



William Montgomery Watt and His Contributions to Islamic and Sīrah Studies: A Critical Analytical Study

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Abstract

This study critically examines the scholarly contributions and methodological approach of William Montgomery Watt in the field of Islamic and Sīrah studies. As one of the most influential twentieth-century Orientalist scholars, Watt played a significant role in reshaping Western academic understanding of Islam and the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ through works such as Muhammad at Mecca, Muhammad at Medina, and Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman. The study explores Watt's interpretation of pre-Islamic Makkan society, his socio-economic explanation of the rise of Islam, and his views regarding revelation and prophethood. Using a qualitative, analytical, and comparative methodology, the research examines both Western and Muslim scholarly responses to Watt's ideas. Particular attention is given to the critiques presented by Muslim scholars regarding his reliance on historical-critical and socio-historical methods in interpreting revelation and sacred history. The study finds that although Watt adopted a comparatively moderate and academically balanced tone in contrast to earlier Orientalist writers, his methodology remained influenced by secular Western epistemological assumptions. The research concludes that Watt's scholarship represents both an important contribution to modern Islamic studies and a continuing subject of intellectual debate within contemporary Islamic thought.

Keywords:

Orientalism, Islamic Studies, revelation, historical-critical method, western scholarship on Islam, analytical

1. Introduction

The study of Islam in Western academia has long remained intertwined with the broader intellectual tradition commonly identified as Orientalism.¹ From the medieval period to the modern academic era, Western scholars attempted to interpret Islamic civilization, the Qur'an, and the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ through frameworks shaped by their own historical, religious, and philosophical assumptions. While many early Orientalist writings were characterized by polemical attitudes, theological hostility, and colonial motivations, the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a comparatively more academic and methodologically refined approach toward Islamic studies². Within this intellectual environment, William Montgomery Watt occupies a distinctive position as one of the most influential Western scholars of Islam and Sīrah studies.

¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 1–28.

² John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 45–50.



William Montgomery Watt is widely recognized for his extensive contributions to the academic study of early Islam, particularly through his major works *Muhammad at Mecca* (1953), *Muhammad at Medina* (1956), and *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (1961)³. Unlike several earlier Orientalists who approached Islam primarily through skepticism or open hostility, Watt adopted a comparatively moderate tone and attempted to understand the rise of Islam within its historical, social, economic, and religious context⁴. His writings played a significant role in reshaping Western perceptions of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and contributed to presenting Islam as a historically dynamic and intellectually serious religious tradition rather than merely a subject of theological controversy.

One of the most significant aspects of Watt's scholarship lies in his methodological approach. He examined the emergence of Islam not only as a religious phenomenon but also as a transformative social movement that addressed the moral, economic, and political conditions of seventh-century Arabia⁵. In *Muhammad at Mecca*, for instance, Watt emphasizes the socio-economic transformation of Makkian society, arguing that growing commercialism, tribal inequality, and moral fragmentation formed an important background for the acceptance of the Qur'anic message⁶. Similarly, in his analysis of the Madinan period, he presents the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as both a spiritual guide and an exceptional statesman who successfully established social cohesion and political order within a fragmented tribal environment⁷. Such interpretations made Watt highly influential in modern Western Islamic studies and established his works as foundational academic references in many universities.

Despite his relatively balanced tone, Watt's scholarship has remained the subject of extensive academic debate among Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike. A major area of criticism concerns his reliance upon the historical-critical method, which approaches religious texts and prophetic experiences through historical and sociological analysis rather than purely theological acceptance⁸. Although Watt did not deny the sincerity of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, he often interpreted revelation as a form of profound religious experience expressed through the cultural and linguistic environment of Arabia⁹. This interpretive framework has been criticized by Muslim scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, who argue that the Qur'an and revelation cannot be reduced to historical or psychological categories because they represent a transcendent and divinely revealed reality within Islamic belief¹⁰.

³ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953); W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956); W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

⁴ Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1991), 12–15.

⁵ Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 1–10

⁶ Ibid., 37–52.

⁷ Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, 221–230.

⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 204–225.

⁹ Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 52–65.

¹⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 15–32; Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1977), 1–15.



