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**Historical and Perceptual Fallacies in Washington Irving's**  
***Mahomet and His Successors***

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## **Dedication**

*I dedicate this work to my parents. It feels pitiful to give so little in return for your love and compassion.*

*I would like also to express my love for my little family: Adnane, Fatima Zohra, Mohammed and Yasser.*

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## Abstract

The representation of the Orient and its specificities has always been a matter of serious thought and important outcome in the West. In literature, European and American authors alike tackled the East in terms of history, geography, and culture. This extended essay examines the picture Washington Irving gives in his biography *Mahomet and His Successors* of the Arabs, Muslims, and their Prophet. It begins by giving reference to Orientalism and its historical and literary branches in addition to the different traditions in biography writing, which will be contrasted in the analytical part to reach thoroughness as well as objectivity in the exposition of the ways literary disposition, religion, and ideology influence Irving's composition.

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## General Introduction

Literature is the embodiment of people's perception of the world and the means through which culture is transmitted from one generation to the next. This being the case, pieces of writing can but be worth scrutinizing to secure authenticity and trustworthiness in the process of depicting the situation of affairs in any given time and place. The scrutiny embraces more significance when dealing with cultural aspects that are alien to the author.

The Western view of the East was mostly shaped by literary works. Many writers who either have travelled to, or just imagined, the Orient are considered significant figures in the perception of the MENA region. This perception is still a matter of heated debate and tangible influence in the relationship between individuals and nations cross-continents.

In his book *Mahomet and His Successors*, Washington Irving presents the life of Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him) on the stretch of thirty-six years with an immense variety of events on different fronts. Despite the attractive story Irving composes, his accurateness and consistency are yet questionable. The biography, which is supposed to rest on reliable sources of historical incidents, is imbued with a multiplicity of either weakly recorded events or rather imaginative ones. The fact that Irving relies, most of the time, on legends ascribed to Muslims and their Prophet instead of the many sound books, which he must have had access to, calls loudly to question the reasons for such a controversial composition. Besides the historical inaccurateness of this book, it includes many misconceptions and stereotypes that were circulating long before Irving had his share in this topic. For the sake of approaching Irving's work through the lenses aforementioned, the following questions are to be answered:

How did Washington Irving's cultural and ideological background influence the composition of his book *Mahomet and His Successors*?

1. What are the main historical errors in Irving's biography according to Muslim reliable sources?
2. What are the religious misinterpretations therein according to Muslim faith?
3. What are the possible reasons that shaped the composition of such a controversial book?

Three hypotheses are provided as possible answers:

1. Washington Irving's reputation as an Orientalist exerted restrictions on his view of the Orient and its specificities.
2. The Romantic leanings of the writer overweighed integrity and faithfulness in presenting events.
3. The endeavour to meet the readers' anticipation at that time pushed Irving to manipulate data.

It should be mentioned that this work is not the first of its kind; nevertheless *Mahomet and his successors* has not undergone much scrutiny due to the limited readership in comparison to other works of Irving's. In his master thesis entitled "Inconsistencies in Washington Irving's characterization of Mahomet in the first volume of *Mahomet and His Successors*, Raymond George Lacina, as suggested by the title, focused most of his efforts on examining how the author dealt with his round character. He discussed Irving's use of Mohammed's mental qualities such as "intelligence, inventive genius, retentive memory, quick apprehension" as an argument to justify the conclusions he wanted to get to. Lacina also sheds light on Irving's scepticism regarding the miracles surrounding the Prophet from birth to death, and the tangible fear Irving failed to veil when he cuts their stories so short and denies them, leaving the reader in deep doubt.

Unlike Lacina's approach, the present paper seeks to expose the historical as well as the argumentative flaws in Irving's biography having his Orientalist



and Christian background as possible conclusions in sight. The importance of this study lies in acquitting Muslim history of many misrepresentations and preventing further discrimination on religious basis because of false versions of Islam that were, and still are, circulating the globe, especially in the West. To do so, a comparative and analytical approach has been selected, drawing on other biographies of the Prophet as well as on historical sources.

This research is divided into two chapters, the first one is theoretical and the second is practical. Chapter one lays the premises of this work by presenting previous works in relation to the field. Chapter two includes an analysis of Irving's book *Mahomet and His Successors* and a discussion of the author's views through cultural and ideological lenses.

## **Chapter One: Irving as an Orientalist**

## **Outline of Chapter One**

### **Chapter One: Irving as an Orientalist**

- 1.1. Introduction
- 1.2. Orientalism:
  - 1.2.1. Definition
  - 1.2.2. Literary Orientalism
  - 1.2.3. Historical Orientalism
- 1.3. Biographies of Mohammed:
  - 1.3.1. Islamic Accounts of the Prophet's Life
  - 1.3.2. Orientalist Biographies
- 1.4. Washington Irving:
  - 1.4.1. The Life of Washington Irving
  - 1.4.2. Irving and Mohammed
- 1.5. Conclusion

## **1.1. Introduction**

The relationship between the MENA region and the Western World has for ages been one of manipulation and disproportionate interest. Ever since the eighteenth century, the countries of North Africa and the Middle East have been subjects to economic and cultural imperialism due to several factors, mainly military unbalance and the acclaimed cultural superiority. This latter gained momentum and became a nearly-conventional view with the works of outstanding Western figures in literature and arts. The purpose of this chapter is to give common-ground definitions of Orientalism and some of its branches. It also sheds light on some biographies of Prophet Muhammad (Peace and Blessings Be upon Him). Furthermore, it presents the life, travels, and works of Washington Irving.

## **1.2. Orientalism**

Given its natural richness and cultural diversity, the orient has always represented a fertile land for artistic and literary production. In many literary masterpieces from the age of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Shakespeare's plays to romantic novels and biographies, oriental settings and characters can be spotted here or there. The lands of the East, then unknown by the crowd, were a fascinating ingredient for they provided an alternative to the actual places people lived in, and allowed readers or audiences' imagination to wander away from the day-to-day life errands. For many academics, including Edward Said, those pieces of writing did not result exclusively in amusement, but also in the establishment of a Western perception and, later, an attitude towards the East. The Orient became widely perceived as a territory characterized by monotony, strangeness, irrationality, exoticism, eroticism, and religious fanaticism. This image, so stained with vices and deficiencies, led inevitably to what Edward Said labelled "Othering", which is, in general terms, the Eurocentric view of the non-European as the "Other".

“The Orient” Said assumes “is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (26). So the East as a whole, MENA in particular, from this perspective is a reflection of all what Europe does not want to be associated with. Thus, the West needs the East to define itself and determine the frame of its history, culture, and identity.

The increasing interest in the Orient manifests itself in the likewise increasing number of Orientalists. The list includes politicians, philosophers, architects, painters, novelists and biographers. Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx, Gustav Bauernfeind, William Muir, and many others are believed to have had a keen preoccupation with this region. This was quite apparent in a number of their works such as Disraeli’s *Tancred* and Muir’s *Life of Muhammad*. The basis of these works is the circulating distinction which made the East different from the West in its peoples, cultures, religions, customs, ideologies, and social organization (Said 27).

It was through this distinction, which puts the West at the other extreme far from the East and its vices, that European colonial powers, mainly France and Britain, gained the worldwide reputation of enlightenment and civilization in the nineteenth century. Being in power and control over countries like India and Algeria enabled the colonizers to be the spokesmen and representatives of the natives. This explains why British and French writers made a weighty contribution to this century’s political, historical, and literary output whereas the following century witnessed an American domination of this writing field alongside with the political, military, and economic manipulation sustained by the US government in the Middle East especially (Said 28). Thus, Said argues further that the Orient is not geographical in its origins, but rather a set of ideas, often intersecting with imagination, that were put forward till they became attributed to the lands in question.

