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***An Analysis of Imam Abu Ja'afar Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari's
historical Works on Tafsir and History***

ABSTRACT

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 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 branches 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, Historical Works.

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Introduction

Muhammad was the custodian of divine message who received revelation and who was assigned to interpret same to the understanding of his followers. The companions, in spite of the fact that the revelation was made in their language (Arabic) relied on the Prophet whom Allah assigned to explain to the people what was revealed to them. Allah says:

وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الذِّكْرَ لِتُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ إِلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

And we have sent down onto you the message; that you may explain clearly to men what is sent to them and you may give thought¹.

The companions had the privilege of referring necessary cases of interpretation of the Qur'anic verses to the Prophet since he was alive. Yet they made their own contributions to the development of *tafsir* literature particularly after the Prophet's death. Muslim scholars from time to time experienced the need to immortalize *tafsir* in order to make the Qur'an relevant to the Muslims at all ages.

Among the later generations after Tabi,un was Abu Ja'far Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari. He was a notable scholar of *tafsir* who contributed a lot to *tafsir* literature. He used a unique method in his *tafsir* showing his intellectual endowment as an expert in the field, and making his *tafsir* book a unique one.

This paper therefore, intends to examine the biography and works of Abu Ja'far Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari in various fields of knowledge in Islam.

His Biography

Muhammad bin Jarir bin Kathir bin Ghalid Abu Ja'far al-Tabari was born in the year 225 A.H/ 838 CE at Amol in Tabaristan. This place of birth is a mountainous district of Persia situated alongside the Caspian Sea². He was very handsome and eloquent. Al-Tabari lived for eighty-five years as he died in the year 320A.H/ 923CE and was buried in Baghdad. Even though his death was not widely announced, a very large crowd attended the funeral formalities. Requiem prayers were repeatedly observed by different people days and nights on his grave, for several months. He was passionately mourned by intellectuals and pious people³.

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, lexicography, grammar, ethics, mathematics, and medicine⁴."

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

¹ Qur'an, 16: 44.

² Y. Rumi; *Mu'jam al-Udaba*; Maktabah al-Qira'ah Wa al-thaqafah, Cairo; n.d, vol. 18, p. 40.

³ J. Ahmad; *Hundred Great Muslims*; Farozson Ltd Laore, 1977, P. 574.

⁴ <https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/5758214>

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 AbiShawarib, 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 seven⁵. Yaqut Rumi reported Al-Tabari as having confirmed by him, to have learnt how to read the Qur'an from Sulaiman bin Abdul Rahman 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 history⁶. People used to learn tafsir from Al-Tabari's dictations.

After receiving his early education in the religious sciences at Amol he continued his studies in Rayy and Baghdad, which he reached about the year 855. Not later than 857 he visited Basra, Wasit, and Kufa to hear the famous scholars there. After his return to Baghdad he studied religious law according to the doctrine of al-Shafi', which he followed for some time before establishing his own doctrine.

His teachers were sorry to see him go. He had been a brilliant student during his entire academic career. Ar-Razi offered him a job of an assistant teacher in order to persuade him to stay at Rayy, but at-Tabari wanted to study hadith under the guidance of Imam Ahmed bin Hanbal in Baghdad, who was an authority on hadith and Tafsir. With this thought in his mind, he set out for Baghdad with one of the caravans that traveled from China along the Khurasan road⁷.

At-Tabari was one of the rare scholars who studied without the help of a patron to finance his studies. He did not depend on others to help him out during the course of his studies. He studied and lived on what he earned and spent it on traveling and studying. He accepted only those gifts from his friends, which he was able to match and throughout his life, he was proud of this fact.

It is said that at-Tabari once refused a gift of 10,000 dirhams from a minister in the King's court. He returned the gift with a letter of thanks. The servant returned with the gift with a message from the minister saying that if he did not want it for himself; he could give it to the poor. At-Tabari refused to accept it and replied that the minister should know the poor people in the land better than he did⁸. He wished that the minister distributed the money himself. He did not want anybody to say that he accepted money from a minister even to distribute it to the poor. It is also said that one day some of his students presented him with a carpet. He accepted the carpet from the student but insisted on paying its cost.

