A handful of red earth: dreams of rulers in Tabari's history of prophets and kings

Weststeijn, J.K.

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TYRANT DREAMER
VS. ABRAHAMITE INTERPRETER

At the beginning of his eight-thousand-page Tārīkh, on page 389 to be exact, Tabari relates a story that is well known to Muslim as well as Jewish and Christian readers, as it is found in both the Koran and the Old Testament. It is the famous story of how the ruler of Egypt dreamt of seven fat cows that came out of the Nile, started grazing and were devoured by seven lean cows. None of the king’s diviners, in fact no one in the whole of Egypt, is able to interpret this dream, until one of the courtiers remembers someone who had been forgotten in the king’s prison, not an Egyptian, but a foreigner, a slave from a people of herdsmen. This prisoner is Joseph, descendant of Abraham, to whom God had promised that all of his offspring would be His chosen people. Joseph succeeds where all the king’s helpers failed, and interprets the dream: it announces seven years of abundance followed by seven years of drought. As a result of this interpretation, the king is full of respect for the wisdom and beliefs of Joseph and his people of herdsmen. The former slave and convict is made viceroy of Egypt. Two thousand years and almost twelve hundred pages later, Tabari presents his reader with a story about another Near Eastern ruler, the
Byzantine emperor Heraclius, which is set in the year 6 H. (AD 627), so six years after the prophet Muhammad had migrated from Mecca to Medina and founded the first Islamic community. This Christian ruler Heraclius also has a dream: he is shown that the 'kingdom of circumcision' will be victorious. Like the Egyptian diviners, the emperor’s advisors fail in interpreting this dream: they suggest that the kingdom of circumcision must refer to the Jews, and, to prevent the prediction from coming true, suggest Heraclius to kill all of them. The emperor, however, keeps his head clear. When a messenger from the Arabs, a people of herdsmen, arrives at his court, Heraclius orders this man to be stripped of his clothes, and behold, the man is circumcised. When the Christian emperor hears about a prophet by the name of Muhammad who has arisen among the people of this messenger, he is among the first to recognize the authenticity of his prophethood, and foresees that the Arab Muslims will conquer parts of his empire.

Although these two dreams are presented to have been dreamt two thousand years apart, and are separated from each other by an interval of twelve hundred pages of text, they share some common elements and a common structure. Two non-Islamic rulers have a dream that predicts havoc to their kingdoms but which their advisors fail to interpret. The key to their dream’s interpretation lies in a member from a foreign people of herdsmen, either Jew or Arab, in short: a descendant of Abraham. As a result of the dream or its interpretation, the ruler is full of respect for the beliefs and wisdom of this people. Its members make a remarkable rise to fortune: Joseph becomes the second most important man in Egypt, the Arabs rise from desert nomads to rulers of the Near East.

There are, of course, also differences between the two episodes: not everything has remained the same in the course of the centuries. In the first episode it is the foreign Abrahamite, Joseph, who interprets the ruler’s dream, whereas in the last episode, the foreign Abrahamite who was stripped of his clothes only functions as an additional hint that helps the ruler to decipher his own dream. To this shift in the roles of the two main characters, ruler and interpreter, we will come back in the conclusion to this chapter.

Because it is unfeasible to treat all the dreams found in the Tārīkh, I will focus here on a specific type of dream that recurs several times in Tabari’s text: a pre-Islamic ruler has a dream that no one can interpret except for a member of a foreign people. (This people descends from Abraham, they are either Jew or Arab.) One of the benefits of studying
this type of dream is that it will allow me to treat an entire cluster of dream-related motifs, which also recur elsewhere in the Tārikh.

The particular ruler dream I will analyse here is found six times in the Tārikh: 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 Rabī’ā b. Naṣr, the Persian emperor Anūsharwān and the Byzantine emperor Heraclius. All these dreams are found in the pre-Islamic part of the Tārikh, except for the last one, which is included in the annalistic part under the year 6 H. This last dream by Heraclius shares, however, a major theme with the five preceding dreams. Those of Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar and Rabī’ā b. Naṣr announce the coming of Islam, while Anūsharwān’s dream announces the conquest of the Persian empire by the Muslims. Likewise, Heraclius’ dream predicts the Muslim conquest of parts of the Byzantine empire.

Two of these six ruler dreams are also found in the Bible: the dream of the king of Egypt about the seven fat and seven lean kine, which is interpreted by Joseph, and the dream of Nebuchadnezzar about the statue which is interpreted by Daniel. The dream of the king of Egypt is also found in the Koran.

