

Early *Sîrah* Literature: A Brief Survey

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The advent of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) made one of the most resplendent landmarks in human history. The message of Muhammad ﷺ was, and, of course, still is, a universal revival, a common blessing, a supranational heritage and everlasting spiritual deliverance.¹ His teachings exerted great influence on human history. His personality is so vigorous, penetrating and transcendental that enlivens him for all times to come. Indeed, never in history has a human being influenced, even after his demise, so deeply and so pervasively as he has². All that is best in human values, all the important advances of human civilization, are direct and indirect result of the revolution he brought about³. *Sîrah* occupies a unique position for it is central to grasp the meaning and message of Islam⁴. The way Muslims have safely preserved not merely the account of life of the Prophet ﷺ, but also everything even remotely connected with him, is simply a marvel of Islam⁵.

Sîrah literature is, perhaps, the most important phase in the growth and development of Muslim historiography⁶. It has been a subject of immense significance for Muslim scholarship as well as common man. A normative source of guidance for the Muslims, *Sîrah* has been the subject of a long and unending series of books and studies by the historians, Traditionists, jurists and scholars interested in various branches of learning⁷.

The literal meaning of *Sîrah* is 'way' or 'path'.⁸ *Sîrah* means "way of going", "way of acting", "conduct", "way of life" (in these meanings it is almost synonymous with *sunnah*); also

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“memorable action” and “record of such an action”⁹. Shah ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Dehalvi defines the word *Sîrah* as, “Whatever is about our Prophet, his companions and great people (of Islam) and the history which runs from the birth of Prophet Muhammad to his demise, is known as *Sîrah*.”¹⁰

Muhaddithun (Traditionists) and *Arbâb al-Rijâl* (compilers of life histories of the narrators) used the term ‘*Maghâzi*’ and ‘*Jihâd*’ as synonymous of *Sîrah*. The word *Maghâzi* is the plural form of *Maghza* or *Maghzat* – an expression which means “Campaigns” and therefore in a verbal sense should have been restricted to the war like deeds of the prophet and his companions, but very often applied to the whole life- story of the Prophet (*Sîrah*)¹¹. Hence the work by Ibn Ishaq is called a book of ‘*Maghâzi*’ as well as ‘*Sîrah*’. Hafiz Ibn Hajar (d. 852 A.H.), in his book *Fath al-Bari* has also used these terms as synonyms¹². In the books on *Fiqh* (Jurisprudence) this term has been used in the same sense¹³. In such books, the word ‘*Sîrah*’ found in chapters captioned ‘*Jihâd*’ and ‘*Sîrah*’ refers to *Ghazawât* and *Jihâd* Injunctions¹⁴. That is why most probably the early *Sîrah* writers mentioned the *Ghazawât* in their book¹⁵. The word *Maghâzi* expanded in its meaning and it was used for all topics concerning the ‘*Sîrah*’ or biography of the Prophet. It did also include the character of the Prophet, his day-to-day life, convictions and behaviour.¹⁶

Works designated as ‘*Sîrah*’ books like *Sîrah of Ibn Hishâm*, *Sîrah of Ibn Sa’d*, *Sîrah of Amari*, generally give the description of ‘*Ghazawât*’ alone. In fact, the early transmitters narrated both *Sîrah* and *Maghâzi* as well as other sayings of the Prophet as one and the same subject. Later on, those Traditions which served the purpose of *Shari’ah* legislations were separated from this stock and the remaining material was left for the use of *Sîrah* writers.¹⁷

On the other hand, the Traditionists regard *Sîrah* and *Maghâzi* as quite different from collections of *Hadith*. Later on, this distinction grew so pronounced that, in some cases, the authors of

Sīrah and *Maghāzi* were regarded as a group opposed to the Traditionists. But the critics opine that an authentically reported Tradition deserves to be accepted.

