

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.¹ "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.²

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*)³ and historiography (*ta'rikh*).⁴ 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."⁵ Such "genetics" of classical Islamic scholarship⁶ should be qualified, though, in the light of more recent suggestions that historiography as a more or less

¹ Humphreys, *Islamic History*, 73.

² *History*, vol. I, 139–40.

³ *E.I.*², s.v. "Hadīth."

⁴ *E.I.*², s.v. "Ta'rikh, section Historical Writing."

⁵ Khalidī, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 73, 74.

⁶ 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 Wāqidi'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 Wāqidī and Madā'inī—Ṭabarī's predecessors and sources he used extensively—were in fact *akhbār* experts, that is, historians.⁷

Precise classification apart, Khalidī views Ṭabarī's methodology (this is the term Khalidī 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, Wāqidī's consensualism and accuracy, Balādhurī's crisp verdicts⁸ and Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam's moral epic.⁹ Such characterization would certainly require some elaboration in order to be taken seriously.¹⁰ 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 Mikhnaḥ, 'Awāna and others,"¹¹ an issue that will need further discussion below.

According to Hodgson's pioneering discussion,¹² which others have adhered to more recently,¹³ Ṭabarī's historical method is far from

⁷ Michael Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mūn* (Cambridge, 2000), 1–6. Cooperson, like Khalidī, identifies Ṭabarī as a "Ḥadīth-scholar" (22). For brief criticism of Khalidī'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.

⁸ For Khalidī's contradictory statement about Ṭabarī's lack of verdict, see below.

⁹ Khalidī, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 73.

¹⁰ 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 Khalidī 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.

¹¹ Petersen, *Alī and Mu'āwiya*, 149–50.

¹² Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. I, 352.

¹³ 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,¹⁴ 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 *ḥadīth*-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.¹⁵

¹⁴ This is an observation that can be challenged, as we have seen in Chapter 1 above.

¹⁵ 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."¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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-

¹⁶ Humphreys, *Islamic History*, 74.

¹⁷ *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.

¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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,²⁰ expressing his own opinion on

¹⁹ El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 217–18.

²⁰ 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,²¹ the first Islamic prescription,²² and the precise dates of various events.²³ Ṭabarī updates the history of Khadīja'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."²⁴ There are several informative interventions of this kind.²⁵

80 [I, 1159]. For the existence in Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra* of a different account on the expedition of Rajīʿ, 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 Naḍīr, see *ibid.*, 161 [I, 1453]. For the different numbers of the *sayāra*, see vol. IX, 124 [I, 1763]. For the different versions of the Ubulla 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 Faṭḥ was carrying, see vol. XXXVI, 60 [III, 1777]. For the precise date on which Abū al-ʿAbbās, al-Muwaffaq's son, shot an arrow at the crane, see vol. XXXVII, 21 [III, 1957].

²¹ *History*, vol. VI, 60 [I, 1139].

²² *History*, vol. VI, 77 [I, 1156].

²³ 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. ʿAlī'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 ʿAlī, see vol. XVI, 176 [I, 3235]. For his opinion on the date of Muʿtaṣim'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].

²⁴ *History*, vol. VI, 50 [I, 1130].

²⁵ 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 Qaynuqāʿ, see *ibid.*, 88 [I, 1362]. For transition passages, see e.g., *ibid.*, 120 [I, 1402–03]. For ʿUmar being the first caliph who was entitled *amīr al-muʿminīn*, see vol. XIV, 113 [I, 2743]. For a brief note that identifies the name of the man who killed a supporter of Ḥusayn at Karbalāʾ, 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 ʿAbbāsīd Muḥammad b. ʿAlī 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 Ṭahir'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 Maʾmūn'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,²⁶ condenses developments and telescopes sequences,²⁷ 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.²⁸ Or, when Ibn Sunbāt, 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.²⁹ 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

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].

²⁶ 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].

²⁷ See e.g., the report on Yaḥyā b. Zayd b. ʿAlī, *History*, vol. XXVI, 120–21 [II, 1770–72].

²⁸ *History*, vol. XXXV, 17 [III, 1518].

²⁹ *History*, vol. XXXIII, 77–8 [III, 1223].

