

From Oral Tradition to Written Text: Neuwirth's Insights on the Spoken Aspects of the Qur'an

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Abstract. Recent Qur'ānic scholarship has increasingly revisited the relationship between the oral and written dimensions of revelation. This article examines these dimensions through Angelika Neuwirth's concept of pre-canonical reading, focusing on Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ. Neuwirth approaches the Qur'ān from literary, historical, and comparative perspectives, emphasizing that its oral features—such as rhythm, recitation, and audience interaction—are vital for understanding how the Qur'ān initially communicated its message. She argues that the process of codification transformed these living oral expressions into a fixed text, often separating the Qur'ān from its dynamic historical setting. By re-examining Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ within its early socio-historical context, this study shows that its concise monotheistic message still carries traces of orality through its sound patterns, rhetorical balance, and dialogical tone. The analysis highlights Neuwirth's contribution to Qur'ānic studies by bridging orality and textuality, showing the Qur'ān as both a spoken revelation and a historical document shaped through stages of transmission and canonization.

Keywords: The Qur'an; Angelika Neuwirth; Orality; Socio-historical context.

Introduction

Western scholarship on the Qur'ān has experienced a significant transformation, from its very beginnings in the 12th century to the present academic environment.¹ Much of the early work focused on the authenticity and historical origins of the Qur'ān, often involving polemics that called into question the legitimacy of this scripture.² Recent scholarship, however, as led by individuals such as Jane Dammen McAuliffe and Angelika Neuwirth, has shifted toward exploring the textual and interpretative dimensions of the Qur'ān. The new wave emphasizes academic engagement with the Qur'ān both as a religious and as a literary corpus.³ Thus, scholars like Stefan Wild and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd underline that the emphasis has shifted from the search for historical origins to the reception, structure, and layers of interpretation of the text itself—a shift that opens the way toward a deeper understanding of the complexity of the Qur'ān.⁴

At the heart of this modern venture is Angelika Neuwirth, who broke new ground in situating the Qur'ān within its historical and socio-cultural environment. Now her Corpus Coranicum project gives free access to early Qur'ānic manuscripts in an unprecedented way, enabling complete analysis

¹ Herbert Berg, "Review: The Origin of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book by Ibn Warraq," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 62, no. 3 (1999): 558.

² Ihwan Agustono, "Potret Perkembangan Metodologi Kelompok Orientalis Dalam Studi Al-Qur'an," *Studia Quranika: Jurnal Studi Quran* 4, no. 2 (January 2019).

³ Fejrian Yazdajird Iwanebel, "Kontribusi Pemikiran Jane Dammen McAuliffe terhadap Kerukunan Antar Umat Beragama," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Hadis* 15, no. 2 (July 2014): 317–32.

⁴ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur'an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* (Amsterdam: Humanistics University Press, 2004), 10.

of the text.⁵ Neuwirth divides the history of the Qur'ān into two phases, pre-canonization and post-canonization, classifying the former as the oral Qur'ān—revealed and dynamically engaged with by the Prophet's community—and the latter as the written Qur'ān (muṣḥaf), preserved in its canonical form.⁶ This is an important distinction that needs to be made for the understanding of the Qur'ān, since it reveals how its movement from orality to scriptuality resulted in the preservation and transformation of its original communicative characteristics.⁷ It thus puts Neuwirth's dual-phase model, whereby the whole history of the Qur'ān is oral and written into two distinct stages, underlines the problematic nature of its evolution, putting into relief how its change from orality to scriptuality preserved not only its teaching but transformed its communicative impact.⁸

In accordance with the distinction above, she divided the history of the Qur'ān into two periods: pre-canonization and post-canonization. The former is the oral Qur'ān, revealed and actively participated in by the Prophet's community; the latter is the written Qur'ān (muṣḥaf), preserved in its canonical form. The difference is significant for understanding the nature of change in the Qur'ān, showing how change from orality to scriptuality imposed preservation and transformation on its original communicative features.⁹

Despite these strides, a few key gaps persist in the scholarship. First, whereas the oral features of the Qur'ān have indeed been acknowledged, their consequences for modern readings and practices remain largely unconsidered. For their part, scholars have not seized the opportunity provided by Neuwirth's framework to examine how the historical context of revelation should inform modern readings and applications of the Qur'ān. While the socio-political context of the Qur'ānic revelation has been commented upon, specific analyses of their bearing on individual sūrahs, with special reference to their theological contributions, are comparatively rare. The paper will attempt to fill in these gaps and contribute toward a nuanced analysis of the oral characteristics of the Qur'ān and their bearing on its contemporary interpretation, with special reference to Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ.

Through Neuwirth's framework, this study will discuss the historical context of its revelation and its codification from another angle, elaborating in detail how these elements create contemporary understandings of the Sūrah. It also examines the relationship between the oral and written forms of the Qur'ān, underscoring their role in shaping communal practices and individual engagement with the text. That is how the work tends to bridge the gap between historical scholarship and its contemporary interpretation in Qur'ānic studies and provides insights that resonate with both academic audiences and practitioners.

Ultimately, this article attempts to contribute meaningfully to furthering an enhanced understanding of the Qur'ān as a living tradition through its focus on the dynamic relationship between it and its Muṣḥaf form. While doing so, it cultivates a deeper appreciation for the role that

⁵ Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, eds., in *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

⁶ Angelika Neuwirth, "Structural, Linguistic and Literary Features", *Dalam The Cambridge Companion to The Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 99.

⁷ Muhammad Asywar Saleh, Hamka Hasan, and Rifqoh Qudsiyah, "Pre-Canonical Reading: An Analysis to the Neuwirth's Chronological Order of the Qur'ān," in *Proceedings of the 2nd ICIS in Conjunction with the 3rd ICONQUHAS* (Jakarta: 7-8 November, 2020).

