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The Main Sources of Seerah and the Correct Way of Approaching Them  
 An Exposition of the Faulty Orientalist and Missionary Approach Towards Seerah  
 and its Sources

The Great Mans' sincerity is of the kind he cannot speak of: nay I suppose he is conscious rather of insincerity; for what man can walk accurately by the law of truth for one day? No, the great man does not boast himself sincere, far from that; perhaps does not ask himself if he is so; I would say rather, his sincerity does not depend on himself, he can not help being sincere!<sup>1</sup> This was stated by Thomas Carlyle in the 18<sup>th</sup> century during a series of lectures given to a Western audience in defense of prophet Muhammad pbuh, with the aim of exposing the lies and dishonest approach that most Orientalists at that time were taking when dealing with the subject. Such approaches are nothing new and have existed since the beginning of time. Anyone who has read the Bible or the Quran will find out that one of the most common techniques for dealing with people who came as prophets in the name of God, was to accuse them of evils, discredit their status and persona, and malign them without any remorse in the name of scholarship and so called service for humanity. M. Watt<sup>2</sup> says that Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him (pbuh) is without a doubt one of the most maligned historical figure in the world, people competing for who can

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Carlyle in *Heroes and Hero Worship* p 59 as referenced by Deedat Ahmed, *Muhammad the Greatest*, Abul-Qasim Publishing House, Jeddah, p21.

<sup>2</sup> Watt M. *Muhammad at Medina*, Oxford University, 1981, p 324.

make more money and more television shows instigating hatred and discord towards the man himself and his followers. People such as Robert Spencer<sup>3</sup>, Daniel Pipes, Sam Shamoun, and others of old such as John of Damascus, Dante, have aimed to distort the life of prophet Muhammad and to portray the religion of Islam in a negative way in order to created hatred towards and rejection of the faith that was so attractive to so many people and gained so many converts as it still does today. Such people have not only made fortunes by their ways, but have also served as advisors to different organizations and government bodies inciting hatred and spreading lies within communities which lead to Muslims being discriminated against. One of the reason that such people gained so much credibility and support is their ability to manipulate Muslim scriptures such as the Quran, Ahadith and biographical works, citing and quoting information that exists in our own sources, the very basis of Islam. However in doing so, such people have made the most categorical mistake<sup>4</sup>, and have ignored traditional scholastic approaches in dealing with such information. Prophet Muhammad taught us an axiom that should be the principle of every Muslim in their daily life and that is *leave that which is unauthentic or unsure for that which is authentic or sure*. This is a principle that the Quran teaches us and warns us not to go against:

It is He who has sent down to you, [O Muhammad], the Book; in it are verses [that are] precise - they are the foundation of the Book - and others unspecific. As for those in whose hearts is deviation [from truth], they will follow that of it, which is unspecific, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation [suitable to them]. And no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allah. But that firm in knowledge say, "We

<sup>3</sup> Wrote a book called *The Truth About Muhammad*

<sup>4</sup> Most likely on purpose.

believe in it. All [of it] is from our Lord." And no one will be reminded except those of understanding.<sup>5</sup>

It is without a doubt a clear warning and a clear picture of who such people who take not only ambiguous things as their basis but an ambiguous approach.

In this paper I will discuss the main sources that are used in studying the life of the Prophet Muhammad pbuh and I will show an example of how Orientalists have misused and taken a different approach to such sources in propagating their hatred for Islam. To do this I have divided this paper in 4 sections: The first section will deal with the life of the prophet in the Quran and will touch shortly upon one example or refutation of faulty approach of the Seerah, and that is the claim of the prophet being a slave owner and encouraging slavery. The second will look at the ahadith, while the third will deal with the early sources called Al Magahzi (the Wars). The forth section will deal with the most often used authors Ibn Hisham and Al Tabari.

