AL-ṬABARĪ
A MEDIEVAL MUSLIM HISTORIAN AND HIS WORK

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PREFACE

The papers presented in this volume were given at a conference held by the Institute for Middle East Studies in the University of St. Andrews. I am grateful to the British Academy and to Bill Pagan and the Honeyman Trust for financial support for this occasion.

I am sadly aware that these papers have taken longer to prepare than I would have wished, and I offer my unreserved apologies to the contributors for this delay. However, I firmly believe that all the papers are still as relevant and important as they were when first delivered, and, apart from some updating of the bibliography, I have not altered them.

I am grateful to Professor Giovanni Canova for kindly giving permission for the publication of Arnaud Vrolijk’s paper, which has already appeared in the Quaderni di Studi Arabi. I would also like to express my gratitude to all the contributors for their patience during the long wait for the appearance of this volume.

I am indebted to many people who helped me with this publication and wish to mention the contributions of Judy Ahola whose hard work is greatly appreciated. I wish to thank Wadad al-Qadi, who made many helpful suggestions, and Barbara Hird, registered indexer of the Society of Indexers, for preparing the valuable index.

Above all, my sincerest thanks to Larry Conrad, whose thorough editorial efforts were essential for the publication of this project.

Hugh Kennedy
St. Andrews, December 2006

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Al-Ṭabarī and the “History of Salvation”

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This paper is intended to be an introduction to three of my articles that all concern the interaction between theology, on the one hand, and narrative and myth, on the other hand, in the part of the Taʾrīkh of al-Ṭabarī where he deals with “universal” history before the coming of Islam.1

The “History of Salvation” and the “Basic Matrix of Religious Choice”2

The expression “history of salvation” demands some explanation. Neither the Qurʾān nor Islam believe in progress within Revelation, unlike Christianity. They also do not believe that salvation comes from a messenger who is its architect (for instance the Saviour or the Redeemer in Christianity); therefore it follows that the concept of salvation differs in Christianity and Islam. In both cases, however, we face a sacred history whose goal is to show paradigms and models or counter-models which are supposed to conform (or not conform) to the divine plan for humanity.

Muḥammad did not view himself as bringing something radically new [“Say : I am not an innovation (mā kuntu bidʿan) among the

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Messengers”): rather he only brought new guidance to his people, and that only because the supposed “first Revelation” had sunk into oblivion. Islam presents itself as a reform. This new Revelation is at the same time the most ancient that was registered by God in the Heavenly Book, ever since, so to speak, copies or imitations of it have been made. Prophets are only Messengers through whom God Himself speaks. So: “All history [of the times before Islam, and especially the history of the Messengers and the Kings] becomes a set of mere rigid examples”.

The Interest of Caliphs and State Dignitaries in History

The history of times that we consider mythical was considered as an example, so we can understand why the caliphs took such an interest in the universal chronicles. It is this part of the chronicles, and above all the chronicle of al-Tabari, which will hold our attention here, in other words universal history before the coming of Islam.

It was not a matter of chance that the caliphs took a special interest in history or that historical instruction held a special place in the education of young princes, even if some of the narratives in which we see them listening, for example, to the reading of the history of the foreign peoples and kings, of their conduct (siyar) in the government of their subjects, may be topoi similar to the scene of the Book of Esther where the Biblical Ahasuerus spends his sleepless night in listening to the reading of the book of the Annals. It is said that they used to put down the high deeds of the Persian kings in annals (The Annals of the Kings of Media and of Persia; Esther 10:2).

As for al-Tabari, we have shown elsewhere how much he was in contact with state dignitaries, especially in Baghdad. He became for instance the private tutor of Abū Yahyā, one of the sons of al-Mutawakkil’s vizier, Abū 1-Hasan ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Yahyā ibn Khāqān during his first vizierate: 236-47/850-61.

It appears to me that al-Tabari was a competitor with other scholars in three fields of knowledge. I think that he wanted to improve on the work of his predecessors: in law, he wanted perhaps to do better than al-Shāfi‘i, not only because he sought to establish his own madhhab, but also because the introduction of his Kitāb al-latīf was known as al-Riṣāla. In hadith he probably wished to compete with Ibn Ḥanbal and with Abū ‘Ubayd. In history, he probably wished to continue and improve on Ibn Ishāq, especially for the pre-Prophetic and Prophetic periods.

