

## Non-Muslims Sources in The Study of Sirah (PBUH)

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### Abstract

Since the Prophet's passing, the Sirah (PBUH) has served as the focal point and source of writing. Over the years, sirah approaches have changed in both Muslim and non-Muslim contexts. The way that the Prophet and even Islam are perceived by both Muslims and non-Muslims has been profoundly inspired by this. Non-Muslim writers have approached sirah quite differently, while Muslim scholars have concentrated on specifics of the biography, what and why a particular incident occurred in his life, his leadership, reverence of his teachings, and other aspects of his life as a role model and lessons that can be derived from his life to emulate in daily life. Some are extremely critical to the point of ridicule and slander, while others approach it in a more authentic and genuine manner. While some take a more sincere and honest approach, others are so critical as to belittle and defame others. The way sirah is approached is greatly influenced by the materials they have access to, namely Arabic ones. Similarly, how sirah is viewed has changed significantly throughout time, especially in the modern day, due to exchanges with Muslims, technological advancements, and globalisation. A chronological and methodical assessment and analysis of the principal sirah texts authored by Muslims and non-Muslims since the seventh century are presented in this article. The evolution of sirah literature in Muslim and non-Muslim academia is traced by highlighting the causes and underlying elements influencing different sirah approaches over the ages.

**Keywords:** Sirah, *The Life of Mahomet*, William Muir, Non-Muslim, Islam, Critical Discourse Analysis.

### Introduction

Non-Muslim sources might offer insightful information on studying Sirah. In order to have a more comprehensive knowledge of the historical setting in which the Prophet lived and the events that transpired during his lifetime, scholars and researchers frequently reference historical narratives, travelogues, and other texts from non-Muslim sources. Writings by Christian Arabs and Jewish academics are among the non-Muslim sources frequently used in the study of Sirah, as are the works of Byzantine historians like Theophanes the Confessor. These sources present many viewpoints and can aid in developing a more thorough knowledge of the life of the Prophet and the early Islamic era. Some commonly used sources by non-Muslim sirah writers include:

1. Early Christian writings: Non-Muslim Writers of sirah make reference to the writings of early Christian authors who interacted with Muslims during the time of the Prophet

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Muhammad (PBUH), such as John of Damascus and Thomas the Presbyter. These works shed light on the pre-existing beliefs and exchanges between Christians and Muslims.

2. Byzantine and Persian sources: When writing a sirah, non-Muslim authors typically refer to Byzantine and Persian texts that discuss the early Islamic era and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). These sources provide insight into the political, military, and cultural aspects of the era. They include historical writings, chronicles, and diplomatic letters.

3. Jewish and other non-Arab sources: Authors of non-Muslim Sirah study Jewish and other non-Arab sources that discuss the advent of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). These sources frequently give an alternative interpretation of the events as well as insightful information on the interactions between various ethnic and religious groupings.

4. Archaeological discoveries: The pre-Islamic and early Islamic inscriptions and archaeological finds are also mentioned by non-Muslim sirah authors. These findings offer tangible proof that supports or adds to the historical narratives found in textual sources.

5. Secondary and tertiary sources: Scholarly books, articles, and research papers that evaluate and interpret original texts are among the secondary and tertiary sources that non-Muslim sirah authors refer to. These resources give academic viewpoints on the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as well as aid in placing historical events in context.

Using the qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) research technique, a critical analysis of a well-known sirah writer will be conducted, with a particular emphasis on resulting in a thorough discussion of his sources and information. Additionally, research of the author's numerous techniques and their impact on the Muslim world will be included in the study.

**"The Life of Mahomet"**

William Muir wrote his seminal work 'The Life of Mahomet' in the 19th century, at a time when European interest in Islamic history and the life of Prophet Muhammad was growing. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked by European colonial expansion and a concomitant interest in understanding the cultures and histories of the colonized regions. Muir's sources for his work on the Sirah included both Islamic historical texts and accounts, as well as earlier European works on Islam. His reliance on translated Arabic texts and reliance on secondary sources has been a subject of critique. In terms of the reception of his work within the field of Islamic studies, Muir's approach and conclusions have been the subject of both praise and criticism. William Muir during the Second Anglo-Afghan War:

His original book *A Life of Mahomet and History of Islam to the Era of the Hegira* was initially published 1861 in four volumes. The book received attention in both literary and missionary circles, and provoked responses ranging from appreciation to criticism. It would eventually evoke a rebuttal from Sayyid Ahmad Khan.[6]

Contemporary reviewers of Muir's *Life of Mahomet* uniformly praised him for his knowledge of Arabic. The only competing work in Britain at the time was a book by Harrow schoolmaster Reginald Bosworth Smith, who had no Arabic language skills.[7] The work was also praised by Christian missionaries who welcomed it as an aid to convert Muslims.

