The Character 'Ark' of Noah and His Descendants

Cross-Cultural Comparative Analysis of the Story of Noah and His Sons in Written Narratives by Bede and al-Tabari

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Introduction

A Shared Story

What gave shape to the world as we know it today? An explanation found in both Christian and Islamic traditions is in the story of Noah, his sons, and the Flood. This story has appealed to varying narratives of medieval Christian and Muslim scholars. Two such scholars are Beda Venerabilis (673-735 CE, Henceforth referred to as Bede) and Abū Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (839-923 CE, henceforth referred to as al-Tabari). Both scholars are regarded as very influential and notable authors to this day. Not only in their exegetical endeavours but also their understanding of historical events. Furthermore, both authors treat the events surrounding Noah and the Flood from vastly different personal contexts, yet surprisingly similar narrative goals. It is from a selection of their works that these narrative goals come to light.

Bede's *De temporum ratione* (henceforth referred to as DTR) not only provides us a source through which his understanding of time can be distilled, it also provides a world chronicle explaining the Six Ages of this world. *Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk* (henceforth referred to as TRM) is the chronicle written by al-Tabari which stretches from the Creation (as does Bede's chronicle) till al-Tabari's own time. It is in the first volume: *From the Creation to the Flood* that al-Tabari's narrative surrounding Noah, his sons and the flood is found. However, it is also where al-Tabari's understanding of time is found which creates another parallel with Bede's DTR. To compare al-Tabari's interpretation of the events surrounding Noah to the interpretation of Bede we have to turn to Bede's *Commentarius in Genesim* (henceforth referred to as CG). It is through these three works that a few key narratives can be distilled and compared to one another.[1]

Can Separate Contexts be Compared?

The comparison can be achieved through a cross-cultural comparative analysis. Because of the vastly different historical contexts of Bede and al-Tabari, as well as the difference in literary styles, a direct comparison would primarily result in stating obvious and less obvious differences. It is through the lens of cross-cultural comparison that more meaningful comparison between their narratives comes to light. The individual contexts of these authors cannot be ignored within such an analysis. Precisely these individual contexts make a comparison of any sort artificial and the comparison at hand should therefore not be considered a comparison between the medieval Christian world and the Medieval

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[1] All three works have been read in English translation. For DTR see: F. Wallis, Bede*: The Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool 1999). For CG see: C. B. Kendall, *On Genesis: Bede* (Liverpool 2008). For TRM see: F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989).

Islamic world. Rather, it is a comparison between the narratives of these two authors who were established within these worlds.

A few specific events pertaining to Noah and his sons are central to this comparison. The first event is that of Noah and his actions up to the flood. The second event is only from the perspective of al-Tabari and concerns the fourth son of Noah as alluded to in the Qur'an, but it is not present in the Hebrew Bible. The third event is that of the Curse which Ham incurs for seeing his father Noah naked and laughing about it. The last event concerns the repopulation of the earth through Noah's sons. How do Bede and al-Tabari present these events surrounding Noah, his sons, and the Flood and what narrative goals did their writing serve?

To answer such a broad question the methodology of this research has to be framed first. The method not only concerns itself with cross-cultural comparative analysis, but also with two concepts related to both Bede's and al-Tabari's historical context , namely eschatology and 'chosen people'. Within the notion of 'chosen people' the concept of othering plays an important part.[2] One might consider Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* as particularly relevant to the topic of 'chosen people'. It is argued by some modern scholars that Bede believed the 'English people' (Anglo-Saxons) were the chosen people of God.[3] This might have resulted in some interesting findings when compared to a different volume of al-Tabari's TRM, but that is a topic for another research. Following the methodology is the first chapter with a brief overview of some key points concerning the historical context of Bede and al-Tabari. Furthermore, I also briefly touch upon their understanding of time and why neither author could do without when interpreting the events surrounding Noah and his sons. The second chapter concerns the event of Noah and his actions before the Flood as well as the event of Noah and his fourth son. Finally, the third chapter compares the narrative goals of Bede and al-Tabari through their portrayal of the Curse of Ham and the repopulation of the world through Noah's sons.[4] Central to this chapter are the notions of 'chosen people' for Bede and al-Tabari and how their narratives might compare to one another through this ultimate goal.

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[2] Othering can be understood as a process through which a certain group or person determines its own identity through juxtaposing it to generalized or stereotypical aspects ascribed to other groups. As found in: T. Modood S. Thompson,'Othering, Alienation and Establishment', *Political studies* 47:1 (2021) 1-17, there 7

[3] M. A. Jones,'A Chosen Missionary People? Willibrord, Boniface and the Election of the Angli', *Medieval Worlds* 3 (2016) 98-115, there 99.

[4] The idea that (proto)racism and antisemitism play a role in this narrative could be argued. However, this would require a different approach as there are many debates surrounding racism and antisemitism and whether we can even speak of such terms for the middle ages. I have opted out of explicitly mentioning these terms, but it would certainly make for an interesting research topic.

Pitfalls of Fame and Opportunities of Obscurity

Notably, the first four volumes of TRM have never received the same amount of attention as the other volumes did within historiography. It is argued that they did not make significant contributions to our 'historical' understanding of these events.[5] Whether this is true or not matters little for the comparative analysis as I am more concerned with highlighting the narrative of al-Tabari. In a similar vein, both DTR and CG are not among Bede's most well-known works. CG was not in high demand in the Middle Ages as earlier scholars like Augustine (354-430 CE) had already provided extensive works on Genesis.[6] DTR was more influential primarily because of the importance of time and numbers in understanding the Scriptures. Furthermore, it was important because of the debates surrounding Easter dates. It is Bede's narrative and position within these debates that even got him branded as heretic by some contemporaries.[7] Yet, DTR has not become as famous as his *Historia eclesiastica gentis Anglorum*.

The comparative analysis of these authors might highlight why these works deserve more scholarly attention. While it may not reveal a lot of new information about the understanding of the history of Noah within the medieval Christian and Islamic worlds, it does reveal Bede's and al-Tabari's view on the position of their respective religious communities and how intertwined these historically separate narratives are when we consider narrative goals.

Methodology

Cross-Cultural Comparison

Comparison is a phenomenon that is present in everyday observations.[8] It always allows for the identification of similarities and differences. In most (scientific) reasoning it can be present either implicitly or explicitly.[9] Qualitative comparison is not a single method and consists of a plurality of approaches. They are useful for tackling questions that require complex and combinatorial explanations. Yet due to the complexity of the cases compared, the number of cases has to be kept low.[10] Comparative

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[5] M. Whitby,'Tabari: The Period Before Jesus' in: H. Börm, J. Wiesehöfer eds., *Commutatio et Contentio: Studies in the Late Roman, Sasanian and Early Islamic Near East* (2009). 393

[6] As stated by the translator in: C. B. Kendall, *On Genesis: Bede* (Liverpool 2008) 1.

[7] J. T. Palmer, *The Apocalypse in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge 2014) 95.

[8] E. Hovden, R. Kramer,'Wondering about Comparison: Enclaves of Learning in medieval Europe and South Arabia – Prolegomena to an Intercultural Comparative Research Project', *Networks and Neighbours* 2:1 (2014) 20-45, there 20.

[9] M. Palmberger, A. Gingrich,'Qualitative Comparative Practices: Dimensions, Cases and Strategies' in: U. Flick ed., *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis* (London 2014) 1. that it is not limited to explicit qualitative comparison is less important here as this paper is explicitly comparative.

[10] Ibidem, 3.

research should not be understood as an independent method per se that requires different forms of research than the existing forms.[11] This makes it malleable to fit a multitude of research approaches.

A comparative analysis is dependent on a category (or anchor point) that is neither too strong nor too weak as Marcel Detienne puts it.[12] Although he mentions this in the context of a group of researchers with different specialities, it holds true for the cross-cultural comparison attempted here. Cross-cultural comparison also faces the task of translating different meanings that specific phenomena assume in different socio-cultural settings. In concrete terms this means that the anchor point, which is the figure of Noah and his sons in this case, has to be understood in both Bede and al-Tabari's socio-cultural setting. However, by focussing on Bede and al-Tabari the near-impossible task of framing a medieval Christian and Islamic cultural context is shifted towards establishing this for their specific context and place in time. Cultures are not static phenomena, but they can be used as descriptive terms.[13] The Christian and Islamic worlds are therefore a frame of reference for research, but were produced and shaped in more specific environments and then adopted and adapted in a great number of particular contexts.[14]

An attempt at cross-cultural comparison might start from the point of finding phenomena that are alike on an often superficial level. Yet this in itself could lead to getting trapped in deeper preconceived notions.[15] If we take the context of Bede and al-Tabari, certain events might have been similarly described or feature similar words. To use this as a point of comparison is not inherently wrong, but assuming it is by default a similarity would be problematic. The context of the authors and their works play an important role in understanding how they individually perceived the events surrounding Noah and his sons. A similar approach is used in this essay. Therefore, the cross-cultural comparison attempted here concerns itself with Bede's and al-Tabari's understanding of Noah and his sons and how they position their own religious community within this narrative. Concepts such as 'chosen people' and eschatology offer a lens through which these narratives can be understood.

Eschatology

At first glance it seems rather straightforward what eschatology entails. It is derived from the Greek word *eschatos* meaning last. According to the Oxford Handbook of Eschatology it is therefore

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[11] Ibidem, 11.

[12] M. Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable,* transl. J. Lloyd (Stanford 2008) 25.

[13] W. Pohl,'Introduction: Meanings of Community in Medieval Eurasia' in: E. Hovden, C. Lutter, W. Pohl eds., *Meanings of Community Across Medieval Eurasia: Comparative Approaches* (Leiden 2016) 1-23, there 6.

[14] Ibidem, 8.

[15] E. Hovden, R. Kramer,'Wondering about Comparison: Enclaves of Learning in medieval Europe and South Arabia – Prolegomena to an Intercultural Comparative Research Project', *Networks and Neighbours* 2:1 (2014) 20-45, there 23.

the study of the final end of things, the ultimate resolution of the entire creation. [16] It does highlight the dichotomy between theistic religions (with a doctrine of creation and a linear view of history and time) and other religions as well as the division of cosmic and personal eschatology. Personal eschatology concerns the final state of individual persons and what will become of them at the end of time. When considering less linear religions or the Hebrew Bible it is a far less satisfactory explanation.[17] Despite this caveat it is a workable definition in which we can frame both Bede's viewpoint as a Christian author and al-Tabari's viewpoint as a Muslim author. This is mainly due to both Islamic and Christian theology adhering to a linear understanding of time that will inevitably head towards the end of the world.[18] Furthermore, the debates surrounding the concept of eschatology have yet to provide a generally applicable definition that is not controversial or problematic. Furthermore, it cannot be denied that eschatology and how it is understood by modern Western scholars is deeply rooted within Jewish and Christian cultures and scholarly traditions.[19]

Understanding the peculiarities of the history and development of medieval Christian and Islamic eschatology is a theme for a different research topic.[20] Important for the cross-cultural comparison is that within the context of Bede and al-Tabari's time, notions of eschatology existed and were used for various ideas. The concept of 'chosen people' was one of these ideas that was tied to a linear understanding of history, time and more importantly, the idea of the end of the world. Yet the concept of 'chosen people' is not without its own controversies and divergent meanings.

