

## Noah and the Flood in Judaism and Islam



### Noah and Rabbinic Literature

Two religions arose out of the Hebrew Scriptures in the second half of the first century of the Common Era. Christianity developed into an array of forms as it moved from Israel into the Greco-Roman world. Similarly, Judaism, in various guises, permeated the Greco-Roman world, especially as a result of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Of the Judaisms that then arose, Rabbinic Judaism was to become normative and remain predominant.

To the Hebrew Scriptures that it now labelled as The Old Testament, Christianity added its own collection of sacred literature – The New Testament. To the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures (also known as the Mikra or Tanak), Judaism added the Rabbinic writings from the Mishnah (c.200 CE) through to the Talmud of Babylonia (c.600 CE) and beyond. The term ‘Rabbinic literature’ thus describes the writings ‘produced by Jewish teachers . . . that became, by the High Middle Ages, the literary patrimony of virtually all of the Jewries of Christian Europe and the Islamic Middle East’.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee, ‘Introduction’, in Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 5.

As the Old Testament was read within Christianity through the prism of the New Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures were read within Judaism through the rabbinic records of the oral teachings of the rabbis. As the New Testament took precedence over the Old Testament, so also the rabbinic interpretations came to take precedence over the Hebrew Scriptures as the rabbis engaged with paganism, Christianity, Gnosticism, and Islam. The rabbis adapted their reading of the Hebrew Scriptures to the cultures that surrounded them as they told and retold the Scriptures, from Bordeaux to Babylon, in the synagogues that had replaced the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

That said, for Rabbinic Judaism, the simple meaning of the Biblical text remained the bedrock of their interpretation. Contradictions were harmonised. Incoherencies were ironed out. Theological problems were resolved. And where the rabbis found gaps in the Biblical narrative, they filled them in. Their interpretations were for the public to hear. They were orators who sought not only to reveal the eternal message of Scripture but to be creative and inventive. They wished not only to educate and to edify but also to entertain their audience. For this discussion, I have chosen the most significant texts that deal with Noah in the rabbinic tradition, covering an eight hundred-year period: from *Genesis Rabbah* in the fifth century, through *The Babylonian Talmud* (sixth century), to *Tanbuma Genesis* (seventh–ninth century), the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* (seventh–eighth century),

<sup>2</sup> See Burton L. Visotsky, 'Genesis in Rabbinic Interpretation,' in Craig A. Evans et al. (eds.), *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 579–606.

*Pirque Rabbi Eliezer* (ninth century), *Abot de Rabbi Nathan* (ninth century), *Sefer haYashar* (at the earliest, tenth century), and the commentary of Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (also known as Rashi) in the eleventh century.

According to the rabbis, the times were good for the generation of Noah. A single harvest provided food for many years. It was perpetual springtime. The contemporaries of Noah were able to travel from one end of the world to the other in a short time. And they were never troubled by wild animals. Noah had helped. Until ‘Noah came,’ we are told by Rashi, ‘people had no agricultural instruments and he prepared such for them. The earth had brought forth thorns and thistles when they sowed wheat in consequence of the curse imposed upon Adam Harishon: in the days of Noah, however, this ceased.’<sup>3</sup> According to one account, women were pregnant for only three days; according to another, only one. And the children who were born spoke and walked at the time of their birth.<sup>4</sup> The times were so good that the people could ignore God:

Our Rabbis taught, the generation of the flood waxed haughty only because of the good which the Holy One,

<sup>3</sup> M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann (trans.), ‘Rashi on Genesis,’ 5:29, in *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Prayers for Sabbath and Rashi’s Commentary* (London: Shapiro and Vallentine & Co., 1929–1934).

Available at [www.sefaria.org/Rashi\\_on\\_Genesis?tab=contents](http://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis?tab=contents) (subsequently referred to as *Rashi*). See also See H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (trans.), *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis in Two Volumes, I* (London: The Soncino Press, 1939), 24.7, p. 202 (subsequently referred to as *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*).

<sup>4</sup> See *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 36.1, p. 287. J. Israelstam (trans.), *Midrash Rabbah... Leviticus* (London: Soncino Press, 1939), 5.1, p. 60.

blessed be He, lavished upon them. Behold, what is written of them? Their houses are safe from fear, 'neither is the rod of God upon them, it is also written, Their bull gendereth, and faileth not,' their cow calveth, and casteth not her calf; further, They send forth their little ones like a flock, and their children dance; further, They take the timbrel and the harp, and rejoice at the sound of the organ; and it is also written, They spend their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasures; and it is also written, and in a moment go down to the grave. And 'tis that which caused them to say to God, Depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways. What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? and what profit should we have, if we pray unto him? They said thus: Do we need Him for aught but the drop of rain?<sup>5</sup>

It was, thus, also the worst of times. It was a time of robbery and violence, idolatry, incest, and murder. Sexual libertinism ran riot. 'The generations of Cain,' said Rabbi Meir, 'went about stark naked, men and women, just like the beasts, and they defiled themselves with all kinds of immorality, a man with his mother or his daughter, or the wife of his brother, or the wife of his neighbour, in public and in the streets, with evil inclination which is in the thought of their heart.'<sup>6</sup> When threatened

<sup>5</sup> I. Epstein (ed.), *Sanhedrin Translated into English*... , 108a.

Available at <https://halakhah.com/sanhedrin/index.html> (subsequently referred to as *Sanhedrin*).

<sup>6</sup> Gerald Friedlander (trans.), *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer: (The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer the Great)* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd, 1916), 22, p. 159 (subsequently referred to as *Rabbi Eliezer*). See also, Michael Maher (trans.), *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), 6.2, pp. 37–38. Lewis, *A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood*, pp. 127–128.

that God would wipe out their children for their wickedness, they refused to have children: ‘Behold, we will restrain ourselves from multiplying and increasing, so as not to produce the off-spring of the children of men. What did they do? When they came to their wives they spilled the issue of their seed upon the earth so as not to produce offspring of the children of men.’<sup>7</sup> Women walked around naked, ‘with their eyes painted like harlots’ and the angels saw them and took wives from amongst them’.<sup>8</sup> According to Rabbi Levi, they bore sons ‘like a great reptile’, six children at each birth.<sup>9</sup> God regretted that he had made humanity.

It was not only humans that had become corrupted. According to Genesis 6.12, ‘all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth’. The rabbis agreed. Sex happened across species: ‘Rabbi Johanan said, This teaches that they caused beasts and animals, animals and beasts, to copulate; and all of these were brought in connection with man, and man with them all.’<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Azariah remarked, ‘All acted corruptly in the generation of the Flood : the dog [copulated]with the wolf, the fowl with the peacock.’<sup>11</sup> When the flood came, no animals that had sex outside of their species were allowed on the ark, ‘Because the ark could harbour only pure beings.’<sup>12</sup> Even the earth acted lewdly: ‘wheat was sown and it produced pseudo-wheat

<sup>7</sup> *Rabbi Eliezer*, 22, p. 162.      <sup>8</sup> *Rabbi Eliezer*, 22, p. 160.

<sup>9</sup> *Rabbi Eliezer*, 22, p. 161.      <sup>10</sup> *Sanhedrin*, 108a.

<sup>11</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 28.8., p. 228.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel A. Berman (trans.), *Midrash Tanbuma-Yelammedenu: An English Translation of Genesis and Exodus*. . . (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1996), 12, p. 64 (subsequently referred to as *Midrash Tanbuma-Yelammedenu*).

[rye grass], for the pseudo-wheat we now find came from the age of the deluge'.<sup>13</sup>

About the birth of Noah, the rabbis gave us a fresh reading. The Genesis text said that Noah was born 'blameless' or 'flawless (Genesis 6.9). This was taken to mean that he was among those notables – like Adam, Seth, Shem, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, David, Job, Jeremiah, and Zerubbabel (literally, an A-Z of Biblical worthies) – who were born circumcised, and in the image of God. In short, Noah was born in the perfect human shape. Thus, as *'Aboth D'Rabbi Nathan* informs us, 'Adam, the first man, also came into the world circumcised, for it is stated, "And God created man in His own image." Seth also was born circumcised, for it is stated "And begot a son in his own likeness, after his image." Noah also was born circumcised for it is stated "In his generations a man righteous and whole-hearted [flawless]."'<sup>14</sup>

There were also many new interpretations of his name. Noah was given his name in Genesis 5.29 where his father prophesied that 'this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands'. Unfortunately, as the rabbis noticed, the root of the Hebrew word 'relief' or 'comfort' and that of the name 'Noah' meaning 'rest' failed to match up. Rabbi Johanan and Rabbi Resh Lakish summed up the problem: 'The name does not correspond to its interpretation nor does the interpretation correspond to the name. Scripture should have written either, "*The*

<sup>13</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 28.8., p. 229.

<sup>14</sup> A. Cohen (trans.), *'Aboth D'Rabbi Nathan*, in *The Minor Tractates of the Talmud... Volume One* (London: The Soncino Press, 1965), 2.5, p. 24. See also *Midrash Tanbuma-Yelammedenu*, 5, p. 51.

*same* yaniḥenu [shall give us rest] “or . . . Naḥman . . . *the same* ye-naḥmenu [shall comfort us].”<sup>15</sup>

More positively, Noah was said to have brought ease. After Adam but before Noah, declared Rabbi Johanan, neither the cow nor the furrow obeyed the ploughman; but after Noah, they submitted.<sup>16</sup> Resh Lakish noted that, from the time of Adam, the dead were inundated by water in their graves twice daily; but when Noah was born, they had rest.<sup>17</sup> Rabbi Eliezer suggested that Noah was so called because of the scent of the sacrifice that Noah made after the ark rested: ‘*And the Lord smelled the sweet (niḥoah) savour,*’<sup>18</sup> while another rabbi connected his name as ‘rest’ to the resting of the ark.<sup>19</sup>

But the issue that most exercised the minds of the rabbis was that of Noah’s righteousness. Genesis 6.9 said that Noah was a righteous man. Did this mean that he was absolutely righteous or only relatively so? Rashi summed up the opposing views:

Some of our Rabbis explain it [righteous] to his credit: he was righteous even in his generation; it follows that had he lived in a generation of righteous people he would have been even more righteous owing to the force of good example. Others, however, explain it to his discredit: in comparison with his own generation he was accounted righteous, but had he lived in the generation of Abraham he would have been accounted as of no importance.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 25.2., p. 206.

<sup>16</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 25.2., p. 206.

<sup>17</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 25.2., p. 206.

<sup>18</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 25.2., pp. 206–207.

<sup>19</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 25.2., p. 207.

<sup>20</sup> *Rashi*, 6.9. See also *Midrash Tanbuma-Yelammedenu*, 5, p. 51.