His Personal Characteristics

He is described as having a dark complexion, large eyes and a long beard. He was tall and slender and his hair and beard remained black until he was very old⁹. He was attentive to his health, avoiding red meat, fats and other foods he deemed unhealthy. He was seldom sick before his last decade when he suffered

⁵ Ibid, P. 574

⁶ Ibid, P. 574

⁷ Ibid, 574.

⁸ Ibid, 574.

⁹ F. Rosenthal, trans., *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, State University of New York Press, 1989, Volume 1, P. 40.

from bouts of pleurisy. When he was ill, he treated himself (to the approval of physicians). He had a sense of humour, though serious subjects he treated seriously¹⁰. He had studied poetry when young and enjoyed writing, reciting and participating in poetic exchanges. He knew Persian and was acquainted with the origins of various foreign loan words in Arabic from a number of other languages.

The Scholar

Baghdad in those days was one of the largest cities in the world with a population of two and a half million people. It was also the center for trade and business. People from all occupations converged on the city to earn their livelihood. It had hospitals, mosques, and public baths. One of the first places visited by him was the academy¹¹. The director was a kind man who showed at-Tabari around the entire campus and graciously allowed him the use of the library whenever he wished. At-Tabari was also able to talk to other scholars who studied there. He discussed with them their fields of study and got firsthand knowledge of the progress of education. He spent several years in the city studying hadith, fiqh, and tafsir with the religious scholars who worked there. At the age of 30, he had become a famous scholar in his own right and except for two short trips to Tabaristan, he spent his entire life in the city of Baghdad¹².

The Popular Teacher

At-Tabari soon became popular as a teacher in Baghdad. Students from distant lands traveled to Baghdad to study under him. He gave lectures and encouraged them towards research work. He advised them to gain knowledge of medicine and mathematics also. He followed a daily program of lecturing and writing¹³. He would start writing from noon until it was time for the afternoon prayers. After that, he lectured his students on tafsir until the Maghrib prayers. After Maghrib prayers, he would lecture them on law. He would retire to his room for the night and spent a good deal of it writing on different subjects. He wrote at an average of forty pages a day¹⁴.

He was very kind to his students and helped them during their studies. He would share meals with them. He advised them to develop the body along with their mind. On his part, he would always be clean and well dressed and won the respect of all with his good behavior.

His Works

Ibn Jarir al-Tabari was an authority in some fields of study, prominent among which are Qur'anic sciences, Hadith, History and jurisprudence. He knew biographies of some personalities and wrote a popular book of history of nations and emperors. Being a prolific writer in a number of disciplines, Al-Tabari was proved beyond doubt by some of his disciples by calculating the leaves he used to write everyday throughout his life time as forty each, for eighty-five years¹⁵. Based on our finding forty leaves he wrote is eighty pages, for he wrote both front and back of the leaves. The areas he covered in his writing include Fiqh,

¹⁰ Ibid, P. 46.

¹¹ <https://kitaabun.com/shopping3/jafar-muhammad>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ F. Sizgin, *The History of Arabic Writings*. Endeavored by Khan-e Kitab, The Organization of Printing and Publishing, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. 2001; Vol 3: PP. 434, 436.

¹⁴ Ibid, PP. 434-436.

¹⁵ Y. Rumi; *Mu'jam al-Udaba*; p. 61.

Hadith, Tafsir, Nahw Luqah and 'Arud among others. He is said to have exceeded other writers in those fields. Also in recitation he wrote a book of eighteen volumes. Below is the list of some of his major works:

1. Jami'u-l-Bayan 'an Ta'wil ayi'l-Qur'an
2. Kitabul-Taqwah
3. Kitabul-'l-Qira'ah
4. Tarikhur-Rusul wal-Muluk
5. Kitab Maratib al-ulama
6. Kitab Adab al-Qudat
7. Kitab Adabin Nufus al-Jayyidah
8. Kitabur-Risalah
9. Kitab al-Musnad al-Mujarrad
10. Al-Basir fi ma'alimid-deen¹⁶

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.

His Books on Tafsir

Al-Nawawi said: „A book of tafsir like that of Ibn Jarir has never been presented“. According to Al-sayuti:

The book gains its distinction to certain level due to the fact that the writer paid attention to various submissions of the contributors of a verse or verses. After that, he would choose the best and take it. The books of tafsir before his own were not in this form¹⁷.

