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Bahīra's Meeting with Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and Argumentative Muslim Scholarship: A Critical Assessment

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ABSTRACT

Bahīra's meeting with Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), during his childhood journey to Syria, has remained a hot-button debate not only in Orientalist scholarship but among Muslim Sīrah writers also. There is a deep-sighted division of opinions between the traditional Muslim Sīrah writers, who stick to the roots of this incident and modern Muslim Sīrah writers, who, seemingly being under the influence of modern scientific and rationalistic approaches, present an outward new trend in Sīrah writing which they deem acceptable to both the orientalists and rationalistic Muslims. If Orientalists have manipulated this incident according to their own bias, some Muslim Sīrah writers, besides refuting the erroneous claims of orientalists, have themselves doubted in the authenticity of this incident. Keeping all this scholarly provocative and engaging incident to the fore, the present paper attempts to inquire into the incident with reference to the primary sources, highlighting the modern Muslim scholars' approach. A critical investigation will be attempted, within the parameters of the sciences of Sīrah and Maghāzi, to explore the authenticity of this Incident. The study methodology will be of a qualitative type based on a thorough comparative content-analysis of the concerned works of Muslim scholarship to draw an argumentative and all-inclusive conclusion.

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Introduction

The incident of the meeting of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) with a Christian Monk Bahīra in 581 CE, has remained contested not only between Muslims and Orientalists,¹ who have been using it against the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), but within the Muslim Scholarship as well. Some of the classical and modern Muslim scholars have strongly criticised the narration regarding the very incident narrated in *Jāmi' Tirmidhī* by Muhammad bin Īsā al-Tirmidhī (d. 892 CE).

The Egyptian writer Muhammad Husayn Haykal (d.1956 CE) writes:

*'It was in al-Shām (Syria) that he (Prophet Muhammad) came to know of Byzantine and Christian history and heard of the Christians' scriptures. ... [This] enabled him at an early age to listen perceptively and to observe details. Later on, he would review in memory all that he had seen or heard and he would investigate it all in solitude, asking himself, "what, of all he has seen and heard, is the truth?"'*²

The narratives of this incident have been described at length with all its ramifications in both the books of *Ahādith* (Traditions) and classical biographies of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Such sources wrest a decent space in the authoritative and canonical Muslim scholarship. The Sirah literature sums up the same incident to unveil the truth regarding the prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his mission. To examine this incident and the nuances aligned to it, let's begin with the account given in the following primary sources.

