

Fred Donner, Early Islamic Narratives and The Problem of The Authenticity of The Qur'an

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Abstract. This article examines Fred Donner's argumentation in criticizing the revisionists group in the discourse of Qur'anic studies. By textual and content analysis, this article argues that Fred Donner is of the view that the Qur'an was completed as a corpus at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Donner's argument is based on a comparative study between the Qur'an and the corpus that emerged about two centuries after the prophet Muhammad. Among the Islamic sources that became the object of his comparative study were the hadith and prophetic history. Based on his findings, that the Qur'an, in some degree, has different tone of elaboration on the political leadership. While the hadith speaks more about leadership with many terminologies, and even describes the names of companion, the Qur'an is silent on the issue of leadership with little reference on it. This, according to Donner, becomes proof that the Qur'an came before the hadith. And it is also certain that the Qur'an became a fixed corpus during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. Donner's argumentation with this method of comparing hadith implies the idea that hadith came later.

Keywords: The Qur'an; hadith; Fred Donner; revisionist.

Introduction

The presence of John Wansbrough's two works entitled *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford, 1997)¹ and *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford, 1978)² marks the revival of the study of the authenticity of the Qur'an after Abraham Geiger, Theodore Nöldeke, and Richard Bell. The reason is that in these two works, there are at least two thoughts of Wansbrough that are considered quite controversial. First, John Wansbrough questioned the authenticity of the Qur'an and considered that the Qur'an did not appear in Mecca when the Prophet Muhammad lived, but in Iraq. According to him, the Qur'an underwent evolutive development until it became a fixed text two centuries after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Wansbrough asserts that the theological discussions presented by the Qur'an contain quite dynamic material and it is completely irrelevant if it reflects the theological debates that existed at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, both in Meccan and Medinan period. For him, Mecca was not a place where progressive intellectual topics about theology were discussed. Mecca was just a small city that only became an alternative trade route to avoid areas of conflict between Byzantium (Rome) and Sasania (Persia).³

¹ John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2004).

² John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

³ Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 86-87.

Secondly, John Wansbrough argues that Islamic histories written by Muslim historians cannot be accounted for their historical reliability. Using a critical historical approach, he says that the early Islamic histories written by Ibn Ishāq (d. 768), Ibn Hishām (d. 834), and Ibn Sa'd (d. 845) were written long after the Prophet died. The period between the life of the Prophet and that of the Muslim historians is more than 100 years. And this history for them deserves to be discredited. For them, the qualifications of historical narratives must be proven by accurate evidence that was present at the time the historical object was written. Thus, according to Wansbrough the works of Muslim historians cannot be used as material for the reconstruction of early Islamic history. Because many of these historical documents contain material that does not describe the original historical reality, but rather describes the object to fit the imagination and doctrine believed. This form of history is what they call as salvation history.⁴

John Wansbrough's study then inspired several researchers such as Patricia Crone who later together with Michael Cook wrote a book entitled *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*⁵ which tries to reconstruct Islam by relying on historical evidence written during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. In this reconstruction effort, Crone did not use history books originating from Islam at all, because according to her the history did not meet the qualification standards in the critical historical perspective. His presence, which had already stretched far from the time of the Prophet Muhammad, made the history invalid from the beginning. So he then used historical evidence derived from Christian documents. From that document, he then reconstructed the history of early Islam. According to him, Islam began with a messianic Jewish movement that did not originate in Makkah, but in an area north of the Hijaz.⁶ At first they did not call themselves a specific teaching that proclaimed a new religion. In its earliest phase, it built an alliance with the Jews of Palestine and the warlike Arabs under the leadership of their Prophet. In the Suryani literature, the religious movement under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad is called "Hajarism" (the descendants of Hajar). And according to that literature, it is also mentioned that the people of Prophet Muhammad who made the hijra (*mhaggraye*) moved from Makkah to Madinah, but the Arabs moved to Palestine.⁷

The discussion from the researchers above certainly shocks the Islamic discourse that is considered established. Islamic sources that are considered the most legitimate are no longer considered to have reliability that should be used. The Qur'an, which is considered the most authentic historical evidence of the presence of Islam, is considered not entirely authentic. These movements to re-examine Islam with a critical historical perspective then named themselves as "revisionist" groups.

In this discourse, presenting Fred Donner's⁸ thoughts are considered relevant. First, he is one of the Western researchers who was able to break the arguments of the revisionist school that

⁴ Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu*, 57.

⁵ Patricia Crone dan Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19. Mun'im Sirry, *Kontroversi Islam Awal: Antara Mazhab Tradisionalis dan Revisionis* (Bandung: Mizan, 2015), 80.

⁸ He is a professor of Near Eastern history at the University of Chicago. He was born in Washington in 1945. In 1968 he completed his studies in Oriental Studies at Princeton University. In the period before graduation, he had also completed his Arab studies at the Middle East Center for Arab Studies (MECAS), Lebanon. He completed his Ph.D at Princeton University in 1975. And since 1982 he has been teaching in Chicago as a lecturer serious about the

rejected all historical documents originating from Islam. Secondly, Donner's critique is not a reflection of apology as found in many criticisms by Muslim thinkers who generally do not answer the questions. Third, Donner attempts to reconstruct early Islamic history and the authenticity of the Qur'an by using Muslim literary sources that revisionists consider unreliable. Despite the different ways of looking at sources, Donner manages to use good arguments to defend the reliability of Muslim sources. Fourth, Donner critiques the revisionists with simple yet argumentative logics. For example, Donner refutes Wansbrough's claim that the Qur'anic text developed outside the Arabian Peninsula and underwent textual evolution by arguing the correlation between the Qur'an and hadith literature. He said, "If the Qur'an is a product of the same milieu that produced the hadith, why is the Qur'anic content so different from the hadith material?"⁹ Donner's logic basically wants to say that if the Qur'an emerged evolutively over two centuries why is the Qur'anic material so different from the hadith material which also evolved evolutively. Thus, this article will examine Fred Donner's thought to see the structure of his thought, his perspective and the strength of his argumentation in criticizing the revisionists, which in this context has not been done by many scholars before.¹⁰ Likewise, the article will look at the theoretical implications of Fred Donner's thinking for the study of Islamic history and Islamic literature sources.

