



## **A Critical Review of Wansbrough's Qur'anic Theory through Quraish Shihab's Epistemology**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The authenticity and codification of the Qur'an remain central debates in contemporary Qur'anic studies. John Wansbrough's historical theory posits the Qur'an as a product of prolonged communal redaction, completed long after the Prophet Muhammad. In contrast, M. Quraish Shihab argues for a systematic transmission grounded in revelation, collective memorization, and historical verification. This study critically examines the methodological assumptions of Wansbrough's theory and reconstructs Shihab's epistemological framework on Qur'anic authenticity and codification. Using qualitative hermeneutic library research with a comparative approach, this study analyzes primary and secondary sources through textual analysis, codicology, and qirā'āt studies. Findings show that Wansbrough's theory suffers from three main weaknesses: uncritical application of biblical criticism to Islamic tradition, neglect of oral transmission, and excessive historical inference with limited manuscript engagement. Conversely, Shihab develops an integrative epistemology combining revelation, rational inquiry, and linguistic analysis. The critical dialogue between both perspectives leads to a Synthetic Qur'anic Epistemology comprising transcendental, historical-transmissional, and textual-linguistic dimensions. This study contributes an interdisciplinary model integrating philology, codicology, radiocarbon analysis, and sanad-qirā'āt studies to balance academic rigor with the epistemological foundations of Islamic revelatory tradition.

**Keywords :** John Wansbrough; M. Quraish Shihab; Qur'anic authenticity; Qur'anic codification; Synthetic Qur'anic Epistemology

## ABSTRAK

Perdebatan mengenai autentisitas dan kodifikasi Al-Qur'an tetap menjadi isu sentral studi Al-Qur'an kontemporer. John Wansbrough mengajukan teori historis yang memandang Al-Qur'an sebagai produk redaksional komunitas dalam rentang panjang, bukan teks yang tuntas pada masa Nabi Muhammad. Sebaliknya, M. Quraish Shihab menegaskan transmisi dan kodifikasi Al-Qur'an berlangsung sistematis berdasar wahyu, hafalan kolektif, dan verifikasi historis. Penelitian kualitatif hermeneutik-komparatif ini mengkaji asumsi metodologis Wansbrough dan merekonstruksi kerangka epistemologis Shihab melalui analisis teks, kodikologi, dan studi qirā'āt. Hasil menunjukkan teori Wansbrough memiliki tiga kelemahan utama: penerapan kritik Bibel yang tidak adaptif pada tradisi Islam, pengabaian transmisi lisan, dan inferensi historis berlebihan dengan bukti manuskrip terbatas. Sebaliknya, Shihab menawarkan epistemologi integratif yang memadukan wahyu, rasionalitas, dan analisis linguistik. Dialog kritis kedua perspektif melahirkan Epistemologi Qur'ani Sintetik dengan dimensi transendental, historis-transmisional, dan tekstual-linguistik. Penelitian ini berkontribusi melalui model interdisipliner yang mengintegrasikan filologi, kodikologi, analisis radiokarbon, dan studi sanad-qirā'āt untuk menyeimbangkan rigor akademik dengan fondasi epistemologis tradisi wahyu.

**Kata Kunci :** John Wansbrough; M. Quraish Shihab; autentisitas Al-Qur'an; kodifikasi Al-Qur'an; Epistemologi Qur'ani Sintetik

## PENDAHULUAN

The issue of the Qur'an's origins, its process of revelation, and its codification remains a core concern in Islamic scholarship, both within Muslim tradition and in Western orientalist studies. For Muslims, the Qur'an is understood as divine revelation delivered gradually to the Prophet Muhammad and preserved with maximum authenticity. This belief rests on 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān, historical records, and *mutawātir* oral transmission that have underpinned Islamic epistemology for centuries.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Abdurrahman Said, "Kajian Historis Alquran," *Al-Bayan: Jurnal Studi Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Tafsir* 5, No. 1 (June 29, 2020), p. 62–74, <https://doi.org/10.15575/al-bayan.v5i1.8887>.

As a result, the Qur'an's authority is seen as both transcendent and historical, while its integrity and continuity from revelation to the present are consistently maintained. In contrast, Western scholars have formulated critical-historical methods that differ in method and epistemology from traditional Islamic approaches. This framework treats the Qur'an as a historical text subject to linguistic analysis, textual criticism, and reconstruction of early Muslim communities. Such assumptions have led to theories that conflict with Muslim tradition, including the view that the Qur'an was not fixed during the Prophet's lifetime but stabilized only after a long process of compilation, redaction, and standardization.<sup>2</sup>

John Wansbrough is a key figure in historical-critical scholarship, known for *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*. Using philological and literary analysis, Wansbrough contends that the Qur'an was not completed in the 7th century. He argues it emerged gradually and attained canonical status centuries later within the sectarian context of the Near East. He dismisses the traditional account of 'Uthmān's codification and reads the Qur'an's structure as the outcome of hermeneutical development reflecting early Muslim theological disputes.<sup>3</sup> Wansbrough's thesis sparked major controversy and rejection among Muslim scholars because it ignores the strong historical, philological, and oral data underlying Qur'anic transmission. For Muslims, the unbroken practice of collective memorization, hadith documentation, *tadwīn*, and reports from the Companions prove the Qur'an's stability since the Prophet's era.<sup>4</sup> Hence, his approach is criticized not only for methodological flaws but also for failing to understand the unique epistemic structure through which Islamic tradition preserves the sacred text.

