

The Quran and its Message

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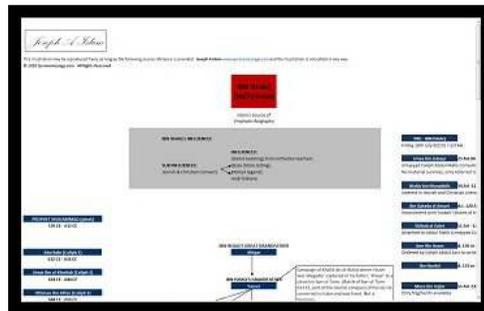
Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

IBN ISHAQ'S SIRA OF PROPHET MUHAMMAD (pbuh)

Joseph A Islam

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Please see the following illustration with regards Ibn Ishaq (Please click on the image)



Who was Ibn Ishaq?

A historian (b c.704CE) and a professional storyteller whose 'sirat rasul-Allah' is the earliest extant Muslim source of the Prophet's biography after the Quran

Please also see article: [Non-Muslim Sources of the Prophet Muhammad's \(pbuh\) Ministry](#)

Does Ibn Ishaq's work survive?

No

Does his student's work survive?

No

How do we get his works?

Through various transmitters (his students) who have passed on the information to others who have edited it. Transmitters include: **Al Bakkai - Ibn Hisham (d.833CE)**; Salm bin-Fadl-Tabari; Yunus Bin Bukayr-Ibn Al-Athir; harun bin Isa -Ibn Saad and many others [**See References Below - Entitled Ibn Ishaq Transmitters**]

What is the most popular transmission?

Ibn Ishaq - Al Bakkai - Ibn Hisham

Do we know much about Al-Bakkai?

No

Quick Timeline

Prophet Muhammad: Died 632 AD

Ibn Ishaq: Died 767 CE

Al Bakkai: Little known.

Ibn Hisham: Died 833 CE

When did Ibn Ishaq supposedly complete his work?

Nearly 130 years after the prophet's death at around c. 760-763CE

Who did he write for?

Caliph Mansur of the Abbasid Dynasty (Royal courts)

Are there differences between his transmitted works?

Yes, some very significant.

Criticisms?

Yes. Many serious ones by his own contemporary scholars including Imam Malik (Malik ibn Anas).

"Ibn Ishaq was eventually compelled to leave Medina. After his conflict with Malik, there was widespread suspicion of his beliefs in Medina, and he was no longer able to hold classes for his students. the transmission of his materials in Medina itself was henceforth discouraged. (99)" [1]

Please see further criticisms below.

Any political or theological motives?

Other than writing for the Abbasid courts who had their own political motives, Ibn Ishaq had pro-Alid views which are clear from a scholarly scrutiny of his works. He was generally accepted to have Shia learnings as did Al Waqidi (c.748-822CE), another well known early historian of Islam.

"ibn Ishaq had certainly voiced 'Alid sympathies in his biography of the Prophet, naming him as the first male convert to Islam (89) and claiming that it was 'Ali whom Muhammad had chosen to be his 'brotherly-partner' soon after their immigration to Medina (90) [2]

Al-Sumuk, investigating the issue, points to the numerous accounts which indicate the harsh treatment meted out to Ibn Ishaq by the Umayyad authorities, and compares it to the encouragement proffered him by the Abbasids (91) [3]

That al-Waqidi had 'Alid sympathies is clearly indicated by the fact that he is reported to have written a book on the birth of Hasan and Husayn. According to al-Nadim, "it was he who quoted that 'Ali ... was one of the miracles of the Prophet, ... as the rod was to Musa (Moses), and the raising of the dead to Isa (Jesus) (33) [4]

Al Waqidi is commonly known to give Islam the original narrative of the 'Satanic Verses' (narrated through his secretary, Ibn Saad (784-845CE))

Is there an immediate verification point or another writer contemporaneous to Ibn Ishaq?