⁸ Munirul Ikhwan, "Western Studies of The Qur'ānic Narrative: From the Historical Orientation into the Literary Analysis", *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 48, no. 2 (M/1431 2010): 387–411.

⁹ Lien Iffah Na'Fatu Fina, "Catatan Kritis Angelika Neuwirth terhadap Kesarjanaan Barat dan Muslim atas Al-Qur'an: Menuju Tawaran Pembacaan Al-Qur'an Pra-Kanonisasi", *NUN: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir di Nusantara* 2, no. 1 (2016): 57–80.

the Qur'ān plays in forming an Islamic identity and its relevance in today's diversified contexts of Muslim life.

Research Methods

The methodology aims to uncover how the oral dynamics of the Qur'ān shape the theological structure and communicative force of its message. This study adopts a qualitative and critical approach because it seeks to interpret the meaning, historical context, and oral features of the Qur'ān—dimensions that cannot be captured through quantitative methods. Guided by Angelika Neuwirth's theory of Pre-canonical Reading, the Qur'ān is understood as a living discourse that evolved through oral transmission before its codification. Applying this framework to Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ, the research examines how rhythm, repetition, and audience interaction reflect its oral nature and how these elements were transformed into textual form.¹⁰

The methodological process involves several stages: collecting primary and secondary sources, conducting a close reading of the Sūrah's linguistic and structural composition, situating it within its socio-historical and intertextual context, and synthesizing the findings to illustrate how orality and textuality coexist within the Sūrah. Historical contextualization is used to situate the Sūrah within the socio-political landscape of Mecca, revealing how that environment shaped its oral proclamation and audience reception, in line with Neuwirth's view of the Qur'ān as a dynamic, communicative act.

In addition, comparative analysis is applied to explore intertextual links between Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ and related monotheistic ideas in Jewish and Christian scriptures. This comparison follows Neuwirth's comparative framework by identifying linguistic and thematic parallels and examining how the Qur'ān rearticulates earlier theological concepts through rhythmic and rhetorical expression. Triangulation and reflective interpretation ensure analytical validity. This integrated historical and comparative approach provides a coherent foundation for examining the Qur'ān as both an oral performance and a written scripture shaped by historical experience.¹¹

Discussion

Angelika Neuwirth's Standpoint on Qur'ānic Studies in the Islamic and Contemporary Western Worlds

Angelika Neuwirth's approach to Qur'ānic studies offers a significant turn in the requirement for an integrated view that respects both the oral and textual dimensions of the Qur'ān. Her two critiques underline the importance of deepening the appreciation of the Qur'ān both in its historical and literary contexts. She first argues against the stance of some Muslim scholars on the post-canonical, textualized Qur'ān, as if that position blurred the dynamically oral character of the Qur'ān as it had been revealed and given experience to. According to Neuwirth, such a canonical perspective has limited this understanding to a basically textual one, perhaps not considering early transmission and communal involvement with the Qur'ān.¹²

¹⁰ Marylin Lichtman, *Qualitative Research for Social Sciences* (California: SAGE Publications, 2014), 223–36.

¹¹ R.G. Bolbakov, A.V. Sinitsyn, and V.Ya Tsvetkov, "Methods of Comparative Analysis," *Journal of Physics: Conference Series* 1679 (2020): 1–6.

¹² Angelika Neuwirth, *Structure and the Emergence of Community*, *Dalam The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 140.

She further criticizes some Western orientalist attitudes, which she perceives as being prejudicially sceptical about the historicity and literary merit of the Qur'ān. What her critique brings to the fore is, in effect, the need to transcend reductive suppositions and encourage an approach that would acknowledge the narrative and rhetorical sophistication of the Qur'ān. Neuwirth counterbalances this with the plea for a historical-critical method that would also consider the oral tradition and the situational unfolding of the text. She further advocates an intertextual, literary approach that should yield a more weighty, balanced text, one unencumbered by the reductionist perspectives of much earlier orientalist work. This integrated approach shall hopefully result in a more subtle, contextualized understanding of the Qur'ān while embracing its multifaceted role within its religious and historical landscape.¹³

From the above outlines, one notices that Neuwirth indeed has a proper argument when he criticizes the post-canonical approach that characterizes the scholarship of some Muslim scholars: in dealing exclusively with the Qur'ān as a finished text, one risks coming into disregard with its formative period of oral transmission. That oral dimension, however, is integral to the way in which early Muslims would have encountered, memorized, and internalized the revelations, framing their understanding in ways that a pure textual focus cannot grasp. In many ways, Neuwirth appeals for the Qur'ān to be recognized both as scripture and as speech—a duality necessarily needed for fully grasping its rhetorical strategies and thematic coherence as that given in piecemeal over time.

By doing so, she also challenges a long-standing scholarly bias seeking to disentangle the Qur'ān from its effective historical intertextuality by criticizing the Western orientalist approaches that often emphasize scepticism regarding the literary and historical dimensions of the Qur'ān.¹⁴ Where Neuwirth advances an intertextual analysis of the Qur'ān, its primary aim was to contextualize it in the general framework of Abrahamic scriptures to get a sense of how it mediates, rephrases, and often reinterprets themes and narratives stemming from Jewish and Christian texts.¹⁵ In this way, one gets to appreciate more precisely what the Qur'ān says, as it uncovers the new contribution this book made to earlier religious traditions and its discourse with them in articulating monotheism, the oneness of God, and the directions for behaviour.

