The influence of Jewish Noah-traditions on the Qur'ān and later Islamic literature

Martin Jagonak

The paper shall give a general idea of the main characteristics of the Qur'ānic report on Noah and a brief outlook at the Flood-story in later Islamic literature. The subject is part of my postdoctoral project "The figure of Noah in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Tradition" (working title) with the aim of "Habilitation" in Semitic Studies as well as in Arabic and Islamic Studies.

The story of Noah and the Flood is mentioned in the Qur'ān ten times altogether. The text being concerned with Noah amounts to a total of 110 verses. The complete course of events as known from the Bible is given in the Qur'ān more or less completely only once, that is to say in surah 11, verses 25–49, but even this report indicates only the rough outlines of the events or rather hints at them. Like all the other Qur'ānic passages dealing with Noah the text concentrates on different points of emphasis: Noah is described as a prophet, who calls upon his contemporaries to turn away from idolatry and tries to bring them to the worship of Allah, the one true God. Threatening those of his people who disbelieve and cannot be admonished with severe punishment Noah is in the Qur'ān the first prophet within a long succession of warners including Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Lot, Šuʿayb and many more. The last one of this line, thus the "seal of the prophets" as he is called in surah 33:40, is finally Muḥammad. Noah represents the prototype of a prophet and therefore stands for Muḥammad himself.

Without any previous knowledge one could hardly understand the Flood report in surah 11, verses 25–49. It is addressed to an audience which is already quite familiar with the story of Noah and the Flood. The version assumed to be known is based on Jewish tradition. Since the Qur'ānic Flood report does not intend to tell a new story but aims to give a re-interpretation of a well-known one, many details of the course of events are omitted. The only section with a narrative structure clear enough to be understood without any previous knowledge is the episode of Noah's fourth son (surah 11:42–47), who refuses to board the ark and finally was among the drowned. On the basis of this tale it becomes exceedingly clear, that it is the right faith in the one true God which saves from drowning, and not kinship to Noah as brought into focus in Genesis 9:8–9.

In the Qur'ān God establishes his covenant with those who believe with Noah, not with his descendants, and even Noah's own son is drowned because he disbelieved and could not be

admonished. In this regard, the story told about Noah corresponds to Muḥammad's mission: Preaching Islam, Muḥammad changes the traditional social structure with the standing of a person being dependent on criteria like consanguinity and membership of a certain tribe or family, and right faith in the one true God and early profession of Islam become decisive instead. This evident parallel to Noah's mission gives special emphasis to Muḥammad's admonitions.

The Qur'ānic Flood report follows a very clear theological concept: Noah is descibed as the prototype of a prophet and therefore stands for Muḥammad himself, and the fist priority is to show that only those find salvation who believe in the one true God.

In contrast, later Islamic literature adopts a large variety of narratives and legends from Jewish (and Christian) tradition, suiting them to Islamic ideas and concepts, of course, and trying to give full details on every aspect of the story.

It goes without saying that oral tradition is of crucial importance for the process of adopting motifs, especially in the period of early Islam. In particular the contribution of liturgical texts has been underestimated so far. Although it is very difficult to make statements on the influence of oral traditions for lack of verifiability, it would be a methodological mistake to leave it out of consideration. That is, however, beyond the scope of this short paper, but maybe the discussion at the conference will give the opportunity of exchanging views and experiences on this topic.