

An Analysis of the Supernatural Archetype of the Prophet Muḥammad as Found in the
Sīra/Ta'riḫ and *Tafsīr* Works of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr

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Abstract

Reports relating supernatural events - or miracles - in the life of the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 11/632) have been traditionally either ignored by those modern scholars attempting to determine the historicity of the source material or have been studied piecemeal in an attempt to determine their origins by those scholars who see them as secondary additions. The current study will examine both the *sīra/ta'riḫh*, the story of Muḥammad's life as told within larger works of universal history, and *tafsīr*, exegetical, works of two medieval Muslim scholars, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 773/1373), to attempt to determine how the reports of the supernatural fit into the story of Muḥammad's life as a whole. The result is that there is both a supernatural and mundane archetype for the life of Muḥammad, and that they appear to mirror each other almost perfectly. Whereas the story begins with God performing all the miracles for Muḥammad's benefit, by the time of his death in Medina, Muḥammad has completed his mastery over the forces of the supernatural, even to the point where it appears that God performs miracles directly in response to Muḥammad's prayers. Thus, as Muḥammad gained more control over the movement he founded, he gained an equal amount of control over the forces of the supernatural. Both al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr include reports that contain the supernatural archetype, but also include reports that diverge from it in important ways. While there is not one, overall theory to explain why each author made the changes he did to the supernatural archetype of Muḥammad's life, the examples in the following chapters indicate that the role of the supernatural versus the mundane, the politicization of the archetype, and authorial opinion were important to

each scholar and help to support the argument that the miracle stories are integral to the life of Muḥammad as a whole, and deserve to be studied as such.

Résumé

Des rapports reliant des événements surnaturel - ou des miracles - dans la vie du Prophète Mahômet (m. 11/632) ont été traditionnellement ignorés par ces érudits modernes essayant de déterminer l'historicité du matériel de source ou étés fragmentaires étudié afin d'essayer de déterminer leurs origines par ces érudits qui les voient en tant qu'additions secondaires. L'étude courante examinera tous les deux le *sīra/ta'rikkh*, l'histoire de la vie de Mahômet comme dit dans de plus grands travaux de l'histoire universelle, et *tafsīrs*, exégétique, travaux de deux érudits musulmans médiévaux, al-Ṭabarī (m. 310/923) et Ibn Kathīr (m. 773/1373), d'essayer de déterminer comment les rapports de l'ajustement surnaturel dans l'histoire de la vie de Mahômet dans l'ensemble. Le résultat est qu'il y a un archétype surnaturel et banal pendant la vie de Mahômet, et qu'ils semblent se refléter presque parfaitement. Considérant que l'histoire commence par Dieu exécutant tous les miracles pour l'avantage de Mahômet, avant que de sa mort dans Medina, Mahômet ait accompli sa maîtrise au-dessus des forces du surnaturel, même au point où il s'avère que Dieu exécute des miracles seulement en réponse aux prières de Mahômet. Ainsi, car Mahômet a gagné plus de contrôle du mouvement il a fondé, il a gagné une quantité égale de contrôle des forces du surnaturel. Les deux al-Ṭabarī et Ibn Kathīr incluent les rapports qui continuent l'archétype surnaturel, mais incluent également les rapport qui divergent de lui des manières importantes. Tandis qu'il n'y a pas d'un, la théorie globale pour expliquer pourquoi chaque auteur fait les changements l'a fait à l'archétype surnaturel de la vie de Mahômet, les exemples dans les chapitres suivants indiquent que le rôle du surnaturel contre le banal, la politisation de l'archétype,

et l'opinion de l'auteur étaient important pour chaque érudit et aident à soutenir l'argument que les histoires de miracle sont intégrales à la vie de Mahômet dans l'ensemble, et à mériter d'être étudiées en tant que tels.

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A project such as this would have been impossible without the help and caring of several people. My advisor, Donald P. Little, has provided much-needed advice and encouragement, clarified some of my translations, and even gave the occasional push, which was needed more often than I care to admit. This entire endeavor would have never begun, much less finished, had it not been for his support. My co-advisor, A. Üner Turgay, was the first faculty member I met at McGill and always made me feel welcome, even when it meant phone calls from 1,500 miles away. It is to the efforts of these two men that I owe any success this project might enjoy, while responsibility for its faults remains my own. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Mr. Karam at McGill University, who took quite a bit of time out of his schedule to tutor me in Arabic, and without whose help I would have been lost. I have also had the good fortune of having the support of not one, but the staffs of two libraries who have gone above and beyond the call of duty to help with discovering (and sometimes recovering) sources and the ever-important Interlibrary Loans. At the Institute of Islamic Studies Library, Salwa Ferahian, Wayne St. Thomas, and Steve Millier provided me with sources I would have otherwise missed, but more importantly gave me their friendship, which I will always cherish. At the University of South Alabama Library in Mobile, Debbie Cobb, Kathy Jones, and Jan Sauer have all gone out of their way to provide the sources and support needed to finish this project so far away from where it first began. The office staff at the Institute of Islamic Studies has been my foster family for the last seven years, and so a special thanks goes to Dawn Richard, Ann Yaxley, and Kirsty McKinnon.

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A Note on Translations

All translations of non-English texts used in this dissertation are my own with the following exceptions: the English translation of al-Ṭabarī's *History* as published by the State University of New York Press by various translators and the English translation by John Cooper of the Introduction to al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*. Trevor LeGassick's translation of Ibn Kathīr's *sīra/ta'rīkh* is somewhat troublesome, since he does not take his material from the *Bidāya wa'l-Nihāya*, but from the work dedicated solely to Ibn Kathīr's life of Muḥammad by Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Wāḥid. While this work sometimes correlates to the text of the *Bidāya*, sometimes it does not. Therefore, where the English translation matches Ibn Kathīr's work, I have used LeGassick, but where the two texts do not match, I have used my own translation of the appropriate parts of the *Bidāya*.

Introduction

The words and deeds of the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 11 AH/632 AD) are of the utmost importance for the Muslim community. Not only do they serve as one of the foundations for Islamic law, but they also reveal the model of Muḥammad's life that Muslims are obligated to follow. The depiction of these words and deeds is found in a wide variety of genres, which are then used for a number of purposes. The authoritative *ḥadīth* collections are used for the law, the works of *sīra* tell the story of Muḥammad's life and the life of the early community, and the *tafsīr*, or exegesis, of the Qur'ān, the book that contains the revelations Muḥammad is said to have received from God and the work that is at the very core of the Muslim faith, helps Muslims to understand the sometimes cryptic text of their scripture. Through all of these types of sources, an image of Muḥammad emerges that appears to be timeless. Muḥammad the Prophet becomes an archetype and the events of his life take on legendary proportions.¹

But the quest of modern scholars in the West has been to look beyond this archetypal Muḥammad in an effort to determine the historical reality of his life and mission.² In an attempt to achieve this end, scholars have become fixated on the

¹The notion of prophetic biography being itself an archetype for biographies of later figures has been studied by Michael Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mūn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and Suleiman Alī Mourad, *Early Islam Between Myth and History: Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110H/728 CE) and the Formation of His Legacy in Classical Islamic Scholarship* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

²It appears as though Watt's biography of Muḥammad is the last overall narrative account of the Prophet's life to be attempted by a Western scholar; see W. M. Watt, *Muḥammad at Mecca* and *Muḥammad at Medina* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1953, 1956). After the revisionist works of Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) and John Wansbrough *Quranic Studies* and *The Sectarian Milieu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 1978), the field of early Islamic history in general and the study of the life of Muḥammad in particular has been relegated to articles that attempt to develop a methodology for determining authenticity. See especially Uri Rubin, ed., *The Life of Muḥammad* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 1998); Harald Motzki, ed., *The Biography of Muḥammad: The Issue of the Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); and Herbert Berg, ed., *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

individual report, the *khbar*, and its component parts, the *isnād*, or chain of authorities, and the *matn*, or the text.³ While much important work has been accomplished, a consensus as to the authenticity of the source material has yet to be reached.⁴ The only aspect of Muḥammad's life that appears to be agreed upon by scholars is that those reports that relate supernatural events are to be studied solely in an effort to determine when and from where they first entered the body of source material.⁵ Since the Qur'ān states that Muḥammad performed no miracles,⁶ modern scholars have hypothesized that these reports must have been added at a later date. In studies that attempt to determine the historicity of reports, these events are ignored completely.⁷

Rather than examine individual reports in the life of Muḥammad to differentiate between archetype and historical truth, the current study will focus on the elements of the supernatural that are found in the story to attempt to determine how they fit into the narrative as a whole. The results have been somewhat surprising. The general story of

³See Stefan Leder, "The Literary Use of the *Khbar*" in Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad, eds., *The Byzantine and Islamic Near East*, vol. 1, *Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1992), 227-315.

⁴See Herbert Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000).

⁵See especially the works of Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, Vol. II, translated by C.R. Barber and S.M. Stern (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1971); Josef Horowitz, "The Growth of the Mohammed Legend," in *The Life of Muḥammad*, edited by Uri Rubin (Brookfield, VT: Ashagate Publishing Co., 1998); Daniel J. Sahas, "The Formation of Later Islamic Doctrines as a Response to Byzantine Polemics: The Miracles of Muhammed," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 27, 2-3 (Summer-Fall 1982): 307-324; Sydney H. Griffith, "The Prophet Muḥammad: His Scriptures and His Message According to Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the First Abbasid Century," in *The Life of Muḥammad*, edited by Uri Rubin (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1995); Harris Birkeland, *The Legend of the Opening of Muhammed's Breast* (Oslo: I Kommissjon Hos Jacob Dybwad, 1955); Toufic Fahd, *La Divination arabe: Études religieuses, sociologiques et folkloriques sur le milieu natif de l'Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1966); and Jaroslav Stetkevych, *Muḥammad and the Golden Bough: Reconstructing Arabian Myth* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996) all of which will be treated in detail in Chapter One.

⁶See Qur'ān 7:188, 10:49, 18:110, 25:7-8, 41:6, and 72:21 for examples of statements wherein Muḥammad is said to be just a man.

⁷Almost none of the articles in the collections on Muḥammad's life and the history of early Islam cited above discuss reports of Muḥammad's miracles.

Muḥammad's life as depicted in the historical and biographical material portrays him as someone who began as an orphan, but who managed to gain a reputation for honesty and marry a wealthy businesswoman. After receiving the Revelation, he became a persecuted prophet who was forced to leave his hometown of Mecca for the oasis settlement of Medina, where, over time, he became the successful leader of both a proselytizing religion and an expanding community. So, how do the miracle stories fit into this tale? Oddly enough, the miracle stories appear to mirror Muḥammad's mundane role almost perfectly. Before the Revelation of the Qur'ān, all of the miracles are performed by God for Muḥammad's benefit. After the first visit by Gabriel, as Muḥammad gains followers, he also gains more control over elements of the supernatural. While God continues to perform miracles for Muḥammad, the Prophet is now able to perform miracles on his own account. But what about the Medinan period? Most scholars who attempt to determine historicity appear to rely more on the reports for this later period due to the argument that it contains less legendary material than that which covers Muḥammad's early life in Mecca.⁸ But a count of the individual miracle stories reveals the opposite to be true. There are markedly more miracle stories related for the roughly ten years of the Medinan period than for the entirety of

⁸See Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1998), 204-5, whose theory of the Islamic communal memory argues that there were more people who had personal memories of the Medinan period than the Meccan, and so there are more reports for this period in general. While it is true that the Medinan period is given far more space in the stories of the life of Muḥammad, the fact that the number of miracle stories also increases dramatically must be taken into account. That scholars continue to rely on reports that claim to describe the Medinan period is indicated in the work by Gregor Schoeler, "Foundations for a New Biography of Muḥammad: The Production and Evaluation of the Corpus of Traditions according to 'Urwah b. al-Zubayr," *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*, ed., Herbert Berg (Leiden: Brill, 2003), see especially 24.

Muhammad's life before his Hijra in 622 AD.⁹ These miracle stories show the finality of Muhammad's control over the forces of the supernatural, including not only the performance of miracles himself, but also occasions where God appears to perform miracles at his request. So, the archetypal image of Muhammad is one of increasing power and control. As he gains control over an ever-expanding number of followers and territory, he gains an equal amount of control over the forces of the supernatural, thus completing the archetype.

While this alone is an important point to make about the life of Muhammad, the devil, as they say, is in the details, and while investigating how this archetypal story was transmitted by different authors at different times, two important points emerged. First, although there are timeless elements to the story of Muhammad that are found in any number of works about his life, different Muslim scholars appear to have their own ideas about how certain aspects of the archetype should be viewed by the community of believers. Each author alters Muhammad's archetypal image, whether consciously or not, to reflect both the author's individual style and his time and place. Second, the story of the life of Muhammad is intimately bound to the exegesis of the Qur'an, including reports of his supernatural abilities. Many of the stories of his life, as reported in the biographical and historical material, include quotations from the Qur'an, serve as reasons for why certain verses were revealed, or both. Thus, in order to examine how the miracle stories fit into the larger story of the life of Muhammad, I have limited this

⁹This includes reports wherein individuals foretell the coming of a prophet or of Islam years before Muhammad's birth. As stated above, the number of miracle stories increases dramatically for this later period, but the total number of reports does as well, so it may be possible that the ratio of miracle reports to mundane reports is the same for both the Meccan and Medinan periods. However, this would still have to be addressed by those who focus on the Medinan period for historical reconstruction.

study, where possible, to examples of those reports in the biographical and historical material that include both a miracle story and a Qur'ān citation. I have then examined the exegesis of those verses in an attempt to determine if they are portrayed in the same manner in the different genres involved.

On the face of it, the first point may not seem like such an important discovery. It is fairly well known that an author will tailor his stories to reflect his own situation, but for Muslim scholars of the medieval period of Islamic history, tailoring the story was supposedly out of the question. For scholars of the medieval Islamic world, the *ḥadīth* format was becoming increasingly important in all types of works.¹⁰ All authoritative reports were eventually to have an *isnād* that went back to the time of the Prophet himself. Any work of *sīra*, *ta'rīkh*, or *tafsīr* was simply supposed to be a collection of authoritative reports from past authorities. The individual author was to act merely as collector and transmitter, and this is what many medieval Muslim scholars claimed to have done. However, a close examination of the historical and exegetical works of two such authors, al-Ṭabarī (d. in Baghdad, 310/923) and Ibn Kathīr (d. in Damascus, 773/1373), reveals that they did not simply relay the reports of others. Each of these men tells the story of the miracles of Muḥammad's life in such a way that his own ideas and biases become evident, as do the ideas and biases of the society in which he lived.

The second aspect of this study, the relationship between the miracle reports in the biographical and historical material containing Qur'ān citations and the exegesis of

¹⁰Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 73-81, discusses this evolution and argues that al-Ṭabarī attempted to use the *ḥadīth* format in his *History* in order to make the genre of history acceptable to *ḥadīth* scholars.

those verses, reveals that, while the *tafsīr* of some of the verses cited is linked directly to the miracle stories in question, the explanation of other cited verses either ignores the miracle stories entirely, or transmits reports of completely unrelated supernatural events. Overall, the supernatural archetype in the *tafsīr* works studied here is represented less than it is in the *sīra/ta'rikkh*, revealing that each author viewed the archetype as more central to the latter genre than to the former. It is also the examination of Qur'ān exegesis that helped determine the choice of the authors studied here. Both al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr are well known for their works of universal history (*ta'rikkh*), which include a lengthy relation of the biography (*sīra*) of Muḥammad, as well as for works of Qur'ān exegesis (*tafsīr*).

There are, however, other similarities between the two scholars that seem to favor a comparative study.¹¹ Both al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr were, to varying degrees, followers of the Shāfi'ī legal school of thought. Al-Ṭabarī would go on to found his own *madhhab*, but it would not long survive his death. Ibn Kathīr became a devoted follower of the controversial Ḥanbalī reformer, Ibn Taymīya (d. 728/1328). Thus, while both men adhered, to an extent, to the Shāfi'ī *madhhab*, each exercised a certain amount of independent reasoning to step beyond the boundaries of his legal school of thought. Also, both men were involved in the controversies of their day relating to the Ḥanbalī *madhhab* and the Shī'a sect. Al-Ṭabarī had been accused of Shī'ī sympathies and was forced to defend himself to the caliph's officials. He was also attacked, sometimes physically, by the Ḥanbalīs of Baghdad, among other reasons, for his lack of support for

¹¹More detailed biographical material on each of these men can be found in Chapter Two of the present work.

the tenets of their movement. Ibn Kathīr makes numerous anti-Shī'ī comments in his works, and was a member of a council of legal authorities called upon to try a Shī'ī, who was later executed, for publicly insulting the first three caliphs, Abū Bakr (d. 13/634), 'Umar (d. 24/644), and 'Uthmān (d. 36/656), among others. Ibn Kathīr's relationship with the Ḥanbalīs of his day focused on the person of Ibn Taymīya, and this appears to have put him at odds with the leaders of the Shāfi'ī school in Damascus. These controversies impacted how both men depicted aspects of the supernatural archetype of Muḥammad in the works studied here.

The events that are examined in the current study, as related by both al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr, were chosen for reasons that are unique to each case. One event was chosen each for the pre- and post-Revelation Meccan periods, while two events were chosen for the Medinan period.¹² The pre-Revelation Meccan period is represented by the story of the supernatural light that appeared on 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib's face immediately before Muḥammad's conception.¹³ None of the miracle stories for this period are given a Qur'ān citation by al-Ṭabarī, and even for Ibn Kathīr such citations are rare. Thus, this event was chosen because it is the only case where Ibn Kathīr provides a Qur'ān citation that matches part of a report related by both men that contains similar language. The miracle story for the post-Revelation Meccan period, Muḥammad's multiplication of a small amount of food and drink to feed a large number of his kinsmen while he announces his mission to them for the first time, was chosen because it is one of the few times that al-Ṭabarī includes a supernatural event with overt

¹²The fact that the Medinan period contains depictions of the vast majority of supernatural events in the life of Muḥammad is the reason that two separate episodes were chosen for this period.

¹³'Abd Allāh is Muḥammad's father.

political implications, Muḥammad's designation of 'Alī as his successor, but also because Ibn Kathīr goes out of his way to refute those implications. The two events of the Medinan period, Muḥammad's clairvoyant knowledge of a letter sent by one of his Companions warning the Meccans of the Prophet's imminent attack and God's killing of two men who plotted to kill Muḥammad, contain reports of Muḥammad's prayers to God being answered in a supernatural manner. These events were chosen, however, because, even though these miracle stories are of relatively minor importance for the overall tale of the Medinan period, both authors purposefully support a supernatural interpretation of the events despite the fact that the majority of the reports they relate do not necessarily indicate such an interpretation, thus revealing that each man was willing, at times, to put his own interpretation of events before the bulk of the evidence presented. Thus, even though each author was constrained to a certain extent by the *ḥadīth* format of text and *isnād*, or chain of authorities, each also used his own interpretation of events to portray the image of the supernatural actions of the Prophet in a manner that revealed the author's own opinions and the impact of the events of his time and place. The supernatural archetype of Muḥammad, then, becomes the framework on which both al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr built their individual portrayals of the Prophet and his miracles, revealing that medieval Muslim scholarship, even by the time of Ibn Kathīr, was not the stiff, formalistic body of work it sometimes claimed to be, but was instead a thriving and ever-changing reflection of Islamic society itself.

Chapter One

Myth, Miracle, and History in the Life of Muḥammad: A Comprehensive Review of the Scholarly Literature

The relation of tales of the supernatural appears to be as old as man himself. As early as the ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations, there has been mention of magic and miracle.¹⁴ The difference between the two categories is, of course, dependent upon whether one is on the outside looking in, or vice versa. It is a well known fact that when one religious tradition supplants another, the miracles of the previous religion are seen by the adherents of the new as magic or superstition, and are, therefore, suspect.¹⁵ Thus, to modern historians, attempting to view their sources through the lens of reason, the stories of miracles performed by various individuals are viewed as either pious fictional works or as the misinterpretation of common magic tricks. History, then, must be studied objectively, rationally, and scientifically in order to be considered a serious category of intellectual pursuit. To that end, the sources for the early Islamic era in general and the life of the Prophet Muḥammad in particular have been used by historians in the same manner as would, say, a dig site by archaeologists. Scholars sift through the material, discarding what they view as irrelevant or false, searching instead for artifacts that they see as historically valuable. By dismissing the tales of the miraculous, the soil, if you will, of our metaphor, modern historians may be missing the one element that

¹⁴Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, eds., *Witchcraft in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 3-90. See also idem, *Witchcraft in Europe: Biblical and Pagan Societies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

¹⁵Georg Luck, "Witches and Sorcerers in Classical Literature" in *Witchcraft in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, 91-158, idem, *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) and idem, *Ancient Pathways and Hidden Pursuits: Religion, Morals, and Magic in the Ancient World* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000). See also Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, and Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher, eds., *Religion, Science, and Magic: In Concert and in Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3-7.

appears to hold the site together. Rather than study the individual reports in an effort to determine which of them are authentic and which are not, or, more commonly, in an effort to devise a methodology by which to make that determination, perhaps a look at precisely those elements in the story of the early community that modern historians find so troublesome, but which were obviously viewed as indispensable by both their original authors and their later narrators, is in order.

The Role of Miracle and Myth in Society

Before an in-depth study of this phenomenon is attempted, however, it is perhaps best to discuss the wider topic of the role of miracle stories in society in general and to this end we will begin with James Frazer, Joseph Campbell, and Mircea Eliade. James Frazer's work, *The Golden Bough*, compares the tale of the Roman hero Aeneas to that of other heroic figures in the mythologies of various cultures and compares the role of the vegetative element in these stories.¹⁶ He argues that ancient peoples were mystified by the acts of nature and saw in them works of magic. This, he claims, is part of man's evolutionary track. He argues that "we shall perhaps be disposed to conclude that the movement of the higher thought, so far as we can trace it, has on the whole been from magic through religion to science."¹⁷ He does not blindly claim that scientific thought is the highest level to which man can aspire, however, but states that "in the last analysis magic, religion, and science are nothing but theories of thought; and as science

¹⁶James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1994). The Golden Bough is the branch used by Aeneas as a key to unlock the gates of the Underworld.

¹⁷Ibid., 804.

has supplanted its predecessors, so it may hereafter be itself superseded by some more perfect hypothesis....”¹⁸

Joseph Campbell, appearing to continue Frazer’s theory that myth is part of an evolutionary step in man’s journey from superstition to science, adds the theories of psychology, especially those of Freud and Jung, to examine the role of myth in the lives of both pre-modern and modern individuals and societies.¹⁹ He argues that “religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth.”²⁰ However, he claims that with the move from superstition to science, especially the science of modern psychoanalysis, man has lost his way in the greater scheme of things, and that, therefore, new symbols must take the place of the old. He argues that the modern emphasis on the individual has severed mankind from the view of human life as one part of a universal whole and that this view must be regained for human life to have meaning.²¹

Mircea Eliade discusses the role of the individual and the archetype in myth, as does Campbell, but also argues in his work on history in pre-modern societies that the members of these societies viewed time as cyclical rather than linear and viewed their lives and deeds, therefore, as reenactments of deeds performed by gods and heroes.²² He

¹⁸Ibid., 806.

¹⁹Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: MJF Books, 1949), 4.

²⁰Ibid., 3.

²¹Ibid., 388-391. He also argues that this does not mean we should return to the beliefs of the past, but that we must devise a new means by which to see ourselves as part of a cosmic whole. To this end, a new hero is needed to complete this task.

²²Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or, Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954, Second Paperback Printing, 1974), ix-x, xiii-xv.

examines how this affected their view of history, and although he focuses on sources for Eastern European history, his ideas can be applied to other societies as well. He argues:

The recollection of a historical event or a real personage survives in popular memory for two or three centuries at the utmost. This is because popular memory finds difficulty in retaining individual events and real figures. The structures by means of which it functions are different: categories instead of events, archetypes instead of historical personages. The historical personage is assimilated to his mythical model (hero, etc.), while the event is identified with the category of mythical actions (fight with a monster, enemy brothers, etc.). If certain epic poems preserve what is called "historical truth," this truth almost never has to do with definite persons and events, but with institutions, customs, landscapes.²³

Eliade, too, concludes his work with a warning for modern man. He claims that modern man, with his linear and de-mythologized sense of history, must effect a total change if he is to avoid falling into spiritual despair. Even religious systems that propound a definite beginning and end to time and human existence are able to avoid this despair, because terrible events "were regarded as a punishment inflicted by God, the syndrome of the decline of the 'age,' and so on. And it was possible to accept them precisely because they had a metahistorical meaning, because, for the greater part of mankind, still clinging to the traditional viewpoint, history did not have, and could not have, value in itself."²⁴

The role of myth in the ancient Middle East is examined by S. H. Hooke, in his work, *Middle Eastern Mythology*, which compares myths from the ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations to those of the ancient Hebrews as well as to

²³Ibid., 43.

²⁴Ibid., 151. Friedrich Nietzsche also calls for history to perform a function, to be useful, and criticizes those who would see in history any inherent value separate from its practical purposes. See Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1980), 13-19.

those found in the New Testament.²⁵ He argues that myth, specifically what he calls ritual myth, is the story that is told to explain ritual elements in religious ceremonies. He adds, however, that this does not mean that the myth is perceived as having no potency. On the contrary, he claims that “the spoken part, the myth, was not a mere description of the situation, but had magical power....”²⁶ Therefore, it appears that religious ceremonies were performed by ancient peoples in an attempt to communicate with their gods, but that later peoples viewed these same ceremonies, complete with myth and ritual, as magical rather than religious. Fear of magic and witchcraft is also found in ancient Jewish sources, yet the Israelite king, Saul, convinces a witch to call upon the spirit of a dead prophet to give him advice.²⁷ So, for the Jewish authors, the woman conjuring the spirit is a witch, rather than a religious figure, but the prophet whose spirit is summoned remains an authentic religious personage since he is recognized by Jewish society as part of their religious tradition.²⁸ Therefore, it would

²⁵S. H. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology: From the Assyrians to the Hebrews* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963).

²⁶Ibid., 183. In this, he is discussing the similarities between the Babylonian Tammuz myth, and its use during the New Year rituals, and the Christian rite of the Eucharist, wherein the priest uses both myth and ritual to resurrect the dead god. But this can also be said of the later use of the recitation of parts of the Qur’ān for magical protection as well as Ibn Kathīr’s claim that the story of Muḥammad’s life itself has healing properties, both of which will be discussed in more detail below. See also Alan Dundes, ed., *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).

²⁷I Samuel 28:3-25.

²⁸Some authors have seen this fear of witchcraft in terms of gender roles within particular societies. Especially popular are those studies that deal with this phenomenon in Europe and America. For example, see G. R. Quaipe, *Godly Zeal and Furious Rage: The Witch Craze* (London: Croom Helm, 1987); Brian Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, Revised Edition (London and New York: Longmans, 1987, 1995); Carol Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York and London: Norton, 1987); but opposing this view is J. A. Sharpe, “Witchcraft and Women in Seventeenth Century England: Some Northern Evidence” *Continuity and Change* 6 (1991): 179-199; and in rebuttal to Sharpe, Clive Holmes, “Women: Witnesses and Witches” *Past and Present* 140 (1993): 45-78. Their arguments appear to have merit, as many of the individual soothsayers in the life of Muḥammad are women, but an investigation of this element of the life of Muḥammad is outside the scope of the current study.

appear that each religious tradition must determine what it will keep from previous religions and what it will shun as magic, myth, and witchcraft.

Islam is, of course, no exception and it is widely known that Muḥammad chose to keep certain elements of the pagan religious tradition of Mecca and to Islamicize these in an attempt to make them acceptable in the new order of things. Other aspects of the Arab pagan tradition were discarded, however, and came to be viewed with disdain and outright hostility. For example, circumambulating the Ka'ba was retained, while divination was set aside. Also, those miraculous acts that were associated with Muḥammad's role as prophet became reserved for him alone. Therefore, later figures who attempted to perform miracles similar to those of Muḥammad were shunned by many as purveyors of magic who intended to fool believers into straying from the true faith.²⁹

²⁹See al-Ṭabarī's comments on the miracles claimed by the leaders of the Zanj and the Qarmaṭians. David Waines, tr., *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 36, *The Revolt of the Zanj* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 32, 33-4; and Philip M. Fields, tr., *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 37, *The 'Abbāsīd Recovery* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1985), 31, 42, 169-75. The only aspect of the supernatural that was allowed to be retained by the Islamic community was the prophetic dream. According to tradition, this is the only part of prophethood that Muḥammad claimed would remain with his people after he had passed on, and we continue to see even the Prophet himself appear to Muslims in their dreams to advise them. See John C. Lamoreaux, *The Early Muslim Tradition of Dream Interpretation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002). Another work that examines the role of dreams in Islamic society is Leah Kinberg, "Dreams as a Means to Evaluate *Ḥadīth*," *Jerusalem Studies of Arabic and Islam* 23 (1999): 79-99. Her study reveals that dreams were sometimes used in concert with other methods to show the trustworthiness of either an individual authority or the text of an individual report. The use of dreams as a means of noting authoritativeness would seem to strengthen the notion of dreams as a supernatural power passed on from Muḥammad to his followers. However, as will be shown later in this work, it would appear that certain popular practices, such as reciting part of the Qur'an for magical protection, also have their origins in the prophetic powers of Muḥammad.

The Miracles of Muḥammad in the Secondary Source Material

Modern works that discuss the miracles of the Prophet typically do so in order to determine their origins. The nineteenth century Hungarian scholar Ignaz Goldziher, in the second volume of his *Muslim Studies*, argues that, while Muḥammad himself consistently denied any supernatural abilities, his contemporaries continued to ascribe them to him.³⁰ After his death and the spread of Islam out of the Arabian Peninsula, the stories of his special powers grew faster than the orthodox version of his lack of miracles. Goldziher claims:

It is one of the most curious phenomena in the development of Islam to observe the ease with which orthodox theology also adapts itself to the needs of popular belief, though this entails open contradiction to the unambiguous teaching of the Koran. The power of *ijmā'* here scored one of its biggest triumphs in the whole system of Islam, insofar as the belief of the people succeeded in penetrating into the canonical conception of the Prophet and, so to speak, forcing it to make him into a fortune-teller, worker of miracles, and magician.³¹

He goes on to relate this change in the image of the Prophet as the direct precursor to the veneration of saints in Islam, an idea that he argues is “alien” to the religion.³²

Goldziher’s work has been extremely influential among Western scholars, and his dual arguments that the miracle stories were not part of the original religious views of orthodox Islam and that their integration into the religious texts reflect a conciliation by Muslim theologians to popular belief have retained their popularity. His views are only partly continued by Josef Horowitz in his article, “The Growth of the Mohammed Legend,” in which he argues that “even during that early period there was no definite,

³⁰Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, Vol. II, translated by C.R. Barber and S.M. Stern (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1971), see especially his section, “Veneration of Saints in Islam,” 255-341. Goldziher’s work served as the basis for several later studies on this topic.

³¹Ibid., 261.

³²Ibid., 262.

clear-cut line of demarcation between the miracle-mania of the popular faith and the teachings of the theologians.”³³ Horovitz agrees with Goldziher in that he states that the Muslim theologians purposefully included the popular legends in their works, but argues that these were not used in their disputations with the Christians at least until the last half of the eighth century AD, “since these had the Koran on their side and the miracles of the Prophet were still far from being a generally accepted article of faith.”³⁴ Daniel J. Sahas, in his article, “The Formation of Later Islamic Doctrines as a Response to Byzantine Polemics: The Miracles of Muhammed,” argues that the compulsion to include miracles for Muḥammad was brought about by the “religious fervor and piety of the believers” as well as by the “direct challenge of the Christian polemicists comparing Muhammed to the Jesus of the gospels.”³⁵ Sydney Griffith, in his article, “The Prophet Muḥammad: His Scriptures and His Message According to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the First Abbasid Century,” argues very strongly for a Christian influence where the miracles of Muḥammad are concerned. He states:

Running like a refrain through all of the Christian apologies of the first Abbasid century is the contention that miraculous signs, worked by the prophets in the name of God, or by Jesus in his own name, are the only sufficiently reasonable warranty for accepting Christianity, or, indeed, any scripture, anyone claiming divine inspiration, or any body of religious doctrine. The reason for this

³³Josef Horovitz, “The Growth of the Mohammed Legend,” in *The Life of Muḥammad*, edited by Uri Rubin (Brookfield, VT: Ashagate Publishing Co., 1998), 270. Peter Brown, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981) argues that the differentiation scholars make between “popular” and “orthodox” or “formal” in Late Antique Christianity is misleading, and that what was typically deemed “popular” is more than likely part of the more “formal” tradition from the beginning. It would appear that the same can also be said of the dichotomy between “popular” and “scholarly” in the Islamic tradition.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Daniel J. Sahas, “The Formation of Later Islamic Doctrines as a Response to Byzantine Polemics: The Miracles of Muhammed,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 27, 2-3(Summer-Fall 1982), 318.

insistence is the notable lack of personal miracles ascribed to Muḥammad, along with the *Qur'ān*'s rejection of miracles as a criterion for religious credibility.³⁶

Griffith also argues that Christians living during the early 'Abbāsīd era were faced with the conversion to Islam of many of their fellow believers due to materialistic concerns. Thus, these writers chose to compare Islam as a religion based on material wealth with Christianity, which they claimed was based on the miracles of Jesus and the apostles.³⁷ It appears, then, that a sort of vicious cycle may have existed whereby Christians were warning their fellows against conversion to Islam, in part due to its lack of miracles, which, in turn, helped to fuel the desire by Muslim writers to include miracle stories regarding their Prophet. Since Ibn Ishāq's (d. 150/767) biography of Muḥammad, or at least Ibn Hishām's (d. 218/833) recension of it, contains so many miracles, the inclusion of miracle stories would have had to have occurred quite early. Were the Christian writers of the early 'Abbāsīd era unfamiliar with this work? Or, was the work not yet considered part of the orthodox tradition?

Rather than investigate the motivations that drove Muslims to include miracle stories in their works, another group of scholars have chosen to examine reports of the supernatural in their Arabian and Islamic environments. Harris Birkeland, whose study on the traditions relating the cleansing of Muḥammad's heart, takes to task previous scholars who focus solely on the external origins of the various versions of the tradition. Instead, Birkeland looks at the evolution of the timing of the incident, from Muḥammad's childhood to his adulthood and back again, that takes place within the

³⁶Sydney H. Griffith, "The Prophet Muḥammad: His Scriptures and His Message According to Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the First Abbasid Century," in *The Life of Muḥammad*, edited by Uri Rubin (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1995), 387-8.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 389.

Islamic sources themselves over time. He argues that the methods of others, especially ethnographic comparison with other cultures, are not a reliable means of discovering what the traditions meant to their Muslim authors. He states that “the conclusion must be that both the single traits of the legends, their totalities as compositions, and their interrelations in the form they appear in the literature transmitted to us, can only be understood on the basis of their Islamic character.”³⁸

Also studying the elements of the supernatural in the Islamic tradition is Toufic Fahd, in his work *La Divination arabe: Études religieuses, sociologiques et folkloriques sur le milieu natif de l’Islam*. He traces the different types of divinatory powers from their roots in the ancient Assyro-Babylonian culture through to the medieval Islamic world. He argues that Arab divination and prophecy were intimately linked, but that a differentiation came to be recognized in the fact that the Arab soothsayer worked with an intermediary creature between himself and the divine, whereas the Prophet was directly linked to God.³⁹ Fahd ties this evolution from divination to prophecy to the societal evolution from nomadism to sedentarism in the Arab world. He also puts forward the theory that, with the introduction of Greek and Persian ways of thinking, the miracles of the soothsayers and prophets evolved into the sciences that were more acceptable to medieval Islam, including astrology and alchemy. Thus, Fahd’s study is an extremely valuable one in which he has placed the miracles of Muḥammad squarely within their Near Eastern context, both prior to and after his lifetime.

³⁸Harris Birkeland, *The Legend of the Opening of Muhammed’s Breast* (Oslo: I Kommissjon Hos Jacob Dybwad, 1955), 59. Birkeland specifically mentions the works of Horovitz, Shrieke, and Bevan as being unacceptable for such a study.

³⁹Toufic Fahd, *La Divination arabe*, 521-2.

Another method of looking at reports of the supernatural in the Islamic source material for the life of Muḥammad is used by Jaroslav Stetkevych in his work, *Muḥammad and the Golden Bough: Reconstructing Arabian Myth*.⁴⁰ Stetkevych examines one set of traditions, that of Muḥammad's discovery of a golden branch in a grave, recalling the story of the tribe of Thamūd, who were destroyed by God for their disobedience.⁴¹ He states, "I attempt in this study, first of all, to demonstrate the existence of a culture-specific, coherent pre-Islamic Arabian myth - which deserves to be qualified as autochthonous - and, further, to engage that Arabian myth in the dynamism of subsequent Islamic myth-building and mythopoesis."⁴² Stetkevych uses the Islamic source material to attempt to discover the pre-Islamic myth of the Thamūd, and then, much like Birkeland, to note its evolution within the Islamic tradition. Unlike Birkeland, he also compares the myth to other stories of mythic branches, including that of Gilgamesh and *The Aeneid*. While not specifically about miracles worked by the Prophet Muḥammad, his study does include the fact that it was Muḥammad who could recognize the bough and the person in whose grave it was found. Stetkevych argues that by this special knowledge, Muḥammad not only recognizes the golden bough, but is recognized by it and is thus confirmed as "the heir of Thamūdīc Arabia."⁴³

⁴⁰Jaroslav Stetkevych, *Muḥammad and the Golden Bough: Reconstructing Arabian Myth* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996).

⁴¹A prophet was sent by God to the Thamūd, who asked for a sign to prove his status. He produced, out of the mountain, a she-camel who was given specific watering rights at the tribe's well. Eventually, people came to dislike the rules governing the she-camel's watering rights and killed her. As a punishment, God destroyed them.

⁴²Ibid., ix.

⁴³Ibid., 112. It is interesting to note that, like the current study, he uses, among other sources, both al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr as his sources for this incident in the life of Muḥammad.

Narrative Historiography

Most works of modern historiography are written in a narrative format, in other words, they tell the story of events after critiquing the source material at their disposal. The usefulness of this narrative form of historiography has been the subject of heated debate among modern historians. Hayden White contends that the use of the narrative form in a work of historiography proves the continued link between history, on the one hand, and rhetoric and literature, on the other.⁴⁴ He argues that “as long as historians continue to use ordinary educated speech and writing, both their representations of the phenomena of the past and their thought about these will remain ‘literary’ - ‘poetic’ and ‘rhetorical’ - in a manner different from anything recognizable as a distinctly ‘scientific’ discourse.”⁴⁵ As an alternative, White argues that historians should instead engage in tropology, which he defines as “a theory of figuration and discursive emplotment, ...[which is] an instrument for relating the two dimensions of denotative and connotative signification by which historians endow past events, not only with factuality but with meaning as well.”⁴⁶ In other words, history is not a science, and the sooner historians drop the charade that it is, the better. White does not argue, however, that historians purposefully intend to fictionalize their works, but does claim that “any representation of reality in the form of a narrativization necessarily fictionalizes its subject-matter,

⁴⁴Hayden White, “An Old Question Raised Again: Is Historiography Art or Science? (Response to Iggers),” *Rethinking History* 4,3 (2000): 391. For other works by White on the same topic, see *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, second printing, 1989).

⁴⁵White, “An Old Question Raised Again,” 391.

⁴⁶Ibid.

however much it may be based on facts.”⁴⁷ Historians have been quick to criticize White’s theories, but none have yet successfully refuted them entirely.⁴⁸

The narrative-literary form of historiography is also the subject of Stefan Leder’s article, “Conventions of Fictional Narration in Learned Literature,” in which he argues that “the existence of fictive contents in many narratives, regardless of their adherence to the genres of historiography, belles-lettres or *ḥadīth* cannot be seriously contested.”⁴⁹ He examines seemingly historical episodes in two works, one by al-Balādhurī and one by Mu‘āfā ibn Zakarīya, and reveals how the presence or absence of the narrator, the “thematic structure of the plot [and]... [t]he degree of literary construction thus betrays that they result from the elaboration of pre-existing narrative models and not from the depiction of a historical reality.”⁵⁰ This does not mean that there is no historical reality

⁴⁷Ibid., 405-6. White also argues that it is not the intentions of the writers with which he is concerned, but rather the intentions of the text. This appears not to take into account the theory that the writer and the text are rather intricately intertwined and are, thus, not so easily dissected. See Louis Gottschalk, Clyde Kluckhohn, and Robert Angell, *The Use of Personal Documents in History, Anthropology, and Sociology*, Prepared for the Committee on Appraisal of Research, Bulletin 53 (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1945).

⁴⁸Some Islamicists have adopted certain aspects of White’s theories. Fred Donner, in his *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, states, “Narrative accounts thus belong to the broader category of literary sources, but are distinct from other literary sources, such as poems, *adab* works, etc.” (4, n. 5). However, he admits that even the non-narrative literary sources mentioned above “convey considerable information that must be seen as belonging to an implicit narrative framework.” (Ibid.) He also argues against the extremes of postmodernism and what he refers to as “the deconstructionist ‘program’....” (Ibid.) Boaz Shoshan, however, openly adopts the theories of White regarding narrative and history in his own deconstruction of al-Ṭabarī’s *History*, *Poetics of Islamic Historiography: Deconstructing Ṭabarī’s History* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), and states that “resorting to a critical approach in the analysis of a classical historical text is highly desirable for the new light it sheds on it. Besides, it can teach us a thing or two about the cultural norms and conceptual assumptions that played a role in the production of that text.” (ix) In other words, he argues that, rather than attempting to reconstruct historical events as most modern historians have done using al-Ṭabarī’s work, historians should look at the *History* as a text in and of itself, and to this end, he uses deconstruction to examine individual parts of the text, grouping them according to the various literary themes that he claims they represent. More about this work will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁴⁹Stefan Leder, “Conventions of Fictional Narration in Learned Literature” in *Story-telling in the Framework of Non-fictional Arabic Literature*, ed., Stefan Leder (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998), 34.

⁵⁰Ibid., 59.

depicted in the Islamic source material, but that fact and fiction are often found side by side in seemingly factual historiographical material. Leder adds that “myth, for instance, is unmasked as pure invention, when it is alienated from its original context.”⁵¹

The Chicken or the Egg: Tafsīr and Sīra

Reports of Muḥammad’s miracles occur in a wide variety of genres in the body of Islamic literature. The present study will limit itself to an examination of two: *tafsīr* and *sīra/ta’rīkh*. The last term, *sīra/ta’rīkh*, is used here to denote the biography of Muḥammad as written within larger *ta’rīkh* works of what are termed “world” or “universal” histories. Of the three main genres used to depict the events in the life of Muḥammad, *sīra/ta’rīkh* more readily lends itself to a study of Muḥammad’s miracles.⁵² Al-Ṭabarī, unfortunately, does not include much of his own interpretation of the supernatural events in this genre, and so this study will examine not only the miracles of Muḥammad as related in his biography, but will also examine the exegesis of those Qur’ān verses cited by our authors in their *sīra/ta’rīkhs*. The third genre, *ḥadīth*, was used as the basis for legal decisions, and works in this genre are structured differently than either *sīra/ta’rīkh* or *tafsīr*.⁵³ The Western study of the latter genres focuses on the

⁵¹Ibid., 60. He also argues that myth “can, however, be recycled to fictional usage, as it is the case with the Greek myths in our times.”

⁵²Another study that compares mythic elements in works of history to those of exegesis in the Islamic source material is Leigh N. B. Chipman, “Adam and the Angels: An Examination of Mythic Elements in Islamic Sources,” *Arabica* 44, 4(2002): 429-455. Chipman, however, compares *ta’rīkh*, *tafsīr*, and *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* (lives of the prophets). This last genre is also included within the larger historical works of the two authors studied here, but will not be examined in this work.

⁵³On the importance of the different structures of *sīra* and *ḥadīth*, see Gordon Newby, “Imitating Muhammad in Two Genres: Mimesis and Problems of Genre in Sīrah and Sunnah,” *Medieval Encounters: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Culture in Confluence and Dialogue* 3:3 (1997): 266-83. See also R. Marston Speight, “Narrative Structures in the *Ḥadīth*,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 59:4 (October, 2000): 265-71.

questions of origins and authenticity, as it does for that of *ḥadīth*. Most scholars argue that if the origin of individual reports can be ascertained, then the next step of determining authenticity can be addressed. Only after this is achieved, can a narrative re-telling of the life of Muḥammad and the history of the beginnings of Islam occur.⁵⁴ The first question that scholars tend to ask, however, is how to go about studying the individual reports in such a way as to determine their origin. The quest for methodology is thus the foundational stage at which the study of Muḥammad's life currently remains, and in which it seems stuck fast.⁵⁵

One important issue for scholars investigating the life of Muḥammad, then, is the question of which genre came first, *tafsīr* or *sīra*. In other words, did the *sīra* of Muḥammad arise out of attempts to explain the verses of the Qur'ān, or did the exegesis of the Qur'ān take shape out of the stories of Muḥammad's life? In a series of articles, Andrew Rippin discusses this question in relation to the genre *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation).⁵⁶ He argues that works dedicated to these types of reports alone were devised by later Muslims, perhaps as late as the eleventh century of the Common Era.⁵⁷ He also argues that the individual *sabab* report, as found in larger works of *tafsīr*, "plays, however, ...what could be called a 'haggadically exegetical' function; regardless of the genre of exegesis in which the *sabab* is found, its function is to provide a narrative

⁵⁴See the Introduction in Harald Motzki, ed., *The Biography of Muḥammad: The Issue of the Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

⁵⁵As stated previously, the present work does not participate in this quest, but one cannot in all good conscience use the sources dealing with the life of the Prophet Muḥammad without at least mentioning these issues which have become so vital to Western scholars who attempt to discern their historicity.

⁵⁶See Andrew Rippin, "The Exegetical Genre *Asbāb al-nuzūl*: a Bibliographical and Terminological Survey" in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 48,1 (1985): 1-15; idem, "The Function of *Asbāb al-nuzūl* in Qur'ānic Exegesis" in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51,1 (1988): 1-20.

⁵⁷Rippin, "The Exegetical Genre *Asbāb al-nuzūl*," 14-15.

account in which the basic exegesis of the verse may be embodied.”⁵⁸ He also states that he “tentatively trace[s] the origins of this material to the context of the *quṣṣās*, the wandering story-tellers, and pious preachers and to a basically popular religious worship situation where such stories would prove both enjoyable and edifying.”⁵⁹ Rippin does not follow up his tentative conclusion by suggesting just how this material made its way from the *quṣṣās* to the written works of *tafsīr*, and by doing so leaves the reader with more questions than answers. In another article, Rippin examines the work *Tafsīr Ibn ‘Abbās* in an effort to determine if it is an accurate reflection of the sayings of the important exegete.⁶⁰ He concludes that “Ibn ‘Abbās is a mythic exemplum for the Muslim community. That is why he is cited within the *isnād* for *Tafsīr Ibn ‘Abbās*.”⁶¹ Rippin has placed himself, therefore, within the camp of what Herbert Berg refers to as the sceptics in the study of early Islam.⁶² However, although Berg pairs the methodologies of Rippin with those of John Wansbrough, Rippin does not agree wholeheartedly with all of Wansbrough’s conclusions, as evidenced by his aforementioned views on the haggadic nature of certain parts of Qur’ānic exegesis.

Berg does his own study of the *tafsīr* reports attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, using those reports found in the exegesis of the tenth century scholar, al-Ṭabarī.⁶³ He

⁵⁸Rippin, “The Function of *Asbāb al-nuzūl* in Qur’ānic Exegesis,” 3. In so doing, he goes against the theory of John Wansbrough that this type of report is halakhic (having to do with the law). (1) See Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 141-2, 177-85, but also see 121, where he argues that *tafsīr* as a whole is narrative, or haggadic, in nature.

⁵⁹Ibid., 19. He argues that these individual *sabab* reports reflect the earliest attempt at exegesis in Islam, despite the fact that they were not compiled into their own genre until much later.

⁶⁰Rippin, “*Tafsīr Ibn ‘Abbās* and Criteria for Dating Early *Tafsīr* Texts” in *JSAI* 18 (1994): 38-83.

⁶¹Ibid., 74.

⁶²Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam*, 82.

⁶³Al-Ṭabarī is the obvious choice for such a study since he is well known for having grouped together an immense number of reports from a variety of sources.

combines an analysis of the *isnāds* with that of the *matns* of the individual reports, and has compiled an immense database of *isnād* authorities. His final conclusion, however, is not promising:

Isnāds, therefore, were attached to material from the beginning of the third century of the Islamic calendar..., after which these *isnāds*, like the *matns* to which they were attached, continued to be subject to organic growth. Moreover, any date significantly earlier would bring the production of the *isnāds* for exegetical *ḥadīths* close enough to the death dates of some of the students of Ibn ‘Abbās that there might have been some living memory of these individuals and what they may or may not have said. My analyses of the data do not support such a scenario.

However, *isnāds* were attached to exegetical material which in many cases must have been much older. It is not impossible that some of this material might even be old enough to derive from Ibn ‘Abbās (if, indeed, he had ever been an exegete). However, my analyses suggest that the *ḥadīths* examined do not seem to originate with him or his students. If some of the material is authentic, it can never be recovered; the genuine material would have been treated in much the same manner as later accretions, adaptations, and additions - the manner of the transmission of the material would have obfuscated any evidence of its early provenance. Eventually *isnāds*, in some sense arbitrary *isnāds* but in some sense not fabricated ones, were attached to all of the material.⁶⁴

Hence, if there are any reports that are authentic representations of the exegesis of Ibn ‘Abbās, there is no way to differentiate them from those later reports that were simply ascribed to him by later Muslims.⁶⁵ So, for Berg and others, without a clear method for determining the authenticity of individual reports, the early history of Islamic exegesis remains a mystery.

Lack of a definitive methodology for determining authenticity has not kept all scholars from hazarding a guess at the origins of *tafsīr* and *sīra*. In his work, *The Eye of*

⁶⁴Ibid., 215.

⁶⁵Berg is not the first to come to this conclusion. See the conclusions of Frederick Leemhuis, “Origins and Early Development of the *Tafsīr* Tradition” in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur’ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 25-30. Berg’s original contribution to this argument, however, remains his impressively clear methodology.

the Beholder, Uri Rubin ignores the question of authenticity altogether and focuses instead on the ways in which the medieval Muslim community viewed the story of Muḥammad's Meccan period.⁶⁶ In an appendix to the main work, however, Rubin posits that it is the *sīra* that predates the *tafsīr* and that the Qur'ānic elements found therein were later additions.⁶⁷ He is taken to task for this assessment by Wim Raven, whose article "The Biography of the Prophet and its Scriptural Basis" examines both the above work of Rubin and Gregor Schoeler's *Character und Authentie*.⁶⁸ Although he greatly admires Schoeler's methodology, Raven criticizes the fact that he completely ignores the question of intertextuality between the *sīra* and the Qur'ān.⁶⁹ Rubin, on the other hand, directly addresses the issue of the relationship between *sīra*, Qur'ān, and Biblical texts. Raven is not completely satisfied with his conclusions, however, and argues that Rubin should have used Schoeler's methodology of examining all the versions of a tradition to fully discuss its meaning.⁷⁰ Raven reveals the weaknesses in Rubin's argument by applying his theory about the Qur'ānization of the *sīra* to a body of traditions not covered in Rubin's book. He argues that some narrative elements in the *sīra* do reveal a later Qur'ānization, but that others do not, and this is his real criticism of Rubin's work. He posits that, had Rubin been more thorough in his approach, he may

⁶⁶Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muḥammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims, A Textual Analysis* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1995).

⁶⁷Ibid., 226-233.

