THE PARASCRIPTURAL DIMENSIONS

OF THE 'TALE OF HĀRŪT AND MĀRŪT'

John C. Reeves

University of North Carolina, Charlotte

One of the more perplexing problems facing modern students of the Qur'ān and the interpretive lore surrounding it that is embodied in early *ḥadīth*, traditional commentaries, and collections of prophetic legends involves the recovery of its oral or written sources and the literary and social contexts wherein such material is rooted. There are few modern critical scholars who would deny the fundamentally generative role played by Bible in the formulation and expression of qur'ānic discourse. Beginning in the nineteenth-century with the influential prize essay of Abraham Geiger[1] and continuing with varying degrees of emphasis and success up to the present, western scholars have devoted considerable effort and energy to show that it is not simply the various canonical versions of 'Bible' familiar from later communities of Jews or Christians that buttress the Qur'ān's or its interpretive tradition's frequent appeals to scriptural characters, episodes, and exemplars. Rather, it is a type of 'Bible' that presupposes and operates with certain distinctive readings or traditions that are paralleled in Jewish midrashic treatments of these same characters or episodes, or in the case of Christian materials, the traditions or interpretations that are also attested in so-called apocryphal and even allegedly heterodox works. It is this broad spectrum of amplificatory materials that my titular adjective 'parascriptural' embraces: communities of readers in Near Eastern late antiquity performed, experienced, and transmitted 'Bible' as well as other scriptures in a variety of registers and interpretive formats.[2] Muḥammad was not the only religious leader in late antiquity

---

[1] Abraham Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (Bonn: F. Baaden, 1833). For the groundbreaking nature of Geiger's research upon Islamic literature, see especially Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 52-62; Reuven Firestone, "The Qur'ān and the Bible: Some Modern Studies of Their Relationship," in *Bible and Qur'ān: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality* (ed. John C. Reeves; Leiden/Atlanta: Brill/Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 7-11.

[2] I borrow the useful phrase 'communities of readers' from Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (trans. Lydia G. Cochrane; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 1-23. For the definition of 'parascriptural,' see

whose Bible was invested with a scope, whether material or conceptual, that transcends reputedly orthodox norms as to what that label supposedly encompassed. But he is surely our most important witness to what might constitute authentic 'biblical' lore in the Ḥijāz during the seventh century.

One intriguing example of this more expansive understanding of scriptural lore presents itself in the curious reference contained in one *sūra* of the Qur'ān to two 'angels' in Babylon named Hārūt and Mārūt who bear responsibility for the spread of 'magic' (*siḥr*) and other revelatory knowledge among the people (2:102). These two names do not figure anywhere else in the Qur'ān nor do they appear in any canonical version of the Jewish or Christian scriptures which would have predated or been contemporary with Muḥammad or the first few generations of Muslim scholastics.[3] The qur'ānic verse is characteristically terse: we are not, for example, informed therein as to who these two particular angels are, how they came to be in Babylon, or why they would implicate themselves in the transmittal of disreputable knowledge to humanity. It does however remark that Hārūt and Mārūt 'never taught anyone without first warning: "We are a temptation; so do not disbelieve!"'[4] It then goes on to affirm that while the empirical application of their teachings might produce marital discord, they remain essentially harmless except for those cases when God permits their efficacy. The unfortunate miscreants who persist in adhering to such teachings and in rejecting God 'will have no portion in the World to Come.'[5]

The present paper focuses upon the ways in which early Muslim commentators and traditionists have embedded and amplified this enigmatic verse within a rich layer of interpretive lore. I will also seek to show that while the extant discursive narratives of an elaborated 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt' are

---

James E. Bowley and John C. Reeves, "Rethinking the Concept of 'Bible': Some Theses and Proposals," *Henoch* 25 (2003): 3-18.

[3] The names 'Hārūt' and 'Mārūt' are most often explained by modern scholars as garbled reflexes of 'Haurvatāt' and 'Amərətāt,' Avestan entities who correspond to the later figures 'Khurdād' and 'Murdād' and who govern the material realms of waters and plant life respectively. See Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *Religion of Ancient Iran* (trans. K. M. Jamaspasa; Bombay: Tata Press Ltd., 1973), 137-38; Alessandro Bausani, *Religion in Iran: From Zoroaster to Baha'ullah* (trans. J. M. Marchesi; New York: Bibliotheca Press, 2000), 116. The source of this suggested explanation appears to be Paul de Lagarde; see the references cited by Max Grünbaum, "Beiträge zur vergleichenden Mythologie aus der Hagada," in idem, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sprach- und Sagenkunde* (ed. Felix Perles; Berlin: S. Calvary, 1901), 63 n.5. Possible confirmation for this interreligious correlation is found in a central Asian Manichaean lexical list (M 109 recto), where line 16 of this Middle Persian-Sogdian glossary seems to make the same identification. See W. B. Henning, *Sogdica* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1940), 16 (text) and 19 (commentary).

[4] Majid Fakhry, *An Interpretation of the Qur'an: English Translation of the Meanings, A Bilingual Edition* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 19-20, slightly emended.

[5] Ibid., 20, slightly emended. Cf. the potentially relevant pronouncements of R. 'Aqiva and Abba Shaul in *m. Sanh.* 10.1.

indubitably Muslim in their cultural identity, the fundamental building blocks out of which the 'Tale' has been fashioned are 'biblically' grounded, and indeed rely upon one or more versions of an articulated 'Bible' that is demonstrably older than the canonical written forms of this book which are presently attested among western Jewish and Christian communities.

Early Muslim tradents recount an elaborate contextual background within which to situate this problematic verse. Arguably its most artificial, by which I mean its most consciously literary, form figures in those medieval anthologies of stories culled from a variety of both written and oral sources that come to be known as 'prophetic legends' (qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'), encyclopaedic assemblages wherein the narrative lore associated with Muḥammad's scriptural predecessors is accumulated and collated under chronologically sequenced nominative rubrics. Within such standard collections, such as those assembled by Tha'labī and Kisā'ī, it takes the form of a self-contained story packaged alongside legends about the prophet Idrīs and normally introduced with the incipit 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt' (qiṣṣat Hārūt wa-Mārūt). By way of contrast, in the *tafsīr* or traditional qur'ānic commentary tradition we encounter a wealth of fragmentary and dissembled clusters of narrative materials and illustrative comments associated with particular named tradents, a few of which are even traced to the Prophet himself.[6] These more malleable clusters by and large can be successfully correlated with the 'prophetic legends' renditions inasmuch as the latter anthologies frequently reproduce the *isnād*s of the authorities upon whom they rely.

For the purpose of my exposition and analysis today, perhaps the least complicated procedure would be to identify first those sources which I am using to uncover the various elements which seem to belong to the narrative complex of the 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt.' To date I have sifted through the most relevant of the lengthy collection of traditions assembled by Ṭabarī in his *Tafsīr* to Q 2:102 as printed in the standard Būlāq edition of that commentary—taking into account both the main text and the marginalia, this amounts to twenty-one printed pages.[7] Prominent traditionists incorporated therein include the notorious Ka'b al-Aḥbār, who is often fingered as a primary conduit of nefarious *isrā'īliyyāt* or 'Jewish stuff' into nascent

---

[6] The latest comprehensive treatment of the *tafsīr* genre, coupled with copious bibliography, is that of Claude Gilliot, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān: Classical and Medieval," *EncQur* 2:99-124.

[7] Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (30 vols.; Būlāq, 1905-11; reprinted as 12 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1986), 1:350-70.

Islam,[8] as well as Mujāhid, Ibn ʿAbbās, Ibn ʿUmar, ʿAlī, Rabīʿ, and Suddī. I have also examined various versions of the 'Tale' that figure in the compilations of quasi-historical and legendary lore attributed to Maqdisī, Thaʿlabī, Kisāʾī, and Qazwīnī, employing the standard print editions in each case.[9] According to Roberto Tottoli, the yet unpublished manuscript of Isḥāq b. Bishr's early collection of 'prophetic legends' held by the Bodleian Library in Oxford contains a discrete section amounting to five manuscript leaves dealing with Hārūt and Mārūt,[10] but I have to date been unfortunately unable to consult this potentially valuable material. Nevertheless Maqdisī does claim to transmit some traditions emanating from Isḥāq b. Bishr, and these will have to serve in the interim as representative of this early compilation.[11]

A synoptic examination of the aforementioned witnesses allows one to produce a skeletal outline or sequence of narrative elements for the 'Tale' which serves to unite the majority of these sources despite the discrepancies in the details of their respective stories. These common structural elements might be listed *seriatim* under the following four rubrics:

> A. a prolegomenon in heaven
>
> B. resulting in an angelic mission to earth;
>
> C. the corruption of these emissary angels,
>
> D. and their consequent punishment by God.

