

AL-TABARĪ: THE CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

By:
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Abstract

Matlamat utama perbincangan artikel ini ialah untuk mengemukakan suatu paparan tentang faham persejaraan Islam di sisi al-Ṭabarī (m. 310/ 923). Beliau memelopori suatu fasa baru dalam perkembangan historiografi Islam dengan memperkayakannya dengan kaedah persejaraan analistik yang asli, di samping falsafah sejarah. Ini dapat diperhatikan menerusi karyanya Ṭarīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk. Artikel ini mengemukakan kaedah persejaraan dan falsafah sejarah al-Ṭabarī yang tergambar melalui persembahan jaringan analistik, penjelasan diri dan pentafsiran deduktif bagi sejarah.

Historical Methodology of Ṭabarī¹

Ṭabarī's Sources

The magnum opus of Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, points out a considerable shift from the early Muslim historians concern-

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¹ See Ṭabarī's biography in Muḥammad Zahrī, *Imām al-Ṭabarī: Shaykh al-Mufasssīrīn, wa 'Umdat al-Mu'arrikhīn wa Muqaddam al-Fuqahā' al-Muḥaddithīn Ṣaḥīb al-Madhab*, (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam, 1990), 25-81; Husayn 'Āṣī, *Abū Ja'far Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī wa Kitābuhu*

ing the selection of the historical sources. Ṭabarī thoroughly selected historical sources in order to present the world history in an objective manner. This was evidently illustrated in his selection of the number of historical sources which comprise of Qur'ān, *tafsīr*, genealogies, biographies, *maghāzī*, *ḥadīth*, pre-Islamic poetry and history, Jewish, Christian, Persian, Greco-Roman and Muslim sources.

Ṭabarī's lucid understanding of the Islamic concept of knowledge, particularly historical knowledge which derived from the Qur'ān, had led him to consider the Qur'ān as the major source and the frame of history. It is for the most apparent part, for instance, in his elaboration on the creation of heaven and earth, the creation of man and the biographies of prophets.

Another supply which radically influenced his historical writing and historical methodology was *tafsīr* (exegesis) of the Qur'ān. He considered *tafsīr* as a historical source, which was particularly evident in the first part of the work on the pre-Islamic and later Prophetic period. In fact, it may be asserted that, the first part of his *History* was a replica of his work *Commentary*.²

Then *nasab* (genealogy), *sīrah* (biography), *maghāzī* (military campaigns) and *ṭabaqāt* were the first historical writings in Islamic history and they took place due to the unfolding of Islām. These early historical writings provided the foundations of Islamic historiography. Some of the major historians on genealogy, biography, campaigns and *ṭabaqāt* who referred to the work of Ṭabarī were Muḥammad b. al-Sā'ib al-Kalbī (d. 149/), al-Hamadānī, al-Mu'arriḡ

Tārīkh al-Umam wa al-Mulūk, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1992), 51-77; Franz Rosenthal, "General Introduction," in Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, vol. 1. ed. Ehsan Yar-Shater, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 5-134; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh al-Baghdād*, 19 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.), 2: 162-169; Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-'Udabā'*, 20 vols., (Beirut: Dār al-Ihya' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1988), 18: 40-94.

² See Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān* (Miṣr: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa Awlāduhu, 1954).

b. 'Amr al-Sadusī (d. 195/811), Abū al-Jaqzān (d. 190/805), Abān b. al-Khalīfah 'Uthmān b. al-'Affān (d. 105/705), 'Urwa b. al-Zubair Ibn 'Awwām (d. circa. 91/692), Shurḥabīl b. Sa'd (d. 133/732), Muḥammad b. Muslim b. Shihāb al-Zuhri (d. 124/741), Musa b. 'Uqba (d. 120/720), Ma'mar b. Rāshid (d. circa. 154/771), Abū 'Abdallah Muḥammad b. Ishāq (d. 85/767).³ Sayf b. 'Umar (d. 180/796), 'Ali b. Muḥammad al-Madā'ini (d. 225/839), Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/826).⁴

The field of *ḥadīth* not only became as another major source of Ṭabarī's history but has also greatly influenced his historical methodology. Ṭabarī's precise presentation of historical events in the form of chain narration, as far as it was possible, was directly dominated by *ḥadīth*.⁵ The field of *ḥadīth* played an important role in Islamic historiography as it gradually formed a strong consciousness in the early Muslims towards of the precise dating and the narrating of events, and consequently instigated the formation of a special field of study, known as *asmā' al-rijāl* or 'who is who.' The task of this discipline was to determine the validity, using rigorous criteria, and methodology, of a certain narration. Its formation was vital for further developments in the field of Islamic historiography and, in fact, Makdisi is explicit in his saying that

³ For a short overview of their contributions as biographers see Nisar Ahmad Faruqi, *Early Muslim Historiography: A Study of Early Transmitters of Arab History from the Rise of Islam up to the End of Umayyad Period (612-750 A.D.)* (Delhi: Idarat-i Adabiyat-i Delhi, 1979), 14-279, and Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: University Press, 1994), 49-58.