Furthermore, Watt's socio-economic interpretation of the rise of Islam has generated important scholarly discussions. While his analysis successfully highlights the social and ethical dimensions of the Qur'anic message, critics such as Fazlur Rahman and Karen Armstrong maintain that reducing Islam primarily to historical or economic conditions risks overlooking its deeper spiritual, metaphysical, and moral foundations¹¹. Similarly, his comparative approach toward Islam and Christianity, though valuable for interfaith dialogue, has occasionally been viewed as insufficiently attentive to the unique theological identity of Islam. Consequently, Watt's scholarship represents both an important intellectual bridge between Islamic civilization and Western academia and a continuing site of methodological debate regarding the limits of Orientalist approaches to religion. In the broader discourse of modern Islamic studies, William Montgomery Watt therefore occupies a complex and multifaceted position. On one hand, he contributed significantly to correcting several extreme misconceptions about Islam within Western scholarship and introduced a more serious academic engagement with the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)¹². On the other hand, his intellectual framework remained deeply influenced by modern Western historical criticism and secular academic methodology, particularly in matters relating to revelation, prophethood, and sacred history¹³. His work may thus be understood as an example of what John L. Esposito describes as "bridge scholarship," namely an attempt to create intellectual dialogue between Islamic and Western traditions while still operating within the assumptions of modern Western academia¹⁴.

The present study aims to critically examine the scholarly contributions, methodological foundations, and intellectual limitations of William Montgomery Watt's approach toward Islam and Sirah studies. Particular attention will be given to his interpretation of Makkan society, his understanding of revelation and prophethood, his socio-economic explanation of the rise of Islam, and the responses of contemporary Muslim scholars to his ideas. Through a balanced analytical approach, this article seeks neither to dismiss Watt entirely nor to accept his conclusions uncritically, but rather to evaluate his scholarship within the wider context of Orientalist studies and modern Islamic intellectual discourse.

The present study is significant because it provides a balanced and critical evaluation of William Montgomery Watt's contribution to Islamic and Sirah studies, highlighting both his scholarly achievements and the limitations of his interpretations. By examining his historical-critical methodology and its application to Islamic sources, the study enhances understanding of modern Western approaches to the study of Islam and early Islamic history.¹⁵ It also addresses a gap in the existing literature by offering a comprehensive assessment that incorporates both Western academic perspectives and the critiques of Muslim scholars.¹⁶ Furthermore, the research serves as

¹¹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 2–8; Armstrong, *Muhammad*, 25–30.

¹² Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 60–65.

¹³ Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought*, 28–32.

¹⁴ Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 67.

¹⁵ William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953); William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956).

¹⁶ Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Riyadh: King Saud University, 1985); Yasir Suleiman, "Orientalism, Islam, and Islamists," in *The Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West*, ed. Roberto Tottoli (London: Routledge, 2015), 47–60.



a valuable resource for students and researchers in Islamic studies, Sīrah studies, comparative religion, and Orientalist scholarship, while contributing to broader discussions on Orientalism, historiography, and the relationship between Islamic and Western intellectual traditions.¹⁷

1.1 Background of the Study

The academic study of Islam in the West developed within the broader intellectual tradition commonly known as Orientalism. From the medieval period onward, European scholars sought to understand Islamic civilization, the Qur'an, and the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ through linguistic, historical, and theological investigations. However, early Western writings on Islam were frequently influenced by religious polemics, political rivalries, and cultural prejudices, resulting in interpretations that often lacked historical objectivity¹⁸. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Orientalist scholarship gradually evolved into a more systematic academic discipline characterized by philological analysis, historical criticism, and comparative religious studies¹⁹.

Within this intellectual development, the study of Sīrah literature gained particular importance. Western scholars increasingly viewed the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as a key subject for understanding the origins and development of Islamic civilization. Rather than approaching Sīrah exclusively as a religious narrative, many researchers examined it through historical, sociological, and political perspectives²⁰. This shift produced a substantial body of academic literature that attempted to reconstruct the historical circumstances surrounding the emergence of Islam and the formation of the first Muslim community.