The primary and historical sources of the Prophet's (ﷺ) biography are:

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| 1. The <i>Qur'ān</i> | 2. <i>Hadith</i> |
| 3. <i>Maghāzi</i> | 4. <i>Kutub al-Tarīkh</i> |
| 5. <i>Kutub al-Dalā'il</i> | 6. <i>Kutub al-Shama'il</i> |

Early Biographers of the Prophet and their Works

1. Imam al-Zuhri (50 A.H./670 AD- 124 A.H./742 AD)

Abu Bakr Muhammad bin Muslim bin 'Ubadullah bin 'Abdullah bin 'Abdullah bin al-Harath bin Zuhra al-Qureshi, commonly known as Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhri, was one of the eminent scholars of historiography during the Umayyad period. He was the grand teacher of Imām al-Bukhari. As a result of his untiring enquiries among young and old, men and women, high and low, al-Zuhri collected vast treasure of Traditions¹⁸. After a careful critical study of these sources, oral as well as written, he prepared a consolidated frame work of the *Sīrah* and the *Maghāzi*. The credit goes undoubtedly to him for working out a general pattern of the biography of the Prophet and introducing the term *Sīrah* for the same¹⁹. As regards the use of authenticity of chains, he is extremely particular about them and does not omit even a single link²⁰. His important contribution is the introduction of the system of collective chains (*al-Isnad al-Jam'ai*) by assimilating the missing chains into one unified narration on the basis of all available reports²¹. Although several generations were benefited by him yet among those who obtained knowledge of *Sīrah* and *Maghāzi* from al-Zuhri and rose to eminence in this field of literature, were Yaqub Ibn Ibrahim (d. 823 C.E.), Muhammad bin Salih Tammar (d. 168 A.H.) and 'Abd al-Rahman bin 'Abd al-'Aziz. Two of his

pupils Musa bin 'Uqba and Muhammad bin Ishaq tower high above the rest.

2. Ya'qub bin Ibrahim (d. 208A.H./823 C.E.)

He was a descendant of 'Abd al-Rahmān bin 'Auf and was a disciple of Imam al-Zuhri. In *Maghâzi* he occupied so high place that eminent critics of Rijal, like Ibn Ma'in, took their lessons from him²².

3. Muḥammad bin Salih bin Dinar al-Tammar (d. 168 A.H./784 C.E.)

He too was disciple of Imam al-Zuhri and was the teacher of al-Waqîdi. Ibn Sa'd Says that he was scholar of *Sirah* and *Maghâzi*²³. Abû Dannâd, who was himself a great Traditionist, says that if any one desired to learn the science of *Maghâzi* he must learn it from Muhammad bin Salih²⁴.

4. Mûsâ bin 'Uqba al-Asadi (d. 141 A.H./758 C.E.)

Musa bin 'Uqba had been a slave of the Zubayr family and was the early Madinan scholar and historian, especially interested in the Prophet's expeditions or *Maghâzi*. He had seen 'Abdullah bin 'Umar living. In *Hadith*, Imam Malik had been his pupil and held him in such high regard that he used to advise others to learn *Maghâzi* from none but Musa²⁵. His *Kitab al-Maghâzi*, has not survived as complete work, although one fragment survives, which has been published by famous German Orientalist Professor Sakhou in 1904.²⁶ This very fragment of Musa was cited by later writers such as Ibn Ishâq, al Wâqidî and al-Tabari.

5. Muhammad bin Ishaq (d. 85 A.H./704-150 A.H./767 C.E.)

Ibn Ishaq sprang from a family of Mawali²⁷. He is the most famous writer of *Maghâzi* and is recognized as the higher authority. About his versatility, Imam Zuhri remarks, "One who wants to learn *Maghâzi* should take the benefit from Muhammad

bin Ishaq²⁸ and Imam Shaf'i while acknowledging his authority comments, "One who wants have an expertise in science of *Maghâzi*, is indigent of Muhammad bin Ishaq"²⁹

As regards the reliability of Ibn Ishaq, opinions differ. Imâm Malik (d.795 C.E.) is doubtful about his veracity³⁰. Yet most of the Traditionists hold him reliable in the field of *Sîrah* and *Maghâzi*.

6. 'Abd al-Rahman bin 'Abd al-'Aziz (d. 162 A.H./778 C.E.)

