeptical, apologetic, and polemical approaches. At that time, the main focus of research was the historical-critical reading of the Qur'an, particularly concerning the origins of ideas within the text.² One of the earliest in this development was the work of Abraham Geiger (1810-1874), entitled *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judentum aufgenommen?* (*What Did Muhammad Borrow from Judaism?*), Published in 1833. Geiger's study marked an important moment in the emergence of modern Qur'anic studies in the West by highlighting the relationship between the Qur'an and Jewish traditions.³ His work emerged within the intellectual movement known as *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, a nineteenth-century German Jewish scholarly movement that sought to historicize Jewish religious traditions.⁴

However, Geiger's approach tended to emphasize the dependency of the Qur'an on earlier religious traditions. His argument suggested that the Prophet Muhammad adopted elements from Jewish teachings in constructing the Qur'anic message. Because some Qur'anic narratives differ from Jewish traditions, the Qur'an was often viewed as a text that misunderstood these earlier traditions. Although Geiger's work is considered pioneering, its epistemological framework narrowed the scope of Qur'anic studies by neglecting the complex processes involved in the formation of the Qur'anic text and by failing to

¹ Mun'im Sirry, *New Trends in Quranic Studies: Text, Context, and Interpretation* (Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2019), 1.

² Angelika Neuwirth, *Qur'anic Studies Today* (London: Routledge, 2016), 179.

³ Stefan Wild, *The Qur'ān as Text* (London: E.J. Brill, 1996), vii.

⁴ Jacob Lassner, "Abraham Geiger: A Nineteenth-Century Jewish Reformer on the Origins of Islam," in *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center, 1999), 103.

recognize the Qur'an as an independent text presenting its own theological paradigm.⁵

In contrast to Geiger's focus on external influences, other scholars began to examine the chronological development of Qur'anic revelation. Gustav Weil, in seiner *historisch-kritischen Einleitung in den Koran* (1844).⁶ The approach notes the existence of a development in the classification of the Meccan period, which he divides into the first, second, and third Meccan phases. Thematic and literary characteristics are used to distinguish these groupings, along with considerations regarding the prophetic career of Muhammad and the development of the Muslim community.⁷

The division of Meccan revelation into three periods was later developed more systematically by Theodor Nöldeke in his influential book *Geschichte des Qorāns* (1860). According to this approach, the Qur'anic revelations are categorized into four main periods: early Meccan, middle Meccan, late Meccan, and Medinan. The transitions between these periods are associated with significant events in early Islamic history, such as the migration to Abyssinia around 615 CE, the Prophet's return from Ṭā'if around 620 CE, and the Hijrah to Medina in 622 CE.⁸

Nöldeke's method relies heavily on philological and historical analysis to reconstruct the development of the Qur'anic text. Angelika Neuwirth described this approach as a form of textual archaeology that attempts to uncover earlier layers of the Qur'an. Nevertheless, this chronological approach still tended to treat the Qur'an primarily as a textual artifact rather than as a dynamic process of communication between the Prophet Muhammad and his audience. Later additions or narrative developments in the Qur'an were often regarded merely as disturbances to earlier textual layers rather than as active dialogues responding to changing circumstances.⁹

More radical perspectives emerged in the works of revisionist scholars such as John Wansbrough. In *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, Fred Donner outlines the views of John Wansbrough as presented in his two major books published in 1977 and 1978. According to Wansbrough, as cited by Donner, the Qur'an was not actually codified as a closed canon until around 250 years later. This process, as Wansbrough argues, took place within a

⁵ Angelika Neuwirth, "Orientalism in Oriental Studies? Qur'ānic Studies as a Case in Point," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 9, no. 2 (2007): 120–21.

⁶ Stefanidis Emmanuelle, "The Qur'an Made Linear: A Study of the Geschichte Des Qorāns' Chronological Reordering," *Journal of Quranic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2008): 1–22.

⁷ Andrew Rippin, "Academic Scholarship and the Qur'an," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2020), 56.

⁸ Taufik Adnan Amal, *Rekonstruksi Sejarah Al-Qur'an* (Jakarta: Yayasan Abad Demokratis, 2011), 117.

⁹ Neuwirth, "Orientalism in Oriental Studies? Qur'ānic Studies as a Case in Point," 120.

"sectarian milieu" characterized by intense monotheistic polemics and possibly located in southern Iraq.¹⁰ This view is similar to other scholars, such as Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, who proposed the *late dating theory*, suggesting that the Qur'an was compiled long after the death of the Prophet.

According to them, the Qur'an is the product of a long process of compilation that was only completed after the Muslim community had become firmly established. Furthermore, Crone and Cook argued that the Prophet Muhammad was not the founder of a new religion but rather preached the teachings of the Old Testament.¹¹ As a continuation of the views of John Wansbrough, several revisionist scholars such as Günter Lüling and Christoph Luxenberg developed approaches that emphasize the linguistic origins of the Qur'an within the Syriac-Christian tradition. These approaches attempt to trace possible influences of Syro-Aramaic linguistic elements in the formation of the Qur'anic text. However, the strong emphasis on external factors often overlooks the internal dynamics of the Qur'anic discourse itself.

Although these revisionist approaches contributed to expanding the scope of Qur'anic studies, they often placed excessive emphasis on identifying external influences while neglecting the internal dynamics of the Qur'anic text itself. Many of these studies focused primarily on *what is behind the text*, namely, external traditions such as Jewish and Christian sources,¹² rather than examining how the Qur'an actively engages with and responds to these traditions.¹³

As a result, the Qur'an was frequently treated as a derivative text rather than as an independent discourse that critically interacts with earlier religious narratives. In response to these limitations, Angelika Neuwirth proposed a new methodological framework known as the pre-canonical reading of the Qur'an. This approach aims to understand the Qur'an not merely as a finalized canonical text preserved in the *mushaf*, but as a record of an ongoing communicative process that unfolded during the prophetic period.

This study focuses on the pre-canonical reading approach developed by Angelika Neuwirth and examines its relevance in Qur'anic studies. It aims to analyze the theoretical and methodological foundations of pre-canonical reading in understanding the Qur'an as a historical and dynamic process of communication, as well as to assess its contribution to uncovering the structural,

¹⁰ Fred Donner, "Reflections on the History and Evolution of Western Study of the Qur'an, from ca. 1900 to the Present," in *New Trends in Qur'anic Studies* (Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2019), in Sirry, *New Trends in Quranic Studies*, 32.