## THE QURAN AS A SOURCE OF SEERAH

The Quran is by all standards, be it historical, be it contextual, be it religious, be it non religious, the most authentic document in the world. It is more authentic than any history book, more authentic than any religious scripture, more authentic than any document that exists. Why? Well simply because its mutawatir nature, meaning the amount of people who have recorded it, memorized it and passed it on from different times and different places with virtually no difference (other than the Qiraat, which is itself part of the Quran). The Muslims follow a strict line of command in terms of seeking and relating authentic knowledge. The Quran is at the top of the pyramid, the most authentic document that narrates the life of Prophet

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<sup>5</sup> *The Quran*, Abul-Qasim Publishing House, Jeddah, 1997, Suratul Ali Imran vs 7.

Muhammad pbuh. So it is only reasonable that when Muslims want to know about their most revered figure, they go to the Quran first and foremost. The Quran is by consensus of all Muslims, even heretical sects, the word of God, and no one, not even groups such as Nation of Islam and 5 % 'ers deny such a fact. Rather all forms and sects of Islam agree upon the Quran.<sup>6</sup> This is a huge and significant difference for example from Protestants, Catholics, Assyrians, Ethiopians and others. Having said all that, the first step in dealing with the Seerah is to study to Quran, to understand its chapters and verses that deal with the life of the prophet, with his struggle, the issues that he had in his daily life, the call that he was calling to day and night, the morals that he was teaching, the socio-economic platform that he was laying. One of the most important and revolutionary steps that we see prophet Muhammad undertaking in his life is the abolishment of slavery:

But he has not broken to through the difficult pass.

And what can make you know what the breaking through the difficult pass? It is freeing a slave, or feeding on a day of severe hunger an orphan of near relationship or a needy person in misery<sup>7</sup>

The prophet Muhammad pbuh laid a clear foundation on the importance and merit of freeing a slave, something that no person who believed in him at that time (and it soon came that within a few decades the whole Arabian peninsula did), could ignore, as it was the path to paradise. Freeing a slave was equivalent to saving your neck from hellfire, the expiation of sins, the expiation of mistakes, and the expiation of certain oaths that people of that

<sup>6</sup> There have been some individual Shia scholars who claimed that there are some parts missing of the Quran, but their own contemporary colleagues have refuted even such people. Some Christian missionaries always try to point out from ahadith that some parts or the Quran are missing however when scrutinized we see them being blameworthy of the same faulty approach that we are dealing with in this paper.

<sup>7</sup> *The Quran*, Abul-Qasim Publishing House, Jeddah, 1997, Suratul Balad vs 12-16

society were so hasty and making. So it became that within a short period of time, slavery was taking a huge turn towards being extinct. Such events that are clearly stated in the Quran, showing the true character of prophet Muhammad are ignored most of the times by Orientalists and twisted in most cases by skipping the basic steps in approaching the Seerah and looking in places where a piece of a puzzle can be taken by itself loosing all value and all context, only to push an ideological battle of lies and distortions against Muslims. They claim that prophet Muhammad was a slave owner, and they quote different sayings and examples where prophet Muhammad dealt with slaves, took slaves, and gave away slaves. This information is correct, however misquoted and distorted. The prophet came with this revolutionary message of freeing slaves in a society where slavery was at the core of its viability. People were drowned in it, and would not have it otherwise.

Unlike the wisdom of political parties today who change rulings and laws based on their own whims and desires, from day to day, prophet Muhammad understood the principle of gradual change (a principle confirmed by modern Psychology when any drastic change is to be done), and implemented it in the best manner. Slavery was still in the system so he dealt with it and so did his companions, but any time one of them would commit a sin, would do something wrong, they would rush to free a slave as per the new teaching, and it became an issue of will rather than governmental compulsion for this reform to be implemented, something that no system has ever done, especially Christianity which as per the New Testament, is silent on the topic.

