

The Quran from Abraham Geiger's Perspective: Between the Historicity of Revelation and Theological Transformation

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Abstract

Abraham Geiger's views on the Quran are often situated within the field of Orientalism, which emphasizes historical and comparative approaches. Geiger viewed the Quran as a text that emerged through interaction with earlier traditions, particularly Judaism, such that revelation is understood as part of a historical process. This study aims to critically examine Geiger's views, particularly the concept of "creative appropriation" and the analysis of intertextuality between the Quran and Jewish literature. The method employed is qualitative research based on a literature review using a historical-philological and comparative approach. The findings indicate that Geiger identified narrative similarities between the Quran and Jewish traditions such as the Midrash and the Talmud; however, he also acknowledged theological transformations in the Quran within the context of 7th-century Arabia. Consequently, Geiger positioned Islam as a reformist continuation of the Semitic tradition, but tended to reduce revelation to a historical construct. Therefore, although his thought contributes to modern Quranic studies, a critical stance is necessary to preserve the theological integrity of the Quran.

INTRODUCTION

The study of the Quran from an Orientalist perspective is one of the key discourses in modern Islamic studies, particularly since the emergence of the historical-critical approach in the West. Within this tradition, the Quran is understood not only as a transcendental revelatory text but also as a historical product that emerged within a specific social and cultural context. One of the early figures who played a significant role in developing this approach was Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), a German Jewish scholar known as a pioneer of comparative studies between the Quran and Jewish tradition (Geiger, 2010).

Geiger developed a historical-philological approach that situates the Quran within the network of Semitic religious traditions. In his work *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (1833), he argued that there is a close connection between Quranic narratives and Jewish literature, such as the Midrash and the Talmud (Geiger, 2010). According to him, the Quran did not emerge ahistorically,

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but rather through a process of interaction with earlier religious traditions, particularly Judaism, which were subsequently adapted to the context of 7th-century Arab society (Schorsch, 1995). This approach is known as the concept of “creative appropriation,” that is, the process of assimilating and transforming earlier teachings into a new form.

Geiger’s views have made a significant contribution to opening up new perspectives in Quranic studies, particularly through the use of comparative methods and philological analysis of the text. He demonstrated the existence of narrative parallels between the stories of the prophets in the Quran and Jewish tradition, such as the stories of the Prophet Moses, Abraham, and Mary, which, in his view, reflect the continuity of the Semitic prophetic tradition (Goldziher, 1889). Within this framework, Islam is positioned as a reformist continuation of the preceding tradition, not as a religion entirely separate from the history of previous revelations.

However, Geiger’s approach has also drawn criticism, particularly from Muslim scholars. His historical-critical approach is viewed as reductionist because it treats revelation as a historical construct, thereby potentially overlooking the transcendental and divine dimensions of the Quran (Neuwirth, 2019). Furthermore, the assumption of “influence” is often seen as reflecting the epistemological biases of Orientalism rooted in Western paradigms. Therefore, a study is needed that not only describes Geiger’s thought but also analyzes it critically and proportionately.

Based on this, this article aims to examine Abraham Geiger’s thoughts on the Quran, focusing on the concept of intertextuality, the historical-philological approach, and their implications for modern Quranic studies. Using a qualitative method based on literature review, this study seeks to objectively situate Geiger’s thought within the landscape of Orientalist studies, while providing a critical evaluation of its contributions and limitations. Thus, this study is expected to enrich the academic discourse on the Quran and open up a more constructive space for dialogue between Islamic scholarly traditions and Orientalist studies.

METHODS

This study is a qualitative study based on library research, which aims to examine Abraham Geiger’s thoughts on the Quran analytically and critically. A qualitative approach was used because the objects of study ideas, texts, and intellectual constructs require in-depth interpretation rather than quantitative measurement (Efendi, 2020; Engkizar et al., 2025; Fathonah, 2018; Harianto, 2026; Izzuddin, 2025; Kassymova et al., 2025; Moleong, 2021; Muzayyin, 2014; Nur et al., 2024).

