Introduction

Al-Tanūkhī

*Al-Faraj baḍ al-shiddah* (*Deliverance Follows Adversity*) was written in Iraq in the second half of the tenth century AD by al-Muḥassin ibn ‘Alī al-Tanūkhī, born in 327/939, the son of ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Tanūkhī, a judge and leading literary figure in the city of Basra. Basra, long a center of learning, agricultural wealth, and Indian Ocean trade, had become politically important during al-Tanūkhī’s childhood. It was one of the theaters where the unraveling of the Abbasid caliphs’ authority played out against the rise of the Shi’i Buyid warlord dynasty. Al-Tanūkhī’s father had a modest part in these events. From his father, al-Tanūkhī inherited land and family connections in neighbouring Ahwaz in what is now Iran, as well as strong family ties in Baghdad thanks to his father’s marriage into a famous legal family there. His writings are full of references to his father’s local friends and colleagues, and to his Baghdad relatives, some of whom had held posts in the old caliphal bureaucracy. He does not mention his mother or any brothers or sisters. His father gave him an excellent education and was clearly a great influence on him.

The key figures in al-Tanūkhī’s life were all exceptionally gifted, and they left their mark on his writings. Al-Tanūkhī was fifteen when his father died in 342/953. At eighteen, in 346/957, he already held the position of inspector of the mint in Sūq al-Ahwāz (§19.1). Not long afterward, he was taken under the wing of his father’s friend and patron, the vizier al-Muhallabī. Thanks to him, al-Tanūkhī studied in Baghdad with Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, one of the greatest literary historians who ever lived, and was given a number of administrative posts and judgeships in southern Iraq. (We do not know how he trained to become a judge.) Al-Muhallabī died in 352/963, when al-Tanūkhī was in his early twenties, and he was less lucky under his successors, losing his positions and having his estates confiscated, as he mentions several times (§§0.5, 8.7, 18.3, 42.1, 59.2–4, 80.1–8). Reinstated in 366/977, al-Tanūkhī joined the court of the greatest of the Buyid emirs, ‘Aḍud al-Dawlah, where we find him in 367/977,
Introduction

aged thirty-eight, taking part in a Hadith session convened by the ruler in private audience while he was on a military campaign (§31.4). Two years later, when ‘Aḍud al-Dawlah married his daughter to the caliph al-Ṭāʾiʿ in Baghdad in 369/979, al-Tanūkhī gave the wedding address. This was the zenith of his career. But the caliph refused to consummate the marriage, and al-Tanūkhī, who had been ordered to recall him to his duty, wriggled out of the task and was disgraced. After ‘Aḍud al-Dawlah’s death, he seems to have spent the last ten years of his life quietly in Baghdad, dying there in 384/994. Deli\-verance and his other work, Nishwār al-muḥāḍarah (The Table Talk of a Mesopotamian Judge), were probably written during this period, or at any rate put into their final form then.5

The theme of Deliverance and al-Tanūkhī as author

The message of Deliverance, spelled out in al-Tanūkhī’s introduction, is that our lives are full of tribulations and reversals, but if we trust in God’s kindness and love Him steadfastly, He will make everything come right. Al-Tanūkhī wrote Deliverance for people like himself: members of the Iraqi upper bourgeoisie and service aristocracy who for centuries had been adept at surviving regime change. A lot of the stories in Deliverance are indiscreet first-person gossip about ups and downs in the careers of just such grandees, keyhole history that reflects their worldly and self-interested attitudes to patronage, politics, money, and success. In Stories of Piety and Prayer, which consists of the first three chapters of Deliverance, stories of this sort (§§14.4, 17.1–4, 65.1–6, 73.1–18, 78.1–7, 82.1–5, 100.1–4, 103.1–4, 111.1–4) rub shoulders with legendary examples of sanctity or moral heroism, and are interwoven with prayers of great spirituality—and others of guaranteed talismanic efficacy—together with reflections on key passages from the Qur’ān. This mix of ingredients, some of them common property, some composed by al-Tanūkhī, and the whole organized by him into a vision of his own, reflects al-Tanūkhī’s idea of authorship, which is in some ways what we would call academic and in others autobiographical. Equally, it reflects his background, his theoretical adherence to the rationalist Mu’tazilī religious thought that ran in his family, and his immersion in Tradition (also a family speciality), which acts as hinge between his intellectual allegiances and his longing for comfort and hope. What Stories of Piety and Prayer offers is not the idealized belief and practice of prescriptive writings. Rather, it gives a rare insight into the complexities of lived religion. When al-Tanūkhī’s sophistication is confounded by another man’s blind faith,
he notes the fact with irony (§80.8). His own acts of blind faith are recorded with no irony at all.

