CHAPTER 22

Stories of the Prophets

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Introduction to the Text

The late tenth/early eleventh century figure Abū Isḥḥāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035) was the author of five major works: a commentary on the Qurʾān (Saleh 2004), a biographical dictionary of people who died upon hearing the Qurʾān (Wiesmüller 2002), two lost books entitled *Rabīʿ al-mudhakkirīn* ("Springtime of the Admonishers") and *al-Kāmil fī ʿilm al-Qurʾān* ("The Complete Work regarding the Qurʾānic Sciences"; see Saleh 2004: 51–2) and the pivotal and much imitated collection of tales of the prophets, the *ʿArāʾis al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* ("Brides at (their) Weddings: Regarding the Tales of the Prophets"; Brinner 2002; Klar 2006; Nagel 1967). This latter work was written subsequent to his commentary on the Qurʾān (the *Commentary* is cited within the *Tales*) and presents a chronologically arranged description of historical events from the time of the creation of the world to the "Year of the Elephant" in 570 CE, giving the biographies of some forty-six individuals or, occasionally, peoples.[1] Many of these are routinely described as Islamic prophets – thus Adam, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Jesus and so forth are included in the volume; others, for instance the "fallen angels" Hārūt and Mārūt, kings such as Saul and Alexander the Great, the peoples of Iram and al-Rass, are not prophets *per se* but rather historical personages or communities significant for their place in the Qurʾān or for the role they are reported to have played in religious history.

Other monographs dealing with pre-Islamic history did already exist at the time of al-Thaʿlabī; it was, however, more usual to find such material within larger scale universal histories, commentaries on the Qurʾān, or collections of *ḥadīth*, and the vast majority of our extant works of tales of the prophets post-date al-Thaʿlabī, with many of them, for example Nāṣir al-Dīn b. Burhān al-Dīn al-Rabghūzī (d. 710/1310) and Muḥammad b. Bisṭām al-Khūshābī Wānī Efendī (d. 1096/1658), openly taking al-Thaʿlabī as their model. The author alludes to his possible motivation in compiling such a volume in his introduction to the collection; among the reasons he cites for

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God having told stories of past peoples to Muḥammad, al-Thaʿlabī (1985: 2–3) states that

> [God] told [Muḥammad] the stories to serve as an example of the noble traits exhibited by the messengers and prophets of old . . . and so that his community would refrain from those actions for which [previous] prophets' communities had been punished . . . He told him the stories to confirm his [position] and prove his glory and the glory of his community. . . . God told him these stories as an education and an instruction for his community, that is to say He mentioned the prophets and their rewards, and the enemies [of God] and their punishment, then in other passages He warned the [community] against the deeds of [God's] enemies, and urged them towards the deeds of [God's] friends. God said, "In Joseph and his brethren are signs for those who ask questions" (Q 12: 7) and "In their stories is a warning for those of understanding" (Q 12: 111) and "A guide and a warning to the godfearing" (Q 5: 46) and other such verses. Shiblī said, "The common people are kept occupied [listening to] the narration of a tale, while the élite are busy learning its lesson". He told him the stories of the prophets and past friends [of God] in order to keep their memory and the memory of their deeds alive. . . . Ibn Durayd recited [the following epithet] to me, "A person leaves only a tale behind him, so strive that your tale be remembered as a beautiful one."

The work as such is presented as an exemplum, a warning, an education, an instruction, and an encouragement for its readers; al-Thaʿlabī would also appear to have believed firmly in the importance and validity of narrative. The fact of his being an established Qurʾān commentator at the time at which he compiled the collection will have given al-Thaʿlabī ample authority to attempt a work of this type. These elements are important in pointing the way one should best approach the text.

