

The Books in My Life: A Memoir

Part 3

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Once I launched *Arab Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, wishing it success, I returned to modern history. I was encouraged to study daily life in the Arab world during the two world wars as part of an edited volume covering the lives of ordinary people from various nations during that period.¹ I vacillated quite a bit before accepting the editors' invitation to contribute, as I was not an authority on that historical period. However, it soon became clear to me that the basic research material upon which I would draw would be the memoirs of those who lived during that time. In the past, I had taken great pleasure in reading such works – of which there are few comparable examples in the pre-modern Arab heritage² – and this encouraged me to accept the invitation.

Memoirs of the Arab Twentieth Century

I began reading memoirs from the first half of the twentieth century with great pleasure and curiosity, intending to include writers from the Levant, Egypt, and Iraq in my contribution. In a previous study of *al-'Irfan* magazine, I had become acquainted with Lebanon's history during World War I, finding that war's tragedy had not spread evenly throughout the country, but was confined to particular areas.³ For example, the famine of Mount Lebanon did not repeat itself in southern Lebanon, just as Palestine did not experience the same disasters as those witnessed in the mountains of Lebanon. In Iraq, it seems that Baghdad did not suffer the same calamities as Mosul, and in Greater Syria, the coastal cities suffered more than those inland. These different experiences are given expression in memoirs. Of course, the memoirs to which we have access were

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written by individuals in urban areas from social milieus that were not the worst affected by wartime tragedies.

Still, memoirists were often overwhelmed by feelings of hopelessness, utter helplessness in the face of events, apprehension toward the future, and profound ignorance of the causes of what was going on around them. They lived within a dark cloud. They record the violent shock of proximity to individuals reduced to skin and bones by starvation, or other horrific scenes. And they express great anger toward those responsible for these calamities, foremost among them Jamal Pasha, the Butcher of the Levant. Others describe desperate attempts by some to alleviate the pain around them. Generally, World War I led to the region's fragmentation, socially and psychologically. People retreated within restricted regions, travel became fraught with hardship and risk, and regions turned inward on themselves. Horizons narrowed and interest and consideration were limited to the immediate, the urgent, the daily. Time and space contracted.

I began with the memoirs of my late mother 'Anbara Salam Khalidi, *Jawla fi dhikrayat bayna Lubnan wa Filastin* (A Tour of Memories between Lebanon and Palestine).⁴ These memoirs are of particular importance as the composition of a woman in a genre dominated by men. My mother, like other memoirists, belonged to a family that did not suffer the horrors of World War I directly, but the famine constantly hovered over them. Scenes of hunger and death are witnessed by a seventeen-year-old Beirut girl, and remain in her mind despite the passage of time. She suffered not only from the wartime environment, but also from a suffocating social atmosphere that forced girls and women to fight for the most basic rights. The intensity of the memoir reaches its peak when, after her fiancé 'Abd al-Ghani al-'Uraysi was hanged by Jamal Pasha, she was then forced to stand before the latter to receive a speech about wartime relief work – a surreal scene.

From my mother's memoir, I embarked upon a vast number of memoirs of varied literary value and degrees of self-exposure. The most revealing were the memoirs of the Egyptian leader Sa'd Zaghlul, which are more like personal confessions than social memoirs.⁵ Zaghlul details the torments of a spirit fond of politics, but torn by a serious addiction to gambling. The war was not one of his primary concerns, and he hardly mentions what was happening in the Levant – a reflection of the narrowed horizons mentioned above. In general, Egypt seems to have escaped the worst horrors of war – as did Sudan, as described in Babikr Badri's memoirs.⁶ In the latter, the war features only as a distant event, its end celebrated by both the British occupiers and the Sudanese under occupation. 'Abd al-Wasi' Ibn Yahya al-Wasi'i's memoirs describe the disruption of Yemen's communications by land and sea, but he claims that the country turned inward, becoming self-sufficient and improving agricultural production, though sugar and kerosene remained unavailable.⁷

Rural memoirs from the Levant and Iraq vary in the horror of their accounts. Jabra'il Jabbur's memoir describes life on the edge of the Syrian steppe, where agricultural villages were not affected by the famine.⁸ Far from the eyes of authorities, their crops safe from confiscation, the villagers only heard tidbits of war news from visitors. Anis Furayha's *Qabla an ansa* (Before I Forget) describes life in a Lebanese mountain village, much

closer to the scourge of war than other parts of the Levant.⁹ Here, too, we are brought face to face with the horrors of hunger and the skeletal body of a child taken in by the writer's family until the orphanage opens its doors. But the village itself is described as overcoming most difficulties through the intelligent use of resources, the conversion of all available land to agriculture, and the return to traditional industries. These memoirs record in detail the villagers' opinions about the war going on around them, which are of value to the historian for comparison with urban memoirs.

In Beirut, Yusuf al-Hakim's memoirs hint at how hunger debilitated those afflicted, to the extent that the starving did not even turn to theft or attacks on stores of food.¹⁰ They surrendered to fate and died, surrounded by the houses of the notables and the affluent, whose tables were laden with the most delicious foods. A somewhat sarcastic appraisal of the war's distortion of normal life is put forward by Khalil al-Sakakini, who in his diaries described the war as seen from his vantage point in Jerusalem.¹¹ Sakakini wrote that among the "advantages" of the war was that it pushed people to economize in all areas of life. Meat disappeared, followed by entertainment and fine clothes. In the realm of reading and writing, people read nothing but telegrams. (Most local newspapers had been shuttered and Egyptian newspapers were banned.) Thus, he noted sarcastically, people became accustomed to the telegraphic style, which required economizing speech and writing – another "advantage" of the war.

