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A Porgine Colloque à l'Université
de Saint Andrews Écosse, 30 août-
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G. 3. 147

STUDIES IN
LATE ANTIQUITY AND EARLY ISLAM

15

AL-ṬABARĪ

A MEDIEVAL MUSLIM
HISTORIAN AND HIS WORK

EDITED BY
HUGH KENNEDY

2008

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[†] Deceased.

PREFACE

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

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

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

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

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

Hugh Kennedy
St. Andrews, December 2006

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Al-Ṭabarī and the “History of Salvation”

Claude Gilliot
Université de Provence

p. 131-140

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

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

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

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

¹ Claude Gilliot, “Récit, mythe et histoire chez Tabari: une vision mythique de l’histoire universelle”, *MIDEO* 21 (1993), 277–89; “Mythe, récit, histoire du salut dans le commentaire du Coran de Tabari”, *Journal asiatique* 282 (1994), 237–79; “Mythe et théologie: calame et intellect, prédestination et libre arbitre”, *Arabica* 45 (1998), 151–92. Cf. Claude Gilliot, *Exégèse, langue et théologie en Islam. L’exégèse coranique de Tabari* (Paris, 1990).

² Marcel Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde: une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris, 1985), XII, speaks of : “[le] plus fondamental de la matrice des choix sous-jacente à l’option religieuse” [“the essence of the matrix underlying religious choice”].

Messengers”³; rather he only brought new guidance to his people, and that only because the supposed “first Revelation” had sunk into oblivion. Islam presents itself as a reform. This new Revelation is at the same time the most ancient that was registered by God in the Heavenly Book;⁴ ever since, so to speak, copies or imitations of it have been made.⁵ Prophets are only Messengers through whom God Himself speaks.⁶ So : “All history [of the times before Islam, and especially the history of the Messengers and the Kings] becomes a set of mere rigid examples”⁷.

The Interest of Caliphs and State Dignitaries in History

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

It was not a matter of chance that the caliphs took a special interest in history or that historical instruction held a special place in the education of young princes,⁸ even if some of the narratives in which we see them listening, for example, to the reading of the history of the foreign peoples and kings, of their conduct (*siyar*) in the government of their subjects, may be *topoi* similar to the scene of the Book of Esther where the Biblical Ahasuerus spends his sleepless night in listening to the reading of the book of the Annals.⁹ It is said that they used to put down the high deeds of the Persian kings in annals (*The Annals of the Kings of Media and of Persia*; Esther 10:2).¹⁰

³ Surat al-Aḥqāf (46) 9, trans. Arberry.

⁴ See A. Jeffery, *The Qurʾān as Scripture* (New York, 1952), 9–17, on “Heavenly Book”.

⁵ Josef van Ess, in Hans Küng, et al., *Le christianisme et les religions du monde: Islam, hindouisme, bouddhisme* [original edition, Munich, 1984] (Paris, 1986), 33.

⁶ See W.M. Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qurʾān* (Edinburgh, 1970), 25–30. On the relation between the supposed “Heavenly Book” and the identity between Muhammad’s message and the “ancient revelations” in his representation, see Frants Buhl, *Das Leben Muhammeds*, trans. H.H. Schaefer (Darmstadt, 1961, 1930), 143–144; Jeffery, *The Qurʾān*, 21–23, on *rasūl*.

⁷ Van Ess, *Le christianisme et les religions du monde*, 35.

⁸ Fr. Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leyden, 1968²), 48–50, 541–42/ *Ilm al-taʾrīkh ʿinda l-muslimīn*, translation of the first edition by Ṣ.A. al-ʿAlī (Beirut, 1983), 69–72. Cf. al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, ed. Ch. Pellat (Beirut, 1966–78), § 1936; Y. Eche, *Les bibliothèques arabes* (Damascus, 1967), 11–13, on the library of Muʿāwīya.

⁹ Esther 6:1.

