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Muhammad: One Story, Multiple Narratives

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Abstract

This paper aims at comparing a few biographies of the Prophet Muhammad. It focuses on the conflicts between Muhammad and the Jews of al-Madīna: Banū Qaynuqā', Banū al-Naḍīr, and Banū Qurayẓa, in six biographies: Ibn Isḥāq and al-Wāqidi from the medieval period and Haykal, al-Ghazāli, Gabriel, and Hazleton from the 20th and 21st centuries. The comparison suggests that both classical and modern *sīra* writers employ various techniques to tell a story that conforms to their viewpoints. *Sīra* works are then creative representations of history rather than factual accounts of it, and as such, they are overloaded with the authors' viewpoints. The paper proposes a way of reading Muhammad's biographies, which distinguishes between story (the objective elements of actions, people, time and place) and discourse (the subjective and/or creative representation of events and people). This analysis of Prophet Muhammad's biographies as including both story and discourse is helpful in understanding both the narrative and people as represented in different biographies.

Key words: Muhammad, Jews of al-Madīna, classical and modern sīra, narrativity

In his book, *The 100: A ranking of the most influential persons in history*, Michael Hart ranks Muhammad as number one. "Today, thirteen centuries after his death," Hart writes, "his influence is still powerful and pervasive."[2] Muhammad continues to exist as a powerful source of stimulation for both

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[2] Hart, Michael. *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*. New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1993, p. 3.

Muslims and non-Muslims. Whereas some are obsessed by Prophet Muhammad to the point of deifying him, some hail all sorts of accusations upon him. Fourteen centuries ago, Quraysh was trying to find out 'how to counter Muhammad without making him seem more important?'[3] They called him a mad poet,[4] lying sorcerer,[5] and obsessed man.[6] "In the twelfth century," as Karen Armstrong states, "Christian monks in Europe insisted that Islam was a violent religion of the sword, and that Muhammad was a charlatan who imposed his religion on a reluctant world by force of arms; they called him a lecher and a sexual pervert."[7] In the 20th and 21st centuries, he was called anti-Semitic,[8] a misogynist,[9] and a terrorist.[10] He is the same Muhammad for the love of whom first Muslims were tortured in the hellish heat of the Arabian desert, on a thin line between life and death, to speak ill of him. But many of them preferred death to utter a word against him.

[3] Hazleton, Lesley. *The first Muslim: The story of Muhammad*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2013, p. 88.

[4] Qur'an 37:36; Qur'an 36:69.

[5] Qur'an 38:4.

[6] Qur'an 25: 8.

[7] Armstrong, Karen. *Muhammad: A prophet of our time*. New York: HaperCollins, 2007, p. 5.

[8] Hazleton, 186.

[9] Shin, Howard. *The Dividing Worldviews of Jesus and Muhammad*. Indiana: WestBow Press, 2015, p. 33.

[10] Bukay, David. *From Muhammad to Bin Laden: Religious and Ideological Sources of the Homicide Bombers Phenomenon.* New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2008.

Indeed, after centuries of describing his life, one still wonders who the true Muhammad is.[11] The question: which biography is not biased, asked particularly by young readers who would like to know Muhammad, is not infrequent.[12] Many people, seeing the complete devotion of Muslims to Prophet Muhammad, as well as the total rejection of him by some others, find themselves between a rock and a hard place.[13] This paper proposes a way of reading Muhammad's biographies. To start with, I argue that the true Muhammad cannot be found in *sīra* works, which are creative representations of history rather than factual accounts of it, and as such, they are overloaded with their authors' viewpoints. As a result, we need to distinguish between story (the objective elements of actions, people, time and place) and discourse (the subjective and/or creative representation of events and people). In addition, reading Muhammad's biographies side by side helps seeing the events from more than one perspective. The assumption is that if story (objective elements of narratives) and discourse (subjective elements of representation) are distinguished, we will be able to understand both events and

[11] Hazleton, pp. 3-4.

[12] Similar questions are posted on-line:
https://www.reddit.com/r/history/comments/42o4a8/objective_biographies_of_the_prophet_muhammad/
https://www.quora.com/What-are-some-unbiased-books-about-the-origin-and-history-of-Islam
https://www.quora.com/Which-are-some-of-the-best-biographies-of-Prophet-Mohammad

[13] As Richard Henry Drummond claims, there is a need for "a fair and balanced presentation of the life of Muhammad," particularly in the Western world today. See: Drummond, Richard Henry. *Understanding Muhammad and the Kuran: Islam for the Western mind.* Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, 2005, p. 25.

people better. The paper analyzes the major narratives that involve Muhammad and the three Jewish tribes of Madīna: Banū Qaynuqā‘, Banū al-Naḍīr, and Banū Qurayẓa. Although the story in the three narratives is quite similar, the representation of the events and people vary greatly.

A narrative is “anything that tells or presents a story, be it by oral or written text, picture, performance, or a combination of these”.[14] Narrative theorists distinguish between the story and discourse of a narrative or the *way* and *how* of a narrative as Seymour Chatman calls them.[15] The difference is between the series of events in an episode and the manner in which these events are presented. That is to say, even when the story is the same, it can be presented variously. This is confirmed by Hayden White, who argues that history relies on narrative for meaning, and so purely factual history is far-fetched.[16] Similarly, Boaz Shoshan believes that “the historiographical text, even when believed, or better still, ‘proven,’ to be factual, often adds up to more than the sum of its facts.”[17]

H. Porter Abbott explains that any story is composed of events or actions in addition to the entities who or which carry out, react to, and/or are affected by

[14] Jahn, Manfred. “Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative,” *English Department, University of Cologne*, no. 2.1.2 (2017): http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppn.htm

[15] Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978, p. 9. See also: Shen, Dan. “Narrative, Reality and Narrator as Construct: Reflections on Genette’s Narration”. *Narrative 9*, 2002, pp. 123-9.

