

On Fiction and *Adab*
in Medieval Arabic Literature

Edited by
Philip F. Kennedy

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5. The Use of Composite Form in the Making of the Islamic Historical Tradition

Stefan Leder
(Halle/Saale)

Readers of *akhbār* need to be aware of the narrative strategies and literary techniques that play an important role in this literature. Nevertheless *akhbār* impart knowledge of the past. They not only refer to historical characters and events but also often expose the actors' motivations and set out external reasons for their actions. In accordance with this function of historical narration, *akhbār* are generally expected to relate things as they have, or may have, happened. The occasional use of fictitious plots does not eliminate this conventional attitude. However, like any narration, they give utterance to ideas, political interests and aesthetic concepts. Moreover, in the framework of *khabar* narration we observe that non-factual matters are sometimes presented in a manner which discloses their fictional character. The term fiction does not denote a category of classical Arabic literary theory, of course, and thus may be seen as alien to this literature.¹ It is, however, important to note that *khabar* literature does not only include the use of fictional devices in order to convey certain concepts and interpretations of history, but also carries a conventional understanding of the fictional mode of literary communication. This implies that the author and his audience in fact share an understanding of narration such as to permit different hermeneutical options regarding their factual value. In spite of a deliberate use of fictional narration, this mode of literary expression did not find general acceptance, but remained under the guise of the factual. Renate Jacobi recently suggested that the opaque nature of narration, lying as it does in a twilight zone between factual and fictional, was actually a particular and authentic form of narration and thus has to be understood as a concept in its own right.²

1 See Julie Scott Meisami's comments below (pp. 149ff.), in "Mas'ūdī and the Reign of al-Amin: Narrative and Meaning in Medieval Muslim Historiography". The significance of non-factual narratives in *khabar*-literature is not, however, that any proper objective of historiography is to be denied. Rather, the nature and implications of non-factual literary discourse, which is part of historiography too, are to be explored.

2 Renate Jacobi, "Porträt einer unsympathischen Frau: Hind bint 'Utba, die Feindin Mohammeds", in WZKM 89 (1999), 85–107.

Narrative strategies manifest themselves in several aspects of literary composition. First, *khavar*-narration adheres to a standardized repertoire of techniques which include complex narrative structures. Second, *akhbār* constitute narrative units which are consciously arranged by the authors of works in history and *adab* into sequences; they thus appear as elements of more or less carefully designed compilations. Third, they are embraced by a context of narrative materials related by origin and content and scattered over a wide range of different titles of *khavar*-literature. Fourth, *akhbār* are interrelated by recurrent motifs and narrative patterns, which establish an intrinsic, yet distant and ambiguous signification.³

The third of these aspects is particularly instructive on the genesis and use of *khavar*-narratives. *Akhbār* about events separated by space and time may be related by distinctive elements of plot, thereby demonstrating the adaptation of narrative material to different purposes. A comparison of variant versions related by common origin brings to light the fact that the process of reproduction includes careful recasting. Another piece of information we can gain from scrutinizing the context of *khavar*-literature concerns the components of comprehensive narrative compositions. Often these are pre-existing narrative elements which can be traced to their origins. Together, these features provide ample evidence about manners of authorial design, planning and decisions. The composite character of many *akhbār* also results in the fact that these texts often mirror and integrate different opinions and views of history.

The interests of history, i.e. knowledge of the past, and *adab*, i.e. representation of moral conduct and intellectual perception, were closely connected in this literature. *Akhbār* were perceived as a source of knowledge and, like poetry,⁴ a lesson in manners and cultivation. Historiography and *adab* literature display a similar attitude in this respect. Ibn Qutayba, for instance, emphasizes in his *‘Uyūn al-akhbār* the educative effect of *akhbār*,⁵ and al-Mas‘ūdī refers to the exemplary representation of excellent behaviour in these accounts.⁶ Historiography and *adab* also share much of the same narrative materials. Many accounts

3 Tayeb El-Hibri's *Reinterpreting Islamic History: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999) provides a study of this interrelation of sometimes disparately connected narratives.

4 See Albert Arazi, "Al-Shi'ru 'Ilmu l-'Arabi wa-Diwānuhā (La poésie est la science des anciens Arabes et leurs archives)" in Raif Georges Khoury (ed.), *Urkunden und Urkundenformulare im Klassischen Altertum und in den orientalischen Kulturen* (Heidelberg 1999; Bibliothek der klassischen Altertumswissenschaften, 2. R., Bd.104), 203–220.

5 Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/890), *‘Uyūn al-akhbār*, i–iv (Cairo 1345/1925–1349/1930), i, p. yā': *wa-hādhihi 'uyūnu l-akhbāri naẓamtuḥā li-mughfili l-ta'addubi tabṣiratan wa-li-abli l-'ilmi tadhkīratan wa-li-sā'isi l-nāsi wa-masūsihim mu'addiban.*

6 al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/956), *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma'ādin al-jawhar*, Ch. Pellat (ed.) i–vii (Beirut 1965–1979), i, 12: *wa-kāna mim mā da'ānā ilā ta'līfi kutubinā hādhihi fī l-ta'rīkh wa-akhbāri l-'ālam ... maḥabbatu ḥtidhā'i l-shākilati llati qaṣadahā l-'ulamā'u wa-qafāhā l-ḥukamā'u.*

contain elements of highly elaborate utterances, such as dicta, proverbs, speeches of various types,⁷ dialogues, poetry, or written communications, such as letters and short written messages. Rhetoric, as well as descriptions of prudent behaviour are constituent elements of *adab* literature, of course; they may also be seen as indicative of the characters' individual capacities as well as playing an effective role in the course of events, and therefore justifying the historian's interest. This perception of narration is an important, if not indispensable, companion to the assertion that accounts of mostly famous peoples' sayings and actions impart knowledge of the past and provide practical examples of eloquence and prudence. This nature of *akhbār* certainly favoured the elaboration of diverse themes from given narrative material.

5.1. Complexity of Form in *Khabar*-Narration

Narrative structure varies from a rather simple form focusing on dicta and short dialogues to the combination of complex perspectives.⁸ Notwithstanding the difference of narrative style the authors' intention to explicate certain situations or to explain ulterior motives can often be observed. Even when the narrator completely withdraws from the scene by directly rendering the characters' words, authorial design may be apparent. A good illustration of this technique, here combined with homodiegetic narration, is found in Ibn Ishāq's (d. 151/768; account of the beginnings of the Prophet's mission.⁹ Only the rendering of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) includes a passage in which the Prophet explains his awe and doubts after receiving Jibril's message for the first time:

“(I awoke from my sleep and it was as though these words were written on my heart.) None of God's creatures was more hateful to me than a poet or a man possessed: I could not even look at them. —He said: I said (to myself): Is this one¹⁰—meaning himself—a poet or possessed? Never shall Quraysh say this of me. I will go to the top of the mountain and throw myself down that I may kill myself and gain rest.”¹¹

This utterance probably belonged to Ibn Ishāq's original account, but was later suppressed by Ibn Hishām. It depicts the Prophet's state of mind and thereby obviously gives emphasis to the distinction between divine revelation and poetic

7 *Waṣīya, khutba, ta'ziyya* etc.

