

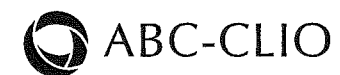
Muhammad in
History, Thought,
and Culture

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An Encyclopedia of
the Prophet of God

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disagreement on the branches (the Imam's identity). Some think that the closest and most virtuous relative of the Prophet is to be appointed but only on condition that the Prophet explicitly designated him; others think "the contrary of this." The question remains "unsolved to the present day" (al-Bustani 1957, III:493:3–10). The Brethren of Purity confine themselves to saying that the Imam should be morally excellent, being aware that the Prophet Muhammad's possible successors do not always match him in nobility (al-Bustani 1957, III:497:1–2). Note that this contrasts with the 'Alids, who advocated closeness to the Prophet as a decisive criterion for election.

Carmela Baffioni

See also: Brethren of Purity; Philosophy, Muhammad as Viewed in

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BURDA

The Arabic poem *al-Kawakib al-durriyya fi madh khayr al-bariyya* ("Celestial Lights in Praise of the Best of Creation"), known as *al-Burda* ("The Mantle"), is arguably the most popular poetic text in the Islamic world still actually sung, studied, and learned by heart by scholarly elites and common people alike. Being a major literary expression of devotion to the Prophet Muhammad, the *Burda* is conceived as a classical Arabic praise poem integrating lyrical, hagiographic, and invocatory elements. Written in 13th-century Egypt, it has inspired a vast corpus of commentaries, adaptations, and translations in probably every language spoken by Muslim communities around the world.

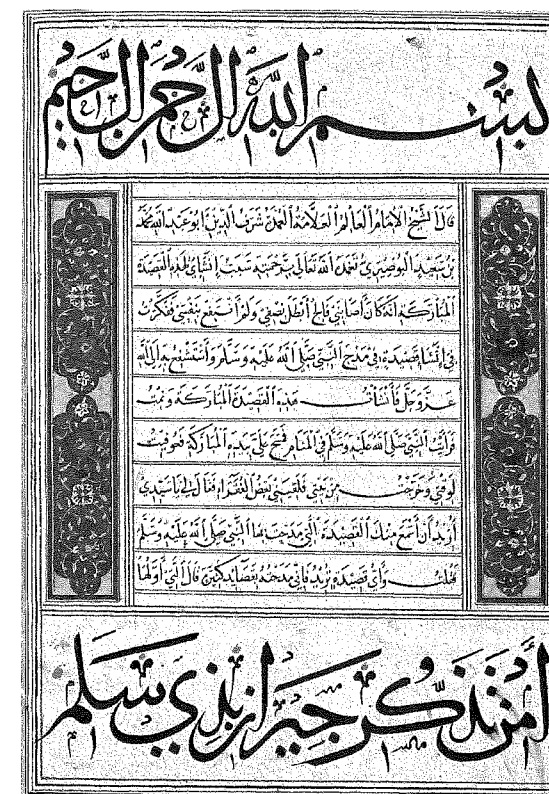
Praise Poems in Arabic Culture

Poetry is the principal mode of literary production in pre-Islamic Arabia and constitutes a type of communication to which the Arabs attributed magical powers. Praise poems (*madih*) exalt the virtues of a glorious ancestor, a ruler, or a religious figure. As in ancient Greece, the act of praising was believed to create a privileged relationship and a sacred bond with the person praised, implying the gain of the latter's protection and support. Praise poems were dedicated to the Prophet already during his lifetime. The most famous ones were those composed by Hasan ibn Thabit and Ka'b ibn Zuhayr, the latter of whom was honored by the Prophet with the gift of his personal mantle.

The Story of the *Burda* and Its Author

According to traditional accounts, the author of the *Burda*, Muhammad Sharaf al-Din al-Busiri (1211–1294), had been suddenly paralyzed by a mysterious disease. He decided to write a poem imploring the Prophet to intercede for him. Falling asleep, al-Busiri saw the Prophet, who wiped his face and covered him with his mantle (*burda*). When al-Busiri awoke, he was again able to walk and was thus cured. The story goes on to tell how the healed al-Busiri left his house and met a *faqir* ("a poor man, a Sufi") who recited to him the first verse of the *Burda* and told him that he saw the Prophet in a dream being delighted by a poem and covering its author with his cloak.

