

A survey of recent collaborative western projects in the genre of Qur’ānic Studies

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Abstract

The Qur’ān has received the attention of western scholars for a long. The tradition of western academic investigation of the Qur’ān goes back to medieval times. Over the centuries, the western folks have produced a bulk of literature in the field of Qur’ānic studies. At present, a rapid rise in the joint efforts funded by renowned publishers is quite evident. In this article, by applying a descriptive and partially analytical approach, an overview of the combined projects is presented highlighting their features and characteristics. For this, few yet most significant works are selected as specimens. In conclusion, some recommendations are put forth for Muslim researchers.

Key Words: Qur’ān, West, Projects, Encyclopedia, Companion

Introduction

The study of the Qur’ān has been enjoying the attention of western scholars since medieval times. Regardless of the factors that led to the scholarly investigation of the Qur’ān, the abundance of literature in the genre of Qur’ānic studies indicates the enthusiasm of western scholars towards the Qur’ān.

In 1974, Willem A. Bijlefeld published his ‘Some Recent Contributions to Qur’ānic Studies: Selected Publications in English, French, and German, 1964–1973’. Providing a detailed study of the works produced in these languages. Mostly, these works owe to the individual efforts of western scholars. Some significant individuals who played a momentous role in setting the trends of subsequent decades are Theodor Nöldeke (d.1930), Richard Bell (d. 1952), Regis Blachere (d. 1973), Kenneth Cragg (d.2012), and John Wansbrough (d. 2002). These scholars addressed the various themes concerning the Qur’ān with the application of multiple yet diverse methods.

In the 21st century, the number of books on the Qur’ān is astounding. There can be numerous factors for the swift rise of academic interest in the Qur’ān. Several recently published bibliographies indicate thousands of works exploring the historical, philological, philosophical, political, and social dimensions of the Qur’ān in the 21st century. These works provide a wealth of information owning a diversity of approaches and methodologies.

A glimpse at the history of the Qur’ānic studies in the west reveals that the field has witnessed some substantial transformations in various dimensions. A few of them are as follows

According to numerous historians, the investigation of the Qur’ān was initiated by Christian writers with hostile motives. Subsequently, the medieval works

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were predominated by polemics.¹ Along with other works, the translations of the Qur'ān exercised profound and pejorative effects on the western mind. With the emergence of the secular academic approaches as an aftermath of the reformation and enlightenment, the intensity of bitterness and hostility reduced to a great extent. From the proclamation of the Qur'ān as a fraud to its recognition as a sacred text is in itself a grave change that should be admitted.

Along with economic and social factors, the contribution of many significant Muslim scholars in western academia played a major role in the process of transformation. John O. Voll counts it as a major aspect of the transformation in western academia concerning the study of Islam.

According to him, these scholars have made a critical contribution to the transition from orientalism to area studies².

Moreover, a remarkable move is also evident in the approaches applied in the field of Qur'ānic studies. In the previous centuries, the most frequent approach implemented in the Qur'ānic investigations was historical-critical. With the emergence of social sciences in the nineteenth century and their further development in the twentieth century, biblical scholars soon realized the significance of these sciences in the thorough comprehension of the historical and social background of the Bible. Many scholars applied the social sciences research methods to interpret biblical texts³. As popular attitude towards Qur'ān was influenced by religion, the academic studies of Qur'ān were naturally molded by these trends. The present-day scholars, too, emphasize the usage of various methods such as anthropological, archeological, philosophical, and sociological in Qur'ānic Studies⁴.

Besides, in the previous century, some huge projects were commenced with collaborative efforts. The few noteworthy works are the concordance of Hadith by Wensinck, Arent J., and the encyclopedia of Islam. These works were compiled by a huge team of prominent field scholars of the time.

