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Department of Jewish, Islamic, and Near
Eastern Languages and Cultures

Reading Polemic as Confessional:
ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's Critique of Christianity
by
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Acknowledgments

This project has taught me just as much about myself as it has about 'Alī al-Ṭabarī, medieval Islam, interconfessional interactions, or any other scholarly discourse. Clarifying one's thoughts takes a long while, especially for those of us whose thoughts are so woefully incomplete and whose thoughtscapes are so tempestuous as my own. Bearing that in mind, I'm grateful for the patience I've been shown by those around me while writing this essay.

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Jake Kildoo

Washington University in St. Louis

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To my brother and closest friend, Noah.

The kind of artist I most admire, "modest in his needs:

he really wants only two things, his bread and his art."

~Nietzsche

Preface

In the present study, I aim to give both an analysis and an interpretation of the two polemical works of ʿAlī ibn Rabban Sahl al-Ṭabarī (c.780 – c.860 CE). These texts, titled *al-Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā* (The Refutation of the Christians) and *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla* (The Book of Religion and Empire), come down to us among the earliest examples in a bourgeoning tradition of ʿAbbāsid anti-Christian polemic. These books' author—a brilliant, albeit obscure figure—grew up in a Nestorian (East Syrian) Christian household in Ṭabaristān and was educated in medicine, philosophy, and other subjects from an early age. After several years of clerical service to the governor of Ṭabaristān, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī was hired as a court physician under the caliph al-Muʿtasim (r. 833 – 842 CE) and remained in this position through the time of al-Mutawakkil (r. 847 – 861 CE). Under this latter caliph, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī reportedly gained much favor, being named table-companion (*nadīm*) to the caliph. Late in his life, he converted to Islam, and then composed the present two religious works. Framing his texts as an exhortation written to his former Christian community, the author not only refutes Christian doctrines, but also justifies his conversion to Islam. In the *Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā*, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī refutes Christian doctrines on the basis that they are neither logical, nor scripturally grounded. In the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, he demonstrates that, in reality, the Bible testifies to the prophethood of Muhammad and the ascendancy of Islam. In the present project, we shall treat these two texts in tandem, using them as a window into the author's religious conversion.

Both *al-Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā* and *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla* have recently been translated and introduced by David Thomas and Rifaat Ebied in their 2016 book, *The Polemical Woks of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī*. These scholars' work contains both texts, presented in a parallel Arabic-English

fashion. Throughout the foregoing project, I shall rely primarily on this edition of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's texts. The first of these books, *al-Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā*, was discovered in 1934 by Maurice Bouyges, as an incomplete copy. It was first translated in 1959 by I.-A. Khalifé and W. Kutsch,[1] but Thomas notes that this edition has been considered inadequate, as it contains a number of misreadings.[2] To remedy these inadequacies, Thomas and Ebied present a full English translation in the aforementioned work.

When the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla* first became available in English in 1922,[3] thanks to the translation of Alphonse Mingana, scholars quickly jumped to conclusions about the text's authenticity. Father Paul Peeters, two years after the work's publication, expressed his doubts about the text, deeming it a *supercherie littérarie* until its authenticity could be proven decisively. This suspicion stemmed in part from the lack of replies that it attracted, as reflected in the documentary record.[4] Maurice Bouyges similarly declared the work inauthentic, suggesting that Mingana himself had forged it. Admittedly, a handful scholars defended both Mingana's and the text's integrity—nonetheless, Thomas suggests that Bouyges's criticisms

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[1] I.-A. Khalifé S.J. and W. Kutch S.J., "al-Radd ʿalā aṣnāf al-naṣārā." (*Mélanges de l'université Saint Joseph*, 1959), 115-48.

[2] Thomas, David, *The Polemical Woks of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī*. (Leiden: Brill. 2016), 25.

[3] al-Ṭabarī, 'Alī Ibn Rabban Sahl, and Alphonse Mingana. *The Book of Religion and Empire. A semi-official defence and exposition of Islām written by order at the court and with the assistance of the Caliph Mutawakkil ... Translated with a critical apparatus from an apparently unique ms. in the John Rylands Library by A. Mingana*. Pp. xxiv. 174. (University Press: Manchester. 1922).

[4] Camilla Adang suggests that this may be because the work perhaps came to be used as a quarry of biblical passages to which later scholars would refer, as evidenced in the work of Husayn al-Basrī. See Adang, Camilla, "A rare case of biblical 'testimonies' to the prophet Muḥammad in Muʿtazilī literature: Quotations from Ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī's Kitāb al-dīn wa-l-dawla in Abū l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī's Ghurar al-adilla, as preserved in a work by al-Ḥimmaṣī al-Rāzī," in *A Common Rationality: Muʿtazilism in Islam and Judaism*, eds. C. Adang, S. Schmidtke and D. Sklare, 297-330, (Würzburg, 2007). 298-299.

unfortunately drew scholarly attention away from this work, in addition to bestowing upon it an air of suspicion.[5] However, with the recent discovery of a new manuscript of the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*[6] (which corroborates the one Mingana translated) and the efforts of Thomas and Ebied, it is timely that we approach ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's life and work afresh.

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[5] Adang, Camilla, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*, (New York, NY: E.J. Brill. 1996). 27-29.
[6] For a discussion of which, see Thomas, David, *The Polemical Works of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī*, (Leiden: Brill. 2016). 26-29.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Polemic as Self-Reflection

ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's religious texts stand out among their peers because of their author's

unique perspective: late in his life, this figure converted from Nestorian (East Syrian)

Christianity to Islam. This fact forms the starting point for our project. It seems to me that any

responsible reading of this author's polemical texts must constantly be cognizant of this fact. In

any work of polemic, authors seek to draw distinctions between themselves and the group

against which they are writing. Given ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's status as a convert, however, we must

remain sensitive to the fact that his refutations are not written against a distant, faceless Other,

but rather against an older version of himself and his former coreligionists, including perhaps his

own friends and family. As J.Z. Smith has noticed, "the making of difference allows for an

understanding of the construction of internal distinctions as well as external ones."[7] This project

is thorniest (and most urgent) not when the Other is perceived as entirely different, but when

they are seen as *similar*—for it is here that we are forced to situate ourselves most precisely.[8] It

is exactly this sort of project that ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī undertakes in his polemic.

Far from writing a detached heresiology on Christians (if such an undertaking is even

possible), ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's project overtly deals with his own direct experience of religious

difference. After all, this figure has, himself, crossed the very religious boundaries that he

delineates in his writing. His texts offer us the unique opportunity to peek into the mind of a

convert whose polemical writing explicitly draws the sort of internal distinctions referred to by

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[7] Smith, Jonathan Z., "Differential Equations" in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2004). 242.
[8] Ibid., 245.

Smith. Therefore, rather than asking what ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī has to say about Christians or Christianity more broadly, our project aims to ask what he has to say about himself (as a religious person) and his experience of religious conversion.

While, indeed, there are numerous facets to his argumentation, the present study evaluates ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's conversion through the lens of a central theme in his texts: namely his treatment of the Bible. Rather than discounting the Bible as a corrupted version of what was once a true scripture, as some other Muslim polemicists have done, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī suggests criteria by which one might interpret this text and then offers interpretations accordingly. Whereas Christians' attempts at biblical exegesis have produced irrational and inconsistent interpretations, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī argues that there is, in fact, a truer, more rational understanding of this text. His reading of the Bible denies the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity, holding that Jesus was not, in fact, divine, but human. At the same time, he understands the Hebrew Bible as prophesying the coming of the Prophet Muḥammad and the establishment of a Muslim Dynasty. Several authors, including Camilla Adang,[9] Theodore Pulcini,[10] and David Thomas,[11] have noticed and written brilliantly on these theological aspects of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's writing. However, beyond merely situating these facets of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's work in theological discourses, we shall read his use of the Bible as a confessional tool. On this view, we will argue that ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī uses the Bible as a mirror in which to reflect upon and make sense of his religious conversion. Running parallel to his nominal change from "Christian" to "Muslim," we see his understanding of the Bible similarly take on a new character. Not only

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[9] Adang, Camilla, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*, (E.J. Brill: New York. 1996).
[10] Pulcini, Theodore, and Gary Laderman, *Exegesis as Polemical Discourse: Ibn Ḥazm on Jewish and Christian Scriptures*. (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press. 1998).
[11] Thomas, David, *The Polemical Woks of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī*.

does his reevaluation of the Bible reflect the effect of his conversion on his theological outlook, but in so doing, it also makes reference to several features of his social and intellectual context. Therefore, we can also read these texts as ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's commentary on his life experiences (including his conversion), as refracted through the lens of his exegesis.

As we shall demonstrate, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī uses the Bible not only for the purpose of expressing the internal religious changes that he has undergone, but also as a way of commenting on the institutions and discourses through which these changes were mediated. In reality, these two factors are not disconnected, and should consequently be treated in tandem. As Lewis Rambo points out:

> the popular polarization of "religious" (read "institutional") change versus
> "spiritual" ("personal") change is, I believe, belied by the actual experience of
> most people. We are all inherently connected through the sociocultural world,
> and perceived spiritual realities are generally shared, not unique. All conversions
> (even Saul's on the road to Damascus) are mediated through people, institutions,
> communities, and groups.[12]

ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's exegetical project makes reference to numerous important discourses shaping his intellectual context: contemporary thinkers' conceptions of rationality, the discussion of Jewish and Christian falsification (*taḥrīf*) of the Bible, proofs of Muhammad's prophethood (*dalāʾil al-nubuwwa*), apocalyptic expectations, and of course the ascendancy of the ʿAbbāsid Empire. Speaking in the idiom of these various discourses, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's reinterpretation of the Bible seems to reflect the ramifications of his conversion on his perception of his external context. Whereas his Christian-self understood the Bible through the lens of Jesus' divinity, his converted-self has coopted a discourse about "rationality" with which to condemn this view.

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[12] Rambo, Lewis, *Understanding Religious Conversion*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 1993). 1.

Whereas his Christian-self rejected the prophethood of Muhammad, his converted-self sees Muhammad prophesied in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament alike—not only that, but he sees the ʿAbbāsid Empire in particular (!) prophesied in the Hebrew Bible. In this way, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī uses a polemical medium in order to express how his conversion has pushed him to make sense of the world around him. Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that the defining feature of human action is our ability to see narrative intelligibility in our behavior, with reference to the social institutions in which we operate.[13] On our reading of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's texts, his exegetical project endeavors to accomplish exactly this goal.[14]

Therefore, the purpose of this study is twofold. First, we will further illuminate a figure whose life and scholarly work are of obvious interest to scholars of Muslim-Christian relations. Barring the aforementioned treatments by Thomas and Adang, few scholars have devoted

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[13] MacIntyre, Alasdair, "The Intelligibility of Action" in *Rationality, Relativism, and the Human Sciences*, edited by Joseph Margolis, Michael Krausz, and Richard M. Burian, 63-80. (Dordrecht: M. Nijhoff, 1986).

[14] It should be acknowledged here that other readings of these texts are certainly available. For instance, we might wish to claim that ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī had been coerced to convert, and then wrote these texts with the goal of pleasing his superiors and coreligionists. (In fact, numerous 20th century scholars have quibbled over the genuineness of his conversion, debating whether he did so for material gain, for social status, or under compulsion by al-Mutawakkil.) However, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī nowhere admits this. As I see it, to prefer this lens requires that we find compelling reason to construe ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī as a liar. On the other hand, the cohesiveness of the narrative that I hope to tell seems a sufficient reason to accept that it might be true. At the same time, it seems rather moot. Even if my account does not accurately represent our author's thought processes, or the "reality" of his situation, it nonetheless illustrates the ways that contemporary discourses were put to work in the context of exegesis or polemic. Even if ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī had been forced to convert, for example, the present reading of his texts demonstrates how contemporary discussions around rationality, *taḥrīf, dalāʾil al-nubuwwa*, and apocalyptic could be put to work in a polemical context. For a discussion of these 20th century scholars' debate over ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's conversion, see Adang, Camilla, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Ḥazm*, 25. For a detailed defense of the genuineness of his conversion, see Thomas, David *The Polemical Works of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī*, 21-24.

significant attention to this figure, and none (to my knowledge) have used his texts as a case study to investigate the relationship between polemical writing and the experience of religious conversion. Broadly speaking, polemical texts can give us insight into the ways that thinkers construct difference in their contexts, but it is rare that we have the opportunity to investigate such an intimate case of constructing difference. Second, this study draws our attention to an important methodological point—when it comes to reading theological texts, we must remember that these authors are not disconnected from their contexts. Their life experiences, the institutions in which they participated, the discourses surrounding them: all of these factors both influence and are influenced by these thinkers' philosophical and theological positions. Therefore, to demonstrate how a thinker's theological texts reflect these various factors means to connect them to the world of which they were a part.

In pursuing our analysis, we shall begin by reconstructing ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's life, to the best of our knowledge. This will furnish the narrative context inside of which these two religious texts were written. From here, we shall move on to a close analysis of his two texts. We will talk first about his *Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā*, as this work came first chronologically. Since the content of the *Radd* intersects largely with the topics of rationality and scriptural falsification (*taḥrīf*), we will introduce this section with an overview of the debate space around these two issues, in ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's day. As we will demonstrate, *al-Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā* argues that Christians have misunderstood their scriptures. Taking the Nicene Creed as the most fundamental statement of Christian doctrines, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī attempts to show that this creed expresses a gross misunderstanding of the Bible. Having thus seen how ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī opens up the Bible to a new interpretation, we shall move on to an analysis of his *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*. In this text, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī offers his reinterpretation of the Bible, especially as it serves

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as a testament to the prophethood of Muhammad and the establishment of a Muslim dynasty. Therefore, we shall introduce this section with discussions of early Muslim uses of the Bible. Given the central role of 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's treatment of the biblical book of Daniel in this text, we shall also discuss, briefly, the role of apocalyptic texts in this era. To conclude, we shall reflect more deeply on the utility of this approach to 'Alī al-Ṭabarī in particular, and religious thinkers in general.

1.2 From *Dhimmī* to *Nadīm*: The Life and Context of 'Alī al-Ṭabarī

Details regarding 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's life are scant in the documentary record. Scholars have found the resources to reconstruct some of his life story, but with precious little detail.[15] He was born to a Nestorian (East Syrian Christian) family in the Persian province of Tabaristan. His father, Sahl al-Ṭabarī, was a pious man and well known for his status as a scholar of medicine in Marw. For this reason, Sahl earned the title *rabban* ("one learned among us"), from which we see 'Alī's patronymic, "ibn Rabban."[16] This title has given rise to the erroneous belief that 'Alī al-Ṭabarī was Jewish, as "*rabban*" bears resemblance to the term "rabbi." However, we know from 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's own works that he came from a Christian background.[17] In addition to his father, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's uncle, Abū Zakkār, was also an accomplished scholar, especially in the field of religion. He mentions this figure occasionally in the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla* as exemplifying some of the false beliefs that he once held, himself.[18] In fact, from these couple of

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[15] The best (and newest) biography that I have been able to find is located in Thomas's *The Polemical Works of 'Alī al-Ṭabarī*, 1-24. See this author's account for a comprehensive overview of this figure's presence in the documentary record.