¹¹ Angelika Neuwirth, "Qur'an and History: A Disputed Relationship Some Reflections on Qur'anic History and History in the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2003): 4–6.

¹² Yusuf Rahman, "Tren Kajian Al-Qur'an Di Dunia Barat," *Jurnal Studia Insania* 1, no. 1 (2013): 2.

¹³ Lien Iffah Naf'atu Fina, "Survei Awal Studi Perbandingan Al-Qur'an Dan Bibel Dalam Kesarjanaan Barat Sebuah Perjalanan Menuju Intertekstualitas," *Jurnal Suhuf* 2, no. 1 (2015): 130.

intratextual, and intertextual dimensions of the Qur'an within the context of the emergence of the early Muslim community. This research employs a qualitative library-based research method with a historical approach. The primary sources consist of the works of Angelika Neuwirth, while secondary sources include studies related to Qur'anic intertextuality and historical analysis of the Qur'an. Data were collected through textual analysis of Neuwirth's major works, including studies on Qur'anic chronology, intertextuality, and revelation history. The data were then interpreted using descriptive-analytical methods to identify the conceptual structure and methodological implications of pre-canonical reading. Accordingly, this study seeks to address the following research question: *What contributions does this approach make to contemporary Qur'anic studies?*

Pre-Canonical Reading: A Microstructural Analysis of Surahs and Intertextuality

The relationship between the Qur'an and history currently occupies a central position in Qur'anic studies. Controversy about the Qur'an should be regarded as an authentic document of the Prophet's communication with his audience, or rather as a later compilation of diverse traditions originating from sectarian monotheistic milieus. This controversy has prompted scholars to articulate their respective perspectives.¹⁴

Debates concerning the historical value of the Qur'an thus hold a prominent place in scholarly discussions. Maxime Rodinson, a French historian well known for his biographical studies of the Prophet, adopted a skeptical stance toward the narrative of the Prophet Muhammad as presented in the *sīrah* literature. Rodinson sought to situate the life of the Prophet Muhammad within the social framework of his time. He emphasized the importance of analyzing the emergence of Islam from a socio-economic perspective rather than from a supernatural dimension that is difficult to explain rationally. Although Rodinson expressed doubts regarding traditional Islamic sources, he nonetheless firmly asserted that "the Qur'an provides a solid foundation whose authenticity cannot be doubted."¹⁵

Thus, despite his skepticism toward the *sīrah*, Rodinson continued to regard the Qur'an as an authentic historical source. Nevertheless, the view that treats

¹⁴ Neuwirth, "Qur'an and History: A Disputed Relationship Some Reflections on Qur'anic History and History in the Qur'an," 1.

¹⁵ "Must one then give up in despair? Must one abandon all thought of a biography, and even, as one Soviet author has done, speak of a "myth" of Mohammed? I do not think so. We still have the text of the Koran. It is very hard to use, being generally extremely enigmatic, and requiring lengthy labours to get it into chronological order (which remains uncertain) but it does provide a firm basis of undoubted authenticity," See, Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Book, 1971), xi.

the Qur'an as a reliable historical source has been questioned by several other scholars. They argue that the Qur'an does not contain sufficiently clear information concerning specific historical events, particularly those related to the biography of the Prophet Muhammad. Instead, the text refers more frequently to narratives drawn from the Bible than to concrete details about the Prophet's life.¹⁶

This position is reflected in the statement of Andrew Rippin, who contends that the Qur'an cannot be regarded as a primary document for reconstructing the life of the Prophet Muhammad. This perspective cannot be separated from the influence of Rippin's teacher, John Wansbrough, who assumed that the Qur'an is a text whose origins emerged *after*, rather than concurrently with, the formation of the early Islamic community. Wansbrough argued that the Qur'an was produced within a "strongly sectarian atmosphere," namely a context of Jewish-Christian polemics in the Mesopotamian region.¹⁷

The approach employed by Wansbrough in his analysis of the Qur'an was grounded in the ideas of Rudolf Bultmann concerning the demythologization of sacred scripture. Bultmann, a theologian, argued that the Gospel narratives of Jesus' life are mythological constructions that were meaningful to the people of their time. Wansbrough adopted this framework in his understanding of the Qur'an, asserting that narratives concerning the life and mission of the Prophet Muhammad were likewise composed in a mythological narrative form. By applying this model to the Qur'an, John Wansbrough advanced historical criticism to a radical level by treating the Qur'an as a collection of texts compiled only at a much later stage. From this perspective, Wansbrough rejected any historical framework that situates the Qur'an within the lived reality of the early Muslim community in Mecca and Medina.¹⁸

According to Islamic tradition, Prophet Muhammad was born around 570 CE, began his public preaching in Mecca in 610 CE, migrated (hijrah) to Medina in 622 CE, and died ten years later, in 632 CE, after successfully spreading his message throughout much of the Arabian Peninsula. How could a message addressed to polytheists in Arabia develop into a new religion within only twenty-two years? How could a sacred scripture be established and codified so soon after the death of its bearer and nevertheless survive in an authentic form until the present day? Such questions prompted Western scholars to formulate various hypotheses that led to radically different reconstructions of early Islamic history. Some even suggested that key Islamic events may have occurred in

¹⁶ Mun'im Sirry, *Rekonstruksi Islam Historis: Pergumulan Kesarjanaan Mutakhir*, 1st ed. (Yogyakarta: UIN Sunan Kalijaga Press, 2021), 142.

¹⁷ Sirry, 43.

¹⁸ Angelika Neuwirth, "Qur'anic Studies and Philology: Qur'anic Textual Politics of Staging, Penetrating, and Finally Eclipsing Biblical Tradition," in *Qur'anic Studies Today* (London: Routledge, 2016), 181.

different regions, at different times, or possibly without the involvement of the Prophet Muhammad himself.¹⁹

Statements about the historical position of the Qur'an and early Islam fundamentally determine how the Qur'an is read.²⁰ In contrast to Wansbrough, Angelika Neuwirth argues that the Qur'an documents the historical process of the emergence of the early Muslim community.²¹ Neuwirth's assertion that the Qur'an functions as a historical document of the early Muslim community opens up the possibility of examining the dynamics of revelation and textual transmission within their socio-historical context. This raises important questions, how should this process be understood, and can the Qur'an in its present form provide insight into the emergence of the early Muslim community?