However, the trend of undertaking mutual projects in western academia is at increase today. The increasing amount of collaborative research under the management of worldly reputed institutions and publishers has resulted in the publication of encyclopedias, companies, companions, anthologies, and journals in the 21st century. A few important publishers playing a dynamic role in this regard are Brill, Ashgate, Cambridge, Oxford, and Routledge. The task of the present article is to provide a succinct survey of a few significant works that have a grave impact on setting the trends for the researchers.

1- Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān

Brill as a publishing house has a strong and rich history of publications. Although it focuses on multiple areas of sciences and humanities, special attention to Islam and the Qur'ān has been paid in this regard. Brill has published various books in the genres of Islamic studies such as 'the Qur'ān concordance', and 'the Dictionary of Qur'ānic Usage' similarly, it has published

various books on the issues related to the history of the Qur'ān. Some of the best recent instances can be given of 'Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān',⁵ 'The Qur'ān as Text',⁶ 'The Qur'ān in Context',⁷ 'The transmission of various readings of Qur'ān',⁸ 'under the series 'Text and Studies on the Qur'ān',⁹.

Moreover, a prestigious peer-reviewed journal "Al Bayan" is launched by Brill in 2003 that primarily emphasizes the Qur'ānic and Hadith Studies. Brill also focuses on the publications of encyclopedias for looking at their grave worth as reference works. Encyclopedia of Hinduism,¹⁰ Encyclopedia of China,¹¹ Encyclopedia of Judaism,¹² and Encyclopedia of Christianity¹³ are the finest examples in this regard. Recently, Brill has produced two extensive compendiums related to Islam i.e. The Encyclopedia of Islam (1913-1938) and The Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān (2001-2006).

The Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān is considered the first comprehensive reference work on the Qur'ān in the English language compiled by the prominent scholars of the field with the contribution of the writers having diverse backgrounds. The writers explored the Qur'ānic themes and ideas with multidimensional approaches. The articles vary in length and approach to a great extent.

The general editor highlights the most prominent characteristics of this works with the term objectivity¹⁴, first introduced by Max Muller (d. 1900) who frequently uses the term 'scientific' and 'impartiality' in his works discussing religious studies¹⁵.

Undoubtedly the present encyclopedia is a fine example of the transformation of tone and style in the western academia concerning the Qur'ān. Moreover, the entries are written in a systematic, uniform, and comprehensive style. Generally, the entries carry a background of the themes to familiarize the researchers with the Qur'ānic notions and ideas.

Though the general editor Jane Dammen McAuliffe declares the work as a fine example of objectivity and impartiality, the work is criticized by many Muslim scholars as contentious. The most prominent is Muzaffar Iqbal who expresses his grievance overwhelmingly in his review of this work.

He frequently mentions that the approach taken in most of the articles of this work negates and ignores the phenomenon of the revelation as understood by the Muslims¹⁶.

Regardless of the scholarly features of this work, a quick browsing of the encyclopedia reveals that the clear manifestation of the epistemic privileging is pretty evident in its material that disregards the classical Muslim scholarship of the Qur'ān. Henceforth, despite numerous citations of the classical Muslim sources, the majority of conclusions are based on the findings of euro American scholarship.

Moreover, the echo of ‘we know better’ can be heard in the proclamations of the writers concerning their views of Muslim sources and classical scholarship. The authors are at quite ease announcing the Muslim sources as problematic, confusing, contradictory, and vague.¹⁷

2- The Series of Companions to the Qur’ān

There is a series of companions to the Qur’ān in the west. These companions have a vast range of core topics and a variety of essays on the Qur’ān shared by both Muslim and Non-Muslim scholars. This section will present an overview of some of the major companions.

3- The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’ān

When we talk about the Qur’ānic studies we cannot deny the significant contribution of the Cambridge University Press. The Cambridge University Press is a publishing house of the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom. It has great importance with regard to the development of the academic stuff. It has published books, articles, Journals, Companions, etc. Many publications of the Cambridge university press are easily accessible across the globe.