Viewed through a more powerful lens, several further sub-themes or motifs are visible within each of the four constituent elements of the larger narrative structure. For example, under (A) 'a prolegomenon in heaven,' a prominent motif is a tension or even a rivalry that is perceived to exist between the angels and the newly created human race. This often produces an angelic reproach or reproof of God Himself for

---

[8] See Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qurʾān and Muslim Literature* (trans. Michael Robertson; Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2002), 90-91; also the sources cited by John C. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postrabbinic Jewish Apocalypse Reader* (Leiden/Atlanta: Brill/Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 109-10 n.20.

[9] Maqdisī, *Kitāb al-badʾ waʾl-taʾrīkh* (6 vols.; ed. C. Huart; Paris: E. Leroux, 1899-1919), 3:14.1-14; Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ al-musammā bʾal-ʿarāʾis* (Cairo: Al-Sharafīyah, 1880), 48-51; Kisāʾī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ: Vita Prophetarum auctore Muḥammed ben ʿAbdallah al-Kisaʾi* (2 vols.; ed. I. Eisenberg; Leiden: Brill, 1922-23), 2:45.22-46.10, 13-17; for Qazwīnī, see *Zakarija Ben Muhammed Ben Mahmud el-Cazwini's Kosmographie* (2 vols.; ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld; Göttingen, 1848-49; reprinted, Wiesbaden: Martin Sändig, 1967), 1:61.18-62.9.

[10] Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qurʾān*, 158-59 nn.11-12. The accession number is Oxford Ms. Bodl. Huntingdon 388; fols. 95a-99a feature the angels Hārūt and Mārūt.

[11] Note also Nabia Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri I: Historical Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 45-46. She speculates that her fragmentary Adam and Eve papyrus may stem from this 'obscure' tradent.

4

bringing such a defective group of creatures as 'humans' into existence. Or under (C) 'the corruption of these emissary angels,' the signal transgression which effects their corruption is that of actual or attempted sexual activity with a woman of unsurpassed beauty. There are however some crucial differences in the way this general scenario is set up and played out among the various narrative renditions. Most of these variant features of what is arguably an integral extra-qur'ānic tale point suggestively toward its essentially folkloristic character and popular appeal predicating a variety of oral and written registers,[12] some of which (as we shall see) extend well beyond the boundaries of Islam.

For a closer examination of the 'Tale' itself, here is the version associated with the traditionist Mujāhid.[13] I have lightly edited the text as found in the *Tafsīr* of Ṭabarī in order to minimize redundancy and omit obscurity:[14]

> According to Mujāhid, the subject of Hārūt and Mārūt pertains to when the angels were amazed at the wickedness of human beings even after messengers, books, and explanations had been provided for them. Their Lord said to them (i.e., the angels): 'Choose from among yourselves two angels whom I will send down to govern among the human beings upon the earth.' They chose Hārūt and Mārūt. [God at this point issues special instructions to Hārūt and Mārūt emphasizing how they should express the divine ordinances].

> Then they accordingly came down—aside from the One God they were the most obedient among them (i.e., of divine beings)—and they governed and acted justly. They would govern during the daylight hours among human beings, and when it was evening they would re-ascend and remain among the angels. They would go back down (to earth) when it was morning. They continued to govern and act justly until al-Zuhara (i.e., the planet Venus) came to them in the beautiful form of a woman. She was party to a lawsuit, and they

[12] Note the remarks of Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (trans. Jacqueline S. Teitelbaum; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 9.

[13] Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 722), identified by Ibn al-Nadīm (*Fihrist* [Dodge, 1:75]) as one who transmitted the 'book of Ibn 'Abbās' whose traditions are considered to be the most trustworthy. See further Gilliot, "Exegesis," 2:105. Gilliot points out that the manuscript edition of Mujāhid's *tafsīr* is not always identical with the material that is quoted by Ṭabarī.

[14] Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān* (ed. Beirut, 1986), 1:365.

pronounced judgment against her. Passion arose in each one of them for her. One of them said to his colleague: 'Do you feel similarly to how I feel?' He answered, 'Yes.' They sent for her (saying), 'Come (back) to us and we will rule in your favor.' When she returned, they spoke to her and issued a ruling in her favor. (Then they said): 'Come with us,' and she came to them, and they exposed their genitals to her. However, their lechery was in their hearts, for they were not like human beings with regard to lust for women and its pleasures.

After they had finished with this, and having taken delight in her and becoming infatuated with her, al-Zuhara flew away and returned to where she formerly was. When it was evening, they tried to re-ascend, but they were repelled: it was not permitted for them to do so, nor were their wings able to carry them. They sought the help of a mortal man: they came to him and said, 'Invoke your Lord for us.' He answered, 'How can the inhabitants of earth intercede for the inhabitants of heaven?' They said, 'We heard your Lord speak well of you in heaven.' He promised them he would pray for them that day or the next day. He prayed for them and his prayers were answered. They were made to choose between punishment in this world or punishment in the hereafter. They each looked at one another and said, 'We know that the types of divine punishment in the hereafter are like such and such and are eternal, whereas in comparison (those for) this world are transient and (will eventually cease).' It was decreed that they be sent down to Babylon and endure their punishment there. It is said that they are suspended in iron (chains), upside-down (and) flapping their wings.

Some pertinent initial observations:

1. Angelic amazement at human wickedness and perfidy is the essential flash point which sets all the extant versions of the 'Tale' into narrative motion. The setting itself however is manifested in a variety of forms. Here their astonishment stems from the circumstance that even though God has already provided

6

them with prophets, scriptures, and clear instructions outlining the difference between right and wrong, the human race persists in its sinful activities. Perhaps humans have misunderstood these particular media of communication? Direct intervention from heaven—in the form of two angelic governors, themselves paragons of virtue—should soon set humans on the straight path. Another version attributed to Rabī' takes a related though variant track. God responds to the same angelic denunciation of humanity by offering an excuse for their sinfulness: humans were in fact ignorant of what constituted criminal or idolatrous activity![15] Hence they would require angelic guidance in order to learn the difference between righteous and sinful behaviors. Far more prevalent, however, are the versions of the 'Tale' which link the angelic condemnation of humanity either directly or indirectly to the scriptural (i.e., qur'ānic) accounts of the creation of Adam. According to one form of this tradition attributed to Ibn 'Abbās, 'God opened a breach in heaven for His angels to view the deeds of humanity. When they saw them committing crimes, they said: "O Lord, these humans whom You created with Your hand and whom You made Your angels worship and whom You taught the names of everything are committing crimes!"'[16] A consequence of this type of exegetical linkage, whether intentional or inherited, is an importation into this particular narrative setting of what were each arguably once independent but which are now interlocked elements or themes; namely, (1) simmering angelic resentment toward and jealousy of the exalted status of Adam;[17] (2) the motif of a contest pitting Adam/humanity against one or more angelic beings in order to determine who is the superior created entity;[18] and (3) the scriptural legend(s) recounting the fall of Iblīs and his minions.[19] None of these complicating elements are visible in Mujāhid or Rabī'. Ibn 'Abbās (and the parallel versions) by contrast has God respond to the angelic reproach with a forceful challenge. He asserts that the angels would fare no better than humans were they to become subject to the same kind of libidinal forces and drives that humans experience on earth. This naturally invites an angelic denial which will invoke the scene for a contest pitting angelic champions against human frailties whose outcome is tragically foreordained.

---

[15] Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān* (ed. Beirut, 1986), 1:364. The theme of human ignorance is at polar variance with the notion that humans had been privy to special instruction prior to the angelic mission.

[16] Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān* (ed. Beirut, 1986), 1:362-63.

[17] This theme can occur in isolation from the following two in rabbinic sources.

[18] Some rabbinic and Christian sources make this theme a consequence of the preceding one.

[19] It occurs almost exclusively in Christian and Muslim sources. *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* is the first indubitably Jewish attestation of this theme, and given this work's undisputed post-Islamic provenance, is likely indebted to non-Jewish thought for this story.

Almost all versions of the 'Tale' specify the emissaries or the contest participants as two in number; more rarely they are identified as three. Citing unnamed 'annalists,' Maqdisī relates that God commanded the reproachful angels 'to select three of their most worthy representatives,' but this anthologist fails to inform us how we should correlate or match these unnamed three with the incipit introducing his discussion of these angels, where only two, namely Hārūt and Mārūt, find mention. A tradition attributed to Kalbī and found in Tha'labī also envisions three angels as involved in this setting.

