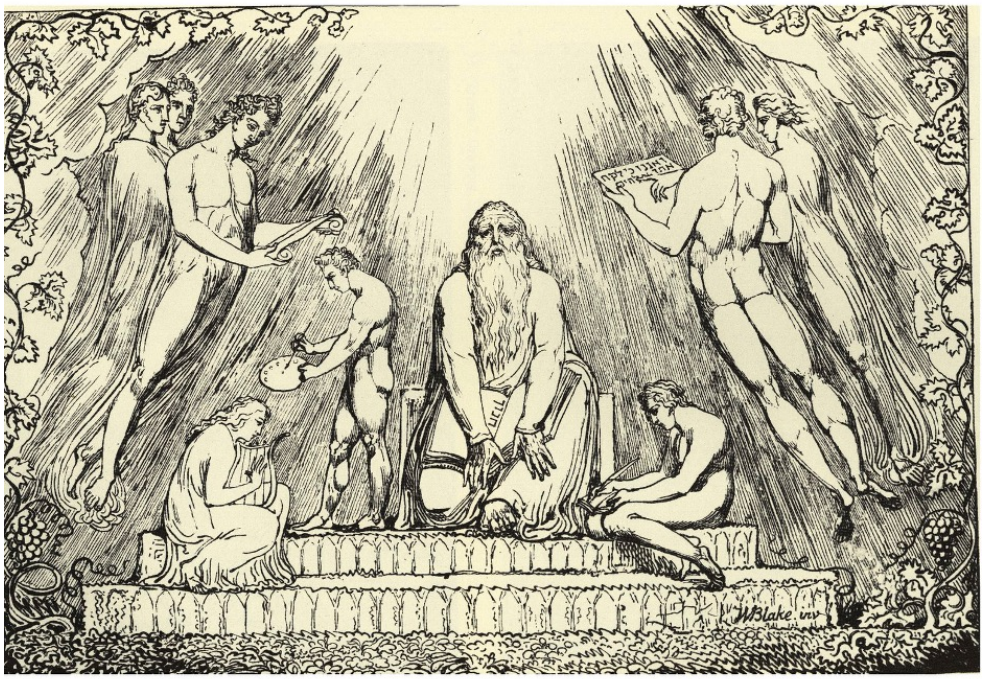
Jillian Stinchcomb, 2024

How Enoch Became Idris: The Co-Production of a Prehistoric Biblical Figure



William Blake's lithograph of Genesis 5:24 (1807), public domain.

> *"Enoch walked with God after he begot Methuselah [at the age of] three hundred years, and begot sons and daughters. All the days of Enoch were three hundred sixty five years. And Enoch walked with God, and he was no more; for God took him." Genesis 5:22-24*
>
> *"Idris surely is a man of truth and a prophet... elevated to a high status." Surah 19:56-57*
>
> *"And remember Ishmael, Idris, and Zul-Kifl. They were all steadfast. We admitted them into our mercy, for they were truly of the righteous. " Surah 21:85-86*

Upon reading these three quotes for the first time, there are few people who would intuitively know that they describe the same person. It is even less likely that they could foresee the rich legendary material that surrounds the figure: tales of a mortal who visited God's palace, toured the heavens with angelic guides, learned about the ordering of the cosmos and the movement of the sun and the stars, and who became a culture hero and one of the first scribes of the world.

The figure of Enoch, or Idris as he is called in Muslim literature, is complex, not just for the variety of traditions associated with him, but also for the range of literary genres, languages, and cultural contexts in which he is found. There is no one source or religious tradition which fully explains the figure; rather, it is only with a view of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim tradition together that one can see the co-produced conceptions of knowledge, culture, and the heavenly realms which emerge through this figure.

