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Review of Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Harun al-Rashid and the Narrative of the 'Abbasid Caliphate by Tayed el-Hibri

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BOOK REVIEW:
REINTERPRETING ISLAMIC HISTORIOGRAPHY:
HARUN AL-RASHID AND THE NARRATIVE
OF THE ‘ABBASID CALIPHATE

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The book under review is a significant contribution to contemporary scholarship of classical Islamic narratives. It stands out for its literary-critical approach to the question of intentions and meanings, and its methodological concern with separating the intertwined lines of fiction and fact as a means to better assess "the elusive nature of medieval Islamic narratives" (2). The book’s point of departure is "that Abbasid historical narratives were not intended originally to tell facts, but rather to provide commentary on certain political, religious, social, or cultural issues that may have been derived from a real and controversial historical episode" (13). Thus el-Hibri examines the background against which Abbasid narratives were composed, and analyzes the motives that structured the agenda of Abbasid historians. Additionally, el-Hibri emphasizes the relationship between prosopographical data of the main protagonists as a means to identify the existence of dialogue between layers of narratives revolving around specific historical problems.

Perhaps el-Hibri’s most significant contribution lies in his identification of themes from Greek tragedy in the Abbasid narrative—namely, hamartia, or a tragic flaw in the protagonist’s life that leads to his downfall. The tragic error is meant to connect between cause and effect and thus generate retrospective prophecies that are already fulfilled. Almost all of the Abbasid episodes which use this theme conclude with the tragic hero who, after undergoing an experience of self-discovery resulting in
repentant confession, utters pietistic declarations that symbolize his redemption. This is the cathartic denouement of the Greek tragedy.

The book consists of an introductory chapter as an historical background and five chapters followed by a conclusion. It also includes a bibliography and an index. The body of the book revolves around two clusters of narratives—the biographies of Harūn al-Rashīd (786-809) and his sons, and al-Mutawakkil (847-861) and his heirs.

The reign of Harūn al-Rashīd takes pride of place in the study. El-Hibri first traces the reasons that led to the idealization of al-Rashīd’s public image and then examines the Barmakid tragedy and its relationship to the fate of al-Rashīd’s successors. The author maintains that among the political factors contributing to the idealized depiction of al-Rashīd was that his biographies were written during periods of unrest in the Abbasid caliphate—the civil war between al-Āmin and al-Maʾmūn, or al-mīhna. The idealized descriptions of al-Rashīd “were intended to provide a stark contrast to the misery, melancholy, and ruin brought about by the civil war” (22).

As for the Barmakid tragedy, el-Hibri argues that Muslim historians tend to associate obliquely the tragedy of the Barmakids with the fate of al-Rashīd’s sons. The reason for this, according to el-Hibri, is that the medieval Muslim reader looked for a correlated structure of symbolism in different narratives. Among many examples that one can find is the association made between the story of the execution of Jaʿfar al-Barmakī by al-Rashīd’s chief servant, Masrūr, and the later death of al-Rashīd himself in Tūs. In the scene of al-Rashīd’s death, he recalled a dream he had some years earlier while visiting the town of Raqqā in Syria. In this dream he saw an arm stretched out towards him full with red soil. This was the arm of Masrūr, whom al-Rashīd had ordered to execute Jaʿfar al-Barmakī. Furthermore, the tragedy of the civil war was foretold by Yahya al-Barmakī who could not dissuade al-Rashīd from his decision to execute Jaʿfar. The moral lesson (ṣibra) from the episode is communicated “repeatedly, and in various ways, building up to the climax that concluded the saga of moralization and tragedy” (56).

In the third chapter, el-Hibri examines the tragic fate of al-Āmin as prophesied by Zubaida’s dream. The murder of al-Āmin was a radical turning point in Abbasid history. As such, it constituted an offense to the collective social and cultural values of the Islamic community. For this reason, el-Hibri argues, Muslim historians faced a difficulty in constructing the narrative of this tragic and far-reaching event. This may explain the divergences in Muslim sources with respect to the question of responsibility for al-Āmin’s murder. Describing the last days of al-Āmin, almost all Muslim historians harbored a deep sense of sympathy for him. Therefore, they “sought to endow the caliph’s downfall with praiseful character, and to this end, they set out constructing a hagiographic web of representation” (84). This sympathy is justified by the fact that al-Āmin was surrounded by inept and incompetent advisers who drove him to his tragic end. Again, we have all the components of Greek tragedy: prophecy, flawed protagonist, tragic error, and catharsis.

Another important aspect of this study is the use of various thematic and literary connections, such as literary formulas and motifs. This may enable us, says el-Hibri, to
understand the way Muslim historians constructed their narratives and their responses to religious and political upheavals. A good example for this is the fish motif in both al-Amin’s fishing scene and al-Ma’mūn’s death episode. In these two scenes, both al-Amin and al-Ma’mūn failed to catch the fish. This motif adds a thematic dialogue between the two stories: in both stories the fish “symbolizes the objective of both brothers, the caliphate” (116).

El-Hibri points out that in some of these narratives, it is difficult for us, as historians, to know the real intention behind the representation of an event. Therefore, there is a need to take into consideration the circumstances under which Muslim historians composed their chronicles. This may explain, for example, why almost all early Muslim narrators described al-Ma’mūn’s personality as well as his policy sympathetically. The reasonable explanation, el-Hibri maintains, is that these historians wrote under the pressure of al-Ma’mūn propagandists. To avoid a collision with al-Ma’mūn’s Mu’tazilite ideas, later Sunni ‘ulama criticized this policy indirectly by highlighting or reinterpreting certain episodes from al-Rashīd’s reign that could support their claims. Hence orthodox narrators, el-Hibri suggests, took advantage of the motif of the fish’s splashing of cold water, which causes al-Ma’mūn’s death, in order to launch their careful, but vehement criticism of al-Ma’mūn’s policies. Thus al-Ma’mūn’s death, as depicted by these historians, “allowed the narrator to share with us his philosophy of life and his religious commentary, both of which were based on the historical record of the caliphs. In doing this, the narrator composed a text that drew on symbols from various sources of thought, and ultimately placed the historical text in dialogue with the very events that it supposedly addresses” (118).

Although the study presents new instructive insights into the understanding of early Islamic narratives, it has some weak points. For instance, el-Hibri does not provide prosopographical data on the historians whose accounts are probed. Thus he passes in silence on the differences between the historical thought and intellectual identity of writers such as Ya’qūbī, al-Ṭabarī, and al-Mas‘ūdī. The only distinction applied is the classification of the relevant historians into Sunnis and non-Sunnis and their political attitude toward the caliph.

Moreover, the digressions used in this book are at times exaggerated. These digressions seem likely to generate weak spots in the skillful argumentative sequence of this study. Examples of this are the case of the Barmakid tragedy (especially 46-52), and the comparison between Abel and Cain (172-173), on the one hand, and al-Amin and al-Ma’mūn, on the other. Though this study will not be the last word on the subject of Islamic narratives, students of both classical Islamic literature and historiography will find it useful and informative.