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### Epistemology of Orientalist Interpretation: A Critical Study of Theodor Nöldeke's Historical Paradigm in the Interpretation of the Qur'an

*Epistemologi Interpretasi Orientalis: Studi Kritis tentang Paradigma Historis Theodor Nöldeke dalam Interpretasi Al-Qur'an*

Muhammad Ahmad Mumtaz Muizza\*<sup>1</sup> Syafi'in Mansur<sup>2</sup>

Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten, Serang, Indonesia <sup>1 2</sup>

\*Corresponding Author: [231320013.muhammadahmad@uinbanten.ac.id](mailto:231320013.muhammadahmad@uinbanten.ac.id)

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#### Abstract

This study aims to examine the epistemology of orientalist interpretation through a critical analysis of Theodor Nöldeke's historical paradigm in *Geschichte des Qur'ans*. The research focuses on exploring the epistemic foundation that places history as the primary source of Qur'anic understanding. Data are drawn from Nöldeke's primary work and relevant scholarly literature from both orientalist and Muslim perspectives. The findings reveal that Nöldeke views revelation as a historical phenomenon rooted in the Prophet Muhammad's religious experience rather than divine communication. This paradigm elevates history above revelation, differing fundamentally from Islamic interpretive epistemology. Nevertheless, Nöldeke's philological rigor and methodological precision offer valuable academic insights that, if applied critically, can enrich contemporary Qur'anic studies.

**Keywords:** Al-Qur'an; Critical Study; Historical Paradigm; Orientalism; Theodor Nöldeke

#### Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji epistemologi tafsir orientalis melalui analisis kritis terhadap paradigma historis Theodor Nöldeke dalam karya *Geschichte des Qur'ans*. Fokus utama penelitian adalah mengungkap dasar epistemologis yang menjadikan sejarah sebagai sumber utama pengetahuan dalam memahami Al-Qur'an. Data penelitian bersumber dari karya primer Nöldeke serta literatur akademik pendukung, baik dari kalangan orientalis maupun sarjana Muslim. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Nöldeke memandang wahyu sebagai fenomena historis yang lahir dari pengalaman keagamaan Nabi Muhammad, bukan sebagai komunikasi ilahi yang transenden. Paradigma ini menempatkan sejarah di atas otoritas wahyu, sehingga berbeda secara mendasar dari epistemologi tafsir Islam. Meskipun demikian, ketelitian filologis dan disiplin metodologis Nöldeke tetap memiliki nilai akademik yang dapat diadopsi secara kritis untuk memperkaya studi tafsir kontemporer.

**Kata Kunci:** Al-Qur'an; Studi Kritis; Paradigma Historis; Orientalisme; Theodor Nöldeke



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## INTRODUCTION

The interest of non-Muslim scholars in Islamic studies in general and the study of the Qur'an in particular has been going on for a long time. Since the 12th century, orientalists have begun to conduct research on the Qur'an, which at first was still apologetic and thick with polemic nuances. The studies pioneered by Jewish and Christian scholars generally took the form of efforts to translate the Qur'an into various European languages, which were often accompanied by provocative and tendentious comments on Islam which was then developing rapidly in Christian areas. The discourse on the Qur'an among Western scholars and orientalists has always been an interesting topic to discuss, especially since the Qur'an asserts itself as a book free from doubt (*la rayba fiha*), guaranteed authenticity, and unmatched by any other book. However, the way Western scholars view the Qur'an underwent a significant shift towards the end of the 20th century. Huston Smith in *The World's Religions* even states that there has never been another scripture that is so difficult for Westerners to understand than the Qur'an.<sup>1</sup>

The development of the study of the Qur'an became more rapid after Flügel in 1834 compiled a critical edition of the Qur'an which became an important reference for the later orientalists.<sup>2</sup> Interest in the study of the Qur'an was also reflected in the monograph writing competition on the theme "historical criticism of the Qur'anic text" organized by the Academy of Inscriptions and Letters in Paris in 1857, and won by Theodor Nöldeke.<sup>3</sup> In addition, although the study of the interpretation of the Qur'an has not received much attention, some orientalists have examined the history of the development of tafsir in the Islamic tradition. Overall, the study of the Qur'an in the West shows significant progress with the emergence of various new approaches, especially the linguistic approach that is now dominating. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that the tradition of Islamic studies known as orientalism has its roots in the paradigm of polemics and accusations against the Prophet Muhammad, especially regarding the origins of the Qur'an which are considered to have similarities with previous religious narratives as assumed by orientalists since the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup>

Theodor Nöldeke, one of the most influential figures in the orientalist tradition who studied the Qur'an through a historical-critical approach.<sup>5</sup> Through his work *Geschichte des Qur'ans* (*History of the Qur'an*), Nöldeke introduced a chronological model of revelation as well as a framework of historical analysis of the Qur'anic text that later became the main reference for many Western scholars. The paradigm he built rested on the assumption that the Qur'an was not a transcendent revelation, but rather a product of the social and psychological historical dynamics of the Prophet Muhammad. Although Theodor Nöldeke's thought has been extensively researched, most of the extant studies are still descriptive, limited to the historical aspects of his work as well as the periodization of the surah he formulated, without critically exploring the

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1 Hasani Ahmad Said, "Potret Studi Alquran Di Mata Orientalis," *At-Tibyan* 3, no. 1 (2018): 22–41, <https://doi.org/10.32505/tibyan.v3i1.474>.

