

## Perception of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) Presented in Modern *Sirah* Literature

İlhami Oruçoğlu, Ph.D.

Department of History of Islam and Islamic Arts  
Faculty of Theology  
Uludag University  
Bursa-Turkey

### Abstract

*In Modern times, Muslim scholars approached Sirah from a western perspective under the influence of intense pressure from western thought that become gradually stronger. This period witnessed the rise of rationalistic assessments; authors often express their discontent with regard to classical sirah writing and the knowledge within conventional sirah works. In particular, the extraordinary cases and miracles which are attributed to Muhammad are intensely criticised and excluded by some modern works. Pursuant to dominant views in the West, modern sirah authors emphasise that Muhammad is only a human, and they opt to analyse his life through the eyes of a natural cause-effect relationship belonging to physical conditions.*

Modern Western thought has generally possessed a humanist worldview; accordingly, it has undergone a period of putting all religious things away from human life. In this context, there was a tendency to evaluate Jesus with a critical method and a rationalistic and positivist point of view towards the ends of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Such a standpoint rejects all definitions attributed to Jesus by the Church. Deist theologians have concluded that the passages of the Bible on his miraculous birth, performance of miracles and resurrection were added by the apostles and have claimed it may be possible to comprehend Jesus only within the scope of Jewish society and the Israelite tradition in which he lived. Therefore, Jesus is not a much awaited prophet or messiah, but a preacher from Jewish society to teach morals. His claim to being the Messiah was a mistake and his crucifixion is considered as a proof of it. As Jesus' status as a prophet was shaken, he was, in the end, accepted merely as a teacher of morals.<sup>1</sup>

Later on, together with 19<sup>th</sup> century colonialism, the Western World opened up to foreign societies and reflected their conceptions on religion and prophecy to other religions and civilisations, particularly on Islam and Muhammad. Arguments and conclusions of historical research on Jesus in the West had an undeniable influence on orientalist approaches with regard to the origin of Islam and life of Muhammad; and such influence can be explicitly observed in the works of many orientalists. For example, the fund of knowledge, which began with historical research by Reimarus on Christianity and Jesus, and which consists of studies by German scientists specialising in Eastern languages, have put forth explanations regarding all religions and the birth and progress of religious mythologies, especially with respect to Semitic religions of the Middle East. These manners of explanation bear striking resemblances to orientalist theories on the progress of Islam and the life of Muhammad.<sup>2</sup> In this period, Orientalist studies evaded theological links and attained a philological ground; furthermore, this was an era when critical historical research began in Europe. According to this opinion, before assessing a fact as part of a historical period, there was a need for a critical analysis of the sources in order to comprehend whether it had a value on its own. Orientalists were well-trained in this sense.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bennett, Clinton, *In Search of Jesus*, London and New York: Continuum, 2001, pp. 96-100.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Warraq, "Studies on Muhammad and the Rise of Islam: A Critical Survey", in *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, ed. Ibn Warraq, New York: Prometheus Books, 2000, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> Fück, J. W., "Islam as an Historical Problem in European Historiography Since 1800", in *Historians of the Middle East*, edited by Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt, London: Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 304; Ibn al-Rawandi, "Origins of Islam: A Critical Look at the Sources", in *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, ed. Ibn Warrak, New York: Prometheus Books, 2000, p. 92; Peters, F. E., "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad", in *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, ed. Ibn Warraq, New York: Prometheus Books, 2000, pp. 444-446.

At the end of discussions throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century on Christianity and the life of Jesus, they had an accumulation of knowledge and methods for attaining historical Jesus, which they began to apply to Islam and Muhammad.<sup>4</sup> The first step was to obtain primary sources by abandoning later references, whereas the second step was not to accept these primary sources as they were but to carry out a critical analysis on them. Orientalists treated Islam and Muhammad using arguments they inherited from Western modern theology, and adopted the same western approach, which assumed it was possible to understand Jesus within Jewish tradition, before tailoring it for our prophet. Accordingly, their assertion was that Muhammad produced Islam by means of borrowing it from Judaism or Christianity. It became a kind of obsession for Orientalists to consider Judaism and Christianity as the origin of Islam, and this opinion was ever-present in orientalist works.

Orientalists did not acknowledge Muhammad as a prophet and could not digest in any way that the Qur'an was sent by Allah as a revelation, and that the prophet was always under a divine control. In order to fill this gap, and even more, to ignore such truths, they generously praise Muhammad. Thus, they feature his statesmanship, military achievements and ability among ruling people, but not his prophethood. In this sense, orientalist ruled out supervision by divine revelation, and preferred to read the events in the life of Muhammad, as well as the progress of Islam, via the perspective of modern social sciences.

