

# The Biography Of Prophet Mohammed In Christian Historical Sources And Its Impact On The New Orientalists

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## Abstract:

This research paper aims to uncover the information found in foreign sources (Armenian and Syriac) regarding the personality of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and discuss the accuracy of the information contained in them. Orientalists heavily rely on these sources when writing about the early history of Islam, considering them more credible than Arabic sources, which they doubt due to the argument that they were recorded two centuries after the emergence of Islam. In contrast, Armenian and Syriac sources were documented during the first century of the Islamic era/seventh century AD. They believe that Arabic sources only represent the perspective of the victorious, ignoring the opinions and positions of the people of the conquered lands who differ from them in terms of belief.

**Keywords:** Prophetic biography, Orientalism, Armenians, Syriacs.

## Introduction:

Many Orientalists base their studies of the Prophetic biography on a premise they have invented, which has become one of their fundamental assumptions. This premise states that "the little information found in the Sunnah (regarding the biography) crumbles under the methods of modern Western methodology." Despite the fact that this statement is mere speculation and lacks evidence to support its validity, they have cast doubt on much of what is mentioned in Islamic sources regarding the birth, name, lineage, life, and even the

authenticity of the revelations received by the Prophet (peace be upon him). Some have gone as far as claiming that the Prophet (peace be upon him) derived his teachings from Jews or was influenced by Judaism. These fabrications are not found in the biographical or Islamic historical books. If these books contain only a small portion about the Prophetic biography, according to their claims, then what sources did Orientalists rely on to fill the void left by Islamic historical texts?

During the last quarter of the previous century and the beginning of the current century, a new Orientalist school emerged, known as the "New Revisionists," calling for a revision of the classical Orientalist methodologies that committed methodological errors in studying the roots of Islam and its history, or what is known as the early history of Islam. The pioneers of this school are guided by the idea that Islamic sources were recorded at a late stage of Islam's emergence. They argue that the earliest sources that reached us were written after approximately two hundred years from the Prophetic migration/ninth century AD, and there are no Islamic historical writings dating back to the first century of the Islamic era/seventh century AD. Based on this, they cast doubt on the validity of the historical writings that have reached us, considering that the eyewitnesses to those early events in Islamic history have passed away, leaving behind only oral narratives that have been subject to forgetfulness, distortion, additions, and omissions.

These "new critics" raise another issue, namely that history is written by the victors, and the victors usually adopt their own perspective and impose it on the conquered peoples, leaving the inhabitants of open countries subdued. However, this does not mean that the people of those countries embrace everything that the victors conveyed to them in terms of ideas and values. Consequently, the Islamic historical writings that were recorded more than two hundred years after the events ignored what the people of open countries said, or perhaps turned a blind eye to them, because they contradicted them in terms of creed or were deemed unreliable.

Based on the aforementioned, the "new critics" question whether we should believe everything mentioned in the Islamic sources written in the second century of Hijra/ninth century AD. Did those sources convey the true image of the early Islamic period, which includes the Prophet's biography and the subsequent historical events that established the

foundations of the Islamic state? They propose an alternative to Islamic sources, claiming that they have remained unknown and underutilized, lacking the same level of reading and inference as Islamic sources. This alternative consists of writings by non-Muslims, specifically referring to Jewish, Persian, Armenian Christian, Syriac, Coptic, and Byzantine sources. These sources are diverse in terms of their racial, linguistic, religious, political, and cultural affiliations, and their authors were contemporaries of the early Islamic events. In their view, these sources are closer to the actual events and more credible than Islamic sources because they were documented in an extremely early period, namely the first century of Hijra/seventh century AD.

It is not possible to present all the non-Islamic sources that have addressed the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) or a part thereof, as they are numerous and require extensive writings to discuss and critique them. Therefore, in this article, we will focus on some Armenian and Syriac sources. What is the view of Armenian and Syriac Christian historians regarding the personality of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)? What are their sources of information about him? Do their writings represent historical facts that are more credible than those found in Arabic sources?

It is important to note that these Christian sources were mostly recorded in the Armenian or Syriac languages before a small portion of them were translated into Arabic, with many others translated into English and French. These sources are characterized by extreme brevity and reliance on the annalistic method of recording events. Additionally, the authors of these sources often do not refer to the sources they relied upon. Overall, they provide inaccurate and unreliable information about the personality of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

### **1. Armenian Sources:**

Among the Armenian books written in the first century of the Islamic era/seventh century AD is the book "Histoire d'Héraclius" (History of Heraclius) by the Armenian historian Bishop Sebeos (L'Evêque Sebéos)<sup>1</sup>. He began writing his book

