Emergence of the Synchronic Approach in Contemporary Qur'anic Studies: An Analytical Study

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ABSTRACT: The synchronic approach in Qur'anic studies examines the Qur'an as a unified and coherent text, focusing on its structural organization, thematic coherence, linguistic features, and literary qualities in its present form. This method aims to understand the Qur'anic text without considering what Western scholars claim to be its historical development or the stages that led to its final composition. It explores how various parts interrelate and contribute to the overall meaning and message of the Qur'an.

Early Western Qur'anic studies were predominantly characterized by the diachronic approach. However, in the twentieth century, several factors contributed to the development of holistic approaches in Qur'anic studies. The latter half of that century witnessed the adoption of new methodologies that treated individual *sūrahs* as coherent units or the Qur'an as an integrated whole. This shift was driven by emerging literary trends that favored synchronicity, particularly after recognizing the limitations of the diachronic approach in text interpretation. Scholars began to emphasize the internal coherence and unity of the Qur'anic text, leading to more detailed and comprehensive analyses of its structure.

Keywords: Synchronic Approach, Qur'anic Studies, Western Approaches in Qur'anic Studies, Diachronic Approach.

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نشأة الاتجاه التزامني في الدراسات القرآنية المعاصرة: دراسة تحليلية

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الملخص: يعني المنهج التزامني (السانكروني) في الدراسات القرآنية بدراسة القرآن كنص متكامل ومتسق، مع التركيز على تنظيمه الهيكلي، وتماسكه الموضوعي، وخصائصه اللغوية، وسماته الأدبية في صورته الحالية. ويهدف هذا المنهج إلى فهم النص القرآني دون النظر إلى ما يدعيه العلماء الغربيون عن تطوره التاريخي أو المراحل التي أدت إلى تكوينه النهائي. كما يستكشف كيفية تداخل أجزاء القرآن المختلفة وكيفية مساهمتها في المعنى العام والرسالة التي يحملها.

كانت الدراسات القرآنية الغربية في بدايتها تتسم بشكل أساسي بالمنهج التعاقبي (الدياكروني). ومع ذلك، في القرن العشرين، ساهمت عدة عوامل في تطوير المناهج في الدراسات القرآنية. حيث شهد النصف الثاني من ذلك القرن تبني منهجيات جديدة تعاملت مع السور كوحدات مترابطة أو القرآن كنص متكامل. وكان هذا التحول مدفوعًا بالاتجاهات الأدبية الجديدة التي فضلت المنهج التزامني، لا سيما بعد إدراك محدودية المنهج التعاقبي في تفسير النصوص. فبدأ العلماء في التركيز على التماسك الداخلي ووحدة النص القرآني، مما أدى إلى تحليلات أكثر تفصيلًا وشمولية لبنيته..

الكلمات المفتاحية: المنهج التزامني - المنهج السانكروني - الدراسات القرآنية - المناهج الغربية في الدراسات القرآنية - المنهج الدياكروني.

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1. Introduction

In dealing with the Qur'an, Western scholars adopted diverse approaches to its content and message. One approach seeks to understand the Qur'an through the lens of Muslim narrations and historical accounts. This is called the diachronic approach. Other scholars state that we can understand the Qur'an without referring to historical accounts whether Islamic or non-Islamic. Hence, they adopt the synchronic approach which advocates for a more text-centered method, focusing on the Qur'an as is without delving into external factors. This approach deals with the Qur'an as a complete and coherent text, examining its structural organization, thematic coherence, and literary qualities.

This research paper forms part of a master's thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the degree requirements. Many issues and statements stated herein are examined and assessed in greater detail within the thesis. The present study adopts an analytical approach to examine the emergence of the synchronic approach in Western Qur'anic studies. It aims to explore the key characteristics that define this approach, along with the underlying principles that guide its application.

