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ṬABARI, ABU JAʿFAR MOḤAMMAD B. JARIR

ṬABARI, ABU JAʿFAR MOḤAMMAD B. JARIR (224-310/839-923), one of the most eminent Iranian scholars of the early Abbasid era, author of a celebrated commentary on the Qorʾān as well as the most important of the classical Arabic historical texts still extant.

BIOGRAPHY

Sources. Despite Ṭabari's intellectual fame and enduring significance, there are numerous problems involved in establishing his biography. First of all, there is precious little information that can be described as coming from either contemporary or near-contemporary sources. Like most authors of his time, Ṭabari rarely reveals much about himself in his writings (see the comments on his ancestry below). Accounts by those who knew him, such as his students, the jurist and judge Aḥmad b. Kāmel (d. 350/961) or the historian ʿAbdallāh Faraḡāni (d. 362/972-73), come to us only indirectly through other sources. The most detailed extant biographical notices, primarily those provided by Ḵaṭib Bağdādi (d. 463/1071), Ebn ʿAsāker (d. 571/1176), and Yāqut (d. 626/1229), are all relatively late in date. Second, while these notices can be quite lengthy, they are very limited in that they concentrate on what could be called Ṭabari's *curriculum vitae*—his teachers, his students, lists of his writings—rather than on details of his life that would be useful for producing a satisfactory biography, that is, one which would shed light on the most basic

problems raised by his writing, such as questions about his religious or political biases. Finally, by the time these sources were written, Ṭabari's scholarly reputation was so great, and his chief works had so thoroughly overshadowed others in their field, that there was little incentive for his biographers to be critical of him. The anecdotes that have been handed down about him are certainly suggestive, and Franz Rosenthal (1989, p. 42) thought that their "small details are no doubt to be taken as factual." However, as Claude Gilliot (1988a, p. 237) has noted, some sound suspiciously like topoi. Indeed, there is much in the biographical notices that seems exaggerated and reverential to the point of hagiography, clearly intended to affirm Ṭabari's formidable intellect, work ethic, and moral probity and piety, and it is difficult to know what to take seriously and what to discount.

Early life. According to Aḥmad b. Kāmel (quoted by Yāqut, *Odabāʾ* VI, p. 429), Ṭabari did not know the exact date of his birth. This was because in his homeland it was the custom not to date by calendar years but by reference to important events (*aḥdāṯ*), and in his case some people attributed the event in question to late 224 and others to early 225 (which would be roughly in the period September-December 839 or January 840). Unfortunately, that specific event is not named, but the dates fall within the period corresponding to the revolt in Ṭabarestān of the Qārenid ruler Māzyār (for some key episodes of which Ṭabari, III, pp. 1274, 1299, notes that there are similarly conflicting datings). It would be interesting to know whether this personal experience of the importance of chronology might have contributed in some way to Ṭabari's attachment to the annalistic style for his historical work.

The sources agree that Ṭabari was born in Āol, presumably the urban center rather than one of its rural dependencies (hence his *nesba*, *al-Ṭabari al-Āoli*, in Ebn al-Nadim, p. 291). That fact, coupled with the time of his birth, is more significant for understanding the shaping of Ṭabari's life than one might think. Āol, a town in the central plains of the southern Caspian littoral, was occupied by the forces of the Abbasid caliphate around 140/758 (according to Ebn Esfandiār, p. 178). It was apparently rather heavily colonized by the Arab and *abnāʾ* supporters of the new caliphal regime and soon became the political and economic capital of Ṭabarestān as well as a center for the Islamization of the region. This also put it at the epicenter of tensions between the Muslim population and the Persian local rulers in the adjacent highlands. These culminated, as noted above, in the very year of Ṭabari's birth with the revolt of Māzyār, in the course of which the Muslims of Āol, led by the *qāḍ*, became