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<sup>1</sup> He is one of the priests of the Armenian Church, and there is not enough information about him. His exact birth and death dates are unknown, but it is certain that he lived in the 7th century AD (1st century AH). He was contemporary with King Khosrow II, who ruled Persia between 590-628 CE. His name is also mentioned among the

in 675 CE/55 AH, and it covers the period from the late fifth century AD to 661 AD. Sebeos was an eyewitness and contemporary of many of the events he wrote about, such as the collapse of the Persian Empire at the hands of the Muslims. This made his book a source for many Armenian historians who wrote after him. The book consists of thirty-eight chapters in which he discusses the history of the Armenian nation and its relationship with the Byzantine Empire. He also touches upon the war between the Persians and the Romans, as well as the victory of Emperor Heraclius and his recapture of Jerusalem from the Sassanians. Sebeos is considered the only Armenian writer from the seventh century AD who witnessed the early Islamic conquests in Armenia and recorded them in his book. He also wrote about some aspects of the life of the Prophet Muhammad. In the final chapter of his book, he presents the events of the Islamic conquests in Persia, Armenia, and the Byzantine Empire, stopping at the accession of Muawiyah ibn Abi Sufyan to the Islamic caliphate in 40 AH/661 AD. He relied on some lost Armenian sources, as well as the accounts of captives and Armenians who were later released by the Muslims<sup>1</sup>. In this article, we relied on a translation by Frédéric Macler from Armenian to French, published by Ernest Leroux in Paris in 1904.

Sebeos discusses the emergence of the Islamic call in the thirtieth chapter of his book, opening it with the statement: "I will speak of the lineage of Abraham, not of the free son, but of the one born of the slave."<sup>2</sup> By this, he refers to our master Ismail, peace be upon him, and he states that the word of the Lord has indeed been fulfilled in him. He cites a passage from the Gospel: "His hand is raised over every man, and every man's hand is raised against him."<sup>3</sup>

Then he proceeds to talk about the Jews and their departure from the city of Raha after realizing that they had no future

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participants in the Fourth Ecumenical Council, which was held in 645 CE in the city of Dvin, which was the capital of Armenia at that time. (See: Hacikyan Agop J., *The Heritage of Armenian Literature*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2002, Vol. II, pp. 81-82.)

<sup>1</sup> Ayadi Hassina, "History of Heraclius" is the oldest source on the history of Islamic conquests, presentation, criticism, and evaluation, in: the journal "Afaq al-Ilm," University of Ziane Achour - Djelfa - January 2019, N°14, Vol. 04, pp. 64-65.

<sup>2</sup> Sebéos the Bishop, *History of Heraclius*, translated from Armenian by Frédéric Macler, Ernest Leroux publisher, Paris 1904, p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis, Chapter 16, verse 12.

with the Byzantine army that besieged them. Emperor Heraclius requested that they leave the city, so they took the desert route. When they arrived in the land of the Arabs, among the descendants of Ishmael, they sought their help, considering them relatives according to the Gospel's provisions. However, they were unable to convince the majority of the people due to their different pagan religions.

At that time, there was a man among the descendants of Ishmael called "Mohammed" (written as "Mahomet"). He was a merchant who presented himself to them as a divine preacher, claiming to bring a message from God that called for the path of truth. He taught them how to recognize the God of Abraham because he was educated and familiar with the laws of Moses. Since the command came from above, they gathered together under one authority, united by a single law, abandoning their arrogant rituals and returning to the living God who appeared to their father, Abraham. Mohammed instructed them not to consume carrion, not to drink wine, not to lie, and not to commit adultery. The Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) said to them, "Indeed, the Lord promised Abraham and his descendants this land forever, and He fulfilled His promise during the time when Israel was favored. But now you are the children of Abraham, and the Lord will fulfill His promise to Abraham. Therefore, go and take the land that the Lord has given to your father, Abraham. No one will be able to resist you in war because the Lord is with you".<sup>1</sup>

Sebeos also speaks of the alliance between the children of Israel and the children of Ishmael, as they formed a massive army and threatened the Byzantine Emperor to withdraw from the land of Palestine<sup>2</sup>.

The excerpt you provided is from the book "Sebeos," written in the 1st century AH/7th century CE. It is notable that Sebeos describes the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a merchant and presents him to the people as a preacher rather than a sent prophet. This indicates that Sebeos does not recognize him as a messenger. Moreover, there are significant errors in this narrative, such as the claim that the Prophet was educated and knowledgeable about the Torah and the laws of Moses, implying that he acquired his knowledge and teachings from Jewish scholars. Additionally, it suggests that Muslims allied with Jews and formed a massive army to invade the

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<sup>1</sup> Sebéos the Bishop, op. cit., pp. 95-96.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

Byzantine Empire. All of these pieces of information are incorrect and stem from ignorance about the true nature of the new religion, as well as the belief that Islam is a continuation of Judaism.