Contemporary historian E. A. Freeman praised the book as a "great work", yet questioned its conjectural methodology, particularly Muir's suggestion that Muhammad was inspired by Satan.[8] Contemporary Aloys Sprenger also criticized Muir for ascribing Islam's origins

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to "the Devil".<sup>[9]</sup> The British Quarterly Review of 1872 criticized his approach as "he is treading ground whither the historian of events and creeds must refuse to follow him".<sup>[9]</sup>

A significant rebuttal to Muir's book was written by Syed Ahmed Khan in 1870 called *A Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammed, and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*.<sup>[9]</sup> Khan praised Muir's writing talent and familiarity with Oriental literature, but criticized Muir's reliance on weak sources like al-Waqidi. He accused Muir of misrepresenting the facts and writing with animus.<sup>[9]</sup> Written objections to this aspect of *Life* could be found in the writings of Muslims living inside British India only after the Indian Rebellion of 1857, an unsuccessful uprising against the East India Company.<sup>[6]</sup>

Aaron W. Hughes (2012) writes that Muir's work was part of a European Orientalist tradition that sought to show that Islam was "a corruption, a garbled version of existing monotheisms".<sup>[10]</sup> Bennett (1998) praises it as "a detailed life of Muhammad more complete than almost any other previous book, at least in English," noting however that besides "placing the facts of Muhammad's life before both Muslim and Christian readers, Muir wanted to convince Muslims that Muhammad was not worth their allegiance. He thus combined scholarly and evangelical or missionary purposes."<sup>[15]</sup> Commenting on Muir's conjecture that Muhammad may have been affected by a Satanic influence, Clinton Bennett says that Muir "chose to resurrect another old Christian theory",<sup>[16]</sup>

In the final chapters of *Life*, Muir concluded that the main legacy of Islam was a negative one, and he subdivided it in "three radical evils"<sup>(17)</sup>

First: Polygamy, Divorce, and Slavery strike at the root of public morals, poison domestic life, and disorganise society; while the Veil removes the female sex from its just position and influence in the world. Second: freedom of thought and private judgment are crushed and annihilated. Toleration is unknown, and the possibility of free and liberal institutions foreclosed. Third: a barrier has been interposed against the reception of Christianity.

According to Edward Said, although Muir's *Life of Mahomet and The Caliphate* "are still considered reliable monuments of scholarship", his work was characterized by an "impressive antipathy to the Orient, Islam and the Arabs", and "his attitude towards his subject matter was fairly put by him when he said that 'the sword of Muhammed, and the Qur'an, are the most stubborn enemies of Civilisation, Liberty, and the Truth which the world has yet known'".<sup>[18]</sup> Daniel Martin Varisco rejects Said's assessment that Muir's *Life* was considered reliable by the 1970s. He writes "Serious historians had long since relegated Muir's work to the rare-books sections of their libraries."<sup>[19]</sup>

### **William Muir Key themes**

Some key themes explored in William Muir's works on the history of Islam include:

1. Prophet Muhammad's life and teachings: Muir's writings examine the traits, teachings, and life of the prophet while offering background information and commentary.
2. Early Islamic history: Muir frequently discusses the political and social changes of the period as well as the growth of the Islamic empire in his works.
3. Islamic conquests and military operations: Muir's writings address the early Muslims' military operations and conquests, as well as their effects on the area.
4. Early Islam's religious and cultural features, particularly the dissemination of Islamic practices and beliefs, are examined in Muir's writings.

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5. Muir's articles explore the contacts that took place between the Islamic world and other civilizations, such as the Persian and Byzantine empires.

These themes highlight Muir's academic concentration on the origins and growth of Islam and offer insightful perspectives on the early Islamic era.

#### **William Muir approach and Strategy**

William Muir used a methodical, objective approach to the study of seerat, mainly depending on primary materials and critical analysis. His methodology encompassed a comprehensive investigation and profound comprehension of the historical milieu in which the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) existed.

1. Primary sources: Muir stressed that in order to fully comprehend the life of the Prophet Muhammad, one must rely on original materials, such as early Arabic manuscripts and eyewitness reports. These, in his opinion, were the most reliable and accurate sources of knowledge.

2. Historical context: Muir realised how important it was to comprehend the historical setting in which the Prophet lived. Through his studies of the political, social, and cultural milieu of the era, he was able to place the Prophet's teachings and occurrences in their historical perspective.

