



Noah and the Near-East (III)

Mircea A Tamas

In the Islamic tradition, the hierarchy of spiritual realization has, at the top, three stations: one occupied by *rasûl* and the other two we already mentioned (*nabî* and *walî*). *Rasûl*, who occupies the highest station (*maqâm*), is “the messenger of God” and manifests the greatest divine attribute, that of being Merciful (*Er-Rahmân*), in all the worlds (*rahmantan lil-âlamîn*) (Guénon, **Initiation**, p. 261), this function having a universal characteristic. *Rasûl* is God’s favorite, chosen to “reveal” the Tradition into the world again when a change of cycles occurs, in order to save the world (or a part of it) from decadence, profane and ignorance, and to establish a new spiritual center and a new traditional society equipped with a sacred Law (Sanskrit *Dharma*). “The messengers of God” are very rare during a human cycle and manifest themselves only when a major crisis develops. The station occupied by *rasûl* contains implicitly the qualities of *nabî* and *walî*. *Nabî* is a divine “messenger” as well, yet the area of his function is limited to a particular people. *Nabî* means literally “prophet” and, in comparison to *rasûl*, does not bring a new law, does not found a new society, but admonishes the people to come back to the existing Law and to the still operating society, in the same way the biblical prophets scolded the Jews to return to Moses’ Law and follow it in all the details. *Nabî* is at the same time a *walî*, that is, a “saint.” *Walî* is the one “close to God,” the one who “walks with God,” and therefore his station is considered by some higher than that of *nabî*; yet in fact the latter is a *walî* who has also a “mission” with regard to a group of people.

We observe that Noah appears as a *walî*, since he “walked with God” and saved himself; but Noah seems to be also a prophet, a *nabî*, whose mission was the endeavour to straighten a specific people, daily warning about the flood. For the Islamic tradition though, Noah is even more than that: he is a *rasûl*, the first “messenger of God” on earth from a long series of “messengers” (which includes Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad). Muhammad is considered the last “messenger” for present humanity’s cycle, and Jesus is the one who will come to earth for the end of times.

Noah and the Near-East (III)

Noah, as the first “messenger of God,” plays an important role in the Islamic tradition.¹ He is often mentioned in the **Qur’ân**. In sûrah *Al Arâf*, the “messengers of God” are listed starting with Noah. It is an important sûrah that depicts a vast picture with regard to human infidelity and decadence, beginning with Adam’s sin; the worshipers of (satanic) idols are condemned and also the lack of faith in the one-and-only God. The sûrah opens with “Follow the revelation given unto you from your Lord, and follow not, as friends or protectors, other than Him” (7:3), in the way Adam and Eve did. A part of humankind (“the righteous men”) accepted the signs and the way of God, yet others rejected the messengers and the signs, and they took beside God the evil ones as protectors, falling into error (7:30); these, even if God created them, do not know to be grateful and were full of arrogance (7:10, 36). *Al Arâf* is the veil that separates the righteous ones who will go to heaven from the evil ones who will go to hell (7:46); the heights (*al arâf*) suggest the wall that divides heaven from hell.

We sent Noah to his people. He said: «O my people! worship Allah. You have no other god but Him. I fear for you the punishment of a dreadful day!» The leaders of his people said: «Ah! we see thee evidently wandering (in mind).» He said: «O my people! No wandering is there in my (mind): on the contrary I am an apostle from the Lord and Cherisher of the worlds! I but fulfill towards you the duties of my Lord’s mission: Sincere is my advice to you, and I know from Allâh something that you know not.» But they rejected him, and We delivered him, and those with him, in the Ark: but We overwhelmed in the flood those who rejected Our signs. They were indeed a blind people! (7:59-64)

The sûrah goes on naming other “messengers of God” (starting with Hûd), and showing how did the disbelievers reject them. Moses occupies an essential place; even though he also wasn’t followed, not all the people building the golden calf as an idol were decayed, and Moses chose seventy men with whom he saved the rest from punishment and installed the Law (7:103-160). Another sûrah, called *Hûd*, talking again about the “messengers,” presents Noah and his message, the infidelity of his people, the building of the ark and Noah’s salvation; the sûrahs *Poets* and *The Moon* stress how Noah was accused of being an impostor, and in the sûrah *The Spider* again Noah is presented as the “messenger of God.” Eventually, there is a short sûrah, called precisely *Noah*, in which Noah complains to God: “My Lord! Lo! I have called unto my people night and day. But all my calling does but add to their repugnance. And lo! whenever I call unto them that Thou may pardon them they thrust their fingers in their ears and cover themselves with their garments and persist (in their refusal) and magnify themselves in pride” (**Qur’ân** 71:5-7). And Noah added: “My Lord! Leave not one of the disbelievers in the land. If

