



Boaz Shoshan



Poetics of Islamic  
Historiography

*Deconstructing  
Ṭabarī's History*



BRILL

POETICS OF ISLAMIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

# ISLAMIC HISTORY AND CIVILIZATION

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# POETICS OF ISLAMIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

Deconstructing Ṭabarī's *History*

BY

BOAZ SHOSHAN



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In Memory of

Shoshana Milstein  
Nahum Shoshan  
Raya Shoshan



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## PREFACE

Like most students of history I have been trained to regard historiography—be it an ancient “source” or a modern “reconstruction”—as essentially a body of fact. Recently, my approach to historical writing has undergone a change of orientation, due to what might be described as a sharpened reflexivity, and the present study is the result. My intellectual journey into what, for me, have been new alleys of research has been influenced, in particular, by two outstanding scholars whom I have not met and who have worked in disciplines somewhat remote from my own.

In falling under the spell of Hayden White, probably the most self-reflective historian of our generation in arguing for a study of historiography as not only a product of report (about history), but also of ideology and literature, I find myself in quite a broad company. In the work of Meir Sternberg, a literary theorist and student of biblical poetics, I see a model of analyzing a purportedly historical work with the tools that literary theory offers. While this book does not set out to emulate these two scholars’ conceptual categories and praxes in strict fashion, I have found them, together with others, a vital source of stimulation in the search for my own approach to Ṭabarī’s historical text.

White’s *Metahistory*, published exactly three decades ago, proved to be a trail-blazing work. But, as Nancy Partner, one of White’s intellectual disciples, has quite recently observed, the historian’s profession as a whole has refrained from taking seriously any approach to history that is too literary. For the most part, historians have either ignored or simply rejected the critical possibilities opened up by literary theory, as if they stand to lose from its intrusion into their discipline. The present work attempts to show that resorting to a critical approach in the analysis of a classical historical text is highly desirable, for the new light it sheds on it. Besides, it can teach us a thing or two about the cultural norms and conceptual assumptions that played a role in the production of that text.

Focusing on the historiographical text, or “the past as text”—to use Gabrielle Spiegel’s apt title of a recent collection of articles on medieval historiography—rather than seeking to verify its “real”

referents, problematizes, I think, the very status ascribed by modern scholarship to a work like Ṭabari's *History*. It questions its usual characterization and mode of scrutiny. Such a focus, I dare say, offers nothing less than a paradigmatic alternative to the *modus operandi* of conventional historians. And although the poetics presented here theorizes on the basis of one—albeit exceptional—magnum opus, I would argue, in the spirit of this book's ambitious title, that to a large extent the general validity of this poetics transcends the single historical work that I have studied.

Part One sets out the plan of the *History*'s poetics by elucidating the underlying structure, the main techniques and some of the implicit ideologies characterizing Ṭabari's book. Put more concretely, my main purpose in this section is to expose, by means of various examples, the tension obtaining between the two major poles emerging from a "subversive" reading of the *History*. On the one hand, there is the sources' unmistakable surface claim to narrate as mimetically as possible. As I argue here, the scores of narrators presented in the texture of the *History* made it a high priority to persuade the reader that their narrative was true and credible. Yet, recounting "facts" was not their sole objective, as an attentive reading reveals. On numerous occasions, and with varying degrees of clarity, one can see that they had further objectives in mind. And, while I would not go as far as Meisami does in a recent book on medieval Persian historiography, where she resorts to the notion of "rhetorical history," I certainly concur with her view that rhetoric plays a significant role in the historian's quest to achieve certain goals, not the least of which is persuasion.

I try, then, to meet the narrators of the *History* on their own turf, as it were, but not, as has so often been done, by scrutinizing their factual reliability. My interest is in the simultaneously mimetic and non-mimetic practices in which they engage (the latter being, interestingly, contrary to their implied intentions), or, to put it somewhat differently, in the rather two poles of the concept of *mimesis*, the classical and (post) modern, representation and textual performance, respectively. My argument is that both *mimesis* and its antithesis affect the production of "history" and are practiced precisely to that end. Here, I suppose, I should emphasize the sort of playful divergence obtaining between the medieval narrators' own conviction that they are telling the "truth," a conviction I am trying to bring into relief, and my own suspicion of it. And thus, while I do endeavor to recon-

struct (indeed) the underlying assumptions, programmatic aims and unavowed convictions that they bring to the task of history writing, my ultimate purpose is to deconstruct all these as well.

In the early part of the book, in Chapters 1 and 2 in particular, I try to strike a balance between a representation of the conceptual principles and examples that demonstrate and embody their actual practice. I am certainly aware that there is always a risk involved in such cases of producing a tedious catalogue. To avoid overburdening the text, I have relegated many more references to the notes. Also, in this part I draw the reader's attention to a necessary (albeit much neglected) distinction between Ṭabari's own role as historian/editor and the product, that is, the *History* as a whole—largely a composite work of many writers and “sources.” As a result, one can see that part of Ṭabari's role simply duplicates the role of the sources, yet, that in other respects Ṭabari's input as editor is unique.

Part Two expatiates on specific points discussed in more fleeting fashion in earlier chapters. In this part, I address poetic features present either in Ṭabari's sources or such as emerge from his own intervention. These features require meticulous study, since they fulfill a function in the historical account of some major, nay formative, episodes of early Islamic history that were to prove crucial in shaping Islamic “collective identity.” I show how a *poetical* approach to the historical text may fundamentally differ from the conventional one and how it exposes the events studied in a new light and to a different interpretation. Admittedly, I examine events that are not only of first-rate importance but also of a particular promise for poetic analysis. However, other events of later periods that are treated in the *History* could be subject to a similar—if not as detailed—an examination.

The reader should not mistake my delving into narrative details as yet another attempt at conventional reconstruction. The details I bring to bear are no less necessary for a project that is primarily of a deconstructive nature. My concern is with the ambiguous effect that the historical stories create, or with the effect created against the narrators' best intentions. In other words, my analysis is sometimes occupied, not with authorial intention, but with what may have escaped authorial attention.

As a historian venturing into the use of literary theory, I am aware of possible deficiencies from which my use of recently acquired tools may suffer. Others, more experienced in the practice of critical theory,

would no doubt have produced a different result. In this regard, and to the further interpretive potential latent in the *History*, this study does not pretend to be exhaustive. I nevertheless hope that it opens up new ways of approaching Ṭabari's opus and Islamic historiography in general. I regard the present product as an invitation to further reading, along similar or more diversified lines.

The reading (and re-reading) of the thousands of pages of the *History* has turned out to be the sort of constantly adjusted timetable so well described by Linda Orr in her introduction to *Headless History* (1990). Orr compares the reading of histories (French Romantic, in her case) to training for a marathon or practicing the piano: an original schedule of fifty pages an hour for five hours a day that is cut down to thirty pages an hour, three hours a day. At least in my case, the "thirty pages an hour" had to be read, re-read and sometimes read yet again. I should like to think that the effort was worthwhile.

I owe thanks to Michael Cook of Princeton University for reading parts of the manuscript and Ella Landau-Tasserion of the Hebrew University for reading chapter 5. Both made important suggestions. Alexander Borg and Amiel Schotz of Ben Gurion University helped to produce a manuscript of more elegant style. The Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung and the French Embassy in Israel provided financial assistance for brief periods of research in Germany and France respectively. A two-month stay at the CMES of Harvard University in the spring of 2002 gave me an opportunity to consult material at the excellent Weidener Library.

When, almost ten years ago, I first started my work on this book, my parents, their respective interests far removed from medieval Islamic historiography, were not quite young. Unsurprisingly, they were anxious to see the project completed and, on occasion, although they never said it, must have asked themselves (or each other) why it required "so much time." I do regret that both did not live long enough to see the end result. This book is a tribute to their memory.

## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND BIBLIOGRAPHIC CITATION

Arabic words are transliterated in this book according to the system employed by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES). The article *al-* has been elided except for names preceded by Abū or Ibn and names and terms that are part of constructs. Dates are given in their Hijrī terms, followed by the Christian equivalent. *History* in the text and in the notes is a short reference to Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*. Volume and page numbers for the *History* in the notes refer to the standard English translation published by SUNY Press; they are followed in square brackets by their equivalents in the Arabic edition of E. J. Brill. Bibliographic references in the notes are given in abbreviated form whenever a full reference is listed in the Select Bibliography.



## ABBREVIATIONS

BSOAS	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
<i>E.I.</i> <sup>1</sup>	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> , first edition
<i>E.I.</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> , new edition
IC	<i>Islamic Culture</i>
IJMES	<i>International Journal of Middle East Studies</i>
IQ	<i>Islamic Quarterly</i>
<i>JĀ</i>	<i>Journal Asiatique</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JRAS	<i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i>
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
MEJ	<i>Middle East Journal</i>
MESA Bulletin	<i>Middle East Studies Association Bulletin</i>
SI	<i>Studia Islamica</i>
ZDMG	<i>Zeitschrift der Deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>





## INTRODUCTION

What, then, are the criteria by which history may be known? . . .  
History is first of all a story . . .<sup>1</sup>  
History is about telling stories. It is not a repository of facts or anecdotes . . .<sup>2</sup>

In a presidential address to the Royal Historical Society delivered some decades ago, R. W. Southern made a point familiar to most practicing historians, namely, that they avail themselves of chronicles and histories “as quarries of facts that require to be sifted and purified to make them useable.” Southern’s exemplar for this operation is the nineteenth-century William Stubbs, who may be considered Oxford’s first professional historian. In fact, Southern implies that the historian’s role as exemplified in Stubbs’ paradigm of work has not undergone substantial change and that it still guides the historian’s profession.<sup>3</sup>

Carrying the argument even further, what I find relevant to the present discussion is that—to evoke Nietzsche’s famous dictum—such use of the historical work (“history”) as it is ascribed to Stubbs (and still resorted to by the historian of the early third millennium) entails its abuse. In fact, in their introduction to a recent collection of historical studies based on medieval judicial records, the editors, Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, present the reader with a considerably less flattering image of the working historian than Southern’s portrayal of Stubbs at work. They go so far as to characterize historians (metaphorically, of course) “as thieves, as persons who practice a form of grave robbing.” Historians “appropriate and dismember the past,” they dismantle historical reports, and all this and worse they perpetrate to produce their works of history.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Barzun, *Clio and the Doctors: Psycho-History, Quanto-History and History* (Chicago, 1974), 93.

<sup>2</sup> Lynn Hunt, “History as Gesture; or, The Scandal of History,” in Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson, eds., *Consequences of Theory* (Baltimore, 1991), 102.

<sup>3</sup> Southern, “Aspects,” 173–4.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, eds., *History from Crime* (Baltimore, 1994), VII–VIII.

Now, whether we tend to agree with this morbid image, or view it with some distaste,<sup>5</sup> this much seems to be clear and worth pondering: the historiographical text, even when believed, or better still, “proven,” to be factual, often adds up to more than the sum of its facts. One could safely argue—although against the convention—that the significance of the historiographical text, as of any text, does not necessarily lie in its referentiality—the latter, in fact, being a dubious assumption. Rather, it resides, to a considerable extent, in the manner whereby the writing engages the reader, in the means to which it resorts in order to produce meaning and effect; in other words, in its *textuality*. For, although it is a linguistic and rhetorical artifact constrained by genre rules specifying reference to conventionally agreed-upon facts, the historiographical text is not merely a vehicle for transmitting these facts but a literary creation in its own right.<sup>6</sup> As Monika Otter puts it, “one need not espouse the extreme, ‘postmodern,’ skeptical formulation that history is nothing but discourse, that there is no reality outside the text, in order to acknowledge that history is a linguistic construct, a text.”<sup>7</sup>

Such, for example, was the central idea informing an innovative, though much neglected study in which Leo Braudy, about thirty years ago, pointed out some of the poetic devices in Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: achieving “mastery of time” through the juxtaposition of eras; the breaking of a straightforward time sequence; the increasing intrusion of the first person pronoun in the second half of the book, and such like devices.<sup>8</sup> For Braudy, the shape of history in Gibbon’s masterpiece

... is pre-eminently a construction, a literary work with aesthetic rather than systematic order and coherence . . . Gibbon’s controlling presence becomes more and more palpable, ordering, assorting, varying, and

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<sup>5</sup> For the “plunder” of medieval Arabic histories for information, see El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> For the importance of a holistic approach to the historical work that looks beyond the facts and seeks to understand the entirety of the author’s message and purpose, and the way they are achieved, see K. Allin Luther, “Islamic Rhetoric and the Persian Historians, 1000–1300 A.D.,” in James A. Bellamy, ed., *Studies in Near Eastern Culture and History in Memory of Ernest T. Abdel-Massih* (Ann Arbor, 1990), 96–7. For the medieval Muslim historian’s primary interest lying less in recording the facts of history than in the construction of a meaningful narrative, see Meisami, *Persian Historiography*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Otter, *Inventiones*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Braudy, *Narrative*, 241–2, 258.

qualifying. By its conclusion the *Decline and Fall* has become an enclosed object, to be contemplated as much for its formal and detailed beauty as for its accurate transcription of what was.<sup>9</sup>

Gibbon, as Braudy points out, followed the stipulation that historical perspective is similar in many ways to the creative vision of the novelist or epic poet. "From facts the historian constructs an imaginative pattern called history, which is altered or reinforced by new facts. But without the prior work of the imagination . . . the facts are useless." "The sportive play of fancy and learning," is Gibbon's characterization of the process by which the factual elements and the creative flair are combined.<sup>10</sup>

Gibbon's conception of the nature of historiography should come as no surprise if we recall that the "natural" division of literature and history as non-communicating opposites is surely not primordial but historical, a creation of the Romantic period. It has undoubtedly informed most historical investigation in the last two centuries and has propelled historians to side with the Romantics against the men of Enlightenment. Thus, in the modern eye, history must be purged of fiction, since the opposition of "history" to "fiction" is tantamount to that of truth to falsehood and the exclusion of the latter guarantees the scientific rigor of the former.<sup>11</sup> It is only in the modern context of so-called scientific history that a writer like Tacitus should possibly be banished from the historians' camp, since he represented history as essentially a clash of characters, and as a spectacle at that.<sup>12</sup>

However, upon critical analysis, the modernist claim appears quite illusory. As Nancy Partner has recently argued, "Only the narcissistic shortsightedness of a rather too self-flattering professionalism prevents historians, as a discipline, from recognizing that the basic literary

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 218–21, 266. For an analysis of the *Decline* that takes into account Gibbon's creativity, see also David Womersley, *The Transformation of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> White, *Tropics*, 123; Suzanne Gearhart, *The Open Boundary of History and Fiction: A Critical Approach to the French Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1984), 3–14; Gossman, *Between History and Literature*, 230. Other scholars antedate the separation. For Thomas More's *Utopia* as a new Renaissance notion of separating fact and fiction, see Joseph M. Levine, *The Autonomy of History: Truth and Method from Erasmus to Gibbon* (Chicago, 1999), IX.

<sup>12</sup> Rosenmeyer, "History or Poetry?" 244.

forms and authorial intentions established in Greek and Latin antiquity have continued, with astonishingly few alterations, into modern times.<sup>13</sup> In other words, *pace* Aristotle's programmatic, antithetical depiction of *historia* and *poesia*,<sup>14</sup> writers throughout the ages have preferred to underscore the affinity between the two. The sixth-century Agathias of Myrrhina, who had originally concentrated on poetry, recalled how a friend encouraged him to engage himself in history writing, since there was no gulf between the two: "[T]hey are close relatives from the same tribe and separated from each other only by metre."<sup>15</sup> As late as the nineteenth century, Macaulay urged the "truly great historian" to "reclaim those materials which the novelist has appropriated."<sup>16</sup> For him, history was "a debatable land . . . [that] lies on the confines of two distinct territories." It is sometimes fiction sometimes theory.<sup>17</sup> And although, in the end, history is essentially different from and superior to fiction, Macaulay earlier had perceived a considerable overlap between the historian's talents and those of the great dramatist.<sup>18</sup> He was not alone in subscribing to this view: that the historian belongs to the artists more than to the scholars was suggested by Theodor Mommsen, curiously enough, in a Berlin where Ranke reigned supreme.<sup>19</sup>

Turning to our own time, one can point to Southern's assertion—although, as he admits, it is "an assertion that not everyone will agree with"—that "the first duty of a historian is to produce works

<sup>13</sup> Partner, "Historicity," 31.

<sup>14</sup> "[T]he difference between the historian and the poet . . . lies in the fact that the historian speaks of what has happened, the poet of the kind of things that *can* happen," quoted in Gossman, *Between History and Literature*, 231. H. G. Gadamer, among others, has shown that Aristotle's position was much more complex than suggested in his *Poetics*. See Bernard P. Dauenhauer, "Introduction," in Bernard P. Dauenhauer, ed., *At the Nexus of Philosophy and History* (Athens, Georgia, 1987), XVIII–XIX n. 2. See also on this point Rosenmeyer, "History or Poetry?" 239–40.

<sup>15</sup> To Agathias, the difference between poetry and history is that in the former praise can be given without reservation; in the latter it needs to be proportionate. See Rosenmeyer, "History or Poetry?" 244. See also Southern, "Aspects," 177–8; A. J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography* (London, 1988), 100.

<sup>16</sup> Rigney, *Rhetoric*, 4 n. 7. For a slightly different phrasing, see Charles Firth, *A Commentary on Macaulay's History of England* (London, 1938), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Comber, "Re-Reading the Roman Historians," in Michael Bentley, ed., *Companion to Historiography* (London, 1997), 54.

<sup>18</sup> Christina Crosby, *The Ends of History: Victorians and the "Woman Question"* (New York, 1991), 46.

<sup>19</sup> Rosenmeyer, "History or Poetry?" 241. Mommsen, a distinguished scholar of ancient history, was in a position to suggest: he won the Nobel Prize in literature.

of art.” In his aforementioned lecture, the future Regius Professor of History draws a line that connects the historian’s aims and those of “a Balzac or a Tolstoy,” and concludes that “a historian should aim at satisfying the same emotional and intellectual needs as a novelist or a poet.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, Walpole’s witticism, uttered long before our allegedly confused age, that history is “a species of romance that is believed,” while romance is “a species of history that is not believed,”<sup>21</sup> may be taken to prefigure Lyotard’s consoling view that some post-modernism precedes every modernism.

It is not (to anticipate a standard, almost banal, objection) that historiography equals fiction *tout court*; certainly not fiction in the sense of the zone of falsehood and invention.<sup>22</sup> After all, historiography is distinct from fiction in that it retains a claim to reproduce facts and “truth.” Historiography is “constructed under the constraint of a protocol which evokes a reader-response recognizing ‘not fiction’ (alias: truth-claim) as its textual intention.”<sup>23</sup> History, in Lacanian terms, is a “discourse of the real.”<sup>24</sup> But history writing shares with fiction fundamental questions about the conditions of representation, the process of signification, the constitution of the subject and other issues.<sup>25</sup> If we consider actual practice, there is no such thing as pure fiction and no such thing as history so rigorous that it abjures the techniques of fiction. The two regimes are not as far apart and not as homogeneous as one might suppose following the convention.<sup>26</sup> That “the artifice of fiction . . . [does] not necessarily lend falsity to

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<sup>20</sup> Southern, “Aspects,” 174–5.

<sup>21</sup> Gossman, *Between History and Literature*, 3. More seriously, for the overlap between history and romance in late medieval English literature, see Helen Cooper, “Romance After 1400,” in David Wallace, ed., *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge, 1999), 713.

<sup>22</sup> Partner, “Historicity,” 33, emphasizes that fictional *invention* is only “a subcategory, a specific application of the larger capacity called fiction.”

<sup>23</sup> Partner, “Hayden White,” 171.

<sup>24</sup> White, *Content*, 20.

<sup>25</sup> Christina Crosby, *The Ends of History: Victorians and the “Woman Question”* (New York, 1991), 45. For the problematization of representation in history, see especially Frank Ankersmit, “Historical Representation.” Ankersmit sees representation as a concept applicable to history even more than the arts. See also Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 60–62.

<sup>26</sup> Genette, *Fiction and Diction*, 82. For a distinction between historical fictivity, in the sense of producing a configured relation of an elusive historical “reality,” and fictionality in the more literary sense, see Fludernik, *Towards “Natural” Narratology*, 39.

an account; it might well bring verisimilitude or a moral truth," is maintained by one of the leading historians of our time.<sup>27</sup>

It was no other than the conventional, albeit brilliant historian J. H. Hexter who, a generation ago, seriously confronted the rhetoric of historiography. According to Hexter, such attributes as accessibility, force, vividness and depth, "are not merely decorative but have true noetic value."<sup>28</sup> As he put it, rhetoric is not the icing on the cake of history, it is mixed right into the batter. "It affects not merely the outward appearance of history, its delightfulness and seemliness, but its inward character, its essential function—its capacity to convey knowledge of the past as it actually was."<sup>29</sup> More recently, several critics, inspired by Hayden White's trailblazing conceptualization, have revealed the discursive dimension that historical narrativization imposes on events, by means that are poetic in nature, thus blurring its supposedly clear boundaries with fictional discourse.<sup>30</sup> They have demonstrated how historical writing suppresses or subordinates events and highlights others. They have shown how characterization, motif repetition, variation of tone and points of view, alternative descriptive strategies, in short—all the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play, are also part and parcel of a historians' arsenal.<sup>31</sup> Linguistic artifacts, the exploitation of syntactical and rhetorical capacities of language, all play a role in the creation of historical narrative.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Seventeenth-Century France* (Stanford, 1987), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Hexter, "Rhetoric," 45. In hindsight it seems that Hexter was a bit ahead of his time. See George L. Dillon, *Contending Rhetorics: Writing in Academic Disciplines* (Bloomington, 1991), 114.

<sup>29</sup> Hexter, "Rhetoric," 68.

<sup>30</sup> E.g., Dale H. Porter, *The Emergence of the Past: A Theory of Historical Explanation* (Chicago, 1981); Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Clio: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge, 1984); Ann Rigney, "Toward Varennes," *New Literary History* 18 (1986): 77–98; idem, *Rhetoric*; Milada Buda, "Early Historical Narrative and the Dynamics of Textual Reference," *Romanic Review* 80 (1989): 1–17; Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison, 1989), esp. Chs. 4–7; John R. Bowen, *Sumatran Politics and Poetics: Gayo History 1900–1989* (New Haven, 1991), esp. ch. 10; Philippe Carrard, *Poetics of the New History: French Historical Discourse from Braudel to Chartier* (Baltimore, 1992); William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78 (1992): 1347–76; Rivka Feldhay, "Narrative Constraints on Historical Writing: The Case of the Scientific Revolution," *Science in Context* 7 (1994): 7–24; Otter, *Inventiones*.

<sup>31</sup> White, *Content*, 84.

<sup>32</sup> Partner, "Historicity," 33.

Formal (i.e., pertaining to linguistic form) matters that are involved, for example, in the ordering and division of material, the structuring of plot and other sorts of manipulation, are all strategies employed in and determining the very *content* of the historical account. In sum: nothing that falls under the rubric of authorial intervention—and this is quite a lot—can be excluded from the label of the fictional in the historian's work.<sup>33</sup>

Thus perceived, historical texts deserve an alternative approach to the usual business of fact-finding—incidentally, an approach liable to undermine prevailing assumptions about their status and intention. They should be explored not in the light of “a something seen,” but as an embodiment of their own *thinghood*.<sup>34</sup> It is not that the question of what may have actually happened is not intrinsically interesting. But, as has been argued apropos the Bible as history, “the focus on the issue of historicity has encouraged habits of misreading or underreading the biblical text, or rather reading through it, against the grain of its own semantic intentions, to conjectured things that might lie behind it.”<sup>35</sup> It is to alternative categories of knowledge that readers of historical texts must be sensitive. As White has argued in his critique of historical positivism, “Only a willful, tyrannical intelligence, could believe that the only kind of knowledge we can aspire to [in historical works] is that represented by the physical sciences.”<sup>36</sup> Once again, the example of the major shift that took place in Bible Studies is pertinent: the failure to find a compelling account of ancient Israel has led to disenchantment and frustration with historical methods and has given way to the search for alternative programs of veracity, each of which produces its own type of truth.<sup>37</sup>

To conclude this point, narrative theory (to many historians, alas,

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<sup>33</sup> For a recognition that history, ancient history included, is a kind of literature that must be exposed to problems of criticism that are keenly felt by literary critics, see Cameron, “Introduction.”

<sup>34</sup> I am inspired here by Murray Krieger, “The Semiotic Desire for the Natural Sign: Poetic Uses and Political Abuses,” in David Carroll, ed., *States of “Theory”*: *History, Art, and Critical Discourse* (New York, 1990), 244–5.

<sup>35</sup> Alter, “Imagining,” 54.

<sup>36</sup> David Carroll, “Poetics, Theory, and the Defense of History,” *Clio* 22 (1993): 273.

<sup>37</sup> Mary E. Mills, *Historical Israel Biblical Israel: Studying Joshua to 2 Kings* (London, 1999), 59.



a blameworthy notion)<sup>38</sup> invites the scrutinizing of history's textuality.<sup>39</sup> For, all historians, ancient and modern alike, cannot escape—to use White's parlance—the content of the (historiographical) forms. Of whatever period and provenance, texts designed as “history” cannot be treated simply as databanks, but are legitimate candidates for linguistic inquiries and literary analyses. They need to be examined for their narratological conventions and rhetorical strategies, the modes in and through which the historical “facts” are portrayed, for emplotment as much as for arguments and ideologies, for the way in which language serves as a creative medium, in short: for their *poetics*. As Cheryl Exum poignantly puts it, modern readings are what keeps ancient literature alive for us, and without them, a historical text (Exum writes of the Hebrew Bible) could become a document of purely antiquarian interest or of concern to a limited audience.<sup>40</sup>

This precisely is the assumption informing my reading of Ṭabarī's *Ta'riḫ al-rusul wa'l-mulūk* (“The History of Prophets and Kings”), or the *History*, as I shall refer to it in the course of this book. My reading, as evinced in the present study, departs substantially from that traditionally employed in so-called Orientalist circles since at least the nineteenth century. To date, the latter have regarded the *History* (or, for that matter, any other historical work authored in the Islamic world) as essentially a record of “what happened,” a package of facts that needs to be unravelled in order to yield what is deemed appropriate for packaging, yet again, as past reality.<sup>41</sup> This positivistic reading<sup>42</sup> has been occasionally questioned by scholars whom one might

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<sup>38</sup> David Carroll, “Introduction: The States of ‘Theory’ and the Future of History and Art,” in David Carroll, ed., *States of “Theory”: History, Art, and Critical Discourse* (New York, 1990), 1–2. For the resistance of the historical discipline to the influence of recent theoretical development, see also Partner, “Historicity,” 22.

<sup>39</sup> Partner has already suggested that the irony is that narrative theory is even more potent to the analysis of history than it is to fiction. Partner, “Hayden White,” 171.

<sup>40</sup> Exum, *Tragedy*, 13.

<sup>41</sup> As Khalid Yahya Blankinship, in his review of the English translation of a section of Ṭabarī's *History* has typically put it, Ṭabarī's narratives “need to be mined for the enormous amounts of detailed social and economic information they contain.” See *MEJ* 44 (1990): 325–6.

<sup>42</sup> A *locus classicus* for the positivistic approach is Hamilton A. R. Gibb, “Arab-Byzantine Relations Under the Umayyad Caliphate,” in idem, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* (Boston, 1962), 53. Gibb is alarmed by the possibility that the whole edifice of early Islamic history may collapse if apparent legends are unaccepted. For further examples, see e.g., W. M. Watt, “The Reliability of Ibn Ishāq's Sources,” in

term revisionists, whose main concern has been to challenge the assumption of factuality.<sup>43</sup> Both schools, however, share a common ground in their attempt to differentiate between fact and fiction. My primary interest in this book lies elsewhere. I am less concerned with what we can embrace or reject as factual—the *past* behind the text—although, to some extent, the “past” may well be a byproduct of my analysis. Rather, my interest is in the *text* about the past. That is to say, historical facts per se are not the focal point of the present book. It is to the narrative that the particular facts sustain that my attention is here drawn.

In setting up these research aims, I do not claim to be an absolute pioneer, since the treatment of classical Islamic historiography as a literary product has been probed more than once. Years ago, scholars such as Franz Rosenthal and Marshall Hodgson suggested that historical accounts transmit a great deal more than things “as they really were,” and that a variety of factors, such as the perceived significance of events, the author’s *Weltanschauung*, his preference for “situation” and “color,” are all part of the historical enterprise.<sup>44</sup> More recently, Marilyn Waldman,<sup>45</sup> Stefan Leder,<sup>46</sup> Albrecht

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idem, *Early Islam: Collected Articles* (Edinburgh, 1990), 13–23, and numerous contributions by the same author; R. B. Serjeant, “Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam: Misconceptions and Flawed Polemics,” *JAOs* 110 (1990): 472–86; Michael Lecker, *Muslims, Jews and Pagans: Studies on Early Islamic Medina* (Leiden, 1995) and Lecker’s other works.

<sup>43</sup> For the early period see especially Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the rise of Islam* (Princeton, 1987); Lawrence I. Conrad, “The Conquest of Arwād: A Source Critical Study in the Historiography of the Early Medieval Near East,” in Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad, eds., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, Vol. I: *Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton, 1992), 317–401. For the origins of ‘Abbāsīd tradition in the framework of propaganda, see Lassner, *Islamic Revolution*.

<sup>44</sup> Franz Rosenthal, *Historiography*, 67, 70. Rosenthal seems less nuanced when stating that “by its very nature annalistic historiography is primarily concerned with facts, bare facts.” See also Marshall G. S. Hodgson, “Two Pre-Modern Muslim Historians: Pitfalls and Opportunities in Presenting them to Moderns” in John Nef, ed., *Towards World Community* (The Hague, 1968), 62–3, 65. I return to Hodgson’s view in detail later in this book.

<sup>45</sup> Waldman, *Toward a Theory*, sets forth the argument that theory of literary narrative can account for historical narrative as well. The title of her pioneering book seems, however, over presumptuous and the expectations raised in the first, programmatic chapter, are not fulfilled in the rest of the book. One wonders to what extent the brief allusion to “speech act theory” (131–8) adds to the appreciation of Bayhaqī. See also the comments by John R. Perry in his review in *JNES* 44 (1985): 243. In “Semiotics and Historical Narrative,” *Papers in Comparative Studies* 1 (1981): 167–88, Waldman has already shifted to the orbit of Umberto Eco’s semiotics.

<sup>46</sup> Leder, “Prosa-Dichtung;” idem, “Features;” idem, “Literary Use.”

Noth,<sup>47</sup> Tayeb El-Hibri,<sup>48</sup> Fedwa Malti-Douglas<sup>49</sup> and Julie Meisami,<sup>50</sup> among others, have put such ideas into practice by comparing parallel versions composed by different Muslim historians. These scholars have demonstrated the creative dimension, expressiveness, and the weight of narrative features that are part of medieval historical texts. Nonetheless, as will become clear in due course, this book departs in some important respects from the studies of the aforementioned scholars.

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The *Taʾrīkh al-rusul waʾl-mulūk*,<sup>51</sup> undoubtedly one of the classic works of Islamic culture, requires no elaborate apologia as a choice for scholarly analysis. Its outstanding significance was realized in its author's own lifetime and its uniqueness was already eulogized by contemporaries such as the jurist Ibn Mughallis (d. 324/936).<sup>52</sup> Only a few decades later, the famous historian Masʿūdī deemed it superior to all other historical works for its abundant information.<sup>53</sup> From the later perspective of the thirteenth-century encyclopedist Ibn Khallikān, the *History* was the soundest and most reliable work of its kind.<sup>54</sup> In fact, it enjoyed the favor not only of medieval Muslim scholars but also of several rulers. Thus the Fāṭimid caliph ʿAzīz

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<sup>47</sup> Noth, *Early Arabic Historical Tradition*. Still, Noth's analysis of the literary forms, *topoi*, etc., in early Arabic historiography is actually spadework to the "reconstruction of what actually happened." See e.g., 1, 61. In other words, for Noth it is important to demonstrate what is fictitious and unreliable, adjectives he frequently uses. In this respect, his book, though in appearance different from revisionist work mentioned in note 43 above, is not dissimilar in essence. A similar observation, based on Noth's German original, can be found in Humphreys, "Qurʾānic Myth," 272.

<sup>48</sup> Tayeb El-Hibri, "The Regicide of the Caliph Al-Amīn and the Challenge of Representation in Medieval Islamic Historiography," *Arabica* 42 (1995): 334–64, now superseded by his *Reinterpreting*, Ch. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Fedwa Malti-Douglas, "Texts and Tortures: The Reign of al-Muʿtaḍid and the Construction of Historical Meaning," *Arabica* 46 (1999): 313–36.

<sup>50</sup> Meisami, *Persian Historiography*.

<sup>51</sup> The original title, as given by Ṭabarī himself in the colophon of one of the manuscripts, would appear to be "Mukhtaṣar taʾrīkh al-rusul waʾl-mulūk waʾl-khulafāʾ," but other titles are available as well. For this and some possible explanations of the meaning of *mukhtaṣar* ("abridgement"), see *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "al-Ṭabarī." Ṭabarī's biography and scholarly work are masterfully studied by Rosenthal in *History*, vol. I, 5–134.

<sup>52</sup> *History*, vol. I, 135. On Ibn al-Mughallis, see *ibid.*, 52 n. 199.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>54</sup> D. M. Dunlop, *Arab Civilization to A.D. 1500* (New York, 1971), 88–9.

(r. 975–96 A.D.) spent the considerable sum of one hundred dinars to purchase a copy, only to discover that his library already contained more than twenty. Another report has it that, about two hundred years later, the library of the Fāṭimid palace contained already 1,220 copies of the work—no doubt a fantastic figure. Yet, even allowing a much smaller number, it would still be useful as an indicator of the popularity of the *History* as perceived by contemporaries.<sup>55</sup>

In the West, Ṭabarī's oeuvre has been known for several hundred years. In his posthumously published *Bibliothèque orientale*, d'Herbelot (1625–95) wrote that Abū Ja'far Muḥammad (i.e., Ṭabarī) was “the most famous of all Ṭabarīs on account of the general History from the creation of the world to the time in which he lived that was published by him.” J. H. Mordtmann, a nineteenth-century Orientalist, called Ṭabarī “Vater der arabischen Geschichte.”<sup>56</sup> M. J. de Goeje who, in the second half of the same century, was chief editor of the E. J. Brill Arabic edition of the *History*, hailed it as a great work “whose fame has never faded from his [Ṭabarī's] own day to ours.”<sup>57</sup>

Needless to say, for all modern scholars writing about the early centuries of Islam, Ṭabarī's opus has served as a major source. Surprisingly, however, other than being utilized for its factual content, it has not received much in the way of substantial analysis at the hands of modern scholarship.<sup>58</sup> The present book is an attempt to rectify the situation.

At this introductory stage, some brief, mostly technical, observations will suffice. To begin with, the *History* treats the “history of humanity”—that is, the scope of humanity known to Ṭabarī and his sources—from the time of creation, so to speak, to the year 302/915, just eight years before Ṭabarī's death.<sup>59</sup> Of course, the main emphasis in the *History* is on the Islamic community. This factor also finds

<sup>55</sup> *History*, vol. I, 141.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 137–8, 139.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>58</sup> See on this most recently, Donner, *Narratives*, 126. Tayob's unpublished dissertation, being one of the notable exceptions, is only partly devoted to Ṭabarī, while other parts draw comparisons with other historians or engage in sometime superfluous surveys of material already well known. As will become clear, I take issue with Tayob on different points.

<sup>59</sup> For other possibilities of the exact termination of the *Ta'rikh*, see Rosenthal's discussion in *History*, vol. XXXVIII, pp. XV–XIX.

technical expression: in its form, no less than in concept, the book undergoes a transformation upon reaching the first Islamic (*hijrī*) year (i.e., 622 A.D.). From that point on, the material is arranged in the form of annals, each year usually occupying tens, though sometimes hundreds of pages in the various modern renditions.<sup>60</sup> This probably correlates with availability of information as well as intended emphasis.

There are additional indicators suggesting that the *History* should be seen as composed of more than one entity. In fact, it could be argued that the very title (“The History of Prophets and Kings”) is a misnomer, in that it applies mainly to the first section of the book, or much of the first volume of the Brill edition. After all, within the Islamic horizon, there are no kings and prophets after Muḥammad. This first section has been characterized by one scholar as “proto-history”<sup>61</sup> and is based on an attempt at synchronizing biblical material; Jewish rabbinic/Haggadic traditions and Midrash in its mediation through “tales of the prophets” (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*), later to appear in specialized collections;<sup>62</sup> Qurʾānic exegesis;<sup>63</sup> confused Christian

<sup>60</sup> However, for exceptions, see *hijrī* years 44, 46, 48, 49, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 62, 64, 172, 173, 174, 175, 177, 179, 181–5, 188–92, 203, 204, 205, 207–09, 211–17, 219, 271–7, 279, which are unusually brief and befit a chronicle rather than “history.”

<sup>61</sup> Brinner, “Translator’s Foreword,” *History*, vol. II, p. XII.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, XI. See also briefly Franz Rosenthal, “The Influence of the Biblical Tradition on Muslim Historiography,” in Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt, eds., *Historians of the Middle East* (London, 1962), esp. 40–45. For Abraham the patriarch, his conception, his early monotheism and trials (i.e., the sacrifice story), see *History*, vol. II; Norman Calder, “From Midrash to Scripture: The Sacrifice of Abraham in Early Islamic Tradition,” *Muséon* 101 (1988): 375–402; Newby, *Making*, 66–7. For an in-depth study of Ṭabarī’s treatment of the “Noah and Sons” story (*History*, vol. I, 347, 365–70; vol. II, 11 [I, 178, 196–200, 211]), as both diverging from the biblical original and of a wider cultural implication, see most recently Benjamin Braude, “Cham et Noé, race esclavage et exégèse entre islam, judaïsme et christianisme,” *Annales* 57 (2002): 93–125. Material that goes back to Waḥb b. Munabbih, an alleged source of Jewish material (*isrāʾīliyyāt*), is also to be mentioned. For the synchronization and the permanent place of this material, especially in so-called world history, see Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 70–71, 73.

<sup>63</sup> See further Chapter 3 below.

<sup>64</sup> For the Baptist, see *History*, vol. IV, 102–03 [I, 711–13], 104–06 [I, 714–17] and n. 289. Folkloric is also the material on the “Men of the Cave” (*aṣḥāb al-kahf*), which is based on a fourth- or fifth-century Christian martyrological legend of the “seven sleepers of Ephesus.” See *ibid.*, 155–9 [I, 775–82] and n. 390. See also Newby, *Making*, 212. For the Story of Saint George (Jirjīs), see *History*, vol. IV, 173–86 [I, 795–811] and n. 416.

<sup>65</sup> E.g., Bishtāsb and his reign of 112 (or 120, or 150) years, *History*, vol. IV,

material;<sup>64</sup> Iranian mythology<sup>65</sup> and its mediation by ancient Arab scholars;<sup>66</sup> and ancient Arab folklore.<sup>67</sup> This “apparent medley” provided the picture of pre-Islamic times for medieval Muslim historians.

The annalistic structure that characterizes the rest of the *History* assumes three forms that differ in length. One is the form of short reports (*khabar*), usually spanning a single line to a few lines, mostly presented at the very beginning or end of each year’s account. Some items of information in this category tend to be repeated for successive years.<sup>68</sup> The *khabar*, a self-contained account was, according to some scholarly opinions (that I do not share, as will instantly become apparent), largely responsible for the lack of development of a truly continuous narrative.<sup>69</sup> The second form is the medium-sized report of a few dozen lines each.<sup>70</sup> The third comprises longer reports that could be labeled “chapters” and that sometimes transcend the boundaries of a particular year.<sup>71</sup> Certainly, this last is the form that comes closest to what we usually consider as “history,” in which

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76–7 [I, 681–3]. For the resemblance of Iranian ancient “history,” as reproduced by Ṭabarī, to that found in the epic *Shāhnāmeh*, see Brinner, “Translator’s Foreword,” *History*, vol. II, p. XI. See also Bosworth, “Translator’s Foreword,” *History*, vol. V, p. XIX. For the “Fall of Hatra,” see *History*, vol. V, 31–6 [I, 827–30] and Mohseb Zakeri, “Arabic Reports on the Fall of Hatra to the Sasanids: History or Legend?” in Stefan Leder, ed., *Story-Telling in the Framework of Non-Fictional Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden, 1998), 158–67.

<sup>66</sup> See Bosworth, “Translator’s Foreword,” *History*, vol. V, 18–19, n. 69, for the more poetic and anecdotal elements introduced by Ibn al-Kalbī, as compared with the more sober material of the Persian tradition.

<sup>67</sup> For Ṣāliḥ, the ancient prophet sent to Thamūd, and for the mysterious Khidr, see *History*, vol. III, 1–18 [I, 414–29] and n. 1.

<sup>68</sup> For examples of such historical notes, see e.g., *History*, vol. XVIII, 19–20 [II, 16], 32 [II, 28], 75 [II, 70]. Information about the leader of the Pilgrimage caravan tends to repeat itself each year. See e.g., vol. XVIII, 19 [II, 16], 31 [II, 27], 75 [II, 70], 90 [II, 84]; vol. XXXIII, 4 [III, 1165], 9 [III, 1168], 35 [III, 1186], 45 [III, 1194], 83 [III, 1228], 134 [III, 1268], 177 [III, 1302], 193 [III, 1313]; vol. XXXVII, 79 [III, 2026], 127 [III, 2084], 145 [III, 2105], 148 [III, 2108], 152 [III, 2111], 154 [III, 2112], 158 [III, 2115], 161 [III, 2117].

<sup>69</sup> Waines, “Abu Ja’far al-Ṭabarī,” 31, 35. But the *History* is able to transcend it.

<sup>70</sup> E.g., *History*, vol. XXVI, 56–7 [II, 1717–18]; vol. XXXII, 14–15 [II, 977–8].

<sup>71</sup> Some are discussed in Part Two below. Thus the Zanj revolt is the subject of the main part of *History*, vol. XXXVII, while other information is rendered subsidiary.

<sup>72</sup> I find it difficult to concur with Humphreys’s opinion that a compilation like the *History* makes no effort to construct a connected narrative of events and that it consists of a series of discrete anecdotes and reports, varying in length from one line to several pages, each being marked off from the others by its “chain of authorities” (*isnād*). See Humphreys, *Islamic History*, 73. As we shall have occasion to see, the case is more complex.

there is a clear sequence, one historical episode leading to another.<sup>72</sup> Here is the place to note that a certain tension is created by the annalistic arrangement, in that the requirement to bring under one year various events that transpired within it, tends to break up the continuity of single events. For example, the rebellion of the Shīʿite Zayd b. ʿAlī and his eventual death, an affair spanning the years 121/738–9 and 122/739–40, is intermitted by a totally unrelated report of “The Raids of Naṣr b. Sayyār,” as well as brief notes on who led the Pilgrimage in that year and who were the provincial governors.<sup>73</sup> All in all, Ṭabarī’s work could be characterized as less than a fully realized “history” in a post-medieval sense,<sup>74</sup> at least if we take cognizance of the fact that Ṭabarī and his sources do not so much conclude reports as simply terminate them. Typically, the *History* lacks a closure, an attempt at summing up the meaning of particular chains of events, which is a feature typifying a fully-fledged historiography.<sup>75</sup>

Aside from these technical points, a comment on the *History*’s authorship is in order. Here, it is worth emphasizing that scholars have not always made a distinction between Ṭabarī’s own contribution and that of his sources. In other words, too often they ascribe

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<sup>73</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 4–35 [II, 1668–98].

<sup>74</sup> The watershed between the genre of history and chronicle in the West has been debated. According to one opinion, prior to the Renaissance, chronicle and history were terms used interchangeably. If there was difference, it was history’s greater laxity in employing chronology. See Bernard Guenée, “Histoires, annales, chroniques: Essai sur les genres historiques au moyen âge,” in idem, *Politique et histoire au moyen âge* (Paris, 1981), 284–6, 288, 290. For a thirteenth-century English opinion about the difference between history (the character and life of a single hero) and chronicle (a year-by-year account of the actions of kings and princes), see Andrew Galloway, “Writing History in England,” in David Wallace, ed., *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge, 1999), 256.

<sup>75</sup> White, *Content*, 16. For the difference between chronicle and history, see also Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), 5–6. William Dray, “Philosophy of History,” in Michael Bentley, ed., *Companion to Historiography* (London, 1997), 775, makes a distinction between a chronicle as a description of how one thing succeeded another, and a narrative, which has an added explanation about how one thing led to another. For a slightly different definition, see M. R. P. McGuire, “Annals and Chronicles,” *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. I, 551–7. The emergence of chronicles (as opposed to annals) in the Christian world occurs about the same time that Ṭabarī writes the *History*.

<sup>76</sup> This is true even of Tayob, who on pp. 213–30, halfway through his “Islamic Historiography,” which is devoted to Ṭabarī, blurs the distinction between Ṭabarī’s own writing and his sources’.



to Ṭabarī the authorship of the *History*.<sup>76</sup> Now, it does not take much to discover that Ṭabarī's role, as Ṭabarī himself makes clear by the frequent and most extensive citation from his sources, is predominantly that of compiler or editor, *not* author.<sup>77</sup> This is absolutely true for the part covering the period prior to his own lifetime, as he relies upon and copies from an array of sources, some of them quite well known, and a few of which will require some discussion in the coming chapters of this book.<sup>78</sup> In fact, it was Goldziher who, in contrast to his generally low opinion of Arabic historiography, appreciated "the great brain work this Asiatic author [Ṭabarī] displayed in the collection and critical examination of historical tradition, having preserved so to speak its archival sources." Goldziher saw merit in the rich, albeit often contradictory, information preserved in the *History* that compensates for its rather modest literary value.<sup>79</sup> I profoundly disagree with such a narrowing down of the import of Ṭabarī's opus. However, I consider it essential in my analysis to specify wherever Ṭabarī's sources come up for discussion, the extent of Ṭabarī's role, and where and when Ṭabarī and his sources converge.

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<sup>76</sup> This will become apparent in the course of Part One of this book. For Ṭabarī as an "extremely skillful compiler," see Tayob, "Ṭabarī on the Companions," 209. This is briefly noted also by John Burton in a review in *BSOAS* 53 (1990): 328. For the point that early 'Abbāsīd historiography was composite chronicles that do not bear the clear stamp of an acknowledged author, see Lassner, *Islamic Revolution*, 25.

<sup>77</sup> For a survey of sources, see Jawād 'Alī, "Mawārid ta'rikh al-Ṭabarī," *Majallat al-majma' al-'ilmī al-'irāqī* 1 (1950): 143–231; 2 (1951): 135–90; 3 (1952): 16–56; 8 (1961): 425–36, which covers only the sources for the period preceding Abū Bakr's caliphate. For Ṭabarī's sources for the Battle of the Camel, see Joseph Bardin Roberts, "Early Islamic Historiography: Ideology and Methodology," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1986, 227–74. For a brief note on Ṭabarī's sources, see Petersen, *Alī and Mu'āwiya*, 150–51, n. 8. For a useful description of the Iraqi sources, see Waines, "Abu Ja'far al-Ṭabarī." For Ṭabarī's reliance on Madā'inī, see Rotter, "Überlieferung." For a useful discussion of Ibn Ishāq, Wāqidī and Hishām al-Kalbī (i.e., Ibn al-Kalbī), see W. M. Watt, "Translator's Foreword," *History*, vol. VI, pp. XI–XXVI. For a brief note on the sources for the early 'Abbāsīd period, see Hugh Kennedy, "Translator's Foreword" *History*, vol. XXIX, pp. XIV–XV. For Ṭabarī and Ibn Sa'd, see Osman, "Oral Vs. Written Transmission."

<sup>78</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, "Historiography in Arabic Literature," in Ignaz Goldziher, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. and trans. Joseph De Somogyi (Hildesheim, 1967–73), vol. III, 359. This is echoed in R. Paret's assessment that it is "just in the conscientious unharmonised repetition of the collected material of tradition that the value of Ṭabarī's work for modern historical research lies, especially when it is a question of reconstructing the events of the early period of Islam." See *E.I.*<sup>1</sup>, s. v. "al-Ṭabarī."



The issue of Ṭabarī's sources calls for one further comment. As El-Hibri has recently pointed out, whereas for the earlier parts of the *History* one gets the impression "that Ṭabarī's chronicle preserves within it 'books' of former scholars who transmitted accounts orally and eventually surfaced disparately in Ṭabarī's text," this can no longer be maintained for the 'Abbāsīd period, the focus of the work's later sections. There the accounts are usually based on testimonies of courtiers and other narrators who "were largely a group of people not well known for their scholarly role in historical transmission or redaction."<sup>80</sup> El-Hibri further raises the possibility that 'Abbāsīd reporters on occasion were contrived, as an extension to the literary-tropological puzzle carried out mostly within the narrative content itself. In contrast with the practice in the narratives of the earlier periods, there is no regularity of narrator practice names and one rarely encounters systematic chains of narrators (*isnād*).<sup>81</sup>

Be that as it may, it is also noteworthy that for approximately the last one hundred years covered by the *History*, and especially from roughly the year 227/841, Ṭabarī is less prone to indicate his sources. At times, he ceases to identify them altogether and makes do with fairly vague references (such as "it has been mentioned" or "it has been said").<sup>82</sup> These are the sections where Ṭabarī's own writing comes clearly to the fore, inviting comparison with what precedes it.

Now, it is important to note that from the year 271/884 until the end of the book with the report of the year 302/915, there are fea-

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<sup>80</sup> See, however, Joel L. Kraemer's remark about the occasionally very simple people, such as a singer or a black slave, who serve as informants, in "Translator's Foreword," *History*, vol. XXXIV, p. XV.

<sup>81</sup> El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 12–13. On p. 219 he expresses doubt as to whether Ṭabarī actually came in contact with the individuals cited as sources, and points out that the latter "are often the very figures around whom . . . narratives revolve." This is possible, yet, such a view principally precludes the use of from-the-scene reports that any historian would hope for.

<sup>82</sup> I tend to disagree with Kraemer, who speaks of relatively few anonymous informants as compared to the identified ones in "Translator's Foreword," *History*, vol. XXXIV, p. XV. The anonymous reports in this particular volume are numerous and in fact are roughly one half of the material. Their number tends to increase especially after the hijrī year 235. See e.g., vol. XXXII, 28 [III, 987], 33 [III, 991], 37 [III, 995], 39 [III, 996], 42 [III, 998], 46 [III, 1001], 52 [III, 1006], 61 [III, 1012] and passim; vol. XXXIII, 6 [III, 1166], 8 [III, 1167], 14 [III, 1171], 19 [III, 1174], 72 [III, 1218], 84 [III, 1229], 94 [III, 1234], 95 [III, 1235], 97 [III, 1236], 136 [III, 1268], 168 [III, 1294], 180 [III, 1303], 203 [III, 1319]. In vol. XXXV most of the reports are anonymous and they are numerous also in vol. XXXVI.

tures that deserve being mentioned. One is that, except for two or three occasions, not only are informants' names completely passed over, but also the text appears to be entirely of Ṭabarī's own creation. What characterizes this part of the *History* is that the thirty-odd years in question are treated in an extremely succinct manner, in contrast to the detailed character of the preceding sections. Not only that, but the material presented for each single year frequently assumes the form of the *khobar*, i.e., a very short report, as explained above. Indeed, to grasp the true character of Ṭabarī's *own* writing, one has to contrast it with some material (within the thirty years here under discussion) that he ascribes to specific informants. Thus, a considerably long account (3–4 pages in the printed editions), mediated by a Baghdadī physician and originally stemming from a woman he treated, allegedly reproduces the woman's story about her son, who turned to the Qarmaṭians<sup>83</sup> and ended up totally estranged from his family. The episode of the encounter between the mother and her son even includes their dialogue in a section where verbatim citation is resorted to only minimally.<sup>84</sup>

The fact that here is a cluster spanning such a period of time makes it appear a systematic development and renders Ṭabarī's self-authored section of the *History* highly distinctive. Furthermore, the abbreviated format of the reports is not a mere technicality, but results in that Ṭabarī's own composition actually becomes a genuinely discrete entity in the *History*. When Ṭabarī comes to the fore as the historical *author*, rather than the compiler or editor, his product is different from what had preceded and, in this respect, he can be characterized as introducing a turning point in the nature of the book. In this he seems to typify the Muslim historian—at least up to Miskawayh (d. 421/1030)<sup>85</sup>—who, according to Erling Ladewig Petersen, evinced only slight interest in contemporary history. Thus, Balādhurī (d. 279/892) passes over entirely his own age, and Ṭabarī deals with his own lifetime “in a rather lapidarian and superficial way.”<sup>86</sup> Robert Irwin, speculating specifically on Ṭabarī's brevity of

<sup>83</sup> For the Qarmaṭians, see *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s. v. “Ḳarmaṭī.”

<sup>84</sup> *History*, vol. XXXVIII, 123–6 [III, 2226–30]. Rosenthal, the translator of this volume, pays attention to the anecdote but sees it as Ṭabarī's “literary taste” and fails to note its uniqueness. See “Translator's Foreword,” XIII.

<sup>85</sup> For Miskawayh, see *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Miskawayh.”

<sup>86</sup> Petersen, *Alī and Muṭawīya*, 180–81.

writing, supposes that the author's concern not to antagonize the palace may have been the reason. But, as he hastens to point out, "political discretion cannot explain the sketchy and perfunctory nature of much of the latter part of his [Ṭabarī's] history." Even the detailed story of the revolt of the Zanj<sup>87</sup> is "shapeless and confusing." Thereafter, the great history degenerates somewhat into an account of *faits divers*. "The broad horizons have been reduced to what is for the most part a scrappy account of parish-pump Muslim politics in Baghdad."<sup>88</sup> This and similar analyses are in dire need of elaboration. It is my intention in this book to contribute to that end.

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<sup>87</sup> For the revolt, see Alexandre Popovic, *La révolte des esclaves en Iraq au III<sup>e</sup>-IX<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris, 1976).

<sup>88</sup> Robert Irwin, review in *JAOs* 113 (1993): 630–31.

PART ONE



## CHAPTER ONE

### TROPES OF *MIMESIS*

In a recent study that aspires to implement a literary-critical approach, and is “based on a new set of propositions and assumptions,” Tayeb El-Hibri discourages the reader from expecting to find genuine historical facts in classical Islamic historiography.<sup>1</sup> ‘Abbāsīd historical narratives, so the argument goes, “were not intended originally to tell facts, but rather to provide commentary on a certain political, religious, social, or cultural issue that may have derived from a real and controversial historical episode.”<sup>2</sup> The intrinsic interest of ‘Abbāsīd historical writing was to promote ideas and interests that were prevalent at the time.<sup>3</sup> Thus El-Hibri’s suggestion carries extremely far the notion that every history is essentially a history of the present. In fact, histories such as Ṭabarī’s *History* are assumed by him to be outright fabrications.

El-Hibri adduces numerous examples to buttress a perception that episodes and dialogues in historical records are largely invented. Their actual import is not—in fact cannot be—history per se, but their polemical utility in theological discourse. In El-Hibri’s view, there is no intrinsic empirical value to these “historical” reports, unless we adopt them as evidence in an entirely different genre of historical pursuit. Since this is not the place to engage in systematic criticism of El-Hibri’s project, one of his examples will serve. It has

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<sup>1</sup> He is inconsistent on this point. On the one hand he challenges the “unstated methodological assumption that we have reliable criteria for separating myth from fact.” On the other hand he is confident that the “true events” in the life of Hārūn, for example, do not exceed “three or four pages.” See El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 12, 21. When he writes that “we know that *zuhd* (ascetism) was never a strong point in Hārūn’s lifestyle,” against historical attestation to the contrary (25), one wonders, when reminded of El-Hibri’s initial premise: How *in fact* do we know? Note further El-Hibri’s statement that a certain debate in Hārūn’s court is an example of “imagined debates,” pp. 30–31.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 14. For similar statements and specific examples, see pp. 15, 21, 33, 35, 54, 57–8, 63, 75, 216.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., *ibid.*, 22.

to do with Ṭabarī's anecdote on Hārūn al-Rashīd, who was weeping ("until his beard was wet") upon hearing that soon he would stand before God, then be consigned "to one of two abodes which have no third: the Garden, or the Fire." For El-Hibri, this anecdote "served more to prove an ideological historical point . . . than to describe an actual historical incident in the court of Hārūn." Note, however, that here El-Hibri, inconsistently with his general argument, is rather equivocal, he does not exclude actual historical description but, on balance, the material is for him "more" a proof of some point. In any case, Hārūn's importance in the sources, according to El-Hibri, lies in the way he serves as a point of reference vis-à-vis the ways and thoughts of Amīn and Ma'mūn. The anecdote on Hārūn fulfills a theological role that one can learn about only from hindsight (and it should be added: only if sufficiently sophisticated or alternatively, carried away by one's interpretation!). "Instead of attacking al-Ma'mūn for his Mu'tazilite sympathies directly, the *ʿulamā* simply called on the father to perform the wrist-slap on his son, thereby proving their point gently."<sup>4</sup>

El-Hibri makes a set of positivistic assumptions<sup>5</sup> and engages himself in the task of "tracing the line of meaning and establishing linkages across eras, regions, and systems of thought,"<sup>6</sup> at times creating, in the present author's view, an extremely tangled edifice. His endeavor is intended to reveal "a myriad of dramatic subplots that are in dialogue with one another and ultimately converge again at a point of resolution."<sup>7</sup> Thus Hārūn's depiction is a critique of his son Ma'mūn and can only be appreciated later on, in the context of Amīn's tragedy; Hārūn's history is a substitute for didactic treatises and a narrative overlapping with the biblical Joseph's; the vizier Ya'qūb b. Dāwūd b. Ṭahmān's false testimony "might be intended by the narrator to be read in conjunction with the earlier about Mālik b. Anas's religious edict," and so on and so force, to the point that medieval readers—so El-Hibri maintains—even contrasted images on a dia-

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 24–5.

<sup>5</sup> "Unlike the neutral [sic] reader of today, who harbors few specific expectations of how things might or should develop, the medieval reader was primarily interested in seeing where all this was leading to—whether events . . . would truly fulfill earlier prophecies and whether the religious lesson truly exists." See *ibid.*, 53.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 56.

chronic axis and on the basis of considering different history works. El-Hibri urges the modern reader to study meanings “in an interactive framework that constantly refers to pertinent moments from the times of the Sāsānids, Rāshīdūn, and Umayyads,” all connections that “are not a random shuffling of earlier images, but are organized in a logic guided by ideas about the irony of destiny, and the corrective process of history.” And thus Amīn’s picking up a cushion to defend himself against his assassin (on this, see further Chapter 4 below) should remind one of the same caliph standing on a cushion on the occasion of his succession. The *cushion* is turned into a symbol of both comfort and fragility and a motif in other historical episodes.

El-Hibri is at his best, so to speak, when suggesting that the systematic arrangement of objects and motifs in three scenes discussed around “the three-something form,” may have been intended to hint a connection with the concept of *qadar* (fate), a three-lettered Arabic word. Similarly, Amīn being thrown into the Euphrates is, for El-Hibri, an appropriation of an ancient motif that symbolized the washing away of sins.<sup>8</sup> Numerous historical episodes are analyzed by El-Hibri with such conviction that the reader virtually loses sight of the possibility that the modern scholar is substituting his privileged access to various kinds of writing, as well as his ability to critically examine and collate sources, for ancient scholars encumbered with major obstacles to communication and disposing of a weak propensity for drawing subtle textual connections and analogies. El-Hibri’s assertion that the medieval reader “was expected to shuffle materials” from different sources and textual locations<sup>9</sup> is, at best, a dubious one.

There is, of course, no question here of denying the imaginative and even fictional component in Islamic historiography, as we have already had occasion to note. That a great deal of commentary or interpretation goes into the production of history can also not be gainsaid. However, Petersen’s suggestion concerning the importance of polemics and the view that the “Muslim historian does not confine himself to a recording of facts, he interprets them over and over

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 23–5, 26, 29, 41, 48, 59 n. 1, 86 and n. 71, 89–90 and n. 88, 91. A major feature of El-Hibri’s project is an excessive deciphering of what he claims to be contrived symbols.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 173.



again in the light of topical conflicts,” seems to strike a better balance when compared to El-Hibri’s.<sup>10</sup> To start from the premise—as El-Hibri does—that the branch of writing known as historiography, more specifically, medieval Islamic historiography, is reducible to mere commentary, is to commit an error on two counts.

First, the assumption conflates two distinctly different and self-proclaimed genres: on the one hand, telling a “true” story—which constitutes the major part of historiography—and, on the other hand, commenting on it. Second, El-Hibri’s interpretation misses the original authorial intent by flatly denying the element of *mimesis* that must be assumed to constitute the prime objective of ‘Abbāsid historical narratives. Merging his *own* interpretation of the content of the historiographical texts with *their authors’* original objectives, El-Hibri unjustifiably dismisses the claim to truth that is an intrinsic element in the rhetoric of historians and pertains to all historiography worthy of the name.<sup>11</sup> He thus overlooks the possibility that “historical narratives for the most part *do* purport to tell us what the past was like. They consist of assertions *about* the past, and they attempt to tell us what actually occurred.”<sup>12</sup> In this respect, ‘Abbāsid narrative materials, be they Ṭabarī’s or those of any other Muslim historian, are certainly no exception to the rule: they purport to “inscribe the past,” to put history into writing, and El-Hibri’s attempt to dispossess them of this professed claim does them disservice. Only after recognition of that claim can a critical and deconstructionist project vis-à-vis historical narratives be at all meaningful.

In fact, the *History*’s explicit claim to veracity, its pretension to be a form of *mimesis* that, at least in its Hellenistic sense, provides an unproblematized presentation of reality, are made to feature, as “naturally” as possible, in the historical story itself. Perhaps nowhere is the Rankean grand illusion (i.e., to tell it *wie es eigentlich gewesen*) better conveyed than in one of Ṭabarī’s accounts of Ḥusayn’s martyrdom

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<sup>10</sup> Petersen, *Alī and Mu‘āwiya*, 184. He adds the element of financial dependency and that early traditionists acted as spokesmen for the Umayyads and the ‘Abbāsids. Even allowing for some measure of independence, there was consonance between the prevailing currents and the views of the historians. Religious, political and other conditions determined the writing (see also *ibid.*, 186). This is truism, however. It certainly applies to all history writing.

<sup>11</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, 32.

<sup>12</sup> Norman, “Telling It Like It Was,” 130.

in 61/680, which we shall examine in some detail in Chapter 8 below. Now, the particular version in question is ascribed to ‘Ammār b. Mu‘āwiya al-Duhnī (d. 133/750–51), a traditionist whom Shī‘ite writers identify as being of their party.<sup>13</sup> Duhnī’s alleged source, it should be noted, is no mean authority: Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad al-Bāqir, the fifth Shī‘ite *imām*. According to Duhnī, he asked the latter to relate Ḥusayn’s killing so that he (Duhnī) “*might think that he was present at [the scene of] al-Husayn’s death.*”<sup>14</sup> In our modern terminology (actually, a perfectly classical one), Duhnī is here making a plea for *mimesis*. And since it is inconceivable for the Shī‘ite leader to disappoint his interlocutor, the story that immediately follows unquestionably bears the imprint of a mimetic account.

Or, take the following account, which Ṭabarī ascribes to Sayf b. ‘Umar, one of his major sources, and which is placed in the context of the *History*’s treatment of the Arab conquest of Byzantine territories in 15/636–7. Accordingly, the emperor Heraclius asks a subject, who had been a prisoner of the Muslims, to inform him about “these people.”<sup>15</sup> The man’s response, “I shall tell you, *and it will be as if you yourself were looking at them,*” leaves no doubt as to the mimetic quality of the description that follows:

They are horsemen during the day and monks at night. In the area under their responsibility they do not eat except for a price and do not enter [a house] except with [a greeting of] peace. They stand up to those who fight them until they destroy them.

For the Byzantine emperor, the description, provided it is true (“if you have spoken the truth”), is sufficient to predict his own defeat.<sup>16</sup> For the modern reader, less concerned than the renowned emperor with the practical implication of this description, it is in the very quality of what has been said (“it will be as if . . . looking . . .”) that the emphasis should rest, even though, as some may rush to protest, it was transmitted by Sayf—a rather controversial source. For the description evokes verisimilitude in a sense that is very much Plato’s, that is, in visual terms, in the form of an *image*.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See on him *History*, vol. XIX, p. XI and 17 n. 79.

<sup>14</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 17 [II, 227], 74 [II, 281], italics added.

<sup>15</sup> The term *qawm* means, among others, “enemy.” See R. Dozy, *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes*, s.v. “qawm.”

<sup>16</sup> *History*, vol. XII, 181–2 [I, 2395], italics added.

<sup>17</sup> Melberg, *Theories*, 10, 25.

A third example of this kind comes from a report transmitted by ‘Umāra b. Ḥamza, an ‘Abbāsīd governor of the Iraqī and Iranian districts of the Tigris, Ahwāz and Fārs,<sup>18</sup> and harks back to the period between 147/764–158/774. ‘Umāra learns from Maḥdī, the caliph’s son and appointed successor, of rumors about his father Maṣṣūr intending to reverse his decision and transfer allegiance to Ja‘far “the Elder,” Maḥdī’s brother. If that ever happened, swears Maḥdī, he would kill his father. As ‘Umāra, the reporter, hastens to tell Maṣṣūr of what he has just heard, the caliph preempts him: “I will tell you about it before you tell me: Al-Maḥdī came to you and said such-and-such (*kayta wa-kayta*).” ‘Umāra’s reaction, “By God, O Commander of the Faithful, it is as if you were present as the third of us,” implies that Maṣṣūr has said what we were told earlier in the account and, most importantly for our purpose, that he was able to convey exactly what had happened and was engaged in a mimetic act.<sup>19</sup>

*Detailed description of objects*

The claim to tell how things really happened finds its expression in the *History* in several distinct modes, tropes, or strategies to be surveyed in this chapter. I begin by examining a recurring endeavor on the part of various narrators to conjure up true-to-life images of objects, trying to make them almost *visible* to the reader. This trait emerges in a striking fashion in an eyewitness report relating to the booty amassed from the defeated Persians in the conquest of their capital, Madā’in, in 16/637. One item that fell into the Muslims’ hands was “a golden figure of a horse, saddled with a silver saddle; on its crupper and breast girth there were rubies and emeralds encased in silver. Its bridle was likewise embellished.”<sup>20</sup> On the same occasion, a carpet termed *qūf* was taken, measuring sixty-by-sixty cubits, which had on it “pictures of roads and inlays like rivers,” as well as a convent (?). “The edges looked like cultivated lands planted with spring vegetables, made of silk on stalks of gold. Their blos-

<sup>18</sup> On this personality, see *History*, vol. XXIX, 77 [III, 379] and n. 211.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 102 [III, 400].

<sup>20</sup> *History*, vol. XIII, 28 [I, 2448].

soms were of gold and silver, etc.”<sup>21</sup> At the Battle of Jalūlā’ in the same year, the booty included “a figurine of a she-camel of gold or silver, adorned with pearls and rubies, about as big as a young goat when placed on the ground. There was a figure of a rider on it, made of gold and similarly adorned.”<sup>22</sup>

It would be wrong to suppose that only booty captured in the period of the conquests was subject to detailed description. Reports from the considerably later ‘Abbāsīd period offer similar accounts. Thus, the land-tax that the ‘Abbāsīd Ma’mūn (r. 198/813–218/833) levied in Damascus “had been arranged in the most attractive way possible: the camels [carrying the money] were adorned with figured silk saddle cloths and caparisons dyed in rich colors, and with woolen streamers draped round their necks. The money bags were made from Chinese silk, red, green and yellow, and their necks were sticking out [from under the cover].”<sup>23</sup> The description of the sword named Ṣamṣama, belonging to ‘Amr b. al-Ma’dī Karīb al-Zubaydī, a poet and warrior of the first generation of Islam,<sup>24</sup> is another example. “[It] had a wide blade, joined at the base by three nails that connected the blade with the joint of the hilt.” The sword survived until the ‘Abbāsīd period and found its way to Wāthiq’s storeroom.<sup>25</sup>

Some buildings are as minutely described as the objects just referred to and, once again, the aim is to give the reader the illusion of having actually seen them. No wonder that their descriptions have been taken seriously by modern scholarship. In the account concerning the newly established town of Kūfa, following the Arab conquest, we find a detailed depiction of its mosque:

Over its front part, a roof structure was built, that had neither walls at either side, nor at the back. The whole square was meant for the people to congregate in, but in a way that they need not stand packed . . . The roof structure [of al-Kūfah’s mosque] measured two hundred cubits [in width] supported by columns of marble, the uppermost part of which was like in Byzantine churches, was (taken from a palace formerly belonging) to the Persian kings. They marked (the outer perimeter

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 32 [I, 2452]. For a somewhat different description, see p. 33 [I, 2453].

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 42 [I, 2463].

<sup>23</sup> *History*, vol. XXXII, 235 [III, 1143].

<sup>24</sup> See further *History*, vol. XXXIV, 33 n. 113.

<sup>25</sup> *History*, vol. XXXIV, 33 [III, 1348]. For a brief description of the “standard of Kisrā,” see *History*, vol. XI, 188 [I, 2175].

of) the congregation area by means of a ditch, lest anyone should inadvertently and boldly embark on building inside that perimeter for his own.<sup>26</sup>

In another account we are told that the Kūfan supply depot “had four gates: one adjoining al-Başrah, one toward al-Khallālīn, one toward the mosque, and one toward the quarter from which the north wind blows.” In addition, there was a small gate facing the river, “next to the people who deal with rubbish.”<sup>27</sup> Caliph Maṣṣūr’s little enclosure inside his palace had “one room in it and a portico in front of it of the width of the house and the courtyard, supported on teak columns. Over the front portico, curtains (*bawāri*) were hanging, as they do in mosques . . . in the room was a coarse carpet and nothing else except his [al-Maṣṣūr’s] mattress, his pillows, and his blankets . . .”<sup>28</sup> Maḥdī, Maṣṣūr’s successor, is described as sitting in a council hall “furnished with exquisite rose-colored fabrics, most lofty in fashion, overlooking a garden in which there were trees, and the tops of the trees were level with the floor of the [hall]. These trees had burst into leaf with roses and peach and apple blossoms, and all these were pink like the furnishing of the *majlis* that he was in.”<sup>29</sup>

### *Detailed description of space*

It has been argued that the textual treatment of space is a useful indicator of the way a narrative situates itself with respect to the reality it tries to represent.<sup>30</sup> In fact, Ṭabarī’s sources sometimes

<sup>26</sup> *History*, vol. XIII, 69 [I, 2489]. For its use by modern scholarship, see K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1969), Vol. I/1, 24–6.

<sup>27</sup> *History*, vol. XXI, 46–7 [II, 681] and nn. 186–7 for the sites.

<sup>28</sup> *History*, vol. XXIX, 118 [III, 415].

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 228 [III, 510–11]. For Abū ‘Awn ‘Abd al-Malik b. Yazīd in “a shabby house, badly built, and the arch of the *suffah* . . . made of mud brick,” see vol. XXIX, 256 [III, 536–7]. For Hārūn al-Rashīd in ‘Awn al-Ibādī’s house, “with summer arrangements in an open pavilion, with no carpet or covering in the place at all,” see vol. XXX, 320 [III, 752–3]. For a description of Afshīn’s prison, see vol. XXXIII, 185 [III, 1308]. For the first edifice of the Hārūnī Palace that Wāthiq constructed in Sāmarrā’, see vol. XXXIV, 11–12 [III, 1331–2]. For the house of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Malik, the famous ‘Abbāsīd vizier known as Ibn al-Zayyāt, see *ibid.*, 69 [III, 1373].

<sup>30</sup> Otter, *Inventiones*, 3. She refers to Erich Auerbach’s perceptive suggestion to

demonstrate a predilection for details of geographical settings in which events are believed to have occurred. Here, for example, is a description of the wadi behind Aqanqal, the halting place of the tribesmen of Quraysh in their confrontation at Badr with the early Muslims:

The bed of the wadi (which is called Yalyal) lies between Badr and al-Aqanqal, the sand dune behind which were Quraysh, and the wells at Badr are on the bank of the Yalyal which is nearer to Medina. God had sent rain, and the wadi-bed was soft; the effect of the rainfall as far as the Messenger of God and his companions were concerned was to compact the ground without impeding their movement, but its effect on Quraysh was that they were not able to set off because of it.<sup>31</sup>

The Maṣānī‘ mountain in the Yemen<sup>32</sup> is described as a long mountain, difficult of access. Another mountain was adjacent to it and a plain that is not very wide was lying between them. No one could possibly conceive in his mind the idea of climbing up to it.<sup>33</sup> Or, consider the following description that Ṭabarī took from Ibn Ishāq and his sources on the “ecological situation” of the Arab expedition to Tabūk in 9/631 against the Byzantines. Its vividness can hardly be improved upon:

This was a season when people were hard pressed; the heat was oppressive and the country was passing through a dry spell. At the time, fruit was ripe and shade was dearly sought. People love to stay where they have shade and fruit [trees], and find leaving them distasteful.<sup>34</sup>

The valley where, in 220/835, the rebel Bābak al-Khurrāmī<sup>35</sup> hid from Afshīn, the Turkish general in the service of the ‘Abbāsīd caliph,<sup>36</sup> was “filled with thick vegetation and trees, with Armenia on one side and Adharbayjān on the other. Cavalry could not penetrate into it, nor could anyone hiding there be seen on account of the density of its trees and watercourses. It was indeed one big jungle-

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see in the absolute (as opposed to relational) localization in romances an ethical, rather than realistic, intention.

<sup>31</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 47 [I, 1308].

<sup>32</sup> *History*, vol. V, 374 n. 919.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 374 [I, 1039].

<sup>34</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 47 [I, 1693].

<sup>35</sup> See on him *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Bābak.”

<sup>36</sup> See on him *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Afshīn.”

like thicket, and this valley was in fact called a ‘thicket (*ghaydah*).’<sup>37</sup> Exceptionally detailed is the following description that Ṭabarī himself provides of the relay system of fortresses constructed by the same Afshīn in north-eastern Iran, with Ḥiṣn al-Nahr as its central point, to protect Muslim travelers from Bābak’s raids. It is a rather verbose description of a relatively minor issue encoded in essentially mimetic terms. It would not be hard to substantially economize on its detail.

Groups of travelers and caravans used to set off from Ardabīl accompanied by an escort until they reached Ḥiṣn al-Nahr, and then the commander of Ḥiṣn al-Nahr would escort them to al-Haytham al-Ghanāwī. [Al-]Haytham, in turn, would set off with those who had come from his own district until he handed them over to the garrison force at Ḥiṣn al-Nahr, who would escort those travelers coming from Ardabīl until they reached al-Haytham. Under this arrangement the commander of Ḥiṣn al-Nahr was exactly halfway along the road, and he would hand over those in his protection to [al-]Haytham, and the latter would hand over those in his protection to the commander of Ḥiṣn al-Nahr. One commander would go with the one group and the other commander with the other group. If one group arrived at the meeting place before the other, they would not go on beyond that point until the other group arrived. Then each commander would entrust to the other the group of travelers whom he had escorted, so that the one could escort them as far as Ardabīl and the other could escort them to al-Afshīn’s camp. Likewise, al-Haytham al-Ghanāwī would escort the group under his protection as far as Abū Sa‘īd’s men, who themselves meanwhile had set forth and halted at the halfway meeting point along the road with their group of travelers. Then Abū Sa‘īd and his men would hand over that group to al-Haytham, and the latter would hand over the group accompanying him to Abū Sa‘īd’s men. Then Abū Sa‘īd and his men would escort those in the caravan to Khushsh, while al-Haytham and his men would go back to Arshaq with the travelers entrusted to them so that they would arrive with them the next day. Then they would be able to hand them over to ‘Alawayh al-A‘war and his men, who would convey them to their intended destination. Abū Sa‘īd and those accompanying him would proceed to Khushsh and thence to al-Afshīn’s camp, where the leader of a caravan from al-Afshīn met him, and that leader would receive from him those in the caravan and send them on to al-Afshīn’s camp. This arrangement has been in constant use.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *History*, vol. XXXIII, 73 [III, 1219].

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–19 [III, 1173–4]. Al-Haytham was a commander originally from the Jazīra region. ‘Alawayh, “the one-eyed,” was commander of the ‘Abbasid troops

*Physiognomic description*

Although most of the persons in the *History* remain unknown to us in terms of their physiognomy<sup>39</sup>—did the body matter less than the soul?—not a few, however, are portrayed in some detail. Two descriptions are given of the Prophet, both attributed to ‘Alī, his cousin: “The Messenger of God was neither tall nor short. [He had] a large head and beard, the palms of his hands and his feet were callused, [he had] large joints, his face [had] a reddish tinge, the hair of his breast was long, and when he walked he bent forward as if he were descending a slope.”<sup>40</sup> The second portrayal is somewhat longer and resorts to laudatory similes:

The Messenger of God was of a white complexion with a reddish tinge, [with] deep-black and large [eyes], and long eyelashes. The hair of his breast was thin, his cheeks were smooth, and his beard was thick and long as if his neck were a silver pitcher. The hair from the upper part of his chest to his navel ran like a branch cut off from a tree. He did not have any other hair on his chest or in his armpits. The palms of his hands and his feet were callused. When he walked, [he walked] as though he were descending a slope or as though he were falling from a rock. When he turned around he turned completely; his turn was neither short nor long, and [he turned] neither like a weak nor like a mean person. The perspiration on his face [looked] as if it were pearls, and the fragrance of his sweat was better than musk.<sup>41</sup>

Unsurprisingly, ‘Alī’s conclusion endeavors to underscore the Prophet’s uniqueness: “I have never seen anyone like him before or since.”

As to ‘Alī himself, according to his great-grandson he was a “tawny man, markedly so, with glaring [?] (*thaqīl al-‘aynayn*) and large eyes, corpulent, bald, tending to shortness.”<sup>42</sup> A number of reporters showing “no difference of opinion among them,” testify that ‘Uthmān, the third Muslim caliph, “was a man neither short nor tall, with a

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known as *ābnā’*. See *ibid.*, 17 [III, 11723]. For the “Tongue” of Kūfa, see vol. XIII, 65 [I, 2485].

<sup>39</sup> For the sparseness of physical descriptions in the Bible, see Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 57.

<sup>40</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 157 [I, 1789].

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 157–8 [I, 1789].

<sup>42</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 227 [I, 3470], translates “heavy eyes.” I am indebted for the variant translation to Professor Albert Arazi of the Hebrew University.



handsome face and fine skin. He had a full beard, brown in color. He was strong-boned and broad-shouldered. He possessed a thick head of hair, and used to saffron his beard.”<sup>43</sup> “He possessed a handsome face, though it had pockmarks left by smallpox, and his arms were covered with hair,” is the account of one who asserts that he “looked closely at him”<sup>44</sup> and, therefore (as the reader should be able to infer), could not be wrong. Umm ‘Amr, Zayd b. ‘Alī’s future mother-in-law, is described as “a corpulent, good-looking, fleshy woman who was already getting on in years, although she did not look her age. When she went in to see Zayd b. ‘Alī and greeted him, he thought that she was a young woman. She chatted to him and she was the most eloquent of people and most beautiful in appearance.”<sup>45</sup> Of Yūsuf b. ‘Umar, the Umayyad governor of Iraq, who was dismissed in 126/743–4, we are told that his “stature was of the shortest, just as his beard was of the longest,” a note that, presumably, is not only meant to provide a physical description but also to caricature.<sup>46</sup> Of Yazīd b. al-Walīd, one of the last Umayyads, it is reported that “[ī]n appearance he was brown-skinned, tall, with a small head, and a mole on his face. He was a handsome man. He had quite a wide mouth but not excessively so.”<sup>47</sup> And, in one description, the ‘Abbāsīd Maṣṣūr “had curly hair, and was tall and white-skinned, with a hooked nose and a handsome face and beard.”<sup>48</sup> In another description, however, “he was brown-skinned, tall, thin, with a sparse beard.”<sup>49</sup> Which reminds us that a person’s physical appearance is to no small extent in the eye of the beholder.

<sup>43</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 253 [I, 3054] and another description that follows there.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 252 [I, 3054]. To a modern scholar, this description may very well ring authentic, “precisely because it was so strange.” See *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Uthmān b. ‘Affān.”

<sup>45</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 21 [II, 1686].

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 203 [II, 1842]. It appears that also Julius Wellhausen did not like him. See *ibid.*, *ibid.*, n. 1014.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 244 [II, 1874].

<sup>48</sup> *History*, vol. XXVII, 212 [III, 88].

<sup>49</sup> *History*, vol. XXIX, 93 [III, 391]. For “Shāhriyār was (tall) [?] as a camel,” see vol. XIII, 5 [I, 2423]. For the smoke of the boiling pot that could be seen through ‘Umar’s beard when in disguise, “because he had a large beard,” see vol. XIV, 111 [I, 2744]. For Mālik al-Ashtar being “one of the strongest built and tallest of the men . . . [who] rarely trimmed his beard,” see vol. XVII, 44 [I, 3297]. For Faḍl b. al-‘Abbās being “fair-skinned,” see vol. XIX, 211 [II, 415]. For the blows that had changed the color of Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh’s complexion and made his blood run down; one of the lashes had struck an eye so that blood flowed from it,” see vol. XXVIII, 127 [III, 177]. For the same Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh as

*Gestures*

Descriptions of physical gestures and mimicry that are a “mute signal,”<sup>50</sup> sometimes accompanying words that were said, and visible only to eyewitnesses, do occasionally occur and undoubtedly enhance the reality effect—to cite Roland Barthes’ well known idiom.<sup>51</sup> Thus we read that on one occasion the Prophet was so angry “that they could see shadows in his face.”<sup>52</sup> That he laughed “so that his back teeth could be seen,” is a statement that occurs twice on two different occasions.<sup>53</sup> A *shaykh* of the Banū ‘Āmir, who challenged the Prophet, listened to his answer while bending his legs and kneeling down “just as a camel does.”<sup>54</sup> ‘Alī, when asked how he became heir to the Messenger of God in preference to his paternal uncle,<sup>55</sup> before going on to specify the circumstances of what one could suspect as an item of Shi‘ite propaganda, “said ‘Ahem’ three times until everybody craned their necks and pricked up their ears.”<sup>56</sup> When Mughīra b. Shu‘ba, a Companion of the Prophet and later an Umayyad governor, was sent to Rustām, the Persian commander at Qādisiyya, he divided his hair into four sections, “[o]ne [by a line running] from the forehead to the neck and [another one] between his ears. Then he plaited his hair . . .”<sup>57</sup> ‘Umar, the second caliph, “burst into

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“very swarthy—his complexion almost black—and corpulent. He was nicknamed ‘Tar Face’ because of his dark complexion, and, in fact, Abū Ja‘far used to call him ‘Charcoal Face (*al-muḥammam*),” see *ibid.*, 160 [III, 203]. For Maḥdī being “tall, of thin build, with curly hair. Opinions differ as to his coloring . . . Some said that he had a white spot in his right eye, and others said that it was in his left eye . . .” see vol. XXIX, 246 [III, 526–7]. For Banūqa being “brown, of beautiful stature, and charming . . .” see *ibid.*, 264 [III, 544]. For Mūsā al-Hādī being “tall, full-bodied handsome, whitish in complexion but tinged with red, and with a contracted upper lip,” see vol. XXX, 58 [III, 580]. For ‘Umar b. Mihrān having a “squint and an unprepossessing face,” see *ibid.*, 135 [III, 627]. For Amīn being “tall, bald over the temples, fair, small eyed, hook nosed, handsome, big boned, and broad shouldered,” incidentally, precisely like the Prophet and ‘Uthmān (!), see vol. XXXI, 211 [III, 938]. There are more examples of this kind.

<sup>50</sup> Sternberg, “Proteus,” 134–5, offers for this some theoretical consideration.

<sup>51</sup> See n. 72 below. They would feature in medieval Western legends and would be particularly noted in Chaucer’s oeuvre. See Fludernik, *Narratology*, 37.