People such as Robert Spencer who have ignored all calls by the Muslim community to be honest, have not only ignored the proper approach

towards the subject but have started a whole movement of hatred and lies that has powered Christian groups to violence against Muslims in the West and all over the world. Such people go and give lectures and advice to military bodies, secret service personal that in turn are involved in operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and other Muslim lands. Need we to say more other than check the news to see what happens? Robert and his clan take a shady approach in their writings and expositions, by quoting sayings of the prophet, something that is even easier to misquote than the Quran, and requires even more Muslim scholarship and adherence to a strict way of procedures.

### **THE AHADITH AS A SOURCE OF SEERAH**

The life of prophet Muhammad as per the ahadith or prophetic sayings or narrations of companions is a very important and integral part of the Muslim tradition. It comes second only to the Quran. In the Masjid of the prophet in Medina, every morning after the pre dawn prayer, different scholars are surrounded by their students reciting the sayings from their own memory in many cases, expounding on the narrations, connecting them to other narrations from different collectors, putting them in the context of the Quran, commenting on their authenticity or weakness based on chains of narrations, based on credibility of narrators, and based on the text itself. It is a very compound process that those who want to claim scholarship study for years at the feet of their teachers who have acquired this knowledge in the same way from their teacher who has done the same through a link all the way to the companions who have seen it, and acquired it from the prophet himself. Each link of the chain has to be sound, each procedure has to be solid, each letter and dot checked, and there is no room for any other way.

But of course such a process is only ignored by those who claim western scholarship, and cut short and shot dead at the hands of those who are not only not worthy of being listened to based on their morals and characters, but who are not worthy of being listened to because of their evil plans and the consequences of such plans. We claim to want peace, we claim to be tolerant, and we blame terrorism and extremism on individuals who are zealous and intolerant. However there is something common to extremist terrorist and people like Robert Spencer, Sam Shamoun, Daniel Pipes, Ali Sina and others: they all use the same faulty approach in dealing with the Islamic texts and that is ignoring the traditional way (which originates from the prophet himself), taking their own interpretations, misquotations and deliberate mistranslations. This is what leads to lives being lost, lands being invaded without any remorse, and cultures and society being destroyed.

The approach in studying the prophetic sayings by Orientalists can be compared to what Shaikh Moustafa Zayed said: “If I have 100 dollars in cash and 40 dollars in debts, and you asked about my financial well being, and someone answered: He owes 40 dollars, then he certainly you even though he has stated a fact. However if I owe not one penny and someone claims repeatedly that I have nothing but debts, then our subject case gets in the absurdity mode. I don’t want to ruin your conclusions, but to sum up Robert Spencer’s claims about Islam in one simple analogy: Shaquille O’Neal is such a poor, short, white guy!”<sup>8</sup> People who want to attack Islam, claiming that we as Muslims do the same thing, often ignore the authenticity of the ahadith. As Muslims we have the prerogative to approach the inauthentic ahadith in a

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<sup>8</sup> Zayed Moustafa, *The Lies about Muhammad*, Unknown, 2011, p 16.

different manner as long as they do not contradict established authentic texts, and do not introduce any different or new shariah ruling opposing what is solid evidence previously established. We look at inauthentic ahadith with the intention of trying to fill in the gap where we are lacking information based on authentic ones. Such an approach is what lead the early collectors of the prophet's life to gather all narrations overlooking degree of authenticity (but stating the chains and all the other required information for scholars to sort through them) in order to try to get a full picture of the Seerah. Such honest approaches have turned out to be detrimental in our times as with the dawn of the technological ear, the internet and translations, such information that was meant for Muslims to study (using the proper approach) fell into the hands of non Muslims who have taken high jacked it. I can only give the following analogy to define the situation we are faced with today: a mature person who has a driving license and has gone to driving school and has been driving every day many years, verses a reckless teenager who hijacked his neighbors' car, with his friends, with no driving license, behind the wheel, out for a joy ride, running over innocent pedestrians (Muslims and non Muslims). Such is the case of today's Orientalist and such is the case of those before them with the exception of a few. They try to make prophet Muhammad look like a war lord, a violent person inciting others to violence, digging deep in the ancient texts on the wars that prophet Muhammad fought as part of his revolutionary endeavor.