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<sup>2</sup>Ahmad Mustakim et al., "Deconstructing The Historicity of The Qur'an John Wansbrough's Perspective : A Hermeneutic Study of Islamic Philological Suspicion and Criticism," *Hunafa: Jurnal Studia Islamika* 22, No. 1 (2025), p. 80–98, <https://doi.org/10.24239/jsi.v22i1.837>.

<sup>3</sup>John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), <https://archive.org/details/quranic-studies-wansbrough>.

<sup>4</sup>M Kholid Muslih, Muhamad Shofwan Muttaqin, and Amir Sahidin, "Konsep Historis Al-Qur'an dalam Pandangan John Wansbrough :," *AL QUDS: Jurnal Studi Alquran dan Hadis* 7, No. 2 (2023), p. 330–45, <https://doi.org/10.29240/alquds.v7i1.5561>.

In Indonesia, M. Quraish Shihab provides the most systematic scholarly response to orientalist critiques. As a mufassir and leading authority, Shihab argues that Wansbrough's theory conflicts with the Islamic epistemological system based on *sanad*, oral transmission, and consistent transmission reports. He stresses that the external-historical method used by many Orientalists neglects the revelatory context, the socio-religious conditions of Arabian society during the Prophet's time, and the central role of collective memorization in ensuring Qur'anic authenticity. Thus, he maintains that orientalist criticism is shaped by methodological biases that differ fundamentally from the Islamic understanding of revelation. Shihab further argues that Wansbrough's theory misrepresents how the sacred text was transmitted and consolidated in the early Muslim community. His critique targets the assumption that the Qur'an resulted from prolonged redaction and only finalized long after the Prophet. In contrast, historical data and authentic reports show the Prophet Muhammad's direct role in reciting, verifying, and arranging verses, alongside memorization and documentation systems already in place during his lifetime.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Wansbrough's claims are seen as incompatible with the historical evidence supporting Islamic scholarship.

Despite this debate, studies linking orientalist historical theories with Muslim scholarly responses remain scarce. Many works describe Wansbrough's ideas descriptively or discuss Shihab's exegesis partially, without placing them in a full methodological dialogue. This shows the need for research that positions both thinkers within a critical, systematic comparative framework to generate deeper analysis. Current research on Qur'anic origins and orientalist methods reveals a clear paradigm gap between Western historical-critical approaches and traditional Islamic epistemology. Modern revisionist works, including Shoemaker's, and critical studies on transmission have fueled intense methodological debate. Yet this discussion often stays at a macro level and fails to address specific methodological implications when radical claims like Wansbrough's are tested against contemporary exegesis grounded in *sanad* and living oral tradition.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an* (University of California Press SE - 372, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1525/Luminos.128>.

Literature on Wansbrough tends to describe his view of the Qur'an's gradual, extended redaction within a sectarian setting. However, few studies examine how these claims affect modern hermeneutical practice when measured against contextually and methodologically grounded Muslim exegetes. In short, mapping the methodological impact of Wansbrough's theories on applied Qur'anic exegesis is still limited.<sup>7</sup> Studies on contemporary Muslim scholarship, including Shihab's work, often analyze the features of his interpretation, its inclusiveness, and the contextual relevance of *Tafsir al-Mishbah*. But they usually focus on thematic methods and social contextualization, with little attention to how Shihab methodologically responds to historical-critical narratives that doubt *sanad* and traditional codification accounts. Thus, a gap remains in comparative studies that systematically place Wansbrough's orientalist thesis in analytical dialogue with exegetical responses like Shihab's.<sup>8</sup>

Recent research on orientalist methodologies also ranges from textual skepticism to collective memory theory. A key weakness, however, is the dominance of a one-sided perspective that adopts an either-or approach: either judging the Qur'an only by Western internal evidence or defending traditional authority without enabling constructive methodological dialogue.<sup>9</sup> This creates a gap in qualitative, library-based studies that (a) compare the epistemic assumptions of both sides, (b) map their convergences and contradictions, and (c) assess their conceptual implications for current hermeneutical research. Few studies also address the meanings, intellectual experiences, or cognitive processes of Muslim scholars when responding to historical-critical arguments. For instance, how leading mufassirs build criteria for textual authentication—whether they emphasize *sanad*, collective memorization, or material evidence—is

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<sup>7</sup>Azwar Sani, "A Study of John Wansbrough Thoughts on Qur'anic Studies: Source and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation," *TANZIL: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an* 6, No. 1 (2023), p. 71–84, <https://doi.org/10.20871/Tjsq.V6i1.304>.

<sup>8</sup>Abdullah Affandi and M Mu Billah, "Tafsir Inklusif Quraish Shihab : Kajian Atas Penggunaan Sumber-Sumber Syiah Dalam Menafsirkan Al- Qur ' an," *Samawat: Journal of Hadith and Qur'anic Studies* 8, No. 2 (2024), p. 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.24054/samawat.v8i2.436>.

