

THE GROWTH OF THE MOHAMMED LEGEND

“Am I then anything but a man?”—thus the Prophet himself replied in the Koran¹ to those who expected miracles of him; and even as late as a hundred years after his death Johannes Damascenus was able to cast triumphantly into the teeth of his Saracen opponents that he, whom they called their Prophet, had performed no miracles which could attest his mission. This fact, to which Becker² has recently called attention, compels us to renew our researches into the age of the miracles of Mohammed, concerning which important investigations have already been made by Sprenger,³ Goldziher,⁴ Mez,⁵ and Caetani.⁶ Can we interpret the words of the Damascene to mean that at that time the figure of Mohammed, of whom his followers afterwards boasted: “No prophet ever performed any miracles that our Prophet did not also perform,”⁷ was not yet surrounded by a halo of sacred legend? That would scarcely be in keeping with the teaching of folk-psychology and hagiology concerning the workings of the legend-making instinct; the figure of him, who to many thousands had become *the* Prophet, could not well escape the transformation which popular veneration has everywhere at all times forced its heroes to undergo.⁸ The new Prophet had to enter into the heritage of his predecessors, and wrap around him their mantle of saintship. His erstwhile heathen countrymen transferred to him the powers which they had formerly ascribed to their Kāhins; the new converts from the old civilizations assigned to him

¹ Sura XVII, 95.

² ZA, Vol. XXVI (1912) 181; Johannes Damascenus died about 748-49 (*ibid.*), see also Lammens in MFOB III, i, 259.

³ Vol. III, p. LIV ff.

⁴ Studien II, 278 ff.

⁵ See Verb. des II internat. Kongr. für allg. Religions Geschichte (2nd Int. Cong. of Religions), Basel, 1904, 235 ff.

⁶ Annali I, 45 ff.

⁷ Kadi Iyad, Shifa (ed. Cairo 1318) 260.

⁸ Sir Alfred Lyall says much to the point: “It is impossible in India to make voluntary conversions of any number perceptible in so vast a population without miraculous gifts, rarely claimed by but always imputed to a new teacher or saint” (*Asiatic Studies*, I, 150).

the attributes of their former saints. Of course, we must realize that the opponents of Johannes Damascenus were learned theologians, and these need not necessarily have voiced their approval of everything which the imagination of nameless worshippers had invented to enhance the fame of their Prophet. When we consider the numerous miracles, however, which even the oldest biography of the Prophet that has come down to us—whose author died about twenty years later than Johannes Damascenus—has woven into the story of his life,⁹ we are forced to assume that even during that early period there was no definite, clear-cut line of demarcation between the miracle-mania of the popular faith and the teachings of the theologians. Just as Johannes Damascenus has done, so even before his time others too—opponents as well as converts-to-be—had put the question concerning the miracles of the Prophet and compelled the theologians to make reply. Not naively, as did the popular imagination, but consciously and deliberately the theologians transferred to Mohammed what they had heard in the miracle-legends related by those of other faiths. This process of assimilation of the miracles performed by earlier saints and prophets, which was made imperative, as it were both by the requirements of the popular faith and by compulsion of the theological propaganda, had, at the time when Johannes Damascenus held his disputations progressed so far that the vacuum in the story of the Prophet's childhood and young manhood was already quite filled in with typical saint-legends and his whole career embellished with signs and miracles. However, the argumentation of Johannes Damascenus does prove that at that time no one ventured as yet to make use of the miracles in a controversy with learned opponents, since these had the Koran on their side and the miracles of the Prophet were still far from being a generally accepted article of faith.

The question as to who first circulated these miracle-
tales would be very easy to answer if we could still look
upon the *isnād*, or chain of witnesses, as unquestionably

⁹ See below.

as we are apparently expected to do. It is especially seductive when one and the same report appears in various, essentially similar versions; in such cases Sprenger has recognized the earliest narrator, to whom all versions refer back, as the originator of the story, but here too there still remains the possibility that a story transmitted by a traditionist on the strength of a certain authority was heard by some one else and then likewise accredited to the same authority. However small reason there may be for doubting that certain of the Companions did report all sorts of marvellous things, still in individual cases it will no longer be possible to tell with certainty what originated with them and what was afterwards attributed to them. Only the date of the written record can give us a safe *terminus ante quem*.

