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

Weststeijn, J.K.

Citation for published version (APA):
4

THE CONFLICTING LEGACIES OF PROPHETS AND KINGS

In the previous chapter, we saw, on the basis of an analysis of a recurring type of dream, the ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamic interpreter’ dream, that in the pre-Islamic section of the Tārīkh, Abrahamic prophets confront time and again, in a recurring pattern, pagan tyrants. We saw this pattern recur in Tabari’s account of events from biblical history, but also in his account of the post-biblical period up to the coming of Islam, the period of Rabī‘a b. Naṣr, Anūsharwān and Heraclius. This conflict between good prophets and evil tyrants is also found in the lives of prophets whose dreams are not dealt with in the Tārīkh, such as Abraham who confronts Nimrod, and goes all the way back to the beginning of history. According to Tabari, the very first ruler was Iblīs, the Devil, who had supreme power over all the jinns that dwelt on earth. This power, however, made him so arrogant that he turned into a tyrant. God dethroned the Devil and appointed Adam, the first man and the first prophet, in his place. In the introduction, Tabari’s primary

narrator announces that two groups of people will form the main subject of his Tārikh: the successors of Iblīs and the successors of Adam.

[Iblīs was] the one who was the first to be given royal authority...Having denied God’s divine Lordship, he was proud and overbearing toward his Lord and was therefore deprived by God of His divine favour and shamed and humiliated. We shall continue and mention those who adopted his ways and followed in his footsteps and were therefore subjected by God to His divine revenge...There were also their counterparts and successors among kings and messengers and prophets who obeyed their Lord. God willing, we shall mention them too.\(^2\)

According to Tarif Khalidi, Tabari originally intended this conflict between good prophets and evil tyrants—such as encountered in the ‘tyrant vs. interpreter’ dream—to constitute the main theme of his Tārikh of Prophets and Kings.\(^3\) However, Khalidi is only able to find this theme in the pre-Islamic section of the text, and is puzzled by its absence in the Islamic part of the work. According to Khalidi, in passages like the one quoted above...

...Tabari seeks to illustrate what he takes to be the origin, structure and ultimate destiny of world history, as symbolized by the struggle of prophets and kings. It was a vision inspired by the Quranic conflict between prophets and ‘pharaohs’, a parallel history first set in motion by Adam and Satan and their respective ‘parties’ (fāriq) and thereafter traceable in the histories of ‘every despotic king and every appointed caliph’...It is a history of moral ‘types’, and one which might be expected to set the stage for what is to come in the Islamic portion of the work.

But the Islamic portion is far different...There is no trace in this whole portion of the History of any explicit judgement on men or events nor any speculation on the course or significance of events...There is much that needs to be explained in this abrupt change of structure and mood...A pattern of conflict was seen to obtain in the pre-Islamic period which was nowhere spelled out in the Islamic. The ‘Adams’ and the ‘Satsans’ of Islamic history are left largely to the judgement of the reader.\(^4\)

Indeed, at the moment the Tārikh arrives at the foundation of the first Islamic state by Muhammad and the beginning of the hijra calendar, the narrative structure of the text suddenly changes. The more or less conventional narrative of the pre-Islamic section gives way to the puzzling catalogue structure of the Islamic section that we analysed in chapter

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\(^2\) Tab. I, 78; See also Tab. I, 164.


\(^4\) Khalidi, pp. 79-80.
two. Does this abrupt change in narrative structure correspond with an abrupt change in theme, or even the sudden absence of a major theme, as Khalidi perceives?\footnote{See also Tayeb El-Hibri, ‘The Unity of Tabari’s Chronicle’, \textit{Al-Usur al-Wusta: The Bulletin of Middle East Medievalists}, 11 (1999): 1–3.} If this is the case, there could be several reasons for such a break.

1. A sudden change of plan by the author

When he arrived at the description of the rule of Muhammad over Medina, Tabari suddenly decided on a completely different outlook on the writing of history and on a different theme for his work. He failed, however, to rewrite the pre-Islamic section to fit into this new perspective.

2. The biblical predictions have been fulfilled

Not the historian, but history itself has changed with the coming of Islam: The biblical predictions have finally been fulfilled. The prophecy that there would arise among the descendants of Abraham a Messiah to defeat the pagan tyrants of this world and found God’s everlasting kingdom on earth, has finally come true. What God had promised Abraham, and what had been announced in dreams to Pharaoh\footnote{Pharaoh’s dream of the man from Jerusalem, see chapter three, p. 82.} and Nebuchadnezzar, has born fruit with the coming of the prophet Muhammad, the foundation of the Islamic state and the Arab conquest of the Byzantine and Persian empires. Now that the Muslim armies have once and for all defeated the unbelieving tyrants of this world and the Arab caliphs taken their place as just rulers over an Islamic empire—an empire that in Tabari’s time was still united and could still be believed to last forever—there is no more need for a struggle between underdog prophets and evil tyrants. Biblical history has finally come to an end.

3. History takes a radically new course

With the arrival of Muhammad, the seal of the prophets, history takes a radically new direction. In pre-Islamic times, history had followed a cyclical pattern. Again and again, God sent a prophet who opposed the tyrant of his day and taught men how to live according to His will. As time went by, this message became corrupted, people went astray, God sent a new messenger and the cycle started all over again. However, the arrival of the very last prophet Muhammad brings about a fundamental
change to this pattern. History changes from a cyclical to a linear course, a straight line symbolized by the rigid annalistic structure of the Islamic section, a ticking of the clock that drowns out any attempt at narrative.\footnote{See also Daniel, ‘Bal‘amî’s Account of Early Islamic History’, p. 182: ‘...a strong millenarian element in Ţabari’s thinking, in which the shift from a cyclical and dynastic conception of pre-Islamic history to a linear model of Islamic history, with its year by year approach, seemed to mark a countdown to the end of the world.’}

4. Myth gives way to ‘real history’

A legendary, mythical past with a clear-cut division between archetypal good (Abrahamite prophets) and absolute evil (pagan tyrants) has made way for the measurable, scientifically approachable reality of everyday life, ‘real history’, where the distinctions between good and evil are much more blurred and less unambiguous.