The Interactive Incident

حَدَّثَنَا الْفَضْلُ بْنُ سَهْلٍ أَبُو الْعَبَّاسِ الْأَعْرَجِيُّ الْبَغْدَادِيُّ، حَدَّثَنَا عَبْدُ الرَّحْمَنِ بْنُ غَزْوَانَ أَبُو نُوحٍ، أَخْبَرَنَا يُونُسُ بْنُ أَبِي إِسْحَاقَ، عَنْ أَبِي بَكْرٍ بْنِ أَبِي مُوسَى، عَنْ أَبِيهِ، قَالَ خَرَجَ أَبُو طَالِبٍ إِلَى الشَّامِ وَخَرَجَ مَعَهُ النَّبِيُّ ﷺ فِي أَشْيَاحٍ مِنْ فَرَنْشِي فَلَمَّا أَشْرَفُوا عَلَى الرَّاهِبِ هَبَطُوا فَحَلُّوا رِحَالَهُمْ فَخَرَجَ إِلَيْهِمُ الرَّاهِبُ وَكَانُوا قَبْلَ ذَلِكَ يَمْرُونَ بِهِ فَلَا يَخْرُجُ إِلَيْهِمْ وَلَا يَلْتَفِتُ . قَالَ فَهَمَّ يَحْلُونَ رِحَالَهُمْ فَجَعَلَ يَتَخَلَّلُهُمُ الرَّاهِبُ حَتَّى جَاءَ فَأَخَذَ بِيَدِ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ ﷺ قَالَ هَذَا سَيِّدُ الْعَالَمِينَ هَذَا رَسُولُ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ يَبْعُهُ اللَّهُ رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ . فَقَالَ لَهُ أَشْيَاحٌ مِنْ فَرَنْشِي مَا عَلِمْتُكَ فَقَالَ إِنَّكُمْ حِينَ أَشْرَفْتُمْ مِنَ الْعَقَبَةِ لَمْ يَبْقَ شَجَرٌ وَلَا حَجَرٌ إِلَّا خَرَّ سَاجِدًا وَلَا يَسْجُدَانِ إِلَّا لِنَبِيِّ وَإِنِّي أَعْرِفُهُ بِخَاتَمِ النَّبُوءَةِ أَسْفَلَ مِنْ غُضْرُوفِ كَتِفِهِ مِثْلَ التُّفَاحَةِ . ثُمَّ رَجَعَ فَصَنَعَ لَهُمْ طَعَامًا فَلَمَّا أَتَاهُمْ بِهِ وَكَانَ هُوَ فِي رِغِيَةِ الْإِبِلِ قَالَ أَرْسِلُوا إِلَيْهِ فَأَقْبَلُ وَعَلَيْهِ غَمَامَةٌ تُظِلُّهُ فَلَمَّا دَنَا مِنَ الْقَوْمِ وَجَدَهُمْ قَدْ سَبَقُوهُ إِلَى فِئَةِ الشَّجَرَةِ فَلَمَّا جَلَسَ مَا لَ فِئَةُ الشَّجَرَةِ عَلَيْهِ فَقَالَ انظُرُوا إِلَى فِئَةِ الشَّجَرَةِ مَا لَ عَلَيْهِ . قَالَ فَبَيْنَمَا هُوَ قَائِمٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَهُوَ يُنَاشِدُهُمْ أَنْ لَا يَدْهَبُوا بِهِ إِلَى الرُّومِ فَإِنَّ الرُّومَ إِذَا رَأَوْهُ عَرَفُوهُ بِالصِّفَةِ فَيَقْتُلُونَهُ فَالْتَفَتَ فَإِذَا بِسَبْعَةِ قَدْ أَقْبَلُوا مِنَ الرُّومِ فَاسْتَقْبَلَهُمْ فَقَالَ مَا جَاءَ بِكُمْ قَالُوا جِئْنَا أَنَّ هَذَا النَّبِيُّ خَارِجٌ فِي هَذَا الشَّرِّ فَلَمْ يَبْقَ طَرِيقٌ إِلَّا بُعِثَ إِلَيْهِ بِأَنَاسٍ وَإِنَّا قَدْ أَخْبَرْنَا خَبْرَهُ بُعِثْنَا إِلَى طَرِيقِكَ هَذَا فَقَالَ هَلْ خَلَّفْتُمْ أَحَدًا هُوَ خَيْرٌ مِنْكُمْ قَالُوا إِنَّمَا أَخْبَرْنَا خَبْرَهُ بِطَرِيقِكَ هَذَا . قَالَ أَفَرَأَيْتُمْ أَمْرًا أَرَادَ اللَّهُ أَنْ يَفْضِيَهُ هَلْ يَسْتَطِيعُ أَحَدٌ مِنَ النَّاسِ رَدَّهُ قَالُوا لَا . قَالَ فَبَايَعُوهُ وَأَقَامُوا مَعَهُ قَالَ أَنْتُمْ كُمْ اللَّهُ أَيُّكُمْ وَلِيُّهُ قَالُوا أَبُو طَالِبٍ فَلَمْ يَزَلْ يُنَاشِدُهُ حَتَّى رَدَّهُ أَبُو طَالِبٍ وَبَعَثَ مَعَهُ أَبُو بَكْرٍ بِرَأْسِ بِلَالٍ وَرَوَدَهُ الرَّاهِبُ مِنَ الْكَعْبِكِ وَالرِّبْتِ.³

The incident of the meeting of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) with Bahīra, a Christian Monk, took place in around 581 CE when Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) accompanied the Quraysh caravan to Syria. The caravan was led by eminent Qurayshites including Abū Ṭālib (d. 620 CE), the Prophet's uncle. The

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biographies of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) situate this incident at a time when the Prophet (peace be upon him) was twelve years old; some Sīrah writers hold nine years.⁴ Though Abū Ṭālib, who succeeded ‘Abd al-Muttalib (d. 578 CE) as the sole guardian of the Prophet, did not want to take the Prophet (peace be upon him) with him thinking that he was too young to bear the hardships of dry desert travel, yet when he prepared to set out, the Prophet (peace be upon him) flew to his arms and he couldn’t control his emotions and said:

“By God, I will take him away with me and never be parted from him, just as he will not be parted from me!”⁵

Thus, he permitted his nephew to accompany him in the journey to Syria. Consequently, the caravan reached Busrā (a province of Syria), the place where the Christian Monk Bahīra lived. Bahīra was well versed in the earlier biblical manuscripts containing the prophecy of a forthcoming Prophet and like Waraqah bin Nawfal and the other Unitarians of the time, he too could infer that Muhammad would be the final prophet as mentioned in their scriptures.

Bahīra came out from his church to meet the caravan and readily recognised the Prophet (peace be upon him) from some attributes and signs. While holding his hand, he proclaimed:

“This is the leader of the universe, the messenger of the Lord of the universe and God will send him as a mercy to the universe.”⁶

The men of Quraysh asked Bahīra: “How do you know that? He replied: “when you appeared from the ‘Aqabah’ (gorge), all trees and stones prostrated themselves and this can happen only for a prophet.” He also acknowledged him by the seal of the prophethood below his shoulder resembling a mark of an apple. Bahīra invited all of them for a banquet in honour of the future Prophet that he recognised. All of them came to his monastery except the Prophet, who was left to take care of the camels, much to the chagrin of the monk. Soon he too was called, at Bahīra's wish, to join the feast. When the Prophet came, surprisingly a small low-hanging cloud above his head shaded him from the scorching heat of the desert sun. People had taken the shelter beneath the shadow of a tree outside the cell of Bahīra and when the Prophet didn’t find any place there, he sat on a side. The moment he sat, the shade of the tree⁷ leaned over him. Bahīra drew the attention of the people on it and advised Abū Ṭālib (when he came to know that he is the guardian of this boy) to send his nephew back to Makkah and not to move towards Syria along with him, speculating the death threat from the Roman Jews. He opined that they might recognise him by the signs and supposedly would not spare his life. Realising the situation Abū Ṭālib abided by Bahīra's suggestion and sent Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) back to Makkah with Bilāl and Abū Bakr.⁸

When the Prophet (peace be upon him) returned to Makkah, Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373 CE) narrates the supplication of Bahīra as: *“Oh God, I place Muhammad in your care.”*⁹

Imām Suhayli (d. 1185 CE) has related from Imām Zuhri (d.741 CE) that Bahīra was a Jewish priest. But Ibn Kathīr says that it appears from the course of the incident that he was a Christian Monk. Famous historian Ali al-Mas’ūdi (d. 956 CE) reports that he belonged to the tribe ‘Abd al-Qays and that his name was *Jarjīs* (Georges). Ibn Kathīr narrates from the work of *Ma’ārif* of Ibn Qutaybah (d. 889 CE) which states that a voice was heard in the *Jāhiliyyah* period, shortly before the advent of Islam, calling out the words that Bahīra was one of the finest men who lived on earth.¹⁰

Ibn Kathīr, in his famous *Al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah*, has regarded the very incident among those events which astounded the contemporaneous people. While narrating the incident, he writes:

*“When the Prophet was twelve years old, he accompanied his uncle (Abū Ṭālib) to Syria on a trade trip. Bahīra Rāhib (Monk) noticed a fragment of hanging cloud protecting him (from the scorching heat of the sun) by leaning shade over him only. Bahīra came out of his monastery and welcomed him and all the members of the caravan respectfully. He sincerely invited all of them and extended his hospitality to all the people in honour of the (future) Prophet. Ibn Asākir has authoritatively narrated it, in his Tārīkh Dimashq.”*¹¹

Views of Some Modern Muslim Sirah Writers on this Incident

The modern Sirah writers namely Allāmah Shiblī Nu’mānī (d. 1914 CE) and Qāḍī Sulaymān Mansūrpūrī (d. 1930 CE), besides refuting biased claims of western scholars, have questioned the very authenticity of this incident and have categorically regarded it as unreliable and inauthentic. However, their unique observation and approach to this incident needs to be critically analysed. The below account based on some arguments highlights their claim:

Allāmah Shiblī Nu’mānī has raised some questions over the tradition of Tirmidhī regarding the very incident and has thereby termed it as unreliable. He writes:

*“The fact is that the story of Bahīra is unreliable. The different chains of narrators that report this incident are all what the Traditionalists have termed as Mursal, i.e., neither was the original narrator an eye-witness himself nor does he name the eye-witness from whom he quotes.....the last narrator of this story at the top-end is Abū Mūsā al-Ash’arī who himself was not present nor does he tell the name of the man who narrated it to him.”*¹²

Allāmah Shiblī has also raised a question on ‘Abd al-Rahmān bin Ghazwān (The narrator of this incident) and has given reference of Imām Dhahabī (d. 1348 CE), who in his *Mizān al-Itidāl*, has stated that ‘Abd al-Rahmān narrates *Munkar* (Unfamiliar) traditions and the tradition regarding the incident of Bahīra is also among them.¹³

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Likewise, while narrating this incident, Qāḍī Sulaymān Mansūrpūrī writes:

“Most of the books describe that when the Prophet (peace be upon him) was twelve years old, his uncle Abū Ṭālib took a trade journey to Syria and the Prophet (peace be upon him) accompanied him. At Busrā, Bahīra Rāhib (a Christian Monk) recognised him as the final prophet. The monk told Abū Ṭālib: ‘Don’t take him to the land of Jews. They might harm him if they recognise him’. Kind-hearted uncle returned him from Busrā.”¹⁴

The same author raises the following questions:

“In this respect, the tradition narrated by Tirmidhī also describes that Abū Ṭālib returned the Prophet (peace be upon him) with Bilāl (and Abū Bakr). Ibn al-Qayyim says that it is an obvious error. Firstly, Bilāl was neither with Abū Ṭālib nor with Abū Bakr. Secondly, probably Bilāl might have not been there at that time.”¹⁵

The same author quotes the following part of the Qur’anic verse in support of his argument, which says:

وَكَاذِبًا مِّن قَبْلُ يَسْتَفْخِمُونَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا، فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ مَا عَرَفُوا كَفَرُوا بِهِ¹⁶

“... Even though before this they (Jews) used to pray for victory over Kuffār (by saying, Oh Allah! Assist us against our enemies through the avenue and grace of your final Prophet). However, when they recognise what comes to them (the prophethood of the final Prophet) they denied it (They reject it, fearing that they will lose their leadership).”¹⁷

Qāḍī Mansūrpūrī further adds:

“The said verse witnesses that Jews were looking for the promised prophet and reckoned that his arrival would bring victory for Jews over Kuffār (Infidels). This belief remained with them until the advent of the (final) Prophet. So, this verse proved that the statement of the Christian monk (Bahīra) is not genuine because if Jews had recognised the Prophet, they would have accepted him as the deity of triumph and victory according to their belief and would have remained submissive to him. In conclusion, the tale of the monk is unreliable.”¹⁸

The Incident in the Primary Sources

Before directly addressing the queries raised by the modern Sīrah writers, let’s revisit the primary sources of Sīrah to reflect on the contested debate again.

Muhammad bin Ishāq (d. 767 CE), whose biography of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) entitled “*Sīrat Rasūlullāh*” is the earliest primary source of Sīrah, has recorded, in detail, the incident of Prophet’s meeting with Bahīra. While advising Abū Ṭālib to return his nephew back to Makkah, he narrates Abū Ṭālib’s action to Bahīra’s call in the following words.

“So, his (Prophet’s) uncle took him off quickly and brought him back to Makkah when he had finished his trading in Syria.”¹⁹

Muhammad bin Sa’ad (d. 845 CE), whose *Tabaqāt al-Kubrā* is regarded as one of the most authentic sources of *Sīrah*, narrates the event of Bahīra in which there is no mention of Bilāl (d. 634 CE) and Abū Bakr (d. 641 CE). He avers:

“Dawūd bin Ḥusayn (The Narrator of Tabaqāt) narrates that when the Prophet (peace be upon him) was twelve years old, a trade caravan was preceding to Syria. Abū Ṭālib went with it and took the Prophet with him. All of the members of the Caravan made a halt at the (Church of) Bahīra monk. What he had to ask Abū Ṭālib about the Prophet he asked and told them to protect him. This was the reason that Abū Ṭālib returned to Makkah along with the Prophet.”²⁰

Similarly, after making a thorough conversation with Abū Ṭālib about the parents of the Prophet (peace be upon him), Bahīra requested him to take his nephew back to Makkah. Ibn Kathīr narrates it as:

“Take your brother’s son back to his own country and guard him against the Jews. For, by God, if they see him and know what I know, they will do him evil. This nephew of yours has a great (wondrous and magnificent) future before him; take him back soon to his own country.”²¹

Accordingly, Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1350 CE) after narrating the entire event along with Bahīra’s suggestion to Abū Ṭālib of not taking his nephew with him to Syria, writes:

“So, Abū Ṭālib returned the Prophet with his slave. Tirmidhī records that Bilāl was sent with the Prophet. But this report is absolutely wrong because Bilāl was not there at that time. (suppose) If he was there, he was neither with the uncle of the Prophet nor with Abū Bakr. Abū Bakr Bazzār (d. 905 CE) has also mentioned this tradition in his Musnad, but has mentioned “a man” (رجل) instead of Bilāl (بلال).”²²

Hāfiz Ibn al-Qayyim has not termed this entire event fabricated or unacceptable, as some people have misunderstood, rather after narrating the entire incident, he only criticised the last sentence of the tradition narrated by Imām Tirmidhī in his *Jām’i* regarding this event.