The oldest biography of the Prophet now extant, that of Ibn Ishāk, we have complete only in the form which Ibn Hishām has given it. The latter has made additions as well as omissions; judging by the conscientious care with which he marks his additions as such, we may well conclude that he has made no alterations of any kind in that portion of the text which he retained from Ibn Ishāk—a fact that can be proved by checking up the numerous citations from Ibn Ishāk's book found in the works of Tabarī and others. Ibn Ishāk is already under the spell of the *isnād* even though he does not take it quite as seriously as later writers. In general the technique of the *isnād* does not make it possible for us to decide where it is a case of taking over oral accounts and where of copying from the lecture-books of the teacher. There is no doubt whatever that even before Ibn Ishāk's time there were already written records of the biography of the Prophet, no matter how skeptical we may be about many of the reports concerning books which were supposed to have existed during those earliest times. Without going too deeply into the earliest biographical literature, upon which Sachau has already enlarged in his introduction to the third volume of Ibn Sa'īd, I would only call attention to the fact that az-Zuhrī, for instance, who is mentioned so often by Ibn Ishāk as his immediate authority,

had already collected and edited older accounts. Reports which were in substantial agreement but which emanated from different authorities were combined by him into *one* narrative—preceded by an *isnād* in which all the authorities were listed together—and then the deviations of the various individual authorities were carefully noted and appended under their own names. In fact, Goldziher¹⁰ has already pointed out that az-Zuhrī had followed this method; a further proof of it can be found in Bukhārī, *Shahādāt XV I*. Besides az-Zuhrī (A. H. 52-124), the men whom Ibn Ishāk most frequently mentions as his immediate authorities, in those portions of his book with which we are mainly concerned, are Yazī b. Rūmān (d. A. H. 130), ‘Abdallāh b. Abū Bakr (d. 135), ‘Asim b. Omar b. Katāda (d. 127).¹¹ In addition to these he mentions members of his own family (his father Ishāh b. Yasār) and descendants or relatives of the hero of the story. Very often the source of the story is only vaguely indicated by the use of formulas such as: *fīmā balaghanī, fīmā yadhkurūn, dhakarū, haddathanī man lá attahim or man athik bihi or ba‘d ahl al-‘ilm* and the skeptical or at least reserved *fīmā yaz ‘amūn*. Frequently every intimation of the source, even the vaguest, is lacking, and I am inclined to believe that these portions were taken from older collections which already assumed the character of a Vulgate; even documents, lists, etc., are given quite anonymously.¹² As did all the older “historians,” so Ibn Ishāk contented himself with collecting the material, pouring in upon him from all sides, and dividing it into chapters, occasionally expressing an opinion concerning the authenticity of a report. In the selection of his material he was guided by his own judgment, which had not remained uninfluenced by his religious and political prejudices; but there is absolutely nothing to indicate that he arbitrarily made any changes whatsoever within the material itself. He invented just

¹⁰ ZDMG. Vol. L, 474.

¹¹ On these authorities see Fischer, *Biographien von Gewährsmännern des Ibn Ishāk*.

¹² Cf. Caetani, *Annali I*, 31 ff.

as little ¹³ as did those before him who had collected and edited the material; the case of the narrators, however, is a different matter—often enough they invented stories as well as chains of authorities. There were already many traditions in circulation during Ibn Ishāk's time, which, for some reason or other, he did not incorporate into his work. Therefore it would be quite incorrect to assume that certain stories were not yet in existence, because Ibn Ishāk does not mention them. In general, a comparison with later works shows the miraculous becoming more and more noticeable, although it does occasionally happen that later works give us versions without miracles of stories which are full of miracles in the earlier works. For we must never forget that even in the case of the oldest collectors it was merely a question of selecting from among the various accounts current at the time.¹⁴ Certain it is that much of what we find in Ibn Ishāk was invented during his life time; but it is equally certain that the older works, had they been preserved, would have given us the biography of the Prophet just as fully adorned with miracles as Ibn Ishāk gives it to us. This figure of the miracle-performing Prophet must have become crystallized during the last quarter of the first century of the Hijra. An attempt at systematic treatment of the miracles is already apparent in the case of Ibn Ishāk when he uses the heading *mā zahara li-rasūli-llāh min-al-mu'jizat fi haḡr al-khandak* (671). Whether anything similar had been attempted by any of his predecessors we do not know; at all events, belief in the miracles of the Prophet had not yet become an established fact during the first century of the Hijra.

In order to show clearly what a large rôle the marvelous already plays in Ibn Ishāk's work, I am appending a list of the miracles related by him (exclusive of those added by Ibn Hishām); the names of the authorities to whom he refers are in every instance subjoined in parentheses.

¹³ It is probably quite true that he used to put verses composed by his friends into the mouth of his hero (see *Fihrist* 92); that was a concession to the literary taste of his audiences who were accustomed from time immemorial to the alternation of prose with poetry.

¹⁴ Cf. also Becker's remarks in *Papyri Schott-Reinhardt*, I, 89.

Marvellous signs accompanying the birth of the Prophet. At his birth a light goes out from his mother by the rays of which she can see the towers of Bostra (102 *yaz ‘amūn fīmā yatahaddath an-nās wallāh a‘lam*); a Jew calls out to his co-religionists: “tonight the star has arisen under which Ahmad was born,” as Hassān b. Thābit heard with his own ears (Sālih b. Ibrāhīm ib. 102-3). The arrival of the child brought blessings to the tribal lands of his foster-mother Halīma, which had been visited by a great drought (103: *Jahm, maula of Hārith b. Hātib*). These as also the Prophet himself (106: *Thaur b. Ziyād*) relate how two angels took out his heart and cleansed it. From youth up he is preserved from sin: one time, when he had removed his clothes during play, an unseen hand dealt him a blow and he received the command to put on the *izār* (117: *fīmā dhukirālī* from the Prophet himself;) as a shepherd boy he happened to be present at a wedding in Mecca when there was music going on; there he was put to sleep by God himself so that he might not hear the music (Tabarī 1126 ‘Ali from the Prophet). Many things pointed to the speedy disappearance of idol-worship: An ‘A’if, to whom they used to bring the boys that he might foretell their future, immediately recognized the signs of his special election (114-15, Yahyā from his father ‘Abbād b. ‘Abdallāh b. az-Zubair); out of the interior of a calf, that was being sacrificed to an idol, Omar heard the prophecy concerning the man who was to call out: “there is no God but Allah” (133-3: *Man lā attahim from Abdallāh b. Ka‘b*). Many signs make known to the enlightened that a Prophet is tarrying in their midst: The monk Bahīra saw the boughs of a tree bend low to shade the young Mohammed; from his utterances he recognized in him the future Prophet, just as he also saw on him the Seal of his prophethood (115-16: ‘az ‘amūn, in Tabarī 1123, *Abdallāh b. Abū Bakr*). Salmān the Persian also recognizes him by the Seal (141 *Asim b. ‘Omar from Ibn ‘Abbās from Salmān*); Jesus, whom Salmān meets in the course of his journey, directs him to the Prophet (142-43 ‘Asim b. ‘Omar, with intermediate authorities:

huddituh ° *an Salmān*). In Syria two angels cover him with their wings (120 *fīmā yaz* ° *amūn*), the trees greet him (151 ° *Abdalmalik b. ° Abdallāh from ba ° d ahl al-°ilm*) and at his command one of them comes towards him (258 *Ibn Ishāk's father*). All his dreams come true (151 *az-Zuhrī from °Orwa from °A° isha*). A strange, wonderful, light appeared on the face of *at-Tufail b. Anas* and then later on his whip as a sign that he had accepted Islam (253 *fakān at Tufail yudahhith*).