Compilation as autobiography

Al-Tanūkhī wrote *Deliverance* not only for a readership of people like himself; he also wrote it for himself and about himself, as a spiritual exercise and a setting in which to relate and give meaning to his own experiences. Such items form a minority, but much if not most of the material in *Deliverance* came to him through people with whom he was on intimate terms, especially his father. Al-Tanūkhī cites his father fourteen times in Chapters One to Three (§§20.1, 20.2, 20.3, 20.4, 20.5, 21.1, 23, 25.1, 25.2, 40 (twice), 59.6, 65.1, 111.4; he is also cited indirectly at §106.1). The connections between al-Tanūkhī and many of his informants would probably have been evident to his intended readers. Nevertheless, because he is a literary scholar and a man of law, he names them formally—publicly, as it were—before identifying any personal relationship, and often stops short of explaining the connection. Most notably in the case of his mother’s family, the Buhūlūids, he never clarifies the family link, although he repeatedly cites the members of the family. This family link, which was first noticed by Margoliouth but ignored by subsequent scholars, explains al-Tanūkhī’s access to inside information about the caliphal court and government offices in Baghdad, and helps us understand certain aspects of his piety. Buhūlid family sources not identified as such in *Stories of Piety and Prayer* are Abū l-Ḥasan Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf the Blue-Eyed, son of Yaʿqūb ibn Ishāq ibn al-Buhūl al-Tanūkhī, al-Tanūkhī’s cousin on his mother’s side, much cited by him in later parts of *Deliverance* and in *Table Talk*, who died when al-Tanūkhī was about twelve (§76.1); the famous judge Abū Jaʿfar Aḥmad ibn Ishāq ibn al-Buhūl al-Tanūkhī, al-Tanūkhī’s great-grandfather (§106.1); his son Abū Ṭālib Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Isḥāq ibn al-Buhūl, al-Tanūkhī’s grandfather, who took a hand in his education and was closely involved with his father (§§83.1, 84.1); his son, al-Tanūkhī’s uncle, Judge Jaʿfar ibn Abī Ṭālib Muḥammad ibn Abī Jaʿfar Aḥmad (§§31.12, 59.5); and his great-great-grandfather, the famous traditionist Ishāq ibn al-Buhūl al-Tanūkhī (§92.1). A different branch of maternal relatives is mentioned at §74.2.

For modern readers, al-Tanūkhī’s reticence has obscured the more general significance of the personal element in his writings. Teachers, friends, and associates, some not overtly identified as such in *Stories of Piety and Prayer*, are his father’s friend Abū l-_FARAJ ʿAbd al-Wāḥid ibn Naṣr ibn Muḥammad al-Makhlūmī
of Naṣībīn, the state scribe and poet known as the Parrot (§§16.1, 42.1–7); Abū ʿAqīl al-Khawlānī, who taught al-Ṭanūkhī’s father in his youth in Antioch (§25.1); his father’s deputy Ibn Khallād of Rāmhurmuz (§§26.3, 63.1); Ayyūb, son of the vizier al-Jarjarāʾī (al-ʿAbbās ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Ayyūb of Jarjarāyā) (§34.1); the literary historian Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī (§§55.3, 64.1, 111.5); the critic al-Ḥātimī (Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ibn al-Muẓaffār) (§§13.5, 94.1, 95.1, 105.12, 108.2, 111.5); and the vizier al-Muhallabī (§61).