Quraysh, Ṭabarī gives the “Year of the Elephant,” the (mythological) episode of Abraha’s siege on Mecca.³⁰

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,³¹ and ‘Uqba b. Nāfi‘, the conqueror of Tunis (Ifriqiya) under Mu‘āwiya’s rule, was “the best of governors and the best commander.”³² There were plenty evil characters as well. Abū Jahl, the Prophet’s fierce opponent, was a “loathsome and evil man.”³³ ‘Umayr b. Wahb, also at one time opponent to the Prophet, was “one of the evil men of Quraysh.”³⁴ Ka‘b b. al-Ashraf and Ḥuyayy b. al-Akhtab, two Arabian Jewish leaders, were each “enemy of God.”³⁵ ‘Utba b. Abī Lahab, the Prophet’s son-in-law, was “the evildoer, the son of the evildoer” and “enemy of God.”³⁶ Ḥaṭīb b. Umayya b. Rāfi‘ the Anṣārī “was an

³⁰ *History*, vol. XI, 160–61 [I, 1254–5]. For the Year of the Elephant, see *E.I.*², s.v. “al-Fīl.”

³¹ *History*, vol. IX, 12 [I, 1162]. See on him *ibid.*, 9 n. 65.

³² *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 Artabūn “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 Maṣṣūr 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-Husayn 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].

³³ *History*, vol. VI, 149 [I, 1240].

³⁴ *History*, vol. VII, 78 [I, 1352].

³⁵ 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].

³⁶ *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.³⁷ Musaylima b. Ḥabīb, the infamous "false prophet" at the beginning of Islam, was an "arch-liar."³⁸ And the Kūfāns, who in 121/738–9 supported the rebel Zayd b. 'Alī, could not be but "wretches."³⁹

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.⁴⁰ 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."⁴¹ In the Battle of the Trench between Muḥammad and the Meccan polytheists "[t]he hypocrisy of some of the hypocrites became evident."⁴² 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."⁴³

³⁷ Ibid., 135 [I, 1423].

³⁸ *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. 'Isā's intoxication with power and his base nature, see vol. XXXI, 63 [III, 808].

³⁹ *History*, vol. XXVI, 16 [II, 1680].

⁴⁰ *History*, vol. VII, 51 [I, 1316].

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 160 [I, 1452–3].

⁴² *History*, vol. VIII, 16 [I, 1473].

⁴³ *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.”⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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.”⁴⁶ 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.”⁴⁷

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 Maḥdī 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 Zanjīl slaughtering Zuhayr b. al-Musayyab “like a sacrificial victim,” see vol. XXXII, 51 [1004–05].

⁴⁴ *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].

⁴⁵ *History*, vol. XXXVI, 18 [III, 1729].

⁴⁶ For this and other Nawrūz customs see my *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge, 1993), 41–3.

⁴⁷ *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.⁴⁸ Commenting on an exchange between the 'Abbāsid 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.⁴⁹ 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 (*khābūth*)," "God's enemy," "traitor (*khā'in*)," as well as other derogatory terms.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ "Enemies of God" and "wicked" are also epithets used to describe Zikrawayh b. Mihrawayh and his Qarmaṭian rebels in 293/905–06.⁵²

Now, even when we view all these interventions in proportion and acknowledge, yet again, the sparseness of Ṭabarī's own voice, two

Rosenthal, "Translator's Foreword," *ibid.*, pp. XIX–XXI, where he argues for the plausible authenticity of additions in the Istanbul recension.

⁴⁸ *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].

⁴⁹ *History*, vol. XXXVI, 70 [III, 1789]. For his depiction of the government forces fleeing "most ignominiously," see vol. XXXVIII, 164 [III, 2263].

⁵⁰ 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.

⁵¹ *History*, vol. XXXVI, 50 [III, 1765].

⁵² *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.”⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ Then, in the account on the capture of Hānī b. ‘Urwa, the Yemeni chief of Kūfa,⁵⁵ 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

⁵³ *History*, vol. XVI, 36 [I, 3095–6].

⁵⁴ 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.*², s. v. “Ṣaḥāba.”

⁵⁵ See *E.I.*², 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 Madhḥij. 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.⁵⁶

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."⁵⁷ 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."⁵⁸ 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 861⁵⁹ and, unfortunately for him, died half a year later almost to the day.⁶⁰ 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. Kisrā after he killed his father. The [account] was spread among the populace and the notables."⁶¹ Unlike the earlier case of false prediction made by the astrologers

⁵⁶ *History*, vol. XIX, 19–20 [II, 230].

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 159 [II, 364].