The story of the night-journey to Jerusalem on Burak *Ibn Ishāk* already gives us in several versions (263 ff.); even at that time there was much discussion as to whether it had been a dream or a reality; the journey to heaven is also related according to *man lā attahim* from *Abū Saīd al-Khudrī* and *Abdallāh b. Mas°ūd* (268-70). The enemies of the Prophet are unable to harm him in any way: *Abū Jahl* is forced to realize that when his hand withers just as he is about to stone the Prophet (190 *ba ° d ahl al ° ilb from Ibn ° Abbās see 187*). *Swrāka* who is pursuing him cannot get at him, his horse stumbles and falls, his arrows are ineffective, the vapor which arises makes him realize that the Prophet is invulnerable (331 *az-Zuhrī with intermediate authorities from Swrāka*). *Jaurath* also, who threatens him with his own sword, cannot injure him (633 *Amr b. ° Obaid from al-Hasan from Jābir*). On the other hand the Prophet puts his enemies to flight with the simplest of weapons, at Badr with a handful of pebbles which he hurls at them (445 *Ibn Hishām without any isnād, Tabarī from az-Zuhrī, like the preceding account*). His prayer against his enemies is answered, they die of diseases which break out on those parts of their bodies at which the Prophet pointed (272 *Yazīd b. Rūmān from ° Orwa* "or some other scholar"); *Obay* must die, although his wound which the Prophet had inflicted upon him was very slight; for did not the Prophet say: "I shall kill you if God wills?" (575 *Sālih b. Ibrāhīm b. ° Aub*). Three times the earth ejected the corpse of *Muhallam*, as the Prophet had prayed God not to pardon him (988-9) *man lā attahim from Hasan al-Basrī*). His enemies are

cowed by threatening visions: Abū Jahl sees a terrible camel standing at the Prophet's head, which would have devoured him if he had not obeyed the Prophet (257-8 ʿ Abdalmalik b. Abdallāh ath-Thakafī.) On the other hand the Prophet remains invisible to his enemies, as they are struck with blindness (326 Yazīd b. Ziyād from *Mohammed b. Ka ʿ al-Kurazī*). The angels assist him: at Badr they battle on his side (449-50 twice, Abdallāh b. Abū Bakr indirectly from a fellow combatant, Ibn Ishāk's father indirectly from a fellow-combatant), also at Honein (849 Ibn Ishāk's father from one who was there); against the Banū Kuraiza he was assisted by Gabriel in the form of Dihya (685 Ibn Ishāk's father from *Ma ʿ bad b. Ka ʿ b*). Gabriel also helped to carry the corpse of Sa ʿ d b. Mo ʿ ādh (698 *man lā attahim* from Hasan al-Basrī). And in numerous other instances we find that the Prophet's Companions as well as himself enjoy special protection; thus the corpse of ʿ Asim b. Thābit, who had sworn never to touch a heathen, was protected from the bees (639 ʿ Asim b. ʿ Omar). The Prophet has power over inanimate nature: a staff is transformed into a sword (452, see the *isnād* which is authority for the entire chapter, pp. 427-8); water gushes forth at his prayer (904, see the *isnād* which is authority for the entire chapter, p. 893, cf. Tabarī 1703); a rain-cloud also appears at his prayer (899). A hard piece of earth becomes soft when water into which the Prophet had spat is poured over it (671 *balaghanī* from Jāibr). With little he feeds many: with a handful of dates he feeds all the "People of the Ditch" (671 *Sa ʿ d b. Mīnā* indirectly from a daughter of *Bāshīr b. Sa ʿ d*, who had herself brought the dates); in like manner a single sheep of Jābir's sufficed for all (672 *Sa ʿ d b. Mīnā* from Jābir). A little piece of gold that the Prophet had on his tongue weighs 40 *okīya* and is sufficient to ransom *Salmān* (142 *Yazīd b. Abī Habīb* from one of the *Abd al-Kais*). Hidden things are known to the Prophet and the future is revealed to him: the conversation of ʿ Omair with Safwān carried on without any witnesses is disclosed to the Prophet (472 *Mohammed b. Ja ʿ far b. az-Zubair*

