

BETWEEN MECCAN ORIGINS AND MEDINAN EXPANSION:
A Diachronic Reading of Secondary Embedding in
Qs. al-Muddaththir [74]: 31

Muhammad Tajuddin
Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar, Indonesia
E-mail: muhammad.tajuddin@uin-alauddin.ac.id

Muh. Awaluddin A
Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar, Indonesia
E-mail: muh.awaluddin1203@gmail.com

Bambang Sampurno
Universitas Muslim Indonesia Makassar, Indonesia
E-mail: bambang.sampurno@umi.ac.id

Basyir Arif
Université Ez-Zitouna, Tunisia
E-mail: arifbasyir@isci.uez.tn

Corresponding Author: Muhammad Tajuddin

Article history: Received: September 15, 2025 | Revised: December 03, 2025 | Available Online: December 20, 2025.

How to cite this article: Tajuddin, Muhammad, Muh. Awaluddin A, Bambang Sampurno, and Basyir Arif. "Between Meccan Origins and Medinan Expansion: A Diachronic Reading of Secondary Embedding in Qs. al-Muddaththir [74]: 31". *Mutawatir: Jurnal Keilmuan Tafsir Hadith* 15, no. 2 (2025): 60-85. DOI: 10.15642/mutawatir.2025.15.2.60-85.

Abstract: This study examines the phenomenon of secondary embedding in the Qur'an, understood as the incorporation of Medinan material into surahs of Meccan provenance through a process of intra-textual development during the prophetic period. The case under consideration is Qs. al-Muddaththir [74]: 31, a verse whose exceptional length constitutes a marked statistical departure from the otherwise compact rhythmic pattern of the surah. Drawing on Nicolai Sinai's analytical framework and the principle of structural cohesion, this article argues that when the verse is analytically bracketed as a distinct literary layer, the thematic continuity of the surrounding passage remains intact, no discernible narrative gap emerges, and the surah's overall rhythmic and structural balance is preserved. It is further proposed that the motive underlying this embedding is responsive in character, the verse appears to address dialogical concerns arising from the early audience's engagement with the Qur'anic proclamation, while the phrase *fi qulubihim maraḍ* aligns

terminologically with vocabulary characteristic of the Medinan discursive context. This study contributes to the growing scholarly conversation on the dynamic textual development of the Qur'an, particularly as it pertains to surah structure and its relationship to the evolving social and theological horizons of the early Muslim community. It further offers a methodological contribution to the diachronic study of surah composition, demonstrating how structural and terminological analysis may illuminate the Qur'an's responsive engagement with its formative historical context.

Keywords: Secondary Embedding; Qs. al-Muddaththir [74]: 31; Diachronic Analysis; *Makki-Madani*; Nicolai Sinai.

Introduction

The discourse on secondary embedding in the Qur'an inevitably intersects with the broader field of critical scholarship on the text's historical formation. This field has long been marked by lively debate, as its methods and assumptions do not always align with the frameworks maintained within classical Islamic tradition.¹ Western scholarship, particularly in its historically oriented strands, has tended to situate the Qur'an within a wider network of late antique religious and literary cultures, rather than reading it solely as a sequential reflection of the Prophet Muhammad's biographical experience.²

Within this scholarly tradition, a range of theories has been proposed concerning the formation and development of the Qur'anic text. Günter Lüling, for instance, contends that significant portions of the Qur'an draw upon pre-Islamic Arab Christian hymnody, subsequently reworked through successive stages of Islamization.³ Hirschfeld, similarly, reads the *muqatta'at* letters not as symbols of divine mystery but as scribal markers indicative of an early compilation process.⁴ John Wansbrough takes a more radical position,

¹ Mun'im Sirry, "Introduction: Recent Trends in Qur'anic Studies," in *New Trends in Qur'anic Studies Text, Context, and Interpretation*, ed. Mun'im Sirry (Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2019), 4.

² Gabriel Said Reynolds, "Introduction: Qur'anic Studies and Its Controversies," in *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2008), 9. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203939604>.

³ Günter Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation: The Rediscovery and Reliable Reconstruction of A Comprehensive Pre-Islamic Christian Hymnal Hidden in The Koran Under Earliest Islamic Reinterpretation* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2003).

⁴ Hartwig Hirschfeld, *New Research Into The Composition And Exegesis of The Qur'an* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902), 141-148.

locating the canonization of the Qur'an as late as the eighth or ninth century and characterizing the early text as fluid and subject to ongoing revision. These positions, varied as they are, share a common impulse: to read the Qur'anic text as the product of a historically conditioned process rather than a singular revelatory event.⁵

Stephen Shoemaker and David Powers similarly engage with the possibility of post-prophetic textual development, though with greater attention to specific passages. Shoemaker identifies Qs. Āli 'Imrān [3]:144 as a potential later elaboration, reading it as a discursive response to the theological crisis precipitated by the Prophet's death.⁶ Powers, in turn, examines Qs. al-Aḥzāb [33]:40 as a passage whose present form may reflect the retrospective consolidation of the doctrine of Muhammad's finality as Prophet. Both scholars, while cautious in their conclusions, suggest that certain verses may bear traces of the community's efforts to negotiate the transition from the prophetic to the post-prophetic era.⁷

Other scholars have approached the question with greater caution, focusing not on wholesale revision but on the possibility that specific passages may reflect processes of clarification or contextual adaptation occurring during or shortly after the prophetic period. Without invoking the language of forgery or fabrication, scholars working within the tradition of redaction criticism have identified verses that appear to function as later elaborations, passages that expand, nuance, or recontextualize earlier material in response to new circumstances.⁸ Studies of Qs. al-Mu'minūn [23]:1–11 and Qs. al-Ma'ārij [70]:22–35, for instance, have noted textual parallels suggestive of a relationship between earlier and later formulations.⁹ Conversely,

⁵ Joshua Little, "On the Historicity of 'Uthmān's Canonization of the Qur'an, Part 1: The State of the Field," *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association*, 10 (2025): 102–172. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jiqsa-2025-0016>.