Sebeos was contemporaneous with many of the events mentioned in his book and witnessed some of them. He relayed narratives and news that reached him without examination, criticism, or commentary, which was the prevailing method among writers and historians of his time. He did not refer to the written sources from which he drew his information. However, at the end of Chapter 30, he mentioned that his sources were a group of prisoners who came from the Arabian Peninsula and were eyewitnesses to and narrators of those events<sup>1</sup>. The reality is that these narratives lack significant scientific value because Sebeos did not mention the names of the prisoners, their positions, or their military ranks. They are unidentified individuals, and it is not possible to rely on the news they conveyed. Undoubtedly, the conditions of captivity left within them a degree of resentment and animosity towards Muslims, and therefore "their narratives are influenced by the background of captivity, slavery, and enmity. Consequently, their narratives are unreliable and of little value compared to the Islamic narrative, which relies on reliable eyewitnesses, even if it was recorded later compared to Sebeos' account."<sup>2</sup>

Sebeos was a Christian clergyman who participated in numerous ecclesiastical councils. Undoubtedly, he was influenced by his religious background, which led him to write in a manner that exposed his strong bias against his own people, religion, and his animosity towards Islam, Muslims, and even Jews. The evidence for this lies in his use of the term "Ishmaelites" and descendants of Hagar instead of Muslims or Arabs, in order to denigrate their value based on the premise that Ishmael, peace be upon him, was born to Hagar, who was the maidservant given to our master Abraham, peace be upon him, by his wife Sarah. The truth is that Sebeos is not the only one who uses this term; all Christian historians of the Middle Ages use it, as well as other terms such as "Agarenes," "Saracens," and "Tayyaye," to diminish the status and origins

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.102.

<sup>2</sup> Ayadi, Hassina, op. cit., p. 69.

of Arabs and Muslims and distort their image before the Christian world<sup>1</sup>.

It appears that some Armenian historians and religious figures who wrote after Sebeos relied on his work and transmitted many events and ideas related to the Prophet's biography without altering their own thoughts and views on the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Following in his footsteps, another historian from his lineage, named Ghévond Léonce<sup>2</sup>, an Armenian monk who lived in the 8th century CE/2nd century AH, authored a book titled "Histoire des guerres et des conquêtes des Arabes en Arménie" (History of the Wars and Conquests of the Arabs in Armenia). In this book, he chronicles the period between 11-171 AH/632-787 CE, and it was completed around 790 CE<sup>3</sup>. In this article, we relied on a translation by Garabed V. Chahnazarian from Armenian to French, published in Paris in 1856, as well as another translation by Jean-Jacques Salmanian from Armenian to Arabic, which is an unpublished doctoral thesis that was defended at St. Joseph University in Beirut in 1994.

Ghevond portrays Islamic conquests in a bloody manner, as is generally the case with Armenian historians in the Middle Ages<sup>4</sup>. He claims that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said to his followers, "Verily, the fertile lands of the world have been given to us. You must eat the bodies of the chosen ones in the universe and drink the blood of the strong. Take the Jews who incite you as your guides."<sup>5</sup> He further adds that these Jews

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> Ghevond Lions: His exact birth and death dates are unknown, but it seems from his book that he lived in the second half of the 2nd century AH / the second half of the 8th century AD. He received his religious and literary education at the Patriarchate of Dvin. He was a theologian (Vardabed), an advisor to the Armenian Church, and perhaps a priest. He wrote his book by order of Prince Chapouh de Bagratouni, which he explicitly mentioned at the end of his work. (See: Iskander Fayez Najib, *Islamic Conquests of Armenia (11-40 AH / 632-661 AD)*, Culture Publishing House, Alexandria, 1983, pp. 4-5).

<sup>3</sup> Salmanian, Jean Jacques, *The History of the Monk Ghévont (632-787 AD): Translation and Study on Arab-Armenian Relations Until the Tenth Century AD*, Doctoral Thesis (Specialization) in Arabic Language and Literature, supervised by Father Dr. Louis Bouzi, Saint Joseph University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Beirut, 1994. p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> Iskander Fayez Najib, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ghévond Léonce, *History of the Wars and Conquests of the Arabs in Armenia*, translated by Garabed V. Chahnazarian, Librairie de Ch. Meyrueis et compagnie publishers, Paris, 1856. p. 2.

turned to the Arabs and sought their help to free them from the Byzantines<sup>1</sup>.

However, there is no record in the biographies and histories that the Prophet (peace be upon him) ever instructed his companions to eat people's flesh, drink their blood, or take the Jews as their role models and guides. This demonstrates the extent of this historian's ignorance of the events of the Prophet's biography, indicating that he was not acquainted with the actual occurrences and did not rely on reliable sources. Nevertheless, this book later became an important and fundamental source for most Armenian historians who came after Ghévond<sup>2</sup>.