Discussion

Early Islam as a Point of Reference

The study of early Islamic narratives and the problem of the authenticity of the Qur'an basically refers to one problem, namely the source. What sources are valid for reconstructing early Islamic history? From here, various views emerge about those who reject all Islamic historical references, because they were written long after the Prophet died, those who try to find earlier historical data, and those who seek new formulations in how to read Islamic history. Those in the first group are generally skeptical of Islamic sources. Therefore, they rely more on earlier sources, that is, sources that were present when the Prophet was alive. And these sources come from Christian and Jewish documents. As for documents originating from Islam, it is almost certainly still difficult to obtain them. Included in this group are Patricia Crone and Michael Cook.¹¹

As for the second group, they are academics who are challenged to collect solid material, whether in the form of writings, coins or other archaeological objects, to prove the existence of historical evidence of Islamic origin. This group includes Fuat Sezgin and Nabia Abbott.¹²

classics of Islam. His books that are widely recognized by the academic community are *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, *Narratives of Islamic Origins* dan *The Early Islamic Conquests*.

⁹ Ibid., 39.

¹⁰ Some of the works that have surfaced generally examine Fred Donner's work in book review writings scattered in various journals. Among them, Stevan C Judd, "Review Muhammad and the Believers: at the Origins of Islam" dalam *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol 79, No. 3, (2011), 762-765; Jude P. Dougherty, "Review Muhammad and the Believers: at the Origins of Islam" dalam *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 64, no. 2, (2010), 382-383; Paul R. Powers, "Review Muhammad and the Believers: at the Origins of Islam" dalam *History of Religions*, Vol. 52, No. 3, (2013), 306-308; Gerald Hawting, "Review Muhammad and the Believers: at the Origins of Islam" dalam *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (2011), 284-285; Daniel Martin Varisco, "Review Muhammad and the Believers: at the Origins of Islam" dalam *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 130, No. 3 (2010), 460-462.

¹¹ See Patricia Crone dan Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of Islam*.

¹² See Nabia Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papiry* 1 (1957); *Studies in Arabic Literary Papiry* 2 (1967); *Studies in Arabic Literary Papiry* 3 (1972), and Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums* (1967-2000) which amounted to 13 volumes.

The last group are those who want to look at the sources of Islamic history in a different way. In this case, the idea arises about whether sources must be material (solid objects). Is it not possible for oral (verbal or oral) sources to be historical evidence? From here the critical historical perspective that requires written historical evidence (solid material) gets a challenge that not all history has written evidence. In fact, much history is reconstructed based on oral or verbal transmission. Likewise, with the Islamic tradition, which initially emphasized verbal transmission of knowledge, is the critical historical paradigm that requires material an absolute requirement? This question is discussed in Gregor Schoeler's book *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*. In this book Schoeler highlights the Islamic tradition that uses a lot of oral traditions. So this tradition needs to be considered by revisionists when they want to review Islamic history. If this orality theory is accepted, then Islamic histories written by classical scholars can become authentic historical evidence for historical reconstruction.

In the development of Qur'anic studies in the West, one of the theories that is quite influential until now is what Abraham Geiger (d. 1874) theorized, namely the theory of borrowing and influence. The above two works written by John Wansbrough is enough to mark that the study of the authenticity of the Qur'an after Abraham Geiger is not over yet. Although in the previous period there were several popular scholars such as Theodore Nöldeke, Montgomery Watt and Richard Bell, it was John Wansbrough's work that initiated the next research movement which in turn became known as the "revisionists".

The 'revisionist' approach is defined as unorthodox, non-normative and unconventional scholarship that offers an alternative methodological approach to traditional Muslim sources on early Islam.¹³ It is important to note that revisionist approaches are very diverse as will be discussed later, but behind the diversity there is a common spirit to consider traditional sources insufficient to be used in reconstructing early Islamic history.¹⁴

In principle, this revisionist approach is based on the following basic assumptions and premises; a) written sources, whatever and however they are, cannot describe what really happened, but are limited to describing what happened according to the author, or what the author wants about something that has happened, or what he wants others to believe that something has happened; b) only eyewitnesses can know what they are writing about, and even then there is still the possibility of inter-pretations that are in accordance or not in accordance with the events observed, because it is not uncommon for what is written to be influenced by prior knowledge and knowledge. Materials that appeared during the time of the event and the written work of an eyewitness; c) because of the limitations of words to describe events that really happened, it is not uncommon for reductions to occur in the writing process; d) written works must reveal what really happened or present actual facts, but only present the author's view of a known event; e) Written evidence is not free from problems. The available evidence is not free from the possibility of change and sometimes only parts or even separate fragments remain; f) external evidence is an important thing to examine when a historian reads written evidence by Muslims.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., 13.

¹⁴ Ibid., 39.

