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

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Citation for published version (APA):

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The Tārīkh as History  
Dreams and Implicit Storytelling

This book’s ambition has been to modify the ‘bewilderment’ and ‘infuriation’ of modern scholars with regard to Tabari’s History of Prophets and Kings, a text that allegedly demonstrates his ‘exasperating paratactical method’, so ‘repetitive, disjointed, cryptic’ and ‘apparently pointless’ that narrative clarity and psychological plausibility are ‘destroyed’ and ‘undermined’. My analysis has demonstrated that these exclamations have been testimonies to the scholarly failure to properly interpret the author’s rhetorical strategies. My main conclusion has been that Tabari takes great pains to appear not to be telling a story – indeed, to appear as a bad storyteller. Behind his facade of objective reporting, however, there are sophisticated narrative techniques at work.

This thesis has presented Tabari as a good storyteller and a convincing historian, whose standards of history writing can not only be compared to those of a Western audience schooled in biblical history, but can also be understood and appreciated by such an audience. His main

1 I thank Thijs Weststeijn for his invaluable help in the writing of this conclusion.
rhetorical strategy was to appear as nothing more than the last transmitter, and thereby seem authoritative, while at the same time providing his own implicit judgement of events, indirectly highlighting historical parallels and captivating the unwitting reader with added suspense and drama. Analyzing his implicit strategies of storytelling reveals that his ideas about the historian’s task and narrative are intricately interwoven with Judaic and Christian notions of sacred history, a conclusion that is reinforced by Tabari’s repeated references, implicit as well as explicit, to biblical themes.

The key to this conclusion has been the narratological analysis of the function of dream reports in the History of Prophets and Kings. In the sober genre of classical Arabic historiography, stringent with accounts of miracles, theurgy or sortilege, dream reports stand out as red flags through their conspicuous inclusion of symbolism and the supernatural. As this thesis has revealed, Tabari included them for clear reasons: dream reports are perfectly suited for implicit storytelling.

We started out by analyzing the meaning of the term tārikh in the title of Tabari’s work. While this term is generally rendered as ‘history’ in the sense of a ‘story about past events’, we have suggested two additional interpretations, based on our analysis of the narrative structure of his work. First, the presentation of key events of the Tārikh in a rigid chronological order, without explicit commentary, suggests this text is nothing more than a list of events. According to this interpretation, Tabari’s objective was to provide his readers information about relative and exact chronology: the term tārikh can simply be translated as ‘chronology’. A second interpretation focuses on elements of the text that foreground the catalogue aspect of Tabari’s work: the Tārikh as a database of akhbār, where reports are central, not the events behind them. According to this interpretation, the word tārikh refers to the fact that the work can be seen as a catalogue of chronologically arranged reports.

Much of the confusion experienced by Tabari’s modern readers can be clarified by taking into account the narratological distinction between the real life author Tabari and the persona of the primary narrator. Tabari gave his work the outward appearance of a compendium of quotations from the works of others, where the entries are presented by a detached primary narrator who merely lists and who refrains from commentary. The reason that Tabari gave his Tārikh this format was not that he lacked storytelling abilities or had no authorial opinion. To the contrary, Tabari did have a strong personal view on the events of the past. Likewise, the reason that he refrained from stating this opinion directly was not that he felt restricted by the taboos of his time and did
not dare to make his point of view public. Tabari gave his Tārikh the format of a catalogue as a conscious rhetorical choice, to bring his opinion across in a more effective way, and render his authorial interpretation of events more convincing.

Aware that readers tend to identify the primary narrator of a text with its author, Tabari consciously gave the primary narrator of his Tārikh an uninvolved, sober style. He knew that this would make himself appear, due to the conventions of his time, as an authoritative conveyor of the truth about the past. However, using implicit storytelling techniques, Tabari could have it both ways. Hiding behind the catalogue format, his detached primary narrator, and a multitude of akhbār reporters, Tabari was able to appear perfectly neutral and objective, while at the same time passing scathing judgements on his characters and captivating his readers with suspense and tragedy. Among the strategies Tabari used for such implicit storytelling was motif repetition and, more particular, the inclusion of dreams.

