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ANACHRONISM IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR RELIGIOUS PAINTING IN IRAN

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This brief article aims to describe and discuss two cheap prints in view of their anachronistic features. These two prints come from a small collection of contemporary popular religious posters collected in Iran during 1974. The first of the two prints shows the Prophet Muhammad on the Buraq (Plate I) and the second shows Noah's arc at the onset of the flood (Plate II).

In plate I the central image is Muhammad on the Buraq. Muhammad has the usual green turban the end of which is slung over his left shoulder. Muhammad does not have a halo. He has a thick black mustache, beard and what would seem Persian features. He is wearing a mulla style light brown cloak over a whitish robe. He has one foot in the stirrup. The Buraq has a Qajar crown, long hair in locks and pink shading on one cheek. The Buraq is a female. Below the neck it becomes a pie-bald horse in gallop. It is caparrisoned with star and flower motives. It has two wings and a tail of peacock feathers about its size.

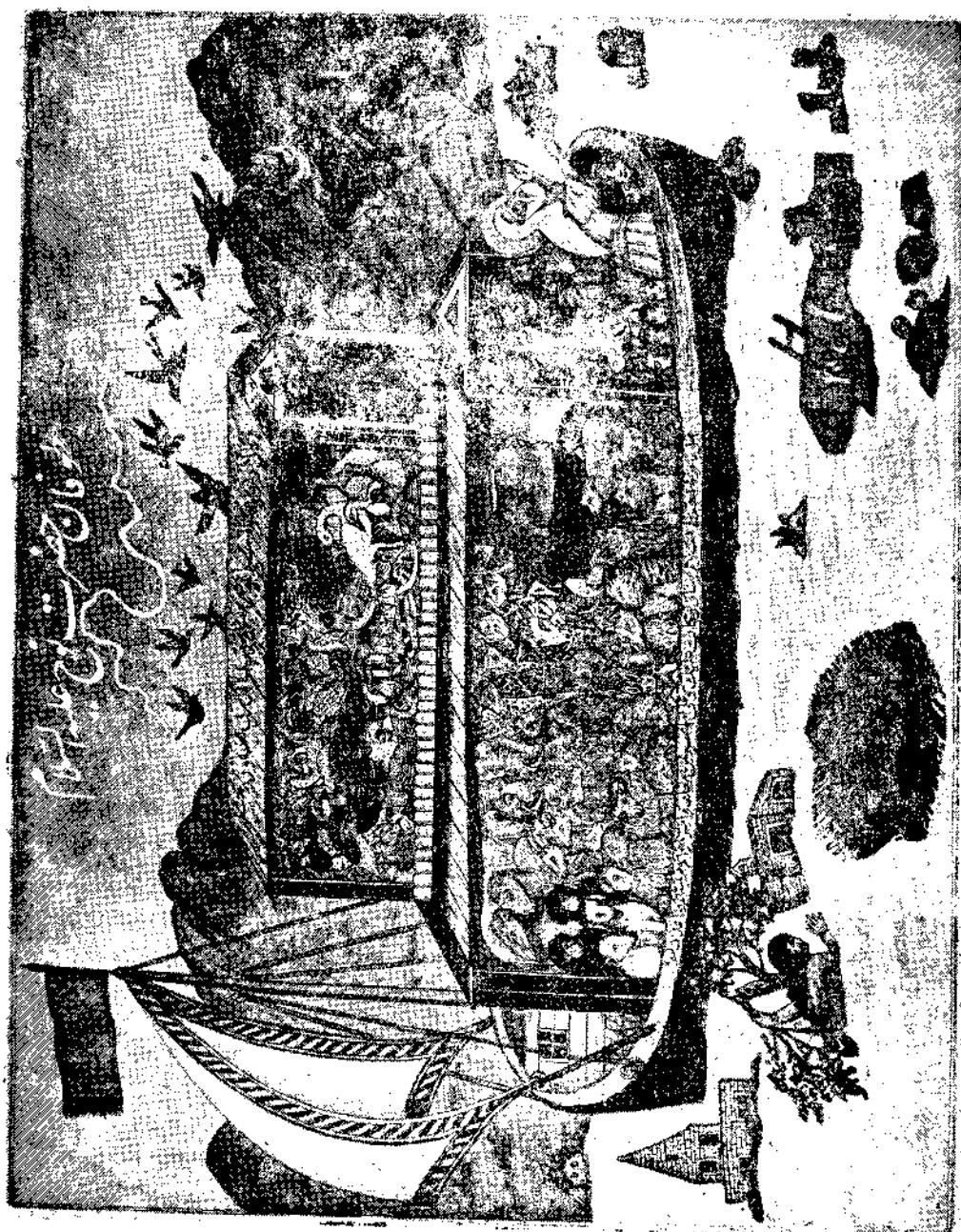
On the top right hand corner there is a small scale picture of a Safavid/Qajar style mosque, possibly the Holy Shrine of Imam Rida at Mashad. The light which radiates from behind the mosque covers one third of the scene.

Below the mosque an angel in full size has two wings, a Qajar crown, long hair in locks, a long robe and an arm band with a twelve leaved rosette. The index finger of its left hand is pointing upwards while that of its right, down. The angel may be identified as Gabriel who is said to have accompanied Muhammad on his miraculous journey.