5. In the catalogue section there is no place anymore for an author’s broader vision

In the Islamic section we do not find a different conception of history with a different theme and different motifs, either due to a change of plan by the historian or to the new direction taken by history itself; in the Islamic section a main theme and a conception of history are completely absent. In the catalogue section of the Tārikh there was no place anymore for a broader vision, a ‘master narrative’, or the author’s hand.

**BIBLICAL ‘TYRANT VS. ABRAHAMITE’ MOTIFS IN THE ISLAMIC SECTION**

If Khalidi is correct, if the change in narrative structure really does correspond with a change in theme and a change in outlook on the broader patterns that govern history, if biblical history has come to an end with Muhammad’s hījra, then we will not find in the Tārikh’s Islamic section:

1. similar motifs as found in the pre-Islamic section;
2. biblical motifs;
3. ruler dreams of the ‘tyrant vs. interpreter’ type or any of the motifs related to this type of dream;
4. confrontations between tyrants and Abrahamite redeemers.
To test if this is indeed the case, we will in the following chapters analyse dreams of rulers from the Islamic section of the *Tārikh*. We will analyse the dreams dreamt by Abbasid caliphs from three succeeding generations, al-Mahdī, al-Rashīd and al-Amīn, found in three successive obituary entries, those of al-Hādhī, al-Rashīd and al-Amīn.

On the basis of an analysis of these dreams, it will be argued here that biblical motifs do recur in the Islamic section of the *Tārikh*. The image of the Abbasids as revolutionaries was painted in biblical colours, as was their image as sovereign rulers over a large Near Eastern empire.

*Abbasid revolutionaries as the rightful heirs of biblical redeemers*

Within half a century after the Prophet’s death it became clear that the Islamic state was not the perfectly just Kingdom on earth. During the initial success of the Arab conquests and the first Rāshidūn or ‘rightly-guided’ successors to Muhammad, history still seemed to be set on a straight path towards salvation. Soon, however, the Arab Muslims, God’s new chosen people, started to behave like a people from the pre-Islamic period: they strayed from the right course and started fighting among themselves, until descendants of Muhammad’s erstwhile opponent Abū Sufyān usurped the caliphate. It turned out that the pre-Islamic cyclical pattern of revelation followed by corruption had not been broken.

When the ascension of the Umayyads was deemed by some illegitimate and their policies unjust, critique of their rule was expressed by way of the good vs. evil oppositions found in the pre-Islamic section of the *Tārikh*. The Umayyads were depicted as unbelieving tyrants, and the motifs of genealogical descent and appointment by testament were dug up again. It was argued that the Umayyads, although Arabs and therefore Abrahamites, were not entitled to rule over the Islamic state because they were not closely enough related to the Prophet and had not been appointed by testament as his heirs.

The opponents to Umayyad rule also cast themselves after the model of earlier opponents to tyranny. The Abbasids claimed they were the true offspring of the last prophet, messianic underdogs who would destroy the tyrants and free the circumcised descendants of Abraham from slavery. With the coming of the Abbasids and their restoration of Muhammad’s original Islamic state, history had once again completed a full cycle. In the same way as Adam had replaced the tyrant Iblīs as just ruler over the world, and Muhammad and the Rāshidūn had replaced the pagan tyrants Heraclius and Anūsharwān as just rulers over the
Near East, so the Abbasids had replaced the Umayyad tyrants as just rulers over the umma and the Islamic empire.

To show that they were successors, almost reincarnations of earlier prophets, one Abbasid caliph called two of his sons Mūsā and Hārūn, after the biblical prophets Moses and Aaron. As insignia of their caliphal power, the Abbasids wielded a staff, a mantle, and a ring, heirlooms they claimed to have inherited from Muhammad and the preceding prophets. To show they were messianic redeemers, the father of Mūsā and Hārūn chose for himself the regnal title al-Mahdī, the Messiah, while his two sons adopted the names al-Hādī and al-Rashīd.

Now prophets have dreams. In the Koran, the major prophets Abraham, Joseph and Muhammad have dreams. Similarly, in the Bible, Daniel is renowned not only for his skills as a dream interpreter but also for being enlightened by prophetic dreams himself. So, to prove that someone is the true successor to the prophets, this successor must be presented as being guided by dreams as well. Apparently to show that the Umayyad caliphs were no true successors to the prophets, they are depicted in the Tārikh as not having had a single dream. To show that the Abbasids were the true successors to the prophets they, on the contrary, were depicted in the Tārikh as having dreams. In the words of Toufic Fahd, one of the authorities on Arabic dream interpretation:

> The history of the dynastic rivalries between ‘Abbasids and Umayyads is well known, but it is only in deftly forged dreams interpreting ab intra facts of the everyday chronicle that there appears the underlying psychological need of the former for prophetic investiture, for divine sanction, and for a mysterious voice affirming their vocation to rule and their superiority to other pretenders to the caliphate.⁹

However, rulers having dreams in a text fraught with biblical references automatically entails the comparison with biblical rulers having dreams, and those rulers were all tyrants: in the Koran: the king of Egypt, in the Bible: Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar.