2. Hārūt and Mārūt are depicted as governing justly for an unspecified period of time. They arrive on earth each morning, spend the day adjudicating lawsuits and disputes (Maqdisī says they instructed the people in righteousness),[20] and return to their heavenly station at nightfall. This version of the 'Tale' is formally distinct from those wherein God has challenged the angels to put their assertion of their superiority to humans to the test. The crucial difference centers on the complicity of the deity in this enterprise. For Mujāhid and allied versions, Hārūt and Mārūt are emissaries of God and serve at His behest. The remaining versions represent God as reluctantly permitting Hārūt and Mārūt to descend to earth in order to confirm a point. The pedagogic mission of the angels is often absent from these versions because it is no longer a necessary component of the plot.[21] Instead, God is usually depicted as endowing Hārūt and Mārūt with human passions prior to their descent so that they can make good on their boast that they would never succumb to terrestrial temptations. According to Ka'b and Ibn 'Abbās, God also explicitly adjures them to avoid specific transgressions such as idolatry, theft, bloodshed, fornication, and the drinking of wine. Finally, unlike those forms of the story which represent Hārūt and Mārūt faithfully discharging their divinely sanctioned educational or judicial obligations on earth among humans for an unspecified number of days, the versions which envision them as 'contestants' portray them as succumbing to temptation almost immediately upon their arrival, usually in less than twenty-four hours.

3. All extant versions of the 'Tale' attribute their downfall to their overwhelming infatuation with a beautiful woman. Most versions identify her by name as Zuhara, 'shining star; Venus,' occasionally supplying the further Persian glosses of Anahid and/or Beidukht, also designations for that heavenly body. She is in almost every case a fully human entity, no matter whether the different versions characterize her

---

[20] *K. al-bad'* (ed. Huart), 3:14.1-14.
[21] The version attributed to Suddī has both, which may be representative of a transitional stage in the recountal of the story. Therein Hārūt and Mārūt criticize not human behavior but human jurisprudence and aver that they themselves could do a better job. See Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān* (ed. Beirut, 1986), 1:363-64.

as inherently deceitful and lustful or as totally chaste. The tradition recounted by Mujāhid is atypical in that the woman who tempts and ultimately corrupts the two angelic rulers is actually a heavenly entity herself, the planet Venus (al-Zuhara), who has apparently only temporarily assumed human guise. Although it is not explicitly stated therein, it seems likely that she was dispatched at the behest of God in order to put his two emissaries to the test, suggesting that the independent motif of the 'contest' staged between the angels and the deity or humans has entered this otherwise distinct tale-type at a different place in the story.

There are at least three different forms of the scene featuring the encounter of Hārūt and Mārūt with the beautiful woman which produces their fateful corruption. As we have just seen, one form conceives of the woman also as a heavenly messenger whom God has apparently dispatched in order to test his angelic judges. This form, representing a conflation of distinct tale-types, is found only in Mujāhid. The remaining two forms, however, are much more common and appear to be equally distributed among the versions. They can be basically distinguished by their variant depiction of the moral character of the beautiful woman so attractive to the bedazzled angels. One form conceives of her as an inherently wicked creature who reciprocates their lust for her and who then coyly effects their ruin by tempting them with a series of criminal or apostate acts, all the while promising to submit to their sexual advances provided they participate in these other forbidden behaviors. The other form similarly exploits their consuming passion, but herein the woman, who is actually virtuous and desperately attempting to evade their attentions, manages to hoodwink the hopelessly enamored angels into disclosing to her a mechanism by which she can effect her escape from their clutches; namely, the correct articulation of the Ineffable Name or Most Powerful Name of God, the very means by which Hārūt and Mārūt themselves re-ascend to their heavenly abode each evening after the conclusion of their daily labors. Once she learns these powerful syllables, she immediately pronounces them and flies off to heaven, where God rewards her cleverness and intact virtue by transforming her into the planet Venus.

Within both of these latter forms, Hārūt and Mārūt succumb to temptation and soon discover they are now doomed to remain permanently on earth. This result invariably follows regardless of whether they physically succeed in consummating their lust for Zuhara. Their intention to perpetrate sinful behavior

9

despite the divine prohibitions against it definitively demonstrates God's earlier point that the angels erred in deeming themselves to be superior to humans.

4. Mujāhid relates that after Hārūt and Mārūt realized they were now barred from re-ascending to heaven, they approached an unnamed human who reportedly enjoyed an unparalleled reputation for piety in order to gain his help and possibly rehabilitate themselves in God's eyes. Several other versions of the story are less reticent and identify this anonymous mortal as the prophet Idrīs. Still others simply identify the temporal setting of the 'Tale' as that of the 'time of Idrīs,' thus inviting the inference that it was in fact Idrīs who played this role. Even outside of the immediate context of the 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt,' the prophet Idrīs was renowned for his righteousness and piety: it is alleged that the quality and quantity of devotion and liturgical service which Idrīs directed to God during his lifetime was equivalent to that of all his contemporaries on earth during that same time.[22] Coincidentally, the appearance of or allusion to this qur'ānic character allows us to situate the 'Tale' along a biblical axis of significance inasmuch as Idrīs is quite often equated by both traditional and modern critical exegetes with the biblical antediluvian forefather Enoch,[23] a personage whom parascriptural sources similarly develop into a paragon of exemplary piety and righteousness.

5. As a result of the intervention of Idrīs, God offers Hārūt and Mārūt a choice between punishments which they must endure as a consequence of their sin. They may choose between an immediate retribution in this world or a postponed one to be enforced in the World to Come. After some deliberation, Hārūt and Mārūt opt for a this-worldly punishment, reasoning that punishment in this world would be preferable since it will eventually come to an end at the Final Hour, whereas the punishment of the World to Come would be eternal in duration. The details of their fate are fairly uniform. According to Mujāhid, they were bound in chains and then suspended upside-down in Babylon. Other versions add little to this colorful description of their incarceration. Some locate the suspension in a pit. Maqdisī relates they were strung up by their hair. The toponym 'Babylon' of course implicitly echoes the qur'ānic passage which the 'Tale' serves to amplify, and some of the versions of the 'Tale' go on to point out that sorcerers and witches make pilgrimage to this pit in order to learn the details of their black arts from them, an aetiology for human

---

[22] See Maqdisī; Tha'labī.

[23] John C. Reeves, "Some Explorations of the Intertwining of Bible and Qur'ān," in *Bible and Qur'ān* (ed. Reeves), 44-52.

knowledge of magic that is again an extrapolation from the language of Q 2:102. Finally, a few of the versions of the 'Tale' explicitly invoke the qur'ānic verse as a coda to their narrative, thus imparting a homiletic quality to the preceding story.

Western scholars who have studied the 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt' and grappled with its literary analogues have most frequently pointed to the Jewish and Christian parascriptural materials which envelop the enigmatic figure of Enoch and in particular to a curious medieval Jewish aggadic narrative known as the 'Midrash of Shemḥazai and 'Azael.'[24] This unusual tale, extant in at least four Hebrew versions and one Aramaic rendition,[25] requires our attention at this stage and I accordingly provide here a translation of what is arguably its earliest written registration in the eleventh-century midrashic compilation *Bereshit Rabbati* of R. Moshe ha-Darshan.[26] As with the previous lengthy citation from the *tafsīr* of Mujāhid, I have compressed the Hebrew text in order to eliminate redundancy or irrelevancy:

> R[av] Joseph[27] said: The angels noticed that the Holy One, blessed be He,
> was perturbed because He had created human beings (cf. Gen 6:6-7).
> Immediately two of the angels, whose names were Shemḥazai and 'Azael,
> stood before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said to Him: 'Master of the
> Universe! Did we not say to You at the time You created Your world, "do not
> create human beings," as Scripture attests: "why do You contemplate
> (creating) mortals, etc."' (Ps 8:5)?[28] The Holy One, blessed be He, answered
> them: 'And the world? What will happen to it?' They said to Him: 'We will
> prove sufficient for it.' He said to them: 'It is revealed and known to Me that
> if you were to be in their world, the evil impulse would gain control of you

---

[24] E.g., Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed*, 107-109; Grünbaum, "Beiträge," esp. 58-75; Bernard Heller, "La chute des anges Shemchazai, Ouzza et Azael," *Revue des études juives* 60 (1910): 202-12; Georges Vajda, "Hārūt wa-Mārūt," *EI²* 3:236-37; J. T. Milik, *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumrân Cave 4* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 330-31; John C. Reeves, *Jewish Lore in Manichaean Cosmogony: Studies in the Book of Giants Traditions* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1992), 88.

[25] *Bereshit Rabbati*, *Yeraḥme'el*, *Pugio Fidei*, and *Yalquṭ Shimoni*. Milik (*Books of Enoch*, 321-31) has presented a synoptic edition and discussion of the 'Midrash' which must be used with caution. An Aramaic form appears in Zohar 3.207b-208a.

[26] Ḥanokh Albeck, ed., *Midrash Berešit Rabbati* (Jerusalem: Mekitze Nirdamim, 1940), 29.14-31.8.

[27] Apparently R. Joseph b. Ḥiyya, a fourth-century Babylonian amora.

