

Self-Censorship in Muslim History A case study of Da'wat dhu 'I-'Ashira

1. Introduction

Many students of Islamic history begin with the assumption that if an event or a statement has not been reported in the earliest sources of Muslim history or hadith like *as-Sirah an-Nabawiyya* of Ibn Hisham or *Sahih* of al-Bukhari, it must be a later fabrication and therefore not credible. They tend to ignore the biases and limitations that are imposed on the writer by the ruling powers as well as by self-inclination. Biases are not only relevant in fabrication of mythical persons, events and statements, they are equally relevant in ignoring and silently bypassing certain historical figures and stories.

This paper intends to examine the way Muslim historians have dealt with the first open call to Islam known as Da'wat dhu 'I-'Ashira.

2. The First Open Call to Islam

Islam began when the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny) became forty years old. Initially, the mission was kept a secret. Then three years after the advent of Islam, the Prophet was ordered to commence the open declaration of his message. This was the occasion when Almighty Allah revealed the verse

"And warn thy nearest relations." (26:214)

When this verse was revealed, the Prophet organized a feast that is known in history as "Summoning the Family – *Da'wat dhu 'I-'Ashira*". The Prophet invited around forty men from the Banu Hashim and asked 'Ali bin Abi Talib to make arrangements for the dinner. After having served his guests with food and drinks, when the Prophet wanted to speak to them about Islam, Abu Lahab forestalled him and said, "Your host has long since bewitched you." All the guests dispersed before the Prophet could present his

message to them.

The Prophet then invited them the next day. After the feast, he spoke to them, saying:

O Sons of 'Abdu 'l-Muttalib! By Allah, I do not know of any person among the Arabs who has come to his people with better than what I have brought to you. I have brought to you the good of this world and the next, and I have been commanded by the Lord to call you unto Him. Therefore, who amongst you will support me in this matter so that he may be my brother (*akhhi*), my successor (*wasiyyi*) and my caliph (*khalifati*) among you?

This was the first time that the Prophet openly and publicly called the relations to accept him as the Messenger and Prophet of Allah; he also uses the words "*akhi wa wasiyyi wa khalifati*– my brother, my successor, my caliph" for the person who will aid him in this mission. No one answered him; they all held back except the youngest of them – 'Ali bin Abi Talib. He stood up and said, "I will be your helper, O Prophet of God."

The Prophet put his hand on the back of 'Ali's neck and said:

"*Inna hadha akhhi wa wasiyyi wa khalifati fikum, fasma'u lahu wa ati'u* – Verily this is my brother, my successor, and my caliph amongst you; therefore, listen to him and obey."¹

This was a very explicit statement because the audience understood the appointment of 'Ali very clearly. Some of them, including Abu Lahab, even joked with Abu Talib that your nephew, Muhammad, has ordered you to listen to your son and obey him! At the least, this shows that the appointment of 'Ali bin Abi Talib was clear and explicit, not just implied.

3. Why Doesn't Ibn Hisham Mention this Da'wat?

One of the questions raised in relation to this issue is why 'Abdu 'l-Malik Ibn Hisham (d. 213 AH) does not mention this event in his *as-Sirah an-Nabawiyya* – The Biography of the Prophet? After all, he is the earliest of all historians.

