BOOK REVIEWS


Writing in the middle of the decade before last Professor Charles J. Adams drew our attention, perhaps for the first time, to the fact that "there have been more biographies of the Prophet in the past seventy-five years than perhaps entire previous span of Islamic history." (A Readers' Guide to the Great Religions, New York, 1965, p. 417). Why this sudden surge of interest in the life of the Prophet? Was it the culmination of a natural feeling and cumulative process of hero worship for the Prophet among the believers, which had commenced in the early classical times of Islam? This is true, but only partially. The high watermark of the idealization and romanticization of the Prophet had already been reached in medieval times, thanks particularly to the Sufi influences which created a veritable cult of the Prophet, transforming the most human Prophet of history into a superhuman creature. Part of the reason behind such an unprecedented turnout of the biographies of the Prophet in modern times is that he became the main target of the hostile criticism by the early modern Western writers on Islam (Orientalists, missionaries, and others) and thus, as if in a reflex action, the main focus of eulogistic apologia by the modern day Muslim writers. Professor Adams himself sees this defensive reaction as part of the "deep stirrings of self-consciousness and vitality affecting the Muslim world in our day" (ibid.) to which he attributes the recent effusion of biographical literature on the Prophet. This explains the phenomenon to a large extent, but not completely.

In our view the direct, material cause of the modern day Muslim writers renewed, increased interest in the life of the Prophet, like many other interests of theirs, lies in the discovery, or rather the rediscovery, of the Prophet in the 18th-19th centuries West. But while the West went ahead to more sober, sustained and scientific studies of the Prophet, we seem to have confined ourselves, again like in many other intellectual pursuits of ours, to spinning out biographies of the Prophet from the same old, second-hand material, by the same old, out-dated methods, and for the same old, apologetic motives provided by the 18th-19th centuries European writers. The book under review belongs to the same old fashioned and antiquated category of the biographies of the Prophet.

The book may or may not earn a reward for its author here and in the hereafter (see the "Dedication" and the "Foreword"), but it contributes absolutely nothing to our knowledge and understanding of the life and times of one of the most outstanding men in history. The fact that the author is "a man of many talents and interests", such as solving the problems of the Third World and scriptwriting, producing and directing documentary and TV
films in Great Britain (see the author's bio-data on the flap of the dust-cover), might be the initial, penal factor in the total failure of the book to impress us as a serious study of the Prophet, neither academically nor didactically. What we need now are not the generalist scholars, men of letters, journalists, dogooders or faith-pedlars, but the specialist historians and social scientists writing the life of the Prophet. Without specialist knowledge and training one should be wary of writing on any subject these days, not to speak of a difficult and delicate subject like the life and teachings of the Prophet.

The source-material used, and also listed in the Bibliography, is another indication of the fact that the author is not conversant with Arabic language and primary Arabic sources, nor with the modern specialist studies of the Prophet by the Western or even Muslim experts of "Sira". Among the sources for the life and message of the Prophet the most recent used by the author and the very first mentioned in the Bibliography is Mawdūdi's Tafhim al-Qur'ān which can be hardly regarded a primary source for the Siraḥ. The rest include, besides 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali's and Marmaduke Pickthall's respective translation and commentary of the Qur'ān, Shibli Nu'mān's Sīrat al-Nabi and al-Furūq, Sulaymān Nadwi's Khutbat-i Madās, and Sīrat 'Uthmān, Ameer 'Ali's Spirit of Islam, and M. Hamidullah's Islām kā Siyāsī Niẓām; and, among non-Muslim Western writers, Washington Irving's Mahomet and His Successors, Arthur Gilman's The Saracens, and Stanley Lane-Poole's The Speeches and Table-talk of Prophet Muhammad. These are the works which perhaps no conscientious scholar of the history of Islam or Prophet would want to rely solely upon or to recommend even to the undergraduate students now, except as examples of early modern (Indian) Muslim and western attempts to rewrite the life of the Prophet. Historians like Ameer 'Ali and Shibli Nu'mān, taking the cue from their Western counterparts, did a commendable job of depicting the glory that was Islaṃ at a time when Muslim self-image and self-confidence was at its lowest. That was about hundred years ago. What we need to do now is to take up the task of rewriting our history from where they left off, instead of merely repeating them ad nauseam. Even so we believe that had the author carefully studied the works of Dr. M. Hamidullah alone, of whom he seems a great admirer and by whom he had the Foreword written to his book, the author would have improved the quality of his work immensely. (Incidentally, to our knowledge Dr. Hamidullah has no book to his credit entitled Islām kā Siyāsī Niẓām.)