As dream reports offered the narrator several possibilities to express his opinion in an indirect way, dreams were essential to a text’s claim to scholarly objectivity. By using dreams, the narrator was able to express an opinion without committing a solecism in the genre of the classical Arabic chronicle. Moreover, he was able to add a semblance of objectivity while hiding behind several ‘layers of reportage’: in the case of dream reports, the primary narrator in the Tārikh may quote an eyewitness who in turn quotes a character who reports an event he witnessed; the dreamer recounts a dream he saw. In case the dream is explained, the eyewitness in turn quotes an additional character (the dream interpreter) who translates the dream’s message. Without explicating a point of view, the dreamer reports an event he witnessed in his sleep, the interpreter simply translates what others experienced. This way, the author himself can hide behind at least five layers of purportedly objective reportage.

We should note, however, that in the case of dream reports, at the same time that the author’s judgement is hidden under so many layers, it is also heavily foregrounded. More than regular historical events, dream reports appealed to the classical Arabic reader’s wish for interpretation. When the contents of a dream were presented, Tabari’s readers knew that these contents constitute a message in need of clarification. As dreams were deemed to come from the supernatural realm, their message was always important. Moreover (as our chapter six has made clear in particular), in contrast to other predictions such as astrological forecasts, in classical Arabic prose texts the relation between the dream and
its meaning was metaphorical: this means that most readers were able to decipher the dream themselves.

In addition, the judgment offered by dreams is also highly authoritative. A report of a dream or its deciphering by a professional interpreter was not judged as the expression of individual opinion, but as an objective account of an event that really happened. No classical Arabic author ever expressed doubt about the possibility that dreams could contain truthful messages. Indeed, dreambooks and philosophical treatises provided the interpretation of these nocturnal phenomena with an aura of scholarly objectivity and authority. Dreams were related to prophecy; they were interpreted as messages sent by God and expressions of His infallible judgment.

Finally, dreams, as the source material for divination, are eminently suited not only to indirectly highlight events but also, as prolepsis, to provide connections between different events. In addition, dreams provide storytelling opportunities on a more aesthetic or entertaining level. Within the conventions that resulted in the dry style of a work such as the Tārikh—both the detached summary by the primary narrator and the 'hard-boiled' reportage by the khabar transmitters—a dream report offered narrators and readers the opportunity to indulge in metaphor, under the pretense of an unadorned and matter-of-fact reportage of actual events. As predictions, dreams are eminently suited as foreshadowing, thereby adding suspense and tragedy to the alleged dry presentation of events. As the various chapters of this thesis demonstrate in synthesis, dreams allowed the historiographer to hide behind a mask of scholarly objectivity while at the same time providing him with a singular spectrum of narrative opportunities for which the genre had no place elsewhere.

As the thesis demonstrates in detail how association and juxtaposition were means of telling an implicit story (chapters four and five) and how suspense and tragedy were added to the apparently dry presentation of events through accounts of predictive dreams (chapter six), we can conclude here that in the case of Tabari’s text, the term tārikh can indeed be translated as ‘story about past event’, i.e. as ‘history’.

As is well known, Tabari incorporated biblical material into his Tārikh. Also common knowledge is the fact that Muhammad was presented as the successor to the earlier prophets Joseph, Moses, Daniel and Jesus; indeed, Islam was presented as the legitimate successor to the earlier monotheist religions Judaism and Christianity. Chapter three has revealed that Tabari used a specific narrative technique to reinforce this doctrine: a deliberate use of motif repetition. The chapter has focused
on a motif which returns no less than six times, and which is rooted in both the Koran and the Old Testament: A ruler has a dream that can only be interpreted by a foreigner who descends from Abraham. By way of motif repetition, Tabari links his episodes about post-biblical prophets and post-biblical tyrants to biblical stories. Doing this, he suggests that the Tahrīkh is a sequel to the Old and New Testaments and that its post-biblical characters are legitimate heirs to biblical predecessors.

This ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamic interpreter’ motif is repeated in the accounts of dreams dreamt by a number of pre-Islamic rulers: the Egyptian pharaohs from the time of Joseph and Moses; the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar; the Arab king Rabī’ā b. Naṣr; and, from the time of Muhammad, the Persian and Byzantine emperors Anūšharwān and Heraclius. The reuse of known motifs allows the narrator to refrain from directly explicating the typology. Instead, by incorporating motifs from the stories about earlier prophets, Joseph and Moses, in his story of Muhammad, 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 draw his own conclusions based on such a comparison. Motif repetition is an indirect way to express the notion of Muhammad’s biblical inheritance. As the primary narrator of Tabari’s Tahrīkh abstained from directly linking, comparing and judging events in his own words, motif repetition allowed the author to indirectly steer the reader’s interpretation. Apparently, even in the pre-Islamic part of his Tahrīkh, 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.