[16] Thomas, David, *The Polemical Works of 'Alī al-Ṭabarī*, 6.

[17] Ibid., 2.

[18] al-Ṭabarī, 'Alī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, in Thomas, David, *The Polemical Woks of 'Alī al-Ṭabarī,* 282-3; 434-5; 439; 444-5.

mentions, we get the sense that he views his uncle as responsible for inculcating him with many of the beliefs that he retrospectively finds so erroneous.

In his youth, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī studied medicine and became recognized for his skill as a physician. However, before finding employment in this field, he was first hired as a secretary to the governor of Tabaristan, Māzyār ibn Qārin (d. 840 CE). Māzyār soon rebelled against the 'Abbāsids during the time of the caliph al-Muʿtasim. In 840, he was captured and executed for his dissidence. 'Alī al-Ṭabarī was fortuitously released from his secretarial position before this execution. Despite his association with the dissident Māzyār, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī was employed to serve al-Muʿtasim as a court physician in Samarrāʾ. He remained in this position under al-Muʿtasim's successor al-Wāthiq (r. 842-847 CE), and through to the time of al-Mutawakkil. During his service to the latter, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī received the honor of being named table companion (*nadīm*) to the caliph. It was also under al-Mutawakkil that he completed his most famous medical treatise, *Firdaws al-Ḥikma* (850 CE).[19]

'Alī al-Ṭabarī served the 'Abbāsids during a particularly colorful time, both politically and intellectually. His period of court service coincided with the height of the Muʿtazila, a group of religious thinkers characterized by their rationalist approach to theological questions.[20] The Muʿtazila flourished remarkably under the caliph al-Maʾmūn (r. 811-833 CE). After founding the *Bayt al-Ḥikma* ("House of Wisdom") in Baghdād, al-Maʾmūn expanded the efforts of the translation movement by sending emissaries to Byzantium in search of ancient texts to be translated by a panel of scholars—perhaps the most preeminent of which was the Nestorian

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[19] Ibid., 11.
[20] Gimaret, Daniel, "Muʿtazila", in *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, (Leiden: Brill. 2012).

scholar, Ḥunayn Ibn Isḥāq (d. 873 CE).[21] The caliph's efforts in this regard were unprecedented

among his forebears and successors. He held *salons*, in which scholars disputed

theological/philosophical questions, and even participated in these discussions, himself.[22] Under

al-Ma'mūn's reign, the Mu'tazila gained numerous resources to aid their rationalistic approach

to religion, coming to rely strongly on the categories of Greek philosophy—especially as

expressed by Aristotle and the Neoplatonics—in the articulation of their philosophical and

theological positions.[23] We shall talk more about these thinkers later.

It should be noted that al-Ma'mūn's effort to support the Mu'tazila fits into a broader

program to consolidate caliphal authority in the wake of the Fourth Fitna ("civil war"). To

remedy the weak state of 'Abbāsid political power after this civil war, al-Ma'mūn attempted to

centralize authority—including religious authority—under the caliph and his immediate circle.[24]

Given that this circle was largely comprised of Mu'tazila, this meant that these thinkers became

the object of caliphal favor and support. However, in branding himself as the true arbiter of

religious authority, al-Ma'mūn had to divest the existing religious scholars of their power.[25]

Therefore, his support for the Mu'tazila came at the expense of the more tradition-minded Hadith

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[21] For a detailed treatment of which, see Gutas, Dimitri, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbasid Society (2nd-4th/5th-10th C.)*. (London: Routledge. 1998).

[22] Fakhry, Majid, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 1970). 6-12.

[23] See D'Ancona, Cristina "Greek into Arabic: Neoplatonism in translation" in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, eds. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor, 10-31, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 2005). 10-20, for an overview of the precise transmission of Greek philosophical curriculum into the Syriac-speaking Christian world and, later, into the Arabic speaking world.

[24] Gutas, Dimitri, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*. 99, 106-7.

[25] This is evidenced, for example, in his inquisition, or *miḥna*, for a detailed discussion of which, see Nawas, John A., "The *Miḥna* of 218 A.H./833 A.D. Revisited: An Empirical Study" *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 116, No. 4 (Oct.-Dec., 1996). 698-708.

People (as Hodgson terms them). Unlike the Mu'tazila, this group of thinkers preferred to rely on traditions about the Prophet rather than reason, in matters of religion. In an attempt to inculcate Muslim unity and to suppress religious sectarianism, al-Ma'mūn required that his public officials, *qādis*, and *'ulamā'* reject the Hadith People's Ḥanbalī religious doctrines[26]—i.e. those which devalued reason in religious matters, favoring only Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* materials.

This controversy between the Hadith People and Mu'tazila came to a head on the issue of the createdness of the Qur'ān. The Hadith People, placing enormous epistemic value on the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, came to assert that the Qur'ān constituted the uncreated Word of God.[27] The Mu'tazila, however, rejected this notion, claiming that to call the Qur'ān uncreated might compromise the doctrine of God's unity (*tawḥīd*). If this Book were, like God, also uncreated, then it would stand as a *second* divine mystery, apart from God, thereby shattering the beautifully simple monotheism of Islam. Al-Ma'mūn sided with the Mu'tazila, decreeing that any who professed the uncreatedness of the Qur'ān were not true Muslims.[28] His imposition of this policy on all public officials in 827 CE and later in 833 CE is known as the *Miḥna* ("testing"/"trial").[29]

Al-Ma'mūn's two successors, al-Mu'tasim and al-Wāthiq, inherited his controversy with the Hadith People and continued in his public support of the Mu'tazila. However, when al-Mutawakkil assumed the caliphate in 847, he reversed the religious policy propounded by his

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[26] Hodgson, Marshall, *The Venture of Islam*, *Vol. 2: The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. 1975). 480.
[27] Ibid., 480.
[28] Ibid., 481.
[29] For a discussion of possible explanations for the *Miḥna*, see Nawas, John, "The *Miḥna* of 218 A.H./833 A.D. Revisited: An Empirical Study".

predecessors, leaving public policy to the Hadith People.[30] This policy led to a stricture of

dhimmī regulations, which we see expressed in al-Mutawakkil's 850 edict:

> It has become known to the Commander of the Faithful that men without judgment or discernment are seeking the help of *dhimmīs* in their work, adopting them as confidants in preference to Muslims, and giving them authority over the subjects. And they oppress them and stretch out their hands against them in tyranny, deceit, and enmity. The Commander of the Faithful, attaching great importance to this, has condemned it and disavowed it. Wishing to find favor with God by preventing and forbidding this, he has decided to write to his officers in the provinces and the cities and to the governors of the frontier towns and districts that they should cease to employ *dhimmīs* in any of their work and affairs or to adopt them as associates in the trust and authority conferred on them by the Commander of the Faithful and committed to their charge….
>
> Do not therefore seek help from any of the polytheists, and reduce the people of the protected religions to the station which God has assigned to them. Cause the letter of the Commander of the Faithful to be read aloud to the inhabitants of your district and proclaim it among them, and let it not become known to the Commander of the Faithful that you or any of our officials or helpers are employing anybody of the protected religions in the business of Islam.[31]

In addition to these strictures, al-Mutawakkil also instituted a literary campaign against *dhimmīs*,

for which he commissioned figures such as al-Jāḥiẓ and others to write tracts against

Christianity. Adang suggests that ʻAlī al-Ṭabarī's *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla* was perhaps

commissioned as a part of this same campaign.[32]

It is most likely around in this period (~850 CE) that ʻAlī al-Ṭabarī converted to Islam.

Thomas reaches this conclusion through a few observations. First, ʻAlī al-Ṭabarī expressly

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[30] Hodgson, Marshall, *The Venture of Islam, Vol. 2*, 485-6.
[31] Quoted in Lewis, Bernard, *The Jews of Islam*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1995). 47-48.
[32] Adang, Camilla, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, 29.

thanks al-Mutawakkil for his guidance and help in the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*.[33] This

suggests that al-Mutawakkil had a hand in his conversion. Furthermore, he mentions in this text

that he wrote it 867 years from the time of Christ. But he cannot have written this book in 867 if,

as he claims, it was composed during the time of al-Mutawakkil.[34] To solve this problem,

Alphonse Mingana suggests that the dating may be off by ten years, as per Syrian practice, with

an additional two years difference because of the disparity between the Western and Syrian

calendars. This means that the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla* was likely written around 855.[35] At

the same time, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī uses different language in his *Firdaws al-Ḥikma* (written in 850)

than he does in these religious texts. In the *Firdaws*, he quotes liberally from the Bible but not

the Qurʾān, and refers to the caliph in less flattering terminology than he does in his religious

texts. One might conclude, then, that he converted sometime after having composed the

Firdaws. If the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla* was composed around 855, then it seems that ʿAlī al-

Ṭabarī converted sometime shortly after 850.

The confluence of these various social, political, and intellectual currents in ʿAlī al-

Ṭabarī's story gives us the proper background against which to read his religious texts. If we

accept the above dating scheme, then the composition of his two religious works falls precisely

in this post-850 edict period. At the same time, given his long tenure as court physician (from al-

Muʿtasim to al-Mutawakkil), he would have been a firsthand witness to the intellectual culture of

the Muʿtazila, the persecution of the Hadith People, and the shift in caliphal attitude regarding

Muʿtazilī thought. Furthermore, reading through the concerns expressed in the *Radd ʿalā al-*

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[33] al-Ṭabarī, ʿAlī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, 205-207, 471, 473.
[34] Thomas, David, *The Polemical Woks of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī*, 9.
[35] al-Ṭabarī, ʿAlī Ibn Rabban Sahl, and Alphonse Mingana. *The Book of Religion and Empire*. 138, n. 1.

Naṣārā, one gets the sense that ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī did not conjure up these issues overnight. His knowledge of the Bible is thorough and the numerous contradictions that he identifies between the Nicene Creed and the biblical text in the *Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā* lead one to conclude that he struggled with these matters for many years before his conversion—his learning in the intricacies of the Bible is simply too erudite to suggest that these concerns would have arisen *post eventum*.[36] At the same time as these theological concerns weighed on him, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī was experiencing the privilege of serving as a courtier to the ʿAbbāsids. He even received the honor of being named al-Mutawakkil's table companion. These two texts, then, might well be understood as emblematic of this figure's coming to grips with the complexities of his social and intellectual situation, all the while struggling with his childhood faith. With that, we turn next to the *Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā.*

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[36] Thomas, David, *The Polemical works of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī,* 19.

Chapter 2: *Al-Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*: A Rational Approach to Scripture and Creed

2.1 Introduction

In this section, we will investigate the argumentation, epistemology, and attitude towards the Bible expressed in 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's first religious treatise, *al-Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*. Composed shortly after his conversion to Islam, this text lays out his grievances against his former community's doctrines, particularly as expressed in the Nicene Creed. As we shall see, the present treatise operates on a couple of important epistemic assumptions: First, religious traditions derive their veracity from the rational coherency of their doctrines. Second, the Christian Bible seems to be a legitimate source of religious knowledge. However, this second assumption proves problematic upon further inspection. Therefore, throughout the foregoing section, we shall investigate exactly how 'Alī al-Ṭabarī conceives of his "rational" approach to religion, and the terms on which he approaches the Bible. Through this investigation of his epistemology, we shall be better equipped to determine how his use of the Bible reflects his experience of conversion. Before turning to the precise content of 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's text, however, we will first discuss more broadly the role of rationality and the appraisal of the Bible in early Islamic treatments of Christianity.

2.2 Rationality and *Taḥrīf*

'Alī al-Ṭabarī's *Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā* stands as one of the earliest examples in a tradition of Islamic anti-Christian refutations. Several other notable thinkers, including Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq (d. c. 864 CE), al-Jāhiẓ (d. 868-9 CE), al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm (d. 860 CE), Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī (d. 873 CE), and many more, composed similar tracts, aimed at exposing the errors in Christian doctrines. While these texts approach the matter of Christianity within various

methodological and epistemic frameworks, they nonetheless tend to focus on two major themes: the Incarnation of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity. To these thinkers, the Incarnation and Trinity were logically incoherent doctrines, containing numerous internal contradictions. As religious dogma, this irrationality would not stand. Therefore, in their refutations, these thinkers aimed to demonstrate (often painstakingly) the various ways in which accepting these doctrines leads one to admit contradictory positions. In this regard, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's treatise fits neatly into this tradition.

This intense focus on the rationality of religious dogma can be seen as emblematic of early Muslim thinkers' need to determine the role of reason in questions of religion. We see this preoccupation with reason exhibited perhaps most strongly in the work of the Muʿtazila. Traditionally, this school is traced back to the Basran scholar Wāsil ibn ʿAtā' (d. 748 CE) who, in a debate over the salvific status of a "grave sinner", refused either to condemn or excuse this sinner. For this reason, he separated himself (*"iʿtazala",* whence the term "Muʿtazila") from the two opposing sides of this debate. While this movement is enormously variegated, and therefore difficult to describe in broad terms, the Muʿtazila are remembered for their commitment to the use of reason in matters of religious dogma. As they saw it, mankind can, in fact, know much about God through pure reason. Not only can we know that God exists, but we can know many of his characteristics: God is wise, powerful, non-material, self-sufficient, etc. Only after we have *rationally* established the prophethood of Muhammad can we begin to rely on the Qur'ān as a source of religious knowledge.[37] To the Muʿtazila, the epistemic importance of reason in matters of dogma could not be overstated.

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[37] Gimaret, Daniel, "Muʿtazila", in *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*.

When it came to refuting other traditions—a task not unknown to these thinkers—we similarly see a strong preoccupation with demonstrating the irrationality of opponents' doctrinal formulations. Unlike the illogical Christian doctrines of who and what God is, the Islamic formulation was presented as the only truly rational conception of God. In demonstrating the irrationality of their opponents' doctrines, early Muslim polemicists benefitted enormously from the translation of Hellenistic philosophy into Arabic, through the translation movement.[38] As late Antique Christians had already come to adopt the language of Aristotle and the Neoplatonics in their doctrinal formulations,[39] this philosophical idiom became commonplace in Muslim-Christian polemical encounters. The dialectical techniques and philosophical vocabulary made available through the translation of Aristotle (and others) allowed Muslims better to engage with Christians and their theologies. We see this sort of engagement as early as Patriarch Timothy I's account of his public debate with the caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775-785 CE).[40] In this dialectical question-and-answer style debate, we find the King (i.e. caliph) questioning the logical coherency of doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation. Refuting the doctrine of the Incarnation, the King pithily notes, "[i]f [God] is one He is not two; and if He is two, He is not one." In his eyes, these doctrines are plainly false because the terms in which they are expressed lead to logical contradictions. We also see the utility of Hellenistic philosophy in polemical

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[38] For an excellent treatment of the variegated social, political, and intellectual factors that gave rise to the translation movement, see the aforementioned Gutas, Dimitri, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*.

