Notes about Censorship and Self-Censorship in the Biography of the Prophet Muḥammad

Notas sobre censura y auto-censura en la biografía del Profeta Muḥammad

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The most popular medieval biography of the prophet Muhammad was compiled by Ibn Isḥāq (d. ca. 151/768) and is known to us through its epitome by Ibn Hishām (d. ca. 218/833). As a history book it is not free of weaknesses, among them editorial practices. The following article deals with rather elusive editorial practices, namely censorship and self-censorship. Both deprive us of certain details or accounts unless they can be found elsewhere in the vast Islamic literature. But at the same time censorship and self-censorship reveal the attitudes of the study of the medieval literary output about Muhammad’s life should go hand in hand with the study of his history, for which we have rich evidence in a variety of sources. Ibn Isḥāq’s biography of Muḥammad and its epitome by Ibn Hishām were products of their time. A case of self-censorship applied by one of Ibn Isḥāq’s informants and two cases of censorship applied by Ibn Hishām, who omitted many of his predecessor’s materials, contribute to a better understanding of the social and political context of the biography.

Key words: Muḥammad; Sīra; Biography; ʼAbbāsīs; Umayyads; Medina; Ḥira; Censorship; Hadīth.

El estudio de la producción literaria medieval sobre la vida de Muḥammad debe ir de la mano del estudio de su historia, empresa para la que disponemos de rica información en una variedad de fuentes. La biografía de Muḥammad por Ibn Isḥāq y su epitome por Ibn Hishām fueron productos de su época. Un caso de auto-censura aplicado por uno de los informantes de Ibn Isḥāq y dos casos de censura aplicados por Ibn Hishām, quien omitió muchos de los materiales de su predecesor, contribuyen a una mejor comprensión del contexto social y político de la biografía del Profeta.

Palabras clave: Muḥammad; Sīra; biografía; ʼabbāsīs; omeyas; Medina; Ḥira; censura; hadīth.

The study of the medieval literary output about Muhammad’s life should go hand in hand with the study of his history, for which we have rich evidence in a variety of sources. Ibn Isḥāq’s biography of Muḥammad and its epitome by Ibn Hishām were products of their time. A case of self-censorship applied by one of Ibn Isḥāq’s informants and two cases of censorship applied by Ibn Hishām, who omitted many of his predecessor’s materials, contribute to a better understanding of the social and political context of the biography.

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I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their thorough commentaries.
those who applied them and shed some light on the social and political context in which Muhammad’s biography emerged. The biography was a product of its time, and as such it reflected the concerns and sensitivities of Muḥammad’s companions, their descendants and all those who contributed to its compilation.

The first case to be discussed is one of self-censorship. It relates to an act of disobedience to Muhammad. The account about it survived, but the identity of the two perpetrators was not disclosed to Ibn Isḥāq and remained secret, no doubt in order to spare their families the embarrassment. The other two cases represent two different categories of the materials that Ibn Hishām expunged from the biography due to the censorship he applied to Ibn Isḥāq’s biography of Muḥammad. One of the two censored accounts implies that before his Mission, Muhammad was an idol worshipper, while the other relates to a harlot in pre-Islamic Yathrib (Medina) whose jinni announced the advent of Muhammad’s Mission.

The two who disobeyed Muḥammad

The following act of disobedience to Muḥammad occurred during the Tabūk expedition (9/630):¹

When the Messenger of Allāh passed al-Ḥijr, he alighted in it and the men got water from its well. When they returned in the evening, the Messenger of Allāh said, ‘Do not drink any of its water nor use it for ablution. If you have used any of it to prepare dough, then feed it to the camels and eat none of it. Let none of you go out at night alone without a companion’. The men did as they had been told, except two men of the Banī Sāʿida: one went out to relieve himself, and the other to look for a camel of his. The one who went to relieve himself was choked where he was relieving himself and the one who went to look for a camel of his was carried away by the wind, which cast him on the two mountains of Tayyi’. The Messenger of Allāh was told of this and said, ‘Have I not forbidden you to go out without a companion?’ Then he prayed for the man who was choked where he was relieving himself and he recovered; the other who landed in the two mountains of Tayyi’ was delivered to the Messenger of Allāh by the Tayyi’ as a gift when he came to Medina. The story about the two men comes from ‘Abdallāh ibn Abi Bakr, from ‘Abbās ibn Sahl ibn Sa’d al-Sāʿida. ‘Abdallāh ibn Abi Bakr told me that ‘Abbās

¹ The account discussed here did not escape Josef Horovitz: see Horovitz, The Earliest Biographies of the Prophet and their Authors, p. 44.
had revealed to him the names of the two men but he ['Abbās] asked that they be kept secret, so 'Abdallāh refused to tell me their names.  

Ibn Išāq’s immediate informant, 'Abdallāh ibn Abī Bakr (d. 130/747-748 or 135/752-753),³ belonged to the Khazraj, more precisely to the Najjār branch of Khazraj. ⁴ 'Abdallāh received the account from 'Abbās ibn Sahl ibn Sa’d (d. ca. 120/738), who belonged to the Sā‘īda branch of Khazraj. The two unspecified protagonists of the account were also from the Sā‘īda, which explains why 'Abbās asked 'Abdallāh not to disclose their identity: he spared the perpetrators’ offspring the embarrassment.

