4.2 Al-Thaʿlabī on Abraha and the expedition of the elephant

Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm Abū Isḥāq al-Nīsābūrī al-Thaʿlabī was a Qurʾān exegete and collector of stories who died in 427/1035. Al-Thaʿlabī is famous today for two works. His massive *tafsīr, al-Kashf waʾl-bayān ʿan tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, is a landmark of intellectual achievement for the period. The work raised concerns in the past, however, for its reliability; its sources include those traditionally deemed untrustworthy within the Sunnī *tafsīr* tradition and this probably accounts for its being ignored for publication until recently, despite its significance. The second famous work by al-Thaʿlabī is his book on the stories of the prophets, *ʿArāʾis al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, which gives a taste of the character of his *tafsīr*. Printed many times and available in numerous inexpensive mass market editions, it is a work of popular imagination designed for education and entertainment. It contains not only the history of the earlier prophets (especially biblical) but also various stories of pre-Islamic Arabian events which lead up to the arrival of Muḥammad, as in the passage translated here about the South Arabian leader Abraha and his attempt to invade Mecca in the year of the birth of Muḥammad.

Much of the account of this story about Abraha is derived from that of Ibn Isḥāq (d. 150/767), who provided the base text for the biography of Muḥammad for generations of later Muslims. After recounting the basic story of the invasion of Abraha with some editorial remarks, all in the form of a long explanation of a very allusive Qurʾān quotation, al-Thaʿlabī adds another version of the story from the *tafsīr* of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (see section 5.3). This provides a wholly different, and much more fanciful, narrative explanation while still embedding the exegesis of the same Qurʾānic reference (the text is found in Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, ed. A. M. Shihāṭa, Cairo 1988, vol. 4, pp. 850–3). Overall, the account is notable for the inclusion of poetry which serves as an additional witness to the events described by the narrative. Poetry is not cited as part of the events themselves, but as the vehicle for the transmission of the memories through later generations and for the glorification of the poets themselves, who are, as in this story, sometimes the heroes of the story as well. This story is included within this book dealing with the 'stories of the prophets' as the very last chapter. This emphasizes the point that the overall aim of the work is not simply to tell the stories of the past, but to see all of the past history as culminating in the coming of Muḥammad.

The historical events referred to in this text suggest the point at which the Muslim tradition of pre-Islamic times begins to overlap with contemporary external sources. It has, therefore, attracted a good deal of scholarly interest. For example, pre-Islamic South Arabian inscriptions and Procopius of Caesarea's *History of the Wars*, written in about 550 CE, provide a good deal of basic data which correlates to some degree with the memories transmitted in later Muslim sources.

Probably because no critical version of the text of al-Thaʿlabī is available, both the poetry and the spelling of some names in the text show variation from those found in the parallel sources such as Ibn Isḥāq [Ibn Hishām], *Al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya*, Cairo 1955, vol. 1, pp. 37–62, A. Guillaume (trans.), *The life of Muḥammad: a translation of [Ibn] Isḥāq's* Sīrat rasūl Allāh, Oxford 1955, pp. 18–30, al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul waʾl-mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Leiden 1879–1901, vol. 1, pp. 925–45,

and C. E. Bosworth (trans.), *The history of al-Ṭabarī, volume V: the Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, Albany NY 1999, pp. 202–35. Occasionally, this translation has followed the better-edited texts of those other sources.

Further reading

Lawrence Conrad, 'Abraha and Muḥammad: some observations apropos of chronology and literary topoi in the early Arabic historical tradition,' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 50 (1987), pp. 225–40.

M. J. Kister, 'The campaign of Ḥulubān: new light on the expedition of Abraha,' *Le Muséon*, 78 (1965), pp. 425–36; reprinted in M. J. Kister, *Studies in Jāhiliyya and early Islam*, London 1980, chapter 18, and in F. E. Peters (ed.), *The Arabs and Arabia on the eve of Islam*, Aldershot 1999, chapter 18.