The blind bias led another Armenian historian named Guiragos de Kantzag<sup>3</sup> to consider the Prophet (peace be upon him) a false prophet<sup>4</sup>. However, this did not prevent the existence of Armenian historians who provided accurate and reliable information about the Prophet (peace be upon him), indicating that they obtained their information from Arabic sources<sup>5</sup>.

## 2. Syriac Sources

In an article titled "Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and Solutions," contemporary Anglo-Saxon Orientalist Robert Hoyland mentions that the first Christian reference to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was found in a Syriac chronicle by a Syriac priest named Thomas. Thomas was a resident of northern Mesopotamia and wrote the chronicle around 640 CE. The chronicle states: "In the year 945 [i.e., 634 CE], in the seventh indiction, on Friday, the fourth day of February, a battle took place between the Romans and the Arabs of Muhammad."<sup>6</sup> This text indicates

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Salmanian, Jean Jacques, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> Guiragos (1200-1271 AD): He is attributed to the city of Kantzag, where he was born and received his early education, and held some religious positions in its monastery. It is located in Greater Armenia, and he lived during the period of Armenia's fall under the Mongols' rule. He wrote a book entitled "History of Armenia." (See: *Recueil des historiens des croisades Documents Arméniens*, Imprimerie impériale, Paris, 1969. Vol. I, pp. 411-412; Hacikyan Agop J., *op. cit.*, pp. 493-494.)

<sup>4</sup> Dulaurier, Edouard, *Research on Armenian Chronology, Technical and Historical*, Imprimerie impériale, Paris, 1859. Vol. I, p. 220.

<sup>5</sup> Dulaurier Edouard, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

<sup>6</sup> Hoyland, Robert, *Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and Solutions*, in: *History Compass*, University of Pennsylvania, February 2007, pp. 277-278.



that Thomas does not consider Muhammad to be a prophet but rather a military leader who rallied the Arabs around him and led them to expand into neighboring lands.

The same view was held by another unidentified Syriac historian while discussing Yazdegerd III (632-652 CE), and it is believed that he wrote around 660 CE. He stated, "God brought the Ismaelites upon them like the sand on the seashore. Their leader was Muhammad, and neither walls, gates, nor shields could repel them. They conquered the entire land of Persia.<sup>1</sup>" It appears that this unknown author regarded the Prophet (peace be upon him) merely as a worldly leader, and it is likely that the reason for this perception was his reliance on distorted oral narratives<sup>2</sup>. It should be noted that the conquest of Persia took place during the time of Umar ibn al-Khattab, not under the leadership of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

Among the historians of the first century of the Islamic calendar/seventh century CE, we mention Jacob of Edessa, who provided highly significant information about the personality of the Prophet (peace be upon him), albeit in a very concise form that does not reach the level of detail found in the biographical and historical books of Islam<sup>3</sup>. However, he describes the Prophet (peace be upon him) as the first king of the Arabs<sup>4</sup>, indicating that Jacob of Edessa did not grasp the true nature of the Prophet's (peace be upon him) character. In his view, the Prophet was a worldly leader rather than the seal of the prophets and messengers. The reason for this is that Jacob of Edessa derived his information from oral narratives transmitted among several individuals. It is expected that Jacob of Edessa would not fall into such an error, considering that he lived contemporaneously with the Rashidun Caliphs and the caliphate of Muawiyah. He had extensive interactions with many Muslims during his time, due to the Islamic conquests in the Levant, which logically would have increased his knowledge of the Prophet's character (peace be upon him).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Asiri, Awad bin Abdullah bin Saad bin Nahai, *The Era of the Message in Eastern Christian Sources: A Study of the Evolution of the Image of the Prophet Muhammad in the Writings of Syriac Historians*, in: *Journal of King Abdulaziz University: Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2019. p. 232.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>4</sup> Hoyland, Robert, op. cit., p. 282.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Asiri, Awad bin Abdullah bin Saad bin Nahai, op. cit., p. 233.

One of the historians who presented a distorted image and inaccurate information about the personality of the Prophet (peace be upon him) is Theophilus of Edessa, also known as "Theophilus of Edessa's Chronicle."<sup>1</sup> He begins his account with the death of the Prophet in the events of 632 CE and describes him as a self-proclaimed prophet and leader of the Saracens. He then states that his close relative Abu Bakr succeeded him as the leader of the tribes. Theophilus of Edessa claims that in the early stages of his appearance, the misguided Jews believed that he was the awaited Messiah. He narrates events and stories that led him to adopt a negative view of the true relationship between the Prophet (peace be upon him) and Lady Khadijah bint Khuwaylid (may Allah be pleased with her). He suggests that since the Prophet ﷺ was impoverished and poor, he entered the service of a wealthy woman who was also a relative of his, working as a hired laborer involved in camel trade in Egypt and Palestine. He mentions historical claims that are pure fabrications, stating, "...when this individual, Muhammad came to Palestine, he would meet with Jews and Christians and ask them questions about religious matters. He also suffered from epilepsy, and when Khadijah learned about it, she was greatly disturbed because she, being a noblewoman, had married a man like him, who was not only poor but also suffered from epilepsy<sup>2</sup>." These are some of the claims found in this chronicle, which were either written out of ignorance of historical facts or with the intention to portray a distorted image of the Prophet (peace be upon him) to his Syriac contemporaries. It is worth mentioning that Theophilus lived in Baghdad during the reign of the third Abbasid caliph, Muhammad ibn Ali al-Mahdi (127-169 AH/745-785 CE), which is in the second century of the Islamic calendar/eighth century CE. This allowed him to interact with Muslims and familiarize himself with their religious and intellectual heritage.

