

Theory & Practice

The Western (Academic) Revisionist School of Islamic Studies: A Critical Response

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I. Introduction

Over the last 150 years, Western academic study of Islam has changed in important ways. A turning point came with the Hungarian scholar Ignaz Goldziher, who published *Muhammedanische Studien* in 1889–1890 (translated as *Muslim Studies*, 1967–1971). Goldziher (among other things) argued that many hadith were not from the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself but were later inventions that reflected the political and legal debates of the Muslim community (Goldziher, 1967/1971). Later, the German scholar Joseph Schacht made a similar argument in his book *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (1950). Schacht claimed that Islamic law developed gradually and that hadith reports were often “back-projected” onto the Prophet ﷺ to give legal authority to new practices (Schacht, 1950). These two scholars set the foundation for what later became known as the (western academic) ‘revisionist school’ of Islamic studies.

A new and more radical stage came in the 1970s. The British scholar John Wansbrough suggested that the Qur’an and the earliest Islamic stories were not fixed in the 7th century, but instead took shape much

later, over the course of several centuries, within a larger Jewish and Christian environment (Quranic Studies, 1977; The Sectarian Milieu, 1978). Around the same time, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook published Hagarism (1977). In this book, they relied mainly on non-Muslim sources and rejected most of the early Muslim narratives. Their aim was to “reconstruct” the beginnings of Islam in a way very different from how Muslims themselves preserved and transmitted their history (Crone & Cook, 1977; Wansbrough, 1977, 1978).

The method of these revisionists had two main features:

- A strong scepticism toward Muslim sources such as hadith, tafsīr, and sīrah.
- A preference for using non-Muslim sources, or literary theories, even when these were biased or incomplete.

Their approach often explained Islam as the product of politics, social change, and religious borrowing, rather than as a divinely revealed religion with carefully preserved texts. While this approach raised new questions and widened the range of sources studied, it also rested on speculation and often ignored evidence of how carefully Muslims preserved their traditions.

The Islamic scholarly tradition offers a very different picture. From the time of the Prophet ﷺ, the

Qur'an was preserved through memorisation, communal recitation, and written manuscripts. Later, the hadith sciences developed sophisticated tools, such as the study of transmission chains (isnād) and biographies of narrators ('ilm al-rijāl), to ensure accuracy. Modern Muslim scholars, such as Shaykh Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, have provided detailed responses to Western criticism. In his works *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature* (1977) and *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (1985), he used early manuscripts and isnad analysis to show that hadith were transmitted with care and authenticity (Azami, 1977, 1985)⁽¹⁾. Other researchers, such as Harald Motzki and Jonathan Brown, have also confirmed the reliability of much early Islamic material (Motzki, 2002; Brown, 2009).

Relying on the works of Shaykh Al-Azami and other notable Islamic scholars, this paper will argue that while the revisionist school of Islamic studies raised some interesting questions, its main conclusions are weak because they are often based on speculation and an unfair rejection of Muslim sources. A more balanced approach, in western academia, would be one that combines historical critique with respect for

¹From Hinduism to Hadith Scholar - An Interview with Shaykh Dr. Muhammad Diya Al-Rahman Al-Azami
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2ZI_ykyv8o

the Islamic methods of preservation. This will provide a clearer and more trustworthy account of the origins of Islam.

II. Historical Background: Roots of Western Revisionist Criticism

Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921): The starting point for modern Western criticism of Islamic tradition is often traced to the Hungarian scholar Ignaz Goldziher. In his *Muhammedanische Studien* (1889–1890; English translation *Muslim Studies*, 1967–1971), he argued that hadith reports did not reflect the time of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ but instead showed the political, legal, and sectarian debates of later generations (Goldziher, 1967/1971). For Goldziher, hadith were less a record of history than a tool of authority used by different groups in the early Muslim community.