8 Muḥammad al-Qaḍī, *al-Khabar fī l-adab al-'arabī. Dirāsātun fī l-sardiyya al-'arabiyya* (Beirut, 1998) 355 ff., 402 ff.

9 Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833): *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, i-ii (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.) i, 254.

10 *Al-Ab'ad*, commonly used by way of allusion to the object of a malediction.

11 al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923): *Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, Michael Jan De Goeje et al. (eds.), series I-III, (Leiden: 1879-1901, reprint 1964), ser. I, 1150; cf. A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammed. A Translation of Ibn Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Oxford: OUP, 1955; Reprint Karachi 1967), 106.

inspiration. It is thus related to an issue discussed from the beginning of the Prophet's preaching onwards. There can be no doubt that this complex narrative element was meant to confirm and amplify our sense of the Prophet's disgust of poetic inspiration. Since narratives are often composed of several dialogues or utterances scarcely introduced and connected by a narrator's report, omissions and additions are easy to perform. The absence of this conspicuous passage in Ibn Hishām's rendering therefore does not cause any noticeable lack or distortion in the structure of the narrative.

The predominant narrative stance is characterised by strict neutrality. However, narrative design in *khabar*-narration has also developed modes displaying the author's interference, especially when various scenes and a complex temporal structure are combined. The more "diegetic" representation of intentions may impute emotions and thoughts to the characters.¹² An excellent example of this kind of narration is a narrative about 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb's conversion to Islam. A number of versions about this event circulate in our sources. Ibn Hishām's redaction of Ibn Iṣḥāq's *Sīra*, Ibn Sa'd, and al-Balādhurī deliver variant versions demonstrating the circulation of this narrative already at the beginning of the second century AH.¹³ The narrative is divided into a number of separate scenes moulded into a sensible composition with dramatic effects: First comes a report of events previous to 'Umar's conversion, i.e. his sister's clandestine faith in the new religion; then we see 'Umar setting out, armed with his sword, to fight the Prophet and his followers, when he encounters a man who prevents him from carrying out his plan. The man reveals that 'Umar's sister has embraced Islam; 'Umar then confronts Fāṭima at her home, together with her husband and a third Muslim. After a harsh dispute, 'Umar accepts Islam, animated by the truth which he finds in the holy words of the Qur'an; finally 'Umar makes his way to the Prophet, where the companions doubt his intentions before they lead him to Muḥammad. When he meets the Prophet, 'Umar finally professes his faith.

The narrator obviously has command over time and space here. He informs about previous events at several instances and records the characters' sayings and

12 Cf. Daniel Beaumont, "Hard boiled. Narrative discourse in early Muslim traditions", *Studia Islamica* 83 (1996), 5–31, here 15.

13 Ibn Hishām: *Sīra*, 355 f.; Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/844), *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*, Eugen Mittwoch & Eduard Sachau (eds.), 1905–1918, ix Indices by Eduard Sachau, edited by W. Gottschalk (Leiden, 1940), iii, 1, 191 f.; al-Balādhurī (d. 279/892): *Ansāb al-ashraf* (*Sā'ir furū' Quraysh*), Iḥsān 'Abbās (ed.) (Beirut, 1417/1996), 346–348. Ibn Iṣḥāq refers to story-tellers of his hometown (*ruwāt ahl al-Madīna*); in al-Balādhurī's collective *isnād*, al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822) vaguely indicates various sources: "*wa-ḥaddathanī Muḥammad b. Sa'd wa-l-Walīd b. Ṣāliḥ 'an al-Wāqidī 'an Ma'mar 'an al-Zuhri, qāla l-Wāqidī wa-ḥaddathanī Ibn Abī Ḥabība 'an Dāwud b. al-Ḥuṣayn wa-ghayruhum yazīdu ba'dhum 'alā ba'din, qālū*". For al-Wāqidī's supposed borrowings from Ibn Iṣḥāq, see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, xi (Leiden, 2000), 102 bf.

doings in different scenes. In addition, he offers occasional insight into ‘Umar’s and the other characters’ intentions by explaining their emotional experience. This technique is able to direct particular attention to the characters and to create a sense of “proximity” and compassion with their experience. It is therefore applied in a scene describing ‘Umar’s encounter with aspects of the Muslim creed and morality at his sister’s house, which is the heart of this narrative. ‘Umar, who hit his sister in a rage, regrets this deed (*nadama ‘alā mā ṣana‘a*), feels pity (*raqqa*) and refrains from (*ir‘awā*) displaying his aggressive attitude; the person he is talking to hopes (*ṭami‘a*) that he will be receptive to the Qur’ān.

One should not conclude, however, that variety of style in this narrative would necessarily reflect a posterior literary development which has reworked and altered an original narration. As Muḥammad al-Qāḍī has recently suggested, the multiplicity of narrative voices which he observed in Ayyām al-‘Arab narratives should be considered as reflecting the narrative structures characteristic of oral tradition.¹⁴ In our example, dialogues from a quasi-eyewitness perspective are combined with the report of an omniscient organising narrator who applies external and internal perspectives. Compared to the pure and consistent eyewitness-report, which along with its *isnāds* is the dominant narrative form of *khobar*, this multiplicity of perspectives shows a lack of consistency and authentication. Now we assume that the complex narrative form here is closer to the “uncontrolled” style of oral narrative than the uncontaminated eyewitness-report; as a consequence, we may consider the latter type of narrative as having emerged from a development of narrative technique intended to further the authority of a Tradition built upon narrative.

5.2. Recasting and Compositeness

In the realms of *khobar*-narration we often stumble into a tangled network of variant reproductions of an episode. Complexity of plot and the subject matter’s potential of thematic development may provoke changes of wording and content in order to stress or attenuate and to add or drop certain elements. Ibn Ishāq’s rendering of the narrative mentioned above, for instance, shows a particular interest for ‘Umar’s sister Fāṭima whose role in convincing ‘Umar of the Prophet’s truthfulness is decisive there. In contrast, al-Balādhurī’s text (which is supposedly mostly al-Wāḳidī’s rendering) emphasizes the animating effect of listening to the Qur’ān when it is read aloud.

14 Muḥammad al-Qāḍī, “La composante narrative des ‘Journées des Arabes’ (Ayyām al-‘Arab)”, *Arabica* 46 (1999), 358–371, 361: «Cette version, où les noms et les voix s’entrecroisent, est sans doute la plus proche de l’état premier de ces récits qui obéissent aux normes de l’oralité et ne possèdent pas un parcours narratif clair.»

The existence of variant versions of a narrative may be due to the fact that an incident is depicted in a number of narratives told by different people. Such a conclusion is impeded by variants referring to one source only. In this case, alterations observed were either brought into circulation by one and the same person, or emerged from subsequent intrusion into the original design. When variants concern significant features of the plot, intentional changes applied to the narrative in the course of transmission become apparent. The intentional creation of variants, or the recasting of texts, has been proven many times; it will be demonstrated here anew and must be considered an established fact. The question therefore is what ideas and concepts have motivated the creation of variant versions. As a first step variants have to be identified, then the process of reshaping has to be reconstructed in order to discern new versions from older ones. Jacob Lassner described this task optimistically: "As with archaeologists trained to distinguish between intrusive deposits and the genuine artefacts of earlier levels, learned and discerning readers can often spot the added material and sort out the original elements from the larger whole."¹⁵ Mostly, however, one is at sea and adrift; clues regarding the origins of variants are hard to gain.