According to Denys de Tell-Mahré<sup>3</sup>, who lived in the third century of the Islamic calendar/ninth century CE, in his book

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<sup>1</sup> He is Tawfil ibn Toma the Christian astrologer, and he was the chief astrologer of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi. He belonged to the Maronites who were in the mountains of Lebanon among the Christian denominations. He authored a book on history and translated two books of the Greek poet Homer from Greek into Syriac. (See: Ibn al-Abri (Gregory Bar Hebraeus), *History of the Dynasties*, Dar al-Massira, Beirut, (nd), p. 127).

<sup>2</sup> Al-Asiri, Awad bin Abdullah bin Saad bin Nahai, op. cit., pp. 237-238; Hoyland, Robert, op. cit., p. 281.

<sup>3</sup> Dionysius of Telmahre: His exact birth date is not known accurately, but it is likely that he was born in the late eighth century AD (between

"Tarikh al-Azaman" (History of the Ages), he states that Muhammad (peace be upon him) was a king. His expressions imply that he does not recognize him as a prophet sent by Allah, but rather claims that his companions and followers are the ones who called him a prophet. "Among them, a king named Muhammad emerged, whom they called a prophet because he diverted them from their multiple religions to the worship of the one God, the Creator of the universe. He legislated laws for them after they had been inclined towards the worship of demons, idols, and especially the worship of trees. As he demonstrated to them the oneness of Allah and, thanks to his guidance, they triumphed over the Romans, he enacted laws that aligned with their inclinations. Therefore, they gave him the title of 'the Prophet' and also the name 'Messenger of Allah'.<sup>1</sup>"

Thus, most of the early Syriac sources written during the emergence of the Islamic message and the spread of conquests describe Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a merchant, a false prophet, a king, and a commander. They do not recognize him as a prophet and messenger receiving revelation from Allah. This view remained prevalent in later sources whose authors interacted with Muslims and acquired some knowledge from them. However, these sources do not provide accurate information, and they did not correct the erroneous information mentioned regarding the biography of the Prophet (peace be upon him). One such example is the treatise by Michel Le Syrien<sup>2</sup> (1166-1199 CE), where it states: "...The king

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750 and 800 CE). He grew up in the town of Telmahre or Tal Mahre (now called Tell al-Manakhira), one of the villages of Iraq, near the Balikh River, a tributary of the Euphrates River. He received education at the Monastery of Qennesrin, and after its burning, he moved to the Monastery of Mar Jacob in Qaysum, between Aleppo and Edessa. In 818 CE, he was appointed as the Patriarch of Antioch. He was received by the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun in 830 CE, and later by al-Mu'tasim in 835 CE, attempting to strengthen the ties between him and the caliphs and princes to safeguard the interests of Christians. He died in 845 CE after spending twenty-seven years on the patriarchal throne of Antioch. (See: Shadia Tawfiq Hafez, Introduction to the book "History of Times," p. 11).

<sup>1</sup> Dionysius of Telmahre, History of Times, translated and introduced by Shadia Tawfiq Hafez, National Center for Translation, Cairo, 2008. p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Michael the Syrian: He was born in Melitene in 1126 AD, into a family where many of its members held religious positions in the Syriac Orthodox Church. He was famous with the title Michael the Great, and sometimes Michael the Magnificent. He was one of the most important patriarchs of the Syriac Orthodox Church in the

of the Taiyayê<sup>1</sup>, when he came to the region of Yathrib, was Muhammad from the Quraysh tribe. He claimed to be a prophet and called his followers "Muslims" or "Ismailis" or "Hajaris" in reference to Hajar and Ismail, and "Sarrasins" in reference to Sarah...<sup>2"</sup>