¹⁵ Akh. Minhaji, *Sejarah Sosial Dalam Studi Islam: Teori, Metodologi, dan Implementasi* (Yogyakarta: Sunan Kalijaga Press, 2010), 83-108; See also, W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh, Paperback edition, 1990), 93

The revisionist approach basically rests on three principles: first, the source criticism approach to the Qur'an and Islamic literature related to the rise of Islam, the Islamic conquests, and the Umayyad period; second, the importance of comparing Islamic literature with external data outside the Muslim tradition, especially data that is contemporaneous with the events mentioned; third, the utilization of material evidence (archaeological, numismatic, epigraphic) that is contemporaneous with the events being researched and the conclusions drawn from these data are considered more valid than data that is not contemporaneous, namely data in the form of Islamic literature written long after the events occurred.¹⁶

In this case, Fred Donner mapped out the approaches developed among modern scholars in addressing traditional Muslim sources. Donner divides the approach into four; First, descriptive approach, Second, source criticism approach, Third, Tradition criticism approach, Fourth, Skeptical approach.¹⁷ The typology of approaches introduced by Donner leads us to know better how Muslim sources are studied or analyzed by modern scholars.

Three of the last four typologies of approaches share a skeptical attitude towards traditional Muslim sources. However, the skepticism of the latter approach is more radical, rejecting outright the factual information contained in traditional Muslim sources. The guiding principle of this approach is that traditions about Islamic origins are the product of a very long process and are part of a slow change in oral transmission. In other words, the skeptic approach rejects the core historical fact of "what really happened" in the early Islamic period.¹⁸

Donner further elaborates on the basic assumptions of the skeptic approach as follows: first, the Qur'an as a codified scriptural text as a closed corpus was formed deep in the period of the second or third century, so that with a long enough time it is assumed by Western scholars that the Qur'an cannot be used as evidence for early Islam, in other words that the Qur'an is a development of the next generation. Second, narratives or stories about early Islam are all seen as "salvation history", which presents stories to idealize the person of the Prophet and his community of followers. Therefore, the description of the idealized Prophet only reflects what they believed and not what actually happened. Thirdly, the stories about the prophet's life are nothing more than mere interpretations created by later generations, and not historical facts because they cannot be historically proven.¹⁹ In fact, Donner's typology of approaches above is the most important and inseparable part of the historical criticism approach. In this context, Edgar Krentz in his work *The Historical-Critical Method*, has first mapped out a model of approaches that fall under the umbrella of historical criticism, for example; the approach of text criticism, philology, literary criticism, form criticism, editorial criticism.²⁰ As diverse as the approaches to historical criticism are,²¹ basically all of them have the same goal of clarifying the origin of the text, obtaining and describing its earliest

¹⁶ Akh. Minhaji, *Sejarah Sosial*, 109.

¹⁷ Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁰ Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 48-51.

²¹ The Historical-critical approach can be understood as an umbrella term for a group of other critical methods or approaches. John.J. Collins, *The Bible After Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Cambridge.U.K. 2005), 4.

form and function, and finally collecting and publishing the results of the research in one or more editions of the Qur'anic text accompanied by historical commentary/interpretation.²²

Since the emergence of historical criticism in the 19th century, some Orientalists have taken a revisionist stance. They argue that the sources of Islam are problematic to be the sole basis for reconstructing early Islam.²³ They view Islam, namely the Qur'an, as having Jewish and Christian origins. They build a theological assumption that there are similarities between the teachings of the Qur'an and the Judeo-Christian tradition which Western scholars base their theory that the sources of inspiration for the Qur'an are the Old and New Testaments.²⁴

Fred Donner and his Scholarship on Islam

His full name is Fred McGraw Donner. He is an American scholar who was born in Washington D.C. in 1945. He grew up in Basking Ridge, a community in the New Jersey area. That's where he started school. In 1968, she completed her undergraduate studies in Oriental Studies at Princeton University. It was during his undergraduate studies that he had the opportunity to visit Shimlan, Lebanon. It was in 1966-1967 that he took Arabic studies at the Middle East Center for Arab Studies (MECAS). And in 1968 to 1970, he joined the American army. Then he took part with the American army in security in Herzogenaurach, Germany in 1969-1970.

He then studied oriental philology for one year (1970-1971) at Friedrich-Alexander Universität in Erlangen, Germany, before returning to Princeton to continue his doctoral studies there. Fred Donner eventually earned his Ph.D. from Princeton in Near Eastern Studies in 1975. He taught Middle Eastern history in the Department of History at Yale University from 1975 to 1982. Subsequently, in 1982 he taught at The Oriental Institute and the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, at the University of Chicago. He was then appointed head of the department in 1997-2002. And since 2009 he was appointed as the director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Chicago until now. In 2007, he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to conduct research on Arabic papyri dating back to the first century of Islam (7th century AD) at the University of Chicago. It was through this project that he came into contact with early Islamic discourse, and he later published many books on early Islamic history.

Donner was also the President of Middle East Medievalists from 1992 to 1994. He was also the editor of the journal *Al-Usur al-Wusta: The Bulletin of Middle East Medievalists* from 1992 to 2011.²⁵ In addition, he is also the President of the Middle East Studies Association in North America.²⁶ He has also been a member of MESA (Middle East Studies Association) since 1975, serving on the MESA Board of Directors from 1992-1994. He was honored with MESA's Jere L. Bacharach Service Award in 2008.²⁷

²² See, Manfred S. Kroop (ed.), *Results of Contemporary Research on the Qur'an: The Question of a historico-critical Text of The Qur'an* (Beirut: Orient-Institute Beirut: Wuerzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2007), 1.

