

Islamic Studies Today

Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin

Edited by

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A Flawed Prophet? Noah in the Qurʾān and Qurʾanic Commentary

Gabriel S. Reynolds

1 Introduction

Few scholars have done more than Andrew Rippin to highlight the richness and diversity of the Islamic exegetical tradition. Among other things, Professor Rippin has highlighted the ways in which the dogmatic concerns of Muslim scholars shape their interpretations. The present article involves an example of one such concern, namely how notions of the exalted status – and indeed infallibility/*iṣma* – of prophets have shaped commentaries on the figure of Noah in the Qurʾān.

In this study I will focus on two passages. The first of these is in *al-Taḥrīm* (Q 66): “Allah draws an example for the faithless: the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot. They were under two of our righteous servants, yet they betrayed them (*khānatāhumā*)”¹ (Q 66:10).² The second, longer, passage is in *Hūd* (Q 11):

- 40 When Our edict came and the oven gushed [a stream of water], We said,
“Carry in it a pair of every kind [of animal], along with your family –
except those [of them] against whom the edict has already been given –
and those who have faith.” And none believed with him except a few.
- 41 He said, “Board it: In the Name of Allah it shall set sail and cast anchor.
Indeed, my Lord is all-forgiving, all-merciful.”
- 42 And it sailed along with them amid waves [rising] like mountains. Noah
called out to his son, who stood aloof, “O my son! Board with us, and do
not be with the faithless!”
- 43 He said, “I shall take refuge on a mountain; it will protect me from the
flood.” He said, “There is none today who can protect from Allah’s edict,

1 Qurʾān translations are from Quli Qaraʾi unless otherwise noted: A. Quli Qaraʾi, *The Qurʾan. With a phrase-by-phrase English translation* (Elmhurst, NY 2011²).

2 This precedes a passage (Q 66:11–2) in which the wife of Pharaoh and Mary are held up as examples of faithfulness.

- except someone upon whom He has mercy." Then the waves came between them, and he was among those who were drowned.
- 44 Then it was said, "O earth, swallow your water! O sky, leave off!" The waters receded; the edict was carried out, and it settled on [Mount] Judi. Then it was said, "Away with the wrongdoing lot!"
- 45 Noah called out to his Lord, and said, "My Lord! My son is indeed from my family. Your promise is indeed true, and You are the fairest of all judges."
- 46 Said He, "O Noah! Indeed He is not of your family. Indeed he is [personification of] unrighteous conduct. So do not ask Me [something] of which you have no knowledge. I advise you lest you should be among the ignorant."
- 47 He said, "My Lord! I seek Your protection lest I should ask You something of which I have no knowledge. If You do not forgive me and have mercy upon me I shall be among the losers" (Q 11:40–7).

Here I will address two different questions that the *mufasssīrūn* asked about these passages. First, what exactly does the Qur'ān mean when it alludes to the betrayal of Noah's wife (Q 66:10)? Secondly, did Noah err when he interceded with God on behalf of his son (Q 11:45)? We will see that, in addressing these questions, the *mufasssīrūn* often connected these two passages. We will also see that their convictions about prophetic infallibility are central to the answers they offered.

In my discussion of each question I examine the views of a small yet diverse group of commentaries, namely those of: *Tafsīr Muqātil*,³ *Tafsīr Ibn 'Abbās*,⁴

3 Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, ed. 'Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Shihāta (Beirut 2002 [Reprint of: Cairo n.d.]). Regarding the complex origin and development of *Tafsīr Muqātil* see Isaiah Goldfeld, Muqātil Ibn Sulaymān, *Bar-Ilan Arabic and Islamic studies* 2 (1978), 13–30; C. Versteegh, Grammar and exegesis. The origins of Kufan grammar and the *Tafsīr* Muqātil, *Der Islam* 67 (1990), 206–42; Claude Gilliot, Muqātil, grand exégète, traditionniste et théologien maudit, *Journal asiatique* 279 (1991), 39–92; Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra* (Berlin 1991–7), 2:516–32.

4 *Tafsīr Ibn 'Abbās* (Beirut 2000); trans. M. Guezzou (Louisville, KY 2008). On the authorship and dating of this work, which is perhaps best attributed to 'Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak al-Dināwārī (d. 308/920), see Michael E. Pregill, Methodologies for the dating of exegetical works and traditions. Can the lost tafsir of al-Kalbi be recovered from *Tafsīr Ibn Abbas* (also known as *al-Wadih*)?, in Karen Bauer (ed.), *Aims, methods and contexts of qur'anic exegesis (2nd/8th–9th/15th C.)*, (Oxford 2013), 393–453.

al-Qummī (d. after 307/919),⁵ al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035),⁶ al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144),⁷ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210),⁸ al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273),⁹ and al-Biqāʿī (d. 885/1480).¹⁰ Before turning to the questions at hand, however, I begin with a brief discussion of the Qurʾān's presentation of Noah.