As the Cambridge University Press states:

“The Cambridge Companions are a series of authoritative guides, written by leading experts, offering lively, accessible introductions to major writers, artists, philosophers, topics, and periods¹⁸.”

Cambridge Companions’ core areas include: ‘The Cambridge Companions to Literature and Classics’, ‘The Cambridge Companions to Music’, and ‘The Cambridge Companions to Philosophy, Religion & Culture’. Many Cambridge Companions are developed under these categories. For Example; ‘The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Economics’¹⁹, ‘The Cambridge Companion to Music & Romanticism’²⁰, ‘The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Logic’²¹, and ‘The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’ān’²².

The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’ān edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe is an important contribution to the field of Religion and more specifically in the domain of Qur’ānic Studies. This anthology provides a venue for academic discourse between the Islamic and non-Islamic worlds through 14 essays that explore various parts of the Qur’an.

A careful introduction is presented here. There are five sections to the essays.

- Part I, Qur’ānic Text Formations, has three chapters. Fred M. Donner provides an overview of the historical context by sketching out Prophet Muhammad’s biography and the Qur’an’s revelation. There is a debate on the creation of a fixed text by Claude Gilliot. He describes how the Qur’an evolved from essentially oral transmission to a written document. Harold Motzki expands on some of the issues related to Qur’ānic text, focusing particularly on the writings of Lulling, Wansbrough, and Luxenberg.

While different authors adopt different approaches to their respective topics, all chapters must analyze historical facts in a comparable analytical manner if they are to be viewed independently of one another. More careful cooperation in this area could have freed up a room for further in-depth discussion of some of these subjects.

- Part II, Description and Analysis, features scholars who were instrumental in establishing the conceptual, rhetorical, and experiential facets of qur'anic studies. Daniel Madigan discusses some of the Qur'an's major theological ideas, such as God's absoluteness and God's role as the sovereign creator. Whereas Angelika Neuwirth examines the Qur'an's structural, literary, and linguistic characteristics. The recitation and aesthetic qualities of the sacred book are discussed in detail by William A. Graham and Navid Kermani.
- Part III, Transmission and Dissemination, examines the various means of sacred text transmission, from palm leaves to colossal buildings and then to the websites. Fred Leemhuis discusses the numerous techniques of transmission of the Qur'an in Arabic. This chapter also mentions the internet, however, does not go into detail about some of the numerous websites that provide sounds, translations, and exegesis. Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair proceed to the visual mode of transmission.
- Part IV, Interpretation and Intellectual Traditions examines the various interpretive styles that have emerged as a result of the Qur'ānic study. Jane Dammen McAuliffe presents a brief history of Qur'an's interpretation by highlighting its main themes and methodologies. Alexander Knysh examines multiple areas like philology, law, ethics, philosophy, theology, literature, and rhetoric, among other fields of Muslim intellectual life. Andrew Rippin describes the rise of 'Western' academic studies of the Qur'an, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries.
- Finally, in Part V, Contemporary Readings, several of the above-mentioned themes are examined in light of current challenges such as feminism. Asma Barlas' study on Muslim women's recent feminist interpretation of the Qur'an. Stefan Wild delves more into the modern political implications of Qur'an interpretation. Finally, Abdulaziz Sachedina addresses inter-religious connections in the Qur'an and argues for a model of qur'anic religious pluralism and acceptance of all human beings' equality.²³

The above discussion provides a glance at the rich content of the book. This book is a source of knowledge and research for both new readers and experts.²⁴ The aim of publishing the book is to provide a guide to the general audience. It serves as an introduction to Islam and Quran. It provides a beautiful combination of two different approaches by adding essays of leading Muslim and Non-Muslim scholars. This masterpiece is appreciated and valued by many Muslim and Non-Muslim scholars. They raise the need of this book to be studied as

academic tool at college and universities because a collection of different and rich logical topics are knitted into a single companion.²⁵

Apart from its need and numerous qualities, this companion has certain shortcomings too. It can be clearly noticed that at some points the content is repeated. This repetition thus exhausts the reader to some extent. The need of footnotes is also suggested for the ease of reader. Some of the contributors don't rely on primary Islamic resources that cause gaps in quality research.