Chosen People

The concept of 'chosen people' is by no means limited to a religious context. It is also present within narratives of nations or sports teams.[21] While the medieval context was often more concerned with the religious notion of 'chosen people' this was not limited to polemical narratives towards peoples of other religions. Within their own religion, medieval Christian and Muslim authors also attempted to establish why one group was favoured over the other. However, the former is most useful for my comparison.

Within the early medieval European context, Christians generally viewed their religious community as a people. The notion of 'chosen people' was used to exemplify how this community was

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[16] J. L. Walls ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford 2007) 4.
[17] For a detailed analysis on the Old Testament see: B. T. Arnold,'Old Testament Eschatology and the Rise of Apocalypticism' in: J. L. Walls ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford 2007) 23-39.
[18] V. Wieser, V. Eiltschinger,' Introduction: Approaches to Medieval Cultures of Eschatology' in: V. Wieser, V. Eltschinger, J. Heiss eds., *Cultures of Eschatology* (Berlin 2020) 1-24, there 4.
[19] Ibidem, 8.
[20] For more information on medieval Islamic notions of eschatology see: J. Smith, Y. Y. Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Albany 1981).
[21] A. Beker, *The Chosen: The History of an Idea, the Anatomy of an Obsession* (New York 2008).

both universal and exclusive in its special bond with God.[22] Yet the understanding of what nations could belong to the 'chosen people' and which could not, changed over time as the status of empires and kingdoms changed.[23] Within the context of Bede the most obvious example of this is his antagonistic description of the Britons compared to his praising of the English (Anglo-Saxons).[24] Similar debates showed up within the medieval Islamic world, including within al-Tabari's own context and the group of scholars belonging to the Abbasid apologists.[25]

The medieval Muslim understanding is also tied to community, which could be derived from the word *umma*. However, there are modern understandings of the word that might lead to conceptual confusion. In the 21st century we can characterize the *umma* as a globalized nationalism which tried to counter colonialism, then capitalism, then the globalized situation of today.[26] Otherwise it could be used to refer to the unified body of believers. This is an extremely simplified interpretation of the complex nature surrounding this term and its relation to the Qur'an as well as more specific terms used for community.[27]

Claiming the Chosen Status

'Chosen people' as it is understood by medieval Judaism, Christianity and Islam is tied to the covenant established between God and Abraham.[28] Within Islam it is claimed that Muhammad is descendant from Abraham and that Abraham did not belong to Judaism or Christianity. Furthermore, Muhammad tried to include the Jews within Islam or what he saw as the new Judaism, but that the Jews ultimately would not join. Yet the Jews were still hailed as the 'chosen people' and the established covenant is emphasized. The Qur'an in sura 5 presents the Muslims as the 'perfected' successors of this 'chosen' narrative that was first bestowed on the Jews. The Muslims have to correct the backsliding of the religion that has been perpetrated under the Jews and Christians.[29] This narrative in a sense, is shared with the Christian narrative regarding the Jewish 'chosen people'.

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[22] G. Heydemann,'People(s) of God? Biblical Exegesis and the Language of Community in Late Antique and Early Medieval Europe' in: E. Hovden, C. Lutter, W. Pohl eds., *Meanings of Community Across Medieval Eurasia: Comparative Approaches* (Leiden 2016) 25-60, there 27.

[23] Ibidem 28.

[24] M. A. Jones,'A Chosen Missionary People? Willibrord, Boniface and the Election of the Angli', *Medieval Worlds* 3 (2016) 98-115, there 99.

[25] This is briefly touched upon in chapter 1 of this essay concerning al-Tabari's background. For further reading see: A. I. Tayob, ''Ṭabarī on the Companions of the Prophet: Moral and Political Contours in Islamic Historical Writing'', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 119:2 (1999) 203-210.

[26] R. Lohlker,'Jamāʿa vs. Mulk: Community-Centred and Ruler-Centred Visions of the Islamic Community' in: E. Hovden, C. Lutter, W. Pohl eds., *Meanings of Community Across Medieval Eurasia: Comparative Approaches* (Leiden 2016) 78-96, there 80.

[27] For more information see: Ibidem.

[28] A. Beker, *The Chosen: The History of an Idea, the Anatomy of an Obsession* (New York 2008) 2.

[29] Ibidem, 50.

The early Christians adhered faithfully to Jewish laws and Jesus himself warned that he was not trying to abolish the laws, but rather fulfil them. Much like the Muslims, it was only later that it became clear that the Jews would not be convinced of the status of Jesus as messiah.[30] It is then that the focus is turned towards the Gentiles instead of the Jews, yet the origin of Christianity within the Jews is not denied, but rather reframed as a divide between the Jews of Old and the Jewish people (now, from the author's perspective). As presented here, the Christians sought to replace the status of the Jews as the 'chosen people' by asserting that through Jesus and the rejection of him by the Jews, the Jews had forfeited their claim to the 'chosen' status.

Important for the comparison at hand is that for both Bede and al-Tabari the notion of 'chosen people' existed and was widely known within their historical contexts. Understanding the actual use of this concept outside of the context of these two authors is a different endeavour all-together. Ultimately, their understanding of 'chosen people' was intertwined with the eschatological narratives of medieval Christianity and Islam.

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[30] A. Beker, *The Chosen: The History of an Idea, the Anatomy of an Obsession* (New York 2008) 41.

Chapter 1: Historical Context and View on Time

Difference in Context: A Curse or a Blessing?

Bede and al-Tabari, as well as their works, were shaped by very different historical contexts. As this section will illustrate, these authors were very much isolated from the context of the other. That does not mean that there are no similarities to be found between their historical contexts. Much like this comparative analysis of their narrative goals, a comparison between their historical contexts might yield very interesting results (but that is a topic for future research). Therefore, Purely comparing these two authors on the basis of their historical contexts would make little sense. However, to illustrate how their narrative goals are a point of comparison, it is important to establish within what context these narratives were shaped.

For both Bede and al-Tabari time plays a crucial factor in their understanding of the events surrounding Noah, his sons, and the Flood. As such, it is no wonder that both Bede and al-Tabari pay attention to this aspect. Arguably, Bede is more invested in this aspect than al-Tabari. Yet neither author has ignored time within their works. Ultimately, both authors could not ignore this important element. The following chapters will highlight why the difference in context is not a curse, but rather a blessing for the cross-cultural comparative analysis attempted here.

1.1 Bede and His Place in the World

Historical Context

Bede was born in Northumbria (North East of present-day England) and was a monk in the monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow. Bede's life might best be illustrated by the following quote:

> When I was seven years old, I was, by the care of my kinsfolk, given into the charge of the very reverend abbot Benedict (Benet Biscop, 628-89) and then of Ceolfrith (642-716), to be educated. From then on I have spent all my life in this monastery (of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow), concentrating entirely on the study of the Scriptures; and in the intervals of the observance of the discipline of the Rule and the daily task of singing in the church, it has always been my delight to learn, or to teach, or to write.[31]

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[31] *HE* V.24 (translated by B. P. Robinson) excerpt found in: B. P. Robinson,'The Venerable Bede as Exegete', *The Downside Review* 112:338 (1994) 201-226, there 201.

This quote reveals a few key aspects of Bede's life. He had spent most, if not all of his life within the monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow. Furthermore, he devoted his life to the monastic tasks, and otherwise to learning, teaching, and writing. He had been educated by abbot Benedict, and later Ceolfrith, and taught others himself, most likely in the established curriculum of the Canterbury School which consisted of Latin, Greek, theology, exegesis, computistics, astronomy, medicine, poetry, and Gregorian chant.[32] The Canterbury School was established in the 7th century by Theodore, a Greek-speaking monk from Tarsus and Hadrian, a Latin-speaking former abbot from Campania (and originally from Africa).[33] Yet, little is truly known about Bede. Most of the information about Bede's life and his personality are concluded from his writings.[34]

Bede did not confine himself to the isolated life of the monastery completely. He was rather outspoken about certain worldly matters and also shaped by them. One such matter was his disdain for episcopal abuse of power, especially the extortion of communities in more remote places who rarely saw a cleric or bishop for that matter. This particular matter is discussed in a letter to bishop Egbert where Bede urges Egbert to perform his pastoral role well.[35] Moreover, Bede had a well-developed sense of his own identity and the one he was creating for his people. Some historians even claim that the concept of 'Englishness', a nomenclature for a collection of Germanic and Celtic descendant people may be attributed to him.[36] Yet 'Englishness' is a rather problematic term, as it probably does not mean the same today as it did back in Bede's time (if such an understanding was present at all).

Bede's life was also shaped by significant events. In the late 7th century, the Jarrow community was decimated by a plague. How Bede survived and how it impacted him is rather clouded within the known information. It is said that Bede took up the vocation of priest alongside that of monk which was not a common occurrence. The other significant event that shaped Bede's life concerns Ceolfrith. Ceolfrith had decided to spend his last days in Rome to be among the tombs of the apostles. Supposedly the quality of Bede's commentaries suffered because of the sorrow he felt when Ceolfrith left Northumbria.[37]

By becoming a monk and spending his entire life within the monastery, Bede was (at least physically) isolated from the outside world. Yet he still gained a lot of fame. He would become known as 'the venerable' from as early as the 9th century. Furthermore, he is also known as one of the only

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[32] M. P. Brown,'Bede's Life in Context'in: S. DeGregorio ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge 2010) 3-24, there 8.
[33] For more information see: M. Lapidge,'The School of Theodore and Hadrian', *Anglo-Saxon England* 47 (1986) 45-72.
[34] M. P. Brown,'Bede's Life in Context'in: S. DeGregorio ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge 2010) 3-24, there 21.
[35] Ibidem, 8.
[36] Ibidem, 10.
[37] M. P. Brown,'Bede's Life in Context'in: S. DeGregorio ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge 2010) 3-24, there 9.

native English doctors of the church (since 1899).[38] Bede and his works became widely available in the 9th century under the Carolingians. Later, during the 12th century copying of his works continued vigorously.[39] This primarily shows that his works were not only influential well after his death, they also spread from Northumbria to other parts of Europe. However, not all his works remained popular. DTR for example was extremely popular up to the period of the Carolingians. After this period it would never be as popular anymore.[40]

Bede's Writing and Early Medieval England

The accessible style with which Bede wrote made his works engaging and put them at the centre of attention for generations to come. On top of that, Bede's writing imitated the monastery's symbolism. Images of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament served as visual summaries, but also illustrated how these were related to each other.[41] Yet the accessiblity of his writing style is not representative of his alleged background. Bede is known today as having been a humble and learned man according to some historians.[42] Not only was Bede close to king Ceolwulf of Northumbria (r.729-737 CE) and Archbishop Ecgbert (a.732-766 CE), his name and the name of Benedict Biscop were present in a grand family as found in a late 8th century genealogical king-list. However, this cannot imply them literally, but does implies a connection to nobility through name.[43] Bede himself says nothing about who his father was, but the ties to influential people of his time suggest a less humble origin.