¹⁰ See A. Momigliano, *Les fondations du savoir historique*, trans. I. Rozenbaumas (Paris, 1992), 6–7.

This was not only a history of salvation for the other World, but also for this World, showing the way of success. It is the reason why “Yaʿqūbī set out to show, by numerous examples arranged chronologically, how people living under succeeding caliphates tend to imitate the behaviour and attitudes of each caliph”¹¹ “in accordance with what they see of him, adhering closely to his morals, actions and speech”¹².

So there was a close link between history and moral attitudes, and, in the genres of literature, between history and *adab*.

Al-Ṭabarī as a Competitor of Previous Scholars

As for al-Ṭabarī, we have shown elsewhere¹³ how much he was in contact with state dignitaries, especially in Baghdad. He became for instance the private tutor of Abū Yaḥyā, one of the sons of al-Mutawakkil’s vizier, Abū l-Ḥasan ʿUbayd Allāh ibn Yaḥyā ibn Khāqān during his first vizierate : 236–47/850–61.¹⁴

It appears to me that al-Ṭabarī was a competitor with other scholars in three fields of knowledge. I think that he wanted to improve on the work of his predecessors: in law, he wanted perhaps to do better than al-Shāfiʿī, not only because he sought to establish his own *madhhab*, but also because the introduction of his *Kitāb al-laṭīf* was known as *al-Risāla*.¹⁵ In *ḥadīth* he probably wished to compete with Ibn Ḥanbal and with Abū ʿUbayd.¹⁶ In history, he probably wished to continue and improve on Ibn Ishāq, especially for the pre-Prophetic and Prophetic periods.

The *Book of the Emendation of Traditions* may appear as a kind of glory hole, but it was in fact in the spirit of his author an essential complement to his *Kitāb al-laṭīf fī aḥkām sharāʿiʿ al-islām*, in the same way that the *Kitāb al-umm*

¹¹ T. Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge, 1994), 117.

¹² Al-Yaʿqūbī, *Mushākalat al-nās li-zamānihim* [The Adaptation of Men to their Time], ed W. Millward (Beirut, 1962; reprint. 1980), 9; trans. W. Millward, *JAOS* 84 (1964), 329–43; trans. M.-B. Pathé, “Traité de la conformité des hommes à leur temps”, *Journal asiatique* 258 (1970), 363.

¹³ Cl. Gilliot, “La formation intellectuelle de Tabari”, *Journal asiatique* 276 (1988), 233–35.

¹⁴ For him, see D. Sourdel, *Le vizirat ʿabbāsīde de 749 à 936* (Damascus, 1959), I, 274–86.

¹⁵ See Gilliot, *Exégèse, langue et théologie*, 40/“Les œuvres de Tabari”, 50.

¹⁶ Cl. Gilliot, “Le traitement du *ḥadīth* dans le *Tahdhīb al-āthār* de Tabari”, *Arabica* 41 (1994), 349.

of al-Shāfi'ī cannot be severed from his *Risāla*. In a certain way, al-Ṭabarī had an even more universal ambition than al-Shāfi'ī's, because of his exegetical and historical production. Three scholars at least had a great influence on him: Ibn Ishāq (historiography and exegesis), Abū 'Ubayd (language, Qur'ānic readings, *ḥadīth*) and al-Shāfi'ī (traditions, law, and methodology of law).¹⁷ It seems that al-Ṭabarī wanted to do more and better than they did, drawing also on other exegetical, historical, grammatical sources, indeed even on dialectical theology (*kalām*), etc., and putting some of his own ideas in it.¹⁸

Al-Ṭabarī and "the Essence of the Matrix Underlying Religious Choice"¹⁹

Even if al-Ṭabarī was neither a philosopher nor a specialist in religious anthropology, it seems to us that the introduction of his *Ta'rikh* provides matter for serious thought, because we can extract from it what builds the "essence of the matrix underlying religious choice", which consists in the ambiguity of the experience of Time: "the division between what is always already there, which reduces us to be nothing, and what has never happened, which projects us into the opportunity for freedom of action".²⁰