Publication History

The earliest extant manuscript of the work would appear to be in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, and has been dated to the end of the eleventh century, though this manuscript is missing its final pages; the British Library has a complete but slightly later manuscript, dated 512/1119. There are a further forty extant manuscripts catalogued in Brockelmann (*GAL* I, 429; SI, 592). Brockelmann also informs us that the *Tales* in its entirety was first published in Cairo in 1282/1865, then again, by the Būlāq Press, in 1286/1869; it was printed a further ten times in Cairo between 1292/1875 and 1345/1926, once in Kashmir (1288/1871), and twice in Bombay (1295/1878 and 1306/1888); a Turkish translation appeared in the same year as the first Arabic edition, with a Tatar translation following in 1320/1903; the Joseph story was published in Cairo as an independent monograph in 1279/1862, and the Samson story in 1299/1881. The Princeton catalogue yields six different editions: the early Būlāq edition, printed by al-Maṭbaʿa al-Miṣriyya in 1286/1869; a 1297/1880 edition published in al-Azhar by al-Sharafiyya press; two further Egyptian editions, with the *Rawḍ al-rayāḥīn fī ḥikāyat al-ṣāliḥīn* of ʿAllāma al-Yāfiʿī in the margins, one printed by Maṭbaʿat al-ʿUlūm al-Adabiyya in 1344/1925 and the other by Maktabat

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al-Jumhuriyya al-ʿArabiyya in the 1950s; and another Egyptian edition, dated 1954 and published by Muṣṭafā ʾl-Bābī ʾl-Ḥalabī. The remaining edition is a Beirut imprint published by al-Maktaba al-Thaqafiyya in the 1970s.

It is worth pointing out that a superficial comparison of four widely available editions of the *Tales* shows little variation in the substance of the text; the printed editions moreover show surprisingly little variation of any significance when compared with the 1119 CE British Library manuscript (Supplementary Or. 1494). For instance, in the manuscript version of the Noah story, Noah is asked, "When you disembarked, how did you find your life (*ʿumraka*)?' In all four versions of the printed edition consulted for this chapter this becomes "When you disembarked, how did you find the world (*al-dunyā*)?"[2] In the Job story, where the manuscript tells us only that God forgives Job, the printed editions all inform us that God forgives Job "for what he said." In the Saul story, where the manuscript states that the king's intentions towards David improved (*ḥassan niyyātahu fīhi*), the printed editions tell us the king "felt more kindly towards him" (*aḥsan thanāʾuhu ʿalayhi*; one edition moreover gives *thanāʾ* in place of *thanāʾahu*). A random comparison yields only this level of minor textual discrepancy between editions.

However, this does not, of course, mean that the text is straightforward or lacking in textual ambiguities. A critical edition is sorely needed, not least to go some way towards setting the work in its contextual background. The dangers of a non-contextualized reading of the text are apparent in Brinner's for the most part excellent translation of the *Tales*. There he renders the events that led to the loss of Solomon's throne (Brinner 2002: 542) as "Solomon became infatuated (*uftutina*)," presumably on the assumption that the context for this anecdote is romantic: the correct context for the passage would, however, seem to be provided in al-Thaʿlabī's Qurʾān commentary, where we are told that, prior to the same events described in the *Tales*, Solomon was "tested (*uftutina*) through taking the statue into his home." An understanding of "infatuated" clearly does not work in this expanded context; the existence of an informed critical edition would be invaluable in limiting such misreadings of the text. As Jacob Lassner (1993: 64ff.) comments, "Arabic texts of the period can be extremely allusive" and this is particularly true in the relatively under-explored field of *Tales of the Prophets*. As such, care should be taken in reading the text.