In Damascus, Khalid al-'Azm, from an Ottoman loyalist family, describes how, at thirteen years old, he and his contemporaries had completely lost faith in the Ottoman state's military announcements celebrating imaginary victories, leading the people to believe that the war would end in defeat.¹² In Iraq, the first Arab country to fall to the Allies, Sulayman Faydi describes the fall of Basra and how this occupation radically changed patterns of behavior.¹³ New strata of merchants and contractors emerged, seeking to ingratiate themselves with the occupiers for profit, while the occupiers dismissed all those who refused to grovel before them.

Two memoirs in particular stand out, those of Rustum Haydar of Ba'lbak and Muhammad 'Izzat Darwaza of Nablus, not only for their descriptions of World War I, but because of their significance for writing the modern history of the Arabs.¹⁴ Haydar's memoirs open with a secret journey from Syria to the Hijaz, undertaken with comrades from the Arab nationalist movement to join the revolt led by Emir Faysal and the Hashemites. Haydar describes the regions through which they passed and the tribes that lived there in an "anthropological" style, with descriptions of customs, lifestyles, beliefs, food and drink, and so on. He then transports the reader quickly to Paris, where Haydar was among Emir Faysal's delegation to the Versailles peace conference, and the subsequent negotiations, talks, conspiracies, and betrayals by the French and British. It is like being in the Italian court of the Borgias or the Medicis, full of rumors, lies, intrigues, backstabbing, and treachery. Haydar stands out as a keen observer of the events taking place around him, envisioning a future of fragmentation and distress for the Arabs. At the same time, he sees Faysal acceding to concession after concession. Haydar was torn by a crisis of faith, wracked with doubt as to Faysal's honesty and commitment to

Arabism and questioning his understanding of the significance of the moment. Haydar, in Thucydidean style, is able to situate his political analysis of the Arab issue within a broader European arena, understanding the balance of power, in which weak states were mere chess pieces in the larger game of superpowers. He describes, with great insight and analysis, meetings with European political actors, such as T. E. Lawrence of Britain and France's Georges Clemenceau, illuminating their thoughts and understandings of issues. I was told that Haydar wrote further memoirs, which remain under wraps – if so, this criminal withholding diminishes modern Arab history.

The memoirs of Muhammad 'Izzat Darwaza, six volumes that extend over nearly a century, are similar. They provide, in precise detail and excluding little, a daily record of political and personal events around Darwaza. He documents every word and sound, every feeling, and every trip. He does not overlook any important document that passed before his eyes; neglect to describe any individual he met, privately or publicly; exclude any letter written or received; or fail to comment on any bit of news he read in a newspaper. Darwaza's intensive and comprehensive description ultimately draws in the reader, who soon begins to feel a certain affinity with the author. Darwaza's memoirs express ideas and emotions frankly, communicating to the reader the spirit of events. The six volumes, which some may initially find intimidating, pass quickly, capturing the reader's attention and, ultimately, admiration.

In the late Ottoman period, Darwaza was a member of the secret Young Arab Society (*al-Fatat*), which drew its members from all over the Arab world. Among the group's central aims were Arab unity and, of course, independence. Darwaza's memoirs, in keeping with this spirit, include comprehensive coverage of all of the Arab East and his wide network of friends in these countries. His nationalist ideology remained undiminished until his death, and the question of Palestine was for him inseparable from events in all other Arab countries. His memoirs thus provide information of great importance for the histories of Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt – material, especially detailed personal conversations with the most significant Arab politicians, that remains underutilized by historians. His evaluation of these figures, many of them Palestinians, is balanced and critical, even harsh, when necessary – his political and moral assessments determined on the basis of adherence to (or divergence from) principle and collaboration with colonial power. For these reasons and others, I consider Darwaza's the most important Arab political memoir of the twentieth century.

Jesus in Arabo-Islamic Heritage

In the 1980s, I began to be attracted by Jesus and his legacy in Arabo-Islamic literature. Again, I do not know the reason behind this interest: Was it nostalgia for my birthplace Jerusalem, where al-Aqsa Mosque neighbors the Holy Sepulchre? Did the war ravaging Lebanon fuel that nostalgia? Can Palestine not be Muslim, Christian, and (anti-Zionist) Jewish at the same time? After all, since my boarding school days in England, I have



Khalidiyya Library, ca. 1900. G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection.

been acquainted to no small degree with the New Testament, fortified through daily attendance of the school church and recitation of religious hymns, especially Christmas hymns, which still enthrall me to this day. A more direct reason, however, was that in books of *adab* and other sources I would occasionally come across sayings attributed to Jesus that bore no resemblance to what is found in the Gospels. Where did these come from? Did Muslim scholars invent them? If so, why? These were questions to which I found no answers at the time, but nevertheless I applied myself energetically to collecting these sayings. A friend encouraged me to make a book of them. This I did finally in 2001, in *The Muslim Jesus*, as part of a book series edited by the late Edward Said and with his support.¹⁵

These accounts and sayings can be found in a multiplicity of Islamic sources – in books of *adab*, asceticism (*al-zuhd wa al-raqa'iq*), morality (*akhlaq*), jurisprudence, theology, Sufism, and history – by the most important thinkers of Islamic civilization, including al-Jahiz, Ibn Qutayba, and (especially) al-Ghazali. I initially focused on Jesus's role in the political and moral debates between Islam and Christianity in the early Islamic period, delving into books of asceticism, hadith, and theology to illuminate how sayings attributed to Jesus were mobilized in this context. It became clear that these sayings had already played an important role among some Islamic groups that saw in them strong support for their arguments. It was also evident from studying chains of transmission that they likely originated in Kufa, perhaps due to its proximity to al-Hira, a major Christian

center in pre-Islamic Iraq. Their source remains obscure, however. Some are similar to what we find in the Gospels, others resemble the sayings of sages from Near Eastern civilizations, still others are like the gnostic and apocryphal gospels, and some offer no clue toward a putative source. But all bestow great Islamic reverence and admiration for, to borrow al-Ghazali's phrase, "the Prophet of the Heart," and all befit Jesus and attribute to him the utmost respect and love.

