

History And Islam

The first and foremost thing to be studied in Islamic history is the Sirah (life) of the Prophet Mohammad (p.b.u.h). The Sirah, itself, was initially taken from the traditions reported by the Sahaba (companions) and Tabeyins (followers of Sahaba) about the life of the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h). Those traditions included all aspects of the Prophet's life and were included with the hadiths. To begin with, when the hadiths were compiled without any systematic organisation, the Sirah remained part of the hadiths. With the arranging of hadiths into defined chapters, the Sirah was separated from those books containing hadith. However hadiths continued to be included in the books of Sirah, such as Bokhari's Kitab al Maghasi' and Muslim's Kitab al Jihad'.

Many people have written Sirah but the earliest book we have is that of 'Ghazwah' by Ibn Ishaq, who died in 153 A.H. Ibn Ishaq is without doubt the most famous writer of Sirah. Imam Shafie once said who ever wanted to find out about the Ghazwah had to refer to Mohammad Ibn Ishaq.

The next famed writer of Sirah was Mohammad Ibn Omar Al Wakidi, who died in 209 A.H. It is said that Al Wakidi is on a par with Ibn Ishaq in the knowledge of Ghazwah. Whilst his knowledge of history and hadith was undoubted, during his last days it is said that he became misguided, Bokhari reporting that he denied hadith. As a result of this many writers lower his standing. Ahmad Ibn Hanbal has commented on his knowledge of Ghazwah and his book on Ghazwah was referred to by Ibn Sa'ad and Tabari.

Other famous scholars to have written in Sirah include Ibn Hisham (218 A.H) and Mohammad Ibn Sa'ad (230 A.H).

Muslims have continued to take care of Sirah and to give it the importance it deserves because it contains all the information of the Prophet (p.b.u.h). Included in Sirah are the Prophet's actions, pronouncements, judgements and silence (i.e. consent). All these are legislation (Tashrii) like Quran. Accordingly Sirah is one of the Tashrii subjects. It is considered as a part of hadiths.

That which is considered to be correct from the Prophet (p.b.u.h), by report and knowledge (Riwayah and Deriah) is hukum Shari' because it is from the Sunnah. Furthermore we have to follow the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h) as Allah says in Quran:

"YOU HAVE INDEED IN THE MESSENGER OF ALLAH A BEAUTIFUL PATTERN OF CONDUCT FOR ANYONE WHOSE HOPE IS IN ALLAH AND THE FINAL DAY".

Taking care of the Sirah, and following it, is therefore a divine rule (hukum Shari')

In terms of the actual style of writing Sirah, there is a real and distinct difference between the writing of Sirah in the days of old and the writing of Sirah latterly. In the days of old, Sirah was written in the manner of hadith. That is, they relied on reports passed down orally, with a known chain of narrators. The first generation who lived with the Prophet (p.b.u.h) - the companions (Sahaba) - reported what they saw, or heard to their followers (tabeyin) and so on. In the second century A.H, some scholars began to collect reports of the Sirah. They compiled these reports in a meticulous manner, being ever so careful to relay the incident with the name of the person who had reported it. Exactly in the manner of relating hadiths. By so doing, the scholars were able to identify whether the reports were correct, false, doubtful, and so forth. This methodology, the methodology of hadiths is in itself a science.

The modern day writers of Sirah however, follow no such methodology. They simply narrate the events that occurred in the Prophet's life without the name of the reporters. Consequently their books cannot be relied upon as sources of Sirah. Because the events of the Prophet's life (p.b.u.h), being a part of the Sunnah, must be taken with sure knowledge that they are correct.

In addition to Sirah, Islamic historians have covered notable Islamic events, such as the opening of lands, wars between Muslims themselves, and between Muslims and others. One famous historian who wrote on such topics was Ali Ibn Mohammad Al Madaini, who is known simply as Al Madatni, he died in 225 A.H and wrote about Sirah, Quraish, the Khalifah and famous women. Thalab Al- Nahawi once said "Whosoever wanted to know about the history of Jahiliah (times of

ignorance) should refer to the books of Abu Ubaidah, and whosoever wanted to know about Islamic history should refer to Al Madini."

The early Islamic historians compiled history in the manner of Sirah. The first generation that had seen the events reported orally to the next generation who then conveyed it and put it to paper. Thus, for example, if one examines the books of Al-Tabari, one finds events reported with a chain of narrators.

During the early period of Islamic history the Islamic historians began to record the history of other nations and religions. The Islamic historians went about this task with the same spirit of questing for the truth, with impartiality and objectivity as they had done with Islamic history. However, because the Islamic historians had to rely upon the reports of other historians from other nations, this history cannot be relied upon with the same accuracy. Thus one finds the history of other people full of mythology. The recording of history by the non Muslim historians contained individual bias in built into the recording of events. Their reporting of history did not follow the same methodological approach as that of the Islamic historians. They contained no chain of narrators or classified levels of authenticity. What's more, they often added to history in order to boost individuals and their exploits.

