

**Martin Lings on Prophet Muhammad A Critical and Analytical review of his book, “Muhammad: His Life Based on Earliest Sources”**

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**Abstract**

Western scholars have been studying & writing about the life of Prophet Muhammad for many centuries. But there are few scholars in the west who have studied the life of Muhammad objectively. Martin Lings is included in the list of those famous western scholars. He has discussed different aspects of the life of Prophet Muhammad in his research work and writings. This research article aims to find out the life history, the contents of his book, and their historiographical analysis. After briefly mentioning his thoughts, this paper proves that he uses authentic and reliable sources along with literary language, combines socio-cultural analysis with the reading of scriptures and Hadith, and includes stories of miracles.

**Keywords:** Historiography, Martin Lings, Sirah

**Introduction**

The writing of history or historiography in the Muslim world starts from the desire to remember the Prophet Muhammad SAW. He is the most perfect human being in the minds of Muslims. His speech and behavior are in accordance with the contents of the holy book of the Qur'an. Coupled with

the assertion of the Qur'an; "His speech is nothing but a revelation revealed (to him)"<sup>1</sup> and also "Surely there has been in (himself) the Messenger of Allah a good example for you (that is) for those who hope (mercy) of Allah and (the coming) of the Hour and he many call upon God."<sup>2</sup>

In the classical period the works of Islamic history were colored with studies of the wars of the Prophet known as Maghazi. In the beginning, the writing of Maghazi was done solely for the benefit and legitimacy of the caliphs in applying various war policies. But later it developed into the writing of the life history of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) which not only discusses his wars, but also the life history more comprehensively from birth to death.

Sirah is a very important science in Islamic science,<sup>3</sup> and becomes the starting point for the development of biographical writing in Islamic historiography. The historians who pioneered the writing of Sirah were Urwah bin Zubair (d. 94 H),<sup>4</sup> Aban bin Uthman (d. 105 H),<sup>5</sup> Syurahbil bin Sa'ad (d. 123 H), Wahab bin Munabbih (d. 110 H),<sup>6</sup> and Ibn Syihab az-Zuhri (d. 124 H).<sup>7</sup> They became extinct in the swallow of time, what remains is only the quotations that we can find in the writings of the Sirah of later generations. The oldest generation whose texts can be found starts with Muhammad bin Ishak (d. 152 H), then al-Waqidi (d. 203 H), Muhammad bin Sa'ad (d. 130 H), and Ibn Hisyam (d. 218 H) who wrote his own Sirah using a lot of the Sirah by Muhammad bin Ishaq.<sup>8</sup>

#### Literature Review

Historical research usually doesn't really start from scratch, but rather depart from topics or problems that have been researched by generations of historians previous. The historians then bequeathed a set of knowledge which historians will study later through the readings. Literature review can be in the form of books or other sources according to the topic research. The authors have made observations to various places to find sources related to the research title which they have adopted. In the result similar literature to this research has been found in other languages of the world but no brief and comprehensive attempt have been made by a scholar on the current topic under discussion.

So this research article concentrates only on Martin Lings's life and his book on Sirah. Therefore, the authors believe that this research is original and worthy of reference followed up.

### **Research Questions**

The present study aspires to evaluate the life and contents along with approaches found in the book of Martin Lings focusing on the following questions:

1. What is the life history of Martin Lings?
2. What are the sources of his book?
3. What are the merits and demerits of the book?

### **Methodology**

The method or steps used in this study are historical methods, heuristics criticism, interpretation, and historiography. For this purpose primary reference such as Quran, Hadith, Sirah early writings & Martin Lings book have been consulted. Among the secondary material that are the reference for the research article are books, research articles related to the theme of the book. This article suggests that more analysis be made on other books written by Martin Lings and other western scholars.