No. There is no extant contemporary immediate verification of Ibn Ishaq's work. In fact, we don't even possess Ibn Ishaq's own original work. Rather, we have received what Ibn Ishaq allegedly wrote through various transmitters who have passed on his work and have edited it. Al Waqidi was writing nearly half a century later and there is much criticism in scholarly circles with regards his work, his influences from Ibn Ishaq's work and the information he drew from a similar (yet ever embellishing) genre pool of traditionalists. These discussions are outside the remit of this article but the reader is encouraged to conduct their own research which they will no doubt find very informative. Please see the next section for more information on how to initiate a study with regards Ibn Ishaq.

INTRODUCTION TO IBN ISHAQ

Those wanting to initiate and study the works of Ibn Ishaq deeply, will find a plethora of scholarship literature available which puts this early formative period of Islam through the eyes of early historians to much scrutiny. It is difficult to recommend literature as research style and source

selection can be very personal, especially when researching privately. Good scholarship works usually cite excellent bibliographies and references which are always useful to further probe and examine.

I have suggested some sources below which should help to initiate a study of Ibn Ishaq. They have been primarily selected as they are very easy to source and study as they have been written in a style which will appeal to a wide readership. They also provide a very good platform to further expand on one's expertise in this area if the appetite remains.

Ibn Ishaq and Al-Waqidi Revisited: A Case Study of Muhammad and the Jews in Biographical Literature

This PhD thesis by Dr. Rizwi Faizer is easily accessible from the following site and provides a firm platform to understand not only Ibn Ishaq's work, but also Al-Waqidi. It also provides a good comparative analysis of the two historians.

Link: [Digital Archive at McGill eScholarship Library and Collections](#)

The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah

This translation by A.Guillaume provides access for the English readers to Ibn Ishaq's Sira which is held in the rescension of Ibn Hisham as he received it from Al-Bakkai. You will be able to find this source from any good Islamic bookshop or online bookshops

New Light on the Story of Banu Qurayza and the Jews of Medina

Journal Article from the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (1976, pp. 100-107)

By Dr. W. N. Arafat

A copy of this article can be found here:

<http://www.haqq.com.au/~salam/misc/qurayza.html>

The Making of an Image: The Narrative Form of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah

Katherine Amanda Milby

Link: [Digital Archive at Georgia State University](#)

IBN ISHAQ CRITICISMS & NOTES

In his book 'The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah (Published by Oxford University Press), Dr. Alfred Guillaume cites I.Sayyidu'l-Nas's '**Uyun al-Athar fi fununi'l-maghazi wa'l-shama'ili wa'l-siyar**' as the best and most comprehensive summary of Muslim opinion of Ibn Ishaq. Both favourable and unfavourable comments are noted in summary form. Opinions favouring Ibn Ishaq can be noted from the Introduction page xxxv and it is suggested that this is read in context till the end (xl). It is also suggested that Ibn Ishaq's Sira and his methodology is studied through the works and analysis of other scholars that specialise in the area.

I have extracted some criticisms relating to Ibn Ishaq work and reputation which Alfred Guillaume has cited. It is suggested that as a bare minimum, the Introduction section of Ibn Ishaq's sira is read. Please note that the comments in **bold black (brackets)** are my own.

Ibn Hisham mentions the following in his 'notes' section:

Quote:

"...and omitting some of the things that I.I (**Ibn Ishaq**) has recorded in this book in which there is no mention of the apostle and about which the Quran says nothing and which are not relevant to anything in this book or an explanation of it or evidence for it; poems which he quotes that no authority on poetry whom I have met knows of; **things which it is disgraceful to discuss; matters which would distress certain people; and such reports as al-Bakka'i told me he could not accept as trustworthy - all these things I have omitted**" [5]

Source: The Life of Muhammad - A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah (A.Guillaume)

"Ibn Ishaq excited the enmity of Malik b. Anas, for whose work he showed his contempt, and it was not long before his own writings and his orthodoxy was called in question" [6]

"He was accused of being a Qadari and a Shi'a" [7]

"Another man attacked his veracity: he often quoted Fatima, the wife of Hisham bin Urwa, as the authority for some of his traditions. The husband was annoyed and denied that he had ever met his wife" [8]