⁶ Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Death of A Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 178–188. <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812205138>.

⁷ David S. Powers, *Muhammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men The Making of the Last Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 68–71. <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812205572>.

⁸ Nicolai Sinai, "Toward a Redactional History of the Medinan Qur'an: A Case Study of Sūrat al-Nisā' (Q 4) and Sūrat al-Mā'idah (Q 5)," in *Structural Dividers in the Qur'an*, ed. Marianna Klar (London: Routledge, 2020), 365–402.

⁹ Guillaume Dye, "Ascetic and Nonascetic Layers in the Qur'an: A Case Study," *Numen* 66, 5–6 (2019): 580–597. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685276-12341555>.

analysis of Qs. al-Nāzi'āt [79]:33 has concluded that the verse is fully integrated into its surrounding structure, demonstrating that not every anomaly signals a secondary layer. The cumulative implication of such studies is that the Qur'anic text, in its final form, reflects a process of careful, purposeful composition rather than uniform, simultaneous revelation.¹⁰

It is at this juncture that the position of Nicolai Sinai becomes particularly significant. Unlike scholars who situate the refinement of the Qur'anic text in a period well removed from Muhammad's lifetime, Sinai grounds his analysis firmly within the prophetic period itself. He draws attention to the fact that classical Islamic scholarship has long acknowledged the presence of Medinan verses within Meccan surahs and vice versa, a recognition that implies, at least implicitly, that surahs were not always revealed as closed, self-contained units. In this sense, Sinai's work can be understood as both extending and refining the legacy of Nöldeke and Schwally, who regarded each surah as a compositional whole while remaining open to the possibility that individual verses or passages might represent later additions.¹¹

Sinai articulates two principal modes of what he terms inner-Qur'anic interpretation. The first, interpretative expansion, describes the incorporation of new material into an existing surah in order to explain, qualify, or supplement its message. Such passages tend to appear at structurally prominent positions, often near the close of a surah or following the conclusion of a narrative unit, and are frequently distinguishable by their greater length and their use of terminology more characteristic of the Medinan period. The second mode, interpretative backreferencing, involves the invocation within a given surah of themes, diction, or arguments drawn from earlier revelatory material, functioning as a form of intra-textual dialogue that assumes a community already familiar with prior passages. Together, these two modes reveal the Qur'an as a text in ongoing

¹⁰ Hamdi Putra Ahmad, "Thematic and Structural Unity of Q 79 (al-Nazi'at): An Intratextual and Intertextual Analysis," *QiST: Journal of Quran and Tafseer Studies* 4, no. 1 (2025): 41–58. <https://doi.org/10.23917/qist.v4i1.6698>.

¹¹ Nicolai Sinai, "Processes of Literary Growth and Editorial Expansion in Two Medinan Surahs", in *Islam and Its Past: Jabiliyah, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an*, eds. Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 72. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198748496.003.0002>.

conversation with itself, dynamic, responsive, and attentive to the needs of its evolving audience.¹²

The concept of secondary embedding, systematically developed by Sinai in *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, belongs broadly within the framework of interpretative expansion. It refers to the phenomenon in which short verses or verse groups of Medinan origin are incorporated into the compositional structure of Meccan surahs, serving to update, clarify, or theologically enrich the existing text in response to the community's changing circumstances.¹³ Crucially, for Sinai, this process occurred during the prophetic period itself, initiated by the Prophet and directed to the scribes of revelation, a position that sharply distinguishes his framework from those who attribute such developments to post-prophetic editorial activity.

Sinai's approach also differs methodologically from the classical *makki-madani* tradition in two important respects. First, whereas the classical tradition tends to treat revelations as discrete events anchored to specific occasions and explained through *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the secondary embedding framework understands each surah as a dynamic literary composition, one that was not revealed in its entirety at a single moment but rather developed gradually through the purposeful incorporation of new material in response to evolving communal and theological needs.¹⁴ Second, where the classical atomistic reading explains different verse-groups within a surah through separate chains of occasion, Sinai's approach insists on reading the surah as an integrated whole, in which the relationship between earlier and later layers is itself theologically and literarily meaningful.¹⁵ In this way, secondary embedding is not merely a historical hypothesis but a hermeneutical proposition: that the internal development of the Qur'anic text is itself a site of meaning.

¹² Nicolai Sinai, "Two Types of Inner-Qur'anic Interpretation," in *Exegetical Crossroads: Understanding Scripture in Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Pre-Modern Orient*, eds. Georges Tamer, Regina Grundmann, Assaad Elias Kattan, and Karl Pinggéra (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 253-288. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110564341-013>.

¹³ Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 94.

¹⁴ Hanifah Amini, Randy Putra Alamsyah, Dedi Masri, and Mariam Ahmed Zanan Alzahrani, "Rethinking the Qur'an's Literary Evolution: Nicolai Sinai's Approach to Inner-Qur'anic Chronology," *Mutawatir: Jurnal Keilmuan Tafsir Hadith* 14, no. 2 (2024): 368-391. <https://doi.org/10.15642/mutawatir.2024.14.2.368-391>.

¹⁵ Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 95.

