

Confronting the Caliph: 'Uthmân b. 'Affân in Three 'Abbasid Chronicles

Until relatively recently medieval Islamic chroniclers were viewed by modern historians in much the same way that Muslims view Muhammad – as transmitter rather than author. While Muslims view the disjointed nature of the Qur'an as one of the proofs of its divine origin, scholars regarded a chronicle's collection of disparate historical accounts from earlier authorities (*khabar*, pl., *akhbâr*) as evidence that chroniclers were not writing their own narratives or imbuing their texts with contemporary concerns. Consider, for example, Franz Rosenthal's assertion in his work on Islamic historiography: "History was not used as a means for the propagation of ideas, or, more exactly, historians as a rule did not consciously intend, in writing their works, to reinterpret historical data so as to conform to the ideas they might have wished to propagate."¹ And although this perspective was at the time coming under attack by the work of Marshall Hodgson and Albrecht Noth, it would be several years, if not decades, before Islamic historiography fully embraced the idea of chroniclers as authors.²

1. Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Islamic Historiography*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), 61.

2. Marshall Hodgson, "Two Pre-Modern Muslim Historians: Pitfalls and Opportunities in Presenting Them to Moderns," in *Towards World Community*, ed. John

The very structure of Islamic chronicles that made them resistant to traditional historiographical analysis, made them particularly receptive to new approaches in literary criticism.³ For example Hayden White's work on "form-as-message" seems especially applicable to medieval Islamic chronicles. He observes, "once we are enlivened to the extent to which the form of the text is the place where it does its ideologically significant work, aspects of the text that a criticism unsensitized to the operations of a form-as-message will find bewildering, surprising, inconsistent, or simply offensive... themselves become meaningful as message."⁴ Such insights have borne much fruit in Islamic historiography leading established scholars such as Fred Donner to marvel at what is revealed about a text and its author by focusing on "strategies of compilation."⁵ In particular Donner mentions the strategies of selection, placement, repetition and manipulation and concludes his article by asserting that coming to grips with these strategies "must be at the top of our agenda when examining such compilations."⁶

This article contributes to this important growing field by analyzing and contextualizing the strategies of compilation of three ninth century chroniclers' treatment of verbal and written confrontations between the Caliph 'Uthmân ibn 'Affân (d. 656/35) and his critics.

Nef, World Academy of Arts and Sciences Publication, vol. 5 (The Hague: Dr. W. Junk N.V. Publishers, 1968), 53-69. Noth's theories were first published in 1973 and then further developed in collaboration with Lawrence Conrad and translated into English by Michael Bonner and published as *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-Critical Study* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, Inc., 1994).

3. An early and ground breaking application of these new methods to medieval Islamic historiography is Jacob Lassner, *Islamic Revolution and Historical Memory: 'Abbasid Apologetics and the Art of Historical Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

4. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 204.

5. Fred Donner, " 'Uthman and the Râshidûn Caliphs in Ibn 'Asâkir's *Târîkh madînat Dimashq*: A Study in Strategies of Compilation," in *Ibn 'Asâkir and Early Islamic History*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 20, (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 2001), 44-61.

6. *Ibid.*, 61.

Through a close comparative reading of these confrontations we can see the relationship between how an author constructed his account and how he construed the causes and contemporary consequences of the conflict.

An author's interpretive and literary construction is most easily detected through focusing on particularly contentious events. The third *Râshidûn* (rightly guided) caliph and successor to Muhammad, 'Uthmân b. 'Affân, is certainly one of the most controversial figures in early Islamic history. While a close companion of the Prophet Muhammad and an early convert to Islam, his caliphate ended with a revolt against his rule which culminated in 'Uthmân being besieged in his home and brutally murdered. 'Uthmân's murder in turn sparked the first *fitna*,⁷ or civil war, in Islam which led to a string of events that would forever divide the Islamic community into Sunnis and Shi'is. R. Stephen Humphreys summarizes the significance of 'Uthmân's reign for later Muslim historians as follows:

“For those who contemplated the Islamic past, it was crucial to determine both the circumstances in which the betrayal of the Muhammadan covenant had occurred and the nature of that betrayal... In particular the debate centered on whether the ultimate guilt for the catastrophe lay with 'Uthmân himself, with the rebels who had put him to death, or with other elements in the community.”⁸

Chroniclers answered questions about whom or what was to blame for the *fitna* by carefully constructing their narratives. Chroniclers could also deploy the symbolic power of 'Uthmân's reign and regicide to address contemporary core moral problems, “namely,” as Tayeb El-Hibri has shown, “whether it is legitimate

7. Ar. *fitna*, pl., *fitan* can also mean sedition, discord, chaos, and schism.

8. R.S. Humphreys, “Qur'anic Myth and narrative structure in early Islamic Historiography,” in *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity*, ed. F.M. Clover and R.S. Humphreys (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 278.

to use force to depose a reigning monarch, and how this political upheaval can bring a social and religious shakeup in the life and fate of the community.”⁹

Thus far efforts to recognize authorial intent in early Islamic historiography have focused primarily on al-Tabarî's (d. 923/310) *Târikh al-rusul wa'l-mulûk* (*History of Prophets and Kings*).¹⁰ Although there is no denying al-Tabarî's literary and historical achievement, comparing al-Tabarî with two other less-studied ninth century chroniclers helps to place his historical interpretation and literary contribution within a broader context. A careful reading of al-Balâdhurî's (d. 892/279) *Ansâb al-ashrâf* (*Book of the Honorable Companions*) and 'Umar b. Shabba's (d. 876/262) *Târikh al-madîna al-munawwara* (*History of Medina*) reveals these authors' complex religio-political interpretations conveyed through equally complex literary constructions.¹¹ Indeed it is possible that Ibn Shabba, whom al-Tabarî used as a source, provided al-Tabarî not only with *akhbâr*, but a framework for understanding the revolt against 'Uthmân – the tension between unity and justice.

In al-Tabarî's treatment of the reign of 'Uthmân b. 'Affân he presents a highly moralized universe, weighing appeals to unity and justice by juxtaposing accounts by Sayf b. 'Umar (d. ca. 796/180)

9. Tayeb El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hârûn al-Rashîd and the Narratives of the 'Abbâsîd Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 84.

10. Abû Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabarî, *Târikh al-rusul wa'l-mulûk*, ed. M.J. de Goeje *et al* (Leiden, 1879-1901). Tayob Abdelkader, "Tabarî on the Companions of the Prophet: Moral and Political Contours of Islamic Historical Writing," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119:2 (1999): 203-210; Marshal Hodgson, "Two Pre-Modern Muslim Historians"; R. Stephen Humphreys, "Qur'anic Myth."

