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THE MAKING OF AN IMAGE: THE NARRATIVE FORM OF

IBN ISHAQ'S *SIRAT RASUL ALLAH*

by

Katherine A. Milby

Under the Direction of Dr. Timothy Renick

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the meaning and significance of the form of Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah.* It asks the questions: What are the possible reasons for Ibn Ishaq choosing a narrative form for this biography of Muhammad? What does a narrative format grant the text? Are there historical factors which could have influenced the decision? What other influences affected the text? Finally, what are the implications of Ibn Ishaq's decision to use a narrative form? Taking into consideration narrative theory, the historical setting, and textual evidence, the thesis argues that Ibn Ishaq chose the format most likely to control the image of Muhammad, thus controlling the conversation of what Islam should be. The implications of this view affect how one understands the usages of the *Sira* as well as the historicity of the text.

INDEX WORDS: Islam, Ibn Ishaq, Narrative Theory, Islamic History

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by

Katherine A. Milby

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Georgia State University

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THE MAKING OF AN IMAGE: THE NARRATIVE FORM OF IBN ISHAQ'S *SIRAT RASUL ALLAH*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION 1

2 NARRATIVE THEORY 6

3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 13

A brief biography of Ibn Ishaq 13

From the death of Muhammad through the Umayyads 15

Historical Setting of the *Sira* 20

4 TEXTUAL EVIDENCE 24

Pre- and Early-Islamic Literature 24

Comparison with Biblical Texts 27

Evidence in the *Sira* 39

5 IMPLICATIONS 42

6 CONCLUSION 46

BIBLIOGRAPHY 48

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Ibn Ishaq's (d. 767 C.E.) *Sirat Rasul Allah* (760 C.E.) is the first known narrative biography of Muhammad. However, this does not mean that biographies of Muhammad did not exist prior to Ibn Ishaq. These other early biographies are in an episodic form rather than the narrative chosen by Ibn Ishaq.[1] This raises the question, why did Ibn Ishaq choose a narrative form? It is my contention that Ibn Ishaq chose the narrative form because it offered the most control over the image of Muhammad, and thus, if the text was accepted, allowed the most control of the conversation regarding what Islam should be. In other words, the *Sirat Rasul Allah* (known as the *Sira* henceforth) is an attempt by Ibn Ishaq to control the conversation taking place between various groups of Muslims about Islam.

This time period in which the *Sira* was written, and the years leading up to it, were fraught with various groups vying for religious, political, and economic superiority. Thus, the Abbasids faced the need to create social cohesion, establish their political authority, as well as instill a vision of Islam upon which the Muslims under their control could agree. While it is not my claim that the only way they faced this challenge was through the *Sira*, it is my claim that the *Sira* was a part of the overall scheme to bring the community together by controlling the image of Muhammad. This thesis will address how narratives help to create image and tradition. Therefore, my conclusion will be based not only on the historical setting of Ibn Ishaq and a comparison of the *Sira* with pre- and early-Islamic Arabic literature as well as Biblical texts, but also on theoretical work done on historical narratives.

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[1] Imam Muslim. *Sahih Muslim.* Translated by Abdul Hamid Siddiqi. Vols. I-IV. New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 2004; Muhammad ibn Isma'il Bukhari. *Sahih al-Bukhari: the translation of the meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari: Arabic-English.* Translated by Muhammad Muhsim Khan. Riyadh-Saudi Arabia: Darussalam Pub. & Distr., 1997.

I first became familiar with Ibn Ishaq's *Sira* while taking a course on the life of Muhammad during my first semester in graduate school. Since I had just completed a bachelor's degree in literature and was accustomed to analyzing texts, I was immediately struck by the *topoi* in the *Sira* which resembled the religious *topoi* I had seen in Christian texts. Aware that my own background could potentially influence the way I was interpreting the *Sira*, I was hesitant to make any conclusions without further research. The interest I had in the *Sira* led me to a project exploring the similarities and differences between Biblical texts and the *Sira*. Eventually, that project led to this thesis. Though the original project is unpublished, I have included some of that research here.

Since my undergraduate work was primarily in literature and literary theory, and since the origin of this thesis began with a textual analysis, I have chosen to continue with a textual analysis. Analyzing the form of a text in combination with examining the historical context often provides insights. However, such an approach is hampered by the fact that I am working entirely from translations of the primary texts. I have attempted to lessen the impact of this fact in two ways. First, I have made every effort to choose standard, reliable texts both by consulting with those conversant in Arabic and by researching reviews of the translation.[2] Second, I have chosen to focus on events and chronology rather than specific words or phrases which could lose their meaning through translation. Despite these efforts, I acknowledge the fact that using

[2] For the purposes of this thesis, I am using the translation of the *Sirat Rasul Allah* by Alfred Guillaume. Despite the problematic aspects of some parts of this translation, it is the standard, most authoritative translation of Ibn Ishaq's work referenced, even in works which use the original Arabic text. See: Philip K. Hitti. "A Review of The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah by A. Guillaume." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 47, no. 1 (1956): 85-86; R.B. Serjeant. "Professor Guillaume's Translation of the "Sirah"." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 21, no. 1/3 (1958): 1-14. For biographical information on Ibn Ishaq see J.M.B. Jones *Ibn Ishak.* Vol. IV, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, edited by Ch. Pellat, and J. Schacht V.L.M.B. Lewis, 810-811. London: Luzac & Co., 1971.

translations opens the possibility of erroneous conclusions. In light of this, I have phrased my conclusions as possibilities rather than as proven fact.

In the next chapter, I will discuss narrative theory. The main emphasis is on what the term narrative means and what a narrative form contributes to a biography. The question of what a narrative is becomes especially important when examining the *Sira* because the narrative in the text is often broken up by *asaniid* and repetitions of a particular event with different variations depending on who is relating the tradition. Determining what a narrative brings to a biography is also critical as it pertains directly to the hypothesis that Ibn Ishaq chose that form to create an image of Muhammad.

In Chapter Three, I discuss the historical context of the *Sira*. The historical context contains two parts: the time from Muhammad's death to the rise of the Abbasid Empire and the context in which Ibn Ishaq lived. The time period leading up to the writing of the *Sira* is crucial since many divisions arose after Muhammad's death. Since my thesis claims that Ibn Ishaq sought to control the image of Muhammad, demonstrating that there was contestation over this image is vital. If there was consensus regarding this matter, Ibn Ishaq would not have needed the narrative form to control Muhammad's image. Thus, in Chapter Three I explore some of the disagreements and factions which arose during this time. The second part of Chapter Three explores some of the relevant information about the Abassids and the cultural context in which Ibn Ishaq lived.

As will be discussed in Chapter Four, there is little precedent in Arab literary culture for a sustained narrative. Pre-Islamic literature was comprised mainly of poetry; early Islamic literature, as already stated, took mainly an episodic form, consisting of short stories meant to

capture a glimpse of the Prophet's life as in the *Hadith* and *Maghazi* literature.[3] Many stories appear in multiple genres. The story of the Battle of Badr, for instance, is referenced in the *Sira*, the *Qur'an* and other texts.[4] However, whereas the stories in the *Hadith* and *Maghazi* literature simply capture the moment, the *Sira* presents a continuous vision. Thus, the episodic literature can be likened to a photo-album which has the pictures arranged according to the desires and needs of the one viewing it, while the *Sira* is similar to a movie which guides the audience through the events in a specific order and with a particular point of view.

This difference was surely not lost on Ibn Ishaq. The variety of cultural and religious beliefs in Ibn Ishaq's historical setting granted him exposure to and knowledge of religious narratives which sought to control the conversations of those respective traditions. It should not be assumed, however, and I am not arguing that these non-Islamic sources solely influenced Ibn Ishaq's writing. Ibn Ishaq certainly drew upon both pre- and early-Islamic texts for inspiration as well. Rather, given the eclectic nature of Ibn Ishaq's writing, I am arguing that Ibn Ishaq borrowed from all the traditions available to him what he found useful, particularly the form. In Chapter Four, then, I explore some textual evidence which supports the claim that Ibn Ishaq drew upon the various texts available to him.

Finally, in Chapter Five I explore some of the implications of the hypothesis that Ibn Ishaq sought to control the image of Muhammad. The two main implications impact how scholars view the usages of the *Sira* and *Hadith* in Islamic legal rulings and the historicity of the *Sira*. My hypothesis offers a different explanation for the preference of *Hadith* in legal rulings

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[3]See Albrecht Noth. *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition A Source-Critical Analysis.* Princeton: The Darwin Press, Inc., 1994.

[4] Majid Fakhry, trans. *An Interpretation of the Qur'an English Translation of the Meanings A Bilingual Edition.* Washington Square, New York: New York University Press, 2004, 55n, 70, 75n, 175n, 180n; Ishaq, Ibn. *The Life of Muhammad.* Translated by A. Guillaume. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967., 289-314, 447, 602, 605, 614, 624.

over the *Sira* than the traditional understanding that the *Hadith* are more historically reliable. If my hypothesis is correct, then the non-contextual nature of the *Hadith* makes the *Hadith* easier to apply in a variety of settings than the *Sira*. Furthermore, my hypothesis complicates attempts at showing that the *Sira* is an historical document.

Before proceeding, there are a few key points and terms that need to be discussed. The first is that, for the purposes of this thesis, I am restricting the comparison between the Sira and Biblical texts to the canonical Biblical texts. While the presence of Nestorians, Zoroastrians, and other religious groups suggest that Ibn Ishaq could have (and probably did) know extra-canonical texts, delving into all the various literature available is too vast a project for the space granted in a thesis. Therefore, limitations must be constructed. Since work has already been done establishing Ibn Ishaq's familiarity with the canonical texts, I will focus on these.

The second point is to clarify what I mean by “Biblical” texts. Since Christians and Jews recognize many of the same books, for convenience I am referring to the corpus of religious literature in the two communities. At those points when it becomes necessary to distinguish between the Jewish and Christian texts, I will refer to the Jewish Scripture as the Torah, and the Christian texts as the Gospels, since those are the parts of the respective texts I will be concentrating on. I am avoiding the terms “Old” and “New” Testaments because these terms represent a Christian understanding of the texts not recognized by the Jewish community.

CHAPTER TWO: NARRATIVE THEORY

The title of the *Sira* (*Sirat Rasul Allah)* is generally translated into English as "The Life of Muhammad."[5] This translation conveys the image of a biography. However, despite the biographical material contained in the *Sira*, the text is not a biography as modern Western readers would understand the term. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the terminology. What does it mean to call something a biography or a narrative? This section examines these terms and some of the relevant theories behind them.