2 Paul Babinski and Jan Loop, "Looting and Learning: War and the Qur'an in European Oriental Studies," *Erudition and the Republic of Letters* 9, no. 3 (September 10, 2024): 239–80, <https://doi.org/10.1163/24055069-09030001>.

3 Sümeyye Güven, "Qur'anic Studies in the British Orientalist Tradition: The Case of Alphonse Mingana" (Yüksek Lisans Tezi, İstanbul Üniversitesi, İstanbul, 2019).

4 Indri, Masayu Nisa Malihah, and Bukhari Abdul Shomad, "Studi Al- Qur ' an Dalam Lensa Orientalis : Antara Kritik Dan Kontribusi," *Al-Shamela : Journal of Quranic and Hadith Studies* 3, no. 2 (2025): 110–23.

5 Bernhard Maier, "Der Orientalist Als Kommentator Des Zeitgeschehens: Theodor Nöldeke Über Politik, Religion Und Gesellschaft," *Deutschland Und Der Orient: Philologie, Philosophie, Historische Kulturwissenschaften* 100 (2021): 177.

epistemological structures that underpin his hermeneutical view of the text of revelation.<sup>6</sup> As a result, there has not been much research that has systematically uncovered how 19th-century scientific rationality, Christian-European theological biases, and positivistic paradigms shaped the construction of the orientalist interpretation he developed.

This study aims to identify and analyze the epistemological structures that make up Theodor Nöldeke's historical paradigm in the interpretation of the Qur'an, as well as assess its methodological implications for the development of contemporary interpretive studies. With this focus, this study seeks to fill the academic gap in the study of orientalist interpretation through a critical epistemological analysis approach, not just through ideological criticism or historical description. This approach is expected to expand the knowledge of how the concept of interpretation is formulated outside the Islamic tradition, as well as open up a space for a more reflective intellectual dialogue between the study of Islamic interpretation and the western scientific tradition.

## Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with the type of library *research*.<sup>7</sup> The data used are sourced from written works that are relevant to the study topic. The primary source of research consists of Theodor Nöldeke's main work, *Geschichte des Qorâns*. Journal articles, books, and various scientific writings that discuss Theodor Nöldeke's thoughts and influences are used as supporting references for this research. Data analysis was carried out using a *content analysis method* that focuses on the study of argumentation structures, historical concepts of revelation, and epistemological assumptions that underlie Nöldeke's historical paradigm. To improve the validity of the findings, this study applied the source triangulation technique by comparing various academic literature from both the perspective of orientalists and Muslim scholars. Through this method, the research not only aims to describe Nöldeke's thought, but also to critically reveal the epistemic foundations that shape his historical construction in the interpretation of the Qur'an.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Theodor Nöldeke's Intellectual Background and Thought Orientation

Theodor Nöldeke was a prominent German orientalist born in Harburg on March 2, 1836.<sup>8</sup> He comes from a family environment that has a strong educational background. From an early age, Nöldeke had received intellectual guidance directly from his father in the city of Lingen. It was also in that city that he pursued his formal education, which lasted from the spring of 1849 to the autumn of 1853. In the autumn of 1853, his father moved Theodor Nöldeke to Göttingen to continue his education at the University of Göttingen. At this college, Nöldeke intensively studied Semitic languages, such as Arabic, Hebrew, and Syriac, under the guidance of Heinrich Ewald (1803–1875), a leading scholar of the Old Testament and Hebrew linguist. In addition to studying Semitic languages, Nöldeke also had time to continue his studies at the University of Kiel to study Sanskrit with his teacher, Benfey. During this period, he also began to pursue Turkish and Persian. The beginning of his academic journey was marked by the acquisition of

6 Christiaan Engberts, *Scholarly Virtues in Nineteenth-Century Sciences and Humanities* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84566-7>.