Secondly, Neuwirth's historical critical approach invites a multidimensional analysis of the Qur'ān beyond the linear or literal ways of interpretation. It calls the scholars to place the Qur'ān in its situational and communal contexts of revelation. Emphasizing both the literary artistry and socio-religious function of the Qur'ān, she engages elaborately with contemporary cultural and theological dialogues. This approach shall, therefore, shed light on the structure of the Qur'ān, whereby recurring themes occur, being revised in view of its adaptability to fit the immediacy of its context while its core theological propositions remain continuous.¹⁶

On the whole, Neuwirth invites the scholars to treat the Qur'ān as an active partner in this magnificent interfaith conversation, neither simply representing nor even surpassing its scriptural antecedents. This approach not only enriches the scholars but also allows one to appreciate the Qur'ān both as a product of history and as a timeless guide, simultaneously firmly embedded in dialogue yet unique in its voice from the divine.

¹³ Neuwirth, 140–41.

¹⁴ William St. Clair Tisdall, *The Origin Sources of the Qur'an* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge &, 1905), 11.

¹⁵ Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam: A Prize Essay* (Vepery: M.D.C.S.P.C.K, 1898).

¹⁶ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "The Qur'anic Context of Muslim Biblical Scholarship," *Dalam Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 6, no. ue 2 (1996).

The Transformation of Qur'ānic Communication: Meanings and Concepts in Oral and Scriptural Contexts

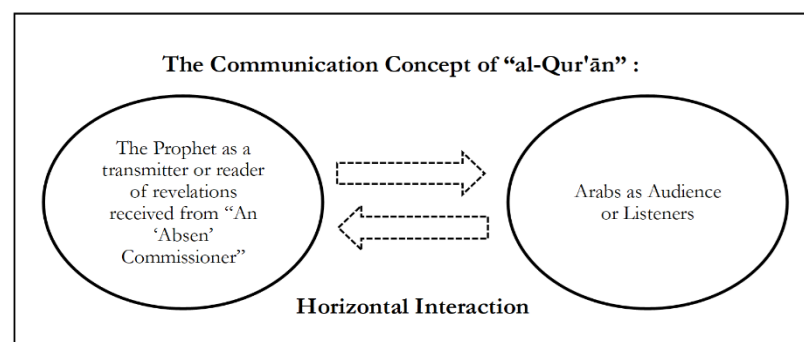
The discussion here draws on insights from Angelika Neuwirth's precanonical reading approach. It engages with the differences between orality and scripturality of the Qur'ān, attempting to provide a transition between the dynamic aspects of the Qur'ān as an oral text discussed in the previous section and its later codification and textualization. Understanding these dimensions is crucial for appreciating how the Qur'ān functioned within the early Muslim community and how its nature has evolved. By contextualizing the Qur'ān in both its oral and written forms, a more comprehensive framework emerges for analyzing its theological implications, especially in relation to the communal identity fostered by its recitation and its role in contemporary scholarship.¹⁷

To appreciate the specificity of the Qur'ān's orality, Neuwirth suggests making a basic differentiation between the terms al-Qur'ān (القرآن) and al-Kitāb (الكتاب). To her, they designate two different phenomena. The term al-Qur'ān designates an event within a community of believers where there is an active, dynamic interaction between multiple actors within a dramatic setting. It is in this context that a speaker—the Prophet Muhammad—relays divine messages obtained from “The Invisible Being” (God), with the task of repeating such revelations to the audience. This process of recitation and engagement underlines the horizontal interaction between the Prophet as the transmitter of the revelation and the Arab audience as the immediate recipients.¹⁸

This idea of al-Qur'ān by Neuwirth becomes one of fluid, living relations within the socio-historical flux of early Islamic society. By contrast, the term al-Kitāb refers to the Qur'ān in fixed, written form, a text compiled after the death of the Prophet. For the dynamic, oral phase of the Qur'ān, Neuwirth uses the term “pre-canonical Qur'ān,” evoking a living, changing entity before the process of canonization took place.¹⁹

In a graphic representation, the horizontal interaction between the Prophet Muhammad and his community—the speaker and listeners—would come across as a continuing dialogue. It is, above all, spontaneous and directly responsive to the surrounding circumstances of the disclosure.

Figure 1. Quranic Communication Concept



¹⁷ Faried F. Saenong, “Kesarjanaan Al-Qur'an di Barat: Studi Bibliografis,” *Jurnal Studi al-Qur'an (JSQ)* 1, no. 2 (2006): 148.

¹⁸ Neuwirth, *Structural, Linguistic and Literary Features*, *Dalam The Cambridge Companion to The Qur'an*, 102.

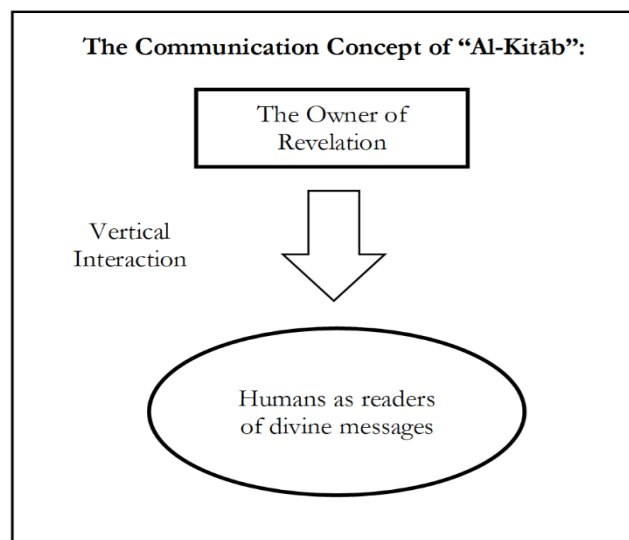
¹⁹ Gabriel S. Reynolds, “Intratextuality, Doublets, and Orality in the Qur'an, with Attention to Sūrah 61 and 66,” in *Dalam Unlocking The Medinan Qur'an*, ed. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 513–42.

