
The volumes under review have been published by the Centre for Muslim Contribution to Civilization which was established under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani [Shaykh Ḥamad ibn Khalīfah Āl-Thānī], the Amīr of Qatar. The main objective of the Centre, as the name itself indicates, was to bring out the contributions of Islam to human civilization during the annals of its history. In order to achieve this objective the Centre embarked on a gigantic project of translating into English a wide range of works representing Islamic civilization in all its diversity and making them available under “The Great Books of Islamic Civilization Series.” The Centre works under a board of trustees chaired by His Excellency Sheikh Muhammad bin Hamad al-Thani [Shaykh Muḥammad ibn Ḥamad Āl-Thānī], the former Minister of Education of Qatar. The board itself comprises among others of such luminaries as Dr Abul-Wafa al-Taftazani [Abū ‘l-Wafā’ al-Taftāzānī], Deputy Rector of Cairo University and Dr Yusuf al-Qaradhawī [Yūsuf al-Qaṣrādāwī] of the University of Qatar. Those interested in knowing about the Centre or the series in detail will find sufficient information in the beginning of all the volumes.

The main translator of all the volumes of this work is an eminent scholar of Arabic, Trevor Gassick, Professor of Arabic Literature at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA. Each of the four translated volumes was reviewed by an Arab scholar. Thus the first volume was reviewed by Dr Ahmad Fareed while the rest of the volumes were reviewed by Dr Muneer Fareed. Professor Gassick’s “Preface” to volume 1 is repeated verbatim in the rest of the 3 volumes while Ahmad Fareed’s “Introduction” to the volume 1 is also repeated verbatim in volume 2 but under the name of Muneer Fareed, the reviewer of volumes 2–4. Muneer Fareed’s “Introduction” to the volume 3 is then repeated verbatim in the volume 4. The present reviewer feels that despite certain similarities, each volume should have had its own introduction as the subject of each volume varies.

Translation from one language into another is not an easy task. One has to know both the languages very well. The reviewer is impressed by the quality of translation of all the volumes. However, there are some though very
few problems, which the reviewer came across here and there. These have been pointed out elsewhere in the review.

These four volumes under the title, “The Life of the Prophet Muhammad,” have been extracted from the well-known original work in Arabic, *Al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah* by Abū al-Fidā‘ī Ismā‘il ibn ‘Umar Ibn Kathīr (700–774/1300–1374), the best known historian and traditionist of Syria during the reign of the Bahri Mamlūk dynasty. *Al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah* is by far the most monumental historical work of Ibn Kathīr which was published in 1932 in 14 volumes from Cairo. *Al-Bidayah* begins with the pre-Islamic period and then goes on to the life of the Prophet (sallallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam) followed by the subsequent history of the caliphate and finally ends with the history of Damascus. Ibn Kathīr’s commentary of the Qur’an is an equally well-known work and is quite popular among the scholars of the Qur’an. Ibn Kathīr has referred in his *Al-Bidayah* (vol. 11, p. 24) to his own commentary on the *Sahih* of Imām Muḥammad b. Ismā‘il al-Bukhāri (d. 256/870) which was later taken up by Ibn al-Hajjār al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1449). In *al-Bidayah* Ibn Kathīr has relied heavily on the works of the well-known historian and jurist, Muḥammad b. Jarīr aka Ibn Jarīr al-‘Aṣqalānī (d. 310/923), Aḥmad b. Muhammad ibn ‘Asākir (d. 600/1203), ‘Izz al-Dīn ‘Alī b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233), and Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), among others.

