

The History of al-Ṭabarī

VOLUME XVI

The Community Divided



TRANSLATED BY ADRIAN BROCKETT

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THE HISTORY OF AL-ṬABARĪ
AN ANNOTATED TRANSLATION

VOLUME XVI

The Community Divided

THE CALIPHATE OF 'ALĪ I

A.D. 656–657/A.H. 35–36



The History of al-Ṭabarī

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The History of al-Ṭabarī

(Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk)

VOLUME XVI

The Community Divided

translated and annotated
by

Adrian Brockett

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Preface



THE HISTORY OF PROPHETS AND KINGS (*Ta'riḫ al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*) by Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (839–923), here rendered as the History of al-Ṭabarī, is by common consent the most important universal history produced in the world of Islam. It has been translated here in its entirety for the first time for the benefit of non-Arabists, with historical and philological notes for those interested in the particulars of the text.

Al-Ṭabarī's monumental work explores the history of the ancient nations, with special emphasis on biblical peoples and prophets, the legendary and factual history of ancient Iran, and in great detail, the rise of Islam, the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, and the history of the Islamic world down to the year 915. The first volume of this translation contains a biography of al-Ṭabarī and a discussion of the method, scope, and value of his work. It also provides information on some of the technical considerations that have guided the work of the translators.

The *History* has been divided here into 39 volumes, each of which covers about two hundred pages of the original Arabic text in the Leiden edition. An attempt has been made to draw the dividing lines between the individual volumes in such a way that each is to some degree independent and can be read as such. The page numbers of the Leiden edition appear in the margins of the translated volumes.

Al-Ṭabarī very often quotes his sources verbatim and traces the chain of transmission (*isnād*) to an original source. The chains of

transmitters are, for the sake of brevity, rendered by only a dash (—) between the individual links in the chain. Thus, "According to Ibn Ḥumayd—Salamah—Ibn Ishāq" means that al-Ṭabarī received the report from Ibn Ḥumayd, who said that he was told by Salamah, who said that he was told by Ibn Ishāq, and so on. The numerous subtle and important differences in the original Arabic wording have been disregarded.

The table of contents at the beginning of each volume gives a brief survey of the topics dealt with in that particular volume. It also includes the headings and subheadings as they appear in al-Ṭabarī's text, as well as those occasionally introduced by the translator.

Well-known place names, such as, for instance, Mecca, Baghdad, Jerusalem, Damascus, and the Yemen, are given in their English spellings. Less common place names, which are the vast majority, are transliterated. Biblical figures appear in the accepted English spelling. Iranian names are usually transcribed according to their Arabic forms, and the presumed Iranian forms are often discussed in the footnotes.

Technical terms have been translated wherever possible, but some, such as "dirham" and "imām," have been retained in Arabic forms. Others that cannot be translated with sufficient precision have been retained and italicized, as well as footnoted.

The annotation aims chiefly at clarifying difficult passages, identifying individuals and place names, and discussing textual difficulties. Much leeway has been left to the translators to include in the footnotes whatever they consider necessary and helpful.

The bibliographies list all the sources mentioned in the annotation.

The index in each volume contains all the names of persons and places referred to in the text, as well as those mentioned in the notes as far as they refer to the medieval period. It does not include the names of modern scholars. A general index, it is hoped, will appear after all the volumes have been published.

For further details concerning the series and acknowledgments, see Preface to Volume I.

To
Fiona and Andrew
with love

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Abbreviations



EI¹: *The Encyclopaedia of Islām*, 1st ed., 4 vols and Supplement, Leiden and London, 1913–42

EI²: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., Vol. I–, Leiden and London, 1960–

Er.: *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Vol. I–, Costa Mesa, Calif., 1985–

IA: Ibn al-Athīr, ‘Izz al-Dīn Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī, *al-Kāmil fī al-ta’rīkh*, ed. C. Tornberg, repr., Beirut, 1965, Vol. III

IJMES: *International Journal of Middle East Studies*

IQ: *Islamic Quarterly*

JESHO: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*

RSO: *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*

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Editors' Foreword



The section of al-Ṭabarī's *History* dealt with in the present volume covers pp. 3066–3256 of the Prima Series in the Leiden edition, which was prepared under the general direction of M. J. de Goeje. It deals with the events of the latter part of the year 35/656, beginning with the election of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib as caliph after the assassination of 'Uthmān, and the events of 'Alī's reign in the greater part of 36/656–57. The chronicler then passes on to an account of the confrontation between 'Alī and Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān at Ṣiffin on the upper Euphrates, the Khārījite secession, and the murder of the caliph by a Khārījite assassin.