The analytic framework adopted by Neuwirth does, however, invite scholars to consider the interaction implicit in the oral Qur'ān with its horizontal relationship between the Prophet and his community.²⁰ This horizontal relationship provided an alive and throbbing socio-historical dimension to the text, whereby the Prophet was not only giving words of God but actually facilitating communal dialogues on various socio-historical concerns dealing with social justice and personal morality. The oral Qur'ān was an agent of the values and practices of the early Muslim community, but could take up varied discourses that were allied with the realities of everyday life by their listeners.²¹

Situating the recognition of Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ within such a framework further takes the implications of distinguishing between al-Qur'ān and al-Kitāb. The rhythm and theological profundity that it displays signal how, through the oral tradition, great ideas were conveyed with ease, building communal identity and reinforcing spiritual cohesion in Islam's early years. Such a perspective opens up possibilities of revisiting the reception and understanding of Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ when it was first articulated, underlining its functional role in fostering community and articulating the faith of all.

The second idea, al-Kitāb (الكتاب), on the other hand, is more transcendent and hierarchical in nature, implying a vertical connection between the readers and the heavenly source of revelation. Al-Kitāb stresses a more formal, rigid, and authoritative way of engagement with the text than the dynamic, horizontal interaction of al-Qur'ān. The difference between these two ideas is helpfully demonstrated by Nicolai Sinai, who characterizes al-Kitāb as “a heavenly medium of storage” (a storehouse of divine will). At the same time, al-Qur'ān serves as “an earthly medium of display,” representing the dynamic, material interactions that take place during the transmission and experience of revelation. These two concepts—al-Kitāb as transcendent and static and al-Qur'ān as immanent and dynamic—highlight the profound differences in how the Qur'ān is understood within the framework of orality and scripturality.²² The following section further illustrates this second concept:

Figure 2. Al-Kitab's Communication Concept



²⁰ Lien Iffah NaFatu Fina, “Membaca Metode Penafsiran al-Qur’ān Kontemporer di Kalangan Sarjana Barat: Analisis Pemikiran Angelika Neuwirth,” *Uhumuna: Jurnal Keislaman* 18, no. mor 2 (2014): 271.

²¹ Neuwirth, *Structural, Linguistic and Literary Features*, *Dalam The Cambridge Companion to The Qur’an*, 102–3.

²² Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur’an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: University Press, 2017).

In the early days of the prophetic mission, the Qur'ān did not instantly highlight the vertical, hierarchical relationship between the Prophet as the messenger and receiver of this divine message and the divine source of revelation. Instead, the emphasis remained on the horizontal sphere of communication in which the Prophet communicated with his people, and the Qur'ān was the medium. Only later in the Prophet's mission did this clear, vertical relationship between the divine and the Prophet—that is, al-Kitāb—become more visible, especially as the idea of al-Kitāb gradually took shape and reached its most whole meaning in the final years of his prophetic life.

From this explanation, it is therefore clear that the meaning of al-Kitāb in the Qur'ān was evolutionary. In the early Meccan period, the concept of al-Kitāb primarily referred to certain narratives in the Qur'ān that were related to the previous Jewish and Christian traditions. At that point, it had not yet come to represent the Qur'ān as a whole. For example, in Sūrah Al-Isrā' (Makkiyah), the term al-Kitāb is mentioned in a context related to:

وَاتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ وَجَعَلْنَاهُ هُدًى لِّبَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ إِلَّا تَتَّخِذُوا مِنْ دُونِي وَكِيلًا ﴿٢﴾

“And We gave Moses the Book (Torah), and We made it a guide for the Children of Israel with the words: ‘Do not take a protector other than me.’” (Al-Qur’ān, 17: 2).

As the period of prophetic preaching advanced, the term al-Kitāb (الكتاب) gradually developed an independent and comprehensive meaning. During the late Meccan period and into the Medinan era itself, the meaning of al-Kitāb started to denote pure and complete messages of the Qur'ān, yet this was still related to its pre-codified form. This progression in meaning continued until al-Kitāb came to signify the standard collection of Qur'ānic revelations as recorded following the compilation of the Mushaf, approximately 25 years after the Prophet's death. In this post-codification context, al-Kitāb found its full expression as the written Qur'ān. An early instance of this usage can be seen in Sūrah Al-Baqarah (early Madinan period), where it is stated:

الَمْ (1) ذَلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٢﴾

“Alif – lam – mim. This book (Al-Qur’ān) does not have the slightest doubt about it; guidance for those who are pious.” (Al-Qur’ān, 2: 1-2).