The Book of the Emendation of Traditions may appear as a kind of glory hole, but it was in fact in the spirit of his author an essential complement to his Kitāb al-latīf fi ahkām sharā‘ī al-islām, in the same way that the Kitāb al-umm

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11 T. Khalidi, Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period (Cambridge, 1994), 117.
14 For him, see D. Sourdel, Le vizirat ‘abbāsīde de 749 à 936 (Damascus, 1959), I, 274-86.
15 See Gilliot, Exégèse, langue et théologie, 40/“Les œuvres de Tabari”, 50.
of al-Shafi'i cannot be severed from his Risāla. In a certain way, al-Tabari had an even more universal ambition than al-Shafi'i's, because of his exegetical and historical production. Three scholars at least had a great influence on him: Ibn Isḥaq (historiography and exegesis), Abu Ubayd (language, Qur’ānic readings, hadith) and al-Shafi’i (traditions, law, and methodology of law). It seems that al-Tabari wanted to do more and better than they did, drawing also on other exegetical, historical, grammatical sources, indeed even on dialectical theology (kalām), etc., and putting some of his own ideas in it.

Al-Tabari and “the Essence of the Matrix Underlying Religious Choice”

Even if al-Tabari was neither a philosopher nor a specialist in religious anthropology, it seems to us that the introduction of his Ta’rikh provides matter for serious thought, because we can extract from it what builds the “essence of the matrix underlying religious choice”, which consists in the ambiguity of the experience of Time: “the division between what is always already there, which reduces us to nothing, and what has never happened, which projects us into the opportunity for freedom of action.”

Al-Tabari says: First, however, I shall begin with what for us comes properly and logically first, namely the explanation of: what is time? how long is its total extent? its first beginning, and final end; whether before God’s creation of [time] there was anything else. Whether it will suffer annihilation and whether there will be something other than the face of the Highly Praised, the Exalted Creator. What was it that was before God’s creation of time and what will be after its final annihilation? How did God’s creation of it begin and how will its annihilation take place? Proof that there is nothing eternal (a parte ante) except God Unique and Powerful, “to Whom belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and what is between them and what is underneath the soil”.

This must be done briefly and concisely, for in this book of ours we do not intend to present the arguments concerning time but rather the dates of past kings mentioned by us and summaries of their history, the times of the messengers and prophets and how long they lived, the days of the early caliphs (mabālīgh wilāyātihim) and some of their biographical data, and the extent of the territories under their control, as well as the events that took place in their age.

Al-Tabari will treat of what was “always already there” which reduces us to be nothing when he will speak about time, of which it is said in the supposed Prophetic tradition said at sunset: “What remains of the world as compared to what has passed of it is just like the rest of the day as compared to what has passed of it”.

The Appearance of Change and the Supposed “Divine Plan”

In contrast to the appearance of change which is a characteristic of societies, the birth and the death of dynasties, we have a clear statement from the beginning, about the idea of what is innate, perpetual and unchanging, as if everything should be ordained by an immutable source while change seems to be evidenced by the historical or pseudo-historical events. It is the meaning of the numerous and contradictory traditions quoted by al-Tabari on the first object created by God: was it the Pen or the Intellect? The legends on the anteriority of the creation of the Pen have been used, as everybody knows, to support the predestinarian theological thesis, but before that they express the wish to conceive change by thinking about the primacy of origins and the immutable.

So it is also for human deeds, whose diversity is reduced to a series of opposing patterns within the legends about the prophets. It is also the case for the narratives on the human groups that existed before Islam: the generous favours of God to which men answer by praising Him and by behavior that conforms to His Law, or, on the contrary, by being ungrateful and refractory. As for the rulers, God’s answer consists either in establishing the caliphs and the kings with authority or in annihilating them:

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17 For these influences and many others, see Gilliot, Exégèse, langue et théologie, passim.  
19 According to Gauchet, Le désenchantement du monde.  
20 Ibid.  
21 Rearrangement of Sūrat Tāhā (20) 6: huk ma fi l samawati wa in fi l ardī wa-ma bānāthami wa ma (tabiq l ilāmi), 3:189, 5:18, etc.  
24 Ta’rikh, I, 10, 12: History, I, 176.  
25 See Gilliot, “Mythe et théologie”.  

