



Review Article

Biography and Historical Works of Imam Abu Ja'afar Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari

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Abstract: Abu Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari was a 10th century Persian physician born in Tabaristan a gigantic scholar, who made his own contributions to *Tafsir* literature, History and philosopher. He was a creative and innovative physician who avoided emulating treatments without investigating and examining them. Tabari was an encyclopedist and had a holistic view to medicine. Investigation of the views of this great Persian scholar indicated that his scientific and moral characteristics contain. The paper attempts to examine the biography and works of Al-Tabari who made a huge amount of works in Islam in various aspects in Islamic religion such as *Tafsir*, history, medicine, and furthermore the highlights on his views on development of medical science among others.

Keywords: Historical works, Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, Tafsir, History medicine and medical science.

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INTRODUCTION

Muhammad was the custodian of divine message who received revelation and who was assigned to interpret same to the understanding of his followers. The companions, in spite of the fact that the revelation was made in their language (Arabic) relied on the Prophet whom Allah assigned to explain to the people what was revealed to them. Allah says:

And we have sent down onto you the message; that you may explain clearly to men what is sent to them and you may give thought¹.

The companions had the privilege of referring necessary cases of interpretation of the Qur'anic verses to the Prophet since he was alive. Yet they made their own contributions to the development of *tafsir* literature particularly after the Prophet's death. Muslim scholars from time to time experienced the need to immortalize *tafsir* in order to make the Qur'an relevant to the Muslims at all ages.

Among the later generations after Tabari, was Abu Ja'far Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari. He was a notable scholar of *tafsir* who contributed a lot to *tafsir* literature. He used a unique method in his *tafsir* showing his intellectual endowment as an expert in the field, and making his *tafsir* book a unique one.

This paper therefore, intends to examine the biography and works of Abu Ja'far Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari in various fields of knowledge in Islam.

His Biography

Muhammad bin Jarir bin Kathir bin Ghalid Abu Ja'far al-Tabari was born in the year 225 A.H/ 838CE at Amol in Tabaristan. This place of birth is a mountainous district of Persia situated alongside the Caspian Sea². He was very handsome and eloquent. Al-Tabari lived for eighty five years as he died in the year 320A.H/ 923CE and was buried in Baghdad. Even though his death was not widely announced, a very large crowd attended the funeral formalities. Requiem prayers were repeatedly observed by different people days and nights on his grave, for several months. He was passionately mourned by intellectuals and pious people³.

Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari was a prominent and influential Persian scholar, historian and exegete of the Qur'an from Tabaristan, modern Mazandaran in Iran. Even if today he's better known for his expertise in Islamic sciences (Qur'anic commentary and law) or history, he has been described as "an impressively prolific polymath. He wrote on such subjects as poetry, lexicography, grammar, ethics, mathematics, and medicine⁴."

¹ Qur'an, 16: 44.

² Y. Rumi; *Mu'jam al-Udaba*; Maktabah al-Qira'ah Wa al-thaqafah, Cairo; n.d, vol. 18, p. 40.

³ J. Ahmad; *Hundred Great Muslims*; Farozson Ltd Laore, 1977, P. 574.

⁴ <https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/5758214>

In the ninth century A.C, Islamic learning was at its peak. Muslim scholars and scientists excelled in their learning and achievements in different fields. Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir at-Tabari surpassed them all. Learned in hadith literature, he also studied many other subjects to further his knowledge of the Glorious Qur'an and the religion of Islam. During the end of his days, he was known as a commentator on the Glorious Qur'an, an expert in Islamic Jurisprudence (*Fiqh*), and as a famous historian.

His Personal Characteristics

He is described as having a dark complexion, large eyes and a long beard. He was tall and slender and his hair and beard remained black until he was very old⁵. He was attentive to his health, avoiding red meat, fats and other foods he deemed unhealthy. He was seldom sick before his last decade when he suffered from bouts of pleurisy. When he was ill, he treated himself (to the approval of physicians). He had a sense of humour, though serious subjects he treated seriously⁶. He had studied poetry when young and enjoyed writing, reciting and participating in poetic exchanges. He knew Persian and was acquainted with the origins of various foreign loan words in Arabic from a number of other languages.