According to Islamic tradition, the collection of the Qur'an began after the death of the Prophet in 632 CE. Nevertheless, some verses appear to have been written down during his lifetime. Early compilation relied on limited materials, as paper was not yet known among the Arabs. The deaths of many of the Prophet's Companions, particularly those who had migrated from Mecca to Medina together with growing debates within the Muslim community, prompted the caliph Uthman ibn Affan to compile the Qur'an into a single authoritative codex (*mushaf*). This codex was declared complete, final, and immutable (*ne varietur*). To prevent disputes over the authenticity of the revelation, other codices were subsequently destroyed.²²

This codification indicates a significant shift from a text originally communicated within a specific context and developing gradually, to a text that was formally standardized. Although the *mushaf* transmitted to later generations was fixed, its final form introduced a distance from the original context of communication. In this regard, Kristina Nelson emphasizes that "the transmission of the Qur'an is fundamentally oral, and the rhythm of the Qur'an

¹⁹ Angelika Neuwirth, *Scripture Poetry and the Making of Community Reading the Qur'ān as a Literary Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5.

²⁰ Angelika Neuwirth, "Locating the Qur'an and Early Islam in the "Epistemic Space" of Late Antiquity, in Adam J. Silverstein dan Guy G. Stroumsa, *Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 176.

²¹ Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, "Introduction," in *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu* (London: E. J. Brill, 2010), 10; Angelika Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity A Shared Heritage* (New York: Oxford University, 2019), 1; Neuwirth, "Negotiating Justice: A Pre-Canonical Reading of the Qur'anic Creation Accounts," 26.

²² Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam Common Questions, Uncommon Answers* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 35.

itself affirms that the text was intended to be heard. The meaning of revelation is transmitted as much through sound as through semantic information.”²³

This fact has significant implications. If the Qur'an was intended to be recited, then the purpose of its oral performance must be reflected in the composition of the text itself.²⁴ This oral tradition provided the initial audience with an immediate context in which revelation was received as a living act of communication. However, once the revelation was codified into a mushaf, the structure of the text was not arranged according to chronological order. This has several important implications for interpretation. First, when these revelations were compiled into a single codex, the texts became detached from their original communicative contexts in the process of community formation. Second, the literary elements within each surah that previously played a crucial role in specific discussions gradually lost their function and were often misunderstood as mere repetition. From an orientalist perspective, the Qur'an came to be viewed simply as an unsystematic collection of materials.²⁵

Third, the representation of the Qur'an as a text still in the process of development, characterized by microstructural diversity, faded in favor of an emphasis on macrostructural coherence.²⁶ These three implications are closely connected to the codification of the Qur'an, which obscured the nature of revelation as a contextual communicative process and transformed it into a text less attentive to its historical dimensions. As a result, understanding the Qur'an became increasingly dependent on the *sīrah* literature, which was codified separately yet from an early stage was used as a historical framework for narrating what appears within the Qur'an itself.²⁷

This transformation has profound consequences for understanding the Qur'an as perceived by the early listening community in contrast to later religious communities. A historical reading requires disentangling the genealogy of the Qur'an and the formation of the community from later Islamic frameworks, and instead situating both the text and its initial audience within the context of Late Antiquity that gave rise to them.²⁸

²³ Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'ān* (Egyp: The American University in Cairo Press, 2001), xiv.

²⁴ Neuwirth, “Qur'an and History: A Disputed Relationship Some Reflections on Qur'anic History and History in the Qur'an,” 14.

²⁵ Neuwirth, 11.

²⁶ Angelika Neuwirth, “Referentiality and Textuality in Surat Al-Hijr: Some Observations on the Qur'anic ‘Canonical Process’ and the Emergence of a Community,” in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), 143.

²⁷ Angelika Neuwirth, “Form and Structure of the Qur'an,” in Jane Dammen McAuliffe *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2002), 2:247.

²⁸ Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity A Shared Heritage*, 35–36.

As Nicolai Sinai has argued, exegetical statements by Muslim scholars are often read within later theological developments rather than as reflections of the Qur'an's original impulses or intentions. Many Islamic reports concerning the historical circumstances in which specific Qur'anic verses are said to have been revealed are suspected of lacking authenticity as accurate portrayals of actual events.²⁹

Furthermore, as noted by Kusmana, a recurring issue is the tendency of interpreters to project their own interests and preferences into exegesis, resulting in tafsir often being characterized as sectarian in nature.³⁰ Although from the eighth century onward Muslim scholars argued that certain passages were revealed in connection with specific events in the Prophet's life (*asbāb al-nuzūl*, "occasions of revelation"), thereby explaining revelation through its attachment to particular historical and social situations, such references have largely been abandoned in modern critical historical research. This is because Islamic testimonies written down a century or more after the events in question are considered historically unreliable.³¹ Moreover, reports concerning the occasions of revelation are relatively few and highly vulnerable to criticism, containing numerous inconsistencies.³²

In treating the Qur'an as the primary source for understanding the context of its emergence, the first step is to strip it of later layers of interpretation. For example, the use of *asbāb al-nuzūl* should be set aside, since linking verses to specific historical events is itself a later construct. The next step is to reconstruct the historical picture by relying on the Qur'an's internal evidence, supplemented by relevant pre-Qur'anic sources. This approach enables a clearer understanding of the identity of the initial audience and the historical context in which the Qur'an emerged.³³

Angelika Neuwirth proposes a pre canonical reading that seeks to recover the Qur'an within the context of early Arab society, where the text developed as an active response to contemporary social dynamics. From this perspective, it is crucial to distinguish between the mushaf form of the Qur'an as we know it today and the communicative process from which it originated. Neuwirth's conception of the Qur'an is based on a distinction between the pre canonical Qur'an, namely the Qur'an as a living discourse during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, and the post-canonical Qur'an, that is, the Qur'an after it was codified and

²⁹ Nicolai Sinai, "Processes of Literary Growth and Editorial Expansion in Two Medinan Surahs," in Adam J. Silverstein and Guy G. Stroumsa, *Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 106.

³⁰ Kusmana, "Membaca Hermeneutika Al-Qur'an Muhammad Izzat Darwazah," *Ushuluna: Jurnal Ilmu Ushuluddin* 7, no. 1 (2021): 113.

³¹ Neuwirth, *Qur'anic Studies Today*, 5.

³² Amal, *Rekonstruksi Sejarah Al-Qur'an*, 105.