11. Ahmad b. Yahyâ al-Balâdhurî, *Ansâb al-ashrâf*, ed. Dr. Ihsân 'Abbâs, *Bibliotheca Islamica* 28d vol. 4 part 1 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1979) and Abû Zayd 'Umar b. Shabba, *Târikh al-madîna al-munawwara*, ed. 'Alî Muhammad Danzal and Yasîn Sa'd al-dîn, part 2 (Beirut: Dâr al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1996).

and Muhammad b. 'Umar al-Wâqidî (d. 823/207).¹² Sayf portrays an idealized caliphate and early community characterized by piety and unity; problems enter the community through disgruntled, marginal figures and heretics. In contrast al-Wâqidî's account portrays glaring abuses and injustices on 'Uthmân's part and clear divisions amongst the Companions. Thus al-Tabarî frames the conflict in a larger theoretical debate: remove 'Uthmân and restore justice or support 'Uthmân and maintain unity. Consequently, because all is at stake, all can be risked. Al-Tabarî alone of the three authors considered here puts forward the legitimacy of armed struggle against the unjust ruler.

Ibn Shabba also begins by presenting the conflict as one between the ideals of justice and unity; however, rather than escalating the rhetoric and the conflict, he defuses it by shifting focus away from principles and on to people. In fact Ibn Shabba structures his narrative of 'Uthmân's caliphate in three concentric circles in which a verbal or written confrontation between 'Uthmân and his critics forms the interpretive center of each cycle. The first cycle presents the growing conflict in terms of the tension between the ideals of unity and justice, while the second focuses on divisions within the community attributed to the "shî'a of 'Alî" and the "shî'a of 'Uthmân." In the climax of the revolt, the siege and murder of 'Uthmân, Ibn Shabba's third interpretive cycle focuses on human error – on the part of 'Uthmân and his advisors. As a result Ibn Shabba permits and even encourages rebuking unjust caliphs, but he does not allow for resisting or removing them; indeed he moves from a highly charged clash of competing ideals to the

12. There is ongoing debate about the reliability of both sources. Marianne Engle Cameron, "Sayf at First: The Transmission of Sayf ibn 'Umar in al-Tabarî and Ibn 'Asâkir," in *Ibn 'Asâkir and Early Islamic History*; R.S. Humphreys, introduction to translation of *The History of al-Tabarî, vol XV, Crisis of the Early Caliphate* (New York: SUNY Press, 1990); R.S. Humphreys, "The Odd Couple: al-Tabarî and Sayf b. 'Umar," in *History and Historiography in Early Islamic Times*, ed. Lawrence I. Conrad, forthcoming; Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 47-48.

more mundane and manageable problem of having good advisors. Moreover, this cyclical narrative is framed by prophetic *hadīth* (pl., *ahādīth*) that defend ‘Uthmân and by Qur’anic references that prioritize obedience and unity. Ibn Shabba appears to support a position of non-violent and non-divisive resistance to injustice.

In *Ansâb al-asbrâf* al-Balâdhurî portrays ‘Uthmân as a corrupt ruler who is still owed absolute obedience. He provides the most thorough catalog of ‘Uthmân’s abuses found in a ninth century source; however, he begins and ends each sub-section with accounts that defend the legitimacy of ‘Uthmân’s caliphate and call for obedience to the ruler – whether he is just or not. In the verbal and written confrontations al-Balâdhurî contrasts appeals to piety and the Qur’an with appeals to caliphal authority. In this way al-Balâdhurî projects onto ‘Uthmân’s caliphate the ninth century relationship between the caliph and the *‘ulamâ’* – one in which the ruler should defer to the religious authorities for guidance and repent when he errs and in turn religious leaders should advise and support the ruler. Consequently, the confrontations recorded in al-Balâdhurî dissolve into recommendations of how to limit the abuses of caliphal authority. Unlike al-Tabarî, al-Balâdhurî does not fear a permanent rupture in the community based on competing ideals. Nor does he present an idealized past community, instead he presents an idealized contemporary relationship between the caliph and the *‘ulamâ’*.

Based on these authors’ portrayals of ‘Uthmân as corrupt at worst, weak at best, each has been accused in the past of having Shî‘i sympathies.¹³ There is no denying the highly negative

13. R.S. Humphreys exposes the flimsiness of the pro-‘Alid label for al-Balâdhurî in *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*, revised edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) pp. 98-103. E.L. Petersen characterizes Ibn Shabba as “pro-‘Alid” and with “shî‘ite inclinations” in *‘Alî and Mu‘awiya in early Arabic Tradition: Studies in the Genesis and Growth of Islamic Historical Writing until the end of the Ninth Century* (Copenhagen: Scandinavian University Books, 1964), 12 n. 45 and 151. But Wilferd Madelung notes that the pro-‘Alid theory is “no longer sustainable” since the publication of *Târikh al-madîna* and points out that Ibn Shabba

portrayal of 'Uthmân in al-Balâdhurî and al-Wâqidî. Ibn Shabba also begins his narrative of 'Uthmân with the subheading “*akhbâr* 'Uthmân b. 'Affân” rather than granting him the title of caliph; nor does he include a section on the *shûrâ* (council) to elect 'Uthmân, and instead gives merely a brief account in which it is stated that 'Uthmân was given the oath of loyalty.¹⁴ However, these narratives taken in the round indicate the still inchoate nature of Sunni and Shi'î religio-political identity and alliances in the late ninth century. And a close analysis of their narratives reveals tensions and solutions that fit within a broad Sunni orthodoxy and expresses a range of views that reflect the evolving nature of religious and political authority within the ninth century Islamic community.

CONTEXT

The ninth century was dominated by questions surrounding the legitimacy of the 'Abbasid caliphs and the relationship between religious and political authority.¹⁵ Since the 'Abbasid Revolution (747-750/129-132) the 'Abbasid's legitimacy was always vulnerable to the purer claims of the 'Alids. Thus the caliphs needed the '*ulamâ*' to bolster their legitimacy while the '*ulamâ*' looked to the caliphs as patrons, enforcers of *shari'â*, defenders of the Islamic community,

“quotes numerous 'Uthmanid traditions missing in other sources and, in contrast to al-Balâdhurî, avoids reports of 'Uthman's wrongdoing.” Wilferd Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), n. 139 pg. 376.

