

From Otzenhausen, 4th Inârah Conference, 21 March 2014

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Did the *Sira* of the Prophet borrow from ancient stories?

Subjective and Objective Problems with the Canonical Biography known as the *Sîra*, with special reference to Q 9:37 and Q 44:54

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(+ 6 footnotes added by E-M Gallez)

The academic establishment, the state media and the general public all accept the canonical biography of *Muhammad*, the prophet of Islam, as the gospel truth. Nevertheless, the canonical biography largely consists of stories that have obvious parallels in the Biblical, Graeco-Roman, Near Eastern and Mediterranean world. Like Jesus, *Muhammad* feeds the multitudes, but *Muhammad* uses a handful of dates, not bread and fishes.

Muhammad digs a **defensive ditch around Medina**, the famous *khandaq*. This he did on the advice of a Persian convert to Islam, Salman Al-Farisi. The same story is told about the East-Roman general Belisarius who in 530 dug a similar ditch to defend his camp against the Persians at Darḡa. Darḡa is an ancient town in Syria, close to the present-day border with Jordan, a little to the East of the Sea of Galilee. Both in time and place Belisarius and his ditch are not far removed from the canonical *Muhammad* or the beginnings of Islam. It is difficult not to suspect that the story of the Ditch as told in *Muhammad*'s canonical biography has its roots in the Belisarius story.

In the canonical biography, Omar, later the second caliph, several times draws his sword with the intent to kill someone who behaved improperly in front of his Master, *Muhammad*. *Muhammad* then orders his disciple to put his sword back where it belongs, exactly what Jesus ordered Peter to do in the Gethsemane scene in the New Testament passion story. If Omar, after many similar scenes, still did not expect his Master to forbid him to draw his sword and to strike

Muhammad's interlocutor, Umar must have been stupid or have had a serious memory problem, which is not the case in the later stories when Umar fulfils the caliphate. A modern scholar cannot fail to suspect that these stories about Umar are the result of **rewriting** the New Testament passion scene where Peter draws his sword and is ordered by his Master to put the sword back where it belongs (**Mt 26:52**).

There is more of a similar nature. Like Mithras, Muhammad releases water by firing an arrow (Guillaume 452). The famous and much quoted *hadith* 'War is deceit', Arabic Al-Harb khidaa غ, sounds very much like a version of Proverbs 24:6, 'By tricks you will make war'. Christian Bible translations are surprisingly restrained in rendering this verse, probably because Christians should not approve of war, but the meaning of the verse is unmistakable, the Hebrew תחבולות, 'cunning acts', is connected to a verb that means 'to ensnare' but, of course, it has other meanings as well.

In the canonical biography, examples of adaptations of earlier material abound. Allow me to bring into the discussion one case that is speculative but of some interest. It is not taken from the canonical biography, but from the Koran itself: the **beginning of Surat ar-Rum, Sura 30**¹. Here the Koran announces that: 'The Romans have been vanquished — after their vanquishing they shall be the victors'. These words are an almost exact replica of the oracle which the Macedonian king Pyrrhus of Epirus received when he asked the oracle to predict the success of his invasion of Italy. The oracle answered 'I say that you will be able to win a victory over the Romans', but Latin *Aio te Romanos vincere posse* may mean as well 'The Romans will be able to win a victory over you'.

The ambiguity of the Arabic personal pronoun in *ghalbihim* in Q 30:3, which can be the subject but the object as well, matches exactly the ambiguity of the Latin accusativus cum infinitivo in the text of the oracle. Moreover, the oracle and Q 30:1-3 both speak of Romans. As you know, King Pyrrhus was victorious in a number of battles but eventually he lost the war against Rome. I would like to argue that such stories must have been of exceptional interest to soldiers in the Roman army, and easily crossed over to the Arab foederati, local mercenary military confederates, and the later Arab Muslim armies who fought the Byzantine Rūm in Syria and North Africa. If I am correct, which is far from certain, the Koran would in 30:1-3 quote an ancient pagan oracle, which, I feel, would be even more exciting than the innumerable allusions to the Bible the Koran contains².

Another parallel, noticed earlier by others, is the decade before the walls of Troy and then the decade needed to sail back to Ithaca. Are these two decades mirrored in Muhammad's decade as a prophet in Mecca and then his decade as a warlord and prophet in Medina? It is difficult to say, perhaps both Homer and the canonical biography use 'decade' in the meaning of 'a substantial number of years'³.

¹ Sixty years ago, Régis Blachère gave the right meaning of Q 30:2-5 by showing that its vowelization was inaccurate (*Le Coran*, Paris, Librairie Orientale et Américaine, 1957, p.429) – see lemessieetsonprophete.com/annexes/mou_ta.htm. The correct translation of these verses is:

"The Romans [i.e. the Byzantines] have overcome (*g°alabat*) in the nearest of the Land [i.e. the Holy Land, in 629 at Mu'ta].
But they, after their victory (*g°alibi-him*), will be defeated (*sa-yag°labûna*) within some years.
To Allah belongs the command before and after. And that day the believers will rejoice".