Further details about the account are relevant for us here. 'Abbās ibn Sahl ibn Sa’d al-Sā‘īd probably received it from a close relative of his. A variant found in Wāqidi’s Kitāb al-maghāzī links it to another event that is similarly related to the Tabūk expedition.⁵ It concerns a woman’s orchard in Wādī I-Qurā which Muḥammad and his companions visited on their way to Tabūk. Muḥammad’s companion Abū Ḥumayd al-Sā‘īdī⁶ transmitted to 'Abbās the account about the orchard,⁷ and one assumes that he also transmitted to him the account about the disobedience discussed here. 'Abbās must have had a special interest in the Tabūk expedition because his father, Sahl ibn Sa’d, had participated in it. According to Sahl’s own testimony, he was then the youngest participant (kuntu ʾasghar ʾašḥābī). Muḥammad prohibited the drinking of the water, but allowed the warriors to feed the camels with dough paste that had been prepared with this water before he gave his
order. The emaciated camels that Sahl fed that dough became the weakest in the herd.\footnote{Wāqīḍi, \textit{Maghāzī}, III, p. 1007. When Muhammad died, Sahl was fifteen years old; Ibn Ḥajar, \textit{al-İşāba fi tamyiz al-sahāba}, III, p. 200.}

The companion Abū Ḥumayd al-Sā‘īdi, who died at the end of Mu‘āwiya’s reign (41/661-60/680) or the beginning of Yazid I’s reign (60/680-64/683),\footnote{See e.g. Ibn Ḥajar, \textit{İsāba}, VII, pp. 94-95.} is said to have been Sahl’s paternal uncle. While their precise family link cannot be established with any certainty, we may assume that they were closely related and that the two who disobeyed Muḥammad were not only fellow Ṣā‘īdīs but also their family members.

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Let us turn now to the two cases of editorial censorship applied by Ibn Hishām in his epitome of Ibn Ishāq’s biography. The relevant accounts are found in the recension (i.e. version or textual tradition,\footnote{The term textual tradition was used by Jones, \textit{“The Maghāzī literature,”} p. 346. He used it side by side with the term recension. Jones used the term version with reference to Ibn Hishām: “Ibn Hishām’s version of the text”.} Arabic: \textit{riwāya}) of Yūnus ibn Bukayr (d. 199/815). Part of Ibn Bukayr’s recension is available to us through fragments published independently by Muhammad Ḥamidullāh in 1976 and by Suhayl Zakkār in 1978. Each of the two editions includes two fragments found in the Qarawiyyīn library in Fez and a single fragment found in the Žāhirīyya library in Damascus. While the two fragments belong to Ibn Bukayr’s recension, the single fragment belongs to that of Muhammad ibn Salama (d. 192/807). The Qarawiyyīn fragments, unlike the Žāhirīyya one, are not homogeneous and include many items from authorities other than Ibn Ishāq.\footnote{Out of 473 articles in Hamidullāh’s edition some 180 go back to sources other than Ibn Ishāq; Muranyi, “Ibn Ishāq’s Kitāb al-Mağāzī in der Riwāya von Yūnus b. Bukair: Bemerkungen zur frühen Überlieferungsgeschichte,” p. 218. Al-Suhayli quoted Ibn Bukayr’s version 52 times, but only 15 of his references are found in the edited fragments; Jarrat, \textit{Die Prophetenbiographie im islamischen Spanien: Ein Beitrag zur Überlieferungs- und Redaktionsgeschichte}, pp. 207-208. Ibn Bukayr was himself a compiler of a Maghāzī book; Jarrat, \textit{Die Prophetenbiographie im islamischen Spanien}, passim. Schoeler, \textit{Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Mohammads}, pp. 50-51 suggested that this type of transmitter/author (Überlieferer/Verfasser) be referred to as adaptor (Bearbeiter). See also Schoeler, \textit{The Genesis of Literature in Islam from the Aural to the Read}, p. 77. Surprisingly, Ibn Ishāq, \textit{Sirat Ibn Ishāq al-musammāt bi-kitāb al-mub-}
to Muḥammad’s biography, such as those concerning the marriages of 'Ali’s daughters Umm Kulthum and Zaynab. However, such accounts probably existed in other recensions of Ibn Ishāq’s biography as well. Alfred Guillaumé observed regarding the Qarawiyyīn manuscript: “The importance of this manuscript lies in those passages which restore to us material that Ibn Hishām omitted from his text for the reasons which he has given in his Introduction to his edition” (see below). Sadun Mahmud al-Samuk pointed out the manuscript’s unorthodox approach regarding Muhammad’s life before the Mission.

The differences in Ibn Ishāq’s recensions notwithstanding, one assumes that the two problematic accounts from Ibn Bukayr’s recension that are discussed here were also included in Ziyād al-Bakkā’ī’s (d. 183/799) recension on which Ibn Hishām based his epitome. Ibn Hishām stated that in certain cases he had applied censorship. The first paragraph in his epitome purports to provide the pedigree of Muḥammad going back to Adam, while the second paragraph reads as follows:

tada’ wa-l-mab’ath wa-l-maghāzi, p. 1 starts with the following isnād: qāla Abū Muḥammad 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hishām ādābā’ī kitāb sīrat rasūl ilāh šallā lāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallām. But the isnād and the following passage which concerns Muḥammad’s pedigree are missing in Zakkār’s edition and probably do not belong to the manuscript to which they were attached. It should be added that a comparison between the Fez manuscript and Ibn Hishām’s book has also been carried out by ’Abd al-ʿAzīz al-Dūrī in his Dirāsā fi sīrat al-nabi wa-mu‘allīfihā Ibn Ishāq, Baghdad, 1965. The book is unavailable to me.

