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## **The Representation of the Prophet in the Qur'an and *Sīrah*: A Historiographical Critique of the Narrative of the Prophet's Life in Ibn Ishāq's *Sīrah Nabawīyyah***

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### **Abstract**

*The reconstruction of the historical life of Prophet Muhammad has predominantly relied on classical sīrah narratives, which are often apologetic in nature, while the Qur'an—as a contemporaneous document—has frequently been overlooked in historiographical inquiries. This article addresses three central questions: (1) How is the Prophet Muhammad represented in the Qur'an in comparison to the sīrah? (2) Are there narratives in the sīrah that contradict or diverge from the Qur'anic representation? and (3) What are the methodological implications of using the Qur'an as a critical tool in examining classical Islamic historiography? By employing a textual-comparative approach to selected key narratives in Ibn Ishāq's Sīrah Nabawīyyah alongside relevant Qur'anic verses, this article demonstrates that the Qur'an portrays the Prophet primarily as a human figure grappling with the challenges of his mission—distinct from the heroic and overly miraculous image often found in the sīrah. In several cases, the sīrah appears to contradict the ethos and content of the Qur'an. This article argues that the Qur'an should not be viewed merely as a supplementary source but as a legitimate and authoritative means of internal critique of the sīrah, thereby offering a new methodological pathway for studying the Prophet's life in a more historical, critical, and balanced manner.*

**Keywords:** *Qur'an, Ibn Ishāq's Sīrah, Islamic historiography, source criticism, biography of the Prophet Muhammad.*

## Abstrak

Rekonstruksi sejarah Nabi Muhammad selama ini lebih banyak bertumpu pada narasi sirah klasik yang bersifat apologetik, sementara al-Qur'an sebagai dokumen sezaman kerap diabaikan dalam kajian historiografis. Artikel ini mengajukan tiga pertanyaan utama: (1) bagaimana representasi Nabi Muhammad dalam al-Qur'an dibandingkan dengan sirah; (2) apakah terdapat narasi-narasi dalam sirah yang bertentangan atau tidak sejalan dengan representasi Qur'ani; dan (3) apa implikasi metodologis penggunaan al-Qur'an sebagai alat kritik terhadap historiografi Islam klasik. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan tekstual-komparatif terhadap cuplikan narasi kunci dalam sirah Ibn Ishāq dan sejumlah ayat al-Qur'an yang relevan, artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa al-Qur'an lebih menampilkan Nabi sebagai sosok manusia biasa yang bergulat dengan tantangan dakwah, berbeda dengan representasi heroik dan mukjizat berlebih dalam sirah. Beberapa narasi sirah bahkan tampak bertentangan dengan semangat dan isi al-Qur'an. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa al-Qur'an bukan hanya pelengkap, melainkan sumber kritik internal yang sah terhadap sirah, serta membuka ruang metodologis baru bagi kajian sejarah Nabi yang lebih historis, kritis, dan seimbang.

**Kata Kunci:** al-Qur'an, sirah Ibn Ishāq, historiografi Islam, kritik sumber, biografi Nabi Muhammad.

## Introduction

The historiography of Prophet Muhammad constitutes a foundational pillar in the construction of Islamic identity—whether theological, sociocultural, or political—by constructing an authoritative model of prophethood that shapes theological beliefs, communal memory, and moral practice across generations.<sup>1</sup> Among the many sources available, *Sīrah Nabawiyyah* by Ibn Ishāq (d. 150 AH), preserved only through the recension of Ibn Hishām (d. 213 AH), is regarded as the earliest and most influential biographical narrative. This work has long served not only as a primary reference for the study of the Prophet's life but also as a framework for the general narrative of prophethood across various classical Islamic disciplines. However, with the rise of critical approaches in the study of early Islam, increasing scholarly attention has been directed toward the historical limitations of the *sīrah*. Many modern historians view Ibn Ishāq's *Sīrah* not as a factual record of events but as an ideological construction intended to craft an idealized and heroic image of the Prophet, one divorced from his human complexity. Uri Rubin, for instance, notes that “the image of the Prophet in early *sīra* is theologically shaped and apologetically motivated.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Gregor Schoeler and Andreas Goerke have questioned the reliability of narrative transmission within a long oral tradition prone to anecdotal, dramatic, and poetic embellishments.<sup>3</sup> These concerns call for a new, more critical approach to rereading *sīrah* narratives—not with cynical presumption, but with a sharp analytical lens applied to their sources.