Before this event, al-Busiri was a court poet in Cairo and in the Delta region. It seems that it was only until later on in his life that he turned to Sufism and became a disciple of the great Shadhili Sufi-master Abu al-'Abbas al-Mursi (d. 1287). Sufi hagiography portrays al-Busiri as a venerated saint. His tomb in Alexandria is indeed considered a major pilgrimage site in Egypt.



The *Burda* of al-Busiri, 1379 (gold leaf, blue pigment & ink on paper). "The Poem of the Cloak" by Busiri (1211–1294) is a poem in praise of the Prophet Muhammad who appears in a vision to the poet and cures him of paralysis by wrapping him in a mantle. (Institute of Oriental Studies, St. Petersburg, Russia/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library)

Content and Structure

The healing anecdote mentioned expresses symbolically the spiritual efficacy of the *Burda* that, like the Prophet's mantle, heals its reader from disease and distress. It may be noted that in Sufism the initiation cloak (*khirqā*) symbolizes the transmission of the spiritual master's mystic state to the disciple.

Consisting of 160 verses ending with the letter *mim* (i.e., the first letter of the Prophet's name), the *Burda* was divided later on into 10 chapters. From a literary point of view, there are four sections, the first one being the *ghazal* or lyric prelude. The classical mourning for the desperate loss of the beloved is here transposed into a description of the state of the one who loves the Prophet and longs for his presence.

The *raḥil* ("journey") section, which can be considered as a poetical rite of passage, describes classically the poet's challenging journey toward the object of his praise. In the *Burda*, this section is dedicated to the theme of the egoistic soul (*nafs*) that, compared to the traveler's riding animal, has to be tamed so that its owner may reach the presence of the beloved Prophet. Following the Shadhiliyya Sufi tradition, the author warns against the soul's subtle trickeries that distract the traveler from his goal.

After this preliminary part, the actual praise section, the *madīh*, begins with the poet's recognition of his indigence, highlighting thereby his need of the Prophet's spiritual support, the excellence of which is subsequently poetically described. The virtues of the Prophet, such as his asceticism, generosity, justice, and mercy as well as his supreme prophetic dignity, are exalted by means of the subtleties of Arabic language. Some of the most famous verses are to be found in this section:

Muhammad is the master of the invisible and visible worlds, of men and spirits, be they Arabs or non-Arabs. He is the beloved of God whose intercession is hoped for in the face of every dread and distress. (v. 34–36)

How noble is the form of a Prophet adorned with beautiful morals, cloaked in comeliness, marked by a radiant face; a tender blossom in complexion, the full moon in nobility, the sea in magnanimity and in aspiration as limitless as time itself. (v. 54–55)

The chapters of this section describe important events of Muhammad's life, namely his birth, his miracles, the excellence of the revelation he received, his heavenly ascension, and his bravery.

The last section, consisting in pre-Islamic praise poems of the demand for a ruler's protection and support, is here transposed to the supplication of the Prophet's intercession on the Day of Judgment:

No one who hopes for the Prophet's generous gift is ever denied, no one who seeks his protection is ever dishonored; since I have committed my thoughts to his praise, I found him most committed to my salvation. (v. 148–149)

The *Burda* in Islamic Life

Venerated as a talisman that is impregnated with the salvific and illuminating presence of the Prophet, the *Burda* has even therapeutic and certain liturgical functions. It is recited to sick and dying people but also in certain Sufi rituals and in the

celebration of the Prophet's nativity, the *mawlid*. In more recent times, a modern adaptation of the *Burda* by the Egyptian poet Ahmad Shawqi (d. 1932) has gained widespread fame. The uninterrupted popularity of the *Burda* shows the sacred force that Muslims still attribute to the spiritual presence of the Prophet in their life, a presence of which the *Burda* is the poetic expression.

