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James Holeman
University of North Florida

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Looking Behind the Veil of an Idealized Past: The Useful Legacy of a False Prophet

James Holeman

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Paul Halsall,
Assistant Professor of History

Traditional Muslim narratives maintain that in 632 C.E., while the Prophet Muhammad (c. 570-632) was on his deathbed, several Arabian tribes apostatized from Islam only to be “recaptured” by Muslim armies during a series of wars fought under the first Caliph Abu Bakr.¹ Muslim traditions attributed leadership of those “apostate” movements to a number of “false prophets.”² The most notorious of these “enemies of God” was Musaylima B. Habib, otherwise known as the “arch-liar” and the “false prophet” of Yamamah. Several scholars have attempted a historical reconstruction of Musaylima’s career, but the problematic

¹ I will use the Common Era (C.E.) dating system for most of this work, although I will occasionally reference the Muslim dating system (A.H. or After *Hijra*, 622 C.E.), which bases year one on the date of Muhammad’s pilgrimage from Mecca to Medina, and signifies the advent of the Muslim polity.

² For an excellent analysis of the suppression of the so-called “wars of apostasy” in the Arabian Peninsula, see Elias Shoufani, *Al-Riddah and the Muslim Conquest of Arabia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973). Shoufani rightfully asserts that the “wars of apostasy”, or *ridda*, was a literary construct used by Muslim scholars to describe the expansion of the early Muslim community. He asserts (as do the primary sources) that the Bedouin tribes that accepted Medinan suzerainty during Muhammad’s lifetime, and shook off the Muslim yoke after his death, only nominally accepted Islam during the lifetime of the Prophet.

nature of the primary source material renders such an undertaking as an exercise in futility.³ While early Muslim scholars claimed that they only repeated the traditions concerning Musaylima’s “apostasy,” in practice they relied on a redacted oral tradition, and included or excluded certain stories and details about Musaylima – depending on the purpose, sponsor and intended audience of the author’s work. Although Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi’s accounts of the legend of Musaylima provide certain limited insights into Musaylima’s movement, the growth and evolution of the Musaylima legend in early Islamic historiography is a better indication of the changing construct of heresy and the evolving construct of communal authority in the first three centuries of Islam.

Muhammad’s preeminent title of the “Seal of the Prophets” necessitated that Caliphs take on at least the veneer of rule based on prophetic precedent. For this reason, a number of Abbasid Caliphs sponsored scholars in an effort to legitimize their policies, laws, and right to rule. Although these early Muslims scholars claimed that they only collected and transmitted traditions about the life of Muhammad, the editorial process played a significant factor in the transmission of early biographical material for Islam’s Prophet, as well as his arch-nemesis Musaylima. In this case study, the primary sources reveal that these

³ For a summary of Western scholarly analysis of Musaylima, see Dale F. Eickelman, “Musaylima: An Approach to the Social Anthropology of Seventh Century Arabia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 10 (1967): 17-52. For a listing of the Arabic source material for Musaylima, consult W. Montgomery Watt’s article “Musaylima,” in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*.

editorial craftsmen tailored the legacy of Musaylima to serve a number of purposes. These purposes ranged from issues of theology and law to issues of land ownership and taxation. Early Muslim scholars operated under the illusion that they mechanically transmitted the sacred history of early Islam. Through the purposeful selection of information, these scholars painted detailed portraits of Muhammad and his foes.

Scholars sponsored by the caliphal office, over a number of years, produced a series of texts, which reflect a concerted propaganda campaign aimed at shaping the historical record in favor of ruling dynasties. As the needs of the dynasty in power changed, the historical record reflected these changes. These changes were inspired by a variety of factors, including agitation from below urging social reform, the direct financial interests of the caliphate, defamation of a host of potential political rivals, and evolving definitions of orthodox belief. In addition to exploring the various ways early Muslim authors used the legacy of Musaylima, I hope this work will offer a modest contribution to the ongoing debate concerning methodological approaches to early Islamic history.

Regardless of whether Muhammad claimed to be a Prophet sent to the Arabs or to all of humanity, the Umayyad leadership was slow to encourage conversion to Islam in their realms. After all, the Caliph Umar established the precedent of dividing the spoils of war based on the order in which families converted to Islam.⁴ Tracing one's genealogy became a very

⁴ Gordon Darnell Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 5.

important factor in determining one's social and economic status. However, as inequalities within the *umma* grew, a number of questions persisted – how should the wealth and tax burden be distributed?⁵ Were Muslims not equal in the sight of God? Periodic Umayyad reform attempts reflected both pushes for conversion of the non-Arab subject population to Islam, and also attempts to mollify the economic grievances of the non-Arab *mawali* converts to Islam.⁶ This trend from “Arab” governance to “Islamic” governance also reflected a concerted scholarly effort to articulate a universal interpretation of Islam. The Umayyad failure to reform resulted in periodic rebellions that culminated in the Abbasid revolution.⁷ Abbasid sponsored

⁵ The term *umma* is generally translated as “nation” or “community,” and refers to the Muslim polity created by Muhammad in the constitution of Medina. Check R.B. Serjeant, “The Sunnah Jami’ah, Pacts with the Yathrib Jews, and the Tahrir of Yathrib: Analysis and Translation of the Documents Comprised in the so-called ‘Constitution of Medina’,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London 41 (1978): 1-42. Also see the same author in “The Constitution of Medina,” *The Islamic Quarterly* 8 (1964): 3-16. Also see Gil Moshe, “The Constitution of Medina: A Reconsideration,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 4 (1974): 44-66. For a monograph on the topic, check Muhammad Hamidullah, *The First Written Constitution in the World: An Important Document in the Time of the Holy Prophet*, 3d ed. (Lahore (Pakistan): Kashmiri Bazar, 1975).

⁶ For an in-depth discussion of the process by which non-Arabs entered into clientage (*mawali*) relationships with Arab patrons upon conversion to Islam, and the social structure that resulted there from, see Patricia Crone, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law: The Origins of the Islamic Patronate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁷ Michael Morony, “Bayn al-Fitnatayn: Problems of Periodization in Early Islamic History,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 40, no. 3 (1981): 247-51. My discussion of early Islamic history utilizes Moroney's suggested

scholars incorporated traditions about the Prophet into historical accounts that explained the past and present for ruling dynasties. As we shall see, these texts say more about the consensus of the scholarly circles that produced them than they do about the actual events they attempted to portray.

The basic outline of the history of the early Muslim community is as follows: During the lifetime of Muhammad, when social problems arose, Muhammad simply called on God for divine prescription. Thus, over the period of about twenty-three years, Muhammad delivered a divinely ordained social program for the nascent Muslim community. His revelations, codified in the Qur'an, must have provided brilliant answers to the social problems of early seventh century Arabia. However, Muhammad had no surviving sons, and made no provision for the leadership of the Muslim community after his death.⁸ In addition,

periodization of early Islamic history. Morony calls for a redefinition of how historians divide Islamic history. He argues that the traditional divisions, which are based on dynastic rulers, and offer little insight into social and economic trends. He insists, "...the Islamic empire was itself the political expression of an expanding economy (p. 249)." He notes, "...the caliphate of Mu'awiya may also be seen in social terms as the political expression of a new, composite, post-conquest elite that provided local backing for it (p. 249)." During the early Umayyad period, important trends included the extension of the state, and the divine legitimization of political power. Morony asks that the new divisions of Islamic history focus on a period of expansion, followed by a period of contraction (i.e. 620s until the second decade of the eighth century) (p. 250). Morony prefers to see a period of centralization (i.e. from the reign of 'Uthman until the ninth century), followed by a period of decentralization (p. 251).

⁸ M. J. Kister, "The Sons of Khadija," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 16 (1995): 59-95.

Muhammad's exclusive claim to be God's final and most authoritative Prophet ensured that the future discourse of the Muslim community would revolve around the historical paradigm of his revelations. After all, God's truth was timeless. Muhammad taught that human innovation had corrupted the revelations of God's previous messengers to the Jews and Christians.

His successors, the "rightly guided" caliphs, violently suppressed the "apostasy" of the many Arabian tribes that rejected the authority of the caliph upon the death of Muhammad, and embarked on one of the most rapid and successful military conquests in history.⁹ These early caliphs enjoyed an enormous amount of authority based on their personnel connection to the Prophet. At first, leadership passed smoothly from Abu Bakr (r. 632-34) to Umar (r. 634-44). However, upon the death of Umar, Uthman (r. 644-56) took over the caliphate. At this point, Muslims began to disagree over how succession to the leadership of the Muslim community should proceed. Ali (r. 656-61) was the Prophet's cousin, and many thought that leadership of the *umma* belonged to the family of the Prophet. Many perceived the ascent of the Umayyad clan as the usurpation of the caliphate by those who were formerly Muhammad's Meccan enemies.

⁹ Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1998), 200-203. Donner says, "...it is not clear when this concept of *rida* actually arose as a separate historiographical category, distinct from *futuh* (p. 200)." Donner also references several important sources for the formation of *rida* writings. He says that *rida* writings were developed between 150-206 A.H. for the "...justification of Muslim rule over non-Muslims, stressing pride in participation by individuals or groups in early battles, etc..."

Upon the assassination of Uthman, the issue of succession became acute, culminating in a military showdown between Mu'awiyah (founder of the Umayyad dynasty, r. 661-80) and Ali. Based on his close relationship with Muhammad, Ali held the loyalty of many Iraqi Muslims from his base in Kufa. Mu'awiyah had the support of the battle-hardened, frontline Syrian troops, as well as his family's Syrian merchant connections.¹⁰ Ali was implicated in the assassination of Uthman, which tarnished his religious credentials, and necessitated that Mu'awiyah claim blood vengeance. The issue of who had the right to rule need not concern us, because Mu'awiyah had the strength to rule – perhaps the best evidence for “divine” sanction. Ali lost a considerable amount of his support because he agreed to arbitration rather than a military solution. The Kharijites believed that a military solution would have allowed God to decide between the contenders.¹¹ Different interpretations of legitimate political authority led to factionalism that plagued the Arab state, and would continue to dominate future Muslim politico-religious discourse. Since God demanded unity (*tawhid*), each faction passed on traditions that reflected their versions of the divisive struggle over power – political challengers were often cast into the mold of schismatic heretics.