12 Guillaumé, New Light on the Life of Muhammad, pp. 50-52.
14 Guillaumé, New Light on the Life of Muhammad, p. 10. Cf. Raven, “Sira and the Qur’ān,” p. 33: “Ibn Hishām made judgments about the theological ‘purity’ in the texts he selected and left out passages that he found offensive… Two striking stories that Ibn Hishām had not included are those about Muḥammad’s intended suicide (al-Ṭabarī, Ta’rikh al-rasul wa-l-mulūk, ed. de Goeje et alii, I, p. 1147) and the ‘satanic verses’; al-Ṭabarī, Ta’rikh, I, pp. 1192-1196).” But al-Ṭabarī’s text relating to the intended suicide is not from Ibn Ishāq. On the topics of suicide and the “Satanic Verses” see Rubin, The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims, pp. 113-114 and pp. 156-166, respectively.

I begin this book, Allâh willing, with the mention of Ishmael son of Abraham and those of his offspring who bore the Messenger of Allâh and their descendants, first things first, from Ishmael to the Messenger of Allâh. [I also mention] their story to the extent that it is available, leaving out the other offspring of Ishmael for the sake of brevity until [I arrive at] the account of the biography of the Messenger of Allâh, leaving out some of what Ibn Ishâq mentioned in this book. To wit, matters in which the Messenger of Allâh is not mentioned, [matters] concerning which no Qur'ân verses were revealed, and those that are not the cause, the explanation or the proof of something in this book. The reason is the above mentioned wish for brevity. [Also left out are] verses which he [Ibn Ishâq] mentioned but none of the connoisseurs of poetry I met was acquainted with, things that are either disgraceful to talk about (yashnu, u l-hadîth bihi), or such that may distress certain people (yasi'u ba'da l-nâs dhikruhu), or such that were not confirmed to us by al-Bakkâ'i. Allâh willing, I shall fully adduce all the rest within the limits of the available transmission and knowledge.\textsuperscript{16}

Two of the above mentioned categories clearly indicate censorship, namely the disgraceful and distressing matters. Johann Fück recorded Ibn Hishâm’s own reports regarding the omission of improper verses and verses which assault the Prophet. Fück correctly included the verses in the category of things that are disgraceful to talk about. He also included in the same category the affair of the Satanic Verses (or “the Gharînq episode” as he called it). As to the second category, that of things which may distress certain people, Fück referred to Ibn Hishâm’s omission of the account about the capture of Muḥammad’s uncle ‘Abbâs in the battle of Badr.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{16} Ibn Hishâm, \textit{Das Leben Muhammeds}, p. 4; below, Appendix V; Guillaume, \textit{The Life of Muhammad}, pp. 3, 691.

\textsuperscript{17} Fück, \textit{Muhammad ibn Ishaq: Literarhistorische Untersuchungen}, p. 35: “…anstößige Stellen; solche, die einige Menschen verletzen könnten”. The verses of the former category are improper verses omitted by Ibn Hishâm according to his own statement: Ibn Hishâm, \textit{Das Leben Muhammeds}, pp. 170, l. 3; 274, l. 18; 523, l. 13; 524, l. 9; 572, l. 15; 581, l. 16; 644, l. 9; 939, l. 4; also verses in which the Prophet is attacked, such as 532, l. 16. In 517, l. 20 Ibn Hishâm changed an insulting word (in fact he changed two words). See also Horovitz, \textit{The Earliest Biographies of the Prophet}, p. 81 (“… besides allegations whereof the mention was malicious, or likely to be disagreeable to certain people”); Schoeler, \textit{Charakter und Authentie}, p. 50; Schoeler, \textit{The Genesis of Literature in Islam}, p. 77 (“indecent passages; passages that might be injurious to certain individuals”); al-Samuk, \textit{Die historischen Überlieferungen nach Ibn Ishâq}, p. 157: “… Dinge und Ereignisse, von denen zu berichten hässlich ist, oder die andere Menschen verletzen könnten”. Nöldeke, “Die Tradition über das Leben Muhammeds,” p. 166, n. 2 has already noticed Ibn Hishâm’s occasional omission of verses of both the Muslims and their opponents. Regarding ‘Abbâs’s capture in Badr, see Nöldeke, “Die Tradition über das Leben Muhammeds,” pp. 167-168. A remark about technology can be made at this point. In order to trace Ibn Hishâm’s omissions of verses which he considered as improper.
NOTES ABOUT CENSORSHIP AND SELF-CENSORSHIP IN THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE PROPHET

Other examples of accounts and problematic expressions that were expunged by Ibn Hishām can be mentioned briefly. Muḥammad, when he was still a young shepherd, intended to obtain illicit sexual pleasure, but Allāh protected him from it.18 During the lapse of revelation (fatrat al-wahy) Muḥammad said to himself: “I am afraid my associate [i.e. the angel] has become hateful of me (qalānī) and has deserted me (wadda’anī).”19 A subtler case of censorship concerns Muḥammad’s worship of idols (on which see more below). In a passage summarizing Muḥammad’s early years with his uncle Abū Tālib we find that he grew up protected by Allāh from the filth of the Jāhiliyya and its vices, “while he was still following the religion of his tribe” (wa-huwa ‘alā din qawmīhi). Ibn Hishām adduced this account without this crucial statement.20 This very expression, wa-huwa ‘alā din qawmīhi, appears in an account about Muḥammad’s wuqūf in Mt. ‘Arafāt which is found in Ibn Hishām with a less problematic phrasing: qabla an yanzila ’alayhi l-wahy or before the revelation.21 Yet another small editorial change by Ibn Hishām can be added. Al-Samuk noticed the difference between Ibn Bukayr and Ibn Hishām regarding ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib’s action upon Muḥammad’s birth. The former said that ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib took the newborn child to the idol Hubal inside the Ka’ba (fa-adkhala ’alā Hubal fi jawfi l-Ka’ba), while the latter omitted Hubal’s mention: ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib merely took the child to the Ka’ba (fa-dakhala bihi l-Ka’ba).22 Other cases of Ibn Hishām’s censorship include the