4- The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān

Wiley Blackwell is a publishing house that produces a large number of scholarly works. Its areas of research are very vast. Its focus on humanities and religious studies has paved great importance in the field of Qur'ānic research. A few examples of its religious publications are as follows: 'Asian Worldviews: Religion, Philosophies, Political Theories'²⁶, 'Islamicate Cosmopolitan Spirit'²⁷, 'Science and Religion; A New Introduction'²⁸. Similarly, it also focuses on companions' publications that consist of many leading scholarly essays. For instance: 'The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion'²⁹, 'The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought'³⁰, and 'The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān'³¹.

In 2006 Blackwell publishing Ltd introduced its scholarly work on the Qur'ān named 'The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān'. It aims to provide a masterpiece for beginners who want to know about Qur'ān as it starts with simple things and ends with complex details that can satisfy its reader.³² Unlike the Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān, it also has five units whereas it has 32 entries that depict the remarkable work of various well-known scholars of the contemporary period.

- Part I, 'Orientation' which includes a detailed introduction. Tamara Sonn, Christopher Buck, and Abdullah Saeed give an introduction of the Qur'ān for the new readers as the editor himself says: "Orienting the reader to the basic facts".³³ Then Abdullah Saeed also describes the history and themes of surahs in detail by applying the Muslim approach. The editor Andrew Rippin says: "Chapter 3 orients the reader to a Muslim scholarly perspective."³⁴

Just like the Cambridge companion, the Blackwell companions' 1st part is also based on the introduction and history of the Qur'ānic text

- Part II, 'Text' describes the language, its structure, poetic nature, linguistic issues, and collection and compilation of the Qur'ān along with a debate on Uthmanic scripture.
- Part III, 'Content', certain core topics of the Qur'ān are discussed in this part. Concepts of God, stories of Prophets, the Qur'ān's argumentation, family, and jihad are highlighted in this section.
- Part IV, 'Interpretation' different sectarian exegesis styles are discussed. There are as many styles of interpretation as the number of sects are there in

Islam. So the scholars have tried to discuss a few of them and the impact of those styles on the interpretation of the Qur'ān.

- Part V, 'Application' deals with Islamic law and ethical values. Jane Dammen McAuliffe discussed two main sources of Ulum-UI-Qur'ān. Theology, Jurisprudence, post-Qur'ānic literature, and recitation as ritual are also described by other renowned scholars.

The Cambridge Companion to the Quran and The Blackwell companion to the Quran were published in the same year but the latter one is more comprehensive and detailed in its essays than the former one.³⁵ The content presented in the both companions is almost the same however The Blackwell Companion is richer in its essays and delivery. According to the editor it aims to facilitate those readers who have a little knowledge of Quran hence its 1st section helps new readers in understanding the complexity of the sacred book.³⁶ The statement written on the website of Wiley's online library explains it as a reader's guide, a true companion for anyone who wishes to read and understand the Qur'an as a text and as a vital piece of Muslim life'.³⁷ Thus this companion comprises on 32 entrees is known to be an advanced source for its reader and praised by many Muslim and Non-Muslim scholars across the world³⁸.