Backed by the power of modern technology, modern science has lured other societies and led them to think like it and to approach both physical and metaphysical questions pursuant to a modern point of view. Muslim geography has inevitably had its share from this influence. Defeats of the Ottoman Empire, the greatest power of the Islamic world of the day, against the West created admiration, firstly in powerful military circles and later in the worldview of Westerners. As a result, the superiority of scientific knowledge and philosophical standpoint was admitted in advance. Such admiration steered Muslim luminaries to learn the Western style of thought and to interpret the entire Islamic civilisation legacy according to this view. "Modern science and its data, which were comprehended only at a very inferior level in terms of philosophical background, historical progress and main goals, and which were thus identified with the concept of 'ilm', were indoctrinated into all Islamic ilms by a defence of absoluteness up to a level of 'science fetishism'."<sup>5</sup> There was a strong conviction that humanist and rationalistic modern science, which pretended to supersede religion, was a convenient tool with which to defend Islam.<sup>6</sup>

Past/tradition is a source which a society refers to light the present and future as a reference point for self-identification and confirmation. Nevertheless, past/tradition may not support the present in any case, and it can in fact be in opposition to it. On such an occasion, an incentive for consistency and continuity requires protecting the past/tradition, whereas the dynamism and the drive to go with the tide, an equally desired motive, shall deem such conservation as an obstacle. When innovation and change are considered inevitable or desirable, either past/tradition loses its function of serving as an example for the present and future, or it is systematically rejected, or even certain fulcrums are searched for within it to legitimise the innovation and the change. In both cases, innovation and change are the main determinants; nevertheless, in the second, the same process takes place in a more implicit way.<sup>7</sup>

Muslim luminaries approached *Sirah* from a western perspective under the influence of intense pressure from western thought that become gradually stronger following the western approach on Muhammad and oppressions by western studies on Islam and Muhammad. This period witnessed the rise of rationalistic assessments; authors often express their discontent with regard to classical *sirah* writing and the knowledge within conventional *sirah* works. In particular, the extraordinary cases and miracles which are attributed to Muhammad are intensely criticised and excluded by some modern works. Pursuant to dominant views in the West, modern *sirah* authors emphasise that Muhammad is only a human, and they opt to analyse his life through the eyes of a natural cause-effect relationship belonging to physical conditions.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Warraq, *ibid*, pp. 75-77; Rodinson, Maxime, "A Critical Survey of Modern Studies on Muhammad", in *Studies on Islam*, ed. Merlin L. Swartz, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Kara, İsmail, "Tarih and Hurafe: Çağdaş Türk Düşüncesinde Tarih Telakkisi", *Türklük Araştırmaları Dergisi* 11, March 2002, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>7</sup> Hagen, Gottfried, "The Prophet Muhammad as an Exemplar in War: Ottoman Views on the Eve of World War I", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, Spring 2000, 22, pp. 145-146.

In this atmosphere, under the influence of modern scientific thought, an external element is taken into account, its data used, and everyone, deliberately or not, adopts its perspective. Consequently, this case reveals certain differences in terms of references, methodology and content between the pre-modern and modern works.

### A. References

In the modern era, it is considered as a prerequisite to attain the oldest references with regard to historical research.<sup>8</sup> Old sources were no doubt used also in the past, nevertheless, in our day, access to older references means disfavoured later sources and signifies that there is no scientific value in relying on them. Therefore, these later works were excluded from the domain of scientific research. It is engraved in memory that the works of later authors cannot exist without the negative influence of the time and environment they lived in; therefore, their works cannot be as pure as the older ones. Such elimination of interim references meant the dissolution of traditional authority that was formed by means of them.

According to this standpoint, which writes off interim references, the early sources on *hadith* and *sirah* are subject to many weaknesses; so they are unreliable. Researchers began to think that the issues which do not comply with modern rationalistic perspective were incorporated in *sirah* afterwards as a result of rivalry with members of other religions, that the works during the Umayyad and Abbasid eras were full of narrations in accordance with the political tendency of narrators, and that the political and religious conflicts made their mark on the writing of sources. In case a narration in a work is considered weak or untrue, all such narrations or sources incorporating all such narrations are considered weak, or even full of superstitions. Basing on the argument that in the classic era, there was a criticism of narrators, but not of the text, it became a much repeated desire that all narrations had to undergo a filter of criticisms.<sup>9</sup> Considering that the minds to realise such criticism are under the influence of modern western scientific conceptions and have accepted its data as unchangeable truths, it is evident that the information which does not comply with these conceptions and which especially surpasses the human and physical level will be eliminated for being untrue.