A celebrated scholar of Islam from the South Asian subcontinent, Shiblī al-Nu‘mānī (d. 1332/1914), had the honour of introducing the *Sīrah* as a distinct discipline. He initiated the project of writing an encyclopaedic work on the life of the Prophet (sallallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam) in Urdu but unfortunately the work entitled, *Sirat al-Nabī*, could not be completed in his lifetime. This work was then completed later in 7 volumes by al-Nu‘mānī’s most renowned and illustrious disciple, Sayyid Sulaymān Nadvī (d. 1373/1953). Both al-Nu‘mānī and Sulaymān Nadvī employed modern techniques of analysis and research. Authors of the *Sīrah* and *Maghāzī* in the classical period such as Muḥammad b. Ishāq aka Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767), Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Waqqidi (d. 207/822), ‘Abd al-Malik b. Ḥishām aka Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833) and such renowned historians as Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Ibn al-Athīr and others were more concerned with recording and preserving the events as they occurred than with critically examining or analyzing them. The method usually employed by these authors was to collect the relevant reports along with their sources. As a result, they sometimes put together even conflicting reports on the same subject or event leaving the judgment to the readers. Although Ibn Kathīr occasionally provides some explanations and gives his own preference for accepting a certain report, he maintains, by and
large, the usual narrative character of his work. It is not fair and appropriate, then, for scholars of today to judge the works of the Muslim scholars of the classical period by the modern criteria of writing history. The only method and style that was then available to them was that of the Hadith scholars but the historians found it cumbersome and unattractive. A good example is that of the celebrated historian and sociologist, ‘Abd al-Rahmân b. Muhammad Ibn Khaldun (d. 808/1406) who, in his well known Muqaddimah, had laid down the criteria of historical criticism and had reproved other historians for not subjecting historical reports to careful examination. However, in his universal history, Kitâb al-‘Ibar, he himself did not follow the standard and principles he had expounded in the Muqaddimah. Ahmad Fareed, in his introduction to the first volume, criticizes Ibn Kathîr, saying that he “falls short of contemporary historiographical standards” (vol. 1, p. xviii). But is it fair to judge the book written in the 14th century CE by contemporary standards? Although the science of Hadith criticism invented by Hadith scholars was most modern according to the time they were living in, Muslim historians of the time found it too tedious to follow it. Historians of the time generally report about various events without critically examining them and the sources from which they drew these events and reports. That is why it is not good enough for a scholar of today simply to quote al-‘Tabari, al-Waqidi, or Ibn Kathîr. He has to employ the method of critically examining the sources in order to reach a reasonable conclusion.

The first volume, consisting of 395 pages, contains the history of the Arab tribes prior to the Prophet’s time, the lives of the Prophet’s parents, accounts of unusual events surrounding his birth, relevant anecdotes regarding his childhood, and ends with the first revelation (waḥya) (al-Qur’ân 96: 1–5). The second volume, comprising 393 pages gives the details of the Prophet’s early years after the investiture of Prophethood and includes such episodes as the night journey (al-‘Isrâ’), and ascent to Heaven (Mi’râj) and the migration (Hijrah) to Madinah. It also gives details of the two years following the Hijrah, including the construction of the Prophet’s mosque (al-Masjid al-Nabawî), and ends with the events related to the Battle of Badr and a list of names of the Companions present at Badr. The third volume, consisting of 532 pages, provides details of the numerous battles between 3–8/624–630, the Prophet’s letters to the various rulers and tribal chiefs, and the events leading to the conquest of Makkah in 8/630. The volume ends with the story of the acceptance of Islam by Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr, author of one of the seven odes, Sab’u Mu‘allaqât, Bânat Su‘âd. The fourth volume narrates events of 9–10/630–632 and provides variant accounts of the Farewell Pilgrimage (Ḥajjat al-Wâdâ’).
and of the events surrounding the demise of the Prophet (salla Allāh ‘alayh wa sallam).