On Noah’s righteousness, see Aryeh Amihay, ‘Noah in Rabbinic Literature,’ in Michael E. Stone, Aryeh Amihay, and Vered Hillel

Rabbi Jeremiah b. Elazar supported the case for absolute righteousness: ‘If a man is to be praised to his face only a small part of the praise due him should be given him, but his entire share may be bestowed upon him in his absence, as it is written [Genesis vii. 1]: “For thee I have seen righteous before me in this generation,” and [ibid., vi. 9]: “Noah was a just, perfect man in his generations.” Thus we see that to his face the Lord merely called Noah righteous, whereas in his absence the verse called him “a just, perfect man.”’<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Rabbi Nehemiah declared, ‘If he was righteous even in his generation, how much more so [had he lived] in the age of Moses. He might be compared to a tightly closed phial of perfume lying in a graveyard, which nevertheless gave forth a fragrant odour; how much more than if it were outside the graveyard.’<sup>22</sup> Rabbi Ahava not only found Noah righteous but extended righteousness to Noah’s sons (but no mention of Noah’s wife or of his daughters-in-law), along with the animals, beasts, birds, and creeping things that accompanied him into the ark.<sup>23</sup> At least this explained why others, besides Noah, were considered worthy of being saved.

Noah’s claim to absolute righteousness was, of course, tempered by his having succumbed to the delights of alcohol shortly after his exit from the ark. As a result, on

(eds.), *Noah and His Book(s)* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), pp. 193–214. I am indebted to Amihay for this discussion of Noah’s righteousness.

<sup>21</sup> *Tractate Erubin*, 2. Available at [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/tractate-erubin](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/tractate-erubin). See also *Sanhedrin*, 108a.

<sup>22</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 30.9, pp. 237–238.

<sup>23</sup> *Midrash Tanbuma-Yelammedenu*, 5, p. 50.



balance, the overall tendency was to limit his righteousness. Thus, according to Rabbi Judah,

Only in his generations was he a righteous man [by comparison]; had he flourished in the generation of Moses or Samuel, he would not have been called righteous: in the street of the totally blind, the one-eyed man is called clear-sighted, and the infant is called a scholar. It is as if a man who had a wine vault opened one barrel and found it vinegar; another and found it vinegar; the third, however, he found turning sour. 'It is turning,' people said to him. 'Is there any better here?' he retorted. Similarly, 'In his generations' he was a righteous man.<sup>24</sup>

On occasion, the view that, compared to his generation, Noah was righteous was qualified even further. His righteousness was not earned. Rather, it was a matter of the grace of God and not Noah's works. Thus, for example, Rabbi Abba b. Kahana suggested that God repented having made men, *even Noah*. *He* was saved, he declared, 'not because he deserved it, but because he found grace'.<sup>25</sup> Even more harsh, Rabbi Hanina declared that, because Noah possessed less than an ounce of merit, he was only saved through the grace of God.<sup>26</sup> Rabbi Johanan, more rigid than many, cut Noah little slack. Noah lacked faith, he declared, and only entered the ark when the water reached his ankles.<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere, Noah himself declared, 'yet what is the difference between me and them? Only

<sup>24</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 30.9, p. 237.

<sup>25</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 28.8, p. 229.

<sup>26</sup> See *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 29.1, p. 230.

<sup>27</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 32.6, p. 252. See also *Rashi*, 7.7.

that Thou showedst love to me and said, “Come thou and all thy house into the ark.”<sup>28</sup>

Still, as with the early Christian interpreters, there was a general consensus that Noah had at least preached repentance to his contemporaries and prophesied the approaching doom. ‘Noah rebuked them,’ declared Rabbi Jose of Caesarea, ‘urging, “Repent; for if not, the Holy One, blessed be He, will bring a deluge upon you and cause your bodies to float upon the water like gourds . . . Moreover, ye shall be taken as a curse for all future generations.”’<sup>29</sup> Genesis 6.3 tells us that, after the sons of God mated with the daughters of men, the days of mortals ‘shall be one hundred twenty years’. The rabbis interpreted this period of time as the period of warning that God had given that generation to repent. Thus, for example, Rabbi Huna said, ‘The Holy One, blessed be He, forewarned the generation of the flood to repent its misdeeds for one hundred and twenty years.’<sup>30</sup> Similarly, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* tells us that, ‘For a whole one hundred and twenty years Noah planted cedars and cut them down. On being asked, “Why are you doing this?” he replied: “The Lord of the universe has informed me that He will bring a Flood in the world.” Said they [his contemporaries] to him: “If a Flood does come, it will come only upon your father’s house!”’<sup>31</sup> According to Rabbi Eliezer, ‘Noah said to them: Turn from your ways and evil deeds, so that He bring not upon you the waters of the Flood, and destroy all the seed of the children of

<sup>28</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 32.1, p. 249.      <sup>29</sup> *Sanbedrin*, 108a.

<sup>30</sup> *Midrash Tanbuma-Yelammedenu*, 5, p. 52

<sup>31</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 30.7, p. 235.

men.<sup>32</sup> While some rabbis had Noah working hard for many years to build the ark, some were not impressed by his commitment. Rabbi Isaac said that it helped to build itself.<sup>33</sup> Rabbi Johanan, never a fan of Noah, said nothing about his labours.

Like other prophets in the Biblical literature, Noah's warnings were met with contempt. Rabbi Huna put it simply: 'They laughed at him and ridiculed his words . . . they continued to mock him.'<sup>34</sup> Rabbi Eliezer graphically reported that the wicked responded, 'If He bring from heaven the waters of the Flood upon us, behold, we are of high stature, and the waters will not reach up to our necks; and if He bring the waters of the depths against us, behold, the soles of our feet can close up all the depths. What did they do? They put forth the soles of their feet, and closed up all the depths. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He heated the waters of the deep, and they arose and burnt their flesh, and peeled off their skin from them.'<sup>35</sup>

The wicked were to get their comeuppance from God. *The Book of Jasher* tells us that, when the flood arrived, around 700,000 people assembled around the ark and cried out in agony, 'Open unto us and let us come into the ark, for why should all of us die?' And they rushed towards the ark to try to find a way in so as to escape the rain, 'which grew terrible all around them.' God ordered the animals and wild beasts that stood near the ark to

<sup>32</sup> *Rabbi Eliezer*, 22, pp. 161–162.

<sup>33</sup> See *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 31.11, p. 245.

<sup>34</sup> *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, 5, p. 52

<sup>35</sup> *Rabbi Eliezer*, 22, p. 162. See also *Sanhedrin*, 108b.

attack them and drive them away: ‘And the animals and the wild beasts fell over the sons of man, and overpowered them, and drove them away. And the wild beasts killed many of the sons of man, and scattered them all over the earth.’<sup>36</sup> Rabbi Berechiah declared that, when God realised that the flood would not kill all of the wicked, he sent fire upon them from above and ‘turned the birds, the wild beasts, and the animals against them to reduce their numbers.’<sup>37</sup>

### Arkan Matters

Generally speaking, the rabbis believed that the deluge had been a universal one, although there was some difference over whether the land of Israel and the Garden of Eden were excluded. At any rate, the world was brought back to how it was before the creation of Adam. Aside from the animals that entered the ark, all were destroyed. As the *Sanhedrin* put it, ‘And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground.’<sup>38</sup> There was, however, some debate over the fortunes of fish (for whom drowning was not really an option). Genesis 7.22-3 made it clear that everything on the face of the ground was blotted out – and this did seem to exclude fish.<sup>39</sup> ‘Some maintain,’ *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* noted, ‘that they too were included among those who were to be gathered into [the ark], but they fled to the

<sup>36</sup> Edward B. M. Browne (trans.), *The Book Jasher, The Lost Book of the Bible* (New York: United States Publishing Company, 1876), pp. 41–42.

<sup>37</sup> *Midrash Tanbuma-Yelammedenu*, 7, p. 55. <sup>38</sup> *Sanhedrin*, 108a.

<sup>39</sup> See *Sanhedrin*, 108a.

Ocean [the Mediterranean].<sup>40</sup> No need then for any arkan aquaria.

That said, the destruction of all the animals did seem a rather gratuitous act of cruelty on God's part. And the rabbis had to work hard to explain it. Rabbi Judan claimed that it was the animals that had led man into sin. He illustrated this by the case of a king who entrusted his son to a teacher who led him into evil ways, at which the king became angry with his son and killed the teacher. 'Said the king: "Did any lead my son into evil ways save this man: my son has perished and this man lives!" Therefore [God destroyed] "both man and beast."<sup>41</sup> Perhaps more plausibly, if equally unkindly, it was suggested that, in the absence of men, they were surplus to requirements: "This may be compared to a man who set up a bridal canopy for his son, and prepared a banquet with every variety [of food]. Subsequently his son died, whereupon he arose and broke up the feast, saying, "Have I prepared all this for any but my son? Now that he is dead, what need have I of the banquet?" Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, said too, "Did I create the animals and beasts for aught but man: now that man has sinned, what need have I of the animals and beasts?"<sup>42</sup>

The giants too had tried to get onto the ark. They 'set their feet on the [opening of the] deep and closed it up, then each attempted to enter the ark, whereupon his feet became entangled [in the water].<sup>43</sup> But one of the giants did survive. This was Og, King of Bashan. The book of

<sup>40</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 32.11, p. 256.

<sup>41</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 28.6, p. 227.

<sup>42</sup> *Sanhedrin*, 108a.

<sup>43</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 31.12, p. 246.

Genesis had no place for him in the ark, and yet he survived. It led Rabbi Eliezer to an innovative solution: “And Noah only was left, and they that were with him in the ark” (Genesis 7.23), except for Og, king of Bashan, who sat down on a piece of wood under the gutter of the ark. He swore to Noah and to his sons that he would be their servant for ever. What did Noah do? He bored an aperture in the ark, and he put (through it) his food daily for him, and he also was left, as it is said, “For only Og, king of Bashan, remained of the remnant of the giants” (Deuteronomy 3.11).<sup>44</sup>

In the meantime, Noah had built the ark according to the specifications that God had laid out for him – three hundred cubits in length, fifty in width, and thirty in height, three decks with rooms inside, a door in the side, a roof (or window) finished to a cubit above (Genesis 6.14–16). This left plenty of scope for disagreement about the details. Rabbi Judah held that the ark had 330 compartments, each ten cubits square, in four rows separated by two corridors each four cubits wide. There was a gangway one cubit in breadth that ran right around the outside of the ark. Rabbi Nehemiah argued for nine hundred compartments, each six cubits square, and three corridors of four cubits in width with the compartments running alongside, leaving two cubits at the outer sides. But there was uncertainty whether the sides were straight or sloping inwards, upwards, and tapering to a cubit.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *Rabbi Eliezer*, 23, p. 167.

<sup>45</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 31.11, pp. 244–245. See also *Rabbi Eliezer*, 23, pp. 164–165; and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, 6.14, p. 39.