Al-Ṭabarī says: First, however, I shall begin with what for us comes properly and logically first, namely the explanation of: what is time? how long is its total extent? its first beginning, and final end; whether before God's creation of [time] there was anything else. Whether it will suffer annihilation and whether there will be something other than the face of the Highly Praised, the Exalted Creator. What was it that was before God's creation of time and what will be after its final annihilation? How did God's creation of it begin and how will its annihilation take place? Proof that there is nothing eternal (*a parte ante*) except God Unique and Powerful, "to Whom belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and what is between them and what is underneath the soil".²¹

¹⁷ For these influences and many others, see Gilliot, *Exégèse, langue et théologie, passim*.

¹⁸ Trans. from Gilliot, "Le traitement du *ḥadīth*", 349.

¹⁹ According to Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Rearrangement of *Sūrat Tāhā* (20) 6: *lahu ma fi l samawati wa-m fi l ardi wa-ma baynahumā wa ma tahtu l-tharā*; 3:189; 5:18, etc.

This must be done briefly and concisely, for in this book of ours we do not intend to present the arguments concerning time but rather the dates of past kings mentioned by us and summaries of their history, the times of the messengers and prophets and how long they lived, the days of the early caliphs (*mabāligh wilāyātihim*)²² and some of their biographical data, and the extent of the territories under their control, as well as the events that took place in their age.²³

Al-Ṭabarī will treat of what was "always already there" which reduces us to be nothing when he will speak about time, of which it is said in supposed Prophetic tradition said at sunset: "What remains of the world as compared to what has passed of it is just like the rest of the day as compared to what has passed of it".²⁴

The Appearance of Change and the Supposed "Divine Plan"

In contrast to the appearance of change which is a characteristic of societies, the birth and the death of dynasties, we have a clear statement from the beginning, about the idea of what is innate, perpetual and unchanging, as if everything should be ordained by an immutable source while change seems to be evidenced by the historical or pseudo-historical events. It is the meaning of the numerous and contradictory traditions quoted by al-Ṭabarī on the first object created by God: was it the Pen or the Intellect? The legends on the anteriority of the creation of the Pen have been used, as everybody knows, to support the predestinarian theological thesis, but before that they express the wish to conceal change by thinking about the primacy of origins and the immutable.²⁵

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

²² Or, perhaps: "the extent of time of their holding office" (?), second proposition Rosenthal, in *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, I, trans. and annotated by Franz Rosenthal (Albany, 1989) 169 n. 19.

²³ Al-Ṭabarī, I, 5–6; *History*, I, 6–7, *Ta'rikh*, 169.

²⁴ *Ta'rikh*, I, 10, 12; *History*, I, 176.

²⁵ See Gilliot, "Mythe et théologie".

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

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

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

The vacuity and the vanity of man, symbolised by the reiteration of the theme *Ubi sunt qui ante nos in mundo fuere?* (Where are those who were before us in the world?) — become an incitement to “well doing”, in accordance with that is supposed to be the Law of God. In

that way, there is a connection between the repetition of models that are for us mythical (for instance, the figures of Adam, Job or Jonah who have never existed) and the present government of the community by the caliphs and the great clerks of the state. Hārūn al-Rashīd would have asked: “Where are the kings and the sons of the kings?”²⁷ according to the topos *Ubi sunt qui ante nos in mundo fuere?*²⁸ Later, al-Ṭurṭūshī (d. 520/1125) has a long page on that theme in his *Mirror for Princes*, which he dedicated to the Fātimid vizier al-Maʿmūn al-Baṭāʾihī (crucified in 519/1125)²⁹ after he had been released from prison in al-Fuṣṭāt: “Where is Adam [...]? Where is Noah [...]? Where are those who have commanded troops and armies [...]?”³⁰