3. Critical analysis: In order to distinguish reality from fiction, Muir used a critical approach when studying seerat, challenging and examining historical sources. To get a more precise picture of the Prophet's life, he explored conflicting tales, cross-referenced various versions, and carefully considered the credibility of sources.

4. Impartiality: Muir made an effort to conduct his investigation with fairness and objectivity. By taking into account many viewpoints and avoiding prejudice or personal bias, he balanced his analysis. His goal was to give a fair and truthful account of the life, teachings, and accomplishments of the Prophet Muhammad.

5. Interdisciplinary approach: Muir used an interdisciplinary approach to explore seerat thoroughly, using techniques from literature, sociology, history, and other disciplines. This gave him the opportunity to examine the seerat from a variety of perspectives, giving him a comprehensive grasp of the topic.

#### **Resources Used**

Muir used a variety of primary and secondary sources in his analysis of the Sirah. He made extensive use of early Islamic writings, including as the Quran, Hadith (the Prophet's sayings and deeds), and historical narratives written by early Muslim scholars. Muir based his study on the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) on these Islamic sources in addition to other historical records and archaeological data.

#### **Approach Adopted**

Muir used a critical and analytical approach to studying the Sirah. Through the prism of Western historical techniques, he attempted to examine the historical narratives of the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) from a non-Muslim viewpoint. Muir's examination of the available materials led him to challenge several of the conventional Islamic story's tenets and provide other explanations.

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### **Strategy Employed**

Muir's approach to researching the Sirah was a careful reading of the primary texts, a comparative comparison with other pertinent writings and historical records that were not Islamic. Using the information at his disposal, he sought to present a thorough and critical analysis of the life and times of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). It's crucial to remember that although Muir's work has greatly influenced Western study, it has also drawn criticism for its prejudices and viewpoints. Muir's method of studying the Sirah as a non-Muslim scholar mirrored the cultural norms of his day and the environment in which he carried out his studies. Furthermore, Muslim academics and historians have criticised his interpretation of Islamic history and the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), arguing that it reveals innate prejudices and preconceived preconceptions. Consequently, it is important to take into account both the merits of Muir's academic research and any potential drawbacks resulting from his status as a non-Muslim historian working in a particular intellectual and cultural context when examining his contributions to our knowledge of the Sirah.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

The literary works of William Muir about seerat studies have had a significant influence on researchers and academics alike. Muir's thorough investigation and in-depth examination of the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) have given academics important new understandings of the early Islamic history. In the discipline of seerat studies, Muir's most well-known book, "The Life of Mahomet," is regarded as a foundational work. This in-depth biography explores the life and teachings of the prophet Muhammad, including his conception, early years, prophetic career, and the propagation of Islam. Because of Muir's rigorous research methodology, reliance on original sources, and attention to detail, this book has become a standard in the field of seerat literature. Academics have commended Muir for his fair and objective analysis of the Prophet Muhammad's life. Readers are given a fair and truthful picture of the Prophet's life by Muir's writing, which is grounded on facts and evidence, in contrast to certain previous writings that were tainted with bias or prejudice. Muir's contributions have also greatly influenced the conversation around seerat research. His focus on using primary materials and critically evaluating historical narratives has encouraged other researchers to use approaches that are similar to his own. Moreover, Muir's contributions have aided in bridging the gap between several academic fields. His multidisciplinary approach to the study of Seerat has expanded the field's research agenda by fusing literary criticism, historical analysis, and social observations. These days, academics understand how important it is to examine the seerat as a historical and cultural phenomenon as addition to a religious book. To conclude, the scholarly community has greatly benefited from William Muir's literary contributions on seerat studies. Muir's objective and impartial analysis have inspired subsequent scholars and shaped the discourse around seerat study. His interdisciplinary approach has also broadened the scope of research in the field, making seerat study a multidimensional and dynamic area of scholarship.

Examining William Muir's work on "The Life of Muhammad" through the lens of critical discourse analysis (CDA) entails dissecting the text to reveal underlying power dynamics, presumptions about ideology, and linguistic devices. Because of its historical and cultural relevance, scholars disagree on Muir's depiction of Muhammad's life. It's crucial to take into

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account how Muir portrays Muhammad in his writings as well as how they represent larger cultural and socioeconomic viewpoints of the era in which they were written while performing a critical discourse analysis.

Muhammad and other Eastern cultures and people were frequently shown through a Eurocentric lens by the Orientalist method, which has been condemned for maintaining stereotypes and power disparities. Examining Muir's narrative construction and the language he use to portray significant individuals and events is essential to understanding his work. A critical discourse analysis (CDA) would look for any hidden biases, prejudices, or ideological stances in the work and consider how they could represent larger power structures and cultural norms in Muir's historical setting. Along with how Muir interprets and contextualizes these materials, the critical analysis would also look at the sources he utilised to build his story.