2. Conceptual Overview of Synchronic Approach

Examining the etymology of the term "synchronic" will help us comprehend its meaning. This term is borrowed from Ancient Greek σύγχρονος (súnkhronos), which means contemporaneous or occurring at the same time.[1] The prefix "σῠν-" (sún-) means "with, together,"[2] and χρόνος (khrónos) means "time" (or "pertaining to time").[3] Hence, "synchronic" literally means "with-time." This term is used to describe an approach, a phenomenon or an activity by analyzing its behavior in respect of a specific period of time, without considering its historical antecedents or subsequent developments.[4] Having said that, it may be noticed that the above-mentioned etymology and the literal meaning of the term "synchronic" is deemed to be misleading, since the first use (i.e. Saussure's use) of the term actually refers to an atemporal approach in linguistics, one that operates independently of time. This

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[1] H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), s.v. "σύγχρονος."

[2] *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. "σῠν."

[3] *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. "χρόνος.";

[4] See Kihel R., "Some Key Concepts in Modern Linguistics," (n.d.): 2; and Adrian Akmajian et al., *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication*, 6th ed. (London: The MIT Press, 2010), 311.

approach "abstracts away from the effects of the ages and studies language at a given, frozen moment."[5]

According to Merriam-Webster, the term "synchronic" refers to something that is "concerned with events existing in a limited time period and ignoring historical antecedents."[6] As for synchronic linguistics, it refers to "the study of a language at a given point in time. The time studied may be either the present or a particular point in the past."[7] This approach allows linguists to understand the structure, vocabulary, and usage of not only the living languages but also the dead ones, such as Latin,[8] offering insights into how those languages functioned in different historical and social contexts without delving into their diachronic, or historical, development.

This term is also used to refer to "the exegesis of the biblical text as a whole, without a specific interest in its process of composition and transmission."[9] The synchronic approach in Qur'anic studies is a method that examines the Qur'an as a unified and coherent text,[10] analyzing its structural organization, thematic coherence, linguistic features and literary qualities as they exist in the final, present form,[11] without considering the historical development or the milestones that led to its final form, e.g.

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[5] Randy Allen Harris, *The Linguistics Wars* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993)*, 17.

[6] *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "synchronic," accessed June 9, 2024, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/synchronic

[7] *Britannica*, s.v. "Synchronic Linguistics," accessed May 17, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/science/synchronic-linguistics.

[8] *Britannica*, s.v. "Synchronic Linguistics," accessed May 17, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/science/synchronic-linguistics.

[9] Mihai Ciurea, "Rhetorical Analysis of Biblical Texts and Its Importance for the Synchronic Exegesis of the New Testament," *Orthodox Theology in Dialogue* 1, no. 3 (2017): 176, https://orthodoxtheologyindialogue.ro/uploads/content_files/papers/otd2017/13.pdf

[10] Andrew Rippin, "Contemporary Scholarly Understandings of Qur'anic Coherence," in *Al-Bayan: Journal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies* 11, no. 2 (December 2013): 13, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.11136/jqh.1311.02.01; Mahmoud Saraeb, "Hay'at al-Qur'ān wa Bunatah: Dirāsah Naqdiyyah li-Ārā' Angelika Neuwirth," in *al-Qur'ān al-Karīm fī al-Fikr al-Istshrāqī al-Mu'āṣir: Critical Approaches to the Encyclopedia of the Qur'an* (Karbala: Islamic Center for Strategic Studies, 2021), 131; and "al-Ittijāh al-Sānkrūnī (al-Tazāmunī) fī Dirāsat al-Qur'ān," Tafsir Center for Qur'anic Studies, accessed June 17, 2024, https://tafsir.net/translation/44/al-mlf-ath-thalth-ala-qsm-at-trjmat-alatjah-as-sankrwny-altzamny-fy-drast-al-qr-aan.

[11] Yusuf Rahman, The Qur'ān as Literature: Literary Interpretation of the Qur'ān," in *Journal of Qur'ān and Ḥadīth Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 29.

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the processes of its compilation.[12] It seeks to explore how the various parts relate to each other and contribute to the overall meaning and message of the Qur'an.[13]

3. Difference Between Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches

The diachronic and synchronic approaches represent two distinct methodologies for studying texts and examining linguistic phenomena, each having its area of focus and offering unique insights. In the field of Qur'anic studies, scholars employ these two methodologies to analyze and understand the Qur'an. Each of the two approaches is based on distinct underlying assumptions, leading to different methods of analysis and producing varied results. In light of the above-stated definition, there are some comparisons between the two approaches.