²³ This concept of imitation became known as the Judeo-Christian Theory of Influence. See, Muzayyin, "Al-Qur'an menurut Pandangan Orientalis: Studi Analisis 'Teori Pengaruh' Dalam Pemikiran Orientalis," *Jurnal al-Qur'an dan Hadits* 16 (2) 2015; See also, Muzayyin, "Menguji 'Otentisitas Wahyu Tuhan' Dengan Pembacaan Kontemporer: Telaah Atas Polemical Studies Kajian Orientalis dan Liberal", *Jurnal Esensia* 15 (2), 2014: 237.

²⁴ Muzayyin, "Pendekatan Historis-kritis Dalam Studi al-Qur'an: Studi Komparatif Terhadap Pemikiran Theodor Noldeke dan Arthur Jeffery", *Tesis*, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, 2015.

²⁵ See, middleeastmedievalists.org.

²⁶ <http://mesana.org/publications/imes/presidents-letters.html>.

²⁷ <http://mesana.org/awards/jere-bacharach-service.html>.

Donner is a researcher and senior member of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), the American Oriental Society, and the Middle East Medievalist. Donner's book *The Early Conquests* was published by Princeton University Press in 1981. In addition, he also published a one-volume work on the translation of al-Tabari's history in 1993. In the book *Narrative of Islamic Origins* (1998), Donner explains his view of the origin of the Qur'anic text. In part, he responds to the "late canonization" theory espoused by John Wansbrough and Judah D. Nevo. The book seeks to explain how the point of Muslim intellectual development that sought to provide political legitimacy moved alongside themes of intellectual writing about prophethood, community, hegemony and leadership. For Donner, these themes are an important marker that Muslims are beginning to move into the tradition of writing because of the political interests they want to promote. These themes, then, are why early Muslim writings were generally concerned with these issues.

Likewise, Donner's book *Muhammad and the Believers* has been described as a scholarly and original work and received a special review in the *New York Times*. Patricia Crone writes that the direct evidence used by Donner in his main thesis on the early Islamic ecumenical movement is drawn partly from the Qur'an and partly from assumptions. According to Crone, the *New York Times* review of her book indicates that it is a successful work in portraying a "kind, tolerant and open" Islam addressed to a liberal American public, and that it may be very useful in educating a wider audience, but as an intellectual work, it still does not explore one controversial aspect. Other reviews have characterized the book as "provocative and convincing" and a possible alternative work on the study of the emergence of early Islam.

Fred Donner and His Approach to Early Islamic History

As a historian, Donner examines various works on early Islamic historiography. As a mosaic, early Islamic history is not immune from academic problems, as Muslims view Islamic history as a finished history. On the contrary, early Islamic history is suspected of having many problems, especially the problem of "sources". This source problem is a problems in the debate of academics when they want to reconstruct early Islamic history. The reason is, according to them, the sources used in reconstructing early Islamic history so far are considered to have many weaknesses such as incoherent, conflicting histories, and historical narratives that are indicated to be thick with political and ideological content. This is one of the reasons why the discourse on sources has not been completed until now.

His position on classical Islamic literature can be described as follows,

"However, as any serious student of the origins of Islam will know, these literary sources have various problems as evidence of the origins of Islam. First of all, there is the fact that they are not contemporary sources; they were sometimes written centuries after the events they describe. Clearly, reconstructing the origins of Islam based on such literary materials violates the first law of historians, which is to use contemporary sources whenever possible. It is not just a nice principle either; even a quick reading of some of the major literary sources on the origins of Islam - especially the narratives on this theme - reveals internal complexities that give serious researchers pause. Chronological discrepancies and absurdities abound, as do flat contradictions in the meaning of events or even, more rarely, in the fundamentals. Many

accounts present information that is clearly anachronistic; others provide ample evidence of embellishment or outright invention to serve political or religious apologetic purposes.”²⁸

From the above statement, Fred Donner theoretically follows what revisionists complain about the absence of early data written contemporaneously with the events of early Islamic history. History books written by Muslim historians only appeared a hundred centuries after the early generation of Muslims had passed away. This is the gap in tracing the early history of Islam, which according to them is filled with ahistorical stories.

In his book, Donner asks the question of when Muslims started writing. This question seems funny. But according to him, it is important when referring to the sequence of events in Islamic history. In his analysis, he says that early Islamic history was colored by the act of piety. This act of piety is what the Qur’an repeatedly demonstrates in thousands of verses. Donner doubts the historical element in the speech of piety, because the core of the speech is about how to be a pious person and group, not about objective history. Therefore, the history of the early Islamic journey is not of general interest. Their main concern is about how to propagate and be pious.

