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


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I. The most popular Arabic dreambook of the modern period, Muntakhab al-kalām fī taṣfīr al-ahlām, generally attributed to Ibn Ṣirīn, is in fact a copy of al-Bishāra wa-l-nidhāra fī ta’bīr al-ruʿyā, composed by Abū Saʿd al-Wāʾiz al-Kharkūshī.


II. In an Islamic context, the classical Arabic ruʿyā always means ‘dream’ (during sleep) and never ‘waking vision’. The Islamic theory of prophecy and divine inspiration states that the soul of normal humans can only receive immaterial images of supernatural origin during sleep, for it is only then that the senses are inactive and stop distracting the soul with their input.

There are two reasons why Western translators tend to render ruʿyā as ‘vision’. Firstly, as ruʿyā is derived from the verb raʿā, with as primary meaning ‘to see’, translators chose to translate ruʿyā with a noun that is likewise derived from a verb meaning ‘to see’: the Latin videre, hence ‘vision’. Secondly, because in Medieval European Christianity a waking vision was considered more truthful than a dream, this hierarchical distinction between vision and dream in Christianity is mistakenly considered as the exact equivalent of the hierarchical distinction between ruʿyā (sound dream) and hulm (false dream) in classical Arabic.

III. In an Islamic context, it is incorrect to label belief in predictive dreams and their interpretation as superstition. The assumption that external truths can be known through dreams has always been an integral part of Islamic ‘orthodoxy’.

IV. The absence of dreams by Umayyad caliphs in Tabari’s Tārīkh implies that, contrary to the Abbasids, the Umayyads do not share in the pre-Islamic biblical heritage.


V. In the story of his interrogation of Abū Sufyān concerning Muhammad, Heraclius not only plays the role of a latter-day Herod, but also that of an Islamic equivalent to the Three Kings from the East. Herod, a vassal king of the Romans, and Heraclius, a Byzantine emperor, are both kings of the Rūm and rulers over Jerusalem. Heraclius and the Three Kings are all foreign rulers who worship a new Abrahamite prophet when most of his own people still do not recognize him.

VI. Christian typology assumes that Salvation History has a twofold structure, where every event from the New Testament has one double in Old Testament history. Herod is a latter-day Pharaoh and Jesus a latter-day Moses. Medieval Islamic historians expanded this typology not merely into a threefold, but into an almost infinitely repetitive structure: every event from Islamic history has not just one or two, but a much larger amount of doubles. Muhammad and the unbelieving tyrants of his age are the counterparts to a long list of opposing prophets and tyrants.

VII. In his Tārīkh, Tabari claims to be interested in the stories that were told by people in the past, rather than in the events of the past. His primary narrator states that his main goal is ‘ilm bi-mākāna min akhbār al-madin (Tab. I, 6). Rosenthal renders akhbār here as ‘history’ and translates: ‘knowledge of the history of men of the past’. This gives the impression that Tabari was primarily interested in the events that befell these men. However, as the context of this passage is one of transmission, akhbār should be rendered as ‘reports’, which results in: ‘knowledge of the reports that were [told by] men of the past.’