3.1. Difference as per Temporal Aspects

Synchrony and diachrony are two dimensions of time, two angles through which any language or historical literary work can be approached. What differentiates synchrony from diachrony is their perspective on time.[14] The synchronic approach examines a subject at a specific point in time. It, meaning "occurring at the same time," treats the subject as a complete and static entity, without delving into how these aspects might have developed or changed over time. That is why Ferdinand de Saussure (1913) often uses the adjective "static" when discussing synchronic linguistics.[15] The synchronic approach analyzes a language or text within specific periods or eras, without considering the historical changes between different eras.[16]

In contrast, the diachronic approach investigates the language or text through its historical development, tracing the changes and transformations that happened in different times. This method emphasizes the dynamic and evolving nature of language, recognizing that it is not static but is constantly influenced by various factors. Hence, it provides an understanding of languages and text as living entities

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[12] Lashkhab Zayn al-Dīn, "al-Manāhij al-Lisānīyah wa Athrhā fī al-Dirāsāt al-Qur'ānīyah al-Muʿāṣirah" (master's thesis, Ahmed Draia University of Adrar, 2017), 104; "al-Ittijāh al-Sānkrūnī (al-Tazāmunī) fī Dirāsat al-Qur'ān," Tafsir Center for Qur'anic Studies, accessed June 17, 2024, https://tafsir.net/translation/44/al-mlf-ath-thalth-ala-qsm-at-trjmat-alatjah-as-sankrwny-altzamny-fy-drast-al-qr-aan.

[13] Rahman, The Qur'ān as Literature,": 30.

[14] Koog P. Hong, "Synchrony and Diachrony in Contemporary Biblical Interpretation," in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (July 2013): 532, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43728235

[15] See Ferdinand De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 101-102

[16] See Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 102

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that develop and transform over time. It helps scholars identify how a text has been interpreted and understood in different times.[17]

In the context of Qur'anic studies, these two approaches offer distinct methodologies for understanding the structure of the scripture. The synchronic approach aims to understand the text in its present form, while the diachronic approach delves into the historical context of the scripture's composition and compilation, examining how various parts were incorporated and how the text was standardized. Therefore, the synchronic approach takes "the Qur'an in its finished form as a starting point for literary investigation,"[18] while the diachronic approach examines the historical events and factors that led to that present form. That is why the synchronic studies are also called "final-from studies."[19]

3.2.Difference as per Area of Focus

The distinction between synchronic and diachronic approaches can also be viewed in terms of their focus on the internal or external elements of a text or a language. The synchronic approach focuses on the internal elements of a text, analyzing its structure, themes, and linguistic features. This method seeks to understand how different parts of the text interact to create a coherent whole. It looks at the structure and the relationships between words, sentences, and other components of the text to examine the text's current form and prove its internal coherence.[20] Consequently, the synchronic approach is also referred to as the "*literary*" approach[21] or "*literary-critical*" approach.[22]

On the other hand, the diachronic approach examines the external elements and factors that have influenced the text over time. This method investigates the historical, cultural, social, and political contexts in which the text was created, transmitted, and received. Thus, in Qur'anic, and Biblical, studies, it is concerned

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[17] See Saussure, 100.

[18] Rahman, The Qur'ān as Literature,": 29.

[19] See Hong, "Synchrony and Diachrony," 527; Rachelle Gilmour, *Representing the Past: A Literary Analysis of Narrative Historiography in the Book of Samuel* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 37.

[20] Tarek Hegi, *al-Dirāsāt al-ʿArabiyyah wa al-Gharbiyyah al-Muʿāṣirah Ḥawla al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*, (Tafsir Center for Qur'anic Studies, n.d.): 53, https://tafsir.net/research/90/ad-drasat-al-rbyt-walghrbyt-al-m-asrt-hwl-al-qr-aan-al-krym-qra-at-fy-mnjz-tsnyf-ad-drasat-wtrh-tsnyf-jdyd-wastkshaf-waq-ad-drasat#:~:text

[21] William R. Darrow, "Recent Trends in Historical and Literary Study of the Qur'ân," in *MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-ilmu Keislaman* 35, no. 1 (January-June 2011): 3; Gilmour, *Representing the Past*, 37; and Hegi, *al-Dirāsāt al-ʿArabiyyah wa al-Gharbiyyah*, 53.

