

VARIEDADES

A Man Who Never Was: Ṭālūt and The Jew Again

Un hombre que nunca existió: Otra vez Ṭālūt y el judío

David J. Wasserstein
Vanderbilt University

The story of Ṭālūt and the Jew (known from our sources for the Revolt of the Suburb, in the early third/ninth century), has been studied recently by Luis Molina (*Al-Qanṭara*, 32, 2011), who argues that the Jew is an invention. Here it is argued that the entire story, including also the character of Ṭālūt himself, is an invention, created probably in the fourth/tenth century. Our apparent evidence is extremely weak: the sources for Ṭālūt's existence are shown to be thin and unreliable; severe chronological problems make it almost impossible for him to have existed; the story has all the character of invention. Its aim, far from being to say something about Jews in al-Andalus or about a participant – Ṭālūt or any other – in the revolt – seems to be to glorify the ruler, al-Ḥakam I.

Key words: Ṭālūt; Jews; al-Andalus; Arabic historiography; Ibn al-Qūṭīyya.

Recientemente (en *Al-Qanṭara*, 32, 2011), Luis Molina ha estudiado el relato de Ṭālūt y el judío (ya conocido de las fuentes sobre la Revuelta del Arrabal), concluyendo allí que el judío es una pura invención. Aquí se propone que todo el relato, incluyendo también el carácter de Ṭālūt mismo, es inventado, creado probablemente en el curso del siglo IV/X. Lo que nos parece ser pruebas fiables carecen en efecto de veracidad. Las fuentes para Ṭālūt se muestran débiles y poco seguras; problemas de orden cronológico demuestran la dificultad en asumir aún su existencia; todo el relato tiene un carácter fabuloso. Su objetivo no es el de dar información sobre judíos en al-Andalus, ni sobre los participantes – Ṭālūt u otros – en la Revuelta, sino de glorificar al emir de entonces, al-Ḥakam I.

Palabras clave: Ṭālūt; judíos; al-Andalus; historiografía árabe; Ibn al-Qūṭīyya.

Introduction

In an elegant study in a recent issue of *Al-Qanṭara*, Luis Molina subjected the story of Ṭālūt b. ‘Abd al-Jabbār to close analysis. His conclusions, which concern not only the story itself but also the larger

work in which we first find the story, that of Ibn al-Qūṭīyya, are far-reaching, significant and completely persuasive.¹ These conclusions touch primarily the nature of the text of Ibn al-Qūṭīyya's work. Given the importance of that work in the historiographical tradition of al-Andalus, and the difficulty it presents to our understanding of its original form and history, Molina's study is of great value. But, perhaps because of his concentration on that aspect of his subject, Molina has, it seems to me, not gone quite as far in his analysis of the story of Ṭālūt b. 'Abd al-Jabbār as may be possible. My purpose in this article is to attempt to take his analysis a step or two further. The story of Ṭālūt b. 'Abd al-Jabbār and the Jew – or of Ṭālūt b. 'Abd al-Jabbār and the emir – or of Ṭālūt b. 'Abd al-Jabbār and the wicked vizier – is of considerable interest in itself. Although it wears a historical appearance, it seems in fact to be almost completely fictional, and to have no value as a historical source for the subjects that it appears to treat. That does not mean, however, that it is valueless in other ways.

The Story

The story was made known to European readers by the first great student of Ibero-Islamic history, Reinhart Dozy, nearly two centuries ago in his history of Islamic Spain.² During the famous Revolt of the Suburb, in, possibly, 202/818, the Andalusī emir al-Ḥakam I (reigned 180/796-206/822) is said to have executed some three hundred of the leading citizens of Cordoba who were (possibly, possibly not) involved in the revolt.³ A number of others, including most famously Yaḥyā b. Yaḥyā al-Laythī, the jurist (*faqīh*), fled. Another jurist, Ṭālūt b. 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Ma'āfirī, is said, instead of fleeing from the capital, to have taken refuge in the house of an un-named Jew, where he stayed for a

¹ Molina, "Ṭālūt y el judío. Análisis de la evolución historiográfica de un relato." There is now a useful English translation with notes, James, *Early Islamic Spain, The History of Ibn al-Qūṭīyya*.

