

AN APPRAISAL OF THE CONTRIBUTION OF IMAM AL-TABARI TO THE ISLAMIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Zayyanu Altine

zayyanualtine@gmail.com

*Department of Islamic Studies, Faculty of Arabic and Islamic Studies,
Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria*

Abstract: *Tabari's work was a World history or a comprehensive history, covering the history of a vast time frame. He consciously kept a chronological scheme of events in his book. He presented the evidence of historical facts, and tried to remain as much objective as possible. He presented elaborate details on the life of the Prophet (S.A.W). While writing' the history of controversial historical events, he devised a new method of narrating all the conflicting versions and then leaving the judgment to the readers. The aim and objectives of this paper is to examine al Tabari's brief biography and contributions towards historiography being him as a Muslim scholar in a tremendous braches of knowledge including history among others. Analytical method is employed when conducting the research. The paper finds out and ascertained some incessant and essential contributions given by the Al-Tabari to the historiography as well. Last but not the list the paper made recommendations and concluded.*

Keywords: *Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari, Glorious Qur'an, History, Historiography, and historical works.*



A. Introduction

The advent of Islam had tremendous impact on human thought, and the early Muslim thinkers and scholars greatly contributed to the production of knowledge. One of the branches of knowledge to which the Muslims paid special attention was the discipline of history. The Muslim historians and philosophers of history made great contributions to the discipline. However, before discussing their contributions, it seems pertinent to briefly highlight the Qur'anic concept of history.

Among the later generations after Tabi'un was Abu Ja'far Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari. He was a notable scholar who contributed a lot to *Tafsir* literature and Islamic history. Tabari's work is one of the major primary sources for historians. The History commenced with the Creation, followed by accounts regarding the patriarchs, Prophets, and rulers of antiquity. The history of the Sasanian Empire came next. For the period of the Prophet's life, al-Ṭabarī drew upon the extensive researches of 8th-century *Madinan* scholars. Although pre-Islamic influences are evident in their works, the *Madinan* perspective of Muslim history evolved as a theocentric (god-centred) universal history of prophecy, culminating in the career of Muhammad and not as a continuum of tribal wars and values. The sources for al-Ṭabarī's History covering the years from the Prophet's death to the fall of the Umayyad dynasty (661–750 CE) were short monographs, each treating a major event or the circumstances attending the death of an important person. Al-Ṭabarī supplemented this material with historical reports embodied in works on genealogy, poetry, and tribal affairs. Further, details of the early Abbasid period were available to him in a few histories of the caliphs that unfortunately have come down only in the fragments preserved by al-Ṭabarī. Almost all of these accounts reflected an Iraqi perspective of the community; coupled with this is al-Ṭabarī's scant attention to affairs in Egypt, North Africa, and Muslim Spain, so that his

History does not have the secular “universal” outlook sometimes attributed to it.¹ This paper therefore, intends to examine the biography and works of Abu Ja’far Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari in the field of historiography.

B. Method

The aim and objectives of this paper is to examine al Tabari's brief biography and contributions towards historiography being him as a Muslim scholar in a tremendous braches of knowledge including history among others. Analytical method is employed when conducting the research. Thus this paper use qualitative approach and use various literature to analyze the problem.

C. Result and Discussion

1. The Concept of History in the Glorious Qur’an;

Quran is not primarily a book of history. Being a Book of revelation origin, it is meant for the guidance of human beings. A sizeable portion of Qur’an contains the histories of ancient nations or communities, and the Prophets sent to them. Not only does it tell about the conduct, behavior and the characteristics of the people of these ancient communities, it also informs how and why Allah bestowed His favors upon some of them while some others were destroyed by divine Wrath owing to multiple causes. These causes which led to their decline or annihilation from the face of earth ranged from their arrogance, pride and hunger for power to extravagance, ungratefulness and, above all, injustice. Thus, Qur’an discusses the principles that govern the rise and fall of various groups and communities. It does not attach importance to material superiority

¹ M.H..Al-Dhahabi, *Al-Tafsir Wal-Mufasssirun*, vol.1, nd, p.208.

and power, rather it is the moral and ethical superiority that is desirable. Moreover, according to Qur'anic principles, disbelief (shirk is not a sufficient ground for divine.²