### 1.2.1 Definition

The year 1978 marks a salient point in defining Orientalism. While it had referred to the sum of paintings, books, and researches whose subject matter was the MENA region and its people's biological and cultural particulars, Edward Said broadened the field in his ground-breaking work *Orientalism*. The specificity of this book lies in presenting the concept from a variety of angles. The first one being academic, Said asserts that:

Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the orient-and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist-either in its specific or its general aspects, is an orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism (Said 27).

So Orientalism, as a term was for much of its history restricted to the very academic interest in the Orient. Whoever studied these regions' cultural patterns, social structures, customs, history, or beliefs was doing Orientalism and, therefore, labelled Orientalist. This statement, extensive as it may seem, does have its limitations, the most conspicuous of which is its vastness. As stated earlier, these works do not suggest a merely geographical distinction, but rather an ideological and, at times, stereotypical one. More deeply, Orientalism is:

... a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) the "occident." Thus a very large mass of writers, among who are poet, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on (Said 27).

Thus, the concept embraced a more specific connotation. Based on Said's definition, through this lens, Orientalism is not about the works (poems, novels, drawings...) themselves, but the ideology which gives them shape from their

genesis; an ideology whose basic axiom is the East-West dichotomy. The term also covers both the installation and acceptance of the Western standpoint deeming the East and its peoples as distant and distinct in their mindset and lifestyle. Another significant term Said used in this definition is “imperial administrators” (27) which implies the would-be imperial plans. These plans can be considered as the third layer of Orientalism. It can be assumed, then, that Orientalism from this angle is “...a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 27).

The domination mentioned here is a final stage which comes after reproducing the Orient through, first, knowing it and, second, discussing it from a superior standpoint. Being a “Western style”, Orientalism is more important to Europe and the United States than it is to North Africa and the Middle East, because the Orient is a Western construct, convenient to Western political interests, to serve Western ends (Said 29).

Therefore, Orientalism in an all-encompassing definition is a way of thinking that has the distinction between the West and the East at its very foundation. The European acceptance of this way of approaching other peoples and countries, which situates others in a state of inferiority, influenced and represented a heavy bias on a number of writers and scholars, therefore writings, in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The corpus which was produced during such a long-stretching period of time quickened the transformation of the Orient from an idea into a conventionally acknowledged geographical reality with specific attributes such as monotony, exoticism, eroticism, and religious fanaticism.

### **1.2.2. Literary Orientalism**

Although scholars worldwide have always been in debate trying to define literature and what it includes or excludes, they agree on the fact that this body is the backbone of the perpetuation of knowledge and culture from one generation to the next. Thus, for most of human history, knowledge of the

present came from, or at least was influenced by, the past. The depiction of the Orient in Western literature, that is literary Orientalism, is no exception.

Literary Orientalism is as ancient as, if not older than, early Greek drama. Such prominent playwrights as Aeschylus and Euripides personify the European attitude of representing and speaking in the name of Asia, after portraying it as defeated at the threshold of Europe by the Athenians. Aeschylus's *The Persians* depicts Asia as a place of emptiness and disaster, which befell it as the inescapable outcome of challenging the West (Said 78).

The end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries is an era marked with the flourishing of the Romantic literary movement. Poets and novelists all alike could not help inserting oriental elements in their works. This was mainly owing to the coincident concordance between romantic aspects and the tributes that had been associated with the Orient. Among these are imagination, extravagance, love, exoticism, magic, and nature. Romantic prose provides a rich bibliography about the Orient. The novel, with its plot specificities, detailed description of settings, and complex engagements of characters, appealed to readers' minds and emotions, and found a large readership because it tended to meet people's expectations and preconceived pictures about the East.

Given the huge number of writers who dealt with the orient in their works, it is disturbingly questionable how they resemble each other in language and content. Said believes that "Orientalism imposed limits upon thought about the Orient". This is tangible in myriads of writings from the times of Chaucer and Shakespeare to those of Scott, Disraeli and Flaubert, to name just a few (Said 29-30).

Travel writing, which is supposedly more authentic than other genres, was not about acquiring first-hand knowledge about the Orient, but rather on the purpose of trying stubbornly to prove that the prerequisite body of information about the place was true (Said 75). Travellers who have really been to North



Africa or the Middle East, the land of their interest and specialization, had the European perception at the back of their minds. So being physically in the place was not to change this view, which Said calls “imaginative geography” (72), but, on the contrary, to gain it more validity and credibility.

Literary Orientalism is as inclusive as to englobe different forms of writing like essays, poetry, and prose, and many genres including historical novels, travel accounts, and biographies. This research is interested in the latter in an attempt to expose the Orientalist epistemological point of view that drove Irving to write such a controversial book about a person whose legacy keeps shaping the world at various levels nowadays, and represents the source of spiritual fulfilment for a portion around one fifth of humans on the planet.

### **1.2.3. Historical Orientalism**

The notion of the Orient has origins far back in history when the encounters between East and West were of hostility and opposing interests. These encounters can be said to have begun with the piracy activities in the Mediterranean. Even during the Elizabethan age, when the British navy was at its zenith, it could not subdue this region for it was dominated by the strong Algerian fleet. This era particularly was marked with a flourishing of English cultural and literary life. Writers of the age, mostly playwrights, dealt with themes directly related to the monarchy and its history (Burns 104).

What was called the piracy activity in the Mediterranean Basin had a reflection in Elizabethan drama. The theatrical productions of Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare such as *Tamburlaine* and *Othello* were imaginative simulations of these activities. Thus, the European people, especially the Britons, had their first impressions about North Africa and its inhabitants; a set of impressions dominated by such characteristics as mystery, evil, and exoticism.

The hostility that rose from these first meetings of the different races coming from different geographical areas did not stop at the level of their

immediate time. With the Orientalist institution in motion for decades and the ever-increasing interest in the Orient, European powers, Britain and France mainly, moved from scholarly to imperial activity. In the nineteenth century Orientalists such as Silvestre de Sacy and Ernest Renan from France and Edward William Lane from England appropriated Orientalism to imperial and colonial plans like the British and French occupations of India and Egypt (Macfie 183).

In America, the conception of North Africa took shape as early as the 1790s. It was dominated by captivity narratives such as James Wilson Stevens' 1797 book *An Historical and Geographical Account of Algiers* and William Shaler's 1826 book *Sketches of Algiers*. In such works, the emphasis fell on the idea that the region of Barbary Coast was once a place of glory but became one of ruin and decay. They also reinforce stereotypes and enlarge racial as well as cultural gaps through making prejudiced judgements about the people living therein. (Miranda 14)

Ever since the end of the Second World War, the Orientalist approach of the Middle East and North Africa transformed from one of othering, in the first place, and civilization, in the second, to one of self-defence and the keeping of world peace. In addition to the rise of nationalism and the intensity of the decolonizing process in the Third World, sustaining control and perpetuating benefits required the West, the United States majorly, to shift from the traditional form of subjugation, that is colonialism, to neo-colonialism including economic as well as political monopoly (Macfie 186).

The term Historical Orientalism can also cover the type of Orientalism that focuses on the history of the Orient with the aim of rewriting or reinterpreting it. History is so important because it tells people who they are, shapes their identities, and gives them reasons to live and endeavours to follow. Thus, blurring nations' histories results inevitably in identity crises. The rethinking and reproducing of places like North Africa and the Middle East by Orientalists is exemplified in Lane's *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. This

work gives historical and anthropological details about Egypt stressing European superiority and racial differences between the orient and Europe (Said 39).