I would like to hope that these sayings can lead toward Islamic-Christian dialogue, affirming what unites these religions, not what separates them. This dialogue, in my view, desperately requires that we read our sacred texts – including the historical records replete with stories and sayings – together. It should also include what has been written about Jesus by the most important contemporary Muslim Arab poets, including Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Muhammad al-Fayturi, and Mahmud Darwish.

Images of the Prophet in Islamic Heritage

I was subsequently approached by a major publishing house in the West to write a biography of the Prophet Muhammad. I was initially wary, as such a task poses great difficulties, and counter-proposed that I write a history of the various depictions of the Prophet through the ages: a historiography, not a history, that examined how and why these depictions changed from one generation to the next. This seems to be the trend in biographical writing – that is, the move away from writing the definitive history of an individual and toward a more historiographical approach. For example, it is increasingly common these days to find biographies bearing titles like *The Invention of X*, *Imagining Y*, or *Constructing Z*.¹⁶ The reasons, it seems to me, are the considerable gaps in the records of all human lives that any biographer faces, as well as the complexities of human subjectivity, as articulated, for example, by the theories of psychology or the postmodern novel. Is it possible to construct a biography of a person that includes and reconciles the many inconsistencies and contradictions of the human personality? Virginia Woolf wrote: "A biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may have many thousand."¹⁷ In Julian Barnes's novel *Flaubert's Parrot*, a character compares the biographer to a fisherman: "The trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets, and sells." He adds: "Consider what he doesn't catch: there is always far more of that."¹⁸

I thus returned to the subject of historiography, which I thought I had consigned to *Arab Historical Thought in the Classical Period*. Still, the biography of the Prophet is an irresistible subject for the historian of early Islamic thought, no matter how hard he or she tries to escape into modern history or other literary subjects. To begin, I put in place a plan that included the most important biographies of each era. I was not able to complete this massive corpus, nor even to read most of it. But as is said, *ma la yudraku kulluhu la yutraku julluhu* – what does not obtain all, does not relinquish most. I tried my best to select from these works the material that had an obvious impact

in its era, as well as that which I thought worthy of praise or into which I hoped to breathe new life.

I wanted to deal with the Prophet's biography from the beginning to the present. Some see this biography as "frozen," its main contours drawn from time immemorial and remaining unchanged. Even cursory research quickly dispels this view, as it soon becomes clear that successive generations formulated life narratives of the Prophet with different goals and to suit the different expectations. I found my net full of fish, revealing a rich historical heritage that required classification into different historical periods or overarching categories that summarized the particular focus of each era. I divided the book into ten chapters along these lines: The Turning Point, The Legislator, The Master Narrative, The Teacher of Manners, The Light of the World, The Model Mystic, The Prophet Canonized, The Universal Model, The Hero, and The Liberator. These proceed, as much as possible, chronologically, beginning with depictions of the Prophet in the Qur'an and hadith and concluding with contemporary biographies.¹⁹

The Emergence of the Prophetic Biography

Some contemporary Orientalists claim that the Qur'an does not contain clearly defined historical events or a chronological narrative of the Prophet's biography, and therefore tells us nothing about his life. This is an incomplete view. True, the Qur'an is not a historical text in the same sense as the Old and New Testaments – it is more interested in the lessons of history than its narration. But the definition of what is historical is not limited to narrative, especially when it comes to the life of the Prophet. We find in the Qur'an an abundant record of the Prophet's suffering, his great difficulty in communicating his message of revelation. This is of great significance in constructing the Prophet's biography, and cannot be ignored. It comprises what we might call the "turning point" in the Prophet's biography, painting a portrait for believers of the supreme example of suffering for the sake of faith.

The hadith portray a somewhat different image of the Prophet, at its core that of the Legislator who establishes for his community and the world an all-encompassing legal and ethical structure. In hadith collections of the Sunni tradition, two figures enjoy particular symbolic importance: 'A'isha, Mother of the Believers, and 'Umar bin al-Khattab. 'A'isha holds the dearest place in Muhammad's heart, eliciting his tenderness, his forgiveness, and his most intimate conversations. 'Umar is a strict believer, unafraid of truth no matter how censorious. These two images, of religious tolerance and religious zealotry, embody the two primary manifestations of faith. The hadith, generally, depict the Prophet within his community, identifying thousands of them by name and even some biographical information at times. However, this depiction is not historical or narrative in style.

We now come to early biographies, which established the "master narrative." The foundations of this narrative were laid by four works: *al-Sira al-Nabawiyya* (The Life of the Prophet) written by Ibn Ishaq and edited by Ibn Hisham; the account of

al-Waqidi and his scribe Ibn Sa‘d, as collected in the first volumes of Ibn Sa‘d’s *Kitab al-tabaqat al-kubra* (The Major Classes); the first volume of al-Baladhuri’s *Ansab al-ashraf* (Lineage of the Nobles); and al-Tabari’s *Tarikh al-rusul wa al-muluk* (History of the Prophets and Kings). If the hadith present Muhammad the Legislator, from these biographies emerges Muhammad in history – that is, the story of Muhammad within his community. These foundational biographies are almost singular in structure. They begin with the Prophet’s lineage, traced from Adam to Abraham and then to the Quraysh and their history, arriving at ‘Abd al-Mutallib, then Abu Talib, then ‘Abdallah, and finally Muhammad. It is as though God made the Prophet’s biography a completed whole from creation. Or as one prophetic hadith puts it: “I was a prophet when Adam was between spirit and body.”

After tracing his lineage, these biographies turn to Muhammad’s birth, his childhood, and his youth, followed by the revelation of the Qur’an, and then his life in Mecca and Medina, all following a clear timeline. The hand of God is evident throughout, shepherding the Prophet, making him devoid of his parents’ flaws, and granting him the angels’ support in his darkest days. These biographies are “cinematic” in character, following the “hero” wherever he may be, even the bedroom, and tracking his spiritual and emotional vicissitudes, his joys and sorrows, and all incidents, great or small, in his life. They also describe in detail his physical and mental constitution, his words and deeds, his brilliance and dignity, his love of children and compassion for those in need, and so forth.

