

The Effect of the Muhadithins' Methodologies in Writing the Prophetic Biography (PB)

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Introduction

All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds, and peace and blessings be upon the best of His Prophets and Messengers, the Prophet Muhammad and his family and Companions and those who followed him truthfully until the Day of Judgment. Writing the prophetic biography (PB) is essentially the job of the historians as they were the first to take interest in writing the prophetic biography (PB) as an integrated work. This was done either as a dedicated work like that of Ibn Hisham, Ibn Is'haq, Al-Halabi and others; or as a part of historic encyclopedias like those of Al Tabari, Ibn Al Atheer, Ibn Kuthair, Al-Mas'udi, Al Yaqubi, and others. The Muhaddithin have left an impact on highlighting some of the chief points in the prophetic biography (PB). It is well known that the writers of the prophetic biography tended to apply the methodologies of the historians in conveying the events of the PB, however, at times, they used to adopt the methodology of the Muhaddithin in weighing between the conflicting narrations, particularly those who had a wide scope of knowledge of the Muhaddithin's methodologies. In fact, they may have considered themselves as muhaddithin like Ibn Kuthair and Ibn Al-Athir. This blending of the two methodologies (historians and Muhaddithin) created a strong bond between the Muslim historians and the Muhaddithin and contributed in filtering the BP from a lot of the forged narrations through which, some tried character assassination to the Prophet (PBUH) as we shall elaborate by examples.

The influence of the narrators' methodologies, particularly with regard to the scrutinization of the chain of narrators, was not always a benign process in writing the PB; it had its cons as we shall elaborate later on. Lately, some called for adopting Muhaddithin's methodology in judging the entirety of the historic narrations in general, and the PB narrations in particular. This was supported by some and opposed by others. This research paper is an attempt to discuss and discern the two approaches: the historian and the Muhaddithin, as well as the possible resulting dilemmas of the adoption of the Muhaddithin approach in judging the historic writing, particularly the part related to the PB. This research paper is divided into an introduction, three sections, and a conclusion. The main elements have the following titles:

Section One: Similarities and differences between the Muhaddithin's methodology and the historians' methodology

Section Two: Application of the Muhaddithin's methodology on writing the PB

Section Three: Examples for the impact of applying the Muhaddithin's methodology on the narrations of the PB.

I ask Allah to help us to make this paper a seed for deeper studies on this important subject.

Blessings and peace be upon our Prophet Muhammad and his Family and Companions.

Section One: Similarities and differences between the Muhaddithin's Methodology and the Historians' Methodology

There are similarities and differences between the Muhaddithin's and historians' methodologies; each party's work is documentary primarily. The Muhaddithin document the sayings primarily and events secondarily, whereas historians have the reverse order of that. Both try to convey the truth as it is without analysis, interpretation, addition, or omission as much as possible.

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They leave the job of analysis and interpretation to later workers and relieve themselves of that burden as they are conveyors only. Al Tabari said 'Let it be known that our book depends in its contents on what I conveyed of events and narrations that rely on their chain of Muhaddithin without adding my rational discussion except as little as much since the role of this documentation is to convey the past events, and that does not need rational analysis. Therefore, whatever you may find in my book that may sound awkward to the reader is not something we created but merely conveyed by Muhaddithin.²' Imam Tabari clearly indicated that he only documents whatever history he managed to obtain, should there be anything in his book that the reader distastes, then he should not be held accountable for that. Yes the historian or the Muhaddithin may find more than one narration of the story or the event, and, therefore, the approach differs from one writer to another. Some may find necessary to write all narrations of the same story or at least most of them together with the chain of conveyors, leaving the task of filtering these narrations to someone else, while others find it essential to select the best and most accurate of these narrations using their knowledge of weighing the evidence to cut short the redundancy. If we compare between the approach of Al Tabari, Ibn Al Atheer and Ibn Kuthair for instance, we would find clear differences in this aspect. Al Tabari thought his duty is to convey the various narrations he found regardless of the conflict in it, whereas Ibn Al Atheer found no reason to mention all narrations and therefore, he selected the longest and most complete of them before adding on other integrative narrations. In this regard, he said: 'I started with Al-Tarikh Al Kabir [the Big Historic Encyclopedia] that was written by imam Abu Jaffar Al Tabari, since it is the book relied on by all. I considered everything he mentioned. He wrote several version of the same narration. I picked up the most complete one and copied it and added to it other smaller narrations to complete it further. After that I referred to other books of history and patched what I constructed even further. The exception was the history of the prophet with his companion, which I copied almost entirely from Abu Jaffar, who is the master in this area.³'

Ibn Kuthair, who is a scholar in the quotes of the prophet, believed that his work does not stop on gathering the narrations. He felt required to scrutinize and filter it. He rejected some of the narrations as he saw no sense in copying everything conveyed by historians. He said: 'We do not copy the Isra'iliyat except what the legislator permitted to copy and that which does not contradict the book of Allah and the prophetic biography– the part which is neither true nor false like a well-known definition or nomenclature. The baseline is the book of Allah and the prophetic biography (PBUH&F). Of the latter, we copy the strong and good narrations and we mention the weak narrations, God help us in that. Allah said in his book 'Thus do We relate to you (some) of the news of what has gone before; and indeed We have given to you a Reminder from Ourselves' and Allah did relate to His prophet (PBUH&F) the news of the past and what did He do to His followers and His enemies and the prophet –in turn– relayed that to his nation elaborately. We shall mention that in various chapters after the Quranic verses that related to that event. So he [the prophet] did tell us what we need and left whatever we do not to avoid creating confusion for us and to avoid redundancy and we shall follow suit.⁴' If we want to compare between these historians and the Prophetic Quotes (PQ) gatherers, then we can say that imam Tabari in his approach of collection and documentation without caring much about weighing the historic narrations is much like the imam Tabarani in his Al Muajam Al Kabeer [Grand Encyclopedia], where he cared to document the Muhaddithin of the PQ without selecting among it. In that he said: 'We wrote this book to collect the narrations according to the alphabetic sequencing of the Muhaddithin's names, starting with the ten [companions]; I obtained one or two narrations from each one⁵.' Whereas Ibn Al Atheer was selective of the most complete of narrations and he was much like the imam Muslim Al Naisabouri, as he indicated in the introduction of his book, who selected the best of the narrations and avoided repetition unless the other version of the narration had some additional information⁶ Ibn Kuthair's work was similar to a degree to the Muhaddithin who committed themselves to copy only the correct narrations of the PQ; Imam Bukhari led this group. Therefore, we realize the similarities between the works of the historians and the Muhaddithin; both aim to convey the history to the next generations accurately without interference in the content.

² Al Tabari, Mohammed, Tarikh Al-Tabari 1/13

³ Ibn Al Atheer, Al Kamil fi Al Tarikh 1/6-7

⁴ Ibn Kuthair, Al bidaya wa Al Nihaya 1/6

⁵ Al Tabarani, Al Muajam Al Kabeer 1/51

⁶ Muslim Al Naisabouri, Sahih Muslim 1/4-6

The differences between the two approaches can be summarized as follows:

- 1- Scrutinization of the chain of narrators (CON) and content: Muhaddithin have strict rules regarding the conveyance of PQ's CON and content. They are always accused of being focused on the scrutinization of the CON and ignoring the content. This scrutinization in my view is largely accurate; despite the desperate defense of the narrations, particularly the contemporary ones, of their approach; the reality supports the fact that Muhaddithin cared much about the scrutinization of the CON much more than the content. Perhaps their excuse in that is scrutinization of CON can be standardized well in contrast to the scrutinization of the content, which is very subjective and reliant on rational opinions. This, in turn, depends on the knowledge background and the intellectual capacity of the scholars as well as the other environmental and contemporary influences on the scholar. Whatever one person likes, may not be so by another. This creates not only person to person differences of judgment, but it also makes the same person differ in judgment from time to time due to his evolving knowledge. This variation is more possible in the area of content than in the CON. Historians, on the other hand, did not care much about copying the CON as this lies in realm of a different discipline altogether. However, even those historians who are knowledgeable of the discipline of narrations did not care much about the CON in the historic narrations and considered it as a redundant lengthening. In this regard, Ibn Al Jawzi said: 'I intended to elaborate in it [the book] all kinds of narrations and versions, but then I thought that selecting the middle is better than elaboration, so I omitted the extra narrations and chains of narrations '
- 2- Muhaddithin's work is religious: This is an important reason for their interest in CON in contrast to the historians. Unlike Muhaddithin, historians' work has no religious implications, doctrines, or jurisprudence, and therefore, does not necessitate being knowledgeable with the CON, let alone being strict in using it. It is for this reason that Muhaddithin take an extra step of precaution to avoid potential errors in the prophetic biography, and hence, this is not a luxury they enjoy to take or leave. This becomes even more serious when we consider that many enemies of Islam cease any opportunity to stain the character of the prophet. Muhaddithin, therefore were very strict on this aspect and did not pass any narration except what came through trustworthy people. Imam Muslim describes that 'and know that it is the duty of anyone who could discern the right from wrong narrations and trustworthy Muhaddithin from the suspected ones not to copy down any narration except what he knew to be right and good. He must avoid whatever comes from the recalcitrant falsifiers. The evidence for what we said is what Allah said "O you who believe! If an evil-doer comes to you with a report, look carefully into it, lest you harm a people in ignorance, then be sorry for what you have done" and He the Almighty said "and call to witness two men of justice among you," this supports what we mentioned that the narration of the untrustworthy is unacceptable and the narration is much like the testimony and therefore, both are unacceptable if the witness/narrator is untrustworthy. The prophetic biography supported this conclusion as well. The prophet said "that, whoever quotes me wrongly is one of the liars ". Consequently, Muhaddithin find the CON one of the essential criteria to filter the narrations. Abdullah bin Al Mubarak said 'the CON to me is from the religion. Without it, anyone could say anything ' He also was quoted 'That who pursues his religion without the CON, is like the one trying to reach the terrace without the stairs '
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Section Two: Application of the Muhaddithin's Methodology on Writing the Prophetic Biography

There is a strong call to apply the Muhaddithin methodology in PQ scrutinization on the historic narrations, particularly the part related to the early Islamic history and the prophetic biography (PB). Supporters for this approach believe that this shall largely help filtering the PB from the distorted narrations that stained the PB. Opponents, on the other hand, see that this is an unnecessary strictness that will end up discarding many historic narrations and will render many gaps in writing the PB, particularly because the writing of the PB in the early times of Islam was not subjected to these criteria. In fact, some of the PB writers are not accepted by the narration scholars. Moreover, the narration scholars themselves did not treat the biography narrations the way they treated the quotes' narrations. They were strict on conveying the PQ and easy on conveying the historic narrations, even the part related to the PB⁷. Abbas Al Dawri said 'I asked Ahmed [ibn Hanbal] about bin Ishaq [Mohammed bin Ishaq- writer of the Prophetic Biography] and Moosa bin Obaida. He said: bin Ishaq is Ok to narrate [probably meaning the book Al Maghazi], but Moosa was fine but narrated reprehensible stories. When we are about the Halal and Haram, then we need people like Abbas⁸'

Akram Dhiya Al Omary is one of the biggest proponents for the application of the Muhaddithin approach in his book *The Prophetic Biography*. He explains his approach Muhaddithin have methodologies and approaches in criticizing narrations and discerning the strong ones from the weak ones. We need to apply these methodologies in criticizing the historic narrations related to the early Islamic history, because these historic narrations resemble the prophetic quotes in the sense of having CONs preceding the contents, which enables the critics to know the successive narrators who conveyed the event or the narration from generation to generation. The information about the narrators is derived from the books dedicated for this. For instance, the condition for a true quote is to be narrated by an accurate and trustworthy narrator without any anomaly or defect; likewise, the condition of the true historic narration is that all the successive narrators are properly religious and have the capability of memorizing that keeps them from erring into delusions and mixing up. Moreover, their narrations must be in line with the other narrations by other trustworthy narrators. If, however, it disagreed with it, then it is unacceptable. The historic narrations also must not have any subtle defect that challenges its validity. If the history narration is not up to the standard of the quotes, then we can look into the number of chains of narration of the single historic event and into its agreement with each other. If the chains of narrations are multiple for the single event, it becomes stronger, particularly when we consider the impossibility of the agreement of the many narrators on lying⁹. However the application of this approach has its own problems.