### **Study Findings and Discussion**

#### **Brief Biography of Martin Lings**

Martin Lings was born into a Protestant Christian family in Lancashire, England in 1909.<sup>9</sup> Although he was born in England, Lings' childhood was mostly spent in the United States with his father. As a teenager, Lings returned to England and received a Protestant education in Bristol.<sup>10</sup> After that he continued his education at Oxford University until he received a Bachelor of Art (1932) and a Master of Art (1937) in English Literature. After graduating from Oxford, Lings taught English in Poland for a while, then moved to Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania until 1939.<sup>11</sup> Since he was still studying at Oxford, Lings has liked the writings of René Guénon, a convert and metaphysic thinker from France, and Frithjof Schuon, a spirituality expert from Germany who was living in Switzerland at that time. In January 1938, Lings left for Switzerland to meet Schuon. Since then Lings

has been Schuon's student and friend and visited him frequently while continuing to teach in Lithuania.

Frithjof Schuon himself is an expert on comparative religions who from a young age was attracted to Advaita Vedânta. Since it was difficult for him to study Hinduism in Europe and the teachings of Caste prevented him from becoming a Hindu teacher, Schuon studied other religions to satisfy his spiritual thirst.<sup>12</sup> Schuon later converted to Islam and became attracted to Sufism. In 1932 his search for a qualified spiritual teacher took him to Algeria.

It was through Schuon's guidance that Lings pronounced two sentences of the creed in 1938.<sup>13</sup> Lings soon had a new name: Abu Bakar Sirajuddin. In the following years, Lings became Schuon's student and friend. Lings also joined the Tarekat Alawiyah-Darqawiyah like Schuon, at that time he was 29 years old.

In 1940, Lings visited a friend who was René Guénon's personal secretary in Egypt. Not long after Lings arrived, his friend died in a traffic accident. In this country which is famous for the Nile River, Lings earns income from teaching English at the University of Cairo, while continuing to perfect his Arabic language skills and studying Islam with Guénon.

For more than a decade, Cairo was home to Lings. He teaches English at the University of Cairo and with his students produces plays every year. Shakespeare's plays (d. 1616) were Lings's favorite. To him, Shakespeare's poetry carried profound universal meaning.<sup>14</sup> In 1944 Lings married Lesley Smalley and they lived together in a village near the Pyramids. While living there, Lings was visited several times by Le Gai Eaton, a British citizen who grew up in Jamaica. With Lings' help, Gai Eaton pronounced the creed and received the name "Hasan."<sup>15</sup> Although Lings and his wife felt comfortable living in Egypt, fate said differently. They were forced to leave Egypt after anti- Eastern in the museum, including manuscripts of the Koran (in 1973 the section was merged with The British Library).

Several years after converting to Islam, Lings became a preacher. He lectured in various places, both in England and in other parts of Europe, and became

an avid writer. Among other things, Lings' writings discuss Sufism, literature, history, and the power of art. After retiring from his curatorial position at The British Museum, Lings lives peacefully with his wife in England. At the same time, Lings reproduces his seminal works. He wrote "Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources" in 1983. The Pakistani Ministry of Religious Affairs selected this work as the first winner in the Sirah Rasulillah writing competition in front of a jury of sirah experts.<sup>16</sup>

Lings' essay touches heavily on the discourse of Islam and Esotericism. From each of his writings can be found a unique combination: between a poet from the West and a Muslim from the East. Lings always wrapped his religious knowledge in English, not ordinary English, but used by a graduate of English literature from Oxford. The language is beautiful and delicious without forgetting the basic principles of a scientific work. This combination is also obvious in this book. Almost everyone who reads it is fascinated by its straightforward and artful sentences.

Lings' commitment to Islam carried on throughout his life. In his last days, Lings planted a tree near his house.<sup>17</sup> Lings was known as a plant lover, especially those with beautiful flowers to look at.<sup>18</sup> Lings died on May 12, 2005 at the age of 96.

Muhammad His Life Based on the Earliest Sources: An Introduction

Broadly speaking, the book is divided into 85 interconnected sections.<sup>19</sup> One by one the sections are ordered according to the sequence of events surrounding the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Almost all of them have a chronological tone, that is, they are based on the time sequence of events that took place, or can be translated into temporal periodization. The book begins with the story of Allah's promise to Prophet Ibrahim that he will soon have children and ends with the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) funeral procession.

The author divides the 85 sections of the book into 4 groups; Before the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, the life of the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca, the life of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina, and the theme of

Islam. The first three groups show a trend of temporal periodization, from one period to the next. Meanwhile, the last group tends to be thematic.