The events during this single year or so were momentous and were to have resonance through much of subsequent Islamic history. In dealing with them al-Ṭabarī was almost exclusively concerned with the heartland of the caliphate, that is, northern and central Arabia (including the original centers of the new faith of Islam, Mecca and Medina) and southern and central Iraq, where, during the reign of the second caliph, 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, the Arab *muqātilah*, or warriors, had defeated the might of Sasanian Persia and driven the Sasanian ruler and his demoralized forces east across the Iranian plateau. It was along the fringes of the Mesopotamian lowlands and the northern Arabian desert—from which access to reserves of fresh Bedouin manpower was easy—that 'Umar had set up the two great military encampments (*miṣr*) for his warriors, al-Baṣrah and al-Kūfah. 'Alī was eventually to move his capital to al-Kūfah from Medina, the home of the Prophet Muḥammad for the ten years before his conquest of Mecca and

the capital of the first three Rightly Guided caliphs; the political capital of the Islamic world was never again to return to the Arabian peninsula, which became increasingly a backwater, often held by sectarian groups like the Khārijites and, nearly three centuries later, the radical Shī'ite Carmathians.

Although al-Kūfah, with a strongly, but not exclusively Yemenī, or southern Arab, tribal element in its population, proved generally sympathetic to 'Alī and, at various points in the following Umayyad and early 'Abbāsīd periods, to his descendants, al-Baṣrah speedily became the epicenter of resistance to 'Alī's claim to the caliphate after 'Uthmān's murder. A rebellion of anti-'Alid forces took shape there, under the leadership of two veteran Companions of the prophet, Ṭalḥah b. 'Ubaydallāh al-Taymī and al-Zubayr b. al-'Awwān al-Asadī, both from aristocratic clans of Quraysh and former members of the *shūrā*, or consultative council, that 'Umar, on his deathbed, had appointed to regulate the succession. They thus considered themselves to have as valid a claim to become Commander of the Faithful as did 'Alī. These two leaders had the backing of 'Ā'ishah bint 'Abī Bakr, the Prophet's favorite wife and daughter of the first caliph. Although 'Ā'ishah had supported the opposition to 'Uthmān, she had had no hand in the tragic events leading to his death and had come to regard 'Alī as at least a passive accomplice in the killing. All three rebel leaders feared that the infant Arab state would be dominated by anarchic and uncontrollable Bedouins in al-Kūfah and elsewhere, who were becoming 'Alī's main supporters. There was thus a distinct possibility that the more aristocratic and conservative elements of Quraysh, which these leaders represented, would be relegated to a less powerful role in the state.

The outcome of this clash of interests was the Battle of the Camel on 10 or 15 Jumādā II 36/4 or 9 December 656, in which Ṭalḥah and al-Zubayr were killed; 'Ā'ishah was subsequently deported under escort to retirement in Medina by the victorious 'Alī. In the present volume al-Ṭabarī gives a highly detailed account of the events leading up to the battle, from the *bay'ah*, or giving of allegiance to 'Alī in Medina (accounts vary as to whether Ṭalḥah and al-Zubayr gave their allegiance to the new caliph willingly, grudgingly, or not at all), and 'Ā'ishah's raising the call for "vengeance for 'Uthmān." Then there is a lengthy account of the

battle itself, which took place outside al-Baṣrah, the center of support for the rebels, in which ʿĀ'ishah, in an armored howdah on her camel, was the insurgents' rallying point and the real instigator and inspiration of the troops. Ṭalḥah and al-Zubayr were quarrelsome and somewhat indecisive leaders, both laboring under the handicap of accusations that they had broken their oath of allegiance to ʿAlī.

