

THE ROLE AND CHARACTER OF BIBLICAL TRADITIONS IN THE ANNALS OF AT-TABARI

Dr. Heiki Palva

University of Helsinki, Finland

Abstract

The Annals of at-Tabari, a monumental universal history, mostly deals with the Biblical traditions and those of other judaeo-christian ones. It is commonly believed that Tabari's work is mainly based upon written sources and reliable narrations and quotations, but still there are some problematic and controversial parts in his work, concerning the exact time of each event. It is true that all the traditions stated in at-Tabari's work can be traced back in the Bible still they don't thoroughly agree chronologically. Moreover, historiologically speaking, some events are not dealt with and thus are missing. Tabari believes that "The history of man is the history of God", so the events are dealt with the way they are known through Devine revelations. Since Tabari mostly focuses on the Quoran, the events he represents may be best studied independently and out of comparison with the Bible.

The initial chapters of the monumental universal history **Ta'rikh ar-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk** by Abū Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarīr at-Tabarī (224/839 — 316/923), in English known as *The Annals of at-Tabarī*, deal mostly with traditions associated with the Bible and other Judaeo-Christian literature. About 650 of the 7787 pages in the Leyden edition are devoted to them. The creation, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood and the patriarchs Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph are treated extensively. Other well-known biblical persons follow: Moses, Joshua, Saul, David and Solomon; the prophets Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel, as well as the pious and patient Job, are also treated as important historical personages. Nebuchadrezzar's expedition and the destruction of Jerusalem, the Babylonian exile and the rebuilding of the temple after the exile are also dealt with. Among the characters of the New Testament, Jesus Christ, or ʿĪsā ibn Maryam is, of course, the key figure, but John the Baptist, or Yahyā ibn Zakariyā, also plays a central role. The chronologically arranged sections are followed by traditions and legends only vaguely placed in time. These are the biblical narratives of Jonah—Yūnus, the Qur'ānic Dhū n-Nūn—and Samson, and the later legends about the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, the three messengers sent to Antioch and St. George, in the Arab tradition known as **Ashāb al-Kahf**, **Irsāl Allāh rusulahu th-thalātha** and **Khabar Jirjis**, respectively.

A reader who is familiar with the contents of the Bible

immediately observes the fact that the biblical traditions included in the Annals of at-Tabarī are only in part in accord with their counterparts in the Bible. Some of them are considerably more extensive, some are radically shorter, and there are noticeable differences in the content.

It is a hypothesis commonly accepted by modern scholars that at-Tabarī based his work mainly upon written sources. These he introduced in several different ways, and, as it seems, made clear distinctions between different categories. It has been suggested that, when quoting traditions contained in books he was authorized to transmit, at-Tabarī began the **isnād** chains with the words **haddathanā**, **akhbaranā**, or **kataba**, whereas in other instances he used the words **qāla**, **dhakara**, **rawā**, **huddithu**, etc. That most of the information was not collected from oral sources is also suggested by the fact that the **isnād** chains do not reach at-Tabarī's time but are cited in the original form.

As far as biblical and related traditions are concerned, the question of at-Tabarī's sources is problematic. A few short passages of his text are identical with the text of the Bible and could be interpreted as a word for word quotation, but the context regularly reveals deviations from both the Bible and other Judaeo-Christian written sources. The short identical passages must therefore be explained as phrases and sentences which at-Tabarī's informants knew by heart. Most of the biblical traditions

included in the Annals ultimately come from written Islamic sources, but at-Tabarī seemed to have resorted to oral sources for complementary information. Why, then, did he, a man known as a scrupulous scholar with a great love of order and accuracy, in all probability not consult the Bible and other Judaeo-Christian written sources, which must have been readily available? The question can only be answered once the aim and scope of his Annals have been discussed. What was, for him, the universal history, the history of prophets and kings that he was writing?

The idea of time and history varies considerably from one culture to another, as is well illustrated by a few examples from the geographical area in question, the Middle East. In Ancient Egypt, the concept of time was static: the past was understood as being present in the lives of every generation. Time was not thought of as a moving process. The history of the Sumerians, as reflected in their historiography, was royal history, which began when kingship first descended from heaven. Sumerian historiography came into being not as a result of an intrinsic interest in recording events for their own sake, but because of the religious conviction that the kings could ensure long life for themselves and prosperity for their subjects by building and furnishing temples. These achievements had therefore to be immortalized in historical documents.

Among the ancient Israelites, another idea of history developed, which was based upon Divine revelation on the one hand and upon experience of the only God's concrete deeds in history on the other. This concept of history can be characterized as the history of Divine salvation. Its starting point—the point to which the Old Testament prophets referred time after time—was the experience of exodus from Egypt as God's work, as an act of collective salvation. Seen against the background of patriarch traditions, above all God's covenant with Abraham, history was interpreted as a dynamic process directed by God according to his sovereign plan. This interpretation of religious experience involved a linear idea of history: it began at a certain point and it proceeds towards the fulfilment of God's plan. After the creation, man's history is a history of unbelief and fall. God has once and over sent his prophets and given man a new chance to repent and turn to the right path. In the youngest books of the Old Testament, the final goal of history becomes ever more emphasized. This temporal history will come to an end, the Day of Judgment will begin a new era, the era of God's sovereign rule. This idea dominates the New Testament; it seems to have been the belief of John the Baptist, Jesus Christ and his disciples, that the Day of Judgment was imminent and would come during the first Christian generation.

