



# Early *Seerah* Literature: A Novel Perspective

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Date of Submission: 01-01-2023

Date of Acceptance: 10-01-2023

**Abstract:** Anything written about Islam somehow throws some light on the life of the Prophet ﷺ. Usually origins and development of *Seerah* literature is traced from chronologically written works, earliest of which were *Maghazi* and *Tarikh* works. In this paper, a humble effort has been made to show Quran and *Hadith* works (non chronological *Seerah*) as the earliest and most important works of *Seerah* literature.

**Keywords:** *Seerah*, the Prophet ﷺ, Quran, *Hadith*, *Maghazi*, etc

## I. Introduction

The life of the Prophet ﷺ is important for Muslims as Allah says in the Quran, ‘*Surah Al-Ahzab*’, verse 21:

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِّمَن كَانَ يَرْجُو اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ  
الْآخِرَ وَذَكَرَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا

“Verily in the messenger of Allah ye have a good example for him who looketh unto Allah and the last day, and remembereth Allah much” (trans. pickthall)

Allamah ibn Qayam writes in his book *Zaad al-Ma’adh* that it is obligatory for every Muslim to gain knowledge of *Sirah* because it is the guidance and leadership of the Prophet ﷺ that leads to happiness in this world and hereafter (**Ghazi, 27**). Learning about the life of the Prophet ﷺ helps to understand Islam better. The life of Muhammad ﷺ is the history of Islam. The life of Muhammad ﷺ is the starting point to know about the origins of the Islamic civilization.

The word *Seerah* comes from the Word *Sara*, which means to travel or to be on a journey. *Seerah* also means “life style” or “way of living”. It was also used for biography of a person. A person's *Seerah* is that person's journey through life, or encompassing their birth, events in their life, manners and characteristics, and their death. *Seerah* was used for biography of any person however, the word *Seerah* has been used so much with Muhammad ﷺ that whenever *Seerah* is said or written, it almost all the time refers to the life of

Muhammad ﷺ. Early scholars used *Maghazi* and *Jihad* as synonymous of *Seerah*. Earlier works on campaigns and wars of the Prophet were called *Maghazi* or *Seerah* works.

Early *Seerah* Literature

Quran and *Hadith* are considered as important sources of all *Seerah* works. Whenever a scholar writes about the origins and development of *Seerah* literature they tend to treat Quran, *Hadith* and *Seerah* as different genres of Islamic literature. Scholars like Horowitz, Fister, A’mmar A’budi, Mahdi Rizqallah etc who have written about the development of *Seerah* literature have done the same that is treating Quran, *Hadith*, and *Seerah* as different genres of Islamic literature. Almost all the scholars who trace the development of early *Sirah* literature tend to overlook Quran and *Hadith* works as works of *Seerah*. Their only focus is on the evolution and development of chronological literature (*Maghazi* or *Tarikh* works) written about the life of the Prophet ﷺ. One of the reasons might be that later works which were titled as *Seerah* evolved from these works. Secondly this genre of literature followed different methodology and criteria. *Maghazi* writers were not as strict as *Hadith* compilers when collecting information about the Prophet ﷺ. Information in these works was not required by Muslims for actions and rituals enjoined by Allah. So this genre of chronological *Seerah* developed in a totally different milieu to cater needs of the different audience.

*Seerah* or the biography of the Prophet ﷺ is anything related to the life of the Prophet ﷺ not just the wars and battles. Shah A’bd al-Aziz al-Dehavi defines the word *Seerah* as, “Whatever is about our Prophet ﷺ, his companions and great people (of Islam) and the history which runs from the birth of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ to his passing away is known as *Seerah* (**Shah, 211**). A *Seerah* work cannot be just a work on the political events in the life of the Prophet ﷺ ignoring other social and ideological aspects. Ideology and the belief system drive all the actions



of a person. Understanding a person's belief system makes his actions and deeds understandable. *Maghazi* and *Siyar* literature answer when and how of the events but it is Quran that answers the why question. In such a case Quran is the first and the most important work of *Seerah*. After Quran, second most authentic and reliable *Seerah* works are those of Sahih *Hadith*. *Hadith* are the important source of all *Seerah* works. These works are not considered as *Seerah* works in themselves. *Hadith* scholars have strived very hard to collect the reliable *Hadith* narrations. Though non chronological and mentioned without any context, these narrations act as snapshots of the life of the Prophet ﷺ.

