

The Gospel according to Ibn Ishāq (d. 767)

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All descriptions of the life of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, go back to a single source: a book written around 750 AD by a certain Ibn Ishāq, who died in Baghdad in 767. The book came down to us in a redaction by a certain Ibn Hishām, who died in Cairo in 833. The book has been enormously influential. Later Muslim scholars from the classical period, like Tabari (d. 923), quote it often. This is fortunate because in this way a number of passages from Ibn Ishāq's work that had been omitted in Ibn Hishām's abridgement have nevertheless been preserved.

Later books about Muhammad essentially limit themselves to retelling Ibn Ishāq's story. Sometimes they are a little more detailed than Ibn Ishāq, but the extra details they supply do not inspire much confidence in modern skeptics. The modern western biographies of Muhammad, too, all completely depend upon Ibn Ishāq. Equally, all encyclopedia articles about Mohammed, whether popular or academic, are nothing but summaries of Ibn Ishāq's narrative.

Ibn Ishāq's book is known as 'Sīra', the Arabic word for 'biography'. Wehr's dictionary of modern standard Arabic assures us that 'As-Sīra', 'the biography', stands for 'the biography of the Prophet'. Until the 1970s and the 1980s scholars of Islam agreed that this book might suffer from a number of shortcomings, but that nevertheless it was a more or less solid base on which a biography of the Prophet could be based. This agreement has been undermined by the work of John Wansbrough and Patricia Crone.

Patricia Crone made her point in an offhand analysis of Watt's famous biography of Muhammad. In the 1950s, the Scottish scholar W.M. Watt published, in two volumes, a biography of Muhammad: First, *Muhammad at Mecca*, and next *Muhammad at Medina*. This biography has been extremely successful. Nevertheless it does not constitute an exception to the rule that everything ever written about Muhammad's life is based on the work of Ibn Ishāq.

Patricia Crone was probably the first scholar to point out that Watt's two authoritative and successful volumes on the life of Muhammad were actually books of a very peculiar nature.¹ In his narrative, Watt left out the miracles (apart from the revelation of the Koran, of course) and took what remained as historical.

If we were to follow the same procedure in writing a biography of Jesus, this would mean that we accept at face value anything from the four Gospels that does not imply divine or supernatural intervention. Of course Jesus did not walk over the waters of the sea of Galilea, or change water into wine, but, e.g., the text of the sermon of the Mount as given by the gospel writer can be trusted to be fully reliable. Few New Testament scholars would take such an unsophisticated approach seriously. Watt's two books on Muhammad, however, became hugely successful,

¹ Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, Oxford 1987, pp. 220-221.

both within and without academic circles, almost as successful as Ibn Ishāq. No one in his right mind does not envy Professor Watt.

In spite of the success of Watt's books, we have to ask ourselves whether Watt and his competitors like the French scholar Maxime Rodinson were right in treating Ibn Ishāq's book as a historical source on which a modern biography could reasonably be based. The answer is that they actually were wrong in this respect, because nothing from the contents of Ibn Ishāq is confirmed by inscriptions or other archeological material. Testimonies from non-Muslim contemporaries do not exist. Greek, Armenian, Syriac and other sources about the beginnings of Islam are very difficult to date, but none of them is convincingly contemporary with the Prophet of Islam. Under such circumstances, no biography can be a scholarly work in the modern sense of that word, not even with the help of an omniscient Ibn Ishāq.

In Göttingen, Germany, in 1858, the German scholar F. Wüstenfeld for the first time edited Ibn Ishāq's book on the basis of a number of manuscripts. In 1864, G. Weil translated the book into German. In 1955 the British Arabist Alfred Guillaume translated Ibn Ishāq's book into English. The seventeenth edition of this English translation appeared in 2004.

The first printed Arabic edition of Ibn Ishāq appeared in Cairo in 1843, and this edition was the basis of a 1927 edition by Mahmoud Sayyid al-Tahtawi, who added a number of footnotes. This edition from 1927 was frequently reprinted. The book is hence widely available both in English and in Arabic. Excerpts have been published in a number of other languages. Professor Wim Raven is the author of the Dutch abridgement of Ibn Ishāq.