Major Sources

The Qurʾān provides the framework for the tales of each figure, but hundreds of additional authorities are cited by name within the text. From these we can deduce that the major sources for the *Tales* included the Ibn ʿAbbās-based commentaries of Saʿīd b. Jubayr (d. 95/714), Mujāhid (d. 100–4/718–22, al-Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 105–6/723–24), ʿIkrima (d. 105/723–4), al-Suddī (d. 127/745), al-Kalbī (d. 146/763), and Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767). Ibn ʿAbbās himself (d. ca. 68/687) is often cited as an authority, as are other companions of Muḥammad, notably Abū Hurayra (d. 58/678), Ibn Masʿūd (d. 32/652–3), and ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar (d. 73/693). Ibn Isḥāq (d. 150/767), whose biography of Muḥammad included a section on the pre-Islamic prophets, is

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another frequent source for material, as are the commentaries of the famous sermonizer and preacher Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and his pupil Qatāda (d. 117/734 or 118/735). Another major source is the ubiquitous Kaʿb al-Aḥbār (d. 32/651), although the equally prolific Wahb b. Munabbih (d. ca. 114/732) is rarely cited (on all of these people see Khoury 1978; Nagel 1967).

Al-Thaʿlabī also cites his fellow commentator and historian, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), and Raif Khoury (1978: 174) suggests that ʿUmāra b. Wathīma was another source for al-Thaʿlabī's *Tales* although, due perhaps to his habit of not giving full chains of transmission for his material (in the introduction to the *Commentary*, al-Thaʿlabī comments that this is a deliberate space-saving strategy; Saleh 2004: 70), ʿUmāra is never mentioned by name in the text. The inter-dependence of this type of literature is, however, clear from the fact that al-Thaʿlabī is in turn cited in the later historiographical works of Ibn ʿAsākir (d. 571/1176) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), as well as in later commentaries and other works. Johns (1989: 225–66; cf. Saleh 2004: 127–9, 209–14 and *passim* with reference to the *Commentary*), for instance, posits a relationship between al-Thaʿlabī's *Tales* and the Qurʾān commentary of al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), stating that, with reference to the exegesis of Q 38: 21–5, the later author "at times indeed seems to be following Thaʿlabī's presentation of the David story verbatim" (Johns 1989: 237), and "It is clear how closely Zamakhsharī has followed Thaʿlabī, accepting and quoting the same mosaic of authorities, but weighting them differently" (Johns 1989: 240).

On a final note, much has been made of the supposedly Jewish or Christian origins of the bulk of this material. That there was no stigma attached to the consultation of extra-Islamic sources in this early period seems evident from *ḥadīth* reports. It is, however, generally concluded that the bulk of these sources were oral in nature and impossible to identify retrospectively; al-Thaʿlabī may well cite the amorphous "People of the Book" but he names no specific Jewish or Christian sources. As such, the extant Jewish and Christian material is not as useful as the Islamic sources in providing a contextual basis to aid our understanding of ambiguous passages. The situation is rendered particularly complex by the difficulty in accurately dating tales. The lack of manuscript versions of a tale prior to a specific date by no means rules out the possibility of that tale having nonetheless been in common circulation. It is hence almost impossible to state with any confidence whether a certain explanation of events common to both traditions entered the Islamic repertoire from that of the People of the Book and should be read in the context of that tradition, or vice versa (see Wheeler 2002: 17–19, 23–6, 39–40). As Peter Awn (1983: 9) points out, the medieval relationship between traditions was less than straightforward:

> The *qiṣaṣ* literature should not be viewed as wholly derivative from Jewish and Christian sources, for it underwent substantial Islamization at the hands of Muslim preachers and commentators. Cross-fertilization occurred, with details, nuances and embellishments traded back and forth among the various religious communities. Finally, the influence of these tales of indigenous non-Christian or Jewish pre-Islamic beliefs should not be discounted.

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Construction of the Text

The *Tales of the Prophets* provides its reader with a history of the world from creation to the year of Muḥammad's birth. It opens with several chapters on the creation, divided into earth, heavens etc., closes with a description of two battles that took place shortly before the time of Muḥammad, and in between gives a chronologically arranged series of biographies; it includes the tales of all the pre-Islamic historical figures mentioned, alluded to, or suggested by the text of the Qurʾān. The vast majority of the forty-six biographies given are introduced through a Qurʾānic passage; thus Qurʾānic verses provide the framework for almost all of the tales.