[28] A more developed version of what is recounted in *b. Sanh*. 38b.

just as it has gained control of human beings, (and) you would be worse than them.' They said to Him: 'Grant us the power to live among the created beings, and You will see how we sanctify Your name.' The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: 'I have already granted you such power.'

Immediately they descended (to earth), and the evil impulse gained control of them. When they beheld the beauty of mortal women, they went astray after them and were unable to suppress their lust, as Scripture attests: 'and the sons of God saw, etc.' (Gen 6:2).

Shemḥazai beheld a maiden whose name was 'Asṭerah (אסטירה).[29] He fixed his gaze upon her (and) said to her: 'Submit yourself to me!' She answered him: 'I will not submit to you until after you teach me the Inexpressible Name, the one which when you pronounce it you (re)ascend to Heaven.' He immediately taught her, she pronounced it, and she ascended to Heaven. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'Since she has kept herself from engaging in sin, I will make her an example so that she might be commemorated in the world.' Immediately he fixed her (in the heavens) among the seven stars of the Pleiades. When Shemḥazai and 'Azael saw this, they arose, married women, and engendered children ….

[At this point intrude two related traditions lifted[30] from *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* which resolve the anticipated physical difficulty of the posited copulation between 'fiery' angels and 'fleshly' humans, and then identify the ambiguous 'Nefilim' of Gen 6:4 and Num 13:33 as the progeny engendered by this unlikely union. Further names for individual 'children' and two biblical correlations are then cited].

---

[29] Variant in *Yalquṭ*: איסטהר. According to the Armenian *Death of Adam*, Est'era is the sister of Seth: see Theodor's note to *Gen. Rab.* 22.2 in J. Theodor and Ḥanokh Albeck, eds., *Midrash Bereshit Rabba* (3 vols.; repr. Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1965), 1:206; Michael E. Stone, "The Death of Adam—An Armenian Adam Book," *Harvard Theological Review* 59 (1966): 284.

[30] So Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabbati*, 30.

R[av] Joseph said: At the time that the decision for the coming of the

Deluge into the world was reached, the Holy One, blessed be He, dispatched

Meṭaṭron as a messenger to Shemḥazai. He reported to him: 'The Holy One,

blessed be He, is planning to destroy the world.' Shemḥazai arose and loudly

wept and lamented,[31] and grieved for the world and for his sons, 'for each of

them customarily consumes one thousand camels, one thousand horses, and

one thousand of every kind of cattle (daily). How now will they survive?'

[The text now recounts two ominous dreams which the sons of Shemḥazai

have which presage the coming Deluge].

They have said about him; i.e., Shemḥazai, that he repented and suspended

himself upside-down between heaven and earth because he had no excuse for

his behavior before the Holy One, blessed be He, and to this very day he

remains suspended between heaven and earth in repentance. 'Azael however

did not repent, and he was appointed chief over all types of coloring agents

and cosmetics for women which entice men to sexual immorality,[32] and he

still persists in his corruptive activity. Therefore Israel brings offerings and

casts one lot for the Lord, so that He might accept atonement for all the sins of

Israel, and one lot for 'Azazel, so that he might bear the burden of the sins of

Israel.[33]

A careful comparison of the developed narratives of the 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt' and the 'Midrash

of Shemḥazai and 'Azael' suggests that the Muslim Hārūt wa-Mārūt complex both chronologically and

literarily precedes the Jewish 'Midrash.' What is likely the oldest Hebrew form of the story dates from

approximately the eleventh century, several hundred years after the bulk of the Muslim evidence. Further,

---

[31] Compare this pericope with *1 En*. 12:3-13:5; 15:2-16:4. Meṭaṭron is, of course, the 'angelified' Enoch.
Note *Tg. Ps.-J*. Gen 5:24: ופלח חנוך בקושטא קדם ה׳ והא ליתותי עם דיירי ארעא ארום איתניגיד וסליק לרקיעא
במימר קדם ה׳ וקרא שמיה מיטטרון ספרא רבא 'and Enoch served the Lord faithfully, and suddenly he was no
longer together with the inhabitants of the earth, for he was snatched up, and he ascended to heaven at the
command of the Lord. He renamed him Meṭaṭron, the great scribe.' See also Margaliot, *Mal'akey 'elyon*,
104.
[32] See *1 En*. 8:1.
[33] Forging a midrashic identification between the 'Azael of this tale and the homonymous 'Azazel found
in Leviticus 16.

each of the extant Jewish versions is embedded within a larger collection of legendary and exegetical lore which exhibits demonstrable links with so-called 'eastern' or 'oriental' figures or sources. Of special interest too is the previously unrecognized Aramaic version of the 'Midrash' which is found in the Zohar, a thirteenth-century Iberian compilation of mystical and theosophical lore which unsurprisingly, given its place of composition, incorporates and adapts a number of motifs and themes from both the Christian and Muslim spheres. A manuscript copy of a magical grimoire whose prototype can be traced back to at least the twelfth century even inscribes the names 'Hārūt and Mārūt' in Hebrew script, although there they are described as 'two youths' who ascend to heaven and attempt to eavesdrop on heavenly deliberations, only to be driven away by fire.[34] It may also be worthy of notice that recitations of the 'Midrash of Shemḥazai and 'Azael' visibly mimic the homiletic structuring of some of the most literarily polished versions of the 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt': just as the latter will typically conclude with an exegetical link to the qur'ānic passage they purportedly explicate (i.e., 2:102), so too the former will usually end with a citation from the Jewish scriptures that the story supposedly explains; namely, Lev 16:8 and its reference to the Day of Atonement ritual which features a mysterious entity named 'Azazel.

Thus at first glance the medieval Jewish 'Midrash' seems literarily dependent on the older Muslim 'Tale.' But matters are actually more complicated. Even though the integral story transmitted by the Jewish sources appears to be post-Islamic, a number of individual motifs and sub-themes—many of the 'building-blocks' that serve as the constituent elements of the larger narrative—predate the Qur'ān. For example, the characters 'Shemḥazai' and ''Azael,' the Jewish counterparts to Hārūt and Mārūt, are authentic rebellious angels who initially appear in the ancient Aramaic and Greek fragments of apocryphal lore associated with the biblical account of the sexual corruption of an unspecified number of divine beings and mortal women (Gen 6:1-4), a complex of mythical traditions which eventually coalesce during the early centuries of the Common Era into what modern scholars following the Byzantine chronographer George Syncellus term the 'first book of Enoch.' The notion that an illicit type of knowledge, including

---

[34] Ms. Vat. 245 f. 111b: ואנה הרות ומרות שני הבחורים העולים עד השמים וישמעו מה יבוא לעולם ותצא אש לשרפם 'and where are Hārūt and Mārūt, the two youths who ascend to Heaven and listen to what will transpire in the world until fire shoots out to burn them?' Text cited from the transcription of Gershom Scholem, "Some Sources of Jewish-Arabic Demonology," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 16 (1965): 9. Note T.-S. K 1.1 for the twelfth century edition of the same work, published in Peter Schäfer and Shaul Shaked, eds., *Magische Texte aus der Kairoer Geniza: Band I* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1994), 79-82. See especially Q 72:8-9; 15:16-18; also *Pirqe R. El.* §7 (ed. Luria 16b).

'magic and incantations' (7:1; cf. 8:3), was imparted by these angels to humans initially surfaces as a significant theme in *1 Enoch* and its allied literature. In *1 Enoch*, the angel 'Azael is punished for his sin by being bound and imprisoned in a dark pit in the desert of Dudael (10:4), a fate reminiscent of that of Hārūt and Mārūt draped in chains in their dark chasm in Babīl. One could certainly speculate here on possible orthographic confusions between Aramaic *beth* and *dalet* or Greek *beta* and *delta*, although the early mishnaic toponym *bēt hidūdō* (בית הדודו) would point to the essential integrity of the phonemic cluster signaled by the texts of *1 Enoch*, a correlation first noticed long ago by Geiger.[35] Also worthy of note is that when the errant Enochic angels realize the gravity of their sin, they approach the antediluvian forefather Enoch to intervene on their behalf with God, 'for they henceforth were unable to speak (with God) or to raise their eyes toward heaven due to the disgrace of their transgression, for which they had been condemned' (13:5).[36] Enoch reluctantly accepts their commission, only to return as the bearer of God's final rebuke: 'Go, tell the heavenly Watchers who sent you to intercede for them, It is proper for you (i.e., the Watchers) to intercede for people, and not people for you! … so tell them, You will not have peace!' (15:2-16:4). The mediating roles ascribed to Idrīs in the Muslim 'Tale' as well as that played by Meṭaṭron in the later Jewish 'Midrash' are of course directly dependent upon this Second Temple era Jewish source.

