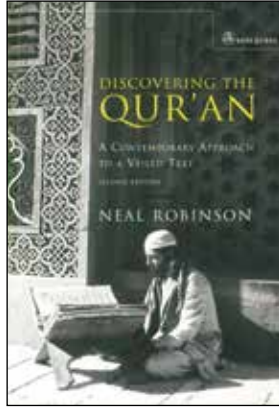


NEAL ROBINSON
**“DISCOVERING THE QUR’AN: A CONTEMPORARY
APPROACH TO A VEILED TEXT”**
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Ersin Kabakcı

Res. Asst., Hitit University, Divinity Faculty, Department of Basic Islamic Sciences
Çorum, Turkey
ersinkabakci@hitit.edu.tr
orcid.org/0000-0002-0913-8087



Neal Robinson is a well-known Western scholar of Islamic Studies. Now professor at Sogang University in South Korea, Robinson, in addition to several articles, has four books: *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (1991), *Islam, a Concise Introduction* (1999), *Simple Guide to Islam* (1997) and his major work, *Discovering the Qur’an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*. *Discovering the Qur’an* is a reference book especially to the readers wondering recent approaches to the Qur’anic text in the contemporary Western scholarship.

The fact that the current Western Qur’anic studies are not followed as it should be is seen as an important shortcoming from the point of Turkish Tafsir academia.¹ This lack feeds a static and negative perception towards western

1 During the preparation of this review, it is a promising news to learn that the Turkish translation of the book has just been published: Neal Robinson, *Kur’an’ı Keşfetmek: Örtülü Bir Metne Çağdaş Bir Yaklaşım*, trans. Süleyman Kalkan (İstanbul: KURAMER, 2018).

Qur'anic studies. There are, of course, some justified reasons for Muslim scholars to be prejudiced against the Western literature considering the former 'highly hostile' works of the Western scholars. However, approaches to the Qur'anic text in the western world are both dynamic and highly diverse today. Especially after the last quarter of the 20th century, we are witnessing more empathetic and academic approaches to the Qur'anic text. In addition; the term 'Western academia' does not imply one-sided nonmuslim scholarship as it was before. Today, Muslim scholars are a significant part of the Western Qur'anic Studies. From now on, what is most needed is to keep away from an 'irritating' language and to keep the studies in an academic aura.

In this context, *Discovering the Qur'an* is a nice work to introduce. The book consists of three main chapters: *Phenomenology*, *Chronology* and *Morphology, Structure and Coherence*.

In the first chapter, *Phenomenology*, the author deals with the value of the Qur'anic text in the lives of Muslims. In this context, listening, memorizing and recitation of the Qur'an are brought to agenda. The oral nature of the text and the original language of the Qur'an, Arabic, are emphasized as important factors to evaluate the text properly. The effectiveness of the Qur'anic discourse 'evaporates' largely when translated into another language since the structural and stylistic devices of the original language disappear (p. 10). Some rhythmic qualities of the Qur'anic discourse are exemplified from various surahs and verses. So, what is stressed in this part is that the Qur'an is not solely a 'book' for a Muslim; it is a discourse memorized, recited and listened during prayers and daily life. Muslims adorn their houses and offices with the verses of the Qur'an. The Qur'an has many other functions in the lives of Muslims (p. 17-21).

The second chapter, *Chronology*, has four subtitles. Here, Robinson describes the historical materials available for the chronological reading of the Qur'an. He warns the readers to be cautious about the biographical traditions as they include several 'exaggerated' narratives, namely, miracles. On the other hand, The Qur'anic text itself gives few clues about the time and place of the revelations. The author does not consider all the biographical works about the life of the prophet as worthless; but he divides these historical materials into two from the aspect of their reliability: the ones having 'historical core' and the others 'abounded with miraculous and folkloric elements' (p. 36). Thus, he advises to be 'cautious' about '*sirah-maghazî*' literature (p. 37). What the author concludes is that although Islamic literature might include questionable materials, the Qur'anic scholars should try to understand and

interpret the text with the historical datum of Islam so that they can get the chance of evaluating the text chronologically (p. 44-45). By the way, the author evaluates the 'reconstruction' attempts of early Islamic history by Crone and Cook (*Hagarism*, 1977) and criticizes their skeptical approach by addressing several questions to them (p. 53-54). According to the author, the radical skepticism of these two scholars is "unwarranted" (p. 55) since a historical approach cannot totally ignore the related Islamic literature.

In this context, *the traditional resources for determining chronological order*, namely, occasions of revelations (*asbâb an-nuzûl*), *abrogating and abrogated ayahs* (an-nâsikh wa'l-mansûkh) and *traditional lists of Meccan and Madinan surahs* are discussed (p. 60-74). All these materials have limited value to create an approximately logical chronology for the Qur'an. Finally, the information at the surah headings of the Egyptian edition cannot be accepted 'sacrosanct' to determine chronology because these are the compilations of the editors from the traditional materials stated above (p. 75).