Among the twentieth-century scholars who contributed significantly to this field, William Montgomery Watt occupies a prominent position. His major works, *Muhammad at Mecca* (1953), *Muhammad at Medina* (1956), and *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (1961), became influential references in Western Islamic studies²¹. Unlike many earlier Orientalists, Watt adopted a relatively balanced tone toward Islam and sought to explain the emergence of the Islamic movement within its historical and social context. He emphasized the importance of economic change, tribal relations, and moral challenges in pre-Islamic Arabia while simultaneously acknowledging the sincerity and leadership of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ²².

A distinctive feature of Watt's scholarship is his reliance upon historical-critical and socio-historical methodologies. He interpreted the rise of Islam not only as a religious phenomenon but also as a response to the social and economic realities of seventh-century Arabia²³. This approach significantly influenced later Western scholarship by encouraging contextual analyses of Islamic history. Nevertheless, it also generated substantial debate because many Muslim scholars viewed

¹⁷ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981).

¹⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 1–28.

¹⁹ John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 39–42.

²⁰ Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1991), 11–18.

²¹ William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953); William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956); William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

²² Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 1–15.

²³ Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 52–74.



such interpretations as insufficient for explaining the divine and transcendent dimensions of revelation²⁴.

The scholarly significance of Watt extends beyond his individual writings. His works reflect a transitional phase in Western Islamic studies, situated between the polemical Orientalism of earlier centuries and the more nuanced academic approaches that emerged in the late twentieth century²⁵. Consequently, examining Watt's scholarship provides valuable insight into both the evolution of Western approaches to Islam and the methodological debates surrounding the interpretation of revelation, prophethood, and early Islamic history.

Therefore, a critical study of William Montgomery Watt is important not only for understanding his contribution to *Sīrah* and Islamic studies but also for evaluating the broader intellectual assumptions that continue to shape contemporary Western scholarship on Islam. Such an investigation helps illuminate both the strengths and limitations of historical-critical approaches when applied to subjects that remain deeply rooted in religious belief and sacred history

1.2 Statement of the Problem

William Montgomery Watt remains one of the most influential Western scholars in the fields of Islamic and *Sīrah* studies. His writings have played a significant role in shaping modern Western perceptions of Islam and the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Despite his reputation as a comparatively moderate Orientalist, many aspects of his scholarship particularly his interpretation of revelation, prophethood, and the emergence of Islam continue to generate scholarly debate. His reliance on historical-critical and socio-historical methodologies has raised important questions regarding the adequacy of secular academic approaches for interpreting religious phenomena grounded in divine revelation and sacred history²⁶.

A review of existing literature indicates that scholarly assessments of Watt often remain polarized. Many Western studies emphasize his contribution to correcting earlier Orientalist misconceptions and promoting a more balanced understanding of Islam, whereas numerous Muslim critiques focus primarily on challenging his conclusions regarding revelation and prophetic experience²⁷. Consequently, insufficient attention has been devoted to a comprehensive evaluation that simultaneously recognizes Watt's scholarly contributions and critically examines the methodological assumptions underlying his interpretations.

Furthermore, existing research has rarely examined the interrelationship between Watt's socio-economic explanation of the rise of Islam and his understanding of revelation and prophethood within a single analytical framework. Likewise, limited scholarly work has explored how Muslim critiques of Watt reflect broader intellectual debates concerning Orientalist methodology,

²⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 45–58; Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1977), 1–25

²⁵ Wan Mohd Fazrul Azdi Wan Razali, Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor Abd Rahman, and Jaffary Awang, "Watt's View on Muslim Heritage in the Study of Other Religions: A Critical Analysis," *Al-Itqan: Journal of Islamic Sciences and Comparative Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 1–18

²⁶ William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 1–15; William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), vii–xii.

²⁷ John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 39–44; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 45–58.



historical criticism, and Islamic epistemology²⁸. This gap has resulted in an incomplete understanding of both the strengths and limitations of Watt's contribution to modern Islamic studies.