## AL MAGHAZI AS A SOURCE OF SEERAH

One of the most controversial topics is the war that prophet Muhammad fought during his lifetime. Even though wars are not only at the

base of our existence but at the base of our current societies, Orientalists and Christian missionaries choose to indulge in double standards more than they walk, claiming that prophet Muhammad's time was spent mostly on engaging in wars with different people, killing them, taking prisoners etc. While we can deal with the falsehood of this on many different levels, it is quite interesting and hypocritical that such people choose to make a case (an in many cases a salary) out of pointing these things out to the people of a society that is based on such wars, and not only that, but a society that praises, studies in academic institutions, hangs pictures of historical figures who have done the same thing or even more. Moses, Alexander the Great, Cesar, Napoleon, Christopher Columbus (Don't we celebrate Columbus day?), and many others are historical figures that are admired in our society and culture. So why the double standard when it comes to Muhammad's life. Yes he fought wars, but it was necessary for the removal of the oppression that he was faced with and that his people were faced with. It was necessary to stop the infanticide that was taking place, the slavery and the degrading of women, and the idolatry that was the cause of most of these ills. He reformed society and established values that democracy can only envy, and much like America and other countries do today, he had to go to war, because it was the right thing to do to achieve safety and peace. However prophet Muhammad had more than 100 dollars in his pocket in terms of his civil life, and much less than 40 in debt in terms of his military life. He was a man of kindness and humbleness who used to stop while walking on the street every time he would see children playing, greeting them and whipping over their heads, sprinkling water on their faces and laughing with them. Little girls used to take him by the hand

throughout the city and he would not tell them that he is too busy and that he has to fight a war. He would be in the service of his family and would mend his own shoes and clothes. He would ride a donkey and a camel and would always encourage people to treat their animals kindly. He was married, had children, and cried on many occasions as he was tested with the death of his progeny more than once. If you would walk on him in a gathering you would not see him sitting at the front, actually you would not even recognize him as you would the leaders of the other empires such as the Persian and Roman empires. I could go on and on talking about his civil life. Enough is to point out the shadiness and dishonesty of those who ignore such facts and try to take out of context his military life like it is something unheard of. Hypocrisy is very painful and harms others, especially when one keeps screaming out of the top of his lungs: "Please do not distort our facts, do not misquote our traditions, and do not use inauthentic information".

## IBN HISHAM AND AL TABARI AS SOURCES OF SEERAH

Two of the most renowned and most ancient authors of the Seerah are Ibn Hisham and Al Tabari. They have written on the life of prophet Muhammad extensively, gathering different traditions regardless of their authenticity, in order to try to get a full picture of his life. In doing so of course they were not able to predict that one day such information (not being scrutinized for authenticity except by other scholars) will fall in the hands of people with agendas to destroy Islam who will ignore the author's pleads for caution when dealing with the narrations they have gathered in their books. Orientalists did not seem to understand that such Seerah books are subject to the same scrutiny that other ahadith are, and that certain narrations that are mentioned in such books are present in their most authentic forms

in books such as Bukhari and Muslim who are the most authentic after the Quran. They used different narrations from whichever book seemed to fit their train of thought, having no standard or no measuring stick in doing so, taken from here and there and making a mix of things, as they would create a painting with different shades of colors ignoring any kind of artistic science that pertains to the modality of using such colors in order to create a sound painting. Everything has principles in life, starting from music, to art to education to social interactions, and playing a bunch of musical notes on a guitar, or throwing a bunch of colors on a paper does not make a symphony or a Picasso.