⁴ Francesco Gabrieli, "Arabic Historiography," trans., M. S. Khan, *Islamic Studies* 18 (1979), 85; Kamil 'Ayad, "The Beginning of Muslim Historical Research," trans., M. S. Khan, *Islamic Studies* 17 (1978), 4; Joseph De Somogyi, "The Development of Arabic Historiography," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 3 (1958), 374-375, and Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 62-68.

⁵ Jawad 'Ali, "Mawārid Tārikh al-Ṭabarī," *Majallat al-Majma' al-'Ilmī al-'Irāqī*, 1 (1950), 161-164 and 169.

"historiography owes its existence in Islām to the exigencies of this *hadīth* criticism."⁶

Pre-Islamic literature, particularly *Ayyām al-'Arab* (Battle-Days' Narrative) and the Arab poetry has provided political, military, socio-economic and cultural details of the pre-Islamic Arabs. 'Poetry is the history of Arabs' – an epigram which pointed out the traditional, religious and intellectual life of the Arab.⁷ For instance, Ṭabarī has quoted from the above-mentioned sources 314 poetical verses in the chapter dealing with the life of the Prophet.⁸

Jewish and Christian sources were indispensable for Ṭabarī particularly for the pre-Islamic history. In many places, he indicated 'the people of the Torah say,' or 'the people of the Torah assume.'⁹ Traditions of the People of the Book, in the work of Ṭabarī, had been used mostly through the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih Dhamarī al-Yamani (d. 114/732), Muḥammad b. Ka'b al-Qurazī (d. 108/708), and Ibn Ishāq.¹⁰

Persian, Greek and Roman literature was, to some extent, available due to the translations of the Greco-Roman heritage initiated during the reign of Ma'mūn and Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 193/809). The Muslim historians obtained most of Persian, Greek, and Roman literature through the new converts. In the case of Ṭabarī two most outstanding converts who provided the most information on Persian history were Ibn Muqaffa' (d. 139/757) and Hishām al-Kalbī.

⁶ George Makdisi, "The Diary in Islamic Historiography," *History and Theory*, 25 (1986), 174.

⁷ Afzal Iqbal, *Culture of Islam*, (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1990), 41.

⁸ Muhammad al-Da'mi, "Major Trends of Arab Historiography," *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, 61 (1993), 263; Badruddin Bhat, "A Survey of Early Muslim Historiography," *Islamic Quarterly*, 29 (1985), 252, and Faruqi, *Muslim Historiography*, 38-39.

⁹ See for example his account on the beginning of creation according to the Jewish and Greek Christian accounts in Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, vol. 1. ed., Ehsan Yar-Shater, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 1: 184-185.

¹⁰ Faruqi, *Muslim Historiography*, 34-35.

Among the major Muslim historians to whom Ṭabarī referred to were Wahb b. Munabbih, Muḥammad b. al-Sā'ib al-Kalbī (d. 204/819), Muḥammad b. Ka'b al-Quraẓī, Abān b. 'Uthmān b. 'Affān, 'Urwa b. al-Zubair b. al-'Awwam, Mūsā b. 'Uqba, Ibn al-Muqaffa', 'Ubaid b. Sharyah al-Jurhumī, 'Āṣim b. 'Umar b. Qattādah (d. 120/720), Muḥammad b. Muslim b. Shihāb al-Zuhri, Saif b. 'Umar Usayydi Tamīnī (d. 180/796), Abū Mikhnaf Lūṭ b. Yahyā (d. 157/774), Al-Madā'ini (d. 225/839), 'Awwānah b. Ḥakam al-Kalbī (d. 147/764), Muḥammad b. al-Sā'ib al-Kalbī, Hishām b. Muḥammad al-Kalbī, Aḥmad b. Abī Haithamah (d. 299/893), Muḥammad b. Ishāq and Haitham b. 'Adi Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān (d. circa. 206/861).