A complementary technique, often combined with recasting, is the composition of narratives from several pre-existing elements such as motifs or sub-narratives. This may lead to the fusion of several variants into a unique version, as was also observed by Jacob Lassner.¹⁶ He regarded this method to be an instrument of apologists who mask "their intentions in heavily encoded texts that were, as such texts are wont to be, extremely vague".¹⁷ But the compositeness of narratives, and of other texts, like speeches (*khutab*)¹⁸ or the *masā'il* ascribed to Ibn al-Azraq¹⁹ for example, is a very common feature. It occurs especially, as we will see, when comprehensive narratives are created. Components of composite narratives may consist of minor narrative elements or of rather complex sub-narratives. The integration of components, which are drawn from a varied narrative tradition and adhere to different chronological layers, into an encompassing master narrative may engender a remarkable complexity of narrative structure including the combination of various perspectives and scenes. Narratives of

15 Jacob Lassner, *Islamic Revolution and Historical Memory. An inquiry into the Art of 'Abbāsīd Apologetics* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1986), 31.

16 Op. cit., 31.

17 Op. cit., 32.

18 Stephan Dähne, *Reden der Araber. Die politische Hutba in der klassischen arabischen Literatur* (Frankfurt, 2001).

19 "What is generally referred to as the *masā'il* of Ibn al-Azraq and the answers of Ibn 'Abbās with poetry citations is a composite text whose historical fluidity permitted continual growth by variant additions." See Issa J. Boullata: "Poetry citation as interpretive illustration in Qur'an exegesis: *Masā'il Nāfi' Ibn Al-Azraq*" in Wael. B. Hallaq, Donald P. Little: (eds.) *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams* (Leiden, 1991), 34.

composite form also tend to represent different interpretations of history in one single *khbar*. They often synthesize various conceptions of history and thus support the characteristic vagueness and multi-faceted appearance of *khbar*-narration.

The composition of composite narratives is accomplished through the combination of already existing narrative elements, or through the insertion of elements into existing frames. This may be realized by referring or alluding to accounts not reproduced in the narrative. This latter kind of narrative composition can be illustrated by al-Madā'inī's *shūrā*-narration about the electoral council held in 23/644 following the instructions given by 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb when he was on his deathbed. It consists of a series of sub-narratives, variants of which can be traced in independent *riwāyāt*. As this narrative has already been studied in some detail,²⁰ it suffices to refer here to the particular method of how the 'Abbasid interpretation of history is woven into the pattern of the narrative. As a comprehensive composition, the narrative does not subscribe to any uniform or exclusive bias, Shiite or 'Abbasid, but rather includes materials shaped according to various tendencies.

On two occasions during the events preceding the gathering of the *shūrā*-committee, al-'Abbās b. al-Muṭṭalib is seen giving good advice to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. Al-'Abbās' role as faithful adviser for Alī's cause, and his initial support of 'Alī's succession to the caliphate is consistent with other accounts and constitutes a well-known theme.²¹ Knowledge of this background is a prerequisite for understanding the message of these short episodes, which are rather isolated and marginal in this long composite narrative. They allude to components of narrative tradition which must have been in the author's mind when he inserted these minor sub-narratives.

Al-'Abbās first recommends 'Alī not to participate at the *shūrā* committee.²² Since 'Alī did not pay heed to his advice, al-'Abbās does not hide his annoyance during their second meeting. He reproaches 'Alī for having ignored his good advice on three particular occasions:

"I have never urged you to do anything without you later returning to me, having abstained (from doing what I told you), with (tidings) I detest.²³ When the Messenger of God died, I advised you to ask him (on his death bed) who should have the rule, but

20 S. Leder, "The Paradigmatic Character of Madā'inī's *shūrā* Narration", *Studia Islamica* 88 (1998), 35–54. The phenomenon discussed here is not considered in the article.

21 Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashraf* (op. cit.), I. Muḥammad Ḥamīdullāh (ed.) (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n.d.), 581f; *idem* (*Banū 'Abd Shams*), Iḥsān 'Abbās (ed.) (Beirut, 1400/1979), 508 f. no. 1313; al-Dīnawarī (d. 282/895), *al-Akhhbār al-tiwāl*, 'Abd al-mun'im 'Āmir (ed.) (Baghdad, n.d.), 42.

22 al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ser. I, 2778; al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashraf* (*Banū 'Abd Shams*), 509, cites separately a similar version from al-Wāqidi.

23 *Lam arfa'ka fi shay'in illā raja'ta ilayya musta'khiran bi-mā akrabu.*

you refused. After (Muḥammad's) death I counselled you to bring the matter to a speedy conclusion, but you refused. When 'Umar nominated you a member of the electoral council, I told you to have nothing to do with them, but you refused. Just learn one thing from me: whenever people make you a proposal, say no, unless they are appointing you caliph."²⁴

Al-Abbās' words place blame on 'Alī not only for his refusal to accept advice, but also for his failure to accomplish his political objectives. The narrative thereby reveals that it was coined as an argument in a pre-established debate. It clearly intends to belittle 'Alī's political skills as well as point out his uncle's perspicacity and truthfulness.

Allusion, not explication, is instrumental in this design. Al-'Abbās mentions three former counsels he had given. The third of these incidents figures in this narrative; the others are only referred to. They are known from the wider context of *khbar*-literature: it is reported on several occasions that when the Prophet became fatally ill, al-Abbās encouraged 'Alī to ask him to settle the issue of succession.²⁵ After the Prophet's death, al-'Abbās told 'Alī not to stay away from the *saqifa* meeting.²⁶ The author of the *shūrā*-narration—probably al-Madā'ini²⁷—who gave shape to the scenic representation of al-'Abbās' and 'Alī's encounter used and adapted this narrative material. But he had no means of telling in detail about the two incidents he referred to in this passage. If he had wanted to do so, he would have been obliged to insert a lengthy monologue by al-'Abbas disturbing the delicate cohesion of his own narrative composed as it was of so many elements. For this reason, he did not reproduce at length the narrative matters involved, but contented himself with alluding to them. Further, the wording of this passage²⁸ mirrors al-'Abbās' words as they appear in two independent accounts about his reaction to the election of 'Uthmān²⁹ and in another version.³⁰

5.3. Al-Zuhri and Ibn Ishāq—Compositeness and Conceptual Recasting

The combination of both techniques, compositeness of the narrative and careful recasting, is at work in a widely circulated narrative about a meeting between

24 al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, ser. I, 2780; cf. translation by G. Rex Smith: The Conquest of Iran, in *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, xiv (Albany, N.Y., 1985), 147.

25 Ibn Hishām, *Sira*, 1502; al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashraf*, i, 520, 565; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, ser. I, 1807 f.

26 Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashraf*, i, 581 f. (Muḥammad b. Sa'd < al-Wāqidī).

27 As note 20, pp. 43 f.

28 *Lam arfa'ka fi shay'in illā raja'ta ilayya musta'khiran bi-mā akrahu*.

29 *Mā qaddamtuka qatṭu illā ta'akhharta*: al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashraf*, i, 586 (*qāla Abū Mikhnaf*); *idem* (*Banū 'Abd Shams*), 508 f. (Muḥammad b. Sa'd < al-Wāqidī).