2. Origin of Muslim Tradition of Historiography

The origin of Muslim tradition of historiography can be traced back to the process of compilation of Quran and hadith (sayings and the actions of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), b. S70-d. 632) collections. During the life-time of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), a group of his Companions were designated to record the Qur'anic revelations in written form. However, these texts were scattered, and had not been compiled³. Moreover, many Companions of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) had also-committed Quran to their memory. The need for the compilation of Quran in a single volume was felt during the reign of Caliph Abu Bakr. (RA; r. 632-34), when many of these Companions, who had memorized Quran, were killed in the Battle of Yamamah fought in 632. Realizing the need to compile Quran, Caliph Abu Bakr (RA) appointed a committee under Hazrat Zayd ibn Thabit (RA; d. 45 AH), who was the personal scribe of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) for this purpose. Consequently, the Quran was compiled. Later, during the reign of Caliph Uthman bn Affan (RA; r. 644-56), the standard text of Quran was copied' and sent to the conquered territories.⁴

Initially, the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) had forbidden his Companions to record and write ahadith, as he feared that people would confuse them with the Qur'anic verses. However, after 623 AD (1 Hijrah/AH), he allowed them to write ahadith, and thus, many of his

²T. J. Al-Nuaimi, Muslim Historiography at al-Madina School and the School of Iraq a Comparison between Two Schools, (N. P), (N. P), (N.D), P, 3

³ M. B. Ahmad, Contribution of the Muslim Historians towards Historiography, (N.P), (N.P), (1898), P, 22.

⁴ M. B. Ahmad, Contribution of the Muslim Historians towards Historiography, P, 23.

Companions prepared their personal collections of ahadith. Later, the Umayyad Caliph, Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (d. 718-20 AD), who is considered to be the fifth pious Caliph by many, ordered the collections of ahadith to be prepared, copied, and sent to the conquered territories⁵.

The early Muslims had a burning desire to preserve the memory of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), including his sayings and actions. They wanted to preserve the knowledge that how he walked and talked, behaved in different situations, acted as a Prophet, as a statesman, as a military commander, as a preacher, as a friend, as a relative, as a father, as a husband, as well as how did he look like, for the posterity. The Qur'an and the hadith collection served as primary sources for writing the history of the early Muslims, particularly the biography of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), called *Sirah* or *Sirat*, and the military history called *Maghazi*⁶.

It is important to note that the development of hadith studies as an independent branch of knowledge among the Muslims greatly contributed to the discipline of history. The early *muhaddithin* (Traditionists or compilers/teachers of ahadith) developed very elaborate rules for ascertaining the authenticity of ahadith. They also classified the ahadith on the basis of their authenticity. They were not only concerned with the contents of a hadith, they also took into account the conditions in which the ahadith were narrated, as well as the 'characteristics of their narrators, especially their reliability and trustworthiness. They also developed principles for internal and external criticism of ahadith in order to assess their authenticity⁷. The Muslim historians derived the principles of research and historical criticism, including the internal and

⁵ M. B. Ahmad, Contribution of the Muslim Historians towards Historiography, P, 25

⁶ M. B. Ahmad, Contribution of the Muslim Historians towards Historiography, P, 26.

⁷ M. B. Ahmad, Contribution of the Muslim Historians towards Historiography, P, 27.

external criticism, from the hadith compilation process. These historians were conscious of the issue of authenticity of their sources, which they critically examined.

3. Brief biography of Imam al-Tabari

Muhammad bin Jarir bin Kathir bin Ghalid Abu Ja'far al-Tabari was born in Amol, Tabaristan, in the year 225 A.H/ 838 CE. This birthplace is a mountainous territory in Persia near the Caspian Sea. He was both beautiful and articulate.⁸ Al-Tabari died in the year 320A.H/ 923CE after living for 85 years and was buried in Baghdad. Despite the fact that his death was not publicly publicized, a sizable audience attended his funeral. For several months, different persons on his grave observed requiem prayers on a daily and nightly basis. Intellectuals and religious people mourned him deeply.⁹

Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari was a prominent and influential Persian scholar, historian and exegete of the Qur'an from Tabaristan, modern Mazandaran in Iran. Even if today he's better known for his expertise in Islamic sciences (Qur'anic commentary and law) or history, he has been described as "an impressively prolific polymath. He wrote on such subjects as poetry, grammar, ethics, mathematics, and medicine."¹⁰

In the ninth century A.C, Islamic learning was at its peak. Muslim scholars and scientists excelled in their learning and achievements in different fields. Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari surpassed them all. Learned in hadith literature, he also studied many other subjects to further his knowledge of the Glorious Qur'an and the religion of Islam. During the end of his days,

⁸ Y. Rumi, "Mu'jam al-Udaba", in *Maktabah Wa al-thaqafah Cairo*, vol. 18, no. 5, nd, p.40.

⁹ <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tabari>. Retrieved on 18/05/2023.