However, the majority of *Muhaddithūn* (Traditionists) and *Ahl al-Siyar* (*Sīrah* Experts) regard this incident as established, although most state that the mention of Abū Bakr and Bilāl with the Prophet (peace be upon him), in most narrations, is an error most probably from a transmitter, as Bilāl was not born or must have been a kid at the time and Abū Bakr too was two and a half years younger than the Prophet (peace be upon him). However, the name Bilāl mentioned in this narration may not necessarily be the Bilāl of Ethiopia.

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One of the modern Sīrah writers, Mawlānā Safī al-Rahmān Mubarakpūrī (d.2006CE), in his *Al-Rahīq al-Makhtūm*, after Bahīra's recognition, narrates his advice and Abū Ṭālib's compliance as:

*"He (Bahīra) asked Abū Ṭālib to send the boy back to Makkah and not to take him to Syria for fear of the Romans and Jews. Abū Ṭālib obeyed and sent him back to Makkah with some of his men-servants."*²³

However, in the footnotes, Mubarakpūrī has also talked about the tradition narrated by Tirmidhī regarding the same event and has quoted Ibn al-Qayyim's criticism on it also. But at the same time, the author has narrated this event from other sources and has given them preference over the narration by Tirmidhī.

Similarly, when Bahīra informed Abū Ṭālib about the hostility of Jews and urged him to take his nephew back to Makkah as soon as possible. Justice Pīr Karam Shah Azharī (d. 1998 CE) discusses different accounts of how Abū Ṭālib implemented the recommendation of Bahīra as:

*"Some narrations mention that Abū Ṭālib took the Prophet (peace be upon him) and immediately returned to Makkah. However, other narrations mention that Abū Ṭālib instantly went to Syria along with the Prophet (peace be upon him) and after completing his business, brought him back to his homeland, Makkah."*²⁴

Some Reputed Reflections in Response to Allāmah Shiblī Nu'mānī and Qāḍī Sulaymān Mansūrpūrī

Ibn Kathīr comments that the tradition regarding Prophet's meeting with Bahīra is among the *Mursalāt* (attributed back to the Companions) because Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī came to Madinah in the year of Khaybar in 7 A.H. Perhaps he received it from the Prophet (peace be upon him) himself, in which case it would be very accurate. Or he could have received it from some of the major Companions, God be pleased with them. Alternatively, the incident might have been well known and often mentioned and the narrator took it from knowledge widely current.²⁵

An established principle of the Hadīth methodology is that if a companion narrates an incident, like the event of Bahīra, without witnessing it first hand, the narration, in the terminology of *Muhaddithīn*, is called *Mursal* of the Companion and is acceptable and reliable to them. Otherwise the traditions of Ā'ishah Ṣiddīqah and other junior Companions (regarding different events), in which they were not the first-hand witnesses, will become unreliable and will lose validity. It is ample for a tradition to be authentic and sound if all the narrators (in the chain) up to the Companion are reliable (*Thiqah*). Whatever the Companions will attribute to the Prophet (peace be upon him), will certainly be related to him through others.

In reply to Allāmah Shiblī assertion, after describing the credibility and validity of

Mursal tradition (the gist of which is written above), Mawlānā Idrīs Kandhalwī (d. 1974 CE) says:

“The astonishing thing is that Allāmah (Shiblī) himself has acknowledged this principle in the event of Bi’tthat (the advent of the revelation on the Prophet) in his ‘Sīrah al-Nabi’. Allāmah writes: “This tradition is narrated by Ā’ishah”. Although ‘Ā’ishah was not even born at that time. In the terminology of Muhaddithīn, this type of tradition is called as Mursal and the Mursal of the Companion is trustworthy and accepted. Because the missing narrator must be a Companion. But don’t know, why Allāmah Shiblī forgot this principle here (in the incident of Bahīra)?”²⁶

Imām Jalāl al-Dīn Suyūṭī (d. 1505 CE) says that these types of traditions (*Mursalāt*) could also be found in *Ṣaḥīh al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīh al-Muslim*.²⁷

The eminent *Muhaddithīn* have discussed the authenticity of ‘Abd al-Rahmān bin Ghazwān and called reports narrated by him as reliable. Ibn Kathīr writes:

“Many Huffāz (experts of the science of Rijāl) relate it (this tradition) from an account of Abū Nūh ‘Abd al-Rahmān bin Ghazwān al-Khuzā’ī. He was known as al-Dabbi and was one of those “trustworthy sources” (Thiqah) vouched for by Bukhārī. Many legal scholars and Huffāz declare him trustworthy and I never knew anyone who impugned him. Nevertheless, there are unique aspects to this account of his.”²⁸