² See Dozy, *Histoire des musulmans d'Espagne jusqu'à la conquête de l'Andalousie par les Almoravides (711-1110)*, I, pp. 295-307; Dozy, *Spanish Islam*, pp. 256-258.

³ For the revolt itself, and the question of its date, see especially Lévi-Provençal, *Histoire de l'Espagne musulmane*, I, *La conquête et l'émirat hispano-umayyade*, pp. 165-70; for the date, n.1 pp. 165-66. The revolt and its date remain obscure.

year. Then, tiring of what was in effect a form of self-imposed captivity, and seeing that the ruler's fury had passed, he made his way to the home of an old friend, now vizier to the ruler, and through his intercession made himself known to al-Ḥakam. The vizier, a false friend, tried to give him up to the ruler, pretending that he had caught him. The truth, naturally, came out; the runaway was pardoned, though he stuck to his principled and, not surprisingly in the context vocally expressed, opposition to the ruler and his policies; the vizier lost his post and the ruler's favour.

Problems

Dozy reported the story in some detail, basically translating the version given by the earliest source, Ibn al-Qūṭīyya, and it was related also by Ashtor in his history of the Jews in Islamic Spain. The latter scholar used it as evidence for “the loyal attitude of the Jewish populace towards the Omayyad government and the kindness with which the court treated the Jews – this mutuality in their relationship constitutes a prominent motif in the history of the Jews of Spain at that time”.⁴

Almost at the start of his study, Molina points to the folkloric character of the story and argues that the Jew is an invention.⁵ (If anything, therefore, the story cannot tell us about Jews, or about Jewish loyalty to the Umayyads in the early ninth century. At best, it can tell us about Muslim attitudes to Jews at the time when the story came into existence – but that, as will be seen, seems to be rather later than the early ninth century). Molina does not go on from this to saying outright that the story as a whole is an invention too. However, that seems to be a logical consequence of his argument. If an important character in a story – here the one who gives shelter to a refugee – is shown to be an invention,

⁴ Ashtor, *The Jews of Moslem Spain*, I, pp. 59-60 (the original is Ashtor, *Qorot ha-Yehudim bi-Sfarad ha-Muslemit*, p. 42). It is but fair to add that while Ashtor seems to credit the story – in line with his policy generally to accept what our sources tell us – he does qualify his credulity by using the word “tales” (in the English translation; the Hebrew original has *sippur*, which conveys less of an implication of doubt than the English ‘tale’) to refer to this and some other stories of similar type. What is not so clear is why Ashtor should see the act of hiding a rebel as loyalty to the ruler.

⁵ The type of the anonymous invented Jew who fills an ambiguous or dishonourable rôle in various historical episodes is not unknown. It deserves further study.

then we have no good reason to imagine that shelter was actually given. Molina does tell us that the story is a knitting together of a number of literary motifs. Like many such stories, however, it contains at least one character whom we know to have existed – the emir al-Ḥakam. The vizier, who is called Abū Bassām, seems to be otherwise unknown.⁶ And as to Ṭālūt, apparently the central character in the story, there is I think just as little certainty.

Ṭālūt appears to be the central character in the story. The story seems to be about him. But is it? Could we see the story as not about him at all, and the man himself therefore as a secondary character in a story about someone or something else? The story occurs in a longer account of the emir al-Ḥakam. And it is found there in a sub-chapter entitled “Mafākhīr al-Ḥakam”, “glorious qualities/acts of al-Ḥakam”. As this suggests, the central character is really the emir: the story is in fact about his clemency towards a rebel, clemency coming after anger (In a way this story could belong to a sub-section of the *Faraj ba’d al-shidda* genre).

