Fragments from the Testament of Adam
in some Arabic Islamic sources

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ABSTRACT: In this research, we provide a series of fragments from Arabic Islamic sources, relating to the “Testament of Adam”. With all this, we try to contribute to the compilation of the legend in Arabic Islamic literature and, at the same time, to take advantage of those elements useful for the study of the legend in Christian texts.


When death time was coming to Adam, he ordered his sons to look for Paradise fruits. This topic based on literary cycles about Adam’s figure, is mainly developed in the well-known “Testament of Adam” \(^1\), where it shows us one of the most famous legendary travels. The subject had an important impact in Jewish literature, as well as in Christian texts, throughout the several textual literary forms which developed and transmitted it during the Medieval Age. \(^4\)

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In this research we are going to deal with the “Testament of Adam”, which arrived to Islam and was assimilated by “tradition literature”, which added it to the *isrāʾiyyāt corpus*. The Islamic reception of the “Testament of Adam” was not uniform. There are different drafts of that text as a result of the receptionist labour which the *isrāʾiyyāt* and *masāʾiyyāt* compilers did. But in this case, as a result of a perceptive rule, they removed all the Christological elements included in the section of the “Prophecy”, contained in the Christian textual tradition of the legend.

Within the most significative Islamic texts collecting the “Testament of Adam”, an interesting one is that of Ibn Kaṭīr. This author makes reference to some parts of the legend in some sequent pieces of *ahādkāt* by means of several representative elements of this legend. We have written other articles about the importance to Ibn Kaṭīr’s text for the reception of legendary texts, which arrived to Islam from Jewish and Christian circles, and about the reasons that made this possible.

In this paper, we could see how Ibn Kaṭīr offered a textual organization introduced by an abridged Biblical rewriting, most probably on the basis of the sources which were transmitted to the fragment. This is not an isolated example of the legend reception, as other Muslim compilers have also included this *isrāʾiyyāt* in their


respective works. The first fragment contains the section devoted to the “Testament of Adam”, where the author tells us the following: “The meaning of Seth¹⁰ is «God’s gift»¹¹, a popular etymology which is not the only one, because there was another one with the meaning of “the base” (wa-tafsir ism Šēt al-asās)¹²; he was named with this [name] they were provided with him after Abel was murdered (wa-ma’nâ Šēt hibat Allâh wa-sammâyâ-hu bi-dâlika li-anna-humâ ruzaqâ-hu ba’d a’ân quilla Hâfîz)⁴.

Obviously, as I have just pointed out, we are in front of an abridged rewriting from the Book of Genesis (4,25): “And [he] named him Seth, because God has replaced to me another son instead of Abel, who was killed by Cain” (‘et-S̱mô Šēt kî šat-Il ‘Elôhim zera’ a’her tahat Hebêl kî harâqô Qayîn). In the Hebrew text the name Šēt has been explained from the verb šit (“to replace”), which is the same popular etymology that Ibn Kaţîr is giving to introduce the fragment.

However, Ibn Kaţîr tells us nothing about the specific origin of the rewriting, because the interpretations of that legend, as well as the text of the verses, are the same which we could find in Targumic literature, in the Syriac text of the Pesîṭtâ or even in the Septuaginta version. These are the standardized texts, although they are not the only ones in these languages, which could be the origin of that quotation.

Besides this, Ibn Kaţîr’s quotation is not the only peripheral interesting element in the “Testament of Adam” to our aim. In fact, after the rewriting we find a hadîth that Abû Dâr heard from the Prophet. In this hadîth the following information is included: “God revealed a

hundred and four sheets, fifty to Seth’ (ina Allâh anzala mi ‘ah sahîfah wa-arba’ sahif ‘alâ Št hamsin sahîfah). This hadith introduces the first element of the ‘Testament of Adam’. The two quotations we have mentioned above, first the Biblical quotation and second that one related to the Prophet’s sunnah, are useful for joining the text inside the last divine revelation through Islam.