Problems of Application of the Methodology of Muhaddithin in Historic Narrations

There are a number of potential problems in the application of the Muhaddithin approach on the historic narrations in general and on prophetic biography narrations in particular. These include

- 1- It creates gaps in history due to lack of reliable narrations. Al Omary admits that by adhering to the Muhaddithin's approach, with all the strict criteria it entails, wide gaps in history will be created. 'Treating historic narrations like prophetic quotes' narrations, and requesting the same level of trustworthiness and accuracy creates wide historic gaps. Other civilizations' histories are not narrated with such scrutiny; and yet are relied upon in the study of history. It only requires comparative study of the content of the narration. '

It is therefore that he recommends a middle way that uses the Muhaddithin's methodology in weighing the conflicting narrations and selecting the nearest one to the acceptable margin and to exclude the others 'We can bring the narrations closer to each other to reach the nearest possible narration to the historic reality instead of rejecting all narrations altogether '

⁷ Al Omary, *Al Sira Al Nabawiya Al Sahiha* 1/39

⁸ Ibn Hajar, *Tahdheeb Al Tahdheeb* 10/319

⁹ Al Omary, *Al Sira Al Nabawiya Al Sahiha* 1/38-39

- 2- The differences of Muhaddithin themselves in the approach to scrutinize the narrations. Which method should one adopt to use for historic narrations? These differences will accordingly reflect on the narrations' acceptance.
- 3- Muhaddithin's dependence on the scrutinization of the CON, with little reliance on rational argument: this is another issue Muhaddithin were described of and they are not totally innocent of either. Muhaddithin repeatedly accepted irrational narrations with the sole reason of the strength of its CON. They have obvious tolerance in this area and using their methodology in history will create the same problem as they will depend on the CON without looking much into the content.

Section Three: Samples for the Impact of Applying the Muhaddithin's Methodology on the Narrations of the Prophetic Biography

In this section we will try to mention some of the samples that result from applying the Muhaddithin's methodology in some of the narrations that were mentioned in the PB books.

Example One (the tale of the idols):

A lot has been said about this story that was mentioned in the books of history. Many interpreters of Quran used it when they came across the verse 'And We did not send before you any apostle or prophet, but when he desired, the Shaitan made a suggestion respecting his desire; but Allah annuls that which the Shaitan casts, then does Allah establish His communications, and Allah is Knowing, Wise, So that He may make what the Shaitan casts a trial for those in whose hearts are hard; and most surely the unjust are in a great opposition' (Al Haj 52-53). The story, as cited by imam Al Tabari in his book of history: 'The Prophet was keen on the righteousness of his people and liked to be close to them anyway he could. Ibn Hamid narrated by Salama by Mohammed bin Ishaq by Yazid bin Ziyad Al Madani by Mohammed bin Kaab Al Qardhi who said: when the prophet found his people away from him and felt uneasy about that, he desired to get something from Allah to approximate him to his people. He liked to make things easier for them. Therefore, Allah said in a verse "I swear by the star when it goes down. Your companion does not err, nor does he go astray" until he reached the verse "Have you then considered the Lat and the Uzza. And Manat, the third, the last?" at that time the Shaitan **[ALLEGEDLY]** cast on his tongue what he kept telling himself of his desire (These are the higher idols, their intercession is hoped). When Quraish heard that, they were thrilled to hear that their idols were **[ALLEGEDLY]** praised, and therefore softened to his side. When he ended up in the surah to the kneeling, he knelt and the Muslims knelt after him, and the infidels knelt because they were happy. Everyone in the mosque knelt except Al Walid bin Al Mughira, who was very old and could not kneel and therefore picked up a handful of dirt and knelt [symbolically] on it. People scattered thereafter and Quraish came out happy. The news of the kneeling reached to the companions of the prophet in the land of Habasha (Ethiopia). It was said that Quraish converted to Islam and Gabriel came to the prophet and asked "what did you do? You recited on people something other than what I conveyed to you from Allah. You said what he did not" as a result, the prophet got sad and feared Allah so Allah comforted him and told him that there was no previous apostle or prophet that the shaitan did not cast in his desire " *And We did not send before you any apostle or prophet, but when he desired, the Shaitan made a suggestion respecting his desire; but Allah annuls that which the Shaitan casts, then does Allah establish His communications, and Allah is Knowing, Wise,*" and therefore the prophet was comforted that his **[ALLEGED]** praise of infidels idols was undone by the other verse "What! for you the males and for Him the females! This indeed is an unjust division! They are naught but names which you have named. You and your fathers" to the part of the verse "to whom He pleases and chooses" meaning how could their intercession be helpful? Whatever came from Allah overrules what the shaitan **[ALLEGEDLY]** casted¹⁰"

