

# Intertext and Allusion in the Qur'anic Presentation of Noah's Story

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the Qur'anic presentation of the story of Noah and his people. In particular, it examines the purposes behind the variations and similarities found in the *s'rahs* that mention it and focuses on three fundamental aspects: linguistic or stylistic variations, religious or moral purposes that determine a particular linguistic or stylistic register and contextualize the story within a particular *s'rah*, and the extent to which the style serves that *s'rah's* objectives. Moreover, while this story has very clear and consistent themes, each *s'rah's* concern and context to some extent shapes its rendering therein. Hence, I propose that the repetition of this story is a response to a particular context or conforms to the particular aims and objectives of the *s'rah* in which it appears. This repetition or intertext and allusion therefore become desirable, if not necessary, for both religious and stylistic requirements.

## **Introduction**

The Qur'anic presentation of the story of Noah and his people is characterized by repetition, similarities, and variations. In examining why this is so, three fundamental aspects are observed: linguistic or stylistic variations, religious or moral emphases that determine a particular linguistic or stylistic register and contextualize the story within a particular *s'rah*, and the extent to which the style serves that *s'rah's* objectives. This challenges D. H.

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Müller's frustrations with those Qur'anic narratives in which accounts tend to split into separate incidents instead of being recounted in a linear sequence. For this reason, he and other western scholars have characterized the Qur'an's style as disjointed.<sup>1</sup>

I argue that each episode or telling of the story is slightly different because it is framed by the *s'rah* in which it appears. Moreover, while very clear and consistent themes do exist, the objective and context of each *s'rah* to some extent shapes the rendering of the story therein. This repetition, with its intertextuality, allusion, and network of themes and verbal echoes, is desirable, if not necessary, for both religious and stylistic reasons.<sup>2</sup> It also represents the Qur'an's unity: God is repeatedly reminding Muhammad of Noah's story, and Muhammad is retelling this and other stories to his followers and opponents to prove that God has sent messengers to humanity throughout history. This repetition also reminds people of the gap between those who hear and believe the Qur'an's message and those who do not: the unbelievers always meet with a disastrous end, while the believers are always rescued from torment.

Given the above understanding, the overall story and each rendition recounts this basic message: do not worship idols or mock God's messengers, follow Him, and heed the revealed warnings. If you do what God tells you to do through His messengers, you will be saved – just like Noah and his followers, who persisted even when they were mocked – while those who ignore the message will perish. Theologically, this casts God as intervening directly in human affairs by requiring everyone to prepare for the final judgment by means of following the Qur'anic message. The story is repeated because Noah is held to have warned his people repeatedly via different techniques and approaches, and because each version sheds a different light on the overall story. I argue that this repetition is significant in itself, as it shows that conveying a message inherently involves constant restatement. This fits with the idea of Islam and religion as the people's constant struggle to resubmit themselves to fundamental truths when they are constantly tempted away.

I chose to explore the story of Noah's relations with his people for the following reasons:

- a) Noah, regarded as one of God's earliest messengers, spent centuries summoning his people to righteousness, albeit without much success. Such repetition over a long time leads one to expect many variations in the style of delivery.

- b) Noah is one of the five messengers to have a *s´rah* named after him (the others are Jonah, Hud, Joseph, Abraham, and Muhammad). He is also one of only two messengers to have an entire *s´rah* given over exclusively to their stories (the other one is Joseph).
- c) Noah’s story is presented in eleven *s´rahs*, with a special, longer *s´rah* devoted entirely to him. Hence, why are there repetitions and variations in other *s´rahs* if Noah is merely a story?

In addition, Noah appears alongside other messengers in seven *s´rahs*. In *S´rat al-Shu`arĒ*, he is mentioned on the occasion of confirming the unity between Islam and the religion of such other messengers as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (42:13). In *S´rat al-Ī ad#d*, Noah and Abraham are said to be messengers sent by God in whose posterity He has established prophethood and revelation – and yet their descendents were divided into those who were rightly guided and those who were rebellious and transgressing (57:26). *S´rat Āl-i `ImrĒn* cites Noah as one of the chosen, along with Adam and the families of Abraham and `Imran, above all other people (3:33). *S´rat al-NisĒ* presents Noah and several other messengers, in the context of confirming that Muhammad’s inspiration is the same as that sent to Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, the tribes, Jesus, Job, Aaron, Solomon, and David (4:163). *S´rat al-AzĒb* presents Noah as one of the messengers from whom God has taken a solemn covenant to proclaim His truth without fear or favor and regardless of the circumstances and consequences (the other messengers are Muhammad, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus [33:7]). *S´rah Maryam* places Noah among those chosen and guided messengers (and their descendants) upon whom God has bestowed His grace: the descendants of Adam, those who were carried with Noah in the ark, and the descendants of Abraham and Israel (Jacob) (7:58). In *S´rat al-An`Ēm*, Noah appears in the assembly of other chosen and guided messengers, namely, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Noah is mentioned as being guided before Abraham, and among his guided progeny are David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Zachariah, John, Jesus, Elijah, Ishmael, Elisha, Jonah, and Lot (6:84-86).

Parts of Noah’s story appear in eleven *s´rahs*. According to the order of revelation, these are *s´rahs al-Najm*, *al-Qamar*, *Mu`min`n*, *al-ĒffĒt*, *N`u*, *al-A`rĒf*, *Y`nus*, *al-Shu`arĒ*, *H`d*, *al-`Ankab`t*, and *al-AnbiyĒ*. This study looks at these variations and seeks to discover the themes and purposes behind them.