We have found the first reference to the ‘Testament of Adam’ in a narrative sequence spelled by Muḥammad b. Iṣṭāq. This first allusion is really important to identify the exact source of the dispersed information which was collected by Ibn Kaṭîr. If we do not take into account this first reference, we would have several possibilities which could make even more difficult our task in order to establish the exact and concrete source of the text. The fragment, of which we also have information from al-Ṭabarî and Ibn al-Aṣîr with a little bit changes, tell us the following:

\[\text{Lammâ hadarat Adam al-wafâh 'ahada ila ibni-hi Št wa-\'allama-hu sa'îl al-layl wa-l-nahîr wa-\'allama-hu 'ibadâ tilka al-sa'îl wa-a\'lama-hu bi-wuqû al-fifîn ba\'da dâlîka.}\]

‘When dead was coming to Adam, he made his will to his son Seth. He informed him about the hours of the night and day.’
He apprised him about the service of those hours and he advised him that the flood will take place after that.’

The fragment we have just copied and translated is a clear allusion to a piece of the ‘Testament of Adam’. This piece is the ‘Hours’, which enjoys/enjoyed great popularity inside the Syriac church. After this fragment, Ibn Kaṭîr combined two different narrative units containing the rest of the information about the collected ‘Testament of Adam’. This narrative units are going to be translated below in a moment. We can see the thematic parallelisms between these narrative units.

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13 Cf. Testament of Adam (Syria Recension) R III; Testament of Adam (Arabic recension) fol. 3r-3v.
units and the so-called “prophetic section”. The topic of the flood, for instance, is found in this section as well as in R II, in order to be entirely accurate:

«When Adam was dead—peace be upon him—it was Friday (yawm al-gum'ah). The angels came to him with a balsam (hanūd) and a shroud (kafrān) from God, glorious and excels—from Paradise. They honored him there [together with] his son, to whom he gave something, peace be upon him.”

Ibn Ishāq said: “The sun and the moon disappeared for seven days and nights.”

«'Abd Allāh ibn al-Imām Ahmad has referred [to us]: Hūbat b. Hālid told us: Hammād b. Salamah informed us to us from Hāmid and this from al-Hasan, who heard it from Yahyā, who is Ibn Ḍamrah al-Sa’dī, who said: “I saw an old man (ṣayf)” in the city who was talking and asking for him they answered: “Tis is Abū b. Ka'b [who] said: When death came to Adam he said to his sons: ‘Hey sons! I need the fruits of Paradise’. They went to look for them and the angels, taking his shrouds and his balsam as well as the hoes (al-fu'ād), the spades (al-masaḥ) and the baskets (al-makādīl), received them and said: ‘Sons of Adam!, what do you want?, what are you looking for?, what do you wish?, where are you going to?’ and they answered: ‘Our father is ill and he needs the fruits of Paradise’. Then the angels answered them: ‘Come back your father has dead’. When they were arriving Eve recognized them and she sheltered in Adam, who said her: ‘I have only been brought before you; it is between you and the angels of my Lord—glorious and excels—who have taken it, they have washed it, shrouded it, embalmed it, buried it, entombed it and they have praised for him’. They have put it in his grave, set out it and have throw soil over it’. Then they said: ‘Sons of Adam!, this is your rule (ṣunnata-kam). Right chain (ismād ẓabīl)’.”

Although some texts are limited to mention the “Testament of Adam”, even without giving any new about it, the information included in Ibn Kašîr work is completed in another fragments, like that

16 Cf. Testament of Adam (Syriac Recension) R III.
17 Cf. Testament of Adam (Syriac Recension) R III; Testament of Adam (Arabic Recension) fol. 10v.
19 Al-Mas’ūdī, Murūǧ al-gilāh, I, p. 37.
well-known work by al-Kisāʿī, the Ḥisāṣ al-anbiyāʾ. In this respect, in a
fragment included in Ibn Katīr’s work, the task of getting the fruits of
Paradise belongs to Seth. Seth, in the Greek recension of text entitled
“Life of Adam and Eve”, is the only one who can smell the odour of the
fruits of Paradise without falling asleep at the moment when God and
the angels descended in front of Adam’s dead body20. I am giving below al-
Kisāʿī’s fragment related to the “Testament of Adam”:

“[Adam said]: I need some fruits from Paradise (iμaʾr min al-
gannah) and my Lord has promised he will give them to me.
Go out, look for the angles and tell them my need. Seth went
out and he found an angel of the gardens treasures (hazāʾin al-
gināʾ) named Nuryoʾel (Nūryʿel) with some fruits from
Paradise he had carried to Adam”21.