³³ Sirry, *Rekonstruksi Islam Historis: Pergumulan Kesarjanaan Mutakhir*, 105.

officially established as a mushaf. The pre canonical Qur'an refers to unfolding events and involves multiple dramatic agents (*dramatis personae*) a speaker delivers a message received from an absent "Commander" to a group of listeners.³⁴

The pre canonical reading advanced by Neuwirth emphasizes the importance of understanding the Qur'an in the context of its growth as a dynamic revelation. In this regard, she draws on the ideas of the American scholar Brevard S. Childs, who argues that the origin of a canon should be understood as a "process of growth." According to Childs, a canon should not be viewed merely as a final product consisting of a formally codified collection of texts, but rather as a covenantal relationship between God and humanity. This relationship constitutes the core of the text and is reinforced by new texts that refer back to earlier ones, which function as a textual nucleus.³⁵

To evaluate the Qur'an historically, it is necessary to recognize the processes undergone by prophetic communication during its formation. One example is found in later revelations that frequently revisit earlier ones, at times even inscribing themselves into previous texts. As a result, numerous inter-surah relationships become visible relationships that are no longer apparent in the canonical mushaf.³⁶ By taking the developmental character of the Qur'an seriously, it may be assumed that the Qur'an is not merely a literary unity reflecting stylistic changes of a single author, but rather a series of successive stages of proclamation. Each stage develops continuously based on what has already been communicated, reflecting the dynamic nature of the message as it interacts with the context of its recipients.³⁷ Accordingly, the ideal approach to addressing this problem is to reanimate the codified Qur'an by returning it to its original form as it emerged within Arab society.³⁸ Pre canonical reading thus refers to reading the Qur'an along the axis of a *process of growth*, or as a presentation of lively scenes from the emergence of the community.³⁹

Nicolai Sinai describes this approach as *processual genesis*, arguing that reading the Qur'an must take into account the gradual process of its revelation.

³⁴ Neuwirth, "Negotiating Justice: A Pre-Canonical Reading of the Qur'anic Creation Accounts," 27.

³⁵ Neuwirth, "Referentiality and Textuality in Surat Al-Hijr: Some Observations on the Qur'anic 'Canonical Process' and the Emergence of a Community," 146; Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

³⁶ Neuwirth, "Two Faces of the Qur'an: Qur'an and Mushaf."

³⁷ Angelika Neuwirth, *The Qur'ān: Text and Commentary* (London: Yale University, 2020), 2.

³⁸ Lien Iffah Naf'atu Fina, "Pre-Canonical Reading of the Qur'an (Studi Atas Metode Angelika Neuwirth Dalam Analisis Teks al-Qur-Ān Berbasis Surat Dan Intertekstualitas)" (UIN Sunan Kalijaga, 2011), 141.

³⁹ Neuwirth, "Qur'an and History: A Disputed Relationship Some Reflections on Qur'anic History and History in the Qur'an," 16.

This does not treat the Qur'an as a final, static canonical text, but rather as a dynamic process of communication. The aim of this approach is to investigate "what really happened" through an exploration of the Qur'an's historical context,⁴⁰ rather than following other Western scholarly attempts to search for an original text or *Urtext*.⁴¹

How, then, does the Qur'an document the historical process of the formation of the Muslim community? Given the Qur'an's poetic language, this investigation can be pursued by analyzing the character of revelation through its literary structures.⁴² Even when addressing the same theme, each surah is designed to respond to a different context. The target audiences in Mecca and Medina also differ, resulting in distinct rhetorical strategies. A similar approach applies to the analysis of supplementary verses from the Medinan period, which, according to Neuwirth, reflect adjustments to the changing needs of society.⁴³

It is therefore not surprising that different linguistic styles alternate and emerge gradually. After an early period dominated by poetic language, a more prosaic mode of discourse became prevalent in Medina. Nevertheless, a rich set of characteristics exists between these two forms of discourse, demonstrating thematic continuity across both periods and providing evidence that they originate from the same source.⁴⁴ The relationship between the Qur'an and history is complex. To uncover this relationship, Neuwirth focuses on the analysis of the microstructure of surahs. This is because the history of the Qur'an does not begin with canonization, but is embedded within the text itself. Its structural form can be read as a historical process that simultaneously bears witness to the emergence of the scripture and the birth of a community.⁴⁵

The post canonical Qur'an retains many elements of its pre canonical character, since throughout the revelatory process, the presence of the listeners was consistently maintained. The believers, the community receiving the revelation, even enter the text itself, not only as principal actors in a new salvation-historical scenario, but also as self-aware voices participating in an ongoing debate.⁴⁶ Based on internal Qur'anic evidence reinforced by external

⁴⁰ Lien Iffah Naf'atu Fina, "Membaca Metode Penafsiran Al-Qur'an Kontemporer Di Kalangan Sarjana Barat Analisis Pemikiran Angelika Neuwirth," *Ullumuna Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 18, no. 2 (2014): 276.

⁴¹ Neuwirth, "Form and Structure of the Qur'an," 253.

⁴² Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity A Shared Heritage*, 35.

⁴³ Angelika Neuwirth, "Structure and the Emergence of Community," in Andrew Rippin *Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 142.

⁴⁴ Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity A Shared Heritage*.

⁴⁵ Neuwirth, "Qur'an and History: A Disputed Relationship Some Reflections on Qur'anic History and History in the Qur'an," 16.

⁴⁶ Neuwirth, "Negotiating Justice: A Pre-Canonical Reading of the Qur'anic Creation Accounts," 29.

sources, Neuwirth thus disagrees with scholars who are pessimistic about linking the biography of the Prophet with the Qur'an, provided that such a biography is not narrowly understood as merely a record of personal development.⁴⁷

Pre canonical texts are strongly shaped by their function as responses to social issues and the belief systems held by the early community. This is reflected in the dialogues and narratives embedded within the text. The early Qur'anic narratives, initially addressed to the pagan Meccan audience who did not believe, gradually transformed into polemical apologetic debates as the emerging community began to confront significant challenges from the heirs of earlier religions, namely Judaism and Christianity.⁴⁸

The decision to read the Qur'an as a "drama" implies the adoption of a particular hermeneutical direction. Unlike a written text that has been carefully premeditated by a single author, a drama composed of multiple and shifting voices requires a sequential, diachronic reading,⁴⁹ since each scene and act constructs its meaning based on what precedes it, while later sections interact with earlier ones. Consequently, within this hermeneutical framework, in addition to examining the intertextuality between the Qur'an and biblical traditions, it is also necessary to investigate the intratextual relationships between earlier and later surahs.⁵⁰

Angelika Neuwirth revitalizes the post canonical surahs of the Qur'an by analyzing their microstructures at the level of individual surahs. Through this method, she seeks to reconstruct their pre-canonical character. In this approach, the prominent patterns of debate within a surah become the central focus of analysis. A surah is no longer treated as a message delivered linearly from a single speaker to an audience, but rather as a form of communication among numerous dramatic agents involved in the process of community formation.⁵¹

When a surah is understood as a discourse within the Qur'an, it can be seen as a developing text centered on a particular theme or issue. Within it, various motifs are interwoven in such a way as to generate internal dynamism.