caught up in anti-Māzyār sentiments and the political intrigues of ʿAbdallah b. Ṭāher, the governor of Khorāsān. In the course of the revolt, Āol suffered considerably, as Māzyār had the city besieged for eight months, tore down the city walls, executed the *qāḍ*, and deported a large number of its inhabitants. After Māzyār was captured and executed in 225/840, the area was essentially annexed by the Ṭāherids as a dependency of Khorasan for the next quarter of a century. Ṭabari thus grew up in Āol as it was recovering from this struggle and returning to prosperity under Ṭāherid patronage, and he left before it began to fall under the influence of anti-Ṭāherid Zaydi Shiʿism (though that was something that would certainly concern him; see below).

This rather complex history of the city also makes it difficult to be certain of much about Ṭabari's ethnic and social background. The sources give slightly differing versions of his ancestry going back for as much as four generations. Ebn al-Nadim (p. 291), citing Moʿāfā b. Zakariā Nahrawāni (d. 390/1000), a prominent judge who followed Ṭabari's juridical system, gives his name as Moḥammad b. Jarir b. Yazid b. Ḵāled. Ḵaṭib Bāḡdādi (II, p. 162), on the other hand, has Moḥammad b. Jarir b. Yazid b. Kaṯir b. Ḡāleb, as do Ebn ʿAsāker (LII, p. 188) and Samʿāni (ed. Yamāni, IX, pp. 40-41). Still other sources (e.g., Ebn Ḵallekān, tr. de Slane, II, p. 597 and Ṣafadi, I, p. 284) give both versions. None of those ancestors can be identified any further (although there seems to be an implication in some of the sources that Kaṯir b. Ḡāleb was a known personality), and about all that can be said about them is that they have Arabic names. However, Ṭabari is never known to have claimed or to have had attributed to him any tribal affiliation and is always called by his regional *nesba*. He certainly knew some Persian, and his history showed more than a passing interest in subjects concerning his homeland, but that proves little. When he was asked about his ancestry, he was deliberately vague and quoted a verse belittling the importance of such genealogies (Yāqut, *Odabāʾ* VI, p. 428; see Rosenthal, 1989, pp. 12-13 on the possible moralizing aspect of this anecdote). There is thus no way of knowing for certain whether Ṭabari's family was native to the Āol region or perhaps arrived with the wave of Muslim colonists after the Abbasid revolution, either as converts or Arab settlers.

As far as social background is concerned, Ṭabari's family was relatively well-to-do. The evidence for this is not only that he subsisted in his lengthy studies and travels on a regular stipend from his father (Ebn ʿAsāker, LII, pp. 198, 203), but also the specific statement in an anecdote (Yāqut, *Odabāʾ* VI, p. 458) that he

received “goods from his landed property” (*māl ḍyʿatehi*). Apparently, most or all of the produce was converted to commercial goods and conveyed to him annually via the pilgrimage caravan. If the anecdote is to be believed, the amount involved was not inconsiderable, since it not only sufficed for Ṭabari, but also enabled him to bestow gifts on his friends, including a quite valuable sable worth forty dinars that he presented to the vizier Moḥammad b. ʿObaydallāh b. Ḵāqān. The anecdote makes clear that the property was in Ṭabarestān but does not indicate exactly when or how Ṭabari or his family acquired it. It could have been an ancestral estate, but it would also not be unusual for it to have been bestowed on an *abnāʾ* settler or acquired as an investment by one of the urban elite. In any case, it is worth remembering that the question of title to land and the right to collect income from it was at the core of Māzyār’s revolt, and Ṭabari’s family seems to have been on the winning side of that struggle. As for Ṭabari himself, there are some anecdotes indicating he was in financial straits at times, but these were rare, temporary, and due to some exceptional circumstance. On the whole, he appears to have led a rather comfortable and even privileged existence for the whole of his life.