14. Ibn Shabba, 97.

15. Humphreys, “Tâ'rikh,” *EF*. El-Hibri also considers the layers of interpretation in the chronicles due to the parallels between the first *fitna* and the civil war between al-Amîn and al-Mâ'mun. He states, “The analogy between the internal strife in both ages inspired narrators to draw a correlation between the actors, situations, and contested ideas in the two eras.” Tayeb El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, 105. See also Lassner, *Islamic Revolution* and M. Qasim Zaman, *Religion and Politics under the Early Abbāsids: the Emergence of the Proto-Sunni Elite* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

and symbols of continuity. The desire for continuity and order encouraged an acceptance of the 'Abbasids and the order of the first four *Râshidûn* Caliphs. This growing consensus is evidenced in the authoritative *hadîth* collections that emerged in the mid-ninth century that emphasize 'Uthmân's personal piety, link him with the first two caliphs, Abû Bakr and 'Umar, and attempt to explain the first *fitna*.¹⁶

Al-Bukhârî's (d. 870/256) chapter on *fitna* in his authoritative *hadîth* collection *al-Sahîh*¹⁷ both condemns and condones the inter-Muslim violence that took place among the Companions. On the one hand Muhammad predicted sedition and stated that those who instigated it would be fellow believers. Several *hadîth* describe those involved as reaching Paradise, but unable to reach Muhammad.¹⁸ The majority of the *ahâdîth*, however, condemn to hell those who depart from the Community or raise their sword against a fellow Muslim. This applies regardless of the impiety or injustice of the ruler. One *hadîth* states: "If you dislike something the amir does, be patient. For whoever goes out from a ruler (*sultân*) by an inch will die like those in the *jâhiliyya* (time of ignorance before Islam)."¹⁹ This is followed by a variant that says whoever dissents from the group an inch will die as in the *jâhiliyya*. Muhammad said once they had given the oath of loyalty (*bay'a*), they must obey in prosperity and want unless it was a matter of *flagrant* unbelief.²⁰ Although these *ahâdîth* clearly prioritize unity and obedience, they also leave open whether those who instigate violence can still be saved, whether a ruler can be the one who

16. Al-Bukhârî, *Al-Sahîh* vol. 9 (Cairo: Dâr wa-matâb'at al-sh'ab, n.d), 58-77; *Sahîh Muslim: Being Traditions of the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad as narrated by his companions and compiled under the title al-Jami'-us-Sahîh by Imam Muslim rendered into English by Abdul Hamid Siddiqî*, vol. 4 (Beirut: Dâr al-Arabiyya, 1971), 1281-2.

17. Al-Bukhârî, 58-77.

18. *Ibid.*, 58,59.

19. *Ibid.*, 59.

20. *Ibid.*, 59-60. Emphasis added.

“dissents from the group,” as well as what constitutes “flagrant unbelief.” The *‘ulamâ’* used historical precedent to help interpret and evaluate these *ahâdîth* and each one of these issues is debated in the revolt against ‘Uthmân.

Defending ‘Uthmân’s personal piety and right to the caliphate is not the same as defending his actions during his caliphate. To evaluate ‘Uthmân’s rule was to consider the foundations and limitations of caliphal authority. In the first half of the ninth century such debates were overshadowed by the subsequent *fitna*, or civil war, between al-Amîn and al-Ma’mûn (809-813-833/214-218) and al-Ma’mûn’s introduction of the *mihna* (inquisition) (832-851/ 217-237), and in the latter half of the century by the growing power of the Turkish military commanders.²¹ But when these events exposed the ‘Abbasid caliphs as very far removed from the idealized image of the Companions simultaneously being crystallized in the *hadîth* collections, why did the *‘ulamâ’* continue to support the ‘Abbasid caliphs’ claims to absolute political authority? While unity of the community was of prime importance there were competing principles.

Khaled Abou El Fadl and Michael Cook point to the efforts of Muslim scholars and jurists to balance the principles of obedience and justice, both of which are endorsed in the Qur’an and *ahâdîth*.²² The Qur’an speaks of the importance of obeying those in authority, of keeping one’s oath of loyalty, and of the blessing of unity.²³ Other verses emphasize the Islamic principle of commanding right and

21. Tayeb El-Hibri elucidates and illustrates the impact of *fitan*, the *mihna* and regicide on Arab chronicles in *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography* while Matthew Gordon discusses the growing power of the Turkish military in *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords: A History of the Turkish Military of Samarra (A.H. 200-275/815-889 C.E)* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).

22. Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; reprint 2002) and Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

23. Q 4:51; Q 6:159.

forbidding wrong.²⁴ Michael Cook notes that while the Qur'anic verses on the duty of forbidding wrong usually imply that it is the obligation of the community as a whole, there are Traditions which stress the responsibility of the individual as well. Consider the *hadīth*, “The finest form of holy war (*jihād*) is speaking out (*kalimat haqq*) in the presence of an unjust ruler (*sultān jā'ir*), and getting killed for it (*yuqatal 'alayhā*).”²⁵ Although this clearly endorses confronting the unjust ruler, most scholars balanced this Tradition with others that warn against stirring up dissension and the more immediate evil of suicide.²⁶ The general consensus was that individual Muslims are called upon to forbid evil with their heart, their mouth, and their hands. If forbidding with the mouth or the hand would produce no good while causing other evils, such as one's own death or social chaos, than it is enough to forbid in one's heart.²⁷ Although this did not encourage rebellion, neither was it simply acquiescing in the face of injustice.

Khaled Abou El Fadl argues this was done even more systematically through efforts to limit the wrongdoing of the state through drawing a legal distinction between fighting rebels (*bughāt*) and fighting brigands (*muhāribūn*). While those who had a grievance against the government based on a religious interpretation were seen as *bughāt* and deserving of more lenient treatment as expressed in Qur'an 49:9-10, the verse calling for the death of those who threatened disorder (Q 5:33-34) was limited to

24. Q 4:135; Q 3:104; 3:110; 3:114; 7:157; 9:71; 9:112; 22:41; 31:17.

25. Cook, *Commanding Right*, 6. He notes that this tradition appears in many *hadīth* collections; however, the last part about being killed does not appear in the most canonical collections.

26. Q 2:195. “Cast not yourself by your own hands into destruction.” Cook discusses al-Ghazali's views on this verse. Cook, 433.

27. Though admittedly, Ibn Hazm and al-Ghazālī, among others, encouraged a more activist interpretation. Cook, 427-468 and Khaled Abou El Fadl, “The Islamic Law of Rebellion: The Rise and Development of the Juristic Discourses on Insurrection, Insurgency and Brigandage” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1999), 243-251.

those classified as *muhâribûn*, i.e., robbers and bandits rather than rebels. In this way jurists removed the criticism of “perpetrating disorder” from those who criticize or rebel against the unjust actions of the government and opened room for interpretations that are distinctly “unhelpful to the state.”²⁸

Both Cook’s and Abou El Fadl’s works show that legal writing was one way scholars could carry on nuanced debates about the tension between religio-political ideals and more sobering realities. They also point to a legalizing of culture; focusing on particulars may not have been sidestepping the issues at all, but a working out of them. Although there are technicalities of legal discourse, I believe the same could be said for historical discourse. How historians selected, edited, and arranged their sources enabled them to carry on debates with their peers, progenitors, and successors.

