



# THE INTRICATE LABYRINTH OF QUR'ĀNIC REFERENCES IN SĪRAH NABAWIYYAH: AN OVERVIEW OF THE ORIENTALIST WORKS

Ahmad Sanusi Azmi

*Fakulti Pengajian Quran Sunnah, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Bandar Baru Nilai, Negeri Sembilan.*

## Abstract

It is beyond question that Sunni Muslims believe that the most important material providing significant information about the Prophet's life is the Qur'ān. However, taking the Qur'ān as a historical source is a stance that has been disputed by numerous scholars on many different grounds. The most crucial argument concerns the reliability of the text, since the earliest manuscript of the Qur'ān does not date back to Muḥammad's lifetime, and nor was it designed to record a biography or history of a particular person or event. While maintaining the need for rigorous scrutiny, some orientalist have accepted that the Qur'ān has a potential for establishing basic information about the Prophet of Islam. The present study aims to explore the orientalist approaches in their study on the Sīrah and analyse their thought on the nature of connection between the Qur'ān and Sīrah Nabawīyyah. The study employed a descriptive, comparative and critical approach where it analyses and extracts the orientalist's unique approach in explaining the legitimacy of the Prophet's tradition. The study in its finding proposes that there are three major approaches designed by the orientalist in exploring the intricate nature of connection between the Qur'ān and the Sīrah Nabawīyyah.

**Keywords:** Sīrah Nabawīyyah, Qur'ān, Orientalist, Approach, Muḥammad

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\*Ahmad Sanusi Azmi, Faculty of Quranic and Sunnah Studies, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Bandar Baru Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia.  
Email: sanusi@usim.edu.my



## 1. QUR'ĀNIC REFERENCES IN *SĪRAH* LITERATURE AND THE ASSOCIATED PROBLEMS

In the Qur'ān, the Prophet Muḥammad is consistently portrayed in solidly human terms, as a most humane human being. He is presented in his full human nature, and is not associated with any miraculous abilities. Every time when an adversary asks him to perform signs or miracles (*āya*), the Qur'ān asserts continually that signs can come only from God (6:109) and Muḥammad is only a 'messenger' (13:7). By contrast, the way the *Sīrah* presents Muḥammad's attributes seems discrepant with his attributes as depicted in the Qur'ān. He was portrayed as a normal human being in the Qur'ān, while *Sīrah* articulates in detail his capacity to perform miracles since the time he was in the womb of his mother. He was born circumcised (Ibn Hibbān, 1417H; al-Asbahānī, 1986) and accompanied with light, he then fell on the ground, leaning on his hands, raised his head toward Heaven and made a supplication to God immediately after he was born (al-Bayhaqī, 1405H). On the day he was born, fourteen pillars in Kisrā's palace cracked and rolled down, the Persians' sacred fire died down and some churches on Lake Sawā sank and collapsed (Al-Asbahānī, 1986; al-Bayhaqī, 1405H).

All these extraordinary features were aspects of a convention that recurs frequently in the works of *Sīrah*. What is of immediate interest is the references they make to the Qur'ān in an attempt to give a solid value to the doctrine they deliver. For example, to verify the story of the opening of Muḥammad's breast by the angel, they used verse 94:1, even though Muslim exegetical scholars never applied this particular verse to this story before this time. In fact, none of the early *Sīrah* authors (the Prophet biographers) connected this event to any verse of the Qur'ān (such as Ibn Ishāq, al-Wāqidī, Ibn Sa'd and Ibn Hishām.). In later centuries, a few *Sīrah* authors, however, started to make a link between this occasion and chapter 94 of the Qur'ān. Al-Bayhaqī (d.458/1065) and al-Maqrīzī (d.845/1441), were instances of authors who connected this chapter with the remarkable event (al-Bayhaqī, 1405; Al-Maqrīzī, 1999). In his *Dalā'il*, al-Bayhaqī commenced a discussion regarding the opening of Muḥammad's breast by citing the first verse of chapter 94.

## 2. ORIENTALIST APPROACH

Researches and intellectual discourses conducted by the orientalist has led us to believe that it is not an easy

task to comprehend and focus upon the appearance of Prophet Muḥammad through the lens of the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān appears as not a book of biography nor history. Welch concludes: "It contains no historical narrative or description, and it does not have as its purpose the recording of history or biography (Welch, 1983)." The complex nature of its narrative puzzles one who ventures to grasp its message (Totolli, 2004). The intricate grammatical usages urge the reader to apply critical analysis to understand the meaning of its text; and the issue of shifting and fluctuating pronunciations in various verses often mires the researcher in perplexity. For instance, Rippin found that, "There are occasions in the Qur'ān in which we might have thought that the singular would have been more appropriate if Muḥammad were to be seen as the addressee of the text but yet the plural is used; this also happens the other way around (Rippin, 2000)."

In fact, the same problems confront Muslim scholars as they try to discern the real meaning of the Qur'ān, when its frequently opaque and ambiguous wording and lexical structures have led to various interpretations through the centuries. However, some scholars are optimistic about reconstructing the Prophet's biography, based on various extant materials survived in our hand. Faith is the one factor which has facilitated and unravelling the intricate labyrinth which comprises the biography of the Prophet. Faith enables Muslims to understand the core message in scripture. In line with their beliefs, Muslim scholars have developed a clear historical life of Prophet Muḥammad based on the verses embedded in the Qur'ān and the Prophetic traditions. Even though this method has been criticised in academic circles for interpreting sources uncritically, Muslims have put their confidence in the system of *isnād*, by which the chain of authority instituting the biography of Prophet Muḥammad has been well developed and a timeline of his life, has become established within Islam.

While maintaining the need for rigorous scrutiny, orientalist have accepted that the Qur'ān has a potential for actually establishing basic information about the Prophet of Islam. On the basis of the principle "by their fruits you will know them", William Montgomery Watt has deduced an outline of Prophet Muḥammad's history, based on the data found within the Qur'ān itself (Watt, 1988). Alfred T. Welch has delineated the Prophet's characteristics thematically, basing his description exclusively on the verses of the Qur'ān (Welch, 1983), while many

others have regarded the Qur'ān as an authoritative source for reconstructing the historical Muḥammad.

### 3. AN OVERVIEW OF ORIENTALIST STUDY ON THE QUR'ĀN AND *SĪRAH* LITERATURE

In *Sīrah* literature, it is beyond doubt that the Qur'ān has served as a major contributor in the construction of the Prophet's biography. Early Muslim scholars regarded the Qur'ān as the ultimate authority from which to outline a narrative framework and delineate specific incidents in the Prophet's life, a practice still followed in large measure today. In the early nineteenth century, modern scholars appeared to approach material from the *Sīrah* within the framework of a historico-critical method. The translation of *Sīrah* works has elevated the scholarship on *Sīrah* to a higher level of significance. The *Sīrah* of Ibn Ishāq, Ibn Hishām, Ibn Sa'd, al-Ṭabarī and al-Wāqidī are among the *Sīrah* references that have been translated into European languages.

In 1843, Gustav Weil inaugurated an advanced method of analysis, when he applied a historico-critical approach on *Sīrah* texts in his study of the life of Prophet Muḥammad and his introduction to the Qur'ān (Weil, 1843, 1895; Silverstein, 2015; Ali, 2014). Weil apparently notices the close relationship between the Qur'ān and the narratives of the *Sīrah*, when he relates the relative poverty of Muḥammad's early life and the reaction to and treatment of him by the Quraish, as stated in 43:30. In this work, Weil offers an alternative reading of the relationship between the revelation of the Qur'ān and Muḥammad's epilepsy (Almond, 1989). Of Weil's work, Arthur Jeffrey, however, concludes that the limited source of available materials during Weil's period of study confines and constricts his academic investigation. Comments on the use of Qur'ānic verses as references to the Prophet's biography are not as many as appear in later works by Aloy Sprenger and William Muir.

It is worthy of note that in 1851, with his expert medical background, Sprenger provides a remarkable commentary regarding Qur'ānic verses purported to be allusions to the Prophet's early life. In the story of Abraha's invasion, for example, Sprenger, in quoting Reiske's thoughts in highlighting the incident, articulates how small pox broke out at Abraha's camp. Sprenger holds that this disease, as well as measles and croup, had never been known before in Hijāz,

while through the eyes of the Arabs, the event is perceived as a miracle from Allah to protect the Ka'ba (Sprenger, 1851). Commenting on the sources of the *Sīrah*, Sprenger expresses his ideas about the nature of the Qur'ān as the source of *Sīrah*. He asserts that "The Qur'ān contains many passages which are not in harmony with the ideas of the Muslim; and Muḥammad was obliged to make many confessions which were not creditable to him (Sprenger, 1851)." Most of the *Sīrah* sources, according to him, were derived from tradition or *hadith*. Sprenger also appears to be very familiar with the Qur'ān. In certain places, he relates the narratives of the *Sīrah* with ideas that are embedded in the Qur'ān. For example in exploring the story of Zayd of the Adiy, Sprenger explain the influence of Zayd on Muḥammad's thought and the ideas seem presented in many places of the Qur'ān. He also give references from the Qur'ān for few events in the Sira such as the building of the Ka'ba and Muḥammad's early condition. He did not, however, make a further commentary on these types of verses. With regard to the Prophet's early life, Sprenger focuses primarily on the mental and physiological development of the Prophet in the early period.

