

## The Hybrid Nature of Sirah Nabawiyah: An Analysis of Quranic Biography of Muhammad's Early Life

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### Abstract

Sirah materials have been deemed by modern scholars as a hybrid literature, a combination of biography, prophetology and hagiography. The authors of the sirah record the Prophet's significance with admiration and clear devotion; but there is very little evidence of his early life and the narratives are recorded with reverence. In the Quran itself, there is little evidence of Prophet Muhammad's early biography, with scarcely any details before the receiving of his first revelations around the age of forty. Even with the infrequency of its references, this condition cause no hinder to a Muslim. A complete biography of the Prophet's life was produced completely equipped with its references from the Quran. The present study aims to explore the development of emerging number of Quranic verses that used as references for the narratives of the Prophet's early life in sirah literature. It also seeks to analyze the nature of relationship between sirah and the Quran. The present study deals solely with texts. In order to attain the objectives of the research, textual analysis will be employed as a major tool in examining and exploring the sources. The study in its findings argue that Quranization of the sirah account in the rationalist atmosphere of the ninth century drove some authors to refer to the Quran as a supportive mechanism, to strengthen and provide a solid ground for what they were saying about Prophet Muhammad.

Keywords: Hybridization, quranization, sirah, muhammad, hadith

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Reading the *Sirah* of Ibn Ishāq (2004), one might notice that the arrangement and the content of the work focuses on the construction of a coherent biography of the Prophet Muḥammad. His basic narrative structure is founded on various sources, including the Quran, ḥadīth, Arab poetry, the stories of nations past and narratives of story-tellers. By analysing the isnād and its style of presentation, al-Duri (1983) notices and remarks upon the style of ḥadīth scholars in Ibn Ishāq's method of *sirah* composition. As time went by, the method and focus of Muslim scholars must have evolved to suit the community's growing need for guidance. Indeed, the strong emphasis of ḥadīth scholars on legal and ethical discourse appears to influence the *sirah*'s work (Azmi, 2017). If the *Sirah* of Ibn Ishāq (2004) and Maghāzī of al-Wāqidi (1989) appear to stress the historical aspect of Muḥammad's life, the emphasis on moral and ethical value may be traced in the work of Ibn Sa'd (1990). His *Akḥbār al-Nabī* portrays the Prophet as a perfect model of humankind which, at the same time, affords an invaluable guide to pious Muslims on how they should present themselves and act with decent manners.

The *sirah* in this form now becomes not only a historical source but also a divine aspiration which ought to be emulated. This is evident when Ibn Sa'd delineates the magnificence of Muḥammad's appearance and his excellent moral qualities. The emphasis of such blandishments could be regarded as a response to the then current community's need to follow a perfect model of the Prophet in order to produce a Muslim of strong physical and moral qualities, and to accommodate and reflect upon some social issues. The novel structure of *sirah*, initiated by Ibn Sa'd helps to establish the foundation of a further branch of prophetic discourse, known as al-Shamā'il (the excellent qualities of the Prophet).

## 2.0 PROBLEM STATEMENT

It is worthy of note that even though all the narratives about Prophet Muḥammad's early life are structured on the framework of reference initiated by Ibn Ishāq, the earliest complete extant account of the Prophet's biography, Ibn Ishāq himself, nevertheless finds it hard to lay claim to a direct connection between the events in Muḥammad's early life and the Quran. Delving deeper in his *Sirah*, Ibn Ishāq actually cites only chapter 105 of the Quran; curiously, the three other Quranic references to Muḥammad's early life appear later in his successors' work, namely that of Ibn Hishām (1955) in which he cited verse 28:12, and the works of other scholars, including Ibn Sa'd (citing verse 26:219) and al-Tirmidhī (1998) where he cited verse 94:1 of the Quran. It seems that Ibn Ishāq's *Sirah*, the earliest complete account of the Prophet's biography, appears as not perceive of such link in which consequently leads him to make no connection between the events of the Prophet's early life with the Quran. It is highly unlikely that if he did know of any connection he would not have included it.