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<sup>1</sup> Tarif Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad: Narratives of the Prophet in Islam Across the Centuries* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 3–5.

<sup>2</sup> Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1995), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Gregor Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*, trans. Uwe Vagelpohl (New York: Routledge, 2006), 47–55.

Amid the growing critical discourse surrounding *sīrah*, one approach that remains largely underexplored is the use of the Qur'an as a source of critique against Ibn Ishāq's narrative. In academic literature, this perspective remains notably rare. Popular writings tend to treat the *sīrah* and the Qur'an as two harmonious sources, without interrogating the possibility of narrative tension or even contradiction between them. Admittedly, some scholarly works have touched upon this issue implicitly. Fred Donner, for example, in *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, compares the more spiritual and rhetorical portrayal of the Prophet in the Qur'an with the concrete and heroic narrative found in the *sīrah*.<sup>4</sup> However, Donner does not systematically use the Qur'an as a tool to critique the *sīrah*, instead treating it primarily as a document of the early Muslim community. A similar approach is seen in the works of Andrew Rippin, who treats the Qur'an more as an exegetical text than as a historical source.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a study that explicitly employs the Qur'an as a corrective lens for the *sīrah* narrative remains a wide-open opportunity—both in global and local academic contexts.

The comparison between the Prophet's representation in the Qur'an and in classical *sīrah*, especially Ibn Ishāq's *Sīrah Nabawiyyah*, is vital because the *sīrah* often constructs an idealized and apologetic image of the Prophet, shaped by the theological and communal needs of later generations.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, the Qur'an, as a contemporaneous and responsive text, presents a more human and historically grounded image of the Prophet.<sup>7</sup> As Rubin notes, early *sīrah* narratives are “theologically shaped and apologetically motivated,”<sup>8</sup> making the Qur'an a necessary critical lens to evaluate and contextualize later narrative constructions.<sup>9</sup>

This article seeks to explore the potential of the Qur'an as a source of critique toward the classical historiography of the Prophet Muhammad, particularly in the work of Ibn Ishāq. The aim is not to set the two foundational Islamic sources in opposition, but rather to use the Qur'an as an alternative lens through which to reread the constructed narrative of the Prophet within the Islamic tradition. Recognizing the Qur'an as a document shaped within the concrete circumstances of the early Muslim community, its verses can offer valuable historical insights. Several narratives in the *sīrah* appear to diverge from the Qur'anic portrayal of the Prophet—whether in terms of lifestyle, attitude toward adversaries, or understandings of miracles and revelation. This raises a fundamental question: to what extent do these narratives reflect the historical Prophet as depicted in the Qur'an, and to what extent do they mirror the ideological needs of the second-generation Muslim community? This article does not seek to “discredit” the *sīrah*, but rather to promote a more critical and contextual reading of it. As Sean W. Anthony reminds us, we

<sup>4</sup> Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998), 62-85.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Rippin, *The Qur'an and Its Interpretative Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 1-19.

<sup>6</sup> Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*.

<sup>7</sup> Gabriel Said Reynolds, ed., *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2008), 6-7.

<sup>8</sup> Uri Rubin, “Prophets and Prophethood,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 4:288.

<sup>9</sup> Sean W. Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith: The Making of the Prophet of Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 14-17.

need not “choose between Qur'ān and sīrah,” but rather “learn to navigate between them with historical caution.”<sup>10</sup>

Building upon this framework, the present study seeks to address three central questions. First, how is the Prophet Muhammad represented in the Qur'an compared to the narrative construction offered by Ibn Ishāq? Does the Qur'an provide a more normative, spiritual, or even personal portrayal, in contrast to the heroic image found in the *sīrah*? Second, are there narratives in the *sīrah* that directly or indirectly contradict the spirit, substance, or chronology of the Qur'an? For example, how do the physical miracle stories or depictions of violence in the *sīrah* compare with the Qur'an's more symbolic and normative tendencies? Third, what are the epistemological and methodological implications of employing the Qur'an as a critical lens for classical Islamic historiography? Does this approach challenge the traditional consensus regarding the *sīrah*, or does it rather enrich our methods for engaging with early Islamic historical sources? These questions are addressed through textual, comparative, and intertextual analyses of selected key cases from the *sīrah* tradition.

