
This volume is a collection of papers presented at a colloquium on the biography of the Prophet (peace be on him) held at the University of Nijmegen in October 1997. The first five papers make up Part I, “The Development of the *Sira* Tradition”, and the second five make up Part II, “The Historical Reliability of Biographical Source Material”.

Part I begins with Uri Rubin’s “The Life of Muhammad and the Islamic Self-Image”. Rubin’s thirteen-page article is focused on two councils of war: one on the eve of Badr when the Companions pledged that they would go wherever the Prophet (peace be on him) would lead them, and another at al-Hudaybiya when he was stopped from doing ‘umrah and he consulted the Companions whether they ought to force their way through to Mecca or do something else. Some reports of each incident mention that a Companion said that they would not say as the Banū Isrā‘il had said to their Prophet, “Go you with your Lord and fight, we are going to remain sitting here” (Qurʾān 5: 24); rather they would fight with him. In some *ahādīth*, the Companion who says this is an Ansārī and in others it is a Muhājīr” (pp. 11-15). Rubin arranges these versions in a way that suggests that the earlier versions of this text were edited so that the credit for making such a speech shifted from the Muhājīrūn to the Ansār (pp. 11-15). Later, as the Arabs rose above this division, the emphasis shifted to the contrast between the Banū Isrā‘il and the Arabs so that the entire *umrah* came to be the new chosen community (pp. 15-16).

Marco Schöller in his “*Sira* and *Tafsīr*: Muhammad al-Kalbī on the Jews of Medina” collects the *tafsīr* reports traced to al-Kalbī which pertain to the major stages of the Prophet’s conflict with the Jews in Medina. Schöller compares these reports with the statements in the Qurʾān that are usually interpreted as dealing with these conflicts, and places them in a certain sequence. In this sequence, Kalbī’s reports are the earliest, while a second group (from Zuhri and Mūsā b. ‘Uqbah) are a little more refined, while the final, finished version has the history of the conflict as Ibn Isḥāq presents it (pp. 33).

Schöller continues by looking at Kalbī’s statements about the division of lands or revenues received from the Jews and compares them with the legal rulings in early *fiqh* sources. He feels that two of Kalbī’s peculiar statements preserve details of specific circumstances which got lost later under the pressures of the needs of legal reasoning. He feels that a third statement
peculiar to Kalbī’s reports is a Sunnī claim interpolated into his work by one of the compilers of his work in order to protect him from accusations of being sympathetic to the Shiʿīs (pp. 40).

Schöller concludes that the need to spell out the legal implications of the events of the Prophet’s life places less of a burden on the Tafsīr tradition, and more on the Sīrah and Maghāzī traditions. Because of this, the Tafsīr tradition preserves much of the ancient material that had to be edited in the Sīrah and Maghāzī accounts (pp. 42).

Adrien Leites, in “Sīra and the Question of Tradition”, compares the Sunnī reports (pp. 55 ff.) that tie the expulsion of evil spirits (with the use of shooting stars) from the heavens with the beginning of revelation, whereas the Shiʿī reports (pp. 58 ff.) associate this expulsion with the birth of the Prophet (peace be on him). Leites feels that while the Orientalists focus on the transmission of reports and texts, they should also look at the meaning of these texts. He contrasts the concept of a functional Prophet (whose becoming the recipient of revelation ushers in a new order in the world) with that of an ontological Prophet (whose very birth in this world ushers in a new order) (pp. 54-55). The early Sunnī sources place the shooting stars tradition at the time of the first revelation, then one late (3rd century report) places it at the time of the birth of the Prophet (pp. 57), and then only in the time of Ibn Ḥajar (al-Haytamī, d. 974) do we see this tradition linked to the birth of the Prophet (pp. 58). Shiʿī reports all place this tradition at the birth of the Prophet (pp. 58 ff.). So, apparently initially the Sunnī tradition saw the Prophet (peace be on him) as a functional Prophet, only to have the view of an ontological Prophet surface in the third century. Then the view of the functional Prophet gained ascendance until the time of Ibn Ḥajar, when the view of an ontological Prophet won over the Sunnī scholars (pp. 63-64).

In “Mūsā b ‘Uqba’s Maghāzī”, Gregor Schoeler reviews the results Sachau and Schacht derived from their study of the nineteen aḥādīth of the Maghāzī. While more recent research tends to indicate that perhaps Schacht’s entire thesis stands refuted, certainly the comments of these two early scholars regarding the aḥādīth of this fragment need to be re-examined. Parallel versions of the reports that Schacht and Sachau seem not to have considered in their examination make it clear that many of their conclusions were tentative and hasty, even unwarranted.