This situation does, however, change gradually in later centuries. As time went by, the Prophet's early life became more Quranic; that is to say the relationship between the Quran and the *sirah* became more intimately connected. Quranic references that are absent in the earliest works of *sirah* appear to blossom prolifically in various kinds of literature of the ninth century. For example the works of Ibn al-Layth as analysed by Azmi (2017a). Muslim scholars began to picture his early life from a specifically Quranic point of view. In fact, these Quranic biographical perspectives found in non-*tafsīr* works have influenced the later *mufasssīrūn* to include these historical interpretations in their *tafsīr* works, even though such interpretations had never been

mentioned by early *mufassirūn*. The emergence of later Quranic references to Muhammad's early life in the works of the ninth century implies, therefore, a clear development of Muslim thought concerning the relationship between the Quran and the Prophet's biography. Analysing the number of verses used by early *sirah* authors, including Ibn Ishāq, Ibn Hishām, Ibn Sa'd and al-Wāqidī, one notices the obvious differences between the usage of, and number of verses employed by, different biographical authors, which sparks a stimulating question in the researcher's mind: how and why did details of biographical information about the Prophet's early life become progressively linked with the Qur'an?

### 3.0 SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Donner (1998) outlines four major approaches that have been employed by modern scholars when dealing with raw materials of Islamic literary and narratives sources, which may be summarized as a descriptive approach, a source-critical approach, a tradition-critical approach and a sceptical approach. The present study employed these methods selectively and appropriately. Critical analysis will be applied to suit the specific nature and context of the text.

The present study also employed a descriptive and textual analysis where it will highlight and analyse the problematic and disputed Quranic verses adduced by the author of *sirah* as a specific reference to Muhammad's early life. All verses that appeared in the *sirah* as an allusion to the Prophet's early life will then be compared with the work of *tafsīr* of the same century, in order to demonstrate the subtle nuances and differences between the understandings and emphases of these scholars. Discussion will be organised thematically, beginning with the Prophet's genealogy, his birth, childhood and early signs of his prophethood.

### 4.0 RESULT: THE QURAN-SIRAH RELATIONSHIP

Based on the present analysis, materials from *sirah* literatures have revealed significant information about the Prophet's early life and, more importantly, has cast a light on the nature of the connection and relationship between the Quran and the narratives of Muhammad's early life. There is a number of reasons which may be proposed as the principal stimulus which provides a spark to an early connection between the Quran and the *sirah*. They may be listed as follows:

#### 4.1 The Use of the Quran as Lexical Explanation

Some modern scholars believe that on certain occasions, verses in the *sirah* are created later to explain apparently ambiguous verses in the Quran. This type of created narrative is known as *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation). Scholars who uphold this proposition include Lammens (2000), Watt (1962), Wansbrough (1978) and Rippin (1985). In contrast, Rubin (1997) is a strong opponent of this idea. He disagrees with this, labelling it as a misleading outlook of the *sirah*. His analysis claims that the *sirah* comes wholly independently of any Quranic origin. It is only in a later period that Quranic references were employed in the *sirah* for various particular reasons (Azmi, 2016). While some modern scholars believed that the stories in the *sirah* are created at a later date to explain or give further illumination upon apparent ambiguities in the use of particular words or phrases in the Quran (Raven, 2006), the connection made by Ibn Hishām indicates that the reverse is the case. In his *sirah*, specifically in his use of 28:12, Ibn Hishām employs the Quran as lexical tool to support his thought and interpretation of the narration, which he recounts from his master, Ibn Ishāq. It is undeniable that some narratives in the *sirah* might have their basic origin in the the Quranic periscope; but in this specific sample, however,

the insertion of Quranic verses is obviously presented to elaborate upon the narrative which he related from Ibn Ishāq. This, at the same time, implies that Quranic elements in the *sirah* could have emerged later. For another instance, in explaining the features of an angel that came to help Muslims in the Battle of Uhud, Ibn Hishām was again found to employ a Quranic reference to elucidate the word *sīma*’ (mark) used by Ibn Ishāq (Ibn Hisham, 1955). In these specific cases, it shows that the Quran has been employed as an auxiliary tool, and as such, has a secondary status in edifying the phrase adduced by the author.

