

# The Warrior Prophet: Muhammad and War

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JOEL HAYWARD

Joel Hayward's *The Warrior Prophet: Muhammad and War* (Claritas Books, 2022; I only have access to the Kindle version) is an important recent addition to the English language Sira literature. The book, erudite and amply referenced throughout, investigates the Prophet Muhammad's motives for waging jihad against Mecca after his flight to what became Medina. Professor Hayward, a specialist in military history, sets out to explain the well-established facts of the Prophet's martial career: In his ten-year stay in Medina, the Prophet sent out some 80 expeditions, himself leading some 27 of them, of which about 9 saw significant combat. These campaigns led to his conquest of Mecca and the rest of Arabia, culminating in numerous encounters with the Arab tribes allied to the Roman Empire in Syria. A challenge for historians has been that whereas the Qur'an, Hadith, and the Sira materials—the three early sources for Hayward's history—furnish a great variety of microscopic detail about these battles, the events are so interlocked that an observer trying to isolate a clear and sufficient motive for the initiation of hostilities against Mecca faces a challenge. Hayward's book is an attempt to answer that challenge.

Hayward convincingly argues, on the one hand, against depicting the Prophet as acting merely in defense, as many modern Muslim authors

do, and, on the other, against his depiction as an aggressive warlord instrumentalizing religion for the sake of booty as many hostile authors do. His own conclusion, however, leaves a lot to be desired, as I argue below. Hayward shines as a military historian, evaluating and correcting the factual claims and apologetic approaches of both modern and occasionally premodern authors, but falters significantly in key moments while interpreting historical texts and addressing religious and theoretical questions, and hence, ultimately, in offering a compelling answer to the central problem of the study.

The book is divided into three main sections. The first lays out the theoretical claim, entitled “Raiding as a Norm: The Best Explanation for the Initiation of Warfare.” The second and the bulkiest section tries to substantiate its thesis through an account of the Prophet’s battles, aptly titled “Pitches Battles and Attacks on Settlements.” Finally, the third delves into “Muhammad’s war with the Jews.”

In the following, I evaluate the thesis of the book by focusing on its framework and conclusions, thus documenting my critiques of this otherwise rich and bold work. In the interest of space, I limit myself to substantiating my critique of the main thesis and avoid delving into an extensive critique of the methodological problems that seemed to underlie it. It bears noting, in this vein, that Hayward’s treatment of early and classical Islamic sources on the Sira, the greatest source of detailed insight and expert knowledge in my view, is inconsistent and lacking. He dismisses them as driven by religious and hagiographic interests, as “theologians and jurists,” in contrast to his own secular, professional approach (26-7). Any serious student of Islamic intellectual history is aware of the meticulous detail in which every act of the Prophet was studied in different fields, as well as the enormous amount of fabrication around his life, and given the variety of perspectives and interests involved, no sweeping judgment holds for all of them. Furthermore, since the Prophet was unquestionably the role model in the premodern period and the Muslims a confident elite, authors had no obvious reason to feel that they had to play up or down his engagement in military action. Complex biases are inevitable in storytelling, of course, and recent academic scholarship, which does not make its way into

Hayward's discussion, has produced vast literature debating such points. Finally, whereas Hayward does a good job critiquing certain popular hagiographies of the Prophet, the bulk of academic writing on the subject in the Arabic and English languages is left out.

The first section offers a refreshing and compelling critique of a number of fashionable trends in modern Sira writing by both Muslim and non-Muslim writers. Muslim authors tend to portray the Prophet's warfare as primarily defensive and for peacekeeping purposes. Uncritical, apologetic summaries of the early sources such as Ibn Hisham and Al-Waqidi, ignore recent scholarship, and attribute anachronistic actions to the Prophet, such as claiming that he founded a modern state and modern bureaucracy with its specialized departments ("department of finance" etc.), notions which Hayward handily dispels. Popular non-Muslim Western authors fare even worse, as they too are often anachronistic, unaware of or unconcerned with primary sources, and build a narrative based on popular prejudices.