Although in term of number, Sprenger appear to notice larger number of connection between the events of the Prophet's life and Qur'ānic verses, Muir (1856-1861) sets forth a deeper analysis of the use of the Qur'ān as a source of *Sīrah*. In his introduction, Muir describes meticulously and explores in great detail the genesis, composition and nature of the Qur'ān as major reference for constructing the biography of the Prophet. Critical question are cast in order to scrutinise the reliability of the scripture; and at the end, Muir infers that "Of Muḥammad's biography, the Koran is the keystone (Muir, 1923)." Not only does Muir provide a weighty prolegomenon, but he also examines thoroughly events in the Prophet's early period that appear to have an association with specific Qur'ānic verses. In the event of Abraha's invasion of Mecca, for instance, he finds an apparently anomalous connection between the assault and chapter 105 of the Qur'ān. Commenting on Gibbon's idea, he claims: "Gibbon says of this passage (*sūra al-fīl*) that it is 'the seed' of the marvellous details of Abraha's defeat. But it must have been partially at least the other way (Muir, 1923)." Of Muḥammad's childhood, Muir refers to 93:6, the chapter that is renowned as portraying an image of the Prophet's early condition. Interestingly, the depth of analysis conducted by Muir enables him to interpret further and connect the



narrative of Prophet Muḥammad's encounter with Bahira at Basra with certain verses from the Qur'ān (5:82 and 5:116), even though it was not to be found in Ibn Ishāq's work.

Margoliouth (1905) composes another fascinating Qur'ānic biography. At many junctures in his work, he reconstructs the Qur'ānic version of Prophet Muḥammad's life story. The early condition of the Prophet's life, his experiences travelling on sea and over land, his command of commercial language, his characteristics of a young man of promise, as well as the occasion of the enlarging of his breast, are all, indeed, rendered from scrupulous reading, interpretation and renovation of the Prophet's biography, all based on meticulous Qur'ānic references (Margoliouth, 2003).

#### 4. THREE TYPES OF METHODOLOGIES CONDUCTED BY ORIENTALISTS

An analysis on the orientalist works on the Qur'ān and *Sīrah*, indicates that there are three types of methodologies invented by them in conducting their study on these subjects. Most of the biographies of Prophet Muḥammad within the nineteenth and twentieth century apply similar descriptive methods by critically rereading Qur'ānic references appearing to have connections to the account of Prophet Muḥammad's life, in order to reconstruct the Prophet's biography.

The first group appears to infer that it is quite impossible to reconstruct the *Sīrah* based solely on the Qur'ān. In his quest for the historical Muḥammad, F.E Peters (1994) proposes a critical evaluation about the Qur'ān as the principal reference for the Prophet's life. Questioning the nature of the text, he asserts that: "Even if we were far more certain of the size and sequence of the original revelations recorded in it, the Quran would still not be terribly useful for reconstructing the Meccan milieu nor the life of the man who uttered its words: it is a text without context (Peters, 1994)." A similar problem has been remarked upon by Maxime Rodinson (1968), when he argues that the nature of its verses are always 'enigmatic' (Rodinson, 2002). While Rippin advances an insightful argument in which he levels further critical analysis, questioning the person mentioned in certain verses of the Qur'ān: is the verse really an allusion to Muhammad? (Rippin, 2000). Furthermore, according to Michael Cook (1983), reliance on the Qur'ān would not be able to produce any comprehensive biography of the Prophet, even though some Muslim scholars

have claimed to have completed their works of biography based solely on material in the Qur'ān itself (Cook, 1983). For this particular reason, Robert Hoyland (2007) reiterates the idea that any biography that was to rely only upon the Qur'ān must also be consulted, along with the prophetic hadith (Hoyland, 2007). Moreover, Herbert Berg (2006) insists that "the sources do not evince the Quran's role in the construction of the figure of Muhammad until one has assumed it (Berg, 2006)."

The second approach appear as optimistic on the Qur'ān as a main source for the *Sīrah*. A comprehensive composition was accomplished by William Montgomery Watt. His *Muhammad's Mecca History in the Quran* (1988) is epitomised as a new benchmark of Qur'ānic *Sīrah*, in which he endeavours to establish the Prophet's biography based on an interpretation of Qur'ānic material (Watt, 1988). Basing his work on the references within the Qur'ān, Watt establishes in depth a reconstruction of the specifically Arabian background and Muḥammad's early life. A similar method has also been applied by A.T. Welch (1988) when he compiles an account of the Prophet's characteristics, using Qur'ānic data (Welch, 1988).