This focus on piety, for example, can be found in the verses of the Qur’an that tell stories. In many verses, the Qur’an does not tell about the details of the event, both the subject, object, setting of the event to the sequence of events. For example, in the longest surah indicated to contain the history of the Prophet Joseph, in QS. Yusuf, many historical details are neglected. The names of the Prophet Joseph’s family, brothers and sisters, who proposed to kill him, and who also proposed to throw him into the well, where the well was located, the name of the person who found it, how much the Prophet Joseph was sold for, and so on. The details of this seem to be ignored by the Qur’an, but on the other hand we can catch so many hints of piety in these verses. For example, when Yusuf’s father received the story of his dream, he told him not to tell his brothers for fear of making a ruse that would eventually harm Yusuf. The verse then ends with a warning of piety, “surely Satan is a clear enemy to man”.²⁹ In another verse, the Qur’an explains that the opposition of piety and piety is to follow the path of Satan³⁰ because Satan leads to the path of misguidance.³¹ In another verse, when Joseph’s brothers came with clothes soaked in fake blood and told the lie that Joseph had been eaten by a wolf while they were playing in the forest, there is a piece of piety, “so the way of patience is the best, and to Allah alone seek His help in what you narrate”.³² This is one of the reasons why Fred Donner said that early Islamic history was filled with discourses of piety, not awareness of history. Therefore, referring to the question above, “when did Muslims start to write?”, becomes a fairly important question to answer the background or initial context why Muslims began to write their history. If the awareness of history did not appear in the early days when the Prophet Muhammad lived, then the possibility of the emergence of awareness of history is the period after the prophet Muhammad. And we know for ourselves that the history of Islam after the prophet Muhammad is decorated with political narratives that do not reflect objective history, but rather subjective history (salvation history). This is where it is important to situate the issue of consciousness and historical authorship in the early Muslims.

²⁸ Ibid., 4.

²⁹ QS. Yusuf (12): 5.

³⁰ QS. al-Baqarah (2): 208.

³¹ QS. Al-Nisa’ (4): 60.

³² QS. Yusuf (12): 18.

His View of the Qur'ān as Authentic Historical Evidence

One of the important topics in critical studies of the Qur'an is whether the Qur'an is an early Islamic historical document? Against this question, some Muslim thinkers, in particular, have argued and even believed that the Qur'an is a product of early Islamic history. It can even be said that Islam was born from and with the framework of the messages of the Qur'an. In other words, without the Qur'an, Islam might not have emerged and grown as a social religious movement that exists until this contemporary era. The Qur'an itself is a historical document that Muslims believe comes from God and is given to the Prophet through a process of revelation transcendence, in which the angel Gabriel has an important role in the process of transmitting the revelation. Many documents mention that the prophet when he received the revelation, experienced various events recorded in the hadith, such as the sound of bells, rumbling, and even the prophet's psychological condition was sometimes "disturbed" by cold sweat which caused the prophet to feel heavy to receive the message of the Qur'an. All of these narratives seem to want to explain to the Muslim audience that the Qur'an is a revelation from God, and even people like the prophet Muhammad still feel heavy when receiving the revelation. This narrative also wants to explain to us that in receiving revelation, not just anyone is strong enough to forge it, so only the prophet should receive it.

These narratives are recorded neatly and in detail in historical books and books of *'ulum al-Qur'an* (the science of the Qur'an). And all these records explain that the Qur'an that exists today is a holy book that was fixed (final) at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. So that its historical authority is able to become an important document to see the dynamics of social life when the prophet Muhammad lived.

This narrative is basically not fully accepted by revisionists. They consider that even the Qur'an cannot be historical evidence, because the material in the Qur'an describes a theological discourse that is thick with nuances of debate, which did not occur at the time of the prophet and in the Arab situation, Mecca and Medina, at that time. Wansbrough argues this, and he proposes the idea that the Qur'an was fixedly documented over a long period of time and in a locus far from Mecca and Medina, between Syria and Iraq. He also said that the process of Qur'anic fixation took place about two centuries after the prophet Muhammad died. This means that the Qur'an was completed as a text during the Abbasid period, at which time the locus of Abbasid power was in Baghdad, Iraq. Actually, the two locations assumed by Wansbrough about the period of fixation of the Qur'an refer to the two periods of Islamic rule after the death of the four caliphs. The first assumption, which says that the Qur'an experienced a fixed period in Syria, was actually the center of power of the Umayyad dynasty. Likewise, the idea of a fixed period in Iraq, which was the center of power of the Abbasid dynasty. These two loci become something predictive, because Wansbrough himself cannot state with certainty where and when the fixation process occurred.

To the ideas put forward by Wansbrough, Fred Donner responded by writing,

"Among the revisionist treatment of the Qur'an, the work of Wansbrough, in particular, creates problems for the would-be historian of the early community of believers. Wansbrough, starting from the fact that the Qur'an contains several different kinds of material, hypothesizes that different parts of the Qur'an originated in different communities, some or all of which, he suggest, were located not in Arabia, but in Iraq or Syria. Moreover, his literary analysis of the Qur'an leads him to conclude that the Qur'anic text as we now know it coalesced only slowly

and did not assume final form until the late second/eighth century or even later. He argues that the texts that finally were accorded scriptural status were merely a small part of the much larger body of pious maxims, stories, wisdom literature, etc. that circulated –orally, at first– in the various communities. The vast majority of this material, on the other hand, never attained the status of scripture, and became instead the stuff of hadīs, or in some cases, was dropped altogether if it was deemed to fall outside the bounds of the slowly evolving notions of Islamic orthodoxy. Wansbrough considers the Quran, then, like the hadīs and other narrative sources for the history of early Islam, to be a product of what he has aptly called “sectarian milieu” of inter-confessional and politic polemics. In this arena, presumably comprising the countries of the Fertile Crescent, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Believers or proto-Muslims bounded ideas and claims off one another until, after a few centuries, all groups has clearly defined their theological, ritual, and sociological boundaries as distinct confessions.”³³

Although he does not consider that the Qur’an existed as a closed text until the late second/eighth century or even later, Wansbrough admits that some of the material eventually enshrined in it was in circulation again. This last point is not unimportant, as it allows Wansbrough to claim that even early documentary citations of the Qur’an (e.g., Qur’anic verses found on 7th century inscriptions) cannot be taken as evidence of the Qur’an’s existence as a closed canon of texts at an early date; rather, they can only be Qur’anic texts that already existed at that time, leaving unresolved the question of when the entirety of the Qur’an as a canonized closed text first crystallized.