⁶⁸Wim Raven, "The Biography of the Prophet and its Scriptural Basis" in *Story-telling in the Framework of Non-fictional Arabic Literature*, ed. Stefan Leder (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998): 421-432. Gregor Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie des Muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Muhammeds* (Berlin: Walter deGruyter, 1996).

⁶⁹Ibid., 424-5.

⁷⁰Ibid., 425-6.

have reached a similar conclusion.⁷¹ This does not mean that he finds no value in Rubin's work, and in fact applauds him for examining "the possible scriptural origins of the stories, and how these were removed, manipulated or enriched. In fact, the scriptural basis of Muḥammad's biography is the main subject of his book."⁷²

Rubin responds to the criticisms of Raven and others in his article, "The Life of Muḥammad and the Qur'ān: The Case of Muḥammad's Hijra," wherein he notes the objections of reviewers to his theory and contends that "the view that considerable parts of the *sīra* are the result of an exegetical mechanism was often brought up to diminish the historical value of the *sīra*."⁷³ He adds that he is not attempting to prove or disprove the historicity of the *sīra* reports, "but rather to show that not everything that looks to the above scholars like exegesis is indeed exegesis."⁷⁴ To do this, he examines the various reports relating the tale of how Muḥammad and a companion hide in a cave on their way to Medina. He begins with Qur'ān 9:40 and the various themes found in that passage, and then moves on to the stories of the cave found in the *sīra*.⁷⁵ He argues, "In short, while in the Qur'ānic cave passage the Prophet and his companion are refugees, in the *sīra* they are fugitives. This crucial gap between the Qur'ān and the *sīra* rules out the possibility that the entire *sīra* cave story was drawn from the Qur'ānic cave

⁷¹Ibid., 430-1. He contrasts Rubin's work to that of Henri Lammens, who claimed that all *sīra* reports were founded by a need to explain the Qur'ān, rather than Rubin's claim that none of them were.

⁷²Ibid., 425-6.

⁷³Uri Rubin, "The Life of Muḥammad and the Qur'ān: The Case of Muḥammad's Hijra," *JSAI* 28 (2003): 41.

⁷⁴Ibid., 42.

⁷⁵Qur'ān 9:40 reads: "If ye help not (your Leader), (It is no matter): for Allah did indeed help him, when the Unbelievers made him leave: he had no more than one companion: the two were in the Cave, and he said to his companion, 'Have no fear for Allah is with us': then Allah sent down His peace upon him, and strengthened him with forces which ye saw not, and humbled to the depths the word of the Unbelievers. But the Word of Allah is exalted to the heights: for Allah is Exalted in might, Wise." All translations of Qur'ānic verses are from the 'Abdullāh Yūsuf 'Alī edition, unless otherwise noted.

passage.”⁷⁶ His final conclusion on the nature of the Islamic Scripture and the *sīra* is that both types of text come “from a common source.... The origin which both the Qur’ān and the *sīra* seem to be using is the communal memory of the Islamic *umma*.”⁷⁷

He continues:

Each represented an advanced version of the previous experiences that the community remembered and wished to document. In the *sīra* the believers documented their communal history (derived mainly from oral tradition transmitted among the individuals of the community), and in the Qur’ān they assembled what was remembered and considered the divine revelations of their Prophet.⁷⁸

Hence, although there are similarities between the two types of source, the Qur’ān (and its exegesis) and the *sīra*, this does not mean that the one grew out of the other. Instead, he argues that they were both drawn from a common pool of communal memory.⁷⁹

Thus, the questions of the origins and evolution of the genres of *tafsīr* and *sīra/ta’rīkh* remain unanswered, at least definitively. They are important questions; however, they are not the ones being asked by the current study. This study examines why the elements of the miraculous in Muḥammad’s life appear as they do in the *tafsīr* and *sīra/ta’rīkh* works of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr. Although the basic story remains the same in the works of both scholars, there are important differences that cannot be explained simply by the distance of time and place. The methodology of Rubin’s works are close to my own, but only in that the miracle stories are examined not in order to

⁷⁶Rubin, “Muḥammad’s Hijra,” 44.

⁷⁷Ibid., 56.

⁷⁸Ibid., 56-7.

⁷⁹Ibid., 61. Rubin does not end his article here, however, and adds a short section on the Biblical sources for the cave story as well. His last argument appears to be that the inclusion of non-Qur’anic *sīra* stories in works of *tafsīr* only shows “how *sīra* was recycled as exegesis.” This comment seems to be a bit of a last-minute quip to those who would argue that *sīra* stories located in works of exegesis, especially those that function as *asbāb al-nuzūl*, are proof of their Qur’anic foundations.

determine their origins, but how later Muslims viewed them. Whereas Rubin charts the evolution of the miracles from Biblical to Arabian to Islamic models and uses this evolution to describe the medieval Islamic self-image in relation to Christians and Jews, the present study examines both the constants in the story itself, the archetypal Muhammad, and the possible reasons for the inclusion of different reports and the treatment of those reports by the two authors mentioned above, and it is to their lives and works that we now turn.

Chapter Two The Lives and Works of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr

Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī was born in Āmul, capital of the province of Ṭabaristān, in 224-5/839.⁸⁰ His family belonged to the class of landowners in the area, and the income from this land allowed al-Ṭabarī to devote his life to study, without having to worry overly much about monetary concerns.⁸¹ He was apparently quite bright as a child and was sent to study in the city of Rayy at the age of twelve. It was here that he studied under Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ḥumayd al-Rāzī (d. 248/862), who passed on to him many of his reports from Ibn Ishāq about pre-Islamic history and the life of Muḥammad.⁸² After about five years, his abilities had outstripped those of his teachers, and the decision was made that he should go to Baghdad to properly pursue an advanced course of study.⁸³ Although making his home in Baghdad, al-Ṭabarī also traveled to various parts of the Islamic world to study under a number of important scholars from a variety of fields. These included the Kūfan scholars, Hannād b. al-Sarī (d. 243/857), from whom he transmitted reports in his *Tafsīr*, and Abū Kurayb b. Muḥammad b. al-‘Alā’ (d. 247-8/861-2), whose reports are to be found in both his *Tafsīr* and his *History*.⁸⁴ In Baṣra, he studied under such scholars as Ḥumayd b.

⁸⁰Franz Rosenthal has written an excellent biography of al-Ṭabarī in the first volume of the English translation of *Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa’l-mulūk*, which is the source of most of the biographical information given here. See Rosenthal, *History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 1, *From the Creation to the Flood* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 5-134.

⁸¹Ibid., 14.

⁸²Ibid., 17-8. According to Rosenthal, Ibn Ḥumayd is the only one of al-Ṭabarī’s teachers in Rayy who is well known to modern scholarship. Rosenthal adds that “Ibn Ḥumayd had lectured in Baghdad and had been welcomed there by Ibn Ḥanbal, who is even said to have transmitted traditions on his authority.” (17)

⁸³Ibid., 15-6.

⁸⁴Ibid., 20-1.

Mas‘ada, from whom he learned *tafsīr*, and Muḥammad b. Bashshār, whose reports are found in his *History*.⁸⁵ Al-Ṭabarī later traveled to Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, and studied under such scholars there as the Syrian al-‘Abbās b. al-Walīd b. Mazyad al-‘Udhri al-Bayrūtī (d. 270/883-4), who taught him some of the variant Qur’ān readings, but who also passed on reports “through his father al-Walīd, the legal views of al-Awzā‘ī, Syria’s most prominent jurist who had died in Beirut about a century earlier.”⁸⁶ Al-Ṭabarī also studied under such scholars as Muḥammad b. ‘Awf al-Ṭā‘ī al-Ḥimṣī (d. 272-3/885-6), whose reports are found in the *Tafsīr*, among other works, and Abū ‘Utba Aḥmad b. al-Farāj (d. 271/884-5), also of Ḥimṣ, who also served as a source for al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr*.⁸⁷ His teachers in Egypt included scholars who passed on their knowledge of the Shāfi‘ī and Mālikī legal schools, such as al-Rabī‘ b. Sulaymān (d. 240/884) and Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Ḥakam (d. 268-9/882-3).⁸⁸ Traveling for the purpose of study was the usual course of action for a student in the classical and early medieval Islamic world, and once his studies were complete, al-Ṭabarī had gained enough of a reputation to begin his own scholarly career.

Despite al-Ṭabarī’s apparently excellent reputation as a scholar, his time in Baghdad was not without controversy, and this centered mainly on his problems with the Ḥanbalīs.⁸⁹ Al-Ṭabarī appears to have had a great deal of respect for Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) himself, who died shortly before al-Ṭabarī’s move to Baghdad, but

⁸⁵Ibid., 20.

⁸⁶Ibid., 23. Al-Awzā‘ī died in 157/773-4. (178, n. 95).

⁸⁷Ibid., 24-5.

⁸⁸Ibid., 27-8, 178, n. 93.

⁸⁹Ibid., 59-63, 69-78. He also appears to have had problems with rival scholars, one of whom went so far as to accuse him, in writing, of having pro-Shī‘ī sympathies, and sending this complaint to Naṣr, the caliph’s Chamberlain, an important government official. In the ‘Abbāsīd period, this type of accusation could have serious repercussions, although al-Ṭabarī’s denial appears to have been accepted. (59-60)

his relationship with the man's followers was extremely troubled, especially in the last years of his life.⁹⁰ One scholar even claimed to have been unable to study under al-Ṭabarī due to the fact that access to him was blocked by the Ḥanbalīs.⁹¹ Rosenthal cites several possible reasons for this animosity, the first of which was the publication of al-Ṭabarī's work on important legal scholars, *Ikhtilāf al-fuqahā'*, in which no mention of Ibn Ḥanbal is found.⁹² Rosenthal points out that al-Ṭabarī "is alleged to have expressed the opinion that he did not think of Ibn Ḥanbal as a jurist whose work in the field of jurisprudence compared with that of other great authorities but rather as an important *ḥadīth* scholar."⁹³ While, for al-Ṭabarī, the distinction between jurist and *muḥaddith* may not have held any intrinsic value judgement, for the Ḥanbalīs it was an outright insult. This appears to be a good example of the growing distinction between Islamic scholarship as it was understood by al-Ṭabarī and the seemingly absolute reliance on *ḥadīth* for judicial decisions espoused by the Ḥanbalīs.⁹⁴

The second reason cited by Rosenthal for the rift between al-Ṭabarī and the followers of Ibn Ḥanbal is the precarious position of the latter in the extraordinarily

⁹⁰Ibid., 19. Rosenthal relates that this occurred despite reports that al-Ṭabarī may have gone to Baghdad with the express intention of studying under Ibn Ḥanbal. Since the older scholar died before his arrival in the 'Abbāsīd capital, al-Ṭabarī never actually studied with Ibn Ḥanbal.

⁹¹Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. 'Uthmān al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rīkh al-Islām*, vol. 23, (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1987), 281-2. No reason is given for why they were keeping students from him, but the report is followed by one that quotes Ibn Khuzayma as saying that the "Ḥanābila wronged him."

⁹²Rosenthal, *General Introduction*, 70.

⁹³Ibid. Rosenthal continues with another statement allegedly spoken by al-Ṭabarī that "he had not seen anyone transmitting legal opinions from Ibn Ḥanbal or any followers of his that were considered authoritative...."

⁹⁴Norman Calder, "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham," in *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, ed. G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993): 101-140. Calder discusses the distinction between al-Ṭabarī's understanding of the "Islamic intellectual tradition" and Ibn Kathīr's absolute reliance on *ḥadīth* by comparing the *tafsīr* works of the two men. Calder's work will be discussed in more detail below.

competitive world of Islamic scholarship in tenth century Baghdad.⁹⁵ In the tenth century, the four schools of Islamic law had not yet become universally accepted. There were a number of legal schools of thought in operation and success was guaranteed to none. Al-Ṭabarī had begun his career as a follower of the Shāfiʿī school, and later founded a *madhhab* of his own, which did not long survive his death, so the Ḥanbalīs would have likely viewed him as competition to their own fairly new school.⁹⁶

Rosenthal further links the conflict to the explanation of Qurʾān 17:79, which states that the person who prays in the very early morning hours would be given a “praiseworthy position.”⁹⁷ The traditional explanation of the verse was that Muḥammad would act as intercessor for the Muslim community on the Day of Judgement, but the Ḥanbalīs latched onto an interpretation whereby the position given to Muḥammad is on the Divine Throne.⁹⁸ They argued that a report from Mujāhid, complete with an authoritative *isnād*, proves that this is the correct interpretation, and, furthermore, anyone who denied this interpretation was a heretic.⁹⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, while not denying the interpretation outright, does argue that the traditional interpretation of the position of Muḥammad as intercessor is the better of the two.¹⁰⁰ For a group such as the Ḥanbalīs had become, anything short of absolute acceptance smacked of rejection, and their conflict with al-Ṭabarī came to a boiling point when, according to Rosenthal, “enraged

⁹⁵Rosenthal, *General Introduction*, 70-77.

⁹⁶Ibid., 63-5. On the role of the Ḥanbalīs in society and politics in tenth century Baghdad, see Nimrod Hurvitz, “From Scholarly Circles to Mass Movements: The Formation of Legal Communities in Islamic Societies,” *The American Historical Review* 108,4 (October 2003): 985-1008.

⁹⁷Rosenthal, *General Introduction*, 71. Qurʾān 17:79 states: “And pray in the small watches of the morning: (it would be) an additional prayer (or spiritual profit) for thee: soon will thy Lord raise thee to a Station of Praise and Glory!”

⁹⁸Rosenthal, *General Introduction*, 71-3.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 73-7.

Ḥanbalites thereupon stoned his residence and caused a serious disturbance which had to be subdued by force.”¹⁰¹

Al-Ṭabarī died in 310/923 at his home in Baghdad.¹⁰² He was buried in the courtyard of his house and, according to a report in al-Dhahabī’s *Ta’rīkh al-Islām*, an untold number of people “prayed over his tomb for a number of months night and day.”¹⁰³ Rosenthal discusses al-Ṭabarī’s reputation as a scholar, stating:

The Fāṭimid caliph al-‘Azīz, who reigned from 975 to 996, spent one hundred dīnārs for a copy of *History* that was offered to him. He then found out that his library already contained more than twenty copies of the work, including one in Ṭabarī’s own hand. According to Ibn Abī Ṭayyi’, 1,220 copies of *History* were in the library of the Fāṭimid palace complex when Saladin took over in 567/1171.¹⁰⁴

Al-Ṭabarī was quite a prolific scholar and wrote, besides his *History*, an equally famous and lengthy work of *tafsīr*, the legal work *Ikhtilāf al-fuqahā’*, and numerous other works on Islamic law and religion. Rosenthal details approximately twenty-nine separate works that he was supposed to have written, although some of these have been lost or were never completed.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹Ibid., 73. Rosenthal discounts reports that they so disrupted events that no visitors were present at al-Ṭabarī’s funeral and that the scholar had to be buried at night. (77-8)

¹⁰²Ibid., 78.

¹⁰³Al-Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-Islām*, vol. 23, 285. Rosenthal also mentions this report, and he and al-Dhahabī seem to share the same source. Rosenthal, *General Introduction*, 78-9.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 141. The popularity of al-Ṭabarī’s works at the Fāṭimid court may have less to do with doctrinal issues and more to do with regional pride. Al-Ṭabarī had visited Egypt during his studies and this fact, along with his reputation, seems to have earned him the respect of the Egyptian scholarly community. Rosenthal mentions that the first biography of al-Ṭabarī to be written after the scholar’s own generation was completed by “the Egyptian scholar al-Qifṭī (568-646/1172-1248)..., entitled *al-Taḥrīr fī akhbār Muḥammad b. Jarīr*. Al-Qifṭī was a great admirer of Ṭabarī, for he not only wrote this monograph but took the opportunity to list Ṭabarī in other works of his, such as his dictionaries of grammarians and of poets named Muḥammad; neither work, especially the latter, necessarily required mention of Ṭabarī.” (8) Since al-Qifṭī lived, not during the Fāṭimid, but during the Sunnī Ayyūbid period, it would appear that the tenth century scholar’s positive reputation in that area superceded doctrinal boundaries. On Egyptian regional pride, see Ulrich Haarmann, “Regional Sentiment in Medieval Islamic Egypt,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43,1 (1980): 55-66.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 80-134. Rosenthal’s introduction includes a detailed account of al-Ṭabarī’s works.

He is also noted for not backing away from controversy in his lectures, and the sources mention that when he found out that a rival scholar was lecturing negatively about the reports concerning Ghadīr Khumm, he was apparently compelled to include his own assessment.¹⁰⁶ This led to the writing of his works of *al-faḍā'il*, or virtues, of the first four caliphs, and then of al-‘Abbās, Muḥammad’s uncle and progenitor of the ‘Abbāsīd line. According to Rosenthal, Ibn Kāmil (d. 350/961), in his biographical report on al-Ṭabarī, gives the reasons for the writings of these works:

One of the scholars in Baghdad had declared the Ghadīr Khumm (episode) to be untrue because, he said, ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib was in the Yemen at the time when the Messenger of God was at Ghadīr Khumm.... When Abū Ja‘far learned about it, he started on a discussion of the virtues of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and mentioned the various recensions of the tradition of Khumm. Many people flocked to listen to (his lectures on) the subject. Some extremist Shī‘ites, who unseemingly slandered the Companions, came together. So Ṭabarī started (to write) on the virtues of Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. Then the ‘Abbāsīds asked him about the *faḍā'il* of al-‘Abbās.¹⁰⁷

All of these works are now, unfortunately, lost. As Rosenthal points out, al-Ṭabarī’s work on Ghadīr Khumm got him into a bit of trouble with later Sunnī scholars, who appear to have been less than thrilled to have an orthodox Sunnī scholar arguing for the authoritativeness of some of the reports used by the Shī‘a to support their own claims to

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 90-3. The scholar in question was none other than Abū Bakr b. Abī Dāwūd (d. 316/929), the same man who had reported al-Ṭabarī’s alleged heretical views to the government. On al-Ṭabarī’s work on Ghadīr Khumm, see also al-Dhahabī, vol. 23, 283. The Ghadīr Khumm incident took place at a stopping point, a place named Ghadīr Khumm, along the return journey to Medina from Muḥammad’s Farewell Pilgrimage. It was here that Muḥammad was supposed to have ordered his followers to obey ‘Alī as they would himself. Later Shī‘ī groups would use the reports of this incident as support for their claims for the primacy of ‘Alī over the first three caliphs and to support their own claims to political power. The Fātimids, especially, used the reports of this incident to support their rule in Egypt and North Africa. See Paula Sanders, “Claiming the Past: Ghadīr Khumm and the Rise of Ḥāfīzī Historiography in Late Fātimid Egypt,” *Studia Islamica* 75 (1992): 81-104.

¹⁰⁷Rosenthal, *General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood*, 91-2. It was this last inquiry that led him to write on the virtues of Muḥammad’s uncle.

the caliphate.¹⁰⁸ Given what is known of al-Ṭabarī's character, it is doubtful that he would have been overly concerned by the opinions of these men.

Al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'riḫ al-rusul wa'l-mulūk* begins with the creation of the world and ends during his own lifetime, in the year 302/915. For the pre-Islamic era, he alternates between the history of the ancient Israelites and the Persians, giving a brief account of the Byzantines, Lakhmids, and Ghassānids, before moving on to the history of the Arabian Peninsula of the pre-Islamic era. He then gives a detailed account of the life of Muḥammad, and describes the history of Islamic civilization up to a few years before his own death. After Muḥammad's journey to Medina, the work is organized into chapters corresponding to each year, and this organization continues to the end of the work. In his Introduction, al-Ṭabarī begins with a laudative section, wherein he praises God and discusses the act of creation.¹⁰⁹ He then moves on to discuss two important points about his own role in the work. First, he reveals his purpose:

There were messengers sent by God, kings placed in authority, or caliphs established in the caliphal succession. God had early on bestowed His benefits and favors upon some of them. They were grateful for His favors, and He thus gave them more favors and bounty in addition to those bestowed by Him upon them in their fleeting life, or He postponed the increase and stored it up for them with Himself. There were others who were not grateful for His favors, and so He deprived them of the favors He had bestowed upon them early on and hastened

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 92-3, 141. The example he gives is a criticism by Ibn Kathīr, and this will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Rosenthal argues that, since Ibn Kathīr also transmits reports from the Syrian historian Ibn 'Asākir (d. 571/1176) about Ghadīr Khumm immediately after his comments about al-Ṭabarī, his complaint "may go back to an older source, perhaps Ibn 'Asākir. It is rather unlikely that Ibn Kathīr would have known Ṭabarī's works." (141) Although it is certainly possible that the comments regarding al-Ṭabarī may have been taken from Ibn 'Asākir, there does not appear to be any reason why Ibn Kathīr would not have access to al-Ṭabarī's works, since Damascus was an important site of scholarly activity at this time. If the library in Fāṭimid Cairo and Ottoman Istanbul could have numerous copies of the *History*, certainly there could have been at least a few works by al-Ṭabarī extant in Damascus.

¹⁰⁹Each of the four works studied here begins with a laudative section. This is a section in which the author praises God, and relates that praise to the subject matter about to be discussed. For example, in the works of history, the laudative section includes praise for God's act of creating the world.

for them His revenge. There were also others who were not grateful for His favors; He let them enjoy them until the time of their death and perdition.¹¹⁰

Thus, al-Ṭabarī's purpose would seem to be an attempt to answer the age-old question of why bad things happen to good people, and why good things happen to bad people. For al-Ṭabarī, God's will is paramount in human history. If something bad happens to a good person, God will reward them in the afterlife. If something good happens to a bad person, God is simply waiting to punish them until after their death. Al-Ṭabarī demonstrates this by recording the lives and deeds of important individuals of the past. Second, he argues that he relies mostly on the reports of others:

[And] only very exceptionally upon what is learned through rational arguments and produced by internal thought processes. For no knowledge of the history of men of the past and of recent men and events is attainable by those who were not able to observe them and did not live in their time, except through information and transmission provided by informants and transmitters.¹¹¹

His argument here reveals that, although he does rely heavily on the reports of others, especially for the period before his own lifetime, he does, periodically, rely on his own intellect in the creation of this work. He goes on, however, to state that if anyone finds fault with the contents of the work, then "it is not our fault that such information comes to him, but the fault of someone who transmitted it to us. We have merely reported it as it was reported to us."¹¹²

During his account of the life of Muḥammad, and certainly for his representation of the supernatural aspect of that life, al-Ṭabarī remains fairly silent as a narrator, making almost no comments about the reliability, or lack thereof, of the reports he

¹¹⁰Ibid., 168; M.J. de Goeje, ed., *Ta'riḫ al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* (Leiden: Brill, 1879-1901), 5. This second work will hereafter be referred to as the Leiden edition.

¹¹¹Ibid., 170; Leiden edition, 6-7.

¹¹²Ibid., 171; Leiden edition, 7.

relates; however, although he claims to be merely a transmitter, it is unlikely that he would include reports that he himself considered faulty without some type of comment.¹¹³ One of his main sources for the life of Muḥammad is Ibn Ishāq, whose famous biography of the Prophet al-Ṭabarī had studied with Ibn Ḥumayd in Rayy. And although Ibn Ishāq did make use, at times, of the *ḥadīth* format, he was certainly not consistent, so many of the events he relates lack any chain of transmitters, much less one that goes all the way back to Muḥammad. So, despite al-Ṭabarī's apparent reliance on *ta'riḫ bi'l-ḥadīth*, the types of reports that he includes in his work may themselves be indicative of his own personal opinion, if not of their authenticity, then of what they relate about the life of Muḥammad. In order to obtain a fuller picture of al-Ṭabarī's views on these events, however, one must turn to another work, his *Tafsīr*.

In his work of exegesis, *Jāmi' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, al-Ṭabarī does, indeed, include much more of his own opinions and comments on the issues at hand than he does in his *sīra/ta'riḫ*. As in his *History*, he begins with a laudative section praising God, and then moves on to indicate his purpose for the work, claiming that he “shall, God willing, compose a comprehensive book, which will incorporate everything which people need to know about this Book, and which will surpass all other books on the subject.”¹¹⁴ He sets out its structure, indicating that he will relate the consensus and

¹¹³Ibid., 170; Leiden edition, 6. It is also possible, however, that the volume on the Prophet's Companions and those who came after them was supposed to have been used as a key, since he states, “I do this for the purpose of clarifying whose transmission (of traditions) is praised and whose transmission is accepted, whose transmission is rejected and whose transmission is disregarded, and whose transmission is considered feeble and whose transmission is considered weak.” He also states that he will give the reasons for these considerations. However, this volume does not appear to reveal any such information.

¹¹⁴Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1986), 3-4. See also John Cooper, tr., *The Commentary on the Qur'ān*, Being an Abridged English Translation of al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 9, which is the translation used here for all quotes from the Introduction. Al-Ṭabarī's exegesis is known by several different titles,

disagreement among various groups, and then discuss how these groups came to their conclusions, adding, finally, his own indication as to which group is correct.¹¹⁵ He later lists three elements he deems necessary for a successful exegesis of the Qur'ān. First, it must have proof of its interpretation:

[Through reports that go] back to the Messenger of God alone to the exclusion of the rest of his community, through Traditions reliably attributable to him, either through an extensive transmission..., or otherwise through a transmission by righteous, reliable persons..., or because of an indication establishing their truth....¹¹⁶

Second, he states that interpretations can be supported through proof of knowledge of the Arabic language.¹¹⁷ Finally, the interpretation must not differ from “what the pious predecessors among the Companions and the Leaders, and the Successors among the Followers, and the men of knowledge in the Community, have said.”¹¹⁸ Thus, one must rely on reports that go back to Muḥammad, must show an expert knowledge of the Arabic language, and must not depart radically from already accepted interpretations.

Elsewhere, he even states:

It is not permitted for anyone to interpret according to his own personal opinion those verses of the Qur'ān whose interpretation can only be known through a

but in this study will be simply referred to as the *Tafsīr*. Although it would enjoy an immense popularity among later Muslims, especially Ibn Taymīya, as will be discussed in more detail below, Walid Saleh, in his work, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur'ān Commentary of al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), argues that, for the *Tafsīr* tradition itself, al-Ṭabarī's work was overshadowed by that of al-Tha'labī. He argues that al-Tha'labī “goes back to the original sources of al-Ṭabarī, utilizes them and adds the new material that has arisen during the intervening century.” (9) While his arguments for the importance of al-Tha'labī's work are sound, his assertions that it is more important in the overall development of the field of exegesis are to be questioned, given the popularity of al-Ṭabarī's work among later Muslim scholars, but this is outside of the scope of the current study.

¹¹⁵Ibid., vol. 1, 4; Cooper, 9.

¹¹⁶Ibid., vol. 1, 28-9; Cooper, 40. What this indication might be is never identified.

¹¹⁷Ibid., vol. 1, 29; Cooper, 40.

¹¹⁸Ibid.; Cooper 40.

text [reporting] the explanation of God's Messenger, or through an indication towards it which he has given.¹¹⁹

So it would appear on the surface that al-Ṭabarī is here arguing vehemently for *tafsīr bi'l-ḥadīth*. However, his description of what makes a report authoritative certainly seems to allow for a bit of leeway, and it is the resultant variety of interpretations in his *Tafsīr* that make it such a powerful expression of the genre.

The body of al-Ṭabarī's exegesis contains a variety of types of reports, including those that relate the historical context in which the verse was revealed, as well as those that explain the language or meaning of the verse through grammar or by using examples from poetry, and it is the reports giving a grammatical explanation that seem to outnumber all the rest. His *Tafsīr* either treats verses individually, or groups them with a varying number of the surrounding verses, but no explanation is ever given for this grouping.¹²⁰ Sometimes he includes citations of other Qur'ān verses, either because the meanings of the verses are similar, or because one verse abrogates another. He also organizes the reports he relates into groups, based on whether they agree or disagree with a particular interpretation of part of a verse, and includes his own interpretation either in an introductory section or after having related the reports of others.

There are several possible reasons for al-Ṭabarī's lack of personal commentary in his *History*, as opposed to its presence in his *Tafsīr*. It is possible that he intended to relate in another work, or in another part of the *History*, his views on the reliability of those individuals identified in his chains of authority, as indicated by the comments he

¹¹⁹Ibid., 27; Cooper, 35. He even adds a statement that anyone who comes to a correct interpretation, but who does so through faulty means, is still incorrect because he lacks certainty. Apparently, for al-Ṭabarī, the only way to obtain certainty in one's interpretation of the Qur'ān was to follow the rules.

¹²⁰The same is true of Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsīr* as well, and seems to be indicative of the genre as a whole.

makes in his Introduction to that work.¹²¹ It is probable, however, that he placed more importance upon a correct interpretation of the Qur'ān than he did upon the correct interpretation of the events of human history, and so was more compelled to provide his own opinion of which interpretation of the scripture was correct and which was not. But the overall tone of his relation of the life of Muḥammad in his *History* is one of quiet confidence. His relation of events without commentary seems to indicate that he was certain that his perceived audience was either intelligent enough to make up their own minds or that they were expected to know the story so thoroughly that they would inherently recognize which reports were deemed acceptable and which were not. Based on what we know of al-Ṭabarī's life, this confidence seems to be indicative of his personality as a whole, but can also be seen as a sign of the confidence of his time and place.

The 'Abbāsīd world in the time of al-Ṭabarī was on the verge of being taken over by the Būyids, who entered Baghdad in 334/945. While this could be seen as the end of actual rule by the 'Abbāsīd caliphs, al-Ṭabarī's own account of the events of his lifetime reveals that caliphal rule was already being questioned by some and outright refuted by others. In 224/838, the year before al-Ṭabarī's birth, the Caliph and his court had moved out of Baghdad itself across the Tigris River to Samarra, due to problems with the ruler's Turkish guard, who ultimately gained the power to make and unmake caliphs much as the Roman Praetorian Guard had done centuries earlier.¹²² But there were problems outside of the capital city as well. In 267/880, al-Ṭabarī reports that

¹²¹See footnote 112, above.

¹²²Philip M. Fields, tr., *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 37, *The 'Abbāsīd Recovery*, xiv. The caliphs returned to Baghdad during the reign of al-Muqtaḍīd (d. 289/902) in 279/892.

“tribesmen seized the carpet covering the Ka‘ba and carried it off. Some of them went to the leader of the Zanj. This calamity shocked the pilgrims of the city.”¹²³ The Zanj were black slaves who had rebelled against the authority of the caliph beginning in 256/869 and who had managed to take a good portion of southern Iraq, especially the agriculturally rich area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.¹²⁴ Their rebellion was not successfully put down by the Caliph’s forces until 270/883.¹²⁵ But just as this problem was beginning to wind down, another took its place in the person of Aḥmad b. Ṭūlūn (d. 271/884), who in 255/868 had been appointed governor of Egypt.¹²⁶ Apparently Egypt was not enough for Aḥmad, and al-Ṭabarī reports that, in 269/883, he sent troops to attempt to take the city of Mecca, but they were unsuccessful.¹²⁷ Ibn Ṭūlūn had basically taken control of Egypt and his loyalty to the ‘Abbāsids was nominal at best.¹²⁸ He was eventually successful in establishing a dynasty there. It is during al-Ṭabarī’s life, too, that he indicates the beginnings of problems with the Shī‘ī revolutionary groups, the Qarmāṭians and the Fāṭimids.¹²⁹ In 285/898, al-Ṭabarī reports that Muḥammad b. Abī al-Sāj was appointed as governor of Ādherbayjān and Armenia,

¹²³Ibid., 6; Leiden edition, 1941.

¹²⁴Waines, *The Revolt of the Zanj*; according to Waines, “The generally accepted view of the origin of the Zanj is that they were blacks imported from East Africa at a time that cannot be determined.” (29-30, n. 117)

¹²⁵Fields, *The ‘Abbāsīd Recovery*, 138-40; Leiden edition, 2096-98.

¹²⁶George Saliba, tr., *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 35, *The Crisis of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1985), 154; Leiden edition, 1697. Another indication of the problems of the caliphate is that he was not appointed by the Caliph, but rather by the Turkic officer, Bāyakkbāk, who had recently established his control over the Turkic forces of the caliphate.

¹²⁷Fields, *The ‘Abbāsīd Recovery*, 127; Leiden edition, 2083-4.

¹²⁸Franz Rosenthal, tr., *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 38, *The Return of the Caliphate to Baghdad* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1985), 22; Leiden edition, 2145-6. His importance became such that his grand-daughter was later married to the Caliph Mu‘taḍid.

¹²⁹Fields, *The ‘Abbāsīd Recovery*, 169-75; Leiden edition, 2124-30. Al-Ṭabarī refers to the Qarmāṭians as “a revolutionary group in the Kūfah area....” See also Rosenthal, *The Return of the Caliphate to Baghdad*, 114-15; Leiden edition, 2218-19.

after he had already militarily taken over this area and previously defied the caliph.¹³⁰

This is indicative of a pattern, whereby someone would take a territory by force, at first defying the caliph, then, once his control had been established, he exchanged nominal recognition of the caliph's suzerainty for legitimation as duly appointed governor, which was then often passed along to his descendants.

Thus, the 'Abbāsīd Empire during the end of the ninth/beginning of the tenth century, was anything but peaceful, however, it is important to note that almost all of the problems were internal to the Muslim world. While there were periodic skirmishes with the Byzantines, they remained a problem for the border territories. The heartlands of the empire, although beginning to splinter among the many groups vying for power, were still at least nominally under the control of the caliph. Despite its problems, the 'Abbāsīd empire, and thus the Muslim world, was still undefeated, and while al-Ṭabarī's entanglement with both the Shī'a and the Ḥanbalīs impacted his work, the overall confidence of an undefeated Muslim empire seems to have influenced it as well.

The life of Ibn Kathīr, the second author whose works make up the foundation of this study, stands in marked contrast to that of al-Ṭabarī. Abū'l-Fidā' Ismā'īl b. 'Umar b. Kathīr was born in Buṣrā, Syria around 700/1300.¹³¹ His family appears to have had some scholarly background and Laoust states that his father was a "modest preacher" who had started out as a Ḥanafī, but who later became a follower of the Shāfi'ī

¹³⁰Ibid., 72-3; Leiden edition, 2185.

¹³¹Henri Laoust, "Ibn Kaṭīr Historien," *Arabica* 2(1955): 42. Laoust's article provides a detailed biography of Ibn Kathīr, but his interpretation of some of the details of the scholar's life has been questioned in the unpublished Ph.D. dissertation by Curtis. See Roy Young Muḥammad Mukhtar Curtis, "Authentic Interpretation of Classical Islamic Texts: An Analysis of the Introduction of Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Azīm*" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1989).

school.¹³² After the death of his father, when Ibn Kathīr was only about six years old, he moved with an older brother to Damascus and began his studies there.¹³³ Whereas al-Ṭabarī had traveled widely in pursuit of his studies, Ibn Kathīr did not venture much outside of Damascus.¹³⁴ Like al-Ṭabarī, he was an excellent student, and quickly came to the attention of some of the most influential scholars in the city.¹³⁵ Laoust lists four of these men as having the greatest impact on Ibn Kathīr's thought, Burhān al-Dīn al-Fazārī (d. 729/1329), one of his first teachers, under whom he studied law; Jamāl al-Dīn al-Mizzī (d. 742/1342), a famous traditionist who also later became Ibn Kathīr's father-in-law; Aḥmad b. Taymīya, the famous Ḥanbalī theologian whose conflicts with the Mamlūk regime would ultimately lead to his death in prison and whose thought seems to have made the deepest impression on Ibn Kathīr's works; and, finally, Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), a noted historian who had also been a student of both al-Mizzī and Ibn Taymīya.¹³⁶ With the exception of Ibn Taymīya, all of these men belonged to the Shāfi'ī school, although al-Mizzī and al-Dhahabī were noted for their support of the Ḥanbalī scholar.¹³⁷

¹³²Laoust, "Ibn Kathīr, Historien," 42.

¹³³Ibid., 42-3.

¹³⁴Ibid., 43.

¹³⁵Ibid., 43-4. Whereas Rosenthal was forced to look to the biographical dictionaries for information on al-Ṭabarī's life, due to his subject's silence on the matter, Laoust, while not ignoring these types of sources for Ibn Kathīr, was able to focus on the scholar's own writings to gather information for his article, since Ibn Kathīr quite often imposes himself upon the text.

¹³⁶Ibid., 43-46.

¹³⁷Curtis, "Authentic Interpretation of Classical Islamic Texts," 9-10. Curtis disagrees with Laoust's assessment of the influence of some other scholars in Damascus upon Ibn Kathīr, but he does agree that the influence of the four men mentioned here, with the addition of 'Alam al-Dīn al-Birzālī and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīya, weighed the most heavily on Ibn Kathīr's thought. Curtis identifies Ibn Kathīr's early teacher, al-Fazārī, as also being a supporter of Ibn Taymīya.

Unlike al-Ṭabarī, whose income from the family land holdings and from teaching allowed him to remain aloof from employment in the government, Ibn Kathīr made his living by teaching at various *madrasas* and by issuing legal verdicts.¹³⁸ While some scholars did still teach out of their homes, the road to advancement now lay in the educational institutions of the Islamic world.¹³⁹ Curtis, in his dissertation on the introduction to Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsīr*, notes that the scholar suffered from a lack of professional positions due to his support of Ibn Taymīya.¹⁴⁰ In fourteenth century Damascus, scholarly success appears to have been largely determined by the relationship one had with the local leader of one's *madhhab*. Since Ibn Kathīr was technically a member of the Shafī'ī school, he had to answer to the men of the Subkī family.¹⁴¹ These men did not appreciate the fact that several prominent members of their school openly supported a Ḥanbalī, much less a trouble-maker like Ibn Taymīya. This hostility toward Ibn Kathīr as a follower of Ibn Taymīya is claimed by Curtis as the reason that Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī broke protocol when it came time to name al-Mizzī's successor to the three

¹³⁸Laoust, "Ibn Kaṭīr Historien," 51, 52-3, 55-6, 58, 61-2. Laoust cites at least three occasions at which Ibn Kathīr participated in a council of legal experts who were called upon by the provincial authorities and three occasions where he was named to posts at the mosque school Umm Ṣāliḥ, the Dār al-ḥadīth al-ashrafiya, and, finally, the Umayyad Mosque itself.

¹³⁹See Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190-1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁴⁰Curtis, "Authentic Interpretation of Classical Islamic Texts," 65-6, 73. While this may be true to a certain extent, the fact that Ibn Kathīr participated in legal tribunals and that he did eventually receive a prestigious position at the Umayyad Mosque show that he was not completely ruined by his association with Ibn Taymīya and reveals the limit of the power of the Subkīs. In his *Encyclopædia of Islam* article on Ibn Kathīr, Laoust points out several more honors and appointments earned by Ibn Kathīr, which would seem to call into question just how seriously his career was affected by his affiliation with Ibn Taymīya. Laoust, "Ibn Kathīr," in *Encyclopædia of Islam*, New Edition.

¹⁴¹Curtis, "Authentic Interpretation of Classical Islamic Texts," 65-6, 73. The men in question were Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1356) and his son, Taj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1371).

positions left vacant at his death in 742/1342.¹⁴² Taking for himself the directorship of al-Ashrafiya, he named Muḥammad b. Rāfi‘ b. Abū Muḥammad al-Sallāmī (d. 772/1372), an ally of the Subkī family, to the other two.¹⁴³ When the elder al-Subkī died in 756/1356, Ibn Kathīr was selected to fill the post at al-Ashrafiya, but he did not stay long in the position, being replaced fairly quickly by al-Subkī’s son and successor, Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī.¹⁴⁴

While Ibn Kathīr may have been punished for his affiliation with Ibn Taymīya, he also seems to have been rewarded, perhaps by the Subkī family themselves, for supporting them on two occasions in which they were brought up on charges. The first incident occurred in 743/1343, when Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī was accused of being involved in the unsuccessful, but bloody, rebellion of the Syrian governor Aṭunbughā and the Egyptian amir Quṭlūbughā al-Fakhrī the previous year.¹⁴⁵ When Ibn Kathīr was consulted, according to Laoust, he abstained from participating in the matter because he saw it as a threat to the prestige of the judicial position itself.¹⁴⁶ It was only after this incident that Ibn Kathīr would begin to receive important public positions. In 746/1345, he gave the first sermon at the new mosque founded by the Amir Bahā’ al-Dīn al-Marjānī (d. 759/1359).¹⁴⁷ Two years later, he was named to his post at Umm Ṣāliḥ, succeeding al-Dhahabī in that position; and Laoust states that “this chair remained for

¹⁴²Ibid., 65-6. Curtis argues that it was tradition for the one closest to the previous office-holder to be named as successor. Since Ibn Kathīr was both student and son-in-law to al-Mizzī, he was apparently the obvious choice.

¹⁴³Ibid., 66. Curtis notes that “these appointments were irregular enough to prompt al-Dhahabī and Ibn Ḥajjar al-‘Asqalānī to record comments about them.”

¹⁴⁴Ibid.

¹⁴⁵Laoust, “Ibn Kathīr Historien,” 52.

¹⁴⁶Ibid.

¹⁴⁷Ibid.

him, for many years, his principal, if not only, teaching assignment.”¹⁴⁸ While he was not named to these public positions until a few years after the trial of the elder al-Subkī, his assignment to the Umayyad Mosque did come almost immediately after a second incident. In 767/1367, Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī was accused by the Ḥanbalī and Mālikī chief judges of what Laoust refers to as “diverse infamies on the nature of which the *Bidāya* remains mute.”¹⁴⁹ Ibn Kathīr, along with many others, did participate in this trial, but worked quite diligently in favor of al-Subkī.¹⁵⁰ Finally, after three hearings and the intervention of the governor himself, the matter was resolved in al-Subkī’s favor.¹⁵¹ Ibn Kathīr’s assignment to the Umayyad Mosque took place later the same year.¹⁵² Curtis notes the assignment at the Mosque, but he also notes al-Subkī’s absence at the first lecture, an act he sees as openly insulting to Ibn Kathīr.¹⁵³ Laoust, on the other hand, sees the appointment as compensation from the Governor, Mankalī-Bughā, rather than al-Subkī.¹⁵⁴ While there is no evidence of direct involvement from the Subkī family in Ibn Kathīr’s favor, the fact remains that it was not until Ibn Kathīr made his public arguments in support of the leader of his school of law, thus showing himself to be a loyal Shāfi‘ī, that he began to receive his most important institutional positions.

¹⁴⁸Ibid., 53.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 61.

¹⁵⁰Ibid.

¹⁵¹Ibid.

¹⁵²Ibid., 61-2.

¹⁵³Curtis, “Authentic Interpretation of Classical Islamic Texts,” 73. He skips over the two incidents with the Subkīs entirely. Laoust, however, states that the first lecture was well attended, including the governor himself, along with “the grand qāḍīs and diverse notables,” and makes no mention of the absence of al-Subkī. Laoust, “Ibn Kathīr Historien,” 62.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 61-2.

Ibn Kathīr died in Damascus in 773/1373.¹⁵⁵ He was buried in the cemetery of the Ṣūfis near both Ibn Taymīya and al-Mizzī.¹⁵⁶ According to Laoust, his most important work was his universal history, *al-Bidāya wa'l-Nihāya*, which covers the history of the world from Creation to his own time with an added volume on the signs indicating the coming of the End of Days.¹⁵⁷ He is also well known for his work on *ḥadīth*, titled *Kitāb al-Jāmi'*, a *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān, and a variety of other works, including commentaries and a biographical dictionary of Shāfi'ī scholars.¹⁵⁸ While Laoust focuses on his work of history, and identifies him mainly with this discipline, Curtis complains that, although Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsīr* "is one of the most popular texts among Muslims..., it has not received much attention from orientalists. Ibn Kathīr has received some attention as an historian but none as an exegete or scholar of *ḥadīth*."¹⁵⁹ Unfortunately, Curtis cites no evidence for the importance he places on Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsīr* for later Muslim scholars, while Laoust points out that his work of history was used as the basis for other noteworthy historical works, including that by Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1449).¹⁶⁰ It is perhaps important to point out here that some of his medieval Muslim biographers describe him first as a Shāfi'ī *faqīh* rather than a historian or *mufassīr*.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁵Ibid., 63.

¹⁵⁶Ibid.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., 63-4.

¹⁵⁸Laoust, "Ibn Kathīr," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition.

¹⁵⁹Curtis, "Authentic Interpretation of Classical Islamic Texts," vii.

¹⁶⁰Laoust, "Ibn Kathīr," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition.

¹⁶¹Ibn al-'Imād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab fī Akhbār man Dhahab* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīya, 1966-7), Vol. 6, 231; Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba, *Ṭabaqāt al-Fuqahā' al-Shāfi'īya* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniya, 1993-1998), Vol. 2, 159; while Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī first discusses his study of *ḥadīth*, *Al-Durar al-Kāmina*, First edition (Hyderabad: Maṭba'at Majilis Dā'irat al-Ma'arif, 1929-31), vol. 1, 383-4.

Like al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'riḫ*, Ibn Kathīr's *Bidāya* covers human history from the creation of the world to his own lifetime, but then, unlike the earlier scholar, moves on to describe the signs that foretell the coming of Judgement Day. Unlike al-Ṭabarī, too, Ibn Kathīr divides his description of the pre-Islamic world between Biblical and Arabian history, basically ignoring the Persians and even the Byzantines. After relating Muḥammad's migration to Medina, Ibn Kathīr, like al-Ṭabarī, organizes his work by the events that occurred within a particular year, and this continues to the end. Later years are divided into an account of the events of that year and brief biographical notices of important individuals who died in that year.

Ibn Kathīr's Introduction to the *Bidāya* does not provide us with a detailed explanation of his methodology for this work.¹⁶² He begins instead with a laudative section, as had al-Ṭabarī, and then moves on to the matter at hand, describing what subjects the work will cover.¹⁶³ He states that he will describe the creation of the world, of the angels, *jinn*, and demons, and move on to the creation of Adam. Then he will discuss the various prophets and the stories of the Banū Isrā'īl and the events of the *Jāhiliyya* up to the time of Muḥammad. Here he adds, "So we mentioned his life just as is necessary, so hearts and desires are healed, and disease goes away from the sick."¹⁶⁴ This is our first indication that, for Ibn Kathīr, the story of Muḥammad's life itself is seen to have miraculous healing properties.¹⁶⁵ He then states that he will describe the

¹⁶²Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāya wa'l-Nihāya*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Maktabat al-Ma'ārifa, 1985), 3-6.

¹⁶³Ibid., vol. 1, 3-4.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., vol. 1, 4.

¹⁶⁵It is, of course, possible that he means spiritual healing, but physical healing seems to be the interpretation intended here.

events up to his own time, and move on to “the portents of the Day of Judgement.”¹⁶⁶

Thus, while his work begins, like al-Ṭabarī’s, with the creation of the world, Ibn Kathīr continues the work beyond his own lifetime to describe the signs of the end of the world, giving his work a sense of closure not found in the *Ta’rīkh*.

After completing his description of what subjects the work covers, he moves on to more methodological issues, and argues that he will only relate stories from the *Isrā’īliyyāt* that are permitted, and that do not contradict “the Book of God and the *Sunna* of His Messenger....”¹⁶⁷ He goes on to state that the stories he does relate from this group will not be relied upon for any religious, i.e., legal, meaning. He claims, instead, that he will rely upon the Qur’ān and the *Sunna* of Muḥammad, and that he will explain the traditions that are correct and those that are weak.¹⁶⁸ Thus, he is arguing for an authoritative retelling of history, relying solely on authoritative sources, but, unlike al-Ṭabarī, he seems unwilling to even mention any possible recourse to the use of reason. Thus, from the beginning, Ibn Kathīr argues not only for the authoritative nature of his historical account, but describes, rather loosely, what it is that makes his account authoritative, and that is his reliance on reports that are based on the Qur’ān and the *Sunna* rather than relying in any way on the use of his own intellect. We shall see, however, that despite his arguments for the use of authoritative sources, Ibn Kathīr is willing to express his own opinion regarding certain events even if it goes against the bulk of the evidence he presents.

¹⁶⁶Ibid.

¹⁶⁷Ibid., vol. 1, 5. The *Isrā’īliyyāt* are stories of Jewish origin that often deal with the Biblical prophets. Although these stories were widely used in the Islamic tradition, a growing number of Muslim scholars came to view them with suspicion.

¹⁶⁸Ibid.

Unlike al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr intersperses many of the reports he relates about the life of Muḥammad with numerous Qur'ān citations, as well as comments about the authoritativeness of a report's chain of authorities, its text, or simply to relate that the same report exists in one of the Six Books of authoritative *ḥadīth*, or another source, with either the same or a similar *isnād*.¹⁶⁹ Like al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr also makes heavy use of reports from Ibn Ishāq, but unlike the earlier scholar, he either points out the weakness of the individual report's chain of authorities, or relates a similar or identical report that is found in one of the Six Books in order to enhance the authoritativeness of the text. Only rarely does Ibn Kathīr quote al-Ṭabarī directly in this section of his work, and when he does, it seems that he refutes him more often than not, but the two men do share many reports in common, even if Ibn Kathīr cites a source other than al-Ṭabarī. One of his favorite sources for events in the life of Muḥammad is the *Musnad* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, a source that is completely ignored by al-Ṭabarī. Ibn Kathīr seems to go out of his way to equate the work of the founder of the Ḥanbalī *madhhab* with the Six Books. Often, he will relate a report and either point out that the same report exists in the Six Books and the *Musnad*, or, if the report is from the *Musnad*, but is not found in the Six Books, he will state that the report is *ṣaḥīḥ*, or excellent, but that the authors of the Six Books did not publish it. However, as we will see, even with his obvious admiration of the work of Ibn Ḥanbal, Ibn Kathīr is willing to express reservations about reports found in the *Musnad* if they disagree with his own interpretation of events.

¹⁶⁹The Six Books are the *Ṣaḥīḥ* works of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and Muslim (d. 261/874), and the *Sunan* works of Ibn Māja (d. 275/888), Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/888), al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), and al-Nasā'ī (d. 303/915). They are considered to be the most authoritative collections of *ḥadīth*.

Ibn Kathīr’s exegesis, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, presents us with a more complicated situation, since, as Curtis points out, the entire introductory section after the laudative is actually a work by Ibn Taymīya.¹⁷⁰ Curtis also notes that Ibn Taymīya’s work itself is largely based on the *Tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī, whose work “Ibn Taymīyah preferred... by far over all other Qur’ānic commentaries.”¹⁷¹ Thus, here we have a fairly direct link between the *tafsīr* works of our two authors. Curtis goes on to state that “Ibn Taymīyah’s preference for Ibn Jarīr’s Qur’ānic exegesis influenced Ibn Kathīr, for his *tafsīr* is similar in style... and it is considered to be a refinement or an updated version of Ibn Jarīr’s *tafsīr*.”¹⁷² The presence of Ibn Taymīya’s introduction gives us a more detailed account of the methodology presented by Ibn Kathīr than we find in his *Bidāya*, but al-Ṭabarī, too, went into more detail in the introduction to his *Tafsīr* than to his *History*.¹⁷³ Ibn Kathīr states, first, that the Qur’ān should be interpreted through the Qur’ān itself, since, he claims, “that which is general in one place is elucidated and expounded upon elsewhere.”¹⁷⁴ If the Qur’ān does not provide an explanation, then one must turn to the *Sunna* of Muḥammad. At this point, Ibn Kathīr makes a claim for the *Sunna* that is not found in al-Ṭabarī’s works, namely, that Muḥammad received the *Sunna* in the same manner as he had the Qur’ān itself, in other words, that it had been

¹⁷⁰Curtis, “Authentic Interpretation of Classical Islamic Texts,” 7. The work in question is Ibn Taymīya’s *Muqaddima fī Usūl al-Tafsīr*.

¹⁷¹Ibid., 77.