With the ark all closed up (Genesis 7.16), a source of light had to be found. The ‘roof’ or ‘window’ (Genesis 6.16) was understood by Rabbi Meir as ‘a light’: ‘One pearl was suspended in the ark, and shed light upon all the creatures in the ark, like a lamp which gives light inside the house, and like the sun yonder which shines in his might, as it is said, “A light shalt thou make to the ark.”’<sup>46</sup> Rabbi Johanan had precious jewels set inside the window to provide light, while Rabbi Phineas imagined a polished gem hung up by Noah so that Noah did not require the light of the sun by day or that of the moon by night.<sup>47</sup>

Where the animals were accommodated was also problematic. For some, the bottom storey was for garbage; the second for Noah, his family, and the clean animals; and the top storey for unclean animals. For others, the unclean animals were on the lowest storey; Noah, his family, and the clean animals in the middle; and the top storey was for the garbage (with Noah shovelling it all through a trapdoor in the side).<sup>48</sup> *Rabbi Eliezer* had all the cattle and animals in the bottom storey, fowl in the next, while reptiles and creeping things were at the top, along with the humans. With 366 kinds of cattle, 366 kinds of fowl, and 366 kinds of reptiles, it was pretty crowded.<sup>49</sup>

The rabbis also wrestled with the question of how all the animals to enter the ark were collected. With the numbers suggested by *Rabbi Eliezer*, little wonder that

<sup>46</sup> *Rabbi Eliezer*, 23, pp. 166–167.

<sup>47</sup> See *Sanhedrin*, 108b; and *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 31.11, p. 244.

<sup>48</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 31.11, p. 245. See also *Sanhedrin*, 108b where the ascending order is dung, animals, man.

<sup>49</sup> *Rabbi Eliezer*, 23, p. 165.

Noah thought that he lacked the strength to gather all the animals. So, the angels that were appointed over each kind of animal went down and gathered them, along with all their food, to the ark.<sup>50</sup> *The Book of Jasher* had God bring them to Noah who, under instructions from God, determined who would enter the ark and who would be left behind:

And thou shalt go out and take thy seat by the door of the ark, and all the beasts of the field, the cattle, and the fowls of the heaven, shall assemble and stand before thee, and all those that come around and lie down before thee, thou shalt take and put into the hands of thy sons, and they shall bring them into the ark. But all those that remain standing thou shalt leave alone. And the Lord did accordingly next morning, and great many animals, beasts and fowls came, and all of them surrounded the ark. And Noah went out and seated himself near the door of the ark and all those of all flesh that would lie down before him he gathered into the ark, and those that remained standing he left outside upon the earth.<sup>51</sup>

Other rabbis looked to different selection criteria. On the basis that ‘every living thing entered the ark’ (Genesis 6.19), Rabbi Hoshaya declared that even spirits who had life but were without bodies entered.<sup>52</sup> According to Rabbi Judah, the re’em or wild ox (or unicorn, according to the King James version of the Bible), a creature reputed to be of enormous height (Job 39.9–12), was not allowed to enter the ark, although its calves were. Rabbi Nehemiah had Noah nonetheless tying it to the ark and

<sup>50</sup> *Rabbi Eliezer*, 23, p. 166.    <sup>51</sup> *The Book Jasher*, p. 40.

<sup>52</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 31.13, p. 247.



ploughing great waves through the water.<sup>53</sup> For rather obscure reasons, *The Book of Jasher* had a lioness rejected but its cubs accepted.<sup>54</sup> On occasion, selection was oddly gendered with God instructing Noah, ‘If thou seest a male pursuing a female, accept him; a female pursuing a male, do not accept him.’<sup>55</sup> Rashi, along with Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman, excluded all those animals who had engaged in cross-species sex before the flood.<sup>56</sup> How did Noah know? Rabbi Hisda let the ark decide. He had Noah lead the animals past the ark: ‘[T]hose which the ark accepted had certainly not been the object of sin; whilst those that it rejected had certainly been the object of it.’<sup>57</sup> On the grounds that cattle were the only species among whom no ‘perversion’ had been seen before the flood, Rashi had them living separately on the ark.<sup>58</sup>

As we recall, having been assured of their safety, Noah was told by God to embark on the ark with his wife, his three sons, and their wives. The rabbinic tradition paid little attention to the wife of Noah. Nevertheless, *The Book of Jasher* tells us that her name was Naamah, that she was the daughter of Enoch, and that she was 580 old at the time of her marriage. Noah was 498 years of age when he married Naamah, and over 500 old when Shem, Ham, and Japheth were born (Genesis 5.32). Aware of God’s intention to wipe out the wicked, Noah had been reluctant to marry and have children. ‘Surely,’ he said, ‘the Lord is about to destroy the sons of man from the

<sup>53</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 31.13, p. 247. The King James version of the Bible, following Jerome’s Vulgate, translates this as ‘unicorn’.

<sup>54</sup> *The Book Jasher*, p. 40. <sup>55</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 31.13, p. 247.

<sup>56</sup> See *Rashi*, 6.22. *Sanhedrin*, 108b. <sup>57</sup> *Sanhedrin*, 108b.

<sup>58</sup> See *Rashi*, 8.1.

face of the earth, and wherefore should I beget children.<sup>59</sup> Genesis 4.22 had noted that the sister of Tubal-cain, a descendant of Adam's son Cain, was called Naamah. Rabbi Abba b. Kahana identified her as Noah's wife. She was so called, he said, because her deeds were pleasing (ne'imim). Others disagreed: '[T]he name denotes that she sang (man'emeth) to the timbrel in honour of idolatry.'<sup>60</sup>

Noah had taken enough food onto the ark to last for twelve months. And God ensured that it would not decay or rot. But there was some uncertainty about which sort of food was taken. Some rabbis held that only pressed figs were on the ark. Rabbi Abba b. Kahana declared that Noah took in branches for the elephants, plants for the deer, and grass for the ostriches.<sup>61</sup> Others declared that each animal was provided with the food it was accustomed to eat.<sup>62</sup> All that said, life in the ark was tough. Noah's son Shem was reported as saying,

[W]e had much trouble in the ark. The animals which are usually fed by day we fed by day; and those normally fed by night we fed by night. But my father did not know what was the food of the chameleon. One day he was sitting and cutting up a pomegranate, when a worm dropped out of it, which it [the chameleon] consumed. From then onward he mashed up bran for it, and when it became wormy, it devoured it. The lion was nourished by a fever, for Rab said, 'Fever sustains for not less than six (days) nor more than thirteen.' As for the phoenix, my

<sup>59</sup> *The Book Jasher*, p. 38.      <sup>60</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 23.3, p. 194.

<sup>61</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 31.14, p. 247.

<sup>62</sup> *Midrash Tanbuma-Yelammedenu*, 2, p. 41.

father discovered it lying ‘in the hold of the ark. “Dost thou require no food?” he asked it. “I saw that thou wast busy,” it replied, “so I said to myself, I will give thee no trouble.” “May it be (God’s) will that thou shouldst not perish,” he exclaimed.’<sup>63</sup>

Noah was so constantly occupied with feeding the creatures in his care that he did not sleep for the whole twelve months he was in the ark.<sup>64</sup> He had so much trouble with the cattle and the beasts, Rashi tells us, ‘that he was coughing and spitting blood’.<sup>65</sup> Noah was once late in bringing food to a lion, Rashi went on, so it struck him. Others reported that, as Noah was leaving the ark, a lion set on him and maimed him, so that he was not fit to offer a sacrifice to God.<sup>66</sup>

Fear and terror were a constant. The ark rolled in the waters, this way and that. Those in it were continually tossed around. It was as if the ark was likely to be shattered into pieces. All the animals that were in the ark ‘were frightened, and the lions were roaring, and the oxen were lowing, and the wolves were howling, and every bird in the ark uttered shrieks after its own language, and the noise re-echoed in the distance’.<sup>67</sup> Noah and his sons cried and wept as if death were imminent. Noah stood and prayed to God: ‘Bring me forth from this prison, for my soul is faint, because of the stench of lions. Through me will all the righteous crown Thee with a crown of

<sup>63</sup> *Sanhedrin*, 108b.      <sup>64</sup> *Midrash Tanbuma-Yelammedenu*, 2, p. 41.

<sup>65</sup> *Rashi*, 7.23.

<sup>66</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 30.6, p. 235. See also Israelstam (trans.), *Midrash Rabbah... Leviticus*, 20.1, p. 250.

<sup>67</sup> *The Book Jashar*, p.43.

sovereignty, because Thou hast brought me forth from this prison, as it is said, “Bring my soul out of prison, that I may give thanks unto thy name: for the righteous shall crown me, when thou wilt have dealt bountifully with me [Psalm 142.7].”<sup>68</sup>

Sexual relations for Noah and his household were banned on the ark: ‘As soon as Noah entered the ark, cohabitation was forbidden to him, hence it is written, “And thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons” – apart; “And thy wife, and thy sons’ wives” – apart. When he went, He permitted it to him, as it is written, “Go forth from the ark, Thou and thy wife.”’<sup>69</sup> Animals were similarly banned from sex for the duration of their time on the ark. According to Rashi, the verse telling Noah to bring all the animals out of the ark that they may ‘be fruitful and multiply upon the earth’ (Genesis 8.17) ‘teaches that cattle and fowls also were separated, male and female, in the ark.’<sup>70</sup> Unlike before the flood, the animals on the ark took it upon themselves to keep to their own species. There were only three who had sex in the ark – the dog, the raven, and Ham: ‘The dog was doomed to be tied, the raven expectorates [his seed into his partner’s mouth]. And Ham was smitten in his skin.’<sup>71</sup> Only after the exit from the ark were normal relations reassumed. According to Rabbi Judah, Noah was put to shame by Ham finding him naked because, rather than having sex immediately,

<sup>68</sup> *Rabbi Eliezer*, 23, p. 169.

<sup>69</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 34.7, p. 271. See also *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 31.12, p. 246; and *Rashi*, 7.7.

<sup>70</sup> *Rashi*, 8.17. See also *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 34.8, p. 271.

<sup>71</sup> *Sanhedrin*, 108b. Ham’s being smitten in his skin refers to the tradition of Ham’s descendants being black-skinned. For more, see Chapter 6.

he first planted a vineyard. Rabbi Nehemiah countered that, for exercising self-restraint even after leaving the ark and not having sex straightaway, Noah was esteemed for waiting until God told him and his sons to ‘be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth’ (Genesis 9.1).<sup>72</sup>

### The New World

Eventually, God remembered Noah, and the waters subsided, and the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. According to the rabbis, when Noah prepared to send out the raven, it argued back. It accused Noah of hating him, for if he came to grief, there would be no more ravens. He even suggested that Noah desired his mate, the female raven. Noah was furious with him: “‘Thou evil one!’ he exclaimed; “even that which is [usually] permitted me has [now] been forbidden: how much more so that which is [always] forbidden me!”<sup>73</sup> Rashi declared that the raven was unconvinced, refused to fly off, and flew in circles around the ark.<sup>74</sup> Eventually it left and, as Rabbi Eliezer reported, ‘it went and found a carcass of a man cast upon the summit of a mountain, and it settled thereon for its food, and it did not return with its message to its sender’.<sup>75</sup> Eventually, as we know, the dove too found dry land and did not return.