On a more general level, if one analyses the Islamic historians contribution to history - which is undoubtedly great one finds their methodology was correct. Indeed it was a science that laid the basis for the scientific study of history. However the reporting of Islamic history and the history of other nations, was not as accurate and authentic as the Sirah and Hadith. Because although their methodology was correct, they often concentrated solely on the Khalifs and governors (Walis). The society and affairs of the people were neglected infavour of personalities. Accordingly the complete picture of the society was missed.

Care must be taken not to derive a comprehensive picture of a society by studying the history of an individual or singular aspect of the society. For example, it would be wrong to take the history of the Omayyad era from studying the history of Yazid, or for that matter to conclude the history of the Abbaside era from the actions of its Khalifs. Obviously, a comprehensive understanding of a society cannot be gleaned from the affairs of individuals.

Care must be taken to study the society as a whole. In particular, we have to pay attention to the fact that the history of the Islamic Society, in any era, was not written. Rather, what had been reported is the news of the rulers and assistants. More often than not, those who wrote such history either praised or slandered such people according to the period within which they wrote. For example, one would find historians of the Abbaside era slandering the rulers of the Ommayed era and, one would find the same historians praising their own rulers.

The early Islamic history however differs from the later times because the books of Sirah and the books of Hadith provide a more complete picture of the society. The books of Sirah and Hadith contain news of the companions and their followers.

As for the affairs of the Companions, we are not that concerned about what happened during this era. More important to us is what originated from them. Because the unanimity (Ijma) of the Companions is a source of Islamic law. During the era of the Companions many new problems arose which required a solution. The way in which they solved the problems is important from the point of view of legislation (Tashree). Many problems were encountered practically within the state by the Companions they include matters relating to Jihad, treatment of Dhimmis, Kharaj, Jiziah, the Call to Islam, and so on. Accordingly it is necessary for us to know what the companions had agreed upon - collectively - because it is a divine rule for the Mujtahideen (those who make exertion).

In addition to the Ijma of the Companions, the individual Ijtihad (exertion) of the Companions, particularly that of the Khulafa-ur-Rashideen, is a divine rule (hukum Sharai) that can be followed. In the affairs of administration, politics and ruling they proved the best example of leadership in the State. Therefore 'to acquaint oneself with that which originated from them is vital for us. This can be done through books such as the 'Muwatta' of Imam Malik which records the correct (Sahih) and good (Hasan). There is no harm in acquainting oneself with the history of the Islamic State after the Companions. However, we must not take this history from the opponents of Islam - who hate it - but from the Muslims themselves after scrutinised research. This will prevent us adopting a distorted image of our history.

There is no harm in acquainting oneself with the stories of the Companions, as information, not to implement. Because Quran mentions many stories of the Prophets and nations, so as to strengthen belief and obedience to Allah and, to show the end of the disbeliever.

"BEFORE THEM (WERE MANY WHO) REJECTED MESSENGERS - PEOPLE OF NOAH., AND AD.. AND PHARAOH THE LORD OF STAKES (SHOWING POWER AND ARROGANCE), AND THAMUD, AND THE PEOPLE OF LUT, AND THE COMPANIONS OF THE WOOD, - THESE WERE THE FACTIONS. NOT ONE OF THEM BUT DID DENY THE MESSENGERS, THEREFORE MY PUNISHMENT CAME JUSTLY AND INEVITABLY ON THEM."

(38:12-14)

However it is a mistake to think that history has a great importance in the progress of nations, or that knowledge of the past will illuminate the present.

History cannot be taken as the source of the system or jurisprudence. Rather the system should be taken from the jurisprudential sources, namely, Quran, Sunnah, Ijma and Qiyas. History is not a source. Islam is a religion with its own creed and systems. When we want to attain knowledge of it, we must not at all refer to history as a source of it, neither for acquainting ourselves with it or for deducing its rules (Ahkam).

If someone wants to acquaint himself with Islam, then one should look to the books of jurisprudence. As for deducing its rules this is done by its detailed evidences. Accordingly history has no place in both. Thus it is incorrect to use the history of Umar ibn al Khattab, or Umar ibn Abdul Aziz or Haroun al Rashid as sources for the divine rules (Ahkam Shariya).

If an opinion of Umar ibn al Khattab is followed in a particular situation, it is followed in its capacity as a divine rule, deduced and applied by Umar. This is the same as the divine rule deduced by Imam Malik, Shafeii, Abu Hanifah, Ahmad ibn Hanbal and Jaffar. It is not adopted in the sense of it being an historical event.

In conclusion, we have to be aware that the history of Islam and Muslims must not be taken from references, even if written by Muslim historians, if they are not written according to the narrators method. Obviously there is no question of taking history from the enemies of Islam and Muslims

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