The theophoric name Nūryʿel (“God’s light”) perhaps could be a
textual variant from the Hebrew form Uriʾel (“God’s light”), which is
the name of a well-known angel in the Jewish and Christian literary
productions. In this later production this is the angel who reveals the
prophecy. He is also the responsible of the penance and the one who
introduces the prayers to God.22

On the other hand, the igneous element is a well-known topos,
very common in Syriac literary production, to describe the qualities of
the angels, who are described, among other possibilities of abstract
description, as nūrā (“fire”) or nūrdāʾ (“burnings”)23.

And al-Taʾlābi, in his Ḥisāṣ al-anbiyāʾ has also collected some
information about the “Testament of Adam” that I am going to give in
the translation below:

20 Cf. Tromp, Johannes, “Literary and Exegetical Issues in the Story of Adam’s Death
and Burial”, in Frishman, Judith & Van Rompay, Lucas (ed.), The Book of Genesis in
Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation. A Collection of Essays. «Traditio
22 Cf. Martinez Fernández, Francisco J., in Díez Macho, Alejandro (ed.), Apócrifos del
Antiguo Testamento V, p. 399 from a fragment by Cedrenus.
Themes and Problems of Early Syriac Angelology”, in Lavan, rend (ed.), V
"The historians (ahl al-ta‘rīḥ) and the chroniclers (asbāb al-aḥbār) say that Adam, peace be upon him, became ill eleven days before dying and he willed to his son Seth. He wrote his testament, he gave it to Seth and ordered him it has to be kept from Cain’s progeny, because Cain has killed Abel, because of his jealousy when Adam give him his sister Iqlīma to marry her." 24

Abel’s death, in relation with Cain’s sister Iqlīma (Lebōdah in the Syriac version of the “Testament of Adam”, R I and III) 25 is a legendary topos in the Jewish literary tradition as well as in Christian one. 26 On the other hand, the “Testament of Adam” in its Syriac recension (R I) is attributed to Seth, but not to Adam, as it has been stated in the fragment by al-Ta‘lābī.

Al-Ṭabarī, just as we can expect, is referring us to some information about the “Testament of Adam”. That information, collected by al-Ṭabarī, is limited, as we can see in the fragment below, and it is also contained in Ibn al-ʿAṯīr’s work:

"Humayd told us saying: Salamah transmitted to us from Muhammad b. Ishāq, who said: When death came to Adam they said: God informed about the prayer (al-duʿāʾ) to his son Seth. He made a pact with him and showed him the cult of the creatures for every hour. 27 And he transmitted that there is a kind of creatures devoted to their cult in every hour". 28

24 Al-Ta‘lābī, Qiṣṣas al-anbiyāʾ al-musammā ‘arāʾ is al-maḥālis, Beirut: al-Maktabah al-Taṣāfiyyah, s.d., p. 41.
25 The name is attested in several variants inside the different linguistic traditions, cf. the variant Azūdā in Ibn-Ṭayyib, Commentaire sur la Genèse, I, p. 44, line 1, trans. II, p. 42, line 2 and note 2, where the editor stated that Ibn al-Ṭayyib took the name from ‘Ibīd’s dad of Merv.
27 On the several angelical levels, cf. Testament of Adam (Syriac Recension) R II [IV,18].
The scattered fragments included in Islamic authors' works, which we have just translated, are of great interest not only to know the Islamic reception of the "Testament of Adam", but also to help to reconstruct the different text which have arrived to us from Jewish and Christian literary production.

Whereas the Greek and Syriac texts has been studied by scholars, the development of the legend in Arabic language in its several Christian recensions has hardly aroused interest among scholars. Besides Renan's translations and notes 29, Bezděl’s editions and study 30, Troupeau's edition of the ms. 68 in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (fol. 2r-10v) 31, Gibson's edition 32 and the information given by Battista-Bagatti 33 as well in Martínez 34 and Monferrer's version 35, we have no studies about the different redactional peculiarities of the legend in its several recension in Arabic language.

In the particular case concerned with the Islamic reception, it has hardly considered, apart from those cases in which the text related to the "Testament of Adam" was a piece of an edited whole text or a particular study. Even in these cases scholars had not paid attention to the legend as a piece of an autonomous literary cycle.

32 Gibson, M. Dunlop, Kitab al-Maghall or The Book of the Rolls. («Studia Sinaitica», 8), London, 1901.
35 Monferrer Sala, Juan Pedro, Apócrifos árabes cristianos, pp. 61-119.

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The fragments we have given in this paper are the first contribution of a former research in which we will try to give new texts to collect as much information as possible from Islamo-Arabic sources.