

Ibn Kathir and His Historical Narrations

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Introduction

The book *Al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya* by Imam Imad al-Din Ibn Kathir is regarded as one of the most prominent historical encyclopedias in the Islamic heritage. It masterfully combines narrative storytelling with critical analysis according to a distinctive methodology. This study aims to trace the methodological approach that Ibn Kathir followed in presenting historical events — beginning with the creation of the heavens and the earth and extending to the major tribulations and apocalyptic battles at the end of time — while passing through the Prophetic Biography (Seerah), and the histories of the Caliphs and various states. The importance of this study lies in uncovering his methods of handling transmitted narrations: how he balanced between different sources, cited the Quran and the Prophetic Hadith, critiqued the Isra'iliyyat (Judeo-Christian traditions), and relied on what he personally witnessed or heard directly to document certain events. The study also explores the temporal structure adopted by Ibn Kathir, which blends annual (chronological) recording with thematic organization, thereby giving his work a unique character in its field. This chapter aims to analyze these methodological features and highlight the scholarly value of *Al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya* as a trusted and authoritative historical source.

Keywords: Ibn Kathir, *Al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, Islamic History, Historical Methodology, Prophetic Biography, Islamic Historiography.

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Section Two: Ibn Kathir and His Historical Narrations

First: Ibn Kathir's Methodology in *al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*

Ibn Kathir divided his book into three parts:

Part One:

In this part, Ibn Kathir begins with the very beginning of creation: the creation of the Throne (al-Arsh), the Footstool (al-Kursi), the heavens and the earths, the angels, the jinn, and the devils. He then proceeds to the creation of Adam, the stories of the prophets, the accounts of past nations, tribes, and kings — including the people of Saba (Sheba), Dhul-Qarnayn, the People of the Cave, and the People of the Ditch — until he reaches the era of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Ibn Kathir gave great attention to the Prophetic Biography (Seerah), dedicating approximately four volumes of his work to it. He concludes this part with the death of the Messenger (peace be upon him).⁽¹⁾

Part Two:

This part covers the period following the Prophet's death up to the year 767 AH/1366 CE. Ibn Kathir

alluded to this in the introduction to his book, writing: “We shall then go on to recount what came after that, down to our own time.”⁽²⁾

Part Three:

This part covers the upheavals and major battles, the signs of the Hour, the Resurrection and the Gathering, the terrors of the Day of Judgment, and Paradise and Hell. Ibn Kathir refers to this in his own words:

“We shall mention the upheavals, the great wars, and the momentous events to come. Then we will describe the Fire, then describe the Gardens and the blessings they contain, along with everything connected to these matters — drawing upon what has been reported in the Book (the Quran) and the Sunnah, the reports of the righteous predecessors (al-Salaf), and the narrations transmitted from the scholars, the heirs of the prophets, who draw from the niche of Muhammadan Prophethood, may the best blessings and peace be upon him.”⁽³⁾

Ibn Kathir was also clear in his avoidance of the Isra'iliyyat (Judeo-Christian traditions), stating that he only narrates what is permitted by the Shari'ah — that is, what does not contradict the Book of Allah or the Sunnah of His Messenger (peace be upon him). He

(1) Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, vol. 1, p. 6.

(2) Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, vol. 1, p. 6.

(3) Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, vol. 1, p. 6.

would only include what cannot be confirmed as true or false, but merely serves as a detail of something we know in general terms, or the naming of something that our Shari'ah has left unmentioned, without any real benefit in determining it precisely. He would mention such material, as he himself says, only for embellishment and decoration, not as something indispensable or a basis to be relied upon. The true reliance and foundation are solely the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of His Messenger — whatever is authentically or reasonably transmitted — while indicating the weak points. “And Allah is the One Whose help is sought”⁽¹⁾

In arranging the historical material, the book *Al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya* opens with a section dedicated to the earliest beginnings, extending up to the start of Islamic history. In this section, Ibn Kathir follows a narrative method that adheres to chronological order by presenting complete events within one continuous, connected account, rather than strictly following the annalistic method of recording and dividing events year by year as they occurred. Ibn Kathir continued this approach until he reached the beginning of Islamic history, represented by the Hijrah of the Prophet (peace be upon him) to Medina. At that point, he shifted to the second method, which is common among some Muslim historians: recording events according to successive individual years. The drawback of this method is that it may fragment and scatter a single event when it extends over multiple years.⁽²⁾