This was a bold claim, because Muslims had long seen hadith as carefully preserved and authenticated. Goldziher's arguments strongly influenced later western scholars, particularly in the area of Islamic law.

Joseph Schacht (1902–1969): The German scholar Joseph Schacht took Goldziher's ideas further. In his *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (1950), Schacht claimed that most hadith used in Islamic law were not authentic but were later inventions. He argued that legal rules developed gradually during the

second and third Islamic centuries and that hadith reports were “back-projected” onto the Prophet ﷺ to give these rules religious legitimacy (Schacht, 1950).

Schacht also claimed that the isnad (chain of transmission) system was not a reliable indicator of authenticity but was often constructed backward to give authority to a statement. This was a direct challenge to one of the most central methods of Islamic scholarship: the detailed study of transmission and narrators (‘ilm al-rijāl).

Transition to Radical Revisionism (1970s onward):

The next major step came in the 1970s with scholars such as John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, and Michael Cook.

- John Wansbrough (1977, 1978) argued that the Qur’an itself was not finalised in the Prophet’s lifetime but took shape over several centuries. He suggested that the Qur’an emerged within a “sectarian milieu” alongside Jewish and Christian debates, rather than being a distinct and complete revelation from the start (Wansbrough, 1977, 1978).
- Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, in their book *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (1977), proposed a new reconstruction of early Islam based almost entirely on non-

Muslim sources such as Christian and Jewish chronicles. They dismissed most Muslim accounts as unreliable. Their conclusion was that Islam began as part of a wider religious movement before becoming independent (Crone & Cook, 1977).

Although many later scholars considered these theories too speculative, the revisionist approach became highly influential in Western academic studies of Islam. It introduced a spirit of radical scepticism: doubting the reliability of Muslim sources, questioning the historical role of the Prophet ﷺ, and portraying Islam as a product of external influences.

Muslim Scholarly Responses: Muslim scholars responded with concern but also with serious academic engagement. The most important response came from Shaykh Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami (1930–2017). In his *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature* (1977) and *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (1985), Shaykh al-Azami showed evidence of very early hadith manuscripts, long before the dates claimed by Schacht. He also demonstrated how carefully Muslim scholars preserved isnād systems and how internal methods of critique ensured authenticity (al-Azami, 1977, 1985). Later, Western scholars such as Harald Motzki and Jonathan Brown further confirmed that many hadith

and legal traditions can indeed be traced back much earlier than Schacht and Goldziher had suggested (Motzki, 2002; Brown, 2009).

Summary: The revisionist school grew from Goldziher's doubts about hadith, through Schacht's criticisms of Islamic law, and finally into the radical reconstructions of Wansbrough, Crone, and Cook. Their common goal was to explain Islam's origins without relying on Muslim sources, often portraying it as a late or borrowed tradition. However, Muslim scholars such as al-Azami, and even some later Western academics, have shown that this scepticism often ignored or undervalued the strong evidence for the early preservation of Islamic texts.

III. Responses from Muslim Scholarship

The claims of the revisionist school were met with strong responses from Muslim scholars, who combined traditional expertise with modern academic methods. Their work shows that the revisionist picture of Islamic origins is not only speculative but also overlooks significant evidence of early preservation.

Shaykh Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami (1930–2017): Perhaps the most influential Muslim scholar to respond was Shaykh Muḥammad Mustafa al-Azami, a leading hadith specialist who taught at King Saud University in Riyadh. In his *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature* (1977), he explained the

principles of hadith criticism, showing how Muslim scholars developed careful methods for checking isnad chains, verifying narrators' reliability, and cross-examining reports. He argued that these methods have no equal in world historiography and demonstrate the seriousness with which Muslims preserved their tradition (Azami, 1977). In his later book *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (1985), he directly addressed Schacht's arguments. He pointed to surviving hadith manuscripts dating back to the first Islamic century, centuries earlier than Schacht claimed written hadith began. He also showed that Schacht often ignored evidence that contradicted his theory, relying instead on selective readings (al-Azami, 1985). Shaykh Al-Azami's respectful but firm response demonstrated that Muslim scholarship could meet Western academic arguments on their own terms while staying rooted in the Islamic tradition.