Even as a rehash of outdated secondary sources the book is wanting in various respects. It has quite a few factual errors, such as that the Prophet has been "completely" ignored by the West (p. 1), that Lat, Uzzah [sic] and Manat were the deities of Ka'ba (p.16), that the newly-born girls were "customarily" buried alive by the pagan Meccans (p. 17), that through keen observation of nature the Prophet became convinced of the "One-ness" of things (p. 23), that the Quraysh sprung a nasty "surprise" on the Muslims in the encounter known as the Battle of Bader [sic] (p. 68), that on the occasion of the Battle of Ohud the Meccans marched "into" Medina (p.70), that there was an "autocracy" in Mecca (p.87), that "no blood was shed" on the day Mecca was taken by the Prophet (p. 105), that in the Treaty of Medina the Muslims and the Jews emerged as two "separate and distinct" communities (p. 120). The author also makes certain very questionable interpretations, such as the episode known (and referred to in the Qur'ān, XXVI: 29-31) as the conversion of the Jābils to Islam on Prophet's way back from his unsuccessful trip to Ta'ifh. It is interpreted as "something of a vision which culminated in the form of some complete strangers from Medina" (p.
68). One would also want to disagree with certain rather naive views of the
author which seem to result from his being impressed by the modern West,
particularly Great Britain and United States, and his trying to impress the
West with the modernness of the medieval Islam (pp. 60-61, 63, 64, 86).
Reacting to the Western charge against Islam that "Islam is a hidebound
religion which keeps its followers in a kind of superannuated Middle Ages,
making them unfit to adapt to the technical conquests of modern age." (pp.
3, 122), the author finds "much of the nineteenth and 20th century's
expectations and inspirations" enshrined in the concept of early Islamic
State. Moreover, European Renaissance, liberty, equality and fraternity,
Rousseau, Voltaire, Bacon, Calvin and Luther ("whose followers now
predominate England and North America"), Spinoza, Hegel and Marx (who had
"an impeccable knowledge of Islam"), all, appear to have their source, in
author's view, in Islamic Ideology (pp. 123-24). As further indication of the
author's westernised outlook one may point out that he characterizes the
Persian Emperor's reaction to the Prophet's letter inviting him to Islam as
"a classic display of an old, very old, Oriental disease: pomposity and
vainglorious arrogance" (p. 96). Such characteristics are not typically
Oriental; the Western despots of medieval time were not much better in
these respects.

There are two other issues on which we would like to differ with the
author. One is his contention, with specific reference to Mawdūdī's
Taḥlīm al-Qur'ān, that economic disparities are ordained by God and are
natural to man, and should not be interfered with. To quote the author
directly: "the disparities in nature are to be followed as an example of
Divine will and design for the affairs of men and the state...a good
economic system is that which comes close to such an order of God made
pattern...man should not try to change this by interfering with artificial
devices." According to the author, "in the Medinite society...the God—made
differences in men and their means were so accepted and respected that
they became a healthy and flourishing way of life." (pp. 61-62). This is
neither good history, nor good theology, nor good science or reason. The
Medinese society, despite the socio-moral teachings and example of the
Prophet, fell sick and aborted so soon after his death precisely because of
the rising socio-economic differences so vehemently protested against by
men like Abū Dhar Ghifārī. To credit God with the creation of the
differences in the 'means of men' may be logical necessity for an
exclusively deterministic interpretation of the ways of gods or may even be
practically useful for sanctifying the man—made economic differences in the
world, but it is absolutely untenable on historical and sociological as well as
moral grounds. To hold that economic disparities are ingrained in the nature
of man and to discredit the human efforts to eradicate them as artificial
devices is possible only through ignorance of the scientific concept of the
nature of man and about man's historical fight to change his physical and
social environs. Either a very naïve or an extremely clever person can
believe that a good economic system is that which comes closest to such a
God—made order which is patently exploitative and evil and therefore cannot
be the creation of a just God nor can it be approved by a humane Prophet
as an ultimate in divine will and design.

The other issue which deserves serious notice is the author's charac-
terization of the change wrought by the Prophet in the life of his people.
The author, doubtlessly having an eye to his Western or Westernised liberal
and democrat readers, becomes quite apologetic on the subject. He would
very much want to describe the change wrought by the Prophet as
revolution and the Prophet as revolutionary. But he is also aware that this

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may not go well with his Western and Westernised readership, for the term revolution evokes the images of violent change. Thus "if the term revolution doesn't sound too good to some ears", the author says, "another way of putting it would be to say that he brought about a complete change in the life of Arabia" (p. 132). Again, the Prophet is a "revolutionary" but "the term revolution is used advisedly. It has several meanings but in this study it is meant to convey a complete change or as something totally different." (p. 80). In short, Prophet's was an "evolutionary-revolution" (p. 40) or whatever that compound term means. But the author is wrong on both counts: the change wrought by the Prophet was not a total break from the past, nor was it without its due share of violence. Both these aspects of the phenomenon of change brought by the Prophet are fully substantiated by historical evidence, however much the exclusivistic and modernistic sensitivities of the author and his readers may be offended by these facts.