[22] Hong, "Synchrony and Diachrony," 527.
The term "literary" here indicates that the synchronic approach focuses on studying the structure of the text while setting aside considerations of its divine nature.

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with issues such as the processes of the collection and organization of the Qur'anic revelation and the efforts to standardize the text in its final form. In other words, the diachronic approach studies the history of the text, while the synchronic approach studies the text itself.[23]

3.3. Difference as per References

The diachronic approach in Qur'anic studies, as previously covered, focuses on tracing the historical development and evolution of the Qur'anic text over time. This method seeks to understand how the text was compiled, transmitted, and standardized, as well as how it was used and interpreted throughout Islamic history. To achieve this understanding, the diachronic approach relies heavily on Islamic traditions and sources. These include historical records and books of Prophetic traditions, exegesis and literature. In addition, this approach often involves examining the manuscripts and studying variant readings of the Qur'an to trace its textual history.

On the other hand, the synchronic approach does not concern itself with what the diachronic scholars deem to be the historical development of the text and how it might have evolved over time. Scholars using this approach aim to understand the meaning and function of the text within its own immediate context, through analyzing the coherence and interconnections within the *Sūrahs* and *Āyahs*. Some scholars, therefore, consider the synchronic approach to be a branch of or inspired by the revisionist school, as it gives no weight to the historical reports and argues that the Qur'an can be fully understood by examining its present form, independent of Islamic traditions.[24]

From this arises another significant distinction between the diachronic and synchronic approaches. That is while the diachronic approach delves into historical Islamic sources to know how the present Qur'anic text came into existence, the synchronic approach concerns itself only with the form of the Qur'an "as is" to explore its linguistic, literary, and rhetorical features within the framework of its coherent text. Emran El-Badawi states, "Revisionist readings starting with Wansbrough inspired a "synchronic approach," since it does not take classical Islamic literary sources into consideration and undertakes a literary study of the

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[23] See Steven L. McKenzie, *Introduction to the Historical Books: Strategies for Reading* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 26.

[24] Emran El-Badawi, "al-Baḥth 'an Siyāq al-Qur'ān al-Tārīkhī: Nubdhah 'an al-Dirāsāt al-Qur'āniyyah al-Ḥadīthah," *Al-Machreq Journal* 5, no. 1 (December 2014): 5

Qur'an alone."[25] In short, one may say that the difference between the diachronic and synchronic studies is that the former is concerned with the writer– how the text was produced - while the latter is concerned with the reader – how the text can be understood.[26]

4. Emergence of the Synchronic Approach

It has been well known that, during its early stages, linguistics was dominated by diachronic studies, such as etymological investigations which aimed at determining word origins through examining the historical progression of languages and the derivational hierarchy of words. Such studies were based on the premise that the relationship between a word's form and its meaning is intrinsic. This changed with Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916; *Course in General Linguistics*). This work fundamentally transformed the field of linguistics by introducing revolutionary concepts and methodologies that shifted the focus of linguistic study.

Saussure's principle of arbitrariness challenged traditional views, arguing that the relationship between the "signifier" (word) and the "signified" (concept) is not inherent but dynamic.[27] Saussure's theory emphasizes that language is a complete and coherent system of meanings, where the value of each linguistic sign arises from its relationship with other signs within the system.[28] Thus, he emphasized that language should be studied as a structured system at a given moment rather than through its historical evolution. Saussure likens a language to a game of chess, where the significance and function of each piece are determined by its position at any moment, not by its past moves.[29] This synchronic perspective reshaped linguistic analysis by shifting the focus to how language functions as a self-contained system.

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[25] Emran El-Badawi, "Readings of the Qur'an from outside the tradition," in *Routledge Companion to the Qur'an*, eds. George Archer, Maria M. Dakake and Daniel A. Madigan (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 358.

[26] See Darrow, "Recent Trends in Historical and Literary Study," 3.