Ibn Kathir typically opens each year with a formula such as: “Then the year eighty-six began, in which Qutayba ibn Muslim, the deputy of al-Hajjaj, raided Marw and Khurasan,”⁽³⁾ and closes it by naming the notable figures who died within it — for instance, regarding the year eighty-six, he writes: “In this year, it is thought, Artat ibn Zufar ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mālik ibn Shaddād died.”⁽⁴⁾

It is worth noting that Ibn Kathir rarely specified the exact day and month in his account of early Islamic history and the affairs of the Umayyad state and the

Abbasid caliphate. However, his attention to recording months and days grows progressively, beginning with his reliance on historians who were careful to fix precise dates, and the closer he draws to his own era, the greater his precision becomes and the more evident his care in dating events by day and month — until, by the time he reaches the period in which he himself lived, this precision and care become so firmly established that the final volumes of *al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya* read, to the observer, almost like a daily journal or personal diary.⁽⁵⁾

Ibn Kathir's style is accessible, marked by clarity and soundness of expression, and he succeeded in presenting historical material through summary, condensation, and paraphrase of his sources' meaning. He absorbed what earlier historians had recorded of events, then related it in his own words within a single coherent narrative, while sometimes pointing to the sources from which he drew his information.⁽⁶⁾

Ibn Kathir also devoted considerable space to biographical entries on caliphs, notable figures, jurists, scholars of Hadith, princes, and kings, without following any fixed method in doing so: at times he gives a biographical entry running to dozens of pages, while elsewhere the entry for another figure runs no longer than three words.⁽⁷⁾

Second: The Narrations Ibn Kathir Recorded

Most of the narrations Ibn Kathir recorded are supported by a chain of transmission. In the first volume of *al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, for example — devoted to the creation of existence and the stories of the prophets from Adam to Jesus (peace be upon him) — he relies in his narrations on the Noble Qur'an, the noble Hadith of the Prophet, the canonical collections (*al-Shihāh*), and the works of Qur'anic exegesis. To illustrate each of these kinds of supported narration: Ibn Kathir opens the first volume of *al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya* by saying: “God Almighty says in His glorious Book, ‘Allah is the Creator of all things, and He is the

(1) Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, vol. 1, p. 7.

(2) al-Shammari, Ibrahim ‘Abbās Husayn Jabbāra, *Hiwār ‘Ahd al-Khalifatayn al-Rāshidayn Abī Bakr al-Ṣiddīq wa ‘Umar al-Fārūq min Kitāb al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya li-l-Ḥafīz Ibn Kathir — Dirāsa wa Taḥqīq*, unpublished MA thesis, Institute for Arab History and Heritage, Baghdad, 2003, p. 15.

(3) Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, vol. 9, p. 74.

(4) Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, vol. 9, p. 82.

(5) Khān al-Nadwī, Mas‘ūd al-Raḥmān, *Ibn Kathir ka-Mu’arrikh: Dirāsa Taḥlīliyya li-Kitāb al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, Publications Department, Akbar Islamic University, India, 1980, p. 153.

(6) Khān al-Nadwī, *Ibn Kathir ka-Mu’arrikh*, p. 147.

(7) Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya*, vol. 8, p. 362.

Disposer of all affairs’⁽¹⁾ — for everything besides Him, exalted is He, is created by Him, subject to His lordship and governance, brought into being after not having been, existing after its nonexistence. The Throne, which forms the ceiling over all of creation down to what lies beneath the earth, and all that lies between — whether inert or possessed of speech — all of it is His creation, His dominion, His servants, subject to His subduing power and might, and to His disposal and will.”⁽²⁾

As for the noble Hadith and the canonical collections, Ibn Kathīr, discussing the creation of the heavens and the earth, first cites the noble verse, “And He it is Who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and His Throne was upon the water, that He might test you as to which of you is best in conduct. And if you say, ‘Indeed, you will be resurrected after death,’ those who disbelieve will surely say, ‘This is nothing but obvious magic.’”⁽³⁾

