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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ENGLISH SUMMARY

A Handful of Red Earth: Dreams of Rulers in Tabari’s History of Prophets and Kings

A narratological analysis of Tabari’s History shows that the impression of uninvolved objectivity offered by this work is merely a façade. Indirect narrative techniques, such as motif repetition and dreams, are used to tell a dramatic story and pass scathing judgement on its characters.

Tabari’s History of Prophets and Kings, an Arabic universal chronicle which deals with the time from Creation until the 10th century AD, is indispensable for our knowledge of the first three centuries of Islam. The work, however, puzzles modern scholars, for it does not comply with what a contemporary reader, on the basis of modern, classical Greco-roman or even biblical examples, expects from a proper piece of history writing. The work appears to lack a unifying narrative thread; the author seems to abstain from any commentary on the sources he has used, any moral judgment of historical characters, and any explanation of the importance, the possible cause or the coherence of events. Countless facts are presented in the eight thousand pages of text that make up the work, but no relationships seem to be established between them whatsoever.

Another disturbing anomaly is the fact that among these apparently factual accounts of realistic events, the reader finds obvious signs of outright invention: predictive dreams that are filled with fantastic content and miraculously come true. As it is highly probable that we will never be able to find out what Tabari’s sources looked like, or ascertain how reliable these materials are for a reconstruction of what has actually happened, these stylistic peculiarities appear insolvable.

Here, however, a way out is provided by a method from the field of literary studies: narratology. The analysis of narrative techniques helps us to differentiate between the flesh-and-blood author Tabari and his primary narrator, a paper persona created by this author. Likewise, it reminds us that all narrators, both primary and secondary, can be used by the author to bring across his opinion indirectly; that there are a number of techniques for indirect storytelling.

A narratological analysis of the structure of the Islamic part of the History shows that Tabari gave his work the outward appearance of a catalogue: a database of chronologically arranged akhbar, eyewitness accounts of past events. Using the conventions of classical Arabic historiography, he chose this catalogue format for rhetorical effect: in order
to appear as the most reliable transmitter of materials about the past. Behind this façade of dry, scholarly objectivity, however, a dramatic story is told, using indirect narrative techniques, such as motif repetition and dreams. Within the conventions of classical Arabic historiography, dreams are not only eminently suited to pass judgment indirectly, but also to build up suspense and present the course of events from a tragic perspective.

It turns out that, after all, Tabari does what we expect from a historian. By way of motif repetition, events are highlighted, commented upon, compared to previous and subsequent events and even placed in a broader framework. A number of narrative motifs, related to the struggle between a descendant of Abraham and an unbelieving tyrant, recur throughout the entire text of Tabari’s History, and are found in both the pre-Islamic and the Islamic parts of the work. This recurrence of motifs throughout the entire text adds to the unity of the work’s composition and shows that the course of history is not chaotic but evolves along a certain pattern. Moreover, in Tabari’s work recurring motifs are not only used to illustrate stale repetition, but also development. In the course of the pre-Islamic struggle between prophets and tyrants, the two opposites gradually grow closer to each other. The tyrant becomes less cruel and develops some prophetic qualities, such as insight in dreams. The two extremes eventually merge into one person: the Abbasid caliph, and the struggle between prophets and tyrants continues within one family, sometimes even within a single caliph.