[16] White, Hayden. *Metahistory. The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1973.

[17] Shoshan, Boas. *Poetics of Islamic Historiography: Deconstructing Tabari’s History*. Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2004, p. xviii.

the events.[18] An optional third element, according to Abbott, is the setting, i.e. the time and place of events. In this sense, the story can be defined as a chronologically ordered series of actions, which involve some entities, and occur in a certain time and place.

The story is straightforward. The discourse is not. Discourse includes so many variables that are difficult to squeeze into any one model. However, Gérard Genette practically reduces these variables into "three basic classes of determination."[19] These are tense, mood, and voice. Tense is concerned with the story-discourse relationship in terms of time. It includes three factors: order, duration, and frequency. The order of events is supposed to be direct and chronological just as normal events are observed from a single perspective in real life. But some narratives can start at the middle or even the end and go back after that to the beginning. These are called analepses. Analepses can be one of three types: (a) external, i.e. providing background to the narrative by introducing events which take place before the narrative; (b) internal, i.e. filling gaps in the narrative by introducing events which take place later; or (c) lateral, i.e. providing parallel narratives. Duration refers to how much discourse is given to a certain event, or how much time the narrator devotes to a certain event. For example, ten years in one's life can be given just one page, or, from a different perspective, they can be given a whole trilogy. Finally, frequency refers to how many times a narrative is referred to or mentioned.

Mood has to do with distance. "The narrative can furnish more or fewer details, rendered in a more or less direct way, and can thus seem to keep at a

[18] Abbott, H. Porter. *The Cambridge introduction to narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 17.

[19] Henderson, Brian. "Tense, mood and voice in film (Notes after Genette)." *Film Quarterly*, 36(4), 1983, p. 5.

greater or lesser distance from what it tells."[20] The contrast is between mimesis- i.e. direct imitation without intermediary as in direct speech, and diegesis- i.e. the narration of the story. Voice refers to focalization, i.e. whose viewpoint is expressed. Focalization is "a matter of getting things in focus when looking through some device or other such as a telescope, binoculars, a microscope, or a mind/body compound considered as a focalizing apparatus."[21]

In short, the model of narratology used for the purpose of this study distinguishes between story (actions, entities, and setting) and discourse. Discourse covers the three aspects of tense (particularly the order of events), mood (directness and the amount of details provided) and voice (who's viewpoint is presented). This model is used to analyze the conflicts between Muhammad and the Jews of al-Madīna in six biographies: Ibn Isḥāq[22] and al-Wāqidi[23] from the medieval period and Haykal,[24] al-Ghazāli,[25] Gabriel,[26] and Hazleton[27] from the 20th and 21st centuries. The paper focuses on the three narratives of Banū Qaynuqā', Banū al-Naḍīr, and Banū Qurayẓa. The three

[20] Ibid, 13.

[21] Miller, J. Hillis. "Henry James and 'focalization,' or why James loves Gyp. In *A companion to narrative theory*. Edited by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz. Malden, USA: Blackwell, 2005, p. 125.

[22] ibn Isḥāq, Muhammad. *Al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya*. Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, n.d..

[23] ibn Omar al-Wāqidi, Muhammad. *History of Muhammad's Campaigns*. Edited by Alfred von Kremer. Calcutta: J. Thomas, Baptist Mission Press, 1856.

[24] Haykal, Muhammad Hussain. *Ḥayāt Muḥammad* (14th ed). Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n.d..

[25] al-Ghazāli, Muhammad. *Fiqh al-Sīra.* Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, n.d..

[26] Gabriel, Richard A.. *Muhammad: Islam's first great general*. USA: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007.

[27] Hazleton, Lesley. *The first Muslim: The story of Muhammad*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2013.

incidents are given due attention in most of Muhammad's biographies, and they raise controversy about the personality of Muhammad. I take these three significant narratives to examine how the story of Muhammad has been presented differently in different biographies. The purpose is not to evaluate the authenticity of each biography but to analyse how various narrative techniques are used by each biographer to present the story from a certain perspective, and the effects of employing such techniques.

Biographies of Muhammad through Time

Biographies of Muhammad appeared as early as few decades after his death and continue to appear up till now with a dozen of biographies each century. The earliest which survived is *Sīrat Rasūli Lah* by Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767). It is reported that al-Mansur (d. 775), the second Abbasid Caliph, asked Ibn Isḥāq to write a comprehensive history book for the Caliph's son, al-Mahdi. Ibn Isḥāq collected the oral traditions and created a book covering narratives from the creation of Adam to the life story of Muhammad. The biography being written as a textbook for the Caliph's son raises the question of whether Ibn Isḥāq wrote his book to describe and explain or to teach and inspire.[28] For Chase F. Robinson, the purpose of early biographers of Jesus and Muhammad was to teach and

[28] Chase F. Robinson believes that "For most Christian and Muslim historians, the purpose of history was generally not to test, probe or explain, nor to provide an accounting for all events that correspond precisely with what had once happened. On occasion it *could* be some of these, but it was usually many other things, the most common being to teach and inspire by illustrating and exemplifying." See: Robinson, Chase F.. *Islamic historiography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 12.

inspire, and so these "constitute evidence for the history of ideas rather than the history of two people".[29]

Ibn Isḥāq's book was later used by two Muslim scholars: Ibn Hishām (d. 833) and al-Ṭabari (d. 923), thanks to whom, most of Ibn Isḥāq's original work has survived to this day. Ibn Hishām's biography of Prophet Muhammad can be seen as a revised edition of Ibn Isḥāq's work. He added, deleted, and commented on it, but he also carefully documented what had come from Ibn Isḥāq's work. Al-Ṭabari also used Ibn Isḥāq's material although al-Ṭabari relied on far more resources than just Ibn Isḥāq's. Later, scholars have used these two resources to re-assemble Ibn Isḥāq's work. This fact is and will continue to be a limitation on any study of Ibn Isḥāq's work as it is not clear to what extent Ibn Isḥāq's editors have been faithful to his work.[30] In spite of that, Ibn Isḥāq's work, according to the majority of scholars, is among the most important biographies of Muhammad.

