

THE SOLOMON LEGEND IN MUSLIM TRADITION

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The principal two components of Muslim Law are the Qur'ān and Tradition. Originally both these sources were transmitted down from father to son orally. It is believed that it was only a century after Muhammad's death that Tradition was set to writing. Nowadays we have free access to Muslim Tradition through *Hadīth* narrations. The actual account of a Prophet's example in deed or word is narrated in small and rather very short stories in which the morale of the "fable" comes up in the end. Every single account of these is called "*Hadīth*" (= *new, modern, recent*; but also: *news, tidings*). Each account is preceded by a chain of authorities (*isnād*) going back to Muhammad himself or to some companion of his as the original narrator who set the ball rolling. Western scholars do not attach much attention to *isnād*, which for the Muslims it might turn out to be more important than the *matn* (= the body of the narration), since from it, through a most complicated process, they try to judge whether a given *hadīth* narration is to be accepted as authentic or not.

One of the main purposes of *hadīth* narrations is, without doubt, to serve as commentary to the Qur'ān, thus providing the believer with a valid explanation elaborating the often concise or hidden message contained in the Book. The Prophetic *Sunna* (= the Tradition or way of behaving of the Prophet Muhammad) therefore, finds its starting point in the Qur'ān of which it is no less than a commentary. If we were to classify *hadīth* narrations and put them in a hierarchical order we would find ourselves dividing these vehicles of Tradition into three main blocks. First in importance come what are called *Hadīth Qudsī* (= Holy narrations), the final source of which is God most high and not just Prophet Muhammad. Since these narrations come directly from God through His Prophet, their authority is only second to the Qur'ān. Next in authority are the *hadīth nabawī* or Prophetic narrations, the final source of which is Muhammad. Finally in order of merit come the *Isrā'īlīyāt*.

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The *Isrāʿīliyyāt* are stories with a Palestinian context and background. This type of *hadīth* narrations is made up of legendary material which grew up around the Bible, promoting apocalyptic literature and mythological figures. The more staunch Muslims at first rejected this type of narrations, and many people in North Africa still do nowadays. The majority of Muslims, however, were not that strict and by time they readily accepted *Isrāʿīliyyāt* as part and parcel of Tradition. In the long run it was recognised that *Isrāʿīliyyāt* narrations were written and promoted to serve as devotion and not to give rise to polemics. Many *hadīth* narrations of this type were collected by *al-Thaʿlabī* in a book entitled “*The Stories of the Prophets*”.⁽¹⁾ In the present article we are about to examine some *Isrāʿīliyyāt* illustrating the Solomon legend in Muslim Tradition.

Solomon’s legendary wealth

To get an idea of the wealth possessed by Solomon, we shall first take a look into a *hadīth* narration without *isnād* reported by *Zamakhsharī* in which there is a sort of inventory of the King’s possessions. It also explains in what way did Solomon have power over the wind – a sort of explicatory note to the Qurʾān’s allusion (Q. 34,12). Another interesting element in this narration is the scale of hierarchy in which the first seats of gold are allotted to the prophets, the second seats of silver go for the *ʿulamāʾ* (learned men), then come common people, and fourth preference is given to *jinn* and satans. No seats are mentioned for the last two groups. This scale, however, is not respected in the inventory list, where the *jinn* are mentioned before mankind, and these before birds and beasts.