**Abbasid caliphs as the rightful heirs of biblical tyrants**

Authors such as Tabari presented the Islamic empire that was led by the Abbasids as the successor to earlier large Near Eastern empires. In the

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words of Tarif Khalidi: ‘The history of the umma...was regarded with ever-increasing fascination by both the ruling elites and the literati as an imperial history on a par with the history of other great nations.’

According to Fred Donner:

[Tabari’s master narrative] shows how the caliphs, as rulers of a world-embracing empire established on the basis of the conquests, are the rightful heirs of earlier empires—especially those of Iran and Babylon and to a lesser extent those of Alexander, Rome, and Byzantium.

Thus, Tabari not only presented Muhammad, Islam, and the Arabs as the rightful heirs to earlier prophets, monotheist religions, and peoples, he also presented the Abbasid empire as the rightful heir to earlier empires. As biblical history was the main frame of reference for the first three elements (prophet, religion, and people), it also provided an important frame of reference for the fourth: the succession of Near Eastern empires, or translatio imperii.

1. The prophet Muhammad was presented as the successor to biblical characters, such as Joseph, Moses, Daniel and Jesus.
2. The religion Islam was presented as the successor to biblical religions, Judaism and Christianity.
3. The Arab people were presented as the successors to the chosen people of the Bible, the Jews.
4. The Abbasid empire was presented as the successor to earlier biblical empires.
5. The rulers over the Abbasid empire were presented as the successors to the rulers over those biblical empires.

Thus, as sovereign rulers over the latest Near Eastern empire, the Abbasids were seen as the rightful heirs to tyrants such as Pharaoh, Nimrod, and Nebuchadnezzar.

Tayeb El-Hibri also notes that classical Islamic historians such as Tabari compare Abbasid caliphs to biblical rulers. El-Hibri, however, only notes the comparison between Abbasid caliphs and good biblical rulers, such as the Israelite kings Saul, David and Solomon. Here I go a step further and argue that Tabari also compares Abbasid caliphs with evil biblical rulers, the very same tyrants that used to oppose the Israelites.

10 Khalidi, p. 82.
11 Donner, p. 131.
BURDENED BY TWO BIBLICAL LEGACIES

In Tabari’s Tārikh, Abbasid caliphs are presented as the bearers of two legacies: on the one hand the legacy of the believing and wise Abrahamite, descendant of nomadic herdsmen, enlightened by prophecy, and on the other hand the legacy of the almighty sedentary ruler over a large multi-ethnic and multi-religious Near Eastern empire, founder of imperial monuments, surrounded by his servants, advisors and courtiers, commander of armies, wielder of worldly might, the erstwhile archenemy of those prophets. This second heritage is not only used to paint a positive image of these caliphs, for together with positive qualities such as grandeur and omnipotence, the Abbasid caliphs are also shown to have inherited the more negative qualities of their tyrannical predecessors: blindness, arrogance and injustice. The Islamic caliphs, the heroes of Tabari’s Tārikh of Prophets and Kings, bear the mutually conflicting inheritances of both Abrahamite prophets and worldly kings.

This double burden leads to internal conflict. One could say that the struggle between prophets and tyrants continues not only during the Umayyad era, but even during the Abbasid period, but this time as a struggle within one family. Members of the Abbasid dynasty fight among themselves. In the Islamic section of the Tārikh, Tabari produces a khabar about a confrontation between the caliph Mūsā al-Hādī and his brother Hārūn, which will be dealt with in more detail later in this chapter. Here it will be argued that in this anecdote the caliph Mūsā al-Hādī is cast in the role of the blind, arrogant, oppressive tyrant, while his younger brother Hārūn is cast in the role of the wise, underdog Abrahamite.

Hārūn as Abrahamite redeemer

In the cases of many an Abrahamite redeemer, one of his forefathers has been given a prediction: Among his offspring will arise a messiah who will replace a tyrant and found God’s everlasting kingdom on earth, ruled by the messiah’s children. Think for example of God’s promise to Abraham that he would appoint among his descendants prophets and kings.13

In the case of Hārūn, his father al-Mahdī has a dream in which one of his sons wields a staff that is covered in leaves, an identifying mark of

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13 Tab. III, 447; Matthew 2:5 quoting Micah 5:2. See also chapter three of this thesis, p. 83.
the Messiah. The dream not only signifies that this son Ḥārūn will replace a tyrant and beget a line of divinely sanctioned rulers, but also that he will rule over a righteous, long-lasting kingdom. In the words of the oneirocritic: “Ḥārūn’s reign will extend further than that of any Caliph who has ever lived; his days will be the finest of days and his age the finest of ages.”

To this prediction, Ḥārūn’s brother Mūsā al-Hādī reacts exactly like a biblical tyrant: blind, arrogant and oppressive. Mūsā is blind because he refuses to believe the prediction will come true. He is arrogant because he tries to avert the prophecy by taking vain measures to prevent this announced redeemer from taking his place. In vain, Mūsā tries to change the succession arrangements and imprisons his brother. In these actions he is oppressive towards the innocent: he tries to deprive Ḥārūn of his rightful inheritance.

One can argue that even the setting of the confrontation between the two Abbasid brothers is reminiscent of the setting of the confrontations between pre-Islamic tyrants and Abrahamite liberators. The tyrant is seated on his throne among the worldly splendours of his palace and surrounded by his supporters, while the Abrahamite contender is completely on his own.