## Research Method

This study employs a qualitative-analytical approach, focusing on textual and historical readings of *sīrah* narratives and relevant Qur'anic verses. The method emphasizes the exploration of meaning, intertextual relationships, and discourse analysis within the historical construction of the Prophet Muhammad. The study is structured around selected case studies—such as the Prophet's birth narratives, the Isra' Mi'rāj episode, the Battle of Badr, and his interactions with the Jewish communities of Medina—which are commonly found in Ibn Ishāq's work. Each case is examined in comparison with Qur'anic verses believed to refer to the same or thematically similar events, whether directly or implicitly. The aim is not merely to assess coherence between the two types of sources but to evaluate to what extent *sīrah* narratives are rooted in revelatory discourse or evolved as post-Prophetic historical and theological constructions. This approach integrates principles of critical hermeneutics with socio-historical contextual analysis of textual formation, while also considering the performative dimensions of narrative transmission.

Theoretically, this study is grounded in a critical historiographical approach that views historical texts not as objective representations of the past but as ideological constructions produced within relations of power. Within this framework, the concept of *counter-narrative* is key. Michel Foucault asserts that every dominant narrative inevitably contains the potential for resistance—voices silenced by hegemonic discourse structures.<sup>11</sup> Hayden White further argues that historical narratives are always shaped by rhetorical strategies, narrative genres, and the moral positioning of their authors.<sup>12</sup> Thus, reading the Qur'an as a *counter-narrative* to the *sīrah* does not imply an antagonistic opposition, but

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 131–133.

<sup>12</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 26–57.

rather positions the Qur'an as a primary source capable of exposing the ideological constructions embedded in post-revelatory historiography. In practice, this approach employs *textual criticism* to identify inconsistencies and narrative motives within the *sīrah* text, as well as *intertextual analysis* to trace resonances, affirmations, or tensions between Qur'anic verses and the narratives of Ibn Ishāq. In doing so, the Qur'an is read not only as a normative text but also as a historical archive offering an alternative to established narratives.

## Results and Discussion

### A. Historical Critique of Early Islamic Narratives: *Sīrah* and the Qur'an as Sources

The *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah* attributed to Ibn Ishāq (d. 150 AH) is the earliest biographical narrative presenting the life of Prophet Muhammad in chronological order, from his ancestral lineage to his death. The main feature of this *sīrah* lies in its systematic and linear biographical approach, which contrasts with the Qur'an's fragmentary style. Its narrative blends historical facts, oral traditions, and legendary elements rich in theological symbolism. Apologetics is a dominant trait; Ibn Ishāq frequently emphasizes miracles and the Prophet's virtues as a defense against both external and internal criticism.<sup>13</sup> The redaction by Ibn Hishām (d. 213 AH), which is the most popular version today, explicitly filters out parts deemed "inappropriate to mention" or "incompatible with doctrine," such as the *gharānīq* episode and details of sectarian conflict.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the narrative character of the *sīrah* was never merely about conveying historical information—it helped shape the Muslim community's collective imagination of prophethood in a normative and sacralized way.

Several modern scholars argue that the *sīrah* is saturated with ideological constructions that reflect the needs of the second-generation Muslim community more than the factual events of the Prophet's time. John Wansbrough asserts that *maghāzī* and *sīrah* literature developed within theological and legal frameworks rather than historical ones, and emerged long after the events they claim to describe.<sup>15</sup> Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, in *Hagarism*, even argue that early Islamic narratives are post-factual reconstructions by Muslims, heavily borrowing elements from Jewish and Christian traditions.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Gregor Schoeler, though more moderate, still emphasizes that the transcription of oral tradition into writing in the *sīrah* was prone to a "dramatization process" that adapted the narratives to the religious and moral needs of the second Islamic century.<sup>17</sup> These critiques affirm that the *sīrah* cannot be read as a neutral historical report, but rather as an ideological text requiring a critical approach in its reading.