It makes sense.

² A comparison with Pyrrhus based on a wrong understanding of the verses cannot be exact; was it besides plausible in itself?

³ An exact number of years doesn't show up at the beginning of verse 4. Many translators render "some years" or "less than ten years". The Islamic reading sees here a kind of prophecy (by Muhammad) although it simply means a prospective (also in order to raise the courage).

Also, the theme of the just commander who has to **sentence his son to death** and sees himself forced to have him executed, because the son went against the law, occurs frequently in Roman military story telling. The theme is regularly discussed in the canonical biography. Perhaps this theme is common amongst warriors and their story-tellers all over the world, but I doubt that.

The Montanists in Phrygia, in what is now west-central Turkey, believed that their prophet Montanus received revelations directly from God. Sounds familiar. Montanus acquired two prophetesses, Maximilla and Prisca, as followers. They preached that the **end of the age** was to arrive very soon. Sounds familiar. In the words of the prophetess Maximilla: 'After me there will be **no more prophecy**, but the End'. Sounds very familiar. Could it be that we have to understand the Islamic dogma of *Muhammad* as the 'seal of the prophets', as an echo of the Montanist viewpoint that there would be no more prophets simply because there was no more time left?

There is another connection to Montanist teaching. *Muhammad*, in his canonical biography, forbade his wives to remarry after his death. Montanists, too, insisted that a **widow should not remarry** (according to New Testament doctrine, widows are free to remarry.) These things all could be coincidences. On the other hand, they might help to make plausible that the biography and teachings ascribed to *Muhammad* developed out of ideas and stories that circulated in the Near East, and that were attributed to the founder of Islam. Certainly the standard Christology of the Koran, 'Jesus was just one of the prophets and was not physically crucified' falls in this category. Several Christian groups that are now lost taught this.

The Old-Testament prophet Daniel is one of those who receives messages from God through Gabriel. The parallel with *Muhammad* is striking, since Gabriel (Dn 8:16, 9:21) is ordered to explain to Daniel the visions he saw. Also, after meeting Gabriel, Daniel feels exhausted and sick (Dn 8:27) which cannot but remind us of a number of stories from the canonical biography of *Muhammad*, not only the account of the first Call which is described as leaving *Muhammad* feeling suffocated but also other description in the standard Koran commentaries of the process of the revelation of the Koran. But again, these might have been general stories, well known over the centuries. Every now and then such stories were connected to a specific prophet. Nevertheless, the coincidence of the presence of **Gabriel who has to explain the person he addresses** what is being revealed to him is striking.

However this all might be, it may be a worthwhile project to select the stories that cannot be suspected of being a rewrite of earlier stories and try and find out whether this category of stories, if it exists, might give a picture of a possibly historical *Muhammad*. New Testament scholars apply a similar technique: Sayings of Jesus that sound very Christian, and sayings that sound very Rabbinic are more or less discarded, and on the basis of the remaining sayings attempts are then being made to see what picture emerges from sayings that are not too Christian and not too Jewish either. This method may not be very fruitful⁴ in the case of *Muhammad's* biography, because there may be only few stories that are original, but it seems imperative to anyhow see what this method may produce if anything.

The canonical biography tells us many stories that are definitely poor in details. It is surprising how little information the stories contain. For instance, *Muhammad* visits a Jewish school in Medina. The reader is left with a feeling of unreality. We get no information about the

⁴ This method has not been fruitful at all in the case of the NT: except that the method is simplistic and based on a philosophical presupposition (the Gospel texts cannot be genuine), before studying the texts in their Greek or Latin version, we have to read them in the Aramaic Peshitta. The good question always is: *why?* Why did the Caliphs change the biography of *Muhammad*? What must remain hidden?

school at all. Is it a building? If so, where does it stand? What do they teach? How can a true historian or a true reporter be so uninterested in the details? Or, we come across a list of the names of a Jewish tribe or subtribe. The names the list gives are not Jewish. Can that be real?

There is another point to be made about the conflict between Muhammad and the Jews of Medina. It is odd that the Jewish tradition does not remember the destruction of the Jews of Medina⁵. This could easily be taken as an indication — not proof, an indication only — that these stories are not historical but instead do aim at delivering a message. The main crime of the Medinan Jews, the canonical biography reports, was trying to forge a coalition that could resist Muhammad. This crime may have been more common amongst Near Eastern Christians who resisted the advance of the Arab armies than amongst Jews.