The main task of al-Ṭabarī in the first part of his *Taʾrīkh*, which concerns mainly mythical times, events and figures (creation of the world, narratives on ancient kings, ancient nations and the supposed “prophets”), consisted in giving historical form to data collected by the old traditionists and historiographers, material that was also present in his *Qurʾānic Commentary*, which was composed before his *Taʾrīkh*.³¹

When al-Ṭabarī wrote his *Taʾrīkh*, at least the first part from the Creation to the biography of the Prophet, he used a literary method

²⁷ Rosenthal, *Muslim Historiography*, 58. Different and more detailed in E.G. Browne, “Some Account on the Arabic Work Entitled *Nihayatu l-arab fi akhbārī l-Furs wa-l-Arab*, Particularly of the Part which Treats of Persian Kings [by ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Muqaffa’], *GAL S I*, 235], *JRAS*, 1900, 196; M. Grignaschi, “*La Nihāyatu-l-ʿArab fi akhbārī-l-Furs wa l-ʿArab*”, *BEO* 22 (1969), 15.

²⁸ C.H. Becker, “*Ubi sunt qui ante nos in mundo fuere*”, [originally in *Festschrift Ernst Kuhn* (Breslau, 1916), 87–105] in *Islamstudien*, I (Leipzig, 1924), 501–19, and addendum of M. Lidzbarski, in *Der Islam* 9 (1918), 300.

²⁹ D.M. Dunlop, in *EI* (French edition), I, 1124.

³⁰ Al-Ṭurṭūshī, *Sirāj al-mulūk*, ed. M. Fathī Abū Bakr (Cairo, 1994), I, 23–25; the complete passage is translated by Becker, “*Ubi sunt qui ante nos*”, 512–13, according to the edition of Cairo, AH 1319, 7. Cf. also the episode of the cemetery with ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, translated in *ibid.*, 511–12, according to Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz*, ed. Becker, 127–28. See Ibn al-Ṭiqṭaqā (701/1302), in his *al-Fakhrī* written for Fakhr al-Dīn ʿIsā ibn Ibrāhīm of Mosul, ed. H. Derenbourg (Paris, 1895), 6/al-Fakhrī, *Histoire des dynastie musulmanes*, trad. Émile Amar (Paris, 1910), 6: “Les plus utiles parmi les livres que lisent les rois sont ceux qui embrassent toutes les règles de la conduite des rois, qui contiennent des récits historiques et qui renferment dans leurs plis les curieuses anecdotes et les merveilleux vestiges du passé.

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

³¹ He mentions his *Commentary* with his title, in *Taʾrīkh*, I, 87, 89/*History*, I, 258. It is worth noting the chronological order of the composition of some works of al-Ṭabarī: his *Commentary* comes in the fifth position; his *Taʾrīkh*, in the eighth position; his *Tahdhīb al-athār*, between the second and the third position; See Rosenthal, in *History*, I, 153.

²⁶ *Taʾrīkh*, I, 5, 6/*History*, I, 168–69.

almost identical to the method he had used in his *Commentary*: at first a summary, or at least a presentation, of the subject, then traditions coming from sources or from old authorities, and finally, when he judges it necessary, a critical personal assessment or an effort to find a compromise between opposed points of view. However, there is a basic difference between the two works. In the *Commentary*, he comments on the Qurʾān *ad litteram*; in the *Taʾrīkh*, he readapts the data in sequences that are supposed to be chronological or at least historical.³² In this way, more in the *Taʾrīkh* than in the *Commentary*, legends appear in historicized form.

The Binary Opposition and the Patterns of Mythological Mentality

From the very beginning of his *Taʾrīkh*, al-Ṭabarī involves his work in a binary opposition typical of the mythological mentality and representation:³³ creation of the universe/its annihilation; the two figures of man seen from a theological point to view, according to “the plan of God”: those upon whom He bestows His generous favour and who are grateful to Him/those who are ungrateful to Him and who seem to prosper for a time, but who will bring upon themselves His revenge. That means from the beginning that the reading of history will be a mythico-theological one. This history is seen from the point of view of what is considered as the *sunna* of God (i.e. His plan and His decree, which are not subject to change), as juxtaposed to the good or bad permanent features of human behaviour symbolized by certain figures, often mythical ones: the mythical proto-man, Adam, the supposed “messengers”, “prophets”, the good and the bad kings.