While the *sīrah* narrative has been heavily questioned, some scholars consider the Qur'an to hold more potential as an authentic historical source. Montgomery Watt and Tor

<sup>13</sup> Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā et al. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, n.d.), 1:2.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., "Muqaddimah."

<sup>15</sup> John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 77-98.

<sup>16</sup> Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 3-14.

<sup>17</sup> Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*, 71-89.

Andrae view the Qur'an as the earliest reflection of the social, political, and religious realities of the early Muslim community.<sup>18</sup> For them, the Qur'an's open, spontaneous, and responsive language indicates that the text was revealed gradually in accordance with the community's lived experience. Uri Rubin reinforces this view by showing how the Qur'an constructs the Prophet's image not as a legendary figure but as one who faced resistance, internal conflict, and even political failure—all of which testify to its authenticity as a living document embedded in history.<sup>19</sup> As such, the Qur'an offers a "direct trace" of the formative process of the early Muslim community that receives little attention in the *sīrah* narrative.

The historical approach to the Qur'an has also developed through the study of *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation). Although interpretive and post-revelatory in nature, this tradition serves as a means of linking verses to specific historical realities. However, recent studies warn that *asbāb* are part of the classical scholars' narrative construction, which sometimes reflects theological assumptions more than historical facts. Andrew Bannister and Nicolai Sinai, in recent research, highlight the importance of linguistic and comparative methods in examining the Qur'an's chronology and rhetorical structure to reconstruct the dynamics of the early Islamic community.<sup>20</sup> Today's historical Qur'anic scholarship seeks to balance textual authenticity and contextual interpretation while remaining cautious of ideological agendas introduced by later generations of scholars. In this context, the Qur'an is not merely a normative text but also a historical artifact that enables the tracing of the early Muslim community's collective memory.

The tension between normative and historical approaches to early Islamic sources remains a central methodological debate in contemporary Islamic studies. The normative approach—which dominates traditional scholarship—views the *sīrah* and Qur'an as harmonious and mutually reinforcing. In contrast, the historical approach emphasizes their temporal layers, social functions, and narrative forms. Muslim scholars such as Tarif Khalidi attempt to bridge these approaches by advocating for a re-reading of tradition through modern methodology without losing respect for Islam's epistemic structure.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that critical readings are often viewed as problematic by the normative community. Therefore, studies like this must proceed within a strict and objective academic framework, while remaining sensitive to the diversity of epistemological positions within the Muslim world.

<sup>18</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 27-45; Tor Andrae, *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, trans. Theophil Menzel (New York: Harper, 1956), 98-102.

<sup>19</sup> Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims*, 35-39.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Bannister, *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur'an* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014); Nicolai Sinai, "When Did the Consonantal Skeleton of the Quran Reach Closure?" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77, no. 2 (2014): 273-292.

<sup>21</sup> Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3-15.

## B. Two Discourses, One Figure: Comparing the Prophet's Life Narrative in the Qur'an and the *Sīrah*

To clarify the analytical framework of this study, four case studies have been selected to illustrate how the representation of the Prophet in the *sīrah* diverges from the Qur'anic portrayal: miracle narratives, military episodes, relations with the Jewish communities of Medina, and the account of the first revelation. These cases are not exhaustive but are chosen because they represent central themes in the construction of the Prophet's image as a heroic, supernatural, and authoritative figure in the *sīrah*. By comparing these themes to the Qur'anic representation—which tends to depict the Prophet in more humanized, restrained, and ethically reflective terms—this study highlights how the *sīrah*'s apologetic narrative both expands and transforms the Qur'anic foundation. Each case study thus serves as a strategic lens to reveal the broader historiographical tension between revelatory discourse and post-Prophetic narrative construction.

### 1. The Prophetic Narrative and Miracles

One of the most striking aspects of classical *sīrah* narratives is the abundance of stories about physical miracles performed by Prophet Muhammad. Ibn Ishāq, in the *Sīrah Nabawiyyah* transmitted by Ibn Hishām, reports numerous extraordinary events, such as water flowing from the Prophet's fingers when the companions were thirsty during a journey, or the miracle of the moon splitting in front of the Quraysh, who refused to believe.<sup>22</sup> These stories were arranged to strengthen prophetic authority and to affirm the legitimacy of Muhammad's apostleship through supernatural signs. Moreover, these elements often align with the hagiographic structure of sacred literature: highlighting the protagonist's uniqueness and dramatizing key moments as part of a "perfect prophethood" construction that is difficult to critique rationally.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the *sīrah* not only records history but also reshapes it within the framework of wonder.