The 'Alid, the descendants of Ali and Fatima, claimed the right to rule based on an apostolic succession that involved the passing down of God given

authority and esoteric knowledge. The 'Alid provoked frequent rebellions, and presented themselves as the rightful leaders of the Muslim community.¹² They portrayed the Umayyads as usurpers who erred in basing their rule on royal authority (*mulk*), as opposed to Islamic principles. In addition; other branches of the Hashim family chaffed under Umayyad rule because the Umayyads rewarded their kinsmen and those loyal to the dynasty with lucrative government positions. The Ansar and the Muhajirun of Muhammad's Hashim clan did not enjoy the benefits of the expanding empire.¹³ They would eventually champion a more pristine version of Islamic governance based on the words and deeds of the religion's founder. As contenders for power, the anti-Umayyad factions needed the support of the non-Arab Muslim population of the empire. Many of the *mawali* converts to Islam did not enjoy the same social status, tax benefits, and economic advantage that their Arab sponsors enjoyed. The anti-Umayyad factions pointed to this aspect of Umayyad governance as evidence of their impiety, and as further proof for the need to base the empire on a universal interpretation of Islam.¹⁴ This empire would of course need the leadership of the Prophet's family. Nevertheless, the Arab Kingdom of the Umayyad dynasty lasted nearly a century before chronic impiety disqualified them as leaders of the *umma*. The Abbasid revolution replaced the Umayyads with leadership

¹⁰ Erling Ladewig Petersen, *'Ali and Mu'awiya in Early Arabic Tradition: Studies on the Genesis and Growth of Islamic Historical Writing until the End of the Ninth Century* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1964), 9.

¹¹ Petersen, 11.

¹² Tayeb El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Harun al-Rashid and the Narrative of the Abbasid Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4. E.g. Husayn at Kerbala in 661, Zayd B. 'Ali at Kufa in 740, Yahya in Marw in 743, etc.

¹³ Petersen, 10.

¹⁴ Petersen, 12.

based on a more universal interpretation of Islam – one that harkened back to the divine precedent of Muhammad’s lifetime.

Those who study the origins of Islam will recognize that the above description of the rise of Islam is based on Sunni historiography – Qur’an, *hadith*, *akhbar*, etc.¹⁵ One should also recognize that the above description provided the framework for Muslims to discuss the origins of the Muslim polity – and by association, God’s timeless plan for history and the model for a just

¹⁵ For an excellent and updated monograph on Islamic historiography, see Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For an excellent discussion on the origins of *hadith*, consult Alfred Guillaume, *The Traditions of Islam: An Introduction to the Study of the Hadith Literature* (Beirut: Khayats, 1966). In this work, I will refer to the term “*hadith*” (from the Arabic verb *hadatha*, to inform) as a report concerning a saying or deed of Muhammad, which was traced by scholars through a chain of transmitters back to the Prophet or one of his close companions. A scholarly transmitter of *hadith* (*muhadathun*) studied under a reputable transmitter of *hadith* until he was awarded a certificate (*ijaza*), which provided him with the scholarly authority to transmit the *hadith* reports of his teacher to future students. The systematic collection of *hadith* reports under the Umayyad dynasts reflected the pro or anti-Umayyad bias of the collector. The pro-Umayyad collections were suppressed under the Abbasids, and replaced by pro-Abbasid collections, which were subsequently challenged by pro-Shia collections (p. 44-54). One should note that the invention of the *isnad* system of tracing the chains of transmission was not invented until the second century A.H. By the third century A.H. the corpus of *hadith* material had grown astronomically, and most scholars recognized that the majority of the existent *hadith* reports were forgeries (p. 66-67). *Hadith* reports were rated according to the reputation of the transmitter. Western scholars generally agree that the *isnad* system was an invention of theological necessity and has very little historical value.

society. It also provided the paradigm for the elaboration of the limits and expectations of political authority. Social institutions, norms, definitions and punishments for delinquency would all be pursued in the context of Muhammad’s life. A foundation myth was born. When historical writing began in earnest under the Abbasid caliphs, scholars rarely wrote histories of their own times and ruling dynasties. Instead, they retold the stories that related contemporary issues to the paradigm of Muhammad’s lifetime – the model society – and adjusted their compilations to reflect criticism and praise of contemporary events and power struggles.

Scholars disagree over how one should make use of the notoriously problematic primary source material for the rise of Islam. Perhaps no other area of research is as fraught with scholarly disagreement over methodological approaches as is early Islamic history. Western scholars accepted the traditional Muslim explanations for the rise of Islam until the precepts of Biblical criticism were applied to Islamic history. Scholars began to question the reliability of the of the *hadith* records, which provided the foundation of all early Muslim historical accounts. This approach is commonly referred to as the “source-critical” approach. I. Goldziher, in *Muslim Studies*, argues that the *hadith* reports divulged considerably more information about the scholarly circles that wrote them down than they do about the events they claimed to portray.¹⁶ J. Schacht’s works on the origins of Muslim jurisprudence described the

¹⁶ Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, Edited by S. M. Stern and translated by C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1966).

process by which the legal systems of the conquered populations of the Umayyad Empire were adopted by the Umayyad dynasty, and subsequently Islamicized over the following centuries.¹⁷ Since Muhammad was the divinely inspired lawgiver, it became increasingly important to pious Muslim theologians to bring the law of the state into harmony with the law of God. The first Muslim scholars to attempt the feat of articulating God's law had only the Qur'an and an ever-growing pool of oral traditions about Muhammad to work with.

According to J. Wansbrough, "Both the quantity and quality of source material would seem to support the proposition that the elaboration of Islam was not contemporary with but posterior to the Arab occupation of the Fertile Crescent and beyond."¹⁸ This quote sums up his thesis in *The Sectarian Milieu*. Wansbrough proposes that the early writers of Islamic history (few in number) interpreted the career of Muhammad by creating a lens of divine causality through which the profane aspects of the Prophet's career were made holy (e.g. Badr).¹⁹ He claims that the *sira* and *maghazi* literature formed a sub-canonical "prophetic logia", in which the story narrative was constructed around extracted Quranic verses – thereby historicizing the text of

the Qur'an.²⁰ He asserts that both Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi used the structural and narrative framework of the popular street preachers (*qass*).²¹ He claims that dogma crystallized "as the result of recurring points of dispute in sectarian polemic."²² Since the Qur'an never stood alone as a source of authority, a scholarly elite devised (*isnad*) chains of transmission in order to properly "express and transmit apostolic authority...", because scripture did not have the same importance as the example of the Prophet.²³ Wansbrough claims that the identity of "orthodoxy" changed with the changing definition of communal authority. He says, "...the earliest formulation of Muslim identity is contained in the *sira-maghazi* literature." "The theology of Islam is likely to have been formulated in a pluralist and cosmopolitan society..." and a sectarian scholarly elite cast the past into the mold of monolithic unity.²⁴ This sectarian scholarly elite explained the fragmentation of a mythic early period of Islam (theophany) as the result of heresy (i.e. the first 150 years of Islam through the early Abbasid period).

According to the standard Muslim narrative, Muhammad restored

¹⁷ Joseph Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964). Also see the same author in, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953).

¹⁸ John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: content and composition of Islamic salvation history* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 99.

¹⁹ Wansbrough, 27.

²⁰ Wansbrough, 2, 7, 10. The terms "*sira*" and "*maghazi*" signify the earliest genres of Islamic historical writing. The *sira* genre organized *hadith* reports into a biography of Muhammad, whereas the *maghazi* genre organized the *hadith* reports into accounts of the Prophet's raids and expeditions. The term *qass* is used to signify both a "storyteller" and a "popular preacher." The Arabic verb *qasas* literally means to tell or relate. Much of the chronological and narrative framework of the *sira-maghazi* genre of early Islamic history was directly borrowed from the stories of the *qass*.

²¹ Wansbrough, 29.

²² Wansbrough, 50.

²³ Wansbrough, 78-80.

²⁴ Wansbrough, 124-125.

Abrahamic monotheism in Arabia. In contrast, many modern Western scholars favor the notion that Muhammad represented part of a general evolutionary trend towards monotheistic creeds in the medieval world.²⁵ G. Hawting reasserted Goldziher's thesis that the *hadith* reports say more about the circles that wrote them down than they do about the early history of Islam.²⁶ He argues that Qur'anic exegesis and *hadith* reports provided the origin of the "polytheist" motif in the standard Muslim account of early Islam. Hawting asserts that the charge of *shirk* (association) most likely originated between two or more monotheistic groups, in which one group (in this case Islam) claimed to have a purer monotheistic (i.e. Muslim *tawhid*) creed than another monotheistic group, thereby accusing the "insufficient" monotheistic creed of polytheism.²⁷ For instance, he points out that the word *shirk* in the Qur'an is often associated (E.g. *Surah* 112) with ritual or dietary prohibitions, which indicates that the charge was leveled at Jews and Christians.²⁸

Hawting also argues that Muslim scholars essentially created a historical context for Qur'anic verses, based on scholarly consensus during the time in which they wrote. However, he doubts that the historical context created by Muslim scholars for a given Qur'anic verse (concerning polytheism) was based on "...historical memory or...secure knowledge of the circumstances of its revelation."²⁹ He does not imply malice

²⁵ G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 32.

²⁶ Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 8-9.

²⁷ Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 18, 62.

²⁸ Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 49.