Ruggero Vimercati Sanseverino

See also: Manuscripts Relating to the Prophet; *Mawlid*; Praise Poetry; Shadhiliyya

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BYZANTINE LITERATURE

When in the 630s CE warrior groups expanded out of the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula, the great power on whose territories they impacted was the empire of East Rome, the eastern portion of the Late Roman Empire, with its capital in Constantinople. The fact of these invasions was immediately reflected in the literature of the time, notably in the sermons and hymns of Sophronios, patriarch of Jerusalem (d. 638), but reactions were expressed in general terms of lamentation without reference to Muhammad, the invaders' ideological leader. The first specific reference to Muhammad appears to come in the *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati* (ca. 634), when a passing reference to a false prophet recently appearing in the East adds historical verisimilitude to a narrative on forcible conversions of Jews in North Africa. Similar brief references appear in works of Anastasius of Sinai (late seventh century). This lack of information continued to mark Byzantine—or rather Constantinopolitan—awareness of Islam and its founder: where information is fuller, it is usually because a Greek-speaking Christian writer has contact with a Muslim environment. Despite the constant encounters, usually warlike, recorded in the Byzantine historians with Muslims (Arab or Turk) and the occasional sympathetic portrayal of an individual, issues of faith after the early years are rarely part of these narratives, and most Byzantine reactions to the figure of Muhammad, Prophet of Islam, must be sought in polemical texts.

The fullest early account of Islam is given by John of Damascus as "Heresy 100" in his *On Heresies*. Writing before circa 750 (there are complex issues on the dating and composition of all his works) John, a Christian whose family had been in the service of the caliphs in Damascus and who probably knew Arabic, spent the major part of his life in a monastic environment in Palestine. He shows a quite detailed knowledge of Islamic doctrines and customs. That the apparent quotations from the Qur'an do not always agree with the Qur'an known today is now increasingly taken not as John's ignorance but as reflecting an early stage of the Qur'anic text.

The Zaydi Shi'a follow Zayd ibn 'Ali, the fifth Imam in the order of the Shi'ite Imams. They endorse the legitimacy of the first three caliphs who preceded the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, 'Ali (d. 661 CE), on the belief that an acceptable leader has a legitimate title notwithstanding the existence of a superior claimant. Their legal doctrine is the nearest of the Shi'ite schools to the Sunnis, and they mainly reside in Yemen.

Hashim Kamali

See also: Twelver Shi'ism; Twelver Shi'ism, Doctrines and Practices

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LIGHT

Al-nur al-muhammadi is an Arabic expression that designates the inner and transcendent reality of the prophetic being, alluding thereby symbolically to the metahistorical significance of the Prophet Muhammad, especially within Islamic soteriology, cosmology, spirituality, and metaphysics. One of the foremost doctrinal implications of the Muhammadan light is the Prophet's primordial existence and his spiritual paternity over mankind. The Muhammadan light is also understood as the universal principle of prophecy of which the pre-Islamic prophets were partial manifestations, while the historic Muhammad corresponded to its full manifestation. Above all, the concept of *al-nur al-Muhammadi* plays a central role in Islamic spirituality. Being the light with which God illuminates the heart of his saints, it highlights the intrinsic relation among spiritual illumination, the Prophet, and sainthood.

Qur'anic Symbolism of Light and the Prophet

The association of the Prophet with the notion and the symbolism of light (*al-nur*) is, in fact, of Qur'anic origin. Light, as opposed to obscurity, allows man to discern between truth and falsehood. Moreover, it is life-giving since no creature is able to live without it. Light is therefore a theophanic symbol par excellence representing divine guidance and revealed knowledge as well as God's creating and vivifying intervention. Furthermore, al-Nur is one of the divine names denoting principally God's power to make things appear from the darkness of nonbeing to the light of existence.

As the instrument of God's guidance, the Prophet is called in the Qur'an "a shining torch" (Q 33:46). Being himself illuminated by divine revelation, the Prophet becomes a light that illuminates those who believe in him, guiding them thereby to God's holy presence. Numerous verses dealing with light are interpreted as

relating to the Prophet Muhammad. The "likeness" of God's light mentioned in the famous light verse (Q 24:35) is interpreted in the commentary of Muqatil (d. 767), one of the earliest exegetic works, as referring to Muhammad's light. According to this conception, it is through the Prophet that divine light "should shine in the world," and it is through him that "mankind was guided to the origin of his light" (Schimmel 1985, 124). In the same way, the verse "a light and a clear scripture have come to you from God" (Q 5:15) is generally understood as meaning, respectively, the Prophet and the Qur'an.