A further third group appears to accept the Qur'ān as a source of the Prophet's biography, while simultaneously imposing a critical reading on Qur'ānic texts which produces a new and innovative critical reading of Qur'ānic biography that may be claimed to contradict Islamic tradition reading. For example Watt analysis on the word *ummī* in which according to him connotes 'gentile' rather than 'illiterate' as popularly known in Islamic tradition. Watt also produced another interesting reading of manners of revelation. Scholars such as Muir, and Margoliouth were other individuals that have applied this method.

#### 5. POSSIBLE LACUNA FOR FURTHER STUDY

There persists, indeed, a long list of critical analyses about the Qur'ān and its relation to the *Sīrah*. But apparently one of the aspects that has eluded examination is the use of obscure Qur'ānic verses in establishing prophetic narratives. In fact, there are certain excellent biographies (such as Tor Andrea's (1960) and Michael Cook's) that discuss the early condition of Muḥammad's life, without any observations on the use of Qur'ānic verses by Muslim scholars. Indeed, each author himself, it could be argued, has a different focus of analysis. It is precisely



where this lacuna occurs which need to be analysed by clarification and analysis. For example, the use of chapter 105 of the Qur'ān, the story of the invasion of Abrahā, is often employed as an early sign of the Prophet's emergence. Certainly, Muir, Sprenger and Gibbon have voiced their doubts about the application of this apparently obscure chapter, and assert that it does not reveal any evidence of the advent of the Prophet.

Similar difficulties are encountered when a number of apparently ambiguous verses are also used to outline the Prophet's genealogy, early childhood, and other events in his early life. Therefore, there is indeed, an urgent need to explore and analyse the genesis of Qur'ānic references that have been utilised as an allusion to Prophet Muḥammad's life in the early biography of the Prophet. Questions to be posed will include: what are the Qur'ānic references which are used by the early biographers of Prophet Muḥammad to develop an ideal role model of the Prophet's life? Why do individual authors select particular verses? Did scholars of the same century share a similar understanding of the original Qur'ānic texts? All these questions will be posed, and a response elicited, in order to critically understand the genesis of such Qur'ānic references in the *Sīrah*.

**Nature of Relationship between the Qur'ān and *Sīrah***  
In terms of the nature of relations between the Qur'ān and the Prophet's biography, Henry Lammens (1910) casts forth a stimulating idea. According to him, the *Sīrah*, for the most part, is merely an interpretative form of narrative in which the greater share of the *Sīrah*'s account has its origin in the Qur'ān (Ibn Warraq, 2000). In other words, the *Sīrah* is exegetic in nature; it was created originally as a mechanism to interpret ambiguous verses of the Qur'ān itself; and for this reason, many of the stories in it are invented. In fact, *Sīrah* is an extraction of interpretation of the Qur'ān itself in the form of narrative. Its stories were compiled, which assisted in developing the complete body of the *Sīrah*. Rubin, however, offers a contradictory reading of Lammens's analysis. In the chapter *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, he contends the idea that the *Sīrah* was designed to provide a context for the revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) of the Qur'ān. Based on his painstaking scrutiny of the nature of the connection between the Qur'ān and the *Sīrah*, Rubin concludes that "nothing in the early biographies of Muḥammad seems to corroborate the belief that the material which came to be known as *asbāb al-nuzūl* had its origin in the exegetic expansion of Qur'ānic

verses (Rubin, 1997)." Regarding these two contradictory ideas, Wansbrough agrees with both. According to him, there are two characteristics of narrative techniques that are employed in the *Sīrah*. Firstly, there is the exegetic, namely an extract from the scripture to provide the framework for extended narration. Secondly, there comes the parabolic, in which the narration is itself an allusion to the scripture (Wansbrough, 1978).

## 6. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Taking this point further, the present study suggests that there must be a future study to venture and explore further the nature of connection between the Qur'ān and the *Sīrah* as perceived by orientalist scholars. Either the *Sīrah* is originated from exegetic reading of the Quran or it is a later authentication tools to substantiate the narratives, it would be best to attempt to understand early Muslim thought regarding this, as a starting point, to explore its genesis. Apart from the authoritative nature of the Qur'ān, it is fair and appropriate to examine whether there are any other reasons that inspire Muslim biographers to include Qur'ānic verses in their work. Would there, for instance, be any specific reason why Qur'ānic references were adduced? Is it possible to point to any particular influence such as political or social movements which created a connection between the Qur'ān and the *Sīrah*? The future study must delve deep into early Islamic materials themselves, in order to explore the nature of the connection between the Qur'ān and the *Sīrah*, and arrive at a specifically Muslim understanding of it.

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