When the perception of a vertical relationship between the Divine as the Source of Revelation and humanity as its recipient predominates—resulting from the crystallization of the concept of al-Kitāb (الكتاب)—the consequence, according to Neuwirth, is a diminishing recognition of the Prophet's role within the process of revelation. It is the perspective wherein al-Kitāb is thought to occur only vertically between God and humanity, thereby bringing the Qur'ān's dynamism to a complete standstill and reifying it into a static collection of texts. The Qur'ān has hence often been considered a “timeless” and “beyond history” book revealed by God in a particular context unrelated to the outside world. It is these socio-historical factors, nonetheless, that existed through the 23 years of the Prophethood and played the decisive role in the emergence of Islam and the Qur'ān.²³

Therefore, the revival of the pre-canonical essence of the Qur'ān requires that the readers reassess their attitude to the book from “a book to read” to “a text to be recited.” Orality and an aural

²³ Angelika Neuwirth, “Locating the Qur'ān in the Epistemic Space of Late Antiquity”, Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi,” 2013, 197.

experience underline its transmission and social context. The Qur'ānic rhythmic pattern underlines a notion of spoken text meant to be heard and not read.²⁴

Two Faces of the Qur'ān: Al-Qur'ān vs. Muṣḥaf

In the discourse of Qur'ānic studies, a crucial distinction arises between two concepts of revelation: al-Qur'ān (القرآن) and al-Kitāb (الكتاب). While often treated synonymously, these terms encapsulate distinct realities within the Islamic tradition, conceptualized as the two faces of the Qur'ān—al-Qur'ān and the Muṣḥaf. Angelika Neuwirth elucidates that while the Muṣḥaf refers to the post-codification corpus of the Qur'ān, al-Qur'ān embodies the dynamic and interactive communication process of revelations during the prophetic era.²⁵

The transition from al-Qur'ān to the Muṣḥaf signifies a pivotal transformation in the perception of the text. Initially regarded as an oral phenomenon intimately tied to its historical context, the Muṣḥaf is often seen as a timeless document, perceived as detached from the socio-historical elements that shaped its revelations. This shift carries significant implications for how the Qur'ān is understood and interpreted, obscuring its original dynamism and reducing it to a static text.

The shift from al-Qur'ān to the Muṣḥaf is, therefore, not merely a transition in the material symbol but is regarded as a pivotal transformation in the perception of the text. Whereas al-Qur'ān as an oral phenomenon was linked with its historical setting, the Muṣḥaf was often treated as a document outside time, if not abstracted from the sociohistorical context of its revelations. This change in perception has essential bearings on Qur'ān understanding and interpretation, reducing its dynamism to a static text.

This transformation is critical in that very little scholarly attention has been paid to the chronological arrangement of the Qur'ān upon what was revealed (*tartīb nuzūlī*). Islamic scholarship conventionally divides the Sūrah into two: Makkiyah, revealed in Mecca, and Madaniyah, revealed in Medina, with greater reliance on hadīth and early scholars.²⁶ This binary division often does little justice to the complexities of the historical development of the text and the various contexts within which revelations took place.²⁷

Contemporary scholarship in the West acknowledges the significance of the codification process, which Muslims consider integral to sustaining the purity and authenticity of the text. It must be realized, however, that this process has far-reaching consequences for the identity of the Qur'ān itself:

1. *Firstly*, the early Qur'ānic manuscripts are in “*scriptio defectiva*”, that is, only consonants have been written. This is evidence for an oral tradition based on a familiar audience, necessitating memory and recitation. These manuscripts also point to a very oral culture where meaning depends on a communal enterprise rather than on written presentation. The acknowledgment of this phenomenon enriches one's understanding of the Qur'ān as a living text in close association with its community and with its recitation rituals.²⁸

²⁴ Mustansir Mir, *Language*, in *Dalam The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Andrew Rippin (USA: UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 88–89.

²⁵ Aldie Fitra and Lia Listiana, “Peradaban Terbentuknya Mushaf Al-Qur'an: Sejarah Terbentuknya Mushaf Rasm Ustmani,” *Qolamuna: Jurnal Studi Islam* 8, no. 1 (2022): 58–68.

²⁶ Muhammad Mustafa Al-A'zami, *The History of The Qur'anic Text from Revelation to Compilation: A Comparative Study with The Old and New Testaments* (Riyadh: Azami Publishing House, 2008), 93.

²⁷ W. Montgomery Watt, *Pengantar Studi al-Qur'an: Penyempurnaan atas Karya Richard Bell, terj* (Jakarta: Taufik Adnan Amal, 1995), 173–74.

²⁸ Watt, 71.

2. *Secondly*, the codification under Caliph Uthman introduced radical changes: the addition of vowel markings and differentiation of the consonants, which finally stabilized the text in its most rigid form. According to Neuwirth, such changes alienated the Muṣḥaf from its authentic socio-historical framework, insofar as it had been rendered a final, closed text. Such rigidification has reduced appreciation for the oral complexity of the Qurʾān and the interactive dynamics that this fostered among the early audiences.²⁹
3. *Thirdly*, the Muṣḥaf is often regarded as timeless and devoid of history; this encompasses and suppresses the intrinsically rich orality of the Qurʾān. Neuwirth insists that this factor then keeps the gradual process of Qurʾānic revelation in obscurity. The fixed arrangement of the Muṣḥaf may make one lose the particular historic-theological position that each Sūrah held. This decrease in critical interest in the specific features and contexts of the individual Sūrahs raises fundamental questions about how a rigidified reading might constrain contemporary interpretations, one that doesn't account for the fluid and evolutionary nature of early reception.³⁰

At this juncture, in order to illustrate the contrast between the Qurʾān in its dynamic presentation during the prophetic era and the Qurʾān in its fixed canonical shape, Neuwirth employs a metaphor with dramatic overtones. What happens on stage combines two external elements—a scenario or script—with the internal ones—the performances of the actors—to produce a vivid interpretation of the text. This metaphor stresses that pre-canonical Qurʾān has an alive possibility of interpretation and that any understanding of it needs to be grounded on both an oral origin and its later form in writing.³¹