Perhaps most remarkable about these early biographies is that these “fishermen,” their nets full of all kinds of fish, seemingly threw nothing back. They include accounts of incidents that may seem today, as they did for many later biographers, unsuitable for the Messenger of God. For example, Ibn Sa‘d narrates that Khadija’s father “had been drinking wine until it overpowered him” when he agreed to marry his daughter to Muhammad; when he recovered, he was angry, displeased with her marriage to Muhammad, but “they reconciled later.”²⁰ Elsewhere, ‘A’isha pokes fun at Muhammad, as in his last days when he expressed his wish that she die before him so that he can pray over her and she responded: “Wouldn’t you like that? I can see you marrying some women on that day.” Or there is al-Baladhuri’s story of Muhammad’s marriage to Asma’ bint al-Nu‘man, who, “when he approached her, said, I seek refuge in God from you” (*a’udhu billah minka*), so he divorced her. There is also the hadith in which Muhammad, before he received the revelation, offered a sacrifice to al-‘Uzza, one of the goddesses of Mecca, suggesting that his faith was not unadulterated from birth. These and other such examples from these biographies raise the question: Why retain these stories, which do not seem worthy of the great Prophet? The answer may lie in these biographers’ belief that a biography of such utmost importance should include all accounts, whatever the implications, remaining unabridged in any way. The duty of the biographer was fidelity to all accounts transmitted by sources, whether weak or strong; critiques of poorly substantiated accounts were sometimes placed beside them, but other times neglected altogether.

The Mature Biographical Tradition

Later narratives of the Prophet's life, pruning these earlier biographies, excised such stories. Biographies written by Shi'i scholars were ideologically rooted in the infallibility of the Prophet and the twelve imams, rejecting all accounts that even remotely entertained his imperfection. Infallibility was attributed to Muhammad from the creation of the world, as in al-Mas'udi's theory of Muhammadan Light (*Nur Muhammadi*), for example.²¹ This gave Shi'i writers a kind of absolute truth not evident in the "founding fathers" of prophetic biography. In the Shi'i narrative, 'Ali is also given a pivotal role in fulfilling the mission of Islam from its beginning. The sixth imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, is the source of most such biographical narratives.²² For him, the Prophet's biography is a prelude to the history of the imamate and the calamities it endured, on the one hand, and its conveyance of right guidance, glad tidings, and hope to believers, on the other. The prophetic biography among the Shi'a is thus theological in nature – there is no uncertainty and its key events are documented so as to avoid question or debate. However, Shi'i poets like al-Kumayt, al-Sayyid al-Himayri, and Di'bal al-Khuza'i played an important role in enriching the biography and enhancing depictions of the Prophet and his relatives, a significance underappreciated by historians. Whereas other depictions culminated in a clear victory for the Prophet, in Shi'i poetry this narrative is accompanied by mourning for the subsequent disavowal and persecution of his family.

Within the most important books of *adab*, the Prophet is depicted as a master of *adab* in the broadest sense, authentic in his morals, wisdom, and pursuit of knowledge.²³ They depict the Prophet as a cultured man who taught his community virtue and morals through his example and words, composed with a clear literary flavor and eloquence that imitates the miraculous, as though he exemplifies the well-known hadith: "I have been given words that are concise but comprehensive in meaning" (*u 'taytu jawami ' al-kalim*). The prophetic hadith in this literature thus includes a vast range of examples connected to daily conduct, modesty, humility, wisdom, poverty and wealth, eloquence, poetry, and other subjects ethically instructive for the cultured believer. Examples are numerous, including: "He who pours should be the last to drink"; "It is customary for a man to walk his guest to the door of the house"; "The greatest gift is from one in dire straits to another in the same"; "A man who seeks knowledge remains learned – he who believes that he has completed his learning is ignorant"; "Leave time between visits to increase love"; or "Knowledge is a treasury, questioning is its key."²⁴ These hadith, and many others, are not only directed toward individual behavior, but have political implications, urging rulers toward humility and justice and encouraging scholars to pursue knowledge rather than the approval of rulers.

Around the third century AH (ninth century AD), scholars became especially interested in prophetic metaphors. One of the most important books in this regard is *al-Majazat al-Nabawiyya* (Prophetic Metaphors) in which al-Sharif al-Radi selected 375 prophetic hadiths and explained their literary qualities and metaphors. As for poetry

and its central position in literature, the unfriendly image of poets in the Qur'an was gradually transformed by prophetic hadith expressing approval of poetry that extolled the merits of morality.²⁵ By the early tenth century AD, for example, Abu Zayd al-Qurashi writes in *Jamharat ash 'ar al- 'Arab* (The Multitude of Arab Poetry):

The Prophet continued to be pleased by poetry, praising it and collecting it, and he said: it is the diwan of the Arabs. And the veracity of this is found in the hadith that we have received . . . the Prophet of God said: "There is wisdom in poetry and enchantment in metaphor."

In *al-'Umda* (The Support), Ibn Rashiq al-Qayrawani emphatically defended poetry, countering the arguments of those who claimed that the Qur'an and the Prophet disapproved of poetry by claiming that the Prophet only denounced obscene poetry.

