

Some Notes on the Correspondance Between Caliph al-Manşūr (r.136/754-158/775) and the ‘Alīd (Ḥasanī) Rebel Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, known as al-Nafs al-Zakiyya (in 145/762).

An Abstract of Amikam Elad's Paper

The paper deals with some aspects of the Correspondance Between Caliph al-Manşūr (r.136/754-158/775) and the ‘Alīd (Ḥasanī) Rebel Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, known as al-Nafs al-Zakiyya (in 145/762). The subject is part of a study on the socio-political history of the revolt.of al-Nafs al-Zakiyya, in the year 145/762.

The Importance of the Revolt for the ‘Abbāsīs.

The revolt of Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya was a serious threat to the legitimacy of the ‘Abbāsīs, a new dynasty that had come to power following a bloody military coup and which was immediately subject to social, political and religious opposition and resistance in various parts of the Caliphate. Some of the opposition movements roused as a result of the ‘Abbāsī rise to power were new, with a largely socio-political colouring, but others were older. These older movements were mainly factions of the Ṭālibī family with a religio-political ideology that had formed in opposition to Umayyad rule. The rise of the ‘Abbāsīs quickened and sharpened the ideological aspects of their protest, now turned against the ‘Abbāsīs, as well as the physical aspects, which found expression in a series of Ṭālibī revolts. The revolt of Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh al-Ḥasanī, therefore, was a politico-religious challenge to the new ‘Abbāsī regime, according to which rule had to be given to the family of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. Had the revolt succeeded, he would have become caliph.

When news of Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh's revolt reached al-Manşūr, he sent him a letter in which he called him to surrender unconditionally, offering him, his family and his supporters an *amān* and a big sum of money. This opened an exchange of three letters between the caliph and Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh.

The letters were reproduced by many sources. Some record the letters in their entirety, some record big parts, some small parts; some give only a summary of the letters. A comparative textual-contextual study of the letters is highly needed. Most of the

sources were mentioned by Traini, some of which were (and still are) in manuscript form.

Only three, relatively small studies were dedicated to the letters, those of Traini, Omar and Nagel, who mainly give detailed contents of the letters, but also analyses of some of the political-religious-theological arguments revolving around the legitimization of each "party" (the 'Abbāsīs and the 'Alīds) to rule. Although they differ in regard to the authenticity of the letters, or parts of them, the accepted view is that they are early, and were composed not later than 200/815-816.

The Problem of Authenticity: The Question of the "Fourth Letter."

The third letter of al-Manṣūr remained unanswered. Scholars stressed that the early sources do not record a fourth letter, nor do they give any hint of the existence of such a letter.

However, van Arendonk and Traini discovered "a fourth letter" of Muḥammad in unpublished Zaydī sources. Their conclusion is that this letter is not authentic.

Al-Sayyid also mentions the fourth letter citing the Zaydī sources. Unfortunately, he does not give the detailed contents of the letter.

The Zaydī sources provide (besides the alleged letters) several sermons that were allegedly delivered by Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya.

Al-Sayyid argues for the authenticity of all letters and sermons that are recorded by the Zaydī sources. However, the theological Zaydī character and content of these sermons and letters, present al-Nafs al-Zakiyya as the leader (*Imām*), a highly educated religious scholar, with defined developed Zaydī doctrine. It raises the possibility that they mirror a period certainly later than the Umayyad period as argued by al-Sayyid, but also later than 145/762. It seems that the doctrines of the Zaydiyya were not fully developed in 145/762, but this topic is beyond the expertise of the present writer and deserves an in-depth study by students of the early Zaydiyya.

The Letters according to Bal'amī (d. 974 or after 992?).

That Bal'amī's Persian translation/ "adaptation" of al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh*, also records the three letters escaped these scholars. But while the two letters of al-Manṣūr are relatively similar to those recorded in the Arabic text of al-Ṭabarī, the second letter recorded by Bal'amī, that of Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh, is completely different. The

Arabic text is hardly recognizable; on the one hand, the letter develops and expands on the *Shīʿī*-ʿAbbāsī polemics existing in the Arabic version, but, on the other hand, it mainly adds many new topics, all expressing a bold, uncompromising contention and strife against the ʿAbbāsīs.

This is certainly "the fourth missing letter."

This version merits an in-depth study of Balʿamī's History, which is beyond the scope of this study and beyond the expertise of this author. I'll suffice here with the following general observations.

It is accepted by scholars that Balʿamī's translation of al-Ṭabarī is not merely a copy or abbreviation of the Arabic text. Occasionally Balʿamī inserted substantial additional information comments and personal criticism of al-Ṭabarī's text. Most surviving manuscripts of Balʿamī represent a later redaction. Dunlop, following Spuler, remarks that "the translation of Ṭabarī into Persian under the Sāmānīs served no mere cultural purpose, but was intended to show the Persians that the destiny of their nation was linked with orthodox Islam." Daniel also argues that the comments and personal criticism of Balʿamī "seem to indicate a pro ʿAbbāsīd stance on his part. He is generally regarded as a staunch Sunni and respected Shāfiʿī religious scholar," but, he adds that "on the other hand, it should be noted that many passages favourable to ʿAlī may also be found in Balʿamī."

In light of this, the question is raised, was Balʿamī himself responsible for the insertion of the "fourth letter" of Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh? Or is this perhaps a later insertion? Daniel has generally and indirectly touched upon this important point when he pointed out that there is evidence of sectarian tampering with the manuscripts of Balʿamī. Three early manuscripts of Balʿamī "are conspicuously pro-Shiʿite in their orientation. Naturally, one wonders what other changes in the manuscripts might have been introduced by copyists who were so conspicuously sectarian in outlook.

The problem of how much, or which variety, of this material may be attributed to Balʿamī is not easy to resolve." Daniel adds that "one's initial reaction [to pro-Shiʿī material] might well be to dismiss the obviously Shiʿite material as later additions by Persian Shiʿite copyists. However, some of the most conspicuously pro-Shiʿite manuscripts are also among the very oldest manuscripts.

Most of the ten manuscripts used by Zotenberg for his French translation are of inferior copies, when compared to the much better manuscripts that are now available.

Today we have a much better scholarly edition of the Persian text by Rausham, which supersedes that of Zotenberg.

A highly desired project would be a comparison of Zotenberg's French translation, Raushan's edition, and other principle manuscripts of Bal'amī with the Arabic text of al-Ṭabarī.