Just like The Cambridge Companion to the Quran it also has a few deficiencies and discrepancies. Some of the concepts are repeated more than once although seems rare. Reader faces trouble in the matter of references, for example, footnotes and endnotes are not given. However further readings are suggested at the end of each essay for detailed study and more research. Some of the topics need to be explained through images, illustrations, graphs and tables but it lacks such helping tools. Similarly, the consulted translation and exegetes of the Quran are not mentioned by the contributors³⁹.

i- The Routledge Companion to The Qur'ān

This Companion is edited by George Archer, Maria M. Dakake, and Daniel A. Madigan. Routledge is a significant publishing house in London and New York that has developed many Routledge religion Companions. For example; 'The Routledge Companion to The Study Of Religion'⁴⁰, 'The Routledge Companion To Religion And Science'⁴¹, 'The Routledge Companion To Religion And Popular Culture'⁴², and 'The Routledge Companion to the Qur'ān'⁴³. Among them, an important companion that is our major concern is 'The Routledge Companion to the Qur'ān'. It has 3 major sections and 40 essays by leading Muslim and non-Muslim scholars.

- PART I is entitled 'The World before the Qur'an'. It has further 3 essays. As clear by the title, this part focuses on the scenario before the revelation of the Qur'ān. Geography, culture, people, religions, and political and social situations of Arabs are discussed in this section. So its study provides a glance at the Arab's history and its suitability to accept and absorb the Qur'ānic revelation.

To understand the message of the Qur'ān, its revelation, and its essence, it is highly important to discuss the pre-revelation periods, places, and conditions. The contributors of the 'Routledge Companion to the Qur'ān' tried their best to satisfy the reader hence there is room for more technical research to bridge the gaps.

- PART II is entitled 'The World of the Qur'an'. It has 16 chapters that deal with the revelation of the Qur'ān, its history, God and man's relation, stories of prophets, and other major yet basic topics. The very 1st chapter of this part discusses the concept of God, His names, and attributes in the light of Qur'ānic verses. The covenant between God and human beings and its different types are also discussed. He also discussed different types of covenants mentioned in the Qur'ān by quoting the verses. Joseph E.B. Lombard thus quoted:

“The concept of religion as a covenant between two parties is indeed no less characteristic of the Qur'an than of the Old Testament⁴⁴.”

This section also highlighted the mentioning of prophets in the Qur'ān specifically a whole essay deals with the citing of the Prophet Muhammad in the Qur'ān. Style, structure, text, and language are also highlighted by the scholars. Another significant issue related to the Qur'ān; the Oral and written Qur'ān is also discussed.

- PART III, The World in Front of the Qur'an is the major part of the book as it contains more than 20 essays. Topics related to Ulum-ul-Qur'ān, different sectarian exegesis, major books of Tafseer, famous exegetes, Islamic and political theology, and philosophy are discussed.

The most recent collaborative work on the genre of Quranic studies is The Routledge Companion to the Quran published in 2021. The 40 leading Muslim and Non-Muslim scholars contributed to this academic work. In this way it provides a mixture of different approaches. It has covered the major areas of the former companions as well. It can be called a journey through the Quran as its titles depict the same. The Routledge official website also mentions this fact in the following words:

“This Handbook accompanies the reader into the many worlds that the Qur'an lives in, from its ancient settings, to its internal drama, and through the 1,400 years of discussion and debate about its meaning⁴⁵.”

Many topics of former companions are covered in this companion but not completely. A few new topics are added to this companion. Thus these companions could not be the only source to understand the Quran. A rich number of endnotes are given at the end of each essay yet a few contributors lack in this field. This companion is also not free of the flaws. Hence for the ease of the new readers and researchers there is a room for the better research and a comprehensive combined companion that gives a detailed study of the Quran.

Besides all these discrepancies we cannot ignore the importance of these companions by the western world in the genre of Quranic studies. It opens up

ways for the research. These are appreciated and quoted by the scholars and researchers. An analytical study of all these companions is suggested and is the need of time.

5- The Corpus Coranicum Project

Understanding and comprehending the Qur'an has sparked numerous scholarly arguments since its origin, ranging from the profound readings to the systematically analyzed mode. 'Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Sciences Germany' has gained grave importance in the field of research. It has accomplished many tasks related to Qur'ānic studies. Koran, Coranica, Paleo Qur'ān, and The Corpus Coranicum are some fine examples. The Corpus Coranicum project was initiated in 2007 and is expected to be completed by 2025.⁴⁶ It is funded research project by the German government and federal states.