Ṭabarī made reference to the above mentioned scholars with regards to the creation of the world, the history of the prophets and their nations, history of ancient kingdoms, the history of pre-Islamic period, the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad (p.b.u.h.), the history of the rightly guided caliphs and the history of Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties.

Origins of the Islamic Historical Methodology

A concise exposition of Ṭabarī's historical methodology requires a short overview of the origins of the Islamic historical methodology. Some of the Western orientalist consider the pre-Islamic Arab's, Persian's, Greek's, Roman's, Yemenite's, Jewish's and Christian's effect on the Islamic historical methodology.¹¹ The influences on the formation of Islamic historical methodology, a rather complex

¹¹ See for instance Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), 18-19; Joseph H. Dahmus, *Seven Medieval Historians* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1982), 20-21 and 77-87; I. H. Qureshi, "Historiography," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed., M. M. Sharif, vol. 1 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1966), 1197; Faruqi, *Muslim Historiography*, 84-87; For general remarks on Biblical influence on the Muslim historiography see Franz Rosenthal, "The Influence of the Biblical Tradition on Muslim Historiography," in *Historians of the Middle East*, eds., Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 35-45.

subject, require special treatment and attention. Therefore, several indications about the origins of Islamic historical methodology may be illustrated as an alternative.

Pre-Islamic Arab historical writings played an important role in the formation of Islamic historical methodology. Some scholars argue that Islām neglected the Pre-Islamic historical period and had put a line between *Jāhiliyya* (the Age of Ignorance) and the new Islamic period. For instance, Rosenthal asserted that the Muslim's view of ancient Arabia as a country of ignorance prevented reporting of that period and, as another scholar had taken for granted the religion of Islām cancelled all that was before it.¹² On the contrary, pre-Islamic Arab history is given special mention in many historical works of the Muslim historians, as a matter of fact, their poetry and genealogy played an important role in the formation of Islamic historical methodology. Pre-Islamic poetry, in fact, became part of historical expression by later Muslim historians.¹³ It means Rosenthal correctly affirms that pre-Islamic history did not influence later Muslim historical writing or historical consciousness but their technique and their form later had played an important role in Islamic historiography.¹⁴

The style of Yemenite Christian scholars in writing history and their method of keeping genealogy, story-telling narration and analytical form in writing history greatly influenced Islamic historical methodology.¹⁵ The scholars of Christian or Jewish origin,¹⁶

¹² Rosenthal, *Historiography*, 18-19, and Joseph H. Dahmus, *Seven Medieval Historians*, (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1982), 86.

¹³ For details on the features of pre-Islamic historiography see Faruqi, *Muslim Historiography*, 37-44; Ilse Lichtenstadter, "Arabic and Islamic Historiography," *The Muslim World*, 35 (1945), 126-128; Somogyi, "Arabic Historiography," 374, and Hamida Murtaza, "The Origin of the Muslim Historiography," *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, 16 (1968), 198.

¹⁴ Rosenthal, *Historiography*, 20-21; Dahmus, *Medieval Historians*, 87; Abd al-Aziz al-Duri, "The Iraq School of History to the Ninth Century - A Sketch." In *Historians of the Middle East*, eds., Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 46, and Qureshi, "Historiography," 1197.

¹⁵ Faruqi, *Muslim Historiography*, 84-87; Rosenthal, *Historiography* 77-79.

¹⁶ See Rosenthal, *The Influence*, 35-45.

whom had influenced Islamic historical methodology were Eusebius, Wahb b. Munabbih, 'Abīd b. Sharya al-Jurhumī, Muḥammad b. Ka'b al-Qurazī and others,¹⁷ have indeed made Greek and Roman historical sources available to the early Muslim historians. There was a great possibility that converts to Islām from Syria had also contributed some techniques of writing history as for example genealogies, yet Muslims could not have derived their historical sense or consciousness neither from Christian scholars of Greek origin nor from biblical tradition.¹⁸

The Persian historical methodology, as Goldziher declared, was inevitable for the formation of Islamic historical methodology. Goldziher argued that several works were translated and written by Persian scholars, which facilitated the formation of Islamic historical methodology. These scholars were 'Abdullah b. al-Muqaffa', Abū 'Ubayda, Muḥammad b. Kalbī and his son Hishām Kalbī.¹⁹

Islām, fore mostly, projects the universal worldview hence, does not approve any fundamental influences from other traditions, ideologies and philosophies. As a result, Muslims adopted or fully understood the Islamic worldview as their very basic sources of intellectual, spiritual and material needs. An emphasis on the importance of knowledge led to the practical implementation of the Islāmic worldview, which was the fundamental requirement for the expansion of Islām. Furthermore, Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him), as well as his Companions (may Allah's Grace be with them), from the beginning of their mission, were considered as models and later great men among the caliphs and scholars.²⁰

¹⁷ See details about these historians in Faruqi, *Muslim Historiography*, 84-87, and Rosenthal, *Historiography*, 77-79.