The Sufi Tradition and Response

Among Sufis we find perhaps the most intimate and loving depictions of the Prophet in the entire Islamic heritage. Sufis viewed themselves as "the friends of God and the best among his creations" – and during the Prophet's lifetime "the recipients of his charity and, after his death, the best of his community," as Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi records in *al-Ta 'arrufli-madhab ahl al-tasawwuf* (Acquaintance with the Sufis' School of Thought). The Beloved (*al-Habib*) is one of the names of the Prophet favored by Sufis, and they believed themselves as the truest adherents of the Prophet's model, depicting him as wearing wool, riding on a donkey, and responding to the call of the weak. One of the clearest depictions of love of the Prophet is found in Abu Talib al-Makki's *Qut al-qulub fi mu 'amalat al-mahbub* (Nourishment of the Hearts in the Conduct of the Beloved):

From love of the Prophet proceeds love of his example (*sunnatihi*), as an opinion and a logical conclusion . . . and an indication of love is to follow him outwardly and inwardly (*dhahiran wa batinan*). Among the ways of following outwardly is the performance of obligations . . . to adhere to his morals and ethics in their entirety . . . asceticism in the world . . . love of the poor . . . And among the ways of following inwardly are the stations of conviction and witnessing the ways of knowing faith . . . and surrender, trust, desire, and love.

As Abu Hafis 'Umar al-Suhrawardi wrote in *'Awarif al-ma 'arif* (Sages of Knowledge), Sufis were "the most fortunate of people in their emulation of God's Prophet, the most righteous in their revival of his model and adherence to his morals." The Prophet guided his community along the ascent to Sufism and his life story is the supreme example to Sufis, who are able to find in it meaning that others cannot. In *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*

(Revival of the Religious Sciences), al-Ghazali writes: “If [the believer] follows the Prophet in learning his words and his deeds, and accepting them, he should be eager to understand his secrets . . . and should search strenuously for the secrets within these deeds and words.”²⁶ Thus, important Sufi texts such as Abu Nasr al-Sarraj’s *Kitab al-luma’* (The Book of Light) and Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri’s *al-Risala* (The Message) include spiritual interpretations, revealed through Sufi practices, of the prophetic hadith. The most complex and difficult of these is found in the works of Muhyi al-Din Ibn ‘Arabi, especially *al-Fatuh al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Revelations). Here, Muhammad becomes an element of existence with six attributes, including the attribute of “a perfect human . . . who provides each perfect human a divine or intrinsic law,” and the “attribute of the Qur’an . . . for he who wants to see God’s Messenger and did not attain this among his community, let him look to the Qur’an. For if he looks there, there is no difference between it and between looking at God’s messenger.”

The frequent tensions between Sufis and other Muslim scholars, especially jurists (*fuqaha’*), were no doubt exacerbated by this kind of Sufi “excess.” It is likely that this tension led to new approaches to prophetic biography, which sought to establish a firm basis for claims, rationalize narratives, eliminate anthropomorphic elements from the conception of deity, extract its lessons, and canonize its traditions. Works of this kind – despite doctrinal differences – show a concerted interest in the history of the prophets and the place of Muhammad within it.²⁷ In particular, we see an interest in defining evidence of prophecy, especially prophetic miracles performed by Muhammad and others. These works are thus valuable to those interested in the apostles more generally, not only Muhammad.

The dawn of this new era in prophetic biography can be seen in Qadi ‘Iyad’s *al-Shifa bi-ta’rif huquq al-Mustafa* (Healing by Recognition of the Truths of the Chosen One). Such works did not emphasize the biographical narrative itself, but what should be included in it. This meant cleansing the biography of excitation, superstition, and wonders in order to bring its subject closer to the heart of the faithful. As Qadi ‘Iyad wrote:

The truth of love tends toward what is agreeable to man . . . whether because he takes pleasure in it upon coming upon it, as a beautiful picture . . . or through his sense of reason . . . as the love of the righteous, the scholars, and the people of knowledge . . . or what is agreeable because it benefits him . . . And if this is determined . . . I have perceived that he [i.e., the Prophet Muhammad] (peace be upon him) combines these three meanings of what motivates love.

Qadi ‘Iyad belongs to the Andalusian school of biographers – which also includes Ibn Hazm, al-Suhayli, and perhaps Ibn Sayyid al-Nas – characterized by intensification of criticism and transformation of the prophetic biography into a record to guide the believer toward proper conduct, ethics, and the aims of *shari’a*. In *al-Rawd al-unuf fi sharh al-sira al-Nabawiyya li-Ibn Hisham* (The Virgin Meadows of Explanation of the Prophetic Biography of Ibn Hisham), al-Suhayli seeks to reconcile completely Ibn Ishaq’s and Ibn

Hisham's biography of the Prophet with the Qur'an. The result is a biography that is coherent in terms of its logic and its harmonization of different narratives. Ibn Sayyid al-Nas's *'Uyun al-athar fi funun al-maghazi wa al-shama'il wa al-siyar* (Most Noteworthy Traditions in the Field of Meanings, Qualities, and Biographies) seems to me the most modern of the pre-modern biographies. It is recitative in nature, but designed as if by a modern historian. Ibn Sayyid al-Nas begins by mentioning his sources and critiquing them, then combining and synthesizing the foundational biographies, and adding the views of the scholars of his era. He provides a list of incidents from each year of the Prophet's life – elaborating on specific subjects such as Muhammad's miracles, his wives, his children, his attendants, and so on – before completing the work with a “bibliography” of his sources and how each reached him, and, finally, a word addressed to the reader – what we would now call an afterword or postscript.

The other major school of prophetic biography was the Damascene school, which flourished in the eighth century AH (fourteenth century AD) and includes al-Hafiz al-Mughaltay, Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi, Ibn Shakir al-Kutubi, Ibn Kathir, and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, who I believe to be the greatest. These biographies sought to combine in a single text the prophetic biography and hadith, or the prophet biography and *fiqh* in the case of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's *Zad al-ma'ad fi hadi khayr al-'ubbad* (Provisions for the Hereafter in Good Guidance for Worshipers), which follows the events of the Prophet's life in detail and derives from them various jurisprudential and ethical judgments with impressive skill.

From Pre-Modern to Modern

Depictions of Muhammad in pre-modern biographies oscillate between sanctification and humanization, but from the nineteenth century on, his biography, generally speaking, is that of a man. When European colonialism entered the Islamic world, it brought with it its Orientalist and missionary projects, one of the aims of which was denigration of the Prophet. This coincided with the emergence of nationalisms that produced an urgent need for history and its heroes. Networks of religious scholars broke down and authors increasingly came from the new professional class of doctors, engineers, university professors, journalists, lawyers, and the like. All of this led to a new kind of defensive biography.