⁵⁸ *History*, vol. XXXIV, 53 [III, 1364].

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 190 [III, 1471].

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 218–19 [III, 1495].

⁶¹ *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.⁶² Like Shīrawayh (591–628 A.D.), who had killed his father Parvīz,⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ 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."⁶⁵ 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."⁶⁶ 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

⁶² Ibid., 178–80 [III, 1458]. See for that above.

⁶³ See ibid., 219 n. 712 about Mas'ūdī's report that the caliph saw a Persian inscription telling Shīrawayh's fate.

⁶⁴ See *E.I.*², s.v. "Djamaḥ;" Madelung, *Succession*, 157–76.

⁶⁵ *History*, vol. XVI, 170 [I, 3231].

⁶⁶ Adrian Bröckert, 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 dissosance 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.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ Indeed, 'Ā'isha looms prominent in the ranks of the opposition.⁶⁹ 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).⁷⁰ Upon arriving in Baṣra, she writes a letter to the Kūfan Zayd b. Ṣūhān, 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.⁷¹

'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."⁷² In another report, 'Alī is worried as to which direction 'Ā'isha's party might take and what would be their destination.⁷³

⁶⁷ Ibid., 52 [I, 3111].

⁶⁸ Ibid., 43 [I, 3102].

⁶⁹ Ibid., 56–7 [I, 3115–16].

⁷⁰ Ibid., 67–8 [I, 3126], 70 [I, 3129].

⁷¹ Ibid., 79 [I, 3138].

⁷² Ibid., 33–4 [I, 3093].

⁷³ 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."⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵

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.

* * *

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.⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ 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 122/740.⁷⁸

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.⁷⁹ Such is the case of the crucial

⁷⁴ Ibid., 34 [I, 3093], 47 [I, 3106].

⁷⁵ Ibid., 50 [I, 3109].

⁷⁶ Humphreys, *Islamic History*, 73.

⁷⁷ Hodgson, *Venture*, I, 353, has already noticed this.

⁷⁸ *History*, vol. XXVI, 4 [II, 1667], 47 [II, 1709].

⁷⁹ 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 Qur'ān 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*.⁸⁰ 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."⁸¹ 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.⁸²

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

⁸⁰ *History*, vol. VI, 73–4 [I, 1153–4].

⁸¹ *History*, vol. VIII, 110–12 [I, 1571].

⁸² *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. Ilāṭ 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 Qarmaṭ, 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.⁸³

On the other hand, there are contrasting versions that indicate differences in matters such as dating,⁸⁴ the exact age of some deceased person,⁸⁵ or other disagreements that may seem trivial to the modern reader. Thus, reporting an encounter between a Khārījite woman and Maṣṣūr 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,⁸⁶ 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 Maṣṣūr.⁸⁷

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,⁸⁸ emphasizes Hānī’s treachery. In contradistinction, Abū Mikhnaḥ and his sources exonerate Hānī from

⁸³ *History*, vol. XXVII, 174–5 [III, 50–51].

⁸⁴ 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].

⁸⁵ *History*, vol. XIX, 225 [II, 428].

⁸⁶ See on him *History*, vol. XXVII, 6 n. 16.

⁸⁷ *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].

⁸⁸ See on him *History*, vol. XIX, 35 n. 163; *E.I.*² s.v. “‘Umar b. Shabba.”

any such blame and represent him as a victim of a ploy by the governor and his aids.⁸⁹ 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 Ṭalhā and Zubayr, the two leading Companions, gave their allegiance unwillingly, or, that Zubayr did not give it at all.⁹⁰

Now, even in those reports that testify to the Companions' allegiance to 'Alī, there is a lack of unanimity. Thus, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiyya, '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.⁹¹ Similarly, Zuhri, the well known transmitter of early tradition, has it in one report that 'Alī demanded allegiance from Ṭalhā and Zubayr and made sure to force them when they hesitated. Yet, the same Zuhri 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."⁹² 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

⁸⁹ *History*, vol. XIX, 37–47 [II, 244–55].

⁹⁰ *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."

⁹¹ *History*, vol. XVI, 2 [I, 3066], 5 [I, 3069].

⁹² *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 Khārījite, 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.⁹³ 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."⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵

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.⁹⁶ 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

⁹³ A typical example is Petersen, *Alī and Mu'āwiya*.

⁹⁴ M. G. Carter, review in *Iranian Studies* 12 (1989): 140.