<sup>9</sup>Iqrom Faldiansyah, A Muh. Azka Fazaka Rif'ah, and Muh. Rizaldi, "Discourse on Skeptical Orientalist Methodology in the Study of Qur'anic Codification," *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 25, No. 2 (November 2, 2024), p. 18–27, <https://doi.org/10.14421/Esensia.V25i2.5781>.

rarely analyzed as a layered epistemic process involving theoretical, methodological, and sociocultural aspects. Without this processual analysis, our understanding of how historicity claims are examined, refuted, or reconciled in modern exegesis remains weak.

This gap calls for a qualitative, library-based comparative study that conceptually examines Wansbrough's claims and current historical-critical discourse, then places them in dialogue with Shihab's epistemological and methodological framework. A hermeneutic-qualitative approach combined with comparative textual analysis enables examination of core assumptions, sources of argument, and each side's defense or correction strategies. Such an approach goes beyond polemics and contributes to developing modern Qur'anic interpretive methodology.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to: 1) identify and analyze the main methodological weaknesses and assumptions in Wansbrough's historical theory; 2) reconstruct Shihab's epistemological and methodological arguments on Qur'anic authenticity and codification; and 3) build critical dialogue between both positions to produce theoretical and practical contributions to contemporary Qur'anic studies. The research focuses on comparing the historical-critical approach with the hermeneutic-epistemic framework of *Tafsir al-Mishbah*, plus a processual analysis of argument construction and defense. The theoretical contribution is an epistemic mapping that strengthens Qur'anic studies methodology, while the practical contribution offers methodological guidance for tafsir researchers and for teaching Qur'anic sciences in plural academic contexts.

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative library research design within a hermeneutic-interpretive paradigm.<sup>10</sup> The paradigm emphasizes contextual interpretation and meaning reconstruction rather than statistical testing.<sup>11</sup> The research critically examines John Wansbrough's historical theory of the Qur'an and evaluates it epistemologically through M. Quraish Shihab's perspective. It aims to identify, compare, and

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<sup>10</sup>John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 4th Ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2018), 35-38.

<sup>11</sup>Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, Eds., The SAGE, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th Ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2017), 43-46.

reconstruct the assumptions, methodological structures, and epistemic foundations underlying both scholars' views on Qur'anic authenticity and codification.

Primary sources include Wansbrough's *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* and Shihab's key works: *Tafsir al-Mishbah* 15 vols, 2002, *Membumikan Al-Qur'an* 2007, and *Kaidah Tafsir* 2013.<sup>12</sup> Secondary sources cover contemporary Qur'anic studies, manuscript studies, codicology, palaeography, radiocarbon research, qirā'āt studies, hadith historiography, and recent historical-critical methodology discussions.<sup>13</sup>

Data were gathered through systematic document analysis and purposive literature selection.<sup>14</sup> Selection focused on works addressing Qur'anic codification, manuscript transmission, oral preservation, revisionist historiography, and Islamic epistemology. Source triangulation was applied by comparing classical Islamic sources, contemporary Muslim scholarship, and modern Western research to ensure rigor.<sup>15</sup> Special attention was given to empirical manuscript evidence such as the Birmingham Manuscript, the Ṣan'ā' Palimpsest, palaeographic data, and isnād-cum-matn studies as material references for evaluating claims on the Qur'an's formation and preservation.<sup>16</sup>

Particular emphasis was placed on the Birmingham Manuscript and the Ṣan'ā' Palimpsest as key material sources for testing competing

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<sup>12</sup>John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Mishbah: Pesan, Kesan dan Keserasian Al-Qur'an*, 15 Vols. (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2002). M. Quraish Shihab, *Membumikan Al-Qur'an: Fungsi dan Peran Wahyu dalam Kehidupan Masyarakat*, 3rd Ed. (Bandung: Mizan, 2007). M. Quraish Shihab, *Kaidah Tafsir: Syarat, Ketentuan, dan Aturan Yang Berlaku dalam Menafsirkan Al-Qur'an* (Tangerang: Lentera Hati, 2013)., n.d.

<sup>13</sup>Nicolai Sinai, "Qur'anic Studies", in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, Ed. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 3-20.

<sup>14</sup>Lee Ann Fujii, *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach* (London: Routledge, 2018), 67-72.

<sup>15</sup>Denzin and Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 297-299.