In “Sirat Ahl al-Kisā: Early Shiʿī Sources on the Biography of the Prophet”, Maher Jarrar tries to provide a sound basis for the study of the Prophet’s biography among the Shiʿītes. Abān b. Uthmān al-Aḥmar seems to be the most “historical” of the many disciples of Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq. Abān also was the author of the first work on the life and campaigns of the Prophet (peace be
on him). By gathering together reports attributed to Abān in later works, Jarrar constructs a “corpus” for him. Then he studies the chains of narration and the tendencies of these reports.

Part II, “The Historical Reliability of Biographical Source Material”, begins with Michael Lecker’s nine-page article, “Did the Quraysh Conclude a Treaty with the Anṣār Prior to the Hijra?” Lecker finds three reports in works of the 10th/16th century that can be seen as alluding to a treaty between the Quraysh and the Medinans at Minā when the Medinans were giving allegiance to the Prophet (at bay’at al-‘Aqabah). Lecker says that these reports were suppressed in the mainstream literature since it preferred the vision of a suffering Prophet instead of one who was willing to make political compromises.

In “The Murder of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq: On the Origin and Reliability of Some Maghāzī-Reports”, Harald Motzki studies the aḥādīth that describe a small group of Companions who went to murder a Jewish leader inside his fortress. He organizes four groups of these aḥādīth by their chains of narration. Similarities and differences in the way events appear in various reports suggest that this hadīth is a report about an actual incident and was transmitted over the centuries more or less as eyewitnesses reported it. Motzki’s thesis is that this type of attention to both the text and how it correlates to the transmission history of the text (as documented in its isnād) can lead to sound conclusions about the origins of these reports. He writes: “...it is obvious that the biographies of the Prophet written by Western do not give a historically reliable picture of his life. Their eclectic use of the sources...prevents it...[Western “lives of the Prophet”] are nothing more than arbitrary summaries of the Muslim tradition on their Prophet” (pp. 232-233). Only by means of hundreds of source critical studies on every aspect of the Prophet’s life would we have a critical ground for accepting or rejecting the reports out of which one would piece together a historically reliable picture of the life of the Prophet.

Andreas Görke in “The Historical Tradition about al-Hudaybiya: A Study of ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr’s Account” has applied the same kind of analysis to the group of aḥādīth about al-Hudaybiya that come to us through ‘Urwa b. Zubayr. As Motzki has done, Görke arranges the aḥādīth of ‘Urwa by narrators and is able to come to some sound conclusions about the origins of various differences in the accounts of various narrators. In the end, he speculates about the historical reliability of ‘Urwa’s description of what happened at al-Hudaybiya. One would have wanted Görke to continue with an analysis of other narrators before such speculation: but one could also see this article as a prelude to a full study.
Robert Hoyland (“The Earliest Christian Writings on Muḥammad: An Appraisal”) surveys the descriptions of the Prophet (peace be on him) in the early Christian sources. Hoyland feels that these descriptions are valuable because they are precisely datable while Muslim sources are not since the Muslim view of the Prophet (peace be on him) underwent major changes in the first two centuries. In addition, Christian sources fill in gaps in our knowledge where Muslim sources have suppressed information or just ignored it because of lack of interest.

Finally, Andrew Rippin’s “Muḥammad in the Qurʾān: Reading Scripture in the 21st Century”, is a reminder that texts do not gain meaning until they are read. Thus, argues Rippin, it is not correct to argue for the “historicity” of the Prophet (peace be on him) from the words of the Qurʾān. A certain view of the Prophet (peace be on him) and his life has created readings of the Qurʾān that support that same view of the Prophet and his life.

The import of Rippin’s article is that reading a text gives it meaning, and that cut off from the context texts can mean anything. It is surprising that in a field so rife with speculation on method, Rippin should have to remind his audience of this. We who are not native speakers of the English language experience this often: not having the appropriate background, when we read Shakespeare’s works we wonder why this confused and confusing text is great literature! However, I am disturbed by the casual way in which Rippin would dismiss the way in which people have traditionally characterized the Qurʾānic discourse when he says that it is “of no significance in my view” (pp. 307). Surely, Rippin does not believe in a realm where significance is independent of people’s perceptions and characterizations?