"It is not known whether Ibn Ishaq was compelled to leave Medina or whether he went away voluntarily" (**His chief informants were there and also the enmity of Malik bin Anas would not have helped**). [9]

"While Mansur (**Caliph**) was at Hashimiya he attached himself to his following and presented him with a copy of his work doubtless in the hope of a grant from the caliph" [10]

(Aban son of Caliph Uthman - born c.20 took part in campaigns with Talha and Zubayr against his fathers slayers). "...Al Waqidi in reference to Ibn Mughira says 'he had nothing written down about hadith except the prophet's maghazis which he had acquired from Aban'. It is strange that neither Ibn Ishaq nor Al Waqidi should have cited this man who must have had inside knowledge of many matters not known to the public. Possibly as a follower of Ali he preferred to ignore the son of the man the Alids regarded as a usurper" [11]

"Like I.I (**Ibn Ishaq**), he (**Urwa bin Zubayr**) was given to inserting poetry in his traditions and justified the habit by the example of Aisha who uttered verses on every subject that presented it ⁽¹⁾. He was a friend of the erotic poet Umar b, Rabia but thought very little of the prophet's poet Hassan b Thabit ⁽²⁾" [12]

"Of Shurahbil b. Sa'd, a freedman, presumably of South Arabian origin, little is known beyond the fact he wrote a Maghazi book. I.I (Ibn Ishaq) would have none of him, and he is seldom quoted by other writers. He reported traditions from some of the prophet's companions and Musa b.Uqba records that he wrote lists of the names of the emigrants and the combatants at Badr and Uhud" (**It is intriguing that not only 'Aban' but other early historians are also not used as sources by Ibn Ishaq even though they were closer to the event in history**). [13]

"Another important Tabi was Wahb b. Munabbih (34-110) a Yamanite of Persian origin. His father was probably a Jew. He is notorious for his interest in, and knowledge of Jewish and Christian scriptures and traditions" "...much that was invented later was fathered on him" [14]

"He (**Asim b. Umar b. Qatada al-Ansari - d.c.120 AH**) lectured in Damascus on the campaigns of the prophet and the exploits of his companions and seems to have committed his lectures to writing. He

too is inconsistent in naming his authorities: sometimes he gives an isnad, more often he does not. He returned to Medina to work, and I.I (**Ibn Ishaq**) attended his lectures. Occasionally he inserted verses in his narrative, and sometimes gave his own opinion" [15]

"..I.I. (**bn Ishaq**) relied on Jewish and Christian informants on the book of Abu Abdullah Wahb b. Munabbih (34-110 or 114) known as Kitab al Muftada and also al-Israiliyat of which the original title was Qisas-ul-Anbiya" [16]

"We do not know Muhammad's age when he first came forth publicly as a religious reformer: some say he was forty, others say forty-five; we do not know his precise relation to the Banu Najjar; the poverty of his childhood ill fits the assertion that he belonged to the principal family in Mecca. The story of those years is filled out with legends and stories of miraculous events which inevitably undermine the modern reader's confidence in the history of this period as a whole." [17]

(The Story of the night journey and ascent to heaven) - "The story is everywhere hedged with reservations and terms suggesting caution to the reader." [18]

"A rather difficult problem in literary and historical criticism is posed by the rival traditions (5) collected by the indefatigable T. (**Tabari**) from two of I.I's (**Ibn Ishaq's**) pupils, Yunus b. Bukayr and Salama b. Al-Fadl, the latter supported by another pupil of I.I's named Ali b. Mujahid. The first had attended his lectures in Kufa and the other two his lectures in Ray. All three claim they transmit what I.I (**Ibn Ishaq**) told them on the authority of 'Afif'. I do not know of a parallel in I.I's work to a contradiction resting on the authority of the same original narrator. Different traditions from different rawis from different sources are to be expected in any history; but here the same man is introduced as the authority for conflicting traditions such as are to be found in the later collections of hadith." [19]

"The prophet summoned a tree to him and it stood before him. He told it to go back again and back it went. It is interesting to notice that the personal for whose benefit this miracle was wrought regarded it as sorcery. The author's father, Ishaq b. Yasar, is responsible for the tale." [20]

"The story of the throne of God shaking when the doors of heaven were opened to receive Sa'd shows how these stories grew in the telling." [21]

There are lots of anonymous informants 'Someone I have no reason to doubt or trust'. In others isnads are fully furnished. Why are some informants anonymous?