2 Noah in the Qurʾān

The Qurʾān includes seven significant Noah accounts,¹¹ and it mentions Noah in numerous other passages.¹² Unlike Genesis, the Qurʾān's principal interest in Noah is not the flood itself but rather the confrontation between Noah and his opponents that precedes it. In terms of their shape, the accounts of Noah in the Qurʾān are like those of the other prophets of the so-called "punishment-stories" or *Straflegenden*.¹³ Like the accounts of Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Lot, Shuʿayb, and Moses, the qurʾanic accounts of Noah follow a pattern by which: (a) the prophet is called; (b) the prophet preaches to his people and warns them of divine punishment; (c) the prophet debates with his people; and (d) God destroys the unbelievers and saves the prophet together with a small group of believers.

The Qurʾān, one surmises, chose to reflect on the biblical narrative of Noah (and that of Lot, and that of Moses) because the plot-line of this narrative, ending as it does with the protagonist and his family being saved while

5 Abū l-Ḥasan Ibrāhīm al-Qummī, *Tafsīr* (Beirut 1412/1991).

6 Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa-l-bayān*, ed. Abū Muhammad b. ʿĀshūr (Beirut 1422/2002).

7 Abū l-Qāsim b. ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ʿan ḥaqāʾiq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ḥusayn Aḥmad (Beirut 1987).

8 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, ed. Muḥammad Bayḍūn (Beirut 1421/2000).

9 Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, ed. ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Mahdī (Beirut 1433/2012).

10 Ibrāhīm al-Biqāʿī, *Naẓm al-durar fī tanāsib al-āyāt wa-l-suwar*, ed. ʿAbd al-Razzāq Ghālib al-Mahdī (Beirut 1432/2011).

11 Q 7:59–64; 10:71–4; 11:25–49; 23:23–30; 26:105–22; 54:9–17; 71:1–28.

12 Q 3:33; 4:163–5; 6:84–90; 9:70; 14:9–15; 17:3, 17; 19:58; 21:76–7; 22:42; 23:23–30; 25:37; 29:14–5; 33:7; 37:75–82; 38:11; 40:5, 31; 42:13; 50:12; 51:46; 53:52; 57:26; 66:10. In all, Noah is mentioned in 26 *sūras*. On Noah see most recently Viviane Comerro, Un Noé coranisé, *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 232 (2015), 623–43, and Carlos A. Segovia, *The quranic Noah and the making of the Islamic Prophet* (Berlin 2015).

13 On this term see Josef Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Berlin-Leipzig 1926), 10–32.

everyone else is destroyed, would have been easily adapted into the schema of the *Straflegenden* that was used to advance its religious exhortations. At the same time, however, the details of the biblical narrative of Noah (like those of Lot, and those of Moses) become necessary elements of the qur'anic account. The Qur'ān could not, for example, have the people of Noah destroyed by fire or wind instead of water (or the people of Lot destroyed by water, or the followers of Pharaoh destroyed in the desert and not in the sea). Yet the role of biblical narratives in shaping the qur'anic *Straflegenden* is, while salient, ultimately ornamental. The Qur'ān is more concerned with making a religious point to the people of its own time by asking the question *ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt* than it is concerned with retelling a story about the time of the prophets gone by.

In its material on Noah the Qur'ān is not in conversation with the Bible itself as much as it is in conversation with the later Midrashic development of biblical narratives. This is evident from the way it emphasizes the confrontation of Noah with his opponents.¹⁴ Whereas the Qur'ān refers repeatedly to Noah's preaching to his people (Q 7:59–63; 10:71–2; 11:25–34, 42–3; 14:9–13; 23:23–5; 26:106–16; 71:2–20), in Genesis Noah does not speak a single word until he has left the Ark and started a new life. Noah's preaching in the Qur'ān follows from the writings of later Jewish and Christian authors who, reflecting on the Genesis account of Noah, generally assumed that Noah must have said something to his countrymen who were on the brink of annihilation. Thus, whereas Genesis describes Noah only as a “good” and “upright” man,¹⁵ the author of

14 Another significant difference between the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān is the way that the Qur'ān relates that the flood begins with a furnace (*tannūr*) pouring forth hot water (Q 11:40; 23:27), a detail which seems to follow from midrash; on this see Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Hildesheim 1961; reprint of Gräfenhainichen 1931), 103. A further contrast is in the name that the Qur'ān gives to the mountain upon which the Ark landed, *al-jūdī* (Q 11:44), a name that reflects post-biblical Jewish and Christian traditions on the name of Noah's mountain (Genesis [8:4] states only that the Ark landed “in the mountains of Ararat”). On this see Gabriel S. Reynolds, A reflection on two qur'anic words (*Iblīs* and *Jūdī*) with attention to the theories of A. Mingana, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 124 (2004), 675–89.

