
TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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ARABIC LITERATURE: POETICS AND STYLISTICS. IX: ON INTERPRETING THE ELEMENTS OF “MIRACULOUS” IN “LIFE OF THE PROPHET” BY IBN ISHĀQ — IBN HISHĀM

“Life of the Prophet” (*al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*) by the two authors Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767) and Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833 or 213/828) is well known in the world scholarship and until recently it has been studied mainly as a historical source. However such approach significantly impoverishes interpretation of this monument that combines a number of heterogeneous elements. For example, its prosaic elements are represented by historical records and stories (*akhabār*), *aḥādīth*, quotations from the Qur’ān, narratives with the so called *asbāb al-nuzūl* (“the occasions of the revelation” of a particular *āya* or *sūra*), interpretations or exegesis of *sūras* and *āyāt* (*tafsīr*), miraculous events and appearances, etc [1]. Among the poetic pieces of different length and purpose there are verses that constitute the plot of the narration itself and verses that serve as examples in explaining the meaning of a rare word, toponym, etc [2].

The present article is aimed at describing narration elements related to miraculous events and appearances in *Sīra*. It seems reasonable to open the detail analysis of such elements with some general remarks.

First of all a few words should be told about the manner, in which the above mentioned heterogeneous elements are combined in *Sīra*. Even after a rapid glance one can assert that *Sīra* is neither an example of the so-called *enfilade* combination of various genres within a single text [3], nor a conglomerate, i. e., a random combination of components from the pieces of various genres. *Sīra* presents a piece of systematically structured heterogeneous elements combined according to certain integrated principles. One of these principles has been mentioned in previous works. It is called the principle of belletrisation (fictionalization) according to which the components of *Sīra* are organized and combined [4]. We believe that within the context of the present article this principle is worth mentioning as it allows us to combine two different approaches to the text under study — historiographical and hagiographical.

Leaving out the discussion of fundamental differences between historiography and hagiography let us indicate two major distinctions between them (after A. Ia. Gurevich). Historical narration follows the chronological order of events, while in hagiographical literature it is rare that the dates of birth and death of saints as well as other dates are pointed, since he “exists beyond time belonging to the world of eternal truth and virtue”. The second distinction is related to different views on causality of the events described. As a rule medieval historians were looking for “rational causes of the events and chronological order itself presupposed such explanation”. On the contrary a hagiographical narration on miraculous events and deeds of a saint was devoid of a causal structure. Due to the fact that a saint acted in accordance with the will of God, the miracles that he performed were acausal, i. e., they were breaking the earthly causality [5].

However it is worth noticing that in *Sīra*, as well as in many other medieval texts, historiographical and hagiographical components are closely related to each other creating a unique character of the record. A story about a real historical event often gradually transforms into the description of a miracle. In its turn a description of miraculous events can precede an accurate and detail documentation of a certain episode.

Let us consider “Life of the Prophet” by Ibn Ishāq — Ibn Hishām. In the chapter describing the battle at Badr (2/624), where the Muslims won the first significant victory over the pagans of Makka, a special paragraph contains “eye witnesses’ accounts” of the angels fighting on the side of the people from Madina. The elements of miraculous are so skilfully included into authentic documentation of the battle progress that they acquire a historical character.

1. One “pagan” told: “And my cousin and I went to the mountain top, where the whole field of Badr was spread before the eyes. We were polytheists then. We waited for