The most important missionary/Orientalist biography that Muslim scholars attempted to rebut was British Orientalist Sir William Muir's *The Life of Mahomet*, first published in 1861.²⁸ One of Muir's methodologies was to accept accounts in the early biographies that were latter deemed unbecoming of the Prophet and excised, finding in their later omission proof of their veracity.²⁹ Muir's depiction is somewhat sympathetic to Muhammad in Mecca, but fiercely prejudiced against him after the hijra. He concludes by stating that “the sword of Mahomet, and the Corân, are the most stubborn enemies of Civilisation, Liberty, and Truth, which the world has yet known.”³⁰ One still hears echoes of this view in the reactionary rhetoric of the American and European right, with the open encouragement of Israeli Orientalism.

The first to respond to this attack was the Indian Muslim writer Syed Ameer Ali, in *A Critical Examination of the Life and Teachings of Mohammed* (1873) and then *The Life and Teachings of Mohammed, or The Spirit of Islam* (1891).³¹ Ali did not just refute European attacks on the Prophet, but presented evidence of the rationality and progressive character of his message, depicting him as a merciful and just educator, whose “devotion to knowledge and science” brought him “into the closest affinity with the modern world of thought.”³² The great Indian thinker Muhammad Iqbal also stressed the Prophet’s modernity. In *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Iqbal argued that the prophetic age closed with the life of Muhammad and the revelation of Islam, which blended the best of ancient and modern civilizations. Muhammad’s message was the most salutary treatment for all of the modern world’s ills, especially its material ones.³³

In Egypt, the famous reformer Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905 AD) in his *Risalat al-tawhid* (Treatise on the Oneness of God) offered metaphysical and philosophical definitions of prophecy in general, and depicted the Prophet as an enduring example of the revival of rational thought and the struggle against superstition, political domination, and blind imitation. ‘Abduh’s students carried forward his ideas and laid down the rules for many biographies that remain influential today. Two books in particular adopted ‘Abduh’s rationality and his courage in criticizing dominant legacies and reinterpreting historical and religious concepts, thus paving the way for the renewed Egyptian biographical tradition: ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq’s *al-Islam wa usul al-hukm* (Islam and the Foundations of Political Power) and Taha Husayn’s *Fi al-shi‘r al-jahili* (On Pre-Islamic Poetry).³⁴ Shortly thereafter, two biographies reformulated the events of Muhammad’s life in drama and fiction: Tawfiq al-Hakim’s 1936 play *Muhammad, rasul al-bashar* (Muhammad, the Human Prophet) and Taha Husayn’s 1933 novel *‘Ala hamish al-sira* (On the Margins of Biography). These works are less remarkable for their literary value than for their historical significance and modern orientation. They do not adhere to the standard incidents of Muhammad’s biography, and introduce a number of people and incidents not found in the classical life narrative, seeking to update it in line with the literary style of the period. Despite their limited literary value, they raise important questions about how to present the prophetic biography to the modern reader.

Four biographies published in the 1930s – by Muhammad Ahmad Jad al-Mawla, Muhammad Husayn Haykal, Muhammad Farid Wajdi, and ‘Abbas Mahmud al-‘Aqqad, respectively – offer a fairly representative view of the interests of biographers of the twentieth (and perhaps the twenty-first) century.³⁵ Their first concern was to counter Orientalists, on the one hand, and narrow-minded reactionaries, on the other. Second, they set out to cleanse the prophetic biography of myths and to interpret prophetic miracles – and the biography in general – in light of modern science. Third, they were interested in Muhammad’s record and status in world history compared with others, especially the Christian record embodied in European colonialism. Finally, they introduced theories from psychology to interpret Muhammad’s genius and his prophetic personality, claiming that the hadith embodied the most advanced thinking of the time in areas like public health, social policy, freedom of expression, and so on.

Egyptian writer Husayn Ahmad Amin treated these and other biographies harshly, and

with a healthy dose of sarcasm, in his brilliant *Dalil al-Muslim al-hazin ila muqtada al-suluk fi al-qarn al-'ishrin wa dirasat Islamiyya ukhra* (The Sad Muslim's Guide to Conduct in the Twentieth Century, and Other Islamic Studies).³⁶ Amin praises early biographies for their frankness, and regrets its diminishment by those who sought to distance the reader from Muhammad's humanity and to emphasize the Prophet's holiness. He pours vitriol on twentieth-century biographies steeped in an "inferiority complex" toward the West, seeking to prove Islamic similitude with European scientific, political, and social theories. These biographers, fascinated with Europe, rushed to make Muhammad the embodiment of every modern European ideology, and the Qur'an a precursor of every modern scientific theory. "Socialists, your Imam is Muhammad!" Instead, Husayn Ahmad Amin proposed:

A biography that is not defensive, apologetic, or ashamed ... that does not blur the facts or invent them ... A biography that does not omit that whose mention makes some uncomfortable, but does not seek to insult ... A biography that revives an historical era in its entirety and reconstructs its moral values ... so that the character of the Prophet and his actions appear clear in context ... A biography worthy of al-Waqidi and al-Tabari if they were to write today.

This is a tall order and few contemporary biographies rise to the task. Two, however, deserve praise: *Kitab al-shakhsiyya al-Muhammadiyya* (The Muhammadan Personality) by Iraqi writer Ma'rif al-Rusafi; and *Twenty-Three Years* by Iranian writer and politician 'Ali Dashti.³⁷ Al-Rusafi first directs his critical eye toward history, whose contradictions gave rise to the rival factions of Islam. He believes the biography of Muhammad should be based solely on the Qur'an and reason, seeing the Qur'an as "the word of Muhammad" and believing that study of its "underlying logic" can clarify the issue of revelation. Based on the Qur'an, al-Rusafi rejects all accounts of prophetic miracles in Muhammad's biography: Muhammad is a man of preternatural intelligence and imagination, but his achievements remain within the realm of the human. Part of a longer heritage of liberal thought, found, for example, in Abu Bakr al-Razi and later in the likes of Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, al-Rusafi's biography must be engaged seriously by anyone writing on the prophetic biography today.