In more ways than scholars have yet examined, al-Ṭanūkhī writes himself into Deliverance, expressing his identity and allegiances by the channels through which he cites his materials. This is particularly true of one of the previous books on the subject of deliverance that he acknowledges as an inspiration and source. He could have quoted it directly, but instead he cites it via a personal informant. Thus in Chapters One to Three, he transmits forty-eight items from Ibn Abī l-Dunyā without naming his Book of Deliverance, instead quoting a personal informant, ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥasan ibn ‘Alī ibn Muṭrif of Rāmhurmuz (of whom, unfortunately, we know little) as citing Ibn al-Jarrāḥ citing Ibn Abī l-Dunyā (§§11.3, 13.2–4, 13.7–8, 13.11, 20.1, 21.2, 22, 26.2, 28, 30, 31.1, 31.6–11, 31.13, 35.1–4, 37, 38.1, 59.5, 68.6, 69.1, 85.1–2, 85.3, 85.5, 85.6, 86.1–3, 87.1, 88.1, 89, 91, 92.1, 93.1, 96.1, 96.3, 97.1, 98.1, 105.5, 105.9, 110.4. There is also one mention of Ibn Abī l-Dunyā with no onward chain of transmitters to al-Ṭanūkhī, §36). ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥasan’s informant, Ibn al-Jarrāḥ (Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Jarrāḥ), was also a personal connection of the Tanūkhī family. He lived in Baghdad and knew al-Ṭanūkhī’s son, to whom he described himself in these terms: “My books are worth ten thousand dirhams; so is my mistress and so are my arms and my horses.” Fully accoutered, he engaged in tourneys with other cavaliers in the maydān or “Great Square” in Baghdad.7 Other noteworthy personal informants are the aforementioned al-Ḥātimī, state scribe and poet as well as literary critic (§§13.5, 94.1, 105.12, 108.2, and 111.5); Abū ʿUmar Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wāḥid, known as “Tha’lab’s Pupil,” with whom al-Ṭanūkhī had studied (§§13.5, 108.2); and the state scribe Abū l-Ṭaḍl Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Marzubān, whom al-Ṭanūkhī had known at the court of al-Muhallabī (§18.1). The chains of transmitters (isnāds) that identify al-Ṭanūkhī’s informants and their sources are discussed in more detail below in the Note on the Text.
A century of reading al-Tanūkhī

With its promise that all life’s woes and perils can lead to happy outcomes, not to mention thrilling stories of romance and adventure involving brigands, caliphs, amateur detectives, and even animals, Deliverance appealed for many centuries to a wide readership, and when it first appeared in print in the twentieth century, the editions were based on manuscripts in which scribes no longer recognized the names of most of the protagonists, and the anecdotes, now blurred and generic, had become much like Thousand and One Nights tales—in the course of time, a number of them were in fact absorbed into the Thousand and One Nights. These versions of Deliverance gave the impression of a naive feast of optimism difficult to reconcile with the rationalist, disillusioned Table Talk, which mirrors tenth-century Iraqi life in all its aspects, from tax collecting to teenage neurosis, with a strong emphasis on absurdities, and is quoted by countless medieval authors. How did al-Tanūkhī manage to write two such different bestsellers? And how could Deliverance be a devotional work, as he claims, when so often it is about morally flawed characters?

Our image of al-Tanūkhī, and especially of Deliverance, has developed over the past century. Alfred Wiener published the first study of the deliverance-story genre and al-Tanūkhī’s precursors and sources in 1913, and in 1955 Rouchdi Fakkar produced the first monograph on Deliverance itself. Meanwhile, in the 1920s and 1930s, D. S. Margoliouth brought out an edition and English translation of what survives of Table Talk, which had hitherto been unknown to modern readers. In 1920, Margoliouth had translated Miskawayh’s history of the times in which al-Tanūkhī and his father lived, and in 1928, Harold Bowen’s The Life and Times of ‘Alī ibn ‘Īsā drew a lively picture of the high politics that some of al-Tanūkhī’s maternal relatives had witnessed or been involved in. In 1937, Adam Mez’s The Renaissance of Islam, co-translated by Margoliouth, provided a wealth of information on the social, literary, and material culture of the period. Together, these books gave (and still give) readers of Deliverance and Table Talk an unusual amount of detailed historical background in accessible form. In the 1950s, Dominique Sourdel, working from two unpublished manuscripts in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, showed that Deliverance is itself a major source for Abbasid political history. Finally, in 1978, the Iraqi scholar ‘Abbūd al-Shālji published a richly annotated critical edition of Deliverance from previously unused manuscripts and drew attention to the mass of information it contains on people, places, institutions, food, music, medicine, local customs,
Introduction

and language. Above all, his edition makes visible its high literary quality and shows the importance of its form and compositional techniques.

Al-Tanūkhī’s compositional techniques

The way al-Tanūkhī cites books reflects his literary training. He sometimes dates and localizes the encounters that provided his literary material, such as the teaching sessions with Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī which he attended as a boy (§§55.3, 64.1, 111.5). The same applies when he cites Tradition. These are compositional techniques insofar as they frame and connect items. Al-Tanūkhī’s attributions of variant tellings of a story and his identification of poetic variants—which he records scrupulously even when they are minor—are likewise techniques of connection and closure, as well as marks of literary scholarship. Among his contemporaries, al-Tanūkhī is unusually rigorous and consistent in his use of such devices and, as he says in his introduction, he makes it a point of honor to acknowledge material quoted from his predecessors in the faraj genre. In Chapters One to Three, besides his single major source, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, whom (as we have already seen) he quotes through a personal informant, he quotes six items from al-Madāʾini (§§58.2–3, 104.1, 105.1, 108.1, and 110.1; see also §108.2) and ten from Judge Abū l-Ḥusayn (§§19.3, 58.4, 60.1, 90.1, 106.2, 107.3, 108.1, 109.1, 110.1, 111.1), whose father is also cited (§109.1).

