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Tyrant Dreamers Face Abrahamite Interpreters: A Recurring Motif in al-Ṭabarī’s History

Johan Weststeijn

wa-kadhālika jaʿalnā li-kulli nabiyyin ʿaduwwan
So We have appointed to every prophet an enemy
(Qurʾān 6:112)

INTRODUCTION

Near the beginning of his History of Prophets and Kings, al-Ṭabarī relates how the tyrannical ruler of Egypt had a dream that no one could interpret except for a foreign slave: Joseph, the descendant of Abraham. After an interval of twelve hundred pages, al-Ṭabarī tells of an event that occurred two thousand years later but in which comparable protagonists acted in a similar way. Another Near Eastern ruler, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, also has a dream: he is foretold that the ‘kingdom of circumcision’ will be victorious. His advisers fail to interpret this correctly, but then an Arab foreigner is brought in, and Heraclius understands that a prophet has arisen among the Arab descendants of Abraham.

This article deals with the phenomenon of recurring narrative motifs in al-Ṭabarī’s Tārīkh. Such an analysis can contribute to the ongoing discussion about the nature of this universal chronicle. Is the History the work of a group of editors who indiscriminately collected all akhbār about the past they could find and then pasted them in chronological order, without concern for a unifying narrative thread?1 Or can we discern the hand and the vision of history of an author, al-Ṭabarī?2 If certain motifs recur throughout the entire text, this is an argument for the thesis that the History shows compositional unity and that this recurrence of motifs is the result of a conscious decision by the author al-Ṭabarī.

Here I focus on narrative motifs which recur in the context of predictive dreams that come true. Such dreams were obviously made up and therefore are unambiguous examples

1 Humphreys, Islamic History, 129; Lassner, Islamic Revolution, 25.
2 Shoshan, Poetics of Islamic Historiography, 109–154.
4. Tyrant Dreamers Face Abrahamite Interpreters

of creative invention by historians, either by al-Ṭabarî or by his informants. Studying how narrative motifs are reused has an additional advantage. The episode of Heraclius' dream has received ample scholarly attention in recent years; I will show, however, that its full ironic quality only becomes apparent when we compare this story with preceding episodes in which similar motifs are used.

The particular ruler dream I analyse here is found six times in the Tārīkh: the dream by the king of Egypt in the time of Joseph, a dream by Pharaoh in the days of Moses, and four more dreams by respectively the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar, the Yemenite king Rabīʿa b. Naṣr, the Persian emperor Anūsharwān and the Byzantine emperor Heraclius. Dreams by rulers that only a foreigner can interpret, and the various narrative motifs related to this type of dream, can be found in many stories and in a variety of cultures.

To us, and probably also to al-Ṭabarî's audience, the most famous examples of this kind of dream are found in the Bible, or in a biblical context, i.e. in Jewish, Christian or Islamic legends about biblical characters. In the Tārīkh, the dream of the king of Egypt interpreted by Joseph is an obvious reference to the Old Testament. To show in what way the dreams from the Tārīkh that I treat in this article are reworkings of earlier biblical material, I begin with an analysis of four biblical stories in which a pagan tyrant opposes a foreigner: Pharaoh's confrontations with Joseph and Moses, Nebuchadnezzar's confrontation with Daniel, and Herod's confrontation with the Wise Men from the East.

After these biblical models I analyse the six dreams of the tyrant vs. interpreter type told by al-Ṭabarî, in the order in which they occur in the Tārīkh. In the course of this step-by-step analysis, I describe two developments. The first of these is a development that has taken place in actual (literary) history. It shows how elements from the Old Testament stories of Joseph and Moses were reworked time after time by different authors from succeeding periods, first by the author of the Book of Daniel, then by the evangelist Matthew, and finally by al-Ṭabarî and his informants. Out of a cluster of motifs, most of which we already find in the original Joseph and Moses stories, each author has made a new selection, and each author has combined his selected motifs in a new fashion.

The second development described here is not a development within literary history, but one that takes place within the story, or fabula, of al-Ṭabarî's chronicle itself. In the course of the analysis of the six dreams from the Tārīkh I show how the initial opposition,

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4 Two examples from al-Andalus that feature, like the Heraclius episode, all three monotheist religions: (1) In his Kitāb al-Khazarī, Jehuda Halevi tells the story of the ruler of the Khazars who is ordered in a dream to live according to God’s will. To find out how exactly God wants him to live, the ruler invites a philosopher, a Christian, a Muslim and a Jew to his court. In the end, the Khazar ruler and his people convert to Judaism, the faith of the foreigner who gave the best interpretation of the ruler’s dream. (2) The Castilian King Alfonso has a dream that his priests and monks fail to interpret, so he asks a Jew to relate this dream to a Muslim interpreter, who predicts that Alfonso will be defeated by the Muslims at the battle of Zallāqa; see al-Maqqarī, Nafḥ al-ṭīb, iv, 363. (I thank Bart Wallet and Arie Schippers for bringing these stories to my attention). Other examples in Gnuse, The Jewish Dream Interpreter; see also Johnson, Historical Fictions, 10, n. 4.

5 See for example Schützinger, Ursprung und Entwicklung and Lowin, The Making of a Forefather.
even enmity between the two main characters, tyrant and interpreter, gradually dissolves. At the beginning of the *Tārīkh*, it is the pious interpreter who is the hero, and the unbelieving tyrant is his evil arch-enemy. In the course of the chronicle, however, the tyrants become less cruel, opposition between interpreter and tyrant gradually diminishes, and the focus shifts from the interpreter hero to the ruler, until, in the last dream treated here, the hero of the episode is the ruler himself.

THE BIBLICAL MODELS

*Pharaoh and Joseph*

The very first biblical confrontation between a tyrant and an interpreter of dreams is the confrontation between Pharaoh and Joseph as found in Genesis. Pharaoh dreams of seven fat cows which are eaten by seven lean ones, and of seven healthy ears of corn which are eaten by seven thin ears. “In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt.”6 None of Pharaoh’s diviners is able to make sense of this dream, but one of the courtiers remembers there is a man in prison skilled in dream interpretation: Joseph, the great-grandson of Abraham, of outstanding wisdom and beauty. This foreign slave deciphers the dream; it announces seven years of abundance which will be followed by seven years of famine. As a result of this interpretation, and his plans to deal with the coming drought, Joseph is released from prison and appointed by Pharaoh as his second-in-command.

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph: “Since God has made all this known to you, there is no-one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you.”7

When the seven years of drought arrive, Joseph invites his father and brothers to come live in Egypt with their families.

*Pharaoh and Moses*

Several generations later, the ruling Pharaoh has become the arch-enemy of the descendants of Joseph and his brothers. There are now so many of them in Pharaoh’s country, that the Egyptians fear they will form a fifth column in case Egypt is attacked by a foreign enemy.

“The Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.”8

Not only are the Jews put to work as slaves, Pharaoh also orders the Hebrew midwives to

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7 Gen. 41:39–40.
8 Exodus 1:9–12.
kill all newborn Jewish boys. When the midwives are not able to do this, Pharaoh orders his people to throw all newborn Jewish boys into the Nile.

When the Hebrew boy Moses is born, his mother puts him in a basket in the river, where he is found by Pharaoh’s daughter and adopted as her child. Just as Joseph, a former slave and prisoner, became the most powerful man under Pharaoh, Moses, a child born to slaves, escapes a violent death and is raised at the court as the grandson of the new Pharaoh. When grown up, Moses is called by God to convince Pharaoh to let the Jewish people leave Egypt. Just like Joseph interpreted Pharaoh’s dream when “all the magicians and wise men of Egypt” failed, the miracles performed by Moses and his brother Aaron with their staffs are more powerful than the magic performed by Pharaoh’s “wise men and sorcerers.”

In the end, Moses succeeds and leads the descendants of Joseph and his brothers back to Israel.

**Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel**

Many years later, however, the Jews find themselves again in foreign slavery. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylonia, has conquered Jerusalem and deported the Israelites to his capital, where he orders that a number of wise and beautiful Jews be raised at his court. Among them are Daniel and three of his friends.

In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.¹⁰

When Nebuchadnezzar has a number of dreams which disturb him so much that he cannot sleep anymore, he “summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers.”¹¹ The king commands his diviners to tell him what he has dreamt. When they reply they are not able to do this, he threatens: “If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces.”¹² Apparently, the king mistrusts the good intent and interpretation skills of his prognosticators:

“You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me.”¹³

The diviners, however, remain unable to fulfil this impossible task, so Nebuchadnezzar orders the execution of “all the wise men of Babylon,”¹⁴ a command that also endangers Daniel and his friends. However, during the night God reveals the contents of the king’s dream to Daniel. Daniel is able to tell Nebuchadnezzar that he has dreamt of a statue of a man, made of various metals. This statue is hit by a stone and breaks down.

“The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay.

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⁹ Ex. 7:11.
¹⁰ Daniel 1:20.
¹¹ Dan. 2:1–2.
¹² Dan. 2:5.
¹³ Dan. 2:9.
¹⁴ Dan. 2:12.
While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time... But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth."

Daniel explains that the statue’s golden head symbolises Nebuchadnezzar’s own rule. The other metals stand for the reigns of other kings, of which the iron one “will crush and break all the others,” but that kingdom will be divided since the iron is mixed with baked clay. The stone that tumbles the statue and becomes a mountain filling the whole earth refers to the rule of a messiah: a final, heavenly kingdom on earth:

“In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.”

As a result of this interpretation, Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges that the God of Daniel is the greatest of all Gods and appoints Daniel as ruler over the entire province of Babylon.

Daniel himself has other dreams that predict a future where Greeks and Persians will fight among each other over the Near East, which will finally come under the rule of an everlasting God-given empire.

In this episode from the Book of Daniel, a motif from the Joseph story has been combined with a motif from the Moses story. A dream of a tyrant that nobody can interpret except for an Abrahamite, is put in a time of exile and slavery for the Jewish people. By way of this reuse of older motifs, Daniel is presented as a latter-day Joseph, and Nebuchadnezzar as a latter-day Pharaoh. The tyrant’s dream, which in the Joseph story merely announced — temporary and surmountable — difficulties for his kingdom, is turned into a prediction of the tyrant’s downfall and of the coming, at the end of times, of an Abrahamite prophet whose kingdom will last forever. It is this combination of motifs as found in the Daniel story which forms the basis for the standard pattern of the ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamite interpreter’ dream. Note that Christian readers of this episode could interpret the indestructible kingdom of God that Daniel announces to rule over the near East, as referring to the coming of Christ, whereas Muslim readers could interpret it as referring to the rule of Islam.

**Herod and the Wise Men from the East**

In the Old Testament, the prophet announced by Daniel does not arrive. However, in the New Testament, the Christian sequel to the Hebrew Bible, we read the following story in the gospel of Matthew. Several centuries after the Jews have returned from Babylonian exile and rebuilt Jerusalem, the Holy Land is ruled by king Herod, a vassal of the pagan Romans. One day, Herod is visited by Magi, or wise men, who have come from outside

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16 Dan. 2:40.
17 Dan. 2:44.
18 Dan. 7:13–14; 7:27; 8:20–21.
Israel, and bring the king a prediction based on an astrological observation of theirs. In
the East, these wise men have seen a star, which they have interpreted as announcing the
birth of a new king of the Jews. “When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all
Jerusalem with him.” Herod summons “all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the
law” to ask them where this Messiah will be born. Although Herod’s own advisors had
not been able to predict themselves that the coming of the king of the Jews was so near,
they do manage to find out in what part of Israel his birth will take place. On the basis of
an old text — next to dreams and astronomical observations a favourite tool for divination,
in this case one of the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible — Herod’s advisors predict
that the Messiah will be born in the city of Bethlehem.

But you, Bethlehem, ... though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will
come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from
ancient times.

The prediction made by the foreign Magi is thus corroborated and completed by Herod’s
own advisors, Jerusalem’s high priests and scribes, the ʿulamāʾ of Judaism, and on the basis
of a text from Jewish tradition, the Old Testament. The collaboration of these two groups,
the advisors of the tyrant and the interpreters from abroad, implies that Jewish as well as
foreign experts agree that a new king to the Jews will be born.

Herod orders the Magi to locate the child for him, but when they have found the Messiah,
a boy called Jesus, they are warned in a dream not to return to Jerusalem. Herod understands
that the foreign prognosticators have outsmarted him, and, in a desperate attempt to
prevent the prediction from coming true, orders a large-scale infanticide.

When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he
gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old
and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

Jesus, however, escapes this massacre, because his guardian Joseph is warned in a dream
to flee to Egypt, only to return to Israel after Herod has died.

In this episode from the gospel of Matthew, a motif from Exodus, the killing of Jewish
boys, is combined with a motif from the Book of Daniel, the prediction of a tyrant’s downfall
and the coming of an Abrahamite ruler whose kingdom will last forever. In the Herod
episode, however, this prediction is not given in a dream but based on astronomical
observation and an old text. Instead of a lone interpreter, the Herod story features a group
of three men, and although they are not said to descend from Abraham, they do come
from the outside, from the East. A more fundamental modification of the motif of the
expected coming of an Abrahamite ruler is that his arrival is moved forward from the end
of times to the lifetime of the tyrant.

The reuse of the ‘coming of Abrahamite’ motif from the Book of Daniel in the story of
Jesus implies that Christ’s coming had already been announced by Daniel. By way of

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19 Matthew 2:3.
20 Mat. 2:4.
21 Mat. 2:6, quoting Micah 5:2.
22 Mat. 2:16.
repetition of the infanticide motif from the Moses story, Jesus, the hero of the New Testament, the lawgiver and saviour of the Christians, is implicitly compared to Moses, the hero of Exodus, the lawgiver who rescued the Jews from slavery and brought them back to Israel. Because the coming of a heavenly kingdom is announced to both Herod and Nebuchadnezzar, and because both Herod and Pharaoh massacre innocent children, Herod is presented as the successor to Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar. Jesus is presented as the successor to their underdog opponents Joseph, Moses and Daniel.

RECEPTION IN AL-ṬABARĪ’S TĀRĪKH

The king of Egypt and Joseph

The biblical story of Pharaoh’s dream of the cows is found in the Qurʾān as well as in al-Ṭabarī’s Tārīkh. In these Islamic texts, the main protagonists of the story have slightly different labels than in the Old Testament. The Egyptian ruler in the time of Moses is called ‘Pharaoh,’ as he is called in the Bible, but the Egyptian ruler in the days of Joseph is simply referred to as ‘king of Egypt.’ Joseph and Moses are considered to have been prophets, like Daniel, of the same category as Muḥammad. In the Tārīkh, the descendants of Joseph and his brothers, in short the descendants of their father Jacob, are never called ‘Jews’ (Yahūd) but always referred to as the Banū Isrāʾīl, the sons (or tribe) of ‘Israel,’ the name given by God to Jacob.

In al-Ṭabarī’s Tārīkh, the king of Egypt’s dream of the cows is the first of six ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamite interpreter’ dreams. The story runs similar to that of the Bible. After the dream, the king of Egypt “assembled his magicians, soothsayers, diviners, and prognosticators.” In the Tārīkh, “all the magicians and wise men of Egypt” of the biblical Joseph story have been adapted to fit the pattern of “the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers” of the biblical Daniel story. When asked to interpret his dream, the Egyptian diviners reply in the Tārīkh, like they do in the Qurʾān: “Aḍghāth aḥlām (Confused dreams)! We are not knowledgeable in the interpretation of dreams.” Finally, Joseph is fetched, and again God’s prophet, an imprisoned slave, is more capable — in foretelling the truth, reading God’s plan for the future and knowing what action to take — than all the advisors of the sovereign ruler of Egypt. Belief triumphs over worldly might.

Pharaoh and Moses

After Joseph’s death, his descendants and those of his brothers remain in Egypt. Not only does the text of the Tārīkh never refer to these descendants as Jews, it also states that they were practising Islam. Jacob’s offspring continues to practice Islam in Egypt until the Pharaoh of Moses’ days arrives, who is as evil a tyrant in the Tārīkh as he is in the Bible.

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23 Al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, i, 389–391.
24 Al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, i, 389.
25 Q 12:44.
4. Tyrant Dreamers Face Abrahamite Interpreters

The Banū Isrāʾīl continued living under the rule of the pharaohs while maintaining of their religion whatever Joseph, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham had prescribed for them of Islam, holding fast to that until the Pharaoh, to whom God sent Moses, had arrived. Among the pharaohs there was none more insolent than he toward God, or haughtier in speech, or longer-lived in his rule... There was no pharaoh more ruthless, harder-hearted, or of more evil character towards the Banū Isrāʾīl than he. He tormented them and made them slaves and chattels...26

In the Tārīkh, as in the Bible, the story of Moses begins with Pharaoh’s command to kill all newborn Israelite boys. Different in the two texts, however, is Pharaoh’s motivation for this massacre. In the Bible, Pharaoh was afraid that the descendants of Joseph and his brothers would form a fifth column in the case of a foreign invasion. In the Tārīkh, Pharaoh’s massacre is motivated by a prediction that someone born among the descendants of Abraham will deprive him of his rule. In a desperate attempt to prevent this prediction from coming true, Pharaoh decides to kill all newborn Israelite boys. Al-Ṭabarī includes three different versions of the beginning of the Moses story in his Tārīkh, and in each version the prediction is based on a different source: an astrological observation, a dream, and an ancient prophecy from Israelite literary tradition.

In the first version of the beginning of the Moses story, Pharaoh is approached by his diviners with a prediction based on their astrological skill.

When Moses’ time approached, the astrologers and diviners of Pharaoh came to him and said: “We want you to know that we find according to our lore that a child born to the Banū Isrāʾīl, the time of whose birth draws near to you, will deprive you of your rule. He will vanquish you in your dominion, send you out of your land, and change your religion.” When they told him this, he ordered the slaying of every newborn male child who would be born among the Banū Isrāʾīl ... [Pharaoh] went so far in this that he almost wiped out all of them.27

In this version from the Tārīkh, Pharaoh is even crueler than in the Bible, for he not only kills the new-born Israelites but also tortures the pregnant mothers to have them miscarry.28

In the second version of the prediction which warns Pharaoh about Moses, Pharaoh is not approached by his diviners and astrologers, but has a dream.29 He dreams a fire comes from Jerusalem (Bayt al-Maqdis) which reaches the houses of Egypt (buyūt Miṣr), burning the Egyptians (al-Qibṭ, literally the Copts) but leaving the Banū Isrāʾīl, and destroying the houses of Egypt. A vision of a fire which will burn the oppressors but leave the righteous is apocalyptic, in the sense of a final verdict at the End of Time. The fire that destroys all of Egypt but discriminates in its destruction between Egyptians and Israelites is also reminiscent of some of the ten plagues that God sent to the Egyptians but which, according to the biblical text, did not harm the Jews: the Flies, the Death of Livestock, the Hail, the Darkness, the Slaying of the Firstborn. In the Tārīkh, the plague of the water which turns into blood affects only the Egyptians and not the Banū Isrāʾīl.30

26 Al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, i, 445, my italics.
27 Al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, i, 445–446, my italics.
28 Al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, i, 446.
29 Al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, i, 446–447.
30 Al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, i, 475; 484.
Just like Nebuchadnezzar in the Bible and the king of Egypt in the *Tārīkh*, Pharaoh calls for his “magicians, soothsayers, prognosticators and diviners” to interpret this dream. They explain as follows: “There will come from that land from which the Banū Isrāʾīl come, meaning Bayt al-Maqdis, a man in whose face one can read the destruction of Egypt.”  

In a third version of the beginning of the Moses story, the prediction that someone who will threaten Pharaoh’s rule shall be born among the Banū Isrāʾīl, is based on an ancient prophecy from Israelite tradition.

Pharaoh and his counselors conferred about what God had promised Abraham: that He would appoint among his descendants *prophets and kings*. Some of them said that the Banū Isrāʾīl were awaiting that, not doubting it. They had thought that it might be Joseph b. Jacob, but when he died they said, “God would not have promised Abraham that.” So Pharaoh said, “What do you think [we should do]?”... They deliberated together and reached a common conclusion: Pharaoh would send men carrying knives to circulate among the Banū Isrāʾīl; wherever they found a male infant, they would kill him.  

In all these three versions of the announcement of Moses’ coming, the prediction is cast not by foreigners, but by Pharaoh’s own diviners. Note further that an astrological prediction which is corroborated by an ancient prophecy from Jewish tradition is also found in the episode of Herod and the three Magi.

By coupling — in his versions of the Moses episode — the infanticide motif with the motif of prediction that someone will bring down the tyrant, as is done in the Herod episode, al-Ṭabarī strengthens the link between the Moses episode and the Herod episode, as well as with other episodes in which this combination of motifs occurs, episodes which deal with the coming of Muḥammad and are found later in the *Tārīkh* and which will be treated below. These correspondences between the Moses-Pharaoh and Jesus-Herod episodes imply that their main characters are manifestations or incarnations of the same archetype. That such a comparison between the Moses episode and later ones is intended, as well as such a conflation between Moses and later prophets, is indicated by the fact that all these three predictions not only foretell the end of the Moses story (Moses’ liberation of the Israelites from slavery and the drowning of Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea) but also announce much more destructive events to befall Egypt and Pharaoh, events that would only occur much later.

The first, astrological, prediction announces to Pharaoh that “a child born to the Israelites, the time of whose birth draws near to him” will do the following: he will not only “vanquish Pharaoh in his dominion” as Moses indeed did by destroying the tyrant’s army, but also “deprive Pharaoh of his rule, send him out of his land, and change his religion.” Likewise, Pharaoh’s dream is interpreted as heralding the arrival of a man coming from Jerusalem in whose face one can read “the destruction of Egypt.” The third prediction, the ancient Israelite prophecy, not only refers to the coming of Moses, but to the

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31 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, i, 447, my italics.
33 Other confrontations between tyrants and prophets were also adopted to fit this combination of infanticide and prediction motifs, for example the confrontation between Nimrod — one of Nebuchadnezzar’s forebears (see al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, i, 662) — and Abraham: al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, i, 254; 257. See also Schützinger, *Ursprung und Entwicklung*.  

appointment of a number of prophets and kings among the descendants of Abraham.

It is true that in the Tārīkh, God’s treatment of Egypt is harsher than in the Bible. In al-Ṭabarî’s text, Egypt is destroyed by the plagues: first by the flood, and then by the locusts, who even eat the iron nails of doors, until the houses of the Egyptians collapse, and it is specified that Pharaoh himself drowns along with his army in the Red Sea. However, Pharaoh’s religion, or that of his subjects, was only changed when the pagan Pharaonic Egyptians converted; first to Christianity and later to Islam. Pharaoh’s rule, or that of his successors — in short, Pharaonic rule in Egypt — ended when Egypt was integrated into the Byzantine empire or when it was conquered by Muslim invaders. Whom do Pharaoh’s dream interpreters refer to when they speak of a man who comes from Jerusalem in whose face one can read the destruction of Egypt? Do they intend Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad or a Muslim conqueror? Or is Moses conflated with his later counterparts into one person? In its description of the contents of the dream, the text calls the Pharaonic Egyptians al-Qibṭ, the Copts. This implies that the fire from the dream which burns the Qibṭ but leaves the Banū Isrāʾīl, symbolises Islam which overcomes or converts the Christian Egyptians, the descendants of the Pharaonic Egyptians, and leaves the descendants of Abraham (the Arab Muslims) untouched. Moses victory over Pharaoh is a foreboding of the final monotheist supremacy in Egypt.

Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel

The third ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamite interpreter’ dream in al-Ṭabarî’s Tārīkh is ascribed to Nebuchadnezzar, who is here an even more tyrannical ruler than in the Bible. Not only has he destroyed Jerusalem and led the Banū Isrāʾīl away in captivity, he has gone so far as to wipe out almost all of the Israelites as well as the Arabs, thereby echoing the genocidal acts of Pharaoh and Herod. According to the Tārīkh, Nebuchadnezzar has a dream in which he is hit by something which makes him forget what he has dreamt. He summons Daniel and his friends, who are “of the seed of the prophets” to interpret his dream. Daniel and his friends ask the king to tell them first what he has seen, but Nebuchadnezzar replies: “I do not remember. If you do not interpret it for me, I shall cut off your shoulders.” God reveals to Daniel and his friends what the king has dreamt and then interprets it for him. Nebuchadnezzar has dreamt of a statue, “its feet and legs of clay, its knees and thighs of copper, its belly of silver, the chest of gold, head and neck of iron.” In the dream, God then sent a rock from heaven, which smashed the statue and made the king forget what he

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34 Al-Ṭabarî, Tārīkh, i, 475.
35 Al-Ṭabarî, Tārīkh, i, 483.
36 Al-Ṭabarî, Tārīkh, i, 481.
37 Al-Ṭabarî, Tārīkh, i, 667–668.
38 Al-Ṭabarî, Tārīkh, i, 646.
39 Al-Ṭabarî, Tārīkh, i, 647; 649; 665.
40 Al-Ṭabarî, Tārīkh, i, 665.
41 Al-Ṭabarî, Tārīkh, i, 671–2.
42 The difference being that Nebuchadnezzar’s aggression against Israelites and Arabs is meted out as divine punishment for the disbelief of these two peoples.
dreamt. The layers of clay and different metals are the reigns of kings. The iron head and neck of the statue represent the realm of Nebuchadnezzar, more powerful than any before it. “The rock you saw, sent by God from heaven to smash it, points to a prophet God will send from heaven to smash it all, and power will revert unto Him.”

After these three dreams by biblical tyrants, rulers over Egypt and Babylon from the days of Joseph, Moses and Daniel, al-Ṭabarī includes three dreams by post-biblical rulers: first an Arab king, and then the emperors that ruled the Byzantine and Sāsānian realms in the days of the prophet Muḥammad. These three post-biblical dreams are not interpreted by Jews but by Arabs, i.e. not by the descendants of Isaac but by those of Ishmael.

**DREAMS BY POST-BIBLICAL TYRANTS IN AL-ṬABARĪ’S TĀRĪKH**

**Rabī’a b. Naṣr and Saṭīḥ and Shiqq**

After the Egyptian Pharaoh and the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar, the next ruler in al-Ṭabarī’s Tārīkh to have a dream none of his advisors can interpret is an Arab king: Rabī’a b. Naṣr of the Lakhmid dynasty, ruler over Yemen. Rabī’a had a dream that alarmed him and continued to disquiet him... He sent out enquiries among the people of his kingdom and gathered together in his presence every soothsayer, magician, drawer of omens from the flight of birds and astrologer.

Echoing the behaviour of Nebuchadnezzar, Rabī’a wants his diviners to interpret his dream without telling them its contents, not because he has forgotten his dream like Nebuchadnezzar in the Tārīkh, but because he mistrusts his interpreters, like the Nebuchadnezzar of the Bible:

“If I recount it to you, I shall have no confidence that you will be able to tell me its correct interpretation; the only person who will know its correct interpretation is the one who already knows about the dream without my telling him.”

Note, however, that Rabī’a does not threaten to kill his diviners if they fail.

The diviners are incapable to fulfil this obviously impossible demand, but, just as one of Pharaoh’s advisors remembered the Jewish slave Joseph in prison, one of the men gathered by Rabī’a suggests that the king should send for Saṭīḥ and Shiqq, the best soothsayers (kuhhān) of their time. Where Saṭīḥ and Shiqq reside is not specified in the Tārīkh, but they come apparently from outside the king’s realm, as they were not among the diviners gathered from the far reaches of Rabī’a’s kingdom. The text does emphasise that Saṭīḥ and Shiqq are Arabs, as their tribal genealogies are given, showing that Saṭīḥ descended from Ghassān and Shiqq from Anmār, the son of Nizār, the progenitor of the Arab tribes of the North.

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43 Al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, i, 668.
44 Al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, i, 911–14.
45 According to Abū Zayd (Al-Ru’yā fi l-naṣṣ, 115) who deals with this dream as it is found in the Sīra of Ibn Ishāq, Saṭīḥ and Shiqq come from Mecca, i.e. from the same city as Muḥammad, the prophet whose coming they announce.
The first to arrive at Rabī‘a’s court is Saṭīḥ. As is fitting an Arab diviner and someone who knows the unknowable — like how the future will unfold or what somebody else has dreamt — Saṭīḥ addresses the king in rhymed prose, the language of the kāhin:

You saw in your dream a skull —
which came forth from the darkness —
and fell upon the lowlands descending to the sea —
and devoured there everything with a skull!

In a variant version recorded by al-Ṭabarī, it is not a ‘skull’ but ‘blazing coals’ that come from the darkness and devour everything with a skull. There are several similarities between this dream and earlier dreams treated in this article. Living things are devoured, as is the case in Pharaoh’s dream of cows devouring other cows. If we read ‘skull,’ then a single object destroys an entire land, as the single rock in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream destroys the statue that symbolised the reigns of great kings. If we read ‘blazing coals,’ then an apocalyptic fire destroys the dreamer’s country, as in Pharaoh’s dream of the fire coming from Jerusalem.

In any case, Saṭīḥ has managed to describe exactly what Rabī‘a has dreamt, and is also able to interpret it. Like Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, Rabī‘a’s dream foretells the succession of several reigns, ending with a reign that will last forever. Some sixty years after Rabī‘a’s time, black Abyssinians will invade and conquer Yemen. Seventy years later, a South Arabian king will expel the Abyssinians, but this king’s rule will also be cut short, this time by:

A prophet —
a pure one —
to whom the inspired revelation will come —
from on high.

Saṭīḥ explains that this prophet will be a descendant from Quraysh, and that “his dominion over his people shall last until the end of time.” When Rabī‘a asks Saṭīḥ if time will indeed come to an end, the latter replies that this will happen on the Day of Judgement, when the righteous will rejoice and the evildoers made wretched. This last part of the prediction — the coming of an Arab prophet, his eternal rule, and a day of reckoning — does not appear to upset the king. Contrary to Herod, or Pharaoh in the Tārīkh, Rabī‘a does not decide on any megalomaniac but ultimately vain genocide to prevent the coming of this prophet.

Later, when Shiqq arrives at Rabī‘a’s court, the king conceals from him what Saṭīḥ has said, to see whether the two interpretations will agree. Shiqq, although using different wording for his rhymed prose, is also able to tell what the king has dreamt and arrives at exactly the same interpretation. Realising that the Abyssinians will indeed conquer Yemen, Rabī‘a decides to migrate with his sons to Iraq, where he settles at the city of al-Ḥīra.

This story not only announces the coming of the prophet Muḥammad and the rule of Islam, but also predicts other important events in the history of the Arabian peninsula, connected to the struggle between the two major empires of the day: the Byzantines and the Persians. These events are the conquest of Yemen by the Abyssinians, backed by Byzantium, and their subsequent expulsion by a Yemenite king, backed by the Persians.
Finally, it offers a motivation for the migration of the Lakhmids all the way from Yemen up to Iraq, where they became a vassal state for the Persian empire.

Important is here that we have an Arab king whose dream is interpreted by Arab diviners, using Arabic rhymed prose, predicting the coming of an Arab prophet. Arab history is moulded on the example of biblical history: An Arab king echoes the behaviour of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar, and the coming of Muḥammad is heralded by events similar to those surrounding the careers of Joseph and Daniel. Moreover, the prediction that had already been announced to Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar, that the tyrants will be replaced and an everlasting kingdom be founded by “someone from the progeny of Abraham,” is here specified: this son of Abraham will be a son of the latter’s descendant Quraysh, and therefore turns out to be not a Jew, but an Arab.

**Kisrā Anūsharwān and Saṭīḥ**

After the Arab king Rabī’a, it is the turn for a Persian king to be told that his empire will collapse and be conquered: the Sāsānian emperor Kisrā Anūsharwān, also known as Khosrau I or Chosroes the Great, who ruled from 531–579 AD. During a very special night — in Arabia, Muḥammad is born — something befalls this most celebrated of Sāsānian rulers. At first, it is unclear from the text whether what happens to Anūsharwān is a dream. The text starts with relating that on the night the Prophet was born, a number of events occurred in the Sāsānian realm. The palace of Anūsharwān was shaken, and fourteen pinnacles of it fell down; the sacred fire of Fārs, that had been burning for a thousand years, extinguished; a lake in the northwest of the realm sank into the earth; and the emperor’s high priest dreamt that Arab horses crossed the Tigris, chasing before them refractory camels.

Then, after listing a number of events that apparently actually took place, the text rather abruptly introduces a subject that witnessed these events, or only dreamt that they happened, by stating: *fa-lamma aṣbaḥa Kisrā afzaʿahu mā raʾā*. The translator of this portion of the *Tārīkh* has rendered this line as: “The next morning, Kisrā was affrighted by what he had seen,” but the Arabic could very well mean: “When Kisrā woke up, he was affrighted by what he had dreamt.” Two key verbs in this phrase are ambiguous: *aṣbaḥa* can mean ‘to be in the morning’ as well as ‘to wake up,’ and *raʾā* can mean either ‘to see’ or ‘to dream.’

This would leave the reader three options:

- The events (the extinguishing of the Fire, etcetera) occurred in reality, and Anūsharwān saw them take place with his own eyes while he himself was wide awake
- The events did not actually take place, but were only dreamt by the emperor
- The events did happen in reality and were simultaneously dreamt about by Anūsharwān

This part of the text presents four arguments in favour of the view that Anūsharwān saw

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47 On the disappearance of this lake, and other sources that quote this dream, see Okhravi and Djamali, *The Missing Ancient Lake of Saveh.*
these events in a dream. When the verb raʾā is connected with night, as is unambiguously the case here, this is a marker to read it as ‘to dream.’ In addition, to be affrighted or worried in the morning by the object of raʾā is a stock effect of dreams, as can be seen from the list of motifs occurring in the ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamite interpreter’ dream (see below). Being frightened upon awaking occurs after the dreams of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar in both Bible and Tārīkh, as well as after the dreams of the post-biblical rulers Rabīʿa and Heraclius.

If the king had seen the events taking place in reality before his own eyes while he was awake, he firstly must have been able to be at different locations that same night: in his palace at the bank of the Tigris, at the lake in the Northwest of his realm, and at the site of the sacred Fire in Fārs. Secondly, he would have been worried the very moment he saw these sites fall into ruin, not the following morning as one does after awaking from a frightening dream.

The later events of that morning offer additional evidence that Anūsharwān did see these things in a dream, and that they simultaneously took place in reality. That the events took place in reality is shown by the fact that a letter arrives at court telling the news of the disappearance of the lake. This letter increases the emperor’s anguish, because it affirms a nightmare that up to that moment might only have been a delusion. That Anūsharwān had a dream is suggested by the fact that the high priest says to his king “I too... had a dream that same night” (wa-ana... qad raʾaytu fī hādhihi l-layla...ruʾyā).

Although the text specifies that the emperor himself was the most knowing of all his assembled advisors about the meaning of these two dreams and the destructive events that took place in his realm, Anūsharwān asks his high priest about the latter’s dream, who interprets it as referring to “an event which is issuing from the Arabs.”

When it was the night in which the Messenger of God was born, the Aywān of Kisrā was shaken and fourteen pinnacles of it fell down, the fire of Fārs, which had not previously been extinguished for a thousand years, was extinguished, the waters of the lake of Sāwah sank into the earth, and the Chief Mōbadh saw in a dream refractory camels running before noble Arab horses which had crossed the Tigris and had spread through those districts of it.

The next morning [when he woke up], Kisrā was affrighted by what he had seen [dreamt]. He resolutely held himself back in patience, but then he considered that he ought not to conceal it from his ministers and Marzbāns... When they were all gathered together around him, he told them why he had sent for them and what he had summoned them for. While they were engaged in all this, a letter arrived bringing news of the extinguishing of the fire, so that his distress of spirit increased.

The Chief Mōbadh said, “I too — may God grant the king righteousness — had a dream that same night,” and he recounted to him his dream about the camels. The king said, “What is this thing, O Chief Mōbadh,” although he himself was the most knowing of all of them about the real meaning of that. The Chief Mōbadh replied, “An event which is issuing from the Arabs.”

Because the interpretation of these dreams and events apparently concerns the Arabs, the Persian emperor decides to ask for the help of an outsider: his Arab vassal in southern

48 Al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, i, 981, slightly adapted translation.
Iraq, a descendant of Rabīʿa b. Naṣr and the Lakhmids who had migrated there after Rabīʿa had his dream announcing the Abyssinian invasion. Anūsharwān writes to this vassal “Send to me a man who is knowledgeable about what I wish to ask him,” an impossible demand reminiscent of Nebuchadnezzar and Rabīʿa’s order to their diviners “Tell me what I dreamt and interpret it for me.” In reply to this letter, the vassal sends a certain ʿAbd al-Masīḥ al-Ghassānī to the Persian court, an Arab Christian, as his first name ‘Servant of the Messiah’ implies. Anūsharwān tells this man what he has dreamt, but ʿAbd al-Masīḥ is not able to interpret the dream, and refers the emperor to a third Arab who lives even farther away: “A maternal uncle of mine who lives in the elevated regions of Syria, called Saṭīḥ, will have knowledge about it.”

Anūsharwān sends ʿAbd al-Masīḥ to this uncle of his. After an arduous camel journey he finds Saṭīḥ, the very same soothsayer who interpreted the dream of Rabīʿa b. Naṣr, and who is now on the verge of death. As a true Arab, ʿAbd al-Masīḥ addresses his uncle with an Arabic qaṣīda, and Saṭīḥ, as a genuine Arab soothsayer, replies him in Arabic rhymed prose. Saṭīḥ tells his nephew what has happened during that eventful night in the Persian realm, and starts to interpret these events. After some vague statements that apparently refer to the future Muslim conquest of Persia, Saṭīḥ comes to the point:

Kings and queens from among them (i.e. the last Sāsānids) shall reign —
according to the number of pinnacles (i.e. those fallen from the Aywān) —
and everything whose coming is decreed will come.\(^{49}\)

After uttering these words, Saṭīḥ expires on the spot. Back at the Persian court, ʿAbd al-Masīḥ confronts Anūsharwān with Saṭīḥ’s interpretation. According to the translators of this passage, the emperor is rather relieved by Saṭīḥ’s forecast, even considers it auspicious, for he deems a total of fourteen Sāsānian successors (corresponding to the fourteen fallen pinnacles) quite a dynasty, not realising that the number 14 also symbolises that ten of these successors will rule for a total of only four years:

\[^{50}\] ilā an yamlika minnā arbaʿat ʿashara malikan qad kānat umūr fa-malaka minhum ʿashara arbaʿ sinīn — “Once fourteen of us have reigned, things will happen!” Ten of them, however, reigned for a total of four years only.

Compare Nöldeke: “Bis vierzehn von uns geherrscht haben, giebt’s noch allerlei!” Nun haben von ihnen aber zehn zusammen nur 4 Jahre regiert.\(^{51}\)

Such blindness on the part of Anūsharwān, however, does not fit well with the earlier statement that the Persian emperor was, even before the high priest told him his dream, the most knowing of all his assembled advisors about the real meaning of these events (a’lamuhum ʿinda nafsihi bi-dhālik). Maybe the words qad kānat umūr, “things may be,” simply express the emperor’s acceptance of the fate of his dynasty. In any case, whether the emperor accepts his fate in all his wisdom or falsely believes the forecast to be auspicious, Anūsharwān does not act upon this prediction.

\(^{49}\) Al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, i, 983.

\(^{50}\) Al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, i, 984.

\(^{51}\) Nöldeke, Geschichte der Perser und Araber, 301. Nöldeke compares Anūsharwān’s uncalled-for relief with Hezekiah’s misplaced optimism when the prophet Jeremiah announces the Babylonian exile.
To interpret the events of a portentous night — his own dream and that of his high priest as well as strange natural events that took place throughout his realm — a Persian emperor, one of the mightiest of the Sāsānian dynasty, asks Arab foreigners for help. They explain to him that his empire shall end and will be conquered by the followers of an Arab prophet, who was born on that very same night.

**Heraclius and Abū Sufyān b. Ḥarb**

In al-Ṭabarī’s *Tārīkh*, the final confrontation between a pagan tyrant and an Abrahamite interpreter is the meeting between the Byzantine emperor Heraclius and the Arab Abū Sufyān b. Ḥarb. All previous episodes figured a confrontation between a pagan tyrant at one side and an interpreter that was Israelite (Joseph and Daniel) or Arab (Shiqq and Saṭīḥ) on the other. Israelites and Arabs were seen as belonging to one and the same group, both descendants of Abraham and both believers in a single God. In this final confrontation, however, all three monotheist religions play a role, and are clearly distinguished from each other: a Christian ruler, the Jewish people, and an Arab prophet of Islam.

Half a century after the night that shook the palace of the Sāsānids, Muḥammad has grown up, his prophetic mission has begun, and he has migrated to Medina, from where he has started to harass the trade caravans of his Meccan enemies, the Qurashī elite. In the annalistic part of his *Tārīkh*, in the year 6 after the Prophet’s migration, al-Ṭabarī has inserted a report told by the leader of Muḥammad’s Qurashī opponents: Abū Sufyān b. Ḥarb, the father of the man that would later become the first Umayyad caliph, Muʿāwiya. Abū Sufyān relates that he travelled with a trade caravan to Gaza at the time that the Byzantine emperor Heraclius had just gained a major victory over his Sāsānian rivals. In this campaign, Heraclius had reconquered Jerusalem from Persian occupation and recaptured the Cross. To thank God for his victory, the emperor walks on foot from Ḥims to Jerusalem, where he has a dream.

When he reached Jerusalem and performed his worship — with him were his patriarchs and the nobles of the Romans — he arose troubled one morning, turning his gaze to the sky. His patriarchs said to him, “By God, you have arisen troubled this morning, O King.” “Yes,” he replied, “I was shown in a dream last night that the kingdom of the circumcision will be victorious.”

Heraclius advisors, “his patriarchs and the nobles of the Romans,” fail at correctly

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53 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, i, 1562. Note the resemblance of this passage with Mat. 2:1–4: “Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.”

54 See note 67 below.
interpreting their emperor’s dream. They assume that a “kingdom of circumcision” refers to a kingdom of the Jews (al-Yahūd). To prevent such a kingdom from coming into existence, they advise Heraclius to kill all his Jewish subjects, just like Pharaoh and Herod had decided to kill the Jews in the days of Moses and Jesus: “Send to all over whom you have authority in your lands and command them to behead all the Jews (Yahūd) under their control, and be rid of this care.” While they are discussing this flawed interpretation and their equally flawed countermeasures, a foreigner is brought in from the outside, led by a messenger from the king of Buṣrā (the city in Syria where the young Muḥammad was recognised as a prophet by the Christian monk Baḥīrā, and the first Byzantine town to be captured by the Muslims). The messenger leads an Arab, a man of “the people of sheep and camels” who has important things to tell the emperor about the situation in Arabia.

Just like the Lakhmid king had sent an Arab to the Persian emperor Anūsharwān to help him interpret his dream, here the king of Buṣrā sends an Arab to the Byzantine emperor Heraclius who will be instrumental in correctly explaining his dream. The Arab reports: “A man has appeared among us claiming to be a prophet.” When Heraclius hears this, he orders to strip the Arab, who appears to be circumcised. The emperor cries out, in a moment of recognition: “This, by God, is what I was shown in the dream; not what you say!”

Heraclius sends this Arab away, but orders his police force to turn Syria upside down and search for another Arab more closely related to the prophet. This is how they find the narrator of this report, Abū Sufyān, and his traders, who were still at Gaza. Heraclius’ police take them to Jerusalem. On the emperor’s question: “Which of you is closest to him in kinship?”, Abū Sufyān, a Qurashi like Muḥammad, steps forward. He remarks in an aside: “I swear to God, I never saw a man I should consider more astute than this uncircumcised one — Heraclius that is.”

Heraclius starts questioning Abū Sufyān about his people’s prophet. The Qurashi leader, as an unbeliever and as Muḥammad’s enemy, does his best to minimise the Prophet’s importance: “O King,“ I said, “do not worry about him. His importance is too small to affect you.” Heraclius, however, knows what to look for in the behaviour of a true prophet. When asked who make up Muḥammad’s followers, Abū Sufyān replies that they are only the weak, the poor and women, thereby inadvertently disclosing the parallels between the first followers of Muḥammad and those of Jesus. Heraclius concludes:

“I asked you about his followers, and you stated that they were weak, poor, juveniles, and women; but such have been the followers of the prophets in every age... And so, if you have told me the truth about him, he shall surely wrest from me this very ground under my feet. Would that I were with him that I might wash his feet!”

The Christian emperor Heraclius foresees that Muḥammad and his followers will become so mighty that they will eventually conquer the ground where this interrogation takes place, Jerusalem, the Holy City, not only of Judaism, but also of Jesus and Christianity. This foreknowledge that parts of his realm will be taken away from him by an Abrahamite prophet, does not seem to upset the emperor, for he concludes: “Would that I were with him that I might wash his feet!”, another reference to Jesus, who washed the feet of his

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55 Al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, i, 1563.
56 Al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, i, 1564.
disciples the night before he was crucified,57 and an expression of how deeply the emperor of Byzantium was willing to humiliate himself in his recognition of a prophet from a people of sheep and camels.

Before the coming of Islam, everybody had expected that monotheist prophecies about a descendant of Abraham who would found God’s kingdom on earth, were predictions announcing the coming of a Jewish prophet, king or saviour, as had been the case with Moses and Jesus. Only when Islam arrived did people recognise that, all this time, they had been tragically blind and had been looking for this man among the wrong branch of Abraham’s offspring. For it turned out that the prophecy had announced the coming of a prophet and rulers born among the Arabs, not the descendants of Abraham’s son Isaac, but the descendants of his son Ishmael.

It is this general neglect of the Arab Abrahamites that makes Heraclius’ advisors assume their ruler’s dream predicts a kingdom of the Jews. The dream image of a kingdom of circumcision is well chosen, for male circumcision is the mark that Jews and Arabs have in common, the proof that they are related to each other and, as descendants of Abraham, share a common heritage. Circumcision, moreover, is the sign of the covenant that God had established with Abraham, in which he promised that he would appoint among his descendants kings.58

Circumcision, therefore, is the sign that connects Arabs with non-Arab Muslims; that connects Arabs and Muslims with Jews; that connects Arabs, Muslims and Jews with the Old Testament prophets and patriarchs, but that leaves out the Christians. Christians might be fellow monotheists, but as uncircumcised ones they are not part of the covenant God established with Abraham. Heraclius might be a wise and believing emperor, he is not a descendant of Abraham, and therefore can never be one of the divinely legitimised rulers God promised to appoint among the offspring of this forefather. This brings us to the figure of Heraclius.

As the ruler of a large empire who has an alarming dream that his incapable advisors fail to interpret correctly, Heraclius assumes here the role of the tyrant in the ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamite confrontation.’ However, instead of being blind, arrogant, unjust and pagan — such as his predecessors the king of Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar and Herod — Heraclius is wise, humble and believing; not exactly an evil tyrant, but rather an ideal ruler. The emperor’s humility, for instance, is apparent from the fact that, to thank God for his victory over the Persians, he walks from Ḥims to Jerusalem on foot. In addition, the head of the Byzantine state expresses his wish to wash the feet of a prophet from a people of herdsmen.

Heraclius’ wisdom is furthermore apparent from the fact that it is he himself who understands the meaning of his own dream, whereas his advisors fail to interpret it correctly. In this episode, the ruler’s opponent, the foreign Abrahamite who is brought in from the outside, consists of two characters: the anonymous Arab sent to the court by the king of Buṣrā, and Abū Sufyān, transported there by the emperor’s police. Again it is stressed that these Abrahamites belong to “a people of sheep and camels,” as opposed to the sedentary and imperial court culture of the tyrant and his counsellors.

57 John 13:5.
However, in this episode it are not the Abrahamites who interpret the ruler’s dream. They merely, and rather despite themselves, provide clues that allow the perspicacious Heraclius to find the correct interpretation himself. It is the emperor who, apparently acting on a hunch, decides to strip the anonymous Arab. What follows is a moment of anagnorisis, where the hero suddenly recognises something of which he had been unaware up to that time; often the recognition, by way of a mark on the body of one of the other characters, that that person is a relative. Here the emperor recognises the Arab, by way of the mark of circumcision, to be a relative of Abraham, who had hitherto been neglected by all. It is Heraclius, in his wisdom, who knows what to ask for when interrogating Abū Sufyān, and who draws the correct conclusion that Muḥammad is a true prophet, worthy of his belief, and that his Arab kingdom of circumcision will become so victorious that it will eventually conquer Jerusalem and parts of his empire.

Why is it Heraclius, who, of all tyrants, has been chosen to play the role of the ‘good tyrant’ in the Islamic sources? Why was Muḥammad not recognised by, for example, a Persian king from the East, just as Jesus was, according to the tradition that sees the wise men from the gospel of Matthew as eastern kings. The answer appears to lie in the fact that Heraclius is a Christian tyrant: as ruler of the Byzantine empire he is the head of the Orthodox Church, God’s representative on earth, and therefore, in Islamic eyes, the leading authority of Christianity. In this episode, the Christian character of Heraclius and his rule is accentuated by various references to Jesus: the episode’s setting in Jerusalem, the emperor’s recent recapture of the Cross, and the motifs of the humble origin of the first converts and the washing of the feet.

To be legitimate, Islam, not only as an empire, but also as the third of three monotheist religions, needed the recognition of its immediate predecessor. Just as Jerusalem’s “chief priests and teachers of the law,” the leading authorities of Judaism in the time of Herod, endorsed the birth of Jesus as new king of the Jews, here the leading authority of Christianity, Heraclius, recognises the prophethood of Muḥammad and the future rule of Islam over Christian territories. As Nadia El-Cheikh concludes in her study on Muhammad and Heraclius, it was to add credibility to his recognition of Muḥammad that Heraclius was depicted as an exemplary emperor:

Heraclius, as presented by our sources, has all the attributes of an ideal ruler... This characterisation is essential to the task assigned to Heraclius in Arabic-Islamic sources, namely that of acknowledging the new faith preached by the prophet Muḥammad. For, in these sources, Heraclius served one cardinal function: It was with him, ... a man whose empire would survive Islam’s onslaught to long remain its main rival, that responsibility lay for recognising and acknowledging the prophetic character of the mission of Muḥammad and the excellence of his umma.59

Interestingly, this image of Heraclius as the ‘good tyrant,’ is only found in the Islamic sources. In the Christian versions of this dream, Heraclius is as blind, arrogant and oppressive as the most evil of his predecessors, Herod and Pharaoh. In these Christian versions, it is not the advisors who fail, but Heraclius himself who is tragically blind, badly misunderstands his own dream, and orders all the Jews in his realm to be baptised. In

59 El-Cheikh, Muhammad and Heraclius, 9.
4. Tyrant Dreamers Face Abrahamic Interpreters

...exiles or massacres the Jews when they refuse to convert. These Christian versions present the subsequent Islamic conquests of parts of the Byzantine empire as God’s punishment for Heraclius’ sins, for example, according to a Coptic version in Arabic, his oppression of the Copts.

Whatever enticed Islamic authors like al-Ṭabarī to cast Heraclius in the image of a good tyrant, it led them to turn around the whole opposition between bad tyrant and good Abrahamic. While in previous episodes the Abrahamic were believing monotheists who saw far into the future, here they lack the wisdom to recognise their fellow Arab as a true prophet. The anonymous Arab, for example, states that there has appeared among them a man who ‘claims’ to be a prophet. Apparently, he is not sure whether to believe in this prophet himself.

That this anonymous Arab has more trouble in recognising an Arab prophet than a foreign Christian emperor is ironic. The irony is driven to the top, however, with the figure of Abū Sufyān. Every time a tyrant confronts an Abrahamic, he in fact confronts the ancestor, however distant, of another Abrahamic who will replace him as ruler over his dominion. In the case of Abū Sufyān, this ancestral relationship is especially poignant, as here the tables will be turned in the time of just one generation. It is Abū Sufyān’s own son, Mu‘āwiya, who, as the first Umayyad caliph, will rule over the Holy Land and other Byzantine provinces that formerly belonged to Heraclius. Abū Sufyān, at the time of this episode still Muḥammad’s arch-enemy, will eventually convert to Islam and father a line of caliphs.

The irony of this situation and the fact that the Qurashi leader is not yet aware of the future triumph of Islam and the glory that will befall his offspring, is heightened by the fact that Abū Sufyān himself, as the blind, evil character, tells this story in the first person and divulges to the reader many of his personal thoughts. This results in dramatic irony, where the reader knows more than the narrator and/or the character. Such an aside, for example, is Abū Sufyān’s remark: “I swear to God, I never saw a man I should consider more astute than this uncircumcised one — Heraclius that is.” Abu Sufyān uses the expression ankar min dhālík al-aghlaf, ‘more astute than this uncircumcised one,’ to grudgingly admit

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60 See The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar with its Continuations in the translation of Wallace-Hadrill; another Latin version is found in the works of the German chronicler Otto Freising.
61 Van Donzel, The Dream of Heraclius.
63 See also Leder, The Use of Composite Form, 135.
64 The verb nakira has the opposite meanings of ‘to be stupid’ and ‘to be astute.’ The adjective nakir means ‘possessing intelligence mixed with cunning and forecast’ with a female form nakrā’, but according to Lane “ankar is not applied to a man in that sense” (Lexicon, 2850–51). However, Michael Fishbein (The History of al-Ṭabarī, viii) and Guillaume (The Life of Muhammad, 654) translate ankar here as ‘more astute’ and ‘more shrewd’ respectively. El-Cheikh also reads ‘more shrewd’ and comments: “That Abū Sufyān, one of the sharpest pre-Islamic personalities, is chosen to utter these words testifies to the strong tradition upholding the astuteness of the Byzantine emperor” (Muhammad and Heraclius, 7). I would argue that just as the words put in Abū Sufyān’s mouth play with the double meaning of aghlab (Heraclius is uncircumcised in the flesh, but not uncircumcised in the heart) they also form a pun on the double meaning of ankar: Heraclius is not ignorant, as
his admiration for the intelligence of his opponent. For an uncut foreigner, Heraclius is not that dense. The irony for the reader is that in this episode the blind, evil Abrahamite has to recognise the wisdom of the good tyrant. Yet the words chosen by Abū Sufyān have an even deeper meaning. The pejorative *aghlab* literally means ‘uncircumcised,’ but metaphorically it can also mean ‘covered from hearing and accepting the truth’ as in Qurʾān 2:88 *qālū qulūbunā ghulf*, where the stubborn unbelievers say: “Our hearts are uncircumcised.”\(^{65}\) In the Qurʾānic contexts of Q 2:87–88 and Q 4:153–157, someone who is *aghlab* fails to recognise the signs of prophethood. The dramatic irony is here that whereas Heraclius is indeed physically uncircumcised, he is not mentally *aghlab*: Heraclius does recognise the signs of prophethood. Abū Sufyān, on the other hand, while circumcised in the literal sense, is at this moment still uncircumcised in heart: unable to recognise Muḥammad as a prophet.

By insulting Heraclius with the ambiguous term *aghlab*, Abū Sufyān again highlights the circumcision motif. Unwittingly, the Qurashī stresses the fact that although Heraclius is a monotheist who believes in Muḥammad, and he himself a pagan and the Prophet’s enemy, Abū Sufyān is a physically circumcised descendant of Abraham, while Heraclius is not. In as much as God has chosen the Abrahamites to rule the earth, this means that Heraclius’ star is predestined to set, while Abū Sufyān’s star is destined to rise.

**DISCUSSION**

On the basis of the ten examples discussed, we can discern several narrative motifs that recur in the ‘tyrant vs. interpreter’ dream episodes. The examples are summarised in what follows.\(^{66}\)

The morning after his dream, the tyrant is alarmed. This motif is expressed by a formula:

**Bible:**
- Pharaoh: “In the morning his mind was troubled.”
- Nebuchadnezzar: “His mind was troubled and he could not sleep.”

**Tārīkh:**
- The king of Egypt: *raʾā ruʿyā ḥālathu* “He had a dream which terrified him.”
- Nebuchadnezzar: *qad aʿjabahu mā rāʾa* “He was amazed by what he had dreamt.”
- Rabīʿa b. Naṣr: *raʾā ruʿyā ḥālathu wa-faẓiʿa biḥā* “He had a dream that alarmed him and continued to disquiet him.”
- Anūsharwān: *fa-lamma aṣbaḥa Kisrā afẓaʿahu mā rāʾa* “When he woke up, Kisrā was affrighted by what he had dreamt.”
- Heraclius: *aṣbaḥa dhāt ghadāt mahmuʿman* “He arose troubled one morning.”

The tyrant summons his diviners to interpret his dream. This motif is expressed by a formula:

\(^{65}\) Lane, *Lexicon*, 2284. Compare the many biblical parallels about circumcised (Deu. 10:16, 30:6, Jer. 4:4, Rom. 2:29) and uncircumcised hearts (Lev. 26:41, Jer. 9:25–6, Ez. 44:7, 44:9 and Acts 7:51).

\(^{66}\) Appendix 1 and 2 schematically present the expressions and events discussed here.
4. Tyrant Dreamers Face Abrahamite Interpreters

Bible:
- Pharaoh: “So he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt.”
- Nebuchadnezzar: “So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed.”
- Herod: “When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law...”

Tārīkh:
- The king of Egypt: Fa-jama’a l-saḥara wa-l-kahana wa-l-ḥāzza wa-l-qāfa “He assembled his magicians, soothsayers, diviners, and prognosticators.”
- Pharaoh: Fa-da’ā l-saḥara wa-l-kahana wa-l-qāfa wa-l-ḥāzza “He called for the magicians, soothsayers, prognosticators and diviners.”
- Rabī’a b. Naṣr: Fa-lam yada’ kāhinan wa-lā sāḥiran wa-lā ʿāifan wa-lā munajjiman illā jama’ahu ilayhi “He gathered together in his presence every soothsayer, magician, drawer of omens from the flight of birds and astrologer.”
- Anūsharwān: wuzarāʾuhu wa-marāzibatuhu... wa-jamaʿahum ilayhi “His ministers and Marzbāns... and gathered them around him.”
- Heraclius: baṭāriqatuhu wa-ashrāf al-Rūm “His patriarchs and the nobles of the Romans”

The tyrant orders his diviners to tell him what he has dreamt.

The tyrant threatens to kill his diviners if they fail.

The diviners are unable to tell the tyrant what he has dreamt or to interpret his dream.

Someone at the tyrant’s court remembers an Abrahamite foreigner skilled in dream interpretation who is brought in from the outside.

The foreigner succeeds where the diviners failed, and predicts that:
- harm will be done to the tyrant and his people;
- the tyrant’s rule will end;
- an Abrahamite prophet will replace the tyrant;
- this prophet and his offspring will rule until the end of time.

Two opposite and mutually exclusive reactions by the tyrant to this prediction are found:

The tyrant is full of respect for the wisdom and beliefs of the interpreter and his people:
- he appoints the interpreter as ruler over parts of his own kingdom;
- he admits that the religion of the interpreter is the best of all religions.

The tyrant tries to avert the coming of the prophet by killing the newborn boys of the Abrahamites.

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67 According to Lane (Lexicon, 217–8), baṭrīq, pl. baṭāriqa means ‘leader of the Roman army,’ while biṭrik, pl. baṭārika can also mean ‘leader of the Christians, patriarch’ or ‘chief of the Magians.’ (The Arabic is a rendering of Latin patricius and/or Greek πατριαρχης.) There are several arguments to assume that the word is intended here in its meaning of religious leader. Except for Anūsharwān, who assembles his marzbāns or Sāsānian warlords, all rulers in this scheme consult spiritual rather than military advisors. Heraclius, moreover, is cast here as a latter-day Herod, who is also advised by religious instead of military leaders: “Magi from the East” and Jerusalem’s “chief priests and teachers of the law” (Matthew 2:1–4). See also Leder, Heraklios erkennt den Propheten, 16.
In the second case, the tyrant’s pre-emptive actions are to no avail. The prophet that was foretold survives and replaces the tyrant as ruler over his kingdom.

There are three main characters in this type of dream: the tyrant, his diviners, and the interpreter.

The tyrant, full of worldly might, is evil, blind and arrogant. His tyranny appears from several of his actions: he gives his diviners a command which is impossible to fulfil: to tell their ruler what he has dreamt; he threatens to kill them if they fail; and finally, to avert his dream from coming true, he commits genocide on innocent children. The fact that the tyrant does not want to accept his destiny is a sign of his arrogance. The extreme scale of his actions — summon all the diviners in his realm to interpret one dream, kill all the newborn Abrahamite boys to prevent a single one of them from growing up — is a sign of the tyrant’s might. At the same time, these extreme actions emphasise the weakness of his worldly powers in the face of God and destiny, and render the tyrant’s eventual downfall even more poignant.

The tyrant’s diviners are incapable: they are unable to reveal to their ruler what his dream means, either because they simply do not understand it, or because they do not dare to tell their ruler the truth, out of fear of being punished for bringing bad news.

The interpreter is the opposite of both tyrant and diviners. Where the tyrant is the sovereign over a large sedentary empire, with thousands of subjects at his command, the interpreter is on his own, a foreigner in the tyrant’s realm. Where the diviners fail and act cowardly, the single interpreter succeeds and dares to speak the terrible truth to the tyrant in the presence of all his advisors. While the tyrant and his advisors are blind pagans, the interpreter believes in one God and sees the truth. The tyrant’s eventual downfall mirrors the ascension of the interpreter and his people.

In the ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamite interpreter’ dream, there is a clear-cut opposition between good (the interpreter) and evil (the tyrant). The interpreter is the hero, who starts as the underdog: he is from a humble background, his people are shepherds, he himself might even be a slave or a prisoner. The tyrant starts as his arch-enemy: unjust and all-powerful, he uses his worldly might to oppress the interpreter and his people. Single-handedly, however, the underdog interpreter is able to succeed where all the tyrant’s helpers failed, and consequently wins the tyrant’s respect, or defeats him.

The fact that the monotheist interpreter succeeds where the pagan diviners fail, suggests that dream interpretation is superior to other forms of divination, such as those practiced by pagan sorcerers or astrologers. Moreover, correct interpretation of dreams is not just a question of exceptional human intelligence; it is a prophetic, God-given skill. The quintessential biblical interpreters of dreams, Joseph and Daniel, receive their interpretations directly from God, and whereas Daniel is a prophet already in the Bible, Joseph is one of the major prophets of Islam.

At a certain moment in the development of the ‘tyrant vs. interpreter’ dream, this interpreter with prophetic skills splits up into two distinct characters: an Abrahamite

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68 Genesis 41:15–6: “Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I had a dream, and no-one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.’ ‘I cannot do it,’ Joseph replied to Pharaoh, ‘but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.’”
interpreter and an Abrahamite prophet, whose coming is announced by the interpreter. It is the prophet, rather than the interpreter, to whom the attention shifts and who becomes the true hero of the story. It is the prophet’s rise from misery — born in a stable, misunderstood by his fellow tribesmen — to greatness which provides the mirror image to the tyrant’s demise.

**Motif Repetition: A way to hint that Muḥammad is a legitimate successor to earlier prophets**

By way of motif repetition, the episodes about post-biblical prophets (Muḥammad) and post-biblical tyrants (Rabīʿa b. Naṣr, Anūsharwān, Heraclius) are linked to biblical episodes. This suggests that al-Ṭabarī’s *Ṭārīkh* is a sequel to the Old and New Testaments, and that the history of the Muslim community forms a continuation of the *Heilsgeschichte* depicted in the Bible. Both Bible and *Ṭārīkh* deal with the descendants of Abraham, whom God elected as His people. The Bible deals with the descendants of Abraham’s son Isaac, the Jews, while the *Ṭārīkh* focuses on the descendants of Abraham’s other son Ishmael, the Arabs. Characters of the *Ṭārīkh*, such as the ‘Abbāsid caliphs, are the successors to the characters of the Bible, such as the prophets and patriarchs. In the words of Ulrika Mårtensson:

> Al-Ṭabarī wrote his history as ‘The True New Testament’ to make the Prophet Muḥammad and the caliphate the fulfillment of the Hebrew Bible’s prophecies of a Saviour and a kingdom of peace and justice.69

In this light, Islam is the legitimate successor of the earlier monotheist religions Judaism and Christianity. As expressed by Uri Rubin in his *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muḥammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims*:

> Medieval Islam was preoccupied with its own status in the world’s history, trying to establish itself as a worthy successor to other monotheistic communities which came under its control, mainly the Jews and Christians.70

In a similar vein, Rudolf Sellheim argues that Muslim historians used biblical motifs in order to address their Christian and Jewish subjects and convince them that the rule of Islam was legitimate. Sellheim discusses the work of Ibn Isḥāq, whose biography of the Prophet was originally the second part of a much larger work containing four volumes entitled respectively: I: *The Beginning*, II: *The Life of the Prophet*, III: *The Conquests* and IV: *The Caliphs*. Judging by the titles of the three volumes that have been lost, this text was similar in subject to al-Ṭabarī’s *Ṭārīkh*. Speaking of Ibn Isḥāq, Sellheim states:

> Für ihn bildet das Erscheinen des Islam Fortsetzung und Schluss der ‘heiligen Geschichte’ der Juden und Christen; er ordnet die Geschichte des Propheten und des neuen Glaubens in die Geschichte der göttlichen Offenbarung ein, welche selbstverständlich mit Adam beginnt... Eine solche Konzeption war aber zugleich eine Legitimation für das arabische Chalifat, welche für sich selbst sprach.71

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69 See the abstract of Mårtensson’s PhD thesis entitled *The True New Testament: Sealing the Heart’s Covenant in al-Ṭabarī’s Ta’rīkh al-Rusul wa’l-Mulūk*.


That al-Ṭabarī incorporated biblical material into his *Tārīkh* is nothing new, just as it is common knowledge that Muhammad was presented as the successor to earlier prophets. My contribution to the discussion is to show that this image is created by way of motif repetition. The reuse of known motifs allows the narrator to refrain from stating in his own voice: “Muḥammad is the legitimate successor to earlier prophets,” or “Muḥammad is comparable to earlier prophets.” Instead, by incorporating motifs from the stories about earlier prophets in his story of Muḥammad, he only suggests to the reader the possibility of comparing the Prophet of Islam to these biblical figures. The narrator leaves it to the reader to actually make this comparison himself, as he leaves it to the reader to draw his own conclusions on the basis of such a comparison. Motif repetition is therefore an indirect way to express the notion of Muhammad’s biblical inheritance. Generally speaking, the reuse of motifs is a strategy to indirectly link, compare and judge events or actors. For a narrator such as the primary narrator of al-Ṭabarī’s *Tārīkh*, who has to abstain, for one reason or another, from directly linking, comparing and judging events in his own words, motif repetition is a strategy which allows him to indirectly steer the reader’s interpretation.

Apparently, even in the pre-Islamic part of his *Tārīkh*, where Tabari had not yet restrained himself by the strict catalogue structure of unconnected events but had the freedom to tell longer stories, he saw it fit to adopt indirect narrative strategies.

Repetition and Change: The opposition between Tyrant and Abrahamite gradually diminishes

By way of the repeated use of motifs from the cluster of motifs connected to the ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamite interpreter’ dream, al-Ṭabarī suggests that history repeats itself every time a true prophet is sent by God. Time and again, each prophet has to oppose the tyrant of his day, who appears as a reincarnation of the tyrants that opposed the previous prophets. However, in the course of pre-Islamic history as told in the *Tārīkh*, there is not only repetition, but also change. In the course of two millennia and more than a thousand pages in the text, the opposition between evil tyrant and good interpreter gradually diminishes. In the *Tārīkh*, Pharaoh is the epitome of evil tyranny. He forces God’s people, the Abrahamites, into slavery, and, refusing in his blindness and arrogance to accept his destiny, massacres their innocent children and tortures their pregnant mothers. Nebuchadnezzar, at his turn, also enslaves the Abrahamites, but is slightly less evil: instead of murdering children, he threatens to cut off the shoulders of his Abrahamite diviners if they fail to fulfil an impossible command.

Rabīʿa b. Naṣr is already less oppressive and less arrogant. Although he gives his diviners an impossible command, he does not threaten to kill them if they fail. When announced that an Arab prophet will eventually replace him as ruler over the Yemen, Rabīʿa, himself an Arab, does not try to avert this destiny by a massacre of innocents, but fully accepts it. The only action the king undertakes is a wise one: to migrate north in order to escape the predicted Abyssinian invasion. Although Rabīʿa’s old dominion is conquered, he flourishes in his new homeland Iraq.

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72 See also Chehabi, ‘Li Kulli Firʿawn Musa’.
4. Tyrant Dreamers Face Abrahamite Interpreters

The next tyrant, Anūsharwān, is also wiser than his predecessors. Whereas none of the previous despots was able to interpret his own dream, the Sāsānian emperor appears to understand the meaning of at least a part of his dream, without the consultation of others. Anūsharwān gathers his advisors, not to ask them for an interpretation of the portentous events he has dreamt about, but because he deems it unwise to withhold this crucial information from his counsellors: “He considered that he ought not to conceal it from his ministers and Marzbāns.” When he asks his high priest for an interpretation of the latter’s dream, this is apparently only to obtain a confirmation of what the emperor already understood himself, for the text states that he asked his high priest about his dream, “although he himself was the most knowing of all of them about the real meaning of that.” Anūsharwān understands that the events he dreamt about concern a threat for his empire issuing from the Arabs.

In this light, Anūsharwān’s consultation of Saṭīḥ is nothing more than a quest for confirmation of what he already suspects, this time a confirmation by someone who is, on the one hand, a more objective outsider since he does not belong to the Persian court, and, on the other hand, as an Arab himself can provide more inside information. As stated above, Anūsharwān’s emotional reaction to the prophecy that his empire will collapse after fourteen of his successors have reigned, is unclear. In any case, the emperor does not turn to cruel oppression to prevent this prediction from coming true. In addition to Anūsharwān’s relative wisdom and the absence of acts of tyranny in this episode, Islamic sources often depict him as an example of good governance, whose cadastral and tax reforms should be considered as a model for Islamic rulers.

This development towards less cruel, less oppressive, less arrogant and more perspicacious tyrants culminates in the depiction of Heraclius as the ‘ideal ruler,’ who completely understands his own dream and almost converts to Islam. That al-Ṭabarī was not the only one to consider a later, Byzantine, tyrant as less evil than earlier despots is shown by the fact that Ibn al-Nadīm mentions in his Fihrist a book — now lost — called: The Story of the Tyrannical Babylonian and Egyptian Kings and the Wise Byzantine King.

Not only the role of the tyrant, but also that of his opponent, the interpreter, changes over time. In the Old Testament, the interpreters Joseph and Daniel are the heroes of their respective episodes. As reward for their correct interpretation of dreams, they rise from slavery to high positions in the service of the tyrant. Starting with the New Testament story of Herod, however, the true heroes are not the interpreters, but the prophets whose coming they announce: Jesus, and in the Tārīkh, Muḥammad. As a result of this shift in attention from interpreter to prophet, and as a consequence of the tyrants becoming wiser and better able to understand their own dreams, the importance of the interpreter gradually diminishes.

In the time of Rabīʿa b. Naṣr, the interpreters Saṭīḥ and Shiqq are still essential in explaining the king’s dream, but after they have fulfilled this function, they do not play

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73 As, for example, in the ‘Tale of the Righteousness of King Anūshirwān,’ Burton, Arabian Nights, v, 254–255.
74 Mårtensson, Discourse and Historical Analysis, 321–331.
any further role in their episode, unlike Joseph and Daniel in theirs. In the time of Anūsharwān, Saṭīḥ turns up again to provide an interpretation, but here not only the interpreter but also his interpretation are less important to the story, as they only provide a corroboration of what the tyrant has already grasped himself. Again the process culminates in the episode of Heraclius, where the two Abrahmites brought to the tyrant’s court do not actively interpret anything themselves, but only and inadvertently provide the ruler with clues to decode his own dream.

At the same time that the tyrants become wiser and the interpreters less important, the initial opposition or enmity between the tyrant and the Abrahmite diminishes as well. In their days, Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar were the outright enemies of the Abrahmites. However, Rabīʿa b. Naṣr, Anūsharwān and Heraclius have no hostile feelings towards the Arabs in general or towards the Arab interpreters brought to their courts, and they appear to completely accept the conquest of their realms by Islam and the followers of Muḥammad.
APPENDIX I: RECURRING EVENTS IN THE CONFRONTATIONS BETWEEN TYRANTS AND ABRAHAMITES

From top to bottom: sequence of episodes in Bible and Tārīkh
From left to right: sequence of events in each episode

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tyrant</th>
<th>Interpreter</th>
<th>...has a dream that is explained by a foreigner.</th>
<th>...orders infanticide.</th>
<th>Tyrant is defeated ...</th>
<th>...at the hand of the intended victim of the infanticide.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>Pharaoh</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>...has a dream that is explained by a foreigner.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharaoh</td>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>...orders infanticide.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebuchadnezzar</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>...has a dream that is explained by four foreigners.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In the distant future, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herod</td>
<td>Wise Men</td>
<td>Wise Men from the East</td>
<td>An astrological prediction is explained by three foreigners.</td>
<td></td>
<td>In this generation, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tārīkh</td>
<td>Pharaoh</td>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>astrological prediction/dream</td>
<td>...orders infanticide.</td>
<td>In the distant future, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebuchadnezzar</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>...has a dream that is explained by four foreigners.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In the distant future, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabi‘a b. Naṣr</td>
<td>Saṭīḥ and Shiqq</td>
<td>...has a dream that is explained by two foreigners.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In the distant future, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God, led by Muḥammad and his successors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anūsharwān</td>
<td>Saṭīḥ</td>
<td>...has a dream that is explained by two foreigners.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In the near future, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God, led by Muḥammad and his successors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heraclius</td>
<td>Abū Sufyān b. Ḥarb</td>
<td>...has a dream that is explained with the help of two foreigners.</td>
<td>in this generation, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God, led by Muḥammad and his successors.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note

1 Daniel and his three wise friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.
APPENDIX II: RECURRING EXPRESSIONS IN THE TYRANT VS. INTERPRETER DREAM EPISODES

From top to bottom: Sequence of episodes in Bible and Tārīkh
From left to right: Sequence of expressions in each episode

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tyrant</th>
<th>Interpreter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bible</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pharaoh</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>'...so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt...'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pharaoh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nebuchadnezzar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>'...So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers...'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Herod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wise Men from the East</td>
<td>'...and told them about the dream.'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tārīkh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The king of Egypt</strong></td>
<td>Pharaoh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>'...and asked them about his dream.'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nebuchadnezzar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>'He summoned Daniel, Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael.'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Tell us about it that we might let you know its interpretation.' He said, &quot;I do not remember.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Tyrant Dreamers Face Abrahamite Interpreters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tyrant Interpreter</th>
<th>Arab Text</th>
<th>Persian Text</th>
<th>Aramaic Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rabī‘a b. Naṣr</td>
<td>‘He had a dream that alarmed him and continued to disquiet him....’</td>
<td>‘...When he had this dream, he sent out enquiries among the people of his kingdom and gathered together in his presence every soothsayer, magician, drawer of omens from the flight of birds and astrologer....’</td>
<td>‘...Then he informed them, “I have had a dream ... so tell me its interpretation.”’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saṭīḥ and Shiqq</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tārīkh Anūsharwān</td>
<td>‘When he woke up, Kisrā was affrighted by what he had dreamt.’</td>
<td>‘His ministers and Marzbāns ... and gathered them around him. When they were all gathered around him...’</td>
<td>‘...he told them why he had sent for them ... “Send to me a man who is knowledgeable about what I wish to ask him.”’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saṭīḥ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heraclius Abū Sufyān b. Ḥarb</td>
<td>‘He arose troubled one morning, turning his gaze to the sky.’</td>
<td>‘With him were his patriarchs and the nobles of the Romans.’</td>
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