This story was also mentioned by Ibn Al Atheer in (Al Kamil fi Al Tarikh)¹¹ and Al Maqdisi in (Al Bad'a wa Al Tarikh)¹² and other historians and was strongly denounced by many scholars because of defaming entailed to the character of the prophet (PBUH&F) in that it paints a picture for him as a possessed who is casted upon by the Shaitan and in that he is incapable of discerning the true revelation from the cast of the shaitan. It is hardly surprising that this story was well taken by the orientlists, who tried to use it to defame the prophet, like Karen Armstrong in her book (Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time)¹³.

¹⁰ Al Tabari, Tarikh Al Tabari 1/550-551

¹¹ Ibn Al Atheer, Al Kamil fi Al Tarikh 1/596-597

¹² Al Maqdisi, Al bad'a wa Al Tarikh 4/149-150

¹³ Karen Armstrong, Muhammad: A Prophet For Our Times p62-65

With the application of the Muhaddithin methodology on this story and by studying its CON, we may find that all of its chains of narrators are contested and virtually unaccepted. Al Albani wrote an epistle the title of which could be translated as (Setting Catapults to Blow the Story of the Idols), in which he concluded, after examining the various chains of narrations that 'These are the narrations of the story and it all, as I see them, defective, weak and ignorant. There is nothing in it that can be validly used for argument, particularly in such a serious issue. Moreover, its inconsistency makes it not only weak, but rather annulled¹⁴.' Akram Dhiya Al Omary said 'following the first migration to Al Habasha, it happened that the prophet PBUH&F was in Al Haram mosque and he read surah Al Najm and knelt when indicated by the surah and then everyone in the mosque knelt also, except two of the arrogant. It was commonly said that Quraish converted to Islam and that their kneeling was due to them being influenced by the charm of Quran. *Mursal* narrations with strong chain of narration including Said bin Jubair, Abu Bakar bin Abdil Rahman, and Abu Al Aalia indicated that the shaitan cast on the tongue of the prophet PBUH&F in his prayer this phrase (those are the higher idols, the intercession of which is wished for). Other *mursal* and weak narrations indicated that this sentence is said by the shaitan and being heard by the infidels only, so they knelt. What these *mursal* narrations collides with the doctrine of the infallibility of the prophet in the revelation and contradicts with the doctrine of monotheism, which is the backbone of the Islamic doctrines. It is therefore rejected in its content even if it has good chains of narration. The three tabiún did not take this narration from one source. Some orientalists chose to believe this story while some others did not according to the like or dislike of each one. Watt claimed that the story is true because it seems strange and therefore it must be true in its essence as it is unlikely that someone created such a story and convinced a big group of people to accept it. In fact, the feeling of Watt that this story is true is only because he likes and wants it to be true. When was the strangeness of any story a criteria for its validity? And why does he not indicate the rejection of many of the Muslim scholars for this story?¹⁵'

