



## Re-evaluating the classical Sīrah-Sources: New Approaches to Sīrah writing with reference to the Contributions of Shiblī Nu‘mānī and Akram Diyā al-‘Umarī

Mubasher Hussain\*

In response to the Western writers on Sīrah, the nineteenth and twentieth century Muslim Sīrah writers realized, on the one hand, that most of the classical Sīrah-source materials contained both authentic and otherwise narratives which have made it easy for the Western orientalists to paint the moral and spiritual life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) according to their desired colours, and to re-examine such materials, on the other hand, they deemed it necessary to set forth the criteria that could be acceptable to both the orientalists and Muslims. To this end, the modern Muslim scholars, to some extent under the influence of modern scientific/rationalistic critical methods, began to take Sīrah-writing into account with a new trend and produced a good deal of literature which may be divided into the following three categories: 1) The books in which authors have restricted themselves to the Qur’ān, the upmost authentic source of Islam. 2) The books in which authors have also consulted, besides the Qur’ān, those ḥadīth collections which they deemed authentic. 3) The books in which writers have attempted to consult, along with the Qur’ān and authentic ḥadīth collections, all the available classical materials including books on history, biography, ‘ilm al rijāl, genealogy, geography, literature, poetry, and Islamic law, etc., but not without filtering them. To evaluate such efforts with respect to Sīrah-writing, ‘Allāmah Shiblī Nu‘mānī from the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent and Professor Dr. Akram Diyā’ al-‘Umarī from the Arab world, have been selected in this paper for several reasons, top of which being their thorough study of and comprehensive approach to the subject and their remarkable works in the field.

### Introduction and background

The portrayal of Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) in the West has varied greatly from the extreme of total ignorance to their gradual realization of the Prophet’s greatness and the vital role he played in the history of mankind some more than fourteen hundred years ago<sup>1</sup>. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the

\* *Asst. Prof., International Islamic University, Islamic Research Institute, Hadith and Sīrah Department, mubashir.hussain@iiu.edu.pk.*

19<sup>th</sup> century, when European powers colonized several parts of the Muslim world and thus, a dire need to understand their culture and languages, coupled with their interest to understand the philosophy of Islam and to find out true facts, led and encouraged them to the academic and scholarly studies of the life of the Prophet. To achieve the said purposes, a large number of institutions, schools and universities, Asiatic Societies, Arabic libraries and chairs of oriental languages were established to edit, compile, translate and publish the original sources of Islam.

Thus, after the easy access to a large number of Islamic sources, especially the early biographical sources of the Prophet<sup>2</sup>, the orientalist started consulting and referring to these sources in their writings, applying the modern scientific approach, which had been developed, formulated and applied by Western deist thinkers throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century on Christianity and the life of Jesus for attaining the “historical Jesus”<sup>3</sup>. As a result, they harnessed their intelligences to pile up a plethora of whimsically handpicked scraps of evidence to cast the shadows of suspicions on every metaphysical and spiritual aspect of the Prophet’s life, attempting to produce a rendition as of a common human being, thus questioning the authenticity of the primary sources by popularizing the same as “superstitious”.

### Muslim response

The colonial period, when the Western civilization came into direct contact with a large number of Muslims for the first time in history and started exerting direct influence on Muslim culture, witnessed, especially in the colonized parts of the Muslim world, the rise and acceptance of Western rationalistic interpretation of science and religion amongst the Muslim writers, scholars, poets and intellectuals trained through a Western style of education<sup>4</sup>. They, in response to the Western

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1 See for instance the writings of those western scholars who being sympathetic towards the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) appreciated his accomplishments. Amongst them some are Thomas Carlyle, W. M. Watt, Annemarie Schimmel, John Esposito, Karen Armstrong, Michael Hart, John Adair, Norman Daniel, John Tolan, Frederick Quinn and Matthew Dimmock.

2 i.e. early books on *Maghbāzī* and *Sīrah*

3 See for instance, Clinton Bennett, *In Search of Jesus: Insider and Outsider Images* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), 96-100; Ibn Warraq, “Studies on Muhammad and the Rise of Islam: A Critical Survey” in *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, ed. with translation. Ibn Warraq (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000), 75; Maxime Rodinson, “A critical survey of modern studies on Muhammad” in *Studies on Islam*, ed. Merlin L. Swartz (New York/Oxford: Oxford University press, 1981), 23-85; J. W. Fück, “Islam as an Historical Problem in European Historiography Since 1800” in *Historians of the Middle East*, ed. Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt, (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 304.

4 See for instance, Antonie Wessels, *A Modern Arabic Biography of Muḥammad: A Critical Study of Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal’s Ḥayāt Muḥammad* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972); Aziz Aḥmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan* (London, Bombay, Krachi: Oxford

writers on *Sīrah*, realized that most of the early biographical sources of the Prophet contained both authentic and otherwise material which made it easy for European orientalists to paint the moral life of the Prophet according to their desired colours. Taking advantage of it<sup>5</sup>, when Sir William Muir, for instance, fueled controversy and debate regarding several aspects of the life of the Prophet in his book “Life of Mahomet,” Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (1817-1898), the very first critic of the work of Muir and the founder of the movement that drew on rationality in its approach towards religion in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent, confessing the said problem of the classical *Sīrah* literature, wrote,