A concrete illustration of this approach appears in Sinai's study of the Qur'an's dietary discourse across multiple surahs. He traces a diachronic progression from the relative openness of the early Meccan period to the more defined prohibitions of the Medinan phase, including those concerning carrion, blood, pork, and animals sacrificed to other than God. In Sinai's reading, these legal formulations, though embedded within Meccan contexts, reflect Medinan concerns about the demarcation of Muslim identity *vis-à-vis* Jewish and Christian dietary traditions. The dietary case thus exemplifies how secondary embedding functions not merely as a textual phenomenon but as evidence of the Qur'an's active engagement with the social and theological realities confronting the early Muslim community.¹⁶

The present article applies this framework to a new case, namely Qs. al-Muddaththir [74]: 31. This surah is generally classified as Meccan, yet verse 31 exhibits a degree of theological elaboration and polemical complexity that sits in notable tension with the compact, eschatological character of its surrounding verses. Its exceptional length alone, far exceeding any other verse in the surah, invites closer scrutiny. The guiding question is whether this verse constitutes an original element of the surah's early composition or whether it represents a form of secondary embedding: a Medinan elaboration grafted onto an earlier Meccan structure in response to the community's evolving interpretive needs. In pursuing this question, the study seeks to move beyond the descriptive categories of the classical *makkī-madani* tradition toward a more nuanced, text-immanent understanding of how the Qur'an developed, contributing, in turn, to the ongoing dialogue between the classical *ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān* and the methods of historical-critical inquiry.

Secondary Additions to the Qur'an: A Western Scholar's Perspective

The question of secondary additions to the Qur'an has emerged as one of the more contested areas within the broader field of historical-critical Qur'anic studies. To appreciate the significance of this debate, it is necessary first to trace the historiographical development of Western scholarship on the Qur'an, particularly its

¹⁶ Nicolai Sinai, "The Qur'an's Dietary Tetralogue: A Diachronic Reconstruction," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 46 (2019): 113–46.

engagement with the text's chronological and compositional dimensions.

1. The Historical-Critical Tradition: From Weil to Neuwirth

The historical approach to the study of the Qur'an has long been the predominant method in Western academic scholarship, both for tracing the text's origins and for understanding its development.¹⁷ For many scholars in this tradition, the historical-critical perspective is regarded as the defining hallmark of rigorous, academically grounded Qur'anic inquiry.¹⁸ The systematic, historically oriented study of the Qur'an can be traced to Gustav Weil, whose *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in den Koran* (1844) introduced a more rigorous framework for distinguishing between Meccan and Medinan surahs. Building on the classical Islamic classification, Weil further subdivided the Meccan period into three phases, early, middle, and late, on the basis of thematic, stylistic, and literary criteria, correlating these phases with the development of the Prophet's mission and the growth of the early Muslim community.¹⁹

This framework was significantly refined by Theodor Nöldeke in his monumental *Geschichte des Qurāns* (1860), which examined the Qur'anic text through careful analysis of its historical sources, thematic content, and stylistic features. Although subsequent scholarship has revised certain chronological details, Nöldeke's framework remains a foundational reference in the historical study of the Qur'an. Importantly, Nöldeke generally regarded each surah as a compositionally coherent and self-contained unit, allowing only limited exceptions to this principle.²⁰

Richard Bell subsequently challenged this view, arguing that the Qur'an's compositional integrity was less complete than Nöldeke had assumed. In Bell's reconstruction, the early Qur'anic material was preserved in scattered fragments across various media, palm leaves, stones, and human memory, and was only later assembled, possibly

¹⁷ Guillaume Dye, "Concepts and Methods in the Study of the Qur'ān," *Religions* 12, no. 8 (2021): 599, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080599>.

¹⁸ Andrew Rippin, "Academic Scholarship and The Qur'an," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, eds. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 31. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199698646.001.0001>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

without a fully systematic ordering.²¹ This fragmentation hypothesis, however, has found diminishing support in recent scholarship, as the growing consensus has moved toward affirming the structural unity of individual surahs.

The most sustained argument for this structural unity has been advanced by Angelika Neuwirth. Beginning with her landmark 1981 study, she demonstrates that the Meccan surahs exhibit a coherent and carefully ordered architecture, discernible in patterns of rhyme, verse arrangement, paragraph division, and semantic interrelation between sections. For Neuwirth, the Qur'an is not a collection of disparate fragments subsequently compiled, but a text whose formal unity reflects the conditions of its gradual development. She further characterizes this development as a process of '*canonization from below*', a formation that unfolded organically alongside the life and needs of the early Muslim community, rather than being imposed retrospectively by later authorities. Within this framework, the various parts of the Qur'anic text are understood as engaged in a continuous process of internal cross-reference, re-explanation, and elaboration.²² The Qur'an, in Neuwirth's reading, is a text that remained attentive and responsive to the evolving social and religious circumstances of its original audience.

2. Radical Revisionism: Wansbrough, Lüling, and Hirschfeld

Not all scholars have been persuaded by arguments for the Qur'an's early coherence and compositional unity. John Wansbrough mounted a sustained critique of the historical-critical tradition, arguing that literary features such as verse length and stylistic variation cannot reliably serve as indices of chronological development, that literary form does not automatically correspond to historical sequence.²³ For Wansbrough, the Qur'an's themes and style point to a formation process far more extended than traditional accounts, Islamic or Western, have allowed. He located the canonization of the

²¹ Mahmoud Ibrahim Rezk Elnemr, "The Ideology and Translations of the Quran by the Orientalists: A Comparative Study of Richard Bells Translation," *Global Journal of Human-Social Science Research*, 20.20 (2020), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.34257/gjhssavol20is20pg1>.

²² Muhammad Fajri, "Pemikiran Al-Qur'an Angelika Neuwirth dalam Structure and The Emergence of Community," *Al-Wajid: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Quran dan Tafsir*, 4.1 (2023), 61-73. <https://doi.org/10.30863/alwajid.v4i1.5697>.

²³ Rippin, "Academic Scholarship and The Qur'an," 32-33.

Qur'an not in the early seventh-century Hijaz but in the Abbasid Iraq of the eighth or ninth century, suggesting that the text achieved its canonical status only when the Muslim community required a stable textual foundation for worship and law.²⁴ While this position has not gained broad acceptance, it has compelled subsequent scholars to interrogate more carefully the assumptions underlying both literary and historical reconstructions of the Qur'anic text.