The main problematic aspect of Orientalist historical writing is its inability to deal with the material itself without being judgemental. This is mainly due to the preconceived notion of the Orient as distant and distinct. In most of their works, Western writers were prone more to adapt the geographical and cultural reality to their beliefs and conception than to report it as it was.

Being the only source for knowledge about the orient, these accounts gained authenticity and credibility among the Western crowd. Moreover, they represented the cornerstone to justify imperialism and subordination. What was even more troublesome in Orientalism is the fact that Orientals themselves, in the span of many generations, came to adopt Western views about the East and its people and consider them as true.

Historical Orientalism transcends the geographical descriptions of the land and the generalized portrayals of Orientals to more detailed scrutiny of some significant figures. In addition to historians like Ibn Khaldoun, mathematicians like Al Khwarizmi, and other scientific forerunners including Ibn Sina, Ibn Hayyan, and Ibn Rushd, religious leaders occupied a colossal space on the orientalist's bookshelves. Of these figures, Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him) had the greatest interest and the minutest probe. The life of the Prophet has been the subject matter of a myriad of biographies on the stretch of many centuries.

### **1.3. Biographies of Mohammed**

Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him) is inarguably the most influential person in the MENA region. Therefore, the depiction of this place and its peoples' customs, traditions, and beliefs would have been both deficient and unconvincing without giving reference to his life and teachings. After more than fourteen centuries, large portions of the Muslim community in North

Africa and the Arabian Gulf follow the prophetic instructions with the keenest care. Knowledge about the Prophet can be divided into two categories, which are distinguished in the study of his life: the Islamic tradition, which is nearest to his lifetime, and the Orientalist studies, which come centuries later (Ali 3).

The Prophet's life is of as massive importance as attractiveness because it offers wide horizons for analysis at different points. Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him) was not only a person who tells people about God and spirituality, but a father, a husband, a neighbour, a companion, a teacher, and a military and political leader as well. This diversity, yet consistency, in the character of the Prophet and his life activities was the subject of many historical and literary productions by Muslim and non-Muslim writers alike.

For Muslims the purpose of studying the "Sirah", the Prophet's biography, is obvious. It is the starting point of the Islamic civilization and the reference of the Muslim identity. In more day-to-day terms, the variety of situations existent in the time of more than six decades offers moral, behaviouristic, and educational codes that are the fundamental basis of Muslim interaction among themselves and with other ethnicities in communities worldwide.

The Orientalist interest in the life of Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him), which was manifested in a number of works, was part of the overall preoccupation with knowing the Orient and its particulars as far as culture and ideology are concerned. This came as a result of witnessing Muslims' high culture and magnificence during their conquests of some European territories such as Spain (Said 82).

A noticeable feature in Orientalist works about Islam in general, the Prophet in particular, is its analogy. Western writers, mostly of Christian faith or background, often probe Islam in comparison to Christianity, and Prophet Mohammed in comparison to Prophet Jesus (Peace Be upon Them). In fact, many make the mistake of placing Prophet Mohammed in the sight of Muslims the way Prophet Jesus is seen by Christians. Thus, they use the term

Mohammedanism for Islam and present it as a faulty version of Christianity and Prophet Mohammed as an “impostor” (Said 83).

### **1.3.1. Islamic Accounts of the Prophet’s Life**

There are mainly three resources for any scholar to have access to the sixty-three-years career of Prophet Mohammed (Peace and Blessings Be upon Him); these are the Quran, the Hadith, and the *Sirah / Maghazi* literature. The Quran is the holy book revealed to the Prophet while the Hadith and *Maghazi* are collections of reports with a certain set of rules and criteria to insure authenticity and trustworthiness of the reporter (Ali 3).

Preserving Quran was based, firstly, on memorizing its verses by the Prophet himself and a number of his followers. After the death of the Prophet, huge numbers of these companions were killed in the war of apostasy against Arab tribes who attempted to renounce Islam and rebel against the authorities of Medina. Therefore, in fear of the disappearance of Quran, Abu Bakr, the first caliph, launched the writing process of the holy book following the suggestion of Omar Ibn Al Khattab and under the supervision of Zaid Ibn Thabit (may Allah be pleased with them), who used to write the verses on separate pieces of parchment and leaves once revealed. The project ended in a “master-copy” that embodied the preservation of the Book from addition, omission, and alteration (Ali 5).

In the time of Othman Ibn Affan, the third caliph, the spread of the faith created a tendency to read the Holy Book differently, given the diversity of languages and cultures. So, Othman (may Allah be pleased with him) got hasty to make copies of the *Mushaf* and send them to distant provinces. Nowadays the number of copies is beyond count, yet preserved word by word as it was revealed to Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him).

The Hadith on the other hand refers to the reports mostly about the sayings and deeds of the Prophet. They also include detailed descriptions made by contributors and eyewitnesses of the events that took place then (Ali 8-12). The Isnad (chain of reporters) is what gives the biography of Prophet Mohammed its authenticity and richness with details in all walks of life, a particularity which could but fascinate Muslim and non-Muslim historian and biographers all alike.

The third source for information about the Prophet's life is *the Maghazi*, which stands for reports as well, with the slight difference that they are chronologically ordered, which is not always the case for Hadith. Collecting information and writing about the Prophet began shortly after his death (Ali 12).

Among the most thorough Islamic accounts in the field of Sirah is Ibn Hisham's *Al-Sirat al-Nabawiyyah* (Ali 16). This book provides information about the Prophet's ancestors and bloodline from Abraham (Peace Be upon Him). It also covers his whole life from birth, childhood, prophetic career, leadership, battles, and death.

### **1.3.2. Orientalist Biographies**

Many of the writers who took interest in the East expressed their standpoints regarding Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him). In the process of dealing with his life, they put forward some views regarding the settings of the rise of Islam. R.I. Nicholson and P.K. Hitti divided Arabian history into different periods in an attempt to determine the concept of "*Jahilyyah*". The linguistic gap between Arabic and English or other languages led these writers to assume that the concept refers to a limited era that is pre-Islamic. Muslim scholars, more knowledgeable in Arabic specificities, since the dawn of Islam agree that "*Jahilyyah*" is not restricted to ignorance, wilderness, or savagery. It encompasses a set of traits and behaviours which are not historically associated with a time or a place, but existed and still exist. (Ali 66-68)

In many an explanation of Islam, Orientalists tended to take a materialistic inclination that often uses some self-serving interpretations of isolated texts from Quran. This approach was quite trendy in the first half of the twentieth century. The first writer to undertake such a task was Hubert Grimme “who in 1892 came forward with a straight socialistic explanation of the rise of Islam” arguing that it is the very simple result of a struggle between the poor and the rich (Ali 95).

The life of Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him) has been scrutinized in almost each and every aspect and period. Orientalists showed interest in his birth, youth, trade activities, marriages, and career as a Prophet and a “statesman”, as William Watt entitled his book.

What can be considered of the utmost seriousness is the Orientalist explicitly laid about views concerning the Prophet’s faith prior to revelation. Margoliouth states that he was so likely a polytheist like his tribe. Again, the arguments used by such writers as Margoliouth are cherry-picked halves of traditions (Ali 196). The central idea around which revolves the Orientalist perception of Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him) is that of an ambitious young man who has been for years preparing a religious reform. This alleged preparation includes the many travels he had at an early age as part of his commercial activities.

Another common feature among Orientalists is the analogical aspect Said mentioned in *Orientalism*. William Muir is considered the first writer to present the theory of Judaeo-Christian influence on the Prophet’s “doctrine” as a whole. He supposes that the contact he had with Jews and Christians in Mecca, Medina, and Syria not only provided him with an abundance of knowledge about previous prophets and religions, but also exerted a significant bias on his future ideas (Ali 253).