²⁹ Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 33.

on the part of the Muslim scholars. Instead, he argues that they may have taken the polemical charges of "polytheism" literally, misunderstanding the original, polemically charged, context of the accusation of *shirk*.³⁰

In a similar fashion, Musaylima represented a historical figure, whose legend was incorporated into the matrix of *hadith* literature as the result of Qur'anic exegesis. Over a period of time, scholars continued to draw upon an evolving oral tradition about Musaylima. This oral tradition provided an image of Musaylima's heresy that morphed according to contemporary politics and the political leanings of the storyteller. By analyzing the Musaylima legend as early Muslim historians recorded it over a period of three hundred years, certain insights emerge into the evolving construct of heresy and communal authority.

Wansbrough's theories have come under considerable scrutiny by Islamicists, who assert that many of the oral traditions recorded in the *hadith* collections of the second and third centuries A.H., actually date to the first century A.H. or earlier.³¹ This author agrees that many of the broad outlines of Muhammad's religious teachings (i.e. prayer rituals, prohibition of donkey meat, etc.) were preserved through oral transmission. However, like Hawting, this author proposes that the historical context of Islam's Prophet underwent a major revision during the first three centuries A.H., as the result of theological debates, state formation and politico-religious feuding.

This case study represents a refinement of Wansbrough's theories,

³⁰ Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 150.

³¹ Sadeghi, Behnam (Princeton University). Personal correspondence.

based on an attempt to answer two questions. First, what does the Musaylima legend in the written record of Abbasid scholarly elites tell us about Abbasid society and scholarly consensus at the time a particular compilation of *hadith* was written down? Second, to what extent can we trust these sources to reveal the historical context of Islam's Prophet? This case study is based on the assumption that oral history has a tendency to evolve according to the needs of each new generation, but without leaving any evidence of the evolution. In contrast, texts act as thoughts, and in these case compilations – arrangements – of *hadith* reports, frozen in time. If scholarly consensus concerning the arrangement of these reports changed over time, this change should be reflected in the texts.

The historians of early Islam did not write history as their primary pursuit. Most were of non-Arab (mostly Persian) descent and served the Abbasid dynasty in a variety of capacities. They all excelled in careers as religious scholars – *qadis*, Qur'anic exegetes, developers of *sunna* and *tafsir*, religious advisors, tutors to the royal family, etc. Early Islamic historiography went through three defining phases – oral (c. 610-c. 730), origins of Islamic historical writing (c. 730-c. 830), and large scale historical works (c. 830-c. 925). C. Robinson says that “[during the oral phase c. 610-c. 730]...the state's apologists and critics narrated contrasting accounts of civil wars and rebellions, and professional (that is, paid) storytellers entered into the mix, drawing on the past to criticize those responsible for the present.”³² He asserts that, under stable circumstances, oral traditions can provide accurate transmission up to three or four

generations, but that the generations that followed the Prophet had no such luxury. The need to adapt stories about the Prophet to changing social circumstances heavily influenced the transmission of early stories.³³ Robinson says that a “culture of documentation” emerged as a function of the state, which gave rise to a literary and chronological consciousness among the Arab elites.³⁴ The origins of much of the source material for Islamic historical writing began during this period as scholars such as Zuhri and Ishaq (Ibn Ishaq's father) systematically collected and transmitted sayings attributed to the Prophet and his companions. For a variety of reasons, scholars only began to write down the *hadith* record in the early eighth century – nearly a century after the death of Muhammad.

Why does a given society preserve certain stories and forsake others?³⁵ In the days before a written *hadith* tradition, Arab tribesmen recounted the glories of their ancestors. After the advent of Islam – and the creation of an epic paradigm – storytellers used old modes of expression to relate the ancestors of their tribes to the important events of Muhammad's career. These tribal traditions were originally preserved as poetic epics (i.e. *ayam al-arab*) about the various raids led by the Prophet, in order for tribes to glorify their ancestors in poetic boasting competitions.³⁶ They

³³ Robinson, 10.

³⁴ Robinson, 21.

³⁵ For an excellent study of the transmission of oral traditions, and the historicization of a foundation myth, see Thomas Spear, “Oral Traditions: Whose History?” *History in Africa* 8 (1981): 165-181.

³⁶ Goldziher, 46-52. Also see Ella Landau-Tasseron, “Processes of Redaction: The Case of the Tamimite Delegation to the Prophet

³² Robinson, 20.

would later be selected for politico-religious purposes according to their utility.

These oral traditions were not fixed tales, but were fluid stories that often took on a contemporary significance – especially if they carried the authority of a saying of Muhammad.³⁷ These traditions did not carry the same weight as a Qur’anic verse, but they were certainly used in juridical judgments, and therefore took on the air of authority.³⁸ It was after all quite necessary to base just governance within the confines of the behavioral model set by the Prophet. As the policies of Abd al-Malik and al-Walid suggest (not to mention the protests of Christian writers), the Umayyad government was beginning to consider the necessity of

Muhammad,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 49 (1986): 255-70. Landau-Tasseron claims that the story of the Tamimite delegation to the Prophet as told by Ibn Ishaq, differs on a number of points. She argues that reason for their divergence is that “...the stories are mostly family traditions, for each ‘Anbarite family preserved a version which glorified its own forefather, sometimes also making accusations against the others (p. 259).” She claims that conflicting account, while preserved by Ibn Ishaq, were grafted into a combined narrative by al-Waqidi (p. 261). Also see Petersen, ‘Ali and Mu’awiya, 10. The *ayam al-arab* (days of the Arabs) poetic genre greatly influenced the type of material available to the early collectors of *sira-maghazi* traditions.

³⁷ J. N. Mattock, “History and Fiction,” In *Occasional Papers of the School of Abbasid Studies* no. 1, 1986, by the School of Abbasid Studies, University of St. Andrews, 80-97, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986. Mattock proposes that historical writing in early Islam drew from a base of material that he likens to epic poetry, which was tailored to suit a particular audience until it was codified, edited, and crystallized into the forms we have today.

³⁸ For an in depth discussion of the formation of Islamic law, see Schacht, *An Introduction*.

putting the empire on a universal footing.³⁹ Thus, under the Umayyads we see the stirrings of a shifting construct of communal authority, which culminated in the Abbasid revolution.

Political views had a profound influence on the process of redaction that the oral traditions underwent. Factional disputes played an influential role in why certain stories were told by tribal poets.⁴⁰ For instance, in the early struggles for the caliphate between the Ansar and the Quraysh, the Ansar referred to the many false prophets that came from the Northern Arabian tribes – the prototype was Musaylima of the Banu Hanifa.⁴¹ In addition, many of the conflicting versions of Ali’s Caliphate originated in the highly politically charged atmosphere of late seventh and early eighth century Kufa.⁴² Politico-religious strife insured that the legend of Musaylima – the false prophet *par excellence* – would be told and retold in the context of politico-religious feuding. The early eighth century is the earliest possible date when Muslims began writing oral traditions down. Due to regional variations, divergent political views, and a host of socio-economic factors, a wide variety of conflicting

³⁹ Both caliphs instituted a building program (i.e. the Dome of the Rock) that stressed the Islamic identity of the empire and challenged the visual imagery of Christian Byzantium.

⁴⁰ Goldziher, 166-68. Genealogists kept track of the tribe’s ancestry, which was an important affair for purposes of taxation, and since the division of the booty was determined by when one’s family converted to Islam.

⁴¹ Goldziher, 94.

⁴² Petersen, 52. Recurring rebellion from Kufa proved to be a never-ending thorn in the side of the Umayyad Caliphate. Abd al-Malik sent Syrian troops to Iraq in response to a series of ‘Alid revolts, which only further heightened tension between the ‘Alid and the Umayyad dynasty.

reports made their way into the written traditions of regional scholastic centers.⁴³ In essence, these pious

⁴³ Goldziher, 60. Poets continued to compete publicly in defense of the honor of their tribe well into the Abbasid period. Therefore, it is not surprising that conflicting reports abound in the primary source material of this period. Also see Michael Cook, "The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam," *Arabica* 44 (1997): 437-530. Scholars generally agree that the authoritative transmission of Muslim Tradition was at some point oral, but disagree over the timing of the transition to a strictly written Tradition (p. 439). For instance, Schoeler dates the prohibition of the writing of Tradition to the last quarter of the first century (p. 491). Cook claims that the prevailing attitude of early Muslim scholars was hostile to the transmission of a written Tradition (p. 441). In addition, Cook postulates the possibility that Muslim opposition to the writing of Tradition was originally a Jewish influence (i.e. Rabbinic Judaism with reference to written and oral Torah, p. 442, 498), which he supports by showing that the mid-second century compromise (oral and written) was based on the separation of the public and private spheres of a scholars life (oral transmission in public, with writing allowed in private, in order to aid the memory, p. 476). Cook argues that the early centers of Muslim scholarship shifted from hostility to acceptance of a written tradition (Kufa in the first half of the second century, p. 441, Basra in the second half of the second century, p. 458). He argues that Medinese authorities prior to Zuhri were strictly oralists. Syrian scholars showed an abundance of arguments (*hadith* reports) for and against the writing of Tradition as late as the mid-second century, possibly reflecting the Umayyad pressure to record the Tradition (p. 473-74). Reasons for the hostility to a written Tradition include: "...to avoid hampering the free development of law...(p. 492)," hostility toward personal opinion, "...opposition to Umayyad attempts to codify Tradition...(p. 493)," written texts might fall into the wrong hands, but most importantly, "...to safeguard the unique status of Scripture (p. 491)." i.e. to prevent the introduction of a schismatic influence into Islam, the polemical lesson of the "people of the Book." Cook concludes that Muslim scholars lacked a formal and organized division of the

scholars collected, sorted, and arranged the collective tribal memory of the second generation Muslims, creating the framework for the interpretation of the Qur'an, and the judicial system of the empire.⁴⁴

Phase two (c. 730-c. 830) saw the beginnings of a written historiographical record with authors such as Zuhri, and due to Abbasid patronage, later writers like Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi. Robinson also notes that in the late eighth century paper was used locally, contributing to an explosion of written works on theology, law and history. These historical works coincided with, and were influenced by the formulation of imperial law.⁴⁵ From the time of Ibn Ishaq, knowledge (or the creation thereof) of the early Muslim community increased exponentially, necessitating the division of historical works into a number of categories, many of which did not survive.⁴⁶

Muhammad may have started a religious movement called Islam, but the formulation of Muslim orthodoxy was to a large degree a product of what Wansbrough calls the interconfessional polemic of a sectarian milieu. Pious "holy men" assumed a gradually increasing position of social power through the medium of theology. Thanks to the literary cultures of Byzantium and Persia, the descendants of Byzantine and Persian administrators searched for their place in the ruling structure of the Umayyad caliphate. Although originally holding subordinate positions of power as merchants, teachers, administrators, tax collectors, translators, and palace

responsibility of memorizing Tradition. Therefore, they wrote it down (p. 523).