¹⁰ Ibid. Retrieved on 18/05/2023.

he was known as a commentator on the Glorious Qur'an, an expert in Islamic Jurisprudence (*Fiqh*), and as a famous historian¹¹.

He is described as having a dark skin, huge eyes, and a long beard. He was tall and slim, and his hair and beard were black until he was very old. He was health-conscious, avoiding red meat, fats, and other potentially harmful meals. He was rarely ill until his last decade, when he suffered from attacks of pleurisy. When he was sick, he treated himself (with the doctors' agreement).¹²

4. His Education

Al-Tabari received his education at Ray, Baghdad, Wasit, Basrah, Kufa and Fustat (old Cairo). He also made extensive study tours to Persia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt in quest for collecting information for his monumental historical works. Among his teachers were Muhammad bin Abdulmalik bin Abis- Shawarib, Ahmad bin Hamid al-Qazi, Abu Hamman al-Walid bin Shujai and Muhammad bin Al-Alaci. He learnt the Qur'an by heart at the age of seven.¹³ Yaqut Rumi reported Al-Tabari as having confirmed by him, to have learnt how to read the Qur'an from Sulaiman bin AbdulRahman bin Hamid together with legal aspect of it. Ibn Jarir had the knowledge of traditions of the Prophet and knew how to distinguish between authentic and non-authentic ones. His knowledge of traditions of the Prophet was so deep that he was regarded as an authority in the science of hadith. Mustalah al-Hadith. His impact as a scholar was widely felt. Among his students was Ahmad bin Kamil, the person to whom Mishkawayh owed his guidance in history. People used to learn *Tafsir* from Al-Tabari's dictations.¹⁴

¹¹ F. Rosenthal, trans., The History of al-Ṭabarī, State University of New York Press, 1989, Volume 1, P. 42.

¹² F. Rosenthal, trans., The History of al-Ṭabarī, State University of New York Press, 1989, Volume 1, P. 43.

¹³ Ibid. p. 3.

¹⁴ <https://www.google.com/amp/s/english.arabiya.net/amp/features/2017/05/28/Al-Tabari-s-biography-the-most-distinguished-Muslim-Interpreter-and-historian>. Retrieved on 21/05/2023.

5. His Works

Ibn Jarir al-Tabari was a scholar in several subjects, including Qur'anic sciences, Hadith, history, and jurisprudence. He knew some biographies and published a popular book on the history of nations and emperors. Al-Tabari, a prolific writer in a variety of subjects, was proven beyond question by some of his pupils by estimating the leaves he used to write every day for eighty-five years. Based on the discovery, the forty leaves he wrote amount to eighty pages, as he wrote both the front and back of the leaves. Among the topics he addressed in his literature were Fiqh, Hadith, Tafsir, Nahw Lughah, and 'Arud. He is claimed to have outperformed other writers in those fields. Also in recitation he wrote a book of eighteen volumes. Below is the list of some of his major works¹⁵:

- a. *Jami'u-l-Bayan 'an Ta'wil ayi'l-Qur'an*
- b. *Kitabul-Taqwah*
- c. *Kitabul-'l-Qira'ah*
- d. *Tarikhur-Rusul wal-Muluk*
- e. *Kitab Maratib al-ulama*
- f. *Kitab Adab al-Qudat*
- g. *Kitab Adabin Nufus al-Jayyidah*
- h. *Kitabur-Risalah*
- i. *Kitab al-Musnad al-Mujarrad*
- j. *Al-Basir fi ma'alimid-deen*¹⁶

He was also the author of many books; the most famous of them was his *Tafsir* of the Glorious Qur'an and the other was his encyclopedia on Islamic history.

¹⁵ M. Benjamin Leopold Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, (Manchester: University Press, 1992, Pp. 22-23.

¹⁶ <https://kitaabun.com/shopping3/jafar-muhammad>. Retrieved on 20/05/2023.

6. Contributions of Al-Tabari to Islamic Historiography

Abu Ja'afar ibn Jarir al-Tabari is considered as one of the distinguished interpreter and historian in Islamic history. He is known for his two books "*Tafsir al-Tabari*", and "The history of al-Tabari."¹⁷

7. The Great Historian

At-Tabari was 65 years old when he returned to Baghdad. He continued to teach the students that came to him in search of knowledge. At the same time, he was eager to begin work on another writing project.¹⁸

Tabari defined history as a science not as an art as some modern historians proclaimed. He categorized history as a science because of his accurate historical methodology, which consisted of chain criticism that "put it more or less on scientific basis." This approach was re-confirmed in the words of Iqbal who said, "Accuracy in recording facts, which constitute the material of history, is an indispensable condition of history as a science."¹⁹

The success of his Commentary of the Glorious Qur'an encouraged him to undertake another encyclopedic work. This time he decided to write an encyclopedia on the History of Islam. Before starting on the project, he spent a good deal of time in its planning and preparation. His students and friends were also enthusiastic about this new project and promised to extend all help that he required from them.²⁰

¹⁷ <https://www.google.com/amp/s/english.arabiya.net/amp/features/2017/05/28/Al-Tabari-s-biography-the-most-distinguished-Muslim-Interpreter-and-historian>. Retrieved on 21/05/2023.