In the standard biographical work on classical Arabic literature, Carl Brockelmann's *Geschichte der Arabischen Literatur*, Ibn Ishāq is classified as historiography (GAL I 135), and so are later biographies of Muhammad, written by Ibn Ishāq's successors Al-Waqidi (d. 823) and Ibn Sa'ad (d. 845). However, a careful reading of Ibn Ishāq does not support this classification. The book explicitly wants to bring the 'good news' of Muhammad's mission to mankind. As everybody knows or should know, 'good news' is the literal translation of the Greek *euangelion*, 'gospel', from which words like 'Evangelist' have been derived.

Etymology, however, is not all. Ibn Ishāq describes the measures that had to be taken in heaven before Muhammad could be sent out as a prophet.² Descriptions of scenes that are situated in heaven are rare in the Bible, and no modern scholar classifies reports about celestial transactions as historiography.

Of course, there is much more. In Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra*, parallel versions of stories abound, and usually it is clear that one of the two versions is a refinement of the other one. Ibn Ishāq's book even contains a story about the miraculous multiplication of food, not bread and fishes as in the New Testament, but dates and

² Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of [Ibn] Ishāq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, Oxford 1955, 104; Koran 34:38.

mutton.³ Speeches delivered at occasions where no witnesses can have been present, are reported elaborately.⁴ Miraculous cures are attributed to Muhammad.⁵ Like Moses, Muhammad draws water from a rock⁶, and like Eliah he makes rain.⁷ Some of his more controversial actions he did not initiate himself, but Angels ordered him to do so.⁸ A rock melted when he spat on it.⁹ Again and again Muhammad predicts the future, in only the story about the raid against Tabuk he is seven times presented as a clairvoyant.¹⁰ Again and again he knows where a camel that went astray can be found back.

If that does not convince the reader that Ibn Ishāq's book is a gospel, not thisworldly historiography, what can? Perhaps Muhammad's letter to the Emperor of Rome will do so. In Ibn Ishāq's version this letter contains only three lines, in the version of Al-Bukhari, about two centuries after Ibn Ishāq, the letter contains eight lines, including the original three. One might almost say that Ibn Ishāq is, to borrow a term from the terminology of synoptic New Testament scholarship, the Marc of the Islamic tradition.

Like Marc, he may have had predecessors who may have left documents and he may have known persons who might have known witnesses. But some of the witnesses Ibn Ishāq mentions can hardly be called witnesses in the normal meaning of the word. Frequently Ibn Ishāq attributes his stories to reports by Aisha, traditionally seen as Muhammad's favorite wife. Aisha, according to the traditional chronology, was only 18 years old when Muhammad died. But even if she would have been a little older, how reliable can her testimony be on things that did not concern her herself or about things that must have happened before her birth?

But even if she would have been a trained and mature observer of new religious movements, which of course she was not, close members of her family played important political and other roles in the early Islamic movement. It is almost unimaginable that she could have been an objective witness on developments in which her father, her uncles, her nephews and cousins, not to mention her husband and his other wives, played such important parts.

Aisha had an older half sister, Asmaa. Asmaa had a son, Urwa ibn Zubayr (643-712). Many of Aisha's reports have been preserved by Urwa. But Urwa was a son of Zubayr ibn Awwaam (d. 657) who was a grandson of Abd al-Muttalib, who also was the grandfather of Muhammad. Zubayr suffered an important defeat

³ Guillaume 452.

⁴ Ibidem 437 and 462 (internal debates amongst the Jews who were attacked by Muhammad); 460 (speech by Abu Sufyan).

⁵ Ibidem 381.

⁶ Ibidem 501, Deuteronomy 8:15.

⁷ Ibidem, 602-608.

⁸ Ibidem 461-469.

⁹ Ibidem 452.

¹⁰ Ibidem 602-608.

against Ali, in 656. How objective can Urwa have been when reporting about Ali who defeated his father?

Urwa had a younger brother, Abdallah ibn Zubayr. Abdallah ibn Zubayr was at war with the Umayyad Caliphs for years, and was defeated by them in 692. How objective can Urwa have been about the enemies of his younger brother and their forefathers?

Urwa's material has been transmitted by a certain Zuhri (d. 742). Zuhri was an important functionary of the Umayyad caliphate. How objective can Zuhri have been about the enemies of the Umayyad family?

But worst of all, the link between Aisha, Urwa and Zuhri on the one hand and Ibn Ishāq on the other, is weak. Ibn Ishāq literally writes that he heard the Aisha-Urwa-Zuhri stories from a man he does not mention by name, but, he writes, 'I do not suspect him [of unreliability or of fabricating stories].'¹¹

Other lines of transmission suffer from similar defects. There are two possibilities: these witnesses and their transmitters were superhuman, or their testimonies are flawed by their close family relationships to the main actors in the dramas they report about.