<sup>52</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 86 [I, 1361].

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 150 [I, 1441]; vol. VIII, 47 [I, 1506].

<sup>54</sup> *History*, vol. V, 276 [I, 974].

<sup>55</sup> It possibly was ‘Abbās. See *History*, vol. VI, 91 n. 144.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 91 [I, 1173].

<sup>57</sup> *History*, vol. XII, 136 [I, 2351].

tears, weeping like a child, [bending his head forward] so that I saw the uppermost part of his shoulders above his neck;” this is how Sā’ib b. al-Aqra’, ‘Umar’s envoy to Nihāwand and the man in charge of the division of booty, describes the caliph’s emotional reaction upon receiving the news of the victory, and the martyrdom of Nu‘mān b. al-Muqarrin, along with two baskets full of precious stones.<sup>58</sup> In another instance, one narrator, who decided to bring to ‘Umar’s attention the faults the Community found with him, reports that the caliph “put the top of his whip in his beard and the lower part on his thigh.” After he had heard one of the complaints, ‘Umar “raised his whip, then ran his hand down it right to the end.”<sup>59</sup> ‘Uthmān, the third caliph, once wept as he stood on the pulpit until his beard “soaked with tears.”<sup>60</sup> When, at his death scene, his beard was seized and shaken, one could hear “his teeth chattering.”<sup>61</sup>

### *Minutiae*

There is a marked disposition in the *History* to record all sorts of details, the intended effect of a great deal of which is to increase the narrator’s credibility. Lists of commanders, banner holders and other functionaries in all sorts of battles, from the Prophet’s to the ‘Abbāsīd caliphs’, are items of information provided by many of Ṭabarī’s sources.<sup>62</sup> They would have most likely been saddened to

<sup>58</sup> *History*, vol. XIII, 183 [I, 2599].

<sup>59</sup> *History*, vol. XIV, 139–40 [I, 2773].

<sup>60</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 179 [I, 2977].

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 190 [I, 2990]. There are numerous examples of this kind.

<sup>62</sup> For commanders, those who commanded “the left wing” and “right wing” in particular, for banner holders etc., see e.g., *History*, vol. VI, 125 [I, 1210–11], 126 [I, 1212–13]; vol. XI, 90–94 [I, 2093–5], 165 [I, 2151]; vol. XII, 18 [I, 2225], 131–2 [I, 2346]; vol. XIII, 76 [I, 2495], 77 [I, 2496], 149 [I, 2569]; vol. XVII, 31 [I, 3283], 36 [I, 3289], 60 [I, 3312], 76 [I, 3327], 87 [I, 3337–8], 130 [I, 3380], 184–5 [I, 3431], 189 [I, 3436]; vol. XX, 170 [II, 587], 198 [II, 614]; vol. XXI, 88 [II, 721], 229 [II, 849]; vol. XXII, 86–7 [II, 935]; vol. XXIII, 25 [II, 1076]; vol. XXIV, 153 [II, 1422]; vol. XXV, 104 [II, 1566], 107 [II, 1569]; vol. XXVI, 40 [II, 1702], 124 [II, 1773], 145–6 [II, 1792]; vol. XXVII, 32 [II, 1920], 68 [II, 1957], 75 [II, 1964], 80 [II, 1970], 98 [II, 1989], 110 [II, 2004]; vol. XXVIII, 9 [III, 93], 201–02 [III, 238], 260 [III, 290], 278 [III, 305]; vol. XXIX, 47 [III, 356]; vol. XXX, 25 [III, 558]; vol. XXXI, 14 [III, 772], 52 [III, 800]; vol. XXXIV, 18–19 [III, 1336], 161 [III, 1444]; vol. XXXV, 67 [III, 1588], 78 [III, 1603]; vol. XXXVI, 103 [III, 1828].

learn that the utility of their lists for the purpose of historical reconstruction has been repeatedly questioned.<sup>63</sup> Figures, whose accuracy modern scholars often doubt,<sup>64</sup> are taken rather seriously by the *History*'s narrators. Thus, we are assured that 60,000 "was the number counted for us in his [Rustām's] register" for the Persian troops at Qādisiyya.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, the 100,000 Persian peasants at the time of the conquest of Bahurasīr, a section of Madā'in, the Sāsānid capital, "were duly counted."<sup>66</sup> "I personally met one hundred *ʿarīfs*," one ʿAṭīyya b. al-Ḥārith states apropos of the Kūfan units known as *ʿirāfas*, in a clear attempt to establish the reliability of his report.<sup>67</sup> Occasionally, Ṭabarī himself deems it appropriate to supply more than one account in order to confirm the accuracy of a certain figure.<sup>68</sup> Another tendency one notes is a marked penchant for describing the dress or armor worn by individuals on a particular occasion,<sup>69</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Noth, *Historical Tradition*, esp. 96–117, who considers this material in reference to the Arab conquests as literary forms and *topoi*, not facts. Noth's argument is that we do not know of any lists, aside from ʿUmar's *dūwān*, to have been drawn during the Arab conquests. That the name lists are "not documents of historical value . . . but rather fictions set into circulation by tradents of later times," (p. 103) Noth bases on comparison of texts.

<sup>64</sup> This critique ranges from sensible attempts, like in Lawrence Conrad, "Abraham and Muḥammad: Some Observations apropos of Chronology and Literary *topoi* in Early Arabic Historical Tradition," *BSOAS* 50 (1987): 225–40, to G. H. A. Juynboll's fanciful (albeit disguised as positivistic) suggestion "to decide on a hypothetical coefficient," in "Translator's Foreword," *History*, vol. XIII, pp. XIII–XVI.

<sup>65</sup> *History*, vol. XII, 136 [I, 2351].

<sup>66</sup> *History*, vol. XIII, 8 [I, 2426]. Compare Richard Kimber's slightly different translation in his review in *JSS* 39 (1991): 176, which does not bear on the point here discussed, however.

<sup>67</sup> *History*, vol. XIII, 77 [I, 2496]. Similarly, the heads of the dead at the civil war at ʿAnbār in 251/865–6 were counted and found to have been seventy. See vol. XXXV, 84 [III, 1611].

<sup>68</sup> For the number of Muslims at Badr, see *History*, vol. VII, 38–40 [I, 1296–9]. For the Prophet's Companions after Ḥudaybiyya, see vol. VIII, 69 [I, 1529–30]. For the number of Rustām's elephants, see vol. XII, 62 [I, 2267].

<sup>69</sup> For the white clothes of ʿAbdallāh b. Jubayr on the day of Uḥud, see *History*, vol. VII, 113 [I, 1393]. For the clothes of Maṭar, see vol. XIV, 41 [I, 2669]. For ʿUmar's dress, see *ibid.*, 103 [I, 2376]. For ʿAlī's dress in Ahjār al-Zayt, see vol. XV, 161 [I, 2956–7]. For Yazīd b. Siyāh's clothes becoming black, see vol. XX, 163 [II, 579]. For the armory of the Khawārij, see *ibid.*, 170 [II, 587]. For Khālīd b. ʿAbdallāh's dress when galloping, see vol. XXI, 173 [II, 799]. For the coat under Ibn al-Zubayr's shirt, see *ibid.*, 228 [II, 848]. For Bukayr b. Hārūn's armor, see vol. XXII, 145 [II, 998]. For Mūsā b. ʿAbdallāh's dress, see vol. XXIII, 106 [II, 1163]. For the Khāqān's Tibetan helmet, see vol. XXV, 59 [II, 1522]. For the Khāqān's wife's shoes of quilted wool, see *ibid.*, 146 [II, 1611]. For the Shākīr's Tibetan horn, see *ibid.*, 163 [II, 1631]. For the dress of the Turkish king of the

and for supplying details about horses, such as name or breed.<sup>70</sup> Clearly, immersion in such particulars is marginal, if not meaningless, outside the mimetic realm.

Admittedly, details in the *History* that might strike the modern reader as quite trivial, are not necessarily so to the narrator: his conception of details and their function was most likely different, or at least his audience may have expected him to give such impression. Besides, much of reality's details are, after all, quite banal. One might cogently argue that it is precisely the historian's emphasis on the mundane and trivial that credits representation as "truly" mimetic. These are the details that, in Genette's terms, are "contingent." They add nothing of importance but they are mentioned because they are (allegedly) "there," as "connotators of mimesis."<sup>71</sup> Barthes termed these "superfluous" details *notations*, and exemplified them by Flaubert's "old piano, under a barometer," and (the historian!) Michelet's "little

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Kursul's camp, see vol. XXVI, 26 [II, 1690]. For Walīd riding on a chestnut horse, "wearing a silk gown and silk turban etc.," see *ibid.*, 156 [II, 1802]. For Walīd "wearing a shirt shot through with silver and trousers of variegated cloth, and his sword . . . in a scabbard," see *ibid.*, 160 [II, 1806]. For Abū Ḥamza "wearing a rough cotton waist-wraper," see vol. XXVII, 91 [II, 1982]. For Ziyād b. 'Ubaydallāh emerging from his bedchamber wearing nothing but his waist wrapper, see vol. XXVIII, 100 [III, 154]. For Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh wearing a rough shirt and a cloak of fine white linen, see *ibid.*, 116 [III, 168]. For a man who "had muffled himself up in a head sash," see *ibid.*, 120 [III, 171]. For Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh "wearing only a shirt, a headwrap (*sāj*), and waist wrapper (*izār*) under his shirt," see *ibid.*, 125 [III, 175]. There are many more examples of this kind.

<sup>70</sup> For the name of Muḥammad's horse, see *History*, vol. VIII, 50 [I, 1509]. For Qutayba's horse, see vol. XXII, 114 [II, 963]. For the name of Abrash's horse and what Abrash was wearing, see vol. XXVI, 158 [II, 1805]. For Kirmānī mounting his she-mule Dawwāma (according to some sources, however, it rather was his horse Bashīr), see *ibid.*, 229 [II, 1862]. For Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh riding a bedouin donkey with a black coat, see vol. XXVIII, 148 [III, 194]. For Muḥammad b. Yazīd's chestnut-colored mount of Persian breed, see *ibid.*, 263 [III, 292]. For Mahdī's "gray beast," see vol. XXIX, 232 [III, 515]. For a horse of Persian breed, see vol. XXX, 67 [III, 586]. For Hādī mounted on a greyish-white ass, see *ibid.*, 68 [III, 587]. For Naṣr b. Shabāth riding "a chestnut horse with a blaze on its forehead" and wearing "a black tunic (*durrā'ah*) that he had tied behind his back," see vol. XXXI, 107 [III, 845]. For Muḥammad b. Ḥumayd al-Ṭāhirī riding a black horse, "a bobtail with a blaze on its forehead and white on its legs; he called it al-Zuhrī," see *ibid.*, 189 [III, 918]. For a tribesman mounted on a greyish-colored camel, see vol. XXXII, 161 [III, 1088]. For Ishāq b. Aḥmad b. Suqayr's horse, see vol. XXXIII, 159 [III, 1285]. For Saliḥ borne away upon a mustard-colored pack animal, see vol. XXXVI, 89 [III, 1810]. For the Zanj led by a man riding a chestnut horse, see *ibid.*, 130 [III, 1853].

<sup>71</sup> Genette, *Figures*, 128–9; Beaumont, "Hard-Boiled," 11.

door” behind Charlotte Corday in a famous scene of murder during the French Revolution. These *notations* “seem to be allied with a kind of narrative luxury, profligate to the extent of throwing up ‘useless’ details and increasing the cost of narrative information,” but in fact they excellently suit *historical* discourse. The ultimate significance of their insignificance, as Barthes brilliantly puts it, is that they conform to cultural rules governing representation.<sup>72</sup>

Thus the reader of the *History* is not expected to experience indifference or fatigue on being informed that the Prophet, on one occasion, pitched a “*Turkish-style* round tent;”<sup>73</sup> or, that in the famous pact between the Prophet and the Meccans at Ḥudaybiyya, ‘Umar “was holding his hand under the tree,” and that the tree was an acacia.<sup>74</sup> “I saw on his throat the scars of two stab wounds, like a pair of leather thongs, which he had suffered on the Day of the House,” says Ḥasan, ‘Alī’s son, of one of ‘Uthmān’s associates on the day of the caliph’s murder.<sup>75</sup> Ḥumayd b. Muslim al-Azdī, an eyewitness to a scene at Karbalā’, in which Ḥusayn’s nephew is being killed, reports that the lad wore a shirt and a waistcloth, and a pair of sandals, “one of whose straps was broken—as I remember, *it was the left*.”<sup>76</sup> Mas‘ūd b. ‘Amr al-Azdī, the leader of the Azd at Baṣra in the early Umayyad period, when visited by ‘Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād, the local governor, is sitting at night in his dwelling place, “kindling a piece of wood on a brick and struggling with his shoes, *one of which he had removed while the other stayed on*.”<sup>77</sup> When, in 251/865–6,

<sup>72</sup> Barthes, “Reality Effect,” 11–17. For a perceptive note on the role of details in increasing the standard of verisimilitude in classical Islamic historiography, see Chase F. Robinson, “The Study of Islamic Historiography: A Progress Report,” *JRAS*, ser. 3, 7 (1997): 210–11.

<sup>73</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 11 [I, 1468], italics added. See there translator’s note 62.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 83 [I, 1544].

<sup>75</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 189 [I, 2989].

<sup>76</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 152 [II, 358], italics added. Julius Wellhausen, discarding the minutiae of such report, misses the point altogether. See *Religio-Political Factions*, 113.

<sup>77</sup> *History*, vol. XX, 18 [II, 442], italics added. For Nizār b. Ma‘add’s tent being of red leather, see vol. VI, 34 [I, 1108]. For the whale’s eye socket in which five men could sit, see vol. VIII, 148 [I, 1606–07]. For the lack of palm trees between Qādisiyya and ‘Udhayb, see vol. XII, 107 [I, 2317]. For Sa‘d performing “eight *rak‘as* without pauses between them,” see Vol. XIII, 23 [I, 2443]. For the lead seal at the bottom of Mukhtār’s letter, see vol. XXI, 114 [II, 747]. For Sulaymān’s troops being positioned with the olive grove on their right, the mountain to the north, and the wells behind them, see vol. XXVI, 187 [II, 1828]. For Yūsuf’s beard that “at that time reached below his navel,” see *ibid.*, 203 [II, 1843]. For Nubāta

Mu‘tazz received allegiance from the Turkish troops and was able to challenge Musta‘in’s caliphate, the caliph ordered Baghdad to be fortified. Now, unless one is a student interested in warfare techniques, the detailed description of the fortification of the Shammāsiyya Gate by Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh, the Ṭāhirid governor of the ‘Abbāsīd capital, offers much more than the average reader would care to know about:

... [H]e [Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh] set up five war engines (*shaddakhāt*) covering the width of the road. The engines contained cross beams (*‘awārīd*), wooden planks (*akwāh*) and long protruding spikes. Outside the second gate, another gate, equal to it in thickness and armored with iron sheets, was suspended by ropes in such a way, if one were to enter that gate, the suspended gate would drop and kill whoever happened to be underneath it. On the inner gate a ballista (*‘arrāḍah*) was set up, and on the outer one there were five huge mangonels (*majānīq*). Among them was a large one called The Angry One (*al-ghadbān*). Added to these were six ballistas which fired in the direction of Raqqat [Plain of] al-Shammāsiyyah. On the Baradān Gate, eight ballistas, four on each side, and four war engines were set up. Similar arrangements were made for each and every gate on the West and East Sides of Baghdad...<sup>78</sup>

Ṭabarī himself, no less than his various sources, also has an eye for detail. In one report about the Ḥudaybiyya pact in 6/628, we are told of a ritual that Muḥammad imposed on his companions in the form of sacrifice and shaving. Immediately, Ṭabarī introduces a second report in which the name of the barber is specified.<sup>79</sup> Or, Ṭabarī

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settling with the Muḍar on the right side of the road “as you come up from Baṣrah,” see vol. XXVII, 16 [II, 1905]. For Maṣṣūr b. Jumhūr cutting off the Khārījī woman’s hand “or... the rein of his horse while it was in her hand,” see *ibid.*, 17 [II, 1906]. For Khāḍir tearing the spearhead “with his left hand,” see *ibid.*, 37 [II, 1926]. For Ḥārīth “who was on a mule, got off it and mounted a horse... [and] was killed... under an olive or a sorb tree,” see *ibid.*, 43 [II, 1932–3]. For saffron used by Maṣṣūr “because his hair was soft and would not take dye,” see vol. XXIX, 118 [III, 414]. For Rabī‘ b. Yūnus coming out with a scroll in his hand, the end of which he let fall to the ground, see *ibid.*, 163 [III, 453]. For ‘Īsā b. Mūsā standing on the *first* step of the pulpit, see *ibid.*, 183 [III, 472]. For Miswār b. Musāwir approaching toward Mahdī until he “was touching the cushion,” see *ibid.*, 248 [III, 529]. For ‘Alī b. ‘Īsā’s leather beg and what precisely it contained, see vol. XXXI, 54–5 [III, 802]. For Mu‘taṣim’s letter being sealed in gold, see vol. XXXIII, 73 [III, 1220]. For what Mu‘taṣim attached to his saddle, see *ibid.*, 95–6 [III, 1235]. There are numerous examples of this sort.

<sup>78</sup> *History*, vol. XXXV, 40–41 [III, 1551–2].

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. VIII, 89 [I, 1550].

provides material that completes details on major participants in the Yarmūk battle against the Byzantines, and thus we learn the name of the seasonal troops (?) (*qārī*?) on that occasion.<sup>80</sup> He also deems it pertinent to cite the conflicting opinions on the trivial matter of whether Abū Mihjān al-Thaqafī, the poet famous for his wine songs, rode his horse saddled or unsaddled.<sup>81</sup>

*“Imperfect Knowledge”*

Oddly, as it would seem at first sight, there are also details concerning which Ṭabarī and his sources acknowledge their imperfect knowledge. However, the decision to do so should be seen as one more device to demonstrate fidelity to reality even at the (small) cost of occasional hesitation, gaps or conflicting accounts, ultimately yielding a notable enhancement of authorial credibility. Therefore, there is no harm in admitting that opinions differed as to Maḥdī’s coloring, some saying that he was brown and others saying that he was white; or, that some said that he had a white spot in his right eye, and others said that it was in his left eye.<sup>82</sup> Rabīʿ b. Yūnus, Maṣṣūr’s chamberlain (*ḥājib*), who was present when a defeated Khārījite was brought before the caliph, did not remember whether he stood “before al-Maṣṣūr or by his head.”<sup>83</sup> The terms of the defeated Byzantines in 165/781–2 were “ninety or seventy thousand dinars.”<sup>84</sup> Muḥammad b. Sulaymān, a member of the ‘Abbāsīd family and an official in Baṣra, confesses that he did not know whether it was the Umayyad Walīd or Sulaymān who allegedly confiscated an estate that had belonged to a Companion’s family.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. XI, 94 [I, 2095]. For the *qurrāʾ* see *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “*ḳurrāʾ*”; Norman Calder, “The *Qurrāʾ* and the Arabic Lexicographical Tradition,” *JSS* 36 (1991): 297–307. Similarly, for the name of the man who killed the Persian near the village of Jazīr, see vol. XIII, 22–3 [I, 2443]. For the name of the one who brought the Ḥasanids down to Rabādha, see vol. XXVIII, 124 [III, 174].

<sup>81</sup> *History*, vol. XII, 104–05 [I, 2313]. See also the conflicting dating of ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s arrival in Khurāsān, vol. XXVIII, 71–2 [III, 136].

<sup>82</sup> *History*, vol. XXIX, 246 [III, 526–7].

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 101–02 [III, 399].

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 221 [III, 504].

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 253 [III, 534]. For uncertainty about the number of Theophilus’ troops, see vol. XXXIII, 95 [III, 1235]. For uncertainty about whom Māzyār summoned,



*Detailed description of scenes*

We have seen the narrators' attention to particulars as a device to maximize realism in their accounts. Let us turn to the accumulation of descriptive detail in the depiction of entire scenes. In fact, the reader of the *History* is frequently regaled with portrayal of scenes in such meticulous detail as to experience the sensation of being a spectator. Our first example comes from the section on the last Sāsānid kings, which Ṭabarī copied from Hishām b. Muḥammad, known as Ibn al-Kalbī.<sup>86</sup> There we have the detailed scene of Asfādh Jushnas, head of the Iranian royal secretaries,<sup>87</sup> being received in an audience by Kīsrā, as Iranian emperors came to be known:

Kīsrā was seated on three Khusrawānī silken rugs woven with gold, which had been laid on a silken carpet, and he was lolling back on three cushions likewise woven with gold. In his hand he had a yellow, well-rounded quince. When he noticed Asfādh Jushnas, he sat up in a cross-legged position and placed the quince on the place where he had been sitting. Because it was perfectly round and because of the smoothness of the cushion on the seat, plumped out with its stuffing, it rolled down from the topmost of the three cushions on to the upper one of the three rugs, then from the rug to the carpet, finally rolling off the carpet to the ground, where it rolled some distance, becoming covered with dirt. Asfādh Jushnas picked it up and rubbed it with his sleeve, moving forward to present it to Kīsrā. But the latter gestured to Asfādh Jushnas to keep it away from him, and told him, "Take it away from me!" So Asfādh Jushnas laid it on the ground at the carpet's edge, fell back, stood in his old place, and did obeisance before Kīsrā by putting his hand on his breast. Kīsrā lowered his head and then uttered the aphorism appropriate to the incident . . .<sup>88</sup>

The florid detail provided here—descriptions of objects, body positions of the *dramatis personae*, their *ipsissima verba*, and the sequence of their gestures—are all meant to promote the illusion that one is actually witnessing the imperial audience.

Consider, as another example, the detailed description of the fol-

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see *ibid.*, 169 [III, 1295]. For the narrator telling Abū Nūḥ ʿĪsā b. Ibrāhīm the same he had told to Aḥmad, "or words to the same effect," see vol. XXXVI, 11 [1722].

<sup>86</sup> For Ibn al-Kalbī and his interest in the Iranians, see *History*, vol. V, 5–6 n. 12.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 382 [I, 1046].

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 385–6 [I, 1048–9].

lowing, almost surrealistic scene, which allegedly took place in the wake of the Arab conquest of Madā'in, the Persian capital, and the arrival at Medina of the Persian royal attire. 'Umar, the caliph, commands Muḥallim, "the most corpulent Bedouin in the region of Medina," to put the attire on. Then,

Muḥallim was crowned with the royal crown, held aloft on its two wooden props, dressed up in his sashes, necklaces and garments, and seated in front of the people. 'Umar looked at him; so did the people. They saw something magnificent belonging to this material world and its allure. Then Muḥallim stepped out of those and he was dressed up in the next set of regalia. The people looked at all that without interest [?] until all the royal garments had been tried on. Then Muḥallim was asked to arm himself with the king's weapons and to gird himself with his sword. The people kept staring. Then 'Umar ordered him to take everything off and said . . .<sup>89</sup>

Or again, take the scene of the duel between Abū Nubāta Nā'il b. Ju'shum, the Tamīmite, and the Persian Shahriyār, which allegedly took place in the course of the Arab conquest of Bābil. It provides us with a strikingly vivid account of a physical struggle:

Each had his spear. Both were of sturdy build, except that Shahriyār was [tall] as a camel. When he saw Nā'il, he flung his spear down in order to grab him by the neck. Nā'il did likewise. They drew their swords and hacked at each other. Then they took each other by the throat and crashed down from their mounts. [Shahriyār] fell on top of Nā'il "like a ton of bricks" and held him down under one thigh. He drew his dagger and started to undo the fastenings of Nā'il's coat of mail. Shahriyār's thumb happened to land in Nā'il's mouth and Nā'il crushed the bone in it (with his teeth). He noticed a [momentary] slackening [in his opponent's assault] and, attacking him furiously, whipped him off onto the ground, sat on his chest, drew his own dagger and tore Shahriyār's coat of mail from his belly. Then he stabbed him in his abdomen and side until he died.<sup>90</sup>

Finally, here is the description of one Ilbā' b. Jaḥsh al-ʿIjlī, being struck by a Persian soldier in the battle known as the Day of Aghwāth in 14/635–6:

<sup>89</sup> *History*, vol. XIII, 34–35 [I, 2454–55]. For the description of a similar scene of Rustām sitting on his throne, see vol. XII, 82 [I, 2287].

<sup>90</sup> *History*, vol. XIII, 5 [I, 2423].

... [H]is bowels spilled out and he could not get up; he attempted to put his bowels back but was unable to do it. Then a Muslim passed by, and Ilbā' said: "O so-and-so, help me with my belly!" The Muslim put his bowels back, and Ilbā' held the slit skin of his belly together and crawled toward the Persian lines, without turning his face to the Muslims. Death befell him thirty cubits from the place where he had been struck, in the direction of the Persian lines.<sup>91</sup>

The mimetic dimension in the (re)production of certain scenes is sometimes achieved through the use of repetitive sentences reflecting acts recurring in real time and thus maximizing transparency of word and world in narrative discourse. Consider the following scene from the account of the murder of Mustawrid b. 'Ullifa, a Khārijite rebel in Iraq in 43/664:

Ḥajjār b. Abjar looked down upon them from a house in which he and a group of his family were staying. Suddenly they would see two horsemen arrive and enter that house in which the folk were [gathered]. Then, before long, two others would *come and enter*, and shortly afterwards another would *come and enter*, then still another who would *enter*.<sup>92</sup>

"We attacked them, but they did not budge. We attacked them again, but they still did the same," reports 'Abdallāh b. 'Uqba al-Ghanāwī, a follower of Mustawrid, of the fight with the Umayyad troops.<sup>93</sup> And Ya'qūb b. Dāwūd, Mahdī's vizier and powerful advisor, reports how his master insisted on a guarantee from him that he fulfill some request: "He said, '[Do you swear] by God?' and I said, 'by God' three times, and then he said, 'by the life of my head?' and I said, 'by the life of your head,' and he said, 'Put out your hand and swear to it,' so I put my hand on him and swore to him by it that I would do what he said and fulfill his request."<sup>94</sup>

<sup>91</sup> *History*, vol. XII, 101 [I, 2310], italics added. Needless to say, the verses ascribed to him at this stage do not add much credibility to the account, but this is a different matter. For the morbid details of Ḥakīm b. Jabala's head "dangling backward, hanging on only by its skin, and his face . . . turned against his back," see vol. VI, 76 [I, 3134]. For the scene of the killing of the Transoxanian prince in 110/728–9, see vol. XXV, 58–9 [II, 1521]. For a description of the chamber with the corpses of the Ṭālibids, see vol. XXIX, 153 [III, 446]. For the scene of Aḥmad b. Naṣr's execution, see vol. XXXIV, 33–4 [III, 1348].

<sup>92</sup> *History*, vol. XVIII, 34 [II, 30], italics added. For Ḥajjār, see vol. XVII, 217 n. 858.

<sup>93</sup> *History*, vol. XVIII, 63 [II, 59].

<sup>94</sup> *History*, vol. XXIX, 229 [III, 511].

The succession of acts described here, closely matching the command, evokes the aura of quasi-ritual that presumably pervaded the scene.

*Role of the eyewitness*

The degree of veracity that is behind an eyewitness report is surely impossible to judge. It has been argued in a different context that a *fabula* inserted into a text purporting to be an eyewitness account could partake of the illusion of truth.<sup>95</sup> In fact, for many medieval European writers, the employment of an eyewitness was a rhetorical topos.<sup>96</sup> Be that as it may concerning veracity, it is difficult to miss the premium that is put on eyewitness reports in the *History*.

The eyewitness is undoubtedly the ideal reporter on detail as well as the unfolding scene, and his word is assumed to command respect. The seeing eye behind the spoken word is the safest medium to inscribe history “as it really was.”<sup>97</sup> It certainly prevails over the ear, as implied by one anonymous narrator, who set off with ‘Alī, when ‘Uthmān, the third caliph, summoned him. By his own admission, he accompanied ‘Alī in order to “overhear their conversation.” He later also joined ‘Alī on his journey to meet Talḥa b. ‘Ubaydallāh, the noted Companion. Finally, he followed Talḥa to ‘Uthmān’s place. “I said [to myself], ‘By Allāh! I’ll see what he says,’” the *shaykh* explains.<sup>98</sup> See rather than hear!

The eyewitness narrator has a clear edge over an indirect reporter because of the intimate knowledge he is able to convey. “I wish you had heard what Hind was saying and seen her insolence as she stood on a rock reciting *rajaz*-poetry,” ‘Umar recounts Ḥassān b. Thābit

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<sup>95</sup> Robert Levine, “The Pious Traitor: Rhetorical Reinventions of the Fall of Antioch,” *Mittelalterliches Jahrbuch* 33 (1998): 60, referring to literature of the First Crusade.

<sup>96</sup> Bernard Guenée, *Histoire et culture historique dans l’Occident médiéval* (Paris, 1980), 78.

<sup>97</sup> For the importance of eyewitness testimony in classical historiography, see John Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge, 1997), 281–2. The view of Isidore of Seville, frequently repeated thereafter, was that true history is always an eyewitness account. See Jeanette M. A. Beer, *Narrative Conventions of Truth in the Middle Ages* (Geneve, 1981), 23; Otter, *Inventiones*, 10.

<sup>98</sup> *History*, vol. XVI, 7–8 [I, 3071–2].

of Hind b. ‘Utba mutilating the dead Muslims after Uḥud. Here, the account combines what the eyes had seen with what the ears had heard. That ‘Umar’s knowledge of the matter is superior to that of Ḥassān comes clearly across in his statement; Ḥassān neither heard nor saw what his colleague did.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, there is none like the eyewitness to convey the “real” picture, give a sense of its specificity to the listener/reader, and if he deems so, add a metaphorical frame that encapsulates the event in question. “He wept so that I could hear his tears dropping into the bowl,” an anonymous eyewitness reports on Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya’s reaction to the departure of his stepbrother Ḥusayn, from Mecca to Kufa, in a prelude to the account of the Karbalā’ massacre.<sup>100</sup> The eye and the ear function in tandem in the interest of *mimesis*.

Similarly, Mu‘ādh b. ‘Amr b. al-Jamūḥ, one of the early Medinan converts, who, at Badr, personally attacked Abū Jahl, one of the Prophet’s opponents, is able to specify, when half of Abū Jahl’s leg flew off, that he could only compare it to “a date-stone which flies out of a date-stone crusher when it is struck.”<sup>101</sup> He thus supplies the quintessentially authentic touch that only a direct reporter is expected to provide. Then again, in an eyewitness report of the Prophet’s preparation for the Battle of the Trench, Muḥammad is portrayed as striking a rock, as a result of which “a flash of lightning shot out, illuminating everything . . . like a lamp inside a dark room.”<sup>102</sup> ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Ammār al-Bāriqī, at one time ‘Alī’s follower and an eyewitness to Ḥusayn’s daring behavior at Karbalā’, describes how the opponents would retreat before ‘Alī’s son “as the goats retreat when the wolf comes upon them.”<sup>103</sup> “By God, I can compare the sound I heard of iron on iron as we fought with each other only to that of fullers’ mallets in the house of al-Walīd b. ‘Uqbah b. Abī Mu‘ayt,” tells Warqā’ b. ‘Azib al-Asadī of Ibrāhīm b. al-Ashtar’s troops who avenged the murder of Ḥusayn and fought with ‘Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād’s troops.<sup>104</sup> And ‘Amr b. Sa‘īd b. al-‘Āṣ, the

<sup>99</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 129–30 [I, 1416].

<sup>100</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 83 [II, 288].

<sup>101</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 61 [I, 1329–30].

<sup>102</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 11 [I, 1468]. This description is thrice repeated.

<sup>103</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 159–60 [II, 364–5].

<sup>104</sup> *History*, vol. XXI, 79 [II, 712]. Walīd b. ‘Uqba was a Companion. See *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “al-Walīd b. ‘Uqba.”

Umayyad governor, compares the lamentation of the women of the Banū Ziyād, as he personally heard it in the aftermath of Karbalā', to the women's lamentation after the Battle of the Arnab.<sup>105</sup>

An eyewitness may indulge in minutiae that, except for himself (certainly more often than herself), are hardly of relevance to anyone, but provide an illusion of "being there." "When I came to Dayr Ka'b, I halted. I hobbled my horse and let him rest, and took a nap myself. Then I awoke quickly and mounted upon the horse," tells an informant of the assault in Iraq on Mustawrid b. 'Ullifa the Khārījite in 43/663–4, including the utterly insignificant sequence of his routine doings.<sup>106</sup>

Body gestures that accompanied some monologue or dialogue are the privilege of the person-on-the-scene to report, so as to bring together word and act in an accurate depiction. Thus, when the Prophet is about to tell 'Ā'isha of the heavenly revelation that declared her innocence of some earlier accusation (for which see more later), "... [drops of sweat] were falling from him like silver beads on a day of hail. He began wiping the perspiration from his brow..."<sup>107</sup> Later, at the time of the Prophet's illness, Ibn al-'Abbās saw that the Prophet had tears flowing down his cheeks "as if they were a chain of pearls."<sup>108</sup> And still later, 'Umar, who recalls his reaction to the death of the Prophet, talks first "to himself," and while doing so, he swished the outer side of his leg with his whip.<sup>109</sup> 'Ā'isha reports that 'Umar asked for 'Abdallāh b. Yazīd's report on the Battle of Qarqus (13/634–5), by the Euphrates, when "[h]e ['Umar] was inside of the mosque and passing by my door."<sup>110</sup> And Mughīra b. 'Aṭīya, a scribe of 'Abdallāh b. 'Umar, an Umayyad governor in Iraq, describes a sort of semiotic play. When the governor, at Ḥīra, on one occasion, remained silent for a while, and the head baker

<sup>105</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 177 [II, 383–4]. Ṭabarī, or his source, identifies it as a battle in which the Banū Zubayd defeated the Banū Ziyād of the Banū Hārith b. Ka'b of the group of 'Abd al-Madan. The verse is by the pre-Islamic poet/warrior 'Amr b. Ma'dikarib, who converted to Islam. For another comparison to the effect that "I saw them thronging about the tomb of al-Ḥusayn more thickly than the people throng around the Black Stone," see vol. XX, 133 [II, 547].

<sup>106</sup> *History*, vol. XVIII, 64 [II, 60]. For Dayr al-Ka'b, see *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Dayr al-Ka'b."

<sup>107</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 63 [I, 1525].

<sup>108</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 175 [I, 1806–07].

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 201 [I, 1829].

<sup>110</sup> *History*, vol. XI, 194 [I, 2181].

came to him and stood in front of him as if indicating that his food was ready, ‘Abdallāh made a sign to him that he should bring it in. Subsequently, the food was brought.<sup>111</sup>

From details about individual gestures, let us now turn to the eyewitness’ description of full scenes. In Ṭabarī’s section on the first believers, an eyewitness report that derives from ‘Afīf, a merchant who happened to be in Mecca, states that,

During the Jāhiliyyah I came to Mecca and stayed with al-‘Abbās b. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib. (He said): When the sun came up and rose into the sky, while I was looking at the Ka’bah a young man came up and gazed at the sky. (He said): Then he turned to face the Ka’bah and stood facing it. Soon afterwards a youth came and stood on his right. (He said): and soon after that a woman came and stood behind them. The young man bowed, and the youth and woman bowed; then the young man stood erect, followed by the youth and the woman, and then the young man prostrated himself, and they did so with him.

The verbatim dialogue that immediately follows, discloses the identity of the three: Muḥammad, Khadīja (his beloved spouse) and ‘Alī.<sup>112</sup>

‘Ā’isha’s personal testimony relating to the so-called “Account of

<sup>111</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 261 [II, 1886]. For Ibn al-‘Abbās, who had been reclining, then sat up and spoke, see vol. I, 233 [I, 62]. For ‘Uthmān b. Nahīk being silent for a while, “not saying a word,” then speaking in a weak voice, see vol. XXVIII, 33 [III, 110]. For Maṣūf bowing his head, scratching at his hand with a mace, then raising his head and speaking, then bowing his head again, scratching even longer than before, see *ibid.*, 101 [III, 155]. For Maṣūf getting down from his throne, kneeling and pulling out a rod from between two cushions, then his color changing, his neck veins swelling out, then speaking, see vol. XXIX, 96 [III, 394]. For Maṣūf biting on his index finger three times, saying each time “Ah, ah,” see *ibid.*, 100 [III, 398]. For ‘Umāra b. Ḥamza starting to gaze intently “as if he had evil in his eyes,” then speaking, see *ibid.*, 117 [III, 414]. For Rabī‘ b. Yūnus and Ḥasan b. Wāṣif looking stupid and covered with confusion, then speaking, see *ibid.*, 212 [III, 497]. For a man “standing at the door . . . muffled up in his *taylasān*, shifting his weight from one foot to the other,” see vol. XXX, 74 [III, 591]. For Yaḥyā b. ‘Abdallāh pointing to Faḍl b. al-Rabī‘ when referring to “this man,” see *ibid.*, 131 [III, 624]. For Hārūn al-Rashīd remaining silent, with his eyes to the ground for a considerable period, then speaking, see *ibid.*, 208 [III, 672]. For Hārūn al-Rashīd weeping “until his beard became damp with tears,” see *ibid.*, 322 [III, 754]. For Amīn’s heart “beating so hard that it was about to burst his chest and come out,” see vol. XXXI, 192 [III, 922]. For Ma’mūn reclining on a cushion, then sitting up and speaking out, see vol. XXXII, 100 [III, 1040]. For Mu’taṣim toying with a bunch of narcissus, then speaking, see vol. XXXIII, 35 [III, 1186]. For Mu’tazz lifting his foot time and again on account of the heat of the place where he stood, see vol. XXXV, 164 [III, 1710]. There are more examples of this kind.

<sup>112</sup> *History*, vol. VI, 81–2 [I, 1160–61].

the Lie,” an incident that generated gossip about her improper behavior,<sup>113</sup> contains the somewhat trivial details of her mounting her litter. By way of preliminary clarification, she makes a contextual observation that will become relevant for the description of the mounting operation: “Women in those days used to eat only enough to stay alive; they were not bloated with meat so as to become heavy.” Presumably, this rendered ‘Ā’isha easy to be carried around:

While my camel was being saddled, I would sit in my litter; then the men who were to bind my litter onto my camel would come and carry me: they would take hold of the bottom of the litter, lift it, and place me on the back of the camel. Then they would tie it with its ropes, take hold of the camel’s head, and set out with it.<sup>114</sup>

The authentic ring of an eyewitness report is well exemplified in a vignette provided by Muḥaffiẓ b. Tha‘laba, who boasts of being among the first Muslims to have crossed the Tigris and enter the Sāsānid capital.<sup>115</sup> He describes his actions as the Persian “unbelievers” flee to Jalūlā’: “I go down into the trench and come to a tent in which there are pillows and clothes. I tear it away and I find a woman, like a gazelle, radiant as the sun!”<sup>116</sup>

The poet Farazdaq, fleeing from the Umayyad Ziyād b. Abī Sufyān, better known as Ziyād b. Abīhi, experiences a bizarre episode while on the run:

We then set out and left behind everything we saw, while a figure accompanied us without leaving us. I said, ‘O Muqais, do you see this figure? We leave behind everything else we pass, but indeed this figure has been keeping up with us since nightfall.’ He replied, ‘This is the lion.’ At that, it seemed to understand our conversation, and went forward until it lay down in the middle of the road. When we saw that, we halted and tied both forelegs of both our she-camels with two hobbles. I took my bow while Muqais said, ‘O fox!’<sup>117</sup> Do you know from

<sup>113</sup> See *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “‘Ā’isha bint Abī Bakr.”

<sup>114</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 58 [I, 1519]. See also the result of a sea battle against the Byzantines in 31/651, as reported by an eyewitness, that “upon it [the beach] was what looked like a great hill of human corpses, and there was more blood than water.” See vol. XV, 75 [I, 2868].

<sup>115</sup> *History*, vol. XIII, 39–40 [I, 2460].

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 42 [I, 2462–3].

<sup>117</sup> The Arabic *tha‘lab* has been retained in Michael Morony’s English translation. I have translated it as “fox” and my understanding is that it is used for the lion in order to ridicule it.



whom we fled to you? From Ziyād.’ At that, it flicked pebbles with its tail so that the dust settled on us and on both of our she-camels. I asked, ‘Should I shoot at it?’ And he replied, ‘Don’t stir him up. When morning comes, he will leave.’ The lion then began to roar like thunder while Muqais menaced it until daybreak. When the lion saw that (it was dawn), it turned away . . .<sup>118</sup>

The keeper deputized to torture Ibn al-Zayyāt, Mutawakkil’s famous vizier, cold-heartedly transmits the details of the vizier’s brutal punishment:

I would go out and lock the door on him [Ibn al-Zayyāt], and he would stretch both hands upward so that his shoulders were narrowed. Then he would enter the chest and sit. The chest had iron spikes in it, and in the middle there was a cross board on which the victim would sit when he wanted some relief. He would sit on the board for a while. Then the keeper would come, and, when the victim heard the sound of the door opening, he would stand as before. Then they would intensify the torture.

The vizier’s slow death is portrayed by the same keeper with a touch of sadistic humor:

I fooled him one day, I led him to think that I had locked the door without actually doing so. I merely closed it with the bolt and waited for a while, at which point I pushed the door by accident, and seeing that he was sitting in the chest on the board I commented, ‘I see that you are doing this thing!’ When I went out afterward, I tightened his strangling cord so that he was unable to sit, and I pulled out the board so that it would be between his legs. He tarried after that for only a few days before he died.<sup>119</sup>

If one is still in doubt about the alleged superiority of the eyewitness and the flair for piquant realism that only he can provide, a comparison of two versions of the same brief episode, only one of which is told by an eyewitness, is worthwhile. In the first account relating to the last days of Sulaymān, the Umayyad caliph, Mufaḍḍal [b. Yazīd] b. Muhallab, of the Muhallabī family of officials, recounts:

<sup>118</sup> *History*, vol. XVIII, 112–13 [II, 103].

<sup>119</sup> *History*, vol. XXXIV, 70–71 [III, 1374–5]. Similarly, see “I was one of ‘Uthmān’s pallbearers when he was killed. We carried him upon a door, and his head was bumping up and down on the door because we were walking so fast,” vol. XV, 249 [I, 3048]. For details of the scene of Walīd’s sermon, see vol. XXIII, 180–81 [II, 1233–4].

He put them [some robes] on, but he did not like them, so he called for others—for green *Sūsī* robes that had been sent by Yazīd b. al-Muhallab. After he put them on and arranged his turban, he asked, “O Ibn al-Muhallab, do you like them?” I replied, “Yes.” He uncovered his forearms and said, “I am a king in the prime of his manhood.” Then he prayed the Friday prayers for the last time. He wrote his last will and testament and summoned Ibn Abī Nu‘aym, the bearer of the seal, who sealed it.

The same episode is reduced to its bare bones in a matter-of-fact report by a narrator who was apparently not present:

One day Sulaymān put on a green robe and a green turban and he looked in the mirror and said, “I am a king in the prime of his manhood.” He lived only one week after that.<sup>120</sup>

Both reports convey the irony emerging from the caliph’s self-delusion (“I am a king in the prime of his manhood”) and the bitter reality of his proximate demise; Sulaymān fell to his deathbed shortly after that episode. However, there is a marked difference between them. It is not merely that in the first report the caliph has a human companion—not just a mirror to look at—with whom he can converse. Only the first report communicates the peculiar flavor of the scene and provides a psychological slant by representing Sulaymān as a dandy preoccupied with elegant robes and in need for compliments on his appearance.

The death of the ‘Abbāsīd propagator Qaḥṭaba b. Shabīb in 132/749–50 is also a revealing episode. Two reports recount the event with only slight divergences. We learn that, on discovering that Qaḥṭaba was missing, his troops reconciled themselves to the loss, and his son assumed command. However, a third report adds the intriguing detail that Qaḥṭaba’s corpse was later found in a ditch with the body of a certain Ḥarb b. Salm b. Aḥwaz slain beside him; the two were assumed to have killed each other. It is only from the eyewitness ‘Abdallāh b. Badr, who was on the scene on the night Qaḥṭaba attacked, that we get the following clarification:

Then Ma‘n b. Zaidah struck Qaḥṭabah on the tendon of his shoulder, and the sword went deep. Qaḥṭabah fell into the water, and they pulled him out. He said, “Tie up my arm,” and they tied it up in a turban. Then he said, “If I die, throw me into the water so that no

<sup>120</sup> *History*, vol. XXIV, 62–3 [II, 1337], 70 [II, 1341].

one will know I've been killed." . . . Qaḥṭabah died, but before dying he said, "When you get to Kūfah, the Imam's wazīr is Abū Salamah. Put yourselves at his disposal."

Other, indirect reports on Qaḥṭabah's death provide a fall back on the prior standard report to the effect that the 'Abbāsīd propagator was missing and was later reported drowned. Once again, it is only when we resort to the report by Aḥlum b. Ibrāhīm b. Bassām, who claimed to have killed Qaḥṭabah, that a detailed scene once again emerges:

Qaḥṭabah's horse was about to emerge from the Euphrates, while I was standing on the bank. I struck him with my sword on the forehead. His horse reared and death came to him quickly, and he fell into the Euphrates with his weapons.<sup>121</sup>

An analogous example has to do with the Prophet's battle at Uḥud, for which there is one eyewitness account by Zubayr b. al-'Awwām, one of the early converts to Islam:

The Messenger of God displayed a sword in his hand on the day of Uḥud, and said, "Who will take this sword with its duty?" (He said): I rose up and said, "I will, O Messenger of God." But he turned away from me, and said again, "Who will take this sword with its duty?" I said again, "I will, O Messenger of God," but he turned away from me and said, "Who will take this sword with its duty?" Then Abū Dujānah Simāk b. Kharashah rose up . . .

The second version, related by one narrator, that is, not by an eyewitness, runs as follows:

The Messenger of God said, "Who will take this sword with its duty?" Various men rose up, but he withheld it from them. Finally Abū Dujānah Simāk b. Kharashah . . . rose up . . .<sup>122</sup>

Zubayr, the narrator and obvious victim in the first version, mediates a tense episode. Thrice he repeats the Prophet's question, his own response, and the Prophet's unaccountable and persistent refusal to assign him to the combative mission. The element of tension is non-existent in the second, matter-of-fact version, which does not even identify the names of individuals involved.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>121</sup> *History*, vol. XXVII, 138 [III, 16], 140 [III, 18].

<sup>122</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 116–17 [I, 1397–8].

<sup>123</sup> See also the difference between the two reports on 'Īsā b. Mūsā writing to

Further concerning the *History*'s discourse strategies, Zubayr's version just discussed also puts on record his own thoughts and feelings.<sup>124</sup> "I shall see what he will do today," Zubayr encodes his curiosity and, perhaps, his hope for a modicum of personal requital as regards Abū Dujāna's actions, after the assignment went into effect. In another case, the utterance of Muḥammad b. Maslama, one of caliph 'Uthmān's loyal men, "this was evil itself," attests to his personal shock when the Egyptians entered the caliph's residence without giving him "the greeting appropriate to a caliph."<sup>125</sup> Similarly, in her aforementioned testimony relating to the "Account of the Lie," 'Ā'isha gives vent to her personal feelings after learning of the suspicions harbored against her:

By God, as soon as he [the Prophet] said that, my tears diminished, so that I felt nothing of them . . . I swear to God, I considered myself too lowly and unimportant for God, who is mighty and exalted, to reveal a Qur'ān about me to be recited in mosques and used in worship; but I hoped that the Messenger of God would see something in a dream whereby God, knowing my innocence, would refute [the accusations] about me or that he would be given a message. As for a Qur'ān to be revealed about me, by God, I considered myself too lowly for that.<sup>126</sup>

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the leading men of Medina on strips of silk. The eyewitness report adds that the color of the silk was yellow and that a bedouin brought it between the soles of his sandals. See *History*, vol. XXVIII, 188 [III, 226].

<sup>124</sup> Here I contest Leder, "Features," 92, who holds that the narrator, even when being a protagonist of the story, does not reveal emotions and rarely inner reflections. See further n. 126 below.

<sup>125</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 193 [I, 2993].

<sup>126</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 62 [I, 1523–4]. There are numerous examples of narrators revealing personal feeling. See e.g., "I was a weak man . . . I was sitting there smoothing arrows, and Umm al-Faḍl was sitting there with me, both of us overjoyed by the news we had received," vol. VII, 68 [I, 1339]. "I do not think that I have ever been more fearful that stones would fall on me from Heaven than I was that day," *ibid.*, 83 [I, 1357]. "I became very uneasy because of what we heard," vol. VIII, 3 [I, 1462]. "By God, he kept scolding me until I wished the earth would split open for me to enter it," *ibid.*, 21 [I, 1478]. "By God, as soon as I saw her at the door of my chamber, I took a dislike to her," *ibid.*, 57 [I, 1517]. "By God, I liked everything he said except the last words," vol. IX, 193–4 [I, 1823]. "I then went to 'Umayr hoping that a spark of life was still in him," tells 'Abdallāh of 'Umayr b. Abī Ash'ath al-Azdī, vol. XVIII, 56 [II, 51]. For "By God, I detested it. I felt sorry for him, and considered such talk to be wrong," *ibid.*, 59 [II, 55]. For what Sulaymān b. Su'l said to himself, vol. XXVI, 32 [II, 1695]. For what Sirhān b. Farrūkh thought when hearing Yahyā b. Zayd's reply, *ibid.*, 123 [II, 1772]. For what Abū al-Bakhtarī could feel, see vol. XXVIII, 111 [III, 164]. For what Waḍīn b. 'Aṭā' thought, see vol. XXIX, 111 [III, 409]. For what Aḥmad b.

To conclude the discussion of the unique slant that the eyewitness may provide, here is the so-called Baghdad foundation lore. It is the story about Maṣṣūr, threatened by turbulent forces in the town of Kūfa and therefore seeking a new place of residence and undertaking a journey for that purpose. This episode has been examined more than once, its apocryphal nature has been noted and need not detain us in the present context.<sup>127</sup> What concerns me is how the different versions in the *History* illustrate the peculiar features I have claimed for eyewitness reports.

To begin with, a brief account that comes from a certain Jābir, tells of an encounter between the traveling ‘Abbāsid caliph and a monk residing in the area. To the question of whether he has found in his books a prediction about a city to be built there, the monk answers positively and adds: “a certain Miqlās is to build it.” The preordained nature of the caliph’s choice becomes evident when Maṣṣūr reveals that Miqlās was his name as a lad. “Then you’re the man for it!” asserts the monk.<sup>128</sup>

Now, there is a second report of the same incident by Sulaymān b. Mujālid, one of the caliph’s retinue, who is presented as an eyewitness. It is substantially different, inasmuch as it displays a considerably thicker texture and thus a more engaging source for modern historians to work with.<sup>129</sup> Accordingly, upon learning that Maṣṣūr is seeking a place in which to settle, a physician dwelling in the vicinity of Madā’in, the former Sāsānid capital, dispatches a mes-

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Sallām, the official in charge of petitions and complaints (*sāhib al-mazālīm*), said to himself, see vol. XXXI, 192 [III, 921]. For the reaction of ‘Alī b. Sāliḥ, a poet in Ma’mūn’s time, to something he heard (“as if this . . . dispelled from my mind what I had been apprehensive about”), see vol. XXXII, 241 [III, 1149]. For Muḥammad b. Hishām (known as Abū Wathīla al-Kirmānī), one of Ṭabari’s sources for the extended report of the revolt of the Zanj, telling about the joy he personally felt, yet had to conceal, on learning the “momentous” news of a defeat suffered by one of the “traitor’s” associates, see vol. XXXVII, 27 [III, 1965].

<sup>127</sup> Jacob Lassner, *The Topography of Baghdad in the Early Middle Ages: Texts and Studies* (Detroit, 1970), 124–6; idem, *The Shaping of the ‘Abbāsid Rule* (Princeton, 1980), 163–9. Lassner’s interest is in sifting the factual from the fanciful and, while admitting that the boundary between the two is obscure, he still adjudges the material an important historical source. See also Charles Wendell, “Baghdad: Imago Mundi and Other Foundation-Lore,” *IJMES* 2 (1971): 112–13, who notes motives similar to the story on the foundation of Raqqā.

<sup>128</sup> *History*, vol. XXVIII, 244 [III, 276].

<sup>129</sup> No wonder that Lassner, in his study of the foundation of the ‘Abbāsid capital (see n. 127 above), selects this report for his discussion.

sage to the Muslim ruler: "In one of our books we find it written that a man named Miqlās will build a city called al-Zawrā' between the Tigris and the Sarāt [canal]." In addition, the physician is also able to predict that construction work will be interrupted for political reasons.<sup>130</sup> However, after the city's completion, the ruler "will be given a long life and sovereignty shall remain in his progeny." The caliph, upon receiving the message, discloses that, as a lad, he was indeed called Miqlās, "but then the name for me fell into disuse."<sup>131</sup>

In another report, the same eyewitness relates how, after receiving the physician's message, Maṣṣūr stops at a monastery located opposite the site where his palace would some years later stand. He summons several Christian clergymen, among them the abbot of the monastery, and asks them about the climatic conditions and certain minor details concerning "bugs and vermin." Not satisfied with their answers, the caliph dispatches his men to spend the night each in a different village to obtain first-hand information. Finally, he asks the advice of the overlord (*dihqān*) of the village of Baghdad. The latter's detailed and rather long piece of counseling is then quoted in full.<sup>132</sup>

The expressions "I see" or "It is as if I see," recur frequently when the source is allegedly an eyewitness and encode not merely the single act of seeing, but a permanent visual image projected in the speaker's mind. "It is as if I could see him now, clinging to the armpit of his camel," testifies the Companion Jābir b. 'Abdallāh, regarding Jadd b. Qays, a member of the Banū Salīma, who took part in the ceremony at Ḥudaybiyya.<sup>133</sup> "It's as if I see 'Ā'ishah's howdah now," says one Abū Raja apropos of the participation of the Prophet's widow in the Battle of the Camel.<sup>134</sup> "I see it clearly before my own eyes," reports one Abū 'Uthmān al-Nahdī of the crossing of the Tigris by the Arab conquerors, and specifically of an incident in which one man "slid off the back of his chestnut-colored mare which . . . shook its mane free."<sup>135</sup> Here the eye does not miss

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<sup>130</sup> What these were and what they teach us about the fabricated part of the report is pointed out by Jacob Lassner, *The Topography of Baghdad in the Early Middle Ages: Texts and Studies* (Detroit, 1970), 125.

<sup>131</sup> *History*, vol. XXVIII, 238–40 [III, 272–3].

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 241–3 [III, 274–5].

<sup>133</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 84 [I, 1545].

<sup>134</sup> *History*, vol. XVI, 156 [I, 3216].

<sup>135</sup> *History*, vol. XIII, 18 [I, 2437].

even the animal's color. Finally, one of Abū Mikhnaf's sources, recounting the Šiffīn battle, and referring to a Syrian opponent who was personally overcome by the caliph, relates how he "sees" the Syrian's two feet coming down on 'Alī's neck.<sup>136</sup>

"I shall/will never forget" is another recurrent phrase that reinforces the sight (or the sound) of an episode lingering in the memory and testifying to the narrator's unassailable reliability. "I will never forget the sound his body made when it fell," tells 'Amr b. Umayya al-Damīrī, who had been sent by the Prophet to kill Abū Sufyān, thus invoking both image and sound. He subsequently narrates the details of his abortive attempt to recover the corpse of Khubayb b. 'Adī al-Anṣārī from the hands of the Meccan idolators, after they had killed this member of the early Muslim community.<sup>137</sup> "I shall never forget my wonder at her cheerfulness and much laugh-

<sup>136</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 40–41 [I, 3293]. "I can see myself with seven other men in a group straining to turn that door over and unable to do it," tells Abū Rāfi', the Prophet's *mawlā*, concerning the fighting at Khaybar. See vol. VII, 121–2 [I, 1581] (but note Wellhausen, *Religio-Political Factions*, 113 and 119 n. 27, for perceiving it an example of over abundant details, which misses the mark). "By God, it is as if I could still see Ja'far when he leaped from his sorrel mare, humstrung her, and fought the enemy until he was killed," tells a participant in the expedition to Mu'ta. See *ibid.*, 156 [I, 1614]. "It is as if I see al-Ashtar Mālik b. al-Hārith al-Nakha'ī. His face was covered with dust, and he was girt with a sword and saying etc.," reports Abū Yahyā 'Umayr b. Sa'd al-Nakha'ī his recollections of the Day of al-Jarā'a in 34/654. See vol. XV, 139 [I, 2934]. "It is as if I see 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Udays al-Balawī as he was leaning with his back against the mosque of God's Prophet," says Abū Bakr b. al-Hārith b. Hishām. Later he says the same (!) about the son of 'Urwa [b. al-Nibā' al-Laythī] twisting around. See *ibid.*, 202 [I, 3003]. One 'Afif b. al-Zuhayr b. Abī al-Akhnas, who witnessed the killing of al-Ḥusayn, reports on one episode of the battleground: "It is as if I see Raḍī b. Munqidh al-'Abdī, who had been lying prostrate, rising, shaking the dust from his clothes, and saying . . ." vol. XIX, 133–4 [II, 339]. Ḥumayd b. Muslim al-Azdī, an eyewitness to a scene in which Ḥusayn's nephew is being killed, tells about the tragic fate of the lad: "It is as if I see the two feet of the boy leaving tracks in the ground while Ḥusayn held his breast close to his own." See *ibid.*, 153 [II, 359]. "It is as if, by God, I see al-Mundhir b. Ḥassān b. Dīrār as he came to him and greeted him as the holder of authority," says one Abū al-Ash'ar on giving allegiance to Mukhtār. See vol. XX, 218 [II, 633]. "It is as if I see Ibn al-Zubayr when he had killed a young black lad," says an unidentified source on Ibn al-Zubayr's struggle before his death. See vol. XXI, 232 [II, 851]. "It is as if I see him, looking at him approaching the leg of the bier as we carried him," says Muḥammad al-Nawfalī on Manṣūr's corpse. See vol. XXIX, 164 [III, 454–5]. For "It is as if I see him proceeding on his mount accompanied by only a single man," see vol. XXXV, 159 [III, 1703–04]. There are more examples of this kind.

<sup>137</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 149 [I, 1440]. For the details of Khubayb's execution, see 143–6 [I, 1431–6].

ter, even when she knew that she would be killed,” tells ‘Ā’isha of the (only) woman executed along with the Jewish men of the Banū Qurayṣa, with whom she had spent some time prior to her death.<sup>138</sup> Qurra b. Qays al-Tamīmī, who fought at Karbalā’ on the Umayyad side, swears never to forget the words that Zaynab (‘Alī’s daughter and Ḥusayn’s sister) spoke when she saw her brother slain; indeed, he quotes her words.<sup>139</sup> And different narrators “will never forget” couplets said on certain occasions and without further ado go on to recite them.<sup>140</sup>

It is a short step from here to the phrases “I have never seen the like” or “I have never heard,” which have the threefold function of first, delivering an authentic record of something genuinely seen or heard; second, the memorialization of some person or historical episode; and third, conveying the narrator’s wonder at the extraordinary. That the Prophet is thus imprinted in his companions’ memory is no cause for surprise: “I have never seen anyone like him before or since,” declares ‘Alī, after offering a physiognomic description of the founder of Islam.<sup>141</sup>

The same trope, used to provide an “exemplum,” goes for other Muslim dignitaries. “I have not seen a man similar to this one, nor have I heard of one like him,” insists a Persian captive, in praise of Ṭulayḥa b. Khuwaylid, the one-time “false prophet,” who then repented and excelled in the famous battle at Qādisiyya against the Iranians. The latter’s praise gains extra weight since, according to the captive, “I have participated in wars, I have heard about heroes,

<sup>138</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 36 [I, 1495].

<sup>139</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 164 [II, 370]. See also “I shall never forget how the Messenger of God asked,” vol. VI, 131 [I, 1218]. “I shall never forget the statement of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Udays,” tells Muḥammad b. Maslama of one of the Egyptian leaders in opposition to ‘Uthman at Dhū Khushūb, and indeed goes on to quote the statement. See vol. XV, 175 [I, 2971]. “I have not forgotten that Sūdān b. Ḥumrān came out and I heard him say . . .” tells ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abzay of one of ‘Uthmān’s murderers and quotes his statement about committing the murder. See *ibid.*, 200 [I, 3001]. “I will never forget what Muḥammad b. Mūsā was saying as we came up on him,” tells Farwa b. Laqīt on the circumstances of the death of the governor of Sijistān in 76/695–6. See vol. XXII, 77 [II, 926–7]. “I will never forget how he rushed up to Suwayd b. Sulaym and told him the following story,” tells the same Farwa of Shabīb b. Yazīd in the context of his fight against Ḥajjāj. See *ibid.*, 121 [II, 971].

<sup>140</sup> E.g., *History*, vol. VIII, 141 [I, 1600]; vol. XVII, 12 [I, 3265–6]; vol. XVIII, 55–6 [II, 51].

<sup>141</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 157–8 [I, 1789].



and I have encountered them from the time when I was a boy until I reached the situation in which you see me now.” With such a resume, his testimony should not be taken lightly.<sup>142</sup> “I have never seen such persistence . . . Neither was anyone sharper in spirit than he . . . By God! I have not seen his like before or since,” recounts ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Ammār al-Bāriqī, an eyewitness to Ḥusayn’s courageous deportment in his last hours at Karbalā’. As if to support his personal impressions, Bāriqī adds that foot soldiers from among his opponents retreated before ‘Alī’s son “as the goats retreat when the wolf comes upon them.”<sup>143</sup>

An unforgettable sight could involve also an enemy of Islam. “I swear to God, I never saw a man I should consider more astute than that uncircumcised one—Heraclius, that is,” tells Abū Sufyān, the Meccan leader, in his recollection of his meeting with the Byzantine emperor.<sup>144</sup> As for aural impressions, “we never heard an imam leading a people in prayer with a clearer tone than he,” says Ḥārith b. Ka’b al-Walībī, one of Abū Mikhnaf’s less known sources, of Mukhtār,

<sup>142</sup> *History*, vol. XII, 59 [I, 2263].

<sup>143</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 159–60 [II, 364–5]. See also “I never encountered any scent . . . more fragrant than the skin of the Messenger of God,” vol. VI, 80 [I, 1159]. “I have never seen a more repulsive scene than that or a more brutal day,” vol. X, 29 [I, 1859]. An eyewitness to the encounter between a Muslim delegation and Yazdagird, the last Iranian emperor, makes sure to tell that he has never seen impressiveness of the sort the Muslim delegates conveyed: “[T]heir horses were striking [the ground with their feet] and made threatening noises at each other.” See vol. XII, 34 [I, 2239]. For “I swear by God, I have never seen a spectacle as on that day,” vol. XIII, 187 [I, 2603]. “I had never seen a sight of women more beautiful than the sight I saw of those women,” vol. XIX, 164 [II, 370]. “I never saw anyone like Muṣ‘ab b. al-Zubayr for the fierceness of his fighting on horseback or on foot,” vol. XX, 64 [II, 481]. “I never saw anyone with more spirit than he [Ibn Khāzim] when at the point of death,” vol. XXI, 211 [II, 833]. “I have never seen people fighting more strongly or with more fortitude in adversity than the sons of those kings [of Samarqand],” vol. XXIII, 191 [II, 1243]. “I never saw an Arab of his stature [Mufaḍḍal b. al-Muhallab] who was more willing to engage in the actual fighting and to smite with his sword,” vol. XXIV, 139 [II, 1407]. “I have never seen a man so overweeningly proud and yet so thoroughly scared as he was,” vol. XXVI, 200–01 [II, 1840]. “I’ve never seen any army that collected what the Syrians had collected at Iṣbahān in the way of horses, weapons and slaves,” vol. XXVII, 128 [III, 6]. For the group “whose equal or augment I have never seen,” vol. XXVIII, 193 [III, 230]. “I have not seen anything more beautiful . . . I have never seen anything better than this ensemble,” vol. XXIX, 228 [III, 511]. For the number of troops and commanders “as I have never seen the like at any Caliph’s gate,” vol. XXX, 126 [III, 620]. There are further examples of this kind.

<sup>144</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 102 [I, 1563].

the leader of the ‘Alīd movement in the latter part of the seventh century A.D.<sup>145</sup>

Given the sterling advantages of eyewitness accounts, it is hardly surprising that authors in the *History* tend to foreground them, even at the cost of abruptly interrupting the less privileged reports of intermediaries. Thus, the Prophet’s first revelation in Ibn Ishāq’s account that Ṭabarī reproduces, switches at some point to the Prophet’s own testimony that benefits from the details of his dream-like encounter with Gabriel the angel and the “verbatim” dialogue between them. The reader is thus apprised of Muḥammad’s inner thoughts, naive as they are, when the future prophet toys with escaping heavenly forces: “I said, ‘What shall I recite?’ only saying that in order to free myself from him [Gabriel], fearing that he might repeat what he had done to me.”<sup>146</sup>

Turning to further examples, the account of the murder of Ka‘b b. al-Ashraf, the prominent Medinese Jew, switches about half way through to the eyewitness report that the contemporary Muḥammad b. Maslama offers. The latter does not hide his own (important) role in the murder, and provides the minutiae of how the dagger mutilated the Prophet’s opponent.<sup>147</sup> The account of the Prophet’s mission to kill Abū Rāfi‘, another Jew, switches to the eyewitness report by ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Uqba—or perhaps ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Atīk, as another version has it. Whoever the source, he provides the minutest details of how he was waiting for the appropriate circumstances and how he was finally able to carry out the mission.<sup>148</sup> One of the two versions of the story of the Revolt of Ḍaḥḥāk b. Qays the Khārijite in 127/745, a version ascribed to one Abū Sa‘īd, an eyewitness, shifts to the latter’s own words and thus—to use relevant classical terms—*mimesis* displaces *diegesis*. Abū Sa‘īd’s “. . . by God we hadn’t come out . . . and lo, most of them had run away,” is an excellent example of an aura of astonishment that only an alleged participant is able to convey.<sup>149</sup> Similarly, in the story of the revolt of Thābit b.

<sup>145</sup> *History*, vol. XX, 205 [II, 621]. For Wālibī, see vol. XIX, 66 n. 228. Similarly, for “I have never heard such wailing as the wailing for al-Ḥusayn by the women of Banū Hāshim in their house,” see *ibid.*, 177 [II, 383–4].

<sup>146</sup> *History*, vol. VI, 71 [I, 1150].

<sup>147</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 97 [I, 1372]. For Ka‘b see *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Ka‘b al-Ashraf.”

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 100 [I, 1376].

<sup>149</sup> *History*, vol. XXVII, 13 [II, 1901].

Nu‘aym, the Kalbī leader, against Marwān, the last Umayyad, and the punishment subsequently inflicted on him and his sons, the source for the extended report, Abū Hāshim Mukhallad b. Muḥammad b. Ṣāliḥ, is, at one point in the course of his account, elevated from the status of a reporter to the level of an eyewitness. Abū Hāshim’s “I saw them cut in pieces and fixed on the gate of the city mosque,” assures the reader that the narrator indeed saw the gruesome death in his own eyes. Later in the report, when the crucifixion and death of the victims are described, we are similarly exposed to the clarity of the eyesight: “I saw them at the time they were slain and gibbeted.”<sup>150</sup>

Finally, in his capacity as editor, Ṭabarī is certainly aware, no less than his sources, of the special credentials of eyewitnesses. After all, already in his introduction to the *History* he states clearly that knowledge of the past cannot be obtained except from those who witnessed the events.<sup>151</sup> And thus, in the latter section of the book, where he is not just an editor but practically the author, he reproduces accounts that stem from persons allegedly present at the scene.<sup>152</sup>

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 7 [II, 1895, 1896]. For switching to the five men of the Khazraj, see vol. VII, 102 [I, 1379]. For ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, see ibid., 132 [I, 1419]. For Ḥabīb b. Ṣuhbān, see vol. XIII, 24 [I, 2444]. For Kulayb, see vol. XIV, 66 [I, 2695–6]. For Mālik b. Aws, a participant in a sea battle against the Byzantines, see vol. XV, 74 [I, 2867–8]. For Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī, see vol. XIX, 214 [II, 418]. For Thumāma b. Nājīdh al-‘Adawī, see vol. XXIV, 16 [II, 1292]. For Khālid b. Ṣubayḥ, see ibid., 54 [II, 1329]. For Abū Sa‘īd al-Qurashī, see vol. XXVII, 60 [II, 1948]. For Aḥmad b. Abī Khālid al-Ahwal, see vol. XXXII, 96–7 [III, 1038].

<sup>151</sup> *History*, vol. I, 6–7.

<sup>152</sup> E.g., the shift to Hishām b. ‘Amr al-Taghlibī, vol. XXVIII, 15 [III, 96]. For a shift to Abū Ayyūb, see ibid., 30 [III, 108]. For a shift to Salm b. Qutayba b. Muslim, see ibid., 277 [III, 305]. For a shift to Yahyā b. Khālid the Barmakid, see vol. XXIX, 82 [III, 381]. For a switch to Zurāra b. Yūsuf al-Sijzī, see vol. XXXIII, 153–4 [III, 1280]. For a switch to Ja‘far b. Wandāmīd, see ibid., 154 [III, 1280]. For a switch to Ibrāhīm b. Mihrān, see ibid., 162 [III, 1288–9]. For a switch to one of the witnesses, see ibid., 166 [III, 1292]. For a switch to Hamdūn b. Ismā‘īl, see ibid., 196–7 [III, 1315]. For a switch to Ibrāhīm b. al-Mudabbir, see vol. XXXIV, 83 [III, 1384]. For a switch to Ibn al-Ḥafṣī, see ibid., 174 [III, 1455]. For a switch to Bunān, see ibid., 177 [III, 1458]. For a switch to the jeweller, see vol. XXXVI, 8 [III, 1718]. For a switch to Ḥasan b. Sulaymān, see ibid., 10 [III, 1721]. For a switch to Rayḥān, the Zanjī commander, see ibid., 51 [III, 1766]. For a switch to Aḥmad b. Khāqān, see ibid., 73 [III, 1793]. For a switch to Muḥammad b. Simān, see ibid., 144 [III, 1868]. For a switch to Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan, see ibid., 183 [III, 1910]. For a switch to Muḥammad b. Shu‘ayb al-Ishtiyām, see vol. XXXVII, 18 [III, 1953]. For a switch to the slave girl of Abū Layla, see XXXVIII, 67–8 [III, 2180–81]. For a switch to an anonymous eyewitness, see ibid., 167 [III, 2266].

When we get to his own time, that is: contemporary history, he occasionally inserts what he himself has witnessed.<sup>153</sup>

That the credibility of the eyewitness—as well as of any other transmitter of information—and also the soundness of his account, have sometimes to be verified is only natural or, shall we say, functional for historiographical rhetoric. After all, where truth claim is the premise, scrutiny becomes part of the game. “Did you witness the siege of ‘Uthmān?” Ḥasan, ‘Alī’s son, is asked, and he responds: “Yes. At that time I was a youth [and was] in the mosque with associates of mine.”<sup>154</sup> Abū Bashīr al-‘Abīdī, an eyewitness in Medina to the events following ‘Uthmān’s murder and the allegiance given to ‘Alī, deems it appropriate to state that he was standing on the Prophet’s pulpit and heard ‘Alī’s words on that occasion.<sup>155</sup> ‘Awf, another transmitter of the allegiance episode, *swears* to have heard the report he delivers.<sup>156</sup> “I was seventeen years old and not yet enrolled for pay,” tells Muḥammad b. Mikhnaf, a paternal uncle of Abū Mikhnaf, the famous early traditionist, of what occurred before Ṣiffīn. Not old enough to receive his own salary and yet, make no mistake, old enough to serve as a reporter.<sup>157</sup> And an eyewitness to a conversation between Ḥusayn and ‘Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr in Mecca, prior to the former’s departure for his fateful journey to Kūfa, admits that, although he tried to listen to the conversation, he could not, because Ibn al-Zubayr whispered to Ḥusayn. But then the latter turned to those present and voluntarily divulged the details of the conversation. The report, then, shares with the listener/reader the “behind the scenes” difficulties of obtaining precise information.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> *History*, vol. XXXVI, 139 [III, 1862]. For Ṭabarī as eyewitness to the burnt-out place in Sāmarrā’, see vol. XXXV, 11 [III, 1512].

<sup>154</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 166 [I, 2962].

<sup>155</sup> *History*, vol. XVI, 3 [I, 3067].

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 [I, 3075].

<sup>157</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 13 [I, 3266].

<sup>158</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 69 [II, 276]. For “I was among those who went forth . . . By God, I did not leave him for an hour . . .” see vol. XVIII, 50 [II, 45]. For ‘Uqba b. Simān, a companion of Ḥusayn in Karbalā’, ascertaining the credibility of his report by the fact that “[t]here was no one who addressed a word to him [al-Ḥusayn] . . . until the day of his death, without my hearing the conversation,” see vol. XIX, 109 [II, 314]. For ‘Afīf replying that “he had seen it with his own eyes and heard it with his own ears,” see vol. XIX, 134 [II, 339]. For Muḥammad b. Yazīd al-Anṣārī asserting his being informed by ‘Abd al-Malik and being concealed of nothing, see vol. XXIII, 112 [II, 1168]. Muthannā b. Mu‘āwiya, who was at Walīd’s audience, could not hear a conversation the caliph initiated with a

“Trustworthy sources”

Not only ordinary narrators, but also Ṭabarī and the earlier writers he relies upon, do occasionally refer to the credibility of the sources in what may be adjudged the rhetoric of reliability.<sup>159</sup> Ibn Ishāq, the author of the famous *Sīra*, testifies that the man from the Banū Aslam, his source for the conversion story of Ḥamza b. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the Prophet’s paternal uncle, “had a good memory.”<sup>160</sup> “I have assembled for you everything they [his authorities] transmitted to me,” says one of Ibn Ishāq’s sources concerning the “Account of the Lie” that defamed ‘Ā’isha.<sup>161</sup> Yaḥyā (b. ‘Abdallāh b. Bukayr) (d. 231/845), a reputed Egyptian traditionist,<sup>162</sup> relates that ‘Ulwān (b. Dāwūd)<sup>163</sup> had transmitted to him a report on the last stage of Abū Bakr’s caliphate just as Layth (b. Sa‘d), his predecessor in the *isnād*, had transmitted it, that is, “letter by letter.”<sup>164</sup> ‘Ā’isha credits

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man beside him, so he “asked one of the people who were standing between al-Walīd and me what al-Walīd was saying.” See *ibid.*, 157 [II, 1803]. When provoked for his credentials, Abū Hāshim Mukhallad b. Muḥammad b. Šāliḥ, the source of the report (*sub anno* 126/743–4) of the rebellion of Marwān b. Muḥammad against Yazīd b. al-Walīd, answers: “I was staying in the camp of Marwān b. Muḥammad.” This answer should remove any doubt about the truthfulness of his report. See vol. XXVI, 239 [II, 1870]. For Ibn Ḥusayn al-Sa‘dī stating, “Were it not that Aḥlum confirmed it . . . I’d not have repeated anything about it,” see vol. XXVII, 140 [III, 18]. “I reached for the letter and read it,” tells ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Imrān b. Abī Farwa and then quotes Maṣṣūr’s letter to Abū al-Azhar. See vol. XXVIII, 136 [III, 185]. For “I transcribed these letters from Muḥammad b. Bashīr, who testified to their authenticity,” see *ibid.*, 165 [III, 207]. “We were but lads; in fact, at that time I was only fifteen years old,” tells Muḥammad b. ‘Umar (Wāqīdī) of Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh (b. Ḥasan) taking over Medina in 145/762–3, and assures the reader that, before reporting of his acts, he “got up close and took a good, long look at him.” See *ibid.*, 185 [III, 223]. For Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl b. Ja‘far transmitting from “someone close whom he trusted,” see *ibid.*, 191 [III, 228], 208 [III, 244]. “Indeed, I was *watching* him when a man struck him a sword blow just beside his right earlobe,” tells one Mas‘ūd al-Raḥḥāl on the death scene of Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. Ḥasan, the rebel of the Ḥasanid family in 145/762–3, and thus assures of the accuracy of his report. See vol. XXVIII, 210 [III, 246] (*italics added*). ‘Umar b. Ḥafṣ, although a mere lad at the time, remembers holding the lantern while his father was paying the army at night in Maṣṣūr’s time. See *ibid.*, 263 [III, 292]. There are further examples of this kind.

<sup>159</sup> For the respectability of informants in Greek history, see Gordon S. Shrimpton, *History and Memory in Ancient Greece* (Montreal, 1997), 135–8.

<sup>160</sup> *History*, vol. VI, 103 [I, 1187].

<sup>161</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 58 [I, 1518]. For the “Account of the Lie,” see above.

<sup>162</sup> See on him *History*, vol. XI, 147–8 n. 806.

<sup>163</sup> See *ibid.*, 148 n. 808.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 150 [I, 2141]. For the *isnād* in question, see 147–8 [I, 2139]. For biographical data, see 148 nn. 807–08.

the reliability of ‘Abdallāh b. Yazīd apropos of his reporting to ‘Umar the Battle of Qarqus, stating: “I have not heard of a man who witnessed something and then reported it who was more reliable in his report than he.”<sup>165</sup> And a narrator on the Plague of Amwās in 17/638–9 testifies to the veracity of one of his informants, whom he personally did not suspect, and who had heard from the “Prophet’s own mouth” a certain utterance concerning the plague.<sup>166</sup>

That the narrators do occasionally express their uncertainty as regards things said or done should, ironically, add to their credibility, as noted earlier. After all, human memory is not infallible and it would do the historical product no good to be garbed in a semblance of absolute certainty. Some doubt is liable to remove much doubt. Thus Abū Mikhnaf admits his incomplete knowledge of the exact circumstances of Naḍr b. Ṣāliḥ’s report on the Umayyad governor of Madā’in, who foolishly allied with the Khārījite leader. As he puts it, “I do not know whether he said, ‘I was among the troops that were with him’ or ‘I was there in his presence’—when Shabīb’s envoys came to him [Muṭarrif b. Mughīra b. Shu‘ba].”<sup>167</sup> “We have endured a great deal from him, *or words to that effect*,” quotes the reporter on the debate among Quraysh that took place at the early stage of Muḥammad’s prophethood.<sup>168</sup> “Then the two men sat with Abū Bakr, or with ‘Uthmān,” hesitates ‘Abdallāh b. Abī Bakr in his report of two men of Jurash, in the southern Ḥijāz, who were sent to Medina at the time of the Prophet.<sup>169</sup> “I do not know whether he [one of ‘Uthmān’s assailants] sliced [the hand] clear off or cut it without severing it,” tells Abū Sa‘īd, the client of Abū Usayd al-Anṣārī, in his account of the fateful attack on the third caliph.<sup>170</sup> “I was present with him at the time, only I did not hear the words,” confesses a source that was present at a conversation between the ‘Abbāsīd Mahdī and a man who confronted him.<sup>171</sup>

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 194 [I, 2181].

<sup>166</sup> *History*, vol. XIII, 99–100 [I, 2520]. For the verbatim of a leaflet written against Muhtadī and transmitted by “someone who claimed to have read [it],” see vol. XXXVI, 76 [III, 1795–6].

<sup>167</sup> *History*, vol. XXII, 131 [II, 983].

<sup>168</sup> *History*, vol. VI, 101 [I, 1185], italics added.

<sup>169</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 88–9 [I, 1730].

<sup>170</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 205 [I, 3007].

<sup>171</sup> *History*, vol. XXIX, 257 [III, 538]. For “I do not know whether Ibrāhīm heard him say it or not,” see vol. XX, 122 [II, 536]. For the two possible versions of what Ibn Khāzim said, see vol. XXI, 211 [II, 833]. For Rabī‘ b. Yūnus’ failure

*Role of “verbatim” quotations*

There is perhaps no discourse element in historical writing as mimetic as “verbatim” quotations of monologues, dialogues, speeches and documents that fill the pages of the *History*. Without actually conducting a quantitative survey of their share in the entire opus, the strong impression is gained that the total of verbatim citations of utterances by the *dramatis personae* amounts to a large portion of the text.<sup>172</sup> Sometimes the sources do not demur from quoting even dialogues between mythological figures such as Hūd, the ancient Arabian prophet, or one Khuljān of the people of ‘Ād.<sup>173</sup> Speeches attributed to the legendary Iranian rulers Manūshihir and Kayqubād̄h also found their way into the pages of the *History*.<sup>174</sup>

Dialogues range anything between succinct statements of a few words (“You did well,” Naṣr b. Sayyār is quoted as having told his emissary to the Farghānīs)<sup>175</sup> and much longer utterances running into hundreds of words, such as the conversation, *sub anno* 127/745, between Maṣṣūr b. Jumhūr, a leader of the Kalb tribe and governor of the eastern provinces, and ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, who would succeed him in the governorship. It is worth quoting in full for its true-to-life character.

Maṣṣūr then said to Ibn ‘Umar, “I’ve never seen anyone like these people,” meaning the Khārījites. “Why are you fighting them and keeping them too busy to deal with Marwān? Give them your approval,

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of memory as regards where he went out, see vol. XXVIII, 110 [III, 163]. For uncertainty about the name of the Khurāsānī man who was put in charge of Qādisiyya, see *ibid.*, 266 [III, 295]. For whether it was said “with poverty on his person,” or “with poverty in his power [or rule] (*mulk*),” see vol. XXIX, 119 [III, 415]. For the name of the observer that has been forgotten, see vol. XXX, 293 [III, 731]. For uncertainty as to whether Amīn asked for food while under siege, or on his last day, see vol. XXXI, 178 [III, 908]. For whether the muleteer hastened to his comrades, or reached a garrison, see *ibid.*, 209 [III, 936]. For Ṣāliḥ either signaling with his head or answering “Yes,” see vol. XXXV, 164–5 [III, 1711].

<sup>172</sup> It is impossible, as well as needless, to refer to all the examples. The reader of the *History* will find them on almost every page. Noteworthy in its length, as far as documents go, is the epistle written by Ṭāhir, the ‘Abbāsīd governor, to his son, reproduced in vol. XXXII, 110–28 [III, 1046–61]. Also, note that the letter sent from the Prophet to the Persian emperor is quoted in two different versions, vol. VIII, 111 [I, 1571–2].

<sup>173</sup> *History*, vol. II, 38–9 [I, 242].

<sup>174</sup> *History*, vol. III, 25–8 [I, 437–40], 116 [I, 534].

<sup>175</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 33 [II, 1696].

and put them between yourself and Marwān. If you do that, they'll let us alone and go off to [fight] him. Their intensity and courage will be directed against him, and you can remain at rest here in your own place. If they defeat him, you will have gotten what you wanted, and you'll be on good terms with them. If he should defeat them and you want to oppose him and fight him, you'll do battle with him fully rested; however, his dispute with them will go on a long time, and they'll give him ample trouble." But Ibn 'Umar said, "Don't rush; let's wait and see!" "What shall we wait for?" Manṣūr asked. "You can't get out with them, and you can't go on. If we went out against them, we could not stand up to them. What can we expect will happen to them? Meanwhile, Marwān is untroubled, because we have absorbed the cutting edge of their power and diverted them from him! As for me, I'm going out and joining them!" He then went out, and, standing opposite their lines, he cried, "I am ready to listen! I want to submit as a Muslim and hear the Word of God!" . . . Then Manṣūr went over to them and gave them his oath of allegiance, saying, "I have become a Muslim." With that, they invited him to the mid-morning meal, and he ate. Then he asked them, "Who was the rider who seized my bridle that day by the Zāb?" meaning the day he slew Ibn 'Alqamah. They called, "O Umm al-Anbār!" Lo, the most beautiful woman came out to them. She asked him, "Are you Manṣūr?" "Yes," he answered. "May God shame your sword wherever you mention it," she told him. "By God, it did nothing, and gave nothing!" She meant by this, why could he not have killed her when she seized his bridle so she would have entered Paradise. Until that moment, Manṣūr had not known that she was a woman. He said, "O Commander of the Faithful, marry her to me!" Al-Ḍaḥḥāk replied, "She has a husband." She was, in fact, the wife of 'Ubaydah b. Sawwār al-Taghlibī.<sup>176</sup>

Or, take the dialogue between Zayd b. 'Alī and Umm 'Amr, the mother of Zayd's future spouse, on the occasion of Umm 'Amr arranging the marriage. It is worded in the language of courting. The reader comes to the dialogue equipped with knowledge that Zayd himself still does not have at this point, namely, that he cannot marry Umm 'Amr herself, the woman of whom he is enamoured.

