

The Quran and its Message

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

NON MUSLIM SOURCES OF THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD'S ^(pbuh) MINISTRY

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There are typically three Muslim sources which provide us with the earliest recognition of an existence of the Islamic Prophet.

(1) The Quran. This is undisputedly the earliest and most contemporaneous source of the Prophet's existence, biography, teachings and ministry.

(2) Muslim sources that have been preserved archaeologically for example inscriptions, coins etc. These typically date towards the end of the 7th century CE. Other administrative papyri and those of religious content typically date from the first half of the eighth century CE. (Over a hundred years after the death of the Prophet).

(3) Muslim sources that are preserved as a literary genre and provide the earliest extant comprehensive source of the recognition of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad ^(pbuh) and his biography (See: [Ibn Ishaq](#)). These typically date to the latter half of the 8th century CE and the first half of the 9th century CE (nearly 2 centuries removed from source).

However, to scholars in particular, there are also a group of writings from **Non-Muslim sources** which are preserved as a literary genre which mention the Islamic Prophet and in quintessential polemic tone, the early Arab Muslims (oft referred to as 'Saracens'). Please see reference material [1] for a survey of these writings.

These sources (if authenticity of transmission and content is accepted) **are earlier and more contemporaneous** than 'Muslim' traditional sources **but appear later** than the Quran.

This small body of Non-Muslim literature comprises Greek and Syriac writings dating from the time of early Muslim conquests which takes us to a time period **within decades** of the death of the Prophet Muhammad. ^(pbuh)

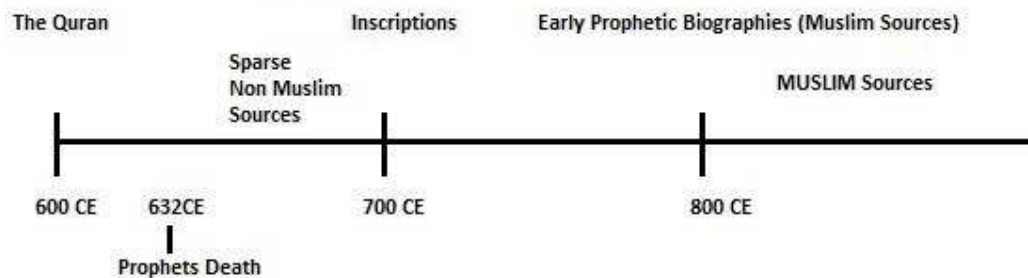


Illustration - Joseph Islam

There are many areas in which both traditional Muslim and Non-Muslim sources agree. However, there are also important areas where there is disagreement and others where Non-Muslim sources remain silent and do not corroborate traditional Muslim narratives. However, given the dearth of Non-Muslim sources covering this subject matter in the early period of Islam, silence in this regards is not necessarily significant from a critical evaluation perspective.

To quote scholar Michael Cook:

"What does this material tell us? We may begin with the major points on which it agrees with the Islamic tradition. It precludes any doubts as to whether Muhammad was a real person: he is named in a Syriac source that is likely to date from the time of the conquests, and there is an account of him in a Greek source of the same period. From the 640s we have confirmation that the term muhajir was a central one in the new religion, since its followers are known as 'Magaritai' or 'Mahgraye' in Greek and Syriac respectively. At the same time, a papyrus of 643 is dated 'year twenty two', creating a strong presumption that something did happen in AD 622. The Armenian chronicler of the 660s attests that Muhammad was a merchant, and confirms the centrality of Abraham in his preaching. The Abrahamic sanctuary appears in an early source dated (insecurely) to the 670s" [2]

Another scholar, S.A. Nigosian writes:

"It must be stated, however, that the information preserved in both the Muslim traditions and the non-Muslim sources contain some essential differences. A few are chronological (e.g., the founding of Muhammad's community); others relate to Muhammad's attitude toward the Jews and Palestine. Naturally, those diverse sources of information are not all of equal importance, even though each has a certain intrinsic value. The Qur'an stands foremost in importance. The Muslim traditions, as a rule, rank next to the Qur'an, while the remaining sources provide especially valuable corroboration

of the statements in the Qur'an and the Muslim traditions" [3]

Arguably, it is the Armenian chronicler Sebeos, Bishop of the Bagratunis (writing approximately 660s CE - approximately 30 years after the death of the Prophet) who gives us the earliest narrative accounts of the **Prophet's ministry** in any language today.

However, before we have a look at some of his writings (and as is the case with any ancient source) some caution is advised with regards Armenian historical texts when considering their authenticity and veracity.

For example, Sebeos's writings and the history attributed to him is a source for much scholarly debate. His work was first published in 1851 in Constantinople under the title 'History of bishop Sebeos on Heraclius'. The text was first published by T'adeos Mihrdatean and both manuscripts he used had neither a title nor name of the author.

"This manuscript, Mat 2639 [henceforth A] was one of the two MSS used by Mihrdatean for his 1851 edition. The other was an older MS, dated to 1568, which has now disappeared. A remains the earliest surviving witness of the History attributed to Sebeos, and from it all other known copies derive" [4]

In the following writing attributed to Sebeos which is sourced from a History of Heraclius, much can be inferred from the narrative and its resonance with the spirit of the Quranic text.