*Sir William Muir writes that “to the three biographies by Ibnī Hishām, by Wakīdī and his secretary, and by Tabarī, the judicious historian of Mahomet will, as his original authorities, confine himself.” But he does not mention how many traditions are contained in these books that have not been traced up to Mohammed, — how many there are the chain of whose narrator is broken, — how many there are whose narrators are of suspected character or impeached veracity, — how many there are whose narrators are entirely unknown, — and, lastly, though not the least, how many traditions there are which have not been subjected to any examination whatever. Dr. Sprenger, in his zeal, overrates the real value of Wakedee, respecting which Sir Wm. Muir says, “But Dr. Sprenger’s admiration of the work carries him beyond the reality.” But Sir Wm. Muir himself seems to have preferred Wakedee to all others, as almost all his materials for the life of Mohammed rest upon the authority of, and are derived from, that book. Wakedee, however, is the worst author of all, and of the least credit, and all Mohammedan doctors and divines have declared him not to be, in the least degree, of any authority, and as being the least entitled to credit.”*<sup>6</sup>

Thus, responding to Muir and other orientalists, Khān wrote a book titled, *Khuṭbāt al-Aḥmadiyyah fī ‘l-‘Arab wa ‘l-Sīrah al-Muḥammadiyyah*<sup>7</sup> in Urdu (lingua franca), however, whose English translation (*A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*) appeared in 1861, before the publication of the original book in Urdu. To evaluate the source materials for *Sīrah*, Khān adopted the same rational approach in his work used by the 19<sup>th</sup> century orientalists, and hence, the work he produced is considered to be a good example of apologia written in the

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University Press, 1967); Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent*, (Karachi: Ma‘ārif, 1977); Dr. Najeeba ‘Arif, “Revisiting the Tenors of *Sīrah* Literature in Urdu,” *Insights*, 2: 2-3 (Winter 2009-Spring 2010), 303-328.

5 Indeed, some were unfortunately misled in this regard because they considered these biographical sources as the only core data for the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and drew their material entirely from them and hence, they could not access the other fundamental Islamic sources.

6 Syed Ahmed Khan, *A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*, (Lahore: Premier Book House, 1968), viii.

7 First published in 1870.

British India, which challenged more or less all the miraculous and supernatural incidents of the life of the Prophet<sup>8</sup>. An almost similar response came from the scholars in other parts of the Muslim world, who, on the one hand, realized that the classical *Sīrah*-source material is a mixture of both authentic and otherwise traditions, and to re-examine such material, they deemed it necessary to set forth the criteria that could be acceptable to the orientalists and Muslims alike.<sup>9</sup>

It is for this reason that biography of the Prophet must be based on reliable sources. The modern Muslim writers, though under the influence of modern scientific critical methods to a great extent, began to take *Sīrah* into account with a new trend, which may be divided into the following three categories,

1. The writers who bound themselves with only the Qur'ān, the most authentic source of Islam.<sup>10</sup> However, this approach has been criticized on the ground that relying upon the Qur'ān only makes it impossible to compile a full-fledged biography of the Prophet.<sup>11</sup>

2. The writers who based, besides the Qur'ān, on those ḥadīth narratives too, which they deemed authentic ones.<sup>12</sup> This trend has also been criticized by many scholars on the ground that relying upon the Qur'ān and the books of ḥadīth, ignoring the specialized books of *Sīrah* and Islamic history, can lead one sometimes

8 See for instance, Khān, *A Series of Essays*, 342-370.

9 See for instance the following works published during the said era, Tāhā Ḥussayn, *Alā Ḥamīsh al-Sīrah* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1962, first published in 1933); Muḥammad Ḥussayn Haykal, *Ḥayāt Muḥammad*, (Cairo: 1935), Eng. trans. Isma'īl Rajī al-Farūqī, *The Life of Muḥammad* (New York: Islamic Book Service, 2005); 'Abbās Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād, *'Abqariyyat Muḥammad* (The Genius of Muhammad) (Baghdād: Maktaba al-'Urūbah, n.d.); Fethī Rıdwan, *Muḥammad: al-Thāir al-A'zam* (Muhammad: the Big Revolutionist) (Kuwait: Dār al-Hilāl: 1994); Maḥmūd Shalabī, *İstisbrakiyyat Muḥammad* (The Socialism of Muhammad) (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhirah al-Ḥadītha, 1966).

10 There is a large number of books that have been written on this pattern and this list is expanding day by day. Amongst them the most important twentieth century works are as follows,

1. Muḥammed 'Izzat Darvaza, *Sīrat al-Rasūl*, (Egypt: Maṭba'at 'Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalābī wa Shurakā'hū, 1965).

2. Abd Mājīd Daryābādī, *Sīrat Nabvī Qur'ānī*, (Lahore: Idārah Takhlīqāt, 2003). (first published before his death in 1977 then republished many times).

3. Muḥammad Ajmal Khān, *Sīrat-i Qur'āniyah*, (Lahore: Al-Faisal Nāshirān Va Tājiraān-i Kutub, 2001).

11 See for instance, S. M. Zamān Chishtī, *Nuqūsh i Sīrat* (Lahore: Progressive books, 2007), 141.

12 This category refers to those writers who claimed not to include in their *Sīrah*-writings a narration which proves weak, though not fabricated, and hence, they avoided them even in ordinary facts of *Sīrah*. See for instance, Muḥammad b. Rizq al-Ṭarhūnī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah* (Cairo: Dār Ibn Taymiyya, 1410), p18.

to great confusion.<sup>1</sup>

3. The writers who, along with the Qur'ān and authentic ḥadīth collections, consulted all the available classical materials including books on history, biography, *ilm al-rijāl*, genealogy, geography, literature, poetry, and Islamic law, etc., but not without filtering them.