Some modern historians believe that Early medieval England was a politically disorganized place during Bede's lifetime. individuals were in constant bids for power and the first-born son of the king was by no means guaranteed to be the successor. Despite these power struggles, those individuals who could claim to be descendants from the royal family belonged to a select set of families and through intermarriage the succession seemed at least somewhat organized.[44] Yet how could Bede, who remained within Northumbria for most of his life write such influential texts? In other words, Bede had to have had access to a large collection of knowledge. The answer to this lies within the monastery itself. Due to the endeavours and travels of Benedict Biscop and Ceolfrith a vast amount of books were collected and formed one of the most extensive libraries in Europe at the time. Through this library Bede had

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[38] M. P. Brown,'Bede's Life in Context'in: S. DeGregorio ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge 2010) 3-24, there 8.

[39] J. A. Westgard,'Bede and the Continent in the Carolingian Age and Beyond' in: S. DeGregorio ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge 2010) 201 – 216, there 210.

[40] Ibidem.

[41] M. P. Brown,'Bede's Life in Context' in: S. DeGregorio ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge 2010) 3-24, there 19.

[42] Robinson,'The Venerable Bede as Exegete', 216.

[43] J. Campbell,'Secular and Political Contexts' in: S. DeGregorio ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge 2010) 25-39, there 25.

[44] Ibidem, 28-29.

gained access to a vast trove of information from which he could write with some authority about different themes.[45]

DTR is perhaps the earliest comprehensive treatment of the subject that would become known as *computus* through later medieval writers.[46] Through Bede's work a fragmented calendar literature was brought together in more textual and coherent form. The subject of *computus* is hard to define because it technically cannot be considered a science. Rather, it is an application of other sciences, namely astronomy and mathematics.[47] A rudimentary explanation would be that it is concerned with measuring time and fixing the dates of ecclesiastical feasts (in particular easter). Yet it is through this work that Bede was also seen as controversial in his own time, although no real consequences stemmed from this controversy.[48] The controversy is tied to his anti-apocalyptic writing and primarily his reinterpretation of the length of the World Ages which caused outrage as he implied that not all the ages took a 1000 years and that they differed in length because human perception of time is different to God's perception of time.

1.2 Al-Tabari and His Place in the World
Historical Context

Al-Tabari (839-923 CE) was born in Amol, Tabaristan (present day Mazandaran, Iran) which is the location his name is derived from. In a similar fashion to Bede, al-Tabari wrote little about himself and most of the information about his life has to be extrapolated from his works or have been handed over through accounts of contemporary and later Muslim scholars.[49] Unlike Bede, al-Tabari did not stay in his birth region his entire life. During his studies, which made him into the famous religious and historical scholar (as his commentary on the Qur'an and his chronicle TRM were the most popular works), al-Tabari would first move to al-Rayy (present day Teheran, Iran) and later to Baghdad.[50]

At the age of 70 al-Tabari recalls that he knew the entire Qur'an by heart at the age of seven, served as prayer leader when he was eight, and wrote down (or studied as it was called then) traditions of the Prophet when he was nine. It should be noted that these boastful remarks were made to the son of Ibn Kamil (al-Tabari's future biographer) to convince him that his son was not too young to start studying and that the boy's age and lack of preparation were not excuses to keep him from studying. It

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[45] C. B. Kendall,'Bede and Education' in: S. DeGregorio ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge 2010) 99-112, there 100.
[46] F. Wallis, *Bede: The Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool 1999) xvii.
[47] Ibidem, xviii.
[48] I. Warntjes, 'The Final Countdown and the Reform of the Liturgical Calendar in the Early Middle Ages' in: M. Gabriele, J. T. Palmer eds., *Apocalypse and Reform From Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London 2018) 51- 75, there 67.
[49] As explained by the translator in: F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 6.
[50] Ibidem, 16.

reflected how al-Tabari's own father treated him as a boy.[51] Whether or not the story is true is not really the point. More so, it reflects what little we do know about al-Tabari's personal upbringing, or at least how he viewed his personal upbringing.

What is known about his upbringing is that he left his home in Tabaristan at the age of 12 in pursuit of expanding his knowledge. As mentioned before, al-Tabari ended up in al-Rayy where his education was furthered by more capable mentors compared to the one he studied under back home.[52] Whether this was true, or rather a form of appealing to his audience is uncertain. It is not known whether he visited other centres of learning before heading to Baghdad. The capability of travelling does suggest some interesting implications pertaining to his background. It also exemplifies how al-Tabari's means to knowledge was opposite of Bede's and more akin to Benedict Biscop's way of obtaining knowledge.

While by no means the richest man of his time, Jarir, al-Tabari's father, owned quite a lot of property and provided his son with an income. After the death of his father, al-Tabari inherited his share of the estate of his father.[53] This provided al-Tabari with a large enough income to go through his studies and life mostly independent, which meant he was not subject to the will of a benefactor. Little to nothing is known about al-Tabari's mother other than the story that she might have begged him to stay instead of going off to study, which he presumably did and that this act of piety had granted him a successful career.[54]

Al-Tabari's Writing and the Abbasid Caliphate

It would be after his visit to Egypt and his pilgrimage (possibly) to Mecca that he would return to Baghdad and his student days were over.[55] Al-Tabari from then on devoted his life to teaching and publication which was a tremendous amount according to contemporaries. Yet for all his fame and all the praise that he got, he found himself in rather controversial situations at times. Primarily due to the Abbasid context of his time.

The Abbasids (750-1258 CE) in the time of al-Tabari were dealing with scholarly debates surrounding the companions of Muhammad. Traditional *hadith* (record of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammed) scholars argued that all companions were equal in merit. However, Especially Mu'awiyah was a problematic companion for the Abbasid period as he was the founder of the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750 CE) which was overthrown by the Abbasids in 750 CE. Opposed to the traditional *hadith* scholars were the Abbasid apologists who argued that placing Mu'awiyah on equal footing to

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[51] As explained by the translator in :F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 15.
[52] Ibidem, 16.
[53] Ibidem, 14.
[54] Ibidem, 16.
[55] Ibidem, 31.

the other companions undermined the Caliphal authority of the Abbasids. On the other hand, undermining the position of Mu'awiyah as one of the companions would undermine the position of the traditional hadith scholars as they used the authority of *isnads* (list of authorities who transmitted reports of a statement, action, or praise of Muhammad, one of his companions, or a later authority). [56] Undermining the position of a single companion would undermine the authority of some of these transmitted reports, which in turn could cause serious issues for topics related to those reports.

Al-Tabari, who himself belonged to the *hadith* scholars had to deal with another group besides the Abbasid apologists. Ibn Hanbal (780-855 CE) was the founder of the Hanbali school which is known today as one of four orthodox legal schools of Sunni Islam.[57] Within the group of *Hadith* scholars the Hanbali scholars were at odds with al-Tabari for a different reason. Al-Tabari as a religious scholar was not opposed to the traditions of the Hanbali scholars, as they both adhered to the notion of equality in merit among the companions of Muhammad. However, Al-Tabari had arrived too late in Baghdad to be a student of Ibn Hanbal. The conflict between the Hanbali scholars and al-Tabari came from his statement that Ibn Hanbal was a great *Hadith* scholar, but not a jurist. This is what led to a confrontation with the Hanbali scholars.[58] It even got to a point where al-Tabari's residence was stoned and the riot had to be subdued by force.

1.3 Understanding and Using Time

Time as Understood by Bede and al-Tabari

Bede was primarily concerned with the calculation of Easter because it involved numbers which are part of understanding the Word of God. Bede's use of *computus* is how he went about writing DTR. Bede did not see *computus* as a 'discipline' or 'art', it is seen by him as a function rather than a subject and what it can do or explain, is defined by time. As such it could include disciplines like astronomy as well as biblical exegesis.[59] DTR could be considered a defence of his earlier work *On Times* and specifically to justify his world chronicle in chapter 66.[60]

In DTR, Bede sets out to explain the details of how time should be understood, but also how one might go about calculating time. Furthermore, Bede illustrates how time is formed by nature, human

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[56] A. I. Tayob,''Ṭabarī on the Companions of the Prophet: Moral and Political Contours in Islamic Historical Writing'', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 119:2 (1999) 203-210, there 205.
[57] The divide between Sunni and Shia Islam did play a significant part in the struggle for caliphal authority between the Abbasids and Fatimids (909-1171 CE). While it also affected al-Tabari's birthplace, it did not affect his situation within Baghdad.
[58] A. I. Tayob,''Ṭabarī on the Companions of the Prophet: Moral and Political Contours in Islamic Historical Writing'', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 119:2 (1999) 203-210, there 205.
[59] As explained by the translator in: F. Wallis, *Bede: The Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool 1999) xxvi.
[60] Ibidem, xxxi.

customs, and divine or human authority.[61] The details of DTR are extremely intricate, and it would require extensive contextualising and framing to do justice to these intricacies.[62] However, the aim of this comparative analysis is not the explicit analysis of differences in understanding of time by Bede and al-Tabari, but rather their narrative use of the events surrounding Noah. Furthermore, al-Tabari's treatment of time is far less intricate within TRM and serves a different purpose.

