



The History of al-Ṭabarī

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The History of al-Ṭabarī

(*Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk*)

VOLUME XVII

THE FIRST CIVIL WAR

translated and annotated

by

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- SNB: Ibn Abi al-Hadid, *Sharh Nahj al-balāghah*, 20 vols., ed. Muhammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm. Cairo, 1939-63.
 Tabari: When followed by a reference, the Leiden edition of the Arabic text of the *Ta'rikh*.
 tr.: translation.
 WS: al-Minqari, *Waq'at Siffin*, ed. 'Abd al-Salām Muhammad Harūn. 2nd ed. Cairo, 1382/1962-63.

In references to the Qur'ān the verse numbering of the Egyptian edition is used.



Translator's Foreword



The Events Described in This Volume: Background and Summary

This volume of translation covers Part I, pp. 3256-3476, of the Leiden 1879-1901 edition of al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh*, a section of the text edited by E. Pryn. To provide the necessary background for the events recounted in it, a summary of some of the happenings reported by al-Ṭabarī in earlier volumes is provided here.

In the summer of 656 C.E. the third caliph, 'Uthmān, was killed in Medina by malcontents from the garrison town of al-Fustāt in Egypt. This act opened the period known in Muslim historical tradition as the *Fitnah*, which Western writers have frequently called the *first civil war* of Islam. In the tradition the word *fitnah* is used in connection with later episodes, too, but this first one is regarded as of such importance that it is often referred to simply as the *Fitnah*, without further elaboration.

'Alī, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, was appointed to the caliphate in Medina in the troubled circumstances that followed the killing of 'Uthmān. From the start he had to face opposition from individuals and groups who generally proclaimed their loyalty to the dead caliph and a desire to take vengeance on his murderers. They charged that 'Alī had obtained the caliphate as the result of an unrighteous act (although usually stopping short of an outright statement that he had been behind 'Uthmān's death) and called upon him to hand over the killers so that blood revenge

could be taken. The implication was that 'Alī's caliphate was illegitimate, and he was neither able nor willing to comply with the demands of his opponents.

The first movement of opposition to 'Alī was led by a widow of the Prophet, the still relatively young and vigorous 'Ā'ishah, and two prominent Companions of the Prophet, 'Talhah and al-Zubayr. They left the Hijaz and went to the garrison town of al-Basrah in Iraq, where they raised an army to fight 'Alī. He followed them to Iraq but went to the other garrison town there, al-Kūfah, which supplied most of the forces with which he would oppose the triumvirate. At the end of 656 the two sides met in battle near al-Basrah, known in tradition as the Battle of the Camel, and the result was an overwhelming victory for 'Alī. 'Talhah and al-Zubayr were killed in the fighting and its aftermath, and 'Ā'ishah was made captive and sent back to Medina. 'Alī remained in al-Kūfah, which was his base for the remaining years of his life and a center for pro-'Alīd movements of all sorts for the next century or so.

At that point, having apparently secured his position, 'Alī was confronted by another enemy, the governor of Syria and close relative of the murdered 'Uthmān, Mu'āwiyah b. Abī Sufyān. Mu'āwiyah, whose criticisms of 'Alī also centered on the wrongful murder of 'Uthmān and included the demand that 'Alī hand over the killers for vengeance, was supported by 'Amr b. al-'Ās. 'Amr had commanded the armies that had seized Egypt for the Arabs from the Byzantines and had been that country's first Arab governor. In the tradition he appears very much as Mu'āwiyah's right-hand man, one might say his evil genius.

The present volume of the translation of al-Tabarī's *Ta'rikh* consists of reports concerning a period for which the struggle between 'Alī and Mu'āwiyah supplies the main theme and focus of attention. It opens at the point where, after initial discussions between them had come to nothing, the two marched to confront each other in battle, a confrontation that occurred in the summer of 657 on the River Euphrates south of al-Raqqa, at the Battle of Siffin. The volume ends, about three and half years later, with the murder of 'Alī in al-Kūfah.

A large part of the volume is concerned with the Battle of Siffin, its conclusion, and the consequences of the way in which it was

concluded. Following 'Alī's march to Siffin, we are told of the preliminary skirmishing, the fighting, and the way the fighting was brought to an end when the Syrian Arab soldiers of Mu'āwiyah, at the suggestion of 'Amr b. al-'Ās, attached copies of scripture to their lances and raised them in the air. Faced with this apparent appeal to the word of God, 'Alī's Iraqi Arab supporters forced him, against his will, to stop fighting and to negotiate with the enemy. The result was an agreement between 'Alī and Mu'āwiyah that each side should appoint a representative or "arbitrator" (*hakam*) and that the two men thus appointed should meet in the future at some agreed upon place and time to settle the dispute peacefully. The agreement having been reached, the two armies separated and returned, Mu'āwiyah to Syria and 'Alī to al-Kūfah.