### Shiblī and al-'Umarī's approaches towards authentic Sīrah writing

To evaluate some of the above-mentioned emerging approaches towards re-evaluation of the early sources of Sīrah, two scholars who fall under the last category, 'Allāmah Shiblī Nu'mānī (d.1914), from the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent<sup>2</sup>, and Professor Dr. Akram Ḍiyā' Aḥmed al-'Umarī al-'Irāqī<sup>3</sup>, from the Arab world, have been selected in this paper for several reasons<sup>4</sup>, top of which being their thorough study of and comprehensive approach to the subject and, to a great extent, their remarkable works in the field as well. However, I will confine myself to the rules and principles of Sīrah-writing articulated and employed by both the scholars in their writings.

### Realization of the need to re-evaluate the source materials for Sīrah

Shiblī and Dr. 'Umarī were not satisfied with the source-critical methodology as introduced, formulated and broadly applied by the western scholars to the religion of Islam, in particular, and to other religions in general. Hence, both the scholars realized the dire need of re-writing the biography of the Prophet with a critical examination of the narratives employing the principles set forth by the classical ḥadīth scholars, the following quotations being reflective of the same viewpoint.

Shiblī, in the preface of his *Sīrat al-Nabī*: stated,

*I shall try to show at length that so far no biography of the Prophet (peace and blessing of Allah be upon him) has been based on authentic sayings. .... It is thus found that even in the most reliable books on "Sīra" there are incorporated many sayings that are weak. Consequently, it was necessary to collect a large number of books dealing with*

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13 A good example, to understand this view point, has been mentioned by Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, in *Fiqh al-Sīrah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadīthah, 1960) 10, 308.

24 Shiblī has been considered a central figure of the Indo-Pak subcontinent with respect to the Sīrah-writing.

35 Who has contributed to many works with respect to *Sīrah* and early history of Islam and thus, was awarded the King Faisal International Prize in 1996.

46 Some of them are as follows:

1. Both produced a good deal of Sīrah literature in which they elaborated the rules and criteria set and formulated by the classical ḥadīth scholars.

2. Both the scholars have reviewed orientalist's works and analyzed their source-critical methodology with that of the classical ḥadīth scholars.

3. Both have been highly appreciated by the mainstream Muslim readership so far.

*traditions and the lives of the narrators and then to compile a standard work based on thorough research and critical study.*<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, ‘Umarī wrote,

*The need to re-write the history of Islam is one of the issues to which Muslim scholars have been directing their attention since the 1960s. These scholars were of the opinion that any such reformulation should take place in accordance with the Islamic concepts of movements and interpretation of history. It must also be carried out along the lines of the hadith scholars’ methodology in the study of Islamic history. It is indeed a most difficult undertaking to offer suggestions for the reformulation of the history of Islam.... I limit this work to the reformulation of the first period of Islam. This period consists of the sirah and the era of the Rightly-guided Caliphs.*<sup>2</sup>

### **Rules and principles of authentic Sīrah writing articulated by Shiblī and ‘Umarī**

With painstaking effort, both the scholars have, first, extracted and refined the rules which were introduced and experienced by the early hadith scholars<sup>3</sup> with respect to the narrations regarding the life of the Prophet, and then both have employed them in their Sīrah works. To a great extent both have similar findings; however, in a few cases, while applying the said rules, they differ with each other. In the following pages, we will attempt at showing to what extent they are similar/different in enunciating the rules of Sīrah writing.

#### *1. Qur’ān as a fundamental source of Sīrah*

Both the scholars, like all the classical and modern scholars, held the opinion that the Qur’ān is the most reliable and fundamental source on the life of the Prophet, and thus, it must be given preference over each and every contradicting statement appearing anywhere in the early Islamic materials. In this respect, Shiblī maintained:

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1 Shiblī Nu‘mānī, *Sīrat-un-Nabī*, English translation. M. Tayyib Bakhsh Budayuni (Lahore: Kazi publications, 1979), 9-11.

2 Dr. Akram Diyā’ al-‘Umarī, *al-Mujtama‘ al-Madanī fi ‘Abd al-Nabuwwah*, Madinan Society at the Time of the Prophet: Its Characteristics and Organization/Issues in Islamic Thought, Engl. trans. Huda Khattab, (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1995),

3. He further added that, “I call upon Muslim historians to produce detailed studies aimed at revealing the salient features of the Islamic interpretation of history, and the real dimensions of the critical methodology with which the narratives of Islamic history must be examined. I warn our youth, in their efforts to understand the events and great men of Islamic history, not to rely totally on reports mentioned in some history books, and not to accept them without subjecting them to the most rigorous criticism. Otherwise, they will run the risk of accepting a distorted picture of Islamic history.” *ibid*, 23.

3 But the rules for judging the truthfulness of a ḥadīth, established by them are scattered here and there in their several writings.

In the first place facts recorded in the Qur'ān regarding the Prophet's life have been given precedence over statements from other sources. It can be positively proved that the Quran describes, or alludes to, certain incidents in a manner that brings controversies to a close, which continue to exist only because people failed to make a careful study of the Quranic verses<sup>20</sup>.