[27] In fact, Ferdinand de Saussure was not the first to discuss that relationship between the signifier and the signified. Numerous Arab scholars, such as Ibn Rushd, Ibn Sīnā, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, and others, had previously addressed this topic. See Attawy al-Tayeb, "Iʿtbāṭiyyat al-ʿAllāmah al-Lughawiyyah Fikrat ʿArabiyyah Qabla De Saussure," *Dirāsāt Lisāniyyah* 2, no. 8 (March 2018): 157-163.
See Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 67

[28] Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: the Basics*, 2nd Ed. (London and New York: Routledge), 19.

[29] See Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 88-89.

It influenced the study of texts, encouraging scholars to analyze internal linguistic coherence rather than historical development.[30]

Regarding Qur'anic studies, early studies, as previously stated, were predominantly characterized by the diachronic approach, to the extent that this approach became a defining characteristic of the Western studies on the Qur'an.[31] Hence, they primarily focused on the historical context of the text. To reach the desired results and achieve the requirements of this approach, diachronic scholars mainly refer to Islamic sources. Classical scholarship on the Qur'an generally concentrated on small segments of the Qur'anic text rather than on entire *sūrahs* or the Qur'an as a whole. This method involved meticulous analysis of individual verses, often examining them in isolation. This atomistic approach allowed for a detailed understanding of the text's meanings, through focusing on single words or passages, but often at the expense of broader thematic and structural coherence.[32]

In spite of the above-stated, some of early Western studies on the Qur'an incorporated elements of synchronic analysis. While studying the text of the Qur'an and its history, they occasionally addressed the text's internal structure and thematic coherence. Nöldeke, for example, is primarily known for his diachronic study of the Qur'an. However, his analysis of the chronological order of the *sūrahs*, in his *Geschichte des Qorāns*, sometimes touched upon the linguistic patterns and rhetorical style. [33] Andrew Rippin states, "Of course, the idea of approaching *sūrahs* as whole units is not entirely new in scholarship. In the 19th century, Theodor Nöldeke approached *sūrahs* in this way, except where he felt there were definite intrusions of Medinan portions into Mecca *sūrahs* in the text, following Muslim tradition."[34] Actually, some

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[30] Saussure's ideas influenced the emergence and development of many linguistic concepts, such as "structuralism" and "generative grammar," which describes the innate linguistic knowledge that enables humans to produce grammatical sentences. See Elly van Gelderen, "Grammaticalization and Generative Grammar: A Difficult Liaison," in *The Oxford Handbook of Grammaticalization*, ed. Heiko Narrog and Bernd Heine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 43, 45, 48.

[31] "al-Ittijāh al-Sānkrūnī (al-Tazāmunī) fī Dirāsat al-Qur'ān," Tafsir Center for Qur'anic Studies, accessed June 17, 2024, https://tafsir.net/translation/44/al-mlf-ath-thalth-ala-qsm-at-trjmat-alatjah-as-sankrwny-altzamny-fy-drast-al-qr-aan.

[32] Nevin Reda, "Structure and Organization of the Qur'an," in *The Routledge Companion to the Qur'an*, eds. George Archer, Maria M. Dakake and Daniel A. Madigan (Oxford, New York: Routledge, 2022), 165; and Rippin, "Contemporary Scholarly Understandings," 4.

[33] Ahmad Syukron and Nikmatul Khairiyah, "Chronology of the Qur'an According to Theodor Nöldeke and Sir William Muir: Analysis of *the History of the Qur'an* and *Life of Mahomet*," *BIRCI-Journal* 5, no. 2 (May 2022): 16654.
For instances where Nöldeke discusses synchronic aspects, see Theodor Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qurʾān*, trans. Wolfgang H. Behn (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 35, 81, 114, 123, 210.

[34] Rippin, "Contemporary Scholarly Understandings," 9.

other diachronic scholars were of views similar to those of Nöldeke in this regard, especially when discussing the chronological order of the *sūrahs*.[35] This is because examining the form and structure of a *sūrah* can help in figuring out the date when that *surah* was revealed, and thus it is a way of categorizing it.[36]

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the adoption of new approaches to reading the Qur'an as a result of the advent of the literary trends that favored the concept of synchronicity,[37] especially after recognizing the shortcomings of the diachronic approach in interpreting the text.[38] When scholars read the Qur'an, they encounter a text that necessitates the adoption of a series of assumptions during the reading process to extract meaning from the written text.[39] They, hence, began to shift their focus from the diachronic analysis to the synchronic one, which examines the internal structure of the Qur'an.

