Review of Ayman S. Ibrahim, *Muhammad's Military Expeditions: A Critical Reading in Original Muslim Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 379., £55.34 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0197769171.

For readers unfamiliar with the foundational genres of Islamic texts, there are different groups of writings that are authoritative in varying degrees for Muslims. There is the *Qur'an* – the highest authority in Islam, followed by the *hadith* – the oral traditions depicting the example or sunnah of Muhammad. There is also the *sira* – biographies of Muhammad, the *tarikh* – history, and the *maghazi* that examine Muhammad's military expeditions. All of these five genres overlap with each other, especially the *hadith*, *sira*, and *maghazi*. This book review concerns the *maghazi*.

Ayman Ibrahim's *Muhammad's Military Expeditions: A Critical Reading in Original Muslim Sources* is the first modern academic study that examines all of Muhammad's military expeditions. It is unique, a landmark publication, thoroughly informed and informative, and demonstrates mastery over primary and secondary sources. *Muhammad's Military Expeditions* "focuses on the various ways early Muslim historians described Muhammad's military campaigns." (2) It examines the historiographical traditions of the *maghāzī* of Muhammad, military campaigns that were led or commission by him. The primary unique contribution of the book is bringing together Arabic Muslim sources with numerous Muslim secondary studies and non-Muslim studies to provide the definitive account, in a single volume in English, of Muhammad's *maghāzī*.

Ibrahim explains how the *maghāzī* are central to Islamic historiography, most especially regarding the life and career of Muhammad. "The earliest documentation of Islam's origins has Muhammad's *maghāzī* at its core, portrayed with awe and admiration". (11) Thus, this book and the topic it discusses is crucial to a Muslim understanding of Muhammad.

After introducing the book and explaining his methodology in Chapter 1, Chapters 2 through to 7 discuss different chronological and thematic groupings of Muhammad's *maghāzī*. Chapter 2 examines four incursions and four raids for the first 2 years of Muhammad's career after *hijra*. Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to Muhammad's confrontations with, and eventual conquest of, the Meccan pagans, and includes the battles of Badr and Uḥud (Chapter 3) and the Battle of the Trench, the raid of Ḥudaybiyya and the conquest of Mecca (Chapter 4). The remaining chapters are thematic, and within each theme, chronological. Chapter 5 examines Muhammad's confrontations with the Jews in Medina and two Jewish settlements. The final two chapters study the *maghāzī* against the Bedouins, leading to Muhammad's increased hegemony in Arabia (Chapter 6), and the military incursions against the Byzantine Empire and its allies (Chapter 7).

A key contention is that the *maghāzī* are not a record but a representation of the events they describe. Ibrahim examines these texts "for the sake of the stories recorded in them, not for the sake of the events described in these stories." (Uri Rubin, cited p2) Citing Andrew Rippin, "The actual 'history' in the sense of 'what really happened' has become totally subsumed within later interpretation and is virtually, if not totally, inextricable from it," as "the records we have are the existential records of the thought and faith of later generations." (Rippin, cited page 2) Thus the focus is not on history but historiography, not what happened in the past but what has been written about the past. (46)

Ibrahim informs readers of two groups of scholars, the revisionists and traditionalists. The former do not trust the historical reliability of the Muslim sources while the latter believe a historical kernel of genuine memory can be deduced from the sources. (47) Ibrahim's repeated contention is the *maghāzī* reports are the product of medieval authors, written to

meet the needs of the Muslim community of their time, by projecting back into history a vast number of traditions and accounts. As such these traditionists do not report the *maghāzī* but author them. Ibrahim argues for several different goals these traditionists had.

The purposes of the *maghāzī* reports are (i) moral and religious, (ii) sociopolitical, (iii) Qur'anic exegesis, and (iv) juristic, and these are frequently blended together. Consider the example of the 'weepers'. These are Muslims who could not join the army because of illness, old age, or poverty. Citing an example of the latter from Ibn Hishām's *sira*, these Muslims stayed back from the military expedition, "their eyes flowing with tears for grief that they had not the wherewithal to meet the expense of the raid." (cited 305–306) Part of the same military raid to Tabūk, reportedly Muhammad's final expedition, adds a related theological lesson: whoever contributes to equipping the Muslim army will be granted paradise (304), for "donating money to prepare soldiers is a virtuous act." (305) Other moral-religious lessons from the homiletical accounts of this raid include "persevering under tough circumstances for the sake of defending the faith, marching in jihad against non-Muslim enemies… and distinguishing between honest and disingenuous Muslims." (300) As such, these accounts are frequently 'theological parable[s]', (304) rather than historical reports, designed to communicate the moral-religious lesson of the virtue of fighting in Allah's "path or for his cause." (88)