By contrast, the Qur'an itself appears to reject the notion that prophethood must be proven through displays of physical miracles. In Surah al-Isrā' [17]:90–93, the polytheists demand various tangible signs—such as making springs gush forth from the earth, causing the sky to fall, or bringing Allah and the angels visibly. However, the Prophet's response, as narrated in these verses, emphasizes that he is merely a "messenger who conveys" revelation.<sup>24</sup> The Qur'an even states that such demands were characteristic of previous disbelieving peoples (Q.S. al-An'ām [6]:109), and that the revelation itself—with its eloquence, profound message, and transformational impact—is the only legitimate and sufficient miracle.<sup>25</sup> In this sense, the Qur'an situates prophethood within a rational and spiritual framework, rather than a supernatural one. This reveals a latent tension between the revelatory source and the historical narrative in portraying prophetic authority.

<sup>22</sup> Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, ed. 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām Tadmurī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1990), 1:353-355.

<sup>23</sup> Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims*, 39-45.

<sup>24</sup> al-Qur'an, Q.S. al-Isrā' [17]:90–93. Lihat juga interpretasi klasik: al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Shākir (Kairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1954), 15:13-20.

<sup>25</sup> Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 79-81.

This difference indicates the emergence of two distinct conceptions of prophethood within early Islamic tradition. On one hand, the *sīrah* frames the Prophet as a charismatic, supernatural figure—akin to prophets in other religious narratives, such as Jesus in the Gospels or Moses in the Torah. On the other hand, the Qur'an presents the Prophet as an ordinary human who receives revelation and must actively resist deification.<sup>26</sup> This tension not only impacts how Muslims understand the figure of the Prophet, but also opens space for a rereading of early Islamic historiography. If the Qur'an is taken as the primary source or as a "critical tool," then many miracle stories in the *sīrah* must be reexamined as cultural and theological expressions rather than mere historical records.<sup>27</sup> Thus, a methodological question arises: are we reading the history of the Prophet, or the history of how Muslims imagined the Prophet?

## 2. Wars and Violence

The *sīrah* narrative of Ibn Ishāq places significant emphasis on military events as turning points in prophetic history. The battles of Badr, Uhud, and Khandaq are not only portrayed as armed conflicts but also as stages for the companions' heroism, the Prophet's brilliant strategy, and dramatic killings that color the course of early Islamic history.<sup>28</sup> In the story of Badr, for instance, Ibn Ishāq records the initial three-on-three duel, the deaths of key Quraysh figures like Abu Jahl, and the role of angels assisting the Muslim army.<sup>29</sup> At Uhud, the Prophet's physical injuries and Mus'ab ibn 'Umayr's heroism are highlighted. Khandaq is filled with intrigue and betrayal, particularly in the narrative of the mass execution of the Banu Qurayzah.<sup>30</sup> All of this gives the *sīrah* a narrative character resembling a military epic, portraying war not just as a historical event but as a medium for reinforcing the collective identity of the Muslim community.

In contrast to the *sīrah*, the Qur'an does not present wars in a chronological or richly detailed narrative form. The verses referring to Badr, Uhud, or Khandaq function more as theological reflections on the inner states of the Muslim community. Q.S. Āl 'Imrān [3]:121–123, for example, mentions the Prophet's departure from his home "to position the believers for battle" before Uhud, but the verse does not elaborate on the course of the battle, the names of figures involved, or military strategies.<sup>31</sup> Instead, the focus is on the meaning of faith, trials, and dependence on God's help. Other verses such as Q.S. al-Anfāl [8]:17 even stress that victory at Badr was not due to human strength but because it was God who cast and defeated the enemy.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the Qur'an frames war not as military glorification but as a spiritual and ethical experience full of moral lessons.

This difference opens space for a critical analysis of the narrative motivations in the *sīrah*. If the Qur'an tends to imply that war is only one aspect of the struggle of faith, then

<sup>26</sup> Andrae, *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, 87–92.