TEXT

Ibn Shabba is the earliest of the three chroniclers under consideration here. He was from Basra, resided in Samarra for some time where he refused to bow to the pressure of the *mihna*. Consequently some of his books were destroyed and he refused to lecture for a period.²⁹ His history *Târikh al-madîna al-munawwara* is arranged in short *akhbâr* that are clearly delineated giving the work the feel of a *hadîth* collection rather than a history or chronicle. However, his writing is more in line with early *tâ'rikh* than *hadîth* studies, as many of his chains of transmission (*isnâd* pl., *asânîd*) do not rely on common authorities and indeed many of them are

28. Abou El Fadl adapts this phrase from Crone and Hinds who “maintain it was the rules of the Sunna that were unhelpful to the state.” Abou El Fadl asserts, however, the Sunna “was a raw body of uninterpreted and undeveloped precedents. It is the legal interpretation of the Sunna, and not the Sunna itself, that was unhelpful to the state.” Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence*, 99, fn. 178.

29. S. Leder, “Umar b. Shabba,” *EP*.

clearly weak and based on little known or anonymous sources. It is possible that some of the accounts presented in his history fall out of the literature not because of their content (*matn*), but because the development of *hadīth* sciences disqualifies their *isnād*. Nevertheless, the themes laid out by Ibn Shabba do endure. As mentioned earlier, his narrative of the confrontations between ‘Uthmān and his critics focuses on three possible causes for the escalating conflict: injustice, partisanship, and poor decisions.

Before ‘Umar b. Shabba is willing to discuss the *fitna*, however, he makes a point of exonerating ‘Uthmān in a subsection entitled: “What has come down of ‘Uthmān abstaining from fighting and that he was killed while sticking to the true path (*anahu yuqṭal ‘alā al-haqq*)”.³⁰ In addition to emphasizing that ‘Uthmān refused to fight to defend himself or bring bloodshed into the community, this section consists of a variety of *abādīth* in which Muhammad predicts there will be *fitna* during the days of ‘Uthmān. It is only after Ibn Shabba has established this important point that all that is to follow in his narrative was predicted by Muhammad, that he moves on to the complaints and uprisings against ‘Uthmān.³¹

In a section subtitled “the movement in the matter of ‘Uthmān and the first attack against him” ‘Umar b. Shabba presents the tension between obedience to God and obedience to the ruler in a verbal confrontation between ‘Uthmān and his detractors who have gathered in Medina. ‘Uthmān preaches to the crowd from the *minbar* stating: “O people, listen and obey. For indeed listening obediently, there is no excuse against it, and listening rebelliously, there is no excuse for it.”³² The account continues, however, by pointing out that some of them called out to him: “Listening to you is what is rebellious.” Although Ibn Shabba gives voice to the perspective that it is the ruler who can be the rebel, he follows this account with a string of accounts that end with

30. Ibn Shabba, 182.

31. *Ibid.*, 186.

32. *Ibid.*, 188.

hadīth in which Muhammad warns against schism (*shī'a*). Like any good interlocutor, Ibn Shabba does not deny the alternative opinion, but rather refutes it through his strategy of placement and repetition.

Whereas most sources focus on events in Kufa to explain the deteriorating circumstances in the community, Ibn Shabba, focuses on Egypt. It is through an exchange of letters that Ibn Shabba continues the debate between appeals to unity and justice. The letter from the Egyptians is addressed: "From the community of Muslims to the afflicted Caliph" and then builds a case urging 'Uthmân to remember God and His divine ordinances (*hudūd*).³³ The letter continues:

"So we remind you of God and we prohibit you from rebellion. For verily you called us to obedience and the Book of God and the Book of God notes: there is no obedience to one rebelling (against) God. Verily we were obedient to God by supporting and revering you, but then rejected that when we learned that you wanted to destroy us and destroy yourself. We must reject and disobey whoever keeps us from God. You are merely a mortal servant whereas God is the eternal creator."³⁴

This letter is remarkable for stating so clearly that obedience to 'Uthmân is conditional. If he is disobeying God then he has become the rebel. I have not seen it in other sources, although this is as likely due to its weak *isnād*, as its controversial *matn*.³⁵ Despite suggesting that 'Uthmân is a rebel, Ibn Shabba does not develop this point. The argument never moves beyond passive resistance.

Instead, Ibn Shabba presents the counter-argument in the form of a response letter from 'Uthmân in which he lists Qur'anic verses

33. *Ibid.*, 193.

34. *Ibid.*

35. One of the transmitters is referred to simply as "a man from his tribe." *Ibid.*

which link obedience to the ruler with obedience to God.³⁶ The verses cited remind the readers they made a covenant with God when they promised to hear and obey and those who break their oath will suffer a “painful chastisement.” The letter also includes the ideologically key Qur’anic verse: “Obey God, and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you.”³⁷ ‘Uthmân concludes by warning them of the consequences of disobedience when he states, “Verily you (pl) will not find a community destroyed except from differences [among its members] and then it will not have a head unifying it. And when that happens you will not pray together and some of you will rule over the others and you will be divided into sects.”³⁸ According to this argument, challenging the ruler leads to a divided Community in which some factions rule over others. The letter concludes with a verse urging them to avoid those who produce schisms and sects.³⁹

After the above exchange of letters, Ibn Shabba moves very quickly through the siege and murder of ‘Uthmân; he does not develop the drama or pathos of this event in any way. Not only does he not dwell on ‘Uthmân’s guilt or innocence in terms of whether his actions provoked the besiegers, but he also does not dwell on the controversy surrounding who exactly killed ‘Uthmân. Rather he simply includes two brief accounts that state ‘Uthmân was killed in his house, adding the key point that al-Husayn and al-Hasan were with him (defending him).⁴⁰ Ibn Shabba follows

36. This letter is almost identical to that recorded by al-Tabarî at the very end of his treatment of ‘Uthmân’s caliphate. Ibn Shabba’s *isnâd* is ‘Alî – ‘Uthmân b. ‘Abd al-Rahmân – al-Zuhrî.

37. Q 4:59. ‘Uthmân also notes – as if any additional commentary were necessary – “therefore God desires for you to listen and obey and warns you against disobedience and divisiveness.” *Ibid.*, 194.

38. This version does not mention the more common corollary that they will not fight their enemies together. The concern with internal oppression seems greater than that of external threat.

39. Q 6:159

40. Ibn Shabba, 199.

this up with several accounts that focus on the support that 'Alî and his sons gave to 'Uthmân's caliphate. The first has al-Hasan address the crowd and say that the killing of 'Uthmân is a rupture in the community. In the second, after 'Uthmân's death a group came demanding 'Alî as caliph and could not find him. They asked al-Hasan, "where is the commander of the faithful?" To which he responded: "in *hash kawkab*." The report concludes, "meaning 'Uthmân b. 'Affân" because that is where 'Uthmân was buried, thus making clear that neither 'Alî or his sons were claiming 'Alî was the rightful caliph.⁴¹ The burial of 'Uthmân does not mark the end of Ibn Shabba's account, but rather the end of his first interpretive layer.