Among other early *sīra* works is al-Wāqidi's *Maghāzi*. Al-Wāqidi (d. 823) was a historian and biographer of Muhammad, particularly known for his work on Muhammad's raids and battles. Al-Wāqidi's approach in collecting the oral traditions is outstanding as he used a rigorous scholarly historical method. It is reported that Wāqidi said, "I never caught up with a descendent or servant of a

[29] Ibid.

[30] See: Little, Donald P.. "Narrative themes and devices in al-Wāqidī's Kitāb al-maghāzī," in *Reason and inspiration in Islam – Theology, philosophy and mysticism in Muslim thought: Essays in honour of Hermann Landolt*, edited by Todd Lawson. London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers in association with The Institute if Ismaili Studies, 2015, p. 44; see also: Conrad, Lawrence I.. "Recovering lost texts: Some methodological issues." *Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 113*, No. 2 1993, p. 260.

companion or martyr without meeting him. 'Did you hear someone among your family talking about the battle scene and where he was killed?' I ask. And if he gives me an account, I would go to the place and check it myself."[31] Among the distinctive features of his *sīra* work are recording all the narrators whose narratives he documented, the date of each campaign, as well as a detailed geographical description of the area where the events took place.[32]

As far as modern biographies of Muhammad are concerned, *The Life of Muhammad* by Muhammad Hasnein Haykal was written in the 1930s. Muhammad Hasanein Haykal (1956-1988) wass an Egyptian writer and politician. With a PhD in law from Sorbonne University, Haykal had been working as a lawyer for ten years before moving to journalism, where he was elected as editor-in-chief of *Al-Siyāsa* newspaper, which is affiliated to 'The Liberal Constitutionalist Party.' He was also appointed as the Minister of Education in more than one government and introduced several reforms in education. Haykal was influenced by modernist reforms introduced by Muhammad Abdu and Qasim Amin. Haykal claimed that his first and most reliable source for writing the biography of Muhammad is the Qur'an, particularly when it contains a reference to an incident in the life of the Prophet. In addition, Haykal consulted the classical biographies, particularly *Sīra* of Ibn Hishām, *Ṭabaqāt* of Ibn Sa'd, and *Maghāzi* of al-Wāqidi. What makes Haykal's biography of Muhammad different from many other Arabic biographies is that he engaged in a dialogue with Western scholars and orientalists such as Èmile Dermenghem and Washington Irving. Another significant aspect of Haykal's biography is the psychological analysis it contains. He believed that

[31] See: Jones, Marsden. *Muqaddimat al-taḥqīq: kitab al-maghāzi li-al Wāqidi*. Cairo: 'ālam al-kutub, 1984, p. 6

[32] Ibid, 31.

advancement in psychological research helps explain many incidents that have been inexplicable for centuries.

Furthermore, Halykal claimed to follow the methods which are already acknowledged in the Western academia. He believed that since the earliest biographies were written more than a century after the death of the Prophet and themselves were influenced by various conditions, then the only way to accept or refute any narrative is by research and rational analysis. He also claimed that his book is for Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and that he is after truth alone regardless of the source.

In 1965, Muhammad al-Ghazāli (1917-1996) wrote *Fiqh al-Sīra* (Understanding the Life of Prophet Muhammad). Muhammad al-Ghazāli is known for his modern understanding of the Qur'an, and so he attracts a large following. In fact, the title he chose for the biography expresses a deeper and more critical understanding of *sīra*. In his preface, he states that he makes use of works of both modern and pre-modern historians, but does not follow the methodology of either. He explains that, contrary to pre-modern historians who care most for collecting and recording details, modern historians are more inclined to analysing, comparing, and synthesising the events into a consistent whole. For al-Ghazāli, both recording and synthesising details into a consistent whole are important. But the problem is to find a theme that ties together the different events in the Prophet's life. For al-Ghazāli, what makes the Prophet's life one unit is spirituality. He claimed that his purpose of writing *sīra* was to nurture faith and purify souls. *Sīra* should not be seen, as al-Ghazāli stated, as a form of entertainment, but rather as a source for inspiration. For him, Muslim's love for their Prophet is as great as the distance between their lives and the Prophet's life. Subsequently, Al-Ghazāli wrote *sīra* with the purpose of bringing Muslims closer to their faith.

One prominent feature of al-Ghazāli's biography of Muhammad is the footnotes, which confirm his view that *sīra* should not be a story for entertainment, but rather a serious thought-provoking work.[33] Most of the footnotes are comments on *Ḥadīth* by the well-known Islamic scholar Muhammad Naṣruddin al-Albāni (1914-1999). Al-Albāni was a specialist in *Ḥadīth* and has taught *Ḥadīth* at the Islamic University of Madīna. He was also an active writer and published chiefly on *Ḥadīth* and its sciences. The contribution of al-Albāni to the book is significant as it provides an assessment of the validity of the sources as well as of the *Ḥadīth* al-Ghazāli relies on.