Education and travels. As the traditional sources would have it, Ṭabari was destined for a scholarly career and prodigiously gifted for one virtually from birth. Aḥmad b. Kāmel (in Yāqut, *Odabāʾ* VI, p. 430) claimed that Ṭabari told him that his father, while Ṭabari was still a small child, had a dream that Ṭabari was standing in front of the prophet Moḥammad holding a bag of stones, which he was scattering before the prophet. An interpreter of dreams explained that this meant the child would be a great scholar of the law (*šariʿa*), which was enough to convince the father to support a religious education for his son. His expectations were not unwarranted, since in the same anecdote Ṭabari encourages Aḥmad b. Kāmel to entrust his own son to Ṭabari’s instruction by explaining that the lad’s youth was no obstacle, since Ṭabari himself had memorized the Qorʾān by age seven, was leading the public prayers at eight, and was transcribing hadith at nine.

After completing his elementary education in Āol, and with the continued approval and financial support of his father, Ṭabari began a series of travels that made up a typical “journey in search of knowledge” (*reḥla fi ṭalab al-ʿelm*) necessary for advanced religious studies at a time when instruction was mostly by oral dictation and memorization under the supervision of recognized transmitters of hadith. From scattered remarks in the biographical

sources and the names of the masters with whom Ṭabari studied, modern scholars have been able to put together the itinerary Ṭabari likely followed (for details and documentation, see Rosenthal, 1989, pp. 15-31; Gilliot, 1988a, pp 205-233). He began his advanced studies in Ray, the most important center of learning in northern Persia, probably in 236/850-51(Ebn Ḥajar, *Lesān* VII, p. 29). His most important teacher there was likely the well-known scholar Moḥammad b. Ḥomayd Rāzi (d. 248/862); Ebn Ḥomayd certainly had a profound influence on Ṭabari, as he is often cited in Ṭabari's own works (see Gilliot, 1988a, p. 206; Rosenthal, 1989, p. 17). It is possible that Ṭabari went to Mecca in 240/855 (see Rosenthal, 1989, p. 19), but only to make the pilgrimage, as there is no indication that he studied there then or later.

For the next phase of his studies after Ray, Ṭabari reportedly hoped to work with Aḥmad b. Hanbal in Baghdad, but arrived there only to find that the celebrated traditionist had just died, which would mean Ṭabari went there in 241/855. He thus moved on to study in other Iraqi cities, including Kufa and Basra. Another story (Ebn ʿAsāker, LII, p. 193) has him employed as tutor to the son of the vizier ʿObaydallāh b. Yaḥyā b. Ḵāqān, which implies that he had acquired something of a reputation as a scholar and was back in Baghdad some time before 248/862. According to Yāqut (*Odabāʾ* VI, pp. 428, 435), he moved to Fosṭāṭ in Egypt in 253/867 and then went to study for some time with scholars in Syria and Palestine before returning to Egypt in 256/870. His stay in Egypt was motivated by a desire to familiarize himself with Šāfeʿite teaching, which proved to be another powerful influence on his thinking (indeed, the Šāfeʿites seem to have always counted Ṭabari as one of their own). Ṭabari was definitely back in Baghdad by 258/871-72, since, in the solitary reference to an event in his personal life found in his history (Ṭabari, III, p. 1862), he says that he witnessed the departure from the city of the army sent to fight the Zanj rebels that year. It can be assumed that by then he was an established religious scholar in his own right and resided more or less continuously in Baghdad, though he is said to have made at least two trips to Ṭabarestan, the last of them in 290/903 (Yāqut, *Odabāʾ* VI, p. 435). After that date (if not earlier), he resided at a house in the Šammāsiya quarter of Baghdad near the Baradān Bridge. It was there, attended by friends and students, that he died and was buried in Šawwāl 310/February 923 (for details on the various exact dates for his death, see Rosenthal, 1989, p. 78, n. 195).