As a literary practitioner, al-Tanūkhī uses rhymed prose (sajʿ) for his chapter headings, perhaps for its mnemonic qualities. He does not use it elsewhere as a stylistic resource, but his introduction illustrates his command of expository and argumentative structures, and of complex analytical phrasing. These are found again in his densely written passages of Qurʾanic exegesis. A compositional feature of Stories of Piety and Prayer (but not of Deliverance as a whole) is al-Tanūkhī’s use of recurrent vocabulary to establish an intertextual connection between the three chapters. This is discussed further in the Note on the Text.

The form and structure of Deliverance

The form of Deliverance is all-important—it is its division into themed chapters, and the way the chapters explore subthemes. Besides the overarching theme of deliverance (faraj), thirteen out of the fourteen chapters deal with a specific type of adversity and deliverance, as announced by al-Tanūkhī in his table of contents (§0.14). Sometimes the chapter contents are also specific to a genre:
Introduction

for example, Qur’anic stories in Chapter One, or medical stories in Chapter Ten. Within each chapter’s theme, particular motifs and narrative schemas are highlighted and explored. For example, “toying with grapes, tyrant taunts captive but is struck down before he can eat them,” in Chapter Three (§§105.2–3), is an elaboration of “tyrant taunts captive with the Angel of Death and is killed in his place” (§§105.6–8). This technique, applied to a range of sources—the Qur’an, histories, life writing, letter writing, and Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī’s Book of Songs are just a few—makes Deliverance a pattern book of Arabic storytelling and a virtual motif index of one of the richest periods of Arabic writing. It has been used as such by folklorists, but it ought to be used much more widely as a guide to plots, themes, and materials that occur across Arabic genres.

I have used numbered paragraphs to emphasize the book’s motif index aspect, breaking down each piece into units that correspond to a theme, situation, or narrative function. Its analytical structure makes Deliverance a revolution in Arabic narratology and literary theory, but the theory is embedded in al-Tanūkhī’s method, not expressed separately. He was conscious of his own originality, but too close to it to do it full justice. As he says in his introduction, his book is, in every way, bigger and better organized than anything written on the subject before. But though he expresses exasperation at having spent so long writing and rewriting it, he makes nothing of the fact that Deliverance is more than a themed anthology: It is in fact an epitome of a culture, in this sense a rival to his teacher Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī’s Book of Songs, from which it differs in that it does not content itself with setting down the complexities of human experience but tries to reconcile them.

Al-Tanūkhī’s notion of faraj

The comprehensiveness of Deliverance is due to al-Tanūkhī’s conception of affliction and divine rescue. His predecessors had thought of deliverance in conventionally devotional terms. Al-Tanūkhī’s notion of deliverance embraced most kinds of human situation and many ways of writing about them. There are few limits to what qualifies as a rescue story in Deliverance. Under the storytelling rules that emerge as one reads, deliverance must be earned, sometimes heroically, or deserved, sometimes by the truly deserving; but often it takes only a very little faith or hope for someone to be plucked from misery, and luck in all its forms, including that of unexpected human kindness, plays a major part. In this moral economy, one person’s merit may rub off on another. The ultimate
Introduction

example of this is asking someone whose prayers are known to be answered to pray in your stead, as at §74.1.

This is where the structure of the book and the plot structures it foregrounds work together to express al-Tanūkhī’s ideas about God and society. Many of al-Tanūkhī’s family members—his father and relatives on his mother’s side—prided themselves on their inquiring, scientific minds. Theologically they were Muʿtazilīs, believing in a just and rational deity whose workings and providence can be rationally apprehended. With al-Tanūkhī, inquiry blossomed into inquisitiveness and a delight in the variety and surprises of God’s world, and he thought (or hoped) that God’s providence was not only just, but merciful to the point of indulgence, and likely to operate in the unlikeliest situations. In an ideal society as al-Tanūkhī’s tales depict it, God’s mercy to the afflicted is channeled through the established customs of generosity and mutual obligation that permeate social hierarchy and social exchange. Money, which is so prominent in many of his stories, even in *Stories of Piety and Prayer*, is a tangible sign of God’s goodness. It should be freely given and gratefully received, for networks of giving and receiving money and favors are the fabric of a good society. Coincidence belongs to this order of things. The wise recognize it as an opportunity to be generous (§§71.4–5); the wicked misread it as a sanction for their evil acts (§§105.2, 105.10). Invoking God, which everyone does, including the wicked, as an everyday habit of speech, never fails in these stories to bring about some operation of divine justice: God is truly present.