¹⁷²Ibid., 77-8. I would disagree with this assessment of Ibn Kathīr’s *tafsīr* in comparison to al-Ṭabarī’s, for whereas al-Ṭabarī brought together a wide variety of reports and ideas in his work, Ibn Kathīr’s is more limited in both scope and depth. Also, Curtis never states exactly who considered it to have this relationship to al-Ṭabarī’s work.

¹⁷³This is more than likely indicative of their views on the importance of spelling out a methodology for *tafsīr* as opposed to history, revealing that they viewed the first genre as far more important than the second.

¹⁷⁴Ibid., 91; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2000), 12.

revealed to him, rather than simply being an inherent part of his personality.¹⁷⁵ Thus, it would appear that for Ibn Kathīr, the *Sunna* was to be treated with the same authoritativeness as the Qur’ān itself, since it, too, was a Divine Revelation.

The Introduction continues, “At such time when we do not find the exegesis in the Qur’ān or in the *sunna*, then we resort in this case to the statements of the Companions because they were the most apprised of correct exegesis.”¹⁷⁶ Favor is shown here especially to the four Rightly-Guided caliphs, Ibn Mas‘ūd (d. 32/653), and Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687).¹⁷⁷ In some cases, it is permitted to relate the stories of the *Isrā’īliyyāt*, but only if they come through an accepted authority, like those mentioned above, and if they “are used for corroboration not for validation.”¹⁷⁸ If the authoritative sources differ in their opinions, then all statements should be related, the incorrect and the correct should be pointed out, giving the reasons for doing so, and this should be done in the order of importance of the subject being discussed.¹⁷⁹ The last step is to rely on the reports of those who came after the Companions.¹⁸⁰ While this is all presented in a much more detailed fashion than in al-Ṭabarī’s work, Ibn Kathīr is here basically following the same exegetical principles set down by the earlier scholar.

Like al-Ṭabarī’s exegesis, Ibn Kathīr treats the verses of the Qur’ān either individually or in groups, without explaining the reasoning behind this treatment. Ibn Kathīr does not transmit as many reports relating to grammar or lexicography as does

¹⁷⁵Curtis, “Authentic Interpretation,” 92; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 12. They do not go into much detail as to exactly how the *sunna* was revealed to Muḥammad, just that it was.

¹⁷⁶Curtis, “Authentic Interpretation,” 93; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 12.

¹⁷⁷Curtis, 93-96; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 12.

¹⁷⁸Curtis, 97; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 12-13.

¹⁷⁹Curtis, 99-100; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 13.

¹⁸⁰Curtis, 100; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 13.

al-Ṭabarī, but reports of this nature can be found in his work. He includes reports that relate the historical context of the revelation of the verse or verses in question, and actually quotes al-Ṭabarī's work quite often. Unlike al-Ṭabarī, however, Ibn Kathīr includes numerous citations of other verses of the Qur'ān in his treatment of a verse. These citations can take place throughout the explanation of the verse, but clusters of citations are also to be found at either the beginning of the section, at its end, or both. As in his *Bidāya*, Ibn Kathīr includes numerous comments about the reported meanings of the verses and their authoritativeness or lack thereof. In his *Tafsīr*, too, however, he seems willing, at times, to push his own interpretation of events, sometimes in contradiction to the evidence he presents.

Overall, the tone of both works by Ibn Kathīr is fairly defensive, and stand in stark contrast to the quiet confidence of those of al-Ṭabarī. Ibn Kathīr goes out of his way to attempt to prove the authoritativeness of those reports that agree with his view of the life of Muḥammad, and is equally insistent in his criticisms of those reports that disagree with that view. He is especially critical in both works of any report that might support a Shī'ī interpretation of events, as will be examined in more detail later. It will be his vehement anti-Shī'a stance that even causes him to express doubt about the authoritativeness of some of the reports related by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, a source that he attempts, at other times, to equate with the authoritative *ḥadīth* collections.¹⁸¹ As al-

¹⁸¹Walid Saleh, in his work on al-Tha'labī, argues that there was a marked increase in hostility between the Sunnī and Shī'ī sects during the Mamlūk period and states that Shī'ī scholars were using Sunnī sources, such as al-Tha'labī, to support their views. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 215-221. Ibn Kathīr's treatment of certain reports from Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal that he perceived as potentially being used by the Shī'a may be an indication that he was attempting to spare the Ḥanbalī founder's work from the same fate, while simultaneously arguing in favor of its authoritativeness.

Ṭabarī's confidence can be seen as a mixture of the strength of his own personality and as a sign of the confidence of Islamic civilization as a whole in the early tenth century, so, too, can Ibn Kathīr's defensiveness be taken as an indication that, not only was he personally less confident than al-Ṭabarī, but that the Muslim world as a whole had become more defensive by the fourteenth century.

There is, however, a certain amount of disagreement among scholars regarding the role of strict traditionalism in Damascene society after the death of Ibn Taymīya. Henri Laoust argues that the influence of Ibn Taymīya was such that members of other legal schools and even some of the Mamlūk amirs were considered his disciples, referring to Ibn Kathīr and some of his contemporaries as "Ḥanbalized Shāfi'īs."¹⁸² Walid Saleh argues that Ibn Taymīya's influence was such that his disciples carried on his attempts to discredit the *tafsīr* work of al-Tha'labī due to its use by Shī'ī scholars. He claims that "al-Tha'labī's reputation never fully recovered from this attack."¹⁸³ The possibility also exists, however, that Ibn Kathīr's defensiveness is not a sign of his times, but is, instead, a reaction against it. Norman Calder, as will be discussed in more detail below, argues that Ibn Taymīya and Ibn Kathīr were ultimately unable to convert the intellectual tradition of Islamic exegesis over to their arguments in support of sole reliance on the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*.¹⁸⁴ But a brief mention of the events that intervened

¹⁸²Henri Laoust, "Le Ḥanbalisme sous les Mamlouks bahrides," *Revue des Études Islamique* 28 (1960): 58.

¹⁸³Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 221.

¹⁸⁴Norman Calder, "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham," in *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, ed. G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993), 131.

between the lives of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr may shed light on possible reasons for an assessment of Ibn Kathīr’s defensiveness as indicative of his age.¹⁸⁵

Between the time of al-Ṭabarī and that of Ibn Kathīr, the Islamic world was witness to several crises that appeared to change its fundamental character.¹⁸⁶ Egypt and much of the surrounding area had been taken over by the Shī‘ī dynasty of the Fāṭimids in 359/969, and the Shī‘ī Būyids were just the first of many foreign groups that would attack the capital of the ‘Abbāsīd Empire, taking actual control away from the caliphs, while allowing them to retain their position.¹⁸⁷ Beginning late in the eleventh century, Christian Crusaders from Europe would take Muslim territories in Syria and Palestine, including the city of Jerusalem, where they engaged in wholesale slaughter.¹⁸⁸ The Saljūqs had taken control of the caliphate in 447/1055, and seemed unable or unwilling to do much to help those who suffered from these attacks from Christian Europe.¹⁸⁹ Although Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (d. 590/1193) took control of Egypt away from the Fāṭimids in 567/1171 and returned rule of their territories to Sunnī Muslims, as well as

¹⁸⁵Norman Calder, Jawid Mojaddedi, and Andrew Rippin, eds., *Classical Islam: A Sourcebook of Religious Literature* (London: Routledge, 2003), argue, in their section on the translation of Ibn Kathīr’s exegesis of Qur’ān 98, that the scholar “relies totally upon *ḥadīth* material; the era of Ibn Kathīr marks the final submersion of rationalism under the powers of traditionalism.” (128) The editors directly tie this victory of traditionalism to the larger events of the time, stating, “In the wake of the Mongol invasion of the Islamic heartlands and the fall of Baghdad in 656/1258, a close definition of Islam was felt by many to be needed as a method of Muslim self-preservation in the face of an external threat.” (Ibid.) While they do not provide any supporting evidence for this statement, it would seem to agree with the overall perception of this period of Islamic history. Certainly, more research needs to be done to determine whether the views of Ibn Taymīya and Ibn Kathīr reflect mainstream Muslim society in fourteenth century Damascus or whether their views were those of a defensive minority.

¹⁸⁶There are a few very good general works on the history of Islamic civilization for this period. Although somewhat dated, Philip Hitti’s work, *History of the Arabs*, Tenth Edition (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1970), is still an excellent source of information, as is Marshall G.S. Hodgson’s *The Venture of Islam*, Vol. 2, *The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), and also see Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, Second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹⁸⁷For the Fāṭimids, see Hitti, 617-31; Hodgson, 21-28; and Lapidus, 283-7.

¹⁸⁸On the Crusades, see Hitti, 635-58; Hodgson, 264-8; and Lapidus, 287-92.

¹⁸⁹On the Saljūqs, see Hitti, 473-81; Hodgson, 42-6; and Lapidus, 117-23.

regaining control of Jerusalem, his descendants were eventually replaced by their own Turkic slave soldiers, the Mamlūks, in 648/1250.¹⁹⁰ Finally, the pagan Mongols took Baghdad itself during their wave of destructive invasions and killed the caliph and his family in 656/1258, thus seeming to destroy the very heart of Islamic civilization.¹⁹¹

Not only had the political unity of the Empire been forever destroyed, but the culture had changed dramatically as well. Education became more centralized under the Saljūqs with the institution of the *Nizāmīya*, a series of schools set up by the vizier Nizām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092), in an apparent effort to ensure that only officially accepted doctrines were taught to the next generation of scholars.¹⁹² In the same period, Ash‘arism became the official theological doctrine of Islam and the Mamlūks continued to support its adherence.¹⁹³ By the late twelfth/early thirteenth century the various Sunnī legal schools were narrowed down to four, Shāfi‘ī, Ḥanafī, Mālikī, and Ḥanbalī, and the Six Books were beginning to be accepted as the only repositories of authoritative Sunnī *ḥadīth*.¹⁹⁴ This centralization of authoritative religious and legal institutions was supported by non-Arab rulers who were eager for some form of legitimation, and this, too, had its impact on Muslim society by the fourteenth century, as rulers who were converts to Islam tried to appear to their subjects as devout Muslims

¹⁹⁰For the history of the Ayyūbids and the Mamlūks, see Hitti, 645-54, 671-82; Hodgson, 267-8, 417-19; and Lapidus, 291-4.

¹⁹¹On the Mongols, see Hitti, 482-8; Hodgson, 286-92; and Lapidus, 226-29.

¹⁹²On the institution of the *Nizāmīya*, see Hitti, 410-11; Hodgson, 47-9; and Lapidus, 141-2.

¹⁹³On the rise of the Ash‘arī system, see Hitti, 430-1; Hodgson, 175-179; and Lapidus, 89-90, 135-7.

¹⁹⁴The four schools are named after their founders, al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 215/830), Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 152/769), Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855). For the Six Books and their authors, see p. 61, note 169, above. Lapidus argues that “the late twelfth century..., brought a shift from sponsorship of individual schools to equal recognition of the four major schools of law.... In 1234, as a further expression of a pan-Sunni policy, a new madrasa was founded in Baghdad to house all four of the law schools.” (142)

and, thus, were reliant upon the support of the religious scholars, creating an uneasy balance between the power of the sultan and the demands of the ‘ulamā’.¹⁹⁵

But what did the ‘ulamā’ of Ibn Kathīr’s day think of al-Ṭabarī? Rosenthal has already pointed out the numerous copies of al-Ṭabarī’s *History* available in the libraries of the Fātimids, and it is a fair bet that at least some of these survived into the Mamlūk period. Also, Curtis has shown how al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr* was used extensively by both Ibn Taymiya and Ibn Kathīr. The latter scholar also included al-Ṭabarī’s biographical notice in both his *Bidāya* and his biographical dictionary of Shāfi‘ī jurists, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi‘īya*. In the *Bidāya*, he begins with a full citation of al-Ṭabarī’s name, the year he was born, and then a physical description of him. He notes that al-Ṭabarī “transmitted... on the authority of a large number of people, and departed to distant lands in the study of *ḥadīth*, and he wrote the... *Ta’rīkh*, and... the perfect *Tafsīr*, which has no equal.”¹⁹⁶ He also relates several reports from other authorities that praise al-Ṭabarī’s scholarly abilities, and then he moves on to those reports from al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071) dealing with al-Ṭabarī’s problems with the Ḥanbalīs, first that one scholar claimed the “Ḥanābila treated him [al-Ṭabarī] unjustly”¹⁹⁷ and then that another scholar complained that he had been prevented from studying with al-Ṭabarī, because “the

¹⁹⁵It seems a universal truth that converts to a religion feel the need to be more devout than those born into the tradition, and this is doubly so for rulers. However, the Mamlūk public display of devotion was sometimes countered by the private events at court, as the various bloody rebellions, coups, and court intrigues reveal. Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāya wa’l-Nihāya*, vol. 13, *passim*. D.P. Little, “Religion Under the Mamlūks.” *History and Historiography of the Mamlūks* (London: Variorum, 1986): 165-181, argues that the Mamlūks had to successfully juggle the interests of all of the groups in their territory, including the Christians, the Ṣūfīs, and the ‘ulamā’, in order to maintain control.

¹⁹⁶Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāya wa’l-Nihāya*, vol. 11, 156.

¹⁹⁷Ibid., vol. 11, 157. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī wrote *Ta’rīkh al-Baghdād*, which Rosenthal includes as one of the most important sources of biographical information for al-Ṭabarī. Rosenthal, *General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood*, 9.

Ḥanābila were hindering anyone from meeting with him.”¹⁹⁸ Ibn Kathīr adds his own comments to these reports, first complimenting al-Ṭabarī’s piety, his scholarly abilities, and relating some of his poetry. Then he discusses al-Ṭabarī’s death and notes that “he was buried in his house, because some of the common people of the Ḥanābila and their riffraff prevented his burial during the day....”¹⁹⁹ He adds that some of the negative views toward the scholar were due to the opinions expressed by Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Dāwūd, who is here described as a legal expert of the Syrian Zāhirī *madhhab*.²⁰⁰ This appears to be the same person previously mentioned by Rosenthal as having forwarded his accusation of al-Ṭabarī’s Shī‘ī sympathies to the Caliph’s Chamberlain.²⁰¹

Ibn Kathīr points out that some scholars claimed that al-Ṭabarī allowed for the wiping of the feet in the ritual ablution before prayer, rather than washing them. This was an important point for Muslims, since the Sunnī perception was that the feet had to be washed, while the Shī‘a argued that they only had to be wiped.²⁰² Thus, the claim that al-Ṭabarī supported the necessity for wiping only could also be seen as an accusation of Shī‘ī views. However, Ibn Kathīr points out:

It is attributed to him that he used to speak of the permissibility of wiping (*mash*) the two feet in ablutions and that he did not require washing (*ghusl*) them, and he became famous for that.²⁰³ One of the ‘ulamā’ claims that there were two Ibn Jarīrs, one of them being a Shī‘ī, and that was attributed to him (on the ablutions), and they deny these qualities to Abū Ja‘far. His words which are relied upon in *Tafsīr* are that he required washing (*ghusl*) the two feet and with

¹⁹⁸Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāya wa’l-Nihāya*, vol. 11, 157.

¹⁹⁹Ibid.

²⁰⁰Ibid. The Zāhirī school, like al-Ṭabarī’s own, did not survive to become one of the four accepted schools of legal thought in Islam, but its adherents certainly would have viewed al-Ṭabarī as competition, as did the Ḥanbalīs, and the steps taken by the Zāhirī jurist reveal just how dangerous scholarly rivalries could become.

²⁰¹Rosenthal, *General Introduction*, 59-60.

²⁰²Ibid., 56-7.

²⁰³Or “reputed for that.”

the washing (*ghusl*), rubbing (*dalk*) them, but he meant by rubbing (*dalk*), wiping (*mash*), but most people did not understand his intention. Those who did understand transmitted from him that he required washing (*ghusl*) and wiping (*mash*), the latter being rubbing (*dalk*). God knows best.²⁰⁴

So, Ibn Kathīr here seems to be attempting a middle path, arguing that, while al-Ṭabarī did require the washing, thus favoring the Sunnī interpretation, he also included the rubbing of the feet in the ritual ablutions before prayer. This assertion, along with the familiar “God knows best,” reveals that either Ibn Kathīr was not entirely certain himself how to interpret al-Ṭabarī’s views on this requirement or that he was attempting to portray the earlier scholar in as positive, i.e., orthodox, light as possible.

Ibn Kathīr’s entry on al-Ṭabarī in his *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi’īya* begins with al-Ṭabarī’s scholarly accomplishments, and describes him as an “author of great literary works, and of the great *Tafsīr*, a great man in the knowledge of the Qur’ān. His roots are among the people of Ṭabaristān, and he wandered the provinces in the study of knowledge....”²⁰⁵ Ibn Kathīr then moves on to discuss those under whom al-Ṭabarī studied, and relates several reports about his abilities and achievements. He includes, again, his own comments about al-Ṭabarī’s difficulties with the Ḥanbalīs, stating that the scholar had been accused of “adherence to Shī‘ī doctrine”²⁰⁶ and that the Ḥanbalīs had demanded a debate with him. Al-Ṭabarī agreed and appeared at the appointed time and place, but the Ḥanbalīs never arrived. Ibn Kathīr then adds that the Ḥanbalīs equated their arguments, presumably those regarding the “praiseworthy position” of Muḥammad in Qur’ān 17:79, with the arguments of the previous generation regarding

²⁰⁴Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāya wa’l-Nihāya*, vol. 11, 158.

²⁰⁵Ibn Kathīr, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi’īya*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Madār al-Islāmī, 2004), 216.

²⁰⁶Ibid., vol. 1, 219.

the issue of the createdness of the Qur'ān, and that they “clung fanatically” to this issue, but that “it was not as they maintained....”²⁰⁷ He adds the familiar, “but God knows best,” at the end of his comments on this subject to indicate, again, his uncertainty.²⁰⁸ Ibn Kathīr ends his section on al-Ṭabarī in this work with a *ḥadīth* related to him from his teacher and father-in-law, al-Mizzī, transmitted through al-Ṭabarī, which states: “The Messenger of God said: ‘Whoever completes, near his death, [the saying] “There is no god but God” will enter Paradise.’”²⁰⁹ Ibn Kathīr remarks that “it is unique from this path, and they [the authors of the Six Books] did not publish it.”²¹⁰

Thus, for the most part in his biographical entries on al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr portrays him in a positive light. He does this even though it brings him into sharp disagreement with the arguments of the Ḥanbalī community of tenth-century Baghdad. His praise is not unflinching, however, as is revealed by his comments regarding the report related by al-Mizzī, which Ibn Kathīr admits is unique and not to be found in the authoritative collections of *ḥadīth*. But the overall picture given to us by Ibn Kathīr is that of an immense amount of respect for the earlier scholar. However, when we delve into the body of Ibn Kathīr’s *sīra/ta’rīkh*, we see that his respect for al-Ṭabarī is mitigated by his hatred for the Shī‘a, and that he was willing to discredit reports or entire works of the older scholar in order to deprive that group of any support they might have gained from his writings.

²⁰⁷Ibid.

²⁰⁸Ibid.

²⁰⁹Ibid., vol. 1, 220.

²¹⁰Ibid.

Ibn Kathīr, in his discussion of the events at Ghadīr Khumm, complains about al-Ṭabarī's work on this subject and states that in it al-Ṭabarī "conveyed the lean and the fat and the authentic and the faulty, as what prevails among most of the traditionists...."²¹¹ Thus, he criticizes the earlier scholar for relaying both authoritative and non-authoritative reports without differentiating between the two, much as he does throughout his *sīra/ta'rikh*. Since al-Ṭabarī did not differentiate between those reports that were acceptable and those that were not, he gave the Shī'a, in essence, a formidable arsenal of *ḥadīth* to use in support of their arguments regarding the primacy of 'Alī. Another instance in which Ibn Kathīr seems willing to discredit a report from al-Ṭabarī to avoid its perceived misuse by the Shī'a is the story of Muḥammad's acknowledgment of 'Alī as his successor after the Prophet's miraculous division of food and drink at his public announcement of his mission to his closest kinsmen.²¹² In fact, it is in connection to this story that Ibn Kathīr is even willing to shed doubt on a report from Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal himself in order to deprive the Shī'a of their own interpretation of this event.²¹³

Finally, the biography of al-Ṭabarī by one of Ibn Kathīr's most important teachers, al-Dhahabī, is also a mixture of positive and negative views. After discussing al-Ṭabarī's importance as a scholar, al-Dhahabī relates one of his legal decisions, to which the later scholar adds the opinions of other jurists. He then refutes al-Ṭabarī's

²¹¹Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāya wa'l-Nihāya*, vol. 5, 208. What Ibn Kathīr fails to note is that al-Ṭabarī does not mention this event at all in his *sīra/ta'rikh*.

²¹²This particular event will be examined in detail in Chapter Four of the current study.

²¹³It is significant that when Ibn Kathīr relates a report from Ibn Ḥanbal that he disagrees with, he merely expresses doubt, but when faced with a report from al-Ṭabarī that he finds troublesome, he goes beyond the expression of doubt and makes his opposition very clear. Thus, even though he respected al-Ṭabarī, he still viewed the work of Ibn Ḥanbal as superior and clearly showed more respect for his reputation than for that of al-Ṭabarī.

ruling with a decision by Ibn Taymīya.²¹⁴ So, it appears that al-Ṭabarī was best respected as an exegete in fourteenth century Damascus, but that perhaps at least one of the followers of the Ḥanbalī Ibn Taymīya still shared some of the hostility that had been shown toward him as a legal scholar by the Ḥanbalīs of his own day.

Al-Ṭabarī's lack of commentary regarding his preference for one report over another in some of his works thus seems to have caused problems for both himself and later scholars. As noted above, his two-volume work on Ghadīr Khumm and the virtues of 'Alī was already being exploited by the Shī'a of his own day, necessitating further works on the positive qualities of the rest of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, as well as al-'Abbās. Since the Fāṭimids and Qarmaṭians were already beginning to cause problems for the 'Abbāsīd dynasty, such exploitation of his works could have serious repercussions. However, the problems he experienced seem to stem more from his exegesis of the Qur'ān, wherein he does provide his own opinion as to which interpretation is to be preferred over others. It would be his interpretation of the "praiseworthy position" that would cause so many problems with the Ḥanbalīs, and his interpretation of the requirement for washing or wiping the feet during ritual ablutions would lead to accusations of Shī'ī sympathies. Ibn Kathīr, whose world had seen the physical reality of Shī'ī rule in Fāṭimid Egypt, reserved his most stinging comments in both his *sīra/ta'rīkh* and his *tafsīr* for those reports that could be used to strengthen any argument in support of Shī'ī claims. Although Ibn Kathīr denies the accusations of Shī'ī sympathies against al-Ṭabarī and strongly criticizes the Ḥanbalīs who attacked the

²¹⁴Al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rīkh al-Islām*, vol. 23, 283-5. The story of the legal decision appears fairly incongruous with the rest of the section devoted to his life and work.

earlier scholar, he does go out of his way to refute those reports that may be interpreted as supporting the Shī'ī view of the life of Muḥammad and the interpretation of the Qur'ān, even if it means besmirching the great scholar's reputation.

Secondary Works on al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr

There are no small number of modern studies that use the works of al-Ṭabarī, and even in those where he is not the primary focus, he is too important a figure for the Classical and early Medieval period of Islamic history to ignore completely. Among the most compelling recent studies are those by Claude Gilliot, who has published a number of works on al-Ṭabarī's *History* as well as his *Tafsīr*, two of which will be discussed here.²¹⁵ The common theme of these studies is the mythic element as found in both works and their perceived importance by their author. He argues in the first article that al-Ṭabarī's *History* is too often used piecemeal by modern historians, and that we tend to lose sight of it as a single, unified work.²¹⁶ In order to accomplish this, he argues, we must take into consideration two facts: first, that al-Ṭabarī was not just an exegete and historian, but that he was also a scholar of Islamic tradition, law, and theology, and second, we must not forget that al-Ṭabarī was Persian.²¹⁷ As such, his work of history is one that combines all of these elements and relates the dual stories of the Israelites, who possessed prophecy, and the Persians, who exercised royal authority.²¹⁸ Gilliot argues

²¹⁵These include "Récit, mythe et histoire chez Tabari. Une Vision mythique de l'histoire universelle," *Mélanges* 21 (1993): 277-289; and "Mythe, récit, histoire du salut dans le Commentaire Coranique de Tabari," *Journal Asiatique* 288,1 (1994): 237-270.

²¹⁶Gilliot, "Récit, mythe et histoire chez Tabari," 277.

²¹⁷*Ibid.*, 277-8.

²¹⁸*Ibid.*, 278.

that these two elements would converge for al-Ṭabarī in the Islamic caliphate “instituted by God.”²¹⁹ After examining some of the stories in the *History*, such as the stories of Noah and al-Ḍaḥḥāk, he concludes that al-Ṭabarī combined the legends of the Israelites and the Persians, along with the works of previous Muslim historians, to produce a unified whole in which the archetype of the just sovereign anticipates the ideal of Muslim government, while the tyrant provides the perfect antithesis to the life of Muḥammad, whom Gilliot refers to as the “nodal point of the *History*.”²²⁰

In the second article, Gilliot uses al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr* to “refute the rather tenacious idea..., of an Orient that does not change.”²²¹ Using three examples of God as master of life and death, he examines al-Ṭabarī’s exegesis, specifically the reports that relate the legendary material associated with Qur’ān 2:258-260.²²² He concludes that, in this case, it is the legendary reports, rather than those that relate grammatical, legal, or theological matters, that perform an “independent function” in al-Ṭabarī’s study, which

²¹⁹Ibid.

²²⁰Ibid., 287.

²²¹Gilliot, “Mythe, récit, histoire du salut dans le Commentaire Coranique de Tabari,” 237.

²²²Ibid., 239-41. The three examples are the believing ruler versus the unbelieving ruler, the destroyed city and the miraculous sleeper, and the story of the four birds. Qur’ān 2:258-260 read: “Hast thou not turned thy vision to one who disputed with Abraham about his Lord, because Allāh had granted him power? Abraham said: ‘My Lord is He Who giveth life and death.’ He said: ‘I give life and death.’ Said Abraham: ‘But it is Allāh that causeth the sun to rise from the East: Do thou then cause him to rise from the West?’ Thus was he confounded who (in arrogance) rejected faith. Nor doth Allāh give guidance to a people unjust. Or (take) the similitude of one who passed by a hamlet, all in ruins to its roofs. He said: ‘Oh! how shall Allāh bring it (ever) to life, after (this) its death?’ But Allāh caused him to die for a hundred years then raised him up (again). He said: ‘How long didst thou tarry (thus)?’ He said: ‘(Perhaps) a day or part of a day.’ He said: ‘Nay, thou has tarried thus a hundred years; but look at thy food and thy drink; they show no signs of age; and look at thy donkey; and that We may make of thee a Sign unto the people, look further at the bones, how We bring them together and clothe them with flesh.’ When this was shown clearly to him, he said: ‘I know that Allāh hath power over all things.’ Behold! Abraham said: ‘My Lord! Show me how thou givest life to the dead.’ He said: ‘Dost thou not then believe?’ He said: ‘Yea! but to satisfy my own understanding.’ He said: ‘Take four birds; tame them to turn to thee; put a portion of them on every hill, and call to them; they will come to thee, (flying) with speed. Then know that Allāh is exalted in Power, Wise.’”

is “far from secondary” to the other types of reports.²²³ The results of the present study do not seem to support this thesis when other verse groupings are examined. While the legendary reports do serve an important function in the *Tafsīr*, and while they do tend to stand out among the other types of reports, they are not always the main focus of al-Ṭabarī’s treatment of the verses of the Qur’ān, being sometimes vastly outnumbered by the other types of reports, most especially those of a grammatical and lexicographical nature.

Perhaps the most thorough examination of al-Ṭabarī’s *History* as a narrative that contains certain literary elements is that by Boaz Shoshan, in his *Poetics of Islamic Historiography: Deconstructing Ṭabarī’s History*. Shoshan argues that the *History*, and history itself, contain elements of literature that the historian, sometimes purposefully, includes in the text to provide it with meaning.²²⁴ He argues that he is not attempting to use al-Ṭabarī’s work to reconstruct the Islamic historical past, but rather that he is deconstructing the *History* to look at how its component parts adhere to various modes of literary interpretation, or, rather, how different literary themes are found throughout the various parts of the *History*.²²⁵ He spends the first half of the work examining these literary themes and how they are portrayed in al-Ṭabarī’s work. The second half of the book consists of specific incidents, wherein Shoshan examines in detail the various

²²³Ibid., 267.

²²⁴Boaz Shoshan, *Poetics of Islamic Historiography: Deconstructing Ṭabarī’s History* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), see especially his Introduction (xvii-xxxiv), where he compares various theories regarding the relationship between history and literature, and his discussion of the role of character in the *History* (148-54) for an example of how he portrays one such literary element as it was related by al-Ṭabarī in that work. For Shoshan’s use of the theories of Hayden White, see note 48, above.

²²⁵Ibid., xi.

literary themes elucidated in the first.²²⁶ The main point of this work, according to Shoshan, is “the ambiguous effect that the historical stories create, or... the effect created against the narrators’ best intentions. In other words, my analysis is sometimes occupied, not with authorial intention, but with what may have escaped authorial attention.”²²⁷ Therefore, the *History* reveals not necessarily history as it was, but history as al-Ṭabarī and his sources chose to depict it, using a variety of techniques by which to stress those elements of the story they deemed most important. While I would disagree to a certain extent with his judgement that al-Ṭabarī’s work is more reliant on the narrative devices included by his sources, and that his own role was, especially for the early period of the work leading up to and including the life of Muḥammad, simply editorial, I agree with Shoshan that too much should not be made of his authorship of this part of the work. Al-Ṭabarī himself claims that he is only passing on what was handed down to him. However, I would argue that the form of the sources at his disposal, the individual *khbar* reports, allowed for a much higher level of editorial complexity, even in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*, thus what Shoshan refers to as editing, may actually be closer to creating.²²⁸

Another study that attempts to deal with al-Ṭabarī’s *History* from a holistic perspective is that by Ulrika Mårtensson, who analyzes the work in light of the

²²⁶Ibid. Shoshan admits that his examples, such as the Saqīfa incident and the Battle of Siffin, are pivotal moments in Islamic history, and thus readily lend themselves to manipulation by al-Ṭabarī.

²²⁷Ibid. He states that, while al-Ṭabarī did act as author for the later years of the *History*, specifically those that take place during the scholar’s adult life, he acted more as an editor for the earlier periods covered by the work.

²²⁸Ibid., xxix. Shoshan’s analysis of the *khbar* form appears to agree with that of the current study, namely, that despite the surface appearance of a fractured account, narrative flow does occur in al-Ṭabarī’s *History*. For an example of this in the current study, see Chapter Four, below.

historian's discourse with the subject studied.²²⁹ Unlike Shoshan, Mårtensson is here attempting to interpret the historical information found in the *History*, and does so by examining both "the *khabar*-form and the religious content."²³⁰ She discerns that "Ṭabarī analysed history in terms of a complex view of society," and that the religious symbols are guides to this analysis.²³¹ Rather than seeing in al-Ṭabarī's introduction a traditionalist statement about his reliance on the works of others, she interprets his stance as being equivalent to the modern historian's use of primary sources.²³² She examines the religious symbolism in the text in light of the later events related by al-Ṭabarī. For example, the Creation of the world by God also created the foundation for the institution of the caliphate, and it is this institution, she argues, that provides the framework for the text as a whole.²³³ In the end, she disagrees with those authors who would argue that al-Ṭabarī's work has a moralistic view, and instead claims that "he explained history in terms of a theory of society rather than moral dilemmas...."²³⁴ She also states, as did Gilliot, that al-Ṭabarī's depiction of the Biblical prophets and the life of Muḥammad all point to the institution of the caliphate, but whereas Gilliot's theories are fairly moralistic, Mårtensson's are institutional.²³⁵

²²⁹Ulrika Mårtensson, "Discourse and Historical Analysis: The Case of Al-Ṭabarī's History of the Messengers and the Kings," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 16:3 (2005): 287-331. She states that she is basing her study on the theories of Michel de Certeau, in his *L'Écriture de l'histoire*. (287-8) Unlike the majority of modern works dealing with Islamic historical texts, she does not attempt to dissect the chain of authorities of individual reports in order to ascertain their authenticity, but rather examines how al-Ṭabarī tied certain parts of the work to larger themes in Islamic history, thus she examines the *History*, not one report at a time, but instead studies the work as a whole, as does Gilliot.

²³⁰Ibid., 288.

²³¹Ibid., 300.

²³²Ibid., 293-4.

²³³Ibid., 301.

²³⁴Ibid., 331. She includes here the works by Gilliot.

²³⁵Ibid.

While al-Ṭabarī has been generally recognized as a scholar of sufficient importance to study in his own right, most Western studies of Ibn Kathīr tend to focus more on his involvement with Ibn Taymīya.²³⁶ This is justified to a certain extent, since the older man did have a profound impact on Ibn Kathīr. However, as has already been argued by Laoust, Ibn Kathīr's *Bidāya* was itself used as the basis for later historical works, and thus was perceived by later Muslim writers as an important addition to the genre.²³⁷ For modern, Western scholars, however, Ibn Kathīr, as a subject of study in his own right, has been largely ignored.²³⁸ One exception to this, besides the studies by Laoust and Curtis already mentioned, is a study by Juan Pedro Monferrer Sala that examines Christian stories in Ibn Kathīr's *Bidāya*, specifically his section on the lives of the prophets, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*.²³⁹ The story studied in this article is the conversion of Saul, who later becomes the New Testament figure Paul. Sala argues that the story of Saul's/Paul's conversion was one that was already in circulation among the Christian community in Damascus, and that it was only used by Ibn Kathīr after it had been thoroughly Islamized.²⁴⁰ Thus, his theory would seem to conform to those already espoused by Rubin and Stetkevych that Biblical and mythical stories made their way

²³⁶The biography by Laoust, "Ibn Kaṭīr Historien," is a notable exception, but even Curtis's work reveals that a large portion of the introduction of Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsīr* is actually from a work by Ibn Taymīya, see above. Laoust himself produced another article that puts Ibn Kathīr under the shadow of his teacher, "La Biographie d'Ibn Taymīya d'après Ibn Kaṭīr," *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 9(1943): 115-162. In this article, he argues that Ibn Taymīya, based on what was written of him by Ibn Kathīr in his *Bidāya*, was more of a political, rather than a religious, reformer.

²³⁷While the "cut and paste" methods of Ibn Kathīr prove problematic for the current study, I would posit that, like al-Ṭabarī, it is doubtful that he would relate wholesale those aspects of the life of Muḥammad or the exegesis of the Qur'ān that he did not agree with, at least not without comment.

²³⁸However, see the articles by Norman Calder and Jane Dammen McAuliffe, below, which compare the exegesis of Ibn Kathīr to that of al-Ṭabarī.

²³⁹Juan Pedro Monferrer Sala, "La conversión de Saulo, según Ibn Kaṭīr," *MEAH*, Sección Árabe-Islam 45(1996): 147-159.

²⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 147, but see also his comments on the role of the "omniscient narrator" and its uses for Ibn Kathīr in this story. (152)

into the mainstream of orthodox scholarly works only after they had been given a proper Islamic context or focus.

A comparison of the works of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr is not without precedent, and based on the views of the two authors that follow, the two men represent opposite ends of a spectrum. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, in her article “Qurānic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr,” argues that while al-Ṭabarī does provide a statement of his hermeneutics, it is one that is fairly simplistic.²⁴¹ The introduction to the *tafsīr* work of Ibn Kathīr, however, includes a complex statement of Qur’ānic hermeneutics, which McAuliffe sees as the maturation of the genre. She claims:

Ibn Kathīr’s approach, on the other hand, is far more self-consciously methodological.... Even more striking is the fact that he has moved beyond a concern with classification to an emphasis on procedure. He has gone ahead to outline a series of steps by which an adequate exegesis may be conducted. Added to this is his interest in the feasible use of extra-Islamic sources and the methods by which their validity may be assessed. The precision with which he distinguishes useful from useless exegetical activity is of equal interest. Here again he has isolated, on the basis of a Qurānic precedent, the sequential procedure which should be followed.²⁴²

McAuliffe’s view of the evolution of exegesis between al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr has not gone unchallenged, however. Norman Calder, in his article “*Tafsīr* from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with References to the Story of Abraham,” while not explicitly arguing against McAuliffe, reaches very

²⁴¹Jane Dammen McAuliffe, “Qurānic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr” in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur’ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 46-62. See especially 60-61. She makes no mention of the fact that his introduction is actually a text by Ibn Taymīya.

²⁴²*Ibid.*, 60-1.

different conclusions.²⁴³ He criticizes Ibn Kathīr for not respecting the intellectual tradition of *tafsīr*, in which scholars like al-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī allowed for a variety of different views regarding various aspects of the interpretation of the Qur’ānic text.²⁴⁴ According to Calder:

[Ibn Kathīr’s] primary objective is to measure the text of the Qur’ān against the established collections of prophetic *ḥadīth*; his concern to measure it against the established scholastic disciplines is minimal. The authorities to whom he looks for support are not those who work in the great intellectual traditions of exegesis or law or *kalām* but those responsible for the great collections of *ḥadīth* and those who figure in their *isnāds*....²⁴⁵

This has a problematic impact on the earlier *tafsīr* works, “Here begins a possibility of *al-tafsīr bi’l-ḥadīth* which retrospectively casts the whole tradition into the shade of *al-tafsīr bi’l-ra’y*.”²⁴⁶ In essence, Ibn Kathīr, following in the footsteps of Ibn Taymīya, succeeds in making his work of *tafsīr* acceptable to the science of *ḥadīth*, but in doing so, impoverishes it as an intellectual pursuit. For Calder, Ibn Kathīr’s (and Ibn Taymīya’s) methodology did not irrevocably change the genre of *tafsīr*, and in fact he contends:

Their arguments were not irresistible. They were neutralized in any case by the intrinsic acquisitiveness of the *tafsīr* tradition, which struggled to contain the whole of a complex and developing past. And counter-arguments displaying a superior appreciation of what the *tafsīr* tradition was about had already been developed....²⁴⁷

²⁴³Norman Calder, “*Tafsīr* from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham,” 101-140.

²⁴⁴Ibid., 127-134.

²⁴⁵Ibid., 130.

²⁴⁶Ibid.

²⁴⁷Ibid., 131. Calder here, too, seems unaware of the fact that the introductory section of Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr* is, in fact, a work by Ibn Taymīya, but does note the older man’s influence.

Calder appreciates what he sees as the religious limitations of *tafsīr*, that as the community developed, the increasing number of variant interpretations could, in effect, tear the community apart. He also appreciates that Ibn Kathīr’s *ḥadīth*-based reading of exegesis appears to be an attempt at dogmatic centralization, an effort to transform the gray, hazy world of *tafsīr* into something as seemingly black-and-white as *ḥadīth*.²⁴⁸ In the process, however, Ibn Kathīr, although his “intemperate restrictions and his wholesale adoption of Islam’s second canon afforded him an easy popularity,” is harshly criticized by Calder for sacrificing “the unity of the diachronic community (so many great thinkers fall outside his definitions) and the independence of the disciplines.”²⁴⁹ So, for Calder, Ibn Kathīr is what he claims to be, a scholar who slavishly follows the principles of *ḥadīth*, no matter what the consequences, to ensure the unity and orthodoxy of the community of believers, while al-Ṭabarī’s allowance of a variety of interpretations served to further enrich the intellectual tradition of the medieval Islamic world.

Although Calder’s study focuses on Ibn Kathīr’s *tafsīr* work, his theory, on the surface at least, appears to apply to the *sīra* section of *al-Bidāya wa-I-Nihāya* as well. While al-Ṭabarī continues to provide a wide variety of reports and possibilities without overtly interjecting much of his own interpretation into his *History*, Ibn Kathīr, although also providing a large number of reports, continues to rely heavily on works of *ḥadīth* and to be more interested in passing judgement in a determination of what is

²⁴⁸Ibid., 138. Calder states that the “canonical six works had barely in the time of Ibn Kathīr established themselves.” However, it is obvious that they were established enough for Ibn Kathīr to see them as the most authoritative sources for his work of *tafsīr*.

²⁴⁹Ibid., 134.

allowed and what is forbidden than in any purely intellectual interest in the subject matter.²⁵⁰ Therefore, even though Tarif Khalidi argues that it was al-Ṭabarī who attempted to make *ta'riḫ* acceptable to scholars of *ḥadīth*, it appears that it would be the works of Ibn Kathīr that would succeed for both *tafsīr* and *sīra/ta'riḫ*.²⁵¹ But appearances can be deceiving, and a careful study of the works of Ibn Kathīr reveals that, while he did focus on reports that were acceptable to *ḥadīth* methodology, he did not allow his reliance on this methodology to override his own interpretation of events, especially when examining the supernatural archetype of the Prophet Muḥammad.

²⁵⁰This does not mean that al-Ṭabarī was uninterested in such pursuits, but that his methodology allowed for a bit more leeway in what he accepted and what he did not. It is also possible that al-Ṭabarī, rather than inserting a tradition in order to prove its incorrectness, simply did not include traditions with which he had serious problems, thus editing by omission rather than by direct comment. Since such a large number of his sources have been lost, however, it is unlikely that this possibility can be sufficiently examined to either prove or disprove its feasibility.

²⁵¹Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 73-81.

Chapter Three

The Archetype of Muḥammad in the Pre-Revelation Meccan Period: The Role of the Supernatural in Muḥammad's Conception

The archetypal story of Muḥammad's life in the period leading up to his reception of the Revelation reveals a dual story-line, one mundane, the other supernatural.²⁵² The first depicts Muḥammad as an orphan from a clan with little power or wealth who gains a reputation for honesty, marries a wealthy widow, and becomes a respected businessman. The second story-line mirrors the first, but contains numerous reports of supernatural events intended to show Muḥammad as marked by God even before receiving the Revelation. While Muḥammad and those around him appear aware of some of these miracles, others are seen only by select individuals. In this part of the story, Muḥammad controls none of these miraculous events, and is represented as a somewhat passive receptor of God's signs.

Although one of the main purposes of this study is to compare how the miracle stories that include a Qur'an citation in the *sīra/ta'rikh* are then treated in the *tafsīr* work of the same author, such a comparison is nearly impossible for this period of Muḥammad's life. At no point in the pre-Revelation Meccan period does al-Ṭabarī cite a verse of the Qur'an in his *sīra/ta'rikh*. However, in one of the reports depicting the appearance of a light in the face of Muḥammad's father, 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, shortly before the Prophet's conception, a portion of Qur'an 6:124 is seemingly foretold

²⁵²The archetype of Muḥammad's life is here represented as being those elements of the story that are found in both al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr. Since al-Ṭabarī's *History* is well known for compiling a wide variety of earlier sources, it is reasonable to take those stories that were reported by him and then survived to be repeated hundreds of years later by Ibn Kathīr as representative of the archetype.

by a Jewish soothsayer, as will be discussed in more detail below.²⁵³ This verse is directly cited for the same event, but in connection to a different report, by Ibn Kathīr in his *sīra/ta'rikh*. Since this is the closest approximation of a Qur'ān citation by al-Ṭabarī in this section of his *sīra/ta'rikh*, it is this event that will serve as the focus for the present chapter.²⁵⁴

The archetypal story of Muḥammad's mundane life in the pre-Revelation Meccan period is one of adversity overcome. The death of his father before his birth left him at a disadvantage, so that it was reportedly difficult to find someone from the bedouin tribes willing to foster him.²⁵⁵ He was eventually fostered to a woman of the Banū Sa'd b. Bakr and was later returned to his mother, who died when he was six years old.²⁵⁶ He then went to live with his paternal grandfather, 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, who died two years later.²⁵⁷ At the age of eight, he moved into the household of one of his paternal uncles, Abū Ṭālib, who cared for him into adulthood.²⁵⁸ Through hard work, he gained a reputation for honesty and came to the attention of a wealthy widow, Khadīja,

²⁵³Qur'ān 6:124 states: "When there comes to them a Sign (from Allāh), they say: 'We shall not believe until we receive one (exactly) like those received by Allāh's messengers.' Allāh knoweth best where (and how) to carry out His mission. Soon will the wicked be overtaken by humiliation before Allāh, and a severe punishment, for all their plots."

²⁵⁴Despite the fact that al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr relate this event in their *sīra/ta'rikh*s, with either direct or indirect Qur'ān citation, they fail to mention it entirely in their *tafsīrs* of Qur'ān 6:124. Both men do allude, albeit sometimes quite indirectly, to the importance of Muḥammad's genealogy in their *tafsīr* works. This is, at least thematically, connected to the story of his conception, since the overall theme of this story is that God's direct actions ensured that Muḥammad would have an excellent lineage.

²⁵⁵C. E. Bosworth, tr., *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 5, *The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 273; Leiden edition, 970-1; Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāya wa'l-Nihāya*, vol. 2, 273-4; Trevor LeGassick, tr., *The Life of the Prophet Muḥammad*, vol. 1 (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 1998), 161-2.

²⁵⁶Bosworth, vol. 5, 273-4, 283-4; Leiden edition, 971-2, 980; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 2, 279; LeGassick, vol. 1, 168.

²⁵⁷W. M. Watt and M. V. McDonald, tr., *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 6, *Muḥammad at Mecca* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985), 44; Leiden edition, 1123; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 2, 282; LeGassick, vol. 1, 173.

²⁵⁸Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 44; Leiden edition, 1123; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 2, 282; LeGassick, vol. 1, 173.

who hired him to work on her caravans.²⁵⁹ She was so impressed by him that they later married.²⁶⁰ He spent the next fifteen years or so of his adult life as a respected businessman and member of his community.

The mundane element of his life up to this point seems rather less than spectacular; certainly there is nothing in it to indicate that this man would go on to become the founder of a major religious movement. Other men in the history of the world overcame adversity to become great leaders, but few would claim such a link to the Divine as would Muḥammad. Thus, we turn to the supernatural aspect of the story. Before his conception, a light could be seen in the face of his father, ‘Abd Allāh, which disappeared after he had consummated his marriage with Āmina and she had conceived Muḥammad.²⁶¹ Āmina would later claim that, during her pregnancy, she had dreamt of a light coming from her belly that lit up the castles of Buṣrā in Syria.²⁶² During Muḥammad’s time with the Banū Sa’d b. Bakr, his foster family enjoyed miraculous prosperity, while the rest of their tribe suffered from the effects of a drought.²⁶³ It would also be during this period that he would endure the cleansing of his heart at the hands of angels, who would then weigh him against an increasing number of men.²⁶⁴ When he was older, he was recognized as a prophet by the Christian monk, Baḥīrā, who saw that

²⁵⁹Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 47-8; Leiden edition, 1127; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 2, 293-6; LeGassick, vol. 1, 189-93.

²⁶⁰Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 47-50; Leiden edition, 1127-30; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 2, 293-6; LeGassick, vol. 1, 189-93.

²⁶¹Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 5-8; Leiden edition, 1077-1081; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 2, 249-51; LeGassick, vol. 1, 127-9.

²⁶²Bosworth, vol. 5, 275-6; Leiden edition, 973-4; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 2, 275; LeGassick, vol. 1, 163.

²⁶³Bosworth, vol. 5, 272-4; Leiden edition, 970-2; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 2, 273-4; LeGassick, vol. 1, 162-3.

²⁶⁴Bosworth, vol. 5, 274-9, 282-3; Leiden edition, 972-7, 979; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 2, 274-7; LeGassick, vol. 1, 163-6.

the natural world, in the form of clouds and trees, went out of its way to honor him.²⁶⁵ As an adult, Khadīja's slave witnessed angels shading him from the sun with their wings.²⁶⁶ Of all these reported signs, the only ones Muḥammad appears to have been aware of, or later made aware of, was the dream of his mother and the cleansing of his heart by the angels. The honors shown to him by the natural world and his shading by the angels, were all witnessed by other individuals; Muḥammad himself appears to have been completely oblivious to them. The overall theme of the supernatural in this period is that all of these signs pointed to his future importance, but only certain privileged individuals were able to see and profit by them.

Al-Ṭabarī's Sīra/Ta'riḫ

Al-Ṭabarī reports roughly twenty-four separate supernatural events for this period of Muḥammad's life in his *sīra/ta'riḫ*, not including multiple reports of the same event. Most of the miracle reports for this period either describe a supernatural manipulation of the natural world or relate stories wherein Muḥammad's coming was foretold.²⁶⁷ None of his reports for this period, whether mundane or supernatural, contain a citation from the Qur'ān. Even Ibn Kathīr, whose work includes many more Qur'ān citations in general than does that of al-Ṭabarī, rarely cites the Qur'ān for a supernatural event in this period. Neither author gives a reason for this, but it may

²⁶⁵Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 44-6; Leiden edition, 1123-26; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 2, 283-6; LeGassick, vol. 1, 174-9.

²⁶⁶Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 48; Leiden edition, 1128; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 2, 294; LeGassick, vol. 1, 190.

²⁶⁷These include eleven different miracles pertaining to the natural world and six occasions foretelling the coming of Muḥammad.

simply have to do with the fact that the Qur'ān had not yet been revealed, and so was not as intimately related to this period of the life of Muḥammad as it was to the time after he began to receive the Revelation. Thus, as stated previously, the story of Muḥammad's conception is the only story in which both authors relate, even if only indirectly, part of a Qur'ān verse.

There are four reports in al-Ṭabarī's *sīra/ta'riḫh* that relate the story of Muḥammad's conception.²⁶⁸ Three of them contain supernatural elements, while the fourth does not. Two of them adhere to the archetypal image of Muḥammad's conception, while the other two seem to diverge from this archetype. Al-Ṭabarī includes this story in his section on Muḥammad's lineage.²⁶⁹ He begins with Muḥammad's father, 'Abd Allāh, and works his way back to Adam himself. He states that 'Abd Allāh was 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib's youngest and favorite son, and, in the first report, which comes from Ibn Ishāq, he describes the promise made by the father to sacrifice a son.²⁷⁰ Arrows are cast, and, of course, 'Abd Allāh's arrow is the one chosen, so 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, in a scene reminiscent of Abraham's sacrifice, takes the young man to the Ka'ba with the intention of killing him. Unlike Abraham, however, it is not God, but his fellow Quraysh who stop him and suggest asking a female soothsayer for an alternative.²⁷¹ Her solution, or rather that of the *jinn* who is her familiar, is to once

²⁶⁸Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 2-8; Leiden edition, 1074-1082.

²⁶⁹Ibid., 1-43; Leiden edition 1073-1123. Oddly enough, this section comes after al-Ṭabarī's description of the birth of Muḥammad and immediately precedes his relation of the encounter between Muḥammad and the monk, Bahīrā. The beginning of the section of al-Ṭabarī's description of 'Abd Allāh, including this quite lengthy report, can be found in full in the Appendix.

²⁷⁰Ibid., 2-5; Leiden edition, 1074-78. This report is not the first in this section, but is the first that relates Muḥammad's conception.

²⁷¹Ibid., 4; Leiden edition, 1076-77. She was not resident in Mecca, however, and the group of men traveled to Medina, only to be told that she was at Khaybar. They found her there and consulted with her about the appropriate course of action to be taken.

again cast arrows, but this time in order to determine how many camels are to be sacrificed in ‘Abd Allāh’s place. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib agrees to this and the final count is one hundred camels in place of the life of his son. Since the report reveals that the blood money among Quraysh at that time was ten camels for one man, the implication here is that ‘Abd Allāh was worth the value of ten men of his tribe.