Therefore, there remains a need for a balanced and critical investigation of William Montgomery Watt's scholarship that evaluates his methodological approach, his interpretation of early Islamic history, and the responses of Muslim scholars to his ideas. By addressing these issues, the present study seeks to contribute to contemporary discussions on Orientalism, Sīrah studies, and the relationship between Western academic methodologies and Islamic intellectual traditions.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To examine the major scholarly contributions of William Montgomery Watt to Islamic and Sīrah studies.
2. To analyze William Montgomery Watt's interpretation of the socio-economic and moral conditions of pre-Islamic Makkah society.
3. To explore Watt's methodological approach toward Islam, revelation, and prophethood in his scholarly works.
4. To evaluate the extent to which Watt's scholarship is influenced by Orientalist historical-critical traditions.
5. To critically assess Muslim scholarly responses to Watt's views on revelation and the rise of Islam.

2. Literature Review

2.1 William Montgomery Watt and Western Islamic Studies

William Montgomery Watt is widely regarded as one of the most influential Western scholars of Islam in the twentieth century. His work occupies a significant position within Orientalist scholarship due to his attempt to present the life of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ through a balanced historical and theological lens. Unlike earlier Orientalists who often adopted critical or polemical approaches, Watt sought a more sympathetic and historically grounded interpretation of Islamic sources²⁹.

A major contribution of Watt is his trilogy on the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, where he reconstructs the Prophet's life within socio-political and economic contexts. These works remain foundational in Western academic discussions of early Islam³⁰.

2.2 Watt's Socio-Historical Interpretation of Early Islam

Watt interprets the rise of Islam through a socio-historical framework, situating it within the economic and social conditions of sixth- and seventh-century Makkah. He argues that the growth of mercantile activity significantly shaped the religious and ethical concerns addressed in the Prophet's message³¹.

He also highlights the importance of tribal structures in pre-Islamic Arabia. According to Watt, tribal loyalty, social inequality, and economic tensions created a context in which a reformative

²⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 272–301; Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1977), 1–25.

²⁹ William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).

³⁰ William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).

³¹ Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 52–74.



religious movement could emerge. Islam is therefore understood not only as a spiritual revelation but also as a historical response to socio-economic conditions³².

2.3 Watt's Understanding of Revelation and Prophethood

Watt's interpretation of revelation reflects a historical-critical methodology. He understands revelation not purely as an external supernatural event but as a profound religious experience within the consciousness of the Prophet Muhammad³³.

He develops the concept of prophetic consciousness, suggesting that revelation can be understood as an intensified awareness of divine reality. While this approach provides a modern analytical framework, it has also been debated in relation to traditional Islamic understandings of wahy (revelation)³⁴.

2.4 Muslim Scholarly Critiques of Watt

Muslim scholars have critically engaged with Watt's methodology, particularly his interpretation of revelation and prophetic experience. Scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, and Fazlur Rahman provide different levels of critique and engagement³⁵.

A key criticism is Watt's tendency toward reductionism, where metaphysical dimensions of Islam are sometimes explained through socio-historical categories. Al-Azami defends the classical Hadith tradition against historical-critical reinterpretations, while Nasr emphasizes the metaphysical and spiritual foundations of Islamic epistemology³⁶.

2.5 Orientalism and the Methodological Debate

Watt's scholarship is often examined within the broader discourse of Orientalism. Edward Said's influential work *Orientalism* argues that Western representations of the East are shaped by historical and political power structures³⁷.

Within this framework, Watt occupies a complex position. While he is often categorized as an Orientalist, his work is considered more balanced and empathetic compared to earlier scholars. Nevertheless, questions remain regarding his historical-critical methodology and its compatibility with Islamic epistemological traditions³⁸.

Existing literature on William Montgomery Watt generally follows two dominant approaches. One group highlights his positive contribution to Islamic studies, especially his socio-historical interpretation of early Islam. The other focuses on methodological critiques, particularly his understanding of revelation and prophethood³⁹.

³² Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1–20

³³ Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, 15–28

³⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 45–58.

³⁵ Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought*, 45–58.

³⁶ Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1977), 1–25.

³⁷ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 272–301

³⁸ Wan Mohd Fazrul Azdi Wan Razali, Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor Abd Rahman, and Jaffary Awang, "Watt's View on Muslim Heritage in the Study of Other Religions: A Critical Analysis," *Al-Itqan: Journal of Islamic Sciences and Comparative Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 1–18.