He too was a disciple of Imam al-Zuhri. In *Sahih* of Muslim, only one Tradition has been quoted on his authority and he is not considered reliable by Traditionists. He was, however, well versed in *Sîrah* and Ibn Sa'd calls him a great scholar of *Sîrah* and other sciences.³¹

7. Ibn Hisham (d. 219 A.H./834 C.E.)

Abû Muhammad 'Abd al-Malik bin Hishâm bin Ayyub al-Hamayri al-Ma'afiri is commonly known as Ibn Hishâm. He had an outstanding knowledge of genealogy and grammar. He is chiefly famous for his work on the *Sîrah* of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم), which became the basic work on this subject. He also gives more accurate version of some of the poems in the *Sîrah*, and explains difficult words and phrases.³² The popularity of the *Sîrah* of Ibn Hishâm persuaded writers to put it in verse. Abû Muhammad 'Abd al-'Aziz bin Muhammad Sa'id al-Damiri al-Dadrini (d. 607 A.H.), Abû Nasr Fatah bin Musa Khudravi (d. 663 A.H.) Abu Ishaq al Ansari, Abû Muhammad bin Ibrahim, better known as Ibn Shahid (d. 793 A.H.) brought out verified editions. The last named author's work contains some 10,000 lines and is entitled *Fath al-Gharib fi Sîrat al-Habib*³³.

8. Ibn Sa'd (d. 230 A.H. /845 C.E.)

Abû 'Abdullah Muhammad bin Sa'd Manî' al-Basri al-Hashimi is commonly known as Ibn Sa'd. His fame rests on his

Kitab al-Tabaqât al-Kubra'. It was also intended to be an aid to the study of Traditions by giving information on some four thousand two hundred and fifty persons (including about six hundred women) from the beginning of Islam down to the author's time³⁴.

Dr. Sprenger remarks about Ibn Sa'd as:

He improved the arrangement of his master's biographical works; and, after abbreviating them and supplying deficiencies, published the whole, under the title of *Tabaqât* in 12 (or 15) large volumes. His *Biography of Mahomet [Muhammad]*, which occupies the greatest part of the first volume, is the most solid work we possess on the subject³⁵.

9. Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 310 A.H./921 C.E.)

Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarir al-Tabari's vast historical repository has remained to us an important monument of his extensive scientific activity which has been written in the early fourth century A.H. and is the first work in the annalistic form written by a Muslim that has come down to us. Tabari's greatness, as a matter of fact, is recognized in all quarters because of his accuracy and great diligence in collecting data and giving them the forms of authentic history³⁶. His fame rests on his remarkably elaborate and accurate history *Tarikh al-Rusûl Wal Mulûk* (annals of Apostles and kings) as well as his commentary on the *Qur'ân*, his monumental work on universal history, the first complete one in the Arabic language, like wise served as a source for later historians such as Miskâwayh, Ibn al-Athîr and Abû al-Fidâ³⁷. While commenting on his renowned history al-Masudi says, "It excels all other works in brilliance and substances as it includes all different kinds of historical information, comprises a great variety of memorable data and contains all sorts of knowledge. It is an extremely useful work"³⁸.

What makes his work especially valuable for the purpose of scientific research is the manner in which he imparts the events recorded. Probably, we are to regard al-Tabari as performing for

history a task similar to what Bukhari and Muslim did for *Ahadith*³⁹. Al-Tabari's work not only contains a mere historical narrative but also imparts the documents authenticating the events.⁴⁰ Tabari is a writer whose scholarly attainments and whose sure and extensive knowledge are unanimously recognized by the Traditionists. Sulaimani has remarks that al-Tabari coined Traditions for the *Shi'a*. But 'Allâma al-Dhahabi in his *Mizân al-'itidal* says, "This is an allegation based on false misgivings".⁴¹ Tabari was a true and real historian as he wrote history without any bias and did not try to shape it according to any particular interests and objects.⁴²

10. Aban bin 'Uthman (d. 105 A.H./724 C.E.)

As the first among the *Tabi'un* to be known as an authority on *Maghâzi* figures the name of Aban, son of the Khalifah 'Uthman⁴³. He was the governor of Madina for seven years during the rule of 'Abd al-Malik bin Marwân (685-705 C.E.). He was one of those seven scholars of Islamic law who used to issue religious decrees (*Fatwa*) during the early century⁴⁴. His *Maghâzi* is perhaps the oldest literary production on that subject⁴⁵.