There remain however considerable differences between the Enochic tale of the 'descent of the Watchers' and the Muslim 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt.' The Enochic angels are not moved by any concerns for the wicked behavior of mortals or by any expressed jealousy for their exalted creaturely status: they are motivated purely by their sexual lust for human women, and this is a desire which apparently attacks them even while they are still resident in heaven. By contrast, both the Muslim 'Tale' and the derivative Jewish 'Midrash' explicitly state that the angels are affected by human passions only *after* they have begun their brief sojourn upon earth. Similarly *1 Enoch* contains no introductory framing scenes wherein the Deity expresses His disappointment or His disgust with human shortcomings: the Watchers neither criticize God for His alleged short-sightedness in creating humanity, nor do they vaunt their own superiority to terrestrial beings. More than two angels are involved in their perfidy, and no one woman is singled out as being

---

[35] Cf. *m. Yoma* 6.8 and Abraham Geiger, "Einige Worte über das Buch Henoch," *Jüdische Zeitschrift für Wissenschaft und Leben* 3 (1864-65): 200-201.

[36] Quotations from *1 Enoch* are based upon the following editions: for the Aramaic fragments, I use Milik, *Books of Enoch*; for the Greek versions, M. Black, ed., *Apocalypsis Henochi Graece* (Leiden: Brill, 1970); for the Ethiopic text, Joh. Flemming, ed., *Das Buch Henoch: Äthiopischer Text* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1902).

particularly attractive to them. The Enoch text is moreover closely tied both etiologically and literarily to

the Flood narrative: it supplies a compelling motivation for this universal cataclysm regarding which the

biblical text is uncharacteristically terse. While Enochic motifs are demonstrably present in the later

recountals of the 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt,' it is clear that *1 Enoch* is not the sole source from which its

narrators have drawn.

At the same time, we also know that *1 Enoch* was not the only repository of 'fallen angel' traditions

in early Jewish literature. I would in particular like to direct attention to a complex of texts which appear in

the originally Hebrew *Book of Jubilees*, a Jewish pseudepigraphic source attributed to Moses paralleling the

biblical books of Genesis and Exodus and emanating from the third or second centuries BCE.[37] A related

set of traditions very similar to those in *Jubilees* and probably dependent on that work is featured in the

Greek Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*, an enigmatic Christian text whose precise socio-cultural location

remains hotly contested.[38] *Jubilees* informs us that at the time when Yared, the father of Enoch, was alive

'the angels of God descended to earth, those who are named Watchers, in order to instruct human beings

and to act (with) justice and righteousness upon earth' (4:15). A little later in the same work, after its

description of the corruption of the earth that will provoke the Flood, it says: 'and against His angels whom

He had sent to earth He grew very angry: He eradicated them from every position of authority, and He told

us that we were to imprison them in the earth's depths; and lo, they are captives within them and are in

solitude' (5:6). It is thus clear that *Jubilees*, unlike the Enochic *Book of Watchers*, considers the angelic

sojourn on earth to have been initiated and condoned by the deity.

Now this particular tradition supplies a jarring narrative dissonance whose implications for the

critical unpacking of older mythologies and their possible reflexes in biblical and rabbinic texts have yet to

be appreciated by most students of Second Temple Jewish literature. Although an identical synchronizing

with the generation of Yared (cf. *1 En*. 6:6; 106:13) insures that *Jubilees* and *1 Enoch* must be referencing

the same narrative event—a descent of the angelic Watchers from heaven to earth—the stories which once

---

[37] *Jubilees* survives as an integral literary unit only in Ethiopic, although varying residues of Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Syriac renditions survive. For the Ethiopic text of *Jubilees*, I am temporarily employing the edition of R. H. Charles, *Maṣḥafa Kufalē, or the Ethiopic Version of the Hebrew Book of Jubilees* (Anecdota Oxoniensia; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895).

[38] Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* 8.12.1-19.4. For the Greek text, see Bernhard Rehm, ed., *Die Pseudoklementinen I: Homilien* (GCS 42; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1953), 126.16-129.18. Note also H. J. Lawlor, "Early Citations from the Book of Enoch," *Journal of Philology* 25 (1897): 189-92.

surrounded this event were clearly very different. *Jubilees* envisions a benign, even altruistic educational mission which was sanctioned by God Himself, whereas *1 Enoch* recounts an unsupervised independent angelic irruption into human society using the militaristic tropes of invasion, exploitation, and plunder. While *Jubilees* imagines erring humans receiving supernaturally mediated tutelage in the virtues of justice and righteousness, the writers of the Enochic myth relate the malicious impartation of closely guarded secrets undergirding the practices of black magic, the production of metal-based weaponry, and the seductive lures of cosmetology in blithe disregard of their deleterious social consequences. Now it is surely of interest to recognize that it is not the Enochic tale of the descent of the angels that is presupposed by the Muslim 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt.' Rather, it is the irenic instructional task as formulated by *Jubilees* that serves as the motivating factor in God's dispatch of Hārūt and Mārūt to earth in those versions of the 'Tale' which we examined above, and in fact Maqdisī explicitly states in his rendition of the 'Tale' that God sent these two angels to earth in order to 'convey to humanity information about proper behavior,'[39] a statement which virtually paraphrases the motive clause of *Jub*. 4:15. The conclusion seems irresistible that it is here—in this particular Jubilean formulation of a pedagogic angelic mission that went strangely sour—that we begin to behold the conceptual seeds of what will become the 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt.'

More however can be said about this peculiar linkage which may shed some light on the prehistory of the constellation of traditions that lie behind the present form of *Jubilees*, a work that is arguably as old as any extant form of the biblical book of Genesis and which does not necessarily 'rewrite' any of these 'canonical' versions.[40] One cannot fail to notice that in every rendition of the 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt' (and for that matter, in the 'Midrash of Shemḥazai and 'Azael'), God's sending of the angels to earth is never purposeless: it is *always* preceded by some sort of motivating circumstance which is typically tied to human behavior. The version of the 'Tale' found in Mujāhid which we examined above portrays the angels' genuine amazement at the continuing involvement of humans in wickedness and sinfulness, and their shock prompts God to send two angelic paragons of virtue; viz., Hārūt and Mārūt, down to earth in order to govern humanity and to model righteous behavior for them. Mujāhid's version of the 'Tale' however differs from its parallel accounts in that it omits a bridging dialogical sequence that is otherwise

---

[39] *K. al-bad'* (ed. Huart), 3:14.1-14.
[40] Speaking in both conceptual and archaeological (i.e., physical) terms, *Jubilees* is simply one pre-canonical presentation of the pool of traditions which also surface in distinctive forms in versions of the 'biblical' books of Genesis-Exodus.

familiar to us from early rabbinic literature as an independent exegetical pericope pertaining to Gen 1:26 and the initial creation of Adam.[41] According to this complex of traditions, when God first proposes to create humanity, the angels verbally object to His plan and offer reasons why God should not pursue the project. Alternatively, God is sometimes portrayed as deliberately concealing crucial information about the nature of humanity from the angels or other heavenly entities so that they will not interfere with or block His intentions. Clearly visible in this particular complex is the theme of angelic rivalry with or jealousy of the new creature, a notion that will receive its fullest narrative development in what will eventually become the formally separate Christian and then Muslim myths about a 'fall of Satan.'[42] The other versions of the 'Tale' insert this bridging sequence at the point in the story where the angels witness the general corruption of humanity on earth. Once they behold human sinfulness, the angels immediately confront God and directly condemn their reckless behavior. They sometimes assert their own superiority to humans and brag about their self-perceived immunity to the kinds of desires and temptations that are leading mortals astray. Occasionally they even go so far as to criticize God for creating humanity in the first place, and they remind God of their earlier objections to Adam's creation during the first week of existence.[43] The end result of this plot development is usually the staging of a contest or trial where chosen representatives of the plaintiffs submit to testing their hubristic claims of fidelity and immunity from sin. And, as we have previously seen, after failing miserably to substantiate their claims, the offending angels are banished from heaven and/or are imprisoned until the final Day of Judgment.

In light of this well attested narrative structure exhibited by both the 'Tale' and the 'Midrash,' one cannot help but notice that the conceptually cognate tradition about the benevolent mission of the Watchers found in *Jub*. 4:15 is a narratological orphan: it lacks any sort of motivating cause. Nothing has been said in *Jubilees* prior to this verse about a general proliferation of wickedness or sin among the human population, and it is not until a later point in the narrative after the arrival of these angels that we begin to see such statements (cf. *Jub*. 4:22-24; 4:26; 5:1ff.). What event or series of events therefore could have prompted this divine embassy? Why did humanity require a colonialist intervention of this magnitude?

---

[41] Note esp. *t. Soṭah* 6.5; *Gen. Rab*. 8.2-5; 17.4 (= *Num. Rab*. 19.3); *b. Sanh*. 38a-b; and the discussion of Alexander Altmann, "The Gnostic Background of the Rabbinic Adam Legends," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 35 (1944-45): 371-79.