*S´rat al-Najm*, like all Makkan *s´rahs*, deals with issues related to creation, death, resurrection, and the punishments for those who deny their messenger. This *s´rah*, which starts with Muhammad’s account of his trip to

the seven heavens (*al-mi`raj*), portrays Noah's people as unjust and insolent transgressors<sup>3</sup> and talks about the people of `Ad and Thamud in a form that could be described as preludes to Noah's story.

Like most Makkan *s`rahs*, *S`rat al-Qamar* deals with eschatological issues. Right from the beginning, it seeks to establish the concepts of resurrection and personal accountability. It ends with the same concepts, after stressing the punishment that will befall those who deny God's messengers and their message, as evidenced by the fates that befell the unbelievers among the people of Noah and Lot, the people of `Ad and Thamud, and of Pharaoh and his people (54:9-42). The Qur'an presents Noah as so frustrated with his people that he calls upon God to interfere and bring about His promised final judgment (54:9-16). The brevity of Noah's story here shows that it is also a prelude, for its details are revealed in subsequent *s`rahs* according to the Qur'an's purposes and objectives.

*S`rat al-Qamar* is severe in tone, harsh in threatening unbelievers, and frightening in its promise of punishment, for its main objective is to warn those who reject Muhammad and his message. The *s`rah*, which threatens and warns unbelievers throughout, begins by reminding them that the Last Hour is approaching and relates the stories of various peoples who denied the messengers sent to them and thus were doomed by God. The first story is that of Noah and his people.

*S`rahs al-`Alfiyyat*, *al-Anbiyyat*, and *al-`Ankab`ut* differ in content from the other *s`rahs*. In *S`rat al-`Alfiyyat*, Noah and some other messengers are mentioned as God's believing servants and being as among those whose prayers and cries were heeded by God. Hence, he is supported and rescued when His wrath falls upon the unbelievers (37:75-82). Noah's story is framed in such a way that it conforms to this *s`rah's* most important theme: the promised victory and support that God gives His messengers, as indicated in 37:171-82, where He consoles the Prophet after the Qurayshi unbelievers reject him.

While *S`rat al-Anbiyyat* shares some contextual similarities with *S`rat al-`Alfiyyat*, it diverges from it by emphasizing and echoing God's mercifulness to His creation, especially through such servants as Noah, whose request for support is granted and who is rescued, along with his household (minus one son) from an awesome calamity as a manifestation of His mercifulness (21:76-77). Therefore, this episode serves primarily to show God's special mercifulness to His messengers, a theme that is reaffirmed several times by repeating the attributes *al-Ra`um`an* and *al-Ra`umah*.<sup>4</sup>

*S`rat al-`Ankab`ut* underscores the test and trial that God inflicts upon the believers to distinguish them from the hypocrites, the punishment meted out to the hypocrites and the unbelievers, and saving the believers from tor-

ment. This conforms to its essential theme, which is announced emphatically at its outset (29:1-4).

In the other six *s'rahs*, the context of Noah's story can generally be divided into the need to heed the message and the unbelievers' failure to do so. Moreover, the rhetoric of God's mercy moves between and harmonizes the two themes.

## Noah's Call to His People

The theme of call and response appears in *s'rahs al-Mu'min 'n*, *N 'u*, *al-A'r'ff*, *Y'nus*, *al-Shu'ar'f*, and *H 'd*. Here, they are analyzed in the order of their revelation. Within the Qur'an's overall message, the story of Noah reveals a divine purpose, an important aspect of which is the centrality of "call," "vocation," or "injunction" and the appearance of this call at specific times via God's messengers, the last of whom is Muhammad. Muhammad's message, therefore, is a commentary on his predecessors, all of whom are presented as communicating the same message as he is.

Noah's call, as recorded in *S'rat al-Mu'min 'n*, mixes appeal and threat. Given that this *s'rah's* key concern is monotheism, its verses discuss the signs of God's existence in creation, the facts of faith and belief presented by the assembly of messengers (from Noah to Muhammad), explores the unbelievers' various reactions, some of the doubts and falsehoods the messengers confront and the hurdles they must deal with to spread the truth, how the messengers pray for support and victory, and how God's consistent support for righteousness saves the believers from His wrath. In this context, Noah's story echoes the rest of the *s'rah* by including the signs of God's oneness in humanity and the numerous blessings He continues to shower upon His creation, such as water, on which all life depends.

Noah is the first messenger sent to call his people to accept God's oneness. But instead of doing as he asks, they argue that he is just a man pursuing status by claiming to be a messenger. They also accuse him of being insane and deluded, for they believe that messages can come only from angels (23:12-25). These themes are echoed in the *s'rah's* brief accounts of subsequent messengers. The issue of such accusations is especially raised in relation to Muhammad and the Qurayshi unbelievers.<sup>5</sup> Hence, this episode mirrors the stories of the other messengers mentioned in this *s'rah*. Similarly, the peoples' doubts and arguments are similar to those raised throughout the *s'rah*: "Indeed We sent Noah to his people, and he said: 'O my people, worship God. You have no other God but Him. Are you not afraid?'" (23:23). Exegetes elaborate upon this, saying that it is a rejection

of the response by those people who disregarded an otherwise clearly understood alternative<sup>6</sup>: “You have no other God but Him. Therefore, are you not afraid of His punishment for associating with Him other deities that would not have existed if God did not allow them to exist, let alone being worthy of worship?”<sup>7</sup>

The fact that Noah’s call in *S’rah N’u* gives us at the outset five episodes, some of them very brief, shows that its style and structure is devoted entirely to the story of Noah and his people. The *s’rah* also represents a turning point in the context of its meanings. The first is the statement that God has sent Noah to warn his people before a painful torment befalls them (71:1). The second shows Noah complying with this command by calling upon his people (71:2-4) to worship God, be pious, and obey their messenger (himself). The rewards of piety and obedience are forgiveness, the delay of death to the appointed term, and being saved from the torment of destruction.