Ibn Kathīr is never content to record his narrations from a single source; rather, he compares the canonical collections and works of exegesis on one and the same event. So, continuing his discussion of the creation of the heavens and the earth cited above, he goes on: “This was also transmitted from Yazīd ibn Hārūn, from Ḥammād ibn Salama, by the same wording, including the phrase ‘Where was our Lord before He created His creation?’ and the rest is identical. Al-Tirmidhī related it from Aḥmad ibn Manī’,⁽⁴⁾ and Ibn Mājah from Abū Bakr ibn Abī Shayba and Muḥammad ibn al-Ṣabbāh, all three from Yazīd ibn Hārūn,⁽⁵⁾ and al-Tirmidhī judged it sound (ḥasan). These transmitters then differ over which was created first.”⁽⁶⁾ Ibn Kathīr likewise draws on the works of

exegesis, in addition to the Noble Qur’ān and the noble Hadith, continuing: “Some have said that the Pen was created before all these other things, and this was the position favored by Ibn Jarīr (al-Ṭabarī), Ibn al-Jawzī, and others; Ibn Jarīr held that the cloud came next.”⁽⁷⁾ In support of this, they cite the Hadith related by Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī from ‘Ubāda ibn al-Ṣāmit (may God be pleased with him), who said: “The Messenger of God (peace be upon him) said: ‘The first thing God created was the Pen. He then said to it: Write — and at that moment it recorded everything that would come to pass until the Day of Resurrection.’”⁽⁸⁾

Nor was Ibn Kathīr content merely to relate narrations, events, and reports; he would also voice his own assessment of most of the events and annalistic entries he recorded — at times critiquing a given narration or event, and at other times affirming it. For example, in recounting the story of Quṣayy ibn Kilāb regaining custodianship of the House (the Ka‘ba) for Quraysh and wresting it from Khuzā‘a,⁽⁹⁾ he offers his own judgment on the episode, saying: “I say: thus right was restored to its rightful place, and errant justice returned home after its absence; the House settled with Quraysh, fulfilling what Khuzā‘a had sought and the limits it had set, and the ancient sanctuary passed once more into their keeping.”⁽¹⁰⁾ We likewise find Ibn Kathīr at times explicitly rejecting certain narrations as false. For instance, on the splitting of the moon, after citing the report: “On the authority of ‘Abd Allāh, who said: We were with the Prophet (peace be upon him) when the moon split, becoming two halves — one half over this mountain, and one half over that

(1) Qur’ān, Sūrat al-Zumar, verse 62.

(2) Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya, vol. 1, p. 8.

(3) Qur’ān, Sūrat Hūd, verse 7.

(4) al-Tirmidhī, Muḥammad ibn ‘Īsā (d. 279 AH), Sunan al-Tirmidhī, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ‘Uthmān, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1402 AH), vol. 4, p. 351.

(5) Ibn Mājah, Muḥammad ibn Yazīd al-Qazwīnī (d. 275 AH), Sunan Ibn Mājah, ed. Muḥammad Fu‘ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1402 AH), pp. 64–65.

(6) Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya, vol. 1, p. 9.

(7) al-Ṭabarī, Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr (d. 310 AH), Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl

Āy al-Qur’ān, ed. Ṣidqī Jamīl al-‘Atṭār (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2000), vol. 12, p. 7.

(8) Abū Dāwūd, Sulaymān ibn al-Ash‘ath al-Sijistānī (d. 275 AH), Sunan Abī Dāwūd, ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Asriyya, n.d.), vol. 4, p. 225, Book of al-Sunna, Chapter on Predestination, ḥadīth no. 4700; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya, vol. 1, p. 9.

(9) Ibn Hishām, Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Hishām al-Ma‘āfirī (d. 218 AH), al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā et al. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), vol. 1, pp. 111–118; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya, vol. 2, p. 263.