Mūsā al-Hādī held a court session of his intimates. He summoned ʿIrāhīm b. Jaʿfar b. Abī Jaʿfar, ʿIrāhīm b. Salm b. Qutayba and al-Ḥarrānī. These last took their places on his left hand, together with one of al-Hādī’s black eunuchs who had the name of Aslam and the patronymic of Abū Sulaymān; al-Hādī used to repose great confidence in him and put him forward into a prominent place. Whilst the Caliph was in this situation, behold, the šāhid al-muṣallāt ʿAlī came in and announced the arrival of Ḥārūn b. al-Mahdī. Al-Hādī said: “Allow him to come in.” So Ḥārūn entered, greeted the Caliph, kissed his hand, and took his seat on al-Hādī’s right, but at some distance and at one side. Mūsā lowered his gaze and was silent.

Although Ḥārūn is all alone, he dares to speak the truth to the tyrant, in a speech in which the themes of arrogance and oppression are linked to the rule of Mūsā and the themes of humility, justice, and freedom from oppression to the future rule of himself. Ḥārūn says to the caliph:

“O Mūsā, if you act haughtily, you will be abased; if you show humility, you will be exalted in rank; and if you act oppressively; you will be deceived by God. I certainly hope that the ruling power will come to me in due course, so that I

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14 Tab. III, 577.
15 Tab. III, 576.
may then mete out justice to those whom you have oppressed and give bounty 
to those whom you have cut off from your generosity.”

After the confrontation with Joseph and Daniel, the tyrants Pharaoh 
and Nebuchadnezzar decide to share their power with their erstwhile 
opponents. They lavish the Abrahamites with gifts and raise them from 
the status of slave or prisoner to appoint them as their second-in-com-
mand. After his confrontation with Hārūn, Mūsā also decides to share 
his power with his erstwhile opponent and lavishes him with gifts.

Compare the following passage from the Bible where Pharaoh rewards 
Joseph, with a passage from the Tārīkh where the caliph Mūsā al-Hādī 
rewards Hārūn:

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt.” Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph’s 
finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his 
neck. He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and men shouted 
before him, “Make way!” Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt. 
Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I am Pharaoh, but without your word no-one will 

Al-Hādī exclaimed to Hārūn...”You shan’t sit anywhere else but here with me!” and he made Hārūn sit with him in the center of the court assembly. Next he 
said: “O Harrānī, convey a million dinārs to my brother, and when the collection 
of the land tax is in hand, convey to him half of it; throw open for him all our 
wealth in the treasuries and what was confiscated from the members of the ac-
cursed house (i.e., the Umayyads) and convey to him half of it, and let him take 
everything he desires.” He put all that into execution, and when Hārūn rose to 
leave, he said to Śālih, “Bring his mount near to the Caliph’s Carpet.”

Hārūn as blind tyrant

The burden of a double heritage not only leads to war and conflict be-
tween different members of the same family, but also to internal con-
flict within one character, or the development of one character from 
wise redeemer to blind tyrant.

When Mūsā al-Hādī was in power, Hārūn behaved like an underdog 
redeemer who would destroy the tyrant and free the latter’s subjects 
from his yoke. However, when Hārūn is caliph himself, he, at his turn, 
starts to adopt the behaviour of blind, evil tyrants. As a caliph Hārūn 
acts unjustly: he cruelly dismembers the innocent brother of a rebel

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16 Tab. III, 576.
17 Genesis 41:41–44, see also Tab. I, 391.
18 Tab. III, 577.
(more on this in the next chapter, ‘A handful of red earth’). In addition, he oppresses, imprisons and kills the innocent Barmakid family, his loyal advisors. In the words of Tayeb El-Hibri:

The fragile credibility of the various suggested reasons explaining Hārūn’s motives for sacking the Barmakids is specifically intended in the narratives to isolate and highlight the brazen injustice that Hārūn committed. Although hailed as an orthodox personality in one dimension of his character, Hārūn has a more controversial character as the subject of a negative moral. Hārūn can be accepted as a legitimate ruler but, like other ‘Abbāsid caliphs, he is obliquely rebuked in the sources for becoming overconfident in his power.

...A particular sinister mood floats over the psyche of Hārūn as we go through the episode of the Barmakid downfall which starkly contrasts with his earlier personality during his years as a youthful heir apparent...This unfair move against a family that had served the caliphate with dedication signalled future divine punishment of the ruler.29

When Hārūn himself has a dream that announces his death, Hārūn acts as a blind tyrant. This dream will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapter, here it suffices to state that Hārūn, just like the pre-Islamic tyrants treated in chapter three, fails to understand the dream that announces his demise. To further stress the relation with biblical tyrants, Hārūn’s incapable dream interpreter reacts with exactly the same words as the incapable dream interpreters of the king of Egypt in the Koran. Both say their rulers’ dreams are adghāth ahlām (meaningless, uninterpretable dreams). Compare the following passage from the Koran about Pharaoh with a passage from the Tārikh about Hārūn:

And the king said: “Lo! I saw in a dream seven fat kine which seven lean were eating, and seven green ears of corn and other (seven) dry. 0 notables! Expound for me my vision, if ye can interpret dreams.” They answered: “Adghāth ahlām! And we are not knowing in the interpretation of dreams.”30

[The court physician to Hārūn al-Rashīd]: “Is all this grief because of a mere dream? Dreams only come from some fancy within the mind, or from unpleasant vapors, or some bogey arising from a fit of melancholy; they are only adghāth ahlām!”31

29 El-Hibri, Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography, p. 34.
30 Koran 12:43–44.
31 Tab. III, 735–6.
Abbasid caliphs as tragic heroes

In classical Islam, dreams were considered a form of prophetic revelation. As stated above, to prove that they were the true descendants of prophets, the Abbasid caliphs were shown to have prophetic dreams just like Muhammad and the prophets before him had been guided by dreams. Receiving dreams, however, is not enough, you also have to be able to deal with the revelation and the truths contained there in. If you do not pay attention to the destiny that is revealed to you in dreams, you will have to bear the consequences, just as the ancient peoples who did not heed warnings of their prophets had to bear the consequences.