Other Muslim Scholars: Shaykh Al-Azami was not alone in this regard. Several other Muslim thinkers also challenged the revisionists:

- Mustafa al-Sibai (d. 1964), in his work *al-Sunnah wa Makānatuhā fī al-Tashrīʿ al-Islāmī* (1961), defended the Sunnah as an essential and authentic source of Islamic law. He argued that hadith transmission was carefully preserved and critically evaluated from the earliest

generations of Islam in response to both classical and modern criticisms.

- Muhammad Hamidullah (d. 2002), a respected historian of Islam, critically edited, translated, and analysed some of the earliest surviving Islamic documents, including the Constitution of Madinah attributed to the Prophet ﷺ. His work demonstrated the existence of written documentation from the earliest period of Islam and highlighted the continuity of Islamic historical transmission.
- In later years, Jonathan A. C. Brown, though writing primarily as a contemporary academic rather than as a traditional Muslim scholar in the mould of al-Azami, has helped explain the sophistication of the classical hadith sciences to modern readers. His *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (2009) introduced many students of Islamic studies to the depth and complexity of the Muslim tradition of hadith criticism.

Contributions from Western Scholars with Balanced Approaches: Interestingly, even some Western academics pushed back against the extreme scepticism of the revisionists.

- Harald Motzki used detailed isnad-cum-matn analysis to argue that many hadith

could be dated earlier than Schacht claimed. His *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence* (2002) argued that many Meccan legal traditions could be traced back to the first Islamic century using this isnad-cum-matn analysis (Motzki, 2002).

- Other scholars, such as Gregor Schoeler and Fuat Sezgin, demonstrated that written materials were used alongside oral transmission from the earliest generations of Islam, challenging the assumption that Islamic knowledge remained exclusively oral for several centuries (Schoeler, 2006; Sezgin, 1967). Furthermore, Sezgin in *Bukhari's sources* (1981) argued specifically that Imam al-Bukhari relied on much earlier written materials.

Epistemological Contrast: At the heart of the disagreement between Muslim scholars and the revisionist school is not just evidence, but two very different ways of knowing.

- The Islamic Epistemology of Revelation. In Islam, knowledge (‘ilm) is inseparable from the moral character of its bearers. The Qur’an teaches that true knowledge is a gift from Allah given to those who have taqwā (God-consciousness): “... And fear Allah, and Allah

will teach you ...” (Qur’an 2:282). The Prophet ﷺ also said that the most trustworthy of people are those who are truthful and God-fearing. For this reason, when Muslim scholars developed the hadith sciences, they did not only examine whether a narrator had a good memory or access to a teacher. They also asked: Was this person upright (‘adl)? Did he live with piety, avoid major sins, and display trustworthiness (amānah)? If he lacked integrity, his reports were rejected, no matter how clever or knowledgeable he might have been. This is why Muslim historians built entire biographical dictionaries (kutub al-rijāl), carefully recording narrators’ honesty, religious practice, and character. The assumption was clear: knowledge is not just about intellect, but about moral uprightness and God-consciousness. The Qur’an itself states: “Indeed, it is only those who have knowledge among His servants that fear Allah” (Qur’an 35:28). For Muslims, the best scholars are not simply the most intelligent, but those whose hearts are shaped by fear of Allah.

- The Revisionist Epistemology of Scepticism. Western academic methods, especially those shaped by the Enlightenment and modern

secular thought, usually separate knowledge from morality or faith. A scholar's personal piety or moral uprightness is considered irrelevant to whether their testimony is accepted. Instead, the emphasis falls on external verification: manuscripts, archaeology, or non-Muslim writings. In this framework, even a dishonest or impious narrator might be taken seriously if his statement fits other historical evidence, while a pious and reliable transmitter may be dismissed simply because he was "inside" the Muslim community.