It is noted by al-Tabari that the aim of his chronicle is not to present arguments concerning time, but rather define time to be able to place the dates of past kings, messengers and prophets, and early caliphs. Al-Tabari also mentions what the Jewish interpretation was according to the Torah, namely 4642 years. Furthermore he mentions how the Greek Christians disagreed with this statement and placed it at 5992 years and some months. Finally he also mentions the Magians (Zoroastrians) perception of time passage.[63] While al-Tabari reports on all the information known by him, including statements of those whose authority is not backed up by the Messenger of God, he makes it clear in some cases which statement is correct according to him. While Bede does not directly comment on how long the Earth will exist, he does comment on how long the five World Ages before the current one lasted.[64] Yet that future judgment will come is hinted at in CG.[65] While this does not imply that Bede was not concerned with eschatological questions whatsoever, it does illustrate how much more finite al-Tabari's stance on the matter was compared to Bede.

Use(fulness) of Time

For this comparison it is interesting that both authors divide time according to hours. Unlike Bede, al-Tabari does not go into detail as to how these hours are then to be divided further.[66] Furthermore, al-Tabari defines what the total extend of time is by stating what different scholars have said. The 'correct' answer is that which is proven by information having come from the Messenger of God (Muhammad).[67] ''…the one more likely to be correct in accordance with the information coming from the Messenger of God is that of Ibn Abbas transmitted here by us on his authority: The world is one of the weeks of the world- seven thousand years.'' This is followed up by another account stating that 6500 years have already passed. Yet another account states the world is only 6000 years which carries similar authority. Bede's understanding of the passing of time in years, months, hours, or any

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[61] F. Wallis, *Bede: The Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool 1999) 13.
[62] For a more detailed context of Bede's work see: J.T. Palmer,'The Ends and Futures of Bede's De temporum ratione' in: P. Darby, F. Wallis, *Bede and the Future* (London 2014) 139-160.
[63] F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 185-186.
[64] F. Wallis, *Bede: The Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool 1999) 157-158.
[65] C. B. Kendall, *On Genesis: Bede* (Liverpool 2008) 208.
[66] F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 171.
[67] Ibidem, 174.

other parts is not just technical. At the base of the technical arguments of how these elements can be understood lay the different forms in which they manifest as well as the divine explanation as to why they are present in such a manner.

Al-Tabari mentions the eras of the world and how the first era went from Adam till the coming of Noah. Contrary to Bede's understanding of the World Ages which frames the Flood as the end of the first Age, the Flood occurred in the second era according to al-Tabari. However, al-Tabari also mentions that these must be the Jewish eras as Muslims only started using eras from the *Hijra* onward.[68] This discrepancy is more centred around prioritising different events and not around a different understanding of the passing of time. Why this is the case will become clear in the following chapters.

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[68] F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 370-371.

Chapter 2: 'The Noah' of Bede and al-Tabari

2.1 The Story of the Flood in Perspective

Understanding the 'Same' Narrative

The story of the Flood and Noah's Ark came to Bede and al-Tabari through their religion's holy text. However, this also means that Bede and al-Tabari present and interpret these events differently. The Hebrew Bible highlights different aspects of Noah and the flood compared to the Qur'an. Furthermore, the understanding of the Hebrew Bible in medieval Christianity is different from the Jewish understanding of the Hebrew Bible. reinterpretation plays a big role in this process of defining and redefining the meaning behind the events of Noah that has taken place in both the Christian and Islamic context. Intertextuality is an extremely broad term, but within the narrative of the Qur'an, oral intertextuality plays a larger part than the written words of the Hebrew Bible. [69] While attempting to divulge exactly how these reinterpretations worked between the Hebrew Bible for medieval Christian authors and the Qur'an for medieval Muslim authors is a whole different task and area of research, it is at the very least useful to illustrate how the concept of oral intertextuality plays a role in the depiction of these events.

For most of the Western world the Christian interpretation of the Flood remains the dominant one. It is therefore not surprising to see at least some modern scholars (and definitely medieval scholars) misconstrue anomalies between the Qur'an and the Bible as a whole. It is sometimes mistakenly assumed by non-Muslim scholars that the Qur'an misrepresents the Biblical accounts and that the Qur'anic readings are therefore confused, mistaken, or even corrupted when compared with what some scholars presume are the originals.[70] Yet there are two problems with this mistaken interpretation. One problem is tied to the concept of intertextuality while the other problem concerns the Qur'an's own prophetic agenda. In this case the intertextuality should be understood as oral intertextuality. The author of the Qur'an is not merely citing written sources and influences, but is more concerned with recalling oral traditions, motifs, and histories that have been retold with a different horizon of meaning.[71] In essence this means that the author has determined what parts of these traditions are to be recalled and how they should be understood.

For al-Tabari it would not be difficult to disregard a different perspective than that of the Qur'an. While he might acknowledge or mention the existence of other (religious) interpretations, ultimately they are brushed aside because they do not carry the same authority as the statements of Muhammad. While the Hebrew Bible is shared between Judaism and Christianity, a few aspects like

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[69] For more information on intertextuality see: G. Allen, *Intertextuality* (London 2011).
[70] S. H. Griffith,'When Did the Bible Become an Arabic Scripture', *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 1 (2013) 7-23, there 11.
[71] Ibidem.

the order of the books and the way the stories should be interpreted differed greatly.[72] For Bede the Christian interpretation was the Truth. As chapter three will illustrate, the new was superior to the old which was not only applied to people or communities, but also to the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament would be more fitting for this particular context). While the story itself might not be as significantly changed as is the case in the Qur'an, the meaning and interpretation have changed compared to the original Rabbinic Judaic iteration. It is through intertextuality that new meaning is gained but old meaning is sometimes inevitably lost. This is due to the altered perspective of the interpreter which also brings about an alteration in the range of understanding.[73]

Prophetic Agenda

Oral tradition and its importance within the Qur'anic interpretation of events like Noah and the Flood is evident when the prophetic agenda of the Qur'an is considered. Medieval Muslim intellectual elites were very aware of the textual narratives that constituted the Hebrew Bible or New Testament but interestingly almost no references to these texts are made in the Qur'an when Biblical narratives and their protagonists are recalled.[74] More importantly, it was assumed that all Muslims at the time knew of the events. The aim was to establish a narrative in support of Muhammad's mission. Not only were the Qur'an's iterations a recollection of the oral traditions and not the written traditions of Christianity and Judaism, they also served a more polemical narrative against these traditions.[75]

This was in a rather different form compared to the polemical narrative we see between Judaism and Christianity pertaining to the Hebrew Bible. Bede, like most Christians of his time thought of the Biblical narrative as the one that had superseded the Judaic narrative. Medieval Christian critique was towards 'wrong' interpretations of an otherwise shared text between the two religions. Within the context of al-Tabari's time, the Muslim approach did entail criticism of the text itself. This manifested itself in Muslim scholars trying to prove that the text of the Scriptures (Old and New Testaments) had been modified in some way by both Christians and Jews.[76] This attitude towards both Jews and Christians (as well as the text) does provide another explanation as to why the Qur'an does not cite the Hebrew Bible as source, yet still uses its narratives.

While Biblical exegesis never became as important for Islam as it was for Christianity, those Muslims that did engage in this practice often did it to prove that Muhammad was the final Prophet

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[72] For more information see: J. Neusner, B. Chilton, W. A. Graham, *Three Faiths, One God: The Formative Faith and Practice of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Boston 2002).
[73] For more information see: G. Allen, *Intertextuality* (London 2011), 47.
[74] S. H. Griffith,'When Did the Bible Become an Arabic Scripture', *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 1 (2013) 7-23, there 13.
[75] S. H. Griffith,'When Did the Bible Become an Arabic Scripture', *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 1 (2013) 7-23, there 14.
[76] H. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton 1992) 9.

while also trying to prove that his divine message to all mankind was authentic.[77] Linking Muhammad to the line of other prophets was one of the ways through which Muslim scholars attempted this authentication. The purpose of prophecy ties into what is generally considered to be a part of all theological thinking within Islam, the three principles of faith: unity of God, prophecy, and 'the return' to God.[78] The role of this line of prophets in short, is to remind people from time to time (hence multiple prophets) that due to their forgetfulness (of the Truth), problems arise. The prophets expose people to God's guidance and invite them to use their free will to conform themselves to the Real or the Truth.[79] Within Christianity prophets also play a major role, mainly to establish Jesus as the chosen messiah. There is less importance within Christianity on tackling forgetfulness (yet it was certainly present) and more attention is focused on Jesus Christ (even from Jesus as prophet himself) and him being the incarnation of God and the church's Lord.[80]

Eschatological World View

Eschatology is where Bede and al-Tabari do share more common ground, especially when considering the story of Noah. While the details surrounding the story of the flood do differ between them, most of these details are less important in this case. To this day many scholars concern themselves with the intricacies of eschatological thinking within Christian and Islamic cultures (and others), both historically and contemporary.[81] Similarly to the impending end of the world that kept both Christian and Islamic scholars busy throughout the ages, the story of the Flood is part of the eschatological thought of both religions. As stated before, the Qur'an highlights different aspects of this event compared to the Hebrew Bible. The book of genesis was primarily concerned with the Flood itself while the same narrative in the Qur'an pays little attention to the Flood and instead focuses on Noah's dealings with the people that would soon meet their demise.[82]

This difference in focus illustrates how a prophetic agenda shaped both interpretations. Both do share that the Flood wipes everyone from the planet safe for Noah and a selection of others (there are a few conflicting accounts within both traditions). Furthermore, among scholars of both religions, individual interpretations were not exact copies of each other and were subject to their own historical

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[77] H. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton 1992) 77.
[78] W. C. Chittick,'Muslim Eschatology' in: J. L. Walls ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford 2007) 132-150, there 135.
[79] Ibidem, 136.
[80] J. Neusner, B. Chilton, W. A. Graham, *Three Faiths, One God: The Formative Faith and Practice of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Boston 2002) 37.
[81] See V. Wieser, V. Eltschinger, J. Heiss eds., *Cultures of Eschatology* (Berlin 2020).
[82] G. S. Reynolds,'A Flawed Prophet? Noah in the Qurʾān and Qurʾanic Commentary', in: Majid Daneshgar and Walid Saleh eds., *Islamic studies today. Essays in honor of Andrew Rippin*, (Leiden 2017) 260-273, there 262.

contexts. Bede and al-Tabari are no exception to this and as such their accounts need to be compared to their respective sources to properly compare them to each other.

2.2 Bede and al-Tabari – Individual Focus

Bede and al-Tabari Approaches

Bede acknowledged that the Bible was written by humans. However, he believed they were setting down God's words. This was also the reason that Bede gave a passive role to the human writers and stated for example, that St Luke was guided by the Holy Spirit in his preface to the commentary on Acts.[83] This had a few consequences for Bede's treatment of Biblical narratives. Most importantly, it meant that he was not debating Scripture, but rather debated against those that would debate it.