Each volume has its own index of names. But the glossary given at the end of the first volume is repeated verbatim in the rest of the volumes. The reviewer feels that in the main text as well as in the footnotes the translator should have used the proper Arabic names instead of the Biblical version of those names which should have been given in brackets. This would have benefited both Muslim and non-Muslim readers. Muslim readers are more familiar with Arabic names such as Ibrāhīm, Ismā‘īl, Ištāq, Sulaymān, etc. Likewise, the translator has not used the more commonly used abbreviation, SAWS, for the phrase, salla Allāh ‘alayh wa sallam; instead, he has used in all the volumes his own version of the abbreviation, viz. SAAS, which is confusing at times because the last two letters, AS, refer usually to the other phrase, ‘alaby al-salām, which Muslims use for Prophets other than the Prophet Muḥammad (salla Allāh ‘alayh wa sallam). Similarly, the reviewer does not agree with the translator’s explanation that in order to “avoid confusion” the word Abū has been retained in all cases. (See the translator’s “Preface” in all the volumes. The same explanation is also repeated in the introductory remarks under glossary in all the volumes). To read Ibn Abū Ṭalib instead of Ibn Abī Ṭalib (genitive case) makes a bad reading and does not go well. All that was required was to explain in the “Introduction” the correct use of “Abū” and “Abi” just as the use of “b.” to denote Ibn and “bt” for Bint has been explained in the “Introduction.”

The reviewer also has some reservations about the translation of certain Arabic words. The following two examples will suffice as it is not possible to give a long list. The true sense of Khadijah’s (raḍiy Allāh ‘anāhā) consoling words to the Prophet (salla Allāh ‘alayh wa sallam) when he returned home from the cave of Ḥirā‘ after receiving the first revelation would have been conveyed more adequately by translating them “will never harm you or destroy you” instead of “abuse you” (vol. 1, p. 279). Similarly, to describe the temporary break or pause in the coming down of revelations (fatrat ‘l-wabī) after the first revelation (96: 1–5) the translator has used the expression that [revelation] “waned for a period.” The fact is that revelation was completely stopped for a short period described in the Ḥadīth and Sirāh literature as “fatrat ‘l-wabī” after which it began to arrive more or less intermittently.

The name, Fir‘awn, as it appears in the Qur‘ān (2: 49–50) and as it is written and commonly spelled has been spelled and transliterated as “Far‘ūn” (vol. 1, p. 5). However, we find no entry of “Far‘ūn” nor of “Fir‘awn” anywhere in the index. In connection with the Prophet’s (salla Allāh ‘alayh wa sallam) journey with Abū Ṭalib to Syria and his accidental meeting with the
Christian monk, Bahîrah, the town’s name has been spelled as “Basra” which is not correct (see vol. 1, pp. 100). At other places the same town has been correctly spelled as “Busra” (see vol. 1, pp. 175 and 194), a town situated at the southern frontier of Syria and to the north of Jordan.

Maryâ’s sister, Sirîn has been spelled wrongly as “Shîrin” (vol. iv, pp. 430 and 431). This name also does not appear in the index, neither under “Shîrin” nor under “Sirîn”. The name of the Queen of Sheba has been consistently mentioned as “Balqîs” (see: vol. 1, pp. 5, 6, 20 and 34). The commonly used spelling of this name in Islamic literature as well as in the Encyclopaedia of Islam is “Bilqîs,”1 rather than “Balqîs”. Furthermore, the translator, explaining the identity of Bilqîs, states as a fact that the Queen of Sheba “married King Solomon” (Sulaymân ‘alayh al-salâm) (see vol. 1, p. 5, n. 5). This is a Biblical story and a legend which found its way into Islamic literature under what is known as “Isrâ’iliyyât.” The story of Bilqîs’s marriage to Sulaymân (‘alayh al-salâm), like the marriage of Zulaykhâ to Joseph (Yûsuf, ‘alayh al-salâm), is a fiction rather than a historical fact. The translator questions the relevance of Ibn Kathîr’s mention of a separate study on the issue of the sale of slave mothers (who bore children to their masters) to the story of Maryâ (see vol. 4, p. 432, n. 175). The relevance of this matter seems to be that according to Islamic legal position in regard to such a slave mother who bears a child to her master will be automatically free (see vol. 4, p. 431) and would no longer be treated as a slave and, therefore, could not be sold. The issue in fact is not about the sale of the child born of this relationship since he will also be free. As there is a difference of opinion among the Muslim jurists in regard to certain aspects of this issue, Ibn Kathîr must have decided to devote a separate study to this matter.