God had to order Noah to leave the ark for, initially at least, Noah was reluctant to do so, saying, ‘Am I to go out and beget children for a curse?’<sup>76</sup> God then swore to

<sup>72</sup> See *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 35.1, p. 282.      <sup>73</sup> *Sanhedrin*, 108b.

<sup>74</sup> See *Rashi*, 8.7.      <sup>75</sup> *Rabbi Eliezer*, 23, p. 168.

<sup>76</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 34.6, p. 270.

Noah that he would not bring another flood upon the world and that Noah could, happily, go forth and multiply. Elsewhere, this slightly rebellious streak in Noah was tempered by his obedience. Thus, when God told him to leave the ark, he went willingly. ‘I entered at the bidding of the Holy One, blessed be He,’ he declared, ‘when He told me, “Come, you and your household into the ark,” and I shall not depart except at His bidding. Thereupon God revealed Himself unto Noah, as it is said: “And God spoke to Noah, saying, ‘Go forth from the ark.’”<sup>77</sup>

Upon Noah, his family, and the animals leaving the ark, the rabbis took the opportunity to have God give commandments, not for Israel which came into being with the advent of Abraham and received its own commandments, but for *all other* human beings. The children of Noah received seven commandments prohibiting idolatry, incest, murder, blasphemy, fornication, witchcraft, and emasculation.<sup>78</sup> *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* informs us that Noah built an altar like that of Adam: ‘[I]t is the altar which Adam built at the time he was banished from the garden of Eden and on which he offered an offering, and upon which Cain and Abel offered their offerings.’<sup>79</sup> Rabbi Eliezer b. Jacob said that it was ‘the great altar in Jerusalem’.<sup>80</sup> According to Rabbi Eliezer, the earth was then divided among the sons of Noah. They spread over the whole earth ‘as by a huge fish that spawned its eggs

<sup>77</sup> *Midrash Tanbuma-Yelammedenu*, 2, p. 56, also p. 60.

<sup>78</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 34.8, p. 272.

<sup>79</sup> *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, 8.20, pp. 43–44.

<sup>80</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 34.8, p. 272.

and filled the earth'.<sup>81</sup> Noah especially blessed 'Shem and his sons, (making them) dark but comely, and he gave them the habitable earth. He blessed Ham and his sons, (making them) dark like the raven, and he gave them as an inheritance the coast of the sea. He blessed Japheth and his sons, (making) them entirely white, and he gave them for an inheritance the desert and its fields.'<sup>82</sup> This is perhaps the earliest example of 'colour-coding' the descendants of Noah.<sup>83</sup>

Be that as it may, for the rabbinic tradition, it was downhill for Noah from the moment he became 'a man of the soil' (Genesis 9.20) and planted a vineyard. There were three that had a passion for agriculture, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* tells us, and there was no good in any of them – Cain, Noah, and Uzziah. Noah was a righteous man, suggested the *Targum Neofiti*, until he began to till the soil.<sup>84</sup> 'At first Noah was called a righteous and perfect man,' declared Rabbi Shalum, 'but now he is described as a man of the earth.'<sup>85</sup> According to several rabbis, the tree of whose fruit Adam first tasted was a grapevine. Others had God ask Noah, 'shouldst thou not have taken a warning from Adam, whose transgression was caused by wine?'<sup>86</sup> It was 'the demon drink' that got him – literally, according to *Midrash Tanbuma-Yelammedenu*: 'While Noah was planting the vineyard, Satan appeared before

<sup>81</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 36.2, p. 289.

<sup>82</sup> *Rabbi Eliezer*, 23, pp.172–173. See also *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 36.2, p. 289.

<sup>83</sup> See Chapter 6.

<sup>84</sup> See Martin McNamara (trans.), *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), 9.20, p. 80.

<sup>85</sup> *Midrash Tanbuma-Yelammedenu*, 2, p. 66. <sup>86</sup> *Sanhedrin*, 70a.

him and asked: “what are you planting?” He answered: “A vineyard.” “What is it?” inquired Satan. “Its fruits are sweet, whether moist or dry,” he answered, “and from them one produces a wine that causes the heart of man to rejoice” . . . Satan suggested: “Come, let us be partners in this vineyard.” And Noah replied, “Certainly.”<sup>87</sup> Thus did Noah begin to go down the slippery slope, we read, that led him to behave like a lion, then like a pig, and finally like an ape. If the righteous Noah could behave like this, ‘how much more so could any other man!’<sup>88</sup> It all happened quickly: ‘He planted it, drank thereof, and was humiliated all in the same day.’<sup>89</sup> The rabbis worried deeply over what was to be done with the drunken former sailor.

According to the Genesis story, drunk and naked, Noah was seen by his son Ham who told his two brothers, Shem and Japheth. When Noah awoke, Noah realised what Ham had done to him. He blessed Shem and Japheth but cursed Ham’s youngest son Canaan (Genesis 9.21-7). Noah’s realising that Ham had *done something to him* suggested to the rabbis that Ham’s sin was more than mere voyeurism on his part. And, in keeping with a tendency among them to see sexual sins as particularly heinous, it was either that Ham had castrated his father or that he had sexually abused him:

Rab and Samuel [differ,] one maintaining that he castrated him, whilst the other says that he sexually abused him. He who maintains that he castrated him, [reasons

<sup>87</sup> *Midrash Tanbuma-Yelammedenu*, 2, p. 66.

<sup>88</sup> *Midrash Tanbuma-Yelammedenu*, 2, p. 67.

<sup>89</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 36.4, p. 290. See also *Rabbi Eliezer*, 23, p. 170.



thus;] Since he cursed him by his fourth son [Canaan], he must have injured him with respect to a fourth son. But he who says that he sexually abused him, draws an analogy between ‘and he saw’ written twice. Here it is written, And Ham the father of Canaan saw the nakedness of his father; whilst elsewhere it is written, And when Shechem the son of Hamor saw her [he took her and lay with her and defiled her]. Now, on the view that he emasculated him, it is right that he cursed him by his fourth son; but on the view that he abused him, why did he curse his fourth son; he should have cursed him himself? – *Both indignities were perpetrated.*<sup>90</sup>

The idea that Noah cursed Canaan, the fourth son of Ham, because Ham had ruined Noah’s own chances of a fourth son cleverly explained why Canaan bore the punishment that ought to have been Ham’s. As *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* had Noah declare to Ham, ‘You have prevented me from begetting a fourth son, therefore I curse *your* fourth son.’<sup>91</sup> More simply, Rabbi Judah held that, since God had already blessed Noah and his sons

<sup>90</sup> *Sanbedrin*, 70a (my italics). See also, Judah J. Slotki (trans.), *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers* (London: Soncino Press, 1939), p. 348; *Rashi*, 9.23; *Rabbi Eliezer*, 23, p. 170; *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, 9.24, p. 46 where Noah is told in a dream what has happened. *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu* sees it only an instance of voyeurism; 2, p. 66. Interestingly, the Christian Theophilus of Antioch seems to know of a tradition of Noah’s castration when he remarks that some have named Noah ‘Eunuchus’. See Dods (trans.), *Theophilus to Autolytus*, 19, in *ANF*, vol. 2, p. 117. For modern readings of the sin of Ham, see John Sietze Bergsma and Scott Walker Hahn, ‘Noah’s Nakedness and the Curse on Canaan (Genesis 9:20–27),’ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124 (2005), pp. 25–40). This article raises the question of whether it was a case of maternal incest.

<sup>91</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 36.7, p. 293 (my italics).

(Genesis 9.1), Ham could not be punished, although his son could be.<sup>92</sup> The other alternative to explain the curse of Canaan was to invent a new story altogether: Canaan castrated his grandfather before Ham entered and saw what his son Canaan had done. Thus, per Rabbi Eliezer,

Canaan entered and saw the nakedness of Noah and he bound thread (where the mark of the Covenant was), and emasculated him. He went forth and told his brethren. Ham entered and saw his nakedness. He [Ham] did not take to heart the duty of honouring (one's father). But he told his two brothers in the market, making sport of his father. His two brothers rebuked him. What did they do? They took the curtain of the east with them, and they went backwards and covered the nakedness of their father.<sup>93</sup>

This was an explanation that sheeted home blame both to Canaan and Ham, the one for castrating his grandfather, the other for gossiping about it and bringing disrepute upon the family patriarch.

For early Christianity, as we have seen, Noah was a prototype of Christ. But there is no sense in the rabbinic tradition of pushing back against the Christian understanding of Noah. Rather, there was a diversity of opinions. On the one hand, Noah was a model of righteousness – pious, obedient, and courageous. On the

<sup>92</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 36.7, p. 293. See also *Midrash Tanbuma-Yelammedenu*, 2, p. 71.

<sup>93</sup> *Rabbi Eliezer*, 23, pp. 170–171. See also *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 36.7, p. 293. Here Rabbi Nehemiah holds that Canaan saw Noah's nakedness first, and therefore the curse attached to him. See also *Midrash Tanbuma-Yelammedenu*, 2, p. 71 where Rabbi Nehemiah's opinion is also reported.

other hand, he was at times a reluctant hero – defiant, querulous, even sinful. And they found it hard to forgive his drunkenness. That said, overall, the rabbis viewed him positively, weaving together, not always completely coherently, the virtues and vices of Noah's character that they perceived within the Biblical text into a positive assessment. They couldn't be too negative. After all, God had chosen him as the only person worthy of being saved from the deluge and the founder of a new humanity to replace the one begun by Adam.

Not as tied to the Biblical Noah as the early Christian fathers or the Judaic rabbis, Islam was more free to create a Noah who, rather like Muhammad the prophet, called his people away from the veneration of idols to the worship of the one true God.

### Noah in the Islamic Tradition

For believing Muslims, the Qur'an is considered to be a literal transcript of the words of God as these were revealed to the prophet Muhammad (c.570–632 CE) from around 610 CE until his death in 632 CE in Medina. According to the Qur'an, Muhammad is the heir of the prophets of Israel in a line that reaches back through Jesus to Abraham to Noah (Nūḥ) and thence to Adam. According to the Qur'an, what God revealed to Muhammad is a recapitulation of what earlier prophets revealed to the people of Israel: 'Surely We have inspired you [Muhammad] as We inspired Noah and the prophets after him, and as We inspired Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and Jesus, and Job, and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon, and we gave David [the

Psalms]’ (Qur’an 4.163).<sup>94</sup> Unfortunately, according to the Qur’an, both Jews and Christians failed to adhere to the covenants they had with God and, as a consequence, needed to repent and to follow the path laid out by Muhammad (Qur’an 5.12-14). Muhammad is therefore the last and the greatest of the prophets.