Contemporary popular religious biographies of the Prophet especially come in for sustained criticism. In its desire to impute perfection to the Prophet, the widely read *The Sealed Nectar* often makes anachronistic observations and unsubstantiated claims intended as praise. It claims, for instance, that the Prophet won every battle he fought (this would be hard to square with the Battle of Uḥud and the Siege of Tā'if), never felt fear, and never invoked God's curse against his opponents, thus effacing his historical personality as amply recorded in the early sources. Such narratives, furthermore, tend to detach him from his pre-Islamic Arabian context, thus obscuring his true challenges and achievement. For instance, it is implied that he immediately took control upon arriving in Yathrib and established a state. Hayward observes, correctly in my view, that in reality Medina was not even a unified city with a meaningful political authority until some five years after the Prophet's hijra.

On the key question of why the raids began, Hayward finds most modern Muslim accounts apologetic and unpersuasive. One common account has it that the raids "were not military campaigns," but rather, "political campaigns, or simply religious excursions." Meanwhile, Mubarakpuri makes the "fanciful" claim that they "were survey patrols

delegated to explore the geopolitical features of the roads... and building alliances with the tribes nearby” (43-4). This apologetic narrative is in Hayward’s view the victim of a modern belief that violence is only ever legitimate in the case of self-defense. On the same grounds, Hayward rejects Juan Cole’s radically revisionist account which is dismissive of the three early sources (the Qur’an, Hadith, Sira), yet also arbitrarily uses them to string together a fantastical narrative, painting a picture of the Prophet as a pacifist, declaring his expeditions as “exploratory journeys” in “search for rural allies” (44). A more common apologist account, however, is exemplified by Reza Aslan’s work, which claims that “perhaps the most important innovation in the doctrine of jihad was its outright prohibition of all but strictly defensive wars... Badr became the first opportunity for Muḥammad to put the theory of jihad into practice... Muḥammad refused to fight until attacked” (174). This account ignores the series of events in which it was the Muslims’ activity that prompted the Quraysh to attack.

The least bad explanation among modern Muslim apologists, in Hayward’s view, seems to be that these raids aimed to recover the property the immigrants had lost when they were driven out of Mecca. He rejects this argument partially on the basis that the Prophet never justified the raids in this way. Instead, the relevant reports in Ibn Hisham, Waqidi and Ibn Sa’d have it that before the Battle of Badr the Prophet simply stated, “This caravan of the Quraysh holds their wealth, and perhaps Allah will grant it to you as plunder.”

Of the popular accounts, the only one that Hayward finds reasonable is Martin Lings’: “God had declared war on Quraysh... [the Prophet] was obliged to attack them by every means in his power... until they submitted to the Divine Will... But for the moment there could be no question of anything but raids” (44). Hayward does not make much of this sole quote from Lings on the matter, failing to note that there is surprisingly enough here to contradict his own explanation, to which we now turn.

## “Raiding as a Norm”

Hayward’s own explanation for the raids that inaugurated the Prophet’s jihad is surprisingly simple. It is captured by the title of the first section

of the book: raiding was the norm in Arabia, hence morally neutral, like taking a trip to the grocery store, plain and simple.

Finding no explanation for raiding in the Qur'an and Hadith and unsatisfied by modern apologetics, by process of elimination, Hayward arrives at the following argument: "The answer seems to lie in the acceptability, indeed esteem, attached to raiding throughout Arabian society. Far from being seen as an extraordinary activity... raiding was very much an ordinary part of the fabric of society" (58). Hayward insists that the Muslims' passion for booty was indisputable and not in any way deemed immoral. As he says, "Muhammed very rationally chose raiding—which was certainly not then understood as immoral—as a means of advancing goals because it brought significant benefits, conformed to seventh-century norms and usefully fulfilled various societal expectations" (40). Indeed, for "[a]ny community that wanted to expand its influence and improve its living standards, the raids made a lot of sense" (41).