This book of tafsir is of thirty volumes excluding extra index at Cairo 1902. The author at the end of each volume guides the reader through special table of contents which he tags as Fihris. He used this as a tool to guide his readers to the specific areas he touches, having found such, relevant to the verses being interpreted. Such tables include:

1. Table of verses used to interpret other verses. Technically, using a verse to interpret another verse is referred to as al-Qur'an bil-Qur'an, a kind of interpretation in which one part of the Qur'an is used to explain another. This type is regarded as the highest form of tafsir bil-Mathur (Traditional tafsir). He would mention the verse in the Fihris and tell the reader the actual page such verse(s) can be found in his book of tafsir.
2. Table of Lugah (vocabularies): The author terms this as Mu'ajim al-Lugah (vocabularies concordance).
3. Table of notable personalities ('Alam al-Mutarjimin): In this table he arranges those personalities alphabetically, on the list, mentioning the page where each one can be found. Sometimes he mentions the areas of contribution they make in his tafsir book.
4. Table of science of subjects (Mustalahat): Al-Tabari uses this table to guide the readers to various sciences of subjects like Hadith and Fiqh among others. He equally gives the number of pages to guide the readers¹⁸.
5. Table of Sects: (Firaq): This table guides to the pages of the book where theological arguments exist, most especially, views of Mu'tazilah in some theological arguments.
6. Search into language structure (Mabahith al-Lugah): This aspect of the book has to do with language structure and formation of words through letters when they are put together¹⁹.

¹⁶ Ibid, P. 61.

¹⁷ M. H. Al-Dhahabi; Al-Tafsir Wal-Mufasssirun; vol. 1, nd. P. 208.

¹⁸ Ibid, P. 208.

¹⁹ Y. Rumi; Mu'jam al-Udaba, OP Cit, P. 42.

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 ²⁰.

Tabari defined history as a science not as an art as some modern historians proclaimed ²¹. 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 ²²". "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."²³

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. ²⁴

He spent the next 12 years writing his 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. Much of the material would have been lost if at-Tabari had not bothered to include it in his work on the History of Islam ²⁵.

His encyclopedia, "Annals of the Apostles and Kings", chronicled the History of Islam year by year; an attempt to categorize history from creation till the year 915 A.C. By the time he had finished his work, he had gathered all the historical traditions of the Arabs in his voluminous work. The Muslim world was not slow in showing its appreciation, and this work became more famous than his Commentary of the Glorious Qur'an, for there was no other works like that in existence at that time ²⁶.

Imam al-Tabari Historical Works

The collecting of forty volumes of the History works by Imam al-Ṭabarī compiled and completed in 1999 by a distinguished group of Arabists and historians of Islam, the annotated translation of The History of al-Ṭabarī is arguably the most celebrated chronicle produced in the Islamic lands on the history of the world and the early centuries of Islam ²⁷. 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 ²⁸.

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²⁰ J. Ahmad; Hundred Great Muslims; Farozson Ltd Laore, OP. Cit, 1977, P. 576.

²¹ M. Benjamin Leopold Bloch, The Historian's Craft, (Manchester: University Press, 1992, PP.22-23.

²² Ibid, P. 24.

²³ M. Iqbal, Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, (Lahore: Javid Iqbal, 1965, P. 140.

²⁴ Ibid, P. 576.

²⁵ Ibid, P. 576.

²⁶ Ibid, 576.

²⁷ <https://sunniconnect.com-history-al-tabari>

²⁸ <https://sunniconnect.com-history-al-tabari>

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CONCLUSION

The paper discusses many issues pertaining the biography of Abu Ja'afar Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari from his childhood, his education where he received his education at Ray in Baghdad, he learnt the Qur'an by heart at the age of seven and he had studied poetry since when he is young and enjoyed writing, reciting and participating in poetic exchanges, his personal characteristics and his scholar ship. Also, the paper discusses about his books on

²⁹ <https://sunniconnect.com-history-al-tabari>

³⁰ <https://sunniconnect.com-history-al-tabari>

³¹ <https://sunniconnect.com-history-al-tabari>

Qur’anic commentary and his voluminous books on history where he wrote about forty volumes on various aspect in Islamic Studies.