<sup>27</sup> Walid A. Saleh, "The Etymological Fallacy and Qur'anic Studies: Muhammad, Paradise, And Late Antiquity," In *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, eds. Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (Leiden: The Netherlands: Brill, 2009): 649–698.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, 2:268–271 (kisah Badar); 2:301–309 (kisah Uhud); 2:357–374 (kisah Khandaq).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 2:270–273.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 2:370–374.

<sup>31</sup> al-Qur'an, Q.S. Āl 'Imrān [3]:121–123.

<sup>32</sup> al-Qur'an, Q.S. al-Anfāl [8]:17.



why does the *sīrah* allocate such a large narrative portion to military conflicts, with details not found in the revelatory source? Are these additions documentary or ideological? Scholars such as Sean Anthony and Fred Donner have shown that military narratives in the *sīrah* often serve as rhetorical tools to affirm the identity of the early Muslim community and to shape a heroic collective memory.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, narratives such as the execution of Banu Qurayzah raise ethical questions about the legitimacy of violence within a prophetic framework, particularly since they are not found in Qur'anic verses.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, a rereading is needed—one that distinguishes between factual description and symbolic construction in the early Islamic historiographical tradition.

### 3. The Prophet's Relationship with the Jews of Medina

One of the most controversial narratives in Ibn Ishāq's *Sīrah* is the story of the betrayal by the Banu Qurayzah and the mass execution of their men. According to the *Sīrah*, following the Battle of the Trench (*Khandaq*), the Banu Qurayzah were accused of violating their treaty with the Prophet and collaborating with the Quraysh coalition forces. Ibn Ishāq depicts the siege of this tribe, their submission to the arbitration of Sa'd ibn Mu'adh, and the execution of around 600–900 adult men, along with the captivity of women and children.<sup>35</sup> This narrative is told in vivid detail: from the digging of trenches and the rotational executions, to the individual reactions of those involved.<sup>36</sup> The entire account conveys a dramatic and final impression of the "Jewish betrayal" of the Muslim community, presenting the event as a symbol of divine justice and a reinforcement of the Prophet's authority in the new legal order following *Khandaq*.

However, the Qur'an never explicitly mentions this event. Surah al-Hashr [59]:11–17 does contain a harsh critique of a group of People of the Book who "aligned with the hypocrites," and then fled from their fortresses in fear.<sup>37</sup> These verses describe disgrace, moral defeat, and cowardice, but do not mention the Banu Qurayzah by name, nor detail the event, and especially do not allude to a mass execution. Instead, the focus remains on a general portrayal of the consequences of betrayal against the Muslim community, rather than on the imposition of a specific punishment.<sup>38</sup> This suggests that, although there was conflict, the Qur'an prefers symbolic and ethical narratives over historical chronicles. The absence of detail about the massacre in the Qur'an raises serious questions regarding the sources and motivations behind the *Sīrah* narrative.

This divergence invites a critical reading of the *Sīrah* as a text that may not be entirely free from ideological interests. Some scholars argue that the story of Banu Qurayzah, with its narrative of mass execution, reflects more the political dynamics and need for legitimation during the period of Islamic tradition compilation than the factual

<sup>33</sup> Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith: The Making of the Prophet of Islam*, 115-134; Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, 47-56.

<sup>34</sup> M. J. Kister, "The Massacre of the Banū Qurayza: A Re-Examination of a Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 8 (1986): 61-96.

<sup>35</sup> Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyah*, 2:367-374.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 2:370-372.

<sup>37</sup> al-Qur'an, Q.S. al-Hashr [59]:11-17.

<sup>38</sup> Tafsir klasik seperti al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, 28:21–28, dan al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2003) 18:6-12, juga tidak menyebut eksekusi secara eksplisit.

conditions of the Prophet's time.<sup>39</sup> In the context of the early Islamic state, facing both internal and external challenges, such narratives could function as theological justifications for violence against opposition groups, and as a means of reinforcing a collective identity of the "righteous ummah" against "convicted traitors."<sup>40</sup> If this is the case, then the *Sīrah* does not merely record history but reshapes it according to the needs of its time. Therefore, it is crucial for modern readers to distinguish between possible historical realities and narrative constructions when seeking a more balanced understanding of the Prophet's relationship with the Jewish communities of Medina.