¹ When the holy Kaaba was built, it is said in the Islamic tradition, the corner (angle) of the black stone was empty and Abraham sent Ishmael to find the stone; in a way, this stone is the thrown keystone that must be found (like the Holy Grail) through an initiatory process. Ishmael embarked on the quest, yet, meanwhile, Tirmidhi said in **Asâr al-hajj**, the mountain Abu Qubays (nearby Kaaba), moved from Khorassan to Mecca and offered to the “intimate friend” (*al-Khalil*, Abraham), with God’s permission, the black stone; this black stone, when the flood took place, Noah gave it to Abu Qubays (Charles-André Gilis, **La doctrine initiatique du pèlerinage**, Les Éditions de l’Oeuvre, 1982, p. 86).

Noah and the Near-East (III)

Thou should leave them, they will mislead Thy slaves. ... My Lord! Forgive me and my parents and anyone who enters my house believing, and believing men and believing women, and increase not the wrong-doers in anything save ruin (71:26-28).

This attention paid to Noah in the **Qur'ân** is due not only to the fundamental importance of the theme, but also to the fact that the Noachite mission was a “preview” of the Muhammadian one. For this reason Islamic esotericism supplied profound commentaries on the subject, like the ones written by the greatest spiritual master, Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabî in his **Kitâb Fusûs al-Hikam**.¹ The third chapter of this work is dedicated to Noah (Nûh) and from the beginning we are warned: “It is well known that the sacred Laws, when uttering about God the Most High, use a language that has for the common believer an apparent meaning; while, for the elite, it comprises the totality of meanings” (p. 115). Then, Ibn 'Arabî stressed that Allâh is both “without” and “within,” therefore we should consider both His transcendence and immanence, suggesting that we must surpass the superficial significance of the Qur'ânic text about Noah and penetrate the initiatory meaning. And from this initiatory point of view Noah presents a “lack,” not the same one as underlined by the Judaic Kabbalah, but equally important. The ambiguity of the Noachite symbolism only underlines the complexity of the crisis in the vicinity of the change of cycles, as well as that of the esoteric and initiatory perspective in comparison to the exoteric one. And everything we describe here about Noah could be transposed to today.

Ibn 'Arabî wrote:

Through transcendence, you condition Him and through immanence you limit Him. If you do both, you are on the right track. You are an Imâm and a Master of Knowledge. Who affirms «pairness» [duality] is an associator [making the mistake to associate something to God]²; who talks about «impairness» [singularity, excluding multiplicity] a unionist [making the mistake to neglect the mystery of One and multiple]. ... Allâh the Most High said: «Nothing is in His likeness,» proclaiming so His transcendence, «and He is the One who listens and sees,» proclaiming His immanence. The Most High said: «Nothing is His simile,» proclaiming His immanence and the existence of a double, «and He is the One who listens and sees,» proclaiming so His transcendence and His incomparability. (p. 118-119)

Meister Eckhart uttered the same metaphysical paradox: “You have to descend in order to ascend. Not because there is a difference between descent and ascension. The supreme ascension resides in the profound abyss of humility. The deeper is the abyss, the higher is the ascension. The high and the profound are one and the same.” And Nicholas of Cusa in his famous **De docta ignorantia** declared:

¹ We use Gilis' French translation and commentaries (Ibn 'Arabî, **Le Livre des Chatons des Sagesses**, Éd. Al-Bouraq, 1997).

² It is what Noah contested at his people.

Noah and the Near-East (III)

God is within everything, because He is an infinite center; without everything, because He is an infinite circle; penetrating everything, because He is of an infinite diameter, the principle of everything being the center, the end of everything being the circumference, the middle of everything being the diameter, efficient cause being the center, formal cause being the diameter, the terminal cause being the circle, the center producing the being, the diameter ruling, and the circle keeping.