³⁹ Yasmeen Sagheer and Khan, "Montgomery Watt's Opinion about Islamic Approach towards Understanding of Religions," *Malakand University Research Journal of Islamic Studies* 4, no. 2 (2022): 1–14.



However, few studies provide an integrated analysis that evaluates both strengths and limitations simultaneously. Moreover, the relationship between Watt's socio-economic interpretation of Islam and his theory of revelation has not been sufficiently explored in a unified framework⁴⁰.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by offering a balanced and comprehensive evaluation of Watt's scholarship through historical, theological, and methodological perspectives.

2.6 Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and descriptive research methodology to critically examine the scholarly contributions and methodological approach of William Montgomery Watt in the field of Islamic and Sīrah studies⁴¹. Since the nature of the topic is interpretive and conceptual rather than experimental, the study does not involve any fieldwork or statistical data. Instead, it relies on a critical examination of textual sources and existing scholarly literature.

The research is primarily based on documentary and textual analysis. In this regard, Watt's major works especially *Muhammad at Mecca*, *Muhammad at Medina*, and *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* are treated as primary sources⁴². These texts are analyzed to understand his interpretation of pre-Islamic Arabian society, the rise of Islam, and his views on revelation and prophethood. Particular attention is given to his socio-economic approach and historical-critical methodology.

Alongside primary sources, the study also incorporates a wide range of secondary literature, including both Western and Muslim scholarly works. These include critical responses from scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, Fazlur Rahman, Edward Said, Karen Armstrong, and John L. Esposito⁴³. These works are used to understand how Watt's ideas have been received, interpreted, and critiqued within different intellectual traditions.

The study employs a comparative analytical approach, where Watt's interpretations are compared with perspectives from Muslim scholarship as well as alternative Western academic viewpoints⁴⁴. This comparative dimension helps in identifying both the strengths and limitations of his methodology, especially in relation to issues such as revelation, historical interpretation, and socio-economic explanations of early Islam.

Furthermore, the research follows a critical historical method, which involves situating Watt's scholarship within the broader context of Orientalist studies and Western academic

⁴⁰ Wan Mohd Fazrul Azdi Wan Razali et al., "Watt's View on Muslim Heritage," 1–18.

⁴¹ William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953); William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956); William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

⁴² Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*; Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*; Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*

⁴³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981); Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1977); Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* (London: HarperPress, 2006); John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴⁴ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*; Said, *Orientalism*



traditions⁴⁵. This allows the study to evaluate not only what Watt argues, but also the intellectual assumptions and methodological frameworks that shape his conclusions.

Overall, this methodology enables a balanced and systematic evaluation of Watt's contribution to Islamic studies, ensuring that the analysis remains both academically rigorous and critically reflective.

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Biography and Academic Background of William Montgomery Watt

Recent scholarship has highlighted Watt's role as a transitional figure within Orientalist and post-Orientalist Islamic studies. While earlier Western scholarship often approached Islam through explicitly polemical frameworks, Watt attempted to develop a more historically sympathetic understanding of Islamic civilization and the Prophet Muhammad⁴⁶. Nevertheless, contemporary analyses argue that his scholarship remained rooted in the epistemological assumptions of Western historical criticism, particularly in relation to revelation and sacred history.⁴⁷ Thus, Watt's academic legacy is frequently viewed as both reformative and methodologically contested within modern Islamic studies discourse.

3.2 Watt's Major Works and Scholarly Contributions

Watt's scholarly reputation is primarily based upon three major works: *Muhammad at Mecca* (1953), *Muhammad at Medina* (1956), and *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (1961). These texts collectively represent one of the most systematic Western academic studies of the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and the development of early Islamic society⁴⁸.

In *Muhammad at Mecca*, Watt examines the emergence of Islam within the socio-economic and moral environment of pre-Islamic Makkah. He argues that growing commercialism, tribal fragmentation, and economic inequality contributed to the social conditions that facilitated acceptance of the Qur'anic message. Rather than portraying Islam merely as a theological movement, Watt interprets it as a reformative response to existing social tensions⁴⁹.

Similarly, *Muhammad at Medina* focuses on the political and communal dimensions of early Islam. Watt presents Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as an exceptional statesman who successfully established unity within a fragmented tribal society. His discussion of the Madinan state highlights political organization, social integration, and communal ethics⁵⁰.