Thus, a central place in the Qur’an belongs to the prophets who preceded Muhammad. Their role was to bring an awareness to their own people of their sinful ways and to call them to repentance. The Qur’an names twenty-five of them from Adam through to Muhammad. Except for five of them, all have a counterpart in the Bible. Six of the chapters (suras) in the Qur’an are named after prophets – Jonah, Hūd, Joseph, Abraham, Muhammad, and Noah. Only two of these, Joseph and Noah, are exclusively devoted to those whose names they bear. With 131 references to him in the Qur’an, Noah is the third most popular of the prophets, with Moses (502) and Abraham (235) coming before and Jesus (93) immediately after.<sup>95</sup> The story of Noah appears in the Qur’an in an extended form in eight places and is mentioned in five others.<sup>96</sup> Thus, unlike the story of Noah in the book of Genesis that forms a continuous story, we need to

<sup>94</sup> Quotations from the Qur’an are taken from A. J. Droge, *The Qur’ān: A New Annotated Translation* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2014).

<sup>95</sup> See Anthony H. Johns, ‘Prophets and Personalities of the Qur’an,’ in Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Qur’anic Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 488–501.

<sup>96</sup> For extended, see Qur’an 7.59-64, 10.71-74, 11.25-49, 23.23-31, 26.105-22, 37.75-82, 54.9-17, 71.1-25. For mentions, see 17.17, 21.76-77, 29.14-15, 51.46, 53.52.

construct the story of Noah from the various references to him across the Qur'an as a whole.

As in the Christian and Judaic traditions, the story of Noah and the flood in the Islamic tradition is also the story of the Muslim interpreters of it. And just as the Christian and Judaic interpretations of Noah and the flood drew upon the story in the book of Genesis, so too did the Qur'anic Noah remain the bedrock of Islamic readings. And where the Islamic commentators found gaps in the Qur'anic account, they filled them in. Where there were difficulties, they clarified them, sometimes by drawing from the details in the Genesis story and in the rabbinic tradition. And they embellished and elaborated on the Qur'anic story of Noah with legends that were told on street corners and in mosques within the earliest Islamic communities, as Islamic interpreters constructed narrative frameworks within which to locate Noah and the other Qur'anic prophets. For this account, I have drawn upon the seminal early Muslim universal histories that chronicle the time from creation via the prophets along with the key early texts in the Muslim literary genre 'Stories of the Prophets'. Within these, Noah functioned, as the Persian commentator al-Tha'labī (d.1035/6) put it, as 'the first of the prophets of the Divine Law and the first summoner sent from God.'<sup>97</sup>

Within the Qur'an, the prophets function as prototypes of Muhammad. The Qur'an constructs the figure of the prophets in ways that are useful for the mission of

<sup>97</sup> William M. Brinner (trans.), *'Arā'is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* or *'Lives of the Prophets' as recounted by . . . al-Tha'labī* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 102–103.

Muhammad. Essentially, the prophets are the subject of persecution stories in which the plot is generally the same: A prophet is sent to a particular people; he delivers his message but is rejected by them; and God destroys the people for their failure to believe the messenger. Noah is the first of these prophets followed by Abraham, Lot, Moses, Hūd, Šālīḥ, and Shu‘ayb. So, the emphasis in the Qur’an is on the confrontation between Noah and his wicked generation rather than on the details of the ark, the flood, and its aftermath.

Thus, as a prototype of Muhammad, the Qur’an gives us minimal personal details about Noah. The Qur’an, like the Genesis account (Genesis 9.29), tells us only that ‘We sent Noah to his people, and he stayed among them thousand years, minus fifty years’ (Qur’an 29.14). The Islamic commentators filled in some chronological details. Thus, for example, Muhammad’s cousin Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 687) declared that ‘God sent Noah to his people when he was 480 years old. Then he called them to God during his prophethood for 120 years. He rode on the boat when he was 600 years old, and then lived after that for another 350 years.’<sup>98</sup> The historian Ibn Ishāq (704–767), the first to write a collection of stories of the prophets, has Noah’s death at the age of 950 years.<sup>99</sup> Following Genesis 7.6, he has the flood beginning in the six hundredth year of Noah’s life. Similarly, the historian al-Ya‘qūbī (d.897), following Genesis, has Noah living for 360 years after

<sup>98</sup> Quoted by Brannon M. Wheeler (trans.), *Prophets in the Quran: An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis* (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 53–54.

<sup>99</sup> See Gordon Darnell Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), p. 47.

disembarking from the ark.<sup>100</sup> Al-Tha‘labī’s *Lives of the Prophets* reported that, after the flood, Noah lived ‘for three hundred and fifty years, and his whole life numbered nine hundred and fifty years’.<sup>101</sup> Al-Ṭabarī (829–923) has one calculation, as I read it, at 1,300 or even at 1,650 years.<sup>102</sup>

But we do get one imaginary description of Noah’s features in a late twelfth-century text, namely Al-Kisā’ī’s *Tales of the Prophets*: He ‘was possessed of reason, knowledge and a beautiful voice. He was tall and stout and resembled Adam. He had a broad forehead, an oval face, beautiful eyes, a stout neck, a lank belly, fleshy thighs and calves, an erect stature and graceful feet. He pastured his people’s sheep for a period and also learned carpentry, so he led an easy existence.’<sup>103</sup> But Al-Kisā’ī also tells us of his birth. His mother’s name was Cainush, daughter of Rakel, in the lineage of Cain. Afraid of the then king, she bore Noah in a cave. Desiring to move freely again, Noah miraculously spoke to her: ‘Have no fear on my account, mother; for He who created me will watch over me.’<sup>104</sup> She left Noah in the cave for forty days, after which ‘the angels took Noah, adorned and painted with kohl, to his

<sup>100</sup> See Matthew S. Gordon et al. (eds.), *The History (Ta’rīkh): Adam to Pre-Islamic Arabia in The Works of Ibn Wāḍih al-Ya‘qūbī: An English Translation, Volume 2* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), p. 271.

<sup>101</sup> Brinner (trans.), ‘*Arā’is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’*’, p. 102.

<sup>102</sup> Franz Rosenthal (trans.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī: Volume 1* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 355.

<sup>103</sup> Wheeler M. Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’): Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Kisā’ī* (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 1997), pp. 92–93.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

mother, who rejoiced over him and undertook his upbringing until he reached maturity'.<sup>105</sup>

The Genesis story declared that Noah only had sons after he was five hundred years old, and that they were called Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Genesis 5.32). The Qur'an makes no mention of them, although it does intimate in several places that his family were with him on the ark. Nevertheless, the scholars filled in the gap from the Genesis text. Thus, for example, al-Ya'qūbī tells us that 'Children were born to Noah after he was five hundred years old.'<sup>106</sup> Ibn Ishāq names them as Shem, Ham, and Japheth as does the historian al-Ṭabarī (839–923).<sup>107</sup>

The Qur'an is virtually silent on Noah's wife. She remains anonymous. We are only told that 'the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot ... were under two of Our righteous servants [Noah and Lot], but they both betrayed them' (Qur'an 66.10). The commentators filled in the details again. Thus, for example, al-Ya'qūbī tells us that, after Noah began his mission, he remained unmarried for five hundred years. Then, just before God ordered him to build the ark, 'God sent him a revelation to marry Haykal, the daughter of Nāmūsā, the son of Enoch.'<sup>108</sup> For this information, al-Ya'qūbī was drawing

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>106</sup> Gordon et al. (eds.), *The History (Ta'riḫ): Adam to Pre-Islamic Arabia* in *The Works of Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Ya'qūbī*, p. 269.

<sup>107</sup> See Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, p. 46 and William M. Brinner (trans.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume II: Prophets and Patriarchs* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p.10.

<sup>108</sup> Gordon et al. (eds.), *The History (Ta'riḫ): Adam to Pre-Islamic Arabia* in *The Works of Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Ya'qūbī*, p. 269.



on the Arabic translation of a sixth-century Christian text in the Syriac language titled *The Book of the Cave of Treasures*. There we read that, when Noah saw the wickedness of his generation, he ‘preserved himself in virginity for five hundred years. Then, God spake unto him and said unto him, “Take unto thee to wife Haykêl the daughter of Namûs (or Haykêl Namûs), the daughter of Enoch, the brother of Methuselah.”’<sup>109</sup> Al-Ṭabarī attributed to ibn ‘Abbās the claim that ‘Noah married a woman [unnamed] of the children of Cain and she bore him a son whom he named Būnāzīr.’<sup>110</sup> Al-Kisā’ī tells us that Noah had two wives – Amorah who bore him three sons (Shem, Ham, and Japheth) and three daughters (Hasura, Mayshura, and Mahbuda), and Walia bint-Mahwil who bore him two sons (Japheth and Canaan).<sup>111</sup> Elsewhere, Canaan is called Yām and Japheth is known as Eber. The latter was said to have died before the flood.<sup>112</sup>

Granting that, according to the Qur’an, Noah’s wife had betrayed him, the occasional commentator took the opportunity to construct reasons to have her, as one of the wicked, out of the picture before the flood. Thus, for example, Ibn Ishāq has Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth on board, along with their wives. But there is no mention of Noah’s wife on board with them.<sup>113</sup> Al-Kisā’ī remarked that the treachery of Noah’s wife was that she ‘told her

<sup>109</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge (trans.), *The Book of the Cave of Treasures* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1927), pp. 98–99.

<sup>110</sup> Brinner (trans.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume 2*, p. 18.

<sup>111</sup> See Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’): Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Kisā’ī*, p. 95.

<sup>112</sup> See Rosenthal (trans.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī: Volume 1*, p. 368.

<sup>113</sup> See Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, p. 46.

people not to strike him because he was mad'.<sup>114</sup> The simple solution to the Quranic account of her betrayal was to have her not enter the ark. Thus, the historian ibn Kathīr (1300–1073) tells us that 'Noah's wife was not a believer with him so she did not join him.'<sup>115</sup> Al-Kisā'ī hints that it was Noah's second wife, Walia bint-Mahwil, who was left behind: She was a hypocrite 'and reverted to her old religion' of polytheistic idolatry.<sup>116</sup>

The fate of Noah's wife was to become entwined with that of one of her sons. For ibn Kathīr went on to say that one of Noah's sons also did not enter the ark because he was 'secretly a disbeliever but had pretended faith in front of Noah'.<sup>117</sup> Ibn Kathīr was drawing here on Qur'an 11.42–47. In this chapter, one of Noah's sons refuses to get on the ark, believing that he can save himself from the flood. 'I shall take refuge on a mountain,' he declared, '[that] will protect me from the water' (Qur'an 11.43). Noah replied that there was no one who would be safe from the edict of Allah. Then, 'the waves came between them, and he was among the drowned' (Qur'an 11.43).<sup>118</sup> But the Noah of the Qur'an was a compassionate man, more so perhaps than the rabbinic Noah. He argued with God for the salvation of his son, but God chastised him,

<sup>114</sup> Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qışaş al-anbiyā': Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Kisā'i)*, p.157.