F. E. Peters, 'Introduction,' in his *The Arabs and Arabia on the eve of Islam*, Aldershot 1999, pp. xlii–xlviii; contains useful bibliographical material.

Sidney Smith, 'Events in Arabia in the 6th century AD,' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 16 (1954), pp. 425–68; includes translations of inscriptions and Greek sources.

Source text

Al-Thaʿlabī, *'Arā'is al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, Cairo n.d., pp. 396–402. The translations of the poems presented here are indebted to the partially parallel texts found in A. Guillaume (trans.), *The life of Muḥammad: a translation of [Ibn] Isḥāq's* Sīrat rasūl Allāh, Oxford 1955. A full translation of al-Thaʿlabī's work is available: W. M. Brinner (trans.), *'Arā'is al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā' or 'Lives of the prophets' as recounted by Abū Isḥāq Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Thaʿlabī*, Leiden 2002.

The story of the companions of the elephant along with an explanation of what occurred during it of benefit and distinction to our prophet Muḥammad

1. God said, *Have you not seen how your Lord acted with the companions of the elephant?* (Q 105/1) to the end of the chapter. Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq ibn Bashshār said that some of the people of knowledge transmit the story about the companions of the elephant on the authority of Saʿīd ibn Jubayr and ʿIkrima from Ibn ʿAbbās, and from other learned people from the Yemen as well as others. The story is as follows.

2. One of the kings of Himyar, named Zurʿa Dhū Nuwās, had adopted Judaism and all of Ḥimyar followed him in that except the people of Najrān who belonged to the Christian religion, following the rule of the Gospels. Their leader was ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Thāmir. Dhū Nuwās summoned them to adopt Judaism but they refused. He let them choose (between that and death) and they chose death. So he dug trenches for them and he divided them up for different methods of

execution. Some were killed while captive and some were thrown into the fire. One man, named Daws Dhū Thaʿlabān from Saba', escaped, however, riding away on one of his own horses. He galloped away such that it was impossible for them to pursue him in the sand. He went to the Byzantine emperor ('Caesar') and told him what had happened to them and asked for help. The emperor said to him, 'Your land is far from us but I will write on your behalf to the ruler of Abyssinia, who also belongs to our religion, and he will help you.' So he wrote on his behalf to the ruler of Abyssinia, the Najāshī, ordering him to help Daws. When the letter reached the Najāshī, the king sent an Abyssinian named Aryāṭ with Daws, commissioning him saying, 'When you reach the Yemen, kill a third of the men, lay waste a third of the country and send me a third of the prisoners.' When they entered the Yemen, the armies engaged in battle. Dhū Nuwās became separated from his army and he plunged his horse into the sea. He and his horse died together. That was the end of him. Aryāṭ took the country and did as he had been commanded by the Najāshī.

3. Dhū Jadan al-Himyarī said the following about what happened to the people of Yemen.

> Leave me! May you have no father! You cannot turn me from my purpose. May God put shame on you; your scolding dries my spit.
> The music of singers in times past was pleasant when we drank our fill of excellent wine.
> Drinking the wine does not cause me shame, when no companion faults my behaviour.
> For no one can hold back death, though he drinks the perfumed potions of the remedy,
> And nor can the monk in his secluded cell on high where the vulture flies around its nest.
> You have heard of Ghumdān's towers which loom from the mountain top,
> Well carpentered, with stones for support, plastered with clean, damp, slippery clay.
> Oil lamps show within it in the evening like the lightning's glow;
> Beside its wall the palm-trees grow with ripening fruit in heavy clusters.
> This once new castle is in ashes today; the flames have eaten its beauty away.
> Dhū Nuwās, humbled, gave up his great castle and warned his people of their coming fate.