15 Genesis 6:9: “This is the story of Noah: Noah was a good man, an upright man among his contemporaries, and he walked with God.”

2 Peter (2:5) describes Noah as a “preacher of uprightness.” Later Jewish¹⁶ and Christian¹⁷ texts describe Noah’s preaching to his people in more detail.

- 16 See Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrīn, 108a, which alludes to Job 24:18: “The righteous Noah rebuked them, 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, as it is written, He is light [i.e. floats] upon the waters. Moreover, ye shall be taken as a curse for all future generations.’” With reference to Amos 5:10 (“They hate the man who teaches justice at the city gate and detest anyone who declares the truth.”), *Genesis Rabbah* 31:3 has Noah declare to his generation: “Ye good-for-nothings! Ye forsake Him whose voice breaks cedars and worship a dry log!” (trans. H. Freedman et al., London 1983). Noah’s preaching is also found in the *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* (see section 22 on Noah’s preaching), which dates from the eighth century but contains earlier material. See the introduction to *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, ed. and trans. D. Börner-Klein (Berlin 2004), The *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu* (the earliest version of which was likely composed in the sixth or seventh century CE), relates:

“Noah arose, repented his sins, and planted cedar trees. They asked him: ‘What are these cedars for?’ ‘The Holy One, blessed be He, intends to bring a flood upon the earth, and He has ordered me to build an ark so that I and my family might escape,’ he replied. They laughed at him and ridiculed his words. Nevertheless he tended the trees till they grew large. Once again they asked him: ‘What are you doing?’ He repeated what he had told them previously, but they continued to mock him. After some time, he cut down the trees and sawed them into lumber. Again they inquired: ‘What are you doing?’ He warned them once again as to what would happen, but they still refused to repent.”

Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu, trans. S.A. Berman (Hoboken, NJ 1996), 52; cf. the similar tradition in *Genesis Rabbah* 30:7. See also *Leviticus Rabbah*, which dates from around the period of the Qur’ān’s origins, 27:5.

- 17 For example: In Greek: Theophilus of Antioch (d. 181), *Ad Autolyicum* 3:19, trans. M. Dods in James Donaldson and Alexander Roberts (eds.), *Ante-Nicene fathers. Fathers of the second century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (entire)*, (New York, NY 2007; originally published 1885), 2:116b. In Syriac: Ephrem (d. 373), *Commentary on Genesis* (6:9), trans Edward G. Mathews and Joseph P. Amar (Washington, CD 1994), 138–9; Syriac text in: Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis and Exodus*, ed. R.-M. Tonneau, Leuven 1955, and *ibid.*, *Hymns on faith* (56:2), ed. and trans. in E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide*, Leuven 1955–67. Narsai (d. 503), *Homily on the flood*, ll. 227–30, in Judith Frishman, *The ways and means of the divine economy*, Ph.D. thesis (Leiden 1992), 33. Jacob of Serugh (d. 521), *Homélies contre les juifs*, ed. and trans. by M. Albert in *PO* 174 (Turnhout 1976), 70, Homily 2, ll. 37–40. See also *idem*, *On the flood*, in P. Bedjan (ed.), *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis* (Paris 1905–10), 4:(1–61) 23–4.

2.1 *The Infidelity of Noah's Wife*

In Q 66 the Qur'ān, like 2 Peter,¹⁸ associates Noah with Lot. However, whereas in 2 Peter the two are linked by their righteousness (in the midst of unrighteous people), in Q 66 they are linked instead by their wives who “betray them.”¹⁹ The betrayal of Lot's wife, one imagines, is an allusion to her disobedience to the divine command not to look back at Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:26, and alluded to in Q 7:83; 11:81; 15:59–60; 26:170–1; 27:54–8; 29:32–3; 37:134–5). What the Qur'ān means by the betrayal of Noah's wife, however, is less clear.²⁰ One could, perhaps, suggest that the Qur'ān is using these two wives as specific examples to illustrate the general principle of Q 64:14: “O you who have faith! Indeed, among your spouses and children you have enemies; so beware of them. And if you excuse, forbear and forgive, then Allah is indeed all-forgiving, all-merciful.” This, however, hardly explains why Noah's wife in particular would be chosen along with Lot's wife as an example.