<sup>115</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Stories of the Prophets* (Kindle edition), p. 35.

<sup>116</sup> Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qışaş al-anbiyā': Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Kisā'i)*, p. 95.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>118</sup> See Gabriel Said Reynolds, 'Noah's Lost Son in the Qur'an,' *Arabica*, 64 (2017), pp. 129–148.

telling him that ‘he was not one of your family’ and should not have been saved (Qur’an 11.45).

Who was this lost son? The early Islamic commentators were familiar with the Genesis account and with the rabbinic readings of it. But within both Jewish and Christian sources, there is no mention of any sons of Noah other than the three that we are familiar with – Ham, Shem, and Japheth. So, the Qur’anic story of the lost son is unique. The commentators elaborated on the Qur’an. Ibn Ishāq tells us that Noah ‘left behind his son Yam, who was an unbeliever’.<sup>119</sup> Al-Kisā’ī called him ‘Canaan’, the son of Noah’s second wife Walia bint-Mahwil.<sup>120</sup> Al-Tha‘labī paraphrased the Qur’anic account naming the son ‘Canaan’.<sup>121</sup> And he went on give a poignant account, putatively from Muhammad, of the death of both Canaan and his mother:

If God had pitied anyone of the people of Noah, He would have pitied the woman, the mother of the lad (Canaan), who feared that the waters would reach him, for she loved him greatly. She went with him to the mountain until she reached its peak, and when the water reached her she went out and stood erect on the mountain and carried the boy. When it reached her neck she raised the boy in her hands until the water carried them both

<sup>119</sup> Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, p. 46. See also p. 47 where Ibn Ishāq paraphrases the Qur’anic account.

<sup>120</sup> Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qisāṣ al-anbiyā’): Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Kisā’ī*, p. 95.

<sup>121</sup> See Brinner (trans.), *‘Arā’is al-Majālis fī Qisāṣ al-Anbiyā’ or ‘Lives of the Prophets’ as recounted by . . . al-Tha‘labī*, p. 98.

away. If God had pitied any one of them, He would have pitied this (woman).<sup>122</sup>

That said, the stories of the lost son, and of the disloyal wife left behind, tragic as they were, made clear to Muslims that all unbelievers, even the closest family members, were to be left behind.<sup>123</sup>

It was the wickedness of the generation of Noah that brought about the flood. In the Qur'an, polytheism and the idolatry that went with it were the key sins. When Noah preached to the people, their leaders said, 'Do not forsake your gods, and do not forsake Wadd, nor Suwā, nor Yaghūth, and Ya'ūq, and Nasr' (Qur'an 71.23). Muhammad saw idolatry as the greatest sin of Noah's generation, like that of his own. Thus, one hadith (discourse) from al-Bukhari (810–870) records Muhammad saying, 'All the idols which were worshiped by the people of Noah were worshipped by the Arabs later on . . . The names (of the idols) formerly belonged to some pious men of the people of Noah, and when they died Satan inspired their people to prepare and place idols at the places where they used to sit, and to call those idols by their names.'<sup>124</sup>

According to Al-Kisā'ī, King Damosel, a descendant of Cain, increased the number of idols of the five gods

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>123</sup> See Gordon D. Newby, 'The Drowned Son: Midrash and Midrash Making in the Quran and *Tafsir*,' in Stephen David Ricks (ed.), *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions: Papers Presented at the Institute for Islamic-Judaic Studies, University of Denver* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986), vol. 2, pp. 19–32.

<sup>124</sup> *Sabih al-Bukhari*, 4920. Available at <https://sunnah.com/search?q=noah>. *Sabih al-Bukhari* is the most important collection of hadith in Sunni Islam.

named in the Qur'an to a total of 1,700. When Noah saw all that, he withdrew into the wilderness.<sup>125</sup> It was then that God sent the angel Gabriel to Noah to tell him of his prophethood and apostleship to his people: "I am Gabriel. I bear your Lord's greetings and tidings that He has made you a prophet to your people." Drawing near, he clothed Noah with the garb of God's warriors, bound his head with the Turban of Victory, girt him with the Sword of Splendour and said, "Go to Darmasel . . . and his people and call them to worship God."<sup>126</sup>

That God commissioned Noah as a prophet to give his people the warning that, should they not turn to Allah, they would be punished, is the Quran's central message about Noah. Thus, the chapter called 'Noah' begins, 'Surely, we sent Noah to his people: "warn your people before a painful punishment comes upon them." He said, "My people! I am a clear warner for you. Serve God, and guard (yourselves) against Him, and obey me! He will forgive you your sins, and spare you until an appointed time. Surely the time of God, when it comes, cannot be postponed"' (Quran 71.1-4).<sup>127</sup> The Qur'an goes on to report that the people argued with Noah, refusing to heed his message.<sup>128</sup> They thought that he was possessed. A later hadith has Noah warning them about the Dajjal

<sup>125</sup> See Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā': Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Kisā'ī)*, p. 93. See also ibn Kathīr, *Stories of the Prophets* (Kindle edition), pp. 25-27.

<sup>126</sup> Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā': Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Kisā'ī)*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>127</sup> See also Qur'an 7.59; 10.71-2; 11.25-6; 23.23; 26. 106-15.

<sup>128</sup> See Qur'an 7.64; 10.73; 11.27-32; 23.24-5; 26.106-16; 54.9; 71.7-23.

[an Antichrist figure] to come: ‘Allah’s Apostle [Muhammad] said, “Shall I not tell you about the Dajjall . . . The Dajjall is one-eyed and will bring with him what will resemble Hell and Paradise, and what he will call Paradise will be actually Hell; so I warn you against him as Noah warned his nation against him.”’<sup>129</sup>

Ibn Ishāq reported a tradition that the people used not only to argue but to attack Noah: ‘and they would choke him until he would pass out’.<sup>130</sup> Al-Tha‘labī reported that, according to ibn ‘Abbās, ‘Noah would be beaten, then wrapped in felt and thrown into his house, and they thought that he had died. But then he would come out and call to them, until he despaired of his people (ever) believing.’<sup>131</sup> He was even beaten up by a boy with a staff.<sup>132</sup> Al-Kisā‘ī declared that the people thought that he was mad and would come out of their houses every day and ‘beat him until he swooned. Then they would drag him by the feet and throw him on the refuse heaps. When he came to, he would go back and be treated the same way. This continued for three centuries . . . with Noah constantly struggling against them and calling them to worship God.’<sup>133</sup>

<sup>129</sup> *Sabih al-Bukhari*, 3338. On the Antichrist in Islam, see Philip C. Almond, *The Antichrist: A New Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 133–139.

<sup>130</sup> Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, p. 45.

<sup>131</sup> Brinner (trans.), ‘*Arā’is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’*’ or ‘*Lives of the Prophets*’ as recounted by . . . *al-Tha‘labī*, p. 93.

<sup>132</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>133</sup> Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*: *Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Kisā’i*), p. 95. See also ibn Kathīr, *Stories of the Prophets* (Kindle edition), pp. 27–32.

## The Islamic Ark

Noah's patience eventually wore out and he complained to God about the people's refusal to listen. 'My Lord,' he said, 'surely my people have called me a liar, so disclose (the truth) decisively between me and them, and rescue me and those of the believers who are with me' (Qur'an 26.117-18).<sup>134</sup> Al- Kisā'ī tells us that the earth, the birds, and the beasts also cried out to God to complain of the people's 'haughtiness, disbelief and tyranny'.<sup>135</sup> God too had had enough: 'Do not address Me concerning those who have done evil. Surely they are going to be drowned' (Qur'an 23.27).<sup>136</sup> He told Noah to build an ark.<sup>137</sup> Still, even as he built it, 'whenever the assembly of his people passed by, they ridiculed him' (Quran 11.38). Despite their ridicule, al-Ya'qubi tells us that, having finished the ark, 'he invited them to board it. He informed them that God was going to send the deluge over the whole earth, to cleanse it of disobedient people, but not one of them responded to him.'<sup>138</sup> According to al-Kisā'ī, always fond of a miracle or two, while Noah was building the ark, the people would come by night and set fire to it. But it remained unharmed. Having completed it, Noah went on a pilgrimage. While he was away, the people decided

<sup>134</sup> See also Qur'an 23.26; 54.10; 71.5-21.

<sup>135</sup> Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qisās al-anbiyā'*: *Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Kisā'ī*), p. 97.

<sup>136</sup> See also Brinner (trans.), *'Arā'is al-Majālis fī Qisās al-Anbiyā'* or 'Lives of the Prophets' as recounted by . . . al-Tha'labī, pp. 94-95.

<sup>137</sup> I have used 'ark' for the sake of continuity. The Arabic words used in the Qur'an translate as 'ship' or 'boat'.

<sup>138</sup> Gordon et al. (eds.), *The History (Ta'rikh): Adam to Pre-Islamic Arabia in The Works of Ibn Wāḍih al-Ya'qubī*, p. 269.

again to burn the ark. But God ‘commanded the angels to bear it up into the sky, where it stayed, suspended between heaven and earth, with the people still looking up at it but unable to do anything to it’.<sup>139</sup>

Unlike Genesis, the Qur’an was silent on the dimensions of the ark. But al-Ya‘qūbī followed the three hundred by fifty by thirty cubits listed in Genesis, along with a lower, a middle, and an upper deck. He reserved the bottom deck for animals (tame, wild, and predators), the middle for birds, and the top deck for Noah and his family, along with food and water.<sup>140</sup> Al-Tha‘labī followed suit but had God ordering a much more elaborate ark: ‘Make it curved, in three (parts); its head like the head of a cock; its middle like the belly of a bird; and its tail inclining like the tail of a bird. Make it symmetrical and place doors in both its sides’<sup>141</sup> (see Plate 10). Al-Kisā’ī’s ark was enormous – one thousand cubits long, five hundred wide, and three hundred high. And he added other decorations: ‘its head like a peacock, its neck like an eagle, its face like a dove, its tiller like a cock’s tale, its beak like that of a falcon, and its wings like a hawk’s. On every feather of the wings he hung multi-coloured jewels, and to the tiller he attached a great mirror.’<sup>142</sup> On each of the planks from which it was made was the

<sup>139</sup> Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*: *Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Kisā’ī*), p. 99.