Noah starts his complaint by summarizing his situation with his people. He then gives the details, reporting how they responded by putting their fingers in their ears, covering themselves with their garments, and persistently and arrogantly refusing to obey him (71:5-7). But he nonetheless persists, using various means and tones (gentle, severe, persuasive, and threatening) and reminding the unbelievers of God’s blessings, which require people to be grateful to Him, obey His commands, and observe His prohibitions. Noah goes on to recount how he has reminded his people of the signs of God’s Oneness both in the universe and within themselves, of His unique perfection in creation, and of His full control and supremacy over everything (71:8-20).

The discourse continues with his heartfelt complaint to God:

My Lord, they have disobeyed me and followed the one whose wealth and children only made him more of a loser. They greatly conspired and said: “Do not desert your deities and do not desert Wadd, Suwa’a, Yaghuth, Ya’uk, or Nasr.” They indeed have led many astray. So Lord, give these wrongdoers only more of misguidance. (71:21-24)

In other words, Noah’s people disobeyed him and continued to follow those with wealth and children (symbols of power in a primitive society preoccupied with this world). They are persistent in their unbelief, obstinacy, and loyalty to their deities. Then God’s response is given: “Because of their sins they were drowned and then entered into the Fire. They found no supporters to help them against God” (71:25). This passage reveals those people’s fate and thus the outcome of continued in unbelief and obstinacy. It also

threatens the Qurayshi unbelievers and warns them of a similar fate if they persist in rejecting Muhammad.

The focus then returns to Noah, who informs his Lord of how deeply the experience has affected him by voicing his anger and wrath against every unbeliever and asking God to cleanse Earth of them because they are infected with unbelief and waywardness. He even asserts that such people will contaminate others, including their offspring, with their sins (71:26-27). Finally, Noah asks God to forgive him, his parents, those who enter his house, and the believers and to grant them a forgiveness that will secure safety from torment. He then requests God to do even more to the unbelievers (71:28).

*S'rat al-A'rḥf's* main characteristic is warning, for its most important objective is to establish Islam and explain its fundamentals: recognizing God's unity and the subsequent rights that belong only to Him, such as being the only one worthy of humanity's worship, the right to legislate and to establish the concepts of resurrection, accountability, revelation, and the divine message in general, and the message given to Muhammad in particular. To achieve these objectives, the *S'rah* warns about and threatens torment, and reveals the severe outcome that will result from denying or rejecting God's messenger. The Qur'anic text presents this within a framework of reminding people of His bounties and drawing attention to the signs of His majesty in the universe and within human beings.

Given this context, the story of Noah's call starts with

Indeed We sent Noah to his people and he said: "O my people, worship God. No other deity has the right to be worshipped but Him. Certainly, I fear for you the torment of an awful Day." (7:59)

The atmosphere of warning and threat predominates and can hardly be missed from the *S'rah's* beginning to its end. Nevertheless, the note of warning gradually becomes less intense and is mixed with a certain softness and appeal.<sup>8</sup>

The verses dealing with the other messengers confirm this warning. Noah's story fits the *S'rah's* overall context and purpose: it follows after the Qur'an is described as a book in which God refers to knowledge and His messengers, the creation of Heaven and Earth, His settling on the Throne, the subservience of the universe, the manifestation of His majesty, and the scenes of the Day of Judgment. The Qur'anic text presents these to justify God's unity (7:52-54). God then commands His worshippers to pray to Him in humility and secrecy and relates an aphorism that serves as the hueris or gateway to Noah's story:

The vegetation of a good land comes forth easily by its lord's permission, and that of an evil land brings forth nothing or so little with great difficulty. Thus do We explain the signs, so that you might be grateful. (7:58)

We notice the gentleness here in the indirect appeal to righteousness alluded to by mentioning the good land and its fruitful production with its lord's (*rabb*) support, an attribute that stands for care, compassion, and provision. In contrast, we also observe the implied threat in the mention of the evil land, which is arid because its lord does not look after it. The gentleness in this appeal, as indicated by Noah's positive command (Worship God) seems to echo God's gentle approach to His creatures in the preceding verse: "Indeed your Lord is God who created ..." (7:54).

God's gentlest approach is seen when He tells His creatures: "Invoke your Lord with humility and in secret, for He does not like the aggressors" (7:55). Since He is the Lord, He will give people what they ask: "Do not spread corruption in the land after it has been set in order, and invoke Him with fear and hope. Surely God's mercy is close to the righteous" (7:56). Such words as *al-balad al-ayyib* (the good land), *nabŧtuhu* (its vegetation), *rabbih* (its Lord), *ud`u rabbakum* (invoke your Lord), and *la yuhibbu al-mu`adŧn* (He does not like the aggressors), as well as the idea of bestowing mercy upon the humble and righteous, all create an atmosphere of gentleness in a *s`rah* that seems to emphasize divine wrath. This gentleness seems to be mixed within the *s`rah*'s context of appeal and warning, for its overall objective is to portray the balanced relationship existing between the servants and their Creator: "Invoke Him with fear and hope" (7:56).

Thus, Noah comes with both fear and hope. He reaches out to his people with notions of kinship – he is concerned with their interests and salvation and fears what might befall them – for as one of their kin he is supposed to work for the interest of all of them. This makes him stress his fear of what will happen if they reject his call and persist in their idolatry and misguidance: they will suffer great torment both here and in the Hereafter. Within a framework of love, He calls them to worship God alone and warns them of His punishment if they refuse to do so,<sup>9</sup> for he relates himself to them ("O my people") and stresses his fear for them ("Indeed I fear for you"). Such a structure portrays Noah as filled with concern, just like a person who is afraid that a loved one is about to fall into a deep pit and perish.