The binary and dualistic Qurʾānic sketch of the opposition between good and evil is not only reasserted by al-Ṭabarī, but is extended to the history of other neighbouring nations, for instance the Persians, as in the example of the opposition between the tyrannical and monstrous potentate (Bīwarāsb/al-Daḥḥāk) and the just king (Farīdūn).³⁴ What explains the historical data is expressed in the good or bad relationship that man has with God.³⁵ To the community of salvation, the descendants of Adam who were obedient to God, are opposed the companions of

³² See Rosenthal, *History*, I, “Introduction”, 158–59.

³³ On the binary oppositions with mythico-theological narratives, See Gilliot, “Récit, mythe”, 211–89; *idem.*, “Mythe, récit”, 237–79.

³⁴ See Gillot, “Récit, mythe”, 281–83.

³⁵ This sketch has sometimes been reassumed in modern and contemporary times, for instance by the Shīʿī Iraqi Sayyid M. Bāqir al-Ṣadr (1935–80), born in Baghdad, then living in Najaf, who wrote against the Marxist conception of history. He established an Islamic anti communist party after the Iraqi revolution of July 1958. He was put into jail several times, then executed. See T.M. Aziz, “The Meaning of History: a

the Devil, who are disobedient to Him. History grows in the struggle between the two, the struggle between *civitas dei* and *civitas diaboli*.³⁶ “God willing, we shall mention both the followers of Adam’s way and the party of Iblīs and imitators of his errors who proceeded along the path of either Adam and Iblīs, and [we shall mention] what God did with each group”.³⁷

Legendary Materials and “Theological Reason”³⁸

Some of his successors in historiography were more sceptical than him about the relation between legendary materials and their own conception of history. Miskawayh (d. 421/1030), for instance, rejected a great part of the antediluvian legends because they could not be accepted as historical.³⁹

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

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

Study of the Views of Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr”, *Islamic Studies* 31/2 (1992), 117–40.

³⁶ Bernd Radkte, *Weltgeschichte und Weltbeschreibung im mittelalterlichen Islam* (Beirut/Stuttgart, 1992), 2; cf. *idem.*, “Das Wirklichkeitsverständnis islamischer Universalhistoriker”, *Der Islam* 62 (1985), 59–70.

³⁷ *Taʾrīkh*, I, 164/*History*, I, 335.

³⁸ The concept of “theological reason” or “Islamic reason” that was brought out by M. Arkoun.

³⁹ See Mohammed Arkoun, “Ethique et histoire d’après les *Tajārib al-Umam*”, in *Atti del III congresso di Studi Arabi e Islamici* (Ravello, 1966; ed. Napoli, 1967); reprinted in *Essais sur la pensée islamique* (Paris, 1977), 85, with the Arabic text, 82. Cf. *Tajārib al-umam (Experiences of Nations)*, ed. Abū l-Qāsim Emami (Umāmi) (Tehran, 1987), I, 3, 1. 4–8. See in the same orientation Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima* (Beirut, 1967), 2. 3/ trans. Fr. Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah* (Princeton, 1967), I, 6.

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

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

⁴⁰ *Ta'rikh*, I, 6–7, 7–8/*History*, I, 170–71.

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

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

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

¹A.A. Dūrī, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, ed. and trans. Lawrence I. Conrad, Introduction by Fred M. Donner (Princeton, 1983) vii–xvii.

²Albrecht Noth, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: a Source-Critical Study*, trans. Michael Bonner (2nd ed. in collaboration with Lawrence I. Conrad) (Princeton, 1994), 2–3.