

Concepts of Time in Early Islamic Historiography

The Case of Abu Ja'far al-Tabari

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Far more than any of his predecessors among early Muslim historians, Abu Ja'far al-Tabari was obsessed by the problem of time. Earlier Muslims were seldom concerned even to construct a coherent sequence of events; rather, each event was recounted as a relatively self-contained entity. Events might be grouped together because of common thematic content, or because they were tesserae in the mosaic of some great drama like the battle of Siffin. Events were worth remembering not as links in a chain leading from past to present, but because of their moral or legal content, or because of how they characterized key actors in Islam's past. Tabari, in contrast, not only sought to reconstitute the chronological order of events; rather, he struggled to assign the most precise date possible to each and every event. An event had its fixed slot in the progression of time; the problem was to discover that slot. And in this way, this most self-effacing and impersonal of Muslim historians was also the most philosophical among them.

In view of the way Tabari has traditionally been viewed in both Muslim and Western scholarship --as an exceedingly industrious, thorough, honest drudge (everyone's favorite B+ good student) -- this may seem a peculiar thing to say. True, at least since Hodgson's treatment of him in The Venture of Islam (Chicago, 1974), we have become increasingly aware of the

complex potential agendas that inform and shape his presentation of early Islamic history. Scholars have noted that his account is filled with ironic juxtapositions, with odd emphases on apparently trivial events and even odder omissions of material that was clearly well-known and highly regarded among his contemporaries. Still, if Tabari's editorial art clearly places him solidly within the religio-political debates of the second and third Islamic centuries, and makes him a very effective protagonist within those debates, there is on the surface very little that is philosophical or even reflective in his presentation of Islamic history. In that portion of his Ta'rikh (which is after all the great bulk of it) he has only two terse methodological notes, explaining that he has omitted some reports because they are too offensive to include.

However, Tabari wrote not a history of Islam, but a history of the world, from the moment of creation down to his own time. It is in the thousand or so pages before the birth of Muhammad, and especially in the 200 pages from the Creation through Noah, that he explicitly deploys his skills and concerns as a muhaddith and theologian. Here he puts on the table an impressive array of logical, metaphysical, and philosophical problems, and establishes the most probable account he can through a fluid mix of text criticism (focussing, as a good muhaddith, on the isnads) and logical analysis. And it is here that he introduces the problem of time which will, on some level, engage him throughout the whole length of the Ta'rikh.

Tabari grapples with time in several registers --the ages of Creation, the generations of the patriarchs and ancient prophets, the succession of kings, the meticulous year-by-year and sometimes month-by-month sequencing of events after the Hijra. These registers are not hermetically sealed, and in places they interpenetrate or even interfere with one another. Still, they are always conceptually distinct in Tabari's text. To a considerable degree, those registers coincide with the three great ages or phases of the world: 1) the phase of Creation; 2) the phase

of the prophets and kings before Muhammad; 3) the phase of Muhammad's community. But it is also true that the issues and concerns raised by each register permeate the whole text, even at points where a particular register seems latent or altogether invisible.

Two examples will suffice to make the point. Tabari is at great pains to establish how long the world has endured and how long it will last. We are now living in the last age of the created world, and therefore his whole account of Islamic history is written with an acute awareness of the inexorable approach of the end. In his annalistic presentations of Islamic History, Tabari is not merely laying down a convenient chronological sequence; he is rather ticking off the years before the final catastrophe.

From a reverse perspective, Tabari clearly values the exactitude (a spurious exactitude perhaps) that the Hijri calendar allows him. In his struggle to find precise dates for the lives of the ancient prophets and his efforts to coordinate the lives of the prophets and the earliest kings of Iran, we see him striving to achieve the same thing for pre-Islamic times. (That goal, I think, explains his fretting over the exact lifespan of each of the Biblical patriarchs.) In the end, of course, he is bound to fail --the contradictions and gaps in the narratives available to him cannot be overcome. But we should not be surprised at his efforts --recall that the coming of Muhammad and his revelation marks no break or new beginning but only a new era --the final era -- in the continuum of history. From the fall of Adam to the Day of Judgment, it is all of a piece. With the Hijra the yardstick changes, but not the object to be measured.