<sup>16</sup>Alba Fedeli, "Early Qur'anic Manuscripts: Their Text and Their Context", in *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu*, Ed. Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 379-402. On *Isnād-Cum-Matn*, See Harald Motzki, "The Collection of the Qur'ān: A Reconsideration of Western Views in Light of Recent Methodological Developments", *Der Islam* 78, No. 1 (2001): 1-34.

historical claims.<sup>17</sup> The Ṣan‘ā’ Palimpsest is strategic because its early 8th-century undertext contains textual variants and different surah sequences cited by revisionists as evidence of long redaction, while Islamic tradition interprets them as attested qirā’āt within the early ‘Uthmānic framework.<sup>18</sup>

Data analysis followed three interrelated qualitative stages.<sup>19</sup> First, comparative textual analysis coded the core assumptions and methodological frameworks of Wansbrough and Shihab. Second, critical-hermeneutic analysis assessed the coherence, strengths, and limitations of each perspective against current manuscript, linguistic, and historical evidence.<sup>20</sup> Third, epistemological synthesis formulated a conceptual framework integrating transcendental, historical-transmissional, and textual-linguistic dimensions for contemporary Qur’anic studies. This process aims to assess competing theories and construct a dialogical, interdisciplinary model for modern Qur’anic scholarship.<sup>21</sup>

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Fundamental Assumptions in John Wansbrough’s Historical Theory

This section assesses Wansbrough’s three core premises: the Qur’an as gradual communal product, textual instability in Islam’s formative phase, and limited reliability of Islamic tradition on preservation and codification. Critical review of recent manuscript data, oral transmission studies, and historiography shows major discrepancies with these assumptions. Instead of prolonged uncontrolled evolution, evidence points to early textual stabilization, robust oral preservation, and enduring relevance of Islamic transmission traditions.

### The Qur’an as Community Product vs Manuscript Evidence

Wansbrough’s premise that the Qur’an is a late 2nd-3rd century AH communal product conflicts with palaeographic data. Contemporary

<sup>17</sup>Alba Fedeli, "Early Qur’anic Manuscripts: ..., 379-402.

<sup>18</sup>Asma Hilali, *The Sanaa Palimpsest: The Transmission of the Qur’an in the First Centuries AH* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 45-68.

<sup>19</sup>Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, 4th Ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2020), 79-88.

<sup>20</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Ed. and Trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 131-144.

<sup>21</sup>Aaron W. Hughes, *The Study of Islam*, 2nd Ed. (London: Routledge, 2022), 112-130.

analysis shows the Qur'an's textual structure had stabilized by the 1st century AH. Brill's *The Qur'an and Its Handwritten Transmission* shows early manuscripts like Birmingham and parts of Ṣan'ā' corpus align closely with 'Uthmānic rasm, contradicting massive redaction centuries after the Prophet.<sup>22</sup> Sadeghi and Goudarzi's work on the Ṣan'ā' palimpsest reveals the lower text contains only minor variants that do not alter surah structure or verse meaning.<sup>23</sup> Connolly's survey of hundreds of personal-use manuscripts confirms consistent surah arrangement and rasm stability, indicating early establishment of the text form.<sup>24</sup> These results suggest Wansbrough's premises rely on theoretical reconstructions modeled on the Bible's codification, not empirical manuscript evidence.

### **Textual Instability vs Oral Tradition Stability**

Wansbrough's claim that qirā'āt variations and Companions' codex differences prove scriptural evolution lacks empirical support. Febra shows most qirā'āt variants are phonetic, morphological, or dialectal and do not change verse meaning.<sup>25</sup> Connolly adds rasm variations in early manuscripts mainly result from absent diacritics, not editorial changes.<sup>26</sup> The combination of written and oral transmission—ḥifẓ, talaqqī, and collective supervision by Companions—functioned as the main mechanism for textual stability. Thus, reading variants lack empirical basis as evidence of scriptural evolution.

### **Rejection of Islamic Sources and Epistemological Bias**

Wansbrough's dismissal of ḥadīth, sīrah, and muṣḥaf compilation reports as "pseudohistorical" reveals methodological flaw and epistemological bias, since Jewish-Christian traditions are accepted

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<sup>22</sup>François Déroche, *The Qur'an and Its Handwritten Transmission: Current Researches*, Vol. 4 (Leiden Boston: Brill, 2024).

<sup>23</sup>Sadeghi Behnam and Goudarzi Mohsen, "Ṣan'ā' 1 and the Origins of the Qur'ān," *De Gruyter Brill*, *Der Islam*, 87, No. 1–2 (2012), p. 1–129, <https://doi.org/10.1515/Islam-2011-0025>.

<sup>24</sup>Magdalen M Connolly and Nick Posegay, "A Survey of Personal-Use Qur'an Manuscripts Based on Fragments from the Cairo Genizah", *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 23, No. 2 (June 1, 2021), p. 1–40, <https://doi.org/10.3366/Jqs.2021.0465>.

<sup>25</sup>Ghozi Febra, Iril Admizal, and Suriyadi, "The Influence of Qira'at Variants in Interpretation Ayat-Ayat Al-Qur'an", *Indonesia Journal of Engineering and Education Technology (IJEET)* 2, No. 2 (May 11, 2024), p. 267–73, <https://doi.org/10.61991/Ijeet.V2i2.49>.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*

without equal critical standards. Contemporary ḥadīth historiography, especially Motzki's isnād-cum-matn method reassessed in 2023, verifies several reports on Qur'an compilation through measurable sanad reconstruction.<sup>27</sup> Sani's study shows Wansbrough's approach projects the Bible's developmental model onto the Qur'an without accounting for Arab oral culture and early Muslim reception.<sup>28</sup> His theory thus fails to explain oral continuity mechanisms that form the historical basis for textual stability.