In *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, Watt summarizes his broader interpretation of the Prophet ﷺ as a sincere religious reformer and effective political leader. Karen Armstrong notes that Watt's willingness to acknowledge the sincerity and moral seriousness of the Prophet ﷺ represented a

⁴⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 272–301.

⁴⁶ Wan Mohd Fazrul Azdi Wan Razali, Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor Abd Rahman, and Jaffary Awang, "Watt's View on Muslim Heritage in the Study of Other Religions: A Critical Analysis," *Al-Itqan: Journal of Islamic Sciences and Comparative Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 1–18.

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953); William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956); William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

⁴⁹ Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 52–74.

⁵⁰ Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*.



major shift from earlier Orientalist narratives⁵¹. Likewise, John L. Esposito observes that Watt contributed to a more balanced academic discourse on Islam in Western universities⁵².

Despite these contributions, Watt's scholarship remains grounded in historical-critical analysis. Muslim scholars often question whether such methodologies can fully address the sacred and metaphysical dimensions of revelation and prophethood⁵³.

3.3 Watt's Interpretation of Early Makkan Society

Modern scholarship continues to debate the adequacy of Watt's socio-economic explanation of Islam's emergence. While his interpretation situates the Qur'anic message within the social realities of Makkah, later scholars question whether economic and political factors alone can explain the religious and theological dimensions of prophetic experience. Recent discussions suggest that overly material explanations risk marginalizing the central role of revelation in Islamic self-understanding and reflect assumptions of historical-critical approaches to religion⁵⁴.

3.4 Watt's View on Revelation and Prophethood

The question of revelation remains one of the most controversial aspects of Watt's scholarship. Contemporary studies note that Watt's historical-critical approach attempts to explain prophetic experience through cultural and historical contexts while maintaining respect for the sincerity of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. However, Muslim scholars argue that such interpretations may unintentionally reduce revelation to a human phenomenon and thereby conflict with the Islamic conception of *wahy* as direct divine communication⁵⁵. Consequently, debates concerning Watt's interpretation of revelation continue to occupy an important place in Qur'anic and Islamic studies.

3.5 Muslim Scholarly Criticism of Watt

Muslim scholarly responses to Watt reveal both appreciation and criticism. Some scholars acknowledge that Watt adopted a comparatively respectful tone toward Islam and rejected many extreme misconceptions found in earlier Orientalist writings. Esposito notes that Watt contributed significantly to improving Western academic attitudes toward Islamic civilization and the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ⁵⁶.

However, Muslim scholars continue to critique the methodological foundations of his work. Nasr argues that Orientalist scholarship is often limited by secular assumptions that fail to appreciate the sacred nature of revelation⁵⁷. Azami challenges historical skepticism in Western approaches by emphasizing the rigorous preservation of Hadith literature⁵⁸.

Rahman also critiques approaches that reduce Islam primarily to social or economic movements, arguing that historical analysis must not overshadow ethical and spiritual dimensions of

⁵¹ Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* (London: HarperPress, 2006)

⁵² John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981)

⁵⁴ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982)

⁵⁵ Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought*.

⁵⁶ Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*

⁵⁷ Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought*

⁵⁸ Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1977).



revelation⁵⁹. Edward Said provides a broader theoretical framework for understanding how Western scholarship may unconsciously reproduce cultural and epistemological biases⁶⁰. Recent studies further argue that some of Watt's generalizations regarding Muslim intellectual history and comparative religion are not fully supported by historical evidence, highlighting the rich tradition of Muslim engagement with interfaith and comparative scholarship⁶¹.

3.6 Findings and Critical Evaluation

A critical evaluation of Watt's scholarship reveals both significant contributions and methodological limitations. One of his major strengths lies in his comparatively balanced treatment of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Unlike many earlier Orientalists, Watt avoided overt hostility and acknowledged the sincerity and moral influence of the Prophet⁶².

Furthermore, his socio-historical analysis expanded Western understanding of early Islam by emphasizing social, economic, and political contexts. His work encouraged more contextual and academically serious approaches to Islamic history⁶³.