one can nowadays employ an electronic version of his book (using the Internet, or electronic text repositories such as al-Maktaba al-shāmila or al-Jāmi’ al-kabīr) and look for the Arabic verb aqḍhā’ā, “to revile, vilify” that appears eight times, and for its feminine form aqḍhā’at that appears once. But of course Fück has already pointed out these verses.


20 Rubin, The Eye of the Beholder, pp. 87, 89; Ibn Ishāq, Sira, ed. Ḥamidullāh, p. 57, no. 54; Ibn Ishāq, Kitāb al-siyar wa-l-maghāzī, ed. Zakkār, p. 78; Ibn Hishām, Das Leben Muhammeds, p. 117.


above mentioned account on the “Satanic Verses” (Ibn Ishāq’s account does not include the “Satanic Verses” themselves); and an account about the evil eye with which Muḥammad was inflicted (tuṣibuhu l-ayn) in Mecca before and after the revelation. Also an account about the rumours that Muḥammad’s son Ibrāhīm was fathered by a cousin of the child’s mother, Māriya the Copt. ‘Ali was ordered to kill the cousin if he found him with her. But the cousin managed to prove that he was gelded, thereby saving his life. Finally, an account about ‘Umāra ibn al-Walī’s overtures to ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ’s wife, followed by ‘Amr’s terrible revenge.

Muḥammad and the holy man

The following account (Ibn Bukayr ← Ibn Ishāq) is missing in Ibn Hishām’s epitome because it concerns a thing that is, according to Ibn Hishām, disgraceful to talk about. It describes a meeting between Muḥammad, accompanied by his adopted son Zayd ibn Ḥarītha, and the ḥanif or “seeker of true religion” Zayd ibn ‘Amr ibn Nufayl:

Ahmad [ibn ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-‘Uṯāridi] ← Yūnus ← Ibn Ishāq: It was transmitted to me that the Messenger of Allāh said referring to Zayd ibn ‘Amr ibn Nufayl, He was the first to blame me for worshipping idols and forbade me to worship them.


27 See his long entry in Ibn ‘Asākir, Taʾrīkh madinat Dimashq, ed. al-ʿAmrawi, XIX, pp. 493-516. See also Rubin, The Eye of the Beholder, pp. 47-48, 77-81, 88. Rubin discussed various aspects relating to the versions of Zayd’s meeting with Muḥammad. The evidence regarding Zayd is unique and calls for a separate analysis.

28 The partial parallel text in al-Rabīʾ ibn Ḥabīb al-Azāri al-Ṭāhirī, al-Jāmiʿ al-saḥīḥ musnad al-imām al-Rabiʾ ibn Ḥabīb, ed. Muḥammad Idrīs & ‘Ashīr ibn Yūsuf, p. 44 is even more explicit at this point through the addition of one word: ‘aḥaʾ alayya ibādatu l-ASNĀM; below, Appendix VI. The contemporary editors of this Musnad could not accept the account at face value and denied that Muḥammad had taken part in his tribe’s idol wor-
I had come from Ta‘if with Zayd ibn Hāritha and passed by Zayd ibn ‘Amr while he was in Upper Mecca (a’lā Makka). The Quraysh had rendered him notorious for abandoning their religion, until he went forth from among them and lived in Upper Mecca. I sat near him with a leather bag (sufra) carried by Zayd ibn Hāritha that contained meat from our sacrifices to our deities. I offered it to him – I was a young lad (ghulām shābb) at that time – and said, Have some of this food, uncle. He said, Nephew, perhaps it is from the animals that you sacrifice to your idols? I said, Yes. He said, Nephew, had you asked ‘Abd al-Muttalib’s daughters [i.e. Muhammad’s paternal aunts], they would have told you that I never eat of these sacrifices and do not need them. Then he denigrated the idols and those who worshipped them and sacrificed to them. He said, They are nothing but falsehood and do neither harm nor good, or words to that effect. The Messenger of Allāh said, After that I never stroked any of the idols (to draw blessing from it), having become aware of them, nor did I sacrifice to them until Allāh to Him belongs glory and power honoured me with his Mission.

Half a century ago Guillaume correctly described the account as one of outstanding importance and added that it had been expunged from Ibn Hishām’s recension. He also remarked that “[i]t is the only extant evidence of the influence of a monotheist on Muḥammad by way of admonition,” implying that it is factual. But it appears – and further research on this matter is needed – that those who were interested in glorifying the holy man, above all his descendants, were prepared to achieve their goal, so to speak, at Muḥammad’s expense.


30 This indicates that the event is supposed to have taken place many years before the Mission.

31 The mention of the aunts is yet another indication of Muḥammad’s young age. The tone is rather offensive.

32 The phrase ‘alā ma’rifā bihā is obscure.


Medieval scholars considered the account problematic. Al-Ḥarbi (d. 285/898) expressed unease about the reports that Muḥammad had consumed the meat of animals sacrificed to an idol. Perhaps Zayd ibn Ḥariritha sacrificed the animal at his own initiative, or Zayd innocently slaughtered it where an idol happened to be located. Allāh forbid, al-Ḥarbi said, that we should adopt the outward meaning of the account.  