30 *Idem*, i, 583 ('Abbās b. Hishām < Abūhu).

Abū Sufyān b. Ḥarb (d. 32/653), spokesman of the Meccan opposition against the Prophet and father of the first Umayyad caliph Mu'āwiya, and Emperor Heraclius (reigned 610 to 641). Comparison of several variants reveals that narrative elements of various origins were recast and combined according to the authors' particular political and theological purposes.

Abū Sufyān is said to have travelled to Syria along with other merchants in the time after the armistice agreed upon at al-Ḥudaybiyya in March 628 and to have met Heraclius at Jerusalem. The Emperor, in fact, restored the relic of the holy cross, or what was believed to be the holy cross, to Jerusalem in the same year, probably in September 628.³¹ Moreover, when Abū Sufyān describes the political situation in Arabia during his conversation with Heraclius, he refers, historically correctly, to the time before the conquest of Mekka. The narrative also alludes to Heraclius' victory over the Persians and mentions the Emperor's anti-Jewish politics. Although the accounts of their encounter seem incompatible with some versions of Diḥya al-Kalbī's mission to Syria,³² there is no other contradicting historical evidence. Heraclius' conversation with Abū Sufyān, however, betrays a composition which owes everything to narrative tradition and authorial intentions.

For Islamic Tradition the narrative is of significance for mainly two reasons. First, the Emperor questions Abū Sufyān in a purposeful and seemingly systematic manner. From his answers he concludes that Muḥammad is a true prophet. Neither revelation, nor the Qur'ān are mentioned in their conversation; instead it is Muḥammad's origins, moral conduct and the circumstances of his mission that are the object of inquiry. Heraclius' conclusions nevertheless are considered meaningful to the tradition of signs (*dalā'il*, *'alamāt*) of prophecy.³³ Second, and most important, the narrative contains the Prophet's letter to Heraclius which was sent with Diḥya al-Kalbī to the ruler of Boṣrā.³⁴ On this basis the narrative

31 Paul Speck: "Zum Datum der Translation der Kreuzesreliquien nach Konstantinopel"; "Anhang I. Zwei Stellen bei Theophanes und Nikephoros", in *Varia VII. Beiträge von Paul Speck sowie Nachträge von Albrecht Berger und Otto Kresten*, Poikila Byzantina 18 (Bonn 2000), 167–175.

32 Suliman Bashear, "The mission of Diḥya al-Kalbī and the situation in Syria", *Der Islam* 74 (1997), 64–91, here 73–77.

33 Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣbahānī (d. 430/1038), *Dala'il al-nubuwwa* (Hayderabad: (Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-Nizāmiyya, 1320h.), ii, 119–121; al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066), *Dalā'il al-nubuwwa wa-ma'rifat aḥwāl ṣāhib al-sharā'a*, 'Abdalmu'tī Qal'ajī (e.d), vols. 1–7 (Beirut 1405/1985), iv, 377–384; Ibn Rajab (d. 795/1393), *Majālis fī sirat al-nabī*, Yāsīn al-Sawās (ed.), Maḥmūd al-Arnā'ūt (Damaskus-Beirut 1408/1988), 31; Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406), *al-Muqaddima* (Beirut 1967), 161f., 828. Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1449), *Fath al-bārī bi-sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Bulāq 1300–1301 h.), i, 30ff.

34 See *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ii, (Leiden, 1965), 244 b.

was transmitted in *ḥadīth* literature and also found its place in historiography and *adab* literature.³⁵

Tradition has preserved numerous letters sent by Muḥammad to rulers of neighbouring countries, and the text of this particular letter is also given independently from the account of Abū Sufyān's conversation with Heraclius.³⁶ Moreover, Islamic tradition claims that the original letter turned up in al-Andalus;³⁷ a papyrus containing the text of the letter, however, is to be considered apocryphal.³⁸ The historicity of such a letter is hard to assess with certainty, but in any case, it is unlikely that the text of this letter was invented along with the rest of the narrative. Rather, it was adopted from Tradition and inserted into the narrative composition.

The *isnāds* of all versions of this narrative refer to Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742). The difference between some of the renderings is substantial, but four groups or families of versions can be distinguished.³⁹ According to the account which represents al-Zuhrī's narrative in the most complete and convincing form,⁴⁰ the Emperor Heraclius came to Jerusalem in order to return the holy cross which the Persians had stolen. There he received a letter from the Prophet inviting him to accept Islam. Worried, he asked to have someone brought to him who could provide more information about Muḥammad. Abū Sufyān and his companions then were summoned by the Emperor. Heraclius first asked which of the men were related to the prophet's family (seemingly because this would ensure good personal acquaintance and reliable information). He then chose Abū Sufyān as his informant. He also made sure that Abū Sufyān's companions would correct him when he tried to tell lies. After concluding from his lengthy interview that Muḥammad's prophecy was true and that the Muslims would conquer

35 S. Leder, "Heraklios erkennt den Propheten. Ein Beispiel für Form und Entstehungsweise narrativer Geschichtskonstruktion", *ZDMG* 151 (2001), 1–42. The study considers about 60 versions. Based upon a dating of Heraclius's visit to Jerusalem in the year 630 (Walter E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* [Cambridge 1992], 27), I had denied that there could be any historical basis for this narrative.

36 Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/844), *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*, i, 2, 15–38, part. 16; Cf. Julius Wellhausen, "Ibn Sa'd, Die Schreiben Muhammads und die Gesandtschaften an ihn" in *idem Skizzen und Vorarbeiten*, Viertes Heft (Berlin, 1889), 87–194, Arabic 1–87.

37 Muhammad Hamidullah, *Le Prophète de l'Islam*, i, Sa vie (Librairie Philosophique: Paris 1959/1378 H.), 230–235; *idem. Six Originaux des lettres du Prophète de l'Islam* (Editions Tougui: Paris 1985), 151–173.

38 Suhayla al-Jabūrī, "The Prophet's letter to the byzantine emperor Heraclius", in *Hamdard Islamicus*, vol. i, part 3 (1978), 36–49.

39 See "Heraklios", *Appendix*.

40 Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), *al-Musnad*, Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (ed.), iv (Cairo 1369/1950), no. 2370; al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), *al-Jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ*, Muḥammad Fu'ād 'Abdalbāqī (ed.) vols. i–iv (Cairo: al-Maktaba as-Salafiyya 1400/1980), ii, 342–344 (*al-jihād*), i, 18 (*al-imān*).

Jerusalem, he ordered that the Prophet's letter be read aloud to the noblemen present at his court. This caused great excitement and Abū Sufyān and his companions were released.

Apart from Heraclius, attention centres upon Abū Sufyān. He is the first-person-narrator of the entire narrative according to some versions, or of his encounter with the emperor only, according to the version chosen here. His narration not only records the dialogue; he also explains his own intentions from an allegedly retrospective position. In this manner he sheds light upon his own reluctance to answer the Emperor in a neutral and truthful manner.

“If I had not been ashamed”, he says, “of what my companions would later report of my (shameless) lies (about Muḥammad), I would not have told him (i.e. Heraclius) the truth”.

