

**THE BIOGRAHY OF MUHAMMAD: THE ISSUE OF
THE SOURCES**

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THE BIOGRAPHY OF MUHAMMAD: THE ISSUE OF THE SOURCES (Islamic History and Civilization Vol. 32). Edited by Harald Motzki. Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill 2000. Pp. 330. \$62.00. ISBN: 9-004-11513-7.

This book contains ten papers on the biography of Muhammad, given at a colloquium convened by Harald Motzki in 1997 in Nijmegen (Netherlands). The previous colloquium on the subject had taken place in Strasbourg, 1980, and the long interval reflects the uneasiness which had grown around the subject. The last scholarly biography of the Prophet was published in 1956 by W. Montgomery Watt. Twenty years later, a wave of critical, skeptical publications was to sweep away Watt's results and conclusions. Leading among the skeptics were scholars like J. Wansbrough, P. Crone and M. Cook. Although their works were severely criticized, their impact made it durably impossible to believe that one could know "what really happened" during Mohammed's life. The Acta of the Strasbourg colloquium (T. Fahd, *La vie du Prophète Mahomet*, Paris 1983) read like a final farewell to his biography, and even Watt had to admit that many of his beliefs were no longer tenable. Since then, the life of Muhammad has seemed no longer a subject worth investigating. What remained is the *vita* in its ample sources, which can be read as early Muslim reflections on their Prophet, as testimonies of prophet-building and, last, but not least, as literature.

Five years ago, however, the file was reopened with monographs by Gregor Schoeler (*Charakter und Authentie*, 1996) and Uri Rubin (*The Eye of the Beholder*, 1995) and now this impressive volume appears. Some contributors display a marked nostalgia towards "what really happened" and try to save as much of the biography as they can. I find this difficult to understand. It is obvious that Muslims need a biography of the Prophet, but why should unbelieving orientalists want such a thing? Some of them seem to be driven by mere *horror vacui*, others by a fear of alienating Muslims or by other unscholarly motives.

Early Islamic sources about Muhammed can be roughly divided into three sorts. The most prestigious is the Qur'an. Unfortunately, the information in that book about the Prophet is scanty and difficult to interpret. The second kind is the *sīra*, the biography, also known as *maghāzī* or campaigns. This is a reservoir of heterogeneous elements: hagiography, reports, *midrash*, Qur'anic exegesis, documents, and poetry. Many of the texts, but not all, are provided with a chain of

transmitters (*isnād*). The third kind is *hadīth*, i.e. a large corpus of mostly concise accounts, always with an *isnād*, of the normative behavior of the Prophet, containing his sayings and deeds. Although *hadīth* is a most relevant source for Islamic law, the book under review does not deal with it.

What is striking in this volume is the increasing acceptance of the *isnād*-analytical method which was invented by J. Schacht (*Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, 1950) and refined by G.H.A. Juynboll and, differently, by Schoeler and Motzki. There are far more sources available now than in the days of Watt, and if one is prepared to go through painstaking detail, research can be brought to another level. The researcher has to collect *all* the versions of a story and analyze their content together with their *isnāds*. This makes it possible, if one is lucky, to establish a short list of transmitters which are common to all or nearly all *isnāds*. In many cases, the youngest of these, the so-called "common link," will be the person who proliferated the story.

Originally the common-link method was the domain of the skeptics. Now it has spread more widely and is applied not only to *hadīth* but also to *sīra* texts. The most convincing results are obtained when the differences in *isnāds* correspond with differences in the texts, which is not always the case. The method can be applied if enough versions of a *hadīth* or narrative unit are available to compare, and if the *isnāds* are not a complete mess. And even when it is applicable, there remains a good deal of speculation. Yet, this method seems to be the only hope to date *hadīth* and *sīra* texts.