Nevertheless, al-Ghazāli, as he explained himself, has his own approach to *Ḥadīth*. He included weak *Ḥadīth* when they do not contradict with the Qur'an. For example, although al-Albāni classifies the following *Ḥadīth* as weak: "Love Allah for the bounties He bestows upon you and love me for the love of Allah," al-Ghazāli does not find a reason not to use it. On the contrary, he does not accept the *Ḥadīth* of the Battle of Banū Muṣṭaliq as narrated in Bukhāri and Muslim and accepts a version narrated by Al-Ṭabari although that latter version is considered weak by al-Albāni. The *Ḥadīth* as narrated by Bukhāri and Muslim suggests that Prophet Muhammad has attacked Banū Muṣṭaliq all of a sudden, which is inconsistent with the logic of Islam and the character of the Prophet according to al-Ghazāli. Al-Ghazāli believes that the *Ḥadīth* as narrated by Bukhāri and Muslim can only be a later stage of the incident, i.e. after hostilities has already started, when, as a war strategy, the

[33] As Robinson explains, the elimination of isnād marks a stage of development from early to modern Muslim historiography. It has been also a solution for the problem of book size. See Robinson, p. 97.

Prophet had to deceive Banū Muṣṭaliq and take them by surprise, as the narrative of Ṭabari suggests.

Al-Ghazāli claimed that he was not the first to adopt that approach and that most scholars, challenged with re-evaluation of *Ḥadīth*, go along similar lines of thought. It is the conformity to Islamic principles as derived from the *Qur'an* and *Sunna* that should be the basis for accepting or rejecting *Ḥadīth*. Al-Ghazāli used the same approach in writing the Prophet's biography. In his introduction, he states that he accepts what conforms to the *Qur'an* and *Sunna* and rejects what contradicts with them. In a nutshell, one can say that Al-Ghazāli has been selective as his biography encompasses features of both classical and modern *sīra*. Thus, he kept the *isnād* (although in the modern form of footnotes), and at the same time, was critical of the various narratives. As he claimed, he tried to describe the life story of Prophet Muhammad as a live example of how the principles of Islam have once been applied fully in life.

Contrary to al-Ghazāli who wrote as "a soldier would write about his leader," Lesley Hazleton looks at the life story of Muhammad from the perspective of an outsider. She believes that "[t]o idealize someone is also, in a way, to dehumanize them, so that despite the millions if not billions of words written about Muhammad, it can be hard to get any real sense of the man himself."[34] Hazleton writes about Muhammad, the man. She believes that

> "[f]or Muslims worldwide, Muhammad is the ideal man, the prophet, the messenger of God, and though he is told again and again in the Quran to say, 'I am just one of you'- just a man – reverence and love cannot resist the desire to clothe him, as it were, in gold and silver."[35]

[34] Hazelton, p. 4.

[35] Hazelton, p. 3.

Like all biographers of Muhammad in modern times, Hazleton's main sources are the early Islamic histories. In particular, she depends on Ibn Isḥāq and Ṭabari. In her work, she mainly raises the question of the differences between early Muslim historians and modern historians. Whereas modern historians use more analysis, historiographers of early Islam care more about recording all accounts even when they contradict one another. Here lies the importance of writing a modern biography of Muhammad, a biography that allows Muhammad "the integrity of reality and see[s] him whole."[36]

Similarly, Richard Gabriel writes about Muhammad the man, and not the Prophet. He believes that it is the religious analysis that "ha[s] sometimes made biographies of the Prophet partisan and unreliable."[37] Gabriel's biography, then, is different from many Muslim biographies which do not only include religious analysis, but are actually written as an expression of love and awe to the Prophet. Gabriel's biography is a military biography, and so it belongs to the genre of *Maghāzi*. In spite of that, as he claims, "the social, economic, and cultural environments in which Muhammad lived are also addressed insofar as they had an important influence on his military life."[38] As for Gabriel's resources, he uses the *Qur'an* as the most reliable source of information on Muhammad's military life, particularly when that aspect of his life is addressed directly in the *Qur'an*. Next to the *Qur'an* comes Ibn Isḥāq's work on the life story of Muhammad, and finally *Ḥadīth*. The reason why Gabriel believes that *Ḥadīth* should come after Ibn Isḥāq's biography, and not before, is that *Ḥadīth* "as a historical source… can at best be regarded as repetitious of those accounts within Ibn Isḥāq's work

[36] Hazelton, p. 5.

[37] Richard Gabriel, p. xviii.

[38] Richard Gabriel, p. xviii.

or at worst as misleading and inaccurate because of the bias of the extrapolators themselves who interpret the reports."[39]

The biographies selected for this study include different methods of research and different perspectives. Whereas one of the major contributions of early biographers such as Ibn Isḥāq and Wāqidi is keeping a record of the various narratives, modern biographers such as al-Ghazāli, Haykal, Hazelton, and Gabriel focus on analyzing the narratives and synthesizing them into a whole that explains Muhammad's life. Whereas al-Ghazāli and Haykal are writing the story of the Prophet of Islam from the perspective of Muslims, Hazleton and Gabriel are writing about Muhammad, the man, from the perspective of outsiders. In addition, while some biographers deal with all aspects of Muhammad's life, Wāqidi and Gabriel focus on military actions and decisions. What is common, however, among all these biographies is that the story does not greatly change as do the representation of the actors and events in the story.

Outline of Three Conflicts

Banū Qaynuqā'. The story of Banū Qaynuqā' starts with a marketplace incident in which a man from Qaynuqā' is said to harass a Muslim woman, and is killed by a Muslim passer-by who sees the incident. Other Jews join the fight and kill the Muslim instead of referring the killer to Muhammad as an arbitrator as their covenant with Muhammad states. Muhammad besieges Banū Qaynuqā'. Ibn-Ubayy intervenes as an arbitrator and Muhammad agrees that Banū Qaynuqā' would leave al-Madīna.