"Doubts and misgivings about the authenticity of the poems in the Sira are expressed so often by Ibn Hisham that no reference to them needs to be given here" [22]

"He (**Ibn Ishaq**) even went to the length of including poems from Ad and Thamud!" [23]

"I. al-Nadim (8) goes farther by suggesting that I.I. (**Ibn Ishaq**) was party to the fraud: the verses were composed for him, and when was asked to include them in his book he did so and brought himself into ill repute with the rhapsodists." [24]

"Ancient poetry has suffered greatly at the hands of forgers, plagiarists and philologists, and the diwans of later poets have not escaped the dishonest rawi. Hasan b. Thabit', the prophet's own poet has many poems to his name which he would be astounded to hear, and there are comparatively

few poets of whom it could be said that the diwans bearing their names contained nothing for which they were not responsible" [25]

There is also Ansari-Shia propaganda, "'The one you killed was the best of us. The one who lived is lord over us and all of you are lords'" (**lord - al Husayn and the lords - Ummayyads**) [26]

"Dr. Arafat notes that in the Sira there are seventy-eight poems attributed to Hassan; the authenticity of fifteen of them is questioned or denied outright" [27]

"Al Waqidi makes no mention of Ibn Ishaq among his authorities. The reason for this is doubtless that he did not want to refer to a man who already enjoyed a great reputation as an authority on Maghazi and so let it seem that his own book was a mere amplification of his predecessors" [28]
"Apostolic tradition in Islam, as Goldziher showed long ago, is the battlefield of warring sects striving for the mastery of men's minds and the control of their behaviour with all the weight that Muhammad's presumed or fabricated example could bring to bear. The earlier the tradition, or collection of traditions, the less this tendency is in evidence; but we have already seen that I.I. (**Ibn Ishaq**) occasionally succumbed to the temptation to glorify Ali at the expense of Abbas" [29]

"Muhammad b. 'Abdullah b. Numayr said that when I.I. (Ibn Ishaq) reported what he had heard from well-known persons, his traditions were and good and true, but he sometimes reported worthless sayings from unknown people" [30]

"Yahya b. al-Qattan would never quote him" [31]

"Ahmad b. Hanbal quoted him with approval, and when it was remarked how excellent the stories (qisas) were he smiled in surprise. His son admitted that Ahmad incorporated many of I.I. (**Ibn Ishaq's**) traditions in his Musnad, but he never paid heed to them. When he was asked if his father regarded him as an authority on what a Muslim must or must not do he replied that he did not. He himself would not accept a tradition that only I.I. (**Ibn Ishaq**) reported. He used to relate a tradition which he gathered from a number of people without indicating who had contributed its separate parts" [32]

"Al-Duri said he was trustworthy but not to be used as an authority on fiqh, like Malik and others" [33]

"Al Nasa'i said that he was not strong" [34]

"Al-Maymuni reported that I. Ma'in 156-233 said he was 'weak" [35]

"Al-Daraqutni said that a tradition from I.I. (**Ibn Ishaq**) on the authority of his father was no legal proof" [36]

"Yahya b. Sai'd said that though he knew I.I. (**Ibn Ishaq**) in Kufa he abandoned him intentionally and never wrote down traditions on his authority" [37]

"Abu Da'ud al-Tayalisi (131-203) reported that Hammad b. Salima said that unless necessity demanded it he would not hand on a tradition from I.I. (**Ibn Ishaq**)". [38]

"When Malik b. Anas mentioned him he said, 'he is one of the antichrists" [39]

"When Hisham b. 'Urwa was told that I.I. **(Ibn Ishaq)** reported something from Fatima he said, 'the rascal lies; when did he see my wife?'" [40]