Here, Abū Sufyān describes the conflict between his pagan identity and his involuntary role as the Prophet's ambassador. This is not merely the description of an individual conflict but also the establishment of a major thematic perspective, as we shall see; Abū Sufyān's transformation from an enemy to a cryptic partisan of Islam, from a pagan nobleman to the forefather of a dynasty of the caliphate is one of the underlying concepts of this narrative. Abū Sufyān's first-form-narration draws attention to this aspect several times: when he answers the question whether the Prophet would commit acts of treason, for example, his reply is:

“No, but we agreed upon an armistice and must be aware of his betrayal.” “This was the only occasion,” Abū Sufyān then says, “that I could speak ill of him without being afraid of what my companions would say about me.”

His stubborn hostility towards the prophet, however, begins to fade away at the end. Impressed with Heraclius' expression of faith, Abū Sufyān becomes aware that Muḥammad's case has become grave (*amira amruhu*). He then adds a comment, which is interesting both in form and content, because he ponders a teleological vision of his life. In light of his remark, Abū Sufyān's encounter with Heraclius also helps to solve, or smooth, the conflict between his role as one of the Prophet's most resolute enemies and his later position in Islamic history.

He says: “I felt humbled (*dhalīl*) knowing that Muḥammad would gain the upper hand. I remained like this until God made Islam enter into my heart against my will.”

Abū Sufyān here appears an instrument of God's plan, subject to His decree, knowing about the advent of Islam before he professed his faith. Our understanding of this passage finds confirmation in al-Dhahabī's assessment of this narrative; in his view, it indicates that Abū Sufyān possessed faith before his formal conversion.⁴¹

41 al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), *Siyar a'lām an-nubalā'*, Shu'ayb al-Arnā'ūṭ et al. (eds.) vols. i–xxv (Beirut 1401/1981–1405/1985), ii, 107.

The intent of this narrative, which justifies Abū Sufyān and allocates him a respectable position in Islamic Tradition, fits very well with Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī's political commitments, since he was associated with the Umayyad caliphs from 'Abdalmalik (reg. 685–705) until Hishām (reg. 724–743). Al-Zuhrī has not invented the entire narrative; other accounts concerning elements of the plot can be found which preserve his source materials, or give an idea of what his source materials could have been.⁴² Other narratives also demonstrate that the questioning as it was undertaken by Heraclius in order to understand the veracity of the Prophet's mission was used as a motif applied to different historical situations.⁴³

Just as al-Zuhrī used older narrative material for his composition, his own narrative was also "used", i.e. recast, enlarged by other materials and altered in its structure. The author of a rendering which bears a substantially different signification, but still refers to al-Zuhrī in its *isnād*, is Ibn Ishāq's (d. 151/758).⁴⁴ In this version, the Prophet's letter is of less importance. Instead Heraclius dreams, when he comes to Jerusalem, "of the kingdom of the circumcised." Advisers tell him to kill the Jews who dwell in his empire. They continue to urge him, when a man from the "Arabs, people of sheep and camels" is brought, who brings the news that a man has appeared claiming to be a prophet. Heraclius orders his clothing to be removed and discovers that he is circumcised. The emperor is all the more impressed by his dream; he lets the man return to his people and asks for someone to be brought to him who could provide more detailed information. Abū Sufyān and his companions are summoned and Heraclius questions him about the Prophet.

The first part of the narrative draws attention to the Emperor's premonition of the events, which predates his meeting with Abū Sufyān and the arrival of the

42 See e.g. Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il*, iv, 384f.; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, iv, 266. And Ibn 'Asākir (d. 571/1176), *Ta'rikh Madīnat Dimashq* (Ṣūratun min nuskhāt al-Maktaba al-Ẓāhiriyya bi-Dimashq ...) vols. i–xix (Madina 1407/1986–87), viii, 238 f.

43 Cf. concerning al-Muqawqis: Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam (d. 257/871), *Futūḥ Miṣr*. *The History of the Conquest of Egypt, North Africa and Spain known as the Futūḥ Miṣr*, Charles C. Torrey (ed.) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), Reprint New York (AMS Press), 45–47; Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya fī l-ta'rikh*, Aḥmad Abū Malḥam et al. (eds.) vols i–xiv, & xv: al-Fahāris (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1408/1988), iv, 271 f.; Pseudo-Wāqidī, *Futūḥ al-Shām*, ii, 25–27. Concerning the questions of a *ḥibr* in Yemen, see: Ibn Ḥamdūn (d. 562/1167), *al-Tadhkira al-ḥamdūniyya*, Iḥsān 'Abbās, Bakr 'Abbās (eds.), vols. i–ix & x: al-Fahāris (Beirut 1983–1996), ix, 166–168; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, ii, 295 f.

44 al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, ser. 1, 1561–1565; cf. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 653–655; Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. 356/967), *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, vols. i–xxiv (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub) 1345/1927–1394/1974, vol. vi, 345–349; al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il*, vol. iv, 381–383; Ibn Ḥamdūn, *Tadhkira*, vol. ix, 164–166; Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh Dimashq*, vol. viii, 240–242; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. iv, 262–263.

Prophet's letter. The supernatural character of his knowledge is also underlined. Here, Ibn Ishāq probably transformed an account which is preserved as an addendum to al-Zuhri's narrative.⁴⁵ There, Heraclius appears as an astrologer (*ḥazzā'*) who learns from the stars about the coming of the kingdom of the circumcised (*mulku l-khitān*).⁴⁶ This account finds confirmation in the chronicle of Fredegar,⁴⁷ which cannot, however, be dated entirely to the eighth century,⁴⁸ because it was exposed to various interpolations.⁴⁹

By placing this component at the beginning of his narrative and by adapting its content, Ibn Ishāq reinterprets the narrative. Heraclius now receives—in a dream—a glimpse of the future events. This element also reappears in the Arabic History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria, which goes back, in its oldest parts, to Severus ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. after 944).⁵⁰ The origin of this information is not disclosed by the parallel, but it is certainly not accidental that Ibn Ishāq's account, contrary to al-Zuhri's older version, does not depict Heraclius as possessing astrological skills. Instead he appears as a man ready and willing to receive the truth. Closely related to this perspective is Ibn Ishāq's conception of Muḥammad's mission as being part of God's plan of salvation announced in previous revelations. Accordingly, in a narrative component attached to Heraclius' questions and conclusion, Ibn Ishāq shows the Emperor as professing his faith in the presence of his nobles: "(Muḥammad) is the Prophet whom we expected and (whose coming) we find (announced) in our (holy) book."⁵¹ Again, this account is modeled after al-Zuhri's narrative where the corresponding sub-narrative constitutes the last part of the composition.⁵² Ibn Ishāq administers a number of changes to this narrative and inserts elements which he has acquired from other materials.⁵³ His shaping of the narrative corresponds with his endeavor to stress that Muḥammad continued and fulfilled the mission

45 Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. i, 18 (*bad' al-waḥy*).

46 Cf. M. J. Kister: "... and he was born circumcised ...", in *Oriens* 34 (1994), 10–30, here 19.

47 *Quellen zur Geschichte des 7. und 8. Jahrhunderts. Die Vier Bücher der Chroniken des Fredegar*. Unter der Leitung von Herwig Wolfram neu übertragen von Andreas Kusternig. (Wiesbaden 1982), 231.

48 Bashear, "The Mission", 77.

49 Paul Speck, "Sophronius und die Juden", in *idem*, *Varia VI. Beiträge zum Thema Byzantinische Feindseligkeit gegen die Juden im frühen siebten Jahrhundert nebst einer Untersuchung zu Anastasios dem Perse* (Bonn, 1997), 469–476, here 463 f.