Minor figures within the volume are presented over a few pages or in a single chapter, while the biographies of major figures can run to over one hundred pages and are divided into various subchapters and headings. Thus, for example, the tale of Abraham opens with a section on the prophet's birth. This is followed by a sub-chapter on his emergence from an underground hiding place and subsequent return to his people, a section on the births of Ishmael and Isaac, Ishmael's and Hagar's departure from the *ḥaram* in Mecca, and the tale of the well of Zamzam, a further section on the story of Zamzam, a fifth section on the history of the Kaʿba to the (then) present day, a sub-chapter on God's command that Abraham sacrifice his son, followed by the tale of the sacrifice itself, then a section on the destruction of Nimrod and the building of the tower of Babel, an eighth sub-chapter concerning the deaths of Sarah, Hagar, and others of Abraham's wives and their children, then a section on Abraham's death, and a concluding section listing the prophet's special characteristics.

The substantially longer Moses chapter, meanwhile, opens with a discussion of the prophet's genealogy. The second sub-chapter deals with his birth, and the next with a physical description of Moses and of Aaron. These are followed by a section on Moses' killing of the Egyptian and his subsequent move to Midian, a sub-chapter dealing with his arrival at Midian and marriage to Shuʿayb's daughter, leading into two sections concerning Moses' staff. The eighth section then describes Moses' departure from Midian and how he and his brother came to confront Pharaoh, and the ninth the arrival before Pharaoh. Then follows a sub-chapter regarding the tale of Moses, Aaron, Pharaoh, and the magicians, a section on the believer who spoke out against Pharaoh, and his family, a section on Pharaoh's wife and her death, and a sub-chapter describing how the tower was built. After sections detailing God's signs to Pharaoh, rationalizing these signs, and specifically dealing with the locusts, the narrative moves on to Moses' night flight and the parting of the sea.

The sixteenth sub-chapter of the Moses chapter then describes the prophet's encounter with God on the mountain, the tablets, and the revelation of the Torah. The "ten commandments" are discussed, followed by the matter of the worship of the golden calf and a sub-chapter on the identity of Korah and his rebellion. The Moses narrative continues with three sections describing Khiḍr, and Moses' encounter with him; a sub-chapter on the cow the people are ordered to sacrifice; and the story of the building of the temple, the ark of the covenant, the Shechina, and the sacrifice consumed by fire. A section on the journey of the Israelites to Syria is followed by the tale

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of Balaam, then a sub-chapter on the chiefs Moses chose to rule his people while they were away. The final five sections deal with the giant Og, God's favors to the people of Israel in the wilderness, the conquest of Jericho, and the deaths first of Aaron then of Moses.

Throughout the volume, the information in each section of al-Thaʿlabī's narrative is presented in the form of a series of individual reports. Most of these are simply ascribed to single figures, but a significant number are given fuller chains of authority. Others are ascribed to anonymous groups such as the "people of knowledge" or the "people of the book," and yet others are unascribed. These individual reports each present a facet of the topic under discussion, and it is through the accumulation of these various facets that al-Thaʿlabī constructs his narrative. The narrative therefore does not progress in a straightforward linear fashion, but rather would appear to meander its way through its presentation of historical events.

Thus if we look at the horses episode in the Solomon story, in which the prophet either slaughters or strokes his horses after they either cause him to forget to pray or remind him of God (Q 38:30–3), al-Thaʿlabī opens his description of events with an anonymous statement to the effect that God gave Arab horses exclusively to Solomon, followed by various possible descriptions of the horses referred to in Q 38:32 – one on the authority of ḥasan, another on the authority of al-Kalbī, and a third on the authority of Muqātil. Al-Thaʿlabī then resumes the anonymous narrative voice to explain the events that caused the prophet to miss the prayer time and slaughter his horses in consequence, and follows this with Kaʿb's explanation of how many horses there were and how they were killed, coupled with the fact that God deprived the prophet of his throne for fourteen days as a result of this slaughter. This serves to move the narrative on, and the forward action is maintained in the next statement, on the authority of Ḥasan, that God in fact rewarded the prophet for his actions with command of the wind, which leads to a description of this obedient wind. The narrative then continues with the theme of the wind, and gives a lengthy anonymous report of one of the journeys Solomon took courtesy of this wind, and what he did in his hometown prior to departing on this journey. Al-Thaʿlabī cites an anonymous couplet inspired by this, which leads the narrative into a lengthy poem on the obedient wind, and other topics, supposedly found engraved on a rock and written by a friend of Solomon's.