His Education

Al-Tabari received his education at Ray, Baghdad, Wasit, Basrah, Kufa and Fustat (old Cairo). He also made extensive study tours to Persia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt in quest for collecting information for his monumental historical works. Among his teachers were Muhammad bin Abdulmalik bin Abis- Shawarib, Ahmad bin Hamid al-Qazi, Abu Hamman al-Walid bin Shujai and Muhammad bin Al-Alaci. He learnt the Qur'an by heart at the age of seven⁷. Yaqut Rumi reported Al-Tabari as having confirmed by him, to have learnt how to read the Qur'an from Sulaiman bin AbdulRahman bin Hamid together with legal aspect of it. Ibn Jarir had the knowledge of traditions of the Prophet and knew how to distinguish between authentic and non-authentic ones. His knowledge of traditions of the Prophet was so deep that he was regarded as an authority in the science of hadith. *Mustalah al-Hadith*. His impact as a scholar was widely felt. Among his students was Ahmad bin Kamil, the person to whom Mishkawayh owed his guidance in history⁸. People used to learn *tafsir* from Al-Tabari's dictations.

After receiving his early education in the religious sciences at Amol, he continued his studies in Ray and Baghdad, which he reached about the year 855. Not later than 857 he visited Basra, Wasit, and Kufa to hear the famous scholars there. After his return to Baghdad he studied religious law according to the doctrine of al-Shafi', which he followed for some time before establishing his own doctrine.

His teachers were sorry to see him go. He had been a brilliant student during his entire academic career. Ar-Razi offered him a job of an assistant teacher in order to persuade him to stay at Rayy, but at-Tabari wanted to study hadith under the guidance of Imam Ahmed bin Hanbal in Baghdad, who was an authority on hadith and Tafsir. With this thought in his mind, he set out for Baghdad with one of the caravans that traveled from China along the Khurasan road⁹.

At-Tabari was one of the rare scholars who studied without the help of a patron to finance his studies. He did not depend on others to help him out during the course of his studies. He studied and lived on what he earned and spent it on traveling and studying. He accepted only those gifts from his friends, which he was able to match and throughout his life, he was proud of this fact.

It is said that at-Tabari once refused a gift of 10,000 dirhams from a minister in the King's court. He returned the gift with a letter of thanks. The servant returned with the gift with a message from the minister saying that if he did not want it for himself; he could give it to the poor. At-Tabari refused to accept it and replied that the minister should know the poor people in the land better than he did¹⁰. He wished that the minister distributed the money himself. He did not want anybody to say that he accepted money from a minister even to distribute it to the poor. It is also said that one day some of his students presented him with a carpet. He accepted the carpet from the student but insisted on paying its cost.

The Scholar

Baghdad in those days was one of the largest cities in the world with a population of two and a half million people. It was also the center for trade and business. People from all occupations converged on the city to earn their livelihood. It had hospitals, mosques, and public baths. One of the first places visited by him was the academy¹¹. The director was a kind man who showed at-Tabari around the entire campus and graciously allowed him the use of the library whenever he wished. At-Tabari was also able to talk to other scholars who studied there. He discussed with them their fields of study and got firsthand knowledge of the progress of education. He spent several years in the city studying hadith, *fiqh*, and *tafsir* with the religious scholars who worked there. At the age of 30, he had become a famous scholar in his own right and except for two short trips to Tabaristan, he spent his entire life in the city of Baghdad¹².

The Popular Teacher

At-Tabari soon became popular as a teacher in Baghdad. Students from distant lands traveled to Baghdad to study under him. He gave lectures and encouraged them towards research work. He advised them to gain knowledge of medicine and mathematics also. He followed a daily program of lecturing and writing¹³. He would start writing from noon until it was time for the afternoon prayers. After that, he lectured his students on *tafsir* until the Maghrib prayers. After Maghrib prayers, he would lecture them on law. He would retire to his room for the night and spent a good deal of it writing on different subjects. He wrote at an average of forty pages a day¹⁴.

⁵ F. Rosenthal, trans., *The History of al-Tabari*, State University of New York Press, 1989, Volume 1,P. 40.

⁶ Ibid, P. 46.

⁷ Ibid, P. 574

⁸ Ibid, P. 574

⁹ Ibid, 574.

¹⁰ Ibid, 574.