Light in the Sayings of the Prophet and in Islamic Salvation History

"The first thing created is the light of your Prophet, *o Jabir*." This hadith is one of various sayings attributed to the Prophet where the conception of a cosmic and metahistorical function of the Muhammadan light is made explicit. The hadith "I am from God's light and the believers are from me" is not accepted as authentic by all Muslim scholars, but it shows how the light theme implies the spiritual and universal paternity of the Prophet. Other prophetic sayings, considered unanimously as authentic, are interpreted by certain scholars in a similar sense, for instance the hadith "God created His creation in darkness and then He threw something of His light on it; whoever is touched by this light will be guided and whoever misses it will go astray."

Besides this cosmological aspect, light is mentioned in the Prophet's teaching as the illuminative reality of faith. In a well-known prayer, he asks God to make him light, illuminate his senses, and envelop his entire being with it. When light penetrates into somebody, such as the Prophet, he loses any interest in the material world and longs for eternity. Further, the believer is able to perceive a man's inner state "in virtue of the light from which he is created." The eschatological value of the Prophet's light is highlighted, too. Those who during their lifetime prayed abundantly upon the Prophet will be securely guided by a light all through their crossing of the infernal bridge leading to Paradise.

The light theme was subsequently integrated into early Islamic tradition and theology. A saying attributed to the Prophet's Companion Ibn 'Abbas describes how the Prophet's spirit was a light in front of God 2,000 years before He created Adam. Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765), venerated by both Sunnis and Shi'ites, explains in his Qur'anic commentary that it is from this primordial light that all beings were created. According to the famous theologian Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209), "the angels were ordered to prostrate to Adam for the reason that the light of Muhammad was in Adam's forehead" (al-Razi 1999, 525). Al-Shahrastani (d. 1153), an influential Persian theologian, held that "the light of Muhammad went from Abraham to Ismael; then that light passed through all his children, until it reached 'Abd al-Muttalib (the grandfather of the Prophet Muhammad)" (al-Shahrastani 1967, 83). In fact, according to traditional accounts such as the *Sira* by Ibn Hisham, the birth of the Prophet was accompanied by luminous signs attesting the final manifestation of the light of prophecy through the historical Muhammad.

Islamic Spirituality

It was the Sufis (i.e., the saints and spiritual guides of Sunnite Islam) who developed and diffused the concept of *al-nur al-muhammadi*. Al-Tustari (d. 896) from Iraq used this concept as hermeneutic principle in his exegesis of the Qur'an. The Muhammadan light appears here as the primordial light by which God created Adam and the universe. The same conception was held by early saints such as the famous al-Hallaj (d. 922). However, it is only with the Andalusian Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240) that the doctrinal implications of the Prophet's spiritual reality were exposed in all their depth. In his view, prophets are essentially the representatives of the Muhammadan reality in human history. Thus, the mission of the Prophet Muhammad encompasses all of humanity, which means also that every human being will benefit from the Prophet's universal intercession in the hereafter. Ibn al-'Arabi doctrine had an important impact on the Islamic conception of sainthood (*walaya*). Hence, the noted Egyptian Sufi Ibn 'Ata' Allah (d. 1309) compared the Prophet to the sun and compared the saint to the moon, which receives and reflects the sun's light. Al-Jili (d. ca. 1409) went even further by explaining that the prophetic spiritual being is illuminated by the light of the divine essence, whereas the other prophets are illuminated by the light of certain divine attributes. The Moroccan saint and reformer al-Jazuli (d. 1465) developed the practical dimension of *al-nur al-muhammadi*. It forms a central



Lawa'ih (Effulgences of Light), Mir 'Ali, d. 1556; Nawwab Durmish Khan, Safavid period (ca. 1521–1525); possibly from Herat, Iran. (Smithsonian Unrestricted Trust Funds, Smithsonian/Collections Acquisition Program, & Dr. Arthur M. Sackler/The Bridgeman Art Library)

element in the prayer rituals and in the practice that very rapidly surpassed the scope of his Sufi order.