With this much as an introduction, what are the crucial problems of time identified by Tabari? Three seem especially central and persuasive:

- 1) What is time and what is its relationship to God and his creation?

- 2) How much time has elapsed since the beginning of Creation, and how much remains -
- or to put the same question in other terms, how old is the world and how long will it
endure?
- 3) In what ways and to what degree, can we integrate the chronologies of the ancient
prophets and the ancient kings of Iran? For to Tabari, both traditions are authoritative
and normative.

What then is Time? "Time" is a word, no more -- on this point, if only this point, Tabari is a perfect Aristotelian. Without saying so in just these words, Tabari has two negative points to make: first, time is not an entity outside or alongside God; it has no existence and no meaning outside God's creation; second, time is not a creature of God per se -- rather, time is simply the measurement of the motions of the heavenly bodies, especially the sun and the moon, which indeed are creatures, obedient servants, of God. Time is a secondary feature of Creation, with no existence or inherent power of its own -- so much for those constant targets of Muslim polemics, the Zanadiqa ("Manichaeans, Dualists") and the Dahriyun ("Materialists").

Tabari's most common word for time is zaman, and he initially defines zaman as "the hours of night and day." (1,171 / I,7). A few pages later he repeats the definition in a more developed form (1,186 / I,18):

Time is but a noun designating the hours of night and day. The hours of night and day are but measurements indicated by the running of the sun and the moon in the sphere ...the hours of night and day are but the traversal by the sun and moon of the degrees of the sphere."

[As proof texts he cites Qur'an 21:33, 36:37-40]

In view of his rather nominalist approach to the concept of Time, the real issues confronting Tabari have to do with the nature of the sun and moon, day and night. In exploring these matters, Tabari first tries to demonstrate by pure logic that days and nights are created -- hence that time has a beginning. (1,187 / I,18-19): "Anything that can be counted [as days and nights can be] . . . has a beginning Whatever has a beginning must have one who begins it, and that is its creator."

To a modern reader, it is intriguing that when he turns to the beings that bring about night and day, he abandons this rationalist mode and turns to what we must call a mythical representation. This takes the form of a number of reports attributed to the Companion and Qur'an interpreter 'Abdallah ibn 'Abbas (d.68/687-8). Ibn 'Abbas hears of a statement by the Jewish convert Ka`b al-Ahbar that the sun and moon will be bound and thrown into hell on the Day of Judgment. Enraged by this slander against two obedient servants of God, he tells how each is given its light -- the sun by a veil from the Throne of God, the moon by a paler veil from the Footstool. (These are of course Qur'anic images of figures for the majesty and power of God.) Both sun and moon are represented as endowed with a voice, actually pleading their case before God. I will confess that I find the juxtaposition of myth and abstract logic a bit jarring. However, I think Tabari means for the myth to be taken not only as allegory, but quite literally. Having said this, I also think that Tabari would agree that the myth of sun and moon also conveys a philosophical-theological proposition -- viz., that the heavenly bodies do not shine by their own light. On the contrary, their light is literally and directly the divine light. The sun and moon embody and symbolize God's active governance of the world. And because the orbits of sun and

moon create and mark the times of day, the month, and the year, they also make it possible for human beings to carry out their due obligations (prayer, fasting, pilgrimages) to God.

Conceptual and logical problems of quite a different sort are raised by Tabari's inquiry into the age and duration of the world. Apart from the logical certainty that the world must have a beginning, Tabari has no rational tools for solving this problem; he can only rely on words transmitted to him on good authority --the words of revelation and the teaching of the Prophet. Tabari indeed states this explicitly, as the guiding methodology of his book:

I rely but rarely on rational argument, for no knowledge of men of the past . . . is attainable by those who could not observe them and did not live in their time.

(1,170 / I, 6-7)

We rely on traditions and reports on the authority of our Prophet and that of the righteous early Muslims before us. We do not use reason and rationalization to produce [this book], for most of its contents refer to past or future matters.

Knowledge of this sort cannot be produced by the use of reason. (1, 226 / I, 56)

Now in fact, Revelation has only a little to contribute --it confirms the fact of creation (independently established by reason) and declares a definitive end to this world. But as to the age and duration of the world, God has little to say in His own voice. We must turn to the words of the Prophet, and these we know of course only through transmission (riwaya). Here Tabari turns textual critic, and after reviewing several groups of reports, he prefers the lines of transmission going back to Ibn 'Abbas and Ibn 'Umar. Ibn 'Umar's and Ibn Abbas' statements

are grounded both in well-attested isnads (chains of transmitters) and their own authority as Companions and interpreters of the Prophet's words.

According to Ibn 'Abbas, the world (from the completion of creation to its Last Day) will last one week of the other world -- 7 "celestial" days or 7,000 years, and of these more than 6,500 have already passed. (Tabari could then look ahead to about 200 years before the end; the Muslim community was already on the verge of the final phase of its existence, with very little time left to redeem itself from the schisms and heresies which beset it -- hence what seems to me the unstated but unmistakable undercurrent of anxiety and pessimism in his presentation of Islamic history).

How do we know the number is 7,000? First, the Prophet states that the time from now until the end is like the time from the afternoon prayer to sunset --i.e., about one-fourteenth of the day. Moreover, the Prophet compares the time between now and the Last Day to the difference in length between the first and middle finger -- again, a proportion of about 1:14. So in fact the meaning of the text is uncovered only through reason, but here reason cannot operate independently of the text. It is reason as explicatio rather than autonomous ratio.

Tabari is aware that other religious traditions assign a different age to the world, and he cites a few of these -- the Jewish calculation of 4600 years from Adam to the Hijra, the Christian of 5992, the Magians only of 3140 -- but he rejects these with minimal debate. (I, 184-5 / I, 16-17). In spite of the differences, however, clearly all the scriptural or quasi-scriptural traditions were operating within the same broad frame of reference, and that fact must have seemed useful if non-probative support for his own conclusions.

The problem of the duration of the world from Creation to the End of course implies another question -- the duration of Creation itself. You will not be surprised to learn of a

symmetry that is both aesthetically pleasing and logically satisfying -- one week “of the other world,” or 7,000 years. The creation of the heavens and the earth required only six days, but one day (1,000 years of the other world) before that, God created the Pen and commanded it to write all that would ever happen down to the last day. So, from the very beginning of Creation down to the final annihilation of the world, the return to God as all in all, we traverse a span of 14,000 years. (1, 224-5 / I, 54-5).

In laying out this argument, Tabari had to confront two difficulties. One is lexical --how do we know that “one day of the other world” is not just a 24-hour day? How can we equate it to a thousand years? Here Tabari must rely on revelation (Quran 32:5) and a host of well-attested statements by early Muslims. (1, 225-6 / I, 56-7). This sort of appeal would not be persuasive to rationalists, of course, but it is not aimed at them. Beneath the placid surface of his text, one detects the unspoken presence of the most literal-minded followers of Ahmad b. Hanbal or, even worse, the anthropomorphists (mujassima, mutashabbiha). They were silenced, or at least they should have been, by this display of heavy artillery.

The second difficulty was also a matter of the word “day,” but it was conceptual and logical. If days and nights were created only by the orbit of the sun and moon, the very word “day” could have no meaning at all before these two entities had been created, and Tabari (following his authorities) concludes that the sun and moon were created only on Friday, the sixth day. So how can we even talk about the days of Creation, let alone assign any meaning to such a phrase? (1, 191 / I, 22). In his response, Tabari might well be citing Humpty-Dumpty as his authority -- “When I use a word, it means precisely what I want it to mean, nothing more and nothing less.” The answer, according to Tabari, is that “God called what I have mentioned ‘days’. Thus, I have used the same designation for them He did.” (1,191 / I, 22). Now, indeed

God is presented in the Qur'an as having established the foundations of the world in two days and having completed Creation in four (Qur'an, 16:15 {check}). But Tabari goes on to argue that these words are used because they make sense to human listeners. In its absolute sense, the word "day" before creation must simply refer to an extent of time, not our sequence of day and night. Even now, however, Tabari does not escape his logical difficulties, for by his definition of time, it is not "day" but time itself which is meaningless before the creation of the sun and moon. And this issue Tabari does not address. He does not omit a discussion of it out of guile, I think, but simply because the underlying paradox -- how can you have time in the absence of the preconditions for time? -- escapes him.

Finally, and very briefly, we come to the last issue --how is it possible to integrate the ancient prophets and the early kings of Iran within the same chronological matrix?

The short answer is that, with the information available to Tabari, it is not. But he gives it his best. The problem is simply that he tries to mesh the Magian chronology going from Gayumars (the first man in the old Iranian mythology) to Feridun, with the patriarchal/prophetic genealogies derived (not always accurately) from Genesis. The thing cannot be done, and the question for us is why devotes such extraordinary effort to the matter. Should it not have been obvious that Zoroastrian and Jewish accounts of the Creation and the origins of man were two utterly disparate things?

A solution to this puzzle would include two points. First, both Zoroastrians and Jews were (on different levels) "People of the Book," though Jewish scripture was admitted to be closer to the authentic prototype of revelation. Still, Zoroastrian teaching, however it may have distorted things, must have contained some grains of truth. Within Tabari's frame of reference, the two accounts had to be at least partially harmonizable. Second, there was the prestige of

Iranian kingship in Tabari's eyes. His book is about prophets and the people to whom they were sent, but it is equally about kings: (1, 168 / I, 5) Kings are crucial in his scheme of history, for it is only kings among the leaders of humankind who have the luxury of accepting or rejecting God's grace and guidance. For most of us, the critical moral lessons of history -- indeed, the lessons of salvation and damnation -- are manifested in the deeds of kings and the fates suffered by them.

Now, among all the kings of the earth, from the beginning down to the present, it is the kings of Iran to whom we should pay closest attention (1, 319 / I, 148):

I mention this information about Jayumart in this place only because none of the scholars of the (various) nations disputes that Jayumart is the father of the non-Arab Persians. They differ with respect to him only as to whether he is Adam, the father of mankind . . . or somebody else. In addition . . . his rule and that of his children continued in the East and the mountains there uninterrupted in an orderly fashion, until Yazdjard b. Shahriyar, one of his descendents -- May God curse him! -- was killed in Marv in the days of Uthman b. Affan. The . . . chronology of the world's bygone years is more easily explained and more clearly seen based upon the lives of the Persian kings than upon those of the kings of any other nation. For no nation but theirs . . . is known whose realm lasted and whose rule was continuous. No other nation had kings ruling all (their subjects) and chiefs protecting them against their adversaries, helping them to obtain the upper

hand over their competitors, defending those wronged among them against those who did them wrong, and creating for them fortunate conditions that were continuous, lasting, and orderly, inherited by later generations from earlier ones. Thus, a history based on the lives of the Persian kings has the soundest sources and the best and clearest data.

With this bit of Persian patriotism, we come to the end of our discussion. I will simply say that the material I left out is as challenging and fascinating as that which I included. I hope I have made a case for Tabari, not only as a formidable scholar -- but as a complex, thoughtful historian, who struggled to work out both the historical and the theological sense of the heap of materials that lay before him. He constructed a flawed but mighty edifice, and that edifice is founded upon an acute sense of human and divine time.