Another weakness in Wansbrough’s case, according to Donner, is that he does not indicate who is responsible for deciding what does or does not belong in the Qur’ānic canon. Putting the responsibility for such a process solely on “the community” or “the scholars” is too vague; we need to know who, or at least which groups, were involved in making such decisions, and what interests they represented; but Wansbrough provides no explanation for this question. Similarly, he fails to explain how the eventual vulgate of the Qur’an, at the end of the second century Hijri, was imposed on people from Spain to Central Asia who may have been using a rather different text for a long time, and why no echoes of this alleged operation - which, one imagines, would have led to sharp contradictions - can be found in our sources.

However, it is almost impossible to reject Wansbrough’s interpretation by systematic argumentation, since his own observations are not presented as an integrated argument. Rather, Wansbrough creates a series of loosely connected and broad hypotheses that together imply his main conclusions about the date and origin of the Qur’anic texts by their collective weight and supporting character, not because they form a linear series of deductions. The confusing presentation of Wansbrough’s work on the Qur’an makes grasping even his basic points all the more difficult. Since Wansbrough does not offer a fully articulated chain of arguments, it is difficult to construct a systematic and logical refutation of his interpretation; the refutation of a particular point may somewhat weaken the plausibility of the whole, yet the validity of his interpretation can still be said to remain intact based on other observations and associations he makes.

Counter-arguments to the Revisionist

³³ Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 35.

According to Mun'im Sirry, Fred Donner takes issue with Wansbrough's argument on five counts. First, a number of early texts that were found also quoted Qur'anic verses and considered them as holy books. This means that since the early days of the development of Islam, the Qur'an has been believed to be a holy book. Secondly, many books written by Muslim scholars contain various different readings of the Qur'anic verses, which means that the different readings are not related to the process of canonization of the Qur'an. Thirdly, Wansbrough does not explain who has the authority to determine the standard texts of the Qur'an. If the process of canonization is related to the issue of what to include or not in the text of the Qur'an, of course the process must invite debate. In fact, we do not find any such debate. Fourth, if the Qur'an was canonized in Iraq, why is it that our sources do not record any sharp resistance from Muslim groups from various Muslim regions spread from Spain to Central Asia. However, in the most elaborate critique of the concept of "prophetic logia," Donner points out the differences in language and content between the Qur'an and the hadith, suggesting that the Qur'an was indeed born much earlier than the hadith.³⁴

Mun'im Sirry sees a weakness in Wansbrough's thesis, his view that the existence of polemical elements in the Qur'an means that it emerged in the sectarian climate in Iraq. First, the polemical climate does not reflect the entire content of the Qur'an. Besides polemical verses, the Qur'an also contains non-polemical verses. Even if we accept the polemical background of the Qur'anic text, it does not mean that this scripture emerged in Iraq. Many studies have proven that the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century was not as isolated as commonly perceived. Thus, polemics could occur anywhere, including in Makkah.³⁵

Commenting on the dependence of Islam on Judaism and Christianity, Fazlur Rahman stated that "all religions are in history." This applies to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Although all three originated from God, however, God has intervened in history for the benefit of mankind.³⁶ Therefore, according to Rahman, to prove this, the history of the two religions must be traced in the Arab region.³⁷ And to get a historical background, it must be sought in the Arab tradition itself, not in the Jewish or Christian tradition.³⁸ The issue of whether there is an influence of Islamic doctrine with previous religions and whether Islam stands alone even though it comes from Judaism and Christianity has been studied by many Orientalists.³⁹

According to Rahman, they are eager to prove Islam's genealogical origin. However, what is important for Rahman is not the question of the originality of Islam, but Muhammad's perception of himself and his mission in relation to previous prophets and their religions and their

³⁴ Mun'im Sirry, *Kontroversi Islam Awal*, 55.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

³⁶ Fazlur Rahman, "Historical versus Literary Criticism," in Issa J. Boullata (ed), *An Anthology of Islamic Studies* (Canada: McGill Indonesia IAIN Development Project, 1992), 198-202.

³⁷ On the situation facing the Muslim community in Makkah, see Fazlur Rahman, *Tema Pokok al-Qur'an*, Trans: Anas Mahyudin dengan Judul (Bandung: Pustaka, 1985), 261-232.

³⁸ Fazlur Rahman, "Approach to Islam in Religious Studies," in Richard C. Martin, *Approaches to religious Studies* (USA: The University of Arizona Press, 1985), 202.

³⁹ Rahman, *Tema Pokok al-Qur'an*, 233-234.

people.⁴⁰ For many verses of the Qur'an reveal that the scriptures before the Qur'an were from God and the prophets who delivered them were also prophets of God.⁴¹

Although there are those who criticize the ideas and methodology used by Wansbrough, there are some other researchers who appreciate the methods used by Wansbrough, especially those that are closely related to the axiological dimension in scientific discourse. This opinion was expressed by Joseph van Ess.⁴² Other support was also expressed by Patricia Crone and Michael Cooks in *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*. The work explains the validity of Wansbrough's method and the way he used it in conducting further studies.⁴³

In the following, I will list some of the arguments put forward by Fred Donner to criticize the thesis of the revisionist school: *First*, the use of hadith as a method of comparing material. In this regard he says,