The overwhelming majority of all historical references in the Qur'ān are associated with biblical traditions, and the concept of time is unmistakably the same as in the Bible. History is Divine history, a history of God's relation to man and man's response. Time can be clearly defined in terms of its beginning, the creation (**al-khalq**), and its end, the Day of Judgment (**yawm ad-dīn**). Behind

temporal history there is God's plan, which He has revealed to his prophets. Both the creation in the past and the Day of Judgment in the future are equally well known through God's revelation. On the basis of this concept of history, it is possible to arrive at an exact chronology; this no longer depends on varying political circumstances, such as reigns of kings or dynasties, which start and end with irregular intervals and which are only applicable in limited areas. Although Jews reckon time from the creation, Christians from the birth of Jesus Christ, and Muslims from the hijrah, the chronology of all three monotheistic religions is based upon the same concept of time.

Annalistic history, that is, history arranged in chronological order according to years, was probably already being practised in the Islamic Empire during the 2nd century A.H., but before the Annals of at-Tabarī, its scope was relatively limited. It is therefore interesting to examine how biblical and related traditions, which were previously transmitted with no concern about relative chronology, were incorporated in the Annals in an exact, universal chronology.

It is impossible to examine the wealth of material associated with biblical traditions in the Annals of at-Tabarī in a short paper. Some representative cases may, however, be sufficient to give a general picture of their use in an annalistic work of history.

The creation of heaven and earth takes up more than sixty pages (I 19-79), rather extensive treatment compared with the two or three pages devoted to the subject in the Bible. The comprehensiveness of this account stems from the author's exhaustive presentation of different **hadīths** with their **isnād** chains, an element naturally absent from the method used in the Bible. It is clear from the very beginning that the focus in at-Tabarī's history is often not on an account of the events but rather on their chronology, especially when they are assumed to be well known to the reader, as is the case with the creation. Thus, at-Tabarī did not say *that* God created heaven and earth—he did not need to—but he did give an account of different **hadīths** concerning the chronology of the creation: the chronological order, the time used by God and the relation of God's time to our time.

In a similar way, the creation of Adam, **Ādam abū I-bashar**, and his fall (I 86-137) is treated from a chronological point of view. Questions relevant to the approach in the Annals are, e.g., the exact day of the week and hour of Adam's creation, the moment of his fall and expulsion from Paradise, as well as exact knowledge about the places to which Adam, Eve and Iblīs fell after their expulsion. In these traditions this is not, however, the main point, although there are long narrative accounts of the course of events. As a matter of fact, a historical bridge was already being built here from Adam to Abraham and further to the Prophet Muhammad: the construction of the Holy House in Mecca was associated with Adam's visit there (I 122f.). This is supported by several **hadīths**. The history of Adam and his descendants was then connected with the traditions of the Persians (I 147-149), a detail very significant in the composition of the Annals. Adam was also mentioned as the first prophet (I

151 f.).

Since the chronological arrangement of events was essential objective in the Annals, it is interesting to examine the method used by at-Tabarī when he had to fill spaces of several hundred years between events known from the Bible and the Qur'ān. One of the most illustrative cases is the period of more than three hundred years between the time of Joshua and the reign of Saul (Tālūt), the first king of Israel. There were practically no sources of chronological data covering this period other than the book of Judges in the Old Testament. Not surprisingly, there is no *isnād* introducing this passage (I 545-547). Instead, the source is anonymously referred to with the words *fima qīla* 'according to what is said'. Thereafter follows an account of the oppressors and liberators of Israel covering three centuries. Compared with the biblical records, it is interesting to find that only one name—Shamgar (Judg. 3,31) — is missing from at-Tabarī's list, and only one piece of chronological data—eight instead of eighteen years during which the Israelites were subject to Eglon, King of Moab (Judg. 3,14) — is different. This striking agreement could be regarded as evidence of the direct use of the Old Testament as a written source. This is, however, rendered improbable or at least uncertain by the fact that, in spite of almost complete agreement in names and chronology, there is no section in at-Tabarī's text which could be considered as a direct quotation from the text of the Bible.

Another similar case is the history of the kings of Judah after Solomon (I 619-637). Again, the source is anonymous and referred to with the words *fimā qīla* and *fimā dhukira* 'according to what has been said/mentioned'. The list of kings starts with Rehoboam, son of Solomon. A long narrative about king Asa, son of Abijam (1 Kgs. 15,1-24) follows, introduced by an *isnād* chain going back to Wahb b. Munabbih. Then, the list of the kings of Judah in Jerusalem continues without any mention of the source. The chronological data for the reigns of the kings are exactly the same as those in the Old Testament and the list of king also agrees with the biblical records, the only exception being the omission of the somewhat chaotic period of nine years during which Jehoram and Ahaziah—at least nominally—reigned in Jerusalem. Typically of at-Tabarī's method, no direct quotations from the text of the Bible are to be found.