⁴⁴ Schacht, *The Origins*.

⁴⁵ Robinson, 27.

⁴⁶ Robinson, 29-31.

scholars, these non-Arabs began to challenge the Arab identity of the Islamic religion.⁴⁷ Certain policies, as well as access to the avenues of social mobility, provided a strong impetus for many to adopt the Arabic language, and to convert to Islam. These non-Arab Muslim administrators systematically collected and arranged much of the earliest written material about the Prophet Muhammad.⁴⁸ They traveled throughout the Muslim world to a variety of centers of learning in pursuit of tribal traditions about Muhammad and his companions (which grew up around the garrison cities).

Zuhri (b. circa 671 C.E., d. 742 C.E.), the first Medinese traditionist to record *hadith* in writing, established the chronological and narrative framework of the *sira* literature, and began the school of history at Medina.⁴⁹ He studied with Sa'id B. al-Musayyab, Abban B. 'Uthman, 'Ubaidullah B. 'Utba, and 'Urwa B. al-Zubair, and his interests covered not only *sira*, but also *maghazi* and *sunna*.⁵⁰ Zuhri's informants were not exclusively scholars, but included any trustworthy source.⁵¹ Duri also notes that "...Zuhri...took an important step in introducing 'the collective tradition' by

⁴⁷ For an more detailed discussion of the professions of the collectors of *hadith*, see H. Cohen, "The Economic Background and the Secular Occupations of Muslim Jurisprudents and Traditionists in the Classical Period of Islam," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 13 (1970): 16-61.

⁴⁸ Ibn Ishaq, al-Waqidi, Baladhuri, Tabari, etc.

⁴⁹ A. A. Duri, "al-Zuhri: A Study of the Beginnings of Historical Writing in Islam," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 19 (1957): 12.

⁵⁰ *Sunna* is the body of traditions attributed to Muhammad, which establish the ideal forms of behavior for Muslims.

⁵¹ Duri, 2.

combining many traditions into a connected simple narrative – preceded by the authorities – and thus making a significant contribution towards connected historical narratives."⁵² As with all of the sources on early Islamic history, the stories of popular preachers (*qass*) left their mark on some of the traditions attributed to Zuhri.⁵³ Caliph Yazid II (r. 720-24) appointed Zuhri as *qadi*, and he also served as the instructor of Caliph Hisham's (r. 724-43) son.⁵⁴ Zuhri's works were composed under the Umayyad caliphs, and only survive in traditions attributed to him by later authors. Nevertheless, Zuhri figures prominently in the historical narratives of Ibn Ishaq, al-Waqidi, Baladhuri, and Tabari.

Unfortunately for those who sought the clearest insight into the life of Islam's Prophet, many of these traditions were contradictory and reflected regional, doctrinal and political nuances.⁵⁵ Some created a combined

⁵² Duri, 8.

⁵³ Duri, 8.

⁵⁴ Petersen, 51.

⁵⁵ Michael Lecker, "The Death of the Prophet Muhammad's Father: Did Waqidi Invent Some of the Evidence?" *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft* 145, no. 1 (1995): 9-27. Lecker insists that by comparing Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi's narratives concerning the death of Muhammad's father, that he demonstrates the "continuing growth" theory of early Islamic historical writings. He proposes that during the seventh century, a number of Muslims collected the various traditions (written and oral) concerning early Islam, in order to trace family and clan involvement (p. 10). He then asserts that in the eighth century, several compilers (i.e. Zuhri, Ibn Ishaq, al-Waqidi, etc.) began to systematically compile these reports in order to provide an authoritative biography of the Prophet (p. 12). He argues that, for the most part, they were reliable transmitters of the traditions that they compiled (p. 20), and when their narratives differ from one another, it is probably

narrative, harmonizing and conflicting reports.⁵⁶ Many, to their great credit, preserved the conflicting reports. The traditionists held a virtual monopoly on the “prophetic” *hadith*, and were thereby in the position to dictate social ideals – the *hadith* provided the connection to the holy precedent of Muhammad.

Ironically, Qur’anic exegesis most likely gave birth to the corpus of prophetic *hadith*, which after the passing of time, was in turn used to interpret the Qur’an. All that these pious scholars needed was a reformed caliphate – one based on a universal interpretation of Islam – that put all Muslims on equal economic footing within the state.

The descendents of the Prophet’s family harnessed these divisive forces through a sustained propaganda campaign. The Abbasids, one of many contending factions, were able to assume leadership of the Hashemite struggle for the caliphate, but it took years to solidify their claim to legitimacy.⁵⁷ The revolution itself unleashed a powerful precedent of justified politico-religious dissent.⁵⁸ Out of the need to restore a lasting political order, the Abbasids

the result of one compiler including information that the other chose to omit (p. 26).

⁵⁶ J. M. B. Jones, “Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi: The Dream of ‘Atika and the Raid to Nakhla in Relation to the Charge of Plagiarism,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 22 (1959): 41-51.

⁵⁷ El-Hibri, 12. The Umayyad dynasty fell from power in 750, but it took over a decade for the Abbasid dynasty to stabilize their rule of the empire.

⁵⁸ El-Hibri, 4-6. The Abbasids came to power by employing a vigorous propaganda campaign from the Khurasan province, which called (*da’wa*) the faithful to revolt against Umayyad rule. The movement was messianic in nature, and although Abbasid involvement stretched back to the 720s, the Abbasids kept a low profile until the movement gained force in the 740s.

sponsored a sustained scholastic venture to prove the “Islamicness” of their governing institutions. This necessitated the demonstration of the pre-Islamic nature of the Umayyad dynasty, and the discrediting would-be rivals from the displaced ‘Alid branch of the Prophet’s family.⁵⁹

Ironically, the consolidation of Abbasid rule necessitated a propaganda campaign to downplay the very same messianic passions that brought them to power. The Abbasids not only sought to discredit their ‘Alid rivals, but also certain individuals that played a vital role in the success of the revolution. For instance, Abu Muslim led the rebellion in the Khurasan province, and he gained an enormous amount of prestige as a result. He was eventually arrested and killed by the Abbasid authorities, and a group of his followers later raised the standard of revolt.⁶⁰ Revolts in the Khurasan province, which were characterized by messianic overtones, proved to be a recurring theme of Abbasid history.⁶¹ In this context, the Musaylima legend provided an invaluable lesson of God given political authority, and the fate of “false prophet” usurpers.

For example, Abu Bakr’s suppression of the *rida* became a popular and useful motif for Abbasid scholars. Just as Musaylima and the other false prophets apostatized against the nascent Muslim community, the Abbasid caliphs presented themselves as rightfully suppressing apostate rebellions within the empire.⁶² For instance, Al-Ma’mun came to power through a civil war against his kinsman al-Amin, and he

⁵⁹ Petersen, 53, 68.

⁶⁰ El-Hibri, 6.

⁶¹ El-Hibri, 99.

⁶² El-Hibri, 122.

presented himself as a champion of Muslim piety in order to justify his ascent to power. He instituted the *mihna* in an attempt to impose caliphal authority over religious dogma. In 811, he adopted the title “Imam al-Huda” (Guide to Righteousness), and instituted a series of laws designed to enforce Muslim piety (i.e. the prohibition of wine).⁶³ In 816, he minted coinage that presented him as “God’s caliph.”⁶⁴ In a conciliatory gesture, Caliph al-Mutawakkil abolished the *mihna* in 847, which conceded control of religious dogma to the *ulema*.⁶⁵

The Abbasids employed a number of scholars to write apologetic accounts of the Prophet’s life, which showed the heroic role that the Abbasid family played in God’s unfolding plan for the *umma*.⁶⁶ For instance, M. Kister compares Wahb B. Munabbih’s papyrus account of the ‘Aqaba meeting, to that of

the *sira* genre. He points out that Ibn Hisham and Baladhuri’s compilations accentuate al-‘Abbas’ attendance and the important role he played at the meeting.⁶⁷ In contrast, Wahb’s account says that ‘Abbas was a pagan at that time. Kister suggests that Wahb’s account reflects the earlier tradition that was compiled by Umayyad scholars [al-Sha’bi, al-Zuhri and ‘Aqil B. Abi Talib], while the account found in the *sira* genre reflects the general narrative of the Wahb papyrus, but with considerable alteration concerning the role of ‘Abbas.⁶⁸

In addition to political rivals, the Musaylima legend was also used as a powerful example for theological rivals. Musaylima was often referred to as “Rahman of al-Yamamah.” The Jews presented one of the most potent theological rivals to early Muslim theology. Certain aspects of the Prophet’s career were retold with exaggerated emphasis on certain details that had significant contemporary meaning. H. Rahman argues that “Tendentious historians, writing a few generations after the Prophet’s death, when the non-Jewish opponents, the *munafiqun* and the pagans were merely a fading memory while the Jewish minority in the Muslim state was an active theological rival, would lay a disproportionate emphasis on the theological strife during Muhammad’s lifetime in order to buttress their arguments against the Jews.”⁶⁹ Goitien

⁶³ El-Hibri, 102-04, 106.

⁶⁴ El-Hibri, 107.