35 Al-Suhaylī (d. 581/1185) wondered how Allāh guided Zayd to refrain from eating what had been sacrificed to idols, while Muḥammad had the better right to such guidance. 36 There is perhaps evidence of contemporary censorship regarding this matter. In the manuscript of al-Khargūshī’s Sharaf al-muṣṭafā quoted by M.J. Kister we find Zayd ibn Ḥariritha’s following statement: “The Prophet slaughtered a ewe for a certain idol; then he roasted it and carried it with him”. 37 The printed edition of this book has a milder version, according to which it was not Muḥammad who roasted the ewe but his companions. 38

35 Fa-ammā zāhir mā jā’a bihi l-hadīth fa-ma’ādha llāhī; al-Ḥarbi, Ḥarīb al-hadīth, ed. Sulaymān ibn Ḫarīm al-Ṭā’yid, s.v. n.ṣ.b., II, pp. 791-792. Al-Dhahabī, Siyār al-lām al-nubalā’, ed. Shu’ayb al-Ḥarnūwī et al., I, p. 127 denied that Zayd had followed Ibrāhīm’s shari’a properly or met someone who could initiate him into it: wa-qāla llahumma inni ‘alā din Ibrāhīm, wa-lākin lam yazar bi-shari’at Ibrāhīm ‘alayhi l-salām kamā yanbaghi wa-lā ra’ā man yiqfuhu ‘alayhī. Al-Dhahabī also argued (pp. 130-131) that Muḥammad had eaten the sacrifices of his tribe before the first revelation, when it was still permitted, exactly as wine had been lawful before it was forbidden.

36 Al-Suhayli, al-Rawd al-umrī, ed. Thāhā ’Abd al-Rahīm Sa’d, I, p. 256; Guillaume, New Light on the Life of Muḥammad, pp. 27-28. Kister (“A bag of meat: A study of an early hadith,” pp. 274-275) concluded that the discussion concerned “the essential problem of the ‘isma of the Prophet before he was granted prophethood. The main effort of the Muslim scholars was to prove that the Prophet did not eat meat slaughtered for idols, nor did he slaughter it, as he was granted immunity from sin before he received prophethood”. Kister (p. 275) remarked regarding a detailed account in the same vein found in al-Khargūshī’s Sharaf al-muṣṭafā: “The tradition of al-Khargūshī based on the idea that the Prophet had no ‘isma before his Mission belongs to the earliest layer of hadith - traditions which fell later into oblivion or were re-shaped or expunged”. See al-Khargūshī, Sharaf al-muṣṭafā, ed. Nabil Al Bā’alawi, I, pp. 455-460, no. 174.


The harlot from Yathrib and her jinni

The following account (Ibn Bukayr ← Ibn Ishāq) was expunged from Ibn Hishām’s epitome because it concerns a thing that may, according to Ibn Hishām, distress certain people:

Ahmad [ibn ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-‘Uṭāridi] ← Yūnus ← Ibn Ishāq: The Anṣār used to say about what they would hear from the Jews concerning the Messenger of Allāh: The first mention [of the Mission] in Medina before the Mission of the Messenger of Allāh was this: Fāṭimah mother of al-Nu‘mān ibn ‘Amr of the Banū l-Najjar was one of the harlots (baghāyā) of the Jāhiliyya. She had a jinnī (tābi), and used to say that whenever he came to her, he would storm (iqtahama) into the room in which she was, regardless of the others who were in it [for whom he was invisible].39 [This went on] until he came to her one day, collapsed on the wall and did not do what he usually did [i.e. have intercourse with her]. She said to him, What’s the matter with you today? He said, A prophet was sent prohibiting harlotry.40

The jinnī’s admission of defeat means that the prohibition of harlotry went into force with immediate effect, and hence he could no longer continue his former way of life. The story shows that in pre-Islamic Medina a love affair between a jinnī male and a woman was not unthinkable. Obviously the woman in question gained special spiritual powers through her jinnī.41 The account was included in Ibn Ishāq’s biography of Muḥammad not because of the light that it sheds on pre-Islamic Medinan society, but because it belongs to the dalā‘il al-nubuwwa or the proofs of Muḥammad’s prophethood. More specifically, it belongs to the dalā‘il subgroup that includes testimonies of jinnīs who realized through the loss of their special status and powers that the world had changed for good.