#### 4.2 The *Sirah* as Exegetical Tool

Indeed, in other cases, the *sirah* is employed as a tool of elaboration for Quranic verses. This can be deduced in the connection made by al-Tirmidhī in his *Sunan*. Although ahl al-hadith have their specific method in Quranic discourse (Azmi, 2017b), in this case al-Tirmidhī invented a novel approach. To elaborate the meaning of 94:1, al-Tirmidhī, in the chapter of *tafsīr*, cites the tradition of the event of the opening of Muḥammad’s breast which, by implication, may be viewed as al-Tirmidhī’s own enterprise in his allusion to the event as a tool of elaboration for verse 94:1. Even though al-Bukhari recorded the similar narration regarding the opening of the Prophet’s breast, he had never cited the verse as al-Tirmidhī did (Azmi, 2017c). On the other hand, Birkeland suggests that the story of the opening of the Prophet’s breast is ‘exegetical materialisation’ (Buhl, 2015), an innovation of expanded narrative, to elaborate the meaning of Quranic verses. This proposition might be contested, however, in the context of al-Hawārī’s tradition. According to his narration, the idea of connection between 94:1 and the event of the opening of Muḥammad’s breast is, apparently, a portrayal of an earlier generation’s thought regarding the meaning of 94:1. If the origin of this thought can be proved, or traced, there is a probability that the idea of Quranic connection with the event is actually an original early Muslim elaboration of the story, and not an invented narrative created in later period to amplify the vague meaning of Quranic verses.

#### 4.3 Authorization of the Narratives

All of the narratives of the Prophet’s early life in this study have a connection with Quranic references, apparently related to somewhat miraculous elements in Muḥammad’s early life. There is first his astounding pre-existence in the loins of previous prophets, the extraordinary victory of the Meccan populace over the elephant army that appeared soon before his birth, amazing occurrences during his wet-nursing period with Halima and the phenomenal event of the opening of his breast. All these accounts share one similar element: their miraculous features. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that, in the era of the Mu’tazilite ascendancy, along with their idea of rationalisation of Islamic thought established as court policy, the insertion of Quranic references in these miraculous narratives occur to give weight and authority to the accounts. In fact, as reported by al-Jishumī, some scholars of Basra did not, in fact, recognise the extraordinary elements in Muḥammad’s early life as miracles at all. ‘Abd al-Jabbār is recorded as yet another later Mu’tazilite scholar who refused to accept miraculous elements in Muḥammad’s early life as the Prophet’s own miracles (al-Alusi, 1415H). He asserts that any putative miracle of the Prophet would happen only after his prophetic call. By adducing the Quran as their reference to the miraculous events of Muḥammad’s early life, Muslim scholars appear to consider it as bestowing an overwhelmingly empowering authority to the reports, in order to allow the narratives to be accepted among a Muslim audience, especially in the period where Mu’tazilites forced scholars to embrace its doctrine. For example Ibn Sa’d was among the scholars who had been ordered by the Caliph court to declare his support toward Mu’tazila’s doctrine. Al-Jāhiz

was actually a supporter of Mu‘tazila’s doctrine, but appears reverted in the reign of al-Mutawakkil