Twelve peoples [representing] all the tribes of the Jews assembled at the city of Edessa. When they saw that the Iranian troops had departed and left the city in peace, they [122] closed the gates and fortified themselves. They refused entry to troops of the Roman lordship. Thus Heraclius, emperor of the Byzantines, gave the order to besiege it. When [the Jews] realized that they could not militarily resist him, they promised to make peace. Opening the city gates, they went before him, and [Heraclius] ordered that they should go and stay in their own place. So they departed, taking the road through the desert to Tachkastan to the sons of Ishmael. [The Jews] called [the Arabs] to their aid and familiarized them with the relationship they had through the books of the [Old] Testament. Although [the Arabs] were convinced of their close relationship, they were unable to get a consensus from their multitude, for they were divided from each other by religion. In that period a certain one of them, a man of the sons of Ishmael named Muhammad, a merchant, became prominent. A sermon about the Way of Truth, supposedly at God's command, was revealed to them, and [Muhammad] taught them to recognize the God of Abraham, especially since he was informed and knowledgeable about Mosaic history. Because the command had [g104] come from On High, he ordered them all to assemble together and to unite in faith. Abandoning the reverence of vain things, they turned toward the living God, who had appeared to their father Abraham. Muhammad legislated that they were not to [123] eat carrion, not to drink wine, not to speak falsehoods, and not to commit adultery. He said: "God promised that country to Abraham and to his son after him, for eternity. And what had been promised was fulfilled during that time when [God] loved Israel. Now, however, you are the sons of Abraham, and God shall fulfill the promise made to Abraham and his son on you. Only love the God of Abraham, and go and take the country which God gave to your

father, Abraham. No one can successfully resist you in war, since God is with you." [5]

"At that time a certain man from among those same sons of Ismael, whose name was Mahmet [i.e., Muḥammad], a merchant, as if by God's command appeared to them as a preacher [and] the path of truth. He taught them to recognize the God of Abraham, especially because he was learnt and informed in the history of Moses. Now because the command was from on high, at a single order they all came together in unity of religion. Abandoning their vain cults, they turned to the living God who had appeared to their father Abraham. So, Mahmet legislated for them: not to eat carrion, not to drink wine, not to speak falsely, and not to engage in fornication. He said: 'With an oath God promised this land to Abraham and his seed after him for ever. And he brought about as he promised during that time while he loved Ismael. But now you are the sons of Abraham and God is accomplishing his promise to Abraham and his seed for you. Love sincerely only the God of Abraham, and go and seize the land which God gave to your father Abraham. No one will be able to resist you in battle, because God is with you. [32]" [6]

FINAL THOUGHTS

It is interesting to note that while the Quran was widely accepted and preached by the earliest Muslim communities, little if no effort was made by them to preserve the traditions or biography of the Prophet in a written form that could be passed on to successive Muslim generations. No doubt it is plausible to accept that personal collections did exist but it is highly debateable whether the intention was for mass interest.

It took nearly two centuries for such information to start taking canon. Arguably, the best placed to oversee and preserve these traditions were the eye-witnesses and those who had been present in the direct company of the Prophet such as the companions and earliest Caliphs of Islam. This clearly did not occur. The fact that we find Non-Muslim sources dealing with the existence of the Prophet early in the 'literary' record than Muslim traditional sources inevitably makes one question the importance of these traditions for the earliest Muslim communities and their possible intentional suppression from wider dissemination.

REFERENCES

[1] A good survey can be sourced from the following reading material: HOYLAND. R. G, *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam)*,

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[4] R.W. Thomson, James Howard-Johnston, *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*. Translated, with notes, by R.W. Thomson. *Historical commentary by James Howard-Johnston, Assistance from Tim Greenwood*, Liverpool University Press First Published 1999, Introduction II. The Armenian Text (i) The Manuscripts xxxi.

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- [6] SAIFULLAH. M.S.M, & DAVID. A, Islamic Awareness, Dated Texts Mentioning Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) From 1-100 AH / 622-719 CE. [online] Available at: <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/History/Islam/Inscriptions/earlysaw.html> [Accessed 13th July 2011]. Note [32] R. W. Thomson (with contributions from J. Howard-Johnson & T. Greenwood), The Armenian History Attributed To Sebeos Part - I: Translation and Notes, 1999, Translated Texts For Historians - Volume 31, Liverpool University Press, pp. 95-96. Other translations can also be seen in P. Crone & M. Cook, Hagarism: The Making Of The Islamic World, 1977, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, pp. 6-7; R. G. Hoyland, Seeing Islam As Others Saw It: A Survey And Evaluation Of Christian, Jewish And Zoroastrian Writings On Early Islam, 1997, op. cit., p. 129; idem., "Sebeos, The Jews And The Rise Of Islam" in R. L. Nettle (Ed.), Medieval And Modern Perspectives On Muslim-Jewish Relations, 1995, Harwood Academic Publishers GmbH in cooperation with the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, p. 89.

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