In the original form of the *Sira*, now lost to scholars, Ibn Ishaq created an historical narrative going back to Adam and Eve.[6] The first part of the work, which covered the time period between Creation and Muhammad known as the *Kitab al-Mubtada*, was removed from the *Sira* by Ibn Hisham.[7] While scholars do not have an extant copy of the full *Sira*, Gordon Newby has offered a reconstruction of this part in *The Making of the Last Prophet.*[8] This book, as well as the understanding scholars have of the original text, show how the Ibn Ishaq is interested in relating the history of God acting in the world, leading up to Muhammad and through the early Muslim communities.

The *Sira* is comprised mainly of *Sunna* (or stories) of the Prophet which are arranged in a chronological order. However, it would be a mistake to consider the text entirely or even mainly as simply another collection of *Hadith* with the main distinguishing factor being the arrangement

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[5]*The Life of Muhammad.*
[6]This has been documented in several sources, including A. Guillaume's translation of the *Sira* and Gordon Newby's *The Making of the Last Prophet*. See: Ibn Ishaq. *The Life of Muhammad.* Translated by A. Guillaume. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967.; Gordon Darnell Newby. *The Making of the Last Prophet A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989.
[7]*The Life of Muhammad*. vxii-xviii.
[8] Gordon Darnell Newby. *The Making of the Last Prophet A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989.

of stories chronologically. Ibn Ishaq includes much material that is not prophetic *Sunna*.[9] He includes *Maghazi* literature -- another genre of Islamic historical writing which focuses mainly on the raids of Muhammad's life -- and poetry, an Arab tradition going back to the pre-Islamic period. He also includes material gathered from Jewish sources, known as the *Isra'iliyat*, especially when dealing with the period before Muhammad.[10] Furthermore, the *Hadith* material Ibn Ishaq uses does not always meet the criteria for "authentic" *Hadith*, a label that Muslims scholars were beginning to and eventually did impose on the *Hadith* literature. These criteria focus more at the *isnad* (chain of transmission) in *Hadith* than on the actual story included. The prophetic *Hadith* which Ibn Ishaq uses sometimes has unreliable or collective *asaniid* which ultimately led to their omission in Ibn Hisham's recension less than a century later. Ibn Ishaq occasionally omits an *isnad* altogether, leading some scholars to add another category of material upon which Ibn Ishaq drew, simply referred to as anecdotes.[11] Thus, though the *Sira* is nominally a biography using mainly prophetic *Sunna* as sources, it is perhaps more appropriately seen as a salvation history which uses an amalgamation of various sources to show God working throughout history.

How we view the text influences the way we interpret the material. This holds true whether we are considering the historicity of the text or its form. Though scholars do refer to Ibn Ishaq's *Sira* as a narrative, the term may not be entirely apt. Andrew P. Norman points out that much attention has been given to narrative theory, but relatively little attention has been given to the term "narrative."[12] This complicates the issue of understanding Ibn Ishaq's *Sira* because

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[9]*Sunna* is a generic term referring to an example given. The term prophetic *Sunna* specifically denotes Muhammad's life, rather than his Companions or another important Muslim.
[10]*The Making of the Last Prophet.*
[11] W. Montgomery Watt. *Early Islam Collected Articles.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990, 13-21.
[12] Andrew P. Norman. "Telling it Like it Was: Historical Narratives on Their Own Terms." *History and Theory* 30, no. 2 (1990): 119-135, 120.

there is such a vague understanding of the *Sira*'s form. Scholars certainly know the *Sira* well enough to know how Ibn Ishaq organizes the information presented and what his style is, but without a clearer idea of the function of the Sira, any attempt to understand it becomes befuddled and risks going awry. This is particularly demonstrable in the debate over the historicity of the *Sira*, in which scholars hotly contest whether or not the *Sira* is a reliable historical source. Rizwi Shuhadha Faizer notes that scholars of Islam, specifically those focused on the *Sira*, have often misread the *Sira* because they assume it is supposed to be primarily a historical text when it is, in fact, a distinct genre.[13] While it is not the purpose of this thesis is to determine the historic validity of the *Sira*, the ongoing debate highlights the importance of understanding the type of material with which we have to work.

While scholars normally refer to the format Ibn Ishaq employs as a narrative form, in contrast to the episodic form regularly employed by the *Hadith* collections and *Maghazi* literature, it may be more accurate to call it a salvation history which uses an amalgamation of various, mainly narrative, sources to show how God works throughout history. Thus, we are left with the task of deciding if Ibn Ishaq's *Sira* is in fact a narrative or something else. So, what exactly does the term "narrative" mean? Norman defines it loosely as something with a plot. There are two possibilities in this regard, according to narrative theorists such as Norman, L.B. Cebik and Anthony Saville.[14] One is that the author of a historical narrative constructs the narrative onto the event. This means that the facts that the author works with are separate events with no narrative connecting them inherently. The act of imposing a narrative upon the events is therefore a constructive act on the part of the historian. The other possibility is that history itself

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[13]Rizwi S. Fazier. "Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi Revisited A Case Study of Muhammad and the Jews in Biographical Literature". PhD diss., McGill University, 1995, 26.

[14]"Telling It Like It Was", L.B. Cebik "Understanding Narrative Theory." *History and Theory* 25, no. 4 (1986): 58-81. Anthony Saville. "Narrative Theory; Anceint or Modern." *Philosophical Papers*, 1989: 27-51.

is inherently narrative. The plot linking the events together exists before the historian begins his work. In this scenario, the good historian merely records the plot (or the story) that exists independently of any human act.

It seems initially that the *Sira* meets the qualification of a narrative as outlined by Norman. The *Sira* does seem to tell a story, the story of God working through history as understood by Ibn Ishaq. However, the only reason this seems so readily apparent in the *Sira* as opposed to the episodic literature is that the *Sira* is arranged in a linear fashion. That is, one event is seen leading to another event in an easily discernible fashion. Thus, the "plot" is no more than the order in which Ibn Ishaq arranges the material. Yet, this alone is not enough to classify it as a narrative. The pre-Islamic poetry can be said to have a plot in this sense insofar as it often recounts deeds, albeit to highlight virtues and glories of the tribe rather than to tell a story.[15] The plot is accomplished, however, through counting the deeds of ancestors in verse rather than in prose; in other words, it is done by composing poems about the stories of members of the tribe. Thus, each poem has a plot, yet the poems are not considered narratives.

More sophisticated work has been done by those exploring the phenomena specifically of biographical narratives. Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps observe:

> The sacred biographer is not primarily concerned to provide a narrative portrait or 'likeness' of the subject. Establishing the mythical ideal, or what might better be called the biographic image, takes precedence over a simple chronicling of biographical facts. Very often this biographic image is established by directing attention to a few key events in the life of the subject including, in most cases, his birth, his religious quest and its denouement, and his death. On the other hand, given the sacred biographer's concern with establishing the mythical ideal, he often finds it necessary to fill gaps in the subject's life which the less 'devoted' biographer might simply recognize and pass over. Stories of an apocryphal nature may be supplied to fill gaps left by a relatively inaccessible or uneventful childhood.[16]

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[15] *Early Islam*, 17.

[16] Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps. *The Biographical Process Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion.* The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1976, 4.

This concern with establishing the mythical ideal can clearly be seen in the *Sira*, though perhaps the text is concerned more with the ideal of a prophet or God's plan than with Muhammad per se. That being said, the elements of establishing a prophetical ideal, for lack of a better term, are continuously evident throughout the *Sira*. Newby's *The Making of the Last Prophet* reconstructs the first part of the *Sira*, showing how a part of the original work established the image of a prophet and linked Muhammad with that image. Since the *Qur'an* does not provide complete stories of the other prophets, Ibn Ishaq relies not only on Islamic traditions and Qur'anic reference, but also draws upon material outside the tradition (in other words, apocryphal material) to relate the story. These materials include Jewish and Christian traditions as well as Arab stories.[17] Either Ibn Ishaq believed these to be accurate historical portrayals of the men and events in question, or he chose them to bolster the claim that Muhammad fit in the line of the prophets, or a combination of the two.

The historical narrative has less to do with stylistics than it has to do with presenting the information in such a manner that it guides the reader through the events as the author intends rather than allowing the information to be taken out of context and viewed by itself. By looking closely at how Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi portray Muhammad's relationship to Jews in Medina, Faizer demonstrates Reynold's and Capp's point that the biographer's concern is with establishing the biographical image rather than the historical fact. As Faizer notes:

> Al-Waqidi, for his part, plays with the scenario depicted by Ibn Ishaq, using repetition, change of chronology, and new material (as is his wont) to weave a motif about the abrogation of the agreement with Muhammad and the Jews. In a sense this too is an age-old Biblical theme: the Jews had not kept their covenant with God either. . . . He [al-Waqidi] takes the aspects of B. Nadir incident as depicted by Ibn Ishaq and presents it during the raid of B. Qaynuqa as well, so that, for instance, the hypocrisy of Ibn Ubayy is not repeated, as is the notion of the exile of the Jews. Through repetition al-Waqidi emphasizes the character of

[17] *The Making of the Last Prophet*, 3.

> the Prophet as honest, a man of his word who keeps his agreements, but as one who is forced to attack the Jews because they abrogated theirs. . . . It is significant that Ibn Ishaq, for his part, does not specifically mention an agreement. Al-Waqidi, by emphasizing the writing of one introduces his own interpretation of these events.[18]

Here Faizer highlights one aspect which shows how the narrative can affect the portrayal of Muhammad and, in this instance, the Jews of Medina. The addition or omission of one piece of information, specifically the agreement between Muhammad and the Jews which al-Waqidi highlighted and Ibn Ishaq did not, as well as the order of the events subtly influences the perception of the events as they unfold. This idea of arranging events in a chronological order to affect the interpretation is the concept of the term narrative as I am using it.

Even though the story of the *Sira* is broken by *asaniid* and repetition of events, the text still fits the concept of narrative as described. Ibn Ishaq arranges the material in a way that takes the reader from the point of Adam and Eve through the death of Muhammad. In doing so, he presents a continuous vision of God working throughout history. He takes the reader through Muhammad's life, much like a director leads a viewer through a film. Other forms of pre- and early-Islamic literature lack this element of control.[19] The *Hadith*, *Maghazi*, and *Tafsir* literature are ahistorical in the sense that they are non-contextual. These texts relate events in isolation, without indicating what led up to the event in question or what followed. In some instances, these texts relate a saying of the Prophet without giving any indication even of the specific event which inspired the saying, such as in the tradition in *Sahih Muslim* which says, "Abu Huraira (Allah be pleased with him) reported that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) forbade a transaction determined by throwing stones, and the type which involves some uncertainty."[20] This tradition, related in its entirety, gives no indication as to the saying's context allowing the

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[18]"Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi Revisited," 235.
[19]This will be discussed further in Chapter Four.
[20]*Sahih Muslim*, v. III, 963.

reader to apply it to various contexts. Since the context of a tradition can subtly alter its meaning, as Fazier shows, this non-contextual form prevents Muslim from controlling the meaning in the way the *Sira's* form allows Ibn Ishaq to control the meanings of the traditions in his text. In the next Chapter, I will examine some of the context in which Ibn Ishaq was working.