The author's language and style of writing, far from being 'noble', 'sublime', 'beautiful', 'powerful and charming', as has been claimed on dust-cover of the book, come out as affectedly grandiloquent and pretentiously rhetorical, which become ludicrous when the author, in an attempt to sound very 'advanced', uses expressions like 'big boys', 'dear man', 'gosh' (pp. 58, 59, 104). Such an old-fashioned, almost archaic, 19th century prose style may perhaps be congruous with the needs of film and TV scripts, one of the many vocations on which author's fame rests, but it is most certainly out of place in a biography of the Prophet for modern times. Generous use of adjectives and superlatives perhaps goes with such a style of writing. Not understandable or excusable are however carelessness in grammatical structure and composition of the sentences, misuse of definite article and semicolon, reluctant use of commas, and very strange and objectionable use of dots and parentheses scattered all over the book. It may also be pointed out that while the lack of proper transliteration of loan words in a book meant for general readership is perhaps understandable, such English rendition of proper names as Hera, Bader, Ramadhan, Khaled, Sood, Abbaside is inexcusable.

In the end, it need be said that the the book under-review actually did not deserve such a detailed notice. They are better left alone or cursorily dismissed. We, however, went to such lengths in criticizing it for two reasons. One, to underline that however pious the motive, it still does not, must not, give a person, without proper academic background and professional training in the discipline, the right to write a biography of the Prophet. There must be less harmful ways and means to seek the pleasure of God than producing such ill-researched and ill-written biographies of the Prophet as the book under review is. The other reason why we took such pains to point out the faults and flaws in the book is to emphasize that works of this nature if produced by means of financial help, or in expectation of financial reward, from the governments trying to legitimize themselves through such acts of Islamic patronage, the results are likely to be rather disappointing. If only we could leave the Prophet out of this international racket in the name of Islam.

Hasan Qasim Murad
Al-Ṭabarī's history begins with the genesis of the universe relating the history of the prophets and their contemporary kings and kingdoms till the golden events of the early three hundred years of the Islamic period. Although al-Ya'qūbī's history is also a universal history and Ibn Kathīr follows the pattern of al-Ṭabarī in al-Bīdāyah wa'l-Nihāyah, Tārīkh al-Rusul wa'l-Mulūk by Abū Ja'far Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, is still held by the scholars as the most valuable source of the history of the first three centuries of Islam. Its translation into the English language was needed since long but it was an uphill task for a single scholar. Now a collegium of orientalists has embarked upon this great project and decided to bring out a complete English translation of the History of al-Ṭabarī in 38 volumes. A number of volumes of this series are already available in the market and it is hoped that the work will be accomplished soon.

No doubt the history of al-Ṭabarī is a great work and its translation a great contribution. But the sole criterion of a translation is its correctness and faithfulness to the original. Regrettably the translation under review fails on both counts. For instance in volume 2, only between pages 48-52 there are five glaring mistakes.

At p. 49 the following words of the original

(Extract from E.J. Brill, vol. 1, 253)
One group of ancient sages says that there was a king over him, whose name was Zarhū b. Ṭahmāṣfān.

The translation of كَانَ مَلِكًا يَأْسِه as "there was a king over him" is obviously incorrect. The correct translation should be: He was an independent king.

Again at p. 49 the words of the original:

إن آزر كان رجلاً من أهل كوث (ص ۳۵۳)

are translated as:

(... There was an inhabitant of Kūthā named Āzar... These words if translated back into Arabic will be:

كَانَ هَنَاكَ رَجُلْ مِنْ أَهْلِ كُوْثَ يَا زَرُّ)

The translator has changed the order of the sentence without any reason. "That Āzar was an inhabitant of Kūthā" is sufficient and correct. There was no need to beat about the bushes.

At p. 50 the words of the original:

وَانَّهُ صَاحِبٌ اِرَادَ اِحْرَأَتِهِ (ص ۳۵۳)

are translated as:

and the Nimrod was his master who wanted to burn him.

al-Ṭabarī did not mean to say this. He did not believe that Nimrod was the master of Abraham the Patriarch. He simply means to say that it is that (selfsame) Nimrod (described in the preceding lines) who wanted to burn Abraham.