#### 4. The Origin of Revelation and the Prophet's Psychology

One of the most memorable narratives in Ibn Ishāq's *Sīrah* is the story of the first revelation in the Cave of Ḥirā'. In this version, the Prophet Muhammad's prophetic experience is portrayed as intense and almost traumatic. After receiving revelation from the angel Gabriel, the Prophet is depicted as overwhelmed with fear, trembling, and rushing home to Khadijah crying, "Cover me! Cover me!"<sup>41</sup> Ibn Ishāq also adds that the Prophet feared he was possessed by jinn or afflicted with mental disturbance, which led to personal doubt until Khadijah comforted him and took him to Waraqah ibn Nawfal for validation.<sup>42</sup> This narrative suggests that becoming a prophet was not an instant or effortless process, but one fraught with psychological turmoil and requiring social support in order for the experience to be positively interpreted by the Prophet himself.

In contrast to the *Sīrah*, the Qur'an portrays the moment of prophethood with a tone of certainty and resolve. In Q.S. al-Muddaththir [74]:1–7, Allah directly calls the Prophet: "O you who are wrapped up [in garments], arise and warn. Glorify your Lord, purify your garments, and avoid impurity."<sup>43</sup> There is no indication of confusion, fear, or psychological hesitation. Rather, the call is emphatic and commanding, presenting the Prophet as someone who, from the beginning, is summoned to a great task with full spiritual awareness. These verses depict a firm, prepared Prophet focused on the mission of da'wah, without being preceded by a phase of personal crisis or trauma.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the Qur'an emphasizes divine authority and the Prophet's moral readiness in accepting his prophetic duty.

The contrast between these two representations highlights the narrative dimension added by the *Sīrah* to dramatize the spiritual event as a human experience. Depicting the Prophet as initially frightened, confused, and seeking reassurance may be understood as an effort to humanize the prophetic figure—demonstrating that even a messenger of God underwent reflection and a search for meaning.<sup>45</sup> However, this addition also risks implying that the Prophet doubted his own religious experience, something not reflected in the Qur'anic text. Scholars such as Uri Rubin and Angelika Neuwirth argue that such *Sīrah*

<sup>39</sup> Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, 77–80.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Lecker, *The "Constitution of Medina": Muhammad's First Legal Document* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2024).

<sup>41</sup> Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah*, 1:253–255.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 1:255–258.

<sup>43</sup> al-Qur'an, Q.S. al-Muddaththir [74]:1–7.

<sup>44</sup> Lihat juga Q.S. al-'Alaq [96]:1–5 sebagai bentuk pembukaan wahyu yang langsung bersifat instruktif.

<sup>45</sup> Tarif Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad: Narratives of the Prophet in Islam Across the Centuries*, 31–33.

narratives emerged in the post-prophetic period, as the Muslim community sought to understand the Prophet's spiritual dynamics in more human psychological terms.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, readers must interpret the origin-of-revelation accounts with caution, discerning between the normative representation in the Qur'an and the dramatic representation in the *Sīrah*.

### C. The Qur'an as a Critique of Historiography

Until now, the Qur'an has tended to be treated merely as a normative-theological text in studies of early Islamic history. However, a close reading reveals that the Qur'an also holds the potential to serve as a corrective source to the narratives shaped by *sīrah* tradition. Rather than offering a chronicle of events, the Qur'an often comments on, responds to, or even refutes collective perceptions circulating within society at the time.<sup>47</sup> In certain contexts, it appears as an alternative voice that clarifies, simplifies, or rejects the "popular" version of an event. While the *sīrah* presents events with dramatic detail and strong moral narrative, the Qur'an sometimes emphasizes symbolic, introspective, and ethical dimensions. Therefore, the Qur'an's role in historiographical reading should not be confined to mere confirmation, but rather viewed as a critical text that offers an alternative narrative framework to prophetic history.