The approaches used in this study are the historical-philological and comparative approaches. The historical approach is used to trace the intellectual background of Abraham Geiger as well as the social and scholarly contexts underlying the emergence of his thought, particularly within the traditions of Orientalism and *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Schorsch, 1995). Meanwhile, the philological approach is used to analyze texts related to Geiger’s thought, particularly his work *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judentume aufgenommen?*, by examining the linguistic structure, terminology, and concepts used in comparing the Quran with Jewish tradition (Geiger, 2010).

In addition, this study employs a comparative method to identify and analyze the similarities and differences between Quranic narratives and Jewish literature, such as the Midrash and the Talmud, as proposed by Geiger. This method aims to understand how the concept of “creative borrowing” is constructed and how Geiger interprets the intertextual relationship between religious traditions (Goldziher, 1889).

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data consists of Abraham Geiger’s major works, particularly *Was hat Mohammed aus*

dem Judenthume aufgenommen?. Secondary data includes relevant literature, such as books and scholarly articles discussing Geiger's thought, Orientalist studies, and contemporary studies on the intertextuality of the Quran (Neuwirth, 2019).

Data collection was conducted through a literature review, which involved examining, classifying, and organizing various sources of literature relevant to the research topic. Furthermore, data analysis employed a descriptive-analytical approach, which involved systematically describing Abraham Geiger's ideas and then critically analyzing them to identify the contributions, underlying assumptions, and limitations of his approach.

Thus, this research method is expected to provide a comprehensive and balanced understanding of Abraham Geiger's thought, while critically situating it within the development of modern Quranic studies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Abraham Geiger's views on the Quran cannot be separated from the intellectual context of 19th-century Europe, which was marked by the development of the historical-critical approach in the study of religion. Within this tradition, sacred texts are treated as historical products that can be analyzed through philological methods, textual criticism, and inter-traditional comparison (Parwanto, 2019). Geiger became one of the pioneers who systematically applied this approach to the Quran, with the aim of tracing the relationship between Islam and earlier Semitic religious traditions, particularly Judaism (Schorsch, 1995).

Drawing from the framework of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, Geiger viewed religion as an entity that develops historically and undergoes transformation in accordance with the social dynamics of society (Meyer, 2001). This perspective led him to the assumption that revelation does not descend into a vacuum but always interacts with existing intellectual traditions. In the context of Islam, he argued that the Quran is part of the continuity of the prophetic tradition that had developed previously, and thus has close ties to Jewish literature (Geiger, 2010).

The key concept proposed by Geiger is "creative appropriation," that is, the process by which elements of earlier traditions are adapted and transformed into new forms. This concept forms the basis for his analysis of the Quran as a text that not only reflects older traditions but also reworks them within a different theological framework (Geiger, 2010). Thus, the Quran is understood as a dialogical text, not a monological one, because it emerged through interaction with a complex religious environment.

An analysis of the story of Prophet Moses stands as one of the most prominent examples in Geiger's thought. He notes that the frequency of Moses's appearances in the Quran underscores the significance of this figure within the theological framework of Islam (Pertiwi et al., 2023). The narrative of Pharaoh's oppression, the liberation of the Children of Israel, and the reception of revelation shares similarities with rabbinic traditions in the Midrash and the Talmud (Goldziher, 1889). However, a fundamental difference lies in the orientation of the message. In Jewish tradition, the story serves to strengthen the collective identity of the Israelite nation, whereas in the Quran, the story is used to affirm the principle of tawhid and universal justice.

This narrative transformation demonstrates that the Quran does not merely adopt earlier traditions but engages in a normative and contextual reinterpretation. In this regard, Geiger observes a systematic effort to shift the focus from ethnic identity toward a universal moral message (As'adah, 2023). This approach aligns with modern views on intertextuality, which emphasize that a text does not stand alone but is always embedded within a network of relationships with other texts (Neuwirth, 2019).

The story of Prophet Abraham is also a key focus in Geiger's analysis. In Jewish tradition, Abraham is portrayed as the ancestor of the Israelites who has a special relationship with God through a divine covenant (Peters, 2007). In contrast, the Quran presents Abraham as a hanif figure who transcends ethnic boundaries and serves as a symbol of universal monotheism (Kildoo, 2022). This difference indicates that the Quran deconstructs the ethnic exclusivity found in earlier traditions while simultaneously constructing a more inclusive religious identity.