(10) Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya, vol. 2, p. 263.

mountain,”⁽¹⁾ he then adds: “As for what some storytellers relate, that the moon fell to earth and entered through one sleeve of the Prophet’s garment (peace be upon him) and emerged from the other sleeve — this has no basis whatsoever; it is a fabricated falsehood and is not authentic. The moon never left its place in the sky when it split; rather, it split apart at the Prophet’s gesture (peace be upon him), becoming two halves.”⁽²⁾

We may therefore say that Ibn Kathir critiqued the content (matn) of historical narrations and concerned himself as well with critiquing their chains of transmission (sanad). In a number of the events and reports he relates, he does not content himself with a single narration of the event, but cites more than one account, drawing on more than one chain for the same incident. In this respect, Ibn Kathir was not merely a historian who recorded events and reports, but a critic of historical narrations from the standpoint of both chain and content, distinguishing between the false report and the sound one.

Third: His Citation of the Noble Qur’ān and the Noble Hadith of the Prophet

Ibn Kathir cited the Noble Qur’ān and the noble Hadith of the Prophet extensively, especially across the eight volumes of al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya devoted to the period from the creation of the world to the end of the Rāshidūn era, drawing heavily on Qur’ānic verses and noble Hadiths, and somewhat less so when relating the accounts of the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. The first and second volumes may, in effect, be regarded as a book of the stories of the prophets, and from the third through the sixth volume he relied heavily on Qur’ānic verses, noble Hadiths, and works of exegesis as he related the biography and campaigns of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), drawing extensively on Qur’ānic citation and the Prophet’s sayings accordingly. The seventh and eighth volumes cover the Rāshidūn era — the caliphates of

Abū Bakr, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān, and ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (may God be pleased with them) — in which his citation of Qur’ānic verses and noble Hadiths is somewhat less frequent than in the preceding volumes, and from the eighth volume to the last, his citation of Qur’ānic verses and noble Hadiths diminishes further still.⁽³⁾ Ibn Kathir likewise cited poetry and historical texts from the first volume of his book through to the last. In the first volume, when discussing the creation of the heavens and the earth, he writes: “How excellent is what the Imām Muḥammad ibn Ishāq ibn Yasār relates at the very start of the Sīra, citing verses by Zayd ibn ‘Amr ibn Nufayl⁽⁴⁾ on the creation of the heavens, the earth, the sun, the moon, and other matters; Ibn Hishām, however, states that these verses, rhyming in lām, belong instead to Ibn Abī al-Ṣalt.”⁽⁵⁾

To God alone I direct my praise and my eulogy,

And I say: may He grant me ease enduring through time.

To the Most High King, above Whom there stands

No god and no lord drawing near to His rank.

O man, beware, and guard against ruin —

For nothing of yours stays hidden from God.

And beware: set up no other beside God,

For the path of right guidance has become plain.

Be gentle with me — for I was the jinn’s hope,

Yet You are my God, my Lord, and my hope.

I am content with You, O Lord, as my sustainer; never shall I see

Any god besides You, God, as a second.⁽⁶⁾

Thus we find Ibn Kathir citing poetry after relating historical narrations, and he goes further still, noting the discrepancies among the historical accounts, as seen above where he records that Ibn Ishāq attributed the verses to Zayd ibn ‘Amr ibn Nufayl, while Ibn Hishām held that the lines belong instead to Ibn Abī al-Ṣalt. Ibn Kathir likewise drew on written,

(1) Ibn Kathir, al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya, vol. 3, p. 150.

(2) Ibn Kathir, al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya, vol. 3, p. 150.

(3) Ibn Kathir, al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya, vol. 1, pp. 6–27.

(4) Zayd ibn ‘Amr ibn Nufayl ibn ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā, al-Qurashī al-‘Adawī: a defender of women in the pre-Islamic era and one of the sages of his time; he was a paternal cousin of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (may God be pleased with him) but did not live to witness Islam.

See al-Dhahabī, Siyar A‘lām al-Nubalā’, vol. 1, p. 132.

(5) Ibn Abī al-Ṣalt: Umayya ibn ‘Abd Allāh Abī al-Ṣalt ibn Abī Rabī‘a ibn ‘Awf al-Thaqafī, a wise pre-Islamic poet from Ṭā’if who was well versed in ancient scriptures. Much has been recorded about him; his poetry belongs to the first rank, though philologists do not cite it as evidence for unfamiliar vocabulary. See further al-Ziriklī, al-A‘lām, vol. 5, p. 23.