Continuing his discussion about the Prophet (peace be upon him), it is stated: "This was Muhammad ibn Abdullah. He used to travel from his city Yathrib to Palestine for trade. There, he would converse with the Jews and adopt their belief in the one God. He witnessed his people worshipping stones, wood, and other creatures, so he became attached to the Jewish doctrine that fascinated him. When he returned to his land, he proposed to his people to believe in Allah, but only a few of them were convinced. As his followers increased in number, he began to compel his people to submit to him through threats and enticements. He praised the land of Palestine and told them, 'Because they believe in the one God, they were given that good land.' He also said to them, 'If you obey me, abandon these false idols, and believe in the one God, Allah will grant you a good land.'<sup>3"</sup>

He continues to narrate events that are not mentioned in the Islamic biography and history books, stating: "He began sending delegations to Palestine in the hope that they would hear things that would encourage them to believe in him and acknowledge him. He went there several times without being harmed, and he returned with spoils, which confirmed what he said. This attracted people to him due to their inclination

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Middle Ages. He began his life as a monk at the monastery of Barsouma near Melitene, then he became its head. In 1166 AD, he was elected patriarch of the Apostolic See, and later moved to the monastery of Mar Hananya, making Mardin the seat of the patriarchate. He had good relations with the Seljuks and the Ayyubids, and established good relations with the Franks during the Crusades, refusing to submit to the authority of the Catholic Church in Rome. He died in 1199 AD, after sitting on the patriarchal throne for thirty-three years, leaving behind a large collection of books in various arts and sciences. (See: Bilal Muhammad Majid, *Early Islam in Syriac Histories*, Dar al-Rafidain, Beirut, 2015. pp. 113-137).

<sup>1</sup> The Tayy tribe: Named after Tayy, one of the Qahtani Arab tribes of Yemeni origin. They migrated after the collapse of the Marib Dam and settled in the northern Arabian Peninsula in an area now called Jabal Shammar. This term is used in Latin, Greek, and Armenian sources to refer to the Arabs. (See: Bilal Muhammad Majid, previous reference, p. 260).

<sup>2</sup> Bilal Muhammad Majid, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

<sup>3</sup> Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle of Michael the Syrian*, translated by J.-B. Chabot, Ernest Leroux publisher, Paris, 1901. Vol. II, p. 403.

towards wealth... They started going there, including those who had not yet obeyed him, and they engaged in plundering because they saw his followers becoming rich. Others followed suit. As the number of his followers increased, he no longer personally led those who went... Instead, he sent others to lead his army while he stayed in his city. He no longer used the method of persuasion for his ideology but rather the sword, and anyone who resisted was killed.<sup>1</sup>"

It is noteworthy here that all the information mentioned by Michael the Syrian about the Prophet (peace be upon him) is incorrect, despite his prominent religious position in the Syriac Church and his access to some books of the Muslims and his good relations with them. The evidence for this is that he provided accurate information about what Islam says regarding our Master Jesus (peace be upon him) and some Muslim rituals and beliefs.

Why does he claim that the Prophet (peace be upon him) derived his knowledge about the oneness of Allah from the Jews? What are his sources? It is likely that Michael the Syrian transmitted these allegations from previous sources such as Sebeos the Armenian, Theophilus of Edessa, and others who fabricated falsehoods or wrote what they heard without scrutiny or reliability.

### **3. The Impact of these Writings on Orientalist Thought.**

The erroneous information recorded by early Armenian and Syriac historians in their books and chronicles portrayed a distorted image of the personality of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the Muslims and their conquests in the Levant, Egypt, and the Byzantine Empire. Many Christian historians transmitted these claims and treated them as established facts. This distorted image prevailed throughout the Middle Ages<sup>2</sup> among Christians and significantly contributed to creating a deep divide between them and Muslims, hindering the spread of Islam in the Christian world. "Furthermore, its influence persisted even during the era of modern colonialism and continues to this day, especially in the absence of Islamic writings produced by Muslims, addressing

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<sup>1</sup> Mar Michael the Great, *History of Mar Michael the Great*, translated by Mar Gregorius Saliba Shamoun, Dar Mardin, Aleppo, 1996. pp. 298-299.

<sup>2</sup> Mar Michael the Great, *oo. Cit.*, pp. 298-299.

the Western world in its language and erasing the medieval image.<sup>1</sup>"

One aspect of this influence is that the terms and designations coined by those writers for Arabs and Muslims in the Middle Ages are still in use today. In fact, a recently published book (in 2003) titled "Les Sarrasins" (The Saracens) discusses the history of Islam in the Middle Ages<sup>2</sup>.

Before discussing the impact of these writings on Orientalist thought, it is worth noting the presence of the article on Muhammad in the Islamic Encyclopedia, which is supervised by a significant number of Orientalists. This article includes a presentation of what is mentioned in most European sources written in the Middle Ages, concluding that a considerable portion of what was written in those sources stripped Muhammad (peace be upon him) of prophethood and denied his reality as a sent Messenger.