⁴⁷ Angelika Neuwirth, "Rhetoric and the Qur'an," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* (Brill, Leiden, Boston: E. J. Brill, 2004), 462.

⁴⁸ Neuwirth, "Orientalism in Oriental Studies? Qur'anic Studies as a Case in Point," 6.

⁴⁹ A diachronic reconstruction of a corpus of texts, whether in Qur'anic studies or in biblical scholarship, generally aims to arrange a body of material chronologically to account for its diversity in style, themes, and concepts. Such diversity is clearly observable in the Qur'an. See, Nicolai Sinai, "The Qur'an as Process," in *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu*, Angelika Neuwirth (London: E. J. Brill, 2010), 408.

⁵⁰ In this context, "intratextuality" refers specifically to the relationships among the Qur'anic surahs, while "intertextuality" denotes the relationship between the Qur'an and texts outside itself, such as the Bible. See, Neuwirth, *Scripture Poetry and the Making of Community Reading the Qur'an as a Literary Text*, xxi.

⁵¹ Neuwirth, "Referentiality and Textuality in Surat Al-Hijr: Some Observations on the Qur'anic 'Canonical Process' and the Emergence of a Community," 147.

Consequently, the study of a surah encourages an examination of its position within the broader developmental process of the Qur'an as well as within the stages of early Muslim community formation.⁵²

Situating the Qur'an within its literary tradition is achieved through an investigation of its distinctive referential character, namely, by observing its connections to earlier traditions and extending this inquiry to an examination of the surah's position as a stage within an ongoing process. On this basis, the diverse literary genres assembled within the Qur'an can be analyzed in terms of both form and content. The initial step in this analysis is the identification of the main elements or *enjeux* within each surah.⁵³ However, almost none of these *enjeux* function as independent acts of communication; rather, they are closely interconnected.⁵⁴

Angelika Neuwirth seeks to overcome this dichotomy by viewing the Qur'an as a living process of communication among the Revealer (God), the bearer of revelation (the Prophet Muhammad), and the community. Accordingly, she argues that any analysis of the Qur'an must attend simultaneously to two dimensions. First, how the structure and rhetorical style of the Qur'anic text shape its message and influence within the context of oral communication, and second, how the text reflects and responds to the historical dynamics unfolding at the time of revelation.

1. Microstructural Analysis of Surahs

One of Angelika Neuwirth's major concerns regarding Qur'anic studies is the prevailing tendency to focus almost exclusively on the final, canonized mushaf, thereby obscuring the dynamic process of revelation that underlies it. This perspective often overlooks the fact that the Qur'an was originally part of a living communicative process within its historical context. In response to this problem, Neuwirth developed a pre-canonical reading that takes the surah as the primary object of analysis. She maintains that the surah constitutes a pre-canonical entity. This approach aims to understand surahs not as isolated units, but as integral components of the Qur'an's overarching narrative.⁵⁵

⁵² Neuwirth, 164.

⁵³ Angelika Neuwirth, "Structural, Linguistic and Literary Features," in Jane Dammen McAuliffe *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 109; Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien Zur Komposition Der Mekkanischen Sureen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1981), 177.

⁵⁴ Neuwirth, "Form and Structure of the Qur'an," 249.

⁵⁵ Angelika Neuwirth, "Neither of the East nor of the West (Lā Sharqiyya Wa Lā Gharbiyya, Q. 24.35). Locating the Qur'an within the History of Scholarship," in *Scripture Poetry, and The*

At first glance, the individual sections of Qur'anic surahs may appear to lack an organized structure. This has led some scholars to conclude that the Qur'an does not observe any systematic structural arrangement. The problem with this assumption is that, if all parts of the Qur'an are treated as equivalent without regard to their context, one might arbitrarily select a passage and use it to explain another passage chosen just as arbitrarily. As a result, isolated verses may become detached from their surah context and be misunderstood as mere repetitions. It is precisely at this point that microstructural surface analysis becomes indispensable.⁵⁶

Although direct chronological evidence of the communicative process is limited, traces of this process are nevertheless reflected in the structure of the surahs themselves. Literary investigation of the Qur'an's microstructures can therefore serve as an effort to uncover historical traces that remain accessible within the text. As emphasized by Mustansir Mir, Muslim exegetes have in recent decades rediscovered one of the most salient microstructural features of the Qur'an namely, the surah as a unit of meaning. This concept had long been neglected in Muslim scholarship and was generally dismissed or deemed irrelevant in Western Qur'anic studies.⁵⁷

One crucial initial step in evaluating the literary aspects of the Qur'an is identifying its compositional elements. These elements, however, rarely appear as independent units. Instead, they are integrated into complex structures that must be understood within a broader context. Surahs are essentially texts that develop gradually within a growing Islamic community. Consequently, the "history" of these surahs can be traced by carefully examining the process of message transmission, analyzing changes in communicative techniques, and identifying clues related to their performative framework in terms of time, place, and the actors involved. This dynamic is reflected in Qur'anic passages that refer back to the text itself, a phenomenon Neuwirth describes as *self-referentiality*.⁵⁸

Making of Community Reading the Qur'an as Literary Text (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 34 and 36.

⁵⁶ Neuwirth, "Form and Structure of the Qur'an," 248.

⁵⁷ Neuwirth, "Form and Structure of the Qur'an," 248; Mustansir Mir, *The Sura as a Unity. A Twentieth Century Development in Qur'an Exegesis*, in G. R. Hawting and Abdul Kader A. Shareef *Approach to the Qur'an* (London dan New York: Routledge, 1993), 147.

⁵⁸ Neuwirth, "Form and Structure of the Qur'an," 249–50; Neuwirth, "Referentiality and Textuality in Surat Al-Hijr: Some Observations on the Qur'anic 'Canonical Process' and the Emergence of a Community," 147.