Thus, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib and ‘Abd Allāh are both shown as honorable men who are favored by God. The older man is seen as intending to honor his word, even though it is his favorite son that must die, while ‘Abd Allāh is aware of his impending death, and yet does nothing to try to save himself. Their favor with God is revealed by the fact that, while the arrows were being cast to determine the number of camels to be sacrificed, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib was said to have been standing in the middle of the Ka‘ba, praying to God.²⁷² Therefore, the number of camels to be sacrificed, signifying the value of ‘Abd Allāh himself, was determined by God. Of course, the obvious Biblical parallel cannot be ignored, and here Muḥammad’s grandfather and father are likened to Abraham and Isaac, revealing their own importance even before Muḥammad is born.²⁷³ Therefore, although they are pagan, both men are shown to be worthy ancestors of the Prophet.

The story, however, is not complete, and the true nature of ‘Abd Allāh’s favor with God is revealed at the very end of the report. Once the sacrifice is completed, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib immediately takes his son to be married. There is no break in the tale that

²⁷²This is despite the fact that the arrows were being cast before the idol of the god, Hubal. See Watt’s comments on this topic in Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 2, note 4.

²⁷³Elsewhere, al-Ṭabarī notes the controversy over whether Abraham was supposed to have tried to sacrifice Isaac or Ismā‘īl, and comes to the conclusion that those scholars who argue in favor of Isaac are correct. William M. Brinner, tr., *History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 2, *Prophets and Patriarchs* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987), 82.

would make one think that any amount of time had passed since the camels were sacrificed, and, indeed, the rhythm of the story is such that one can almost picture ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib leading his son by the hand out of the Ka‘ba where the camels had been slaughtered, through the streets of Mecca. The rest of the report reads:

‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib left, taking his son ‘Abd Allāh by the hand. It is alleged that he passed by a woman of the Banū Asad called Umm Qattāl bt. Nawfal b. Asad b. ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā, the sister of Waraqa b. Nawfal b. Asad; she was by the Ka‘ba. When she looked at his face she said, “Where are you going, ‘Abd Allāh?” “With my father,” he said. She said, “I have for you as many camels as were slaughtered for you, so sleep with me now.” “My father is with me,” he replied, “and I cannot oppose his wishes or leave him.” ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib took him away and brought him to Wahb b. ‘Abd Manāf b. Zuhra, who was the leading man of the Banū Zuhra in age and eminence at that time, and the latter married him to [his daughter] Āmina bt. Wahb, who was then the most excellent woman in Quraysh as regards genealogy and status....

It is alleged that he consummated his marriage to her there as soon as he married her, that he lay with her and that she conceived Muḥammad; then he left her presence and came to the woman who had propositioned him, and said to her, “Why do you not make the same proposition to me today which you made to me yesterday?” She replied, “The light which was with you yesterday has left you, and I have no need of you today.” She had heard [about this] from her brother Waraqa b. Nawfal, who was a Christian and had studied the scriptures; he had discovered that a prophet from the descendants of Ismā‘īl was to be [sent] to this people; this had been one of the purposes of his study.²⁷⁴

The second report is one of two that appear to diverge from the archetype, and so will be studied later. The third report originates with Ibn ‘Abbās, and reads:

When ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib was taking ‘Abd Allāh to marry him to Āmina, they passed by a female soothsayer from the tribe of Khath‘am called Fāṭima bt. Murr, a convert to Judaism from the people of Tabāla, who had read the scriptures and who saw light in his face. “Young man,” she said, “would you like to lie with me now, and I will give you a hundred camels?” He replied,

As for unlawful relations, I would sooner die,
and as for lawful marriage, there can be none, as

²⁷⁴Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 5-6; Leiden edition, 1078-79. Translations of al-Ṭabarī’s *sīra/ta’rīkh* are taken from the respective volumes of the English translation. Brackets in the sections quoted here are as they appear in the published English translations.

I can clearly recognize.
So how can that be which you desire?

Then he said, "I am with my father and I cannot leave him." His father took him and married him to Āmina bt. Wahb b. 'Abd Manāf b. Zuhra, and he stayed with her for three days. Then he left her, and when he passed by the Khath'amī woman he felt a desire to accept the proposition which she had made, and he asked her, "Would you like what you wanted before?" "Young man," she said, "I am not, by God, a woman of questionable morals. I saw light in your face and wished it to be within me, but God willed that He should place it where He wished. What did you do after you left me?" He said, "My father married me to Āmina bt. Wahb and I stayed with her for three days."²⁷⁵

This is the one place in al-Ṭabarī's reports of this event that even remotely refers to the Qur'ān verse used later by Ibn Kathīr, Qur'ān 6:124.²⁷⁶ Thus, the soothsayer, while not directly quoting the Qur'ān, comes extremely close in her statement that God placed the light, i.e., the light of prophecy, where He willed. When 'Abd Allāh tells her of his marriage to Āmina, the soothsayer recites two pieces of poetry in which she compares the light to that of the full moon and admits she wanted that light for herself, but that Āmina had taken it.²⁷⁷ It is with her poetry that the report ends.

These two reports reflect al-Ṭabarī's rendering of the archetypal story of Muḥammad's conception. 'Abd Allāh is shown here to be valued, both by his family and by God, and to be a man who is able to control his lust long enough to be obedient to the wishes of his father. He is marked by a supernatural light that is apparently not visible to the general populace, but only to certain individual women. They offer

²⁷⁵Ibid., 7; Leiden edition, 1079-80.

²⁷⁶Although the verses from the Qur'ān in this study are taken from the translation of 'Abd Allāh Yūsuf 'Alī, the translation of this verse by Arberry reads more closely to the woman's statement: "And when a sign came to them, they said, 'We will not believe until we are given the like of what God's Messengers were given.' God knows very well where to place His Message; and humiliation in God's sight shall befall the sinners, and a terrible chastisement for what they devised."

²⁷⁷Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 7-8; Leiden edition, 1080-1081. Muḥammad is often compared to the full moon throughout the *sīra/ta'rikh*.

themselves to him, he refuses, and marries \bar{A} mina, whereupon she conceives Muḥammad, thus appearing to take the light into herself and proving her own favored status. Thus, it is apparently not enough that both of Muḥammad's parents have an excellent lineage; the familial connections of the Prophet are shown here to have been chosen by none other than God himself.

It is in the second and fourth report of this event that al-Ṭabarī diverges from the archetype, possibly interjecting his own ideas about the story of Muḥammad's conception. This second report gives more specific information about 'Abd Allāh's light, but in a slightly different context, in which 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib is absent entirely. The report takes place sometime after 'Abd Allāh married \bar{A} mina, but before the conception of Muḥammad. It is from Ibn Ishāq and states:

'Abd Allāh paid a visit to a wife whom he had in addition to \bar{A} mina bt. Wahb b. 'Abd Manāf b. Zuhra. He had been working in clay and traces of the clay were still on him, and when he invited her to lie with him she made him wait because of this. He went out, performed his ablutions, washed off the clay which was on him, and went to \bar{A} mina's quarters. He went in and lay with her, and she conceived Muḥammad. Then he passed by this other woman and said, "Do you wish to lie with me?" "No," she replied. "When you passed by me before you had a white blaze between your eyes. You invited me to lie with you and I refused, so you went to \bar{A} mina and she has taken it away."²⁷⁸

Here the report contains an inconsistency. Whereas at the beginning, the reporter claims that the first wife only asked him to wait, the woman herself is now stating that she refused him outright. The next section changes the story even further, but it is unclear whether this is part of the original report, or a bit of commentary that has been added at some point in the report's transmission. It states:

²⁷⁸Ibid., 6; Leiden edition, 1079.

They allege that this wife of his used to relate that when he passed by her he had between his eyes something like the white blaze on a horse's forehead, that she invited him in the hope that he would lie with her, but that he refused and went in to Āmina bt. Wahb and lay with her, as a result of which she conceived the Messenger of God.²⁷⁹

So, the first wife evolves from someone who simply wanted to wait for her husband to be clean before having intercourse with him, to someone who refused him, to being the one who was refused. Her status and that of 'Abd Allāh are thus reversed through the course of the report.²⁸⁰

The last report having to do with the conception of Muḥammad does not refer to a light or any other supernatural occurrence. It is a very brief report from al-Wāqidi and states:

'Abd Allāh b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib was the handsomest of the men of Quraysh. They told Āmina bt. Wahb of his handsomeness and his appearance and asked if she would like to marry him, so she married him. He consummated his marriage to her, and she conceived the Messenger of God. 'Abd Allāh's father sent him to al-Madīna for provisions, where he died. When he was late in returning, 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib sent his son al-Ḥārith to look for him, but al-Ḥārith found that he had died.²⁸¹

Of the four, this last report is the only one that does not include a supernatural element in Muḥammad's conception. Āmina is convinced to marry 'Abd Allāh by her family's remarks about his good looks, Muḥammad is conceived, and story moves on to 'Abd Allāh's death shortly thereafter. This is not the end of the matter, however, and

²⁷⁹Ibid.

²⁸⁰There is no discussion by al-Ṭabarī about this turn of events, but it certainly brings out many potential issues, such as a wife's right to refuse intercourse to her husband, as well as the notion that 'Abd Allāh himself, even with his wife's recognition of the importance of the light he carried, was not irresistible to women.

²⁸¹Ibid., 8; Leiden edition, 1081.

al-Ṭabarī adds another report by al-Wāqidī who disagrees with this last version of events. He argues:

This is an error. In our view the consensus of opinion concerning the marriage of ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib is that which is related to us by ‘Abd Allāh b. Ja‘far al-Zuhrī - Umm Bakr bt. al-Miswar who said: ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib came with his son ‘Abd Allāh, seeking a wife for himself and one for his son; they were married at the same time. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib married Hāla bt. Uhayb b. ‘Abd Manāf b. Zuhra, and ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib married Āmina bt. Wahb b. ‘Abd Manāf b. Zuhra.²⁸²

No mention is made here of Muḥammad’s conception, supernatural or otherwise, and the report appears simply to imply that ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib and his son each married women from the same tribe at the same time.

Al-Ṭabarī thus diverges from the archetypal image of Muḥammad’s conception in a number of important ways. In the story of ‘Abd Allāh’s other wife, he relates that Muḥammad was not conceived immediately after the marriage of Āmina and ‘Abd Allāh. The timing of this archetypal conception, during their first sexual encounter, thus loses its significance and takes on an arbitrary tone. Also, the possibility that ‘Abd Allāh had other wives opens the door to the possibility of half-siblings for Muḥammad. If the light of prophecy came through ‘Abd Allāh, it could have passed to another child, thus potentially adding to the number of rivals for leadership of the community. The report from al-Wāqidī, as well as the report responding to it, diverge from the archetype in that there is no supernatural significance for Muḥammad’s conception; he is conceived either due to the machinations of the young woman’s family, who convince her of ‘Abd Allāh’s good looks, or to the perceived convenience of his own family getting two brides at the same time, one each for father and son, although this last

²⁸²Ibid.

report does not specifically mention the conception. Again, if Muḥammad's lineage was not determined by God, or if the product of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib's marriage to one of Āmina's kinswomen had the same lineage, there would be no indication of Muḥammad's future importance; indeed, he would be no different from other boys of his clan.

When taken as a whole, the story of Muḥammad's conception, as related by al-Ṭabarī in his *sīra/ta'riḫ*, would seem to reveal an added element beyond adhering to or diverging from an archetype. Al-Ṭabarī shows that only three women could actually see the light in 'Abd Allāh's face, and these women each appear to represent a religious tradition that would eventually be shown as superseded by Islam, namely, Christianity, Judaism, and Arabian polytheism. Also, the conception story of the Prophet is fraught with sexual tension, complete with attempted seductions, and, with the offer of payment, apparent outright prostitution, since all three of the women discerned that the only way to attain the light for themselves was through sexual relations with 'Abd Allāh. However, their efforts are for naught, since neither the women nor the religious traditions they seem to represent could either seduce or purchase their way into God's favor, and the reports show that the conception of Muḥammad happened exactly as God had willed. Thus, al-Ṭabarī's inclusion of all three reports could, indeed, be a literary device to reveal the perceived relation of Islam to the other religious traditions against which it was competing.

Al-Ṭabarī's Tafsīr

Qur'ān 6:124 reads:

When there comes to them a Sign (from Allāh), they say: “We shall not believe until we receive one (exactly) like those received by Allāh’s messengers.” Allāh knoweth best where (and how) to carry out His mission. Soon will the wicked be overtaken by humiliation before Allāh, and a severe punishment, for all their plots.

In his exegesis of this verse, al-Ṭabarī does not mention the miracle of the light in ‘Abd Allāh’s face, nor does he mention Muḥammad’s conception.²⁸³ Instead, he focuses on the meaning of the verse itself, and this is quite typical of his *tafsīr* as a whole. He does, however, provide a vague contextualization for the verse, and states:

[The] unbelievers... said to the Prophet of God and his Companions: “We shall not believe... until God grants the wonders like those granted Moses from the parting of the sea, and Jesus from the revivification of the dead and healing of the blind and the lepers.”²⁸⁴

This statement reveals that the group of unbelievers in this verse were familiar with the Biblical stories of the miracles of Moses and Jesus, and expected the same from the person claiming to be a prophet sent by the same God. Of course, this demand for a sign would have taken place after Muḥammad had received the Revelation and began to preach openly. Thus, it would have nothing to do with events that took place at his conception.

As for the part of the verse alluded to by the soothsayer in al-Ṭabarī’s *sīra/ta’rīkh*, “God knows best where to place His mission,” al-Ṭabarī reports, “Truly, the

²⁸³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 6:124, <<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=6&tAyahNo=124&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0>> May 2006.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

signs of the prophets and messengers are not granted from men....”²⁸⁵ In other words, men do not provide signs, but these only come from God Himself. God continues to chastise the unbelievers by stating, “So I know the places [or ranks] of my messengers and to what people [they belong]....”²⁸⁶ This is the closest al-Ṭabarī comes to connecting the story of Muḥammad’s conception to Qur’ān 6:124.²⁸⁷ Just as the three women sought to obtain the light for themselves, attempting to take control away from God regarding the placement of the light of prophecy, the unbelievers in the verse claim that they are the ones who can tell a true prophet from a false one, and that the signs by which they can determine this are the miracles that are performed; thus, they, too, attempt to take power away from God by limiting the criteria that determines who is and is not a prophet. God responds that only He knows where and among whom He will send a prophet, implying that Muḥammad’s conception, as the combination of two specific bloodlines, was an act of the will of God. The light shining on ‘Abd Allāh’s face was merely the external indicator of the divine plan. Of all the individuals involved, only the Jewish soothsayer appears to be aware of the power of the divine will in the determination of events, but al-Ṭabarī, for whatever reason, does not include her report in his *Tafsīr*.

It is only in the explanation of the last part of the verse, “Soon will the wicked be overtaken by humiliation before Allāh, and a severe punishment for all their plots,” that al-Ṭabarī references a report from an authority other than himself.²⁸⁸ But here, too,

²⁸⁵Ibid.

²⁸⁶Ibid.

²⁸⁷Of course, he does not, at any time, specifically relate this verse to Muḥammad’s conception, but the themes prevalent in both the reports of the *sīra/ta’rīkh* and the *tafsīr* appear to be the same.

²⁸⁸Ibid.

he limits himself to an explanation of the grammar of the verse's wording and the meaning of the verse itself, rather than relate it to any historical event. There is no occasion of revelation for the verse in al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*, nor does he provide any detailed chronology of when it was revealed or in response to what specific event. However, his commentary regarding the will of God in the placement of His messengers is thematically linked to the story of the conception of Muḥammad, even if the link is rather less than direct. Therefore, of the two scholars examined here, Ibn Kathīr is alone in specifically linking Qur'ān 6:124 to the miracle surrounding the conception of Muḥammad, at least in his *sīra/ta'rikh*.

Ibn Kathīr's Sīra/Ta'rikh

Ibn Kathīr's account of the pre-Revelation Meccan period includes roughly eighty-five separate supernatural occurrences, and, as in al-Ṭabarī, none of these are performed by Muḥammad himself. Whereas, for al-Ṭabarī, most of the reports of the supernatural for this period center upon the manipulation of the natural world, for Ibn Kathīr the overriding focus of his re-telling of this period of Muḥammad's life is that Muḥammad's prophethood had been foretold years before he received his first visit from Gabriel, in fact, years before he had even been born.²⁸⁹ Ibn Kathīr organizes his *sīra/ta'rikh* differently than does al-Ṭabarī for this event, and includes the story of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib's vow to sacrifice one of his sons and his arrangement of the marriage between 'Abd Allāh and Āmina at the end of the first major part of his section on the

²⁸⁹The combination of those reports that relate predictions of the coming of Islam itself with those that specifically describe the coming of a prophet, i.e., Muḥammad, comes to a total of about thirty-three. Reports relating supernatural events in nature number about seventeen.

story of the Prophet, which reports the events leading up to the actual lifetime of Muḥammad himself.²⁹⁰ He begins the tale of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib’s attempted sacrifice with a report by Ibn Ishāq, apparently the same report used by al-Ṭabarī, but abridges part of the report that appears to be given in full by the earlier scholar.²⁹¹ Thus, like al-Ṭabarī, he begins his series of reports for this incident with one that fits the archetype.

While al-Ṭabarī related the two events in a single report, Ibn Kathīr gives the archetypal account of the marriage of ‘Abd Allāh and Āmina in a separate section from that of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib’s attempts to sacrifice his son. As in al-Ṭabarī’s *sīra/ta’rīkh*, the section contains four reports that deal with the conception of Muḥammad, but unlike al-Ṭabarī’s account, all four reports contain elements of the supernatural.²⁹² Three of these appear to follow the archetype, while the fourth diverges from it significantly. He begins with a report from Ibn Ishāq, again without any further *isnād*, and this is the same report found in al-Ṭabarī that relates the attempt by Umm Qattāl to seduce ‘Abd Allāh.²⁹³ The account is related much as it was in al-Ṭabarī, but Ibn Kathīr inserts his own comments, first, that her offer was probably one of marriage, rather than seduction, presumably because she offered him a hundred camels to replace the ones that had been sacrificed, and two, the fact that Muḥammad was conceived by ‘Abd Allāh and Āmina, as opposed to Umm Qattāl, was the will of God. He states, “So God made him of the finest and most noble lineage, as the Almighty put it, in the Qur’ān, ‘And God knows

²⁹⁰Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 2, 248-51; LeGassick, vol. 1, 125-129.

²⁹¹Ibid., vol. 2, 248; LeGassick, vol. 1, 125. He begins the report simply with “Ibn Ishāq said.” The part of the report left out by Ibn Kathīr is the section that explains in detail how the early Meccans used the casting arrows at the idol of the god Hubal in the Ka’ba. Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 3-4; Leiden edition, 1075-1076.

²⁹²Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 2, 249-51; LeGassick, vol. 1, 127-29.

²⁹³Ibid., vol. 2, 249; LeGassick, vol. 1, 127-8. The report may actually be a continuation of the one by Ibn Ishāq in the earlier section, but Ibn Kathīr treats it as a separate report altogether.

best where to place His prophethood.’²⁹⁴ Thus, Ibn Kathīr directly relates the conception of Muḥammad to Qur’ān 6:124. He goes on in a second report, also from Ibn Ishāq, to add poetry spoken by the woman, and he states:

And Umm Qattāl bt. Nawfal said in the poetry she composed because she did not get what she wanted, and that is in what al-Bayhaqī transmitted from Yūnus b. Bukayr on the authority of Muḥammad b. Ishāq, may God have mercy on him:

And take the Banū Zuhra where they were
and Āmina who bore a boy
She saw al-Mahdī when he mounted her
and a light that preceded him, ahead

to what she said:

So all creation were hoping for him, together
he leads the people rightly-guided, an Imām
Allāh shaped him from a light, purified him
so his glow took from us the gloom
And that is the work of your Lord who singled him out
whether he would move ahead one day or stay
So he guides the people of Mecca after faithlessness
enjoining thereafter the fast.²⁹⁵

The poetry has obviously been abbreviated, and this may have been the form in which Ibn Kathīr received the report; so, the reasons for the omission of part of the poem is unknown. Again, we see the sexual aspect of the miracle in the fact that the light could only be transferred through intercourse, as well as the mystical aspect of the light motif itself, but Ibn Kathīr makes no comment about the poem’s possible meaning.

The third report continues the archetypal story, and in it we find the tale of the Jewish soothsayer, who, like Umm Qattāl, attempts to seduce ‘Abd Allāh while he is on his way to being married to Āmina.²⁹⁶ This report is, again, basically identical to that

²⁹⁴Ibid., vol. 2, 249; LeGassick, vol. 1, 128.

²⁹⁵Ibid., vol. 2, 249-50; LeGassick, vol. 1, 128. While this report could be counted as a simple addition to the previous report, the fact that Ibn Kathīr gives a fuller *isnād* for it reveals that he treated it as a separate report.

²⁹⁶Ibid., vol. 2, 250-1; LeGassick, Vol. 1, 128-129. The text of the report is the same as that in al-Ṭabarī, but the *isnād* is different.

found in al-Ṭabarī, quoted above. Ibn Kathīr makes no comment about this report, even though the soothsayer makes the same offer of replacement camels for those who were sacrificed as had Umm Qattāl, and the same statement that appears to quote part of Qur'ān 6:124 that we saw in al-Ṭabarī, which the later scholar cites, rather, in relation to the story of Umm Qattāl. So, the possibility exists that his comments regarding Umm Qattāl's offer as being one of marriage and his connection of Qur'ān 6:124 to the first report, despite better evidence for such a connection in the report relating the attempts of the Jewish soothsayer, reveal that Ibn Kathīr may have favored the first report over the others.

Ibn Kathīr ends this section with a report originating from Ibn 'Abbās, which he cites from Abū Nu'aym's (d. 430/1038) *Dalā'il al-Nubūwa*, and it is this report that diverges from the archetype.²⁹⁷ He states:

Truly 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib came to Yemen in the journey of the winter, then he took up lodgings with a learned man of the Jews. He said: "So, one of the men of the people of the monastery - meaning the people of the book - said to me: 'O 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, will you permit me to look at part of you?' [I] said, 'Yes, if it is not the genitals.' Then he opened one of my nostrils, and he looked in it, then he looked in the other. Then he said, 'I see that in one of your hands is kingship and in the other prophethood, but truly we supported that in the Banū Zuhra, so how is that?' I said, 'I do not know.' He said, 'Do you have a *shāghā*?' I said, 'And what is the *shāghā*?' He said, 'A wife.' I said, 'Not at the present time.' He said, 'Then when you return, marry from among them.'" So, 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib returned. Then he married Hāla bt. Wahb b. 'Abd Manāf b. Zuhra and she gave birth to Ḥamza and Ṣafiya, then he married 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib to Āmina bt. Wahb, and she gave birth to the Messenger of God (ṢAAS). Then

²⁹⁷Whereas *sīra/ta'rīkh* relates the life of Muḥammad within the larger framework of universal history, all in chronological order, and *tafsīr* includes some description of the life of Muḥammad in an attempt to explain the text of the Qur'ān, Abū Nu'aym's *Dalā'il al-Nubūwa* belongs to that genre which relates reports about the supernatural signs, or proofs, of Muḥammad's prophethood. Al-Ṭabarī intended to write his own work in this field, but it was either never written, never finished, or was simply lost completely. Rosenthal, *General Introduction*, 88-9.

Quraysh said, when ‘Abd Allāh was married to Āmina, ‘*falaja*,’ meaning ‘Abd Allāh was successful and got the better of his father, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib.’²⁹⁸

This report diverges both from the archetype and from the final report in al-Ṭabarī, despite being remarkably similar to the latter. Although coming from a different source, claiming to originate with Ibn ‘Abbās and following a chain that does not include al-Wāqidī or any of the other authorities listed by al-Ṭabarī, it contains both important similarities and important differences from the report related by the earlier scholar. Both reports share the basic details of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib and ‘Abd Allāh marrying women from the same tribe. However, in Ibn Kathīr’s report, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib’s marriage comes not at the same time as that of ‘Abd Allāh and Āmina, but years earlier, before ‘Abd Allāh himself was born. The two women involved are at least half-sisters in Ibn Kathīr’s account, although separated by many years, but are only cousins in al-Ṭabarī’s. Also, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib’s motives are supernaturally based and appear somewhat self-serving. He marries solely in order to gain the power and prophethood that was foretold. Therefore, we have an element of the supernatural in a report by Ibn Kathīr, which is very similar to a report in al-Ṭabarī that has none.²⁹⁹ This report diverges from the archetypal story of ‘Abd Allāh refusing seduction and marrying and impregnating Āmina in the same way as does the report found in al-Ṭabarī; however, by adding the supernatural element, this report appears somewhat rehabilitated. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, by marrying both himself and his son to women from

²⁹⁸Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 2, 251; LeGassick, vol. 1, 129.

²⁹⁹Since this is obviously not from the same source as the report in al-Ṭabarī, we do not here have a clear example of adding material to a previously existing report. However, the fact remains that in al-Ṭabarī, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib’s marriage to a woman of the Banū Zuhra had nothing supernatural or unusual about it, whereas in Ibn Kathīr it does.

this clan to fulfill a prophecy, removes the element of the earlier report that detracted from the supernatural aspect of Muḥammad's conception. So, although the report still diverges from the archetype, it also continues the archetype's theme of Divine intervention in the genealogy of the Prophet.

The most important element in Ibn Kathīr's relation of the story of Muḥammad's conception seems to be the presence of the supernatural in all of the reports given. Whereas al-Ṭabarī allows for a report that includes merely a mundane reason for Muḥammad's conception, 'Abd Allāh's good looks, Ibn Kathīr does not. This may mean that, despite his inclusion of the report about 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib's supernatural expectations of his own marriage into the Banū Zuhra, the story of Muḥammad's life was actually beginning to close in on itself by the time of Ibn Kathīr. His exclusion of reports not indicating a supernatural element in Muḥammad's conception indicates the possibility that the mundane aspect of the story was no longer seen as viable and that, for the community of believers in Ibn Kathīr's time, Muḥammad's conception could only occur under supernatural circumstances.

Ibn Kathīr's Tafsīr

As with the exegesis of Qur'ān 6:124 by al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr at no point overtly references the conception of Muḥammad. He does, however, join it to the previous verse, 6:123, and both verses state:

Thus have We placed leaders in every town, its wicked men, to plot (and burrow) therein: but they only plot against their own souls, and they perceive it not. When there comes to them a Sign (from Allāh), they say: "We shall not believe until we receive one (exactly) like those received by Allāh's messengers." Allāh

knoweth best where (and how) to carry out His mission. Soon will the wicked be overtaken by humiliation before Allāh, and a severe punishment for all their plots.

Unlike al-Ṭabarī, however, he does directly reference Muḥammad's genealogy, and so the theme, at least, of the conception story can be found more directly in his explanation of the verse quoted in his *sīra/ta'riḫh*. The structure of his exegesis includes citations of several other verses of the Qur'ān, explanations of the meanings of Qur'ān 6:123-4, and, unlike al-Ṭabarī, reports from various other authorities.³⁰⁰ He does not include in the *tafsīr* of these two verses an occasion of revelation, but does make a brief reference to the meeting between Muḥammad's uncle, Abū Sufyān, and the Byzantine emperor, Heraclius, and it is in this section that Ibn Kathīr comes closest to connecting this verse to the topic of the conception of Muḥammad.

In his commentary, he argues that the unbelievers claimed that they would only believe in the message Muḥammad was preaching if they received the message directly from God, or at least from someone more important than Muḥammad. He states:

They did this although they admitted to his virtue, honorable lineage, respectable ancestry, and the purity of his household and his good breeding and his upbringing.... So that truly they used to call him amongst themselves, before that was revealed to him, *al-Amīn*.³⁰¹

Thus, unlike al-Ṭabarī's exegesis, which has the unbelievers demanding a miracle like those performed by previous prophets, Ibn Kathīr argues that they questioned God's choice of messengers. They wanted the message to come either from God directly or from someone with a higher social status than Muḥammad. Ibn Kathīr comments above that both his reputation and his lineage were already recognized as excellent by the

³⁰⁰Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Azīm*, vol. 3, 694-5.

³⁰¹Ibid., vol. 3, 694. *Al-Amīn* means honest or trustworthy.

Meccans, so they had no real reason to complain about his choice as Messenger of God. By interpreting the verse in this way, Ibn Kathīr ties it more closely to the story of Muḥammad's conception, in which the Prophet's lineage appears to have been chosen by God Himself.

Ibn Kathīr continues his exegesis of this verse by relating a different historical setting, the meeting between Abū Sufyān and the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, while maintaining the thematic continuity of his explanation. He states:

And the chief of the unbelievers Abū Sufyān recognized that when Heraclius, king of the Rūm asked him: "And how is his genealogy among you?" He said: "He has among us a (good) genealogy." He [Heraclius] said: "Did you suspect him of lying before he said what he said?" He said: "No."³⁰²

Ibn Kathīr adds his own comments on this exchange by stating, "The report of his power was such that the king of the Rūm judged by the sanctity of his attributes... the truthfulness of His prophet and the veracity of what he brought."³⁰³ In other words, the Christian king of the Byzantines recognized Muḥammad as a prophet of God even before the Meccans, and did so, in part, due to the excellence of his lineage.

Ibn Kathīr goes on to relate reports that discuss the lineage of Muḥammad and these, in combination with the reference to Heraclius above, are how Ibn Kathīr links his *tafsīr* of this verse to Muḥammad's conception. For, not only does he quote this verse in the section of his *sīra/ta'rikh* that covers the conception of Muḥammad, he also quotes it in the very next section, which is the beginning of his *Book of the Life of the Messenger*

³⁰²Ibid.

³⁰³Ibid.

of God.³⁰⁴ This section begins with a treatment of Muḥammad's lineage and is thus thematically linked to Ibn Kathīr's treatment of the conception story. In this later section, though, it is not the conception of Muḥammad that provides the story around the verse, rather, as in the *tafsīr*, the setting is the conversation between Heraclius and Abū Sufyān. Thus, the correlation between the contents of this part of the *sīra/ta'rikh* and the *tafsīr* for this verse appear to reflect that Ibn Kathīr's Qur'ān citation regarding the conception of Muḥammad may have been viewed by him as less important than its inclusion in the story of Heraclius. What appears more likely, however, is the possibility that it served as a literary device to connect the two events in his *sīra/ta'rikh*. This possibility would certainly seem to shed new light on the relationship between *sīra* and *tafsīr*, although it does not necessarily mean that every citation of the Qur'ān in the *sīra* or *sīra/ta'rikh* was placed by the author for literary purposes, but in this instance and for this author, it is the possibility that makes the most sense.³⁰⁵

To sum up, then, the archetypal story of Muḥammad's conception as told by al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr in their *sīra/ta'rikh*s appears to show that 'Abd Allāh was favored by God with a light that only certain individuals could see. Either through his own fortitude or divine intervention, he circumvents attempts by these individuals to seduce him, and passes on this light to the child created with his wife, Āmina. The archetype is changed by al-Ṭabarī in two ways: first, he relates a report wherein 'Abd Allāh is shown

³⁰⁴Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāya wa'l-Nihāya*, vol. 2, 252. It is unclear whether the section titles as found in the edited text are originally from Ibn Kathīr or were added by a later editor or copyist of his work. In either case, Ibn Kathīr is still connecting the conception of Muḥammad and Qur'ān 6:124 with Abū Sufyān's interview with Heraclius and discussions about Muḥammad's genealogy.

³⁰⁵Although Rubin and Raven both appear to argue for the primacy of either the *sīra* or the *tafsīr* for many of the stories of Muḥammad's life, their arguments reflect the quest for origins rather than the issues studied here.

to have another wife besides Āmina and that the conception of Muḥammad takes place at a time other than the consummation of their marriage, and second, he allows for a report that has absolutely no supernatural element at all, and that relates the conception of Muḥammad in a much more worldly, rather than other-worldly, fashion. These changes to the archetype appear to reveal that al-Ṭabarī did not necessarily need Muḥammad's conception to have taken place on the couple's wedding night, nor did he need for this to have been the first and only marriage for both individuals. It also seems to show that the supernatural element, although outweighing the mundane in the number of reports for this incident, was not seen as the only possibility for Muḥammad's conception. Therefore, al-Ṭabarī's version of the story seems to allow for a wider variety of possibilities regarding the conception of the Prophet. Ibn Kathīr, on the other hand, changes the archetype in a way that appears to limit these possibilities. Ibn Kathīr does not include the report of 'Abd Allāh's other wife, nor does he relate the report that excludes the supernatural aspect of the story. Rather, he adds a report that changes the setting of the story away from 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib's aborted attempted to sacrifice his youngest son, and instead shows the patriarch getting married in response to a Jewish prophecy. Thus it would appear that, for Ibn Kathīr, the story of Muḥammad's conception had to be related to a supernatural event and, to a lesser extent, had to take place on the wedding night of 'Abd Allāh and Āminah, and that these two should have had no other spouses or offspring.

The *tafsīr* works of both al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr in relation to Qur'an 6:124, while not directly citing the story of Muḥammad's conception, are at least thematically

connected to this incident. As in their *sīra/ta'riḳhs*, al-Ṭabari's connection in his exegesis to the conception of Muḥammad is less direct than that of Ibn Kathīr. He does, however, place this verse and the conception story in the broader theme of the actions of God's will in human history, and this connects back to his purpose for writing the *History* as a whole, as stated in his Introduction. Only God determines where and among whom He will place a prophet. Human beings, whether they be the women in the *sīra/ta'riḳh* or the demanding unbelievers in the *tafsīr*, do not get to make that determination. Ibn Kathīr, however, directly links his explanation of the verse to Muḥammad's genealogy, thus making a stronger connection to Muḥammad's conception story as found in his *sīra/ta'riḳh*. His explanation that the Meccans specifically asked for God's message to be related through someone more important than Muḥammad ties in with the claims for the excellence of Muḥammad's lineage, which his *sīra/ta'riḳh* shows as having been chosen by none other than God Himself. He adds to this explanation by relating the story of the meeting between Abū Sufyān and Heraclius in his *Tafsīr*, wherein the Christian emperor is convinced of Muḥammad's status as prophet after Abū Sufyān admits that his lineage is a good one. So, although there is no element of the supernatural in either work of exegesis for this verse, the authors' explanations of the verse do coincide with the broader themes associated with the story, namely the direct action of God in the location of the light of prophecy.

Chapter Four
The Archetype of Muḥammad in the Post-Revelation Meccan Period: The Politicization of the Supernatural in the Publication of Muḥammad's Mission

After Muḥammad receives the first revelation, the story of his life changes dramatically. No longer do we have a neat division between supernatural and mundane archetypes, since his life during the roughly twelve year period leading up to his emigration to Medina in 622 AD appears to have been completely taken over by his role as prophet. The division is still there, but the line between the two halves of his life has become somewhat blurred. Whereas the story of the early period of his life revealed how he succeeded despite humble beginnings, the reports of this period show a marked decline in his mundane role as respected merchant, while at the same time revealing the emergence and continued growth of his status as prophet. It is during this period that Muḥammad himself begins to display increasing control over elements of the supernatural, performing some miracles rather than having all of them performed on his behalf. The miracle reports that are the focus of this chapter relate his miraculous multiplication of a small amount of food and drink to feed his extended family when he announces his mission. The reports relate that Muḥammad preached privately for roughly three years after the beginning of the Revelation, but then began to preach openly to his fellow tribesmen. The archetype of Muḥammad for this event contains two elements: a public annunciation that includes no miracle, and a private announcement for members of his extended family that does include a miraculous event.³⁰⁶ Unlike the reports surrounding Muḥammad's conception, this section of the

³⁰⁶It remains unclear what, if any, significance should be attached to the apparent exclusivity of the miracle story in this section. The public pronouncement of God's message would seem to have been the perfect time for a public miracle that could have been witnessed by all present, but instead the miracle is

story is connected to numerous verses of the Qur'ān by both al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr and the story itself appears in both works of *tafsīr*. The reports of this section also differ in that neither of our authors diverges seriously from the archetype, but that each appears to have his own idea about what the archetype means in each of the two genres examined. The overall story of this event, by the time of Ibn Kathīr, appears to have taken on a serious religio-political meaning that he apparently could not ignore and found it necessary to refute. In his *Tafsīr*, he also adds a miracle story not found in the *sīra/ta'rīkh* that seems to add an element of folk magic to the exegesis of the Qur'ān, as well as being an indication of the belief that later Muslims could enjoy some of the same supernatural benefits as the Prophet.

The story of Muḥammad's mundane existence in Mecca between the first Revelation and the migration to Medina is one of sharp decline. While the new religious movement that became Islam was kept private, the reports relate that Muḥammad had no serious problems with his fellow Meccans.³⁰⁷ However, once he began to openly preach a message that opposed their traditional religious and social values, he faced increasingly stiff opposition.³⁰⁸ This opposition became so severe that he sent some of his followers to live in Abyssinia, while those who remained were forced to endure a boycott whereby they could neither trade with nor marry into the majority of the clans

reserved for the much more intimate setting of Muḥammad's meeting with his closest kinsmen. Even then, as with 'Abd Allāh's light, the miracle appears to go unnoticed by all but a few individuals.

³⁰⁷Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 93-4; Leiden edition, 1174-5; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 3, 38.

³⁰⁸Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 93-4; Leiden edition, 1174-5; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 41-4.

of Mecca.³⁰⁹ While the boycott eventually ended, the opposition did not, and Muḥammad was forced to look for another place to live. Finally, members of the Arab tribes in the oasis city of Medina came to him, requesting that he act as arbitrator in their civil war and agreed to take in his followers as well.³¹⁰ He accepted and the move to Medina began.

Alongside this story of rejection and humiliation, however, is another story whereby Muḥammad begins to perform the miracles that are intended to prove the truth of his preaching. While the Qur'ān itself is supposed to be the ultimate miracle, the story of his life during this period contains several reports of supernatural activity. God still performs most of the miracles during this period, but Muḥammad now plays a slightly more active role. Muḥammad is said to have been taken up into heaven, where he is presented to the various patriarchs who welcome him into their company.³¹¹ He multiplies a small amount of food and drink so that it satisfies a large number of people.³¹² The boycott written against him is miraculously devoured by worms.³¹³ Muḥammad preaches to and converts some of the *jinn* while returning from his failed trip to al-Ṭā'if.³¹⁴ Satan begins to take an active interest in him by encouraging the

³⁰⁹Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 98-101, 105-6; Leiden edition, 1180-84, 1189-91; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 66-82, 86-97. The two clans who remained loyal to Muḥammad, whether they espoused his religious beliefs or not, were the Banū Hāshim and the Banū 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib.

³¹⁰Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 124-44; Leiden edition, 1209-34; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 158-96.

³¹¹Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 78-80; Leiden edition, 1157-59; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 108-17. Part of this story also repeats the washing of his heart and weighing him against others performed by the angels.

³¹²Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 88-92; Leiden edition, 1169-74; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 38-40.

³¹³Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 112-4; Leiden edition, 1196-8; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 96-7.

³¹⁴Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 117-8; Leiden edition, 1202-3; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 137.

Quraysh in their decision to kill him.³¹⁵ Gabriel warns Muḥammad against the assassination plot.³¹⁶ And, finally, Muḥammad escapes assassination by throwing dust on his assailants' heads and quoting part of the Qur'ān, making him invisible to them.³¹⁷ Thus, while the mundane story of his life for this period would seem to be one of defeat, the supernatural story-line appears to reveal just the opposite, rather, indicating an increasing control over the supernatural world, as well as over an increasingly large number of followers.

Al-Ṭabarī's Sīra/Ta'riḫ

Overall, al-Ṭabarī relates reports for some seventeen supernatural events for this period. There is no single type of miracle story that dominates the others in this section, but there is an increasing amount of involvement in Muḥammad's life by such supernatural entities as the angels, Satan, and the *jinn*. The event discussed here, the miraculous multiplication of food and drink to feed a large number of people, is an obvious allusion to the same type of miracle said to have been performed by Jesus.³¹⁸ The section of al-Ṭabarī's *sīra/ta'riḫ* that discusses the publication of Muḥammad's mission contains six reports, two of which, the longest, include elements of the

³¹⁵Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 140-2; Leiden edition, 1229-31; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 175-6.

³¹⁶Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 142; Leiden edition, 1231-2; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 176. While I do not include the reception of the various verses of the Qur'ān in this study, I do include any communication or activity between Muḥammad and the angels that does not relate to the act of the Revelation itself.

³¹⁷Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 142-3; Leiden edition, 1232-3; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 176-7.

³¹⁸Matthew 15:32-39 and Mark 6:34-44; 8:1-10. The Biblical elements of Muḥammad's Meccan period, including the publication of Muḥammad's mission, have already been ably studied by Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder*, 127-48. His focus is not on the miracle story itself, but rather on the themes of declaration and persecution.

supernatural.³¹⁹ Unlike the section on Muḥammad's conception, al-Ṭabarī begins his treatment of this event with an introduction that includes two Qur'ān citations, namely, Qur'ān 15:94 and 26:214-216.³²⁰

The introduction appears to contain three parts. The first is the statement that the command to publicize God's message came roughly three years after the beginning of the Revelation, and is followed by the citation of Qur'ān 15:94:

Three years after the commencement of his mission, God commanded His Prophet to proclaim the divine message which he had received, to declare it publicly to the people, and to summon them to it. God said to him: "So proclaim that which you are commanded, and withdraw from the polytheists."³²¹

The second relates how Muḥammad had at first preached only in private, but was forced to be more overt by God's command as found in Qur'ān 26:214-216:

In the previous three years of his mission, until he was commanded to summon people openly to God, he had kept his preaching secret and hidden. Then God revealed: "And warn your tribe of near kindred, and lower your wing (in kindness) to those disbelievers who follow you. And if they (your kinsfolk) disobey you, say: 'I am innocent of what they do.'"³²²

The introduction then concludes with the seemingly unrelated tale of how the first blood was spilled between Muslims and non-Muslims:

When the Messenger of God's Companions prayed, they went to the ravines and concealed themselves from their fellow tribesmen. Once while Sa'd b. Abī Waqqāṣ and a number of the Messenger of God's Companions were in one of the ravines of Mecca, a group of polytheists suddenly appeared before them as they were praying, expressed their disapproval and reproached the believers for what they were doing. Finally, they came to blows, and Sa'd b. Abī Waqqāṣ struck

³¹⁹Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 88-92; Leiden edition, 1169-1174.

³²⁰Ibid., 88; Leiden edition, 1169. Most of the text of the introduction itself comes from Ibn Ishāq, but al-Ṭabarī makes sufficient changes to it to treat it as part of his own work.

³²¹Ibid., 88; Leiden edition, 1169.

³²²Ibid.; Leiden edition, 1169.

one of the polytheists with a camel's jawbone and split his head open. This was the first blood shed in the time of Islam.³²³

Although this threefold division would appear to indicate that the introduction was at first composed of three separate parts, a closer reading reveals that the second section actually builds on the first and helps move the story along. The first establishes the chronology of the event, while the second gives the appropriate background information that actually leads into the final section of the introduction. Thus, as in Ibn Kathīr's use of Qur'ān 6:124 in the conception story of Muḥammad, al-Ṭabarī here appears to be using the citation of Qur'ān verses as a literary device to move from one section of his introduction to the next. Only after this does al-Ṭabarī relate reports that discuss the actual publication of the message given to Muḥammad.

The archetype of Muḥammad for this event appears to reveal that he was actually given two separate commands to perform two separate deeds. The first, as indicated by the first section of al-Ṭabarī's introduction and by the citation of Qur'ān 15:94, was the command to preach openly to the Meccans in general. The second, as indicated in the second section of the introduction and by the citation of Qur'ān 26:214-216, was the command to warn his extended family against their continued disbelief.³²⁴ The introduction then ends with the story of the first blood spilled, which could serve two different functions in the story. It could either supply a more mundane reason for the coming hostility of the Meccans, since it was one of their own who was wounded, or

³²³Ibid., 88-89; Leiden edition, 1169-70.

³²⁴The verses cited actually only say to admonish one's family, but they do not specify against what, nor do they indicate possible consequences.

it could be seen as a literary foreshadowing of the later conflicts between the two groups.

The section following the introduction contains a number of reports that describe how Muḥammad fulfilled both the public and private aspects of God's commands, thus providing detailed examples of the archetype. These reports also appear to be broken down into thirds, and so the structure of this section mirrors that of the introduction. The first two reports contain the occasion of revelation for Qur'ān 111:1-5 and a quote from 34:46.³²⁵ The second two reports contain a detailed account of how Muḥammad announced his mission to a gathering of his kin, and was able to feed all of them with just a small amount of meat and milk.³²⁶ The last two reports are extremely brief accounts similar to the first two.³²⁷ To examine these reports in relation to how they follow the archetype, we will first study the public preaching of Muḥammad's mission.

The first pair of reports are relatively short and straightforward, depicting how Muḥammad carried out the command to publicize his mission. The first report originates from Ibn 'Abbās and relates:

One day the Messenger of God mounted al-Ṣafā and called out, "Beware this morning!" Quraysh gathered around him and said, "What is the matter?" Then he said, "If I were to tell you that the enemy would come upon you this morning

³²⁵Ibid., 89; Leiden edition, 1170. Qur'ān 111:1-5 reads: "Perish the hands of the Father of Flame! Perish he! No profit to him from all his wealth, and all his gains! Burnt soon will he be in a Fire of blazing Flame! His wife shall carry the (crackling) wood - as fuel! - A twisted rope of palm leaf fibre round her (own) neck!" The second report discusses Muḥammad's actions in response to Qur'ān 26:214-216. Both reports contain a quotation from Qur'ān 34:46, which reads: "Say: 'I do admonish you on one point: that ye do stand up before Allāh - (it may be) in pairs, or (it may be) singly - and reflect (within yourselves): Your Companion is not possessed: he is no less than a Warner to you, in face of a terrible penalty.'" Only the last segment of this verse is quoted in the report, somewhat loosely, as Muḥammad identifies himself as the Warner. Since some of these reports relate Muḥammad's reaction to receiving Qur'ān 26:214-216, rather than the events leading up to their revelation, they are not here technically considered the occasion for the revelation of these verses.

³²⁶Watt and McDonald, tr., *Muhammad at Mecca*, 89-92; Leiden edition, 1171-1173.

³²⁷Ibid., 92; Leiden edition, 1174.

or this evening, would you believe me?” “Certainly,” they replied. He said, “I am a warner to you in the face of a terrible doom.” Then Abū Lahab said, “May you perish! Did you call us together for this?” Then God revealed: “The power of Abū Lahab will perish and he will perish” ...reciting to the end of the sūra.³²⁸

The second report, also from Ibn ‘Abbās, contains more detailed information, and has Muḥammad specifically reacting to the revelation of Qur’ān 26:214-216:

When God revealed the verse, “and warn your tribe of near kindred,” the Messenger of God went out, mounted al-Şafā, and called out, “Beware this morning!” Some said, “Who is that calling out?” and others said, “It is Muḥammad.” Then he said “Banū so-and-so, Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Banū ‘Abd Manāf!” They gathered round him, and he said, “If I were to tell you that horsemen were coming out at the foot of that mountain, would you believe me?” They replied, “We have never known you to tell a lie.” Then he said, “I am a warner to you in the face of a terrible doom.” Abū Lahab said, “May you perish! Did you only bring us together for this?” Then the following sūra was revealed: “The power of Abū Lahab will perish, and he will perish...” reciting to the end of the sūra.³²⁹

This report gives not only the names of the groups called, but also relates the conversations that took place both among the people and between them and Muḥammad. The fifth report, through Ibn Ishāq, also provides Muḥammad’s reaction to the revelation of Qur’ān 26:214-216:

When the verse “and warn your tribe of near kindred” was revealed to the Messenger of God, he rose up in the valley and said, “Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Banū ‘Abd Manāf, Banū Qusayy!” Then he named the various groups of Quraysh, clan by clan, until he had come to the last of them, and said, “I summon you to God and warn you of his punishment.”³³⁰

These reports seem to show a variety of possibilities for the archetype of Muḥammad’s public preaching. While the second and fifth reports state that Muḥammad’s call to his fellow tribesmen took place in response to a Qur’ānic command, the first gives no such

³²⁸Ibid., 89; Leiden edition, 1170.

³²⁹Ibid.; Leiden edition, 1170.

³³⁰Ibid., 92; Leiden edition, 1173-74.

indication and begins with the more literary formula “one day.”³³¹ However, it is the two reports that include the Qur’ān verse that link best with the theme of the introduction, which claims that Muḥammad began his public preaching in direct response to a Qur’ānic command. Again, it appears that al-Ṭabarī is presenting more than one possible story for the beginning of Muḥammad’s public preaching.

The other aspect of the archetype is the more private meeting between Muḥammad and his extended family for the purpose of warning them against disbelief, and this is related in the third report of this section, originating with ‘Alī and coming through Ibn Ishāq. The report states:

When the verse “and warn your tribe of near kindred” was revealed to the Messenger of God, he called me and said to me, “‘Alī, God has commanded me to warn my tribe of near kindred. I was troubled by this, for I knew that when I broached the matter to them they would respond in a way which I would not like. I kept silent until Gabriel came to me and said, ‘Muḥammad, if you do not do what you are commanded, your Lord will punish you.’ So prepare a measure of wheat for us, add a leg of mutton to it, fill a large bowl of milk for us, and then assemble the Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib for me so that I may speak to them and tell them what I have been commanded to tell them.”

I did what he had told me to do and then called them to him. At that time they numbered forty men, more or less, including his uncles Abū Ṭālib, Ḥamza, al-‘Abbās, and Abū Lahab. When they had gathered together, he called on me to bring the food which I had prepared. I brought it, and when I put it down the Messenger of God took a piece of meat, broke it with his teeth, and threw it towards the dish. Then he said, “Take, in the name of God.” They ate until they could eat no more, and yet the food was as it had been, except for where their hands had been. I swear by God, in whose hand ‘Alī’s soul rests, that a single man of them could have eaten the amount of food which I put before all of them. Then he said, “Give them something to drink,” so I brought them that bowl and they drank from it until they had drunk their fill, and I swear by God that one man could have drunk that amount.

When the Messenger of God wanted to speak to them, Abū Lahab forestalled him and said, “Your host has long since bewitched you.” Then they dispersed without the Messenger of God speaking to them. On the following day he said to me, “‘Alī, this man forestalled me by saying what you heard him

³³¹Ibid., 89; Leiden edition, 1170.

saying so that the people dispersed before I could speak to them. Prepare the same food for us as you did yesterday, and assemble them here.”

I did this, assembled them, and brought the food to them when he called me. He did as he had done the previous day, and they ate until they could eat no more. Then he said, “Bring the bowl,” and they drank until they could drink no more. Then he spoke to them, saying, “Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, I know of no young man among the Arabs who has brought his people something better than what I have brought to you. I bring you the best of this world and the next, for God has commanded me to summon you to him. Which of you will aid me in this matter, so that he will be my brother, my agent, and my successor among you?”

They all held back, and although I was the youngest and the most bleary-eyed, pot-bellied, and spindly-legged of them, I said, “I will be your helper, Prophet of God.” He put his hand on the back of my neck and said, “This is my brother, my agent, and my successor among you, so listen to him and obey him.” They rose up laughing and saying to Abū Ṭālib, “He has commanded you to listen to your son and obey him!”³³²

Thus, what began as a simple miracle story ends as an apparent justification for the primacy of ‘Alī. Al-Ṭabarī makes no comment here, but instead moves directly into the next report.

It is the fourth report of this section that appears to deviate from the archetype of the private meeting, and this is due to its much more overt political theme, as well as the fact that it leaves out all mention of the revelation of Qur’ān 26:214-216, thus taking away Muḥammad’s supernatural motivation for calling the meeting. Instead, it relates:

A man said to ‘Alī, “Commander of the Faithful, how did you become the heir of your cousin to the exclusion of your paternal uncle?” ‘Alī said, “Ahem” three times until everybody craned their necks and pricked up their ears, and then said, “The Messenger of God assembled the whole of the Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, including his own closest relatives, to eat a year-old lamb and to drink some milk. He also prepared a quantity of wheat for them, and they ate until they were full, while the food remained as it was, as though it had not been touched. Then he called for a drinking cup and they drank until they could drink no more,

³³²Ibid., 89-91; Leiden edition, 1170-73.

while the drink remained as though it had not been touched and they had not drunk.