Ibn Shabba's second interpretive cycle begins with a rewinding of the clock and a return to the siege of 'Uthmân and the verbal confrontations that took place. The support which 'Alî and his sons gave to 'Uthmân is now overshadowed by accusations that it was rivalry between the shî'a of 'Alî and the shî'a of 'Uthmân that led to the deteriorating situation in the community. Like the previous cycle, this one centers on verbal and written exchanges. The letter in question is the controversial letter 'Uthmân supposedly wrote to his governor in Egypt ordering him to kill the Egyptian critics upon their return to Egypt. The letter was intercepted by the Egyptian band and they immediately returned to Medina and laid siege to 'Uthmân in his house. All sources on the first *fitna* regard this letter as the tipping point that shifted the conflict from one of verbal criticism to rebellion and regicide. For Ibn Shabba, the conflict shifts from competing ideals to competing factions.

Ibn Shabba's sources focus on whose shî'a was responsible for the letter. The first account simply says that the Egyptians found the letter and returned to Medina and wanted to kill 'Uthmân. "The shî'a of 'Alî said it [the letter] was the work of 'Uthmân and the

41. *Ibid.*, 200.

shí'a of 'Uthmân said it was the work of 'Alî and his companions."⁴² The next several accounts of the letter all frame it in terms of conflict between 'Uthmân and 'Alî or their supporters. The first is based on Abû Mikhnaf's version of finding the letter.⁴³ The band brings the letter to 'Alî and he takes it to 'Uthmân who denies any knowledge of it. The account ends very significantly by stating the Banu Umayya blamed 'Alî for manufacturing the story of the letter and turning the people against 'Uthmân; an accusation 'Alî denies. In another account 'Uthmân denies the letter and when asked who wrote it or how this happened, 'Uthmân says maybe his servant did it or maybe 'Alî did it. When 'Alî asks why he is accusing him, 'Uthmân says because he ['Alî] went out to the band the first time and then they came back.⁴⁴ This is followed by another account in which 'Uthmân accuses 'Alî of collaborating with 'Uthmân's scribe in writing the letter.

Although it is not uncommon in the sources to blame the Umayyads or 'Alî's supporters, I have not seen it expressed as their shí'a, nor the term used as frequently as it is in Ibn Shabba. Furthermore, while the verse about avoiding schisms is usually cited in the narrative of 'Uthmân, Ibn Shabba refers to it repeatedly. It would seem then, that for Ibn Shabba the lesson to be drawn is not in the danger of unjust caliphs or confronting them, but factionalism that leads to inter-Muslim violence and one group of Muslims oppressing another.⁴⁵

The third interpretive cycle moves beyond blaming factions, to blaming individuals, in particular 'Uthmân and his advisers. This theme is introduced by the longest single account so far, transmitted

42. *Ibid.*, 209.

43. *Ibid.*, 210.

44. *Ibid.*, 212.

45. This emphasis can also be seen in 'Uthmân's letter of defense based on Qur'anic verses mentioned earlier. Whereas Ibn Shabba focuses on the threat of internal oppression, a similar letter found in al-Tabarî includes the risk of external oppression, a point Ibn Shabba consistently fails to raise.

by al-Zuhrî, in which the narrator asks Sa'îd b. al-Masayyab: "Can you tell me how 'Uthmân was killed? And what was the situation with him and the people and why Muhammad's Companions abandoned him?"⁴⁶ And he replied:

"'Uthmân was killed unjustly and those who killed him were unjust and those who abandoned him were justified." Then I said: "How is that?" He said: "verily when 'Uthmân was appointed (*walî*) a group of the Companions of the Prophet hated his rule (*wilâyatahu*) because 'Uthmân loved his own band. He ruled over the people twelve years, and there were many among those he appointed from the Banu Umayya, who were not with the Messenger of God and his company. And there came to pass from his governors things hateful to the Companions of the Messenger of God and they complained about them and he did not remove them."⁴⁷

The account continues to list grievances against 'Uthmân's governors and then dwells for some time on the incident of the letter and how it was the fault of either Muhammad b. Abî Sarh, his former governor in Egypt, or Marwan b. al-Hakam, 'Uthmân's cousin and advisor in Medina. Blame focuses on Marwan. 'Alî and 'Â'isha urge 'Uthmân to turn him over and the Companions insist they cannot forgive 'Uthmân for the treacherous letter ordering the murder of his critics unless Marwân is turned over to them.⁴⁸ 'Uthmân refuses and this is what prompts the Companions to abandon him in anger.⁴⁹ It is surely significant that Ibn Shabba holds 'Uthmân responsible for his own demise. However, Ibn Shabba has moved his narrative from an unresolved debate about competing core principles to the more mundane need for trustworthy advisors.

46. *Ibid.*, 213.

47. *Ibid.*, 213-214.

48. *Ibid.*, 214.

49. *Ibid.*, 215.

But this is not Ibn Shabba's last word on the subject, he reserves that for a letter from 'Uthmân to the people made up almost entirely of Qur'anic verses that exhorts his audience to hold on to obedience and unity and ends with a plea for forgiveness.⁵⁰ Al-Tabarî ends his narrative of 'Uthmân with an almost identical letter; however, he also chooses to maintain the ideological tension between unity and justice until the very end.

AL-TABARÎ

As mentioned previously, al-Tabarî debates the appeals to unity and justice by juxtaposing accounts by Sayf b. 'Umar and al-Wâqidî. A few representative confrontations between 'Uthmân and his detractors reveal the effectiveness of this "strategy of compilation." In al-Tabarî's narrative difficulties started to mount for 'Uthmân when the people of Kufa rejected their governor, Sa'îd b. al-'Âs and demanded that 'Uthmân appoint Abû Mûsâ. In an account recorded by Sayf, a group has gathered in criticism of 'Uthmân, but Abû Mûsâ stands up in the Mosque and states: "O people, be still. For I heard the Messenger of God say, 'He who departs [from the Community] when there is an imam over the people' – and by God, he did not say a just imam – 'in order to shatter their staff and to break up their community, kill him whoever he may be.'"⁵¹ Unity appears more important than justice, and can even authorize more injustice through the murder of the rebels.

Sayf does not present 'Uthmân as an unjust imam; rather the Sayf account continues with the transcript of 'Uthmân's letter written in response to the Kufan's demands. He writes:

50. Q 3:102; Q 3:105; Q 5:1; Q 5:7; Q 8:49; Q 10:48; Q 6:159; Q 11:89-90.

51. The translation is from Ehsan Yar-Shater, ed., *The History of al-Tabarî (Tâ'rikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk)*, vol. 15, *The Crisis of the Early Caliphate*, trans. R. Stephen Humphreys (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 140.