Likewise 'Umarī opined that, "At the top of the list of Sirah source books is the Quran".<sup>21</sup> Umarī also elaborated as to what extent one can benefit from the Qur'ān and how this source of Sirah may be beneficially drawn upon<sup>22</sup>.

## 2. Classical Books of Ḥadīth

Both the scholars agreed that besides the Qur'ān, the next fundamental source of the Sirah is all the classical books of ḥadīth. Though, these sources do include both authentic and unauthentic (i.e. weak, spurious and fabricated) narrations, but it is possible to filter them following the methods developed by classical ḥadīth scholars. In this respect, both the scholars have reached the following conclusions:

1. The two ḥadīth books of *Al-Bukhārī* and *Muslim* are the most authentic and deserve preference over all other ḥadīth collection and therefore, "Facts mentioned in the "Sahihain" of *Al-Bukhari* and *Muslim*" as Shibli states, "need no confirmation by *Sira* or history".<sup>23</sup>

2. Then the four books of *Ṣiḥāḥ/Kutub Sittah*, (namely *al-Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, *al-Tirmidī*, *Ibn Mājah*, *Nasā'ī*) should be given preference over the remaining ḥadīth corpus<sup>24</sup>.

3. Rest of the ḥadīth books (such as the books of *al-Shamā'ī'l* and *al-Dalā'l*, etc.) are generally preferable over all other source materials (such as the books of history, Sirah, etc.). It needs, however, to be noted that a particular event/narration reported in the latter sources may be preferred over the earlier ones if its soundness is approved.<sup>25</sup>

20 Shibli, *Sirat-un-Nabī*, 89.

21 'Umarī, *Madinan Society*, 24, 25.

22 Ibid, 25-26.

23 Shibli, *Sirat-un-Nabī*, 89. The same upheld by 'Umarī in the following words, "the books of *al Bukhari* and *Muslim* have been defined as being authentic, and every hadith contained therein is regarded as being sahih. After many studies of these two books, both by ancient scholars with excellent memories and by modern scholars, even small details in the two books have firmly resisted criticism." See, *Madinan Society*, 16.

24 As 'Umarī maintained that, "we may then consider the other four books of hadith, and the *Muwatta'* of *Imām Mālik*, which have also received a great deal of attention, even though these books do not attain the same level of authenticity as the two sahih". *Madinan Society*, 16.

25 Shibli only indicated to this point whereas 'Umarī elaborated it and mentioned those books in some detail.

4. All ḥadīth books are not of equal status. This fact, according to both the scholars, necessitates the verification of their narrations according to the rules set forth by the early ḥadīth scholars.<sup>26</sup>

5. To compile a full-fledged biography of the Prophet, it is necessary for a writer to consult all the early Islamic sources, namely, the Qur'ān, the ḥadīth books, the Sīrah-books, the history books and the related early materials<sup>27</sup>.

### 3. *Early Sīrah literature*

Both the scholars have placed the classical Sīrah books next to the ḥadīth collections, and emphasized on the critical evaluation of their narrations, particularly those which deal with an extraordinary incident. After a brief history of the classical Sīrah literature, Shiblī, recognizing its importance, concluded:

*There are hundreds of books on Sira now available, but the ultimate sources to which they are all indebted are: Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Sad, al-Waqidi and al-Tabari. ... Of these al-Waqidi deserves no notice.... The other three writers are quite reliable. ... Unfortunately, however, their personal integrity and position of authority do not guarantee the authenticity of their works on Sira. They were not eye witnesses to any incident and have consequently quoted from others, many of whom are untrustworthy. .... Thus the books on Sira do not stand at par with the traditions in authenticity. Only those statements that may stand scrutiny are worth recording<sup>28</sup>.*

*“From the point of view of accuracy,” as ‘Umarī stated, “the books specializing in Sīrah come after al-Quran al-Karim and al-Hadith al-Sharif. What gives them their great academic value is the fact that the first books of Sīrah were written at a very early period; to be exact, in the generation of the Tabi‘ūn when the companions were still alive, and the latter did not criticize the writers of the Sīrah”<sup>29</sup>.*

Then ‘Umarī has also mentioned more or less the same history of the classical Sīrah literature which Shiblī had already dealt with, even he reached the

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26 Because, contrary to *kutub sittah*, they contained a large number of weak traditions. Quoting some weak traditions which got placed in the books of some leading traditionists, as Abū Nu‘aym, Ibn ‘Asākir, Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, al-Ḥāfiẓ ‘Abd al-Ghanī and others, Shiblī justified that, *“still they freely quoted weak traditions..... the only explanation is to be found in the belief that strict care and caution had to be observed only when quoting the traditions telling what is lawful and what is forbidden. In matters other than these they thought it enough to quote the name of those from whom they narrated; and did not care for a critical study and scrutiny.”* Shiblī, *Sīrat-un-Nabī*, 57. Then he quoted from Imām Ibn Mahdī and Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal which supports his standpoint and the same quotation by Ibn Mahdī has been incorporated by ‘Umarī. See, ‘Umarī, *Madinan Society*, 37.

27 See, Shiblī, *Sīrat-un-Nabī*, 11; ‘Umarī, *Madinan Society*, 26.

28 Shiblī, *Sīrat-un-Nabī*, 46-47. The same is the response of ‘Umarī in this respect, see, ‘Umarī, *Madinan Society*, 34-35.