“Then he said, ‘Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, I have been sent to all men in general and to you in particular. Now that you have seen what you have seen, which of you will swear an oath of allegiance to me to become my brother, my companion and my inheritor?’ Not one of them rose up, so I stood before him, although I was the youngest there. He said, ‘Sit down.’ He repeated the words he had spoken three times, while I would rise up and he would say to me, ‘Sit down.’ On the third occasion, he struck his hand on mine. In this way I became the heir to my cousin to the exclusion of my uncle.”³³³

The question of the man in the report, how ‘Alī came to have precedence over his uncle, meaning apparently al-‘Abbās, would thus appear to support an interpretation that would be a direct justification for the claims of the ‘Alids over those of the ‘Abbāsids, since the latter claimed Muḥammad’s uncle, al-‘Abbās, as their progenitor. ‘Alī’s response is certainly intended to be heard by a wide audience, since the report has him clearing his throat repeatedly, thus gaining the attention of all present before responding.³³⁴ However, ‘Alī’s own role in the story has changed dramatically. Instead of being the one to prepare the food and drink, and to summon the men, in this report, Muḥammad performs all of these functions himself. ‘Alī is simply one among the many other men who were in attendance. Thus, his role has changed from that of a youth who would be expected to perform such tasks for the Prophet, to a young man important enough in his clan to be included in the summons. Muḥammad’s comments to his kinsmen that he was sent to them specifically seems to support arguments for the elevated status of the Prophet’s family. While the archetypal story of this meeting did have Muḥammad claiming a close connection to ‘Alī, there was no overt political

³³³Ibid., 91-2; Leiden edition, 1173.

³³⁴Ibid.; Leiden edition, 1173.

message. Al-Ṭabarī diverges from this archetype by providing a report that spells out in no uncertain terms the religio-political meaning later given to this event.

But does this mean that al-Ṭabarī supported the arguments of the Shī‘a?

Certainly, this cannot be ruled out as a possibility. Al-Ṭabarī has been portrayed by many as a devout defender of orthodoxy, but it is possible that, even by the late ninth and early tenth centuries, the idea of orthodoxy had yet to be firmly established.³³⁵ The heated debate over the createdness or uncreatedness of the Qur’ān only one generation before al-Ṭabarī would seem to indicate that it had not. Therefore, it is entirely possible that al-Ṭabarī could espouse views that would be seen as offensive to later Sunnī notions of orthodoxy, but that in his own time and place were completely acceptable.³³⁶ And yet, his views regarding certain aspects of the events of early Islam were not appreciated by some of his contemporaries, such as the Ḥanbalīs, and, as we have seen, were also criticized by later scholars such as Ibn Kathīr. Another possibility is that al-Ṭabarī, while not necessarily supporting the primacy of ‘Alī over the first three caliphs, did support the idea that the ‘Alid claim to authority outweighed that of the ‘Abbāsids. This certainly would have been a dangerous assertion to make in the ‘Abbāsīd capital city, but, based on what we know of this late period of their reign, al-Ṭabarī would have been among the least of their worries.

This brings us, finally, to the last report related by al-Ṭabarī for the publication of Muḥammad’s mission. This report, through al-Wāqidi, does not reference specific verses of the Qur’ān and includes no miracle, but instead simply states:

³³⁵Rosenthal, *General Introduction*, vol. 1, 59-63. Rosenthal denies that al-Ṭabarī had any sympathy whatever for the Shī‘ī movement.

³³⁶For example, his work arguing for the authenticity of the reports about Ghadir Khumm.

The Messenger of God was commanded to proclaim the divine message which he had received, to declare it publicly to the people, and to summon them to God.³³⁷

There is no indication in this report whether he obeyed the command or what response he may have received. This report, then, would seem to serve as a summation of the section as a whole, providing in brief what the previous reports related in detail.

Thus, al-Ṭabarī continues the archetype's dichotomy of public and private, mundane and supernatural in the publication of Muḥammad's mission. He diverges from both archetypes, however, by yet again adding possibilities. The archetype of Muḥammad's public preaching would appear to be that it was done in response to the revelation of Qur'ān 26:214-216 and was responsible for the beginning of the opposition of the Meccans. Yet, al-Ṭabarī also includes reports that would seem to indicate that Muḥammad simply took it upon himself to preach to his fellow tribesmen and that do not relate what reaction, if any, he received from them. The archetype of the more intimate meeting between Muḥammad and his extended family includes the miraculous division of food and drink, as well as the superior faith of 'Alī who, although just a sickly youth, believed in Muḥammad when no one else would. Al-Ṭabarī's divergence from this archetype is perhaps the most important, since he relates a report that gives this story an overt religio-political message that appears to support the case of the 'Alids over that of the 'Abbāsids.

³³⁷Watt and McDonald, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 92; Leiden edition, 1173-4.

Al-Ṭabarī's Tafsīr

Unlike his section on Muḥammad's conception, al-Ṭabarī makes four distinct Qur'ānic references in his relation of the publication of Muḥammad's mission in his *sīra/ta'rikh*. Two of these are directly cited in the introduction, while the other two are related in some of the individual reports. The first verse cited is Qur'ān 15:94. Unlike its citation in the historical work, however, in the *tafsīr* it is not treated as an isolated unit, but instead is joined to the two verses immediately preceding it.³³⁸ They read: "Therefore, by thy Lord, we will, of a surety, call them to account, for all their deeds. Therefore expound openly what thou art commanded, and turn away from those who join false gods with Allāh."³³⁹ The main thrust of al-Ṭabarī's exegesis of this verse grouping has to do with its religious and grammatical meanings. Only one of the twenty-three reports in his *tafsīr*, coming through Ibn Ishāq and originating with Ibn 'Abbās, references the historical context of the verse, giving it the meaning of the public announcement, but it does not mention any specifics:

Allāh revealed, "Therefore expound openly what thou art commanded,..." then truly He commanded His prophet Muḥammad in the conveyance of His message (to) his people (*q-w-m*)....³⁴⁰

A few of the other reports simply state that the verse grouping means that Muḥammad was ordered to recite the Qur'ān publicly or that he was commanded to pray publicly,

³³⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 14, 46-48.

³³⁹ Qur'ān 15:92-4.

³⁴⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 14, 46. The exact meaning of the word, *q-w-m*, in this report is unclear. Was he supposed to only tell his immediate family, his extended family, his clan, or his entire tribe/people? This issue is not overtly discussed in either the *sīra/ta'rikh* or the *tafsīr*, and thus may have been thought to be well known by their intended audiences. However, the fact that the individual reports have Muḥammad either making a general announcement or an announcement to specific clans or individuals reveals the possibility that even scholars like al-Ṭabarī were not completely certain of its precise designation.

but no other details or arguments are given.³⁴¹ For the most part, the exegesis of these verses focuses on grammar, their religious meaning, and eventual abrogation.³⁴²

Nowhere in his *tafsīr* does al-Ṭabarī discuss the circumstances of revelation of any of the verses in this grouping. Historical context, in the specific sense of the reports located in his *sīra/ta'rikh*, is not found at all. Likewise, neither Qur'ān 15:94 nor the other verses joined to it are mentioned in any of the reports cited in his *sīra/ta'rikh*. The only place where 15:94 is recorded is the introductory section by al-Ṭabarī himself. Thus, there does not appear to be a sharing of Qur'ān citations and historical reports between the *sīra/ta'rikh* and the *tafsīr* for this verse. Oddly enough, it is this verse that would seem to most closely match the order to publicize God's message, and yet all of the reports in the *sīra/ta'rikh* that claim a Qur'ānic impetus to Muḥammad's public preaching cite Qur'ān 26:214-216.

The second verse grouping referred to in al-Ṭabarī's *sīra/ta'rikh* is Qur'ān 26:214-216. His *tafsīr* of these verses is broken up, with verse 213 being added to 214-215, while 216 is attached to the beginning of his treatment of 217-220.³⁴³ The first group, 26:213-215, reads, "So call not on any other god with Allāh, or thou wilt be among those under the Penalty. And admonish thy nearest kinsmen, and lower thy wing to the Believers who follow thee." The second group of verses, 26:216-220, reads,

Then if they disobey thee, say: "I am free (of responsibility) for what ye do!"
And put thy trust on the Exalted in Might, the Merciful - Who seeth thee
standing forth (in prayer), and thy movements among those who prostrate
themselves. For it is He who heareth and knoweth all things.

³⁴¹Ibid., vol. 14, 47.

³⁴²The order to separate or withdraw from the polytheists is later abrogated in favor of the command to fight them outright.

³⁴³Ibid., vol. 19, 72-77.

His grouping appears to make little sense here, since he ties the meaning of 26:216 to the previous verses, as he does in his *sīra/ta'rikh*, and mentions this verse only in the introductory section of his commentary on the later three verses, basically explaining that what Muḥammad is supposed to be free of responsibility for is the continued idol worship of those to whom he had delivered God's message.³⁴⁴

As in the *sīra/ta'rikh*, none of the reports treats the actual occasion of revelation for these verses, but instead details Muḥammad's reaction. Al-Ṭabarī also includes an introductory section for his *tafsīr* of 26:213-215 that discusses what Muḥammad is warning against, i.e., polytheism and disbelief, and then continues to discuss who was to be included in this warning:

Allāh said to His prophet, Muḥammad, "And warn your kinsmen from your tribe, the nearest to you (in) kinship and warn them about Our punishment that is revealed to them in their unbelief." And it was mentioned about this verse, when it was revealed, (that) he began with the tribe of his grandfather, 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib and his sons, so he cautioned them and he warned them.³⁴⁵

This would appear to show al-Ṭabarī's personal views regarding the correctness or incorrectness of the reports that follow, namely that those who claim Muḥammad's warning was against polytheism and those who cite the identity of the people being warned as the Banū 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib are correct and that all others are to be treated with suspicion.

As for the section of the *tafsīr* containing the actual reports, there appears to be a variety of themes, some of which are found in the *sīra/ta'rikh*. First is the issue of who was meant by "your nearest kinsmen." The reports dealing with this theme list various

³⁴⁴Ibid., vol. 19, 76.

³⁴⁵Ibid., vol. 19, 72.

groupings among the tribe of Quraysh, as well as certain individuals, specifically, Muḥammad's daughter, Fāṭima, his aunt, Ṣafiya, and his uncle, al-'Abbās.³⁴⁶ The second theme is the warning itself. Most of the reports in this beginning section relate the message that nothing will protect those mentioned from the will of God and that they should take measures to protect themselves from Hell. The next theme appears to be very similar to that found in the first pair of reports in the *sīra/ta'rikh*, and this is the theme of placing Muḥammad's call to his kinsmen at a particular place, thus giving it a kind of historical context. Al-Ṭabarī cites several reports that place Muḥammad at al-Ṣafā, repeating his call to his kinsmen, their response, and his warning. It is in this middle section of the exegesis that al-Ṭabarī repeats several of the exact reports found in his *sīra/ta'rikh*. Reports fourteen and fifteen are identical to the first pair of reports in his *History*. Report fourteen, which originates with Ibn 'Abbās, reads:

One day the Messenger of God mounted al-Ṣafā and called out, "Beware this morning!" Quraysh gathered around him and said, "What is the matter?" Then he said, "If I were to tell you that the enemy would come upon you this morning or this evening, would you believe me?" "Certainly," they replied. He said, "I am a warner to you in the face of a terrible doom." Then Abū Lahab said, "May you perish! Did you call us together for this?" Then God revealed, "Perish the hands of the Father of Flame..." to the end of the *sūra*.³⁴⁷

Report fifteen, also originating with Ibn 'Abbās, reads:

When this verse was revealed, "and warn your tribe of near kindred," and your group among them, the righteous, the Messenger of God went out, mounted al-

³⁴⁶Ibid., vol. 19, 72-74. This could mean that these individuals had not converted to Islam at this time. While this is completely in line with the later conversion story of al-'Abbās, the possibility that Muḥammad's own daughter, who would go on to have such a profound influence on Shī'ī Islam, did not convert until years after the beginning of the Revelation would have presented quite a challenge to later Muslim scholars. Thus, it is not surprising that al-Ṭabarī makes no comment on these reports. I have not found specific information regarding the conversion of Ṣafiya, but it is unlikely that the mention of her name here lacks some kind of significance.

³⁴⁷Ibid., vol. 19, 74. Since the report is identical, I have maintained the translation as found in al-Ṭabarī's *sīra/ta'rikh*.

Şafā, and called out, “Beware this morning!” Some said, “Who is that calling out?” And others said, “It is Muḥammad.” Then he said, “O Banū so-and-so, O Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, O Banū ‘Abd Manāf!” They gathered round him, and he said, “If I were to tell you that horsemen were coming out at the foot of that mountain, would you believe me?” They replied, “We have never known you to tell a lie.” Then he said, “I am a warner to you in the face of a terrible doom.” Abū Lahab said, “May you perish! Did you only bring us together for this?” Then he stood up. So this sūra was revealed, “Perish the hands of the Father of Flame, perish he!” Like the recitation of al-A‘mash to the end of the sūra.³⁴⁸

As in his *sīra/ta’rīkh*, the first of the above reports includes an allusion to Qur’ān 34:46, and provides the occasion of revelation of 111:1-5. However, no mention is made in that report of the verse discussed in this part of the exegesis, namely 26:214. In fact, this is the only report that does not describe Muḥammad’s actions as a direct result of the revelation of 26:214. Thus, al-Ṭabarī continues his citation of fairly brief reports that provide a very public context for Muḥammad’s announcement of his mission.³⁴⁹

Report eighteen is basically identical to the first report of the second grouping in the historical work, and is the only report in the exegesis of these verses that includes a supernatural element.³⁵⁰ This is, of course, the report wherein ‘Alī, upon Muḥammad’s command, prepares the food and drink, calls the men, witnesses the miracle, and stands as the only one willing to support Muḥammad in his cause. The main difference in this report is that, whereas the report in the *sīra/ta’rīkh* includes the words “my agent and my successor” after Muḥammad’s request for someone to act as his brother, the report in the *tafsīr* only has him state, “Which of you will aid me in this matter, so that he will be my brother, etc., etc.?”³⁵¹ It is unclear whether al-Ṭabarī himself made the change to

³⁴⁸Ibid. While most of the report is identical to that found in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*, there are some minor differences that are included in my translation here.

³⁴⁹Ibid., vol. 19, 73-4.

³⁵⁰Ibid., vol. 19, 74-5.

³⁵¹Ibid., vol. 19, 75.

this report or whether this was the work of one of his reporters or even a later editor, so the importance of these changes remains unclear. That being said, however, the fact remains that the only two words that have been edited out are precisely those two that give this report a political interpretation in favor of ‘Alī’s immediate succession to Muḥammad. Also, al-Ṭabarī does not here repeat the second report of that particular grouping found in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*, the report in which ‘Alī relates the tale to a large assembly, and it is not found elsewhere in his exegesis of any of the verses mentioned. The first report of the last pair of reports in the *sīra/ta’rīkh* is also included in this part of the exegesis. It comes through Ibn Ishāq, and reads:

When the verse “and warn your tribe of near kindred” was revealed to the Messenger of God, he rose up in the valley and said, “Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Banū ‘Abd Manāf, Banū Qusayy!” Then he named the various groups of Quraysh, clan by clan, until he had come to the last of them, and said, “I summon you to God and warn you of his punishment.”³⁵²

But the final, summary report from al-Wāqidī is not included. The exegesis of 26:213-215 ends with a discussion of what was meant by “lower thy wing” and this section includes neither historical nor miraculous associations.³⁵³

Thus, al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* of these verses seems to include the archetype depicted in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*, but not his divergence from it. He continues the public archetype by including numerous reports that are similar, as well as identical, to those found in his *History* and continues the private archetype by including the report of Muḥammad’s miraculous multiplication of food and drink. He does diverge from the archetype as presented in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*, but not in the same fashion. The only divergence we see in

³⁵²Ibid.

³⁵³Ibid., vol. 19, 75-6.

his explanation of these verses is that Muḥammad is shown to have called out to individuals from his own family during the part of the story that was supposed to have been public and general, thus relating reports that appear to show Muḥammad airing private concerns during his first public preaching.

But what of the two verses cited in the reports in the *sīra/ta'riḫh* that were not mentioned by al-Ṭabarī in his introduction? The first, 34:46 reads:

Say: "I do admonish you on one point: that ye do stand up before Allāh - (it may be) in pairs, or (it may be) singly - and reflect (within yourselves): your Companion is not possessed: he is no less than a Warner to you in face of a terrible penalty."

The introductory section of his exegesis of this verse is limited to a discussion of the identity of those Muḥammad is advising, his tribe, and of what he is advising them, that is to say, obedience to God.³⁵⁴ Thus, the issue at hand for this verse is much the same as that of 26:214-216, the problem of identifying who was called and what message they were given. Of the three reports cited, none gives the historical context of this verse. The main focus here seems to be the variant readings of the verse, and the meanings of "pairs" and "individually." One compelling point is that the two reports that cite part of this verse in his *sīra/ta'riḫh* are not to be found in this section of his exegesis. This may be an indication that al-Ṭabarī viewed the importance of these verses, or at least his exegesis of them, as separate from their role in his *sīra/ta'riḫh*.

The last group of verses mentioned in the *sīra/ta'riḫh* are 111:1-5, which read:

Perish the hands of the Father of Flame! Perish he! No profit to him from all his wealth, and all his gains! Burnt soon will he be in a Fire of blazing Flame! His

³⁵⁴Ibid., vol. 22, 70-1.

wife shall carry the (crackling) wood - as fuel! - a twisted rope of palm leaf fibre round her (own) neck!³⁵⁵

In the introductory section of his commentary on these verses, al-Ṭabarī limits himself to a discussion of the variant readings of the sūra's first verse.³⁵⁶ Of the approximately forty-two separate reports cited in the exegesis of this sūra, only five deal with the same issues as those raised in the *sīra/ta'riḫh*.³⁵⁷ However, the second report cited gives a historical context different from that found previously, stating:

Perish the hands of the Father of Flame! Perish he!... Abū Lahab said to the Prophet: "What will I get, O Muḥammad, if I believe in you?" He said: "The same as the Muslims get." So he [Abū Lahab] said: "My wealth surpasses them...."³⁵⁸

Thus, the verse is here shown as being revealed not in response to Abū Lahab's criticisms of Muḥammad's first public preaching, but because of his desire to be given special status as a Muslim due to his wealth before agreeing to convert.

Al-Ṭabarī goes on to directly cite many of the same reports as he does in his *sīra/ta'riḫh*, but introduces them with a section that indicates his own opinion about the historical context of the revelation of these verses. He states:

Truly this sūra was revealed about Abū Lahab, because when the Prophet gave the call to his kinsmen, as when it was revealed, "And warn your nearest kinsmen," and he gathered them for the call, Abū Lahab said to him, "May you perish this day! Is this what you called us for?"³⁵⁹

³⁵⁵The literal translation of Abū Lahab is father of flame.

³⁵⁶Ibid., vol. 30, 217. Qur'ān 111:1 reads: "Perish the hands of the Father of Flame! Perish he!"

³⁵⁷Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 30, 217-218.

³⁵⁸Ibid., vol. 30, 217. The conversation continues with Muḥammad asking Abū Lahab what he wants, and his response is that he wants the destruction of the religion of Islam, and it is for this reason that the verse was revealed. This theme of asking for material considerations in return for conversion is repeated in the story of 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl and Arbad b. Qays in the next chapter.

³⁵⁹Ibid.

He then cites the four reports that correlate to the story of Muḥammad's climbing of al-Şafā and calling to the Quraysh, as well as one report that does not give the physical setting, but is instead reminiscent of the summary report from al-Wāqidi that ends the section in his *sīra/ta'riḫh*. The first of the reports, originating with Ibn 'Abbās, states:

The Messenger of God climbed that day al-Şafā, then he said: "Beware this morning!" So the Quraysh gathered to him, then they said: "What do you want?" He said: "What would you think, if I told you that the enemy (is coming) this morning or this evening, would you believe me?" They said: "Yes." He [Muḥammad] said: "Then truly I am a warner to you in the face of a terrible penalty." Then Abū Lahab said: "May you Perish! Is this what you called us and gathered us for?" Then Allāh revealed: "Perish the hands of the Father of Flame..." to its end.³⁶⁰

The second report is identical in text, but bears a different *isnād*, however, it, too, originates with Ibn 'Abbās. These two reports are the same as the first report in al-Ṭabari's *sīra/ta'riḫh*. The third report then states:

When it was revealed, "And warn you nearest kinsmen," the Messenger of God rose upon al-Şafā, and cried out: "Beware this morning!" So the people gathered to him, and some came themselves, while others sent their messengers, then he said: "O Banū Hāshim, O Banū 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, O Banū So-and-so, O Banū, O Banū - What would you think if I told you that horses (are coming) from the foot of this mountain, wanting to vie for you, would you believe me?" They said: "Yes." He said: "Then truly I am a warner to you in the face of a terrible penalty." So Abū Lahab said: "May you perish this day! You called us for this?" So it was revealed, "Perish the hands of the Father of Flame! Perish he!"³⁶¹

While this report shares similarities with the other reports in this section as well as those contained in the *sīra/ta'riḫh*, it is not precisely the same. The next report, however, is identical to the second report in the *sīra/ta'riḫh*. It, too, originates with Ibn 'Abbās, and reads:

³⁶⁰Ibid., vol. 30, 218.

³⁶¹Ibid.

When this verse was revealed: “And warn you nearest kinsmen” and your group among them, the righteous, the Messenger of God went out until he climbed al-Şafā, then he shouted: “Beware this morning!” So, they said: “Who is this that is shouting?” They said: “Muḥammad.” So they gathered to him, then he said: “O Banū So-and-so, O Banū So-and-so, O Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, O Banū ‘Abd Manāf!” So they gathered to him, and he said: “What would you think if I told you that horses were coming out from the foot of this mountain, would you believe me?” They said: “We have not known you to lie.” He said: “Then truly I am a warner to you in the face of a terrible penalty.” Then Abū Lahab said: “May you perish! You only gathered us for this?” Then he got up. So this sūra was revealed: “Perish the hands of the Father of Flame! Perish he!...” Al-A‘mash recited to the end of the sūra.³⁶²

These reports directly quote 26:214-216, 34:46, and 111:1-5 with a historical context similar to that found in both the *sīra/ta’rīkh* and in the exegesis of 26:214-216. The last report that relates the context of this verse reads:

Perish the hands of the Father of Flame!... When the Prophet sent to him [Abū Lahab] and to others, and Abū Lahab was the paternal uncle of the Prophet and his name was ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā, so he [Muḥammad] told them [what he told them], then Abū Lahab said: “May you perish! You sent to us for this?” So Allāh revealed: “Perish the hands of the Father of Flame!”³⁶³

This report appears to act as a summarization of the events previously described. None of the details that are found in the other reports, the location of the conversation, the identity of whom Muḥammad called apart from Abū Lahab himself, nor even the text of his warning is included here. The lack of detail in this report means that it could have taken place at either the public announcement or the private meeting, but since the private meeting is nowhere discussed in relation to this sūra, the public announcement is the more likely venue. The placement of this report does not seem to be accidental, since it is the last to discuss this particular verse before the exegesis moves on to the next one. Although the rest of al-Ṭabarī’s commentary on this sūra does include some

³⁶²Ibid.

³⁶³Ibid.

historical context, it is not related to either incident found in his *sīra/ta'rikh*. Instead, it focuses on the meaning of “his wealth will not avail him” and the historical context of the label given to the wife of Abū Lahab as a “carrier of firewood” and even different arguments regarding the composition of the rope tied around her neck.³⁶⁴

It would thus appear that, for al-Ṭabarī, the supernatural element found in the miracle story of the food and drink is of minor, if any, significance in his *tafsīr*. Instead, his treatment of this event focuses on identifying those who were called, what they were called to do, the possible consequences of ignoring this call, and the opposition of Abū Lahab. The miracle story is included, but the fact that it is related in only one report out of nearly a hundred would suggest that al-Ṭabarī's focus is definitely elsewhere. The dual archetype is repeated in the *tafsīr*, but the focus is on the public announcement rather than the private meeting and the miracle associated with it. Nowhere in the *tafsīr* of the above verses does he repeat the overtly religio-political report espousing 'Alid superiority over the 'Abbāsids, nor does he repeat al-Wāqidī's summary report. Since there appears to be a much higher number of reports for Muḥammad's public announcement, it would seem that this is the aspect of the archetype he chose to stress in this particular genre. His inclusion of an alternative incident for the revelation of Qur'an 111:1 would seem to indicate his allowance of this possibility, but again, this report is vastly outnumbered by those depicting the verse's revelation in the context of Muḥammad's public preaching. Also, the fact that he left out the second report from 'Alī regarding the private meeting may indicate that he viewed it as inappropriate in a work of *tafsīr*. Therefore, the archetype of Muḥammad for this incident is related rather

³⁶⁴Ibid., vol. 30, 218-221.

differently by al-Ṭabarī in his *sīra/ta'riḫ* as opposed to his *tafsīr*, and this may be our best indication, so far, of his views regarding these genres.

Ibn Kathīr's Sīra/Ta'riḫ

For the post-Revelation Meccan period, Ibn Kathīr relates roughly sixty-five supernatural events. Unlike the pre-Revelation period, wherein the majority of the miracles in his account involved prophecies about Muḥammad or the coming of Islam, in this period, the most numerous miracles are those involving aspects of nature, and God and Muḥammad appear almost evenly matched in the number of such miracles performed.³⁶⁵ Ibn Kathīr's treatment of this part of Muḥammad's life in his *sīra/ta'riḫ* is again structured in a slightly different manner than that found in al-Ṭabarī, as was the case in the section on Muḥammad's conception. For example, he includes the story of the first blood spilled for Islam, but places it at the end of the section immediately preceding his chapter on *The Command to Announce the Mission*.³⁶⁶ He includes an introductory section that not only relates what events the chapter will cover, but also cites several verses of the Qur'ān.³⁶⁷ He ends this introductory section with a reference

³⁶⁵According to Ibn Kathīr's account, Muḥammad performed around ten such miracles, while God was responsible for roughly thirteen.

³⁶⁶Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 38-40; LeGassick, vol. 1, 330-334. This is also similar to his separation of the story of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib's attempt to sacrifice his son from the story of the marriage between 'Abd Allāh and Āminah and Muḥammad's conception.

³⁶⁷Whereas al-Ṭabarī only cited two verse groupings in his introduction, Ibn Kathīr cites four, which are: Qur'ān 26:214-220 ("And admonish thy nearest kinsmen, And lower thy wing to the Believers who follow thee. Then if they disobey thee, say: 'I am free (of responsibility) for what ye do!' And put thy trust on the Exalted in Might, the Merciful - Who seeth thee standing forth (in prayer), And thy movements among those who prostrate themselves. For it is He who heareth and knoweth all things."), 43:44 ("The (Qur'ān) is indeed the Message, for thee and for thy people; and soon shall ye (all) be brought to account."), 28:85 ("Verily He Who ordained the Qur'ān for thee, will bring thee back to the Place of Return. Say: 'My Lord knows best who it is that brings true guidance. And who is in manifest error.'"), and 15:92-93 ("Therefore, by thy Lord, We will, of a surety, call them to account, For all their deeds.").

to his *Tafsīr* on the same subject, and specifically cites his exegesis of Qur'ān 26:214.³⁶⁸ This is then followed by roughly six reports, all of which can be found in some form in either al-Ṭabarī's *sīra/ta'riḫ* or his *tafsīr*.³⁶⁹ Unlike al-Ṭabarī, many of Ibn Kathīr's reports are interspersed with comments by the author that discuss the existence of similar reports, their *isnāds*, and his own personal views regarding the trustworthiness of the sources or the meaning of the text.

The reports in Ibn Kathīr's *sīra/ta'riḫ* that relate the dual archetype of Muḥammad's public and private delivery of God's message are grouped by the author in such a way that the first three relate Muḥammad's public preaching, while the last three discuss his private meeting with his kinsmen. Unlike al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr's reports on Muḥammad's public preaching all connect the incident to the revelation of Qur'ān 26:214. Also, unlike al-Ṭabarī's *sīra/ta'riḫ*, Ibn Kathīr includes in this work reports that identify individuals, as well as clans, as objects of Muḥammad's message. Thus, it would appear that, for Ibn Kathīr, the archetype of Muḥammad's public preaching could only be in response to a command from God. Ibn Kathīr goes on to relate the more private setting of Muḥammad's meeting with his extended family and includes the story of the miraculous division of food and drink. He takes issue with this facet of the archetype, however, and appears to go out of his way to refute every possible aspect of it that would support its political or religious use for the Shī'a. His reactions to these

³⁶⁸Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 38; LeGassick, vol. 1, 331.

³⁶⁹The exact number of reports is rather subjective here, since Ibn Kathīr includes full reports, partial reports, and references to similar reports with similar *isnāds*.

reports reveal both his vehement personal bias against Shi'ism, as well as a possibly anti-Shi'a atmosphere in Mamlūk Damascus.³⁷⁰

The introduction to this section reads:

[He was commanded] to publicize the message to high and low, and He commanded him [Muḥammad] to be steadfast and tolerant and honorable against the ignorant, the stubborn, and the liars after the rise of evidence before them, and the sending of the greatest messenger to them. And he mentioned the suffering he met from them, he and his Companions....³⁷¹

Thus, Ibn Kathīr tells us that this chapter will cover not only the publication of Muḥammad's mission, but also the negative response he received from his fellow Meccans. He goes on to cite several verses of the Qur'ān in connection to these events. He begins with Qur'ān 26:214-220:

And admonish thy nearest kinsmen. And lower thy wing to the Believers who follow thee. Then if they disobey thee, say: "I am free (of responsibility) for what ye do!" And put thy trust on the Exalted in Might, the Merciful - who seeth thee standing forth (in prayer), and thy movements among those who prostrate themselves. For it is He who heareth and knoweth all things.

He then moves on immediately to cite Qur'ān 43:44, which reads, "The (Qur'ān) is indeed the Message, for thee and for thy people; and soon shall ye (all) be brought to account." He then cites, again without further comment, the first part of Qur'ān 28:85, which reads, "Verily He who ordained the Qur'ān for thee, will bring thee back to the Place of Return."³⁷² Ibn Kathīr here explains that this means that God made it necessary for Muḥammad to publicize the Qur'ān, but that God will, in return, convey Muḥammad

³⁷⁰Laoust describes an incident in which Ibn Kathīr was among a panel of judges who condemned a Shi'i man to death for insulting the first three Caliphs, as well as Mu'āwīya and his son, Yazīd, at the Umayyad Mosque. See Laoust, "Ibn Kaṭīr, Historien," 55-6.

³⁷¹Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 38; LeGassick, vol. 1, 330.

³⁷²The rest of Qur'ān 28:85 reads, "Say: 'My Lord knows best who it is that brings true guidance. And who is in manifest error.'"

to the “abode of the hereafter,” meaning “the afterlife.”³⁷³ He moves on to cite Qur’ān 15:92-3, which state, “Therefore, by thy Lord, we will, of a surety, call them to account, for all their deeds.” He moves on to refer the reader to his *tafsīr* of Qur’ān 26:214 for a more complete recitation of the reports related to this event:

And the verses and reports about this are quite numerous, and we already examined the speech about that in our book of *Tafsīr*. And we explained about the... speech of the Most High in the sūra of the poets, “And warn your nearest kinsmen.” And we conveyed numerous reports about that....³⁷⁴

The section containing the reports after this introduction begins much like that in the *sīra/ta’rīkh* of al-Ṭabarī; the initial reports are brief and detail Muḥammad’s reaction to the revelation of Qur’ān 26:214.³⁷⁵ The first three reports relate how Muḥammad called out to those around him, including clans among the Quraysh as well as individuals. None of them contain a supernatural element. The first report is very similar to those found in both al-Ṭabarī’s *sīra/ta’rīkh* and *tafsīr*. It originates with Ibn ‘Abbās and comes from Ibn Ḥanbal and states:

When God revealed “And admonish thy nearest kinsmen” the Prophet came to al-Ṣafā, then he climbed upon it, and cried out: “Beware this morning!” So the people gathered to him, either coming themselves or sending a messenger. Then the Messenger of God said: “O Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, O Banū Fihir, O Banū Ka’b, what would you think if I told you that horses [were coming] from the foot of this mountain wanting to attack you, would you believe me?” They said: “Yes.” He said: “Then truly I am a warner to you in the face of a terrible penalty.” Abū Lahab, may God curse him, said: “May you perish this day! You called us only for this?” And God revealed: “Perish the hands of the Father of Flame! Perish he!”³⁷⁶

³⁷³Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāya wa’l-Nihāya*, vol. 3, 38; LeGassick, vol. 1, 331.

³⁷⁴Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 1, 331.

³⁷⁵Ibid., vol. 3, 38-9; LeGassick, Vol. 1, 331-2. Whereas the reports in al-Ṭabarī give the complete citation, 26:214-216, Ibn Kathīr cites only the single verse, 26:214.

³⁷⁶Ibid., vol. 3, 38; LeGassick, vol. 1, 331.

Thus, we have here the physical setting of the scene, al-Ṣafā, as well as all of the elements that are present in the similar reports in al-Ṭabarī's *sīra/ta'riḫ* and *tafsīr*, for example, the questioning of Muḥammad's reputation among his tribe, his calling to specific clans among the Quraysh, his recitation of part of Qur'ān 34:46, as well as the occasion of revelation of 111:1. Ibn Kathīr goes on to state that a similar report was also published through a different chain.³⁷⁷

The second report, is more reminiscent of al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* than his *sīra/ta'riḫ*.

It also comes from Ibn Ḥanbal and reads:

When this verse was revealed "And admonish thy nearest kinsmen," the Messenger of God called the Quraysh, the low and the high. Then he said: "O community of Quraysh, save yourselves from Hellfire, O community of the Banū Ka'b, save yourselves from Hellfire, O community of the Banū Hāshim, save yourselves from Hellfire, O community of the Banū 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, save yourselves from Hellfire, O Fāṭima bt. Muḥammad, save yourself from Hellfire, for truly I, by God, do not possess for you anything from God except mercy...."³⁷⁸

Thus, the contextualization is missing in that there is no physical setting, no climbing of al-Ṣafā, but simply the statement that Muḥammad called out to certain groups and one individual in response to a Qur'ānic revelation. Here, too, there is no citation of other verses of the Qur'ān, no indication of Muḥammad's reputation among those assembled, and no response given. He is simply warning those named against their potential fate in the afterlife, and reminding them that he cannot necessarily intercede with God for their souls. Ibn Kathīr then cites other sources for this report, stating:

And Muslim transmitted it from a report of 'Abd al-Malik b. 'Umayr, and it was published in the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* from a report of al-Zuhrī, on the authority of Sa'īd b. Musayyab and Abū Salama, on the authority of Abū Hurayra, and from another

³⁷⁷Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 1, 331.

³⁷⁸Ibid.; LeGassick, 331.

path, on the authority of Abū Hurayra in the *Musnad* of Aḥmad [b. Ḥanbal] and others.³⁷⁹

He is here attempting to add to the authoritativeness of this report by showing that the same text could be found in other reports, and notes their presence in the authoritative works of Muslim and al-Bukhārī, as well as in that of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal. This is one of several occasions in which he attempts to equate the authoritativeness of the *Musnad* of Ibn Ḥanbal with the *Ṣaḥīḥ* works of Muslim and al-Bukhārī.³⁸⁰

The third report, once again from Ibn Ḥanbal, but originating with ‘Ā’isha, is much shorter than the previous two and also leaves out the physical setting of Muḥammad’s call. It states:

When He revealed, “And warn your nearest kinsmen,” the Messenger of God... rose. Then he said: “O Fāṭima bt. Muḥammad, O Ṣafiya bt. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, O Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, I do not possess anything from God for you, ask me whatever you want from my wealth.”³⁸¹

This report is also missing what Muḥammad is warning his family members and fellow tribesmen against. He is simply telling this group that he cannot intercede for them with God, but does not mention his own role as a warner as he has in the previous reports, nor do we see the reaction of those called. Again, Ibn Kathīr attempts to bolster the authoritativeness of this report by adding that it was also transmitted by Muslim.³⁸²

Thus, Ibn Kathīr’s relation of the archetype of the beginning of Muḥammad’s public preaching in his *sīra/ta’rīkh*, appears to focus on its Qur’ānic impetus. All of the

³⁷⁹Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 1, 331-2.

³⁸⁰Although Ibn Kathīr does not specifically mention it here, al-Ṭabarī also includes similar reports in his *Tafsīr*, but unlike the later author, does not make any comment about his authorities. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, vol. 19, 72-3.

³⁸¹Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 38-9; LeGassick, vol. 1, 332.

³⁸²Ibid., vol. 3, 39; LeGassick, vol. 1, 332.

above reports relate that Muḥammad only appeared publicly to his fellow tribesmen in response to the revelation of this verse. The three reports also seem to mix Muḥammad's larger message to Quraysh with his more personal message to members of his immediate family, seeming to focus specifically on Fāṭima.³⁸³ Ibn Kathīr's comments regarding these reports can either be taken as the author's attempt to relate all the reports at his disposal, or as an attempt to bolster their authoritativeness or the authoritativeness of works such as Ibn Ḥanbal's *Musnad*. Thus, for Ibn Kathīr, the historical context of the public aspect of the announcement of Muḥammad's mission does not appear to be as important as its Qur'ānic connection. The focus of these reports for Ibn Kathīr appears to be the connection between the Qur'ānic command and the beginning of Muḥammad's public preaching, no matter the identity of those being called.

Ibn Kathīr continues with a report that is very similar to that found in al-Ṭabarī's *sīra/ta'riḫ* wherein 'Alī narrates that Muḥammad miraculously fed his kinsmen with a small amount of food and drink. It comes from al-Bayhaqī's (d. 458/1066) *Dalā'il al-nubūwa* and its chain includes Muḥammad Ibn Isḥāq and Ibn 'Abbas, originating with 'Alī, and states:

When this verse was revealed to the Messenger of God, "And warn your nearest kinsmen and lower thy wing to protect those believers who follow you," the Messenger of God said: "I knew that if I began it with my group, I would see from them what I would hate, so I remained silent. Then Gabriel came to me and he said: 'O Muḥammad, if you do not do what your Lord commands, he will punish you with Hellfire.'" Then he called to me ['Alī] and he said: "O 'Alī, truly God has commanded me to warn my nearest kin, so arrange for us, O 'Alī, a

³⁸³ Al-Ṭabarī also relates reports in his *tafsīr* that single out Fāṭima, but only in combination with several other reports. Ibn Kathīr's relation of two reports out of three that mention Muḥammad's daughter would, however, seem to indicate a conscious choice on his part.

sheep with a *ṣā'a* of food, and prepare for us an *'asī* of milk, then gather the Banū 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib to me." So I did, then they gathered to him that day and they were forty men, give or take a man, and among them were his paternal uncles Abū Ṭālib, Ḥamza, al-'Abbās, and Abū Lahab, the wicked unbeliever. Then I brought them the bowl, and the Messenger of God took a piece of meat from it, tore it with his teeth, and then threw it back. He said: "Eat in the name of Allāh." So the group ate from it until they were satisfied, and we only saw the traces of their fingers, and by God, truly one man could have eaten the like of it. Then the Messenger of God said: "Give them something to drink, O 'Alī." So, I placed before them the large drinking-bowl, and they drank from it until they drank all of it, and I swear, by God, truly one man could drink the like of it. Then when the Messenger of God wanted to speak to them, Abū Lahab, may God curse him, interrupted him, and said: "...Your companion has bewitched you." So they dispersed and the Messenger of God did not speak to them.

Then, when it was the following day, the Messenger of God said: "Make the same for us as you did yesterday of the food and drink, for truly this man already interrupted with what you heard [him say] before the group ate." So I did, then I gathered them to him and the Messenger of God prepared as he had the previous day. So they ate until they were satisfied and I swear, by God, truly one man could have eaten the like of it. Then the Messenger of God said: "Give them something to drink, O 'Alī." So I brought the large drinking-bowl, then they drank from it until they drank it all, and I swear, by God, truly one man could drink the like of it. Then, when the Messenger of God wanted to speak to them, Abū Lahab interrupted his speech, and he said: "...Your companion has bewitched you." So they dispersed and the Messenger of God did not speak to them.

Then, when it was the next day, the Messenger of God said: "O 'Alī, make the same for us as I was going to prepare yesterday of the food and drink, for truly this man interrupted me as you heard before the group ate." So I did, then I gathered them to him. Then the Messenger of God prepared as he had done the day before, so they ate until they were satisfied, then I gave them something to drink from the large drinking-bowl until they were satisfied, and by God, truly one man could have eaten and drank the like of it. Then the Messenger of God said: "O Banū 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, truly I, by God, do not know a young man from the Arabs (who) brought his group better than what I have brought you. Truly I bring you the power of this world and the hereafter."³⁸⁴

The remainder of this section in Ibn Kathīr's *sīra/ta'rīkh* deals with variations on this report. The main difference between this report and that by al-Ṭabarī is that it ends with Muḥammad finally being given the chance to warn his kinsmen after Abū Lahab's

³⁸⁴Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 1, 332-3.

interruption, but without continuing his speech or revealing the response.³⁸⁵ Here, Ibn Kathīr adds: “Thus al-Bayhaqī transmitted it from the path of Yūnis b. Bukayr, on the authority of Ibn Ishāq, on the authority of a shaykh whose name is not known, on the authority of ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Ḥārith.”³⁸⁶ By adding this, he is emphasizing the fact that there is an unknown person in the chain of authorities, thus making sure the reader spots the problems in this *isnād*. Ibn Kathīr then moves on to specifically quote al-Ṭabarī, even mentioning the earlier scholar by name.³⁸⁷ He states:

And Abū Ja‘far b. Jarīr transmitted it on the authority of Muḥammad b. Ḥumayd al-Rāzī, on the authority of Salama b. al-Faḍl al-Abrash, on the authority of Muḥammad b. Ishāq, on the authority of ‘Abd al-Ghaffār Abū Maryam b. al-Qāsim, on the authority of al-Minhāl b. ‘Amr, on the authority of ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Ḥārith, on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās, on the authority of ‘Alī, and he mentioned the like of it. And he added after his speech, “And truly I bring you the best of this world and the hereafter, and God commanded me to call you to it, so which of you will support me in this matter in the manner of being my brother, etc., etc.” Then the entire group refrained from it, and I [‘Alī] said, although I was the youngest of them, and had the rheumiest of eyes, the biggest of bellies, and the most scarred legs, “I, O Prophet of God, will be your helper in this.” Then he took hold of my neck and he said: “Truly, this is my brother, etc., etc., so listen to him and obey.” Then the group rose, laughing, saying to Abū Ṭālib: “He commands you to listen to your son and obey!”³⁸⁸

Thus, the unknown person in the previous report’s *isnād* is here identified, and Ibn Kathīr makes his own views of this source very clear by stating that “‘Abd al-Ghaffār b. al-Qāsim Abū Maryam is alone in this, and he was a liar and a *Shī‘ī* whom ‘Alī b. al-

³⁸⁵Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 1, 333.

³⁸⁶Ibid., vol. 3, 40; LeGassick, vol. 1, 333.

³⁸⁷Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 1, 333. Although the two authors appear to share several reports in common, Ibn Kathīr rarely mentions al-Ṭabarī as a source. This does not necessarily imply that this was a purposeful act, but rather could simply mean that both men used a common pool of sources. This is especially true of those reports listing Ibn Ishāq as an authority, but then moving on to someone like Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal as the author of the published version rather than al-Ṭabarī. This may have more to do with Ibn Kathīr’s obvious preference for Ibn Ḥanbal’s *Musnad* as a source over al-Ṭabarī’s *Ta’rīkh*.

³⁸⁸Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 1, 333.

Maḍīnī and others suspected of inventing the *ḥadīth*; the rest consider him weak.”³⁸⁹

But after making such a definitive statement regarding the lack of authenticity of this report, Ibn Kathīr admits that there is another source that would appear to lend it credence. He cites a report from a work of exegesis that seems to substantiate that of al-Ṭabarī, and even includes the scene between Muḥammad and ‘Alī. He states:

But Ibn Abī Ḥātim transmitted in his *Tafsīr*, on the authority of his father, on the authority of al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Isā b. Maysara al-Ḥārithī, on the authority of ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Qadūs, on the authority of al-A‘mash, on the authority of al-Minhāl b. ‘Amr, on the authority of ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Ḥārith, who said: ‘Alī said: “When this verse was revealed, ‘And warn your nearest kinsmen,’ the Messenger of God said to me: ‘Prepare for me a leg of lamb with a *sā’a* of food and a container of milk, and call to me the Banū Hāshim.’ So I called them, and truly that day they were about forty or forty-one men.” Then the story mentioned the like of what preceded to where he said: “And the Messenger of God surprised them with his speech. Then he said: ‘Which of you will complete for me my religion and be my successor among the people?’ They were silent and al-‘Abbās was silent, fearing to protect his wealth, and I was silent for the age of al-‘Abbās. Then he said it another time, and al-‘Abbās was silent, so when I saw that, I said: ‘I, O Messenger of God.’ He said: ‘You?’ And truly, that day I was the most ill of them in appearance, truly I had the bleariest eyes, the biggest belly, and the most scarred legs.”³⁹⁰

The scene is here, however, incomplete, in that Muḥammad does not make his announcement to those assembled that ‘Alī is to be his successor, and is not even shown as having completely accepted the younger man’s offer himself. Ibn Kathīr then states that the *isnād* of this report does not include Ibn ‘Abbās and adds the familiar “but God knows best” to indicate, in a more subtle fashion, his uncertainty regarding its authoritativeness.³⁹¹ He uses the same formula regarding a report from Aḥmad b.

³⁸⁹Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 1, 333. ‘Alī b. al-Maḍīnī (d. 234/848) was an important early *ḥadīth* scholar. On a possible work of *tafsīr* written by him, see Andrew Rippin, “The Exegetical Genre *asbāb al-nuzūl*: A Bibliographical and Terminological Survey,” *BSOAS* 48,1 (1985), 3.

³⁹⁰Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 40; LeGassick, vol. 1, 333-4.

³⁹¹Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 1, 334.

Ḥanbal's *Musnad* that would also seem to support the previous reports, stating: "And Imām Aḥmad transmitted in his *Musnad* from the report of 'Abbād b. 'Abd Allāh al-Asadī and Rabī'a b. Nājīdh, on the authority of 'Alī, the like of what preceded, but God knows best."³⁹²

He ends this section of his *sīra/ta'rīkh* with his own explanation for Muḥammad's request and what he considers the real ramifications of the Prophet's acceptance of 'Alī's support.³⁹³ He states:

And the meaning of his speech in this report: "Who will complete for me my religion and be my successor among the people" means in case of death, because he feared that if he undertook to deliver the message to the unbelievers among the Arabs, they would kill him. So, he trusted who would execute after him that which was good for his people, and completing (it) for him. But God already reassured him about that in the speech of the Most High, "O Messenger! proclaim the (Message) which hath been sent to thee from thy Lord. If thou didst not, thou wouldst not have fulfilled and proclaimed His Mission. And Allāh will defend thee from men (who mean mischief)."³⁹⁴

Ibn Kathīr is here saying that Muḥammad was only concerned about appointing someone to follow him and take care of his family if he were killed before completing his mission. Therefore, Muḥammad's acceptance of 'Alī's support would have had no political or religious implications. Ibn Kathīr even takes this role away from the younger man by adding that God revealed Qur'ān 5:67 in order to assure Muḥammad that he had God's protection against his enemies, thus invalidating the need for a successor in case of his untimely demise.

³⁹²Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 1, 334.

³⁹³Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 1, 334.

³⁹⁴Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 1, 334. The remainder of the verse, 5:67, reads: "For Allāh guideth not those who reject Faith."

By refuting al-Ṭabarī's report with an accusation of deception and Shī'ī sympathies against one of the transmitters, and by adding a disclaimer to the other reports that he cites, even the report from Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, Ibn Kathīr appears to go out of his way to refute any source that would bolster 'Alī's immediate claim to the caliphate. And yet, even after he has called into question the authoritativeness of the *isnāds* of these reports, he adds an attack on the text itself. His interpretation of the meaning of Muḥammad's request for someone to support him precludes any possible politicization of 'Alī's role. His addition of the reason for the revelation of Qur'ān 5:67 seems to add Qur'ānic authority to his own personal viewpoint. By refuting reports containing the scene between Muḥammad and 'Alī after the former has delivered his message, Ibn Kathīr refutes part of the archetype itself. The story of Muḥammad's public preaching includes a report wherein we are permitted to see the reaction of the Meccans to his announcement, but Ibn Kathīr's attack on the end of the story relating the private aspect of the archetype would deny us this type of closure. Thus, it would appear that Ibn Kathīr's hatred of the Shī'ī movement was such that not only was he willing to express doubt about reports transmitted through al-Ṭabarī and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, but that he was willing to adjust the archetypal story of Muḥammad in his *sīra/ta'rikh* in order to deny that group the support this story appears to give. As we will see, he allows for a further adjustment to this part of the archetype in his *Tafsīr*.

Ibn Kathīr's Tafṣīr

As noted above, Ibn Kathīr refers his readers to his *tafsīr* of 26:214 in his *sīra/ta'rikh*, and it is in his explanation of this verse, and the others grouped with it, that we find his most extensive treatment of the publication of Muḥammad's mission and the miracle associated with it in his *Tafṣīr*.³⁹⁵ In this section, Ibn Kathīr groups 26:214 within his explanation of 26:213-220.³⁹⁶ He includes some twenty separate reports, which are preceded by an introduction that includes citations of several other Qur'ān verses.³⁹⁷ His introduction states:

The Most High says, commanding the worship of Him alone, He has no associate, and it is a real message that He will punish whoever associates (others) with Him. Then the Most High spoke, commanding His messenger to warn his closest kinsmen, that is to say those closest to him; however, he will not save anyone among them, except those who have faith in his great and mighty Lord. And He commanded him to lower his wing to he who follows him among the servants of God, the believers. And whoever renounces him, he whom God

³⁹⁵Ibn Kathīr, *Tafṣīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, vol. 3, 1363-1366.

³⁹⁶These verses read: "So call not on any other god with Allāh, or thou wilt be among those under the Penalty. And admonish thy nearest kinsmen, and lower thy wing to the Believers who follow thee. Then if they disobey thee, say: 'I am free (of responsibility) for what ye do!' And put thy trust on the Exalted in Might, the Merciful - who seeth thee standing forth (in prayer), and thy movements among those who prostrate themselves. For it is He who heareth and knoweth all things."