Bede in DTR is primarily concerned with *computus*. Little attention is paid to details not directly pertaining to time even when discussing chapter 66: The World Chronicle or The Six Ages of the World. This was in sharp contrast to the approach of al-Tabari in his chronicle as he reiterates what multiple sources say about the specific dealings of Noah. Bede does provide more insight into his thoughts surrounding the Flood in CG. However, the details he does state in DTR do provide glimpses into how the Flood should be interpreted according to Bede, including symbolic meanings behind numbers. Moreover, it is likely that due to the focus on numbers within this work, Bede would include symbolically significant numbers related to the Flood.

Al-Tabari has a very different approach. Much like Bede and his Bible, he saw the Qur'an as the most important text. Unlike Bede, he does at least report on other traditions within his work. While some of these differences are due to the *Hadith* tradition, the differences between the Bible and the Qur'an, and differences in context, it is nonetheless surprising how much more detailed the account of al-Tabari really is compared to that of Bede on the events before the Flood. Whether or not their respective works even fall under the same genre, the differences in combination with the similarities are too significant to simply set aside. In the first volume of the TRM, al-Tabari strikingly devotes a lot of time to explaining the events leading up to the Flood. In his first volume the last section is devoted not only to the Flood but also the events that took place in the time of Noah. This style is not exclusive to the description of Noah, al-Tabari does the same for the events surrounding Adam up to those of Noah. Much like the numbers of Bede, al-Tabari's work holds a lot of symbolism that is tied to these events.

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[83] B. P. Robinson,'The Venerable Bede as Exegete', *The Downside Review* 112:338 (1994) 201-226, there 202.

The Accounts of Bede and al-Tabari, Similarity in Difference?

Through (Gen 6:1-22) it is made clear that the world was filled with humans who had grown wicked for which God was going to end the world. The Lord was deeply troubled by their wicked ways and therefore wanted to end all life. However, Noah found favour within His eyes. He told Noah to build an ark made of wood, coated in pitch, and with three levels. Bede approaches the story of Noah in DTR from the perspective of the Six Ages of the World.[84] These ages of the world are not merely a means of understanding the comparison to the first week, in which the world was created by God. The ages also symbolize different stages in a person's life and fittingly, the first age is synonymous with infancy. This ties in with the concept of *microcosm* or 'smaller universe' as the Greek philosophers called it (according to Bede).[85] The Flood in this case symbolizes how people cannot remember their infancy and how they are submerged in oblivion much like the universal Flood wiped out everything. The main aspect Bede wants to highlight is how long each of these era's last. While he mentions the discrepancy between the Hebrew Truth and the Septuagint (1656 years vs 2242 years respectively) for the first age, He does not state which one is to be believed. The true point of how to interpret discrepancies is made when he highlights what St Augustine said concerning these discrepancies: '' I would certainly not be justified in doubting that when a discrepancy is found between the two texts, and both cannot be true records of historical fact, one should place greater reliance in the language from which the translators made a version in another tongue''.[86]

The only other aspects highlighted about Noah in DTR are that the Flood arrived on the 600th year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the 17th day of the month. Noah, who emerged from the Ark in the Second Age of the world was symbolic of, as Apostle Peter explained it: ''Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clean conscience, through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God.''[87] In other words, Noah's emergence from the Ark was a representation of humankind coming out of its 'infant' (ignorant) state. When Bede's believe that the Bible was unambiguously the Word of God and that the dogmas of the faith were completely infallible is taken into account, it becomes clear that the reason so little is said about Noah, is because he does not have to defend what he believes to be infallible knowledge. However, for a comparison with al-Tabari's TRM, one has to turn to Bede's CG to get a better view of Bede's understanding of the historical side of these accounts.

Al-Tabari's approach is best compared to Bede's narrative rather than Bede's personal context. This is due to Bede reporting on how to understand time within DTR while explaining how to interpret the Biblical events in CG. Contrary to this, al-Tabari reports on what others have said about these

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[84] As stated in the author's preface in: F. Wallis, Bede*: The Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool 1999) 157.
[85] Ibidem.
[86] Ibidem, 162.
[87] F. Wallis, Bede*: The Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool 1999) 162.

historical events in TRM. Al-Tabari also explains how time is defined and understood through this method. However, al-Tabari does mention that statements are correct when its soundness is proven by information having come down from the Messenger of God (Muhammad).[88] From this it becomes clear that reporting on different viewpoints does not mean that these are to be regarded as equal in the eyes of al-Tabari.

In the chapter: ''From the Creation to the Flood'' al-Tabari not only parallels the focus of the Qur'an on tackling the forgetfulness of humans, but also gives more details about the historical context of Noah as a warning bringing prophet. According to al-Tabari there were ten generations between Adam and Noah and all of them were followers of the true religion. Unbelief only started showing up in the generation that Noah was sent to.[89] From here on, the biggest difference between Bede and al-Tabari is primarily due to the Bible not going into the amount of detail that the Qur'an does on Noah's actions before building the Ark and waiting out the Flood. In short, Noah is sent to make the unbelievers repent and when they defied him he complained to God. Noah tells God that they followed the one whose wealth and children have added nothing to him but loss.[90] The prophetic agenda seems to play a role for al-Tabari here. While he gives different sources they ultimately hint at a single outcome, namely that God will punish humans no matter what because they will not change their wicked behaviour. Noah tries to get them back to the Truth but does not succeed and from there follows the command of God to plant a tree and build the Ark from it.

The Ark brings us to another interesting difference in approach between Bede and al-Tabari. In CG, Bede clearly states that the building process of the Ark took 100 years as this signified the time of this age (First Age) in which the holy Church is built and brought to its perfect end. Furthermore, Bede claims it makes sense that the Ark was 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide and 30 cubits tall as these numbers signify the suffering of patience, extent of charity and loftiness of hope.[91] Yet it is exactly these numbers that are questioned within some of the accounts al-Tabari. While the dimensions of the Ark were all described differently, al-Tabari mentions at the dimensions that Bede adheres to that ''God willing…it has been mentioned that to us that the Ark was 300 cubits long and fifty cubits wide, and its height in the sky was thirty cubits. Its entrance was on the wide side.''[92] This could be an indication of similarities in their sources rather than a mere coincidence. While their approach to the events surrounding Noah are different, they have similar understandings of technicalities within the story.

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[88] F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 174.
[89] Ibidem, 353.
[90] Ibidem, 355.
[91] C. B. Kendall, *On Genesis: Bede* (Liverpool 2008) 172, 176.
[92] F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 356.

Both authors concern themselves with the numbers involved in these events. Yet it seems that Bede puts more thought towards the meaning behind numbers. This is an unfair comparison, as al-Tabari is concerned with writing a historical overview of the beginning of the world until his own time within this work and is not commenting directly on the way in which the accounts of the Qur'an should be interpreted. Contrary to this, Bede's main concern in DTR is to explore *computus* while in CG he is more focused on how each passage in Genesis should be understood. Interestingly enough, even in CG Bede comments on discrepancies in timelines and numbers and how these are to be understood. Furthermore, CG is a representation of Bede's own interpretations of the events surrounding Noah. Still, there is another difference that deserves more attention.

Bede mentions about (Gen 7:13-15) that all living creatures entered into the Ark on one and the same day because Noah did not have to labour hard to get them in, but they were compelled by the divine command and thus came willingly along with Noah and his sons and their wives.[93] In stark contrast to this is the account al-Tabari mentions of what animal entered first and what animal entered last. The ant was the first to enter and the donkey was the last animal to enter. Iblīs (usually compared to the Christian notion of Satan) had attached himself to the tail of the donkey and in a slip of the tongue while trying to get the donkey inside Noah said: ''Woe to you! Go in, even if Satan is with you!?''[94] Through this mistake it is believed that Satan had entered the Ark and despite protests of Noah, could stay because Noah had made a mistake.

Was Noah therefore not a perfect prophet? Bede describes in CG that the perfection of saints has to be understood as meaning that they were perfect in this exile on earth, not in their immortality which set them as equals to the angels of God.[95] However, the account described by al-Tabari seems to suggest that Noah was not in all ways perfect. While the story of the donkey could perhaps be interpreted as meaning that Satan had to endure as a means of setting apart 'good' and 'evil', this is a rather broad topic and requires more in depth research (especially when comparing medieval Christian and Islamic notions of Satan, evil, good, etc.). A different event is more suited to my comparison between these two authors. According to the Qur'an and the TRM of al-Tabari, Noah had a fourth son next to Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

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[93] C. B. Kendall, *On Genesis: Bede* (Liverpool 2008) 186.
[94] F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 360.
[95] C. B. Kendall, *On Genesis: Bede* (Liverpool 2008) 172.

2.3 Questionable Nature of Noah's Infallibility

Ignorance and Disobedience Towards God

In sura 11 (Hūd) of the Qur'an a fourth son of Noah is mentioned named Yam who refuses to get on the Ark because he thinks he can save himself by climbing a mountain. He is swept away by the flood like everything else.[96] The account of Yam is contradictory to the account of the Bible where only three sons (Shem, Ham and Japheth) are mentioned and they all enter the Ark with Noah. In a similar vein to the Qur'an al-Tabari describes how Noah called out to his son who was still standing apart that he should come aboard not knowing that his son was among the unbelievers because his son had hidden this from him.[97] Noah is finally seen interceding on behalf of his son, but God tells Noah that Yam was not of his family and that Yam was the personification of unrighteous conduct.

The most important aspect of these passages on Yam is that they are not made up out of thin air, but rather reflect the dynamic conversation of the Qur'an with the oral tradition.[98] The Qur'an had its own prophetic agenda which was interpreted by many Muslim scholars to be related to the divinity of the message of Muhammad and his prophetic status. One of the ways in which the passages of Yam are understood is in relation to Muhammad's own people, the Meccan unbelievers and that it must have been hard for him to break his natural ties with this group.[99] It was the struggle of Muhammad to adhere personally to the demands of God. That believers should forsake their ties with unbelieving family members is something the Qur'an is particularly concerned with. Very harsh language can be found in the Qur'an that pertain to what God thinks of unbelievers and does to them.[100] This might also explain why God tells Noah that Yam is indeed not of his family, it could refer to the idea that unbelievers should not be considered family. Another possible interpretation is that it is tied to the idea of Umma (community) where unbelievers are not part of this community and for that reason they are excluded.

