

Al-Ṭabarī and the Description of the Children of Shem:

*A Historical Witness from the Medieval
Islamic World*

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History is preserved through many voices. While the Hebrew Scriptures remain the foundation of our understanding of the ancient world, valuable historical information has also been preserved by so-called Jewish, Greek, Roman, Syriac, Persian, and Muslim historians. Collectively, these sources provide insight into how earlier civilizations understood the peoples, lands, and events that shaped human history.

Among the most respected historians of the Islamic world was Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (A.D. 839–923). His monumental historical work, *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk* (*History of the Messengers and Kings*), remains one of the most significant historical chronicles produced during the medieval period and continues to be studied by historians throughout the world.

In his historical chronicle, al-Ṭabarī preserves a tradition attributed to ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās concerning the descendants of Noah, which states:

*"The children of **Sām (Shem)** settled in the center of the earth, between Satidma and the sea, and between Yemen and Syria. Allah made the prophets from among them, revealed the Books to them, made them beautiful, and gave them **a black complexion, luminous and free from blemish**. Their complexion is further described as **a black complexion with a light-brownish undertone (bayāḍh)** and **a dark blackish-brown (udmah)**.*

*"The children of **Hām (Ham)** settled in the south. Allah gave them **a black complexion**, and some among them possessed **a black complexion, luminous and free from blemish**. Their color is further described as **true black (sawād)**, while some are said to have **a black complexion with a light-brownish undertone (bayāḍh qalīl)**.*

*"The children of **Yāfith (Japheth)** settled in Safoun toward the north. They are described as **light-skinned and very fair-skinned**, further characterized as **very fair-skinned (al-shuqrah)** and **olive-skinned (al-ḥumrah)**."*

According to the passage, the descendants of Shem settled in the central regions of the earth, between Yemen and Syria. Al-Ṭabarī further records that the prophets arose from among them, that the revealed books were given to them, and that they possessed a black complexion described as beautiful, luminous, and free from blemish. He continues by describing the descendants of Ham as dwelling in the southern regions and the descendants of Japheth as inhabiting the northern territories, whom he characterizes as light-skinned." It should be noted that **the** Arabic term الشُّقْرَة (*al-shuqrah*), derived from the root ش-ق-ر (*sh-q-r*), denotes *blondness, golden coloration, or a very fair complexion*. In

classical Arabic usage, it commonly describes individuals with light or blond hair and a fair, often ruddy, complexion. By contrast, **الْحُمْرَة** (*al-ḥumrah*), derived from the root **ح-م-ر** (**ḥ-m-r**), literally means *redness* and, when applied to human complexion, refers to a *ruddy, rosy, or reddish* skin tone. Although some modern translators render *al-ḥumrah* as "olive-skinned" when describing northern so-called "Mediterranean" populations, the more literal lexical sense is "ruddy" or "reddish-complexioned." Accordingly, the expressions *al-shuqrah* and *al-ḥumrah* are best understood within their classical Arabic semantic range rather than through the lens of modern racial or ethnic terminology.

This passage is noteworthy because it preserves an early medieval understanding of the descendants of Noah within the Islamic historical tradition. Regardless of one's broader historical conclusions, it demonstrates that discussions concerning the appearance and geographical distribution of the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth were not limited to biblical literature alone but were also addressed by later historians and chroniclers.

For students of history, passages such as this provide valuable evidence of how earlier civilizations understood the ancient world. They become part of the broader historical record that scholars compare alongside other literary, archaeological, linguistic, and documentary sources.

Final Exhortation

History is not merely a collection of dates and names; it is a conversation carried across generations. Every surviving document offers another opportunity to better understand the people who came before us. By reading broadly, examining sources carefully, and pursuing knowledge with integrity, we become better equipped to distinguish assumption from evidence and tradition from testimony.

The pursuit of wisdom begins with the willingness to read, to study, and to let the historical record speak.