It is indeed possible that smaller thematic units or individual verses within the Qur'an have their own origins, connected to particular events or "occasions of revelation" (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). However, from a literary-critical perspective, what matters more than the external event that prompted a theme is how that theme is shaped and integrated into the overall composition. For this reason, the present study takes the surah as its primary analytical foundation to avoid the tendency of many modern studies to neglect or fragment the surah as a literary form.⁵⁹

The first step in surah analysis involves dividing the surah into segments based on the grammatical structure of each section and its thematic content. Thematic grouping is clearly the principal procedure, but it must be supported by additional considerations such as rhyme structure (continuity or shifts in rhyme patterns), verse length, stylistic features, and changes in pronoun usage. When such similarities are identified across the surahs under analysis, their relevance must be examined carefully. These two modes of analysis, viewing the surah and its elements as a self-contained unit on the one hand, and viewing the surah as part of a sequence of surahs with similar structures on the other, complement one another.⁶⁰

2. Intertextuality

The term *intertextuality* was first introduced by Julia Kristeva, who adopted and further developed the concept of dialogism formulated by Mikhail Bakhtin. At the time, Bakhtin's thought was not widely known in the Western academic world due to limited access to his publications. Following Kristeva's intervention, however, Bakhtin's ideas began to exert a significant influence on literary theory.⁶¹

Intertextuality asserts that every text is bound to earlier texts, since no text exists in complete isolation. Both in its production and reception, a text is always situated within a complex network of references, in which earlier works function as models, sources, or conceptual frameworks for meaning-making. Nevertheless, this relationship should not be understood merely as imitation or repetition of preexisting structures.⁶²

⁵⁹ Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran Als Text Der Spantike* (Jerman: Verlag der Weltewligionen, 2010), 270.

⁶⁰ Neuwirth, *Studien Zur Komposition Der Mekkanischen Suren*, 175.

⁶¹ Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 5.

⁶² Halimah Halimah, "Intertekstual Babad Tanah Jawi Dalam Novel Bilangan Fu Karya Ayu Utami," *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Dan Sastra Indonesia* 2, no. 2 (2022): 109–10.

As implied by the term itself, intertextuality refers to reciprocal relationships among texts.⁶³ Reuven Firestone explains that intertextuality is an approach used to trace influences derived from other texts.⁶⁴ The term *intertextual* is commonly employed to denote the relationship between the Qur'an and other texts. However, some scholars use it to describe internal Qur'anic relationships. Michael Sells, for example, uses *intertextuality* to describe connections between Qur'anic surahs, while reserving the term *intratextuality* to indicate relationships within a single surah.⁶⁵

Given that the use of *intertextuality* is well established in biblical studies, the two types of relationships proposed by Sells are, in fact, more accurately described as intratextual. In this sense, both Jane Dammen McAuliffe and Asma Barlas employ the term *intratextuality* specifically to describe internal relationships within the Qur'an.⁶⁶

At the time of its initial emergence, the Qur'an functioned as a text engaged in dynamic dialogue, reflecting debates among various groups during Late Antiquity. It must therefore first be read as a drama involving multiple actors. The Qur'an was communicated to an audience whose knowledge already included biblical narratives, enabling this newly emerging scripture to address questions raised within the Bible, itself a sacred text that offers commentary on a vast body of earlier theological traditions.⁶⁷ In other words, the Qur'an was deeply embedded in its surrounding context, which rendered its rhetorical strategies effective and its meanings relevant to the historical circumstances in which revelation unfolded.⁶⁸

During the Prophet's mission in Mecca, his audience consisted primarily of pagan followers as well as monotheists not affiliated with any specific denomination. After the migration to Medina in 622 CE, however, the Prophet and his community also encountered educated

⁶³ Patricia Tull, "Intertextuality and the Hebrew Scripture," *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 8 (2000): 59.

⁶⁴ Firestone Reuven, *Journey in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abrahamic-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 18.

⁶⁵ Michael Sells, "A Literary Approach to the Hymnic Surahs of the Qur'an: Spirit, Gender, and Aural Intertextuality," in Isa J. Boullata, *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), 4.

⁶⁶ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Text and Textuality: Q. 3:7 as a Point of Intersection," in Issa J. Boullata, *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), 58; Asma Barlas, "Believing Woman," in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretation of the Qur'an* (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), 18.

⁶⁷ Neuwirth, "Two Faces of the Qur'an: Qur'an and Mushaf," 142.

⁶⁸ Neuwirth, "Form and Structure of the Qur'an," 147.

Christians and, in particular, Jews well versed in their own traditions. With these groups, the Prophet and the emerging Muslim community engaged in controversial discussions, reflected in numerous negotiations concerning Jewish traditions recorded in the Qur'an. In terms of textual development, this transformation was highly significant, as political involvement in Medina entailed enduring religio-political consequences that are clearly reflected in the text.⁶⁹

In recent scholarship, it has been argued that the evident intertextuality found across the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scriptures reflects shared traditions, motifs, and historical circumstances present at the time of the Qur'an's emergence. These elements reveal interactions with earlier religious traditions. Contemporary research no longer focuses primarily on identifying sources or influences, but rather on examining how traditions, motifs, and histories are re-narrated with new meanings. Some scholars have even characterized the Qur'an as a form of biblical interpretation, aiming to analyze how the Qur'an, in the course of its formation, interacted with Jewish and Christian traditions.⁷⁰

Understanding the Qur'an as a form of communication requires attention not only to the text itself, but also to the external elements that shaped it. Discourses circulating within the Prophet's audience constitute part of the intertext elements not explicitly written into the text, yet essential in shaping its meaning. The Qur'an cannot be detached from the social landscape in which it was first revealed. Consequently, approaching the Qur'an as a historical document necessitates an in-depth study of the Prophet Muhammad's audience, which evolved continuously in response to the social dynamics of the time.⁷¹

Recent studies that situate the Qur'an firmly within Late Antiquity have renewed scholarly interest in the Arabian Peninsula. Researchers have linked crucial formative developments in early Islam to this environment. This approach differs both from readings that treat the Qur'an as a completed, static text and from revisionist positions that marginalize the historical role of the Prophet Muhammad. When the Qur'an is read within an intertextual landscape, its connections with

⁶⁹ Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity A Shared Heritage*, 5.

⁷⁰ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext* (London: Routledge, 2010), 3.