Banū al-Naḍīr. As for Banū al-Naḍīr, the story starts with Muhammad's visit to them when he is seeking financial support to pay blood money for two

[39] Richard Gabriel, pp. xxx, xxxi.

people killed by mistake by Muslims. Banū al-Naḍīr agree to help him, but Muhammad discovers that they have been plotting to kill him. As a result, he besieges Banū al-Naḍīr. Eventually, Banū al-Naḍīr capitulates, and Muhammad allows them to leave al-Madīna with some of their goods.

Banū Qurayẓa. In the third conflict, Banū Qurayẓa collaborates with the disbelievers in their battle against the Muslims. Upon return from the battle, Muhammad besieges Banū Qurayẓa, who agrees to arbitration by Sa‘d ibn Mo‘ādh. Sa‘d ibn Mo‘ādh’s decision is to kill all men and make all children and women captives.

Muhammad’s Biographies as Narratives

It is interesting to notice that the time span that early Muslim biographers cover is broad. They do not write a traditional biography that tells the story of an individual or even the story of a family. They set the life story of Muhammad as part of the history of humanity, which starts with the creation of Adam and continues up till Prophet Muhammad. [40] This is different from modern biographies which time span is Muhammad’s birth and death. In this sense, early biographers radically change the concept of a narrative which has a beginning, climax and end[41]. In addition, by setting the life story of Muhammad as part of

[40] See Clifford Greetz who defines religion as a system of symbols that helps formulate a general order of existence. Greetz, Clifford. “Religion as a cultural system.” In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Seleccted Essay*, Clifford Greetz. New York: Basic Books, 1973, pp. 87-125.

[41] See Brian Richardson who analyses some postcolonial narratives as interrogating and extending “the traditional concept of plot.” Since these authors write about extended periods of time, they “radically expand the conventional limits to the concept of a story.” Richardson, Brian. “U.S. ethic and postcolonial fiction: Toward a poetics of

the history of humanity, early biographers convey their understanding of life while they divide the vast chaotic history of man into simpler interpretable whole and the life of the Prophet itself as part of a divine plan. This extended context, in which the reader is invited to see Muhammad as a Prophet, affects all other narratives including the narratives of Banū Qaynuqā‘, Banū al-Naḍīr, and Banū Qurayẓa.

For example, Ibn Isḥāq and al-Wāqidi blame the Jews of al-Madīa for disbelieving in Muhammad's prophethood, and they see that as the main root of conflict. Ibn Isḥāq starts the story of Banū Qaynuqā‘ with what Genette calls *external analepses*.[42] External analepses describe events which take place before the narrative and which can serve as a background for the narrative. Before the conflict of Banū Qaynuqā‘, according to Ibn Isḥāq, the Prophet assembles Banū Qaynuqā‘ in their marketplace and warns them of misfortune similar to that which has befallen Quraysh in the Battle of Badr if they do not believe in his prophethood. Banū Qaynuqā‘ respond that they are real fighters and far greater than the unskilled fighters of Quraysh. So, the roots of tension go back to these events. Next to this introductory narrative, Ibn Isḥāq mentions the Qur'anic verses that Ibn ‘Abbās says they must have come down about Banū Qaynuqā‘. These verses provide a conclusion to the story: "[y]ou will be overcome and gathered to Hell."[43] Focalizing the story from the lenses of the Qur'an positions the Muslim reader to be strongly against Banū Qaynuqā‘. Wāqidi reminds the

collective narratives." In *Analyzing world fiction: New horizons in narrative theory*, edited by Frederick Luis Aldama. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992, pp. 5, 3-16.

[42] Genette, Gerard. *Narrative discourse: An essay in method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. New York: Cornell University Press, 1983, p. 40.

[43] Qur'an 3: 12.

reader at the beginning of the narrative of the covenant between the Jews of Madīna and Prophet Muhammad, and how Banū Qaynuqā‘ have been the first Jewish tribe to breach that covenant.

Similarly, Al-Ghazāli starts his narrative with how the Muslims have expected the Jews to be their supporters against the polytheists, given the commonalities between the two religions, but the Jews, just as they disbelieve in Jesus, disbelieve in Muhammad and do their best to demolish the new Muslim state. Al-Ghazāli, like Ibn Isḥāq and Wāqidi, refers to how the Jews challenge the Muslim army after Badr, and how the Qur'an warns them of misfortune. Haykal introduces his narrative with how the Jews of al-Madīna are concerned after the killing of Abu ‘Afk, ‘Aṣmā’, and Ka‘b ibn al-Ashraf for their sarcasm and/or conspiracy against the Prophet. Such incidents deepen the Jews' hatred for and apprehension of the Muslims. Their hatred emerges in the incident of the market, in which a man from Qaynuqā‘ is said to harass a Muslim woman.

Hazleton introduces her narrative in a similar manner. She also refers to the already tense relationship between Muslims and Jews, but she focalises the whole narrative from the lenses of politics,[44] and thus provides another version of the background to the exile of Banū Qaynuqā‘. On the part of the Jews, "Medina's three Jewish tribes had already been outnumbered by the arrival of the Aws and Khazraj in the fifth century, and now, with the rapid expansion of Muhammad's influence, they feared being marginalized further". On the part of Muhammad, he "was deeply disappointed by Jewish resistance to his message, it was equally clear that he needed to establish himself as no longer a man to disappoint".[45] So, the Jewish clans, on the one hand, are unhappy about the expansion of Muhammad, and Muhammad, on the other hand, wants a chance to

[44] "The real issue was not religious but political" (Hazleton, 149).

[45] Hazleton, p. 149.

affirm his status as the authority in al-Madīna. He finds Banū Qaynuqā‘, the smallest and weakest of the three clans, a good path towards his goal.