Günter Lüling advanced an equally provocative thesis, arguing that the Qur'an cannot be understood solely through the lens of Prophetic biography or later Islamic tradition. In his view, significant portions of the Qur'anic text bear traces of pre-Islamic Arab Christian hymnody, subsequently reworked through successive stages of Islamization. Lüling emphasized the poetic and liturgical dimensions of the Qur'anic text, reading many passages as reflecting a religious background older and more complex than is usually assumed. He further contended that the early transmission of the Qur'an, prior to the Uthmanic codification, was particularly susceptible to variant readings, given that early manuscripts consisted solely of a consonantal skeleton (*rasm*) open to multiple vocalizations. On this basis, Lüling proposed that beneath the present canonical text lies an earlier stratum of material closely related to the Jewish-Christian religious culture of Late Antiquity, a stratum that was gradually transformed into the Qur'an as it is known today.²⁵

Hirschfeld, approaching the question from a different angle, proposed that the *muqatta'at* letters found at the opening of numerous surahs are not symbols of divine mystery but rather scribal abbreviations marking the provenance of source materials used in the Qur'an's compilation. In his reading, such figures as *ṭā-bā* represent the initials of individuals whose personal collections of revelatory material were drawn upon during the compilation process. The *muqatta'at*, on this account, are not an original feature of the revealed text but traces of the editorial history through which the Qur'an took its present form.²⁶

²⁴ Little, "On the Historicity of 'Uthmān's Canonization of the Qur'an," 102–172.

²⁵ Holger Zellentin, "Q 96 Sūrat Al-'Alaq Between Philology and Polemics: A (Very) Critical Assessment of Günter Lüling's Ur-Qur'an," In *Die Koranhermeneutik von Günter Lüling*, edited by Georges Tamer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 159-86. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110599176-010>.

²⁶ Ibid.

3. Moderate Positions: Shoemaker and Powers

Between the structural unitarianism of Neuwirth and the radical revisionism of Wansbrough and Lüling, a group of scholars has advanced targeted hypotheses about the possible post-prophetic elaboration of specific passages. These scholars neither dismiss the early formation of the Qur'an nor attribute its entire development to later communities; rather, they examine whether particular verses may reflect the discursive needs of the community in the immediate aftermath of the prophetic period.

Stephen Shoemaker identifies Qs. Āli 'Imrān [3]:144 as a passage whose present form may reflect the theological crisis precipitated by the Prophet's death. Given that the early Muslim community appears to have operated within an intense eschatological framework, anticipating the imminent arrival of the Day of Judgment, Muhammad's death carried the potential for serious doctrinal disruption.²⁷ Shoemaker reads this verse as a discursive response to that disruption, functioning to affirm that Muhammad, like the prophets before him, was subject to death. This reading is lent further weight by Ibn Ishāq's account suggesting that the community was not widely familiar with the verse until Abū Bakr recited it at the moment of the Prophet's passing, a detail that raises questions about the verse's integration into the Qur'anic corpus from the outset, and points to a possible historical inconsistency between the verse's apparent importance and the community's apparent unfamiliarity with it.²⁸

David Powers similarly examines Qs. al-Aḥzāb [33]:36-40, particularly verse 40, in relation to the consolidation of the doctrine of Muhammad's finality as Prophet. Powers argues that the narrative concerning Zayd, Zaynab, and the Prophet's marriage functions not merely as historical reportage but as a theologically motivated construction, serving to sever the perceived father-son relationship between Muhammad and Zayd and thereby clearing the doctrinal ground for the affirmation that Muhammad died without an adult

²⁷ Jay Rubenstein, "The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam by Stephen J. Shoemaker (Review)," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 28, no. 2 (2020): 335–337. <https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2020.0018>.

²⁸ Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Death of A Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 178-188. <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812205138>.

male heir.²⁹ The retrospective tone of verse 40, which speaks of Muhammad as definitively “not the father of any of your men”, strikes Powers as inconsistent with a text revealed in the fifth year of the Hijra, when the possibility of Muhammad fathering a son remained open. He therefore concludes that this passage most plausibly reflects a later consolidation, designed to lend revelatory authority to a doctrine the post-prophetic community urgently required.³⁰

4. Sinai’s Mediating Position

It is against this varied scholarly backdrop that Nicolai Sinai’s position acquires its particular significance. Sinai neither endorses the radical revisionism of Wansbrough or Lüling nor entirely dismisses the possibility of limited post-prophetic elaboration. His most important contribution lies in his insistence that the phenomenon of intra-textual development, the incorporation of new material into existing surahs, need not be attributed to a period after the Prophet’s death. Sinai argues, rather, that this process was an integral feature of the Qur’an’s formation during the prophetic period itself, finding implicit acknowledgment in the classical Islamic tradition’s long-standing recognition of Medinan verses within Meccan surahs and vice versa.

Sinai does allow, in a limited number of cases, for the possibility of very early post-prophetic additions. His reading of Qs. Āli ‘Imrān [3]:7, for instance, suggests that this verse, with its unusual acknowledgment of ambiguity within the Qur’anic text and its instruction to the community to refrain from pursuing obscure passages, may reflect the situation of a community no longer able to resolve textual uncertainties through ongoing revelation. The terminological distinctiveness of the verse and the relative ease with which the sequence of verses 7–9 reads as a separable unit lend some support to this conjecture.³¹ Nevertheless, Sinai treats such cases as exceptional rather than paradigmatic. His broader framework locates the dynamic development of the Qur’anic text firmly within the

²⁹ Leor Halevi, “David S. Powers. Muhammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet. (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion.)”, *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 1 (2011), 246–247. <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.116.1.246-a>.