Zayd then said to her: "May God's mercy be upon you, how would you like to marry me?" She said to him: "By God, may He have mercy on you, you are the one I would like to marry, if I were in a position to do so." Zayd rejoined: "What prevents you from doing so?" She said: "What prevents me from doing so is that I am too

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 18–19 [II, 1907–08]. Both Ibn 'Alqama and 'Ubayda were of the Khawārīj.



old.” Zayd said to her: “Not at all! I am satisfied. You are far from being too old.” She said: “May God have mercy on you! I know myself better than you do and I know better what time has done for me. If I were to marry one day, I would not prefer anyone else to you. But I do have a daughter, whose father was my parental cousin and who is more beautiful than I am. I will give her to you in marriage, if you like.” He said to her: “I will be satisfied if she is like you.” She said: “Her Creator and Maker was not content to make her like me, so He made her whiter, more good-looking, more corpulent, and finer than me in coquettishness and form.” Zayd laughed and said to her: “You have been blessed with your full share of eloquence and fine speaking. How does her eloquence compare with yours?” She said: “I am not sure about that, because I grew up in the Ḥijāz and my daughter grew up in al-Kūfah, so I don’t know. Perhaps my daughter speaks as the Kūfans do.” Zayd said: “I don’t object to that.”

This is a strikingly humane dialogue of a private nature, so to speak, in marked contrast with numerous dialogues in the *History* relating to the public domain. Incidentally, we learn that, subsequently, Zayd contracted a marriage with Umm ‘Amr’s daughter and that she bore him a daughter, after which she died. “As for Zayd, he was delighted with her,” concludes the narrator, taking an omniscient posture, an apt conclusion to this romantic interlude.<sup>177</sup>

The verbatim reproduction of dialogues is retained for the sake of a sense of authenticity, even when dialogues that feature in a sequel are repetitive in the extreme, and could be summarized. Consider, for example, the following:

On the day of Ḥudaybiyah, some men shaved [their heads] and others shortened [their hair by cutting it]. The Messenger of God said, “God will have mercy on those who shave.” They asked, “And those who shorten, Messenger of God?” He replied, “God will have mercy on those who shave.” They asked, “And those who shorten, Messenger of God?” He replied, “God will have mercy on those who shave.” They asked, “Messenger of God, and those who shorten?” He replied, “And those who shorten.”<sup>178</sup>

At times, as we have had occasion to learn, not only the precise words of the speaker are given, but the narrator makes a point of describing the physical gestures that are relevant to the speech. Reporting such gestures is supposedly the privilege of someone pre-

<sup>177</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 21–2 [II, 1686–7].

<sup>178</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 89 [I, 1550].

sent at the scene. Sa'd b. Mu'adh, the leader of Aws at Medina, says "[a]nd God's oath and covenant be upon the one who is here" and, to clarify to those not present what precisely he means, the source tells us that he spoke "in the direction of the Messenger of God, while turning away . . . out of respect for him."<sup>179</sup> The man who memorized Sa'd b. 'Ubāda's speech at the Saqīfa, when the Anṣār assembled to nominate the Prophet's successor (for which see Chapter 5 below), recited the text "in a loud voice so that his companions would hear it."<sup>180</sup> Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, the theologian, who was with his party at the mosque of the Baṣran governor, told about Mas'ūd b. 'Amr, the leader of the Azd at Baṣra, that he was coming "from over here looking like a bird," and indicated with his hand that by "here" he meant the dwelling of the Azdīs.<sup>181</sup> Muqātil b. Ḥayyān, beginning to dictate to Khālīd b. Ṣubayḥ, his tutor, a dispatch on behalf of his father, a local warlord in Iran in the time of the Umayyads, immediately gestures, thus indicating: "Don't write that."<sup>182</sup>

<sup>179</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 34 [I, 1492–3].

<sup>180</sup> *History*, vol. X, 2 [I, 1837–8].

<sup>181</sup> *History*, vol. XX, 33 [II, 455].

<sup>182</sup> *History*, vol. XXIV, 55 [II, 1330]. For 'Alī who said "Ahem" thrice before he spoke, see vol. VI, 91 [I, 1173]. For Abū Lubāba saying "Yes," but in fact pointing with his hand to his throat, vol. VIII, 31 [I, 1489]. For 'Uthmān kneeling down as he was speaking to Kumayl, vol. XV, 233 [I, 3035]. For Mustawrid b. 'Ullifa smiling while speaking to 'Abdallāh b. 'Uqba al-Ghanawī, vol. XVIII, 47 [II, 41]. For Khawālī b. Yazīd's wife saying, "I do not know where he [my husband] is," but pointing to the latrine, see vol. XXI, 35 [II, 671]. For Mukhtār putting his finger on his mouth, thus commanding Ibn Kāmil to be still, see *ibid.*, 41 [II, 676–7]. For Muṣ'ab b. al-Zubayr reciting a Qur'ānic verse and pointing in the direction of Syria, see *ibid.*, 84 [II, 717]. For 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad's speech that "[h]e said . . . at the top of his voice, to make the people hear," see vol. XXIII, 25 [II, 1075]. For 'Uthmān b. Mas'ūd turning away and gesturing with his hand "that he should be released," see *ibid.*, 107 [II, 1163]. For Abū Ru'ba al-Murjī'ī speaking to Yazīd, the Umayyad caliph, about the "iron mountains" around him, and gesturing at him, see vol. XXIV, 137 [II, 1404]. For the mortally wounded Qaḥl b. 'Ayyāsh saying "I slew him," signaling to his comrades with his head, thus showing them where Yazīd b. al-Muhallab lay, and pointing at himself to indicate that he had been mortally wounded by Yazīd, see *ibid.*, 138 [II, 1405]. For 'Umar b. Yazīd al-Uṣayyidī giving "one loud clap of the hands" before speaking to Hishām, see vol. XXV, 4 [II, 1468]. For Naṣr b. Sayyār closing one eye and pondering long before speaking, see vol. XXVII, 67 [II, 1956]. For Abū Ḥamza al-'Ibādī looking sternly into the messengers' faces and showing his aversion, then being cheerful toward them, and smiling in their faces, then speaking to them, see *ibid.*, 91 [II, 1982]. For Mahdī following Ya'qūb b. Dāwūd with his eyes, then saying "May God strike me dead if I do not kill you!" see vol. XXIX, 227 [III, 509].

It is noteworthy that the intensity of “verbatim” quotation tends to abate in the *History*’s latter part. The curious historian may wonder whether such a tendency can be accepted at its face value. After all, verbatim reproduction must have been for Ṭabarī no more difficult to obtain than for Ibn Ishāq, for example, whose eighth-century *Sīra* is replete with verbatim citations. What is certainly significant is that there is a marked shift to the non-verbatim modality the closer we get to Ṭabarī’s contemporary history. Is it unsound to assume that the earlier sources were following a commonly accepted stylistic usage that gradually fell out of use as the years passed?<sup>183</sup> Here is some food for thought about verbatim as a rhetorical device in the writing of history. We shall return to it briefly once more in the Epilogue.

Verbatim material—abundant in the *History* as it is—may leave the skeptical reader perplexed. For what is one to make of the considerably long testament of the ‘Abbāsīd caliph Ma‘mūn, addressed to Abū Ishāq (later to be known as Mu‘taṣim), before his death, even though “his affliction grew intense and he felt the imminence of God’s command?”<sup>184</sup> To be sure, the authenticity of all this enor-

<sup>183</sup> For reports on letters without reproducing their texts verbatim, see e.g., Amīn’s letter to Ma‘mūn, vol. XXXI, 26 [III, 778]. Similarly, for Amīn’s letter to the commanders, see *ibid.*, 48–9 [III, 796–7]. For Afshīn’s letter to Bughā, see vol. XXXIII, 20 [III, 1175]. For Afshīn’s letter to the commander of Marāgha, see *ibid.*, 24 [III, 1178–9]. For Mu‘taṣim’s letter to Afshīn, see *ibid.*, 102 [III, 1239–40]. For Yāṭis’ letter to the “king of the Byzantines,” see *ibid.*, 109–10 [III, 1246]. For Balkājūr’s letter, see vol. XXXV, 62 [III, 1581]. For Mūsā b. Bughā’s letter, see *ibid.*, 63 [III, 1582]. For Muḥammad b. Ṭahir’s letter, see *ibid.*, 63–4 [III, 1583]. For Mu‘tazz’s letter to Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh, see *ibid.*, 71 [III, 1594–5]. For Mustā‘īn’s letter to Ḥusayn b. Ismā‘īl, see *ibid.*, 83 [III, 1610]. For Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh’s letter to Ibn Aḥmad, see *ibid.*, 106 [III, 1641]. For Sulaymān b. Jāmi’s letter to the Zanj leader, see vol. XXXVI, 191 [III, 1917]. For ‘Alī b. Abān al-Muhallabī’s letter to the leader of the Zanj, see vol. XXXVII, 8 [III, 1943]. For Muḥammad b. ‘Ubaydallāh’s letter to the leader of the Zanj, see *ibid.*, 10 [III, 1945]. For Nuṣayr Abū Ḥamza’s letter to Abū al-‘Abbās b. al-Muwaffaq, see *ibid.*, 14 [III, 1948]. For the letter of the leader of the Zanj to ‘Alī b. Abān al-Muhallabī, see *ibid.*, 35 [III, 1974]. For Muwaffaq’s letter to the leader of the Zanj, see *ibid.*, 42 [III, 1981–2]. For ‘Amr b. al-Layth al-Ṣaffār’s letter, see vol. XXXVIII, 39 [III, 2159]. For Ṣaffār’s letter to Mu‘taḍid, see *ibid.*, 40 [III, 2160]. For ‘Alī b. ‘Isā b. al-Jarrāḥ’s dispatch, see *ibid.*, 118 [III, 2221]. For the merchants’ letters from Damascus, see *ibid.*, 119 [III, 2222]. For Qāsim b. ‘Ubaydallāh’s dispatch, see *ibid.*, 128 [III, 2232]. For Abū Ma‘add’s dispatch from Raqqā, see *ibid.*, 148 [III, 2250]. For a dispatch from the Yemen, see *ibid.*, 169 [III, 2267]. For Bishr’s dispatch from Tarsūs, see *ibid.*, 206 [III, 2293].

<sup>184</sup> *History*, vol. XXXII, 229–30 [III, 1138–40].

mous verbatim citation of monologues, dialogues etc., that is to be found in the *History* is not my concern here and, in any case, is hard to determine. Sir Hamilton Gibb characterized dialogues in medieval Islamic historiography as a whole as a “romantic” technique “to present a situation in terms of *imaginary* conversations or statements by the persons concerned.” Gibb’s opinion was that “there is no justification whatever for regarding them as records of actual events.”<sup>185</sup> As for early Islamic documents, Noth was of the opinion—based on what he termed as rational arguments and practical considerations, as well as the appearance of anachronisms—that these documents can, at the most, allow us to discern the faded outlines of the originals. Certainly, letters issued by the Persians or the Byzantines could not have been available to the Muslim traditionists.<sup>186</sup> Speeches, Noth considers even more clearly unauthentic; we must view them as fictions “from beginning to end.”<sup>187</sup>

These are all compelling assumptions, at least for those committed to the project of historical reconstruction. One could ponder, for example, on how all these verbatim passages would be viewed by modern eyes, if the text had been presented as a straightforward narrative account? In such a case, would there be equal suspicion? And if not (which is rather plausible), are not scholars, in this instance, simply being manipulated by the rhetorical tactics of their medieval predecessors? An ironic possibility to contemplate. Putting it differently, from the point of view from which this book is written, it is not difficult to see the role that verbatim citation plays in contributing to a reality-effect, thus playfully deriding the dead earnest positivism that modern research professes.<sup>188</sup>

An allusion to classical mimetic notions is here pertinent. Homer uses direct speech right at the beginning of the *Iliad*, in the passage where Chryses pleads for his daughter. Homer does it as if he himself were the father.<sup>189</sup> In fact, for Plato, *mimesis*, strictly speaking,

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<sup>185</sup> H. A. R. Gibb, “The Arabic Sources for the Life of Saladin,” *Speculum* 25 (1958): 63 (italics added).

<sup>186</sup> Noth, *Historical Tradition*, 72, 76, 77–80.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>188</sup> See also Meisami, *Persian Historiography*, 290–92.

<sup>189</sup> Melberg, *Theories*, 16–17. For the use of speeches as a Homeric structural form that is also found in Herodotus, see Flemming A. J. Nielsen, *The Tragedy in History: Herodotus and the Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield, 1997), 31–2. For speeches in Herodotus, see Mabel L. Lang, *Herodotean Narrative and Discourse* (Cambridge, M.A., 1984).

can only be *mimesis of speech*, since language can only imitate language (or is it, only language can imitate language?). Direct speech, as Plato sees it, is mimetic, while indirect speech is diegetic. The treatment of speech is determinative, and what distinguishes a scene (as the term runs in narrative theory) is that speech is rendered in direct form.<sup>190</sup>

In Bible Studies, verbatim dialogues have also drawn their share of attention. One scholar sees them as a stylistic ploy, a form of “verbalized action” that can be skillfully employed to enliven the prose tale.<sup>191</sup> Similarly, another scholar is of the opinion that “it would be extremely far-fetched to imagine that anyone present could have heard these words and transcribed them for the subsequent use of the historian.” Rather, the biblical historian invented the dialogue to represent a clash of motives or something else.<sup>192</sup> Dialogue “is the most pervasive technical means through which the writer adumbrates the multiple and often murky human implications of the historical record.”<sup>193</sup> But as Robert Alter hastens to add, the notion of invention requires here conceptual complication: the unvoiced speech of the protagonist is not a freestanding fabrication but a means of artfully focusing on the nature of the historical figures. The biblical writer (and, one can add to him the narrator in the *History*) “exercises . . . a certain freedom of stylization” like, say, Thucydides’ contrived speeches, as part of his concern with questions of politics. Similarly, monologues display sensitivity to individual psychology and moral character and to the manner whereby they play out in the historical arena.<sup>194</sup>

Verbatim citation being such a prominent feature in the *History*, seldom can one encounter either uncertainty as to what exactly was said or a direct speech in incomplete form. Alter, who treats the latter, namely, items left unspecified in the Hebrew Bible, suggests that

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<sup>190</sup> Beaumont, “Hard-Boiled,” 7–8.

<sup>191</sup> Shemaryahu Talmon, “Ezra and Nehemia,” in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 362.

<sup>192</sup> Alter, “History in the Bible,” 66. For the biblical writers repeatedly using dialogue not only to clarify political positions, as Thucydides does in his historiography, but also “to delineate unfolding relations, nuances of character and attitude,” see Alter, “Introduction,” 20.

<sup>193</sup> Alter, “History in the Bible,” 65.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

they be seen as an expression of “authorial abstraction.”<sup>195</sup> In the *History* this phenomenon generates its special trope. Thus, when ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ writes to Arṭabūn, a commander of the Byzantine army in Palestine, “I am seeking against you the help of *so-and-so and so-and-so and so-and-so*,” the narrator adds, only partly filling the gap of information thus created, that “he [‘Amr] mentioned some of Arṭabūn’s aides.”<sup>196</sup> “I am the messenger of the Commander of the Faithful to you, and he proposes to you *such-and-such*,” announces the Umayyad prince, Muḥammad b. Marwān in 82/701, to the people of Iraq. When the narrator adds that “he mentioned these conditions” without, however, specifying them to the reader, it is clear that this paraphrase of the message is done for reasons of brevity: after all, the conditions in question had already been listed earlier in the narrative.<sup>197</sup> ‘Īsā b. Mūsā, a member of the ‘Abbāsīd family and at one time a designated successor to Maṣṣūr,<sup>198</sup> confesses that he sold his caliphal rights for large sums of money “to be divided among my children *such and such and such . . . and . . . to so-and-so*.” Lest we think that the father had a lapse of memory in so vital a matter as his children’s names, the narrator notes that, in reality, ‘Īsā did name those entitled to the sums in question and acknowledges his own excising of them.<sup>199</sup>

<sup>195</sup> Alter, *Art*, 70–71. See also Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 149.

<sup>196</sup> *History*, vol. XII, 188 [I, 2400], italics added.

<sup>197</sup> *History*, vol. XXIII, 24 [II, 1074]. For these conditions, see p. 23 [II, 1073].

<sup>198</sup> See on him *History*, vol. XXIX, 15 n. 46.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 38 [III, 351]. For “*so-and-so*” of the Banū Muḥārib, see vol. VII, 163 [I, 1456]. For “the rear of it is at *such-and-such* a place on the street,” see vol. X, 30 [I, 1860]. For “[t]his is what Khālīd b. al-Walīd made a truce with . . . and *So-and-so* and *So-and-so* about,” see *ibid.*, 131 [I, 1954]. For “[o] *so-and-so*, help me with my belly!” see vol. XII, 101 [I, 2310]. For “[w]hen the day *such-and-such* has come,” see vol. XIII, 116 [I, 2535]. For “. . . one said that *so and so* was the best poet. Another said that, rather, *so and so* was the best poet,” see vol. XIV, 136 [I, 2769]. For “[l]ook for *so-and-so* and *so-and-so*, and behead them,” vol. XV, 184 [I, 2983]. For “[w]e think he wrote to you *such-and-such*,” see vol. XVII, 104 [I, 3354]. For the name of ‘Alī’s governor being “the son of *so-and-so* al-Arḥabī,” see *ibid.*, 199 [I, 3445]. For “I have seen the Khāqān’s troops in *such and such* a place,” see vol. XXV, 14 [II, 1478]. For “[s]ome said Zayd said *such-and-such* and others said ‘Abdallāh said *such and such*,” see vol. XXVI, 11 [II, 1673]. For “[a] bowl was put between me and *so and so* and another bowl between *so and so* and *so and so* and *so until* (all) those who were at his table were included,” see *ibid.*, 261 [II, 1886]. For “[o] son of this, O son of that!” see vol. XXVIII, 198 [III, 234]. For “. . . my sister, *so-and-so . . . met me*,” see vol. XXIX, 54 [III, 362]. For “*So-and-so’s* mother did this, and *so-and-so’s* mother acted in this way, and *so-and-so’s* mother said this?” see vol. XXX, 45 [III, 571]. For “[s]*o-and-so* has

*Omniscience*

To conclude this chapter, I wish to turn to an underlying premise of the historians/narrators of the *History* in their mimetic claim: the premise of omniscience. Unaware of, or perhaps, consciously disregarding its double-edged nature, so to speak, that is, it being by no means simply mimetic, the sources resort to omniscience time and again purely for the benefits it offers. How—may we ask—could the ancient Muslim narrator/historian aspire to omniscience? This is a question that, if entered his mind at all, appears not to have troubled his poetics. But not only his. Indeed, omniscience is assumed by historians in general, the ancient and the modern, not unlike the case of many writers of fiction.<sup>200</sup>

At its best, omniscience means the source's ability to enter, as well as exit, unscathed, the hearts and minds of the *dramatis personae*. This is a privilege reserved for a narrator worthy of the name. We should not be surprised, therefore, at our sources' ability to penetrate even the mind of no other than the Prophet himself. Thus, there is no need for us to doubt that his purpose in the expedition to Ḥamrā' al-Asad was "to terrorize the enemy and to bring to their knowledge that he went out in pursuit of them. So *he wanted to give them the impression* that his strength was unimpaired, and that the Muslims' casualties had not weakened their ability to engage in fighting."<sup>201</sup> Similarly, that Muḥammad lent a hand in digging the trench at the battle thus named thereafter, *in order to inspire the Muslims with the hope of reward*, is intended to be seen as an undisputed report on the Prophet's inner thoughts.<sup>202</sup> In his expedition against the Banū Mustaliq,

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fought with the 'naked ones'; so-and-so has come; so-and-so has plundered," see vol. XXXI, 177 [III, 907]. For "[s]o-and-so just happened to me," see vol. XXXII, 101 [III, 1041]. For "[s]o-and-so, son of so-and-so, with so-and-so *nisbah*," see *ibid.*, 242 [III, 1150]. For Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim and his followers "making for so-and-so district," see vol. XXXIII, 6 [III, 1165]. For "[t]hey did so-and-so and so-and-so," see *ibid.*, 256 [III, 1162]. For "Ītākḥ had said to me such and such," see vol. XXXIV, 86 [III, 1386]. There are further examples of this kind.

<sup>200</sup> For a pioneering statement on this, see D. S. Margoliouth, *Lectures on Arabic Historians* (New York, 1930), 63. For the omniscient narrator in fiction, see e.g., Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Baltimore, 1978), 236–75. Unsurprisingly, Genette sees the omniscient "access" to the subjectivity of the characters such as feeling and thinking, and interior monologues, an index of fictionality. See *Fiction and Diction*, 67.

<sup>201</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 139 [I, 1427–8].

<sup>202</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 8 [I, 1465].

it is related that the Messenger of God travelled all the day and all the night until his followers fell asleep as soon as they felt the touch of the ground, and all this he did “*only to distract them from the talk that had taken place the day before.*”<sup>203</sup> There is not the slightest hesitation that the Prophet’s intentions are an open book for the narrators.

If this is the case with the Community’s founder, all the more so with prominent Muslims. When Abū Sufyān asks Budayl b. Warqā’ al-Khuzā’ī, a tribal leader, where he had gone, we are assured that the former “*guessed that he [Budayl] had gone to the Messenger of God.*”<sup>204</sup> ‘Umar, when taking a large sum from Khālid b. al-Walīd, “*felt that he had avenged himself*” on the latter.<sup>205</sup> The thoughts and feelings of various *personae* are brought into relief with an intimate “knowledge” of their biographical details as a backdrop. A participant in the battle known as the Night of the Howling, on the eve of the Qādisiyya battle against the Persian army, tells us that Sa’d b. Abī Waqqāṣ spent a night “the like of which he had never spent before, and the Arabs and the Persians saw things the like of which they had not seen before.”<sup>206</sup> Likewise, on the eve of the Battle of the Camel, there were those who spent the worst night of their lives, for they were on the verge of destruction. By contrast, others were so relaxed that they slept that night as they never had slept before.<sup>207</sup> ‘Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr (manipulatively) suggested to Ḥusayn that he stay in Mecca and not go to Kūfa, and he made this suggestion—so we are assured—only because he feared that if he advised Ḥusayn to the contrary, the latter would surely suspect his motives.<sup>208</sup>

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 53 [I, 1513], italics added. For what the Prophet longed for in his soul, see vol. VI, 108 [I, 1192]. For what the Prophet feared of, see vol. VIII, 68 [I, 1529].

<sup>204</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 163 [I, 1622–3], italics added.

<sup>205</sup> *History*, vol. XI, 163 [I, 2150], italics added.

<sup>206</sup> *History*, vol. XII, 121 [I, 2333].

<sup>207</sup> *History*, vol. XVI, 122 [I, 3182]. For this battle see Chapter 4 below.

<sup>208</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 67 [II, 274]. For Ibn Ladh’a seizing Durayd b. Simmāh’s camel by its halter, “thinking that he was a woman because he was in a howdah,” see vol. IX, 16 [I, 1666]. For what ‘Amr b. ‘Abd al-Maṣīḥ wished, see vol. XI, 33 [I, 2043]. For what Rib’ī b. ‘Āmir knew and what he wanted, see vol. XII, 66 [I, 2270–71]. For what ‘Umar “did not think would be accomplished for him so quickly,” see vol. XIV, 37 [I, 2666]. For what the man of the tribe of Sūdda thought, see vol. XIX, 108 [II, 313]. For “each hoped the other would kill al-Ḥusayn,” see *ibid.*, 160 [II, 365]. For what ‘Amr b. Sa’īd thought, see *ibid.*, 193 [II, 399]. For what ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn felt, see *ibid.*, 216 [II, 420]. For what Abū Qaṭān thought, see vol. XX, 200 [II, 616]. For Mukhtār’s intention, see vol. XXI, 55 [II, 689]. For Ḥajjāj’s fear, see vol. XXIII, 23 [II, 1073]. For the words that



When he deems it pertinent, the omniscient narrator is able to cite no less than a verbatim monologue that took place in the hero's mind. "I will find no greater honor or celebrity than will come to me from killing this man, and it will be my safe-conduct with al-Ḥajjāj," thus "*said to himself*" Ḥayyān, an attendant of Shabīb b. Yazīd, the rebel against the Umayyad regime during 'Abd al-Malik's reign, when he was about to cut off Shabīb's hand.<sup>209</sup> And Yazīd b. al-Muhallab's reflection, upon being given the responsibilities in Iraq, is rendered as follows:

Iraq has been ruined by al-Ḥajjāj. Today I am the hope of the people of Iraq. But if I go there and force the people to pay the tribute and punish them for nonpayment, I will have become just like al-Ḥajjāj, throwing the people into conflict and returning them to those prisons from which God had released them. On the other hand, if I do not send Sulaymān an amount equal to what was collected by al-Ḥajjāj, he will not be pleased with me.<sup>210</sup>

Omniscience should not recognize religious or ethnic boundaries, and thus the narrators of the *History* are able to claim acquaintance not only with the inner minds of Muslim protagonists. In the Battle of Qādisiyya, Rustām, the renowned Persian general, decided to camp between 'Atīq and Najaf and engage the Arabs in combat, since "he *thought* that this was the best thing they [the Persians] could do."<sup>211</sup> Hurmuzān, another Persian commander, hastened to organize a counterattack at Rāmḥurmūz against Nu'mān b. Muqarrin, "*hoping* he would cut short (the other's) offensive."<sup>212</sup> Mobilizing his forces

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rested in Ḥajjāj's heart, see *ibid.*, 66 [II, 1121]. For what Ma'mūn's heart was filled with, see vol. XXXII, 40 [III, 997]. For what Ibn Sunbāt wished, see vol. XXXIII, 80 [III, 1226]. For what Māzyār did not imagine, see *ibid.*, 169 [III, 1295], 170 [III, 1296]. For what Yaḥyā b. Khālid wondered about, see vol. XXXIV, 15 [III, 1334]. For Ibn al-Zayyāt sensing "something ominous," see *ibid.*, 68 [III, 1373]. For what Qabiḥa hoped for, see vol. XXXVI, 25 [III, 1737]. For what 'Alī b. Abān "held in his heart," see vol. XXXVII, 10 [III, 1946]. For what Badr, Mu'taḍid's *mawlā*, was certain about, vol. XXXVIII, 109 [III, 2213].

<sup>209</sup> *History*, vol. XXII, 127 [II, 979].

<sup>210</sup> *History*, vol. XXIV, 31 [II, 1306]. Similarly, for what Mālik b. al-Haytham (known as Abū Naṣr) said to himself, see vol. XXVIII, 42 [III, 118]. For what Riyāḥ b. 'Uthmān b. Ḥayyān said to himself, see *ibid.*, 114 [III, 166]. For what Maṣṣūr said to himself, see *ibid.*, 246 [III, 278]. For what Mūsā b. 'Īsā said to himself, see vol. XXIX, 22 [III, 336].

<sup>211</sup> *History*, vol. XII, 53 [I, 2257], italics added.

<sup>212</sup> *History*, vol. XIII, 133 [I, 2552], italics added.

at Ḥimṣ, Heraclius “*intended* that the different Muslim forces would be too busy to cooperate, owing to the number of his troops and the excellence of his men.”<sup>213</sup> Before the Battle of the Yarmūk, Bahān, a Byzantine commander, together with his companions, “wanted only for the Romans to recover their senses and behave in a nonaggressive manner toward the Muslims, so that their courage might return to them.”<sup>214</sup>

It is not only a reading of the hearts and minds of individuals to which readers of the *History* are exposed, but also of collectivities. The Persian troops at Ullays, who had been prevented by Khālīd b. al-Walīd from eating their meal, said among themselves that they would abstain from food until they annihilated the Arabs, and they said it “to display their toughness.”<sup>215</sup> At ‘Ayn al-Tamr, the Persian enemy hoped that Khālīd b. al-Walīd “would be like those of the Arabs who would raid [and withdraw].” Later, when Khālīd’s prisoners saw ‘Aqqa (their protector) beheaded, “they despaired of life,” and the narrator has the knowledge to state that, in this regard, they were *precisely as Khālīd had expected them to be*.<sup>216</sup> The Arab conquerors of Madā’in, who met a Persian carrying a box full of soils, “*realized* that this was a man of importance,” when he told them that, had it not been for God, he would not have brought the box.<sup>217</sup> Later, whenever the same Arabs sat and drank on the carpet called “the king’s spring” (*Bahār-i Kīsrā*), “they would *feel* as if they were sitting in a garden.”<sup>218</sup> And Ḥusayn “was the most unwelcome of God’s creatures in the eyes of Ibn al-Zubayr,” while “in the eyes and hearts” of the people of the Ḥijāz he “was greater and more capable of commanding the people’s obedience” than Ibn al-Zubayr.<sup>219</sup>

<sup>213</sup> *History*, vol. XI, 84 [I, 2086], italics added.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 85 [I, 2088]. Similarly, for what came to the Yemeni king’s mind, see vol. V, 182 [I, 913]. For Kīsrā “affrighted by what he had seen,” see *ibid.*, 285 [I, 981].

<sup>215</sup> *History*, vol. XI, 23 [I, 2033–4].

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 54–5 [I, 2063], italics added.

<sup>217</sup> *History*, vol. XIII, 28 [I, 2449], italics added.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 33 [I, 2453], italics added.

<sup>219</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 23 [II, 233]. Similarly, going out to the land of India was onerous to Bahlūl’s men, therefore they hastened to accept the offer. See vol. XXV, 157 [II, 1624]. For the Rabī‘a’s feeling of shame, see vol. XXVI, 258 [II, 1882]. For the people thinking that it boded ill, see vol. XXVII, 112 [II, 2006]. For the feelings of fear of defeat in the hearts of those who had been defeated, see vol. XXIX, 46 [III, 356]. For what the people in Mecca imagined about Muḥammad

That the narrator (like, quite often, the *dramatis personae*) is able to enjoy omniscience, even when God's will is at stake, is particularly striking. Whatever reservation of the rationalist kind the modern reader may have, the ancient sources know, for example, that the pledge to the Prophet at the 'Aqaba was a result of God's wish to honor the Anṣār, as well as to aid His Prophet, to render Islam and its followers mighty, and to humble the polytheists.<sup>220</sup> Some Bedouins who had excused themselves from participating in the Prophet's expedition to Tābuk, later came to apologize, "but God would not accept their excuse."<sup>221</sup>

We should not fail to see what usually comes with such peculiar presumption of omniscience: the theological role it plays in aggrandizing His name. Thus, when Ibn Abzā the transmitter states that God is the one who restrained the Prophet at the conquest of Mecca, that "God did not want the horsemen to trample them [the Muslims of Mecca] unwittingly," the narrator's omniscience and God's omnipotence do converge.<sup>222</sup> After all, is not knowledge of God's desire part of the theological claim?

For omniscience to be effective, chronology must, on occasion, pay the price and be tampered with. To put it another way, the absolute (or close to that) knowledge finds its "proof" by the narrator purporting to present a sequence in which a premeditated thought (of which, needless to reiterate, the narrator has access to) precedes a consequent statement, deed or development. In this way, what is in all likelihood at best the narrator's hindsight speculation or *post factum* conclusion is disguised. And thus, the illusory access to the inner thoughts is not just a privilege in its own right, but makes the historical story seem unproblematic.

As one narrator twice relates, Heraclius, who gave orders to gather his commanders, "was mortally afraid of them." Later, the narrator

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b. Sulaymān's troops, see vol. XXX, 24 [III, 558]. For the hearts of the troops of Ḥarashī's sons being filled with fear and terror, see vol. XXXI, 90 [III, 832]. For the rancor that the Turks harbored in their heart against Muhtadī, see vol. XXXVI, 75 [III, 1795]. For what "became clear to the people," see vol. XXXVII, 101 [III, 2053].

<sup>220</sup> *History*, vol. VI, 130 [I, 1217].

<sup>221</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 50 [I, 1695].

<sup>222</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 72 [I, 1532]. For what God "wished and desired to be communicated," see vol. X, 48 [I, 1876]. For Mughīra being perplexed one night "because that was God's will," see *ibid.*, 187 [I, 2010].

has the emperor himself confess to that effect. The Byzantine ruler, in a statement clearly working in the service of Islamic propaganda, adds that, but for his fear, he would have followed the “Arab prophet” who “is the one whom we have been awaiting and whom we find in our book.”<sup>223</sup> Or, Abū Bakr, naming the Syrian chief cities for his generals, “knew that the Romans would divert their attention; therefore he desired to have the descending one ascend and the ascending one descend, so that they would not foresake one another.” Given this modality of omniscient script, it hardly comes as surprise that “[i]t turned out as he had supposed, and they achieved what he had wanted.”<sup>224</sup> This way, the narrator has no less than two birds in his hand, so to speak: the farsightedness of the distinguished *dramatis personae*, here Abū Bakr, and his own, unlimited knowledge. Finally, in the context of the Zanj revolt, *sub anno* 267/880–81, Muḥammad b. Ḥammād, one of Ṭabarī’s main sources for that event,<sup>225</sup> reports some action of Muwaffaq the ‘Abbāsīd. The preferred sequence is, first of all, to intimate the latter’s thoughts:

[O]bserving the position of the abominable one [the leader of the Zanj], his fortifications and the vastness of the army, Abū Aḥmad [al-Muwaffaq] realized that he must wear him out in a long siege and bring about a split among his troops by offering good-will to those who would turn away from their master, and by treating harshly those who stuck to their errors. He further realized that he needed more barges and other equipment for river fighting.

Now that, through the narrator’s good services, the reader has gained access to the ruler’s mind, Muwaffaq’s subsequent action presents not the slightest surprise: “He therefore sent agents to collect provisions and let them come by land and water to his camp in the

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<sup>223</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 105–06 [I, 1566]. In the so-called *Ridda* Wars, Fayrūz al-Daylamī, who confronted Aswad al-Ansī, the so-called false prophet, “feared that if he went back he and the woman [with him] would be killed.” Therefore, he acted first. Thus Daylamī’s fear is presented to us as part of the narrator’s omniscience and not a matter of his speculation or conclusion at best. See vol. X, 31–2 [I, 1861]. Similarly, the Muslims who fought the Persians in the vicinity of Madā’in, “were apprehensive that an enemy ambush might be located there. Hence they hesitated and were afraid to enter it.” Once again, through reversing the sequence, hesitation is presented as a sure thought and an example of the narrator’s privileged knowledge, not what it is most likely, a matter of speculation in explaining a certain development. See vol. XII, 142 [I, 2359].

<sup>224</sup> *History*, vol. XI, 83 [I, 2086].

<sup>225</sup> See on him *History*, vol. XXXVII, 13 n. 29.

city which he named al-Muwaffaqiyyah.”<sup>226</sup> The narrator’s selection of this particular sequence affords him a privileged position vested with foreknowledge. He is better off with it than with its alternative—evidently, less effective rhetorically—of first presenting the action and then probing for its explanation.<sup>227</sup>

This reversed order puts omniscience in stark relief and helps it derive its “proof” not only from actual deeds that follow its explanation but also from subsequent dialogues. For example, the narrator’s insistence that Zaynab “excited the admiration of the Messenger of God” is later followed by a dialogue between Zayd and the Prophet in which the former asks: “Messenger of God, perhaps Zaynab has excited your admiration . . .?” In this way the dialogue is made to corroborate omniscience. Yet, if at this point the Prophet’s feeling remains only a possibility, as indicated by the mode of question, by the time we come to another report on the same episode, the question has become an undisputable fact, stated, unsurprisingly, in another omniscient declaration: “. . . and admiration for her [Zaynab] entered the heart of the Prophet.”<sup>228</sup> Similarly, the narrator of the scene of a meeting between Yazdagird, the last Persian emperor, and a Muslim delegation, is able to preempt that after Nu‘mān b. Muqarrin, the commander in Kūfa, told the Persian king that the name of his garment was “a cloak (*burd*),” the king *saw* an evil omen in this. That Yazdagird then says that his enemy “has carried off the world” (a wordplay on the Persian phrase *burd jahān*) serves, of course, to “establish” the narrator’s unassailable knowledge.<sup>229</sup>

By the nature of things, the narrator may have an edge over the

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 47–8 [III, 1988–9].

<sup>227</sup> For other examples, see Mughīra’s question following his thought, *History*, vol. XVIII, 27 [II, 23]. For what Ibn Ziyād supposed, therefore rising, riding off, and leaving his wager, see *ibid.*, 197 [II, 186]. For Asad’s desire to put a seal on his neck, and, therefore, “he put a seal on his neck,” see vol. XXV, 162 [II, 1630]. For Walīd suspecting ‘Abbās, therefore ordering him to come and join him, see vol. XXVI, 157 [II, 1804]. For what Manṣūr thought, therefore saying what he said, see vol. XXIX, 23 [II, 1336–7]. For what Ya‘qūb b. Dāwūd was afraid of, therefore he sent someone, see *ibid.*, 258 [III, 538–9]. For what Faḍl b. Sahl realized, therefore employing a harsh treatment, see vol. XXXII, 80 [III, 1027]. For Afshīn fearing that the enemy become emboldened, therefore sending foot soldiers, see vol. XXXIII, 67 [III, 1213]. For Ibn Sunbāt not wishing to arouse Bābak’s suspicions, therefore saying what he said, see *ibid.*, 79 [III, 1224].

<sup>228</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 2 [I, 1461], 4 [I, 1462].

<sup>229</sup> *History*, vol. XII, 34–5 [I, 2239].

*dramatis personae*, no less than over his reader, due to his posture of omniscience. And to maximize some effect, he may even decide to share his omniscience with his reader, to the exclusion of the historical protagonists. In this way, both know what the latter do not, at least up to the point when, according to the requirements of the plot, they need to. However, the narrator's benevolence to his reader may at times exact its price. For the latter is thus deprived of his share of suspense.

One example that illustrates this tactics comes from an account on the end of Shabīb, the rebel, *sub anno* 77/696–7. There is the scene of him, injured, managing to slip out and reach a stream, where he finds Ḥayyān, his attendant. Shabīb asks Ḥayyān to pour some water on his head, and when he innocently stretches his head, Ḥayyān “was about to cut it off, saying to himself, ‘I will find no greater honor or celebrity than will come to me from killing this man, and it will be my safe-conduct with al-Ḥajjāj.’” But just as this thought crosses his mind, Ḥayyān feels a shudder of fear. Meanwhile, Shabīb, totally unaware of the drama in his companion's thoughts (and before the reader's eyes, so to speak), only notes his slow gait in opening the waterskin and requests to know why. Together with Shabīb, the reader is denied an answer, and is only informed that Shabīb later rejoins his companions in his camp. Ḥayyān's *post factum* explanation that “It was cowardice, by God, and the shudder of fear that came over me, that kept me from cutting off his head after I intended to do so,” discloses a secret that only the narrator, Ḥayyān, and the reader share, to the exclusion of the protagonist that is Shabīb.<sup>230</sup>

A similar example has to do with Maṣṣūr's order to Zuhayr b. al-Turkī, a governor of Hamadhān, not to let Mālīk b. Haytham, formerly a leading figure in the ‘Abbāsīd revolution, escape. The reader knows what Mālīk does not: that a banquet to which he was invited at Zuhayr's would prove fateful to him. Sure enough, as Mālīk is enjoying some food, armed men burst upon him and bind him with fetters.<sup>231</sup>

<sup>230</sup> *History*, vol. XXII, 127 [II, 978–9].

<sup>231</sup> *History*, vol. XXVIII, 43 [III, 119]. Maṣṣūr eventually released him. Similarly, for Najāḥ being invited to drink with the caliph, but actually being tricked, see vol. XXXIV, 158–9 [III, 1441–2].

If such gaps of information sometimes produce various effects, one of which is irony, so much the better. This emerges clearly in the narrative recounting the conversion of ‘Umayr b. Wahb al-Jumāhī, an “evil” Qurashī (i.e., of the tribe of Quraysh) and previously a strong opponent of the Prophet. Ṣafwān b. Umayya, who cooperates with ‘Umayr and expects him to murder the Prophet after Badr, is late to learn what the reader, thanks to the narrator’s courtesy, already knows: that ‘Umayr will betray Ṣafwān and convert to Islam, falling under the spell of the (omniscient, indeed) Prophet. Ṣafwān’s words: “Rejoice, good news will come to you . . . of an event which will make you forget what happened at Badr,” meaning, Muḥammad’s assassination by ‘Umayr, are uttered when all, except Ṣafwān, know that there is actually no reason to rejoice: the plan has been averted. Ṣafwān is thus made to appear a fool.<sup>232</sup>

How our historians (or their sources, for that matter) can know what some of the protagonists said or thought to themselves? How can they foresee an action that *will* take place? Alter, apropos of omniscience in the Hebrew Bible, offers a simple answer: the narrator knows because he invented it.<sup>233</sup> The question, however, may be out of place altogether. As Sternberg reminds us,

[t]he marriage of omniscience to fiction and of restrictedness to factual report is a much later arrival on the scene of narrative, deriving from an earthbound view both of the world and the rules for its representation. Born of a new sense of realism that has established itself as the common-sense norm, it shows an empirical or rationalistic approach in disallowing the supernatural outside the framework of myth, religion, and other fictions. Its spirit is also more egalitarian in that it allows the storyteller no undue advantage over his audience.<sup>234</sup>

And thus omniscience and history, in the *History*, as in the Bible, *are* a legitimate pair and, indeed, a productive one.

<sup>232</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 78–80 [I, 1352–4].

<sup>233</sup> Alter, “History in the Bible,” 64.

<sup>234</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, 82–3.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CHRONOLOGY IS A FLEXIBLE MATTER

Chronology is a *sine qua non* of the mimetic assumption. After all, in real life, that is, in history, or in *res gestae*, unfortunately—at least for some—there is only one way, from the most to the more to the less and least distant in time. This is, by and large, what one finds in the *History* and, as in the Hebrew Bible, for example, the order of presentation follows the sequence of events in the “real world.”<sup>1</sup> In a sense, Ṭabarī and his sources, in their aspiration to mimic reality, can be said to anticipate Gibbon’s dictum that “the mind takes much higher delight in progressing from cause to effect than in regressing from effect to cause.”<sup>2</sup> Up to a limit, though. That the chronological framework is not always strictly adhered to, and for good reasons that are always the narrator’s deliberate policy, can be amply demonstrated. Ṭabarī and his authorities deem it necessary at times to violate strict chronology and to shift the narrative out of step with real time, either backwards or forwards in order to attain what Sternberg has termed “local dechronologizing” or “temporal deformation,” and others have referred to as “chronological dislocation.”<sup>3</sup> The—so to speak—free movement along the temporal axis and its effect on the historical narrative in the *History* is the subject of this chapter.

The movement *backward* against the tide of chronology is pursued for various purposes. Most banal of these is to highlight the background to or elucidate a particular historical event, thereby throwing into relief the operation of causality in reverse, so to speak. Thus, reporting on what occurred in the year 121/738–9, Ṭabarī proceeds to expatiate on “The Reasons for Zayd b. ‘Alī’s Death etc.,” and deems it appropriate to provide some background information. He therefore reviews Zayd’s meeting with Khālīd b. ‘Abdallāh al-Qasrī,

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<sup>1</sup> For the Bible, see Sternberg, “Time and Space,” 82.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 84. For dislocation in Thucydides, see Hornblower, “Narratology,” 131–66.



the Iraqi governor, a meeting that had taken place prior to the year in question.<sup>4</sup> In another instance, first comes the statement that in 123/740–41 “Yūsuf b. ‘Umar sent al-Ḥakam b. al-Ṣalt to Hishām b. ‘Abd al-Malik, asking him to put Khurāsān under his jurisdiction and to dismiss Naṣr b. Sayyār.” Then our historian introduces a section entitled “The Reasons for Yūsuf’s Request and the Outcome of It,” which recounts events that chronologically preceded the request.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, the report on 125/742–3 concludes with the accession of the Umayyad caliph Walīd b. Yazīd; then our attention is shifted backward by as much as ten years, to “Some of the Reasons Why al-Walīd Acceded to the Caliphate.”<sup>6</sup> There are numerous examples of this sort.<sup>7</sup>

There is another mode of flashing back (*analepsis*) and this time its objectives, or at least impact, is not as impartial. One purpose could very well be the presentation of the march of history as a teleological process. That the emergence and victory of Islam appear as a fulfillment of some prediction is hardly surprising. In fact, teleology constitutes a major component of Islamic theology. Significantly, it is no other than the Byzantine emperor who is made to play the role of a *vaticinatio post eventum* in the context of the year 6/627–8, when the Prophet allegedly invited the ruling emperors to embrace the new religion. Here Ṭabarī inserts an alleged recollection of Abū Sufyān, the Meccan leader, and, at the time, one of Muḥammad’s rabid opponents, that, after arriving at Gaza, he heard that Heraclius, while in Jerusalem, despite his recent victory over the Persians, woke up troubled one morning. According to the emperor’s own testimony, he had dreamt that “the kingdom of the circumcision will be victorious.” His entourage misinterpreted the dream as a triumph for the Jews and, therefore, no cause for serious trouble as the latter are controlled and a command to behead all Jewish subjects could be issued if necessary. However, at this point, as a debate is taking place, there arrives a messenger from the southern Syrian

<sup>4</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 4 [II, 1668] and n. 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 57 [II, 1718], 58–9 [II, 1718–19].

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 83 [II, 1740], 87–115 [II, 1740–1765].

<sup>7</sup> E.g., reverting to the “beginning” of the incident of the raiding party, see *History*, vol. VIII, 94 [I, 1555]; reverting to the circumstances of ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ’ conversion, *ibid.*, 143–4 [I, 1601–02]; reverting from the note on ‘Abdallāh al-Qaṣrī’s death to earlier episodes, vol. XXVI, 166–7 [I, 1812].

town of Buṣrā (Bostra), bringing with him an Arab who reports about “[a] man [who] has appeared . . . claiming to be a prophet.” The Arab is stripped naked and found to be circumcised and thus the Byzantine emperor grasps the truth of his own dream. Interrogating Abū Sufyān and his company about “this man in the Ḥijāz,” he concludes, against Abū Sufyān’s self-confessed attempt at minimizing Muḥammad’s significance, that “he [Muḥammad] shall surely wrest from me this very ground under my feet.” Furthermore, according to Heraclius, he wished he could be on Muḥammad’s side so that he might “wash his feet.”

Ṭabarī’s decision to insert this piece of Islamic propaganda in the account of the Prophet’s alleged missions to foreign rulers evidently serves the Islamic claim to secure position vis-à-vis the so-called “Religions of the Book;” it also projects the Prophet’s mission as not devoid of reason. The *analepsis* employed by including Abū Sufyān’s account should draw a continuous line between Heraclius’ “foreknowledge” of the rise of Islam and the Muslim Prophet’s later acts, in other words: between Byzantine anxiety and Islamic triumph. That not only the Byzantine, but also Muḥammad’s Arab ex-opponents, and not unimportant ones—as Abū Sufyān surely is—are made to advert to the truth that is being revealed, is of course for the best. As we learn, the Qurashī leader himself, impressed by his encounter with Heraclius, now claps his hands saying: “O worshippers of God, the affair . . . has become serious. Now the kings of the Greeks [*banū al-asfār*] fear him in their domain in Syria!”<sup>8</sup>

Similar in its effect is an account in the section dealing with ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ’ allegiance to Mu‘āwiya. Here Ṭabarī inserts material transmitted to him by Sayf b. ‘Umar, one of his foremost sources, which is chronologically misplaced, and the clear motive of which is creating another *vaticinatio post eventum* effect. Accordingly, already at the time of the Prophet, ‘Amr, the Arab protagonist, had heard in ‘Umān a prediction from a Jewish scholar, foretelling the fateful assassination of three of the four so-called Rāshidūn caliphs. Obviously, relevant to ‘Amr’s act of allegiance to Mu‘āwiya, which is now being

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<sup>8</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 100–03 [I, 1561–5]. For this episode see further Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, “Muḥammad and Heraclius: A Study in Legitimacy,” *SI* 89 (1999): 5–21; Stefan Leder, “Heraklios erkennt den Propheten: Ein Beispiel für Form und Entstehungsweise narrativer struktionen,” *ZDMG* 151 (2001): 1–42.

given, is the other part of the scholar's prediction, about a "ruler of the Holy Land" whose kingdom would last a long time and who would unite the Community. In the light of the *vaticinatio* certifying that Mu'āwiya is the intended ruler, 'Amr's current support of the first Umayyad caliph is projected as absolutely justified.<sup>9</sup> Given what the historical record tells us elsewhere, it is not that 'Amr's allegiance to the Umayyad has not been in the offing. After all, as historiography tells us and we shall later see, the two had worked closely together. Yet interest is one thing and inspired prediction is another thing. Certainly, a combination of both renders 'Amr's act so much better.

The deposed Amīn being under the siege of Ṭāhir, Ma'mūn's henchman, in the last phase of the 'Abbāsīd "civil war" in 198/813–14, we have an eyewitness piece of *analepsis* coming from Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī, the caliph's uncle and famous singer, who had occasionally been Amīn's boon companion. Ibrāhīm tells of one occasion, when the two are sipping date wine, enjoying the beauty of the moon and its reflection in the Tigris. Ibrāhīm is demonstrating his poetic/vocal talent to the gloomy caliph, by then already troubled by his brother's political maneuvering. At one point, Amīn calls for his favorite slave girl, Ḍa'f ("Weakness," an ominous name, according to Ibrāhīm's interpretation, considering the particular circumstances), and asks her to sing. Ḍa'f, as Ibrāhīm informs us, had already become notorious, for "whenever we sat with this slave girl, we experienced something unpleasant in our assembly." Sure enough, this time too, Ḍa'f does not disappoint.

She opens the session singing verses by the ancient poet Nābigha al-Ja'dī, in which he depicts Kulayb, a *jāhili* protagonist and the cause for the renowned pre-Islamic War of Basūs,<sup>10</sup> as "stained with

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<sup>9</sup> *History*, vol. XVI, 193 [I, 3251–2]. For the son of the Prophet who would be killed in Karbalā', see vol. XIX, 81–2 [II, 287]. For the *vaticinatio post eventum* of Shabīb's mother, see vol. XXII, 126 [II, 977–8]. A report on the death of one Wajīh al-Ba'ūnī in a battle against the Turks in Khurāsān in 110/728–9 is the occasion to flashback to a conversation he had sometime before that. Combining the circumstances of Wajīh's death and the evocation of a past conversation and a prior encounter with the Turks, makes it a purposeful death that Wajīh now meets and provides religious determinism to human act. See vol. XXV, 52–3 [II, 1514]. For a similar case about Yazīd b. al-Mufaḍḍal al-Huddānī, see *ibid.*, 75 [II, 1537].

<sup>10</sup> See *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Basūs."

blood.” These verses, although ostensibly pertaining to sheer historical memory, are, in fact, considered “ominous” by Amīn himself, most likely for evoking his own situation. The ‘Abbāsīd ruler (“May God curse you!” he reacts to the singer) now orders the young woman to change her tune. Again, the verses about “parting from loved ones” and their emotional effect justifiably irritate the caliph. Given the circumstances, the woman’s response to his curse (“I only sang what I thought you liked”) is undoubtedly ironic. Unsurprisingly, neither does her third poetical attempt, this time in verses attributed to Abū al-‘Atāhiya, telling of the transfer of prosperity “from one king occupied with the love of this world to another,” do much to lift Amīn’s spirits. And, as if all this is not enough, the singing girl, once dismissed, adds insult to injury by tripping over the caliph’s beautiful crystal cup and breaking it.

Now, the caliph, although at the time not revealing to Ḍa’f the reason for his anger, is not a fool as to miss the bad omen foreshadowed in her verses and in her accident: “Alas, Ibrāhīm, don’t you see what this slave girl has mentioned and what happened with the cup? By God, I think my time has come.” As if to underscore the vanity of his boon companion’s encouraging remark that he would nevertheless be victorious, a mysterious voice is heard coming from the Tigris, uttering Qur’ān 12:41 (the story of Joseph): “Decided is the matter whereon you two enquire.” The same verse is repeated a short while later. “It was only one or two nights later that the events of his [Amīn’s] death occurred,” Ibrāhīm concludes his report.<sup>11</sup>

A similar version of this *vaticinatio post eventum*, though without commenting on the affinity between the two, occurs after Ṭabarī’s report on Amīn’s death, in the section devoted to aspects of his conduct, which serves as a standard epilogue in the *History* whenever deceased personages are treated. Amīn now dead, the function of the anecdote on the slave-girl is transformed from foreshadowing to a *post factum* confirmation. The narrator of this version, Kawthar, Amīn’s favorite eunuch,<sup>12</sup> tells of ten—not just one—slave girls, who upon

<sup>11</sup> *History*, vol. XXXI, 179–81 [III, 908–11]. This version has been verbatim reproduced by El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 63–5, who has called it “al-Amīn by the River.” This anecdote, together with Mas‘ūdī’s “Zubayda’s Nightmare” anecdote, shows, according to El-Hibri, the inevitable approach of Amīn’s fate.

<sup>12</sup> See *History*, vol. XXXI, 57, n. 248.

the caliph's command, come to entertain him. The verse they sing ("They killed him that they might take his place,/as once Kisrā was betrayed by his *marzūbāns*") unsurprisingly angers the caliph, perhaps not only for its obvious association, but for the historical precedence that evoked it and that precisely now enhances its ill omen: the murder of 'Uthmān, the third caliph.<sup>13</sup> Another team of female singers add to Amīn's anxiety when they recite the eulogy originally said for Mālik b. al-Zuhayr al-'Absī, who had been killed in the Jāhiliyya.<sup>14</sup> A third team recites the verses on Kulayb that feature in Ṭabarī's aforementioned first version. All this is obviously too much for the caliph: "[S]o ominous did he find what had happened" that he ordered to tear down the special bench constructed for the party.

Yet another version, the third in number and a considerably shorter one, which is ascribed to one Muḥammad b. Dinār, has three different slave girls recite the verses that appeared in the aforementioned versions, and a line from an ancient poem ("Arise, Umayma, they have killed my brother").<sup>15</sup> Another difference in the third version is Amīn's cruel punishment of the slave girls for irritating him: the first is thrown to the lions, the other two are more fortunate and are punished with a mere blow with a cup on their faces. The version concludes dryly: "He [Amīn] was killed a few days afterward."<sup>16</sup> The use of the *vaticinatio post eventum*, side by side with the matter-of-fact statement about Amīn's death, has certainly a role to play: it highlights the deterministic character of a certain historical course. Communicated is the message that Amīn's murder was not a contingency but an inevitable consequence. Inevitability of the human kind, it is not superfluous to note, is a product of the historian's mind, a scheme that is of human creation as well and, thus, poetic in nature.

Irony is another effect created by the use of *analepsis* in the *History*. For example, in the midst of the "civil war" between Amīn and Ma'mūn, Ṭāhir b. al-Tājī, known as "the younger," appears holding the head of 'Alī b. 'Īsā, a former governor in Khurāsān loyal to Amīn. There comes the remark that 'Alī b. 'Īsā had sworn that he would set the head of Aḥmad b. Hishām, his rival, on the very

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 231 n. 778.

<sup>14</sup> See on him *ibid.*, n. 779.

<sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*, 232–3 n. 781 for this poem.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 232–3 [III, 958].

pulpit on which Amīn had been deposed.<sup>17</sup> It is indeed ironic that what ‘Alī had in mind for his opponent was eventually to befall himself. Consider also the following example in the story of Māzyār, the rebel in Ṭabaristān in the 220s/840s. After we are told that caliph Mu‘taṣim ordered his execution and that his corpse was then gibbeted beside that of Bābak, another famous rebel, there follows Ṭabarī’s observation that Ma‘mūn had used to write to Māzyār and address him in honorific titles.<sup>18</sup> This recourse to *analepsis* here ironically contrasts Māzyār’s current downfall and death on the gallows with his past success; *sic transit gloria mundi*.

Two consecutive reports on the last days of Mutawakkil in 247/861 employ *analepsis*: one conveys a sense of irony, the other reinforces the effect of determinism. The first is attributed to ‘Alī b. Yaḥyā al-Munajjim, Mutawakkil’s boon companion, and comes as a flashback, since the caliph is already dead. Munajjim tells how a few days before the caliph’s murder, he had read to him from the apocalyptic (*malāḥim*) books on the fate of dynasties.<sup>19</sup> When Munajjim reached a passage stating that the tenth caliph would be killed in his audience hall—exactly Mutawakkil’s prospective fate—the boon companion, for reasons obvious to the reader with his hindsight, stopped reading. Upon the ‘Abbāsīd ruler’s insistence, however, Munajjim continued to read but, according to his testimony, refrained from specifying the name of the caliph. Mutawakkil’s comment “I wish I knew who this poor fellow is who is going to be killed,” is ironic for the reader who knows that the “poor fellow” is no other than the speaker himself.

The next report that instantly follows is another flashback, but this time the effect is different. Once again, the occasion is a few days before Mutawakkil’s murder, when the caliph relates a dream he had in which the Armenian king Ashot complains to him about his tyranny and predicts his end within a few days. The narrator’s comment that the prediction tallied with what actually happened reasserts the deterministic aura of this piece of *vaticinatio post eventum*.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. XXXI, 54 [III, 801–02].

<sup>18</sup> *History*, vol. XXXIII, 172 [III, 1298].

<sup>19</sup> See *Ē.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “malāḥim.”

<sup>20</sup> *History*, vol. XXXIV, 183 [III, 1463–4]. For the irony created by the *analepsis* following the note on Qutayba’s slaying, see vol. XXIV, 8–9 [II, 1286–7]. For a note on Mahdī’s death ten days after he had a dream that predicted it, see vol. XXIX, 245 [III, 525–6].

As a final comment on the poetic device of the flashback, it will come as no surprise that it is employed to enhance the Prophet's stature. Thus, the death of Ubayy b. Khalaf, the Prophet's opponent, in the course of the Battle of Uḥud, becomes the occasion for invoking an earlier brute exchange between Ubayy and the Prophet, in which the latter had predicted that he himself would kill Ubayy. Hence, when Ubayy is only slightly wounded at Uḥud, he surely knows what the Qurashīs around him do not: this is his death and it is the Prophet's doing.<sup>21</sup> Thus, not only are the Qurashīs exposed for their ignorance; *analepsis* here works to demonstrate how the Prophet's prediction comes true.

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Let us now recall a constraint that faces the mimetic project when historiography is involved: at each point of the writing, the future is already past, so to speak, its facts are *fait accompli*. Put another way, unlike a vantage point situated in the all too brief present, from which the future is undetermined, "history's future" is surely foreclosed, it is already there, in the historian's mind (or in his cards). Given this limitation, all that remains for the historian (or his sources) is to decide on how to disclose what is there ahead: he may choose to imitate (or even intensify) the suspenseful advance from present to future that occurs in real life, to multiply gaps, and to delay resolution to the last possible moment; or, he may prefer to play down suspense by revealing at an early point what lies ahead—surely inaccessible in reality and yet is the privilege of hindsight.<sup>22</sup> If the obvious result is to rule out the slightest suspense, then one can conclude that suspense has been sacrificed for worthier objectives. Which brings us to *prolepsis*, the other mode of tampering with chronology that is to be found in the *History*, as in any historiography.

As with *analepsis*, there are instances in the *History* when foreshadowing what lies ahead appears quite innocent, its effect on the historical story is minimal and it just rounds up some report. For example, following an account on the deputation of 'Amr b. Ḥazm al-Anṣārī of the Medinan Khazraj tribe to the Banū al-Najjār in order to instruct them in the new religion, we are told that 'Amr

<sup>21</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 123–4 [I, 1407–09].

<sup>22</sup> This paragraph owes to Sternberg, *Poetics*, 64–5.

was (but in fact *would be*) the Prophet's agent in the southern Arabian region of Najrān.<sup>23</sup> Involved here is only a small item of information. Similarly, after the report on Farwa b. Musayk al-Murādī's withdrawal from his alliance with the Arabian kings of Kinda to join the Prophet in the year 10/631, we are informed that the latter appointed Farwa as governor in South Arabia but, surely, the appointment would materialize in the future.<sup>24</sup> When Mu'āwiya, the future Umayyad caliph, answers 'Alī's messengers, before the Ṣiffīn confrontation, "You will learn of my decision," we are instantly told that the next thing the envoys knew was that the decision came in the form of sending troops and, thus, no suspense is allowed.<sup>25</sup> Or, consider the following account by one Muḥammad al-Nawfalī, of Manṣūr's illness while en rout to the Pilgrimage. When he reaches the bottom of the wadi, Nawfalī and his company meet 'Abbās b. Muḥammad, the caliph's brother, and Muḥammad b. Sulaymān, his cousin, on their way to Mecca. When asked about the significance of this fact Nawfalī replies: "I reckon that the man [Manṣūr] has died . . . and that they want to secure Mecca." The narrator's confirmation instantly follows: ". . . so it proved to be."<sup>26</sup> Foreshadowing the sad event of the caliph's death eliminates suspense and can be considered a drawback. However, that the report is a compliment to Nawfalī for his well-developed intuition is probably a compensation.

*Prolepsis* is often employed in the *History* to achieve less benign ends, however. One of its functions is to bring the significance of some event into relief. Take the report of a futile attempt to poison the Prophet by the Jewish community of Khaybar. It is immediately followed by a scene taken from the Prophet's state of illness shortly before his death, in which he discloses his feeling that his "aorta [is] being severed" as a delayed after-effect of that attempt on his life.<sup>27</sup> This way the event at Khaybar gains a special significance and its far-reaching result is demonstrated. Another example is of Hārūn al-Rashīd divulging to one Ṣabāḥ al-Ṭabarī the secret of his grave health ("I don't think you will ever see me again") that he hides

<sup>23</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 87 [I, 1729].

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 93–4 [I, 1736].

<sup>25</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 15–16 [II, 3269].

<sup>26</sup> *History*, vol. XXIX, 162–3 [III, 451–2]. Similarly, what Nu'mān b. Bashīr had predicted, "happened just as he said it would." See vol. XIX, 200 [II, 404–05].

<sup>27</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 124 [I, 1584].



from his sons. They, as the ‘Abbāsīd caliph points out, are only counting his breaths and numbering his days. When Hārūn departs, he tells Ṣabāḥ that they should not “properly bid farewell,” on account of the latter’s many responsibilities and preoccupations. The narrator tells how Ṣabāḥ, obeying Hārūn, only said goodbye, and that was the last time he saw the caliph. This remark provides the encounter between the two with the sad atmosphere of an unfulfilled act.<sup>28</sup> Similar is the effect of an episode in which the ‘Abbāsīd Ma’mūn, his eyes “overflowing with tears,” is portrayed as saying to his brother, the future Mu‘taṣim: “This is, by God, my last expedition and I don’t think that I shall ever see Iraq again.” That this was indeed what happened, as we are immediately assured, enhances the episode’s significance.<sup>29</sup>

Another effect achieved by the use of *prolepsis* is making it clear to the reader without delay that a certain wish, threat, etc., has indeed been fulfilled. Thus, immediately following the text of Abū Bakr’s letters to two of his commanders, enjoining them to forbid apostates taking part in Islamic campaigns without his approval, we learn that the campaigns (*ayyām*) “did not subsequently see any apostate [participating].”<sup>30</sup> Or, take the episode, prior to Ṣiffīn, when the headgears (*qalansuwa*) of ‘Abdallāh b. Abī al-Ḥusayn al-Azdī and ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Azdī are reported to have fallen off their heads. This prompts the latter to predict that both would be shortly killed (a prediction with which Ibn Abī al-Ḥusayn readily agrees). When the narrator instantly relates that the two were indeed (but in fact, would be) killed at Ṣiffīn, one is unsure about the reason for that, but it is clear that the slightest suspense is removed.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, when Zayd b. ‘Alī, the rebel in the Umayyad period, departs to Kūfa, Abrash b. Sa‘īd al-Kalbī addresses caliph Hishām: “By God, may the first news that reaches you be that of his [Zayd’s] removal!” We are instantly told that this indeed was the case.<sup>32</sup> Later, concluding the report of Zayd’s death *sub anno* 122/739–40, Ṭabarī adduces a report that belongs to the following year about the display of Zayd’s head in Medina and quotes verses said on that occa-

<sup>28</sup> *History*, vol. XXX, 293–4 [III, 731–2].

<sup>29</sup> *History*, vol. XXXII, 257 [III, 1163].

<sup>30</sup> *History*, vol. XI, 8 [I, 2021].

<sup>31</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 6–7 [I, 3260].

<sup>32</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 12 [II, 1675].

sion.<sup>33</sup> Here *Prolepsis* is plausibly in the service of (personal?) satisfaction.

Somewhat similar is the narrator's urge to use his alleged foreknowledge when moral issues are at stake, and when he feels compelled to assure his listeners/readers that justice has prevailed or a certain reward has accrued. For example, following a report on the flogging of Bahī, one of the Prophet's freedmen, by the Umayyad governor 'Amr b. Sa'īd, we are informed of the execution of the latter a few years afterwards and are given Bahī's couplets celebrating the occasion.<sup>34</sup> In another instance, in Karbalā', a man of the Banū Abān b. Dārim, who prevented Ḥusayn from quenching his thirst, is cursed by the latter: "O God! Make him thirsty!" Ṭabarī's source then reveals immediately that, indeed, the man "only waited a short time before God cast down on him a thirst that he could never quench."<sup>35</sup> This way, the reader is not given even the slightest cause to suspect that one, especially an enemy of the Prophet's descendants, can "get way with murder." Similarly, of the man of Kinda who took Ḥusayn's silken cloak, we are told not only that his wife admonished him for doing so, but that he remained poor until his death "as a result of the wicked action."<sup>36</sup> To linger on the Karbalā' affair, we have the moving scene of the severed head of Ḥabīb b. Muzāhir, Ḥusayn's staunch supporter, being taken to 'Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād, the Umayyad governor, and the victim's son, keeping the head in view, and following the horsemen who carry it "wherever they went." The son's remonstrations to receive the head and bury it is ignored. At this point, Abū Mikhnaḥ and his sources tell us that Ḥabīb's son steadfastly waited to avenge his father's blood until he succeeded a dozen years later.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 52 [II, 1714]. Similarly, for Maṣṣūr's prediction being fulfilled, see vol. XXVIII, 277–8 [III, 305], 287 [III, 313]. For the doctor predicting Maṣṣūr's imminent death, see vol. XXIX, 88 [III, 387]. For Maṣṣūr's threat to his tax officials achieving its purpose, see *ibid.*, 101 [III, 398–9]. For the fulfillment of Ma'mūn's prediction, see vol. XXXII, 97 [III, 1039].

<sup>34</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 144 [I, 1779].

<sup>35</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 156–7 [II, 361–2].

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 153–4 [II, 359] and n. 497.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 143–4 [II, 349]. For the poet Mu'ammil b. 'Umayl being duly rewarded, see vol. XIX, 109–11 [406–08]. In 126/743–4, after Marwān b. Muḥammad, the future caliph, curses Qays b. Ḥanī al-Absī for giving allegiance (*bay'a*) to Yazīd b. al-Walīd and extolling him, we are immediately informed that Qays would in fact be murdered by Marwān's order during the latter's reign. See vol. XXVI, 195 [II, 1836]. For the reward to Fulayḥ b. Sulaymān, see vol. XXVIII, 117 [III, 169].

The Prophet and the prophetic Mission feature in several accounts that resort to *prolepsis* for reasons that are not difficult to grasp. The *History*'s "chapter" on the "Occasions of Revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*)" foretells a scene in which 'Umar, the second caliph, is sitting in the Prophet's mosque in Medina when a man, who had been a soothsayer in the Jāhiliyya, comes upon him. To 'Umar's question, "What is the most amazing saying which your familiar spirit brought you?" the man tells an episode that is clearly an "occasion (*sabab*)": his spirit came to him "a month or a year before Islam" and spoke to him about the demons (*jinn*) and their hopelessness. This *sabab* is followed by 'Umar's own testimony about a voice "more penetrating than any voice I have ever heard," coming from the belly of a slaughtered calf in the Jāhiliyya and proclaiming the future "testament (*shahāda*)".<sup>38</sup> *Vaticinatio post eventum* is the bread and butter, so to speak, of any prophetic mission worthy of the name.

Or, let us take the vow made by Abū Ḥudhayfa, of the 'Abd Shams clan, after Badr, to kill 'Abbās, Muḥammad's uncle, and the negative reaction it arouse in the Prophet and in 'Umar in particular. Abū Ḥudhayfa's admission, that after what he had said he never felt safe and hoped for martyrdom, is followed by the narrator's revelation that he was killed as a martyr on the Day of Yamāma, about ten years later, in Abū Bakr's caliphate.<sup>39</sup> By employing *prolepsis* a few effects are simultaneously secured: Abū Ḥudhayfa gets his share of criticism; he is also rewarded (both in word and act) for his repentance; and, not least, the Prophet's view of him is shown to have its influence. Similar is the effect of a report on Makhshī b. Ḥimyar, known as 'Abd al-Raḥmān. Being a "hypocrite" (*munāfiq*), he was pardoned by the Prophet, but apparently much regretted his old erring ways, since he "asked God to make him die as a martyr in a place not known." We are immediately told that he (like Abū Ḥudhayfa) was killed in Yamāma "and no trace of him was found."<sup>40</sup> Or, consider 'Abdallāh b. Unays' report about accomplishing the mission that the Prophet had charged him with, to kill Khālīd b. Sufyān al-Hudhalī, chief of the Liḥyān tribe.<sup>41</sup> 'Abdallāh also relates

<sup>38</sup> *History*, vol. VI, 65–6 [I, 1145].

<sup>39</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 57 [I, 1324].

<sup>40</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 57–8 [I, 1701–2].

<sup>41</sup> See on him *History*, vol. VII, 143 n. 210.

that Muḥammad gave him a stick as a “sign between me and you on the day of resurrection.” The narrator then foreshadows that, indeed, “the stick remained with him [‘Abdallāh] until his death, when he ordered that it should be fastened to his body with the shroud and buried with him.”<sup>42</sup> The urge to use *prolepsis* here is obvious: to demonstrate the power emanating from the Prophet’s declarations. Finally in this vein, when, shortly before the battle at Uḥud, Nu‘mān b. Mālīk al-Anṣārī comes to the Prophet and begs him not to be deprived of Paradise, in other words, he urges Muḥammad to start the battle, we instantly learn that Nu‘mān was indeed killed. The reader, assured of the latter’s fate in Paradise, is spared any delay in realizing the blessed result of martyrdom at Uḥud.<sup>43</sup>

To foreshadow the fulfillment of the Prophet’s prediction or desire is certainly an important reason for sacrificing strict chronology. Thus, following Muḥammad’s statement “May God have mercy on Abū Dhārr! He walks alone, will die alone, and will be raised alone,” we immediately move to a report of the funeral of this Companion, many years later. We are assured that “there was no one with him except his wife and slave.” Lest there be any ambiguity, the report bestows upon ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd<sup>44</sup> the important role of reasserting the Prophet’s infallibility. Witnessing the somewhat bizarre funeral, ‘Abdallāh declares, facing Abū Dhārr’s corpse, that “[t]he Messenger of God spoke the truth [when he said] You will walk alone, die alone, and be raised alone.”<sup>45</sup>

A similar case is the Prophet’s vision, during the Battle of the Trench, of the Iranian palaces in Ḥira and Madā’in, a vision in which Gabriel, the angel, informs him on his people’s future victory. Ṭabarī now interrupts the sequence with a brief report, which not only affirms the conquest of these cities years later, in ‘Umar’s days, but also quotes a saying attributed to Abū Hurayra, the Companion, that no city would be conquered “but that Muḥammad was given its keys beforehand.” The purpose of the *prolepsis*, to extol the Prophet, is obvious.<sup>46</sup> In a similar vein, following the Prophet’s prediction to

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 122 [I, 1761].

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 109 [I, 1389].

<sup>44</sup> See on him *History*, vol. IX, 56 n. 392.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 55–6 [I, 1700]. See also vol. XV, 100 [I, 2895].

<sup>46</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 12–13 [I, 1469–70].

‘Adī b. Ḥātīm, still another of his Companions, that “soon you will hear that the white castles of Babylon have been conquered,” we learn of ‘Adī’s affirmation that he indeed saw these castles being captured.<sup>47</sup>

*Prolepsis* is also employed in the service of the narrators’ urge to praise some person without delay. Thus, immediately following Ḥakam b. Kaysān’s conversion to Islam, we are told of his future death “as a martyr” about two years later in the Prophet’s battle at Bi’r Ma‘ūna. Such violation of chronology is intended to buttress the narrator’s evaluation of Ḥakam as an excellent Muslim.<sup>48</sup> Of Ma‘n b. ‘Adī, who is reported stating that he wished to bear witness to the Prophet’s truth after his death, we are instantly told that he was indeed killed as a martyr, about a year after the Prophet’s death, in the so-called Day of Yamāma, fighting against Musaylima, the “false prophet.”<sup>49</sup> It is almost needless to explicate that, in this manner, Ma‘n was granted the privilege of bearing witness to the Mission, a piece of information that should outweigh any chronological consideration.

*Prolepsis* is also employed for its critical function, however. Immediately after a report on ‘Umar and his prohibiting ‘Utba b. Abī Sufyān from spending money he had taken from the Kināna tribe, we are told that, years afterward, when ‘Uthmān assumed the caliphate, he volunteered to return that money from the treasury. Abū Sufyān’s statement addressed to ‘Uthmān: “If you contradict your predecessor, the people will think badly of you,” supports the effect of *prolepsis* that contrasts between the two caliphs, to ‘Uthmān’s disadvantage.<sup>50</sup> Another example occurs in the context of a discussion about the legal status of Egypt, following its conquest. The narrator assures us that “[h]e who says . . . that its [Alexandria’s] inhabitants had no pact with us, that man is a liar, by God!” The narrative then transfers us several decades later to find that, despite what has been said, the Umayyads used to write to their governors in Egypt that the land had been conquered by force and therefore its inhabitants were “slaves” with whom one could deal as one wished and

<sup>47</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 67 [I, 1710].

<sup>48</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 21 [I, 1276].

<sup>49</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 195 [I, 1824]. For Sa‘īd b. ‘Ubayd, his promise to ‘Alī and his death at Šiffīn, see vol. XVI, 82 [I, 3140]. For Zuhayr b. al-Qayn’s death at Karbalā’, see vol. XIX, 86 [II, 291].

<sup>50</sup> *History*, vol. XIV, 132–3 [I, 2766].

exact taxes from as desired.<sup>51</sup> Whatever the credibility of this piece of *prolepsis*, it certainly represents the Umayyads as re-writers of historical facts.

There is nothing like foreshadowing that endows events with a touch of irony that, otherwise, only hindsight can provide. Thus, recounting the Arab conquest of Egypt, an eyewitness named Qāsim b. Quzmān tells how a local lad, named Abū Maryam, was given the choice of remaining Christian or converting to Islam. To his close family's chargin, Abū Maryam chose Islam, hence his father and brothers struggled with the Arabs to exercise physical control on him "until they tore his clothes and his body." At this point the narrator makes a leap into the future, so to speak, and comments: "Today he is our *ʿarīf*, as you see."<sup>52</sup> Walking the tight rope between Christianity and Islam at the time of the conquest, as the narrator himself admits ("All the time we were subject to great uncertainty as if one of us was about to cross over to the other camp"), can be seen ironic in retrospect, since the Christian-born Abū Maryam would become holder of a distinguished position in the Muslim elite.

Its tragic aspect (for which more in Chapter 8 below) notwithstanding, Ḥusayn's death at Karbalā' is an event to which the use of *prolepsis* in the *History* also gives an ironic slant by means of the juxtaposition of two contrasting scenes, otherwise separated in time. Thus we read of the prediction made by 'Abdallāh b. 'Amr b. al-'Āṣ, to the poet Farazdaq, about the outcome of Ḥusayn's journey to Kūfa: "Wo on you! Why don't you follow him? By God! He will be victorious, and no weapon will affect him or his followers." This prediction would have tempted the poet to join Ḥusayn, were it not for his recollection of "the prophets and how they were killed." In the event, Farazdaq's lesson from history proves to be advantageous to him, for Ḥusayn's future death in Karbalā' is immediately foreshadowed. How ironic and treacherous the temptation now appears!<sup>53</sup> And in the midst of the Karbalā' affair itself, as the enemies surround Ḥusayn, he takes a pair of well-woven trousers and splits them open so that they not be looted. When it is suggested to him that

<sup>51</sup> *History*, vol. XIII, 166 [I, 2583–4].

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 165 [I, 2583]. The term *ʿarīf* denotes an official in the administration of the new Islamic towns (*amṣār*). See *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s. v. "arīf."

<sup>53</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 72 [II, 278–9].

he should wear underbreeches, he refuses on the ground that it is not appropriate for him to do so. Immediately afterwards, a note is introduced that when Ḥusayn was killed, his trousers were plundered and his corpse was left naked.<sup>54</sup>

Foreshadowing can thus become a merciless device demonstrating the unpredictability of fate. Here are some other examples to this effect. Immediately after detailing the dismissal and re-appointment of ‘Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād as governor of Baṣra, a process in which Aḥnaf b. Qays, a local leader, was instrumental, the report states that “[w]hen the civil strife broke out, no one fulfilled (his obligation) to ‘Ubaydallāh except al-Aḥnaf.”<sup>55</sup> The intention is to instruct the reader without delay how things can take an unexpected turn and how ironic the result can be. Similarly, following a gloomy assessment by one Abū ‘Amr of Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh, the rebel against the ‘Abbāsīd caliph Maṣṣūr—“he’s a man all right, but I saw that the fat on his back was a yard thick. That’s not how a true warrior looks”—we are instantly informed that afterward Abū ‘Amr gave Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh an oath of allegiance and joined his forces.<sup>56</sup> Then, on the day he was killed, so we are told about the same Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh, he carried the Prophet’s sword known as Dhū al-Faḡār. When he sensed death approaching, he gave the sword to a merchant to whom he was indebted. Muḥammad said: “Take this sword. You will never meet any member of the family of Abū Ṭālib who will not take it and give you your just due.” Now comes a *prolepsis* about the fate of the sword that casts much irony on the statement. We are told that, a few years later, Ja‘far b. Sulaymān, a governor of Medina and cousin of the ‘Abbāsīd Maṣṣūr, bought it from the merchant. Still later, when information about the sword reached the caliph Maḥdī, he took it and then passed it on to his son Mūsā al-Hādī who, in an apparent act of contempt, tried the sword out on a dog. It broke into pieces.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 159 [II, 364].

<sup>55</sup> *History*, vol. XVIII, 201 [II, 190–91].

<sup>56</sup> *History*, vol. XXVIII, 184 [III, 222].

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 211 [III, 247]. Ṭabarī adds a report revealing that the sword had also been in Hārūn al-Rashīd’s possession. In another case, after telling how ‘Abdallāh b. Khalīfa al-Ṭā’ī supported ‘Adī b. Ḥātīm’s right to carry the banner at Ṣiffīn, the narrator immediately shifts attention forward to the time of a revolt in Kūfa in 51/670, in the course of which Ibn Khalīfa was imprisoned and exiled. We are

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Retrospective statements that are employed in the *History* to highlight a certain episode or event being discussed, or to comment on it, are part of the proleptic enterprise. Take the account telling of the allegiance of the Aslam tribe to Abū Bakr at the Saqīfa (for which see Chapter 5 below). It is endowed with its significance by ‘Umar’s retrospective reflection that immediately follows: “It was not until I saw Aslam that I was certain we had won the day.”<sup>58</sup> To evaluate the drought in Medina in the years 17–18/638–9, there follows the note that the inhabitants of this town “never saw anything like the drought again after it was over, until their trading route via the sea was cut off at the time of the murder of ‘Uthmān.”<sup>59</sup> In the confrontation between Hādī, the ‘Abbāsīd caliph, and Khayzurān, his mother, a result of her alleged attempt at interfering with the affairs of the state, the caliph threatens her with punishment if she does not change her conduct. There follows a retrospective statement that the queen mother never again dared to utter a single word in Hādī’s presence. Another report of the strained relationship between the two and how Hādī maneuvered to isolate Khayzurān, relates that thereafter, until his death (which she masterminded), the queen mother never entered her son’s presence.<sup>60</sup> Another example introduces Manšūr’s retrospective astonishment at the revolt of Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh, of the Ḥasanīd family: “Whoever would have believed that the sons of Zayd b. ‘Alī would join the uprising when we had killed their father’s killer just as he killed Zayd b. ‘Alī, gibbeted him just as he did and consigned him to fire just as he consigned Zayd b. ‘Alī.”<sup>61</sup>

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told of his hope that ‘Adī b. Ḥātim would have the exile revoked and that he would seek amnesty for the former, but this did not happen. See vol. XVII, 26–8 [I, 3279–80]. Also, for Amīn’s remark on the very day he was killed, see vol. XXXI, 195 [III, 924]. For the fate of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Malik, see vol. XXXIII, 32–3 [III, 1184].

<sup>58</sup> *History*, vol. X, 8 [I, 1843].

<sup>59</sup> *History*, vol. XIII, 159 [I, 2577].

<sup>60</sup> *History*, vol. XXX, 42–5 [III, 569–71].

<sup>61</sup> *History*, vol. XXVIII, 224 [III, 258]. See also “[t]hat [the people attaching themselves to the notables of Quraysh at the time of ‘Uthmān] was the first flaw to enter Islam, and the first discord (*fitnah*) to appear among the common people,” *History*, vol. XV, 224 [I, 3026]. For Abū Zanād’s comment, “[t]hat which I had witnessed him say before Hishām weighed heavily on Sa‘īd, and I noticed he looked broken whenever he saw me,” see vol. XXV, 19 [II, 1483]. For the comment that



Foreshadowed retrospective, so to speak, is occasionally used to introduce criticism as regards some episode. For example, an account about a few Muslims at Uḥud, who were eager to get their booty, is concluded by the following retrospective that comes from one Ibn Masʿūd: “I never realised that any of the Prophet’s companions desired the world and its goods until that day.”<sup>62</sup> This comment does not bespeak well of the persons under discussion. Similarly, towards the end of the report on the Battle of the Trench, Ṭabarī introduces a dialogue, carried out years later, between Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yaman, an Arab commander, and a young Kūfan, who wanted to know how things fared during the time of the Prophet. Ḥudhayfa’s reply “By God, we toiled,” is apparently unsatisfactory for the young interlocutor who states: “[H]ad we lived in his [the Prophet’s] time, we would not have left him to walk on the ground; we would have carried him on our necks.”<sup>63</sup> This is another piece of hardly concealed criticism that the combination of *prolepsis* and retrospective bears on the description, and it cannot but be attributed to Ṭabarī’s editorial intention. Or, take ‘Ā’isha’s account of the Prophet’s illness that caused his death. Referring to the transfer of Muḥammad to her own house, she tells that he walked between two men, one of them being Faḍl b. al-‘Abbās. A remark by ‘Ubaydallāh b. ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Utba, an early transmitter, is then cited to the effect that, on one occasion, when he had related ‘Ā’isha’s account to ‘Abdallāh b. al-‘Abbās, the latter knew that the second man was ‘Alī. His further remark that “‘Ā’isha could not bring herself to speak well of him [‘Alī], although she was able to do it,” serves as a critique of ‘Ā’isha’s manipulation of material and questions the innocence of her partial amnesia.<sup>64</sup> One last example of this kind follows a report about ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Rabī‘a’s (Dhū al-Nūr) attack on Balanjar in the Caucasus, at the time of ‘Umar’s caliphate. Dhū al-Nūr’s death during ‘Uthmān’s caliphate as a result of the Kūfan rebellion

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the people “thereafter used to say, ‘Abū Ja‘far [Maṣūf] was never known to have uttered any lie other than this,” see vol. XXVIII, 136 [III, 184]. For what ‘Abd al-‘Azīz used to say, see *ibid.*, 207 [III, 243]. For Afrīk never again eating meat until her death, after she had witnessed an execution, see vol. XXIX, 60 [III, 368]. For a retrospective view of how Ḥasan b. Makhḥad was spared the fate of his two companions, see vol. XXXVI, 13 [III, 1724–5].