Geiger interprets this change as a form of deliberate theological reform. According to him, the Prophet Muhammad not only conveyed revelation but also reinterpreted the prophetic tradition to address the needs of a pluralistic Arab society that remained bound by polytheistic practices (Noor & Mokhtar, 2023). Thus, the Quran functions as a transformational text that bridges the past with a new reality (Levenson, 2012).

In addition, Geiger also analyzed the stories of Mary and Jesus, which he believes bear similarities to Jewish-Christian apocryphal traditions. The narrative of Jesus's miraculous birth and Mary's virginity suggests connections to non-canonical texts such as the Protoevangelium of James (Goddard, 2000). However, the Quran places a different theological emphasis by rejecting the concept of Jesus' divinity and affirming absolute monotheism. This difference demonstrates that the Quran not only adopts but also critiques and reformulates previous traditions.

From these various examples, it is evident that Geiger's approach seeks to situate the Quran within the historical context of the Semitic religions as they interacted with one another. He views Islam as a reformist continuation of the existing prophetic tradition, not as an entirely new phenomenon (Nöldeke, 2013). This perspective makes a significant contribution to opening new avenues in Quranic studies, particularly regarding the use of comparative methods and philological analysis.

However, this approach also has significant limitations. One of the main criticisms is its reductionist tendency in understanding revelation. By emphasizing the historical aspect, Geiger tends to overlook the transcendental dimension of the Quran as the Word of God. From an Islamic theological perspective, revelation cannot be reduced to a historical product, as it possesses a divine aspect that transcends human understanding (Imran, 2017; Shihab, 2018).

Furthermore, the "influence" paradigm employed by Geiger also raises methodological issues. Similarities between the Quran and earlier traditions do not necessarily indicate a cause-and-effect relationship but may reflect shared sources of revelation within the prophetic tradition (Noor & Mokhtar, 2023). Fazlur Rahman asserts that the Quran must be understood within the framework of the continuity of the moral messages of the prophets, not merely as the result of historical adoption (Graham & Rahman, 1983). Thus, a more appropriate approach is to view the relationship between traditions as a theological dialogue, not merely a cultural transfer.

Another criticism concerns Geiger's assessment of the spiritual dimension of Islam. He considers Islam to be more oriented toward social reform than spiritual deepening. This view reveals a limitation in understanding the complexity of Islamic teachings, which encompass both the outward and inward dimensions in a balanced manner. The Sufi tradition, for example, demonstrates that Islam possesses a spiritual depth that cannot be ignored (Nasr, 1987). Therefore, Geiger's generalization can be viewed as the result of an incomplete reading.

In contemporary scholarship, Geiger's approach has undergone revision and development. Scholars such as Angelika Neuwirth have developed a historical approach while still accounting for the complexity of revelation as a religious phenomenon (Neuwirth, 2019). Meanwhile, modern intertextual studies no longer

emphasize a linear relationship between texts but view them as a dynamic network of relationships. This approach allows for a more balanced understanding of both historical and theological aspects (Moreen & Firestone, 1991).

Thus, Abraham Geiger's thought occupies an ambivalent position in Quranic studies. On the one hand, he made significant methodological contributions through the introduction of historical-philological and comparative approaches. On the other hand, his approach also contains epistemological limitations that warrant critical examination. Therefore, an examination of his thought must be conducted critically and proportionally, appreciating his contributions without neglecting the theological dimensions of the Quran.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that Geiger's thought is not only important within the historical context of Orientalism but also relevant to contemporary discourse on Quranic studies. By integrating historical and theological approaches, Quranic studies can evolve into a more comprehensive and dialogical discipline, thereby bridging the differences in perspective between Western and Islamic scholarly traditions.

CONCLUSION

Abraham Geiger's interpretation of the Quran stems from a historical-critical approach that views revelation as part of historical dynamics. He emphasizes the existence of "creative appropriation" that is, the process of adapting and transforming earlier traditions, particularly Judaism, into the Quran, thereby making it a dialogical and contextual text. However, this approach tends to be reductionist because it overlooks the transcendental dimension of revelation. Fazlur Rahman's critique asserts that the Quran is more appropriately understood as a continuation of the prophetic message, not merely the result of historical influences. Thus, Geiger's thought is methodologically significant, but it must be critically examined and balanced by considering the theological aspects of the Quran.

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