[42] See the fuller discussion in Reeves, "Some Explorations," 52-53.

[43] This being of course the original 'scriptural' context for their now displaced objection, thus confirming the primitive independence of the rivalry-motif.

The transgression of the primal couple in the Garden never acquires in Jewish sources the reputation it would come to enjoy in post-Augustinian Christian interpretations of a fatal 'original sin.' Cain murders Abel—a grave crime, in that blood is shed and a sentient life is prematurely terminated, but *Jubilees* mentions no further homicides (prior to 4:15) that may have been inspired by Cain's example, and apart from a birth-notice for his son, it lacks all record of the genealogical line of inventors and cutthroats which that same figure spawns according to the 'canonical' version(s) of Gen 4:17-24. The mysterious figure of Enosh—grandson of Adam via Seth—attracts critical attention insofar as the rabbinic Sages credit him with the invention of idolatry and also recount a legend about how God once prior to Noah had to purge the world with a Flood during the generation of Enosh.[44] However, the information which *Jubilees* provides about Enosh is no more prolix than what we have in the canonical version(s) of Genesis, save that *Jubilees* does provide us with names for his wife (No'ām) and his mother ('Azurā).[45] Interestingly it is the surprising collocation of these two female names which constitute another point of intersection with the 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt.'

The name 'No'ām' is a recognizable phonological reflex of the appellation of the sole woman explicitly identified as a descendant of the murderer Cain in Genesis 4: Na'amah, there termed the sister of the culture-heroes Yabal, Yuval, and Tubal-Qain (Gen 4:22). Her name in Hebrew means 'lovely, pleasant,' and given the penchant of the Genesis narrators (or at least one of its constituent sources) for wielding symbolic names,[46] it seems legitimate to understand her name as somehow connotative within its present context. But the authors and/or the redactors of Genesis do not disclose any further information about this potentially intriguing character, and we must turn to the interpretative tradition in order to glean more information about her. *Genesis Rabbah*, an important third to fourth-century exegetical midrash emanating from Eretz Israel, preserves a pair of discordant traditions about the woman named Na'amah mentioned in Gen 4:22: 'R. Abba bar Kahana said: Na'amah was the wife of Noah. And why was she named Na'amah? Because her conduct was pleasing (*ne'imim*). But the Sages said: This one is a different

---

[44] See *Mek.*, *Baḥodeš* §6 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 223.13-14); *Sifre Deut* §43 (ed. Finkelstein, 97.2-3); *Midr. Tanḥ.*, *Noaḥ* §18; Rashi *ad* Amos 5:8. Mandaean literature is also familiar with this motif (i.e., the synchronization of Enosh and Deluge): note *Right Ginzā* (ed. Lidzbarski) 27.19-28.7; 45.22-46.6.

[45] *Jub*. 4:8; 11-13.

[46] Note, e.g., Gen 2:7 (Adam), 3:20 (Eve), 4:1 (Cain), 4:25 (Seth), 5:29 (Noah), etc. These examples all stem from the so-called 'J source.'

Na'amah; she would sing with a tambourine while worshipping idols.'[47] Curiously each of these incongruous specifications—some say she was the virtuous wife of the Flood-hero Noah; others say she was just an idolatrous chorus-girl—are extensively exemplified and amplified within a wide variety of parascriptural sources. For its part, *Jubilees* is clear that the character No'ām/Na'amah is the wife of Enosh (4:13) and not the wife of Noah, a female figure identified later in that work under the name of 'Emzārā (4:33).[48] Might she then be identified with her wicked alter-ego, the infamously corrupt songstress to idols and celebrant at their service? Her marriage to Enosh coupled with his extra-textual reputation for being the inventor of idolatry make this a tempting association, and perhaps *Jubilees* can be viewed as implicitly endorsing such traditional valuations. Yet this remains spectacularly speculative. It may be worth reiterating that Enosh, like Noah, is legendarily associated with a cataclysmic Flood, and even though that pre-Noachic Flood is not described in *Jubilees*, the cultural memory of an alternate 'Na'amah as wife of a Flood-hero' may have been enough to forge this present linkage. If *Jubilees*, like Genesis, had operated with the two rival genealogical lines of Seth and Cain and then explicitly situated No'ām/Na'amah, again like Genesis, within that latter family tree, then we could have argued that *Jub*. 4:13 marks the earliest textual instantiation of a wedding between a 'son of Seth' (i.e., Enosh) and a 'daughter of Cain' (i.e., Na'amah), a union which eventually becomes an extremely popular exegetical reading of the ancient story about the marriages contracted between angels and human women that is synopsized and undermined by the present form and placement of Gen 6:1-4. But unfortunately *Jubilees* subverts this attractive interpretation by categorically identifying No'ām/Na'amah not only as Enosh's wife, but as his sister as well.[49] She thus cannot be a biological 'daughter of Cain': Jubilean No'ām/Na'amah is most certainly a 'daughter of Seth.'

---

[47] *Gen. Rab.* 23.3 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 224): אמר ר׳ אבא בר כהנה נעמה אשת נח הייתה ולמה נקראת נעמה שמעשיה נעמים רבניך אמ׳ נעמה אחרת היית שהיתה מנעמת בתוף לעבודה זרה. According to Theodor's textual apparatus, the Oxford manuscripts identify the initial tradent as 'R. Ḥiyya bar Abba,' as does also the quotation of this passage by the fifteenth-century homilist Isaac Arama in his *'Aqedat Yiṣḥaq*.

[48] With regard to this name for the wife of Noah, note the homophonic variants from Hebrew, Syriac, and Greek sources cited by Charles, *Ethiopic Version*, 18 n.21, to which can be added the overlooked testimony of the ninth-century Muslim chronicler Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk* (15 vols.; ed. M. J. de Goeje; Leiden: Brill, 1879-1901), 1:177.18-19: 'Noah b. Lamech married 'Emzūrah ....' Compare now what may be the earliest reference to this character in 1QapGen 6.7: 'and 'Emzara' (אמזרע) his daughter I (i.e., Noah) took as my wife ....' This last text is cited from the edition of Matthew Morgenstern, Elisha Qimron, and Daniel Sivan, "The Hitherto Unpublished Columns of the Genesis Apocryphon," *Abr-Nahrain* 33 (1995): 40.

[49] *Jub*. 4:13a: 'and in the seventh jubilee in the third week Enos took No'ām his sister to be his wife ....'

There is however still another reading of the biblical character Naʿamah which draws her closer to the orbit of the traditions which are visible in the 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt.' This interpretation is signaled in the thirteenth-century commentary of Ramban (i.e., Nachmanides) to Gen 4:22: '… another midrash recounted by our Sages holds that she was a very beautiful woman, and that it was because of her that the 'sons of God' were led astray; this is hinted at in the verse 'and the sons of God beheld mortal women …' (Gen 6:2), and a similar (interpretation) is mentioned in *Pirqe R. Eliʿezer*.'[50] While our extant printed copies of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliʿezer* no longer contain this tradition (at least in the form referenced by Ramban), it is present in a text of roughly similar provenance, one of the Oxford manuscripts edited by Salomon Buber for his edition of *Midrash Tanḥuma*, wherein we read in the course of a longer rabbinic temptation-narrative: 'He (i.e., Satan) transformed himself into a beautiful woman—one whose beauty had not been matched since the time of Naʿamah, the sister of Tubal-Qain, <u>the one after whom the ministering angels had strayed</u>, as scripture attests: "and the divine beings saw that mortal women were beautiful" (Gen 6:2).'[51] The relative age of this particular tradition about the stunning beauty of Naʿamah and its seductive effects upon all who beheld her—even the ascetically inclined ministering angels—remains unclear.[52] At its most basic level it is a simple linguistic rendering of her name using a visual instead of a moral register. Naʿamah is understood here to be literally '*the* lovely one,' a woman so physically attractive that she drew down the angels from their heavenly stations. And if one is permitted to synchronize the seven generations as they unfold respectively from Cain and from Seth—an exegetical move which the canonical versions of the Genesis text encourage us to make—one is brought narratologically to the epoch of Methuselah on the very cusp of the infamous Generation of the Flood.[53]

---

[50] Translation of the vulgate text as reproduced in standard editions of *Miqraot gedolot*.

[51] *Midr. Tanḥ.* (Buber), *hosaphah* to *Ḥuqqat* §1. Cf. Salomon Buber, ed., *Midrash Tanḥuma* (6 vols.; Lvov, 1883; reprinted in 2 vols., Jerusalem: [s.n.], 1964), 5:66a. This addition comes from a second Oxford manuscript examined by Buber. A parallel version of this anecdote appears in *Yalq. Šimoni* §161, and is referenced by Grünbaum, "Beiträge," 59.