Because the material is so far-reaching, the following essay will not be able to cover it fully. Instead, it will first describe Enoch's profile in the Bible and the Qur'an before turning to a selection of motifs associated with Idris in Muslim and Jewish literature. In the process, we see how the biblical past is made through borrowing, influence, and processes of communal memorialization. Idris is a particularly poignant example to think through the shared Muslim, Jewish, and Christian past because he is understood to have lived before Abraham, and thus functions as a more universal figure who is connected to all of human culture. This stands in contrast to biblical figures from later periods who are often utilized to make particular claims about the truth and validity of one or another of the Abrahamic faiths. The figure of Enoch/Idris, on the other hand, is used to differentiate humans from angelic beings, as much as humans from other humans. The co-production of the time in which Enoch lived occurs not through explicit thinking about the other Abrahamic religions but rather through the utilization of shared traditions about the relations between the human and the divine.

Enoch in Scriptures

The book of Genesis makes a cryptic reference to the figure of Enoch: a seventh generation descendent of Adam and the father of Methuselah (of "as old as Methuselah" fame), Enoch is different from his forefathers and his descendants. Whereas they die, Genesis tells us, Enoch walked with and was taken by God. Why was Enoch special? What does "taken by God" mean? Is it a euphemism for death, or did something else – something extraordinary – happen to Enoch?

Enoch is not discussed further in the Hebrew Bible. Chapter 5 of Genesis concludes the description of the generations born after Adam with the birth of Noah and his sons following the same pattern that had been set with the description of Enoch's forefathers. Enoch alone walked with God and was no more; the rest of the antediluvian (pre-Flood) patriarchs lived and died in a similar way to one another, according to the text.

Enoch is mentioned once in the Christian New Testament, in the Letter to the Hebrews, where it is said that "By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death, and “he was not found, because God had taken him.” For it was attested before he was taken away that “he had pleased God” (11:5). This simple exegesis shows a deep knowledge of the text of Genesis but does little to shed light on what Enoch did to please God, or what he experienced that was not death.

The Qur'an offers even less information on the prophet Idris. We are told that Idris has been "elevated to a high status" and admitted into God's mercy, but no more, nothing about his lineage, the time in which he lived, or what he did that afforded him such a status as to be compared to Ishmael.

Clearly the scriptural figure of Enoch/Idris attracted enormous attention despite (or because of) this paucity of detail, because readers created many traditions to provide more. Early Muslim exegetes consistently understood Idris to be another name for

Enoch. Christians, Jews, and Muslims produced a wide range of non-scriptural stories about Enoch escaping death, engaging with angels, and holding a special place in the history of mankind. We now turn to a selection of these motifs and the sources which attest to them.

Enoch and Astronomy

One of the oldest known Jewish books that did not become part of the Hebrew Bible is called the *Astronomical Book*. It is preserved in full in a text called *1 Enoch*. Fragments of the *Astronomical Book* from as early as the third century BCE are found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The *Astronomical Book* describes some of the knowledge Enoch received in his trips to heaven. The knowledge relayed in this book are, as the title suggests, astronomical in nature: the movement of the heavenly bodies is described, as well as an outline of a solar calendar of 364 days. This calendar is similar to the one described in another ancient text not included in the Hebrew Bible, the *Book of Jubilees*. (*Jubilees* is included in the canon of the Ethiopic Orthodox Tawahedo Church, but is not considered canonical for most Christians and Jews.) Enoch's calculations speak to a long-standing debate within ancient Judaism between proponents of a calendar measured by lunar cycles and proponents of a calendar measured by solar cycles. The debate was not trivial: because the lunar and solar calendar do not perfectly align with one another, a fierce debate resulted about the proper days to celebrate festivals. A debate like this was one major reason that the sect who lived at Qumran lived separately from the Jewish community who worshipped at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Even after the solar-lunar debate effectively closed, with the rabbinic argument for a lunar calendar carrying the day, Enoch was associated with astronomy. In Muslim tradition, Ibn Abi Usaybi'a (1203-1270 CE) reports that Abu Ma'shar (787-886 CE) said that Enoch "was the first person to speak about supernal things such as the movements of the stars." Abu Ma'shar, who himself was a renowned astronomist and astrologist, reported that Enoch was the first person to speak about the movements of the stars; he further suggested that Enoch learned the hours of night and day from Adam himself. Similarly, Ya'qubi (d.897 CE) relates that Idris "was the first to write with a pen and to teach the science of the stars," while Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1070) reports that Idris is said to be "the one who revealed knowledge about the stars and about computation."

