

Kecia Ali,

The Lives of Muhammad,

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Lives of Muhammad is not the life story of Prophet Muhammad. Rather than tracing the true facts of Muhammad's life, Kecia Ali examines the prophet's biographies written by both Muslims and non-Muslims in the centuries after his death. As she states, "it is a book not about the life of Muhammad but about the ways in which his life has been told" (p. 1) According to her, the perception of Muhammad has dramatically changed over centuries. This diverse, multifaceted and changeable nature of Sira literature is widely known. However, less well-known is that since the nineteenth century, as Ali points out, "they [Muhammad's biographies] have become increasingly interdependent. In the twenty first century, it makes no sense to speak of the Muslim views of Muhammad in opposition to Western or Christian views" (p. 2).

The author's comprehensive overviews of Prophet Muhammad's biographies aim to demonstrate the interdependencies between the discourses in Islam and the West. Her study also challenges Huntington's well-known theory of the "clash of civilization" in which cultural and religious identities are presented as the main source of conflict between the Christian West and the Muslim East, two irreversibly separated entities. However, Ali states that in time Muslim and non-Muslim writers have compromised on certain methodological issues such as questions, evidence and facts via modern printing, mass dissemination of the publications, and recent exchanges of scholars between the East and West. They have achieved shared values and assumptions on Prophet Muhammad's life, and a moderate body of literature, neither Western nor Eastern, has eventually been constituted.

The book consists of six thematic chapters: "The Historical Muhammad," "A True Prophet," "Eminent Muslims," "The Wife of Muhammad," "Mother of the Faithful," "An Enlightened Man." A simple chronology of fourteen events, which include the migration to Medina, Battle of Badr and Uhud and the Conquest of Mecca, appear in the book before the Introduction. However, there is little mention of such issues in the book itself. His marriages to Khadija and Aisha, his night journey and the Banu Qurayza incident mostly compose the headlines of such chronology.

In essence, Kecia Ali focuses on the biographies written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries although she also briefly mentions the earlier accounts. She aims to reveal the interconnection between non-Muslim biographers from Britain and North America and Muslim biographers who wrote English responses from Egypt and India. One of the deficiencies of the book is that it does not touch upon works by other Muslims from different countries. She restricts Prophet Muhammad's life to Arab cultures only. There is almost no reference to Turkish or Persian biographies in the book and Indian sources are insufficient to draw a whole picture. There could be two reasons for this exclusivist attitude. First, Ali does not know Turkish, Persian or any other language spoken by the Muslims in different parts of the world. Second, the non-English speaking academia of Muslims does not publish in English. To some extent such restrictions are necessary and understandable to draw the borders of a wide-ranging research like that of Ali; but in any case, this exclusion jeopardizes the main arguments of the study that excludes the biographies and thus misses the possibility of introducing different narratives about the perception of the Prophet Muhammad. Moreover, Although Kecia Ali includes several biographies extended to certain centuries, she fails to explain or defend them. The reader cannot understand the author's analysis or approach to certain events. In addition, the connection among the chapters is not sufficiently strong. Apart from the chronological order, they lack coherence. Nevertheless, it still provides a wide-range of information and it is an updated biography for students, scholars and others interested in the processes of the Prophet Muhammad's life story.

At the beginning of each chapter, Ali gives an excerpt from a conventional narrative of Muhammad's life and constructs her narrative around these excerpts. In the first chapter, she touches upon the historical Muhammad. On the basis of the Hagarism debate¹, Ali seeks answers to the questions such as what one can really know about Muhammad and how one can know this information, or as to whether or not Muhammad really existed (p. 11). In the issue of reliability of early sources there is a divergence of opinion in the field. Some of them believe that traditionally transmitted sources are fabrication, whereas others remain optimistic about earlier sources, although they preserve their skepticism. Daniel Peterson

1 Hagarism is a book published in 1977 by the historians Patricia Crone and Michael Cook who refused to rely on Islamic sources by questioning the basic outlines of early Muslim history. Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

produced more moderate remarks by stating, “If we were to restrict ourselves entirely to the undisputed facts of Muhammad biography, we should run out of information after only a few pages” (p.12). So, to some extent, one has to trust the narratives about him.

In the medieval accounts, Muhammad was depicted as a heretic, fraud and false prophet. The understanding of the false prophet converged in the eighteenth century within the three overlapping bodies of literature: Orientalist scholarship, Enlightenment thought, and Christian apologetic. In the period of Enlightenment, all religions were considered false and discussion went beyond the prophecy of Muhammad. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries western scholarship on Arabic and Islam gained speed and paved the way for the flourishing of different approaches about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. With the Qur’an and the Prophet’s medieval biographies being translated into the western languages, the European perception dramatically shifted.