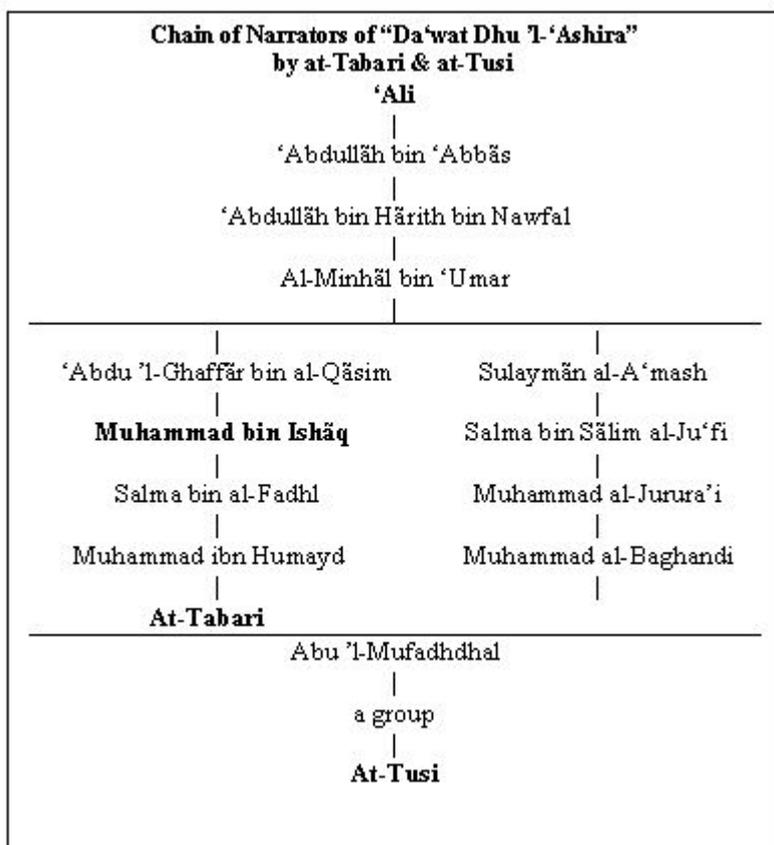
What is known as the *Sirah* of Ibn Hisham is actually the summary of the book of Muhammad Ibn Ishaq (born in 85 AH in Medina and died in 151 AH in Baghdad). The unabridged version of Ibn Ishaq's history book does not exist anymore. So the question has to be reformulated: "Did Ibn Ishaq mention the Summoning of the Family event?"

The political considerations that influenced Ibn Hisham in deleting certain events and maintaining others is clear from his own statement. While listing the items that he has omitted, Ibn Hisham writes, "...things which it is disgraceful to discuss; matters which would distress certain people...all these things I have omitted."² Editors of the 1955 Egyptian edition of the *Sirah* write that Ibn Ishaq had quoted events that would not have pleased the 'Abbasids "like the participation of al-'Abbas with the infidels in the battle of

Badr and his capture by the Muslims—the narration that Ibn Hisham later on omitted out of the fear of the 'Abbasids."³

Praises of Imam 'Ali bin Abi Talib, especially the tradition of *dar*, were among the items that Ibn Hisham has deleted in summarizing the *Sirah* of Ibn Ishaq. "The tradition of *dar*" is about the Summoning of the Family event mentioned above.

The fact that Ibn Ishaq had mentioned the Summoning of the Family can be seen through those who have narrated events from Ibn Ishaq by sources other than Ibn Hisham. For example, at-Tabari (d. 310 AH) narrates the same event through Ibn Ishaq. Shaykh Abu Ja'far at-Tusi (d. 460 AH) also narrates the same event through two different chains of narrators: one of those two is on the authority of Ibn Ishaq through at-Tabari.⁴



This clearly shows that what has come to be recognized as the earliest and the most authentic historical account is not free from bias in ignoring certain events and in narrating others.

Ibn Ishaq himself has been accused of having Shi'ite leanings. If true, this could be one of the considerations that prompted Ibn Hisham to omit the items that he thought supported the Shi'ite cause. However, al-Khatib al-Baghdadi in *Ta'rikh Baghdad* and Ibn Sayyidi 'n-Nas in *'Uyunu l-Athar*, both Sunni historians, have defended Ibn Ishaq against all kinds of accusations including that of having Shi'ite leanings.⁵

4. Self-Censorship by At-Tabari

The case of Muhammad bin Jarir at-Tabari (d. 310 AH) is even more interesting. The event of Da'wat dhi 'l-'Ashira given above is based on the version of at-Tabari's monumental work in history: *Ta'rikhu 'l-Umam wa 'l-Muluk*. At-Tabari has also authored a famous commentary of the Qur'an: *Jami'u 'l-Bayan 'an Ta'wil Ayai 'l-Qur'an*. It is interesting to compare the history of at-Tabari with his Qur'anic commentary in relation to the present topic.