39 Guillaume, New Light on the Life of Muḥammad, p. 26: “[Whenever] he came to her, the house became intensely dark to those who were in it”. Guillaume opted for the reading iftahama instead of iqtahama, although he admitted that the former could not be found in the lexicons.
40 Ibn Ishāq, Sira, ed. Ḥamidullāh, p. 92, no. 122; Ibn Ishāq, Kitāb al-siyar wa-l-maghāzi, ed. Zakkār, p. 113; Guillaume, New Light on the Life of Muḥammad, pp. 25-26; below, Appendix VIII.
41 Jinnī females were said to have married humans: ‘Amr ibn Yarbū’ ibn Hanzala of the Tamīm had a jinnī wife; Wellhausen, Reste arabischen Heidentums, p. 154. In Wellhausen, Reste arabischen Heidentums, n. 1, with regard to the kidnapping of Sinān ibn Abī Ħārizah by the jinn to be used as “stallion,” there is a misprint: read istafḥalathu instead of istafḥalathu; see. e.g. Ibn ‘Asākir, Dimashq, XVI, pp. 338-339.
Fāṭima’s occupation is a background detail, and as such it is trustworthy. Her pedigree which is found in an entry about her son, al-Nu’(ay)mān ibn ’Amr runs as follows: Fāṭima bint ’Amr ibn Aṭîyya ibn Khansāʾ ibn Mābdhūl ibn ’Amr. The pedigree shows that she belonged to the Najjār branch of the Khazraj, more precisely to the Māzin ibn al-Najjār subsection.42 Her husband belonged to another subsection of the Najjār, namely Ghanm ibn Mālik ibn al-Najjār. His pedigree is: ’Amr ibn Rifāʿa ibn al-Ḥārith ibn Sawād ibn Ghanm ibn Mālik ibn al-Najjār. Their son al-Nuʿ(ay)mān was a companion of Muḥammad with a penchant for practical jokes and a drinking problem.43

There are two other versions regarding the harlot’s identity. While confirming that she was from the Najjār, they offer no pedigree and probably aim at obscuring her identity so as to protect her family’s reputation. One source calls her Fukayha of the Najjār,44 while another source, which similarly states her Najjār affiliation, calls her Fāṭima bint al-Nuʿmān.45 According to al-Suhaylī, the woman was referred to as Fāṭima bint al-Nuʿmān in a recension of Ibn Isḥāq’s biography other than al-Bakkāʾī’s.46 Beside the woman’s name there are several

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43 Ibn Saʿd, al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā, Beirut, III, pp. 493-494. When he was drunk, he killed a fellow member of the Najjār; Ibn ʿAsākir, Dimashq, LXII, p. 148. It may be of interest that he had nine children born by different slave girls and only one born by a freeborn woman; Ibn Saʿd, al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā, Beirut, III, p. 493. One or two years before Muḥammad’s death he reached Buṣrā with Abū Bakr and another Qurashi called Suwaybīt on a trading mission, which is why Ibn ʿAsākir, Dimashq, LXII, pp. 139-149 included him in his History of Damascus. For entries on Suwaybīt see e.g. Ibn Manzūr, Mukhtaṣar taʾrikh Dimashq li-Ibn ʿAsākir, ed. Rūḥiyya al-Nahlās et alī, X, pp. 213-214; Ibn Hājar, Isāba, s.v., III, pp. 222-223. Guillaume argued (New Light on the Life of Muḥammad, p. 25, n. 3) that the harlot’s son was a Jew who was hostile to Muḥammad. He concluded (New Light on the Life of Muḥammad, p. 26) that Jews were regarded as members of the Najjār, the tribe of the prophet’s maternal relations. But the Jew al-Nuʿmān ibn ʿAmr belonged to the Qaynuqāʾ; Ibn Ḥishām, Das Leben Muḥammsds, pp. 352, 383.
45 Ibn Saʿd, al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā, I, Beirut, p. 167; below, Appendix IX. Ibn Saʿd quotes a series of dalāʾil al-mubawwā accounts including this one from ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad al-Madāʾinī. Three of al-Madāʾinī’s accounts go back to ʿAlī ibn Muḥājir who at some time officiated as the qaḍī of Rayy. According to some, he had a bad reputation as a hadīth transmitter and compiled a book entitled Kitāb al-magḥāzī; al-Mīzzi, Tahdhīḥ al-kamāl, ed. Bashshār ʿAwwād Maʿrūf, XXI, pp. 117-120. Two of the three accounts go back to Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq. See also al-Damiri, Hayāt al-ḥayawan al-kubrā, I, p. 294; below, Appendix X.

other differences between the text that al-Suhayli quoted from the unspecified recension of Ibn Iṣḥāq and Ibn Bukayr’s text. This shows that at least two recensions of Ibn Iṣḥāq’s biography contained this account.

Harlotry must have been common in pre-Islamic Arabia, especially in connection with its markets and fairs. But the case of Fāṭima is of special interest, because harlots were usually slave girls, not freeborn women. 47

A similar account of a jīnī relates to an unspecified woman in Mecca who belonged to the Asad ibn ‘Abd al-Uzzā branch of the Quraysh tribe. Her jīnī informed her of an unbearable grave matter that had occurred, namely that Aḥmad (i.e. Muḥammad) had prohibited harlotry. When Allāh brought Islam, they (i.e. the jinnīs) were barred from eavesdropping, i.e. they could no longer listen and uncover the goings on in Heaven. 48

Ibn Iṣḥāq’s account about the harlot from Yathrib/Medina could indeed distress certain people, i.e. her direct descendants and her other family members.

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According to an account found in Abū l-‘Arab’s Kitāb al-miḥān, Ibn Iṣḥāq was flogged twice by the governor of Medina for disclosing faults in the genealogy of his fellow Medinans: “He was an expert on genealogy and no family in Medina was spared the faults that he discovered in its genealogy. Hence the people of Medina treated him with hostility”. The governor of Medina had him flogged once, but he did

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46 Al-Suhayli, Rawd, I, p. 239; below, Appendix XI. The story of Fāṭima bint al-Nuʿmān is also found in Ibn al-Jawzi, al-Wafā bi-ahwāl al-muṣṭafā, ed. Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Wāḥid, p. 154 where it is preceded by an account along the same lines (← Jābir) in which the woman’s name and tribal affiliation are unspecified and the jinnī has the form of a bird.