This shift prompted scholars to explore the Qur'an's literary and rhetorical coherence. This is because the flow and structure of a text greatly impact how well it is understood.[40] While elaborating on the synchronic approach, its defining characteristics, its primary focus, and the implications it carries, Rippin states, "Discussions of the literary unity of extended passages of the Qur'anic text often position an affirmation of the strategy in opposition to the "atomistic approach" of medieval exegesis and also in opposition to the philological approach of some contemporary scholarship that focuses on single words or phrases… The unity of extended segments is also often seen to be in tension with a fully historical and philological reading."[41] He adds, "Many scholars have looked at the structural features of the *sūrahs* and each has used his or her own theoretical structures and vocabulary for the delimitation of Qur'anic segments and the literary character of the overall text. The goal of all of these efforts has been to reject what is understood to be the claim of some other scholars that the Qur'an is a jumble of texts with forced rhyme, that was composed with little overall conception during an extended period

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[35] See Gabriel S. Reynolds, "The Qurʾān and Its Biblical Subtext," in *Routledge Studies in the Qur'an*, ed. Andrew Rippin (London, New York: Routledge, 2010), 10-11, 14; and Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 87.

[36] See Rachel Friedman, "Interrogating Structural Interpretation of the Qur'ān," *Der Islam* 87, no. 1-2 (March 2012): 139.

[37] Emmanuelle Stefanidis, "The Qur'an Made Linear: A Study of the *Geschichte des Qorâns'* Chronological Reordering," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2008): 1-2, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25728286

[38] Zayn al-Dīn, "al-Manāhij al-Lisānīyah," 103.

[39] Rippin, "Contemporary Scholarly Understandings," 1.

[40] See Rippin, 5.

[41] Rippin, "Contemporary Scholarly Understandings," 4.

of time and then put together by editors who had little understanding of the original intention of the text. Rather, the argument is that there is a unity that can definitely be perceived in each extended segment and it is a unity that can be uncovered."[42] In his book, *How to Read the Qur'ān*, Carl Ernst states, "…appreciation of the internal structure and organization of the Qur'ān is extremely helpful for grasping its overall message, and it offers ways to comprehend the relation of one passage to another. Within the chronological framework, the primary unit of analysis is the *sūrah*, which needs to be understood as a literary whole rather than a random assortment of unrelated verses."[43]

In 1963, one of the earliest, or the earliest,[44] Western works on the synchronic studies of the Qur'an came into existence, that is *Analyse conceptuelle du Coran sur cartes perforées* of Michel Allard and others. This book employed semantics in dealing with the Qur'anic text.[45] Since the 1980s, the synchronic approach in Qur'anic studies has gained considerable traction and prominence. This significant shift was pioneered by Angelika Neuwirth's works. Her work, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, examines the structures and linguistic features of the *sūrahs* attributed to the Meccan period to demonstrate their integrity and coherence. Her research challenges the traditional view that these texts are merely "secondary collocations of originally independent verse groups."[46] When discussing the characteristics of the Meccan revelation and establishing a relationship between the style and content of the verses and the geographical nature and social contexts of Mecca and Medina, Maria M. Dakake summarizes the view of Neuwirth and says, "Like Mecca itself, built around a single sacred shrine, the Meccan *sūrahs* tend to be composed around a single theme and, as Angelika Neuwirth and others have clearly demonstrated, often have a clearly defined 'center.'"[47] Although her book primarily concentrates on the

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[42] Rippin, 8.

[43] Carl W. Ernst, *How to read the Qur'an: a new guide, with select translations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 12.

[44] Zayn al-Dīn, "al-Manāhij al-Lisānīyah," 103.

[45] Yayına Hazırlayan, *Al-Islām wa al-Ta'wīl: al-Munāqashāt al-Ta'ṣīliyyah, al-Ishkālāt wa al-Imkānāt*, Vol. 4 (Malatya: Inonu Universitesi, 2017), 40.

