Al-Tabari’s history begins with the genesis of the universe relating the history of the prophets and their contemporary kings and kingdoms till the golden events of the early three hundred years of the Islamic period. Although al-Ya’qūbī’s history is also a universal history and Ibn Kathîr follows the pattern of al-Tabari in al-Bidâyah wa’l-Nihâyah, Târîkh al-Rusul wa’l-Mulûk by Abû Ja’far Ibn Jarîr al-Tabari, is still held by the scholars as the most valuable source of the history of the first three centuries of Islam. Its translation into the English language was needed since long but it was an uphill task for a single scholar. Now a collegium of orientalists has embarked upon this great project and decided to bring out a complete English translation of the History of al-Tabari in 38 volumes. A number of volumes of this series are already available in the market and it is hoped that the work will be accomplished soon.

No doubt the history of al-Tabari is a great work and its translation a great contribution. But the sole criterion of a translation is its correctness and faithfulness to the original. Regrettably the translation under review fails on both counts. For instance in volume 2, only between pages 48–52 there are five glaring mistakes.

At p. 49 the following words of the original

(English translation)

[E.J. Brill, vol. 1, 253]
are translated as:

One group of ancient sages says that there was a king over him, whose name was Zarhā b. Ṭahmīsīn.

The translation of كان ملكاً برآسه as 'there was a king over him' is obviously incorrect. The correct translation should be: He was an independent king.

Again at p. 49 the words of the original:

إن آزر كان رجلا من أهل كوث (ص 253)

are translated as:

(... There was an inhabitant of Kūthā named Āzar... These words if translated back into Arabic will be:

كان هناك رجل من أهل كوث يقال له آزر

The translator has changed the order of the sentence without any reason. "That Āzar was an inhabitant of Kūthā" is sufficient and correct. There was no need to beat about the bushes.

At p. 50 the words of the original:

وانت صاحب ايا بعرة (ص 253)

are translated as:

and the Nimrod was his master who wanted to burn him.

al-Ṭabarī did not mean to say this. He did not believe that Nimrod was the master of Abraham the Patriarch. He simply means to say that it is that (selfsame) Nimrod (described in the preceding lines) who wanted to burn Abraham.

The fourth mistake is the translation of ورسولا إلى علي عبد (ص 251)

as:

As a messenger to His worshippers (p. 50).

Perhaps the translator took this word as 'اباد (‘ubbād) which means ‘worshippers’. عباد [‘Ibad] means ‘slaves, servants’ and in dignified Arabic usage it is used for ‘responsible creature’, ‘mankind’, ‘human beings’. If Nimrod and his people were already the worshippers of God there was no need to send Abraham as a Messenger unto them.

The fifth mistake is the translation of

وقوله إنه سيوم أي طييم بالسهم كأنه يبحر في مه (ص 251)
as:

His saying, 'I am sick', meant he was attacked by illness. They fled from him when they heard it (p. 52).

The correct translation is: 'he was attacked by the illness wherefrom they used to flee'. Whenever someone falls ill people do not run away from him. It in fact means that this was some contagious disease known to them wherefrom they used to flee.

The volume 18 comprises the events from the year 41 A.H., to the year 60 A.H., properly entitled as The Caliphate of Mu'awiya. Mu'awiya is the founder of the Umayyad rule and it is very interesting to study how he wrestled power from his equally strong rivals, the Alavids on the one hand and the Kharijites on the other, and, becoming the sole ruler of the entire Islamic world, established, by use of wisdom instead of force, the firm foundation of the Umayyad rule. He was indeed the master of political settlements.

As for the translation, it is generally correct and faithful but requires improvement. Let us, for example, examine the following passage of the original along with its translation:

ان اباکیره ایبلار ظلبہ السما وآخرج برر بر بی زیاد نیتیر بیم غربب

السما لکتیل مما ایتا واجت اینل اینک واعینهم طامة نیتطرن اباکیره

(Tarikh al-Tabari, E.J. Brill, Secunda Series, vol. 1. p. 11)

Abü Bakrah approached al-Bagrah on the seventh day, when the sun had risen. Meanwhile Busr brought out the sons of Ziyad, awaiting sunset in order to kill them if necessary. The people assembled for that, while their leaders were anticipating Abū Bakrah. (p. 15)

The phrase 'اذنا وجبت' in the above passage is translated by the learned translator as 'if necessary'. Firstly, this phrase need not be translated, and if it were absolutely necessary to translate, it would have been rendered as: when the sun has set or sunk (at the end of the seventh day as it was stipulated). Because the primary meaning of 'اذنا' is 'when', 'if' is its secondary meaning. There was no need to deviate from the primary meaning of the word. Secondly, 'وجبت' is a verb and necessarily requires a subject which, according to Arabic grammar, must be feminine. If necessary means: 'if it is necessary!' 'It' would refer to killing (القتل), which cannot be the subject of 'وجبت', because it is masculine, 'وجبت' would be correct, but 'وجبت القتل' is absolutely wrong. What is the subject of 'وجبت'? Necessarily it is the sun (السم), which is feminine. Had the translator consulted an Arabic dictionary he would have found there the phrase 'وجبت الشمس' which means 'leaders'. For example see Lane, Arabic English Lexicon (Lahore Book 1-part 8 p. 2921).

Again he translated the word 'إعينهم' in 'فاجت الناس لذلك واعيينهم طامة' as 'their leaders', whereas the first meaning of 'عين' (sing. غبن) is, 'eyes'. The sentence simply means that the people assembled for that with their anxious eyes looking forward to the arrival of Abū Bakrah. The word 'عين' means 'eye' and by the transference of meaning means: fount, essence, spy and leader; but nowhere did I find, throughout the Arabic literature, the word 'عين' used in the meaning of leaders.
It appears that the translation would improve further if attention is paid to the subtleties of Arabic language, and that is certainly a necessary requirement for translation.

There has also occurred a serious printing mistake at p. 105, where the word Mu‘āwiya b. Abl Sufyān is printed as Mu‘āwiya b. Abl Sufyān.

The volume 32 of the translation of al-Tabari’s monumental work on history titled Tārikh al-Rusul wa’l-Muluk comprises the events from the year 198 A.H. to the year 218 A.H. In other words, it is the history of the major part of the caliphate of al-Māmūn. The Reunification of the Abbasid Caliphate is quite an appropriate title.

I have found the translation correct, faithful to the original and fluent, rendered in a beautiful language. Difficult words of the text are explained, place-names are identified and short biographical notices are given in the footnotes. This has enhanced the value of the book. The reviewer personally congratulates the translator and his colleagues on bringing out a reliable translation of the most relied upon history of Islam, although one desires that the same could be said about the other two volumes under review.

Ghulam Murtaza Azad