CHAPTER THREE: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Since my claim that Ibn Ishaq chose the narrative form in order to control the image of Muhammad depends upon the fact that there was division among the Islamic community at the time of Ibn Ishaq, it is necessary to show that such division did in fact exist, to discuss some of the causes, and to argue that Ibn Ishaq had motivation to address these divisions in some fashion. To this end, this chapter will focus on the historical background of Ibn Ishaq. The first section will focus on the divisions which arose during the succession of Muhammad to the establishment of the Abbasid Empire. This time period in Islamic history is vital because many of the divisions began in this time period. To understand the context in which Ibn Ishaq lived, one must understand the events leading up to the Abbasid Caliphate, for whom Ibn Ishaq worked. The second section of this chapter will then focus on the early years of the Abbasid Empire. It will explore the different populations existing in the Abbasid Empire as well as delve into some of the political maneuvering of Caliph al-Mansur, the first Abbasid Caliph and Ibn Ishaq's patron. Before beginning that examination, however, it is necessary to briefly look at the life of Ibn Ishaq himself.

A Brief Biography of Ibn Ishaq

Ibn Ishaq is best known for his biography of Muhammad, though he also claimed to be a scholar in law. He was born in Medina around 85A.H. (704CE). Scholars can trace Ibn Ishaq's lineage back to his grandfather, Yasar. Yasar was an Arab prisoner captured at Aln al-Tamr in 12AH (633-4CE). Yasar became a slave but later became a Muslim and was freed. Yasar had three sons, all of whom were known as transmitters of *akhbar*.[21]

[21] *Ibn Ishak.*, 810-811.

Despite having this detailed lineage, little is known about Ibn Ishaq's early life. He did apparently gain a scholarly reputation at an early age, for there he was references as "'the most knowledgeable of men in *maghari*'" by no later than 121AH (741CE).[22] Scholars also know he studied under Yazid b. Abi Habib in Alexandria. Ibn Ishaq was married to a woman named Fatima bint al-Mundhir b. al-Zubayr. Ibn Ishaq probably returned to Medina later, but was forced to leave. Contributing to Ibn Ishaq's departure may have been his bad relation with Malik b. Annas, a scholar of law who Ibn Ishaq treated with contempt.[23]

Malik was not the only contemporary of Ibn Ishaq's to have problems with him. Despite writing the earliest biography of Muhammad, al-Nisa'I and Yahya b. Kattan did not view him as a reliable or authoritative source of *Hadith*. Though some thought his use of collective *isnad* problematized his Hadith, several people went so far as to call Ibn Ishaq a liar on matters of *Hadith*. Others claim Ibn Ishaq included verses in his *Sira* that he knew were not authentic. This is not to say that all of Ibn Ishaq's contemporaries had a dim view of him. Asim b. Umar b. Katada claimed that "knowledge will remain amongst us as long as Ibn Ishaq lives."[24]

After Ibn Ishaq left Medina, he travelled east and eventually settled in Baghdad. It was there Ibn Ishaq met al-Mansur, the first Caliph in the Abbasid Empire. Eventually, Ibn Ishaq moved to the capital of the Abbasid Empire and tutored al-Mansur's son. Ibn Ishaq died around the year 150 AH (767 CE).[25]

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[22] ibid. 811.
[23] ibid. 811.
[24] ibid. 811.
[25] *The Life of Muhammad*, xiv.

From the death of Muhammad through the Umayyads

This section seeks to outline some of the various factions that arose in the wake of Muhammad's death. An exact chronology of events and battles is beyond the scope of my thesis. However, some discussion of this period is vital to my project because of the divisions that arose in the community after the Prophet's death. If the community was in unity about Muhammad's image, his successor, and the future of the nascent Islamic *umma*, then there would be no need for Ibn Ishaq to gain control of that conversation. Only if a debate about the identity and structure of the Islamic community was in fact taking place can my thesis be correct. Therefore, I will focus on the various groups, referencing dates and events as appropriate.

Both the Qur'an and the *Hadith* suggest that unity among the *umma*, or Islamic community, is important.[26] For instance, there is a prophetic *Hadith* which says, "There will come a time when men will come to graves and roll on them, as animals roll in the dust, wishing that they could be in the graves in place of their occupants -- not out of a desire to meet God, but because of the *fitan* they witness."[27] During Muhammad's life, he was the political, military, and religious leader of the budding religious community. He not only received the Revelation of *the Qur'an* from Gabriel, but interpreted it when necessary, and acted as arbitrator of disputes and as a military leader.[28] However, after Muhammad's death, division arose regarding his successor. While Abu Bakr initially succeeded Muhammad, his appointment was not uncontested. A portion of the Muslim community supported Ali, Muhammad's cousin, as the rightful Caliph. This portion later developed more fully and eventually became known as the

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[26] Marshall G.S. Hodgson. *The Venture of Islam Conscience and History in World History: The Classical Age of Islam.* Vol. 1. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974, 183.
[27] Sandra S. Campbell. "Fitna." In *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, edited by Richard C. Martin, 259-261, 261.
[28] A.T. Welch. *Muhammad.* Vol. VII, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition*, edited by C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P Heinrichs and Ch. Phellat. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993, 360-376.

shi'a, or party of Ali, while those who supported Abu Bakr as the first Caliph grew to be the *Sunni*. While I will refer to the group which supported Ali as the S*hi'ites* and those who supported Abu Bakr as S*unnis* from this point on, it is important to remember that the S*hi'a-Sunni* divide was not actually a divide at the time Ibn Ishaq wrote the *Sira*. However, the beginnings of this split started during this early period and factions working against each other did exist. Thus it is necessary to examine some of the tensions which existed during this time.

The *Sunnis* and the *Shi'ites* first split over the issue of who and what the successor of Muhammad should be. *Shi'ites* now maintain that Muhammad intended for his cousin and son-in-law, Ali b. Abu Talib, to inherit Muhammad's position in the community, despite the Arab tradition of naming older men as leaders.[29] The new community, however, elected Abu Bakr, one of Muhammad's friends and one of the first converts to Islam, to succeed Muhammad.[30] The question of who was to succeed Muhammad was not the only issue; there was also division regarding the manner by which the successor would be leader. Muhammad was "the Seal of the Prophets," and thus the last prophet, however, at the time of his death, it was unclear whether or not Muhammad's successor would be a religious leader as well as a political leader.[31] *Sunnis* maintain that since Muhammad was the last Prophet, religious inspiration such as his ended with his death.[32] They look to learned scholars, called *ulama*, for interpreting the *Qur'an* and *Hadith*.[33] *Shi'ites*, on the other hand, maintain that Ali, being the cousin and son-in-law of

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[29]L. Veccia Vaglieri. *Ali.* Vol. I, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, edited by H.A.R. Gibb, J.H. Kramers, E. Levi-Provencal and J. Schacht, 381-386. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960.
[30]W. Montgomery Watt. *Abu Bakr.* Vol. I, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, edited by H.A.R. Gibb, J.H. Kramers, E. Levi-Provencal and J. Schacht, 109-112. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960.
[31]Mark Wegner. "Succession" In *The Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, edited by Richard C. Martin, 651-656, 652.
[32] Devin J. Stewart. "Shi'a Early." In *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, by Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World, edited by Richard C. Martin, 621-624.
[33]This has changed over the years and the *ulamas* position on *Sunni* society has dramatically decreased. See: Zaman, Muhammad Qasim. *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam Custodians of Change*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Muhammad, inherited not only Muhammad's political leadership, but his religious authority as well.[34] They do not believe that Revelation has continued, but hold that God would not leave the community without religious inspiration. They, in turn, view Ali as the first *Imam*, an inspired religious leader as well as leader of the community.[35] Thus, while the *Sunnis* follow the line of the Caliphates, *Shi'ites* follow the line of the *Imams*.[36]

This debate between supporters of Ali and those of Abu Bakr as the first successor of Muhammad highlights another dispute in the community, actually dating back to before Muhammad's death, between A'isha and Ali. During Muhammad's life, A'isha -- Muhammad's beloved wife and Abu Bakr's daughter -- found herself in a compromising position, known now as the Affair of the Necklace. During this time, Ali was in the forefront of the people urging Muhammad to set A'isha aside, for the sake of appearances if nothing else. A'isha, however, maintained her innocence. Eventually Muhammad received a Revelation exonerating A'isha, but the rift between A'isha and Ali continued from that time onwards.[37] After Ali was appointed the fourth Caliph, A'isha took part in a rebellion against him. Ali defeated her forces and confined her to her house, but these events highlight the animosity between these two people and their followers.[38]

Another rivalry that existed during this time is that between the *Ansar* and the *Muhajirun.* The *Ansar* and the *Muhajirun* had an increasing level or rivalry between them in Muhammad's

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[34]Some *Shi'a* sources, such as the Life of Muhammad by Majlisi, actually go to the extreme and suggest that Ali had more of a spiritual leadership than Muhammad. See: al-Majlisi, Allama Muhammad Baqir. *The Life and Religion of Muhammad.* Edited by James L Merrick. The Zahra Trust.

[35]"Shi'a Early," 623.

[36]This is a simplified version of the differences between *Shi'ites* and *Sunnis*. For more information see: Marshall G.S Hodgson. *The Venture of Islam Conscience and History in World History: The Classical Age of Islam.* Vol. 1. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974; Marshall Hodgson. "How Did The Early Shi'a Become Sectarian?" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 75, no. 1 (1995): 1-13; Muhammad Qasem Zaman. *Religion and Politics Under the Early Abbasids The Emergence of the Proto-Sunni Elite.* New York: Brill, 1997.

[37] *The Venture of Islam*, 183.

[38]L. Veccia Vaglieri. *Ali.* Vol. I, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, edited by H.A.R. Gibb; Watt, W. Montgomery. *A'isha.* Vol. I, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, edited by H.A.R. Gibb, J.H. Kramers, E. Levi-Provencal and J. Schacht, 307-308. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960.

lifetime, and the power struggle between the two continued after Muhammad's death.[39] The *Muhajirun* were Muhammad's Companions who fled from Mecca with him.[40] The *Ansar* were the "Helpers," or those in Medina who helped the fledging Muslim community and converted later in Muhammad's career.[41] The unrest between Muslims who converted during different times escalated during Umar's Caliphate and later again under the Umayyads. Part of the unrest during Umar's Caliphate was due to his laws regarding the portion of war booty a man could claim. The longer a person had been a believer, the larger portion he received. This arrangement caused resentment among the newer members of society. The problem escalated even more during the Umayyad Dynasty (661-759 C.E.). During this period, non- Muslims could only become Muslim by becoming the "client" of an Arab Muslim.[42] However, the number of converts was rapidly increasing, causing discontent among a large portion of the population.