³⁰ Powers, *Muhammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*, 68-71.

³¹ Sinai, *The Qur’an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 52-54.

prophetic period, positioning secondary embedding as a feature of the Qur'an's own internal history rather than as evidence of later community intervention. This framework, and its systematic application to Qs. al-Muddaththir [74]: 31, will be examined in the following section.

Nicolai Sinai and Secondary Embedding in the Qur'an

Nicolai Sinai is a German scholar of Islamic studies, currently serving as a professor and Fellow of Pembroke College, Oxford. He has been a member of the editorial committee of the *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association* since its third edition, and obtained his doctorate from the Free University of Berlin in 2007 before taking up his position at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. Sinai is also among the founding researchers of the *Corpus Coranicum* project, established together with Angelika Neuwirth and Michael Marx.³²

Among his most methodologically significant contributions is *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, a work that adopts a historical-critical approach combining literary analysis with historical contextualization. The study explores the internal structure of individual surahs, the chronological development of Qur'anic revelation from the eschatological concerns of the Meccan period to the legal and communal emphases of the Medinan phase, and the relationship between the Qur'anic text and the broader biblical and late antique traditions within which it emerged. Originally conceived as an English translation of a shorter German introduction, the work was entirely rewritten by Sinai, who felt that four decades of Qur'anic studies had been marked by a persistent lack of consensus on fundamental historiographical questions. He sought to bridge the bifurcation between literary and intertextual approaches, treating them as complementary rather than competing orientations.³³ The work is designed to serve both specialist researchers and Muslim readers seeking to understand how their scripture is engaged by contemporary Western scholarship.³⁴

³² Anis Tilawati, 'Struktur Cincin Dalam Al-Qur'an (Perspektif Orientalis-Nicolai Sinai)', *Journal Nun*, 4.2 (2018), 51–77. <https://doi.org/10.32495/nun.v4i2.67>.

³³ Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-5.

Sinai's broader intellectual framework departs from the premise that the Qur'an is best understood not as a static text delivered in its final form at a single moment, but as a dynamic canonical process, a text that developed historically through successive stages of revelation, compilation, and internal updating during the prophetic period.³⁵ Two conceptual pillars sustain this framework: the literary integrity of the surah as a compositional unit, and the mechanism of secondary embedding through which that composition could be expanded and refined. Together, they demonstrate that the interpretive history of the Qur'an did not begin with the formal tradition of *tafsir* in later centuries, but within the text itself.

In this respect, Sinai aligns himself with Angelika Neuwirth against the atomistic reading associated with Richard Bell. Where Bell viewed the surahs as assemblages of irregular fragments, Sinai affirms that each surah constitutes a compositional unit with discernible literary integrity. Many Meccan surahs, he observes, display a relatively consistent tripartite structure: an opening section in the form of a hymn or polemic, a narrative middle section drawing primarily on prophetic stories, and a closing section reaffirming the authority of revelation. In the early phase, surahs functioned as liturgical units recited in their entirety within a single worship session. The Medinan surahs, by contrast, developed into longer, more complex compilations less strictly bound by this tripartite pattern, often assembling multiple verse-groups addressing diverse themes.³⁶

It is within this framework that Sinai formulates the theory of secondary embedding. The theory describes the expansion of an existing surah's composition through the incorporation of short verses or verse-groups, in which the newly added material serves to interpret, modify, or harmonize with statements already present in the text.³⁷ This process implies that during the prophetic period, the Qur'an functioned as an open canon: its verses continued to circulate within the community's liturgical practice while being periodically updated to remain responsive to evolving historical circumstances and doctrinal developments.³⁸

³⁵ Nicolai Sinai, *Fortscheibung Und Auslegung: Studien Zur Frutben Koraninterpretation* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009), 63.

³⁶ Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 87.

³⁷ Sinai, *Fortscheibung Und Auslegung*, 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

Sinai's most extended illustration of this method concerns Qs. al-Ṣaffāt [37], particularly verse 102. The surrounding narrative traces the arc of Prophet Ibrāhīm's prayer for a righteous child (verses 99–100), the announcement that the prayer has been answered (verse 101), and the subsequent scene of the intended sacrifice (verses 103–105). Within this sequence, verse 102, which memorializes the dialogue between Ibrāhīm and his son, in which the son freely consents to being sacrificed, stands out by virtue of its exceptional length, making it the longest verse in the surah.³⁹ In Sinai's analysis, when this verse is provisionally bracketed as an analytical thought-experiment, the surrounding narrative retains its internal coherence without any discernible rupture. The identifiable rationale for its incorporation is equally significant: the verse functions to preserve the moral integrity of Ibrāhīm by establishing that his son had been duly consulted and had freely consented, thereby preempting the charge that Ibrāhīm had acted upon a child incapable of informed assent.⁴⁰

Sinai further observes that verse 103, which attributes the act of surrender (*aslama*) jointly to Ibrāhīm and his son, sits in some tension with verses 104–105, which praise Ibrāhīm alone for fulfilling God's command. This asymmetry raises the possibility that verse 103 originally referred only to Ibrāhīm's act, and that the son's participation was introduced through a minor later revision, a revision consonant with the embedding of verse 102, since the dual form *aslama* in reference to Ibrāhīm is a terminological feature more characteristic of the Medinan period.⁴¹ On this basis, Sinai reconstructs what he proposes as the earlier form of Qs. al-Ṣaffāt [37]: 101-105, comprising only the following:

فَبَشِّرْهُ بِعَلْمٍ حَلِيمٍ وَتَلَّهُ لِلْجَبِينِ وَنَادَيْتُهُ أَنْ يَا بُرْهِيمُ ۖ قَدْ صَدَّقْتَ الرُّؤْيَا إِنَّا كَذَلِكَ
نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنِينَ

“So We gave him the good news of a forbearing son. And when he had laid him face down, We called out to him: ‘O Abraham, you have fulfilled the vision!’ Thus do We recompense those who do good.”⁴²

³⁹ Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 94.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

From this analysis, Sinai derives four methodological steps for detecting secondary embedding. The first and most foundational is literary removability, understood not as a textual operation but as an analytical thought-experiment in which the reader provisionally brackets a verse from its surrounding context to test whether the remaining sequence sustains its internal logic and thematic continuity. Should the discourse cohere without rupture, the bracketed verse may be considered a candidate for secondary embedding. Sinai further stresses that such embeddings were introduced by the Prophet Muhammad himself, who directed the scribes of revelation to incorporate the newly received passages into surahs already in circulation,⁴³ a position that explicitly distances his framework from that of scholars such as Friedrich Pohlmann, who attribute such expansions to post-prophetic redactors of Jewish or Christian background.⁴⁴

The second step involves the analysis of verse length. Sinai employs statistical indicators of average verse length as a diagnostic for secondary embedding: a verse that departs significantly from the length pattern of its surah warrants closer scrutiny as a potential later addition.⁴⁵ The third step requires the identification of terminological shifts, specifically, the presence within an otherwise early Meccan surah of vocabulary more characteristic of the Medinan period, which may signal the later provenance of a given verse or passage.⁴⁶ The fourth step concerns the identification of the motive or occasion underlying the embedding: a compelling hypothesis must account for *why* the passage was incorporated, whether to clarify an ambiguity, respond to an audience question, update a doctrinal position, or address a new social or theological circumstance.⁴⁷

Taken together, these four steps constitute a methodological approach that enables the diachronic analysis of surah composition from within the Qur'anic text itself, rather than relying exclusively on external accounts of the occasions of revelation. Sinai's contribution has significantly enriched the study of the Meccan and Medinan tradition, offering researchers more precise analytical instruments for tracing the dynamic relationship between the Qur'an's early Meccan

⁴³ Sinai, "Two Types of Inner-Qur'anic Interpretation," 264.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁴⁵ Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 94.

⁴⁶ Sinai, "Two Types of Inner-Qur'anic Interpretation," 254.

⁴⁷ Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 96-97.

core and its subsequent Medinan elaborations. While his conclusions remain hypothetical in character, they are grounded in systematic textual evidence and represent a serious engagement with the literary and historical dimensions of the Qur'anic text.

Secondary Embedding in Qs. al-Muddaththir [74]: 31: A Medinan verse in a Meccan Surah

The classical discipline of *Ulūm al-Qur'ān* has long acknowledged that the designation of a surah as *Makkīyah* or *Madanīyah* does not necessarily extend to every verse it contains. Abū Syahbah, in his *Al-Madkhal li al-Dirāsah al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, identifies four categories within this classification: surahs whose verses are entirely Meccan; surahs whose verses are entirely Medinan; Meccan surahs containing Medinan verses; and Medinan surahs containing Meccan verses.⁴⁸ This fourfold typology implies that the internal composition of a given surah may be more layered than its overall classification suggests, a premise that provides the classical foundation for the present inquiry into Qs. al-Muddaththir [74].

Qs. al-Muddaththir [74] is generally classified as Meccan, comprising fifty-six verses. A number of scholars, however, have noted that verse 31 stands apart from this characterization, regarding it as Medinan in provenance. The surah as a whole offers guidance to the Prophet Muḥammad in his preaching, issues a warning against a prominent figure among the disbelievers, and elaborates upon the nature of Hell and its inhabitants. It bears a thematic kinship with Qs. al-Muzzammil [73], with the latter addressing the Prophet's spiritual preparation and the former delineating the principles that would sustain the success of his mission.⁴⁹

1. The Structure of Qs. al-Muddaththir [74]

Following Neuwrith's analytical framework, Qs. al-Muddaththir [74] may be divided into three broad structural sections,⁵⁰ as summarised in Table 1 below:

⁴⁸ Abū Shahbah, *Al-Madkhal li al-Dirāsah al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1992), 201.

⁴⁹ Muḥammad Mahmūd al-Ḥijāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Wad'iyy*, Vol. III (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl al-Jadīd, 1993), 773.

⁵⁰ Angelika Neuwrith, *The Qur'an Text and Commentary: Early Meccan Suras Poetic Prophecy* (London: Yale University Press), 254.
<https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300232332.001.0001>.

Table 1: Division of Qs. al-Muddaththir [74] According to Neuwirth

Exhortation to askesis	Polemic against the ungrateful, punishment	Eschatological, revelation problematic
1-2: Exhortation to vigils	11: Injunction to leave the opponents over to God	32-34: Oath by moon, night, morning
3-5: Order to produce ritual and moral purity	12-14: Divine show of favor to a rich man	35-37: Oath pronouncement about the nature and role of hell (<i>sagar</i>)
6-7: Exhortation to patience	15-16: His ingratitude	38: Self-responsibility of man
8-10: Eschatological scenery and process	17: Threat of punishment	39-42: Teichoscopy of the inhabitants of paradise, question about the damned
	18-23: Description of his reaction to the proclamation	43-47: Vice catalogue in flash-back: neglect of prayer, of care for the poor, frivolity, failure to believe in the afterlife
	24-25: His disparagement of the proclamation as human speech	48: Hopelessness of their condition
	26: Threat of punishment: saqar ("hell heat")	49-51: Rejection of the proclamation by anonymous opponents
	27-30: Teaching question about saqar, description	52-53: Longing of the opponents for scriptural evidence with simultaneous rejection of the resurrection
	30-31: The keeping watch over it by nineteen angels and explanation on the nineteen angels	54-55: Positive confirmation of the proclamation
		56: Later restriction

Neuwirth's verse-by-verse analysis illuminates the surah's literary architecture with considerable precision. Verses 1–3 constitute a call to the recipient of revelation, described as one wrapped in his garment, to undertake a night vigil, a motif that resonates with Psalms 119:55a and 119:62a.⁵¹ Verses 4–5 introduce ritual and ethical instructions, with the term *rujz*, readable as an Aramaic loanword from *ruḡzā*, carrying connotations of both impurity and divine wrath. Verse 6 corrects the transactional mentality prevalent in pre-Islamic Arab social relations, paralleling Psalm 119: 36. Verse 7 is a call to patience; verses 8–10 evoke the eschatological rupture of the Day of Judgment; and verse 11 recalls the solitary origins of the human individual, stripped of the tribal affiliations that confer social prestige.