Hayward repeats this claim throughout the text but rarely questions its implications. This innovative but in the final analysis entirely unsupported assertion remains unharmed in his journey through a vast array of sources premodern and modern, for anyone who disagrees (and nearly everyone does) is deemed apologetic and hagiographic. This works for Muslim scholars, but hardly for others not particularly interested in saving the Prophet's image, as we shall note. Hayward's own explanation, however, too has an ideological tendency, which is to prove that the Prophet was not engaged in religious violence, but rather moved purely by the secular concern of helping his penniless followers survive. In the following, we call into question this tortured thesis.

## Was raiding the norm?

Raiding, presumably involving taking a tribe's property and killing for the purpose, was morally neutral, even honorable in pre-Islamic Arabia. This key idea on which Hayward's edifice is built is contradicted by the spite the Arabs felt for the highway robbery of tribes like Banū Ghifār

(including the Prophet's own surprise at Abū Dharr's interest in Islam, given his dishonorable tribe). Hayward's claim that "raiding was a norm" in Arabia cannot be established without reference to the central question of alliance and hostility between tribes. Raiding, although commonplace in pre-Islamic Arabia, is a less useful way to understand the dynamics of the Arab tribes than an anarchic system of intricate alliances and rivalries akin to the modern realist model of International Relations. Such a system has great powers or hegemons (like the Quraysh) as well as some rogue tribes (like the Banū Ghifār). But since our concern is the Prophet's conduct, who departed from the Arabian norms on any number of issues, we will set this question aside and hone in on the Prophet's own conduct of war.

## There is no evidence that the Prophet raided without prior hostility

If the Prophet considered raiding perfectly normal according to the presumed Arab custom, one would be able to produce instances in which the Prophet raided a caravan solely for the sake of the loot. Hayward himself notes that no such instance has been recorded. He notes that the Prophet's raiding had been "directed solely against the caravans of the Quraysh," with the exception of one punitive campaign against a man who had raided Muslims (53-4). If raiding were a normal affair as Hayward claims, why would the Prophet raid and provoke the single most formidable power in Arabia rather than going after smaller tribes that could not retaliate?

Hayward's thesis seems to heavily rely on an "argument from silence," arguing that the sources do not give the motive for the raids because they were widely understood in the Prophet's society. For instance, he writes "It (a previously quoted hadith) seems to assume that the purpose of raiding was widely understood and did not therefore need to be stated" (55). While this may be true of the hadith evidence provided by Hayward, it is not the case for the Qur'an.

## The Qur'an gives a clear *casus belli*: injustice and religious obstruction

Hayward mentions the relevant Qur'anic verses stating the *casus belli*, the cause of war, but fails to appreciate how it directly contradicts his own conclusion. Verse 22:39 in Sura al-Hajj permits Muslims to fight the Meccans who had wronged them for their pure monotheism, and 2:217 in al-Baqara gives even more detailed reasons for the Muslims' right to fight. In both verses, two types of reasons for war are given: *injustice*, which even a non-believer could understand, and obstruction of the *religious mission*, and relatedly, access to the Holy Mosque. The next verse in Sura al-Hajj states that the Quraysh would continue to fight the Muslims until they would turn them away from their religion. In other words, even in the absence of an immediate threat the Quraysh still presented a long-term existential threat.

What is surprising is that Hayward lists these verses but does not consider them drivers of the Prophet's war against the Meccans. Hayward suggests in passing that this earlier persecution of Muslims in Mecca, mentioned repeatedly in the Qur'an as the reason for initiating jihad, should be somehow dismissed as the real explanation for the raiding activity because, he claims, the persecution no longer continued after the migration: "With Muḥammad and his cadre now in Medina, there was no longer any active Quraysh armed pressure upon it. There were certainly no Quraysh attacks. There was not even ongoing persecution of Muslims..." These verses, Hayward further claims, justified attacks "not against the Quraysh themselves, but against their vulnerable caravans" (56). These claims are misleading and overwrought: the Medinan Qur'an continues to speak of the persecution of the weak Muslims in Mecca throughout (4:75; 4:97-8), persecution evidenced by Abū Jandal on the occasion of Ḥudaybiyya. Nor is there any reason to think that permission was given only to attack the caravans rather than make jihad against the Quraysh in retaliation for its wrongs and its opposition to Islam.