⁶⁵ The Arabic term *ulema* is the plural of ‘*alim*, and refers to religious scholars and teachers of Muslim law.

⁶⁶ Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God’s Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Since prophecy ended with Muhammad, the *ulema* gradually rose to a position of authority by monopolizing the knowledge left behind by the Prophet. Crone and Hinds claim that the traditional title for the caliph was *khalifat Allah* (deputy of God), and that due to a struggle between the caliphs and the *ulema* over religious authority, was changed to *khalifat rasul Allah* (successor to the Prophet of God) by the Sunni *ulema*. Whereas religious and political authority was vested in the caliph, the *ulema* now assumed the role of religious authority. The implication is that al-Ma’mun’s attempt to preserve the religious authority of the caliphate failed, and as a result “...al-Mutawakkil abolished the *mihna* in 234/848...” (97). They conclude by noting that the Shia interpretation of the caliphal office most likely resembles that of the early caliphal office.

⁶⁷ M. J. Kister, “Notes on the Papyrus Account of the ‘Aqaba Meeting,” *Le Museon* (1963): 406-10.

⁶⁸ Kister, “Notes on the Papyrus,” 412.

⁶⁹ Hannah Rahman, “The Conflicts Between the Prophet and the Opposition in Medina,” *Der Islam* 42 (1985): 261. The *munafiqun* (hypocrites) were those in Medina that openly criticized Muhammad.

claims that the Torah was translated into Arabic as early as the second or third century A. H.⁷⁰ In addition; *Rahman* is the official name of God in the Babylonian Talmud.⁷¹ Muslim sources attest to "...an unbroken chain of Jewish settlements stretched from the border of Palestine to al-Medina..."⁷² Furthermore, Jews lived in Yemen, and Muhammad's revelations frequently refer to the "people of the book."⁷³ Concerning the resurrection of the dead, Muhammad said that "...It comes like the blinking of the eye..." This exact phrase was also employed three times a day during prayer by the Jews of Muhammad's lifetime.⁷⁴ Of the many descriptions of Musaylima, one of them concerns Musaylima's reduction of prayer from five times daily, to three times daily, which might be interpreted as either an attempt by the *qass* to associate him with the Jews, or a credible indication of a Jewish influence on his movement. Goitien implies that Jewish missionaries, perhaps a splinter group, promoted the idea of "local prophets" as a means of Judaizing local populations, but unlike Yemen and Yamamah Muhammad succeeded in fulfilling that role.⁷⁵

Many of the pre-Islamic ways of the Bedouins did not simply disappear upon the delivery of Muhammad's revelations. Many who had nominally accepted Islam did not willingly follow all of the rituals and prohibitions demanded by Muhammad. In an ongoing effort to Islamicize Abbasid society, the early Abbasid caliphs imprisoned wine

poets and pushed for a more rigorous adherence to the strictures of prayer rituals. The wine poets mocked the pursuits of the pious theologians who demanded that God's prohibition of wine be taken seriously.⁷⁶ The traditions concerning Musaylima's relaxation of certain Muslim rituals dealing with wine and prayer were almost certainly inserted into the *hadith* record, perhaps by a moralizing theologian. These types of stories were most likely grafted into the Musaylima legend by popular preachers and later recorded as *hadith* by traditionists in search of knowledge.⁷⁷ We will now take a closer look at the historians that compiled and historicized the *hadith* traditions.

Non-Arab converts to Islam found gainful employment under the early Abbasid rulers, and put their pens to the task of preparing historicizing compilations of *hadith* reports. These patchwork compilations provided moral lessons that explained the workings of God in history. The earliest histories were essentially exercises in Qur'anic exegesis, and told the story of God's *umma* from the vantage point of Abbasid scholarly elites. These narratives not only created a mythic past for the ruling regime and legitimized Abbasid authority, but also set the historical standard for institutional reform. In this

⁷⁰ S. D. Goitien, "Muhammad's Inspiration by Judaism," *The Journal of Jewish Studies* 9 (1958): 150.

⁷¹ Goitien, 151.

⁷² Goitien, 151.

⁷³ Goitien, 153.

⁷⁴ Goitien, 158.

⁷⁵ Goitien, 161.

⁷⁶ Goldziher, 36-37, 42-43.

⁷⁷ Goldziher, 42-43. Like almost every aspect of the Musaylima legend, contradictory accounts abound. While some popular preachers enhanced their message by stressing Musaylima as a "Judiazzer," others found it useful to endow Musaylima with a strict program concerning sex, wine and prayer. See Al-Tabari, *The Conquest of Arabia*, trans. Fred M. Donner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 92-93. "... You shall not come to women, nor drink wine, but you are the company of the pious fasting by day..."

context, the Musaylima legend provided a number of useful lessons.⁷⁸

Muhammad Ibn Ishaq was a remarkably talented scholar whose life personified an evolutionary and revolutionary phase of Islam. He not only witnessed, but participated in the transformation of Islam from a loosely defined religion used to justify the socio-economic dominance of the Arab elite of the Umayyad Empire, to a universal religion used to legitimize Abbasid rule. The army of Khalid B. al-Walid captured Ibn Ishaq's Persian grandfather in 12 A.H. (634 C.E.), who at first served his Arab master as a slave, and later became a *mawali* convert to Islam. Ibn Ishaq's father (b. 50 A.H. / 672 C.E.) participated in the Syrian campaigns and was a well-known collector and transmitter of *hadith*.⁷⁹ Ibn Ishaq was born in Medina in 85 A.H. (707 C.E.), and as the descendent of a non-Arab convert to Islam, Ibn Ishaq pursued a career in one of the few fields that promised some socio-economic opportunity – the collection and transmission of *hadith*. In light of the chronological proximity of the capture of Ibn Ishaq's grandfather and the defeat of Musaylima (634 C.E.), Ibn Ishaq probably had access to some accurate details about Musaylima's movement. After all, Ibn Ishaq's grandfather was captured in the same year and by the same army that defeated Musaylima's force.

He traveled widely and studied under a number of prominent and respected second generation traditionists,

⁷⁸ Historical writing represented only one facet of Abbasid state propaganda. For instance, Abbasid caliphs took titles that emphasized their divine right to rule (i.e. al-Mansur, al-Mahdi, al-Hadi etc.).

⁷⁹ Newby, *The Making*, 5.

including Zuhri.⁸⁰ The majority of early Muslim jurists (including al-Shaybani, al-Shafi'I, Abu 'Ubayd and al-Mawardi) were familiar with the *sira-maghazi* literature, and, with the exception of Malik B. 'Anas, they considered Ibn Ishaq to be a reliable transmitter of *hadith*.⁸¹ While working as a scholar in Medina, the famous jurist Malik B. 'Anas feuded with Ibn Ishaq, which resulted in Ibn Ishaq's expulsion from the city. The feud probably began as a result of Ibn Ishaq's knowledge of the (dubious) lineage of many Medinan families, and because Ibn Ishaq criticized Malik's lineage.⁸² M. J. Kister notes that, "Ibn Ishaq was indeed accused of many faults like: *shi'i* leanings, *qadari* beliefs, transmission of *sifat* traditions, playing with cocks, *tadlis* in transmission, and of course transmission of unreliable traditions, especially traditions of the descendents of Jews who had embraced Islam."⁸³ At any rate, in the early 760s, Ibn Ishaq traveled to Baghdad, where he found gainful employment in the court of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur. He served as the tutor for the Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur's son al-Mahdi, and the *Sirah* may have been sponsored for the instruction of the latter.⁸⁴ Ibn Ishaq died around 767 C.E.

Ibn Ishaq's *Sirah* existed in at least fifteen variants, and each variant

⁸⁰ Newby, *The Making*, 5-7.

⁸¹ M. J. Kister, "The Massacre of the Banu Qurayza: A Re-Examination of a Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 8 (1986): 73, 79, 80.

⁸² Kister, "The Massacre," 75-77.

⁸³ Kister, "The Massacre," 76.

⁸⁴ Newby, *The Making*, 4. Also see the same author in "The *Sirah* as a Source for Arabian Jewish History: Problems and Perspectives," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 7 (1986): 123.

reflected the independent versions of his students. Only fragments of a few of these variants survived into the modern era. Ibn Hisham's recension of the *Sirah* preserved much of Ibn Ishaq's original, but with some noteworthy omissions. As pointed out by W. Montgomery Watt, Ibn Hisham based his recension of Ibn Ishaq's *Sirah* on Ziyad B. 'Abdallah al-Bakka'i's version, whereas Tabari quoted the versions of Ibn Ishaq's *Sirah* as it was transmitted by Salamah B. al-Fadl al-Abrash and Yunus B. Bukayr.⁸⁵ Originally the *Sirah* existed in three parts: *Kitab al-Mubtada'* (Book of the Beginnings), *Kitab al-Mab'ath* (Book of the Sending Forth), and *Kitab al-Maghazi* (Book of the Expeditions/Raids). The three sections respectively covered the periods from the creation of the world to the birth of Muhammad, from the birth of Muhammad to the *hijra*, and from the *hijra* to Muhammad's death.

Ibn Ishaq set out to place the life of Muhammad as the focal point of a universal history, presenting Muhammad as the culmination of God's revelation to mankind through the prophets.⁸⁶ He used a variety of sources to construct the *Sirah*, including oral and written Muslim traditions, and stories from Jewish and Christian writings known as *Isra'iliyat* literature.⁸⁷ The *Sirah*, an immensely popular work during the lifetime of its compiler, provided a chronological framework and historical context for understanding the disjointed and timeless text of the Qur'an.

⁸⁵ See W.M. Watt's excellent translator's forward to al-Tabari, *Muhammad at Mecca*, Edited and translated by W. M. Watt and M. V. McDonald, Vol. 6, *The History of al-Tabari* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), xi-xlvi.

⁸⁶ Newby, *The Making*, 2, 151.

⁸⁷ Newby, *The Making*, 3.