Nevertheless, positioning the Qur'an as a corrector of historiography does not mean rejecting the overall validity of the *sīrah* narrative. The critique offered here instead aims to encourage a more triangulated historiographical approach, one that brings together various types of sources with scholarly humility.<sup>48</sup> This is because the *sīrah* still holds valuable historical information, including aspects not discussed in the Qur'an, such as names of individuals, travel routes, or logistical details of battles. What needs to be recognized is that the *sīrah* is not a historical record in the modern sense, but a narrative of collective memory shaped through social, theological, and political constructions. Through triangulation, both the Qur'an and the *sīrah* can be re-read in a productive tension, rather than within a rigid binary opposition.

A historiographical approach to the early period of Islam thus requires openness to multi-sourced materials: the Qur'an as a normative text that also records social dynamics; the *sīrah* as a collective biographical narrative; *ḥadīth* as a normative-practical record that often reinforces or expands upon the *sīrah*; and non-Muslim sources (such as Byzantine, Syriac, or Jewish records) as external comparative mirrors.<sup>49</sup> Each type of source brings its own interests, perspectives, and methods of transmission, and it is precisely in this diversity that a more comprehensive understanding can be achieved. Relying on only one type of source when writing the history of the Prophet Muhammad risks producing a biased

<sup>46</sup> Rubin, "Prophets and Prophethood," 4: 288; Angelika Neuwirth, *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community: Reading the Qur'an as a Literary Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 203–205.

<sup>47</sup> Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 83–85.

<sup>48</sup> Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*.

<sup>49</sup> Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997).

image—whether overly apologetic or excessively skeptical. A critical synthesis across sources offers a more balanced and scholarly methodological alternative.

The theoretical implication of this article lies in a paradigmatic shift in reading the Qur'an—not merely as a religious object but as a narrative intervention in the discourse of early Islamic history. This perspective positions the Qur'an not only as a normative source or a document of faith, but also as an epistemic actor in the process of constructing Islamic historiography.<sup>50</sup> By reading the Qur'an intertextually alongside the *sīrah*, one becomes aware that prophetic history was never singular, but formed through the negotiation of multiple versions that contest authority. This article contributes by offering a reading that combines theological hermeneutics with historical criticism, while also fostering dialogue between the two main textual authorities in Islam: revelation and collective memory. In the contemporary academic landscape, this approach helps enrich debates on the narrative status of sacred texts and opens space for a more reflective and nuanced methodology in Islamic historical studies.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Qur'an presents a portrait of the Prophet Muhammad that differs from what we find in *sīrah* literature. While the *sīrah* often portrays the Prophet's life in a dramatic manner, complete with strong psychological and narrative elements, the Qur'an offers a prophetic image that is more straightforward, direct, and assertive. In many cases, the Qur'an avoids lengthy biographical narratives and instead emphasizes the Prophet's mission, the community's responses, and his moral-spiritual reactions in specific contexts. This difference is not merely a matter of narrative style; it reflects a vision that does not always align with how the Prophet's history ought to be remembered and told. Through a comparative approach, we can see that the Qur'an does not function solely as a normative source, but also as a kind of internal critique of the narratives developed within the *sīrah* tradition. It sometimes corrects, challenges, or overlooks elements considered important in the *sīrah*, thereby offering an alternative perspective on the same events. This approach enriches the way we read early Islamic history by enabling dialogue between sources, rather than allowing one to dominate. In other words, reading the Qur'an historically can open the door to a more nuanced narrative that avoids being trapped within a singular normative historiographical framework. It is essential to frame the critical analysis of the *sīrah* not as an attempt to undermine traditional narratives, but as an effort to enrich the understanding of the Prophet's life through a more nuanced and source-aware reading. By positioning the Qur'an as a complementary lens rather than an oppositional source, this study encourages respectful dialogue between tradition and critical scholarship, aiming to deepen appreciation of both the human and spiritual dimensions of the Prophet without compromising reverence. The relevance of this kind of reading lies in the effort to build an Islamic historiographical tradition that is more critical, reflective, and not merely hagiographic. Honoring the Prophet does not mean closing off the possibility of analytically reading the sources that

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<sup>50</sup> Neuwirth, *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community*, 197-210.

discuss his life. On the contrary, mature reverence is shown through the willingness to understand the full complexity of prophetic history—by acknowledging that each source carries its own perspective. Amid contemporary challenges that demand methodological clarity and intellectual openness, this approach can serve as a foundation for renewing the study of Islamic history in a scholarly manner without losing its spiritual depth.

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