Furthermore, Hayward contends that the *casus belli* given in these verses cannot be called "defensive, at least not in the ordinarily understood meaning of the word" (55), since there was no army marching on

Medina. This is correct, but irrelevant to his case, for whether or not we call it defensive, this *casus belli* has nothing to do with raiding as a norm or raiding as an economic activity, and everything to do with punishing the Meccans and taking control of the Sacred Mosque in order to establish the monotheistic message that the Prophet preached.

The author's singular focus on raiding is also puzzling given in an article published four years prior to the work in hand, he noted commenting on the aforementioned verse from Sura al-Hajj (22:39) that such verses "reveal very clearly that Allah's permission to undertake armed combat was not for offensive war, but *self-defence* and *self-preservation* when attacked or oppressed."<sup>1</sup> Raiding, in contrast, is as offensive a type of warfare as one can imagine. The author's view seems to have notably evolved in the current volume, namely, that the Prophet's raids that led to Badr were offensive, driven by desire for booty rather than self-defense. Neither view, as far as I can see, seems to interpret the given evidence accurately.

## Booty as motive is explicitly condemned by the Qur'an

Another difficulty with the idea of raiding as the Prophet's justification is that worldly possessions are explicitly and repeatedly deprecated as a motive for jihad in the Qur'an, seen as a weakness among some of the believers, and associated with hypocrisy (3:152). Hadith reports record numerous warnings of the Prophet against those who fight for spoils, glory, and the like.<sup>2</sup>

One corollary of Hayward's claim, which he states explicitly, is that the Prophet intended to engage only in economic warfare against the Quraysh. This flies in the face of the Qur'an's explicit statements to the contrary, but also casts doubt on the Prophet's leadership—did the idea of the Quraysh's counteroffensive never cross his otherwise exceptionally strategic and perspicuous mind? Given that the Quraysh were completely dependent on trade, raiding their caravans was bound to invite a major confrontation, as happened at Badr. Centering his newfangled thesis, Hayward is forced to create a narrative of the Sira in which pragmatic warfare has replaced the Prophet's professed divine mission.



## Better explanations

The author, to his credit, does acknowledge and dismiss several competing accounts of why the Prophet went to war. Unfortunately, a survey of those accounts does not do his account any favors.

Hayward dismisses M. Watt's conclusion, in *Muhammad at Medina*, that the raids were the result of "a deliberate intention on Muhammad's part to provoke the Meccans" (quoted at p. 53). The reason Hayward gives is at best speculative: the Prophet could not have intended this because the Muslims were far outnumbered at this time. Watt's suggestion is supported by the Qur'an, which strongly suggested the promise of total victory for Allah's messengers and that God will bring the Prophet back to Mecca (from verses such as 28:85, the subtext of Suras like Yūsuf and the many tellings of the story of Moses, and the many warnings that the unbelieving leaders of the Quraysh will be subdued, the Prophet could easily infer an expectation to return to Mecca). Watt's own view, on the very pages that Hayward cites, is far more nuanced and based on a careful reading of the Qur'anic passages: "Clearly, the Muslims regarded their political and military activities as taking place within a religious setting."<sup>3</sup>

In response to the apologist argument that the raids were only conducted in self-defense, the German orientalist Tilman Nagel writes in his book *Muhammad's Mission*: "Nowhere in the historical reports or in the Koran is there any indication that Muhammad's first military expeditions were meant to defend Medina against Quraysh attacks." So far, Hayward would be in agreement. But he parts ways with Nagel's explanation, which he quotes without much engagement in a footnote:

*[The raids] were part of a pre-planned, determined effort, first of all, to cut off Quraysh's commercial traffic to the north, to reduce Mecca's income, and finally, as will become clear in the following chapters, to gain control over the Kaaba and thereby to achieve the objective that he had already pointed to in Sura 7. (Quoted at p. 467)*

Nagel has clearly based his explanation on a careful reading of the Qur'an. This explanation is more persuasive than Hayward's by all

accounts, and is in agreement with Lings' and Watt's views, to name just the few authorities that Hayward invokes.