¹⁸ Z. Altine and D.A, Muhammad," *Biography and historical works of imam Abu Ja'afar ibn jarir al-Tabari*", in *GlobalAcademic journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, P, .3.

¹⁹ F. Rosenthal, trans., *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, State University of New York Press, 1989, Volume 1,P. 40.

²⁰ F. Rosenthal, trans., *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, State University of New York Press, P, 41

8. Imam al-Tabari and his Historical Works

Imam al-Tabari was able to write his book “History of al-Tabari” which has become a reference till today. The history of the nations and kings or the “History of Prophets and kings” or “*Tarikh al-Rasul wa’I muluk*” which is known by “The history of al-Tabari”, is considered as a reference book in its field, its idea was preceding, it documents the world from the beginning of creation to the end of the year 302 AH, from the story of Adam A.S till the time al-Tabari lived in. The book tells the news in sequence and stated the evidences, the book has been printed many times.²¹

The collecting of forty volumes of the History works by Imam al-Ṭabari compiled and completed in 1999 by a distinguished group of Arabists and historians of Islam, the annotated translation of The History of al-Ṭabari is arguably the most celebrated chronicle produced in the Islamic lands on the history of the world and the early centuries of Islam. The thirty-nine-volume set, published in the SUNY series in Near Eastern Studies, under the general editorship of Professor Ehsan Yarshater of Columbia University, is the only complete English translation. The History was published by SUNY Press between 1985 and 1999, with the Index, added to the set in 2007. It is an essential and highly praised resource in Islamic studies.²²

9. Below are Summary of Volumes and Table of Contents

The History of al-Tabari **Vol. 1:** General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood. The **Vol. 2:** Prophets and Patriarchs. **Vol. 3:** The Children of Israel. **Vol. 4:** The Ancient Kingdoms. **Vol. 5:** The *Sasanids*, the Byzantines, the *Lakhmids*, and Yemen. **Vol. 6:** Muhammad at Mecca. **Vol. 7:** The Foundation of the Community: Muhammad At Al-Madina A.D. 622-626/Hijrah-4

²¹ https://wikiislam.net/wiki/The_History_of_al-Tabari. Retrieved on 20/05/2023

²²Ibid. Retrieved on 20/05/2023.

A.H. **Vol. 8:** The Victory of Islam: Muhammad at Medina A.D. 626-630/A.H. 5-8. **Vol. 9:** The Last Years of the Prophet: The Formation of the State A.D. 630-632/A.H. 8-11. **Vol. 10:** The Conquest of Arabia: The *Riddah* Wars A.D. 632-633/A.H. 11. **Vol. 11:** The Challenge to the Empires A.D. 633-635/A.H. 12-13. **Vol. 12:** The Battle of *al-Qadisiyyah* and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine A.D. 635-637/A.H. 14-15. **Vol. 13:** The Conquest of Iraq, Southwestern Persia, and Egypt: The Middle Years of ‘Umar’s Caliphate A.D. 636-642/A.H. 15-21. **Vol. 14:** The Conquest of Iran A.D. 641-643/A.H. 21-23. **Vol. 15:** The Crisis of the Early Caliphate: The Reign of ‘Uthman A.D. 644-656/A.H. 24-35. **Vol. 16:** The Community Divided: The Caliphate of ‘Ali I A.D. 656-657/A.H. 35-36. **Vol. 17:** The First Civil War: From the Battle of *Siffin* to the Death of ‘Ali A.D. 656-661/A.H. 36-40. **Vol. 18:**²³ Between Civil Wars: The Caliphate of *Mu’awiyah* A.D. 661-680/A.H. 40-60. **Vol. 19:** The Caliphate of Yazid b. *Mu’awiyah* A.D. 680-683/A.H. 60-64. **Vol. 20:** The Collapse of *Sufyanid* Authority and the Coming of the *Marwanids*: The Caliphates of *Mu’awiyah* II and *Marwan* I and the Beginning of The Caliphate of ‘Abd al-Malik A.D. 683-685/A.H. 64-66. **Vol. 21:** The Victory of the *Marwanids* A.D. 685-693/A.H. 66-73. **Vol. 22:** The *Marwanid* Restoration: The Caliphate of ‘Abd al-Malik A.D. 693-701/A.H. 74-81. **Vol. 23:** The Zenith of the *Marwanid* House: The Last Years of ‘Abd al-Malik and The Caliphate of al-Walid A.D. 700-715/A.H. 81-96. **Vol. 24:** The Empire in Transition: The Caliphates of Sulayman, ‘Umar, and Yazid A.D. 715-724/A.H. 97-105. **Vol. 25:** The End of Expansion: The Caliphate of Hisham A.D. 724-738/A.H. 105-120. **Vol. 26:** The Waning of the Umayyad Caliphate: Prelude to Revolution A.D. 738-745/A.H. 121-127. **Vol. 27:** The ‘Abbasid Revolution A.D. 743-750/A.H. 126-132. **Vol. 28:** ‘Abbasid Authority Affirmed: The Early Years of al-Mansur A.D. 753-763/A.H.