Richard Gabriel refers to the tension between Muslims and Jews before the exile of Banū Qaynuqā‘, but he sees the roots of tension in both religion and politics. The Jews have been hostile to Muhammad's claims to prophethood as well as to his expansive political power in al-Madīna. For Muhammad, if the three Jewish tribes decide to unite, they will definitely threaten his authority.

> "Of the Jewish tribes – Banū an-Nadir, Banū Qurayzah, and Banū Qaynuqa – the Qaynuqa alone were said to have three hundred soldiers with armor and four hundred without armor. The other two Jewish clans were either larger in absolute numbers or had stronger alliances with the Aws and Kazrai."[46]

Muhammad decides to attack the weakest. They "were goldsmiths and armorers and owned no fields; they had their own compounds and a small marketplace where they traded and sold their wares."[47] Like Hazleton, Gabriel blames Muhammad, who had his political and military plans, and has waited for a chance to implement them.

Regardless of which interpretation the introductory narratives serve, the technique itself is noteworthy. In particular, the way early biographers introduce their narratives indicate that they, by no means, are mere compilers of reports.[48] They have their own perspective, and they select the framework, which best serves their purpose. In this context, Ibn Isḥāq stands out. Ibn Isḥāq moves from the past (flashback) to the future (flash-forward) and then back to the present (the narrative). His flashback is the breach of the covenant by the Jewish clan, and

[46] Gabriel, p. 104.

[47] Gabriel, p. 104.

[48] See Robinson.

the flash-forward is their punishment as described in the Qur'an. By doing so, Ibn Isḥāq sets his viewpoint clearly. Regardless of what happens in the narrative of Banū Qaynuqā', they have breached their covenant with the Prophet, and so God punishes them.

Another narrative technique which is used to emphasize a certain interpretation is *focalisation*. I have already mentioned that the different introductions given by the above biographers serve to focalise the narrative from a particular perspective. Ibn Isḥāq, for example, focalises the narrative from the lenses of the Qur'an, whereas, Hazleton and Gabriel focalise the narrative from the lenses of politics and the military. In addition, some events can be focalised through the eyes of certain characters, that is, "who sees?" For example, in their description of the marketplace conflict, both Haykal and al-Ghazāli focus on the Arab woman. They add adjectival and adverbial phrases that reflect the position of the Arab woman and indicate the sneakiness of the Jew. According to Haykal, the Jew comes from behind the woman to tie the hem of her dress to a post.[49] Al-Ghazāli says that the woman has been unaware of the Jew, and when standing up and becoming exposed, she cries out for help.

Richard Gabriel describes the Banū Qaynuqā' marketplace conflict as follows: "The immediate cause of the break with the Jews was an altercation that occurred in the Qaynuqa marketplace involving some sort of indecency to a Muslim woman. Both Hamza and Ali, two of the Apostle's closest companions, were involved, leading one to suspect that the confrontation was deliberately provoked."[50] Gabriel invites readers to look at the incident from the perspective of deliberate provocation. He describes Hamza and Ali as sitting and watching the incidents unfolding, waiting for the right moment to become involved.

[49] Haykal, p. 291.

[50] Gabriel, pp. 104-105.

The difference between classical and modern biographies of Muhammad can be explained in terms of Harry Shaw's two categories of narrative communication.[51] Harry Shaw sees narrative communication as belonging to one of two broad categories. The first focuses on external information and immediate perception:

> "If you observe two people conversing, you can take an objective stance in which you concentrate on what they are saying, on who is talking and who is listening, on whether the person who is telling the story is recounting his or her own experience or that of another (and in the latter case, if he or she does so by enacting the other person's words and actions or summarizing them), and so on."[52]

The second category of narrative communication goes beyond immediate perception as it tries to enter the mind of the speaker and see what s/he is thinking of.[53] Modern biographies belong to this latter category. In particular, Haykal and Hazleton try to explain the events in terms of what a character might be thinking of.

[51] The difference is also explained by Chase F. Robinson, who believes that early Muslim biographers "were generally interested not so much in what made their subjects unique as in what made them exemplary, and they favoured in their modes of characterization the external (appearance, speech, the sequence of events and actions) over the internal." By contrast, a modern biographer is expected to "get under the skin of his subject, to explain how and why he is in some way unique or exceptional – to show, perhaps most important of all, how he is in some way to be who he was" (Robinson, 61-64).

[52] Shaw, Harry E.. "Why won't our terms stay put? The narrative communication diagram scrutinized and historicized." In *A companion to narrative theory*, edited by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz. MA/ USA: Blackwell, 2005, pp. 299-311.

[53] Shaw, Harry E., p. 300.

According to Hazleton, in Muhammad's mind are disappointment and anger. He is so confident that the Jews will support him against the polytheists, that when they disappoint him, his reactions are exaggerated. According to Hazleton,

> "It may be only human to feel the most bitterness not for declared enemies but for those to whom one once felt closest. Only they have the ability to disappoint deeply. The sense of disloyalty—"How could you?"—cuts deep, not least because it's a defense against realizing how much had been assumed, mistaking friendship for unqualified support. When such expectations fall short, there's a tendency to experience this as the fault of the other, and to see it as personal betrayal."[54]

Furthermore, Hazleton invites the reader to see the narrative through the eyes of Banū Qaynuqā'. "The last thing Qaynuqa wanted was to be caught in the middle of a power struggle like this." They see Muhammad's siege as "an over-reaction on his part" and "demonstration of his power and authority."[55] Then the reader is invited to read Ibn Ubayy's mind on his way "to intercede."[56] "The Qaynuqa had been loyal to him, and now his loyalty to them was on the line – his reputation, that is, as a leader of integrity with the power to protect his allies. But the only weapon he had was outrage."[57] By this psychological analysis of the characters, Hazleton hopes to help the reader understand the story better.