The group before the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) first described the story of Prophet Ibrahim and his family. Then proceed with the history of Qushay who founded the Quraish, Abdul Manaf, Hashim, and so on, the descendants of Qushay to Abdullah bin Abdul Muthallib; the father of the Prophet Muhammad. The life group of the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca tells the story of the Prophet's life while still in Mecca: from birth, prophecy, to leaving for emigration to Yathrib. Yathrib then changed his name to Medina and in this city the Prophet spent about Eleven years of his life. Those years were the contents of the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) life group in Medina, which also contained wars and the life of his family. Meanwhile, the Islamic theme group, which consists of six parts, all outlines of Islamic teachings, such as monotheism, worship and doomsday.

### **Analysis of the Book**

The first question of the historical method is the question of source. Historical sources, whether in the form of objects, or writings, or not both, can generally be said to be abundant. Although some places and times can be found that are difficult to find contemporary historical sources, such as the land of Arabia in the 6th and 7th centuries AD, where the Prophet lived. Fortunately, 1.5 centuries after the death of the Prophet, the book of Sirah began to appear and half a century later began to be found many works on hadith, which immortalize the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. But whether the books of Sirah and hadith are completely reliable?

Lings is aware of the above source issues. So from the beginning he was careful in choosing and selecting sources to link the life story of the Prophet Muhammad. It can be said that Lings uses only primary sources. So he gave this book a sub-title; his life based on the earliest sources, to further echo that his book has used truly reliable sources.

One might suspect that the English -born Lings was actually writing the history of the Prophet according to Western scientific tradition. We know that Western Europe is the birthplace and development of Scientific

historiography, with its character Leopold Ranke, where writing must be based on strong, authentic, and document-oriented facts.<sup>20</sup> But this premise is very weak. In fact, Lings does not adhere to Rankean's dogma that the only credible source is a document or artifact created at the same time as the event in question, or must have been created by eyewitnesses to the event.<sup>21</sup> Lings has come out of that grasp. Moreover, he did not include a single title of a book or a secondary source made by Modern Europeans in his bibliography of Muhammad's books.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the books of hadith, Lings also added other sources in the form of the book of early Sirah. Among them is Sirah Nabawiyah by Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham. This is the right choice because both are among the earliest biographical works of the Prophet Muhammad. Tariff Khalidi classifies Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham as the founding fathers of sirah. In addition to the two figures, which include the founding fathers are al-Waqidi, Ibn Sa'ad (d. 845), al-Baladzuri (d. 892), and ath-Thabari (d. 923). Khalidi assumed that these six writers were the printers of the structure of the sirah throughout history.<sup>23</sup> All of them referred to Lings as the source for his book, except Al-Baladzuri.

Lings several times quoted the work of Imam ath-Thabari, both Tarikh ar-Rusul wa al-Muluk and Al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an. But Lings rarely uses the book Tarikh Imam Thabari than Thabaqat al-Kabir Ibn Sa'ad as a reference.<sup>24</sup> Tarikh ar-Rusul wa al-Muluk Imam Thabari is quoted three times while Thabaqat Ibn Sa'ad is quoted fifty two times.<sup>25</sup> Sirah Nabawiyah Ibn Isaac is also quoted, even more often than Thabaqat. The three most frequently referenced books are Sirah Nabawiyah Ibn Ishaq, Thabaqat al-Kabir Ibn Sa'ad, and followed by Al-Maghazi Waqidi. The books of hadith that are in Kutub al-Sittah are also widely quoted. These are considered the most reliable in the Sunni Islamic tradition.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Uniqueness of the Book**

The first unique thing is in the author himself, namely Martin Lings. Born into a Protestant Christian family in England, Lings converted to Islam in 1938. By positioning himself as a Muslim, the biography of the Prophet he

wrote was different from the writings of other non-Muslim Westerners. Lings would not write the Prophet Muhammad as a person bloodthirsty, as Robert Spencer did in his book. He mentions: "... Jews of Medina were next to receive the wrath of Muhammad".<sup>27</sup> He also said that the Prophet Muhammad had ambitions to expand his territory and continue to increase his wives.<sup>28</sup>

Lings is clearly different from Spencer, and also different from Chase Robinson or Karen Armstrong. Chase Robinson doubts the validity of the data on the birth and youth of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).<sup>29</sup> For him the times before the Prophethood were less important and full of legends. Karen Armstrong, on the other hand, despite her sympathy for Islam and its prophets, remained a Christian.<sup>30</sup> Lings was different, for in addition to his status as a scholar from Oxford and London, he was also a Muslim who practiced Islam every day and loved the Prophet Muhammad with genuine love. .

