Book Reviews


Biographies of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) in Urdu are almost countless, but correspondingly few have been written in English by Muslim scholars. Of the scholars whose works are available in English the following merit special mention: Syed Ameer Ali, Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar, Khalifah A. Hakim, Abdul Hameed Siddiqi, G. M. Jalbani, Muhammad Hamidullah, (and quite recently) Tarik Jan. The English translations of the works of Maulānā Shibili Nu’mānī, Muhammad Husayn Haykal and Fakir S. Waheeduddin are also available and deserve mention.

Writing the Prophet Muhammad’s biography is a delicate and stupendous undertaking. It requires outstanding qualities of head and heart. Dr Alavi is uniquely fortunate in so far as he has displayed some of those qualities and has richly contributed to *Sirah* in both Urdu and English.

The book under review represents hard work on the author’s part spanning one year and a half. The author had already written a book in Urdu on *Sirah* before writing the present one in English. The present book, however, is not a translation of his earlier book in Urdu, namely *Insān-i Kāmil* (“The Perfect Man”).

Dr S. M. Zaman (Chairman, Council of Islamic Ideology Pakistan) has characterised this book in his “Foreword” as a “medium sized, authentic and well documented account of the life of the Prophet (Ṣallā Allāh ‘alayh wa sallām) for the benefit of English readers” (p. xvii). The Prophet’s career, again to quote him, “has been given in a simple and racy style without looking for ornate expressions” (p. xix). “The size of the book and its style are both calculated to suit the needs and limitations of the lay reader, but equally a

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serious student would find much that he would expect to see in a medium sized authentic account of Prophet’s life” (p. xix).

The book, which is spread over 308 pages and comprises nine chapters, portrays the life and times of the Prophet (peace be on him) generally in a chronological order, commencing from the Arabian background (discussed in chap. 1). This is followed by “Early Life” (chap. 2), “The Call” (chap. 3), Arrival in Madinah (chap. 4), Armed Conflicts and other Events (chap. 5), Path to Victory after Hudaibiyah (chap. 6), Dissemination of the Message of Islam after the Expeditions of Khaybar, Makkah and Tabūk (chap. 7), The Consolidation of Muslim Power (chap. 8). As for chapter 9, it deals with the conclusion of the Prophet’s mission with the Farewell Pilgrimage and the last days of his illness until his return to the mercy of the Lord.

The book concludes with a short description of the Prophet’s succession by Abū Bakr brought about by the near unanimous choice by the Muslim community followed by a brief mention of the burial and lastly the decision regarding the Prophet’s inheritance.

On the whole, this book contains a simple account of the life of the Holy Prophet. Perhaps, on that account, most of the events of the Prophet’s life and achievements are narrated in a plain, simple manner without going into details or trying to induct fresh insight or new facts. It may be noted that this “simplicity” has been maintained throughout the book to such an extent that on the one hand it reminds the similarity of its contents with different noteworthy works of the past (for instance, the Sirat al-Nabī of Mawlānā Shibli Nu‘mānī). On the other hand, it becomes indistinguishable from several other works on the subject since it has hardly anything insightful to add to our knowledge. Consequently, the narration seems more or less formal and conventional rather than original and critical. For example, ‘Amr ibn Luḥayy is described by the author (without quoting any authority), as the inventor of idolatry in the whole of the Arabian peninsula (p. 11). This, in my view, is questionable. No doubt, this story is found in the famous classical work of Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833), al-Sirāh al-Nabawīyyah;2 and has also been mentioned by Mawlānā Shibli Nu‘mānī (d. 1332/1914) in his Sirat al-Nabī.3 This implies that idol worship was not in practice before ‘Amr ibn Luḥayy who is stated to be a contemporary of Kinānah ibn Khuzāmah. This means that ‘Amr lived approximately during 250–273 CE as ascertained by Mawlānā Sayyid Sulaymān Nadvī (d. 1373/1953) in his Arḍ al-Qur‘ān.4 But the theory

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seems flawed when we find idol worship persistently present along with the worship of sun, moon and stars long time ago even in the times of the some of the oldest peoples known to have lived in Arabia. These were 'Arab B ā'idah ('Ad, Thamūd, etc.) during 2000 BC–1700 BC, ‘Arab ‘Arībah (Qaṭṭān, Hīmyar, Kahlān, etc.) during 1500–525 CE, and ‘Arab Musta’ribah. Thus idolatry was in vogue much before ‘Amr ibn Luḥayy, except that he might have been the first to have put idols in the Ka'bah itself. Moreover, the learned author provides the readers a list of “Arab tribes and their idol gods in pre-Islamic Arabia” (p. 11) which is also found in Shibil i’s Sirat al-Nabī.7

The date of birth of the Prophet (peace be on him) also deserves to be considered with care. The author, in dealing with the Prophet’s early life, has mentioned, the date of birth precisely as 20th April 571 corresponding to 9th Rabi’ al-Awwal (p. 22), the same as given by Shibil.8