³⁹⁷These verses are: Qur'ān 36:6 ("In order that thou mayest admonish a people, whose fathers had received no admonition, and who therefore remained heedless (of the Signs of Allāh)."); 42:7 ("Thus have We sent by inspiration to thee an Arabic Qur'ān; that thou mayest warn the Mother of Cities and all around her - and warn (them) of the Day of Assembly, of which there is no doubt; (when) some will be in the Garden, and some in the Blazing Fire."); 6:51 ("Give this warning to those in whose (hearts) is the fear that they will be brought (to Judgement) before their Lord: Except for Him they will have no protector nor intercessor; that they may guard (against evil)."); 19:97 ("So have We made the (Qur'ān) easy in thine own tongue, that with it thou mayest give glad tidings to the righteous and warnings to people given to contention."); 6:19 ("Say: 'What thing is most weighty in evidence?' Say: 'Allāh is witness between me and you; this Qur'ān hath been revealed to me by inspiration. That I may warn you and all whom it reaches. Can ye possibly bear witness that besides Allāh there is another God?' Say: 'Nay! I cannot bear witness!' Say: 'But in truth He is the One God and I truly am innocent of (your blasphemy of) joining Others with him.'"); and 11:17 ("Can they be (like) those who accept a Clear (Sign) from their Lord, and whom a witness from Himself doth teach, as did the Book of Moses before it - a guide and a mercy? They believe therein; but those of the Sects that reject it - the Fire will be their promised meeting place. Be not then in doubt thereon: for it is the Truth from thy Lord: Yet many among men do not believe!"). As elsewhere, the number of reports here is subjective, since Ibn Kathīr also cites numerous instances where other authorities have repeated a report with a slight variation in its *isnād* and points out when these are included in authoritative *ḥadīth* compilations.

created, whoever it may be, so then he is free of responsibility for him. And regarding this, the Most High said: “So whoever renounces you, say: ‘I am free (of responsibility) from what you do.’” And this special warning does not exclude the people at large, rather it is unrivaled in its punishment.³⁹⁸

From there, he cites the Qur’ān verses mentioned above and moves on to a report found in Muslim’s *Ṣaḥīḥ*, which states, “By Him who holds my soul in His hands, no one of this community who hears (of) me, whether he be Jew or Ansārī, and does not then believe in me, will enter the fire.”³⁹⁹ This quote would appear to act as a thematic preamble for the reports that follow, indicating that for Ibn Kathīr the focus should be on Muḥammad’s role as warner and the punishment that awaits those who would disregard him or his mission.

The next six reports are much like the first reports in both works of *sīra/ta’rīkh*.⁴⁰⁰ They are relatively short, and simply mention that Muḥammad called out to particular groups or individuals among his fellow tribesmen and warned them of God’s impending judgment. Only one report, nearly identical to the first report in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*, provides the setting for the revelation of Qur’ān 111:1, also being the only report of this group that reveals what response Muḥammad received to his public preaching. It comes from Ibn Ḥanbal, originating with Ibn ‘Abbās, and reads:

When God, great and glorious, revealed: “And warn your nearest kinsmen,” the Prophet came (to) al-Ṣafā, then he climbed on it, and he cried out: “Beware this morning!” So the people gathered to him, some coming to him, and some sending a messenger, then the Messenger of God said: “O Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, O Banū Fahr, O Banū Lu’ayy, what would you think, if I informed you that horses [were coming] from the foot of this mountain, wanting to vie for you - would you believe me?” They said: “Yes.” He said: “Then truly I am a warner to you in the face of a terrible penalty.” Then Abū Lahab said: “May you perish

³⁹⁸Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 3, 1363.

³⁹⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰Ibid., vol. 3, 1363-4.

this day! You only called us for this?” And God revealed: “Perish the hand of the Father of Flame and Perish he!”⁴⁰¹

Three of the other reports relate this story to the revelation of Qur’ān 26:214, seeming to continue the theme of Ibn Kathīr’s *sīra/ta’rīkh*. The first of these is similar to the third report in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*, above. It, too, comes from Ibn Ḥanbal, originating with ‘Ā’isha, and states:

When it was revealed: “And warn your nearest kinsmen,” the Messenger of God rose and said: “O Fāṭima bt. Muḥammad, O Ṣafiya bt. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, O Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, I do not possess anything for you from God, ask me whatever you want from my wealth.”⁴⁰²

This is followed by the comment that it is unique in the publication of Muslim.⁴⁰³ The second report of this group, from Ibn Ḥanbal again, is similar to report two in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*:

When this verse was revealed: “And warn your nearest kinsmen,” the Messenger of God called Quraysh, the low and the high, and he said: “O community of Quraysh, save yourselves from Hellfire, O community of the Banū Ka’b, save yourselves from Hellfire, O community of the Banū Hāshim, save yourselves from Hellfire, O community of the Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, save yourselves from Hellfire, O Fāṭima bt. Muḥammad, save yourself from Hellfire, for truly I, by God, do not possess for you anything from God, except for mercy....”⁴⁰⁴

This report is followed by the comment:

Muslim and al-Tirmidhī transmitted it from a report by ‘Abd al-Malik b. ‘Umayr, and al-Tirmidhī said: “It is unique from this direction.” And al-Nasā’ī transmitted it incompletely from a report of Mūsā b. Ṭalḥa, and he does not mention Abū Hurayra in it.... And they published it in the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* from a report of al-Zuhūrī, on the authority of Sa‘īd b. al-Musayyab, and Abū Salama b. ‘Abd al-Raḥman, on the authority of Abū Hurayra.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰¹Ibid., vol. 3, 1363. Ibn Kathīr follows this report with the comment that “al-Bukhārī and Muslim and al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā’ī transmitted it... on the authority of al-A‘mash.”

⁴⁰²Ibid.

⁴⁰³Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵Ibid., vol. 3, 1363-4. Again, this appears to be an attempt at equating the authoritativeness of a report found in the *Musnad* to those in the Six Books.

The third report that links this event to the revelation of Qur'ān 26:214 also comes from

Ibn Ḥanbal and states:

When it was revealed, “And warn your nearest kinsmen,” the Messenger of God climbed the great boulders from the mountain on its stone heights, and he began to cry out: “O Banū ‘Abd Manāf, rather I am a warner, rather like me and like you is the man who saw the enemy, so he went to warn his people, returning to get ahead of them, then he began to cry out and to shout - Beware this morning!”⁴⁰⁶

Ibn Kathīr also adds comments to this report, stating that “Muslim and al-Nasā’ī transmitted it from a report of Sulaymān b. Ṭarkhān al-Taymī, on the authority of Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Abd al-Raḥman b. Sahl al-Nahadī, on the authority of Qubayṣa and Zuhayr b. ‘Amr al-Hilālī.”⁴⁰⁷

Of the remaining two reports in this group, neither attempts to connect the event of Muḥammad calling out to his fellow tribesmen to a Qur’ānic revelation. The first of the pair comes from Ibn Ḥanbal and includes Ibn Ishāq in its chain of authorities, and reads:

The Messenger of God said: “O Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, buy yourselves from God, O Ṣafiya, aunt of the Messenger of God, and O Fātima, daughter of the Messenger of God, buy yourselves from God, for truly I can be of no help for the two of you from God, ask what you want from my wealth.”⁴⁰⁸

The second reads:

And Abū Ya‘lā said: Suwayd b. Sa‘īd informed us, Ḍamām b. Ismā‘īl informed us, on the authority of Mūsā b. Waradān, on the authority of Abū Hurayra, on

⁴⁰⁶Ibid., vol. 3, 1364.

⁴⁰⁷Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸Ibid. This is followed by yet another comment by Ibn Kathīr, who relates that the same text can be found in other reports. He states: It is unique from this direction. And it is unique also on the authority of Mu‘āwiya, on the authority of Zā’ida, on the authority of Abū al-Zanād, on the authority of al-A‘raj, on the authority of Abū Hurayra, on the authority of the Prophet, the like of it. And it was transmitted also on the authority of Ḥasan, Ibn Lahī‘a informed us, on the authority of al-A‘raj, on the authority of Abū Hurayra, traceable in ascending order of traditionaries to the Prophet (*marfū‘ ān*).

the authority of the Prophet: “O Banū Qusayy, O Banū Hāshim, O Banū ‘Abd Manāf, I am the warner... and the appointed time.”⁴⁰⁹

Of these six reports, five are from Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal. This appears to be one of the many times that Ibn Kathīr attempts to equate reports from Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal with those found in the Six Books. He even points out which reports are unique to one of the Six Books, seeming to show that, even though some reports are only found in Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, the authors of the Six Books were also not above transmitting unique reports. The message of these reports appears to be the same as that found in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*: that Muḥammad announced his mission to certain tribes within Quraysh as well as to certain individuals. The reports vary as to whether or not this was in response to a Qur’ānic revelation.

It is with report eight that we arrive at the story of Muḥammad’s private announcement to his kinsmen and the scene between himself and ‘Alī, but Ibn Kathīr begins here with a report that seems to summarize those that follow and, like the report at the beginning of this section, serves to focus the reader on that element of the story that Ibn Kathīr deems most important. It comes from Ibn Ḥanbal and originates with ‘Alī, and states:

When this verse was revealed, “And warn your nearest kinsmen,” the Prophet gathered from among the people of his house, and thirty assembled, then they ate and they drank. And he said to them: “Who will safeguard for me my religion and my promises, and be with me in Paradise, and be my successor among my people?” ...Then ‘Alī said: “I (will).”⁴¹⁰

While this report contains themes similar to those in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*, there are also important differences. In this report, ‘Alī simply summarizes events without any great

⁴⁰⁹Ibid.

⁴¹⁰Ibid.

detail. The number of men in attendance is thirty, whereas in other reports it is forty. There is no mention of the miraculous multiplication of food and drink, nor is there any refutation by Muḥammad's kinsmen. Thus, this report is unique in Ibn Kathīr's treatment of this event, since it seems to allow for a mundane element in Muḥammad's private meeting, and is the only report in any of our sources to do so. While Muḥammad is still shown as obeying a command of God, he performs no miracle in the process.

The ninth report, also from Ibn Ḥanbal and originating with 'Alī, includes the miracle story, but not the Qur'ānic motive, and in this section, Muḥammad himself calls attention to the supernatural event:

The Messenger of God gathered - or the Messenger of God called - the Banū 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib..., then he arranged a spread of food for them, so they ate until they were satisfied, and the food remained as it was, as if they had not touched it..., so they drank until they were satisfied, and the drink remained as if they had not touched it, or had not drunk. And he said: "O Banū 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, truly I have been sent to you in particular, and to the people in general, and you have seen from this sign what you have seen. So which of you will pay homage to me because of that, being my brother and my companion?" No one rose to him. So, I ['Alī] rose to him, although I was the youngest of the group. Then he said: "Sit," until the third time, he hit his hand on my hand.⁴¹¹

Muḥammad's message in this report seems to take a back seat to the miracle itself. This is nearly identical to the report in al-Ṭabarī's *sīra/ta'riḫh*, but without the introductory part that gives the setting in which it was related, thus omitting any potential interpretation that would seem to support 'Alid claims to superiority over the 'Abbāsids.

The tenth report is taken from al-Bayhaqī's *Dalā'il al-nubūwa*.⁴¹² This report is very similar to that found in both Ibn Kathīr's and al-Ṭabarī's *sīra/ta'riḫh* as well as al-

⁴¹¹Ibid.

⁴¹²Ibid., vol. 3, 1364-5.

Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*. Muḥammad describes to 'Alī his hesitation to carry out God's command and Gabriel's threat of punishment, which acts as the impetus for the report.⁴¹³ This report is different, however, in that Muḥammad must perform the miracle of the food and drink not twice, but three times before he has a chance to deliver his message to his kinsmen. As in the other works, Abū Lahab interrupts him, informs the other men that they have been bewitched, and they disperse. After the third miraculous division of the food and drink, Abū Lahab remains silent, and Muḥammad states "O Banū 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, truly I, by God, do not know a young man among the Arabs who brought his people better than what I have brought you, truly I have brought you the best of this world and the Hereafter."⁴¹⁴ The report ends here and Ibn Kathīr states that Aḥmad b. 'Abd al-Jabbār provides an alternate *isnād*, one in which Ibn Ishāq's mystery source is revealed as 'Abd al-Ghaffār b. al-Qāsim Abū Maryam, the same reporter he so completely discredits in his *sīra/ta'riḫ*.⁴¹⁵ Ibn Kathīr continues by relating a report from al-Ṭabarī, the same one that he relates in his *sīra/ta'riḫ*, that includes 'Abd al-Ghaffār as a source.⁴¹⁶ This report adds to the end of Muḥammad's speech, and quotes Muḥammad as saying, "And He commanded me to invite you to it, so which among you will aid me in this matter in addition to being my brother and so on and so on?"⁴¹⁷ None of the men responds, so 'Alī volunteers, although he is the youngest and least physically fit among them. Muḥammad accepts him and announces to the group that 'Alī is his brother and that they should listen to him and obey. As in the previous reports, this is

⁴¹³Ibid., vol. 3, p. 1364.

⁴¹⁴Ibid., vol. 3, p. 1365.

⁴¹⁵Ibid.

⁴¹⁶Ibid.

⁴¹⁷Ibid.

unacceptable to the group and they leave. At this point, Ibn Kathīr adds comments identical to those found in his *sīra/ta'rikh* regarding the untrustworthiness of 'Abd al-Ghaffār b. al-Qāsim Abū Maryam as a *ḥadīth* reporter, and again refers to him as “a liar and a Shī'ī.”⁴¹⁸

Ibn Kathīr follows this with the last of the reports that deal with the publication of Muḥammad's mission in his *tafsīr* of these verses, and it repeats the lengthy tale of Muḥammad, 'Alī, and the multiplication of the food and drink.⁴¹⁹ In this version there are some forty men present at the meeting, but they are listed as belonging to the Banū Hāshim, as opposed to the Banū 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, as mentioned in the other reports. Again, Muḥammad must perform the miracle three times on three separate occasions before he is able to deliver his message and must actually take the men by surprise in order to do so. Abū Lahab is completely absent from this report, and it is the men as a collective whole who state that they have been bewitched. This is the only report in all of our sources with an indication that more people than just 'Alī and Abū Lahab witnessed the miraculous division of the food and drink. This report is similar to others in that Muḥammad does not mention his mission for God, but instead asks: “Which of you will complete for me my debts and be my successor among my people?”⁴²⁰ The report also includes 'Alī's comments about al-'Abbās and the older man's concern for his property, as well as his own perceived low status among those assembled. The report ends here, with no indication whether Muḥammad accepted 'Alī's offer. Ibn Kathīr's comments are the same as those found in the *sīra/ta'rikh* wherein he argues that

⁴¹⁸Ibid.

⁴¹⁹Ibid.

⁴²⁰Ibid., vol. 3, 1365.

what Muḥammad really meant was that if he were killed in the course of his mission, he would need someone to look after his affairs. Here again, he dismisses the religio-political implications of the report and takes the extra step of arguing that the revelation of Qur'ān 5:67 further negates the need for 'Alī's promise of assistance by assuring Muḥammad that God will protect him from his enemies.

Despite his acerbic reaction to the above reports, Ibn Kathīr is careful to point out here that he has an immense amount of respect for 'Alī. Indeed, he states that “there was none among the Banū Hāshim at that time who was more faithful... to the Messenger of God than 'Alī...”⁴²¹ However, having said that, he continues by citing a report of a much later incident wherein Muḥammad is quoted as saying: “The most devout of people in this world are the prophets; those who oppose them most strongly are their relatives.”⁴²² Ibn Kathīr here repeats his citation of the verses from 26:214-216 and then cites 26:217, wherein Muḥammad is told to put his trust in God. Our author then interprets this as meaning that God fulfils all of the roles that Muḥammad had asked of 'Alī, stating: “So truly He is your helper and your guardian, and your protector and your success...”⁴²³ Thus, Ibn Kathīr has apparently successfully refuted the previous reports by questioning their chains of authorities, putting his own spin on the interpretation of the text, and then providing Qur'ānic support for his arguments.

The overall image of the archetype of Muḥammad's publication of God's message thus appears to have been rather seriously challenged by Ibn Kathīr's *tafsīr* of this verse. Not only does he allow for a public announcement that has no Qur'ānic

⁴²¹Ibid.

⁴²²Ibid., vol. 3, 1366.

⁴²³Ibid.

component, he also allows for a private announcement that has no element of the supernatural. He includes the report found in al-Ṭabarī, but without the politico-religious implications. And he cuts short the archetype in a report wherein Muḥammad does perform his miracle, but no response is given to his request for support, ending the story before the involvement of ‘Alī. Ibn Kathīr thus appears to go out of his way, even to the point of changing the archetype itself, to deny the Shī‘a any use of reports that seem to support their cause.

But what of the other verses? Even though Ibn Kathīr himself cites his *tafsīr* of 26:214 as the most comprehensive treatment of this issue, could his exegesis of the other verses mentioned in his *sīra/ta’rīkh* provide a more complete insight to his treatment of this event? It seems most reasonable to begin with Qur’ān 43:44, since this is the verse cited after 26:214. The explanation of this verse is embedded within that of Qur’ān 43:36-45, which states:

If anyone withdraws himself from remembrance of (Allāh) Most Gracious, We appoint for him an evil one, to be an intimate companion to him. Such (evil ones) really hinder them from the Path, but they think that they are being guided aright! At length, when (such a one) comes to Us, he says (To his evil companion): “Would that between me and thee were the distance of East and West!” Ah! Evil is the companion (indeed)! When ye have done wrong, it will avail you nothing, that day, that ye shall be partners in punishment! Canst thou then make the deaf to hear, or give direction to the blind or to such as (wander) in manifest error? Even if We take thee away, We shall be sure to exact retribution from them. So hold thou fast to the Revelation sent down to thee: verily thou art on a Straight Way. *The (Qur’ān) is indeed the Message, for thee and for thy people; and soon shall ye (all) be brought to account.* And question thou our messengers whom We sent before thee; did We appoint any deities other than (Allāh) Most Gracious, to be worshiped?⁴²⁴

⁴²⁴Qur’ān 43:44 is italicized.

The exegesis of these verses contains six reports, none of which mentions the publication of Muḥammad's mission. The author's commentary, located between the fourth and fifth report, cites Qur'ān 26:214 along with other verses, but still does not specifically mention the event studied here. Instead, these verses are discussed for their religious and lexicographical meanings, but none of these appear to be associated with the event at hand beyond the overarching theme of calling mankind to the belief in God alone.

The next verse mentioned by Ibn Kathīr is Qur'ān 28:85. This verse is joined with verses 86-88 in the *Tafsīr*, and states:

Verily He Who ordained the Qur'ān for thee, will bring thee back to the Place of Return. Say: "My Lord knows best who it is that brings true guidance. And who is in manifest error." And thou hadst not expected that the Book would be sent to thee except as a Mercy from thy Lord: Therefore lend not thou support in any way to those who reject (Allāh's message). And let nothing keep thee back from the Signs of Allāh after they have been revealed to thee: and invite (men) to thy Lord, and be not of the company of those who join gods with Allāh. And call not, besides Allāh, on another god. There is no god but He. Everything (that exists) will perish except His own Face. To Him belongs the Command, and to Him will ye (all) be brought back.

Here there is no element of the miraculous, nor any reports that describe the publication of Muḥammad's mission, but Ibn Kathīr does reference the order given to publicize the message of God in his introductory comments to this verse.grouping.⁴²⁵ He states:

The Most High commands His Messenger in the publication of the message and the public reading of the Qur'ān to the people, and (it is) a real message... in that He will bring him back to a Place of Return, and it is the Day of Judgement. He asks him whether he observed it among the burdens of prophethood. And to this the Most High said: "Verily He Who ordained the Qur'ān for thee, will bring thee back to the Place of Return," which is: He imposed upon you the conveying

⁴²⁵Ibid., vol. 3, 1409-1410.

of it to the people. “He will bring thee back to the Place of Return” which is: to the Day of Judgement....⁴²⁶

He follows this with a number of reports that give varying explanations for the Place of Return. Some of them agree with his assessment, that it refers to the Day of Judgment, while others claim that the Place is Mecca.⁴²⁷ Ibn Kathīr then goes on to discuss the variant meanings of some of the other verses in this grouping, including the verse that commands Muḥammad to “never be a supporter of the unbelievers.”⁴²⁸ He does not, however, list any reports that detail how or even if Muḥammad obeyed this command. Thus, Ibn Kathīr, at no point in his explanation of these verses, relates a historical context for either Muḥammad’s public or private announcement of his mission.

The last verse grouping mentioned in the introductory section of the publication story in his *sīra/ta’rīkh* is Qur’ān 15:92-3. These verses are embedded within his exegesis of Qur’ān 15:89-93.⁴²⁹ They read:

And say: “I am indeed he that warneth openly and without ambiguity” - (Of just such wrath) as We sent down on those who divided (Scripture into arbitrary parts) - (So also on such) as have made the Qur’ān into shreds (as they please). Therefore, by thy Lord, We will, of a surety, call them to account, For all their deeds.

His *tafsīr* of these verses contains eighteen reports, as well as an introductory section in which he indirectly connects these verses to the publication of Muḥammad’s mission.⁴³⁰

He states: “The Most High commands His Prophet to say to the people: ‘I am indeed he that warneth openly....’”⁴³¹ Nowhere in his treatment of these verses does he give the

⁴²⁶Ibid., vol. 3, 1409.

⁴²⁷Ibid.

⁴²⁸Ibid., vol. 3, 1410.

⁴²⁹Ibid., vol. 2, 1022-3.

⁴³⁰Ibid., vol. 2, 1022.

⁴³¹Ibid.

historical context of either Muḥammad's public or private announcement. He does, however, relate a report in which Muḥammad uses a parable to compare himself and his mission to the tale of a man who warns his people of the coming of an invading army, and this is the closest connection we see to the other reports cited elsewhere that deal with Muḥammad's public announcement to his fellow tribesmen. The report states:

And in the *Ṣaḥīḥayn*, on the authority of Abū Mūsā, on the authority of the Prophet, who said: "Rather like me and like what God sent me with compares (to) a man (who) came to his people, then he said: 'O People, truly I saw the army with my eyes, and truly I am the... warner, so (save yourselves)!' So then a (number) of his group obeyed, and they set out at nightfall and got underway at their leisure, and so they were saved. But a number of them accused him of lying, and so they woke in the morning in their places. Then the army came in the morning, and destroyed them and annihilated them. And that is similar to who obeys me and follows what I bring him, and it is similar to who disobeys me and disbelieves what I bring him from the truth."⁴³²

This explanation is reminiscent of the reports cited previously wherein Muḥammad asks those assembled if he were to warn them of an impending attack, would they believe him? This report leaves out the recitation of part of Qur'ān 34:46 and the reaction of Abū Lahab, which leads into the revelation of 111:1, but it does give a more detailed account of Muḥammad's warning itself. The remainder of the exegesis of these verses is not tied in any way to the initial publication of Muḥammad's mission, and deals with the meanings of different parts of the verses, as well as commentary by Ibn Kathīr as to which reports are authoritative and which are not.

But what about Qur'ān 15:94, which al-Ṭabarī cites in his *sīra/ta'rīkh*? In his *tafsīr* of this verse, Ibn Kathīr joins it to Qur'ān 15:95-99:

Therefore expound openly what thou art commanded. And turn away from those who join false gods with Allāh. For sufficient are We unto thee against those

⁴³²Ibid.

who scoff - Those who adopt, with Allāh, another god: but soon will they come to know. We do indeed know how thy heart is distressed at what they say. But celebrate the praises of thy Lord, and be of those who prostrate themselves in adoration. And serve thy Lord until there come unto thee the Hour that is Certain.

In only one of the sixteen reports related does Ibn Kathīr tie the meaning of these verses, especially 15:94, to the publication of Muḥammad's mission. It is a brief report that states:

And Abū 'Ubayda said, on the authority of 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd, that the Prophet did not cease concealing (his mission) until it was revealed "Therefore expound openly what thou art commanded." So he went out, he and his Companions.⁴³³

There is no historical context or detailed account in this report, but it does tie the verse to the event at hand. Thematically the majority of the exegesis of these verses deals with the trouble Muḥammad experienced with the polytheists as a result of his publication of God's message. Thus, only the first verse of this grouping is linked to the publication, while the rest deal with the response Muḥammad received. The *tafsīr* of this verse grouping does contain an element of the supernatural, but it is from a different historical context and is not the same miraculous act as that which takes place during Muḥammad's private meeting with his kinsmen.

Ibn Kathīr relates three reports in which Muḥammad gets revenge upon certain men who had tormented him.⁴³⁴ The most detailed report comes from Ibn Ishāq, and Muḥammad is shown using the power given to him by God to punish his enemies.⁴³⁵

God sends the archangel Gabriel to stand with Muḥammad and punish those individuals

⁴³³Ibid., vol. 2, 1023.

⁴³⁴Ibid., vol. 2, 1023-4.

⁴³⁵Ibid., vol. 2, 1024.

who had mocked him. Every time Gabriel, or Muḥammad, the text is unclear as to who is performing these acts, points to a part of a man's body, his death results almost immediately from an affliction in that part. Ibn Kathīr interprets the meaning of this story as a fulfillment of God's promise to protect Muḥammad from those who refuse to believe.⁴³⁶ Although he does not tie this event to the private announcement made by Muḥammad to his family members, the theme of God's protection is found in relation to Ibn Kathīr's citation of Qur'ān 5:67 in the *sīra/ta'rikh* as the reason why Muḥammad no longer needed 'Alī to act in his stead in case he was killed in the course of carrying out his mission. The supernatural aid given to Muḥammad by God through Gabriel stands as a concrete example of the power of God's protection.⁴³⁷

There are three verse citations used by Ibn Kathīr that are found either in the reports he relates or in his comments that are not found in his introduction to this section in his *sīra/ta'rikh*. The first is 34:46, which is treated alone in the *tafsīr*, and states:

Say: "I do admonish you on one point: that ye do stand up before Allāh - (it may be) in pairs, or (it may be) singly - and reflect (within yourselves): Your Companion is not possessed: He is no less than a warner to you, in the face of a terrible penalty."

Ibn Kathīr transmits only three reports for this verse, with two of them relating in some way to the story of Muḥammad's public announcement to the Quraysh. The first of these gives the historical context of the announcement, but not the Qur'ānic command. It comes from al-Bukhārī and originates with Ibn 'Abbās, and reads:

⁴³⁶Ibid.

⁴³⁷The theme of God's protection is discussed again in Chapter Five of the present work in relation to an assassination attempt during the Medinan period.

The Prophet climbed al-Ṣafā that day, and he said: “Beware this morning!” So the Quraysh gathered to him, then they said: “What do you want?” He said: “What would you think, if I told you that the enemy (was coming) this morning and this evening - would you believe me?” They said: “Yes.” He said: “Then truly I am a warner to you in the face of a terrible penalty.” Abū Lahab said: “May you perish! Is this what you gathered us for?” So God revealed: “Perish the hands of the Father of Flame and Perish he!”⁴³⁸

This report is obviously similar to those found in relation to 26:214 and details the archetypal story of Muḥammad’s public announcement. The next report relates Muḥammad’s parable of the man who tried to warn his people of an approaching enemy, but unlike the previous mention of this story, it ends not with the reaction of the people and their reward or punishment, but simply that the warning was delivered.⁴³⁹ There is no miracle story here, nor is there any differentiation between Muḥammad’s public and private announcement.

The *tafsīr* of the next group of verses, 111:1-5, also contains an element of the supernatural, but again it is in a different context than the miracle story in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*. The verses make up the whole of the sūra and read:

Perish the hands of the Father of Flame! Perish he! No profit to him from all his wealth, and all his gains! Burnt soon will he be in a fire of blazing Flame! His wife shall carry the (crackling) wood - as fuel! - a twisted rope of palm leaf fibre round her (own) neck!

Ibn Kathīr’s exegesis of this sūra begins with an explanation for the occasion for its revelation. He does this through a report from al-Bukhārī that originates with Ibn ‘Abbās and is reminiscent of those in his *sīra/ta’rīkh*:

⁴³⁸Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 34:46, <<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=7&tSoraNo=34&tAyahNo=46&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0>> (July 2006).

⁴³⁹Ibid.

The Prophet went out to the valley, then he climbed the mountain, and cried out, “Beware this morning!” So Quraysh gathered to him, and he said: “What would you think, if I told you that the enemy (was coming), this morning and this evening - would you believe me?” They said: “Yes.” He said: “Then truly I am a warner to you in the face of a terrible penalty.” Then Abū Lahab said: “You gathered us for this? May you perish!” Then God revealed: “Perish the hand of the Father of Flame and Perish he!” to its end.⁴⁴⁰

Yet again, this report lacks the Qur’ānic impetus for Muḥammad’s announcement, but includes most of the other details of the story. The rest of the exegesis of this sūra focuses on the meanings of the remaining verses and it is here that we find an element of the supernatural that is not associated with the publication of Muḥammad’s mission.

The miracle story is included in Ibn Kathīr’s discussion of the role of Abū Lahab’s wife, Umm Jamīl. He admits that she was one of the most important women among the Quraysh at that time and that “her name was ‘Arwa bt. Ḥarb b. Umayya and she was the sister of Abū Sufyān.”⁴⁴¹ Since she supported her husband in his activities against Muḥammad, her punishment would be to support the fire that would burn him by carrying wood to feed the flames. After citing several reports that discuss the composition of the rope said to be around her neck, Ibn Kathīr adds two reports that describe a confrontation between Umm Jamīl and Muḥammad.⁴⁴² The first report states:

When it was revealed, “Perish the hand of the Father of Flame!” the one-eyed Umm Jamīl bt. Ḥarb approached [Muḥammad].... And the Messenger of God was sitting in the *masjid* and with him was Abū Bakr, then when Abū Bakr saw her, he said: “O Messenger of God, she is approaching and I am afraid for you if she sees you.” But the Messenger of God said: “Truly she will not see me.” And he recited a Qur’ān, taking refuge in it. Just as the Most High said: “When thou dost recite the Qur’ān, We put, between thee and those who believe not in the Hereafter, a veil invisible.” So she approached until she came to a stop at Abū Bakr, and she did not see the Messenger of God. Then she said: “O Abū Bakr,

⁴⁴⁰Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 4, 2088.

⁴⁴¹Ibid.

⁴⁴²Ibid., vol. 4, 2089.

truly I have been informed that your companion has ridiculed me.” He said: “He did not... ridicule you.” Then she left, saying: “The Quraysh know that I am the daughter of their chief.”⁴⁴³

So, here again Ibn Kathīr has included a report of supernatural powers being given to Muḥammad by God. No mention is made of the report describing Muḥammad’s meeting with his kinsmen and the multiplication of food and drink. Also, unlike other reports of supernatural events, this report appears to read like an instruction manual for folk magic based on reciting Qur’ānic verses. The believer is told in this verse that he will be “veiled” against evil, and that all he has to do is recite the Qur’ān.⁴⁴⁴

The second report is slightly different: Abū Bakr sees Umm Jamīl coming and encourages Muḥammad to run away in order to avoid being physically harmed by her. Muḥammad refuses, stating: “Truly He will come between me and between her.”⁴⁴⁵ Here there is no recitation of the Qur’ān nor mention of 17:45. Again, Umm Jamīl holds her conversation with Abū Bakr, being unable to see Muḥammad sitting right in front of her. After she is gone, “Abū Bakr said: ‘Did she not see?’ He [Muḥammad] said: ‘No, an angel did not cease hiding me until she left.’”⁴⁴⁶

By including the first report, Ibn Kathīr appears to be giving some of the power God granted to Muḥammad to all believing Muslims. This is not as unusual as it may appear at first, since, according to Tewfic Canaan, it was considered quite appropriate

⁴⁴³Ibid. The verse cited in this report is 17:45.

⁴⁴⁴Ibid. The report does not indicate just how much of the Qur’ān is meant here, but considering the amount of time involved between Abū Bakr’s warning and Umm Jamīl’s approach it would have to be a fairly short recitation.

⁴⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁴⁶Ibid.

by some Muslim scholars to use verses of the Qur'ān as inscriptions on magical amulets, as incantations for protection, and as recitations for healing.⁴⁴⁷ There are even reports that Qur'āns were washed and that the water was then given as a remedy to heal sickness.⁴⁴⁸ Whether Ibn Kathīr tacitly approved of this or not is uncertain, but his inclusion of this report without negative comment would appear to indicate that he, too, believed in the protective power of the Qur'ān. This assertion is further supported by his own statement in the introductory section of his larger *ta'riḫ* work about why he has included the life of Muḥammad. He states, "So we mentioned his life just as is necessary, so hearts and desires are healed, and disease goes away from the sick."⁴⁴⁹ But Ibn Kathīr's inclusion of the second report seems to take away this possibility by claiming that it was not a recitation of the Qur'ān that hid Muḥammad, but was, instead, an angel who protected him.

But what of the last verse mentioned by Ibn Kathīr in his *sīra/ta'riḫ* regarding Muḥammad's announcement of his mission? Unlike most of the previous verses examined, Ibn Kathīr treats Qur'ān 5:67 as a single unit. It states:

O Messenger! Proclaim the (message) which hath been sent to thee from thy Lord. If thou didst not, thou wouldst not have fulfilled and proclaimed His mission. And Allāh will defend thee from men (who mean mischief). For Allāh guideth not those who reject Faith.

Here Ibn Kathīr brings full circle the story of the beginning of Muḥammad's public preaching by using this verse to report a story connected to its completion. He cites reports from al-Bukhārī and Muslim regarding Muḥammad's Farewell Pilgrimage in

⁴⁴⁷Tewfic Canaan, "The Decipherment of Arabic Talismans," *Magic and Divination in Early Islam*, Emilie Savage-Smith, ed. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 126-9.

⁴⁴⁸Ibid., 127.

⁴⁴⁹Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 1, 4.

which he relates that all present responded to Muḥammad's speech, agreeing that he had carried out his mission.⁴⁵⁰ Thus vindicated by his own followers, Muḥammad was confirmed as having completed his preaching of the message sent to him by God.

Ibn Kathīr moves on from this to explain the last part of the verse as a promise from God to protect Muḥammad against his enemies. He states:

And His speech: "And Allāh will defend thee from men (who mean mischief)," which means: "...I am your guardian and your helper and your supporter against your enemies and you will be victorious over them...." And the prophet was already, before this verse was revealed, being guarded.⁴⁵¹

He follows this statement with a report that relates that Muḥammad was concerned for his safety and prayed to God for protection. It comes from Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal and originates with 'Ā'isha, and states:

'Ā'isha used to relate that the Messenger of God was sleepless at night while she was at his side. She said: "What is the matter with you, O Messenger of God?" He said: "There is no pious man from my Companions who will guard me this evening." She said: "Then between us I heard the sound of a prayer, so he said: 'Who is this?' Then he [the man] said: 'I am Sa'd b. Mālik.' Then he [Muḥammad] said: 'What brings you?' He replied: 'I came to guard you, O Messenger of God.'" So she said: "Then I heard the Messenger of God snoring in his sleep."⁴⁵²

Ibn Kathīr comments here that 'Ā'isha's presence meant that the incident had to have taken place after the second year in Medina, during which time Muḥammad consummated his marriage to 'Ā'isha.⁴⁵³ The reports that come after this contradict those already related by stating that Muḥammad had been under guard until the verse was revealed. At this point, Muḥammad informs his guards that God will protect him,

⁴⁵⁰Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, 611.

⁴⁵¹Ibid., vol. 2, 612.

⁴⁵²Ibid.

⁴⁵³Ibid.

and that he no longer needs their protection. The first of these reports is again from ‘Ā’isha, and it states:

The Prophet used to be guarded until this verse was revealed: “And Allāh will defend thee from men (who mean mischief).” The Prophet stuck his head out from the tent and he said: “O you people, leave, for God will protect us.”⁴⁵⁴

Here Ibn Kathīr adds his own comments to this turn of events, at least as they are related in this report, stating:

Thus Ibn Jarīr transmitted it from the path of Ismā‘īl b. ‘Alīya and Ibn Mardūya from the path of Wahīb, both of them from al-Jarīrī, on the authority of ‘Abd Allāh b. Shaqīq, (it is) incompletely transmitted, and he transmitted this incompletely on the authority of Sa‘īd b. Jubayr and Muḥammad b. Ka‘b al-Qarāfī, and Ibn Jarīr and al-Rabī‘ b. Anas transmitted (it).⁴⁵⁵

Thus it would appear that Ibn Kathīr is again trying to undermine a report related by al-Ṭabarī. This report does not seem to have any intrinsic value in and of itself, but when read in relation to Ibn Kathīr’s treatment of the reports relating the publication of Muḥammad’s mission, the miracle of the food and drink, Muḥammad’s reported designation of ‘Alī as his successor in his *sīra/ta’rīkh*, and his *tafsīr* of 26:214, his comments fall into the familiar pattern of doing away with the reliability of al-Ṭabarī as a traditionalist, at least as far as certain reports are concerned, in order to avoid the use of such reports by the Shī‘a. This does not mean, however, that Ibn Kathīr disagrees with this interpretation of events, and he goes on to relate five reports that agree, at least in their basic text, with the one above.⁴⁵⁶ They all relate that Muḥammad was being guarded, although the identity of his guard varies, until the verse was revealed,

⁴⁵⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶Ibid.

and that after this occurred, Muḥammad gave up his human guard, preferring divine protection.⁴⁵⁷

Again, in Ibn Kathīr's *tafsīr* of this verse, our author relates another story with a supernatural element that is not related to the miraculous division of food and drink, nor to the publication of Muḥammad's mission. As in his explanation of 15:94, he provides a concrete example of God's protection of Muḥammad. This time, there is no visit from Gabriel, but there instead appears to be direct interference from God. Ibn Kathīr relates four reports that describe a scene in which someone either attempts or threatens to kill Muḥammad. The first is from al-Ṭabarī, and also appears in the earlier writer's *tafsīr* of this verse. It states:

Abū Ja'far b. Jarīr said: al-Ḥārith informed us, 'Abd al-'Azīz informed us, Abū Ma'shar informed us, on the authority of Muḥammad b. Ka'b al-Qaraṭī and others, they said: "The Messenger of God used to... prefer for him (and) his Companions shady trees. So he was speaking under them. A bedouin came to him, and pulled out his sword. Then he said: 'Who will protect you from me?' So he [Muḥammad] said: 'God.' Then the hand of the bedouin shuddered, and he dropped the sword. Then he hit the tree with his head until his brains scattered out. Then God revealed: 'And Allāh will defend thee from men (who mean mischief).'"⁴⁵⁸

None of the other three reports include the death of the would-be assassin, but they are thematically linked in that someone either voices a desire to kill Muḥammad, or actually has a weapon in hand, but is compelled to desist in his activities. The unifying theme of these stories is Muḥammad's insistence that God will protect him. Again, this can be

⁴⁵⁷Ibid., vol. 2, 612-3. Some of the reports identify al-'Abbās as the protector, while others name Abū Ṭālib. Ibn Kathīr points out that Abū Ṭālib could not have been protecting Muḥammad when this verse was revealed, since the verse is Medinan, and Abū Ṭālib died in Mecca before the Hijra. He does make an attempt at compromise, however, by stating that Muḥammad was being protected by his uncle in Mecca, and that the job was then taken over by the Anṣār in Medina until the verse was revealed.

⁴⁵⁸Ibid., vol. 2, 613.

used as proof by Ibn Kathīr that Muḥammad did not need ‘Alī to succeed him, because God would make sure Muḥammad was not killed by his enemies. However, at no point in his relation of these stories does he tie their meaning to his comments regarding the scene between Muḥammad and ‘Alī at his private meeting with his kinsmen. Thus, there is no direct connection made here by our author, but the inference is certainly present nonetheless.

In the *sīra/ta’rīkh*, Ibn Kathīr cites this verse as an example of why Muḥammad would not need ‘Alī’s support as executor of his estate. Since God would protect Muḥammad, ‘Alī was no longer needed. He repeats this assertion in his *tafsīr* of Qur’ān 26:214. However, in his *tafsīr* of Qur’ān 5:67, this verse is shown as being revealed in Medina, not Mecca, since ‘Ā’isha relates the story as an eye-witness after her marriage to Muḥammad. Thus, this verse could not be connected to the events surrounding the initial publication of Muḥammad’s message.⁴⁵⁹ Also, at no point in his exegesis of Qur’ān 5:67 does Ibn Kathīr discuss Muḥammad’s publication of his mission, nor his private meeting with his kin. Therefore, Ibn Kathīr’s use of this verse in his *sīra/ta’rīkh* is out of context related to his use of it in his *tafsīr*.

Ibn Kathīr’s overall portrait of Muḥammad’s publication of his mission in his work of *tafsīr* would seem to indicate that the archetype of the public announcement made by the Prophet was of significantly more importance, as it was in al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr*. This is indicated by the fact that he relates the story, or certain aspects of it, in

⁴⁵⁹It is possible, however, that Ibn Kathīr simply meant that ‘Alī’s support was no longer needed after this verse was revealed. This would allow him to have spent a certain amount of time as executor of Muḥammad’s estate, but that he would not have held this position at the time of the Prophet’s death in 11/632, thus negating later Shī‘ī claims. However, if this is what Ibn Kathīr intended by his citation of this verse, he probably would have made this point clear in his comments on the related reports.

his exegesis of roughly five of the seven verse groupings cited in connection with this event in his *sīra/ta'rikh*. Reports depicting the private meeting between Muḥammad and his family members are only related in one verse grouping, Qur'ān 26:213-220, and these reports are refuted absolutely by Ibn Kathīr. The only exception to this refutation are those reports that do not indicate that Muḥammad accepted 'Alī as his successor and the one report that left out the miracle story entirely. Whereas half of the reports listed in his *sīra/ta'rikh* deal with the archetype of the private meeting between Muḥammad and his family, only a fraction of those in his *tafsīr* cover the same event. This does not mean, however, that the element of the supernatural is only found in relation to these reports. In his *tafsīr* of these verse groupings, Ibn Kathīr relates five separate supernatural events: the miraculous division of food and drink, the death-curse Muḥammad and Gabriel placed on those who mistreated the Prophet, his invisibility from Umm Jamīl after reciting some of the Qur'ān, the appearance of the guard to protect him in immediate response to his prayer, and the protection he receives against assassination attempts. This would seem to indicate that, while the miracle story of the food and drink had taken on a completely unacceptable Shī'ī tone, the role of the miraculous in the life of Muḥammad was still seen by Ibn Kathīr as a vital part of the story as a whole. His inclusion of the report of Muḥammad's invisibility would also seem to indicate contemporary belief regarding the power of the Qur'ān to protect those who truly believe.

The archetype of Muḥammad's publication of his mission appears to have been changed rather drastically by both authors, but only in a small percentage of their

reports on this event. Al-Ṭabarī, in his *sīra/ta'riḫ*, appears to focus more on the public announcement and allows for reports that do not tie it to a revelation of the Qur'ān. His reports on the private meeting, however, reveal that he was willing to add an overtly political report that appears to support an 'Alid interpretation of the archetype. His *tafsīr* of the verses quoted in his account also appears to change the archetype somewhat. He allows reports that show Muḥammad calling to individuals as well as clans, and these are the reports as well that fail to mention any reaction caused by his announcement. Some of his *tafsīr* reports allow for alternate occasions of revelation, as is the case in sūra 111. For the private meeting, he does not include the political version of the miracle of food and drink, but instead appears to allow the archetype to stand on its own for this incident. Ibn Kathīr, on the other hand, is not as subtle as al-Ṭabarī, and overtly challenges the archetype of the private meeting, while appearing to mix reports found in both al-Ṭabarī's *sīra/ta'riḫ* and *tafsīr*. Whereas al-Ṭabarī limited the reports of the public preaching in his *sīra/ta'riḫ* to those wherein Muḥammad called out to entire clans, Ibn Kathīr includes in this genre reports that mix his call of clans and individuals. It is the archetype of the private meeting with the miracle of the food and drink that Ibn Kathīr takes to task, even casting doubt on a report by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal in the process. It does not appear to be the miracle story itself that causes him so much trouble, rather, it is the last part of the story that relates Muḥammad's apparent acceptance of 'Alī as his successor. This is completely unacceptable to Ibn Kathīr and his work takes on a vitriolic tone as he attacks the report's *isnād*, its meaning, and even supplies a verse of the Qur'ān that he claims refutes it. Thus, the archetype of

Muhammad for this event is set aside or even attacked for the personal and political reasons of our later author. His repugnance for this report is carried over into his *Tafsīr* as are his comments regarding its authoritativeness, or rather lack thereof. He even goes so far as to include a report that leaves out the miracle altogether. Yet again, it is the public aspect of Muhammad's preaching that receives the most attention in this genre and here, too, the archetype is allowed to remain. Despite changes made by both authors in both genres, the basics of the story persist for the public archetype. It is the private archetype that seems to be the most controversial, and each author takes steps to put forth what may be his own version of events.

Chapter Five
The Archetype of Muḥammad in the Medinan Period:
Clairvoyance, the Power of Prayer, and Authorial Opinion

The move from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD signals a pivotal moment in the life of Muḥammad. By the time of his death, some ten years later, his transformation was complete. No longer was he the orphan, struggling for material success, nor was he the persecuted prophet, rejected by his own people. Rather, he had achieved the fulfillment of both his mundane and supernatural archetypes. As his worldly success grew, so, too, did his mastery over the forces of the supernatural. This period of his life contains, by far, the most numerous reports of miraculous events, and the one type of incident that outnumbers the rest is Muḥammad's clairvoyance. Though there are many different miracle stories for the Medinan period, this chapter will examine two such events, one of which contains reports relating an example of Muḥammad's clairvoyant abilities, while the other relates the direct actions taken by God to protect His prophet. The first event is the warning Muḥammad receives that one of his followers has written a letter to the Quraysh, informing them of the Prophet's impending attack on Mecca. The second event includes two supernatural incidents, and these are the protection Muḥammad receives during the assassination attempt by 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl and Arbad b. Qays, and how God kills these two men, apparently in response to Muḥammad's prayer. Al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr both portray the archetype of the knowing prophet, but both authors also allow a certain amount of variance from this image revealing that, perhaps, divergence from the archetype was permitted for stories that were not seen as having a vital importance or controversial interpretation. Both of these stories take place within the

framework of larger events, and so appear to have been seen by our authors as less pivotal than were the miracles studied in the last chapter, but it could be precisely this view of these miracles that allows us to better examine the potential viewpoints of both al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr, since no major dogmatic issues were at stake and since they would appear to have had no overt reason for altering the archetype.

The dual story-line of mundane versus supernatural is perhaps best laid out in the story of Muḥammad's Medinan period. Upon arriving at Medina, Muḥammad had to deal not only with the increasingly hostile Meccans, but also with those groups and individuals in Medina who refused to accept his authority.⁴⁶⁰ Slowly, he consolidated his power within Medina, eventually defeating both the Meccans and the Medinan Jewish tribes, and began to make treaty agreements with the various bedouin tribes in the area. By the time of his death, he had gained total mastery over Medina, Mecca, Yemen, and an increasingly large part of the Arabian peninsula. He had even begun to send his armies to the north against the Byzantines, thus seeming to foreshadow the conquests that would occur after his death.⁴⁶¹

At the same time that Muḥammad the leader was gaining ground against his enemies, Muḥammad the prophet was gaining control over the world of the supernatural, including his supernatural enemies, namely Satan and the *jinn*, whose appearances decrease dramatically over the course of this period.⁴⁶² Muḥammad's

⁴⁶⁰Watt and McDonald, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 7, *The Foundation of the Community* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 26-61, 85-7, 105-138, 156-61; Michael Fishbein, tr., *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 8, *The Victory of Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 5-41; Leiden edition, 1281-1329, 1359-62, 1383-1427, 1448-53, 1463-1500; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 256-91; vol. 4, 3-4, 9-46, 74, 92-131.

⁴⁶¹Fishbein, *Victory of Islam*, 152-60; Leiden edition, 1610-18; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 4, 241-60.

⁴⁶²Oddly enough, those *jinn* who converted to Islam in the post-Revelation Meccan period are not mentioned again, and it is rare that we see a positive story about the *jinn* in general.

dependence on the supernatural world is revealed shortly after his arrival in Medina, when he allows his camel, or divine guidance of it, to choose the spot for his mosque.⁴⁶³ Most of the miracles for this period surround the various battles fought between the Muslims and their enemies, thus revealing that the story told is not just one of military prowess, but of divine aid on the road to success. Angels take an active part in the Battle of Badr, the dead of Uḥud do not decay, even after many years, and Muḥammad feeds the multitudes again before the Battle of the Ditch.⁴⁶⁴ Muḥammad receives a warning from heaven of the assassination attempt by the Banū Naḍīr and it is Gabriel who tells him that he must do battle against the Banū Qurayza.⁴⁶⁵ It is only during this period that Muḥammad is able to miraculously heal his followers, although it is never explained why he is able to heal some, and not others. Most significantly, throughout his time in Medina, Muḥammad appears to be in almost constant communication with the divine realm. Not only does he receive regular Qur'ān revelations, but he also receives numerous warnings and messages that help him in his cause, sometimes saving his life outright. Thus, his supernatural success appears to be an other-worldly mirror of his material success.

⁴⁶³Watt and McDonald, *The Foundation of the Community*, 4; Leiden edition, 1258-9; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 198-9.

⁴⁶⁴Watt and McDonald, *The Foundation of the Community*, 26-61, 105-38; Fishbein, *The Victory of Islam*, 5-27; Leiden edition, 1281-1329, 1383-1427, 1462-85; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, 256-91; vol. 4, 9-46, 92-116.

⁴⁶⁵Watt and McDonald, *The Foundation of the Community*, 156-61; Fishbein, *The Victory of Islam*, 27-41; Leiden edition, 1448-53, 1485-1500; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 4, 74, 116-31.

The Letter of Ḥātib b. Abī Balta‘a

Al-Ṭabarī's Sīra/Ta'riḫh

Al-Ṭabarī relates roughly ninety-five miracle stories for this period in his *sīra/ta'riḫh*, the majority of which, twenty-eight, relate to Muḥammad's clairvoyance. The first event studied in this chapter is an example of this clairvoyant power, as Muḥammad receives a supernatural warning that one of his followers has sent a message to the Quraysh, informing them of his planned attack on that city around 8/630. Al-Ṭabarī only relates one report for this incident in his *sīra/ta'riḫh*, and that is taken from Ibn Ishāq.⁴⁶⁶ The story itself is related within the larger framework of Muḥammad's attack on Mecca, and does not appear to have been seen as particularly important by al-Ṭabarī.⁴⁶⁷ The report states:

When the Messenger of God had decided to go to Mecca, Ḥātib b. Abī Balta‘a wrote a letter to Quraysh informing them of the decision of the Messenger of God to go to them, and he gave the letter to a woman. (Muḥammad b. Ja‘far alleged that she was from [the tribe of] Muzayna; others asserted that she was Sāra, a mawlā of one of the sons of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib.) He paid her to deliver it to Quraysh. She put it on her head, twisted the hair on the sides of her head over it, and set out carrying it. But word of what Ḥātib had done came to the Messenger of God from heaven, and he sent out ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and al-Zubayr b. al-‘Awwām, saying, “Overtake a woman with whom Ḥātib has sent a letter to Quraysh warning them of what we have decided about them.” The two went out and overtook her at al-Ḥulayfa, al-Ḥulayfa of Ibn Abī Aḥmad. They made her dismount and searched her saddle, but found nothing. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib said to her: “I swear that the Messenger of God did not lie, nor have we lied. You shall produce this letter to me, or we will strip you.” When she saw that he was serious, she said, “Turn away from me.” He turned away from her, and she untied the sidelocks of her head, took out the letter and handed it to him. He brought it to the Messenger of God.

The Messenger of God summoned Ḥātib and said, “Ḥātib, what made you do this?” He said: “Messenger of God, by God, I am a believer in God and His

⁴⁶⁶Fishbein, *Victory of Islam*, 166-8; Leiden edition, 1626-7.

⁴⁶⁷Ibid.; Leiden edition, 1626-7. The report does not receive its own section heading, but instead is simply one of a number of reports of the events leading up to the actual taking of the city.

Messenger. I have not changed or altered. But I was a man with no roots or clan among the people, while I had family and children among them. And so I did them this favor for their sake.” ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb said, “Messenger of God, let me cut off his head, for the man has played the hypocrite.” The Messenger of God said, “How do you know, ‘Umar? Perhaps God looked down on those who were at Badr on the day of the battle and said, ‘Do what you will, for I have forgiven you.’” Concerning Ḥaṭīb, God revealed: “O believers, take not My enemy and your enemy for friends” to the words, “to Thee we turn,” and the end of the story.⁴⁶⁸

The story does not stand entirely alone, however, since al-Ṭabarī transmits a rather lengthy report immediately before it that relates how the truce between the Muslims and the Quraysh was broken, Abū Sufyān’s failed peace attempt, Muḥammad’s announcement to the people of his plans to march on Mecca, and, near the end of the report, his prayer to God to “keep spies and news from Quraysh until we take them by surprise in their territory.”⁴⁶⁹ Thus, the supernatural warning would appear to be in response to his prayer, and the prayer itself could be seen as a foreshadowing of the entire story of Ḥaṭīb.