القوم ليقوموا، ودعاهم محمد في الغداة كرة أخرى، فلما طعموا قال لهم: ما أعلم إنسانا من العرب جاء قومه بأفضل مما جئتمكم به، قد جئتمكم بخير الدنيا والآخرة، وقد أمرني ربي أن أدعوكم إليه، فأيكم يوازرنني على هذا الأمر، وأن يكون أخي ووصيي وخليفتي فيكم؟ فأعرضوا عنه وهموا بتركه، لكن عليا نهض وما يزال صبيا دون اللحم، وقال: أنا يا رسول الله عونك، أنا حرب على من حاربت. فابتسم بنو هاشم وقهقهه بعضهم، وجعل نظرم ينتقل من أبي طالب إلى ابنه ثم انصرفوا مستهزئين

In his *Ta'rikh*, at-Tabari⁶ has quoted the words used by the Prophet for 'Ali in the Feast in its entirety:

"*akhhi wa wasiyyi wa khalifati*:

my brother, my successor, my caliph."⁷

But in his *at-Ta'wil* (vol. 19, p. 74), while discussing the relevant verse in which the Prophet was ordered to call his relations to Islam, at-Tabari exercises self-censorship and has concealed the clear and the explicit impact of the Prophet's words by recording it as follows:

"*akhhi wa kadha wa kadha*:

my brother, and so-and-so, and so-and-so."

Ibn Kathir, another famous Damascene author of *al-Bidayah wa an-Nihayah* (vol. 3, p. 40), has used the *Ta'rikh* of at-Tabari as his main reference. However, when he comes to the event of the Feast, he abandons the *Ta'rikh* of at-Tabari and uses the altered version of *Jami'u 'l-Bayan* of at-Tabari! This is not surprising since it is known that Ibn Kathir had anti-Shi'a sentiments.

5. Self-Censorship in Modern Times

A modern writer of Egypt, Dr. Muhammad Husayn Haykal, wrote a famous book on the Prophet's biography known as *Hayat Muhammad*. Haykal had first published the Prophet's biography in his weekly paper *as-Siyasa*. The event of the Feast was published in the supplement of issue # 2751 (12 Dhu 'l-Qa'dah 1350) p. 5, column 2. One of his critics wrote a letter to the paper accusing Haykal of using Shi'ite sources for that statement about Imam 'Ali. Haykal responds to this accusation in the supplement of issue # 2758, p. 6, column 4, by denying that he used a Shi'ite source "since all traditions do speak of

this behaviour of 'Ali;" and quotes the *hadith* from *Sahih* of Muslim, *Musnad* of Ahmad and others.⁸

Haykal resisted the pressure to omit the Prophet's statement about 'Ali when the biography was finally printed in a book form. In the first edition of *Hayat Muhammad*, Haykal narrates the event of the Feast as follows:

"...When they had finished eating, he [the Prophet] said to them, 'I do not know any person among the Arabs who has come to his people with something better than what I have come to you; I have come to you with the best of this world and the hereafter. My Lord has ordered me to call you unto him.

"So who among you will help me in this matter, so that he may be my brother, my successor, and my caliph among you?"

"All of them turned away from him and wanted to leave him but 'Ali stood up although he was still a child who had not reached maturity and said, 'O Messenger of Allah, I shall be your helper! I will help you against whomsoever you fight.' The Banu Hashim smiled, some of them laughed, and their eyes moved from Abu Talib to his son; and then they left in the state of ridicule."⁹

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Haykal has quoted the important words in the initial statement of the Prophet asking for support; but conveniently left out the Prophet's entire response to 'Ali's readiness to help him!

In the second edition, Haykal seems to have given into the pressure of the bigots and even deleted the crucial words of the Prophet and just wrote: "...he said to them, '...So who among you will help me in this matter? All of them turned away from him..."¹⁰

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This clearly shows that he doesn't doubt the actual "Summoning of the Family" event but he lacked the intellectual courage to stand by the logical conclusion of his initial findings in the study of history.

6. The Isnad of "Summoning the Family"

The opponents of the Shi'a view naturally have tried to question the credibility of some of the narrators of this famous event.