The Prophet was sometimes mentioned as a flat character in literary works such as Walter Scott’s *Talisman* and Herman Melville’s *White Jacket* when he

writes: “like that old exquisite, Mohammed, who so much loved to snuff perfumes and essences” (quoted by Baghli Berbar 74). At other times, more importantly, whole books were devoted to present a biographical study of the Prophet’s career.

This was the case for Muir’s *Life of Muhammad* which was described by Albert Habib Hourani, one of the twentieth-century Islamic scholars, as “still not quite superseded” (*New World Encyclopaedia* Contributors). Muir depicts the Prophet as sincere and looking for truth initially, but later he draws dangerous conclusions which would be provocative to any Muslim. For example, he accuses the Prophet of fabricating revelations for worldly gain (*New World Encyclopaedia* Contributors). Another feature in parts of his book is the fact that he relies on sources given by Muslim historians so selectively that he takes some aspects and ignores others within the same piece of information (Ali 144).

Gustav Weil was a path breaker in the field with his work *Mohammed der Prophet, sein Leben und sein Lehre*. A piece of writing which influenced both Muir’s *Life of Muhammad* and Washington Irving’s *Mahomet and His Successors*. This latter, which is the topic of this research, was a project which took Irving quite a long time to accomplish. Hugh Griffith in the introduction to this edition of the book assumes that the period from 1826 to 1850 granted the author the opportunity to steady his foothold in the historical principles of studying religion (Griffith xvi). Whatever Irving learnt from history, his biography still has some flaws at different spots. The book, being the first in a number of volumes, has more polish and is most read, but it is “far from successful” (Lacina 1). Unlike Lacina’s perspective, which stresses the inconsistencies in the characterisation of Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him), this research aims at unveiling the historical inaccuracy according to Muslim resources. Furthermore, it attempts to explain the misconceptions that are easily spotted here and there during the thirty-six lifetime and possible reasons behind them, again in contrast to Muslim reliable records. Irving’s



biography continues to be the most famous one, calling therefore for probing into its composition.

## **1.4. Washington Irving**

Washington Irving is one of the most remarkable American writers of the romantic era. His world-famous short story “Rip Van Winkle” gained him international recognition and fame. Along the numerous works, his style changes from humour and mockery to historical analysis. It is of immense importance to know about the author of the book under scrutiny for it helps determine his background, motives, and intentions.

### **1.4.1. The Life of Washington Irving**

Irving was born in the heart of Romanticism in 1783 and on the advent of the newly independent United States of America. As soon as he left school, he sought his own education and spent long times patrolling New York streets and alleys. He once said, “I know every spot where a murder or robbery had been committed, or a ghost seen” (Griffith “Introduction to *Mohammed*” xviii). In 1803, Irving began transforming into a writer in the company of his law teacher Josiah Ogden Hoffman (Griffith xviii). He started writing articles addressed to the *Morning Chronicle*, a new magazine edited by his brother, Peter. Under the pseudonym Jonathan Oldstyle, Gent, Irving wrote some funny essays about dressing and manners of prominent figures such as actors, managers, and critics. He, after that, contributed with two other writers of a club called the ‘nine worthies’ in a periodical with the title *Salmagundi*. *A History of New York* was the work that made Irving the first American writer to be well known across the Atlantic. It was a mockery of the Dutch founders of New York which was received with amusement by such imminent figures as Byron, Coleridge, Scott, and later, Dickens (Encyclopaedia of World Biography). His intended bride, Matilda Hoffman died in 1809, aged only seventeen; a shock that caused him a loss of direction.

In 1815 Irving went to England to work for his brothers' business, and when that failed, he composed a collection of stories and essays that became

*The Sketch Book*, published under the name “Geoffrey Crayon” (1819–20), which included “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”. In 1822, he went to the Continent, living in Germany and France for several years. In 1824, he published *Tales of a Traveller*, a work influenced by the many legends and stories he collected from the countries he visited. As a new wave of depression to Irving, the book was received as unoriginal, and thus failed. Before leaving England, he accepted an honorary doctorate from Oxford. The next station was Spain in 1826, when he became attaché at the US embassy in Madrid (Britannica).

While in Spain, a place Irving called his “Moslem Elysium” (Marr 222), he made research for his biography of Christopher Columbus for two years of hard work. In 1828, he finally came out with a biography of acknowledged brilliance. Irving was re-established as America’s leading writer (Britannica).

In 1832, the year *Alhambra* was published, he returned to America for the first time since 1815. Irving was received as a guest of honour (Encyclopaedia of World Biography). A noticeable particularity of his last years is that biography became his sole interest. In 1849, Irving wrote *Oliver Goldsmith* which he described as “a tribute of gratitude to the memory of an author whose writings were the delight of my childhood, and have been a source of enjoyment to me throughout my life” (Griffith xxii). Residing in Alhambra Palace in Granada was an abundant source of inspiration. He was pushing his potential far back into the past. It was there that he wrote *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, *The Conquest of Granada*, and *Mahomet and His Successors*.

The first volume of his last work, *Life of George Washington*, came out in 1855. It was so difficult for a man in his seventies to carry on so voluminous a project, but Irving’s passion and determination to prove, to himself more than any other person, that he was a first-class biographer. The four following volumes came successively. The whole task achieved completion in 1859. In November of the same year, Washington Irving died and was buried in the cemetery of Sleepy Hollow (Griffith xxii).

Irving's later reputation was marked by an ever-falling rate. The coming of such writers as Twain, Harte, Bierce, and London made him and his style look ancient and outdated (Griffith xxiii ). However, being one of America's most prominent literary figures in both his lifetime and later on, it would be nonsensical to underestimate his genius or take his views lightly.

#### **1.4.2. Irving and Mohammed**

What is commonly remarkable in a huge mass of oriental writing about Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him), in Irving biography for example, is the extent to which these pieces resemble each other. This particularity raises the question whether these writers were echoing each other's views from time to time.

The Christian standpoint traditionally considers Mohammed an impostor who came with a modified version of religion that draws from both Judaism and Christianity, that is to say his faith has no divine origins, but his own fabrication (Said 83). Irving's approach is slightly less offensive. Nevertheless, he cannot escape taking sides whenever he has done the laying down of historical events.

So Washington Irving fell in line with the orientalist tendency to put the East ideologically, culturally, and theologically on one hand, and the west on the other. This would have been an easier matter had he dealt with something other than religion. In *Mahomet and His Successors*, Irving had to either acknowledge the prophethood of Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him), therefore contradict the Christian point of view, or account for his career as the outcome of the amalgamation of many factors including ambition and self-deception (Irving 213-214).

As mentioned earlier, the book *Mahomet and His Successors* was written wholly during Irving's stay in Spain. While residing in Alhambra castle, he was taken by the oriental architecture and the other traces of the Islamic civilization. This fascination added to his passion for history and the past, being a romantic.

He, then, became so interested in writing about the Muslim occupation of Spain. This took him to the very beginning of Islam, the seventh century AD.

The writing of the biography under study took Irving considerable time to finish. The period from its genesis to its completion granted the author a chance to learn how to approach religion based on historical principles. So helpful in this was Gustav Weil's work *Mohammed der Prophet, sein Leben and sein Lehre* (Griffith xvi).