[52] It certainly predates the Zohar passages which some modern scholars uncritically adduce as parallels; e.g., John D. Turner in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (ed. Marvin Meyer; New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 607.

[53] A circumstance which sheds light on an otherwise curious tradition cited from *Sefer ha-Yashar* that 'Naʿamah was the daughter of Methuselah'; see R. David Luria, *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer ha-Gadol* (Warsaw: T. Y. Bamberg, 1852), 50a in n.3 at the bottom of the page. According to the edition of this work that was published by Joseph Dan, Noah weds 'Naʿamah the daughter of Enoch'; see Joseph Dan, ed., *Sefer ha-Yashar* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1986), 56.

One can however note some non-Jewish parallels which may assist us in dating these pluriform contextualizations. According to some heresiological texts authored by the church fathers during the second, third, and fourth centuries of the Common Era regarding the alleged teachings and writings of certain so-called 'gnostic' sects, a female scriptural character bearing the names 'Norea' (Νωρία), 'Horaia' (Ὡραία), or various permutations thereof plays a set of roles roughly parallel to those ascribed to Naʿamah by rabbinic tradition and exhibits the full range of positive and negative moral qualities assigned to Naʿamah by later Jewish tradition; moreover, the variant spelling 'Horaia' confirms that she is in fact equivalent to biblical 'Naʿamah' inasmuch as it is a literal Greek translation of the Hebrew proper noun.[54] According to Irenaeus, some gnostic groups (unhelpfully termed by him in the extant Latin rendition *alii* 'others')[55] recounted tales about how following the births of Cain and Abel and the murder of the latter that 'Seth and then Norea were born,' a consanguine marital pairing from whom the rest of humanity allegedly descend.[56] Similarly Epiphanius informs us that the gnostic sect known as the Sethians 'claim that a certain Horaia was the wife of Seth.'[57] However, the tradition of situating Norea-Naʿamah during the generation of Seth and viewing her as that forefather's wife-sister is not an exclusive peculiarity of gnostic biblical exegesis. The allegedly first-century Jewish *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* of Pseudo-Philo begins its version of the legend of the protoplasts as follows: 'Adam engendered three sons and one daughter: Cain, Noaba, Abel, and Seth' (1:1).[58] Its medieval Hebrew retroversion increases the number of Adam's

---

[54] A comprehensive discussion of these texts and the 'Norea-Naʿamah' nexus was supplied by Birger A. Pearson, "The Figure of Norea in Gnostic Literature," in *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Gnosticism, Stockholm, August 20-25, 1973* (ed. Geo Widengren; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1977), 143-51, revised and reprinted in idem, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 84-94. Subsequent references to this article in the present essay are to the revised version. Note too idem, "Revisiting Norea," in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism* (ed. Karen L. King; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 265-75. See also the even more widely ranging remarks of Gedaliahu A. G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (NHS 24; Leiden: Brill, 1984), 53-62.

[55] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.30.1; these anonymous groups are specified as 'Sethians/Ophites' by Theodoret, *Haereticarum fabularum compendium* 1.14.

[56] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.30.9.

[57] Epiphanius, *Panarion* 39.5.2-3.

[58] *Adam genuit tres filios et unam filiam, Cain, Noaba, Abel et Seth.* Latin text cited from Guido Kisch, ed., *Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (Notre Dame, Ind.: [University of Notre Dame], 1949). A persistent Muslim tradition holds that the name of the first daughter of Adam and Eve was ʿAnāq: she was Seth's twin sister, Cain's wife, and the mother of the legendary giant ʿŪj (= biblical ʿŌg of Bashan). She was also reportedly the first human to engage in sexual fornication. See Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-tarbīʿ waʾl-tadwīr* §47: وخبرني عن عناق بنت ادم 'Tell me about ʿAnāq bt. Adam'; cited from Charles Pellat, *Le Kitāb at-tarbīʿ wa-t-tadwīr de Ǧāḥiẓ* (Damas: Institut français de Damas, 1955), 30; B. Heller-S. M. Wasserstrom, "ʿŪdj," *EI²* 10:777; Brannon Wheeler, *Mecca and Eden: Ritual, Relics, and Territory in Islam* (Chicago

daughters to three and assigns 'Noba' (presumably its rendering of Latin *Noaba*) to Seth as his 'twin' and 'wife.'[59] Pearson is surely correct in suggesting that Pseudo-Philo's 'Noaba' results from a textual garbling of the Old Greek form of Na'amah (Νόεμα) in Gen 4:22.[60] The connubial association of Seth and Norea-Na'amah would thus appear to be an early narrative motif,[61] an unlikely coupling whose ultimate explanation perhaps lies in their close textual conjunction in the canonical versions of Gen 4:17-26.

Norea however also figures in other gnostic texts and traditions as the wife of the Flood-hero Noah, a role which matches one of the identities assigned the biblical Na'amah by a prominent stream of rabbinic tradition.[62] According to Epiphanius, the Nicolaitan sect utilized 'a certain book they call *Norea*' which they had themselves forged, identifying the title character Norea with the 'wife of Noah.'[63] Interestingly an untitled book which scholars have labeled *Thought of Norea* (NHC IX,2) was among those recovered in the Nag Hammadi corpus of Coptic gnostic texts, and references to a 'Book of Noraia' (ⲛⲃⲓⲃⲗⲟⲥ ⲛⲛⲱⲣⲁⲓⲁⲥ) and a 'Discourse of Oraia' (ⲛⲗⲟⲅⲟⲥ ⲛⲱⲣⲁⲓⲁⲥ) occur in the separate tractate to which scholars have given the title *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II,5).[64] She moreover plays a prominent role as one of the *dramatis personae* in another text stemming from that particular find. In the work known as *The Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II,4), essentially a narrative counter-version of the opening chapters of the biblical book of Genesis, Norea/Orea[65] is introduced as Eve's daughter (and hence Seth's sister), a pure maiden whom the evil archons eventually seek to ravish. She however manages to escape their sexual assault by calling upon 'the Holy One, the God of the pleroma,' and that deity then dispatches an angel to

---

and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 231 n.130. Jāḥiẓ (§38) also mentions 'Ūj: كم مات عوج

ومذ 'How long has it been since 'Ūj died?' (Pellat, *Kitāb al-tarbī'*, 26).

[59] Oxford Ms. Heb. d. 11 (2797), published by Eli Yassif, ed., *Sefer ha-Zikronot hu' Divrey ha-Yamim le-Yeraḥme'el* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2001), 117: ושת ותאומתו נובא אשתו.

[60] Pearson, "Figure of Norea," 91; see also Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 57-58.

[61] A cognate tradition is preserved by Majlīsī wherein Seth takes a wife named Nā'ima, said to be a *houri* sent to him by God. See M. J. Kister, "Ādam: A Study of Some Legends in *Tafsīr* and *Ḥadīṯ* Literature," in idem, *Concepts and Ideas at the Dawn of Islam* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 146.

[62] *Gen. Rab.* 23.3 as above, where R. Abba bar Kahana's identification of Na'amah as Noah's wife is also repeated by Rashi, Radaq, Ramban, and R. Baḥya b. Asher in their respective commentaries *ad* Gen 4:22.

[63] Epiphanius, *Panarion* 26.1.3-4. With regard to the various names accorded the wife of Noah, see the magisterial study of Francis Lee Utley, "The One Hundred and Three Names of Noah's Wife," *Speculum* 16 (1941): 426-52.

[64] *Orig. World* 102.10-11, 24-25. This untitled work is also attested in a more fragmentary form in NHC XIII,2 and Ms. Brit. Lib. Or. 4926(1), but these latter witnesses do not overlap the section containing the references to Noraia/Oraia.

[65] Throughout this work the spelling of this character's name alternates between ⲛⲱⲣⲉⲁ and ⲱⲣⲉⲁ.

rescue her from her plight.[66] The remainder of the work consists of a didactic dialogue couched in the first-person wherein the angel instructs his interlocutor (Norea?) about her true nature as well as the coming into being of the world and its ruling archons.[67]

Curiously the same text also situates her briefly as a character in its Flood-narrative. When the ruling archons conspire to destroy all corporeal life on earth by means of a flood, the repentant archon Sabaoth undermines their plan by warning Noah about the coming deluge and instructing him to build the ark. 'Orea' thereupon approaches Noah, but when he refuses her passage on the ark, she sets it ablaze with her fiery breath, forcing him to reconstruct it.[68] It is apparent that this particular textual manifestation of the Norea/Orea character is akin to that of the aforementioned corrupt Na'amah which is visible in one stream of rabbinic tradition charging her with licentiousness and idolatry, as Orea here is certainly in league with those malevolent archons who seek the death of a 'righteous' Noah.[69] At the same time her contextual association with Noah is suggestive of those persistent traditions which view her as the wife of that forefather. The malevolent character of Noah's wife is also a theme which surfaces in the Qur'ān, where she is labeled a 'disbeliever' and condemned by God to the flames of hell (66:10). Interestingly, what seems to be this very same 'wicked' (N)orea in medieval Jewish tradition has resurfaced in a recently published Cairo Geniza incantation: it seems to refer to a spell which counteracts one 'by which Nīryah, the bride/daughter-in-law of Noah, brought sin ….'[70] Is the Nīryah (a slight corruption of Nūrya?) of this magical text beholden to the same set of esoteric traditions which lie behind the gnostic construction and/or utilization of a fire-breathing (N)orea? It is also worthy of notice that in some Mandaean texts the wife of Noah's son Šum (= Shem) bears the cognate name 'Nhūraitā,'[71] and that the Sibyl who recites the *Third Sibylline Oracle* terms herself the 'daughter-in-law' (νύμφη) of Noah.[72]

---

[66] *Hyp. Arch.* 91.34-93.13.

