

From Christianity to Islam: An Analysis of Ibn Rabban's Approach towards *Sira Nabawiyya*¹

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ABSTRACT

*With the expansion of Muslim territory in the ninth century, non-Muslim communities' reactions to the denials of the prophethood of Muhammad created an impact on the development of Islamic prophetology. Vigorous refutations from non-Muslim community, specifically the Jews, Christians and Brahmins urged Muslims to develop a solid mechanism in defence of the status of their beloved Prophet. One of the works that has been recognized as an apparatus to defend the Prophet Muhammad veracity is *al-Din wa al-Dawla* composed by Ibn Rabban, a physician of the Caliph's court. This study analyses the novelty of his approaches in exploring *Sira Nabawiyya* and defending the prophethood of Muhammad. The study employed a descriptive, comparative and critical approach where it analyses and extracts the author original approach in explaining the legitimacy of Muhammad's prophethood and enlightening the Prophet's biography. The study argues that most of Ibn Rabban arguments in this work are actually developed from the foundations of Biblical scripture. His style of interpreting Biblical passages indicates a possible dependence on Ibn al-Layth's letter. However, the way in which he presents Quranic references seems not to be in accordance with Ibn al-Layth's perspective. This is where the novelty of his approach is distinguished. As a result, the study also affirms that Ibn Rabban imposes his own standards of selection and interpretation of Quranic verses when he applies it as reference to the Prophet's life.*

Keywords: Christianity, Ibn Rabban, Prophetic biography, Sira Nabawiyya

Abu al-Hasan `Ali ibn Rabban al-Tabari was a Christian convert to Islam who subsequently became a table companion of the Abbasid Caliph, al-Mutawakkil and the previous caliphs. Known as an expert in medicine, his professional background was described variously as a 'Christian writer' (*al-Katib al-Nasrani*), the secretary of Governor Mazyar ibn Qarin (*katib Mazyar*) (Ibn Maskawayh 2000), and also a medical doctor (*al-Tabib*). Al-Qifti attributed him as an authority in

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medical sciences, an expert in philosophy, a devotee of the natural sciences (Al-Qifti, 2005). His considerable abilities as an administrative secretary and writer testify to his ability or, indeed, probable mastery of the Arabic language, which would have helped him greatly in his understanding the meaning and interpretation of the Quran.

Early Muslim sources frequently associate Ibn Rabban's name with his former Christian belief. Christian titles such *al-Nasrani* and *Masihi* (Ibn Nasir al-Din 1993) evidently accompanied his name. In fact, in his work, *al-Radd `ala al-Nasara*, he openly acknowledges his first seventy year of life as a Christian, as he does in respect of his book *al-Din wa al-Dawla*, in which he clearly concedes his Christian origins (Ibn Rabban 1992). It is undeniable that his uncle, Abu Zakaria Yahya ibn al-Nu`man, a prominent Christian scholar and expert in debate, is likely to be the source of his Christian and theological knowledge. In discussions of the polemical topic of the authenticity of the Quran and the signs of prophethood, he quotes twice his uncle's own words as his source of information. This implies that he was no ordinary Christian, but that he was nurtured in a family with a thoughtful Christian faith.

From Christianity to Islam

According to Ibn al-Nadim (1997), Ibn Rabban's conversion to Islam occurred in the reign of al-Mu`tasim. However, the warmth of the statement which he makes regarding Caliph al-Mutawakkil in his work *al-Din wa al-Dawla* leads A. Nuwayhid and David Thomas to suggest that he converted in the period of al-Mutawakkil (Thomas 2015). Meyerhof (1931) offers other evidence for the date of his conversion. Based on his reading, Ibn Rabban produced his medical treatise entitled *Firdaws al-Hikma* eight years after the death of al-Mu`tasim; and since there is no Quranic citation and 'Muhammedan sentences' in the work, he argues that Ibn Rabban's conversion could not have occurred in the reign of al-Mu`tasim and suggests that its happened in the era of al-Mutawakkil. In contrast, Bouyges asserts that the absence of Islamic language and references in *Firdaws* does not prove that he was not Muslim at the time he composed the book (Adang 1996).

What galvanized him to convert to Islam is left tantalizingly unclear. Adang (1996) adduces three modern scholars' opinions regarding this. According to her, Ibn Rabban's conversion seems to be attributed to ulterior motives; whereas Noldeke conceives him as an opportunist; Macdonald identifies his conversion as nominal and professional; while Meyerhof (1931) suggests that it was Caliph's pressure that influenced his conversion. Since there is no clear statement or confession regarding his conversion, these theories remain conjecture. Even though his conversion came late in his life, after seventy years of life as a Christian, his acquaintance and contact with the Quran and Islamic knowledge appears to have occurred long before his conversion, while he was still a practicing Christian. In conversation between him and his uncle regarding rhetorical aspects of the Quran and the miracles of the Prophet, Ibn Rabban acknowledges freely that such discussions took place while he was a practising Christian.