(6) Ibn Kathir, al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya, vol. 1, pp. 38–39.

documented sources — the works from which he transmitted his reports — and in most cases he names for us the source from which he took a given account. Among the most important sources he relied upon are al-Ṭabarī's (d. 310 AH) *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk*, Ibn al-Jawzī's (d. 597 AH) *al-Muntazam fī Tārīkh al-Mulūk wa al-Umam*, Ibn al-Athīr's (d. 630 AH) *al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh*, as well as Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī's (d. 654 AH) *Mir'āt al-Zamān*, and material drawn from Abū Shāma al-Maqdisī (d. 665 AH) in his work *al-Rawḍatayn*, in addition to other sources.⁽¹⁾

Fourth: His Reliance on What He Himself Witnessed and Heard

In recounting certain events, Ibn Kathīr drew on what he had personally witnessed. For example, in relating an incident that took place in the year 741 AH, he writes: "On Tuesday, the last day of Shawwāl, a session was convened in the House of Justice at the House of Felicity, which I myself attended; the judges and notables gathered as usual, and 'Uthmān al-Dakkākī was brought before them, charged with grave statements the like of which had not even been attributed to al-Ḥallāj⁽²⁾ nor to Ibn al-Qaddāfir al-Salqamānī. Testimony was established against him, and a record was made of his disrespect toward the Ḥanbalī judge before that session, which led the Mālikīs to declare him an unbeliever and to have him returned to prison in chains. Then, on Tuesday the twenty-first of Dhū al-Qa'da, the aforementioned 'Uthmān al-Dakkākī was brought once more to the House of Felicity and made to stand before the princes and judges, where he was questioned as to objections raised against the witnesses; he was unable to answer and failed to do so, and judgment was accordingly passed against him... The sentence was then carried out in the very session, and I myself witnessed the execution of the man from beginning to end, having overseen the entire affair myself."⁽³⁾

He likewise drew on certain events and reports he had heard directly, as in his statement: "Judge Jamāl al-Dīn ibn al-Qalānisī informed me of the details of this session and of the honor and high regard shown to him there, including the thanks and praise he received from the sultan and the princes present, and Chief Judge Maṣṣūr al-Dīn al-Ḥanafī likewise informed me of the same."⁽⁴⁾ However, Ibn al-Qalānisī's account was more detailed, since he was at that time judge of the armies, and both men had been present at that very session.⁽⁵⁾ *Al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya* was not confined to particular events; rather, it is a comprehensive history of Arab and Islamic life down to the author's own age, addressing the full range of events. To illustrate, in the political sphere, regarding the movement of 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr's rule, Ibn Kathīr writes: "According to Ibn Ḥazm and a group of others, he was at that time the commander of the believers; and as we have noted, when Yazīd died, the army that had been besieging Ibn al-Zubayr, who had taken refuge in the House, withdrew from Mecca. When Ḥusayn ibn Numayr al-Kashkūnī returned with the army to Syria, Ibn al-Zubayr's authority grew strong throughout the Ḥijāz and its surrounding regions, and the people there pledged allegiance to him after Yazīd. He appointed his brother Muṣ'ab ibn al-Zubayr as his deputy over the people of Medina and ordered him to expel the Banū Umayya from Medina, which he did, and they journeyed to Syria — among them Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam and Ibn 'Abd Allāh. Ibn al-Zubayr received the pledge of allegiance in Rajab, after the people had remained roughly three months without an imam. He then sent 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Yazīd al-Anṣārī to lead prayer for the people of Kūfa, and Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad ibn Ṭalḥa ibn 'Ubayd Allāh to oversee taxation there, and secured the allegiance of both garrison cities (Baṣra and Kūfa) together; he sent envoys to Baṣra, who pledged to him, to Khurāsān,

(1) Muḥammad al-Zuhaylī, *al-Imām Ibn Kathīr al-Dimashqī: Ḥayātuhu wa 'Āthāruhu wa Manhajuhu fī al-Tafsīr wa al-Tārīkh wa al-Ḥadīth*, Dār al-Qalam (Damascus, 1992), pp. 115–120.