Ibn Taymiyya, well known for his anti-Shi'a sentiments, has adamantly declared it to be a fabricated *hadith*. He has attacked the credibility of 'Abd al-Ghaffar bin al-Qasim known as Abu Maryam al-Kufi. [11](#) Abu Maryam is the source of Ibn Ishaq in narrating the event of "Summoning the Family". However, the only basis for questioning the credibility of Abu Maryam is his Shi'a links; but, as any unbiased person knows, that is not a sufficient ground to reject his narration. Shi'a biographers of narrators have counted him among the reliable narrators of hadith from the fourth, fifth, and sixth Shi'a Imams (a.s.). [12](#)

Salma bin al-Fadhli (d. 191), the foremost disciple of Ibn Ishaq, is also recognized as credible in narrating the Prophet's biography from his master. He is quoted as saying, "I have heard the *al-Maghazi* from Ibn Ishaq two times;" and he is well known among the scholars of *hadith* for historical narration from Ibn Ishaq. [13](#) According to Muta' at-Tarabishi, Salma bin al-Fadhli's narration of historical nature are accepted by all. [14](#) Ibn Mu'in says, "Salma [bin al-Fadhli] al-Abrash ar-Razi was a Shi'i as already written and there is no defect in him... Abu Zuhra says, 'The people of Ray did not like him because of his undesirable [i.e., Shi'i] beliefs.'" [15](#) Adh-Dhahabi writes the following about Salma: "He was steadfast in prayer and full of humility in his beliefs; he died in 191 A.H." [16](#)

Shaykh Salim al-Bishri had raised the issue why al-Bukhari and Muslim do not mention this tradition in their *Sahih*s. Sharafu 'd-Din al-Musawi responded as follows:

"The tradition conflicts with the views of the two Shaykhs, Bukhari and Muslim, in respect of the Caliphate and that is why they have not recorded it in their *Sahih*s. They have also scrupulously avoided recording a number of other genuine traditions which stipulated the Caliphate in favor of Amir al-Mu'minin lest the same serve as a weapon in the hands of the Shi'as, and so intentionally concealed the truth.

Not only Bukhari and Muslim but also many other Shaykhs (i.e., senior traditionists) among the Ahl al-Sunnah followed this practice... They used to conceal everything of this nature and are well known for their creed of concealment of facts (favoring 'Ali and the Ahl al-Bayt). Hafiz Ibn Hajar has related this from them in *Fath al-Bari*...

"Anyone who knows the behaviour of Bukhari towards Amir al-Mu'minin and other members of the Ahl al-Bayt also knows that his pen invariably omits mentioning the clear traditions of the Holy Prophet in their favor, and that his ink dries up before relating their distinguished, excellent qualities and one will not be surprised at his skipping over this and other similar traditions. There is neither might nor power but by Allah, the High and the Great." [17](#)

7. Conclusion

This brief review on the self-censorship that was exercised by the early historians and compilers of hadith proves that absence of an event in the well-known "early" books of Islamic history and hadith does not necessarily mean that that event is a later invention by the Shi'as or is not considered credible. One must go beyond the artificial limits of "early" and official history of the Muslim people and also study the other "non-orthodox" sources to fully comprehend the real life drama that unfolded in the early days of the history of Islam.

1. Most Muslim historians and commentators of the Qur'an have quoted this event. See the following Sunni sources: at-Tabari, at-Ta'rikh, vol. 1 (Leiden, 1980 offset of the 1789 edition) p. 171-173; Ibn al-Athir, al-Kamil, vol. 5 (Beirut, 1965) p. 62-63; Abu l-Fida', al-Mukhtasar fi Ta'rikhi l-Bashar, vol. 1 (Beirut, n.d.) p. 116-117; al-Khazin, at-Tafsir, vol. 4 (Cairo, 1955) p. 127; al-Baghawi, at-Tafsir (Ma'alimu t-Tanzil), vol. 6 (Riyadh: Dar Tayyiba, 1993) p. 131; al-Bayhaqi, Dala'ilu n-Nubuwwa, vol. 1 (Cairo, 1969) p. 428-430; as-Suyuti, ad-Durru l-Manthur, vol. 5 (Beirut, n.d.) p. 97; and Muttaqi al-Hindi, Kanzu l-Ummal, vol. 15 (Hyderabad, 1968) pp. 100, 113, 115. For further references, see 'Abdu l-Husayn al-Amini, al-Ghadir, vol. 2 (Beirut, 1967) pp. 278-289. In English see, Rizvi, S. Saeed Akhtar, Imamate: the Vicegerency of the Prophet (Tehran: WOFIS, 1985) pp. 57-60. Available on line at:

<http://www.al-islam.org/imamate-the-vicegerency-of-the-prophet-sayyid-ak...> [1]

For an elaborate discussion on the isnad and meaning of the Prophet's hadith in this event, and also the variations in the early Sunni and Shi'a sources, see Dr. Sayyid Talib Husayn ar-Rifa'i, Yawmu 'd-Dar (Beirut: Dar al-Azwa', 1986).

2. Ibn Hisham, as-Sirah an-Nabawiyya, vol. 1 (Cairo: Mustafa al-Halabi & Sons, 1955) p. 11-12; also see its English translation by A. Guillaume, The Life of Muhammad (Lahore: Oxford University Press, 1955) p. 691. See also the introduction by Dr. Asghari Mahdawi to the 6th century Persian translation by Rafi'u 'd-Din Hamadani of the Sirah entitled as Sirat-e Rasulu l-lah (Tehran, Bunyad-e Farhang-e Iran, 1360 [solar] AH) p. nun.

3. Ibn Hisham, as-Sirah, vol. 1, p. 10.

4. Abu Ja'far at-Tusi, Kitabu l-Amali, vol. 2 (Najaf: Maktabatu l-Haydari, 1964) p. 194-196.

5. See the introduction to as-Sirah an-Nabawiyya, vol. 1, p. 15-17; also see Guillaume, The Life of Muhammad, p. XXXIV-XXXVIII.

6. Tabari's Ta'rikh, vol. 3 (1879 edition) p. 1173.

7. See the 1879 edition of EJ Brill, Leiden (vol. 3, p. 1173), the 1908 edition of Daru l-Qamusi l-Hadith, Cairo (vol. 1&2, p. 217), and also the 1961 edition of Daru l-Ma'arif, Cairo, edited by Muhammad Abu l-Fadl Ibrahim (vol. 2, p. 321) in which the original words are intact. Even at-Tabari's 1988 English translation published by State University of New York, vol. 6 (translators: WM Watt and MV McDonald) p. 90-91 has maintained the original words of the Prophet without any omission.

8. Antonie Wessels, A Modern Arabic Biography of Muhammad (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1972) p. 223, 245; also see 'Abdu l-Husayn Sharafu 'd-Din al-Musawi, al-Muraji'at, annotated by Husayn ar-Razi (Beirut: n.p., 1982) p. 189.

9. Haykal, Hayat Muhammad (Cairo: 1st edition) p. 104.

10. Haykal, Hayat Muhammad (Cairo: 2nd edition, 1354) p. 139-140.

11. Ibn Taymiyya, Minhaju 's-Sunnah, vol. 4 (Cairo: al-Matba'atu l-Kubra al-Amiriyya, 1322) p. 81.

12. Sayyid Abu l-Qasim al-Khu'i, Mu'jam Rijali l-Hadith, vol. 10 (Beirut: Madinat al-'Ilm, 1983) p. 55-56.

13. Muta' at-Tarabishi, Ruwat Muhammad bin Ishaq bin Yasar fi l-Maghazi wa 's-Siyar wa Sa'iri l-Marwiyat (Damascus: Daru l-Fikr, 1994) p. 149.

14. Ibid.

15. S. Sharafu 'd-Din al-Musawi, al-Muraji'at, p. 129; also its English translation by M. A. H. Khan, The Right Path (Blanco, Texas: Zahra Publication, 1986) p. 85-86..Also see

<http://www.al-islam.org/al-murajaat-shii-sunni-dialogue-sharaf-al-din-al...> [2]

[16.](#) Adh-Dhahabi, Mizanu 'l-'tidal, vol. 2 (Egypt, Dar Ihya'i 'l-'Kutubi 'l-'Arabiyya, n.d.) p. 192.

[17.](#) Sharafu 'd-Din al-Musawi, al-Muraji'at, p. 191-192

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