¹⁸ See detailed discussion on the subject in Qureshi, "Historiography," 1197.

¹⁹ For a short summary on Goldziher's view on the subject see Somogyi, "Arabic Historiography," 373-374.

²⁰ Rosenthal, *Historiography*, 101; 'Abd al-Laṭīf Sharārah, *al-Fikr al-Tārīkhī fī al-Islām*, (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1983), 59-68, and Anwar Ameen al-Mudamgha, *Ibn Khaldun's Socio-Historical Theory: A Study in the History of Ideas*, (Ph.D. Diss., University of Syracuse, 1971), 34-36.

Thus, the knowledge and virtues of the Prophet, Companions, caliphs and great scholars had instigated the writing of the first genealogies, biographies, and *ṭabaqāt*. Watt on the other hand still insists that the writing of *maghāzī*, for instance, was motivated by tribal pride, which shows a ground for doubting the truth of the main events of *maghāzī*.²¹

It can be declared that the fundamental principles of Islamic historical methodology are to be traced from the Qur'ān, the roles of the Prophet, the caliphs and scholars. In fact, the need to understand and interpret the Message of Islām had stimulated an interest of early Muslim scholars in historiography.²² These two sources dominated the formation of *ḥadīth* writing, genealogy, biography, *maghāzī*, and *ṭabaqāt*.²³ Then, when the religion of Islām expanded into new regions with people of diverse cultures and traditions, the need to write universal histories became clearly perceptible.

Islamic historical methodology has, therefore, developed due to the influence in terms of certain techniques used from other traditions, but the idea of Islamic historical methodology in itself is original. An exposition of Ṭabari's Islamic historical methodology, consequently, would meaningfully prove its originality.

Ṭabari's Annalistic Chain Historical Methodology

The annalistic-chain historical methodology, according to Rosenthal, originated in the works of Ḥalīfah b. Ḥayyāt (d. 240/854), Ya'qūb b. Sufyān (d. 277/891), and Ibn Abī Ḥaythamah.²⁴ He further asserted that "the idea of annalistic arrangement came to early Muslim historians through contact with learned Christians or

²¹ See Montgomery Watt, "The Materials Used by Ibn Ishāq," in *Historians of the Middle East*, eds., Bernard Lewis & P. M. Holt (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 27-28.

²² Iqbal, *Culture of Islam*, 145.

²³ Muhammad al-Da'mi, *Major Trends*, 262.

²⁴ See Rosenthal, *Historiography*, 71-73; Zahīlī, *Imām al-Ṭabari*, 231-232.

Christian converts to Islām.”²⁵ Another historian suggested that the Assyrians, Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans have used the annalistic method.²⁶ Rosenthal on the other hand, had also asserted that “this form of historical presentation [annalistic historical methodology] was fully developed in the time of the great Ṭabarī.”²⁷ This means that some features in the early Christian and pre-Islamic historical writings may be part of annalistic-chain historical methodology, but they do not indicate any influence vividly.

The annalistic-chain historical methodology developed from *akhbāri* (monographic) presentation of historical events. When the monographic presentation was no longer suitable, Ṭabarī undertook the great task of writing universal history using the annalistic chain historical methodology, marking “a turning-point between the old style of historiography and the new historiography.”²⁸ However, since the pre-Islamic period could not be arranged in an annalistic chain form, Ṭabarī used the method of chronicles which was used by the historians prior to him.

With Regards to these two methodological approaches one may assert that the annalistic-chain historical method, with its unique Islamic components, was an original contribution of Ṭabarī since it surpassed the work of every predecessor of him.²⁹ Besides, his historical method characterized unique Islamic components illustrated in the following words:

The Muslim historians were not contented with even the name of the highest-most narrator, the person who saw and witnessed the facts, but also how this report was transmitted from generation to generation, on the part of trust-

²⁵ Rosenthal, *Historiography*, 71.