7 Mestika Zed, *Metode Penelitian Kepustakaan* (Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2008).

8 Christiaan Engberts, "A Helping Hand: Private Evaluation in Scholarly Correspondence," in *Scholarly Virtues in Nineteenth-Century Sciences and Humanities* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 23–61, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84566-7\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84566-7_2).

a first-level bachelor's degree in 1856, when he was 20 years old.<sup>9</sup>

Nöldeke obtained his first bachelor's degree in 1856 through the compilation of a final work dealing with the history of the Qur'an. The work was written in Latin under the title *De Origine et Compositione Surarum Quranicarum Ipsiusque Qorani* (the origin and composition of the Surah of the Qur'an). The following year, 1857, the paper was included in a scientific competition organized by the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* in Paris. At the event, Nöldeke won the award for the best historical-critical study of the Qur'anic text, which at the same time confirmed his reputation in the field of orientalist studies. This success also marked the choice of the Qur'an as the main focus of his academic research. Subsequently, in 1860, the work was translated into German with the help of his pupil, Friedrich Schwally, and published under the title *Geschichte des Qorans* or *The History of the Qur'an*. This publication then became a fundamental reference for the development of Qur'anic studies among Western scholars.<sup>10</sup>

Of the various fields of scholarship he has been involved in, Nöldeke has consistently focused on two main disciplines, namely Semitic languages and Islamic studies. In the field of Semitic languages, he produced a number of important works, including *Semitic Languages* and *The History and Civilization of Islam*. Meanwhile, his monumental works such as *Grammatik der neusyrischen Sprache* (1868), *Mandäische Grammatik* (1874), as well as his translation of al-Ṭabari's works in 1881–1882 demonstrate his profound competence in Islamic studies. *The Geschichte des Qorans* (History of the Qur'an) is one of the main works that confirms Nöldeke's great expertise and influence in the study.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Nöldeke's Interpretive Paradigm***

The main paradigm underlying Nöldeke's interpretation is based on the view that the Qur'an is a text that was born, grown, and developed in the historical context of the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslim community.<sup>12</sup> In *The History of the Qur'an*, Nöldeke does not make revelation a transcendent reality that stands outside of history, but rather places the Qur'an within the framework of human experience.<sup>13</sup> Revelation is understood as the Prophet's religious experience expressed through Arabic and influenced by the social, psychological, and political conditions of his time.<sup>14</sup> With this framework, the Qur'an is not treated as an ahistorical and final normative text, but rather as a religious document that can be analyzed for its origins, dynamics, and historical transformations. It is this perspective that epistemologically distinguishes Nöldeke's orientalist interpretation from the Islamic tradition of interpretation, which makes the sacredness of revelation the main methodological foundation. One of the most prominent manifestations of Nöldeke's historical paradigm is his attempt to reconstruct the chronology of the Qur'anic surah and verse. He considers that the classification of Makki-Madani and the order of descent of revelation as accepted in the Islamic tradition are not fully critically acceptable, because according to him it contains theological elements and is retrospective. Therefore, Nöldeke developed an alternative chronological framework by relying

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9 Jacob Lassner, "Modern Europe and Traditional Islamic Views of Jews and Judaism: Restoring the Postscript to a Study of Early Jewish-Muslim Relations," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 16, no. 2 (April 3, 2025): 107–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2025.2491880>.

10 Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte Des Qorâns*, trans. Gotthelf Bergsträsser (Boston: Elibron Classics, 2005).

11 Kurdi Fadal, "Pandangan Orientalis Terhadap Al-Qur'an ('Teori Pengaruh' Al-Qur'an Theodor Nöldeke)," *Religia* 14, no. 2 (2011): 189–206.

12 Nicolai Sinai, *Inner-Qur'anic Chronology, The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

13 Theodor Nöldeke et al., "The History of the Qur'an," *Texts and Studies on the Qur'ān*, v. 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004228795>.

14 Ihwan Agustono, "Potret Perkembangan Metodologi Kelompok Orientalis Dalam Studi Al-Qur ' an," *Studia Quranika* 4, no. 2 (2019): 159–80.

on stylistic analysis, themes, verse length, and the level of complexity of language. The early surahs are seen as having a short, poetic, and eschatological oriented language, while the later surahs show a longer, normative, and legislative-nuanced structure. This chronological reconstruction is not only historical, but also serves as a basis for interpretation, since the meaning of the verse is determined by the assumed phases of Islamic historical development.

Nöldeke put forward a theory of the chronology of the surahs of the Qur'an by dividing the period of revelation into four main phases, namely the three phases of Makkiyah and one phase of Madaniyah. This division is based on differences in language style, structure, and thematic content which according to him reflect the development of the Prophet Muhammad's thought throughout his prophetic life.<sup>15</sup> In this framework, the variation in the character of the surah is understood as an indication of the Prophet's psychological and social evolution, not as a continuation of divine revelation that was transcendent and consistent from the beginning. Although Nöldeke acknowledged that the Qur'an was substantially derived from the Prophet Muhammad, he questioned its transmission and codification process after the Prophet's death. According to him, the preparation of the Qur'an in the post-prophetic period, especially in the form of standard mushaf, has the potential to undergo adjustments, harmonizations, and even certain changes.