This does not need to mean that Ṭālūt is not an important figure. Indeed, scholars from Dozy onwards have seen him as, along with Yaḥyā b. Yaḥyā al-Laythī, one of the instigators of the Revolt of the Suburb, and his need to have recourse to this form of flight as resulting from his actions during the Revolt. But was he so important? And how important were his actions during the Revolt? What, indeed, were those actions?

Ṭālūt b. ‘Abd al-Jabbār

Ṭālūt b. ‘Abd al-Jabbār is a decidedly obscure figure. As Molina points out, a good number of sources tell us about him. These range over some seven centuries, from Ibn al-Qūṭīyya, the earliest, to al-Maqqarī, in the early seventeenth century. As with Ibn al-Qūṭīyya, the works of al-Maqqarī, Ibn Ḥayyān and al-Nuwayrī are histories; the others, by ‘Iyād, ‘Abd al-Wāḥid al-Marrākushī, Ibn Sa‘īd, Ibn ‘Abd al-

⁶ Molina, “Ṭālūt”, p. 541, n. 13, notes that Ibn Ḥayyān, in one of two versions of the story that he gives, identifies the vizier as someone well-known, al-Iskandarānī. But al-Iskandarānī seems to be little known, beyond his name, outside anecdotes.

Malik, Ibn al-Abbār and al-Dhahabī, are biographical collections. All of these sources, however, go back, directly or indirectly, to that earliest source, Ibn al-Qūṭīyya (d. 367/977).

According to Ibn al-Qūṭīyya, Ṭālūt was not only active in the revolt. He was also a *faqīh* and a student of Mālik. But we worry: although we find Ṭālūt in several biographical dictionaries, it is striking, to put it mildly, that the entries on him in all the dictionaries where he occurs derive from a single historiographical source. There is nothing independent, from another source. Ṭālūt has no biographical existence of his own. Further, he has no other teachers, and no pupils of his own. He is not mentioned among the pupils of other teachers; he is not listed among the teachers of any other scholars. He has no children: no other scholars, or any other people for that matter, are mentioned in biographical or other sources as being descended from him. None of his ancestors has an independent identity in our sources. And Molina, following Ibn al-Abbār, even casts doubt on his alleged relationship with Mālik. Chronologically, it is not impossible – Mālik died in 795, while Ṭālūt was a “shaykh”, at the time of the story, some twenty-odd years later. But at least one of our sources says that the relationship is doubtful; and it is strange that ‘Iyād, whose biographical dictionary is devoted wholly to students of Mālik, knows him only through this story in a historiographical writer and has no other information, more internal to his school.

More problems

We actually seem to know more about Ṭālūt. Ibn al-Abbār gives us more information than we get in Ibn al-Qūṭīyya, including a genealogy: Ṭālūt b. ‘Abd al-Jabbār b. Muḥammad b. Ayyūb b. Sulaymān b. Šāliḥ b. al-Samḥ.⁷ We are struck here by the length of the ancestry recorded,

⁷ Ibn al-Abbār also tells us that he “lived in Cordoba near the cemetery called after him, where the mosque that is well-known on his account lies”. This testimony might be seen as confirming the man’s existence. However, Ibn al-Abbār is very late; neither the cemetery nor the mosque is mentioned in earlier sources; Lévi-Provençal does not record either in his listings of such places (see especially *L’Espagne musulmane au Xème siècle, Institutions et vie sociale*, pp. 208-209, n. 2). Could this be an error by Ibn al-Abbār? Might he be thinking of a cemetery and a mosque named after another Ṭālūt?

for a Muslim in al-Andalus at this early stage. It seems to carry us far back into a time before the conquest of 711, very close to the birth of Islam.⁸ Yet none of his ancestors is recorded as taking part in the conquest and early settlement or even as simply entering al-Andalus. And the presence of al-Samḥ (a rare name – it occurs only once in Marín’s ‘Nómina’, at no. 607) at the head of the ancestry must raise questions. Al-Samḥ was also the name of an early governor of al-Andalus.⁹ And another early Samḥ in al-Andalus was the ancestor of the B. Dhī al-Nūn, the fifth/eleventh-century rulers of Toledo, al-Samḥ b. Ward-Ḥayqa al-Hawwārī.¹⁰ But neither of these can be the ancestor of our Ṭālūt.

