From Noah to Nuḥ: The Making of a Prophet

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1 Introduction

Noah features as a prophet in Qur’ān and post-Qur’anic literature. Whereas Western Christianity is accustomed to reserve that title for prophets after the promulgation of the Mosaic law, Islam does not hesitate to reckon Nuḥ (henceforth: Noah) to the prophetic ranks. Noah is called both rasūl (messenger) and nābi, a double honor vouchsafed to Ishmael, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad only.1 In Noah’s case, some remarkable divergences from the Biblical account can be pointed out. In the Bible, there is the flood, but there is no explicit mention of warning the people of the inherent danger. On the contrary, the catastrophe of the Flood seems to unfold itself without any indication that the repentance of the people might have prevented it. God sees the evil, announces the impending disaster to Noah and Noah starts to build the ark (Gen. 6:5–22). In contrast, the Qur’ān points time and again to Noah’s plea to the people to listen to his message. Noah even accuses the people of stupidity for their refusal to realize the consequences of their disobedience. There is no doubt that Muhammad’s own bitter experience with a ‘stubborn’ audience finds its echoes in Noah’s plight. The people accuse Noah of being nothing more than a mere mortal and not an angel, as they would have expected (Q. 23:24). Noah emphasizes that he is not an angel and does not pretend to be one (Q. 6:50). Exactly the same happens with Muhammad in confrontation with his audience (Q. 6:8–9; 11:12; 25:7).2 Noah warns his people time and again, but they put their fingers in their ears (Surat Nuḥ Q. 71:1–21). The difference with the Biblical Noah is striking indeed.

With the possible exception of Abraham, there is hardly a Biblical figure with whom Muhammad identified so strongly as with Noah. We might assume that Noah’s persistent plea to the people to repent has been developed out of this resemblance with Muhammad’s plea to his own ‘stubborn’ audience. This, however, is not the case, as I will demonstrate. Pre-Islamic sources are familiar as well with a warning Noah. From the point of view of method, a comparison of the Biblical account with Qur’anic and post-Qur’anic literature in order to trace influences has only limited value. In the more than thousand years between the Bible and the Qur’ān, a wealth of commentaries, retold

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1 See: R. Tottoli, Biblical Prophets in the Qur’ān and Muslim Literature, Richmond 2002, 73.
2 Tottoli, Biblical Prophets, 52, n. 12.
Biblical histories, embellishments and paraphrasing translations have seen the light. This milieu, consisting of Judaism and Eastern Christianity as well as of a plethora of Jewish-Christian currents and 'sects', forms the lens through which the Qurʾān and the post-Qur'anic stories, the Qiṣṣa al-Anbiyāʾ, perceive the patriarchs and prophets. This is not to say that these stories were always communicated in written form by adherents of those religions: oral stories and testimonies of converts to Islam may have been responsible for it as well. Neither should we think of a slavish adoption of these stories by Islam. It can be proven that these stories were subjected to a highly creative process of Islamization. Scholarly theories about a Jewish original, copied by Islam, but sometimes only half understood, betray a biased perspective, which does not reckon with this process of Islamization. In spite of that, the quest for Jewish and Christian sources of the Islam remains indispensable in order to understand this process of Islamization.

As to Noah, the Qurʾān gives the impression that the audience of Muhammad had already been familiar with some basic elements of the stories about this figure. Hence the Qurʾān is not a revelation of stories that were totally unknown, but admonishes an audience by referring to moral examples that are more or less familiar to them. There is no doubt that all post-Qur’anic literature is heavily indebted to the Qurʾān itself. It can be proven, however, that pre-Qur’anic literature did have its share in shaping post-Qur’anic literature. By going backward from the Tales of the Prophets to pre-Islamic literature, this hermeneutical process of adopting and transforming existing stories may be clarified. By doing so, we will be able to offer a more refined explanation of the making of the Islamic Noah. For our purpose we will focus upon the episode of the preparation of the ark.

The method of tracing the sources to their origin has been inspired by Geza Vermes’ generic research on midrash. Starting with a retold Biblical story, elaborately retold in late midrashic literature, he traces the way back to the Bible itself. Still, some of his presuppositions should be challenged, e.g. it is not certain that the later sources are the most elaborate. This becomes all the more essential when one wishes to cross the boundaries between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Older studies are often limited to listing the sources, implicitly assuming a one-sided borrowing from Judaism by Islam. My research

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4 See the wealth of sources in: M. Grünbaum, Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sagenkunde, Leiden 1893; more limited D. Sidersky, Les origines des légendes musulmanes dans le Coran et dans Les Vies des Prophètes. Paris 1933.