²⁶ ‘Ali, *Mawārid*, 1: 173 and 184; Zahīlī, *Imām al-Ṭabarī*, 231, and Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 81.

²⁷ Zahīlī, *Imām al-Ṭabarī*, 71.

²⁸ Claude Cahen, “History and Historians: From the Beginning to the Time of al-Ṭabarī,” in *Religion, Learning and Science in the Abbasid Period*, ed., M. J. L. Young (Cambridge: University Press, 1990), 199.

worthy narrators, to reach, without least interruption, to our historian. Even religious books of other peoples do not equal in this respect to lay books of general history produced by Muslims.³⁰

The annalistic-chain historical methodology was dominated by the successions of the individual years under headings such as, "in the year" or "then there came the year."³¹ Therefore, the events were arranged in accordance to years in which they happened and if events covered several years, they were treated as if they occurred each year.³² To differentiate his historical methodology and the *ḥadīth* methodology, Ṭabarī had used several modes of presentation of historical events.³³ The first mode of presentation of historical event resembles *ḥadīth* presentation. The second mode of presentation was not in the form of chain narration, but was taken from books or statements permitted by the author. This was the method Ṭabarī used in presenting Persian history on the authority of Hishām b. al-Kalbī, either from his books or narrations. The third mode of presentation was in a general form. This method was mostly used in the last part of his book on the Abbasids. The fourth mode of presentation Ṭabarī was referred to a particular book written by a certain author. The final mode of presentation was in a form of narrating several different narrations of a single historical event, as well as Ṭabarī's preference for one narration depending on its sound.³⁴

Ṭabarī was highly praised for his sincere, accurate and well-developed historical methodology. His historical methodology was precisely defined in the introduction of his work where he clearly

²⁹ Gabrieli, *Arabic Historiography*, 85, and Dahmus, *Medieval Historians*, 89.

³⁰ Muhammad Hamidullah, "Birth Pagans of Islamic History," *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, 33 (1985), 242-243.

³¹ Rosenthal, *Historiography*, 71.

³² 'Ali, *Mawārid*, 1: 173.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1: 157-157 and 168.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1: 164-168.

stated the chronological and annalistic-chain historical methodologies.³⁵ It has been argued that chronological methodology in the work of Tabarī could have been taken from the Bible and it made way for anecdotes, *isrā'iliyyāt* (the Biblical and Near-Eastern antiquities), legends, and stories to his work.³⁶ His annalistic-chain historical methodology marked the new beginning of Islāmic historiography. It was an original contribution to this field in view of the fact that he introduced a unique historical methodology comprising biographical, genealogical, poetical and philological historical techniques, which set apart his annalistic-chain historical methodology and earlier annalistic methodologies.

As Islām is a universal message to mankind, Ṭabarī had therefore considered history as universal, too. His Universal History has endured in its original form as a gate to antiquity, ancient historians, their works, and their methodologies. In addition, he had made comprehensive and objective periodization of history.³⁷ Apparently, the work of Ṭabarī as world history was among the first world histories and Hamidullah was probably referring to him when he declared "the first universal history originated from Muslim scholars."³⁸

³⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr, *Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī: Tārīkh al-Uman wa-l-Mulūk*, 6 vols., (Beirut: Dār al-Maktabah al-'Ilmiyyah, 1988), 1: 13.

³⁶ Rosenthal, *Historiography*, 135; 'Alī, *Mawārid*, 1: 173, 183 and 187; Zahilī, *Imām al-Ṭabarī*, 230; and 'Āṣī, *Ṭabarī wa-Kitābuhu*, 111.

³⁷ The need for revival of present periodization of history was originally and consistently stressed by al-Attas. In addition, Blankinship in his works also has addressed the idea of periodization of history. See al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978), 95-99; Wan Mohd. Nor Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization*, (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1998), 18; Khalid Yahya Blankinship, "The Need for an Islamic Theory and Methodology of History," *Journal of Objective Studies*, 1 (1989), 58-64, and idem, "Islam and World History: Towards a New Periodization," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 8 (1991), 423-452.

³⁸ Hamidullah, *Islamic History*, 230-231.