Relatedly, Hayward takes the pagan Arabs' acceptance of the Prophet's actions as normal and comprehensive as evidence for his case. He writes that the raids "cannot have been entirely outrageous... otherwise we would have records in the earliest sources of complaints or mocking about that very point by the non-Muslim clans in Medina, or even by the Meccans" (59).

But a more compelling explanation is already available to us. When the Prophet fled Mecca, there was a bounty on his head. One Western biographer notes the significance of this fact: "In the old Arab law, the Hijra did not merely signify rupture with his native town, but was equivalent to a sort of declaration of war against it. The Meccan guild were under no misapprehension [about this old Arab law]."<sup>4</sup> By putting a bounty on the Prophet's head, the Quraysh had started a feud. The Prophet's hostile actions against Mecca, therefore, while extremely bold and courageous, would have been entirely comprehensible to the Arabs. The only protection in Arabia was the tribe, and someone exiled from a tribe needed to find another tribe, and the Prophet did precisely that by creating the "supertribe" of his followers, as documented in the Qur'an and in the *Ṣaḥīfah* of Medina. The Meccans had not retracted the call to assassinate the Prophet, and Hadith and Sira reports confirm that the Meccans initiated correspondence with the pagan Arabs who were displeased with the Prophet's arrival but had expediently embraced a Muslim identity, the hypocrites. These correspondences the Prophet intercepted and neutralized.<sup>5</sup> Hayward waxes lyrical about the Arab tradition of "blood-feuds" that us moderns cannot possibly comprehend (e.g., 151-189), and yet fails to note how this condition would have created a state of war between the Meccans and the Muslims fleeing Mecca such that the latter's attack on the Meccan caravans would be seen as a daring but expected step.

Hayward's insistence on raiding as the Prophet's goal casts a shadow over his interpretation of the rest of the Medinan Sira. Accordingly, his conclusion bears the same stamp: "in the years after Badr, Muḥammad fought mainly defensive and preemptive battles against non-Muslims

primarily for existential reasons, as well as certain offensive campaigns for demonstrable societally beneficial reasons” (62).

In Hayward’s story, the Prophet unintentionally provoked the Meccans for economic reasons, but then went on to wage a successful war against them for “existential” and “societally beneficial” reasons. Regardless of whether he intended this result, his series of misreadings depict the Prophet as an Arab chieftain who was driven by largely secular, pragmatic concerns; one who was benevolent, courageous, and wise, but also at times rather short-sighted, undertaking raiding campaigns without a sense of political consequences, let alone moral compunction. Nearly every syllable of this conclusion is called into question by the very sources that the author has employed.

Notwithstanding my disagreement with the thesis of the book, it is an erudite and insightful work written by a Western Muslim military historian who has wrestled with a vast array of sources. As a text that I have eagerly read and assigned in my graduate course, this monograph is sure to reawaken the much-needed interest in the military and political dimensions of the Sira.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Joel Hayward, "Justice, Jihad, and Duty: The Qur'anic Concept of Armed Conflict", *Islam and Civilizational Renewal*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (July 2018), pp. 267-303: 282.
- 2 E.g. Bukhari 3126 and Muslim 1904; Muslim 1905.
- 3 M. Watt, *Muhammad at Madina* (Oxford University Press, 1956), 4-5.
- 4 Henri Lammens, *Islam: Beliefs and Institutions* (Routledge, 2008 [orig. 1929]), p. 27.
- 5 See Ovamir Anjum, "The 'Constitution' of Medina: Translation, Commentary, and Meaning Today," *Yaqeen Institute*, 4 Feb. 2021, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/the-constitution-of-medina-translation-commentary-and-meaning-today> fn. 37, 47.