Ibrahim observes numerous examples in which traditions have been designed to exegete the Qur'an, such as in the accounts of the Battle of Badr and al-Khandaq. Ibrahim summarises: "Narrators, as we repeatedly encounter, frame the historiographical narrative to exegete the Qur'ān, precisely establishing an interpretation and scriptural context linked to Muhammad's *Sīra*." (257) Where some Qur'an passages are obscure in meaning, these storytellers provide narratives which illuminate the unclear. (312) Sometimes this produces jarring narratives. Some stories that depict Jews negatively were "fashioned to exegete verses in the Qur'ān". (328) In one specific example, during Muhammad's confrontation with the Jewish Banū Qurayẓa tribe, he reportedly shouted at them "You brothers of apes." (227–228) Ibrahim comments: "these historians shaped the tradition to serve as an exegetical tool, especially as the Qur'ān itself includes verses claiming that Allah punished some evil Jews by transforming them into apes (Q 2:65; 5:60; 7:166)." (228)

Foremost among the moral-religious lessons is exalting and proving Muhammad's prophethood. The *maghāzī* report Muhammad carrying out numerous miracles and delivering supernatural prophecies. Muhammad is said to have softened rocks with his spittle to aid trench digging, multiplied a handful of dates to feed thousands, performed miracles in the course of battle, and miraculous provision of fresh drinking water. (152, 307, 159-160) However, the accounts are not uniform. Al-Waqidi (747-823), who writes about the water miracles, offers a contradictory report that Muhammad searched repeatedly for water without success until he discovered some at al-Kharrār. (160) The many miracle reports are problematic for contradicting the Qur'an, for "the Qur'ān explicitly highlights that Muhammad's only 'miracle' was the revelation of the Qur'ān (Q 6:37; 11:12; 13:7; 17:59; 28:48; 29:50– 51)." (4) The medieval *maghāzī* reports were written in part to promote Islam in a religious milieu in which miracle-working prophets were the norm. "The narrators appear to have been under pressure to detail proofs for Muhammad's prophethood. They desired a specific portrayal of Muhammad who performed wonders and was supported by metaphysical signs— so they designed one." (118) Regarding al-Waqidi's competing tradition regarding water, a major motif in Ibrahim's monograph is the highlighting of competing traditions.

The *maghāzī* Ibrahim describes in each chapter have competing and often contradictory reports about the same events. The most frequent reason Ibrahim gives for this is political loyalty and messaging. While sometimes this pertains to the Sunni-Shi'ite polarity, far more often, "anti-Umayyad authors formed traditions for sectarian purposes." (52) Earlier Umayyad-era reports often extolled the virtues of figures tied to the Umayyad caliphate. When the Abbāsids overthrew the Umayyads new layers of traditions were authored according to the changing sociopolitical needs, often resulting in the rewriting of stories. (221) Abbāsid-era historians elevated the status of persons central to Abbāsid legitimacy while also portraying key Umayyad figures as weak and impious. (326) Crucially, evidence of both sets of traditions survive in the *maghāzī* literature. Consider Abū Sufyān ibn Ḥarb, a leader of the Quraysh of Mecca and later Umayyad leader.

Muhammad initiated a *sariyya* (military incursion) against the Meccan leader and Umayyad figure Abū Sufyān. Abbāsid-era traditions portray Abū Sufyān as weak, cowardly, and afraid. (123) Ibrahim explains that traditionists chose Abū Sufyān as a representative Umayyad figure in order to delegitimise the Umayyad dynasty. Abū Sufyān is typically contrasted with Muhammad's uncle Al-ʿAbbās ibn ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, whose positive portrayal supports "ᶜAbbāsid claims for power." (185) When Muhammad called for Abū Sufyān's conversion to Islam, he expressed doubt. In response, al-Abbās shouted, "Woe to you! Recite the testimony of truth before, by God, your head is cut off!" (189) Given the threat of losing his head, Abū Sufyān "submitted, surrendered, and accepted Islam by openly reciting the *shahāda*." (189) While this became the official Abbāsid account of Abū Sufyān's conversion, pre-Abbāsid accounts portray his conversion to Islam as "a genuine process of questioning and contemplating Muhammad's prophethood and his message." (190) Ibrahim treats Abū Sufyān as a literary figure constructed to promote Abbāsid hegemony against the Umayyads. (72) He traces this same phenomenon with other figures in the *maghāzī* also, and concludes: "Muslim historians were unable to relinquish their religious sympathies or political inclinations in forming their narratives. They not only report stories— they author them." (326)