The work of Ṭabarī was written in an academic manner without any confusing supernatural and physical causes in history. However, in several places he generally assumed that God punished dynasties or kings whom were sinful. In his introduction, Ṭabarī describes the purpose of creation *vis-à-vis* the misery of those who do not manage to grasp and fulfil the purpose of creation – the reason for living. Those who submit to God and follow the right path will truly enjoy both the worldly life and the hereafter.³⁹

On the subject of interpretation of historical events, many historians had criticised Ṭabarī. However, he was of an opinion that it is not possible to deduce past historical events neither through reason, logic, nor analogy,⁴⁰ probably due to the inaccuracy and possible subjectivity in presenting historical events. He was not against interpretation of history as far as it complied with the historical methodology and the techniques of presenting history.

His annalistic-chain historical methodology also leaves room for criticism concerning the endless different narrations, which sometimes disrupt the reader's attention from the real issue discussed. Nevertheless, it has positive aspects too; for example, the readers can reflect upon several different narrations and deduces certain conclusions themselves.⁴¹ Concerning his sources, Ṭabarī had left great confusion for the readers to determine the exact source of the event. Sometimes he referred to a book, an oral narration, or a general narration from several narrators without including their names.⁴²

³⁹ See al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1: 12-13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ 'Alī, *Mawārid*, 1: 167; Zahīlī, *Imām al-Ṭabarī*, 232, al-Mudamgha, *Ibn Khaldūn*, 80.

⁴² Rosenthal, *Historiography*, 135; 'Āṣī, *Ṭabarī wa Kitābuhu*, 109; and Zahīlī, *Imām al-Ṭabarī*, 242-243.

Although he has limited himself in the introduction to presenting the history of kings and prophets,⁴³ the work suffers a great gap because of omissions of religious, political, cultural and socio-economic aspects of history. His treatment of pre-Islamic history, albeit an introduction, is very brief. However, most probably due to lack of sources and problems in narrating pre-Islamic history, he was somehow prevented from covering it more profoundly.⁴⁴

Philosophy of History of Ṭabarī

Although Ṭabarī had not directly expressed his philosophy of history, he managed to imply the annalistic-chain self-explanatory and deductive interpretation of history. His philosophy of history was closely related to the historical methodology, and he considered precise historical methodology as a pre-requisite for self-explanatory and deductive interpretation of history.

In order to expose Ṭabarī's philosophy of history one has to start with an exact historical methodology as a pre-requisite for self-explanatory and deductive interpretation of history. According to Ṭabarī, one of the major principles of historical methodology was the concept of chain transmission. He was aware with of the difficulties of tracing back the chain transmission when dealing with ancient history; nevertheless, the concept of chain transmission still play an important role to his understanding in presenting and interpreting historical phenomena. The chain transmission represented, according to the application in his work, the means of arriving at the highest probability of accuracy. In fact, accuracy in presenting the historical event for Ṭabarī was as it was⁴⁵ by not

⁴³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1: 12-13.

⁴⁴ Dahmus, *Medieval Historians*, 90-91; 'Ali, *Mawārid*, 1: 169-170, and Zahīlī, *Imām al-Ṭabarī*, 239-240.

⁴⁵ See for instance the same idea of disciple of Hegel, which was re-introduced in the 19th century by Leopold von Ranke one of the leading German historians in, Stuart Hughes, *History as Art and Science*, (Chicago & London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), 7; William Dray, *Philosophy of History: A Study in the Philosophical Foundation of the Science of Culture*,

utilizing rational, philosophical, analogical or other means for its determination.

In line with the concept of chain transmission, it is interesting to point out the relationship between the word *ta'rikh* and annalistic-chain presentation, and the interpretation of historical event. Although Rosenthal denies any correlation involving the word *ta'rikh*, annalistic-chain presentation,⁴⁶ and interpretation of history, the conception of Islamic historiography, principally as seen in the case of Ṭabarī, was identical with the word *ta'rikh*.⁴⁷ The definitions of *ta'rikh* - not etymological meaning of the term - from the early Muslim historians⁴⁸ necessarily confirm the identical relations between *ta'rikh* and the annalistic-chain presentation alongside the interpretation of historical events. Ṭabarī, for instance, had illustrated it in the following words:

For no knowledge of the history of men of the past and of recent men and events is attainable by those who were not able to observe them and did not live in their time, except through information and transmission provided by informants and transmitters. This knowledge can not be brought out by reason or produced by internal thought process...⁴⁹

The above statement, as well as definitions given by the majority of Muslim historians, had deliberately demonstrated the main aim of historiography as a precise codification and chain transmission of knowledge. Therefore, knowledge is possible if it has been precisely transmitted and, as such, history, in its broad sense, is part of the theory of knowledge because only through a precisely chain-transmitted history it will appear possible to reach the differ-

2d ed., (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993), 34, and Robert Canary & Henry Kozicki, eds., *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 3-4.