In the present volume, three authors resorted to this method. After a theoretical introduction, Motzki goes to great length in analyzing one complex of traditions, which is about the assassination of Ibn Abī al-Huqayq, a Jewish adversary of the Prophet. He establishes two common links: al-Zuhrī and Abū Ishāq al-Sabī'ī, who both died around 740.

Andreas Gohrke tackles the Hudaybiya story: Muhammad's treaty with the hostile Meccans, which was to enable him to do the pilgrimage in the following year. He looked at the many versions of the narrative, the vast majority of which go back via al-Zuhrī to 'Urwa ibn al-Zubayr (d. 712).

Schoeler draws attention to the well-known "fragment" of the *Maghāzi* of Mūsā ibn 'Uqba (d. 758). He refutes, point by point, a 1953 article by Schacht, who had maintained that certain texts do not go back to Mūsā: that Mūsā's source indications (mostly al-Zuhrī) are basically fictitious; and that Mūsā must have invented part of them. Schoeler rehabilitates Mūsā and his source al-Zuhrī and even proves the

authenticity of the latter's source, again 'Urwa. He does so by drawing in more Mūsā quotations and parallels texts than Schacht had at his disposition and by implicitly using the common-link method.

The conclusion thus reached is that al-Zuhrī, Abū Ishāq al-Sabī'ī and 'Urwa are authentic, i.e. that the narratives have been really been transmitted by them. Motzki goes even further back and sees the outlines of a common link in a Companion of the Prophet. Hence, these stories are to be dated much earlier than was hitherto considered possible. One unpleasantness that must still be confronted is the fact that Juynboll discovered no less than 66 different Zuhrī's contemporaneous with the famous one. (*Muslim Tradition*, 1983, p. 148) Is al-Zuhrī always al-Zuhrī? Even if part of the argument could be refuted, certainly the bulk of it cannot. The intense research that has been practiced by these three scholars indeed brought us nearer to the oldest sources.

All three users of this method share a longing to go further back in history. Gohrke is not content with 'Urwa, but dreams aloud of Ā'isha, the wife of the Prophet, as a verifiable transmitter. Schoeler gropes for 'Urwa's source, namely his father. Motzki thinks that "a true historical biography could be written if source-critical studies on all the details of his life were available." (233) That would require hundreds more studies like his, and the resulting biography "will probably be only a very small one." (234)

Even the dull question of Watt is effectively resurrected: "Why would someone invent a story if there was not something true in it?" I have told many untrue stories myself, and storytellers do so even more often. Why? Sometimes for the applause, in other cases just for the *fun* of it. Serious scholars tend to have little understanding of this dimension of life.

The authors' speculations about the time before 'Urwa do not convince me. They contain more "probably," "we may assume," and "it seems plausible" language I am prepared to swallow. But this kind of research is not only about finding facts. The intimate contact with the texts and the growing insight into their development is far more fascinating. Two other papers emphasize the mobility and volatility of materials within the *s̄ā'a*. Rubin examines a narrative element about a council of war which Mohammad held with his Companions. In three versions, this narrative is placed in the al-Hudaybiya story (two of them going back to 'Urwa); in others, it is a prelude to the battle of Badr. When battle is imminent and the question comes up which Muslims are willing to participate, the council, embodied by one Companion, Abū

Bakr, or another Emigrant or a Helper, declares its readiness. In the "Qur'anized" version, sura 5:24 is put to use: there the Israelites refuse to join Moses in battle. The Muslims, in contrast to the Israelites, or elsewhere the Emigrants in contrast to the Helpers, or elsewhere just the Helpers, are eager to fight. Thus, Rubin shows how a narrative element wanders through the *s̄ira* and once it settles somewhere it may be recycled for various purposes.

Adrien Leites looks at the *s̄ira* studies from a critical distance and describes the various methods employed therein. Then he offers a method of his own, in which he focuses on the often changing associations of what he calls a "unit of meaning" with the various "verbal units," in a way not unlike that of Rubin.