In their inability to deal correctly with the revelation sent to them in dreams, the Abbasid caliphs resemble the tyrants of the pre-Islamic section. In the following quote, Tayeb El-Hibri compares Hārūn with the Israelite king Saul, but his comment also applies to a comparison of the caliph with biblical tyrants:

While neither just a temporal leader, nor an infallible prophet in the Islamic sense of the term, the ‘Abbasid caliph’s figure frequently resembled in various stories the biblical king...who encounters tribulation but is able through dreams, inner awakenings, and premonitions of the future to discover closure and redemption for his errors.

Burdened by two conflicting legacies, blessed with dreams but unable to deal with them rightly, the Abbasid caliphs are presented in Tabari’s Tārīkh as tragic heroes, a point which will be developed in chapter six, ‘Three tragic rulers’.

Mūsā and Hārūn: The dream of al-Mahdī

Here I will analyse in more detail a khabar on the confrontation between the Abbasid caliph Mūsā al-Hādī and his brother Hārūn, that was already referred to above. I will begin by providing some information on the general historical background, information that can be assumed to have been part of the general knowledge of a classical Arabic audience. After a summary of the khabar in which the dream report has been embedded, I will first interpret the symbolical meaning of the imagery used in the dream. Then I will analyse how this imagery is used to judge and explain the events the dream refers to, that is, how the dream is

used to influence the opinion of the audience on these events. Finally, I
will analyse how the dream is embedded in the larger khabar. I will ana-
lyse the way the story is told: in what order the events are presented,
what is narrated by whom, and analyse the identity of the transmitters.
I will conclude that the judgement and explanation offered by the
dream is hidden under a deceptive layer of objective reporting.

The struggle over the succession to al-Mahdi

The Abbasid dynasty had come to power after a revolution in 750. 'Suc-
cession to the Caliphate was the most crucial political question which
confronted the ruling élite in early Abbasid times.' Each caliph designated a wali' ahd, an heir apparent, normally one of his own sons, but
such as designation was not final. There were very few rules or prece-
dents to provide guidance in this matter. A rule like primogeniture, the
eldest son taking the entire inheritance, did not apply to the Caliphate.

Within the Abbasid family, designation by the previous Caliph was a very impor-
tant claim to legitimacy. But because such a designation was not final, no son
could be sure of his position as wali' ahd until the moment of his father's death.

During the reign of the caliph al-Mahdi, the father of Mūsā and Hārūn,
two groups fought for influence at the court in Baghdad and thereby
over the Abbasid empire. On one side there were the palace servants,
most of them mawāli or freed slaves, who were later joined by the secre-
taries or kuttāb. This faction of bureaucrats and palace servants was
opposed by the army. The debate between these two groups was not
conducted 'in terms of elections or coups d'état, but by supporting dif-
f erent candidates for the succession.' The army supported Mūsā; the
palace servants and the secretaries supported Hārūn.

In the beginning of his reign, the caliph al-Mahdi appointed his son
Mūsā as his successor. Soon afterward, however, he showed signs that
he preferred his younger son Hārūn. Al-Mahdi decreed that if Mūsā
would die, the latter would not be succeeded by his own son, but by his

24 See also: Richard Kimber, 'The Succession to the Caliph Mūsā al-Hādi', JAOS, 121
25 Hugh Kennedy, 'Succession Disputes in the Early Abbasid Caliphate (132/749–
193/809)', in: ed. Robert Hillenbrand, Proceedings of the 10th Congress of the Union
29.
26 Kennedy, p. 29.
27 Kennedy, p. 32.
younger brother, Hārün. Eventually, al-Mahdī wanted to annul Mūsā’s appointment as heir apparent altogether, and to replace him with Hārün. Mūsā, however, who was not in Baghdad at that time, refused to step aside. When al-Mahdī and Hārün rode out to persuade Mūsā to relinquish the throne, al-Mahdī suddenly died, and Mūsā succeeded him as caliph.28

Now it was Mūsā’s turn to appoint an heir apparent. Instead of choosing his brother Hārün, as had been decreed by al-Mahdī, Mūsā decided to appoint his own son.29 This decision, however, provoked the anger of Mūsā’s mother, Khayzurān,30 who chose the side of her other son Hārün.31 When Mūsā died after only a year in office, it was rumoured that he had been killed by his own mother,32 because Khayzurān was afraid that Mūsā would kill her favourite Hārün, so he could put his own son on the throne.33

After Mūsā’s death, he was not succeeded by his son, as he had wanted, but by Hārün, his brother. The legitimacy of this accession was ambiguous. It is true that the second-last caliph, al-Mahdī, had decreed that Mūsā should be succeeded by Hārün, but Mūsā himself, as the last caliph, had wished that he should not be succeeded by Hārün. For his accession to become completely legitimate, Hārün had to prove somehow that he had more right to the throne than Mūsā’s son. Moreover, if Mūsā had indeed died an unnatural death, Hārün’s accession to the throne was based on murder, and as long as Hārün did not take measures to revenge his predecessor, the legitimacy of his own rule would always remain doubtful.