“In the name of the Merciful, the Compassionate, I have named as your governor the one whom you have chosen, and I have relieved you of Sa‘id. By God, I will surely expose my honor to your abuse, and wear out my patience, and use every effort to seek reconciliation with you. So do not fail to ask for whatever you desire, so long as it does not involve rebellion against God. Nor should you fail to demand relief in what you hate, so long as it does not involve rebellion against God. Thus, I will comply with whatever you desire until you have no argument [*hujjah*] against me.”⁵²

In this response al-Tabarî, via Sayf, presents ‘Uthmân as a pious ruler responding patiently to the demands of the people. Moreover, the reader is left to conclude that rebellion against authority leads to rebellion against God. Sayf makes this connection explicit during the later siege when ‘Uthmân repeatedly defends his authority on the basis that he cannot remove the cloak [of authority] that God has bestowed upon him.

Immediately after this Sayf account, however, al-Tabarî places one by al-Wâqidî in which ‘Alî b. Abî Tâlib confronts ‘Uthmân for various abuses. ‘Alî warns:

“Know, ‘Uthmân, that the best of God’s servants in His eyes is a just imam, one who has been guided aright and who himself gives right guidance... The worst of men in God’s sight is a tyrannical imam, one who has gone astray himself and by whom others are led astray... Verily, I heard the Messenger of God say, “The Day of Resurrection will be brought by the tyrannical imam; he will have no helper and no advocate, so that he will be cast into Hell...” ‘Alî continues, “I tell you beware of God and His sudden assault and His vengeance, for His punishment

52. *Ibid.*

is harsh and painful indeed. I tell you beware lest you be the murdered imam of this Community.”⁵³

In this account not only are ‘Uthmân’s actions defined as tyrannical, but his murder is an act of judgment by God rather than the rebels. This is the final account recorded under year 34; ‘Uthmân was killed the following year.

Another account by Sayf echoes the earlier confrontation. Thus it is not altogether surprising when al-Tabarî records ‘Uthmân’s supporters urging him to kill the dissidents. ‘Uthmân’s supporters point out Muhammad said, “God’s curse is on any man who has summoned [others] to join him or anyone else while there is an imam over the people, so put him to death.”⁵⁴ What is noteworthy in al-Tabarî is the willingness to use extreme violence – on both sides – in defense of foundational principles, but also the willingness to refrain from violence. Sayf’s account of the siege and murder emphasizes the attackers’ aggression and greed in contrast to ‘Uthmân’s piety and passivity. He refuses to fight or to bring bloodshed into the community. Al-Tabarî relies on Sayf’s account for much of the siege and murder in which ‘Uthmân is portrayed as a martyr figure who accepts his fate and refuses to resist his accusers with violence. Thus the narrative reinforces the view that the imam is in the right while his attackers are cursed; piety and unity go hand in hand while disobedience leads to inter-Muslim fighting and division.

It is significant, however, that he places the al-Wâqidî account of the confrontations between ‘Uthmân and his besiegers after the murder narrative – so that it is al-Wâqidî’s dialogue that provides the concluding conceptual framework for the siege and murder. ‘Uthmân reminds them of his appointment based on consultation (*shûrâ*) to succeed ‘Umar and that this was done with their blessing and before God. He concludes his defense by stating:

53. *Ibid.*, 142.

54. *Ibid.*, 155.

“No, do not kill me, for a man may be put to death only in three cases: when he commits adultery, when he disbelieves after accepting Islam, or when he takes another’s life except in legitimate retaliation. Verily, if you kill me, you will place the sword upon your own necks, and Almighty God will not lift it from you until the Day of Resurrection. Do not kill me, for if you do, you will never pray together again, nor will you ever join together in sharing out booty (*fay*), nor will God ever remove dissension from among you.”⁵⁵

'Uthmân's appeal that it is only permissible to kill a Muslim for these three reasons, and that his murder will lead to the permanent division of the Community, becomes a key part of the canon in 'Uthmân's defense. Much less common, however, is the rebuttal of the besiegers recorded in al-Tabarî.

The besiegers point out it is also lawful to kill someone who spreads corruption or tyranny. They reply by agreeing that 'Uthmân was appointed by God and that God knows all things, but assert that 'Uthmân is a “test” from God. They add that 'Uthmân was once worthy of authority, but has since brought innovations. They conclude by stating:

“You mention the trials that will afflict us if we kill you. But it is not right to fail to uphold the truth against you out of fear of discord (*fitnah*) sometime in the future. You say that it is lawful to kill a man only in three cases. But in the Book of God, we find that other men are put to death besides the three named by you. [We find that] the man who spreads corruption in the land is put to death, and likewise the oppressor who fights to continue his oppression and the man who prevents justice (*al-haqq*).”⁵⁶

55. *Ibid.*, 221-2.

56. *Ibid.*, 222-3.

In this response, the besiegers argue that it is necessary to risk discord and disunity in the name of justice. And violence against *anyone* who resists or hinders justice is likewise justified. Al-Tabarî maintains his emphasis on the religious ramifications and eternal consequences of disobedience and disunity throughout his narrative.

Al-Tabarî, like Ibn Shabba, concludes his narrative of the revolt with a letter of Qur'anic defense written by 'Uthmân. This version of the letter includes some additional verses not mentioned in Ibn Shabba's letter that state a unified Community is one of God's blessings and a sign of salvation. Furthermore, whereas Ibn Shabba's version of the letter warns that without a unified head the community will not pray together and some will rule over others, al-Tabarî's version says it will lead to disagreements about what is lawful and forbidden and "no true religion will remain before God."⁵⁷ More than Ibn Shabba, al-Tabarî places the tragedy of 'Uthmân's reign in cosmic proportions, and disunity is a threat not only to the survival of the community, but the religion itself. It is not clear to what extent this apocalyptic vision reflects al-Tabarî's temperament or the deteriorating state of the 'Abbasid dynasty by the late ninth century. In either case, the centrality of the unity-justice paradigm presented by Ibn Shabba and intensified by al-Tabarî is highlighted by comparison with al-Balâdhurî's far more critical view of 'Uthmân and more pragmatic view of government.

57. *Ibid.*, 242.