Life and career in Baghdad. There is no real information about Ṭabari's family life and indeed no proof that he ever married or had children; one anecdote

has him proclaiming that he was celibate (see Rosenthal, 1989, pp. 33-34). So far as can be told, Ṭabari spent his life in Baghdad absorbed in a disciplined routine of research, writing, teaching, and worship. According to Yāqut (*Odabāʾ*, VI, p. 360), he would rise early for the dawn prayer at home, write until noon, attend prayers, recite and discuss the Qorʾān until time for the evening prayer, and give lessons on jurisprudence and law (*al-feqh wa'l-dars*) before ending with the night prayer and returning home, thus spending his days and nights for the betterment of himself, his religion, and humanity. Numerous other anecdotes attest to his fastidious, even puritanical, lifestyle; his scrupulous avoidance of any employment, gifts, or entanglements that might compromise his independence or suggest even a hint of corruption; and his close, sometimes humorous, relations with friends and students who were devoted to him.

Yet there is also evidence that Ṭabari was not the ivory tower intellectual and perhaps not quite the saintly figure that such stories suggest. He clearly had access to some of the highest circles of Baghdad society, as indicated not only by the ease with which he obtained at such a young age a position as tutor to ʿObaydallāh b. Yaḥyā b. Ḵāqān's son but by his apparently close association with members of the Banu Forāt family of viziers (one dropped by to observe Ṭabari's class on Qorʾān recitation and one was with him when he died; Ebn ʿAsāker, LII, pp. 199, 201). If Ṭabari made a point of resisting the blandishments of such powerful notables, he was no doubt helped by his own financial independence. As noted earlier, he received a steady income from Ṭabarestān and perhaps other sources, and he lived rather well as he had a substantial private library, owned at least some slaves, and regularly socialized with his friends and colleagues. One detects an aristocratic, elitist bearing and more than a touch of vanity at work in reports of his fussy concern with dress, diet, and etiquette; on one occasion he displayed a haughty attitude toward his servants and discomfited a guest in the process (Yāqut, *Odabāʾ* VI, pp. 458-59; see also Rosenthal, 1989, pp. 39-42). While supposedly not one to boast (Yāqut, *Odabāʾ* VI, p. 433), he clearly did not enjoy being bested in any scholarly disputation, once going so far as to evade answering a question on prosody until he could go home and study a book to learn (in one night!) everything there was to know about the subject (Yāqut, *Odabāʾ* VI, p. 434).

Despite the overwhelmingly positive depiction of Ṭabari in the sources, it is clear that he had his share of detractors, rivals, and opponents. He is known

to have had something of a running feud with Dāʾud b. ʿAli, the founder of the Ẓāheri school of jurisprudence, and his son Moḥammad, though he did not take it to the level of a personal grudge (see Rosenthal, 1989, pp. 68-69). The most serious cloud over his career in Baghdad was the apparent animosity of the Hanbalites—ironic, if it is true that he first went to Baghdad to study with Aḥmad b. Hanbal. Ṭabari's friend Moḥammad b. Esḥāq Nišāpuri (known as Ebn Ḵozayma), after reading a copy of Ṭabari's commentary on the Qorʾān, lamented that he had been wronged by the Hanbalites (Ḵaṭib Bāḡdādi, II, p. 164), presumably in their criticism of his exegesis. However, the problems between Ṭabari and the Hanbalites evidently went well beyond the level of ordinary academic disputes. The Hanbalites enjoyed considerable support among the urban masses of Baghdad and were generally an unstable and intolerant element in the city; Ṭabari seems to have been one of the earliest and most prominent targets of their violence. There are reports that mobs (*al-ʿāmma*), often explicitly associated by the sources with the Hanbalites either in composition or inspiration, created disturbances that prevented other scholars from going to hear traditions from Ṭabari, stoned his house, and caused problems about his funeral (see, for example, Yāqut, *Odabāʾ* VI, p. 436; Ebn al-Jawzi, XIII, p. 217; Margoliouth and Amedroz, *Eclipse* IV, pp. 93-94; Ebn ʿAsāker, LII, p. 195). The great vizier ʿAli b. ʿIsā b. Dāʾud attempted to arrange a debate between Ṭabari and the Hanbalites in 309/922, but the latter refused to participate (Ebn al-Jawzi, XIII, p. 200).

