Abū Ja'far Muhammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (839-923 A.D.) ranks among the foremost historians of the history of Islam. He availed himself of the works of his predecessors and enlarged their historical scope by bringing it up to the year 915 A.D. Later, his pupils Abū Muhammad al-Farghānī and Abū'l-Mu'mammad al-Hamdānī wrote supplementary works and covered the period up to 1094 A.D. Ibn Ṭabhīr tried to fill up some of the gaps and rationalize some of the discordant traditions incorporated by al-Ṭabarī. Al-Ṭabarī's work comprising several number of volumes was not conceived as an integrated coherent account but embodies a storehouse of information in chronological order. Truly it is raw material for the analyst. With remarkable impartiality and high sense of integrity he strung up together different versions of events even at the risk of appearing to be repetitive or self-contradictory. He took care to verify his sources of information but did not personally vouch for the authenticity of events and opinions incorporated by him in his monumental Tārīkh al-Rūṣul wal-Mulūk. This work was acclaimed for its merit during his lifetime and only twenty four years after his death was rendered into Persian. In 1964 M.J. De Geoe edited the Arabic text after meticulous collation and added a scholarly introduction and footnotes in Dutch language.

The State University of New York has launched an ambitious programme of translation al-Ṭabarī's history into English. An editorial board comprising distinguished scholars headed by Said Amir Arjomand is piloting this project. Jacob Lassner of Wayne State University, Detroit, is the Supervising Editor and Ehsan Yar-Shater of Columbia University is the General editor of the whole series. Close collaboration between such eminent American Arabists as C.E. Bosworth, Franz Rosenthal and Jacob Lasner on the one hand and Muslim scholars like Ihsan Abbas, Said Amir Arjomand and Ehsan Yar-Shater on the other hand is a sure indication of the earnestness of this team to guard against the usual reservations and pre-conceived interpretations commonly associated with the Orientalists of the classical vintage. The pooling together of such high calibre talent justifies our hope that full justice shall be done to al-Ṭabarī's translation in the light of the recent researches in this field.

Al-Ṭabarī's extensive work has been split into 38 manageable small volumes representing thematic units and assigned to different translators. The Editorial board laid down a uniform system of transliteration. But curiously enough, the use of Greek suffix id to transform the Arabic and Persian nouns and names into adjectival form, now growing out of fashion and almost archaic has been retained.

The volumes under review comprise volume xxviii sub-titled The Abbasid Revolution translated by John Alden Williams of University of Texas at Austin; and Volume xxxv bearing the sub-title The Crisis of the Abbasid Caliphate, translated by George Saliba of Columbia University. Since both the translators have selected two different segments of the same work and are governed by the policies of the same Editorial board it would not be too unusual to review them together. Of course it would be irrelevant to draw both the translations into a comparative study. Translation is a genre which does not provide for an uninhibited display of creative talent or research expertise, hence no attempt is being made to make comparisons.
John Alden Williams has translated and annotated the section dealing with the ‘Abbāsī struggle for power and overthrow of the Umayyads. He has used the Arabic text published in Leiden and in order to facilitate ready reference to the Arabic original has given its page numbers on the margin of his work. He has added critical notes which enhance the usefulness of the translation. Persons and places have been introduced to the reader in lucid and concise notes. The place names have been explained with reference to the old geographers like Yāqūt. There are two towns bearing the name Wāṣīt. Mr. Williams has clarified this point and removed the common misunderstanding. Following the Arab tradition he has displayed great care in the matter of Ṣīrah or genealogical trees of the persons mentioned by al-Ṭabarī and has removed some of the likely misconceptions. He has not placed implicit reliance on the Leiden edition and has supplied some of the missing words and phrases in the Leiden edition from other sources, mainly the Cairo edition of al-Ṭabarī’s Tarāḥ. He has not hesitated to give the variants of phrases and words by collating different editions. Undoubtedly his annotations are valuable addition, and enlarge our knowledge of the socio-political history of the times. The annotations are cover different facets of social sciences such as geography, topography, biography, poetry and literature. The English translation is eminently readable and combines the stylistic flavour of the original with high quality English prose.

Though the title page shows that the period between year 743 and 750 A.D. has been covered in the book but in fact he has taken the narative up to the year 753 A.D. Perhaps, it is no oversight. The story of ‘Abbāsī struggle for power is completed with Marwān’s defeat at the battle of Zab. But the story does not end there. The ‘Abbāsī military triumph was transformed into ‘Abbāsī state by Abu’l ‘Abbās al-Saffāh. In terms of historical analysis this is quite a justifiable departure. However from the strictly dynastic point of view the reign of al-Saffāh, the founder of the dynasty, should have been taken up along with his successors. Whatever the reasons it is baffling why did the learned translator not indicate the year 753 A.D. on the title page and why he preferred to confine it to 750 A.D.? but this observation, a matter of arrangement, in no way detracts from the merit of this translation.

Mr. George Saliba has chosen a very momentous period of ‘Abbāsī history for translation. The Crisis of the Abbasid Caliphate, as he has designated, the years 862-869 highlight the disintegration of ‘Abbāsī central authority and the emergence of the Turkish Amīrs. The defacto authority passed into the hands of the Turkish commanders who wielded the sword and the successors of Hārūn-al-Rashīd were reduced to the position of nominal but de jure rulers. The crisis and confrontation between de jure and de facto authority unfolded against the sickening backdrop of political decay of the ‘Abbāsī system. This crisis, later typified a political pattern in Muslim history, was replicated in all its intrigues and palace conspiracies in the annals of the Mughals in the Indian subcontinent. The question of political legitimacy and the exercise of de facto authority is an old and unresolved malaise of Muslim societies. In this context, the study of this period is very instructive.

G. Saliba has followed the same methodology as adopted by his fellow translator John Alden Williams in order to conme to the rigorous discipline required by the Board of Editors. Unhesitantly, I would say that George Saliba’s translation and annotation embody the same high qualities of erudite scholarship, and all the observations made with regard to the translation of John Alden Williams are equally and fully applicable to Saliba’s work. In sum these translations symbolize the larger academic achievement encompassing 38 volumes which taken together would stand out as a landmark in the recent concern with the Muslim history in the U.S.A.

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