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# The Origin of the Tale and of the Story-tellers

It is twelve centuries ago since historians first wrote about 'Abdullah Bin Saba. One can rarely find a writer who does not talk about him if he is writing about Sahabis, Muslims who met the Prophet.

The difference between the writings of the old and recent Islam historians while talking about 'Abdullah Bin Saba tales is that the latter has chosen the modern analytical method of writing, while the old ones told the story in the language of Hadith (record of the sayings of the Prophet). To study and examine this story properly we have to find the narrators who have spoken and, or written about it.

## 1) Muhammad Rashid Reza

Among recent writers is Muhammad Rashid Reza, who in his book al-Sunna wal Shi'a (pp.4-6) says: "Shi'ism was invented by 'Abdullah Bin Saba. He claimed that he had renounced his Jewish faith and had been converted to a Muslim. He exaggerated grossly about 'Ali, the fourth successor of the Prophet Muhammad and invented Shi'ism in 'Ali's name.

The invention of Shi'ism was the beginning of the corruption in the religious and worldly affairs of Muhammad's nation, by creating differences between Muslims." Then Reza twisted the story to suit himself, and if one wishes to know the beginning of the story Muhammad Rashid Reza confesses saying,

"Anyone referring to the stories concerning the Battle of Jamal in the history book of Ibn Athir for example, will discover the extent of the evil influence of Sabaian in the armies of both sides, when the settlement was expected (refer vol.3, pp.96,103)." Hence al-Sayyid Rashid's source of information was the history book of Ibn Athir.

## 2) Abul Feda (d. 732 H.L. 1331 A.D.)

Abul Feda in his book Al-Mukhtasar says: " I have summarized in my book that which Sheikh Ezzed Din 'Ali, known as Ibn Athir Jazari, has written in his complete book." Hence the sources of the above two writers was Ibn Athir.

## 3) Ibn Athir (d. 630 H.L. 1229 A.D.)

He has mentioned the story among the events which took place' during the years 30—36 H.L. He does not state the sources of these stories except in the preface of his book Tarikh al-Kamel (printed in Egypt, 1348 H.L.) saying: " I have found these stories in the book of Abu Ja'far, al-Tabari." The complete history book of Tabari (17) is the Muslims historical Bible — the only reliable book amongst Muslims who refer to it when any disputable subject is to be examined.

Tabari has written many hadiths (traditions) in different parts of his book, regarding one event; but I have rearranged these stories under a proper title and have chosen the most complete story for each event. With regard to the S ah abis I have quoted their stories exactly as Tabari (17) has written them in his book, and except for the explanatory notes not interfering with the quotations.

This is Ibn Athir ( 3 ) from whom Muhammad Rashid ( 1 ) and Abul Feda (2) have borrowed their stories. This Ibn Athir (3) had recorded exactly what al-Tabari (17) had written.

## 4) Ibn Kathir (d. 774 H.L. 1289 A.D.)

Ibn Kathir in his book 'Al Bedaia wal Nehaia vol.7, citing Tabari says: "Saif Bin 'Omar has said that the cause of the revolt against 'Othman was 'Abdullah Bin Saba who pretended to be a Muslim and went to Egypt spreading false stories."

Then Ibn Kathir writes the complete story of 'Abdullah Bin Saba, including the Battle of Jamal. He says on p.246 "This is the summary of what Abu Ja'far Bin Jarir Tabari (17) may God bless him, has written."

## 5) Ibn Khaldoon

The philosopher of the historians in his book 'al-Mobtada wal Khabar has mentioned Sabaian in the Events of House (martyrdom of 'Othman) and Jamal. Then on p.425 vol.2 of his book he says: "This is the summary of the events of Jamal from the book of Abu Ja'far Tabari (17) because he is more reliable and more trust-worthy than other historians including Ibn Qotaybah."