⁹⁵ *History*, vol. XVI, 57 [I, 3116].

⁹⁶ *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.⁹⁷

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.⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹

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

⁹⁷ Ibid., 58–61 [I, 3117–20].

⁹⁸ Donner, *Narratives*, 258–9 and n. 14 for specific examples.

⁹⁹ *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,¹⁰⁰ no such information appears in Zuhri's minor version: Ibn Ḥunayf has only conciliatory words to say and is treacherously killed.¹⁰¹ '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.¹⁰²

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 "*islāh* between the Muslims." From Ṭalḥa and Zubayr the envoy learns that they share 'Ā'isha's concept of *islāh*, 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 *islāh*, 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

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 64 [I, 3123].

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 68 [I, 3126-7].

¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³

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,¹⁰⁴ 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.¹⁰⁵

* * *

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 'Abbāsid 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.¹⁰⁶ As pointed out by El-Hibri, in light of the customary

¹⁰³ Ibid., 98–103 [I, 3157–62].

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 108–09 [I, 3168–9].

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 109–112 [I, 3169–72].

¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷

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,¹⁰⁸ 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 cell-mate 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.¹⁰⁹

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.

¹⁰⁷ For a summary and extended verbatim extracts out of the *History*, see *ibid.*, 77–82.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁰⁹ *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.¹¹⁰

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.¹¹¹ 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.¹¹² 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

¹¹⁰ *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.*², s.v. “al-Abnā'.”

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 22 [III, 776]. See also Cooperson, *Biography*, 21 n. 87.

¹¹² See *E.I.*², 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.¹¹³

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.¹¹⁴ 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,¹¹⁵ 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 'Abbāsid 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."¹¹⁶ 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."¹¹⁷

¹¹³ El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 77–9, based on the Leiden edition, III, 916.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 71, as well as the different versions about the circumstances of its authorship.

¹¹⁶ *History*, vol. XXXI, 197–202 [III, 926–30]. See also El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 81.

¹¹⁷ 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.¹¹⁸ 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.¹¹⁹ 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.¹²⁰

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.¹²¹ 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,

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 72.

¹¹⁹ *History*, vol. XXXI, 202–04 [III, 931–2].

¹²⁰ Ibid., 204–05 [III, 932–3].

¹²¹ 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.¹²²

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.

¹²² 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.¹²³ 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.¹²⁴ Certainly, this is an embarrassing revelation. Also, the official document is silent about a defeat at Nahrawān that one of the Baghdadī 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.¹²⁵

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

¹²³ *History*, vol. XXXV, 50 [III, 1565].

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 45–6 [III, 1558].

¹²⁵ *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."¹²⁶ 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.¹²⁷

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."¹²⁸ 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.¹²⁹ 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-abṣār*)."¹³⁰ In the best manner of blending history with exegesis, their fate—so we are told—had been intended by God already in Qur'ān 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."¹³⁰ In Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh's account of the revolt, history and theology intermesh.

* * *

¹²⁶ Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge, 1986), 116–26, for Walīd b. Yazīd's document.

¹²⁷ *History*, vol. XXXV, 50–53 [III, 1565–8].

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 46 [III, 1559].

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 53 [III, 1569], 54 [III, 1570], 55 [III, 1572], 56 [III, 1573].

¹³⁰ *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.¹³¹ 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.”¹³² 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.”¹³³

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

¹³¹ *History*, vol. I, 168 [I, 5].

¹³² *Ibid.*, 170 [I, 6].

¹³³ 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.¹³⁴

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."¹³⁵ 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."¹³⁶ 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 *Shāhnāme* 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

¹³⁴ Spiegel, *Past as Text*, 102.

¹³⁵ *History*, vol. I, 171 [I, 7].

¹³⁶ Khalidi, *Arab Historical Thought*, 76.

historian tells us of Bīwarasb "at this point," as he himself puts it,¹³⁷ 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.¹³⁸ 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

¹³⁷ *History*, vol. II, 10 [I, 210].

¹³⁸ *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.¹³⁹ 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],"¹⁴⁰ thus implying selection.

More explicit is Ṭabarī's admittance of the deliberate excision of certain material.¹⁴¹ 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.¹⁴² 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 Nakhī, "for fear that this book may be unduly prolonged."¹⁴³ 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

¹³⁹ See note 126 above.