The narrative then returns to the main story, and gives an anonymous report to the effect that Solomon did not slaughter the horses but rather branded their legs "with the brand of charity," followed by al-Zuhrī's account that Solomon wiped the dust from their legs and necks. An alternative version is then proposed, via the explanation given by ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, in which God orders the angels to return the sun so that Solomon can perform his missed prayer. This leads the narrative on into another new phase: an account in which God's creation of the horse is described, statements from God and from Muḥammad about the nature and function of the horse, the angel's reaction to the creation of the horse, what the horse said when it arrived on earth, and Adam's choice of the horse among all of God's creatures.

There ends al-Thaʿlabī's description of the horses episode in the story of Solomon. Out of two full pages of narrative, there are eighteen lines directly related to the subject: thirteen stating that the horses were slaughtered, five giving other explanations. Of the

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thirteen lines, only one suggests that the prophet was censured for his actions, while a sum total of twenty lines are devoted to the subject of the wind the prophet was supposedly given as a reward for his actions. Sixteen lines are devoted to praise of the horse.

Thus, on the basis of narrative volume alone, the reader could assume that the "correct" reading is as follows: the horses, which were a remarkable and precious possession, were slaughtered and that God rewarded the prophet for his actions. However, it is important to stress that at no point is the reader told what he or she should think about the episode. Moreover, the nature of al-Thaʿlabī's text is such that the reader must make his or her decision about an episode based not only on the information given that directly relates to that episode, but on the strength of the chapter in its entirety. Indeed, the whole book acts as a cohesive unit. A series of complex themes runs across the tales, and it is important to view each chapter in light of those that went before. Although the text moves through the biographies of forty-six very different figures, these figures share the same basic human concerns (Klar 2006). Moreover, there are constant characters across the narrative; God, of course, and the Devil, but also prophets who continue to reappear throughout the *Tales* via the devices, both narrative and concrete, that are not confined by their actual birth and death. Thus, for instance, Adam, whose coffin is used to divide the sexes on board the Ark, who brings Moses' staff down with him when he falls from the garden, who names Joseph and is the cause of his amazing beauty, who gives sixty of his own years to prolong the future life of David, who is used, as we have seen, to add legitimacy to the horses in the story of Solomon, and so on.[3]

A further cohesive element is drawn by the constant, almost tangible presence of the voices of the prophet Muḥammad, his nephew ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, the second caliph, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, and, of course, the Qurʾān, which all serve to remind the reader of where this apparently meandering narrative is leading. Thus while pre-Islamic figures move forwards through history, post-Islamic figures move backwards, and the end result is a narrative that is tightly woven together. Of course, the text can be utilized as a reference work to access the major opinions on a specific incident, but it is at its richest as a manual which, by wise and varied example, teaches its reader about the nuances of the human condition and the range of human experience. A similar impression of the text is apparent in Nagel's (1967: 96 – my translation) pronouncement that "Thaʿlabī's stories of the prophets are not simply history or tales as, for instance, in Ibn Qutayba's *Book of Knowledge* or Tabari's *Annals*: they address themselves to the listener or the reader and require him or her to accept and to follow the insights and behaviors portrayed therein." Much like the rabbis of late antiquity, the Islamic storytellers and historiographers were engaged in an ongoing exploration of the meaning of the stories they inherited, attempting to present these stories to their readers in a convincing and communicative way, and in many ways al-Thaʿlabī's *Tales of the Prophets* is a unique expression of the desires and concerns of the ordinary medieval Muslim. The linking together of figures from the distant past, early Islamic figures, and a contemporary voice, serves to emphasize the relevance and applicability of the events described.