## **1.5. Conclusion**

Orientalism, as a style of thought, creates imaginative boundaries that separate the East from the West, on the first hand, and imposes limits upon the Western thinking as far as the Orient is concerned on the other. In literature particularly, the depiction of the MENA region and its people's attributes has undeniably been influenced by this disposition. Religion, precisely the Prophet's life and teaching, being decisive and referential for these people, has been given much time and effort. Washington Irving's *Mahomet and His Successors* calls into question Muslim fundamental sources, Quran and Hadith, making itself seriously confrontational and worth scrutinizing.

## **Chapter Two: Irving's Biography of Mohammed**

## **Outline of Chapter Two**

### **Chapter Two: Irving's biography of Mohammed**

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## 2.1. Introduction

Not being the first to present a biography of the Prophet (Peace Be upon Him), Washington Irving lays no claims of novelty as far as the events are concerned. *Mahomet and His Successors* is a thorough composition which seeks to help readers from different intellectual levels have an idea about Prophet Mohammed's life, teaching, and activities on the stretch of sixty three years. A lifetime that was enough to grant him the chance of being an orphan, a shepherd, a merchant, a friend, a husband, a father, a grandfather, a migrant, a state founder, a man of war, and a religious leader. In addition, the Prophet encountered different people from distant lands and distinct cultures, which makes his biography of interest to both Muslims and non-Muslims. This chapter will be devoted to, first, presenting Irving's biography of the Prophet. Moreover, it will attempt at unveiling some historical inaccurateness and misconception as well as misinterpretation of revelations. Furthermore, it will suggest possible reasons behind the way the author, as an Orientalist, perceives Islam and its founder. Finally yet importantly, this part will give reference to the conspicuous correspondence between Irving's views and nowadays' perception of the Islamic faith and its adherents. The reader will come across such words as "Prophet" and terms as "Peace Be upon Him", which are not used by Irving. These words, according to Islamic jurisdiction, are to be added when mentioning the name of any prophet like Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed.

## 2.2. Life of Mohammed

The book under study is a Wordsworth Edition in 2007 entitled *MOHAMMED*. The editors grant no explanation for the change of title from the original one *Mahomet and His Successors*, but it might be owing to the endeavour to make this edition distinct from the whole work, which talks not only about Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him), but the Islamic expansion after his death as well.

Irving begins his book by introducing the social structure and theological background of the Arabs prior to Islam. The Arabs used to live in tribes governed by a Sheikh to whom the whole tribe pays respect and reports problems and worries. There were two sects of desert dwellers: people of the cities, who occupied themselves with commerce and agriculture, and the constantly moving Arabs, who know but the tent as home. “A strong distinction grew up in the earliest times between the Arabs who held towns and castles, and those who dwelt in tents” (Irving 6). The first portion lost much of their original characteristics in the course of their frequent encounters with other races, including conquerors. This was the case for Yemen, being the most accessible with its easy terrain. The others, however, kept the reputation of being the representatives of ancestors. They lived in the open roaming the desert in search of water and pastures for their herds of sheep and camel. This lifestyle imposed on the Arab, consequently equipped him with, the skill of survival and coping with the strictest natural conditions. This skill involves many characteristics, such as the early acquaintance with the bow and the scimitar, which were not unfrequently put into use against other tribes.

As far as religious matters are concerned, Arabs drew their religion from the Sabeian and Magian faiths. The former was believed by some to be derived from the teachings of Abraham (Peace Be upon Him), and it called for the belief in one God and a future state of reward and punishment, a God whose name was never pronounced as a sign of thorough sublimity. The latter, on the other hand, can be defined as addressing prayers to fire, which represented the symbol of the angel of light, Ormusd. Judaism and Christianity found their way at an early period to the peninsula and had their practices implemented by followers from various parts of the land (Irving 13).

Prophet Mohammed is the only child of Abdallah and Amina. The night of his birth was engulfed in wonders. His mother feels no pain and he speaks once he gets out to the world. His father dies before he reaches the third month and his mother has to take care of him. Sadly, she dies too when he was only six



years old leaving him to his grandfather's care. This latter dies and Mohammed spends the next period of his life with his uncle Abu Taleb. Abu Taleb takes him on a journey to Syria when Mohammed learns of extinct tribes like the Thamudites. This journey allows a meeting between him and a Christian monk in the city of Bosra. Bahira, as he is called, has a conversation with Mohammed upon which he discovers his intellectual capacities and eagerness for knowledge, especially in religious matters. The monk warns Abu Taleb to protect his nephew should the Jews meet him on the way back to Mecca (Irving 25).

Mohammed then gets involved in commercial activities in service for Cadijah, a Meccan widow. His companions in several expeditions bear witness of his integrity and trustworthiness as well as the quality of his manners in interaction and financial dealings. Cadijah, aged forty, considers all these attributes and offers her hand to him and they get married when he is twenty-five.

In the following years, Mohammed alienates himself from his people and their practices of idolatry, and tends to spend long times away from the city centre. He goes up the Mount Hara for the whole month of Ramadhan praying and contemplating the universe. One night, an angel comes to him with the first words of revelation and announces him the Prophet of God (Irving 32-35). Upon this incident, he hastens down to Cadijah and relates what happened. Cadijah reassures him and asks her cousin Waraka, who is knowledgeable in Judaism and Christianity, to have a say. Waraka asserts that this is the same angel who came to Moses. Thus, Mohammed's fears are abated and he assumes the new responsibilities of conveying the message.

The first steps of introducing the faith are taken in secrecy. Some people believe including his servant Zeid and his cousin Ali, but the overall number does not exceed forty. Once Mohammed starts proclaiming Islam publicly, he becomes subject to ridicule, violence, and hostility by the Koreishites. Some of his followers are so weak and unprotected that their only way to survive is to

leave Mecca to Abyssinia in the fifth year of the prophetic career. Others like Hamza, Abu Beker, and Omar, who are of strength and status, remain in the city. However, the situation soon became unbearable with the death of Abu Taleb and Khadija. Mohammed seeks refuge in Tayef, a neighbouring city, but he receives no better treatment than in Mecca. He leaves Tayef and spends the night in a valley where he prays and reads Quran. Upon hearing his recitation, a number of Gens accept Islam and return to convey it to their kind.

When ten years of the prophetic career elapse, Mohammed is taken on a night journey to Jerusalem then to the seventh heaven on a creature called “Al Borak” (Irving 71). In the course of this errand, he meets prophets and sees wonders that soften the bitterness of his worldly loss of wife and uncle and the denial of the Koreishites. When he relates the event the next morning, he is scornfully laughed at and considered insane.

Three years later, a plot is laid to put Mohammed to death as a punishment for the crack his teaching caused in the city. He leaves home the very same night of the execution, heading to Medina, around two hundred and seventy miles to the north. The travel is extremely dangerous for the Koreishite put a price of a hundred camels to whoever brings the Prophet alive or dead. He and Abu Beker take refuge in the cave of Mount Thor for three days and are protected by an acacia tree, a pigeon, and a spider. They proceed on the fourth day and carry on until they reach their destination, where the people of the city receive them graciously and honourably. The day of the arrival marks the introduction of the Arabian calendar, which coincides with the year 622 AD. (Irving 86-87).

Once established as leader, Mohammed links the Muslims coming from Mecca to the natives of Medina in a fellowship so solid that they should assist each other in weal and woe. He then gets married to Ayesha, aged nine, and his daughter Fatima gets married to Ali shortly afterwards.

During the second year of Hegira, Prophet Mohammed receives intelligence of a Koreishite caravan coming back from Syria and goes with three hundred and fourteen of his men to intercept it. When the leaders of Mecca hear of this, they hurry to rescue their money. The caravan, however, escapes the reach of Muslims. Yet, the two parties end up in the famous Battle of Beder. Despite being outnumbered by eight hundred to three hundred and fourteen, the Muslim army is victorious. The Battle of Beder marks the shifting point of Islam from a doctrine oppressed in patience to one of action and counteraction. It also demonstrates to the neighbouring territories that Islam has become a significant factor in the balance of power within the Arabian Peninsula (Irving 102-107). The next military encounter turns the tide for the Koreishites though it takes place in Ohod, which is an outskirt of Medina.