#### 4.4 The Quranisation of the Nature of the Story

Modern studies of the origin of the *sirah* acknowledge the influence of previous scriptures and their elements (known in Islamic literature as *israiliyyat*) within the *sirah* narrative. Some important *sirah* scholars are recognised as well-versed in biblical and other pre-Islamic heritage, including Wahb ibn Munabbih, on whom, according to Khoury, Ibn Ishāq is highly dependent as a source of biblical narratives, and indeed, Ibn Hishām establishes him (Wahb ibn Munabbih) as major reference in his *Kitāb al-Tijān* (Khoury, 2015; Raven, 2015); and Hishām al-Kalbī, who according to Horovitz (2002), is the source of biblical pre-history for Ibn Sa‘d. Such scholars are regarded as opening the floodgates to the insertion of ‘foreign’ features in the *sirah* narratives. Some narratives of Muḥammad’s early life are clearly similar to, or inspired by, previous biblical prophet narratives, such as the concept of pre-existence as traced by Rubin (2015), the sign of the emergence of the prophet in the miraculous event of the elephant army (Muir, 1923) and the extraordinary speed and marks of physical maturity in Muḥammad’s wet-nurse period with Halima, which, according to Raven, indicates a parallel occurrence with Jesus’ precocity in the Gospels of the Infancy (Raven, 2015). Besides, as discussed before, Muslim scholars such as Ibn Hishām and others consistently make parallel comparison between Muḥammad and biblical prophets. The profuse ‘foreign’ elements embedded in the Islamic *sirah* might not cast a favourable image upon the Prophet of Islam among Muslims. It is reasonable, therefore, to suggest that the process of Quranisation was developed in order to neutralise the ‘foreign’ accounts and provide a more Quranic image to the final prophet. In the *Sirah* of Ibn Hishām, the process of how God protects Muḥammad from being wet-nursed by any other woman except Halima has noticeably similar concepts, of protection and God’s plan for His prophet, with the narrative of Moses. Apart from providing a lexical explanation of Ibn Ishāq’s *Sirah*, the insertion of 28:12 as Quranic reference to this event might also be perceived as Ibn Hishām’s effort to Quranise the narrative.

Al-Jāhiz’s Quranic reference is another instance. In the story of the companion of the elephant, he provides a considerable amount of material from pre-Islamic poetry to convince the reader that the story has a historical value. Rubin even traces that the wording of the reports is apparently free from Quranic terminology or phrases, which indicates the independent origin of the story from Quranic pericope. At the end of his explanation, however, al- Jāhiz begins to adduce Q105, not only to give an authorization of the story but also so that it may be seen as an embellishment of the report with a specific Quranic element. A comparable style might also be traced in Ibn Sa‘d’s account of Muḥammad’s genealogy (i.e. as a pre-existent being). In his account, 26:219 is used as Quranic reference to Muḥammad’s genealogy. Since the concept of pre-existence has its basis in another religious tradition (Rubin, 1975) the insertion of 26:219 could be regarded as a part of the process of Quranisation, insofar as it is an ornamentation of the account. Analysing the verse, one might notice that the verse has no apparent connection with genealogical discussion. It would therefore seem judicious to deem the involvement of 26:219 in the Prophet’s genealogical tradition as an element in the process of the Quranisation of the *sirah* account as well.

## 5.0 DISCUSSION: THE HYBRID NATURE OF BIOGRAPHY AND HAGIOGRAPHY

It is quite clear that any Qur'ānic reference to Muḥammad's early life is hard to find in Muslim classical sources produced in the ninth century. Based on our observation of the selected literature, only four references from the Qur'ān employed by the authors as an allusion to the Prophet's early life may be traced. Among these, there persists one criterion shared by them all, which is the fact of their employment in reference to supernatural aspects in Muḥammad's life. This embraces Muḥammad's pre-existence (26:219), the remarkable nature of his breastfeeding period (28:12), the opening of his breast (94:1) and the incident of Abraha's invasion (105:1-5). All of these events reveal clear evidence of elements of miracles, and at the same time implies divine intervention in Muḥammad's life.