<sup>62</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 114 [I, 1395].

<sup>63</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 26 [I, 1483].

<sup>64</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 169–70 [I, 1801].

is foreshadowed, and is attributed to ‘Uthmān’s appointment of former apostates to the post of provincial governors in an attempt at “reforming” them. But this did not happen; rather they became more disobedient, concludes the interpolation.<sup>65</sup> The retrospective here achieves the aim of criticizing both ‘Uthmān and Dhū al-Nūr.

Not just criticism but also self-criticism is attained by the means of *prolepsis*. Reverting once again to the case of Abū Ḥudhayfa’s harsh reaction after Badr, we learn that it is followed by his later reflection on the gravity of his behavior: “I never felt safe afterwards on account of those words which I spoke that day, and I continued to be afraid because of them, but hoped that martyrdom might expiate them.”<sup>66</sup> That martyrdom would in fact be Abū Ḥudhayfa’s destiny we have had occasion to see. Another retrospective is ‘Umar’s, apropos of a dispute he had with the Prophet concerning his leniency toward his enemies: “I continued to fast, give alms, pray and free slaves because of what I did on that day, for fear of the words I had spoken, until I hoped it would be set right.”<sup>67</sup> In both cases, confronting the Prophet is represented as a haunting memory and an egregious error. Similarly, after reporting that ‘Abd b. Zam‘a, the infidel, had poured dust over his head, upon learning that the Prophet had married Sawdā’, ‘Abd’s own sister, the account instantly makes a chronological leap forward. Now, after Ibn Zam‘a has embraced Islam, his radical change of view is quoted, to the effect that in hindsight he considered his reaction as foolish.<sup>68</sup>

One further example of this kind comes in the midst of detailing the events in the years 60–61/680. Here Ṭabarī deems it appropriate to reproduce the precise statement made by Shabāth b. Rib‘ī al-Tamīmī, one of ‘Alī’s staunch supporters, and later also a supporter of Ḥusayn, and still later in the service of the Umayyads.<sup>69</sup> In strict chronological terms, the statement does not quite belong here but to the time of the governorship of Muṣ‘ab b. al-Zubayr

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<sup>65</sup> *History*, vol. XIV, 39 [I, 2667–8]. For the reflection on the first disgrace in Kūfa, following the report on the execution of Ḥujr b. ‘Adī in 51/671–2 (the disgrace includes also the future Karbalā’ affair), see vol. XVIII, 154 [II, 145–6]. It is followed by a second paragraph on Mu‘āwiya’s flaws.

<sup>66</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 57 [I, 1323–4].

<sup>67</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 85 [I, 1546].

<sup>68</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 130 [I, 1769].

<sup>69</sup> See on him *History*, vol. XIX, 25 n. 119.

(67/687–72/691–2). Now, addressing an unspecified conversant, Shabāth asks: “Are you not amazed that we should fight for ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and his son after him against the clan of Abū Sufyān for five years, and then make war on his other son and fight for the clan of Mu‘āwiyah and the son of Sumayyah, the harlot, against the best man on earth? Error! O what error!”<sup>70</sup> The gist of this outburst cannot be mistaken: it is a confession that the frequent shifting of alliance is an ill-conceived policy. From our perspective, however, Ṭabarī’s insertion of this piece of retrospective at this particular point is of no less interest. It seems to be introducing, apropos of the protagonists in the Karbalā’ affair, an ironic comment on the circumstances into which people are drawn, transferring loyalties and fighting today their friends of yesterday.

At the opposite end, retrospective statements are also sometimes proleptically employed to confer praise. Thus in the midst of a report on one of the Prophet’s expeditions, known as the Expedition of Rajī’, a Meccan woman says of the Muslim captive Khubayb b. ‘Adī: “I never saw a more virtuous captive than Khubayb,” and proceeds to recount God’s gift to him.<sup>71</sup> Or, take Zayd b. al-Dathinna, another Muslim captive in the same affair, who is brought forward by a group of Meccans for execution. He nonetheless tells Abū Sufyān, the Meccan leader, that he would not even consider the possibility that Muḥammad take his place and thus save his own life. There follows Abū Sufyān’s retrospective statement to explicate the significance of Zayd’s response: “I never saw anyone love another person so completely as Muḥammad’s companions loved Muḥammad.”<sup>72</sup> This poetic intrusion of a piece of propaganda extolling the Companions balances Ibn Mas‘ūd’s earlier retrospective that criticizes them.

As with self-criticism, retrospective may enhance one’s own credit. This, for example, occurs following a brief account on the Prophet’s

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 139 [II, 344–5]. I. K. Howard’s translation slightly alters the original order. Taking another instance, in the midst of the report of the “Rawāndiyya Affair,” a riot of a so-called extremist Shī‘ite group that took place under the ‘Abbāsīd Maṣṣūr, the caliph is quoted for a retrospective reflection on the three mistakes he had made but from the consequences of which he was divinely protected. One of these had been his cavalier behavior during the riot in question. As he admits, had a stray arrow struck him, he would have perished. See *History*, vol. XXVIII, 67 [III, 132]; *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “al-Rawāndiyya.”

<sup>71</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 146 [I, 1435].

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 147 [I, 1437].

marriage to the six- or seven-year old ‘Ā’isha. We are referred to a considerably later time,<sup>73</sup> when ‘Ā’isha, “Mother of the Faithful,” specifies to ‘Abdallāh b. Ṣafwān her own “nine special features . . . that have not been in any woman, except for what God bestowed on Maryam b. ‘Imrān.” Now, although ‘Ā’isha herself “modestly” claims that such specification is not meant as self-praise, it seems that Ṭabarī’s interpolation of the account at this very point is designed to attain just that. For the reader is instantly granted a retrospective evaluation of the excellent choice that was made in selecting ‘Ā’isha as the Prophet’s spouse, her young age notwithstanding.<sup>74</sup> Or, take ‘Umar’s explanation, during his last year in office, of his reaction to the Prophet’s death (“I thought that the Messenger of God would remain among his people until he could witness for them to their last deeds”), that is purposefully misplaced and inserted into the account of the Prophet’s death. It obviously has the intention of exhonourating ‘Umar from an all too recognizable fiasco that his actual reaction in real time was.<sup>75</sup>

Once again, the Prophet deserves a special place in a discussion of the role of retrospective in narrative, for the device serves to demonstrate his special status. And thus, in the chapter on his birth, following the miraculous “operation (*sharḥ*)” that occurred to him as an infant, Ṭabarī introduces an episode that allegedly took place decades later, when Muḥammad had already launched his prophetic mission. Here, a *shaykh* of the Banū ‘Āmir challenges the recent prophecy by claiming that prophets had stemmed from the Children of Israel only, whereas Muḥammad “come[s] from a people who worship these stones and idols.” Taking the challenge, Muḥammad insists that he was the fulfillment of Abraham’s and Jesus’ prayers. Then follows his own version of the *sharḥ*. The shaykh’s alleged reaction after hearing this version—his conversion to the new faith—is certainly a significant insertion by Ṭabarī, who shifts the scene from the pre-Prophetic to the Prophetic age, and to quite a crucial phase in it: infidels’ conversion. Yet no less important in this *prolepsis* is the orchestrated opportunity it gives the Prophet to explicate the significance

<sup>73</sup> For W. Montgomery Watt’s remark that the episode in question was at least nine years later, see *ibid.*, 7 n. 13.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 [I, 1262].

<sup>75</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 201 [I, 1829–30].

of the *sharḥ*, something he could not, logically speaking, do as an infant at the beginning of Ṭabari's chapter. Indeed, in the Muḥammad-as-Prophet version, the *sharḥ* is transformed from an obscure "event" in a child's eye to a theological exemplum. It is in the *sharḥ* that the infant undergoes the "operation" that prepares him for his divine mission.<sup>76</sup>

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I would like to conclude this chapter with a brief reflection on the place of poetry in the *History*, for poetic lines occupy no negligible space in Ṭabari's opus. However, my concern here is not poetry as such, discussion of which is both irrelevant in the present book and beyond my competence.<sup>77</sup> What interests me here is the *function* of poetry in the framework of the historical narrative. Now, Wansbrough in his brief observation on poetry in the *Sīra* (the latter, let us recall, being part of the *History*'s early section) has drawn attention to poetry's role beyond mere embellishment. In Wansbrough's argument, poetry that features in the *Sīra* and is appended to historical descriptions plays the role of commemoration of events. Also, as part of the narrative, poetry could have some structural value.<sup>78</sup>

My own point about poetry in the *History* as a whole is that, quite often, it is not an integral part of the narrative in the sense of being recited in "real time."<sup>79</sup> Not infrequently, poetry is inserted by Ṭabari's various sources as a commentary or a retrospective reflection on the events that unfold. This is perhaps another point of similarity between the *History* and the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis, it has been argued, short poems serve as crystallization points in the text, thus creating moments of reflection.<sup>80</sup> In the same vein, consider, for example, the following lines in the *History*:

<sup>76</sup> *History*, vol. V, 275–82 [I, 973–9].

<sup>77</sup> See Gautier H. A. Juynboll's brief remark, in *History*, vol. XIII, 219, about the little artistic merit of the poetry he translated and the fact that it constitutes "no more than the endeavors of alleged eyewitnesses at *Gelegenheitsdichtung*, commemorating mostly military events." What Juynboll regards as marginal, I put a premium on, and thus what is to one "no more" is to another "no less." In *History*, vol. I, 47, Franz Rosenthal briefly speaks of the *History*'s use of poetry to enliven the narrative or to support the historical argument.

<sup>78</sup> Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 38–9.

<sup>79</sup> It is pointless to refer here to all the poetry integrated into the *History*. For an example of poetry in "real time," however, see e.g., vol. VII, 116 [I, 1397].

<sup>80</sup> J. P. Fokkelman, "Genesis," in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide of the Bible* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 44.

O men who have rashly killed al-Ḥusayn,  
do expect torture and chastisement.  
All the people of heaven,  
prophets, angels, and tribes prosecute you.  
You have been cursed by the tongue of the son of David,  
and of Moses, and of the bringer of the Gospels.<sup>81</sup>

These verses, recited by an unidentified man (“a voice”), lack a specific context yet, they should be seen in the broader ambit of the aftermath of Ḥusayn’s death at Karbalā’. The clear message is criticism of the perpetrators.

To take one further example, an anonymous report on the raids of the Umayyad governor Naṣr b. Sayyār, *sub anno* 121/738–9, is interrupted by the following verses by one Abū Numayla Ṣālīḥ b. ‘Abbār, who associates himself with Yaḥyā, the son of the Shī‘ite rebel Zayd b. ‘Alī:

When Naṣr returned after his absence, we felt  
like someone who watches a storm until the rain sheets  
down on him.  
When it stopped, there abated with it a cold drenching  
climax  
which threatened the destiny of the people.<sup>82</sup>

Yet another example can be found at the end of the long report of the Zanj revolt. We are told that the revolt “became the subject of many poets,” and a rather long poem by Yaḥyā b. Muḥammad al-Aslamī is reproduced.<sup>83</sup> Other examples abound.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>81</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 178–9 [II, 385].

<sup>82</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 29 [II, 1693]. For further information on Abū Numayla, see *ibid.*, 63.

<sup>83</sup> *History*, vol. XXXVII, 140–43 [III, 2098–2103]. For a poem against the politics of ‘Ā’isha as regards ‘Uthmān, see vol. XVI, 53 [I, 3112]. For the same see *ibid.*, 62–3 [I, 3121].

<sup>84</sup> E.g., *History*, vol. VII, 103 [I, 1380–81], 111 [I, 1391], 119 [I, 1401–02], 127–9 [I, 411–15]; vol. IX, 91–2 [I, 1733–4], 93 [I, 1735]; vol. X, 49 [I, 1877], 52 [I, 1879], 81 [I, 1905], 88 [I, 1911], 98 [I, 1921–2]; vol. XI, 32–3 [I, 2042], 36–7 [I, 2046–7]; vol. XII, 100 [I, 2308–09]; vol. XIV, 78 [I, 2708]; vol. XVI, 32 [I, 3092]; vol. XVIII, 41–2 [II, 36], 109–110 [II, 100], 110–11 [II, 101], 118–19 [II, 108], 131 [II, 120–21]; vol. XIX, 63 [II, 269–70], 154–5 [II, 360], 182 [II, 389–90]; vol. XXIII, 158 [II, 1210–11], 159–60 [II, 1212]; vol. XXV, 62 [II, 1525–6], 84–5 [II, 1548], 89–90 [II, 1553], 151 [II, 1616–17]; vol. XXVII, 25 [II, 1915], 56 [II, 1945], 58 [II, 1946–7]; vol. XXVIII, 129 [III, 178], 220–21 [III, 255–6], 281 [III, 308]; vol. XXIX, 20 [III, 334]; vol. XXX, 98 [III, 604], 144–5 [III, 631–2], 180 [III, 651], 181 [III, 652], 182 [III, 653]; vol. XXXI, 18

There are also some occasions when poetry assumes the role of *prolepsis* as, for example, the verses cited immediately following the report on the killing of Khālid b. ‘Abdallāh al-Qaṣrī, the renowned Umayyad governor. These lines, which are composed by Khalaf b. Khalīfa<sup>85</sup> and others, are mentioned in the context of the murder of Walīd b. Yazīd, a fomenter of Khālid’s assassination. The poetry hails the death of the Umayyad caliph and the avenging of Khālid’s blood. Thus,

In avenging Khālid, they have left the Commander of the  
Faithful  
Prostrate upon his nose, though not in the act of worship.<sup>86</sup>

To sum up, what all the examples discussed in this chapter amount to is not just an argument about historiography occasionally being unfaithful to history as a result of chronological “dancing.” This, in itself, is hardly sensational. My emphasis is rather on the teleological mould, the ironic mode, the moralistic dimension, the ideological intention as well as other ends that the sources of the *History* had in mind while purporting to write history as it actually was. For all these ends are there, yet skillfully inserted. And thus *analepsis*, *prolepsis*, *vaticinatio post eventum* and retrospective observations are all devices in the service of the historian’s craft and are ingredients of history’s (and the *History*’s) poetics.

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[III, 774–5], 44 [III, 794], 47 [III, 796], 57 [III, 803], 113–14 [III, 851], 132 [III, 866–7], 139–50 [III, 873–80], 208 [III, 935]; vol. XXXII [III, 1067]; vol. XXXIII, 120–21 [III, 1256], 195 [III, 1314].

<sup>85</sup> See on him *History*, vol. XXVI, 178 n. 923.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 178 [II, 1822–3].

## CHAPTER THREE

### THEOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY AS HISTORY

In a pioneering discussion of its kind, Marshall Hodgson sees the *History*, together with Ṭabarī's Qur'ānic commentary, as part of their author's overall effort to build a more perfect system of Islamic legal science (*fiqh*). As befitting a religious scholar, Ṭabarī's main concern in writing his historical work was not the working of institutions, nor even the splendor of kings. His focus was on the success and failure of historical communities—above all the Muslim community—as well as the responsible behavior of individuals, and “the personal decisions of Muslim souls in the series of choices which had faced the Muslim community.”<sup>1</sup>

More recently, in his analysis of the cultural context and the very evolution of early Islamic historiography, Tarif Khalidi has briefly examined Ṭabarī's book as well. His evaluation of the *History* goes in a direction different from Hodgson's, as he suggests that we see Ṭabarī as “one of the earliest of Islam's historians to project a vision of history inspired by the regular rhythms of Qur'ānic narrative.” In a somewhat different formulation, it might be argued that “Ṭabarī's intention was to historicize the Qur'ān, to transform its timeless, one-dimensional allegories into historical narrative that reflected the scholarly interests and attachment to ‘pious ancestors’ current among the *Hadīth* group to which he belonged.” Here, according to Khalidi, is how Ṭabarī himself sought to illustrate his own perceptions of the origin, structure and destiny of world history:

Our intention in this work is to record what we have indicated to be its content, that is, the history of mighty kings, both those who disobeyed and those who obeyed God, and the times of messengers and prophets . . . Let us now turn to the mention of the first to be given dominion and blessings by God who then showed ingratitude, denied and rebelled against God and waxed proud. God then withdrew His blessings, shamed him and brought him low. We shall follow this with

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<sup>1</sup> Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. I, 352.



a mention of those who followed his path . . . and earned God's wrath . . . as well as contemporaneous or later praiseworthy kings who obeyed God.

Central to this historical vision, as Khalidi sees it in this passage, is the struggle of prophets and kings, the Qur'ānic conflict between prophets and 'pharaohs,' traceable in the histories of "every despotic king and every appointed caliph," in Ṭabarī's own phrasing. This vision might be expected to set the stage for the "Islamic portion" of the *History*, where the Muslim community (*umma*) should find its place as "the prophetic heir of Biblical tradition and the temporal heir of Persian dominion."<sup>2</sup> Significantly, however, the little that Ṭabarī has to say on the epistemic status and the evaluation of historical reports is to be found in the part of the book that treats the pre-Islamic era. It is as regards that era that "Ṭabarī felt most urgently the need to *reshape* history in order to conform with both the form and the substance of the Qur'ānic view."<sup>3</sup>

When we turn to the sections covering the Islamic era (in fact, the major part of the voluminous book), so Khalidi thinks, we find no historical vision embedded in its portrayal. The main feature of the annals portion of the *History* (from approximately half way through the prophetic mission to the end of the book) is the lack of any explicit judgment on men or events, nor any speculation on their course or significance, or of moral verdict on episodes of momentous consequences to the Muslim community. Judgment is largely left to the reader. Whence this significant absence? According to Khalidi, only Ṭabarī's self-perception as sheer transmitter of information could explain it, yet even this with some difficulty.<sup>4</sup> I take up this point in the next chapter. For now, one can note that, if true, Ṭabarī's alleged lack of judgment is similar to what has been observed for the narrator of the Hebrew Bible. The latter's extreme reticence in telling us what we should think has been characterized as "extraordinary."<sup>5</sup>

Stephen Humphreys, another scholar who has devoted consider-

<sup>2</sup> Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 78, 79. For Rosenthal's translation of this passage, see *History*, vol. I, 248–9.

<sup>3</sup> Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 78.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 79–81.

<sup>5</sup> Alter, "Introduction," 22–3. Alter raises the possibility that the reticence has to do with aesthetic predisposition.

able thought to the *History*, sees it as a culmination of the historical outlook of early Islamic religious scholarship. History was a religious science, and the early scholars focused on three central problems: the sociopolitical order established by the Prophet; the Prophet's successors in light of the model he had set; the transmission of Muḥammad's religious doctrine. Within such a frame, historians did not normally regard events as constituting a process governed by cause and effect or other general laws.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, a historian like Ṭabarī had no interest "in weaving a seamless narrative fabric but in making doctrinally correct statements."<sup>7</sup>

Now, in marked contrast to Khalidi's difficulty with Ṭabarī's lack of vision when it comes to the Islamic era, Humphreys claims to have identified no less than the "paradigm (or paradigms) governing early Islamic historiography," or "the general interpretive framework that early Muslim historians used to lend form, cohesion, and meaning to the disparate and fragmented materials available to them."<sup>8</sup> Humphreys reduces the Islamic historiographic paradigm to the "generally understood myth of divine promise, partial fulfillment, betrayal, and . . . redemption."<sup>9</sup> An example that Humphreys discusses in some detail is the event of 'Uthmān's murder, to which I return in Chapter 6. According to Humphreys, it is reasonable to suppose that the paradigms "are somehow embodied" in a "limited and remarkably stable repertory of key events, which remain much the same among writers of all different religious and political persuasions." We should thus be able to recover the paradigm by identifying the core events, and analyzing how they are related to one another.

These events were regarded as the central crises in the Community's evolution, they assured its triumph, or threatened its integrity and even its very existence.<sup>10</sup> They are presented in a specifically religious framework, and statements of the religious issues at stake, unsurprisingly, are grounded in citations from, or unmistakable allusions

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<sup>6</sup> *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol. VI, s.v. "Historiography, Islamic."

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Humphreys, "Qur'anic Myth," 272, 275.

<sup>9</sup> *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol. VI, s.v. "Historiography, Islamic." This is echoed in El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 218, who speaks of "story lines describing cycles of temptation, fall, and redemption."

<sup>10</sup> Humphreys, "Qur'anic Myth," 275.

to, the Qurʾān—the sacred text “that seems to provide the definitive criterion for understanding and judging these events.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the source to which we should look in order to assist us in uncovering the interpretive framework is the Qurʾān itself. Now, although “[t]he hypothesis of a Qurʾānic underpinning for Islamic historiography, however plausible in principle, is admittedly difficult to demonstrate . . . certain structural features in this [historiographic] literature do point to a consciousness of the past which has been decisively shaped by the Qurʾān.”<sup>12</sup>

In a more recent study Abdulkader Tayob sees the *History*'s main theme as the conception of God's will on earth and, thus, he similarly reduces the book to a theological master narrative, so to speak.<sup>13</sup> Fred Donner, too, has suggested that a master narrative dictates the book's overarching structure. The *History*'s objective is “to affirm the belief that the Islamic community was . . . the community of the true faith, and to explain how the Islamic community had reached the situation and circumstances it faced in al-Ṭabari's day.” The *History* shows how earlier communities went astray, thus making the Muslims unique in their adherence to the true law, but also tacitly warning the Muslims to be mindful of their behavior, lest they stray as well. Donner lists twelve main episodes that comprise the master narrative, from God's creation of the world to the reign of the 'Abbāsids and the succession of governors and other officials who were “the human embodiment of the Islamic state.”<sup>14</sup>

Certainly, one can hardly speak of the shaping of a historian in the classical Islamic context in isolation from other scholarly activities. From its beginning, Islamic historiography served a social function, determined by the basic theological view framed by Muḥammad, and by the believers' interest in their *umma*. History, together with other branches of knowledge, was influenced by the religious, political and social ferments of the early centuries of Islam.<sup>15</sup> Ṭabari's

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Tayob, “Islamic Historiography,” 83.

<sup>14</sup> Donner, *Narratives*, 129–31.

<sup>15</sup> Petersen, *Alī and Muʿāwija*, 177. That the origins of Islamic historical tradition are exegetical is an argument that has been taken by several scholars since Lammens. See more recently, Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*; Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton, 1987), 214 ff.; Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder*:

sources, as we shall shortly see, employ Qurʾānic models to give meaning to later historical events. In Ṭabarī's own case, his historiographical enterprise should be considered in the larger framework of his variegated writings, not least amongst which is his *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl al-Qurʾān*, the Qurʾān commentary (*tafsīr*) for which he has been highly esteemed.<sup>16</sup> As Rosenthal argues, in rearranging and presenting the material in the *History* as sequential history, Ṭabarī used throughout the same method he used in his *tafsīr*, starting with a summary of the topic and concluding with a critical evaluation.<sup>17</sup> Regardless whether we accept this analogy—in the introduction I suggested a different assessment of the *History*—one can certainly concur that our historian had the privilege not only of referring to others' exegeses, but also to his own work, to reproduce from it, and even send the reader to consult it for further elaboration.<sup>18</sup> While a systematic collation of the contents of the relevant parts of the *History* with the *Jāmiʿ al-bayān* is certainly beyond the scope of the present work, suffice it to mention the similarity existing in certain instances.<sup>19</sup>

Reduction has its limits, though, and the temptation to essentialize should be resisted. The scholarly twin assumptions that the Qurʾān provides a model for history writing and a paradigm that guided

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*The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims* (Princeton, 1995), 130 ff.; Marco Schöller, *Exegetisches Denken und Prophetenbiographie* (Wiesbaden, 1998), 230–55.

<sup>16</sup> Gilliot, *Langue*. For Ṭabarī's theological views concerning such issues as the famous *khalq al-Qurʾān*, see Sourdel, "Une profession de foi." It is impossible to know how his alleged legal school, known as the Jarīrī *madhhab* (see *History*, vol. I, 63–9), influenced his historical writing, especially since, it appears, the school was not distinctive enough to make it on purely intellectual grounds.

<sup>17</sup> *History*, vol. I, 157–8. On the other hand, it is Norman Calder's contention that, even in the *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, Ṭabarī prefers narrative to theology. See "*Tafsīr*," 107–08.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., *History*, vol. I, 258 [I, 87], 272–4 [I, 100–03] and Rosenthal's remark on p. 157.

<sup>19</sup> See e.g., Gilliot, "Mythe," 243–4, 249, for such similarity between Ṭabarī's exegetical on Sura 2, in the tale about the Patriarch Abraham (Ibrāhīm) and the ancient king Namrūd, and the story of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. See also e.g., the treatment of Abraham in *History*, vol. II, 52 [I, 256], 55 [I, 259] and 82–90 [I, 290–301], discussed in Calder, "*Tafsīr*," esp. 107–08, 117–18, 121. In his *Jāmiʿ al-bayān* Ṭabarī goes into details that are unnecessary in the *History*, such as the questions: Did Abraham really lie? Or, what were the arguments against those rejecting the tradition on Abraham's youth? For Moses and the calf, see *History*, vol. III, 72–5 [I, 490–93] and Tayob, "Analytical Survey," 168; G. R. Hawting, "Two Citations of the Qurʾān in 'Historical' Sources for Early Islam," in G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader Shareef, eds., *Approaches to the Qurʾān* (London, 1993), 263–4.

early Muslim historians cannot be overly promoted. Humphreys himself admits the difficulty in demonstrating the Qurʾānic underpinning of Islamic historiography, as does Khalidi.<sup>20</sup> Donner, for whom the Qurʾān represents a “profoundly ahistorical view of the world and of humankind,” would most likely join his two colleagues.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, to see the motif of covenant (*‘ahd*, *mīthāq*) between God and man as not only central to the Qurʾān—as, incidentally, it has been claimed of the Hebrew Bible<sup>22</sup>—but “as the kernel of a powerful myth informing the whole body of early Islamic historical writing,”<sup>23</sup> seems considerably strained.

To cut, then, the Qurʾān-*History* nexus to size, one can observe that Qurʾānic passages and verses, as well as verses taken from different Qurʾānic *sūras* and patched together, are interwoven into the *History* from its very beginning, that is, already in the ancient “historical” narrative that covers the pre-Islamic period. This is true of the ancient Arab and biblical “histories,” and thus we find Qurʾānic material in the stories of the Creation, the mythological people of ʿĀd and Thamūd, the biblical and folkloric figures of Abraham, Moses, Joseph and Khiḍr, or the legends of “Nebuchadnezzar and the Arabs” and the three envoys sent to the “Roman” king Antiochus.<sup>24</sup> Unsurprisingly, Qurʾānic material features in the parts that are culled from the Prophet’s biography (*ṣīra*), and this in rather a complex manner that is both exegetical (i.e., using extracts from scripture as a framework for extended *narratio*) and parabolic (i.e., using *narratio* as a framework for allusion to scripture). All this has been master-

<sup>20</sup> Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 13, does not detect the Qurʾān’s impact on historiography before the third/ninth century.

<sup>21</sup> Donner, *Narratives*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> Compare the criticism of the notion promoted by Von Rad and Eichrodt that it is possible to show how the theme of the Covenant runs through the entire Old Testament, in Mary E. Mills, *Historical Israel: Biblical Israel, Studying Joshua to 2 Kings* (London, 1999), 101. For Humphreys’s faint allusion to this biblical notion, see “Qurʾānic Myth,” 278.

<sup>23</sup> Humphreys, “Qurʾānic Myth,” 276–8; *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Taʾrīkh (Historical Writing), section II/a.”

<sup>24</sup> For Creation, see *History*, vol. I, 166–7 [I, 2–4]. For the story of ʿĀd, see vol. II, 39–40 [I, 243–4]. For the story of the prophet Ṣāliḥ, see *ibid.*, 41 [I, 244–5]. For Abraham, see *ibid.*, 54–8 [I, 258–62], 67–8 [I, 272–3], 78–9 [I, 285–6], 89–91 [I, 299–301]; Newby, *Making*, 65–7. For Moses, see vol. III, 6–17 [I, 417–29], 34–44 [I, 446–7], 48–84 [I, 463–501], 94–5 [I, 511–12]; Newby, *Making*, 102. For Nebuchadnezzar, see vol. IV, 69 [I, 674]. For God’s three envoys, see *ibid.*, 167–70 [I, 791–3].

fully studied by Wansbrough and need not be repeated here.<sup>25</sup> Suffice it to mention that interpolating Qurʾānic verses to the Prophet's *sīra* resulted in what became a genre in itself, namely: the "Occasions of Revelation" (*asbāb al-nuzūl*).<sup>26</sup> When we turn to later sections of the *History*, the role of the Qurʾān is mainly restricted to citations by the *dramatis personae* in many speeches and documents, with claimed relevance to the circumstances in question.<sup>27</sup>

It is not only scripture itself, but also Qurʾānic exegesis that puts on the garb of history, a point already made by Wansbrough, Rosenthal, Crone and others.<sup>28</sup> Take, for example, *History's* report

<sup>25</sup> Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 2. For the original identity between *sīra* and *tafsīr*, which only later became two distinct literary genres, see idem, *Quranic Studies*, 127. For the view that certain *sīra* sections were generated by the Qurʾān, see also Raven, "Biography." For the Qurʾānic verses that feature in the section "The Messenger of God Begins to Preach Openly," see *History*, vol. VI, 88 [I, 1169]. For the episode known as the Satanic verses, see *ibid.*, 108–112 [I, 1192–6]. For the verse revealed after the return from the expedition of Nakhla, see vol. VII, 20 [I, 1276], 21 [I, 1278], 22 [1279], 23 [I, 1279]. For Badr, see *ibid.*, 29 [I, 1285], 54 [I, 1320], 55 [I, 1320], 64 [I, 1334], 81 [I, 1355], 82 [I, 1356], 84 [I, 1359]. For the campaign against the Banū Qaynuqāʿ, see *ibid.*, 86 [I, 1360]. For the battle at Uhūd, see *ibid.*, 109–10 [I, 1389], 114 [I, 1395], 120 [I, 1403], 125 [I, 1410], 126 [1410], 133–4 [I, 1421]. For other expeditions, see *ibid.*, 155–6 [I, 1447], 163 [I, 1456]. For other episodes in the career of the Prophet, see vol. VIII, 3 [I, 1462], 9 [I, 1466], 13 [I, 1470], 54 [I, 1514], 64 [I, 1525, 1526], 72 [I, 1532], 80 [I, 1541], 81 [I, 1541–2], 92 [I, 1553], 125 [I, 1585], 151 [I, 1610], 167–8 [I, 1627], 181–2 [I, 1642]; vol. IX, 40 [I, 1687], 48 [I, 1694], 49 [I, 1694], 51 [I, 1696], 57 [I, 1701], 61 [I, 1704], 62 [I, 1705], 73 [I, 1717], 79 [I, 1722], 85–6 [I, 1727], 134 [I, 1773], 162 [I, 1793], 173 [I, 1805], 200 [I, 1828].

<sup>26</sup> For the *asbāb*, see e.g., Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 141–2, 177–85. A. Rippin, "The Function of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* in Qurʾānic Exegesis," *BSOAS* 51 (1988): 19, traces this material to the culture of the preachers and story-tellers (*quṣṣāṣ*). See also Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder. The Life of Muḥammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims* (Princeton, 1995), 71, 227.

<sup>27</sup> E.g., ʿĀʾisha, vol. VIII, 63 [I, 1524]; Abū Bakr, vol. X, 4 [I, 1840]; Abū Bakr, vol. XI, 79 [I, 2083]; Muʿadh al-Qārī, *ibid.*, 194–5 [I, 2182]; Mughīra b. Zurāra b. al-Nubāsh al-Uṣaydī, vol. XII, 38 [I, 2242]; Mughīra b. Shuʿba, *ibid.*, 73 [I, 2277]; Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ, *ibid.*, 84 [I, 2289]; Rabīʿ b. al-Balad al-Saʿdī, *ibid.*, 88 [I, 2293]; ʿUmar and ʿAlī, *ibid.*, 207 [I, 2418]; Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ, vol. XIII, 23 [I, 2443]; ʿUmar, vol. XIV, 5 [I, 2636]; ʿUthmān, vol. XV, 3–4 [I, 2800, 2801]; Muʿāwiya, *ibid.*, 116 [I, 2911], 118 [I, 2913], 122 [I, 2918]; Ṣaʿsaʿa b. Sūhān al-ʿAbdī, *ibid.*, 122 [I, 2918]; ʿAmr b. al-Hurayth, *ibid.*, 134 [I, 2929]; ʿUthmān, *ibid.*, 196 [I, 2997], 206 [I, 3008], 210 [I, 3012]; Zubayr, *ibid.*, 217 [I, 3019]; ʿAlī, *ibid.*, 217 [I, 3019]; ʿUthmān, 239–45 [I, 3041–5]; ʿUrwa b. Udayya, vol. XVIII, 197 [II, 186]; Ibrāhīm b. al-Ashtar, vol. XX, 209 [II, 625]; Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya, vol. XXI, 98–9 [II, 732].

<sup>28</sup> Rosenthal (*History*, vol. I, 160) states that the first hundred pages (of the modern edition) are for all practical purpose a commentary on Genesis 1–10, in other

originating in Ismāʿīl b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Suddī (d. 127/745), the Kūfan exegete and controversial transmitter of prophetic tradition, which starts with the Qurʾānic verse (11:50) “And unto ʿĀd [was sent] their brother Hūd, who said, ‘O my people! Serve God! You have no other god save Him.’” From there Suddī goes on:

This means that Hūd came to ʿĀd and admonished them, reminding them of what God had related in the Qurʾān, but they persisted in disbelieving him, and challenged him to punish them. So he said to them, “Knowledge is with God alone. I pass on to you that with which I have been sent.”

What we see here is an allegedly historical episode that starts out as an exegesis on a brief Qurʾānic passage, followed by the insertion of another verse (46:23) into the evolving story. Suddī then goes on to tell of the drought that God inflicted on the people of ʿĀd, and concludes the account with another exegesis on 54:19, “a day of constant calamity,” which is given the realistic expressive details of “camels and men . . . blowing around between heaven and earth” and the destruction of homes.<sup>29</sup> Similar examples ascribed to Suddī, as well as other exegetes, do feature elsewhere in the *History*.<sup>30</sup>

Qurʾān and Islamicized biblical material is employed as a model of reference in the *History* and is used by both the narrators and the *dramatis personae*, who are eager to promote analogy to the historical episodes they consider and thus endow their case not only with “depth” but with a parabolic dimension. For example, Pharaoh (Firʿawn), the Qurʾānic symbol of evil, is a figure used in descriptions of Muslim sinners. This is the case of the piece of Ṭabarī’s contemporary history about the “appointed day,” in the year 293/906, of the Qarmaṭian Zikrawayh b. Mihrawayh and the “remaining

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words, Islamic mythologizing of ancient “history.” For the exegetical nature of Meccan “history,” see Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton, 1987), e.g., 203–14.

<sup>29</sup> *History*, vol. II, 39 [I, 243].

<sup>30</sup> E.g., *ibid.*, 56 [I, 260], 112–13 [I, 327–8], 152 [I, 376], 179 [I, 406–07]. For examples of exegesis by Mujāhid b. Jabr al-Makkī (d. ca. 102/720; see on him *E.I.*, s.v. “Mudjahid b. Djabr al-Makkī”), see e.g., vol. I, 246, 247 [I, 76], 251 [80–81]; vol. II, 95 [I, 307], 101 [I, 313–14], 113 [I, 328], 152 [I, 376–7], 158 [I, 383]. For what is for all practical purpose Qurʾān commentary intermingled with accounts on the Prophet, see e.g., vol. VI, 118 [I, 1202]; vol. VII, 21 [1277], 30 [I, 1287], 32 [I, 1288], 83 [I, 1357], 110 [I, 1389], 126 [I, 1410–11]; vol. VIII, 4 [I, 1462], 7 [I, 1464], 9 [I, 1466], 23 [I, 1480]. See also Raven, “Biography,” 426–7.

wicked adherents of the religion of the Qarmaṭian,” who came in their thousands to declare allegiance to their leader in Kūfa. Here, Ṭabarī invokes Qurʾān 20:59, where Moses tells Pharaoh, following his request to appoint a day for a contest: “Your appointed day is a day of splendor, and it should be that the people will assemble in the early morning.” In equating the Qarmaṭian’s “appointed day” with that of Firʿawn’s, whose sorcerers were overwhelmed by Moses and Aaron, Zikrawayh is assigned the role of the wicked ancient king. His doom, like that of the Biblical/Qurʾānic villain, is thus foreshadowed.<sup>31</sup>

Pharaoh features in other instances as well. Thus, condemning ‘Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād (“the son of Marjana,” as he is derogatively referred to) for Ḥusayn’s murder at Karbalā’, Ibn al-Ashtar, supporter of the ‘Alīd cause, states that “Pharaoh never did to the noble sons of the Children of Israel what the son of Marjana did to the members of the family of the Messenger of God.”<sup>32</sup> Or, after the defeat suffered by Ibn al-Ash‘ath, the rebel, in 83/702–03,<sup>33</sup> one of his associates admits to Ḥajjāj, the prominent Iraqī governor, of being an unbeliever “even more . . . than Pharaoh, the master of the stakes,” thus referring to a Qurʾānic characterization of the Egyptian despot and so making the worst of self-accusations.<sup>34</sup> Yet another example comes from a report on the armed confrontation between Marwān, the last Umayyad, and the ‘Abbāsīd ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Alī, in the course of which some three hundred Umayyad troops are reported to have drowned in the Zāb river. The ‘Abbāsīd commander is made to cite a Qurʾānic verse (2:47), referring to the drowning of Pharaoh and the Egyptians: “And we divided the sea for you, and delivered you, and drowned Pharaoh’s people while you were beholding.” The Egyptian tyrant is also invoked in a verse, cited immediately thereafter, which represents Marwān as “[I]ghtwit in patience, a Pharaoh in persecution.”<sup>35</sup> Finally, the ‘Abbāsīd Ṣāliḥ b. ‘Alī, later reporting to ‘Abū al-‘Abbās on the killing of Marwān,<sup>36</sup> has the following to

<sup>31</sup> *History*, vol. XXXVIII, 161–2 [III, 2260].

<sup>32</sup> *History*, vol. XXI, 78 [II, 710–11].

<sup>33</sup> See on him *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Ibn al-Ash‘ath.”

<sup>34</sup> *History*, vol. XXIII, 46 [II, 1098]. The references are to Qurʾān 89:10 and 38:12.

<sup>35</sup> *History*, vol. XXVII, 164–5 [III, 41].

<sup>36</sup> See on him *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Ṣāliḥ b. ‘Alī.”



say: “We pursued al-Ja‘dī [Marwān], the enemy of God, until we caused him to seek refuge in the land of God’s enemy, the like of Pharaoh—he who made himself like unto God—and in that land I slew him.”<sup>37</sup>

There are other villains besides the Egyptian despot. Such, for instance, are the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. In 126/743–4, in the revolt against the Umayyad caliph Walīd, one of the rebels is reported as shouting: “Kill the enemy of God [that is, the caliph] in the way Lot’s family were killed.”<sup>38</sup> References to the Children of Israel have the clear intent of contrasting the conduct of Muslim protagonists with the faulty conduct of the Israelites. Thus, Miqdād b. ‘Amr, the Prophet’s Companion, compares the Muslims at Badr with the Israelites, and he cites Qur’ān 5:24 to prove the impropriety of the latter in a time of war.<sup>39</sup> Mukhtār, a propagator of the ‘Alīd cause in 66/685–6,<sup>40</sup> refers to Qur’ān 2:248, when comparing his special Chair (*kursī*) to the Ark of the Children of Israel, “in which there was a remnant of what the family of Moses and the family of Aaron left behind.”<sup>41</sup> In what appears to be a special cultic ceremony, taking place in the course of a confrontation between his party and Umayyad forces, Ibrāhīm b. al-Ashtar, Mukhtār’s key supporter, and men of his party, circle round Mukhtār’s chair with their hands upraised to heaven. Ibrāhīm invokes the story of the Golden Calf worshipped by the Israelites and, clearly alluding to Qur’ān 7:14, says: “O God . . . do not take us to task for what the foolish ones have done after the manner of the Children of Israel . . . when they circled about their calf.”<sup>42</sup> The intent of distancing the ‘Alīds from the ancient Hebrews is evident.

Positive models are occasionally invoked as well. In the aftermath of the battle at Badr, the Prophet compares Abū Bakr to Abraham and Jesus, and ‘Umar to Noah and Moses.<sup>43</sup> Biblical Saul (Tālūt) is another term of reference. The number of three hundred and thir-

<sup>37</sup> *History*, vol. XXVII, 174 [III, 50]. For Jadī‘ see *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Marwān II.”

<sup>38</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 153 [II, 1799].

<sup>39</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 41 [I, 1300]. See on him *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Miqdād b. ‘Amr.”

<sup>40</sup> *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “al-Mukhtār b. Abī ‘Ubayd.”

<sup>41</sup> For this chair, see *History*, vol. XXI, 68 [II, 701], 69–73 [II, 703–06].

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 69 [II, 702], 70 [II, 703]. For a reference to this biblical story, see also Qur’ān 2:286 and 7:155.

<sup>43</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 82–3 [I, 1356–7].

teen Muslims participating on Muḥammad's side is compared to the "number of people of Saul."<sup>44</sup> Or, receiving the news about the defeat of the aforementioned Marwān at the Zāb river, Abū al-ʿAbbās, soon to be nominated the first ʿAbbāsīd caliph, invokes Qurʾān 2:249–51, which deals with Saul setting out against Goliath. It would seem that this particular Qurʾānic analogy was chosen for two reasons. One is the role of the river in the two cases. In the current situation, the river (Zāb) is like that in the Qurʾānic exemplum, where Saul's host undergoes God's trial by the river: only those who overcome their thirst or scoop with their hand have the privilege of joining the biblical king.<sup>45</sup> The second reason has to do with the fighting of the Believers ("patient ones") against the infidels, and the victory that God gives to a small group over a numerous party.<sup>46</sup>

King Solomon features as another model. Thus, about the time of caliph Hishām's death in 125/743, one ʿAmr b. ʿAlī narrates how he told Muḥammad b. ʿAlī, the ʿAbbāsīd, that the rule of the Umayyad caliph was approaching its twentieth year, meaning "a long time," (in fact, from an ʿAbbāsīd point of view, much too long). The narrator's grounds for this assessment are instantly provided: "People say that Solomon asked his Lord to bestow on him sovereignty such as should not behoove any after him. They do claim that that period was twenty years."<sup>47</sup> Muḥammad b. ʿAlī's response is not devoid of its own significance: to the "biblical precedent" he juxtaposes an Islamic one. Accordingly, there is a *hadīth*, ascribed to the Prophet, which limits the life of a king who rules an *umma* to no longer than the life of its prophet.<sup>48</sup> The implication apropos of the (execrable) Umayyad Hishām is obvious. Finally, a Christian model is invoked as well, and thus Ḥamdān Qarmaṭ, initiator of the Qarmaṭian movement at the end of the ninth century A.D., selects his twelve agents and compares them to Christ's twelve apostles.<sup>49</sup>

A thread that connects a few episodes of ancient, sacred history, with current events, and thus enhances their significance and adds

<sup>44</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 39–40 [I, 1297–8] and n. 74. For a reference to this Islamicized story of Saul, see also *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Tālūt."

<sup>45</sup> This motif is associated in the Hebrew Bible rather with Gideon.

<sup>46</sup> *History*, vol. XXVII, 165 [III, 41].

<sup>47</sup> This alludes to Qurʾān 38:5. See *History*, vol. XXVI, 83 n. 436.

<sup>48</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 82–3 [II, 1739–40].

<sup>49</sup> *History*, vol. XXXVII, 171 [III, 2126].

some teleological mystique, emerges in the context of the year 144/760–61, in which a most substantial challenge to ‘Abbāsid authority was posed by the rebellion of Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh, known as “The Pure Soul,”<sup>50</sup> and his brother Ibrāhīm, two descendants of ‘Alī through Ḥasan’s branch. Here, Ṭabarī gives voice to ‘Īsā b. ‘Abdallāh and ‘Ubaydallāh b. Muḥammad, two great-grandsons of ‘Alī, who introduce a piece of Ḥasanid ideology. It starts with the “biblical” story of the expulsion of Adam from Eden *and his receiving from God a mirror with which to view the earth*. A “satan” called Faḡṭas later breaks that mirror and, upon its pieces, builds the “City of Jābirat.” Later, when King Solomon finds out about it, he orders Faḡṭas to tear down the city and bring the broken mirror to him. Solomon is able to reassemble the mirror, but after his death devils pounce on it and carry it off, except for one bit that remains with the Jews (Banū Isrā’īl), who pass it down from one generation to the next, until it comes to their Exilarch. He brings it to Marwān b. Muḥammad, the last Umayyad caliph, who keeps polishing it and affixes it to another mirror. After seeing in the mirror something repulsive, he throws it down, hands it over to one of his slave girls, and also beheads the Exilarch. When the Ḥasanid legend finally reaches contemporary history, we learn that the ‘Abbāsid Maṣṣūf searches for the mirror and finds it, and he does exactly what his Umayyad predecessor did. Looking into the mirror, he can now see the image of Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh the Ḥasanid and, as a result, starts pursuing him.<sup>51</sup> Thus, through the mythological mirror of Solomon and the concoction of fanciful details, a connection is established between the Ḥasanids and the wise biblical king.

Clearly ideological is also the representation in the *History* of certain episodes pertaining to the Community as a sort of reenactment of significant events that occurred in the first generation of Islam. Thus, Abū Bakr “waged war against all the apostates [only] by means of envoys and letters, just as the Apostle of God had done,” except for two cases, the affairs of the people of Dhū Ḥusā and Dhū Qaṣṣa, in which he resorted to military confrontation.<sup>52</sup> In the aforementioned Ḥasanid revolt, led by Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh, the war cry was “One and one alone,” and we are told that this had been the

<sup>50</sup> See *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh . . . al-Nafs al-Zakiyya.”

<sup>51</sup> *History*, vol. XXVIII, 112–15 [III, 165–7].

<sup>52</sup> *History*, vol. X, 159 [I, 1984] and n. 1006.

Prophet's war cry at the Battle of Ḥunayn. The illusion of reenactment is also reflected in a report that instantly follows, in which 'Abd al-Ḥamīd b. Ja'far, a traditionist and supporter of the Ḥasanid claim,<sup>53</sup> is quoted comparing the number of Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh's companions ("a few more than 300") to the people of Badr "on the day they faced the idolaters."<sup>54</sup> And in the revolt against him in 125/742–3, the Umayyad caliph Walīd b. Yazīd reportedly sits in his room, takes a copy of the Qur'ān and says: "This is a day like the day 'Uthmān was killed," referring to the immortalized scene of the third caliph shortly before his murder.<sup>55</sup>

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A clear reflection of the theological concept that is part of Islamic historiography is God's role in history. In the *History's* "proto-history" unit—as one scholar characterized the pre-Islamic part of Ṭabarī's opus—God is a major actor. This is quite understandable given the fact, already noted, that it is biblical and Qur'ānic material, scripture and its various exegetical forms, that serve as the "archive" for this portion of history. Take, for example, the very beginning of the *History*. As soon as we encounter the biblical Noah, we learn of God's special treatment of him and of His role in general. In fact, in the following passage, God is undisputably the protagonist, while Noah is not only obedient to Him but also subsidiary to the plot:

We have mentioned God's kindness and helpfulness to Noah. This was because of Noah's obedience to God and his steadfastness in the face of all the injury and unpleasantness which befell him in this world. God thus saved him and those of his people who believed with him and followed him. God peopled the world with his descendants and made his name a name to be praised forever, and stored up for him a life of everlasting pleasure and ease in the hereafter. All others He slew, because they had disobeyed Him and rebelled against Him, contradicting His command. He deprived them of the comforts they had and made an example of them for all those who came after them, along with the painful punishment He had stored up for them in the hereafter with Him.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> *History*, vol. XXVIII, 144 n. 674.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 201 [III, 237–8].

<sup>55</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 153 [II, 1800].

<sup>56</sup> *History*, vol. II, 10 [I, 210–11].

Later, “God desired to send Abraham, the Friend of the Merciful, as an argument against his people and as a messenger to His worshippers, since there had been no such messengers between Noah and Abraham except Hūd and Šāliḥ.”<sup>57</sup> It was God who commanded Abraham to build the Ka‘ba as a house of worship for Him.<sup>58</sup> God is not only the major actor in the context of biblical stories, but also in ancient Arab folklore, as reconstructed by the Islamic community. Thus, God destroyed the people of Thamūd for their sins;<sup>59</sup> He inflicted a bleeding of the nose and a plague of ants on the Jurhum and destroyed them;<sup>60</sup> He sent a bird to seize the snake that terrified the pagan worshippers of the Ka‘ba.<sup>61</sup> God’s role in the context of the “history” of the Iranian monarchs looms large when, for example, He sends an angel to Kisrā with the message: “Are you going to submit yourself to God? If not, I shall break this staff!” In the following year, the ruler has to face exactly the same question, and on the third occasion the angel indeed breaks the staff. A short time afterwards, Kisrā’s royal power disintegrates, and a rebellion puts an end not only to his reign but to his very life.<sup>62</sup>

Moving ahead to the Islamic era, in light of the uncertain boundary between history and exegesis in the Prophet’s *Sīra*, to which I have alluded above, God’s important and quite intensive role apropos of the Prophet’s mission comes as no surprise. History (and the *History* as well) unfolds as expressing divine omnipotence. As Ṭabarī himself states in the context of discussing the Prophet’s first revelation, “God commanded His Prophet Muḥammad to rise up and to warn his people that God would punish them for their ingratitude to their Lord and for their worship of false gods and idols to the exclusion of Him who created them and gave them their daily bread.”<sup>63</sup> There is no doubt about the theological manifesto that such a statement provides for historiography. Then the Prophet makes contact with the would-be Anṣār, that is, the Arabs of Medina, since “God wished to make His religion victorious, to render His Prophet

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 50 [I, 254].

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 69–72 [I, 274–7].

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 42–6 [I, 246–51].

<sup>60</sup> *History*, vol. VI, 53 [I, 1132].

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 56 [I, 1136]. See also vol. V, 229 [I, 941], 235–6 [I, 945], 265 [I, 966].

<sup>62</sup> *History*, vol. V, 335–8 [I, 1013–15]. See also 112 [I, 874], 199 [I, 922].

<sup>63</sup> *History*, vol. VI, 76 [I, 1156].

mighty, and to fulfill His promise to him.”<sup>64</sup> Similarly, the Prophet is able to escape his opponents because “God blinded the sight of those who were lying in wait for him so he departed [without their seeing him].”<sup>65</sup>

Also in later periods—in fact, till the end of the *History*—Allāh reigns supreme, although His appearance in the text (if one is allowed to put it thus) is made less frequent.<sup>66</sup> And thus, an anonymous source for the Karbalā’ tragedy, who tells of the refusal of a man of the Banū Abān b. Dārim to let Ḥusayn quench his thirst, adds that the fate of that man was that “God cast down on him a thirst that he could never quench.”<sup>67</sup> In the battle of the Ḥarra, which the Medinese fought against Umayyad troops in 63/682–3, “God sent down the rain on the Syrians.”<sup>68</sup> In the extended report on the revolt of the Zanj in the second half of the ninth century A.D., Muḥammad b. Ḥammād, Muwaffaq’s close companion and an eye-witness to many of the events of the revolt, either rhetorically or theologically—or perhaps both—time and again ascribes to God the defeat inflicted on the Zanj: “God put the enemy to flight;” “God smote them with His power;” “God filled their hearts with terror;” are some of the expressions he uses.<sup>69</sup> Allāh is not only omnipotent but also just and helps the right party.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 124 [I, 1209]. See also 130 [I, 1217].

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 142, 143 [I, 1232]. See also 144 [I, 1234], 145 [I, 1234], 147 [I, 1237], 152 [I, 1245]; vol. VII, 24 [I, 1279], 33 [I, 1290], 65 [I, 1335], 74 [I, 1347], 79 [I, 1353], 113 [I, 1393], 114 [I, 1395], 118 [I, 1400], 145 [I, 1433], 146 [I, 1435], 163 [I, 1456]; vol. VIII, 11 [1467], 24 [1482], 25 [1483], 30 [1487], 51 [1511], 72 [1532], 92 [1553], 113 [1573–4], 117 [1577], 129 [1589], 141 [1599], 163 [1622], 167 [1626], 176 [1635]; vol. IX, 53 [I, 1698], 54 [I, 1698], 105 [I, 1747], 155 [I, 1788], 163–4 [I, 1794]; vol. X, 33 [I, 1863].

<sup>66</sup> See e.g., the Rāshidūn period, vol. X, 45 [I, 1873], 52 [I, 1880], 116 [I, 1940], 119 [I, 1943], 154 [I, 1979], 156 [I, 1981], 164 [I, 1988], 187 [I, 2010]; vol. XI, 6 [I, 2019], 13 [I, 2024], 24 [I, 2034], 68 [I, 2074], 88 [I, 2091], 104 [I, 2104], 129 [I, 2127], 171 [I, 2158], 180 [I, 2166], 212 [I, 2199]; vol. XII, 4 [I, 2213], 20 [I, 2227], 40 [I, 2244], 96 [I, 2304], 108 [I, 2319], 134 [I, 2349], 139 [I, 2355], 140 [I, 2356], 143 [I, 2360], 144 [I, 2360], 155 [I, 2371], 156 [I, 2372], 168 [I, 2384], 171 [I, 2388], 176 [I, 2391].

<sup>67</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 157 [II, 362].

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 219 [II, 423].

<sup>69</sup> *History*, vol. XXXVII, e.g., 14 [III, 1949], 15 [III, 1949], 18 [III, 1954], 20 [III, 1955], 23 [III, 1960], 41 [III, 1980], 53 [III, 1995], 55 [III, 1998], 57 [III, 2000], 60 [III, 2004]. For Muḥammad b. Ḥammād, see *ibid.*, 13 n. 29. For Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan, another source, and his invocation of God, see *ibid.*, e.g., 92 [III, 2042], 94 [III, 2044], 95 [III, 2045], 100 [III, 2051], 104 [III, 2056–7], 107 [III, 2059]. For an unidentified source who does the same, see *ibid.*, 119–20 [III, 2075], 121 [III, 2077].

Satan (Iblīs) is the counterpart to the divine on several occasions and promotes evil and straying. Thus he comes to meet the leaders of Quraysh disguised as a venerable old man, when they assemble to discuss Muḥammad's contact with Medina.<sup>70</sup> Unsurprisingly, Satan has an influence on Aswad al-Ansī, a false prophet in Arabia at the end of Muḥammad's era.<sup>71</sup> At the time of 'Uthmān, there is a "satanically inspired event" among the Kūfians in the form of their splitting into wrangling factions, following a financial dispute between two dignitaries.<sup>72</sup> When the Arabs fight the Iranians at Qādisiyya, "it was the *jinn* who brought the news about it to humans, the news brought by the *jinn* had arrived before that which was brought by men."<sup>73</sup> Abū Jandal b. Suhayl, who in 'Umar's caliphate was accused of drinking wine, "was suffering from a diabolical whispering in his ear (*waswasa*)," hence 'Umar, in a letter, called upon him to repent.<sup>74</sup> And 'Abd al-Wahhāb b. Ibrāhīm, Ṭabarī's source, remarks apropos of the revolt of Sulaymān b. Hishām, an Umayyad contender to the caliphate in 127/ 745, that it was Satan who caused Sulaymān to err.<sup>75</sup>

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Apart from theological conviction, it is rather seldom that we get the sources' views of political/ideological issues in explicit terms. I. K. Howard's interpretation of some Karbalā' reports as reflecting a political stand vis-à-vis the Umayyads, makes a compelling case for propaganda that is hardly disguised. He sees Abū Mikhnaf's account as a clear attempt to transfer the responsibility for Ḥusayn's death from Yazīd, the caliph, to 'Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād, the Iraqī governor. Similarly, 'Awāna b. al-Ḥakam al-Kalbī's (d. 147/764) account of the treatment of Ḥusayn's severed head, transfers all the blame from Yazīd to 'Ubaydallāh. Elsewhere, Howard sees the sources trying to mitigate Yazīd's responsibility for the battle of the Ḥarra and

<sup>70</sup> *History*, vol. VI, 140 [I, 1229].

<sup>71</sup> *History*, vol. X, 26 [I, 1857], 31 [I, 1861], 32 [I, 1862], 34 [I, 1864], 35 [I, 1864], 37 [I, 1867].

<sup>72</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 15 [I, 2811].

<sup>73</sup> *History*, vol. XII, 147 [I, 2374].

<sup>74</sup> *History*, vol. XIII, 153 [I, 2572].

<sup>75</sup> *History*, vol. XXVII, 19 [III, 1908]. For Iblīs manifested in the person of Surqān b. Jurshum, see vol. VII, 38 [I, 1296].

the bombardment of the Ka'ba, thrusting the blame on the generals.<sup>76</sup>

There is ample ground to suspect that a pro-Yazīd attitude is involved in such historiography and that this caliph's reaction to the news of Karbalā' was reported by circles associated with the Umayyads.<sup>77</sup> An account describing Yazīd's distress upon learning of Ḥusayn's death, his tearful eyes, his request for God's mercy for 'Alī's deceased son, and his characterization of those mistreating Ḥusayn's household as "evil and grievous,"<sup>78</sup> demonstrates a pro-Umayyad inclination. One can add to this Abū Mikhnaf's reliance on no other than Yazīd's client (*mawla*), in a report to the effect that the caliph had stated that, had he fought Ḥusayn in person, he would have spared him.<sup>79</sup> Or, can one accept at face value Yazīd's declaration, "I would have protected him [Ḥusayn] from death with all my power, even through the destruction of some of my own children"?<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, how is one to evaluate the praise for Yazīd that comes from no other than Fāṭima, Ḥusayn's own daughter?<sup>81</sup> She tells about the caliph's order to equip the women and children of Ḥusayn's household and appoint a trustworthy Syrian to accompany them to Medina. Her report concludes with the praise that "[t]here was not one of the women of the family of Mu'āwiyah who did not meet them [Ḥusayn's family] with tears and weeping for al-Ḥusayn. They continued the lamentation for him for three days."<sup>82</sup> Another of Abū Mikhnaf's reports, transmitted by Abū Ḥamza al-Thumālī, presumably of Shi'ite inclination,<sup>83</sup> and hence far from being considered sympathetic to Yazīd, ascribes the following statement to the caliph: "Lament for him and put on mourning garments for the son of the daughter of the Apostle of God, the son

<sup>76</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 76, [II, 282], 176 [II, 382], and see "Translator's Foreword," pp. XIII, XIV, XV.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 168 n. 543.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 169–70 [II, 376].

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 170 [II, 376].

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 172 [II, 379]. Another of Abū Mikhnaf's sources tells that Yazīd was apparently dismayed by the recitation of Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥakam (a leading figure in the Umayyad family) about his clan's victory, as is proved by his command to the speaker to be quiet. Also, seeing the "dreadful sight" of the women and children of Ḥusayn's clan, Yazīd curses 'Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād ("Ibn Marjana") and implies his sorrow at what he sees.

<sup>81</sup> For the confusion about her identity, see *ibid.*, 171 n. 554.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 172 [II, 378].

<sup>83</sup> See on him *ibid.*, 175 n. 561.



of the pure woman of Quraysh.” The caliph then curses ‘Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād, his governor in Iraq, whom he blames for Ḥusayn’s death.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Yazīd’s reaction to Ḥusayn’s tragedy makes it for a suspicious piece of historical narrative, where the border between facts and propaganda is hard to delineate.

In fact, if one reads the *History* attentively, with the net cast not merely for facts, cases where ideology or a political stance are implied may occasionally surface. Consider, for example, the aftermath of the Qādisiyya battle in the context of the Arab conquest of Iraq. Here, Ṭabarī’s sources foreshadow the fact that some of the so-called elite, being early converts to Islam, such as Zubayr and ‘Ammār b. Yāsir, would receive fiefs in ‘Uthmān’s days. Then the following statement is made: “If ‘Uthmān committed an error, then those who accepted the error from him committed a greater one; they are the people from whom we have received our religion.” The report then reverts to the fact that ‘Umar gave fiefs to certain persons, including Ṭalḥa, the Companion, “from whom we took [our religion].” It was ‘Umar who instructed ‘Uthmān b. Ḥunayf, one of Medina’s Muslims (Anṣār), whom he installed over the Sawād lands in Iraq,<sup>85</sup> to give these fiefs. The latter, in his turn, did not follow it before he double-checked with the caliph. To clinch the argument, it is stated that ‘Alī also gave a fief.<sup>86</sup> Consequently, this report has more to tell us than simply who received fiefs and when. It implies a political view that pertains to two issues. One is that not only ‘Uthmān committed an error in giving out fiefs, but so did his predecessor and successor. This sympathetic attitude toward ‘Uthmān, which comes from Sayf b. ‘Umar and his authorities, will later be amplified when we come to the chapter that deals with ‘Uthmān’s murder. The other issue raised here is that leading persons of early Islam, such as the Companions Ṭalḥa and Zubayr, by accepting land allotments they were not supposed to accept, failed to provide a model of proper conduct.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 176 [II, 382]. In the light of all this, it is surprising, perhaps also revealing, to find immediately in the following sentence a report on Yazīd’s poking in Ḥusayn’s mouth. The stitching of contradictory stuff appears to be quite thin.

<sup>85</sup> See on him *History*, vol. XII, 160 n. 553.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 159–61 [I, 2376].

Finally, what about Ṭabarī's own ideology? There have been attempts to reconstruct it on the basis of circumstantial "evidence," which, it ought to be admitted, is quite inconclusive. The task is not easy and, at times, amounts to reading too much between the lines. A scholarly tendency, which one occasionally comes across, to equate the very stuff of historical reports with the authors' political stand is surely debatable, as the reporting of a particular event or some opinion does not indicate that the reporter perforce approves of them. In other words, lacking an independent access to historical reality, the reader is entitled to obediently follow the so-called Rankean premise and consider what a narrator/historian relates as a product of fidelity to history "as it really happened," no less than as a concoction made up to express some political view. And thus, to interpret a reference to 'Alī's initial abstention from paying homage to Abū Bakr as a "modified 'Alīd point of view" on the matter of the first caliphate, seems to contain a dose of over-interpretation.<sup>87</sup> In fact, it has been argued that Ṭabarī could be sufficiently open-minded (or, shall we say, equally committed/uncommitted to two opposing parties?) to compose tracts on two diametrically opposed issues such as the merits (*faḍā'l*) of Abū Bakr and 'Umar on the one hand, and a monograph on Ghadīr Khumm, that is, 'Alī's designation as heir to the Prophet, surely a formative event in the creation of the Shī'ā, on the other hand.<sup>88</sup> Other testimonies, such as Ṭabarī's belief that ablution only required the wiping of one's feet, which is in accordance with the Shī'ite point of view, or general remarks that he had a slight Shī'ite inclination, are hardly sound.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, Ṭabarī's presumed pro-'Alīd sympathy is contradicted by his support of the 'Abbāsīd caliph Muktafī (289/902–295/908), who in fact did away with his father's 'Alīd policy. Such contradiction, in turn, has been resolved by resorting to Ṭabarī's "alarm at the rise of . . . extremist forms of Shī'ism."<sup>90</sup> In the end, all this sort of jumping around leads nowhere and it has to be conceded that, whatever he was in terms

<sup>87</sup> Thus Tayob, "Islamic Historiography," 81–2, 130.

<sup>88</sup> See *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Ghadīr Khumm."

<sup>89</sup> Tayob, "Islamic Historiography," 72–3, 81–2. Rosenthal thinks that Ṭabarī's opinion as regards the wiping and washing in the ritual of ablution requires considerable imagination to provide support for "accusing" him of Shī'ism. See *History*, vol. I, 62–3.

<sup>90</sup> Tayob, "Islamic Historiography," 74–5.

of religious inclination, Ṭabarī “was not a typical Sunnite or ‘Alīd scholar.”<sup>91</sup>

In fact, a challenge to the depiction of Ṭabarī as a Shī‘ite sympathizer is raised by Petersen, who argues that our historian was writing when Ismā‘īlī propaganda was making headway and threatening the social order. As a result, the caliphal power was trying to reach a compromise with moderate Shī‘ism. Now, although Ṭabarī never wrote under official or even semi-official auspices, his orthodoxy is expressed in the *History*, as in the *tafsīr*. Both “bear the stamp of the political, religious and social antagonisms of their time.” According to Petersen, it is beyond doubt, that Ṭabarī’s attack on Mu‘āwiya for usurping the caliphate is aimed at satisfying the prevailing views, including those of the Ḥanbalites. Like them, he substantiates his assertions by traditions that are traced back to contemporaries. However, unlike them, he demonstrates Mu‘āwiya’s unwavering ambition. His rendering bears witness to defense of the ‘Abbāsids and ‘Alī. Accordingly, the aim in the account of the first “civil war” is to bridge over moderate differences of opinion and suppress extremist points of view, to find a compromise that might unite all moderate forces against radical tendencies.<sup>92</sup>

Petersen argues that Ṭabarī’s aversion to extreme Shī‘ism dictates his use of Sayf’s “corrupt” transmission, at the expense of more reliable authorities, an argument to which we shall later return in this book.<sup>93</sup> At the same time, the *History* has been built up as a defense against the Mu‘tazilite attempt to introduce rational views, to historiography as well, on the basis of “rational deductions and intellectual *edificatio*,” so as to defend its cogency and justified position within society. For historians such as Ṭabarī, “[t]he worth of the historical narrative depended . . . solely on the narrator’s or transmitter’s competence in furnishing a loyal rendering, and it permitted only a formal criticism of the trustworthiness of the machinery of transmission,” concludes Petersen.<sup>94</sup>

As I argued in the introduction, to consider the material he received from his sources as actually expressing Ṭabarī’s own views, disguised

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>92</sup> Petersen, *‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya*, 156–7, 172–4.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 181–2.

by the authority of his predecessors, would mean to implicate Ṭabarī almost constantly in viewpoints that were not necessarily his. Such an approach may indiscriminately turn many items of historical information into a camouflage for ideological propaganda.<sup>95</sup> It is hardly acceptable, of course. After all, modern historians who, precisely like Ṭabarī, are also in need of their sources, should be careful not implicate their medieval predecessor across the board in charges they would not wish directed at themselves. This does not mean, of course, that, apart from the Sunnī-Shīʿī nascent schism, Ṭabarī did not have an axe to grind. But the circumstantial evidence being what it is, one is better advised to consider Ṭabarī's *own* ideologies as they may be reflected in the textual *production* rather than in the "facts" themselves, and in doing so, to exercise a modicum of caution and to avoid unwarranted generalizations.<sup>96</sup>

The 'Abbāsīd accession to the caliphate is my exemplar of a case where Ṭabarī's historical product is ideologically motivated. The report on the oath of allegiance to Abū al-'Abbās, the first 'Abbāsīd caliph, in 132/749,<sup>97</sup> serves Ṭabarī as an occasion to reflect more broadly on the 'Abbāsīd right to rule. He interrupts his enumeration of the remaining events of the hijrī year 132, the first of which is Abū al-'Abbās' crowning ceremony, and introduces a section under the title "The Origins of His [Abū al-'Abbās] Caliphate."<sup>98</sup> This is not simply a technical matter, but an ideological allusion. More concretely, Ṭabarī uses the opportunity to engage in what is generally considered an 'Abbāsīd piece of propaganda, which is given in the speech of the first 'Abbāsīd caliph himself that the editor of the *History* will soon quote. His aim is—what one might call—putting things in perspective. It is clear from the very beginning of this section that, together with the 'Abbāsīd family, our historian concocts

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<sup>95</sup> This is Tayob's methodology in analyzing the Saqīfa episode. See "Islamic Historiography," esp. 145, 150–67, where the report reproduced by Ṭabarī becomes in a sleight of the pen an expression of his ideological views. I return to the Saqīfa event in chapter 5 below. Tayob operates similarly in the case of the Battle of the Camel, *ibid.*, 230.

<sup>96</sup> Thus, according to Tayob, the conquest of Arabia is for Ṭabarī and most Muslims a religious battle of Jihād. See review in *MESA Bulletin* 28 (1994): 115. And as in generalizations, for another scholar, the stories of the conquests reflect the desire for booty and tribute, rather than the motive of Paradise. See M. Reza Afshari, review in *MESA Bulletin* 29 (1995): 82.

<sup>97</sup> *History*, vol. XXVII, 145 [III, 23].

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 147–58 [III, 23–34].

here—what modern readers would consider to be—a teleological story, namely, a story telling that the road to the legitimate caliphate surely leads from the Prophet to Abū al-‘Abbās:

According to what has been mentioned as coming from God’s Messenger, may God bless him, it all began when he informed al-‘Abbās b. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib that he would pass the caliphate to his descendants. His descendants therefore never stopped expecting it, and passed on the tradition among themselves.<sup>99</sup>

That the tradition, hence the expectation to assume the caliphate, was indeed current in the ‘Abbāsīd family, is further demonstrated by Ṭabarī in the following item, which he quotes from Madā’inī. Accordingly, when Abū Hāshim, ‘Alī’s grandson through Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanaffiya, met in Syria with Muḥammad, ‘Abbas’ great-grandson, he shared with him what was supposed to be a top secret piece of information (*‘ilm*)—mind you, so secret that, despite Abū Hāshim’s warning (“[d]o not divulge it to anyone”), it did find its way to the history books. “[T]his authority which men long for will be in your family,” is Abū Hāshim’s secretive prediction about the caliphate, namely, that it will become an ‘Abbāsīd prize. Obviously, the point of the short dialogue between the ‘Alīd and the young ‘Abbāsīd is propagandistic: to let the reader know that for the latter, Abū Hashim’s *‘ilm* was a well known secret, given the “fact” that the Prophet had said it all to ‘Abbās. “I knew it already,” replies Muḥammad the ‘Abbāsīd, and it is his turn now to warn his interlocutor to keep the secret, apparently from those, only too many, who need not know it.

Next we learn that the posture of secrecy concerning ‘Abbāsīd future glory is pure irony. For here is a case of an open secret, once again, so open that it was known to the Umayyads, not to speak of historians. Clearly, what is here at work is the *topos* (to which we shall have further occasions to return) of employing the archenemy—surely without his awareness—in the service of the opposite party’s propaganda. For what Ṭabarī tells us (quoting from Madā’inī) is that, years before the actual ‘Abbāsīd *coup*, the Umayyads worried about a rupture (*fatq*) destined to come from the direction of Khurāsān. Although, at this point, it is clear to Ṭabarī’s readers what it was that made the Umayyads worry as regards Khurāsān—in fact our

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 147 [III, 23].

historian himself will shortly remind us that “[w]e have already mentioned the story of Muḥammad b. ‘Alī and the propagandists whom he sent to Khurāsān”—there comes an explanation, set out within the context of an outline of the ‘Abbāsīd future “turning points,” as ascribed to ‘Abbās’ great-grandson. Following the actual occurrence of the third of these points, disruption in the region of Ifrīqiya, the ‘Abbāsīd leader initiated the revolt in Khurāsān.

Another “proof” of Umayyad knowledge about the ‘Abbāsīd future, hence an important building block in the ideological structure of the new ruling dynasty, is supplied in another frame story, this time quoted by Ṭabarī from Ibn Shābba. According to that source, Marwān b. Muḥammad, the last Umayyad caliph, was able to describe to his troops the appearance of Abū al-‘Abbās, “as he found it in books that such a one would kill the Umayyads.” The Umayyad caliph, unlike his erring messengers—who mistake Abū al-‘Abbās for his brother Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad, surnamed “the Imām,” and capture the wrong man for their master—knows the implications too well so as to not delude himself. He is aware that Ibrāhīm, the ‘Abbāsīd he is about to execute, is not the man destined to be victorious. But before the caliph sends his men back to look for the right person, the ‘Abbāsīds have already been warned and have fled from Iraq.<sup>100</sup>

Ṭabarī’s work for the ‘Abbāsīd propaganda is considerably subtle. One would assume that other cases may lend themselves to a similar analysis. It has been my contention in this chapter that one should scrutinize the *History* for manifold expressions of theology and ideology rather than be satisfied with one overarching paradigm.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 147–9 [III, 24–5].



## CHAPTER FOUR

### ṬABARĪ'S VOICE AND HAND

Turning from issues of theology and ideology to Ṭabarī's "methodology," disappointing as it may be, it is a matter of fact that we are not actually much informed about the latter. What was Ṭabarī's approach to historiography? What guided him in his selection of data? Like other early Muslim historians, the editor of the *History* did not state what were the principles of sequence and linkage which governed his efforts to give order, coherence, and meaning to the highly disparate materials which he brought together.<sup>1</sup> "Beyond a general Baghdad-centrism that was indicated by his own residence in the capital and by the audience for which he was writing, what were his views on historical events and personalities?" asks Rosenthal in his magisterial introduction to the collaborative English translation of the *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*. He observes that Ṭabarī's own statements about such issues are rare and others' reports on this matter are of dubious historicity.<sup>2</sup>

The taxonomy that is often practiced by modern scholarship has considered Ṭabarī sort of a bridge between the two sequential genres of Prophetic Tradition (*ḥadīth*)<sup>3</sup> and historiography (*ta'rikh*).<sup>4</sup> The *History*, in Khalidī's opinion, is "by far the most explicit defence of the Hadith method in historical writing." In fact, Ṭabarī "sought . . . making it [History] into a branch of Hadith."<sup>5</sup> Such "genetics" of classical Islamic scholarship<sup>6</sup> should be qualified, though, in the light of more recent suggestions that historiography as a more or less

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<sup>1</sup> Humphreys, *Islamic History*, 73.

<sup>2</sup> *History*, vol. I, 139–40.

<sup>3</sup> *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Ḥadīth."

<sup>4</sup> *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Ta'rikh, section Historical Writing."

<sup>5</sup> Khalidī, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 73, 74.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the heading "From Hadith to History," in *ibid.*, 28. For the "transition from Hadith to history," see *ibid.*, 30, 34, 43. Zuhri is "of course still the Hadith scholar," but also one of the earliest historians, "preparing the ground for the emergence of a new style of historical narrative." See *ibid.*, 33. For Wāqidī's *Maghāzī* as signaling the break between *ḥadīth* and historiography, see *ibid.*, 48.



distinct branch of scholarship emerged in Islamic societies before Ṭabarī's time. Furthermore, writers such as Wāqidi and Madā'inī—Ṭabarī's predecessors and sources he used extensively—were in fact *akhbār* experts, that is, historians.<sup>7</sup>

Precise classification apart, Khalidi views Ṭabarī's methodology (this is the term Khalidi uses) as a composite one and his enterprise he reduces to merely three or four characteristics of his predecessors' work: it echoes Ibn Ishāq's universalism, Wāqidi's consensualism and accuracy, Balādhuri's crisp verdicts<sup>8</sup> and Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam's moral epic.<sup>9</sup> Such characterization would certainly require some elaboration in order to be taken seriously.<sup>10</sup> Petersen's more concrete assessment sees in the *History* the application of the general principles that Ṭabarī adopts in his Qur'ānic exegesis, the use of sober commentaries and strict and narrow knowledge, as evolved in the philological schools—all of which make the historical project basically conservative. This, so Petersen assumes, is a plausible explanation of the annalistic format. Year by year and event after event, Ṭabarī builds up his exposition by means of parallel traditions and follows this "conservative traditional technique" fairly loyally. He "gives his reader, immediately and overwhelmingly, the impression of final authority." The difficulties do not appear until we encounter his peculiar choice of sources, and especially his preference for "a corrupt source like Sayf b. 'Umar to the pure ones, Abū Mikhnaf, 'Awāna and others,"<sup>11</sup> an issue that will need further discussion below.

According to Hodgson's pioneering discussion,<sup>12</sup> which others have adhered to more recently,<sup>13</sup> Ṭabarī's historical method is far from

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mūn* (Cambridge, 2000), 1–6. Cooperson, like Khalidi, identifies Ṭabarī as a "Ḥadīth-scholar" (22). For brief criticism of Khalidi's "genetics," see Lawrence I. Conrad, "'Umar at Sargh: The Evolution of an Umayyad Tradition on Flight from the Plague," in Stefan Leder, ed., *Story-Telling in the Framework of Non-Fictional Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden, 1998), 524.

<sup>8</sup> For Khalidi's contradictory statement about Ṭabarī's lack of verdict, see below.

<sup>9</sup> Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 73.

<sup>10</sup> The analogy with Ibn Ishāq is problematic, not only for the reason that his *Sīra* dominates the sections in the *History* that are devoted to the Prophet; hence, there is not much that can actually stand for comparison between Ṭabarī and Ibn Ishāq. As for the other three, one wishes that Khalidi had more to say to justify their characterization and how the features he ascribes to them are relevant to Ṭabarī's own writing. See *ibid.*, 45, 47–8, 61, 65–6.

<sup>11</sup> Petersen, *Alī and Mu'awiya*, 149–50.

<sup>12</sup> Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. I, 352.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g., Joel Kraemer, "Translator's Foreword," *History*, vol. XXXIV, p. XX.

embodying sophisticated historical principles. It seems, at least at first sight, "to rule out any interpretive intent at all—to consist merely in the driest chronicling of data. Ṭabarī rarely speaks in his own voice, except in jejune frame or transition passages. What he has to say is told purely by judicious selection, arrangement, and documentation of verbatim reports which he has received." Interpretation or lack thereof, is a crucial point to which we will have to return. Unfortunately, Hodgson does not explicate whether, after the "first sight," there is room for a second sight and, if indeed, what its possible implication could be.

Mainly on the basis of Ṭabarī's account of 'Uthmān's murder, an episode that is at the center of Chapter 6 below, Hodgson concludes that Ṭabarī

. . . cannot make his own conclusions explicit; he is like the detective who would give in immaculate detail every piece of evidence which he has found . . . but in the end would fail to set forth his reconstruction of it, leaving you to draw your own conclusions from the evidence he has set in order before you. Unless you have something of the mind of a detective yourself, you are likely to miss the point.

Here, the verbatim quotation of the sources, otherwise severely limited,<sup>14</sup> has its advantages. First, it allows an accuracy of detail. Second, it preserves the vivacity of style that, according to Hodgson, a judicious legal mind such as Ṭabarī's was unable to duplicate on its own. Finally, it allows Ṭabarī to avoid commitment on any given issue, in fact even to "suggest two contradictory conclusions at once to two different sorts of people."

Why did the editor of the *History* have such an interest? Why was it important for him, as Hodgson suggests, pleasing a wide audience? His answer is that, teaching his own system of *fiqh*, Ṭabarī's viewpoints were sufficiently at odds with the zealously *hadīth*-minded faction, then dominant in Baghdad, for it to distrust his loyalty to what it regarded as proper Sunnī doctrine. At one time, indeed, our writer had barely escaped lynching. According to Hodgson, this explains Ṭabarī's non-committal writing of history. His neutral historiography would mitigate the conflict he engendered in his other occupation as jurist.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This is an observation that can be challenged, as we have seen in Chapter 1 above.

<sup>15</sup> Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. I, 352–3.

To this explanation, similarly pointing out Ṭabarī's reluctance to speak in his own voice, to state explicitly the sense and significance of the materials that he had so laboriously assembled, Humphreys adds two more. One is the requirement in Ṭabarī's milieu to convey *objective* knowledge of those past events that were generally believed to possess religious or some other significance. "The historian's task was decisively not to interpret or evaluate the past as such." The other explanation is that an early Muslim historian, who spoke about the past in his own voice, "would inevitably be regarded as no serious scholar but as a mere propagandist for one or another faction. For an historian to be accepted as an objective transmitter of reliable facts about . . . religiously sensitive events, he had to disclaim personal responsibility for the statements in his works."<sup>16</sup>

The observations and explanations offered by Hodgson and Humphreys require some comment, however. Hodgson's, which hinges Ṭabarī's methodology on the danger posed by Baghdadī zealots, is quite a superficial argument; it certainly does not speak well for Ṭabarī's reputation as a historian, when he is thus represented as sacrificing his true views for the sake of his own peace of mind and body. Besides, Ṭabarī's alleged conflict with the Ḥanbalites, as pointed out more recently by Rosenthal, is reported too confusedly to attach to it much bearing on the formation of the *History*. Indeed, the conflict came to a head only after 290/903, too late to affect the work in question.<sup>17</sup> The problem with Humphreys's explanation is different: his assumption about the requirement of the classical Muslim historian to supply "objective knowledge" and display neutrality is unsubstantiated and could be regarded as markedly anachronistic. It is erroneously informed by a modernist view of science, the "science" of history included.<sup>18</sup>

When it comes to El-Hibri, things become apparently easier. What puzzles Hodgson and Humphreys seems to him unproblematic, since there was no need, in the first place, for the compiler of the *History* to interject his own opinions. But this was not—as Humphreys sug-

<sup>16</sup> Humphreys, *Islamic History*, 74.

<sup>17</sup> *History*, vol. I, 69–78. Rosenthal notes that this is the case also as regards the *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*. And see Chapter 3 above for the Jarīrī school of law.

<sup>18</sup> That in the eyes of medieval Muslim scholars as well, history was not science, but a form of literature, is occasionally explicated. See for this, e.g., Rosenthal, *Historiography*, 32–42.

gests—because historians were expected to lay out just bare facts. For facts, as El-Hibri repeatedly tells us, are not what Islamic history is about, it being a complex structure of commentary and interpretation. However, even this could not grant the medieval writer freedom to express himself. For by doing that, he “would have undermined the aesthetic basis of the literary construct. The message of the text lay in the very encoded structure of symbolism, allusion, innuendo, symmetry, and intertextuality that governed the make-up of the historical text.” It is only at this point, so El-Hibri implies, that the real question should be posed: Why was there such evasiveness in the narration to begin with? He dismisses both the need for caution in the face of political authority, and the explanation that one would anticipate from his own analysis, which puts a premium on games of tropology and art for art’s sake. Instead, El-Hibri’s argument is that the elusive nature of the writing of history was contrived because it touched upon issues even more sensitive than caliphal politics. In other words, the chroniclers were not particularly concerned with saving their skins, as Hodgson, Humphreys and others suggest. Rather, it was public responsibility that dictated the nature of the historiographical product. And since historical narratives about the *umma* carried religious and philosophical implications, their writers did not think they should be accessible to every reader. In El-Hibri’s depiction, classical historiography takes the shape of an exclusive matter, akin to the Druze religion, to give a superficial analogy. And not only to presumably uncultivated readers were the historical narratives hard stuff. Also the “orthodox milieu” would view them with resentment for the unpopular theme of civil war and other troublesome subjects that they raised.<sup>19</sup>

Thus far for the diversity of scholarly views. Be that as it may, as rightly pointed out by Hodgson (and Humphreys and El-Hibri), this much can be agreed upon: Ṭabarī rarely speaks in his own voice, if by “voice” we do not mean simply introductory sentences or some editorial comments of limited or technical significance. For these are relatively abundant: one can find the editor of the *History* introducing scholarly, minor debates,<sup>20</sup> expressing his own opinion on

<sup>19</sup> El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 217–18.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g., the controversy over the (folkloric) personality of Khidr, *History*, vol. III, 4–5 [I, 415–16]. For the dispute on the precise day of the revelation, see vol. VI, 62 [I, 1142]. For the dispute on the identity of the first believer, see *ibid.*,

such questions as the age of the Prophet at the time of the revelation,<sup>21</sup> the first Islamic prescription,<sup>22</sup> and the precise dates of various events.<sup>23</sup> Ṭabarī updates the history of Khadija's dwelling place and tells the reader/visitor that "[t]he stone which is at the door of the house to the left as you go in is the stone beneath which the Messenger of God used to sit to shelter himself when people threw stones at him."<sup>24</sup> There are several informative interventions of this kind.<sup>25</sup>

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80 [I, 1159]. For the existence in Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra* of a different account on the expedition of Rajī', see vol. VII, 145 [I, 1434]. For a difference of opinions on the question of what was the expedition that followed the one against the Banū Naḍir, see *ibid.*, 161 [I, 1453]. For the different numbers of the *ṣayāra*, see vol. IX, 124 [I, 1763]. For the different versions of the Ubulā story, see vol. XI, 14 [I, 2025–6]. For differences concerning the reason for Yazdajird's journey to Khurāsān, see vol. XIV, 51 [I, 2680]. For the different opinions as to who led the Pilgrimage in 39/659–60, see vol. XVII, 202 [I, 3447–8]. For disagreement on the length of Walīd b. Yazīd's caliphate, see vol. XXVI, 164 [II, 1810]. For different reports on what Fath was carrying, see vol. XXXVI, 60 [III, 1777]. For the precise date on which Abū al-'Abbās, al-Muwaffaq's son, shot an arrow at the crane, see vol. XXXVII, 21 [III, 1957].