<sup>140</sup> See Gordon et al. (eds.), *The History (Ta’rīkh): Adam to Pre-Islamic Arabia in The Works of Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Ya‘qūbī*, p. 269.

<sup>141</sup> Brinner (trans.), *‘Arā’ is al-Majālis fī Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’* or *‘Lives of the Prophets’ as recounted by . . . al-Tha‘labī*, p. 94. Elsewhere, al-Tha‘labī has different dimensions for the ark. See pp. 95, 100.

<sup>142</sup> Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*: *Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Kisā’ī*), p. 99.



name of one of the prophets that shone like stars, except for that of Muhammad that shone as brightly as the sun and moon together. This ark had seven stories, each with a door. Little wonder Noah needed help, not only from his children and his faithful followers, but also from Og, the giant.<sup>143</sup>

Like Genesis, the Qur'an has Noah place two of every kind of animal on the ark (Qur'an 11.40-1, 23.27). According to some of the commentators, Iblis (Satan) made it in as well. Thus, ibn 'Abbās said that the first animal that Noah took into the ship was the ant and the last the ass. 'When the ass entered and got its breast in,' we are told,

Iblis, may God curse him, grabbed on to its tail, and it could not pick up its feet. Noah began to say, Woe unto you, enter, even if the Devil is with you. The words slipped from his tongue. When Noah said it, the Devil let the ass go on its way, and it entered, and the Devil entered with it. Noah said to him, What caused you to come on board with me, O Enemy of God? He said, Did you not say Enter, even if the Devil is with you? He said, Depart from me, O Enemy of God. The Devil said, There is no way out for you but to carry me, and he was, according to what they assert, in the back of the boat.<sup>144</sup>

Al-Tha'labī recounts the story of the serpent and the scorpion, neither of whom Noah wished to allow on

<sup>143</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 98, 99.

<sup>144</sup> Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, p. 46. See also Brinner (trans.), 'Arā' is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā' or 'Lives of the Prophets' as recounted by . . . al-Tha'labī, p. 96. Here the ant is replaced by a cow.

board. But he relented when each of them promised not to harm anyone who mentioned Noah's name.<sup>145</sup> Worried that some of the other animals would attack each other, Noah asked God what to do: 'God said to him, "Who set enmity between them?" He answered: "You, O Lord." He said, "So shall I reconcile them so that they will not cause harm to one another?"'<sup>146</sup> In the end, there was a mix of animals on the two lower stories. The humans were on the top story although, for reasons that are mysterious, Al-Tha'labī has Noah place 'the parrot with him on the upper level out of solicitude, lest anything evil kill it'.<sup>147</sup> The isolation of the parrot is puzzling. But it may well go the tradition of the language of the birds, lost after the Fall of Man but vestiges of which remain with the parrot. In Qur'an 27.16, Solomon declares that God gave him 'the speech of birds'.

The Genesis account, we recall, had eight people on the ark – Noah and his wife, his three sons, and their wives. But the Qur'an was ambiguous about who was on the ark with Noah. As we have seen, one of his sons wasn't. And the Qur'an does suggest, although doesn't explicitly say so, that his wife was left behind. Noah and his family were on the ark and, we can say, 'whoever has believed. But only a few had believed with him' (Qur'an 11.40). This left plenty of scope for the commentators. Ibn Ishāq, following the Qur'an, included some believers, but he is confusing on whether, besides Noah, his sons,

<sup>145</sup> See Brinner (trans.), *'Arā'is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* or *'Lives of the Prophets' as recounted by ... al-Tha'labī*, pp. 96–97.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97. <sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

and their wives, there were four or six others.<sup>148</sup> Al-Tha‘labī cited Qatādah who, following the Biblical account, limited the numbers to eight, including Noah’s wife. He cited a further source that had the numbers as seven, leaving out Noah’s wife, another that had seventy over and above the Biblical eight, and yet another that held that they were eighty in total.<sup>149</sup>

Within the Islamic tradition, the ark had one unusual traveller – Adam, or at least his body. The scholar al-‘Yaqūbī (d. 897/8) tells us that, before Noah brought the animals onto the ark, he and his sons ‘went up to the Cave of Treasure. They carried down the body of Adam and put it in the middle of the upper deck of the boat on Friday the seventeenth of Ādhār.’<sup>150</sup> Elsewhere al-Tha‘labī reports that the body of Adam was put ‘on display as a barrier between the men and the women’.<sup>151</sup> Upon his deathbed, al-‘Yaqūbī tells us, Noah ordered his son Shem to go into the ark and retrieve the body of Adam. With his grandson Melchizedek, Shem was to follow an angel to the middle of the earth (Jerusalem) and place the body of Adam where the angel showed him. Melchizedek was commanded to stay there and

<sup>148</sup> See Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, p. 46. Al-Tha‘labī has different similarly confusing numbers for ibn Ishaq, namely a total of ten, aside from their wives. See Brinner (trans.), ‘*Arā’is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’* or ‘*Lives of the Prophets*’ as recounted by . . . al-Tha‘labī, p. 98.

<sup>149</sup> See Brinner (trans.), ‘*Arā’is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’* or ‘*Lives of the Prophets*’ as recounted by . . . al-Tha‘labī, p. 98. See also Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, p. 35.

<sup>150</sup> Gordon et al. (eds.), *The History (Ta’rīkh): Adam to Pre-Islamic Arabia* in *The Works of Ibn Wāḍih al-Ya‘qūbī*, p. 269.

<sup>151</sup> Brinner (trans.), ‘*Arā’is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’* or ‘*Lives of the Prophets*’ as recounted by . . . al-Tha‘labī, p. 98.

‘not to marry any woman, or build any building, or shed any blood, or dress in any garment except the skins of wild animals, or cut his hair or nails. Let him sit alone and constantly praise God.’<sup>152</sup>

Again, the Islamic tradition appears to be relying here on the Christian text, the *Cave of Treasures*, for there we read that Noah and his sons retrieved the body of Adam from the cave; that later, Shem and Melchizedek took the body of Adam and placed it in Golgotha in Jerusalem, the centre of the earth; and that Melchizedek remained there for the remainder of his life as a celibate ascetic. And the *Cave of Treasures* illuminates the reason why the body of Adam was placed in the middle of the ark, between the men and the women. For, according to the *Cave of Treasures*, Methuselah, Noah’s grandfather (Genesis 5.21-7), ordered Noah to place the body of Adam between the women in the eastern part of the ark and the men in the western part to keep them from having *anything* to do with each other: ‘[T]hy wives shall not pass over to you, and ye shall not pass over to them. Ye shall neither eat nor drink with them, and ye shall have no intercourse whatsoever with them until ye go forth from the Ark.’<sup>153</sup>

<sup>152</sup> Gordon et al. (eds.), *The History (Ta’rikh): Adam to Pre-Islamic Arabia* in *The Works of Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Ya’qūbī*, p. 272. See also Brinner (trans.), *‘Arā’is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’* or *‘Lives of the Prophets’ as recounted by . . . al-Tha’labī*, p. 82 for a variety of places on the final burial site of Adam.

<sup>153</sup> Budge (trans.), *The Book of the Cave of Treasures*, pp. 104–105. The story of Noah retrieving the body of Adam from the Cave of Treasures (Caverna Thesaurorum) also occurred in the writings of the Christian Hippolytus of Rome in the third century. See Chapter 2 for more details.

Unlike in the rabbinic tradition, the Islamic commentators generally did not allow Og the giant on to the ark. But he survived anyway. Ibn ‘Abbas declared,

Og would seize the clouds for himself, and drink from them, because of his height. He would take the whale from the depths of the sea and fry it in the eye of the Sun. He would lift it up to the Sun, then eat it. He said to Noah: ‘Take me with you.’ But Noah replied: ‘Out with you, enemy of God, I have not been ordered to take you with me.’ God spread water on the face of the Earth and the mountains, but it did not even reach the knees of Og son of ‘Anaq.<sup>154</sup>

That said, Al- Ṭabarī, following the rabbis, did find a place for Og on the ark.<sup>155</sup> Except for Noah and those with him on the ark (and perhaps Og), everybody and everything else perished.

According to the Qur’an, after Noah had gathered the animals, his family, Og, and other believers into the ark, the flood came. Like the Genesis story, the Qur’an has the waters coming from above and below: ‘So We opened the gates of the sky with water pouring (down), and made the earth gush forth with springs’ (Qur’an 11.12). And the commentators faithfully followed the Qur’an on this. But the Qur’an also contains another account of whence the waters came: ‘our command came and the oven boiled’ (Qur’an 11.40). This reflects the rabbinic tradition that the waters of the flood were boiling. And it is redolent of

<sup>154</sup> Brinner (trans.), *‘Arā’is al-Majālis fi Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’ or ‘Lives of the Prophets’ as recounted by . . . al-Tha’labī*, pp. 99–100. See also Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, p. 47.

<sup>155</sup> Rosenthal (trans.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī: Volume 1*, p. 361.

Hippolytus of Rome and his story of the wife of Ham, Zedkat Nabu, whose bread was ruined as water gushed out of the oven – a sign of the deluge to come.<sup>156</sup> But, that said, what was the oven? Al-Thaʿlabī reported on the variety of possible meanings among the commentators. Several said that it meant no more than the water gushing forth from the surface of the earth; another that it referred to the tannūr – the noblest and highest spot on earth; another said that it was an oven (tannūr) of stone that belonged to Adam.<sup>157</sup> Al-Ṭabarī mentioned that the oven belonged to Eve.<sup>158</sup> Ibn Kathīr believed that it was the oven at Noah’s house.<sup>159</sup> There was also debate about the original location of the oven. Al-Kisāʿī declared that when Noah completed his pilgrimage rites in Mecca, ‘he turned and saw Adam’s kiln to the right of Noah’s house, which was where the mosque of Kūfa [in Iraq] now stands,’ and where, tradition has it, Noah built the ark.<sup>160</sup> This was perhaps the most common opinion, but others located the oven in Syria or even India.<sup>161</sup>

The Qur’an tells us simply that the ark was ‘in (the midst of) wave(s) like mountains’ (Qur’an 11.42). But Al-Kisāʿī let his imagination soar:

God told Gabriel to command the wardens of the waters to send them forth in measureless amounts and to strike

<sup>156</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>157</sup> See Rosenthal (trans.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī: Volume 1*, pp. 95–96.

<sup>158</sup> Rosenthal (trans.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī: Volume 1*, p. 363

<sup>159</sup> See Ibn Kathīr, *Stories of the Prophets* (Kindle edition), p. 35.

<sup>160</sup> Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ: Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Kisāʿī)*, p. 100.