### Quran

عَنْ عَائِشَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهَا قَالَتْ: "كَانَ خُلُقُ نَبِيِّ اللَّهِ ﷺ الْقُرْآنَ".  
When A'isha r.a was asked about the character of the Prophet ﷺ, she replied, "haven't you gone through the Quran, his character was Quran" (Muslim, 2:258). This means that he ﷺ would follow its orders and exhortations, stop from what is prohibited or mentioned with aversion in it and believe in its stories (al-Nawawi, h:746). All the important incidents in the life of the Prophet ﷺ are described in the Quran with varying details. It mentions various dimensions and aspects of the Prophet ﷺ's life. His orphanage, the purity of his life before Prophethood, the beginning of revelation, the finality of his Prophethood, the animosity and antagonistic attitude of the opponents, his preaching methodology, his perseverance and steadfastness in the religious struggle, his patience and his gratitude, his battles with the non-Muslims, his relations with the Jews, Christians and polytheists, his treatment of the hypocrites, and his dealing with his companions is expressed in it. His migration, ascension, his answers to the critics of Islam, his refuge in a cave, the battles of Badr, Uḥud, Khandaq, Quraizah, Tabuk etc are the major events in his life and none has been left undescribed (Ghazi, 106). Dr. Daefallah al-Zahrani says, "The Quran throws light on the social, economic and political legislations that were applied by the Prophet ﷺ to administer the first Islamic state." (al-Zahrani, 4-5). The Prophet ﷺ has rightly been called "Quran in action." No doubt Quran is non chronological and there are only subtle allusions to incidents in the life of the Prophet ﷺ nevertheless all the verses of Quran make us understand some aspect of the life of the Prophet ﷺ.

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There are verses in Quran which had specific reason and background in which these verses were revealed. Verses about Jihad, battles of the Prophet ﷺ, Halal and Haram, some matters personal to the Prophet ﷺ, verses that teach dealings with other persons or people are verses whose background has been extensively treated by the commentators. Such verses and their explanations are of utmost importance for a *Sirah* student. One of the earliest works dealing exclusively with this subject is A'li Wahidi's "Asbab al-Nazool". We have some verses which appear to be of general nature of exhortation to Muslims, with no need to know their background, however these provide plentiful of information about some incident in the life of the Prophet ﷺ.

There are Verses which are not directly related to some incident in the life of the Prophet ﷺ, these however help us a lot to understand his belief systems, his understanding of the God, his concept about life after death, his perception of earlier Prophets like Abraham, Moses, Jesus etc. These verses also help us to comprehend his attitude towards polytheists, Jews, Christians etc. These verses display the ideology within which all the actions of the Prophet came into effect. To understand his actions, Quran needs to be understood.

What adds to the significance of the Quran as a work of *Sirah* is its "Mutawatir" nature. Number of people who have recorded it, memorized it and passed it on from one generation to another, with no discrepancy in its text, since the time of the Prophet ﷺ himself is matchless for any other historical or religious document. This feature makes it the most authentic and trustworthy source of *Sirah*. This feature also makes it touchstone for other *Sirah* works as some of the Prophetic biographies are filled with unreliable and exaggerated stuff. The Quran gives the ideological background to understand the narrations even in "authentic *Hadith* works". It acts as an iron frame for all the *Sirah* literature, whatever doesn't fit with this frame should be discarded. This pre-eminence of the Quran as a source of *Sirah* have led many scholars to write Prophetic biographies exclusively in its light.

### Hadith

In *Hadith* sciences, term *Hadith* stands for words, acts or tacit approvals ascribed to the Prophet ﷺ. It also includes the reports about his etiquettes and physical characteristics (al-Ṭaḥan, 17). Khabar and Athar are other terms denoting the same



meaning as that of *Ḥadith*, some even have used *Sunnah* as a synonymous term for *Ḥadith*. *Ḥadith* narrations act as snapshots from the life of the Prophet.

### Significance of *Ḥadith* as a source of *Sirah*.

#### 1. Reliable

When compared with other categories of *Sirah* literature *Ḥadith* is more authentic source for the life of the Prophet ﷺ. The compilers of *Ḥadith* collections like al-Bukhari, Muslim and other authors of *Kutub Sittah* fame, have followed strict conditions in order to select *Ḥadith* narrations for their works. *Isnad* (chain of narrators) is an indispensable part of the *Ḥadith*. It points out the source of the information and gives the route via which it was transmitted. Continuity of the chain, integrity of the narrator having perfect memory, narration having no internal or hidden defect and that it doesn't contradict other more reliable narration were the conditions adopted by the authors of *Sahih* works. Some of the scholars have tried to be exact in words as well as ideas while transmitting the *Ḥadith* while others have remained faithful only to the ideas. Some scholars, certain about the mistakes made by the narrators still didn't make any corrections to the text. The *Ḥadith* scholars attached great importance to the study of Arabic so as to avoid linguistic and grammatical mistakes.