Many *mufasssīrūn* sought to explain the presence of Noah's wife here by referring to the passage involving Noah's lost son in Q 11. In that passage the Qur'ān (v. 45) has God declare, referring to that son: “O Noah! Indeed, he is not of your family” (Q 11:46). According to one tradition (though one not actually supported by any of our *mufasssīrūn*), this son was indeed not Noah's but rather the fruit of an illicit relationship between Noah's wife and another man (hence the “betrayal” of Q 66:10). Noah only learned of this when God informed him (Q 11:46) that the one who refused to get in the Ark was not of his family. Roger Arnaldez explains the logic behind this position: “Ce personnage ne serait pas fils de Noé au sens propre, car il n'est pas convenable qu'un prophète ait un

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- 18 After alluding to Noah's righteousness (2:5), 2 Peter turns immediately to the righteousness of Lot (2:6–8).
- 19 The verse in question (Q 66:10) is connected by most *mufasssīrūn* to the beginning of *sūra* 66. The opening verse of the *sūra* (“O Prophet! Why do *you* disallow [yourself] what Allah has made lawful for *you*, seeking to please *your* wives? And Allah is all-forgiving, all-merciful.”) is usually explained with a story by which ʿĀ'isha and Ḥafṣa, two wives of the Prophet, objected to the entrance of Mariam the Copt into the Prophet's harem. The reference to unfaithful women (v. 10) and pious women (vv. 11–2) was accordingly meant as a lesson to his wives. Thus, for example, *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* explains (p. 677): “Allah warned ʿĀ'isha and Hafsa because they hurt the Prophet by mentioning the example of the wives of Noah and Lot.”
- 20 Geiger considers this report to be simply a product of confusion. Abraham Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen* (Leipzig 1902; reprint of Bonn 1833), 109. Bell wonders if there has been some confusion with the wife of Job (who is reprimanded by her husband in Job 2:10, something alluded to in Q 38:44); Richard Bell, *A commentary on the Qur'ān* (Manchester 1991), 2:399.

fil infidèle.”²¹ However, this position engendered a new problem: “Pourtant la question rebondit: comment les prophètes peuvent-ils avoir des femmes qui les trahissent?”²²

Indeed, this question seems to have figured strongly in the exegetical mind. All of the exegetes I studied agree that the figure in Q 11 certainly was Noah's biological son, although some cite traditions to the contrary. Some of them explicitly argue that prophets are protected from the shame of being cuckolded.

Tafsīr Muqātil, after explaining that Noah's son was named Kanʿān and that Noah called out to him seven times, adds that this was Noah's son “from his loins [*min ṣulbihi*].”²³ Thaʿlabī relates a tradition from Saʿīd b. Jubayr (d. 95/714): “He was [Noah's] son but he opposed him in intention and work and religion.”²⁴ This, of course, raises the problem of why Noah – a prophet of God who prayed for the unbelievers to be destroyed (Q 71:26) – would yearn for the salvation of an unbelieving son (Q 11:42, 45). The answer, according to al-Qurṭubī (and al-Rāzī), is that Noah's son was a hypocrite (*munāfiq*): He “kept his unbelief secret while pretending to believe.”²⁵ Noah, in other words, never knew that his son was an unbeliever.

In *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* we find the explicit declaration that no prophet has ever had a wife who betrayed him: “[The wives of Noah and Lot] did not betray their husbands in the sense that they committed adultery, for no wife of a prophet has ever done this.”²⁶ Al-Zamakhsharī seems to make this a dogmatic principle. He explains that the shame of being a cuckold is “a disgrace against which prophets are protected (*ʿuṣīmat*).”²⁷ It is, of course, important that

21 Roger Arnaldez, *Le Coran* (Paris 1983), 103.

22 Ibid., 104.

23 *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 2:283, ad Q 11:42. The idea that Noah's son was named Kanʿān is widespread among the *mufasssīrūn* (see also *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās*, 231; Zamakhsharī, 2:396; Biqāʿī, 3:532). This idea is derived ultimately from Genesis 9, according to which Canaan was Noah's grandson (through Ham), whom Noah curses (Genesis 9:26). An alternative tradition (noted by, among others, Zamakhsharī, 2:396) gives this son the name Yām, no doubt derived from Ham, father of Canaan in Genesis 9.

24 Thaʿlabī, 5:172–3, ad Q 11:41–8. The tension around the identity of the son in question is resolved in the English Qurʾān translation of the Iranian Ṭāherah Ṣaffarzādeh. She renders Q 11:46 as follows, “Surely, he is not of your [spiritual] family”; see T. Saffarzade, *The Holy Quran. Translation with commentary* (Tehran 2007). I am grateful to Majid Daneshgar for this reference.

25 Qurṭubī, 9:42; Rāzī, 17:185, ad Q 11:42–3.

26 *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās*, 677, ad Q 66:10.