29 ‘Umarī, *Madinan Society*, 29.



same conclusion with respect to Ibn Ishāq,<sup>30</sup> Ibn Hishām and Ibn Sa‘d,<sup>31</sup> the most important figures of the classical Sirah literature and summarized it in the following words:

*The works identified above are the most important sources of Sirah to have reached us. From the point of view of accuracy, as previously mentioned, they come after al Quran al Karim and al Hadith al Sharif. But that does not mean that everything mentioned in the books of Sirah has the same degree of sihhah (soundness). It is not necessary, however, for all of the Sirah to be sahih; rather, there is both sahih and daif in it. When studying the Sirah, we should rely on the sahih in the first instance, then complete the picture with what is hasan, or close to it, not referring to the daif on matters having bearing on basic beliefs and principles or tashri'. There is nothing wrong with using the Sirah when we cannot find stronger reports which will encourage high moral standards or which describe buildings, crafts, agriculture, and the like. Following is the method the hadith scholars themselves used..... The isnads and mutun of the Sirah need to be closely examined in accordance with the hadith scholars' rules of hadith criticism. What could help us in doing so is the fact that all the important sources of Sirah introduce every report with the isnad and most of the reporters of Sirah are also hadith scholars whose biographies are mentioned in Kutub al Rijal. These books clarify their status and explain what has been said about them as regards jarh and ta'dil<sup>32</sup>.*

#### 4. Contradiction between ḥadīth and Sīrah narrations

Whenever a contradiction occurs between ḥadīth and Sīrah narrations, the authentic statement will be given preference and, according to both the scholars, books of ḥadīth, in general, and the books of *al-Bukhārī* and *Muslim* in particular, are the authentic collections which deserve the right of preference in such kind of controversies, as both maintained in this respect:

#### Shiblī

“Books on Sira being inferior to those on Hadith in respect of authenticity, preference should always be given to the statements of Hadith when the two disagree”<sup>33</sup>.

“In controversies on certain incidents, one may see the entire class of Sira-writers arrayed against the Imam al-Bukhari and Muslim, and there are people who would reject the statements of the Imam al-Bukhari and Muslim on the ground that it is belied by writers of books on “Sira”. But critics declare that an authentically reported tradition deserves to be accepted, even though discredited by all the “Sira”-

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30 Ibid, 31.

31 Ibid, 35.

32 ‘Umari, *Madinan Society*, 37-38.

33 Shiblī, *Sīrat-un-Nabī*, 74.

writers unanimously”<sup>34</sup>.

“There are many important events about which one may get valuable information from the books on traditions and thus solve many problems. But books on Sira and history show that their authors have taken no notice of these facts.... Some of the writers realized this fault; and on a close examination of the traditions, they had to admit that a large number of reports, clearly contradicted by the authentic traditions, had been wrongly incorporated in books on Sira, and needed correction”<sup>35</sup>.

“Most of their [Orientalists] are the outcome of the fact that they draw their material entirely from books on Sira and history. They turn to al-Waqidi, the Sira of Ibn Hisham, the Sirah of Ibn Ishaq, Tarikh of al-Tabari and others of a piece with them.”<sup>36</sup>

### ‘Umarī

“There is no doubt that sirah material in the books of hadith is authentic, and must be relied upon and given priority over the reports in the Maghazi books and general histories, especially if it is mentioned in the Sahih books of hadith, because these books are the result of huge efforts on the part of the hadith scholars in thoroughly examining the hadith and criticizing its isnad and matn. The precision and criticism which were applied to the hadith were not applied to the historical books”<sup>37</sup>.

“We should accept the ṣaḥīḥ reports, then the hasan ones, and then those ḍa‘īf reports which are supported by other independent isnāds... in this way, a picture of the events of early Islamic history can be reconstructed. If any contradiction arises, then the strongest hadith must always be followed, but the weak hadith which are not supported nor otherwise strengthened may be used to fill any gaps not covered by either ṣaḥīḥ or ḥasan. However, this may only be done when the issue concerned is not related to either ‘aqīdah or Sharī‘ah.”<sup>38</sup>

“There is a mistaken tendency among some Orientalists (in which some Muslim historians have acquiesced) to upgrade al Waqidi’s Maghazi, and to prefer it even to the Sirah of Ibn Ishaq. The Sirah of Ibn Ishaq is actually more precise and more authentic than al Waqidi’s work. The information given by Ibn Ishaq agrees in many aspects with that found in the books of hadith.”<sup>39</sup>

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34 Ibid, 9. Then Shibli cited two instances in favor of this view point.

35 Ibid, 51.

36 Shibli, *Sirat-un-Nabi*, 86.

37 ‘Umarī, *Madinan Society*, 26.

38 Ibid, 16.

39 ‘Umarī, *Madinan Society*, 17.