Triumph succeeds triumph ever after the defeat of Ohod but none is more valued than the taking over of his hometown. This takes place in the tenth year of Hegira when the Prophet marches in ten thousand soldiers and enters the city from all gates. Once in Mecca, he purifies the Caaba from symbols of idolatry with which it is crowded. Then he announces a general forgiveness from which only few were excepted.

Such is the biography presented by Washington Irving about the life of Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him). It should be mentioned also that besides relating a charmingly attractive story, he devoted a chapter to speculate the Prophet's character and career. Irving did not free it either from imagination or inconsiderate probabilities every so often, which calls into question the reliability of his book as a historical account.

### **2.3. Historical Inaccuracy**

Since history deals with the happenings of the past, historians have events at the heart of their inquiry. The more accurate the description of the incident the more reliable interpretations and judgements. Despite the immense knowledge of the East, which this book displays, accuracy applies poorly to Irving's work. More than once does the author either add or omit important

details from stories where they are critical to form logical interpretations, which presents interpretations given by Muslim historians as nonsensical. At other times, these modifications have less significance; they just make the biography different from those written before.

The chief problem in *Mahomet and His Successors* is the conspicuous want of references. Irving deals with the life of a person whom he was acquainted with only through books, and with a culture which is not his, yet he merely puts forward imaginative additions next to such phrases as “if Moslem traditions are to be credited” and “the Arabian legends”. The negligible minority which he cites includes what fits in the outline of his perception of the prophetic career, which will be dealt with later in this paper. The author states that “if Moslem traditions are to be credited, on the night of his (the Prophet’s father) marriage with Amina, two hundred virgins of the tribe of Koreish died of broken hearts” (Irving 16). Ibn Hisham’s book, though it is so inclusive of both sound and loose chains of recorders, grants no mention of this tragedy, nor does any other common Muslim reference including Abulfeda, whom Irving mentions in the foreword as the source his work rests on the most. The reader here is put in an either-or situation, established solely by the writer. If traditions are reliable, then you have to accept the fact that two hundred women died on the night of the wedding, which is far-fetched. Otherwise, they are not to be credited, and then why should they be trusted in any other matter, whether credible or not, more than they are in this one?

If, for the sake of argument, Muslim traditions are not of historical value, then they have to remain so during the whole work. A blatant aspect in this biography is the absence of this consideration in many a critical concept in the perception of Islam. Sometimes, as in the example mentioned few lines above, he hints at the questionability of Muslim sources, as if they are not the very same ones he is supposed to have relied on in the composition of *Mahomet and His Successors*, a composition which is the concretion of his views. The devaluation of Muslim traditions regarding the life of the Prophet (Peace Be

upon Him) would be, in this case, nothing other than backfiring the author's standpoint. At other times, he ascribes superstitions to non-Muslim writers whom he judges as "the good old Christian writers..." (40). A simple, laconic comparison is required to point out the writer's already-explicit partiality: the Muslim tradition, upon the author's word, is to be questioned first, and then its reliability remains shaken by exaggeration and religious zeal. Christian records, on the other hand, are good from the start, and then the content is to be examined. The inconsistency of Irving's analysis appears further in the diversity of his strategies to prove the legitimacy of his view. When there is room for various interpretations, he gives his own, not without underestimating others. When there is not, he either adds or omits to serve the purpose. When the two ways prove inefficient, he discards the events altogether as fables and legends put forward by zealots.

Yet, his research was not enough to keep him away from what specialists in the science of Hadith (chains of recorders) are almost in total agreement are fables. One of these stories, which the majority of Muslim people go into raptures at their mere mention, is what happened in the migration trip. The story says that when the Prophet and his companion sought refuge in the cavern of Thor, a pigeon and a spider came at the entrance to give the idea that no one was inside. Miraculous as the story already is, it would not have needed more details, but Irving had to add his touch with inserting the instantaneous springing up of an acacia tree on which the pigeon put its nest and eggs (83-84). In faithfulness to history, most specialists in chains of hadith like Al Albany describe the story as "weak" ("the story of the pigeon and the spider, Sheikh Al Albany"). Therefore, if the author's literary background excuses him to manipulate historical events for the sake of weaving a fascinating story, Irving, on this head, has absolutely no right to judge Muslim traditions of recording, for they only enrich his endeavour. If, on the other hand, he seeks precision and authenticity, then he has to either expand his bibliography for a multiplicity of perspectives or rid his approach of the biases that appear every now and then.

However, the question is not always about reliability, but rather existence. Some incidents, or parts of incidents, are non-existent in any Muslim source, let alone reliable ones. They can only be the traces of the comparative approach Irving, like many other Orientalists, feels obliged to juxtapose on the events in his biography. No example would be more to the point than the miraculous ability to speak upon birth (Irving 16). The circumstance that Christians and Muslims agree that Prophet Jesus (Peace Be upon Him) spoke once he came to the world is used as an attempt to discredit Muslim accounts and reduce the Prophet's career from prophethood to a false emulation of Christianity. The frequent reference to Christianity throughout the pages shifts from the source of Mohammed's teachings of patience, compassion, and good conduct in the first years of his mission to the principles he neglected in pursuit of what Irving perceives to be worldly gain.

The examples of Irving's shift from one course of argument to another are far from being uncountable. On the night the Koreishites planned to assassinate the Prophet (Peace Be upon Him), he was informed of the plot by the angel Gabriel according to well-grounded, reliable historians like Ibn Hisham (230) and Al Mubarakpuri (107). His cousin Ali slept in his bed and stayed in Mecca after the Prophet's migration in order to give back to people what he was intrusted with. Muslim historians say that the Prophet left from the front door of his house reciting the first verses of chapter thirty-six of the Quran that made the executors heedless to his escape (Abulfeda 126). These, from Irving's angle, are definitely a catchy addition to the story, but Irving seems to prefer probability to imagination in this case. He says that "it is probable that it (the warning) was given by some Koreishite, less bloody-minded than his confederates", and later "the most probable account is, that he clambered over the wall in the rear of the house, by the help of a servant, who bent his back for him to step upon it" (83). Again, never in historical accounts did authors mention such details of the Migration. In addition, this being "the most probable" explanation is by no means in Irving's authority to decide, for if the door is open for imaginative probabilities, there can be myriads of

interpretations besides the one he provides. The weakness in the author's presentation lies also in the reluctance he so evidently fails to veil. It is increasingly apparent from one page to the next that Irving does not have the historical happenings at the foundation of his premise. Rather, he mirrors a certain point of view in the events so selectively.

When it comes to Muslim call for prayer, Irving superfluously edits it. He omits four sentences for no stated reason. Moreover, he seems to understand the words Allah and *ilah* as always interchangeable. In Arabic, the word *ilah* is the equivalent of the word god in English. Allah, however, is equivalent to God. In Muslim faith, Allah (God) is the only *ilah* (god) worthy of worship. Therefore, when Irving writes that Muslims call for prayer saying "there is no God but God" (89), he inspires contradiction and simple-mindedness more than benefits the reader with a piece of information. Once again, the author's historical precision in transmitting particularities seems to desert him.