27 Zamakhsharī, 2:396.

al-Zamakhsharī chooses to use the verb *ʿuṣimat*, as it suggests that he sees this as a question of prophetic *ʿiṣma* (infallibility).

Al-Qurṭubī notes this opinion, and attributes it to Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687): “No woman ever cuckolds a prophet. He was his son from his loins.”²⁸ For their part, al-Thaʿlabī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī cite a different tradition from Ibn ʿAbbās, which explains that when the Qurʾān speaks of the betrayal of Noah’s wife it means only that she accused him of being crazy.²⁹

Al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī, and al-Qurṭubī variously attributed to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (al-Zamakhsharī) or Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 117/735) and al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728; al-Rāzī and al-Qurṭubī) the suggestion that Q 11:42 should not be read *nādā Nūḥ ibnahu* (“Noah called his son”) but rather *nādā Nūḥ ibnahā* (“Noah called *her* son”).³⁰ Such a reading would make the point that the boy was not *his* son. Al-Rāzī also notes the opinion that Q 66:10, with its reference to the betrayal of Noah’s wife, implies that she was guilty of adultery. None of them, however, ultimately agree with this opinion.³¹

Indeed, al-Rāzī insists that a clear reading of the Qurʾān indicates that the lost son was a biological son of Noah. He argues that those who disagree “do so only because they seek to distance themselves from the idea that the son of an infallible messenger would be an unbeliever.”³² Al-Rāzī, however, insists that they are wrong to be concerned with such a thing: if both the father of Abraham (whom the Qurʾān presents as an unbeliever) and the father of Muḥammad (who, according to the *sīra*, died before Muḥammad proclaimed Islam in pagan Mecca) were unbelievers, then the son of Noah could be an unbeliever as well: “It is confirmed that the father of our Messenger was an

28 Qurṭubī, 9:42.

29 Thaʿlabī, 5:172, ad Q 11:41–8; Rāzī, 17:185, ad Q 11:42–3 (cf. Qurṭubī, 9:43). In so doing Noah’s wife acted as did the unbelievers who accused Noah of insanity (Q 23:25; 54:9).

30 According to another alternative reading, attributed to Muḥammad al-Bāqir (again) and ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr (d. ca. 94/712), which avoids the necessity of adding an *alif*, the text should read here *nādā nūḥ ibnaha* (the *fatha* on the *hāʾ* taking the place of the *alif*); see Rāzī, 17:185, ad Q 11:42–3, and Zamakhsharī, 2:396. Qurṭubī also notes this grammatical explanation but (like Rāzī) rejects it. To this end he cites the grammarian Abu Jaʿfar al-Naḥḥās (d. 338/950), who writes: “That which Abū Ḥātim [al-Sijistānī (d. 255/869)] said is not possible according to the teachings of Sibawayhi [d. ca. 180/796–7] because the *alif* is light (*khafīf*) and cannot be elided”; Qurṭubī, 9:35–6.

31 Later, Rāzī notes the view of those who hold that the boy was “a child of fornication” and calls it “completely false”; Rāzī, 18:4, ad Q 9:45–7. A similar tradition is reported by Thaʿlabī, 5:172, ad Q 11:41–8.

32 Rāzī, 17:184, ad Q: 11:42–3.

unbeliever, and the father of Abraham was an unbeliever, according to the text of the Qur'ān. Here we have something similar.”³³

In a tradition found in the *tafsīrs* of al-Tha'labī, al-Zamakhsharī, and al-Qurṭubī, the question of whether Noah's lost son was his biological son becomes the subject of a debate between al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and Qatāda (d. 117/735). According to al-Tha'labī:

Qatāda said, “I asked al-Ḥasan about [the lost son] and he said, ‘By God, he was not [Noah's] son,’ and he read *khānatāhumā* [Q 66:10].” [Qatāda] said, “God has said of him, that he said: ‘My son is from my family [Q 11:45],’ and [God] said, ‘Noah called his son,’ [Q 11:42] and you say, ‘It was not his son,’ but the People of the Book agree that he was [Noah's son].” Al-Ḥasan said, “Who takes his religion from the People of the Book? They are liars.”³⁴

Al-Biqā'ī writes of Noah's lost son: “[His name was] Kan'ān and he was from his loins.”³⁵ He adds that Kan'ān was an unbeliever, explaining that when the Qur'ān has God declare (before the flood): “None of your people will believe except those who already have faith” (Q 11:36), the son was not included among their number.³⁶

The position of the *mufasssīrūn* on this issue does seem to develop over time. The view that Noah had been cuckolded (associated primarily with al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī) appears first in the work of al-Tha'labī (among the *mufasssīrūn* I surveyed). However, it is true that even the earliest works, including *Tafsīr Muqātil*, insist that he had not, which implies that this debate existed from the earliest period of Islamic exegesis. Of all of the *mufasssīrūn* I surveyed, only al-Qummī never addresses this debate. Yet the categorical insistence that a prophet could never be betrayed by his wife appears first with al-Zamakhsharī. Indeed,