**The General Structure of the 'Tyrant vs. Interpreter' Dream and Its Related Motifs**

In the interval between the Egyptian king’s dream of the kine and Heraclius’ dream of circumcision, the ‘tyrant vs. interpreter’ dream takes on its most commonly found shape. The general structure of this type of dream is as follows:

An infidel tyrant has a dream that disturbs him. He gathers all his professional diviners, but not one of them is able to interpret it. The only person who can make sense of the dream is a foreigner, a descendant of Abraham who believes in one God. This foreigner reveals that the dream foretells the end of the tyrant’s reign and the coming of a righteous ruler, who is also one of the descendants of Abraham, and who will found a kingdom of God that will last forever.

Several narrative motifs can occur in combination with this type of dream:
- The morning after the 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: ra'ā ru'yā hālaṭu 'He had a dream which terrified him.'
- Nebuchadnezzar: qad ājābhu mā ra'ā 'What he dreamt disturbed him.'
- Rabī'ā b. Naṣr: ra'ā ru'yā hālaṭu wa-faṣ'atibih 'He had a dream that alarmed him and continued to disquiet him.'
- Anūsharwān: fa-lamā ʿašbaha KISRĀ ʿaʃa′ahu mā ra'ā 'When he woke up, KISRĀ was affrighted by what he had dreamt.'
- Heraclius: ʿašbaha dhāt al-ğadāt mahmūman 'He arose troubled one morning.'

- The tyrant summons his diviners to interpret his dream.

This motif is expressed by a formula:

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 al-sahara wa-l-kahina wa-l-hāza wa-l-qāfa 'He assembled his magicians, soothsayers, diviners, and prognosticators.'
- Pharaoh: Fa-da'ā al-sahara wa-l-kahina wa-l-qāfa wa-l-hāza 'He called for the magicians, soothsayers, prognosticators and diviners.'
- Rabī'ā b. Naṣr: Fa-lam yada' kāhinan wa-lā sāhīrān wa-lā ʿaʃiṣan wa-lā munayjīman illa jama′ahu ilāyihi '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.'
- Anūsharwān: wuza'ā uhu wa-maraẓibatuha 'His ministers and marzubāns'
- Heraclius: baṭāriqatuha wa-ašhrāf al-Rūm 'His military commanders 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:

1. 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.

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

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.

After interpreting Pharaoh’s dream, Joseph is appointed supreme commander of Egypt (Genesis 41:40). Bijbelse Historiën, 30.
<table>
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<td><strong>The king of Egypt</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Moses</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Satīḥ</strong></td>
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<td>‘His ministers and marzubāns...and gathered them around him. When they were all gathered around him...’</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Satīḥ</strong></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>
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There are three main characters in this type of dream: the tyrant, his diviners, and the interpreter.

The Tyrant

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 humanly 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 emphasize the weakness of his worldly powers in the face of God and destiny, and render the tyrant’s eventual downfall even more poignant.

The Diviners

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

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 peo-
ple. 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 form God\textsuperscript{107}, 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, such as it is sketched below, this interpreter with prophetic skills will split up into two distinct characters: an Abrahamic interpreter and an Abrahamic prophet, whose coming is announced by the interpreter. It is the prophet, rather than the interpreter, to whom the attention will shift and who will become 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 will provide the mirror image to the tyrant’s demise.

The following analysis of the six times this type of dream and its related motifs are repeated will provide an example of the repetition of narrative motifs in general and dreams in particular throughout the text of the Tārikh. At the same time, my analysis of the reception of the two biblical dreams of this type in Tabari’s text will provide an example of the general reception of biblical material in the Tārikh.

In this chapter, I will proceed as follows: I will compare these six dreams of tyrants from the Tārikh with each other and with their biblical models. As I will show, each time this type of dreams recurs, a new selection is made from a cluster of related motifs and each time the selected motifs are combined in a different fashion. In the course of this comparison, I will interpret the effects of the repetition of (such a cluster of ) narrative motifs within the text of the Tārikh, as well as the ef-

\textsuperscript{107} 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.” Holy Bible: New International Version (The International Bible Society, 1984).
Effects of the reception of biblical material (stories, motifs and themes) in Tabari’s chronicle.

**Effects of the Reception of Biblical Material in the Tārīkh**

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.\(^\text{110}\) To us, and probably also to Tabari’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.\(^\text{111}\) In the Tārīkh, the dream of the king of Egypt interpreted by Joseph and the dream of Nebuchadnezzar interpreted by Daniel are obvious references to the Old Testament. The fact that Tabari incorporated biblical material—not only motifs, but also themes and entire episodes—into his Tārīkh is nothing new. In this chapter, however, I will try to analyse the effects of this reuse of biblical material.