Nevertheless, the generation that followed him no longer condoned the use of non-Muslim sources (i.e. *Israiliyat* literature), and preferred strictly Muslim sources for the reconstruction of such a legally important topic as the life of Muhammad. Therefore, Ibn Hisham heavily edited the *Sirah*, and purged the document of its non-Muslim source material, including "...most of the *Kitab al-Mubtada'* and some of the *Kitab al-Mub'ath*..."⁸⁸ Ibn Hisham's omissions reflected a shift in the scholarly consensus of his day that viewed sources external to the Muslim community as untrustworthy for the purposes of defining the law.⁸⁹

A. Guillaume reconstructed and translated Ibn Ishaq's *Sirah* based on Ibn Hisham's recension and Tabari's quotes of Ibn Ishaq.⁹⁰ G. Newby attempted to reconstruct the first (missing) part of Ibn Ishaq's *Sirah*. Although both attempts fall short of a flawless reconstruction of Ibn Ishaq's original *Sirah*, they provide enough of the *Sirah*'s pre-edited narrative for one to draw some basic conclusions about the consensus of al-Mansur's court scholars.

Newby suggests that in addition to its pedagogical function, Ibn Ishaq's work targeted the Jewish and Christian population of the Abbasid Empire.⁹¹ The framework of the *Sirah* attempts to present Muhammad in the literary *topoi* of the Christian Bible, "...all of which

⁸⁸ Newby, *The Making*, 8-9.

⁸⁹ Newby, *The Making*, 4, 8.

⁹⁰ Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, Edited and translated by Alfred Guillaume (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1955).

⁹¹ Newby, *The Making*, 1, 20-21. Newby estimates that Muslims represented only about 8% of the population of the Abbasid Empire during Ibn Ishaq's lifetime.

themes fit the apologetic patterns adopted by Islam and current in Abbasid circles when Ibn Ishaq was writing and teaching.”⁹² Newby claims that the *Sirah* conformed to literary forms and motifs common to other contemporary literary traditions. For instance, concerning Ibn Ishaq’s presentation of Christian missionary activity in pre-Islamic Arabia, he says, “we are dealing with a type of wisdom literature that has examples throughout the Mediterranean world but finds its best expression in that group of stories called the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, or Tales of the Coptic Fathers (which date from the fourth and fifth century).”⁹³ Newby asserts “Hagiologic tales were undoubtedly a part of the stock repertory of the storytellers, *qussas*, in Arabia as they were in the rest of the Mediterranean world.”⁹⁴ He says, “...one of the major functions of the *Sirah* is to present a biography of Muhammad that would fit into the already existent and revered patterns of Christian hagiology.”⁹⁵

During Ibn Ishaq’s lifetime the Abbasid caliph claimed to have authority over religious dogma. In addition, scholars like Ibn Ishaq pursued religious knowledge from a multitude of sources as they sought to explain Muhammad’s prophetic career as the culmination of God’s plan of salvation. Future scholars came under increasing pressure to insure the accurate transmission of *hadith* material, and Jewish and Christian source material became increasingly unfashionable for the development of

law and the regulation of social behavior.

The Medinan scholar Muhammad B. 'Umar al-Waqidi (d. 823) traveled to Baghdad in 796 where he worked for the vizir Yahya B. Khalid al-Barmaki, and later served as a *qadi* under Caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813-33).⁹⁶ He most likely synthesized the Medinan and Kuffan traditions to form a pro-Abbasid narrative.⁹⁷ Al-Waqidi lived in the generation after Ibn Ishaq. His *Kitab al-Maghazi* reflected many of the same practices employed by Ibn Ishaq, heavily relying on the same written materials and in the same literary genre as Ibn Ishaq, and was primarily concerned with adjusting minor chronological details in order to “...generate a new interpretation of the Prophet’s life.”⁹⁸

Al-Waqidi’s work had a significant influence on Ibn Sa’d (d. 845), Baladhuri, and al-Tabari. He followed much of Ibn Ishaq’s chronological framework, but provided a much more detailed narrative, which has led some scholars to propose the “continuing growth” theory. According to this theory, as the demand for *hadith* material grew (due to legal necessities and general interest in the Prophet’s life) the supply of *hadith* material also grew as a result of popular preachers and inventive tribal genealogists.⁹⁹

⁹² Newby, “The Sirah,” 123.

⁹³ Gordon Darnell Newby, “An Example of Coptic Literary Influence on the Sirah of Ibn Ishaq,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 31 (1972): 24.

⁹⁴ Newby, “An Example,” 27.

⁹⁵ Newby, “An Example,” 28.

⁹⁶ Petersen, 83.

⁹⁷ Petersen, 91.

⁹⁸ Rizwi S. Fraizer, “The Issue of Authenticity Regarding the Traditions of al-Waqidi as Established in His *Kitab al-Maghazi*,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 58, no. 2 (1999): 98.

⁹⁹ Michael Lecker, “The Death of the Prophet Muhammad’s Father: Did Waqidi Invent Some of the Evidence?” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft* 145, no. 1 (1995): 10, 12, 20, 26. Lecker insists that by comparing Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi’s narratives concerning the death of Muhammad’s

J. M. B. Jones, the editor of al-Waqidi's *Kitab al-Maghazi*, points out that details not found in Ibn Ishaq's *Sirah*, such as the precise chronological sequence and the dating of several events, are an integral part of al-Waqidi's *Maghazi*.¹⁰⁰ He also asserts that no great confidence should be placed in Ibn Ishaq's chronology.¹⁰¹ In fact, Jones implies that much of the chronology for the less important raids of the Prophet was the creation of Qur'anic exegetics, who added "...the story necessary to explain the text of the Quran."¹⁰² Jones points out that both Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi "...drew freely upon *qass* material..." and that the similarities and differences between al-Waqidi and Ibn Ishaq's narrative are a result of both authors reliance of the *qass* renditions of their respective lifetimes.¹⁰³ He also proposes that Ibn Ishaq, al-Waqidi and Zuhri all used the

father, that he demonstrates the "continuing growth" theory of early Islamic historical writings. He proposes that during the seventh century, a number of Muslims collected the various traditions (written and oral) concerning early Islam, in order to trace family and clan involvement. He then asserts that in the eighth century, several compilers (i.e. Zuhri, Ibn Ishaq, al-Waqidi, etc.) began to systematically compile these reports in order to provide an authoritative biography of the Prophet. He argues that, for the most part, they were reliable transmitters of the traditions that they compiled, and when their narratives differ from one another, it is probably the result of one compiler including information that the other chose to omit.

¹⁰⁰ J. M. B. Jones, "The Chronology of the Maghazi: A Textual Survey," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 19 (1957): 259, 264, 277.

¹⁰¹ Jones, "The Chronology," 261.

¹⁰² Jones, "The Chronology," 264.

¹⁰³ J. M. B. Jones, "Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi: The Dream of 'Atika and the Raid to Nakhla in Relation to the Charge of Plagiarism," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 22 (1959): 46.

"collective *isnad*" (i.e. the established and generally agreed upon traditions), but al-Waqidi employed the "collective *isnad*" as "an essential part of the conceptional framework of his *Kitab al-Maghazi*."¹⁰⁴ Jones concludes that "...the greater part of the *sira* was already formalized by the second century A.H. and that the later writers shared a common corpus of *qass* and traditional material, which they arranged according to their own concepts and to which they added their own researches."¹⁰⁵

In phase three (c. 830-c. 925), large-scale collections replaced single topic monographs, and many of the works that were considered unimportant were not copied and were subsequently lost.¹⁰⁶ The third phase also reflected changing theological norms. In the first three centuries of Islam, the corpus of *hadith* reports had grown astronomically, and legal scholars readily admitted that many were forgeries and innovations.¹⁰⁷ Legal scholars such as Muhammad Bukhari (d. 870) compiled "authoritative" compilations of *hadith* reports, and eliminated thousands of reports that they considered fraudulent.

Baladhuri (d. 892) was born in Baghdad, but was of Persian ancestry. He wrote under the patronage of Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil. Baladhuri presented his material with a special emphasis on the precedent set by Muhammad and the early caliphs concerning issues of taxation and land grants. In addition, a consistent theme in *Kitab Futuh al-Buldan* is the manner in which a particular city or land area was

¹⁰⁴ Jones, "Ibn Ishaq," 50.

¹⁰⁵ Jones, "Ibn Ishaq," 51.

¹⁰⁶ Robinson, 34.

¹⁰⁷ Schacht, *Origins*, 3.

incorporated into the Muslim *umma*. He carefully distinguished the areas brought into the *umma* by force of arms, from those that conceded and converted to Islam, or agreed to pay the poll tax.¹⁰⁸

Scholars such as Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari incorporated large sections of earlier works, like Ibn Ishaq's *Sirah*, while not including the information that no longer measured up to scholarly consensus. Tabari (d. 923) was born in Amul (Tabaristan Province on the Southern shore of the Caspian) in 839.¹⁰⁹ He traveled widely in search of traditions about the Prophet, and was a prolific author whose works included jurisprudence, Qur'an commentary, and history. In 855, he settled in Baghdad and embarked on a long and celebrated career as a Muslim scholar. Now that we have established the historical context for the writers of the Musaylima legend, we shall take a closer look at specific examples of the legend, which underscore the basic thesis of this work.

We will first investigate the issue of chronology in the Musaylima legend. Ibn Ishaq provided both a chronological framework for Muhammad's life, and also a chronological framework for the occasions of certain revelations. While his purpose was to compile the traditions of an earlier generation in order to clarify the truth about the Prophet, Ibn Ishaq actually codified the historical context of, and hence the meaning of, certain Qur'anic revelations. Ibn Ishaq first mentions Musaylima in his

¹⁰⁸ Al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan*, Edited and translated by Phillip K. Hitti (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 5.