In addition, we demonstrated how motifs from the ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamic interpreter’ cluster are used to show that in the course of pre-Islamic history as told in the Tahrīkh, there is not only repetition, but also change. In the course of history the opposition between evil tyrant and good interpreter gradually diminishes. Tabari suggests that history repeats itself every time a true prophet is sent by God: time and again, each prophet has to oppose the tyrant of his day who appears as an incarnation of previous tyrants. However, in the Tahrīkh, whereas Pharaoh is the epitome of evil tyranny, Rabī’ā b. Naṣr is already less oppressive and arrogant, and Anūšharwān is able to understand the meaning of at least a part of his dream, without consulting interpreters. This development towards tyrants being less evil and more insightful culminates in the depiction of Heraclius as the ‘ideal ruler’, who almost converts to Islam.

We have seen that the interpreter’s role changes as well. In the Old Testament, the interpreters Joseph and Daniel are the heroes of their
respective episodes who rise from slavery to high positions in the tyrant’s service. Starting with the New Testament story of Herod, however, the true heroes are not the interpreters, but the prophets whose coming they announce. In the time of Rabī’a b. Naṣr, after explaining the king’s dream, the interpreters do not play any further role in that particular episode. In the time of Anūṣhārwān, the interpreter only provides a corroboration of what the tyrant has already grasped by himself. Again the process culminates in the episode of Heraclius, where the two Abrahamites merely inadvertently provide the ruler the clues to interpret his own dream. As the tyrants become wiser and the interpreters less important, the opposite extremes tyrant and Abrahamite gradually grow closer to each other, because the rulers adopts qualities that were initially the prerequisite of the Abrahamites, such as insight in dreams.

Chapters four, five and six were devoted to the dreams of three Abbasid caliphs from the catalogue section of the Tārīkh, al-Mahdī, al-Rashid and al-Amīn. Chapters four and five have analyzed how the biblical motifs used in the pre-Islamic section of the Tārīkh are also used in the Islamic section to implicitly judge caliphs and their actions. The pre-Islamic struggle between good and evil, between tyrants and Abrahamite redeemers, continues in the Islamic section as a struggle within the Abbasid dynasty. The competition between two Abbasid pretenders to the throne, Mūsā and Hārūn, is cast as a struggle between blind tyrant and wise redeemer. Hārūn himself develops during his lifetime from an underdog liberator into a blind and cruel oppressor. The process of gradual rapprochement between ruler and Abrahamite, as noted in our analysis of the pre-Islamic section, has resulted in the fusion of these two characters 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. The difficulty of coping with this double heritage is poignantly illustrated by the dreams of these Abbasid caliphs and the way they try to handle the truth that is revealed to them.

Our analysis of al-Mahdī’s dream in chapter four has shown that motifs connected to the ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamite’ dream, as well as another biblical motif, the staff that miraculously grows leaves, are used to compare Mūsā al-Hādī and his brother Hārūn with pre-Islamic prophets and tyrants and thereby to implicitly pass judgment on their actions.
Our analysis of al-Rashīd’s dream in chapter five has shown how a number of techniques are used to indirectly pass judgment on Hārūn al-Rashīd, now that he has become caliph himself. By way of the juxtaposition of akhbār, a flashback, characters who openly link events from different entries, and the repetition of motifs mentioned in the previous khabar, Hārūn’s death is linked to the unjust and cruel way he dealt with the innocent brother of a rebel. By way of the ‘red earth’ motif, Hārūn is compared to Muhammad, and the murders of his son al-Amīn and his grandson al-Riḍā linked to the murder of the Prophet’s grandson al-Ḥusayn. The children of both Prophet and caliph were murdered by their Muslim brethren, and both their grandchildren were be buried in blood-drenched soil. The red earth motif is used to illustrate the themes of fratricide and civil war.

In both cases the judgement and explanation offered by the dream is hidden under a deceptive layer of objective reporting. Again we can conclude that, within the conventions of the chronicle, dreams provide an ideal tool by which the author can offer his opinion indirectly.