Abu Hatim al-Razi (811-890 CE) has a more detailed account, according to which the Qur'anic statement that Enoch was elevated to a lofty place (19:57) has a lengthy backstory.

They say that God, may He be praised and extolled, raised [Enoch] up to the mountain that is at the navel of the earth, and He sent him an angel in order to teach him the heavenly courses, the celestial sphere, and what pertained to it with regard to the zodiacal terms, the signs, the planets, and the periods of their movements, and the remainder of those things which belong to the science of the stars. They say that the Hermes who is mentioned among the philosophers is Idris; i.e., his name among the philosophers is Hermes, but in the Qur'an he is Idris... His name in the remaining revealed scriptures is Enoch... so star-lore has its point of origin from Idris (upon whom be peace).

Abu Hatim al-Razi's account of Idris is fascinating for the ways it speaks to Idris's reputation as one who learned and taught astronomy, and for its explicit equation between Idris and Enoch. It also brings together several other fascinating traditions

about Enoch, including the tradition that he consorted with angels.

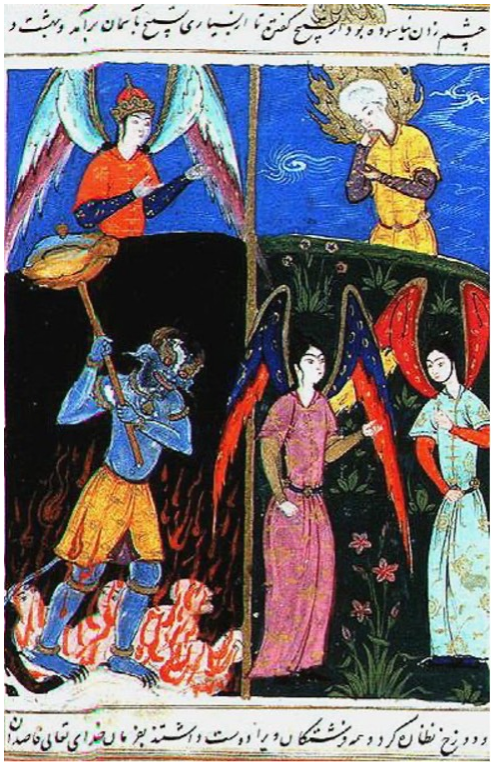


Image of Idris in a manuscript of "Tales of the Prophet" (public domain)

Enoch in the Heavens

Besides the *Astronomical Book*, the other oldest tradition about Enoch, and indeed another of the oldest known non-biblical Jewish texts, is a work called *The Book of the Watchers*. This text tells a story that resonates with what al-Razi reports, that Enoch was taken to heaven and learned many things from the angels there. *The Book of the Watchers* has a more involved narrative, however, linking information from chapter 6 of Genesis to the cryptic reference to Enoch in Genesis 5:21. Genesis 6 reports that:

(1) when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them,

(2) that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives, whomsoever they chose...

(4) The Nephilim were in the earth in those days, and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bore children to them; the same were the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown.

(5) And the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

(6) And it repented the LORD that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart.

In this short narrative, the audience is told that when humankind became numerous, the "sons of God" – usually understood to be angels – saw the beauty of women, they

took (some of) them as wives. The language of verse four is unclear, but many interpreters understand this to mean that the Nephilim, giant men of great renown, were born from the union of human women and angels. This wickedness leads to God deciding to initiate the Flood which only Noah and those on the ark would survive.