When a narrator reuses motifs from an older text, this induces his readers not only to compare the work they are reading with that older text, but also to compare the characters and events from the work they are reading with those of the older text. The reuse of motifs (as well as broader themes and entire episodes) from the Bible in Tabari’s chronicle, has therefore two effects: The readers are led to consider the Tārīkh as a text comparable to the Bible, as being of the same standing as the Old and New Testaments, indeed as a sequel to it. The events that occurred since the coming of Islam are presented as a continuation of the

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\(^{110}\) Two examples from al-Andalus, that feature, like the Heraclius episode, all three monotheist religions: In his Kitāb al-Khazar, 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. Juda Hallevi, *Kitab al-Khazar: Translated from the Arabic with an Introduction by Hartwig Hirschfeld* (London: Routledge, 1905).

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. Maqārī, *Nafī al-rūb min ghuṣn al-Andalus al-raṣīf*, ed. Iḥsān Abbās (Bayrūt: Dār Ǧādir, 1968) IV, p. 363. (I thank Bart Wallet and Arie Schippers for bringing these stories under my attention). Other examples in: R. Gnuse, *The Jewish Dream Interpreter in a Foreign Court: The Recurrent Use of a Theme in Jewish Literature*, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, 7 (1990): 29-53.

events reported in the Bible. Islamic history, from the mission of Muhammad until the rule of the Abbasid caliphs, is a continuation of the Salvation History, or, perhaps better, ‘Election History’ as described in the Old and New Testaments. Both Bible and Tārikh deal with the descendents of Abraham, whom God elected as His people. The Bible deals with the descendents of Abraham’s son Isaac, the Jews, while the Tārikh focuses on the descendents of Abraham’s other son Ishmael, the Arabs. Characters of the Tārikh, such as the Abbasid caliphs, are the successors to the characters of the Bible, such as the prophets and patriarchs. In the words of Ulrika Mårtensson: ‘al-Ṭabarî wrote his history as “The True New Testament” to make the Prophet Muhammad and the caliphate the fulfilment of the Hebrew Bible’s prophecies of a Saviour and a kingdom of peace and justice. To show in what way the six dreams from the Tārikh that I will treat in this chapter are reworkings of earlier biblical material, I will begin this chapter with an analysis of those biblical models, starting with Pharaoh’s dream from Genesis, Pharaoh’s confrontation with Moses as found in Exodus, and Nebuchadnezzar’s dream from the Book of Daniel. Then I will deal with the episode of how king Herod was foretold of the birth of Jesus, as found in the gospel of Matthew. Although this New Testament episode is not centred on a dream, it will be shown that it constitutes an important link in the chain that connects the history of the biblical patriarchs and prophets with that of Muhammad, as well in the chain that connects Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

After these biblical models I will treat, one by one, the six dreams of the tyrant vs. interpreter type told by Tabari, in the order in which they occur in the Tārikh. In the course of this step-by-step analysis of four biblical episodes and six dreams from the Tārikh, I will describe two developments. The first of these is a development that, arguably, 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 Matthew, and finally by Tabari and his sources. 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 selec-

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tion, 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 Tabari’s chronicle itself. In the course of the analysis of the six dreams from the *Tārikh* I will show how the initial opposition, even enmity between the two main characters, tyrant and interpreter, gradually dissolves. At the beginning of the *Tārikh*, 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 effects of this second development for the Islamic part of Tabari’s *Tārikh* will be dealt with in the next chapters.

**TEN CONFRONTATIONS BETWEEN A TYRANT AND AN ABRAHAMITE**

**I. 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.’114 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

114 Genesis 41:8.
palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to
the throne will I be greater than you.”

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-en-
emy 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 much 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.”

Not only are the Jews put to work as slaves, Pharaoh also orders the
Hebrew midwives to 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 bask-
et 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, es-
capes 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.

116 Exodus 1:9-12.
117 Ex. 7:11.
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.118

When Nebuchadnezzar has a number of dreams that disturb him so much that he cannot sleep anymore, he ‘summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed.’119 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.’120 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.”121

The diviners, however, remain unable to fulfil this humanly impossible task, so Nebuchadnezzar orders the execution of ‘all the wise men of Babylon,’122 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. 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

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118 Daniel 1:20.
120 Dan. 2:5.
121 Dan 2:9.
122 Dan. 2:12.
pieces at the same time...But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.\textsuperscript{123}

Daniel explains that the statue’s golden head symbolizes 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,’\textsuperscript{124} 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:

\begin{quote}
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.\textsuperscript{125}
\end{quote}

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 Abrahamic, a motif taken from Genesis, is put in a time of exile and slavery for the Jewish people, which is a motif from Exodus. 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 Abrahamic 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. Abrahamic interpreter’ dream. Note that Christian readers of this biblical 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.

\textsuperscript{123} Dan. 2:32-5.
\textsuperscript{124} Dan. 2:40.
\textsuperscript{125} Dan. 2:44.
Daniel explains to Nebuchadnezzar his dream and its interpretation (Daniel 2:26),
*Bijbelsche Historiën*, 154.