It is narrated that his (Solomon’s) army camp measured 100 parasang by 100: 25 for the *jinn*, 25 for mankind, 25 for birds, and 25 for beasts. He also possessed 1,000 houses of glass (*qawārīr*) built on wood, with 300 women in them and 700 concubines. The *jinn* weaved for him a carpet of gold and silk measuring one parasang by one. His rostrum, which was made of gold, was placed in the middle of it; he sat upon it and around it were 700,000 seats made of gold and silver. The prophets sat on the seats of gold, while the *ʿulamāʾ* sat on the seats of silver. Around them were the people and around the people were the *jinn* and the satans. The birds overshadowed him with their wings so that candle drops might not

1. Al-Thaʿlabī, Abū Ishaq Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Ibrāhīm, *Kitāb qisas al-anbiyyā*, Mīsr (Cairo), al-Matbaʿa al-ʿāmira, 1898.

fall upon him. The east wind elevated the carpet and departed with it for a month's journey.⁽²⁾

Not only did the Prophet-King possess great wealth, but he also had angel "bodyguards". One of these angels is mentioned in the following narration; he seems to have occupied the post of supervisor over the *jinn*:

From *Ibn ʿAbbās*: He (Solomon) had with him an angel with a fiery whip in his hand. When someone rebelled against him, he (the angel) hit him without the *jinnī* seeing him.⁽³⁾

Solomon's adventure with the *jinn*

We pass now to Solomon's adventure with the *jinn* of which six versions have been collected. Each version has its own particular events which serve as etiologies justifying Qurʾānic allusions. In the first story, Solomon's *jinn*, being builders, are said to have been commissioned with the finishing of the temple.⁽⁴⁾ The King's death remained hidden from them principally that they may go on working:

It is narrated that David, peace be upon him, layed the foundations of the building of the temple on the site of Moses' tent, peace be upon him. But he died before bringing it to an end, so he entrusted it to Solomon. He therefore commanded the *jinn* to finish it. But when there remained only one year of his life, he asked that his death be hidden from them that they may finish the building of the temple, and their pretence that they know the unseen (*al-ḡayb*) may be rendered vain.⁽⁵⁾

In another version it is said that the *jinnī* were ordered to build a castle for Solomon. The temple is not mentioned. Another character comes on the scene – the Angel of Death disguised as a young man:

It is narrated that he (Solomon), peace be upon him, ordered the building of a castle for himself. So they (the *jinn*) built it and he retired in it one day at a time of distress to devote himself (to

2. Al-Zamaksharī, Abū al-Qāsim Mahmūd b. ʿUmar, *Al-Kashshāf ʿan haqāʾiq al-tanzīl*, Miṣr (Cairo), al-Maktaba al-tijāriyya al-kubrā, 1953, III, 279.

3. Al-Zamaksharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, III, 451 – 453.

4. "Besides the building of the Temple, the *masjid al-Aqsā* is likewise claimed as his work. And a mosque in Alexandria." Cfr. *Shorter encyclopaedia of Islam edited on behalf of the Royal Netherlands Academy by H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers...*, Leiden, E.J. Brill; London, Luzac & Co., 1961, 549 – 551.

5. Al-Alūsī, Abū al-Thanā Mahmūd Shihāb al-Din, *Rūh al-maʿānī*, Miṣr (Cairo) Idāra al-tibāʿa al-muniriyya, 1926, XXII, 113 – 114.

prayer). But a young man entered before him. He (Solomon) said, "How did you enter to me without permission?" He said, "But I entered with permission." He said, "Who gave, you permission?" He said, "The Lord of this castle." Solomon knew that it was the Angel of Death who came to seize his soul, so he said, "Glory be to God, this is the day in which I asked for serenity." The young man said to him, "You have asked that which is not fitting." So Solomon sought security by leaning on his staff. And his soul was grasped, but his death was hidden from the *jinn* until he fell.⁶

The following narration again of Solomon, the Angel of Death (*Malak al-mawt*), and the *jinn*. This time the stress is perhaps put more on the *jinn*'s ignorance of the unseen:

From *Ibn Zayd*: Solomon said to the Angel of Death, "O Angel of Death, when you are commanded to strike me make me know." The angel went to him and said, "O Solomon, I have been ordered to strike you; only a little while is left for you." So he called the satans and they built around him an imposing castle with no door. He started performing *salāt* (canonical prayer) leaning on his stick. The Angel of Death went to him and grabbed his soul while he was leaning on his staff, nor was that done quickly by the Angel of Death. The *jinn* worked before him watching him, thinking that he was alive. But God sent the beast of the earth, a beast that eats wood and which is called "the borer" (*al-qādih*). It entered into the staff and began gnawing at it until it had eaten its inner part. Thus the staff became weak and Solomon became heavy upon it, so he fell down dead. When the *jinn* saw that, they disbanded and went away.⁷

A new element comes in – this time the talking tree sprouting in the temple seems to replace the Angel of Death in announcing the prophet's imminent death together with the destruction of the temple. Of some interest is perhaps the play on words: "*kharrūba*" = carob tree, and "*kharaba*" = to destroy, ruin, which come from the same root: "*KH-R-B*". From one of the branches of this tree the King made a staff, leaning upon which, he died. On this occasion Solomon prays that his death may be rendered obscure to the *jinn*, not that they might go on working, but that men may know that the *jinn* were lying when they pretended to know the unseen:

6. Al-Alūsī, *Rūh al-maʿanī*, XXII, 113 – 114.

7. Al-Tabarī, Abū Jaʿfar Muhammad b. Jarīr, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl al-Qurʾān*, Al-Qāhira (Cairo), 1954, XXII, 68 – 76.

From *Ibn ʿAbbās*, from the Prophet, may God bless him and keep him: Solomon, the Prophet of God, while performing *salāt* used to see a tree sprouting before him. He said to it, "What is your name?" It said, "Such-and-such." He said, "For what purpose are you?" If it was to be planted it used to be planted, and if it was for medicine it used to be written down.⁸ One day while he was performing *salāt* he saw a tree before him. He said to it, "What is your name?" It said, "Carob (*Kharrūba*)." He said, "For what purpose are you?" It said, "For the ruin (*kharb*) of this house." Solomon said, "O God, render my death obscure to the *jinn* that mankind may know that the *jinn* do not know the unseen." So he formed a staff out of it and he died supporting himself upon it. He remained in that position for one year. But the woodworm gnawed at the staff and he fell. So men and *jinn* saw clearly that had they only known the unseen, they would not have continued for one year in the humbling chastisement. Then the *jinn* thanked the woodworm and they used to bring water to it.⁹

The following narration admits both the talking tree and the Angel of Death. New elements are: after that the tree was pulled off and a staff taken from its branches, it was planted in one of the temple's walls; the glass construction with no door where Solomon entered to pray, in contrast with the already mentioned castle; the punishment which used to be imparted to the *jinn* for eavesdropping; and the mathematical calculation from which it resulted that the King had been dead since a year:

It was the custom of Solomon, peace be upon him, to devote himself for long moments in the holy temple. On those occasions it would not yet be dawn when he would see in the sanctuary a growing tree to which God most high had granted speech. He would ask it, "For what purpose are you?" It would say, "For such-and-such." Until one day he saw the carob tree and he asked it. It said, "I have sprouted for the destruction of this temple." He said, "God most high will not destroy it while I am alive; you are the one who brought my death and the destruction of the holy temple." So he pulled it out and planted it in a wall of the temple and took off a staff from it. He said, "O God, hide my death from the *jinn* that it may be known that they do not know the unseen as they feign to do. So he said to the Angel of Death, "When you are

8. Cfr. I Kings 4, 33: "He (Solomon) spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. . ."

9. Al-Tabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, XXII, 68 – 76.

commanded to strike me make me know.” He said, “I have been ordered to strike you; only an hour is left of your life.” So he called the *jinn* and they built around him a castle of glass (*qawārtr*) without a door, and he started to perform *salāt*, leaning on his staff. His soul was grasped while he was leaning upon it. While he was performing *salāt* the *jinn* were gathered around his place of worship. Any satan who eavesdropped Solomon during prayer used to get burnt.⁽¹⁰⁾ A *jinnī* passed by but he did not hear Solomon’s voice, then he returned again but did not hear anything. So he looked: there was Solomon who had fallen dead. So they opened where he was and saw that his staff was gnawed at by a woodworm. They wanted to know the time of his death, so they placed the woodworm on the staff and it gnawed at it for a whole day and night. They calculated on that average and found out that he had died a year before. They were working for him thinking him alive. They saw clearly that had they known the unseen, they would not have continued in the punishment for a year.⁽¹¹⁾