Furthermore, a critical examination will go into the discursive techniques Muir utilised to mould the readers' opinions about Muhammad and the Islamic heritage. This would entail analysing the narrative strategies, imagery, and rhetorical elements Muir employed to express his viewpoint and shape the reader's comprehension of the material. The examination should also include how imperialist ambitions, religious prejudices, or Eurocentric attitudes may have impacted Muir's work, as well as the larger sociopolitical environment of his day. This would involve investigating the political and ideological currents that shaped scholarly discourse on Islam and the Middle East during the 19th century and their potential impact on Muir's portrayal of Muhammad. A critical discourse study would also draw attention to the ways in which Muir's writings have affected how Islam and its prophet are portrayed in Western academic discourse and popular culture. It would aim to clarify how Muir's depiction of Muhammad has influenced intercultural understanding and communication as well as contributed to or challenged prevalent misconceptions and biases against Islam. A thorough analysis of the language, sources, discursive techniques, and sociopolitical environment supporting *The Life of Mahomet* would be necessary in order to identify any hidden biases, power dynamics, or ideological presuppositions in Muir's depiction of Muhammad.

**Comparison of William Muir with Other Non-Muslim Sirah Writers**

The 19th-century Orientalist William Muir made significant contributions to the subject of Islamic studies with his research on the sirah, or the biography of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Muir's method of approaching the sirah fit within a larger Orientalist academic movement that aimed to investigate and comprehend Islamic history and culture from a Western viewpoint. Comparable to other Orientalist sirah authors of his age, his work and method of approaching the sirah provide insights into the many academic stances and methods within the area of Orientalist Islamic studies.

Like other Orientalist scholars of his age, Muir placed a strong focus on textual analysis, historical context, and the comparative study of Islamic sources in his work on the sirah. "*The Life of Mahomet*," which was originally published in 1861, is Muir's most well-known sirah book. Using mostly early Arabic sources and writings, Muir aimed to present a thorough and critical examination of early Islamic history as well as the life of Prophet Muhammad in this study.



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Muir's critical examination of Islamic texts, including as the Quran, Hadith literature, and early biographies of the Prophet, was a fundamental component of his approach to the sirah. Muir frequently questioned the conventional Muslim narratives of the Prophet's life and the early Islamic era in his effort to assess the historical legitimacy and dependability of these sources. His critical thinking enabled him to cast doubt on a number of stories and incidents and offer a different reading of the sirah that was in line with his Orientalist scholarly viewpoint.

Muir's analytical and often sceptical evaluation of Islamic texts sets him apart from other Orientalist sirah authors of his age, like Montgomery Watt, Thomas Carlyle, and Sir William Muir. Although these researchers used similar analytical techniques to analyse the sirah, Muir's work differed from some of his colleagues because of his critical attitude and mistrust of Islamic sources.

Montgomery Watt, another significant Orientalist scholar, approached the study of the sirah in a more contextualised and balanced manner. In Watt's work, the life of the Prophet and the early Islamic era were critically and respectfully analysed, all while demonstrating a profound mastery of Islamic sources. Watt's approach was distinguished by a nuanced and multifaceted view of the sirah, which aimed to connect with Islamic texts in a more sympathetic and empathic manner even though it had certain methodological parallels with Muir.

Muir's approach to the sirah might be viewed as more critical and combative than Watt's and other Orientalist authors', reflecting the larger context of 19th-century Orientalist studies. Muir's work on the sirah exemplifies the many and sometimes opposing viewpoints within Orientalist sirah literature. It also contributed to the complex and nuanced conversation surrounding the study of Islamic history and the life of Prophet Muhammad.

Contemporary scholars seek to enhance the discourse surrounding the sirah and provide a more complete picture of the life of Prophet Muhammad and the early Islamic period by critically analyzing both Orientalist and Muslim academic works.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, in terms of analytical techniques, critical assessments of Islamic sources, and interpretations of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, William Muir's work on the sirah may be compared to that of other Orientalist writers of his period, like Thomas Carlyle and Montgomery Watt. Muir's work differs from those of his colleagues due to his critical and occasionally antagonistic viewpoint on the sirah, which reflects the complex and varied terrain of Orientalist studies on Islamic history and civilization in the 19th century. In response to the ongoing evolution of the discipline of Islamic studies, modern academics endeavor to both interact with Orientalist literature and provide alternative viewpoints that represent a more critical and balanced approach to the study of Islamic history and the sirah.

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