[46] Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 87.

[47] Maria M. Dakake, "Mecca and Medina: The Sacred Geography of Qur'anic Revelation," in *The Routledge Companion to the Qur'an*, eds. George Archer, Maria M. Dakake and Daniel A. Madigan (Oxford, New York: Routledge, 2022), 36-37.

Meccan *sūrahs*, Neuwirth extends her approach to encompass *sūrahs* from all periods[48] through a series of articles.[49]

The synchronic approach to Qur'anic studies has captivated many researchers and scholars, drawing them into the detailed exploration of the Qur'an's language and structure. Other synchronic studies on the Qur'an include, for instance, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* by Neal Robinson,[50] *Le Coran, aux sources de la parole oraculaire: structures rythmiques des sourates mecquoises* by Pierre Crapon de Caprona,[51] "Major Transitions and Thematic Borders in Two Long Sūras: al-Baqara and al-Nisāʾ," by A.H. Mathias Zahniser,[52] *The Qur'an's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture* by Daniel Madigan,[53] *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text* by Raymond Farrin,[54] and *The Composition of the Qur'an: Rhetorical Analysis* by Michel Cuypers.[55]

Some scholars synchronically study the short *sūrahs*, such as Neuwirth who has examined the Meccan *sūrahs*, while others focus on the longer ones, such as Neal Robinson, who has studied *sūrah* 2, and Michel Cuypers, who has studied *sūrah* 5. Furthermore, some synchronic scholars focus on the unity and coherence of individual *sūrahs* of the Qur'an. They aim to demonstrate how each *surah* functions as a cohesive unit, meticulously analyzing the relationship of each successive verse to its predecessor and highlighting the correspondence between the last verses and the opening ones of the *sūrah*. Meanwhile, other scholars extend their analysis to the entire Qur'an, seeking to explore the coherence of the text as a whole, by examining the patterns, themes, and structural frameworks that bind the *sūrahs* together.[56]

In addition, some scholars attempted to approach the Qur'an through combining both the diachronic and synchronic views, arguing that the two approaches are complementary ways for examining the language of the Qur'an. Among the most prominent Western scholars in this area are Angelika Neuwirth, Holger Zellentin and

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[48] Regarding classifying the *sūrahs* of the Meccan period, Neuwirth followed the footsteps of Theodor Nöldeke and classified the *sūrahs* into early, middle, and late Meccan.

[49] Friedman, "Interrogating Structural Interpretation," 139.

[50] London: SCM Press, 1996.

[51] Paris: Publications Orientalistes de France, 1981.

[52] in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qurʾān*, ed. Issa J. Boullata (Richmond: Curzon, 2000).

[53] Princeton University Press, 2001.

[54] Oregon: White Cloud Press, 2014.

[55] London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

[56] See, for example, Reda, "Structure and Organization of the Qur'an," 173.

Marianna Klar. For example, Zellentin states, "Hence, I consider the use of the diachronic and the synchronic approaches to the Qurʾān as two complementary tools of research. It seems that the current debate between scholars exclusively subscribing to either synchronicity or diachronicity enshrines the two divergent methodological approaches to the text as if they had any value in and of themselves, above and beyond the results they provide – a view I challenge by pointing to the potential of combining the approaches."[57] In this way, these scholars establish a third approach in the Qur'anic studies,[58] that is the diachronic-synchronic approach.[59]

5. Principles of Synchronic Approach

Based on all the above-discussed, it can be deduced that the principles of the synchronic approach in Qur'anic studies are two. The first principle is that the Qur'an itself is the primary or sole source of study. This approach asserts that no external elements, such as historical context, should be used to understand the text. Instead, the Qur'an should be studied as is, analyzing its internal structure, themes, and linguistic features. Synchronic scholars treat the Qur'an as a complete and self-contained entity that can be fully understood through its own words and body.