¹⁴⁰ There are numerous examples. See e.g., vol. XIX, 201 [II, 405]; vol. XXXVI, 119 [III, 1841], 136 [III, 1859].

¹⁴¹ For Ṭabarī's principles in selecting material (appeal to the majority view and to experts), see Khalidī, *Arab Historical Thought*, 77–8.

¹⁴² *History*, vol. VI, 67 [I, 1146].

¹⁴³ *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.¹⁴⁴

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-ʿifk*) in the year 6/627, which appears to be based on some gossip that had been circulating to besmirch ʿĀʾisha.¹⁴⁵ 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,¹⁴⁶ 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 [ʿĀʾisha] what they had," with the result that nothing of the content of their statement is revealed. ʿĀʾisha, 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, ʿĀʾisha does not divulge what was the lie about. Also the Prophet himself, and Usāma b. Zayd (the Prophet's step grandson) who, according to ʿĀʾisha, both address themselves to the issue, refer to "rumors," "things" and "falsehood." By the time her innocence is revealed in a Qurʾānic verse (24:11),

¹⁴⁴ *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 Muʿtazz provided to Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh, for fear of becoming too verbose, *ibid.*, 42 [III, 1553].

¹⁴⁵ See e.g., D. A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past: the Legacy of ʿĀʾisha bint Abī Bakr* (New York, 1994), 61–89.

¹⁴⁶ 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.¹⁴⁷ 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 Mikhnaḥ, 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.¹⁴⁸ 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.¹⁴⁹ 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.¹⁵⁰

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,¹⁵¹ 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.¹⁵² 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

¹⁴⁷ *History*, vol. VIII, 57–64 [I, 1518–25].

¹⁴⁸ Petersen, *Alī and Mu‘āwiya*, 151, 152.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 154, 157.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁵¹ *E.I.*², s.v. “‘Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr.”

¹⁵² 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.¹⁵³

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),¹⁵⁴ 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.¹⁵⁵ 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,¹⁵⁶ as well as the pursuit, by the 'Abbāsīd Mu'taṣim, of the *miḥna*—the infamous "inquisition" established by his predecessor for imposing theological dogmas.¹⁵⁷ 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,¹⁵⁸ 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'āwiya before the outbreak of

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. XV. The relevant passage is on p. 190 [II, 396–7].

¹⁵⁴ See *E.I.*², s.v. "Muslim b. 'Aqīl b. Abī Ṭālib."

¹⁵⁵ I. K. Howard, "Translator's Foreword," *History*, vol. XIX, pp. XII–XIII. The relevant passages are on pp. 30–31 [II, 239–40].

¹⁵⁶ 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.

¹⁵⁷ "Translator's Foreword," *History*, vol. XXXIII, pp. XV–XVI. See further *E.I.*², s.v. "Miḥna."

¹⁵⁸ 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,¹⁵⁹ who, in turn, relied on no other than Abū Mikhnaf, Ṭabarī's major source on Šiffīn. 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 Saqifa 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."¹⁶⁰ '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 Madelungs terms as the "public slanging match" before Šiffīn, 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."¹⁶¹ 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

¹⁵⁹ See *E.I.*², s.v. "al-Minqarī."

¹⁶⁰ Madelung, *Succession*, 210–215, esp. 211 n. 280; 213. See also Chapter 7 below.

¹⁶¹ *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.¹⁶²

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

¹⁶² 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.”¹⁶³ 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.¹⁶⁴ 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.”¹⁶⁵ In other words, Ṭabarī signals in each of the cases a specific criterion for the omission.¹⁶⁶

* * *

I wish to conclude this chapter with a discussion of the feature of characterization.¹⁶⁷ 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,¹⁶⁸ 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.¹⁶⁹ ‘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.”¹⁷⁰ 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-

¹⁶³ *History*, vol. XV, 181 [I, 2980].

¹⁶⁴ *History*, vol. XXXIV, 220 [III, 1497] and “Translator’s Foreword,” p. XXII.

¹⁶⁵ *History*, vol. XXXVI, 50 [III, 1765].

¹⁶⁶ See *ibid.*, 50 n. 203, where David Waines, 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.”

¹⁶⁷ For characterization as part of the rhetoric of historiography, see Hexter, “Rhetoric,” 52–4.

¹⁶⁸ See *E.I.*², s.v. “Sa’d b. Abī Waqqāṣ.”

¹⁶⁹ *History*, vol. XII, 96 [I, 2304].