The writer of this review found most problems in the glossary which should have been explained more carefully. In fact it needs to be revised and corrected before the publication of the second edition of this work. Another matter that needs to be pointed out is that explanations of quite a few Arabic words and legal terms do not reflect their correct understanding and meaning. The translator’s remarks under the title, “Glossary Items,” that “words defined in footnotes associated with the text are not generally included in this glossary” (vol. 1, p. 381). But if Arabic words and Islamic terminologies associated with the text are explained in footnotes and are included again in the “Glossary Items,” then the explanations given in footnotes should also have been repeated in order to avoid confusion. For instance, the explanation of the word Anšâr, given in vol. 1, p. 12, n. 8 is correct, but the explanation of the same word in the glossary (vol. 1, pp. 371–372) differs somewhat from it.

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and this is likely to confuse the readers. The correct method would have been to repeat in the glossary what had been stated in the footnotes. As the glossary in the first volume is repeated verbatim in the rest of the other volumes, the list below is given from the first volume:

1. *Afkhādh* (p. 371). No explanation is given here but an explanation appears under *Fakhādh* (sing. of *afkhādh*) on p. 372 but without any reference to *Afkhādh* on p. 371.

2. ‘Arafāt (p. 372). In order to have a full understanding the explanation should have included that spending the day of 9th Dhu ’l-Ḥijjah till sunset, or at least a part of that day, at the plain of ‘Arafāt (*Wuqūf al-‘Arafah*), by the pilgrims is an essential requisite of Ḥajj. The explanation given under “Ifāda” on p. 373 is also not satisfactory.

3. Bakkah (p. 372). Here a reference to the Qur’ānic verse 3: 96, should have been added to provide more clarity.

4. *Al-Fajr* (p. 373). It is amazing why the translator’s explanation was not corrected by Dr. Fareed, the reviewer of the first volume. In addition to the literal meaning of *al-Fajr*, a further explanation has been given as follows:

   “... also the superogatory prayer, recommended But Not Required, performed immediately after dawn...” (p. 372).

   It seems that the translator has confused this prayer with the pre-dawn prayer (*Ṣalāt al-Ṭabāṣṣājud*) which is not an obligatory prayer. But the prayer after dawnbreak but before sunrise (*ṣalāt al-Fajr*) is certainly an obligatory prayer and not a superogatory one.

5. *Ifāda*. There is a typographical error in the first line. After the word “departure,” should be read “of” and not “or” (p. 373).

6. *Iḥrām* (p. 373). The explanation should also have included the fact that the *Iḥrām* is donned by any one who performs major pilgrimage (*Ḥajj*) or minor pilgrimage (*‘Umrah*).

7. *Izār*. An open ended material (cloth) that covers a person from waist to just above the ankles but covering the knees and not up to knees as suggested by the translator (see p. 373). Similar type of *izārs*, known as sarong, are worn traditionally by Muslims in countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Bangladesh.

8. *Maqām Ibrāhīm* (p. 374). This is actually a stone upon which Ibrāhīm (peace be on him) used to stand while building the Ka’bah. It has been preserved in a case made of crystal and has been positioned a few feet away from the door of the Ka’bah. Pilgrims are required to pray in its vicinity as this was also a place where Ibrāhīm (‘*alayh al-salām*”) used to pray. Praying at this place has nothing to do whatsoever with Ibrāhīm’s (‘*alayh al-salām*”) “prayer during the summer months” as the translator has stated (p. 374). I do not know what is his source for this. For one would then wonder where did
9. *qibla* (p. 375) [*Qiblah*]. Here the words “of the Ka'bah” should have been added after “the direction” to make it clearer. The reference to the *Qibla* being changed from Jerusalem to Ka'bah in Makkah, mentions that it was “later changed by the Prophet Muhammad…” (p. 375). It was not the Prophet (peace be on him) who changed the *Qibla* on his own as he had no authority to do it. It was God who commanded him to change the *Qibla* towards the Ka'bah as mentioned in the Qur'anic verses, 2: 142–144. A reference should have been made to these verses in the explanation.