Still another dissident group within the Muslim community was the *Kharijites.* *Kharijites* were originally supporters of Ali, yet they were distinctly different from *Shi'ites*. They abandoned Ali after he accepted arbitration with Mu'awiya, claiming that "judgment belongs to God alone."[43] A *Kharijite* assassinated Ali in 661 C.E. and the *Kharijites* continued to engage in military campaigns against the Umayyads throughout their Caliphates.[44]

These divisions and groups represent some, though by no means all, of the challenges which the Abbasids faced when they gained control in 750 AD: *Shi'a* against *Sunni*, A'isha's followers versus the followers of Ali, the growing unrest based on the length of a person's time

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[39]Cyril Glasse. *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam.* San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1989, 365.
[40]W. Montgomery Watt. *al-Ansar*. Vol. I, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition*, edited by H.A.R. Gibb, J.H. Kramers, E. Levi-Provencal and J. Schacht, 514. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960.
[41]ibid 514.
[42]Jonathan P. Berkey. *The Formation of Islam Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 77.
[43]Annie Higgins. "Kharijites." In *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, edited by Richard C. Martin, 390.
[44] G. Levi Della Vida. *Kharjites.* Vol. IV, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition*, edited by E. van Donzel, B. Lewis and Ch. Phellat, 1074-1077. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978.

as a believer, and the *Kharijites*. To unify the community and build a secure political base, the Abbasids therefore had either to reconcile or to subdue these groups within their jurisdiction. Still, the groups within the community were not the only forces involved. Seventh-century Arabia was a mix of various religions in Muhammad's lifetime. Many tribes were pagan. There was a monotheistic sect known as *hanifs* that claimed an uncorrupted worship to the One God despite the polytheistic culture around them.[45] The Constitution of Medina proves the existence of a significant Jewish population, if not a majority. The *Sira* indicates a Christian presence through the monk Bahira and Muhammad's cousin Waraqa. There is also evidence of a Zoroastrian sect present. Thus, there was, as Jon Wansbrough labels it, a sectarian milieu present in the area.[46]

Another important historical factor involves those outlying churches that were not a part of the Byzantine or other "orthodox" churches of the time. Christian communities such as the Syrian Church, the Coptic Church, the Melkites, the Nestorians, Jacobites, and others were attempting to establish their legitimacy in the Abbasid Empire through historical narrative. In many of these cases, they were not as focused on controlling the narrative of Jesus but as on establishing a narrative of their community.[47] These groups wanted to show their lineage back to one of the Apostles, thus proving their legitimacy through their antiquity. These communities sought not so much to establish the supremacy of their beliefs over other Christian communities but to exist as separate, disparate groups. As we have seen, it was already apparent through the history of the early Islamic community that a variety of factions did exist. The Caliph for whom Ibn Ishaq wrote the *Sira* would likely not have wanted there to be the multitude of sects within

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[45] *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, 148.
[46] John Wansbrough,. *The Sectarian Milieu.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.
[47] Sidney H. Griffith, . "Disputes with Muslims in Syriac Christian Texts." In *Religionsgesprache im Mittelalter*, edited by Herausgegeben von Bernard Lewis and Friedrich Niewohner, 251-274. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992.

Islam that were present in Christianity. He would have emphasized the unity of the *umma* mentioned above to help establish their political control early in the Abbasid dynasty. Thus, there is the possibility that the Ibn Ishaq would have chosen the narrative format to help prevent or to minimize the division within the Islamic community that was present in the Christian community in the area.

The fact that Ibn Ishaq was familiar with Christianity is indisputable. There is evidence in the *Sira* alone to prove such a claim. The *Sira* opens with a genealogy of Muhammad, following the formula of the genealogy of Christ found in the Gospel of John. Furthermore, several scholars, such as Uri Rubin and Jane McAuliffe, have noticed similarities between Gospel stories and stories found in the *Sira* which point to a familiarity with the Gospels on the part of the author.[48] Lastly, scholars such as Sidney Griffith have proven that Ibn Ishaq in particular knew the Gospel stories well enough to quote from them.[49] Yet, it is not only the canonical Gospels with which Ibn Ishaq was familiar. The stories of Jesus' childhood found in the *Kitab al-Mubtada* contain themes which parallel those found in the non-canonical Infancy Narratives.[50] Thus, it is evident that Ibn Ishaq knew enough about Christianity use the parts that were helpful to him.

Historical Setting of the Sira

The Abbasids came into power in 750 AD, overthrowing the Umayyads. While an exact account and chronology of their battles is not necessary for this thesis, there are two points about how they came into power which are relevant. The first is their claim to familial ties with the

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[48]Jane D. McAuliffe. "The Prediction and Prefiguration of Muhammad." In *Bible and Qur'an Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, edited by J.C. Reeves, 107-132. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.; Rubin, Uri. *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims.* Princeton, NJ: The Darwen Press, Inc., 1995.
[49]See Sidney Griffith. "The Gospel in Arabic: An Inquiry into its appearance in the first Abbasid century." *Oriens Christianus*, 1985: 126-167.
[50]*The Making of the Last Prophet*, 205.

Prophet and the second is their use of *Hadith* to bolster their claim to power. These two points show that the Abbasids knew the value of image in gaining control and help establish that they knew the value of using the image of Muhammad to their advantage.

The Abbasids based their claim to power partly on the fact that they were connected to the family of the Prophet. They were not direct descendants of the Prophet, but they were descended from an uncle of the Prophet, allowing them to garner support from the *shi'a* community.[51] Thus, it would make sense that the Abbasids had an interest in promoting fidelity to the family of the Prophet to support loyalty to them. This is relevant since, though the distinctions between S*unni* and S*hi'a* were not yet fully formed, one of the charges leveled against Ibn Ishaq, both during his life and after, is that he had S*hi'a* leanings.[52] Part of the question then becomes, why has Ibn Ishaq been accused of having S*hi'a* leanings?

One of the distinctive traits of the *Shi'ites* is veneration not only of Muhammad but also of the Prophet's family. The S*hi'ite*, unlike the S*unni*, believe that spiritual leadership did not end with the death of Muhammad but rather continued through his relatives.[53] Hence, there is an emphasis given to Ali's role in S*hi'ism* that is not present among the S*unni*. In the *Sira*, Ibn Ishaq, like many S*hi'a* biographers, presents Ali as the first male convert to Islam.[54] However, in many S*unni* accounts, Abu Bakr was the first male convert. While this seems an insignificant difference, the order of conversion demonstrates two things for the S*hi'a*. The first is that God intended Ali to be first after Muhammad. The second is Ali's openness to the Revelation from God. As one of the traditions that Ibn Ishaq relates says, "It was a special favour to Ali from

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[51]*The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, 12.
[52]*The Making of the Last Prophet*, 6.
[53]*The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, 365-366.
[54]Muhammad's first wife, Khadijah, is generally accepted as the first convert regardless of gender.

God that he was in the closest association with the apostle before Islam."[55] It is important to remember at this point that Ibn Ishaq wrote the *Sira* during the point of his life when he was working for the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad. It would make sense that the Abbasids had an interest in promoting fidelity to the family of the Prophet to support loyalty to them, and since Ibn Ishaq worked for them, it is equally as probable that they expected the *Sira* to help promote that fidelity.

Furthermore, the Abbasids also promulgated a Hadith which said:

> Tirmidhi on the authority of Ibn Abbas: The Prophet said to Abbad: . . . . The Prophet wrapped us in a robe . . . saying: "Oh Allah grant Abbas and his children full redemption. . . . Oh Allah, keep him (Abbas) safe amongst his children. . . and let the caliphate remain with his descendants.[56]

This Hadith shows clearly that the Abbasids used the prophetic Hadith to bolster their claims to authority. Since the Abbasids commissioned Ibn Ishaq to write the *Sira*, it is reasonable to assume that they expected the *Sira* to help do so as well, thus prompting Ibn Ishaq to promote the family of the Prophet and their own claim to legitimacy.

There is also evidence suggesting that the Abbasids knew the unifying power of literature. In her article "The Abbasid Construction of Jahiliyya: Cultural Authority in the Making," Rina Drory notes:

> "Discovering" and processing images of a distant past seem to have become major, though not unique, endeavors in this period. They compromise part of an overall project of constructing "Arab" ethnic identity in the context of the power struggles roiling the contemporary cultural arena. The pre-Islamic past becomes an icon of "Arab" ethnic identity. Pre-Islamic poetry, which in classical Arab literature was long assigned the function of authentically representing the past, becomes a central prop for that icon.[57]

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[55]*The Life of Muhammad*, 115.
[56] *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, 97.
[57]Rina Drory. "The Abbasid Construction of Jahiliyya: Cultural Authority in the Making." *Studia Islamic* 83 (1996): 33-46, 34.

Here, Drory suggests, and I concur, that Abbasids used the pre-Islamic poetry, that the Abbasids used pre-Islamic poetry to construct an idea of Arab identity. Caliph al-Mansur, the first Abbasid Caliph, supported this endeavor enough to assign his son a tutor in pre-Islamic poetry.[58] I would go a step farther and argue that al-Mansur wanted to create this identity to form a cohesion and unity amongst the various diverse groups. For despite the ideological differences between them, whether *Shi'a* or *Sunni* or even non-Muslim, the majority of the people under Abbasid rule shared a cultural identity and heritage.

Caliph al-Mansur's need to unify the divergent groups emphasizes the divisions of this period. Despite the emphasis on unity, the early Muslim community quickly fragmented into different ideas as to who should succeed Muhammad and how the community should be run. These various forces, while not yet formal schisms, resulted in civil unrest. In addition to the divisons forming among Muslims, there were various Jewish and Christian communities adding both impetus and influence for Ibn Ishaq's project. These communities added impetus by demonstrating ideological and sectarian differences which can occur within traditions. Their influence on Ibn Ishaq's work can be seen through textual analysis and will be examined in the next chapter.

[58]ibid 34.

CHAPTER FOUR: TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

This chapter attempts to demonstrate three main points: 1) the pre- and early-Islamic literary genres, while often providing the content of Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*, do not by themselves adequately explain Ibn Ishaq's choice of a sustained narrative; 2) the Biblical stories or texts with which Ibn Ishaq was familiar influenced his writing style; and 3) traces of Ibn Ishaq's intent can be found in the *Sira* itself. The second point is vital because, as already discussed, narratives can help to shape and mold a tradition, Caliph al-Mansur knew and exploited literary genres to his benefit, and the Jewish and Christian communities present in the Abbasid Empire used narratives to help legitimize their own communities. However, looking to Biblical material for parallels in theme and style is a pointless endeavor if the non-Judeo-Christian, pre- or early-Islamic Arabic texts provided the same format and element of control as did the Biblical texts. Finally, if the thesis that Ibn Ishaq was attempting to control Muhammad's image is correct, then there should be some evidence of this in the text itself. In this chapter, I will explore such evidence.