Also on p.457 he says: "This is the last word about Islamic succession, and of heretics conquerors and fights. After this there will be agreement and Assembly (al-Jamaat) amongst Muslims. I have taken these extracts from the book of Muhammad Bin Jarir al-Tabari (17) as it is the most reliable, and does not criticize Sahabis and Tabe 'in."

## 6) Muhammad Farid Wajdi

Farid Wajdi in his book Encyclopedia' under the word Atham and under Jamal fight, also in the biography of 'Ali Bin Abi Talib has mentioned 'Abdullah Bin Saba's story and on pp.160, 168 and 169 tells us that

his source of information is from Tabari (17).

## 7) al-Bostani

In his Encyclopedia under the name ‘Abdullah Bin Saba says: "‘Abdullah Bin Saba says Ibn Kathir. . . ."

## 8) Ahmed Amin

One of today's historians who has used the analytical method of recording the stories is Ahmed Amin. In his book Fajrol Is lam concerning Persians* and their effect on Islam he writes, "The main difference between the Mazdak's religion and other religions was its socialistic idea. Mazdak believed in the equality of man by birth and stated that they must, therefore, have equal opportunities for their livelihood.

He saw the most important issues in the equality of man as being wealth and women, these being the cause of all disagreements. Hence he said women and wealth were equally for all. Men of lower classes took advantage of Mazdak's teaching and caused much trouble. His followers broke into houses, sharing amongst themselves the women and the goods.

This went on for so long that children did not know who had fathered them, and fathers could not recognize their sons." Ahmed Amin continues saying "This way of life was adopted by some, even after the advent of Islam. There were villages in Kerman (Southern Persia) where this religion was still practiced in the reign of Amawys Dynasty."

"From this" says Ahmed Amin, "we see the similarity of the ideas of Abu Dharr and Mazdak as far as the distribution of wealth is concerned." "Abu Dharr," says Tabari "rose up in Damascus (Shaam) saying " O men of wealth, share your money with the poor people," and he recited this verse of the Holy Qur’an:

***"Proclaim a woeful punishment to those that hoard up gold and silver and do not spend it in God's cause. The day surely comes when their treasures shall be heated in the fire of Hell, and their foreheads, sides and backs, branded with them."*** (***The Holy Qur’an, Surah At-Tawbah*** (***9***)***: Verse 34***).

Abu Dharr repeated this quotation so often that poor men took it as an obligation for wealthy men to distribute their money, and pestered rich people so much that they complained about Abu Dharr to Mo'awiah, the governor.

Before Ahmed Amin, Rashid Reza has written the story in his book al-Sunna wal Shi‘a of Syria, and he sent Abu Dharr to Medina to the Caliph ‘Othman.

"Citizen of Damascus, why does your tongue make much complain?" Said ‘Othman. "The wealthy people are not supposed to keep their money entirely for themselves," said Abu Dharr.

"We see from the above," says Ahmed Amin, "that Abu Dharr's idea was very close to that of Mazdak concerning wealth." But where did Abu Dharr get this view? Tabari answers: "Ibn al-Souda met Abu Dharr and suggested this socialistic idea, at the meeting with Abu Darda[1] and ‘Obada Bin Samet, but the latter men were not deceived and they took Ibn al-Souda to Mo'awiah and said this was the man who had prompted Abu Dharr to make you so tiresome.”[2]

Ahmed Amin continues: "We also know that Ibn al- Souda was known as ‘Abdullah Bin Saba who was a Jew from San‘a’ (Yemen). He pretended to be a Muslim in ‘Othman's time, and tried to ruin the religion of the Muslims by spreading harmful ideas." This, we will discuss later.

"‘Abdullah Bin Saba," continues Ahmed Amin, "travelled to many cities in Arabia, Basra, Kufa, Damascus and to Egypt. He may have got this socialistic idea from the followers of Mazdak in Iraq or Yemen. So, Abu Dharr learned it from him."