He completely doubted the reliability of the oral transmission of the Qur'an and opened up the possibility of additions or modifications by the companions in the process of compiling the final text. In *the Geschichte des Qurâns*, Nöldeke attempted to reconstruct the chronology of revelation by relying on stylistic analysis, language structure, and surah themes.<sup>16</sup> He argued that the early surahs were poetic, short, full of religious emotion, and reflective, while the Madaniyah surahs tended to be longer, systematic, normative, and legalistic. This periodization is then used as a framework for historical interpretation, in which the meaning of the verse is understood based on the phases of the development of the Muslim community and the socio-political situation that is assumed to be the background. This view implicitly confirms the epistemological assumption that the Qur'an is a product of the Prophet Muhammad's historical development and religious experience, not a final, ahistorical divine revelation. Nöldeke also considers that the process of codification of the Qur'an during the time of Caliph 'Uthman bin 'Affan opened up space for revision and standardization, so that the current text of the Qur'an does not fully represent the form of the first revelation as revealed.<sup>17</sup>

Nöldeke made the Bible the main benchmark for judging the Qur'an. In this framework, he thinks that the Qur'an is not a divine revelation, but the result of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). According to him, a number of teachings and expressions in the Qur'an show strong similarities to Jewish and Christian traditions, so they are understood as a form of adoption of the Bible. For example, the expression monotheism "*lā ilāha illā Allāh*" is associated by Nöldeke with a theological statement in the Book of Samuel II 32:22. Similarly, the phrase "*bismillāh*" is understood as a religious formula that has been commonly used in Jewish and Christian worship traditions before Islam, so it is not considered a completely original expression of revelation.

In Nöldeke's frame of mind, the meaning of Qur'anic verses is not primarily traced through internal relationships of the text, such as reasonableness, thematic structure, or internal

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15 Mokh Sya'roni, Moh Ichwan, Muhammad Yusuf Pratama, and David Ming. "Ecotheological Insights from Prophetic Hadiths: Reframing Islamic Environmental Ethics Based on SDGs." *Pharos Journal of Theology* 106, no. 5 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.106.51>

16 Nöldeke, *Geschichte Des Qurâns*.

17 Masruchin, Sultan Dzaki, and Rahmat Gani, "Kontroversi Dan Kritik : Pandangan Orientalis Tentang Autentisitas Al-Qur'an," *Al-Shamela : Journal of Quranic and Hadith Studies* 3, no. 2 (2025): 155–68.

coherence, but rather through external historical contexts.<sup>18</sup> The verses are understood as a response to the concrete situation faced by the Prophet and the Muslim community, so that the meaning is positioned as a reflection of certain historical needs.<sup>19</sup> This approach makes the interpretation more oriented to the question of the time setting and the cause of the appearance of the verse rather than the exploration of linguistic meaning or its normative message.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the verses of the Qur'an are understood not as stand-alone universal statements, but as situational expressions that follow the historical dynamics of Islamic da'wah. This historical paradigm is evident in Nöldeke's reading of the verses of war and law. Verses on jihad and conflict, for example, are interpreted as a reflection of the context of Medina, when Muslim communities already had more established social and political structures. These verses are understood not as universal theological commands, but rather as historical responses to specific conflict situations. Similarly, the concept of *nasikh-mansukh* is seen as an indication of the historical development of the Prophet's thought and his community, rather than as a divine mechanism in the legal system of revelation. Even the provisions of worship are understood as the result of a gradual process that follows the needs of the formation of a religious community. This overall approach suggests that Nöldeke's interpretation consistently moves from history to meaning, rather than from text to norm.

Nöldeke's view of the Qur'an is also closely related to the figure of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), especially regarding his status as *an ummi*. In his work and *The History of the Qur'an*, Nöldeke rejected the understanding that *ummi* means not being able to read and write at all. He argues that the Prophet Muhammad (saw) had very limited literacy skills, although he was not completely illiterate.<sup>21</sup> According to Nöldeke, the term *ummi* is more accurately understood as opposed to *ahlulkitab*, which is someone who does not have access or deep understanding of the previous holy books. Theodor Nöldeke's thought on the Qur'an can be seen as one of the most mature formulations of orientalist interpretation rooted in the historical-critical paradigm.<sup>22</sup> Through *The History of the Qur'an*, Nöldeke does not position himself as a mufasir as understood in the Islamic tradition, but as a historian of texts who seeks to trace the process of emergence, development, and codification of the Qur'an with a scientific approach. This orientation reflects a significant shift in perspective: the Qur'an is no longer understood primarily as a transcendent revelation containing normative authority, but rather as a historical text that can be analyzed through the tools of philology, textual criticism, and historical reconstruction.

Regarding the letters of muqatta'ah, in the *Geschichte des Qorans* Nöldeke argues that the letters of *muqatta'ah* are not part of the Qur'an as revelation. He considered that these letters did not come from the Prophet (peace be upon him), but were non-revelational elements that appeared in the process of writing the early Qur'an. According to Nöldeke, the letters of *muqatta'ah* located at the beginning of a number of surahs serve as the initials of the names of the authors of the Qur'an or the owners of the *mushaf* in the early days, before the official codification

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18 Guillaume Dye, "Concepts and Methods in the Study of the Qur'ān," *Religions* 12, no. 8 (August 3, 2021): 599, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080599>.

