

A Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Reader Calculating the Apocalypse

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Context

How did sixteenth-century Ottoman subjects relate to debates and calculations regarding the end of the universe? A Turkish manuscript at Oxford Bodleian Library (Arch. Sel. 31) that houses a copy of an almanac with prognostications (*taḳvīm*) from the year 872 Hijri (1467/1468 AD) offers some intriguing insights. On the left half of the first page of the manuscript are inserted some back-of-the-envelope type calculations of dates accompanied by their explanations. These notes are located close to an ownership statement documenting the possession of the book by a certain Ca'fer b. 'İvaż, who, as the statement reveals, was an instructor (*müderri*) teaching at the Torumtay *medrese* in Amasya. We cannot claim with certainty that these calculations were made by Ca'fer b. 'İvaż. I was not able to trace any instructor with the name Ca'fer from Amasya in contemporary biographical sources of the sixteenth century. In any case, these notes capture a particular moment of the note-taker, who, in the Hijri year 959 (1551 or 1552 AD), computes how much time is left until the end of the world, which was largely believed to have 7000 years of lifespan.

In order to find out the remaining number of years, the note-taker first calculates how much time has elapsed since Noah's flood and finds 4656 after making simple arithmetic mistakes. They take the Hijri year 862 as a starting point and add that 4570 years have passed from the time of Noah's flood till the Hijri year 862. It is difficult to trace the sources of the note-taker's information; there were already irreconcilable discrepancies at the time among the chronological computations of the biblical past. For instance, another *taḳvīm* from the Hijri year 858 that includes chronology tables notes that 3996 years passed since Noah's flood until the year 858.¹ No matter what their source was, the note-taker departs from 4570 years and adds, consecutively, 38 (900-862) and 59 (959-900) to identify the number of years that have elapsed since Noah's flood to their particular moment in the Hijri year 959. Instead of writing 4667, however, which should be the correct sum of 4570, 38, and 59, they compute the sum as 4656. The

¹ Nihal Atsız, "Hicrî 858 Yılına Ait Takvim," *Selçuklu Araştırmaları Dergisi* IV (1975): 223-283.

note-taker further notes that in between Noah's flood and the time of Adam (i.e., the Creation) are there 1200 years, which they add to the previous 4656 and reach 5856. To make their calculations easier, they round it up to 6000 and mark the 144-year difference. Based on the belief that the world had a 7,000-year lifespan, the note-taker registers that there were then 1,144 years left till the end of the world. As the note-taker says, this is attested by many books in theology, philosophy, Quranic exegesis, or Prophetic tradition.

Although debates and expectations about the imminency of the apocalypse was a theme frequently visited by the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Ottoman literati and individuals with overt Sufi leanings, astrological texts from the period reveal surprisingly little about the millenarian and apocalyptic discourse.² In that regard, this note found in an astrological almanac is a precious documentation of the use of astrological texts as a space for the manifestation of apocalyptic and millenarian concerns by their readers and copyists.

Transcription

Tārīḥ-i hicret

862

Tārīḥ-i Nūḥ nebī

4570 yıl

38

1159

4656 [sic]

² For examples of the apocalyptic discourse penetrating the varying textual corpus of the period, see Cornell H. Fleischer, "The Lawgiver as Messiah: The Making of the Imperial Image in the Reign of Suleyman," in *Soliman le magnifique et son temps*, ed. Gilles Veinstein (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1992), 159-177; Barbara Flemming, "Sāḥib-ḳırān und Mahdī: Türkische Endzeiterwartungen im ersten Jahrzehnt der Regierung Süleymāns," in *Between the Danube and the Caucasus*, ed. by György Kara (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1987), 43-62.

*Tārīh-i hicretüñ
 bu yıl toköz yüz elli toközudur
 Hazret-i Nūh nebī tūfānından berü
 Dört biñ altı yüz elli altı yıl [sic]
 olmuşdur vesselām*

*Nūh ile Ādem arasında daħi
 tūfāna gelince biñ iki yüz [hod?] oldı
 teşmīl [?] olursa*

1200

[+] 4656

5856. 144 ile 6000 yıl olur

*Ammā kitāblarda eger kelām eger hikmet eger şurūh-ı eħādīsdir ba 'z-ı tefāsırde
 daħi vardır bu nev '-i insānuñ*

*yedi biñ yıl hükmi vardır, anuñçündür dār-ı āhıretde nev '[-i insānu]ñ hükmini
 Qurān virir*

*Āhır cefāsı cihetleri yedi biñ yıldan şoñra çıkar pes ma 'lūm oldı ki müddet-i dünyā
 yedi biñ yıl imiş. Bu taķdirce bāķi 1144 yıl daħi*

vardur ki yedi biñ yıl tamām ola

Va-llāhu 'a 'lam

Translation

The Hijri year: 862 [corresponding to 1457 or 1458]

The number of years that have elapsed since the [flood at the] time of prophet Noah:
 4570

When added by 38 [i.e., 900-862] and 59 [i.e., 959-900], it equals 4656 [sic].

The present year is 959, according to the Hijri calendar

Thus, 4656 [sic] years have elapsed since the flood at the time of the prophet Noah.

And from the time of Adam to the flood in the era of Noah are also 1200 years. When this is added to 4656, it makes 5856.

When 144 is added to it, it makes 6000.

It has been written in books, be it books on theology, philosophy, commentaries on Prophetic tradition, and even Quranic exegesis, that humankind has 7000 years of lifespan [on earth]. God gives their decrees in the abode of the afterlife; the suffering begins after 7000 years. It is thus known that the world's lifespan is 7000 years and that 1144 years have remained.

God knows best.

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