Qurʾānic Sūrah-Based Research in Attempting the Qurʾānic Verbal Aspects

This section outlines Angelika Neuwirth's methodological framework, which serves as the foundation for interpreting the Qurʾān's oral and historical dimensions. According to Neuwirth, understanding the Qurʾānic sūrahs requires attention not only to their verbal artistry but also to the social and historical context of their revelation. The Qurʾān's beauty, in her view, is not limited to its written form but is a living expression manifested through recitation, performance, and its function within the early Muslim community. Its eloquence represents a continuous dialogue between divine speech and human response, reflecting its dynamic nature before becoming a fixed text.³²

Neuwirth identifies a significant gap in Qurʾānic scholarship—the neglect of the pre-canonical stage, the formative period before the Qurʾān's codification. She argues that limiting interpretation to linguistic and grammatical analysis detaches the text from the historical realities that shaped it. Unlike earlier Orientalists who sought a hypothetical “urtext,” Neuwirth's pre-canonical reading aims to restore the Qurʾān's vitality by situating it within its original oral and cultural environment. This approach highlights the Qurʾān as both a literary and lived discourse that evolved through communal interaction.³³

Within this framework, the Qurʾān is seen as a living message that developed through recitation, response, and reflection among early believers. Reconstructing this pre-canonical milieu enables scholars to recover the Qurʾān's historicity and the oral dynamics that sustained its

²⁹ Neuwirth, *Structural, Linguistic and Literary Features*”, *Dalam The Cambridge Companion to The Qurʾan*, 99.

³⁰ Neuwirth, 100.

³¹ Angelika Neuwirth, “Two Faces of the Qurʾan: Qurʾān and Muṣḥaf”, *Oral Tradition*, no. 25, Vol. 1 (2010): 141–56.

³² Angelika Neuwirth, “Orientalism in Oriental Studies? Qurʾanic Studies as a Case of Point”, *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 9, no. 2 (October 2007): 123.

³³ Fina, “Catatan Kritis Angelika Neuwirth terhadap Kesarjanaan Barat dan Muslim atas Al-Qurʾan: Menuju Tawaran Pembacaan Al-Qurʾan Pra-Kanonisasi”.

transmission. By doing so, Neuwirth offers a fuller appreciation of its linguistic richness and formative influence on the early Muslim community.³⁴

Consistent with this view, Neuwirth contends that sūrah units evolved dynamically in content, structure, and style according to their circumstances. Their linguistic and rhetorical features reveal clues about the time, audience, and intent of each revelation.

Through this sūrah-based analysis, she distinguishes between the prophetic messages of the pre-canonical period and the systematized form they assumed in the post-canonical muṣḥaf, compiled after the Prophet's death.

Focusing mainly on the Makkiyah sūrahs, Neuwirth examines them both as literary compositions and as reflections of early communicative practices. These sūrahs were meant to be heard and recited collectively, forming part of communal worship and reinforcing the Qur'ān's spiritual and social roles. To revive their vitality, she applies microstructural analysis, treating each sūrah as a coherent speech unit linked to the community's development. Her two-step method interprets each sūrah as a liturgical pericope and then situates it within the Prophet's historical context, integrating sūrah data to recover its historical grounding.³⁵

Within this dual approach, Neuwirth bridges the textual and oral dimensions of the Qur'ān, portraying it as a living discourse shaped by history, community, and worship. This framework provides a conceptual foundation for analyzing Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ, where the interplay between orality and scripturality is most evident.³⁶

Building on Neuwirth's methodological insights, four key components help explain the structure and meaning of the Qur'ānic sūrahs, namely:

1. *Firstly*, Eschatological themes, that is, events concerning the afterlife, revealed by the Prophet, were very distinct from the works of the Arab poets during pre-Islamic times.³⁷
2. *Secondly*, Signs of God's Existence emphasize that the recognition of signs about God is for those who ponder, and these signs can be placed within the book's recorded historical accounts, too, bringing forth a message of regret, dishonor, and ruin awaiting those who disobey at the end of their days.³⁸
3. *Thirdly*, Narratives of Previous Peoples: These are the stories of past nations, which organically relate to recorded events and are an essential lesson for moral teaching to the audience in the present.³⁹
4. *Additionally*, Conflict and debate are also there, for on many occasions the Sūrahs themselves discuss and debate what belief is opposed to unbelief, knowledge to ignorance, which was part of the dynamic of early Islamic discourse.⁴⁰

This formalized approach brings the reader into a more profound understanding of the Qur'ān's verbal dimensions and those related to both its early Muslims and today's believers. Neuwirth

³⁴ Neuwirth, *Structure and the Emergence of Community*, Dalam *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, 146–47.

³⁵ Neuwirth, *Structural, Linguistic and Literary Features*, Dalam *The Cambridge Companion to The Qur'an*, 101–2.

³⁶ Angelika Neuwirth, "Refentiality and Textuality in Sūrah Al-Hijr: Some Observations on the Qur'anic Canonical Process and the Emergence of a Community," in *Dalam Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an*, ed. Issa J. Boullata (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), 147.

³⁷ Neuwirth, Sinai, and Marx.

³⁸ Neuwirth, "Locating the Qur'an in the Epistemic Space of Late Antiquity", Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi."

³⁹ Amal Riyadh Kitishat, "Contemporary Theoretical Insights of the Qur'anic Stories: A Case Study of the Narrative Elements in The Holy Qur'an," *Journal of Islamic Studies and Culture* 4, no. 2 (December 2016): 95–100.

⁴⁰ Neuwirth, *Structural, Linguistic and Literary Features*, Dalam *The Cambridge Companion to The Qur'an*, 104–8.

is interested in deepening insight into the Qur'ān's relation to lived life, underscoring the fact that it constitutes a living tradition.