As far as pure chronology is concerned, at-Tabarī made use of all available information. Thus, having told a lengthy legend about the death of John the Baptist (I 714-717), which was also included in his Tafsīr (15, 25f. Būlāq ed.), he added chronological comments which he introduced with the words *qāla Abū Ja'far*—that is, at-Tabarī himself—and in which he pointed out an anachronism in the legend: John the Baptist could not possibly have been killed at the time of Nebuchadrezzar, because there was a long interval between the destruction of Jerusalem and the birth of John the Baptist. Then he continued: "According to what the Jews and Christians say", *fī qawli l-yahūd wa-n-nasārā*, this period was 461 years, and, he added, "they say that this is obvious from their books and writings", *wa-yadhkurūna anna dhālika 'indahum fī kutubihim wa-asfārihim*

mubayyan (I 718) Here again, it seems that at-Tabarī attained information from Jewish and Christian written sources, but indirectly, only through informants.

It is not surprising to find that about half of the contents of the Bible were left out of the Annals. The books which in the Old Testament are called the Prophets were practically ignored, and the books of the New Testament, with the exception of the four gospels and the first few chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, were not referred to. For one thing, the books omitted by at-Tabarī do not contain traditions referred to in the Qur'ān, and, secondly, there is not much information of chronological interest in them. Rather, their scope is almost exclusively theological and therefore uninteresting in an annalistic history. But why did at-Tabarī, who carefully collected his source material and objectively transmitted different traditions without trying to reconcile the often contradictory data, complement his material from written Judaeo-Christian sources only in chronological matters, and even then, as it seems, indirectly?

In order to realize the scope of at-Tabarī's Annals, it is important to reflect what is meant by 'history'. As the subject of historiography, history has been defined in many different ways. In his Muqaddimah (I 50) Ibn Khaldūn defined it as "*referring to events that are peculiar to a particular age or race*". His contemporary colleague Muhammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ījī, however, defined historiography as "*the acquaintance of conditions of the world that have been transmitted provided with an indication of the times when they took place, inasfar they constitute items of information*" (Tuhfat al-Faqīr ilā Sāhib as-Sarīr, fol. 12b). This corresponds to the methodological approach of at-Tabarī's Annals. As far as the contents are concerned, in my opinion, a modern definition often applied well describes the aim and scope of the Annals. This is the definition given by J. Huizinga: "*History is the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past.*" (in: Philosophy and History. Essays presented to Ernst Cassirer, London 1936; pp. 1-10).

In all historiography, a certain scope has to be fixed, and the choice of material has to be adjusted to the scope. In the political and intellectual centre of the Islamic Empire at-Tabarī's time, the scope relevant to a universal history was naturally, in the first place, the Islamic world, with special reference to its politically and intellectually most important national elements, the Arabs and the Persians. From the religious point of view, the material most relevant to history between the creation and the hijrah was the information needed to shed light on the historical references in the Qur'ān, in other words, the history of the prophets—in the widest meaning of the word—from Adam to Muhammad. This is the *Ta'rikh ar-Rusul*. The history of the prophets was then followed by the history of the kings, *Ta'rikh al-Mulūk*, the history of the Islamic Empire, seen from its political and intellectual centre and therefore containing most information about the history of the Arabs and Persians, the nations which have made the greatest contributions to Islamic civilization. Therefore, as mentioned by at-Tabarī (I 147), although the historical and cultural horizon had been

considerably widened during his lifetime, no attention was paid to this widened scope in the Annals. This was because it was not thought relevant to the history of the Islamic Empire, and because it would have been almost impossible to synchronize the history of these peripheral nations and groups in the same painstaking way as was done with the history of the Arabs and Persians. In this context, it is also interesting to point out that Greek historiography falls totally outside the scope of at-Tabarī's Annals. There are two major reasons for this. For one thing, history was not regarded as belonging to higher studies, and only works in that category were translated from Greek into Arabic. Secondly, the material included in the works of the Greek historians could only have been used with utmost circumspection, because they were often associated with aspects of the polytheistic religion of the Greeks.

When at-Tabarī wrote his Annals, he did not do so only in the capacity of an historian. He did it also in the capacity of a theologian. As a meticulous investigator of the **hadith** and the author of the great **Tafsīr**, it is only natural that at-Tabarī saw more clearly than most of his contemporary colleagues that the history of man was the history of God's work in history, a series of events known through Divine revelation or observed in the course of history. Within the framework of a universal history as seen through Muslim eyes, although the biblical traditions were ultimately traceable back to the Bible, they were relevant only in as far as they were associated with the Qur'ān. As such they have an autonomous role in the Annals, independent of the Bible, and therefore do not warrant comparison with biblical text.