19 Zunaidi Nur, "Kronologi Al-Qur'an Periode Makkah (Analisis Internal Teks Theodor Nöldeke (1836-1930) Dalam Penyusunan Kronologi Al-Qur'an Periode Makkah)," *Ulul Albab: Jurnal Ilmiah Multidisiplin* 1, no. 12 (2022): 4536–45.

20 Rochmah Nur Azizah, Nailatuz Zulfa, and Ziska Yanti, "Analisis Wacana Kritis Konsep Plagiat Dan Buta Huruf Nabi Muhammad Saw. Dalam Geschichte Des Qoran Karya Theodore Noldeke," *Jurnal Mafatih : Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Tafsir* 2, no. 1 (2022): 25–32.

21 Sri Lestari, "Pandangan Theodore Noldeke Tentang Ke-Ummi-an Nabi Muhammad SAW" (IAIN BENGKULU, 2019).

22 Nöldeke, *Geschichte Des Qorāns*.

process during the time of Caliph ‘Uthman bin ‘Affan. These letters, in his view, are also markers of mushaf owned by certain individuals. For example, the series of *letters alif-lām-rā* is interpreted as the initials of al-Zubayr, the letter *ṣad* refers to *Ḥaṣṣah*, the letter *kāf* to Abu Bakr, and the letter *nūn* to ‘Uthman. Nöldeke’s view is not a new idea, but a continuation of previous orientalist thought, especially Jacob Golius and George Sale. Sale states that of the many interpretations of the *muqatta’at* letters, only Golius’s opinion is the closest to the truth. Golius thought that the letters of *muqatta’at* were additions inserted by the writers of the Qur’an, not part of the original revelation. He even interprets the series of *alif-lām-mīm* as an abbreviation of *amr li Muḥammad*. Similarly, the series of *kāf-bā-yā-‘ain-ṣād* is understood as if it was written by a Jewish priest with the meaning of *Koh Ya’as* (“thus He commands”).<sup>23</sup>

In *The History of the Qur’an*, Theodor Nöldeke does not treat the verses of the Qur’an as objects of thematic or normative interpretation as is common in the Islamic tradition of interpretation. These verses are positioned primarily as historical data used to reconstruct the process of revelation as well as the textual development of the Qur’an. For example, early verses such as Surah al-Alaq verses 1–5,

إِقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ اقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ  
مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ

This verse is seen as a representation of the earliest phases of the Prophet Muhammad’s religious experience. Nöldeke interprets these verses based on their short, poetic, and emotional stylistic character, which according to him reflects the early stages of da’wah that are still personal and have not been institutionalized in the form of laws or social communities. In this reading, the theological dimension of the verse is not the main concern, because what is emphasized is its function as a historical indicator of the emergence of the Qur’an.<sup>24</sup>

A similar approach is also applied in Nöldeke’s analysis of Surah al-Fatiḥah. This surah is not understood as the theological core of the Qur’an, but rather as a prayer text that is studied through comparison with the Jewish and Christian liturgical traditions. Nöldeke questions the chronological position of al-Fatiḥah and opens up the possibility that the surah underwent a formalization process as the Muslim community grew. Thus, al-Fatiḥah is placed within the historical framework of the development of religious practice, not as a normative revelation that from the beginning occupied a central position in the structure of the Qur’an.<sup>25</sup>

In the recitation of verses related to conflict and war, such as Surah al-Baqarah verse 190,

وَقَاتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ الَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَكُمْ وَلَا تَعْتَدُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُعْتَدِينَ

Nöldeke saw a change in the character of revelation in the Medina phase. The verses were interpreted as a response to the social and political conditions faced by the early Muslim community as Islam had developed into a socio-political entity. In this paradigm, the command of jihad is not understood as a universal principle that is transhistorical, but as a product of certain historical needs. This interpretation shows how the historical context is used as the main determining factor in the meaning of the verse.

23 Nöldeke.

24 M. Rama Haqiqi and Kartika Kadar Manik, “Menelusuri Tuduhan Dan Kritik Orientalis Terhadap Nabi Muhammad, Al- Qur’an, Dan Hadis: Tinjauan Terhadap Pemikiran Theodor Nöldeke,” *Indonesian Society and Religion Research* 1, no. 2 (2024): 110–17, <https://doi.org/10.61798/isah.v1i2.161>.

25 Ahmad Syukron and Nikmatul Khairiyah, “Chronology of the Qur’an According to Theodor Nöldeke and Sir William Muir (Analysis of the History of the Qur’an and Life of Mahomet),” *Budapest International Research and Critics Institute-Journal (BIRCI-Journal)* 5, no. 2 (2022): 16644–56.

The same thing is seen in the discussion of verses about nasakh, such as Surah al-Baqarah verse 106,

﴿ مَا نَنْسَخْ مِنْ آيَةٍ أَوْ نُنسِهَا نَأْتِ بِخَيْرٍ مِّنْهَا أَوْ مِثْلَهَا ۗ أَلَمْ تَعْلَمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴾

Nöldeke understands this as an indication of changes and developments in the teachings of the Qur'an in line with the dynamics of the situation faced by the Muslim community. The verse is not seen as a divine mechanism within the framework of revelation theology, but rather as historical evidence that the teachings of the Qur'an are undergoing a process of adaptation. This view reinforces Nöldeke's thesis of the Qur'an as a historically growing text and absent in its final form from the beginning.

The verses of the law of worship, such as the fasting command in Surah al-Baqarah verse 183,

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

This verse was also read by Nöldeke in the framework of the institutionalization of Islamic teachings. The emergence of the laws of worship is understood as part of the process of forming an increasingly structured religious community, with the possibility of influence from previous religious traditions. In this reading, the practice of worship is seen as the result of the historical evolution of the Muslim community, not merely as a decree of revelation that has been revealed at once and definitely. All of these examples confirm that in Nöldeke's historical paradigm, the verses of the Qur'an are positioned primarily as objects of historical study, so that their meaning and function are determined by the context of revelation and the dynamics of the development of the early Islamic community.

## The Epistemology of Orientalist Interpretation According to Nöldeke

Nöldeke relies on non-normative sources of knowledge derived from the disciplines of history and philology. In *The History of the Qur'an*, the understanding of the Qur'an is built through *textual criticism* of the variety of readings, linguistic analysis of classical Arabic, and tracing the social and religious conditions of pre-Islamic Arab society.<sup>26</sup> In addition, Nöldeke implicitly uses a comparative approach with Jewish and Christian scriptures to explain the emergence of certain themes in the Qur'an. Through this framework, the Qur'an is positioned within the historical network of Semitic religions and is not understood as a fully autonomous or unique text (*sui generis*). Thus, the source of knowledge of interpretation does not rely on revelation or the internal authority of the Islamic tradition, but on historical reconstruction based on linguistic data and comparison of religious texts. Within this epistemological framework, interpretive authority underwent a fundamental shift, from prophetic *sanad* and Islamic scientific tradition to modern scientists.<sup>27</sup> Interpreters are positioned as rational subjects who have the methodological capacity to assess the validity of the text as well as the history of its formation. The classical Islamic histories are not completely rejected, but are treated as objects of critical study, not as a source of final truth. The validity of an interpretation is determined by the accuracy of the method, the consistency of the argument, and its conformity to historical data, not by the legitimacy of religious authority or the continuity of transmission. Thus, the epistemology of orientalist interpretation affirms the supremacy of academic ratios over religious authority in determining the meaning and history of the Qur'anic text.

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26 Nöldeke et al., "The History of the Qur'an."

27 Muhammad Yusuf Pratama, M. Sihabudin, Mokh. Sya'roni, and Saepudin. 2025. "Living the Qur'an: Exploring Dalā'il Al-Khairāt in Indonesia As a Bridge Between Devotional Tradition and Emotional Experience". *Millati: Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities* 9 (2). <https://doi.org/10.18326/millati.v9i2.3944>.



Nöldeke departs from the assumption that religious phenomena are subject to historical causality. Revelation is understood as the religious experience of the Prophet Muhammad expressed through human language and influenced by the social, psychological, and cultural conditions of seventh-century Arabia.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the structure and meaning of the Qur'an are not treated as an ahistorical entity, but rather as the result of a gradual process that can be traced through the study of chronology, the character of the language style, and the development of the theme. Within this framework, history does not simply serve as a background for interpretation, but becomes the main epistemic foundation in understanding the text. This assumption is concretely manifested in Nöldeke's central project, the preparation of the chronology of revelation. By not placing traditional Islamic history as a normative authority, he proposes the periodization of Makki–Madani based on stylistic and thematic analysis. The early surahs are seen as reflecting a religious phase that is eschatological and emotional in nature, while later surahs show a shift towards social and legal arrangements. This chronology is not only descriptive, but also determines the direction of interpretation, because the meaning of the verse is understood based on its position in the historical stage of the development of the Prophet's da'wah. Thus, the meaning of the text departs from historical reconstruction, not from the normative assumptions of revelation.