<sup>161</sup> See Brinner (trans.), *ʿArūʾis al-Majālis fī Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ or ʿLives of the Prophetsʾ as recounted by . . . al-Thaʿlabī*, p. 96.

the waters with the Wing of Wrath. Gabriel struck the waters. And springs and wells gushed up profusely; the kiln boiled over, the sky poured down rain, and the waters met as ordained; the water of the sky was dark and that of the earth light. The waters broke freely, and the waves battered against themselves, with the angels in their midst causing lightning and thunder; and the deluge inundated from all sides and every place, the angels of wrath churning it up with their wings. And God commanded the angels of the earth to hold the world lest it be pulled loose from its moorings.<sup>162</sup>

During the flood, it was difficult to tell night from day, although, enlightened by the rabbinic tradition, al-Kisā'ī remarked there was a 'white bead', the light from which diminished by day and increased by night. Those on the ark were also comforted by a cock that crowed at dawn and cried out, 'Praise be to the Blessed King . . . who hath taken night away and brought the dawn of a new creation. To prayer, O Noah! God will have mercy upon thee.'<sup>163</sup> Life on the ark was not always pleasant. Adam's body was intended to preclude men and women from having sex. But Ham, we are told by Qatādah (c.581–c.644), 'had intercourse with his wife, and Noah prayed to his Lord . . . and Ham's sperm became altered, and he brought forth black (offspring)'.<sup>164</sup> Al-Tha'labī also reported that Noah had forbidden sex to the animals on

<sup>162</sup> Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*: *Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Kisā'ī*'), pp. 101–102.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>164</sup> Brinner (trans.), '*Arā'is al-Majālis fī Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* or '*Lives of the Prophets*' as recounted by . . . *al-Tha'labī*, p. 97.

the ark, but ‘a dog mounted a bitch and Noah cursed him saying: “O God, bring him unto distress.”’<sup>165</sup>

Human and animal waste was a problem: ‘[W]hen the people’s waste offended Noah on the ship, he was commanded to stroke the tail of the elephant. So he stroked it, and two pigs came forth from it, and he was freed from it [because they ate it]. The mouse gave birth on the ship, and when the mice troubled him, he was commanded to order the lion to sneeze, and two cats came forth from the nostrils which ate the mice.’<sup>166</sup> Al-Tha‘labī related the same legend, told by Shem, who was resurrected by Jesus for the occasion, although the problem was one of cattle dung rather than human.<sup>167</sup> That the pig was only created on the ark from the rear of an elephant provided a legendary reason for the Muslim distaste for pork.<sup>168</sup> As for Noah, he had no sleep from the time that he boarded the ark until he disembarked.

The Genesis story gives both forty and 150 days for the duration of the flood. But the Qur’an gives us no indication how long the flood lasted, nor how long before Noah disembarked. So, the Islamic commentators were free to be creative, suggesting anywhere from 150 days to six months to just over a year. The Qur’an has Noah praying that God will bring him ‘to a blessed landing place’ (Qur’an 23.29) before the ark came to rest on al-Jūdī. But there was a general agreement that, before landing there, the ark

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.      <sup>166</sup> Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, p. 47.

<sup>167</sup> See Brinner (trans.), ‘*Arā’is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’* or ‘*Lives of the Prophets*’ as recounted by . . . al-Tha‘labī, p. 100.

<sup>168</sup> See Moshe Bildstein, ‘How Many Pigs Were on Noah’s Ark? An Exegetical Encounter on the Nature of Purity,’ *Harvard Theological Review* 108 (2015), pp. 448–470.



circumnavigated the Kaaba in Mecca. Thus al-Kisā'ī has the ark visiting Jerusalem, then on to the Kaaba, which it circled seven times,<sup>169</sup> while al-Ya'qūbī has the ark circumambulating for a week.<sup>170</sup> To this, drawing on rabbinic sources, he added the story of the dove and the raven. Four months after the ark came to rest on al-Jūdī, he wrote, Noah sent out the raven, to find out how things stood with the water. It found corpses floating on the water, settled upon them, and did not return. Then he sent out the dove. It brought back an olive leaf, so he knew that the water had gone.<sup>171</sup>

### A New Humanity

The Qur'an tells us that, while on the ark, Noah expressed the hope of coming to land (Qur'an 23.29). It also tells us that God eventually ordered the earth to swallow up the water and the sky to stop the rain (Qur'an 11.44). And Noah was told by God to leave the ark (Qur'an 11.48). Of Noah's life after the flood there is no mention in the Qur'an. But there was a general agreement among the commentators that Noah was saddened by it all, although heartened by God's promise never to flood the earth again. Al-Ya'qūbī declared, 'When Noah emerged from the boat and saw people's bones

<sup>169</sup> See Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā': Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Kisā'ī)*, p. 103.

<sup>170</sup> See Gordon et al. (eds.), *The History (Ta'rikh): Adam to Pre-Islamic Arabia in The Works of Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Ya'qūbī*, p. 270. See also Rosenthal (trans.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī: Volume 1*, p. 362.

<sup>171</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 270. See also Brinner (trans.), *'Arā'is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā' or 'Lives of the Prophets' as recounted by . . . al-Tha'labī*, p. 100–101, where it is the resurrected Shem who reports on the raven and the dove.

glimmering, it grieved him and saddened him. God revealed to him, “I will not send the deluge onto the earth ever again after this.”<sup>172</sup> Al-Kisā’ī too told the story of the rainbow: ‘Noah,’ God said, ‘I have known from all time that I should not again torment anyone with flood and drowning until the Day of Resurrection, for I have set my rainbow, which thou seest in the sky, as a guarantee for the people of the earth against deluge.’<sup>173</sup> Following the Biblical account, Ibn Ishāq spoke of Noah’s division of the land among his sons, and followed with a long list of the descendants of Noah, as did al-Ṭabarī, giving an array of descendants from a number of sources.<sup>174</sup> Of those other than Noah and his family who were on the ark, al-Ṭabarī tells us that ‘they disappeared and perished, and no descendants of theirs survived’.<sup>175</sup> In short, a new humanity began with Noah. Al-Ṭabarī again: ‘In this world today, the children of Adam are the direct offspring of Noah and of no other descendants of Adam, as God says, “And we made his offspring the survivors”’ (Qur’an 37.77).<sup>176</sup>

And of Noah’s drunkenness? Given the disapproval of alcohol in the Qur’an, the commentators ignored it. They did not follow the rabbinic criticism of Noah for his having drunk too much. Noah was far too important to Islam, as one of God’s prophets, to have passed out from

<sup>172</sup> Gordon et al. (eds.), *The History (Ta’rīkh): Adam to Pre-Islamic Arabia* in *The Works of Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Ya’qūbī*, p. 270.

<sup>173</sup> Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qisṣat al-anbiyā’): Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Kisā’ī*, p. 104.

<sup>174</sup> See Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, pp. 48–49. Brinner (trans.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume 2*, pp. 10–27.

<sup>175</sup> Rosenthal (trans.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī: Volume 1*, p. 368.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 368.

too much wine. But they did recount the Biblical story of his nakedness. And like Judaism and Christianity, they too wrestled with the apparent unfairness of Noah's cursing Canaan for what was, after all, the sin of Ham.

Thus, for example, ibn Ishāq ignored the vineyard and drunkenness but reported on Noah's nakedness being uncovered while he slept, Ham's failure to cover him, and Shem and Japheth's doing so. In this case, Noah cursed Canaan, the son of Ham.<sup>177</sup> Similarly, al-Ṭabarī has Canaan cursed, although he also included Ham as a slave to his two brothers.<sup>178</sup> This may have been because al-Ṭabarī was familiar with the rabbinic story that had Ham having sex on the ark: 'Ham attacked his wife [sexually] in the ark, so Noah prayed that his seed be altered, and he produced the blacks.'<sup>179</sup> Al-Ya'qūbī followed the rabbinic tradition of Ham's laughing at his father's genitals, although he laid the curse upon Canaan and explicitly excluded Ham from the curse.<sup>180</sup>

On the other hand, al-Kisā'ī ignored Canaan altogether and placed the curse on Ham. When Noah awoke, he reported, Noah asked Ham, "Do you laugh at your father's genitals? . . . May God change your complexion and may your face turn black!" And that very instant his face did turn black.<sup>181</sup> And he went on to ask God to

<sup>177</sup> See Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, p. 48.

<sup>178</sup> See Brinner (trans.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume 2*, pp. 11–12. Al-Ṭabarī has Noah take a softer attitude to Ham later; see p. 14.

<sup>179</sup> Rosenthal (trans.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī: Volume 1*, p. 365.

<sup>180</sup> See Gordon et al. (eds.), *The History (Ta'rikh): Adam to Pre-Islamic Arabia in The Works of Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Ya'qūbī*, p. 271.

<sup>181</sup> Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qisṣ al-anbiyā')*: *Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Kisā'ī*, p. 105.

make slaves of Ham's progeny from that time on. As for the 'blackness' of his progeny, al-Kisā'ī told his readers that, after the death of Noah, the wife of Ham bore two black children. Ham declared that they were not his. "They are yours," said his wife, "for the curse of your father is upon us."<sup>182</sup> After these two children had grown up, Ham laid with her again and she bore two more black children. Ham knew that they were his, and he left his wife and fled. Among the descendants of Ham, al-Kisā'ī declared, 'are the Nubians, the Negroes, the Berbers, the Sindhis, the Indians and all the blacks'.<sup>183</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, following ibn 'Abbas, had all the descendants of the sons of Noah colour-coded: 'Born to Noah were Shem, whose descendants were reddish-white; Ham, whose descendants were black with hardly any whiteness; and Japheth, whose descendants were reddish-brown.'<sup>184</sup> Thus, as in Christianity and Judaism so too in Islam, all the people of the earth were part of a common humanity. But on the other hand, as in early modern Christianity and Judaism so too in Islam, the connection between Ham, blackness, and slavery was embedded in the story of Islam.<sup>185</sup>

The common theme in accounts of Noah's death was his exhortation to be faithful to one God only. According to al-Kisā'ī, when Noah's time had come, he called Shem to his deathbed: 'I charge you with two things . . . One of the two with which I charge you is the Profession of faith,

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.      <sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>184</sup> Rosenthal (trans.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī: Volume 1*, p. 368.

<sup>185</sup> For refutations within Islam of the connection of blackness and slavery, see Haroon Bashir, 'Black Excellence and the Curse of Ham: Debating Race and Slavery in the Islamic Tradition', *ReOrient* 5 (2019), pp. 92–116.

“There is no God but God,” for this Profession will render asunder heaven and earth, and nothing can veil it . . . The second thing is that you increase saying “Praise be to God,” and “Praise Him,” for He is the repository of all reward.<sup>186</sup> Thus, on his deathbed, Noah was repeating the verse in the Qur’an (37.35) that is the first part of the Shahada, the central assertion of Islamic faith, and the first of the five pillars of Islam: ‘There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his prophet.’

<sup>186</sup> Thackston Jr. (trans.), *Tales of the Prophets (Qisāṣ al-anbiyā’): Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Kisā’i*, p. 106.