AL-BALADHURÎ

While al-Tabarî pits competing ideals against each other, al-Baladhuri presents a process of reconciliation not between unity and justice, but between political and religious authority. Al-Baladhurî defends 'Uthmân's caliphate despite the fact that he portrays 'Uthmân as a capricious ruler who abuses his power and tortures any who dare to criticize him. He introduces the confrontations with an appeal by religious leaders to the authority of the Qur'an and *sunna*. In response 'Uthmân occasionally restrains his anger, but more often than not, he orders his critics to be tortured or exiled. But the narratives usually conclude with 'Uthmân either repenting and being forgiven, or the same pious individuals recommending obedience even when he is intransigent. It is within this context that the confrontations are sprinkled with recommendations to the caliph to show mercy, to listen to counsel, and to make sure he does not alienate too many segments of the population at once. In this way, al-Balâdhurî's narrative is reminiscent of the more pragmatic aspects of the "mirrors for princes" literature of later centuries and a far cry from al-Tabarî's idealism and despair.⁵⁸

In accounts of confrontations with 'Uthmân al-Balâdhurî repeatedly shapes his narrative to defend the rights of the caliphs

58. In "Qur'anic Myth" Humphreys presents al-Tabarî as optimistic and the apogee of historiographic dynamism based on the Qur'anic myth of Covenant, Betrayal, and Redemption. Although he still finds this a helpful framework for analyzing ninth century Islamic historiography, he now emphasizes the pessimism in al-Tabarî's history, a pessimism Humphreys attributes to al-Tabarî's understanding of Time and belief that the Final Judgment was drawing near. See "Divine and Human Meanings of Time in Early Islamic Historiography: The Case of Abû Ja'far al-Tabarî," in *Proceedings: reports, abstracts and round table introductions, 19th International Congress of Historical Sciences held in Oslo 6-13 August, 2000* (Oslo: University of Oslo, 2000), 66; and "Turning Points in Islamic Historical Practice," in *Turning Points in Historiography: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Q. Edward Wang and Georg G. Iggers, Rochester Studies in Historiography (Rochester, NY: The University of Rochester Press, 2002), 99, fn. 2.

(past and present) against those basing their authority on the Qur'an and personal piety. The growing problems in Kufa are emblematic of 'Uthmân's reign and al-Balâdhurî's narrative strategy. 'Uthmân's governor, al-Walîd, was accused of a wide range of abuses so that 'Uthmân was forced to remove him and replace him with Sa'îd b. al-'Âs, but problems continued in Kufa. "Sa'îd used to sit in the company of its [Qur'an] reciters and its distinguished citizens and chat with them."⁵⁹ When disagreements broke out in this assembly, Sa'îd wrote to 'Uthmân: "I cannot keep control over Kufa while al-Ashtar and his friends, who claim to be reciters but are [in fact] foolish, [are in it]."⁶⁰ Al-Balâdhurî then gives the transcript of several letters produced by the conflict in Kufa.⁶¹ In this exchange of letters, al-Balâdhurî grants men of religion the right to warn the caliph, but at their own risk, and with no recourse to outright rebellion. Moreover, although there is general appeal to the Qur'an, al-Balâdhurî does not actually quote any verses from the Qur'an or *hadith* that would condemn 'Uthmân – or any other ruler for that matter.⁶²

The first letter in al-Balâdhurî is from the Qur'an reciters of Kufa who wrote to 'Uthmân to complain about Sa'îd's treatment of them. They claimed Sa'îd "was antagonistic towards some of

59. Al-Balâdhurî, 528. There is ambiguity over whether the term *qurra* means Qur'an reciters or *abl al-qurra* (men of the towns). See T. Nagel "qurâ" *EP* for a summary (without resolution) of the literature. The issue is also discussed by R.S. Humphreys in his translation of al-Tabarî, *Crisis*, 112, fn. 194. Based on context, Humphreys chooses to use the traditional interpretation of "Qur'an reciters" and I believe the same holds true for al-Balâdhurî as well.

60. Al-Balâdhurî, 529.

61. Ella Landau-Tasseron has pointed out how speeches and letters often migrate through narratives. Thus the focus should be on their content more than their context; they form discrete rhetorical units. Landau-Tasseron, "New Data on an old Manuscript: An Andalusian Version of the works entitled *Futûh al-Shâm*," *Al-Qantara* 11:2 (2000): 370-72.

62. Al-Balâdhurî also summarizes in a few sentences 'Uthmân's letters of self defense which consist primarily of Qur'anic verses. That al-Tabarî, Ibn Shabba, and Ibn A'tham all include full transcripts of these letters further highlights al-Balâdhurî's choice to limit the Qur'anic material in his narrative.

the people of piety, virtue and uprightness. He caused you to treat them in a way which is not justified in religion or fitting to hear about.”⁶³ 'Uthmân wanted to punish them and indeed did have Ka'b b. 'Abda, who had written a similar letter, whipped. Ka'b had written to 'Uthmân warning him:

“The *imâra* of the believers only came to you by virtue of the *shûrâ* when you made a pledge to God to follow the *sîra* of His Prophet and not to fall short of it. If they were to consult us about you a second time, we would transfer it [the *imâra*] from you. O 'Uthmân, the Book of God is for whomever it has reached and [whoever] has recited it; we have recited it just as you have. If the reciter [of the Qur'an] does not follow what is in it, it becomes an argument against him.”⁶⁴

In this letter the caliphate is bestowed by and to those who follow the Qur'an. Abû Mikhnaf gives two similar versions of these confrontations and the subsequent whipping of Ka'b b. 'Abda.⁶⁵ Both end however, when 'Uthmân repented, asked Ka'b to whip him, Ka'b refused, and instead forgave 'Uthmân. Through a 'strategy of repetition,' al-Balâdhurî presents a model of the relationship between the caliph and those claiming authority based on the Qur'an and their personal piety. The caliph may abuse his authority, and others may confront him with right religion, but there is no further action from the caliph's accusers.⁶⁶ Moreover, although 'Uthmân

63. Al-Balâdhurî, 530. The letter concludes, “We bear witness against you before God and God is a sufficient witness. You are our *amîr* as long as you obey God and act uprightly. You will not find, other than God, any refuge or savior.”

64. *Ibid.*, 531.

65. This account has the added twist that Marwân was the one who encouraged 'Uthmân to beat the messenger and that it was his leniency that encouraged people to talk to him that way, thereby preparing the way for Marwân's role later during the siege.

66. Al-Balâdhurî was a member of Mutawakkil's court – one wonders about the contemporaneous relationship between the caliph and the *'ulamâ'*. Apparently, al-

punished them, apparently unfairly, he was redeemed in the end; when confronted the ruler *should* admit his mistakes, repent, and rectify the situation.