Ibn al-Abbār also gives us two more pieces of genealogical information: first, that Ṭālūt was related to Ayyūb b. Sulaymān b. Ṣāliḥ b. Gharīb (842-914; = Marín, ‘Nómina’, n. 298), through Gharīb, who was Ṭālūt’s brother; and second, that Ṭālūt was the maternal uncle of Muḥammad b. ‘Īsā al-A‘shā (‘the dim-sighted’) (d. 836-37).¹¹

The second of these pieces of information is of interest, but raises no difficulty, at least for the present. As to the first, it raises a serious difficulty. Though there is some doubt about the exact date when it took place, the Revolt of the Suburb is generally agreed to have taken place in around 818. Ayyūb, who died in 914, was born in 842 as the great grandson of Ṭālūt’s brother, Gharīb. We can assume Ṭālūt’s brother to have been much of an age with him. When was Ṭālūt born? We do not know this. He must have been an adult in 818, so certainly 20;¹² but he could easily have been much older, say seventy, which would agree much better with Ibn al-Qūṭīyya’s characterization of him as a “shaykh”. In the first case, he would have been born in 798; in the second, in 748. When was his brother born? Again, we do not know, but clearly he could have been born at any date between around 750 and 800. The problem is that we have to fit the births of this man’s son and

⁸ Depending on the age at fatherhood of the individuals mentioned here, al-Samḥ could have been born as late as ca. 700 or as early as 600 (For ages at fatherhood, see Molina, n. 13).

⁹ See, e.g., Sumner, “The chronology of the early governors of al-Andalus to the accession of ‘Abd al-Rahmān I,” pp. 422-469. But the governor was a Khawlānī.

¹⁰ See Dhanūn Ṭāha, *The Muslim Conquest and Settlement of North Africa and Spain*, p. 175 (with refs. p. 181, n. 108).

¹¹ See Fierro, “El alfaquí beréber Yahyā b. Yahyā al-Layṭī (m. 234/848), ‘el inteligente de al-Andalus’,” pp. 269-344, at 299-300, with n. 104, p. 299, and 331.

¹² Ibn al-Qūṭīyya calls him a “shaykh” at the time of the Revolt, so twenty is of course an impossibility here.

grandson into the relatively short period between his own coming to adulthood and a date early enough to allow for the birth to his grandson of Ayyūb himself. Thus, if Gharīb was born in, say, 780, then he could have had a son, Ṣāliḥ, in around 800, and Ṣāliḥ could have sired Sulaymān in his turn in around 820, in time for Sulaymān to become the father of Ayyūb in 842. But it is a little tight. Each man in these three generations will have become a father at around the age of 20. If we pull the birth of Gharīb back in time, to say 750, that gives us more time: Gharīb born in 750 could have been the father of Ṣāliḥ in around 781, Ṣāliḥ of Sulaymān in around 812, and Sulaymān of Ayyūb in 842. In this way, the average time between birth and fatherhood in this particular line of descent rises from around 20 to around 31 (all the years in these calculations are solar).

Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, the limited information that we have or can derive from our sources on the subject of age at (not necessarily first) fatherhood, as studied by Luis Molina, suggests relatively high ages at fatherhood in al-Andalus.¹³ This would suggest that 31 is not too low a potential average age for these men; but 20 appears absurdly low. However, attractive though it is, 31 depends wholly on our assumption of a birth date for Gharīb around 750. We have no special reason to suppose that he was in fact born so early. Any date later than that requires a lower average age for all these links in the genealogical chain at the time of their fatherhood. (It is worth stressing the word average here: the average age applies necessarily to every member of the genealogical chain in such a statement.) But a date as early as 750 calls for Gharīb and Ṭālūt both to have been very old by the time of the Revolt. It is not easy.

