

A life with the Prophet?

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A life with the Prophet?

Examining Hadith, Sira and Qur'an

In Honor of Wim Raven



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Introduction

Stefan Weninger/Albrecht Fuess

The following contributions of the present volume “‘A life with the Prophet?’ Examining Hadith, Sira and Quran“ serve two aims. They present on one side a comprehensive insight into actual trends in academia in Arabic literature and Islamic studies, but first and foremost they shall pay tribute to an outstanding scholar of early Arabic literature and the formative period of Islam. Wim Raven has deepened the international knowledge on the prophet tremendously through his works on the sources for Muḥammads life, especially the Sira and the Ḥadith. And he continues to do so in his scholarly publications and his ongoing writings on his blog “lesewerkarabisch.wordpress.com” which might perhaps not be categorized as too scholarly in an academic sense. But the texts there are humorous and very informative which fits Wim Raven well. And after all did not the Prophet use to “laugh so loud that his eyetooth could be seen” as Wim has reminded us in some of his writings? And of course Wim Raven remarks that some critics might argue that the themes in his blog are treated better in the form of good scholarly works, but he would reply to such argumentations “you wouldn’t read them anyway”.

However, we would like to argue here that almost everything Wim Raven has ever written is a worthy read and the same holds true for the contributions we have gathered here in his honor. While organizing the conference “‘A life with the Prophet?’ Examining Hadith, Sira and Quran“ in the year of his retirement in May of 2012 at the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at Marburg University (thankfully funded by the Fritz Thyssen foundation), we tried to bring together academic friends and colleagues from the Netherlands and Germany who accompanied him either personally at different stages of his life or were guided by his work.

The volume gathers authors from among his teachers, friends from his study days at university, colleagues and his students to present aspects of

scholarship on early Islam which were dear to Wim Raven. It has a clear emphasis on the early Islamic period looking at the language and stories of the Qur'an (Robert Hoyland), medieval and contemporary literature on the prophet (Anna Akasoy and Remke Kruk), depicting a Maghrebian love story with adventurous and fantastic elements (Jan Witkam) and finally trying to make sense of it all by describing the development of Early Islamic thinking (Hans Daiber).

In recent years the discussion about Islam and its prophet has become a hotly debated issue in European societies. The fact that young men and women try to lead their life as close as possible to the way of life of the prophet is alienating western societies and is a matter of intensive debate in Islamic countries as these movements tend to become more radical and threaten the inner security of societies. However, in contrast to medieval Europe which had a very negative image of the prophet as "polygamist, epileptic and fanatic" in the Islamic lands the prophet was idealized as the ideal man and husband. Especially Sufism depicted Muhammad as a role model one has to follow in daily life. However, the Muhammad we encounter through the stories of the Ḥadiths and the Sira never seems as stern and strict as we encounter him in modern Salafism with its urge to get even the last detail of Muhammads life right. Perhaps this development was in some kind due to European colonialism and counter reactions. In being asked to getting rid of ambiguities within the Islamic image of the prophet by Christian missionaries and orientalist many features of the human prophet disappeared in modern islamist movements trying to depict a rational prophet who was beyond any doubt, as has been recently argued by Thomas Bauer, who said that the "Frühzeitversessenheit" ("obsession with the early Islamic period") of western scholars and Islamic reformers since the 19th century did Islam no good.¹

However, in order to understand these processes of transformations of religious concepts and also to improve our interpretation of the early Islamic periods we would need more scholarship like the articles in the present volume and more erudite scholars like Wim Raven. He really has provided us with valuable insights of the human and humanistic nature of the early Islamic image of the prophet and of literature, stories and

¹ Thomas BAUER, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islams*. Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen 2011, 161.

poems contemporaries told among them for religious instruction but also as romantic, sometime even frivolous, entertainment.

Wim Raven

Willem Raven was born on the 26th of July in 1947 in Raamsdonk in the Dutch province of Northern Brabant. After his time at a humanistic Grammar school in Amsterdam he started studying Theology there. This makes him member of an illustrious group of scholars who, like Heinrich Ewald, Gustav Flügel, Georg Wilhelm Freytag, Enno Littmann und Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje found their way to Oriental studies through Christian Theology. When he had finished his first propaedeutic exam, Wim Raven enlarged the subjects of his study with Arabic, cultural history of Islam, Semitic philology and Aramaic. Then after having passed the “Kandidaat-examen” he changed to Leiden, where he enrolled at the Rijksuniversiteit in the subjects Semitic Languages and Literatures. His major was Arabic Language and Literature. As minors he chose Modern History of the Near East and Indonesian Language and Literature. During his Leiden years he stayed abroad in Cairo where – as he recalls himself – he got distracted by the Egyptian dialect and Egyptian daily life more than he should have in respect to his classic course work he was supposed to have followed.