Are the stories about the destruction of the Jews of Medina a warning to Christians who might consider to join forces with others against the Arab invaders? Do the stories wish to convey the idea that trying to forge an anti-Islamic coalition is a mortal sin? If the stories would be about Christians being punished for this crime, the warning might miss its effect because a Christian audience might be inclined to feel sympathy for the Christian victims that the Muslims made at these occasions. Jewish victims, however, would not make the Christians worry unduly.

In the New Testament passion story Peter denies his Lord three times the way Jesus had predicted. Do the Jews of Medina mirror Peter's denial by **three times** committing the mistake of **not accepting Muhammad** as their Lord and Master?

Or the names of Muhammad's two most famous wives: Khadiga means 'still-born', 'dead'. Aisha means 'living'. Possible, but very odd. Amina, the name of Muhammad's mother, may mean 'fostermother', איוגמת in Hebrew. Possible but odd. 'Abu Bakr' means 'the father of the virgin', and well, his daughter is the only virgin Muhammad married. Possible, but odd. And so on.

On the whole, the canonical biography will leave many readers wondering. Too many echoes of similar stories from other religions and cultures. The canonical biography is too one-dimensional to be a real report about real events, but this, of course, is a subjective feeling. However, for hundreds of pages the characters of the individuals that play their role do not develop or change. Some individuals seem to be forgotten by the author already a few pages after they were first introduced, e.g. the colorful Juwayriyya. Too often one cannot but be surprised to see in one scene a number of individuals coming together whose offspring plays important interacting roles in a much later period, and the reader gets the feeling that the narrator already knew this. Too often the stories lack details — but of course our judgement on which details should be included when telling a story cannot be the same as the judgment of the ancient editors of the canonical biography.

A difference in outlook and culture may explain a number of cases in which details are not mentioned, but probably not all cases where this happens. Each story from the canonical biography should be examined carefully. It does not matter if it is implausible, because life itself is implausible. But **it does matter if the story is identical to other stories** — the only difference being that the protagonists have other names. A story that betrays that its author was not familiar with a part of the rest of the story may be problematic. Are we reading the work of the writer of a sequel who did not know about the prequel that figures in the final version of the

⁵ No, it fits with history: the Jewish tribes of Medina did not belong to the rabbinic-Judaic movement (the Jews of Taif well); so, they are not on the list of the Jewish tribes that the Sanhedrin of Babylon controls. Many other tribes were not under their control (the Qaraites by instance). Indeed, the Jewish tribes of Medina were not Judaic but "Nazarenes".

story? Also, stories that contradict each other present a problem. Only one of them can be historically true in the common meaning of that word. And maybe there were three versions once – but the third version, the true one, got lost. There is no way to know these things.

It is weird that scholars in the 19th and 20th century did not pay more attention to these multiple oddities in the canonical biography and to the many similarities between Muhammad and earlier religious and military figures. If the extant stories about Muhammad reflect the historical reality, there can be no doubt that Muhammad was the Messenger of God since so much coincidence is not humanly possible. However, to a modern mind the similarities suggest another explanation. It is reasonable to suspect that these stories are not historical reports but adaptations of existing lore. These adaptations were made, perhaps with undue haste and at breathtaking speed, in order to propagate a creed that was novel at the time: Muhammad is the messenger of God.

There is, however, also at least one argument that is not subjective at all and that pleads fervently in favor of the fictional character of the canonical biography. Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham are the authors of the first complete consistent biography of Muhammad, around ± 800 AD. Much of their account is arranged according to a clear-cut chronological order. Until recently this order impressed scholars because it looked authentic: the biographers give a month-by-month account of Muhammad's acts and whereabouts. However, this month-by-month structure is peculiar. The ancient Arabs, the canonical biography and the Koran assure us, reckoned in solar years that consisted of twelve lunar months to which a leap month had to be added when necessary. **Q 9:37** abolishes this system and replaces it with the Islamic lunar year as we know it today. Ibn Ishaq confirms this alteration. This reform of the calendar is assumed to have taken place in March 632, not long before Muhammad's death.

Muhammad's last twenty years, that is the decade as a prophet in Mecca and the decade as a warlord and prophet in Medina, **must have counted seven leap months**. The lunar year is about eleven days shorter than the solar year, so after each three solar years one leap month would have to be added to keep the lunar calendar more or less in harmony with the solar year. Now the following question has to be answered: **Why does Ibn Ishaq not report a single exploit by Muhammad that took place in one of the leap months?** Did Muhammad seven times refrain from all action during a whole month? This is inexplicable. It suggests that the stories were put together long after people had forgotten about the leap months, that is: at an even later date than we usually assume.