Uniqueness in Terms of Content

While in terms of content, there are many uniqueness that can be found in the book. This uniqueness will only be discovered after the object is paired with other objects.<sup>31</sup>

Due to the influence of modern historical writing that integrates many branches of science, many modern sirahs contain socio-cultural analysis of the Arabs before Islam first. Muslim historians believe that an understanding of life in the environment and the time of the Prophet's birth, a kind of background chapter before entering into the core discussion, is essential, so that Muslims realize how much the presence of a Prophet is necessary at that time. Among such stylish writers is Shafi urrahman Al-Mubarakfuri. He began his book by explaining the geopolitical situation in the Arabian Peninsula around the 6th century AD. He explained the political forces in Yemen, Hira, Syria, and Hijaz.<sup>44</sup>

Likewise with the religion, economy, and culture of the Arabs should clearly be known to the reader. Western writers' books such as *The Venture of Islam*<sup>32</sup> also used to include descriptions of the conditions of pre-Islamic



Arabia. But between Muslim writers and them there are differences in terms of purpose.

Historians and Arabists such as Marshall Hodgson have attempted to explain pre-Islamic times empirically. What he needs is an almost quantitative data on the structure of society in political and economic terms. Hodgson looked for when the Arabs started raising sheep, when they started to establish cities, and how the interactions between individuals and between tribes.<sup>33</sup> While the main question in Al-Mubarakfuri's head was how the Arabs used to be. He really wanted to show that the Arabs used to have too lecherous morality: they were diligent at gambling, drunk, changing partners, and like to kill each other.<sup>34</sup> The explanation became so because it was confined by the notion that Arabia before Islam was Jahiliyyah, full of ignorance.<sup>35</sup> This understanding has been very widely circulated among Muslim intellectuals. So it can be concluded that there are striking differences between Muslim writers and non-Muslim writers in responding to the life of the pre-Islamic Arabs, namely the first to find out moral depravity and then to seek only social structures.

Lings was amazingly able to get out of the two grips earlier. In discussing the conditions of the pre-Islamic Middle East, if the average Muslim writer showed more moral depravity in society, then Lings focused more on the hanifs, namely a small part of the Arabs who preserved the teachings of Prophet Abraham by worshipping One God.<sup>36</sup> He does not wish to confine itself to matters of precision such as exact dates or typical Western formal-analytic analysis. What Lings did was follow the writing of the previous sirah in his own style. Thanks to the existence of the Hanifs, there are still people who worship Allah SWT.<sup>37</sup> As for Michael Cook, he promised that he wanted to write a biography of the Prophet according to Ibn Ishak's source only without any serious analysis.<sup>38</sup>

But Cook's explanation was still very dry, unlike Lings's lively and easy-to-consume style. This kind of thing cannot be found in other Western writings of the Prophet's biographies. Even if there is, usually with an interpretation that is too wild. Maxime Rodinson, for example, argues that it is politically

controlled by three people: Abu Bakr, Umar bin Khattab, and Sa'ad bin Ubadah. The three of them actually led the "state" of Medina.<sup>39</sup> It was said that Abu Bakr and Umar bin Khattab could have had such an impact on the mind of the Prophet because they married their daughters to the Prophet. The daughter who was also the Prophet's wife controlled his thoughts every day. For Maxime, getting married is about gaining influence, something that can be concluded after seeing many feudal societies.<sup>40</sup> In addition, Maxime believes more in the conception of Marxism than in the Prophet's hadith.