Below Gabriel there is a roaring lion in a squatting position. His hind half is concealed by the clouds. He has his right paw up and is looking at Muhammad. The lion represents 'Ali the Asadullah. Muhammed's two hands are stretched towards the lion and with his left hand he is giving away a ring; in other words, he is handing over his authority.

On the left side of the Buraq there are nineteen angel heads over a background of clouds. The angels have curly hair down to their shoulders and two wings. It would seem they are females in the style of 1930ies, Hollywood stars.





Two thirds below the top, the sky is dark and covered with stars. The bottom right hand side is Medina and the left Mecca, the two being separated by mountains. Houses, minarets, domes and palm trees fill the background. The Mecca scene shows a large courtyard with numerous arches and the Ka'ba.

Inscriptions on these posters almost always include a verse from the Quran together with a Persian title or explanation. The names of places and people are also inscribed over the relevant part of the picture. Sometimes the printing firm, the name of the designer, and the name of the printer are also indicated. The Buraq poster quotes chapter XVII, verse 1, from the Quran, gives a Persian explanation of this verse, points out Mecca and Medina and gives the name of the printing firm (Kitab-furushi-yi Adabiyya) which is in Tehran, the designer (Sayyid 'Arab), and the printer (Hasan Amini, Gravur Sazi-yi Mudarn).

In the Buraq poster every detail except one corresponds to the Isra (The Night Journey) chapter, verse 1, in the Quran and more so to the hadiths relating to the Mi'raj (The Journey to Heaven). The exception is the lion and the ring composition. The Shi'ite belief that Muhammad handed his authority to 'Ali is generally agreed to have taken place at Ghadir Khum. The Isra or the Mi'raj and the supposed designation of 'Ali are two unrelated events. The juxtaposition as seen in this poster has neither any textual support nor, to my knowledge, can it be traced back to any pictorial representation. A possible explanation of this anachronism may be the Shi'ite fervour which seeks to glorify 'Ali in every context.

In plate II, Noah's arc is the central image. The arc is a doubledecked sailing ship. On the top deck pairs of all kinds of birds are installed. A son of Noah is standing at the edge holding a bird. The mammals are packed in the lower compartment. Humour is not lacking: a bear is clinging on to the trunk of an elephant while the bear's mate looks at her in wonder. Men, women, and children stand on the fore part of the boat. Their style of dress is distinctly Arabic. Noah, an old man with a white beard and mustache, has a halo. His left hand is stretched in supplication to the sky. The style of his depiction could be compared with that of Christian saints. On the rear the sail is full blown and on the mast the flag bears the motto "Bismi Allahi ar-Rahman ar-Rahim" (In the Name of God the Merciful and the Compassionate).

Above the arc, a snake like lightning over a green sky and hovering birds are to be seen. Below the sky barren mountains slope to the shore. On the right hand two men are climbing to the top of the mountain. An inscription informs the viewer, "Noah's son mixed with the bad ones and his branch of the family pertaining to prophethood became lost." The son concerned must be Kan'an.

Below, the rising flood manifests a most melodramatic horror: drowning men and beasts, broken trees, wrecked houses and, in the fore, an erupting fire. A man wearing a red head gear clings on a broken tree. An inscription identifies him as "the Qadl of the time of Noah". One sinking monument is a church and behind the church the son of the minister is drowning. Both figures bear the explanatory inscription.

Other inscriptions are two verses from the Quran, chapter XI, verses 40 and 47, a Persian title, "Noah's Flood", and the name of the designer Sayyid 'Arab who is the designer of plate I.

In plate II all the details correspond to the Quranic Noah and the traditional Noah legends. The church, the drowning son of the minister and the qadi, however, are significant anachronisms which may be explained in terms of Iran's recent history. From the middle of the nineteenth century the religious classes in Iran had opposed foreign intervention and had proclaimed all trading agreements a direct attack on Islam. For propaganda purposes, therefore, Christianity, a symbol of the foreign, became a convenient target in the hands of the religious classes. The clash of the religious classes was not only with the 'exploiting powers' but also with the secular state. The qadis who, by this time, had been incorporated into the bureaucracy, were part of the secular state. The drowning gadl is a reminder on the part of the religious classes that the state has not yet justified its legitimacy in face of the divine.

In conclusion it may be said that the absurd and the out of context in contemporary popular religious painting in Iran is not to be attributed simply to the Idiocyncracy of the artist concerned. These posters are a reflection on the religious repertoire, endoctrination, and the perception of its customer.

ÖZET

1974 senesinde İran'ın muhtelif yerlerinde toplanan ve ucuz dini basmalar üzerinde tahrif-i zaman açısından kısa bir araştırma yapılmış ve bu resimlerden ikisi ele alınarak, tarif edilmiş ve görülen zaman uygunsuzluğunun menşei araştırılmıştır. Nettece olaraq, tahrif-i zaman unsurunun ressamın dini meselelerde bilgisiz veya sadece hayal gücüne dayanarak hareket etmiş olmasından doğmayıp kökünü İrandaki dini ve 19. asırdan bu yana gelişen siyasi akımlarda bulduğu görüşü ortaya konmuştur.