The great master Ibn 'Arabî continued:

If Noah had gathered for his people the two modalities of appeal [immanent and transcendent], the folk would have listened to him. But he called them loudly, and then whispering and secretly; and then he told them: «Beg the Lord for forgiveness: He is indeed the eternal forgiver.» Noah said as well: «I called the population day and night and my appeal had no other effect than to increase the aversion.»¹

Ibn 'Arabî showed the difference between the Noachite mission (*risâla nûhiyya*) and the Muhammadian one (*risâla muhammadiyya*): the people did not respond to Noah's appeal because there was a discrimination (*furqân*) between transcendence and immanence; yet the true reality is at the same time discrimination (*furqân*) [between One and multiple] and synthesis (*qur'ân*), this synthesis including discrimination, but the reverse not being possible; for this reason *qur'ân* is Muhammad's privilege, since *risâla muhammadiyya* unites the two aspects. And Muhammad, compared to Noah, did not call the people day and night, but he called them "nightly" in the daytime, and "daily" in the nighttime.

In comparison with *risâla muhammadiyya*, which has a universal and integrative characteristic, addressing all the people, Gilis observed, *risâla nûhiyya* is restricted to a specific nation, having a goal of installing limited traditional unity; therefore Noah asked the population to leave the idols and the multiple divinities, to come and obey the transcendent Unity, which means to abandon the previous traditional forms. *Risâla muhammadiyya* on the other hand, integrated the previous traditions, like the Judaic and Christian ones, and included the deities of the Arab tribes; for this reason Noah, Hûd and Jesus are among the "messengers of God" before Muhammad's arrival. The Islamic tradition realized the synthesis of immanent and transcendent, because it contains a metaphysical doctrine and accepts beside the exoteric domain an esoteric one, to the latter belonging the writings generating perplexity of Ibn 'Arabî. The limitation to an exoteric domain imposes only the aspect of a transcendental Unity, like in Christianity. From a metaphysical perspective, the perfect reality occurs when we consider not only the non-manifestation but also the manifestation, not only the ascendant spiritual realization but also the descendent one, not only One but also the multiple. For this reason in Hesychasm there are the uncreated energies that correspond to the divine attributes and which, from a metaphysical point of view, are exactly the "idols" of Noah's folk. Therefore Ibn 'Arabî considered that Noah's mission was limited, because he did not know how to solve the

¹ The quotations are from the **Qur'ân**, sûrah *Nûh*.

Noah and the Near-East (III)

mystery of “One and multiple,” since “the Most High is at the same time the origin of unity and multiplicity.”

If the exoteric tradition is the same (the circumference, the fruit’s skin), referring to the transcendental One, the initiatory ways (*turuq*), belonging to the esoteric domain, are multiple (the circle’s radius), they are all aiming at the One (the center, the kernel, the immanent One), and in this mode the One and the multiple are reconciled (see Guénon, **L’ésot. islam.**, pp. 14-15). From a metaphysical point of view, the “idols” of Noah’s people can be considered these initiatory ways (*turuq*), each “idol” being nothing else but a face of Allâh. On the other hand, to push the ambiguity of Noah’s symbolism to the limit, the danger is the appearance of error and sectarianism, as Gilis stressed (vol. I, pp. 142-145); *risâla nûhiyya* offered the needed stability for a traditional society, a stability reached through Noah’s appeal to an exoteric unity for all and to submission to the transcendental One, the multiplicity of “idols,” that is, of ways and laws, of particular prophets, leading to confusion, heresy and sectarianism, especially at the end of the cycle. That is what forced the Christian tradition to “descend” into the exoteric domain and to reject all the other “Christian” currents; that is also the motivation for *risâla muhammadiyya* to establish an exoteric Law and integrate the previous traditional forms to prevent any contradiction and dispute among the regular and authentic traditions, which exacerbate at the end of times.

Today though, not too many understand the universal function and the metaphysical essence that are hidden in *risâla muhammadiyya*; the spiritual and symbolic meanings are often forgotten, and the Islamic exotericism itself expressed more than once incomprehension with regard to Ibn ‘Arabî’s teachings; in the same way, Judaic and Christian exotericism seem to have lost the *absconditorum clavis*, the key of the secret things.