Ali Dashti's biography is in many ways similar to al-Rusafi's, but it is constructed around a series of questions. Can we accept miracles attributed to the Prophet in his biographies despite the Qur'an's explicit denial of miracles? Was Muhammad really infallible, as some Muslims claim, even if many Qur'anic verses describe his weakness and human frailty? Did he love women? Without a doubt, but his love was sometimes stormy. Was he overly harsh in some rulings? Yes, for example, as in the case of Banu Qurayza. Dashti, like al-Rusafi, sees the Prophet as in "psychological continuity" with the Qur'an and describes this continuity as "prophetic rhetoric." He sees "the internal logic of the Prophet" as the quiddity of revelation. Any adulteration by superstition should be excised from the Prophet's biography, and only thus can we arrive at a depiction of the Prophet that fully illuminates his humanity and his genius.

Conclusion

These are some of the books with which I have had the privilege to travel during a long academic voyage, and which have been engraved on my mind – these histories becoming a part of my history, these biographies a part of my biography, these memoirs a part of my memoirs. These works contain insights and understandings that are deserving of continued interaction, allowing us to draw from them what is still worthy of reflection, critique, and interrogation. I have presented these works in the style of an autobiography, to indicate some measure of the identification and intimacy of my relationship with them, and perhaps to entice the reader. But my satisfaction will only be complete when other Arab academics who have reached retirement age, as I have, take the same path and record what they have learned from books worthy of consideration and revival. For we stand today on a heritage threatened by neglect, ignorance, amnesia, and cultural illiteracy.

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Endnotes

- 1 Tarif Khalidi, "The Arab World," in *The Great World War, 1914–45, Vol. 2: Who Won? Who Lost?*, ed. Peter Liddle, J. M. Bourne, and Ian R. Whitehead (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 291–308.
- 2 Calling upon my memory, I can think of *al-Munqidh min al-dalal* (Deliverer from Error) by al-Imam al-Ghazali, Ibn Khaldun's *al-Ta'rif* (The Definition), and *The Life of Ibn Sina*, though surely there are others that I have forgotten. In any case, autobiography is not a familiar genre in our classical literary tradition, or indeed any pre-modern tradition – a phenomena that calls for greater investigation into the precise definition of the concept of modernity and its relationship to the individual. See R. J. McCarthy, *Al-Ghazali's Path to Sufism and His Deliverance from Error: An Annotated Translation of al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2000); Ibn Khaldun, *al-Ta'rif bi-Ibn Khaldun wa rihlatihi gharban wa sharqan* [The Definition of Ibn Khaldun and His Journey, West and East], ed. Muhammad Tawit al-Tanji (Cairo: Lajnat al-ta'lif wa al-tarjama wa al-nashr, 1951); and *The Life of Ibn Sina: A Critical Edition and Annotation Translation*, ed. William E. Gohlman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1974).
- 3 See Tarif Khalidi, "Shaykh Ahmad 'Arif al-Zayn and al-'Irfan," in *Intellectual Life in the Arab East, 1890–1939*, ed. Marwan R. Buheiry (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1981).
- 4 'Anbara Salam al-Khalidi, *Jawla fi al-dhikrayat bayna Lubnan wa Filastin* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1978). Translated into English by the author as *Memoirs of an Early Arab Feminist: The Life and Activism of Anbara Salam Khalidi* (London: Pluto Press, 2013).
- 5 Sa'd Zaghul Pasha, *Mudhakkirat* [Memoirs] (Cairo: n.p., 1900–1927). Reprinted recently as *Mudhakkirat Sa'd Zaghul* (Cairo: Dar al-kutub wa al-watha'iq al-qawmiyya, 2011).
- 6 Babikr Badri, *Tarikh hayati* [The History of My Life] (Cairo: Matba'at Misr, 1959). Published in English as *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969–1980).
- 7 'Abd al-Wasi' Ibn Yahya al-Wasi'i, *Tarikh al-Yaman: al-musamma furjat al-humum wa al-huzn fi hawadiith wa tarikh al-Yaman* [The History of Yemen: Meaning the Spectacle of Grief and Sadness in the Events of Yemen's