The contrast between the fertile and arid land refers to the contrast, at the human level, between the believers and the unbelievers in terms of the spiritual benefits that they derive from divine revelation. Al-Biqa`i asserts



that God reveals the messengers' stories in this *s'rah* as proof that there are similar contrasts of good and evil between human beings.<sup>10</sup>

*S'rah Y'nus* talks about the Qu'ran, the wisdom of sending messengers to humanity, the manifestation of God's power, the evidence of His existence and oneness, and the powerlessness of any idol to benefit or harm anyone. It goes on to confirm God's attributes of subjugation, domination, and comprehensive control; to affirm the good news to the believers of security and pleasure in this world and the Hereafter; to stress that only He has absolute power and that all of creation has submitted to it; and that those who deny Him will achieve nothing and will not escape torment.<sup>11</sup> Noah's story thus emphasizes what has already been said herein about the all-powerful God (10:71-73).

Here, Noah's approach takes a different form in order to conform to the *s'rah's* context, objectives, and aims. He is not presented as enjoining his people directly, as in *S'rat al-A'rff*, but as struggling with the idolators. He calls his people to monotheism by stressing God's attributes of power and perfection, coupled with the challenge that their idols are the exact opposite of God as regards His power, perfection, and protection. Noah's approach alludes to, or is determined by, an earlier verse in which Muhammad is instructed to state the idols' worthlessness:

They worship besides God things that neither hurt nor profit them and say: "These are our intercessors with God." Ask: "Do you inform God of that which He does not know in the heavens and on Earth?" Glorified and exalted be He above all that which they associate with Him as partners. (10:18)<sup>12</sup>

It is worth noting that this episode presents, as Qutb puts it,

... the final episode, the episode of the last challenge, after a prolonged warning, a prolonged reminding, and a prolonged denial. ... The objective of the story here is to highlight the challenge, seeking help only from God, and the deliverance of the Messenger and those with him, who were a minority, and the destruction of those who belied Noah, in spite of being the majority and the powerful. Here the context cuts short the details of the story into one single episode that led to its outcome, because this is required by the context in this position.<sup>13</sup>

The text here does not explicitly present the threat posed to Noah by his people because of his persistent calling to monotheism, which led him to challenge them and their idols. Rather, through its context it implies that a real threat has to be addressed in order to affirm the messenger's credibility

and convince his followers that they shall prevail. Noah's words could not be more confident, challenging, and powerful:

O my people, if my stay (with you) and my reminding (you) of the (proofs, evidences, verses, lessons, signs, revelations, and so on) of God is hard on you, then I put my trust in God. So devise your plot, you and your partners, and do not let it remain a matter of doubt for you. Then pass your sentence on me and give me no respite." (10:71)<sup>14</sup>

The other fundamental element of Noah's story is his absolute trust in God for protection. *Fa`alĀ AllĒhi tawakkaltu* means "Then in God alone I put my trust." This concept seems to echo the attributes of God that the Qur'an seeks to establish or affirm in this *s`rah*, for it is echoed twice in the story of the struggle of Moses and the Israelites against Pharaoh.<sup>15</sup>

This episode's last important element is the consequences of believing or denying the messengers. Early in the *s`rah*, the Qur'an says that the earlier unbelievers perished in their unbelief because of their wrongdoing and rejection of their messengers; however, the earlier believers were made vicegerents in order to be tested through their deeds (10:13-14). The last verse in this account echoes and alludes to this:

But they denied him, so We saved him and those with him in the ship and made them vicegerents (in the land), while We drowned those who denied Our revelations. See, then, what happens to those who have been warned. (10:73)

Perhaps this account serves to console and encourage Prophet Muhammad and his few followers as well as to warn the Qurayshi unbelievers who, despite being stronger in number and power, might suffer the same fate.<sup>16</sup>

Noah denies that he expects any personal interest or gain from inviting his people to worship God alone (10:72). This stresses his lack of any material concern for the people, for he does this only out of his love for them. Denying him will neither benefit nor harm him, for his reward comes from God, irrespective of his people's belief or rejection. This verse alludes to 10:41 and 104 in the context of Muhammad and his people.

*S`rat al-Shu`arĒ'* has several purposes, one of which is praising the Qur'an (which indirectly emphasizes its inimitability). It also consoles Muhammad after the Qurayshi unbelievers reject his call to monotheism. Hence, it warns unbelievers that God's anger will fall upon them, just as it did to those who refused to heed the earlier messengers, one of whom was Noah. The *s`rah*'s narrative style differs considerably from the styles used in previous *s`rahs*. Here we do not see God addressing the Prophet

by “Indeed We sent Nuh,” unlike in *s´rahs al-A`rḥf*, *H´d*, and *al-Mu`min´n*. On the contrary, the story starts with its end “Noah’s people did not believe the messengers” (26:105). This seems to have the immediate effect of consoling Muhammad, whom the opening verses present as grieving for the Qurayshis’ rejection of his message (26:3). The story then goes back in time and relates the events from the beginning, thereby echoing the narrative order of the messengers mentioned in the *s´rah*, who are also in reverse order (Moses, Abraham, and Noah). The story starts: “When their brother Noah asked them: ‘Are you not afraid?’” His words to them are also different, for he starts with: “I am a trustworthy messenger to you, so fear God, keep your duty to Him, and obey me” (26:107-08).

After the implied threat in “are you not afraid?,” which characterizes his call in *S´rat al-Shu`arḥ*, Noah emphasizes three important characteristics that, in his view, should earn him a favorable response: his status as a messenger, his trustworthiness, and his lack of personal or material interest. He specifies his task, “I am a trustworthy messenger to you,” and underlines his trustworthiness to highlight that he seeks no reward from them for revealing God’s message to them. Hence, a person as trustworthy as he is should be believed and obeyed. It seems that Noah is drawing upon his premission reputation.