Pre- and Early- Islamic Literature

Much attention has been given to the early Islamic texts upon which Ibn Ishaq drew for source information. However, much of the scholarship has focused on the reliability of the sources rather than the form in which they were written. That has begun to change in recent years; Daniel Beaumont notes that the question has changed from 'why did it happen?" to "how did it happen?"[59] Still, because of the scholarship available, there is less uncertainty about the types of early Islamic sources from which Ibn Ishaq had to draw than about the pre-Islamic texts

[59] Daniel Beaumont. "Hard Boiled: Narrative Discource in Early Muslim Traditions." *Studia Islamica*, no. 83 (1996): 5-31.

he had to draw upon. Despite this relative certainty, many early Islamic texts, like the pre-Islamic texts, have been lost to history. The genres of which scholars are aware consist of the *Qur'an*, poetry, anecdotes, S*unna*, *Tafsir*, and *Maghazi* literature. I will separate these genres into three main categories: the *Qur'an* (sacred text), poetry, and episodic prose.

The *Qur'an*, being Islam's sacred text, belongs to a category separate from poetry (despite its being poetic) because of the sources of the two genres. The *Qur'an* has an elevated status among Muslims as they believe it is the Word of God. The sacredness of the text grants it a special status, whereas poetry, even if it is about divine subjects or is allegedly divinely inspiration, remains the work of humans. There is another difference in the two; poetry, even in early Islamic times, generally told a story or history. It was not until the Abbasid Empire that poetry began to play another function in Islamic society. The *Qur'an*, on the other hand, despite its sublime nature, does not attempt to tell a story. It is God's Revelation to man; it lays out some history, but also provides instructions, laws, prohibitions, and admonishments. I group the anecdotes, *Sunna*, *Maghazi*, and *Tafsir* literature together because they are all written (or told) in narrative, prose form and are comprised of small pictures or glimpses into the life of the Prophet in an episodic format.

The *Qur'an*, despite its sublime nature, cannot be considered to have provided the format for the *Sira*. This is true for several reasons. The *Qur'an*, unlike the *Sira*, is written in verse. The second reason is that the subject matter is vastly different from the *Sira's*. The *Qur'an* does not concern itself with providing a biography of Muhammad. It exhorts, condemns, exonerates, and provides rules for worship, belief, and community. Lastly, the *Qur'an* is not arranged in chronological order. Except for the first *Sura*, it is arranged from longest *Sura* to shortest. Thus, it does not provide a narrative vision to its reader.

One of the challenges in comparing the *Sira* with pre- or even early-Islamic texts is that few manuscripts from that period have survived. Despite this obstacle, scholars are aware of at least two separate genres of literature in pre-Islamic times: poetry and short narratives.[60] Pre-Islamic poetry itself formed a kind of narrative. It related the stories and deeds of the tribe, including the genealogies, the accomplishments, and the defeats of the tribe to which the poet was attached. It, unlike later poetry, was not courtly poetry. Instead, pre-Islamic poetry related history by telling a story in verse form. However, this does not mean that it is pure historical fact. Poets could and did exaggerate their claims, as can be seen in the anecdote of the poet 'Amr who boasted of killing an opponent by beheading him with one blow. A listener interrupted and cautioned the story-teller that his "victim" was listening in audience. To which the poet replied, "If you want to be a listener, listen; If you want to disturb, go away and do not interrupt. . . . In story telling small errors can surely be forgiven."[61]

There are two reasons, however, why this genre is distinctive from Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*. The first and most obvious is that the poetry is not written in prose. While Ibn Ishaq did include poetry in his *Sira* (some of the harshest criticisms against him were directed at the poetry he chose to include), the text itself is written mainly in prose. The second distinction is the length. The *Sira* consists of four separate books and covers a wide range of history, extending from the time of Creation, when the *Kitab al-Mubtada* is included, to the beginning of the Abbasid Empire. The pre-Islamic poetry, on the other hand, covers relatively short periods of time and

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[60] See: *The Life of Muhammad*, Albrecht Noth. *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition A Source-Critical Analysis.* Princeton: The Darwin Press, Inc., 1994.; Derek Hopwood. "An Approach to Islamic History." *Bulletin British Soceity for Middle Eastern Studies* 7, no. 1 (1980): 24-32. ; Fred M. Donner. *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writings.* Princeton: The Darwin Press, Inc., 1998.

[61] Muhammad Abduh Ghanim. "Yemeni Poetry from the Pre-Islamic Age to the Beginning of the Modern Era." In *Yemen 3000 Years of Art and Civilisation in Arabia Felix*, edited by Werner Daum, 158-162. Innsbruck: Pinguin, 159-160.

was much shorter in length. The reasons for this should be obvious: the poetry was meant to be recited and thus could not have the same scope and length of the *Sira*.

The pre- and early-Islamic prose is just as problematic for the purposes of this thesis. While this prose did take the form of narratives, it had a similar length and function as the poetry. It told the history of a clan or tribe, but did so in shorter, episodic formats. Often it, like the *Sira,* is interlaced with poetry. This is a similarity that cannot be overlooked or dismissed. Ibn Ishaq includes poetry in a fashion not seen in the Biblical texts to which I will be comparing it. Also, the *Sira* is compromised of shorter stories, normally introduced first with an *isnad*. Despite this similarity, the format of pre-Islamic prose remains largely episodic and not presented in a way to provide the continuous vision offered by the *Sira*.

Comparison of the Sira with Biblical Text

There are two main areas of comparison to explore when discussing the *Sira* and Biblical texts, themes and forms. However, there are several factors required in order to establish that this comparison is not only feasible, but helpful as well. The first is to show that Ibn Ishaq was familiar at least with the Biblical stories, if not the text itself. The second is to demonstrate the parallels in Ibn Ishaq's *Sira* and various episodes and *topoi* in the Biblical materials. These two factors show that the comparison is in fact possible, but they do not show how it is helpful. A comparison must be both feasible and helpful in order to be justified. The usefulness of the comparison lies in the fact that the form of the Biblical texts provides the same benefits that the form of *Sira* grants that text. This, combined with the probability that Ibn Ishaq knew the Biblical texts, argues for the idea that Ibn Ishaq could have borrowed the form of the Biblical material for his own texts. This does not mean that the Biblical texts are superior in nature to the

Sira or that Ibn Ishaq blindly followed their format. Rather, since they predate the *Sira*, Ibn Ishaq borrowed what was useful to him from the Biblical material even while maintaining a distinctly Arab and Islamic style to create his own text.

Uri Ruben notes that, due to Muslims' need to establish their Prophet in the same line of prophets as the Judeo-Christian tradition, "the Muslims had to establish the story of Muhammad's life on the same literary patterns as were used in the *vitae* of the other prophets. Since all those prophets were biblical characters, Muhammad's biography had to be shaped according to biblical modes."[62] In doing so, Muslims, according to Rubin, searched the Jewish and Christian passages which could be interpreted to signify the coming of Muhammad. Sidney Griffith seeks to prove that Ibn Ishaq specifically knew the Christian Gospels well enough to quote from them.[63] In fact, Griffith argues, "Ibn Ishaq was in fact one of the first Muslim scholars on record to search out passages from the canonical Gospels for the purpose of defending the veracity of Islamic religious claims."[64] Despite this, Griffith maintains it was unlikely that Ibn Ishaq had a text of the Gospels from which to draw, but rather drew his information from a Christian or from a Christian who converted to Islam.[65]

Jane McAuliffe takes this comparison a step further. She identifies several parallels between the *Sira* and the Biblical texts. Her list includes:

> 1) the sacrificial vow made by Muhammad's grandfather and his cultic service and the temple service of Mary's guardian Zechariah and of Mary and Joseph; 2) the miracles associated with the conceptions of Joseph and Muhammad; 3) the visitation and recognition of Elizabeth and Bahira, respectively; and 4) episodes

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[62]Uri Rubin. *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims.* Princeton, NJ: The Darwen Press, Inc., 1995, 457.
[63]Sidney Griffith. "The Gospel in Arabic: An Inquiry into its appearance in the first Abbasid century." *Oriens Christianus*, 1985: 126-167.
[64]Sidney Griffith. "The Gospel, The Qur'an, and the Presentation of Jesus in al-Ya'qubi's Ta'rikh." In *Bible and Qur'an Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, edited by J.C. Reeves, 133-160. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003, 140.
[65]ibid. 141.

> of messengers and magi seeking a prophet. Additionally. . . it would be worth exploring some of the parallels between the stories of Mary and Muhammad.[66]

This list focuses on the thematic parallels between the two texts and gives a starting point for comparing the *Sira* with the Gospels, though it is in need of some revision. Most of the episodes and themes in this list focus on the legitimization of the men in question (Muhammad in Islam and Jesus in Christianity). It is these themes which most clearly show that Ibn Ishaq sought not just to record history, but that he in fact had another agenda in mind. To more clearly show this, I suggest the following list as points of comparison between the *Sira* and the Biblical texts: 1) the sacrificial vow made by Muhammad's grandfather and the intended sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham; 2) the annunciation of Muhammad and of Jesus; 3) the miraculous events in nature at the time of the birth of Muhammad and of Jesus; 4) the recognition of Bahira and Simeon early in Muhammad's and Jesus's life respectively; 5) the prediction of suffering given to Muhammad and Mary; and 6) the recognition of Waraqa and John the Baptist at the beginning of each man's mission.[67]

The first instance I have mentioned in which parallels to Biblical literature appear is the story Ibn Ishaq relates about Muhammad's grandfather, Abdu'l-Muttalib, abridged here for brevity's sake.

> It is alleged . . . [that Abdu'l-Muttalib] vowed that if he should have ten sons to grow up and protect him, he would sacrifice one of them to God at the Ka'ba. Afterwards, when he had ten sons. . . [he] told them about his vow and called on them to keep faith with God. They agreed to obey him. . . . Abdu'l-Muttalib said to the man with the arrows, 'Cast lots for my sons with these arrows' . . . . It is alleged that Abdullah was Abdu'l-Muttalib's favourite son, and his father thought that if the arrow missed him, he would be spared. . . . Then the man cast lots and Abdullah's arrow came out. His father led him by the hand and took out a large knife; then he brought him up to Isaf and Na'ila to sacrifice him. . . . [But] the Quraysh and his sons said he must not do it [but consult a sorceress]. . . . She told

[66] "The Prediction and Prefiguration of Muhammad.," 127.
[67] This list uses the list by Jane McAuliffe previously as a starting point, but with revisions and additions from my own work.