¹¹ <https://kitaabun.com/shopping3/jafar-muhammad>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ F. Sizgin, *The History of Arabic Writings*. Endeavored by Khan-e Kitab, The Organization of Printing and Publishing, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. 2001; Vol 3: PP. 434, 436.

¹⁴ Ibid, PP. 434-436.

He was very kind to his students and helped them during their studies. He would share meals with them. He advised them to develop the body along with their mind. On his part, he would always be clean and well dressed and won the respect of all with his good behavior.

His Works

Ibn Jarir al-Tabari was an authority in some fields of study, prominent among which are Qur'anic sciences, Hadith, History and jurisprudence. He knew biographies of some personalities and wrote a popular book of history of nations and emperors. Being a prolific writer in a number of disciplines, Al-Tabari was proved beyond doubt by some of his disciples by calculating the leaves he used to write everyday throughout his life time as forty each, for eighty-five years¹⁵. Based on our finding forty leaves he wrote is eighty pages, for he wrote both front and back of the leaves. The areas he covered in his writing include *Fiqh*, *Hadith*, *Tafsir*, *Nahw Luqah* and *'Arud* among others. He is said to have exceeded other writers in those fields. Also in recitation he wrote a book of eighteen volumes. Below is the list of some of his major works:

1. *Jami'u-l-Bayan 'an Ta'wil ayi'l-Qur'an*
2. *Kitabul-Taqwah*
3. *Kitabul-'l-Qira'ah*
4. *Tarikhur-Rusul wal-Muluk*
5. *Kitab Maratib al-ulama*
6. *Kitab Adab al-Qudat*
7. *Kitab Adabin Nufus al-Jayyidah*
8. *Kitabur-Risalah*
9. *Kitab al-Musnad al-Mujarrad*
10. *Al-Basir fi ma'alimid-deen*¹⁶

He was also the author of many books; the most famous of them was his *Tafsir* of the Glorious Qur'an and the other was his encyclopedia on Islamic history.

His Books on Tafsir

Al-Nawawi said: „A book of *tafsir* like that of Ibn Jarir has never been presented“. According to Al-sayuti:

The book gains its distinction to certain level due to the fact that the writer paid attention to various submissions of the contributors of a verse or verses. After that, he would choose the best and take it. The books of *tafsir* before his own were not in this form¹⁷.

This book of *tafsir* is of thirty volumes excluding extra index at Cairo 1902. The author at the end of each volume guides the reader through special table of contents which he tags as *Fihris*. He used this as a tool to guide his readers to the specific areas he touches, having found such, relevant to the verses being interpreted. Such tables include:

1. Table of verses used to interpret other verses. Technically, using a verse to interpret another verse is referred to as *al-Qur'an bil-Qur'an*, a kind of interpretation in which one part of the Qur'an is used to explain another. This type is regarded as the highest form of *tafsir bil-Mathur* (Traditional *tafsir*). He would mention the verse in the *Fihris* and tell the reader the actual page such verse(s) can be found in his book of *tafsir*.
2. Table of *Lugah* (vocabularies): The author terms this as *Mu'ajim al-Lugah* (vocabularies concordance).
3. Table of notable personalities (*Alam al-Mutarjimin*): In this table he arranges those personalities alphabetically, on the list, mentioning the page where each one can be found. Sometimes he mentions the areas of contribution they make in his *tafsir* book.
4. Table of science of subjects (Mustalahat): Al-Tabari uses this table to guide the readers to various sciences of subjects like Hadith and *Fiqh* among others. He equally gives the number of pages to guide the readers¹⁸.
5. Table of Sects: (*Firaq*): This table guides to the pages of the book where theological arguments exist, most especially, views of Mu'tazilah in some theological arguments.
6. Search into language structure (*Mabahith al-Lugah*): This aspect of the book has to do with language structure and formation of words through letters when they are put together¹⁹.

The Great Historian

At-Tabari was 65 years old when he returned to Baghdad. He continued to teach the students that came to him in search of knowledge. At the same time, he was eager to begin work on another writing project²⁰.