from 'Orwa; from Heaven he learns what the Nadīrs are planning (652 *Yazīd b. Rūman*); the bone of a sheep reveals to him that it has been poisoned (764 anonymous); he knows about the letter of *Khātib b. Abī Balta'a* to the *Kuraish* (809 *Mohammed b. Ja'far* from 'Orwa) and he knows where the lost camel can be found (900, the *isnād* p. 893 applies to the entire passage, see *Tabarī* 1699 and 1692). He prophesies to Khālīd that he will come upon Okaidir while the latter is hunting, which is exactly what does happen (903, for the *isnād* see p. 893); also his prediction that Abū Dharr would soon die is fulfilled (901 *Buraida b. Sufyān* indirectly from ' *Abdallāh. b. Mas'ūd*. The Prophet's death took place according to his own choice: when he was given his choice between the keys of Paradise and those of eternal life on earth he chose the former, and so he died (1000 ' *Abdallāh b. 'Omar* indirectly from a *manulā* of the Prophet. Even after his death he is still the object of divine solicitude: when there is doubt as to just how his body is to be cared for a mysterious voice brings the decision (1-9 *Yahayā b. 'Abbād* indirectly from *A'isha*).

Old Arabian "motifs" (like the knowledge of hidden things, which the Kāhīns also possessed), interpretations of passages in the Koran, Hebrew tales of godly men and pious rabbis, apocryphal gospels and legends of Christian saints, ancient heathen, Buddhistic¹⁵ and Zoroastrian¹⁶ elements, they all had to contribute their share—even as early as the first century of the Hijra—towards embellishing the picture of the Prophet; the ancient and the Buddhistic elements entered mainly through Christian channels, the Zoroastrian directly. Here the Christian influence is stronger than the Jewish, which latter is triumphant in the *kisas al-anbiyā*.¹⁷ It is remarkable how often in the biography of the Prophet we find mention of things Christian. The passage about the Paraclete on St. John's Gospel (XV, 23-27) which was interpreted as

¹⁵ See Basset's translation of the *Burda* (*La Borda du Cheikh el Bouairi*, Paris, 1894); cf. also Windisch, *Buddhas Geburt und die Seelenwanderung*, Leipzig, 1908, for the details of the Buddha-legend.

¹⁶ See Blochet, *RHR.* vol. 40, pp. 1-26.

¹⁷ Also cf. Goldziher, *Studien*, II, 382.

referring to Mohammed is quoted by Ibn Ishāk in the form a literal Arabic translation, and this—as Guidi has already pointed out¹⁸—shows a close resemblance to the Palestinian-Christian version. Much space is devoted to the Christians in Najrān and in this connection a typical Christian legend, that of Phemion (Euphemios?) is related.¹⁹ Salmān al-Fārisī, who was a Christian before he accepted Islam is directed to Mohammed by Jesus himself. In the account attributed to him we find a rather remarkable description of the personal appearance of Jesus: “a ruddy man, of medium height with smooth hair and many marks on his face; he looks as though he had just emerged from the bath (*dīmās—synóslōv*), one might imagine his head dripping with water, but there is no water on it” (206); this sounds like the description of a picture of Christ seen somewhere or other. Moreover the account of the Najāshī, who, in marked contrast to his bishops, received the Moslems very kindly, also shows a Christian coloring in the Abyssinian expressions which it contains, like “sheyūm” and “dabr” (231). When Othmān Ibn Maz un, whose left eye has been put out, wishes that the same might happen to his right eye (244) we readily recognize the original in Matthew 5: 39. The twelve *Nukabā* of the Prophet are purposely placed parallel to the twelve *Hawāriyūn* (299).

The learned theologians of the first and second centuries were by no means ignorant of the extent to which Christian influences had contributed towards the adornment of the Prophet's picture, and doubtless for that very reason they were reluctant to expose its genuineness to the criticism of a Christian controversialist. However, just those very controversies with Christians must have encouraged them to put on the missing colors all the more heavily.²⁰

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Tr. by Emma Agnes Licht,
Missionary Research Library, New York.

¹⁸ Le traduzioni degli Evangelii in Arabo e in Etiopico (Atti della R. Accademia dei Lincei, 1888) 6 Nota 4.

¹⁹ See also Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Araber u. Perser*, 177.

²⁰ Cf. also Becker, *ZA*, loc. cit.