"I. Idris said that he talked to Malik about they Madhazi and how I.I. **(Ibn Ishaq)** had said that he was their surgeon and he said, 'We drove him from Medina'" [41]

"Al Mufaddal b. Ghassan said that he was present when Yazid b. Harun was relating traditions in al-Baqi' when a number of Medinans were listening. When he mentioned I.I. **(Ibn Ishaq)** they withdrew saying: 'Don't tell us anything that he said. We know better than he' Yazid went among them, but they would not listen and so he withdrew" [42]

"Abu Daud said that he heard Ahmad. b. Hanbal say that I.I. **(Ibn Ishaq)** was a man with a love of tradition, so that he took other men's writings and incorporated them in his own" [43]

"Ahmad said that he used to relate traditions as though from a companion without intermediaries" [44]

"Abu Abdullah said that I.I. **(Ibn Ishaq)** came to Baghdad and paid no attention to those who related hadith from Al-Kalbi and others saying that he was no authority" [45]

"Al Fallas (d.249) said that after being with Wahb b. Jarir reading before him the Maghazi book which his father had got from I.I. **(Ibn Ishaq)** we met Yahya b. Qattan who said that we had brought a pack of lies from him" [46]

"Ibn Ma'in did not like to use him as an authority in legal matters" [47]

"Abu Hatim said that he was weak in tradition yet preferable to Aflah b. Said and his traditions could be written down" [48]

"Sulayman al-Taymu called him a liar..." [49]

"...Yahya al Qattaan said that he could only abandon his hadith to God; he was liar" **(Malik's view regarding using Hisham's wife, Fatima as a source)** [50]

"Among the reasons for rejecting his authority was that he was a Shi'i, that he was said to hold the view that man had free will, and that his isnads were defective" [51]

Notes:

- His trustworthiness can never be concluded upon as he may have narrated what was told to him. So suspicion would be divided between him and his informants. This will never be proved conclusively.
- Ibn Ishaq does introduce caution to the reader by saying "and God knows best, ' God preserve me from attributing to the apostle words which he did not use' fi ma balahani"
- Even so, Al Bukhari did quote him as an authority and Muslim cited him often as did Tirmidhi. This proves that Qisas also made it into the Hadith canons.

Please find below an example of the popular story of the 'Night Journey' of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the Ascent to Heaven'. Note in particular, how Ibn Ishaq acquires the information:

Some Authorities Given:

THE NIGHT JOURNEY AND THE ASCENT TO HEAVEN

"Ziyad b. 'Abdullah al-Bakka'i from Muhammad b.Ishaq told me the following"

"The following account reached me from 'Abdullah b. Mas'ud and Abu Sa'id al-Khudri, and Aisha the prophet's wife, and Mu'awiya b.Abu Sufyan, and al-Hasan b. Abul-Hasan al-Basri, and Ibn Shihab al Zuhri and Qatada and other traditionalists, and Umm Hani' d. of Abu Talib. **It is pieced together in the story that follows, each one contributing something of what he was told about what happened ...**" [52]

3rd Person Reference:

THE NIGHT JOURNEY AND THE ASCENT TO HEAVEN

"I was told that al-Hasan said that the apostle said: 'While I was sleeping ..."

"I was told that Qatada said that he was told that the apostle said: 'When I came up ..." [53]

No Names Given

THE ASCENT TO HEAVEN

"A traditionalist who had got it from one who had heard it from the apostle told me that the latter said: "All the angels who met me when I entered the lowest heaven ..." [54]

Reference to Stories:

THE NIGHT JOURNEY AND THE ASCENT TO HEAVEN

"In his story al-Hasan said: 'The apostle and Gabriel went their way until ..." [55]

Sometimes just passing on the information of others without any verification:

THE NIGHT JOURNEY AND THE ASCENT TO HEAVEN

"According to what I have heard 'Abdullah b. Masud used to say: Buraq, the animal whose every stride ..." [56]

Concealing the identity of the sources:

THE ASCENT TO HEAVEN

"One whom I have no reason to doubt told me on the authority of Abu Sa'id al-Khudri: I heard the apostle say, ..." [57]

REFERENCES

IBN ISHAQ'S TRANSMITTERS

According to Islamic Scholar J.F.