### Methodological Weaknesses

Wansbrough's historical-critical method, while launching revisionist studies, shows several limits when tested against current manuscript, oral transmission, linguistic, and epistemological research. Three key weaknesses stand out:

1. Western Hermeneutical Bias: Application of biblical form and redaction criticism to the Qur'an creates category error. The method assumes manuscript plurality and weak communal control, excluding Islamic epistemic features like sanad and memorization. Qur'anic studies methods must integrate manuscript evidence, archaeology, and socio-cultural analysis, not just philological data.
2. Neglect of Oral Tradition: Focus on written variants ignores memorization as collective memory and talaqqī as cross-chain instruction. Ethnographic studies show oral transmission is primary, not supplementary, with deviant readings quickly detected by trained auditory communities and isnād/ṭuruq al-qirā'āt safeguarding recitation.<sup>29</sup> The claim of 2-3 century codification ignores these social mechanisms.
3. Neglect of Manuscript Evidence: Post-Wansbrough discoveries provide stronger empirical basis for chronology and stability. The Birmingham folios radiocarbon-dated to 568-645 CE match the

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<sup>27</sup>Bidayatul Mutammimah, Muh. Husni, and Umi Sumbulah, "Hadith Authentication Method: Concept, Application and Critique of Orientalist Skepticism", *Religia* 26, No. 1 (March 30, 2023), p. 58–75, <https://doi.org/10.28918/Religia.V26i1.863>.

<sup>28</sup>Sani, "A Study of John Wansbrough Thoughts on Qur'anic Studies: .....", 71-84.

<sup>29</sup>Maqdis Maqdis and Lukman Hakim, "Prinsip Penafsiran Al-Qur'an Perspektif John Wansbrough Dan Komparasinya Dengan Tradisi Mufasir Islam", *AT-TAISIR: Journal of Indonesian Tafsir Studies* 3, No. 2 (December 15, 2022), p. 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.51875/Attairsir.V3i2.134>.

contemporary muṣḥaf closely, narrowing scope for late construction hypotheses.<sup>30</sup> Ṣan‘ā’ Palimpsest critical editions show minor variants in lower text but overall patterns of stability and early codification, constraining radical reconstruction theories.<sup>31</sup> Topkapi and early Kufic codices show consistent orthography and rasm supporting early codification or rapid post-formative standardization.<sup>32</sup> Radiocarbon data and critical editions significantly reduce plausibility of overlapping construction across centuries.

Methodologically, Wansbrough's theory is weak due to unmodified biblical tools, neglect of oral/communal dimensions, inference without linguistic alternatives, inconsistency with manuscript evidence, and lack of triangulation with non-textual data. Rigorous Qur'anic studies thus require an interdisciplinary framework integrating philology + codicology + radiometric dating + socio-historical analysis + sanad studies + oral transmission.

### **Epistemology and Methodology of M. Quraish Shihab**

This section analyzes Shihab's epistemological and methodological structure on Qur'anic authenticity and codification, focusing on three themes: revelation-rationality epistemology, collective historical transmission, and linguistic/textual criticism.

#### ***Revelation and Rationality***

Shihab builds an integrative epistemology combining revelation as absolute truth with rationality as human verification, rejecting revelation-reason dichotomy and aligning with modern Islamic epistemology. Qur'anic authenticity rests on faith plus rational-historical foundations.<sup>33</sup> This aligns with Basit and Sanah's view of the Qur'anic miracle as rational, allowing scientific argumentation through coherence,

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<sup>30</sup>Muslih, Muttaqin, and Sahidin, "Konsep Historis Al- Qur ' an Dalam Pandangan John Wansbrough :"

<sup>31</sup>Asma Hilali, The Sanaa Palimpsest: ..., 45-68.

<sup>32</sup>Hythem Sidky, "On the Regionality of Qur'anic Codices,' Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association", *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association*, 5, No. 1 (2020): 133–210, <https://doi.org/10.5913/jiqsa.5.2020.A005>.

<sup>33</sup>Abdul Basit and Siti Sanah, "Kemukjizatan Al- Qur ' an Perspektif Muhammad Quraish Shihab", *Qudwah Qur'aniyah : Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir* 2, No. 1 (2024), p. 81–97, <https://doi.org/10.30631/Quawahquraniyah.V2i1.2239>.

transmission continuity, and linguistic structure. Shihab occupies a middle position between classical tradition and modern scholarship. Compared to Neuwirth and Sinai who stress historical context and composition, Shihab acknowledges context while maintaining the theological distinction that the Qur'an is transcendent revelation, not communal construction.<sup>34</sup> His thought opens space for constructive dialogue with critical scholarship.

### ***Codification as Collective Process***

For Shihab, codification was collective, systematic, and regulated: recording in the Prophet's lifetime, compilation under Abu Bakr, and standardization under Uthman as complementary epistemic stages. This reinforces Aspandi and Sarkoni's argument that the Uthmanic arrangement is *tauqifi*, not *ijihad*.<sup>35</sup> Shihab rationalizes this through modern arguments: two-witness validation, *ḥuffāz* cross-checking, and orthography standardization. Compared to Wansbrough and Luxenberg, Shihab's approach aligns with "historical-critical within tradition," where historiography verifies internally rather than deconstructs text.<sup>36</sup> This parallels Motzki's *isnād-cum-matn* method. Shihab's construction demonstrates Islamic tradition's robust epistemic controls, offering an alternative to orientalist narratives of gradual redaction.