11. Urwah bin Zubayr (d. 94 A.H./712 C.E.)

'Urwah bin Zubayr was a renowned jurist and Traditionist of Madinah. His father was Zubayr bin Awwâm, a cousin of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم). 'Abdullah bin Zubayr and Mus'ab bin al-Zubayr were his two renowned brothers. The family of 'Urwah had been closely connected with the house of Prophet that is why 'Urwah was able to accumulate information on matters of *Sîrah* and other subject of historical value. His social position, as well as his family connection, enabled him to obtain first hand information, especially from 'A'isha, al-Zubayr and Asma bint Abu Bakr⁴⁶. He is regarded the pioneer of the *Sîrah* and the *Maghâzi*⁴⁷. The work of 'Urwah is now extinct, and only some extracts, are

found in the works of later historians like al-Tabari, Ibn Sa'd, Ibn Sayyid al-Nas and Ibn Kathir.

12. Imam Abu Amr 'Amir Shurahail al-Shabi (d.109 A.H./727 C.E.)

He was a great Traditionist and had a full mastery over various science, viz; *Fiqh*, *Hadith*, *Maghâzi* and *Sîrah*. He had seen five hundred companions of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم)⁴⁸. He knew so much of *Maghâzi* and *Sîrah* that Abdullah bin 'Umar once remarked about him that; "Though I was myself present at three *Ghazawât*, he knows more than me"⁴⁹. Khatib Baghdâdi also appreciates his *Kitâb al-Maghâzi*⁵⁰.

13. Wahab bin Munabbih (d.114 A.H./732 C.E.)

He belonged to a non-Arab family of Yemen. A book on the subject of *Maghâzi* is attributed to him. A fragment of the same work is preserved in Heidelberg (Germany)⁵¹. Wahâb also compiled *Kitâb al-Mubtadâ*, a book on the subject of Genesis which served the purpose of the later historians dealing with the Prophet's biography. Wahâb is universally recognized as a reliable transmitter.⁵²

14 'Asim bin 'Umar bin Qatadah al-Ansari (d. 121 A.H./738 C.E.)

He sprang from a Madinan family which had early adhered to the Prophet. His grandfather Qatâdah was one of the Ansar who took part in the battle of Badr⁵³ and at Hunain he was the standard bearer of his clan⁵⁴. Ibn Ishaq was a pupil of 'Âsim bin Qatadah⁵⁵. 'Âsim is one of the chief authorities of Ibn Ishâq and Wâqidî.

15. Shurahbil bin Sa'd (d. 123 A.H./740 C.E.)

Shurahbil bin Sa'd, a contemporary of 'Urwa bin Zubayr, also played an important role in the growth and enrichment of the material produced and preserved by the Madinan School of Arab

Historiography⁵⁶. Shurahabil is said to have known the fourth caliph 'Ali (d. 30 A.H.)⁵⁷. The companions of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) from whom he derived Traditions include Zaid bin Thâbit, Abû Hurairah and Abû Sai'd al-Khudrî⁵⁸. He compiled the lists of the names of the emigrants to Madinah and of the men who took part in the battles of Badr and Uhad⁵⁹. Sufyan bin 'Uyuni declares that no one possessed better information regarding the *Maghâzi* and the participants of *Ghuzwah Badr* better than Shurahbil.⁶⁰

16. Yaqub bin Utba bin Mughira bin Akhnas bin Shuraiq al-Thaqafi (d. 128 A.H./745 C.E.)

He was highly reliable Traditionist. Governors and state officials sought his advice in administrative affairs. He was reputed to be one of the jurists of Madina and scholar of *Sîrah*⁶¹.