(2) al-Ḥallāj, Abū 'Abd al-Ḥusayn ibn Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj, known as Abū Mughīth, of Persian origin, raised in Wāsiṭ (some say Tustar); charges of unbelief and heresy against him were established both by his own admission and otherwise. al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, vol. 8, pp. 112–141; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya*, vol. 11, pp. 132–144.

(3) Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya*, vol. 14, p. 221.

(4) This refers to 'Alī ibn 'Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn Abī al-'Izz, the Ḥanafī judge of Damascus, who later served as chief judge in Egypt. His works include *al-Tanbīh 'alā Mushkilāt al-Hidāya* and *al-Nūr al-Lāmi' fīmā Yu'mal bihi fī al-Jāmi'*. He was born in 731 AH/1331 CE and died in 792 AH/1390 CE. See further Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Durar al-Kāmina*, vol. 3, p. 87.

(5) Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya*, vol. 14, p. 60.

who likewise pledged to him, and to al-Ḍaḥḥāk ibn Qays in Syria, who also gave the pledge.”⁽¹⁾

“It is said that the people of Damascus and its districts in Jordan did not pledge allegiance to him, since they had already pledged to Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam when Ḥuṣayn ibn Numayr returned from Mecca to Syria. A group from the Khārījites had also rallied around ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr in his defense, among them Nāfi‘ ibn al-Azraq and ‘Abd Allāh ibn Ibād, along with a number of their leaders. But once his position in the caliphate was secured, they said among themselves: ‘We have erred, for we fought alongside this man without knowing his view regarding ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān (may God be pleased with him),’ as they had been disparaging him. They therefore gathered before him and asked him about ‘Uthmān, and he answered in a manner displeasing to them, describing the faith, sincerity, justice, kindness, and good conduct ‘Uthmān possessed, and his readiness to return to the truth once it became clear to him. At that, they turned away from him and parted from him, heading instead toward the lands of Mesopotamia and Khurāsān, where they scattered, dividing among themselves in body, in creed, and in the many conflicting paths and sects that can neither be contained nor enumerated, born as they were of ignorance, self-assertion, and corrupt belief.”⁽²⁾

It is evident that Ibn Kathīr did not merely record the political episode but also offered his own judgment, describing the Khārījites' creed as corrupt. Turning to social events, Ibn Kathīr records the Prophet Muḥammad's (peace be upon him) marriage to Zaynab bint Jaḥsh, writing: “His marriage to Zaynab bint Jaḥsh ibn Ri‘āb ibn Ya‘mar ibn Ṣabra ibn Murra ibn Kabīr ibn Ghanm ibn Asad ibn Khuzayma al-Asadiyya, Mother of the Believers — she being the daughter of Umayma bint ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the paternal aunt of the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) — who had previously been married to his freedman Zayd ibn Ḥāritha (may God be pleased with him). Qatāda, al-Wāqidi, and some among the people of Medina state that he married her (may God be pleased with her) in the year five, with some adding that it was in Dhū al-Qa‘da; al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Bayhaqī states that he married her after [the campaign against] Banū Qurayẓa; while Khalīfa ibn Khayyāt, Abū ‘Ubayda, Ma‘mar ibn al-Muthannā, and Ibn Manda state that he

married her in the year three — and the former view is the more widely held.”⁽³⁾ Here too we find Ibn Kathīr drawing his narrations from a number of historical sources, presenting them, and then rendering his own judgment, saying that the former view — that is, the account of Qatāda and al-Wāqidi — is the more widely held, before supplying supporting evidence, in this case relying on al-Ṭabarī. As for matters of religion, he treats them with precision, particularly in relating the Qur’ānic narratives, as already noted, as well as in discussing the descent of revelation upon the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), his call to Islam, and his military campaigns. On the philosophical side, Ibn Kathīr addresses philosophical questions through his biographical entries on Arab and Muslim philosophers. In his entry on Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 339 AH/950 CE), he writes: “Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, the Turkish philosopher, was among the most learned of people in music, to the point that he could use it, together with his skill, to move those present among his listeners to weep, laugh, or fall asleep, as he wished. He was highly skilled in philosophy, and among the books that benefited from him was Ibn Sīnā's. He held that the return [to God] was spiritual rather than bodily, restricting this spiritual return to souls possessed of knowledge and excluding the ignorant, and he held doctrines on this matter at variance with both Muslims and other philosophers.”⁽⁴⁾