<sup>21</sup> *History*, vol. VI, 60 [I, 1139].

<sup>22</sup> *History*, vol. VI, 77 [I, 1156].

<sup>23</sup> For Ṭabarī's opinion concerning disputes about dating, see e.g., vol. V, 415–16 [I, 1070–72]. For his opinion concerning the dispute on the chronology of the descendants of Ishmael, see vol. VI, 160–61 [I, 1254–5]. For his assessing of the dating of Ḥasan b. 'Alī's birth, see vol. VII, 92 [I, 1367]. For Ṭabarī's initial rejection of the report on Mihrān and Jarīr, see vol. XI, 214 [I, 2201–02]. For Ṭabarī's opinion on the date of the Qādisiyya battle, see vol. XII, 161 [I, 2377]. For the exact sequence of the governors of Egypt in the time of 'Alī, see vol. XVI, 176 [I, 3235]. For his opinion on the date of Mu'taṣim's expedition to Qātūl, see vol. XXXIII, 32 [III, 1184]. For his opinion on the date of capturing of the rebel Māzyār, see *ibid.*, 146 [III, 1274].

<sup>24</sup> *History*, vol. VI, 50 [I, 1130].

<sup>25</sup> A cluster of Ṭabarī's interventions can be found in the part dealing with the early career of the Prophet, see e.g., vol. VI, 51 [I, 1130], 60 [I, 1139], 63 [I, 1143], 64 [I, 1143–4], 67 [I, 1146–7], 76–7 [I, 1156–7], 101 [I, 1185], 105 [I, 1189], 138–9 [I, 1227–8], 142 [I, 1232], 145 [I, 1234], 150 [I, 1242], 155 [I, 1248–9], 157 [I, 1250]. For a note on the Muslims participating in Badr, see vol. VII, 83 [I, 1357]. For an introductory note to the affair of the Banū Qaynuqā', see *ibid.*, 88 [I, 1362]. For transition passages, see e.g., *ibid.*, 120 [I, 1402–03]. For 'Umar being the first caliph who was entitled *amīr al-mu'mīnīn*, see vol. XIV, 113 [I, 2743]. For a brief note that identifies the name of the man who killed a supporter of Ḥusayn at Karbalā', see vol. XIX, 156 [II, 361]. For an explanatory note about the Rāfiḍīs and the origin of their name, see vol. XXVI, 38 [II, 1700–01]. For Naṣr b. Sayyār's citadel being "nowadays . . . the *dār al-imārah*," see *ibid.*, 117 [I, 1767]. For the dates of death of the 'Abbāsīd Muḥammad b. 'Alī and his father, see *ibid.*, 120 [II, 1769]. For Khayzurān being the directing influence behind Hārūn al-Rashīd's candidacy, see vol. XXX, 56 [III, 578]. For Ṭāhir's absolute success in battles, see vol. XXXI, 156 [III, 887]. For the name Zayd al-Nār, see vol. XXXII, 26–7 [III, 986]. For Ma'mūn's servants at wine sessions, see *ibid.*, 101–02 [III,

There are occasions when Ṭabarī does offer his opinion more extensively: he explains the reasons for numerous events and phenomena,<sup>26</sup> condenses developments and telescopes sequences,<sup>27</sup> or draws conclusions and provides interpretations and speculations. Thus, he is of the opinion that had Ḥusayn b. Ismāʿīl b. Ibrāhīm, a commander in Mustaʿīn's army, wished to catch up with Yaḥyā b. ʿUmar, the Shīʿite rebel in 250/864–5, he could have done so.<sup>28</sup> Or, when Ibn Sunbāṭ, the Armenian local lord, tells Bābak the rebel, that “. . . they [the local princes] are people of your own house, for sons have come to you by them!” Ṭabarī offers to clarify for us what is a somewhat obscure statement: whenever Bābak learnt of a beautiful daughter or sister of one of the nobles, he would seek her in marriage but, when refused, would conduct a raid and seize her, together with some property.<sup>29</sup> Or, Ṭabarī supports an account, transmitted by one ʿAlī b. Mujāhid, concerning the chronology of the ancient Arabs (“descendants of Ishmael”) and alludes to the soundness of a chronological system that is based on a local event as the criterion of dating; which accounts for differences of dating among ancient Arab poets. As an example of such a criterion among the

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1041]. For the Crete colony, see *ibid.*, 165 [III, 1092]. For the prison known “until today” as the prison of Afshīn, see vol. XXXIII, 184 [III, 1307]. For ʿUmar b. Faraj's custom to sit in a mosque, see vol. XXXIV, 66 [III, 1371]. For wine not being prohibited to the army, see vol. XXXVI, 46 [III, 1760]. For Muwaffaq's consistent policy against the leader of the Zanj, see vol. XXXVII, 105–06 [III, 2058].

<sup>26</sup> Ṭabarī frequently purports to explain an event by the recurrent formula “The reasons for . . . are . . .” See e.g., for what provoked Quraysh's expedition to Uḥud, *History*, vol. VII, 105 [I, 1383]. For the reason for Ibn Uthāl poisoning ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. al-Khālīd, vol. XVIII, 88 [II, 82]. For the reasons for Yazīd's dismissal of ʿAmr b. Saʿīd from the governorship of Medina, vol. XIX, 189 [II, 395]. For the reasons for the battle at ʿAyn al-Jarr, vol. XXVI, 249–50 [II, 1876]. For the “Reasons of the Falling out between Muḥammad al-Amīn and ʿAbdallāh al-Maʿmūn,” vol. XXXI, 22 [III, 776]. For “The Reasons behind the Revolt of Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm,” vol. XXXII, 13 [III, 976]. For “The Reasons for this Battle between al-Afshīn and Bābak,” vol. XXXIII, 19 [III, 1174]. For the reasons for the occupation of al-Ahwāz, vol. XXXVI, 111 [III, 1837]. For the reason for the mob's attack on Ibrāhīm al-Khalījī, vol. XXXVII, 81 [III, 2027]. For the reason for a Greek page of the Zanj shooting an arrow at Muwaffaq, *ibid.*, 82 [III, 2029].

<sup>27</sup> See e.g., the report on Yaḥyā b. Zayd b. ʿAlī, *History*, vol. XXVI, 120–21 [II, 1770–72].

<sup>28</sup> *History*, vol. XXXV, 17 [III, 1518].

<sup>29</sup> *History*, vol. XXXIII, 77–8 [III, 1223].

Quraysh, Ṭabarī gives the “Year of the Elephant,” the (mythological) episode of Abrahā’s siege on Mecca.<sup>30</sup>

However, Ṭabarī does not always stick to that minor level. Occasionally, as we shall shortly see, he does not hide his personal views and is on a par with his sources in this regard. After all, long before the *History*, they had occasionally pronounced judgment on different *dramatis personae*. To them, Abū Sufyān b. al-Ḥārith, the Prophet’s cousin, was the strongest man ever seen,<sup>31</sup> and ‘Uqba b. Nāfi‘, the conqueror of Tunis (Ifriqiya) under Mu‘āwiya’s rule, was “the best of governors and the best commander.”<sup>32</sup> There were plenty evil characters as well. Abū Jahl, the Prophet’s fierce opponent, was a “loathsome and evil man.”<sup>33</sup> ‘Umayr b. Wahb, also at one time opponent to the Prophet, was “one of the evil men of Quraysh.”<sup>34</sup> Ka‘b b. al-Ashraf and Ḥuyayy b. al-Akhtab, two Arabian Jewish leaders, were each “enemy of God.”<sup>35</sup> ‘Utba b. Abī Lahab, the Prophet’s son-in-law, was “the evildoer, the son of the evildoer” and “enemy of God.”<sup>36</sup> Ḥaṭīb b. Umayya b. Rāfi‘ the Anṣārī “was an

<sup>30</sup> *History*, vol. XI, 160–61 [I, 1254–5]. For the Year of the Elephant, see *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “al-Fīl.”

<sup>31</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 12 [I, 1162]. See on him *ibid.*, 9 n. 65.

<sup>32</sup> *History*, vol. XVIII, 103 [II, 94]. For Salāma b. al-Akwa‘ being like a “beast of prey,” see vol. VIII, 48 [I, 1507]. For Umm Qirfa being most powerful, see *ibid.*, 96 [I, 1558]. For the sincere people whose Islam was beyond reproach, see vol. IX, 50 [I, 1695]. For Fayrūz being more clever than the narrator, see vol. X, 30 [I, 1861]. For the Byzantine Arṭabūn “the most farsighted, and the most harmful,” see vol. XII, 185 [I, 2398]. For Muḥallim being the most corpulent Bedouin in Medina, see vol. XIII, 34 [I, 2454]. For Sumayr b. al-Rayyān being “one of the most courageous of the men,” see vol. XVII, 61 [I, 3314]. For ‘Alī b. Abī Shimr being one of the pious ascetics of the Arabs and among the best of them, see vol. XVIII, 36 [II, 31]. For Wā’il b. Ḥujr being superstitious, see *ibid.*, 77 [II, 71]. For Nu‘mān as a tolerant, pious man who preferred the gentle approach, see vol. XIX, 29 [II, 238]. For ‘Ubaydallāh as a person “whose fiery spirit was unapproachable,” see *ibid.*, 176 [II, 383]. For Yazīd never considering fleeing from battle, see vol. XXIV, 136 [II, 1403]. For Manṣūr being “like a solitary hawk,” see vol. XXVIII, 281 [III, 308]. For Ja‘far having one of the acutest intelligences and soundest perceptions among all mankind, see vol. XXX, 206 [III, 670]. For Ḥasan b. al-Ḥusayn as “the most incorruptible of men with regard to taking dirhams and dinars,” see vol. XXXIII, 167 [1293]. For “the most courageous and valiant of the abominable one’s men,” see vol. XXXVII, 105 [III, 2057].

<sup>33</sup> *History*, vol. VI, 149 [I, 1240].

<sup>34</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 78 [I, 1352].

<sup>35</sup> For Ka‘b, see *ibid.*, 94 [I, 1368], where such characterization embraces the alleged depiction originally used by the *dramatis personae* (e. g., Muḥammad b. Maslama, *ibid.*, 97 [I, 1372]). For Ḥuyayy, see vol. VIII, 14 [I, 1471], 35 [I, 1494].

<sup>36</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 74 [I, 1347].

elderly man who had grown old in the Jāhiliyyah, and his being a Hypocrite appeared that day," that is, after the Prophet's battle at Uḥud, for (selfish as he was) he refused to rejoice in the death of his son just for the "garden of rue" that he would now (that is, after his death), enjoy.<sup>37</sup> Musaylima b. Ḥabīb, the infamous "false prophet" at the beginning of Islam, was an "arch-liar."<sup>38</sup> And the Kūfans, who in 121/738–9 supported the rebel Zayd b. 'Alī, could not be but "wretches."<sup>39</sup>

Surely, not only personages but also acts and deeds had been assessed and valued by Ṭabarī's sources. "They agreed upon the evil course on which they were set," tells one Ḥakīm b. Ḥizām, a Qurashī who had participated in the battle of Badr, was miraculously saved on that occasion, and later became a devout Muslim, as he assesses the negative turn that the Meccans took at Badr.<sup>40</sup> When the Jewish tribe of the Banū Naḍīr were expelled by the Prophet's command, "[t]hey went with a splendour and a glory the like of which had never been seen from any tribe in their time."<sup>41</sup> In the Battle of the Trench between Muḥammad and the Meccan polytheists "[t]he hypocrisy of some of the hypocrites became evident."<sup>42</sup> And on the Day of Aghwāth, in the year 14/635–6, "the Persians suffered from the camels more than the Muslims had suffered on the Day of Armāth from the elephants."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 135 [I, 1423].

<sup>38</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 106 [I, 1749], 195 [I, 1824]. For the three who were the mischief-makers (*shayāṭīn*) of the tribe, see *ibid.*, 103 [I, 1746]. For the insanity that was in Sinān, see vol. XIX, 162 [II, 367]. For 'Alī b. 'Īsā's intoxication with power and his base nature, see vol. XXXI, 63 [III, 808].

<sup>39</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 16 [II, 1680].

<sup>40</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 51 [I, 1316].

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 160 [I, 1452–3].

<sup>42</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 16 [I, 1473].

<sup>43</sup> *History*, vol. XII, 100 [I, 2309]. The Day of Armāth was a prelude to the Qādisiyya battle. Similarly, for Quraysh being gripped by what the Prophet said "as though every man of them had a bird perched on his head," see vol. VI, 102 [I, 1186]. For Ḥudaybiyya being the greatest victory, see vol. VIII, 90 [I, 1550]. For the Muslims being "like sheep on a cold and rainy night because the loss of their Prophet," see vol. X, 14 [I, 1848]. For Fayrūz coming "like a camel," see *ibid.*, 32 [I, 1861]. For the Muslims attacking the Persians "like a lion who struggles with his prey," see vol. XII, 7 [I, 2215]. For Mīnās the Byzantine suffering a defeat he had never suffered like it, see *ibid.*, 178 [II, 2393]. For problems never being dealt with behind closed doors, see vol. XIII, 191 [II, 2606]. For the understanding of rulers that they should assist each other, see vol. XIV, 56 [II, 2685]. For 'Abdallāh b. Khabbāb's blood flowing "like the lace of a sandal," see vol. XVII,



Ṭabarī follows suit. Summing up the section on the nomination of ‘Alī to the caliphate, which is based on a variety of sources, all of which report that the Medinese actually imposed the post on ‘Alī and forced Ṭalḥa and Zubayr to be the first to swear allegiance, our writer observes that “[t]he authority of the Medinese was thus acknowledged. All would have been as in the past and they would disperse to their homes, had it not been for the dissenters and riffraff among them.”<sup>44</sup> Employing the derogatory term *ghawghā’* on this occasion, Ṭabarī takes the liberty of implying a critical stand on the matter. In another instance, speaking of the unrest in Baghdad in 255/869, and the breaching of the prison there by troops and local crowds, Ṭabarī sees it as “one of the most significant events [or elements?] that caused both the privileged and the common people to lose any fear they had of Sulaymān b. ‘Abdallāh,” the governor of the city.<sup>45</sup> Here, as in the preceding example, the perspective is of a speculative nature. Describing Nawrūz (the Persian New Year) celebrations in Baghdad in 284/897, Ṭabarī notes that, by pouring water, even upon policemen, “the populace exceeded the bounds of propriety.”<sup>46</sup> His own assessment, critical in the extreme, is that “[t]his was one of Islam’s greatest troubles ever and was most reminiscent of the Antichrist and his companions. Moreover, it was an open show of despicable disloyalty.”<sup>47</sup>

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124 [I, 3373–4]. For “such fighting . . . never seen since my Lord created me,” *ibid.*, 180 [I, 3427]. For the people of Medina going out in a manner the like of which has not been seen, see vol. XIX, 219 [II, 423]. For Leo deceiving Maslama “by means of a trick that would shame even a woman,” see vol. XXIV, 41 [II, 1316]. For the men of Maṣmughān “reverting to a savage state like the asses of the wilderness,” see vol. XXVIII, 74 [III, 137]. For ‘Abdallāh b. Ḥasan’s “broken” heart that caused his death, see *ibid.*, 137 [III, 186]. For ‘Īsā b. Mūsā’s forces being “like a swarm of locusts,” see *ibid.*, 193 [III, 230]. For the wind in the reign of Mahdī that was so strong “that we would be swept away to the Last Judgment,” see vol. XXIX, 250 [III, 530–31]. For the ‘Alīd troops amassed together like a “compact ball of spun thread,” see vol. XXX, 26 [III, 559]. For ‘Alī b. ‘Īsā’s body being carried as a “donkey would be carried,” see vol. XXXI, 55 [III, 802]. For Abū Zambīl slaughtering Zuhayr b. al-Musayyab “like a sacrificial victim,” see vol. XXXII, 51 [1004–05].

<sup>44</sup> *History*, vol. XVI, 15 [I, 3078], my translation. For the kind of incident that caused the Zanj rebels to crumble, see vol. XXXVII, 111 [III, 2064].

<sup>45</sup> *History*, vol. XXXVI, 18 [III, 1729].

<sup>46</sup> For this and other Nawrūz customs see my *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge, 1993), 41–3.

<sup>47</sup> *History*, vol. XXXVIII, 45 [III, 2163]. This appears in the Istanbul manuscript, which had not been consulted for the Leiden edition of the Arabic text. See

Elsewhere, our historian's disdain for astrologers is expressed in his report *sub anno* 284/897, when he contrasts their prediction of heavy rainfall and flood damages with the fact that people actually saw little rain in that year, so little that they had to pray for it. "God proved . . . the trickery, and the deception of the astrologers as well as the trickery of those who believed them," Ṭabarī leaves no doubt as to who should be trusted.<sup>48</sup> Commenting on an exchange between the 'Abbāsīd caliph Muhtadī and Mūsā b. Bughā, the son of a Turkish army commander, and a general in his own right, the editor of the *History* tells his reader why he should be suspicious of the latter's promise that he had sought only the caliph's good.<sup>49</sup> Unquestionably, most repugnant for Ṭabarī and his informants was the leader of the revolting Zanj, 'Alī b. Muḥammad. After some straightforward references, they all abandon their sort of "PC" attitude and use terms such as "the abominable (*khabīth*)," "God's enemy," "traitor (*khā'in*)," as well as other derogatory terms.<sup>50</sup> Ṭabarī himself characterizes "every act" the Zanj leader committed as "atrocious" or "a calamity (*azīma*)," a characterization influencing his selection of material regarding the "outrages" perpetrated by the leader's followers. For as Ṭabarī explains, he decided not to mention these outrages since, in comparison to those of their leader's, none was especially atrocious.<sup>51</sup> "Enemeies of God" and "wicked" are also epithets used to describe Zikrawayh b. Mihrawayh and his Qarmaṭian rebels in 293/905–06.<sup>52</sup>

Now, even when we view all these interventions in proportion and acknowledge, yet again, the sparseness of Ṭabarī's own voice, two

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Rosenthal, "Translator's Foreword," *ibid.*, pp. XIX–XXI, where he argues for the plausible authenticity of additions in the Istanbul recension.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 69 [III, 2182]. Similarly, for Ṭabarī's description of the darkness that fell upon Egypt in 26 Rabi II 284/ 2 June 897, see *ibid.*, 44 [III, 2163].

<sup>49</sup> *History*, vol. XXXVI, 70 [III, 1789]. For his depiction of the government forces fleeing "most ignominiously," see vol. XXXVIII, 164 [III, 2263].

<sup>50</sup> E.g., *History*, vol. XXXVI, 66 [III, 1785], 111 [III, 1837]; vol. XXXVII, 37 [III, 1976], 39 [III, 1979], 40 [III, 1979], 41 [III, 1981], 45 [III, 1985], 46 [III, 1986], 49 [III, 1991], 53 [III, 1996], 74 [III, 2020], 98–9 [III, 2049], 100 [III, 2051], 102 [III, 2053], 106 [III, 2058]. The shift in characterization of the leader of the Zanj has also been noted by David Waines, "Translator's Foreword," vol. XXXVI, p. XVII.

<sup>51</sup> *History*, vol. XXXVI, 50 [III, 1765].

<sup>52</sup> *History*, vol. XXXVIII, 161, [III, 2260], 166 [III, 2264], 167 [III, 2266], 179 [III, 2275].

comments are here in order. First, the absence of an explicit authorial voice is no guarantee of a constantly neutral stand, when other mechanisms of representation, such as the very selection—as pointed out by Hodgson himself—and (which is the other side of the coin) suppression of information, are at work. Ṭabarī can, and, indeed does, use these and other options to communicate his view on crucial historical subjects, as well as on a variety of minor matters. In fact, Hodgson, in his discussion as reproduced at the outset of this chapter, implies the “missing” second sight that would enable one to fully grasp Ṭabarī’s complex, sophisticated representation. For a reader who is not satisfied with a simplistic story and who is ready to face challenges, Ṭabarī—so Hodgson maintains—is willing to provide the leads such a reader requires. This is clearly manifested in the *History*’s account of ‘Uthmān’s murder. But before we turn to this case in more detail in Chapter 6 below, we must clarify the precise nature of Ṭabarī’s subtle intervention and his choices that, among other, subvert the mimetic claim.

\* \* \*

One way by which Ṭabarī implies his view of some matter is introducing or concluding a particular narration with information that affects, in some way, the matter in focus. Take his report on the unrest following ‘Alī’s accession and the background to the so-called Battle of the Camel, of which I shall have more to say. Ṭabarī inserts the opinion, stemming from one Sa‘īd b. Zayd, that “[f]our Companions of the Prophet never got together and surpassed others in achieving something good without ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib being one of them.”<sup>53</sup> This is an explicit statement that bespeaks ill of the nature of the *ṣaḥāba*. More concretely, it is employed to castigate the Companions’ attitude during the event that Ṭabarī will shortly unfold: their lack of support for ‘Alī.<sup>54</sup> Then, in the account on the capture of Hānī b. ‘Urwa, the Yemeni chief of Kūfa,<sup>55</sup> by ‘Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād, the governor, an affair that serves as an early prelude to Ḥusayn’s martyrdom at Karbalā’, Ṭabarī inserts a note to the effect

<sup>53</sup> *History*, vol. XVI, 36 [I, 3095–6].

<sup>54</sup> This is also implied in Tayob, “Ṭabarī on the Companions,” 209. But see the view that there is lack of criticism of the Companion’s role in early Islamic history, in *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s. v. “Ṣaḥāba.”

<sup>55</sup> See *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “al-Hānī b. ‘Urwa.”

that the man who had brought Hānī was 'Amr b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Zubaydī, a leader of the Yemeni tribe of Madhhij. Our historian continues with another anecdote, in which Zubaydī is characterized, in front of 'Ubaydallāh, as a child who will end up in hell fire. The intrusion clearly works to ridicule Zubaydī.<sup>56</sup>

Another example comes from a report on the aftermath of the Karbalā' affair, following some information on the looting of the trousers that were on Ḥusayn's corpse. Ṭabarī inserts the note that the plunderer, Baḥr b. Ka'b, would thereafter suffer from hands that "were so wet in winter that they used to sprinkle water and . . . so dry in summer that they were like sticks."<sup>57</sup> This could be taken as an infliction of a divine punishment for violating Ḥusayn's honor.

We have already had an occasion to see Ṭabarī's disdain for astrologers. It comes up on yet another occasion, this time obliquely, in the portrayal of the 'Abbāsīd Wāthiq. When this caliph was stricken with the sickness from which he would die in 232/847, he called upon the astrologers, apparently to learn from them about his fate. They "considered his illness, star, and horoscope, and predicted that he would live a long time, estimating fifty years in the future." Ṭabarī contents himself with a concluding sentence that reiterates information that the reader already knows: "But in less than ten days he [Wāthiq] died."<sup>58</sup> No further comment is needed to expose the irony created and, thereby, astrology's utter futility.

Another case, with entirely different results, concerns Muntaṣir's fate. We are told that this caliph received the oath of allegiance on 4 Shawwal 247/11 December 861<sup>59</sup> and, unfortunately for him, died half a year later almost to the day.<sup>60</sup> Informing the reader of his death and its cause, Ṭabarī now inserts the following statement: "I often heard people say, when the caliphate passed to al-Muntaṣir, that from the time he acceded to rule until his death he would live for six months, as did Shīrawayh b. Kīsrā after he killed his father. The [account] was spread among the populace and the notables."<sup>61</sup> Unlike the earlier case of false prediction made by the astrologers

<sup>56</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 19–20 [II, 230].

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 159 [II, 364].

<sup>58</sup> *History*, vol. XXXIV, 53 [III, 1364].

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 190 [III, 1471].

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 218–19 [III, 1495].

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 219 [III, 1496].

and clearly used against them, the latter case is a prediction that comes true, possibly because it is not made by astrologers but by the *vox populi*. At any rate, Muntaṣir's destiny is thus presented as foreclosed, and for a good reason: he had masterminded his father's murder.<sup>62</sup> Like Shīrawayh (591–628 A.D.), who had killed his father Parvīz,<sup>63</sup> Muntaṣir deserved divine and swift punishment for his patricide.

There is perhaps no other point at which Ṭabarī creates a greater sense of dissonance than at the conclusion of the 150 or so pages he devotes to a detailed description of the Battle of the Camel (36/656) that took place between 'Alī and the opposition led by 'Ā'isha, the Prophet's widow, and the renowned Companions Ṭalḥa and Zubayr.<sup>64</sup> An item of information that Ṭabarī takes from Sayf b. 'Umar relates that, before her departure for Baṣra, "'Alī equipped 'Ā'ishah with everything she needed in the way of riding beasts, provisions, and other baggage and sent with her all those who had fought on her side and had survived, except for anyone who wished to stay behind. He also selected forty prominent Baṣran women to go with her."<sup>65</sup> Before 'Ā'isha was about to set off, 'Alī came to her "to stand and bid her farewell." She had the following to say to those present: "My sons . . . some of us criticized others of us, saying they were slow or excessive.<sup>66</sup> But don't let any of you hold it against any others over anything you might hear about this." 'Ā'isha here clearly delimits the practical implication of any disagreement that had existed between two parties that just finished fighting, allegedly over their attitude toward the murder of 'Uthmān. Then, referring to her relationship to 'Alī in particular, she continues: "By Allāh! There was never anything in the past between me and 'Alī other than what usually happens between a woman and her male in-laws. In my opinion he has shown himself one of the best of men, despite my criticism." To which 'Alī, apparently only too happily, rushes to agree: "By Allāh men . . . She has spoken the truth and

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 178–80 [III, 1458]. See for that above.

<sup>63</sup> See *ibid.*, 219 n. 712 about Mas'ūdī's report that the caliph saw a Persian inscription telling Shīrawayh's fate.

<sup>64</sup> See *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Djamal;" Madelung, *Succession*, 157–76.

<sup>65</sup> *History*, vol. XVI, 170 [I, 3231].

<sup>66</sup> Adrian Brockett, the translator, interprets it as a reference to the dealing with 'Uthmān. See *ibid.*, 170 n. 1066.

nothing but the truth. That was all there was between us.” Now comes an additional statement the flattering intent of which is not difficult to grasp: “She’s the wife of your Prophet in this world and the Hereafter.”

Now, there is good reason to doubt whether there had never been anything in the past between ‘Ā’isha and ‘Alī but the usual (universal? patriarchal?) pattern of a somewhat strained relationship between a woman and her son in-law, in this case, not even far apart in age. Obviously, such is not the story that Ṭabarī and his sources tell us prior to the episode in question. In fact, ‘Ā’isha’s statement and ‘Alī’s approval thereof could be a source of cognitive dissonance when one examines the preceding story. For, according to one report, the reaction of the Prophet’s widow to the news of ‘Alī’s nomination was not favorable in the least. “[W]ould that the sky were overturned,” she exclaims.<sup>67</sup> We further learn that, as early as four months after ‘Uthmān’s murder and ‘Alī’s accession, a meeting took place at ‘Ā’isha’s home in Mecca, in which Ṭalḥa and Zubayr participated, and in which a call to fight ‘Alī was made.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, ‘Ā’isha looms prominent in the ranks of the opposition.<sup>69</sup> When Ṭalḥa and Zubayr capture ‘Uthmān b. Ḥunayf, ‘Alī’s governor in Baṣra, they send to the Prophet’s widow asking what they should do with the captive (“Kill him,” is her first reaction, then she changes her mind and orders to let him free).<sup>70</sup> Upon arriving in Baṣra, she writes a letter to the Kūfan Zayd b. Ṣūḥān, a former opponent to ‘Uthmān, in which she calls upon him to urge the people to abandon ‘Alī or, still better, rally them to her own camp.<sup>71</sup>

‘Ā’isha is also characterized as ‘Alī’s opponent in ‘Alī’s own speech, delivered upon learning that the Meccans were not inclined to rise up against her party (“the schismatics”). The caliph reports that Ṭalḥa, Zubayr and the “Mother of the Faithful” have joined together in discontent against his rule and “have called on the people to set things right.”<sup>72</sup> In another report, ‘Alī is worried as to which direction ‘Ā’isha’s party might take and what would be their destination.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 52 [I, 3111].

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 43 [I, 3102].

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 56–7 [I, 3115–16].

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 67–8 [I, 3126], 70 [I, 3129].

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 79 [I, 3138].

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 33–4 [I, 3093].

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 53 [I, 3112].

When he learns of the speech that the Prophet's widow made to the Pilgrims in Mecca and the move of his opponents in the direction of Baṣra, he makes preparations to go out against them, fearing that "the structure of the community will have been badly damaged."<sup>74</sup> When 'Ā'isha is at the halting post of the "water of Ḥaw'ab," on the Ḥijāz-Baṣra trail, Zubayr's son warns her to escape, since 'Alī is upon her.<sup>75</sup>

In sum, there is a clear gap between the story of the Battle of the Camel itself and its conclusion, as expressed in the exchange between 'Ā'isha and 'Alī. The end of the story supplies an unexpected turn-about and posits a peculiar meaning (or is it non-meaning?) to the event as a whole. Inserting 'Ā'isha's *post factum* assessment, and 'Alī's confirmation of it, Ṭabarī is able, without expressing his own voice, to subvert a straightforward meaning of the event. What kind of politics did go behind the scene to produce what is to the modern reader a sheer puzzle? What role, if any, did the narrator play? These are some of the questions that remain unanswered.

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Let us now turn to one further feature of Ṭabarī's method in the *History*: his frequent reproduction of more than one version concerning a single historical episode. Humphreys has already briefly observed that, whenever there is more than one version, reports may repeat, supplement, overlap, or flatly contradict one another.<sup>76</sup> One result that repetition produces is irony. Thus, what one might regard as a somewhat satirical side of 'Uthmān's death (not in real life, in the text, that is) is that the caliph dies several times over, according to the number of the extant versions.<sup>77</sup> A similar instance is the double death (so to speak) of Zayd b. 'Alī at the hand of the Umayyads in 121/739 and then in 122/740.<sup>78</sup>

More seriously, when almost identical versions follow one another, they often serve the purpose of enhancing the credibility of the report in question, or amplifying an episode.<sup>79</sup> Such is the case of the crucial

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 34 [I, 3093], 47 [I, 3106].

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 50 [I, 3109].

<sup>76</sup> Humphreys, *Islamic History*, 73.

<sup>77</sup> Hodgson, *Venture*, I, 353, has already noticed this.

<sup>78</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 4 [II, 1667], 47 [II, 1709].

<sup>79</sup> For the same in Greek historiography, see Gordon S. Shrimpton, *History and Memory in Ancient Greece* (Montreal, 1997), 107.

question as to which verse of the Qurʾān had been first revealed. In the first version, there is still some doubt, for the interlocutor believes it was 96:1, while a certain Abū Salama, an early Muslim, definitely rejects the possibility and asserts, on the authority of the Prophet himself, that it was 74:1. Immediately, there follows an almost identical version, but with a slightly different *isnād*.<sup>80</sup> Elsewhere, the account of the Prophet's letter to the Persian emperor (Kisrā), calling upon him to embrace Islam, is thrice repeated and in two versions we are given (twice) the text of the letter itself, although once in a somewhat abbreviated form. Twice we get the Prophet's *vaticinatio post eventum* reaction upon learning of the tearing of the letter by the Persian ruler: "His kingdom has been torn up."<sup>81</sup> Or, take the story, in the framework of Karbalā', of the fate of 'Abdallāh b. Ḥawza, Ḥusayn's opponent, who is cursed by the latter with hell fire. Ṭabarī chooses to reproduce three different versions of his gruesome death, all to be found in Abū Mikhnaf, as if a grim satisfaction with the man's fate and not just care for dry details, is at stake.<sup>82</sup>

The corroboration of some information by a second report, especially when the information is of dubious *vaticinatio post eventum* nature, for example, can be exemplified in the following case, where 'Āmir b. Ismā'īl reports a prediction made by Bukayr b. Mahān, a leader of the 'Abbāsīd movement at Kūfa, that he ('Āmir), an agent in the service of the 'Abbāsīds, would slay Marwān, the last Umayyad caliph. This account is corroborated by a second report, this time coming from a *shaykh* of the Bakr b. Wā'il tribe. The latter relates

<sup>80</sup> *History*, vol. VI, 73–4 [I, 1153–4].

<sup>81</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 110–12 [I, 1571].

<sup>82</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 131–2 [II, 337–8]. See also several versions relating that the Prophet received his mission at the age of forty and remained in Mecca for thirteen years, vol. VI, 154 [I, 1247]; vol. VII, 6–8 [I, 1261–3]. For the marriage of the Prophet to 'Ā'isha in Shawwāl of 1/622, see vol. VII, 41–2 [I, 1300–01]; the second version gives extra strength to the first. For 'Alī receiving the banner at Khaybar, see vol. VIII, 119–21 [I, 1579–80]. For 'Umar and the jade, see vol. XII, 193 [I, 2407–08]. For the view of the bridge from the Kūfan mosque, see vol. XIII, 75 [I, 2494]. For a repetition of a poem, transmitted by two somewhat different *isnāds*, on the occasion of the killing of Mu'arriḍ b. Ilāt in the Battle of the Camel, see vol. XVI, 171 [I, 3232]. For the report asserting the recitation of verses, see vol. XIX, 179 [II, 385]. For Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh making the mosque curtains unto chain armor for his associates, see vol. XXVIII, 200 [III, 236]. For the name of Qarṣaṭ, see vol. XXXVII, 172 [III, 2127]. Note that in the case of Usāma b. Zayd advancing to Dhū al-Marwa, the second version is not even repeated but is abbreviated as "a similar account." See vol. X, 17–18 [I, 1851].



that, while he was with Bukayr at Dayr Qunnā, east of the Tigris, he saw a young man passing by with two waterskins. To their question, the young man identified himself as ‘Āmir b. Ismā‘īl and then Bukayr is reported to use precisely the same words that ‘Āmir in his own account quotes: “[Y]ou will slay Marwān; it is as though I hear you cry: ‘Give it to them, bullies [in Persian].’” There is a third report, ascribed to the “shaykhs at Kūfa,” which serves to corroborate the earlier stories, by invoking the prophecy that the Banū Musliyya, to whom the aforementioned ‘Āmir belonged, would be the killers of Marwān.<sup>83</sup>

On the other hand, there are contrasting versions that indicate differences in matters such as dating,<sup>84</sup> the exact age of some deceased person,<sup>85</sup> or other disagreements that may seem trivial to the modern reader. Thus, reporting an encounter between a Khārijite woman and Maṣūr b. Jumhūr, the leader of the Kalb, who had helped plan the death of al-Walīd b. Yazīd, and was subsequently made governor of Iraq and Sind,<sup>86</sup> one version has it that the officer cut off the woman’s hand that had seized the bridle of his horse. It is immediately followed by a qualifying version, stating that he cut the rein of his horse while it was in her hand. This latter version obviously projects an image of a less cruel Maṣūr.<sup>87</sup>

Some versions may contradict each other concerning more serious matters, however, and thus leave the reader somewhat perplexed. For example, Ṭabarī produces two contradictory versions of the aforementioned story of the capture of Hānī b. ‘Urwa al-Murādī, a tribal leader at Kūfa, by the governor ‘Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād, and his cruel fate in 60/680. The first version, coming from the early historian ‘Umar b. Shabba,<sup>88</sup> emphasizes Hānī’s treachery. In contradistinction, Abū Mikhnaf and his sources exonerate Hānī from

<sup>83</sup> *History*, vol. XXVII, 174–5 [III, 50–51].

<sup>84</sup> E.g., the date of Muslim b. ‘Aqīl’s rising in Kūfa, *History*, vol. XIX, 64 [II, 271–2]. For different datings of Ḥusayn’s death, see *ibid.*, 82 [II, 287–8]. For Ṭabarī grouping the various opinions about the date of the changing of the *qibla*, see vol. VII, 24–5 [I, 1279–81]. For the same as regards Badr, see *ibid.*, 26–8 [I, 1281–4].

<sup>85</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 225 [II, 428].

<sup>86</sup> See on him *History*, vol. XXVII, 6 n. 16.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 [II, 1906]. For the number of Companions at Ḥudaybiyya, see vol. VIII, 69–70 [I, 1529–30]. For whether Muḡhīra b. Shu‘ba was the last man to be with the Prophet, see vol. IX, 205 [I, 1833–4]. For who brought Hānī b. ‘Urwa, see vol. XIX, 19 [II, 230].

<sup>88</sup> See on him *History*, vol. XIX, 35 n. 163; *E.I.*<sup>2</sup> s.v. “‘Umar b. Shabba.”

any such blame and represent him as a victim of a ploy by the governor and his aids.<sup>89</sup> This is also the case of the accounts of the allegiance due to 'Alī as caliph. Ṭabarī first enumerates the versions reporting that the Companions asked 'Alī to agree to the nomination, but he initially declined and only later succumbed to pressure and accepted. Then we read that Ṭalḥa and Zubayr, the two leading Companions, gave their allegiance unwillingly, or, that Zubayr did not give it at all.<sup>90</sup>

Now, even in those reports that testify to the Companions' allegiance to 'Alī, there is a lack of unanimity. Thus, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya, 'Alī's son, offers two relevant accounts, yet, despite allegedly accompanying his father and thus being an eyewitness, his accounts differ. In the first, 'Alī declines the Companions' desire to see him as *imām*: "Don't do this. It's better that I be a wazīr than an amīr." In the second report 'Alī's reply is "May be there should be an electoral council," which does not close the door to the possibility of his own nomination.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, Zuhūrī, the well known transmitter of early tradition, has it in one report that 'Alī demanded allegiance from Ṭalḥa and Zubayr and made sure to force them when they hesitated. Yet, the same Zuhūrī has another report in which 'Alī allegedly said to the two: "If you wish, give allegiance to me, or, if you wish, I'll do so to you."<sup>92</sup> The end result of all this is inconclusive.

The scrutiny of versions, be they located in one source or across sources, is the bread and butter of modern historians in their attempt at reconstruction and at finding which is the most reliable account. As amply argued, versions not only depict events differently but also

<sup>89</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 37–47 [II, 244–55].

<sup>90</sup> *History*, vol. XVI, 1–15 [I, 3066–3078]. Note that S. Husain M. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam* (London, 1979), 88, overlooks the problematic attitude of the two and flatly states that they were the first to swear. For further details based on various sources, see Madelung, *Succession*, 144–5, who detects a "legendary air."

<sup>91</sup> *History*, vol. XVI, 2 [I, 3066], 5 [I, 3069].

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 [I, 3069]. See also how Hurmuzān received 'Umar's immunity, vol. XIII, 139–40 [I, 2559–60]. For 'Abdallāh b. Mu'āwiya's uprising, see vol. XXVI, 254–60 [II, 1879–85]. For the revolt of Daḥḥāk the Khārijite, see vol. XXVII, 9–17 [II, 1897–1906]. For the murder of Abū Muslim, see vol. XXVIII, 331–9 [III, 110–15]. For the cause of Najāḥ b. Salāma's demise, see vol. XXXIV, 158–62 [III, 1440–45].

stand for different interests.<sup>93</sup> However, this piece of truism is not my concern here. I wish to probe what has been characterized as Ṭabarī's "habit of meticulously, not to say obtrusively providing alternative versions of events even at the apparent cost of destroying the narrative clarity and undermining psychological plausibility," a habit explained by his applying *ḥadīth* methods, *ḥadīth* being for Ṭabarī "a subset of global Islamic history."<sup>94</sup> My concern is with the effect that a juxtaposition of versions creates in the *History*, with Ṭabarī actually playing versions one against the other, with the results that contradictions produce.

A pertinent example comes, once again, from the treatment of the Battle of the Camel. The section entitled "Their Entry into al-Baṣrah and the Battle between Them and 'Uthmān b. Ḥunayf" starts with a version produced jointly by Muḥammad b. Nuwayra and Ṭalḥa b. al-A'lam al-Ḥanafī, and is marked by a close attention to and a favorable attitude toward 'Ā'isha's party. This is accomplished, significantly, by letting 'Ā'isha speak in her own voice, and what she has to tell, of course, is not flattering in the least to 'Alī's people. As the bearer of an important message, she says that

[t]he riffraff of provincials and outsiders from the tribes committed aggression in the Messenger of Allāh's sacred enclave, perpetrated crimes there, and gave refuge to the criminals. They therefore deserve the curse of Allāh and His Messenger along with what they have been debited for killing the imām of the Muslims without blood debt or excuse. They desecrated sacred blood and shed it; they plundered sacred property and profaned the sacred city and the sacred month.<sup>95</sup>

Ṭalḥa and Zubayr allegedly deliver identical statements, claiming their goal to be revenge on 'Uthmān's blood, and that, although their allegiance to 'Alī was forced upon them at sword point, they would nonetheless be faithful to him as long as he did not block their attempt to capture 'Uthmān's killers.<sup>96</sup> The report then goes on to portray the aforementioned 'Uthmān b. Ḥunayf, a Companion and 'Alī's appointee on Baṣra, as the man responsible for the escalation

<sup>93</sup> A typical example is Petersen, *Alī and Mu'āwiya*.

<sup>94</sup> M. G. Carter, review in *Iranian Studies* 12 (1989): 140.

<sup>95</sup> *History*, vol. XVI, 57 [I, 3116].

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 57 [I, 3116].

between the two parties, and quotes another of 'Ā'isha's flamboyant speeches in praise of 'Uthmān and condemning his assassins.<sup>97</sup>

At this point Ṭabarī interrupts the account, in a sort of "occasional policy" thus put by Donner. According to Donner, a comparison of Ṭabarī's accounts with those of the twelfth-century Ibn 'Asākir, for example, which are based on identical sources, demonstrates the editorial decisions of the individual compiler.<sup>98</sup> In fact, Ṭabarī now introduces an account that derives also from Sayf, yet this time originating in one Qāṣim b. Muḥammad. Accordingly, Jāriya b. Qudāma al-Sa'dī, a faithful ally of 'Alī, admonished 'Ā'isha that her participation in the revolt and thus, her "tearing down the curtain" and "profaning her sanctity" given to her by God, are matters graver than the murder of 'Uthmān, the cause under which banner she allegedly went to act. "Return home," is the advice that Sa'dī has for the Prophet's widow. In the same vein, a poem recited by a slave boy from the Banū Sa'd, Jāriya b. Qudāma's clan, reprimands Ṭalḥa and Zubayr for leading out their "Mother" (namely, 'Ā'isha). "Her curtains have been ripped down by Ṭalḥah and al-Zubayr. No further tale needs to be told about them," thus ends the critical verse. The argument that is the subtext is clinched by recounting another episode, the message of which is only too obvious. Its hero is no other than Muḥammad, Ṭalḥa's son, "a pious man," according to the report. In reply to a question addressed to him about 'Uthmān's killers, he has the following to say: "'Uthmān's blood divides into three: A third is debited against the woman of the howdah, that is, 'Ā'ishah; a third is against the rider of the red camel, that is Ṭalḥah; and a third is against 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib." Hearing this declaration, the interrogator joins 'Alī's party, for he believes that 'Alī is innocent of 'Uthmān's blood.<sup>99</sup>

Here, the editor of the *History* has performed a most significant job of contrasting two totally different perspectives, albeit both to be found in Sayf's work. The way things are put, Qāṣim b. Muḥammad's material undermines the claim of 'Ā'isha's party since, most significantly, Ṭalḥa, one of the triumvirate, is indicted by his own son and is exposed as a liar. Whether this was Ṭabarī's intention is hard to

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 58–61 [I, 3117–20].

<sup>98</sup> Donner, *Narratives*, 258–9 and n. 14 for specific examples.

<sup>99</sup> *History*, vol. XVI, 61–3 [I, 3120–21].

say, yet one risks the possibility of underestimating a scholar of such high caliber in assuming that all this went above his head.

Ṭabarī does the same later on, when, once again, he interrupts Sayf's account that stems from Ibn Nuwayra and Ibn al-A'lam. As a result, the picture that emerges tends to be confused. While on the one hand, 'Uthmān b. Ḥunayf, the governor of Baṣra, plays the role of the provocateur and is killed for insulting 'Ā'isha,<sup>100</sup> no such information appears in Zuhri's minor version: Ibn Ḥunayf has only conciliatory words to say and is treacherously killed.<sup>101</sup> 'Ā'isha's role in Ibn Ḥunayf's murder, following his capture, is ambiguous as well. In a version supplied by Sayf, she orders to set him free. Yet, according to Abū Mikhnaḥ and his sources, she commands that he be killed.<sup>102</sup>

Coming to the section on 'Alī's arrival at the watering place of Dhū Qār, the account, once again, is mainly derived from Ibn Nuwayra and Ibn al-A'lam. Accordingly, 'Alī's envoy to 'Ā'isha's party hears from the "Dear Mother" that her purpose in Baṣra was "iṣlāḥ between the Muslims." From Ṭalḥa and Zubayr the envoy learns that they share 'Ā'isha's concept of *iṣlāḥ*, which is punishing 'Uthmān's killers, and that they would be willing to give allegiance to 'Alī to calm things down. At one point, however, Ṭabarī interrupts this dominant version and quotes from one of his allegedly written sources, a book by one Ziyād b. Ayyūb. That report derives from one Kulayb al-Jarmī, who recounts a dream he had at the time of 'Uthmān. This dream obviously serves in the function of *vaticinatio post eventum* for the current 'Alī-'Ā'isha conflict, and implicates the Prophet's widow in 'Uthmān's murder. Thus, it subverts her posture as revenging the third caliph's blood. Kulayb's report goes on to express his own perplexity at this obvious contradiction in representing 'Ā'isha's role. But not for long, as Kulayb takes a clear stand in favor of 'Alī, by letting him speak his own version of affairs, and presenting his own claim for *iṣlāḥ*, which is approved by Kulayb, the narrator. Convinced by 'Alī's rhetoric of the rightful, Kulayb ends up swearing allegiance to him. The report then goes on to tell that "young boys," "slaves" and "foolhardy men" from

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 64 [I, 3123].

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 68 [I, 3126–7].

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 67–8 [I, 3125–7].

the two armies, bear the blame for provoking the Battle of the Camel. Special attention is paid to 'Alī's benevolence at the end of the event.<sup>103</sup>

Reverting now to Sayf's version of the circumstances leading to the clash between the two parties, there is the issue, among others, of the role of Aḥnaf b. Qays, a Baṣran leader. While Sayf has it that Aḥnaf was ready to fight 'Alī and then, persuaded by the latter, decided to remain neutral, only to join the caliph after his victory,<sup>104</sup> Ṭabarī has an account from Aḥnaf himself. He prefaces it with the unequivocal statement that "[w]hat the narrators transmit concerning al-Aḥnaf is different from Sayf's account from his teachers." Aḥnaf implies the lack of any intention on his part to confront 'Alī and reveals the "awful situation" he had been put into by the "Party of the Camel," who had first implored him to swear allegiance to 'Alī, but later sought his support in their opposition to the caliph. This being the situation, it was Aḥnaf's own solution to adopt neutrality so he could avoid the trap. That Ṭabarī inclines to prefer Aḥnaf's version—that is, the protagonist's—over Sayf's, the historian, can be gauged from his adducing a third, extremely brief, account, which is only a frame story to a version that is attributed, once more, to Aḥnaf, and is deleted because of being "more or less" identical to Aḥnaf's first account.<sup>105</sup>

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Particularly enlightening are cases where Ṭabarī's (and his sources') versions can be compared with a sort of official version, produced by the ruling establishment or, more precisely, the 'Abbāsīd regime. One such case that deserves some attention is the circumstances of Amīn's death, in the aftermath of the "civil war" between him and his brother Ma'mūn. Amīn's murder was most likely an event that left a profound impression on the Islamic community and, as with every event of such a high profile, was presented in different dramatic depictions.<sup>106</sup> As pointed out by El-Hibri, in light of the customary

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 98–103 [I, 3157–62].

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 108–09 [I, 3168–9].

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 109–112 [I, 3169–72].

<sup>106</sup> El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 73–4, where the hypothetical relevance of Sāsānid history seems unnecessary, since the event's significance can rest on its own. On p. 167, El-Hibri knows to tell that the Amīn-Ma'mūn narrative actually bears rela-

hostile treatment that Amīn receives in Islamic historiography, we might expect his death story to dwell minimally on his suffering and emphasize the deserved fate that befell him for his treachery. However, Ṭabarī's narrative (extracted from *Madā'inī*) of Amīn's final days is devoid of any indication of treachery. In fact, Amīn was seeking to fulfill the agreement of surrender to his brother. He appears as a victim of inept advisors or double-faced collaborators and, by listening to their advice, unwittingly enters the path that would bring about his destruction. His fate is thus sealed because Ṭāhir, Ma'mūn's topmost aid, so desires.<sup>107</sup>

In his last hours, Amīn, a captive of Ṭāhir's soldiers, "unclothed, wearing drawers, a turban veiling his face, and a tattered piece of cloth on his shoulders," is confined to a small chamber. An eyewitness report, originating in Aḥmad b. Sallām, an official in Amīn's administration and now also a prisoner, sharing with the deposed caliph narrow, unfurnished space, puts before us a sad scene. Accordingly, Amīn begs him to come close and hold him, since he feels "very frightened." The caliph's heart "was beating so hard that it was about to burst his chest and come out." It becomes Ibn Sallām's task to calm the caliph down. Amīn is submissive to the point that he objects to Ibn Sallām's charges against the ministers for bearing responsibility to the situation. In what has been described as a suddenly endowed intellectual awareness and understanding of the human condition, a growing piety, and exemplary Senecan stoicism,<sup>108</sup> Amīn states that he is "not the first person to have sought a thing and been unable to achieve it." Then he turns to his cellmate and asks: "Aḥmad, what do you think they will do to me? Do you think they will kill me, or will they keep their oaths to me?" Amīn's helplessness and submissiveness are further reflected in his refusal to accept from Ibn Sallām a lined cloak to cover his naked body ("let me be. This is from God"). As El-Hibri envisions it, like a rehearsal of the Islamic conception of final judgment, Amīn is reduced to the role of an ordinary believer who is trying to bring sense to his path in life.<sup>109</sup>

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tion to proper history in a way that is similar to Shakespeare's plays to their historical setting. For El-Hibri's basic assumptions, see chapter 1 above.

<sup>107</sup> For a summary and extended verbatim extracts out of the *History*, see *ibid.*, 77–82.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

Not quite, though. When his executioners enter the room, the 'Abbāsīd caliph has human difficulty to reconcile with what he—*as does Ibn Sallām*—no doubt knows awaits him (“I knew that he was a dead man”). Amīn desperately asks: “Is there no escape? Is there no one to help? Is there none of the *abnā'*?” In a last-minute attempt to save his life, he admonishes the would-be murderers and proclaims to them his noble credentials: “Woe unto you! I am the cousin of the Messenger of God . . . I am the son of Hārūn. I am the brother of al-Ma'mūn. [Fear] God, [fear] God concerning my blood!” But all this to no avail.<sup>110</sup>

At this point, one should add to Amīn's death scene, as contrived by Ṭabarī (and based on Madā'inī), our historian's own assessment that, contrary to accusations coming from Ma'mūn's side, Amīn did not intend or resolve to remove his brother from the succession and divert it to his own son. Rather, he intended to be faithful to their agreement. According to Ṭabarī's sources, it was Faḍl b. al-Rabī', Amīn's close counselor who, for his selfish reasons, masterminded Ma'mūn's deposition.<sup>111</sup> The vividly detailed narrative of Amīn's last days, apparently harboring a deep sense of sympathy for the disgraced caliph, seems to subvert Ma'mūn's propaganda without overtly criticizing it.

Madā'inī's report, which Ṭabarī reproduces, offers glimpses of Ma'mūn's camp, where Ṭāhir's demand of Amīn's surrender is countered by other opinions that show more respect for the caliph. Just when a compromise is to be reached, Ṭāhir is warned of treachery and becomes suspicious of Amīn's intent. Since the latter is also anxious about Ṭāhir's plan, he resolves on leaving by night and going to the boat of Harthama b. A'yan, a prominent general, who, although loyal to Ma'mūn, tries to procure Amīn from Baghdad.<sup>112</sup> The 'Abbāsīd ruler now orders his mare to be saddled and then bids farewell to his two children, embracing them and tearfully saying that he leaves them in God's trust. He mounts the beast and sets off on the journey that will bring about his captivity. Despite Harthama's advice against such a move, for the fear of Ṭāhir's

<sup>110</sup> *History*, vol. XXXI, 192–4 [III, 921–3]. For a slightly different version, see 194–5 [III, 923–4]. For the *abnā'*, see *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “al-Abnā'.”

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 [III, 776]. See also Cooperson, *Biography*, 21 n. 87.

<sup>112</sup> See *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Harthama b. al-A'yan.”



possible action, Amīn arrives at Harthama's boat outside the Khurāsān Gate. It is pertinent to dwell on the reception he receives on the boat. The men all rise in respect and Harthama himself, despite being ill, falls to his knees, then gives Amīn a full embrace, kissing his eyes, hands and feet, addressing him as "master and son of my master." The caliph acknowledges various members of Harthama's staff and thanks one of them for rendering him a special favor.<sup>113</sup>

At this point we move to a diametrically opposed version of the regicide—also extracted from Madā'inī—in the form of a letter, composed by Ṭāhir, Ma'mūn's closest man, and announcing Amīn's death and Ma'mūn's victory. In the letter, as El-Hibri already noted, Ṭāhir lays out a self-justifying background for Amīn's murder, arguing that it was Amīn's attempt to break the capitulation treaty that led to his own tragic fate.<sup>114</sup> Although, as El-Hibri points out, Ṭāhir's letter, as reproduced in the *History*, is less antagonistic to Amīn than its version as supplied by other medieval writers, and altogether more like a factual statement than a propaganda message,<sup>115</sup> our task is to compare it, not with slightly different versions in other sources, but with Amīn's death narrative that precedes the letter in question. In the letter, the 'Abbāsīd governor provides his own version of the circumstances that led to the caliph's death. What clearly stands out in Ṭāhir's rendition is the accusation of Amīn for breaking his oath of allegiance and of violating "his covenant." Even after being arrested, so Ṭāhir maintains, Amīn still attempted to exercise his cunning by offering bribes to his captors. Ṭāhir's version, needless to say, contains nothing of the dramatic scene of the killing of Amīn. Stripped of any mimetic elements it is turned into a theological/moral reflection: "Finally, there was appointed for him one zealous for God, His religion, His Messenger, and His caliph, and he did away with him."<sup>116</sup> The cruel realism of the regicide is completely effaced.

El-Hibri rightly notes that Ṭāhir's letter, its conclusion in particular, "is filled with those religious labels characterizing righteousness and transgression that clearly show Ma'mūnid propaganda at work."<sup>117</sup>

<sup>113</sup> El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 77–9, based on the Leiden edition, III, 916.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 71, as well as the different versions about the circumstances of its authorship.

<sup>116</sup> *History*, vol. XXXI, 197–202 [III, 926–30]. See also El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 81.

<sup>117</sup> El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 81.

Accordingly, Amīn's performance is "God determined." It is God who exhausted and cut off the hopes of the caliph's supporters. With Mamūn's victory achieved, God removed corruption from the earth. There is a point in El-Hibri's suggestion that, by emphasizing the predestinatory nature of Amīn's fall, the letter downplays an explanation that is targeted on Amīn's flaws.<sup>118</sup> There is another side to the coin, however. God's will is invoked in the letter, since the defeated side (Amīn) surely deserves its defeat.

A second round of contrasting narratives now follows. This time, it starts with Ṭāhir's letter to Ma'mūn on the death of "the Deposed One." Then we are analeptically introduced to an episode that has taken place earlier, before Amīn's death. Accordingly, Amīn summons all the commanders and soldiers loyal to him and, in a speech full of religious idioms, reminds them of their disobedience on more than one occasion, in contrast to his own generosity.<sup>119</sup> At this point, the narrative switches sides once more, to Ṭāhir's Friday sermon in Baghdad, following Amīn's death. Undoubtedly, Ṭāhir's quotation from Qur'ān 3:26 about God giving kingship to whom He wishes and removing from kingship whomever He desires, as well as other Qur'ānic quotations as regards the fate of the treacherous, should have a clear relevance to the current situation. Like the letter sent to Ma'mūn, the sermon leaves no doubt as to who had played the evil part in the affairs that brought about Amīn's downfall:

You have seen the fulfillment of God's promise—He is exalted and glorified—against the one who behaved insolently against Him: how He brought His strength and retribution upon him after he had turned from his promise, rebelled against Him, and disobeyed His commandment; and how His prohibition replaced him, and His admonition brought about his destruction.<sup>120</sup>

What, then, does the treatment of the regicide in the *History* stand for? El-Hibri considers the narrative a determined effort at subverting Ma'mūn's propaganda concerning the legitimacy of his rise to power.<sup>121</sup> He is of the opinion that "[i]n the careful positioning of actors' testimonies and actions one can discern a shadow opinion of the chronicler coming through." Indeed,

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>119</sup> *History*, vol. XXXI, 202–04 [III, 931–2].

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 204–05 [III, 932–3].

<sup>121</sup> El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 77.

Ṭabarī does not state openly who betrayed the agreement and was responsible for the ensuing tragedy. Rather, he lays out the conflicting accusations. It is not until al-Amīn's final moments—an occasion he depicts with a solemnity that lends an irresistible air of sincerity and trustworthiness to what is said there—that Ṭabarī . . . points at the possibility that it was Ṭāhir who betrayed the agreement.

And El-Hibri concludes:

In the face of the testimony of al-Amīn, Ṭāhir's accusation of treachery against him, which is only mentioned in the dubious letter to al-Ma'mūn informing him of victory, becomes worthless. Al-Amīn's personality is endowed with a new credibility and tragic sympathy in these images of dramatic downfall.<sup>122</sup>

El-Hibri's reading of al-Amīn's regicide seems to me commendable. That the details of the caliph's last-hour episode are bound to induce the reader's sympathy to the sorry figure of the caliph is obvious. There is an almost a priori advantage to the realistic representation, when compared to the business-like letter that is ascribed to Ṭāhir. Still, one is advised to pay heed to two aspects of the governor's letter that may leave the reader—perhaps the (medieval) listener—somewhat less decided: these are the rhetoric that the letter employs and the location of the letter within the narrative.

The concentration of religious idioms and Qur'ānic citations in Ṭāhir's letter is not devoid of significance in the framework of a contest like the one under consideration, over questions of right and wrong. It should also be noted that in both rounds where the narrative alternates between the two parties, Ṭāhir has the final word. Both his letter and his sermon come after the material that is sympathetic to Amīn. Now, textual order, it has already been argued, is not without its effect. This is why the outcome of the regicide narrative would appear to me less conclusive than earlier conceived. For the advantage of one side, achieved by particular narrative techniques, is countered by the special features of the other side. The contest is between emphatic narrative and religious rhetoric. As content and form, realism and order all play here a role, the result, at least in this case, could be seen as open-ended, an outcome that has its own merits, of course.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 82.

A second case I now wish to consider is the revolt by Muʿtazz to seize the caliphate from Mustaʿīn in 251/865–6, a revolt in which the ʿAbbāsīd prince was supported by the Turkish troops at Sāmarrāʾ. Two versions describe the attack of the Turks on Baghdad and the ability of Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh, the Ṭāhirid governor, to route it. These versions are another illustration of the divergence between official propaganda and a more balanced—although not necessarily ultimately “true”—historian’s account. What we have here is Ṭabarī’s narrative, immediately followed by a document ordered by the Ṭāhirid official and composed by Saʿīd b. Ḥumayd, the head of the Bureau of Correspondence. It was read to the people of Baghdad in the congregational mosque.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, for good reasons. A comparison between the two versions allows us to observe the propaganda of the caliphate at work.

To begin with, it is not details that are at the core of the divergence between the two versions, although here and there one does detect some difference in the details as well. In this respect, perhaps most significant is Ṭabarī’s disclosure of an item that the Ṭāhirid governor of Baghdad would be reluctant to include in his own version of the confrontation: at some point he offered the Turks a compromise, namely, that Muʿtazz would be the heir apparent to Mustaʿīn.<sup>124</sup> Certainly, this is an embarrassing revelation. Also, the official document is silent about a defeat at Nahrawān that one of the Baghdādī commanders, ʿAbdallāh b. Maḥmūd al-Sarakhsī, suffered on 16 Safar 251/19 March 865. Ṭabarī tells us that Sarakhsī’s troops fled from the Turks; around fifty were killed and their heads were sent to Sāmarrāʾ, and sixty mounts were seized. The road to Khurāsān fell into the hands of the Turks and traffic to Baghdad was cut.<sup>125</sup>

What is significant about the official version, however, is the theological garb that it wears, once again, a manipulation that governments have known only too well to perform. Unlike the earthly, prosaic description that Ṭabarī’s narrative provides, Saʿīd b. Ḥumayd, under the general’s supervising eye, composed a document the religious aura of which is hard to miss. In the best manner of such documents, Qurʾānic verses are adduced as relevant to the current

<sup>123</sup> *History*, vol. XXXV, 50 [III, 1565].

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 45–6 [III, 1558].

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 48 [III, 1562].

situation. Furthermore, it is only befitting that the considerably long prolegomenon states, among others, what is familiar from caliphal documents that had been issued on similar occasions: obedience to *God's caliph* is a duty incumbent upon all Muslims, for the caliphs are the protectors of God's message and, in turn, "protected from error."<sup>126</sup> Sedition against them is opposition to God's religion and the results of the caliphs' wars are ensured by Heaven. And since Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh, the Ṭāhirid, is the man behind the document, his status in it is of a "chief supporter of God's cause," "sword of the caliph's authority," and "God's favor" to Musta'in.<sup>127</sup>

Turning to the account of the revolt itself, one notices a few recurrent arguments that serve the official point of view. First, there is, initially, the caliph's lenient attitude toward the rebels. It is noteworthy that also Ṭabarī, in the narrative account, gives a verbatim citation of the Ṭāhirid command made on 12 Safar 251/15 March 865: "Don't initiate hostilities. If they attack, do not attack them. Defensive action is the order of the day."<sup>128</sup> However, in the official document, this point is much more emphasized and given expression several times. Accordingly, the caliph gave his enemies a chance to reconsider their position; he "did not spare them any chance of admonishment, guidance, persuasion and advice," he counseled them "but they would not listen," and their eyes were blind.<sup>129</sup> Another argument is that the defeat was a result of God's hand. It is He who dealt the Mu'tazz party a mighty blow and killed them in great numbers. Their fate is an exemplum to "those who comprehend (*ūlī al-absār*)." In the best manner of blending history with exegesis, their fate—so we are told—had been intended by God already in Qur'an 14:28: "Hast thou not seen those who exchanged the bounty of God with unthankfulness, and caused their people to dwell in the abode of ruin?—Gehenna, wherein they are roasted; an evil establishment."<sup>130</sup> In Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh's account of the revolt, history and theology intermesh.

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<sup>126</sup> Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge, 1986), 116–26, for Walid b. Yazīd's document.

<sup>127</sup> *History*, vol. XXXV, 50–53 [III, 1565–8].

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 46 [III, 1559].

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 53 [III, 1569], 54 [III, 1570], 55 [III, 1572], 56 [III, 1573].

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 55 [III, 1572], 56 [III, 1574], 57 [III, 1576].

One point that Ṭabarī makes in his introductory remarks to the *History* is worth mentioning: he has no intention of exercising selection and promises to mention whatever information has reached him about kings throughout the ages.<sup>131</sup> It is important for our historian to clarify “whose transmission is praised and whose information is accepted, whose transmission is rejected and whose transmission is disregarded, etc.”<sup>132</sup> Note that the emphasis here is on *who* delivers the information and not on *what* is being delivered. And if the result is the inclusion of information that the reader may either disapprove of, find detestable, or, perhaps more seriously, find unsound and having no real meaning, Ṭabarī’s answer to him reminds one of the Venerable Bede and his later medieval followers (such as William of Malmesbury), who too asked their readers not to impute on them inaccuracies and not brand them with censure. This because, as Bede pleads, “I have laboured honestly to transmit whatever I could ascertain from common effort for the instruction of posterity.” And, as Malmesbury claims, comparing himself with Bede, “I have asserted nothing but what I have learned either from relaters, or writers, of veracity.”<sup>133</sup>

Now, the self-conception of the medieval (Christian) chronicler as a faithful conveyor of the written record has been pointed out in Gabrielle Spiegel’s discussion of “the most distressing feature of medieval historiography to modern researchers—its extraordinary vulnerability to legend, fiction, and fable.” As Spiegel sees it, this conception, among other reasons, compelled the medieval historian to incorporate into his account “whatever legends, miracles, or fictions circulated in the world he was attempting with mimetic fidelity to record.” These

entered the narrative without necessarily violating the chronicler’s obedience to the first law of history—which was, of course, the pursuit of truth . . . Indeed, to leave them out would have been neglectful of that obligation to truth, for once such fictional elements became part of

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<sup>131</sup> *History*, vol. I, 168 [I, 5].

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 170 [I, 6].

<sup>133</sup> Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages: Rhetoric, Representation and Reality* (Cambridge, 1991), 94; Robert W. Hanning, review in *History and Theory* 12 (1973): 428. For a re-examination of the notion of factuality in Bede’s *Historia*, see Roger Ray, “Bede’s Vera Lex Historiae,” *Speculum* 55 (1980): 1–21. For the quotation from Malmesbury, see Otter, *Inventiones*, 107–08.

the received stock of stories, there was practically no sound theoretical ground for banishing them from the narrative.<sup>134</sup>

Some of Ṭabarī's sentences in the introduction to the *History* resonate this conception. Our historian excuses himself that "it is not our fault" that questionable information comes to the reader, "but the fault of someone who transmitted it to us. We have merely reported it as it was reported to us."<sup>135</sup> In other words, Ṭabarī does not defend his historical product by all means and allows for the possibility that, like his reader, he has been victimized by faulty transmission. His statement, taken by Khalidi at face value, is seen as acknowledgement that in the *History*, unlike in the Qur'ān commentary—where inference and deduction could be employed to wrest meaning out of a text—Ṭabarī "is at the mercy of his transmitters."<sup>136</sup> Yet, as I wish to emphasize, not at complete mercy. One may argue that Ṭabarī is not quite the totally constrained author that Khalidi has in mind and, in fact, he amply demonstrates that, being a compiler of transmitted accounts, and enjoying the position of having the final word about these, he has a certain advantage over his transmitters. He can be selective, he puts things in the order he decides to, he may even choose to play his transmitters against each other, and all these things and more Ṭabarī actually does. This point will be taken up at length also in the second part of this book. Here a few brief examples will suffice.

At quite an early point in the *History* Ṭabarī does not shy away from sharing with his reader the reasons that have led him to put forth certain material. The issue in question has to do with Bīwarasb, the mythological Iranian figure that features in the epic of the *Shāhnāmeḥ* and is the first one encounters at the very beginning of the narrative part of the *History*, right after the lengthy introduction. After he had reproduced Bīwarasb's "biography," Ṭabarī explains to the reader why he has chosen to do so. The explanation itself—Bīwarasb's contemporaneity with Noah, whom Ṭabarī actually has in mind as the earliest historical hero—is not of our main concern. It is rather Ṭabarī's implication that he is not obliged to include every piece of material at his disposal that I wish to emphasize. Our

<sup>134</sup> Spiegel, *Past as Text*, 102.

<sup>135</sup> *History*, vol. I, 171 [I, 7].

<sup>136</sup> Khalidi, *Arab Historical Thought*, 76.

historian tells us of Bīwarasb "at this point," as he himself puts it,<sup>137</sup> that is, at the very beginning of the historical narrative, because he so *chooses*, because it serves a specific purpose.

Now, the inclusion of materials at the historian's discretion has its effects, as can be demonstrated abundantly. My example here is Ṭabarī's reproduction of caliph Hishām's message to Yūsuf b. 'Umar, his envoy in Iraq, about Zayd b. 'Alī, a rebel for the 'Alīd cause.<sup>138</sup> Ṭabarī provides an opportunity for the Umayyad caliph to express his concern for the Community and to contrast Hishām's interest with that of Zayd. While Hishām attributes Zayd's alliance with the people of Kūfa to "the fragmented state of the community," his own plan to take repressive measures against Zayd is meant to ensure "communal safety, the prevention of bloodshed, and security against division." This way, Hishām presents himself repeatedly in the role of the preserver of "true religion" and keeper of the Qur'ānic notion of "God's covenant." And thus communal unity is God's "firm covenant," it is "true obedience to Him and His most secure support" (Qur'ān 2:255).

In defending the Community against a disruptive situation, the Umayyad caliph removes a possible reason for its "punishment and perdition . . . just as a tender father does with his child or a kind shepherd with his flock." Zayd's followers are described harshly as "rabble . . . people impelled by dire need and those who are in league with Satan and who have been enslaved by him." They are those who want "to break down this door through which God has commanded us to enter." And yet, treating them, Hishām seeks God's guidance and provides his plan with the aura of the Almighty's supervision. He advises to his governor that, in order to overcome the rebels and to render himself "worthy of assistance from God," he should refrain from injustice and meet their demands in full, give money to their children, forbid his troops from attacking their women and property. Only thus would it be possible "to set to rights that which is corrupt in them and to bring them speedily to salvation and deliverance."

A reproduction of Hishām's alleged manifesto is of significance when other options, such as censorship, are possible. That is, Ṭabarī

<sup>137</sup> *History*, vol. II, 10 [I, 210].

<sup>138</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 18–20 [II, 1682–5].



(and it is indeed Ṭabarī himself in this case) deems it appropriate, if not commendable, to let the Umayyad caliph delineate his religious belief, not to say deliver his propaganda. As we shall see below, Ṭabarī's decision, in this particular case, has to be considered in the larger context of his general view of Hishām. Ṭabarī's ideology (or is it his sympathy? His earnest job?) in his treatment of some Umayyad caliphs has allowed modern scholars, through the concept of "God's Caliph," to revise conventional (that is, negative) attitudes toward the Umayyad regime.<sup>139</sup> This aspect of his approach implies a pertinent caveat against the all too simplistic and overly generalized notion of an anti-Umayyad historiography.

The other side of the coin in this particular context is the exclusion of material. Ṭabarī's programmatic commitment to tell his reader all his information notwithstanding, close scrutiny of his actual praxis reveals occasions when the editor of the *History* stops short of doing so. It is almost banal to state that Ṭabarī, like any historian, almost routinely exercises selection in his choice of what to submit to the reader out of the much larger amount of historical information he has at his disposal. A formula he uses time and again at the beginning of his treatment of a new hijrī year is "Among the events that took place in the year [x],"<sup>140</sup> thus implying selection.

More explicit is Ṭabarī's admittance of the deliberate excision of certain material.<sup>141</sup> Thus, our historian states that the stories of the "Occasions of the Revelation" are too numerous to be counted, which implies that he is leaving material out. He promises, however, to devote an entire book to the topic.<sup>142</sup> Ṭabarī also refuses to mention the various accounts of the manner in which the Prophet led the so-called Prayer of Fear, at the Valley of Nakhil, "for fear that this book may be unduly prolonged."<sup>143</sup> Or, after bringing a brief and extremely unfavorable assessment of Walīd b. Yazīd's reign (see further below), Ṭabarī, like on a few other occasions, tells the reader

<sup>139</sup> See note 126 above.

<sup>140</sup> There are numerous examples. See e.g., vol. XIX, 201 [II, 405]; vol. XXXVI, 119 [III, 1841], 136 [III, 1859].

<sup>141</sup> For Ṭabarī's principles in selecting material (appeal to the majority view and to experts), see Khalidī, *Arab Historical Thought*, 77–8.

<sup>142</sup> *History*, vol. VI, 67 [I, 1146].

<sup>143</sup> *History*, vol. VII, 162 [I, 1455].

that he “left to one side the accounts which deal with all this,” as he would hate to make his book longer.<sup>144</sup>

But sometimes selection is not the result of the economy of textual production and thus we enter the realm of what one may term censorship (or, is it self-censorship?). In fact, regarding this matter, Ṭabarī is preceded by the censorship that his sources had themselves exercised on their material. A case in point is the famous “Account of the Lie,” or the “scandalous event” (*ḥadīth al-‘yfk*) in the year 6/627, which appears to be based on some gossip that had been circulating to besmirch ‘Ā’isha.<sup>145</sup> One looks in vain, however, to find the lie that was told about the Prophet’s wife (her committing adultery) explicated in the section that Ṭabarī reproduced from Ibn Ishāq’s *Sīra*. Although Zuhri, the foremost authority on this case,<sup>146</sup> states that he assembled “everything” that had been transmitted, we get absolutely no word as to the crucial subject of what was the lie about. Rather, we thrice encounter the ambiguous sentence that “the authors of the lie said about her [‘Ā’isha] what they had,” with the result that nothing of the content of their statement is revealed. ‘Ā’isha, who tells her own account of how she was left behind the Prophet’s caravan, because she was searching for a necklace, twice testifies to having known nothing about the lie, when rumors about it first started to spread. She then refers to a “story” that reached the Prophet, as well as her parents, of which, once again, she had no knowledge at the time, since her parents said nothing to her. It is only later that, one night, she was told “what the authors of the lie had been saying,” but again, ‘Ā’isha does not divulge what was the lie about. Also the Prophet himself, and Usāma b. Zayd (the Prophet’s step grandson) who, according to ‘Ā’isha, both address themselves to the issue, refer to “rumors,” “things” and “falsehood.” By the time her innocence is revealed in a Qur’ānic verse (24:11),

<sup>144</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 127 [II, 1775]. For Ṭabarī’s remark, in the context of his brief account of the brutality of Muḥammad al-Balkhī’s sons in Ṭabaristān, that to properly tell their story “would increase the size of the book,” see vol. XXXV, 21 [III, 1525]. Similarly is his explanation for leaving out all the excuses that Mu‘tazz provided to Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh, for fear of becoming too verbose, *ibid.*, 42 [III, 1553].

<sup>145</sup> See e.g., D. A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past: the Legacy of ‘Ā’isha bint Abī Bakr* (New York, 1994), 61–89.

<sup>146</sup> Ibn Ishāq’s version is analyzed in Gregor Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Muhammads* (Berlin, 1994), 124–31.

the reader still remains in the dark.<sup>147</sup> The obvious intent of saving ‘Ā’isha’s honor intact has been maintained throughout.

Turning to Ṭabarī himself on the issue of selectivity, modern scholars since Wellhausen have argued that his reliance on the “corrupt” Sayf and other one-sided sources, such as Abū Mikhnaf, for important topics such as Abū Bakr’s *ridda* wars, the Arab conquests, and the revolt against ‘Uthmān, has incurred a “fatal lopsidedness” in the rendering of early Islamic history.<sup>148</sup> It reflects a defense of ‘Abbāsīd and ‘Alīd interests, and, conversely, a harsh denunciation of the ‘Umayyads, which is, so it has been argued, in absolute contrast to Balādhurī’s attitude and cogency, for example.<sup>149</sup> This would mean that Ṭabarī the historian, much unlike Ṭabarī the exegete, was not entirely independent and had to—or, rather, eagerly did—bow to the regime.<sup>150</sup>

I. K. Howard has recently pointed out Ṭabarī’s silence in reports on the allegiance given to Yazīd, the second Umayyad caliph. In treating the position taken by Ḥusayn and ‘Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr, who refused to swear loyalty to Yazīd,<sup>151</sup> Ṭabarī fails to convey information that both Balādhurī and Ibn A‘tham al-Kūfī relate. In these two sources, we read that Mu‘āwiya, Yazīd’s father, had agreed that a consultative council (*shūrā*) would decide on the succession. Ḥusayn and Ibn al-Zubayr could have expected to be among the *shūrā*, and they, almost certainly, would not have chosen Yazīd. Ṭabarī also ignores reports provided by Balādhurī and Khalīfa b. Khayyāt (d. 240/854), and derived from the Baṣran historian Juwayriyya b. Asmā’ (d. 173/789) on this matter; the selective picture that emerges from Ṭabarī’s version favors Ḥusayn at the expense of Ibn al-Zubayr.<sup>152</sup> In the same vein, Howard detects Ṭabarī’s deliberate excision also in the treatment of the allegiance to Ibn al-Zubayr, who, following Ḥusayn’s death at Karbalā’, contested Yazīd for the caliphate. Unlike Balādhurī, Ṭabarī deliberately (so Howard maintains) omits

<sup>147</sup> *History*, vol. VIII, 57–64 [I, 1518–25].

<sup>148</sup> Petersen, *Alī and Mu‘āwiya*, 151, 152.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 154, 157.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>151</sup> *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “‘Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr.”

<sup>152</sup> I. K. Howard, “Translator’s Foreword,” *History*, vol. XIX, p. XII. The relevant passage is on pp. 4–5 [II, 217–18].

mentioning that Ibn al-Zubayr received allegiance on condition that a *shūrā* be established.<sup>153</sup>

In another instance, Ṭabarī's decision to leave out Abū Mikhnaf and rely on Ibn al-Kalbī's account on the circumstances preceding Ḥusayn's departure to Kūfa (which eventuated in the Karbalā' massacre), the mission of Muslim b. 'Aqīl (Ḥusayn's leading supporter),<sup>154</sup> and Yazīd's appointment of 'Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād to the governorship of Iraq, works in Yazīd's service and puts the blame on Sarjūn, Yazīd's Christian counselor. Also, Yazīd's personal responsibility concerning the decision to kill Muslim b. 'Aqīl is diminished.<sup>155</sup> To all these incidents one can add Yazīd's exoneration for the Karbalā' massacre, as already noted in an earlier chapter. The latter, which appears also in the Shī'ite account of the events in an inexplicably detailed form—in fact more detailed than many other events that one would expect to be treated in a sympathetic view of Ḥusayn—begins to look suspect in terms of its origin.

Concerning other instances, scholars have pointed out that Ṭabarī did not report the death of the foremost theologian Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal,<sup>156</sup> as well as the pursuit, by the 'Abbāsīd Mu'taṣim, of the *mihna*—the infamous “inquisition” established by his predecessor for imposing theological dogmas.<sup>157</sup> In these cases no immediate reasons appear. Be that as it may, we shall instantly see that, at times, the reasons for significant omissions are more complex than either the lack of apparent logic in Ṭabarī's editorial decisions,<sup>158</sup> or straightforward political partisanship.

An intriguing example of Ṭabarī's self-imposed censorship has been detected in a recent reconstruction of the major event that was the Battle of Ṣiffīn (for which see Chapter 7 below). Here, Wilferd Madelung raises the possibility that Ṭabarī suppressed some written correspondence between 'Alī and Mu'āwīya before the outbreak of

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XV. The relevant passage is on p. 190 [II, 396–7].

<sup>154</sup> See *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Muslim b. 'Aqīl b. Abī Ṭālib.”

<sup>155</sup> I. K. Howard, “Translator's Foreword,” *History*, vol. XIX, pp. XII–XIII. The relevant passages are on pp. 30–31 [II, 239–40].

<sup>156</sup> For Joel Kraemer's observation concerning this omission, that “[h]is silence is eloquent” and could not be accidental, see vol. XXXIV, pp. XX–XXI. For Ṭabarī and the Ḥanbalites, see *History*, vol. I, 69–78.

<sup>157</sup> “Translator's Foreword,” *History*, vol. XXXIII, pp. XV–XVI. See further *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Mihna.”

<sup>158</sup> El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 218.

the fighting. The suggestion makes sense, as the text of the letters between the two contenders *was* transmitted by both Balādhurī and Minqarī,<sup>159</sup> who, in turn, relied on no other than Abū Mikhnaf, Ṭabarī's major source on Ṣiffīn. It is rather unlikely that the letters in question were unknown to our historian. Why did he *choose* to suppress the 'Alī-Mu'āwiya correspondence?

Madelung points out a critical passage that presumably was the cause for censoring. It appears in 'Alī's dispatch and was unpalatable from Ṭabarī's Sunnī perspective. In answer to Mu'āwiya's accusation that 'Alī held back from his predecessors to the caliphate and rebelled against them, the latter, while denying the accusation of rebellion, admits his holding back and his "being loath" to taking part in the caliphs' affairs. The reason, as he states it, is that the Qurashī claim in the Saqīfa that Muḥammad was from among them (for which see Chapter 5 below), and, therefore, that they had the right to the caliphate, did not receive its correct interpretation. In other words, the right was *'Alī's*. As 'Alī puts it: "If they [Quraysh] deserved it through Muḥammad to the exclusion of the Anṣār, then the people closest to Muḥammad are more entitled to it than they. If not, the Anṣār surely have the greatest portion in it among the Arabs."<sup>160</sup> 'Alī's position, unsurprisingly, preempts the future Shī'ite "official" one, that is, 'Alī's exclusive entitlement, which militates against the Sunnī majority. Was such a position too hard for Ṭabarī, hence he chose to sacrifice veracity for (Sunnī) ideology?

Now, in this case, Ṭabarī's employment of censorship can be treated as a mere conjecture, although quite a strong one. However, when it comes to what Madelung's terms as the "public slanging match" before Ṣiffīn, in the form of another correspondence, this time between Mu'āwiya and Muḥammad, the son of Abū Bakr and 'Alī's governor of Egypt, Ṭabarī *admits* that he is loath to detail it because it contains matters that the common people (*'amma*) "could not tolerate."<sup>161</sup> What were these?

The intriguing question can be answered with confidence since, once again, the correspondence that the *History* hides from its readers has been preserved by Balādhurī and other sources. In response to

<sup>159</sup> See *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "al-Minkarī."

<sup>160</sup> Madelung, *Succession*, 210–215, esp. 211 n. 280; 213. See also Chapter 7 below.

<sup>161</sup> *History*, vol. XVI, 190 [I, 3248], quoted in Madelung, *Succession*, 222.

Abū Bakr's son, who describes Mu'āwiya in a variety of derogatory terms, and as unquestionably inferior to 'Alī, Mu'āwiya himself accuses no other than Abū Bakr, the first caliph, for usurping the caliphate from 'Alī, to whom it rightly belonged. Together with 'Umar—so Mu'āwiya maintains—"the two of them agreed and cooperated . . . both had designs against him ['Alī] and intended great offence . . . They would not let him share in their reign . . ." Focusing on Abū Bakr, Mu'āwiya depicts him as an infamous model of some of the wrongs that followed:

If what we are about is not sound, then your father [Abū Bakr] was the first one to be [informed?] about it. If it was injustice, then your father founded it, and we are his partners. We followed his guidance and imitated his action. If your father had not preceded us to it and considered him unsuitable for the rule, we would not oppose Ibn Abī Ṭālib and would submit to him. But since we saw your father do that, we follow his example and imitate his action. So blame your father as you see fit or quit.<sup>162</sup>

It is hard to tell if Mu'āwiya's letter appeared amusing to his contemporaries (who presumably regarded it as absolutely fraudulent), as Madelung speculates with the hindsight "truths" of an established anti-Umayyad tradition that secured its position within orthodox Islam. After all, having no direct access to the reality of the time, our vision is screened by generations of a particular (Sunnī) representation that has not allowed the Umayyads even the slightest chance of ideological self-defense. For our purpose, however, it is significant that Ṭabarī chose to suppress the correspondence. For him, as it so obviously appears, the accusation against Abū Bakr and 'Umar of a conspiratorial policy vis-à-vis 'Alī, even if false, was a matter one should not toy with, and was better eliminated. For an orthodox Sunnī, the possibility of rethinking Mu'āwiya's claim, as contained in the correspondence, was of destructive potential and had to be censored.