This incomplete implementation of critical insight (that stops short of self-criticism) is most apparent in Rubin’s article “The Life of Muḥammad . . .” (pp. 3–17). Rubin speaks of the function of the “eye of the beholder” in what is beheld, but is unaware of his own eye. Banū Isrāʾīl have a complex role in the Qurʾān and Hadith: they are the chosen people, many of whom were very good and many, one might say, were quite bad. Now that the Muslim ummah has assumed the duty to communicate God’s Word, the story of Banū Isrāʾīl is a reminder to them to do what the good ones among them did and not to do what their evil ones did. The focus of the narrative is the Muslim ummah and the mention of the Jewish nation is in order to describe the Muslim ummah and not in order to malign the Jewish nation. The issue of fakhr over the Jews might have been important in Mecca and Medina during the life of the Prophet (peace be on him), but I cannot imagine that anyone would argue that fakhr over them remained important. To study the ahādīth of councils of war
(“ṣhūrā”) with nationalism in mind only makes sense because of Rubin’s own sitz-im-leben!

In terms of method, Schöller continues in Rubin’s style: gathers together a number of reports, organizes them in view of “what we know” about the history of Islam in the first few centuries, then weaves a story about the development of these reports that will reassure us in these preconceptions. Lecker’s article, (the opening article in the second section), is an extreme example of this. Three reports of the tenth century can be read in a way that suggests that there was a treaty between the Quraysh and the Medinans before the hajrah. The fact that there is no mention of this anywhere in the tradition is sufficient evidence that these reports must be correct! The tradition has suppressed these reports because “it” preferred a view of a suffering Prophet and not one who used political compromise to further his ends.

What tradition is Lecker speaking of? Have Muslim scholars “suppressed” reports about strategies to which the Prophet (peace be on him) resorted to win over the Meccans—from using the non-Muslim ‘Abbās’ strength and connections and Abū Bakr’s knowledge of genealogies in his early da’wah, to entering Mecca on his return from Ṭā’if in the protection of an idolater, to the “Constitution of Medina”? And if, along with the Orientalists, we doubt that these reports have anything to do with reality it is even more significant that they were not suppressed.

Leites says that his article distinguishing between the “ontological prophet” and the “functional prophet” which presupposes a comprehensive discussion that he has done in his dissertation (pp. 62). What he has written seems a strained effort to import a method that may or may not be appropriate to his material. But since I am not familiar with his dissertation so I am must suspend my judgment.

When there is a common culture of knowledge, variety of methods can be a sign of innovation and new avenues opening up. But not having read the sources can also be the source for such variety. Schöller’s article on Mūsā b. ‘Uqba’s Maghāzi clearly demonstrates that the “innovative” (indeed, at that time, “revolutionary”) readings of Schacht and Sachau were cases of not having read the sources, combined with an unwillingness to listen to those who had read them—that is, to “the tradition”. For, although one may say that Ibn Ḥajar and al-Dhahabī conceal things and distort them and while one is exclusively devoted to the truth as such, one cannot say that they have not read the sources.

Viewed in this background, Hoyland’s survey of the picture of the Prophet (peace be on him) in early Christian sources would be useful as a supplement to detailed knowledge of the Islamic tradition, but certainly not as
a replacement for it. Maher Jarrar’s attempt to piece together the corpus of Aban b. ‘Uthmân al-Ahmâr is a valiant attempt to chart out new territory where, to the best of my knowledge, there is an empty spot in the work of traditional Shi‘ite scholars.

By far the two most important articles in this collection, and the ones that have the most substance, are Motzki’s article on the Murder of Ibn Abî l-Huqayq (often referred to as “Abû Râfî’” in the sources), and that of Görke on “The Historical Traditions about al-Ḥudaybiya” (pp. 240 ff). Both authors organize the texts about the incident they are studying by their isnâds. In this way, they are able to identify groups of reports. Each such group of reports has its peculiarities that are common to all the reports within the group. Then, within the group, each report is different from the other. Looking at all these reports without reference to their isnâds (as is the common practice among the Orientalists), one would naturally conclude that the evidence of the ahâdîth on this topic is hopelessly confused. Again, were one to dispense with the isnâd, one could reconstruct any “history” of the text that pleased one’s fancy. With the isnâds in front of the researcher, at least we can separate the differences in the reports introduced by the transmission of the text from the differences we would want to attribute to partisan politics, suppression, dogma, and the like.

I cannot understand how any scholar working with “the sources” can justify simply ignoring the many versions of every hadîth and the information encoded in the isnâd of each hadîth. There is much discussion of applying insights of Biblical criticism to the study of hadîth. But consider someone theorizing on a passage from Luke, while ignoring a parallel passage in, say, Paul. Is this not gross negligence?

Ahmad Hasan


The book under review is purportedly written about the history of Jordon during the fateful years of 1939 to 1947. At least, this is what the title suggests. After glancing through it, one may say that the volume is a compendium of letters of the ex-King Abdullah [‘Abd Allâh] of Jordan, interspersed with, and