- The Clash of Worldviews. This creates a profound difference:
 - In Islam, the path to knowledge is inseparable from the path of taqwā. Truth is preserved through people of integrity who fear Allah and whose lives embody honesty and piety. Without this, knowledge itself becomes corrupted.
 - In Western revisionism, the path to knowledge is primarily intellectual and procedural, with little regard for the moral character of transmitters.
- Thus, where Muslim scholars saw isnad plus piety (taqwā, 'adālah, amānah) as the highest guarantee of truth, revisionists dismissed isnād

as fabrication, precisely because they operated within a secular framework where moral character has no epistemic value.

This contrast explains why western academic revisionists often misunderstand the heart of the Islamic preservation system. For Muslims, truth is not preserved only by memory or documents but by trustworthy hearts and God-conscious lives. The divine guarantee of preservation (Qur'an 15:9) is realised through a chain of scholars who embodied both knowledge and righteousness.

Summary: Muslim scholarship, led by figures like al-Azami, provided strong and respectful responses to the revisionist school. By presenting manuscript evidence, demonstrating the sophistication of hadith sciences, and pointing to internal critiques within the tradition, they showed that the revisionist claims were often exaggerated or unsupported. At the core of the debate lies a deeper epistemological difference: Muslims approach revelation as divinely preserved and safeguarded by both scholarly rigor and personal piety, while revisionists approach it as a purely 'human' product. Recognising this contrast is key to understanding why the two sides often reach such different conclusions.

IV. Critique of Revisionist Methodology

The revisionist school, in some circles, has played an

intellectually dishonest role when stimulating discussion about the study of Islam's origins. Its emphasis on broadening the range of sources and applying critical methods appears to enrich academic discourse. Yet, on closer examination, the revisionist methodology suffers from several weaknesses. These flaws explain why many of their most striking claims have not gained broad acceptance, even within Western academia, and why Muslim scholars (or masses) have found them unconvincing.

Selective Use of Sources: One of the most significant weaknesses is the uneven treatment of evidence. Revisionists frequently dismiss early Muslim sources, such as hadith, seerah, and tafseer, as unreliable because they were compiled within the Muslim community. Yet they often rely heavily on non-Muslim sources, including Christian, Jewish, or Byzantine chronicles, which were written with little sympathy for Islam and often contained polemical distortions.

- For example, Crone and Cook in *Hagarism* (1977) treated hostile external reports as more reliable than Muslim accounts, despite the fact that these reports were often based on hearsay and carried their own political and theological biases.
- This double standard undermines the

credibility of revisionist reconstructions. A balanced methodology would recognise that both Muslim and non-Muslim sources carry biases and must be critically assessed, not selectively privileged.

Over-Reliance on Speculation: Revisionist theories often rest on conjecture rather than firm evidence.

- Wansbrough's claim that the Qur'an only took shape two or three centuries after the Prophet ﷺ relies heavily on literary analysis but lacks manuscript evidence to support such a late dating.
- Similarly, Crone and Cook's reconstruction of Islam as an offshoot of a Jewish-Arab coalition is largely hypothetical, based on a narrow set of texts while ignoring counter-evidence.

As a result, their reconstructions, while creative, are often more imaginative than historically grounded. Even within Western scholarship, these speculative leaps have been criticised for going beyond what the evidence can sustain.

Dismissal of Isnad and Internal Muslim Methods: Revisionists often dismiss the entire system of isnad (chains of transmission) as a later invention. This overlooks the sophisticated critical methods developed by Muslim scholars to test the reliability of reports.

- The science of ‘ilm al-rijāl carefully evaluated narrators’ memory, honesty, and piety, creating one of the most advanced systems of source criticism in world history.
- By rejecting isnad wholesale, revisionists ignored a unique epistemological framework that has no equivalent in biblical or classical studies.