In the second chapter, Ali mentions the affirmation of Muhammad’s prophethood within the tradition of Biblical prophecy, through his encounter with certain Christian figures. Khadija’s Christian cousin Waraqa’s confirmation of Muhammad’s revelation and the monk Bahira’s recognition of the seal of the prophecy indicate the non-Muslim affirmation of his prophethood. Ali sheds light on early Muslims’ Biblical categories and miracles that prove Muhammad’s true prophecy as well as the superiority of Islam against the Christian opponent. Then the theme of rebutting western misconceptions becomes ubiquitous in studies of Islam. Syed Ahmad Khan and Amer Ali’s names come to the forefront as upper-class reformer Muslims. These English-educated people’s attempts to correct the western misunderstanding of Islam provide agreement on standards of the proof and dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims. They problematize the same sort of questions as European scholars. Even the miracles of Muhammad are opened up to the discussion. Many European writers and reformer Muslims emphasize Muhammad’s humanity and see the function of miracles as unnecessary to fulfill Muhammad’s mission as prophet. Islam as a more rational religion diminishes the role of miracles in the eyes of both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars.

In the third chapter, Ali dwells on Pakistani scholar Fakir Syed Waheed-Ud-Din’s *Benefactor* (1987) and Egyptian Muhammad Husayn Haykal’s *The Life of Muhammad* (2005). Both works are modern biographies that drew on the Muslim

reform movements. According to these authors, Muhammad was not only the political or religious leader of the Islamic society but also a social reformer. They present a less religious Muhammad, free of miracles. When Ali refers to the aforementioned approaches of modern Muslim scholars, she concurrently reveals the ongoing relationships with European writers (p. 103).

In the fourth and fifth chapters, Ali focuses on Muhammad's marriages. For several modern authors, his marriage to Khadija is important for showing who Muhammad really was. Through his marriage, he is depicted as a man rather than a prophet. If one pays attention to the headlines of Muhammad's life stories, it can be seen that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, biographies turned into life stories and religious titles were transformed into personal names. The subject of such studies was no longer the prophet, the God's messenger, but a man (p. 116). In this chapter, Ali touches upon the controversial issues in the Prophet's life and offers plausible explanations taken from certain biographies. For instance, the symbolic significance of the number forty is crucial in the Prophet's story, because at the age of forty, he received the first revelation and married Khadija (p. 120). In the Sunni tradition, Khadija was praised due to her impunity and neutrality against the sectarian threat. On the other hand, the prophet's remarriages after Khadija's death have been questioned by many authors. Believing that the power corrupts, some European authors defend that Muhammad's increasing social status changed his attitude towards marriage. In addition, polygamy was a custom of the seventh-century Arab society. One cannot judge the Prophet's attitude from a modern point of view (p. 132). The protection of the widows within the institution of marriage was another possible explanation of the Prophet's marriages. "Author after author" as Ali points out, "Muslims and non-Muslims insisted that Muhammad's motives were political and therefore salutary rather than lustful and therefore deplorable" (p. 144). After centuries of European criticism of the Prophet's lustfulness and lechery, modern historiography replaced such arguments with his pre-marital chastity and his longtime fidelity to Khadija became proof to his sexual morality.

On the other hand, the marriage age of Aisha was another topic of debate among scholars. In the literature, Muhammad's marriage to Aisha has been associated with his lustfulness and polygamy. Many authors believe that the girls who live in hot climates mature rapidly and at the age of nine or ten they become suitable for marriage. Many argue that Aisha was betrothed at the age of seven, and then the marriage was consummated when she turned nine. Since this was the

custom at the time, the accusations of children abuse and pedophilia are frivolous and anachronistic.

In the last chapter, Ali mentions the recent biographies written by academics, (Jonathan Brown, Tarif Khalidi, Daniel Peterson, Omid Safi), journalists (Lesley Hazelton, Barnaby Rogerson), public intellectuals (Karen Amstong, Tariq Ramazdan), and spiritual figures (Deepak Chopra), as well as poet Elliott Weinberger and professional polemicist Robert Spencer. With the exception of Spencer's accounts, others carry positive attitudes towards Muhammad's life and present more accurate information. They also take into account the Beni Qurayza incident and offers different approaches to this sad event in Muhammad's life. Likewise, in the previous chapter, Ali had remained neutral and refrained from attributing a meaning to the ongoing debates.

In conclusion, pre-modern biographers recount Muhammad's prophethood with his special seal of prophecy and his miraculous ascent into heaven, while modern biographers reconstruct his life as an ideal statesman or social reformer. The enlightenment critique of the religion, the growth of academic Orientalism and the rise of colonialism have led to an increased interplay between Muslim and non-Muslim narratives of Muhammad's life. Today, there is a more moderate depiction of the Prophet. However, this does not mean that twenty-first century accounts are free from prejudices. The Danish cartoon debacle and the Charlie Hebdo cartoon are two recent examples of such misconceptions showing that they still exist in the non-Muslim societies. However, the main reason behind the changing perception of Muhammad in historiography is the Europeans' own intellectual development. The interconnection between Muslim and non-Muslim authors, emphasized throughout the book, are actually a following of western counterparts by the Muslims scholars. Western texts, ideas, and strategies shape the Muslim history writing of Prophet Muhammad and directed them into historicist explanations.

Merve Uçar Nurcan
İstanbul Şehir University