Physician by Profession

The focus of the greater part of Ibn Rabban al-Tabari's works concern knowledge of medical and health sciences; and as a result, al-Dhahabi (1985) called him 'the author of medical works' (*sahib al-tasanif al-tibbiyah*). Twelve titles of his works are recorded by Ibn al-Nadim, Ibn al-Qifti, Ibn Abi Usaybi`a and Ibn Isfandiyar, and three of them were published (Thomas 2015). One of them served as a reference for the medical sciences and was recognized as one of the oldest Arabic compendiums of medicine, entitled *Firdaws al-Hikmah*. The other two, *al-Din wa al-Dawlah* and *al-Radd `ala al-Nasara*, contain his theological reflections on the Islamic creed, employs the rhetorical devices of an apologia and provides a critical re-assessment of his former Christian faith.

A survey of *Firdaws al-Hikmah* leads us to conclude that there is no direct reference to the Islamic sources cited in this work. Meyerhof's analysis confirms this. According to him, there is

no Quranic citation and 'Muhammedan sentences' (he probably means hadith by this) in *Firdaws al-Hikmah*. However, some terms that have been used in the book indicate the influence of Islamic thought (or Muhammedan practice) such as *insha Allah* (if God wills) *bi iznillah* (with the permission of God) and *bi 'awnillah* (with help of God). These terms, especially the term *insha Allah*, is a particular Muslim practice based on the Quranic teaching of verse 18:23-24.

The Book *al-Din wa al-Dawla fi Ithbat Nubuwwa al-Nabi Muhammad*

It is undeniable that Ibn Rabban's name was familiar among Muslim biographers. This work is, however, did not enjoy a similar awareness and popularity. The work seems hard to be found associated with him when Muslim biographers introduced his memoirs and his works. It was also difficult to find the book, *al-Din wa al-Dawla*, being cited by Muslim scholars, and due to its unpopularity, modern scholars have consequently expressed their doubts about the authenticity of this work. Paul Peeters voices his suspicions when he asserts that there is no reference to *al-Din wa al-Dawla* to be found in the works of later authors (Adang 1996).

In contrast, David Thomas (2015) confirms that the work was used as a reference by the 4th/10th century authors al-Hasan b. Ayyub and Abu al-Hasan Muhammad b. Yusuf al-'Amiri (d. 381/992). Indirect references may also be identified in the work of 13th century scholar entitled *Takhjil Man Harafa al-Tawrah wa al-Injil* by Taqi al-Din al-Ja'fari (d. 688/1289). According to the editor of this work, Mahmud 'Abd al-Rahman, al-Ja'fari relies completely on *al-Din wa al-Dawlah* in order to develop the tenth chapter of this work which discusses the prophecies of Muhammad in the Gospels and Bible (al-Ja'fari 1998). Besides Peeters, Maurice Bouyges is another scholar to articulate his doubts about this work. He declared the work as a "fraud and a product of modern forgery". According to him, the work employed a too modern style and vocabulary, a new division of Biblical chapters and a suggestion of a lack of awareness of the religious and political milieu during al-Mutawakkil's reign (Adang 1996). The issue of its authenticity has been largely agreed upon by scholars, and now regarded as resolved as a result of the reading and findings adduced by Thomas, Adang and others (Pulcini 1998).

The circumstances that influenced Ibn Rabban to compose the work are somewhat ambiguous. But since the work cites several times the name of Caliph al-Mutawakkil, and praises him, scholars tend to accept the idea that this work was conceived to fulfill the Caliph's own request. Minggana (1922) asserts that the work written under the directive of al-Mutawakkil, and portrays it as a semi-official defence of Islam from the opponent of the state religion, especially the Christians at the time. This possibly makes sense; but his work named *al-Radd* by the author is rather more appropriately to be assumed as a defensive device against the Christians' argument. Meyerhof (1931) offers a similar suggestion with different purpose, which, according to him the Caliph himself, commissioned Ibn Rabban to produce the work in order to test the authenticity and sincerity of his own conversion. Adang (1996) argues that it seems unlikely because, according to her, the Caliph must have been sufficiently satisfied by the time he attacked Christianity in his work, *al-Radd*. Graff's suggestion appears hesitant: his view is that Ibn Rabban might have written the book on his own initiative, to justify his conversion, or possibly even in response to Christian attacks, while simultaneously attempting to please the Caliph. What is clear is that Ibn Rabban's intention was to compose a comprehensive and enlightening theological work as a reference for both Muslims and non-Muslims on this particular topic.

The Prophet's Early Life According to Ibn Rabban

Providing evidences of the prophethood of Muhammad, miraculous occurrences during the Prophet's birth is adduced here. Ibn Rabban recounts an event at the Prophet Muhammad's birth, in which his mother saw a bright light which accompanied his birth. Ibn Rabban describes how Muhammad fell on all fours, his face and sight being directed towards heaven. Since the story is located in the chapter of Muhammad's signs (*ayat*), this implies that Ibn Rabban seems to consider the event as among the early signs of his prophethood. This account is clearly gleaned from Muslim tradition, and there is no Quranic reference cited here.