An interesting aspect of this *s´rah* is the idea of unity conveyed by means of the elements of prophethood that God’s messengers hold in common. In the beginning of Noah’s story, this unity means that denying one messenger amounts to denying all of them, because they all come from one source and worship one Lord. The subsequent stories of other messengers, which are in normal chronological order (26:123-27, 141-45, 160-64, and 176-80), show that all of them relayed the same message to their people. Those who deny or do not believe face terrible consequences, while those who believe are saved.

Two verses conclude the Qur’an’s address to Muhammad, who is being consoled for his people’s denial, and threaten the unbelievers: “Lo! Herein is indeed a portent, yet most of them do not believe” and “Lo, your Lord is indeed the Mighty, the Merciful” (26:8-9). These verses relate to the one that, at the *s´rah*’s beginning, mentions Muhammad’s grief over his people’s denial of his message. We could say that they represent this *s´rah*’s core objectives: consoling Muhammad and threatening the Qurayshi unbelievers. The first verse refers to the uncountable gifts He has bestowed upon humanity, the greatest of which is sending messengers for their enlightenment and salvation. And yet few people choose to believe in them. The second verse,

which stresses His attributes of might and mercy, warns of the serious consequences of denying God's commands as revealed through His messengers.

Both verses allude to an implicit threat: "Now they have denied [the Truth], but there will come unto them tidings of that whereat they used to scoff" (26:110). They are repeated seven times as epiphonema for each messenger mentioned in the *S'rah*, a style that seems to serve two purposes: to confirm that the first threat is not empty, as it was carried out before in a similar context, and to authenticate all of the messengers' unity of purpose and support. In light of this, the primary purpose of Noah's story here, besides consoling Muhammad, is to affirm the messengers' unity of purpose.<sup>17</sup> The strong similarities between the story of Noah and those of the messengers that follow allude to that purpose.<sup>18</sup> As regards this concept, al-Biqā'ī quoted al-Hassan al-Basri's response when asked about the verse "Noah's people did not believe the messengers": "Whoever rejects one of the messengers has indeed rejected all, for the other one came with what the previous one came with."<sup>19</sup>

Like *S'rat al-Shu'arF'*, *S'rah H'd* explores the challenging evidence that the Qur'an, as a divine revelation, is inimitable. It highlights, as do most of the Makkan *S'rahs*, such monotheistic themes as forbidding the worship of anything/anyone that is not God, presents Prophet Muhammad as one who warns the unbelievers of the severe punishment awaiting them but informs the believers of a good life in this world and the Hereafter, and establishes the concept of resurrection so that all people can be rewarded or punished according to their deeds. Supporting Prophet Muhammad and consoling him over his people's denial and unreasonable demands comprises one of this *S'rah's* major themes and objectives. Hence, stories of the messengers' struggles, including that of Noah, against their people's denial and linking their situations to that of Muhammad form a cornerstone of this *S'rah*.<sup>20</sup>

*S'rah H'd* characterizes Noah's call to monotheism and righteousness by a style based upon warning and threat:

Indeed We sent Noah to his people (and he said): "Verily, I have come to you with a plain warning: That you worship none but God. Surely, I fear for you the torment of a painful Day" (11:25-26)

Here, Noah presents his people with a warning in the emphatic style. The episode is in line with the *S'rah's* overall aims and objectives: relaying the facts of faith through the stories of messengers and their persistent and tolerant confrontation with their people's stubbornness, arrogance, denial, ridicule, mockery, and threats. The messengers fully trust the truth of God's inevitable victory, which He has revealed to them. All of this consoles

Prophet Muhammad for the similar attitudes he finds among the Quraysh, especially at this difficult and crucial time of his mission.<sup>21</sup> Thus, here Noah's story is longer and more detailed than elsewhere.

We also find a thread of similarity between the attitudes of the unbelievers who confronted both Muhammad and Noah. The Qu'ran speaks to Muhammad about how his people's words affected him:

So, perchance you (O Muhammad) may give up part of what has been revealed to you and be distressed, as they say: "If only a treasure were sent down to him or an angel came with him." (11:12)

Such words are comparable with what Noah said to his people: "I do not tell you that I have the treasures of God or that I know the Unseen. I also do not tell you that I am an angel" (11:31). In addition, the Quraysh mock God's promised wrath and torment, "What is keeping it from coming?" (11:8), just as Noah's people did: "Now, bring upon us that which you threaten us with, if you really are truthful" (11:32).

The *s'rah's* opening verses describe the Qur'an as a book, the verses of which are perfect and explained in detail, and then moves on to the Qurayshi unbelievers' attitude toward it, an attitude that deeply distressed the Prophet (11:12). Likewise, Noah is concerned by his people's reaction to the message he brings (11:36). God's anger is extreme and reaches its ultimate level when faced with a degree of obstinacy that warrants His severe torment (11:17-18 and 20-22). In the midst of this threatening tone, the Qur'an reassures those who respond to God and His messenger that they will live forever in Paradise (Hud 11:23) and then, after an introductory statement in which the comparison promotes reason rather than emotion (11:24), relates Noah's story. Noah then begins his speech with a warning and a threat: "Verily, I have come to you with a plain warning" (11:25). This echoes what Prophet Muhammad is instructed to tell his people (11:2). As we can see, this approach differs from that of *S'rat al-A'rḥf*, where warning is blended with gentleness (7:59). These and other similarities are conspicuous in this *s'rah*.