Latin words 'Corpus Coranicum' mean collection of the Qur'ānic Scriptures. Manuscripts of the Qur'ān are collected from different parts of the world and are analyzed by a team of leading scholars, and specialists in their respective fields. The project mentioned on the website aims to offer systematic access to early Qur'anic manuscripts with images and transliterated texts⁴⁷.

This is a unique and needed work done by the Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Sciences. This project has a team of six editors. It is headed by Angelika Neuwirth, Michael Marx is the director of the research unit. The core aim of the project is to fill the gap in the understanding of the Qur'ān and its message by analyzing primary Arabic resources, ancient writings, and Qur'ānic scriptures. Then the collected stuff should be analyzed comparatively. They also aim to collect the scriptures from Egypt. Moreover, detailed systematic research is carried out on Uthmanic scripture found in different countries⁴⁸.

The study adopts the method of textual criticism of the Qur'an's reading variants in their classical sources, and provides a critical analysis of the hermeneutical presuppositions of the historical interpretation of the Qur'an⁴⁹.

Initially, they collected, analyzed, and uploaded 1100 pictures of manuscripts. They have developed more than 6500 Databases. Arabic fonts and transliterations are developed according to the need of the project. Radiocarbon chemical scientific methods of analyzing the manuscripts are incorporated.

Website Overview

When you open the website you have to choose a language. The options are English, French, and German. Project name is also mentioned and the details of the project and topics are clearly described. There is also a feature named: 'Verse Navigator' that is a tool for searching verses easily. Then there are 7 sections that describe the project as well as contain the content of the project.

1st Section gives detailed Information of the project along with further resources. The Project, Research, Tools, Materials, and Staff are also introduced. 2nd Section deals with Manuscripts and parchments. It has two options: Overview and Manuscripts by Verse. 3rd Section presents different variant readings (qira'at) for one verse. Overview and Reading Variants by Verse are further mentioned. 4th Section describes 'The World of the Qur'ān that deals with the text from the Qur'ān. It has an overview and inter-texts by verse. 5th Section is based on the commentary. The Surahs are arranged according to their historical chronology. Thematical development of the Quranic verses is also mentioned. Overview and Commentary by Surah is an important feature of the project. Introduction to the commentary on the early Meccan surahs and middle Meccan surahs is also given. 6th Section functions the Printed Edition of the Qur'ān, Cairo 1924. Whereas the 7th Section is entitled as Qur'ān Concordance.

The Corpus Coranicum Project is a well-known contemporary project by the western world that is appreciated and awaited by the both Muslim and Non-Muslim world. Although it is not yet completed but a few parts of the project can be viewed online. Scholars are waiting to observe its final appearance. This is a unique project and it has grabbed the attention of the scholars. Many reviews are written on the project mentioning its merits and demerits. We cannot deny the significance of the project yet it has some weaknesses as well. For example, the digital database and a few manuscripts collected by the concerned persons is not sufficient to have a healthy criticism or to have a strong critical analysis on the Quran and its text⁵⁰.

Hence the project management has the plenty of time to fix these discrepancies and issues raised by the scholars. The need of the project is evident but these matters should be addressed as well.

Conclusion

Another matter of significance is that the western Qur'ānic studies are far ahead of the Muslim world. The extensive project of the EQ that took thirteen years of painstaking labor denotes the high morale, enthusiasm, passion, and endurance of the western scholars in this regard. Apart from the EQ, many anthologies on the subject of the Qur'ānic studies have appeared in the recent century. On contrary, in the Muslim world, efforts for further research and developments in the communal are very few. Hence, there is an extreme need to focus on the fundamental issues of this discipline at a collective level.

The task of the following survey is to provide an outline of some of the most substantial projects that are considered symbols of great advancement in western academia.

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