Another subject related to determining a chronological order for the text is the attempts of western scholars. Especially after the second half of the 19th century, we witness several studies searching for a chronology for the surahs of the Qur'an. In this context, Noldeke-Schwally and Bell chronologies are introduced briefly and pros and cons of these works in comparative to the Egyptian chronology are shared by the author. (p. 76-96).

As a result of evaluation of the chronology studies, the author concludes that "the problem of the chronology of the revelations is still far from solved." (p. 95). What the author suggests is that the Qur'anic scholars should do thematic studies by taking all the Qur'anic references into account; "but without being rigidly tied to any chronological classification of the surahs." (p. 95). Such kind of a study might tell us a probable chronology of the surahs; but that does not bear a certainty.

The author, over the conclusions he reached about the attempts of probable chronological order, directs the attention of the readers to the thematic studies and then he passes to the last chapter of the book, which deals with the structural, thematic and stylistic characteristics of the Qur'anic text. He bases on Noldeke chronology for his following analysis because, according to the author, Noldeke-Schwally surah classification is 'a better working hypothesis' (p. 95) than the standard Egyptian chronology.

In the last chapter, the author begins his analysis with *the formal elements of the 'early Meccan' surahs*. The 48 'early Meccan' surahs according to the Noldeke chronology are analyzed from thematic and formal aspects. In this

context, under ten subtitles these surahs are examined: *surah openings, oaths, eschatological sections, narrative sections, sign sections, revelation sections, polemical sections, didactic questions and answers, messenger sections, miscellaneous* (p. 99-124). Each subtitle is exemplified with the related verses in the Qur'anic text.

In the analysis of the Meccan surahs, Robinson divides the surahs into sections involving one or more of the six principles following: polemic, eschatology, God's personal communication with the Messenger, the signs of God's power and beneficence, lessons from history, and the status and authenticity of the revelation (p. 125). According to the author, each of these six principles has its own 'register', that is, its own structural, phonetic or semantic characteristics. He analyzes the surahs by keeping in mind that there is a relation between the six principles and their distinctive 'registers'.

The author argues that the *structure, sound and meaning* should be taken into account in terms of their interrelation to each other. So, in three Meccan surahs (Q 103, 104, 78) the author analyzes the surahs with regard to their structural, phonetic and semantic relations in a successful way (p. 162 ff.). In addition, there are remarkable examples to show how effective and functional role sound and intertextuality have (p. 177 ff.). Within this framework, the author shows that the end-rhymes of the verses have a unifying effect as in the example of Q 79. Similarly, he makes some etymological analyses of the words considering their usage in various surahs (p. 182-184) as well as comparative readings with the Biblical references (p. 183-185). Considering these factors helps a reader find a more coherent text than thought (p. 195).

As for the Madinan surahs, Robinson tries an analysis of the longest surah, al-Baqara, by dividing it into five main sections: The Prologue (vv. 1-39), Criticism of the Children of Israel (vv. 40-121), the Abrahamic Legacy (vv. 122-152), Legislation for the New Nation (vv. 153-242), the Struggle to Liberate the Ka'bah (vv. 243-283) and the Epilogue (vv. 284-286). The epilogue is not included in the main sections. What the author argues is that as a result of this kind of analysis the al-Baqara has a 'coherent structure' (p. 196 ff.). When considering the 'orientalist' claims that the Qur'anic text lacks coherence, witnessing such western approach especially by the Muslim scholars must really be striking.

Another important point argued by the author is that while reading the Qur'an, what should be kept in mind is that it is originally an oral discourse so it bears many characteristics of the orality. In this context, the author makes a detailed analysis on the subject of who the addresser and the addressees are. Similarly, sudden shifts of the pronouns (from first person singular to third

person singular, first person plural or singular to third person singular etc.) are analyzed in terms of their structural and thematic functions (p. 224 ff.).

As for the order of the surahs in the Qur'anic text, Robinson argues that although there is a decreasing-length rule, there are several exceptions. It is difficult to explain the order of the surahs only with the decreasing-length rule or the sura groupings beginning with the same letters (al-hurûf al-muqattaah). The editors must have been affected several factors not all of which are open to us (p. 270).

In the last part of the third chapter Robinson shares Islahi's views on the order of the surahs. Islahi (d. 1997), following the footsteps of his teacher Farahi (d. 1930) is one the most cited Muslim scholars on the coherence of the Qur'anic text. The strengths and weaknesses of Islahi's approach are mentioned clearly at the end of this part (p. 275-283).

For the last few decades, interest to the Qur'anic text in the Western Academia has considerably increased. One of the main foci of the studies is the composition of the Qur'anic text. In this context, such prolific scholars as Angelika Neuwirth, Michel Cuyppers, Matthias Zahniser, Carl W. Ernst, Raymond Farrin, Marianna Klar, Nevin Reda el-Tahri, Mustansir Mir, Michael Sells and, here, Neal Robinson have valuable academic works approaching the composition of the Qur'anic text from thematic, structural and symmetrical perspectives. *Discovering the Qur'an: a Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* is, in this context, a good beginning for the readers looking for fresh western perspectives about the Qur'anic text.