### ***Interdisciplinary Methodology***

Shihab employs linguistics, Arabic rhetoric, *qirā'āt*, and textual criticism selectively to reinforce authenticity claims, emphasizing rhyme patterns, sentence balance, and linguistic uniqueness as "markers of internal originality." Zubairin's research shows literary analysis reveals Qur'anic cohesion, but Shihab goes further by integrating textual

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<sup>34</sup>Sujiat Zubaidi, Aqdi Rofiq Asnawi, and Nurul Arifah Hilda, "Intertextuality in Qur'anic Studies: Ulum Al-Qur'an Perspective on Utilization of the Bible in Qur'anic Interpretation", *AL QUDS: Jurnal Studi Alquran dan Hadis* 8, No. 2 (2024), p. 103–16, <https://doi.org/10.29240/Alquds.v8.2.8603>.

<sup>35</sup>Aspandi Aspandi and Muhammad Sarkoni, "Menelaah Ulang Kodifikasi Struktur Ayat Dan Surah Al-Qur'an Rasm Uthmani", *KACA (Karunia Cahaya Allah): Jurnal Dialogis Ilmu Ushuluddin* 12, No. 1 (February 1, 2022), p. 100–114, <https://doi.org/10.36781/Kaca.V12i1.203>.

<sup>36</sup>Muammar, "Metode Taqti' Al-Mutun Analysis (Sebuah Kajian Konstruktif Atas Metode Isnad Cum Matn Harald Motzki)" (Pascasarjana UIN Alauddin Makassar, 2019).

criticism for qirā'āt variants and muṣḥaf differences.<sup>37</sup> This reflects methodological confidence: criticism is adopted if compatible with Islamic epistemology. Literature shows his approach incorporates thematic, social, and linguistic dimensions with flexibility and depth.<sup>38</sup> This enables treating variants as legitimate tradition within “Uthmanic *\_rasm\_*” orthography. His methodology follows a clear trajectory: religious epistemology → historical criticism → linguistic verification.

### ***Synthesis and Position***

Shihab integrates epistemological-theological, historical-empirical, and linguistic-methodological dimensions into a synthetic approach explaining authenticity and codification comprehensively. His key contribution is constructing arguments rooted in theology yet acceptable to modern academia. Most prior works discuss his exegetical methods or moderation views, but few map his epistemological-methodological framework as foundation for authenticity arguments. Theoretically, this enriches Islamic epistemology by showing scripture authenticity can be supported by scholarly argumentation, not only doctrine. Practically, Shihab's approach models Qur'anic exegesis teaching, critical Islamic literacy, and public discussion on revelation authenticity in the digital age.

### **Critical Dialogue: Wansbrough and Shihab**

This discussion reconciles Wansbrough's communal-development theory and Shihab's transcendent-revelation perspective. Their epistemological divergence enables productive dialogue for new theoretical frameworks.

### ***Epistemological Dialogue***

Wansbrough positions the Qur'an as gradually developed through redactional process, with revelation as literary dynamics of early community and final text stabilizing centuries post-Prophet. This reflects skeptical historiography questioning early Islamic sources as

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<sup>37</sup>Achmad Zubairin, "Upaya Pembuktian Otentisitas Al-Qur'an. Melalui Pendekatan Sastra (Tafsir Adabiy)", *Jurnal Asy-Syukriyyah* 21, No. 1 (June 9, 2020), p. 34–48, <https://doi.org/10.36769/Asy.V21i1.97>.

<sup>38</sup>Abdi Risalah Husni Alfikar and Ahmad Kamil Taufiq, "Metode Khusus Muhammad Quraish Shihab Dalam Tafsirnya", *Jurnal Iman dan Spiritualitas* 2, No. 3 (2022), p. 373–80, <https://doi.org/10.15575/Jis.V2i3.18691>.

theologically committed.<sup>39</sup> Shihab affirms transcendent foundation: the Qur'an is divine revelation completed in the Prophet's lifetime. He acknowledges human roles in preserving, recording, and interpreting revelation, but not altering substance—human role is administrative, not substantive.<sup>40</sup> This dialogue yields two insights: history cannot be dismissed, yet cannot be sole interpretive lens. Revelation is transcendent reality entering social realm, examinable from theological and historical dimensions.

### **Methodological Dialectics**

Wansbrough's framework uses stringent literary criticism and intertextual reading, comparing the Qur'an with Semitic scriptures. Narrative similarities with Jewish-Christian traditions indicate emergence within plural, interactive milieu, not prophetic continuity.<sup>41</sup> Thus the Qur'an is outcome of complex theological discourse, not final-form revelation from the start. Shihab develops "interdisciplinary moderation"—open to modern disciplines while placing revelation as foundation. He integrates history, linguistics, and philosophy of language to explain Arab understanding and authentic transmission.<sup>42</sup> Shihab accepts textual criticism if it does not conflict with Islamic fundamentals; modern disciplines strengthen, not relativize, divine source. This dialogue is mutually reinforcing: Wansbrough's skepticism demands verification, Shihab's moderation sets boundaries respecting revelation integrity. The result is a proportional model: critical without deconstruction, rational without reductionism.