In this regard, Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ epitomizes the phonetic features of the Qur'ān and their consequences regarding theological density and collective identity. With its assertion of Islamic monotheism, Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ carries some fundamental theological tenets at the core of Islamic belief and therefore plays a vital role in worship and identity. Its brief verses stir emotional and spiritual participation among those who are listening by reaffirming the concept of Tawḥīd.

By using Neuwirth's framework, the discussion on Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ has unfolded both oral and written dimensions of this Sūrah. In its orality, this Sūrah suggests a collective sense of faith and cohesion among Muslims, and by being written as a word in the Muṣḥaf, it sustains the message of the Qur'ān. A close examination of the nature of Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ shows evidence of spiritual awareness that it contributes to within the Muslim community.

Considering the historical context of Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ tends to bring its formative effect on early Islamic beliefs and practices to the fore. It invites readers today to engage with a sūrah beyond that mere level of recitation to one more profound in understanding its continuing relevance. This kind of dual engagement falls under the bigger category of revealing how individual Sūrahs build into communal identity and faith.

This interrelation between the oral and written dimensions of the Qur'ān creates a situation in which each mode enriches the other in their understanding of the text. Applying Neuwirth's thesis, Muslims today can draw on the Qur'ān in ways relevant to modern contexts and deepen awareness of its character as a living tradition. Therefore, Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ is a striking example of the specific ability of the Qur'ān to steer individual and collective Islamic identity through centuries.

Analysis of Angelika Neuwirth's Pre-canonical Reading of the Qur'ān: A Focus on Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ

The pre-canonical reading of the Qur'ān, following Angelika Neuwirth's principle, will be specified with the Makkiyah Sūrahs to show a more engaged understanding of the Qur'ān—not as a static text but as a dynamic entity in the socio-historical context of its revelation. A case study on Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ will be taken up, showing how it purifies the oneness of God and summarizes the essential principles of Islamic monotheism.

Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ is representative of the socio-religious ambiance of early Islam, which faced the polytheistic way of beliefs that dominated Meccan society. Confirming the oneness of God, this Sūrah is a strong declaration of monotheism that is contrasted against the prevailing practices of idol worship. This short but profound statement signifies the heart of Islamic theology and thus makes Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ indispensable in comprehending monotheism within the Islamic faith.⁴¹ A pre-canonical reading of this Sūrah, according to Neuwirth, opens perspectives toward its historical and literary dimensions; it shows how it reflects and responds to the cultural and religious context in which it appeared.

The text of Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ is as follows:

قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ ﴿١﴾ اللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ ﴿٢﴾ لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ ﴿٣﴾ وَمَنْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ ﴿٤﴾

⁴¹ "Tafsir Al-Qur'an Surah Al-Ikhlāṣ Karya M. Quraish Shihab Afwaz Fafaza Rif'ah, "Studi Komparatif Terhadap Metodologi Tafsir Al-Mishbāh dan Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Karim," *Jurnal Tafseer* 8, no. mor 1 (2023): 78–91.

*“Say (Muhammad), He is Allah, the One.
Allah is the place to ask for everything.
(Allah) neither begets nor is He begotten.
And there is nothing equal to Him.” (Al-Qur’ān 112: 1-4).*

Revealed during a time of hardship for the early Muslim community living under the dominance of the polytheistic Meccans, Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ serves as a clear theological response to the prevailing belief that associated God with offspring, represented by idols such as al-Lāt, al-‘Uzzā, and al-Manāt. Although monotheistic traditions like Judaism and Christianity were known in pre-Islamic Arabia, polytheism remained deeply rooted in society. By using the name “Allah,” which was already familiar among different religious groups, the Qur’ān directly challenges these beliefs, emphasizing God’s absolute oneness and rejecting any idea of divine progeny. The early Meccan sūrahs, including Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ, share common structural traits such as brevity, rhythm, and sound harmony, reminiscent of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. This rhythmic and concise style not only strengthens their emotional and aesthetic appeal but also makes them easier to recite and memorize—key elements in the Qur’ān’s oral transmission during its early period.⁴²

At the same time, the Qur’ān engages actively with the language, culture, and religious traditions of seventh-century Arabia. According to Neuwirth, this engagement is not simple imitation or borrowing, but a dynamic intertextual dialogue in which the Qur’ān interacts with earlier traditions, reshaping and transcending them. Many of these early revelations were publicly recited at the Ka’bah—the central place of worship for both pre-Islamic and Islamic faiths—addressing themes such as monotheism, eschatology, and theological debate. In this sacred setting, the Qur’ān reinterpreted existing rituals and symbols, giving them new meaning within a monotheistic framework. Through this transformation, the Qur’ān positioned its message as part of a broader spiritual heritage while also redefining the religious landscape of its time.⁴³

Neuwirth brought out in her analysis that this Sūrah not only represents Islamic monotheism but also carries intertextual elements with preexisting religious traditions, above all Judaism and Christianity. Therefore, the Jewish confession “Shema’ Yisrā’ēl adōnay ēlōhēnū adōnay eḥad” is similar in meaning to the first verse of this Sūrah, “Qul huwa Allāhu aḥad,” since both affirm the oneness of God. The usage of “aḥad,” which is unusual in Arabic, supposes a deliberate resonance with the Jewish texts. Neuwirth views this as a translingual strategy designed to familiarize Jewish audiences with the Qur’ān while maintaining its universal message.⁴⁴

Verse three, “lam yalid wa lam yūlad,” absolutely denies the Nicene Christian theology of divine sonship as if in opposition to Jesus Christ having been born of God. As such, it forms part of a deliberate theological revision of the axioms of the previous religions. Moreover, verse four, “wa lam yakun lahū kufuwan aḥad,” further negates the Nicene concept of homoousios, the union of divine and human substance. However, Neuwirth insists that the Qur’ān, all the while rejecting Christian theology, also adopts rhetorical strategies from Syriac texts—a phenomenon she calls “intensification.” Eventually, Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ emerges as a dynamic, intertextual text in its countering and engaging with Jewish and Christian traditions to assert the monotheistic message of the Qur’ān.⁴⁵

Building upon Neuwirth’s pre-canonical framework, the reading of Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ reveals both its theological depth and its formative role within the early Muslim community. Revealed during

⁴² Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, ed. R. Cecep Lukman Yasin and Dedi Slamet Riyadi (Jakarta: Serambi Ilmu Semesta, 2002), 124.