Similarly, psychological analyses dominate Haykal's work. He introduces the narrative of Banū al-Naḍīr by describing the mood at al-Madīna after the battle of Bi'r Ma'ūna. On the one hand, "Muhammad was greatly

[54] Hazleton, p. 147.

[55] Hazleton, p. 151.

[56] Hazleton, p. 151.

[57] Hazleton, p. 151.

disturbed and deeply grieved for the deaths of Muslims at Bi'r Ma'ūna". On the other hand,

> "For *al-munāfiqūn* and the Jew of al-Madīna, the afflictions of the Muslims in al-Rajī' and Bi'r Ma'ūna were evocative of the victory of Quraysh in Uhud. They criticized the Muslim victory over Banū Asad, and their dread from Muhammad and his companions waned. …[Muhammad] assumed that there would be nothing better than forcing them into betraying their intentions."[58]

He also gives us a hint of the feelings of the Jews of Banū al-Naḍīr as he uses a flashback to the killing of Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf: "[t]hey seemed as if they were mentioning the killing of Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf."[59] Muhammad sees their suspicious moves and withdraws back to al-Madīna, leaving Banū al-Naḍīr confused as much as his companions.

Muhammad's biographies can also be analysed in terms of Ganette's mood. [60] Mood refers to closeness to events which the narrator pretends to have, and hence the amount of details he is able to provide. Probably the clearest example is why Prophet Muhammad suddenly leaves Banū al-Naḍīr. Ibn Isḥāq, and al-Ghazāli report that he gets revelation about Banū al-Naḍīr's conspiracy, whereas, Wāqidi says that Muhammad leaves as if to answer a call of nature.[61] Hazleton favors Wāqidi's report, whereas, Gabriel prefers a deeper drive: "hearts have changed."[62] Robinson suggests that these varied representations result from the preference of the historian:

[58] Haykal, p. 319.

[59] Haykal, p. 319.

[60] Henderson, Brian. "Tense, mood and voice in film (Notes after Genette)." *Film Quarterly, 36*(4), 1983, p. 13.

[61] Wāqidi, p. 355.

[62] Gabriel, p. 128.

> "For every historian who suppresses a fact or point of view, one can usually find another who provides it; and for every historian with a taste for the miraculous and legendary, one can usually find another with a nose for documentary materials (or another who embraces both)."[63]

The difference can also be explained in light of the distance between the narrator and what is narrated. By citing something which is very private like answering a call of nature, Wāqidi presents himself as someone who is very close to the incidents.

Wāqidi also gives the impression that he is close to the events from his depiction of characters. Like Hazleton and Haykal, Wāqidi gives the reader access to the characters' minds, but he does that subtly. Unlike Haykal and Hazleton, Wāqidi does not comment on the characters' behavior and minds, and so he does not provide his interpretation directly to the reader. Wāqidi gives the characters space to speak and express their viewpoint without the narrator's mediation.[64] In a lively conversation among the Jews of Banū al-Naḍīr, Wāqidi breaks many of the stereotypes - of early Islamic historiography as well as of Jews:

> The messengers of Ibn Ubayy, Suwayd and Dā'is came to [Banū al-Naḍīr] and said, "Abdullah b. Ubayy says, 'Do not leave your homes and properties and stay in your fortress for I have two thousand men from my tribe and others from the Arabs who will enter with you into your fortress, and die to the last one of them before Muhammad reaches you… Ibn Ubayy then approached Ka'b b. Asad to

[63] Robinson, p. 144.

[64] "The single most distinctive feature of Islamic historiography is the *khabar-isnād* unit, which, transmitted, transformed, compiled and arranged according to a variety of formats, functions as the building block of large-scale historical works" (Robinson, p. 92).

> support his fellows. But Ka'b says, "Not a single man from Banū Qurayẓa may break the covenant."
>
> Having despaired of Banū Qurayẓa, Ibn Ubayy turned to fixing what was between Banū al-Naḍīr and the Messenger of God. He was in contact with Huyayy until Huyayy said, "I will send to Muhammad informing him that we will not go out of our homes and our properties and he can do whatever he likes." Having hopes for what Ibn Ubayy said, Huyayy stated, "We will repair our fortress, bring in whatever we need, prepare our streets and move stones to our fortress. We have sufficient food for a year, and our water is accessible from inside our fortress. So, do you think Muhammad will besiege us for a year? We do not."[65]

It is clear from the passage above that early Islamic historiography is not a mere collection of reports as the above short passage is lively with characterization. Ka'b ibn Asad appears confident, honest and firm. He sees breaching the covenant as disgracing him and his clan. Later on, Ka'b ibn Asad's character develops as he becomes a less influential leader after he repeatedly fails to please the Jews in the way he handles the continuing conflicts between the Jews and Muhammad.

Furthermore, the character of *al-munāfiq* (the hypocrite) such as Ibn Ubayy is always incomplete in Islamic historiography and literature. It seems that there is no need to describe it further as it is described so clearly in the Qur'an.[66] Therefore, it is used in Islamic historiography and literature as a stock character.[67] When a writer uses a stock character, s/he does not need to give full

[65] Wāqidi, p. 359.

[66] See, for example, Qur'an 4: 142; Qur'an 63.

[67] Jannidis, Fotis: "Character," in: *The living handbook of narratology*, edited by Hühn, Peter et al. Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, paragraphs 16-36. URL

information. S/he can leave characters incomplete as readers can fill the missing characteristics from their schemata.[68] Wāqidi, however, gives a vivid characterization of Ibn Ubayy and makes him flesh and blood rather than a concept in the Qur'an. For Wāqidi, Ibn Ubayy genuinely tries to help Banū al-Naḍīr. First, he tries to mobilise supporters for them, and when this fails, he tries to fix the situation between them and the Prophet. However, this has been too late as Ibn Huyayy has already sent his response to the Prophet. Ibn Ubayy seems confident, smart, accomplished, and charismatic. His dishonesty is not the dishonesty of the subordinate, but the dishonesty of a defiant, defeated king. As for Huyyay, he seems to be the less independent and less wise of the three.