The second principle is that the Qur'an is a coherent text. This method posits that the Qur'an's literary and rhetorical unity is inherent and must be explored through a detailed analysis of its internal structure. By examining the arrangement of verses, the progression of themes, and the interrelationships between different parts of the text, scholars aim to uncover the smooth design that underlies the Qur'an. In addition, the synchronic scholars discuss how each verse and *sūrah* contribute to the overall harmony and message of the Qur'an,

Many synchronic scholars point to these principles while studying the Qur'an or reviewing synchronic studies on the Qur'an. For instance, Rachel Friedman states, "Structuralist theories of the Qurʾān, such as Neuwirth's, emphasize that the Qurʾān does indeed work based on an internal logic that careful readers can discern (though, notably, none did notice this pattern of structures before these recent structuralists)… Structuralist theories of the Qurʾān thus go to great lengths to provide a detailed demonstration of how exactly the Qurʾān is organized. Not only is the Qurʾān logical,

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[57] Holger Zellentin, "The Synchronic and the Diachronic Qurʾān: *Sūrat Yā Sīn*, Lot's People, and the Rabbis," in *The Making of Religious Texts in Islam: The Fragment and the Whole*, eds. Asma Hilali and S. R. Burge (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2019), 112.

[58] This third approach is also applied in Biblical studies. See C. Lombaard, "The Old Testament Between Diachrony and Synchrony: Two Reasons for Favouring the Former," *Journal for Semitics* 15, no. 1 (2006): 27-29.

[59] Saraeb, "Hay'at al-Qurʾān wa Bunatah," 130.

according to proponents of these theories, but it works on a logic understandable to a Western reader, provided that the structural organization of the text is decoded properly."[60] Also, Gabriel Reynolds in a review of Cuypers' work on *sūrah* 5 states, "The hierarchical structure of Cuypers' analysis reflects a conviction that the Qur'ān is organized with a breathtaking, mathematical precision, whereby one unit of text plays at once a certain role on one textual level and other roles on other textual levels and that all of the textual units do this together, so that a perfect rhetorical symphony is achieved."[61]

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[60] Friedman, "Interrogating Structural Interpretation," 139. Although "structure" is sparingly used in Course on General Linguistics, Saussure is considered to be the one who laid the foundation for structuralism.

[61] Gabriel S. Reynolds, "Review of Michel Cuypers' *Le festin: une lecture de la sourate al-Māʾida*," *Der Islam* 88, no. 2 (2012): 430.

6. Conclusion

Western approaches to the Qur'an have undergone significant methodological developments. Early studies were predominantly defined by the diachronic approach, to the extent that this method became a hallmark of Western Qur'anic scholarship. However, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of new approaches to reading the Qur'an, largely influenced by literary trends that emphasized synchronicity. This shift was driven, in part, by a growing recognition of the limitations inherent in the diachronic approach, which often failed to account for the internal structure and coherence of the text, as well as by the influence of the revisionist approach, which advocated minimizing reliance on traditional Muslim narratives in the academic study of Islam.

Synchronic studies of the Qur'an predate the emergence of the synchronic approach in Western scholarship. Many Muslim scholars have long recognized the coherence of the Qur'anic text, asserting, for instance, that, "No matter how many subjects a surah addresses, it remains a single, unified discourse—its end connects to its beginning, and its beginning to its end, with the entire surah oriented toward a single overarching purpose."[62] This perspective serves the broader aim of constructing a comprehensive understanding of the Qur'an's treatment of various themes.

When Western scholars engage with the Qur'an, they encounter a text that requires a series of interpretive assumptions to extract meaning from the written words. Recognizing this, they gradually shifted their focus from diachronic analysis—concerned with historical development—to synchronic analysis, which examines the internal structure, thematic coherence, and literary qualities of the Qur'anic text as it exists today and as a unified whole. It explores how different *sūrahs*, verses, and themes contribute to the overall meaning and interrelate to form a cohesive whole.

The synchronic approach operates on two fundamental principles. First, the Qur'an itself is the primary—if not the sole—source of study, with external elements playing little to no role in the interpretive process. Second, the Qur'an is regarded as a coherent text, with an internal structure that can be analyzed to uncover its literary, thematic, and rhetorical unity. These principles have redefined the field of Western Qur'anic studies, paving the way for a deeper appreciation of the text's composition and its interpretive possibilities.

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[62] [62] Muhammad Diraz, *al-Naba' al-'Aẓīm* (Cairo: Dār al-Qalam, 2005), 192.

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