4. Aryāṭ held command in the Yemen and the Najāshī wrote to him saying, 'Remain there with your army and those with you.' He had been in command for some time when Abraha ibn al-Ṣabbāḥ became annoyed at him concerning the matter of the Abyssinians such that they split into two groups, one following Aryāṭ, the other Abraha. The two of them prepared to move against one another. When they were fairly close, Abraha sent a note to Aryāṭ saying, 'Don't do

anything! We Abyssinians should not fight one another. Come out and fight me alone. Whoever is killed, his army will unite with the other.' He replied, 'You have made a just suggestion.' They went out (to meet each other). Aryāṭ was a large, handsome man and held a spear in his hand. Abraha was short and fat and belonged to the Christian religion. Behind him was a helper named ʿAtawda. When they were close, Aryāṭ lifted his spear and hit Abraha on the head, striking his forehead, slashing his eye, brow, nose and lips. For this reason Abraha was called al-Ashram (the hare-lipped). When ʿAtawda saw that happen, he attacked Aryāṭ and killed him. So the armies were joined under the leadership of Abraha. When the news of what Abraha had done reached the Najāshī, he became angry and swore that he would not leave Abraha alone until he had cut off his forelock and trampled his country underfoot. So he wrote to Abraha saying, 'You attacked my commander and killed him without having received my command.' Abraha was a defiant person so when the Najāshī's letter reached him, he shaved his head and filled a bag with dirt from his land and wrote to the Najāshī saying, 'My King! Aryāṭ was your servant and I am your servant. We disagreed over your command. I was more knowledgeable and more firm in the affairs of the Abyssinians. I wanted to separate, so I killed him. When news of the oath of the king reached me, I shaved my head and I am sending my hair to you. I have also filled a bag with dirt from my land and I am sending it to you so that the king may trample on it and thus keep his oath.'

5. When that reached the Najāshī, he calmed down and he confirmed Abraha in his position, writing to him that he was in command of the soldiers who remained with him. Then Abraha built a church in Sanʿā', calling it al-Qullays ['cathedral' from the Greek *ekklesia*]. He then wrote to the Najāshī saying, 'I have built a church for you in Sanʿā', the like of which no king has ever built before. I shall not rest until the Arabs perform their pilgrimage to it.' A man from Banū Mālik ibn Kināna heard of this and went to al-Qullays and entered it one night, defiling it in a derogatory manner and praising the Kaʿba. When news of that reached Abraha, it is said that he went there to see it. He entered the church, and found that someone had defecated there, so he said, 'Who has had the nerve to do this?' He was told that an Arab from the people of that house to which the Arabs go for pilgrimage did it after he had heard what Abraha had said. Abraha swore as a result that he would go to the Kaʿba and demolish it. So the rest of the Abyssinians set out for Mecca, taking with them an elephant. News of this reached the Arabs who became alarmed and anxious when they saw that his effort was truly directed against them.

6. One of the Himyarite kings named Dhū Nafar set out with those of his people who would help him. They engaged Abraha in battle but they were routed and Dhū Nafar was captured and taken before Abraha. He said to him, 'O king, do not kill me! Your sparing me would be better for you than my death.' So he kept him alive but shackled him, for Abraha was a merciful man. The rest of the troops set out until they approached the territory of Khathʿam. Nufayl ibn Ḥabīb al-Khathʿamī went out against them with the two tribes of Khathʿam, Shahrān and Nāhis and some others from the Yemeni tribes who had joined them. They battled and were defeated, and Nufayl was taken prisoner. He said to Abraha,

‘O king! I will be your guide in the land of the Arabs. Do not kill me! I will order my people to obey you.’ So he spared him and they set out with him guiding them until they passed al-Ṭā’if, where Masʿūd ibn Muʿattib al-Thaqafī came out with troops from the tribe of Thaqīf. He said to him, ‘O king! We are your servants and we have no quarrel with you. It is not our temple (that is, the temple of al-Lāt) that you want; rather you want the temple which is in Mecca. We will send someone to guide you there.’ They sent Abū Righāl who was their client. They set out until they reached al-Mughammis, close to Mecca, where Abū Righāl died and later the Arabs would stone his grave.