As Harald Motzki and other scholars have shown, isnad-cum-matn analysis can, in fact, be used to date traditions back to the first Islamic century, contradicting Schacht’s sweeping rejection (Motzki, 2002).

Ignoring the Role of Taqwa and Character in Knowledge Transmission: A deeper problem is that revisionists operate within a secular framework where the moral character of transmitters is considered irrelevant. In Islamic epistemology, however, the trustworthiness (‘adālah), honesty (amānah), and God-consciousness (taqwā) of a narrator are central to determining the authenticity of a report.

- Muslim scholars saw personal integrity as inseparable from the truth of transmission: a liar, even if intelligent, could not be trusted to bear the Prophet’s ﷺ words.
- Revisionist scholars, by contrast, focus only on external data (such as manuscripts or external

corroboration) and exclude moral criteria.

This exclusion strips away one of the key safeguards in the Islamic preservation system and imposes a secular framework that does not fit the nature of Islamic knowledge.

Neglect of Early Manuscript and Archaeological Evidence: Revisionist arguments often underestimate or overlook the growing body of evidence for early Islamic texts.

- Discoveries such as the Ṣan‘ā’ Qur’an manuscripts, dated to the first Islamic century, directly challenge claims that the Qur’an only reached its final form much later.
- Early hadith manuscripts, studied by al-Azami and others, demonstrate that written preservation began far earlier than Schacht or Goldziher admitted.

By not fully engaging with this evidence, revisionists perpetuate outdated assumptions.

Imposing External Models on Islam: Finally, revisionist scholarship often applies models borrowed from biblical studies without adjusting for the differences between the two traditions. The Bible, for example, went through centuries of oral transmission, redaction, and canonisation without a system of isnād or communal memorisation. Islam, by contrast, developed a unique method of preservation from the

very beginning, combining memorisation, isnad, and written records.

Applying biblical-critical methods directly to Islam ignores these fundamental differences and risks producing distorted conclusions.

Summary: The revisionist school, while innovative, suffers from serious methodological weaknesses: selective use of sources, reliance on speculation, dismissal of isnad, neglect of taqwa and personal character, disregard for early manuscript evidence, and the imposition of external models. These flaws explain why the revisionist picture of Islamic origins remains unconvincing to many scholars and especially to Muslim communities, who see in their tradition a much stronger and more credible system of preservation.

V. The Robustness of Islamic Preservation

While the revisionist school often emphasises doubt and speculation, the Islamic scholarly tradition provides strong evidence of a remarkably careful and reliable system of preservation. Unlike other ancient religious traditions, Islam developed a unique combination of oral memorisation, written recording, and critical evaluation of transmitters. These measures, grounded in both faith and scholarship, ensured that the Qur'an and Sunnah were transmitted with extraordinary accuracy.

Preservation of the Qur'an: From the very beginning, the Qur'an was preserved through a dual system of oral and written transmission.

- During the Prophet's ﷺ lifetime, many Companions memorised the Qur'an in its entirety (ḥuffāz), while scribes such as Zayd ibn Thabit رضي الله عنه recorded the revelations in writing on parchment, bones, and palm leaves.
- After the Prophet's ﷺ passing, first khalifah Abū Bakr رضي الله عنه commissioned Zayd ibn Thabit رضي الله عنه to compile these materials into a single collection, ensuring nothing was lost. Under third khalifah Uthman رضي الله عنه, standardised copies were made and distributed to key Muslim regions, while variant codices were destroyed to avoid confusion.
- Importantly, this process did not erase authentic variation, but rather preserved the canonical qiraat (recitations), reflecting the Prophet's ﷺ teaching of the Qur'an in multiple authentic modes.