So far, we have seen that Noah, when calling upon his people to follow the one God and adhere to moral values, mobilizes all available ways and means, in the hope that they will respond positively and believe. Depending upon the occasion, he both mixes styles and methods or just repeats the same style and method. There is a relevant style and method for each situation, for example to highlight or confirm a point. In addition to this appropriateness, each one fits the episode's context and alludes to or echoes the particular *s'rah's* themes and objectives. The following discussion illustrates the variations and similarities in Noah's call to monotheism.

In all of his calls, Noah calls his people to monotheism and warns them of their fate if they persist in their unbelief and stubbornness. Despite this unified approach, additions and differences in presentation help clarify the situation and the scope of the story. For example, there are contrasts between *S'rahs al-A`rḥf* and *H'd*. In the first one, the warning is surrounded by an atmosphere of softness in the form of an admonition. When Noah says "Certainly, I fear for you the torment of an awful Day," it is a restated warning that people should worship God alone.<sup>22</sup> In addition, it reveals the subject of that warning: the torment and its awfulness (*adhḥba yawm `a'im*). This kind of Arabic metaphorical verbal protocol is meant to magnify the torment indirectly and add to its warning.<sup>23</sup> This conforms to the atmosphere of gentle warning and threat that dominates *S'rat al-A`raf*. We find a similar warning in *S'rah H'd* (*adhḥba yawm `alḥm*). The description of the day and the torment are different, however, for although they are described as painful, the latter stresses the pain's severity. This not only shows the torment's immensity, but also implies the severe pain of those experiencing it. It is, therefore, more frightening than simply describing the torment as awful. This also conforms to *S'rah H'd*'s tone of anger and threat.

Furthermore, *S'rat al-A`rḥf* does not mention the torment to the same extent as does *S'rah Hud*,<sup>24</sup> for it mixes the warning with a threat appropriate to describing the pain felt by a tormented individual and to Noah's mission to warn: "I have come to you with a clear warning." Noah's task alludes to Muhammad's, which is also to warn and give good news (11:2). While the call in *S'rat al-A`rḥf* has a verbal protocol in the form of a positive command (worship God), it has a negative form in *S'rah H'd* (that you worship none but God), which is more appropriate to a harsh threat. It also parallels Muhammad's telling the Qurayshi unbelievers that his task is to convey a warning from God: "Worship none but God. Verily, I am coming from Him to warn and bring glad tidings" (11:2). Noah's description in *S'rat al-A`rḥf* of the torment as awful also alludes to *S'rat al-A`rḥf*'s opening verses, which describe the awful events of the Day of Judgment.<sup>25</sup>

*S'rat al-Mu'min* contains no explicit mention of what is being threatened. After stating his mission, Noah asks: "Are you not afraid?" As we have seen, this is a threat. But the threat is not explicitly mentioned, because the *S'rah*'s overall message is positive: God's overwhelming power, as manifested in life, death, resurrection; Heaven's creation; sending rain to revive an otherwise dead land; subjugating animals to humanity; and the rescue of humans by means of a ship. In addition to this, this episode is presented in the context of God's blessings and favors, an approach that would not sit well with frequent mentionings of torment and destruction. That may be

why insinuation is more effective here than explicit reference. In contrast, *S'rat al-Shu'arĒ* follows with explicit and implicit references to God's threat. Noah asks, alluding to this threat: "Are you not afraid?" He later elaborates: "So fear God [His torment] and obey me." Clearly, God's punishment is being threatened. This conforms to the style used by most of the messengers whose stories are mentioned in this *s'rah*.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, in *S'rah N'ū*, we see the threat implied in the command to fear God. A new element is introduced in the statement of who is to fear God's punishment. However, the degree of torment is not apparent, perhaps because it is mentioned elsewhere, in the command to Noah to warn his people: "Warn your people before a painful torment befalls them" (71:1).

As mentioned before, Noah's call in this *s'rah* combines all of the methods and styles that he uses elsewhere and is like a final account and apology to God. Therefore, it is not surprising to find similarities to verses dealing with Noah's call in the other *s'rahs*. Here, the sermon or injunction seems like a summary of all of his injunctions and proclamations of mission given elsewhere. For example, "Worship God" also appears in *S'rat al-A'rĒf*; "Be dutiful to Him and fear Him" are reflected in *S'rat al-Mu'min ĩn's* "Are you not afraid?"; and his command "Be dutiful to Him and obey me" is mentioned in *S'rat al-Shu'arĒ*: "Keep your duty to Him and obey me."

This *s'rah* stresses the wealth and privilege of Noah's opponents. This could mean that wealth and power can easily lead to arrogance and bigotry toward any call for social justice and equality.<sup>27</sup> It could also mean, however, that the poor will most easily receive the message in which they find social justice. As for the people's responses to his call, the Qur'an portrays Noah as suffering abuse and harm while presenting his message. Noah calls for good manners and morality and commands people to worship the one God. The unbelievers' immoral attitudes are summarized below.

The stand of Noah's people in *S'rat al-Qamar* is characterized by violence and accusations of insanity, both of which are presented in a concise language appropriate to the expression of anger and with the *s'rah's* atmosphere of violent warning (54:9-16). *S'rat al-Mu'min ĩn* stresses their rudeness and belittlement of him far more directly (23:24-25). Notably, they base their assumption of a conflict between prophethood and human beings on the ground that prophethood has no precedent. *S'rah N'ū* is the final depiction of the stubbornness, arrogance, and disobedience of Noah's opponents. As there is no other way to reach them, he calls upon his Lord to destroy them because they and their future generations are infected with unbelief and idolatry and will infect others. So, the solution is to wipe them out (71:21-24 and 26-27).