Tabari defined history as a science not as an art as some modern historians proclaimed²¹. Probably he categorized history as a science because of his accurate historical methodology, which consisted of chain criticism that "put it more or less on scientific basis²²." This approach was re-confirmed in the words of Iqbal who said, "accuracy in recording facts, which constitute the material of history, is an indispensable condition of history as a science."²³

The success of his Commentary of the Glorious Qur'an encouraged him to undertake another encyclopedic work. This time he decided to write an encyclopedia on the History of Islam. Before starting on the project, he spent a good deal of time in its planning and preparation. His students and friends were also enthusiastic about this new project and promised to extend all help that he required from them.²⁴

¹⁵ Y. Rumi; Mu'jam al-Udaba; p. 61.

¹⁶ Ibid, P. 61.

¹⁷ M. H. Al-Dhahabi; Al-Tafsir Wal-Mufasssirun; vol. 1, nd. P. 208.

¹⁸ Ibid, P. 208.

¹⁹ Y. Rumi; Mu'jam al-Udaba, OP Cit, P. 42.

²⁰ J. Ahmad; Hundred Great Muslims; Farozson Ltd Laore, OP. Cit, 1977, P. 576.

²¹ M. Benjamin Leopold Bloch, The Historian's Craft, (Manchester: University Press, 1992, PP.22-23.

²² Ibid, P. 24.

²³ M. Iqbal, Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, (Lahore: Javid Iqbal, 1965, P. 140.

²⁴ Ibid, P. 576.

He spent the next 12 years writing his encyclopedia on Islamic history. His job was not easy for he had to collect and compile the material from different sources. He had to rely on oral reports as well to complete his encyclopedia. Much of the material would have been lost if at-Tabari had not bothered to include it in his work on the History of Islam²⁵.

His encyclopedia, "Annals of the Apostles and Kings", chronicled the History of Islam year by year; an attempt to categorize history from creation till the year 915 A.C. By the time he had finished his work, he had gathered all the historical traditions of the Arabs in his voluminous work. The Muslim world was not slow in showing its appreciation, and this work became more famous than his Commentary of the Glorious Qur'an, for there was no other works like that in existence at that time²⁶.

Imam al-Tabari Historical Works

*The collecting of forty volumes of the History works by Imam al-Tabarī compiled and Completed in 1999 by a distinguished group of Arabists and historians of Islam, the annotated translation of *The History of al-Ṭabarī* is arguably the most celebrated chronicle produced in the Islamic lands on the history of the world and the early centuries of Islam²⁷. The thirty-nine-volume set, published in the SUNY series in Near Eastern Studies, under the general editorship of Professor Ehsan Yarshater of Columbia University, is the only complete English translation. The *History* was published by SUNY Press between 1985 and 1999, with the Index, added to the set in 2007. It is an essential and highly praised resource in Islamic studies²⁸.*

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Tabari has Authored Several Valuable Books on Medicine

1. Al-Mu'alajat al-Buqratiya (Hippocratic Treatments)

The book is composed of 10 parts and 474 chapters. It is extant only in Arabic. Three versions of the book are in Oxford. Tabari achieved prominence and distinction after writing this book. The book is among the best and most useful ones mentioning diseases and their treatments completely. The book is a guide for physicians and an aid in diagnosis and treatment of diseases, citing the dialog of preceding renowned physicians and analyzing their theories, explanations and evaluations, citing his holistic and hospital experiences regarding the treatment, and the various medicinal methods he used in the different cities where he had traveled, reflecting on his debates. He was able to formulate a balance between theory and experience in medicine³².

2. Risala Fi Zikr al-Qaruna (A Book of Urology)

In his time, Tabari found no other book on urology, except two *al-Tafsira* and *al-Bayan* by *Ayuba Rahavi* According to Tabari, since the two had many shortcomings; he was motivated to author the detailed book *al-Qaruna*³³.

²⁵ Ibid, P. 576.

²⁶ Ibid, 576.

²⁷ <https://sunniconnect.com-history-al-tabari>

²⁸ <https://sunniconnect.com-history-al-tabari>

²⁹ <https://sunniconnect.com-history-al-tabari>

³⁰ <https://sunniconnect.com-history-al-tabari>

³¹ <https://sunniconnect.com-history-al-tabari>

³² Najmabadi M. *History of Medicine in Iran after Islam*. 3rd ed. Tehran: Publishing & Printing Institute of Tehran university; 1996, Vol 3: PP. 656, 657.