Modern manuscript discoveries, such as the Ṣan'ā' Qur'an fragments dated to the first Islamic century, confirm that the Qur'an was preserved in essentially the same form as it is recited today (Neuwirth, 2019). No other ancient scripture can claim such early textual integrity combined with widespread memorisation.

Preservation of Hadith: The Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ was preserved through an equally careful system, rooted in both oral and written practices.

- **Early written collections:** Contrary to Schacht's claim that hadith writing began late, evidence shows that Companions and early successors recorded hadith in personal notebooks (ṣaḥīfah). Famous examples include the Ṣaḥīfah of Hammām ibn Munabbih, a student of Abū Hurayrah رضي الله عنه, which has survived and can be traced back to the first century of Islam.
- **Isnad system:** The chain of transmission (isnad) was the hallmark of hadith preservation. Each transmitter was evaluated for memory, accuracy, honesty, adālah (العدالة, moral integrity and upright character) and ḍabt (الضبط, precision and accuracy in transmission). This meant that only reliable transmitters could pass on the Prophet's ﷺ words.
- **Hadith sciences:** Muslim scholars developed complex tools to assess reports, including jarḥ wa-ta'dīl (criticism and validation of narrators), isnad comparison, and cross-examination of matn (content). These methods produced collections like Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, which continue to stand as monuments of rigorous scholarship.

As Shaykh M. M. al-Azami (1977, 1985) and Jonathan Brown (2009) have argued, the sophistication of hadith criticism is unmatched in other religious traditions.

Role of Character and Piety: A distinctive feature of the Islamic preservation system is the emphasis on character and God-consciousness (taqwā). A narrator's reliability was judged not only by intellectual ability but by moral integrity. If a narrator was known to lie, neglect prayer, or commit major sins, his reports were rejected. This reflects the Qur'anic principle: "Indeed, it is only those who have knowledge among His servants that fear Allah" (Qur'an 35:28). The best bearers of knowledge were those who combined learning with piety and trustworthiness (‘adālah). Thus, the preservation of revelation was not only technical but also spiritual: it depended on communities of scholars who embodied both ‘ilm and taqwā.

This integration of scholarship and spirituality has no parallel in secular academic models, which often treat personal character as irrelevant to knowledge.

Historiography and Critical Tradition: Islam also developed a vibrant historiographical tradition that reflects both honesty and self-criticism.

- Early historians such as Ibn Ishāq and al-Ṭabarī preserved multiple versions of reports,

sometimes including contradictory accounts, rather than erasing them. This practice shows a commitment to transmitting knowledge rather than manipulating it for a single narrative.

- Scholars openly debated reliability, with disagreements preserved in writing. This transparency strengthened, rather than weakened, the authenticity of the tradition.

As Franz Rosenthal (1968) noted, the Muslim historiographical tradition demonstrates a critical spirit absent in many other pre-modern civilisations.

Divine Guarantee of Preservation: Muslims believe that the Qur'an and Sunnah are not merely traditions but are actually safeguarded by Allah Himself. The Qur'an promises: "Indeed, it is We who sent down the Reminder, and indeed, We will be its guardian" (Qur'an 15:9). The rigorous scholarly methods of memorisation, isnād, and scholarship are understood as instruments of this divine protection. From this perspective, the robustness of Islamic preservation is not accidental but a fulfilment of God's promise.

Summary: The Qur'an and Sunnah were preserved through a unique combination of oral and written transmission, the isnād system, and strict criteria for narrator integrity. Early manuscripts, continuous memorisation, and critical scholarship confirm their

authenticity. Unlike the revisionist claim that Islam's origins are uncertain, the Islamic tradition demonstrates a preservation system that is unparalleled in human history: one that combines rigorous scholarship with moral uprightness and divine protection.

VI. Institutional and Ideological Context

The rise of the western academic revisionist school of Islamic studies did not occur in isolation. It was shaped and supported by academic institutions, funding structures, and broader capitalist ideological currents in Western intellectual life. Understanding this context helps explain both the persistence of revisionist approaches and their influence beyond the academy.