Back in Leiden he then finished his graduate studies with a double master degree. As a result of a peculiar rule of Leiden University he had to write two M.A. theses because there were two professors teaching Oriental Studies at the University. Whether this would be treated as a “human right offense” in current post-bologna European academia is a question open to debate, but at the time it enabled Wim Raven to dig deep into his two long life academic passions: Ḥadīth and Arabic literature. His first thesis dealt with the genre of the works of the forty *ḥadīths* (*arbaʿūna ḥadīṭan*) which were very popular special collections of 40 *ḥadīths* of the prophet each in order to be learnt by heart. The learning was very recommendable as the prophet once said in a *ḥadīth* that God will resurrect any Muslim together with all the erudite Islamic scholars at the day of judgment, who knows 40 *ḥadīths* by heart and is teaching them. For whatever this is worth, we are quite sure that Wim Raven, who has also published extensively on the

Islamic perceptions of heaven and hell, is up to the task and qualifies as Muḥaddith.

His second thesis dealt with Ibn Dāwūd (254–296/7 = 868/908/9), an author of Abbasid times and his Anthology *az-Zahra*, a work he would later on pursue during his PhD thesis. However, before he started his PhD thesis he worked at the “Netherlands Institute for Pure Research“, where he was in charge together with Jan Just Witkam to complete the monumental Ḥadīth-concordance which had been initiated by Dutch scholar Arent Jan Wensinck (1882–1939). When Wim Raven took on the task to finish the *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane*, with the final eighth volume which was to contain the indices of names, places and Koranic verses, this seemed at first sight like the easy and boring work of just typing the existing file cards. However, it turned out to be a very complex mission! The work on the *Concordance* had already been started in 1922 (sic!) but many of the files were erroneous or missing at the time Wim Raven went through them. Moreover, the work of the fifty volunteers who had helped Wensinck turned out to be very inconsistent regarding quality standards. Wim Raven had to re-index large parts of the nine Ḥadīth-collections. That he became a real world leading expert on Ḥadīth is therefore not really surprising. It is thanks to Wim Raven that Arabic and Islamic Studies could then finally make use of the complete *Concordance* since 1988.

After this endeavor, Wim Raven lectured Arabic and Islamic Studies at the Free University of Amsterdam before finishing his PhD, again at Leiden, in the year 1989.

His dissertation represented a follow-up of a topic of his second Master thesis on *Ibn Dāwūd al-Iṣbahānī and his Kitāb az-Zahra*. The result of his work was a new look on the poetic and literary Anthology. Ibn Dāwūd, author of the examined anthology, wrote in – we dare to say it² – the “classical” time of the Abassid caliphate. Wim Raven showed convincingly that the *Kitāb az-Zahra* represented in fact an anthology of genres (*afānīn*) and motives (*ma‘ānī*). This went against the former assumption of some Arabists who had prematurely classified it as a book on love theory. Had early Orientalists used anthologies like *Kitāb az-Zahra* in their “Frühzeitverses-

² After Thomas BAUER’S fundamental critique of the notion of a “post-classical” Arabic literature, and thus implying the very notion of a “classical” Arabic literature (*Mamlūk Studies Review* 11.2 [2007], 137ff) the very term “classical” seems to be problematic, when applied to Arabic literature.

senheit", quoted above, only as a quarry for finding citations of earlier poetry, Raven analyzed it as a work with its own merits, as witness of the literary production and taste of its times. This research angle seems to be self-evident nowadays but for the 1980s these were new academic paths to be taken and many researchers took them in addition to Wim Raven like Fedwa Malti-Douglas³, Hilary Kilpatrick⁴ and Stefan Weninger⁵ (the co-author of the present introduction).

During the years at the Islamic Institute in Amsterdam Wim Raven met the German Islamicist Hans Daiber. When Hans Daiber got the position of Professor of Islamic Studies at the Goethe-University in Frankfurt as successor of the quite remarkable Rudolf Sellheim in 1995, he managed to obtain a position as senior lecturer (Studienrat im Hochschuldienst) for Wim Raven the year later. For the students of Frankfurt Wim immediately developed through his humorous character into a well-liked teacher and fatherly friend. He was reported to have been the "good soul of the Institute". In summer of 2005 then came the re-structuring of the universities in the land of Hesse concerning the so-called "Area Studies" by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and the Arts. According to the plans, Frankfurt should obtain a center for East Asia, Gießen a center for Eastern Europe, and Marburg should have a Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies. The plans, however, and that was the tricky bit, included that professors and staff had to move from one university to another and build new structures. Immediately there was resistance against these plans from above. Many argued it should be better if fields of study such as Islamic Studies, Russian or Chinese should be present in all three universities instead of the concentration at one single place. How, so one voice from the Eastern European studies, could this field leave Marburg where Michael Lomonossow and Boris Pasternak had studied? The Jewish Studies Department of Frankfurt University simply refused to leave Frankfurt

³ See, e.g. the paper "Structure and Organization in a Monographic *Adab* Work: Al-Taṭṭīl of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 40 (1981), 227–245.