In terms of interpretive authority, Nöldeke's orientalist interpretation epistemology places modern scientists at the center of knowledge production. The validity of interpretation is not measured through sanad, ijma', or religious legitimacy, but rather through methodological coherence and its compatibility with historical data. Islamic histories are still used, but they are treated as objects of criticism that must be tested for validity.<sup>29</sup> This marks a profound epistemic shift, in which the Qur'an is no longer within the horizon of faith, but rather in the realm of academic research that demands a critical distance between the interpreter and the text. This difference in orientation is also reflected in the purpose of interpretation. In Nöldeke's paradigm, interpretation is not directed to produce spiritual, theological, or normative meanings, but rather to reconstruct the history of the formation of the Qur'anic text. Interpretation functions as a historiographic instrument, not as a guideline for religious life. This is evident in Nöldeke's reading of the verses of law, jihad, and worship understood as a response to the historical needs of the early Muslim community, rather than as a norm that applies across the ages. With this approach, the Qur'an is positioned primarily as a document of religious history.

Nöldeke takes a different approach from the scholarly tradition of Muslim scholars, namely by focusing on historical methods and linguistic-philological analysis. The use of this historical approach can be traced from his statement that the main sources of his studies are historical and exegetical traditions, which he considers most reliable when they are associated with major events in Islamic history. Within this framework, the history of the Qur'an is seen as an integral part of the history of Islam as a whole. The two are intertwined and inseparable, like two sides of a unit. Therefore, the discussion of the Qur'an cannot be separated from the comprehensive study of Islamic history. Ignoring historical data and relying solely on theological arguments can be seen as a flaw in the academic approach. However, this does not mean placing historical data as the sole interpretive authority, especially considering that the Qur'an was born and developed in oral tradition. Nevertheless, the fact that the Qur'an is present in a certain historical context, responds to social events, and has a close relationship with the development of Islamic civilization is a historical reality that cannot be ignored in scientific studies<sup>30</sup>

28 Aramdhan Kodrat Permana, "Neal Robinson's Criticism of Nöldeke's Theory of The Chronology of The Qur'an," in *Proceeding International Conference on Education, Humanities, and Social Science*, vol. 1, 2021, 21–34.

29 Necmettin Salih EKİZ, "What Do Orientalist Qur'anic Studies Mean For a Muslim?," *Tefsir Araştırmaları Dergisi* 7, no. Özel Sayı (September 30, 2023): 30–51, <https://doi.org/10.31121/tader.1316371>.

30 Sirajuddin Bariqi, "Pengaruh Theodor Noldeke Terhadap Studi Sejarah Al-Qur'an Di Indonesia," *Subuf* 11, no. 2 (2018): 237–56.

The main purpose of interpretation in Nöldeke's epistemology is not a spiritual, theological, or legal interpretation, but rather a historical reconstruction of the Qur'an. *The History of the Qur'an* is explicitly directed to answer questions about the process of formation, development, and codification of the Qur'an, not to formulate the normative meaning of the verse for the religious life of Muslims. In this context, interpretation serves as an instrument to trace the layers of the text's history, including editorial changes, the chronology of revelation, and the social context of its emergence. This orientation causes the interpretation to lose its performative and normative dimensions, and then shifts to a historiographic tool that aims to produce descriptive knowledge about the past. Epistemologically, Nöldeke's orientalist interpretation has a rational-historical character, because it departs from the assumption that religious phenomena can be explained through rational historical causes. This approach is also empirical, in the sense that it only recognizes data that can be traced through language, documents, and social contexts that can be scientifically reconstructed. Moreover, Nöldeke's interpretation is descriptive, not normative, because it does not aim to establish theological truth, but rather to describe the historical process as understood by modern researchers. The combination of these three characteristics forms an epistemology of interpretation that appears objective and scientific, but at the same time removes the dimension of transcendence of revelation from the realm of knowledge that is considered legitimate.

### **Criticism of Nöldeke's Historical Paradigm from the Perspective of Islamic Interpretation**

Nöldeke's historical paradigm contrasts sharply with classical Islamic epistemology, which rests on *rimayah* (revelatory authority) and *dirayah* (rational-linguistic understanding within sacred bounds). In Islam, revelation is transcendent, while history aids interpretation. Nöldeke reverses this: history becomes the primary epistemic source, and revelation a historical phenomenon. This reduces the Qur'an's transcendence and confines its meaning to past contexts. His claim of scientific objectivity also reflects Western biases shaped by biblical criticism and colonial intellectual power. Yet, his philological rigor and methodological discipline remain valuable if critically adapted. Islamic interpretation can selectively adopt his analytical precision without undermining revelation's epistemic authority, fostering a critical-constructive dialogue between Islamic and orientalist scholarship.

Theodor Nöldeke's criticism of the authenticity of the Qur'an, which he considers to be the work of the Prophet Muhammad, is theologically clearly at odds with the Islamic belief that the Qur'an is a divine revelation. However, to show the weakness of Nöldeke's view, the rejection does not have to be based solely on theological arguments, but can also be examined through empirical and rational approaches. The Prophet Muhammad (saw) was known as a figure who was ummi (unable to read and write) and lived in the condition of an orphan, so logically it raises a fundamental question, namely how can a person who does not have a formal literacy tradition be able to compile a text that has a complex language structure, deep meaning content, and information that in many new ways can be understood and proven by the development of modern science?