One of the most decisive points in the history of Islam is the famous Battle of Beder because it represented a split between two eras: the first period of persecution and suffering and the second one of power and triumph. To account for the Muslim victory despite being outnumbered, Irving contradicts some of the introductions from which he planned to draw conclusions. He describes Arabs of the desert as "light and meagre, but sinewy and active, and capable of sustaining great fatigue and hardship," therefore "requiring but little food, and that of the simplest kind" (9). The reasons of the Koreishites' defeat, for the author, are a hasty departure from Mecca and a poor supply of water and food in addition to fatigue and a split in the army (104). To complete the image, it should be mentioned that the number of Muslims was not more than three hundred and fourteen, two horses, and seventy camels mounted by turns. Their enemies had one hundred horses and seven hundred camels (Irving 101-102). The infantry according to Al Mubarakpuri made the whole army one thousand and three hundred, one thousand after the split (137). In these circumstances, which make the Koreishites three-to-one superior, Irving's explanation is an

antithesis of his view of Arabs physically and mentally in the first pages of the book.

If there is a chapter that expresses Irving's perception straightforwardly, it must be the one entitled "Person and character of Mahomet, and speculations on his prophetic career". In this part of the work, he claims that "according to accounts handed down by tradition from his (the Prophet's) contemporaries," he had "a vivid imagination, and an inventive genius" (209). There is absolutely no Muslim tradition that mentions the Prophet (Peace Be upon Him) as fanciful or inventive. Thus, the author here is criticised for the want of authenticating references in so serious a declaration. Whereas the lack of citations can be justified by Irving's endeavour not to make his presentation so thick and heavy on readers' eyes and minds, this positive probability is undeniably outweighed by the uncertainty of language and incongruity of information.

The author's condescension, which is overindulged athwart the pages, is arguably the aspect that resulted in undermining the historical integrity the most. For example, when Irving discusses the origin of the Quran, he mentions two Muslim views, with no reference again: the first one is ascribed to zealots and some learned doctors. It asserts its divine origin. Less devoted Muslims hold the second, which considers it a chaotic mixture of beauties and defects. In fact, in Islam, there cannot be two opinions that anyone who denies the divinity of Quran is a non-Muslim. However, knowledge deficiency is not the main concern at this stage. The point is that Washington Irving does not even bother to evaluate the two views. He states that "the truth is that the Koran as it now exists is not the same Koran delivered by Mahomet to his disciples, but has undergone many corruptions and interpolations" (211). "The truth" has to be backed up by evidence; Irving provides none, except the usual inclination toward probabilities to which he so unreservedly gives the air of authenticity with the introductory statement "the truth is".



## 2.4. Misconceptions and Misrepresentations

It is of no less importance, after pointing out the historical shortcomings of *Mahomet and His Successors*, to heed some of the main images Washington Irving seeks to frame to the readership in his work. Since the book is about Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him), the focus is to fall on the perception of the Quran, the Prophet and Islam.

Something Irving is seemingly unable to grasp about the Quran in the first centuries of Islam is that the Prophet used to recite it in different ways. This difference was not for the sole sake of amusement, but in concordance with the varieties of Arabic spoken by other tribes. The author sounds sure about the conclusion that the Quran underwent corruption and edition. What significance does this conclusion have if the Book was not revealed from God in the first place? If, otherwise, the book was indeed a revelation, then it should not be subject to human interference, for it declares, “We have, without doubt sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption)” (Chapter 15, verse 9). Moreover, Irving says that the Quran includes many “incoherencies, repetitions, and other discrepancies” (213), but does not afford any illustrations.

Irving then raises a number of questions that readers are so prone to ask themselves. If Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him) were not a prophet, why would he forsake all the worldly pleasures that he, being of so honourable a family, would have had? Why, in the pursuit of a religious doctrine, would he make himself and his friends subjects to ridicule, persecution, and banishment? Why would he, in many instances, prefer fear to security, hunger to provision, and hardship to leisure while he could have had it otherwise? Such serious questions Irving answers in contradiction to some passages of the very same biography. “In the absence of any worldly motives” he says, “we are compelled to seek some other explanation” (213). He admits the want of worldly drives few lines before he acknowledges them as dictators of the Prophet’s actions (214-215).

Irving accounts for the beginning of this career as the result of a self-deception that drove Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him) into his mission of religious reform through a continuity of ecstasies and trances. Once he gets to Medina and becomes the leader of a nation, these ecstasies seem to vanish from Irving's book and be replaced by the worldly motives he formerly denies. If worldly motives were his endeavour, they should have been there at the outset. After all, he spent thirteen years with no gain, but rather sufferance, loss, and pain. Why would he persevere despite the loss of his wife and his status in his hometown when no advantage was in sight? If, on the other hand, he has always been so violently subject to delirium, why would it stop at the threshold of Medina? If Irving is ever to be deemed successful in answering one of these questions, he falls in his own paradox in the next. Neither worldly gain justifies the beginning of the Mission nor does self-deceit account for later years.

Another perception that seems to prevail in Irving's biography is Islam as the "religion of the sword" (216). This generalisation needs to be specified from many angles. First, in terms of chronology, the establishment of the faith took thirteen years of patience and persecution, while the expansion, which Irving insistently ascribes to the sword, took ten years. Second, the first major battle when Muslims used "the sword" was Beder. It should be known that the author is oblivious to an important particularity when presenting the circumstances of the battle. The caravan led by Abu Sofian, which caused the ignition of this confrontation, was holding the belongings of *Almohadjirin* (the migrants), that were taken illegally after their leave. When these people wanted to anticipate it, consequently retrieve their money, the Koreishite advanced to the battle. On which basis are the Muslims blameable in using force to reclaim their possessions when the enemy is doing likewise?

In addition, Irving acknowledges the fact that Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him) was leading a city and its people. Thus, he is responsible for their protection and welfare. In the Battle of Ohod, Muslims again were on the defensive. How could the Prophet protect his city and its inhabitants from a

military conquest without the use of force? This was the same case in the third battle when the tribes besieged Medina; Muslims were defending their city. Moreover, even in the process of extending the geographical territories of Islam, people were given the choice of either embracing the faith or keeping their religion. If in the majority of battles Muslims were either seeking their rights or defending themselves, what pushed Irving to so generalised a misrepresentation?

## **2.5. Reasons for Controversy**

To account for the many inconsistencies and the direct contradictions in *Mahomet and His Successors*, three perspectives are suggested: literary, religious, and ideological.

### **2.5.1. Literary Reasons**

On the literary front, Washington Irving is widely known to be a Romantic biographer. Romanticism was an intellectual, artistic, and literary movement that developed towards the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Romantic literature emphasises the superiority of feeling and emotion over logic and analysis. It is also characterised by imagination, exaggeration, and the supernatural. During the time Irving wrote his books, Romanticism was at its zenith. Consequently, the largest portion of readers was always anticipating new characters and happenings in the newly published works. *Mahomet and His Successors* seems to fall in line with this tradition. Given the impossibility of creating a wholly credible story about the Prophet (Peace Be upon Him), Irving resorted to lean against previous works like Gustav Weil's 1843 *Mohammed der Prophet, sein Leben und sein Lehre* adding his imaginative touch to many subjects in the biography. The spirit of the time played a role in the many additions the author felt necessary to insert in order to captivate readers' attention to a book written about a person who had become a subject of debate ever since the day he called for monotheism in the Arabian peninsula.