[39] See Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, (Princeton, N.J. 2008), 108-110, for a short discussion of the Christian co-optation of Late Antique Hellenistic philosophy for theological purposes.

[40] See Patriarch Timothy I, *Apology for Christianity*, translated by Alphonse Mingana, Reprinted form "Bulletin of the John Rylands Library," Vol. 12, (Cambridge W. Heffer & Sons Limited. 1928). http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/timothy_i_apology_00_intro.htm. While we should be wary to take this account as an exact transcript of the debate, we might nonetheless trust that it faithfully reflects the rough form and content of the encounter.

works such as al-Kindī's *Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*, which relies strongly on philosophical categories derived from Porphyry's *Isagoge* and Aristotle's *Topics*.[41] Through the application of these categories to Christian formulations of the Trinity and Incarnation, al-Kindī extracts several contradictions in his treatise.

Among the most scathing accounts of the irrationality of Christian doctrines is the work of the aforementioned 'Abū 'Īsā. In his own tract titled *al-Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*,[42] he begins with a painstaking formulation of the Nestorian, Jacobite, and Melkite[43] doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity. The remainder of the work is devoted to demonstrating the internal contradictions in his formulations. For Abū 'Īsā, one need not look to scripture or even Hellenistic philosophy to understand the error in these formulations. Their contradictions are internal and self-evident, when interrogated properly. In one place, for instance, he refutes the Nestorians' and Jacobites' claim that the one substance of God is identical with the three hypostases (i.e. the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). He demonstrates, through a fictitious dialectical exchange, that if a person were to ask Nestorian or Jacobite Christians whether the One, Eternal Substance was differentiated, they would answer "no." Nonetheless, Abū 'Īsā believes they will concede that the hypostases are differentiated. However, since the substance *is* the hypostases, according to their own formulation, this must mean that the substance is differentiated. Thus, Abū 'Īsā

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[41] See Thomas, David, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press. 1992), 35-7, for a detailed explanation.

[42] See Ibid. for an introduction to and translation of Abū 'Īsā's *al-Radd 'alā al-Thalāth Firaq min al-Naṣārā* ("The Refutation of the Three Sects of Christians")

[43] These are the three predominant Christian sects in his context. Their divisions run along doctrinal lines, marking distinctions in christological positions.

reaches a contradiction.[44] This method of extracting contradictions was commonplace in these sorts of polemical treatises.

In many ways, Abū ʿĪsā's method is representative of a standard Muʿtazilī approach to Christianity. These thinkers took it as axiomatic that one's religious claims ought to be construable in logically consistent formulations. In order to refute the claims of other religious traditions, then, one effective method was to construe their religious claims in such a way as to demonstrate how they contained contradictions. While some Muʿtazilī works such as al-Jāḥiẓ's *Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā* focused on non-theological matters (in this case, the author denigrates the character of his Christian contemporaries), most of this group's polemic concerned itself with demonstrating the logical inadequacy of their opponents' doctrines.[45] This sort of argumentation was especially common in the context of early ʿAbbāsid attacks on Christianity, in part because these thinkers drew an explicit connection between the rationality of a society's religion and its scientific and socio-cultural progress. Therefore, the irrationality of Christianity could be seen in connection with the decline of Byzantine society, in contrast to the flourishing ʿAbbāsid society.[46] This focus on rationality is similarly at the forefront of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's critique.

In addition to rationality, the concept of scripture could also set the stage for these polemical interactions. For ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī, the Bible plays a large part in his refutation of Christianity. Notably, he cites this text continually in such a way that it apparently holds at least some level of authority to him. This evaluation is striking when contrasted with some of the less

[44] al-Warrāq, Abū ʿĪsā., *al-Radd ʿalā al-Thalāth Firaq min al-Naṣārā*, 76-79.
[45] Reynolds, Gabriel Said, *Critique of Christian Origins: A Parallel English-Arabic Text.* (Provo, Utah: Bringham Young University Press. 2010). xxv-xxvii.
[46] Belhoul, Samuel M. "The Testimony of Reason and Historical Reality: Ibn Ḥazm's Refutation of Christianity," in *Ibn Ḥazm of Cordoba: The Life and Works of a Controversial Thinker*. Edited by Sabine Schmidtke, Maribel Fierro, and Camilla Adang, 457-483, (Leiden: Brill. 2013). 458-9.

favorable medieval Islamic appraisals of the Bible. These appraisals frequently involve a polemical application of the Qur'ānic concept of *taḥrīf* ("scriptural falsification") as it pertains to Jewish and Christian scriptures.[47] As Reynolds has noticed, whereas much of Western scholarship has understood the Qur'ānic sense of this term as denoting blatant textual alteration, the Qur'ān actually uses the term in a much more limited sense—rather, this text appears concerned with the *misuse* of scripture.[48] Still, we see this concept mobilized by numerous Muslim thinkers for diverse polemical purposes. Along these lines, al-Bukhārī transmitted a report in which the Prophet declares to the Community of Believers that they "read a book [i.e. the Qur'ān] that has not been distorted, but the People of the Book [i.e. Jews and Christians]…exchanged what God wrote, changing the book with their hands."[49] Similarly, authors such as Abū Naṣr al-Maqdisī (d. ca. 966 CE) and Abū Muhammad Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064 CE) argued that the actual text of the Torah had been altered at the hands of the 70 elders who accompanied Moses to Mt. Sinai.[50] 'Abd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmād (d. 1025 CE) puts forward an account of how a group of Jesus' unfaithful disciples conspired with the Romans to write a new Gospel (*Injīl*), since the faithful disciples had fled with the true scripture. [51]

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[47] See Q. 2:75; 4:46; 5:13, 41. Note that several other verses refer to a similar concept, albeit using different words.

[48] Reynolds, Gabriel Said, "On the Qur'anic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (*taḥrīf*) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130, no. 2 (2010). W.M Watt has made the same observation, though in a less detailed way. For a discussion of which see *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions*. (London: Routledge. 1991). 30-33.

[49] al-Bukhārī, Saḥīh, K. al-Shahādāt, 29 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1420/1999), 2: 182.

[50] Adang, Camilla, "Medieval Muslim Polemics against the Jewish Scriptures." in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, edited by Jean Jacques Waardenburg, 143-159, (New York: Oxford University Press. 1999). 150.

[51] 'Abd al-Jabbār, *The Critique of Christian Origins*, 92-94.

At the same time, some Muslim authors, including ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī, merely accused Jews and Christians of distorting the *meaning* of their scriptures (*taḥrīf al-maʿānī*). On this view, the People of the Book were not responsible for *changing* their scriptures, but for misunderstanding them. Beyond that, several Muslim authors put biblical passages to work for their own religious purposes. They could act as proofs of Muhammad's prophethood (*dalāʾil al-nubuwwa*), apocalyptic predictions, justifications for conquest, and so on (we shall discuss these topics further in the following chapter). Still, these uses of the Bible raise questions: to what extent can the Bible be considered authoritative for Muslims? Inside of what parameters can biblical passages be put to work? What pictures of Jewish and Christian communities does the use of biblical passages paint? ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's texts speak to these questions.

Through the course of *al-Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā*, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī draws out two major points: the inconsistencies between the Nicene Creed and the Bible, and the internal inconsistencies in the Nicene Creed. The majority of the work comprises the former category of criticism, for which he cites numerous biblical passages from the Old and New Testaments alike. His use of the Bible raises questions about his epistemology. Is his use of this text a mere rhetorical tactic, or does he value this text as genuinely authoritative? In other words, how and why does he use the Bible in his arguments? When approaching these questions, we must be careful to remember that this figure was, himself, a convert from Christianity, looking back upon his old sacred texts. I mention this lest we think that he could approach the Bible as a detached, objective onlooker. The very choice to investigate so closely the compatibility between the Bible and the Nicene Creed bespeaks a certain sympathy. If his goal were merely to demonstrate the error or atrocity of Christianity, he might easily have treaded the path taken by Abū ʿĪsā and others: extract contradictions from Christians' formulation of their doctrines. Admittedly, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī does

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employ arguments of this sort, but it seems that his primary goal is to demonstrate the incompatibility between the Bible and the Nicene Creed. Why draw out this incompatibility if not to leave the Bible open for a better interpretation? Knowing, as we do, that he later proposed a new interpretation of the Bible in the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, we can clearly see that he means to open up his audience to a new understanding of this text. His project seems a constructive rather than destructive one. After all, he explicitly writes that he aims to warn Christians against their unbelief—an understandable goal for someone with such a personal stake in this project.[52]

In the present evaluation, I will argue that to characterize ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī as accepting the textual authenticity of the Christian Bible in the same way as he accepts the textual authenticity of the Qurʾān would be to compare apples to oranges. As we shall see, he makes use of biblical passages in such a way as to suggest that this book carries some level of authority. In fact, his use of biblical passages has led scholars such as Adang and Thomas to suggest that he does not question the textual authenticity of the Bible.[53] Be that as it may, I would submit that his use of biblical citations in his argumentation need not imply that he outright accepts these texts as revealed in the same way as the Qurʾān. As I shall demonstrate, we have several reasons to believe that this is not the case—for instance, how could he accept the authority of Gospel accounts that report Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, when the Qurʾān explicitly denies the crucifixion?[54] Still, it remains that the present text cites the Bible in support of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's

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[52] al-Ṭabarī, ʿAlī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā*, 65.
[53] See Thomas, David, *The Polemical Works of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī*, 51; Adang, Camilla, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, who argues based on his use of biblical materials in the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*. In fairness to Adang's position, she focuses on ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's use of the Hebrew Bible, in particular.
[54] See Q 4:157.

view of the nature of God, while the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla* asserts the presence of proofs of Muhammad's prophecy in the Bible. Are we to believe, then, that these arguments are merely rhetorical, aimed exclusively at convincing a Christian audience? I believe that this conclusion is also false. While ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī presents no decisive theory on the revealed status of the Bible, he nonetheless leaves hints as to how we might think about the efficacy of this book in directing us towards truth. As we shall see, he delineates these epistemic boundaries in the discourse of rationality and the Bible's relationship to the Qurʾān.

2.3 The Arguments of the *Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā*

In the first pages of this text, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī opens with a discussion of reason and religion. Everyone who follows a religion, he admits, will naturally favor his own tradition over others. But if everyone were to prefer his own religion, then how could we judge whose is correct? After all, each tradition presumably possesses at least some semblance of internal coherence. To remedy this dilemma, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī proposes that we must evaluate religions through some neutral set of criteria: reason. Only through reason can we discern which religion is superior to which.[55] In this statement, we certainly see the influence of the Muʿtazila and their rationalist approach to theological questions. While ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī nowhere speaks disparagingly of the epistemic quality of revealed knowledge, he clearly values reason as the arbiter of truth in this discussion. When judging between the content of religious paradigms, we must turn to rational criteria. This position is perhaps curious, given al-Mutawakkil's preference for the tradition-minded Hadith People over the rationalistic Muʿtazila. However, it should be noted here that the present tract serves a polemical purpose, first and foremost. Rather than making a

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[55] al-Ṭabarī, ʿAlī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā*, 63.

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positive statement about the epistemological stance that Muslims ought to take, it rather demonstrates the irrationality of Christian doctrines.

For ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī, any proper religion must stand up to rational appraisal. Thus, when he claims that his "intention is not to refute Christ (peace be upon him) or the people of his truth, but those Christian sects that oppose Christ and the Gospels and corrupt the words [*ḥarrafa*[56] *al-kalimāt*],"[57] we understand that the corruption (*taḥrīf*) that he here refers to has left Christianity in a state of irrationality. These corruptors apparently stand guilty of suppressing Christ's truth. Still, it remains to be seen exactly what this accusation entails. The contours of this corruption shall become clear as we follow his argument.

Approaching Christian doctrines in this way, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī moves on to extracting numerous contradictions from the Nicene Creed's formulation of the nature of God. His first method of argumentation involves posing a series of seven questions, which he calls the "Silencers" (*al-musakkitāt*). He devised these questions such that, were they posed to a Christian in the course of a debate, s/he would be forced to arrive at a contradiction, and would thereby be reduced to silence. This section follows the common Muʿtazilī pattern of argumentation known as *masāʾil wa ajwiba* ("Questions and Answers").[58] This stylistic choice allows ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī to steer his imaginary interlocutor's questions and responses in whatever direction he prefers. For this reason, his own arguments tend to belabor his point by emphasizing the woeful irrationality of the Nicene Creed's claims. As far as their content, the Silencers aim primarily at discrediting

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[56] When made into a verbal noun, this term becomes "*taḥrīf*," about which we have spoken above.
[57] al-Ṭabarī, ʿAlī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā*, 65.
[58] Reynolds, Gabriel Said, *Critique of Christian Origins*. xxvi.

the doctrine of the Incarnation. We shall refer to a couple of examples, for the sake of illustration.

In one Silencer, he poses the question, "Is God truly One?" If his opponents were to respond in the affirmative, he argues, they would be mistaken. In reality, he claims, the Christians believe in three or even four gods, as per their Creed: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, *and* the eternal human called Jesus. Furthermore, to disagree with the Islamic formulation of divine unity means to deny Moses, Jesus, and all of the prophets, who unfailingly professed God's oneness in this very manner. 'Alī al-Ṭabarī belabors the impossibility that Jesus could be associated with the Creator. On the contrary, he is a created being, subordinate to (and certainly other than) the One Creator. To illustrate this point, he cites Deuteronomy 32:39, in which Moses sings in his hymn: "I am God, great and mighty, and you should know that I am the only One; I make die and I make live, I make ill and I make well, there is none who can escape from me."[59] He follows this passage by citing the genealogy of Jesus, given in the book of Matthew.[60] This genealogy calls Jesus a *generated* being and son of Abraham. Clearly the generated, contingent Jesus cannot be the same God declared by Moses. How could Jesus be both Creator and created? If this was not sufficient to prove his point, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī goes on to Jesus' own declaration of God's otherness: "I have not come to act in accordance with my own will, but in accordance with the will of him who sent me."[61] If, as Christians claim, Jesus were the Creator, then to make this claim would be to attribute self-contradiction to him. 'Alī al-Ṭabarī unequivocally calls this a most repulsive slander (*aqbah al-tashnī'*) on the part of Christians.[62]

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[59] al-Ṭabarī, 'Alī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*, 69-71.
[60] Matthew 1:1.
[61] John 5:30.
[62] al-Ṭabarī, 'Alī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*, 71.