Another interesting part of the account of Yam is that it deals with a son who is an unbeliever instead of the father. In similar examples, like that of Abraham, it is the father who is framed as the unbeliever and from whom Abraham distances himself.[101] The general message does seem to be that those who believe must not love those who do not, even if they are kin. That Noah served a prophetic agenda becomes even more clear when accusations that were made against Muhammed were turned into accusations against Noah as well in his time.[102] A less convincing argument by scholars like Abraham Geiger is that the account of Yam can be tied to the indiscretion of Ham after the flood.[103] We

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[96] G. S. Reynolds,'Noah's Lost Son in the Qurʾān', *Arabica* 64 (2017) 129-148, there 130.
[97] F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 361.
[98] Reynolds,'Lost son in Quran', 132.
[99] Ibidem, 133.
[100] G. S. Reynolds,'Noah's Lost Son in the Qurʾān', *Arabica* 64 (2017) 129-148, there 135.
[101] Ibidem, 137.
[102] Ibidem, 139.
[103] Ibidem, 141.

will return to the indiscretion of Ham in chapter three. However, there is little to suggest that this was the intention of the story of Yam. Another interpretation is that it ultimately illustrates how the merits of a father will do nothing for a sinful son.[104]

Noah the Flawed Prophet?

Al-Tabari interestingly leaves out the part of Noah interceding on behalf of his son.[105] Could this have been because such an act was problematic in of itself? The issue is primarily concerned with whether Noah's act of complaining to God about his son was the misdeed.[106] Among translators there has been a debate about this to this day. For medieval Muslim scholars the idea of prophetic infallibility plays a role. Even if Noah is not to be blamed for his son's misgivings (Noah was not aware of his son being an unbeliever), the issue then arises that Noah fathered an unbelieving son. The explanation that this was due to his wife's betrayal is also problematic.[107] The idea that God would allow a prophet to be shamed by the dishonour of a wife's betrayal seemed inconceivable to most. The son was therefore not considered to be the fruit of Noah's wife with another man. However, if a prophet is exempt from such mishaps, how come an unbelieving son was fathered in the first place? It is interesting to note that the Qur'an specifically does not state that prophets are infallible and that this was the product of later discussion among scholars who tried to interpret this scene and were concerned with the honour of the prophets as well.[108]

Most striking is that al-Tabari's exclusion of the intercession effectively circumvents the issue which might have required more explanation. As stated by al-Tabari himself, the aim of this work was to compile the different statements on historical events, not to provide commentary on possibly problematic passages. Yet this explanation is unsatisfactory when we consider the following passage: ''Abu Ja'far (al-Tabari) says: The information given by God concerning the Flood contradicts their statement, and what He says is the truth…God thus indicates that Noah's offspring are the survivors, and nobody else.[109] This statement is in regards to the statement of the Magians (Zoroastrians) who claimed to have had no knowledge of the Flood and that it had not reached them. Al-Tabari's work

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[104] G. S. Reynolds,'Noah's Lost Son in the Qurʾān', *Arabica* 64 (2017) 129-148, there 146.
[105] F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 361.
[106] G. S. Reynolds,'A Flawed Prophet? Noah in the Qurʾān and Qurʾanic Commentary', in: Majid Daneshgar and Walid Saleh eds., *Islamic studies today. Essays in honor of Andrew Rippin*, (Leiden 2017) 260-273, there 269.
[107] Ibidem, 272.
[108] For more information see: G. S. Reynolds,'A Flawed Prophet? Noah in the Qurʾān and Qurʾanic Commentary', in: Majid Daneshgar and Walid Saleh eds., *Islamic studies today. Essays in honor of Andrew Rippin*, (Leiden 2017) 260-273.
[109] F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 369.

could therefore be better understood as an account of events according to 'right' and 'wrong' traditions for which problematizing 'right' interpretations would weaken their position.

Bede's treatment of the sons of Noah is different first and foremost because there is no fourth son named Yam in the Hebrew Bible. Yet this is not problematic for a comparison between Bede's and al-Tabari's narrative since Yam perishes in the Flood and is therefore not part of the sons of Noah that come out of the Ark and form the new peoples of the world. In this regard, their treatment of the sons of Noah is very different for the situation before the Flood, but becomes strikingly similar for the situation after the Flood. Neither author seems to grant the three sons of Noah a particularly large role in the events before the Flood. Therefore Yam is an interesting phenomenon within the work of al-Tabari but the comparison with Bede is best done through their portrayal of the remaining three sons.

Chapter 3 The Chosen and the Scapegoat?

3.1 The World Formed by the Sons of Noah

Settling After the Flood

The Flood's water had receded and after sending out a raven (who found nothing) and a dove (who eventually found land because it brought back an olive branch) Noah knew the water had receded. Bede states in CG that it is made clear that the animals were to fear humans, but that God explicitly did not want the same to happen between humans.[110] Bede also tells his audience in DTR that 8 people left the ark which evidently were Noah, Shem, Ham, Japheth, and the four wives.[111] Al-Tabari mentions a few accounts that stated not 8, but 80 people being on the Ark. Other sources (according to al-Tabari) claim 10 whereby the wives are not counted (but present) and 6 individuals who believed in Noah were counted.[112] These discrepancies seem of little consequence when a more trustworthy account, according to al-Tabari, is the one where only the offspring of Adam survived (hinting at Noah and his sons) and that the other perished. While these discrepancies had little to no influence on the forming of the world after the Flood, it does tie into the idea that al-Tabari (as Muslim) is restoring the Truth which the Christians and Jews had misrepresented in their holy texts.

Through the three sons of Noah the world would be repopulated and the different nations as they would become known eventually formed. Both al-Tabari and Bede acknowledge that the three parts of the world as they understood it were divided among the three sons. Al-Tabari states the following on this matter:

> When Noah, his offspring, and all those in the ark came down to earth, he divided the earth among his sons into three parts. To Shem, he gave the middle of the earth where Jerusalem, the Nile, the Euphrates, the Tigris, the Sayhan, the Jayhan, and the Fayshan (Pishon) are located. It extends from the Pishon to east of the Nile and from the region from where the Southwind blows to the region from where the northwind blows. To Ham, he gave the part (of the earth) west of the Nile and regions beyond to the region from where the westwind blows. The part he gave to Japheth was located at the Pishon and regions beyond to the region from where the eastwind blows.[113]

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[110] C. B. Kendall, *On Genesis: Bede* (Liverpool 2008) 204.
[111] F. Wallis, Bede*: The Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool 1999) 162.
[112] F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 365-366.
[113] F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 370.

Bede understood it as follows:

> But Japeth, the third [son took] from Media to Gadira and northwards. Japeth had the Tigris River, which divides Media and Babylonia: 200 nations, in 23 languages of different speech. Altogether these made 72 languages, and 1,000 nations of the generations, located in this order throughout the threefold world. Japeth, as I said, had the Tigris River, which divides Media and Babylonia, while Shem had the Euphrates and Ham the Geon, which is called the Nile.[114]

Notably, this is to explain the meaning behind the name Peleg who was the son of Heber who in turn was the son of Shem. Peleg is described as meaning division which is used to signify the confusion of languages because the earth was divided into these languages.[115] Certain languages thus pertain to multiple nations within these three regions.

Bede explains in CG that Shem obtained Asia, Ham obtained Africa, and Japheth obtained Europe. It is stated that Asia is much larger in geographical size which naturally meant that descendants of Ham and Japheth obtained parts of Asia too.[116] Al-Tabari mentions no such development, but does reference a division between the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth which seems to be based on skin colour. Shem's descendants were reddish-white, Ham's descendants were black with hardly any whiteness, and Japheth's descendants were reddish-brown.[117] This is not necessarily a connection made by al-Tabari to race or actual skin colour. At first it seems to differ greatly from Bede's explanation of the world being divided into the confusion of languages. Yet, it is true of both authors that divisions between the sons and their descendants are made, tied to their individual religious convictions. As the next sections will illustrate, this very much ties into the idea of a 'chosen people', both through othering and favouritism.

3.2 Ham's Curse

Problems of the Curse in a Medieval Context

The Biblical account states that Noah and his sons went forth from the ark and that Noah planted a vineyard as the first tiller of the soil. The account continues along these lines:

> And drinking of the wine, he was made drunk, and was uncovered in his tent. Which when Ham the father of Canaan had seen, to wit, that his father's private parts were uncovered,

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[114] F. Wallis, Bede*: The Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool 1999) 164.
[115] The story of the Tower of Babel comes to mind in this regard. While this could also form an interesting comparison with al-Tabari, that is a topic for a different analysis.
[116] C. B. Kendall, *On Genesis: Bede* (Liverpool 2008) 215.
[117] F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 368.

he told it to his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth put a cloak upon their shoulders, and going backward, covered the private parts of their father; and their faces were turned away, and they saw not their father's sexual organs. And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of Shem; let Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and may he dwell in the tents of Shem. And let Canaan be his servant.[118]

The Curse of Ham as described in the bible is problematic for a number of reasons. The Curse of Ham has been used in rhetoric surrounding the enslavement of black Africans.[119] Yet this is by no means the context of Bede's or al-Tabari's world and time as this rhetoric is primarily seen in the 19th century. Both authors do refer to the curse albeit in different forms and from different perspectives. Different translations of this passage mention that Canaan would be a slave to Shem and Japheth while the translation in CG clearly states servant. This is in part due to the problem of how to interpret the Hebrew term.[120] Far more problematic is that Canaan is cursed for something his father (Ham) did. Furthermore, nowhere does the Bible describe anyone as black.[121] The aim here is not to go into detail as to how the story was used to justify early modern subjugation of black Africans. However, the debates surrounding the Curse of Ham put al-Tabari's and Bede's perception of this event into perspective.

'Blackness' A Modern Concept in Medieval Context

The reason that Ham was related to a dark skin colour is perhaps due to the confusion surrounding Hebrew words being put into text.[122] Ham's Curse being tied to skin colour, at least for the trans-Atlantic slave trade, served rhetoric that legitimized the subservience of black Africans.[123] That Ham was a person of colour seems to have been accepted as fact in the 19th century, even by abolitionists and African American clergy (It was not limited to the United States). Furthermore, it is argued by some modern scholars that the first reference to the 'blackness of Ham' is found in the Talmud. However, this interpretation is not without controversy.[124]

The idea of the Curse of Ham being tied to a predisposition to slavery stem from much earlier sources. It is in the Near Eastern sources from the seventh century onward that we see a link between skin colour and slavery. The Curse of Ham is not just about 'blackness', the aspect of slavery is perhaps

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[118] Translation of the passage from the Bible used by Bede in: C. B. Kendall, *On Genesis: Bede* (Liverpool 2008) 209-212.