It is true that there are differences about the exact date of birth of the Prophet (peace be on him). This is evident from the varying opinions expressed by different scholars of sirab. To mention just a few, Watt mentions the date as 570 CE, G. Sarwar as 22 April, 571 CE, Jālbanī as 570 CE, Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq Ibrāhīm ‘Uṭān as 11 August, 570 CE, M. Raza as 28 April, 570 CE, Ibn Hīshām as 12 Rabi’ al-Awwal, Ibn Khaldūn as 12 Rabi’ al-Awwal, Ṭabarī as 12 Rabi’ al-Awwal, Ibn al-Jawzī as 10 Rabi’ al-Awwal.

In some recent studies made by some Orientalist as well as Muslim scholars like Dr Muhammad Hamidullah (d. 2002), Kārūm Shāh al-Azharī (d. 1998) and Maulānā ‘Abd al-Qudūd Hāshimī (d. 1989), have asserted in favour of 12th Rabi’ al-Awwal, Dr Hamidullah9 has preferred the corresponding date of birth of the Prophet (peace be on him) to be June 17, 569 CE, whereas Hāshimī has determined that it corresponds to December 9, 569 CE, 53 years before Hijrah.10 In a way this can be worked out by simple calculation. The Prophet (peace be on him) passed away in 632 CE at the age of 63. Thus 632 minus 63 equals 569 CE corresponding to 12th Rabi’ al-Awwal (of the Makkāni calendar). Besides calculations, this date is also in conformity with the general opinion obtaining among the Muslims.

5 See, Ibid., 2: 130–189, etc.
7 Maulānā Shibli Nu’mān, Sirat al-Nabī, 1: 131.
8 See, Ibid., 1: 176.
It is worth mentioning that due to some typographical or composing mistakes, the date of the Prophet’s demise as mentioned in this book is “18 June, 632 CE” (p. 295) which is obviously an error. This may be verified with the date of his burial, which is stated by its author himself as “10th June 632 CE, two days after his death” (p. 305). Dr Hamidullah has calculated the Prophet’s death to have taken place on 25th May 632 CE.

The incident of Shi’b Abī Ṭalib, a great historic event of the Makkan period of the Prophet’s life, is unfortunately described by the biographers mostly without any consideration of its actual location and the nature of the concerned Qurayshites’ accord.\textsuperscript{11} That is why generally the Shi’b is erroneously visualized to be situated somewhere outside Makkah. Astonishingly, not only the earlier but also modern writers, for instance, Mr Tarik Jan,\textsuperscript{12} convey the same impression by mentioning its location “in a mountain defile”….. “in wilderness”.\textsuperscript{13} The same impression is conveyed by the photograph under the caption “Some place in this cruel topography was located Shi’b Abī Ṭalib”.\textsuperscript{14} Fakir Syed Waheed-ud-Din in his book \textit{The Benefactor} writes about the Prophet’s followers that they “were forced to leave the town and find shelter in a nearby valley called Shi’b Abī Ṭalib”.\textsuperscript{15}

The description of Shi’b Abī Ṭalib in Dr Alavi’s book is too brief to enable one to locate its site, “... a gorge called Shi’b Abī Ṭalib” (p. 47). However, the uncertainty about the actual location of the Shi’b (“somewhere in the desert, and outside Makkah”) perhaps led the author to conclude that during their confinement in Shi’b Abī Ṭalib the Hashimites had been confined to some “prison” from where they were released after three years. Thus writes Dr Alavi: “... a few days after release from the prison of Shi’b Abī Ṭalib” (p. 48). Thus it was considered to be something like an oppressive jail and hence the statement that they were “liberated from oppression” (p. 47). This would suggest that it was a place where they had remained under siege or detention.

As a matter of fact, Shi’b Abī Ṭalib was a place very near to the Haram. It was the residential area of Banū Hashim outside the Ka’bah, a defile or gorge of the mountain of Abū Qubays in the north-east direction of the Haram. This locality can be recognised even today: it is adjacent to the birth place of the Prophet (peace be on him). It is in the vicinity of, and contiguous to, Shi’b

\textsuperscript{11} Boycott resolution of Quraysh drafted by Mansur b. ‘Ikramah against Banū Hashim.
\textsuperscript{12} The author of \textit{The Life and Times of Muhammad Rasul Allah} (Islamabad: IPS, 1998).
\textsuperscript{13} See, Ibid., 181.
\textsuperscript{14} See, Ibid., 182.
‘Alí and Shi‘b ‘Āmir facing the gates of Mas‘ā, Bāb al-Nabī, Bāb al-Salām and Bāb ‘Ali, etc, bordering Šāfā and Marwah. The above site can also be verified from the photograph taken during the visit of Saudi Arabia by Maulānā Mawdūdī in 1959.\textsuperscript{16} The present reviewer has had the pleasure of visiting the site several times, especially during the Ḥajj season of 2002.