### **Relevance, Limitations, and Reconciliation**

Wansbrough contributes by emphasizing manuscript research, critical philology, and intertextual analysis, opening rigorous standards

<sup>39</sup>John Henrik Clarke, "Decolonizing Qur Anic Studies", *Religions* 13, No. 2 (2022), p. 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.3390/Rel13020176>.

<sup>40</sup>Rahmatullah Rahmatullah, Hudriansyah Hudriansyah, and Mursalin Mursalin, "M. Quraish Shihab Dan Pengaruhnya Terhadap Dinamika Studi Tafsir Al-Qur'an Indonesia Kontemporer", *SUHUF* 14, No. 1 (June 30, 2021), p. 127–151, <https://doi.org/10.22548/Shf.V14i1.618>.

<sup>41</sup>Sani, "A Study of John Wansbrough Thoughts on Qur'anic Studies: .....", 71-84.

<sup>42</sup>Luthviah Romziana and Linda Fajarwati, "Analisis Kritis M. Quraish Shihab Terhadap Karakteristik Kepemimpinan dalam Tafsir Al-Mishbah", *Al-Bayan: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Hadist* 6, No. 2 (May 24, 2023), p. 191–209, <https://doi.org/10.35132/Albayan.V6i2.378>.

for origins, manuscript history, and formation processes.<sup>43</sup> However, he overlooks anthropological evidence of oral tradition strength in pre-Islamic and early Islamic society, and many views remain speculative due to limited archaeological/manuscript data.<sup>44</sup> Shihab's strength is reconciling revelation and history through coherent framework, detailing codification via Abu Bakr compilation and Uthman standardization with rigorous verification: two-Companion testimony, ḥuffāz involvement, and Prophet's direct validation.<sup>45</sup> This positions revelation as preserved yet open to inquiry. Shihab has not yet developed structured manuscript criticism comparable to Western models, but opens space for integrating philological criticism with qirā'āt traditions and classical sciences. Reconciliation requires acknowledging Islamic tradition's historical-epistemological legitimacy and Western criticism as enriching tool, not threat. Integration yields a methodology that is comprehensive, critical, and respectful of sacred text, enabling advancement while rooted in tested tradition.

### ***Theoretical Contribution: Synthetic Qur'anic Epistemology***

Dialogue between Wansbrough and Shihab yields "Synthetic Qur'anic Epistemology"—balancing theological foundations with analytical tools. It avoids theological determinism and historical reductionism. This model examines sacred text through historical, linguistic, and literary tools without abandoning revelation status, recognizing the Qur'an as divine text living in history and transmitted through academically examinable social mechanisms.

A three-layer framework emerges:

1. Transcendental layer: Revelation as divine truth with spiritual-theological authenticity, not reducible to cultural product.

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<sup>43</sup>Déroche, The Qur'an and Its Handwritten Transmission: Current Researches, ....

<sup>44</sup>Ali Aghaei and Michael Josef Marx, "Carbon Dating of Seven Parchment Qur'ān Manuscripts and One Syriac Bible of the National Museum of Iran", *Journal of Iran National Museum* 2, No. 1 (2021), p. 205–26, <https://doi.org/10.22034/JINM.2022.553481.1055>.

<sup>45</sup>Ayiub and Isna Mutia, "Muhammad Quraish Shihab's Methodology in Interpretation of The Qur'an," *Jurnal Ilmiah Al Mu'ashirah: Media Kajian Al-Qur'an dan Al-Hadits Multi Perspektif* 20, No. 1 (2023), p. 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.22373/Jim.V20i1.16891>.

2. Historical-transmissional layer: Revelation descent, Prophetic instruction, Companions' memorization, and Abu Bakr-Uthman codification; supported by historical studies and oral anthropology.
3. Textual-linguistic layer: Sentence structure, rhetoric, intertextuality, and variants; bridging classical sciences and modern criticism.

This framework provides flexible tools for exegesis, hermeneutics, historicism, and literary criticism, enriching discipline and paving way for integrative, responsive Qur'anic studies paradigm.

### **Practical Contribution**

Dialogue between Wansbrough's skepticism and Shihab's moderation has practical implications. In Islamic higher education, exposure to both traditions shapes critical thinkers who weigh arguments and evaluate evidence, fostering essential epistemological skills. Integrative approach also advances manuscript studies in Muslim world, where institutions increasingly recognize manuscript studies investigate transmission history and variants without challenging authenticity.<sup>46</sup> By adopting frameworks that do not reject philological criticism, Muslim researchers can lead studies instead of consuming Western data. Socially, this synthetic approach bridges public resistance to orientalist methods by showing modern methods enrich Qur'anic history understanding without threatening faith, fostering open, scholarly, globally engaged society.