01. Ibrahim b. Sa'd (110/728 - 184/800), in Madinah
02. Ziyad b. 'Abd Allah al-Bakkai
03. Abd Allah b. Idris al-Awdi (115/733 - 192/808)
04. Yunus b. Bukayr
05. Abda b.Sulayman
06. Abd Allah b. Numayr (115/733 - 199/815), in Kufa
07. Yahya b. Sa'id al-Umawi (114/732 - 194/810), in Baghdad
08. Jarir b. Kazim (85/704 - 170/787)
09. Harun b. Isa, in Basra
10. Salama b. Al-Fadl al Abrash (d.191/807)
11. Ali b. Mujahid
12. Ibrahim b. al-Mukhtar, in Rayy
13. Sa'id b. Bazi
14. Uthman b.Saj
15. Muhammad b. Salama al-Harrani

Islamic Scholar Abbot adds three more:

16. Abu Yusuf (113/731 - 182/798)
17. The Kufan Husayn ibn Hassan al-Awfi (d.201 or 202/816 or 817)
18. Muhammad ibn Sa'id al-Umawi.

[SOURCE] FAIZER. R.S, *Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi Revisted, A Case Study of Muhammad and the Jews in Biographical Literature*, Ph.D thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, National Library of Canada [online], Chapter 2, Page 48, Available at [Digital Archive at McGill eScholarship Library and Collections](#) [Accessed 13th April 2011]

[1] FAIZER. R.S, *Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi Revisted, A Case Study of Muhammad and the Jews in Biographical Literature*, Ph.D thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, National Library of Canada [online], Chapter 2, Page 64, Available at [Digital Archive at McGill eScholarship Library and Collections](#) [Accessed 13th April 2011]

Reference cited:

(99) Abbott, *Historical Texts*, 91

[2] *Ibid.*, Page 62

References cited:

(89) Ibn Sihaq, *Kitab sirat rasul Allah*, 158-59

(90) *Ibid.*, 344

[3] *Ibid.*, Page 63

References cited:

(91) "Die Nachrichten über das Leben Ibn ishâq's, die wir bei Yâqut (Irsâd 18: 6f.), al-Xatîb (1: 214-34), ad Dahabî (Mîzân 2: 343-47; Tadhkirah 1: 164) oder Ibn Nadîm (Fihrist s. 92) finden, zeigen die Schwierigkeiten, die Ibn Ishâq von den Umayyaden zu ertragen hatte." See al-Samuk, *Die historischen Überlieferungen nach Ibn Ishâq*. 12, r. n.12.

[4] *Ibid.*, Chapter 3, Page 142

Reference cited:

(33) Ibn al-Nadîm, *The Fihrist*, 214; also see Jones, introduction to *Kitâb al-maghâzî*, by al Wâqidî, 16-18.

[5] GUILLAUME. A, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, Oxford University Press, Page 691

Highlights in black text are my own insertions and are for clarification and emphasis only.

[6] *Ibid.*, Author, Page xiii

[7] *Ibid.*, Page xiii

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*, Page xiv

[11] *Ibid.*, *The Sira*, Page xiv

[12] *Ibid.*, *The Sira*, Page xv

References cited:

- (1) Fischer, Asanid, 46;
(2) Horovitz, op. cit. 251

[13] Ibid., Page xv

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid. Page xviii

[17] Ibid. Page xix

[18] Ibid. Page xx

[19] Ibid. Page xxi

Reference cited:

- (5) T.i. 1162. 8-1163.2

[20] Ibid. Page xxiii

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid. The Poetry, Page xxv

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

Reference cited:

- (8) Al Fihrist, Cairo, 136

[25] Ibid. Page xxvi

[26] Ibid. Page xxvii

[27] Ibid. Page xxviii

[28] Ibid. Page xxxii

[29] Ibid. Page xxxiv

[30] Ibid. Page xxxvi

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid., Page 181

[53] Ibid., Page 182

[54] Ibid., Page 185

[55] Ibid., Page 182

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., Page 184

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