Imām Jazarī (d. 1429 CE) says that the chain of this narration is authentic (*Ṣaḥīh*) and all of its narrators are the narrators of *Ṣaḥīh al-Bukhārī*. So, the mention of Abū Bakr and Bilāl is only an (inadvertent) mistake of the narrator.²⁹

Hāfiz ibn Hajar al-Asqalānī (d. 1449 CE) says that all the narrators of this tradition are reliable and are narrators of Bukhārī. ‘Abd al-Rahmān bin Ghazwān too is among the narrators of Bukhārī. *Muhaddithīn* entrust him with authenticity.³⁰

Allāmah Sakhāwī (d. 1497 CE) says that he has not seen anyone who has criticised ‘Abd al-Rahmān bin Ghazwān. Further, he says, it is the mistake of some narrators who mentioned the name of Abū Bakr and Bilāl in this tradition. Therefore, it can be said that the mention of Abū Bakr and Bilāl is *Mudraj* (Interpolated) in this narration and due to the *Mudraj* of two words we cannot entirely cast off or reject this incident because all the narrators of this tradition are reliable and trustworthy.³¹

Ibn Hajar says that the chain of this tradition reported by *Tirmidhī* is strong and sound. The mistake may have happened due to another narration i.e. the narration of Ibn Abbās who narrates that the Prophet (peace be upon him) travelled to Syria at the age of twenty years and Abū Bakr accompanied him in that journey and both met the same Bahīra at that time. Ibn Hajar in his *al-Isābah* says, that if this narration is sound then this journey is a separate journey from the previous one, which has been mentioned before. So, the narrator has fallen in doubt due to the similarity and

proximity of both the events and thus mentioned Abū Bakr by mistake.³²

Moreover, *Muhaddithīn* (like 'Alā al-Dīn Mughultāy (d. 762 CE) (the Commentator of *Sunan Ibn Mājah*) narrates a principle that when both *Jarah* (Criticism) and *Ta'dīl* (Eulogy) are found about a narrator, preference will be given to that group who have made *Ta'dīl* of the narrator. Unless *Fisq* (persistent involvement in major sins) of the narrator is not proved and certified, his narration cannot be rejected. Jurists (*Fuqahā*) also hold the same principle that in this case, preference will be given to the *Ta'dīl* over vague and ambiguous *Jarah*, although critics may number more than the admirers and verily accepting this principle is the path of prudence and meticulousness.³³

Mawlānā Idrīs kandhalwi states that Badr al-Dīn 'Aynī (d. 1451 CE) and Sheikh ibn Humām (d. 1457 CE) have followed the same path in '*Umdah al-Qāri* (Commentary of *Sahih al-Bukhārī*) and *Fath al-Qadīr* (Commentary of *Al-Hidayah*) respectively. Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855 CE) also rely on the same conduct that unless all of the people of knowledge are not unanimous on the abandonment of any narrator, he doesn't abandon his narration.³⁴

Although the verse quoted in defence of his argument, Qādī Sulaymān Mansūrpūrī describes that the Jews were eagerly waiting for the final prophet whose coming had been prophesied by the previous prophets and they used to pray for his advent so that the dominance of *Kuffār* could come to an end by gaining triumph over them. But, needless to say, when the Prophet (peace be upon him) arrived, they did not go by their intention to join the Prophet (peace be upon him), on the contrary they refused to believe him as the final prophet on a collective scale. Verily, they knew the arrival of the final prophet and they recognised him but *Imān* (Faith) is not to recognise but to believe with firm conviction.

And when Qur'an says, "They recognised him," we find many contemporaneous events. The most authentic evidence in this connection is that of *Safiyyah* (Wife of the Prophet), whose father (Ḥuyayy b. Akhtab) and uncle (Abū Yāsir) were eminent Jewish scholars. She said that when the Prophet (peace be upon him) migrated to Madinah, both her father and uncle went to meet him and conversed with him for quite a while. When they returned home. I (*Safiyyah*) went up to them and found them sunk in a gloom. I heard my uncle saying to my father, "Is he really the same Prophet whose advent has been prophesied in our scriptures? Do you recognise him, and can you be sure?" My father replied, "Yes! By God, he is." My Uncle said, "And what do you feel about him"? My father replied, "By God, I shall be his enemy as long as I live!"³⁵