²³ Ibid. Retrieved on 21/05/2023.

136-145. **Vol. 29:** Al-Mansur and al-Mahdi A.D. 763-786/A.H. 146-169.²⁴ **Vol. 30:** The ‘Abbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium: The Caliphates of Musa al-Hadi and Harun al-Rashid A.D. 785-809/A.H. 169-193. **Vol. 31:** The War between Brothers: The Caliphate of Muhammad al-Amin A.D. 809-813/A.H. 193-198. **Vol. 32:** The Reunification of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate: The Caliphate of *al-Ma'mun* A.D. 813-833/A.H. 198-218. **Vol. 33:** Storm and Stress along the Northern Frontiers of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate: The Caliphate of *al-Mu'tasim* A.D. 833-842/A.H. 218-227. **Vol. 34:** Incipient Decline: The Caliphates of *al-Wathiq*, *al-Mutawakkil*, and *al-Muntasir* A.D. 841-863/A.H. 227-248. **Vol. 35:** The Crisis of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate: The Caliphates of al-Musta'in and al-Mu'tazz A.D. 862-869/A.H. 248-255. **Vol. 36:** The Revolt of the Zanj A.D. 869-879/A.H. 255-265. **Vol. 37:** The ‘Abbasid Recovery: The War against the Zanj Ends A.D. 879-893/A.H. 266-279. **Vol. 38:** The Return of the Caliphate to Baghdad: The Caliphates of *al-Mu'tadid*, *al-Muktafi* and *al-Muqtadir* A.D. 892-915/A.H. 279-302. **Vol. 39:** Biographies of the Prophet's Companions and Their Successors: al-Tabari's Supplement to His History³¹. **Vol. 40:** Index.²⁵

This monumental work explores the history of the ancient nations, the rise of Islam and the history of the Islamic World down to the year 915 AD/ 302 AH.

Imam al-Tabari spent 12 years writing this encyclopedia on Islamic history. His job was not easy for he had to collect and compile the material from different sources. He had to rely on oral reports as well to complete his encyclopedia.²⁶

It is reported that there were at least 20 copies of his encyclopedia in all great libraries in the Muslim world of those days. Hundreds of copyists earned their living copying his work for use of individuals and libraries. Many of his original works were lost over the passage of time. It was

²⁴ Ibn abi Osaybaa. *Qium al-anba fi Tabaqat al-Atebba*. Beirut: Dar al- Maktaba al-Haiat Press, explanation and exploration by Nazar Riza: P. 427.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid

only in the end of the last century that modern scholars pieced together his work so that it could be studied by students in modern time.²⁷

D. Conclusion

The paper discusses many aspects of Abu Ja'afar Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari's biography, including his childhood, education (he received his education at Ray in Baghdad, he learned the Qur'an by heart at the age of seven, and he enjoyed writing, reciting, and participating in poetic exchanges), personal characteristics, and scholarship. The paper also covers his publications and his extensive books on history, where he published about forty volumes on various aspects of Islamic Studies and finally brought up his ideas on the development of history, among others.

E. Recommendations

1. Muslims should pay extra attention to the Islamic history being it very essential to the people of Islam
2. Muslims should shun away from using the books of westerners and concentrate to the Muslim historians in order to have accurate and meritorious history of Islam especially from the books of great, gigantic and titanic *Mufassir* and historian Ibn Jarir al-Tabari .
3. Muslim researchers should try as much as possible to continue writing in order to refute westerners' writers who are malign and rancorous to Islam by writing authentic books, papers, thesis and dissertations and disseminate in the society.

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