During the renewal of Sufism in the 18th and 19th centuries that advocated a return to the essential sources of Islamic spirituality, the light doctrine was further emphasized. In the teaching of certain Sufis, the Muhammadan light is the life principle that dwells in the heart of every human being. It is in virtue of this interior light that man intuitively worships and knows God. Sainthood consists, then, of the actualization of this Muhammadan light in the saint's heart. The Moroccan saint al-Dabbagh (d. 1720) based his entire spiritual teaching on *al-nur al-muhammadi*. Paradise, according to him, is made of the Muhammadan light, and this is the reason why the Companions of the Prophet felt like being in Paradise when they were in his presence. In today's Sufi orders, *al-nur al-muhammadi* remains a central concept, which shows the crucial spiritual significance that is still attributed to the prophetic figure.

Shi'ism and Islamic Philosophy

The light theme plays an important role in Shi'ite thought, too. The idea that the Prophet's inner being is made of light is interpreted in a way that consolidates the Shi'ite doctrine of the imamate. The prophetic light, inherited by 'Ali, is passed on to the Imams. Light appears here as a symbol of the transmission of the prophetic normative authority, impeccability, and sainthood to the leaders of Shi'ism.

Even if the prophetic light seems to be less considered in Islamic philosophy than it is in Sufism and Shi'ism, certain thinkers understood it as a metaphor meaning the reflection in the Prophet's heart of the Neoplatonic active intellect, that is, the first divine emanation. Notably, al-Suhrawardi (d. 1191) developed in his illuminative philosophy a whole ontology based on the effusion of the supreme divine light.

Prophet's Light in Islamic Practice

Al-nur al-muhammadi forms a central motive in the celebration of the Prophet's nativity, the *mawlid*. Referring to the luminous events that accompanied the birth of the Prophet, the poems recited and sung during the festivities acclaim the coming of the light of guidance (*nur al-huda*) to the world. For Sufis, the nativity symbolizes a spiritual rebirth consisting of the illumination of the believer's heart by the Muhammadan light.

The practice of prayer upon the Prophet (*tasliya*), widely spread in the Muslim community through prayer manuals, chants, and poems, is considered a direct means of access to the Prophet's sanctifying light.

The doctrine of *al-nur al-muhammadi*, especially its cosmological and spiritual aspects, had been contested by certain Islamic scholars and, in more recent times, by Muslim modernists and fundamentalists. Nonetheless, these conceptions continue to sustain the veneration of the Prophet in popular and learned milieus alike. The symbolically rich term of *al-nur al-muhammadi* still expresses for a large

number of Muslims the certainty that the spiritual presence of the Prophet continues to illuminate the hearts of those who love him.

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See also: Names; Perfect Man; Prayer; Sufism

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M

MADHAHIB

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MADIH AND MADIH NABAWI

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MAGHAZI

The term *maghazi* refers to military endeavors, raids, expeditions, and battles that the Prophet Muhammad carried out during the Medinan period of his career. The term is the plural of the substantive *ghazwa* (another plural, *ghazawat*, was mainly used for the raids of the tribes prior to Islam) from the verb *ghaza*, meaning to raid, to invade, or to attack. The *maghazi* also include other expeditions and squadrons sent by the Prophet, even if they did not involve fighting.

All the *maghazi* took place during the Medinan period, stretching over a period of 8 years from the second to the ninth year; note that the Islamic year follows a lunar calendar contained in 12 months that make up 354 days. In the year 17 or 18 of the Islamic era the second caliph, 'Umar I, approved of taking the event of the migration of Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Yathrib, later called al-Madina (the city of the Prophet) as the beginning of the Hijra calendar. The Prophet arrived there in July 622 CE.

The total number of both major and minor battles and raids reaches 66, 38 out of which were expeditions and squadrons sent out by the Prophet; fighting took place in only 9 of these *maghazi*. The *ghazwa* that took place farthest away from Medina reached Tabuk, some 700 kilometers northwest of al-Madina in the ninth year of the Hijra. Watt (1953) undertakes a thorough portrayal of Muhammad's Medinan period.

Sources

The *maghazi* form part of the general mass of traditions (hadith) and historiographical materials that constitute self-contained narratives and a common collection of originally oral stories that formed the lore of the early Islamic community, since they were an integral component of the community's collective memory about its origin and formation (Jones 1983, 345), whereby social relations and early institution building are also managed in this emblematic representation