So, the archetype of Muḥammad as portrayed here by al-Ṭabarī would appear to be of a man whose prayers are answered by the Divine in the form of clairvoyant

⁴⁶⁸Ibid.; Leiden edition, 1626-7. The words in brackets reflect the punctuation of Fishbein’s translation. The Qur’ān verses cited in the report is 60:1-4, which read: “O ye who believe! Take not My enemies and yours as friends (or protectors) - offering them (your) love, even though they have rejected the Truth that has come to you, and have (on the contrary) driven out the Messenger and yourselves (from your homes), (simply) because ye believe in Allāh your Lord! If ye have come out to strive in My Way and to seek My Good Pleasure, (take them not as friends), holding secret converse of love (and friendship) with them: for I know full well all that ye conceal and all that ye reveal. And any of you that does this has strayed from the Straight Path. If they were to get the better of you, they would behave to you as enemies, and stretch forth their hands and their tongues against you for evil; and they desire that ye should reject the Truth. Of no profit to you will be your relatives and your children on the Day of Judgement: He will judge between you: for Allāh sees well all that ye do. There is for you an excellent example (to follow) in Abraham and those with him, when they said: ‘We are clear of you and of whatever ye worship besides Allāh: we have rejected you, and there has arisen, between us and you, enmity and hatred forever - unless ye believe in Allāh and Him alone.’ But not when Abraham said to his father: ‘I will pray for forgiveness for thee, though I have no power (to get) aught on thy behalf from Allāh.’ (They prayed): ‘Our Lord! In Thee do we trust, and to Thee do we turn in repentance: to Thee is (our) final Goal.’”

⁴⁶⁹Fishbein, *Victory of Islam*, 166; Leiden edition, 1625.

communication. This communication from a supernatural source is not a Qur'ānic revelation, but is instead of a rather vague nature. There are examples wherein Muḥammad and Gabriel speak to each other outside of the Qur'ānic context, such as when Gabriel tells him he must fight the Banū Qurayza, but no such scene is indicated here.⁴⁷⁰ Therefore, since the report only indicates that the warning came “from heaven,” it remains unclear as to whether this source was an angel, God himself, or some as yet unknown third entity. Another element that may be of some importance here is ‘Alī’s belief in Muḥammad, and it may be his faith in Muḥammad even when no letter is found that provides the report with the proof of the miracle at hand. Of course, this could also be another example of the mundane/supernatural dichotomy. While ‘Alī’s faith could be seen as reflecting his belief in the supernatural source of Muḥammad’s information, it could also be seen as ‘Alī’s faith in Muḥammad himself. Another unusual factor in this report appears to be Muḥammad’s uncertainty about the will of God. He tells ‘Umar, “How do you know...? Perhaps God looked down on those who were at Badr on the day of the battle and said, ‘Do what you will, for I have forgiven you.’”⁴⁷¹ It is only after he says this that the report indicates the Qur'ānic revelation. While Qur'ān 60:1-4 does order the Muslims not to befriend unbelievers, there is nothing in this verse group regarding the veterans of Badr, so Muḥammad’s question appears to remain

⁴⁷⁰There is also a fascinating report in an earlier section of al-Ṭabarī’s *History* in which Gabriel tells Muḥammad the story of Moses, Pharaoh, and the parting of the Red Sea. In it, Gabriel admits that he shoved pebbles in the mouth of the Pharaoh as he was drowning so that he could not pronounce the *shahāda* and thus become a Muslim so close to his death. This appears to relate, not only a non-Qur'ānic conversation between Muḥammad and the archangel, but also a certain amount of free will on the part of the latter. William M Brinner, tr., *History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 3, *The Children of Israel* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991), 65, 71.

⁴⁷¹Fishbein, *Victory of Islam*, 167; Leiden edition, 1627.

unanswered.⁴⁷² Therefore, the archetype of the knowing prophet is counterbalanced by the concept that, while Muḥammad knows much that others do not, he does not know everything.

Al-Ṭabarī's Tafsīr

In his *Tafsīr*, al-Ṭabarī relates some seven reports for Qur'ān 60:1.⁴⁷³ He begins with an explanation of the meaning of the verse, sometimes using examples from poetry for aspects of the language that he determines need clarifying. The final part of his explanation appears to lead into the story of Ḥāṭib by explaining that God knew that Muḥammad's Companions had been "confiding secrets" with the unbelievers.⁴⁷⁴ In doing so, they had strayed from the path to Paradise.⁴⁷⁵ Al-Ṭabarī then specifically relates the revelation of this verse to Ḥāṭib's letter, and states:

And it was mentioned that this verse was from one of this sūra revealed in the matter of Ḥāṭib b. Abī Balta'a, and he had written to the Quraysh in Mecca informing them about the order that the Messenger of God had kept secret from them, and by that come the signs and the tales about the group of the Companions of the Messenger of God and others.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷²It is also possible, of course, that this report could have been used as justification for the special privileges given later to those who had fought at Badr.

⁴⁷³Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 60:1, <<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=60&tAyahNo=1&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0>>, 60:2-3, <<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=60&tAyahNo=2&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0>>, 60:4, <<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=60&tAyahNo=4&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0>>, May 2006. Qur'ān 60:1 is treated separately, 60:2-3 are treated together, and 60:4 is treated individually. Although al-Ṭabarī ties the meanings of the other verses in this group to the story at hand in his comments, the reports of this incident are only found in his exegesis of 60:1.

⁴⁷⁴Ibid., 60:1.

⁴⁷⁵Ibid.

⁴⁷⁶Ibid.

It is uncertain what he means by this statement, except that he may be claiming here that this incident is one of a number of miraculous occurrences involving Muḥammad's Companions. This may be an indication that this group, too, was viewed by later Muslims as having a supernatural connection, and, thus, were to be considered even more authoritative as sources for the words and deeds of Muḥammad.⁴⁷⁷

The reports related by al-Ṭabarī vary in how much of the story they tell, whether the miracle is explicitly stated as such or merely implied or even present at all, as well as certain details, such as how many men were sent after the woman and what reaction 'Umar gave to Muḥammad. Thus, for the reports in the *Tafsīr*, the archetype of the knowing prophet appears counterbalanced by the possibility that Muḥammad received some of his information from a more mundane source. Al-Ṭabarī clearly indicates the involvement of the supernatural in his introductory comments, but at the same time, does not explicitly disagree with any of the reports he relates, not even the two that omit the miracle entirely.

The first report is based on testimony by 'Alī, who appears to begin his narrative in the middle of the story, when Muḥammad orders him to go after the woman.⁴⁷⁸ He states:

The Messenger of God sent me, I and al-Zubayr b. al-Awwām and al-Miqdād..., and he said: "Hurry along until you come to a plum garden, then truly in it is a woman in a howda and with her is a letter, so take it from her." So we hurried along, racing our horses with us until we wound up at the garden, then we found the woman, and we said: "Take out the letter." She said: "I do not have a letter

⁴⁷⁷If this is the case, it would appear that the Companions also enjoyed an archetypal dichotomy between the supernatural and mundane. Whether this has a positive or negative connotation remains unclear, however, since the story at hand does relate an example of their disobedience and apparent friendliness to the enemy.

⁴⁷⁸Ibid.

with me.” We said: “Take out the letter, or we will throw away (your) clothes.” So she took it out from her braids, and we took the letter. Then we hurried with it to the Messenger of God, and it (was) from Ḥātib b. Abī Balta‘a to the people of Mecca, telling them of some of the commands of the Messenger of God.

So the Messenger of God said: “O Ḥātib, what is this?” He said: “O Messenger of God, do not be hasty against me. I was a man connected to Quraysh, but I did not have a clan among them, while those (others) with you among the Emigrants had clans, and they desired (to protect) their people in Mecca, so I wanted... (to protect) my family, and I did not do that as an unbeliever nor apostasy in my religion nor approving of unbelief after Islam.” Then the Messenger of God said: “You speak the truth.” Then ‘Umar said: “O Messenger of God, let me cut off the head of this hypocrite.” He [Muḥammad] said: “Truly he was present at Badr. And you do not know, perhaps God notified the people of Badr, and He said: ‘Do what you want, for I have forgiven you.’”⁴⁷⁹

No overt mention is made here of Muḥammad’s plans to attack Mecca, so the historical context of the report remains in question. In this report, ‘Alī is accompanied by al-Zubayr b. al-Awwām and al-Miqdād, and this is one of the variables in the archetype, since the number and identity of those accompanying ‘Alī change for almost every report, while ‘Alī remains the only constant when the identity of the pursuers is revealed. It is in the Prophet’s scene with Ḥātib that we have added information not found in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*. Ḥātib explains that the other Emigrants all had clans in Mecca to look after the loved ones they left behind, but that he did not, perhaps indicating that his faith in the Prophet at the time of the Emigration was stronger than the others, since he had more to lose. There is no mention in this report of how Muḥammad came to know about the woman and the letter, thus there is here no clear indication of a miracle. Muḥammad could have simply been told by someone who had this information. At the end of the report, there is an added remark that “al-Faḍl added in his *ḥadīth*, (that) Sufyān said: ‘And it was revealed about him “O you who believe, take not my enemies

⁴⁷⁹Ibid.

and yours as friends” to His speech “until you believe in God alone.”⁴⁸⁰ Thus, the connection between this event and the revelation of 60:1-4 appears to have been added on, and thus was not part of the original report.

The second report is also from ‘Alī, but begins with Muḥammad’s announcement that he is going to attack Mecca. It contains details not found in the previous report, giving a fuller sense of the story. It reads:

When the Messenger of God wanted to come to Mecca, he told the people among his Companions confidentially that he wanted Mecca, and among them was Ḥātib b. Abī Balta‘a, but he [Muḥammad] revealed to the people (in general) that he wanted Khaybar. So Ḥātib b. Abī Balta‘a wrote to the people of Mecca that the Prophet wanted (them). So the Prophet sent me and Abū Mirthad..., and he said: “Come to a plum garden, then truly you will meet a woman in it and with her is a letter, so take it from her.” So we hurried until we saw her in the place that the Prophet mentioned, and we said: “Give me the letter.” Then she said: “I have no letter.” So we took down her baggage and we searched, but we did not find it in her baggage. So Abū Mirthad said: “Perhaps it is not with her.” But I said: “The Prophet did not lie and he was not misled.” So we said: “Take out the letter, or else we will strip you...”

So we brought it to the Prophet, and the letter was from Ḥātib b. Abī Balta‘a to the people of Mecca. Then ‘Umar stood up and he said: “He betrayed God and His Messenger, permit me to cut off his head.” Then the Prophet said: “Is he brave, for he was present at Badr?” He [‘Umar] said: “Yes, but he... aided your enemies against you.” Then the Prophet said: “Then perhaps God notified the people of Badr, and He said: ‘Do what you want.’” Then ‘Umar wept and he said: “God and His Messenger know.” Then he sent for Ḥātib, and he said: “(Why) did you induce (her) to do what she did?” So he said: “O Prophet of God, truly I was a man joined to the Quraysh, and I had there family and property..., so I wrote to them of that. By God, O Prophet of God, truly I believe in God and in His Messenger.” So the Prophet said: “Ḥātib b. Abī Balta‘a spoke the truth, so do not say anything to Ḥātib except good.”⁴⁸¹

This report varies from the one immediately prior, as well as from that reported in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*, in that Muḥammad makes a private announcement to his Companions that he is marching on Mecca, but purposefully gives false information in his public

⁴⁸⁰Ibid. Al-Faḍl and Sufyān are members of al-Ṭabarī’s chain of authorities for this report.

⁴⁸¹Ibid.

announcement, claiming instead that they are preparing to attack the Jewish oasis settlement of Khaybar. The report continues much like the previous one, but with a few notable changes. This time, ‘Alī’s only companion is Abū Mirthad, who also alters the story by expressing doubt after the woman denies having the letter and they are unable to find it in her baggage. ‘Alī alone remains firm in his belief. In this report, the scene between Muḥammad and ‘Umar takes place before the Prophet’s confrontation with Ḥāṭib, and this time ‘Umar weeps in response to Muḥammad’s speech about those at Badr.⁴⁸² Another change is that Ḥāṭib does not just discuss his family in Mecca, but his property as well. The report ends with Muḥammad’s acceptance of the man’s statement as true and adds an order that people, or ‘Umar, the report is unclear who is being addressed, should not say anything negative to Ḥāṭib.⁴⁸³ All of these changes give the reader a wealth of detail about the story and the people in it. As with the previous report, however, the source of Muḥammad’s information about the woman and the letter she carries is not specified, thus again there is no clear indication of a supernatural element. Another factor in common with the first report is the statement at the end of this account that “Ḥabīb b. Abī Thābit said: ‘So God revealed “O you who believe, take not my enemies and yours...” the verse.”⁴⁸⁴ So again, the connection of the verse appears as an addition to the original story.

The third report is from Ibn ‘Abbās, and links the verse directly to this incident, but merely summarizes the story:

⁴⁸²Ibid.

⁴⁸³Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴Ibid.

“O ye who believe! Take not My enemies and yours as friends (or protectors) - offering them (your) love...” to the end of the verse. It was revealed about a man who was with the Prophet in Medina from Quraysh; he wrote to his people and his kinsfolk in Mecca, informing them and warning them that the Messenger of God was traveling to them. Then the Messenger of God was informed of his letter, so he sent ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib for it, so he brought it to him.⁴⁸⁵

This report does not provide the detail of the previous reports, with the name of Muḥammad’s Companion being omitted, as is any partner for ‘Alī. Although the role of the Qur’ān verse is here central to the report, there is no mention, again, of how Muḥammad received his information.

The fourth report is identical to the one in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*, discussed above.⁴⁸⁶

The fifth report directly relates the Qur’ānic revelation to this event, and includes an explicit statement of the supernatural source for Muḥammad’s knowledge.⁴⁸⁷ This report states:

When it was revealed, “O ye who believe, take not my enemies and yours as friends” (it was) about Ḥāṭib b. Abī Balta’a, (who) wrote a letter to the infidels of Quraysh, advising (them) about it. Then God informed His prophet about that, so he sent ‘Alī and al-Zubayr, and he said: “Go, then truly you two will find a woman in such and such a place, so bring (me the) letter (that is) with her.”⁴⁸⁸

The report continues as have some of the previous ones, detailing the encounter between the woman and the men sent after her, as well as between Muḥammad, ‘Umar, and Ḥāṭib. Again, however, at the end of this report is an added comment that the verses of the Qur’ān were revealed in relation to this event, but this time the verses cited go all the way to Qur’ān 60:7.⁴⁸⁹ Report six is simply a statement that this verse is “about the

⁴⁸⁵Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹Ibid. Qu’rān 60:5-7 read: “‘Our Lord! Make us not a (test and) trial for the Unbelievers, but forgive us, our Lord! For Thou are the Exalted in Might, the Wise.’ There was indeed in them an excellent example for you to follow - for those whose hope is in Allāh and in the Last Day. But if any turn away, truly Allāh

correspondence of Ḥaṭīb b. Abī Balta‘a, who with it warned the unbelievers of Quraysh.”⁴⁹⁰ No other information, such as Muḥammad’s knowledge of the event or even what Ḥaṭīb was warning the Quraysh about, is included.

The final report of al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* of this verse contains an important divergence from the archetypal story in that it claims that Ḥaṭīb wrote his letter, not to warn the Quraysh about Muḥammad’s attack on their city, but in relation to a much earlier incident:

It was mentioned to us that Ḥaṭīb wrote to the people of Mecca informing them of the journey of the Prophet to them (at the) time of al-Ḥudaybiya, so God informed His Prophet about that. And it was mentioned to us that they found the letter with a woman (who had hidden it) in the top of her head. So the Prophet of God called him [Ḥaṭīb] and said: “What caused you to do that?” He said: “By God, I did not have doubts about the command of God, and I did not apostatize in it, but I have there [in Mecca] family and property, so I wanted to bribe the Quraysh about my family and my property.” And it was mentioned to us that he was an ally of Quraysh, not being from among themselves.⁴⁹¹

Al-Ṭabarī makes no comment about any of these reports, even the last one, above, that sharply disagrees with the timing of the event as related in the other reports. He simply passes them on as he does in his *sīra/ta’rīkh*, but it must be pointed out that, unlike the exegesis of every other verse examined by either of our authors in this study, this is the only instance so far in which every report is directly tied to the historical context of the verse.

Thus, the archetype of Muḥammad for this event, as a prophet who receives secret knowledge from a supernatural source, is only explicitly upheld in three of the

is Free of all wants, Worthy of all Praise. It may be that Allāh will grant love (and friendship) between you and those whom ye (now) hold as enemies. For Allāh has power (over all things); and Allāh is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful.”

⁴⁹⁰Ibid.

⁴⁹¹Ibid.

preceding reports, one of which is identical to that found in the *sīra/ta'rikh*. The first two reports merely imply the supernatural aspect of this warning through the detailed description Muḥammad gives of the woman's location, while two other reports leave it out completely. Also, the connection between this event and the verses of the Qur'ān appears, in many of these reports, to have been added on, almost as an afterthought. The supernatural archetype in this story, therefore, is that God protected Muḥammad and his cause by passing along information about which no one else was aware. The dual archetype of the mundane remains possible, however, in that Muḥammad may have been informed by someone who learned of Ḥātib's letter. However, since this is nowhere stated explicitly, and since al-Ṭabarī himself argues for this event as a sign from God, the supernatural element dominates. The only event that is completely missing in the treatment of this archetype in al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr* is Muḥammad's prayer, which precipitated the miracle itself in the *sīra/ta'rikh*. This indicates that, while the *sīra/ta'rikh*, despite its surface structure of individual reports, is able to maintain a narrative flow, linking the events of one report to those in the next, the *Tafsīr*, by its very nature, is more limited in this respect.

Ibn Kathīr's Sīra/Ta'rikh

Ibn Kathīr relates over two hundred sixty-five supernatural events in his *sīra/ta'rikh* for the Medinan period, and, as in al-Ṭabarī's work in the same genre, the clairvoyance of Muḥammad easily outdistances any other type of miracle.⁴⁹² The event

⁴⁹²The eighty-three reports of Muḥammad's clairvoyance are seconded only by the thirty-three reports of angelic activity during this period.

of Ḥāṭib's letter is presented as slightly more important for Ibn Kathīr, since it is related in a separate section with its own heading.⁴⁹³ Unlike al-Ṭabarī's *sīra/ta'rīkh*, Ibn Kathīr relates three reports in this section and, as is typical, adds his own comments throughout. The first report is nearly identical to the one used by al-Ṭabarī in both genres studied above, and comes through Ibn Ishāq.⁴⁹⁴ The only differences are that al-Miqdād does not accompany 'Alī and al-Zubayr in pursuit of the woman, and that Muḥammad tells them the identity of the letter's author and reveals its contents before sending them off in pursuit. Ibn Kathīr adds a comment about this report, stating that "Ibn Ishāq sent forth this story as *mursal* [incompletely transmitted]."⁴⁹⁵ He adds that two other authorities, namely al-Suhaylī and Ibn Salām, give the text of the letter, but each of these men gives a different text, and Ibn Kathīr is silent about which one he deems more acceptable.⁴⁹⁶

The second report is much like the first one in al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*, beginning with 'Alī, but ending with al-Bukhārī. This report, too, starts the story in the middle, with Muḥammad sending 'Alī, this time with both al-Zubayr and al-Miqdād, after the woman.⁴⁹⁷ Like the other report, no miracle is explicitly stated, and the only indication of possible supernatural intervention is the detailed information Muḥammad gives about the woman and her location. The report ends with a statement that Qur'ān 60:1 was revealed in response, but does not identify a particular authority with this addition. The

⁴⁹³Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 4, 283-5. The heading of this section is not Ibn Kathīr's usual "Chapter" or "Division," but is instead "The Story (*qiṣṣa*) of Ḥāṭib b. Abī Balta'a."

⁴⁹⁴Ibid., vol. 4, 283-4.

⁴⁹⁵Ibid., vol. 4, 284.

⁴⁹⁶Ibid. Although Ibn Kathīr is rarely silent when confronted with conflicting reports, the fact that he does not attempt to give the two texts a complete isnād is an indication that here he is simply relaying information, rather than determining authenticity or designating preference.

⁴⁹⁷Ibid.

result is that the Qur'ān verse does not appear as something that has been added on at a later date. Here again, Ibn Kathīr makes comments about the report's authoritativeness, noting that "it is excluded (by) the rest of the group except Ibn Māja from the *ḥadīth* of Sufyān b. 'Ayina. And al-Ṭirmidhī said: '*Ḥasan Ṣaḥīḥ*.'"⁴⁹⁸

The third and final report is from Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, but does not originate with 'Alī. It differs from the first two reports in that at no time is a Qur'ānic connection made for this event.⁴⁹⁹ It states:

Ḥaṭīb b. Abī Balta'a wrote to the people of Mecca mentioning that the Messenger of God wanted to attack them. So He showed the Messenger of God about the woman who had the letter with her. So he sent for her, and then she took (the) letter from her head. And he said: "O Ḥaṭīb, did you do this?" He [Ḥaṭīb] said: "Yes, (but) truly I did not do it (out of) disloyalty to the Messenger of God and not (out of) hypocrisy. I know... that I was a foreigner in their midst and (that) my sons were with them, so I wanted to obligate them to protect them." Then 'Umar said to him: "Shall I not cut off his head?" Then he [Muḥammad] said: "Would you kill a man from the people of Badr? And you do not know, perhaps God notified the people of Badr, and said: 'Do what you want.'"⁵⁰⁰

While the basics of the story remain the same, many of the details are here completely different. 'Alī is not mentioned at all, and the report claims that the woman herself was brought before Muḥammad and gave him the letter directly. There is no Qur'ān verse associated with this report, but the miracle is explicitly stated, revealing Muḥammad's source for his information as not only supernatural, but divine. Again, Ibn Kathīr adds his own comment and states that the report is unique in its *isnād* from Aḥmad b.

⁴⁹⁸Ibid. *Ḥasan Ṣaḥīḥ* is a *ḥadīth* designation that means the *isnād* of a report is excellent and is considered completely authoritative. Obviously, if Muslim did not include this report in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, then this designation for this particular report is not unanimous among the authors of the Six Books.

⁴⁹⁹Ibid., vol. 4, 284-5.

⁵⁰⁰Ibid.

Hanbal.⁵⁰¹ However, he ends the above statement by praising God. This may be another way of indicating a certain amount of doubt, and thus could be seen as an attempt to salvage the report itself, despite the fact that it does not meet the requirements of the *ḥadīth* authorities.

Thus, in the three reports given by Ibn Kathīr for this event, two state explicitly that the information Muḥammad received came from a supernatural source, and yet both reports are indicated as being faulty by our author. The authority of the remaining report, wherein the Qur'ānic connection is indicated, but the miracle is only implied, is basically accepted. For Ibn Kathīr, then, it seems that an explicit statement of the miraculous element of the story is unnecessary, as is the connection of this event to Muḥammad's attack on Mecca.

Ibn Kathīr's Tafṣīr

Unlike al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr groups his *tafṣīr* of Qur'ān 60:1 with that of 60:2-3.⁵⁰² These verses read:

O ye who believe! Take not My enemies and yours as friends (or protectors) - offering them (your) love, even though they have rejected the Truth that has come to you, and have (on the contrary) driven out the Messenger and yourselves (from your homes), (simply) because ye believe in Allāh your Lord! If ye have come out to strive in My Way and to seek My Good Pleasure, (take them not as friends), holding secret converse of love (and friendship) with them: for I know full well all that ye conceal and all that ye reveal. And any of you that does this has strayed from the Straight Path. If they were to get the better of you, they would behave to you as enemies, and stretch forth their hands and their tongues against you for evil; and they desire that ye should reject the Truth. Of no profit to you will be your relatives and your children on the Day of Judgement: He will judge between you: for Allāh sees well all that ye do.

⁵⁰¹Ibid., vol. 4, 285.

⁵⁰²Ibn Kathīr, *Tafṣīr*, vol. 4, 1875-1877.

The first five reports relate the verses to the incident of Ḥaṭīb's letter, while the remaining reports provide explanations for the meanings of the verses and are unrelated to this event. Ibn Kathīr begins his treatment of these verses with a lengthy introduction, which gives the story added details not found in his *sīra/ta'riḫh*.⁵⁰³ He states:

The reason for the revelation of the beginning of this great sūra is the story of Ḥaṭīb b. Abī Balta'a. And he was... a vendor of firewood, and he was a man among the Emigrants (who) was also among the people of Badr. And he had family and property in Mecca, while he was not of Quraysh themselves, rather he was an ally of 'Uthmān. So when the Messenger of God decided about the conquest of Mecca, when its people violated the treaty, the Prophet ordered the Muslims to prepare for their raid, and he said: "O God, keep our information from them."⁵⁰⁴ So Ḥaṭīb supported this, (but) he wrote a letter and he sent it with a woman from Quraysh to the people of Mecca informing them of what the Messenger of God had decided about raiding them.... Then God the Most High informed the Messenger of God about that in response to his prayer, so he sent (him) on the track of the woman, then he took the letter from her.⁵⁰⁵

Thus Ibn Kathīr here specifically links the revelation of these verses to Ḥaṭīb's letter and Muḥammad's planned attack on Mecca. He adds information not found elsewhere, for example, that Ḥaṭīb was an ally of 'Uthmān and that Ḥaṭīb supported the attack on Mecca, but sent the letter anyway out of concern for his family and property there. Most importantly, Ibn Kathīr specifically states that God is the source of Muḥammad's information and claims that this was in direct response to Muḥammad's prayer. This is the only time in any of our sources that these two events are overtly linked. As we will see, however, not all of the reports that Ibn Kathīr relates fully support this assessment.

⁵⁰³Ibid., vol. 4, 1875.

⁵⁰⁴The literal translation is "prevail against them our information," but the translation given above seems to make more sense in this context. *Allāhumma `amm `alayhim khabaranā*.

⁵⁰⁵Ibid. Ibn Kathīr does not identify who was sent after the woman.

The first report is from Ibn Ḥanbal and Ibn Kathīr bridges the introductory section to it with the comment, “And its soundness is evident in this agreed upon *ḥadīth*.”⁵⁰⁶ As with most of the previous reports examined, this one is narrated by ‘Alī, and begins with him and his companions, al-Zubayr and al-Miqdād, being sent after the woman, with Muḥammad giving them the same specific information about her location, but no details about the importance of the letter itself. The rest of the story is much the same, and ends with Muḥammad’s statement about those who fought at Badr. Thus, there is no supernatural element expressly stated in this report. Ibn Kathīr comments at the end of the report that “the group published it, except Ibn Māja, from another direction..., and al-Bukhārī made additions in the Book of the Maghāzī that Allāh revealed the sūra: ‘O you who believe, take not my enemies and yours as friends.’”⁵⁰⁷ So, here, too, the attachment of the Qur’ānic revelation to this event is represented as a later addition to the original report.

Ibn Kathīr then moves on to the second report, also from ‘Alī, which he states is published in the *Ṣaḥīḥayn*, or the *Ṣaḥīḥ* works of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, and it, too, begins with Muḥammad’s order to pursue the woman, thus leaving out how he knows about the letter.⁵⁰⁸ This report contains variations from the others and reads:

The Messenger of God sent me and Abū Mirthad and al-Zubayr b. al-‘Awwām, and all of us (had) horses, and he said: “Hurry until you come to a plum garden. Then truly in it is a woman from the unbelievers (and) with her is a letter from Ḥātib b. Abī Balta‘a to the unbelievers.” So we overtook her traveling on a camel of hers where the Messenger of God said. So we said: “(Where is) the letter?” Then she said: “I have no letter.” So we made it [her camel] kneel down and we searched, but did not find a letter, so we said: “The Messenger of God did

⁵⁰⁶Ibid.

⁵⁰⁷Ibid.

⁵⁰⁸Ibid.

not lie; truly, take out the letter or we will strip you.” So when she saw the seriousness of our desire to restrain her..., then she took it out. So we hurried with her to the Messenger of God.⁵⁰⁹

Already by this point in the report there are differences that must be noted. The woman is here identified as an unbeliever, whereas her religious affiliation has not been previously discussed. Also, the three men sent after her do not simply take the letter back to Muḥammad, as in previous reports, but the woman as well. The report continues with ‘Umar’s request to cut off Ḥaṭīb’s head, Muḥammad’s questioning of the man, and Ḥaṭīb’s explanation about his fear for his family and property in Mecca. At this point, however, the report again reveals slight changes:

So he [Muḥammad] said: “He told the truth. Do not speak of him except good.” Then ‘Umar said: “Truly he has been faithless to God and His Messenger and the believers, so permit me to cut off his head.” Then he [Muḥammad] said: “Is he not of the people of Badr...? Perhaps God appeared to the people of Badr, then He said: ‘Do what you wish for Paradise is imposed upon you - or, I have already forgiven you.’” ‘Umar wept and said: “God and His Messenger know.”⁵¹⁰

‘Umar has here repeated his request to kill the man, even after hearing his explanation. Again Muḥammad makes his comment about those who fought at Badr, but with the additional expression that perhaps God promised them a place in Paradise; ‘Umar weeps in response and states, “God and His Messenger know.”⁵¹¹ This is where the report ends, and no Qur’ānic connection is made.

The text of the third report is identical to one found in al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr*, but Ibn Kathīr relates that it, too, comes from al-Bukhārī.⁵¹² It includes the Prophet’s purposeful disinformation about his plans to take Khaybar, as well as Abū Mirthad’s

⁵⁰⁹Ibid.

⁵¹⁰Ibid.

⁵¹¹Ibid.

⁵¹²Ibid., vol. 4, 1875-6. The report is the second one in al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr* that has been examined above.

doubts about the woman having the letter. The report states that Muḥammad “was informed” of Ḥātib’s letter, but does not relate whether the source of the information was human or supernatural.⁵¹³ ‘Umar again weeps at Muḥammad’s response and the Prophet again orders people to say only good things to Ḥātib. This report also has a comment at the end about the event’s connection to a Qur’ān revelation that makes the tie to the verse appear as something added on to the original.⁵¹⁴ Ibn Kathīr then states that al-Ṭabarī had transmitted this report from a similar chain, but that it had already been mentioned by the authors of the *Maghāzī* and the *Sīra*, thus making it seem that he viewed al-Ṭabarī’s *History* as less authoritative than the work of Ibn Ishāq.⁵¹⁵ He then goes on to relate a report from Ibn Ishāq that is identical to that found in al-Ṭabarī’s *sīra/ta’rīkh*, which reads:

When the Messenger of God had decided to go to Mecca, Ḥātib b. Abī Balta‘a wrote a letter to Quraysh informing them of the decision of the Messenger of God to go to them, and he gave the letter to a woman. (Muḥammad b. Ja‘far alleged that she was from [the tribe of] Muzayna; others asserted that she was Sāra, a mawlā of one of the sons of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib.) He paid her to deliver it to Quraysh. She put it on her head, twisted the hair on the sides of her head over it, and set out carrying it. But word of what Ḥātib had done came to the Messenger of God from heaven, and he sent out ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and al-Zubayr b. al-‘Awwām, saying, “Overtake a woman with whom Ḥātib has sent a letter to Quraysh warning them of what we have decided about them.” The two went out and overtook her at al-Ḥulayfa, al-Ḥulayfa of Ibn Abī Aḥmad. They made her dismount and searched her saddle, but found nothing. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib said to her: “I swear that the Messenger of God did not lie, nor have we lied. You shall produce this letter to me, or we will strip you.” When she saw that he was serious, she said, “Turn away from me.” He turned away from her, and she untied the sidelocks of her head, took out the letter and handed it to him. He brought it to the Messenger of God.

The Messenger of God summoned Ḥātib and said, “Ḥātib, what made you do this?” He said: “Messenger of God, by God, I am a believer in God and His

⁵¹³Ibid., vol. 4, 1876.

⁵¹⁴Ibid.

⁵¹⁵Ibid.

Messenger. I have not changed or altered. But I was a man with no roots or clan among the people, while I had family and children among them. And so I did them this favor for their sake.” ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb said, “Messenger of God, let me cut off his head, for the man has played the hypocrite.” The Messenger of God said, “How do you know, ‘Umar? Perhaps God looked down on those who were at Badr on the day of the battle and said, ‘Do what you will, for I have forgiven you.’” Concerning Ḥāṭib, God revealed: “O believers, take not My enemy and your enemy for friends” to the words, “to Thee we turn,” and the end of the story.⁵¹⁶

This report is the first in Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr* that specifically states that the information Muḥammad received came “from heaven...,” thus agreeing with his statement of its supernatural provenance in his introduction.⁵¹⁷ The Qur’ān revelation is also related as a part of the original report, despite the fact that it is located, like the others, at its end.

The fifth report by Ibn Kathīr in his *tafsīr* of this verse, and the last that gives any amount of detail about the story, contains some rather interesting changes.⁵¹⁸ It is not related in its complete form, but appears to be summarized, and states:

These verses were revealed about Ḥāṭib b. Abī Balta‘a, that he sent Sāra, a *mawla* of the Banū Hāshim, and that he gave her ten *dirhams*. The Messenger of God sent in her tracks ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, and they overtook her in the Jaḥfa.⁵¹⁹

The report does not indicate why Ḥāṭib gave the woman money or anything relating to the historical context of the story, and this is the only source that provides the exact amount of money that changed hands. At no point is anything stated about how Muḥammad was informed of the woman’s mission, and thus omits the element of the supernatural entirely. Another important difference is that, this time, ‘Alī’s companion

⁵¹⁶Ibid. Again, since the report is identical to that in al-Ṭabarī’s *sīra/ta’rīkh*, I have maintained Fishbein’s English translation.

⁵¹⁷Ibid.

⁵¹⁸Ibid.

⁵¹⁹Ibid.

is none other than ‘Umar himself. Ibn Kathīr then mentions other authorities who claim that the verse was revealed about Ḥātib, but no other details of the story are given. He adds a section explaining what the verse itself means, and it is in this section that we find the familiar citation of several other Qur’ān verses. The last mention about Ḥātib is a statement by Ibn Kathīr that this verse was revealed before Muḥammad forgave Ḥātib, but after the latter had expressed his concerns for his family and property.⁵²⁰

So, of the five reports related to this event in Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr*, only one explicitly states that there was a supernatural element to Muḥammad’s knowledge about the woman and the letter. Three of the reports indicate what appear to be implied miracles based on the details Muḥammad knew about her location, while one does not contain the miracle at all. The reports that include the implied miracles could also conceivably be interpreted as examples of more mundane sources for Muḥammad’s knowledge. However, Ibn Kathīr’s introductory section sets aside any possible doubts about who informed Muḥammad, and takes the added step of connecting this information to Muḥammad’s prayer, something he does not do in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*. The verses of the Qur’ān are also explicitly linked to this event by Ibn Kathīr, even though this link appears to have been added on to most of his reports. Oddly enough, the only report that reveals an explicit element of the supernatural, as well as containing what appears to be a firm connection to the Qur’ān verses, is the one by Ibn Ishāq, which he listed as *mursal* in his *sīra/ta’rīkh*. Perhaps, at some point, Ibn Kathīr realized that this was the only report that completely supported his own assertions, since he does not

⁵²⁰Ibid., vol. 4, 1877.

repeat his criticism of it in his *Tafsīr*. Therefore, his introductory section allows us to see his own interpretation of the reports that follow, despite their apparent authoritativeness or lack thereof.

The overall image of the archetype of Muḥammad's clairvoyance for this event appears to be resolutely supported by both of our authors. They both argue for a supernatural source for his knowledge about Ḥāṭib's letter and claim this incident is the occasion for the revelation of Qur'ān 60:1, despite the fact that the majority of the reports they transmit do not seem to support these arguments. In fact, of the seven reports they transmit do not seem to support these arguments. In fact, of the seven reports related in al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*, only two directly support his assertions. Of the five reports in Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsīr*, only one, that by Ibn Ishāq, appears to satisfy his argument for the miracle and the revelation of the verse. Therefore, for this incident, our authors are willing to overlook weaknesses in the *isnād* if the text of the report conforms to their own opinions, and this is especially true of Ibn Kathīr. His use of other reports from more authoritative sources that contain implied miracles could be an indication that he needed them to bolster his arguments for the text of Ibn Ishāq's report. Al-Ṭabarī, on the other hand, is not as overtly concerned with the authoritativeness of his sources, and though his relation of other reports in his *Tafsīr* could be used for an argument toward consensus, his reliance on Ibn Ishāq alone in his *sīra/ta'rikh* indicates that, for this particular genre, he viewed the one report as sufficient.

The Story of ‘Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl and Arbad b. Qays

The second example of the element of the supernatural in the Medinan period of Muḥammad’s life that will be examined here is the story of ‘Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl and Arbad b. Qays. This story includes not only Muḥammad’s prayers being answered in a rather violent fashion, but also direct intervention by God to save Muḥammad’s life. ‘Āmir and Arbad were two men of the Banū ‘Āmir b. Ṣa‘ṣa‘a who were among the delegation that tribe sent to Muḥammad around 10/632. This event is told in the wider context of the large number of delegations sent by the various bedouin tribes to Muḥammad after his conquest of Mecca. Unlike the story of Ḥāṭib’s letter, this tale is given its own section by both al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*. As in the story of Muḥammad’s conception, however, the main difference between the two authors is that al-Ṭabarī does not relate any Qur’ān verses in connection to this event in his *sīra/ta’rīkh*, whereas Ibn Kathīr cites Qur’ān 13:9-13.⁵²¹ Unlike the verses in the earlier story, however, both men do relate this event to the relevant verses in their works of *tafsīr*.

⁵²¹Qur’ān 13:9-13 reads: “He knoweth the Unseen and that which is open: He is the Great, the most High. It is the same (to Him) whether any of you conceal his speech or declare it openly; whether he lie hid by night or walk forth freely by day. For each (such person) there are (angels) in succession. Before and behind him: they guard him by command of Allāh. Verily never will Allāh change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (with their own souls). But when (once) Allāh willeth a people’s punishment, there can be no turning it back, nor will they find, besides Him, any to protect. It is He Who doth show you the lightning, by way both of fear and of hope: it is He Who doth raise up the clouds, heavy with (fertilising) rain! Nay, thunder repeateth His praises, and so do the angels, with awe: He flingeth the loud-voiced thunderbolts, and therewith He striketh whomsoever He will, yet these (are the men) who (dare to) dispute about Allāh, with the strength of His power (supreme)!”

Al-Ṭabarī's Sīra/Ta'riḫ

As with the story of Ḥātib's letter, al-Ṭabarī relates only one report in his *sīra/ta'riḫ* for this incident, again through Ibn Ishāq. It states:

The deputation of the Banū 'Āmir came to the Messenger of God, and among them were 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl, Arbad b. Qays b. Mālik b. Ja'far, and Jabbar b. Sulmā b. Mālik b. Ja'far. These three were the chiefs and mischief-makers (*shayāḫīn*) of the tribe. 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl came to the Messenger of God intending to act perfidiously. His people had urged him to embrace Islam because others had embraced it, but he said, "By God, I have sworn that I would not cease [to attain power] until the Arabs follow me. Am I to follow the footsteps of this youth from Quraysh?" Then he said to Arbad, "When we come to the man, I will divert his attention from you, and as I do that, cleave him with the sword." When they came to the Messenger of God, 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl said, "O Muḥammad, can I [talk to you] privately?" He replied, "No, by God, [I will not talk to you] until you believe in God alone." ['Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl] repeated his request for privacy and went on talking to him, expecting that Arbad would act as he had told him, but Arbad did not return a word in reply. When 'Āmir saw that Arbad did not respond, he again repeated his request and the Messenger of God gave him the same reply. When the Messenger of God refused, he said, "Then, by God, I will fill the land with red horses and men against you." When he turned away, the Messenger of God said, "O God, protect me from 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl." On their return, 'Āmir said to Arbad, "Woe to you, Arbad! What happened to that with which I had charged you? By God, there was no man on the face of the earth whom I feared more than you, but by God, I shall never fear you after today." "May you have no father, don't be hasty with me," Arbad replied, "By God, whenever I tried to do what you had asked me to do, you got in my way so that I could not see anything but you. Was I to strike you with the sword?" 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl said:

The Messenger sent what you see, as if
we were intending to raid the troops of horsemen.
Our horses became lean while bringing us to Medina,
and they killed the Anṣār in their midst.

While they were on their way back to their country, God afflicted 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl's neck with a fatal disease [a tumor] and killed him while he was in the house of a woman from the Banū Salūl. He began to say, "O Banū 'Āmir, a lump like the lump of a young camel, and death in the house of a woman from the Banū Salūl!" When they buried him, his companions left for the country of the Banū 'Āmir. When they arrived there, their people came to them and asked Arbad what had happened. He replied, "Nothing, by God. He [Muḥammad] called on us to worship something. I wish he were near me now, and I would

shoot him with this arrow of mine and kill him.” A day or two after he had uttered those words, he went out with his camel to sell it, and God sent a thunderbolt which scorched him and his camel. Arbad b. Qays was the brother of Labīd b. Rabī‘a by the same mother.⁵²²

The archetype of Muḥammad for this story would thus appear to be a mixture of what has come before. Again, Muḥammad is saved by a miracle of God, who tricks Arbad into thinking his companion is blocking his shot, and the Prophet’s prayer is answered with the death of ‘Āmir, who is thus no longer able to order an attack. But God takes his protection of the Prophet a step further and kills Arbad, and his camel, after the man expresses his own desire to kill Muḥammad. As with the miracles of the pre-Revelation Meccan period, Muḥammad appears unaware of the first miracle, although since ‘Āmir blames him directly, this could be an indication that Muḥammad knew what they were planning and acted accordingly, either supernaturally or simply by refusing to turn his back, but the wording of ‘Āmir’s poem would seem to indicate the former rather than the latter. Also, it is not revealed how or whether Muḥammad received word of the strange and sudden deaths of these two enemies, thus again, we are left with the possibility that he was unaware that his prayer had been answered. So, whereas in the story of Ḥātib’s letter, Muḥammad’s prayer is answered directly and he is able to act on this information, in this tale, Muḥammad is yet again a passive receptor of God’s works. However, it is also possible that Muḥammad’s relationship with the supernatural had reached the point where simply the act of making such a prayer guaranteed a response. By the end of the Medinan period, during which this event takes place, the archetypal Muḥammad was so confident of his favored status with God that

⁵²²Ismail K. Poonawala, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 9, *The Last Years of the Prophet* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 103-5; Leiden edition, 1745-7.

he knew that if he prayed for protection, he would receive it, and it is this interpretation that is most likely.

Al-Ṭabarī's Tafsīr

Al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* of Qur'ān 13:9-13 directly links this event to the verses, specifically to 13:11-13, despite the fact that they are not cited in his *sīra/ta'riḫh* at all.⁵²³ They read:

He knoweth the Unseen and that which is open: He is the Great, the most High. It is the same (to Him) whether any of you conceal his speech or declare it openly; whether he lie hid by night or walk forth freely by day. For each (such person) there are (angels) in succession. Before and behind him: they guard him by command of Allāh. Verily never will Allāh change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (with their own souls). But when (once) Allāh willeth a people's punishment, there can be no turning it back, nor will they find, besides Him, any to protect. It is He Who doth show you the lightning, by way both of fear and of hope: it is He Who doth raise up the clouds, heavy with (fertilising) rain! Nay, thunder repeateth His praises, and so do the angels, with awe: He flingeth the loud-voiced thunderbolts, and therewith He striketh whomsoever He will, yet these (are the men) who (dare to) dispute about Allāh, with the strength of His power (supreme)!

The verses are all treated individually except 13:12-13, which are treated together.

However, in his explanation of what these verses mean, al-Ṭabarī does seem to tie the entire group together. His explanation of Qur'ān 13:9-10 focuses on the power of God to know everything, whether one admits it openly or tries to keep it secret, and again he

⁵²³Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 13:9,

<<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=13&tAyahNo=9&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0>>, 13:10,

<<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=13&tAyahNo=10&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0>>, 13:11,

<<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=13&tAyahNo=11&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0>>, 13:12-13,

<<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=13&tAyahNo=12&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0>>, May 2006.

uses examples from poetry and discussions on grammar and lexicography to support his arguments.⁵²⁴ It is in his rather lengthy explanation of Qur'ān 13:11 that we see the first indication of this event.

The main controversy regarding this verse for al-Ṭabarī appears to be over what is meant by “those who go in succession.”⁵²⁵ Al-Ṭabarī argues that the meaning of this verse is directly tied to the two previous verses, in that those who go in succession are guarding “he who lies hidden in the night,” and that this ties in with God’s knowledge of all things.⁵²⁶ The story of ‘Āmir and Arbad appears in only one of the numerous reports listed for this verse, and each of the two miracle stories is explicitly related. It states:

‘Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl and Arbad b. Rabī‘a came to the Messenger of God, and ‘Āmir said: “What will you give me if I follow you?” He said: “You are a horseman, I will give you the bridle of the horses.” He [‘Āmir] said: “No.” He [Muḥammad] said: “Then what do you desire?” He said: “For me the East and for you the West.” He [Muḥammad] said: “No.” He said: “Then for me the tent-dwellers and for you the city-dwellers.” He [Muḥammad] said: “No.” He said: “Truly I will fill it up over you (with) horses and men!” He [Muḥammad] said: “God prohibits you this....” So they left.⁵²⁷

At this point, the story is very much one of attempted bribery rather than assassination.

Thus, this version of the story is different from that found in his *sīra/ta’rīkh* in that the two men do not initiate this meeting with the intent to kill Muḥammad. Instead, ‘Āmir,

⁵²⁴Ibid., 13:9,

<<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=13&tAyahNo=9&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0>>, 13:10,

<<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=13&tAyahNo=10&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0>>, May 2006.

⁵²⁵Whereas the Yūsuf ‘Alī translation indicates that this means angels, al-Ṭabarī’s exegesis shows that this was not the only interpretation being circulated.

⁵²⁶Ibid., 13:11,

<<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=13&tAyahNo=11&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0>>, May 2006.

⁵²⁷Ibid.

like Abū Lahab in the *tafsīr* of 111:1-5, is attempting to exchange conversion for power. It is only when Muḥammad refuses him that ‘Āmir becomes enraged and threatens violence. The story continues with ‘Āmir and Arbad conspiring to go back and kill Muḥammad, reasoning that the Medinans will be satisfied with the payment of blood-money if they are successful. The report continues:

So they consulted (each other), and he [‘Āmir] said: “Return and I will distract him from you with discussion, and (you will) be behind him. Then strike him with the sword, one stroke.” So the two of them (stood) likewise, one [Arbad] behind the prophet, and the other [‘Āmir] said: “Tell us your story, what does your Qur’ān say?” Then he began to argue with him (in order) to keep him waiting until he [‘Āmir] said: “What are you doing?” He [Arbad] said: “I placed my hands on the upright of my sword, then they became dry, so I did not have power over (it, as if I were) stuck in a quagmire and could not walk and (could) not move it [the sword].” So the two left.

Then, when they were in the lava field [outside of Medina] Sa’d b. Mu’ādh and Usayd b. Ḥuḍayr heard about that, so the two went out (after) the two of them.... Then the two said to ‘Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl: “O one-eyed, O wicked, O tasteless, you are he who imposed conditions on the Messenger of God? If you were not in the protection of the Messenger of God, I would not want to stop until I cut off your head, but you will truly not be spared....” Then he [‘Āmir] said to Arbad: “You go out, O Arbad, to an agreeable direction and I will go out to the Nejd, then we will gather the men, and we will meet about him.” So Arbad went out until, when he was in al-Raqm, God sent a cloud from the summer (and) in it (was) a thunderbolt, then it burned him. And ‘Āmir went out, so that when he was in a valley..., God sent to him the plague, so he began to cry out: “O people of ‘Āmir, a growth like the growth of the young camel and it has killed me, O people of ‘Āmir, a growth like the growth of the young camel, it has killed me, and a death moreover in the house of a Salūfiya and she is a woman of Qays....”⁵²⁸

The element of the supernatural is here more strongly implied in that Arbad claims that, not only did his hand become so dry that he was unable to use his sword, but that he felt as if he were “stuck in a quagmire.”⁵²⁹ Thus, God protected Muḥammad from their plan.

Another addition is the appearance of the two Muslim men, who threaten ‘Āmir and

⁵²⁸Ibid.

⁵²⁹Ibid.

Arbad for their attempts at selling their conversion, but nothing here is said by the two Muslims of the attempted assassination. Thus, it would appear that, even though God protected Muḥammad, the Prophet remained unaware of either the attempt on his life or the divine intervention. It is also at this point in the report that we see a bit of foreshadowing in the statement that, even though the two men are under the protection of Muḥammad, they will not be spared the punishment for their sins.

The narrator ties this story to Qur'ān 13:10-11 by stating that even though 'Āmir and Arbad plotted in secret, God knew about their plans, and that the angels guarded Muḥammad from before him and behind him against the two assassins. He adds quotations from Qur'ān 13:12-14, and then adds some poetry recited about Arbad by his brother, Labīd. Al-Ṭabarī appears to take issue, not with the story itself, but rather with its interpretation in light of the verses at hand. He argues that the verses simply mean that God has knowledge of all things and that even if someone tries to hide his words or deeds, and even if he has guards in front of him and behind him, if he rebels against God, nothing will protect him.⁵³⁰ The rest of al-Ṭabarī's commentary on this verse relates to the arguments of the various groups of grammarians and their disagreements over the meanings of different parts of the verse.⁵³¹

It is only in al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* of Qu'rān 13:12-13 that we have a fuller treatment of the event involving 'Āmir and Arbad.⁵³² Again, there appears to be a controversy over the meaning of different aspects of these verses, and the first disagreement appears

⁵³⁰Ibid.

⁵³¹Ibid.

⁵³²Ibid., 13:12-3,

<<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=13&tAyahNo=12&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0>>, May 2006.

to be over the meaning of *b-r-q*, which Yūsuf ‘Alī translates as lightning, but which can also have the connotation of something glittery, and so some of al-Ṭabarī’s authorities say, instead, that it means water.⁵³³ In his explanation of Qur’ān 13:13, we see a return to the story of the attempted assassination, but in it, too, a possible reason why this story contains no Qur’ānic revelation in his *sīra/ta’rīkh*.⁵³⁴ The commentary begins with a listing of reports that relate what Muḥammad used to say or do any time he heard thunder.⁵³⁵ Most of these simply have him praising God, but the last one of this series includes an element of folk magic, and states, “He who says, upon hearing the thunder: ‘Praise God and Praise Him,’ the thunderbolt will not hit him.”⁵³⁶ Thus, it appears that the power of the Qur’ān or the model of Muḥammad will protect those who believe. Al-Ṭabarī does not give any criticism of this report, and moves on to comment that when thunder sounds, it is glorifying God, and that God is above what some would ascribe to him, such as the taking of a female companion and a son, which are obvious references to the Christian divinity of Jesus.⁵³⁷ There does not appear to be a reason for this comment, since he moves on fairly quickly to a discussion of the reason for the revelation of this verse. He states that there is some disagreement on this subject, and then goes on to transmit reports that relate various stories in connection with this verse. Five of these reports indicate that it was revealed in a different context from that found

⁵³³Ibid. Al-Ṭabarī claims that he has already discussed the variant meanings of *b-r-q* elsewhere, but does not say in relation to what verse.

⁵³⁴Ibid.