33 Ibid.

34 Tha'labī, 5:172, ad Q 11:41–8. Cf. Zamakhsharī, 1:504, ad Q 11:42–4; Qurṭubī 9:42–3. The appeal to the People of the Book here is strange, seeing that the account of Noah's lost son is not found in the Bible. Nevertheless, this appeal, and al-Ḥasan's response, reflects the dispute of the *mufasssīrūn* over the permissibility of turning to Jews and Christians in order better to understand the Qur'ān. On the origin of this qur'anic account see my study, Noah's lost son in the Qur'ān, in progress, and Comerro, Un Noé coranisé, esp. p. 624.

35 Biqā'ī, 3:532.

36 Ibid., 3:535.

his view might be considered an expansion of the general idea of prophetic infallibility.³⁷

2.2 *Noah's Complaint to God*

A second exegetical debate surrounding Noah and his son involves the question not of whether Noah's wife committed a misdeed but rather of whether he himself did so by complaining to God about his son. This problem is raised by Q 11:45: "Noah called out to his Lord, and said, 'My Lord! My son is indeed from my family. Your promise is indeed true, and You are the fairest of all judges.'" At the center of this debate was how to read a phrase in the following verse (Q 11:46): "Said He, 'O Noah! Indeed, He is not of your family, *innahu 'amalun ghayru ṣālihin*. So do not ask Me [something] of which you have no knowledge. I advise you lest you should be among the ignorant."³⁸

In this translation Quli Qara'i renders the Arabic phrase *innahu 'amalun ghayru ṣālihin* so that the pronoun *hu* refers to Noah's son: "Indeed he is [the personification of] unrighteous conduct." This implies that the son acted in unrighteous ways (and accordingly was killed). A similar perspective is found with a number of other translators: Yusuf Ali: "His conduct is unrighteous"; Pickthall: "He is of evil conduct"; Blachère, "Il a fait un acte impur"; Asad: "he was unrighteous in his conduct." Others, however, render the phrase in a manner that impugns Noah himself; they make the *hu* refer instead to Noah's act (*'amal*) of complaining to God: Paret: "Das (d.h. daß du dich bei mir für ihn einsetzt) ist nicht recht gehandelt"; Khalidi: "It is an act unrighteous"; Droge:

37 One modern *mufasssīr*, the Tunisian Ibn 'Āshūr (d. 1973), seems to take a compromise position on the debate surrounding Noah's son. In his *Tafsīr al-tahrīr wa-l-tanwīr* Ibn 'Āshūr describes Noah's lost son as the "fourth of his sons from Noah's second wife whose name was Wā'ila, and who drowned." Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-tahrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, (Beirut 1420/2000), 11:262, ad Q 11:43.

38 David Marshall argues that Noah's prayer to God here shows that his paternal feelings for his son overcame his religious convictions as a prophet. He maintains further that Noah's disposition is a projection of Muḥammad himself in the late Meccan period. On this, Marshall refers to Sayyid Quṭb, *al-Taṣwīr al-fannī fī l-Qur'ān* (Cairo 1993¹⁴), 58. See David Marshall, *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers* (Richmond, UK 1999), 99. According to the standard Cairo edition Q 11 was the 52nd *sūra* proclaimed. Nöldeke puts it somewhat later, towards the beginning of the third Meccan period (the 75th *sūra*; Blachère makes it 77). See Theodor Nöldeke et al., *The history of the Qur'ān*, ed. and trans. Wolfgang H. Behn (Leiden 2013), 118–26 (corresponding to the second edition of the German, originally published in 1909: 1:144–54).

“Surely it is an unrighteous deed.”³⁹ David Marshall notes that the way in which Abraham is later rebuked (v. 76) for interceding for Sodom suggests that this is indeed a rebuke of Noah.⁴⁰

We will see that this division among translators has its roots in *tafsīr*. *Tafsīr Muqātil* reads the phrase in question not as *innahu ‘amalun* (“it is a deed”) but rather *innahu ‘amila* (“he did”), and he explains (referring to Noah’s son): “He engaged in polytheism” (*‘amila shirkan*).⁴¹ *Tafsīr Ibn ‘Abbās* notes two possibilities. Either the text is to be read *innahu ‘amila*, meaning “he engaged in polytheism” (the reading of *Tafsīr Muqātil*) or *innahu ‘amalun*, meaning that Noah’s complaint to God on behalf of his son is unacceptable since he is “not deserving of being saved.”⁴²