⁴⁶ Rosenthal, *Historiography*, 72.

⁴⁷ See Qureshi, "Historiography," 1212.

⁴⁸ See Rosenthal, *Historiography*, 15-16.

⁴⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, 1: 170-171.

ent levels of knowledge.⁵⁰ Some of these reasons influenced al-Attas, who holds among the channels of knowing is true report (*al-khabar al-ṣādiq*),⁵¹ to declare history as *fard al-'ayn* at the First World Conference on Islamic Education held in Mecca in 1977.⁵²

No doubt, Islām is against the corruption of knowledge, and its very fundamentals and principles promote accuracy shown in the Qur'ān, tradition, jurisprudence, theology, and the social and natural sciences. As-Siddiqi declared, "the Qur'ān and the Prophet of Islām replaced the old traditional method of the pursuit of knowledge by the new method of the study of facts."⁵³ Therefore, the precise methodological preservation of Islamic thought brings harmony and the possibility to trace back its preserved roots in order to establish an Islamic worldview. It is significant to point out the concept of *shajarah* as originally exposed by one of the contemporary Muslim thinkers, al-Attas, who holds that history is like a tree having roots, which consequently leads back to the truth.⁵⁴ Through the meticulous preservation of the Islamic heritage by means of original and clear methodology, including historical methodology, Islām has not undergone change like many other ideologies.⁵⁵

Another principle of Ṭabarī closely related to both historical methodology and interpretation of history was the presentation and interpretation of history as it was. While some historians spent considerable amount of time to establish the correct meaning of an event,⁵⁶ Ṭabarī was more concerned about how the event was nar-

⁵⁰ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Religion of Islam*, Lecture delivered at ISTAC, Saturday Night Seminar, 5 May 2001, Kuala Lumpur.

⁵¹ Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy*, 115 and 117.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 255.

⁵³ Zubeir Siddiqi, "Islamic Studies: Their Significance and Importance" in *Islamic Culture*, 23 (1961), 217.

⁵⁴ Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy*, 288.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁶ See Canary, *The Writing of History*, 7.

rated without discussing much of its content. The question is, is it necessary for a historian to discuss an-already-narrated-events and give his own value judgement? Tabari's annalistic-chain self-explanatory and deductive interpretation of history can answer essential questions such as What? Where? When? Who?⁵⁷ Therefore, Tabari's historical methodology was based on an annalistic-chain presentation of history, which in turn was a prerequisite for self-explanatory and deductive interpretation of history.

Tabari's annalistic-chain self-explanatory and deductive interpretation of history has brought the field of historiography closer to the field of science. He insisted on collecting the facts by applying source criticism. Then, the factually narrated events become either self-explanatory or are subjected to deduction of the historical truth either by the author or by the reader. Yet, the priority in determining the historical truth is based on the chain transmission of the historical event rather than on the event itself because it is hardly possible, as Tabari said, to deduce past historical events by reason.

Tabari defined history as a science not as an art as some modern historians proclaimed.⁵⁸ Probably 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."⁵⁹ 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."⁶⁰

Tabari's historical methodology, furthermore, had prevented a

⁵⁷ Allan Lichtman & Valerie French, *Historians and the Living Past*, (Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 1986), 20.

⁵⁸ See March Benjamin Leopold Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, (Manchester: University Press, 1992), 22-23.

⁵⁹ Siddiqi, *Islamic Studies*, 219.

⁶⁰ Muhammad Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, (Lahore: Javid Iqbal, 1965), 140.

historical speculation, and it is most likely that he would be against Carl Becker who says, "every man was his own historian."⁶¹ Al-Attas called this type of thinking Sophism, which resulted in great cynicism, relativism, and moral uncertainty.⁶² Such historical relativism may leave room for use and abuse of history.

Ṭabarī interrelated both historical methodology reflected in the annalistic chain presentation of events, and self-explanatory and deductive interpretation of history. This unique historical approach provided a greater possibility of genuine presentation and interpretation of history. If the chain transmission of an event is reliable, then, it necessarily follows that the event itself is correct, self-explanatory or deductive. However, rational analysis was omitted by Ṭabarī most probably due to the possible distortion of the chain transmission and incorrect interpretation of events. In this regard, Ṭabarī was correct in view of the fact that it is necessary to make a clear distinction between accurately narrated events and the historian's commentary or value judgement. In the case of value judgement on the historical event, one could ask, "how are we to assess whether one historian's judgement is better than that of another?"⁶³

Taking into account Ṭabarī's presentation and interpretation of history it is interesting to point out the argument that positivists of the nineteenth century were the first to introduce source criticism variously named as historical-critical, philological-critical, and scientific methods in determining historical truth.⁶⁴ In addition, it has

⁶¹ Hughes, *History*, 14.