### 5. Status of weak narrators/narrations

Both the scholars held the opinion that the books of *Sīrah* and history, contrary to those of *ḥadīth*-books, contained a very large number of weak traditions, and hence, they were not reliable particularly for significant issues/aspects of the life of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Both criticized the orientalist's approach in which no distinction has been made between these weak and otherwise reports and therefore, both the scholars charged them for their lack of knowledge in the field regarding the methods and rules set by *ḥadīth* scholars, as further maintained by the twain:

#### Shibli

“Apart from the writers on *Sira*, the narrators from whom the works on *Sira*, borrow their material, like Saif, Suri'ī and Ibn Salam are all unreliable; they may pass as tolerable sources for ordinary facts, but for facts of importance which form the basis of weighty questions, this material is totally worthless.”<sup>40</sup>

“The traditionists were not ignorant of the principle that the character of evidence must vary in accordance with the character of the report. .... this means that in view of the importance of a report, the traditionists took into account the status of the narrators. It was on this account that al-Imam Ibn Hanbal declared Ibn Ishaq to have been dependable with respect to military history, but was not to be relied upon in matters of *fiqh*. This is simply a restatement of the principle that the character of the sources must correspond to the nature of the incident, and that the evidence required must vary with the importance of the event. But legal injunctions are not the only importance things.”<sup>41</sup>

“It is to be noted that the position and status of the narrator must vary according to the nature and importance of the incident. Suppose a man, generally regarded as trust-worthy, narrates an ordinary incident that commonly occurs and may occur at any time, his version may then be accepted without any hesitation. But if the same narrator narrates an extraordinary incident that runs counter to general experience and cannot be reconciled to the attendant circumstances, it should then require a stronger evidence and the reporter has to be uncommonly judicious, discerning and scrupulous, far above the average”<sup>42</sup>.

“For ordinary facts of daily experience we have been content with Ibn Sa'd, Ibn Hisham and al-Tabari. But in matters of importance we had to be critical, inquisitive and unsparing of labour. The first thing we had to do was to collect from the above-named books the names of all their narration; and they ran into

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40 Shibli, *Sīrat-un-Nabī*, 86.

41 Ibid, 57-58.

42 Ibid, 54-55.

hundreds. Then with the help of works on “Asmā al-Rijāl,” we prepared a chart of their merits and demerits. Thus the value of any report could be judged by a reference to this chart.<sup>43</sup>... Important events have been referred only to authentic traditions or books on history. For ordinary matters or while dealing with minor details of the battles, we have not been much at pains for making the scrupulous research of a traditionist.”<sup>44</sup>

### ‘Umarī

“The methods of the ḥadīth scholars must be observed when dealing with historical narratives. The hadith scholars themselves are lenient when they narrate historical reports. We may notice this even in the most trustworthy of early Muslim historians, such as Ibn Ishaq, Khalifah ibn Khayyat and al Ṭabarī. They all give many historical reports which are either *mursal* or *munqati*. Al Tabari also often reports historical reports on the authority of very weak and untrustworthy narrators, such as Hisham ibn Kalbi, Sayf ibn Umar al Tamimi, Nasr ibn Mazahim and others.

Undoubtedly, the fact that the earlier historians accepted historical reports without subjecting them to the same rigorous criticism of the hadith places a heavy responsibility upon the contemporary Muslim historian. The earlier historians were content to put their trust in the narrators mentioned in the *isnads*. This means that the contemporary Muslim historian must make a tremendous effort to determine which historical reports are *sahih*. He needs to understand the methods of the hadith scholars and to apply them to the historical reports in the same way as they were applied to the hadith.

This is no longer such an easy task as it was for Khalifa ibn al Khayyat or al Tabari, because they were well-versed in the methodology of the hadith scholars in criticizing historical reports. We do not wish to detract from the credit that is due to the early historians nor from the contribution they have made. They collected for us the primary material, along with the *isnads*, which enable us to judge it, however difficult this may be. ...

If any contradiction arises, then the strongest hadith must always be followed, but weak hadith which are not supported or otherwise strengthened may be used to fill any gaps not covered by either *sahih* or *hasan*. However, this may only be done when the issue concerned is not related to either *‘aqidah* or *Shari‘h*. The general rule is that one must be stringent in matters relating to basic beliefs and principles of Shariah. We cannot fail to notice that the age of the Sirah and the Rightly-guided Caliphs is full of legal precedents.”<sup>45</sup>

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43 Ibid, 90.

44 Ibid, 92.

45 ‘Umarī, *Madinan Society*, 16.

## Common views/findings of both the scholars

With respect to the above-mentioned principles for the re-evaluation of the early biographical sources of the Prophet (peace be upon him), it is pertinent to mention here that neither Shiblī nor ‘Umarī had invented them; they merely dugged them out of the early ḥadīth scholars’ works and articulated them. This is the main reason behind the similarity in the findings and conclusions reached by these scholars, despite there being a gap of one hundred years between their appearance. We may summarize their common findings in the following points.

1. Amongst the available sources of Sīrah, the Qur’ān enjoys the maximum authority.

2. The classical books of ḥadīth that contained both authentic and otherwise narrations will be placed next to the Qur’ān with the following classification:

- The two ḥadīth books of *Al-Bukhārī* and *Muslim* are the most authentic ones.

- Then the four famous books of ḥadīth, (namely al-Sunan Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidī, Ibn Mājah, Nasā’i) should be given preference over the remaining ḥadīth corpus.

- All other ḥadīth books (such as the books of al-Shamā’ī and al-Dalā’l, etc.) are generally preferable over all other source materials (such as the books of history, Sīrah, etc.), however, a particular event reported in the latter sources may be preferred over the earlier ones if its soundness is approved.

- All ḥadīth books are not of equal status, therefore, according to both the scholars, their narrations need to be verified according to the rules set forth by the early ḥadīth scholars.

3. Both the scholars have placed the classical Sīrah books next to the ḥadīth collections, and emphasized the critical evaluation of their narrations, particularly those that deal with an extraordinary incident.