Al-Zamakhsharī, who insists that this passage shows that “nearness in religion is more encompassing than nearness in relation,”⁴³ argues that the expression suggests that Noah’s son, by being an unbeliever, has “made himself an unrighteous deed (*‘amalan ghayra ṣāliḥin*).”⁴⁴ He continues, however, by noting the debate over the pronoun *hu* in the expression *innahu ‘amalun ghayru ṣāliḥin*. Some connect the *hu* with Noah and explain that his calling out to God (Q 11:45) was an unrighteous act; others read instead *innahu ‘amila ghayra ṣāliḥin* and explain that Noah’s son was guilty of doing something unrighteous.⁴⁵

Al-Rāzī also considers both readings, and asks whether the *hu* in *innahu* refers to Noah, or to his son.⁴⁶ Without taking sides on this issue, he insists that Noah’s calling out to God does not make him guilty of sin (*dhanb*) or rebellion (*ma‘ṣiya*). Al-Rāzī explicitly makes this an issue of prophetic infallibility (*‘isma*). After noting six different arguments that those who seek to “defame the infallibility of the prophets” point to as proofs, he concludes that Noah’s calling out to God involved only “neglecting the most preferred or perfect” conduct, rather than sin.⁴⁷

39 Droge adds in a note: “Noah’s intercession for his disbelieving son is (lit.) ‘a deed other than righteous,’ even though it was on behalf of a member of his own family. Religious affiliation supersedes family ties.” Arthur J. Droge, *The Qur’ān. A new annotated translation* (Bristol 2013), 136, n. 56.

40 Marshall, 102.

41 *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 2:285.

42 *Tafsīr Ibn ‘Abbās*, 232, ad Q 11:46.

43 Zamakhsharī, 2:399, ad Q 11:45–46.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid. Al-Zamakhsharī also insists that when Noah called out to God the son had not yet died in the flood; Zamakhsharī, 2:400, ad Q 9:45–6.

46 Rāzī, 18:3–6, ad Q 11:45–7.

47 Ibid., 18:4–5, ad Q 11:45–7.

Al-Qurṭubī gives a list of those who support the reading *innahu 'amila ghayra ṣālihin*: Ibn 'Abbās, 'Urwa, 'Ikrima, Ya'qūb, and al-Kisā'ī.⁴⁸ He also notes the opinion that (if one were to follow the reading *innahu 'amalun ghayru ṣālihin*) the Qur'ān means *dhū 'amal* ["doer of an act"] even if it only states *'amal*, the idea being that Noah's son is "a person of unrighteous deeds." However, al-Qurṭubī also mentions the position that, with this verse, the Qur'ān has God rebuke Noah: "It could be that the *hā'* [in *innahu*] refers to the question, meaning: 'Your request to me that I save him is an unrighteous act.'"⁴⁹ He then turns to a third position, namely that the pronoun *hu* is a reference to the act of unfaithfulness by Noah's wife through which this son was born: "Qatāda said that al-Ḥasan said, 'The meaning of the "unrighteous act" is that he was a "son of his bed" but not his son.' Mujāhid also said this."⁵⁰ Al-Qurṭubī also explains that the reason for Noah's complaint to God was God's earlier command to have his family ("except those [of them] against whom the edict has already been given") board the Ark (Q 11:40). Noah never knew that his son was among those already condemned, because his son was a hypocrite who hid his unbelief. God, however, "knows the unseen."⁵¹

Al-Biqā'ī, like al-Qurṭubī before him, does not accept the idea that Noah was at fault. He blames the son for the misdeed, and in particular his secret unbelief. When the Qur'ān has God declare *innahu 'amalun ghayru ṣālihin*, al-Biqā'ī explains that the pronoun *hu* refers to "the one who did the act (*dhū 'amal*)."⁵² In other words, he continues, it refers to the son: "He was a hypocrite who pretended to believe."⁵²

3 Dogma, Noah, and the Qur'ān

The influence of dogmatic notions of prophetic privilege is evident in the way the *mufasssirūn* surveyed in this modest study answer the two questions at hand, i.e. the infidelity of Noah's wife and the meaning of *innahu 'amalun ghayru ṣālihin* in Q 11:46. With regard to the first question, they all come to

48 Qurṭubī, 9:42.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid. This possibility is also raised, and then rejected, by Rāzī: 18:4, ad Q 9:45–7.