It could be argued that the early chapters of *Deliverance*—those translated in this volume—are the most genuinely religious since they focus on the Qurʾan and prayer, and that as the book proceeded, worldliness got the better of al-Tanūkhī, or that he observed a certain decorum by placing an increasing distance between sacred and worldly material. The contrast between the earlier and later materials has been seen as hierarchical (downward from the divine to the human) or stylistic (upward from the archaic and schematic material that forms the bulk of the first three chapters to the contemporary realism of the following ones). If hierarchy there is, it is complicated by what seems to be al-Tanūkhī’s conviction that the present and everyone in it is as immediate to God as is the sacred past of prophets and saints. The evidence of God’s providential mercy is manifest in all lives, and all afflictions are important and morally productive if God responds to them with mercy. The happy accidents that prove this increase in frequency as the book proceeds.
Introduction

Does this confirm the traditional view of *Deliverance* as optimistic? In his introduction, al-Tanūkhī insists we must believe that, with faith, all will be well. But the examples he gives from his own experience are mixed, and the letter of consolation sent to him by Abū l-Faraj “the Parrot,” which argues that good and bad fortune alternate cyclically (§§42.1–7), offers no lasting comfort if the argument is followed to its conclusion. Scripture, parables, and fiction affirm the optimistic, deliverance-follows-adversity paradigm. Life writing, on the other hand, conforms more to the paradigm of circularity or alternation. Thus X, whose friendship saves his colleague Y from ruin (§§73.9–18), is a threat to Z, who is saved when X drops dead of a stroke (§§103.1–4); and in real life, as al-Tanūkhī knew from his own checkered career, benevolence has limits and deliverance is a respite. The information on protagonists in the Glossary shows that many of the people held up as examples of deliverance in *Stories of Piety and Prayer* met a sticky end in real life.

The contradiction between the two paradigms is unresolved, and their juxtaposition points to *Deliverance*’s dark side. Al-Tanūkhī lived in dangerous times, and the experience of fear and loss is as much part of the book as the theme of hope. The emotional immediacy of autobiographical narrators’ reactions to fear, grief, and pain is heightened by the deliberate eschewing of distinctions of proportion and time that places an anecdote about the worries of a civil servant (§§17.1–4) in the same chapter as the ordeals of prophets, or al-Tanūkhī’s unabashedly self-pitying reminiscences of his own misfortunes (§§59.2–4) next to the Prophet’s and the Alids’ teachings on fortitude.

*Stories of Piety and Prayer*

The first three chapters of *Deliverance*, which we have called *Stories of Piety and Prayer* for convenience, combine literary genres, which makes it both self-consistent and a foretaste of *Deliverance* as a whole. Its dominant genres, not found in other parts of *Deliverance*, are Tradition; prayers; paraphrases of and glosses on the Qur’an; Qur’anic exegesis and theological discussions that, typically, expand condensed expressions, explain imagery, and clarify grammatical rules, citing authorities where appropriate, and adducing key passages of the Qur’an to prove the necessity of faith and the efficacy of prayer. Some glosses are specifically Mu’tazilī in their concern to demonstrate that God is just and that believers, including prophets, earn their own destinies by making rational moral choices (§§4.6, 8.5, 9.3). The prayers quoted range from short, talismanic
supplications to complex meditations. A large component of Stories of Piety and Prayer is Tradition, both Prophetic and Alid (an index of the former has been provided). Aphorisms, popular proverbs, admonitions, and edifying epistles are seemingly accorded the same moral authority as Tradition. Uniquely for al-Tanūkhī, there is also a story involving a demon (§§16.1–7).

The scattered examples of the genres typical of the rest of Deliverance include occasional poetry; anecdotes about sicknesses and cures; supposedly real-life autobiographical narratives (the default mode of Abbasid storytelling and historiography) involving Abbasid bureaucracy and politics; and stories that afford glimpses of Abbasid urban and rural domestic and economic life. These last are of special interest, for medieval Islamic social and economic history remains the least developed area of modern scholarship. Hints at the connections between Abbasid political structures, officeholding, landholding, agricultural and manufacturing production, distribution, trade, and taxation can be gleaned from stories such as §§73.1–18, 77.1–3, 78.6–7, 80.1–8, 82.1–5, 103.1–2, 106.1–2.