> them to go back to their country and take the young man and ten camels. Then cast lots for them and for him; if the lot falls against your man, add more camels, until your lord is satisfied. . . . So they returned to Mecca, and when they had agreed to carry out their instructions, Abdu'l-Muttalib stood by Hubal praying to Allah. . . . There were a hundred camels when the lot fell against them.[68]

Compare this story to the biblical account of Abraham and Isaac:

> Then God said: "Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moran. There you shall offer him up as a holocaust on a height that I will point out to you." Early the next morning Abraham saddled his donkey, took his son Isaac. . . [and] set out for the place which God had told him. . . . When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. Next he tied up his son Isaac, and put him on the top of the wood and took out the knife to slaughter his son. But the Lord's messenger called to him from Heaven. . . . "Do not lay your hand on the boy" . . . . Abraham looked about, he spied a ram caught by his horns in the thicket. So he went and took the ram and offered it up as a holocaust in place of his son.[69]

It is true that there are many differences between the two stories. Abdu'l-Muttalib makes the vow to sacrifice his son; Abraham is commanded by God. Abdullah willingly agrees to abide by his father's decision; Isaac is never given a choice in the Biblical story, since Abraham does not tell Isaac beforehand.[70] Abdu'l-Muttalib is prevented from offering the sacrifice by people; an angel stops Abraham. Most notably, Abdu'l-Muttalib consults a sorceress who gives him a way out, whereas Abraham finds a suitable substitute seemingly provided by God. These differences should not be trivialized or ignored. Neither, however, should they prevent the reader from noting the parallels that do exist, especially when the passages are put into context.

Most of the parallels are thematic rather than in the details. In both cases, the two men pray only to Allah or God. This is an important point, especially as both lived in polytheistic cultures. In both stories, a father is called is upon to sacrifice a beloved son. Though, in the

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[68]*The Life of Muhammad*, 66-68.

[69] Jean Marie Hiesberger, ed. *The Catholic Bible Personal Study Edition.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, Gen 22:2-13.

[70]This difference is probably due to the fact that in the Qur'anic account of Abraham's intended sacrifice, he was going to sacrifice Isaac only after Isaac agreed to do God's will in the matter. See: *Qur'an* 451-452.

passage from Genesis, Isaac is named Abraham's only son, the quotation is slightly misleading. Abraham, in fact, had another son, Ishmael, by his wife's handmaid. Isaac was Abraham's only son from his wife, Sarah. So in both cases, the father was spared sacrificing a favored son by replacing him with a suitable substitute.

The most important thematic parallel, however, has to do with the son's descendants. The inheritance that God had previously promised Abraham was to be fulfilled through Abraham's son, Isaac. The inheritance of the Jewish people came through the line of the son that was to be sacrificed. Likewise, Abdullah survived to father Muhammad. Though there is no specific promise of inheritance of God through Abdullah or Muhammad in this sequence, it can be argued that the *Qur'an* itself is a kind of inheritance which passed through Muhammad to all Islamic people. God's Word, His law, and His message become, in effect, what the Islamic people inherit. The parallel becomes even more striking when one remembers that Jesus, referred to as the Word of God, [71] is a descendant of Isaac according to Biblical accounts.[72] Thus, in both cases, the Word of God which brings salvation for the Christian and Muslim people (though in radically different fashions) comes through the line of a son that was to be sacrificed to God by his father.

McAuliffe discusses the miracles surrounding the births of Muhammad and Jesus.[73] Both women experience miraculous events during their pregnancies, but the most striking similarity between them lies in the annunciation. Ibn Ishaq relates the following tradition:

> It is alleged in popular stories (and only God knows the truth) that Amina d. Wahb, the mother of God's apostle, used to say when she was pregnant with God's apostle that a voice said to her, “You are pregnant with the lord of this people, and

[71]John 1:14.
[72]Mat 1:1-16; Luke 3:23-38.
[73] The Prediction and Prefiguration of Muhammad.,” 127.

> when he is born say, 'I put him in the care of the One from the evil of envier;" then call him Muhammad.'"[74]

The Gospel according to Luke records a similar experience in the case of Mary:

> In the sixth month [of Elizabeth's pregnancy], the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of Dave, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you. . . . Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.[75]

Again, the details vary (in Ibn Ishaq's account, Amina merely heard an unspecified voice whereas Gabriel visited Mary in the Christian account), but the thematic elements are largely the same. A woman hears an announcement of her pregnancy and a prediction of her son's life. In both cases, the son will be a "lord" over people. Also interesting to note, both are told what to name their son.

McAuliffe also notes the recurrence of people seeking the child when he is born.[76] Ibn Ishaq relates the story:

> Hassan ibn Thabit said: "I was a well-grown boy of seven or eight, understanding all that I heard, when I heard a Jew calling out at the top of his voice from the top of a fort in Yathrib. . . 'Tonight has risen a star under which Ahmad is to be born.'"[77]

The Biblical narrative is as follows. "When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea . . . magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem saying, 'Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.'"[78] Unlike McAuliffe, I have chosen here to emphasize not the people seeking Muhammad or Jesus, but the miraculous event surrounding the

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[74]*The Life of Muhammad*, 69.
[75]Luke 1:26-33.
[76] The Prediction and Prefiguration of Muhammad.," 127.
[77]*The Life of Muhammad*, 70.
[78]Mat 2:1-2.

actual birth of each. The births of the two men were recognized by those seeking a sign, the sign of the star over the place which signifies the birth of an expected prophet. The star is a religious *topos* that helps to prove the special status of each man, confirmed by the heavens themselves.

McAuliffe compares the recognition of Bahira with the recognition of Elizabeth, but I think this is one place where her list could be altered to make a more effective comparison.[79] Rather than compare Bahira and Elizabeth, I suggest comparing Bahira with the recognition of Simeon during the presentation of Jesus in the Temple in Jerusalem. Ibn Ishaq relates a story of Muhammad's youth in which Muhammad accompanies his uncle Abu Talib's caravan on a merchant expedition:

> When the caravan [of Abu Talib] reached Busra in Syria, there was a monk there in his cell by the name of Bahira, who was well versed in the knowledge of Christians. . . . They allege that while he was in his cell he saw the apostle of God in the caravan when they approached, with a cloud overshadowed the tree near the monk. . . . When Bahira saw him [Muhammad] he stared at him closely, looking at his body and finding traces of his description (in the Christian books).[80]

The story of Simeon, in the Biblical narrative, occurs when Mary and Joseph take Jesus to Jerusalem to be presented according to Mosaic Law.

> Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord. . . . When the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, he took him in his arms and blessed God, saying: "Now Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all the peoples, a light for the revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel."[81]

Both Bahira and Simeon are devout, righteous, and knowledgeable men according to the respective traditions. Both are awaiting the coming of a prophet for their people. They

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[79] The Prediction and Prefiguration of Muhammad.," 127.
[80] *The Life of Muhammad*, 80.
[81] Luke 2:25-32.

recognize Muhammad and Jesus, respectively, when the two are still young. They also legitimize the two men's claims to their respective statuses from the scriptures of already established religions. Bahira grants Muhammad authority based on the Christian scriptures he was familiar with, which can have the effect of legitimizing Muhammad. Simeon names Jesus as the Jewish Messiah who was foretold, legitimizing Jesus with Jewish scripture. In each instance, the coming of the prophet had been foretold and was expected within an existing tradition.

Simeon can also be compared to the figure of Waraqa on several counts. Shortly after Muhammad received his first Revelation, he returned to Mecca to circumambulate the Ka'ba per his usual custom. When he did,

> Waraqa met him and said, "O son of my brother, tell me what thou hast seen and heard." The apostle told him, and Waraqa said, "Surely, by Him in whose hand is Waraqa's soul, thou art the prophet of this people. There hath come unto thee the greatest Namus, who came unto Moses. Thou wilt be called a liar, and they will use thee despitefully and cast thee out and fight against thee."[82]

In the Biblical narrative, after Simeon recognizes Jesus as his Messiah, he "blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'Behold, this child is destined for the rise and fall of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted and you yourself a sword will pierce so that the thoughts of many will be revealed.'"[83] In this case, the comparison is between not Muhammad and Jesus, but Muhammad and Mary, which in some ways is more appropriate. Waraqa confirms Muhammad's prophethood, as well as prophesies the hardships Muhammad will endure for bringing the Word of God (in this case, the *Qur'an*) into the world. Simeon, after recognizing Jesus as Messiah, prophesies that Mary will suffer for bringing the Word of God (in this case, Jesus) into the world. It could potentially be argued that Simeon also prophesies the sufferings

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[82]*The Life of Muhammad*, 107.
[83]Luke 2:34-35.

of Jesus, in that the world will “contradict” Him. The manner in which the two predict the future sufferings differs, but mainly in the details given. Simeon speaks much more like a prophet, issuing vague and general statements. Waraqa speaks from one man to another, giving the detail that is characteristic of the *Sira* and that the Gospels often lack.

Waraqa also serves to legitimize and acknowledge Muhammad in a different way. After Muhammad's first Revelation, he seeks consolation from his wife, Khadija, who in turn goes to her Christian cousin, Waraqa. After Khadija explains what had happened to Waraqa, he says, “'If this is true, Khadija, verily Muhammad is the prophet of his people. I knew that a prophet of this people was to be expected. His time has come,' or words to that effect.'”[84] Here, Waraqa, like Bahira, expects a prophet of the people, acknowledges Muhammad to be that prophet, and claims the time of his message to have come. Likewise, in the Gospel according to John, John the Baptist proclaims Jesus at the start of Jesus' ministry. In this instance, John the Baptist had been out, actively preaching the coming of the Messiah and baptizing people to prepare for His coming. When he “saw Jesus coming toward him [he] said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. He is the one of whom I said, A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.'”[85] Like the event with Waraqa in the *Sira*, John the Baptist's recognition comes at the beginning of Jesus's public ministry. It is also interesting to note that, as Waraqa is Muhammad's cousin through Muhammad's marriage to Khadija, John the Baptist is Jesus's cousin. That detail aside, Waraqa and John the Baptist serve much the same function as Bahira. That is, they establish the men's statuses through the tradition from which they come. Yet rather than just acknowledge these prophets when they are still

[84]*The Life of Muhammad*, 83.
[85]John 1:29-30

young, Waraqa and John the Baptist acknowledge the beginnings of the men's adult missions on Earth.