Academic Institutions and Centres of Learning:

Several universities and research institutes became hubs for the development and promotion of revisionist scholarship:

- **SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London).** In the mid-20th century, SOAS was one of the key centres of critical Islamic studies. Patricia Crone and Michael Cook both studied and taught there, contributing to the development of revisionist theories.
- **Institute for Advanced Study (IAS), Princeton.**

Patricia Crone spent much of her career at IAS, where she held the Andrew W. Mellon Professorship. After her death, the “Patricia Crone Membership” was established to support future research on Near Eastern and Islamic studies. This illustrates the institutional legacy of her work.

- **Stanford University:** Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies. The Abbasi Program, supported by donors such as Sohaib and Sara Abbasi and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, funds academic work on Islamic history and society. While not exclusively revisionist, such centres provide platforms for historical-critical approaches to Islam.
- **Duke Islamic Studies Center (DISC).** Supported by the Carnegie Corporation, DISC has hosted research and events that promote interdisciplinary Islamic studies, including historical-critical perspectives.
- **Georgetown University:** Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim–Christian Understanding Established with a \$20 million gift from Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, this center fosters interfaith and academic dialogue. While it has Muslim donors, its intellectual approach remains largely within Western secular academic

paradigms.

- **McGill University Institute of Islamic Studies.** Founded in 1952 by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, this institute was the first of its kind in North America. Supported initially by the Government of Pakistan and Canadian foundations, it became a training ground for many Western scholars who applied critical methods to Islam.
- **Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Berlin.** Funded by German research bodies such as the DFG and the federal government, ZMO promotes the study of Muslim societies with a strong emphasis on modern academic frameworks.

These institutions not only employed leading revisionist scholars but also trained generations of students who would adopt and spread similar approaches.

Funding and Patronage: The growth of revisionist scholarship was sustained by a variety of funding sources:

- **Western Philanthropic Foundations:** Bodies such as the Carnegie Corporation, the Hewlett Foundation, and the Ford Foundation have supported Islamic studies programs, often with an emphasis on secular, historical, or social-

scientific perspectives.

- **Government Research Bodies:** In Europe, agencies like the German Research Foundation (DFG) and national education ministries provided grants for projects in Islamic history and philology.
- **Private Donors:** Wealthy individuals (including Muslims such as Prince Alwaleed bin Talal) endowed centres for Islamic studies. However, even when funded by Muslims, the academic frameworks often reflected secular Western paradigms rather than traditional Islamic epistemology.

Ideological Underpinnings: Beyond institutions and funding, revisionist scholarship reflects broader Western intellectual trends:

- **Secularism:** Since the Enlightenment, Western academia has often approached religion as a human construct rather than divine revelation. This framework shaped the historical-critical method applied to the Bible, and later to the Qur'an and hadith.
- **Relativism:** Revisionists often portray Islam as a latecomer to an already crowded Near Eastern religious landscape, stressing borrowing and syncretism while downplaying Islam's originality and divine claim.

- **Suspicion of Authority:** Revisionism aligns with a broader Western intellectual habit of questioning religious authority and privileging “outsider” accounts over internal testimony.
- **Post-Colonial Continuities:** While Orientalist scholarship was closely tied to colonial interests, revisionism represents a subtler form of intellectual dominance. By denying the authenticity of Muslim historical memory, it implicitly weakens Islam’s intellectual authority in modern discourse.

Contrast with the Islamic Tradition: The institutional and ideological environment of revisionist studies contrasts sharply with the Islamic scholarly world:

- In Western universities, funding, prestige, and advancement often reward radical critique, novelty, and scepticism.
- In the Islamic tradition, piety (taqwā), integrity (‘adālah), and service to the preservation of revelation are the preconditions for true knowledge.
- Where Western institutions emphasise innovation and doubt, the Islamic heritage emphasises continuity and trustworthiness.