Abu Ja'far said: In this book of mine, I shall mention whatever information has reached us about kings throughout the ages from when our Lord began the creation of His creation to its annihilation. There were messengers sent by God, kings placed in authority, or caliphs established in caliphal succession. God had early on bestowed His benefits and favours upon some of them. They were grateful for His favours, and He thus gave them more favours and bounty in addition to those bestowed by Him upon them in their fleeting life, or He postponed the increase and stored it up for them with Himself.

There were also others who were not grateful for His favours, and so He deprived them of the favours He had bestowed upon them early on and hastened for them His revenge. There were also others who were not grateful for His favours; He let them enjoy them until the time of their death and perdition. Every one of them whom I shall mention in this book of mine will be mentioned in conjunction with his time, but [only] summaries of the events in his day and age will be added, since an exhaustive treatment is not possible in a lifetime and makes books too long. This will be combined with references to the length of their natural life and the time of their death.26

On the one hand, the appearance of change, of the transforming action performed by individuals and groups is repressed, or at least concealed and contained, for instance by the creation or the existence in the beginning of “divine objects” like the Pen, the Divine Memory (dhikr), the Throne, etc. On the other hand, a way of behaving (so it is not all pre-ordained) is proposed to man, whose behaviour is presented in those archetypes of “well doing”, which the “messengers”, “good and just kings” are supposed to be. The outcome is the following paradox: whereas it would seem that events are the mere repetition of something that occurred in illo tempore, which is a mythical time, in accordance with the primitive essence of religion that expresses itself in a tendency against history and change (all is given ab ovo, from the beginning), a historical space is opened, even if one recognizes in it the same great deeds and the same errors and faults (al-mahásin wa-l-masawi').

The vacuity and the vanity of man, symbolised by the reiteration of the theme *Ubi sunt qui ante nos in mundo fuere?* (Where are those who were before us in the world?) — become an incitement to “well doing”, in accordance with that is supposed to be the Law of God. In that way, there is a connection between the repetition of models that are for us mythical (for instance, the figures of Adam, Job or Jonah who have never existed) and the present government of the community by the caliphs and the great clerks of the state. Hārūn al-Rashīd would have asked: “Where are the kings and the sons of the kings?”27 according to the topos *Ubi sunt qui ante nos in mondo fuere?* Later, al-Ṭūrūsī (d. 520/1125) has a long page on that theme in his *Mirror for Princes*, which he dedicated to the Fāṭimid vizier al-Ma'mūn al-Batā’ī (crucified in 519/1125)28 after he had been released from prison in al-Fustāt: “Where is Adam [...] ? Where is Noah [...] ? Where are those who have commanded troops and armies [...] ?”

The main task of al-Ṭabarî in the first part of his *Ta‘rīkh*, which concerns mainly mythical times, events and figures (creation of the world, narratives on ancient kings, ancient nations and the supposed “prophets”), consisted in giving historical form to data collected by the old traditionists and historiographers, material that was also present in his *Qur'ānic Commentary*, which was composed before his *Ta‘rīkh.*

When al-Ṭabarî wrote his *Ta‘rīkh*, at least the first part from the Creation to the biography of the Prophet, he used a literary method

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28 D.M. Dunlop, in *EI* (French edition), I, 1124.


Toutefois, les vizirs détestaient jadis que les rois fussent la moindre notion des biographies et des annales, de peur que les rois ne parvinssent à comprendre certaines choses que les vizirs n’aimaient pas que les rois comprirent”.

30 He mentions his *Commentary* with his title, in *Ta‘rīkh*, I, 87, 89/History, I, 258. It is worth noting the chronological order of the composition of some works of al-Ṭabarî: his *Commentary* comes in the fifth position; his *Ta‘rīkh*, in the eighth position; his *Taḥālīf al-aḥādīth*, between the second and the third position; See Rosenthal, in *History*, I, 154.
al-Tabarî and the “History of Salvation”

The Binary Opposition and the Patterns of Mythological Mentality

From the very beginning of his Ta’rîkh, al-Tabarî involves his work in a binary opposition typical of the mythological mentality and representation.† creation of the universe/its annihilation; the two figures of man seen from a theological point of view, according to “the plan of God”: those upon whom He bestows His generous favour and who are grateful to Him/those who are ungrateful to Him and who seem to prosper for a time, but who will bring upon themselves His revenge. That means from the beginning that the reading of history will be a mythico-theological one. This history is seen from the point of view of what is considered as the sunna of God (i.e. His plan and His decree, which are not subject to change), as juxtaposed to the good or bad permanent features of human behaviour symbolized by certain figures, often mythical ones: the mythical proto-man, Adam, the supposed “messengers”, “prophets”, the good and the bad kings.