To consider Christ, a prophet of God, irrational in his speech constitutes a grave error. The broader suggestion, therefore, is that to interpret the sayings and actions of Christ in the manner of the Nicene Creed means to adopt an irrational understanding of this prophet's teachings. Given that rationality gives the neutral criteria by which we are to evaluate religions against one another, this constitutes a strike against Christians.

In another of these Silencers, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī asks: Is Jesus the eternal Creator (as the Nicene Creed calls him), a chosen man (as Muslims call him), or is he "God and man as groups of [Christians] have said"?[63] To claim that Jesus was merely a chosen man, created and sent, would be to agree with Muslims in their Creed. If they claimed that Jesus was associated with the eternal Creator in any way, they would oppose the Gospels and other revealed books (*al-injīlāt wa ghayruha*), wherein Jesus clearly distinguishes himself from the Father. To prove this, he points to several passages from the Gospels. Hanging from the cross, Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"[64] ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's suggestion in picking out this text is clear: one who addresses God as another being, like Jesus does here, questioning His will, cannot be one with that very same God. He also notes that this was Jesus' last utterance on earth, before he *died*. But if Jesus and God were one, and Jesus died, then this would suggest that God could die—a despicable notion. Furthermore, at the Last Supper, Jesus offers bread and a cup to his disciples, calling them his flesh and blood. One who has flesh and blood, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī notes, comprises a body, possessing length, width, and depth. However, God cannot be measured, for all things that are measurable are limited, and God is boundless and infinite.

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[63] Ibid., 77.
[64] Mark 15:34

Therefore, Jesus cannot be God.[65] Conversely, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī points out that to call Jesus God means also to call God Jesus. If this were true, then the Creator would be composed of flesh and blood. But if we believe that the Creator is composed of the created (i.e. flesh and blood), then we are lead to claim that the created is responsible for its own creation.[66] This also cannot be.

For ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī, an even more atrocious conclusion arises from this claim. To claim that God is Jesus means to claim that a part of the world (Jesus) was the Creator of the whole world. But the part cannot exist without the whole—otherwise there would be nothing to be a part of. If we accept Christians' claims about Jesus, then we are forced to believe that the part created the whole. Still, there must have been a time before the creation of the whole during which the whole was nonexistent; otherwise, this would not be "creation" at all. But if such a time existed, then there must have been a time when the part (i.e. Creator) did not exist. In other words, there was a period in which God did not exist. And if the Creator did not exist, then there could be no created.[67] To conclude this Silencer, he remarks:

> I think that the holders of this view aimed at this very meaning, and no other. This would be like one who said: "One part of humanity is the Creator of all humanity," although we know that the flesh does not come before humanity, and what does not come before humanity is nothing. So it is as though he were saying: "The Creator of humanity is nothing."[68]

If these arguments come off as convoluted, then ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī has made his point abundantly clear. The sheer irrationality of this conclusion aims to give readers pause. At stake here is the rational cohesion that underlies one's doctrinal formulations.

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[65] al-Ṭabarī, ʿAlī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā,* 77-79.
[66] Ibid., 81.
[67] Ibid., 81.
[68] Ibid., 82. My translation.

We see other assumptions at work in these arguments too. Not only should one's creed

stand up to rational appraisal, but one should be careful to avoid attributing irrationality or self-

contradiction to prophets. If Jesus, at once both prophet and God, were truly God the Creator,

then for him to claim that he has flesh and blood would be for him to profess the very errors

described above. This sort of behavior does not befit a prophet. Furthermore, not only are our

doctrinal formulations restricted to the confines of reason, but so are God's actions and his

nature. 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's God is not an irrational deity. He can do nothing that fails to conform to

the standard of reason: he cannot "die," he cannot be both three and one at once, he cannot be

both transcendent and immanent. As Christians construe him, God fails to conform to the

standards of reason. This irrationality leads 'Alī al-Ṭabarī seemingly to the point of

exasperation:

> You Christians, may God guide you, can you not all see that however we spin the
> circles, they will revolve in restricted and disagreeable ways, and lead | either to
> disagreement with the Gospel or to abandonment of what is understood and
> considered reasonable, or else to disbelief in your Creed?...
>
> [Therefore] I acquit myself before God, great and mighty, from the
> atrociousness of this matter, the vileness that accrues from the Creed of the
> Christians, and the vileness of their doctrine.[69]

Something must change, then. In their present circumstance, the doctrines of the Nicene Creed

cannot stand up to rational questioning.

For this reason, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī attempts to ground his Christian audience in something he

considers solid, agreeable, and universal. In this matter, he takes his cue from the Qur'ān: "Say:

O People of the Book, come to a word that is common between us and you, that we do not

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[69] Ibid., 89.

worship anyone except God, we do not associate anything with him, and none of us takes any of ourselves as Lord in place of God."[70] He goes on to formulate this common ground in twelve propositions, on which he believes there is "no difference between us [Muslims] and you [Christians]."[71] These twelve points predictably emphasize the transcendent, unchangeable, and omniscient nature of God:

> The first of the points on which you agree is that God almighty is eternal and alone, without partner or equal in his sovereignty.
>
> The second point is that God does not forgive associating with him, and he is the One beyond need, the all-praiseworthy.
>
> The third point is that he has no father or mother or mother's sisters, no ancestors or contemporaries.
>
> The fourth point is that he cannot be measured or weighted, and location cannot surround him.
>
> The fifth point is that he does not endure increase or decrease.
>
> The sixth point is that he does not eat or drink, does not hunger or eat his fill.
>
> The seventh point is that he cannot be spoken of as something from his creation regarding his stature, the number of his limbs or his character.
>
> The eighth point is that God's true being cannot be described, nor any fashioner fashion him.
>
> The ninth point is that God does not tire or grow weary, and "slumber and sleep do not affect him."[72]
>
> The tenth point is that he encompasses everything with knowledge, and nothing on earth or in heaven is hidden from him.
>
> The eleventh point is that he is victorious, mighty, is not humiliated or frightened.
>
> The twelfth point is that God almighty does not grow old or die.
>
> The present-day nations and the rightly-guided religions agree that only by these twelve points can God be known, and he cannot be construed through any divergence from them.[73]

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[70] Q 3:64.

[71] al-Ṭabarī, ʿAlī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Radd ʿalā al-Nasārā,* 91.

[72] See Q 2:225

As Thomas notices, this list expresses a blatantly Qur'ānic conception of God.[74] This

conception, of course, strongly eschews a Trinitarian view of God. Perusing these points, we

quickly see that 'Alī al-Ṭabarī aimed to distinguish, yet again, between the changeable, human

Jesus and the transcendent God. Nonetheless, he insists that Christians and Muslims agree on

them. What he seems to be saying is that Christians cannot, in reality, believe what they purport

to believe. Proper belief conforms to the standards of reason, and Christian dogma has been

shown to fail in this regard. In view of this, he posits these twelve, "neutral," rationally-sound

statements as a starting point for reforming Christian doctrine.

While it may seem clear to us that 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's choice of these criteria derives from a

Qur'ānic understanding of God, he nonetheless defends their authority on different grounds—

namely their presence throughout the Christian Bible. He goes on to cite several passages

throughout the Bible that bolster his twelve rational criteria. In the Torah (*tawrāt*), he points out,

it is said that no one can see God and live[75] and that God commands men not to take idols from

among anything in heaven or on earth.[76] He also points to King David's saying that God is

touched by neither slumber nor sleep,[77] David's declaration of the eternity of God's kingdom and

authority,[78] and other similar praises of God's majesty and transcendence. Next, he cites

passages from the Gospel of John, including the author's statement that nobody has ever seen

God and lived,[79] Jesus' implicit acknowledgment (as 'Alī al-Ṭabarī sees it) of his inferiority to

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[73] Ibid., 91-93.
[74] Ibid., 93, footnote 68.
[75] Exodus 33:20
[76] Exodus 20:4
[77] Psalm 121:4
[78] Psalm 145:13
[79] John 1:18

God in praying to him before raising Lazarus from the dead,[80] and two other instances of Jesus'

apparent inferiority to God, professed in this book.[81] These passages all support 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's

position that all prophets prior to Muhammad pointed to the same God: the transcendent,

immutable God expressed in his twelve points. From this, we can see that 'Alī al-Ṭabarī aims to

find evidence for the Qur'ānic portrayal of God in the three old dispensations named in the

Qur'ān: the Torah (*tawrāt*), the Gospel (*injīl*), and the Psalms (*zabūr*).[82] On the surface, then, it

would seem that arguments made on the basis of these passages from Exodus, Psalms, and John

hold at least some level of authority for 'Alī al-Ṭabarī. One must wonder, then, whether he

considers these texts the genuine scriptures revealed to Moses, Jesus, and David.

However, to accept the validity of the Gospel accounts, as 'Alī al-Ṭabarī does, poses a

problem. Contrary to the Qur'ānic assessment,[83] the Gospel accounts attest to the crucifixion

and resurrection of Jesus. In his line of argument, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī apparently accepts this event.

He makes this clear when he notes that the Gospel accounts testify to Jesus's humanity, in

addition to his having been *raised from the dead* by God.[84] In the Qur'ānic account, Jesus did

not die, but it was made to appear as such. Therefore, we come upon a situation in which 'Alī al-

Ṭabarī's acceptance of the Bible clearly stands at odds with his acceptance of the Qur'ānic text.

To accept both accounts would lead to contradictory beliefs, which, as we have seen, could not

stand up to his rationalist criteria for proper religion.

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[80] John 11:41-42
[81] al-Ṭabarī, 'Alī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Radd 'alā al-Nasārā*, 95.
[82] While he explicitly invokes the Qur'ānic names for the first two scriptures (*tawrāt* and *injīl*), and cites them in an authoritative way, he does not make mention of the term "*zabūr*"—the Book traditionally thought to have been granted David by God[82]—when speaking of King David's sayings. Nonetheless, I take his efforts to name David as an implicit reference to the *zabūr*.
[83] See Q 4:157.
[84] al-Ṭabarī, 'Alī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Radd 'alā al-Nasārā*, 123.

'Alī al-Ṭabarī further complicates matters by venturing elsewhere in the New Testament, citing the Apostle Paul's letter to Timothy. He first cites Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 1:17 that "God's is the kingdom of the worlds and ages, for he is not abased and cannot be seen; he is God alone, and to him be honor and glory for ever and ever." This serves to demonstrate the distinction between Jesus, who has a body and can be seen, and the transcendent God.[85] He goes on to cite a later chapter in the same letter, in which Paul writes:

> He is God alone, the powerful One, and he is the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone does not suffer corruption or pass away. He it is who dwells in dazzling light, whom none can come near, whom no human has seen or can see; to him is honour and power for ever and ever. Amen.[86]

While these passages clearly mesh with 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's criteria for the proper portrayal of God, we nonetheless encounter a serious problem: as we know him in his epistles, Paul cannot possibly count as an unproblematic authority figure for Muslims. Surely, non-Trinitarian readings of Paul exist, but he nonetheless expresses a christology that stands at odds with Qur'ānic teaching. This is summed up succinctly in 2 Corinthians 5:14-18, where Paul writes:

> For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.[87]

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[85] Ibid., 95.
[86] 1 Timothy 6:15
[87] 2 Corinthians 5:14-18 (ESV)

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Not only does Paul affirm the death and resurrection of Jesus (which, again, the Qur'ān seems to deny), but he explains how this sacrifice reconciles mankind and God. For one who believes in the Qur'ān and the principle of non-contradiction, Paul's teaching cannot count as unproblematic. Nonetheless, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī curiously cites Paul without a single qualification— nowhere does he denounce Paul's teachings as false. On the contrary, he makes use of discreet, isolated bits of solid doctrine expressed by Paul.

In this same vein, he goes on to quote a hymn attributed to Nestorius (d. 450),[88] which, unlike the Nicene Creed, he believes expresses the truth about God's nature:

> O Lord, indeed we bow down and praise and exalt you; O you who are everlasting substance, concealed and unattainable; O King of kings and Lord of lords, who dwell in dazzling light, whom none at all has seen or can see. He alone is holy, he alone has might and power, who alone does not die.[89]

This hymn, he believes, expresses the true faith of Moses, Jesus, and the prophets. Both here and in his references to Paul, we see 'Alī al-Ṭabarī refer to figures who espouse numerous doctrines that he would find abhorrent. All this, seemingly for the purpose of finding examples of properly articulated dogma. Still, these citations tell us something important: just because 'Alī al-Ṭabarī makes appeal to a source for proper teaching, this does not imply that he views that source as completely authoritative and inerrant. In the same way, we should be wary to suggest that he views the Gospel accounts or Old Testament as inerrant throughout, simply because he makes reference to discreet passages in his arguments.

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[88] Nestorius was a prominent theologian and Archbishop of Constantinople for whom the Nestorian Church (i.e. Church of the East) had come to be named by western Christians. He belonged to the Christian tradition from which 'Alī al-Ṭabarī had converted.

[89] al-Ṭabarī, 'Alī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Radd 'alā al-Nasārā*, 97.

To understand how he makes his selection of biblical passages, we must keep in mind ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's rationalist epistemology. He makes this epistemic stance plain in his discussion of the Council of Nicaea. It is here that we reach the heart of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's issue with Christian belief. He claims that after having exhaustively searched through the Gospels and the letters of Paul, he found 20,000 verses that attested to the humanity of Jesus. As for those that might be construed as suggesting divinity, he found precious few. However, he claims that those churchmen who gathered at the Council of Nicaea—318 in total, as attested by Athanasius (d. 373)—rejected the clear truth reported in these 20,000 verses. Instead, they clung to erroneous interpretations of the few problematic verses, which "were opposed to the majority of the principles and *lay outside what is rational*."[90] ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī speculates that they favored these interpretations in order to draw closer to the leading Byzantine philosophers of the day, who were materialists and dualists, claiming that the Creator of the world is part of the world. If they had simply been careful to interpret scripture in light of scripture, it would have been obvious to them that the Nicene Creed's teachings were spurious. As he puts it, "[i]f they had been seeking the truth, they would have found it clear and evident, and they would have referred the problematic, exceptional [verses] to the ones that are evident, because the greater number are the bases and the few exceptional ones are the derivatives."[91] From this account, we can better understand the underlying reason for his earlier accusation of corruption (*taḥrīf*): rather than interpreting scripture according to rational criteria, these 318 churchmen preferred to appeal to Byzantine thinkers who associated the Creator with worldly things. Above all else, their error stems from their irrational interpretive methods. Rather than operating according to reason and

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[90] Ibid., 125. Emphasis mine.
[91] Ibid., 125.