The *Ḥadith* scholars paid little attention to the Caliphs and their representatives. These scholars would reject and refuse the favors offered to them by the rulers. No doubt the Qaḍi's required the basic qualification of mastery over *Ḥadith* and other Islamic sciences, the authors of the important and authoritative *Ḥadith* works never received any post, purse or privilege from the rulers. Though some early traditionists enjoyed some degree of state patronage from Ummayyad Caliphate but they would never over step certain limits nor did they fabricate *Ḥadith* in their favor (Siddiqui, 89).

One of the basic principles of the *Ḥadith* scholars was giving preference to the text over rationality. The narrations that fulfilled the conditions set up by the *Ḥadith* scholars were given place in their works irrespective of whether these texts were compatible with "rationality" and suited their beliefs or not. This is the reason we may find narrations suitable for each sect in a single *Ḥadith* work.

#### 2. Diverse subject matter

All the major works on *Ḥadith* like *Sunan ibni Majah*, *Ṣaḥīḥ ibn Khozaimah*, *Musnad Sarraj*, *Sunan Nasai*, *Sunan abi Dawood* etc have chapters on belief (*Eman*); prayer (along with chapters on

Friday prayer, E'id, *Ṣalat al-Khauf* (at the time of fear), funeral prayer etc), Fasting, *Zakat*, *Ḥajj*; purification; *Jihad*; marriage, divorce, foods, drinks, inheritance, financial transactions, dresses and etiquettes, supplications and invocations etc. All the issues related to above mentioned topics have been discussed from the perspective of the Prophet ﷺ. Either what he himself did, said, what he exhorted others to do or prohibited them doing so. *Sunan Darimi*, *Musnad ibn Rahuway*, *Jami' Tirmidhi*, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhari* etc have chapters on the virtues of the Prophet ﷺ which contain narrations about his manners, habits, miracles performed by him, year of birth, physical features etc, Bukhari and Tirmidhi have separate chapters on *Maghazi*; *Ṣaḥīḥ ibni Hibban* has a section on history which contains information about the Prophet ﷺ. *Musnad A'bd bin Ḥumaid* has a chapter on *Jihad* that contains narrations about the battles of the Prophet ﷺ.

#### 3. Treats all aspects of the Prophet's Life

Perusal of *Ḥadith* literature gives an overall view of the life of the Prophet ﷺ. If we go through only *Maghazi* literature it would appear that the Prophet ﷺ only fought wars and married women. Similarly books on Dala'el al-Nabuwah highlight only the super natural aspects of the Prophet's life. *Ḥadith* works treat all aspects of the Prophet's life. His thoughts, beliefs, ideology, his economic condition, his social status become clear from *Aḥadith*. Prophet ﷺ as a leader, as a Judge, as a Husband become manifest through this literature. His dressing, food and drinks are noted down. His daily activities of purification, *Ṣalat*, supplications etc are mentioned. Frequency of fasting, number of times he performed *Ḥajj* and *U'mrah*, how often he went out for *Jihad* can be easily discerned from *Ḥadith* literature. The social status he had in society, the way he would solve the issues, obedience of his companions are mentioned in detail. Chapters on *Eman*, day of Judgement, Paradise, Hell, *Qadr* etc bring his beliefs to fore. Chapters on *Jihad* and *Maghazi* highlight his military genius. Chapters on *Aḥkam* (judgements) highlight his astute qualities as a judge. Sections of *Manaqib* (virtues) and *Zuḥud* manifest his *Makarim al-Akhlaq* (elite manners), his physical features and austere life.

#### 4. Minute details of his activities

Most of the activities, especially those having religious significance, have been minutely detailed in *Ḥadith* books. The way the Prophet ﷺ would wake up from the sleep up to the supplications he



would recite just before sleep have been widely noted down. The way he would attend the call of nature, style of performing ablutions, the prayers he would offer during night and day, with all the variations have been preserved in these works. Words uttered by him at different occasions, sermons delivered, exhortations made, advices given, prohibitions ordered are all extensively mentioned.

## II. Conclusion

Quran and *Hadith* are the earliest works on the life of the Prophet ﷺ which were written or compiled during his lifetime. These are also most important works on *Seerah*. Quran is the most authentic work on *Seerah* followed by *Hadith* literature especially the six canonical works. Authors of other works on the life of the Prophet ﷺ like works on *Maghazi*, *Tarikh*, *Dala'el al-Nabuwah* (Proofs of the Prophethood) have not been as strict in methodology while compiling reports about the Prophet ﷺ as compared to some *Hadith* scholars. Quran presents the ideology of the Prophet ﷺ that guided all his actions. *Hadith* literature is diverse, treats all aspects of the Prophet ﷺ's life, some with minute details. There is a strong case for taking Quran and *Hadith* works as the primary works of *Seerah*.

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