There are other loaded cases where Ṭabarī explicitly admits his suppression of material. One such case has to do with the reasons for the murder of 'Uthmān, an issue to be dealt with at some length later in this book. Ṭabarī states that he mentions many of the reasons

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<sup>162</sup> Madelung, *Succession*, 223–4. Madelung does not hide from the reader his aversion to Mu'āwiya's "facetious brainwash."

that the murderers cited, and that he also avoids mentioning many other “that should not be included here.”<sup>163</sup> Why, is not explicated, but one possibility is that he had objections to the reasons that were raised. In another instance, Ṭabarī admits his reluctance to relate “unseemly things” that Mutawakkil’s son told a group of jurists about his father.<sup>164</sup> And in the course of the large section devoted to the revolt of the Zanj, Ṭabarī discloses that he does not mention the “outrages” perpetrated by their leader, “since none was especially atrocious, considering that every act he committed was atrocious.”<sup>165</sup> In other words, Ṭabarī signals in each of the cases a specific criterion for the omission.<sup>166</sup>

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I wish to conclude this chapter with a discussion of the feature of characterization.<sup>167</sup> Here and there, we get from Ṭabarī and his sources snapshots of characters and of the conduct of certain historical figures. Thus, of Sa’d b. Abī Waqqāṣ, a leading Companion and commander of the Arab troops in the conquest of Iraq,<sup>168</sup> we are told that—contrary to common opinion and to what the poets held against him after the battle known as the Day of Aghwāth—he was not a coward.<sup>169</sup> ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Āmir, one of Mu‘āwiya’s governors, “was gentle and easy-going, governing smoothly; he would not punish (anyone) during his regime, nor cut off (the hand of) a thief.”<sup>170</sup> Mughīra b. Shu‘ba, another of Mu‘āwiya’s governors, “was the best behaved and the most (strongly) in favor of well-being, although he would not stop blaming ‘Alī and admonishing him for killing ‘Uthmān . . . He was the most commendable toward the inno-

<sup>163</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 181 [I, 2980].

<sup>164</sup> *History*, vol. XXXIV, 220 [III, 1497] and “Translator’s Foreword,” p. XXII.

<sup>165</sup> *History*, vol. XXXVI, 50 [III, 1765].

<sup>166</sup> See *ibid.*, 50 n. 203, where David Waynes, the translator, suggests a practical implication of Ṭabarī’s statement in terms of the material he provides. “By highlighting in his succeeding account only the major crimes and depredations of the Zanj, Ṭabarī is perhaps also pointing to a shift in their leader’s policy toward plunder and destruction, rather than recruitment of forces.”

<sup>167</sup> For characterization as part of the rhetoric of historiography, see Hexter, “Rhetoric,” 52–4.

<sup>168</sup> See *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Sa’d b. Abī Waqqāṣ.”

<sup>169</sup> *History*, vol. XII, 96 [I, 2304].

<sup>170</sup> *History*, vol. XVIII, 71 [II, 67].

cent, the most forgiving toward those who were offensive, and the most receptive to excuses."<sup>171</sup>

Ṭabarī himself characterizes ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb as “hard on those of dubious reputations and severe in [seeking out] God’s truth until he extracted it, but easygoing in what was owed to him until it was handed over to him and compassionate and full of pity for the weak.”<sup>172</sup> Harthama b. Aʿyan was a master of flexibility.<sup>173</sup> Ḥasan b. Sahl, Maʾmūn’s father-in-law, “was superstitious and believed in omens.” Small wonder that he disliked being told about a funeral bier or someone’s death.<sup>174</sup>

In his capacity as editor, Ṭabarī amasses page after page of anecdotes by various sources on historical personages of the first order.<sup>175</sup> While this is not the place to systematically engage with von Grunebaum’s observation of the general lack of “a vision of the personality” in medieval Islamic biographies,<sup>176</sup> it should be noted that the *History* supplies, so to speak, raw data for personality analysis in the anecdotes. In many cases, these are extremely diversified, yet, occasionally, they add up to projecting some image.<sup>177</sup> Thus, seventeen out of twenty-one anecdotes amassed on Maʾmūn, the ʿAbbāsīd caliph, treat him as a generous patron of poets and poetry and himself of considerable poetic skill.<sup>178</sup> This, supposedly, is an image that

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 123 [II, 112], 125 [II, 114], my translation. For ʿUbaydallāh b. Ziyād as “most courageous,” see *ibid.*, 178 [II, 170]. For ʿUthmān b. Muḥammad b. Abī Sufyān being “a young lad without any judgment,” see vol. XIX, 202 [II, 406]. For ʿAliya being an intelligent and sagacious woman, see vol. XXX, 271 [III, 715]. For Muḥammad b. Jaʿfar being “a venerable figure, of a very pacific nature, well-loved by the people at large etc.,” see vol. XXXII, 31 [III, 989]. For Durriʿ as a “courageous and valiant warrior,” see vol. XXXIII, 174 [III, 1300].

<sup>172</sup> *History*, vol. XIV, 111–12 [I, 2746].

<sup>173</sup> *History*, vol. XXX, 281–2 [III, 723–4].

<sup>174</sup> *History*, vol. XXXII, 157 [III, 1085].

<sup>175</sup> E.g., for Ziyād b. Abīhi, see *History*, vol. XVIII, 76–87 [II, 71–81]. For Maṣūʿ, see vol. XXIX, 93–149 [III, 391–443]. For Maḥdī, see *ibid.*, 246–64 [III, 527–44]. For Ḥādī, see vol. XXX, 59–87 [III, 580–99]. For Ḥārūn al-Rashīd, see *ibid.*, 305–25 [III, 740–57]. For Amīn, see vol. XXXI, 225–50 [III, 950–74]. For Muʿtaṣim, see vol. XXXIII, 210–16 [III, 1324–9].

<sup>176</sup> Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation* (Chicago, 1953), 277–8.

<sup>177</sup> Cooperson, *Biography*, identified such portraits as a distinct genre of biography. It is questionable whether these portraits, made of snippets, can be subsumed under the same roof with more conventional and full-fledged biographical (*ṣīra*) works, be it the Prophet’s or some Mamlūk sultan.

<sup>178</sup> *History*, vol. XXXII, 232–57 [III, 1141–63].



Ṭabarī thought important to project. Michael Cooperson reminds us that Ṭabarī's treatment of Ma'mūn in this "biographical" section is unlike anything in the preceding narrative, where, save for the instance already detailed above, the so-called "civil war," Ṭabarī eschews commentary and explicit interpretation of Ma'mūn's behavior. However, in the "biography"—so Cooperson maintains—Ṭabarī is "positively dismissive" of Ma'mūn. A comparison with Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr's biographical material, assembled in his *Kitāb Baghdad*, is revealing, since the latter treats more central issues that Ma'mūn's reign involved. According to Cooperson's somewhat questionable interpretation, since Ṭabarī had access to that material and decided nevertheless to leave it out, the section of Ma'mūn's anecdotes in the *History* reflects Ṭabarī's own commentary on the caliph's claim to the imamate. That is, Ma'mūn's religious knowledge (*ilm*)—so Ṭabarī thought—was not of the right kind needed for a true imam, and this caliph could claim no more than being king.<sup>179</sup>

The portrayal of two Umayyad caliphs, very different from each other, as we shall see, stands out as an example of a more coherent character study in the *History*. Following his section on the malady that caused Hishām's death, Ṭabarī compiles a series of anecdotes that comprise "some biographical details about Hishām."<sup>180</sup> The anecdotes create an extremely favorable portrait of this Umayyad caliph, especially his conscientious handling of the public finances. Thus, Hishām is given the opportunity to emphasize his own modesty, as against his concern for the wellbeing of the community. Whereas the frugal caliph attests that he has only one tunic (the same tunic that he had been wearing prior to becoming caliph), the money that he has collected during his office is for all the Muslims.<sup>181</sup> He refuses to raise the stipend to one of his clients (*mawālī*), even when pleased with his performance, arguing that ten dinars are not "a mere trifle."<sup>182</sup> Hishām's frugality appears almost obsessive when he rebukes one

<sup>179</sup> Cooperson, *Biography*, 21–3, 48–9. For Ibn Ṭayfūr's description, see 41–8. It is possible to interpret thus the portrait, although Cooperson's argument for that is not entirely persuasive. His associating Ma'mūn's "kingship" with the *mulūk* in the *History*'s Arabic title should obviously have applied not only to Ma'mūn, but also to other caliphs.

<sup>180</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 72–3 [II, 1730–31].

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 73 [II, 1731].

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 74–5 [II, 1731–3].

of his officials for badly packing some of the truffles he sent to the caliph, and gives precise instructions how to avoid it in the future ("If you send any more of them . . . fill with sand the jar in which you put them so that they will not move about and knock against each other").<sup>183</sup> Likewise, when he sees people shaking an olive tree, he instructs them to pick the olives properly ("[o]therwise its fruit will burst open and its branches will break").<sup>184</sup>

According to a reporter who attests that he himself scrutinized the registers of the Marwānid branch of the Umayyads,<sup>185</sup> he had never seen a more sound register than Hishām's, "nor one which was more beneficial both to the common people and to the governor." In the same vein, none of the Marwānids investigated his officials with such thoroughness, as did Hishām.<sup>186</sup> He forbade going around with a retinue; Hishām is also reported by one of his servants to be "chock-full of intelligence." The caliph provided protection to the weak and thus punished a eunuch who beat a Christian and rebuked his own son Muḥammad who was involved in the incident.<sup>187</sup> The Umayyad ruler punished another of his sons, who had not attended the Friday prayer and had not produced a satisfactory explanation for that.<sup>188</sup> Hishām reprimanded yet another of his sons for neglecting his mule, when he demanded a horse for transportation.<sup>189</sup> The caliph made sure that Ghaylān, the Qadarī theologian,<sup>190</sup> received a fair investigation in the process of his trial and vowed to support him if he argued "the truth." The impression is that the report is eager to convey that Ghaylān himself is to be blamed for his fate.<sup>191</sup> A special anecdote, which focuses on a dialogue with one of his entourage, portrays the humane person that was Hishām:

One day Hishām said to al-Abrash: "Have your she-goats given birth yet?" Al-Abrash said: "By God, yes." Hishām said: "But my she-goats

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 77 [II, 1734].

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 80 [II, 1737].

<sup>185</sup> This is 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī. See ibid., 75 n. 401, for his possible identification as a member of the 'Abbāsīd family.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 75 and n. 402.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 73 [II, 1731].

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 76 [II, 1733].

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 76 [II, 1733-4].

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 75, n. 404. For Ghaylān see also, Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. Und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra*, 6 vols., (Berlin and New York, 1991-7), esp. vol. I, 73-106.

<sup>191</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 75-6 [II, 1732-3].

are late in giving birth. Take me out to see your she-goats and let me have some of their milk.” Al-Abrash said: “Yes. Shall I send people on in advance (to make preparations)?” Hishām said “No.” Al-Abrash said: “Shall we send a tent ahead so that it can be put up for us?” Hishām said “Yes.” Accordingly, al-Abrash sent out two men with a tent and it was put up. Early the next morning, Hishām, al-Abrash and the people went out, Hishām and al-Abrash each seated themselves on a stool, and an ewe was brought to each of them. Hishām milked the ewe with his own hand and said: “Take note, Abrash, that I had no difficulty in getting the milk to flow.” Then Hishām ordered that the bread dough should be brought and it was kneaded. Then Hishām lit the fire himself, made a hollow in it for the bread, and threw in the bread. He began turning it over with the poker and said: “Well Abrash, what do you think of my expertise?” When the bread was cooked thoroughly Hishām removed it. He began hitting it with the poker, saying: “This is just for you!” And al-Abrash would reply “Here I am” (this is what young boys say when bread is being baked for them). Then Hishām and the people ate lunch and he returned home.<sup>192</sup>

To grasp Ṭabari’s attitude toward Hishām, it is instructive to compare it to the attitude of Mas‘ūdī, another leading and almost contemporary historian. There is no doubt that the Hishām that emerges from Mas‘ūdī’s treatment (incidentally, much shorter) is an entirely different ruler. Furthermore, material that in the *History* implies Hishām’s virtue, in Mas‘ūdī’s history book is used against the caliph. There the Umayyad caliph is portrayed as “intractable, rude in his manners and harsh. He amassed riches, stimulated agriculture and the improvement of horse strains.” Mas‘ūdī points out Hishām’s fondness of horse races the like of which, “[n]o one, in pagan or Islamic times, had been known to arrange.” The Umayyad promoted the textile industry and “made ready for war by preparing arms and drilling men, and he strengthened the border fortifications.” The brief portrait is concluded with a dismal description of the general atmosphere: “Generous action was rare, charity dried up. Never was there a time when people were harder.”<sup>193</sup>

It is not just the different depiction that one notices here, but another technique at work. Hishām’s character in the *History* is

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 78–9 [II, 1736].

<sup>193</sup> Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation* (Chicago, 1953), 284–5, for a translation from the *Murūj*.

revealed to us through dialogues and the reader is probably expected to make inferences from this sort of "raw data." Mas'ūdī's is more like Sallust's portrait of Sempronia in the *Bellum Catilinae*:

. . . In birth and beauty, in her husband and in her children, she was abundantly favoured by fortune; well-read in the literature of Greece and Rome, able to play the lyre and dance more skillfully than an honest woman need, and having many other accomplishments which minister to voluptuousness . . .

Here, as M. J. Wheeldon notes, everything one needs to know about the character is explicated, not left to be inferred or reconstructed. Sempronia's portrait appears to the reader as an objective historical reality. It is as if Sempronia, whatever her real qualities were, existed independently of the writer's characterization.<sup>194</sup>

To return to Ṭabarī and, this time, his treatment of Walīd b. Yazīd, another Umayyad caliph, the latter's characterization can be even better appreciated when contrasted with that of Hishām. At the end of the "chapter" on Walīd's reign, after detailing the (not extremely important) controversy about the date of his death and his age at the time of death, Ṭabarī, as he so often does with first-rate protagonists, does not turn to a new subject, but instead, has still things to tell us about Walīd. These are embedded in a subversive story, the clear aim of which is to expose the deceased ruler as a hedonist. The source, Abū al-Zinād b. Dhakwān, a jurist and traditionist, who has the status of an eyewitness, contrasts, with unmistakable irony, Walīd's accusation of no other than the famous traditionist Zuhrī as "libertine," on the one hand, with information on Walīd's own conduct, on the other hand. Ibn Dhakwān tells how, on one occasion, as he spent an evening with Walīd, the caliph, after praying the late night prayer, sat down and asked for something to drink, and a covered vessel was brought in. There were also three slave girls who were invited to the room and lined up between the caliph and the scholar. During that night, the slave girls continued bringing him wine until dawn. Ibn Dhakwān reports that, according to his own counting, Walīd drank that night seventy cups.<sup>195</sup>

<sup>194</sup> M. J. Wheeldon, "True Stories: The Reception of Historiography in Antiquity," in Averil Cameron, ed., *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History* (London, 1989), 43.

<sup>195</sup> *History*, vol. XXVI, 164–6 [II, 1810–12].

What is the function of this report? One obvious purpose is to project an image of Walīd as a drunkard. Incidentally, this is not the sole occasion where Ṭabarī focuses on this Umayyad's predilection for wine. Yet, the story being situated at precisely this point in the *History*, it plays an additional role: it creates the impression with which the reader departs from Walīd. It is not some dry information of age and date of death that terminates the treatment of the caliph (as earlier, in the narrative section on Walīd), but a defamatory anecdote. One can hardly believe that the concluding depiction of the (impious) ruler pouring wine down his throat is unintentional.

In contrast to Hishām, Walīd is under a shadow in the *History*. As already noted elsewhere, Ṭabarī's own estimate of his reign stresses "his immorality, his wantonness, and his flippant and frivolous attitude toward religion before he became caliph." After his accession to the caliphate "he only persisted all the more in his pursuit of idle sport and pleasure, hunting, drinking wine, and keeping company with libertines."<sup>196</sup> And to clinch it all, there comes the realistic depiction of the wine drinking on a particular occasion. If this is not an expression of opinion and making a judgment on a historical protagonist, then, what is?

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<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 126–7 [II, 1775]. Ṭabarī tells the reader he has spared him from delving on the matter in order not to increase the size of the book.

## PART TWO



## CHAPTER FIVE

### STRUCTURE AND/AS ARGUMENT IN THE SAQĪFA ACCOUNT

Les païens ne s'interrogent pas sur la conformité du récit à son objet, ils savent que les références sont organisées par les mots, et que les dieux n'en sont pas les garants, parce que leur parole n'est pas plus véridique que l'humaine. Rhétorique et chasse les affairant assez, on n'y a pas le dernier mot et il n'y a pas de coup de grâce.<sup>1</sup>

When the Prophet died in Medina, appointing no one to succeed him, the young Islamic community was divided over the identity of his successor. While a small group assembled around 'Alī, Muḥammad's cousin and son-in-law, most of the Medina Muslims, known as Anṣār ("Helpers"), especially those belonging to the tribe of Khazraj, feared that the Muhājirūn ("Emigrants") would usurp the leadership. Therefore, they called for a meeting in the portico (*saqīfa*) of the Banū Sā'ida, one of their clans, in order to elect Sa'd b. 'Ubāda, their own member, as successor to the Prophet. Abū Bakr, Muḥammad's closest associate, was warned of this possibility and with 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and Abū 'Ubayda b. al-Jarrāḥ, two fellow leaders of the Emigrants, he hurried to the assembly. In the course of a stormy session, one of the Anṣār suggested that two successors, a Medinese and a Meccan, be elected. Abū Bakr objected and proposed either 'Umar or Abū 'Ubayda as the sole successor. Taking now a decisive move that broke the deadlock, 'Umar swore allegiance (*bay'a*) to Abū Bakr, and then all the Muslims followed suit.

Thus, receiving anything between a few lines and a number of pages, the so-called Saqīfa episode has variously been reconstructed.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Instructions païennes* (Paris, 1977), 45.

<sup>2</sup> For brief, standard accounts, see e.g., Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (London, 1964), 50–51; G. E. von Grunebaum, *Classical Islam* (Chicago, 1970), 50; Laura Veccia Vaglieri, "The Patriarchal and Umayyad Caliphates," in P. M. Holt, Ann K. S. Lambton and Bernard Lewis, eds., *The Cambridge History of Islam*, Vol. 1A: *The Central Islamic Lands from Pre-Islamic Times to the First World War* (Cambridge, 1970), 57; Maxime Rodinson, *Mohammed* (Harmondsworth, 1971), 291; Fred McGraw Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, 1981), 82–3; Hugh Kennedy, *The*



To be sure, here we deal with a major event, for it is widely agreed that no issue has divided Muslims more profoundly and durably than the succession to Muḥammad.<sup>3</sup> As for the scholarly view, two elements appear to be common to all writings on the subject. One is the implication that, by itself, the Saqīfa episode, aside from the Anṣār's abortive attempt at seizing the caliphate, was unproblematic. In other words, Abū Bakr was a "natural" choice and the well-known conflictual dimension of the succession issue is to be seen as a later development in the framework of the Sunna-Shī'ā schism and as generated by Shī'ite fabrication.<sup>4</sup> The second aspect has to do with the very reconstruction of the event. Here, a prevalent assumption, actually lacking any critical basis, is that a report preserved in Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām's well known biography of Muḥammad (*Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*), a report ascribed to 'Umar, the second caliph, produced late in his reign and transmitted by the reputed 'Abdallāh b. al-'Abbās is, unlike reports in other (later) sources, factual.<sup>5</sup> Surely,

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*Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London, 1986), 51–2. Miklos Muranyi, "Ein neuer Bericht über die Wahl des ersten Kalifen Abū Bakr," *Arabica* 25 (1978): 233–60, is mainly concerned with a report identified as Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī's. Madelung, *Succession*, esp. 30–31, speculates about an array of issues and puzzles that arise, especially from reading Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām's *Sīra*. Since I do not share Madelung's point of departure for establishing the "true" history in this case, his speculations are not my concern here. See most recently, Khalil 'Athamina, "The Pre-Islamic Roots of the Early Muslim Caliphate: The Emergence of Abū Bakr," *Islam* 76 (1999): 1–32.

<sup>3</sup> Madelung, *Succession*, 1. The significance of the event as the first division in Islam has been noted already by Mas'ūdī, as cited in Tayob, "Islamic Historiography," 105.

<sup>4</sup> Madelung, *Succession*, 1–2. On pp. 3–18 he problematizes this assumption, the origins of which he attributes to Caetani, who, in turn, followed the Sunnī doctrine. Madelung goes on to speculate on some hypothetical scenario on which I do not see it necessary to comment. He fails to notice that such a problematization, albeit from a partisan (Shī'ite) point of view, yet based on similar arguments, is already to be found in Jafri, *Origins*, 13–57. Unsurprisingly, Jafri sees the Saqīfa event as the earliest manifestation of the Sunnī-Shī'ī schism (27), and in treating the episode groups the sources according to their supposed biases.

<sup>5</sup> For Jafri's traditional and utterly uncritical argument for his choice of 'Umar's version as a so-called master version, see *Origins*, esp. 28–32. For example, the argument that 'Umar's account was widely circulated and was later unanimously transmitted, hence stood no chance of fabrication, takes it for granted that the attribution to 'Umar is authentic. Also Madelung, *Succession*, 18–27, insists on the authenticity of Ibn al-'Abbās' report, yet rightly stresses that authenticity is no guarantee for reliability. He "resolves" the problem by suggesting that, for the historian, the source's point of view and bias is as interesting as the facts themselves (22–3). However, Madelung's treatment of the report by Ibn al-'Abbās (28–31) is uninformed by this qualification and, in the end, sets out to tell the "real" story instead.

there are scholars who point out the difficulties involved in establishing precise facts from reports that, in their earliest rendition, are at least one hundred years later than the alleged occurrence itself. Also, suspicion has been raised as to the interests and biases that informed these reports.<sup>6</sup> These serious reservations notwithstanding, there is a clear desire to resolve the problems involved. Isolating differences of information and disregarding them as simply manifesting partisanship, scholars have preferred to stress rather the similarities between the various Saqīfa accounts in order to pursue, after all, a reconstruction of the event.<sup>7</sup>

That not all the differences that emerge in the reports about the Saqīfa can be satisfactorily resolved becomes clear upon a cursory reading of the available material. To illustrate the point: there are in the *History* alone (that is, apart from other historical works) two different versions of the reaction of Sa'd b. 'Ubāda, the leading Anṣārī contender to the *khilāfa*, to Abū Bakr's nomination. In the first, Sa'd remains firm in his opposition, vows under no circumstances to render an oath of allegiance, and to fight the winning party "until I am brought forth before my God and know what my reckoning is." Thereafter, a leading man of Medina advises against 'Umar's suggestion to pester Sa'd in order to force him to change his mind, since—he argues—nothing would be effective in this case. However, in a second version we are told that, as a result of physical pressure exerted on him, Sa'd joined the Community in rendering the oath, albeit in "an action taken without consideration, like those of the *jāhiliyyah*." In a complementary version we find that Sa'd is totally isolated in his opposition to Abū Bakr and he himself expresses disappointment in his own tribe for not supporting him on this matter. Thus, in contrast to the first version, where Sa'd remains a bastion of opposition, in the second he is reduced to a state of misery. The Emigrants leave him with little room for escape: "If you withdraw a hand from obedience, or divide the union, we will strike off your head."<sup>8</sup> Reading the two versions, a question thus remains: Did Sa'd swear allegiance to Abū Bakr? Did he not?

<sup>6</sup> Jafri, *Origins*, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. For his unconvincing reconciliation of variances, see pp. 44–5. Muranyi, "Bericht," 254, who points out an array of differences, mildly concludes that the material belongs to "Nacherzählung." Also Madelung, *Succession*, 28, speaks of "slightly variant versions."

<sup>8</sup> *History*, vol. X, 9–11 [I, 1844–5].

Take as another example Abū Bakr's coronation speech, so to speak. In the account preserved in Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām's *Sīra*, it is quite relevant to the occasion, its thrust being the relationship between the Caliph and the Community (*umma*). Abū Bakr expresses the desire to be corrected when in the wrong and promises to absolve the Believers from obedience if he himself defies God. He takes upon himself to defend the weak, and warns the Muslims that straying unto a wicked course would soon bring calamity upon them.<sup>9</sup> When we turn to Ṭabarī's account, although it echoes the former in its first passage, and on occasion re-formulates what the *Sīra* had already said (e.g., "I have a Satan who takes possession of me," instead of the more prosaic phrasing of the possibility of the caliph committing error), it then takes an entirely different direction. In this version, Abū Bakr chooses to briefly relate Muḥammad's mission "as an Apostle to His creatures and as a witness to his community." The caliph further mentions Meccan opposition to the prophetic message, the suffering by the Muhājirūn from hatred, and their ability to prevail. The speech moves on to emphasize three theological issues that bear questionable relevance to the occasion. One is the tension between human brevity of existence and one's obligations in this world. The second theme is the fate of past generations and the lesson to be learned from it. That is, the Community is to take warning from those tyrants, renowned for their victories, from the kings who had cultivated the earth and fortified cities—all of them now perished and their bodies turned into dust. The third theological theme deals with the deception involved in the conventional categorization of good and evil, one that may lead to an erroneous association of "good" with Hell and "evil" with Paradise.<sup>10</sup> Once again, the two versions in the *Sīra* and the *History* respectively leave the quest for Abū Bakr's "real" speech unanswered: Does the first account provide a truncated speech? Does the *History*'s version supply a mostly fabricated speech? Surely, the two versions are hard to reconcile.

Without direct access to *History*, having no Archimedean point from which to decide what are the facts, we are, like Lyotard's pagans, forced to satisfy ourselves with different *historiographical* accounts,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibn Hishām, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā' (Cairo, 1936), vol. IV, 306–10, English trans. Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muḥammad* (London, 1955).

<sup>10</sup> *History*, vol. IX, 11–13 [I, 1845–7].

none of which has an edge that would entitle it to be called “History.” The crucial question to me, therefore, is not what *really* happened in the Saqīfa; the sad yet unavoidable answer is that we simply do not know. À la Magritte and his “This is not a pipe,” and Michel Foucault’s elaboration thereof,<sup>11</sup> shifting our emphasis from an elusive object to its *representation*, we may ask: What sort of representation of an alleged historical event do we have in the *History*? That is to say, what are the main features of the historical reports about the Saqīfa event and what is the meaning they have for us as modern/postmodern readers?

In light of my approach as already clarified, which is opposed to a comprehensive comparison between the existing versions of the episode in question, and even more so to an attempt to “reconstruct” a composite story,<sup>12</sup> I intend to concentrate on the account I consider most significant, the one preserved in the *History*.<sup>13</sup> Still, it is essential to my treatment of this account to note (as has already been mentioned) that it is in no small detail different from that contained in Ibn Ishāq’s “Biography of Muḥammad,”<sup>14</sup> as well as other early sources.<sup>15</sup> Compared with Ṭabarī’s, Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām’s “Saqīfa” is clearly a minimal narrative. It is ascribed, as noted above, to none other than ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, who was allegedly required to relate his version of the event a few years *post factum*, when oppositional elements in the Community were still questioning the legitimacy of Abū Bakr’s election, by now a *fait accompli*. ‘Umar’s version is clearly meant to dispel the doubts and can be considered an

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe* (Berkeley, 1983).

<sup>12</sup> This is done in Tayob, “Islamic Historiography,” 121–5.

<sup>13</sup> To be precise, there is besides the account that is here in focus, another that is placed earlier in the *History*, vol. IX, 192–4 [I, 1822–3], and is similar to the one in the *Sīra*.

<sup>14</sup> Jafri, *Origins*, 40, is clearly erroneous on this. He most likely considered the shorter version in the *History* (see note 13 above). Similarly, Madelung’s insistence that there are merely slight differences between the versions (see n. 7 above) should be contested.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn Ishāq himself has another version that was transmitted by Zubayr b. al-Bakkār, as pointed out by Muranyi, “Bericht,” 251–2, 258. Balādhurī, Ibn Sa’d, Ibn Abī Shayba, and Bukhārī in his Commentary (“kitāb al-muḥāribīm,” in the section *Bāb rajm al-ḥablā min al-zinā*?; I owe this reference to the late Norman Calder), all resemble Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām. The latter is reproduced in later sources such as Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya* (Beirut, 1966), vol. V, 245–7; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fi’l-ta’rīkh* (Beirut, 1965), vol. II, 326–8. For further treatment of sources, see Muranyi, “Bericht.”

exercise in historicized ideology or, else, ideological history. Implied in it is a *post factum* justification of Abū Bakr's appointment.

There are three major speakers in 'Umar's story as it unfolds in the *Ṣīra*: an anonymous speaker for the Anṣār, who briefly states his party's rights; Abū Bakr, who, in response, takes a conciliatory tone, but at the same time insists on Qurashī superiority ("the best of the Arabs in blood and country") and suggests either 'Umar or Abū 'Ubayda b. al-Jarrāḥ as caliph; a second Anṣārī, also anonymous, who proposes a compromise in the form of dividing the caliphate between the Anṣār and the Muhājirūn. The conclusion is somewhat unexpected and quite dramatic: as "voices were raised" and a "complete breach was to be feared," 'Umar performed the *bay'a*, everybody then followed suit, and thus Abū Bakr was elected.

Ṭabarī's account, we are informed, originated in one 'Abdallāh b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī 'Amra al-Anṣārī, of the Khazraj tribe,<sup>16</sup> no trivial ascription, since it would be expected that, like 'Umar's version that gives voice to the party of the Muhājirūn, al-Anṣārī's would identify itself with the Anṣārī position. That things are in fact different, or at least, so they are told to have been, will soon become clear. In any case, this account in the *History* is considerably more complex than Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām's. Of the five (as opposed to three in Ibn Ishāq) major speakers in the session, three represent different positions with regard to the Anṣār's political aspirations. Their identity, the order of their appearance, and the content of their addresses are significant elements, creating the basic thread of the narrative, which is the demonstrably gradual decline in support for the Anṣār's cause and the shift to the side of the Muhājirūn as the only party worthy of the caliphate. To put it the other way around, implied in the sequence is Quraysh's claim to the *khilāfa*; the propagation of the Emigrant's right to the caliphate is embedded in the very development of the plot. Let us examine this sequence in some detail.

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<sup>16</sup> For biographical references, see Muranyī, "Bericht," 234 n. 2. The account reached Ṭabarī by way of the Kūfan writer Abū Mikhnaf (d. 157/745), to whom a *Kitāb al-ṣaqifa* is attributed. See Ursula Sezgin, *Abū Miḥnaf* (Leiden, 1971), 111 n. 33. Hishām b. Muḥammad al-Kalbī (d. 204/819) was also allegedly involved in the transmission of the account.

The opening speech in the hastily convened assembly, a speech most eloquently representing the Anṣār's claim of the right to rule the Community, is delivered on behalf of Sa'd b. 'Ubāda (Sa'd himself being ill), the chieftain of the Khazraj tribe and one of the Prophet's "apostles (*nuqabā'*)."<sup>17</sup> Sa'd is the man whom most of the Anṣār are planning to choose as Muḥammad's successor. He is of the opinion that his party's exclusive claim to "precedence in religion and merit in Islam," their determination to counter the Messenger's enemies, and their taking up the sword to abase the Arabs, are now, in the wake of Muḥammad's death, all expected to pay dividends. Sa'd's concluding sentence leaves no room for doubt: "[K]eep [control of] this matter [the caliphate] to yourselves, to the exclusion of others, for it is yours and yours alone." That is to say, the sole leader of the *umma* should come from among the Anṣār. Unsurprisingly, Sa'd's audience agrees: "We will not diverge from your opinion, and we shall put you in charge of this business."<sup>17</sup>

Contrary to this vote of confidence, however, some of the Anṣār, anticipating Qurashī opposition, express their anxiety at quite an early stage. In the course of the debate now evolving, they raise the idea of dividing the leadership between the two parties, the Helpers and the Emigrants. As it turns out, the unexpected arrival of the triumvirate of Abū Bakr, 'Umar and Abū 'Ubayda indeed justifies the Anṣārī anxiety. For, Abū Bakr, albeit in a conciliatory speech, stresses before the assembly the priority of the Muhājirūn. According to his description, they were singled out by God to affirm the truth and were the first to worship Him and believe in Him and His messenger. They were ready to endure patiently harsh insults from their kin. "We are the leaders, and you are the helpers," Abū Bakr flatly states the only hierarchy possible in his opinion; the Anṣār *must* occupy a secondary status to that of the Muhājirūn.<sup>18</sup> For him, the option of dividing the rule over the Community is nonexistent.

Next, at a considerably lower point on the scale of Anṣārī demand of government, we find Ḥubāb b. al-Mundhir's speech. A Khazrajī leader as well, and a warrior in the Prophet's army, Ḥubāb, unlike Sa'd, does not explicate the grounds for the Anṣār's claim to succession. He certainly retreats from the statement by his Anṣārī predecessor

<sup>17</sup> *History*, vol. X, 1–3 [I, 1838].

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–5 [I, 1840–44].

on the exclusive right of his party. The Helpers, according to Ḥubāb, have no claim to run the affairs of the entire Community on their own; their rights should be limited to self-government only. Surely, he depicts the Anṣār as “people of power and wealth, numerous and strong in resistance,” but he does so not in order to stake a claim for an exclusive privilege, as Sa’d had done, but rather to prescribe a self-imposed obligation, since the people “look only to what you do.” In order to live up to the expectations, it is necessary to demonstrate unity, not to be trapped in a maze of inner dissention. As it turns out, in his call for unity (“[D]o not differ among yourselves, lest your judgment [*ray*] be spoiled and your cause [*amr*] collapse”), Ḥubāb anticipates a situation of fissure within the Anṣārī camp. It should be noted, however, that having decided on a two leaders solution, Ḥubāb is unwilling to retract. Against ‘Umar’s objection that two successors cannot come to an agreement, as well as other arguments against the suggested compromise, Ḥubāb retains his firm opinion: “If they [the Muhājirūn] refuse to give you what you ask for, then drive them out of this country, and seize control of these matters despite them.”<sup>19</sup>

With Bashīr b. Sa’d’s (no immediate relation to Sa’d b. ‘Ubāda) address, the third in number for the Anṣār, which follows an exchange of insults between ‘Umar and Ḥubāb, as well as a brief intervention by Abū ‘Ubayda on behalf of the Muhājirūn, we reach a total relinquishing of any pretensions to government on the part of the Anṣār. Here are Bashīr’s crucial words:

If indeed by God we were the first in merit in battling the polytheists and in precedence in this religion, we would want by [these deeds] only [to gain] our Lord’s pleasure . . . it is not appropriate for us to exalt ourselves over [other] people.<sup>20</sup>

In a clear antithesis to Sa’d b. ‘Ubāda, Bashīr states that the Anṣār’s privileges should not be “cashed” in the form of political gains. In his opinion, his party should relinquish their claim to the caliphate. Bashīr’s view is theologically grounded: the caliphate is one of the worldly “transitory things” and, therefore, should not be craved. The speaker then goes on to argue that, since Muḥammad was of

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 5–6 [I, 1840–41].

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 7–8 [I, 1842].

the Quraysh, “his people are more entitled to [hold] authority and more suitable.” He is utterly “persuaded” by the Muhājirūn’s point of view. Not only that, and unlike what we read in the *Sīra*, he even precedes ‘Umar and Abū ‘Ubayda in swearing allegiance to Abū Bakr. To Ḥubāb’s admonition that, in so doing, Bashīr puts himself in opposition to his own kinsmen, and that his act possibly derives from envy of his “cousin” (i.e., Sa‘d b. ‘Ubāda), Bashīr replies that he “abhorred contending with a group [Muhājirūn] for a right that God had given them.”<sup>21</sup>

Now, it is important to stress that Bashīr’s position is not presented in the narrative as an outcome of any special circumstances. Neither are there decisive arguments that Bashīr is forced to confront and that might divert his view in the unexpected direction that he has taken. In short, there are no obvious reasons in Ṭabarī’s version to explain this Anṣārī’s peculiar position. Bashīr’s conclusion in favor of the Muhājirūn employs the familiar topos of using the opponent’s testimony against his own interest as a means of clinching an argument in favor of the winning party. There is certainly no better way to legitimize a claim than the support it receives from the opposition.<sup>22</sup>

After Bashīr’s speech, further arguments by Qurashīs themselves to promote their cause are unnecessary. Bashīr has done the job for them. Furthermore, with Bashīr’s homage to Abū Bakr, the flimsy unity of the Anṣār, a body composed of—as tradition has it—the originally rivals Aws and Khazraj, is supposedly exposed. The Aws express suspicion that all the Khazraj desire is to monopolize power.<sup>23</sup> Precisely at this point, a manifestly pro-Qurashī argument, dressed in the garb of a conventional literary formula, is introduced to tell

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 8 [I, 1843], italics added.

<sup>22</sup> Notable examples of this topos can be found in alleged Jewish and Christian predictions of the rise of the future Prophet. See, for example, the story of Baḥīrā’s prediction of the future emergence of the Prophet in Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām’s *Sīra*. Early popular material of this kind is briefly discussed in my *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge, 1993), 30, 31.

<sup>23</sup> For this as evidence of the inner division within the body of the Anṣār, which, as the sources tell us, goes back to pre-Islamic times, see Muranyi, “Bericht,” 234, 235; Isaac Hasson, “Contributions à l’étude des Aws et des Ḥazrağ,” *Arabica* 36 (1989): 1–35, esp. 30–31 (I owe this reference to E. Landau-Tasseron). For a problematizing of this “fact” see below.



the reader what he already comprehends: “Thus that which Sa‘d b. ‘Ubādah and the Khazraj had agreed to do was defeated.”<sup>24</sup>

This somewhat inexplicable sequence, whatever the puzzles it leaves in the reader’s mind, is the crucial axis in Ṭabarī’s Saqīfa account, while the precise content of the arguments in favor of either of the two parties, the Anṣār or the Muhājirūn, is rendered marginal. No side is made to produce a decisive argument.<sup>25</sup> Such an argument is unnecessary to bring the plot to its desired conclusion, which appears pre-determined. Thus, when Sa‘d’s claim about the Anṣār’s “precedence in religion and merit in Islam” is, surprisingly, confirmed almost word for word by no other than Abū Bakr, it has no effect on what follows and leads to no tangible gain for the Medinan Muslims. And when Abū Bakr, in turn, maintains that the Muhājirūn “were the first who worshipped God on earth,” he almost repeats Sa‘d’s words, only this time applying them to the Meccan party. Similarly, when Abū Bakr represents the Emigrants as the Prophet’s “friends and kinsmen,” he is made to describe his own party in terms not dissimilar to that of Sa‘d, who depicts the Anṣār as a squadron in the service of Muḥammad during his life and his favorites up to the moment of his death. In short, Abū Bakr’s ascription to the Muhājirūn of the title of “leaders,” relegating the Anṣār to the status of “helpers,” is not an outcome of an intellectual showdown but takes the form of an arbitrary pronouncement. There is no winner in this ideological debate.

What gives Ṭabarī’s account about the Ṣaqīfa affair its dramatic flavor,<sup>26</sup> when compared with other accounts of the same event, is the quite enigmatic turn-about from an initial position to its antithesis on the part of the Anṣārī speakers. The claim to an exclusive right of succession is followed by a compromise proposal, only to

<sup>24</sup> *History*, vol. X, 8 [I, 1843].

<sup>25</sup> This is overlooked by Tayob, “Islamic historiography,” 150–51, who sees in Abū Bakr’s speech evidence for Ṭabarī’s own approval of his election. Tayob fails to note that Ṭabarī’s text reproduces Sa‘d’s parallel claims for the Anṣār.

<sup>26</sup> In *E.I.*, s.v. “Saqīfa,” Gerard Lecomte refers to the Saqīfa event as “worthy of the ancient theatre,” and analyzes the account in the psd. Ibn Qutayba, *Kūtib al-īmāma wa’l-siyāsa*, which is believed to have originated in the ninth or tenth century A.D. See further idem, “Sur une relation.” Lecomte fails to notice that most of this account is also found in the *History*. The latter part of the psd. Ibn Qutayba, pertaining to ‘Alī’s claim, echoes the text in Ibn A‘tham al-Kūfī, as I point out at the end of this chapter.

lead to the total waiving of pretensions. While in Ibn Hishām's account the drama lies in the unexpected end, when 'Umar imposes Abū Bakr's rule upon the Anṣār against their plan to divide the office, the drama in the *History* is located elsewhere, that is, in the debate itself and the change in position. In the end, the allegiance to Abū Bakr, which is the climatic moment in Ibn Hishām's version, is in Ṭabarī's account a sort of anticlimax, an almost natural outcome of the Anṣār's final position. Persuasion, rather than coercion, is the name of the game.

To conclude up to this point, the two accounts, one in Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām's *Sīra*, the other in Ṭabarī's *History*, are about the same event, they share some details, and yet they differ significantly in both particulars and form. I would say that, in the end, they tell us quite different stories. Which, if any, is of historical veracity? Unlike scholars who lean on the "evidence" of reliable authorities (*isnād*), or something else,<sup>27</sup> I have no way to answer. I wish, therefore, to choose a different track and consider the Saqīfa episode as not only a factual account but also as a form of an argument. That is to say, what allegedly happened in the Saqīfa is a "proof" in what could be contextualized as a specific and rather important dispute that took place among the early Muslims concerning the right of succession.<sup>28</sup>

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Focusing on contextualization, it is perhaps a truism, yet an important one, that a text is shaped by a host of unstated desires, beliefs, interests, etc., which arise from pressures that are social (in the broadest sense of the term), namely, *contextual*, and that impress themselves upon the text.<sup>29</sup> We need to complement textual analysis, even in its deconstructionist form, by conceptualizing text production as an action in a social world, undertaken by socially (which certainly subsumes politically, etc.) situated authors, and linked to extra-textual

<sup>27</sup> Jafri, *Origins*, 30–32.

<sup>28</sup> *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Saqīfa;" Lecomte, "Sur une relation," 175, 180, argues that the Saqīfa event has become an article of faith in Sunnī Islam.

<sup>29</sup> Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 65 (1990): 84. On pp. 78–83 Spiegel discusses two cases of the text-context relationship, which are expanded in her *Romancing the Past: Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, 1993).

realities, with the intention of influencing the thoughts and behavior of other persons. This is why, as William Sewell argues, “even a study focused resolutely—indeed, almost obsessively—on puzzles of textual interpretation cannot avoid, or can only avoid with peril, articulations between texts and the social world.”<sup>30</sup>

How to define the social world of a given text? For, as LaCapra tells us, “one never has—at least in the case of complex texts—the context.”<sup>31</sup> A major result of what has been termed the “linguistic turn” in the human sciences has been to collapse text and context “as equally part of one broad vein of discursive production characteristic of a given epoch.”<sup>32</sup> Reality is implicated in textual processes, the “real world” is textualized in a variety of ways,<sup>33</sup> thus one must guard off falling into the trap that posits the context as something ontologically different from the text.<sup>34</sup>

Still, nothing can stop the effort of tracing “the ways in which the historical world is internalized in the text,”<sup>35</sup> the “social logic of the text,” as Gabrielle Spiegel has coined it.<sup>36</sup> Like Sewell pushing the reading of the Abbé Sieyès’s *What is the Third Estate?* to its limits, in order to demonstrate the unavoidable presence of the social in the text, I propose to look for the context not just in texts but *in the very text it produced*. To follow Spiegel, only by attending to overt and suppressed meanings, of implied and articulated purposes, together with the variety of literary and discursive modes in which they are given

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<sup>30</sup> William H. Sewell, Jr., *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: The Abbé Sieyès and “What Is the Third Estate?”* (Durham, 1994), 36–7, 38.

<sup>31</sup> Dominick LaCapra, “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts,” in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals & New Perspectives* (Ithaca, 1982), 57.

<sup>32</sup> Spiegel, *Past as Text*, 50.

<sup>33</sup> Dominick LaCapra, “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts,” in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals & New Perspectives* (Ithaca, 1982), 50. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 65 (1990): 76 n. 57, dissociates herself from this conclusion.

<sup>34</sup> For some thoughtful remarks on this issue, see Andrew Galloway, “Narratology and the Pursuit of Context: Three Recent Studies of Medieval Narrative,” *Medievalia et Humanistica* 21 (1994): 111–26, esp. 117–21, where the author criticizes Spiegel’s contextual assumptions in her otherwise innovative *Romancing the Past: Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, 1993).

<sup>35</sup> Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 65 (1990): 84.

<sup>36</sup> Idem, *Past as Text*, 53.

voice, can we achieve “a genuinely historical understanding of textual production.”<sup>37</sup> Attempting to define the context of Ṭabarī’s Saqīfa episode, my focus is on the ideological debate I detect resonating in the text.

Now, this debate has been mainly seen as taking place on the Sunna-Shī‘a axis. Already by the second half of the ninth century A.D., Ya‘qūbī (d. 824/897), a historian with attested Shī‘ite inclination, appropriately attributed his Saqīfa account to the *imām* Ja‘far al-Šādiq. That account is certainly a counterpart to the reports detailed above. On the one hand, it suppresses Qurashī claims to leadership and pursues strictly Hāshimite, though not strictly ‘Alīd, precedence. On the other hand, the Anṣār’s claim is rendered marginal.<sup>38</sup> For Ya‘qūbī, the Muhājirūn-Anṣār dispute is not a real issue.

Yet, it will not be superfluous to note in this regard that, as we have briefly seen above, such a dispute between the Emigrants and the Helpers is indeed the backdrop to Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām’s version. Accordingly, ‘Umar describes his recollection of “what really happened” in the assembly, in order to justify Abū Bakr’s election against an opposition that still exists a dozen years after the event had already been concluded. Whatever the specific details of the context in which accounts of the Saqīfa were produced, there is a general sense of a milieu in which Abū Bakr’s nomination is yet debated, not in the way we are acquainted with as coming from the camp of the Shī‘a, but rather the one supporting an Anṣārī claim.

If, then, our emphasis shifts from the question of “truth” (or, “what are the facts?”) to that of an ideological intent of the Saqīfa report, there can be no doubt that, in terms of defending Abū Bakr’s right to the caliphate, Ṭabarī’s account performs the job more effectively than Ibn Hishām’s. The latter is inferior in terms of reproducing (or, is it rather producing?) the debate between the contending parties. No less important, the need of the *Sīra* to conclude the story with an act of violence, by which Abū Bakr was elevated to office, can be seen as both an outcome and a symptom of the ideological aspect (actually, ideological weakness) of the contention: the deadlock requires some form of a showdown, force will have the last say.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, 54–5. For Sieys see n. 30 above.

<sup>38</sup> Tayob, “Islamic Historiography,” 133–5, 151–2. The suggestion to see also in Mas‘ūdī’s report some ‘Alīd leanings (136–7) seems less persuasive.

In *Contradistinction*, Ṭabarī's account, not without its touch of the aesthetics of storytelling, unfolds a more complex plot that leads to a "natural" solution and thus the *bay'a* can forego violent means. It is rationality that, supposedly, prevails.

Interestingly enough, once the dispute is over, Ṭabarī's *Saqifa* may convey the image that things were not actually so grave. In fact, in a recent study, Tayob points out one possible tactic at play, which is to show the dispute as no more than a result of Sa'd b. 'Ubāda's personal ambition, with no genuine support on the part of the Anṣār as a whole. The projected amicable relationship between the two parties, the Emigrants and the Helpers, appears to propagate the general Sunnī view that all the parties involved lived up to the moral and ethical demands of their faith. Whether this was Ṭabarī's intention—there seems ample room for debate—at least he was able to persuade one modern reader (Tayob, that is) that this was the case.<sup>39</sup> And a late chronicler like Ibn Kathīr, possibly trying to benefit from frail human memory, strove to put on a poker face and declare that no tension or conflict arose after the death of the Prophet.<sup>40</sup>

Ideology *cum* history being the interpretation here suggested, authorial production or narrator's intention, rather than the real facts, become the main focus for consideration; narrator's intention as Sternberg has it, not in the antiquated sense of a psychological state of mind that is consciously (or unconsciously) rendered in words. As Sternberg defines it, intention in this case is "a shorthand for the structure of meaning and effect supported by the conventions that the text appeals to or devises: for the sense that the language makes in terms of the communicative context as a whole."<sup>41</sup> Or, as LaCapra puts it, "an intention is a kind of proleptic reading or interpretation of a text . . . for it is rarely a transcription of what the author meant to say at the 'original' time of writing."<sup>42</sup>

Ṭabarī's account, in the structure it develops, exemplifies—what Sternberg has argued of biblical narrative in general—the "transformation of ideological discourse into art of the highest order, with-

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 161, 162, 166.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>41</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Dominick LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts," in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals & New Perspectives* (Ithaca, 1982), 58.

out compromising either but enriching both.”<sup>43</sup> At play is the shaping of history by its meeting with ideology and aesthetics, all three joining to generate a strategy of telling that casts reading as a drama. They merge into a single poetics, their interests and formations so coalescing that they can hardly be told apart in the finished product.

How the two accounts, in the *Sīra* and the *History*, respectively, stand diachronically to one another is a moot point. One possibility is that Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām’s, the relatively simpler of the two, is also the earlier one.<sup>44</sup> In the light of such hypothetical chronology, this account could have been deemed at some point insufficient to convey the rights of the Qurashī claim. A clearer (*historicized*) argument, hence a more complex plot, were required to buttress it. And these were indeed achieved in the *History*.

The shift to authorial intention is, perhaps, also a way out of the aforementioned contradictions that transpire between significant elements in the different versions. In the light of what has been argued above, it is possible to approach the variations in detail in a way different from a straightforward factual concern that, to reach a solution, is bound either to gloss over differences, or make preferences on the basis of guesswork or sheer idiosyncrasy. When the emphasis shifts to the argumentative aspect, to possible authorial intent, contradictions of facts—if, indeed, facts they are—do not oblige one to decide which are the true ones when he is unable to do so. Rather, a specific element in one plot may be judged according to the function it serves. And thus, Sa’d b. ‘Ubāda’s oath of allegiance to Abū Bakr, featuring in one version, may be seen as the narrator’s need to emphasize Sa’d’s surrender in order to provide a conclusive end to the episode. In contradistinction, the lack of Sa’d’s compromise in another version can be seen as serving the purpose of preserving tension; or, to put it differently, the author there possibly deemed it unnecessary to introduce Sa’d’s humiliation in order for the account to achieve its purpose. Similarly, the narrator of Ṭabarī’s Saqīfa version considered it appropriate to provide an elaborate text of Abū Bakr’s coronation speech, which is a concise version of the “official” story of the founding of the Community, in

<sup>43</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, 98.

<sup>44</sup> Madelung, *Succession*, 28, asserts that this is indeed the case. He is even able to tell that Ṭabarī’s account was composed in the late Umayyad age.

other words: Islamic salvation history in a nutshell.<sup>45</sup> To approach contradictions this way may also save us from what could be an almost automatic fall into a propagandistic trap set by Muslim orthodoxy. Thus, instead of looking at the inner division within the Anṣār on the issue of the succession, along Aws-Khazraj lines, as perpetuating their inner division in pre-Islamic time,<sup>46</sup> the detail of the division may be seen to function as an additional argument against the Anṣār, hence, an ideological element.

One final note on the foregoing analysis may be in order. A comparison of Ṭabarī's version with the (later?)<sup>47</sup> version reproduced by Ibn Aʿtham al-Kūfī (d. ca. 314/926?) reveals that in the *History* we do not necessarily reach the final elaboration on the Saqifa report. Although not essentially different, Ibn Aʿtham's version provides additional, on occasion indeed trivial, details that add to its sense of "authenticity" and persuasiveness. To give one example, Bashīr b. Saʿd, the third Anṣārī speaker, who, it should be remembered, tips the balance in favor of Abū Bakr's appointment, is not only, as in Ṭabarī, the first one to confer the *bayʿa* on the elected caliph. He also makes a declaration about his intent.<sup>48</sup> It is also noteworthy that Ibn Aʿtham concludes with a unique treatment of ʿAlī's merits as a candidate to the caliphate, a treatment that, obviously, contradicts the gist of most of the report: that Abū Bakr is the right successor. It is likely that such a Shīʿite point of view<sup>49</sup> is to be explained by Ibn Aʿtham's reliance in his report on the Shīʿite author Minqarī, and thus resulting in inner contradiction.<sup>50</sup> However, the issue need not concern us here.

<sup>45</sup> For Wansbrough's discussion of this concept, see *Sectarian Milieu*, 147–9.

<sup>46</sup> See above and note 23.

<sup>47</sup> Madelung, *Succession*, 28, n. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Muranyi, "Bericht," 244.

<sup>49</sup> See also *ibid.*, 257.

<sup>50</sup> For this reliance see *ibid.*, 237.

## CHAPTER SIX

### ‘UTHMĀN’S MURDER: POINTS OF VIEW AND ṬABARĪ’S ROLE

[T]here is no such thing as a *single* correct view of any object under study but . . . *many* correct views, each requiring its own style of representation.<sup>1</sup>

The murder of ‘Uthmān, the third caliph, a momentous event to which early Muslim historiographers devoted considerable space, is largely summarized in modern history books in one or some paragraphs. Quite expectedly, the aim is to relate the murder *wie es eigentlich gewesen*,<sup>2</sup> and on occasion, to evaluate its historical significance.<sup>3</sup> Against this backdrop of orthodox engagement, a single voice has recently been raised, asking to what extent do we deal here with authentic accounts. Can we penetrate to the “core” of facts behind the existing reports? Humphreys, who asks these questions, denies authenticity to the historical material and proposes that we see it as

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<sup>1</sup> White, *Tropics*, 47.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Wellhausen, *Arab Kingdom*, 44–50; Carl Brockelmann, *History of the Islamic Peoples* (New York, 1960), 65–6; Laura Veccia Vaglieri, “The Patriarchal and Umayyad Caliphates,” in P. M. Holt, Ann K. S. Lambton and Bernard Lewis, eds., *The Cambridge History of Islam* (Cambridge, 1970), Vol. 1A: *The Central Islamic Lands from Pre-Islamic Times to the First World War*, 68–9; Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London, 1986), 74–5; M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History: A New Interpretation I: A.D. 600–750 (A.H. 132)* (Cambridge, 1971), 70–71. Madelung, *Succession*, esp. 113–40, is an exceptionally lengthy and detailed treatment.

<sup>3</sup> Evaluation is mostly expressed in hyperbolic terms that reflect the opinions of modern historians and not necessarily those of medieval Muslims. Thus, to Wellhausen “[t]he murder . . . was more epoch-making than almost any other event of Islamic history.” See *Arab Kingdom*, 50. Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (London, 1964), 61, considers it “a turning point in the history of Islam,” as does Hinds, “Murder,” 450, in an article that is mostly an analysis of the opposition to ‘Uthmān. Similarly, for J. J. Saunders, *A History of Medieval Islam* (London, 1965), 62–3, “[t]he murder of Othman was one of the most fateful events in Islamic history.” According to Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London, 1986), 73, it was “one of the most traumatic incidents in early Islamic history . . . [whose] effect were to have a profound bearing on the future development of the Islamic state.” Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. I, 354, thinks that “[h]istorically, all later breaches derived from this [‘Uthmān’s murder] one.”



“literary constructions.” He claims that what we have are not narratives of what actually happened, but rather what ‘Uthmān (and one may add, events of his reign) meant to men (sic! or is it, indeed, men only?) living a century or more afterwards. Humphreys even draws a parallel between the *History*’s story of ‘Uthmān’s murder and the Napoleonic wars as artfully told in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*.<sup>4</sup>

A position thus put I do not intend to pursue, in fact, I regard it erroneous, for it claims knowledge of the history (apart from the historiography) of ‘Uthmān’s reign, something—it seems not superfluous to restate—we are unlikely to obtain. It also cavalierly takes the liberty to collapse the difference between (ancient) self-professed historiography and the (modern) historical novel. Hence, while I do wish to challenge the existing scholarly writing on the murder of ‘Uthmān, I do so from a different angle. And while I have no ground for doubting the facts provided, I wish to demonstrate that the *History* has on the event under consideration not only facts. In sum, my argument is that, in their reductionist approach to the murder story, modern historians do injustice to medieval Muslim writers in more than one respect. For they disregard any aims, apart from sheer supply of information, that these writers might have had in portraying the event.<sup>5</sup> And, in conflating a complexity of reports, they have created an illusion of a straightforward and unproblematic story. Only a few scholars alert us to the fact that Ṭabarī’s report of ‘Uthmān’s murder, in drawing heavily on Sayf b. ‘Umar (d. ca. 180/796) and Wāqidi (d. 207/823), provides two entirely different accounts,<sup>6</sup> so

<sup>4</sup> R. Stephen Humphreys, “Translator’s Foreword,” *History*, vol. XV, p. XV.

<sup>5</sup> That Muslim writers of the ninth and tenth centuries A.D. indeed had such aims is briefly suggested by Humphreys, *Islamic History*, 98–9.

<sup>6</sup> Scholars have opined that the two wrote whole books on ‘Uthmān’s murder. For this suggestion concerning Wāqidi, see Josef Horowitz, “The Earliest Biographies of the Prophet and Their Authors,” *IC* 2 (1928): 516; Duri, *Rise*, 39; Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums* (GAS), vol. I (Leiden, 1967), 297. Concerning Sayf, see Wellhausen, “Prolegomena,” 4. A text identified as Sayf’s *Kitāb al-ridda wa’l-futūh*, which also contains the section on ‘Uthmān’s murder, was recently published as Sayf b. ‘Umar al-Tamīmī, *Kitāb Al-Ridda Wa’l-Futūh and Kitāb Al-Jamal Wa Maṣīr ‘Āsha Wa ‘Alī*, ed. Qāsim al-Sāmarrā’ī (Leiden, 1995), 2 vols. For al-Sāmarrā’ī’s conclusions that are based on his comparison between Sayf’s allegedly independent manuscript and Ṭabarī’s reproduction of Sayf, see the English introduction, 14, 15, 18. Al-Sāmarrā’ī’s assumption that the manuscript he edited is Sayf’s definitive text is questionable. In any case, my own comparison between the edited text and Ṭabarī’s reproduction of Sayf’s account of ‘Uthmān’s murder reveals differences, yet not so significant as to suggest any particular policy employed by Ṭabarī in copying from Sayf.

different as to be, in fact, incommensurable.<sup>7</sup> However, whenever this difference has been acknowledged, the usual way out has been to consider Wāqidī as the reliable source, despite his possibly pro-‘Alīd, if not pro-Shī‘ite, tendency and definitely anti-Umayyad propensity.<sup>8</sup> Following de Goeje and Wellhausen, scholars are in the habit of dispensing with Sayf’s material as tendentious in the “cover-up” it gives to the Prophet’s Companions (*ṣaḥāba*) and its tendency to minimize the extent of Medinan opposition to ‘Uthmān. Sayf, so the argument goes, stressed Medinan support for the caliph and threw the blame for the murder on marginal characters.<sup>9</sup> This view of Sayf has been maintained by most scholars,<sup>10</sup> and a recent attempt to reconsider it<sup>11</sup> has received shortshrift.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> This has been first noticed by Wellhausen, “Prolegomena,” 5–6. See more recently also Humphreys, “Qur’ānic Myth,” 279.

<sup>8</sup> Madelung, *Succession*, 373–4. For Wāqidī’s own sources and his tendencies, see Petersen, *‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya*, 83–9. For suspicion that he was pro-Shī‘a, see Duri, *Rise*, 39, relying on Jones’s introduction to the edition of the *Maghāzī*; Humphreys, *Islamic History*, 100; Landau-Tasseron, “Sayf,” 6. Madelung, however, describes as “baseless” Caetani’s characterization of Wāqidī as a pro-‘Alīd. Similar is the opinion expressed in *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “al-Wāqidī.”

<sup>9</sup> For de Goeje’s view, see Hinds, “Sayf b. ‘Umar’s sources,” 13 n. 3. For Wellhausen’s, see “Prolegomena,” 113–35, esp. 124–5, 133–5.

<sup>10</sup> *E.I.*<sup>1</sup>, s.v. “‘Uthmān;” *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “‘Abd Allāh b. Saba’.” Contrast Hodgson’s reference to Dhahabī’s condemnation of Sayf with Landau-Tasseron, “Sayf,” 9; Hodgson, *Venture*, Vol. I, 355; Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London, 1986), 74–5. For Sayf’s work as “pseudo-historical” and his account on the murder as a striking example of “irenical falsification,” see Hamilton A. R. Gibb, “Tarikh,” in idem, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* (Boston, 1962), 116, 118. According to Petersen, Sayf tendentiously adapted the Iraqi transmission of the mid-eighth century A.D., and his construction of ‘Alī’s failure and Mu‘āwiya’s rise to power is “the most excessive falsifications ever produced by Islamic historiography.” See “Studies on the Historiography of the ‘Alī-Mu‘āwiyah Conflict,” *Acta Orientalia* 27 (1963): 85. For “Sayf’s monstrosity,” see p. 87. For Sayf’s falsifications and fabrications “whose historical absurdity was fully shown by Wellhausen,” see Petersen, *‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya*, 78. Accordingly, Wellhausen established that the main object of Sayf’s rendering was “to demonstrate that ‘Uthmān’s murder was due to a rabid ‘proto’-Shī‘ite sect, as-Saba’iyya.” For further examples of modern rejection of Sayf, see Hinds, “Sayf,” 3, 4, 13 nn. 3–5; Landau-Tasseron, “Sayf,” 3, 5. For criticism of Sayf as regards his report of the Arab conquest of Fārs, see Hinds, “First Arab Conquest,” esp. 48–9; Khalid Blankinship, “Translator’s Foreword,” *History*, vol. XI, pp. XV–XXIX.

<sup>11</sup> Albrecht Noth, “Der Charakter der ersten grossen Sammlungen von Nachrichten zur frühen Kalifenzeit,” *Islam* 47 (1971): 168–99 (for a favorable summary of Noth’s arguments, see Hinds, “Sayf,” 3–4, 12); Landau-Tasseron, “Sayf,” esp. 6, 7, 12–19, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Madelung is of the opinion that Noth’s and Landau-Tasseron’s attempts to rehabilitate Sayf “have done little to invalidate the substance of Wellhausen’s judgement.” He dismisses Sayf’s version as a most blatant representative of early Sunnī

Wellhausen's argument to excise Sayf's version, apart from another demerit—its total oblivion of, or worse still, its taking sides in the early Islamic struggle over monopolizing knowledge and interpreting the past<sup>13</sup>—hides from the reader one prominent feature: nowhere does Ṭabarī so well exemplify the practice of his programmatic promise to disclose *all* the material he has, as he does in the account of 'Uthmān's murder.<sup>14</sup> Seen in this light, his use of the “corrupt” Sayf,<sup>15</sup> a vexing problem for modern scholarship,<sup>16</sup> poses no special problem in my discussion.<sup>17</sup> Rather, the problem here is that, being faithful to his declared principle of complete and unprejudiced transmission, and supplying versions that contradict one another, Ṭabarī

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tendentious historiography, “a late Kūfan 'Uthmānid and anti-Shī'ite concoction without source value for the events.” See *Succession*, 374. For Sayf as a “fiction writer,” see p. 50 n. 60. For sermons delivered by 'Uthmān and transmitted by Sayf as “fictitious,” see p. 80 n. 8. For Sayf “obviously trying in his account to obfuscate the facts,” see p. 84 n. 21. For Sayf's report as “farcical,” see p. 114 n. 72. There are other occasions on which Sayf's information is curtly dismissed by Madelung as fiction, “probably fiction,” fable or fabrication (e.g., 151 n. 43; 152 n. 46; 162 n. 88; 164 n. 102; 169 n. 135; 184, 372).

<sup>13</sup> I have briefly treated such a struggle in my *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge, 1993), e.g., 37–8.

<sup>14</sup> See Chapter 4 above.

<sup>15</sup> This is Petersen's characterization in *Alī and Mu'āwiya*, 150. See also Chapter 4 above.

<sup>16</sup> Petersen speaks of Ṭabarī's “personal motives” and selective method, which requires explanation. See *ibid.*, 150 n. 6. Thus, at one point, Petersen surmises that Ṭabarī prefers Sayf to Abū Mikhnaf because the former's transmission meets “his preconceived conditions on which to refute the extremist Shī'ism.” See *ibid.*, 185. He accepts Wellhausen's view that Ṭabarī's rendering incurred “a fatal lopsidedness” as a result. See *ibid.*, 151. However, Petersen notes that after the account of the Battle of the Camel, Ṭabarī breaks off abruptly with Sayf and turns to Abū Mikhnaf, realizing that the former's points of view were no longer compatible with his own. See *ibid.*, 151–2. Humphreys, “Translator's Foreword,” *History*, vol. XV, pp. XVI–XVII, maintains that Sayf appealed to Ṭabarī for his popular material on “sentimental piety” and his “Sunday School” depiction of 'Uthmān's caliphate, stressing the harmony within the Islamic community. I take issue with this view toward the end of this chapter. For the reason for Ṭabarī's inclusion of Sayf's material on the Arab conquests, see Hinds, “Sayf,” 3. Although Hinds considers it premature to hazard an answer, he quotes from Hodgson the possibility that Ṭabarī, in his attitude to early events, played a role comparable to the role of Shāfi'ī in Islamic law. For different answers suggested by other scholars, see Landau-Tasserón, “Sayf,” 5.

<sup>17</sup> See also Landau-Tasserón, “Sayf,” 11: “The question which should be asked is not ‘why did Ṭabarī draw on Sayf who was weak (in the opinion of the *muhaddithūn*)’ but ‘why did Wellhausen, Caetani and their numerous followers totally reject Sayf who was trusted (by eminent historians)?’” See also pp. 6, 10.

should have left the reader, at least the one who does seriously attend to the difficulties that the versions pose, at a virtual impasse. On the face of it, this is what Ṭabarī seems to do. Or, does he? My claim is that a close reading of the text brings to the surface our historian’s own view. Hence, my real concern here is neither the facts of the murder, although these will be retold; nor is it Sayf’s and Wāqidī’s two different versions as such. If, nevertheless, I devote considerable attention to the two issues, it is because this is necessary in order to bring forth the argument of authorial/editorial (i.e., Ṭabarī’s) intervention and its effect on the reading of the account Ṭabarī provides. Thus, the first part of this chapter contrasts the two versions of the murder story as Ṭabarī reproduced them. I then turn to his additional editorial job and the bearing it has on the meaning of the narrative.

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To begin with, Ṭabarī’s two sources part way already in their survey of ‘Uthmān’s reign.<sup>18</sup> From Sayf we get a portrait of a benevolent and pious caliph who, in his coronation speech, had already urged the Believers to avoid the deceits of this world.<sup>19</sup> He increased stipends,<sup>20</sup> provided for the weak,<sup>21</sup> and skillfully handled problems pertaining to the sensitive issue of division of property.<sup>22</sup> He treated his officials respectfully and, at the same time, instructed them to refer to him anything about which they had doubts, in order that he could convene the Community and reach the right decision.<sup>23</sup> He adhered to the tradition established by ‘Umar, his predecessor, and

<sup>18</sup> Other sources play a minor role. See *History*, vol. XV, e.g., 167–9 [I, 2963–5], 183–91 [I, 2983–91], where ‘Uthmān is presented in even less favorable light than in Wāqidī’s account. The story of ‘Uthmān’s murder appears, of course, in several medieval history works. My intention, unlike other scholars’, is obviously not comparative. Suffice it to mention that Ibn Kathīr drew on Ṭabarī and his informants, but, as far as details go, provided a considerably different narrative. See *al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya*, vol. III (Beirut, 1966), esp. 174–91. For a concise and different narrative, see Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam*, vol. I, ed. A. Emami (Tehran, 1987), 274–90.

<sup>19</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 3–4 [I, 2800–01]. For a dismissal of this speech as fictitious, see Madelung, *Succession*, 80 n. 8.

<sup>20</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 2 [I, 2799] and n. 4; 3 [I, 2800], 7 [I, 2804].

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 48 [I, 2842], 50 [I, 2845].

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 59–61 [I, 2854–5]. For uncertainties in this report and criticism of Sayf, see Madelung, *Succession*, 83–4.

<sup>23</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 19 [I, 2814], 30 [I, 2825–6].

warned his governors not to alter it.<sup>24</sup> Thus, he did not hesitate to punish Walīd b. ‘Uqba, the governor in Kūfa, when the charge of wine drinking was brought against him.<sup>25</sup> He also expanded Islamic territories by sending troops to conquer the region of Ifrīqiya (North Africa), and thus influenced the Islamization of the local population.<sup>26</sup> He then ordered an expedition to Spain in order to facilitate the conquest of Constantinople (sic!).<sup>27</sup> In ‘Uthmān’s reign the first naval engagement was conducted, namely, the successful Battle of the Masts, against the Byzantine navy.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast, Wāqidi’s report—actually, the version accepted by the Community and largely embraced also by modern scholarship—focuses on troubles in the latter half of ‘Uthmān’s reign.<sup>29</sup> We are told about his deviation from a ritual established by the Prophet and followed by the first two caliphs, as a result of which the people begin to speak openly against him.<sup>30</sup> Prominent among the caliph’s opponents is Muḥammad b. Abī Ḥudhayfa, a participant in the Battle of the Masts who, together with Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr, the son of the first caliph, declares ‘Uthmān’s blood to be a lawful target.<sup>31</sup> Another turmoil is stirred up by a group of dissidents at Kūfa over the issue of the status of the Sawād land in Iraq. When Mālik al-Ashtar, their leader, is exiled to the Syrian town of Ḥimṣ, he calls for vengeance.<sup>32</sup> Wāqidi also relates that in the year 34/654–5 some Companions start to propagate the idea of embarking on jihad within the Community, undoubtedly due to ‘Uthmān’s aberrant conduct.<sup>33</sup> The people “maligned ‘Uthmān and censured him in the harshest

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 30 [I, 2825].

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 52–4 [I, 2848].

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 19 [I, 2814].

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 22 [I, 2817].

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 28–30 [I, 2823–5].

<sup>29</sup> See e.g., *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān,” where an allegedly consensual view of ‘Uthmān’s grievances is represented, although the authors are sympathetic to the caliph’s difficulties.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Uthmān allegedly introduced two additional prostrations (*rak‘a*) to the prayer at Mīna. To queries he answered that the decision was based on his personal opinion. See *History*, vol. XV, 38–9 [I, 2834–5]; Madelung, *Succession*, 93. See, however, *History*, vol. XV, 155–6 [I, 2951–2], where Sayf’s version gives less arbitrary an explanation to ‘Uthmān’s role in this particular decision.

<sup>31</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 76–7 [I, 2871].

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 125 [I, 2921].

<sup>33</sup> For the Companions, see *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Ṣaḥāba.”

language ever used against anyone.” Even among the Companions, only four forbade this.<sup>34</sup>

In the same year, a confrontation between ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī takes place. “[T]he people stand behind me, and they have spoken to me about you,” ‘Alī challenges the caliph.<sup>35</sup> On the one hand he credits him with full knowledge of things Islamic (“I know nothing of which you are ignorant . . . Indeed you know what we know . . . In no affair have we been assigned greater distinction than you”), and also points out ‘Uthmān’s blood relationship to the Prophet—a merit which distinguishes him from both Abū Bakr and ‘Umar, his two predecessors. On the other hand ‘Alī, apparently without great effort to be subtle, emphasizes the importance of having a just *imām* and warns of the rule of a tyrant. Then, narrowing his general remarks to ‘Uthmān himself, ‘Alī, as if prophesizing, puts his interlocutor on the alert lest he “be the murdered *imām* of this Community.”<sup>36</sup>

The argument between the two then centers on charges of nepotism and ‘Uthmān’s choice of incompetent officials. ‘Alī contrasts the caliph’s soft handling of his appointed relatives with ‘Umar’s close scrutiny of his officials. He dismisses ‘Uthmān’s line of defense namely, that Mu‘āwiya—the foremost of his associates in the leadership of the Islamic state—had been appointed by no other than ‘Umar himself. ‘Alī also emphasizes the problem, of which, he claims, the caliph is well aware, that the Syrian governor is practically independent.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, ‘Uthmān delivers a combatant speech from the pulpit, in which he attempts to save his authority and standing. However, the speech conveys—or, at least it can thus be read—weakness and self-pity. This aspect comes out when ‘Uthmān complains that the Muslims were blaming him for things they were ready to tolerate from his predecessor. The caliph, in pointing out all the good that he lavished upon his subjects and their ingratitude, is no doubt pathetic. It only befits Wāqidī’s account that the speech ends with ‘Uthmān’s threat to employ a militant envoy, that is, Marwān b. al-Ḥakam, against his opponents. “There is a surplus of wealth, so why should I not do as I wish with the surplus? Why otherwise did I

<sup>34</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 140–41 [I, 2935–6]; Madelung, *Succession*, 113.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 141 [I, 2936].

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 142 [I, 2937].

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 143 [I, 2939].

become imām?” asks ‘Uthmān a question that hardly speaks in his favor.<sup>38</sup>

Returning to Sayf, he claims that ‘Abdallāh b. Saba’, the son of a black woman (“Ibn Sawdā”), originally “a Jew from Ṣan‘a” and a new convert to Islam, was the cause of the dissidence that resulted in ‘Uthmān’s murder. Ibn Saba’ had started to roam among the Muslims in the lands of Islam, “attempting to lead them into error.” Forced out of Syria, a region loyal to the caliph, and making Egypt his base, Ibn Saba’ was preaching, among other things, the implementation of ‘Alī’s rights as Muḥammad’s “executor (*waṣī*),” and was bemoaning ‘Uthmān’s “sin” in usurping these rights. Being active in garrison towns, Ibn Saba’ dispatched agents and summoned the Believers to redress the situation. In Sayf’s version, ‘Uthmān is oblivious to all this. “I have only heard about order and security,” he naively answers his informants who tell him about the agitation.<sup>39</sup> His envoys discover the plot masterminded by Ibn Saba’s followers (a plot which, in fact, achieved its aim) to convince the Muslims of the caliph’s misdeeds, to stress his refusal to repent, then to arrive at Medina disguised as pilgrims and either depose ‘Uthmān or, in case he does not abdicate, kill him.<sup>40</sup>

The theme now dominating Sayf’s account is the contrast between the pious caliph and the evil rebels. The text of ‘Uthmān’s letter to enlist support in the garrison towns is an opportunity to declare the caliph’s justice: “Nothing has been demanded from me or from any of my governors that I have not granted. Neither I nor my household claims any priority in rights over the subjects . . . save [the rights] bequeathed to them.” In the letter ‘Uthmān urges all those claiming they have suffered injustice to come before him during the Pilgrimage and regain their rights. The reaction to this letter in the garrison towns is one of empathy: the listeners weep and invoke

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 143–4 [I, 2939–40]; Madelung, *Succession*, 113–14.

<sup>39</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 145–7 [I, 2942–3]. For Ibn Saba’s “Jewishness,” see also p. 65 [I, 2859]. For “Ibn al-Sawdā” (i.e., ‘Abdallāh b. Saba’) as the man responsible for “chaos” and “baneful innovations,” and whose followers claimed that ‘Umar was superior to ‘Uthmān, see *ibid.*, 225 [I, 3027]. Madelung, *Succession*, 2, dismisses this story of Sayf as a legend that “few if any modern historians would accept.” This may be true, but clearly, is not my concern in this book. What is important is Tabarī’s inclusion of this version.

<sup>40</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 154–5 [I, 2950].

blessings upon their ruler. ‘Uthmān, however, is not satisfied with his message only, and summons the governors in order to investigate them about complaints addressed by the subjects. Then the charges are denied. Among the governors there is also ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ, at the time in command of Egypt, who (contrary to his role in Wāqidī’s account), quite ironically (as will be later demonstrated), counsels ‘Uthmān to be less lenient with his subjects. The caliph, however, insists that one should be lax and generous, while conforming to the legal restrictions (*hudūd*). He declares himself to be sinless: “Against me no man has any valid proof, and God knows that I have not neglected any good for the people, even at the expense of myself.”<sup>41</sup>

Of ‘Uthmān’s other virtues, Sayf mentions his refusal to leave Medina and go with Mu‘āwiya to the loyal and secure region of Syria. “I will not exchange my proximity to the Messenger of God for anything, even if my throat is slashed because of that,” vows the caliph. He even refuses to Mu‘āwiya’s suggestion to send a Syrian army to Medina, on grounds that it might cause scarcity in the town. In response to his Syrian governor’s prediction “you will surely be assassinated or attacked,” the caliph affirms his trust in God.<sup>42</sup>

‘Uthmān is also shown to be a merciful ruler when the plot of Ibn Saba’s followers to depose and kill him is uncovered. When, in the course of a congregational meeting, those present declare the need to execute the agitators, he responds leniently since, he argues, there is an obligation to pardon and enlighten even people of this sort. He insists on letting them go, a decision that will cost him his life. In a speech he delivers to Kūfans, Baṣrans, and the Companions of the Prophet, he himself reproduces the allegations, eight in number, directed at him by the dissidents, among which is the well-known charge of establishing a single version of the Qur’ān. Supported by the congregation, he rejects all these charges. His denials are accepted by the audience one by one in a fixed, affirmative formula (“Is this the case? O, God, it is so”).<sup>43</sup>

Next, we learn of the plan of hundreds of dissidents from Egypt, Baṣra and Kūfa, disguised as pilgrims, to depose ‘Uthmān and offer the caliphate to ‘Alī, Ṭalḥa or Zubayr. Sayf’s account portrays their

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 147–50 [I, 2943–6]. My translation differs slightly from Humphreys’s.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 153 [I, 2949].

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 155–9 [I, 2951–4].



departure to their towns as a camouflage, noting that “they intended for the Medinese to disperse, and then they would turn around and come back.” By giving no other than ‘Alī the role of the interrogator, who confronts the inconsistency in their account, Sayf’s version more than implies that an allegation about ‘Uthmān’s order to execute the dissidents’ leaders is a fabrication and a pretext for the acts of rebellion that follow.<sup>44</sup> The caliph then writes to the inhabitants of the garrison towns, seeking their aid and emphasizing that he had not asked to become caliph; neither had he adhered to any innovator, nor followed the example of any hypocrite. His only “crime” was the “carrying out of the Book of God.” ‘Uthmān accuses the dissidents of hypocrisy: publicly they proclaim one goal and in reality they pursue another. They blame him for things that had previously been acceptable to them and that are actually within right conduct. He stresses the malcontents’ “insolence toward Almighty God,” which has reached such a degree that they attacked in the “very precincts of the Messenger of God, in His Sanctuary, and in the territory of the Hijrah.” ‘Uthmān draws an analogy between the current situation and the attack by the Meccan polytheists on the Prophet at Uḥud.<sup>45</sup> In a Friday prayer, immediately after the rebels from Egypt had set up camp, he summons the latter as “enemies” who “have been cursed by the tongue of Muḥammad.” The evil of the dissidents on this particular occasion is demonstrated by their driving the people from the mosque and throwing stones at ‘Uthmān until he falls unconscious from the pulpit. They bar the caliph from praying in public and impose a state of terror in Medina so that no one ventures out or attends any council without arming himself whereby “he could defend himself from the tyranny of the dissidents.”<sup>46</sup>

While Sayf’s ‘Uthmān is a just caliph, Wāqidi portrays a weak ruler who, in the sequel leading to the siege on his residence, is humiliated by his opponents and is forced to succumb to the mounting pressure built by the opposition. The prelude to the revolt starts with the removal of ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ, the governor in Egypt, an act

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 159–62 [I, 2954–8].

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 163–4 [I, 2958–9]; *imḍā’ al-kitāb* that Humphreys translates “carrying out,” could, alternatively, be an allusion to the enterprise of editing the canonical text of the Qur’ān.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 165–6 [I, 2960–62].

that is assigned a key role in the subsequent developments that will result in the caliph’s tragic fate. ‘Amr starts to incite leading figures, such as ‘Alī, Talḥa and Zubayr, against the caliph. When the latter admonishes ‘Amr for his hypocrisy and blames him for his ingratitude, ‘Amr rudely denies his obligation to the caliph. ‘Uthmān’s deficiency vis-à-vis ‘Amr is exemplified in an apparently petty (yet of no small significance) argument between the two as to whose father was nobler in the *jāhiliyya*. In the end, the caliph’s answer is found wanting.

In an analeptic synopsis of the story of rebellion and murder that is to follow, ‘Amr is presented as the *éminence grise* of the affair who, upon learning of ‘Uthmān’s death, states: “When I rub a scab, I scrape it off. Had I incited [people] against him [‘Uthmān], even the shepherd on the mountaintop with his flock [would join].” That is, ‘Amr’s self-proclaimed omnipotence allows for him to proceed in a rather low gear. To justify his prominent role in “breaking down the gate,” as the murder has been metaphorized in Muslim tradition, ‘Amr blatantly reveals the unholy nexus of ‘Uthmān and falsehood: “We wanted to draw the truth out of the pit of falsehood and to have the people be on an equal footing as regards the truth.”<sup>47</sup>

According to Wāqidi, ‘Uthmān’s status is inferior to ‘Alī’s. When the Egyptian dissidents camp near Medina, the caliph himself goes to ‘Alī (“I know that you enjoy prestige among the people and that they will listen to you”), insists on receiving his support, and begs him to send the dissidents away. In the dialogue between the two the caliph appears quite pathetic.

‘Alī: “On what grounds shall I send them away?”

‘Uthmān: “On the grounds that I shall carry out what you have counseled me to do . . . and that I will not deviate from your direction.”

Yet ‘Alī remains unpersuaded. In his view, the whole trouble has been brought about by ‘Uthmān’s relatives, led by Marwān b. al-Ḥakam.

‘Alī: “You have heeded them and defied me.”

‘Uthmān: “Then I shall defy them and heed you.”

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 170–72 [I 2966–8]. I slightly deviate from Humphreys’s translation.

‘Uthmān’s similar request from ‘Ammār b. Yāsir also remains unanswered, especially after the latter discovers the caliph’s alleged attempt at spying on him.<sup>48</sup>

After ‘Ali is apparently persuaded to help the caliph nonetheless and is able to send the camping rebels away, ‘Uthmān is put under pressure from several directions. On the one hand, Marwān urges him (and succeeds) to deliver a sermon and inform the people that the Egyptians have returned home, since the false rumors they had spread have now been exposed. On the other hand, ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ, attending the sermon, interrupts the caliph, and his warning to him generates an appeal to ‘Uthmān to repent. Also ‘Alī urges the caliph to do so and make a public statement in order to prevent a possible arrival of dissidents from other towns.<sup>49</sup> In his repentance speech, ‘Uthmān is strikingly submissive:

But my soul has raised vain hopes within me and lied to me, and my rectitude has slipped away from me . . . I ask God’s forgiveness for what I have done and I turn to him. A man like me yearns to repent . . . By God, if the truth turns me into a slave, then I shall tread the slave’s path, I shall humble myself like a slave, and I shall be like the bondsman.

No wonder that the audience feel pity for him and some even burst in tears.<sup>50</sup>

Marwān, however, is critical of the caliph’s gesture. When he tells ‘Uthmān that the people have assembled at the gate against him, he himself is sent to speak to them, for the caliph is ashamed to do so. Marwān’s admonition and warning to the crowd (“Why have you gathered here like looters . . . you will encounter something distasteful from us”) irritates ‘Alī: “Surely you have satisfied Marwān, but he is satisfied with you only if you deviate from your religion and reason, like a camel carrying a litter that is led around at will.” From now on ‘Alī would not come again to chide the caliph since, as he puts it, the latter destroyed his own honor and has been robbed of his authority. When ‘Uthmān, following his wife’s advice, sends

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 173–4 [I, 2969–70].

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 174–6 [I, 2970–73].

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 176–7 [I, 2973–4]. For Caetani’s rejection of this speech as fabrication and Madelung’s rebuttal, see *Succession*, 122–3. Incidentally, it is not that Madelung (who produces an argument based on the “historicity” of medieval European accounts) does not allow for fiction in the *History*. But, as we have had occasion to see, it is Madelung alone who is to decide what is authentic and what is not.

for ‘Alī to appease him, ‘Alī refuses to return. This forces ‘Uthmān to go himself to ‘Alī. His complaint that the latter has abandoned him and emboldened the people against him indicates his difficult situation.<sup>51</sup>

The troubled condition continues even after ‘Uthmān’s repentance and is described in several accounts that provide variations on one theme. Standing on the pulpit during a Friday prayer, the caliph faces the demand made by an unidentified man “to carry out the Book of God.” Subsequently, people in the crowd throw pebbles “until the sky could not be seen.” ‘Uthmān is hit and is carried off unconscious.<sup>52</sup> An account that follows implicitly indicts the caliph in making a gift of camels, which he received as alms, to one of his relatives among the Banū Ḥakam family. When the news is disclosed, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Awf, a leading Companion, instructs that the camels be taken and distributed among “the people.”<sup>53</sup> In another of Wāqidi’s accounts, ‘Uthmān is contemptuously addressed by one Jabala b. ‘Amr al-Sa‘īdī: “You hyena! By God, I shall kill you. I shall carry you off on a scab-covered camel and send you to blazing fire.” In a slightly different version of this incident, the man also demands that the caliph dissociate himself from his entourage, among whom are men “who are condemned in the Qur’ān, men whose blood the Messenger of God has declared lawful.” As a result, “the people have continued to talk spitefully” about the caliph.