Furthermore, he indicated that there was one more player who wanted to enter Medina's political field, namely Ali bin Talib. At that time he was young, almost twenty years old when he migrated, and very excited. Ali was very loyal to the Islamic ideal and he managed to marry the Prophet's daughter by his first wife. Unfortunately, his political career was not smooth sailing because he had to face Abu Bakr's representative, namely Aisyah. We have seen how Ayesha sometimes rubbed against Ali's wife, Fatimah, and confidently expressed her jealousy in the presence of the Prophet. The feud between Fatimah (and Ali) and Aisyah was kept hot even after the death of the Prophet and then Abu Bakr. The climax was the Jamal War, in which Aisyah raised her sword to Ali.<sup>41</sup> For Maxime, marriage, especially marriage in the circle of the Prophet Muhammad, was merely a tug of war for political interests.

We must admit that in a family, the Prophet was a human being like us, who was pleased with the presence of a loyal wife and devoted children. It is true that some of the Prophet's marriages were aimed at strengthening relations and brotherhood with various tribes.<sup>42</sup> In fact, according to Husain Haekal, the Prophet married Hafsah solely because of Umar, not at all because of lust.<sup>43</sup> The kinship system can also explain why the Ghazwa e Ahzab took place. Most of the Muslims who are migrating to Medina was a relative of the Meccans. Even though faith had separated them, it would still be a disgrace to the Meccans if they killed their own relatives. So they chose to form alliances with the Bedouin tribes (ahzab)

in the desert. If their Muslim relative was killed by the hands of the Bedouins, then that would be more like them than by their own hands

Explanations for behavior that are so complex cannot be found in orientalist writings because they are modern, individualistic Europeans. Georg Simmel has explained how in the nineteenth century individualism became increasingly prevalent in Europe. Individualism that was originally based on uniqueness is now based on the extreme loneliness.<sup>44</sup> So what we find is a society separated from "society" and, even more so when marriage is only optional if one wants to have children, it will not be. can understand what kinship is. Humanism - that's another name for individualism in Europe - for Lings is a fantasy that will destroy the West, instead of advancing it.<sup>45</sup>

Another uniqueness of book the lies in the style of the author when he writes that generally speaking, whereas the Arabs were in favor of the man but against the message, the Jews were in favor of the message but against the man.<sup>46</sup> With this Lings not only tells the Prophet's life story in a descriptive-narrative, but also adds analytic nuances to his book. On average, Lings generalizes on the collective behavior of the Jews.<sup>47</sup> The Prophet's relationship with the Jews was ambivalent: at times friendly and sometimes hostile. When he came to Medina the Jewish leaders also agreed to the Medina Charter where each party agreed to live peacefully in Medina and would work hand in hand if there was an attack from outside. But then the Jews themselves turned traitor. So the Prophet Muhammad expelled two Jewish tribes, namely the Banu Qainuqa 'and Nadir. <sup>48</sup>

For Western writers such as Spencer and Maxime, the expulsion was simply the result of resentment in the Prophet's chest. Also that Prophet indeed planned to get rid of all of its political rivals, by being expelled or beheaded.<sup>49</sup> It cannot be denied that the Jews did compete for political supremacy with the Prophet. They used to dominate the market by playing monopoly.<sup>50</sup> The series of wars of the Prophet with Quraish and the infiltration of Muslim Meccaans, who on average were tenacious businessmen, in the Medina market clearly diluted their supremacy. Finally, some of them helped the Meccan military to finish the leadership of the Prophet. The Prophet who knew this

had to act decisively, so that peace in Medina could be maintained. Moreover, the Jewish merchants from Bani Qainuqa 'once presumptuously harassed a Muslim woman in the market.<sup>51</sup> Even the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself tried to kill a Jewish person, Bani Nadir.<sup>52</sup> So expulsion is a worthy punishment, considering that people at that time lived collectively or, to borrow Max Weber's term, a patrimonial society.<sup>53</sup>

Nagel wrote that the events of the Prophet Muhammad who were shaded by clouds when he went to Syria as legend. He also suspected the Prophet of wanting to have influence in the Quraish circles, something he would achieve by composing more legends. A different attitude was taken by Martin Lings, who believed in a cloud that always overshadowed the Prophet and saw that the Prophet was destined to rule all Arabs and non-Arabs.