### **Convergence Between Two Paradigms**

Dialogue between Wansbrough and Shihab shows differences need not create conflict; they are complementary poles. Wansbrough's skepticism drives scientific verification of Islamic tradition's historical claims and reminds scholars that religious texts cannot be separated from sociohistorical context; manuscript and variant research should not be limited to traditional acceptance.<sup>47</sup> Shihab's defense demonstrates Islamic tradition's strong, historically verifiable transmission system. Compilation during the Prophet's lifetime and Uthmanic standardization via collective Companions' mechanisms indicate transmission was not

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<sup>46</sup>Dedi Kuswandi, Ris'an Rusli, and Nyimas Umi Kalsum, "A Philological Study And Analysis Of Tafsir Methodology: The 19th-Century Palembang Malay Qur'an Commentary Manuscript by Masagus Muzammil", *TAJID: Jurnal Ilmu Ushuluddin* 24, No. 1 (2025), p. 318–48, <https://doi.org/10.30631/Tjd.V24i1.600>.

<sup>47</sup>Ahmad Mustakim et al., "Deconstructing The Historicity of The Qur'an John Wansbrough'S Perspective : ..., p. 80-98

random or unsupervised.<sup>48</sup> For Shihab, tradition strength is social-historical evidence examinable through linguistic, historical, and modern criticism.

Convergence is productive: Wansbrough's skepticism corrects unverified claims, while Shihab's moderation sets limits on historical criticism to avoid violating revelation's epistemological structure. This enables mature, comprehensive methodology that values modern philology while preserving Islamic memorization-transmission integrity. Shihab's greatest contribution is "scientific apologetics"—defending authenticity through historical data, linguistic analysis, and testable methodology. Unlike defensive classical apologetics, Shihab opens critical dialogue with Western scholars without compromising theology, shifting defense from dogmatic to argumentative domain and making it acceptable in global academic discourse.<sup>49</sup>

This critical synthesis contributes importantly to contemporary Qur'anic studies. It demonstrates Islamic tradition need not reject methodological modernity and Western approaches need not negate revelation's transcendent dimension. When both are placed in fair dialogical space, they can complement each other: Wansbrough offers skeptical framework demanding rigor, while Shihab provides epistemic structure preserving revelation continuity. The result is new paradigm more balanced and functional for comprehensively understanding the Qur'an in modern era.

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<sup>48</sup>Munirul Ikhwan, *An Indonesian Initiative to Make the Qur'an Down-to-Earth: Muhammad Quraish Shihab and His School of Exegesis* (Freie Universität Berlin, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.17169/Refubium-12771>.

<sup>49</sup>Muhamad Ali, "Indonesian Post-Orientalist Study of Islam", *Studia Islamika* 32, No. 1 (April 30, 2025), p. 43–73, <https://doi.org/10.36712/Sdi.V32i1.45297>.



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Critical Dialogue between Wansbrough and Quraish Shihab

Figure 1 summarizes this study’s conceptual synthesis. The framework illustrates how John Wansbrough’s revisionist historical model and M. Quraish Shihab’s authenticity-based epistemological

framework can be positioned in constructive dialogical relationship rather than mutually exclusive paradigms. Through critical evaluation of contemporary manuscript evidence, oral transmission studies, and socio-historical research, both approaches' strengths and limitations become apparent. This dialogue ultimately leads to Synthetic Qur'anic Epistemology formulation, integrating transcendental, historical-transmissional, and textual-linguistic dimensions as comprehensive framework for contemporary Qur'anic studies. The model also highlights this synthesis's theoretical and practical contributions, particularly in advancing integrative methodologies, manuscript studies, and critical Islamic scholarship.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the radical claims of Wansbrough's historical theory, which positions the Qur'an as a product of community development and prolonged redaction, exhibit significant methodological weaknesses when tested against manuscript evidence, paleographic studies, and the dynamics of oral Qur'anic transmission. Wansbrough tends to rely on biblical criticism analogies without epistemic adaptation to the nature of Islamic transmission, overlooking the oral-communal dimension and insufficiently triangulating manuscript, material, and social data. In contrast, M. Quraish Shihab offers an integrative epistemological framework in which revelation as a transcendental category is combined with rationality, collective historical evidence, and linguistic verification. This approach treats the codification of the Mushaf as a collective, standardized process that can be methodologically explained without diminishing the status of revelation. From the critical dialogue between these two poles emerges a conceptual proposition known as the Synthetic Qur'anic Epistemology (encompassing the transcendental, historical-transmissional, and textual-linguistic layers). It recommends an interdisciplinary approach (combining philology + codicology + radiocarbon analysis + socio-historical research + sanad/qirā'āt studies) as the most proportional model for contemporary Qur'anic studies.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that academic research in Qur'anic studies develop an interdisciplinary approach that integrates philology, manuscript studies, sanad criticism, linguistic analysis, and socio-historical perspectives to enhance

methodological rigor and validity. Islamic higher education institutions should also promote the implementation of more integrative methodological learning, enabling constructive and mutually reinforcing dialogue between the Islamic scholarly tradition and modern academic criticism. Furthermore, the Synthetic Qur'anic Epistemology model proposed in this study can serve as a foundation for further research, whether focused on reconstructing the early history of the Qur'anic text or strengthening scholarly understanding in a manner consistent with theological frameworks within the Islamic tradition.

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