50 Ed., trans. and annotated by B. Evetts (Paris 1948) (*Patrologia Orientalis* I, Fasc. 4), 402; P. Speck, "Sophronius", 462.

51 Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ*, ser. 1, 1065; cf. note 20.

52 'Abdarrazzāq b. Hammām, *al-Muṣannaḥ*, Ḥabībarrahmān al-A'zamī (ed.), vols. i–xi (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī 1403/1983), vol. v, 347; Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. i, 18.

53 Abū Nu'aym, *Dalā'il*, vol. ii, 121 f.; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. iv, 266 f.

of God's previous Prophets.⁵⁴ By Heraclius' statement that Muḥammad was announced in "our book", Ibn Ishāq probably refers to the prophecy ascribed to Isaiah.⁵⁵

Abū Sufyān's role in the conversation with the Emperor is also re-interpreted. Ibn Ishāq does not alter the narrative style for this purpose, but enhances the effect of Abū Sufyān's first form narrative. As we have seen before, the narrator not only reports the dialogue in a mimetic manner, but also explains his own intentions and strategies. In Ibn Ishāq's version his comments are more detailed and emphasise especially the tension between the Emperor's authority which demands precise answers and his own enmity towards the Prophet.

Abū Sufyān's reluctance to answer Heraclius' questions honestly is shown in comparatively bold terms. Only his sense of honour keeps him from lying:

"Since I was a man of distinction (*imru' sayyid*), I was too honorable to lie; and I knew that it was too easy, if I lied to (the Emperor), that (my companions) would remember that against me."⁵⁶

In contrast to other versions, he also takes countermeasures in attempting to persuade Heraclius of the Prophet's only marginal importance:

"I began to belittle him and to speak disparagingly of his affair and to say: 'Don't let him cause you anxiety, his importance is less than you have heard.'"

When the Emperor asks whether the Prophet was treacherous, Abū Sufyān's narration demonstrates eagerness to slander the Prophet and disappointment about the failure of his scheme:

"This was the only question of his which (gave me occasion) to slander (Muḥammad). I said: 'No, but we are having an armistice with him without being secure from his treachery.' But the Emperor paid no attention to what I said."

In accordance with this characterization Abū Sufyān does not ponder any consequences of his own creed and future role. At the end of this conversation, when Heraclius recognizes Muḥammad as the Prophet, he only claims to be impressed by the Emperor's weakness.

Abū Sufyān remains a representative of the heathen world of Mecca. Apart from his sense of honour, which helps him to refrain from telling obvious lies, he is

54 Gordon Daniel Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet. A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 9, 182.

55 Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh* vol. i, 638; Raif Georges Khoury, *Les légendes prophétiques dans l'Islam. Depuis le I^{er} jusqu'au III^e siècle de l'Hégire* (Abū Rifā'a 'Umāra b. Wathīma) (Wiesbaden: 1978), 238; Tha'labī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1405/1985), 332f. Cf. "Sha'yā" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. ix (Leiden: 1997), 382f.

56 Only Ibn Ishāq's version refers to his sense of honour.

unaware of the situation and completely ignorant of Islam. He does not show any sign of remorse but gives support to his rather unfavorable image from an Islamic point of view. This tendency is, of course, perfectly in line with what is known about Ibn Ishāq's pro-'Abbasid penchant. However, Ibn Ishāq's recasting of the narrative, in combination with his composition of different narrative elements, does not cover all of al-Zuhrī's narrative. Abū Sufyān's role as an involuntary advocate of the Prophet's mission remains controversial. Ibn Ishāq adapted the narrative by carefully enhancing aspects of its content and form. He displaced some components (the letter, the dream), and invented and added new traits and thus developed a thematic orientation which corresponds with his interpretation of history.

5.4. Diversification of Components: Motifs, Thematic Perspectives, Sub-Narratives

The elaboration of given thematic aspects is a common phenomenon in *khbar*-literature. Owing to the often complex thematic potential of composite narratives, minor elements of plot often develop differently as new versions are produced. Narrative variations nourished from a stock of motifs may thus involve a process of agglutination⁵⁷ upon a single initial scenario.

An example of this type of narration occurs in the meeting of 'Abdallāh ibn al-Zubayr (d. 73/692) and his mother Asmā' bint Abī Bakr. When 'Abdallāh was left by his allies and remained almost defenceless at Mekka, besieged by al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf and his troops, he was sure of his defeat. At this moment he went to his mother to seek her counsel and to say farewell to her. Asmā', known as "the one with the two girdles" (*dhāt al-niṭāqayn*), was one of the earliest converts to Islam. She was an elderly woman at that time, renown for her piety and self-denial. The advice and admonition she gave on this occasion became a famous example of moral consistency and personal bravery. Narratives of this meeting were reproduced in works of historiography, because this dramatic scene sheds light upon 'Abdallāh ibn al-Zubayr's cause and also gave occasion to present a conclusive statement concerning the schismatic caliph's legitimation. They were also adopted by works of *adab*-literature because of their rhetoric as well as moral value.

From the many renderings which could be considered, we will concentrate on what we can trace as the earliest versions.⁵⁸ We discern groups of related versions

57 I borrow this term from Jacob Lassner who described the growing of variants and their collection by the authors of our sources as an "agglutinating process"; see "Propaganda in early Islam: The 'Abbāsids in the post-revolutionary age" in *Israel Oriental Studies* 10 (1983), 74–85, part. 82.

58 A papyrus at the University Library of Heidelberg, dating probably from the time between 820 and 850 A.D. contains a short narrative quoted from 'Abdallāh ibn Wahb (d. 197/812), see 'Abdallāh ibn Wahb (d. 197/812) in Raif Georges Khoury,

focusing on specific aspects and also find versions which combine elements pertaining to different groups.⁵⁹ The elaboration of particular concepts can be retraced to different layers of a complicated process of recasting and variation. Only the major characteristics of narrative diversification and thematic specification can be considered here.

The common ground connecting all versions is like a hollow narrative shell. It provides a narrative pattern and general thematic orientation which were filled in with different wordings and ideas. Asmā's request not to give in, and, as a consequence, her acceptance of 'Abdallāh's death on the battlefield are at the core of the story and constitute one of the two central thematic perspectives. Her argument is that 'Abdallāh should stick to his principles if he has any. This view is brought forward, according to one version, in the form of a pragmatic suggestion, still dependent on 'Abdallāh's decision:

"If you were right and purposeful in what you were doing, vigorousness and [a willingness to] fight these people would be the best; if not, reconciliation with them is better for you."⁶⁰