**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 can read the following story in the gospel of Matthew. Several centuries after the Jews have returned from Babylonian exile and re-built 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 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

126 Matthew 2:5.
127 Mat. 2:4.
basis of an old text—next to dreams and astrological 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.”

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The prediction made by the foreign Magi is thus corroborated and completed by Herod’s own advisors, Jerusalem’s high priests and scribes, the ‘ulamā 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. 129

Jesus, however, escapes this massacre, because the husband of his mother, 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 the struggle between Pharaoh and Moses is combined with a motif from the confrontation between Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel. 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 Abrahamic ruler whose kingdom will last forever. In the Herod episode, however, this prediction is not given in a dream, but based on astrological 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

128 Mat. 2:6, quoting Micah 5:2.
129 Mat. 2:16.
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 the following. In comparison with the Daniel story, the ruler’s coming is moved forward from the end of times to the lifetime of the tyrant, and the Abrahamite ruler is identified: it is Jesus.

The reuse of the ‘coming of Abrahamite’ motif from the Book of Daniel in the story of Jesus implies that the Abrahamite ruler announced by Daniel is Jesus himself. Daniel’s prediction and that of the wise men from the East refer to one and the same event: the coming of Jesus.

The prediction cast by Daniel, the prediction from the Book of Micah quoted by Herod’s high priests, and the prediction made by the eastern Magi all refer to the same event: the birth of Jesus. To the explicit reference to the Old Testament as found in the quotation from the Book of Micah by Herod’s high priests, two implicit references are added by way of the reuse of a motif from Exodus and one from the Book of Daniel.

To prevent the coming of this prophet, the tyrant turns to the killing of the newborn boys. By way of 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 or equivalent of these evil Old Testament tyrants.

By way of the reuse of these two motifs, ‘infanticide’ from Exodus and ‘coming of Abrahamite’ from Daniel, Herod is cast in the role of a latter-day Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar. Jesus is the successor to the Abrahamite underdogs Joseph, Moses and Daniel, while Herod is the successor to their arch-enemies Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar.

**II. RECEPTION IN THE TĀRĪKH**

*The king of Egypt and Joseph*\(^{110}\)

The biblical story of Pharaoh’s dream of the cows is also found in the Koran as well as in Tabari’s Tārīkh. In these Islamic texts, the main protagonists of the story have slightly different labels than in the Old Tes-

\(^{110}\) Tab. I, 389-91.
tament. 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 Muhammad. In the Tārikh, the descendants of Joseph and his brothers, in short the descendants of their father Jacob, are never called ‘Jews’ (Yaḥūd) but always referred to as the Banū Isrā‘īl, the sons (or tribe) of ‘Israel’, the name given by God to Jacob.

In the Tārikh, 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.’ As we can see, ‘all the magicians and wise men of Egypt’ of the biblical Joseph story have been adapted in the Tārikh 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 Tārikh, like they do in the Koran: “Adghāth ahlām (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 Tārikh 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 Tārikh as he is in the Bible.

The Banū Isrā‘īl 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

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131 Tab. 1, 389.
132 Koran 12:44.
character towards the Banū Isrā‘īl than he. He tormented them and made them slaves and chattels...133

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. Tabari 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 Isrā‘īl, 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 Isrā‘īl...[Pharaoh] went so far in this that he almost wiped out all of them.134

In this version from the Tārīkh, Pharaoh is even more cruel than in the Bible, for he not only kills the new-born Israelites but also tortures the pregnant mothers to have them miscarry.135

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.136 He dreams a fire comes from Jerusalem (Bayt al-Maqdis) which reaches the houses of Egypt (buyūt Miṣr), burning the Egyptians (al-Qibṭ, litt. the Copts) but leaving the Banū Isrā‘īl, 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

133Tab. I, 445, my italics.
134Tab. I, 445–6, my italics.
135Tab. I, 446.
136Tab. I, 446–7.
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 Ṭārīkh, the plague of the water which turns into blood affects only the Egyptians and not the Banū Isrā‘īl.  

Just like Nebuchadnezzar in the Bible and the king of Egypt in the Ṭārīkh, Pharaoh calls for his ‘magicians, soothsayers, prognosticators and diviners’ to interpret this dream. They explain to him: ‘There will come from that land from which the Banū Isrā‘īl 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 Isrā‘īl, is based on an ancient prophecy from Israelite tradition.