It is possible that the sources have exaggerated these tensions for their own reasons, but there are enough such reports to think they have some basis in fact. It is much harder to be sure of what issues or grievances lay behind them (for details and documentation, see Rosenthal, 1989, pp. 69-78; Melchert, pp. 278-80). The possibilities range from substantive differences over religious methodology and interpretation to petty jealousy stemming from the perception that Ṭabari had slighted Ebn Hanbal's stature as a jurist to vague accusations of *rafḍ* (heretical Shiʿism). At the same time, the contrast between the popular nature of the Hanbalite movement and the elite circles in which Ṭabari moved so easily suggests that the fundamental nature of their dispute may have involved much deeper socio-political causes.

WORKS

The often repeated claim that Ṭabari wrote forty folios a day for forty years is hardly credible, but there is no doubt that his literary production was immense. The primary aim of Ṭabari's education was the mastery of Islamic

jurisprudence and its ancillary disciplines, especially the collection of hadith, and in his travels he studied with some of the most celebrated and demanding scholars of his day (see the annotated list in Gilliot, 1988a). His success and subsequent career in this field was such that his admiring biographers emphasize that he attained the rank of an *emām*, a jurist capable of reaching independent judgements and establishing a juridical school (*maḏhab*) of his own, although his particular school, the Jariri, soon died out. Yet it is clear that his intellectual interests went well beyond jurisprudence to fields as diverse as history and medicine; ironically, most of his writings on jurisprudence have been lost, while much of his work in other fields has survived and has had more enduring influence.

A full account of Ṭabari's writings is far beyond the scope of this article. Even a mere listing of the books attributed to him is no easy task as so many are no longer extant and may be referred to under variant titles; readers are referred elsewhere for such compilations (see especially Rosenthal, 1989, pp. 80-134, and Gilliot, 1989). Of his extant writings, the best known and most influential are his massive commentary on the Qorʾān, *Jāmeʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwil āy al-Qorʾān* (often called simply *al-Tafsir*), and his great history and chronicle, *Taʾriḵ al-rosul waʾl-moluk*. Both are notable for their comprehensiveness and their meticulous citation of multiple and often conflicting sources, presumably in order to bring out their differences in accounts and interpretations, though not always (especially in the history) attempting to resolve them.

The same general approach is evident in the surviving portions of his comparative analysis of the major juridical schools of his era, the *Eḵtelāf al-foqahāʾ*, as well as in what little is known of his unfinished work on hadith, *Tahḏib al-āṯār*, and on variant readings of the Qorʾān, *al-Faṣl bayn al-qerāʾa*. The *Eḵtelāf* is supposed to have been the first book published (*i.e.*, made public) by Ṭabari, who regarded it as one of his two most important juridical texts (Yāqut, *Odabāʾ*, VI, p. 447), but it is also thought to have been the work that initially aroused the opposition of the Hanbalites as Ṭabari had failed to include Aḥmad b. Hanbal as one of the jurists to be discussed (Ebn al-Aṯir [Beirut], VIII, p. 134).

Ṭabari also authored a biographical dictionary of religious scholars (probably to identify those named in his other works), an epitome of which survives under the title *Ḏayl al-muḏayyal*. Finally there are two other short works, both more or less theological and polemical in nature, attributed to Ṭabari: the *Ṣariḥ al-sonna*, a creedal statement mostly on the legitimacy of the caliphate,

and the *Tabṣir*, a kind of catechism on the articles of faith requested by the religious scholars of Āol to assist them in resisting the spread of disturbing and heretical (for which one may probably read Zaydi) religious issues in the province.

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