¹⁰⁹ See Franz Rosenthal's introduction to *The History of al-Tabari: General Introduction and from the Creation to the Flood*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.

description of the early Meccan period, in the context of Muhammad's struggle with the Meccan authorities. Ibn Ishaq chronologically placed Musaylima's movement prior to that of Muhammad. This issue has not gone unnoticed by Western historians. D. Margoliouth argues that the names 'Muslim' and 'hanif' possibly originated as terms to describe "...followers of Musaylimah, the Prophet of the Banu *Hanifah*."¹¹⁰ He claims that *Surah* 26:61 provides evidence that Musaylimah [the diminutive version of Maslamah] predated Muhammad as a prophet.¹¹¹

Ibn Ishaq's first entries concerning Musaylima are found in Part II of *Sirat Rasul Allah* entitled "Muhammad's call and preaching in Mecca." Ibn Ishaq's first references to Musaylima are located in a specific section of Part II, subtitled "Negotiations between the Apostle and the Leaders of Quraysh and an explanation of the Sura of the Cave."¹¹² In this section, Ibn Ishaq describes the growth of Muslims in Mecca, and their subsequent persecution by the Meccan authorities. He describes Muhammad in typical saintly literary *topoi*. The Quraysh offer Muhammad money, honor, and power, if he would only agree to stop preaching. Muhammad, like any saintly figure worth his salt, refuses the lure of worldly vices. The Quraysh then proceed to challenge his claim to prophecy by asking him to perform a number of miracles. Ibn Ishaq also mentions that one of Muhammad's accusers was a poet named al-Nadr B. al-Harith, who "...had

¹¹⁰ D. S. Margoliouth, "On the Origin and Import of the Names Muslim and Hanif," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 35 (1903): 484.

¹¹¹ Margoliouth, "On the Origin," 484-85.

¹¹² Ibn Ishaq, p. 133-41, text 187-203.

been to al-Hira and learnt the tales of the kings of Persia...”¹¹³ al-Harith claimed to be able to tell a better story about ancient peoples than Muhammad. It is important to note the connection with al-Hira and Persia. Interestingly, in their melee of verbal assaults on the Prophet, the Quraysh accused him of learning his religion from Musaylima. “Information has reached us that you are taught by this fellow in al-Yamama, called al-Rahman, and by God we will never believe in the Rahman.” Ibn Ishaq then adds that this was the occasions of the revelation of Surah 17:94, “We will not believe in you until you come to us with God and the angels.” It is important to note that Surah 17, “The Night Journey,” is the same Surah in which God revealed to the Muslims that they were allowed to call God either Allah or al-Rahman.¹¹⁴ Ibn Ishaq continues by relating that the Quraysh then consulted the Jews of Yathrib concerning Muhammad’s prophecy.¹¹⁵ The Jews provide the Quraysh with a series of questions to ask Muhammad in order to test him as a prophet. After a two week delay, Muhammad responded to these questions with a number of revelations from God.

Ibn Ishaq’s narrative then relates a story about Muhammad after his arrival in Yathrib. Ibn Ishaq places the occasion of the revelation of Surah 13:29 as a response to skeptical Jewish rabbis of Yathrib that accused Muhammad of learning his religion from Musaylima in the same fashion that the Quraysh did. Ibn Ishaq records that they said, “... We have heard that a man in al-Yamama called al-Rahman teaches you. We will

never believe in him.”¹¹⁶ Muhammad responds with Surah 13:29, which reads, “Thus did we send you to a people before whom other peoples had passed away that you might read to them that which we have revealed to thee, while they disbelieved in the Rahman. Say, He is my Lord; there is no other God but He. In Him I trust and unto Him is the return.” Interestingly, in Surah 13, “Thunder,” God revealed that He has provided a warner to every nation (*munthiru likul qum had*).¹¹⁷ Muhammad, like other prophets and “warners” before him, was sent by God to deliver his revelation to a specific people – a message in Arabic to the Arab people. This reference is striking. Perhaps Musaylima led the local opposition to Persian rule in Yamamah. Perhaps Muhammad followed his lead.

Ibn Ishaq also includes an account about Musaylima that places him as a politico-religious leader prior to Muhammad’s consolidation of power in Medina. Chronologically, Ibn Ishaq includes the story during the period when Muhammad concluded the second Pledge of ‘Aqaba with the tribes of Medina (c. 622). Ibn Ishaq mentions Musaylima as only as an explanatory detail concerning one of the Medinan Arabs that pledged to support Muhammad at ‘Aqaba. According to this story, a certain Nusayba (the one who pledged at ‘Aqaba) had two sons. Her son Habib was tortured by Musaylima for not recognizing him as a prophet equal to Muhammad. Ibn Ishaq’s narrative also mentions that Nusayba was present some years later at the Battle of Yamamah, and received a number of wounds.¹¹⁸ Al-Baladhuri

¹¹³ Ibn Ishaq, p. 136, text 191.

¹¹⁴ Surah 17:107.

¹¹⁵ Yathrib was renamed Medina after Muhammad’s ascent to power.

¹¹⁶ Ibn Ishaq, p. 140, text 200.

¹¹⁷ Surah 13:7.

¹¹⁸ Ibn Ishaq, 212, text 312-13.

relates a similar story concerning the torture of Nusayba's son Habib, and her participation and wounds in the Battle of Yamamah. However, Baladhuri mentions this story in the context of a list of martyrs who fell at the Battle of Yamamah, leaving out the chronological position of the events described.¹¹⁹

Further evidence for the early dating of Musaylima's movement can be found in both Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi. Both accounts reveal that a certain 'Abdul 'Amr changed his name to Rahman, during the Meccan period, after becoming a Muslim.¹²⁰ A pre-Islamic friend of his did not want to call him 'Abdul Rahman, because he did not want to associate him with Musaylima, so he called him 'Abdul al-Ilah.' 'Abdul Rahman ran into his friend after the Battle of Badr and took him and his son prisoner.¹²¹ It is interesting to note that Ibn Ishaq *implies* that the friend did not call 'Amr Rahman on account of Musaylima, whereas al-Waqidi's account clearly states that 'Amr's friend did not want to associate 'Amr with Musaylima. Additionally, Ibn Ishaq states that 'Amr took his friend captive at Badr, whereas in al-Waqidi's account, 'Amr took both his friend and his friend's son captive at Badr. Thus, while Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi's accounts are essentially in agreement, al-Waqidi's account notoriously provides more detail. Both stories support the idea that Musaylima's religious movement was active while Muhammad preached in Mecca, and Musaylima's title "al-Rahman" was infamous enough to be the subject of dispute among old friends

¹¹⁹ Al-Baladhuri, 140.

¹²⁰ Ibn Ishaq, p. 302-03, text 448.

¹²¹ Muhammad b. 'Umar Al-Waqidi,

Kitab al-Maghazi, ed. Marsden Jones (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 82.

during the battle of Badr. Tabari is strikingly silent concerning traditions about Musaylima's dealings with the Prophet during the Meccan and early Medinan periods. Al-Tabari frequently quoted Ibn Ishaq and was undoubtedly familiar with those traditions. One has to wonder, why did he exclude the early dating of Musaylima's movement from his compilation? A clue to this answer can be deduced from a comparison of Ibn Ishaq, Bukhari, and al-Tabari's accounts of the "dream of the armbands."

Ibn Ishaq reports that just after the treaty of Hudaibiyyah (c. 628 C.E.), Muhammad explained to his followers that they would fight a people of great prowess. Ibn Ishaq reports that, "One whom I do not suspect from al-Zuhri told me that 'a people of great prowess meant Hanifa with the arch-liar.'"¹²² Ibn Ishaq continues,

Now the two arch-liars Musaylima B. Habib and al-Aswad B. Ka'b al-'Ansi had spoken during the apostles lifetime, the first in al-Yamama among the B. Hanifa, and the second in San'a. Yazid B. 'Abdullah B. Qusayt told me from 'Ata B. Yasar, or his brother Sulayman, from Abu Sa'id al-Khudri, saying: 'I heard the apostle as he was addressing the people from his pulpit say 'I saw in the night of al-qadr and then I was made to forget it; and I saw on my arms two bracelets of gold which I disliked so I blew on them and they flew away. I interpreted it to mean these two liars, the man of al-Yamama and the man of al-Yaman.' One whom I do not suspect on the

¹²² Ibn Ishaq, p. 506, text 750.

authority of Abu Hurayra said: ‘I heard the apostle say: The hour will not come until thirty antichrists come forth, each of them claiming to be a prophet.’¹²³

The “dream of the armbands” in the *Sahih al-Bukhari* collection is shorn of Ibn Ishaq’s original chronological position (c. 628), and Muhammad is made to say, “...I interpreted the two bracelets as symbols of the two liars who would appear after me...”¹²⁴

Tabari reports that,

The Prophet had ordered the expedition of Usamah, but it did not go well because of his illness and because both Musaylima and al-Aswad had renounced [his authority]. The hypocrites did much [to criticize] Usamah’s leadership. When [the criticism] reached the Prophet he went out to the people while his head was wrapped around because of the pain, which had increased due to the dream he had seen [while he was] in A’ishah’s house, saying, ‘last night I saw what a sleeping person sees, that in my two upper arms there were two golden armbands. I disliked them so I blew on them and they flew away [in the air]. I interpreted the armbands to mean these two arch liars, the possessor of al-Yamamah and the possessor of

the Yemen...¹²⁵ Isnad: ‘Ubaydallah [al-Zuhri] – his uncle Ya’qub – Sayf [B. ‘Umar] – Talhah B. al-A’lam – ‘Irkimah – Ibn ‘Abbas.¹²⁶

Although the dream of the two armbands might reflect something Muhammad said about Musaylima and al-Aswad, the story was most likely told and retold during the period of oral transmission, taking on the character of the storyteller’s explanatory framework. The several variants of the same story were likely copied down at different times and in different places, thus providing a large information pool for future editors and compilers. Based on Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi, Musaylima and al-Aswad’s movements were active for some time before Muhammad’s illness, and they may have taken the opportunity of his illness to consolidate and expand their own positions. For our purposes I would like to draw attention to Ibn Ishaq’s report, which places the dream of the two armbands in the context of Hudaibiyyah (c. 628), prior to the conquest of Mecca and the zenith of Muhammad’s power in the Arabian Peninsula. Muhammad only entered Mecca in triumph in 630, and his success with the Bedouin tribes is said to have followed his triumph over the Quraysh. In contrast, al-Tabari reports that the dream of the two armbands took place just prior to Muhammad’s death (c. 632), foreshadowing the wars of “apostasy.” In Tabari’s version, Muhammad had

¹²³ Ibn Ishaq, p. 648, text 964. To date this *hadith* remains a very popular way of slandering Abd al-Wahab – the founder of Wahabbi religious doctrine.