It is worth emphasising to reflect on what such a rooted criticism on narration system means. Assessments on these narrations, which are the main fulcrum of classic *sirah* literature, implicate a criticism, even an accusation, on their narrators and authors. If criticisms and assessments are taken to their reasonable consequences, it is possible to attain the following results: Narrators/authors have provided misinformation, deliberately or not. The first means a fraud regardless of intention, whereas the second points out a weakness of mind unable to comprehend such fallacy. Therefore, the reliability of the source, in both cases, is lost. And if the sources are not considered reliable, it is a compelling question what kind of a prophet portrait will appear.

Another tendency in the modern era is to consult the works by non-Muslim authors. After the conquest of a considerable part of Muslim geography in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Islamic world, which had never had such a problem before, appreciated the western scientific paradigm that had the upper hand regarding Western technical, economic and military dominance; in the end, it had to follow studies conducted in the West. In the refutations and apologetic works, the positive views of Western authors were seen as a kind of lifebuoy. Furthermore, orientalist works that praised Muhammad in various aspects were widely appreciated. By means of such works, many Muslims almost restored their trust in their prophet under the pressure of the modern world, and proceeded to recover from their inferiority complex. The necessity to refer to Western works also means that their historiography was accepted. So, even though Western works were apparently rejected, the same ground is inevitably shared with them.

### B. Methodology

The modern worldview has concluded that man is at the centre and the model for all, that everything in the universe can be discovered and explained by human mind, and that unexplainable things lack meaning. In this sense, it doubts the trueness of references that were formed in the pre-modern era, under the influence of a standpoint that built all around the axis of god and religion, and that accepted that facts had metaphysical and spiritual causes, as well as physical ones.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed assessment, see Kara, *ibid*, pp. 50-52; also Hagen, *ibid*, p. 156.

<sup>9</sup> Syed Ahmad Khan, *Life of Mohammed and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*, Lahore: Sh. Mubarak Ali Oriental Publishers and Booksellers, 1979, pp. XII-XIII.

The modern scientific critical method proposes to eliminate supernatural conceptions and convictions of the past, and to rebuild it by choosing the elements only a rational mind may accept. This method, essentially sceptical, is not satisfied with the accounts in sources; rather, it looks down on the information given in such references, and bears the concern and claim to determine “what really happened”. Such a view brings to the forefront the question “what should happen/should have happened” in history, rather than “what really happened”, in order to impose the standpoint of the day on history. This is why orientalist considered the works on Islamic history full of superstitions and defended that it was possible to “rebuild” the entire Islam history and life of Muhammad via information that will remain after eliminating such superstitions.

The Islamic world was subject to every single influence of the modern ages, and Muslim scholars adopted this method.<sup>10</sup> As modern authors began to write their work, they had, in a sense, expressed those former sources replete with superstitions and biased declarations.<sup>11</sup> Even in the works that were written as a rejection of orientalist research, where the Muslim authors opted to correct at a phenomenal level the partial and deliberate orientalist comments on issues such as the event of Gharaniq, Muhammad’s marriage with Zaynab bint Jahsh, and the spread of Islam via the sword, they could not get out of the modern scientific method. Works by Muslims have, in general, continued to reflect the orientalist view on Islam. Pursuant to this view, it is the standpoint and opinion of the writer, but not what actually happened, that is the determinant in history. However, the way to comprehend a historical fact depends on being purified as much as possible from the influence of the current situation, and on animating in the mind the past as it was.

## C. Content

### 1. Highlighted Themes

In pre-modern siyar sources, the coming of Muhammad is treated within the scope of the general history of prophets. This is why a common feature of these works is to study his dynasty in detail. After the exactitude of the fact that he is a descent of Abraham is expressed, the events in Arabia since Abraham’s day until the birth of Muhammad are told as a kind of background to his coming as a prophet. The striking point in these accounts is that the scene, which may be interpreted as a background, displays a view that heralds his prophecy.

In many modern sources, however, Muhammad is placed in a historical and socio-cultural frame. There are extensive chapters on what Arabia and the world was like before the birth of Muhammad and when he had the first revelation. These chapters treat the Arabian geography, political situation, history, the conditions in neighbouring countries, the social collapse and moral corruption, and emphasise the need for a saviour since all went wrong in those days.<sup>12</sup> The interesting point here is the emphasis on the poor social, political, economic and moral environment and that every prerequisite was present for the achievement of a saviour who would then appear. The things that lead to necessity of a saviour, and the means the latter will use to achieve success, are some earthly elements.<sup>13</sup>

The emphasis here is clearly different from the orientalist’s descriptions of a prophet who got the best out of a malignant social environment and used it for personal success; it is true that Muslims can not bear such a conviction. Nonetheless, one can scarcely say they were not at all influenced by such orientalist views. Since the difference between this view and the orientalist opinion is whether Muhammad is truly a prophet, or a crook who declared himself as a prophet by making use of the conditions. Otherwise, there is an agreement on the corrupt situation and the need for a reformist, and that Muhammad was good at this.