47 Cf. the so-called “harlots of Ḥadramawt”. Upon hearing of Muḥammad’s death, twenty-odd harlots (baghāyū) emulated six women from the Kinda and Ḥadramawt; the latter rejoiced by dying their hands with henna and playing on tambourines. A parallel text refers to these women as singing girls (qiyyān) from the Kinda and prostitutes (‘awāhir) from the Ḥadramawt who dyed their hands, exposed their charms and played on tambourines. In fact they were respectable women of various Kindite and Ḥadramite clans; Lecker, “Judaism among Kinda and the ṭidda of Kinda,” pp. 646-649.

48 Ibn Sa’d, al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā, I, Beirut, p. 167; below, Appendix XII.

49 Chabbi, “Jinn”.

not give up his genealogical research and was flogged again. Ibn Ishāq comes through as a man who did not shy away from treading on people’s toes and had no fear of the Umayyad governor. Ibn Ishāq’s character and, as it were, his origin – his grandfather was Jewish – are comparable to those of another famous mawla, namely Abū ‘Ubayda Ma’mar ibn al-Muthannā (d. 210/825) who was similarly of Jewish descent. The latter made himself extremely unpopular by specializing, among other topics, in mathālib or “faults,” often those linked to genealogy.

Ibn Hishām, who must have been a more conventional person, omitted many of his predecessor’s materials, which probably contributed to the popularity of his epitome. Beside improper verses he also expunged details and accounts that were incongruous with Muhammad’s image, or could offend the offspring of Muhammad’s companions. Censorship and self-censorship applied in Ibn Ishāq’s biography of Muhammad and in its epitome belong to the social and political context of both books.

Appendices

Appendix I: Ibn Hishām, Das Leben Muhammeds, 898-899

قال ابن اسحاق وقد كان رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم يحب أن يرغم الناس بغيره فلا راح قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم لا تشددوا من يأتي شينا ولا تتوضؤوا منه للصلاة وما كان من عجيبة فاعلموا الإبل ولا تأكلوا منه شينا ولا يخرجوا أحد منكم الليلة إلا ومعه صاحب له فعل الناس ما أمره به رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم إلا أن رجلين من بني ساعدة خرج أحدهما لحاجته وخرج الآخر في طلب بعير له فأما الذي ذهب لحاجته فإنه خنق على مذهبه وأما الذي ذهب في طلب بعيره فاحتمله الريح حتى طرحته بجبلة طيء فأخير بذلك رسول الله صلى الله صلى الله عليه وسلم فقال ألم أنه كأن

51 Lecker, “Muḥammad ibn Ishāq saḥīb al-maghāzī: was his grandfather Jewish?” (forthcoming).
52 Lecker, “Biographical notes on Abū ’Ubayda Ma’mar b. al-Muthannā”.

يرجيح منكم أحد إلا ومعه صاحبه ثم دعا للذي أصيب على مذهب فشفي وأما الآخر
الذي وقع بجيلى طي فإن طيبا أمهدته للرسول صلى الله صلما حين قدم المدينة.
والحديث عن الرجلين عن عبد الله بن أبي بكر عن عباس بن سهل بن سعد الساعدي
وقد حدثني عبد الله بن أبي بكر أن قد سمعى له العبسان الرجلين ولكنه استودعه إياهما
فأجاب عبد الله أن يسميهما لي.

Appendix II: Wāqīdī, Maghāzī, III, 1005-1006
قال أبو خميس الساعدي خرجنا مع رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم إلى تبوك فلمما جئنا
وادي القرى مرروا على حديثة لأمرآة فقال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم
اخرصوها فخرجزها رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم وخرصانها معه عشرة أوساق
ثم قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم احفظي ما خرج منها حتى نرجع إليك.
فلما أمسينا بالحجر قال إنها ستهب الليلة ريح شديدة فلا يقومن أحد منكم إلا مع
صاحب ومن كان له يعبر فليلوئق عقاله قال فهاجته ريح شديدة ولم يقم أحد إلا مع
صاحب إلا رجلين من بني ساعدة خرج أحدهما لحاجته وخرج الآخر في طلب
بيعره فأما الذي ذهب لحاجته فإنه خنق على مذهب وأما الذي ذهب في طلب بيعره
فاحتجت الريح فطرحته بجيلى طي فأخرج رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم خبرهما
فقال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم ألم أنهكم أن يخرج رجل إلا ومعه صاحب له ثم دعا
الذي (أ) أصيب على مذهب فشفي وأما الآخر الذي وقع بجيلى طي فإن طيبا أمهدته
للنبي صلى الله عليه وسلم حين قدم المدينة.

53 Add...

أخبرنا حمید أبا أوس أبا أخی عن سليمان بن بلال عن عمرو بن بحی
المزمنی عن عباس بن سهل الساعدي عن أبا حمید صاحب رسول الله صلى الله
عليه وسلم أن رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم خرج إلى تبوك قال أبو حمید وخرجنا
معه فلما جننا الوادي مرنا على حديثة لأمرأة فقال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم
اخرصوها فخرصناها وخرصها رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم عشرة أسوق ثم قال
لها احتفظي بها خرج منها حتى نرجع إليك فلما رجعنا مرنا على المرأة فسألناه
رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم عما خرج من حديثتها فقالت خرج منها عشرة
أسوق.