This fact shows that there is a significant gap between the human capacity of the Prophet Muhammad and the characteristics of the Qur'an as a text. Therefore, the most rational explanation is not that the Qur'an is an intellectual product of the Prophet, but that it comes from God the Creator and was conveyed to the Prophet Muhammad through revelation. The personality of the Prophet, which is known for his noble qualities, namely *ṣiddiq*, *amanah*, *tabligh*, and *faṭḥanah*, makes him a figure worthy of receiving and conveying the divine decree authentically. It is within this framework that the wisdom of the revelation of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) can be understood, as well as an empirical rebuttal

to reductionist claims that see the Qur'an solely as the work of man.<sup>31</sup>

Abu Laylah refuted Nöldeke's claim that Zayd bin Tsabit used initials to classify the Companions' mushaf, arguing it lacked historical and methodological basis. Zayd's compilation of the Qur'an, he explained, relied on verified fragments written during the Prophet's lifetime and the memorization of trusted Companions—not on complete manuscripts requiring ownership markers. Each verse was authenticated by two witnesses, ensuring precision and eliminating the need for initials. The process, conducted under Abu Bakr and completed within a year, produced the *ṣuḥuf* later preserved by 'Umar. Abu Laylah also noted inconsistencies in Nöldeke's argument, such as the selective appearance of initials and their weak linguistic links to names like al-Zubayr. Hence, Nöldeke's theory is deemed speculative, undermining Qur'anic authenticity without credible evidence.<sup>32</sup>

Since the emergence of orientalist criticism in the 19th century, led by figures like Theodor Nöldeke, Muslim scholars have responded through rigorous studies emphasizing narrative completeness, memorization traditions (*taḥfīẓ*), and early Qur'anic manuscript evidence. They generally reject applying biblical textual criticism to the Qur'an without adapting to its unique transmission ecology. Critics argue that Nöldeke's framework imposes Western philological models, overlooking the Qur'an's collective preservation through memorization, communal verification (*jama'i shahādah*), and strict authentication by the Companions. His claims of "human intervention" and "biblical borrowing" rely on unequal cross-tradition assumptions. Furthermore, research on the Ottoman codification underscores moral integrity—truthfulness, trust, and consistency—as core to preservation, aspects Nöldeke's analysis neglects, thereby undermining his assertions about the Qur'an's alleged inauthenticity.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Theodor Nöldeke's historical paradigm represents a distinct epistemological construction within orientalist Qur'anic studies. His approach, grounded in 19th-century rationalism and historical-critical methodology, positions history and language as the primary sources of knowledge, thereby reducing revelation to an object of historical inquiry. This contrasts sharply with Islamic epistemology, which upholds revelation as the ultimate authority and history as a contextual aid. Nöldeke's paradigm relocates interpretive authority from prophetic transmission to modern scholarship, redefining tafsir as historical reconstruction rather than spiritual interpretation. Despite its reductionist implications, his philological rigor and systematic method provide valuable tools for academic analysis. Thus, Nöldeke's historical-critical framework, though epistemologically divergent, contributes methodological insight into how Western scholarship reconfigures revelation within the logic of modern historiography.

This study is limited by its textual-analytical focus, relying mainly on secondary literature and partial engagement with Nöldeke's *Geschichte des Qurāns*. Future research should strengthen the epistemological critique through direct textual analysis of the original German edition or its

31 Muttaqin Muttaqin and Moh Agung Fambudi, "Kritik Orientalis Dalam Aspek Ontologis Studi Al-Qur'an," *Al-Adabiya: Jurnal Kebudayaan Dan Keagamaan* 17, no. 2 (2022): 187–200, <https://doi.org/10.37680/adabiya.v17i2.2470>.

32 Naufal Cholily, "Kritik Atas Pandangan Theodor Noldeke Tentang Al-Hurūf Al-Muqatta'Ah Dalam Al-Qur'an," *Mutawatir* 4, no. 1 (2015): 70, <https://doi.org/10.15642/mutawatir.2014.4.1.70-86>.

33 Masruchin, Dzaki, and Gani, "Kontroversi Dan Kritik : Pandangan Orientalis Tentang Autentisitas Al-Qur'an."

English translation by Behn. Comparative research between Nöldeke and Muslim scholars—such as al-Suyūṭī, al-Zarkashī, or contemporary philologists—could also clarify convergences and boundaries between Western and Islamic interpretive rationalities. Further, expanding the study to include other orientalist figures like Richard Bell or Arthur Jeffery would contextualize Nöldeke's influence within the broader evolution of Qur'anic historicism. Such work can enrich inter-civilizational dialogue and refine Islamic hermeneutics by integrating methodological precision without undermining revelation's epistemic authority.

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