<sup>10</sup> See Günaltay, Mehmed Şemseddin, *İslam Târîhi*, Istanbul: Evkâf-ı İslamiyye Matbaası, 1338-1341, I, 9. Here, Günaltay expresses that his work “relies on eastern sources in terms of documentation and on western works in terms of methodology”.

<sup>11</sup> Syed Ahmed Khan, *ibid*, pp. XII-XIII; Şehbenderzade Filibeli Ahmed Hilmi, *İslam Tarihi*, Istanbul: Anka Yayınları, 2005, pp. 28-29; see also In his *Siyar-i Celîle-i Nebeviyye*, (Istanbul: Tevsi‘-i Tıbâ‘at Matbaası, 1332) İzmirli İsmail Hakkı said the work he was planning to write would “include critical thinking and reasoning in terms of narrations and individual opinion” (pp. 41-42) and he allocated more than half of this book of 154 pages to issue of weak hadiths.

<sup>12</sup> Syed Emir Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*, Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1978, pp. XVII-LXXI; Şehbenderzade, *ibid*, pp. 109-136; Mahmud Es‘ad, *Tarih-i Din-i Islam*, Istanbul: Marifet Yayınları, 1983, pp. 29-368; Hamidullah, Muhammed, *İslam Peygamberi*, I-II, trs. Salih Tuğ, Istanbul: İrfan Yayımcılık, 1990, I, 11-27.

<sup>13</sup> For a good example, see Ahmed Refik, *Büyük Tarih-i ‘Umûmî*, V, Istanbul: İbrahim Hilmi, 1328, pp. 27-28.

## 2. Receded Themes

As is seen through the previous issue, the concentration on the earthly aspect of Muhammad's life pushed its metaphysical side into the background. In this sense, the most important neglected points are miracles and evidential rumours. Nevertheless, not all modern authors adopt the same attitude regarding miracles. Some of them entirely reject miracles and exclude them from their work, whereas some others accept and cite certain miracles in their work, although deeming it unnecessary to refer to miracles in order to relate the life of Muhammad. Both approaches agree, however, that miracles should take place in today's siyar literature. The followers of first group lay stress on the miraculous aspect of Qur'an, insisting that it is the only miracle of Muhammad, and claim that polytheists, who asked for miracles, were always refused.<sup>14</sup> The second group admits miracles, but argues that they do not play a part in explaining the life of Muhammad, so they are not a valuable material for siyar.<sup>15</sup>

The approach by Muhammed Hamidullah, a good example, on the debate is worth noting. The author generally accepts miracles, and refers to certain arguments while assessing them. First, since Allah created the universe in a causal link, everything should have a cause.<sup>16</sup> In addition, as Muhammad is a human, it would be more accurate to understand his life in cause-effect relationship, and more valuable to learn his efforts and struggles than to know about supernatural events.<sup>17</sup> Further, according to Hamidullah, the events that are told as miracles may be, in the final analysis, natural events whose causes are unknown to us. Therefore, perhaps, the splitting of Moon happened as a result of a quake at the same time,<sup>18</sup> the pigeons which were already nesting at the cave during Hegira did not fear the comers and left eggs afterwards, and maybe the spider finished spinning its web before the arrival of the Meccan polytheists.<sup>19</sup> Another argument the author believes is that there is no connection between "performing salah" and "responding of the tree as called by the prophet".<sup>20</sup>

Miracles and miraculous narrations that take place as an important element in our sources are pushed into the background, are discredited in social memory, partially rejected, sometimes heavily criticised, and most of them are degraded to the level of weak hadith, fabrication, former Jewish accounts, superstitions etc.... These are the expected costly consequences of science fetishism that gradually becomes dominant.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

The "Historical-critical" approach to history is developed and formulated by western deist thinkers within a secular worldview; therefore, it does not seem a suitable method in order to comprehend the life of a prophet. It is really surprising to consider an approach as a scientific method while it restrains within historical conditions as part of sociological, psychological, economic and ethnic elements a religion and its prophet, who both bear metaphysical elements due to their content and moreover are essentially metaphysical.

---

<sup>14</sup> See Heykel, Muhammed Hüseyin, *Hayâtu Muhammad*, Maktabat al-Usra, no date, pp. 58-59.

<sup>15</sup> See Hamidullah, *ibid*, I, 120-128.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 123.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 128.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 120.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 163.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 125.

<sup>21</sup> Kara, "Tarih ve Hurafe", p. 53.