'Abd Allāh Ibn Labī'a (97–174/715–790): *Juge et grand maître de l'école égyptienne* (Wiesbaden, 1986), 199–201, 253f.; Abū l-Ḥasan al-Madā'inī (d. 228/843) *Kitāb al-Ta'āzī*, in Borni El-Ouni, *Das Kitāb at-Ta'āzī des Abu'l Ḥasan al-Madā'inī*, Edition und Übersetzung (Göttingen, 1984), 70f., 150f.; al-Balādhurī (d. 279/892), *Ansāb al-ashraf*, S. D. F. Goitein (ed.) (Jerusalem, 1936), 364–366; Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (d. 280/893–4), *Balāghāt al-nisā'* (Beirut, 1972), 180f.; al-Ya'qūbī (d. 283/897), *Ta'rikh*, M. Th. Houtsma (ed.), vols. 1–2 (Leiden, 1883), vol. ii, 319f.; al-Mubarrad (d. 285/898), *Kitāb al-Ta'āzī wa-l-marāthī*, Muḥammad al-Dībāji (ed.) (Damascus: Maṭbū'āt Majma' al-Lughā al-'Arabiyya, 1396/1976), 56f., 193f.; al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), *Ta'rikh*, ser. 2, 845–847; cf. (translation) Michael Fishbein: "The Victory of the Marwānids" in *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. xxi (Albany, NY, 1990), 226–228; Ibn 'Abdrabbih (d. 328/940), *al-'Iqd al-farīd*, Aḥmad Amīn, Aḥmad az-Zayn, Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī (eds.) vols. i–vi (Cairo 1359/1940–1368/1949), vol. 7 al-Fahāris (Cairo 1372/1953), vol. iv, 415 f.; al-Mas'ūdī (345/956), *Murūj al-dhahab*, vol. iii, 316; al-Ābī (d. 421/1030), *Nathr al-durr*, M. 'Alī Qarna, 'Alī Muḥammad al-Bijāwī et al. (eds.), vols i–v, vol. vi, 1–2, vol. vii (Cairo 1980–1991), vol. iv, 93 f.; Ibn Ḥamdūn (d. 562/1167), *al-Tadhkira*, vol. iv, 311 f.; Aḥmad Zakī Ṣafwat, *Jamharat khutaḅ al-'arab*, vols i–iii (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-'Ilmiyya, n.d.), vol. ii, 178 f.

59 al-Madā'inī and al-Mubarrad both refer to Makhlad b. Ḥamza < 'Abdalmalik b. 'Umayr (d. after 130/747–48) and show minor variants. This version is part of Ibn Ṭayfūr's longer narrative which shows a number of variants and is reproduced by al-Ābī and Ibn Ḥamdūn. Al-Ṭabarī offers an elaborated version of this narrative. In his *isnād* figures Abū l-Zinād mistakenly for 'Abdarrahmān b. Abī l-Zinād (d. 174/790) who is referred to in Ibn Ṭayfūr's *isnād*. Another version is given by al-Balādhurī (p. 364); it is to be recognized partly in al-Ya'qūbī's account, as well as in al-Mas'ūdī's comprised rendering.

60 *Fa-in kunta 'alā ḥaqqin wa-baṣīratin fī amrika fa-mā awlāka bi-l-jiddi wa-munāzalati hā'ulā'i l-qawmi wa-illā fa-l-silmu minhum awlā*; al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, 364.

In other versions however, Asmā'’s opinion becomes an uncompromising moral demand:

“If you were right and have been advocating what is right, persevere towards it, for your companions have been killed while in the right.”⁶¹

In this case, there is no alternative to sacrifice, since his companions’ death in battle obligates ‘Abdallāh not to save himself. In order to emphasise this point of view, Asmā’ adds in al-Ya‘qūbī’s version:

“But if you were not right, then it is your own affair, what do you want (from me)?”

This passage shows more than a resolute character. Her contempt for any conduct that would not satisfy the moral requirements she demanded demonstrates an adherence to the principles of honour and loyalty. In contrast to this validation of secular moral principles, al-Ṭabarī’s version has Asmā’ condemning any such behaviour from a religious point of view:

“But if you only desired the present world, what a bad servant of God you are. You have ruined yourself and those who were killed fighting on your side.”

This turn in the meaning of the story is characteristic of al-Ṭabarī’s version, which has Asmā’’s morality developed into a *leitmotiv* of religious signification, namely the opposition between worldly interest and salvation in the hereafter. In a particular manner which has no parallels in the versions known to me al-Ṭabarī elaborated two thematic perspectives: pious abstinence from worldly interests as a proof of ‘Abdallāh’s political legitimation and justice as the ruler’s ultimate qualification.

When Asmā’ encourages her son to remain true to himself, she also demonstrates her determination to face the consequences. This component is a common narrative element, but its signification is diversified by subtle changes in the wording. According to one version she expresses her hope not to die before discovering what happened to her son; if he should be killed, she would be patient (and reckon upon a reward for her patience in the hereafter), if he was victorious, she would rejoice.⁶² As we have seen before, another version does not leave any alternative to ‘Abdallāh’s defeat and death. Focusing on Asmā’’s pious wish to keep her composure this version anticipates the course of events:

“I pray God that I may endure your loss with good patience, if you precede me, and if I precede you, may there be [endurance] of my loss.”⁶³

61 al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rikh*; cf. al-Madā’inī (op. cit.) and al-Mubarrad (op. cit.), who both have shortened versions; Ibn Ṭayfūr (op. cit.), al-Ābī (op. cit.), Ibn Ḥamdūn (op. cit.).

62 al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, 364: *mā antaẓiru illā an tuqtala fa-ḥtasibaka aw tazfara fa-usarra bi-ẓafarika*; al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, 366: *mā uḥibbu an amūta yawmī hadhā ḥattā a’lama mā yašīru amruka ilayhi ...*; cf. al-Ya‘qūbī (op. cit.), al-Mas‘ūdī (op. cit.).

63 al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rikh*: *innī la-arjū min Allāh an yakūna ‘azā’ī fika ḥasanan in taqad-*

It is worth mentioning that Asmā'’s determination is meant to contrast ‘Abdallāh’s hesitation. The versions which show her leaving no doubt about the outcome of the events introduce ‘Abdallāh considering the possibility of surrender:

“With me there remain only a few people who do not have the strength to repulse the enemy more than a short time. People (the enemy) would give me whatever I desired from this present world. What is your advice?”⁶⁴

This somehow critical stance in the depiction of ‘Abdallāh’s state of mind does not, however, develop into a consistent interpretation of his character. It only serves as a starting point for his mother’s reaction.

An early component is Asmā'’s general sense of honour. In spite of not being extant in all versions, this element is not limited to any group either. Furthermore, it is related to the motif of hatred against her son’s enemies, which is also spread over different groups of variants. Her attitude appears either in the form of a rather general maxim: “live honorably and die in honour”;⁶⁵ or is clad in a more complex argument involving the nobility of free men. Asmā' says to her son:

“For you to say, ‘I was right, but when my companion grew feeble (*wahana aṣḥābī*), I became weak,’ is not what free men (*aḥrār*) ... do.”⁶⁶

Ibn Ṭayfūr elaborated this aspect with some more detail:

“To be killed is the best (*aḥsan*) that can happen to you; (that you should die from) a sword’s blow in honour is more desirable to me than a whip’s blow in humiliation”.⁶⁷

This version again inspired al-Ṭabarī to offer a particular interpretation of the scene. He omits part of the passage given by Ibn Ṭayfūr, with whom he has most of the narrative’s wording in common, and elaborates instead the theme of his predilection:

“... is not what free men and men of religion do. How long is your stay in this world (*dunyā*)? Death is better (*aḥsan*)!”