[67] *Hyp. Arch.* 93.13-97.23.

[68] *Hyp. Arch.* 92.4-18. Epiphanius (*Panarion* 26.1.7-9) knows a somewhat garbled version of this story. Despite the coincidence in names, it is highly unlikely that this dragon-like (N)orea is identical with the virtuous Norea bt. Eve who figures in the narratives enveloping this pericope.

[69] The version of Epiphanius has reversed these allegiances perhaps in an attempt to harmonize the divergent profiles of the (N)orea entity.

[70] T.-S. K 1.162 fol. 1c lines 36-37: דבה איתת ניריה כלת נח חובתז נחובת. Transcription cited from Peter Schäfer and Shaul Shaked, eds., *Magische Texte aus der Kairoer Geniza: Band III* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 70; cf. 398-99 for the photograph of the relevant lines. See also Reimund Leicht, "Gnostic Myth in Jewish Garb: Niriyah (Norea), Noah's Bride," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 51 (2000): 133-40.

[71] *Right Ginzā* (ed. Lidzbarski) 410.7; E. S. Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans* (Leiden: Brill, 1959), 152.2. But the name 'Nūraitā' is also used for the wife of Noah and the wife of the

Pearson's insight that gnostic (N)orea and biblical/rabbinic Na'amah are in fact the same narrative character is a signal contribution toward reconstructing the scope of scriptural legendry preserved and reworked by biblically-grounded religious communities during the centuries surrounding both sides of the beginning of the first Christian millennium. However, the philological and historical explanations which he offers for the Na'amah/(N)orea nexus are much less compelling. He employs an uncritical reading of Jewish sources which presumes as a matter of course the antiquity, necessary priority, and universality of the traditions reported therein regardless of the actual time of composition and cultural provenance of each literary title: 'aggadoth dealing with Na'amah' which come to expression in later redacted collections like *Genesis Rabbah*, Zohar, and *Yeraḥme'el* are assumed by Pearson to be linguistically extant and available for 'appropriation' by 'Greek-speaking Jewish communities' during the centuries surrounding the beginning of the Common Era.[73] According to Pearson, it is among these latter circles that the Hebrew name 'Na'amah' (נעמה) becomes Greek 'Horaia' (Ὡραία), and they serve in turn as one conduit for these sorts of traditions about antediluvian figures to contemporaneous and later classical gnostic groups like the Nicolaitans, Sethians, and even the Mandaeans. Pearson also speculates that the variant spellings of Horaia employing an initial nasal consonant (Norea/Noraia) are consciously hybrid forms which prefix the first letter of Hebrew Na'amah or Greek Noema to the subsequent Greek syllables (H)oraia.

I would like to propose instead that the parascriptural names of the female temptress which employ the initial nasal consonant – like Greek Norea/Noraia, Aramaic Nīrya (Nūrya?), and Mandaic Nhūraitā – are semantic, and in the case of the Greek examples, transliterative reflexes of the 'luminous' or astral character of the woman who figures in an older mythological narrative shared by the Muslim 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt' and Jewish 'Midrash of Shemḥazai and 'Azael.' Each of these names arguably can be tied to a learned word-play on the middle weak Semitic stem that yields the Aramaic words for 'light' (נהורא) and 'fire' (נורא), and their incandescent and/or combustible qualities are prominently displayed in the varying plotlines of the story. What is more, the proper name 'Azurā (ࡀࡆࡅࡓࡀ) used by *Jubilees* for the sister/wife of

bibliomorphic 'wise scribe' Dīnānūkht, an Utnapishtim-like figure who tells his story in *Right Ginzā* (ed. Lidzbarski), 206.11-212.19. See Mark Lidzbarski, *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer* (2 vols.; Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1915), 2:58; Eric Segelberg, "Old and New Testament Figures in Mandaean Version," in *Syncretism* (ed. Sven S. Hartman; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1969), 234; Pearson, "Figure of Norea," 86.

[72] *Sib. Or.* 3.827. See St[ephen] Gero, "Henoch und die Sibylle," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde* 73 (1982): 149.

[73] Pearson, "Figure of Norea," 92.

Seth may also bear some sort of semantic or even genealogical relationship with the Arabic name Zuhara for the *femme fatale* of the 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt.' As we have seen above, the name 'Zuhara' is the usual Arabic name for the planet Venus, one of the brightest luminaries in the darkened heavens. Could it be possible that the common Semitic verbal stem *zhr* (זהר) 'be bright, shine' – the consonant string from which the maiden Zuhara takes her name – also lies behind the various orthographies and vocalizations of the mysterious appellation 'Azurā?[74] Apart from its spellings in the Ethiopic version of *Jubilees*, we have the same name partially attested in Hebrew among the Cave 11 *Jubilees* fragments (11Q12),[75] and wholly present in several variant spellings in Greek ('Αζουρᾶ),[76] Syriac (ܐܙܘܪܐ),[77] Armenian,[78] and Arabic exegetical texts.[79] According to the 'Midrash of Shemḥazai and 'Azael,' the name of the virtuous maiden who successfully resists the advances of the lust-crazed Watchers by zooming off to the sky is 'Asṭerah (אסטירה), a name that is a transparent rendering of the common Indo-European stem for 'star,' and it is surely no coincidence that the Armenian *Death of Adam* informs us that Seth had a sister whose name was Estʿera.[80] Given this impressive accumulation of converging evidence gleaned from a wide variety of biblically affiliated sources, it does not seem wrong to conclude that the 'star' imagery – or at the very least the notions of 'brightness' and perhaps 'astral ascent' – constitute central motifs for this portion of the overarching tale.

What may ultimately prove more intriguing though is the potential which the 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt' and its congeners have for reconstructing what is certainly a pre-Islamic and very possibly a pre-Pentateuchal, perhaps even pre-Israelite, tale about the early generations of humanity upon earth, their troubled relationship with the celestial entities who preceded them, and the questionable origin of certain

---

[74] For some less than compelling etymological speculations, see R. H. Charles, *The Book of Jubilees or the Little Genesis* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1902), 30; Klaus Berger, *Das Buch der Jubiläen* (JSHRZ II.3; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1981), 341.

[75] Unfortunately only the final two letters of the name can be read.

[76] Epiphanius, *Panarion* 39.6.4-5 *apud* Albert-Marie Denis, *Fragmenta pseudepigraphorum quae supersunt graeca* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 81-82; Georgius Syncellus, *Chronographia* (CSHB; 2 vols.; ed. Guilielmi Dindorf; Bonn: Ed. Weber, 1829), 1:16.18; 17.13. A marginal Greek scholion attached to Gen 5:6 in one manuscript reads γυνὴ σὴθ ἀζουρα ἡ ἀδελφὴ αὐτοῦ 'the wife of Seth was Azura his sister.' See Paul A. de Lagarde, *Genesis Graece* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1868), 16.

[77] Brit. Lib. Ms. Add. 12.154 fol. 180 *apud* Charles, *Ethiopic Version*, 183.

[78] *Azerah*. See W. Lowndes Lipscomb, "A Tradition from the Book of Jubilees in Armenian," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 29 (1978): 149-63, at 150, 156-57.

[79] Tabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (ed. de Goeje), 1.146, 153, 164. The spellings عزورا and حزورا are attested.

[80] Stone, "Death of Adam," 284.

types of efficacious crafts and technologies such as the magic arts and the manufacture of material images for worship. The Enochic *Book of Watchers* illustrates one Second Temple era way of articulating these concepts, the initial chapters of *Jubilees* allude to another, and the multiple sources underlying the so-called 'Primeval History' section of the canonical versions of Genesis furnish still further fragmentary instances where once separate myths have been forcibly constrained and adjusted to fit within a relatively new sequential tale-cycle. The 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt' invites us to postulate that the pre-canonical dimensions of Israelite myth and narrative tradition were much richer and more long-lived than most scholars of Bible or Qur'ān tend to realize.