⁴ See e.g. her contribution „A genre in classical Arabic literature: the *adab* encyclopedia", in Robert Hillenbrand (ed.): *Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants. 10th Congress. Edinburgh 9–16 September 1980. Proceedings* (Edinburgh 1982), 34–42.

⁵ See his dissertation *Qanā'a (Genügsamkeit) in der arabischen Literatur anhand des Kitāb al-Qanā'a wa-t-ta'afuf von Ibn Abī d-Dunyā* (Islamkundliche Untersuchungen 154; Berlin 1992), where he focusses strongly on the choice and arrangement of the material quoted by Ibn Abī d-Dunyā and his successors.

for Marburg, because of the long history of the Jewish community and of Jewish studies in Frankfurt. Wide critique swept even through nationwide newspapers and magazines about this issue. Finally, Jewish Studies were spared to become part of a Center for Middle East, which suffered another loss when Turkish Studies were declared part of Eastern Europe and staid at the University of Gießen.

Still, above all stood Wim Raven and wondered. In the midst of the turmoil where universities clashed about money and positions he called Stefan Weninger from Frankfurt and told him in his calm voice “I like the idea of an Orient-Center. It is good if students have more than one professor to teach them and it is good to work in larger research groups. Therefore I gladly would come to Marburg.” That was the first time he had spoken to one Professor of our Institute and Marburg was glad that he came and staid. But, before that could finally happen, the fight of university presidents continued and at one point Wim Raven even wrote to Marburg: “Now I have heard from the dean in Frankfurt that I have to stay in Frankfurt and be the last one to turn the light off.” Thankfully for us this did not happen. In the summer of 2006 the ministry for Higher Education did finalize its plans and the Center of Near and Middle Eastern Studies at Marburg University was founded, first as an idea, then as a sketch and then filled with life. Needless to say, that the life at the Center in Marburg was in the early years very much shaped by Wim Raven. Until the advent of further new professors for Arabic Literature and Islamic Studies Wim held up the classes and taught the students Marburg had inherited from Gießen. At Marburg University those of us who just knew him from his writings before, then could witness the commitment he showed to academic teaching. His position included a high teaching load but he managed to teach students the contemporary situation of the Near- and Middle East combined with the sound knowledge of the orientalist philological tradition. That is the legacy he has left for the center after his retirement in 2012.

Although teaching was very important for Wim Raven he always upheld research. Witness to this are his publications and the participation of well-known scholars at the workshop in his honor in 2012. Besides the aforementioned books, Wim Raven published several articles in journals, edited volumes and encyclopedias, which underlined his knowledge and deep understanding of research. Of his numerous texts only a few should be named here (a complete list is to be found at the end of this volume):

“Some early Islamic texts on the Negus of Abyssinia” (1988), “[Ps.-]Aristoteles *De Mundo* in arabischer Überlieferung” (1989), *A Kitāb al-‘Aẓama: on Cosmology, Paradise and Hell*” (1993), “The Chew Stick of the Prophet in Sīra and Hadīth” (2003), “Ibn Ṣayyād as an Islamic “Antichrist”. A Reappraisal of the Texts” (2008).

No wonder he was chosen to author a central twenty pages long entry in the *Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān* about the genre of the biography of the prophet (the *sīra*).

He also translated central Islamic texts into Dutch to initiate an interested public into the reading of the genre. Ibn Ishāq's Sīra of the prophet was published under the title *Het leven van Mohammed*, first in 1980, and then again in a second edition in 2000. Moreover he translated a selection of the Ḥadīth-collections of Bukhārī and Muslim (*Leidraad vor het leven: De tradities van de profeet Mohammed*). In addition to that Wim Raven wrote texts for newspapers, literary journals and translated from French, which plays witness to his versatile interests.

And as already mentioned above, Wim Raven goes with the time. He is very active on the net where he writes texts full of academic insights but in a light heartedly way. His weblog ‘Lesewerk Arabisch und Islam’ shows that he is still ready to search new ways of communications. If readers find him, good, if not, their fault, but when they find, they can be sure of a bit of investigative academic entertainment ranging from Arab Grammar, the *ridḍa* wars, the laughing of the Prophet to Muslim female super heros in contemporary comic strips. We are sure that he will continue to work, travel and publish, especially his edition of the *Kitāb Dalāʾil al-ītibār* he is working on.

The contributions of this volume

The present volume is not only a dedication for Wim Raven, but a publication in its own right. As editors we were keen to single out contributors who could relate to the way Wim Raven worked and published, i.e. there had to be a new and innovative twist to the topic and the thematic frame we chose had to be the early Islamic period or Arabic Literature. We had somehow given the task to look for something unconventional in one's own research which could be realized here.