7. Abraha sent an Abyssinian named al-Aswad ibn Mafṣūd out of al-Mughammis with a raiding party. He set about plundering and seized two hundred camels belonging to ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, grandfather of the messenger of God. Abraha sent Ḥunāṭa, the Himyarite, to the people of Mecca, telling him to ask about who their leader was and to tell them that they had not come to fight but to destroy the temple. On reaching Mecca, Ḥunāṭa met ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib ibn Hāshim and said to him, ‘The king has sent me to you to inform you that he has not come to fight you unless you attack him; rather, he has come in order to destroy this temple. He will then leave you alone.’ ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib said, ‘We are powerless in front of him and what he brings. But this is God’s sacred temple and the temple of His friend Abraham, upon whom may there be peace. If He defends it, then it is most certainly His temple and sacred place; if He lets him have it, then so be it for, by God, we do not have the strength (to do otherwise).’ Ḥunāṭa replied, ‘Come with me to the king.’ Some of the learned ones claim that he sat him on one of his mules and he rode on that, and that some of his sons accompanied him to the camp. Dhū Nafar was a friend of ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, so he went to him and said, ‘Dhū Nafar, do you have the ability to deal with this matter that has come upon us?’ Dhū Nafar replied, ‘A prisoner does not have any ability when he expects to be killed sooner or later. But I will send you to Unays, keeper of the elephant, who is a friend of mine. I will ask him to do whatever good he is able with the king on your behalf. That will strengthen your position and fortune with him.’ So he wrote to Unays and he came to Dhū Nafar, who said, ‘This is the lord of the Quraysh, master of the Meccan well, who has come; he feeds the people in the plain and the mountains as well as the wild animals and birds on the hilltops. The king has taken two hundred camels from him. If you are able to do something to his advantage with the king, please do so. He is my friend and I would like to see him rewarded.’ Unays, accompanied by ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, went to Abraha and he praised ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib to him, saying, ‘We have come not to display antagonism nor to quarrel with you but to seek your permission for you to listen to him as we desire.’ Permission was granted.

8. Now ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib was an impressive, handsome man and, when he entered, he sat in front of Abraha, but Abraha got up and made him sit on his throne with him. He told his interpreter to ask what he wanted, to which ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib replied that he wanted the return of the two hundred camels which were taken from him. Abraha replied through his translator, ‘I was amazed when I saw you but I am displeased with you now!’ He asked, ‘Why?’ The king replied, ‘I have come to a temple which is at the centre of your religion and that of your fathers

in order to destroy it and you do not speak to me of that, but rather you speak of the two hundred camels which I have taken!' ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib said, 'I am the owner of these camels and this temple has an owner who will defend it against you.' The king replied, 'It cannot be defended against me!' to which ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib said, 'That's between you and Him!' Then he asked about his camels again and they were returned to him.

9. Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq said that some of the learned people have claimed that, when ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib went to Abraha, he was accompanied by Yaʿmar ibn Nufātha ibn ʿAdī ibn al-Du'il ibn Bakr ibn ʿAbd Manāt ibn Kināna (who was at the time chief of the tribe of Kināna) and Khuwaylid ibn Wāthila al-Hudhalī (who was chief of the tribe of Hudhayl at that time). They offered to give Abraha a third of the property of Tihāma if he would withdraw and not destroy the temple. He refused to withdraw, however. When he returned the camels to ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, the latter went back and told the Quraysh of the news and ordered them to disperse into the hills and to keep a lookout on the mountaintops for fear of the large numbers of soldiers coming. They did that.

10. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib went to the Kaʿba and, seizing the door-knockers, began to say,

> Lord, I do not wish for them anyone against them but You! Lord,
> prevent them from entering Your sacred area!
> The enemy of the house is the one attacking You; so prevent them
> from destroying Your settlements.

and he said,

> O great God, the man defends his dwelling, so You must defend
> yours!
> Help Your people against the people of the cross and their servants
> today!
> Let not the cross and their crafts ever overcome Your craft.
> All of the people of their land and the elephant went into action in
> order to capture Your dependants.
> They attacked Your sacred area cunningly in ignorance and paid no
> need to Your majesty.
> If You had abandoned them and our place of worship, then the
> affair would have been of no concern to You.