¹²⁴ Muhammad Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol. 4:56, no. 817.

¹²⁵ al-Tabari, *The Last Years of the Prophet*, trans. Ismail K. Poonawala (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 165-66, text 1796.

¹²⁶ Petersen, 78-83. Sayf B. ‘Umar notoriously fabricated the *hadith* record. The chronology of the events described in this *hadith* report clearly represents a late addition.

reached the pinnacle of power and his ill health had provided the opportunity for “apostate” movements to surface.

Based on the numerous times that Tabari cites Ibn Ishaq as a credible source, one can only conclude that Tabari *chose* not to include Ibn Ishaq’s narrative concerning the dream of the armbands, because Ibn Ishaq’s chronology did not fit into Tabari’s interpretation of the sequence of Musaylima’s activities. The earliest written scholarly consensus (i.e. Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi) on the chronological position of Musaylima’s movement reflected the application of *hadith* reports to specific occasions of Qur’anic revelation. By the time Tabari wrote his universal history, scholarly consensus no longer supported the early dating of Musaylima’s movement. The evolution of the Musaylima legend was shorn of its original chronological context, and was placed into the context of a new paradigm. The new paradigm chronologically positioned the formation of Muhammad’s model society first, and the schismatic example of apostasy followed the illness and death of Muhammad.

The Year of the Delegations (c. 631) as recorded by Ibn Ishaq, Baladhuri, and Tabari provide evidence for the “continuing growth” theory. Ibn Ishaq includes two reports in his compilation. In the first report, Ibn Ishaq cites a Medinese scholar as the source of his information. According to this report Musaylima accompanied the delegation of the Banu Hanifa to Medina, and asked Muhammad for a “gift” (i.e. a claim to land by the authority of Muhammad), which Muhammad promptly rejected. In the second report, Ibn Ishaq cites a shaykh of the Banu Hanifa of Yamama. According to this report Musaylima

accompanied the delegation, but did not speak to Muhammad, and later claimed that Muhammad recognized him as an equal in their prophetic gift. In addition, the second reports mentions that Musaylima apostatized after returning to Yamamah, and “...began to utter rhymes in *saj’* and speak in imitation of the style of the Quran.” The second report also claims that Musaylima “...permitted them to drink wine and fornicate, and let them dispense with prayer, yet he was acknowledging the apostle as a prophet, and Hanifa agreed with him on that.” Ibn Ishaq probably doubted the veracity of both reports since he added the phrase “But God knows what the truth was.”¹²⁷

Concerning the same delegation, Baladhuri repeats the same report provided by the shaykh from the Banu Hanifa, but in his account, a certain man named al-Rajjal bears witness to Musaylima’s claim to prophecy, and Muhammad’s authorization of that claim. Without providing an *isnad*, Baladhuri reports that,

when the delegation of the banu-Hanifah returned to al-Yamamah, Musailimah, the false Prophet, asserted his claim as a prophet, and al-Rajjal ibn-‘Unfuwah testified that the Prophet gave him [Musailimah] a share in the authority with him. Banu-Hanifah and others in al-Yamamah followed him.

Baladhuri’s explanatory detail probably served as a warning to Muslim scholars who supported the claims of “false prophets” (i.e. ‘Alid rivals). Tabari quotes both of Ibn Ishaq’s accounts verbatim concerning the Banu

¹²⁷ Ibn Ishaq, p. 636-37, text 945-46.

Hanifa delegation to Medina.¹²⁸ Thus, Ibn Ishaq seemed uncertain about the details of the Banu Hanifa delegation to Medina, and included two contradictory reports, one from a Medinese scholar, and one from a shaykh of Musaylima's tribe. On the other hand, Baladhuri confidently passes along the report from the Banu Hanifa shaykh, and he even adds the detail of al-Rajjal's support for Musaylima. Tabari simply transmits Ibn Ishaq's two traditions. The differences in Ibn Ishaq and Baladhuri's account of the Musaylima legend concerning the Year of the Delegations underscores the flexibility that compilers had due to constantly evolving oral traditions. The enormous pool of *hadith* material allowed compilers like Baladhuri to include explanatory detail that provided practical lessons for contemporary circumstances.

Baladhuri's account of the Battle of Yamamah (634) provides this study's final example of the utility of the Musaylima legend. Baladhuri relates several specific details about the battle, which regardless of their veracity clearly had a specific purpose in shaping Abbasid taxation policy. For instance, Baladhuri says that after Musaylima was killed, the new leader of Yamamah, Mujja'ah, tricked the Muslim commander Khalid B. Walid into conducting peace negotiations.¹²⁹ Had Yamamah been overcome by Muslim arms; the women and children would have been sold into slavery and the men put to the sword. Since the city entered the *umma* by means of a treaty, the residents were entitled to the economic benefits of entering the *umma* peacefully. The Abbasid tax reforms that

¹²⁸ Al-Tabari, *The Last Years*, p. 95-96, text 1737-38.

¹²⁹ Al-Baladhuri, 137.

attempted to put the empire on an Islamic footing would have had to take into account the ways in which territories such as Yamamah were originally incorporated into the empire. These types of details were not likely to be forgotten by tribal genealogists, or perhaps they were remembered in a way favorable to the tribe's contemporary economic interests.

Muhammad's revelations provided a finite number of solutions to social problems. While these solutions worked well for Arabian Bedouins and oasis towns, Muhammad was unable to foresee the social structure needed to rule an empire that stretched from Spain to the Indus valley. While stories about the Prophet remained the domain of an oral tradition, a certain built-in flexibility allowed the historical paradigm of the Prophet to be adapted (knowingly and/or unknowingly) to the changing circumstances of imperial growth. As the tribal Arab armies absorbed the ancient literary cultures of Persia and Byzantium, Islamic principles were gradually articulated, written down, and studied as a historical phenomenon – one comparable to previous human experience. The sophisticated cultures inherited by the Muslim polity provided the intellectual construct through which Islamic principals were articulated and applied to the administrative structure inherited by the state.¹³⁰

From the first quarter of the eighth century onwards, pious scholars were appointed as *qadis* who in turn attempted to harmonize legal practices with the teachings of the Qur'an.¹³¹ For

¹³⁰ Schacht, *An Introduction*, 20.

¹³¹ Schacht, *An Introduction*, 26, 34, 40, 47. Several legal schools of thought emerged (i.e. Kufa, Basra, Mecca, Medina, Syria, etc.) which attempted to bring the administrative

most of the Umayyad dynasty's rule, non-Arabs were not encouraged to convert to Islam. The Umayyad dynasty remained an Arab oligarchy, and Muslims only represented a fraction of the population. For most of this period, the non-Arab subject population remained predominately Jewish and Christian, who practiced their religion in the midst of their new rulers. Throughout the course of the seventh and eighth centuries, the competing worldviews of Muslims, Christians and Jews, coupled with the political struggle between Byzantium and the Umayyad Empire, provided the philosophical, political and theological framework for the articulation of Islamic theology.

However, Muhammad played the role of statesman and prophet, and his revelations delivered God's plan for a just and divinely ordained society. The Prophet's precedent insured that religion and political organization would be inextricably linked. It is therefore no wonder that the Abbasid revolution succeeded through the use of a brilliant campaign of politico-religious propaganda – one that promised a return to the pristine model of the early Muslim community. The very nature of Islamic history – oral, written and rewritten – provides insights into the changing politico-religious discourse of the Muslim *umma*. Islamic history represented an outgrowth of this politico-religious discourse, and

practices of the state into harmony with the Qur'an, thereby creating Islamic Law. Although Islamic law was originally formulated according to judicial precedent and scholarly consensus and individual reasoning, traditionists claimed that *hadith* reports held authority in establishing legal precedents. By the advent of the Abbasid period, traditionists claimed that *hadith* reports were the proper medium for interpreting the Qur'an and determining legal decisions.

provided useful stories to illustrate politico-religious truths, as determined by compilers, and directed by their sponsors.

The eighth century consensus of the compilers of written *hadith* collections (Ibn Ishaq and Waqidi) presented Muhammad and Musaylima as contemporaneous prophets. The late dating of Musaylima's apostasy was codified in the *Sahih Hadith* collections, historicizing the theological consensus of ninth century Baghdadi scholars, and obscuring the fact that Muhammad was part of a regional phenomenon of localized politico-religious leadership. Later compilations like those of Baladhuri and Tabari reflected the idealized view that Muhammad's preaching was a *unique* phenomenon, which apostate opportunists imitated. Musaylima's movement probably had much more in common with Muhammad's movement than late Abbasid scholars were aware of. As P. Crone implied, Islam, as well as the movements of Musaylima and the other "false prophets," may have developed as a "nativist movement" in reaction to foreign domination" (i.e. Sasanid Persia and Byzantium).¹³² While it is tempting to credit Muhammad and his Companions with the accomplishments of their Successors, it would be a mistake to minimize the vital role that *hadith* reports played in the invention and articulation of an Islamic identity and communal creed. *Hadith* reports, prior to their crystallization into an idealized past, provided the flexible structure of an imperial ideology, which evolved according to the changing construct of communal authority.

¹³² Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 247-49.

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