¹⁷⁰ *History*, vol. XVIII, 71 [II, 67].

cent, the most forgiving toward those who were offensive, and the most receptive to excuses."¹⁷¹

Ṭabarī himself characterizes 'Umar 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."¹⁷² Harthama b. A'yan was a master of flexibility.¹⁷³ Ḥasan b. Sahl, Ma'mūn'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.¹⁷⁴

In his capacity as editor, Ṭabarī amasses page after page of anecdotes by various sources on historical personages of the first order.¹⁷⁵ 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,¹⁷⁶ 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.¹⁷⁷ Thus, seventeen out of twenty-one anecdotes amassed on Ma'mūn, the 'Abbāsid caliph, treat him as a generous patron of poets and poetry and himself of considerable poetic skill.¹⁷⁸ This, supposedly, is an image that

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 123 [II, 112], 125 [II, 114], my translation. For 'Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād as "most courageous," see ibid., 178 [II, 170]. For 'Uthmān b. Muḥammad b. Abī Sufyān being "a young lad without any judgment," see vol. XIX, 202 [II, 406]. For 'Aliya being an intelligent and sagacious woman, see vol. XXX, 271 [III, 715]. For Muḥammad b. Ja'far being "a venerable figure, of a very pacific nature, well-loved by the people at large etc.," see vol. XXXII, 31 [III, 989]. For Durī as a "courageous and valiant warrior," see vol. XXXIII, 174 [III, 1300].

¹⁷² *History*, vol. XIV, 111–12 [I, 2746].

¹⁷³ *History*, vol. XXX, 281–2 [III, 723–4].

¹⁷⁴ *History*, vol. XXXII, 157 [III, 1085].

¹⁷⁵ E.g., for Ziyād b. Abīhi, see *History*, vol. XVIII, 76–87 [II, 71–81]. For Maṣṣūr, see vol. XXIX, 93–149 [III, 391–443]. For Maḥdī, see ibid., 246–64 [III, 527–44]. For Hādī, see vol. XXX, 59–87 [III, 580–99]. For Hārūn al-Rashīd, see ibid., 305–25 [III, 740–57]. For Amīn, see vol. XXXI, 225–50 [III, 950–74]. For Mu'taṣim, see vol. XXXIII, 210–16 [III, 1324–9].

¹⁷⁶ Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation* (Chicago, 1953), 277–8.

¹⁷⁷ 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.

¹⁷⁸ *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 Baghdād*, 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 (*ʿilm*)—so Ṭabarī thought—was not of the right kind needed for a true imam, and this caliph could claim no more than being king.¹⁷⁹

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."¹⁸⁰ 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.¹⁸¹ 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."¹⁸² Hishām's frugality appears almost obsessive when he rebukes one

¹⁷⁹ Cooperson, *Biography*, 21–3, 48–9. For Ibn Tayfūr'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.

¹⁸⁰ *History*, vol. XXVI, 72–3 [II, 1730–31].

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 73 [II, 1731].

¹⁸² *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").¹⁸³ 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").¹⁸⁴

According to a reporter who attests that he himself scrutinized the registers of the Marwānid branch of the Umayyads,¹⁸⁵ 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.¹⁸⁶ 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.¹⁸⁷ The Umayyad ruler punished another of his sons, who had not attended the Friday prayer and had not produced a satisfactory explanation for that.¹⁸⁸ Hishām reprimanded yet another of his sons for neglecting his mule, when he demanded a horse for transportation.¹⁸⁹ The caliph made sure that Ghaylān, the Qadarī theologian,¹⁹⁰ 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.¹⁹¹ 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

¹⁸³ Ibid., 77 [II, 1734].

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 80 [II, 1737].

¹⁸⁵ This is 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī. See ibid., 75 n. 401, for his possible identification as a member of the 'Abbāsīd family.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 75 and n. 402.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 73 [II, 1731].

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 76 [II, 1733].

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 76 [II, 1733-4].

¹⁹⁰ 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.

¹⁹¹ *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.¹⁹²

To grasp Ṭabarī'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."¹⁹³

It is not just the different depiction that one notices here, but another technique at work. Hishām's character in the *History* is

¹⁹² Ibid., 78–9 [II, 1736].

¹⁹³ 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.¹⁹⁴

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 Zuhri 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.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ 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.

¹⁹⁵ *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."¹⁹⁶ 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?

¹⁹⁶ 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.