Ahmed Amin wrote in the margin of his book: "Refer to Tabari vol.5, p.66 onwards." On p.112 Ahmed concludes that: "The Shi‘a regarded ‘Ali and his sons divine, as did their Persian ancestors and the Pagans regard their Kings of the Sasanid dynasty.”

Ahmed Amin was faithful to his promise when he said, "we will discuss the harmful ideas of ‘Abdullah Bin Saba later."

Ahmed Amin on p.254, talking about different de- nominations says; "At the end of ‘Othman's reign, some secret groups, scattered far and wide, rioted against ‘Othman, trying to rob him of power and give it to someone else. Amongst these groups some were soliciting support for ‘Ali, the strongest force behind this movement in Basra, Kufa and Damascus was ‘Abdullah Bin Saba. He said; "Every prophet has a successor. ‘Ali is the successor of Muhammad who is more unjust than the man who unjustly has usurped the place of ‘Ali?" He insisted on this until ‘Othman was killed.

"We are bound," says Ahmed Amin, "to discuss this story as three Muslim denominations came into being as a result of it. They are Shia, etc.

In the chapter concerning Shi‘a on pp.266-278 he says that the idea of a second coming of the Prophet Elijah belongs to the Jews. ‘Abdullah Bin Saba learned of it from the Jews. Shias adopted it from ‘Abdullah Bin Saba to agree with their ideas concerning Mandi who was supposed to come and fill the world with justice.

Shiaism is a refuge to shelter those who wish to destroy Islam under the camouflage of love of the Prophet's family. Any Jew or Christian can state his views about Islam through Shiaism, like the Jewish idea concerning the second coming of Elijah.I On p.277 he says: "According to Wellhouzen, Shi‘a derives more from Jewish than from Persian beliefs, 'because ‘Abdullah Bin Saba was Jewish." In other words, Ahmed Amin that Shias derived their belief in the successor- ship of ‘Ali, and the second coming of the Saints and Mahdi, from Ibn Saba, that is, from Jews.

It is unfortunate that Ahmed Amin's book Fajrol Islam and the Islamic Political History by Hassan E. Hassan are the only books about Shi'a thought at Western universities.

Abu Dharr got his communistic notions from Ibn Saba, Ibn Saba learned communism from Mazdaki people who lived in the time of the Amawid Dynasty. Mazdak was Persian, and Persians revere their Kings. So do Shias revere their Imams. Shiaism is a cloak for those who wish to des-troy Islam by hatred and jealousy.

It is also a shelter for any who wish to introduce Judaism, Christianity or the Zoroaster faith to Islam. We note that all these ideas come from 'Abdullah Bin Saba, which Ahmed Amin took from Tabari and Wellhouzen. We shall see that Wellhouzen too, has recorded it from Tabari (17).

## 9) Hassan Ibrahim.

Another contemporary historian who has adopted the analytical method in his book Islamic Political History, is Dr. Hasan Ibrahim. After considering the Muslim situation at the end of 'Othman's Caliphate he says, "The atmosphere was ready to accept the Sabaians movements.

One of the companions of the Prophet well known for his piety and righteousness, was one of the narrators' leaders, called Abu Dharr Ghafari. It was this man who caused trouble, as he was affected by 'Abdullah Bin Saba's rousing propaganda, and he opposed 'Othman and his Governor in Syria, Mo'awiah.

'Abdullah Bin Saba was a Jew who pretended to be a Muslim and travelled to Hijaz, Kufa, Syria and Egypt.

Dr. Hassan Ibrahim has taken this story from vol.1, p.2859 Tabari (17). On p.349 he says,"' Abdullah Bin Saba was the first person to lead people against 'Othman, causing him to be overthrown.

In the margin of his book he has referred to Tabari four times concerning the story of 'Abdullah Bin Saba. He also refers to Tabari twelve times about this story in his book. Yet he has refrained from quoting what Tabari has written in his book concerning Sabaians, even though the hero in both stories is the same — 'Abdullah Bin Saba.