On the way back to al-Kūfah, however, many of those who had insisted that 'Alī abandon the fight and accept the Syrians' appeal to the word of God concluded that they had sinned in doing so. They argued that the appointment of men as arbitrators was contrary to the principle that all authority belonged to God. With the slogan "Authority belongs to God alone" (*la hukma illa li-Allah*), these men insisted that 'Alī begin the fight again, and, when he insisted that he could not, they branded him a sinner who must repent and seceded from him. These seceders are known as the Khārijites (*kharājī*), because they "went out from" (*kharaja min*) or rebelled against (*kharaja 'alā*) 'Alī. Initial attempts by 'Alī to win them back are said to have had some limited success, but ultimately were unsuccessful, and the result was a major battle between 'Alī and these Khārijites at the canal of Nahrawān east of the River Tigris in the region of al-Mada'in. The battle resulted in a mass slaughter of the Khārijites but not the eradication of their opposition to 'Alī.

The reports about the meeting of the "arbitrators" are confusing and obscure. They lead to the conclusion that no agreement was reached but that 'Alī's participation in the arbitration process had caused him to lose status and prestige. His position was further weakened by Mu'āwiyah's success in establishing his authority over Egypt. How Mu'āwiyah did this and the events leading to the killing of 'Alī's representative there, Muhammad b. Abī Bakr, are described in some detail. In Iraq 'Alī had to face another rebellion, that of al-Kharrīb b. Rashīd and the tribe of Najiyah. It is difficult to assess

the importance of this rebellion for 'Alī: The numbers of men involved do not seem to have been great, but the reports about it occupy considerable space in this volume. Although al-Khiṛīf does not seem to have been connected with those men whose opposition to 'Alī culminated in the battle at Nahrawān, he is reported to have used some of their arguments (as well as others when addressing different groups of possible supporters), and some of the stories about him are remarkably parallel to some of those about the Khārijites. Also of interest in the reports about his revolt are the details concerning the unrest of the bedouins (including many Christians) and the involvement of Kurds.

The volume ends with the account of 'Alī's murder in al-Kūfah at the beginning of 661, an account that bears some of the signs of a popular narrative. We are told that he was killed by one Ibn Muḥjam, who is portrayed as motivated by a desire to avenge himself on 'Alī for those whom 'Alī had slaughtered at Nahrawān. Further, we are told that the murder of 'Alī was the only successful part of a plot aimed at the elimination of each of the three main players in the events recounted in this volume: 'Alī, Mu'āwiyah, and 'Amr b. al-'Ās.

Most of the other events reported here seem to have been more or less directly related to 'Alī's struggles with Mu'āwiyah and the *khawārij*. For example, there are accounts of the death of 'Alī's pious supporter 'Ammār b. Yāsir in the battle against Mu'āwiyah's Syrians, of the troubles in al-Baṣrah when Mu'āwiyah sent Ibn al-Hadrāmī there to attempt to win support, of the expedition of Busr b. Abī Artāt, sent against 'Alī's representatives in Arabia and the Yemen by Mu'āwiyah, of the activity of Ziyād b. Abīhi in Fārs and Khuziṣtān on behalf of 'Alī, and of the dubious behavior of 'Alī's representative in al-Baṣrah, 'Abdallāh b. al-'Abbās, toward the end of the Fitnah. Two short and isolated reports of the attempt by 'Alī to establish control in western Khurāsān seem somewhat remote from the main theme.

*The Significance and Interpretation
of the Events Recounted Here*

In the traditional accounts of the origins and early development of Islam the period of the Fitnah is of crucial importance. It is

portrayed as the time when the previously united community founded by the Prophet was split apart and the three chief sectarian traditions within Islam—Sunni, Shi'i, and Khārijī—had their origins. Not only the Fitnah as a whole, but also the prominent events within it, like the "raising of the Qur'ān," the appointment and meeting of the two "arbitrators," and the battle at Nahrawān, came to be seen as turning points in the history of Islam. This view is undoubtedly oversimplified, but in their attitude toward the different individuals and groups involved in the Fitnah later Muslims expressed and defined their own identities. Many of the events and personalities of this volume, therefore, have become a part of general Muslim historical consciousness in a way in which much else that is reported by al-Ṭabarī in his *History* has not.

But, in spite of the number of reports that have been transmitted and the richness of their detail, there is much about the Fitnah and its individual episodes that remains puzzling. The relative chronology and causal links of the various events are not at all certain from the sources and have been the subject of much discussion by such scholars as Leone Caetani and Julius Wellhausen. The nature of the tensions that erupted in the Fitnah have also been much studied. Wellhausen, like Muslim tradition itself, focused on the rivalries and intrigues among the leading figures of the time, whereas more recent scholars, like H. A. R. Gibb and Martin Hinds, have sought to elucidate the situation among the Arab warriors in the garrison towns and the causes of their resentment against the ruling authorities. Laura Vecchia Vaglieri has attempted to use the material preserved in relatively late Ibādī sources to throw light on what exactly was at issue between 'Alī and Mu'āwiyah and about what the two "arbitrators" were supposed to "arbitrate." The source material relating to the struggle between 'Alī and Mu'āwiyah, as preserved by al-Ṭabarī and other early collectors of historical tradition, has been analyzed in particular by E. I. Petersen. The present translator has drawn attention to parallels between some of the terms and concepts that occur in the Muslim traditions about the Fitnah and those to be found in Jewish materials concerned with the conflict between Scripture and "Oral Law" as sources of religious authority. For more detail, see the works listed in the Bibliography of Cited Works at the end of this translation and the various articles in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* referred to in the notes.