11. Then ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib let go of the knocker and went off with his people in various directions. In the morning Abraha prepared to enter Mecca with his troops and his elephant. The elephant's name was Maḥmūd and he had been sent by the Najāshī to Abraha. No one in the land had ever seen anything like it in size or strength. Al-Kalbī has said that only that one elephant had ever been there and therefore God said, *Have you not seen how your Lord acted with the companions of the elephant?* (Q 105/1)

    11.1. Al-Daḥḥāk said that it was a huge elephant. It is also said that there were twelve other elephants with it, but there can only have been one in

accordance with this interpretation of the beginning of the verse of the Qur'ān. It is also said that all these elephants were offspring of the one large elephant.

12. Nufayl approached the large elephant and took it by the ear and said to it, 'Kneel, Maḥmūd, or go back directly to where you came from. You are in God's holy land!' So the elephant knelt. The troops called it but it refused to get up. They beat it on the head but it still refused. They stuck hooks under it and lifted it up in order to make it stand up, but still it refused. So they turned it around in order to return to the Yemen, and then it got up and started off. They then turned it towards Syria and it did the same, as it did when they turned it to the east. But when they turned it towards the sacred area of Mecca, it knelt and refused to stand up. Nufayl, meanwhile, had left them and gone up into the hills. God sent some birds from the sea, various kinds of swallows, each of them carrying three rocks – two between their legs and one in their beak, just like lentils and peas. When they descended upon the people they had been sent to, everyone whom they hit with the rocks died, although not all the people were hit. That is what is referred to by God's saying, *birds in swarms* (Q 105/3), that is, scattered everywhere.

    12.1. Ibn ʿAbbās said that they had beaks like fowl and claws like the paws of dogs. ʿIkrima said their heads were like those of lions, the likes of which had not been seen previously nor have they been seen since. Rabīʿ said that they had teeth like those of lions and Saʿīd ibn Jubayr said that they were green birds with yellow beaks. Abū 'l-Jawzā' said that God created them in the air at that time.

13. Ibn Masʿūd said that the birds screamed and pelted the troops with their rocks. God sent a wind which pushed the rocks and increased their strength; whenever a rock struck a man on the side, it would pass out the other side. If a rock struck someone's head, it would come out of his buttocks. He made those people resemble harvested plants, that is, like crops where the seed has been consumed and only the straw remains. When the Abyssinians saw this, they fled, rushing the way they had come.

14. They called for Nufayl ibn Ḥabīb to show them the way, but, when he saw the punishment God had sent down upon them, he said,

> Where can one go when God is the pursuer? Al-Ashram is the conquered, not the conqueror.

He also said about that,

> Greetings, Rudayna! Our eyes rejoice at you this morning!
> Rudayna, if only you had seen, but you will not see, what we saw near al-Muḥaṣṣab.
> Then you would have forgiven me and praised my action, and would not have been grieved at what has passed and gone between us.

I praised God when I saw the birds but I feared the stones would
fall on us.
All the people were asking for Nufayl, as though I owed the
Abyssinians a debt.

15. Ziyād mentioned on the authority of ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿUmar that the *birds in swarms* (Q 105/3) had approached from the sea from the direction of India, pelting them with small rocks about the size of a man's head or somewhat bigger, such that what they threw hit its target, and what hit its target killed. Nufayl saw some of this from the hills. The people were leaving and some of them called to the others who then left, falling over each other via every route, but they were killed at every oasis at which they stopped. God caused Abraha to be injured on his body, and as he was being taken away, his fingertips fell off with pus and blood pouring out from their place. When he arrived in Sanʿāʾ he looked like a young bird in the midst of what remained of his followers. He did not die until his heart burst within his chest and then he was destroyed.

16. Muqātil ibn Sulaymān claims that the reason for the report about the companions of the elephant lies in the fact that a group of merchants from the Quraysh went to the country of the Najāshī. They travelled there and established an agreement with the Najāshī and the people of his land.