Up to now we have seen how Muslim historians have quoted from the history book of Tabari (17) concerning Sabaian.

## 10) Van Flotten (Volten) (Johannes 1818—1883).

In his book Arabian rule and Shi'a and Israilyat in Amawid Time, translated by Dr. Hassan Ibrahim and Muhammad Zaki Ibrahim (1st edition Egypt, p.79) says concerning Shia: "The Sabaians, the followers of 'Abdullah Bin Saba regarded 'Ali as the rightful person for the successorship of the Prophet during the

time of ‘Othman." Then he refers to Tabari (17) on the margin of p.80 in his book.

## 11) Nicholson, Reynold Alleyne (1868 1945).

In his book The History of Arabian Literature (Cam– bridge, p.215) he says, "‘Abdullah Bin Saba founded the Sabaian's Society. He was from San‘a in Yemen. It is said that he was a Jew who, in ‘Othman's time, embraced Islam.

He was in fact a wicked, travelling missionary, who tried to lead Muslims astray. He started from Hijaz, and went to Basra, Kufa and Syria. Finally he lived in Egypt. He believed in the second coming of the Prophet." He said, "People believed in the second coming of Jesus, but denied the second

coming of the Prophet Muhammad, even though this is mentioned in the Qur'an. Moreover, God has sent over one thousand messengers, and each of them had a deputy — a successor. ‘Ali is the successor of the Prophet Muhammad — the last one." Then in the margin of his book he refers to Tabari (17) and indicates the page.

## 12) The Islamic Encyclopedia

In this Encyclopedia, written by some orientalists, the story is written as follows:–

"If we want to consider only what Tabari and Maghrizi have recorded, we say that one of the subjects Bin Saba was preaching was the second coming of Muhammad. This was the theory — that to every Prophet there is a successor, and ‘Ali is the successor of Muhammad. So, every Muslim, therefore, must help ‘Ali by his words and deeds. It is said that ‘Abdullah Bin Saba sent missionaries all over the country to propagate his theory. He himself was among those who set off from Egypt towards Medina in Shawwal 35 H.L., April, 656 A.D." The Encyclopedia refers to Tabari and Maghrizi,

Tabari lived 300 years after the story, and Maghrizi 800 years. Tabari mentions the names of those he has quoted but Maghrizi does not. Hence the writings of Maghrizi are not thought to be as reliable as those of Tabari, who lived 500 years before Maghrizi. We will write about Maghrizi later.

## 13) Donaldson, M. Dewight.

In his book The Shi‘ah Articles of Faith Arabic translation p.85 he says: "The earliest references show us that the claim of the followers of ‘Ali, regarding his succession was not just political, but they believed that the succession of ‘Ali was divinely inspired. Yet a mysterious man can be held greatly responsible for that belief. During the time of the succession of ‘Othman, ‘Abdullah Bin Saba started a movement to bring Muslims to ruin, as is said by Tabari."

Donaldson has not quoted directly from Tabari, but according to the margin of p.59 in his book, he has

quoted from the Islamic Encyclopedia previously mentioned and from the book History of Arabian Literature. We have stated earlier that they themselves have quoted from Tabari (17).

## 14) Wellhousen Julius (1844 — 1918).

On p.56—57 in his book Sabaian and the Spirit of Prophethood, he says : " A party was formed in Kufa, called Sabaian, and this party made many drastic changes in Islam. Despite the teaching of the Qur'an, they preached the divinity of the Prophet Muhammad. Sabaians believe that Muhammad died bodily but not spiritually, that his spirit is a divine one, and is alive for all eternity."

As in the, theory of incarnation, they say that the spirit of God has been incarnated in his Messengers and passed through all the prophets, one to the other, and that after Muhammad, it was passed on to ‘Ali and then to his descendents.