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Social and Intellectual Context

A native of Nīshāpūr, a then bustling intellectual center several weeks' journey from the seat of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate in Baghdad, al-Thaʿlabī reflects contemporary concerns and sensibilities in his work, which is in many ways a reflection both of his person and of his times. The rising popularity of mystical thought can for instance be evidenced in his citation of Shiblī (d. 334/945) and al-Junayd (d. 298/910), and in the frequent presence of ascetic themes within the tales.[4] The thorny issue of free will versus pre-determination, at its height in the second half of the second/eighth century with the rise of the Muʿtazila, is meanwhile expressed, for instance, in the story of the phoenix which tried to cheat destiny and was duly humiliated. The question of rationalism, also brought to the forefront by the Muʿtazilī movement and much disputed over the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries, can be seen to be expressed through al-Thaʿlabī's ongoing concern with reason (*ʿaql*), for example in the story of the Queen of Sheba where Solomon sets tests to gage the Queen's sense of reason. The infamous Qarmaṭīs of the same period are mentioned in al-Thaʿlabī's description of the history of the Kaʿba, and the fact that it was a Nīshāpūrī, described by al-Thaʿlabī as "our leader," who restored the black stone from the Kaʿba in Mecca after the failed Qarmaṭī attempt to remove it, can be taken both as evidence of the strong regional identities of the period and as an allusion to the growth of Persian nationalism. Indeed the presence of an isolated passage of Persian left untranslated in the otherwise Arabic text of the *Tales* (al-Thaʿlabī 1985: 208) can be read as something of a nod to the resurgence of Persian as a literary and scholarly language. Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200) certainly highlights the Persian aspect of al-Thaʿlabī when he mentions him (Swartz 1986: 182), making it clear that his national identity was part of how al-Thaʿlabī was later perceived.

This notwithstanding, it should be borne in mind that many of these more general features are also true of earlier works of tales of the prophets, and indeed of the genre as a whole. Moreover, at no point does al-Thaʿlabī engage with any of these theories on a sophisticated level; theological and political debate was not his purpose in compiling his text, and by concentrating on "evidence" within al-Thaʿlabī's text of the doctrinal, political, and historical issues of the times, one runs the risk of restricting medieval intellectual society, and al-Thaʿlabī's understanding of it, to a series of simple concepts. Although al-Thaʿlabī was a product of his time, his work was also a product of its genre; another element is added by the fact that al-Thaʿlabī remained throughout an individual, with his own interests and specific academic agenda: all of these factors should be considered in one's approach to the text. Furthermore, the *Tales of the Prophets* consists for the most part of citations from referenced sources rather than the author's own words. Even if adherence to a certain theological doctrine can be perceived to be implied in a report, there still remains to be decided the extent to which al-Thaʿlabī can be held to have shared such views. The situation, as such, is highly complex.

Where a relationship between al-Thaʿlabī and his medieval environment can, however, be more straightforwardly attributed is in the author's choice of sources and

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his methods. Later commentators who also produced a volume of pre-Islamic history tended, significantly, to utilize different criteria in selecting the sources they deemed reliable and the stories they judged to be worthy of repetition, famously rejecting many of the first generation of exegetes and traditionists as unreliable. Al-Thaʿlabī's concern was evidently not for textual criticism (though this is not to suggest that he knowingly repeated tales he suspected of being inauthentic) but for comprehensiveness (he tends to quote more variants of each episode than any other author within this genre) and narrative cohesion, as is made abundantly clear in the introduction to his *Tales*. While other collectors of tales of the prophets continued, and indeed still continue, to utilize such a methodology beyond the early medieval period, the highly traditional Sunnī scholars came to alter their perception of the function and purpose of such material. Al-Thaʿlabī, rather like al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) a century later, was inclusive of certain aspects of some potentially unorthodox elements of society; in al-Thaʿlabī's case these were the Ṣūfīs, the Shīʿīs, and the popular storytellers, whose customs and materials he utilized to enhance the readability and impact of his own work. As will become clear below, this decision was later to have a significant impact on his scholarly reputation, and it is in its innovative use of genre and materials that the work shows us why al-Thaʿlabī is a significant figure for this formative period of Islamic intellectual history.