Pharaoh and his counselors conferred about what God had promised to Abraham: that He would appoint among his descendants prophets and kings. Some of them said that the Banū Isrā‘īl 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 Isrā‘īl; 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 astronomical 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 (Matthew’s account of the birth of Christ), Tabari 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 Muhammad and are found later in the Ṭārīkh and which will be treated

137 Tab. I, 475; 484.
138 Tab. I, 447, my italics.
139 Tab. I, 451-2, my italics.
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 proven 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 things: 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 last prediction, the ancient Israelite prophecy, not only refers to the coming of Moses, but to the appointment of a number of prophets and kings among the descendants of Abraham.

It is true that in the Tarih, God’s treatment of Egypt is harsher than in the Bible. In Tabari’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. Who 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, Muhammad or a Muslim conqueror? Or is Moses conflated with his later counterparts into one per-

140 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 Tab. I, 662)—and Abraham: Tab. I, 254; 257. See also Schützinger.
141 Tab. I, 475.
142 Tab. I, 483.
143 Tab. I, 481.
son? In its description of the contents of the dream, the text calls the Pharaonic Egyptians al-Qibt, ‘the Copts’. This implies that the fire from the dream which burns the Qibṭ but leaves the Banū Isrā‘ īl, symbolizes 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 monothestic supremacy in Egypt.

_Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel_\(^\footnote{144}\)

The third ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamite interpreter’ dream in the _Tārikh_ is ascribed to Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of Babylonia, a large multi-ethnic Near Eastern Empire with its heartland in Iraq and its capital Babylon not far from the site of the later Abbasid capital Baghdad. Nebuchadnezzar is in the _Tārikh_ an even more tyrannical ruler than in the Bible. Not only has he destroyed Jerusalem\(^\footnote{145}\) and led the Banū Isrā‘ īl away in captivity,\(^\footnote{146}\) he has gone so far as to wipe out almost all of the Israelites\(^\footnote{147}\) as well as the Arabs,\(^\footnote{148}\) thereby echoing the genocidal acts of Pharaoh and Herod.\(^\footnote{149}\) According to the _Tārikh_, 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 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

\(^{144}\) Tab. I, 667-8.
\(^{145}\) Tab. I, 646.
\(^{146}\) Tab. I, 647; 649; 665.
\(^{147}\) Tab. I, 665.
\(^{148}\) Tab. I, 671-2.
\(^{149}\) The difference being that Nebuchadnezzar’s aggression against Israelites and Arabs is meted out as divine punishment for the disbelief of these two related peoples.
you saw, sent by God from heaven to smash it, points to a prophet God will sent from heaven to smash it all, and power will revert unto Him.\footnote{150}

After these three dreams by biblical tyrants, rulers over Egypt and Babylon from the days of Joseph, Moses and Daniel, Tabari includes three dreams by post-biblical rulers: first an Arab king, and then the emperors that ruled the Byzantine and Sasanid empires 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.

\textit{Rabi’ā b. Naṣr and Saṭīḥ and Shiqq}\footnote{151}

After the Egyptian Pharaoh and the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar, the next ruler in Tabari’s \textit{Tārikh} to have a dream none of his advisors can interpret is an Arab king: Rabi’ā b. Naṣr of the Lakhmid dynasty, ruler over Yemen. Rabi’ā 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, Rabi’ā wants his diviners to interpret his dream without telling them its contents, not because he has forgotten his dream like Nebuchadnezzar in the \textit{Tārikh}, 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 Rabi’ā 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 Rabi’ā suggest that the king should send for Saṭīḥ and Shiqq, the best soothsayers (\textit{kuhhān}) of their time. Where Saṭīḥ and Shiqq reside is not specified in the \textit{Tārikh}, but they come apparently from outside the king’s realm, as they were not among the diviners gathered from the far reaches of Rabi’ā’s king-

\footnote{150} Tab. I, 668. \footnote{151} Tab. I, 911-14.
The text does emphasize that Sāṭiḥ and Shiqq are Arabs, as their tribal genealogies are given, showing that Sāṭiḥ descended from Ghassān and Shiqq from Anmār, the son of Nizār, the progenitor of the Arab tribes of the North.

The first to arrive at Rabī’a’s court is Sāṭiḥ. As is fitting for an Arab diviner and for someone who knows the unknowable—like how the future will unfold or what somebody else has dreamt— Sāṭiḥ 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 Tabari, 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 chapter. 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 symbolized 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, Sāṭiḥ 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.

Sāṭiḥ 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

\[152\] According to Abū Zayd, who deals with this dream as it is found in the Sīra of Ibn Ishāq, Sāṭiḥ and Shiqq come from Mecca, i.e. from the same city as Muḥammad, the prophet whose coming they announce. ‘Rū’fā’, p. 115.
Rabī’ā asks Sāṭīḥ 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 evil doers 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 Ṭūrīkh, Rabī’ā does not decide on any megalomaniac but ultimately in vain genocid to prevent the coming of this prophet.