4. Both the scholars held the opinion that the books of Sīrah and history, contrary to ḥadīth-books, contain a very large number of weak traditions due to which they do not constitute reliable evidence for the discussion on basic beliefs and significant issues/aspects of the life of the Prophet. In other matters, however, such ḥadīth play a complementary role, helping researchers to construct the full picture and thus, there is nothing wrong with using them.

5. Whenever a contradiction occurs between ḥadīth and Sīrah narrations the authentic statement will be given preference and according to both the scholars, books of ḥadīth, in general, and the books of al-Bukhārī and Muslim in particular, are the authentic collections which deserve the right of preference in such kind of

controversies.

## Differences between both the scholars

Besides the above-mentioned common findings, both the scholars have some differences, both in terms of formulating the principles and their application. Some of such differences are discussed below.

### 1. Clarity and preciseness

‘Umarī’s work appeared after a century later than that of Shibli. Because of having access to Shibli’s work, ‘Umarī enjoyed all the benefits of the developments made under this period, lending clarity and preciseness to his work. The following two instances may be helpful to understand this claim.

1) Both held almost the same opinion as to the classification of the early Sirah sources, however, what Shibli had been able to present much less coherently was clearly offered by ‘Umarī, as manifest from one of his following quotations,

*“There are various sources for the study of the Sirah; some may be described as primary sources, and include the Quran, hadith, the books of al-Shamail and al Dala’il, the books specializing in the Sirah, and the books of general history. The other sources may be described as secondary and complementary. These are books which do not deal specifically with the Sirah or history as such, but with other subjects which are useful in the study of the Sirah. Examples of the latter include books on literature, poetry, biography, ilm al rijal, geography, fiqh, genealogy and dictionaries, etc. undoubtedly, if all these sources were incorporated in the study of the Sirah, they would produce the most complete and most detailed picture possible. I shall try to give a clear picture of these source books, their value and how they may be utilized<sup>46</sup>. The first fact that the researcher must note is that they are not all on the same level. They vary in strength and authenticity, and cannot be treated equally. One cannot compare a Quranic verse or a hadith with a historical or literary narrative. These sources must be evaluated and each one placed in the appropriate category”<sup>47</sup>.*

Such a clear approach towards the classification of the early Sirah sources, as evident from the foregoing passage, is rare in Shibli’s account.

2) Both the scholars categorized al-Wāqidi amongst weak narrators and maintained a rule according to which a weak narrator is not reliable for significant incidents/aspects of the life of the Prophet (peace be upon him), but on the contrary, for ordinary fact he is considered a tolerable source. In this respect, we find that ‘Umarī has been very clear both in discussing Wāqidi’s status and incorporating

46 ‘Umarī elaborated them under the heading of “supplementary sources”, See, *Madinan Society*, 38-39.

47 *Ibid*, 24.

his narratives, as he held the opinion that, “he [Wāqidī] is *ḍa‘īf* in the opinion of the ḥadīth scholars, despite his abundant knowledge. His reports do not lend themselves to argumentation in matters of basic beliefs and principles and Shari‘ah, but they are useful in describing the details of events which have nothing to do with basic beliefs and principles and Shari‘ah.”<sup>48</sup>

Shiblī seems to whimsically apply the said rule<sup>49</sup> about weak narrators; he held the opinion that narrators “like Saif, Suri‘ī and Ibn Salam are all unreliable; they may pass as tolerable sources for ordinary facts,”<sup>50</sup>; on the other hand, discussing Wāqidī’s status, he ignored this rule by asserting that “Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Sad, al-Wāqidī and al-Tabari. ... Of these al-Wāqidī deserves no notice”.<sup>51</sup> In addition to this, we see that Shiblī himself could not avoid taking Wāqidī’s narrations in his account<sup>52</sup>, though it happened only in ordinary facts<sup>53</sup> and, therefore, due to this of his confusion, he has been criticized by several scholars<sup>54</sup>.

## 2. Rules of ḥadīth scholars respecting *matn*/text criticism and *dirāyah*

Both the scholars agree that all the Sīrah material must be carefully investigated in accordance with the rules of ḥadīth criticism set forth by the early ḥadīth scholars; they, however, differ on the rules of *matn*/text criticism. In this respect, ‘Umarī has confined himself strictly to the rules of ḥadīth scholars, while Shiblī, along with these rules, also employed the rules of *dirāyah* enunciated by some early Muslim jurists<sup>55</sup>. Contrary to ‘Umarī, we can see that Shiblī had discussed these rules in great detail<sup>56</sup> and employed them broadly in his writings, though, on the one hand, he admitted that these rules (of *dirāyah*) are a matter of controversy amongst the ḥadīth scholars and “it is hard to decide the controversy one way or the other. Generally it is recognized that a report of which the narrators are all persons of sound integrity and

48 Ibid, 32.

49 For another instance of Shiblī’s confusion, see his discussion under the heading, “Is sīrah a part of ḥadīth?”. Shiblī, *Sīrat-un-Nabī*, 8.

50 Shiblī, *Sīrat-un-Nabī*, 86.

51 Ibid, 46.

52 See for detail, Dr. Zafar Aḥmad Ṣiddiqī, *Mawlānā Shiblī Nu‘mānī ba Ḥaythiyyat Sīrat Nighār* (Lahore: Bayt al-Ḥikmat, 2005), 112-113.