This difference in values explains why revisionist conclusions resonate in secular academia but fail to persuade

those who value the lived continuity of the Muslim scholarly tradition.

Summary: The revisionist school thrived within a network of influential universities and was supported by foundations, governments, and donors committed to secular models of scholarship. Its intellectual roots lie in Western secularism, relativism, and the historical-critical method developed for biblical studies. By contrast, the Islamic tradition sees knowledge as inseparable from taqwā, integrity, and divine preservation. Recognising these institutional and ideological contexts clarifies why revisionist claims have influence in Western academia but remain unconvincing within the Islamic intellectual world.

VII. Conclusion

The western academic revisionist school of Islamic studies represents a radical current in modern Western scholarship on Islam. Building on the early critiques of Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht, scholars such as John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, and Michael Cook advanced sceptical reconstructions of Islam's origins. Their methods often rely on dismissing Muslim sources, privileging non-Muslim accounts, and constructing speculative historical models that reduce Islam to a product of politics, borrowing, and sectarian conflict. While these approaches succeeded in raising new questions and broadening the range of sources

examined, they also revealed serious methodological weaknesses: selective use of evidence, heavy reliance on conjecture, wholesale rejection of isnād traditions, neglect of early manuscript evidence, and a secular epistemology that severs knowledge from moral uprightness and piety. These weaknesses explain why even within Western academia, many scholars have moved away from their most extreme revisionist claims.

Nevertheless, the revisionist impulse remains alive. More recent figures, such as Herbert Berg, who questions the early development of tafsir; Andrew Rippin, who cast doubt on the formative role of Qur'anic exegesis; and Fred Donner, who portrays Islam's beginnings as part of a broad "believers' movement", continue to exist in academic circles. Their works, like those of their predecessors, often carry the authority of Western universities and publishing houses, which can mislead some Muslims into confusing academic prestige with accuracy or truth. It is therefore vital to approach such writings with caution, recognising that they are shaped by intellectual traditions rooted in scepticism and secularism, not in the Islamic worldview of divine preservation.

By contrast, the Islamic tradition demonstrates a robust preservation system, combining oral

memorisation, written recording, isnād verification, and a strong emphasis on the moral integrity (‘adālah, taqwā, amānah) of transmitters. The Qur’an was preserved through a dual oral and written system from the Prophet’s ﷺ lifetime, while hadith sciences developed unparalleled methods of authentication. Muslim historians showed a commitment to transparency by recording multiple versions of reports and critically assessing narrators.

Equally important, the Islamic epistemological framework insists that knowledge is not simply intellectual data but a trust carried by the most God-conscious and upright individuals. This deep link between taqwa and truth has no equivalent in the secular academic tradition, but it is precisely what safeguarded the Qur’an and Sunnah across the centuries.

The institutional and ideological setting of revisionist scholarship in secular universities, Western funding structures, and intellectual trends shaped by biblical criticism and relativism, explains why revisionist ideas found an audience in Western academia. Yet these same ideas have failed to convince those who recognise the integrity of the Muslim scholarly tradition and the divine promise of preservation: “Indeed, it is We who sent down the Reminder, and indeed, We will be its guardian”

(Qur'an 15:9).

In conclusion, while the revisionist school, (whether in the earlier writings of Goldziher, Schacht, Wansbrough, Crone, and Cook, or in more recent contributions from Berg, Rippin, and Donner) continues to exist in academic debates; its speculative theories do not outweigh the strength of the Islamic preservation system. In western academia, a more balanced approach is needed: one that engages critically with historical evidence but also respects the rigorous methods and epistemological principles of the Islamic scholarly tradition. Muslims, living in western countries or studying in western universities, must remain mindful that true knowledge is not guaranteed by academic prestige, but by adherence to truth, trustworthiness, and most importantly the fear of Allah SWT.

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