³³ Ibn abi Osayba. *Qium al-anba fi Tabaqat al-Atebba*. Beirut: Dar al- Maktaba al-Haiat Press, explanation and exploration by Nazar Riza: P. 427.

3. **Kitab Alaj al-Atfal (The Book of Children's Diseases)**

He had novel views on the specialization of pediatric diseases. In the introduction of Alaj al-Atfal he writes, "I decided to write in particular about treating children and this is what has not been done so far completely and technically by any of my ancestors". Discusses children's diseases in detail and sixty terms including pediatric hematuria, pediatric convulsions, pediatric gastro-intestinal cancer, kidney/bladder stones and much more.³⁴

4. **Kitab al-Ain Fi al-Mu'alajat (The Book on Ophthalmology treatments)**

Tabari has authored an enormous treatise on ophthalmology alone, declaring, "I have authored a distinct book completely and exclusively on ophthalmology in which I have mentioned all ocular diseases including important and unimportant, each for each temper". Unfortunately, this book is lost.³⁵

5. **Kitab al-Fasd (The Book on Phlebotomy)**

Phlebotomy is one of the methods used in treating diseases in Iranian traditional medicine alongside the major therapeutic techniques like food-therapy. Observing Jorjan Physicians' inaccurate method and their phlebotomies which they carry out without any understanding and knowledge, Tabari was moved to author an exclusive paper as *Kitab al-Fasd*³⁶.

Tabari's Views on the Development of Medical Science

1. **The Necessity of Learning Philosophy for Understanding Medicine**

Although Tabari does not have a separate book on philosophy; he expands on this subject in fifty chapters, the topic of which is the physician's familiarity with philosophy. Tabari believed that a selective knowledge of philosophy is necessary for a physician to grasp medical discussions accurately³⁷.

2. **The Necessity of Clinical and Hospital Training**

Al-Tabari has conducted clinical trials with his teacher Abu Mahir Shirazi at Basra Hospital and gained extensive clinical experiences. In *Al-Mu'alajat* Tabari writes: "I frequently observed that Abu Mahir treated like this about the so-and-so disease or treated the ailments that are diagnosed difficulty by others."³⁸ He believed that a good physician must be a resident of the hospital, where patients come for treatment, and pursue their needs and conditions closely with a well-grounded professional, in their medical affairs and the physician must remember the subjects that he has studied before regarding these conditions and then his treatments will be right and useful for the patients³⁹.

3. **Emphasizing Native Medications**

Despite having adequate knowledge and understanding of treatments methods of other renowned physicians, he was also interested in the conventional native holistic treatments and the application of people's experiences after ensuring their validity through clinical experiences. Tabari refers to many cases regarding this matter in his book⁴⁰.

CONCLUSION

The paper discusses many issues pertaining the biography of Abu Ja'afar Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari from his childhood, his education where he received his education at Ray in Baghdad, he learnt the Qur'an by heart at the age of seven and he had studied poetry since when he is young and enjoyed writing, reciting and participating in poetic exchanges, his personal characteristics and his scholar ship. Also the paper discusses about his books on Qur'anic commentary and his huge amount of writings on medicine and his voluminous books on history where he wrote about forty volumes on various aspect in Islamic Studies and lastly brought about his views on the Development of medical Science among others.

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³⁴ Ibid, P. 427.

³⁵ Al-Tabari AH. *Al-Mualajat al-Buqratiya*. The introduction by Foad Sizgin, Ma'had al-Tarikh al-Olum al-Arabia va al-Islamia; 1990, Vol 1: PP. 6, 12, 25, 31, 37, 42, 44, 58, 95, 71, 72, 85, 123, 140, 145, 178, 195, 200, 244, 250, 252.

³⁶ Danishpaju MT. *The Handwritten Copies lists of Tehran University Central Library*. Tehran: Tehran University Press; 1966, Vol 8: PP. 103- 118.

³⁷ Al-Tabari AH. *Al-Mualajat al-Buqratiya*. The introduction by Foad Sizgin, Ma'had al-Tarikh al-Olum al-Arabia va al-Islamia; 1990, Vol 1: Op. Cit, PP. 6, 12, 25, 31, 37.

³⁸ Ibid, PP. 37- 42

³⁹ Ibid, PP. 42, 44, 58.

⁴⁰ Ibid, PP. 42, 44, 58.