In *S`rat al-A`rḥf*, Noah meets his people's cheiftains (*al-mala'u min qawmihi*) who, according to the exegetes,<sup>28</sup> consist of the chieftains, the council of elders, the nobility, as well as those who are preoccupied with status, popularity, and leadership and have a monopoly of the means of wealth and dominance. In response to his call, which is full of feelings of love, goodwill, appeal, and conciliation, they behave with arrogance, pride, and rudeness, saying that he is "immensely misguided." The language used presents a rhetorical contrast with Noah's mildness, casting his opponents as over-confident and intolerant. Noah responds by simply denying their accusations, stating that he has no trace of misguidance and describing himself as a messenger from the Lord of the worlds (7:60-61).

*S`rat al-Shu`arḥ* accentuates how the unbelievers use the believers' low social status as a reason for their unbelief: "Shall we believe in you when the lowest of our people follow you?" (26:111). Noah answers: "... what knowledge have I of what they used to do? Their account is only with my Lord, if you were aware. I am not going to drive away the believers, [for] I am just coming with a clear warning" (26:112-15). Noah's words "what knowledge have I of what they used to do?" indicate that his people's chiefs, besides belittling his followers, also accused them of immorality, at which Noah is incredulous. This answer supports the view of those exegetes who say that he and his followers were accused of immorality.<sup>29</sup> Their rejection of Noah (11:27) is based on the following factors:

- Noah is a human being and, according to their logic, a human being cannot be a messenger. Therefore, they stress his human aspects. As al-Razi says: "He is equal to them as a human being, and the differences between individual human beings are not so great that all human beings should follow one of them."<sup>30</sup>
- Those who follow Noah are the lowest members of society – they are of low social status and lack intelligence and wisdom in deciding upon issues. So, by implication, they follow Noah without thinking. Moreover, if his claims were credible, the people of intellect and high social status would have followed him.<sup>31</sup> Given this, Noah and his followers are all liars (11:27).
- Noah's followers had no material wealth and authority before following him; after following him, their status did not change (11:27). Commenting on this materialistic mentality, al-Biqā`i says that his opponents can only judge superficially.<sup>32</sup>



## Conclusion

The above discussion reveals a specific stylistic device: if a story is repeated therein, it nevertheless carries new material that uncovers aspects not mentioned before or elaborates upon earlier summaries. This device is used in response to the context or to conform to the particular *s'rah's* aims and objectives. For example, *S'rat al-Mu'min'in* discusses faith and belief as presented by the assembly of God's messengers from Noah to Muhammad, as well as how the unbelievers react to them, including their doubts, lies, and the obstacles they put in the messengers' way. This *s'rah* also shows how the messengers pray to God for support and victory and how His consistent support of righteousness saves the believers from the wrath inflicted upon the unbelievers. Moreover, the themes of Noah's story echo the *s'rah's* themes: his people rejected his call because they considered him a mere human being who sought to gain status by claiming to be a messenger. They argued that only angels could carry messages and that Noah must be insane to claim such a responsibility (23:12-25). These themes are echoed in the brief accounts of subsequent messengers, especially as regards Muhammad and the Qurayshi unbelievers.<sup>33</sup> Noah's message alludes to those messengers mentioned in the *s'rah*. Similarly, the doubts and arguments raised by his people are similar in tone to those raised against these specific messengers.

*S'rat al-A'rḥf* features warning as a primary topic, and thus the messengers' stories are presented to confirm the warning, with Noah's story forming a part of that overall message. *S'rah Yunus* stresses God's absolute power, the evidence of His existence and oneness, the denial of any idol's ability to benefit or harm anyone, and that the unbelievers achieve nothing and will not escape torment.<sup>34</sup> Noah's story serves to emphasize all of this. *S'rat al-Shu'arḥ* focuses on the unity of the messengers to the extent that denying any one of them amounts to denying all of them, as they all derive from one source and worship one Lord. Noah's story and those of all the other messengers echo this concept of unity.<sup>35</sup>

*S'rah H'd's* account of Noah is in line with its overall aims and objectives: to present the facts of faith through the history of sending messengers and the stories of their persistent and tolerant confrontations with stubbornness. The messengers fully trust the truth revealed to them and see God's victory as inevitable. All of this consoles Prophet Muhammad when he is confronted with similar attitudes. For this reason, the story of Noah here is longer and more detailed than in any other *s'rah*, and the similarities between his and Muhammad's situations are made clear.

*S`rah N`û* is a comprehensive summary of the various episodes of Noah's story presented in the Qur'an. It is like his final account to his Lord, and features his frustration in the face of his people's arrogance. Even with all of its variations and repetitions, it notably affirms the following important themes:

- The story functions within the Qur'an's overall message, particularly in how it reveals a divine purpose, such as the call's or injunction's centrality and the former's appearance at specific times in history through the agency of messengers, the last one being Muhammad. The revelation brought by Muhammad is thus a commentary on the previous messengers, all of whom are presented as communicating the same message as Muhammad. Hence, denying any one of them, from a Qu'ranic viewpoint, amounts to denying all of them.
- There is a direct parallel between the repeated warning in Noah's story and Muhammad's struggles with those who rejected his message.
- The story's variations are important, instead of just minor differences in emphasis within a basically unified structure, just as repetition is really a way to reaffirm one central truth. Noah's story attempts to display the plurality and diversity of a prophetic tradition that derives its inspiration from one source and to show how a story can be narrated to achieve different (but coherent) objectives. Repetition, a special kind of rhetorical effect, is arguably one of the Qur'an's distinctive features, for its central image is of a recurrent relationship between God and humanity expressed in language through persistent repetition with slight differences. It has been argued that this repetition is significant in itself, showing, as it does, that God's message inherently involves constant restatement. This understanding fits with the idea of Islam and religion as each person's constant struggle to resubmit to fundamental truths when he/she is constantly tempted away.
- Conveying God's message consists of a dialogue between a messenger and his people and the division of those who follow him and those who do not. It is, however, a different relationship from the one between the messenger and God. Within the context of the Qur'an, Noah's story is a classic illustration of this messenger-people relationship. One's commitment to the messenger and thus to God is more powerful than any other type of commitment, for it cuts across ties of blood, as seen with Noah and his unbelieving son, and is stronger than wealth and status,

as is proven by Noah's refusal to expel his low-status followers. In overall terms, this commitment supersedes and inverts the social relationships and divisions that were the basic principles of social organization prior to the revelation.