Other explanations are imaginable, but none of them will enhance the prestige of the canonical biography of Muhammad. Could **Q 9:37** be a misunderstood reference to the end of chapter 6 of the apocryphal Book of the Jubilees? (See R.H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, Oxford 1913 & repr.; pp. 22-23). Could the whole story of the assumed calendar reform be nothing but an attempt to explain the mysterious verse Q 9:37, and to create a historical context for this verse? If so, how much more of the canonical biography is not based on any form of historical memory, however vague, but exclusively the product of exegesis? Q 9:37 is an important verse in this connection, since it is difficult to imagine that the verse is not a misunderstood adaptation of the **end of Jubilee, chapter 6**. It was the lecture by Dr Geneviève Gobillot (Lyon) at Otzenhausen, March 23, that made me understand that Jubilee 6 could have decisive importance for the **genesis of Q 9:37** ⁶.

⁶ We read: "36. For there will be those who will assuredly make observations of the moon-now (it) disturbeth the seasons and cometh in from year to year ten days too soon. 37. For this reason the years will come upon them when they will disturb (the order), and make an abominable (day) the day of testimony, and an unclean day a feast day, and they will confound all the days, the holy with the unclean, and the unclean day with the holy; for they will go wrong as to the months and sabbaths and feasts and

The spiritual power the Churches declined when historical criticism of the Bible convinced the public that, in the words of Gershwin's Porgy and Bess, 'it ain't necessarily so'. Could something similar happen in the world of Islam if the true nature of Muhammad's canonical biography becomes more visible, and better known? Anyhow, already internal evidence suggests that the canonical version of the early history of Islam is untenable as history. This makes research like that being done by Luxenberg, Ohlig, Popp, Puin and others a moral and intellectual duty.

As you all know much has been said of Luxenberg's emendation of **Q 44:54** and **Q 52:20**, *zawwagnaahum*, usually understood as 'we gave them in marriage'. Luxenberg here suggests the text should be read as *rawwaHnaahum*, 'we gave them rest', a perfectly proper thing to do to the deceased, much more fitting than to supply them with a stream of virgins. Nevertheless, Luxenberg's emendation has been laughed out of court by many widely respected colleagues, who obviously did not realize that *rawwaHa* in the meaning 'to give rest' is common in ancient Arabic inscriptions. (See: Enno Littmann, 'Thamud und Safa', in: *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, Band 25, Nr. 1, 1940. Kraus reprint, Nendeln (Liechtenstein) 1966. [See index at p. 161, sub $\Pi\Gamma$, *r-w-H*]. W.G. Oxtoby, *Some Inscriptions of the Safaitic Bedouin*, New Haven 1968, p. 52-53. *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum: Pars Quinta Inscriptiones Saracenicis Continens*, Paris 1950, xvi + 656 pp.; Inscription 4956: p. 607. 2718: p. 355).

Antique funeral inscriptions in the area of modern Jordan use *rawwaHahu Allah* in the sense of *requiescat in pace*, 'may he rest in peace', or perhaps rather *Dona eis requiem*, 'Give them rest'. The editors of the Koran may have been motivated to **change** رح , '*rawwaHa*', 'to give rest', **into** زوج '*zawwaga*', 'to give in marriage', by the contents of Matthew 22:30: 'For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are they given in marriage but are as the angels of God in heaven.'

The New Testament preaches that the dead are not given in marriage, so the editors of the Koran made the Koran preach that they are, and this by the simple addition of two dots, thus fulfilling the Islamic command *khaalifuuhum*, 'be different from them'.

It is difficult to imagine that the editors of the Koran were not familiar with the standard form of the expression 'May he rest in peace' if this formula occurred in funeral inscriptions in their time. Could it be that they changed the text on purpose? If so, similar cases may exist, and one is justified to speculate whether this may help to explain the Muslim obsession with *taHriif*, the alleged Jewish-Christian distortion of the text of the Bible.

It will take solid German nineteenth century scholarship to determine which suggestions are idiotic and unfounded, which suspicions can be dispelled and disregarded, and what will stand. And here we have a problem: the material to work on might be scarce, or difficult to find and to interpret. Many of our esteemed colleagues will hesitate to join such research projects, because of the complexities involved - or out of respect for Islam and the Muslims. To these colleagues I can only say: *rawwaHakum Allah*, 'May you rest in peace'.

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jubilees. 38. For this reason I command and testify to thee that thou mayest testify to them; for after thy death thy children will disturb (them), so that they will not make the year three hundred and sixty-four days only, and for this reason they will go wrong as to the new moons 1 and seasons and sabbaths and festivals, and they will eat all kinds of blood with all kinds of flesh" (*Book of the Jubilees*, VI, 36-38).

A lunar year consists of 354 days. *Jubilees* wages a polemic against the use of the moon for determining the seasons and feasts. But a lunar year seemed to be accepted by the Pharisees.