Ibrahim discusses the traditional apologetic perspective that the *maghāzī* "were never offensive in nature", were conducted primarily in order to spread Islam, and are rightly understood as a mercy in freeing people from political oppression and religious idolatry. (14) For example, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal (1888–1956), former Egyptian Minister of Education, contended "Muhammad loathed *al-qitāl* (fighting) and preferred peace *ṭūl ḥayātih* (all his life)." (12) Ibrahim's account adroitly repudiates this claim. Not that Ibrahim is adjudicating the peacefulness of the historical Muhammad. The book concerns the Muhammad of the *maghāzī* traditions, whom Ibrahim sharply distinguishes from the historical Muhammad, about whom we can know very little since "there is no feasible way to identify the historical Muhammad in the tendentious tradition." (322) Regarding motives, the *maghāzī* report that vengeance and financial gain were uppermost. (106) The exception is Muhammad's commissioning of Khālid to lead a Muslim army to the Banū Jadhīma to proclaim Islam. (248) More typical is Ibrahim's remark that Muhammad "was not launching this battle as Allah's prophet, but as a tribal leader seeking resources and power." (107)

Muhammad repeatedly initiated expeditions against the Meccans. Citing W. Montgomery-Watt: "The chief point to notice is that the Muslims took the offensive." (89) Ibrahim suggests this continues as military expeditions move further south from Medina toward Mecca, (154) before expanding outward to the Bedouin tribes and north toward the Byzantine Empire (Chapters 6 and 7 respectively). Ibrahim summarises "Traditionists cherished and advanced a memory of Muhammad as a war initiator and a caravan interceptor. Seizing and distributing the spoils after battles is a repeated theme in the tradition." (326) This depiction, avers Ibrahim, would have appealed to the intended medieval audience even though it is ill-

fitting with the modern pluralist world. Ibrahim shows that through all the seventy-four expeditions (by al-Waqidi's count) investigated, "Muhammad is depicted as completely dedicated to raiding without ceasing." (327)

Muhammad's Military Expeditions is clear, accessible, and persuasively written. It demonstrates an encyclopaedic knowledge of the *maghāzī* themselves as well as relevant secondary literature from both Arabic Muslim and Western academic sources. It is clearly structured, thoroughly referenced, and comprehensive. The book has no substantial weaknesses but two slight drawbacks. First, the writing style is occasionally repetitive. In signalling a point, establishing that point, and then recapping that point, clarity was purchased potentially at the slight cost of repetitiveness. Second, Ibrahim is frequently forthright that the *maghāzī* traditionists authored the reports themselves. Of specific reports Ibrahim states, "The account is clearly fictional" (213), and speaks of "literary fiction" (151, 223, 291) and "forged literary characters." (227) To this major note Ibrahim also plays the following minor note. Ibrahim often refers to a common pool of memories drawn on by traditionists, albeit selectively, in order to advance and suppress different agendas, thereby resulting in competing narratives. (127, 134, 162, 205, 227, 328) How does this pool of memory relate to actual history? Ibrahim's claim that *maghāzī* narratives are "a medieval religious memory, designed after conquering many lands and projected back in history for ideological purposes" suggests non-identification. (153; cf. 140) Where, then, does this shared pool of memory come from? Greater clarity on this point would be welcome.

In sum, *Muhammad's Military Expeditions* is the definitive publication in English on the *maghāzī* and significantly contributes to *maghāzī* scholarship. (324) It is a landmark publication and essential reading for any student or scholar examining this subject.

Rev Dr Adam Dodds
Senior Lecturer in Systematic Theology
Alphacrucis University College
Brisbane, Australia