29 Bonner, p. 84. It is unclear whether the appointment of Mūsā’s son as his successor had become completely official at the time of Mūsā’s death (see the conflicting reports in Tab. III, 571-8). There appears to be no doubt, however, as to Mūsā’s intentions, as some reports state that Mūsā put Hārün in prison or even wanted to kill him, to secure the accession of his own son. See Tab. III, 575, note 199 by C.E. Bosworth in his annotation to the English translation, as well as Tab. III, 600.
30 Tab. III, 569.
31 Tab. III, 578.
32 Tab. III, 569.
33 Tab. III, 571.
Al-Mahdi’s dream

The selected khabar is set during the days of Mūsā’s caliphate. It is told by a freed slave who was present at one of the caliph’s court sessions. The friction between the two brothers is apparent. During the court session, the caliph Mūsā attacks his younger brother for thinking too much about a certain dream. He reproaches his brother:

“Oh Hārūn, it appears to me that you are dwelling to lengthily on the fulfilment of the dream...but before that can come to pass, you will have to strip the spiny leaves from the tragacanth bush’s branches! Do you really hope for the caliphate?”

To strip the tragacanth bush of its leaves was a proverbial expression meaning: to remove mountains, to accomplish the impossible. Hārūn replies to this attack with an ambiguous platitude about the vicissitudes of power. This apparently satisfies the caliph, for he rewards his younger brother with large sums of money and bestows honours upon him.

After this report of the court session, the narrator of the khabar, who is as curious as his audience regarding this dream the brothers were arguing about, turns to one of the characters. He stresses that he was on intimate terms with Hārūn, so he asks him about the dream.

Hārūn used to regard me as a close companion, so I stood up before him and said: “Oh my master, what was the dream which the commander of the faithful spoke to you about?”

Hārūn replies the narrator with a story told by his father al-Mahdi. One night, al-Mahdi relates, he dreamt that he gave a staff to two of his sons: one to Mūsā and one to Hārūn. In his dream, the staff he had given to Mūsā started to grow leaves, but only a few of them and only at the top. The staff he had given to his son Hārūn put forth leaves from one end to the other. This dream was explained by an interpreter of dreams as meaning that both these sons would become caliphs, but that the younger son would rule longer. In the words of the interpreter, Hārūn’s reign “will extend further than that of any other Caliph who has ever lived; his days will be the finest of days and his age the finest of ages.”

After this embedded story told by Hārūn, the narrator of the anecdote apparently returns to the main story line by stating: ‘Only a few days passed before Mūsā fell ill and died, his illness lasting for three

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34 Tab. III, 576-8.
days only.’ The narrator concludes by stating that Hārūn succeeded his brother and became caliph, and that his age was indeed the finest of ages.

*The staff that grows leaves*

Let us first analyse the dream more closely. A staff, in general a symbol of power, was one of the three insignia of the caliphate, one of the heirlooms Muhammad had bequeathed to his successors. A caliph giving two of his sons a staff is a clear sign that he wants these two sons to succeed him.

However, the Arabic word used here for staff, *qadīb*, also means ‘branch of a tree.’ In this sense, the two staffs are two branches of the Abbasid family tree. Mūsā’s branch only grows a few leaves: he will have but little offspring. Hārūn’s branch has leaves from beginning to end: he will be the father to a long line of caliphs.

The flowering staff has a third meaning. This plays with the fact that the names of the two brothers, Mūsā and Hārūn, are the Arabic equivalents of the names of the biblical brothers Moses and Aaron. In the Bible, God elects Aaron by way of a flowering staff. In the Old Testament, the twelve chiefs of Israel leave their staffs overnight in a tent to decide who will be their leader. When they come back the following morning, they find that Aaron’s staff has grown leaves. This they take as a sign that Aaron has been chosen by God to lead them.

Finally, a flowering staff is one of the attributes by which the Mahdi, the Muslim Messiah, can be recognised. This Mahdi is the expected redeemer who will once again reunite all Muslims under his just leadership and whose reign will herald the beginning of the End of Times. Such messianic symbolism was an important element of Abbasid propaganda. Remember that the two brothers and their father bore the messianic epithets *al-Mahdi*, *al-Hādi* and *al-Rashīd*, which all mean ‘the rightly-guided one’ and refer to the Mahdi as the expected just ruler. The messianic interpretation of the flowering staff is also supported by the fact that there are other dreams in which Abbasid caliphs are invested with eschatological attributes. Al-Manṣūr, the grandfather of Mūsā and Hārūn, had a dream that echoes the dream of al-Mahdi. Al-

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36 For other instances where the Abbasid brothers Mūsā and Hārūn are compared with the biblical brothers Moses and Aaron, see: Bonner, p. 82 & p. 86, n. 50.

37 Num. 17.

Manṣūr dreamt that his own father gave him and his older brother standards with black flags. These standards were symbols of power, and the longer standard was for, again, the younger brother, al-Manṣūr, who would rule longer. However, these black standards were also eschatological symbols, because in one version of this dream al-Manṣūr's standard is explicitly intended to fight the Dajjāl, the Muslim Antichrist who will appear at the End of Times.39 In another version, al-Manṣūr is not only given a standard but also a turban, which he has to wear 'until the arrival of the Day of Judgement.'40

The messianic interpretation of the flowering staff also sheds light on the expression: 'Hārūn's age will be the finest of ages'. In a messianic context, finest of ages could well refer to the everlasting kingdom of God that had already been announced by Daniel. This way, Hārūn's rule is the fulfilment of biblical prophecies.