53 According to the said rule articulated and accepted by Shiblī himself with respect to the weak narrators.

54 See for instance, Ṣiddiqī, *Mawlānā Shiblī Nu‘mānī*. cf.

55 Shiblī introduced them under the title of “*dirāyah*.” See the following pages of his *Sīrat-un-Nabī*, 40, 58, 62. These rules experienced broadly by ‘Irāqī jurists as can be found in the writings of Abū Yūsuf and al-Shyabānī: disciples of Abū Ḥanīfah, however, al-Shafi‘ī challenged some of these rules in his polemical account: al-Umm, and inspired almost all the ḥadīth scholars of second and third Hijrī centuries. See for detail, Mubasher Hussain, in *Legal Traditions and ‘Irāqī Jurists (Aḥādīth-i Aḥkām avr ‘Irāqī Fuqahā’)*, (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 2015).

56 See, Shiblī, *Sīrat-un-Nabī*, 40-88.

*the chain is unbroken is not to be rejected, although it does not stand to reason*".<sup>57</sup>

On the other hand, he upheld,

*"There is no gainsaying the fact that mere reliability of the narrator does not always count. It is therefore, imperative that the critical tests of reason and circumstance which the Muhaddithun devised and which they sometimes ignored<sup>58</sup>, be strictly applied as, even an honest narrator cannot claim immunity from error"*<sup>59</sup>.

Contrary to 'Umarī, once again, Shibli challenged the ḥadīth scholars with respect to the companions of the Prophet, as evidenced in the following quotation by him,

*"The principles set forth for judging the veracity of the narrators were, in some cases, ignored in respect of the companions. For example, there are many grades of narrators. Some have a retentive memory, keen intelligence and discerning mind, some possess them still less. These differences are noticed in all kinds of narrators; and the Companions of the Prophet were no exception. .... Traditionists in general have disagreed with this view.... This fact is to be kept in mind particularly when problems of Fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence) are involved, or where the issues are subtle and deep"*.<sup>60</sup>

As a result, Shibli rejected even some of the traditions reported in the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* of *al-Bukhārī* and *Muslim*.<sup>61</sup> But one can hardly find such kind of instances in 'Umarī's writings.

### 3. Apologetic approach

Under the heading *Apology and justification cannot serve as a basis for the interpretation of early Islamic history*, 'Umarī stated,

*"This logic is a result of psychological and intellectual oppression created in our minds by the cultural invasion of the West. One aspect of the logic is the apologetic approach which some Muslim historians use when they discuss the issue of jihād in Islam, or the Islamic conquests (al futuh al islamiyyah). They view these military expeditions as having been launched in defence of the Arabian peninsula against the incursions of the Romans and Persians. Even the military expeditions of the Prophet himself have not*

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57 Ibid, 62.

58 This is a matter for further consideration whether the ḥadīth scholars ignored/employed these rules or not.

59 Shibli, *Sīrat-un-Nabī*, 88.

60 Ibid, 52-53. Shibli in support of his opinion quoted from some early jurists and, as it is pointed out before, these rules of *dirāyah*, generally speaking, set forth by the early jurists and criticized by the ḥadīth scholars. In another *dirāyah*-related rule, with respect to *khābar al-aḥād* (i.e., a ḥadīth narrated by one or in some cases, by two narrators), Shibli, contrary to ḥadīth scholars, preferred the methodology adopted by the Ḥanafī Jurists. See, Shibli, *Sīrat-un-Nabī*, 73.

61 See for instances, Shibli, *Sīrat-un-Nabī*, 64-69.



*escaped this apologetic approach, which portrays them as being waged in defence of the state of Madinah. Professor Muhammad Shalabī [cic.] al Nu'mānī's study of the Sirah, despite his excellence, has also committed this error".*<sup>62</sup>

It was quite natural because the period under discussion was greatly influenced by the Western scholarship, equipped with rational approach, upon the Muslim intellectuals of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent including Shibli. However, he was much less influenced by this approach than Sayyid Aḥmad Khān. Nevertheless, many scholars charged Shibli with adopting an apologetic or rational approach in Sirah writing, while, contrary to him, Umarī has so far not been charged with such an apologetic approach.

### **Conclusion**

Shibli took the task in the last decade of the nineteenth century under the British rule in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent<sup>63</sup>. Despite the absence of peaceful social milieu and lack of basic sources, the work he produced is considered a hallmark in the field with no parallel to date. He exerted great influence on the contemporary scholarship; even 'Umarī is one of the scholars who consulted, extracted from and, at the same time, criticized Shibli's work. 'Umarī, took all the advantages of the one hundred years gap and produced more articulated and more reliable work for traditional mindset with fewer controversies, however, he could not draw much attention<sup>64</sup> because of emerging the same trend in the contemporary scholarship which resulted in a plethora of books in the said field, and hence, he should be considered no more than one of the representatives of this trend.

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62 'Umarī, *Madinan Society*, 13.

63 But he could only accomplish the data of almost the first two volumes which unfortunately, could not get author's final touch till his death in 1914.

64 Even his writings have not been critically evaluated yet. See the sole critique made in this regard, 'Abd al-Qādir Ibn Ḥabīb Allāh al-Sindī, *Istidrākāt wa Mulāḥzāt Ḥawl Kathīr Mimmā Waqa'a Fihī al-Duktūr al-'Umarī Fi Kitābibi al-Maz'ūm Bi al-Sirah al-Nabawīyah al-Ṣaḥīḥah* (n.p.: 1416). The book can be found through, <http://waqfeya.com/book.php?bid=4949> (last seen, February 11, 2011).