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logic, they chose to grant greater weight to the few, hazy verses than to the numerous, evident ones.

2.4 Conclusion: What is the Bible to ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī?

While I agree with Thomas's assessment that ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's accusation of corruption refers to the interpretation of scripture, I would not take this so far as to conclude that he would consider the entire Christian Bible, as it exists in the form present to him, inerrant or unproblematic. In fact, we have several reasons to believe otherwise. For instance, he outright admits that the translators of his own Syriac edition of the Bible have corrupted the text by changing the term "gods" to "angels" in Psalm 82.[92] Furthermore, as we have seen, he cites passages from Paul's letters and the hymn of Nestorius to support his argument. He also cites the Acts of the Apostles, wherein Simon Peter declares that Jesus was a *man* whom God raised from the dead.[93] In other words, he ventures outside of the Torah, Psalms, and Gospel in support of his position. Even if he restricted himself to these three, the Gospel accounts that he relies on preserve reports that are at odds with the Qur'ānic account of the crucifixion. What I hope to illustrate here is this: We cannot conclude from ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's mere citation of a text in support of his argument that he accepts the integrity of the book and its author. He clearly reads the Bible through the lens of both a rationalist and Qur'ānic understanding of God and prophecy— God does not act irrationally, religious doctrines must be rational and logical, and prophets do not say what is contrary to reason. Despite apparent contradictions between the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion and the Qur'ānic accounts of the event, he nonetheless references the Gospels. Despite Paul's problematic theology, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī nonetheless cites him.

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[92] Ibid., 152-3. Here, he uses the same term for corruption (*taḥrīf*) that he previously used: "*man naqalaha ilā al-siryāniyya fa qad ḥarrafahu*."
[93] Ibid., 149-151, Acts 2:22-24.

Therefore, we need not believe that ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī considers the Christian Bible a revealed text on equal footing with the Qur'ān. On the other hand, we need not go so far as to believe that his citations are merely a rhetorical tactic. Embarking on this project in order to protect against those who *ḥarrafa al-kalimāt* ("corrupt/falsify the words"), he posits a number of criteria—both rational and Qur'ānic in nature—by which one can read the Christian Bible, in order to extract its truth. These he summarizes in the twelve "neutral" criteria, to which any rational understand of God must adhere. It seems that rather than attempting to make a statement about the reliability of this text, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī focuses on establishing the criteria by which we can draw out its truth. Whereas the 318 who gathered at Nicaea corrupted the words in their interpretive methods, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī aims to demonstrate how we *really* ought to interpret the Bible: namely, according to reason. In this endeavor, we clearly see his investment in correcting his old tradition's understanding of their scriptures. Unlike the priests at Nicaea, who sought the approval of materialists and dualists, he implores his readers to avoid ridiculous, irrational doctrines. Not only does he apply his rational criteria to the Torah, Gospel, and Psalms, but he also uses them to draw truth out of Paul's letters. It seems strange, then, to conclude that the reliability of the passages he cites derives primarily from their revealed status. Rather, these verses are selected and interpreted according to ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's *rational* criteria, which he expresses in Qur'ānic language.

Relating these arguments to his conversion, we can see that ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī sees his religious change as guiding him away from an irrational Christianity and towards a rational Islam. In making this argument, he does not need to discard the Bible as a corrupted text, but merely to establish parameters in which to understand it properly. It is towards this goal that his twelve criteria point. Thanks to his conversion, then, he has been granted a new lens—one that

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allows him to extract truth from these texts. But what sort of truth can be found in the Bible? In order fully to answer this question, we must turn to his interpretive endeavor in the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*. While the *Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā* gives us an understanding of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's epistemic stance, in addition to a few instances of citing the Bible in support of his case for Islam, this second text gives us further examples of how the Bible might be used to build a case for Islam: namely its testament to the coming of the Prophet Muhammad. Additionally, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī articulates his view of the differences between previous dispensations and the Qurʾān. As we shall see, his approach to the Bible is largely flavored by his understanding of the Qurʾān's superiority to previous dispensations.

Chapter 3: Conversion as Reinterpretation: The Bible and the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*

3.1 Introduction: Putting the Bible to Work

In considering the work done by the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, it will help to put ourselves in the position of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's intended audience. Let us suppose for a moment, then, that we were Christian readers of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's texts. If we were to read the *Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā* and accept all of its arguments, then where would this leave us? First and foremost, we would have to admit that the doctrines expressed in the Nicene Creed—namely the Incarnation and the Trinity—were irrational and untenable. Neither do these doctrines conform to the parameters of reason, nor are they rooted in a proper understanding of the Bible. Bearing this in mind, we might feel that Christians had grossly misinterpreted this text. If it turned out that Jesus' life was not, in fact, the central event in salvation history (as ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī implicitly argues) then we would be forced to approach the Bible anew. Thus, we might also conclude that the Bible was in need of reinterpreting. As I read it, this is the primary conclusion pushed by the *Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā*.

But what ought we to look for in reinterpreting this text? In light of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's argumentation in the *Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā*, we might know what *not* to read into the Bible: the transcendent, changeless God ought *not* to be likened to or associated with humankind. In other words, Jesus cannot be understood as God. He was merely a human prophet like many before him. But if we were to accept this alternative understanding of Jesus, then we would be forced to discard traditional Christian understandings of the Gospels, and consequently the entire New Testament. By extension, we would be at a loss as to how we should read the Hebrew Bible— for Christians have traditionally understood the relationship between these texts as that between

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prophecy and fulfillment, old and new covenant, Law and Gospel. For Christians, the New Testament is the key to understanding the Old. The life and work of Jesus, as an exceptional figure who forgives sins and initiates a new covenant, gives the lens through which to understand what the Hebrew Bible was pointing ahead towards. To accept 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's alternative understanding of Jesus would be to alter this lens. Therefore, to accept the arguments of the *Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā* would be to discard our central biblical hermeneutic.

As though to remedy this problem, the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla* offers a method for understanding the Bible in light of the newest divine dispensation, the Qur'ān. In the same way that Christians have traditionally understood the New Testament as the key to reading the Hebrew Bible, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī essentially proposes a Muslim equivalent: the Qur'ān gives us the key to understanding these previous dispensations. His approach to the Bible works in the spirit of *Sūrat al-A'rāf*, which looks fondly on "[t]hose who follow the Messenger, the unlettered prophet, *whom they find written in what they have of the Torah and Gospel*."[94] In demonstrating this claim, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's text points out a wealth of biblical passages that, on his interpretation, describe the features, career, and success of the Prophet Muhammad. As we shall see, not only does the Bible foretell a prophet whose description matches Muḥammad's, but, in fact, it mentions Muḥammad *by name*. In this way, the Bible can be read as prefiguring the revelation to come.

The *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla* therefore fits into a literary genre known as *dalā'il al-nubuwwa* ("proofs of prophethood"). These works aim at articulating the characteristics possessed by prophets, and then demonstrating that Muḥammad matches this description. As

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[94] Q. 7:157.

Sarah Stroumsa indicates, this genre arose when Jews and Christians in the early Islamic period first encountered the prophetic claims of Islam:

> Since Muḥammad had claimed to be a prophet, and since this claim had been rejected by both Jews and Christians, the traits that distinguish a true prophet from a false one became a key issue. And although by the ninth century we find this topic elaborated by Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike, it is a safe assumption that in the first round it was Islam which had to come up with "proofs of prophecy," in response to Christian and Jewish incredulity.[95]

In ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's text, we find a unique instance wherein this incredulity and its response are self-contained. It is safe to assume that ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī not only responds to Christian doubts generally, but specifically to *his own* previously held doubts. This is the position from which he reads the Bible anew.

This theme of a convert using the Bible in the service of Islam has numerous precedents, dating to the earliest generations of Muslims. Many of these early figures had a strong interest in appropriating biblical stories and traditions for the use of the Muslim community. These traditions had their roots in the Hebrew Bible and most frequently came from converts. Biblical traditions were usually transmitted orally and told the stories of the biblical prophets, thereby giving valuable context to the Qurʾānic references to such figures. As Steven Wasserstrom argues, early Muslims not only condoned but seem to have encouraged the collecting of *Isrāʾīliyyāt*[96] as testaments to the truth of Islam. Jewish traditions were not, inherently, any

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[95] Stroumsa, Sarah, "The Signs of Prophecy: The Emergence and Early Development of a Theme in Arabic Theological Literature," *The Harvard Theological Review* 78, no. 1/2 (1985): pp. 101-14. 105.
[96] This term broadly refers to narrative traditions, transmitted orally, about biblical figures—particularly prophets. The traditions were oftentimes transmitted by Jewish converts to Islam, and were used for such purposes as clarifying Qurʾānic references to biblical prophets and writing histories. For more information, see Vajda, Georges, "Isrāʾīlliyyāt", in *Encyclopedia of*

threat to Islam. Rather, these and Christian traditions alike stood as testaments to the veracity of the new religion.[97] In this way, converts could often make use of their intimate knowledge of Christianity or Judaism in the service of their new religion.

One major use of these traditions was to deepen Muslims' background knowledge in approaching the Qur'ān. In this regard, biblical (and post-biblical) narratives known as *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* ("Stories of the Prophets") proved especially useful. These traditions served to tell the biographies of biblical Patriarchs such as Moses and Abraham. Professional reciters, known as *quṣṣāṣ*, taught these stories to large audiences in mosques, for the purpose of expanding on the Qur'ānic allusions to the Hebrew prophets.[98] The famous Yemeni scholar Wahb b. Munabbih (d. c. 730) was known to have expanded upon and *recorded* such legends, thereby preserving the lore circulated by figures such as Ka'b al-Aḥbār and 'Abd Allāh b. Salām.[99] In particular, Wahb did much to popularize the Psalms, of which he produced largely impressionistic translations. He was also known to transmit biblical accounts that oftentimes conflicted with the Bible. As Adang notices, Waḥb's altered accounts agree more closely in content with the Qur'ān.[100] Thanks to traditions such as these, one could more readily assert the connection between Muhammad and the Hebrew prophets.[101]

As the reputation of the *quṣṣāṣ* declined, scholars in the early 'Abbāsid period made serious attempts to trace the description of Muhammad in Jewish and Christian scriptures. This

Islam, Second Edition. Eds. P. Bearman, Th. Biaquis, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, (Leiden: Brill. 2012).

[97] Wasserstrom, Steven M. *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis Under Early Islam.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2016.) 174.

[98] See Adang, Camilla, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, 9.

[99] Two of the earliest Jewish converts to Islam.

[100] Ibid., 12.

[101] Ibid., 16.

stemmed largely from the need for more reliable sources from which to convince Jews and

Christians of Muhammad's prophethood, as Stroumsa indicates above. The oldest substantial

attempt of this sort comes from Abū al-Rabīʿ al-Layth (d. ca. 819), who worked in the court of

Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786-809). This work takes the form of an epistle, sent to the Byzantine

emperor Constantine VI, exhorting him to accept Islam.[102] In so doing, it cites numerous biblical

passages, which the author interprets as testaments to the Prophet Muḥammad.[103] In this way,

scholars made use of the actual text of the Bible for the purpose of advancing Islamic religious

claims.

The scriptures of the People of the Book were also put to use for other purposes in the

early Islamic centuries. Several early Islamic historiographers, for instance, remembered the

Arab conquest of Palestine as the result of divine promises located in the Torah.[104] Many such

traditions revolve around the aforementioned Jewish convert, Kaʿb al-Aḥbār. In one such

tradition, reported by Aḥmad ibn Aʿtham, we see an interaction between Kaʿb and the caliph

ʿUmar, in which they recite the Bible and Qurʾān to one another. ʿUmar recites a section from

Sūrat al-Nisāʾ (4):47, wherein the People of the Book are called to believe in the Qurʾān, which

confirms their own holy books. Kaʿb responds by embracing Islam and subsequently quoting the

Torah in such a way that confirms this Qurʾānic passage. He quotes a passage strongly

reminiscent of Isaiah 42:1-13, which suggests that the Torah prophesied ʿUmar's conquest of the

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[102] Ibid., 21.

[103] This work also utilizes other strategies common in Christian-Muslim disputes over prophethood in the early ʿAbbāsid period. It appeals to reason as the arbiter in these sorts of discussions, points to Qurʾānic predictions of Islam's success, and argues for the inimitability (*iʿjāz*) of the Qurʾān. See Roggema, Barbara, "Ibn al-Layth" in *Christian Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*. 347-353 (Leiden: Brill NV, 2009).

[104] Rubin, Uri, *Between Bible and Qurʾān: The Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-Image.* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press. 1999). 17.

Holy Land.[105] Another notable figure, Nuʿaym b. Ḥammād (d. 843 CE), a *ḥadith* scholar, is

remembered for having included a wealth of biblical material in his work, particularly the *Kitāb*

al-Fitān (The Book of Apocalyptic Turmoil). In one place, he reports the fortuitous finding of

the book of Daniel by the conquerors invading Tustar (during the reign of the caliph ʿUmar [r.

634-44 CE]). In this section, he mentions that the book contains reports about what will come to

pass.[106] The Bible could serve not only imperial purposes, but also apocalyptic ones.

Much like these earlier figures, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī similarly uses the lore of his former

community in the service of his new religion. Still, while his work fits neatly into this tradition,

his position as a convert and his experience serving the ʿAbbāsids adds a novel dimension. For

as much as this text shows us how ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī aims to serve the purposes of his new religion,

it also demonstrates the utility of the Bible in explaining his own present situation. While the

Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā serves largely to divorce Christian doctrine from the Bible, the present text

gives us an alternative to how the Bible can be understood and used. In addition to using the

Bible as proof of Muḥammad's prophethood, we also see our author use this text as a means of

commenting on his own life experiences.

On my view, he does this through a combination of biblical proofs of Muḥammad's

prophethood and a reinterpretation of apocalyptic passages in the book of Daniel. Many

Christians in the early period of Muslim rule understood the rise of Muḥammad and his religion

as God's punishment for their dissolute behavior. They reached this understanding through a

particular schematization of history, influenced by the biblical book of Daniel. In this book,

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[105] Ibid., 13-16.

[106] See Yücesoy, Hayrettin, *Messianic Beliefs and Imperial Politics in Medieval Islam: The*
ʿAbbāsid Caliphate in the Early Ninth Century. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina
Press. 2009). 33-34.