Reception of the Text

Although we have no evidence of any contemporary criticisms of al-Thaʿlabī (indeed, the wide citation and dissemination of his major works implies rather that these were extremely favorably received), at a later date al-Thaʿlabī was to come under attack on several fronts. Ibn al-Jawzi mentions him as follows (Swartz 1986: 182 [Arabic 103]): "A number of Persians (*aʿājim*) have written books of a homiletic nature which they filled with incredible stories and corrupt ideas. Much of this can be found among tafsīr works of which Abū Isḥāq al-Thaʿlabī has preserved an example."

He then goes on to single out four specific examples of the kind of material he has in mind: stories about Dhū 'l-Kifl which evidently conflate this character with a wicked Israelite known as Kifl; reports to the effect that David wished for the death of Uriah and subsequently married his widow; the claim that Joseph loosened his belt during his encounter with Potiphar's wife; and the suggestion that Muḥammad uttered the so-called Satanic verses (with reference to Q 53:19–20).

That there was an on-going friction between the storytellers and the authorities on this issue is evident from the writings of al-Ghazālī a century earlier:

> People should guard against lies and against such stories which point to trivial faults and compromises which the common folks fail to understand, or to realize that they are nothing but trivial and unusual faults although they have been followed by atoning deeds and rectified by good works which are supposed to make up for them. (Faris 1966: 89)

Nonetheless, such material did continue to appear in later works and, as such, Ibn al-Jawzī's criticism of al-Thaʿlabī should by no means be seen as indicative of a mood of

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universal censure. To suggest that such anecdotes intended, or indeed were read, by those who repeated them, to imply any disrespect to the prophets in question is incorrect. Consequently, although some may have been alarmed by what they saw as the potential for misunderstandings in these stories, the tales continued to circulate in popular, scholarly, and even the most orthodox circles.

Al-Thaʿlabī was to come under criticism again under the pen of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 729/1328) who dedicates a lengthy passage in his *Minhāj al-sunna al-nabawiyya* ("The Path of Prophetic Conduct") to a refutation of aspects of al-Thaʿlabī's material and, *inter alia*, to a general critique of al-Thaʿlabī's use of *ḥadīth* (Ibn Taymiyya n.d.: IV, 2–80). Although this is with specific reference to al-Thaʿlabī's Qurʾān commentary, aspects of Ibn Taymiyya's criticism can also be perceived to have relevance for the reputation of the *Tales*; he describes al-Thaʿlabī as possessing virtue and faith, but being, in the likeness of "someone who attempts to gather firewood by night," unable to discern good *ḥadīth* from bad, or prophetic *sunna* from heretical innovation (*bidaʿ*) (Ibn Taymiyya n.d.: IV, 4).

Yet it is surely extremely significant that, despite these attacks on al-Thaʿlabī, Ibn Taymiyya's pupil, Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), who is credited with carrying out his master's radical methodology in the production of his own works, cites al-Thaʿlabī repeatedly in his own history of the pre-Islamic prophets. He omits passages whose content he disputes (often albeit referring the reader instead to his Qurʾān commentary where details are provided; for the issue of *isrāʾīliyyāt* see, e.g., Calder 1993; McAuliffe 1998), and qualifies the authenticity of some *ḥadīth* taken from our author where he deems this appropriate, but al-Thaʿlabī clearly remains, for him, a substantial source. Moreover, in his entry for al-Thaʿlabī in the biographical section of his work, Ibn Kathīr (1985: XII 43) describes al-Thaʿlabī as follows: "He knew many *ḥadīth* and had many teachers, and many marvelous things are found in his books on account of this." Ibn Kathīr would therefore appear to downplay his master's criticism of al-Thaʿlabī via his biographical entry, implying that it is merely on account of the quantity of *ḥadīth* he knows and the breadth of his learning that there are so many strange and wondrous things in his works. This can be read as a qualification of previous words of censure against our author, and indeed as something of an attempt to salvage his reputation; alternately it can be viewed, as can Ibn Taymiyya's admission of al-Thaʿlabī's religiosity and good character, as a way of criticizing the text without criticizing the man.