- The poor will be the most open to the message. In addition, while God ordains material favor, this is seen as temporary and inferior to spiritual commitment. Those who cling to their wealth and deny the message will ultimately be brought low, just like the unbelievers among Noah's people, who perished in the flood.
- The unbelievers consider the messengers' humanity as one reason why their messages should not be heeded. The Qur'an, however, stresses that the ensuing divine vengeance proves that His messengers tell the truth.
- The story, with its intertextuality, allusion, and network of themes and verbal echoes, represents the Qur'an's unity. Thus it both yields spiritual meaning and reveals some aspects of its literary dimension.<sup>36</sup>
- A final observation is that the voice in these episodes varies: sometimes God speaks directly to the reader or the listener, sometimes Muhammad speaks about what God says after having been instructed to do so, sometimes Noah speaks to God or God speaks to Noah, sometimes the unbelievers speak to Noah or Noah speaks to them, sometimes Noah speaks about what has happened to him, and sometimes Noah speaks to his followers. Noah's followers do not speak at all in these texts. Does this suggest that the messengers defend their followers and speak on their behalf against their oppressors or enemies? It seems that this is the case, and this interesting phenomenon deserves further exploration.

## Endnotes

1. See W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1970), 73.
2. Some of the classical exegetes mentioned this contextual factor but provided no thematic explanation. See, for example, Burhan al-Din Abi al-Hasan Ibrahim ibn Umar al-Biqā'i, *Na'm al-Durar fi Tanfisi al-Āyāt wa al-Suwar* (Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-Islami bi al-Qahirah, 1992), 9:278.
3. See 53:52.
4. *Al-Ra'um* is mentioned three times in 21:26, 36, and 42; *ra'um* is mentioned in 21:75 and 86; *Ar'amu al-R'um* is mentioned in 21:83; and *r'umat* is mentioned in 21:107.

5. Regarding these themes, see 23:33, 34, 43, 47, and 70.
6. See Abu al-Fadl Shihab al-Din al-Sayyid Mahmud al-Alusi, *R`ú al-Ma`ġnġ* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr li al-Tiba`ah wa al-Nashr, 1987), 19:23.
7. Abu al-Sa`ud, *Irshġd al-`Aql al-Salġm ilġ Mazġyġ al-Qur`ġn al-Karġm* (Riyadh: al-Maktabat al-Hadithah, n.d.), 4:57.
8. See 7:2-59.
9. See 7:59.
10. Ibid., 4: 423.
11. See 10:1-70.
12. Verse 106 echoes the idea that idols can neither benefit or harm anyone.
13. Sayyid Qutb, *Fġ ġilġ al-Qur`ġn* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruġ, 1980), 3:1810.
14. The idea of putting absolute trust in God.
15. See 10:84-85.
16. See Qutb, *ġilġ*, 3:1810.
17. Belief in all of God's messengers is one of Islam's fundamental pillars (2:285).
18. See 26:123-91.
19. Al-Biqa`i, *Na`m al-Durar*, 14:61.
20. For more details, see Mohammad al-Tahir ibn `Ashur, *Tafsġr al-Taúrġr wa al-Tanwġr* (Tunisia: al-Dar al-Tunisiyyah li al-Nashr, n.d.), 11:198.
21. It is said that *S`rah H`d* was revealed sometime after the deaths of the Prophet's paternal uncle Abu Talib and his wife Khadijah and when the activities of his mission were at a standstill. See Qutb, *Zilal*, 4:1840.
22. Mahmud ibn `Umar al-Zamakhshari, *Al-Kashshġf`an ġ aġġ`iq Ghawġmid al-Tanzġl wa `Uy`n al-Aġġwil fġ Wuj`h al-Ta`wġl* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma`rifah, n.d.), 2:89 and Muhammad `Abduh, *Tafsġr al-Manġr* (Cairo: al-Hay`ah al-Misriyyal al-`Ammah li al-Kitab, 1972), 8:47.
23. See Abu al-Sa`ud, 2:53 and 8:150.
24. Torment is mentioned five times in 7:59, 141, 164, 165, and 167.
25. See verses 8, 38, 39, 40, and 41.
26. See 26:123-91.
27. See 71:21.
28. See al-Alusi, *R`ú al-Ma`ġnġ*, 4 :150.
29. Ibid., 19:107.
30. Al-Razi, *Al-Tafsġr al-Kabġr* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-`Ilmiyyah, 1990), 17:169.
31. Ibid.
32. See al-Biqa`i, *Na`m al-Durar*, 9:270.
33. Regarding these themes, see 23:33, 34, 43, 47, and 70.
34. See 10:1-70.
35. See 26:123-27, 141-45, 160-64, and 176-80.
36. In his beautiful exploration of the story of Job, A. H. Johns mentioned this important aspect in his conclusion. See his "Narrative, Intertext, and Allusion in the Qur`anic Presentation of Job," *Journal of Qur`anic Studies*, no. 1 (1999): 24. Published by the Centre of Islamic Studies, SOAS, University of London.