The binary and dualistic Qur’ânic sketch of the opposition between good and evil is not only reasserted by al-Tabarî, but is extended to the history of other neighbouring nations, for instance the Persians, as in the example of the opposition between the tyrannical and monstrous potentate (Biwarâb/al-Dâhâk) and the just king (Fârîdûn). What explains the historical data is expressed in the good or bad relationship that man has with God. To the community of salvation, the descendants of Adam who were obedient to God, are opposed the companions of the Devil, who are disobedient to Him. History grows in the struggle between the two, the struggle between civitas dei and civitas diaboli. “God willing, we shall mention both the followers of Adam’s way and the party of Iblîs and imitators of his errors who proceeded along the path of either Adam and Iblîs, and [we shall mention] what God did with each group.”

Legendary Materials and “Theological Reason”

Some of his successors in historiography were more sceptical than him about the relation between legendary materials and their own conception of history. Miskawayh (d. 421/1030), for instance, rejected a great part of the antediluvian legends because they could not be accepted as historical.

This does not mean that al-Tabarî was absolutely lacking in critical sense, but his project was different from Miskawayh’s. For al-Tabarî, historiography has nothing to do with rational argumentation:

The reader should know that with respect to all I have mentioned and made it a condition to set down in this book of ours, I rely upon traditions and reports that I have transmitted and that I attribute to their transmitters. I rely only very exceptionally upon what is learned through rational arguments and produced by internal thought processes. For no knowledge of the history of men of the past and of recent men and events is attainable by those who were not able to observe them and did not live in their time, except through information and transmission provided by informants and transmitters. This knowledge cannot be brought out by reason or produced by internal thought processes. This book of mine may [be found to] contain some informa-

§ See Gilliot, “Récit, mythe”, 281-83.
¶ This sketch has sometimes been reassumed in modern and contemporary times, for instance by the Shi’i Iraqi Sayyid M. Bâqir al-Šâdir (1935-80), born in Baghdad, then living in Najaf, who wrote against the Marxist conception of history. He established an Islamic anti-communist party after the Iraqi revolution of July 1958. He was put into jail several times, then executed. See F. M. Azziz, “The Meaning of History: a


Ta’rîkh, I, 164; History, I, 335.

The concept of “theological reason” or “Islamic reason” that was brought out by M. Arkoun.

tion, mentioned by us on the authority of certain men of the past, which the reader may disapprove of and the listener may find detestable, because he can find nothing sound and no real meaning in it. In such cases, he should know that it is not our fault that such information comes to him, but the fault of someone who transmitted it to us. We have merely reported it as it was reported to us.40

Nevertheless all these materials were used by him for a definite purpose, that is to write an imperial history that should be at the same time a “history of salvation” in which the Islamic community should appear not only as the continuation of previous communities, but above all as the restoration of the supposed initial “divine plan” for humanity.

The Historical Work of al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī: the Author’s Attitude towards the Sources

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The question raised by M.J. de Goeje in his work Mémoire sur la conquête de la Syrie concerning the authenticity of the contradictory historical accounts of the conquest of Syria by the Muslims actually opened up the controversy surrounding Islamic history and historiography. Fred M. Donner has prepared an excellent concise survey representing the totality of research carried out on this issue from the second half of the nineteenth century through the early eighties of the present century. This survey appears in the introduction to the English translation of A.A. Dūrī’s work.1

It is well known that this research has examined a broad range of topics and has addressed the question from various viewpoints. But, as A. Noth has pointed out,2 it is easy to distinguish two typical tendencies in these works and to divide the research into two main groups. The first of these, which includes F. Rosenthal, Nabia Abbott, A.A. Dūrī, and Fuat Sezgin, deals with the methods and style by which the historical material was passed down, the development of an Islamic historical tradition, the traditions’ points of origin, and the relationship between written and oral material. The second group, which includes the research of M.J. de Goeje, Julius Wellhausen, Leone Caetani, and N.A. Mednikov, focuses on the traditions themselves.


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