Fifth: His Treatment of Scholars, Jurists, Men of Letters, and Judges

In al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya, Ibn Kathīr followed the approach of earlier historians, particularly al-Ṭabarī and Ibn al-Athīr, in recording biographical entries on notable figures among scholars, jurists, men of letters, judges, and political and military leaders, typically listing at the close of each hijrī year the deaths of prominent figures, together with mention of their major scholarly, political, and intellectual achievements, in addition to recounting some of their affairs and activities in the course of presenting the year's events. This approach reflects Ibn Kathīr's concern with linking historical events to the figures who shaped them, lending his book substantial scholarly and documentary value. Take, for example,

(1) Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya, vol. 8, p. 263.

(2) Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya, vol. 8, p. 263.

(3) Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya, vol. 4, p. 166.

(4) Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya, vol. 11, p. 250; Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba, Taqī al-Dīn Abū Bakr ibn Aḥmad (d. 851 AH), Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyya, ed. al-Ḥāfiẓ ‘Abd al-‘Alīm Khān, ‘Ālam al-Kutub (Beirut, 1987), vol. 3, pp. 79–81.

the scholar Ibn Sīnā (d. 428 AH).⁽¹⁾ Ibn Kathīr writes of him: “Abū ‘Alī ibn Sīnā, the philosopher-physician, al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn Sīnā, al-Ra’īs, excelled in medicine in his time. His father was from Balkh and moved to Bukhārā, where Ibn Sīnā applied himself, reading the Qur’ān and mastering it by the age of ten; he likewise mastered arithmetic, algebra, Euclid, and the *Almagest*. He then studied under Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Nātilī the Sage, in which he excelled, surpassing the people of his time, so that people sought him out and studied under him while he was only sixteen years old. He treated certain Sāmānid rulers, among them the Amīr Nūḥ ibn Naṣr, who rewarded him generously and granted him access to his library, where he found wonders and excellences not found elsewhere. He composed many works on metaphysics and natural philosophy. Ibn Khallikān states that he authored some one hundred works, large and small, among them al-Qānūn, al-Shifā’, al-Najāṭ, al-Ishārāt, Salāmān wa Absāl, and others, and that he was among the philosophers of Islam; it is recorded that he died of colic in Hamadān⁽²⁾ — though some say in Iṣfahān,⁽³⁾ the former being more reliable — on a Friday in the month of Ramaḍān, at the age of fifty-eight. I say: al-Ghazālī later summarized his views in *Maqāṣid al-Falāsifa*, then refuted him across twenty discussions in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, declaring him an unbeliever on three of these — namely, his belief in the eternity of the world, his denial of bodily resurrection, and his claim that God does not know particulars — while regarding the rest as merely heretical innovation; it is said that he repented at the time of his death, though God knows best.”⁽⁴⁾

It is evident that Ibn Kathīr’s entry on Ibn Sīnā drew on Ibn Khallikān’s *Wafayāt al-A’yān*, in addition to a critique of Ibn Sīnā’s views informed by his study of Imām al-Ghazālī’s positions and writings. As for jurists, he provided entries on most of the jurist-companions; by way of example, here is his entry on

Abū Sa’īd al-Khudrī: “Abū Sa’īd al-Khudrī, that is Sa’d ibn Mālik ibn Sinān al-Anṣārī al-Khazrajī, an eminent Companion among the jurist-companions; his first campaign was at the Trench, and he was present with the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) at twelve battles. Many Hadiths are related on his authority, as well as on the authority of a group of other Companions, and he was in turn related from by the Successors and a group of Companions. He was among the noble, virtuous, and learned of the Companions. Al-Wāqidī and others state that he died in the year seventy-four, though some say ten years before that — God knows best.”⁽⁵⁾