[119] D. M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton 2003) 142.

[120] M. L. Kaplan, *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity* (New York 2019) 106.

[121] D. M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton 2003) 142.

[122] D. M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton 2003) 156.

[123] Ibidem, 143.

[124] See: S. L McKenzie,'Response: The curse of Ham and David H. Aaron', *Journal of the America Academy of Religion* 65:1 (1997) 183-186.

even more important for the medieval context. However, these accounts explicitly state that the face is turned black, Al-Tabari quotes a similar statement.[125] Directly linking these sources to the modern concept of skin colour and its negative stigma's is problematic. The human face is important within Islamic notions of life and death as it was seen as bestowing the identity of a person while also being the most vulnerable part. The face mirrored the truth inside every person. It is therefore thought that those that go to Hell will deal with different forms of literal defacement. More importantly, those that are in Hell have blackened faces of which the cause is attributed to different aspects.[126]

Ideas surrounding the 'whiteness' or 'blackness' of faces within Islam are also tied to the Prophet Muhammad. He would wash his face during prayer and it was said he liked to wash his face in general. The concept of 'water of the face' was a sign of moral goodness or sanctity and this is linked to the Prophet's use of water. It is from this notion of moral goodness that later moralists would create a divide between 'whitening' and 'blackening' the face.[127] In some cases this was also translated to physical distinctions where those that were sick and as such had 'black' faces were stigmatized as dishonourable. It was true that within medieval Islam a lot of attention was paid to physical imperfections and these were seen as a problem. This could have easily facilitated colour prejudice although it seems that there was a lot of support among Muslims for a more egalitarian view of skin colour where it was argued that those Africans with black skin had gotten that from natural causes and cannot be compared to the moral wickedness associated with 'blackened' skin.[128] Some Muslim authors like al-Jahiz (869 CE) believed that those with black skin were actually the preferred peoples of God. What stands out within claims like the one made by al-Jahiz is that the Curse of Ham is rejected altogether.[129]

Curse of Whom?

Why is Canaan punished for something his father (Ham) did? The problem lies in the intent of the author when this is being explained. For some it was because Ham represented potential for evil while Canaan represented action.[130] And only actions could properly be punished according to this interpretation which meant that Canaan and not Ham was punished. In a similar vein to this, Ham was blessed by God when the Covenant was established and he could therefore not be punished by God.

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[125] D. M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton 2003) 170.
[126] C. Lange,'''On That Day When Faces Will Be White or Black'' (Q3:106): Towards a Semiology of the Face in the Arabo-Islamic Tradition', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 127:4 (2007) 429-445, there 433.
[127] Ibidem, 435-436.
[128] Ibidem, 437.
[129] H. Bashir,'Black Excellence and the Curse of Ham: Debating Race and Slavery in the Islamic Tradition', *ReOrient* 5:1 (2019) 92-116, there 102-103.
[130] D. M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton 2003) 157.

Canaan here is a representative of all of the descendants of Ham and not just himself. From Augustine (d. 430 CE) and later authors we find that it was explained as Ham being cursed and not Canaan because Ham had laughed at his father's nakedness and was thus punished with shame which was interpreted as a fate to slavery.[131] The 'proof' for this was found in peoples presumed to be descendant from one of the sons of Ham that was not Canaan.

Among medieval Muslim scholars it seems that Ham was cursed instead of, or alongside Canaan. It was so prominent among them that according to Gerhard Rotter, only Ya'qubi (d.900 CE) limits it to Canaan. However, it was arguably easier for Muslim scholars to state it was Ham and not Canaan since it was a Biblical account. Yet medieval Christian scholars also tried to explain why it was Ham and not Canaan that was cursed.[132] If Ham sinned he should be the one that is punished was the usual rhetoric.

Bede and al-Tabari on the Curse of Ham

Both authors took time to address the issue of Ham and him, or his descendant(s) being cursed. Yet the differences are very apparent, Bede mentions nothing about skin colour while this is exactly the element al-Tabari seems to be most focused on in TRM. Bede says nothing about the Curse of Ham in DTR. In CG some attention is paid to the Curse of Ham especially in establishing the superior position of the Christians and the dubious position of the Jews. Bede's historical context is interesting in this regard as he was very aware of ideas behind skin colour.[133] However, Bede makes no reference to skin colour within the narrative of the three sons of Noah. As stated before, al-Tabari seems to be far more focused on skin colour and mentions nothing specifically pertaining to Jews.

Bede explains that Ham laughed when he saw his father's private parts and that this was symbolic for the insulting and incredulous Jewish people who had degenerated from its ancestral nobility.[134] According to Bede, Ham represents how the Jewish people consented to the killing of Christ. Shem and Japheth represent Jews and Gentiles that do not see the nakedness of Noah, or in other words, do not consent to the killing of Christ. Moreover, Bede states that the Lord on the cross thirsted for wine, but that the Jewish people gave him vinegar instead. This signified that he was thirsting for the faith and love of that people, but got the bitterness of hatred and infidelity instead.[135] As such the Jewish people are related to Ham, yet it is also said that the Jews are related to Shem and the Gentiles to Japheth.

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[131] D. M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton 2003) 159.
[132] Ibidem, 166.
[133] For a more detailed approach see: E. Wade,'The Birds and the Bedes: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Bede's In Cantica Canticorum', *Postmedieval: a Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 11 (2020) 425-433.
[134] C. B. Kendall, *On Genesis: Bede* (Liverpool 2008) 210.
[135] Ibidem, 211.

This is because, the primitive Church as Bede calls it, was gathered from the Israelite people, which was signified allegorically in Shem.[136]

The key is that Bede is insinuating that the Jewish people once held the favour but had lost it as is signified in Ham laughing at his father's nakedness. Yet Bede acknowledges that the Bible states Canaan as the cursed one and not Ham. Bede explains that in the literal sense it was Ham who sinned but Canaan who got punished because it was foreseen on the spiritual level that the offspring of Canaan would sin more than the other descendants of Ham and as such deserved to perish through the Curse or be subjected to slavery.[137] Bede relates this to the sins of the Sodomites who came from the Canaanites. More importantly, Bede also explicitly states that Scripture does not report on any such punishment for peoples descendant from other sons of Ham.

Al-Tabari is not concerned with the Jews in his account and most of what is stated in his account is said to have come, one way or another, from the Jews. As stated before al-Tabari mentions that Shem's descendants were reddish-white, Ham's descendants were black with barely any whiteness, and Japheth descendants were reddish-brown. Yet within this account the fourth son is also mentioned of whom is said: ''Our paternal uncle Yam – he was balmy. They all had the same mother.[138] If we take into account the symbolical meaning of 'whiteness' and 'blackness' within Islam it could be stated that Shem is in this case the most favoured and Ham the least favoured. However, what would the position of Japheth be then? This might be linked to a statement by Philo (20 BCE-50 CE) on colours. Noah's sons were symbolic of three natures: good, evil, and indifferent.[139] In this case then both Shem's and Japheth's descendants have indifference as a trait which would then mean a combination, or lack of, both good and bad (signified by red). It could also imply that the descendants of Japheth are not good or bad and that Shem's descendants are either good or neither.

However, al-Tabari mentions another story that explains a different reason for the Curse of Ham. Ham had sexually assaulted his wife in the Ark, so Noah had prayed to God to have Ham's seed altered.[140] This story is tied to the idea that any form of intercourse was forbidden while they were on the ark and thus had not only displeased Noah, but also God.[141] While these accounts could be interpreted as referring to literal 'blackness', it is hard to determine whether this is actually what is

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[136] C. B. Kendall, *On Genesis: Bede* (Liverpool 2008) 212.
[137] C. B. Kendall, *On Genesis: Bede* (Liverpool 2008) 213.
[138] F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 368.
[139] Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham* 152
[140] F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 365. Rosenthal translates it to: '…and he produced the blacks.' The way it is worded here would be too contentious to quote literally.
[141] Ibidem. Rosenthal mentions in the footnotes that this disregard for the prohibition of intercourse in the ark is mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud.

being implied. It should also be noted that this passage is thrown in with others that are primarily focused on the question as to how many people were on the ark.

Religious othering seems to be the primary motivation for both Bede and al-Tabari in this instance. Al-Tabari applies othering through a sense of symbolic ethnic differences between the descendants of Noah's sons. Bede on the other hand links the Curse of Ham to the lost privilege of the Jewish people which creates the narrative that they have fallen from grace and are therefore rightfully subjected to slavery in a symbolical and literal sense. While the method and targets of othering are different for both authors, they both apply it to not only establish the inferiority of the (in their eyes) non-believers, but also to imply the superiority of a certain group. In other words, they are referring to a 'chosen people'.

3.3 Chosen People

Inheriting the Chosen

Bede and al-Tabari were both convinced that their religious communities were the 'chosen people' of God. Sometimes within a Christian and Islamic context, the notion of 'chosen people' was tied to the idea of the Covenant between God and Abraham. Of course the covenant with Abraham is not the focus here. There was also a covenant established with Noah which both Bede and al-Tabari allude to in their work. Bede comments on this directly in CG as the establishment of the Covenant of Noah and his family with God is directly referenced there. Al-Tabari also acknowledges this covenant in his TRM. The problematic thing here is that it implies a universal covenant between God and humanity, rather than a covenant between God and the 'chosen people'.[142] However, when we consider their individual accounts of the story of Noah, it becomes clear that both authors already frame a narrative where their respective religious groups are seen as the 'chosen people'

Bede and al-Tabari: Narrative of a 'Chosen People'

Bede mentions in DTR how the descendants of Shem were key figures for the religious community to which the Jews belong.[143] The special position of Abraham is also acknowledged by him. Yet, in CG we see how the sons of Noah are symbolism for a division of the 'good' and 'bad' Jews and how the Gentiles were going to be favoured in faith over the Jews, according to Bede. The symbolic link Bede makes between the Jewish people and Ham (who saw Noah naked and laughed) signified their approval of the killing of Christ. However, he also specifically stated that the other two sons covered their father without looking and that this was because they did not approve of the killing. It

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[142] U. Martensson,'Discourse and Historical Analysis: The Case of al-Tabari's History of the Messengers and the Kings', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 16:3 (2005) 287-331, there 311.
[143] Wallis, Bede*: The Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool 1999) 165 – 168.

might seem confusing at first that Bede mentions that both Shem and Ham are linked to Jews in this case. The Jews linked to Shem should in this regard be understood as those Jews that would eventually become the Christian movement.[144]

This connection does not account for why the Gentiles (represented by Japheth) would become the favoured peoples over the Jews (represented by Shem). To establish this, Bede mentions how the primitive Church was gathered from the Israelite people which was signified allegorically in Shem, but more importantly, he states:

> Blessed be the Lord God of Shem. For although he is God of all the Gentiles, yet in a sense even now among these very people he is called his proper name 'God of Israel'; and for what reason was this done, but from the blessing of Japheth? For the Church occupied the whole world in the people of the Gentiles. This was foretold straightway, when it is said, subsequently.[145]

It is through Japheth that the Church grows which is also symbolically implied in the name Japheth, as it means enlargement according to Bede. Furthermore, Canaan is to be his servant which is a reference to the faithless Jews offering a service of salvation to both peoples of believers. These Jews are therefore set apart by Bede to strengthen the position of the 'good' Jews and the Gentiles.[146] (Gen 10:1-2) states what the Generations of the sons of Noah are and begins with the descendants of Japheth.[147] Bede explains that it was common in the Holy Scriptures to start with the youngest and finish with the oldest. This signified that the coming of Christ in the flesh would usher in the time that the younger people of the Gentiles were going to be preferred in the faith over the older people of the Jews.[148] This practice would not only set apart the good from the bad, but also the good and the better as was the case here. This theme always favoured the younger over the older. This in effect meant that the New Testament was deemed superior to the Old Testament, the New Covenant was seen as better, and the Church was favoured above the Synagogue.[149] It served as the legitimization for Bede to claim that the Christian Gentiles were superior to the unbelieving Jews, but also to the believing Jews which effectively ushered in a new 'chosen people'.