In chapter six it is argued that dreams are not only used to cast judgement on characters and their actions, but also to add suspense and tragedy to the deceptively dry presentation of events. The three obituary entries of the caliphs al-Hādī, al-Rashīd and al-Amīn contain dreams with the same import: they turn the deaths of these Abbasid caliphs into the downfall of tragic heroes. Here, a pattern is revealed returning in the aforementioned accounts of al-Mahdī’s dream about the staffs growing leaves, al-Rashīd’s dream of a handful of read earth, and, in addition, al-Amīn dreaming that his hat falls off. The pattern that these three dreams share is one of tragedy. All three caliphs die prematurely: al-Hādī is murdered at an early age; al-Rashīd dies from an illness caught travelling; and al-Amīn is decapitated. These Abbasid rulers, however, are not pagan tyrants, such as Pharaoh or the Umayyads who, in Tabari’s chronicle, meet their well-deserved punishment after a reign of unbelief and oppression. Hādī, Rashīd and Amin share just one tragic flaw: not being able to deal with the revealed truth that is exposed to them in dreams. All three characters misunderstand the dreams that concern them and fail to accept the destiny announced to them. In addition, the actions these three caliphs undertake in order to postpone, avert, or completely ignore their destiny, have opposite results: instead of lengthening their lives, these actions shorten it and make it more miserable. The one ruler who does not die a violent death and who manages to bequeath the caliphate to his offspring, is Hārūn al-Rashīd: he is blessed with a moment of anagnorisis, where he recognizes his own tragic flaw and the full meaning of his dream.
The comparison of these three dream reports has made clear that just as dreams may reveal tragic flaws and provoke the tragic behaviour of characters, they are instrumental in creating the particular discrepancy in knowledge between reader and character that results in dramatic irony.

All this disproves the assumption that Tabari was nothing but an uncreative compiler who did not understand the reports he included. The analysis of the narratological function of the three dreams treated in this chapter demonstrated that the Tārīkh is more than a catalogue: dreams create links between different entries and provide them with a background of suspense and tragedy. Tabari, after all, does behave the way a modern audience expects an historian to behave: he highlights events that are more important than others, he provides connections between earlier and later events, he judges the actions of historical characters, and he situates all these events in a larger pattern that governs the course of history.

In synthesis, my analyses of the various dream reports have pointed out how narrative parallels and subtle adjustments of the reader’s opinions return at various moments in Tabari’s History of Prophets and Kings. This places the chronicle firmly within the tradition of Judaic and Christian sacred history writing. The comparison of motifs from the Tārīkh with motifs from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which yielded interesting results in this case, promises a fruitful inroad for further research. More specifically, Tabari’s take on dreams could be provided with further context by casting out the net more widely to include not only his use of other types of predictions but also additional classical Arabic texts on predictions in relation to concepts of history and predestination.

For the moment, Vogt and Robinson’s earlier intuitions have been vindicated that dream reports are important narrative moments in Tabari’s Tārīkh. In fact, as dreams have turned out to be so well suited to his project of implicit storytelling, it can be concluded that they constitute key passages that are essential to our understanding of Tabari’s vision of history. As predictive dreams have appeared instrumental in provoking a tragic response from characters and in creating dramatic irony, my conclusions support those of Shoshan who makes Tabari an author of suspense and tragedy. Most importantly, pointing out some of Tabari’s implicit narrative strategies throws new light on the au-

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7 Robinson, pp. 150-52; Vogt, p. 286.
8 Shoshan, pp. 233-52.
tor's abilities as a storyteller. The dream reports reveal an inherent cohesion in Tabari’s chronicle. Motifs from biblical history recur in the pre-Islamic as well as in the Islamic parts of the Tārīkh, drawing implicit comparisons between episodes that are hundreds of pages apart.

These observations substantially modify Khalidi’s conclusion that the pre-Islamic and Islamic parts of Tabari’s work are fundamentally disparate. As my analysis of dream reports has revealed, the struggle between prophets and tyrants forms a cohesive factor throughout the entire work. As much more than a mere compiler, throughout the chronicle Tabari highlighted the parallels when history repeats itself in the story of rulers—regardless of whether they are pre-Islamic kings or Islamic caliphs—who are given the choice between good and bad governance. Throughout the entire chronicle, biblical time continues from pre-Islamic to Islamic history, and the battle between good and evil continues along biblical lines as well. In the course of ages, however, this battle becomes more ambiguous. Rulers are no longer presented as either good or evil, but as ambivalent and tragic characters. For the rest is the difference between the pre-Islamic and Islamic parts only one of narrative structure: there is one ideological framework underlying the chronicle in its entirety. Tabari’s History of Prophets and Kings was written in fairly literal reaction to, not to say rivalry with, history writing in the Judaeo-Christian world: modern scholarship should not hesitate to bring analytic traditions developed for modern European and American writing, such as narratology, to bear on this ‘bewildering’ work.

4 Khalidi, p. 79-80.