At the same time, limitations remain evident. His reliance on historical-critical frameworks often prioritizes sociological explanation over theological meaning. Nasr argues that this risks neglecting the transcendent dimensions of Islamic revelation⁶⁴. Said similarly notes that even moderate Orientalist scholarship may remain shaped by underlying Western intellectual assumptions.⁶⁵

Therefore, Watt's scholarship should neither be dismissed nor accepted uncritically. It remains valuable for understanding the development of Western Islamic studies, but requires a balanced reading that recognizes both its contributions and its methodological constraints.

4. Conclusion

The study of William Montgomery Watt and his contributions to Islamic and Sirah studies reveals the complexity of modern Orientalist scholarship and its evolving engagement with Islam. Watt occupies a distinctive position within twentieth-century Western academia because of his comparatively moderate and analytical approach toward the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and the origins of Islam. Unlike earlier Orientalist writers who frequently approached Islam through theological hostility and polemical assumptions, Watt attempted to examine Islamic history within its broader historical, social, and intellectual context⁶⁶. His scholarship therefore represents an important transitional phase in the development of Western Islamic studies.

Through works such as *Muhammad at Mecca*, *Muhammad at Medina*, and *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, Watt contributed significantly to reshaping Western academic perceptions of Islam. Similarly, his recognition of the sincerity, leadership, and transformative role of Prophet

⁵⁹ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*.

⁶⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁶¹ Yasmeen Sagheer and Khan, "Montgomery Watt's Opinion about Islamic Approach towards Understanding of Religions," *Malakand University Research Journal of Islamic Studies* 4, no. 2 (2022): 1–14; Razali et al., 2017

⁶² Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time*.

⁶³ Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*

⁶⁴ Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought*

⁶⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 272–301.

⁶⁶ Wan Mohd Fazrul Azdi Wan Razali, Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor Abd Rahman, and Jaffary Awang, "Watt's View on Muslim Heritage in the Study of Other Religions: A Critical Analysis," *Al-Itqan: Journal of Islamic Sciences and Comparative Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 1–18.



Muhammad ﷺ marked a notable departure from many earlier Orientalist depictions that relied heavily upon suspicion and reductionism⁶⁷.

However, despite these positive contributions, Watt's methodology remained deeply influenced by Western historical-critical traditions and secular academic assumptions. His interpretation of revelation and prophetic consciousness through psychological and socio-historical frameworks created substantial disagreement with traditional Islamic perspectives. Muslim scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, and Fazlur Rahman critically responded to these interpretations by emphasizing the transcendent, divine, and metaphysical nature of revelation within Islam⁶⁸. From their perspective, revelation cannot be fully understood through historical or sociological analysis alone because it belongs to a sacred epistemological framework that transcends material explanation.

The analysis conducted in this study demonstrates that Watt's scholarship contains both strengths and limitations. On one hand, he played an important role in encouraging a more balanced and academically serious engagement with Islam in Western universities. On the other hand, his reliance upon Orientalist methodological frameworks restricted his ability to fully appreciate the theological and spiritual dimensions of Islamic revelation and prophethood⁶⁹. Consequently, his work reflects both intellectual openness and methodological constraints simultaneously.

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of approaching Orientalist scholarship with critical balance rather than absolute acceptance or total rejection. Watt's writings continue to remain influential in contemporary Islamic studies because they provide valuable historical analysis and stimulate important scholarly discussions regarding methodology, revelation, and historiography⁷⁰. At the same time, the critiques offered by Muslim scholars demonstrate the necessity of evaluating Western academic interpretations within the broader context of Islamic intellectual traditions and epistemology.

In conclusion, William Montgomery Watt may be regarded as one of the most influential and comparatively moderate Orientalist scholars of modern Islamic studies. His scholarship contributed significantly to Western academic understanding of Islam, yet it also reflects the continuing limitations of secular historical criticism when applied to sacred religious phenomena. Therefore, a balanced engagement with Watt's work remains essential for contemporary researchers seeking to understand both the development of Orientalist studies and the ongoing dialogue between Western academic thought and Islamic intellectual tradition.

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⁶⁷ Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* (London: HarperPress, 2006); John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁶⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981); Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1977); Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

⁶⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

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