⁷¹ Neuwirth, "Two Faces of the Qur'an: Qur'an and Mushaf," 143–44.

earlier monotheistic traditions, both Jewish and Christian, become evident.⁷²

One of the central figures advancing this perspective is Angelika Neuwirth, who emphasizes that a full understanding of the Qur'an cannot be achieved without attention to its intertextual relationship with the biblical tradition. The Qur'an frequently presents narratives that intervene in and restructure biblical narrative frameworks in order to articulate new theological meanings relevant to the early Muslim community. In her view, the Qur'an neither merely accepts nor rejects earlier traditions, but responds to them in a distinctly Qur'anic mode. This approach distinguishes Neuwirth from earlier scholarship. Previous research, notably that pioneered by Abraham Geiger, often overlooked significant transformations occurring during this process or dismissed such modifications as "misunderstandings" rather than recognizing them as meaningful reinterpretations. Geiger's approach has frequently been suspected of harboring a political agenda aimed at portraying the Qur'an as nothing more than a repetition of earlier traditions.⁷³

According to Neuwirth, the dialogical interaction between the Qur'an and the Bible is far more significant than viewing the relationship simply in terms of influence. In many cases, the Qur'an engages polemically with these traditions, selectively adopting and reconstructing particular elements. This process of reception, rejection, and reinterpretation situates the Qur'an within a broader pattern similar to the development of earlier religions.⁷⁴

Within this framework, similarities between Qur'anic ideas and expressions and those found in earlier texts do not constitute proof of direct borrowing, nor is such a question particularly relevant.⁷⁵ As the most recent of the Abrahamic religions, Islam and the Qur'an emerged within an inherently pluralistic world, a world that the Qur'an itself

⁷² Angelika Neuwirth, "A 'Religious Transformation in Late Antiquity' Qur'anic Refigurations of Pagan-Arab Ideals Based on Biblical Models," in *The Qur'an's Reformation of Judaism and Christianity: Return to the Origins* Edited by Holger M. Zellentin (New York: Routledge, 2019), 63–64.

⁷³ Manzoor S. Parvez, "Method Against Truth: Orientalism and Qur'ānic Studies," *Muslim World Book Review* 7, no. 4 (1987): 33. Neuwirth, Sinai, and Marx, "Introduction," 4.

⁷⁴ Neuwirth, *Studien Zur Komposition Der Mekkanischen Suren*, 37.

⁷⁵ Reuven, *Journey in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abrahamic-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*, 18.

critically evaluates.⁷⁶ Interaction between the Qur'an and other religious literatures thus becomes a key factor in exploring the possibility that the Hijaz belonged to a region shaped by encounters among competing monotheistic traditions. In this sense, Islam and the Qur'an did not arise in isolation, but formed an integral part of Late Antiquity.⁷⁷

The Implication of Pre-Canonical Reading in Qur'anic Studies

Angelika Neuwirth has proposed a distinctive approach to reading the Qur'an that offers an alternative perspective within contemporary scholarship. In particular, she situates the Qur'an as a living text embedded in the historical and cultural space of Late Antiquity. Neuwirth seeks to trace how the Qur'an interacted with the religious, social, and political discourses developing around it. This approach, known as *pre-canonical reading*, involves reading the Qur'an as it was experienced and understood prior to the codification of the final mushaf.

An alternative reading never emerges in an intellectual vacuum; rather, it is shaped by the academic problems that surround it. The same holds true for Neuwirth's pre-canonical reading, which arises from her unease with prevailing trends in Qur'anic studies. Skeptical conclusions, the dominance of reductive historical-critical approaches, and the tendency to treat the Qur'an as an "invisible text" have convinced Neuwirth of the need for a new methodology. She therefore argues that the Qur'an should not be read merely as a finalized written text, but as a historical document that records the Prophet's communication with the early Muslim community.

First, Neuwirth addresses the problem of the Qur'an's historicity. She demonstrates that the Qur'an documents the historical processes involved in the formation of the early Muslim community. Her conclusion stands in contrast to the skeptical position of John Wansbrough, who argued that the Qur'an was a later construction produced long after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Likewise, Neuwirth diverges from Western historical-critical studies that cast doubt on the Qur'an's authenticity. Rather than viewing the Qur'an as a mere imitation or borrowing, she understands intertextuality as a natural process in the emergence of any text, functioning as a communicative strategy through which the Qur'an conveys its message. Contemporary scholarship, accordingly, no longer focuses on identifying sources and influences, but on how traditions, motifs, and histories are re-narrated and even transformed into new meanings.

⁷⁶ Abdulaziz Sachendina, "The Qur'an and Other Religions," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an* Edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 292.

⁷⁷ Sirry, *Rekonstruksi Islam Historis: Pergumulan Kesarjanaan Mutakhir*, 123.

Scholars who adopt this approach often assume that Muhammad himself authored his scripture. Neuwirth's decision to read the Qur'an as a "drama" entails a specific hermeneutical orientation. Unlike a written text carefully planned by a single author, a drama involves multiple, shifting voices. Consequently, historical-critical analysis cannot serve as the sole analytical tool; additional methods are required. Relying exclusively on historical criticism is akin to breathing with only one lung. Literary analysis must accompany historical criticism, since the Qur'an's poetic language allows the character of revelation to be explored through its literary structures.

Second, Neuwirth addresses the problem of the Qur'an as an "invisible text." Many scholars have been reluctant to engage directly with the Qur'an, preferring instead to read it through later exegetical traditions. As a result, scholarly attention has shifted away from the Qur'an as a cultural expression of its own time, one that documents responses to contemporary discourses, and toward the Qur'an as reflected in the understandings of later Muslim communities.⁷⁸

Third, approaches that focus exclusively on the final mushaf neglect the historical processes and oral communication that underlie revelation. Such approaches tend to regard the Qur'an merely as a completed written text, overlooking the fact that each surah originally emerged within a living communicative space between the Prophet and his community. Consequently, the dialogical dimension of the Qur'an, intratextual relationships among surahs, and the Qur'an's engagement with contemporary traditions and discourses become obscured. In other words, an exclusive focus on the final mushaf strips the Qur'an of its historical character as a document of early community formation.

The Qur'an and the emergence of the Islamic community cannot be separated from the historical context in which they arose. The Qur'an's appearance constituted a response to specific circumstances, and much of its content consists of moral, religious, and social statements addressing concrete problems within historical reality. These responses are sometimes framed in the form of *ratio legis*, yet even such formulations allow insight into the original meanings of revelation.⁷⁹

Most Qur'anic narratives can be classified as directed exhortations, often addressed explicitly and at times implicitly, to their audience. These listeners are present within the text itself: they are encouraged, admonished, or inspired. To do justice to the Qur'an as communication addressed to listeners, Neuwirth characterizes it as a drama referring to the period of oral communication with its

⁷⁸ Neuwirth, "Orientalism in Oriental Studies? Qur'ānic Studies as a Case in Point," 117.