Ibn Hisham editing ibn Ishaq's work is recorded to have said himself about his Seerah that it contains both authentic and fabricated narrations and that only God knows which one is correct.<sup>9</sup> Keeping in mind such a powerful statement how can such be ignored by Orientalists and missionaries when approaching the life of prophet Muhammad? Do they not read the introductions, the author's notes the warning sings and pleads? Do they not care about truth and sincerity, about scholarship and integrity, or is it just the money and the fame, the podium and the advancement of their movement that they are after? Ibn Hisham is without a doubt a great resource for the Muslim scholars, those who have the tools to deal with his text, but it has been sold on the market under the translation of Guillaume, which makes quite a strong attempt to put doubts on the Muslim scholarship from the first page. The second author that the Orientalists often use and misuse is Al Tabari. The book Tarikh ar Rasul wal Maluk is a very comprehensive book which collects different accounts even though on many occasions opposing clear fundamental principles laid out in the Quran. For example we find in it the infamous event of the Satanic Verses,

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<sup>9</sup> Zayed Moustafa, *The Lies about Muhammad*, Unknown, 2011, p 17.

which are a total invention not befitting to the place where it supposed to have been laid even to a five year old Muslim who can read and understand Suratul Najm and it's topic<sup>10</sup>. However Al Tabari and others have recorded it and people like Selman Rushdie have taken it upon themselves and made a fortune and fame on it. First of all it should be mentioned that Al Tabari's book is not a hadith book but a history book thus its authenticity level is far below any hadith book. Going back to the Muslim approach in dealing with texts when studying the life of prophet Muhammad, we analyze the saying of Al Tabari himself who said regarding his own work:

“Let him who examines this book of mine know that I have relied, as regards everything I mention therein which I stipulate to be described by me, solely upon what has been transmitted to me by way of reports which I cite therein and traditions which I ascribe to their narrators, to the exclusion of what may be apprehended by rational argument or deduced by the human mind, except in very few cases. This is because knowledge of the reports of men of the past and of contemporaneous views of men of the present do not reach the one who has not witnessed them nor lived in their times except through the accounts of reporters and the transmission of transmitters, to the exclusion of rational deduction and mental inference. Hence, if I mention in this book a

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<sup>10</sup> No matter how much we have shown the missionaries that such reports are unauthentic they still reproduce the same arguments ignoring any kind of scholarship. The so called Satanic verses do not fit in the surah in any direction and no sensible person would ever believe that prophet Muhammad praised idols in one verse and the rest of the 62 verses deal with condemning idols, and that the idolaters somehow did not get angry or noticed that prophet Muhammad was literally smashing their gods, and not to mention that after having their idols digested and thrown out the window, they all still prostrated at the last verse praising God and God alone, and shunning their idols. It is out right foolishness to believe in such a thing, however the out right foolish insist on doing so.

report about some men of the past, which the reader or listener finds objectionable or worthy of censure because he can see no aspect of truth nor any factual substance therein, let him know that this is not to be attributed to us but to those who transmitted it to us and we have merely passed this on as it has been passed on to us."<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly enough Orientalists continue to deny the Muslims criteria, setting up their own criteria, which is based on their own understanding of scholarship and tradition. It seems that this is a battle that will keep going on forever.

We have taken a deep look at the main sources of Seerah that Muslim scholarship insist be followed and in a certain order I might say, however we have seen the ongoing ignoramus type of approach that Orientalists and missionaries have entertained. We have showed that authenticity is at the base of Muslim scholarship, while integrity of the reporter is one of its main pillars. I remember one scholar saying that based on the science of hadith and the subset called ilmul rijal (the knowledge of men, the character of the reporters), no one in our time, from our historians, politicians, presidents, leaders and others, would be able to stand scrutiny and be accepted as a credible narrator. Yet our world is full of books, full of claims, full of information, full of ideas and philosophies written by people who have a DR. before their name or just lame thugs such as Sam Shamoun and others, while their morals and characters are in the gutter. How can anyone take such people as credible? How can anyone take such people as authorities on a subject so deep as Islam, let alone on anything else?

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<sup>11</sup> Tarikh Al Tabari 1/3 as cited by Waqar Akbar Cheema, *A Compendium of Answers to Allegations Against Islam* vol. 1, Pakistan, 2010, p 21.