Daniel predicts that there will be four world empires between the time of the Babylonians and the end of days.[107] Looking to this schema, Christians in the early Islamic period understood themselves to be living under the final world empire in history—Byzantium—anxiously awaiting the second coming of Jesus. The rise of the Muslim conquerors therefore demanded explaining. As we shall see, different apocalyptic authors handled this challenge in various ways, but tended to agree on one point: the Muslims represented a threat and punishment from God, from which Christians needed rescuing.[108] In the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī uses the very same Danielic schema to characterize the *victory* and divine appointment of the ʿAbbāsid Empire. His interpretation of the Bible demonstrates that Muḥammad's prophethood and the present ascendancy of the ʿAbbāsid Empire are not disconnected phenomena. Rather, Muḥammad initiated the conquest that led to the establishment of the final world empire prophesied by Daniel: the ʿAbbāsids. Therefore, we might read this tract as ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's self-conscious attempt at using scripture to understand his present political and social situation. A formerly Christian figure working in a privileged position under Muslim rule comes to grapple with the realities of his situation in the terms with which he is most intimately familiar: the Bible. Before we draw this out, however, let us first take some time to articulate the parameters in which he undertakes this project.

3.2 The *Din wa Dawla*'s Occasion and Approach to Scripture

Aside from his own personal interests, external factors also affected ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's composition of the present tract. He writes in his introduction that the caliph al-Mutawakkil

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[107] Dan. 7.

[108] See Hoyland, Robert G., *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it: a Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*. (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press. 1997). 257-335.

provides the impetus for writing the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, noting the reasons why this

caliph hopes to circulate books of this sort:

> [A]s a support to the reasons for the religion [Islam], to make the proofs for it prosper, and to arouse a desire for it in those who are ignorant of its superiority and of the fact that *God has chosen Islam and its followers in his time, has renewed his marks of honour on them and has made them know growth, increase and superiority through the gentleness of his oversight.*[109]

From this, we see that ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī views Islam's present state of superiority and prestige as an

indication of God's favor. From his language here, it appears that al-Mutawakkil may have

commissioned this piece. Whether or not this is the case, this caliph certainly played an

important role in this book's composition. In the same sentence that he praises God for his help,

ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī also thanks al-Mutawakkil for his guidance and support.[110] Thus, it would appear

that ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's acceptance of the religion of the present empire is not disconnected from his

recognition of its goodness and generosity.

His project seeks to demonstrate the testimony to this success that is written in the books

of Jews and Christians. By drawing out these biblical prophecies, he can justify to his audience

the reasons for the success of Islam. Therefore, he writes that his project seeks to uncover the

portrait (*rasmuhu*)[111] of Muhammad as he appears in the accounts preserved by the "bearers of

the book" (*ḥamilat al-kitāb*, Jews and Christians). He needs to do this because "they concealed

[Muhammad's] name and distorted (*ḥarrafū*) the outline of him that was found in the books of

their prophets (peace be upon them)."[112] Here, again, we come upon this issue of

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[109] al-Ṭabarī, ʿAlī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, 207, emphasis mine.
[110] Ibid., 205-7.
[111] In other words, the "testament to him" or "outline of him," as Thomas translates it.
[112] Ibid., 202-3.

corruption/scriptural falsification (*taḥrīf*). Recalling 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's use of this term in the *Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*, we notice that this accusation was pointed at Christians' irrational interpretations of scripture (especially at the hands of those gathered at Nicaea). In the present case, this accusation similarly aims at a matter of scriptural interpretation. Despite the fact that Jews and Christians have concealed the Prophet's portrait in their scriptures, his picture nonetheless persists there—'Alī al-Ṭabarī demonstrates this in the ensuing endeavor.

While the *Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā* encourages rational appraisal of the Bible, the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla* gives us yet more resources for understanding this text. Through his discussions of the veracity of reports (*akhbār*, "transmitted knowledge"), the characteristics of prophets, and the relationship between divine dispensations, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī expands his model for approaching the Bible. He initiates this endeavor with a broader examination of the various forms of reports and consensus. When it comes to discussing the veracity of religious claims, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī recognizes that we must establish criteria by which to evaluate them. This discussion serves to evaluate the reasons why we should or should not believe in transmitted knowledge. Whereas some reports are universally true and agreed upon by all (e.g. the claim that the sun rises every day), others are riddled with falsehood and trickery, such as those of Zoroastrians, Buddhists, and Manichees. He draws this distinction in order to protect his readers from reports that are meant to manipulate one's emotions and affections. The mere fact of consensus means nothing if a report aims at deception. Unlike these deceptive sorts of reports, those preserved by Muslims are beyond reproach. As 'Alī al-Ṭabarī explains, we can know this by evaluating the source of the information: the prophet. If we examine the reports of false prophets, we will find that they contain lies and contradictions. This is because God does not hesitate to make false prophets contradict themselves. Whoever believes in such a figure errs

greatly.[113] Therefore, in evaluating transmitted knowledge about religion, we must consider the integrity of the messenger.

Having established this, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī sets out to demonstrate the reliability of the Prophet Muḥammad. Interestingly, he notes that the only other prophet whose reliability is as certain as Muḥammad's is Jesus.[114] These two both exhibited characteristics that place them beyond reproach, and which other messengers cannot be affirmed to possess. These include such qualities as prayerfulness, piety, manifestation of signs (āyāt), accurate predictions, victory over the nations, and possession of a divine book. Furthermore, he mentions that prophets had foretold Muḥammad long before he appeared, giving descriptions of his career, homeland, and the success of his community.[115] We see all of this in the reports that have been passed down about Muḥammad, and the lasting legacy of the community that he founded.

At the same time, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī argues that we can see the reliability of this messenger in the book that he brought—the Qur'ān. For Alī al-Ṭabarī, the very quality of this book proves the prophetic status of the one who brought it. As he mentions, when he used to be a Christian, neither he nor his uncle believed rhetorical figures (balāghāt) to be signs of prophethood, for these are common to all nations. However, the Qur'ān has convinced him otherwise. In elaborating why, however, he nowhere mentions the literary or poetic beauty of this book. Rather, he focuses exclusively on its content, praising the beauty of its message:

> I have never found any book written by an Arab, Persian, Indian or Roman that brings together the declaration that God is one and that there is no other god than him, or praise of him, great and mighty, the attestation of the messengers and prophets, the urging to good works that endure, the command to the good and

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[113] Ibid., 209-217.
[114] Ibid., 221.
[115] Ibid., 221-223.

prohibition of the forbidden or the kindling of the desire for paradise and arousal of the hatred of hell as does this Qur'ān. Ever since the world has existed, who has delivered to us a book with such an attribution or character as this, which contains the very essence of such appropriateness, exaltedness and refinement, and which is accompanied by such vindication, success and victory? The one who brought it, on whom it was revealed, was illiterate, and had no knowledge of any writing or eloquence. So it is a sign of prophetic status, without doubt or argument.[116]

On 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's view, the combination of characteristics present in the Qur'ān is unmatched by other books. Its declaration of God's unity and unparalleled nature conforms exactly to the twelve criteria that he gives in the *Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*, thereby standing up to rational appraisal. At the same time, this book is woven through with exhortations to goodness and piety. Furthermore, the success of the movement initiated in its spirit also attests to its integrity. Given the unparalleled quality of this book, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī argues that we ought to be convinced of its messenger's reliability.

But how, on 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's view, are we to understand the Qur'ān's relationship to other scriptures? In approaching this question, it is important to be mindful of the Qur'ān's self-understanding as sacred scripture. As Walid Saleh points out:

> [t]here is…a rather developed notion in the Qur'an of what Scripture is, what it should look like, and what its supposed function is in monotheistic history—what has been called the 'self-referentiality' of the Qur'an. The Qur'an speaks of itself as a Scripture and demands to be treated as one. This understanding of Scripture is projected back onto the Torah and Gospels, and it determines how the Qur'an understands what the Torah is and what the Gospels are. In this sense, the past is made into the image of what Muḥammad was experiencing.[117]

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[116] Ibid., 283.
[117] Saleh, Walid A. "The Hebrew Bible in Islam." *in The Cambridge Companion to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, edited by Stephen B. Chapman and Marvin A. Sweeney, 407-25 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2016). 410.

Along these lines, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī submits an evaluation of the Qur'ān's forerunners that measures them by a Qur'ānic standard. The Torah, he notes, preserves stories about the Israelites, their genealogies, and their wanderings in Egypt, in addition to many excellent laws and customs. The Qur'ān, he points out, contains the most important parts of these reports, including God's mercies, parables, and admonitions. The Gospel, he mentions, preserves narratives about Jesus, moral precepts, and wise parables, but contains little in the way of laws or customs. He mentions this final quality in such a way as to suggest that it is a weakness or incompleteness. The Psalms contain numerous beautiful hymns and a few historical accounts, but, like the Gospels, nothing in the way of laws and customs. Finally, the other prophetic books contain condemnations of the Israelites and their behavior and predictions of the disgrace that will befall them.[118] The Qur'ān surpasses all of these, however, for it contains:

> the declaration of God's oneness, assertions that there is no god but him, high praises of him, customs and laws, reports and narratives, the promise and the threat, hungering and alarming, prophecies and foretellings of attractive things which conform to God's glory, wisdom and might, the extending of hope in forgiveness, pity and the acceptance of repentance, and expressions by which souls can find rest and in which hopes can take refuge without losing heart.[119]

In other words, previous scriptures have their merits, but the Qur'ān brings all of their most important and potent qualities together into a single text. It is unmatched by all other books, even other scriptures.

From all of this, we see that 'Alī al-Ṭabarī commends the use of the Qur'ān as a lens through which to read the Bible. In this regard, he perhaps echoes *Sūrat al-Mā'ida*, wherein God urges Muḥammad to judge between the content of previous scriptures according to what has

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[118] al-Ṭabarī, 'Alī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, 285.
[119] Ibid., 289.

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been revealed to him.[120] As we have seen, when judging prophets, we ought to take notice of their reports, weighing their content. As it happens, the content of the Qur'ān—the most significant report attributed to Muḥammad —contains the most excellent and rational material of all prophets. Where other scriptures lack, the Qur'ān abounds. The Torah, Gospel, and Psalms all lack the Qur'ān's complete excellence. Therefore, we should approach the Bible in light of the Qur'ān and its messenger. In his ensuing analysis, he does, in fact, interpret the Bible in this way. Not only does this involve a rational reading of this text, but also one that accommodates the prophethood of Muḥammad and the success of the movement that he initiated.

3.3 *Dalā'il al-Nubuwwa* as *Dalā'il al-ʿAbbāsiyyīn*

As I see it, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's interpretive project commences in four steps. First, he demonstrates the connection between Muḥammad and the biblical prophets. These arguments show that Muḥammad ought to be accepted by anyone who also accepts the prophets that Christians and Jews believe in. Not only do these arguments rely on connecting Muḥammad's message with that of the biblical prophets', but they also involve demonstrating Muḥammad's goodness and success. On ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's view, the success of such a pious man cannot be but divinely authorized. Next, he draws out the portrait of Muḥammad contained in the Bible. In doing so, he not only uses verses that speak of a coming prophet whose description matches Muḥammad's, but he also finds Muhammad prophesied *by name*. He goes on to demonstrate that the Muslim conquests are also prophesied in the Bible—not only does the Prophet Muḥammad show up in this text, but so does the military conquest that he initiates. Finally, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī demonstrates that this Prophet's military conquests are prophesied to result in a Muslim dynasty. As he demonstrates, this foretold dynasty refers *specifically* to the ʿAbbāsids

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[120] Q. 5:48.

and none other—certainly not the Umayyads. By building stepwise from Muḥammad's prophecy to the ascendancy of the 'Abbāsids, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī demonstrates the divine appointment of this empire.

3.3.1 Muhammad and the Biblical Prophets

Before searching for Muḥammad's portrait in the Bible, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī first seeks to establish the continuity between the Muḥammad and the biblical prophets. This connection allows him to paint Muḥammad's prophethood and the Qur'ān as a continuation of the prophetic history detailed in the Bible. He does this in several ways. In one place, he attempts to demonstrate the continuity between the regulations of Muḥammad and those of Moses and Jesus. As he points out, Moses and Jesus both required that in legal disputes, allegations ought to be confirmed by two or three witnesses. Not only does Muḥammad affirm this regulation, but he deepens it: in order to prevent the possibility that these two witnesses be liars or reprobates, Muḥammad demanded that the witnesses be upright and just. In this way, he renewed and clarified the teachings of Moses and Jesus.[121] Using this sort of argument, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī demonstrates the continuity between the two foremost prophets for Jews and Christians and the prophet Muḥammad.

'Alī al-Ṭabarī also establishes Muḥammad's status alongside biblical prophets by advancing arguments for the piety of the Prophet and early Caliphs. These arguments stand to convince his Christian readers that adherents to such a good and pious religion as Muḥammad's cannot have been liars. Therefore, Muḥammad must be seen as standing in line with the other pious, divinely appointed prophets that have gone before him. In order to evaluate Muḥammad's

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[121] Ibid., 245.

status as prophet fairly, he sets out ten qualities that a prophet must have.[122] In his explanation of the second of these ten characteristics, he draws out the excellence of the customs and regulations that Muḥammad installed. Among the injunctions of Muḥammad's religion were love of God, love of parents, condemning lying, exercising generosity, showing kindness, focusing on the hereafter, fasting, prayer, giving alms, forgiveness, forbidding intoxication, and the like. Concluding this list, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī mentions that neither religion nor the world (*dīn wa…dunyā*) can stand without these regulations.[123] Just like all of the prophets that have gone before him, Muhammad established rules and regulations befitting of *any* good religious messenger: namely those that serve to foster a flourishing, pious society.

Furthermore, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī argues that the followers of Muḥammad attest to the goodness and truth of his message through their piety and asceticism.[124] He goes on to recount the ascetic and pious deeds of early caliphs such as Abū Bakr, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz, and others, focusing most strongly on their disdain for the world and its pleasures.[125] These figures' goodness, as 'Alī al-Ṭabarī sees it, disqualifies them from deception:

> Such was the asceticism of many kings, kings' sons and the most eminent in the [Muslim] community, of whom there has been no like or equal among the kings of the earth or communities of the prophets since the world has been. Those who were such people cannot be accused of deceptions or lying.[126]

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[122] Ibid., 221-3.
[123] Ibid., 236-7
[124] Ibid., 303.
[125] Ibid., 303-319.
[126] Ibid., 321.

Given that these figures followed in the legacy of the Prophet Muḥammad, their piety stands as evidence for his authenticity.