“If the Qur'an text is really a product of the same milieu that produced the hadiths and the origins narratives, so that the hadiths and various passages in early narrative sources contain (to use Wansbrough's own phrase) “sub-canonical” versions of Qur'anic materials, why is the content of the Qur'an so different from that of the other materials? Anyone who has read much of both Qur'an and hadith will recognize that they diff dramatically in content—a general point that, I believe, Wansbrough nowhere addresses. A ready explanation of this difference might be that the Qur'an and the other materials crystallized at roughly the same time and in roughly the same historical circumstances, but for very different purposes: the Qur'an for liturgical needs and recitation, the hadiths and pseudo-historical origins narratives to serve the exegetical and historicizing needs of the community (and all, perhaps, to serve the legal needs of the community). Setting aside the question of whether the Qur'an text really is best understood as originating as a liturgy—a proposition of Wansbrough's that I also find dubious—we can still note that the differences between Qur'an and hadiths are so fundamental that the plausibility of the whole scheme and timetable of Qur'anic coalescence that Wansbrough has proposed is called into question.”⁴⁴

From the above statement, in reversing the logic of the revisionist school, Fred Donner uses comparative logic by using hadith as his material. There are several points that are used as comparative material. First, the material on leadership in the Qur'an and hadith. Donner considers that the material between the two sources is very different. He says “*one of the most striking aspects of the corpus of hadith and the origins narratives in general (including those origins narratives that were compiled into the standard Muslim biographies of Muhammad) is the degree to which they reflect the salient political issues of the first and second centuries AH.*”⁴⁵ One of the most striking things about the corpus of hadith and early historical narratives is that they generally differ in the degree to which they reflect the salient political issues of the first and second centuries AH. According to him the hadith books are voluminous and filled with narratives that speak of good and bad leadership in a community and in what ways Muslims are required to follow their leaders. For example, many hadith narratives talk about how we should behave towards our leaders. Leaders in the hadith narratives are also described with various linguistic versions, such as *kehalifah*, *amir*, *wali*, *sulthān* and *imām*.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 65-66.

⁴¹ Ibid., 167-168 .

⁴² Taufik Adnan Amal, *Rekonstruksi Sejarah al-Qur'an* (Jakarta: Yayasan Abad Demokrasi, 2011), 43.

⁴³ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁴ Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 39.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 40.

Donner then cites various traditions found in the hadith canons that deal with the issue of leadership. Some of these traditions deal in more detail with the ethical aspects of responsibility, fairness, not asking for positions and equality between the leader and the led. These traditions are narrated in more detail with various versions that can be found in the books of hadith, as well as the *sīrah* (history) of the Prophet.

In this regard, Donner says that all hadith-reports related to leadership explain in detail the politics of leadership, starting from who should lead, what principles a leader should have, and what the attitude of the people should be when facing a leader who is doing injustice to them, what the prerogatives of the leader are in political, legal, administrative and moral aspects, and other aspects that often describe the hot political situations and conditions.

In contrast to the material in the hadith, the Quran is silent on the subject of political leadership concessions. The Quranic text, on the other hand, speaks almost nothing at all about political or religious leadership, except as it relates directly to Muhammad himself (or occasionally about other prophets). The Qur'an clearly gives no guidance on who should exercise political power among believers after Muhammad, or on the person who should lead after him; this does not seem to interest or concern the Qur'an. On the other hand, the Qur'an also gives no indication of how power should be exercised; the only exceptions are moral injunctions that are so general and vague that they apply to all believers, and hence do not address the issue of political leadership and its rights or responsibilities with respect to the interests of its people in any meaningful way. Almost the only expression in the Quran that could be seen as hinting at the continuation of political authority after Muhammad, in fact, is the famous passage from the Quran, namely "Obey God and obey the Messenger and those in power among you (*ūlī al-amr minkum*), and even this may only be taken as a reference to "those in power" at the time of Muhammad, such as the commander in a raid, rather than an expression related to the future for the concession of the election of governors, caliphs, imams, viziers and others.

For the word caliph itself, the Quran only mentions it twice, and even then it is only related to Adam and David. This indicates that the word caliph in the Quran does not have a political sense. The word is a moral message for leadership in general, not directed at a particular party. Thus, says Donner, that the thesis of the caliph in the Qur'an certainly precedes the debate about the caliph that exists and is revealed in the hadith. Hence, Donner says "the discrepancy between the Qur'an and hadith on the question of political leadership is striking, and suggests strongly that the two bodies of material are not the product of a common "sectarian milieu", but come from somewhat different historical contexts." That the difference between the Qur'an and hadith on the question of political leadership is striking, and suggests strongly that the two bodies of material are not the product of a common "sectarian milieu", but come from somewhat different historical contexts.

Secondly, the use of hadith as a method of comparing material on the names of the Prophet's companions. In a similar direction to the above way of thinking, it is necessary here to question Wansbrough's thesis about the emergence of the Qur'an, that the Qur'an does not mention the names of the companions as much as the hadith. The Quran seems to mention only the name of Abū Lahab, the uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, who openly opposed the teachings of the prophet. Apart from that name, the Quran is almost absent in explicitly mentioning names. This is in stark contrast to the hadith, where the names of companions such as 'Alī, Abū Tālib, al-

'Abbās, Abū Sufyān, etc., are highlighted and mentioned specifically and explicitly in the hadith. This indicates that the material between the Qur'an and the hadith is quite different and that the Qur'an became a fixed corpus long before the hadith was codified.⁴⁶