⁷⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 5.

audience during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad.⁸⁰ In interpreting this drama, Neuwirth does not begin with the canonized Qur'an, but rather traces the early phases of revelation as experienced by the receiving community. She reads the Qur'an as a living communicative process that interacts with social and religious realities, rather than as a static, finalized text. This approach enables her to uncover the dynamics of Qur'anic discourse, how it responds to polemics, formulates arguments, and shapes communal identity.

From the outset, Qur'anic revelations were received within a community. It can therefore be assumed that the Prophet's followers possessed a synoptic mode of understanding revelation: they did not interpret each surah in isolation. When a new surah was recited, its meaning was understood not only in relation to the immediate situation but also in comparison with and in connection to earlier revelations.⁸¹ The alternative reading proposed by Neuwirth is thus relevant to Qur'anic studies in several respects:

1. Diachronic Reading: Tracing the Historical Dynamics of the Qur'an

The significance of a diachronic reading of intratextuality lies in its capacity to uncover textual development over time. This approach enables scholars to trace transformations within the text and shifts in meaning across different periods.⁸² Contemporary research often creates the impression that when the Qur'an is read solely in its post-canonical form, it is a closed document, neglecting changes in language, style, and referentiality. Read synchronically, narratives featuring the same figures and patterns may appear as historically irrelevant repetitions.⁸³

Such impressions arise when the Qur'an is approached as a finalized corpus of 114 surahs without regard for the processes reflected in its language and style. From this perspective, recurring narratives seem repetitive rather than historically meaningful. A clear example of the relevance of diachronic reading can be found in the Qur'anic portrayal of Maryam, discussed in Neuwirth's book. A static reading suggests a single, unchanging image of Maryam throughout the Qur'an, making it difficult to explain the marked shifts in her representation across different surahs. How, for instance, can one account for Maryam's reformulation in Surah Āl 'Imrān as a member of the House of 'Imrān, endowed with genealogy and legitimacy comparable to the family of Abraham?

⁸⁰ Neuwirth, "Structure and the Emergence of Community," 146.

⁸¹ Sinai, "The Qur'an as Process," 431.

⁸² Mun'im Sirry, *Interaksi Islam: Bergelut Dengan Teks Dan Konteks* (Yogyakarta: UIN Sunan Kalijaga Press, 2024), 12.

⁸³ Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity A Shared Heritage*, 106.

If the Qur'an were merely a compilation, its compilers would likely have presented Maryam from the outset as both a sanctified woman and a member of a prophetic lineage. Instead, the text reveals two distinct narrative layers: one portraying Maryam as a woman tested, patient, and defended by her infant son Jesus, and another depicting her as part of the House of 'Imrān, positioned as a "true rival" to Jewish Abrahamic tradition.

2. Intertextual Reading: Revealing Dialogue with Other Traditions

Another key relevance of pre-canonical reading lies in its ability to uncover the Qur'an's intertextual engagement with contemporary religious traditions. The Qur'an did not emerge within a cultural vacuum, but interacted with Jewish, Christian, and pre-Islamic Arab discourses. Within a pre-canonical framework, these interactions are understood not as acts of borrowing but as Qur'anic strategies for conveying meaning. Narratives of the prophets, theological polemics, and eschatological concepts can thus be read as part of a cross-traditional conversation situating the Qur'an within the religious dynamics of Late Antiquity.

Neuwirth's edited volume *The Qur'an in Context* has become a central reference for investigating the Qur'an's historicity. The editors emphasize a complementary reading, one that is genuinely contextual rather than merely a reading of context. Such an approach must not dissolve the Qur'an into its Jewish, Christian, or other "sources," but should allow for the possibility that the Qur'an constitutes an autonomous text: a diachronically continuous discourse with a distinct theological agenda.⁸⁴

The Qur'an neither simply borrows nor consistently quotes earlier texts verbatim. Rather, it evokes and reactivates earlier narratives, employing their language for its own rhetorical purposes. Studies that merely collect Qur'anic verses with Jewish or Christian resonances and draw negative conclusions from isolated fragments are methodologically insufficient. While historical study of the Qur'an indeed requires broad awareness of Late Antique traditions, contextualization alone is not sufficient.⁸⁵

Intertextual reading within a pre-canonical framework thus goes beyond demonstrating traces of Jewish or Christian traditions in the Qur'an. Its primary function is to show how the Qur'an reworks existing discourses into new messages relevant to the early Muslim community. The task of intertextual research, therefore, is not simply

⁸⁴ Neuwirth, Sinai, and Marx, "Introduction," 13.

⁸⁵ Neuwirth, 14.

to identify similarities but to understand how these similarities are positioned, transformed, and directed toward the Qur'an's rhetorical and theological aims.

In this sense, the relevance of pre-canonical reading in Qur'anic studies lies in its effort to return the Qur'an to the historical space in which it first emerged. This approach not only uncovers the Qur'an's internal dynamics through structural analysis but also reveals its dialogue with Jewish and Christian traditions. Through these two analytical gateways, the Qur'an appears not as a static text finalized in the mushaf, but as a living discourse, one that interacts with its environment and shapes the identity of the early Muslim community. This is precisely what enabled the Qur'an to transcend earlier traditions while simultaneously serving as the foundational text for the emergence of a new monotheistic religion Islam.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that Angelika Neuwirth's pre-canonical reading provides a robust and productive framework for understanding the Qur'an as a historical, dynamic, and communicative process rather than a static text fixed solely in its canonical muṣḥaf form. By emphasizing the distinction between the pre-canonical Qur'an as lived revelation and the post-canonical Qur'an as a standardized text, this approach successfully addresses the limitations of earlier historical-critical and revisionist paradigms that either reduced the Qur'an to external influences or detached it from the lived reality of the early Muslim community. Through microstructural analysis of surahs and careful attention to intratextual and intertextual relationships, pre-canonical reading reveals how Qur'anic discourse develops diachronically, with each surah functioning as an episode within an unfolding drama of revelation that responds to shifting social, political, and theological contexts. Moreover, this approach reframes the Qur'an's engagement with Jewish and Christian traditions not as mere borrowing, but as a dialogical and transformative interaction that articulates a distinct Qur'anic theological vision. In doing so, pre-canonical reading restores the Qur'an to the historical space of Late Antiquity while simultaneously affirming its autonomy as a coherent and evolving discourse. Ultimately, this study underscores the relevance of pre-canonical reading for contemporary Qur'anic studies, as it enables a more nuanced understanding of revelation, community formation, and the Qur'an's role as a foundational text in the emergence of early Islam.

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