Importantly, worldly success also counts as a proof of prophethood for ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī. In particular, he argues that the success of Muḥammad's religion demonstrates its truth:

> He called all the Arabs and every one of the nations to faith in God, great and mighty, while people were shooting at him from one bow, were sneering at him, and looking at him scornfully. But this did not hold him back or deter him, for he unfolded the religion without keeping anything back and went forward to what God ordered him without turning away. But when he saw them rejecting his order and accusing him, and not entering into God's religion and grace voluntarily, he made them enter by force until the preaching prevailed and all the Arabs yielded. Then signs and prophecies followed one another among them, the religion became sweet to them, and certainty shone forth.[127]

This success, he points out, stretches from Sūs to the deserts of the Turks and Tibet.[128] Much like his argument for the piety and goodness of Muḥammad and his followers, this argument drives at a similar point: God would not have granted this sort of success to a false prophet. For one who preaches such a good and wholesome message, enjoining asceticism and the like, the success of his legacy *must* be God-granted. To further this point, he makes a distinction between the victory of Muhammad and his followers and the victory of Alexander or Ardashīr. Simply put, the victory of the Greeks and the Persians arose out of desire for conquest, might, and reputation. These victories were from Satan. The victory of Muslims, on the other hand, derived from their love of God and loyalty to his prophets.[129] On his view, Satan would never have supported a religion like Islam. It is simply too pious for Satan to support its success: it orders fasting and prayer; forbids immorality, unbelief, and adultery; and it exalts and glorifies God in

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[127] Ibid., 295.
[128] Ibid., 295
[129] Ibid., 297.

its slogans. Furthermore, Muḥammad explicitly denounces Satan and warns against his tricks. It would be ridiculous to claim that Satan might support such a religion. Therefore, this religion and its victory must both be from God.[130] Yet again, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī appeals to the moral sense of his Christian audience. The success of a messenger who preached such a pious religion, reminiscent of the piety that Christians themselves value, must have been sanctioned by God. Therefore, his readers should be led to believe that Muḥammad was sent by God, just like the biblical prophets that they already accept.

3.3.2 The Prophet's Portrait in the Bible

Having made his case that Muḥammad's prophecy is legitimate, he turns next to the Bible, in order to find Muḥammad and his success prophesied there. Among these prophesies, he quotes Genesis 17:20, in which God says to Abraham "I have answered your prayer about Ishmael and have blessed him and increased him and made him exceedingly great. He will beget twelve mighty beings, and I will make him a mighty nation." Paired with other promises in Genesis regarding Ishmael,[131] ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī argues that this prophecy receives its fulfillment in the Prophet Muḥammad.[132] For it is through him that the descendants of Ishmael (i.e. Arabs) have come to such a high position of prestige. This prestige serves to fulfill the prophecy that Ishmael might be heir to a *great* nation.

Similarly, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī argues that the eighteenth chapter of Deuteronomy points ahead to the Prophet Muḥammad. In this chapter, God says to Moses: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers, and whichever man does not hear my words that this

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[130] Ibid., 297-301.
[131] E.g. Gen. 21:13.
[132] al-Ṭabarī, ʿAlī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, 327-335.

man will relay in my name, I will avenge myself upon him."[133] Since this passage specifies that

this prophet will come from among the *brothers* of the People of Israel, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī argues that

it refers explicitly to a prophet from *outside* of the direct lineage of Israel. While Christians

interpret this verse as referring to Jesus, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī points out that Jesus was actually from

among the People of Israel (being descended from David). Thus, this verse must refer to

someone else. 'Alī al-Ṭabarī also takes issue with the common Jewish interpretation that this

verse refers to Joshua son of Nun, simply because Joshua does not actually qualify as a

prophet—for he conveyed nothing new to the Israelites, past what Moses already taught.

Furthermore, Joshua was, himself, from among the Israelites rather than their brothers. Instead,

'Alī al-Ṭabarī understands this prophecy as a reference to Muḥammad.[134]

In many of his interpretations, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī claims to find Muḥammad mentioned *by

name* in the Bible. While this claim perhaps seems odd at first blush, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's

methodology here has its precedent in a particular facet of the existing debate over Muḥammad's

presence in the Bible. We see this precedent, for example, in Patriarch Timothy I's account of

his disputation with the caliph al-Mahdī. In this debate, the caliph similarly attempts to make a

case for the claim that Muḥammad was foretold in the Bible. To this point, he suggests that

Jesus' reference to the "Paraclete" in the Gospel of John[135] actually refers to the Prophet

Muḥammad.[136] While Christians traditionally understand this Paraclete (*paraklētos*, in Greek,

meaning "advocate," "helper," "comforter," etc.) as the Holy Spirit—the third person in the

Trinity—al-Mahdī sees the matter differently. His understanding of this passage as a reference

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[133] Deut. 18:18-19.
[134] al-Ṭabarī, 'Alī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, 341-343.
[135] See John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7.
[136] Patriarch Timothy I, *Apology for Christianity*.

to Muhammad seems to derive from the similarity between the present Greek term and another

Greek word, *periklutos*, meaning something like "famous" or "praiseworthy." Since

Muḥammad's name literally means "praised one," this understanding of the term Paraclete is a

possible interpretation.[137] This understanding becomes all the more convincing when read in

connection with *Sūrat al-Ṣaff,* which reports Jesus as saying "Oh children of Israel, indeed I am

the messenger of Allah to you confirming what came before me of the Torah and bringing good

tidings of a messenger to come after me, *whose name is Aḥmad*."[138] Given that "Muḥammad"

and "Aḥmad" share the same semantic root—*ḥ-m-d* ("praise")—Jesus' biblical declaration of the

Paraclete might seem a direct parallel to his Qur'ānic annunciation of Muḥammad's coming.

In several places, Alī al-Ṭabarī takes advantage of this semantic similarity, finding

numerous biblical references to a "praised one" or some similar term. While the version of the

Bible that he is working with is written in Syriac, he nonetheless counts instances of a "praised

one" and its variants as references to the Prophet. He can make this claim because Syriac, being

a Semitic language like Arabic, similarly makes use of a three-letter root system. In several

passages, he finds Syriac terms whose root (*sh-b-ḥ*) corresponds with the Arabic root *ḥ-m-d*,

from which we get the name "Muḥammad," and interprets these passages as prophesying

Muḥammad by name.[139] For example, he cites a passage from Isaiah, wherein the prophet says:

> Let the people of the dry desert rejoice, let the deserts and arid spaces be glad, let
> them bring forth blossom like the crocus, let them rejoice and thrive like the
> mountain goat, because they will be given by *Aḥmad* the beauties of Lebanon, and

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[137] Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters*, 34. For a full discussion of this issue, see also Watt, W. Montgomery, "His Name is Aḥmad", (*Moslem World*, xliii, 1953). pp. 110-117. Here, he discusses the eighth century discourse about the meaning of Aḥmad, which can be construed either as an adjective ("most praiseworthy") or as a proper name. Another such discussion can be found in Parrinder, Geoffrey, *Jesus in the Qur'ān*, (London: Oneworld. 1965). 96-100.
[138] Q. 61:6 emphasis mine.
[139] al-Ṭabarī, 'Alī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, 411-413.

similar to the loveliness of villages and meadows. And they shall see the greatness of God, great and mighty, the splendour of our God.[140]

Between the mention of the Prophet's name and the description of the dry desert—which is to evoke the image of Muḥammad's western Arabian homeland—ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī takes this as a clear reference to Muḥammad.[141]

Like the caliph al-Mahdī, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī also takes the mention of the Paraclete in the Gospel of John as a reference to Muḥammad.[142] In this case, he makes clever use of Jesus' statement in John 14:16 that he will send "*another*" Paraclete, in his own name. As ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī sees it, this means that Jesus was, himself, called by the name "Paraclete," presumably in the aforementioned sense of "praiseworthy one." Since Muḥammad shares this name, "praiseworthy" (on a literal understanding of his name), ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī understands this reference to "another Paraclete" as pointing to Muḥammad. Beyond these references, he picks out several other instances of biblical testimonies to the coming of Muḥammad—but the above examples will suffice to show the reader a sampling of Alī al-Ṭabarī's method of extracting the portrait of the Prophet from the Bible. We will now move on to his method of finding biblical testimonies to the Muslim Conquests.

3.3.3 The Muslim Conquests in the Bible

Several passages that Alī al-Ṭabarī cites purportedly prophesy more than just the coming of the Prophet Muḥammad. Others, as he sees them, actually predict the Muslim Conquests. We

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[140] Isa. 35:1-2.
[141] al-Ṭabarī, ʿAlī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, 361.
[142] Ibid., 425.

will refer here to a couple examples. In one case, Alī al-Ṭabarī looks to the fifth chapter of

Isaiah, which reads:

> I will raise up a sign to the nations from a distant land, and I will signal to them from the ends of the earth and they will come to me speedily, swiftly; they will not be weary and will not stumble; they will not be drowsy and will not sleep, they will not loosen their girdles and the fastening of their shoes will not be broken. Their arrows are sharpened and their bows are taut; the hooves of their horses are as hard as a rock, and their speed is as rapid as storms; their roaring is like the voraciousness of lions and like the lion cub which bawls and roars at its prey, so that none can be saved from him. On that day he will overtake them like the echoing and resounding of the sea. They will cast their eyes to the earth, and will see only disasters and gloom, and light will be darkened from the dust of their hordes.[143]

‘Alī al-Ṭabarī understands this passage as a reference to the "People of Ishmael," or community

of the Prophet, who expanded and conquered with much haste.[144] The sharpened arrows, taut

bows, hard-hooved horses, and speed evoke a mighty group of conquerors, much like the early

Muslims.

Turning to the minor prophets, Alī al-Ṭabarī finds another description of a mighty force that

he believes refers to the Muslim Conquests. This, he finds in the third chapter of Habakkuk,

which again uses the Syriac root that corresponds with ḥ-m-d (twice, in fact) to describe a

glorious and praiseworthy figure, who brings with him doom, destruction, and a great fury.[145]

While Christians and Jews both traditionally understand these verses as referring directly to an

angry God's work for the Israelites in Egypt, ‘Alī al-Ṭabarī here understands the figure with

whose praise the earth is filled as the Prophet Muhammad—whose name derives from this same

ḥ-m-d root. Therefore, when the passage describes a figure whose armies "will conquer the earth

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[143] Isa. 5:26.
[144] al-Ṭabarī, ‘Alī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, 355.
[145] Hab. 3:3-13.

in anger and trample the nations in wrath, because [he] appeared for the salvation of [his] community and for the rescue of your fathers' inheritance," 'Alī al-Ṭabarī takes this as a reference to the conquest led by the Prophet.[146] As he goes on to demonstrate, these conquests are not without a divinely foretold goal.

3.3.4 The 'Abbāsids in the Bible

Up to this point, Alī al-Ṭabarī has gone to great lengths to demonstrate that the Bible not only prophesies the coming of the Prophet Muhammad, but also the conquest that he initiated. But these predictions do not stop here. On his view, a couple of key passages actually predict the establishment of a Muslim Dynasty—and not just *any* dynasty, but the 'Abbāsids in particular. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Alī al-Ṭabarī's way of finding the 'Abbāsid Empire in the Bible is how his interpretations subvert contemporary Christian apocalyptic understandings of their position under Muslim rule. This departure becomes most clear upon comparing Alī al-Ṭabarī's understanding of the book of Daniel with that of Eastern Christians living under Muslim rule. His interpretation of these passages is poignantly emblematic of his conversion's affect upon his attitude towards his social and political circumstances.

In the seventh chapter of this book, Daniel has a dream in which he sees four beasts. The fourth beast far exceeds the others in power and might, and ushers in the Ancient of Days and finally the Son of Man, whose kingdom shall be everlasting.[147] While interpreters agree that the four beasts represent four world empires, there are many opinions on the matter of which empires are represented. From the time of the Muslim Conquests, non-Muslims began incorporating the Arabs/Muslims into their apocalyptic texts and understandings of history. As

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[146] al-Ṭabarī, 'Alī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, 395-397.
[147] Dan. 7.

Robert Hoyland points out, the first texts from non-Muslims that deal with the challenge posed

by these conquests come in the form of apocalypses. On these texts, he writes:

> These [apocalypses] constitute a cognitive and consolatory enterprise, an attempt
> to render meaningful and endurable a traumatic situation, notably cultural and
> political oppression by a foreign power, but also the suffering inherent in
> everyday existence; they therefore remain popular long after the original crisis
> had passed. Apocalypses may, in addition, serve a paraenetic function, a plea to
> the faithful not to weaken in the face of present-day trials, but to hold out for
> impending deliverance.[148]

In these apocalyptic texts, Arab/Muslims served two functions. First, they were classed as

villains, acting as the hand of cosmic forces of evil. Therefore, they ought to be opposed by any

who aimed to work in favor of the good.[149] Second, the readers were made to feel that the day of

God's deliverance from these conquerors was approaching, and consequently that they ought to

hold steadfast in their faith and hopes.[150]

Eastern Christians writing in Syriac shared an eschatological heritage rooted in a small

sampling of Old and New Testament passages. Seventh century Syriac apocalypses, in

particular, express a vision of history that derives strongly from the books of Daniel and Judges.

Daniel foretells four world empires that will culminate in the arrival of the Antichrist and then

the Son of Man. On the other hand, Judges tells a narrative in which the Children of Israel

alternate between a position of subjugation to barbarian peoples when God is angry with them

and one of deliverance when they have secured His pity. Syriac Christians came to see

themselves as the Children of Israel in this schema, and further identified the four world empires

as the Babylonians, Medes/Persians, Greeks/Romans, and a final Christian kingdom that would

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[148] Hoyland, Robert G., *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it*, 257.
[149] Ibid., 258.
[150] Ibid., 258-9.

last until Christ's second coming. However, the ascendancy of the Arabs/Muslims challenged

this conception, demanding new interpretations. Where would these conquerors fit into

apocalyptic history?[151] A few examples of these apocalypses will prove instructive.

In the first Syriac apocalypse appearing in Islamic times (ca. 640 CE), written in the

name of Ephraem the Syrian (d. 373 CE), the Arabs/Muslims are portrayed as the harbingers of

the last days. These offspring of Hagar will usher in the Antichrist and the end of time with

destruction, ravaging, and plundering.[152] Similarly, the apocalypse of pseudo-Methodius (ca.

690 CE) depicts the Arabs ("sons of Ishmael") as a chastisement to Christians in the last days—

the final Millennium—for their dissolute behavior. This punishment will include captivity,

slaughter, ridicule, destruction of cattle and forests, and other horrors at the Arabs' hands. Just

when Christians reach the height of their suffering, the "king of the Greeks" will rescue them

from their plight and bring with him the final peace until the time of the Antichrist.[153] This

insistence that a final Greek emperor will usher in the time of the Antichrist attests to this

author's adherence to the traditional view that the Roman Empire will usher in end of days. He

expresses this view by outlining Daniel's schema of the four world empires, emphasizing that

Christian Rome is the final of these four. This author, then, handles the challenge of the Muslim

Conquests by asserting that Muslim rule is merely temporary and that a savior-like Christian

emperor will evict the Arabs after all.[154] The Coptic Daniel apocalypse, on the other hand, types

the four beasts in Daniel differently. They are the Persians, Romans, Byzantines, and

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[151] Ibid., 259.
[152] Ibid., 260-2.
[153] Ibid., 264-5.
[154] Ibid., 265-7.