Marco Schöller studied the *Tafsīr* of Muhammad al-Kalbī (685-763), a well known exegete of the Qur'an. Early *tafsīr* tend to abound in "unorthodox" materials, and so does the *tafsīr* of Ibn al-Kalbī. In connection with Muhammad's conflict with the Jews, the focal point of Schöller's study, about the most unorthodox thing found with Ibn al-Kalbī is that the Prophet concludes a treaty with the B. Qurayza and al-Nadīr, who thereafter paid *jizya*, "the first *jizya* in Islam." (41) The *Tafsīr* in its present state dates back to the tenth century. In many cases, Schöller was able to prove that its materials indeed go back to the lifetime of Ibn al-Kalbī, i.e., to the eighth century.

Robert G. Hoyland offers a survey and appraisal of the earliest Christian writings on Muhammad. Crone and Cook had been the first to point out these sources, several of which are older than any Muslim sources. Hoyland himself collected all the texts in his *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It* (Princeton 1997). In the present volume, he offers a selection of that material, as well as hitherto untranslated fragments. He arranges his texts thematically, which makes them easily accessible and may whet the appetite for his large collection.

Michael Lecker presents three obscure texts, both in Arabic and in English, about what happened after Muhammad concluded a treaty with the Helpers at 'Aqaba about his emigration to Medina. According to the standard accounts, Muhammad then lingered in Mecca for several months. Lecker's texts mention a deal between Quraysh and the Helpers to postpone the emigration, in order to save Quraysh from loss of face. This explains the prophet's delay, and exactly that fact might arouse suspicion about the value of these texts, particularly because they are as late as the sixteenth century! Yet, Lecker has strong points to make in their defense. He demonstrates that one text is a quotation from an early 8th century biography. Furthermore he argues that the mainstream

stories about the emigration are molded according to a pious scheme of persecution and subsequent deliverance by God, whereas the lesser known story about political compromise may have been suppressed as being theologically less expedient.

Shī'ī sources on the biography of the Prophet have been systematically neglected, and Maher Jarrar deserves our gratitude for making some of them accessible. From al-Majlisī's *Bihār al-anwār* he collected fragments from the lost *s̄ira-maghāzī* work by Abān ibn 'Uthmān al-Ahmar (d. around 800). In the Shī'a, the emphasis is so much on the *imāns* that *s̄ira* literature hardly fullfills this task. That explains why so many early sources are lost.

Andrew Rippin's is the only paper dedicated to the Qur'an as a source for the biography. This author does not want to derive as much biography as possible from Scripture. On the contrary, he warns the reader not to expect too much from the text of the Qur'an. After all, only four verses of the Qur'an mention Muhammad by name. Apart from peoples' beliefs or habits there is no need to force the rest of the Qur'an into the world of prophetic biography. Referring to the rather chaotic addresses of Qur'anic texts, Rippin points out the rushed composition, compilation and editing of the Qur'an. In his view, the earliest Muslim community saw it as its task

to provide a consistent and coherent picture of Muhammad as a background to the [Qur'anic] text. Through this process, an opaque text was rendered intelligible and (legally and religiously) relevant to the living Muslim community. This was likely done by both creating a *s̄ira* based upon imaginative reading of the Qur'an and grafting a pre-existent and emerging *s̄ira* onto the Qur'an.
(308)

This book is a must for committed students of early Islam. It provides quite an easy update on the problems and recent discussions around the prophetic biography. Almost all contributions are by leading specialists, but their level of accessibility varies. Some papers require familiarity with early Islamic literature, and *isnād*-analyses are a notoriously tedious reading matter. The authors are not to be blamed for that: it is their scholarly duty to show how they came to their results. Besides, most *isnād*-bundles are rendered in clear graphic representations of the "tree" type, which relieves the reader's task. Around half of the contributions would be easily accessible to a general academic readership.

Since this issue is dedicated to law, it may be useful to state that the book under review has nothing to offer about that subject. However,

since students of the law of Islam cannot possibly get around its founder, the book is of interest to them as well.

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