Muhammad besieges Banū al-Naḍīr, and to demonstrate his resolution, he cuts some of Banū al-Naḍīr's palm trees.[69] "Cutting them down was a calculated statement that the Nadir now had nothing left to stay for, and a warning of what might happen to them if they resisted further."[70] Hazleton further explains that "[i]n Arabia, trees of any kind were treasured, but date palms especially so. Each one represented generations of careful tending and work, so that to destroy the palms was to destroy not only property but history."[71] According to Ṭabari, the believers feel uneasy about cutting the trees, particularly after Banū al-Naḍīr have blamed them for that. Hence, the Qur'an

= hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php?title=Character&oldid=2042. [view date: 11 Feb 2018].

[68] Critten, Charles. Fictional Characters and Logical Completeness. *Poetics 11*: 1982, pp. 331-44. Lamarque, Peter. How to Create a Fictional Character. In *The Creation of Art: New Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics*, edited by B. Gaut & P. Linvingston, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003, pp. 33-5.

[69] Gabriel, p. 128.

[70] Hazleton, p. 165.

[71] Hazleton, p. 165.

says: "Whatever you have cut down of palm trees or left on their trunks – it was by permission of Allah so He would disgrace the defiantly disobedient."[72] Eventually, as Hazleton says, "the Nadir capitulated. They would leave with little more than their lives."[73]

In the conflict of Banū Qurayẓa, the character of Sa'd ibn Mo'ādh has various representations. Sa'd ibn Mo'ādh is the person whom Banū Qurayẓa agrees functions as an arbitrator between them and Muhammad. According to Hazleton, Ibn Mo'ādh is a "militant hardliner," who is eager "for blood." He is known for "his prejudice…for the sword."[74] Ibn Isḥāq's representation of Ibn Mo'ādh is different at least in the way Banū Qaynuqā' and their supporters see him. On his way to the Prophet, some people from his clan, apparently Muslims from the Aws, are accompanying him. They ask him to be kind to his clients (Banū Qurayẓa). They call him by his kunya (nickname) out of respect. Like Ibn Ubayy, he also seems to be a respectful awe-inspiring leader. They say, "O Abu 'Amr! Be kind to your clients. Indeed, the Prophet asks you to arbitrate to do them favor," but Ibn Mo'ādh keeps silent as if disapproving of what they say. Like Ka'b ibn Asad, Ibn Mo'ādh seems to be honest, confident, accomplished and independent. When he arrives, he seems very conscious of his decision. So, he asks both Banū Qurayẓa and the Prophet if they would agree to his decision. After he gets confirmation from both sides, he says, "My arbitration is that men shall be killed, properties divided, and women and children made captives."

Different reports in different biographies may require a multi-perspective approach to interpretation. A multi-perspective approach to Muhammad's biographies does not only tolerate multiple narratives, but encompasses, as well,

[72] Qur'an: 59:5.

[73] Hazleton, p. 166.

[74] Hazleton, p. 184.

the view that the narratives themselves may not reflect reality. As Chase Robinson explains:

> "In societies undergoing rapid social and political change (such as early Islam), oral history tends to be much less accurate. The material may be authentic, at least in that it represents a genuine attempt to make sense of the world, and as such it may interest anthropologists or anthropologically inclined historians. But in this sense, it is much more useful as a barometer of social change – especially how people come to terms with the present by reconceptualizing the past – than as a record of what had actually happened."[75]

On the one hand, Robinson's view can explain the contradictory reports of incidents such as the unexplained departure of Muhammad from Banū Qaynuqā'. On the other hand, it can explain the importance of multiple source reporting in assessing *sīra* as well as the importance of multiperspectivity in interpreting *sīra*. Multiperspectivity is the ability and willingness to see a situation from different angles.[76] It is a process in which one acknowledges the right of the other to see things differently, puts himself in the other's shoes, and recognises the fact that our own perspectives are also affected by our own biases.[77] In this case, multiperspectivity requires critical thinking. By examining and comparing different representations of events, we can understand both the events and their explanations better. Adopting a multiple-perspective approach to Muhammad's biographies helps recognize the differences and similarities in

[75] Robinson, p. 10-11.

[76] Low-Beer, Ann. *The Council of Europe and school history*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1997, pp. 45-55.

[77] See: Stradling, Robert. *Multiperspectivity in history teaching: a guide for teachers*. Council of Europe, 2003. See also: Fritzsche, K. Peter. "Unable to be tolerant?" In *Tolerance in transition*, edited by Russell F. Farnen, Karl Peter Fritzsche, Ivan Kos & Rüdiger Meyenberg. Oldenburg: bis, 2001.

the various representations, evaluate the bias in each representation, and challenge one's own view.

To conclude, both classical and modern *sīra* works are told from the perspective of the authors who use various techniques to represent the events and people in a way which conforms to their viewpoints. In the three conflicts discussed above, some authors prefer to focus on the Jews' attitude to Muhammad and explain the conflict in light of that attitude, whereas, others stress Muhammad's practicality in handling the conflicts. Reading the various narratives side by side indicates that the story is quite similar, but the interpretation of the story varies greatly. Although sīra writers use the same sources and rarely have new events to relate to,[78] their final outputs yield different, and sometimes competing, narratives.

[78] Iqbal, Muzaffar. "Living in the time of prophecy: Internalized Sīrah texts." *Islamic Studies 50*, No. 2 (2011), p. 204.