

Enoch in the Islamic Tradition

By *Imad Jafar*

Die, O friend, before your death, if you want to live -
long ago, by such a death, Enoch went up to Paradise.

Sana'i

Islamic tradition preserves the narrative of an ancient prophet, philosopher, and teacher named Idris, a most enigmatic figure who is mentioned twice by name in the Qur'an¹ and whom Muslims have, throughout history, consistently identified with the biblical Enoch (*Ubnukh*), whilst also simultaneously linking him with numerous other spiritual figures, including the mythological Hermes Trismegistus (*Hirmis*), the Ancient Egyptian deity Thoth, the Roman deity Mercury, and the legendary Persian king Hushang. Indeed, just the sheer *variety* of figures with whom Muslims have mystically connected Idris should adequately convey the pivotal role he has played in the contemplative conscience of the Islamic faith, the tradition of which, as we shall see, has preserved a copious amount of rich lore and legend celebrating the legacy of this mysterious "Father of the Philosophers" (*abu'l-ukam*).² The purpose of this essay, therefore, will be to explore and analyze the prophet's role in Islamic tradition, which we shall observe in light of both the religion's general lore as well as the doctrines of Islamic mysticism,

¹ Cf. Qur'an, XIX. 56-57 and XXXVIII. 48.

² This was a popular title for Idris during the Islamic Golden Age, and its significance shall be touched upon at a later point in this essay.

or Sufism. That said, it is *not* a study of Enoch's³ role in either Judaism or Christianity, whence the traditions of the other two faiths will only be referred to if and when they relate to the patriarch's role in Islam.

The Qur'anic references to Idris are concise and serve primarily a memorial purpose. The first of these briefly summarizes the prophet-sage's venerable nature, whilst also alluding to a certain high rank or station he attained during his life: "And do mention in the scripture Idris; he was a man of truth, a prophet, and We exalted him to an elevated station".⁴ In contrast, the second reference is purely commemorative, as it places Idris in the company of two other prophets, stating: "And do commemorate Ishmael, Idris, and Dhul-Kifl,⁵ all men of dedication and patience. We admitted them into Our Mercy for they were all of the righteous and devoted ones".⁶ Now, whilst it goes without saying that positive personality traits such as "dedication" and "patience" are characteristics applicable to all the celestial revealers, the one *unique* aspect of Idris' mission as alluded to in the Qur'an is that of his ascension "to an elevated station". Was this a literal or figurative elevation? If it *was* literal, could it signify a translation, a transfiguration, or perhaps even theosis, viz. a union⁷ with the Absolute? These were the questions that early Islamic exegetes and philosophers sought to answer—as did the Jewish Rabbis before them with regard to Enoch—in a quest to comprehend and understand the true nature of the arcane Idris, around whom developed numerous other tales and traditions all woven around the concise Qur'anic reference.

Already in the earliest stages of Qur'anic exegesis, Idris was almost unanimously identified with the biblical Enoch, who was, according to the biblical table of nations, the great-grandfather of Noah and one of the most notable of the primordial patriarchs who lived prior to the

³ The two names (Idris and Enoch) will be used more or less interchangeably throughout the essay, though "Idris" will be used when referring to the figure in the Islamic context and "Enoch" when speaking of him in the context of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

⁴ Qur'an, XIX. 56-57.

⁵ Dhul-Kifl is commonly identified in Islamic tradition with the biblical Ezekiel.

⁶ Qur'an, XXXVIII. 48.

⁷ "Union" with the Absolute or "Extinction" in the Absolute = Latin: *deificatio*, Greek: *theosis*, Sanskrit: *yoga* or *moksba* ("deliverance") or *nirvana* (Pali: *nibbana*), Arabic: *fana*.

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