As far as the nature of the incident of Shi‘b Abī Ṭālib is concerned, Dr Alavi is correct in saying that it was actually a socio-economic boycott of Banū Ḥashim (and Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib) (p. 46) as per the terms of the Qurayshites’ resolution. This was meant for an indefinite period or till the time the parent clan handed over the Prophet (peace be on him) to them for execution. This was a diabolical scheme conceived by the enemies of the Prophet (peace be on him) to put a halt on the growth of Islam. They wished to isolate Banū Ḥāshim from the rest of the Quraysh so that the former could be singled out for hostile action.\textsuperscript{17} 

As far as the character, quality and nature of the Charter (\textit{Mithāq}) of Madīnah is concerned, the author expresses the following view in regard to the three Jewish tribes of that city: “...judging them to be a menace, the Prophet (SAW) entered into a pact with them” (p. 83). It is difficult to agree with this evaluation. As a matter of fact this was neither a pact, nor an agreement, nor a treaty with the Jews. It was a charter proclaimed by the Prophet (peace be on him) which he issued of his own accord as the ruler of the city state of Madīnah in 1 \textit{AH} and Dr Hamidullah has rightly called it the “First Written Constitution of the World.”\textsuperscript{18} 

The author has also deviated from the traditional point of view at a few places, for example, in dealing with the “Armed Conflicts” in chapter 5 of the book in determining the sequence, description, and the time of occurrence of some military campaigns and expeditions such as the campaigns of Banū Qaynuqā’, Banū Naḍīr, and Dawmat al-Jandal. About the Battle of Uḥud the author has written in greater detail than other military encounters. But the result of the battle at which he has arrived is surprising in view of the phrase: “the defeat of Muslims at Uḥud,” which has been mentioned more than once


\textsuperscript{17} For a detailed discussion of the subject see the reviewer’s article, “Shi‘b Abī Ṭālib”, in \textit{Nuqūsh: Rasūl Nambar} (Lahore: Idārah Farōgh-i Urdu, 1984), 9: 260–268.

\textsuperscript{18} SAW stands for \textit{Ṣallā Allāh ‘Alayh wa Sallam}; the author mentions this invocation in Arabic, each time after the mention of Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him). Ed.

In fact the Muslims did not suffer any defeat at U’bud. The Makkans were not only defeated twice (before and after Khālid’s attack from the rear) on 7th Shawwāl 3/22 March 625, but the next day (8th Shawwāl/23rd March) the Prophet (peace be on him) was able to lead a campaign to Ḥamra‘ al-Asad in pursuit of the Makkans.

The author has described the incident of “Qirṭās” during the last days of the Prophet’s life unnecessarily. He has quoted it on the authority of Bukhārī with the note that “this hadith [ṣaḥīḥ] has provoked a good deal of controversy among Muslims” (p. 287).

The author, under the heading “Nomination of Successor” (p. 298) has narrated the incident of Thaqīfah Banū Sā’īdah” and the news that the Anṣār had assembled in the courtyard even before the burial proceedings. He has also written that “on the insistence of ‘Umar (RA)” Abū Bakr (RA) agreed to go and meet the Anṣār” (p. 298). On that occasion and during the whole episode of Thaqīfah Banū Sā’īdah, it is noteworthy that the name of a great Companion, Abū ‘Ubaydah, has not been mentioned at all. This is astonishing because Abū ‘Ubaydah was among the three most prominent figures — the other two being Abū Bakr and ‘Umar — who handled the whole situation wisely and ensured a peaceful transfer of political authority at this critical juncture of history.

In the end, it would be pertinent to mention that in spite of the fact that the book contains some points on which I do not agree with the author, it is nevertheless an important and useful book. It is a welcome addition to the sīraḥ literature in English.

Dr Alavi is to be congratulated for devoting his expertise as a seasoned scholar and biographer to this work, thus rendering a valuable service to the cause of Sīraḥ-writing in English.

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19 Dr Alavi has not used this term, but generally among the historian it is known as the incidence of Qirṭās. Shibili’s work has also described the same details and contains the same discussion as found in Dr Alavi’s book. See Shibili Nu’mānī, Sirat al-Nabi, 2: 164, 173. This can also be seen in the English tr. of Shibili’s book by Mr Sibtain Ahmad, Allamah Sibli’s Sirat-un-Nabi (Karachi: Jamiyat-ul-Falah, 1971), 2: 150–151. This may also be verified from Shāh Mu’īn al-Dīn Ahmad Nadvi, Tārikh-i Islām (Azamgarh: Dār al-Muṣannifin, 1370/1951), 1: 113.

* RA stands for Rādī Allāh ‘Anhu [May Allah be pleased with him]; the author mentions this invocation after the mention of the name of any of the companions of the prophet.