10. * сахиб* (pl. * сахаба*, * сахаби*) (p. 375). The explanation is not clear. It is not the question of “men who knew and supported” the Prophet (*salla Allāh ‘alayh wa sallam*) because the Prophet’s uncle, Abū Ṭalib, had known him and defended him in the early years in Makkah and yet he was not a * сахаби*. Like wise, there were hypocrites (*Munāfiqūn*) in Madinah who knew him and on occasions had even supported him and yet they were not called * сахаба*. Correct definition will be to say that any person who, in the state of *иман* (Faith), saw the Prophet (*salla Allāh ‘alayh wa sallam*) would be called, technically, a * сахаби* (companion). By the same token, a female companion is known as * сахабия*. As for the status of senior or junior * сахаби* or * сахабия*, it will depend on the length of time he or she might have spent in the company of the Prophet (*salla Allāh ‘alayh wa sallam*).

11. * Shahāda* (p. 376) [*Shahādah*]. The first half of the explanation beginning from “the profession of faith…” up to “in Arabic words…” (p. 378) is correct, but the translation of the Arabic phrase, *Lā Ilāh Illā Allāh Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh*, quoted in the explanation does not relate to affirmation of faith. *Shahādah*, in fact, is an act of affirmation of faith (*иман*) by reciting the Arabic words, “*Asbhadu An Lā Ilāh Illā Allāh Wa Asbhadu Anna Muḥammadan ‘Abduh Wa Rasīluh,*” the translation of which is “I bear witness that there is no other object of worship but Allah and I bear witness that Muhammad is His Servant and His Messenger.” The Arabic phrase of which the translator has given the translation in the explanation is popularly known as “*al-Kalimah al-Tayyibah*” (good word) which is recited to declare one’s faith while the *Shahādah* is an act of affirming the declared faith by reciting the “*Kalimat al-Shahādah*” quoted above. In fact, *Shahādah* is one of the five pillars of Islam.

12. *Tawāf*. The translator’s explanation that *Tawāf* is a “ritual circumambulation of a religious site, normally the Ka’bah” is not entirely correct. This term does not apply to a ritual circumambulation of just any religious site as is suggested by the translator. This term applies strictly to the circumambulation of the Ka’bah alone.
Errors and lack of clarity pointed out above may appear trivial and a matter of semantics at the first glance, but that is not so. Revision and correction should be carried out before a second edition is considered.

All this notwithstanding, the reviewer would like to express his admiration for the achievements of the translator as well as the reviewers of the volumes. They have done a superb job of translating an important text relating to *sirah* which is admittedly a tedious and toilsome task and demands expertise in both languages, English and Arabic. While serious scholars of Islam will still consult the work in its original Arabic, the value of this translated work lies in the fact that for the first time Ibn Kathîr’s original Arabic work has been made accessible to the general English readership, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. The Centre for Muslim Contribution to Civilization deserves our gratitude and congratulations for embarking successfully on this monumental project.

Syed Salman Nadvi


Both the Bible and the Qur’ân have narrated the event of Abraham [Ibrâhîm] offering his son for sacrifice to God. There are, however, several significant differences in the two narratives. While the Qur’ân does not mention the name of the son who was offered for sacrifice, the Bible claims that it was Isaac [Ishâq]. It has been the predominant view of the Muslim scholars that in fact it was Ishmael [Ismâ‘îl] who was offered for sacrifice and that the word “Isaac” was later interpolated in the original narrative of the Bible. The famous Indian scholar of the twentieth century, Ḥamîd al-Dîn al-Farâhî (d. 1349/1930), who was also the founder of a new school of *tafsîr*, wrote a valuable book on this issue entitled *al-Ra’y al-Šabîh fi man huwa al-Dhabîh*.¹

¹ It was translated into Urdu by Amin Ahsan Ishaq, *Dhabîh Kaun Hai?* (Lahore: Khuddâm al-Qur’ân, 1975).