A further problem makes it even less easy. The genealogy of Ayyūb is actually more complicated than the above might suggest. So far we have used the genealogy given by Ibn al-Abbār. If we use, not the record given by Ibn al-Abbār but the collective record established by Manuela Marín in her wonderful ‘Nomina de sabios de al-Andalus (93-350/711-961)’, then we discover the possibility that Ayyūb had a richer and fuller set of ancestors going back to Gharīb, and beyond him for

¹³ Molina, “El estudio de familias de ulemas como fuente para la historia social de al-Andalus,” p. 166. It should be said that Molina’s dataset is rather small – 53 father-son (or grandfather-grandson) pairs from 34 families.

several more generations.¹⁴ Marín gives us: Ayyūb b. Sulaymān b. Hāshim b. Šāliḥ b. Hāshim b. Gharīb/‘Arīb b. ‘Abd al-Jabbār b. Muḥammad b. Ayyūb b. Sulaymān b. Šāliḥ b. al-Samḥ. We note at once that some of this extra generational *richesse* derives simply from problems in spelling: thus we have Gharīb alternating with ‘Arīb and Hāshim with Hishām. But some derives from more people: we have now Hāshim/Hishām as Ayyūb’s grandfather – and also as his great-grandfather’s father. That means that Gharīb – the brother of Ṭālūt – and Ayyūb are now separated, not by a mere two generations, but possibly as many as four. This is exceedingly problematic. Why so?

More ancestors means more links in the chain, more generations to fit in to a specified, and not very long, span of time. That means shorter generations. In the present case, that means that in order for Ayyūb to have been born in 842, and even if we assume Gharīb to have been born, not in 750 but in, say, 740, each generation of his descendants must have been born when each progenitor in turn was no more than, on average, roughly eighteen. And that means either that we have to move Gharīb’s birth still further, impossibly, back in time or that we have to reject the longer genealogies. We cannot reasonably move Gharīb’s birth date further back in time, without making him a competitor with those Caucasian centenarians whom we read about occasionally in the newspapers. That means, though, that we must reject the genealogies. Rejecting the genealogies – both the long and the short versions – means rejecting Talut’s existence, as his existence is confirmed for us essentially by his relationship with Gharīb as recorded in our sources and their genealogies; and it seems impossible to place Gharīb chronologically at the time of the Revolt if he had a great grandchild who was born in 842. If we have this problem with Gharīb, then we have the same problem with his alleged brother Ṭālūt.

An invented story

If the Jew is an invention, then it follows that the shelter that he allegedly gave to Ṭālūt is an invention too. And it follows from that that

¹⁴ Marín, “Nómina de sabios de al-Andalus (93-350/711-961),” pp. 23-182, at pp. 41 and 113, no. 298.

we have a problem with Ṭālūt himself: either he did not exist or, somehow managing to overcome the problems of age outlined above, he enjoyed a different fate during and after the Revolt. If he existed, how old was he at the time of the Revolt? And how did he manage to survive the massacre – for that is what it was – imposed on the participants in that revolt by the emir? It is worth recalling at this point that our primary source for Ṭālūt and for his story (for they are one and the same – we know of Ṭālūt only in the context of his surviving the revolt and ending up being pardoned by the emir) is in a small collection of “Mafākhir al-Ḥakam”, ‘glorious qualities/acts of al-Ḥakam’. Their aim is to glorify the emir and to paint him as a ruler characterized, in this case, by clemency and mercy even to those who would have done him harm. The story of the Jew giving shelter to a rebel and being pardoned by the ruler when he pardons the rebel himself could not be fitted onto the character of Yaḥyā – he and his fate were too well-known. So, in the absence of a real recipient of the ruler’s clemency, it was no great problem to invent someone and to provide him with a family background suitable for the time and place and political context. Such a character would naturally have a good ancestry – ideally including someone, or a hint of someone, with an onomastic echo of those involved in the conquest and early Islamic history of al-Andalus: hence al-Samḥ at the head of the genealogy. He would also ideally be learned, like his partner in crime, Yaḥyā b. Yaḥyā al-Laythī, and possess the attribute, necessary for the story, of a learned opponent of rulership – hence his outspokenness in the presence of the emir: that was what the story needed. But nothing else was needed – and nothing else was invented.