They did not consider that ‘Ali was equal to the Caliphs who preceded him and were the successors of Muhammad, but they regarded those Caliphs as illegal. They proclaimed ‘Ali as the sole, divine, legal successor of the Prophet Muhammad, and obedience to him was to be regarded as obedience to God.

Wellhousen also said that it is understood that the Sabaians derive their name from Bin Saba — a Yemenese Jew, and under a title ‘Sabaian extremist and Believers of Reincarnation.' He says: "The extremists have different names not worthy of mention, but all the names proved that they had gone astray." Saif Bin ‘Omar Tamimi says, "Sabaian right from the start were trouble makers, killing ‘Othman, and starting Civil war .....Most of them were non- Arabic slaves.

They believed in the passing of the soul from one person to another, especially the spirit of Muhammad incarnated in ‘Ali, Then the descendants of ‘Ali, by Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, rejected the Sabaians, so they followed Muhammad al-Hanafiyah, a son of ‘Ali but not by Fatimah. The 'Sabaian followed Aba Hashim the son of Muhammad al-Hanafiyah, an unworthy man like his father. Aba Hashim nominated his son Muhammad Bin ‘Ali ‘Abbasy. Hence the successorship of ‘Ali went from him to ‘Abbassids dynasty. ‘Abbassids, like the Sabaians, originated in Kufa. Both parties rioted against Arabian Muslims and their supporters were Iranian 46 slaves."

Wellhouzen refers to Saif twice in this story in the margin of his book. Hence it is clear to us that he has taken the story from Tabari (17) — the first historian to mention Saif.

So, we have written about historians who have mentioned Tabari, directly or otherwise, when writing the story of Bin Saba. There are other writers who have not mentioned the original writer of the story of Bin Saba. But in other places in their books they have named Tabari or the books which have quoted from Tabari such as:-

## 15) Mirkhand

In–his book Rawzatus–Safa.

## 16) Ghiathud Din (d. 940 H.L. — 1455 A.D.)

The son of Mir Khand, in his book Habibus Siyar, has quoted from his father as is mentioned in the preface of his book. All the above historians have quoted from Tabari (17).

## 17) Tabari and his source

Abu Ja'far Muhammad Bin Jarir Tabari Amoli, (d. 310 H.L. — 825 A.D.). In his book Tarikhol Omam wal Mulook (The History of Nations and Kings), Tabari has quoted the story of the Sabaians exclusively from Saif Bin 'Omar Tamimi. He refers only to some of the events of the year 30 H.L. as follows:–

In the same year (i.e. year 30 H.L.) the events concerning Abu Dharr took place. Mo'awiah sent Abu Dharr from (Damascus) Shaam to Medina. Many things are told of that event, but I do not like to record them.

Sari has written to me about the stories told by those who find excuses for Mo'awiah, regarding the incidents concerning Abu Dharr. Shoaib has told Sari that Saif said, "When Bin Sawda reached (Damascus) Shaam he met Abu Dharr and reported to him the things which Mo'awiah was doing. And Tabari narrates the story of Sabaians as told by Saif, and finishes the story of Abu Dharr with the following sentence, "Others have said much concerning this story (the exile of Abu Dharr), but I am reluctant to relate them."

Regarding the events of the years (30–36 ,H.L.), Tabari records the story of Bin Saba and the Sabaians, the murder of 'Othman (The third Caliph) and the Battle of Jamal from Saif — Saif being the only one from whom he could quote.

Tabari narrates his story from Saif through two persons, 1) 'Obaidullah Bin Said Zohari from his uncle Ya'qub Bin Ibrahim and then from Saif. From this channel the stories begin "narrated to me" or "narrated to us." 2) Sari Bin Yahya from Shoaib Bin Ibrahim from Saif. Tabari recording from two books, al–Fotuh and al–Jamal from Saif, has begun with "He wrote to me," "He narrated to me," and "In his letter to me." So far we have dealt with Tabari's source.

