The Curse of Noah

A contexture of race, religion, and power in early Islamic Africa and Yemen

The Curse of Noah, as represented in *The Adventures of Sayf Ben Dhi Yazan*, presents a means to examine power through race and religion in early Islamic Africa and Yemen. Throughout the text, the worshipers of Saturn consistently refer to Sayf Ben Dhi Yazan as the harbinger of the Curse of Noah. This is a consistent point of conflict: it directly or indirectly propels almost all of the challenges Sayf encounters. Isolated, the Curse represents the will of fate, in which Sayf is entailed by virtue of prophecy. When analyzed in historical context, fate, and by inheritance, the Curse, becomes a representation of the will of God. Even when Sayf explicitly prays, the will of God is detached from God through the manifestation of fate. The conquest of Ethiopia by the Yemeni is depicted in *Adventures* as a nigh impossible task which has been willed by God; fate represents God's will. In historical context, race was appended to the Curse to represent this struggle presented in *Adventures*; the modern Curse of Noah wasn't predestination of the Ethiopian-Yemen conflict, but a depiction of it.

By examining the historical context of *Adventures*' version of the Curse of Noah, we are able to form a better understanding of the power dynamics of early Islamic Africa and Yemen. It's established that the people of Ethiopia are the descendents of Ham, and that they fear annihilation at the hand of Sayf Ben Dhi Yazan, who will enact the Curse of Noah (Adventures 18). The Curse is borne of lineage rather than skin color – the descendants of Ham being black serves as a way for *Adventures* to give historical context to religion. *Adventures* was written for the common Arabic Muslim world, and so the recounting of the Curse presented in *Adventures* makes an adjustment from which a modern interpretation, missing historical context, vastly

deviates. The skin color of Ham and his children isn't the cause for the Curse, but rather, a way to give the audience a concrete historical context – Sayf's position as both Yemeni, and the protagonist, means the largely Yemeni audience's historical enemies are necessarily his enemies. This minor textual adjustment has a monumental contextual impact on the depiction of the Ethiopians in *Adventures*.

Appreciating and accounting for *Adventures's* adjustments to the Curse during analysis allows for more accurate conclusions. Peter Brooks, in his *Reading for the Plot*, refers to these adjustments as products of societal 'meta-fictions': narratives we as a society tell ourselves. The role of plot in the study of narrative is one of context: plot points reveal larger societal narratives, which is seen in *Adventures*' adjustments to the Curse. The value of these plot points is therefore recursive; we can examine them on both their own merit and that of the underlying 'meta-fictions'. This examination in itself is a reflection of our own 'meta-fictions', even when interpreted through a pseudo-historical lense. In *Adventures*' variation of the Curse, skin tone isn't attributed to carry any inherent negative predestination other than designation as a child of Ham. Depictions of black people in *Adventures* are of beauty and grace, and Sayf's sexual conquests of dark skinned women aren't presented differently than those of fair skinned women (Adventures 18, 19, 23). It is in this way that the Curse as presented in *Adventures* deviates from the modern interpretation, which presents skin color as justification for the deplorable treatment of dark skinned people. The Curse as presented in *Adventures* serves to align historical context with larger societal narratives through adjustments which distinguish Yemeni and Ethiopians among its characters. The larger Yemeni 'meta-fiction' is the divine predestination of the Yememi Islamic conquest of Ethiopia.

Fate as a literary device in *Adventures* aligns with societal narratives about faith in God; the strength of fate in *Adventures* is an affirmation of faith in God. In a similar sense to how *Adventures'* adjustments of the Curse fulfills a societal narrative about the conquest of Ethiopia, the strength of fate is in itself a product of a societal narrative apropos to God. The strength of fate is an affirmation of the strength of God's will — while God is depicted in *Adventures* with explicit agency (*Adventures*, 4), fate is presented with no agency, except that it is always in alignment with God's will. The face of fate therefore, is of dual purpose: while fate is not explicitly the will of God, its constant alignment with the will of God, and being within the domain of God means that, as a literary device, fate is an affirmation of the supremacy of God. Brooks stresses the role of plot as "... something in the nature of the logic of narrative discourse, the organizing dynamic of a specific mode of human understanding." (Brooks, 330). The shrouded nature of faith in *Adventures* is a product of this "logic of narrative discourse"; while the audience's acceptance of God's explicit will is paradigmatic, the use of fate as an obscured means of God's will demonstrates the breadth of God's domain to the audience. The obvious alignment of fate with the will of God is the means with which to deliver this narrative.

Contexture of *Adventures*' modified Curse and the implied nature of fate aligns with the early Islamic societal narrative of divine predestination. Albert Hourani, in his *A History of the Arab Peoples*, determines the prevailing Islamic world view in the tenth century to be binary; "... men and women in the Near East and the Maghrib lived in a universe which was defined by Islam. The world was divided into the Abode of Islam and the Abode of War, and places holy … or connected with their early history gave the Abode of Islam its distinctive feature" (Hourani, 57). This boolean interpretation of reality explains the narratives we observe in *Adventures*, and

is itself a 'meta-narrative': the divine predestination of Islamic triumph. All other narratives in *Adventures* define and construct this 'meta-narrative'. We observe the injection of historical context into the biblical tale of the Curse of Noah: the purpose of explicit distinction in the characterization of Ham as the Ethiopians and Shem as the Yemeni mirrors the plot point of the Curse's enaction. The culmination of the Curse and faith in the ultimate power of God results in a 'meta-narrative', in which we see the adventures of Sayf align with the divine predestination that we observe in the larger societal narrative. This 'meta-narrative' forms the catalyst for the religious conquest of Ethiopia.

Allegiance to the idea of a homogeneous people in *Adventures* was chiefly motivated by religion, rather than ethnicity. Concepts of Islamic kinship saturated the societal narratives of early Islam; "Our religion and our empire are Arab and twins, the one protected by the power of God, the other by the Lord of Heaven. How often have the tribes of subjects congregated together in order to impart a non-Arab character to the State! But they could not succeed in their aim" (Hourani, 58). These concepts of Islamic kinship formed the 'meta-narrative' of divine predestination – the unifying factor of these distinctive ethnic groups was that of Islam. This is why Ethiopians in *Adventures* are not demonized and slaughtered at every chance, rather, they are depicted as misled equals: Sayf consistently unites with his opponents, and characters of good morals and honor are acknowledged as such (*Adventures*, 30). Sayf's adopted father, King Afrah, is depicted as a kind man, and good father; when told by royal wizard Saqardyoun that the boy would be the destruction of the Ethiopian people, he resolves not kill him, against the council of Saqardyoun (*Adventures*, 19). Instead, Afrah raises Sayf as his own, and only when pressured by his lord does he send away Sayf (*Adventures*, 20, 21). This characterization is not one of a villain; the key distinction that *Adventures* places between the Ethiopians and Yemeni is

one of religion. Sayf's borderline technical pacifist tendencies are not one of a weak hero, but that of a proselytizer.

By examining the Curse and its related plot points through the societal 'meta-narratives' of early Islamic Yemen, we are able to understand the importance of religion in Islamic homogeny. It is to this end that *Adventures*' adjustments to the Curse serve to give historical context to a biblical tale, not to vilify the descendents of Ham; we observe the importance of conversion, rather than slaughter, in Sayf's confrontations with his Ethiopian opponents. The will of God as represented through fate affirms the divine predestination of the Islamic Yemeni triumph. These 'meta-fictions' compose a uniform 'meta-narrative' of the supremacy of Islam and establishes the importance of religious homogeneity in early Islamic Yemen.

Works Cited

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