Book Review

Carlos A. Segovia


The Qurān repeatedly makes mention of the prophet Noah. Carlos Segovia’s book aims at exploring a number of intertextual connections between the quranic depiction of Noah and several Jewish and Christian writings. Ch. 1 provides an introduction to the theme while at the same time ‘re-mapping early Islamic studies’; ch. 2 traces the apocalyptic image of Noah in the literature of pre-Islamic Judaism and Christianity; ch. 3 gives an ample overview of all quranic passages that mention Noah and explores both the basic structure of the quranic Noah narratives and their distinctive traits in contrast to his biblical counterpart; ch. 4 is a ‘multifaceted analysis’ of those narratives based upon their adaptation of classical prophetic and apocalyptic literary forms and themes; ch. 5 studies the intertwining between the quranic Noah narratives and the quranic prophet, i.e., the way in which the latter is modelled after the former; ch. 6 focuses on the precedents and sources of the quranic Noah narratives while, finally, ch. 7 describes the use that the earliest ‘biography’ of Mohammad by Ibn Ishāq and his editor Ibn Hišām made of the quranic Noah narratives. Especially here and in his Afterword, Segovia contends that the quranic Noah narratives helped these writers to enhance Mohammad’s credentials and also to ‘subliminally’ represent him as a new Messiah.

Segovia’s basic presumption is that, originally, the Islamic community was a Christian movement. This opinion will not be shared by all specialists in the field. It is, moreover, not conclusively proven in this book but—by and then—only indicated or tacitly supposed. In other cases, too, the reader is faced with several hypotheses and a number of rather curious ‘reasonings’. As an example I quote a long sentence from the book’s pivotal ch. 6: ‘I would go even further to argue that Noah, as a symbol of the righteous seed from which a new
humanity would rise (as also perhaps as a semi-supernatural being modelled after certain Babylonian epic legends), might well have been the original key-figure in Jewish apocalypticism—a figure whose quasi-messianic role (a reminder perhaps of the messianic role attributed in the early Second Temple Period to the mourned king of Judah, whose temporal rule came to an abrupt end after the Babylonian exile together with the priestly rule of his most loyal supporters, arguably the Levites) was later partially transferred inter alios to Levi (in the Aramaic Levy Document from Qumran and later the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs), Enoch (in most of 1Enoch, where nonetheless Noah remains a crucial figure), Melchizedek (in 2Enoch), Jesus (in the New Testament), and Seth (in some Gnostic traits1) (87-88). Unfortunately this is not the only sentence the reader will stumble across that is both enigmatic and, for several reasons, highly problematic.

All this is a pity, because the author tackles a scholarly important and socially most relevant theme. Besides, he appears to be equipped with a wide range of linguistic skills, although in his use of German words as termini technici he some ten times mistakenly writes ‘Straflegend’ for ‘Straflegende’. More importantly, his redactional construction and deconstruction of the diverse Noah narratives in the Qur’an will by no means convince conservative Islam scholars while, in the end, others will be left with a more or less sceptic feeling because of the arbitrary nature of the procedure. On his page at academia.edu, Segovia announces a remarkable number of further studies on (parts of) the theme of this book and related subjects. He even foresees his publication track on this matter up to and including the year 2020. One may wish that he and/or his publishers will find some strict editor(s) to enhance the clearness and the cogency of his expositions.

In one of his main arguments, i.e., the biblical background of the qur’anic Noah narratives, Segovia repeatedly refers to Mt 24:37-39, Lk 17:26 and 2 Pt 3:5-7,10-12 (85; 106; 121), but curiously fails to mention 1 Pt 3:20.2 I deem this omission all the more significant, because the author (repeatedly as well) claims that the motive of the mocking of Noah’s contemporaries is typical to the Qur’an and, near the end of his analysis of the sources, states: ‘In all probability Ephraem, Narsai, and the anonymous author of the Struggle of Adam and Eve with Satan provided the model for the qur’anic Noah narratives that include such a motif, namely Noah being mocked by the people . . . ’ (90). It might be that those Christian authors had some influence on the said motif, but in my view it is already sufficiently hinted at in the mention of the people’s

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1 Read: tracts?
2 He also (but understandably) omits Heb 11:7.