If that is the case, then the chronological difficulty of the relationship of an alleged brother to that brother’s descendant becomes simply a little imperfection in the construction of a character in a tale in a society and a literary context where such detail is certain not to be noticed and in any case irrelevant to the aims of the story. If Ṭālūt is an invention, then his relationship to someone real is an invention too. There is then no need to place Gharīb’s birth at any particular date that makes for chronological difficulties about the births of Gharīb’s descendants. We are then also much better placed to understand how and why it is that we find no trace anywhere in our voluminous biographical records of any teachers or students, ancestors or descendants (just one indirect descendant), of this learned opponent of the ruler. Ṭālūt was a man who never was.

Date of Invention

When was this story invented? Obviously it was invented at some point between ca. 818, its narrative time, and the time of Ibn al-Qūṭīyya, in the mid-tenth century. Can we narrow this down? Several indices point to a late date for the invention of this story. The reference to descendants of the wicked vizier Abū Bassām (whether or not he actually existed) suggests a period quite long after the narrative time of the story. If Ṭālūt is an invention, then he was invented for some purpose that involves not only praising al-Ḥakam, but also affecting the genealogy into which he was inserted. Cui bono: if we cannot identify the reason for that, we can at least identify the persons of interest here. They are Ayyūb and/or Muḥammad b. ‘Īsā al-A‘shā. Muḥammad, identified as a nephew of Ṭālūt, died in 836-37, while Ayyūb lived from 842 to 914.¹⁵ Our biographies of both of these scholars do not seem to offer any information that might be helpful here. But, given the very early date of Muḥammad and the relatively late date of Ayyūb, it may be right to look for a hint in the latter. Ayyūb is recorded also as avoiding (the) government (*mujāniban lil-dawla*), though he did exercise the *ḥisba* authority.¹⁶ Should we see this as an attempt to endow him with a family tradition of respectable Islamic resistance of this type? He was still alive in the tenth century, and Ibn al-Qūṭīyya could, just, have known him. A chronological overlap of this sort is not, of course, the same thing as a necessary or a meaningful historical link, but we should consider the possibility that the living memory of Ayyūb and a useful family link with Gharīb (and possibly also the establishment or confirmation of one with Muḥammad) lie in some way behind the story that we have.

Conclusion

Proving that someone in the past never existed is not easy. It is, perhaps, paradoxically, easier to invent someone. ‘The Man Who Never

¹⁵ For Muḥammad see Marín, ‘Nómina’, pp. 87, 146, no. 1291.

¹⁶ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A‘lām al-Nubalā’*, XV, p. 331, no. 166. We also hear of him enjoying jokes, not always at the best moments; for a good example see al-Juṣanī, *Ajbār al-Fuqahā’ wa-l-Muḥaddiṭīn*, p. 114.

Was', a great British film about the Second World War, is a record of a great British invention and its contribution to winning the war.¹⁷ It demonstrates how (though not how easily) a man could be invented. Proving him an invention would have been difficult under the easiest of circumstances. In the present case, it may not be possible to prove that Ṭālūt never existed, but we can at least point to the problems that pile up as soon as we begin to examine our records for him at all closely. Those problems are as many improbabilities, and the improbabilities must remind us of the Cheshire Cat, progressively fading until only the smile remained. Ṭālūt progressively fades, leaving only an invented story about a not very clement ruler.

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¹⁷ Made in 1956, it was based on the book of that title by Ewen Montagu, which in its turn was based on true events of the Second World War.

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