The narrative continues to record the problems between ‘Uthmân and Kufa in the form of exchanged letters. ‘Uthmân had brought his governors, including Sa‘îd, to Medina for consultation and upon Sa‘îd’s return he was barred from entering the city by al-Ashtar.⁶⁷ ‘Uthmân wrote them a letter stating they were the first to start divisions in Islam and ordering them to fear God and return to the truth and the Book.⁶⁸ Al-Ashtar wrote a response letter to ‘Uthmân addressed to “the afflicted and erring caliph who has diverged from the *sunna* of his prophet and has cast behind his back the rule of the Qur’an.”⁶⁹ Al-Ashtar stated: “forbid yourself and your governors injustice, aggression, and the exiling of the righteous, then we shall grant you obedience... As to our affection [you can have it] if you retract, repent, ask God to forgive your injustice to the best among us, your exiling of our righteous ones, ousting us from our homes, and appointing youths over us.”⁷⁰ ‘Uthmân had the person who

Mutawakkil, unlike al-Ma‘mûn, was not interested in asserting any religious role for himself. He was too busy building palaces and going on the hunt. Consequently, El-Hibri concludes, “In the post-mihna era the ‘ulamâ’ had resolved on running religious affairs in isolation from the caliphate, whose role was reduced to providing a stamp of approval.” *Reinterpreting*, 122. Al-Balâdhurî’s conceptualization of the struggle between religious and political authority might also be reflecting back on the conflicts during the reign of al-Ma‘mûn. Ira Lapidus points out how Sahl ibn Salama al-Ansarî posed a threat to caliphal authority; he wore a copy of the Qur’an around his neck and preached “that allegiance to the Qur’an and *sunna* superseded obedience to authorities who were compromised by failure to uphold Islam.” Ira Lapidus, “The Separation of State and Religion in the Development of Early Islamic Society,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6 (1975), 372. 67. Al-Balâdhurî, 534.

68. Significantly, al-Balâdhurî does not include any of the actual details or Qur’anic verses that fill this letter in al-Tabarî and Ibn Shabba’s narratives.

69. Al-Balâdhurî, 535. This is slightly different in content and context from similar letters found in Ibn Shabba’s narrative. Ibn Shabba’s letter is from the Egyptians and is addressed simply to “the erring caliph.” Ibn Shabba, 193.

70. *Ibid.*, 535. The letter in Ibn Shabba is similar, but rather than listing specific abuses, accuses ‘Uthmân of rebellion (*ma’siyah*). Rather than referring to those

delivered the letters and his governor in Kufa whipped. But the narrative ends with 'Uthmân exclaiming: "By God I am repentant" and appointing a new governor of the people's choosing.⁷¹ Al-Balâdhurî presents a political paradigm in which the ruler makes mistakes, is confronted, and repents.

Al-Balâdhurî tells of another confrontation with one of these "righteous ones," Abû Dharr, who was sent into exile. The first account shows Abû Dharr basing his criticisms on the Qur'an, and stating he has the right to recite the Qur'an. The narrative continues with a variety of accounts some showing 'Uthmân frustrated, but refraining from punishing Abû Dharr to others in which 'Uthmân sends Abû Dharr into exile and is reprimanded for punishing anyone who criticizes him. Al-Balâdhurî concludes the narrative with an account I have not seen elsewhere in which a group asks Abû Dharr if he is going to raise a banner to rally men against 'Uthmân. Abû Dharr responds: "Even if 'Uthmân crucified me on the tallest trunk, I would listen, obey, accept, and be patient, for whoever humiliates the ruler there is no repentance for him."⁷² The account concludes by stating: "they were dissuaded." Repeatedly, al-Balâdhurî frames the different contentious aspects of the revolt in this way with an appeal to the Qur'an (rather than justice) against 'Uthmân's abuses and errors, but concludes with an appeal to the prestige of the ruler – rather than the unity of the community.⁷³

who recite and follow the Qur'an, it quotes the Qur'an: "There is no obedience to one who rebels [against] God." The letter concludes: "Verily we were obedient to God by supporting and revering you, but then rejected that when we had learned you wanted to destroy us and destroy yourself. We must reject and disobey whoever keeps us from God. You are merely a mortal servant whereas God is the eternal Creator." Ibn Shabba, 193. Ibn Shabba raises the stakes from conflict with pious men to rebellion against God and from withheld obedience to active disobedience and rejection. Lapidus notes that in the struggle for authority in the early ninth century, Sahl ibn Salama al-Ansarî adopted the slogan: "No obedience to the creature in disobedience of the Creator." "The Separation of State and Religion," 373.

71. *Ibid.*, 535.

72. *Ibid.*, 546

73. Consider the contrast with al-Tabarî who relies on Sayf's version which pres-

Although there is general appeal to the Qur'an, al-Balâdhurî does not actually quote any verses from the Qur'an that would condemn 'Uthmân. Al-Balâdhurî defends the authority of the caliph despite clear evidence of injustice; he grants pious individuals the right to correct the ruler verbally, but no more – and at their own risk. Nor does 'Uthmân's injustice have any larger religious ramifications. In his version of the confrontation between 'Uthmân and 'Alî, for example, there is no reference to a murdered unjust imam. Rather 'Alî warns 'Uthmân to keep a firmer hand on his governor, Mu'âwiya, in Syria. Nor does al-Balâdhurî develop the consequences of disunity. Rather he appears to defend the continuity of the caliphate despite religious divisions. While al-Balâdhurî includes accounts stating it is only legitimate to kill a Muslim for one of three reasons, he does not include the corollary argument that if they kill 'Uthmân the community will be permanently divided. There is no reference to the sword of God upon the necks of the Community or warning that they will never pray together again, or be permanently divided. What happened to 'Uthmân did not permanently tarnish the Community or the Caliphate. Al-Balâdhurî's concern is with the practicalities of governing the Community rather than idealized communities – past or present.

CONCLUSION

Based on this brief analysis we can see how these authors used literary techniques to point to moral and political lessons. For Ibn Shabba obedience to God is first and foremost. This may mean confronting and disobeying an unjust ruler, but to use force against a ruler, separate from the community, or to oppress certain segments of the community were equally sinful. Ibn Shabba's concerns are reflected in his own life in which he refused to bow to the pressure

ents an idealized image of 'Uthmân honoring and respecting Abû Dharr rather than sending him into exile.

of the *mihna* and consequently had some of his works destroyed. Although al-Tabarî may have been influenced by Ibn Shabba, he takes a more absolutist position. The two ideals of unity and justice legitimize the use of violence in their defense. Perhaps it was easier for him to remain a purist and an idealist because he consistently distanced himself from court politics. In contrast, al-Balâdhurî was a part of the inner court in Baghdad, and a 'boon companion' of the caliph al-Mutawakkil. Thus it is not too surprising that he does not defend an ideal caliph or abstract religious or political ideals. Rather the ruler must be obeyed, but he should also listen to religious advisors and restrain himself. Thus we can see in these confrontations with the caliph, that "in the end, the ultimate goal of the narrators was not to prove or disprove the charges against 'Uthmân, but to lay out a particular scheme of a political drama centered as much on the confrontations of the past as the challenges of the present."⁷⁴

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74. This is paraphrase of El-Hibri's assessment of narrators' treatment of the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mûn (d. 833) in *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, 94.