The common theme running throughout these examples is an effort to prove the prophethood and messiahship of Muhammad and Jesus, respectively. These stories are designed to legitimize the two men's claims, linking the men with the prior religions with which Christianity and Islam are connected. Rubin notes the recurrence of what he calls similar annunciation themes in the Gospels and in the *Sira*. For Rubin, this similarity was intentional. He argues, "in their quest for literary evidence of the annunciation of their prophet, Muslims used the same device as that used by Christians for Jesus; they looked for attestation in previous scriptures whose emergence was believed to have been foretold in numerous biblical passages."[86] Hence, in the "annunciation" stories, there is, in the words of F.E. Peters, "a consistent, though low-key, attempt to demonstrate the authenticity of the Prophet's calling."[87] The Gospels seek to prove that Jesus is the Son of God. The *Sira* seeks to prove that Muhammad is the Apostle of God. In effect, the stories are written, in the words of the evangelist John, so that the reader may believe.[88]

The comparison, however, does not end with merely the thematic elements present. The form of the *Sira* can also be compared to the form of the Biblical materials. The *Sira* opens with a genealogy of Muhammad. It reads:

> This is the book of the biography of the apostle of God.
> Muhammad was the son of 'Abdullah, b. 'Abdu'l-Muttalib (whose name was Shayba), b. Hashim (whose name was 'Amr), b. 'Abdu Manaf (whose name was al-Mughira), b. Qusayy (whose name was Zayd), b. Kilab, b. Murra, b. Ka'b, b. Lu'ayy, b. Ghalib, b. Fihr, b. Malik, b. al-Nadr, b. Kinana, b. Khuzayma, b. Mudrika (whose name was Amir), b. Ilyas, b. Mudar, b. Nizar, b. Ma'add, b.

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[86]*The Eye of the Beholder*, 21.
[87]Peters, F.E. "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad." In *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, edited by Ibn Warraq, 444-464. New York: Prometheus Books, 2000, 460.
[88] John 1:7

> 'Adnan, b. Udd (or Udad), b. Muqawwam, b. Nahur, b. Tayrah, b. Yarub, b. Yashjub, b. Nabit, b. Isma'il, b. Ibrahim, the friend of the Compassionate, b. Tarih (who is Azar), b. Nahur, b. Sarugh, b. Ra'u, b. Falikh, b. 'Aybar, b. Shalikh, b. Arfakhshadh, b. Sam, b. Nuh, b. Lamk, b. Mattushalakh, b. Akhnunk, who is that prophet Idris according to what they allege, but God alone knows best . . . b. Yard, b. Mahil, b. Qaynan, b. Yanish, b. Shith, b. Adam.[89]

Two of the Gospels also contain a genealogy: Luke and Mark. In these two cases, of course, the genealogy is of Jesus, not Muhammad.[90] However, it is Luke's Gospel which more clearly calls for a comparison. The genealogy there is as follows:

> [Jesus] was the son, as was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli, the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, the son of Melchi, the son of Jannai, the son of Joseph, the son of Mattathias, the son of Semein, the son of Josech, the son of Jodea, the son of Joanan, the son of Rhesa, the son of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, the son of Neri, the son of Melchi, the son of Addi, the son of Cosam, the son of Elmadam, the son of Er, the son of Joshua, the son of Eliezer, the son of Jorim, the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, the son of Simeon, the son of Judah, the son of Joseph, the son of Jonam, the son of Eliakim, the son of Melea, the son of Menna, the son of Mattatha, the son of Nathan, the son of David, the son of Jesse, the son of Obed, the son of Boaz, the son of Sala, the son of Nahshon, the son of Amminadab, the son of Admin, the son of Arni, the son of Hezron, the son of Perez, the son of Judah, the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, the son of Terah, the son of Nahor, the son of Serug, the son of Reu, the son of Peleg, the son of Eber, the son of Shelah, the son of Cainan, the son of Arphaxad, the son of Shem, the son of Noah, the son of Lamech, the son of Methuselah, the son of Enoch, the son of Jared, the son of Mahalaleel, the son of Cainan, the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.[91]

There are two reasons why this comparison is preferable to the genealogy found in Mark. The first is that the genealogies in the *Sira* and in Luke both record the families in the same order, meaning they both work from the person in question (Muhammad or Jesus) and move backwards to Adam. The second is that they both come in roughly the same place in the narrative. In the *Sira*, the genealogy immediately follows the *Kitab al-Mubtada*. This means that Ibn Ishaq places Muhammad's genealogy after the lives of the other prophets have been presented and the model

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[89]*The Life of Muhammad*, 3
[90]Mat 1:1-16; Luke 3:23-38.
[91]Luke 3:23-38

of prophethood is created. Luke places the genealogy of Jesus after John the Baptist finished his ministry, placing the genealogy after the lives of the prophets prior to him. This grants a two-fold formal comparison between the two texts in this instance.

This example combines both a thematic parallel and a formal comparison. In both genealogies referenced, Muhammad and Jesus are linked back through the prophets, the patriarchs, and back to Adam.[92] This provides both men with a claim to prophethood, linking them to the promises of God to Abraham. They are similar in form because of where they are placed in the respective texts. The *Kitab al-Mubtada*, which covers the prophets before Muhammad, comes before the genealogy Ibn Ishaq provides of Muhammad. Likewise, the genealogy in Luke comes after the Tanakh, which covers the prophets and time leading up to Jesus, as well as after the ministry of John the Baptist.[93]

There are other comparisons in form between the Biblical texts and the *Sira*, however. Both provide short stories punctuated with other material, much like oral traditions do. In the Torah, the stories are punctuated by genealogies. In the *Sira*, the stories are punctuated by *asaniid.* The stories are then carefully arranged into cohesive narratives in both texts. J.R. Porter has noted several other parallels: the avoiding of the emotions of the characters, use of descriptive detail only to advance action, the centrality of speech, variations of the same theme, and turning individuals into types.[94] All these similarities point to Ibn Ishaq's intentional use of the form of previous Biblical texts in constructing his work.

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[92]Note the Ibn Ishaq traces Muhammad's genealogy through Isma'il while Luke traces Jesus's genealogy through Isaac due to cultural and theological differences between the two religions.
[93]John the Baptist was the last prophet before Jesus's ministry began.
[94] J.R. Porter. "Pre-Islamic Historical Traditions and the Early Historical Narratives of the Old Testament." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87, no. 1 (1968): 17-26, 21.

Evidence in the Sira

Thus far, I have established the possibility that the narrative form shapes the image of the subject of a biography, that there were historical reasons for Ibn Ishaq to do so, and that there were influences which could have prompted Ibn Ishaq to choose the narrative form for those reasons. At this juncture, it is prudent to examine the *Sira* itself to see if there is any indication that Ibn Ishaq was attempting to shape the image of Muhammad. Unfortunately, as Guillaume also notes, "very seldom does Ibn Ishaq make any comment of his own on the traditions he records apart from the mental reservation implied in these terms. Therefore when he does express an opinion it is the more significant."[95] A careful reading produces two instances that clearly show Ibn Ishaq's method in piecing together the narratives within the *Sira*. Ibn Ishaq first gives the reader a glimpse of his method while relating the story of the night journey and ascent into Heaven. Ibn Ishaq introduces this narrative by stating:

> The following account reached me from Abdullah b. Mas'ud and Abu Sa'id al Khudri, and A'isha the prophet's wife, and Mu'awiya b. Abu Sufyan, and al-Hasan b. Abu'l-Hasan al-Basri, and Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri and Qatada and other traditionists, and Umm Hani d. of Abu Talib. It is pieced together in the story that follows, each one contributing something of what he was told about what happened when he was taken on the night journey.[96]

The next instance is very similar to the first. It occurs when Ibn Ishaq is introducing the Battle of Uhud.

> I have pieced together the following story about the battle of Uhud, from what I was told by Muhammad b. Muslim al-Zuhri and Muhammad b. Yahya b. Hibban and Asim b. Umar b. Qatada and Al-Husayn b. Abdu'l-Rahman b. Amr b. Sa'd b. Mu'adh and other learned traditionists. One or the other, or all of them, is responsible for the following narrative.[97]

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[95]The terms which Guillaume refers to as "they allege" and "God alone knows best." See *The Life of Muhammad,* xix.
[96]ibid. 181.
[97]ibid. 360.

The common fact linking these two episodes together is that Ibn Ishaq took bits of stories from various sources and pieced them together into what he believed to be the correct order. These examples provide a small, subtle glimpse into his methodology. The life of the Prophet up to that point had consisted of stories, sometimes contradictory, stories, from various sources. They had been gathered into collections of *Maghazi* or *Hadith* literature, but they had not been pieced together to form a coherent narrative. Ibn Ishaq took these various stories and, like the two examples offered here, pieced them together into a coherent narrative which he created. Thus, these two stories are examples of what the *Sira* is on a larger scale. Furthermore, they show that Ibn Ishaq was aware of creating a narrative out of the sources available to him, which is how traditions are normally created. He created a vision of Islamic history using Arabic (pre- and early-Islamic), Jewish, Christian, and other sources. He followed patterns available to him with which his audience would be familiar. He used forms and stylistics that people in his time were already used to recognizing as authoritative. Furthermore, Ibn Ishaq was able to supplement the pre- and early-Islamic Arabic sources with the non-Islamic sources. This blending of texts and traditions accomplishes three important tasks. It allowed him to fill in areas in which there was not enough information in the pre- and early-Islamic texts. It legitimized Muhammad in a way that readers from several different backgrounds would recognize and acknowledge in a way that using only one type of source would not. Finally, it provided a continuity with the past as is the wont of invented traditions.[98]

As already noted, the *Kitab al-Mubtada* established the role and image of a prophet into which Muhammad could fit. However, the *Qur'an,* while referencing several of the prophets, does not provide a complete narrative of these men. In order to provide such detailed accounts, Ibn Ishaq had to rely on other traditions. This led to Ibn Ishaq's use of the *Isra'iliyat*, which Ibn

[98] ibid. 6

Ishaq was perfectly comfortable using as a source of information for previous prophets. Furthermore, many of the details of Muhammad's birth and childhood are examples of religious *topoi* as shown in the previous section. These *topoi* show how Ibn Ishaq used other sources to fill in details even in the early life of Muhammad.

Ibn Ishaq's use of *Isra'iliyat* and religious *topoi* brings into focus the second task mentioned, that drawing from other sources provided a legitimization of the Prophet that a variety of audiences could recognize as such. If Ibn Ishaq had drawn only on Arabic literature for his sources, it would not have fulfilled the need that Rubin noted for creating a life of Muhammad along the same lines of the prophets. However, if Ibn Ishaq had used only non-Islamic styles, themes, and sources, the Muslims would not have recognized his work as authoritative. As it was, he drew sharp criticisms from Muslims for using the *Isra'iliyat*, and much of the material he used from non-Islamic sources was removed in Ibn Hisham's recension of the *Sira*. However, using a combination of Arab, Islamic, Jewish, and Christian sources, Ibn Ishaq was able to create a text that had more credibility with people of divergent backgrounds.