The accumulation of claims found in non-Islamic sources, which presented a distorted and inaccurate image of the reality of our Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), served as a source of inspiration for some contemporary Orientalists who claim that Islam was a mixture of Jewish and Christian beliefs. Orientalist schools were formed, working to cast doubt on biographical and historical books, and among the prominent figures was the Hungarian Jewish Orientalist Ignác Goldziher<sup>3</sup>. He was knowledgeable and well-versed in Arabic sources, to the point of being considered the "Grand Sheikh" of Orientalists. His books and research remain a rich and important reference for Orientalists in this era. Goldziher cast doubt on the authenticity of the noble Prophetic Hadith and established a principle that many Orientalists followed, which became a given for them, namely, "that the little information found in the Sunnah (related to the biography) collapses in the face of the goals of modern Western methodology."<sup>4</sup> He considered Islam to be a selective blend of Jewish, Christian,

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<sup>1</sup> Tolan, John, *Saracens: Islam in the European Imagination in the Middle Ages*, translated from English by Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, Flammarion, Paris, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Noth, A., *Muhammad*, in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, E.J. Brill, Leiden – New York, 1993. Vol. VII, p. 379.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Sibai, Mustafa, *Sunnah and Its Status in Islamic Legislation*, Islamic Office, 2nd edition, Damascus, 1978. p. 189.

<sup>4</sup> Matboukani, Mazen Salah, *Orientalism and Intellectual Trends in Islamic History*, World of Ideas, Algeria, 2011. p. 258.

and some religious ideas prevalent in southern Arabia<sup>1</sup>. Another Orientalist who adopted his views is Louis Bernard, who applied them in all his research on Islam. He questioned the historical account of the birth of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and conveyed from Syriac sources that the Prophet was influenced by Jews and Christians. He stated, "The background of the Prophet raises many questions. It is evident that he was influenced by Judaism and Christianity, as the concept of monotheism and numerous scriptural elements in the Quran attest to that... However, his narration of biblical stories indicates that he obtained his scriptural knowledge indirectly. It is possible that it came from Jewish and Christian merchants and travelers whose knowledge was subject to Jewish Midrashic<sup>2</sup> and apocryphal influences.<sup>3</sup>" Bernard Lewis, another Orientalist, also expressed doubts about the literacy of the Prophet (peace be upon him), stating that it may or may not be accurate<sup>4</sup>.

Even Carl Brockelmann, who is considered moderate in his views and judgments about Islam, also doubts the historical account of the Prophet's birth<sup>5</sup> and does not deny his connection with groups of Jews and Christians<sup>6</sup>. He openly states, "There is no doubt that his knowledge of the material of the Holy Scriptures was superficial to the extreme and filled with errors. Some of these errors may be attributed to the Jewish myths abundant in Talmudic stories. However, he is more indebted to Christian teachers who introduced him to the Gospel of Infancy, the story of the Seven Sleepers, the Alexander legend, and other subjects that are common in

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<sup>1</sup> Kocher, F., F. Goldziher, Dogma and Law in Islam, History of the Dogmatic and Legal Development of the Muslim Religion, translated by Félix Arin, Paris, 1920. In: *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses*, 2nd year, No. 1, January-February 1922. p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Midrashim: Jewish texts in the interpretation of the Bible, and the Apocrypha: A collection of Jewish texts that Jews excluded from their holy book because their scholars considered them uninspired texts. (See: Matboukani, Mazen Salah, op. cit., p. 132).

<sup>3</sup> Matboukani, Mazen Salah, op. cit., p. 132; Tomiche, Nada, Bernard Lewis, *Arabs in History*, translated from English by A. Mesritz., In: *Annales. Economies, societies, civilizations*. 16th year, No. 3, 1961. p. 600.

<sup>4</sup> Matboukani, Mazen Salah, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>5</sup> Broklemann, Carl, *History of Islamic Peoples*, translated into Arabic by Nabiha Amin Faris and Munir Al-Baalbaki, Dar Al-Ilm Lil Malayin, 9th edition, Beirut, 1981. p. 32; Matboukani, Mazen Salah, op. cit., p. 259.

<sup>6</sup> Broklemann, op. cit., p. 34.

medieval literature. Alongside that, there were Arab stories like those that speak of the destruction of the Thamud tribe, to which the secondary story of the prophet Salih may have been added as a necessary supplement.<sup>1</sup>

The Orientalist Richard Bell states, "The Prophet derived much of what is found in the Quran, especially the stories, from the Holy Scriptures. The majority of the material that Muhammad used to interpret and support his teachings was drawn from Jewish and Christian sources. However, some stories of punishment, such as the stories of 'Ad and Thamud, were derived from Arab sources. When he migrated to Medina, he had the opportunity to draw extensively from the Holy Scriptures as he was in contact with Jewish communities that undoubtedly included rabbis and scholars. There are indications that he benefited from this opportunity and gained a considerable amount of knowledge, at least about the books of Moses".<sup>2</sup> Another, said about the Prophet (peace be upon him) that he couldn't understand Christianity, and therefore, his imagination of it was distorted, upon which he built his religion that he brought to the Arabs<sup>3</sup>.