*Calips and Prophets*

How would this dream be understood by a classical Arabic audience, if seen against the background of the ambiguous legitimacy of Hārūn's accession, and the rumours concerning Mūsā’s possible violent death?

In short, what is implied by the dream?

Firstly, the dream shows that Hārūn's accession to the throne and his success had been predicted beforehand. It was apparently in the nature of things that this would happen. This in itself offers some kind of explanation and justification of these events.

Secondly, the flowering staff shows that Hārūn had been chosen by God. The fact that Mūsā gave two of his sons a staff implies that he had chosen these two sons to succeed him; the fact that Hārūn's staff grows more leaves than that of Mūsā, shows that of these two brothers, God prefers the younger one.

Thirdly, by way of the messianic connotation of the flowering staff and the expression 'finest of ages' it is hinted that Hārūn is not just a caliph, but that he might be the Messiah, the ultimate just restorer of religion.

In the fourth place, the link with the story of the biblical Aaron strengthens the connection, already apparent in the names of the two

brothers, of Abbasid caliphs with pre-Islamic prophets. This link between Abbasid caliphs and what I will refer to as ‘biblical prophets’ has several implications:

A) Abbasid caliphs are more than mere kings. They are different from their predecessors the Umayyads, who were nothing but tyrants who had usurped power by sheer force and without any legitimisation. Abbasid caliphs, on the other hand, are to be compared to figures like Moses, who had been chosen by God to rule his people, to give them divine law, and to lead them away from tyranny. Likewise, Abbasid caliphs are also chosen by God; they have been given a divine licence to rule, to free the community of believers from the tyranny of the Umayyads, and to give them laws. In the ongoing struggle of righteous prophets against tyranny, Moses and Aaron represent the quintessential prophet-leaders, who fought with their staffs against the archetypal tyrant, Pharaoh.

B) Abbasid caliphs are not only comparable to biblical prophets, they are also the successors to these prophets: they are the true inheritors of the prophets (waratha al-anbiyā), and the continuators of this line of rulers from world history.

C) The link of Abbasid caliphs with biblical prophets implies that the history of these caliphs is in fact a continuation of the sacred history of the Bible. By way of this connection, an event from everyday politics, an ordinary power struggle between two brothers, is raised to a higher level, that of World History. Hārūn’s succession to Mūsā is implied to be an important step in God’s plan with mankind.

At first glimpse, too much emphasis on the link between the Abbasid brothers Mūsā and Hārūn and the prophet brothers Moses and Aaron could seem dangerous for Hārūn’s image. In both the Old Testament and the Koran, Moses is more important than his younger brother. Aaron is only a sidekick, a support, a wazīr to his older brother.41

However, because the link with biblical prophets is established in a dream, it also entails the association with the biblical prophet Joseph, the archetypal dreamer in Islam. Joseph, like Hārūn, had been told in dreams that he would be more successful than his older brothers.42 This connection with Joseph entails three biblical themes that are not only found in the Joseph story but can be considered as stock themes in the

41 Koran 25:35.
42 For other comparisons between Hārūn and Joseph see El-Hibri, Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography, p. 41.
history of the prophets. These themes are highly relevant to the power struggle between Mūsā and Hārūn.
- The younger brother is preferred by God (as God prefers Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, and Joseph over his brothers); the younger brother receives his father’s blessing instead of the first-born, becomes the more successful one and continues the family line (as happens in the three generations of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph).
- The older brothers become jealous and try to put their younger brother out of the way (Cain slays Abel; Esau tries to kill Jacob, who has to go into exile; Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery). God does not approve of this jealousy.
- Younger brothers deceive older ones, but contrary to the deeds of the older brothers, this deceit is allowed by God (Jacob deceives his older brother Esau to receive their father’s blessing).

The resemblance of these biblical themes with the situation of the Abbasid brothers Mūsā and Hārūn is obvious. Al-Mahdi’s dream implies that it is the younger son Hārūn who has his father’s true blessing. It is Hārūn who has been chosen by God to continue the family line. Mūsā’s jealousy towards Hārūn and his efforts to put his younger brother out of the way are against God’s will. Hārūn, however, is allowed to use deceit to ensure his accession. The mother of Hārūn and Mūsā, Khayzurān, assumes the role of the mother of Jacob and Esau, Rebecca, who schemed on the side of the younger son against the older. Just as Rebecca is portrayed as the mastermind behind the betrayal of Esau, in order to relieve Jacob of his guilt, Khayzurān, and not Hārūn, is portrayed as the one who decided to kill Mūsā. Hārūn’s succession, even if against his brother’s will, is legitimate, and Hārūn does not have to revenge his brother’s murder.

The fact that a younger brother succeeds and surpasses his older brother, the legitimate caliph, and might even have put him out of the way, is not the result of the fact that Muslims live in a time devoid of divine guidance, where injustice and disorder reign, a time of tyrants who do not recoil from murdering their own kin to achieve power. To the contrary: Hārūn’s actions conform to the standard behaviour of prophets; things like this happened also in those sanctioned days when God did still send prophets to guide man. Hārūn does not act opportunistically; he obeys to a law of history.
A deceptive layer of objective reporting

All the above-mentioned interpretation in favour of the Abbasid caliphs and of Hārūn’s accession in particular, is expressed indirectly. It is hidden behind a deceptive outward appearance of objective reporting by uninvolved reporters. The secondary narrator who relates the khabar pretends to adhere to all the conventions of classical chronicles: he pretends to be simply testifying what he heard and saw with his own ears and eyes, and to refrain from giving his own opinion on the events he witnessed.