Finally, using forms, themes, and material formerly used in these various traditions allowed Ibn Ishaq to provide continuity with the past. By grafting his text onto previously established materials, Ibn Ishaq was able to provide an image of Muhammad which built upon the histories of pagans, Jews, and Christians. It showed Muhammad to be the last of the Prophets and the beginning of a new era, an era of Muslim dominance. It established Muhammad's place in the world and why people of all backgrounds should accept the Islamic faith.

CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS

If my conclusion is correct that Ibn Ishaq chose the narrative form to control the image of Muhammad, there is an interesting implication for the historical uses of the *Hadith* and the Sira. While there is some overlap on how the two are used, it does become clear that the *Hadith* is used in contexts which require a more flexible approach and the *Sira* is used in contexts which require an overall image of Muhammad. AnneMarie Schimmel notes that both the Hadith and the *Sira* give Muhammad a more charismatic image than do a mere telling biographical events. Part of the function of both the *Hadith* and the *Sira* is to create an image of Muhammad which is humanistic. That is, both these genres give a personality to Muhammad through the stories they relate. Thus, they both are used in holidays celebrating the Prophet's life, such as *maulid*. In *And Muhammad Is His Messenger The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety*, Schimmel explores the development and practice of various *maulid* celebrations in different times and cultures. One of the things she notes is that often a recital of the miracles surrounding Muhammad's birth is an integral part of the celebrations. These stories come both from the *Hadith* and the *Sira.* In this sense, the *Hadith* give Muslims as much a personality as the *Sira* does. Hence, the charismatic aspect of the *Sira* is likely not the sole reason why Ibn Ishaq chose the narrative form.

One of the places at which the usage of the *Hadith* starts to diverge from the *Sira* is in legal jurisdiction. By the 9th century, Muslim law was based primarily on four things: the *Qur'an*¸ the *Sunna* of the Prophet, analogous reasoning, and consensus of the *ulama*. The *Sunna* of the Prophet used in legal rulings generally comes from the *Hadith* rather than from the *Sira*. Many studies have been done on the use of *Hadith* and legal jurisprudence, both in general and

on specific subjects.[99] While it is not important to review all of these studies here, there are a couple of points of note. First, the use of *Hadith* for legal jurisprudence began early in Islamic history. Secondly, the *Hadith* used to decide a ruling often is selected from multiple competing *Hadith* on the subject, normally revealing more about the person making the ruling than about what the *Hadith* actually say on the subject. Though there are a multitude of cases of *Hadith* being used for legal purposes, two examples should be sufficient to show how legal rulings use Hadith

G.H.A Juynboll offers an interesting example of how *Hadith* can be used to support opposing positions in the use of birth control.[100] One of the people in favor of birth control, Sarabasi, relied on the tradition which says, "the healthy believer is better than the frail believer."[101] This tradition is taken to mean that a healthy population is preferable to a population suffering from ill effects of overpopulation due to the lack of use of birth control. The context of the *Hadith* is not given, nor considered. Therefore, it is possible to use it in support of Sarabasi's argument. Yet, more conservative *ulama* point to a tradition which states, "Beget as many children as you like; you do not know at any rate, who it is that will provide for you."[102] While the context of this prophetic *Sunna* is also not given, it at least more obviously bears on the subject at hand. Furthermore, it gives an indication that the first reasoning may take the *Hadith* out of context and so apply it in a way that may not have been intended.

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[99]See Herbert Berg. *The Development of Exegsis in Early Islam.* Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000.; Donner, Fred M. *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writings.* Princeton: The Darwin Press, Inc., 1998.; Nasr, Seyyed Hossain. "Sunnah and Hadith." In *Islamic Spirituality Foundations,* by Seyyed Hossain Nasr, 97-110. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1987.; Noth, Albrecht. *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition A Source-Critical Analysis.* Princeton: The Darwin Press, Inc., 1994.
[100] G.H.A. Juynboll,. "The hadith in the discussion of birth control." In *Studies on the Origins and Uses of Islamic Hadith*, edited by G.H.A. Juynboll, 373-379. Brookfield, Vermont: Variorum, 1996, 375.
[101]ibid. 375.
[102]ibid. 376.

Khaled Abou El Fadl offers another instance of a *Hadith* being taken out of context and used in a legal ruling. In the ruling El Fadl examines, a person asks whether it is permissible for a woman to wear brassieres. In this case, it is deemed permissible if a woman is doing so for her health. However, it is forbidden for other reasons, as fraud is forbidden in Islam. One of the more well-known Hadith in this regard is when the Prophet reportedly states, "whoever defrauds us is not one of us."[103] This *Hadith* is supposedly in response to a person misrepresenting food items.[104] Yet, this fact does not prevent this precept from being carried over into the area of women's clothing. It is precisely because the *Hadith* are so flexible and can be easily taken out of context that a person can be used to justify this claim.

The *Sira*, on the other hand, is seldom used as a basis for Islamic law. Rather, it forms the basis for all biographies of the Prophet, rather directly or indirectly. Historians such as Ibn Kathir and al-Tabari used the *Sira* as a model from which to write their own biographies of the Prophet.[105] It is this fact that allows scholars to piece together the part of the *Sira* that is available today. Ibn Hisham heavily edited the *Sira*, but the parts of the works of Ibn Kathir and al-Tabari that are gleaned from Ibn Ishaq fill in most of the missing material. Other biographers base their histories on these two historians, and thus Ibn Ishaq becomes responsible for the image of the Prophet maintained throughout Islamic history.

The reason most often given for the preference of the *Hadith* over the *Sira* in legal rulings is because the *Sira* is an unreliable source for historical information. The idea that the *Sira* is unreliable is what led to the omission of certain material from the *Sira* in Ibn Hisham's recession less than a century later. There are collections of *Hadith*, on the other hand, which are

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[103] Khaled Abou El Fadl. *Speaking in God's Name Islamic Law, Authority, and Women.* Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001, 178.
[104]ibid. 178.
[105]*The Life of Muhammad*, xvii.

considered "sound," or *sahih*, by Muslims, the most popular being the *Sahih Muslim* and the *Sahih Bukhari*.[106] Since they are considered reliable by Muslims, they can be used in legal rulings. While these two factors certainly influence the use of *Hadith* and the disuse of the *Sira* in legal rulings, the fact that the format Ibn Ishaq chose for the *Sira* does not have the flexibility of the *Hadith* may possibly also influence this situation.

Finally, this thesis inevitably impacts the historical value of the text as well. The historicity of the *Sira* has been, and continues to be, debated fiercely. The *Sira* is not comprised of a single story based on facts which are verifiable through documents such as birth certificates or a census. Scholars such as Patricia Crone and Michael Cook completely reject the *Sira* as a source for historical information for this reason.[107] Others, such as Montgomery Watt, attempt to piece together the historical facts while weeding out parts which are unreliable.[108] If the thesis that Ibn Ishaq was deliberately creating an image is accepted, it adds support, but not uncontroversial proof, to Crone's pessimistic statement that "one can either take the *Sira* or leave it, but one cannot *work* with it."[109] This thesis makes the stance that the *Sira* is a reliable source for historical information more tenuous, since it suggests that Ibn Ishaq may have been more interested in the image he was creating than in recording accurate information. However, this does not mean that one must abandon the text. Rather, it means that biographers of Muhammad will have to take Ibn Ishaq's motives into account when approaching the *Sira*.

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[106] Jonathan Brown. *The Canonization of al-Bukhari and Muslim The Formation and Function of the Sunni Hadith Collection.* Leiden: Brill, 2007, 4.

[107]See Michael Cook. *Muhammad.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1983., Crone, Patricia. *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.; W. Montgomery Watt. "The Materials Used by Ibn Ishaq." In *Historians of the Middle East*, by Bernard Lewis and P.M. Holt. London: Oxford University Press, 1962, 23-34.

[108]See W. Montgomery Watt. *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman.* London: Oxford University Press, 1969.

[109] Ibn Rawandi. "Origens of Islam: A Critical Look at the Sources." In *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, edited by Ibn Warraq, 89-126. New York: Prometheus Book, 2000, 92.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, I have repeatedly argued that Ibn Ishaq's *Sira* was an attempt to control the image of Muhammad and thus control the conversation over what Islam should be. I have offered evidence that historical narratives shape the image of a biography and that Ibn Ishaq may have had historical reasons for desiring to control this image, offering support from the *Sira* itself and from the uses of the *Sira* and *Hadith* throughout history. However, I have not addressed the issue of why controlling the image of Muhammad would be so instrumental in promulgating a specific version of Islam.

There are two primary reasons that make controlling the image of Muhammad so central to controlling the conversation of Islam. The first is that Muhammad is considered the best of mankind by Muslims. Muslims believe that all the prophets deserve respect, but that the Jews and Christians have corrupted the image and messages of the prophets before Muhammad, while Muhammad's message and image remains uncorrupted.[110] This makes Muhammad the model which Muslims seek to emulate. Though Muhammad often stated that he was only a man, many Muslims look to him for not only the Revelation of the *Qur'an* but also as an example to follow in all things. He is also the first source for Islamic law when the *Qur'an* is silent on a subject. In this sense, controlling the image of Muhammad controls Islamic life and law.

The second reason the image of the Prophet is so important is because it affects the interpretation of the *Qur'an*.[111] The *Qur'an* is not arranged in chronological order. It is arranged, with the exception of the first *Sura*, from longest to shortest Sura. Nor does the *Qur'an* provide the occasion of revelation which prompted a verse to be revealed. Thus, Muslims and non-Muslims scholars alike often look toward the *Sira* of the Prophet to interpret a

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[110]See *Qur'an* 2-3.
[111]*Early Islam*, 17.

Sura. This means that, by controlling the life of the Prophet, one may also partially control the interpretation of the *Qur'an*.

Despite my argument that Ibn Ishaq sought to control the image of Muhammad and thus the conversation about what Islam should be, I am not attempting to suggest that Ibn Ishaq created the image with no historical basis. The epistemological question raised by Norman about whether the historian records or constructs the narrative is also a question about the historicity of the *Sira*. It is possible that Ibn Ishaq desired to control the image of Muhammad in order to preserve the historical facts of the Prophet's life. It is also possible that he fabricated the chronology so as to promote either his idea of Muhammad or that of the Abbasids. This question remains for scholars and is not one which I have attempted to answer here. However, I do argue that Ibn Ishaq intended the *Sira* to shape and control the image of Muhammad based on the function of historical narratives, the historical context in which Ibn Ishaq lived, evidence found in the *Sira* itself, and the importance of controlling Muhammad's image.

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