17. Some people, who settled in support of the agreement, gathered firewood and started a fire and cooked some meat. When they departed, they left the fire just as if it was a summer's day. However, a wind roared up and the temple caught on fire. The screaming reached the Najāshī and he was told what had happened. He fell into a rage at the agreement after that, and decided to send Abraha to destroy the Kaʿba. At that time Abū Masʿūd al-Thaqafī was in Mecca. Being blind, he spent the summer in al-Ṭāʾif and wintered in Mecca. He was a well-known, noble and intelligent man and a friend of ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib said, 'Abū Masʿūd! Today you have no need of your vision! What do you think?' He replied to him, 'Take one hundred camels and make them a gift to God. Adorn them with sandals hung around their necks and put them in the sacred area. Perhaps some of these black people will slaughter some of them and cause the Lord of this house to be angry.' So ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib took them and did that. The people of Abraha came to the camels and mounted them, and they slaughtered some of them. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib began crying out and Abū Masʿūd said, 'There is a Lord of this house who will prevent these actions!' The followers of the king of Yemen stayed in the wasteland around the house which they wished to destroy. God prevented them from doing that by putting them to the test with three days of darkness. When ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib saw that, he went out, draping a camel in fine white Egyptian cloth to enhance its greatness, and he slaughtered it as a sacrifice. Then Abū Masʿūd said to ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, 'Look towards the sea of Yemen. Do you see something?' He replied, 'I see white birds emerging out of the sea, circling over our heads.' Abū Masʿūd said, 'Do you understand it?' to which he replied, 'By God, I do not understand. They are not from the Najd or Tihāma, nor from the Arabian desert, nor Syria. They are flying over our land but are unfamiliar.' Abū Masʿūd said, 'How strong are they?' to

which he replied, 'They are like a swarm of bees; in their beaks they have little stones like stones from a slingshot.' They approached like the darkness of night, following one after the other. Leading in front of each group was a bird with a red beak, a black head and a long neck. This continued on until they faced the army of people, remaining motionless above their heads. When all of them had encircled the men, the birds dropped what was in their beaks on whoever was under them, the name of its victim being written on each stone. Then they returned to where they came from. When ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib and Abū Masʿūd got up, they came down from atop the mountain and walked over the hill, but they met no one. They walked on and heard no sound at all. They said to each other, 'The people must have spent the night untroubled and must still be sleeping.' When they approached the army of the elephant they found they were all dying. The rocks had fallen on the helmets of every one of them and had smashed them, and the men's brains were split open. The elephant and the riding animals had all dispersed. The rocks had disappeared into the earth because of the force with which they had fallen.

. . .

18. There is disagreement concerning the date of the year of the elephant. Muqātil says that the affair of the elephant took place forty years before the birth of the prophet of God while ʿUbayd ibn ʿUmayr and al-Kalbī say it was twenty-three years before his birth. Everyone else says that it occurred in the year in which the messenger of God was born and, according to the opinion of the majority of the learned class, that is the sound opinion. What we are told from Abū Bakr al-Jawzaqī indicates this. He was told by ʿAbd al-Azīz ibn Abī Thābit al-Zubayr, who was told by Ibn Mūsā on the authority of Abū ʾl-Jawzāʾ, who said that he heard ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān say to Ghayyāth ibn Usaym al-Kinānī, 'Ghayyāth! Who is older, you or the messenger of God?' He replied, 'The messenger of God is greater than me, but I am older than him. The messenger of God was born in the year of the elephant while my mother was with me in the dung [i.e., at the time] of the elephant.' A report from ʿĀʾisha also indicates this when she said, 'I saw the elephant's guide and its groom in Mecca, both of them blind, crippled and begging for food.'

After God had sufficed in the affair of the companions of the elephant, the Arabs exalted the Quraysh and they said that they were the people of God for whom God had fought and had sufficed them over their enemies. God is all-knowing and all-wise. May God grant us our final reckoning and the blessing of His representative. Amen.