In yet another account about the low status to which ‘Uthmān has been reduced, one dissident approaches the caliph with an old she-camel, a robe and a rope. He tells him to dress in the robe and then the rope would be thrown around his neck; he would be carried off on the camel, then thrown “into the mountain of smoke.” All the caliph is able to do in the face of such an evil suggestion is to retort: “May God disfigure you and reveal the ugliness of your deeds.” ‘Uthmān’s vulnerability reaches a lowest ebb in what appears to be another version of the incident that forced him off the pulpit: his assailant insults him (“You hyena”) and breaks the Prophet’s staff, on which it was the caliph’s custom to lean. ‘Uthmān is injured, and the wound remains open for so long that it becomes infected.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 177–80 [I, 2974–9].

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 181 [I, 2979].

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 181–2 [I, 2980], and see Hodgson’s elaboration below.

“From that day until he was besieged and killed, ‘Uthmān went out only one or two times.”<sup>54</sup>

Ṭabarī now turns to another of Wāqidī’s accounts of the letter that ‘Uthmān had allegedly dispatched to the governor in Egypt. The claim of its disclosure not only provides the opposition with a new momentum and brings the Egyptian rebels back to Medina; it is also one more opportunity to attach a serious blemish to the caliph’s conduct and ascribe to it all the tragedy that follows. Even ‘Uthmān’s supporters, who earlier tried to convince the rebels to retreat to Egypt, now refuse to do so since, in Muḥammad b. Maslama’s words, the caliph has not kept his word “to desist from certain matters.” When ‘Uthmān begs ‘Alī to go out and speak to the Egyptians in order to convince them that he is not responsible for the letter, ‘Alī refuses and tells the caliph to go himself and present his excuses. The leading dissidents, upon entering the caliph’s residence, do not greet him in the appropriate manner, as if foreshadowing future mistreatment. One of them blames ‘Uthmān for the orders he had given to his governor in Egypt to treat the inhabitants there unjustly; others mention innovations that the caliph had instituted in Medina. As ‘Uthmān confesses his ignorance of the letter in question, the dissidents ask in disbelief: “Can anyone treat you so audaciously that your slave is sent . . . your seal is forged . . . while you know nothing?” To ‘Uthmān’s admission that this is possible, the reply is: “A man like you should not govern. Remove yourself from this office, as God has removed you from it.”<sup>55</sup>

In Wāqidī’s second version of this encounter, ‘Uthmān is also accused of beating some of the Companions after they had admonished him and demanded that he return to righteousness. The caliph now admits that practical considerations overrule the principle of justice: “The *imām* both errs and acts rightly. I shall not have myself chastised, because if I accepted retaliation for everyone against whom I have acted in error, I would be destroyed.” This answer does not seem to serve him well. The rebels then mention “grave innovations” for which the caliph deserves to be deposed. He has even betrayed his own supporters and has not fulfilled his promise to

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 182–3 [I, 2981–3].

<sup>55</sup> For the scholarly treatment of the alleged letter, see Madelung, *Succession*, 126–7. Madelung’s own view is that Marwān was behind it.

refrain from certain misdeeds. He has displayed the tendency to revert to error after his feigned repentance. ‘Uthmān is also accused of “tyrannical rule,” “selfishness” in matters of booty, and the use of freehanded punishment against the people. “Give back our [sic] caliphate and abdicate, for that is our surest recourse against you and your surest recourse against us,” the leading rebels proclaim. Now, while ‘Uthmān is unwilling to abdicate (“I shall not remove a shirt that Almighty God has placed upon me, and by which he has honored me and set me apart from others”), he is willing to repent and promises “never again do anything that the Muslims find blameworthy.” However, the dissidents ridicule his suggestion of repentance since, they claim, experience shows that he soon reverts to sinning. Once again, they reconfirm their determination to depose him, even if fighting is demanded and blood on both sides is spilled (“until we reach you and kill you”). And, yet, ‘Uthmān responds that he would rather be crucified than give up the caliphate. He even vows not to return battle against his opponents. His murder, he warns them, would bring about bloodshed. The meeting is hereby adjourned and, once again, the caliph’s request from Muḥammad b. Maslama, his ex-supporter, to convince the rebels to return to their homes is blatantly refused: “By God, I do not lie to God twice in one year.” There is no doubt as to who should burden the blame for the lie already told.<sup>56</sup>

Proceeding to Wāqidi’s story of the siege on ‘Uthmān’s residence, it is a rather neutral story. We have a few, laconic reports, one of which is told by ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Ayyāsh, who visits the besieged caliph and, together with him, hears the rebels discussing their plans: some are eager to attack; others prefer to wait and see if the caliph repents. Listening to them, ‘Uthmān tells his companion about his hope for the death of Talḥa b. ‘Ubaydallāh, whom he considers to be the chief instigator. He stresses the evil act that his murder would be.<sup>57</sup> All of Wāqidi’s reports block our view, so to speak, of what, supposedly, is taking place inside ‘Uthmān’s house. We are laconically informed about “some skirmishing,” and then one of the murderers emerges: “We have killed [‘Uthmān] Ibn ‘Affān.”<sup>58</sup> According to

<sup>56</sup> *History*, XV, 191–7 [I, 2991–8].

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 197–9 [I, 2998–3000], 220 [I, 3022–3].

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 200 [I, 3001].

Wāqidī, it is Abū Ḥafṣa al-Yamanī, Marwān's former client (*mawlā*), hence one of 'Uthmān's own party, who confesses to having initiated the actual fighting by throwing a stone and killing one of the besiegers. The caliph himself expresses a fatalistic reaction to the development. When the rebels retaliate and set fire into his residence, he is cited stating that he is ready to endure what the Messenger of God enjoined upon him and suffer the death that was decreed for him. 'Uthmān has no desire to live: "My health is ruined, my teeth have fallen out and my bones have weakened."<sup>59</sup>

Ṭabarī now interrupts Wāqidī's account and will return to the latter's version of the act of the murder itself only later. Following an intermezzo of a variety of brief accounts about the siege, our historian now turns once again to Sayf who, as a prelude to his description of the murder, provides the caliph's last sermon. Here piety is the main theme and is expressed in 'Uthmān's emphasis on the hereafter and fear of the Almighty. There is also the political message, undoubtedly, not only of general validity, but with an eye to the current crisis, to keep the Community united and not let it be divided into factions. 'Uthmān appears subdued and resolves "to endure patiently and to resist [the rebels] through God's power." In a speech he delivers to 'Alī, Ṭalḥa, and Zubayr, one can detect a sense of fatalism and submissiveness: the caliph is awaiting God's judgment. As if realizing the imminent end of his reign, he asks God to restore the caliphate to the "men of Medina" after him. He expresses concern for his supporters and promises not to endanger them. He commands them to return to their homes and vows not to give the rebels a pretext that they can use against the Medinese. Indeed, there follows a comment that the attackers "sought for pretexts but none were offered them." Devoid of what they hoped for, they throw stones into the caliph's house at night in the hope that thus they can provoke a skirmish. Yet, 'Uthmān's sole reaction is concern for members of his family. "Do you not know that there are others besides me in the house?" he addresses the rebels. However, they disclaim any responsibility for the act and ascribe it to God. 'Uthmān, in turn, exposes their lie in a sort of down-to-earth argument: "If Almighty God had thrown [stones] at us, He would not have missed

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 200–01 [I, 3001–02].

us, but you did.” The report goes on to describe the evil committed by the rebels: eighteen days after the beginning of the siege the caliph is denied water and has to send for ‘Alī and others for help. When the latter admonishes the rebels for their deed (“O people, neither Believers nor unbelievers act like this. Do not cut off supplies from this man”), they repeat their determination to show no mercy. Indeed, when Umm Ḥabība, one of the Prophet’s widows, tries to smuggle a waterskin to the besieged caliph, she is dismissed and her mule is struck.<sup>60</sup>

The rebels’ evil is further highlighted by two interventions coming from ‘Uthmān’s sympathizers and made as an observation on the situation. In the first, Ḥanzala, the scribe, who admonishes Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr for his role in the opposition, is made to utter the following verse:

I am astonished at the depths into which the people plunge,  
desirous of the Caliphate’s end.  
Should it disappear, all good would pass from them as well,  
and thereafter they would suffer shameful humiliation.  
they would be as the Jews or Christians—  
they would all alike have lost their way.<sup>61</sup>

A second intervention is Layla bt. Umays’ message to Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr and Muḥammad b. Ja‘far, his fellow rebel, in the course of the siege. Layla refers to ‘Uthmān in terms of a “lamp [that] consumes itself as it gives light to the people,” and warns against the possibility of committing a crime against someone whose sole “sin” is compelling the Believers to obey God.<sup>62</sup>

Sayf now reports that the immediate events prior to the murder were entirely the rebels’ responsibility. Fed with rumors that members of the Pilgrimage caravan intended to attack them, and informed about the disgust that the men of the garrison towns felt for them, “Satan gripped them” and they now decide that their only way is to kill “this man,” as they insolently refer to the caliph. They assault the door behind which ‘Uthmān and his supporters have taken shelter. Among the latter we find also Ḥasan (‘Alī’s son), Muḥammad (Ṭalḥa’s son), and ‘Abdallāh (Zubayr’s son), who were there “in

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 206–08 [I, 3008–10].

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 208–09 [I, 3010–11].

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 210 [I, 3012].



accordance with their fathers' command," after their fathers were barred by the besiegers from joining the caliph. As the scene of the murder is drawing near, 'Uthmān emerges to Sayf's readers in all his dignity. His major concern is not for himself but for his loyalists, so that they should not get hurt. "You are absolved from defending me," he tells them. Courageously, he opens the door and takes up his shield and sword to hold back his enemies. Indeed, when the Egyptians see him they retreat and 'Uthmān, generous in the extreme, restrains his supporters from pursuit. He entreats the Companions, who had stayed with him, not to reenter his residence, and commands his supporters to leave. After the rebels set fire to his front door, 'Uthmān prepares himself to die and sends his will in the hands of 'Abdallāh, to deliver it to Zubayr, 'Abdallāh's father. Ibn al-Zubayr is credited with being the last to leave 'Uthmān, and hence, the one who could tell the people about the precise circumstances of the caliph's death. Also 'Abdallāh b. al-'Abbās is among those stationed at the caliph's front door. To 'Uthmān's request that he lead the Pilgrimage, Ibn al-'Abbās answers that he would prefer the struggle (*jihād*) against the rebels.

'Uthmān tearfully takes up a copy of the Qur'ān, prays and keeps the sacred text beside him. In absolute calm, "without making an error or stuttering," he cites Qur'ānic verses about the Battle of Uḥud and the Prophet's enemies, all verses appropriate to the occasion and clearly analogous to his own situation. In another version that Sayf offers, the besieged caliph forbids his followers from fighting, since the "Messenger of God has laid an obligation (*ahd*) on me, and I will suffer it patiently." All those present leave, and 'Uthmān orders that a copy of the Qur'ān be brought to him.<sup>63</sup>

Of the murder, Sayf relates that there were five men who, each in his turn, were assigned the mission of killing 'Uthmān, yet, significantly enough, none was able to accomplish it. To the (anonymous) first, who demands from 'Uthmān to abdicate so he can spare his life, the caliph states that he had not violated a woman, nor had he expressed carnal desires, therefore he is determined to stay in office as long as God decreed it. The man is won by 'Uthmān and returns to the rebels with the statement that an act of murder would

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 211–13 [I, 3012–15], 218 [I, 3019–20].

be unlawful. To the second man, from the Banū Layth, ‘Uthmān says that, since the Prophet had prayed for the man’s safety in a certain battle, he (‘Uthmān) is not his “companion in death,” the implication being that by the act of murder the Laythī risks violating the Prophetic statement. As a result, the man resigns from the rebels. Similar is ‘Uthmān’s message to the third of his assigned murderers, this time a Qurashī, in whom the caliph puts his trust that he would not be tempted “to sin against forbidden blood.” This man also deserts the dissidents’ party. The fourth, ‘Abdallāh b. Salām, does not even need ‘Uthmān’s admonition in order to change his mind and warns the rebels about the dire consequences of the crime they plan. He predicts that if they killed the caliph, God’s angels, now protecting Medina, will surely forsake it. Insulted by his comrades (“son of a Jewess”), he withdraws. The last abortive attempt is by Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr. Like his predecessors, he retreats in the face of ‘Uthmān’s rebuke. In another version, Zubayr and Marwān, who had been so far on guard and had skirmished with the assailants, flee when Abū Bakr’s son enters ‘Uthmān’s presence.<sup>64</sup>

When we finally reach the murder scene, three men attack ‘Uthmān, one of whom, known as Ghāfiqī (b. Ḥarb al-‘Akkī), strikes the caliph with an iron tool and kicks his Qur’ān with his foot. The sacred text is besmeared with the caliph’s flowing blood. When another of the three, Sūdān b. Ḥumrān, comes up to strike the caliph, Nā’ila, the caliph’s wife, bends over to ward off the sword and, as a result, her fingers are struck off. Nā’ila is not only injured but also sexually assaulted. Then Sūdān kills the caliph. Shortly afterward he himself is killed by one of ‘Uthmān’s manumitted slaves. The assassins pillage “everything they found,” “what was on the women,” even Nā’ila’s head wrap, as well as the (almost empty) Treasury. They are described by the guards of the Treasury as “people [who] are only after worldly goods.”<sup>65</sup> In a slightly different version, Abū Bakr’s son seizes ‘Uthmān’s beard, then his henchmen come in and attack. One strikes the caliph with the iron tip of his scabbard, another beats him with his fists. A man with broad iron-tipped arrows comes and stabs the caliph in his throat, and the blood flows down on the Qur’ān. We are told that the murderers, “[e]ven as they did this

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 214–15 [I, 3016–17], 218 [I, 3020].

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 215–16 [I, 3017–18].

they were afraid to kill him [‘Uthmān].” When other rebels come in and see the caliph lying unconscious, they drag him by the legs. One named (Kināna b. Bishr) al-Tujībī draws his sword to plunge it into ‘Uthmān’s belly. Nā’ila, who attempts to shield her husband, is injured. Then Tujībī leans on ‘Uthmān’s chest with his sword. Following the caliph’s death, his property and the public Treasury are pillaged.<sup>66</sup>

‘Uthmān’s blood is not even dry when we learn from Sayf and his sources that the criminal party manifests a volte-face. “The rebels regret their deeds,” Zubayr is told, as are also told (in what one suspects to be a formulaic device) Ṭalḥa and ‘Alī, who each recites a Qur’ānic verse to express the rebels’ grave error.<sup>67</sup> The purpose of this sort of repentance, one assumes, is more to highlight how grave a mistake the murder was—the instant regret being the best “proof” for that—than to absolve the perpetrators from it. Ṭabarī now returns to Wāqidī’s description of the murder which, like Sayf’s, has it that Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr, accompanied by two men, breaks into ‘Uthmān’s residence only to find him reading the Qur’ān. The son of the first caliph seizes the third caliph by his beard and insults him (“May God disgrace you, you hyena”). At this point, however, Wāqidī differs from Sayf. Accordingly, to the caliph’s answer that he is no hyena but “God’s servant and the Commander of the Faithful,” his assailant answers that had his father (i.e., Abū Bakr) seen ‘Uthmān “doing these [evil] things,” he would have done worse to him than grab his beard. Then the act of murder, committed by Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr and one of his companions, is detailed. Wāqidī’s other sources demonstrate the tendency of rather absolving Abū Bakr’s son from the act of murder and ascribe it to his comrades only.<sup>68</sup>

The murder being a *fait accompli*, there follows now another text from Wāqidī, in the form of a flashback to the circumstances prior to the murder, clearly trying to exonerate the rebels from responsibility to the tragic development. The Egyptians, we are told, steadfastly abstained from shedding ‘Uthmān’s blood and from fighting until reinforcements from Baṣra, Kūfa and Syria approached. This

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 218 [I, 3020].

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 216–17 [I, 3019].

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 219–20 [I, 3021–3].

was the spark that ignited the act of the murder. Then Wāqidī quotes ‘Uthmān’s speech to the rebels as they surround his house. The caliph exposes the irreconcilable nature of the rebels’ demand to depose him with their earlier consent to his caliphate. He reminds his audience that the rebels themselves took part in his election, an act through which they beseeched God to bless them and unite them. Now, in acting to displace him, they imply that God in fact did not answer them and thus, they are either of no importance to Him; or else God does not care to whom He gives authority.

Another possibility—unlikely, of course—that ‘Uthmān suggests in his speech to the rebels is that God allowed his election since He did not know how the third caliph would conduct himself. ‘Uthmān declares, however, that he had not committed any offense, either to God or the rebels, of which God had no (fore)knowledge on the day He chose him and attired him with “the garment of His grace.” ‘Uthmān is the one on whom God, long ago, had conferred good actions and is the one through whom God chose to bear witness to His rights. Another (impossible) explanation that the caliph offers for the rebels’ acts is that they had chosen him without consultation. In short, any way one looks at their conduct, they have clearly erred. They are a rebellious lot who will be punished and make God abandon the Community. ‘Uthmān concludes his speech by a plea to the rebels not to kill him, since he has not committed any of the three sins justifying a death penalty: adultery, apostasy, and murder. Taking his life, he warns the rebels, would place the sword upon their own necks until the Day of Resurrection. His murder would terminate their unity.

Now it is the rebels’ turn to answer. Wāqidī’s version, unlike Sayf’s, confers on them the privilege of the last word. They take up ‘Uthmān’s arguments one by one and try as best as they can to refute them. Admitting that the Believers, having sought God’s guidance, chose ‘Uthmān, and that God’s acts are certainly right, the rebels insist that the way to view ‘Uthmān’s case is that here is a test for God’s servants, the implication being that it is up to the Muslims to realize the error committed and amend it. As to ‘Uthmān’s long-standing ties and priority with the Prophet, and his deserving of authority, these are no longer valid, since his conduct has changed and he introduced innovations. To his warning about dissension that would engulf the Muslims after his murder, their answer is that “it is not right to fail to uphold the truth against you out of fear of

discord (*fitnah*) sometime in the future.” To the three sins mentioned by the caliph as the only justified reasons for deposition, the rebels, claiming the “Book of God” as their source, add three more: the spreading of corruption, oppressing the Muslims and preventing justice, all of which, of course, have been committed by ‘Uthmān. He is also accused of applying tyranny in his legal judgments and in the allocation of booty. It is actually ‘Uthmān’s intransigence that is the problem, for, were he to abdicate, those fighting on his behalf would have laid their swords and a *fitna* would be averted.<sup>69</sup>

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‘Uthmān now dead, one would expect Ṭabarī to move on to the reign of his successor. However, our historian does not conclude his treatment of the reign of the third caliph with the murder scene, nor even with ‘Uthmān’s burial. He now introduces a sort of sub-chapter on “The Conduct of ‘Uthmān,” definitely out of place chronologically. To be sure, and as already noted in this book, Ṭabarī does similarly in other cases of the *History*’s protagonists, ‘Alī being one such example.<sup>70</sup> Yet, although the form in both cases is similar, the effect is very different. For at this particular juncture, the discussion of ‘Uthmān’s reign serves a purpose, or, to put it more neutrally, it creates a certain effect. My argument is that in the absence of an explicit judgment on the act of the murder, Ṭabarī can be interpreted as using the section on ‘Uthmān’s conduct as a yardstick against which the reader is to measure that act. And thus, although Ṭabarī does not explicate his own opinion of ‘Uthmān’s tragic end, he implies one by structuring the material in the particular way he does. I shall return to this point shortly.

In the meantime, it is of no small importance to note that most of the reports in the section on ‘Uthmān’s conduct stem from Sayf, by now certainly familiar to us as an advocate of the deceased caliph. For example, Sayf tells us that the Qurashīs in the Community preferred ‘Uthmān to ‘Umar. While the second caliph had forbidden the Emigrants from going out into the conquered territories, except with his permission—the pretext being the chance they might be

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 220–23 [I, 3023–5].

<sup>70</sup> *History*, Vol. 17, 230–32 [I, 3474–6]. This feature is also discussed in Chapter 4 above.

scattered—‘Uthmān did not restrain them likewise. To those blaming ‘Uthmān for precisely such policy toward the Emigrants, Sayf’s answer is that the caliph firmly denied any leniency.<sup>71</sup> ‘Uthmān is also praised for his order to his governors in the garrison towns, as well as to those having complaints to lodge against them, to perform the Pilgrimage every year, a duty which the caliph, except during the time of his house arrest, personally observed. ‘Uthmān also declared his support of justice. In a letter to the provinces he urged the believers to “[c]ommand one another to do good and forbid one another to do evil,” and promised to “side with the weak against the strong as long as he suffers oppression.” The third caliph took measures against reprehensible practices in Medina such as wine drinking and the performance of magic. When unlawful innovations appeared in that town, causing an outflow of inhabitants, ‘Uthmān, during one Friday sermon, declared that any person found guilty of reform would be exiled. This declaration was later implemented. One report praises ‘Uthmān as a lenient ruler who “contested claims vigorously but did not void a single rightful claim.” The people “loved him for his leniency, and that in part induced them to submit to the commandments of Almighty God.” Among ‘Uthmān’s acclaimed acts is his vigorous defense of ‘Abbās’ reputation. When a certain man belittled the Prophet’s uncle, ‘Uthmān struck him and rhetorically asked: “[I]f the messenger of God shows honor to his uncle, shall I allow contempt for him?” A related report notes ‘Uthmān’s seeking advice from ‘Abbās.<sup>72</sup>

Special attention in Sayf’s report on the “Conduct of ‘Uthmān” is devoted to exposing the reasons behind some of the leading rebels’ acts. Accordingly, the aforementioned Muḥammad b. Abī Ḥudhayfa agitated against ‘Uthmān in Egypt because the caliph, under whose guardianship Ibn Abī Ḥudhayfa had been as an orphan, denied him the office of governor. ‘Ammār b. Yāsir, another rebel, had a grudge against ‘Uthmān for once being punished by him. And Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr turned against the caliph because of sheer “anger and greed.” ‘Uthmān, in his part, was contemptuous of him and made

<sup>71</sup> *History*, Vol. 15, 223–4 [I, 3025–6].

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 224–9 [I, 3026–31], 230–32 [I, 3032–4]. For an example of his forgiveness to opponents, see 232–3 [I, 3034–5].

no effort to conciliate him.<sup>73</sup> There is an unmistakable message of praise for ‘Uthmān in Sayf’s material, to the effect that “no one who rode forth to war against ‘Uthmān . . . was not killed.” One such man was ‘Umayr b. Dābi’ who, together with Kumayl b. Ziyād, swore to kill the caliph. Although he outlived ‘Uthmān by about forty years, Ḥajjāj, the renowned Umayyad governor, decided on one occasion to “make an example” of him for that past expression of rebellion and executed him. As for Kumayl, he would have to surrender to the Umayyad governor as well.<sup>74</sup>

Ṭabarī’s section here under review also provides reports deriving from Wāqidī. Unexpectedly, perhaps (given Wāqidī’s report on ‘Uthmān up to this point), these tell positive things about the third caliph, although, admittedly, they have to do with trivial matters. We read, for example, about ‘Uthmān honoring his guests with tasty dishes, tastier than those served by his immediate predecessor, yet, as emphasized by ‘Uthmān himself, not financed by the Treasury but by his own purse. “I know of no accusation that anyone can bring against me on account of this,” ‘Uthmān is credited as saying in Wāqidī’s report.<sup>75</sup> Another report in this section refers, once again, to the crisis in the relationship between ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī, for which, as Wāqidī’s sources note, not the caliph himself but his evil counselors, headed by Marwān b. al-Ḥakam, are blamed. In ‘Alī’s own words to ‘Abdallāh b. al-‘Abbās these counselors are portrayed as “perfidious advisers” who took possession of districts, devoured their revenues, and mistreated the inhabitants.<sup>76</sup> And there is also sympathy for ‘Uthmān’s difficult circumstances under siege, such as the report, ascribed by Wāqidī to Ibn al-‘Abbās, which reproduces ‘Uthmān’s message to Khālīd b. al-‘Āṣ, the governor at Mecca. The besieged caliph describes how he is unable to drink, except from the brackish water in his house, is barred from using a well he purchased with his own money, and how he can eat only the food stored at his house with no possibility of obtaining from the market.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 227–8 [I, 3029–31]. One can add the case of Ka‘b b. Dhī al-Ḥabaka, who joined the rebels because ‘Uthmān ordered to punish him for performing magical spells. See *ibid.*, 230 [I, 3032–3].

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 232–5 [I, 3034–7].

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 229–30 [I, 3031–2], where another of his praiseworthy deeds is mentioned.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 236–7 [I, 3038–9].

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 237 [I, 3039].

Most significant is Wāqidī’s reproduction of ‘Uthmān’s farewell letter to the Believers in the provinces.<sup>78</sup> His text, especially in its initial part, is woven with Qur’ānic citations,<sup>79</sup> with the besieged caliph stressing in it the Believers’ obligation to maintain unity and brotherhood and preserve themselves as “one nation.” He then mentions the “compact” and “covenant (*mīthāq*, ‘*ahd Allāh*)” between God and the Muslims, the abrogation of which, according to God’s warning, would result in a painful chastisement, such as “the people of Noah” suffered. The resurrection and “interrogation” awaiting the Believers on the Day of Judgment are also invoked. Then, once again with the aid of a Qur’ānic verse (4:31), ‘Uthmān stresses that obedience to God demands obedience to the ruler as well, as “a community can be saved only if it has a head who can unite it.” Rebellion against the head of the community is a rebellion against God, ‘Uthmān implies, and its consequences might be that the Muslims would never pray together, would be engulfed in legal dissensions, would be divided into sects, and would be overpowered by their enemies.

The caliph turns now from the Qur’ānic principles and norms to the current situation. As already suggested by Humphreys, the crisis to which ‘Uthmān has been drawn is perceived by him as a test case for the Qur’ānic scheme of things, the “conceptual apparatus” he had presented at the outset of his letter.<sup>80</sup> The rebels jeopardize the Community’s agreement with the divine and ‘Uthmān wishes to expose the deceit in their summoning the people “to the Book of Almighty God and to the truth.” Although claiming their deeds to have nothing to do with worldly desire, they have seen their hopes of governing deferred. Hence their desire to “hasten [God’s] decree,” to take the caliph’s life, which “has seemed [too] long to them.” ‘Uthmān insists that, contrary to the rebels’ claim, he has not gone back on any promise he had given them when they had first set out against him. As a matter of fact, he had conceded to their demand to enforce legal restrictions (*hudūd*); had agreed to the loud recitation of the Qur’ān; had accepted the demand to provide for the

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 239–45 [I, 3040–45].

<sup>79</sup> Humphreys, “Qur’ānic Myth,” 276, lists nine, but there seem to be actually more.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 276.



needy, to curb exceeding taxes, and to appoint worthy governors. What he received in return is the rebels' barring him from prayer, and their looting of whatever they could lay hand on in Medina.

To the rebels' vow to retaliate against him for every man he had struck, 'Uthmān responds that also his predecessors in office had used to strike men in error but retaliation had not been demanded of any of them. The alternative demand, that he should abdicate, the caliph flatly rejects. He repeatedly emphasizes that what the rebels require simply amounts to deposition. As to their threat to send for the provincial garrisons in order to foment disobedience, 'Uthmān answers that, initially, he had not been the one to demand obedience but it was rather conferred on him in order to avoid discord. In a clear allusion to the Qur'ānic theme raised as a matter of principle at the beginning of his letter, 'Uthmān now urges the Muslims to abide by their "covenant" and warns them that its violation would be tolerated neither by God nor by himself. Toward the end, 'Uthmān reaffirms the propriety of his conduct: he has overseen the enforcement of God's judgment (*ḥukm*); he has hated evil custom, division within the Community, and the shedding of blood. His letter ends in a conciliatory tone; he allows the possibility that he has committed some errors: "I claim not that my soul was innocent—surely the soul of man incites to evil." Yet, in his defense he claims that even if he chastised certain groups it was with good intentions. He is even willing to repent.

There is undoubtedly a dissonance created by the juxtaposition of 'Uthmān's letter, read by Ibn al-'Abbās as the leader of the Pilgrimage, and the latter's laconic statement that, upon returning to Medina, he found out that the oath of allegiance had already been given to 'Alī.<sup>81</sup> It is a striking contrast which, in a sort of an *obiter dictum*, implies the death and succession, yet conceals the grave circumstances behind the two events. These circumstances, namely: the caliph's cruel murder, have been, after all, already extensively related by Ṭabarī and, of course, are known to the reader at this point. What instantly follows in Ṭabarī's account enhances the dissonance even more: after the murder, 'Uthmān's corpse was thrown out and left unburied for three days. The sad story of the burial, the details of which need not detain us here, then follows.

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<sup>81</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 246 [I, 3045].

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In what I regard as pioneering and stimulating, yet largely off the mark analyses, first Hodgson,<sup>82</sup> then Humphreys—basically following the former’s lead—consider Ṭabarī’s account of ‘Uthmān’s murder as a *historiographical* piece worthy of close attention.<sup>83</sup> As Hodgson sees it, our historian deals in this case with an awesome problem facing the Sunnīs. For, if the Prophet’s Companions were to be trusted as transmitters of *ḥadīth* and, more generally, as a model for the *umma*; and if the latter was indeed to be regarded as specially blessed by God, how could the calamity of the caliph’s murder be explained? In other words, two interrelated issues are here at stake in the wake of the caliph’s murder and their satisfactory resolution depends on a proper interpretation by the early Muslim historians. These issues are the status of the Community and the reputation of the Companions. Humphreys formulates the historical challenge here at stake somewhat differently, though in essence the issue involved is the same. As briefly referred to in an earlier chapter, the murder of ‘Uthmān and its historiographical treatment disclose, in Humphreys’s opinion, no less than “the kernel of a powerful myth informing the whole body of early Islamic historical writing,” a myth which crystallized out of the “soul-searching provoked by the dialectic of scripture and historical experience.” It is the myth of Covenant, Betrayal, and Redemption.<sup>84</sup>

As Hodgson and Humphreys are careful to note, by including both Sayf’s and Wāqidi’s versions of the murder story,<sup>85</sup> Ṭabarī does not provide just one single answer to the problem posed above, be it the status of the *umma/ṣahāba*, as in Hodgson’s view, or the fate of the Covenant-Betrayal-Redemption myth, as in Humphreys’s analysis. Both scholars maintain that each of the two versions appealed to a different type of readers.<sup>86</sup> To begin with Sayf, his story is “wooden,” in Hodgson’s questionable estimation; a “Sunday school”

<sup>82</sup> Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. I, 354–8.

<sup>83</sup> For Humphreys’s acknowledgement of Hodgson’s inspiration, see “Qur’ānic Myth,” 289–90 n. 22.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 278, 279; *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Ta’rīkh, section II, Historical Writing.”

<sup>85</sup> Hodgson is somewhat contradictory when ascribing the material to Ṭabarī himself, as in *Venture*, vol. I, 354.

<sup>86</sup> Humphreys, “Qur’ānic Myth,” 279.

interpretation, according to Humphreys's more generous verdict. More substantially, it is a story filled with "sentimental piety" and strongly influenced by popular preaching. It would be accepted by a loyal, but naive and uncritical Sunnī believer, for it tells that Muḥammad's Companions, the very guarantors of *ḥadīth*, supported 'Uthmān throughout and were not at fault. The *ṣahāba*, even in the context of 'Uthmān's murder, remain for Sayf and his sources "models of correct belief and practice," in whose actions and statements "true Islam is enshrined." Alien troublemakers were those generating the breach in the Community, a major culprit among them being the notorious 'Abdallāh b. Saba'. The mutineers, then, were not part and parcel of the main core of the *umma*.<sup>87</sup>

Sayf's version thus solves the problem in implying that neither the Companions nor the Community sinned in the caliph's murder, and any hint for that effect is ill intended, a reflection of malicious misinterpretations by later commentators. To cling to Humphreys's terminology, in Sayf's story the Covenant was continuously and faithfully maintained, the Community has not fallen into disobedience, and there was no Betrayal. Hence, the Muslims could be confident that their relationship with God remained unbroken. Sayf's "hidden agenda," that is, his "intense desire to assert the unbroken unity and integrity of the Muslim community," is thus carried out.<sup>88</sup> Sayf's

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<sup>87</sup> There are other Companions such as Mughīra b. al-Akhnas and Abū Hurayra, who are credited with support of 'Uthmān in his last days. The former meets his death in the course of the siege. See *History*, vol. XV, 211–14 [I, 3013–16]. The Companions, despite 'Uthmān's entreatment not to, reenter his residence to be at his side. With 'Ā'isha, the Prophet's widow, the picture is more complicated. She first asks her brother, Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr, a leading rebel (see this chapter above), to accompany her to the Pilgrimage, and says: "By God, if I can make it so that God will frustrate their [the rebels'] efforts, I will surely do so." However, her less than full determination in defending 'Uthmān is expressed in her response to Marwān's claim that if she remained in Medina, the rebels are more likely to show respect to the caliph. 'Ā'isha, who mentions the rebels' assault on Umm Ḥabība, claims that no one would protect her in Medina. "I do not know what the actions of these people will lead to," she excuses herself. See *ibid.*, 208–09 [I, 3010–11]. In another report, Ibn al-'Abbās is quoted telling of 'Ā'isha's advice to him to abandon 'Uthmān, whose associates "have milked the lands because of what had been decreed" (I differ from Humphreys's translation), and to "sow doubt about him among the people." Ibn al-'Abbās predicts, however, that if some evil were to befall 'Uthmān, support would be given to 'Alī, who is not 'Ā'isha's candidate for the caliphate. See *ibid.*, 238–9 [I, 3040]. For discussion of the Companions' role in the murder story, see also Miklos Muranyi, *Die Prophetengenossen in der frühislamischen Geschichte* (Bonn, 1973), 69–93.

<sup>88</sup> Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. I, 355; Humphreys, "Qur'anic Myth," 279–80.

account provides a “successful counterpart to the disheartening events of ‘Uthmān’s reign,”<sup>89</sup> a counterpoise to the danger of hopelessness. It becomes a symbol of optimism and a call to steadfastness, an antidote to cynicism and despair, in one: sacred history.<sup>90</sup>

Wāqidī’s version, as Hodgson sees it, would appeal to totally different readers, Muslims subtler than Sayf’s adherents. The reason is not simply that they would be aware of Sayf’s bad reputation as a *ḥadīth* reporter; after all, as Hodgson points out, Wāqidī was not immune from criticism, even by Ṭabarī himself.<sup>91</sup> The point is that, unlike Sayf, Wāqidī does not avoid the problem that is at the very center of the murder event; on the contrary, he is ready to confront it. Hodgson detects Wāqidī’s critical approach in that he does not fail to reproduce two contrasting speeches delivered by ‘Uthmān on the one hand, and the mutineers on the other hand.<sup>92</sup> The contrast is evident in that, while ‘Uthmān defends himself against accusations of major crimes, reasserts his right to rule, and warns that his murder will break Muslim unity, the mutineers, in their part, insist that the caliph must either resign or be deposed, i.e., killed.

As Hodgson formulates it, the dilemma that emerges as a result of the two speeches is the following: How can political power be simultaneously held within the limits of justice and yet retain sufficient supremacy and independence to be genuine? How can power be at once practically effective and morally responsible? Between the two parties, the caliph and the rebels, there is total disagreement on this issue: they differ on what is the relevant law and both appeal indecisively to the Qur’ān. Neither side recognizes an alternative to either accepting the injustice that results from ‘Uthmān’s inadequacy, or deposing ‘Uthmān and disuniting the Community. On the face of it, we are at a deadlock. Yet, according to Hodgson, an alternative is actually suggested elsewhere in Wāqidī’s account and is, in fact, implied in an incident mentioned earlier. It may be recalled that when the caliph ordered that one of his relatives be given some camels he had received as alms, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Awf saw to it

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<sup>89</sup> Here Humphreys implies that Sayf’s version does not tell us the history *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. See further below.

<sup>90</sup> Humphreys, “Translator’s Foreword,” *History*, vol. XV, p. XVII.

<sup>91</sup> Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. I, 355–6.

<sup>92</sup> See this chapter above.

that the camels were distributed among the people instead.<sup>93</sup> In handling the case of the camels most properly, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān took a personal initiative to effect justice, yet, without questioning ‘Uthmān’s authority.<sup>94</sup> Thus, in the particular case in which he involved himself, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān was able to achieve—so runs Hodgson’s argument—a compromise which, unfortunately, neither the caliph nor the rebels reached.

Like Hodgson, Humphreys emphasizes that, in contrast to Sayf, Wāqidī’s interpretation exposes the very sad truths that Sayf tries to cover up: no reputable Companion did defend ‘Uthmān; nor was any of the *ṣaḥāba* guiltless at the critical junctures. Thus being the case, the Covenant was betrayed and, even if the revolt seemed justifiable on a certain level, it “had shattered the unity of the community for at least the next century and rived it with constant rebellion and civil strife.”<sup>95</sup> And what about the element of Redemption, so crucial to the guiding myth that Humphreys claims to have uncovered? We shall return to it in a moment.

Before that, if we are to follow Hodgson and Humphreys, we must turn now from Sayf, Wāqidī and their distinctly different stories, to Ṭabarī himself. At his hands, as Hodgson concludes, ‘Uthmān’s murder becomes a “perfect occasion for showing the naivety of a conventional response” to the deep crisis that the murder certainly created. Ṭabarī suggests what the true Sharī response must be. To be sure, it is a response of the type exemplified by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s act of returning the camels. As Hodgson admits, the story of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s initiative, as told by Wāqidī, is not an invitation for every Muslim to behave with the same freedom. Yet the law must be worked out so that everyone will know what it is, and responsible Muslims comprehending the Sharī’a should be able to make up for the caliph’s deficiencies. Like ‘Abd al-Raḥmān with the camels, every Muslim has the duty of “commanding the good and forbidding evil,” in other words, the Community should not be entirely dependent on the caliph for doing justice.<sup>96</sup> Hodgson more than implies, then,

<sup>93</sup> See above.

<sup>94</sup> Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. I, 355, 356.

<sup>95</sup> Humphreys, “Qur’anic Myth,” 279–81. On p. 278 Humphreys implies that the “betrayal of the covenant” is not only Wāqidī’s (or any group he stands for) concept; it is the concept of any “thoughtful Muslim.”

<sup>96</sup> Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. I, 356.

that, between Sayf and Wāqidī, Ṭabarī himself prefers the latter’s version of the murder story. For him, as, presumably, for the modern reader, it suggests a sophisticated approach to a conflictual situation and a perfect solution to an apparently insoluble case.

Humphreys maintains that, by making Sayf’s report “the visible framework of his narrative,” Ṭabarī “could slip in the much less flattering interpretations of early Islamic history presented by his other sources.”<sup>97</sup> Yet, Humphreys also thinks that, although the editor of the *History* gives pride of place to Sayf’s account and retains it as a coherent unit, he is inclined to reject it. Sayf’s version is meant to serve the critical reader “only as a matter of religious faith, not as established knowledge.” Ṭabarī merely seems to use it as a kind of “idealized core account,” much less realistic than Wāqidī’s. Therefore, Wāqidī does not just provide an alternative version, thereby to fulfill Ṭabarī’s commitment to place all the relevant material before the reader. As Humphreys sees it, Wāqidī establishes true history and a critique of Sayf, all in one.<sup>98</sup>

Now, given the presumed preference by Ṭabarī (or by a subtle reader, to follow Hodgson and Humphreys) for Wāqidī’s version of the murder account, which relates the story of a “Betrayal of the Covenant,” how would Ṭabarī escape the consequence that “his own life’s work as a jurist and Qur’ānic exegete would have been a sham?” How could a pious and thoughtful Muslim prefer Wāqidī to Sayf and not descend into despair? Humphreys’s answer is that, betrayed as the Covenant was as a result of the caliph’s murder, even the critical Wāqidī believed that “redemption and the restoration of the covenant may still be hoped for.” Also Ṭabarī himself “must surely have accepted the notion that the community’s sin was not irrevocable, that many Muslims had remained faithful to their covenant.” In short, Humphreys’s interpretation of the message of Wāqidī’s account is that Redemption may still be hoped for. This, in turn, renders the myth embedded in Uthman’s murder account “productive,” in that it functions not only to interpret the past, but also to provide a hopeful future. Islamic history is thus seen as a dynamic force.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Humphreys, “Translator’s Foreword,” *History*, vol. XV, pp. XVI–XVII.

<sup>98</sup> Humphreys, “Qur’ānic Myth,” 280.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 281. Humphreys’s understanding of Wansbrough, leading him to link the latter with Snouck (281 n. 26), seems to me questionable.

Now, after the murder of the third caliph, where was Redemption to be found? Given Ṭabarī's political affiliation, Redemption could come in the garb of the so-called 'Abbāsīd Revolution. Humphreys, however, is uneasy with such speculation for, with Ṭabarī, it can be misleading. His ironic and sometimes paradoxical juxtaposition of varying accounts means that we should resist conclusions that are not based on a close analysis of the texts he presents and their relationships to one another. After all, it is mostly thanks to Ṭabarī, as Humphreys reminds us, that we know how many hopes were disappointed by the 'Abbāsīds, how many revolts they faced, how many stresses arose within their own family. We are left, therefore, with no clear answer as to the question of the Community's Redemption after the murder: Did it take place after all? Be that as it may, after Ṭabarī, hopes for Redemption receded. Disbelief in the ability of the *umma* to achieve Redemption was confirmed by the inexorable decline and ultimate humiliation of the 'Abbāsīd dynasty in the course of the tenth century A.D. It was then that the "redemption model" collapsed and with it Ṭabarī's historiographical interpretation along a Qur'ānic framework.<sup>100</sup>

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There is no question that, in hermeneutic terms, Ṭabarī's authorial intentions are extremely difficult to fathom. In an attempt to account for the difficulty, Hodgson suggests that our historian "cannot [sic] make his own conclusions explicit," and notes that Ṭabarī failed to set forth his own reconstruction of the historical case, thus leaving the reader to draw *his* own conclusions from the evidence.<sup>101</sup> In fact, this is precisely what Hodgson (as well as Humphreys) does, being the innovative reader he is. Now, it is certainly difficult to tell whether Ṭabarī's tactics in his compilation were designed, as Hodgson argues, so as not to disclose his own preference of version, and thus to avoid making explicit judgment on the historical matter in question and please a wide audience;<sup>102</sup> or, as Humphreys even more concretely

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>101</sup> Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. I, 353.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 353. Hodgson connects it to his problematic career as a jurist and teacher of *hadith*. For an example where Ṭabarī, in juxtaposing two entirely different versions, provides an effective commentary, see pp. 355–6.

puts it, whether Ṭabarī’s desire, in the tense atmosphere in Baghdad of his lifetime, was to avoid being accused of sectarianism.<sup>103</sup> For example, it is possible to envisage entirely different reasons than the ones just suggested, less personally motivated and more culturally imposed, such as the general trend and basic assumptions about the historian’s craft, so to speak, in the context within which Ṭabarī was active. Granted, as Hodgson rightly observes, that Ṭabarī did not offer an explicit conclusion about the murder issue, it does seem to me that he is nonetheless leading the reader to support a particular view, rather than leaving him totally perplexed. And thus in conclusion, I wish to suggest a reading of Ṭabarī’s poetics as they are employed in the murder story, a reading quite different from that suggested by Hodgson and Humphreys.

To begin with, the murder of ‘Uthmān, as rightly suggested by Hodgson, Humphreys, as well as other scholars, surely was an extremely significant event that Muslims, at least the Sunnī majority of all generations, have had to reckon with. As Humphreys has sensibly opined, at stake was the moral standing of a community that could allow the murder of its third ruler take place. Indeed, this crucial issue is implied in Wāqidi’s account, and especially hovers above ‘Uthmān’s aforementioned farewell letter. “Almighty God desired for you absolute obedience and unity and warned you against rebellion, schism, and discord,” ‘Uthmān warned, but to no avail. Obedience to God demands obedience to the caliph, “a community can be saved only if it has a head who can unite it,” the caliph proclaimed, but was not heeded. For Wāqidi, as well as for Ṭabarī, the question thus remained unresolved. For if, indeed, as maintained by Humphreys, there was a question about the survival of the notion of Redemption after the grave tragedy of ‘Uthmān’s deposition, of the persistence of hopes after the “betrayal of the covenant,” then Ṭabarī, in this respect, is certainly unhelpful. He is more helpful, I would argue, on another, important issue, which both Hodgson and Humphreys tend to neglect, and which is much more directly related to the murder itself.

Before taking it up, I wish to object to two arguments that play a prominent role in Hodgson’s and Humphreys’s analyses yet, so it

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<sup>103</sup> Humphreys, “Translator’s Foreword,” *History*, vol. XV, p. XVII.



seems to me, unjustifiably so. One has to do with considering the Companions as a most, perhaps the most crucial element in the murder story. Here, Hodgson's emphasis on the inner division among the Companions, and the sharp contrast that this generates with their role as reliable transmitters of *ḥadīth* and, more generally, as exemplars of the *umma* at its historical best,<sup>104</sup> seems to me ill placed. I think that the importance of the *ṣaḥāba* and the significance of their behavior are simply overblown by Hodgson, and to some extent by Humphreys as well. In other words, as important as the conduct of the Companions in the murder affair may be regarded, an overly heavy emphasis on their involvement creates imbalance that is informed by considerations that are not part of the historiography in question. It is simply erroneous to represent the Companions as *the* issue occupying our writers, whether Sayf, Wāqidī, or Ṭabarī, in their treatment of the murder story.<sup>105</sup>

The second argument, which Hodgson builds from his reading of Wāqidī's account (in Hodgson's view, the account preferred also by Ṭabarī), is about a solution to the seemingly insoluble conflict between the caliph and the rebels and, by extension, a model of action to the pious Muslims in similar conflictual situations. The solution, it should be recalled, is modeled on 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Awf's act with the camels, by which he both averted error and maintained the caliphate's dignity. Once again, as with the Companions, what Hodgson does here is taking a marginal element out of the large and complex account of the last phase of Uthman's reign and imposing on it a prominent role in the work of interpretation. In Hodgson's exposition, a trivial episode becomes the prime key to understanding Ṭabarī's view of the whole affair.

My own interpretation of the gist of the "Murder of 'Uthmān" is that it is precisely *the murder*, no other element in the rich texture

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<sup>104</sup> Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. I, 354. On p. 355 Hodgson briefly returns to the Companions, and points out that Sayf's account actually describes unity among them, thus "solv[ing] the historical dilemma" to a "loyal, but somewhat naive, Jamā'i-Sunnī." Humphreys acknowledges his debt to Hodgson. See, however, Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam*, vol. I, ed. A. Emami (Tehran, 1987), 274, about the Companions' indifference to 'Uthmān's maltreatment; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa'l-nihāya* (Beirut, 1966), vol. VII, 197, for an apologetic explanation as to how the Companions allowed the murder to have happened. For a similar emphasis on the Companions, see Khalidī, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 80, 81 n. 129.

<sup>105</sup> The controversial implications involved in treating the *ṣaḥāba* resonate as a general consideration also in El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 218.

before us, which is the major issue at stake. Taking the life of the caliph, not the Companions’ (let alone one Companion in particular) role in it, is what had to be confronted: Was the murder of the third of Muḥammad’s successors a justifiable act? After all the detailing and the recording of the various versions, there was no way one could sidestep the question. In their reconstruction, Sayf and Wāqidī, as we have seen, suggest totally contradictory answers to this very question, the former implying that the murder was a grave error, the latter supplying the assassins with some measures of defense by implicating ‘Uthmān in his own tragic fate. If one looks for *hubris* in early Islamic history, Wāqidī’s account is possibly the place to find it in the way it represents ‘Uthmān. The more intriguing puzzle is, however, Ṭabarī’s stand on the matter. And it is in this regard that the effect of his own contribution to the story seems to me entirely different from what both Hodgson and Humphreys have seen.

It is here that I wish to expand on the moment I consider most crucial in Ṭabarī’s orchestration of the murder story: his flashback to review ‘Uthmān’s career, just at the point when the caliph, according to the chronology of the narrative, is already dead. Granted that historical narration, as a rule, adheres to chronology, for Ṭabarī to regress at this point is to go against the usual flow of things. The regression should disrupt the illusion that the reader is a spectator of “what really happened;” it creates an analeptic effect that undoes the so-called reality effect. To put it more concretely, and reiterate an argument already made in Chapter 2 above, the movement back and forth in the course of a narration that otherwise should chronologically advance—thus working against the informing assumption of a historiographical piece—is a poetic device that cannot be regarded (or disregarded) as merely a matter of style. And as a poetic element it introduces (to play on Hayden White’s phrasing) a form which shapes a content.

When Ṭabarī relates the act of the murder, which is the final phase in ‘Uthmān’s caliphate, and then returns to some of the caliph’s pious deeds, as related by Sayf and also by *Wāqidī*, the effect on the reader, at least this reader, is the creation of a stark contrast between the protagonist’s cruel death and the benevolence that seemingly characterized his life. Juxtaposing the two, and in the particular order it is done, places the (dark) scene of the murder in the (bright) light of ‘Uthmān’s reign.

It would not be superfluous to note at this juncture that what escaped both Hodgson and Humphreys is Ṭabarī's own admission of applying censorship to Wāqidī's account. At one point, our historian discloses that he refused to mention things reported by Wāqidī concerning the Egyptians' move toward the caliph and their camping at Dhū Khushūb, "because I find them offensive."<sup>106</sup> On another occasion, the editor of the *History* states that he excluded arguments adduced by the murderers in their debate with 'Uthmān.<sup>107</sup> It is, then, not Ṭabarī's self image, as well as his image in the eyes of scholars as an impeccably neutral and totally faithful compiler, that is here at stake. After all, it was Ṭabarī himself who chose to tell the reader that he was engaged in deleting specific material. It will not do, as one reader (who did notice Ṭabarī's admission) thinks, to interpret this self-imposed censorship as merely an attempt to "minimize the damage" caused by the trauma of 'Uthmān's murder.<sup>108</sup> One could claim, with no less justification, that by the omission, Ṭabarī indicated a more assertive intent.

His intention in the case of 'Uthmān's murder being unspecified, one can only try one's best at making sense of the complex narrative. What I suggest, then, is that Ṭabarī was very much concerned with 'Uthmān's murder itself, and that he clearly took Sayf's side—not Wāqidī's—but not because Sayf provided a theological relief from Wāqidī's true picture of harsh reality. In fact, the well-known modern reluctance to use Sayf notwithstanding, both competed on the same terrain of historical reality. Both claimed to tell things as they actually were. In playing Sayf against Wāqidī, as well as putting the two side by side in the section on 'Uthmān's conduct, Ṭabarī ended up condemning 'Uthmān's murder as an evil act and lamenting the cruel fate of Islam's third caliph. To see the murder as an unbecoming end to the career of the pious 'Uthmān is the almost unavoidable conclusion to which the reader is led by Ṭabarī's story of "The murder of 'Uthmān."

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<sup>106</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 170. See on this also Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 81; idem, "Battle of the Camel," 153–4; Madelung, *Succession*, 374.

<sup>107</sup> *History*, vol. XV, 181; Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 81; Madelung, *Succession*, 374.

<sup>108</sup> Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 81.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE BATTLE OF ŞİFFĪN: AN IRONIC STORY

Şiffīn is the site<sup>1</sup> of a famous battle, or rather a series of skirmishes, which took place in 37/657 between Iraqi supporters of ‘Alī, the fourth caliph, and troops of the Syrian governor Mu‘āwiya. The so-called Battle (*waq‘a*) of Şiffīn and the religio-political schism (*fitna*) that it generated have been considered in modern scholarship “a major factor in shaping the regional and political identity of both the Iraqi Shī‘īs and the Syrian Umayyads.” The political and theological debates about it have been the backdrop to many contradictory claims throughout Islamic history.<sup>2</sup> However, given the confusing and “atomistic” details in the sources, reconstruction of the event has proved to be a problem.<sup>3</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century, from Gustav Weil onward, at least up to Wellhausen, scholars found Abū Mikhnaf’s account quite incomprehensible. They suspected, for example, that there were traitors (actually, quite prominent ones) on ‘Alī’s side, with whom Mu‘āwiya and ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ had preplanned some trickery.<sup>4</sup>

Some scholars have therefore opted for concentrating on “hard (and, one might add, antiquarian) data,” such as the identity of the leading warriors and tribal units, the weapons, military tactics and banners employed in the fighting.<sup>5</sup> Others imply the contingency of the affair, stressing that neither side actually wanted to engage in real battle.<sup>6</sup> Most modern readers are occupied with the arbitration

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<sup>1</sup> Şiffīn was a ruined Byzantine village not far from Raqqa, on the right bank of the Euphrates. See *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Şiffīn.”

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* See also Petersen, *‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Şiffīn.” Wellhausen, *Arab Kingdom*, 80, is disappointed in the contradictory accounts, which “have hardly any practical value” for reconstructing the real course of the battle. For a most detailed treatment see, Madelung, *Succession*, esp. 220–62. Madelung does not seem to share earlier skepticism.

<sup>4</sup> Wellhausen, *Religio-Political Factions*, 5–9. Wellhausen almost non-chalantly “solves” the puzzle that earlier scholars faced.

<sup>5</sup> *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Şiffīn;” Hinds, “Banners;” Yahya, “Events of Şiffīn.”

<sup>6</sup> *E.I.*<sup>1</sup>, s.v. “Dīffīn;” *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Şiffīn;” *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Taḥkīm;” *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol. XI, s.v. “Şiffīn;” Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London, 1986), 78–80.

that followed the fighting; they devote a considerable space to the curious nomination of Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī as ‘Alī’s negotiator and, lacking details on the negotiation between Abū Mūsā and ‘Amr b. al-‘Ās, Mu‘āwiya’s representative, they speculate about the issues that were discussed.<sup>7</sup> A highly esteemed study has provided an especially positivistic tinge by focusing on the two different versions of the alleged document that the two arbitrators had produced, and by suggesting which version is authentic.<sup>8</sup> The role of the *qurrā*<sup>2</sup>-turned-Khawārij, first within and later outside ‘Alī’s camp, and the rationality (or lack thereof) behind their decisions, initially pushing toward the arbitration, but later bringing about its breakdown, is another issue that has extensively been discussed.<sup>9</sup>

A closely related question that has been raised is the reliability of the sources.<sup>10</sup> Decades ago, Frants Buhl, for example,<sup>11</sup> questioned the accuracy of the available accounts—mainly that of the Kūfan Abū Mikhnaf (d. 157/775), Ṭabarī’s almost exclusive source for Ṣiffīn<sup>12</sup>—accounts that betray a preference for ‘Alī and antipathy to

<sup>7</sup> Vecchia Vaglieri, “Il conflitto,” esp. 26–31. Madelung, *Succession*, 254–7, disagrees with the former on several issues.

<sup>8</sup> Hinds, “Ṣiffīn.” Humphreys, *Islamic History*, 89, deems the former to have provided “one solid point of repair in analyzing the first civil war.”

<sup>9</sup> E.g., N.A. Faris, “Development in Arab Historiography as Reflected in the Struggle Between ‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya,” in Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt, eds., *Historians of the Middle East* (London, 1962), esp. 436; *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol. XI, s.v. “Ṣiffīn;” Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London, 1986), 78–80; M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History: A New Interpretation, I: A.D. 600–750 (A.H. 132)* (Cambridge, 1971), 75–7; J. J. Saunders, *A History of Medieval Islam* (London, 1965), 65–6, and particularly Hinds, “Ṣiffīn,” 97–9.

<sup>10</sup> For a list of sources, most of which are either lost or preserved in later writings, see *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Ṣiffīn.” For a detailed discussion of an anonymous work, which possibly dates to the eighth or ninth century A.D., and is extant in two different manuscripts, see Hinds, “Banners,” 3–8. Madelung, with an exception only as regards Abū Mikhnaf (see n. 12 below), does not problematize the position of the sources, most notably Naṣr b. Muzāḥim al-Minqarī’s *Waq‘at Ṣiffīn*. In his lack of critical treatment of the sources, Madelung regresses from earlier studies (e.g., Duri’s), which did not fail to point out the partisanship of the sources.

<sup>11</sup> *E.I.*<sup>1</sup>, s.v. “Ṣiffīn.”

<sup>12</sup> It is assumed that Abū Mikhnaf wrote a book on Ṣiffīn, which reached Ṭabarī in Hishām b. al-Kalbī’s recension. See Sezgin, *Abū Mikhnaf*, 126–7. An Ankara manuscript (Sa’ib 5418) that is attributed to Abū Mikhnaf, a copy of which I have not been able to obtain, is listed by Sezgin. The similarity between Abū Mikhnaf’s text, as well as the *isnāds*, which is preserved in the *History*, and extended passages in Minqarī, *Waq‘at Ṣiffīn*, where the immediate source is ‘Umar b. Sa’d al-Asadī (d. ca. 180/796; for Asadī as an important source also for the anonymous work cited in n. 10 above, see Hinds, “Banners,” 5), suggests that Abū Mikhnaf and Asadī

Mu‘āwiya, and especially to ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ, the mastermind of Mu‘āwiya’s policies.<sup>13</sup> Seizing upon Zuhri’s “very temperate” tradition that was reproduced by Ibn Sa‘d, Buhl’s opinion was that, contrary to what is described by the narratives, there is no clear-cut division between “right” (‘Alī) and “wrong” (Mu‘āwiya).<sup>14</sup> In the same vein, Petersen, comparing Abū Mikhnaf’s “orthodox Iraqī tradition” with the pro-Umayyad version of Şāliḥ b. Kaysān (d. 140/758), the Medinese informant—a version preserved in Balādhurī, yet ignored by Ṭabarī although, presumably, known to him<sup>15</sup>—detects in the contrasting accounts *post-eventum* propaganda and “imaginative constructions which gradually degenerate into grotesque caricatures.”<sup>16</sup> As for Sayf, According to Petersen he pursues his peculiar view of history and takes his idiosyncratic explanation from the murder of ‘Uthmān forward to the Şifḥīn battle and the budding of the Khawārij, whereby the culprit is the Saba’iyya, followers of the aforementioned Ibn Saba’. Sayf’s exposition “has nothing whatever to do with historical facts, but it rather reveals the problems with which Sayf’s own contemporaries were occupied.”<sup>17</sup> Sayf projects the radical Shī‘ism of his own time back onto the first civil war “by means of a series of venturesome constructions.” It is ‘Alī’s adherents, those controlling the powerless caliph, that Sayf wants to make responsible for the *fitna*. He is obviously pro-‘Abbāsīd, and argues with unusual consistency and daring constructions, “and with a temperament and force

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had before them an identical version of the Şifḥīn story. On the similarity, see also Sezgin, *Abū Miḥnaf*, 16–17, 47–8, 104. Since Minqarī’s text is much more extensive than Ṭabarī’s, it was either Abū Mikhnaf or Ṭabarī, or perhaps an intermediary, who made deletions from the “*urtext*” on Şifḥīn.

<sup>13</sup> For Abū Mikhnaf’s partisanship, see Duri, *Rise*, 44 (how this reconciles with Duri’s “free[dom] of factional bias” is hard to tell); Hinds, “Şifḥīn;” Madelung, *Succession*, 90, 376. For Ṭabarī’s occasional reliance on other sources, see e.g., *History*, vol. XVII, 113–14.

<sup>14</sup> See, however, Madelung’s inclination to embrace pro-‘Alī points of view in referring to Mu‘āwiya as a “brute” (221) “despot” (227, 235), “chess king” (235), or to the taking of bribery as a requisite of every “good Umayyad merchant” (230). Madelung does not hide his praise for ‘Alī, and his criticism of him is mild (e.g., 244–5). In his rejection of information provided by Umayyad sources (e.g., 258 n. 440) he appears oblivious to the implication of largely embracing pro-‘Alīd materials, let alone unpleasant prejudice.

<sup>15</sup> Petersen, *Alī and Mu‘āwiya*, 151.

<sup>16</sup> Erling Ladewig Petersen, “‘Alī and Mu‘āwiyah: the Rise of the Umayyad Caliphate 656–661,” *Acta Orientalia* (Copenhagen) 23 (1959): 157–96, esp. 190–92.

<sup>17</sup> Petersen, *Alī and Mu‘āwiya*, 78–9.

that give his exposition a stamp of topical political agitation rather than of historical writing of lasting importance.”<sup>18</sup> Petersen has opined that, as far as Ṭabarī is concerned, not only does he attempt at glossing over a breach in ‘Alī’s camp,<sup>19</sup> but also that Sayf’s influence led the compiler of the *History* to dispense even with Abū Mikhnaf’s report of an exchange of notes between ‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya.<sup>20</sup> The result, much unlike what one finds in Balādihurī, is the depiction of Mu‘āwiya’s lust for power, and the suppression of his claim to revenge ‘Uthmān’s blood.<sup>21</sup> “There can be no doubt that Mu‘āwiya’s way to the caliphate looked to him [Ṭabarī] illegal usurpation, beginning with the Syrian governor’s declaration of open enmity towards ‘Alī, and culminating with his receiving homage as caliph when ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ had outmaneuvered Abū Mūsā at the arbitration hearing.”<sup>22</sup> It is beyond doubt, concludes Petersen, that Ṭabarī’s denunciation of Mu‘āwiya is aimed at Islamic orthodoxy, the Ḥanbalite school in particular.<sup>23</sup>

From a point of view of its poetics, the Ṣiffīn story, as unfolded in the *History*, is not necessarily a story that emphasizes the issues noted by modern historians—the act of arbitration, for example. Neither is Abū Mikhnaf’s full story, Ṭabarī’s chief material for Ṣiffīn,<sup>24</sup> a simply straightforward propagandistic account, although considerable sections of the story might be considered as such. For in this case, it may be argued, the whole is not simply the sum of its parts. Abū Mikhnaf’s is a story the most interesting moment of which is its discontinuity or, to put it somewhat differently, its unexpected end. While it builds up in a certain direction, just at the point where one might expect a sort of crescendo, it suddenly takes an unexpected turn, leading us to (sticking to musical terminology) a surprising coda. From the reader’s, if not the narrators’ point of view,

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 80–82.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 156. For Ṭabarī’s suppression of facts, see also 157 and n. 37.

<sup>20</sup> For Sayf b. ‘Umar’s role and the excision of this particular material from the *History*, see Chapters 4 and 6 above.

<sup>21</sup> Petersen, *Alī and Mu‘āwiya*, 153–4, 157. See on this also Madelung, *Succession*, 211, n. 280; 213, 222–3, and his justification of Ṭabarī’s decision of suppression, p. 224.

<sup>22</sup> Petersen, *Alī and Mu‘āwiya*, 156.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 157. For Ṭabarī and the Ḥanbalite school, see Chapter 3 above.

<sup>24</sup> Like others, I refer to the account as Abū Mikhnaf’s, although it appears that Abū Mikhnaf had before him some unknown source. See n. 12 above.

it is almost certainly not a story with a “happy end.” For ‘Alī went to Şıffīn as morally superior to Mu‘āwīya, and carried his superiority into the battlefield. But then things went wrong, resulting in Mu‘āwīya’s nomination as caliph by his supporters, in the tragic massacre of ‘Alī’s former supporters, the *qurrā’*/Khawārij, and finally, in ‘Alī’s own death.

In fact, at one point, half way through his presentation, Abū Mikhnaf introduces a succinct summary—perfectly acceptable also to the modern reader—of the plot up to that stage, as he himself has supplied it:

They [‘Alī’s companions] left for Şıffīn with ‘Alī full of brotherly love and affection, and they came back with mutual hatred and enmity. Before they had left their camp at Şıffīn the [cry ‘Authority belongs to God alone’ (*lā ḥukma illā lillāh*)] (*taḥkīm*) had spread among them, and they had set out, pushing each other aside all along the way, insulting each other and beating each other with whips.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, for Abū Mikhnaf and his partisan sources, the problem was especially difficult: How, in the light of what had gone before, is it possible to explain ‘Alī’s defeat, a result not only unexpected but also undesired? After all, Abū Mikhnaf had earlier imparted an expectation of a certain scenario, only to reach quite a different conclusion. And if this is not enough, discontinuity is not limited to Abū Mikhnaf’s text. What I wish to argue is that, in Ṭabarī’s editorship, the Şıffīn story receives additional dimension that complicates even Abū Mikhnaf’s story, to which Ṭabarī gives an almost exclusive voice. As I hope to show, our historian, either consciously or, perhaps more likely, unaware thereof, undermines Abū Mikhnaf’s (and thus his own) already discontinued story, with the result that, in the process, his alleged partisanship is deconstructed. In what follows I shall delve on the development of the plot, its turning point, and on the poetical and ideological grounds on which the shift occurs.

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Written exclusively from the point of view of ‘Alī’s camp, and occasionally based on alleged eyewitness reports as supplied by ‘Alī’s loyal supporters,<sup>26</sup> speeches made by participants in the caliph’s camp,

<sup>25</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 98 [I, 3349]. I slightly diverge from Hawting’s translation.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, e.g., 10 [I, 3263–4], 11–16 [I, 3265–9], 19 [I, 3273].



and, above all, ‘Alī’s own addresses,<sup>27</sup> Abū Mikhnaf’s report tilts the balance from the outset toward ‘Alī’s cause. An array of lexical-conceptual dichotomies works to this end. Thus Mu‘āwiya and his troops are the “enemy.”<sup>28</sup> There is the juxtaposition of “we”/“they,”<sup>29</sup> or ‘Alī’s party as “Muslims”<sup>30</sup> vs. the other party as “Syrians,”<sup>31</sup> “magnanimous heroes of the Arabs” vs. “Syrian bedouins,”<sup>32</sup> “servants of God” vs. “evil people,”<sup>33</sup> followers of the truth vs. followers of falsehood and error,<sup>34</sup> or, worse still, the Syrians are “faithless,”<sup>35</sup> “infidels,” “wanton ones,” “wine drinkers,”<sup>36</sup> “crude tyrants”<sup>37</sup> and “transgressors (*muhillūn*).”<sup>38</sup> Small wonder that ‘Alī “summons” his opponent (“this man,” he dismissively refers to Mu‘āwiya) “to God,” “to fear God,” to “the truth,” to the “Book of God and His Prophet’s *sunna*,” and to “reviving the signs of the religion.”<sup>39</sup> ‘Alī states that, even before Šiffīn, Mu‘āwiya and his band, “evil ones (*fāsiqūn*)” as they are, had fought him, and while he was “calling them to Islam” they were calling him “to the worship of idols.” Yet, God “made them slaves.”<sup>40</sup> ‘Alī tells his men that God has given them victory over the Syrians because of the Syrians’ “evil and oppression.”<sup>41</sup>

An arsenal of Qur’ānic and historical (Muḥammadan) analogies is employed to ‘Alī’s advantage. Thus, in one of his speeches, the caliph applies a Qur’ānic verse about God’s guidance to the current

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., e.g., 73–4 [I, 3325].

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., e.g., 8 [I, 3261], 9 [I, 3262], 11 [I, 3264], 12 [I, 3265], 13 [I, 3267], 34 [I, 3286], 36 [I, 3288], 39 [I, 3291], 41 [I, 3294], 44 [I, 3298], 45 [I, 3298], 47 [I, 3300], 71 [I, 3322], 136 [I, 3385]. The Arabic terms are *‘aduww* and *qawm*. For the latter in the sense of “enemy”, see also “Translator’s Foreword,” *History*, vol. X, p. XXIII. However, in some instances “enemy” in the English translation is used rather freely and does not correspond with either of the two Arabic terms. See e.g., 42 [I, 3295], 68 [I, 3320].

<sup>29</sup> E.g., *baynanā wa-baynahum*, ibid., 11 [I, 3264].

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 13 [I, 3266].

<sup>31</sup> Arabic *ahl al-shām*, e.g., ibid., 8 [I, 3261], 9 [I, 3262], 13 [I, 3266].

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 47 [I, 3301]; “rude and evil” does not seem to provide the true meaning of *al-tughāt al-jufāt*. See, however, p. 37, where these terms are translated as “crude tyrants.”

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 39 [3292].

<sup>34</sup> E.g., ibid., 64 [I, 3317].

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 13 [I, 3266]: *al-ghudr*.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 15 [I, 3269]: *al-kafāra al-fasaqa wa-sharbat al-khamr*.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 37 [I, 3290]: *al-tughāt al-jufāt*.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 76 [I, 3327], 121 [I, 3371], 122 [I, 3372].

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 16 [I, 3270], 17 [I, 3271], 26 [I, 3279].

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 74 [I, 3325], and see the somewhat different version in n. 303 there.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 16 [I, 3269]; for God’s victory see 38 [I, 3291].

Şiffīn situation,<sup>42</sup> and another verse, about the fighters in His path,<sup>43</sup> to the case of his own followers.<sup>44</sup> ‘Alī describes his troops as “servants of God,” who have truth and right on their side, while Mu‘āwiya, ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ and the rest of his opponents are “men without religion and without Qur’ān.”<sup>45</sup> ‘Abdallāh b. Budayl, one of ‘Alī’s supporters, predicts God’s victory and describes the current war as a reenactment of the Prophet’s war against the Umayyad family in Mecca.<sup>46</sup> So does ‘Ammār b. Yāsir, a Companion and ‘Alī’s partisan;<sup>47</sup> he tells how, at the side of the Messenger of God, he thrice fought against those bearing now the Umayyad banner at Şiffīn.<sup>48</sup> In several speeches delivered from ‘Alī’s side, the battle is described as a *jihad*.<sup>49</sup> Mālik b. al-Ḥārith al-Ashtar, one of ‘Alī’s close associates,<sup>50</sup> claims that the aims of the Syrians are destroying the *sunna*, introducing innovations (*bid‘a*), and casting the people back into the error from which God has delivered them.<sup>51</sup> After the abortive arbitration, ‘Alī infamously refers to the Syrians as “tyrants and kings,” who wish to “take the servants of God as chattel.”<sup>52</sup>

Another feature of Abū Mikhnaf’s account is the contrasting representation of the two protagonists, ‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya. Since both are represented by ‘Alī himself and his loyalists, small wonder that the caliph enjoys an uncontested moral supremacy. Thus, Bashīr b. ‘Amr, a member of ‘Alī’s delegation to Mu‘āwiya that was sent in the last month of 36/657, has the following to tell: “My master [‘Alī] is not like you [Mu‘āwiya]. Of all creation, he has the most right to this position of authority by virtue of his merit, his religion (*dīn*), his precedence in Islam, and his relationship with the Messenger of God.”<sup>53</sup> Significantly, Mu‘āwiya does not challenge the statement.

<sup>42</sup> Qur’ān 61:10.

<sup>43</sup> Qur’ān 61:4.

<sup>44</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 37–8 [I, 3290].

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 79 [I, 3330].

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 37 [I, 3289–90].

<sup>47</sup> See on him *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “‘Ammār b. Yāsir.”

<sup>48</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 66–7 [I, 3319].

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 39 [I, 3292], 51 [I, 3304], 64 [I, 3317], 71 [I, 3323], 76 [I, 3327], 121 [I, 3371], 123 [I, 3373], 136 [I, 3385].

<sup>50</sup> See on him *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Mālik b. al-Ḥārith al-Ashtar.”

<sup>51</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 45 [I, 3288].

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 123 [I, 3372].

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 [I, 3270].

On another occasion, a month later, ‘Adī b. Ḥātim,<sup>54</sup> a member of ‘Alī’s delegation, tells Mu‘āwiya:

Your cousin [‘Alī] is the lord of the Muslims, the most meritorious of them regarding his early acceptance of Islam, and the best of them in it respecting his deeds. The people have agreed upon him, and God has guided their decision. There only remains you and those with you (who have not accepted him).<sup>55</sup>

He is followed by Yazīd b. Qays al-Arḥabī, another member of the delegation:

Our master is he whose excellence you and the Muslims have recognized, and I think it is obvious to you that the people of religion and merit will not put anyone on a level with ‘Alī or waiver in a choice between you. Fear God, Mu‘āwiyah, and do not oppose ‘Alī, for we have never seen anyone more God-fearing in his deeds, more abstemious in the things of this world, or more complete in all the good qualities than he.<sup>56</sup>

In this case as well, Mu‘āwiya does not contest this depiction of ‘Alī.

On yet another occasion, speaking to Mu‘āwiya’s delegation, it is ‘Alī who emphasizes the contrast between the Syrian governor and himself. The caliph claims that he had agreed to be ‘Uthmān’s successor only under pressure, none being acceptable other than himself. Then he was surprised to find Mu‘āwiya opposing him. As ‘Alī hastens to state, it is the same Mu‘āwiya “to whom God had given neither precedence in accepting the religion nor forebears of good character in Islam.” In a reference to blemishes in Mu‘āwiya’s past, ‘Alī notes that his rival was a member of those parties (*ahzāb*) who persisted in enmity to the Prophet, that he reluctantly entered Islam, and allowed by Muḥammad to be set free (*ṭalīq*) at a time when he was actually liable to enslavement as a defeated enemy.<sup>57</sup> ‘Alī’s superiority over his contender is further reflected in Mu‘āwiya’s consent, without the slightest argument (“we will not argue . . . about that”), to ‘Alī’s declaration that he had not killed ‘Uthmān.<sup>58</sup> This way, in a matter-of-fact manner, Mu‘āwiya’s moral challenge is undermined.

<sup>54</sup> See on him *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “‘Adī b. Ḥātim.”

<sup>55</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 22 [I, 3274].

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 22–3 [I, 3275].

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 25–6 [I, 3278].

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 [I, 3276].

In another speech, ‘Alī describes Mu‘āwiya and ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ (“Ibn Nābigha”) as the “closest to ignorance (*jahl*)” and another man of their band, Ibn Abī Mu‘ayt, as “the wine drinker who was flogged according to God’s law in the time of Islam.” ‘Alī accuses Mu‘āwiya and his party of “duping” a large part of the Community and leading it to a *fitna*, “winning over their wandering desires with lies and falsehood.” “They have raised war against us in putting out the light of God,” the charge is made. And ‘Alī concludes his accusations with expressing his desire for the destruction of his opponents: “Oh God, disperse their congregation, shatter their arguments, and deliver them for destruction for their sins.”<sup>59</sup>

A speech delivered to ‘Alī’s people by Ibn Budayl, the caliph’s aforementioned supporter, is another *locus* for defaming Mu‘āwiya. Accordingly, the latter has claimed that to which he has no right, and has challenged someone to whom he is incomparable. The Syrian governor is accused of using a futile argument in his attempt to refute the truth and is scorned for his reliance on bedouins and confederates. To the latter he has made “error seem good . . . and sowed the seeds of *fitnah* in their hearts. He has deceived them . . . and increased the filth in which they were already plunged.” In contrast to the “crude tyrants” that support Mu‘āwiya, ‘Alī’s followers received the light from their Lord and a clear proof in the form of the Book of God.<sup>60</sup> In a speech delivered by the aforementioned Yazīd b. Qays al-Arḥabī, another of ‘Alī’s men, the Syrians are accused of not fighting to “reestablish a religion . . . and to restore a truth” that they think ‘Alī and his people had destroyed. Rather, Mu‘āwiya’s men are fighting only for this world so that they may become its “tyrants and kings.”<sup>61</sup> Another contrast is implied in the behavior of the two leaders at the battlefield. While ‘Alī advances with his men, Mu‘āwiya stays in a tent over which he had cast hangings, and sends out the cavalry of Damascus to protect it.<sup>62</sup>

In Abū Mikhnaf’s narrative there is further emphasis on Mu‘āwiya’s posture of the impostor. His claim of revenging ‘Uthmān’s blood is exposed by one of ‘Alī’s delegates as a deceit. Allegedly, it is known

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 73–4 [I, 3325].

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 37 [I, 3289–90].

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 39 [I, 3291–2].

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 36–7 [I, 3289].

that the Syrian governor had delayed coming to ‘Uthmān’s help, in fact he desired the caliph’s death so he could take his place.<sup>63</sup> This charge Mu‘āwiya rejects, yet if one expects from him a convincing response to the allegation, the voice given to him is rather faint; what we find is Mu‘āwiya’s flat denial of the charge and an *ad hominem* attack on the speaker (“you rude and uncouth bedouin”), quite simplistic an evasion.<sup>64</sup> The falsity of the claim of taking revenge for ‘Uthmān’s blood is also attributed to the entire Syrian army in a speech delivered by ‘Ammār b. Yāsir. He accuses the Syrians of duping their followers with their claim of vengeance in order to become, once again, “tyrants and kings.”<sup>65</sup>

Particularly instructive on this point is Abū Mikhnaf’s account of the encounter between Hāshim b. ‘Utba al-Zuhrī, an ‘Alī supporter,<sup>66</sup> and a young warrior of Mu‘āwiya’s camp, who identifies himself as an “adherent to the religion of ‘Uthmān.” The latter challenges Hāshim to a duel on the grounds that ‘Alī killed ‘Uthmān and did not perform the prayer ritual. This is an occasion for Hāshim (as a spokesman for ‘Alī’s cause) to clarify matters. Accordingly, “it was the companions of Muḥammad and the sons of his companions and the *qurrā’* of the people<sup>67</sup> who killed him [‘Uthmān] when he introduced innovations (*aḥdāth*) and opposed the authority (*ḥukm*) of the Book.” Thus portraying the circumstances of ‘Uthmān’s murder, Hāshim clearly puts the blame on the murdered caliph himself, as someone who deserved his fate at the hand of the righteous people of the Community (“[t]hey were people of religion (*dīn*) and more worthy of handling the affairs of the people than are you and your companions”). To the allegation that ‘Alī sinned in the matter of prayer, Hāshim answers that ‘Alī was the first to perform the ritual “and he is the most knowledgeable of God’s creatures regarding the religion of God and the closest to the Messenger.” With a clear touch of irony, Hāshim adds that in ‘Alī’s camp there are “Qur’ān reciters” (*qārī’ li-kitāb Allāh*), who are “not sleeping at night in his vigil.” In a clear play on the well known topos of the converter who,

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 17 [I, 3271].

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 18 [I, 3271].

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 66 [I, 3318]: *jabābira mulūk*.

<sup>66</sup> See further below.

<sup>67</sup> For *qurrā’* see chapter 1 n. 80 above.

in the process of attempting persuasion, is himself converted by those to whom he is sent, Mu‘āwiya’s messenger, undoubtedly alluding to his charges against ‘Alī, promises not to lie, acknowledges Hāshim’s righteousness (“By God, I do not doubt that you have advised me sincerely”), and asks for forgiveness. The story’s conclusion is that the youth parts way from his fellows in Mu‘āwiya’s camp. Responding to their admonition that Hāshim (“the Iraqi”) had cheated him, he reaffirms his confidence in the sincere advice that Hāshim had given to him.<sup>68</sup>

Mu‘āwiya is also depicted as treacherous. On one occasion, he tries to bribe one of ‘Alī’s loyalists and attract him to his side. He promises him governorship of whichever of two garrison towns he desires.<sup>69</sup> The rejection of the overture is an occasion to emphasize the virtue of ‘Alī’s troops, whereby Mu‘āwiya himself is made to appreciate their unity “as if their hearts were the heart of one man.”<sup>70</sup> Further on this point, it is no other than the client (*mawlā*) of Yazīd b. Mu‘āwiya who testifies that, in the initial stages of the Şıffīn battle, some of the Syrians, who gave the oath of allegiance to Mu‘āwiya, bound their legs together with turbans in order to prevent potential deserters from flight.<sup>71</sup> The contrast between the two sides as regards their fortitude is thus put into stark relief.

Next to Mu‘āwiya, ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ, his shrewd advisor, is another object of defamation. Challenged to a duel by ‘Ammār b. Yāsir, he is described by the latter as an enemy of God and His Prophet, “one who oppressed the Muslims and gave support to the polytheists.” He accepted Islam not out of desire but fear, and after Muḥammad’s death he continued to demonstrate enmity to the Muslims and polytheistic forbearance. He ought to be fought, or otherwise he “will extinguish God’s light.”<sup>72</sup> On a later occasion, ‘Ammār b. Yāsir accuses ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ for having sold his religion for the governorship of Egypt and for having desired for long deviation from Islam.<sup>73</sup>

In Abū Mikhnaf’s account, ‘Alī exhibits extreme moderation in

<sup>68</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 71–2 [I, 3323–4].

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 23–4 [I, 3276].

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 [I, 3277].

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 31 [I, 3283].

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 31–2 [I, 3284].

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 66 [I, 3319].

dealing with the Syrian troops before the eruption of the fighting. Initially, he instructs Ibn al-Ashtar, his close associate, not to begin fighting and not to allow Syrian hatred to provoke him; he should meet Mu‘āwiya’s troops, appeal to them, and give them “every chance, again and again,” to change their views.<sup>74</sup> Later, when the Syrians block ‘Alī’s men from reaching water for their supply, the caliph sends a messenger to Mu‘āwiya, saying that he is reluctant to fight him before exhorting him by all possible means. In his message, ‘Alī emphasizes that “[you] have attacked us before we attacked you. You began the fighting against us while we considered that we should hold back from fighting you until we had appealed to you and put before you our arguments.”<sup>75</sup> An informant in ‘Alī’s camp states that on every occasion on which ‘Alī’s men confronted the Syrian “enemy,” the caliph commanded them not to fight unless they were attacked first. Should things lead to a fight and to the Syrians’ defeat, Mu‘āwiya’s men should be fairly treated: their fugitives should not be killed, their wounded should not be finished off, their nakedness should not be exposed, and the slain should not be mutilated. Also, should his troops reach the enemy’s abode, ‘Alī instructs them not to tear aside a curtain, not to enter a dwelling without permission, not to harm any woman—even if she utters abuse and vilifies—and not to seize property.<sup>76</sup>

In Muḥarram 37/June 657 ‘Alī extends an invitation to Mu‘āwiya “to something by means of which God will overcome our dissensions and reunite our community, avoid our shedding blood, give security to the roads, and settle discord.”<sup>77</sup> At the end of the month, ‘Alī, once again, in a message to the Syrians, emphasizes that, as the Commander of the Faithful, he has given them time so that they “might revert to the truth and turn to it in repentance.” The Syrians’ erroneous position is amplified by the caliph’s insistence that they “have not turned away from oppression or responded to truth,” despite his arguments, based on the Book of God, and his call to them to abide by it, a motif that will later become prominent. However, when the Syrians display no remorse, ‘Alī cites the Qur’ānic verse “I have cast back to you the covenant between us in a just

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 8 [I, 3261–2].

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 14–15 [I, 3268].

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 30 [I, 3282].

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 21–2 [I, 3274].

manner, for God does not love the faithless,<sup>78</sup> a verse considered appropriate to describe Mu‘āwiya’s camp. Yet, the Syrians do not heed ‘Alī’s conciliatory tone or his admonishing words. When they anxiously rush to their leaders, Mu‘āwiya and his advisors organize them for war.<sup>79</sup>

Finally, the ‘Alī that Abū Mikhnaf portrays is both courageous and a protecting father. On his own initiative, fearful of the outcome, he takes the place of his son Muḥammad, known as Ibn al-Ḥanafīyya, in one of the customary duels that should precede the all out fighting. His opponent, upon discovering who is about to fight him, retreats. “I have no desire to meet you in combat,” he explains to the caliph.<sup>80</sup> ‘Alī himself is involved in the preparation for the fighting at Şiffīn.<sup>81</sup> When the battle ensues, he is to be found at the center of his troops.<sup>82</sup>

\* \* \*

It is in the description of the actual fighting that the reader begins to see some fissure in Abū Mikhnaf’s hitherto solid picture of ‘Alī’s superiority. Unlike the one-sided representation of ‘Alī’s moral standing and his religio-political credentials, the scene of the battlefield displays less certitude. While in the initial fighting the military results are in tandem with ‘Alī’s spiritual supremacy—the Syrians withdraw and ‘Alī’s troops gain success<sup>83</sup>—thereafter the picture gets more complicated and neither side enjoys a clear victory.<sup>84</sup> It is, according to Abū Mikhnaf, when things reach a deadlock, and ‘Alī’s people attack the Syrians several times without triumph, that the notion of “God’s judgment (*tahkīm*)” is implied by Hāshim b. ‘Utba al-Zuhrī, a carrier of ‘Alī’s banner. Hāshim urges the people to “make *jihād*” against the opponent in expectation of divine reward, then cites the Qur’ānic verse “Until God decides between us and them, for He is the best of judges.”<sup>85</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Qur’ān 8:54.