Verses 12–15 catalog the material blessings, sons, wealth, and social standing that the recipient of divine favor has received yet failed to acknowledge. Verses 16–17 signal the consequences of this ingratitude. Verses 18–25 trace the psychological arc of rejection among the privileged listeners: from calculated distancing and expressive body language to explicit dismissal, framed by two accusations, that the message lacks novelty and that the messenger lacks distinction.⁵² Verses 26–9 introduce *sagar* through a rhetorical question, followed by a vivid description of its consuming character, culminating in a deliberate play on the word *basbar*, used earlier in a social sense and now redeployed to evoke the scorched skin of the damned. Verse 30 introduces the figure of nineteen guardian angels, a detail without direct parallel in canonical tradition and one that, by virtue of its deliberate placement in a rhyming position, appears designed to provoke reflection, or, as Neuwirth notes, to elicit precisely the kind of critical questioning that verse 31 subsequently addresses.⁵³

Verses 32–34 invoke the transitional moments between night and day. Verses 35–37 return to *Sagar*, with the phrase *naẓīran li al-bashar* reactivating the earlier wordplay in response to the accusation that the proclamation is merely human speech. Verse 38 introduces an economic metaphor of moral accountability; verses 40–42 stage a theoscopic dialogue between the inhabitants of paradise and the condemned; and verses 43–47 catalog the failings of the disbelievers.

⁵¹ Ibid., 255.

⁵² Ibid., 256.

⁵³ Ibid., 257.

Verse 48 affirms the impossibility of escaping divine decree. Verses 49–51 rebuke the resistance of the listeners, verse 52 records the demand for tangible proof, and verses 53–55 close with a characteristic eschatological warning. The surah concludes in verse 56 with a formula that introduces a note of qualified resignation.⁵⁴

2. Applying Sinai's Four Steps to Qs. al-Muddaththir [74]: 31

This study applies Sinai's four analytical steps to examine the hypothesis that verse 31 of Qs. al-Muddaththir [74] constitutes a secondary embedding, a Medinan passage incorporated into the structure of an otherwise Meccan surah.

The first and foundational step is to test whether the passage in question can be provisionally bracketed, treated as a separable literary layer, without disrupting the logical and thematic continuity of the surrounding text. When verse 31 is set aside as an analytical move, the sequence of verses 27–30 and 32 onward retains a clear thematic arc: the rhetorical question concerning *Saqar* (verse 27), its description as all-consuming (verse 28), its searing of human skin (verse 29), the mention of the nineteen angels (verse 30), and the subsequent affirmation that *Saqar* serves as a warning to humankind. The resulting sequence reads as follows:

وَمَا أَذْرَاكَ مَا سَقَرٌ لَا تُبْقِي وَلَا تَذَرُ لَوَاحِةٌ لِلْبَشَرِ عَلَيْهَا تِسْعَةَ عَشَرَ وَمَا هِيَ إِلَّا
ذِكْرٌ لِلْبَشَرِ

“Do you know what *Saqar* is? It leaves nothing and spares nothing. It scorches human skin. Over it is nineteen. It is nothing but a warning to humankind.”

This sequence preserves a coherent rhetorical movement, introduction, description, and eschatological affirmation, without any perceptible lacuna. The textual continuity that persists when verse 31 is read as a separable unit lends weight to the hypothesis that it constitutes a secondary layer: one that amplifies and contextualizes the surrounding discourse rather than forming part of its original rhetorical core.

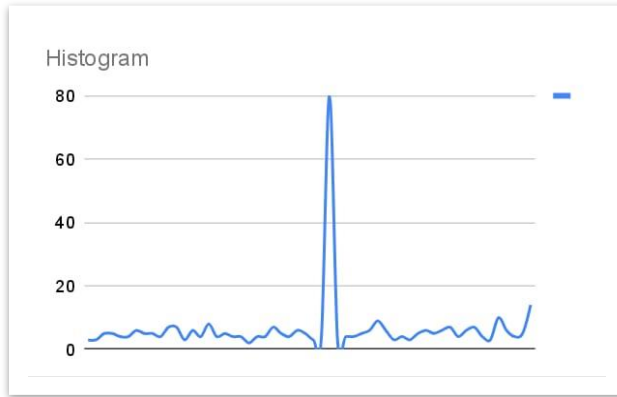
The second step employs statistical indicators of verse length as a diagnostic for secondary embedding.⁵⁵ A systematic count of the words in each verse of Qs. al-Muddaththir [74] reveals that verse 31

⁵⁴ Ibid., 259-260.

⁵⁵ Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 94.