Al-Tabari's approach to determining the 'chosen people' from the narrative of Noah and his sons is rather different from Bede's. We might discern from the symbolic skin colours of the sons that Shem was the most favoured and Ham the least favoured while Japheth falls somewhere in between. It is clear from his own narrative that al-Tabari is aware of the Curse of Ham and acknowledges its

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[144] M. L. Kaplan, *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity* (New York 2019) 109.
[145] C. B. Kendall, *On Genesis: Bede* (Liverpool 2008) 212.
[146] Ibidem.
[147] (Gen 10:1-2) as seen by Bede in: C. B. Kendall, *On Genesis: Bede* (Liverpool 2008).
[148] Ibidem.
[149] As explained by the translator in: Ibidem.

existence. Therefore, Ham being the most favoured because of his skin colour is an unlikely stance for al-Tabari. One rather interesting statement made by al-Tabari himself is that Noah and his family became Muslims whereupon the Covenant was established with God and he revealed he would never again destroy the world with a flood.[150] Because al-Tabari adhered to the *hadith* as a scholar, this statement might hold less authority over those with longer chains of transmission.

Through a literal interpretation of this statement it could suggest that everyone in the world should be seen as Muslim or at least descendant from a Muslim through the three sons. However, it seems primarily aimed at telling the reader that the covenant between God and humankind is established here. If we do entertain the idea that this makes all three sons Muslim, it could be implied through the symbolic skin colour that descendants of Shem were the favoured Muslims or that the others deviated from the Truth and therefore lost their 'whiteness'. That one son was favoured is further backed up by al-Tabari stating that Shem was granted the middle of the earth and that Abraham was related to Shem.[151] Ultimately it is the statement at the end of this volume of the TRM that reveals an important point about the entire narrative of Noah and his sons. Al-Tabari points out that Muslims only started the practice of eras after the *Hijra* (Muhammad's pilgrimage from Mecca to medina). This could imply that the importance of events only truly starts with the coming of the Messenger of God, Muhammad.

Both Bede and al-Tabari make use of narratives that establish a hierarchy among the three sons of Noah. While they both use Ham to denote that their descendants are inferior it is far less clear with al-Tabari whether Japheth or Shem is the favoured son compared to Bede's hierarchical interpretation. For Bede it is clear that Japheth is the favoured son as he is the youngest and linked to the Gentiles symbolically taking over the status of 'chosen'. What little al-Tabari says that could be seen as favouritism is mostly aimed at establishing that Ham was at least inferior to his two brothers. Only through the skin colour do we see a possible inclination of favouritism. Once this division of skin colour is tied to the idea of Truth and that Muhammad was seen as the descendant of Abraham it could be stated the descendants of Shem were favoured over the others. With the coming of Muhammed the true status of Muslims as 'chosen people' is established.

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[150] F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 367.

[151] F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 1: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (New York 1989) 370.

Conclusion

Cross-Cultural Comparative Analysis in Perspective

The cross-cultural comparative analysis highlights how both Bede and al-Tabari used the story of Noah and the Flood for a multitude of narrative goals. Neither author wrote in a vacuum and they were shaped by their personal context. As chapter 1 illustrated, Bede lived most (if not all) of his life within the walls of the monastery at Wearmouth-Jarrow. Apart from the knowledge he obtained through his teachers, he had access to one of the most extensive libraries in Europe at the time. The works he wrote throughout his life reflect that he was a learned man, but also that he was shaped by his monastic life. He was in many ways a product of his time and surroundings. However, he did not go through life without controversy. While relatively minor, his rigorous narrative on time and numbers, combined with his determination of a single Easter date (per year) did cause controversy with contemporary individuals.

Al-Tabari was in many ways the opposite. He quickly left his home in pursuit of education and unlike Bede, was not tied to a single location. While he remained in Baghdad for most of his life, his base of knowledge can be tied to a multitude of teachers (with varying degrees of competency) and his travels. The controversy that Bede faced was perhaps less prevalent than that of al-Tabari. Unlike Bede, al-Tabari was decidedly more independent from his surroundings. He was by no means separate from his time or surroundings, but his altercations with the Abbasid apologists and more importantly, the Hanbali scholars set him apart as a relatively independent scholar within Baghdad at the time. His inheritance further facilitated such an independent scholarly existence.

The Qur'an has a more detailed account of what Noah did before the Flood than the Hebrew Bible does. This can be attributed to the prophetic agenda of the Qur'an. For the narrative in the Qur'an it was important to highlight that Noah was sent by God to remind people of the 'Truth' (God's message) because of the forgetfulness of humans. The Flood only came after numerous failed attempts by Noah to remind the people of the 'Truth' and the world would in a sense be reset. That it also served to parallel the struggles of Muhammad with his unbelieving community is illustrated through Yam, the fourth son of Noah. Yam as an unbeliever would not come aboard the ark and Noah interceded on his behalf to God. Yam perished, but it also raised questions of whether prophets were infallible or not within medieval Islamic scholarly debates.

That both Bede and al-Tabari were products of their own time is reflected in their portrayal of Noah before and during the Flood. Bede follows the Hebrew Bible's narrative on the matter and comments in CG how different passages can be understood in a multitude of ways (the literal and allegorical sense are most important here). He does not deviate from the narrative as much as al-Tabari. Al-Tabari follows the narrative of the Qur'an, but interestingly skips over the part where Noah intercedes on Yam's behalf. However, al-Tabari does highlight how Iblis was able to come aboard the

ark. Al-Tabari deals with conflicting narratives on the events by stating how the words of the Messenger of God (Muhammad) carry the most authority. The way Bede and al-Tabari present the events reflect their personal contexts, For Bede it is about determining when and how long the events of Noah took, as well as commenting on the symbolic meaning behind the events. Al-Tabari is less concerned with the duration (yet does not ignore it completely) and more concerned with determining what happened and which account holds the most authority. The symbolic meaning behind the events is more implied than actually mentioned most of the time.

It is in their narrative of the three sons of Noah that their goals are truly revealed. Both Bede and al-Tabari acknowledge that the world is divided among Shem, Ham, and Japheth. However, there are some discrepancies as to who gained what parts exactly. Bede mentions that Shem got Asia and that this was the largest area which is why Ham and Japheth received parts of this land too. Al-Tabari makes no mention of this, he does allude to Shem receiving the centre of the world. Al-Tabari does not comment on the symbolical meaning behind this, but it could be tied to the idea that Shem was the favoured son by God. A more interesting difference is that Bede mentions how the languages of the world came to be and how many were tied to the descendants of each of the sons. Contrary to this, al-Tabari stresses the difference in skin colour between the descendants of the three sons.

It is through the Curse of Ham that both authors frame part of their notion of 'chosen people'. Bede was at least aware of skin colour, but does not mention it in the specific passages researched here. Instead, his narrative is focused around the Jews and how the Curse symbolized that the Jews had fallen from God's grace. Al-Tabari does explicitly state skin colour but interestingly enough makes no reference to a connection with the Jews. His narrative is much more implicit, but it seems to imply a symbolical blackness and whiteness that can be connected to the Prophet Muhammad. When combined with the notion of three natures (good, evil, indifferent) the true means through which al-Tabari constructs the 'chosen people' is prevalent.

The 'chosen people' according to al-Tabari are those that are descendant from Shem, this is implied in the way al-Tabari describes that they are reddish-white while Ham's descendants had barely any whiteness at all. For Japheth it is not explicitly stated whether or not the descendants had some whiteness or not, but the description of them being reddish-brown implies that it was less prevalent and when combined with the three natures would suggest that the descendants of Japheth were representations of indifference. Bede is far more explicit in stating whose descendants belong to the 'chosen people'. His narrative frames the Curse of Ham to symbolize the approval of Christ's killing by the Jews. This puts Shem and Japheth above Ham and they respectively symbolized the Jews of Old and the Gentiles according to Bede. However, Bede illustrates through the order in which the descendants of each son are presented that the Gentiles would become favoured above the Jews of Old through the symbolic superiority.

Narrative Goals

How do Bede and al-Tabari present the events surrounding Noah, his sons, and the Flood and what narrative goals did their writing serve? In short, the presentation of events is rather different but serve similar narrative goals. Bede concerned himself with the perspective of the Hebrew Bible and specifically tried to explain how these events shaped the inevitable superiority of the Gentiles within the world as the 'chosen people' of God. Al-Tabari on the other hand concerned himself with the different known accounts of these events and which ones carried the most authority. He implicitly states through his narrative which of the sons and his descendants would become the 'chosen people' of God. Bede and al-Tabari wrote in different times, locations and personal contexts. However, all the differences bring about interesting similarities when considering their narrative goals. The cross-cultural comparative analysis attempted here also raise new questions. One such question is: How did their narrative styles compare to one another and what could this reveal about medieval literary genres from a cross-cultural perspective? Furthermore, it also leaves the question of how Bede and al-Tabari framed the notion of 'chosen people' more specifically to their 'national' communities. Ultimately, the cross-cultural comparative analysis opens up otherwise incomparable historical narratives and authors to new research in a familiar approach.

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