In the *Book of the Watchers*, the material about the Nephilim is integrated with the material about Enoch into a coherent narrative. There, the angels are frequently called watchers. The text reports that the angels disobeyed God by descending to earth and choosing wives for themselves, bearing Nephilim as children and teaching their wives forbidden arts, including metallurgy, cosmetics, and how to work with jewels. Angels who have not fallen ask God to judge the wickedness of the earth, including humans, Nephilim, and the fallen angels. In turn, Enoch is asked by the fallen angels to intercede on their behalf, because Enoch had a special relationship with God. In response to these competing requests, God decides to flood the earth to wipe out the wickedness, and to bind the fallen angels under the earth until the end of time.

This narrative has notable parallels with earlier Greek and ancient near eastern traditions; it also stands as an important precursor to traditions about Enoch interacting with angels which is developed in new and surprising ways in the Muslim period. Abu Hatim al-Razi, as seen above, tells us that Enoch was taken to heaven and learned many sciences from the angels there. Maqdisi (945-991 CE) cites Abu Hudhayfah (d. 633 CE) who taught that "during the time of Idris the angels would pass among human beings and visit them in their settlements and places of gathering, for it was a blessed age in which righteousness was resident." This vision of the enochic period stands in some contrast to the version seen in Genesis, where the angels coming to the earth and their interaction with human women was a mark of the evil of the age.

Tha'labi (d. 1035 CE) relates a tradition from Ibn 'Abbas which says that when the angels Harut and Marut had sinned with women, they were unable to ascend back to heaven because their wings would not function. They knew that they were being punished for their sin and went to Enoch. "They went to Idris (upon him be peace) and recounted their case to him, and they asked him if he would petition God Most High on their behalf... Idris did that, and God gave them an option between punishment in this world and punishment in the world to come. They selected punishment in this world because it will have an end. They are in Babylon undergoing punishment." Tabari records a similar story in detail, though there he does not explicitly identify Idris/Enoch as the mortal intercessor on behalf of Harut and Marut.

Idris/Enoch is associated with the angel of the sun in several Muslim sources, a fact which is tantalizingly reminiscent of his place in the solar/lunar calendrical debate of Second Temple Judaism. Muqatil b. Sulayman al-Balkhi (d. 767 CE), in his *Tafsir* (exegesis) to the Qur'an, explains that "Idris... prayed on behalf of the angel who bears the sun." Maqdisi reports a debate about Idris, where some argue that the Angel of the Sun asked to see Idris and petitioned God to raise Idris to heaven, while others report that Idris "asked the angel of the Sun to teach him [Idris] the Name by means of which he could ascend to heaven. He taught it to him, and using it he ascended to the fourth heaven."

Similar stories abound in Muslim literature about Enoch engaging with the Angel of Death. Thal'abi records a story from Wahb, who said that "Every day there would ascend from Idris as much worship as would come up from all the (other) people on earth in his time. The angels were amazed at him, and the Angel of Death yearned for him. He asked God for permission to visit him." They became friends, such that the Angel of Death was willing to carry Idris to heaven to see the Garden of Paradise; once there, Idris refused to leave. Idris cited the Qur'anic verse 15:48, which says "they will not be expelled

(from Paradise)." This story has intriguing parallels in the writings of Majlisi (1627-1699), Pseudo-Mas'udi (date unknown), and Kisa'i (d. 805). These texts sometimes suggest Idris avoided death by tricking the Angel of Death and other times suggest he died in heaven when the Angel of Death finds him there. These narratives share an intriguing overlap with medieval Jewish traditions about Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who also tricked the Angel of Death in order to enter Paradise alive, which speaks not only to the fluidity of Enoch/Idris as a figure, but also to the motifs associated with them.

Enoch's engagement with the angels as an intercessor speaks to the final motif to be explored in this essay, which is Enoch as a culture hero foundational to the development and promulgation of writing and reading.