⁴³ Neuwirth, *Structural, Linguistic and Literary Features*, *Dalam The Cambridge Companion to The Qur’an*, 103.

⁴⁴ Neuwirth, “Two Faces of the Qur’an: Qur’ān and Muṣṣḥaf.”

⁴⁵ McAuliffe, “The Qur’anic Context of Muslim Biblical Scholarship,” 141–54.

a period of hardship under the dominance of polytheistic Meccan society, this sūrah stands as a firm declaration of monotheism—a direct theological counter to the prevailing belief in idols such as al-Lāt, al-‘Uzzā, and al-Manāt, which were regarded as the daughters of God. While monotheistic traditions like Judaism and Christianity were known in pre-Islamic Arabia, polytheism remained the dominant worldview. By affirming the absolute oneness of God and denying any divine offspring, Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ not only reorients theological understanding but also lays the foundation for a distinct communal identity grounded in tawḥīd. This transition from belief to belonging illustrates how doctrinal assertion evolved into a unifying force, providing early Muslims with moral and spiritual coherence amid social opposition. In this light, the sūrah functions as both a theological proclamation and a formative statement of identity—an enduring expression of faith that continues to define Islamic belief and collective consciousness.

Further, the Sūrah’s terse yet powerful statement makes it highly relevant to communal prayer and worship. In the context of persecution, the recitation of Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ may strengthen communal resistance by bringing a feeling of cohesion and direction. The theological implications extend beyond individual belief systems to the collective consciousness of the early Muslim community, attempting to find its place against a largely polytheistic society.

Taking Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ within the broader context of religious traditions—particularly Judaism and Christianity—reveals both parallels and distinctions. The first verse, “Qul huwa Allāhu Aḥad,” closely echoes the Jewish declaration of monotheism in the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Both statements affirm the oneness of God, reflecting a shared monotheistic conviction. This intertextual resonance helps clarify Neuwirth’s interpretation that the Qur’ān deliberately employs the term “aḥad” to engage with Jewish audiences familiar with this theological idea. By doing so, the Qur’ān not only establishes common ground with earlier monotheistic traditions but also asserts its unique articulation of divine unity within the emerging Islamic revelation.⁴⁶

But in its denial of divine sonship, the Sūrah advances a most Islamic critique of the Christian faith. Indeed, “lam yalid wa lam yūlad” constitutes a direct negation of the Nicene understanding of the Trinity and of Jesus as Son of God, which was a central tenet of early Christianity. Neuwirth’s contention that the Qur’ān uses Syriac texts for rhetorical strategies seems to suggest an act of deliberateness with which the Qur’ān was engaging in current religious discourse and in which the Qur’ān not only differentiated itself from these traditions but even dialogized with them in order to make a message relevant and enticing.

The Sūrah is short, rhythmic, and acoustic, with hallmarks of oral traditions that marked pre-Islamic Arabia, for easy communication with an audience accustomed to the spoken word. This second aspect constitutes the continuity of Jewish and Christian traditions, relying heavily on oral transmission for safeguarding and communicating religious messages.

By setting Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ within comparative frameworks of theology and social realities, Neuwirth clearly brings out how theological concepts and lived social realities interact within the Sūrah to articulate a unique Islamic identity that at once responds to and resists the more general religious environment. This sets up a critical intertextual dynamic that furthers not only the meaning of the Sūrah but even the Qur’ān’s development as a foundational text within Islamic theology.

⁴⁶ Neuwirth, “Locating the Qur’ān in the Epistemic Space of Late Antiquity”, Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi.”

Conclusion

The pre-canonical reading of Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ, following Angelika Neuwirth's framework, highlights the Qur'ān as a dynamic discourse shaped by both its oral performance and historical context. This Sūrah articulates the oneness of God against the dominant polytheistic environment of early Meccan society while simultaneously fostering communal identity among early Muslims. By focusing on rhythm, repetition, and acoustic qualities, the analysis demonstrates how the Qur'ān's oral features were integral to its initial transmission and memorization, reinforcing its theological and social impact before codification.

Neuwirth's insights also reveal the intertextual engagement of Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ with existing religious traditions, particularly Judaism and Christianity, without reducing it to mere borrowing. The Sūrah negotiates these interactions through linguistic and rhetorical strategies, positioning the Qur'ān within a broader theological discourse while maintaining its distinct message. This dual oral and textual presence exemplifies how Qur'ānic revelation functioned as both a spoken and a written medium, preserving its vitality across generations and situating it within a formative socio-religious context.

By applying this framework, the study underscores the importance of integrating oral, textual, and historical perspectives in Qur'anic scholarship. Sūrah Al-Ikhlāṣ exemplifies how individual sūrahs contributed to shaping early Islamic identity and belief while retaining a communicative dimension that resonates with contemporary audiences. The findings demonstrate that a pre-canonical approach not only recovers the Qur'ān's historical depth but also enhances understanding of its enduring theological and performative significance, offering a model for future research into the interplay between orality and textuality in sacred scripture.

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