The fourth mistake is the translation of

وَرَسُولٌ إِلَى عِبَادَهُ (ص ۴۰۴)

as:

As a messenger to His worshippers (p. 50).

Perhaps the translator took this word as "عِبَادَ (ʻubbād) which means 'worshippers'. "عِبَادَ (ʻIbad) means 'slaves, servants' and in dignified Arabic usage it is used for 'responsible creature', 'mankind', 'human beings'. If Nimrod and his people were already the worshippers of God there was no need to send Abraham as a Messenger unto them.

The fifth mistake is the translation of

وَقَالَ اَنَّهُ سَفِينَتِي أَيْطَهُمْ بِالسَّمَّاءِ كَاذَّبْنَا بِهِ أَيْرُونُ مِنْهُ (ص ۴۰۱)
His saying, 'I am sick', meant he was attacked by illness. They fled from him when they heard it (p. 52).

The correct translation is: 'he was attacked by the illness wherefrom they used to flee'. Whenever someone falls ill people do not run away from him. It in fact means that this was some contagious disease known to them wherefrom they used to flee.

The volume 18 comprises the events from the year 41 A.H., to the year 60 A.H., properly entitled as The Caliphate of Mu‘awiyyah. Mu‘awiyyah is the founder of the Umayyad rule and it is very interesting to study how he wrestled power from his equally strong rivals, the ‘Alavids on the one hand and the Kharijites on the other, and, becoming the sole ruler of the entire Islamic world, established, by use of wisdom instead of force, the firm foundation of the Umayyad rule. He was indeed the master of political settlements.

As for the translation, it is generally correct and faithful but requires improvement. Let us, for example, examine the following passage of the original along with its translation:

Abū Bakrah approached al-Baqrah on the seventh day, when the sun had risen. Meanwhile Busr brought out the sons of Ziyad, awaiting sunset in order to kill them if necessary. The people assembled for that, while their leaders were anticipating Abu Bakrah. (p. 15)

The phrase ' وجبت أن' in the above passage is translated by the learned translator as 'if necessary'. Firstly, this phrase need not be translated, and if it were absolutely necessary to translate, it would have been rendered as: when the sun has set or sunk (at the end of the seventh day as it was stipulated). Because the primary meaning of ' ۷۷ ' is 'when', 'if' is its secondary meaning. There was no need to deviate from the primary meaning of the word. Secondly, ' وجبت أن' is a verb and necessarily requires a subject which, according to Arabic grammar, must be feminine. 'If necessary' means: 'if it is necessary!' 'It' would refer to killing (القتل) which cannot be the subject of ' وجبت أن' because it is masculine, 'وفي' would be correct, but ' وجبت أن' is absolutely wrong. What is the subject of ' وفي'? Necessarily it is the sun (السمى) which is feminine. Had the translator consulted an Arabic dictionary he would have found there the phrase ' في الشمس' which means 'in the sun'. For example see Lane, Arabic English Lexicon (Lahore Book 1–part 8 p. 2921).

Again he translated the word ' اعينهم' in as 'their leaders', whereas the first meaning of اعين (sing. عين ) is, 'eyes'. The sentence simply means that the people assembled for that with their anxious eyes looking forward to the arrival of Abu Bakrah. The word ' عين' means 'eye' and by the transference of meaning means: fount, essence, spy and leader; but nowhere did I find, throughout the Arabic literature, the word اعين used in the meaning of leaders.
It appears that the translation would improve further if attention is paid to the subtleties of Arabic language, and that is certainly a necessary requirement for translation.

There has also occurred a serious printing mistake at p. 105, where the word Mu'āwiyah b. Abl Sufyān is printed as Mu'āwiyah b. AII Sufyān.

The volume 32 of the translation of al-Ṭabarî's monumental work on history titled Tārikh al-Rṣul wa'l-Mulûk comprises the events from the year 198 A.H. to the year 218 A.H. In other words, it is the history of the major part of the caliphate of al-Māmûn. The Reunification of the Abbasid Caliphate is quite an appropriate title.

I have found the translation correct, faithful to the original and fluent, rendered in a beautiful language. Difficult words of the text are explained, place-names are identified and short biographical notices are given in the footnotes. This has enhanced the value of the book. The reviewer personally congratulates the translator and his colleagues on bringing out a reliable translation of the most relied upon history of Islam, although one desires that the same could be said about the other two volumes under review.

Ghulam Murtaza Azad