As is conventional for historical reports in classical Arabic chronicles, the anecdote is preceded by an isnad, a chain of transmitters. This chain bridges the distance in time between the historian Tabari and the reported event. At first glance, the isnad seems just a list of names without faces, but if we examine it more closely, it appears that the transmitters of this particular story belonged to a specific group.

Tabari claims to have heard the story from a certain Muhammad b. al-Qāsim b. al-Rabī‘. This man was presumably the grandson of al-Rabī‘ b. Yūnus, the leader of the palace servants who supported Hārūn. This grandson had heard the story from the son of someone who had witnessed the events personally: ʿAmr al-Rūmī. This eyewitness was a freed slave, like most of the palace servants, and as he was present during the court session, he probably did serve in the palace himself. The anecdote is thus presented by Tabari to have circulated among palace servants and their offspring, who tended to support Hārūn.

The secondary narrator ʿAmr al-Rūmī, however, does his best to appear as an objective reporter, who does not take sides. Three modes of reporting are used by the narrator to appear as reliable and objective a reporter as possible: 1. Detailed report of a scene the narrator actually witnessed. 2. Consultation of another informant to obtain information about things the narrator did not witness himself, definition of relationship to this second informant (the narrator states that his informant Hārūn ‘used to regard him as a close companion’). 3. Conclusion of the report in which the narrator refers to general knowledge of the audience.

It should be noted that his method of reporting results in a reversal of the story’s chronology: The embedded story of the dream told to the

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44 Kennedy, p. 30.
45 See Tab. III, 576, note 207 by Bosworth.
narrator by Hārūn becomes a flash back to the time Hārūn’s father was still alive.

Nowhere does the secondary narrator say directly: In my opinion, Hārūn was more fit to rule than his brother; Hārūn was chosen by God. The narrator does not even quote characters who express their opinion and offer these judgements. All the secondary narrator does is to quote someone who describes his own dream. The account of a dream is not the expression of a personal opinion, but an eyewitness report of an experience the dreamer underwent. This dream is explained, but this is done by a dream interpreter, someone who is also not stating his personal opinion, but just doing his job, translating a message according to the rules of his trade. The statement ‘Hārūn’s age will be the finest of ages’ is of course a statement of opinion, but by putting it in the mouth of a dream interpreter, who is just decoding an event, it is disguised as a statement of fact.

One could say that to voice the opinion: ‘Hārūn’s age is the finest of ages’, the secondary narrator hides behind Hārūn, who hides behind his father, who is just reporting an experience he pretended not to understand himself, so the father in his turn hides behind an interpreter of dreams.

In the conclusion to the anecdote, the statement of opinion ‘Hārūn’s age is the finest of ages’ is even repeated a second time, but again the narrator pretends that it is a statement of fact and not the opinion of himself or one of the characters. In his conclusion, the secondary narrator pretends just to be summarising what was said before or to be repeating what is already unquestioned general knowledge of the audience.

The other judgements on the legitimacy of Hārūn’s accession, such as the link between Hārūn and biblical prophets and Hārūn and the Messiah, are not even mentioned in the anecdote at all. By reporting a dream, you can pretend to be just reporting an event. Every reader or listener, however, was of course aware that dreams could be more than events, that they are also messages, that can be decoded. Although the dream of the flowering staffs is explained by an interpreter, most of this decoding is left to the audience. Neither the secondary narrator nor the characters explain that the flowering staff is a reference to the biblical story of Aaron or to the messiah.
CONCLUSION

A prediction based on a dream could be used by a narrator to highlight the predicted event. What is more important, a dream report offers the narrator several possibilities to express his opinion in an indirect way. By reporting a dream, the narrator seems to be reporting an event. The particular event of dream, however, offered the narrator three possibilities to provide judgement or interpretation.

Dreams offer scope to introduce symbols. In contrast to reports about events from waking, daily life, the report of a dream could contain fantastic imagery. It would have gone too far to spread the story that Hārūn’s staff miraculously put forth flowers in real life, as did happen in the biblical story. Such miracles were against the conventions of classical Arabic historiography, and such a story would probably not have been believed by a classical Arabic audience. These miracles could only occur in dreams. Because dreams were considered to be more than events, to be messages which could be decoded, the narrator could expect that his audience would give the fantastic imagery of dreams a symbolical interpretation.

To steer the interpretation of the dream by the audience, the narrator could introduce an interpreter. By quoting the interpreter of the dream, the narrator seems to be quoting someone who is not giving a personal opinion, but just translating, applying the rules of the science of dream interpretation.

Whether or not a dream contained symbolism, whether it was interpreted or not, a dream was considered to be a sign from God. By way of a dream, a narrator could imply Gods approval, one of the strongest opinions possible.

By using dreams, the narrator was able to express an opinion without having to step outside the conventions of the classical Arabic chronicle.

The transition from the pre-Islamic to the Islamic section of the Tārīkh shows a break in narrative structure. This change in structure, however, does not correspond with a break in motifs used. Biblical motifs are not only found in the pre-Islamic section, but also in the Islamic section, as is shown by the recurrence of the biblical ‘staff that grows leaves’ in the dream of al-Mahdī. Motifs from the cluster of motifs surrounding the ‘tyrant vs. interpreter’ dream also recur in the Islamic section, as the struggle between tyrant and redeemer continues as a struggle within the Abbasid family. By way of motif repetition, Tabari is able to indirectly compare Abbasid caliphs with pre-Islamic prophets and tyrants, thereby indirectly passing judgement on their actions.