<sup>79</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 29–30 [I, 3282].

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 32 [I, 3285].

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 74–5 [I, 3325–26].

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 76 [I, 3327].

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 [I, 3262], 13 [I, 3267], 16 [I, 3269]. For Mu‘āwiya’s idea to desert, see 47 [I, 3300].

<sup>84</sup> E.g., *ibid.*, 36 [I, 3288–9].

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 70–71 [I, 3322–3]. The verse is from Qur’ān 7:87.



It is to ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ that reversal of the course that otherwise would have led to ‘Alī’s victory, is attributed. As ‘Amr can see the destruction of Mu‘āwiya’s party in the offing, he suggests—in what has become a well-known scene in the annals of Islam—that “Qur’āns (*maṣāḥif*)”<sup>86</sup> be raised on the warriors’ lances in order for their contents be authoritative in the dispute. The result, as anticipated, is for ‘Alī’s men to “respond to the Book of God.”<sup>87</sup> ‘Amr’s appeal now causes a friction in the caliph’s camp. ‘Alī’s own position is that Mu‘āwiya and his party have abused the Qur’ān, used the *maṣāḥif* as a deceit, that they actually have not exalted them and that they are ignorant of their content. Finally on ‘Alī’s position, and quite ironically, as far as the reader is concerned, the reason for ‘Alī’s own decision to initiate the fighting, as ‘Alī himself declares it, is to summon his rival to the “authority of the Book.” In other words, Mu‘āwiya is now beating ‘Alī with the latter’s own weapon.

‘Alī’s cause is also subverted by the leading *qurrā’* (those who “afterward became Khawārij”), who insist that there must be a response to Mu‘āwiya’s appeal to the Book as a source of judgment. In fact, their reaction is such that they threaten to deliver ‘Alī to the enemy, or do to him what they did to ‘Uthmān, if he neglected to respond to the Syrian initiative.<sup>88</sup> Ibn al-Ashtar, to whose subsequent military effort to route the Syrians the *qurrā’* now object (“we would be partaking of your sin”),<sup>89</sup> later summarizes the events by stating that ‘Alī’s followers (“the people”) were those who compelled the caliph to accept the arbitration (*ḥukūma*).<sup>90</sup> Such a view is clearly confirmed by ‘Alī’s own admission to his people after the *qurrā’* desisted from answering his call: “We have agreed to make the Qur’ān an authority (*ḥukm*) between us and them.”<sup>91</sup> ‘Alī later regards this refusal as disobedience.<sup>92</sup> He admonishes them: “You have done something that has demolished strength, brought down might, caused weakness, and bequeathed lowliness.” As ‘Alī sees it, precisely when his men had the upper hand and the enemy suffered great slaughter

<sup>86</sup> See for this term *History*, vol. XVII., 78 n. 319.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 78 [I, 3329].

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 79 [I, 3329–30].

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 80–81 [I, 3331–2].

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 80 [I, 3330].

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 81 [I, 3332].

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 82 [I, 3333].

and feared destruction, the Syrians, “as a trick and a cunning trap,” raised the *maşāḥif* and summoned ‘Alī’s people to “what was in them.” The *qurrā*’s response to Mu‘āwiya’s appeal is, in ‘Alī’s eyes, a watershed in their course of action: “. . . I swear by God that I do not think that henceforth you will agree upon right conduct or achieve a gate of discretion.”<sup>93</sup>

The arbitration and ‘Alī’s massacre of the Khawārij (grave as it is) being of no immediate interest to the present analysis, it is pertinent, however, to point out what scholars have so far disregarded. That is, the failure of the arbitration attempt results in quite a dramatic development in Abū Mikhnaf’s account. For, unlike his earlier line of exclusively reporting on ‘Alī’s party and casting a shadow, if not complete darkness, on its rival, we are now offered a glimpse at the Syrian side. Abū Mikhnaf gives us several reports on what happens in Mu‘āwiya’s camp, the text of Mu‘āwiya’s letters, and discussions and dialogues among his supporters. When we have an opportunity to compare all this material to the earlier reports on ‘Alī’s people, the development is dramatic and the result ironic.

Mu‘āwiya and his people, who up to this point were referred to as “faithless,” “infidels,” etc.,<sup>94</sup> now gain prospects for receiving God’s blessing. As Mu‘āwiya tells his supporters: “I have summoned you to a matter of great importance in which I desire that God grants help.”<sup>95</sup> His speech to them is a surprise to the reader, who, thus far, led by Abū Mikhnaf, has seen ‘Alī as the good person and Mu‘āwiya as the evil one. For, after praising God and extolling him, the Syrian governor calls upon his supporters to see what God has done for them in their fight against their “enemy,” a designation that, from now on, and quite frequently, will be applied to ‘Alī and his people.<sup>96</sup> And now, allowed in Abū Mikhnaf’s account what he previously—as God’s enemy—has been denied, namely “access” to the Qur’ān, Mu‘āwiya quotes a verse relevant to the situation: “But God repelled them with their rage, and they obtained none of the good that they desired.”<sup>97</sup> Once again, the enemy is no longer the

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 89 [I, 3340].

<sup>94</sup> For these and other terms see above.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 148 [I, 3396].

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 149 [I, 3397], Arabic *‘aduww*. See further 149–50 [I, 3398], 152 [I, 3400], where both Mu‘āwiya and ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ use the term “enemy,” and ‘Amr hopes for God’s help.

<sup>97</sup> Qur’ān 33:25.

Syrians, as ‘Alī and his people used to see them and Abū Mikhnaf repeatedly told the reader; it is now—from Mu‘āwiya’s point of view—‘Alī himself and his party. Similarly, the *taḥkīm* is now employed to serve the Syrians. In the words of their leader, “We entrusted the decision (*ḥakammāhum*) about them to God, and He decided for us against them (*ḥakama lanā ‘alayhim*).” The result of the conflict up to that point is represented by Mu‘āwiya as a clear sign from Heaven in favor of his party and to ‘Alī’s detriment: “He joined together our forces and settled our differences, while He cast them into enmity and division, bearing witness one against another of unbelief and shedding each other’s blood.”<sup>98</sup>

In a letter that Mu‘āwiya sends to Maslama b. Mukhallad al-Anṣārī and Mu‘āwiya b. Ḥudayj al-Kindī, two leaders of the opposition to ‘Alī in Egypt, the reversal of roles is once again reflected. First, Mu‘āwiya takes the liberty of addressing the two “in the name of God” and of characterizing their mission to avenge ‘Uthmān’s blood as commissioned by God; through it He will make great their reward. The victory Mu‘āwiya foresees for himself and his supporters is “the victory of the friends of God.” Second, he (that is, Mu‘āwiya), who in Abū Mikhnaf’s account had thus far been an “infidel,” is now depicted as speaking on behalf of the “Muslims.” In his view, they would glorify the man who avenges ‘Uthmān’s blood. The term *jihād*, which up to now has been reserved for characterizing the fight of ‘Alī’s people, is now invoked *against* them. As Mu‘āwiya writes to the two aforementioned Egyptians: “You have waged *jihād* against the people of injustice and enmity.” There is no doubt as to whom he has in mind. Finally, Mu‘āwiya’s own view of the controversial *ḥukm* and *taḥkīm* is expressed: *ḥukm* is the actions of his own supporters, and these compensate for the current absence of the “authority (*ḥukm*) of the Book.”<sup>99</sup>

A balanced representation of the two opposing parties now characterizes the narrative of conflict and can be seen, for example, in Abū Mikhnaf’s account of Mu‘āwiya’s attack on Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr, ‘Alī’s governor in Egypt. Jihad is the term by which *both* sides describe their battle against each other. It is used in Mu‘āwiya’s letter to the Egyptian governor, but also in ‘Alī’s reaction to that

<sup>98</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 149 [I, 3397].

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 150–51 [I, 3398–9].

letter, as well as in Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr's own address to his supporters. In his message to his governor, 'Alī describes Mu'āwiya as "the wicked one (*fājīr*) son of the wicked one," and 'Amr b. al-'Āṣ as "the wicked son of the infidel," as the two are engaged in disobedience to God. Yet, after Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr is defeated and slain, it is no other than 'Amr who refers to his opponent's fatal end coming from God.<sup>100</sup>

It is the notion of judgment/arbitration (*ḥukm, taḥkīm*) that provides a great deal of irony in Abū Mikhnaf's account. However, before we look at its cunning development in the context of the Şiffīn affair, it is worthwhile to note that the concept, as the sources tell us, has already some history at this point. At an earlier stage, that is, in the Battle of the Camel, but not so far removed in the historiographical rendering in the *History*, it is 'Alī who raises *ḥukm* as a solution to that *fitna*. Addressing his people at Dhū Qār, he vows to fight whoever opposes him by quoting Qur'ān 7:87: "... until Allāh judges between me and them. He is the best judge."<sup>101</sup>

Now, at Şiffīn, the concept of *ḥukm* is used again, but this time *against* 'Alī, as it is brought up by 'Amr b. al-'Āṣ, Mu'āwiya's highest consultant, who, at the point when the Syrian army shows weakness, suggests the raising of the *maṣāḥif* in order that "their contents are to be authoritative in our dispute (*mā fihā ḥukm baynanā wa-baynakum*)."<sup>102</sup> 'Amr repeats the use of the term later on. Reflecting back on his successful enterprise in Egypt to remove 'Alī's governor and bring the region under Syrian authority, 'Amr says: "We called them to the right path, the accepted precedent (*sunnaḥ*), and the authority (*ḥukm*) of the Book, but they rejected the truth and persisted in error."<sup>103</sup> There is no better way to express the reversal of images that has taken place since the drama's beginning.

Now, not only is the notion of *ḥukm* taken over by Mu'āwiya; so is the gesture of raising the *maṣāḥif*. Once again, the precedent is set by 'Alī himself who, in the Battle of the Camel, at one point asks his supporters: "Which of you will hold up this copy of the Qur'ān and what is in it before them?" 'Alī then instructs the boy who

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 153–9 [I, 3401–07].

<sup>101</sup> *History*, vol. XVI, 51–2 [I, 3111].

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 78 [3329], *ḥakam* in the Cairo edition, but *ḥukm* is a preferable reading.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 159 [I, 3407].

volunteers to announce that “[e]very word in this [Qurʾān] shall judge between you and us, [and I beg of you] for Allāh’s sake [to stop shedding] our blood and yours.” Yet, contrary to what will happen at Şiffīn, this stratagem does not make an impact and the boy who lifts the Qurʾān finds his death.<sup>104</sup> The “calling to the Qurʾān” is subsequently employed by both ʿĀʾisha’s and ʿAlī’s camps, but to no avail.<sup>105</sup>

Seen in this light, ʿAlī’s later address to those of his supporters who see themselves obliged to ʿAmr’s demand, an address in the course of which he emphasizes that the reason for his fighting against the Syrians is “that they should adhere to the authority of this book (*li-yadīnū bi-ḥukmi hādihā al-kitāb*),”<sup>106</sup> appears to be ironic. For ʿAlī’s alleged cause for fighting Muʿāwiya and his party has been appropriated by no other than Muʿāwiya’s top advisor, who manipulates the idea of *ḥukm* in his struggle against ʿAlī and his appeal to a ceasefire. But, as if to double the irony and demonstrate the unexpected reversal that *ḥukm* undergoes, it is now ʿAlī’s own supporters, known as *qurrāʾ*, who imply that ʿAlī is unwilling to act in accordance with the Qurʾān. In other words, in Abū Mikhnaf’s account, the (future) Khawārij portray no other than ʿAlī as backtracking his own principles. Accordingly, it is *they* who compel the caliph to accept the *ḥukūma* (“arbitration”).<sup>107</sup> The way Abū Mikhnaf represents the consequences is that in ʿAlī’s consent “to make the Qurʾān an authority (*ḥukm*)” between him and Muʿāwiya, ʿAlī succumbs to pressure from the *qurrāʾ*.<sup>108</sup>

Now, from Muʿāwiya’s point of view, the *taḥkīm* works in an interesting manner. Asked by Ashʿath b. Qays, ʿAlī’s envoy, why he raised the *maṣāḥif*, the Syrian leader answers that it was done in order “that you and we together turn to what God commanded in His book.” Thus Muʿāwiya, who all along had been portrayed as a sinner, presents himself as initiating the religious turn that *taḥkīm* provides. Accordingly, two acceptable men would be sent to speak for the two sides respectively, and they would act “according to what is in the Book of God” and would be followed at that by all the others.

<sup>104</sup> *History*, vol. XVI, 126–7 [I, 3186], 129–30 [I, 3189].

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 131–3 [I, 3190–92].

<sup>106</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 79 [I, 3330].

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 79–80 [I, 3330].

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 81 [I, 3332].

Ash‘ath accepts the proposal as “just,”<sup>109</sup> and thus a supporter of ‘Alī grants the Syrian governor a considerable degree of respect.

Moving now to the alleged document produced by the two arbitrators at Şiffīn, both ‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya agree to “comply with the authority (*ḥukm*) of God and His Book.”<sup>110</sup> But later on, it is precisely the arbitration procedure that is perceived by ‘Alī’s opposition to be a human—hence abhorred—interference with God’s authority (*ḥukm*). In the words of the future Khārījite ‘Urwa b. ‘Udayya, “Do you appoint men as arbitrators on God’s business? Authority (*ḥukm*) belongs to God alone.”<sup>111</sup> In the standard historical representations, such as Zuhri’s, which Ṭabarī quotes, this statement becomes one of the causes of the rebellion against ‘Alī that the Khawārij generate: “They exhorted him to fight (against Mu‘āwiyah) and rejected his giving authority (*ḥakkama*) to men in something that was a matter for God’s authority (*ḥukm*). They said, ‘Authority belongs to God alone’ (*lā ḥukma illā lillāh subḥānahu*) and fought against ‘Alī.”<sup>112</sup>

After the Khawārij dissent from his camp, yet with ‘Alī still entertaining the hope that he can reconcile them, he sends Ibn al-‘Abbās to them with a message. The Khawārij, however, put the blame on ‘Alī’s supporters for vying with the Syrians “in unbelief (*kufī*).” They insist that, by setting up the arbitration, ‘Alī (and surely also Mu‘āwiya) subverted God’s decision (*ḥukm*). The Khawārij narrow down the Quranic permission of human decision (*ḥukm*) to matters much lighter than the one in dispute. While Ibn al-‘Abbās, ‘Alī’s envoy, maintains that “what He [God] has decided (*ḥakama*) and effected Himself is not for His servants to look into,” the Khawārij reject Ibn al-‘Abbās’ defense of the principle of arbitration by arguing that the latter, a Qur’anic option, was meant to resolve marital problems,

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 82 [I, 3333].

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 85 [I, 3336].

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 88 [I, 3339] and n. 350 for the Qur’anic phrase. For the suggestion that this slogan was a denial of the authority of the *imām*, see Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977), 27 and n. 63, quoted in G. R. Hawting, “The Significance of the Slogan *Lā Ḥukm illā lillāh* and the References to the *Ḥudūd* in the Traditions about the Fitna and the Murder of ‘Uthmān,” *BSOAS* 41 (1978): 460 n. 35. Hawting’s suggestion that we see in the Khārījite slogan a Jewish influence is thought provoking, but not of our concern here.

<sup>112</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 90 [I, 3341]. See also 111 [I, 3360], for the slogan proclaimed to ‘Alī by the two Khārījites and 115 [I, 3365], for this slogan as an operative principle in the framework of the idea to establish a Khārījite “mini-state.”

for example, but not an affair in which “the blood of the Muslims” is involved. The Khawārij further maintain that, since the issue at stake is the fate of Mu‘āwiya and his party, God has already “effected His precept (*ḥukm*) . . . that they should be killed or repent.” In the view of the Khawārij, the Syrians do not qualify for “discussion and truces.”<sup>113</sup> Later on, Abū Mikhnaf, as if accepting the Khārījite argument, reports in a business-like manner that opposition to ‘Alī stemmed from “his giving men authority in God’s affairs.”<sup>114</sup>

As for ‘Alī, prior to the arbitration, in the course of a conversation he has with two men of the Khawārij, he is given the opportunity to present his position on the *tahkīm*. Responding to the challenge to repent and wage war against Mu‘āwiya, he answers that this precisely had been his initial intent, but the Khawārij disobeyed him and now he cannot retract from his consent to the arbitration. ‘Alī rejects the accusation that he has committed a sin; by his own admission, he only failed in judgment (*ra’y*) and was weak in acting under the pressure from the Khawārij.<sup>115</sup> In the wake of the failure of the arbitration, ‘Alī’s ambivalence on the issue of *ḥukm* is only heightened. While, on one occasion, he refers to it as “God’s decision,”<sup>116</sup> he then refers to the Qur’ān’s *ḥukm*,<sup>117</sup> and then to each of the arbitrators’ judgment as *ḥukm*.<sup>118</sup> On the eve of the massacre of the Khawārij, he reproaches them for being deceived by the Syrians’ call for the “arbitration process (*ḥukūma*).”<sup>119</sup> Thus, reading Abū Mikhnaf’s references to the *ḥukm* issue with a deconstructive aim in mind, it looms as a double-edged sword that is turned against ‘Alī himself.

It is pertinent at this point to draw attention from Abū Mikhnaf’s material to Ṭabarī’s own voice. Although our historian has himself very little to add to the Ṣiffīn story,<sup>120</sup> he has one crucial intervention that deserves our consideration. It comes in the midst of describing the actual fighting and its importance lies in Ṭabarī’s own piece

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 100–01 [I, 3352].

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 111 [I, 3361]. See also 112 [I, 3362].

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 111 [I, 3360–61].

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 114 [I, 3363].

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 118 [I, 3368], 119 [I, 3369], 128 [I, 3378].

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 119 [I, 3368–9], twice in ‘Alī’s two different messages, one in Kūfa to his party and the other to the Khārījites.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 128 [I, 3378].

<sup>120</sup> There are a few instances where Ṭabarī’s intervention is significant.

of information about the issue of the *tahkīm*. Ṭabarī tells us that, after ‘Ammār b. Yāsir was killed, about 12,000 men presented themselves to ‘Alī, and he led them riding his mule. His men then “attacked together as one man, and there was no line of the Syrians that was not destroyed.” Killing everybody they came up against, ‘Alī’s troops finally reached Mu‘āwiya. Thus the Syrians were on the verge of disaster, and ‘Alī could have the privilege of mocking his opponent.<sup>121</sup>

But at this crucial point—Ṭabarī continues—there occurs a totally unexpected move. ‘Alī now asks Mu‘āwiya: “Why are the people being killed in our quarrel? Come, I will entrust God with the decision between us (*uḥākimuka ilā Allāhi*).” At the very moment when ‘Alī can foresee the victory that Ṭabarī’s (following Abū Mikhnaf’s) narrative is thus far building up to, he suggests to Mu‘āwiya (and not the other way around!) that they stop the fighting and let God make His judgment (*ḥukm*). Now, what precisely does ‘Alī have in mind in proposing a divine decision? There is no reason to speculate, for he tells instantly: “Whichever of us kills the other, authority (*umūr*) will remain for him.” Thus, ‘Alī bluntly presents to his opponent his own interpretation of the *ḥukm* business: a duel. ‘Alī’s self-interest that is implied in this suggestion/interpretation is reflected in Mu‘āwiya’s negative response. And thus, against ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ’ enthusiasm, the Syrian governor, who suspects his top advisor of eagerness to replace him, can easily envision the trap that ‘Alī lays before him: “I have not been made a fair offer. You [‘Amr] know that he [‘Alī] has killed everyone whom he has challenged to combat.” To ‘Amr’s provocative remark that it would not be appropriate to decline the duel, Mu‘āwiya does not waist even a modicum of politeness: “You cannot wait to get power after my death.”<sup>122</sup>

Clearly, as a result of Ṭabarī’s intervention, ‘Alī does not come out well. His idiosyncratic suggestion of *ḥukm* at that particular point is conceived, certainly by Mu‘āwiya, and plausibly also by the modern reader, as deceitful. Moreover, it sheds new light on the issue of *ḥukm* as it later develops in Abū Mikhnaf’s account and casts a shadow on it. For immediately after Ṭabarī’s intervention, as already related above, we find Abū Mikhnaf reporting of the appeal made

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 69 [I, 3321].

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 70 [I, 3322].



by one of ‘Alī’s chief supporters, Hāshim b. ‘Utba al-Zuhrī, to ‘Alī’s men, to “make *jihād*” “until God decides (*yaḥkumu*) between us and them, for He is the best of judges (*ḥākimīn*).”<sup>123</sup> Hāshim’s *ḥukm* is certainly not ‘Alī’s, and there is incongruency as regards the meaning of God’s *ḥukm* within ‘Alī’s own camp: the leader speaks of a duel between himself and his opponent; his loyal supporter speaks of an all out battle.

More significant, however, is to compare Ṭabarī’s representation of ‘Alī’s position on the *ḥukm* issue with Abū Mikhnaf’s. Obviously, Ṭabarī’s (i.e., ‘Alī’s) *ḥukm* in the form of a duel cannot be reconciled with Abū Mikhnaf’s (i.e., ‘Alī’s) *ḥukm* that refers to the Qur’ān.<sup>124</sup> But even more noteworthy than the meaning of the term in question is the two contrasting reconstructions made by ‘Alī when reporting of the circumstances leading to the particular solution. According to Ṭabarī’s intervention, it is no other than ‘Alī himself who, unexpectedly, at a state when he is about to win the battle, acts against the momentum by suggesting a duel to stop the fighting. As reproduced by Abū Mikhnaf, however, ‘Alī’s own version of the circumstances is entirely different. Admonishing the opposition of the *qurrā’* in his own camp, ‘Alī ascribes to the Syrians the break in the momentum—the famous raising of the *maṣāḥif*—an act with whom the *qurrā’* (mistakenly, according to him) go along.<sup>125</sup> Once again, Ṭabarī’s brief intervention undermines Abū Mikhnaf’s partisan report. The ‘Alī that emerges from Ṭabarī’s account is manipulative and opportunist, not a man of principle who foresees the future correctly, as Abū Mikhnaf’s account would like us to believe.

In the end, then, the reading of the *History*’s account of the Ṣiffīn battle as here offered discloses tensions not only within Abū Mikhnaf’s partisan text, but also between Ṭabarī’s “editorial” intervention and his almost exclusive source, namely, Abū Mikhnaf. Was the particular information about ‘Alī’s initiative consciously suppressed by Abū Mikhnaf for the shadow it cast on ‘Alī, while it was Ṭabarī’s conviction, for unspecified reasons, that here he had to interrupt the account he had before him?<sup>126</sup> It is impossible to be conclusive on

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 71 [I, 3322–3], cited from Qur’ān 7:87.

<sup>124</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 85 [I, 3336].

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 89 [I, 3340]. See also 102 [I, 3352–3], 111 [I, 3360], 129 [I, 3378–9].

<sup>126</sup> Ṭabarī’s source for the intervention is unspecified. In Mīnqarī’s *Waq‘at Ṣiffīn* ‘Alī’s initiative does appear, yet not in the place that Ṭabarī assigns it in the *History*.

this point.<sup>127</sup> Given all these uncertainties, the *History* provides in the case under consideration not just facts, be they about the arbitration, the schism, or other historical issues, but a story with a subversive plot. The latter cannot be summarized only on the level of contradictions, be they inner or intertextual. Other levels of tension may also be suggested.

Much ambiguity surrounds the crucial *ḥukm* issue. There are more interpretations of this concept than there are parties to the dispute, and these not only undermine each other in a path toward an inevitable conflict, but also, on the way, create strange, if temporary, bed-fellows. Thus ‘Alī’s initial concept is not his supporters’, is certainly not his opponents’, but at a certain point, his opponents see eye to eye with the *qurrā’*, who later, of course, opt for yet another interpretation of *ḥukm*.

Finally, I would like to point out the irony underlying Ṭabarī’s Şifḫīn story in its account of human failure to enlist—not to say manipulate—“God’s judgment.” Not even ‘Alī, the pious hero (certainly in Abū Mikhnaf’s eyes, most likely also in Ṭabarī’s), is able to implement what he had in mind when claiming to “entrust God with the decision.”<sup>128</sup> In the outcome of Şifḫīn, God’s judgment, no doubt, is manifest, but in a form that none of the historical participants, perhaps not even the modern reader, could expect. For the latter, following Abū Mikhnaf’s lead, has reason, as ‘Alī himself had had at the time, to see God’s judgment working on ‘Alī’s side. ‘Alī enters Şifḫīn as an assured winner but in the end he is the biggest loser, for he loses not only the crown, but his life as well. Similar is the fate of his staunch supporters. And those who deserted him and hoped to see *their* interpretation of *ḥukm* come true, also encounter disaster. Thus we are left with the unexpected winner (“And the winner is . . . Mu‘āwīya!”). In the story of his victory at Şifḫīn, complete reversal, discontinuity, surprise and irony all contribute their share.

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Furthermore, the phrase *uḥākimuka ilā Allāh* is missing in *Waḡat Şifḫīn*. Ibn Kathīr, whose information is similar to Miṅqarī’s, ascribes it to (unspecified) “historians” (*‘ulamā’ al-ta’rīkh*). See *al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya* (Cairo, 1351–8/1932–9), Vol. VII, 263. Balādhurī has only a few words on ‘Alī’s suggestion and Mu‘āwīya’s refusal. See *Ansāb al-ashrāf*, ed. Muḥammad Bāqir al-Mahmūdī, pt. 2 (Beirut, 1974), 303. See also Ibn A‘tham al-Kūfī, *Kūtab al-Futūḥ* (Beirut, 1991), vol. III, 103–04.

<sup>127</sup> An authentic version by Abū Mikhnaf himself would have clarified this issue.

<sup>128</sup> *History*, vol. XVII, 70 [I, 3322].



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### ḤUSAYN'S MARTYRDOM: A TRAGIC STORY

Studies of Ḥusayn's martyrdom at Karbalā' are largely a retelling of what are deemed to be the main facts of the event or an attempt at evaluating the event's historical significance.<sup>1</sup> Wellhausen and Lammens, writing about one hundred years ago, provide an exception in their clear intent to produce a negative impression of Ḥusayn. Characterizing Ḥusayn, Wellhausen uses a number of unflattering metaphors, such as "a clay pot . . . [that] clashed against the iron 'Ubaydallāh; like the Messiah, he goes along a prepared way to have the kingdom of the world laid at his feet." Ḥusayn is like a child stretching his hand to the moon, selfish and idle, totally futile, lacking moral fibre. He is one who nobody has any confidence in, who takes to his heels when facing opposition and spares himself to the end. In contrast to 'Uthmān's death, which is a tragedy, Ḥusayn's death is a melodrama, so concludes Wellhausen his harsh scholarly verdict, caught in a flare of unsympathetic rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Lammens emphasizes Ḥusayn's feeble character, which was all too clearly revealed in the ten days of Karbalā': "He played none of the heroic parts so fondly described by the Shī'is."<sup>3</sup> As if to balance this negative judgment, much more recently Jafri has gone to the other end, insisting that Karbalā' unquestionably reveals Ḥusayn's merits.<sup>4</sup>

My distance from both approaches, that of the reconstructionists, and that of the judges or advocates, will be apparent. I am interested here neither in historical details as such, nor in Ḥusayn as a saint or a villain. My concern is with the nature of the historical narrative about the circumstances of his death. I intend to show that,

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<sup>1</sup> The most extensive of these is in *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib." See also *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, Vol. VI (New York, 1985), s.v. "Ḥusayn Ibn 'Alī."

<sup>2</sup> Wellhausen, *Religio-Political Factions*, 116.

<sup>3</sup> See *E.I.*<sup>1</sup>, s.v. "Husayn."

<sup>4</sup> Jafri, *Origins*, esp. 182–204.

in Ṭabarī's account, which is mainly based on Abū Mikhnaf (on occasion, in the recension of Hishām Ibn al-Kalbī)<sup>5</sup>—a Ḥusayn sympathizer<sup>6</sup>—one is able to observe, more than in other contemporary sources,<sup>7</sup> the version that would be amplified in future Shī'ite circles.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in the *History* one finds the kernel of a tragic story that, in the modern era, through the *ta'ziya* plays of 'Ashūrā', would become internationally known as a dramatic spectacle.<sup>9</sup>

Now, Ḥusayn's martyrdom is certainly not the only story in the *History* that may be deemed tragic or, of "flirtation with the tragic."<sup>10</sup> Consider, for example, the episode taking place after Karbalā', in which one 'Abdallāh b. Ḥāzim, soon to join the Penitents (*tawwābūn*),<sup>11</sup> hears the cry "Revenge for Ḥusayn!" He hurriedly gets his clothes and weapons and saddles his horse. "I will seek vengeance for the blood of this man [Ḥusayn] until I die or God makes an end of my affair, whichever is more pleasing to Him," he tells his perplexed wife. To her question: "And to whom do you leave this little son of yours?" Ibn Ḥāzim replies, "To God alone who has no partner!"

<sup>5</sup> For other versions attributed to Abū Mikhnaf, which are, in fact, a later reworking of Ibn al-Kalbī's edition, see Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums* (GAS), vol. I (Leiden, 1967), 308–09; Sezgin, *Abū Miḥnaf*, 116–23. A work entitled "The so-called (*al-Ma'rūf*) Murder (*maqtal*) [written by] Abū Mikhnaf" (Beirut, 1971; originally Najaf 1929, see Sezgin, *Abū Miḥnaf*, 119) is an uncritical edition, based on a manuscript the provenance of which is unspecified. It does not contain large sections attributed to Abū Mikhnaf and incorporated by Ṭabarī. It appears that two Berlin manuscripts of this work were used by F. Wüstenfeld, *Der Tod des Husein ben Ali und die Rache* (Göttingen, 1883). All these versions, as already suggested by Sezgin, *Abū Miḥnaf*, 8–10, are later than the recension preserved in the *History*.

<sup>6</sup> *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib."

<sup>7</sup> Compare truncated versions in Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, ed. M. Th. Houtsma (Leiden, 1883), vol. II, 288–92; Dināwarī, *al-Akhhār al-tūwāl* (Cairo 1960), 243–72. Especially brief is Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma'ādīn al-jawhar*, ed. Charles Pellat (Beirut, 1970), vol. III, 256–7. The much later Ibn Kathīr basically follows Ṭabarī, but omits some parts. Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-ashraf* (Beirut, 1972), pt. 3, 161–99, conforms to the *History* yet also omits portions while, as already noted in *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib," providing only minor additions.

<sup>8</sup> The tenth-century Shī'ite scholar Shaykh al-Mufid, in his treatment of Ḥusayn in *al-Irshād fī ma'rīfat ḥujaj Allāh 'alā'l-'ibād* (Beirut 1995), vol. II, 32–114, reproduces Ibn al-Kalbī's version and thus conforms largely to Ṭabarī.

<sup>9</sup> For *ta'ziya* plays as coming close to "drama proper," as "folk drama," and a "dramatic spectacle of a tragic nature," see M. M. Badawi, *Early Arabic Drama* (Cambridge, 1988), 8–10.

<sup>10</sup> W. Lee Humphreys, *The Tragic Vision and the Hebrew Tradition* (Philadelphia, 1985), 67.

<sup>11</sup> See *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "tawwābūn."

As he goes out to join the Penitents, his wife, surrounded by her female relatives, weeps for him. Subsequently, 'Abdallāh b. Ḥāzim meets his death.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Salāma b. Marthad, known also as Abū 'Izza al-Qābidī,<sup>13</sup> who, in the mosque at Kūfa, hears the cry "Revenge for Ḥusayn!" takes hold of his weapons and calls for his horse. To his daughter's inquiry about his destination, he answers: "Oh my daughter, your father is fleeing from his sin to his Lord." The daughter begins to weep, while Abū 'Izza bids farewell to his relatives.<sup>14</sup> As it appears, he also dies with his fellow *tawwābūn*.

Finally, 'Abdallāh b. 'Azīz al-Kindī, who joins the Penitents with his small son Muḥammad, asks whether there is a fellow-tribesman among the "Syrians," as his Umayyad opponents are termed, to take care of the child. When he is promised a safe-conduct, he tearfully refuses to be saved from the destruction that is to befall his brethren. To his weeping offspring he says: "Oh my son, if there was anything preferable to me than obedience to my Lord, then it would be you." Seeing the anguish and tears of the son, who is holding onto the father, the men of Kinda, who are among the Syrians, implore 'Abdallāh to accept their guarantee, and they are so moved that they themselves burst in tears. The father, adamant in his refusal, joins his party and fights to the death.<sup>15</sup>

The story of Ḥusayn's death at Karbalā' is by far a better known tragedy. While small vignettes such as those cited above have survived merely as obscure textual references, Ḥusayn's martyrdom found its way into the "collective memory" of the entire Islamic community, not to mention that of the Shī'ites. As such, it certainly deserves special treatment. This, of course, has variously been done, yet my concern here is specific. From my particular point of view, the Karbalā' affair is of interest for the *literary* creation of a tragic story and the manner in which the tragic elements are put to work in the account. It will be my main purpose in this chapter to show that the story of Ḥusayn's martyrdom is tragic on two different counts that work together yet, occasionally, also work against each other in

<sup>12</sup> *History*, vol. XX, 125 [II, 539], 150 [II, 565].

<sup>13</sup> See on him *ibid.*, n. 465.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 125–6 [II, 539].

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 151–2 [II, 566].

creating the tragic effect. This aspect renders the story a complex one.

As the narrative unfolds, the crucial event, which sets in motion everything to come, is the invitation sent by the Kūfans to Ḥusayn, following the death of Muʿāwiya, the Umayyad caliph, to leave his residence in Mecca and join them in their town, a plea to which Ḥusayn favorably responds. However, the invitation and the reply are soon overshadowed by the policies of the regime: Yazīd, the new caliph, sends ʿUbaydallāh b. Ziyād, a tough Umayyad, to tighten control on the turbulent Kūfa. The newly appointed governor now takes terrifying measures against Ḥusayn's sympathizers, among which is the execution of Ḥusayn's envoy, who, shortly before that, had optimistically informed Ḥusayn about the support he believed he enjoyed.<sup>16</sup>

At this point, Abū Mikhnaf's account (as already noted, mediated by Ibn al-Kalbī) presents to us a sequence of people attempting to dissuade Ḥusayn from going to Kūfa. First is ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Makhzūmī, a close adviser of Ibn al-Zubayr, the noted Companion,<sup>17</sup> who tells Ḥusayn that he would be entering a country where Yazīd's men are active and in control, and where the people are slaves to material considerations; hence, he should not trust those who have promised him their help. Ḥusayn is grateful for the "good advice" and the reasonable words, yet refers to the overriding power of destiny: "Whatever is destined will happen whether I take your advice or ignore it."<sup>18</sup>

Next comes ʿAbdallāh b. al-ʿAbbās, who similarly warns Ḥusayn that the Kūfans are controlled by their governor and that one cannot be sure that they are not deceiving Ḥusayn and would not desert him and even oppose him and fight him. Once again, Ḥusayn answers that he will leave the choice to God and see what happens. "Leaving the choice to God" are also Ḥusayn's words to Ibn al-Zubayr when the latter asks him about his intentions.<sup>19</sup> In another meeting between Ḥusayn and Ibn al-ʿAbbās, the latter is even more categorical in his opposition to the journey to Kūfa and expresses fear for Ḥusayn's

<sup>16</sup> See briefly *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib."

<sup>17</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 65 n. 225.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 65–6 [II, 273].

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 67 [II, 274].

“destruction.” Ḥusayn appreciates the advice, yet announces that he has made his decision and is determined to set out; to which Ibn al-ʿAbbās responds that, in that case, Ḥusayn should at least leave behind the womenfolk and children. “I fear that you will be killed just as ʿUthmān was killed, while his womenfolk and children were watching,” Ibn al-ʿAbbās concludes.<sup>20</sup>

This destiny is echoed in Ḥusayn's own reaction to Ibn al-Zubayr's suggestion that he stay in Mecca under protection. Ḥusayn answers:

By God! I would prefer to be killed a few inches outside the sanctuary of Mecca than to be killed a few inches within it. I swear by God, even if I were in a deep snake's hole, they would pull me out in order to carry out their will. By God! They would violate me just as the Jews violated the Sabbath.<sup>21</sup>

Ḥusayn thus refers to his inevitable, violent end at the hands of the Umayyads. The same is suggested in accounts pertaining to the beginning of Ḥusayn's journey. Ḥusayn “fiercly” resists the demand of Umayyad messengers to turn on his heels, lest he “split his community.”<sup>22</sup>

On his way, Ḥusayn meets the famous poet Farazdaq,<sup>23</sup> who reports to him that the hearts of the people are with him, but their swords are with the Banū Umayya. Then, as if echoing Ḥusayn's earlier statement, Farazdaq concludes that “the decision will come from heaven, and God will do what He wishes.” To which Ḥusayn certainly agrees, for, in his words, fate may frustrate the hopes of the pious.<sup>24</sup> A second version of this account, which is ascribed to the poet's own testimony, goes on to tell that, sometime later, Farazdaq learns about Ḥusayn's killing. Ḥusayn's tragic end is thus revealed at an early stage of the narrative. Its insertion in proximity to the statement about “God's decision” gives concrete expression to the notion.<sup>25</sup>

Suspense having been abandoned in favor of amplifying horror, after this chronological digression that foreshadows the tragedy that is to come, we are informed of further attempts to dissuade Ḥusayn

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 67–8 [II, 274–5].

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 69 [II, 276].

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 69–70 [II, 277].

<sup>23</sup> See *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “al-Farazdaq.”

<sup>24</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 70–71 [II, 277–8].

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 71–2 [II, 278–9].



while on his way to Iraq. One is by ‘Abdallāh b. Ja‘far, his cousin, who sends a letter in which he expresses fear that the direction Ḥusayn is taking will lead to the destruction and extirpation of his house. To this attempt, Ḥusayn answers again with the argument of God’s decision, this time in the form of a vision he had, in which the Apostle of God confirmed to him that “he had been ordered to do what he was doing, whether it went against him or in his favor.” Note that the vision is given a special, mysterious aura by Ḥusayn’s refusal to expand on it “until he met his Lord.”<sup>26</sup> ‘Abdallāh b. Ja‘far is also behind another letter, sent to Ḥusayn on the same occasion by no other than the Umayyad official ‘Amr b. Sa‘īd b. al-‘Āṣ. In it, ‘Amr leaves no doubt as to what, according to his prediction, will be Ḥusayn’s fate: “I ask God to make you turn aside from what will cause your death and to lead you to what will bring you guidance. I learnt that your destination is Iraq. I seek refuge for you in God from dissension, for I fear that your destruction is imminent.” ‘Amr promises to Ḥusayn a guarantee of safe-conduct, a promise flatly rejected by the argument that the best safe-conduct is that granted by God.<sup>27</sup>

To conclude this part in the *History*’s report, what dominates Abū Mikhnaf’s account of the early stages of Ḥusayn’s departure to Kūfā is the repeated counsel Ḥusayn receives from a variety of men to cancel his plan, while he, in his part, responds that he is obligated to God’s decision. This is why he must pursue his original plan.

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At this point, Ṭabarī chooses to interrupt Abū Mikhnaf’s account and turn to other sources. While one may fail to see an obvious reason for such an interruption, its effect is quite clear. For here comes a report that allegedly originates in Abū Ja‘far al-Bāqir, the fifth Shī‘ite *imām*, whose credentials need no introduction when he summarizes the tragic Karbalā’ affair and the sad fate of his ancestor. What is even more noteworthy than the brevity of the report in question is the fact that it undermines the gist of Abū Mikhnaf’s account and represents Ḥusayn in a different light. According to the

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 73 [II, 280].

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 73–4 [II, 280–81], where the special circumstances of producing ‘Amr’s letter are elaborated.

*imām*, when Ḥusayn is on his way to Kūfa, he is told by Ḥurr b. Yazīd al-Tamīmī, a leading tribesman in that town,<sup>28</sup> to return to Mecca, “for he [Ḥurr] had not left behind him anyone who desired good for him.” Now, Ḥusayn would agree, were it not for the brothers of Muslim b. ‘Aqīl, his murdered envoy to Kūfa, who prevent him from doing so, since they are determined to take vengeance for their brother. Thus, according to a prominent Shī‘ite source, as Imam Bāqir certainly is, Ḥusayn is ready to disengage himself, yet is pressured to persevere.

This position of Ḥusayn receives further emphasis near Karbalā’, in his appeal to ‘Umar b. Sa‘d b. Abī Waqqāṣ, the governor of Rayy, and the one charged by the Umayyad regime with confronting Ḥusayn’s party. Now ‘Alī’s son actually begs Ibn Abī Waqqāṣ to be released from the trap to which he is heading, by asking for one of three possibilities to be implemented: that he be permitted to return to Mecca; that he be granted an audience with the caliph; or that he be allowed to join one of the frontier posts. In fact, the Umayyad governor is about to respond favorably, but is prevented by his superior, ‘Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād, the Iraqi governor, who would be satisfied only with Ḥusayn’s personal submission.<sup>29</sup> An account by Ḥusayn b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, a Kūfan traditionist,<sup>30</sup> offers a similar version. Accordingly, stationed at Karbalā’, Ḥusayn appeals to the Umayyad officers to let him go to the caliph. The rest of the report summarily refers to the fighting and to Ḥusayn’s death.<sup>31</sup>

Returning now to Abū Mikhnaf, we are where we left Ḥusayn, that is, in the middle of his journey to Kūfa. The array of men trying to stop him continues. ‘Abdallāh b. Mutī‘ al-‘Adawī, a loyal supporter of Ibn al-Zubayr,<sup>32</sup> and thus, not necessarily an honest broker in this context, meets Ḥusayn at a watering place and warns him that if his intention is to seek “that which is in the hands of Banū Umayyah,” namely, the caliphate, they would kill him. ‘Abdallāh also points out the significant damage that would result, in that the sacredness of Islam would be violated, as would the veneration of

<sup>28</sup> See on him *ibid.*, 74 n. 252.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 74–6 [II, 281–3].

<sup>30</sup> See on him *ibid.*, 77 n. 262.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 79–81 [II, 285–7].

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 n. 101.

Quraysh and the esteem of the Arabs. Ḥusayn, however, insists on continuing his journey.<sup>33</sup>

In another of Abū Mikhnaf's accounts of the journey, Ḥusayn avoids speaking to a Kūfan man he meets, as if to be spared listening to yet another warning about the danger ahead. It turns out that the man had the news that Ḥusayn's messengers, Muslim b. 'Aqīl and Hānī b. 'Urwa, had already been killed. In fact, he even witnessed them "being dragged by their legs into the marketplace."<sup>34</sup> When the man's report is later disclosed to Ḥusayn, the latter repeats several times a Qur'ānic phrase (2:156) that is an epitome of submission and the acceptance of death: "We belong to God and to Him we shall return." Further attempts to dissuade Ḥusayn with the argument that he can count on no support in Kūfa are protested by some of his family members, with the backing of Ḥusayn himself.<sup>35</sup>

As Ḥusayn proceeds toward Kūfa, the news of the murder of Muslim b. 'Aqīl reaches him. In a statement to his people, he acknowledges that his *shī'a* has deserted him and gives his permission to those who would prefer to leave him to do so. The account has it that, indeed, the people began to disperse and the only kernel of followers left were those who had come with Ḥusayn from Medina. Ḥusayn knew—so we are told—that when he explained the possibilities, "only those would accompany him who wanted to share his fate and die with him."<sup>36</sup> Thus, the statement has the role of making it clear that, at least as early as the middle of his voyage to Kūfa, Ḥusayn was fully cognizant of his imminent death.

The account of the desertion by a major part of Ḥusayn's company along the road is followed in the *History* by another account from Abū Mikhnaf, according to which one of Ḥusayn's relatives implores to the *imām* not to go to Kūfa, for he would not "come to anything there except the points of spears and the edges of swords." To which Ḥusayn replies that "wise decisions are not hidden from me. Yet the commands of God cannot be resisted."<sup>37</sup> The sense of predestination that is in the answer is not difficult to detect.

At this point Ṭabarī turns to Ibn al-Kalbī's report of Ḥusayn's

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 84–5 [II, 289–90].

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 86–7 [II, 291–2].

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 87–8 [II, 292–3].

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 88–9 [II, 293–4].

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 90 [II, 294].

stop at the watering station of Dhū Ḥusūm.<sup>38</sup> Once again, as we have seen before, this interruption works to undermine Ḥusayn's image as a man determined to pursue his plan and reach Kūfa against all odds. For here, according to Ibn Kalbī's sources, Ḥusayn delivers an address to a cavalry unit from Kūfa, headed by Ḥurr b. Yazīd, the aforementioned Tamīmī leader, in which he demands that the Kūfans give him what they had guaranteed in their "covenants and sworn testimonies," namely, support in the taking over of the town; otherwise, he will leave them and return to Mecca. The same is repeated in Ḥusayn's speech to his supporters.<sup>39</sup> Now, the significance of this possibility of escape from inevitable doom that comes from no other than Ḥusayn himself is difficult to overestimate when this account is compared with Abū Mikhnaf's version of the same episode that now follows. Here, in contradistinction, Ḥusayn mentions the "breaking of the covenant" by the Kūfans not as something that would cause his withdrawal from his destination. Instead, he is determined to go on: "God will enable me to do without you." It is at this point that Ḥusayn introduces the notion that his death, under the circumstances of falsehood and oppression that now prevail, would be martyrdom (*shahāda*). In response to Ḥurr b. Yazīd's warning that confronting the Umayyads would result in his death, Ḥusayn denounces any second thought. He quotes verses attributed to one Aws, who allegedly recited them when he was predicted his death before participating in one of the Prophet's wars: "I will depart, for there is no shame in death for a young man/whenever he intends right and strives as a Muslim . . ."<sup>40</sup>

The prospects of doom for Ḥusayn are enhanced by the news conveyed to him by a group arriving from Kūfa at another watering stop (note that such stops are usually the occasion for learning something new). Members of this group tell Ḥusayn that the leading Kūfans had been won over by the Umayyad regime through bribery, and they are now all united against him; the rest of the Kūfans would soon draw their swords against him. The tragic murder of Qays b. Mushir, another of Ḥusayn's messengers to Kūfa,

<sup>38</sup> For the variant Dhū Ḥusm or Ḥusam, see *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī b. Abī Ṭalib."

<sup>39</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 92–4 [II, 296–9].

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 95–7 [II, 300–02].

who had been captured by the Umayyads, is retold. On hearing the report, Ḥusayn prays to God to make Paradise an abode not only for those of his supporters who have already been killed, but for him and his company as well. “Gather us and them in a dwelling place of Your mercy and of the desirable reward that You have in store,” says the prayer. The Qur’ānic verse cited by Ḥusayn (33:23) (“Some have reached their death and some are waiting and have not changed”), is a clear allusion to his own situation.<sup>41</sup>

In the account that now follows in the *History*, and which is derived from Abū Mikhnaf, the Kūfan poet Tirimmāḥ b. ‘Adī<sup>42</sup> joins those who implore Ḥusayn to withdraw. Surveying Ḥusayn’s followers, he gives them no chance of victory in the fight awaiting them since, in Kūfa, more people “than my eyes have ever seen” have gathered. Tirimmāḥ promises to provide Ḥusayn with troops if he desists continuing the journey and contemplate alternative plans. Ḥusayn, once again, refuses the offer because of his agreement with his company. Tirimmāḥ’s attempt to organize support for Ḥusayn despite the latter’s refusal is cut short by the dramatic news of Ḥusayn’s death, and once again the end of the story is foreshadowed.<sup>43</sup>

The feeling of doom is further heightened at Qaṣr Banī Muqātil, Ḥusayn’s next stop. There, the Kūfan poet ‘Ubaydallāh b. al-Ḥurr al-Ju‘fī,<sup>44</sup> whose tent is near by, refuses to meet Ḥusayn and confesses that he left Kūfa out of dread that Ḥusayn would enter the town while he was there.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the poet can see the danger that Ḥusayn’s arrival in Kūfa would cause. A sense of imminent death is conveyed by Ḥusayn himself, joined by his son ‘Alī, when repeating a few times, like in an earlier version, the Qur’ānic phrase (2:156) “We belong to God and to Him we shall return.” Ḥusayn explains to his son that his recital of the verse is a result of realizing, through a vision that occurred to him, that their death had been decreed.<sup>46</sup> Somewhat later, when a messenger arrives with the command from ‘Ubaydallāh, the Umayyad governor, that Ḥusayn must halt, the latter rejects a suggestion to divert from his route and

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 98–9 [II, 303–04].

<sup>42</sup> See on him *ibid.*, 97 n. 338.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 99–100 [II, 304–05].

<sup>44</sup> See on him *ibid.*, 100 n. 348.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 100–01 [II, 305].

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 101 [II, 306].

stop and fortify himself at the village of 'Aqr. "O God! I seek refuge with you from al-'Aqr," proclaims Ḥusayn, making a punning reference to the literal meaning of the name ("wound"). He refuses to make any alteration in his itinerary.<sup>47</sup>

Doom is also predicted in other circles. Thus Ḥamza b. al-Mughīra b. Shu'ba, an associate of the Umayyads, advises Ibn Abī Waqqāṣ not to accept the mission imposed on him by Ibn Ziyād to fight Ḥusayn: "I adjure you before God not to go against al-Ḥusayn, for you would be committing a crime . . . It is better that you should abandon all your world, the wealth and the earthly authority that you have than that you should meet God with the blood of al-Ḥusayn on your hands."<sup>48</sup> The possibility of Ḥusayn's murder is raised, then, as well as deplored, also in Umayyad circles.

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Ḥusayn's pursuit of his fate, in the face of the repeated exhortations by a score of men to change his plan to enter Kūfa, has been interpreted by Henri Lammens, probably in line with some general views he had on Muslims and Islam, and on Ḥusayn in particular, as an expression of "fatalisme" and "inconscience" rather than "désespoir" and "héroïsme."<sup>49</sup> In his insistence to go to Kūfa, Ḥusayn behaves as an ideal Muslim (in Lammens's eyes, ironically speaking, of course) ought to: as an utter fatalist. More recently, for Jafri, who comes from the opposite end as a Shī'a sympathiser, Ḥusayn's refusal to listen to the advice given him by "dozens [sic!] of people," not to go to Kūfa, is grounded in his "definite plan and strategy."<sup>50</sup> Jafri criticizes "[s]ome Muslim historians writing directly under the influence of the ruling authorities of the time," as well as contemporary, compromising theologians, for erroneously describing Ḥusayn's action as an ambitious attempt to wrest political power. Similarly, Jafri also

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 103 [II, 307–08].

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 103–04 [II, 308–09].

<sup>49</sup> Henri Lammens, "Le califat de Yazid Ier," *Mélanges de la Faculté orientale. Université Saint Joseph. Béirut* 5 (1911): 160.

<sup>50</sup> Jafri, *Origins*, 182–3, 200, 201, 205–11. It can be added that for Jafri the importance of Karbalā' is in the "evidence" it provides for the existence of "official Shī'ism" and its role in consolidating Shī'ite identity, manifested in the number of participants in the confrontation on Ḥusayn's side. Jafri's criticism as regards the issue of Ḥusayn's party probably derives from Wellhausen's view of its small size. For the latter, see *Religio-political Factions*, 114.

castigates “Western Orientalists”<sup>51</sup> for never grasping “‘feelings’ and ‘necessary aptitude’ so vitally important in understanding religious history and its development.” Focusing attention on the external aspects of the events at Karbalā’ is done at the expense of “the inner history and agonizing conflict in Ḥusayn’s mind.” This focus led scholars to regard the tragedy of Karbalā’ with “mechanical historicism,” thus neglecting “Ḥusayn’s action in its meaning and purpose.” They erroneously describe him as an ill-fated adventurer who is attempting to seize political power.<sup>52</sup>

Jafri counters this view by arguing that Ḥusayn’s plan was “to bring about a revolution in the consciousness of the Muslim community.” His analysis of Ḥusayn’s actions leads him to think that Ḥusayn

was aware of the fact that a victory achieved through military strength and might is always temporal, because another stronger power can in course of time bring it down in ruins. But a victory achieved through suffering and sacrifice is everlasting and leaves permanent imprints on man’s consciousness.<sup>53</sup>

Mere force of arms would not have saved the Islamic “action” established by the Prophet from the “reaction” (that is, a reactionary policy) of Yazīd and the Umayyads.<sup>54</sup> Rather, a “shaking and jolting of hearts and feelings” were needed and these could be achieved by Ḥusayn’s sacrifice and suffering of the kind of (in Jafri’s comparison) Socrates and Joan of Arc and, above all, Christ, who embraced death for their ideals and for the redemption of mankind.<sup>55</sup> To Jafri, taking even women and children along, was Ḥusayn’s deliberate tactic; their captivity would publicize his message and force the Muslims ponder on the tragedy. Indeed, Jafri estimates that this is exactly what happened. Ḥusayn’s sacrifice “always served as a line of distinction between Islamic norms and the personal character of the rulers.”<sup>56</sup>

Now, Jafri is plausibly right in his criticism of the Orientalist old

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<sup>51</sup> He actually cites for this matter Lammens only. See, however, Wellhausen’s view referred to in the note above.

<sup>52</sup> Jafri, *Origins*, 199–200, 201–02.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 200, 202.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 203. For this “action” and “reaction,” see 202–03.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 203–04.

guard, but himself goes to the other extreme and thus comes a full circle. Comparing the Orientalist treatment of the narrative with Jafri's, the distance between the two is, after all, not as great as might first appear. Both are grounded in a positivistic approach, they resort to the common denominator of rational explanation. In the Orientalist explanation, Ḥusayn is rational (though vile) in that he is driven by the ambition of seizing power. Jafri's initial call to appreciate the meaning of the martyrdom is not consistently maintained. Besides, as will shortly become clear, Jafri censors an intriguing element in the story that may undermine his interpretation. In any case, to him Ḥusayn's rationality has few negative connotations and is manifested in his carefully deliberated sacrifice.

Here, I wish to argue that both approaches are off the mark in that they entirely disregard the premises and aims of Ṭabarī and his sources. For the story that is told is hardly about a rational set of actions that is so important for modern writers to fathom. On the contrary, what we have is a *theological story*: the unavoidable tragedy that is the result of submission to God's will. What the accounts in the *History* amount to is a story of a Muslim, pious in the extreme, who, despite the "good advice" of sympathizers not to embark on his adventure, and despite his foreknowledge of the terrible end in the offing, is determined to continue on a course of destruction that is directed by "God's decision" and omnipotence.

I would like to take a step further and argue that the story becomes at one point more complicated. For, in contrast to Abū Mikhnaf's account up to this stage, dominated as it is by a foreclosed end and Ḥusayn's determination to become a martyr, Ṭabarī now introduces accounts, including some by Abū Mikhnaf himself, which depict Ḥusayn as less determined. The first account to this effect is from Ibn al-Kalbī, according to whom, on the eve of Karbalā', 'Umar b. Sa'd who, against his own wish, is commanded by the governor 'Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād to march against Ḥusayn, inquires about the latter's plans. It is at this point that Ḥusayn raises the possibility to withdraw and not to enter Kūfā against the wishes of its people: "The people of this town of yours wrote to me that I should come. However, if they have now come to dislike me, then I will leave them." A similar account is attributed also to Abū Mikhnaf.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 104–06 [II, 309–11].



The latter has another report, according to which Ḥusayn himself initiates a meeting with ʿUmar b. Saʿd, in which he suggests—so his entourage speculates (“it spread among the people without their ever having heard the conversation or knowing anything about what actually was discussed”)—that the two would leave the site and go to Yazīd, the Umayyad caliph. Such suggestion would have signaled a clear change of mind on Ḥusayn’s part. ʿUmar is reluctant to accept the suggestion for fear of the consequences. Ḥusayn’s persistence in his attempt to persuade his Umayyad interlocutor thus fails.<sup>58</sup> Another of Abū Mikhnaf’s versions of the verbal exchange between Ḥusayn and ʿUmar b. Saʿd is based on the opinion of “the majority (*jamāʿa*) of the transmitters” and thus enjoys credence. Accordingly, Ḥusayn suggests the three options already detailed earlier: to return to his home, namely to the Ḥijāz; to surrender to Yazīd so that “he should make his own judgment about what is between him and me;” or to impose on himself self-exile in one of the border stations. Even one of Abū Mikhnaf’s eyewitness sources, ʿUqba b. Simʿān,<sup>59</sup> who insists on his credibility as a companion to Ḥusayn until his death, and who dismisses the discussion of two out of Ḥusayn’s three aforementioned options, does admit that Ḥusayn looked for some escape: “Leave me, and I will travel this broad land so that we may see how the people’s affair develops.”<sup>60</sup>

When ʿUmar b. Saʿd reports Ḥusayn’s three suggestions to ʿUbaydallāh b. Ziyād, the governor is about to accept them, when Shamir b. Dhī al-Jawshan advises him to demand from Ḥusayn submission or battle. Subsequently, ʿUbaydallāh’s message to ʿUmar b. Saʿd actually leaves Ḥusayn with no alternative other than submission, as the instructions about his particular treatment, if he is defeated, are especially severe: according to one version he should be beheaded; according to nother version horses should trample his corpse.<sup>61</sup>

ʿUmar b. Saʿd’s preparation for the battle, under the pressure of his superiors and against his own will,<sup>62</sup> renews Ḥusayn’s sense (as well as the reader’s) of the approaching death. Hearing the clamor, Ḥusayn tells his sister Zaynab: “I have just seen the Apostle of God

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 108–09 [II, 313–14].

<sup>59</sup> See on him *ibid.*, 22 n. 99.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 109 [II, 314].

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 109–10 [II, 314–16].

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 111–12 [II, 317–18]. See also 114 [II, 319–20].

in my sleep. He said to me: 'You are coming to us.'<sup>63</sup> Ḥabīb b. Muzāhir, Ḥusayn's staunch supporter, also implies doom. "How wretched will it be in the eyes of God for people who come to Him after having killed the offspring of His Prophet," he refers to the Umayyad future sin.<sup>64</sup> In a speech to his followers, Ḥusayn predicts that "our final day will come tomorrow," he absolves them from their oath to him, and urges them to desert under the cover of the night and take along the members of his household. The latter, however, refuse to consider the possibility that they would remain alive ("How abominable is life after you!") One after another, a number of supporters rise and promise their support to the very end.<sup>65</sup>

Simultaneously, however, the fissure in Ḥusayn's posture of determination, which already had been exposed on a past occasion, is perhaps somewhat widened, when Ḥusayn sends 'Abbās b. 'Alī with a mission to the Umayyad camp:

Go back to them. If you can, delay them until the morning . . . Then, perhaps, we may be able to pray to our Lord during the night, to call upon Him and seek his forgiveness. He knows that I have always loved His prayer, the recitation of His book, making many invocations to Him, and seeking His forgiveness.<sup>66</sup>

What is the purpose of soliciting God's forgiveness at this particular moment is not entirely clear, although one could argue that what Ḥusayn has in mind is averting his doom.

Predictions of destruction are now intensified, however. 'Alī, Ḥusayn's son, in his sort of archival policy of preserving verses uttered by his father ("so that I understood it and realized what he meant"), recites these several times. They predict that "At the day's dawning and the sun's setting,/How many a companion or seeker will be a corpse!" Hearing that, 'Alī is "choked by tears" and knows that tribulation had come upon him. Zaynab, Ḥusayn's sister, "could not control herself." She tears her clothes and, unveiled, goes to her brother and laments the grave loss to come. The scene of both, the tearful brother about to die, and his grieving sister, is especially moving, that only those obsessed with hard facts can remain indifferent to.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 112 [II, 318].

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 113 [II, 318].

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 115–17 [II, 320–23].

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 114 [II, 320].

Zaynab laments the life that “will be violently wrenched,” she strikes her face and tears her dress, then faints. Ḥusayn rises, washes his sister’s face, tries to console her, and commands her not to perform the ritual of mourning after his death.<sup>67</sup>

The beginning of the confrontation with the Umayyad troops represents to us Ḥusayn trying to save his life.<sup>68</sup> As the Umayyads are beginning to close on, he shouts “at the top of his voice” and reminds his opponents of their “duties” toward him. He is ready to explain the reasons for coming to Kūfa in order to receive justice; if these are not accepted, then the opponents are entitled to act against him. Ḥusayn’s sisters and daughters shriek and weep at hearing these words and need to be calmed down. Later, Ḥusayn appeals to the Umayyads’ consciousness: “Consider whether it is right for you to kill me and desecrate my inviolability.” Stressing his noble lineage, he asks: “Am I not the son of the daughter of your Prophet . . . the first of the believers in God and the man who [first] believed in what His Apostle brought from his Lord?” Ḥusayn invokes the names of the meritorious Ḥamza and Ja’far, his two uncles, and cites the Prophet’s words, heard by some Companions, regarding himself and his brother Ḥasan: “These are the two lords of the youths of the inhabitants of heaven.” It is especially pathetic to hear Ḥusayn providing a list of men who could testify (“[i]f you still regard me as a liar”) to the truth of his speech.<sup>69</sup>

In another appeal, Ḥusayn stresses, once again, his noble lineage, then asks his opponents: “Tell me, are you seeking retribution from me for one of your dead whom I have killed, or for property of yours that I have expropriated, or for a wound that I have inflicted?” As he receives no answer, he calls by name those of the Kūfans who initially wrote to him the letter of invitation, and quotes from that letter’s code words, so to speak: “The fruit has ripened; the plant [?] (*janāb*) has grown green; the waters have overflowed; you will come to an army which has been gathered for you, come?” The Kūfans now deny their responsibility, hence Ḥusayn asks them (“since you dislike me”) to be permitted to leave for a place where he might

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 117–18 [II, 323–4].

<sup>68</sup> This, once again, is unsurprisingly eliminated from Jafri’s account, for it contradicts his basic assumptions concerning Ḥusayn’s strategy.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 122–4 [II, 327–9].

be safe. He rejects the possibility of surrender (“Do you want the Banū Hāshim to seek vengeance from you for more than the blood of Muslim b. ‘Aqīl?”), implying that it would bring about his murder, like the murder of his envoy to Kūfa. Deciding neither to submit nor to “flee like a slave,” Ḥusayn makes his mount kneel and, as the Umayyads are advancing toward him, is ready to “take refuge in his Lord.”<sup>70</sup>

Zuhayr b. al-Qayn, of Ḥusayn’s camp, makes an effort to save his leader’s life and dissuade the opponents from pursuing their way. He argues, among other things, that Fāṭima’s offspring (namely, Ḥusayn himself) is more entitled to love and help than the son of Sumayya, “the prostitute” (that is, ‘Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād, the Umayyad). Zuhayr begs for Ḥusayn’s life: “If you will not help them, then I seek refuge with God for you that you do not kill them. Do not prevent this man from going to his cousin, Yazīd b. Mu‘āwiyah. By my life! Yazīd will be satisfied with your obedience without killing al-Ḥusayn.” He warns them that Muḥammad’s prophetic intercession will not be given to a people who shed the blood of his offspring and of the *ahl al-bayt*.<sup>71</sup> As ‘Umar b. Sa’d begins to march forward, Ḥurr b. Yazīd, the leading Kūfan, who will soon join Ḥusayn’s party, tries to dissuade the Umayyad general from advancing: “Aren’t you satisfied with one of the three proposals that he [Ḥusayn] offered you?” he asks ‘Umar, and the latter discloses, what the reader has already been told, that he is acting in this matter against his own desire: “If the matter rested with me, I would accept, but your governor [‘Ubaydallāh] has refused.”<sup>72</sup> Later, Ḥurr makes another effort to preserve Ḥusayn’s life, this time addressing the Kūfans’ consciousness:

You summoned him. Then, when he had come to you, you handed him over . . . You have laid hold of his life; you have seized his throat; you have encircled him on every side in order to prevent his returning to God’s broad land . . . He has come into your hands like a prisoner who no longer can attract benefit to himself and cannot secure himself against harm. You have prevented him, his womenfolk, his children, and his followers from the water of the flowing Euphrates, which Jews, Magians, and Christians may drink, and which the pigs and dogs of Sawād wallow in. Now they are likely to die of thirst.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 124–5 [II, 330].

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 126 [II, 332].

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 127 [II, 332–3].

Yet, instead of arousing sympathy, Ḥurr is attacked by some foot soldiers, who shoot arrows at him.<sup>73</sup>

As the skirmish develops and becomes increasingly unfavorable to Ḥusayn, his followers vie with each other to be killed before him. They realize that the enemy has become too numerous for them to survive. To two weeping young men, his paternal cousins and half-brothers, who explain their emotional disarray by their failure to defend their leader, Ḥusayn expresses his hope that in a short time they will be joyful, namely, in Paradise. He similarly comforts another of his defenders, that he will go “to a better place than this world and what it comprises, to a kingdom that will never be worn out.” Abū Mikhnaf provides consecutive descriptions of the deaths of several of Ḥusayn’s supporters on the battlefield.<sup>74</sup> Especially moving is the scene in which Qāsim b. al-Ḥasan, Ḥusayn’s nephew, a young lad whose face “was young like the first splinter of the moon,” is marching against Ḥusayn’s opponents. He is given his deathblow and falls, face downward, calling out “O uncle!” Immediately, Ḥusayn shows himself “like the hawk” and launches “like a raging lion.” The scene of Ḥusayn standing later by the head of the dead lad, whose feet are “stretched out on the ground,” is another moving scene. Ḥusayn says: “By God! It is hard on your uncle that you called him and he did not answer you, or rather he answered but your cry did not help you . . .”<sup>75</sup>

No less moving is the scene of Ḥusayn, holding his young child on his knee, when suddenly an arrow pierces the son to death. The bereaved father tries in vain to stop the bleeding. When his palm is full of blood, he pours the blood onto the ground, consoling himself that God’s purpose is better than His immediate help.<sup>76</sup> A young man from Ḥusayn’s family who emerges, clutching a stick and looking very frightened, is cut down by a rider’s sword.<sup>77</sup> A similar account by Abū Mikhnaf relates the story of a young relative of Ḥusayn, who rushes to his defense when the latter is completely surrounded. Zaynab, the boy’s aunt, tries to stop him, but to no avail. The boy is severely wounded and cries to his mother. Then Ḥusayn

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 128–9 [II, 334–5].

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 137–50 [II, 342–56].

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 152–3 [II, 358–9].

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 154 [II, 360].

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 155–6 [II, 361].

embraces him and consoles him with thoughts about their union with their righteous ancestors.<sup>78</sup>

Reports coming from Shī'ite authorities, and transmitted by Ibn al-Kalbī, now focus on Ḥusayn's personal fate. One of them describes Ḥusayn trying to quench his thirst, then being struck in his throat by an arrow. All the helpless *imām* can do is utter: "O God! I complain to you about what is being done to the son of the daughter of your Prophet."<sup>79</sup> An alleged eyewitness dwells on Ḥusayn's unquenchable thirst: "There would be cold water with date wine in it, glasses with milk in them, and earthenware bottles with water, and yet he would say, 'Woe upon you! Give me a drink, for the thirst is killing me.'"<sup>80</sup> Abū Mikhnaḥ reports that, shortly before Ḥusayn's death, he still tries to convey a message to his enemies about the evil involved in his murder: "After me you will not kill another servant of God," meaning that he is the "last of God's servants," hence should be spared. Ḥusayn adds that if his opponents killed him, God will spread misfortune among them and cause the shedding of their blood. But this is to no avail. In the next scene Ḥusayn's death occurs.<sup>81</sup>

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Tragedy, as defined by strict Aristotelian categories, is not easy to come by, except, perhaps, in classical tragedies. According to Cheryl Exum,

The idea that a work is tragic if it displays certain predetermined features, and not tragic if one or more of these features is missing, or even handled differently, cannot find support either in art or, for that matter, in the actual practice of criticism, where the description 'tragic' has been claimed for works of widely different character. Since theories are based on existing tragedies, and then applied to other tragedies, they are neither absolute nor innocent; rather, the critic's choice of examples guides the theory.<sup>82</sup>

In the Bible, the concepts of a tragic dimension or tragic vision provide a special way of looking at texts, a way that brings to the

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 158 [II, 363].

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 156–7 [II, 361–2]. The shī'ite sources are 'Amr b. Shamir, Jābir al-Ju'fī and Qāsim b. al-Aṣḥab b. Nubāta. See on them p. 156 nn. 508, 509, 511.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 157 [II, 362]. The source is Qāsim b. al-Aṣḥab. See on him also *ibid.*, p. X.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 160 [II, 365].

<sup>82</sup> Exum, *Tragedy*, 2.

foreground neglected aspects.<sup>83</sup> Thus, at the heart of the biblical tragic vision lies human suffering, or the hero's lack of control over his destiny.<sup>84</sup> As Exum argues, "Tragedy involves catastrophe, and the catastrophic events that bring the tragic tale to closure are irreparable and irreversible."<sup>85</sup> "Tragedy is made possible when human freedom comes into conflict with the demands of the cosmic order," she adds.<sup>86</sup> Tragic heroes are gripped by forces beyond their control.<sup>87</sup>

Faced with an inevitable fate he already knows, and obliged by God to submit to it, any effort on Ḥusayn's part to escape his destiny is thus in vain. His death at Karbalā', as told in the *History*, comes pretty close to the classical definition of tragedy, save for the element of *hubris*. Indeed, it is Zaynab, Ḥusayn's sister, who confirms what has been repeatedly stated and exemplified in the narrative that has been here analyzed. When 'Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād, the Iraqi governor, asks her, *post eventum*, that is, after the sad news of Karbalā' reaches them, "How do you consider God has treated your family?" Zaynab answers: "God decreed death for them, and they went forward to their resting places."<sup>88</sup> This, in a nutshell, is the *tragic* story of Husayn's death.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 1; W. Lee Humphreys, *The Tragic Vision and the Hebrew Tradition* (Philadelphia, 1985), 1–2.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 3, 68–9.

<sup>85</sup> Exum, *Tragedy*, 4.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 10. The fate of King Saul has been variously discussed.

<sup>88</sup> *History*, vol. XIX, 165–6 [II, 371].

## EPILOGUE

My aim in this book has not been to engage yet again in a reconstruction of the history of early Islam and the all too well known project of verifying the historicity of this or that episode. Rather, I set out to learn something new about early Islamic historiography. More concretely put, one major purpose in my reading the *History* has been to fathom the historicist assumptions guiding the many who took part in its production, as well as whatever undermines such assumptions. This seems to me no minor a challenge, given that, time and again, in fact, constantly, the reader of Ṭabarī's book is at the mercy, so to speak, of the "impeccable" sources and their access to historical knowledge. He/she must succumb to their posture—actually well known in all historical works since ancient times to our own days—that is meant to blur any distinction between the historical event and the text about it, and thus grant the latter the *status of reality* and its producer the position of a privileged "observer" of a reality that is no more.

All could be very simple were there not sufficient ground to see history in general, Ṭabarī's *History* included, as non-mimetic, not to say anti-mimetic, for which aspect, like art in general, it should be exposed.<sup>1</sup> This is what I have attempted to do in the first part of this book. Phrasing it differently, I have tried to make use of the recent theoretical shift in conceiving *mimesis*, which takes into account how the reproduction of the world *as language* "may expose and call into question precisely those conventions meant to systematize and objectify representation."<sup>2</sup> And so, in Part One I attempted to tackle the mimetic assumption that underlies the *History* head on and problematize it.

This leads me to another reflection that has more to do with the

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<sup>1</sup> Murray Krieger, "The Semiotic Desire for the Natural Sign: Poetic Uses and Political Abuses," in David Carroll, ed., *States of "Theory": History, Art, and Critical Discourse* (New York, 1990), 248.

<sup>2</sup> John D. Lyons and Stephen G. Nichols, Jr., "Introduction," in John D. Lyons and Stephen G. Nichols Jr., eds., *Mimesis: From Mirror to Method, Augustine to Descartes* (Hanover, 1982), 3.



second part of my study. As I see it, Part Two not only suggests a different approach to reading historiography, having in mind aims other than “reconstruction,” but it also makes an additional contribution to our assessment of classical Arabic writing in general. For here I beg to differ from distinguished scholars, such as Paret and von Grunebaum who, speaking of classical Arabic literature, looked for the tragic mainly in poetry,<sup>3</sup> or found it strange that despite its richness in anecdotal and unusual material, Arabic literature “never did seriously turn toward the large-scale narrative or the drama.”<sup>4</sup> This assessment, I contend, is based on a rather narrow definition of literature. If one casts the net wider and also considers *taʾrīkh* for that matter, one finds in historiography perhaps the largest sample of dramatic literature produced in classical Islam. This should come as no surprise. As we all learn and experience, life is drama, the drama that is in historiography cannot be severed from the drama that exists in real life, and Islamic historiography as practiced in the *History* is no exception to that. The drama of the Amīn-Maʾmūn struggle, for example, or the tragedy of Ḥusayn’s murder, are relevant cases that I discuss in this study. In sum, drama is drama, whether in real life or fiction, and whether we find it in *belles-lettres* or in other genres of literary writing such as historiography, is a question of category, not of essence.

One further point that one should make at this stage is that Ṭabari’s book is certainly a culmination of what could be largely viewed as sacred history (or classical history, or whatever epithet one chooses) that was produced in the formative age of Islam. Its poetics, as here analyzed, have, I think, much to tell about the poetics of this whole genre. But how should the *History* be considered in a wider context, that is, a context that includes not only Islamic historiography written before Ṭabari’s age but generations later? The question is particularly pertinent, since in other respects, which have not been in the focus of my present study, Ṭabari’s book has been seen as a watershed, in that the historiography of the following century, for example, had new things and different schemes to offer.

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<sup>3</sup> Rudi Paret, “Das ‘Tragische’ in der arabischen Literatur,” *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* 6 (1928): 247–52; 7 (1929): 17–28, where the Karbalāʾ affair is noted in passing.

<sup>4</sup> Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation* (Chicago, 1953), 287.

Thus Khalidi, who links the *History* with the study of *ḥadīth*, pairs the history writing of a generation later, such as Masʿūdī's (d. 345/956), or of a century later, such as Miskawayh's (d. 420/1030), with a different sort of scholarship, referred to as *ḥikma*, literally "wisdom," and actually a secular "science" bearing affinity to classical philosophy and the so-called natural sciences. This new synthesis, carved out of different fields of scholarship should, at least is expected to, inform both the form and content of historiography.

Masʿūdī's historical writing, especially his *Murūj al-dhahab wa-maʿādin al-jawhar*, has drawn considerable attention and needs no elaborate discussion in this book.<sup>5</sup> What I do find pertinent to note, however, is that from the perspective I have adopted in this study, the *Murūj* shows both difference and similarity when compared to the *History*. On the side of differences, one will easily note that Masʿūdī largely abandoned what Khalidi and others have seen as the methodology of *ḥadīth*, in that the identity of the sources is no longer part of the text. For all practical purposes, the well-known pattern of supplying *isnāds* disappears. It is also not especially difficult to appreciate Masʿūdī's brevity, his history being more a matter of facts, so to speak. To give a concrete example, while the *History*, as we have seen, devotes dozens of pages to the Karbalā' affair, in the *Murūj* the same event occupies less than a dozen.<sup>6</sup>

It is hard to tell with absolute certainty whether brevity in Masʿūdī's case is the crucial factor that influences the narrative. I suspect that, as Hayden White would have it, the form has indeed considerable bearing on the content. In any case, whatever the reasons, Masʿūdī's Karbalā' relegates Ḥusayn, otherwise the uncontested protagonist of the narrative, to utter marginality. Hence, there is not even the slightest doubt that a reading of Karbalā' as tragedy, for which Ṭabarī's text provides ample potential, is irrelevant in the case of the *Murūj*. Both in terms of space and ingredients, Masʿūdī's production of Ḥusayn's martyrdom story is a different matter and creates a considerably different effect.

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<sup>5</sup> Tarif Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography: the Histories of al-Masʿūdī* (Albany, 1975); Ahmad M. H. Shboul, *Al-Masʿūdī and his World: a Muslim Humanist and his Interest in Non-Muslims* (London, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-maʿādin al-jawhar*, ed. Charles Pellat (Beirut, 1970), vol. III, 248–59.

This is not to say that, if we delve into the business of poetics, there are no elements that do persist in Mas‘ūdī’s work. Unsurprisingly, the mimetic claim is present—after all, how could it disappear from history writing? And thus, to linger on the Karbalā’ affair, we get the details of Muslim b. ‘Aqīl, Ḥusayn’s envoy to Kūfa, when besieged by the Umayyad troops, roaming perplexed (this is repeated twice in a brief passage) in the alleys of the town until he finds shelter. Later, having been spotted and trying to clear his path by the sword, in the course of which he is wounded, the text mimetically depicts Muslim’s attempt to drink, and the blood that is pouring from his mouth being mixed in the water. Also the use of verbatim citation of dialogues, eyewitness reports, the narrator’s omniscience, and the insertion of poetry for general reflections, all—as in the *History*—feature in Mas‘ūdī’s Karbalā’ account.

Moving forward, in Miskawayh, the state secretary, “a philosopher of very broad interests, an accomplished poet and *adīb*, as well as a universal historian,” one finds a model of scholarship that is markedly different from Ṭabarī, the jurist and exegete. This is manifested to some extent also in Miskawayh’s historiography. And so he writes his *Tajārib al-umam* (“Experiences of the Nations”), which covers history from the Flood to the year 369/980, especially for the ruling elite (the ‘Abbāsīd as well as the Buyīd), as “a long parable on the art of government,” and as offering an experience that can be put to useful application. In his contention, events like the ones he describes may recur. Miskawayh, then, is after the sort of observations and conclusions of general relevance that are not part of Ṭabarī’s agenda. He finds interest in “the policies followed in bringing prosperity to countries, unity among subjects . . . [and] the reasons for which some men have advanced in status with kings while others declined.” At the same time, he excludes prophetic miracles, or the Prophet’s expeditions (*maghāzī*), for example, as if, due to their indisputable uniqueness, they are utterly unprofitable for the readers. And while for Ṭabarī and his sources God is a prominent actor in history, in Miskawayh’s scheme, what God himself takes a hand in is of no earthbound use.<sup>7</sup> It is as if what is God’s is to God, what is man’s [sic] is to man, hence, in (*human*) history, never the twain shall meet.

<sup>7</sup> Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 171–4. See also *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Miskawayh.”

When, for instance, Miskawayh tells that ‘Izz al-Dawla Bakhtiyār, the Buyīd prince, left Baghdad in ca. 350/960 to fight ‘Imrān b. Shāhīn, a local Iraqī bandit-lord,<sup>8</sup> one observes that it is not the event per se that is the writer’s main interest, but the general conclusions, the praxis of the skill of *tadbīr* (proper management), which can be drawn on the basis of the particular event:

And kings do indeed act thus, but with it must go perseverance and the patience necessary to exhaust the enemy with ruses that resemble what Bakhtiyār began by doing, not that such a policy (*tadbīr*) would begin well . . . and proceed to jesting and frivolity, to the point where military power is neglected, the army is left unattended . . . and that this was why Bakhtiyār was forced to sue for peace.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, in the pen of an eleventh-century Muslim intellectual (is’nt it much like in the education of nineteenth-century British statesmen?) historiography becomes a guide to proper political conduct.

Here, as in Mas‘ūdī’s case, I should like to introduce some qualification, however. There are other aspects, more related to the concern of poetics, that render Miskawayh’s “Experiences of the Nations” not so dissimilar after all to Ṭabarī’s supposedly orthodox history. And although this is not the place to engage in even a superficial comparison between the historical products of these two scholars, I would suggest that, in terms of their poetics, the *History* and the “Experiences” are of a kind to a certain degree. Once again, the two share the mimetic assumption; what is more, they even share some of the mimetic tropes. Admittedly, there is in the *Tajārib* less extensive “verbatim” chunks of historical monologues and dialogues, but this tendency has earlier been detected in Ṭabarī’s own contribution to the *History*, where he writes as an eyewitness. In fact, one could argue that, after Ṭabarī’s inexplicable shift, in the latter part of his book, to a genre of historiography that is characterized by “drying out” history and doing away with verbatim material altogether, Miskawayh (and Mas‘ūdī before him) finds it necessary to return to a sort of middle ground: including verbatim material, yet not excessively so. Still, Sinān b. Thābit, a court physician and one of Miskawayh’s sources, is believed to quote the exact words that

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<sup>8</sup> See on him *E.I.*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “‘Imrān b. Shāhīn.”

<sup>9</sup> Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 175.

Bajkam, a Turkish officer, told him in 329/941, and in these words there is room for personal feelings, reflections, etc. Furthermore, there are in the monologue details that endow the historical description of the eyewitness with the aura of *mimesis*:

When I wished to make an expedition for the purpose of burying treasure, I used to have mules laden with empty chests brought to my palace. In some of the chests I would place the treasure, after which I would lock them. Into the rest I would introduce the men who were to accompany me, while they were on the mules' backs; I would then cover the chests, lock them and lead the mules, taking the rope which led the train, and sending away the attendants of the mules, which I would myself lead to the place which I wanted. When I was by myself in the middle of the country, I would let the men out of the chests, they having no idea where they were; I would then have the treasure taken out and buried in my presence, while I made some private marks. After this I would make the men get back into their chests, which I would then cover and lock . . .<sup>10</sup>

Miskawayh's predilection for eyewitness accounts appears no less than Ṭabarī's, and these accounts tend to provide the reader not only with the main contours of this or that episode, but the narrators' more private concerns and experience. And thus, Miskawayh's Abū Aḥmad al-Faḍl of Shirāz inserts into a description of a courtly audience in 329/941 information that one Qarārīti tells him privately ("If the matter [paying the troops] be put in my hands, I will manage it . . .")<sup>11</sup>

Other tropes are used as well. For what is Miskawayh's point in telling the reader, for example, that Bajkam, in attacking some wealthy Kurds in 329/940, was clad in a *qabā'* without lining and without a *jubba*,<sup>12</sup> if not the urge to convey the "reality effect" that we have seen time and again featuring in the *History*? And is Miskawayh's omniscient posture—telling us that the 'Abbāsīd bureaucrats, when gathering in the same year to deliberate the appointment of a new caliph, had no doubt that the matter had already been decided, which is why they approved of Ibrāhīm, Muqtadir's son,<sup>13</sup> or when

<sup>10</sup> *The Experiences of the Nations by Miskawaihi*, Vol. II: *Reigns of Muttaqī, Mustakfī, Muṭī' and Ṭā'ī'*, trans. D. S. Margoliouth (Oxford, 1921), 11–12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 19. For "I said to myself" that is so similar to what is repeated in eyewitness accounts in the *History*, see e.g., 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. See also e.g., p. 15 for Aḥmad b. Maimūn; p. 16 for the Barīdī.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2.

stating that the caliph summoned one Yakaq only when he felt sure of Bajkam's death<sup>14</sup>—any different from the omniscience displayed by Ṭabarī and his sources? One could go as far as to argue that, with Miskawayh being no part of the “old-fashioned” (or is it, actually, à la Lyotard, an antiquated precursor of the postmodernist?) school of history, which allows versions to exist side by side, and thus, in a sense, relativizing (our knowledge of) reality, there is in the history that the “Experiences of the Nations” provides an attempt to maximize *mimesis*, so to speak: a single version is better than many versions when the “telling” of reality is at stake.

All these are general suggestions and afterthoughts that should open new doors, not close old ones. The poetics of Islamic history writing remains a resourceful avenue to explore.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 11.



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