Appendix IV: Muslim’s Ṣaḥīḥ, IV, 1785-1786 (Kitāb al-faḍā’il, no. 11)

حدثنا عبد الله بن مسلمة بن قعنة حدثنا سليمان بن بلال عن عمرو بن بحی
عن عباس بن سهل بن سعد الساعدي عن أبا حمید قال خرجنا مع رسول الله صلى الله
عليه وسلم غزوة تبوك فأتينا وادي القرى على حدفاده لأمرأة فقال رسول الله صلى الله
عليه وسلم اخرصوها فخرصناها وخرصها رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم
عشرة أسوق وقال أخسبيها حتى نرجع إليك إن شاء الله وانطلقنا حتى قدمنا تبوك
 فقال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم ستهب عليكم الليلة ريح شديدة فلا يقم فيها أحد
منكم فمن كان له بعير فليشد يقال له ريح شديدة فقام رجل فحملته الريح حتى
اختلطت بيجلی طيء ووجه رسول ابن العلماء صححب أبیة إلى رسول الله صلى الله
عليه وسلم بكتاب وأهدي له بعلة بيضاء فكتب إليه رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم
وهدي له بردأ ثم أقبلنا حتى قدمنا وادي القری فسأل رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم
المرأة عن حديثتها كم بلغ ثمرها فقالت عشرة أسوق.

Appendix V: Ibn Hishām, Das Leben Muhammeds, 4

Appendix VI: Al-Rabī’ ibn Ḥabīb, Musnad, 44

55 Kister, “A bag of meat,” p. 270: “approached them with reverence”.

Appendix VII: Ibn 'Asākir, Dimashq, XIX, 507

نا أحمد نا يونس عن ابن إسحاق قال فحدثت أن رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم قال:

"وهو يحدث عن زيد بن عمرو إن كان لأول من عاب على الأثاث ونهائي عنها أقبلت من الطائف ومظفر زيد بن حامرة حتى مررت بزيد بن عمرو بن نفيل وهو بايعًا مكة وكانت قريش قد شرته بفراغ دينها حتى خرج من بين أثاثهم وكان بايعًا مكة فجلست إليه ومعي سفرة لي فيها لحم بجملها زيد بن حامرة من ذيانها على أصنامنا فقربتنا له وأنا غلام شاب فقلت كل من هذا الطعام أي عم قال فلعلها أي ابن أخي من ذبيانكم هذه التي تذبحون لأثاثكم فقلت نعم فقال أما إنك يا ابن أخي لو سألت بنات عبد المطلب لأخبرك أن لا أنص من الذبيان فلا حاجة لي بها ثم عاب الأثاث ومن يعبده وربح لها وقال إنما هي باطل لا تضر ولا تمنع أو كما قال قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم فما تسمحت بوثن منها بعد ذلك على معرفة بها ولا ذبحت لها حتى أكرميني الله تعالى برسالته صلى الله عليه وسلم.

Appendix VIII: Ibn Ishāq, Sīra, ed. Hamīdullāh, 92, no. 122

حدثنا أحمد نا يونس عن ابن إسحاق قال وكان هذا الحي من الأنصار يتحدثون مما كانوا يسمعون من يهود من ذكر رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم أن أول ذكر وقع بالمدينة قبل مبعث رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم أن فاطمة أم النبي بن عمرو أخي بن بني النجار وكانت من بغائها الجاهلية وكان لها تابع فأثقت أنه كان إذا جاءها اقتحم البيت الذي هي فيه اقتحاماً على من فيه حتى جاءها يوماً ووقع على الجدار ولم يصنع كما كان يصنع فقالت له ما لكي اليوم قال بعث نبي بتحريم الزنا.

أخبارنا على بن محمد عن علي بن مجاهد عن محمد بن إسحاق عن عاصم بن عمر
بن قادة عن علي بن حسين قال كانت امرأة في بني النجار يقال لها فاطمة بنت
النعمان كان لها تابع من الجن فكان يأتيها فأتاهه حين هاجر النبي صلى الله عليه
 وسلم فانقض على الحائط فقالت ما لك لم تأت كما كنت تأتي قال قد جاء النبي الذي
يرحمر الزنا والخمر.

Appendix X: al-Damirī, *Ḥayāt al-Ḥayawān*, I, 294

وفي أيضا أن فاطمة بنت النعهان التجارية قالت قد كان لي تابع من الجن فكان إذا
جاء اقتحم البيت الذي أنا فيه افتحما فاجأتني يوما فوقف على البدار ولم يصنع كما
كان يصنع فقلت ما بالك لم تصنع ما كنت تصنف صنعيك قبل فقال إنه قد بعث اليوم
نبي يحرم الزنا.

Appendix XI: al-Suhayli, *Rawd*, I, 239

وفي غير رواية البكاني عن ابن إسحاق أن فاطمة بنت النعهان التجارية كان لها
تابع من الجن وكان إذا جاءها افتحم عليها في بيتها فلما كان في أول البعث أتاهما
فقعد على حائط الدار ولم يدخل فقالت له لا تدخل فقال قد بعث النبي بتحريم الزنا
فذلك أول ما ذكر النبي صلعم بالمدينة.

Appendix XII: Ibn Sa’d, *al-Tabaqāt al-kubrā*, I, 167

أخبارنا على بن محمد عن عبد الله بن محمذ القرشي من بني أسد بن عبد العزيز عن
الزهري قال كان الأجنبي يستمع وكان لامرأة من بني أسد تابعها يوما وهو
يصبح جاء أمر لا يطلق أحمد حرم الزنا فلما جاء الله بالإسلام منعوا الاستماع.

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**Recibido:** 29/07/2013
**Aceptado:** 21/01/2014