Later, when Shiqq arrives at Rabī’ā’s court, the king conceals from him what Sāṭīḥ 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. Realizing that the Abyssinians will indeed conquer Yemen, Rabī’ā decides to migrate with his sons to Iraq, where he settles at the city of al-Ḥīrā.

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 here 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.
The Aywān or vaulted hall of the Sasanids or Taq-i Kisra ("Kisra’s Arch") on the bank of the Tigris at al-Madā‘in; photograph by Gertrude Bell, 1909, *The Gertrude Bell Archive*

*Kisrā Anūsharwān and Saṭīh*

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 emperor of the Sasanid dynasty, Kisrā Anūsharwān, also known as Khosrau I or Chosroes the Great, who ruled from 531-79 AD. During a very special night—in Arabia, Muḥammad is born—something befalls this most celebrated of Sasanid 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 Muḥammad was born, a number of events occurred in the Sasanid realm. The palace of Anūsharwān, close to the site of later Baghdad, was shaken, and fourteen pinnacles of it fell down; the sacred fire of Fars, that had been burning for a thousand years, extinguished; a

153 Tab. I, 981-4.
lake in the northwest of the realm sank into the earth;\textsuperscript{154} 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: \textit{fa-lamma ašbaha Kîrsâ aflâahu mā ra‘ā}. The translator of this portion of the Târikh has rendered this line as: 'The next morning, Kîrsâ was affrighted by what he had seen,' but the Arabic could very well mean: 'When Kîrsâ woke up, he was affrighted by what he had \textit{dreamt}.' Two key verbs in this phrase are ambiguous: \textit{ašbaha} can mean 'to be in the morning' as well as 'to wake up', and \textit{ra‘ā} can mean either 'to see' or 'to dream'. This would leave the reader three options:

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

In this part of the text, there are four arguments in favour of the view that Anūsharwân saw these events in a dream. When the verb \textit{ra‘ā} 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 \textit{ra‘ā} is a stock effect of dreams, as can be seen from the list of motifs occurring in the 'tyrant vs. Abrahamite interpreter' dream, presented earlier in this chapter. Being frightened upon awaking occurs after the dreams of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar in both Bible and Târikh, as well as after the dreams of the post-biblical rulers Rabî‘a and Heraclius.

If the king had seen this taking place in reality before his own eyes while he was awake, he firstly would have to have been on 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 Fars. Secondly, he would have been worried the 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 more proof 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 ra‘aytu fi hádhihi al-layla...ru‘yā).

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 priests about the latter’s dream, who interprets it as referring to ‘an event which is issuing from the Arabs’.

When it was the night when 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 lake Sāwah sank into the earth, and the chief Mōbadh saw in a dream refractory camels running before noble Arab horses who 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 [dream]. 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.”

As 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 Iraq, a descendant of Rabī‘a b. Naṣr and the Lakhmids who had migrated there after Rabī‘a 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’,

155 Tab. I, 981, slightly adapted translation.
an impossible demand reminiscent of Nebuchadnezzar and Rabī’ā’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 ‘Abd al-Masīḥ al-Ghas-sānī to the Persian court, an Arab Christian, as his first name ‘Servant of the Messiah’ implies. Anūšharwān tells this man what he has dreamt, but ‘Abd 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.’

Anūšharwān sends ‘Abd al-Masīḥ to this uncle of his. After an arduous camel journey he finds Saṭīḥ, the very same soothsayer who interpreted the dream of Rabī’ā b. Naṣr, and who is now on the verge of death. As a true Arab, ‘Abd al-Masīḥ addresses his uncle with an Arabic qāṣīda, 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 Sasanids) shall reign—
according to the number of pinnacles (i.e. those fallen from the Aywān)—
and everything whose coming is decreed will come.156

After uttering these words, Saṭīḥ expires on the spot. Back at the Persian court, ‘Abd al-Masīḥ confronts Anūšharwān 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 Sasanid successors (corresponding to the fourteen fallen pinnacles) quite a dynasty, not realising that the number 14 also symbolizes that 10 of these successors will rule for a total of only 4 years:

ilā an yamlaka minnā arba’at ʿashar malikan qad kānat umūr fa-malaka minhum
ʿashara arba’ sinān.

“Once fourteen of us have reigned, things will happen!” Ten of them, however, reigned for a total of four years only.157

Compare Nöldeke: “Bis vierzehn von uns geherrscht haben, gibst’s noch al-
lerleil!” Nun haben von ihnen aber zehn zusammen nur 4 Jahre regiert.158

156 Tab. I, 983.
157 Tab. I, 984.
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 (al’amahum ‘ind nafsīhi 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, in all his wisdom, the emperor accepts his fate, or whether he falsely believes the prediction to be auspicious, Anūsharwān does not act upon this prediction.