Enoch and the Arts of Writing

The Jewish *Book of the Watchers* is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the earliest text which attests to Enoch's important role as a scribe. Enoch is asked to intercede on behalf of the Watchers who descended to earth to consort with women and have children. Enoch is able to perform this role because of his immense piety and also because he has the skills as a scribe to work in the divine court. The Jewish text *Jubilees*, written sometime before 100 BCE, reports that Enoch "was the first among men born on earth to learn to write" (4:17). Ibn Hisham (d.833 CE), writing roughly a thousand years later, similarly reports that "the prophet Idris was the first to write with his hand among the inhabitants of this world." Ibn Qutayba (d. 889 CE) writes that "God Most Exalted revealed to [Enoch/Idris] thirty scrolls. He was the first to write with a pen." The claim that Enoch/Idris was the first to write with a pen is repeated in Tha'labi, Maqdisi, and also in the Christian writings of Agapius (d. after 942 CE).

Enoch/Idris is exalted not only as a scribe and author, but also as a teacher, which is attested in writings from Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. The *Testament of Abraham*, a first- or second-century CE Jewish text, calls Enoch "the teacher of heaven and earth and the scribe of righteousness." Sefer ha-Yashar, a medieval Jewish text, has a long excursus on Enoch where he acts as a traveling teacher who shows various communities "the way of the Lord." Petrus Alfonsi (died after 1116), a Jewish convert to Christianity, briefly mentions Enoch, identifies him with Idris in the Arabic tradition, and conveys that he taught his son the parable "Let fear of the Lord be your business, and you will have wealth without toil." Writing one century earlier, Sa'id al-Andalusi (1029-1070) reports that Idris was "the first person to speak about celestial substances," a claim we have seen already, but adds the further detail that in preparation of the Flood, which he foresaw, Enoch/Idris "built the Pyramids and the ancient temples in highest Upper Egypt. He drew within them all crafts and the tools, and indicated pictorially the characteristics of the sciences, for he wanted to immortalize the sciences for those who would come after him inasmuch as he feared that all trace of them might depart from the world." Enoch/Idris is associated with a wide range of knowledge – of writing, of the movement of the cosmos, of scripture, and of angels, just to name a few – which are intimately tied up with one another. The connections between these forms of knowledge, just like the connections between the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian traditions about Enoch, are not always clear but consistently show close linkages to one another. Enochic traditions, just like the forms of knowledge he shared, are inextricably intertwined.

Conclusion

The two earliest books about Enoch/Idris, the *Astronomical Book* and the *Book of the Watchers*, already associate Enoch with a dazzling array of topics: the antediluvian past, heavenly knowledge, calendrical disputes, human-angel relations, and more. These potentials were activated at various points in later history, albeit inconsistently, showing the enormous creative potential of this figure. We do not find answers to the mysteries surrounding Enoch from the Hebrew Bible, nor from the Christian New Testament, nor from the Qur'an. Instead, we have evidence that Jews, Christians, and Muslims developed an array of legendary material to "fill in the gaps" left by the terse references to Enoch in scripture. This legendary material survives in texts written in a wide array of genres, languages, and disparate cultural contexts. The material does not fit into neat categories: while there are Christian, Muslim, and Jewish texts and traditions, they show so much cross pollination from each other that it is misleading at best to speak of a "Jewish" or "Christian" or "Muslim" Enoch. The paradigm of co-production is useful in studying Enoch because it offers a means of understanding the complexities of influence and borrowing not as a bug to be resolved but as a feature of the traditions about Enoch.

In turn, studying Enoch helps us to better understand co-production, specifically how co-production can encompass a rich tradition beyond "influence" and "borrowing." On the one hand, Enoch is not borrowed from other traditions, but rather in the scriptural heart of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. On the other hand, specific motifs and themes associated with Enoch do seem to traverse religious, linguistic, and sectarian borders, and thus can be partially but not totally explained via models of influence. The example of Enoch thus enables a broad view of the dynamics of co-production and what co-production can offer historians of similarly complex traditions.

Further Reading

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