Many researchers believed that Orientalism was on its way to extinction, and that the ideas they propagated and the doubts they raised about Islam were fading away due to the emergence of a group of Muslim thinkers and writers who refuted many of those fallacies. However, some Anglo-Saxon writings that appeared at the end of the last century and the beginning of the current century (the New Revisionists) have revived those ideas and brought them back to the forefront. This new Orientalist trend is the harshest and most destructive in criticizing Islamic Arabic sources. It works to employ Eastern Christian sources to rewrite the early history of Islam in a new form that differs from the well-established narrative, creating a distorted image of the true nature of Islam as a creed, identity, and history, which we have inherited from the Quran, Sunnah, and various Islamic heritage sources<sup>4</sup>.

The danger lies in the Christian sources being utilized to reshape the early history of Islam with the aim of presenting a

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Tahtawi, Mohamed Ezzat Ismail, *Evangelism and Orientalism: Hatreds and Campaigns*, General Authority for Amiri Printing, Cairo, 1977. p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Asiri, Awad bin Abdullah bin Saad bin Nahai, op. cit., p. 229.



different image of the true nature of Islam as a creed, identity, and history, which Muslims derived from the Quran, Sunnah, and multiple Islamic heritage sources. At the forefront of this is the book "Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World," in which the authors adopted a different approach and posed the following question: Why don't we completely exclude what is mentioned in Islamic sources and instead examine the historical material found in contemporary sources such as Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism? The authors worked to downplay the significance of Islamic sources by considering them late and followed a methodology that called for disregarding and surpassing Islamic tradition and starting the research anew by relying on non-Islamic sources<sup>1</sup>. They claim that there were Christian and Jewish influences on Islam, basing their argument on the writings of Sebeos the Armenian, who claims the existence of an alliance between Jews and Arabs. They use the alleged document or book of agreements between the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the Jews of Yathrib (Medina) after the Hijra, and they highlight the personality of the Prophet as a military leader<sup>2</sup>. In their view, there is nothing that calls for exalting and venerating him as befits the Messenger of Allah sent to the worlds.

In 2010, a book titled "Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam" was published, asserting that Islam is a mixture of Christian and Jewish beliefs<sup>3</sup>. The danger lies in the utilization of Christian sources to reshape the early history of Islam with the aim of presenting a different image of the true nature of Islam as a creed, identity, and history.

Nevertheless, this did not prevent the existence of orientalist who bore witness to the truth in our Prophet's message (peace be upon him). Among them are those who stated that the biography of Ibn Hisham holds greater historical significance than the Gospels circulated among Christians<sup>4</sup>. Another scholar remarked, "It is disgraceful for any civilized individual of this generation to lend an ear to the delusion of those who claim that Islam is a lie and that Muhammad was not truthful."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Crone Patricia & Michael Cook, *Hagarism the Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1977. p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Donner Fred M., *Muhammad and the Believers at the origins of Islam*, The Belknap of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 2010. p. 215.

<sup>4</sup> Tahtawi Mohamed Ezzat Ismail, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

## Conclusion

This is some of what has been mentioned about the biography of the Prophet (peace be upon him) in certain Armenian and Syriac sources. This subject requires further studies and research to unveil what has been written in other Jewish, Byzantine, and Persian sources in order to identify the sources of error and distortion that have affected the Prophet's biography. It is necessary to correct the distorted and erroneous image of the Prophet (peace be upon him), particularly among Muslims in general. This image was crafted by certain church figures who dominated ideas and narratives during the Middle Ages. Religious men such as priests and monks, through their writings, took it upon themselves to shape the perceptions and images of the Prophet (peace be upon him), Islam, and Muslims before the Renaissance era in Europe.

Historians fed the imagination of Europeans with a large number of distorted and false narratives about the Prophet and Islam, presenting them as a creed invented by Muhammad, describing it as a lie, a religion of moral decay and corruption, driven by desires, violence, and bloodshed. This vision created significant barriers for Europeans in understanding the reality of Islam and fostered a general popular psychology of hatred towards Islam and Muslims, perceiving them as a formidable enemy that must be fought.

This distorted image is now circulating in historical writings related to the history of Islam, portraying Muslims as hungry invaders seeking only fertile lands and economic resources. This image has become deeply ingrained in the subconscious mind of individuals in Europe, in the social consciousness of Europeans, and in their social perceptions. It has generated a distorted image among some European societies and instilled a subconscious aversion to Islam. To correct this image, specialists in the biography of the Prophet need expertise in foreign languages and ancient languages to refute these fabrications and rectify historical inaccuracies.

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