We end this article by giving the whole text of the most complete narration of all. The Angel of Death, however, is absent; and the Prophet is said to have died in the sanctuary of the temple not in a glass castle. The satan who dared to enter where Solomon was praying is here described as a rebel, his action was therefore an act of disobedience punishable by burning. The *hadīth* is concluded by the *jinn* thanking the woodworm for its good service in helping them to discover Solomon’s death, and for that they gave it some gifts, not only water, as has been mentioned elsewhere, which it surely appreciated:

From *Ibn Mas‘ūd*, from people among the companions of the Messenger of God, may God bless him and keep him: Solomon used to retire in the holy temple for a year or two, or for a month or two, or for less than that or more. His food and drink used to be brought to him. On the day he died it was brought to him. There passed not a day in which on waking up he would not see a tree sprouting and he would ask it, “What is your name?” The tree would say, “My name is such-and-such.” He would ask again, “For what purpose are you?” It would say, “I am for such-and-such a purpose.” So he would give an order and it was chopped off. If it had sprouted for plantation, it used to be

10. This was the punishment inflicted by Solomon upon those *jinn* who dared to eavesdrop on him while he was praying.

11. Al-Alūsī, *Rūh al-ma‘ānī*, XXII, 113 – 114.

planted. But if it had sprouted for medicine it used to say, "I sprouted for the cure of such-and-such." And he would use it for such a purpose. Until a tree sprouted which is called carob. He asked it, "What is your name?" It said to him, "I am the carob tree." He said, "For what purpose did you sprout?" It said, "For the ruin of this temple." Solomon said, "God will not destroy it while I am alive; you are the one who brought my death and the destruction of the holy temple." So he took the tree away and planted it in one of the walls of the temple, he then entered the sanctuary and began to perform *salāt* leaning upon his staff. He died, but the satans did not know it. While they were working for him, they were afraid that he would come out and punish them. The satans used to gather around the sanctuary, which had some windows in front and at the back. The satan who wanted to rebel used to say, "Would I not be daring were I to go in and come out from the furthest side?" So one of the satans went in and passed by. Now, any satan who eavesdropped on Solomon in the sanctuary used to get burnt. This satan passed by but he did not hear the voice of Solomon, peace be upon him. Then he returned again but did not hear anything. Again he returned and went in the sanctuary but did not burn: there he saw Solomon who had fallen. So he came out and informed the people that Solomon was dead. They opened where he was and brought him out. They found his stick which the woodworm had gnawed. But they did not know how long he had been dead, so they placed the woodworm on the staff and it gnawed at it for one day and one night. Then they calculated on that average and found out that he had been dead for one year, during which time they continued to be devotedly attached to him. At that the people were convinced that the *jinn* were telling them lies, for had they known the unseen, they would have known about the death of Solomon and would not have persisted in the chastisement for one whole year, working for him. Then the satans said to the woodworm, "Had you used to eat food, we would have brought you better food; and had you used to drink, we would have given you better drinks, but we shall bring you water, soil and wood stuffing." This is what the satans gave it with thanks.⁽¹²⁾

12. Al-Tabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, XXII, 68-76. As to the origin of these legends cfr. *Shorter encyclopaedia of Islam*, 549-551, where it is stated: "Later legendary lore has magnified all this material, which is chiefly Rabbinic in origin." Many of these elements are also found in: Al-Tha'labī, *Qisas al-anbiyyā'*, 164-165.