Implications of Fred Donner's Thought in Islamic Studies

From some of the descriptions above, Fred Donner basically wants to raise an issue and discourse on the authenticity and authority of the Quran. In his efforts, he criticizes revisionists who reject the idea that the Quran was a finalized corpus at the time of the prophet; instead, he assumes that the Quran became a finalized corpus during the Umayyad or early Abbasid periods. In the paragraphs above, Fred Donner has presented a contrasting idea to the revisionist school that the Qur'an did not appear at the time of the Prophet, by comparing it with texts that are considered to have appeared after the Prophet. From here, Fred Donner seems to support the "traditional idea" that the Quran is a text that was finalized at the time of the Prophet. Therefore, the Quran can be used as historical evidence to see historical phenomena at the time of the Prophet. As he writes, "*while not serving as absolute proof, our arguments will tend to support the traditional view that the Qur'an text is a literary artifact emanating from the earliest community of believers in Arabia.*"⁴⁷

This argument is important to underline because with the emergence of the speculative ideas of the revisionist school, all Islamic historical documents become "lost", neglected and do not function as historical tools and evidence. This is because one of the historical doctrines they apply is to use evidence and historical documents that existed at that time, not the time after, let alone the time several centuries apart. Historical documents such as the works of Ibn Ishāq, Ibn Hisyām and al-Tabarī that appeared in the early days of Islam, have a long historical time span. The history closest to the Prophet, Ibn Hishām's Sirāh alone, has a time gap of almost two centuries. For the revisionist school, they question the validity of the content, material and historical data contained therein. Because the time span is not a short time span, but a very long time span and it is difficult to describe the authenticity and factual reliability of the history contained in the document.

From the description in the previous paragraphs of Fred Donner's argumentation by comparing it with the historical evidence in the hadith, Donner seems to be able to distort the argument. And the arguments he makes are sufficient evidence to show that the Qur'an and the hadith are two documents that originated at different times. The Hadith, with its detailed discussion of leadership issues and the names of the Companions, provides evidence in contrast to the content of the Qur'an, which does not mention the details of leadership succession, power politics and the names of the Companions. Thus, for Fred Donner, the Quran still lies in its position as a corpus that was fixed at the time of the Prophet. It is a text that was finalized long before the hadith were recorded.

This argument clearly rejects Wansbrough's idea that the Qur'an became a fixed document in the second or third century of the Hijri and that its location was not in Arabia, Mecca or Medina, but in Syria or Iraq, two locations that became the nodes of power of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. These periods are well known among Islamic scholars to be the times when hadith received considerable attention and it was during these times that the process of codification of hadith took place. If we follow Joseph Schacht's view, the hadith is a product of the second century

⁴⁶ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 39.

when it began to be well codified at the initiative of jurists since their position as judges (*qādī*) required them to use arguments based on the authoritative Islamic sources, namely the Qur'an and the hadith. The Quran itself does not address many specific issues, only general issues. In contrast to this, the hadith provides a "particular" function because many hadiths report specific incidents that can be taken as a basis for legal reasoning.

From this description, it is clear that while Fred Donner espouses and supports traditional ideas, it is not necessarily linked to his support for the hadith. The Qur'an that he supports, on the other hand, is at the expense of the hadith. By examining the material and content of the succession of leadership and the names of the companions in both the Qur'an and the hadith, Donner seems to be saying that the Qur'an is indeed an authentic document born at the time of the prophet. The hadith, on the other hand, was born during the polemical period because it contains many historical elements that illustrate how complicated the process of leadership succession was after the prophet died. This confirms that the hadith, with its various material variants, is a product of the time after the prophet Muhammad. As he states that "*a much more natural way to explain the Qur'an's virtual silence on the question of political leadership is to assume that the Qur'anic text, as we now have it, antedates the political concerns enshrined so prominently in the hadith literature. This is what we might expect if the Qur'anic text is the product of the time of Muhammad and his immediate followers.*"

Conclusion

In studying the early history of Islam and the tradition of writing in Islam, Fred Donner believes that the Qur'an is the main source in the formation of Islamic religious structures. According to him, the Qur'an is authentic evidence that can be an original history to describe the events that occurred during the time of the prophet Muhammad. The Qur'an, according to him, was completed as a corpus at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. This is different from the opinion of the revisionist school which says that the process of forming the Qur'an occurred over a long period of about two centuries. So that the Qur'an had not yet become the final form at the time of the Prophet Muhammad.

Fred Donner's argument is based on a comparative study between the Qur'an and the corpus that emerged about two centuries after the prophet Muhammad. Among the Islamic sources that became the object of his study were the hadith and *sirah nabawi* (prophetic history). In conducting a comparative test, Fred Donner found that the material in the hadith is significantly different from the material in the Qur'an. The hadith is characterized by its detail in reporting on leadership succession. On the other hand, the hadith also speaks more about leadership. Leadership terminologies such as caliphate, imam, vizier, sultan are very much mentioned in the hadith with intonations that lead to leadership succession. In contrast to the hadith, the Qur'an is silent on the issue of leadership. Another argument is that the hadith in describing the names of the companions often speaks clearly by mentioning the names of the companions. Unlike the Qur'an which almost does not mention the names of its companions. The names tend to be "hidden" by using vague "*dhampir*" (pronouns) or *khitab* (object of discussion). These two arguments are Donner's proof that the Qur'an came before the hadith. And it is also certain that the Qur'an became a fixed corpus during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad.

Fred Donner's argumentation with this method of comparing hadith implies the idea that hadith came later. This is because hadith materials tend to describe the polemics that occurred after

the death of the prophet. Of course, Fred Donner does not say this explicitly but the idea implies that the hadith emerged after the death of the prophet.

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