It seems likely that given the extent of Islam in the ninth century, setting down roots in the diverse intellectual and religious ferment of sophisticated courts far from Mecca, there was a need within the growing religion to establish the authority of the central figure of Islam, to unite people as diverse as peasants, caliphs and clerics. It is likely that an even greater emphasis fell upon the figure of the Prophet himself, and therefore, a tradition of the Prophet's life then came to be the focus. The literature of *sirah* was developed, establishing a classical tradition, which in its turn sparked a hagiographic tradition which continues to try to piece together a credible and truthful portrait of the Prophet to this day.

The earliest proponents of *sirah nabawiyah* were not detached historical critics or disconnected observers: they were principally attempting biography, and were responsible, above all, for the transmission of tradition. They apparently took any narration or anecdote about the Prophet, even, on occasions, contradictory accounts, or narrations which revealed Muḥammad as imperfect, but from sources which were treated as significant and sacred. Two hundred years after the death of Muḥammad, they therefore looked both inwards and outwards. Throughout the early growth of Islam, the emphasis is on the character of Muḥammad, with his exceptionally gifted qualities of leadership, and recognition of the spiritual needs of his people and, by extension, the wider world.

The apparent contradictions of accounts of the writers of the *sirah* can be of no surprise: the writers were men of their times, hagiographers at once concerned to hold the *umma* together, and defend it against other equally or more well-established religious traditions. It might well be more productive to view the *sirah's* principal value not so much as an attempt to provide an exegesis of the life of Muḥammad, but as a part of a greater hermeneutic, whose resonances still resound today, not only in the world of academia, but in popular cultural imagination too. It is very hard, through exegetical or hermeneutical means, to attest to the veracity of factual details of Muḥammad's biography as presented in the *sirah*. Biography and hagiography, by their very nature, are written with audiences in mind; and the ninth century audience, like the extensive Islamic empire, was hugely diverse. Large parts of it, particularly in the educated courts beyond Mecca, were driven by a ninth century rationalism, an attempt to understand a man called prophet.

With its repeated patterns, apparent contradictions, circumlocutions and diverse emphases, in which no one part is given distinction or importance over another, the *sirah* itself contains the totality of what the compilers could gather, as scrupulously as they found possible. But the *Sirah* as presented can be regarded mainly as a tool of hermeneutics, its chief value being to illuminate the diversity of perspectives at a rich time of diversity and the spread of Islam.

## 6.0 CONCLUSIONS

Based on our study of the Quranic references to the Prophet's early life, it seems reasonable to conclude that the earliest Quranic references that were perceived as a direct allusion to the Prophet's early life are to be found in works of the ninth century. A comparative analysis of a variety of sources in Islamic literature of this century shows that the idea of a connection between the verses and events of the Prophet's life was simply not regarded as of any particular value or significance in this particular period. Moreover, those specific Quranic verses adduced by the scholars of the ninth century as references to Muḥammad's early life appear as their own novel enterprises for various reasons, audiences and conditions. The references were then employed by later scholars and became used more widely at later dates, since the references clearly appear to claim their origin from the first century of Islam.

Lexical explanation, authorisation and Quranisation of the *Sirah* account in the rationalist atmosphere of the ninth century drove some authors to refer to the Qur'an as a supportive mechanism, to strengthen and provide a solid ground for what they were saying about Muhammad. As discussed previously, the explanation of *sirah* stories and the attachment of Quranic references appear to be influenced by their contemporary socio-political and religious contexts, as well as the authors' own personal interpretations.

And yet the rarity of a perceived connection between the Quran and Muḥammad's early life in the selected works of the ninth century indicates and illuminates the actual condition of Muslim thought within this period. The connections made by the authors themselves imply, presumably, an early phase of the connection, which might well have been influenced by the contemporary intellectual and religious milieus, as well as the authors' own personal spiritual concerns, and their social and historical approaches and preoccupations.

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