This volume ends with the triumphant caliph precariously in control of Arabia and Iraq and sending governors to such provinces as Egypt and Khurāsān. He had to accept a de facto division of the Islamic lands, with his rival Muʿāwiyā b. Abī Sufyān as governor of Syria and the Byzantine marches and the latter's influential supporter ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ al-Sahmī as governor of Egypt. The remainder of ʿAlī's rather brief caliphate was to be spent in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to humble the much more experienced and sagacious Muʿāwiyā, to restore the unity of the caliphate under his own leadership, and to combat the violent and irreconcilable Khārijite secessionists from his own army, who would, in fact, bring about his death.

All these events left a legacy of dissension that was to resound through Islamic history for centuries to come, involving such basic political and religious questions as how the caliph or imām was to be chosen, what should be his qualifications for office, and what should be the basis of the *ummah*, the community of true believers? Above all, these events were part of the prehistory of the Shīʿite movement in Islam, which came to involve such vexed points as the position of ʿAlī and his descendants: Should they be regarded, as Shīʿite partisans were to assert, as the rightful spiritual and political heirs of ʿAlī's cousin Muḥammad and the Prophet's daughter Fāṭimah, possessors of a divine light of guidance for the faithful implanted in all the ʿAlids by God? Or had their political and military incompetence disqualified them from leadership of the community in favor of the much more capable Umayyads and ʿAbbāsids? The debate continues today.

For this section of al-Ṭabarī's text the editor was the Bonn scholar Eugen Prym. For the earlier part of the preceding section on ʿUthmān's caliphate Prym had at his disposal as many as four manuscripts (see R. Stephen Humphreys, "Translator's Foreword" in Volume XV *The Crisis of the Early Caliphate*, pp. xviii–xix),

but for the latter part of that caliph's reign he had only the Berlin manuscript Springer 41 (*siglum* B). This manuscript was also the only one available for the present volume, and Prym had to seek elucidation of difficult passages and readings in the works of the later historians Ibn al-Athīr, in his *al-Kāmil fī al-tārīkh*, and al-Nuwayrī, in his *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, supplemented by occasional references to such historical and biographical works as al-Dīnawarī's *al-Akhbār al-ṭiwāl*, al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj al-dhahab*, Ibn al-Athīr's *Uṣd al-ghābah*, Ibn Ḥajār's *Iṣābah*, al-Dhahabī's *Mizān al-ītidāl* and *al-Mushtabih fī asmā' al-rijāl*, and Ibn Taghribirdī's *al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, as well as to such geographical works (primarily for place names) as al-Bakrī's *Mu'jam mā ista'jam* and Yāqūt's *Mu'jam al-buldān*.



Translator's Foreword



This volume of al-Ṭabarī's history deals with the traumatic break-up of the Muslim community following the assassination of the caliph 'Uthmān. It begins with the first seriously contested succession to the caliphate, that of 'Alī, and proceeds inexorably through the rebellion of 'A'ishah, Ṭalḥah, and al-Zubayr, to the Battle of the Camel, the first time Muslim army faced Muslim army. As such, it deals with the very first violent response to the two central problems of Muslim history: Who is the rightful leader? Which is the true community? It is therefore a section with the most weighty implications for the Muslim interpretation of history, wide open to special pleading. There are the Shī'a who depict 'Alī as a spiritual leader fighting against false accusation and the worldly ambitious. Conversely, there are those who would depict him or his followers in a negative light, and there are the 'Abbāsīd historians, who, while anti-Umayyad, have to balance reverence for the Prophet's household (*ahl al-bayt*) with a denunciation of 'Alid antiestablishmentarianism. All these points of view, and more, are represented in al-Ṭabarī's compilation, illustrating the difficulty the Muslim community has had as a whole in coming to terms with these disastrous events.

Acknowledgment

Many thanks to my friend, Muhammad Munir 'Abd al-'Aziz, for many enjoyable discussions about the text.

Adrian Brockett

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The Caliphate of the
Commander of the Faithful
‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib