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 Sasanid 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 the Tārīkh, the final confrontation between a pagan tyrant and an Abrahamic interpreter is the meeting between the Byzantine emperor Heraclius and the Arab Abū Sufyān b. Ḥarb. All previous episodes figured a confrontation between, at one side, a pagan tyrant, and at the other side, an interpreter that was Israelite (Joseph and Daniel) or Arab (Shiqq and Saṭīḥ). 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 between: a Christian ruler, the Jewish people, and an Arab prophet of Islam.

(Leyden: Brill, 1879), p. 301. Nöldeke compares Anūsharwān’s uncalled-for relief with Hezekiah’s misplaced optimism when the prophet Jeremiah announces the Babylonian exile.

Half a century after the night that shook the palace of the Sasanids, 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 opponents, the Qurashī elite. In the annalistic part of his Tāríkh, in the year 6 after the Prophet’s migration, Tabari has inserted a report told by the leader of Muḥammad’s Qurashī opponents: Abī 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 Sasanid 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 Aleppo to Jerusalem, where he has a dream.

When he reached Jerusalem and performed his worship—with him were his military commanders and the nobles of the Romans—he arose troubled one morning, turning his gaze to the sky. His military commanders 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 military commanders and nobles of the Romans’, fail at correctly 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 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 Muhammad was recognized as a prophet by the Christian monk Bāhīrā, 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 instru-

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160 Tab. I, 1562.
mental 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 kingship?’, 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 minimize 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 Muhammad’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 Muhammad 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 Abrahamic 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 disciples the night before he

161 Tab. I, 1563.
162 Tab. I, 1564.
was crucified,\textsuperscript{163} 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 recognize 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 Abrahamicites 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.\textsuperscript{164}

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 legitimized 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. Abrahamic confrontation’. However, instead of being blind, arrogant, unjust and pagan—such as his predecessors the king of Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar and Herod—Heraclius is here wise, humble and believing: not exactly an evil tyrant,

\textsuperscript{163} John 13:5.

\textsuperscript{164} Gen. 17: 6-14.
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 Aleppo 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, furthermore, is 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.

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 perspicuous 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 recognizes 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 recognizes 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 wasn’t Muḥammad recognized 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

165 More on anagnorisis in chapter six ‘Dreams, Suspense and Tragedy’. 
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, recognizes the prophethood of Muhammad and the future rule of Islam over Christian territories. According to Nadia El-Cheikh, it was to add credibility to his recognition of Muhammad that Heraclius was depicted as an exemplary emperor.

Heraclius, as presented by our sources, has all the attributes of an ideal ruler...This characterization is essential to the task assigned to Heraclius in the Arabic-Islamic sources, namely that of acknowledging the new faith preached by the prophet Muhammad. 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 rival, that responsibility lay for recognizing and acknowledging the prophetic character of the mission of Muhammad and the excellence of his umma.164

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 baptized. In some versions, Heraclius even exiles or massacres the Jews when they refuse to be converted. 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.165

164 El-Cheikh, p. 9.
Whatever enticed Islamic authors like Tabari 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. Ironically, in this episode the Abrahamic play the part of the bad guys. While in previous episodes the Abrahamic were believing monotheists who saw far into the future, here they lack the wisdom to recognize 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 recognizing 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 Muhammad’s arch-enemy, will eventually convert to Islam and father a line of caliphs.

The irony of this situation, and the fact that the Qurashī 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 bad guy, 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’. Here, ironically, the blind Abrahamic bad guy has to recognize the wisdom of the good tyrant. By his pejorative reference to the emperor as ‘this uncircumcised one’, 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 circumcised descendant of Abraham, while Heraclius is not. As God has chosen the Abrahamic to rule the earth, this means that Heraclius’ star is predestined to set, while Abū Sufyān’s star is destined to rise.

Table IV: Recurring Events in the Confrontations between Tyrants and Abrahamites

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tyrant</th>
<th>Tyrant</th>
<th>Interpreter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bible</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pharaoh</strong></td>
<td>has a dream that is explained by a foreigner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharaoh</td>
<td><strong>Moses</strong></td>
<td>orders infanticide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharaoh</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tyrant is defeated...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nebuchadnezzar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebuchadnezzar</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>has a dream that is explained by four foreigners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<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></td>
<td>Herod</td>
<td>An astrological prediction is explained by three foreigners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herod</td>
<td></td>
<td>leads the intended victim of the infanticide.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wise Men from the East</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>leads the intended victim of the infanticide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Pharaoh</strong></td>
<td>astrological prediction/dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharaoh</td>
<td></td>
<td>orders infanticide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>in the distant future, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nebuchadnezzar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebuchadnezzar</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>has a dream that is explained by a foreigner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<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></td>
<td>Rabī’a b. Naṣr</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rabī’a b. Naṣr</td>
<td>Satṭḥ and Shiqq</td>
<td>has a dream that is explained by two foreigners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>in the distant future, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God, led by Muhammad and his successors.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anūsharwān</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anūsharwān</td>
<td>Satṭḥ</td>
<td>has a dream that is explained by two foreigners.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>in the near future, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God, led by Muhammad and his successors.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heracleus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heracleus</td>
<td>Abū Sufyān</td>
<td>has a dream that is explained with the help of two foreigners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Ḥarb</td>
<td>infanticide (not executed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In this generation, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God, led by Muhammad and his successors.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Daniel and his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.
Nebuchadnezzar orders to bring before him some Israelite youngsters ‘from the seed of the King’ (Daniel 1:3), Bijbelsche Historiën, 153.

The Wise Men who have come from the East are questioned by Herod (Matthew 2:7), Bijbelsche Historiën, II, 11.
CONCLUSION

Motif Repetition: A Way to Hint that Muhammad is a Legitimate Successor to Earlier Prophets

By way of motif repetition, the episodes about post-biblical prophets (Muhammad) and post-biblical tyrants (Rabîa b. Naṣr, Anūshharwān, Heraclius) are linked to biblical episodes. This suggests that the Tārikh is a sequel to the Old and New Testaments, and that the history of the Muslim umma forms a continuation of the Heilsgeschichte depicted in the Bible. Likewise, it is suggested that post-biblical characters from the Tārikh are comparable to biblical characters, and therefore their legitimate successors as spiritual and worldly leaders. Muhammad is the latter-day counterpart to the earlier prophets Joseph, Moses, Daniel and Jesus. Islam is the legitimate successor of the earlier monotheist religions Judaism and Christianity. As expressed by Uri Rubin in The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad 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.170

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 Išāq, whose biography of the prophet was originally the second part of a much larger work. The respective volumes of this larger text were titled: 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 now been lost to us, this text was similar in subject to Tabari’s Tārikh. Speaking of Ibn Išāq, 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.171

That Tabari incorporated biblical material into his *Tārīkh* is nothing new. Also common knowledge is the fact that Muḥammad was presented as the successor to earlier prophets. My contribution in this chapter has been to show how 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.” He does not even have to say: “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 Muḥammad’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 Tabari’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 Abrahamic Gradually Diminishes

By way of the repeated use of motifs from the cluster of motifs connected to the ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamic interpreter’ dream, Tabari suggests that the course of 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 centuries 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 Abrahamic, 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 Abrahamic, 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 a humanly impossible command.

Rabi’a b. Naṣr is already less oppressive and less arrogant. Although he does give 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, Rabi’a, 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 Rabi’a’s old dominion is conquered, he flourishes in his new homeland Iraq.

The next tyrant, Anūsharwān, is also wiser than his predecessors. Whereas none of the previous despots was able to interpret his own dream, the Sasanid 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 also 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, as he does not belong to the Persian court, and who, 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,172

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whose cadastral and tax reforms should be considered as a model for Islamic rulers.\textsuperscript{173}

This development towards less cruel, oppressive, arrogant and more perspicuous tyrants culminates in the depiction of Heraclius as the ‘ideal ruler’, who completely understands his own dream and almost converts to Islam. That Tabari 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-Nadim mentions in his \textit{Fihrist} a book—now lost—called: \textit{The Story of the Tyrannical Babylonian and Egyptian Kings and the Wise Byzantine King.}\textsuperscript{174}

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, 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 \textit{Tārikh}, 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 Rabī’a 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 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 Abrahamites brought to the tyrant’s court do not actively interpret anything themselves, but only and inadvertently provide the ruler with clues to interpret 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 Abrahamite diminishes as well. In their days, Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar were the outright enemies of the Abrahamites. However, Rabî‘a b. Naṣr, Anūsharwân 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.

In short, one can say that the opposite extremes tyrant and Abrahamite gradually grow closer to each other, because the tyrant adopts qualities that were initially the prerequisite of the Abrahamite, such as insight in dreams, and because their initial enmity dissolves. In the next chapter, I will argue that this process of gradual rapprochement will eventually result in the fusion of these two extremes of tyrant and Abrahamite into one person, when each Abbasid caliph is depicted as the bearer of a double heritage: as head of the umma, that of Abrahamite descendant of the prophets, and as head of state of a large Near Eastern empire, that of successor to the pre-Islamic tyrants.
This table illustrates two major themes of the *Tārikh*: Succession and Opposition. The vertical axis forms a pedigree that charts succession in the course of time. An uninterrupted line denotes succession based on genealogical descent. The horizontal axis illustrates opposition between contemporaries. The struggle between each tyrant and the prophet of his day continues within the Abbasid family in the form of competition between brothers.