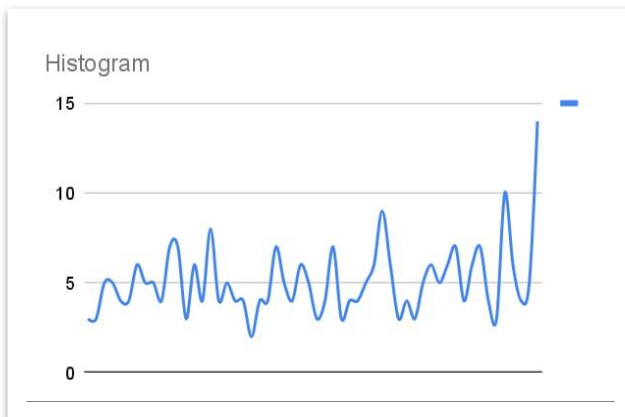
contains approximately eighty words, a figure that constitutes a marked statistical departure from the surah's prevailing pattern, in which no other verse approaches twenty words. This distribution is represented in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Word Count per Verse in Qs. al-Muddaththir [74]



When verse 31 is provisionally excluded from the statistical computation, the average word count across the remaining verses falls consistently below twenty, yielding the more uniform distribution shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Distribution of Word Counts in Qs. al-Muddaththir [74] with the Hypothesized Embedded Segment Analytically Excluded



The exceptional length of verse 31 relative to its textual environment constitutes a significant structural signal, one consistent with what Sinai identifies as a characteristic feature of secondary embedding.

The third step examines whether the vocabulary of the verse in question reflects a later, Medinan register despite its location within a Meccan surah.⁵⁶ In Nöldeke's analysis, verse 31 exhibits precisely this terminological profile: it categorizes its audience into four distinct social and theological groups, the People of the Book (*ūtu al-kitāb*), the believers (*al-mu'minūn*), those in whose hearts is disease (*fī qulūbihim maraḍ*), and the disbelievers (*al-kāfirūn*). This fourfold social taxonomy is characteristic of the Medinan period, when the Muslim community found itself navigating a complex pluralistic environment. Nöldeke further suggests that the verse reflects an early Medinan phase, when the Prophet's relationship with the Jewish community remained relatively open and conciliatory.⁵⁷

The term *fī qulūbihim maraḍ* is particularly significant in this regard. A survey of its occurrences across the Qur'anic corpus reveals that it appears almost exclusively in Medinan surahs, making its presence in Qs. al-Muddaththir [74]: 31, a Meccan surah, a terminological anomaly that warrants explanation.

The fourth step seeks to identify the occasion or rationale that would account for the verse's incorporation into its present context.⁵⁸ Neuwrith observes that verse 31 functions as an apologetic elaboration, most plausibly occasioned by the mockery of certain listeners in Medina who were familiar with speculative traditions concerning angels. The verse addresses this mockery by reframing the question of the angels' number as a theologically layered matter, one that serves simultaneously to unsettle the sceptics, reinforce the People of the Book in their recognition of the signs, and deepen the faith of the believers.⁵⁹

This reading is further enriched by Veronika Roth's intertextual dimension. The depiction of the angels in verse 31 as *junūdu rabbik*, the hosts of your Lord, resonates with comparable formulations in

⁵⁶ Sinai, "Two Types of Inner-Qur'anic Interpretation," 254.

⁵⁷ Theodor Nöldeke, Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträßer, Otto Pretzl, *The History of the Qur'an*, ed. trans. Wolfgang H. Behn (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2013), 73.

⁵⁸ Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 96-97.

⁵⁹ Neuwrith, *The Qur'an Text and Commentary*, 257.

the biblical tradition: Psalm 148:2 (“Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts”), Matthew 26:53, and Luke 2:13.⁶⁰ The verse thus operates within a discourse horizon already familiar to the People of the Book. Its function is not merely defensive but hermeneutical: it reinterprets the mention of the nineteen angels within a broader theological language intelligible to communities beyond the immediate Meccan audience. The emergence of this more explicit, argumentative, and theologically resonant formulation is precisely what one would expect from a community increasingly engaged in substantive dialogue with *Ahl al-Kitāb*, a dynamic characteristic of the Medinan phase.

Conclusion

An analysis of Qs. al-Muddaththir [74]: 31, conducted within the heuristic framework of literary-historical inquiry, suggests that this verse exhibits several indicators consistent with a Medinan provenance subsequently incorporated into a surah generally classified as Meccan. This observation is advanced strictly as an analytical proposition and carries no implication regarding the integrity of the Qur’anic text as preserved in the *mushaf* ‘Uthmānī.

In terms of content, the verse reflects a distinctly Medinan discursive environment, one in which debates concerning angels, challenges from theological opponents, and the social stratification of the community into Muslims, Jews, hypocrites, and disbelievers had become defining features of religious life. This configuration is more characteristic of the Medinan period, as Nöldeke among others has noted. The occurrence of the phrase *fi qulūbihim maraḍ*, a terminological marker that appears almost exclusively in Medinan surahs, lends further weight to this reading.

The question of how such a verse may have come to occupy its present position within a Meccan surah finds a plausible, if necessarily hypothetical, framework in scholarship on Qur’anic composition regarding the integration of Medinan material into earlier Meccan structures. Such integration may have occurred through marginal annotations subsequently incorporated into the main text by scribes, or through the Prophet’s recitation of a surah in Medina,

⁶⁰ Veronika Roth, ‘1 Kings 22:19 - TUK_1088’, in *Exts from the World of the Qur’an* (Berlin: Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities). <https://corpuscoranicum.de/en/verse-navigator/sura/74/verse/31/intertexts/1088>.

accompanied by clarifications later understood as constitutive of the revelation itself. In the case of Qs. al-Muddaththir [74], the community's sustained inquiry into the theological significance of the nineteen guardian angels may plausibly have occasioned the articulation of verse 31 as a responsive and interpretive elaboration.

The study's broader contribution lies in its application of structural and terminological analysis as complementary instruments for tracing the diachronic layering of the Qur'anic text. By engaging Sinai's framework of secondary embedding alongside the classical *Makki-Madani* tradition, this research proposes a methodologically refined approach to reading passages of potentially distinct provenance, one that deepens our understanding of how the Qur'an engaged, from within its own textual history, with the evolving social and theological horizons of its early community.

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