### **Merits and Demerits**

Lings' keen sense of the family tree and tribal kinships of the Prophet adds the beauty of the book. His lofty style evokes the beauty of the language of the Quran and Hadith. At times Lings writes not only to narrate but to reflect and makes keen observations, particularly in analysis of the attitude of the Jews toward the revelations. It is also true that there are many problems with Lings' book. Lings is at his weakest in one of his final chapters entitled "The Degrees", which is replete with incautious interpretations or misreporting of Quran and Hadith. Certain readers grumbled about the masonic imagery they said they found in the book. Lings advocates applying the title of Furqan not only to the Quran but to "every revealed Scripture"<sup>54</sup>

The book has been criticized by a few scholars as well. Dr. Zahid writes about Martin's book that it "consists of a collection of the least reliable (and in many cases false and damaging) reports and stories about the Holy Prophet's."<sup>55</sup>

He further writes that "he has obviously used his judgment and discretion to give far more weight and credence to one type of source (the biographies) than the others (Quran and Hadith), and is also responsible for making particular selections, as well as omissions, from his own preferred sources".<sup>56</sup> Maulana Shibli Numani writes in his book about the earlier

biographies mostly consulted by Martin Lings that “unfortunately, these persons being reliable does not have any effect upon the reliability of their writings. These people were not witnesses of the events, and so whatever they relate is through narrators. However many of their narrators are weak in reporting and unreliable”<sup>57</sup>.

### Conclusion

Martin Lings is a Sufi Muslim scholar who offers new interpretations of the Sira of the Prophet. His beautiful and dense language along with the authentic and reliable sources adds the value of the book. He trusted on authentic and reliable sources and wrote the biography in a beautiful and dense language. He combines socio-cultural analysis with scriptural understanding of the scriptures and hadiths and recognizes the importance of direct and indirect causes with proper contextualization, and not does not hesitating in publishing stories about miracles and wonders in the Prophet when they were recognized by the majority of Muslim historiography. Lings is completely different from other Western writers and his book is the best book of best Sirah. He may be defended for his demerits.

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<sup>2</sup> al-Ahzab 33:21

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<sup>4</sup> Urwah bin Zubair bin Awwam, including the tabi'in generation. It is possible that Urwah died in 94 AH.

<sup>5</sup> Aban bin Uthman bin Affan was the son of the third caliph, Uthman bin Affan. He died during the time of the Caliph Yazid bin Abdul Malik.

<sup>6</sup> Abu Abdullah Wahab bin Munabbih came from Yemen.

<sup>7</sup> Syihab az-Zuhri was a student of Urwah bin Zubair and Aban bin Uthman. He died in 124 A.H.

<sup>8</sup> Ajid Thohir, *Sirah Nabawiyah: Nabi Muhammad Saw dalam Kajian Ilmu Sosial-Humaniora*, (Bandung: Marja Publisher, 2014), 32.

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- <sup>47</sup> Lings, *Muhammad: His Life*, 125, 229.
- <sup>48</sup> Lings, *Muhammad: His Life*, 160, 203.
- <sup>49</sup> Rodinson, *Mohammed*, 172-174; Spencer, *The Truth*, 100-101.
- <sup>50</sup> Mubarakpury, *Ar-Raheeq* ,225-230.

<sup>51</sup> Lings, Muhammad: His Life, 161.

<sup>52</sup> Lings, Muhammad: His Life, 203-204.

<sup>53</sup>. See Peter Burke, History and Social Theory, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1992). 30-31.

<sup>54</sup> G.F.Haddad, "A Critical Reading Of Martin Lings' Muhammad ﷺ: His Life Based On The Earliest Sources -"

[https://www.livingislam.org/ir/d/crml\\_e.pdf](https://www.livingislam.org/ir/d/crml_e.pdf)

<sup>55</sup> Dr. Zahid Aziz, "Review Of a New Biography of Holy Prophet Muhammad". Accessed: 27 May 2019. <http://www.naseeb.com/villages/journals/martin-lings-book-review-of-the-holy-prophets-life-18153>

<sup>56</sup> Aziz, "Review Of a New Biography".

<sup>57</sup> Maulana Shibli Numani, Sirat an-Nabi (Lahore: Idara islamiat, 2002), 1/49.