As for the reception of the *Tales per se*, this is difficult to gage, as the volume is not often described in classical sources. The fifteenth-century chronographer al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497) quotes it at length, and places the *Tales* alongside the biographies of Muḥammad by Ibn Isḥāq and al-Bukhārī, the story collections of Ibn al-Furāt (d. 807/1405) and al-Kisāʾī (fl. eleventh century), and the world histories of al-Ṭabarī, Ibn ʿAsākir, Ibn Kathīr and al-Mālikī, under the category "stories of the prophets" (al-Sakhāwī n.d.: 518), but although al-Thaʿlabī is listed in all the other appropriate biographical dictionaries and the *Tales* is usually mentioned by name, it is the Qurʾān commentary that has traditionally been the focus of scholarly attention. Similarly, we have very little documentary evidence of how collections such as al-Thaʿlabī's were used in medieval society. Nonetheless, the number of extant, catalogued manuscripts of the *Tales*, and the wide dissemination of printed editions of the work, belie any

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attempt to diminish its importance or popularity. From the introduction to the *Tales* we can deduce that al-Thaʿlabī believed in the importance and validity of narrative as an instructional tool. That al-Thaʿlabī also held the conviction that a work should be disparate in its sources and arranged in a reader-friendly fashion is clear from the introduction to his *Commentary*. Both of these stated methodologies place the reader firmly in pole position, and could explain why the wider success of the work may have been commercial rather than scholarly; the work's commercial success also shows itself in the number of imitative volumes that later appeared, especially in the Turkish and Persian-speaking Islamic lands.

Notes

1 This figure does not take into account personages whose biographies are provided within the tales of others, e.g. the story of Khiḍr which is contained within the tale of Moses.

2 The printed versions consulted include: al-Thaʿlabī (1985); the Azhar edition, al-Maktaba al-Saʿīdiyya, Cairo, n.d.; edition by ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Sayyid al-Ahl, Singapore, 1962; and the edition of al-Maktaba al-Thaqafiyya, Beirut, n.d.

3 Thackston (1978: xxiii–xxiv) describes a similar phenomenon as occurring in Kisāʾī's *Tales of the Prophets*: "In Kisa'i's version . . . a sense of continuity is maintained by reintroducing 'props' throughout the tales. Adam's tābūt, for example . . . emerges at significant points in the narrative: it holds the leaves of Adam's Book and is passed down through Seth and successive generations to Noah; it contains carpentry tools used by Noah to construct his ark; it is also the Ark of the Covenant carried about by the Children of Israel. All of the articles of clothing with which Jacob invests Joseph were inherited from the former prophets. Moses' staff, which he takes from Shuʿayb/Jethro, had been brought to Adam from Paradise and passed down to Seth, Idris, Noah, Salih, and Abraham. In the Job narrative, Iblīs stands on the very rock Cain used to kill Abel. The ram that miraculously appears to be sacrificed in Isaac's stead turns out to be the very ram that Abel offered to God. And the stones which David picks up on his way to do battle with Goliath cry out that they had belonged to his fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

4 For al-Thaʿlabī's alleged Ṣūfī connections see Nagel 1967: 82. Saleh (2004: 56–65) disputes the extent to which al-Thaʿlabī can be named a Ṣūfī, yet makes it clear that he was nonetheless extremely interested in the ideas of the mystics. It is moreover evident that asceticism as a whole was a general feature of literature of this type (see Khoury 1978: 44–5, 96–7).

Further reading

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