⁶² See Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy*, 84-88; Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam*, (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995), 81-89, *idem*, *The Correct Date of the Terengganu Inscription*, 2nd ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Museum Department, 1984), 7, and *idem*, *Islam and Secularism*, 22-23.

⁶³ Hughes, *History*, 13.

⁶⁴ See Harry Ritter, *Dictionary of Concepts in History*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 268.

been said that they were the first whose tasks was "creating a science of historical study."⁶⁵ However, Ṭabarī had originally, concisely, and practically stressed upon all these aspects in his work and yet his contribution has not been acknowledged.

In spite of the reasonable significance of the annalistic-chain self-explanatory and deductive interpretation of history, Ṭabarī has been accused of being a "static historian" and "transmitter"⁶⁶ particularly due to his rejection of the rational interpretation of historical events. Those who categorize Ṭabarī as a static historian and transmitter are correct to some extent. However, they have to take into consideration his annalistic-chain self-explanatory and deductive interpretation of history. In this context, Dray is unequivocally correct to declare that, "it has been held that narratives can themselves be explanatory in a special way; or that narrative is *per se* a form of explanation, if not indeed self-explanatory."⁶⁷

The annalistic-chain self-explanatory and deductive interpretation of history does not present to the reader the philosophical side of history i.e., its aim, its purpose, its meaning, internal criticism, and historical causes. Nevertheless, it is left to the reader to deduce it himself. In simple terms Ṭabarī was not Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1405) who declared that history "involves speculation and an attempt to get at the truth, subtle explanation of the causes and the origins of existing things, and the deep knowledge of how and why of events."⁶⁸ In this matter Ṭabarī had also greatly differed from

⁶⁵ Hughes, *History*, 14; Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century from Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, (Hanover & London: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 51, and Canary, *The Writing of History*, 7.

⁶⁶ See al-Mudamgha, "Ibn Khaldūn," 65-89, and Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 73-81.

⁶⁷ William Dray, *On History and Philosophers of History*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), 111.

⁶⁸ Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, 3 vols., Bollingen Series, XLIII, (New York: Princeton University Press, 1958), 6.

Collingwood who holds that "the object to be discovered is not the mere event, but the thought expressed in it. To discover that thought is already to understand it."⁶⁹ Therefore, to some extent Ṭabarī neglected the internal meaning of history, clarification, explanation, and the cohesion of historical events, as he supremely considered it as a separate field of study. He would most probably be in agreement with Ranke that further explanation is the subject of the social sciences while the historian has to provide the raw material for them.⁷⁰

Ṭabarī's priority of transmitted information over reasonable information is another disputable approach particularly if one deals with legends, anecdotes, and metaphysical issues. There is no doubt that under these circumstances the historian has to apply intellect, in a classical sense, as well as chain transmission to determine the validity of historical truth.

Then, as al-Attas argues, it does not mean that all historical facts would necessarily promote a meaningful understanding of history. Thus, again it implies that facts may not be self-explanatory and deductive. In this context, it is noteworthy to stress the tawhidic historical method propagated by al-Attas, which could be further utilized to determine the philosophy of Islamic history practically proved in his historical studies.⁷¹

Conclusion

Ṭabarī's chronological methodology for pre-Islamic history resembled that of his predecessors but his annalistic-chain historical methodology was his original contribution to the field of historiography. The main features of his annalistic-chain historical

⁶⁹ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1946), 214.

⁷⁰ Dray, *Philosophy of History*, 9.

⁷¹ See al-Attas, *Terengganu Inscription*, 1-24, and Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy*, 268-269, 271, 275-276 and 385.

methodology involved historical criticism, observance of the chain and application of annalistic form. The historical methodology of Tabari was relevant and it is close to the field of science since it is sound and does not leave room for speculations and historical relativism.

Tabari, as a philosopher of history, implied annalistic-chain self-explanatory and deductive interpretation of history which is based on scientific foundations. The precise historical methodology was a pre-requisite of self-explanatory and deductive interpretation of history. Then, his historical approach clearly draws a line between historical events, which can be self-explanatory or deductive, and rational speculations.