51 Ibid.

52 Biqā'ī, 3:532. In his *Commentary*, Bell (1:359) notes that al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286) also takes *hu* as referring to Noah's son, and interprets the phrase as *innahu dhū 'amalin*: "These interpretations are probably due to Moslem aversion to ascribing an unrighteous deed to a prophet, the real interpretation being that 'it (i.e. the questioning of Allah about the loss of a relative) is an unrighteous deed.' Islam breaks all ties."

the conclusion that Noah's lost son was not the fruit of his wife's relations with another man, and indeed that her infidelity was not sexual at all. One might detect a certain development in the way this conclusion was justified in the declaration of al-Zamakhsharī that prophets are "protected" from the disgrace of being a cuckold. Nevertheless, maintaining this dogmatic position involves conceding another point: the possibility that a prophet's son might be an unbeliever. Al-Rāzī justifies this possibility, as we have seen, by noting how the cases of Abraham and Muḥammad show that a prophet's father could be an unbeliever (although it can certainly be maintained that this is not really the same thing). In any case, with al-Zamakhsharī at least, the dogmatic notion that a prophet could not be cuckolded is an extension of the idea of prophetic infallibility (*ʿiṣma*). Indeed, inasmuch as all of the exegetes studied here resist the idea that Noah's wife cheated on him, we might also see them as implicitly accepting this expansive notion of *ʿiṣma*. In other words, these Muslim exegetes are concerned not only with the things that prophets said and did, but also with their honor. It was, in the end, inconceivable that God would allow a prophet to be shamed by the dishonor of a wife's betrayal.⁵³ Of course, there is nothing in the Qurʾān to this effect,⁵⁴ but then (and as has been pointed out in earlier scholarship) there is nothing in the Qurʾān to the effect that prophets are infallible, either.⁵⁵

With regard to the second question the commentators are less unified. Some of them at least allow for the possibility that the phrase *innahu ʿamalun ghayru*

53 This idea contrasts dramatically with the story of Hosea in Bible, whereby God marries Hosea (a prophet) to a prostitute so that Hosea will learn how God feels by the repeated betrayals of Israel (and appreciate God's mercy in forgiving her). "The beginning of what the Lord said through Hosea: The Lord said to Hosea, 'Go, marry a whore, and have children with a whore; for the country itself has become nothing but a whore by abandoning the Lord'" (Hos 1:2). By the end of Hosea the lesson comes full circle as God extends his mercy to Israel: "I shall cure them of their disloyalty, I shall love them with all my heart, for my anger has turned away from them. * I shall fall like dew on Israel, he will bloom like the lily and thrust out roots like the cedar of Lebanon" (Hos 14:5–6).

54 It should be noted, however, that al-Rāzī defends this principle by noting how the Qurʾān commands that the unrighteous should only marry other unrighteous people. He quotes two verses to make the point: "Corrupt women are for corrupt men, and corrupt men for corrupt women. Good women are for good men, and good men for good women" (Q 24:26a; modified translation); and "The fornicator shall not marry anyone but a fornicatress or an idolatress, and the fornicatress shall be married by none except a fornicator or an idolater, and that is forbidden to the faithful" (Q 24:3); see Rāzī, 17:185, ad Q 11:42–3.

55 "The term and the concept of *ʿiṣma* do not occur in the Qurʾān or in canonical Sunni *Ḥadīth*"; Wilferd Madelung and E. Tyan, *ʿiṣma*, EI2.

ṣāliḥin refers to the appeal that Noah made to God on behalf of his unbelieving son. After all, this act would seem to contradict the Qur'ān's call elsewhere to have no sympathy for unbelievers "even though they be their fathers or their sons or their brethren or their clan" (Q 58:22). In light of this, and in light of the parallel case in the same *sūra* whereby Abraham is reprimanded for appealing to God on behalf of Lot's people (Q 11:76), it is notable that most *mufasssirūn* do not embrace the possibility that God is reprimanding Noah in Q 11:46. Most instead look for ways to connect *innahu 'amalun ghayru ṣāliḥin* with Noah's son. The grammatical awkwardness of doing so meant that a variant reading (*'amila* for *'amalun*) became an attractive option.

With this question, too, we can detect a certain hardening of the dogmatic position over time. Rāzī vigorously defends Noah against the possibility that he sinned, while al-Qurṭubī and al-Biqā'ī argue unambiguously for the position that Noah's son, and not Noah himself, was at fault. Thus, these exegetical debates over Noah illustrate the significant place that dogma regarding prophets came to have in the exegetical thinking of the classical *mufasssirūn*.⁵⁶

56 One might note, by way of contrast, the work of the modern (Marxist) Egyptian poet Amal Dunqul (d. 1983), "A special interview with Noah's son," in which Dunqul makes not Noah but the son of Noah into a hero for his willingness to remain with the people and not flee from them onto the Ark: Amal Dunqul, *Muqābala khāṣṣa ma'a Ibn Nūḥ*, in *Dōwān Amal Dunqul* (Cairo 1983), 393–4.