- History] (Cairo: al-Matba'a al-salafiyya wa maktabatuha, 1927).
- 8 Jabra'il Sulayman Jabbur, *Min ayyam al-'umr* [From the Days of Life] (Beirut: Jam'iyat asdiqa' al-katib wa al-kitab, 1991).
 - 9 Anis Furayha, *Qabla an ansa* (Tripoli: Jarrus Press, 1989).
 - 10 Yusuf al-Hakim, *Bayrut wa Lubnan fi 'ahd al-'Uthman* [Beirut and Lebanon in the Ottoman Period] (Beirut: al-Matba'at al-Kathulikiyya, 1964).
 - 11 Khalil al-Sakakini, *Kadha ana ya dunya* [Such Am I, O World] (n.p.: al-Matba'a al-tijariyya, 1955). An unabridged version of Sakakini's diaries, along with correspondence and other writings, were published in eight volumes by the Khalil Sakakini Center in Ramallah and the Institute of Jerusalem Studies between 2003 and 2010. See *Yawmiyyat Khalil al-Sakakini: yawmiyyat, risalat, ta'ammulat* [The Diaries of Khalil al-Sakakini: Diaries, Letters, Reflections], ed. Akram Musallam (Ramallah: Institute of Jerusalem Studies and Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center, 2003–2010).
 - 12 Khalid al-'Azam, *Mudhakkirat Khalid al-'Azam* [The Memoirs of Khalid al-'Azam] (Beirut: al-Dar al-muttahida lil-nashr, 1972).
 - 13 Sulayman Faydi, *Mudhakkirat Sulayman Faydi fi ghamrat al-nidal* [The Memoirs of Sulayman Faydi in the Midst of the Struggle] (Beirut: Dar al-qalam, 1974).
 - 14 Rustum Haydar, *Mudhakkirat Rustum Haydar* [The Memoirs of Rustum Haydar] (Beirut: al-Dar al-'Arabiyya lil-mawsu'at, 1988); Darwaza, *Mudhakkirat*.
 - 15 Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).
 - 16 See, for example: Mary Beard, *The Invention of Jane Harrison* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Maria DiBattista, *Imagining Virginia Woolf: An Experiment in Critical Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Edmund Gordon, *The Invention of Angela Carter: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Geoffrey W. Gust, *Constructing Chaucer: Author and Autofiction in the Critical Tradition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and Alan D. Vardy, *Constructing Coleridge: The Posthumous Life of the Author* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
 - 17 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (New York: Mariner Books, 1973), 295.
 - 18 Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 38.
 - 19 I should note here the inspiration that I drew from the important book by the early Christian historian Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).
 - 20 Al-Waqidi disputes this story, claiming that it could not be correct because Khadija was given in marriage by her uncle, not her father, who had died before the marriage.
 - 21 This theory describes a light that God cast upon his land with its creation, and which shone upon Muhammad, his family, and his followers, and which remains shining until the Day of Resurrection. See U. Robin, "Nūr Muḥammadi," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. Peri Bearman, Thierry Banquis, Clifford E. Bosworth, Emeri van Donzel, and Wolfhart P. Heinrichs (Leiden: Brill, 2012), online at dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_5985 (accessed 14 June 2018).
 - 22 We see this, for example, in *I'lam al-wara bi-a'lam al-huda* by al-Tabrisi, one of the most important Shi'i scholars and exegetes.
 - 23 See, for example, Ibn Qutayba's *'Uyun al-akhbar* (The Most Noteworthy Reports), al-Mubarrad's *al-Kamil* (The Perfect One), Ibn 'Abid Rabbih's *al-'Iqd al-farid* (The Unique Necklace), and Raghīb al-Isfahani's *Muhadarat al-udaba' wa muhawarat al-shu'ara'* (Lectures of the Litterateurs and Conversations of the Poets).
 - 24 For more examples, see Tarif Khalidi, *al-Kutub wa ana* (Beirut: Manshurat al-jamal, 2018), 153–54.
 - 25 On poetry and poets in the Qur'an, see, for example, Qur'an 26:224 and 36:69: *wa al-shu 'ara' yattabi'uhum al-ghawuna* (And the poets – the tempters follow them); and *wa ma 'allamnahu al-shi'r wa ma yanbaghi lahu* (We did not teach him poetry, nor does this befit him). *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, trans. Tarif Khalidi (New York: Penguin Classics, 2008), 303, 359.
 - 26 Among the incidents of Muhammad's life dearest to Sufis is the Night Journey (*al-isra' wa almi'raj*), which revealed to them many of the "secrets" on their path toward God.
 - 27 See, for example: *al-Din wa al-dawla* (Religion and the State) by 'Ali Ibn Sahl Rabban al-Tabari, *A'lam al-nabuwa* (Banners of Prophecy) by Abu Hatim al-Razi, *Dala'il al-nabuwa* (Evidence of Prophecy) by Abu Na'im al-Isfahani, *Ithbat nabawat al-Nabi* (Proving the Prophet's

- Prophecy) by Ahmad Ibn al-Husayn al-Haruni, and *Tathbit dala'il al-nabuwa* (Proving the Evidence of Prophecy) by the Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar.
- 28 William Muir, *The Life of Mahomet* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1861), 4 vols. An abridged version was published as a single volume in 1878.
- 29 See Muir, *Life of Mahomet* (1878), 593–94.
- 30 Muir, *Life of Mahomet* (1878), 535.
- 31 Syed Ameer Ali, *A Critical Examination of the Life and Teachings of Mohammed* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1873); Syed Ameer Ali, *The Life and Teachings of Mohammed, or The Spirit of Islam* (London: W. H. Allen, 1891).
- 32 Ali, *Spirit of Islam*, 360.
- 33 First published in 1930 as *Six Lectures on the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Kapur Art Printing Works, 1930).
- 34 Taha Husayn, *Fi al-shi'r al-jahili* (Cairo: Matba'at dar al-kutu al-Misriyya, 1926). 'Abd al-Raziq's text was first published in Arabic in 1925, and was recently translated into English as Ali Abdel Razek, *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power*, ed. Abdou Filali-Ansary, trans. Maryam Loutfi (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).
- 35 Muhammad Ahmad Jad al-Mawla, *Muhammad al-mathal al-kamil* [Muhammad, The Perfect Example] (Cairo: Matba'at dar al-kutub al-Misriyya, 1931); Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *Hayat Muhammad* [The Life of Muhammad] (Cairo: Matba'at dar al-kutub al-Misriyya, 1934); Muhammad Farid Wajdi, *al-Sira al-Muhammadiyya tahta daw' al-'ilm wa al-falsafa* [The Muhammadan Biography in Light of Science and Philosophy] (Cairo: n.p., 1939); 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad, *Aqbariyat Muhammad* [The Genius of Muhammad] (Cairo: Dar nahdat Misr lil-nashr, 2004).
- 36 Cairo: Dar Su'ad al-Sabbah, 1992.
- 37 Ma'ruf al-Rusafi, *Kitab al-shakhsiyya al-Muhammadiyya, aw hall al-lughz al-muqaddas* [The Muhammadan Personality, or the Solution to the Holy Riddle] (Cologne: Manshurat al-jamal, 2002); and Ali Dashti, *Twenty-Three Years: A Study in the Prophetic Career of Mohammed* (London: G. Allen, 1985).