Regarding men of letters, we may cite, by way of example, his entry on al-Ṣāhib ibn ‘Abbād: “He is Ismā’īl ibn ‘Abbād ibn ‘Abbās ibn ‘Abbād ibn Aḥmad ibn Idrīs al-Ṭāliqānī, Abū al-Qāsim, the renowned vizier known as Kāfi al-Kufāt, vizier to Mu’ayyid al-Dawla, son of Rukn al-Dawla ibn Būya. He possessed great learning, virtue, and eloquence, together with remarkable generosity and kindness toward scholars and the poor; each year he would send five thousand dīnārs to Baghdad to be spent on the people of learning. He held a high standing in letters and authored works across various fields of knowledge, and he amassed a vast library that required some four hundred camels to transport. None among the viziers of the Banū Būya equaled him, nor came close to him, in the sum of his virtues.”⁽⁶⁾

As for judges, he provided entries on many of them; by way of example, we may take the judge Shurayḥ, of whom Ibn Kathīr writes: “Shurayḥ ibn al-Ḥārith ibn Qays al-Qāḍī had lived through the pre-Islamic era; ‘Umar appointed him judge over Kūfa, and he remained in that post for sixty-five years. He was learned, just, abounding in goodness, of fine character, and possessed of much good humor; he had a smooth, beardless face. Accounts differ regarding his lineage, his age, and the date of his death, though Ibn Khallikān

(1) Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya*, vol. 12, p. 54.

(2) Hamadān: a city in Persia. Hishām al-Kalbī stated that Hamadān and Iṣfahān were two brothers, each of whom built his own city; some Syriac chronicles of kings and lands say that the founder of Hamadān was called Karmī ibn Ḥalīmūn, while certain Persian scholars held that the name Hamadān derived from “Nādima,” meaning “the beloved.” Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu’jam al-Buldān*, vol. 5, p. 410.

(3) Iṣfahān: a great and renowned city in Persia, one of the most celebrated of cities, whose grandeur writers often describe in terms verging on excess; the name also denotes the entire surrounding province. Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu’jam al-Buldān*, vol. 1, p. 206.

(4) Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya*, vol. 12, p. 54.

(5) Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya*, vol. 9, pp. 359–360.

(6) Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya*, vol. 11, pp. 359–360.

avored the view that he died in this same year (87 AH).”(1)

It may be said that Ibn Kathīr followed the approach of Ibn al-Jawzī and those who represent his school, such as Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī and others, in treating the history of later centuries, and was deeply influenced by them in his detailed, expansive, and lengthy biographical entries, and in his recording of scholarly and cultural reports, as well as his interest in extraordinary phenomena and rare curiosities.

As for the history of his own era, he recorded what he had witnessed with his own eyes, heard with his own ears, learned from official documents and personal correspondence, and gathered orally from informants.(2)

It is clear from the foregoing that Ibn Kathīr did not confine al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya to the recording of political and military events alone; rather, he gave considerable attention to biographical entries on scholars, jurists, men of letters, and judges, making these an essential component of his historical material, taking care to show the influence of these figures on the scholarly, cultural, and administrative life of the Islamic state. Ibn Kathīr's biographical entries likewise reveal the breadth of his learning and his reliance on multiple sources, particularly works of biography and prosopography, as well as his evident debt to the methodology of earlier historians such as al-Ṭabarī, Ibn al-Jawzī, and Ibn al-Athīr, in linking historical events to those who shaped them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study clarifies that Al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya (The Beginning and the End) represents a unique model in Islamic historiography. Ibn Kathir skillfully combined narrative storytelling with analytical criticism, while maintaining a balance between evaluation and review, all according to a well-established scholarly methodology. The author distinguished between authentic and weak narrations, relying primarily on the Holy Quran and the Noble Prophetic Hadith as the two main criteria. He also critiqued the Isra'iliyyat (Judeo-Christian traditions) and carefully balanced various sources. The study further highlights Ibn Kathir's mastery in employing the chronological method, with special attention to the Prophetic biography (Seerah) and the biographical accounts of prominent figures. This approach made his book a comprehensive encyclopedia of Islamic life. His reliance on personal observation and oral reports for certain events, along with his citation of poetry and historical texts, gives his work a distinctive documentary value. Thus, Al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya

remains a trusted and authoritative reference for researchers in Islamic history, and a pioneering model in combining objective criticism with a balanced historical perspective.

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(2) Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya, vol. 1, p. 114.

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