17. Hashim bin 'Urwa bin Zubayr (d. 146 A.H./763 C.E.)

He was a disciple of al-Zuhri and was considered one of the learned men of Madina. He quoted Traditions, generally from his father, some Traditionists hold the view that the Traditions collected by him at Baghdad were not carefully scrutinized.⁶²

18. Ma'mar bin Rashid al-Azdi (d. 152 A.H./769 C.E.)

He is another disciple of al-Zuhri. He is regarded by the critics and scholars as trust-worthy in his transmissions and knowledge of the *Maghâzi*. According to Ibn Nadim Ma'mar had compiled a book on the *Maghâzi*⁶³. The plan of his work includes, the stories of the earlier Prophets, life of the Prophet at Makkah, the Hijra, and the *Maghâzi*. Some of his reports deal with the events of the pious caliphate⁶⁴. Al-Wâqidî, al-Tabarî, Ibn Ishâq, Ibn Sa'd and other rely on him.

In addition to these works of the early period, the following works on *Sîrah* by later writers are worth mentioning:

1. Hafiz Abu Sa'd 'Abd al-Malik of Nishâpur (d. 406 A.H./1015 C.E.), *Sharaf al-Mustafa*, 18 vols.

2. Abû Muhammad 'Ali Ahmad bin Hazm al-Andulusi (d. 456 A.H.), *Jawama al-Sîrah*.
3. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Suhaili (d. 581 A.H./1185 C.E.) *Raud al-Uruf*, a commentary on Ibn Ishaq, *Kitâb al-Sîrah*.
4. Abu Dhar al-Khushasiu (d. 604 A.H.) *Sharah Gharib Sîrah ibn Ishaq*.
5. Abu Rabi' Sulaiman bin Musa al-Kala (d. 634 A.H./1237 C.E.) *Iktifa fi Maghâzi al-Mustafa al-Thalaha*.
6. Al-Hafiz 'Abd al-Mumin al-Dimyati (d. 705 A.H./1305 C.E.) *al-Mukhtasar fi Sîrah Khair al-Bashar*.
7. Sayyid bin al-Nasr (d. 734 A.H./1334 C.E.) *Uyan al-Athar*.
8. Ibrahim bin Muhammad, *Nur al-Nibras Sirat Sayyid al-Nas*.
9. Hafiz 'ala al-din Muglatai, (d. 762 A.H.) *al-Ishrat Ila Sirat al-Mustafa wa Athar asin Ba'dihi Min al-Khalafa*.
10. Zain al-Din Iraqi, *Sîrah Manzuma*.
11. Ismail bin 'Amr bin Kathir, (d. 774 A.H.) *Sîrut al-Nabawwiyah*.
12. Hafiz ibn Jauzi, (d. 957 A.H./1201 C.E.) *Uyun al-Hikayat fi Sirat Sayyid al-Bariyyah* commonly known as *Sharaf al-Mustafa*
13. Rastallani, (d. 923 A.H./1517 C.E.) *al-Mawahib al-Ladunniya*
14. 'Ali bin Ibrahim al-Halaki's (d. 1044 A.H.) *Inshan al-Uyan fi Sirat al-Amin al-Mamun*
15. Muhammad bin 'Abd al-bati al-Zurqani, (d. 1122 A.H.) *Sharah al-Mawahib al-Ladunniya*, 18 vols.

It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed treatment to these sources.

A study of the history of the world religions brings into prominence the irrefutable fact that with the exception of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) not a single Prophet has had his life documented in such a comprehensive, exhaustive and authentic

manner⁶⁵. As regards the historicity of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم), R. Bosworth comments:

We know less of Zoraster and confucious than we do of Solon and Socrates, less of Moses and Budha than we do of Ambrose and Augustine. We know indeed some fragments of a Christ's life; but who can lift the veil of the thirty years that prepared the way for the three? What we do know indeed was renovated a third of the world, and may yet renovate much more; an ideal of life at once remote and near; possible and impossible; but how much we do not know! What do we know of his mother, of his home life, of his early friends, and his relation to them, of the gradual dawning, or, it may be the sudden revelation, of his divine mission? How many questions about him occur to each of us which must always remain questions! But in Mohammedanism everything is different, here, instead of shadow and mysterious we have history. We know as much of Muhammed as we do even of legendary, the supernatural is almost wanting in the original Arab authorities, or at all events can easily be distinguished from what is historical. Nobody here the dupe of himself or of others; there is the full light of day upon all that light can ever reach at all!⁶⁶

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- ²² *Ibid.*, p.31

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- ²⁵ Shibli Nu'mani, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
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