All versions containing the element “Asmā'’s pride” in one form or another also have her disparaging remark concerning ‘Abdallāh’s enemies. A common feature is her warning that the young men of the Banū Umayya would amuse themselves with him in a cruel manner when he surrendered:

damtanī wa-in taqaddamtuka fa-fi nafsī, ukhruj ḥattā anḥura ilā mā yaṣīru amruka;
cf. Ibn Ṭayfūr (op. cit.), al-Ābī (op. cit.), Ibn Ḥamdūn (op. cit.).

64 al-Ṭabarī (op. cit.); cf. al-Madā’inī (op. cit.), al-Mubarrad (op. cit.), Ibn Ṭayfūr (op. cit.), al-Ābī (op. cit.), Ibn Ḥamdūn (op. cit.).

65 Ibn ‘Abdrabbih (op. cit.): *ish karīman wa-mut karīman*; cf. Ibn Wahb (op. cit.): *mut karīman wa-lā tastalim*.

66 Ibn Ṭayfūr (op. cit.), al-Ṭabarī (op. cit.), al-Ābī (op. cit.), Ibn Ḥamdūn (op. cit.).

67 Ibn Ṭayfūr (op. cit.), al-Ābī (op. cit.), Ibn Ḥamdūn (op. cit.).

“Don’t put yourself in the situation that the young men of the Banū Umayya may play around with you (while you are helpless)”⁶⁸

Instead of her argument that surrender would involve humiliation while alive, other versions mention that ‘Abdallāh’s corpse would be exhibited in a most shameful way. This is an anticipation of the alleged crucifixion of ‘Abdallāh’s headless corpse by al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf, and is also used as an occasion to show Asmā’’s courage in the face of death: “slaughtered sheep don’t feel the pain of being flayed”.⁶⁹ This declaration may also be meant, of course, to belittle the shame caused by the enemy’s triumph.

This element reappears in a sub-narrative provided by some of our versions. Here Asmā’ requests that ‘Abdallāh take off his chain mail before returning to battle.⁷⁰ In this impressive scene Asmā’ feels—being blind according to al-Balādhurī—her son’s chain mail when he approaches to embrace her. His returning without armour to the battlefield underlines his sacrifice—and the ruthlessness of the enemy. In al-Ṭabarī’s version it is ‘Abdallāh himself who alludes at this point to what would be done to his corpse:

“Know mother, that if I am killed I am only flesh, what is done to me does not harm me.”

The reappearance of this element again proves the use of motifs related to a certain narrative matter for the building of composite *akhbār*.

A second major thematic perspective of the narrative consists in the justification of ‘Abdallāh’s caliphate. This difficult and delicate issue is articulated in various ways. According to Ibn Wahb’s (d. 197/812) early and very particular version, ‘Abdallāh states his great attachment to scholarship and then declares his preference of the Qur’ān to all other traditions (*aḥādīth*) he has heard. Ibn Wahb here refers to an image of the scholar-caliph not reproduced in other versions. Already in the context of Asmā’’s admonition, Ibn Wahb provides an isolated version with the statement of her disillusionment about the political affairs of the community of believers:

“I have seen Islam and its people; if they gathered around a sheep, they would not (manage to) eat it (because of their disagreements).”⁷¹

All other versions which pay attention to ‘Abdallāh’s legitimation converge in essential traits.⁷² In form of a consolation (*ta’ziya*) for his mother ‘Abdallāh

68 Al-Ṭabarī: *lā tumakkin min raqbatika yatala’ ‘abu bihā ghilmānu Banī Umayya*; cf. Ibn Ṭayfūr, al-Ābī, Ibn Ḥamdūn (op. cit.): *ghilmān*; al-Ya‘qūbī (op. cit.): *‘abīd*; Ibn ‘Abdrabbih (op. cit.): *ṣibyān*.

69 al-Balādhurī (op. cit.), 364; cf. al-Ya‘qūbī (op. cit.).

70 al-Balādhurī (op. cit.), 366; al-Ṭabarī (op. cit.) ser. 2, 847 f.; Ibn Ḥamdūn (op. cit.).

71 Ibn Wahb (op. cit.), 254, 310.

72 Al-Ṭabarī (op. cit.); cf. al-Madā’inī (op. cit.) and al-Mubarrad (op. cit.), who both have shortened versions; Ibn Ṭayfūr (op. cit.), al-Ābī (op. cit.), Ibn Ḥamdūn (op. cit.).

points out that he always abstained from evil, endeavoured to apply God's commands and personally took care of the application of justice in the affairs of his subjects. 'Abdallāh is presented as an ideal Islamic ruler, at least by his intentions. Again al-Ṭabarī deviates from the older model by enhancing the aspect of justice. He achieves this effect by adding 'Abdallāh's statement that he always shunned *ẓulm*. Even without this additional element, his speech may be recognized as an attempt to carefully justify 'Abdallāh ibn al-Zubayr's rule and rebellion by exposing his correct political conduct in accordance with God's commands.

"For your son intended to do nothing dishonourable or indecent: he did not act unjustly in applying God's ordinance, he betrayed no trust and he intended no unjust rule (*ẓulm*) over any Muslim or confederate (*mu'āhad*). When informed of wrongdoing (*ẓulm*) on the part of my agents, I never approved, rather I disapproved of it. I have never preferred anything to the approval of my Lord."⁷³

The assessment of 'Abdallāh's legitimation is given from a distant and rather general point of view. This may be due to the problematic nature of the schism which arose from his caliphate: after his dismissal of the *shūrā*-principle 'Abdallāh's rule was not substantially different from the Umayyad caliphate.⁷⁴ When 'Abdallāh argues that anger for God's sake had brought him to rebellion (*khurūj*), because His sacred rules were disgraced (*an tuhtaka maḥārimuhu*),⁷⁵ this political statement remains an additional and marginal note in the context of the narrative.

5.5. Conclusion

The production and preservation of variant narratives is a salient feature of early historical tradition. Although the authorial intentions that engendered variants cannot always be identified, the shaping of new versions served, as a rule, particular interests and functions. It is characteristic of *khbar*-literature that variants produced by way of recasting do not obscure the main traits of an original, nor completely distort its message. New aspects may be added, others omitted or altered. The creation of variants by use of pre-existing narrative elements is facilitated, if not enabled, by the compositeness of *akhbār*, which permit the unobtrusive insertion, omission and "mixing" of sub-narratives. This method safeguards the continuity of content in spite of variance. It results in an allusive manner of expression allowing for the juxtaposition of materials, rather than the replacement of older versions by newer ones and constitutes a "noble, terse, con-

73 Al-Ṭabarī (op. cit.); cf. note 67.

74 Gernot Rotter: *Die Umayyaden und der zweite Bürgerkrieg (680–692)* (Wiesbaden, 1982; *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 45.3), 246 f.

75 Ibn Ṭayfūr (op. cit.), al-Ābī (op. cit.), Ibn Ḥamdūn (op. cit.).

sensual and reconciliatory mode” of historical representation.⁷⁶ New details and features are mostly restricted to referring to ideas and issues recognizable only to those who are familiar with the background of the narratives. *Khabar* narration thus produces a peculiar discourse: legitimised by *riwāya*, it marshals, gathers and combines different views without intending that they should confront or challenge each other. It aims instead at a general recognition of its message.

76 Tarif Khalidi: “The Battle of the Camel”, in A. Neuwirth /A. Pflitsch (eds.), *Crisis and Memory in Islamic Societies* (Beirut, 2001), 153–164, here 163.

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