The Second Example: The Day of the Prophet's BUH&F Death

The historians are almost unanimous that the death of the prophet was on a Monday the twelfth of Rabeeá Al Awal [in Hijri calendar]. Al Tabari¹⁶ and Ibn Kuthair¹⁷ mentioned that. However, when the Muhaddithin applied their criteria on the narrations and tried to reconcile between it, they found a very evident problem in this date. The known fact is that the day of Arafa in the Hajjat Al Wadaa' was unanimously Friday¹⁸, and therefore, astronomically speaking, the twelfth of Rabee'a Al Awal could not possibly be a Monday. Ibn Hajar explains that: 'The Suhaili and those who followed him contested that the prophet died on a Monday, twelfth of Rabeeá Al Awal because they agreed that Dhi Al Hijja commenced on Thursday and therefore whichever way you calculate the three months, it does not fit. This is an obvious fact for whoever contemplates it. Al Barzi and ibn Kuthair answered that the three months possibly had 30 days each and that the Meccans and Madinans disagreed on sighting the lunar of Dhi Al Hijja. The Meccans sighted it on the night before Thursday while the Madinans sighted it the night before Friday and therefore the waqfa occurred by the sighting of the Meccans, but when they reached back to Medina they adjusted the date according to the calendar of the Medinans. Accordingly, the first of Dhi Al Hijja and the last of it was on Saturday and therefore the first of Muharam was on Sunday and the last of it wa on Monday. This makes the first of Safar on Tuesday and the last of it on Wednesday.

That makes the first of Rabeeá Al Awal on Thursday and the twelfth of it on Monday if the four months had 30 days each¹⁹' Al Siyooti adds 'As the day of Arafa in Hijja Al Wada was unanimously on Friday, the twelfth of Rabeeá Al Awal of the next year cannot be on Monday whether you consider the months in between having 30 days each, 29 days each, or 30 days in some and 29 in some because Dhi Al Hijja's first was on Thursday, so if it had 29 days as well as the Muharam and Safar, the twelfth of Rabeeá Al Awal would be on Thursday. On the other hand if all three months had 30 days, the 12th would be on Sunday.

¹⁴ Al Albani, Nasb Al Majaneeq li nasf qisat al Gharaniq

¹⁵ Al Omary, Al Sira Al Nabawiya Al Sahiha 171-172

¹⁶ Al Tabari, Tarikh Al Tabari 2/241

¹⁷ Ibn Kuthair, Al bidaya wa Al Nihaya 5/235

¹⁸ Al Siyooti, Tadrib Al Rawi 2/351

¹⁹ Ibn Hajar, Fat'h Al Bariá 8/129-130

If some had 29 and some had 30, the 12th would be on Friday or Saturday²⁰. This illustrated the ingenuity of the Muhaddithin and their approach in studying the narrations and highlighting this issue.

The Third Example: The Story of Al Miraj [The Ascension Journey]:

A lengthy narration of Ibn Abbas mentioned what the prophet PBUH&F at the night of Al miraj. It contained many myths. Scholars of narration were unanimous on its weakness as mentioned by Ibn Al Jawzi²¹ and Al Siyooti²² and others. These simple examples indicate to us that the application of the Muhaddithin's methodology in criticizing the historic narrations may help finding out the accepted narrations and the unaccepted ones. There are other examples discussed as well in length like the incident of (incision of the chest), which was rejected by many contemporary writers despite it being accepted by Muhaditeen for the sake of its CON²³.

Conclusion

After this quick presentation for the impact of the application of the Muhaditeeh's methodology on writing the prophetic biography, we can conclude the following:

- 1- There is a clear difference in the methodologies of the Muhaddithin and the historians in writing the prophetic biography despite the same overall goal of both in documenting the authentic history and quotes.
- 2- It is not possible to strictly apply the Muhaddithin's methodology in its entirety on writing the prophetic biography due to the many resultant gaps that would occur in the prophetic biography.
- 3- Application of Muhaddithin's methodology in writing the prophetic biography can help filtering it from the untrue and forged history documentation.
- 4- Application of the Muhadditheen's methodology in writing the prophetic biography can lead to acceptance of some issues that are ruled out rationally.
- 5- Therefore, we can work to find the balanced collective approach that benefits from the merits of the Muhaddithin's methodology without the strict application of it.

May Allaah bless our Prophet Muhammad and his family and companions

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²⁰ Al Siyooti, Tadrib Al Rawi 2/351

²¹ Ibn Al Jawzi, Al Mawdhooat 2/210

²² Al Siyooti, Al Laaliá Al Masnooáa fi Al Ahadith Al Mawdhooa 1/62

²³ Al Booti, Fiqh Al Sira Al Nabawiya 47