

MARCH, Kathryn

2002 *If Each Comes Halfway: Meeting Tamang Women in Nepal*. Ithaca, N.Y.; London: Cornell University Press.

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### MIDDLE EAST

DUNDES, ALAN. *Fables of the Ancients? Folklore in the Qur'an*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003. xiv + 88 pages. Bibliography, index. Paper US\$19.95; ISBN 0-7425-2672-0. Cloth US\$62.00; ISBN 0-7425-2671-2.

This is to my knowledge the first folkloric study of the Qur'an—the holy book of Islam, which was revealed piecemeal by Allah through angel Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad over a period of twenty three years, that is, until his death in 632. Dundes, who is “neither Islamophile nor Islamophobic” (xi), approaches the Qur'an folklorically to attest its orality by finding traces of oral tradition in it.

Dundes begins with a word on the Qur'an and touches on many big issues, which are impossible to deal with in a brief review. It suffices to mention some, however, which qualify him for the “orientalist-folklorist” epithet. First, he is puzzled by the first word revealed in the Qur'an —“*iqra*” (“Read;” a translation which is more preferable to “recite”), for the Prophet was illiterate. But Allah, the Creator of man, can make him read: “Read! In the Name of your Lord who has created (all that exists). Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous. Who has taught (the writing) by the pen” (96: 1–4). Second, Dundes also mentions Prophet Muhammad's *isra'* (night journey) from Mecca to Jerusalem and his subsequent *mi'raj* (ascension) to Heaven. He thinks that “he [Prophet Muhammad] was *magically* teleported from Mecca to Jerusalem” (6, my emphasis) whereas Allah says in the Qur'an (17: 1) that it is He who did so. Third, though the Qur'an is Allah's word, Dundes states that “(T)he Qur'an as a text could provide only a means of analyzing the personality of its *true author*, that is, *Gabriel or Allah Himself*, not Muhammad” (7, my emphasis). He excludes the Prophet but does not explain how Gabriel who, like the Prophet, could add or subtract nothing from the revelation, could be an author!

Dundes hopes that the findings of his study are not rejected strictly on the basis that he is an orientalist-folklorist. According to him, the two basic questions that should be considered concern the presence of formulas and folktales respectively in the Qur'an. He holds that anyone who evaluates the empirical data neutrally would answer both questions in the affirmative. Laying aside the issue of neutrality, for neutrality is an impossibility, we proceed to examine how Dundes deals with the Qur'an in the light of the oral-formulaic and folktale theories.

Applying Parry-Lord's oral-formulaic theory to an English concordance of the Qur'an based on one translation of its meanings, Dundes claims that the presence of hundreds of oral formulas attests the orality of the Qur'an. He identifies “probable oral formulas” (24) by looking for any repeated utterances and gives many samples. It is noteworthy that Parry's definition of formula applies to poetry, not to the Qur'an. Dundes does not give a definition but seemingly he has Parry's definition in mind when he says that an ideal study of formulas in Arabic should take the Qur'an's poetic features into consideration. Even if repetition is used in the definition of formula, Dundes does not indicate the elements of repetition, be they lex-

ical, morphological, or syntactical. Moreover, the theory focuses on improvised performance; it is applied to an oral text before it is written down; it would not be applicable to any text where the wording remains the same in every instance of its performance and transmission. Now, the Qur'ān was committed to written form when Prophet Muhammad recited it, once it was revealed to him, to his companions. His companions recorded and recited it to the believers who memorized it verbatim. Despite that, Dundes applies the theory to the Qur'ān. In addition, he depends on a story that shows Prophet Muhammad's alleged approval of substituting one formula for another. The story which Dundes describes as "perhaps apocryphal" (31) is in fact considered not true by Muslims. He also speaks of the Prophet's approval of repetition, which is one of the basic characteristics of oral tradition, because it has been suggested (by whom?) that he did so.

With regard to the folktales, Dundes identifies three Aarne-Thompson folktale types in three chapters (*Suwar*; singular, *Sūrah*) in the Qur'ān. The first, tale type 766 "The Seven Sleepers," the summary of which is "magic sleep extending many years," he finds in *Sūrah* 18 "The Cave," in which young men, whose correct number Allah only knows are sent to deep sleep by Allah, not magic. The second, a version of the tale type 759, "God's Justice Vindicated" (The Angel and the Hermit), is found in verses 70–84 in *Sūrah* 18. The last one is an illusion tale, type 670 "The Animal Languages," which Dundes identifies in *Sūrah* 27 (The Ant). Dundes imposes Aarne-Thompson's categorization, which lacks universality, on the above tales and ignores other notable folkloric approaches to the issue, such as the native categorization and categorization in terms of people's attitude towards their tales. He disregards the way Muslims classify the Qur'ānic tales. Prophet Muhammad's disbelievers refer to the tales in the Qur'ān as *asāṭīr-al-awwālīn* (fables of the ancients). Dundes agrees that at least three of them are so and thus answers his question, that is, the provocative title of his book, in the affirmative. He adds, "what is wrong with that?" What is wrong with that is the implication. *Uṣṭūrah* (fictitious tale) is derived from the root s\*ṭ\*r\*. Other derivations include "*saṭr*" (line) and *saṭṭra* (wrote). The disbelievers accused Prophet Muhammad of writing down the tales. "And they say: 'Tales of the ancients which he has written down: and they are dictated to him, morning and afternoon'" (25: 5). In other words, they denied that the Qur'ān is revealed by Allah. Muslims believe that these are *true* stories for mankind to learn lessons from.

Dundes dedicates his book to his grandchildren "with the hope that their world will enjoy increased peace through greater tolerance and understanding of religious differences" (v). The question to be asked is "Does this study contribute to that peace?" The answer is a definite resounding "no."

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