The endeavour to shed all the light on this work can be illustrated by many passages in the book. The author from time to time discredits, discards, or devaluates what other historians and biographers said in the matter at hand. After that, as previously discussed, he puts forward his point of view as the true, appreciable one. This should not be understood as denying Irving the right of any biographer to have a say regarding different incidents. The interpretation of the variety of events that took place in Mecca, Medina, and elsewhere would have been acquitted of all blame or criticism had Irving backed it up with solid arguments. His presentation, however, gives the impression of disproportion between sticking to evidence and indulging the writer's literary loyalty, which is Romanticism in Irving's case. He could have stuck to the accounts given by Abulfeda, Ibn Hisham, and the like in the decisive detail that shape people's beliefs. Following this logic, the work would have been more reliable and imagination spared for new characters and even new events that do not interfere in the direct making up of the Prophet's perception. Being fair to Washington Irving obliges readers to read his work as a biography written by a Christian for a Christian readership. This consideration allows his book to escape some of the criticism cast upon it, at least in the literary sphere. On the other hand, it lessens its historical value and affects the writer's reputation as an outstanding biographer.

### **2.5.2. Religious Reasons**

Religiously speaking, Washington Irving descends from a Presbyterian family. Being a Christian writing about another religion, he seems to feel the obligation to give reference to Christianity every now and then, which is not a problem initially. Nevertheless, the weak point in his presentation is that he draws conclusions from the introductions he made. For example, when talking about the Prophet's childhood, he says that he had many conversations with Christians during his journeys to Syria (26). This background information, which has no supporting evidence, helps Irving later on in deducing the source of the extensive religious knowledge the Prophet had about other faiths,

Judaism and Christianity in particular. If the background of the information is partial, how is any deduction supposed to be neutral?

Another palpable aspect in *Mahomet and His Successors* is the analogy between Christianity and Islam in terms of language and teachings. Linguistically, Irving uses the term “Mahometan faith” to refer to Islam (42). This makes room for two interpretations: first, that Mohammed established Islam on his own, without any divine interference. To ascribe the faith to Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him), therefore strip it of divinity, would be a violation against the author’s faith in the first place. For, in terms of appellation, if “Mahometan” suggests that Mahomet made up his doctrine, what makes “Christian” any different? This however does not make much sense as to be Irving’s intention. The second possibility, which seems likely, is that Irving used the term as a mere concretion of his understanding of adherence that if you follow Jesus Christ (Peace Be upon Him) you are Christian, if you follow Mahomet (Peace Be upon Him) you are Mahometan and so forth. This analogy that the author rejoices in, might understate similarities in religious practices, which is not the case with Islam. Muslims do not call themselves Mahometans, nor do they consider Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him) the son of God, nor a god to be worshipped, as some Christians do Jesus (Peace Be upon Him).

The argument here is that the author’s beliefs are a factor that prevents him from being objective at several points. Straightforwardly, it can be said that any non-Muslim who writes about Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him) has no more than two options: either acknowledge his prophetic career as the fulfilment of a divinely received mission, therefore believe in his prophethood, or deny his mission and reduce it to a false mixture of previous faiths. Irving’s choice fell upon the second option. However, whilst reading the book, the indecisiveness is tangible in his conclusions. Whenever he discredits something about the prophet, he goes back and raises a question that undermines his logic. The sum of these considerations leads inevitably to the deduction that if Irving

was convinced that Islam was a false emulation of Christianity, his work was short of proofs to convince his readership, be it through consistency or credibility. Rather it so overtly exposes the bias he could not overlook when writing. This latter is exemplified when he accounts for the change in Muslim policies after their migration to Medina as a departure from Christian codes of conduct (99-100).

### **2.5.3. Ideological Reasons**

In terms of ideology, Washington Irving is part of the Orientalist tradition of writers, which has a framed picture of the Orient not likely to change. On this head, *Mahomet and His Successors* is far from authenticity. There are myriads of traces that indicate the Orientalist attitude and perception of the East as mysterious and distinct from the West. Irving speaks of “the oriental state in which they were received by Habib the Wise, seated under a tent of crimson, on a throne of ebony, inlaid with ivory and sandal-wood, and covered with plates of gold” (59). This image, alongside with many others, reinforces the existence of a place called the Orient with its particularities, such as extravagance and exoticism. In addition, throughout the text, the author uses a diction which does not transcend the previously written works about this region. He declares in the preface that the book does not “depart from the old English nomenclature of Oriental names” (4).

Such a declaration may account for the use of appellations like “Arab of the desert” (9), “Oriental state” (59), and “Saracens” (107). Nevertheless, as Said argues, Orientalism exerts many restrictions on western thought about the Orient. The biography under study is no exception to this assumption. Despite the many inconsistencies formerly presented and the unjustified uncertainty in the author’s arguments, he seems to be guided by conclusions more than background knowledge, consistency or soundness. Another Orientalist aspect is the epistemological authority with which Irving speaks about, represents, and judges the foundation of the Islamic faith and civilisation. On the other extreme, he belittles, nullifies, or discards altogether Arab and Islamic minds

and views. Factually speaking, Irving never lived in the Orient, nor was he so likely to have frequent meetings with Orientals. Rather, his discussion of the past was influenced by the circulating perception of the East laid about by preceding writers like Gustav Weil, Walter Scott, and Benjamin Disraeli during so long a history that stretches back to the time of Chaucer and Shakespeare.

In turn, Washington Irving contributed in the establishment of the modern American vision of Islam both on the social and political levels. The present attitude towards Muslims within and without the American frontiers bears witness to the survival of such views which see Islam and its adherents as inferior to Christians. On the other hand, the perception of Islam as “the religion of the sword” paves the way for political and ethnical polarization which are depended on to reach economic and strategic goals under the banner of fighting terrorism and spreading peace.

## **2.6. Conclusion**

Washington Irving’s *Mahomet and His Successors* is a thorough composition in which the author espoused evidence with imagination in the pursuit of a fascinating story. Though Irving succeeded in his endeavour to a far extent, the indulgence of his literary, religious, and ideological backgrounds proved to be to this work’s disadvantage. As much as the insertion of imaginative stories enriched the biography, they undermined the historical value of this piece of writing, putting it far from being a reliable record. Nevertheless, the many inconsistencies in Irving’s presentation of his standpoint did not prevent their survival to this very day.

## General Conclusion

Orientalism as a style of thought has always influenced the western vision of the East, its history, its cultures, and its peoples. It has many types and manifestations, especially in literature. Western writers from times of antiquity have shown a keen interest in deciphering what was called the mystery of the Orient.

As the interest in all what is oriental increased, authors sought distinction to give their pieces of writing the air of authenticity and originality, and to secure a considerable number of readers. This endeavour, rightful as it seems, resulted in an image of the Middle East and North Africa which is anything but accurate. The presentation of these lands' history, geography, and ideology became subject to manipulation and reproduction.

Part of this reproduction was dealing with Prophet Mohammed's career. This research presented two different traditions in writing the *Sirah* (the Prophet's biography). The first one is the Islamic recording tradition, which relies on the uninterrupted chain of recorders while the second is the Orientalist way of writing, which often indulges the authors background.

This study was mostly concerned with Washington Irving's biography *Mahomet and His Successors*. It shed light on some deficiencies in this book, mainly historical and conceptual inaccurateness. The historical issues revolve around the lack of reference and the insertion of many events which are purely the author's invention. In terms of conception of Islam, this study attempted to make up for the many gaps in Irving's interpretations of events.

The analysis of the biography helped in drawing the conclusion that many forces can be deemed responsible for the controversy in Irving's composition. These forces are the Romantic literary inclination, the Christian background, and the Orientalist vision of the author.

More importantly, this paper arrived at the deduction that *Mahomet and His Successors* grants any reader a plausible amount of knowledge about the



Arabian Peninsula and a primary acquaintance with the main character, with attractive descriptions and flowing narration. Nevertheless, it would be going too far to consider it a reliable historical account of the prophet's life, given the many fallacies aforementioned.

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