⁵³⁵Ibid. Here, too, al-Ṭabarī indicates a previous discussion on the topic without any further citation.

⁵³⁶Ibid.

⁵³⁷Ibid. Christianity does not, however, allocate a female companion to God, so it is possible that, since he makes this remark in reference to the throwing of thunderbolts, he could be indicating any number of polytheistic deities as, for example, the Greek god Zeus, who was well-known as the master of thunderbolts as well as for his numerous affairs with female companions.

in the *sīra/ta'rikh*, while only one seems to support the story of 'Āmir and Arbad. Al-Ṭabarī begins with four reports that relate stories whereby an individual, either someone named Jabbar, a Jew, an unidentified man, or “a man of the pharaohs of the Arabs,” asks inappropriate questions about God.⁵³⁸ They each ask, in different contexts, what material God is made from. Usually the materials mentioned are gold, silver, rubies, or pearls, and, of course, none of these are appropriate, so God kills each of these men with lightning and then reveals the verse. Another possibility presented by al-Ṭabarī is from a report wherein “a man renounced the Qur'ān and lied to the Prophet....”⁵³⁹ This man, too, is destroyed by lightning, and then God reveals the verse.

Finally, al-Ṭabarī relates the report linking this verse to the story of 'Āmir and Arbad.⁵⁴⁰ The report begins by connecting the revelation of the verse to this event, stating:

It was revealed, meaning His speech, “He flingeth the loud-voiced thunderbolts, and therewith He striketh whomsoever He will,” about Arbad, brother of Labīd b. Rabī'a, because he, Arbad, and 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl b. Mālik b. Ja'far appeared before the Prophet, then 'Āmir said: “O Muḥammad, is it decided (that I) will be the successor after you?” He said: “No.” He ['Āmir] said: “Then I will be over the bedouins and you over the city-dwellers.” He said: “No.” So he ['Āmir] said: “Then what is this?” He [Muḥammad] said: “You will receive the reins of the horses, fight with one another over them, for truly you are a horseman.”⁵⁴¹ He said: “...Truly, by God, (I will bring) against you horses and men from the Banū 'Āmir.” And he said to Arbad: “Either you protect me from him and I will strike him with the sword, or I will protect you from him and strike him with the sword.” Arbad said: “I will protect you from him and I will strike him,” so 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl said: “O Muḥammad, I have business with you.” He [Muḥammad] said: “Profess!” So he ['Āmir] continued to draw near, while the

⁵³⁸Ibid. The third man whose name is given as a chief of the Banū 'Āmir along with 'Āmir and Arbad is also named Jabbar. Since he is also depicted as an evil person, the report may well be about him, although this is not stated outright.

⁵³⁹Ibid.

⁵⁴⁰Ibid.

⁵⁴¹It appears here that Muḥammad is offering 'Āmir command over the cavalry.

Prophet was saying “Profess,” until he laid his hand on his knee and leaned toward him while Arbad drew the sword. Then he withdrew from him somewhat. Then, when the Prophet saw its [the sword’s] shine, he was protected by a miracle..., so (that) the hand of Arbad became dry on the sword. And God sent on him a Thunderbolt, which burned him.⁵⁴²

The poetry from Arbad’s brother is repeated, and this ends the report. Al-Ṭabarī adds that he has related another version of this story, and this is the report examined above in relation to 13:11. Only one other report in the numerous reports that follow relate to this story, and it is simply one that states that the verse was revealed about Arbad and that God sent the thunderbolt against him.⁵⁴³ The rest of the explanation of this verse has to do with the possible vowelization of the word *m-h-ā-l*, which might make the word indicate God’s strength, as translated by Yūsuf ‘Alī, or as cunning, which appears to be the preferred meaning of al-Ṭabarī.⁵⁴⁴

The supernatural archetype of Muḥammad in al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* of Qur’ān 13:9-13 would appear to be slightly different from that presented in his *sīra/ta’rīkh*. Of the numerous reports transmitted, only three mention Arbad b. Qays, while only two of these mention the full story of his failed plot with ‘Āmir. All three of the reports link the event to the verses of the Qur’ān, and two of them explicitly relate the miracle that saved Muḥammad’s life. Only one details the Divine punishment meted out to both men, while the second reserves that punishment for Arbad alone. However, the fact that they are in the minority, even among those reports that indicate possible reasons for the

⁵⁴²Ibid.

⁵⁴³Ibid.

⁵⁴⁴Ibid. Yūsuf ‘Alī’s translation of the end of this verse is: “Yet these (are the men) who (dare to) dispute about Allāh, with the strength of His power (supreme)!” The word in question, *m-h-ā-l*, is thus translated as God’s power, but al-Ṭabarī expresses preference for an interpretation of the word that indicates God’s cunning.

revelation of this verse grouping, would seem to indicate some uncertainty on the part of al-Ṭabarī and may have led to his decision not to include the Qur'ān citation in his *sīra/ta'rīkh*. Also, his report in that genre is not repeated in his *tafsīr*, possibly since it does not mention a Qur'ānic connection, which may also indicate his hesitancy about the relation of this story to this particular part of the Qur'ān. Therefore, whereas his *sīra/ta'rīkh* yet again seems to reveal a certain confidence on his part, since he relates only one report for this event, his work of *tafsīr* appears more concerned with other aspects of the verse grouping, such as its meaning and matters of grammar and lexicography, making it seem that the archetypal Muḥammad is of only minor significance for his *Tafsīr* in this instance.

Ibn Kathīr's Sīra/Ta'rīkh

Ibn Kathīr also gives this incident its own section in his *sīra/ta'rīkh*, as he did that of Ḥāṭib's letter, but instead has Arbad identified in the first part of the section as Arbad b. *m-q-y-s*.⁵⁴⁵ Unlike al-Ṭabarī's treatment of this event in only one report in his *sīra/ta'rīkh*, Ibn Kathīr relates some nine separate reports in this section, seven of which are actually linked to this event.⁵⁴⁶ The first is nearly identical to the one from Ibn Ishāq that appears in al-Ṭabarī's *History*.⁵⁴⁷ It relates:

⁵⁴⁵Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāya wa'l-Nihāya*, vol. 5, 56; LeGassick, vol. 4, 76. I am uncertain as to the vowelization of this word. As with the story of Ḥāṭib's letter, the heading here reads: "The Delegation of the Banū 'Āmir and the story (*qiṣṣa*) of 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl and Arbad b. *m-q-y-s*." He is also sometimes referred to as Arbad b. Rabī'a, although LeGassick simply relates his name as Arbad b. Qays.

⁵⁴⁶Ibid., vol. 5, 56-60; LeGassick, vol. 4, 76-81. When numbering reports for this section, then, only the ones actually examined here will be counted. The other two reports relate the story of a man from this tribe who converted to Islam and remained a faithful Muslim who lived to be over one hundred years old.

⁵⁴⁷Ibid., vol. 5, 56-7; LeGassick, vol. 4, 76-7.

Then a delegation from Banū ‘Āmir came to visit the Messenger of God. It included ‘Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl and Arbad b. *m-q-y-s* b. Jaz’ b. Ja‘far b. Khālīd and Jabbār b. Salmā b. Mālīk b. Ja‘far.⁵⁴⁸ These three men were the leaders and chief mischief-makers of their tribe.

When that enemy of God, ‘Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl came to see the Messenger of God, it was with the intent of betraying him. His people had told him, “Abū ‘Āmir, others have accepted Islam, you do so too.” But he replied, “I swear, by God, I made a vow I would never cease striving to get the Arabs to follow me; should I now follow this Quraysh fellow?”

He said to Arbad:⁵⁴⁹ “When we go see this man, I will get him to turn his face away from you. When I do this, you strike him with your sword!”⁵⁵⁰

When they reached the Messenger of God, ‘Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl said: “Muḥammad, will you come aside with me?” He replied: “No, by God, not until you believe in God alone.” ‘Āmir repeated: “Please, just come aside with me, Muḥammad.” And he began talking to him, waiting for Arbad to act. Arbad, however, did nothing. When ‘Āmir saw that Arbad was taking no action, he again said, “Muḥammad, do come aside with me,” but he again replied, “No not until you believe in God alone Who has no partner.”

When the Messenger of God thus rejected him, ‘Āmir said, “Then, by God, I will fill this place with horses and men to fight you!” When ‘Āmir had turned away to leave, the Messenger of God said: “O God restrain from me ‘Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl.”⁵⁵¹

When they had left the Messenger of God, ‘Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl asked Arbad, “Had I not ordered you what to do? I swear, by God, there was no man on earth I considered more fearsome than you! I swear, I will never fear you again after today.”

He replied, “I pray you, do not blame me too hastily. Whenever I was about to do as you had asked, you got in the man’s way so all I could see was you. Should I have struck you with my sword?”

They headed back home and when they had gone part way, God, the Almighty and Glorious, afflicted ‘Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl with a growth in his neck. And God killed him in the home of a woman of Banū Salūl. He exclaimed, “O Banū ‘Āmir, shall (my) death be from a growth like that on a young camel in the home of a woman of Banū Salūl?”⁵⁵²

⁵⁴⁸LeGassick has the names as Arbad b. Qays b. Jaz’ b. Khālīd b. Ja‘far and Ḥayyān b. Salmā b. Mālīk b. Ja‘far.

⁵⁴⁹LeGassick has “Al-Arbad then said,” but the Arabic clearly states that Arbad is the one being addressed, not the one speaking. *Thumma qāla li-Arbad.*

⁵⁵⁰The Arabic text has: “Then he said to Arbad: Truly when we reach this man, I will distract his face from you, so then when you do that I will descend upon him with the sword.” This implies that ‘Āmir will both be the one distracting Muḥammad and the one hitting him with the sword.

⁵⁵¹LeGassick has Muḥammad praying: “O God, take care of ‘Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl for me!”

⁵⁵²Ibid., vol. 5, 56; LeGassick, vol. 4, 76-7.

Muḥammad prays for protection, the men have their quarrel, but this time there is no poetry from ‘Āmir to indicate that Muḥammad was responsible for what Arbad saw. In fact, without the poetry, the story up to this point could be seen as one indicating no miracle, since it is possible that ‘Āmir was simply in the way. The report ends differently from the one in al-Ṭabarī, however, in that it only gives the death story of ‘Āmir, not Arbad, thus leaving out any connection between Arbad’s death by lightning and the Qur’ānic verse about God’s power to throw thunderbolts.

Ibn Kathīr moves directly and without comment into the second report, and this one, too, only relates the death of ‘Āmir.⁵⁵³ This report, from al-Bayhaqī, does not give his meeting as part of the delegation sent by his tribe, but rather begins by stating that ‘Āmir came to Muḥammad, who urged him to convert. The man again tries to negotiate for power, but Muḥammad refuses and ‘Āmir repeats his threat. This time, the prayer is slightly different, as Muḥammad asks, “O God, protect me from ‘Āmir and one of his group.”⁵⁵⁴ There is no mention of Arbad at all in this report. Again, the man contracts a disease in his throat at the woman’s house, and rides out on his horse until he dies. It is at this point that Ibn Kathīr inserts the two reports about the other member of the Banū ‘Āmir b. Ṣa‘ṣa‘a who converted and became a good Muslim.⁵⁵⁵

The third report to deal with ‘Āmir and Arbad begins with a comment by Ibn Kathīr that deals with the chronology of this event. He states that although Ibn Ishāq and al-Bayhaqī put this event after the conquest of Mecca, he argues that it took place

⁵⁵³Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 4, 77.

⁵⁵⁴Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 4, 77. LeGassick here has Muḥammad say, “O God, rid me of ‘Āmir and give his people guidance!”

⁵⁵⁵Ibid., vol. 5, 57-8; LeGassick, vol. 4, 78.

before that.⁵⁵⁶ He relates the third report in relation to a previous event at Bi'r Ma'ūna.⁵⁵⁷ The report relates that Muḥammad prayed about 'Āmir for some thirty days, asking God to kill him: "O God, restrain from me 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl with what you will and send on him what will kill him."⁵⁵⁸ The report ends with the statement that God then killed him with the plague. This would seem to indicate that the later meeting between 'Āmir and Muḥammad never took place.

The fourth report again leaves out the context of the tribal delegations, and states:

'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl went to the Messenger of God and told him, "I give you to choose between three options: you shall govern the people of the plains, while I the nomads, or I shall be your successor after you, or I will attack you with Banū Ghāṭafān and 1,000 stallions and 1,000 mares."

He was then, while staying in a woman's house, afflicted with a malignant growth. At this, he exclaimed, "Shall it be a growth like that on a camel and death in the house of a woman of Banū so and so? Bring me my horse!" He rode away and died upon his horse.⁵⁵⁹

So, here again, Arbad is left out of the story entirely, and the report is limited to the meeting between Muḥammad and 'Āmir and the latter's death after his threat.

Muḥammad makes no request via prayer, but 'Āmir dies anyway, and there is no

Qur'ānic connection to this story.

The fifth report appears to be a continuation of the first by Ibn Ishāq, since it begins with the return of the delegation to their territory after the death of 'Āmir.⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁶Ibid., vol. 5, 58; LeGassick, vol. 4, 78.

⁵⁵⁷Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 4, 78. The event at Bi'r Ma'ūna, which took place in 4/625, was the slaughter of several Muslims sent by Muḥammad to the Banū 'Āmir at the invitation of their chief. 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl, who was also important in the tribe, killed the first Muslim representative without looking at the letter of safe-conduct granted by the tribe's chief, and even after he knew of it, he gathered others to him, who agreed to help him kill the others.

⁵⁵⁸Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 4, 78.

⁵⁵⁹Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 4, 78.

⁵⁶⁰Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 4, 79. Ibn Kathīr simply begins this with "Ibn Ishāq said."

They ask Arbad what happened, he repeats the story as before, and includes his desire to kill Muḥammad. The report then relates the story of Arbad and his camel and how they were both burned by the thunderbolt sent by God. Unlike the account in al-Ṭabarī, however, this report includes a much lengthier example of the poetry recited by Arbad's brother, Labīd b. Rabī'a.⁵⁶¹ The sixth report, from Ibn Hishām, reads more like a *tafsīr* report, in that it begins by mentioning the Qur'ān verses and stating that they were revealed regarding 'Āmir and Arbad.⁵⁶² This report gives the meaning of the verse regarding "those who guard from before and behind by the command of God" as protecting Muḥammad and that Arbad was killed by God, but gives no details of the events.⁵⁶³

Before moving on to the last report, Ibn Kathīr cites his own *tafsīr* of these verses, stating:

And we already spoke about these noble verses in sūrat al-Ra'd, and to God goes all praise and credit. And he already recorded for us an *isnād*.⁵⁶⁴ Ibn Hishām, may God have mercy on him, did not make note of it, so we transmitted it from the path of the *ḥāfiẓ* Abū al-Qāsim Sulaymān b. Aḥmad al-Ṭabarānī in his great lexicon....⁵⁶⁵

The text of this report is much like that found in al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* of Qur'ān 13:11, and states:

Truly Arbad b. Qays b. Jaz' b. Khālīd b. Ja'far b. Kilāb and 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl b. Mālīk came to Medina to see the Messenger of God in Medina. When they reached him, he was seated and they both sat down in front of him. 'Āmir b. al-

⁵⁶¹Ibid., vol. 5, 58-9; LeGassick, vol. 4, 79.

⁵⁶²Ibid., vol. 5, 59; LeGassick, vol. 4, 80. Unlike the other reports, however, this begins with Qur'ān 13:8, which reads: "Allāh doth know what every female (womb) doth bear, by how much the wombs fall short (of their time or number) or do exceed. Every single thing is before His sight, in (due) proportion."

⁵⁶³Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 4, 80. The part of the verse quoted is from Qur'ān 13:11.

⁵⁶⁴It is unclear here who is meant. It may have been Ibn Hishām, in which case the statement is rather contradictory, or some otherwise unidentified source.

⁵⁶⁵Ibid.; LeGassick, vol. 4, 80.

Ṭufayl asked him, “Muḥammad, what will you do for me if I accept Islam?” The Messenger of God replied, “You will receive the same as the other Muslims and have the same obligations.”

‘Āmir then asked, “If I accept Islam, will you ensure that I become leader after you?” The Messenger of God replied, “That shall not be for you or for your tribe. But you may have command over the cavalry.” ‘Āmir responded, “I already now have control over all the cavalry of Nejd. Give me control over the nomads, and you control the villages.”

“No,” he replied. As he was leaving him, ‘Āmir said, “I am going to fill up this place with horses and men to fight you.” The Messenger of God responded, “God will prevent you.”

When Arbad and ‘Āmir left, the latter suggested, “Arbad, I will distract Muḥammad from you by talking to him, and then you strike him with your sword. If you do kill Muḥammad, they will want no more than to be satisfied by payment of the blood-wit. They dislike warfare. You will just give them the blood-wit.” Arbad replied, “I will do it.”

They proceeded back to the Messenger of God, and ‘Āmir addressed him, “Muḥammad, get up and come with me so I can talk to you.” The Messenger of God arose and went alone with him toward the wall where he stopped to talk to him. Arbad went to draw his sword, but when he touched it, his hand lost its grip on the sword’s hilt and he could not unsheathe it. Arbad was unable to strike him sufficiently quickly for ‘Āmir, because the Messenger of God turned and, seeing Arbad and what he intended, walked away from them both.

When Arbad and ‘Āmir left the presence of the Messenger of God, and reached the lava plain of Wāqim, they halted. But Sa’d b. Mu’adh and Usayd b. al-Ḥudayr went out after them and said, “Clear off, you enemies of God! God damn you both!” ‘Āmir responded, “Who is that, Sa’d?” “That is Usayd b. Ḥudayr of the cavalry squadrons,” he replied.

They left, and while they were at al-Raqm, God sent a thunderbolt down on Arbad and killed him. ‘Āmir then left, and when he was in the lava field, God sent a malignant growth to afflict him. That night he spent in the house of a woman of Banū Salūl. He began feeling the growth on his neck and said, “A growth like that of a camel, in the house of a woman of Banū Salūl!” He loathed the idea of dying in her house.

He then rode off on his horse, made it gallop, then died on it as he returned. God revealed about them both, “God knows what every female...” and so on, to the words, “For each (such person) there are (angels) in succession. Before and behind him....” By this, He was making reference to Muḥammad. He then made a reference to Arbad and how God had killed him, then quoted the verse, “He sends the thunderbolts and uses them....”⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶⁶Ibid., vol. 5, 59-60; LeGassick, vol. 4, 80-1. The translation of the Qur’ān verse here reflects the Yūsuf ‘Alī translation as opposed to that found in LeGassick’s text, which is otherwise the wording of the translation given here.

In this report, the supernatural archetype has been slightly altered. While divine aid may have had a hand in Arbad's inability to draw his sword, ultimately it was the fact that Muḥammad turned around and saw what the man was doing that saved his life. Here Ibn Kathīr seems to add his own comment, although it could still be part of the report itself, that the presence of Sa'd b. Mu'ādh is troublesome in this chronology, and adds the familiar "but God knows best."⁵⁶⁷

So, Ibn Kathīr's *sīra/ta'rikh* of this event relates seven reports, although the fifth appears to be a continuation of the first, that discuss 'Āmir and Arbad. The archetype of this story contains two miracles, the first is the supernatural reason that keeps Arbad from striking Muḥammad with his sword, and the second is God's retribution against 'Āmir and Arbad. The first part of the archetype is found definitively in none of the reports related here. It is only possibly implied in two reports, the first and the last. In the first report, Arbad claims that he could not strike Muḥammad because 'Āmir was constantly in the way. While this could have been the case, it could also have been an illusion sent by God to protect Muḥammad, but without the poetry found in al-Ṭabarī's account, the mundane element appears more likely. The first miracle is even less likely in the last report, wherein Arbad's hand becomes too dry to pull out his sword and Muḥammad turns around and sees him. Again, it is possible that divine intervention made his hand dry, but the report simply does not seem to indicate this. As for the second of the two miracles, the deaths of 'Āmir and Arbad, these, too, are not found in all of the reports. If report five is a continuation of report one, then the deaths of both

⁵⁶⁷Ibid., vol. 5, 60; LeGassick, vol. 4, 81. Sa'd b. Mu'ādh died immediately after the attack on the Banū Qurayza in 5/627. His presence after the meeting between 'Āmir and Muḥammad is troublesome, since the delegation did not arrive until some five years after the time of Sa'd's death.

men are related and are ascribed to God. Report seven is, again, the only other report that gives the deaths of both men as an act of supernatural retribution. The second report only relates the death of ‘Āmir, but does not specifically describe it as an act of God, although the fact that it comes shortly after Muḥammad’s prayer is a good indication that it was, in fact, supernatural. Report three has the supernatural death of ‘Āmir as a response to Muḥammad’s prayer, but relates it to a completely different incident, and Muḥammad has to pray for a month before anything happens. Report six indicates that God revealed Qur’ān 13:13 in relation to how he killed Arbad, but fails to give any other details of the story. Thus, of the seven reports, the full archetype is described only in one, while another one leaves out any miraculous element whatsoever. Since Ibn Kathīr does not provide an introductory section for this event, his own opinions about the details of the story, besides the troubling chronological issues surrounding the presence of Sa’d b. Mu’ādh, are not given in the *sīra/ta’rīkh*, but the supernatural element certainly seems not to be fully supported by the reports he relates.

Ibn Kathīr’s Tafsīr

Although Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr* includes numerous reports for Qur’ān 13:9-13, only one is directly linked to the story of ‘Āmir and Arbad.⁵⁶⁸ The verses read:

Allāh doth know what every female (womb) doth bear, by how much the wombs fall short (of their time or number) or do exceed. Every single thing is before His sight, in (due) proportion. He knoweth the Unseen and that which is open: He is the Great, the most High. It is the same (to Him) whether any of you conceal his speech or declare it openly; whether he lie hid by night or walk forth freely by day. For each (such person) there are (angels) in succession. Before and behind

⁵⁶⁸Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 2, 975-979. Ibn Kathīr groups the verses as follows: 13:8-9, 13:10-11, and 13:12-13.

him: they guard him by command of Allāh. Verily never will Allāh change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (with their own souls). But when (once) Allāh willeth a people's punishment, there can be no turning it back, nor will they find, besides Him, any to protect. It is He Who doth show you the lightning, by way both of fear and of hope: it is He Who doth raise up the clouds, heavy with (fertilising) rain! Nay, thunder repeateth His praises, and so do the angels, with awe: He flingeth the loud-voiced thunderbolts, and therewith He striketh whomsoever He will... yet these (are the men) who (dare to) dispute about Allāh, with the strength of His power (supreme)!

As in al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*, there are many reports about what the verses mean, but there is no mention of 'Āmir and Arbad until Ibn Kathīr's exegesis of 13:12-3. It is not until nearly the end of his explanation of Qur'ān 13:13 that Ibn Kathīr even gets around to the occasion for the verse's revelation.⁵⁶⁹ He begins with reports that discuss the origins of lightning and thunder, relating, for example, that God's voice is the thunder and His laughter is the lightning, or that lightning comes from the movement of the tail of "an angel who has four faces: a human face, a bull face, an eagle face, and a lion face...."⁵⁷⁰ He then moves on to relate reports like those found in al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr* that detail Muḥammad's reaction to hearing thunder, including the report in which the element of folk magic offers the believer protection against the lightning if he offers God praises similar to those of Muḥammad.⁵⁷¹

Like al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr relates reports indicating other possible incidents leading up to the verse's revelation, including the stories of the various men who asked what material God was made of, and the story of the man who lied to Muḥammad.⁵⁷² However, unlike al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr nowhere directly states that these are conflicting

⁵⁶⁹Ibid., vol. 2, 978-9.

⁵⁷⁰Ibid., vol. 2, 978.

⁵⁷¹Ibid.

⁵⁷²Ibid.

stories regarding the verse's revelation. At this point, Ibn Kathīr gives his own version of events involving 'Āmir and Arbad:

And they mention as the reason (for) its revelation the story of 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl and Arbad b. Rabī'a, when they came (to see) the Messenger of God (in) Medina. Then they asked him that he give them half of the command, but the Messenger of God refused. So 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl, may God curse him, said to him: "Truly, by God, we will fill it up against you (with) plain horses and recalcitrant men." So the Messenger of God said to him: "God refuses you that...." Then truly they, both of them, (plotted) in the murder of the Messenger of God, so one of the two of them began to speak to him, while the other pulled out his sword (in order to) kill him from behind. So God the most High protected him from the two of them and safeguarded him. So the two went out from Medina, and they started off in the district of the Arabs [bedouin], gathering the people to war against him. So then God sent against Arbad a cloud (and) in it (was) a thunderbolt, so it destroyed him by fire. And as for 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl, so God sent against him the plague..., so he began to say, "O family of 'Āmir, a growth like the growth of the young camel and death in the house of a Salūīya." So the two of them died because God was against them, and God revealed about that: "He flingeth the loud-voiced thunderbolts, and therewith He striketh whomsoever He will... yet these (are the men) who (dare to) dispute about Allāh."⁵⁷³

Ibn Kathīr ends his introductory section with the poetry recited by Arbad's brother, eulogizing him.⁵⁷⁴ He then moves directly into the one report he relates for this incident and it is identical to report seven in his *sīra/ta'rikh*.⁵⁷⁵ Again, this report contains the incident where Muḥammad turns and sees Arbad trying to draw the sword, and so this part of the supernatural element appears less likely. However, it does include the supernatural link to the deaths of both men, and so this part of the archetype appears to be upheld.

Thus, as in his *tafsīr* account of Ḥāṭib's letter, Ibn Kathīr completely upholds the supernatural archetype of Muḥammad in an introductory section despite the fact that his

⁵⁷³Ibid.

⁵⁷⁴Ibid.

⁵⁷⁵Ibid., vol. 2, 978-9. See also 240-1 above.

supporting sources are less than explicit in this matter. However, the fact that he only relates this story in one small section of the overall exegesis for these verses would appear to indicate that the archetype of Muḥammad for Ibn Kathīr's description of this incident in his *Tafsīr*, whether miraculous or mundane, is secondary in importance to explanations regarding the meanings of the verses themselves. The only real indication of the importance of these verses for their role in describing the archetype of Muḥammad would thus be the introductory section itself. Ibn Kathīr does not give such an introduction to the reports listing other possible occasions for the revelation of these verses; and he goes out of his way to argue for his own interpretation of the story, no matter what his reports relate.

In conclusion, the archetype of Muḥammad for the Medinan period continues, to a certain extent, the mundane/supernatural dichotomy of the other periods. His worldly success proceeds at a rate matched only by his increasingly successful control over the supernatural world. The sheer number of reports of supernatural occurrences for this period reveals that arguments for its historicity over the Meccan period can no longer be unquestioningly accepted, and that the study of this period by modern historians must be rethought. In the case of Ḥāṭib's letter, the archetype is of the knowing prophet, who receives secret knowledge from a divine or supernatural source. In the incident involving 'Āmir and Arbad, he is the protected prophet, whose enemies must face not only his human supporters, but his supernatural protector as well. The violent deaths of these men are an indication that Muḥammad is someone whose prayers are answered quickly and with terrible certainty, and the comments made by Sa'd b. Mu'ādh that

these men were under Muḥammad's protection may indicate an awareness by Muḥammad of his control over this type of power. He may have shielded them from his human supporters so that they could be properly punished by his divine protector.

For al-Ṭabarī, the supernatural archetype, although not always well attested by the reports at his disposal, appears to be just as important as the mundane. In the story of Ḥātib's letter, he relates only one report in his *sīra/ta'riḫh*, and that one states explicitly that Muḥammad received his warning about his Companion's treason from a supernatural source. In his *Tafsīr*, he provides more reports, and a slight majority of these contain a direct statement of supernatural activity. In addition, his comments in his *Tafsīr* reveal that he himself argues for a supernatural element to this tale. Ibn Kathīr relates more reports in his *sīra/ta'riḫh* for this incident than does al-Ṭabarī, but does not appear to support the supernatural archetype as wholeheartedly as did his predecessor. However, whereas he only seems to approve of the *isnād* of one of the reports, one that contained an implied rather than explicit miracle, his inclusion of the others may be an indication that, while not absolutely authoritative, they were still necessary to complete the story. This theory is upheld in his *tafsīr* of the related verses, where he adds his own commentary to the reports, indicating his wholesale support of the supernatural archetype and he pointedly states that Muḥammad's reception of this knowledge was in answer to his prayer, something not directly indicated in any of the other sources for this event.

The failed assassination attempt by 'Āmir and Arbad and their sudden deaths are also portrayed by al-Ṭabarī in his *sīra/ta'riḫh* as having a supernatural element. In the

lone report he relates about the incident in this genre, the poetry recited by ‘Āmir points to his awareness of the involvement of the supernatural, and this poetry is not found elsewhere in our sources. The author does not, however, include a citation from the Qur’ān for this event. Al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* of Qur’ān 13:9-13 does link the incident to the revelation of these verses, but it appears here that he is uncertain of this link due to the number of reports that connect the revelation of this verse grouping to other incidents. In the two reports he relates in his *Tafsīr* that detail this event, both include explicit statements supporting a supernatural explanation, and even though he takes issue with one, it is his source’s interpretation of its connection to the meaning of the Qur’ān verses rather than the description of the event itself that he criticizes. Ibn Kathīr provides many more reports for this incident in his *sīra/ta’rīkh*, but only one of these would appear to definitively support the supernatural archetype, while the others only include partial or implied support. It is in his *Tafsīr*, however, that we have, yet again, a statement by him indicating his connection of the events to the direct intervention of God on Muḥammad’s behalf and at Muḥammad’s request, despite the fact that the one report he relates in connection to this fails to do so definitively.

Thus, for both men, the supernatural archetype of Muḥammad for these incidents is supported either by the reports they relate or by their own comments. These comments are found exclusively in their works of *tafsīr*, but it may be possible that they correlate to their views of the same events in their *sīra/ta’rīkh*s as well. This being said, the fact that the total number of reports in their works of exegesis vastly outweighs the number of reports relating the events would also appear to indicate that, again for both

authors, portraying the archetype of Muḥammad, whether supernatural or mundane, was of secondary importance to the task of providing an authoritative explanation of the meanings of these verses. It would be left to their works of history to relate this archetype in a more narrative fashion. Thus, their description of the events studied here would seem to be an excellent example of the benefits of comparing works of *sīra* or *sīra/ta'riḫ* to works of *tafsīr* to better determine a scholar's views of the events being described. This comparison does not always provide the desired result, an overt statement of the author's opinion, but certainly allows for a broader perspective of the author's position on certain aspects of the life of Muḥammad.

Conclusion

The role of the supernatural in the life of Muḥammad is depicted by al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr in their *sīra/ta'rikhs* and *tafsīrs* as both adhering to and diverging from an archetype. The supernatural archetype of Muḥammad's life mirrors that of his mundane, with the Prophet exhibiting an increasing amount of control over the forces of the supernatural as he gains power over an increasingly large number of followers. Thus, his supernatural success mirrors his worldly success. Both of our authors diverge from this archetype in a number of ways that reflects their choices as individual scholars, their views of the genres within which they worked, and the societies in which they lived.

Al-Ṭabarī's depiction of this supernatural archetype in his *sīra/ta'rikh* reveals that he allows for a wide variety of possibilities in some cases, but that in others, he relates only one report and thus only one possible version of the story. His lack of commentary regarding the reports he relates in this genre makes the determination of his views difficult at best. However, when compared to his exegesis of the Qur'ān verses he relates to these events, his viewpoint can sometimes be ascertained. If the examples viewed herein are any indication of the work as a whole, the role of the supernatural in al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr* takes a back seat to other issues, such as grammar and lexicography.

Al-Ṭabarī's treatment of the conception of Muḥammad reveals that he allowed for a mundane representation of that event, relating reports that indicate supernatural involvement in the choice of the Prophet's lineage, but also one report that does not. He also relates a report that shows Muḥammad's father having wives other than Āmina, and changing the timing of the Prophet's conception to a time other than the couple's

wedding night. His exegesis of Qur'an 6:124, which appears to be partially quoted by a Jewish soothsayer in one of the reports, while not specifically mentioning the conception of Muḥammad, is thematically linked to this event in that he focuses on the power of God to determine who will and will not be a Prophet, in other words, where the light of prophecy will reside.

In the story of Muḥammad's publication of his mission to both his fellow tribesmen and his extended family, al-Ṭabarī reveals that there were two announcement stories, one public and one private. It is in the private announcement that we see the role of the supernatural exhibited in Muḥammad's multiplication of a small amount of food and drink to satisfy over thirty of his relatives. The reports containing this miracle are politically and religiously controversial, since they also describe the scene wherein Muḥammad asks his relatives who will help him in his endeavor and succeed him, and only 'Afi volunteers. Thus, in this case, the supernatural archetype becomes politically inflammatory. However, in his exegesis of the verses he relates in connection to this event, the political aspect and even the miracle story itself, is fairly negligible when compared to the public announcement, which contains no supernatural activity, and the linguistic explanation of the verses involved.

In al-Ṭabarī's depiction of both the letter by Ḥātib b. Abī Balta'a and the assassination attempt by 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl and Arbad b. Qays, he relates only one report for each event in his *sīra/ta'riḫh*. By thus limiting the perception of these events, he is controlling the archetype. The reports he relates contain explicit examples of Muḥammad's clairvoyance and the supernatural response to his prayers. However, in al-

Ṭabarī's exegesis of the pertinent verses of the Qur'an, he relates more reports, most of which allow only an implied supernatural context or none at all. He indicates through his own commentary on these verses that his preference is for the supernatural explanation of events, thus showing that he is here placing his own opinion, or his own perception of the archetype, ahead of the bulk of reports related to this event.

Taken together, al-Ṭabarī's treatment of the supernatural archetype of Muḥammad in his *sīra/ta'riḫ* and his *tafsīr* reveals a level of confidence that may well be indicative of not only his own personality but also the society in which he lived. Although he experienced some personal difficulties due to the variety he allowed in the source material he used, especially from the Ḥanbalīs and those who would accuse him of Shī'ī sympathies, these difficulties could not seriously lessen the overall appreciation of his intellectual achievement, as the success of his works in these two genres reveals. Islamic civilization in the tenth century AD had yet to be defeated by any outside force, and despite its internal problems, which were numerous, maintained its position of superiority in the 'Abbāsīd heartlands. This position of superiority can be seen, to a certain extent, in the variety al-Ṭabarī allowed in his depiction of the life of Muḥammad and, to a lesser extent, in his exegesis of the Qur'an.

Ibn Kathīr's representation of the archetype in his *sīra/ta'riḫ* is very similar to that found in his *Tafsīr*. In each genre, he intersperses many of the reports he relates with comments regarding their chains of authority, their texts, or both. It is in both genres that he attempts to judge these reports against those found in the Six Books, but related to this endeavor is his attempt to equate the *Musnad* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal to

these authoritative sources. However, even though Ibn Kathīr makes serious claims for the authoritative nature of his sources, he, too, at times, puts his own interpretation of events before the very sources he claims to support.

In his treatment of the conception of Muḥammad, we see that Ibn Kathīr relates only reports that contain a supernatural element. Thus, it would appear that he could only accept a re-telling of Muḥammad's conception that included an overt act of the will of God. Also, he leaves out the report found in al-Ṭabarī that relates that 'Abd Allāh had another wife besides Āmina. Muḥammad's lineage is of utmost importance in other reports as well, such as those related to the meeting between Abū Sufyān and Heraclius, and it is in these reports that the excellence of Muḥammad's lineage is one of the signs by which he can be recognized as a true prophet. It is also in this section that we see Ibn Kathīr use a quote from the Qur'ān as a literary device to link two sections of his *sīra/ta'rikh*, tying the story of the conception to that of the meeting with the Byzantine emperor, which itself leads into a discussion of Muḥammad's genealogy. Ibn Kathīr's *tafsīr* of the verse related to this event, 6:124, does not discuss the Prophet's conception, but does relate those reports about Abū Sufyan and Heraclius. Our author relates the verse and the meeting to the will of God in determining the bloodline of His chosen prophet. Thus, for Ibn Kathīr, the role of the supernatural in Muḥammad's conception had become a prerequisite to the recognition of the importance of his lineage.

Ibn Kathīr becomes even more involved in attempting to put forward what he deems a correct interpretation of the publication of Muḥammad's mission, wherein he uses all of the tools at his disposal to either discredit or re-interpret reports that could

support the primacy of ‘Alī and thus aid in the efforts of the Shī‘a. He even takes the added step of casting doubt upon a report from Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, not to mention that by al-Ṭabarī, in order to defend his own explanation of the meaning of the events these reports relate. He attacks the *isnād* and the text of the report, and even provides Qur’ānic justification for his re-interpretation. Thus, he argues that the report could not possibly mean that Muḥammad named ‘Alī as his heir, but must have simply meant that he wanted someone to watch over his estate in case he was killed in the course of his mission, but Ibn Kathīr then quotes Qur’ān 5:67 that makes even this role unnecessary for the younger man. His exegesis of the verses he relates for this event reveals that his views regarding the potentially pro-Shī‘a report are the same in this genre, but this event is vastly outnumbered by reports depicting the public announcement of Muḥammad’s mission, as well as other concerns. The presence of numerous other, unrelated, miracle stories in the *Tafsīr* show that, for Ibn Kathīr, the role of the supernatural did have a place of importance in this genre regardless of his views of the miracle associated with this particular event.

It is in Ibn Kathīr’s depiction of Ḥātīb’s letter and the assassination attempt by ‘Āmir and Arbad that we see him again putting forward his own opinion, sometimes in opposition to the bulk of reports he relates for these events. His comments in his *sīra/ta’rīkh* regarding these events are limited, but in his exegesis, he expresses himself as clearly supporting a supernatural interpretation of Muḥammad’s clairvoyance, as well as the divine protection afforded him from his enemies. This is despite the fact that many of the reports he relates only provide an implied supernatural event or ignore the

supernatural element entirely in their relation of these events. Thus, for example, in the story of Ḥātib's letter, the only report that fully supports the supernatural element of the story, that by Ibn Ishāq, is one that Ibn Kathīr criticizes as being less than completely authoritative.

Al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr were men who lived in societies that increasingly demanded that scholarly works meet the criteria of authoritative *ḥadīth*, and were forced to create works that appear to have had the same dual nature as did their depiction of the life of Muḥammad. On the one hand, their Introductions to both their *Tafsīrs* and their works of history contained statements that implied that they were following the accepted methodology of adhering to past authorities in the creation of their work. Al-Ṭabarī's Introductions allow for more leeway, however, in that he openly admits that one can use a certain amount of rational deduction in the writing of history, but that one should always use the accounts of eye-witnesses; and in his *Tafsīr*, he seems to allow for a more vague conception of exactly what makes a report authoritative. Ibn Kathīr, however, goes into great detail in his *Tafsīr's* Introduction to spell out, in no uncertain terms, what was acceptable and what was not. While the Introduction to his *Bidāya* is not as detailed, he still demands adherence to certain rules of transmission for the work to be considered authoritative and allows for no recourse to one's own rational faculties. The actual works that they produced, on the other hand, appear, at least for the examples studied herein, to contradict the rules laid out in their Introductions. Both men were willing, at various times, to set aside authoritative reports or to include reports with incomplete *isnāds* in order to tell their own version of the story of

Muḥammad's life in their *sīra/ta'rikhs* or in order to support their own interpretation of the verses of the Qur'ān in relation to that story in their *tafsīrs*.

This is not the only example of a medieval Muslim historian setting up a grand design in his Introduction only to have the final work itself fall short. Donald P. Little, in his work on Mamlūk historiography, remarks that the famous historian Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1405-6/808), whose *Muqaddima* has been hailed as a groundbreaking work on the rise and fall of civilizations, basically failed to live up to the hype of his own introduction and whose actual work was only a summary of that by a previous historian.⁵⁷⁶ While I am not here saying that al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr's Introductions are anything like that of Ibn Khaldūn, they do make certain claims for the rest of the work that do not appear to have been followed in every case. I do not view these divergences in a negative light, however, as they show that, even in the time of Ibn Kathīr, when many modern scholars claim that blind adherence to traditionalism had completely done away with the use of individual judgement, this type of judgement still existed.⁵⁷⁷ Be that as it may, the arguments used by these scholars, then as now, had to at least appear to follow the rules of their discipline in order to be accepted. As has been shown in this study, however, sometimes even this appearance was jettisoned to further advance the individual scholar's own interpretation of events. These acts of individual judgement appear to reveal two possibilities, either their works are examples of the continued use of independent reasoning by certain scholars despite taking on an

⁵⁷⁶Little, "An Analysis of the Annalistic and Biographical Sources in Arabic for the Reign of al-Malik an-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalā'ūn," (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1966), 230-4; published as *An Introduction to Mamlūk Historiography* (Wiesbaden: Steiner Verlag, 1970).

⁵⁷⁷See Calder, Mojaddedi, and Rippin, *Classical Islam: A sourcebook of religious literature*, 128.

authoritative appearance, or their works are examples of how the necessity of adhering to an accepted image of Muḥammad, whatever that image might be, superceded the necessity of relating an account with only completely authoritative reports. While the second option is certainly a possibility, it is hoped that the findings of the current study have helped advance the first option, since the broader implications of it would be an image of medieval Islamic society that is much more vibrant than many scholars seem determined to depict. Thus, al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr have taken on archetypes of their own that I hope here to diverge from. Al-Ṭabarī was not always the champion of independent reasoning as shown by his arguments in favor of adherence to accepted norms, and Ibn Kathīr was not the strict disciple of Ibn Taymīya who forced Islamic civilization into a cage of traditionalism. Both men argued in favor of using authoritative sources, but both men also favored their own opinions above all else. And so, while there is an archetype of the life of Muḥammad that remains constant, the scholars studied here who transmitted this archetype were willing to diverge from it, either to make the archetype more acceptable for their own time and place, or to make it fit into their own individual views of what that archetype should entail.

Appendix

*Partial Section of al-Ṭabarī's description of 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib*⁵⁷⁸

The name of the Messenger of God was Muḥammad, and he was the son of 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib. 'Abd Allāh, the father of the Messenger of God, was his father's youngest son. 'Abd Allāh, al-Zubayr, and 'Abd Manāf, who is Abū Ṭālib, were sons of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib by the same mother, Fāṭima bt. 'Amr b. 'Ā'idh b. 'Imrān b. Makhzūm. This information was given to us by Ibn Ḥumayd - Salama b. al-Faḍl - Ibn Ishāq.

Hishām b. Muḥammad - his father: 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the father of the Messenger of God, Abū Ṭālib, whose name was 'Abd Manāf, al-Zubayr, 'Abd al-Ka'ba, Ātika, Barra, and Umayma, the children of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, were full brothers and sisters, their mother being Fāṭima bt. 'Amr b. 'Ā'idh b. 'Imrān b. Makhzūm b. Yaqaza.

Yūnus b. 'Abd al-A'lā - Ibn Wahb - Yūnus b. Yazīd - Ibn Shihāb - Qubaysa b. Dhu'ayb: A woman had sworn to sacrifice her son at the Ka'ba if she achieved a certain matter; she did [in fact] achieve it and then she came to al-Madīna to seek a legal opinion on her oath. She went to 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar, who said, "I do not know that God has given any command concerning oaths other than that one should be faithful to them." "Am I to sacrifice my son, then?" she asked. 'Abd Allāh replied, "God has forbidden you to kill one another," and said no more to her than that. Then she went to 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abbās and asked his opinion. He replied, "God has commanded you to

⁵⁷⁸Watt and McDonald, tr., *Muḥammad at Mecca*, 1-6; Leiden edition, 1073-1079. The translation here is that of Watt and McDonald, with the brackets as they appear in their work.

be faithful to your oaths and has forbidden you to kill one another. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib b. Hāshim vowed that if ten of his sons grew to manhood he would sacrifice one of them. He cast lots among them, and the lot fell on ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, whom he loved more than any other. Then he said, ‘O God, shall I sacrifice him or a hundred camels?’ He cast lots between him and the camels, and the lot fell on the hundred camels.” Then Ibn ‘Abbās said to the woman, “My opinion is that you should sacrifice a hundred camels in place of your son.”

Finally the matter came to the attention of Marwān, who was governor of al-Madīna at that time, and he said, “I do not think that either Ibn ‘Umar or Ibn ‘Abbās has given a correct opinion; no vow which contravenes God’s commands can be binding. Ask God’s forgiveness, repent, give alms, and perform such charitable actions as you are able. As for sacrificing your son, God has forbidden you to do that.” The people were delighted and lost in admiration at this verdict, and concluded that Marwān’s opinion was the correct one; from that time on they adopted the opinion that no vow which contravenes God’s commands can be binding.

Ibn Iṣḥāq gives a fuller account of this matter of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib’s vow than one given above. Ibn Ḥumayd - Salama b. al-Faḍl - Muḥammad b. Iṣḥāq: ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib b. Hāshim, so it is said - and God knows best - had vowed when Quraysh made difficulties for him about the digging of Zamzam, that if ten sons were born to him and reached maturity so that they could protect him, he would sacrifice one of them to God at the Ka‘ba. When he had ten sons grown to maturity and he knew that they would protect him, he brought them together, told them of his vow, and called on them to keep

faith with God in this matter. They expressed their obedience, and asked what they should do. He replied, "Let every one of you take an arrow, write his name on it, and bring it to me." They did this, and he went into the presence of Hubal in the interior of the Ka'ba. Hubal was the greatest of the idols of Quraysh in Mecca, and stood by a well inside the Ka'ba in which were gathered the offerings made to the Ka'ba.

Beside Hubal there were seven arrows, on each of which there was writing. On one was written, "the blood money"; when a dispute arose as to which of them was responsible for paying blood money, they cast lots with the seven arrows to settle the matter. On another arrow was written "yes"; when they were considering some course of action, they cast lots, and if the "yes" arrow came out they acted on it. Another arrow had "no," and if that came out they did not proceed with their course of action. On the other arrows was written "of you", "attached", "not of you", and "Water." When they wanted to dig for water they cast lots with the arrows, including this last one, and wherever it fell they started digging. Whenever they wanted to circumcise a boy, arrange a marriage, or bury someone who had died, or when they were in doubt as to the descent of one of them, they took him to Hubal together with a hundred dirhams and a slaughtering-camel which they would give to the custodian who used to cast lots with the arrows. They would bring forward the person about whom they wished to consult the oracle and would say, "O god of ours, this is so-and-so the son of so-and-so, about whom we wish to know such-and-such; so reveal the truth concerning him." Then they would say to the custodian of the arrows, "Cast!" The latter would cast them, and if "of you" fell to the person in question, that meant that he was a fellow tribesman; if it was

“not of you,” he was a confederate; and if it was “attached,” he remained as he was, linked to them neither by descent nor alliance. In matters other than these, when “yes” came out they acted accordingly, and when “no” came out they deferred the matter until the following year, when they brought it up again. This recourse to the way the arrows fell was their ultimate method of deciding their affairs.

Accordingly, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib said to the custodian of the arrows, “Cast my sons’ arrows to determine their fate,” and told him of the vow which he had made. Each of them gave the custodian his arrow with his name written on it. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib was his father’s youngest son and, it is claimed, the one he loved most, and ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib thought that if the arrow missed [this son] he himself would be able to endure the outcome. ‘Abd Allāh was the father of the Messenger of God. When the custodian of the arrows took the arrows to cast them, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib stood beside Hubal in the interior of the Ka‘ba, calling upon God. The custodian of the arrows cast, and the lot fell against ‘Abd Allāh. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib took him by the hand, took a large knife, and went up to Isāf and Nā‘ila, two idols of Quraysh at which they used to slaughter their sacrifices, to sacrifice him. However, the Quraysh rose from their assemblies and came to him, saying, “What do you intend to do, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib?” He replied, “To sacrifice him,” but the Quraysh and ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib’s other sons said, “By God! You shall never sacrifice him but must get an excuse for not doing so. If you act thus men will never stop bringing their sons to sacrifice them, and how will the people survive in this way?” Then al-Mughīra b. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar b. Makhzūm, from whose tribe ‘Abd Allāh’s mother was, said, “By God! You shall never sacrifice him, but

must get an excuse for not doing so. If it takes all we possess to ransom him, we shall do so.”

The Quraysh and the other sons of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib then said, “Do not do this, but take him to the Ḥijāz. There is a sorceress there who has a familiar spirit; ask her, and you will know what to do. If she commands you to sacrifice him, you will sacrifice him, and if she commands you to do something which offers relief to you and to him, you can accept it.” They went to al-Madīna where, it is claimed, they found that she was in Khaybar. They rode until they reached her and consulted her. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib told her the story about himself and his son, what he had intended to do to him, and the vow which he had made, and she said to them, “Retire from me for today, until my familiar visits me and I can ask him.”

They retired from her, and when they had left her presence ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib stood and prayed to God. On the following day they went back to her and she said, “Yes, news has come to me. How much is the blood-money among you?” They replied, “Ten camels,” which it was. “Go back to your country, then,” she said, and bring forward the young man and ten camels, and cast the arrows. If they fall against the young man, add to the camels until your Lord is satisfied. If they fall against the camels, sacrifice them, and your Lord will be satisfied and the young man will be saved.”

They left and returned to Mecca, and when they had all agreed on the matter, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib stood and prayed to God. Then they brought forward ‘Abd Allāh and ten camels, while ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib was in the interior of the Ka‘ba beside Hubal

praying to God. The arrow fell against ‘Abd Allāh, so they added ten camels, making twenty, while ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib stood where he was praying to God. Then they cast again, and the arrow fell against ‘Abd Allāh, so they added another ten camels, making thirty. They went on in this way, casting the arrows and adding ten camels every time the arrow fell against him, until they had cast ten times and the number of camels had reached a hundred, while ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib continued to pray. Then they cast again, and the arrows fell against the camels. Then the Quraysh and those others present said, “Your Lord is satisfied at last, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib.” They claim that he said, “No, by God, not until I cast the arrows against them three times.” So they cast the arrows between the camels and ‘Abd Allāh while ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib prayed, and they fell against the camels; then they did it again, a second and a third time, with the same result. Then the camels were slaughtered and left there, and no man or wild beast was turned back from eating them.

‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib left, taking his son ‘Abd Allāh by the hand. It is alleged that he passed by a woman of the Banū Asad called Umm Qattāl bt. Nawfal b. Asad b. ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā, the sister of Waraqa b. Nawfal b. Asad; she was by the Ka‘ba. When she looked at his face she said, “Where are you going, ‘Abd Allāh?” “With my father,” he said. She said, “I have for you as many camels as were slaughtered for you, so sleep with me now.” “My father is with me,” he replied, “and I cannot oppose his wishes or leave him.” ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib took him away and brought him to Wahb b. ‘Abd Manāf b. Zuhra, who was the leading man of the Banū Zuhra in age and eminence at that time, and the latter married him to [his daughter] Āmina bt. Wahb, who was then the most

excellent woman in Quraysh as regards genealogy and status. Her mother was Barra bt. 'Abd al-'Uzzā b. 'Uthmān b. 'Abd al-Dār b. Qusayy, Barra's mother was Umm Ḥabīb bt. Asad b. 'Abd al-'Uzza b. Qusayy, and Umm Ḥabīb's mother was Barra bt. 'Awf b. 'Abīd b. 'Awīj b. 'Adī b. Ka'b b. Lu'ayy.

It is alleged that he consummated his marriage to her there as soon as he married her, that he lay with her and that she conceived Muḥammad; then he left her presence and came to the woman who had propositioned him, and said to her, "Why do you not make the same proposition to me today which you made to me yesterday?" She replied, "The light which was with you yesterday has left you, and I have no need of you today." She had heard [about this] from her brother Warāqa b. Nawfal, who was a Christian and had studied the scriptures; he had discovered that a prophet from the descendants of Ismā'īl was to be [sent] to this people; this had been one of the purposes of his study.

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