## 18) Ibn 'Asaker (d. 571 H.L. — 1086 A.D.)

'Ibn 'Asaker records from another source. In his book The History of Damascus whilst writing the biographies of Talha and 'Abdullah Bin Saba, he has recorded parts of the story of Sabaians, through Abul Qasim Samarqand from Abul Husain Naqqoor from Abu Taher Mokhallas from Abu Bakr Bin Saif

from Sari from Shoaib Bin Ibrahim from Saif.

Therefore, the origin is Sari, one of the two channels from which Tabari has recorded.

## 19) Ibn Badran (d. 1346 H.L. — 1851 A.D.)

Ibn Badran, has recorded stories in his book Tahzib without mentioning the names of the persons from whom he has quoted. He has written some of the story of Ibn Saba in his book without naming the originators. But in the biography of Ziad Bin Abih he has mentioned Tabari in connection with Saif's stories (vol.5, p.406).

## 20) Ibn Abibakr (d.741 H.L. — 1256 A.D.)

Ibn Abibakr has a book called al-Tamhid, from which some writers have quoted. The book concerns the killing of Caliph 'Othman and in its preface the name of al-Fotuh, the book of Saif is mentioned, as is also the name of Ibn Athir. Ibn Athir has quoted from Tabari and Tabari from Saif. So far the tales of Saif have three principles sources:-

1) Tabari (d. 310 H.L. — 825 A.D.);

2) Ibn 'Asaker (d. 571 H.L. — 1086 A.D.);

3) Ibn Abibakr (d. 741 H.L. — 1256 A.D.).

Some writers have quoted from one source, some from two, and some from all three.

## 21) Sa'id Afghani

In his book Aisha and Politics, Sa'id Afghani has written some of the stories of the Sabaians under the following titles.

"Prophet against 'Othman And The Consequence."
"Bin Saba The Secret Dreadful Hero."
"Observation of the Reconciliation," and "The Plot."

He also mentions the Sabaians in other chapter of his book. His principle source is Tabari, followed by Ibn'Asaker, then Tamhid of Ibn Abibakr. He relies on Tabari more than anyone else, giving as his reason the trust he has in Tabari, saying that Tabari is more dependable, and that all previous historians have trusted him. He then says "As far as I could, I have quoted from Tabari's book exactly as it was."

## 22) Dhahabi (d. 748 H.L. — 1263 A.D.)

There is another channel for the tale of Ibn Saba namely Dhahabi's recording. He has written some parts of the story in his book The History of Islam (vol.2, pp.122-128) where he has recorded the killing of 'Othman among the events of the year 35 H.L. He begins as follows:-

"And Saif Bin 'Omar said that 'Atyya said, that Yazid al-Faq'asi said when Bin Sawda went to Egypt....." Dhahabi has also written another story told by Saif in more detail than Tabari. Later he has recorded a summary of what Tabari has written. The original of the stories written by Dhahabi concerning Sabaians and others, can be found in the preface to his book.

1) Books such as al-Fotuh by Saif, from which Dhahabi has obtained the most important material for his book.

2) Books from which he has obtained that which he has recorded as the summary.

3) Books he refers to frequently to, such as Tabari.

Since Dhahabi has mentioned the book al-Fotuh by Saif and he lived in 8th Century of Muslim era then the book al-Fotuh must have been available until then.

In summary we can say that all these historians referred to have taken their stories and tale of 'Abdullah Bin Saba from Saif. Four of these historians: Tabari, Ibn 'Asaker, Ibn Abibakr and Dhahabi have taken their stories directly from Saif, while others have got their stories indirectly from Saif.

The chart on the next page indicates the channels through which the Sabaians tale has been recorded from its original story teller Saif.

1. They were known followers of Prophet (Sahabis).
2. This story is false and made up by 'Abdullah Bin Saba, Abu Dharr never preached against the wealthy people, his talks were aimed at Mo'awiah and his dynasty, who had captured peoples' wealth by force and 'Abdullah Bin Saba tried to cover up the matter by making up these tales.

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