Ishmaelites, according to this text.[155] In this schema, the Arabs/Muslims become the fourth beast and consequently the harbingers of the last days.

Notably, all of these examples assign a particularly negative place to the Arabs/Muslims. If the Muslim rulers are understood as the fourth beast, then the readers are made to hope for someone to deliver them from this oppressive empire and usher in the end of time. On the other hand, if they are merely an interruption of the final (fourth) dynasty (as in pseudo-Methodius), then the readers are similarly made to long for one who will deliver them from these overlords and reinstitute Christian rule, before the end of time. In each of these schemas, Muslim rule is construed as something from which Christians need delivering.

'Alī al-Ṭabarī paints an altogether picture of 'Abbāsid rule, similarly relying heavily on the biblical book of Daniel (in addition to other biblical passages). While the aforementioned apocalypses reflect Christian fears in the face of a rising power, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's reading of Daniel seems to reflect his coming to terms with the reality of Muslim rule. Looking at Daniel's second chapter, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī takes Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams as a testament both to the Prophet Muḥammad and to the "empire of the Arabs," as he calls it. The prophecy of Daniel serves as a "confirm[ation]…that the Prophet…is the Seal of the Prophets, that his triumph was from God, that his is the authorised [sic] empire after which there is no empire nor any nation like his nation."[156] In the first of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams, the king sees a statue with a head of gold, forearm of silver, belly and thigh of copper, and legs and feet made of both iron and earthenware. This statue was stricken by a stone cut from a mountain, causing it to shatter and blow away in the wind. Daniel interprets the head of gold as referring to the

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[155] Ibid., 289.
[156] al-Ṭabarī, 'Alī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, 413.

kingdom of Babylonia, and the other components of the statue as each referring to various kingdoms that will succeed Babylonia. All of these kingdoms will be brought to an end, as symbolized in their crumbling and blowing away. However, after these kingdoms have fallen, God will establish an *everlasting* kingdom that will crush and destroy all competitors—this is the meaning of the stone. On 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's view, this everlasting kingdom points to the empire initiated by Muḥammad. Since he has initiated the final, everlasting kingdom, he is therefore called the Seal of the Prophets.[157]

'Alī al-Ṭabarī goes on to read Daniel's dream in chapter seven similarly. As he understands it, the first kingdom is the Babylonians, the second the Medes, the third the Persians, and the fourth the Arabs. Again, it is this fourth kingdom that will last eternally.[158] In particular, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī understands this everlasting kingdom to be the 'Abbāsids. He supports this view by appealing to Daniel 12:12, in which the prophet says that the one who waits 1,335 days will be blessed. Pondering this verse, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī notes that Daniel could have either intended days, months, years, or "some prophetic secret that mathematics can extract."[159] Since he could find no significant event following this prophecy by 1,335 days or 1,335 months, he concludes that it must refer to years—for this would refer approximately to the present age. Therefore, Daniel's prophecy foretells the prosperity of the 'Abbāsid Empire, specifically.[160] Quite unlike the understandings of Muslim rule expressed in Christian interpretations of Daniel, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī opts for a particularly triumphalist reading of these passages. Not only that, but he cleverly

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[157] Ibid., 413-7.
[158] Ibid., 417-21.
[159] Ibid., 421.
[160] Ibid., 421-3.

interprets Daniel 12 in such a way that allows him to call the 'Abbāsids, specifically, the fulfillment of the prophecy about the fourth beast.

He further supports his claim that the 'Abbāsids have been divinely foretold by turning to Jeremiah 49. He cites a passage that reads:

> The Lord says, I will break the bow of Elam, the chief of their power and might, and I will rouse up against Elam four winds from four parts of heaven, and I will scatter its people through all these parts until there will be no nation without a trace of those cut off and scattered from Elam. I will smash Elam into pieces before their enemies, and I will subdue them utterly before those who seek their very selves. I will bring down upon them affliction and painful suffering, and I will send upon them the sword until I have consumed them. I will set my throne in the midst of Elam and I will wipe out the kings and powerful ones there. This is the word of the Lord.[161]

On 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's reading, "Elam," which was in the far southwest of Iran, refers to the Sassanian capital of Ahwāz, which the Muslim conquerors eventually came to inhabit. As he points out, this prophecy could not have been fulfilled either by Alexander the Great or the Himyarite king Tubba', for neither of these truly set up "God's throne" in that region—for neither conquered the region in the name of God. Rather, this prophecy refers specifically to the 'Abbāsids, whose capital was set up in Baghdād. It is *Abbāsid* Baghdād that the prophecy refers to when it mentions God setting up his throne in Elam. 'Alī al-Ṭabarī also notes that this could not have referred to the Umayyads, who set up their capital in Syria (i.e. Damascus).[162] Understood in concert with his interpretation of Daniel above, and inside the broader scheme of Muhammad to Conquest to Dynasty that we have outlined, we see that 'Alī al-Ṭabarī meant to pick out the establishment of the 'Abbāsids as the eventual goal of Muḥammad's prophethood.

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[161] Jer. 49:35-38.
[162] al-Ṭabarī, 'Alī ibn Rabban Sahl, *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*, 403-5.

It is also notable that ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī paints the ʿAbbāsids as the successors of the Persians, in particular. Following the ʿAbbāsid revolution, one of the major goals of the early ʿAbbāsid rulers was to reconcile rival factions of the House of Muhammad and to legitimize ʿAbbāsid authority in the eyes of all parties. The party that needed satisfying most was the "Persian" faction, comprised largely of the Arab tribes that had moved to Khurāsān at the time of the early conquests. In order to accomplish this, the ʿAbbāsid dynasty promulgated the view that they were not only the successors of the Prophet Muhammad, but also the heirs of the ancient dynasties of ʿIrāq and Iran, from Babylon to Sassania.[163] By naming the ʿAbbāsids the prophetically foretold successors of Persia as per Daniel, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī explicitly uses the Bible in support of ʿAbbāsid imperial ideology.

3.4 ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's Exegesis as a Self-Reflexive Exercise

In light of his life story, it would seem that ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's way of finding not only Muhammad, but also the ʿAbbāsids prophesied in the Bible is emblematic of his personal experience serving as a courtier and eventually converting to Islam late in his life. To him, the ʿAbbāsids were no oppressive overlords from whom he needed rescuing. Rather, he saw enormous favor at their hands, gaining employment despite his association with Māzyār ibn Qārin, spending most of his court service as a Christian, becoming al-Mutawakkil's table companion, and so on. His experience of the ʿAbbāsids' goodness and piety seems to resonate in his insistence on the piety of the Prophet Muḥammad and his successors. For ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī, such an admirable prophet cannot have been but God-sent. It seems that his reaction to living as an ʿAbbāsid courtier mirrors this argument—such an admirable dynasty must also be God-sent. While contemporary Christian apocalyptic texts were construing their Muslim rulers as a force

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[163] Gutas, Dimitri, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, 28-29.

from whom they needed rescuing, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's personal experience of these overlords seems to have pushed him to reconsider this framework. After his conversion to Islam, he sees good reason not only to realign his understanding of the Prophet Muḥammad, but also of the place of the ʿAbbāsids in apocalyptic history.

While the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla* is written under the pretense of convincing Christian readers of the prophethood of Muḥammad, we also see a systematic legitimization of the ʿAbbāsid Empire on scriptural grounds. By examining this line of argument, we can readily understand the reason for this work's title: *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*. Not only was the Prophet Muḥammad divinely foretold and appointed, but so was the present dynasty. ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's argument begins by demonstrating the continuity between Muhammad and the biblical prophets. He shows this by making arguments for the continuity between the message of the Torah/Gospel and that of the Qurʾān; setting out the qualities that prophets must exhibit and showing that Muḥammad meets them; and arguing that both the goodness of Muḥammad and his successors and their military success attest to Muḥammad's prophethood.

Having established Muḥammad's prophethood, he next turns to finding the portrait of the Prophet in the Bible. As I have construed it, he portrays the Bible as prophesying three sorts of proofs for Muḥammad's prophethood. Some prophecies mention the coming of a prophet whose description clearly matches Muḥammad's. Other prophecies foretell the success of the Muslim Conquests. Finally, some prophecies predict the establishment of a dynasty—which ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī demonstrates refers to the ʿAbbāsid Empire. By conveying Muḥammad's portrait in the Bible as such, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī not only legitimizes his prophethood but also the divine appointment—indeed, the everlasting success!—of the present empire. Not only does the success of the ʿAbbāsids serve as proof for the prophecy of Muḥammad, but the biblical portrait

of this messenger and the kingdom he establishes attests to the grandeur of the present empire. Furthermore, using the specific passage in Daniel 12, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī can actually date the divinely appointed kingdom to the present day: therefore, the Bible foretells the ʿAbbāsid Empire, in particular.

More broadly, this analysis draws our attention to the ways in which thinkers can use sacred texts such as the Bible in order to make sense of their present contexts. Far from entering into this discourse on prophethood as a disinterested theologian, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī brings with him a rich set of intellectual, social, and political experiences. In light of his experience serving in the caliph's court, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī composes this tract as a dual defense of the prophethood of Muḥammad and the divine authorization of the ʿAbbāsids. These subjects intersect in his peculiar life story, culminating in his conversion. Recalling our quotation of Rambo above,[164] we must approach this conversion with a keen awareness of the interconnectedness of our sociocultural contexts. Religious conversion, therefore, must be approached as an interplay between one's personal, spiritual experiences and the social institutions through which these experiences are mediated. If we approach ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī's conversion in this way—and I believe we have—then we ought to be able to see in his religious texts the interaction between his theological positions and the institutions in which he is operating. We see this connection strongly exemplified in his method of connecting the prophethood of Muḥammad to the ascendancy of the dynasty that he presently serves. All of this happens with reference to the Bible. Looking to this remarkably malleable book, ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī finds the resources he needs to make sense of his world.

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[164] See p. 3.

Chapter 4: Conclusion: Polemic and Constructing the Self

Theologians are humans. Unless we are reading an explicitly confessional work like St. Augustine's *Confessions* or al-Ghāzālī's *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, this fact can be easy to gloss over. But to recognize this reality in a serious way can drastically change the way that we approach texts. Augustine would never have produced the *City of God* were it not for his mischievous childhood, his constant battle with concupiscence, his flirtation with Manichaeism, and his eventual conversion to Christianity. Al-Ghazālī would never have written *Ihya' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* or *Kīmiyyā Sa'āda* were it not for his period of teaching in the Baghdad Nizamiyya, his spiritual crisis, and his period of seclusion. In the same way, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī would not have written the present two texts were it not for his upbringing as a Christian, his experience of favor under 'Abbāsid rule, and his religious conversion. Our reading of his religious texts has therefore worked to draw out the connections between his personal experiences and the way that he approaches his polemical project.

As we have argued, it seems that his approach to the Bible serves as a remarkably self-reflective aspect of his texts. Through his writing on the Bible, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī largely engages in discourses on rationality, *taḥrīf*, *dalā'il al-nubuwwa*, and apocalyptic. Through the medium of these discourses, we have attempted to reconstruct the parameters of the religious changes that this figure has undertaken, and identify the social institutions through which these changes have been mediated. Through his newly conceived notion of rationality, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī demonstrates how his former understanding of the Bible—as expressed in the Nicene Creed—was inadequate and in need of revision. This is the project undertaken in the *Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*. In order to correct his old doctrinal mistakes, he formulates his twelve "neutral" criteria to which any proper religion must adhere. Thanks to these criteria, defined at once along rational and Qur'ānic lines,

he can draw truth not only from the Gospels, Torah, and Psalms, but also from the epistles of Paul, the Hymn of Nestorius, and elsewhere. Importantly, these criteria forbid us to profess doctrines such as the Incarnation and the Trinity. At the same time, by discarding these doctrines, we have opened up the Bible to the possibility of reinterpretation, apart from the christological lens preferred by Christians. It is this project that he undertakes in the *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla*. Throughout this text, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī demonstrates that the Bible, in reality, contains testaments to the Prophet Muḥammad, the Muslim Conquests, and the eventual establishment of the 'Abbāsid Empire. Therefore, the Bible not only professes the Islamic notion of God (and, consequently, the humanity of Jesus), but it also contains testaments to the messenger of Islam.

Through this use of the Bible, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī is able to reflect on his experience of religious conversion in a number of ways. By mobilizing discourses on rationality and *taḥrīf* in the *Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*, he demonstrates how his religious conversion is reflected in his approach to his former community's scriptures. His conversion has resulted in his picking up a discourse on rationality that rejects Christian approaches to the Bible. Not only does he use his new perspective to open the Bible up for reinterpretation, but he also uses his reinterpretation of this text in ways that reflect his coming to terms with the reality of his context. As we have seen, contemporary Christians were using apocalyptic texts, built on a Danielic schema, to understand their position under Muslim rule. This understanding construed the Christian situation as one from which they needed saving. 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's reinterpretation of Daniel subverts this understanding, viewing the 'Abbāsid Empire as a divinely sanctioned dynasty, borne out of the prophethood of the pious, upright, biblically-foretold Prophet Muḥammad. It seems no

coincidence that he writes this way about a dynasty under whom he saw significant favor, even while still a Christian, and under whose service he converted to Islam.

On a broader scale, this approach to polemical texts affords us the opportunity to put thinkers in conversation with numerous facets of their historical contexts. On this view, polemical writing can become a valuable tool for investigating how figures come to cope with the perceived realities of their everyday lives. Beneath philosophical and theological arguments, we find men and women with pens and paper, inhabiting historical space. Not only do these thinkers respond to their contexts through polemical writing, but they also place themselves, self-consciously, in those contexts. When ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī writes of the irrationality of the religion that he abandoned, he simultaneously constructs an image of himself as a rational religious man. When he writes of the ways that Christians have misinterpreted the Bible, he paints himself as a proper exegete. When he reinterprets passages in Daniel as a testament to the victory of the dynasty that he serves, he paints a picture of himself as someone on the victorious side of apocalyptic history. To write polemic is to construct a picture of oneself. This process always happens with reference to the discourses and social institution in which one is operating. If we view polemic through this lens, then we have the opportunity to reconstruct thinkers as they saw themselves.

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