The chronological gap

There is, however, a much more general argument not to regard Ibn Ishāq's book as historiography. Already its chronology indicates irrefutably that something is wrong. As you all know, the Arab Muslim calendar is a lunar calendar. A year in the Muslim calendar consists of twelve lunar months. Hence, in the Muslim calendar this lunar year is approximately 11 days shorter than the solar year. In the period before 629/630, this problem was solved by adding leap months. One leap month every three solar years would keep the calendar more or less in harmony with the four seasons.

Muhammad abolished the leap months in 629/630, and this abolition is confirmed by the Koran. Verse 9:37 categorically forbids the introduction of leap months, because as the beginning of verse 9:36 has it, the number of months with God is twelve.¹² It is not known how and when the ancient Arabs added a leap month in the decades before this became forbidden, but whatever system they used, this state of affairs creates a number of problems and anomalies.

One glance at the tables that are used to find corresponding dates from the Christian and the Muslim calendars shows that these tables do not take leap months into account for the period before the prohibition of such months. They

¹¹ Ibidem 493.

¹² *Inna ʿiddata sh-shuḥūr ʿinda llaḥi thnaa ʿashara shahran.*

present us with years consisting of twelve lunar months, also in the period before 629/630. But we now know, if only from Koran 9:36-37, that before 629 such leap months were actually added.

Internet sites that offer to calculate a Christian date from a Muslim date, or the reverse, suffer from the same defect, be it that this is not as easily visible as in the printed tables offered by, e.g., Wüstenfeld, Mahler, and Spuler.¹³

What does this mean for the historicity of Ibn Ishāq biography of Muhammad? Ibn Ishāq's narrative covers a period of almost 21 solar years, from Muhammad's first call as a prophet in around 610, till the prohibition of leap months in 629/630. Of course the narrative continues after this prohibition till the death of Muhammed in 632, but in this last period there can have been no leap months.

In such a period of twenty solar years six or seven leap months must have occurred. Our only problem is that we do not know when these leap months were added, and who decided on the introduction of such a month.

For every event which took place in the life of Muhammad Ibn Ishaq meticulously recorded in his *Sīra* in which month it took place. The Koran and its commentaries also date at least one important event by month, i.e. the Battle of Badr that according to the Koran took place in the month of Ramadan.¹⁴

This meticulous and systematic dating by month which is Ibn Ishāq's wont, is, of course, one of the main reasons why western historians classified his book as historiography in the normal sense of that word.

However, as we now know, in the period which Ibn Ishāq writes about, at least six, perhaps seven, leap months occurred. How then, is it possible that not a single one of the numerous events Ibn Ishaq describes and attaches a date to, took place during a leap month?

If his narrative of the life of Muhammad would be based on historical memories and on real events, however distorted, but remembered by real people, how can half a solar year (or more) remain unmentioned and have disappeared from the record? It must be admitted that this amounts to only 2.8% of the period concerned, but nevertheless this is serious, because Ibn Ishāq repeatedly enumerates the successive months in which Muhammad stayed in Medina, or elsewhere. How is it possible that these months in a row never include a leap month?

The same reason why Ibn Ishāq was mistaken for a historian like Thucydides or Herodot, his precise dating of events by month, may now become the argument that unmask him as an evangelist, a gospel writer. His stories are not the reflection of events remembered if only vaguely, but his stories are sermons disguised as

¹³ Bertold Spuler & Joachim Mayer, *Wüstenfeld-Mahler'sche Vergleichungstabellen zur Muslimischen [...] Zeitrechnung [...]*, Wiesbaden 1961.

¹⁴ Koran 2:185 & 8:42.

stories. There is no way in which he could have omitted the leap months if he would have been a profane historian. His stories can only date from a period in which people had forgotten that leap months had once existed.

These stories by Ibn Ishāq, we are forced to conclude, do not attempt to describe memories of events that took place in the past, but they want to convince the reader that the protagonist of these stories, Muhammad, is the Messenger of God. Like the four gospels of the New Testament, they are not history in the normal sense of that word. Ibn Ishāq's book, his widely known and often paraphrased *Sīra*, is nothing but a gospel.