Ibn Rabban, however, cites al-Quran (93:6-8) as a reference to Muhammad's early life. He is described as being 'alone' (*wahidan*), 'unique' (*faridan*), an 'orphan' (*yatiman*) and 'poor' (*'a'ilan*) in the seventh chapter. No further interpretation is offered by the author in citing these verses. It is worthy of note that among the three attributes alluded to in the verses about Muhammad (orphan- *yatiman*, lost-*dallan*, poor-*'ailan*), Ibn Rabban seems to avoid mentioning the word *dallan* (lost or misguided) in this regard. This omission might have been made deliberately to avoid giving a possibly negative impression of the image of the Prophet's early life.

In chapter five, verses al-Quran (94:1-4) are mentioned. These are cited to reveal how God will raise the Prophet's status to a more exalted status. A brief interpretation of the verses implies that Ibn Rabban chose to read the verses quite literally, rather than to interpret them on a deeper level, as been the case in work of later scholars. It also shows that the story of Muhammad's life had already begun to acquire its own form and meaning during this period; and that gradually, some of the Quranic elements only began to penetrate this account in later decades.

Ibn Rabban's Novelty in His Methodology

In the introduction, he argues that the previous works by other authors on this topic are inadequate, as they have abridged, curtailed, and have not explained the truth of Islam satisfactorily (Ibn Rabban 1922). To cater the problem, designed this work to provide wide-ranging sources of guidance for Muslims and other communities. The work contains a profusion of Quranic and prophetic tradition, and supplements the argument with Biblical references as proof of the veracity of Islam. Since most of the discussion focuses on the authenticity of the prophethood of Muhammad, it is reasonable to assume that there must be a root cause that inspires Ibn Rabban to organize the structure of the discussion to focus on the theme of Muhammad's prophethood. The cause might arise from a particular Christian argument concerning the prophethood of Muhammad; or possibly as a result of dialogue with the Caliph himself, since he was his close associate; or even, possibly, at the community's request for him to express his opinions on this topic from his own particular perspective.

Another innovative approach invented by Ibn Rabban in his work is adducing Quranic references that have never been cited by his predecessor, Ibn al-Layth. It is an established practice in which the Muslim authors of creedal works begin their discussion with Quranic references related to the core topic of the work. As with Ibn al-Layth, Ibn Rabban introduces his own work by adducing five references from the Quran, declaring the veracity of the faith to which he now adhered. The first two verses (2:136 and 2:285) reveal that previous prophets had belief in and received divine messages from the same God, and indeed, Muhammad is regarded as one of them. The third reference is a declaration of disassociation from the polytheist in which the entire chapter 112 of the Quran is cited to make a clear distinction between Islam and other faiths. The author calls upon the people of the book to 'the common word' and, as usual, 3:64 is raised. He then concludes the prologue with verse 9:109 to confirm that this call is inspired and founded on piety towards Allah. Among these references, none of them is cited previously by Ibn al-Layth except for verse 3:64, which is related to 'the common word'. This is probably due to different circumstances at the time of its composition: Ibn Rabban's preface is more likely to tackle a wider general audience, compared to Ibn al-Layth's, in which *Risala* has the specific objective to

persuade the Roman Emperor and his people. Unlike Ibn al-Layth, Ibn Rabban organized his works more systematically. He outlines ten proofs of Muhammad's prophethood, each proof is discussed in a specific chapter. Each chapter is furnished with references from the Quran, except for chapters eight and nine, which support his argument.

To conclude, most of Ibn Rabban arguments in this work are actually developed from the foundations of Biblical scripture. His style of interpreting Biblical passages, as suggested by Adang (1996), indicates a possible dependence on Ibn al-Layth's letter. However, the way in which he presents Quranic references seems not to be in accordance with Ibn al-Layth's perspective. This is where the novelty of his approach is distinguished. Selections of Quranic verses regarding the Prophet's victory and his miracles are among the body of evidence considerably differing understandings between these two scholars. In discussing the topic of the Prophet's victory against the prevailing religions, Ibn Rabban cited very different verses in comparison with the verses quoted by Ibn al-Layth.

The way Ibn Rabban selects verses regarding to the Prophet's miracles also seems very different. In this regard, Ibn Rabban focuses on Muhammad's night journey and God's protection of him while Ibn al-Laith emphasizes the evidence of shooting stars as Muhammad's sign of prophethood. Furthermore, it would appear that Ibn Rabban imposes his own standards of selection and interpretation of Quranic verses when he applies them as reference to the Prophet's life. For example, in the discourse regarding the Prophet's illiteracy, no Quranic reference is made, even though it can be found in the Quran. The same thing happens when discussing the Prophet's miracles: only two are selected, even though the previous scholars have already provided examples. Most of the Quranic references in this work focus upon Muhammad's ability to foretell future events, as well as portraying his particular characteristics.

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