Therefore, there is no contradiction between the apprehension of Bahira regarding the animosity of Jews and the report of the above Qur'anic verse. It substantiates the account that the Jews knew about the advent of the last Prophet and would aspire

his assistance against the *Kuffār* in their future. However, when the final prophet (peace be upon him) proclaimed his prophethood, they denied and refused to accept it though they recognised him the way they recognise their children. This view is succinctly expatiated in Quran:

الَّذِينَ آتَيْنَاهُمُ الْكِتَابَ يَعْرِفُونَهُ كَمَا يَعْرِفُونَ أَبْنَاءَهُمْ وَإِنَّ فَرِيقًا مِّنْهُمْ لَيَكْتُمُونَ الْحَقَّ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ³⁶

“Those who have been given book (the Jews and the Christians) recognise him (the Prophet together with his lineage, tribe, place of birth, place of residence, appearances, qualities and attributes) just as they recognise their sons. Undoubtedly there (still) exists among them a group who knowingly hide the truth.”³⁷

They not only denied his message rather left no stone unturned to harm him and created hurdles in his mission. The period of Madinah contains ample examples in this regard. Therefore, Qādī Mansūrpūrī’s declaration of calling this incident a fake story is refuted by the sound arguments mentioned above.

Conclusion

The historicity and occurrence of the incident of Bahīra’s meeting with Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) have been discussed and examined critically in Muslim writings on Sīrah literature. It is evident that Muslim narrators have not handled narrations regarding the incident carefully which has given birth to various issues not only in the Orientalist approach but within the Muslim scholarship as well. The paper attempted to critically examine the stance of some modern Sīrah writers who have doubted the authenticity of the incident altogether. It is exemplified that such writers have taken the various narrations of the incident far-granted to put forth their reservations. The hiatus in the narration by the name of *Mudraj*, apparent contradiction among the various narratives, Prophet’s age, Bilāl’s companionship in the incident, trustworthiness of the narrator of Tirmidhī namely, ‘Abd al-Rahmān bin Ghazwān al-Khuzā’ī, Hāfiz Ibn al-Qayyim’s criticism is the case in point. Keeping in view the overall debate, it is manifested that the incident of Prophet’s meeting with Bahīra is not a fake story and is rather based on narrations which are reliable and acceptable as far as the sciences of Sīrah and Maghāzi are concerned.



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References & Notes

¹ The Orientalists like John William Draper (d.1882) held that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was deeply impressed not only by the religious but also the philosophical ideas of Bahira. He argued this in the light of his assertion that later in his career the Prophet (peace be upon him) was glared by the Nestorian (a Christian sect) doctrines to a great extent. See, John William Draper, "*History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science.*" [EBook #1185] www.gutenberg.org.

The Muslim response to the biased and subjective claims of Orientalists can be seen in: 1) Mawlānā Abū al-Hasan 'Alī Nadwī, *Nabī-i-Raḥmat*, English translation. *The Apostle of Mercy*, Mohiud Din Ahmad (Laknow: Academy of Islamic Research and Publications, 1982), 96-97. 2) Allāmah Shiblī Nu'mānī, *Sīrah al-Nabī*, English translation. M. Tayyib Bakhsh Badāyūnī (New-Delhi: Adam Publishers and Distributers, 2010), I/145-147.

² Muhammad Ḥusayn Haykal, *The Life of Muhammad*, English Translation, Isma'il Rāgī A. al-Farūqī (Delhi: New Crescent Publishing Company, 2013), 55.

³ Muhammad bin Īsā Tirmidhī, *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, Chapter, *Abwāb al-Manāqib*, *Bāb Mā Jā'a Fī Bad'i Nabuwwah al-Nabī*, Ḥadīth No. 3620.

⁴ Imām Suhaylī has narrated that Prophet's age at that time was nine years old. See, Imād al-Dīn Ibn Kathīr, *Sīrah al-Nabī*, English translation, Prof. Trevor Le Gassick, *The Life of the Prophet Muhammad*, (Lebanon: Garnet Publishing, 2006), I/178.

⁵ Ibid., I/174.

⁶ Tirmidhī, *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, Ḥadīth No. 3620.

⁷ Government of Jordan (Urdun) has established an institute namely, *Mu'assasah Āal al-Bayt Lil Fikr al-Islami* (موسسة آل البيت للفكر الاسلامي). It has been assigned the job to search and preserve those historical monuments and remnants which belong to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his Companions. Fortunately, after going thorough strict and scrupulous investigation with the help of narratives of Ḥadīth, Sīrah, historical documents preserved by the Ottomans and witnesses of the regional public, the institute succeeded in finding out the tree which casted its shade on the Prophet (peace be upon him) outside the church of Bahira monk.

Few years ago, while making a survey of an oil pipeline, the road was discovered which was used in the ancient times for journeys between Hijaz and Syria. At that time this wonderful tree was discovered, which stand-alone like a pearl in the middle of the desert expanded hundreds of square miles and it is still alive up to this day in that dreary scorched desert.

The local government after enclosing the premises of this tree, has arranged irrigation facility which has made it more fresh and verdant. The existence of this tree, around which there is neither a single tree standing up to hundreds of miles and nor any way for water to feed it, is a sheer miracle of the final Prophet (peace be upon him). (See: Mufti Abū Lubābā Shah Mansūr, *Āsār-e-Nabī Khatrey mei*, Urdu (Karachi: Al-Sa'īd Publishers, 2011) 34.

- ⁸ Tirmidhī, *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, Hadith No. 3620.
- ⁹ Ibn Kathīr, *Sīrah al-Nabī*, I/179.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., I/179.
- ¹¹ Hāfiz Imād al-Dīn Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah*, Urdu translation, Muhammad Arshad Hasan (Deoband: Maktabah Dānish, 1999), I/540.
- ¹² Nu'mānī, *Sīrah al-Nabī*, I/146-147.
- ¹³ Ibid., I/146.
- ¹⁴ Qāḍī Sulaymān Mansūrpūrī, *Rahmah al- Lil 'Ālamīn* (New-Delhi: Ateqad Publishing House, 2007), I/65.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., I/65.
- ¹⁶ *Al-Qur'ān* 02:89.
- ¹⁷ Mufti Afzal Hossen Elias, *Qur'ān Made Easy* (Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2020) 16.
- ¹⁸ Mansūrpūrī, *Rahmah al- Lil 'Ālamīn*, I/65.
- ¹⁹ Muhammad bin Ishāq, *Sīrat Rasūlullah*, English translation, A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad* (Karachi: Oxford Printing Press, 2004), 81.
- ²⁰ Muhammad bin Sa'ad, *Tabaqāt al-Kubrā*, Urdu translation, Abdullah Imādī and Muhammad Asghar Mughal (Deoband: Hafzi book depot, 1998) I/114.
- ²¹ Ibn Kathīr, *Sīrah al-Nabī*, I/176.
- ²² Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-Ma'ād*, Urdu translation, Ra'īs Ahmad Ja'farī Nadwī (Deoband: Maktabah Fārān, 2012), I/69.
- ²³ Safi al-Rahmān Mubārakpūrī, *Al-Rahīq al-Makhtūm*, English translation, *The Sealed Nectar*, (Riyadh: Dar al-Salaam, 2008) 76. The author has narrated the entire incident on the authority of *Al-Muṣannaḥ ibn Abī Shaybah* XI/489, *Baihaqī's Dalā'il*, II/24 and *Al-Ṭabarī*, II/278-278.
- ²⁴ Pīr Muhammad Karam Shah Azharī, *Diyā al-Nabī* (Lahore: Diyā al-Qur'ān Publishers, 1420 AH), II/ 108.
- ²⁵ Ibn Kathīr, *Sīrah al-Nabī*, I/178.
- ²⁶ Kandhalwī, *Sīrah al-Mustafā*, I/113-114.
- ²⁷ Jalāl al-Dīn Suyūtī, *Tadrīb al-Rawī*, on the authority of *Sīrah al-Mustafa*, I/114.
- ²⁸ Ibn Kathīr, *Sīrah al-Nabī*, I/178.
- ²⁹ Kandhalwī, *Sīrah al-Mustafā*, I/113.
- ³⁰ Ibn Hajar al-Asqalānī, *Al-Iṣābah*, on the authority of *Sīrah al-Mustafā*, I/112-113.
- ³¹ Fath al-Dīn Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *'Uyūn al-Athār Fī Funūn al-Maghāzi wa al-Shamā'il wa al-Siyar*, I/43, on the authority of *Sīrah al-Mustafā*, I/113.
- ³² Ibn Hajar, *Al-Iṣābah*, on the authority of *Sīrah al-Mustafā*, I/113.
- ³³ Kandhalwī, *Sīrah al-Mustafā*, I/127.
- ³⁴ Ibid., I/128.
- ³⁵ Ibn Ishāq, *Sīrat Rasūlullah*, 242.
- ³⁶ *Al-Qur'ān* 02:146.
- ³⁷ Mufti Afzal Hossen Elias, *Qur'ān Made Easy*, 29-30.