Abstract

The study of qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ, the Islamic tales of the prophets, has a distinguished pedigree in the Western academy, but much work remains to be done in the field. Although there have been numerous studies of individual prophetic figures over the last few decades, focused studies of specific works in the literary genre of qiṣaṣ have generally been lacking. Moreover, many studies of prophetic narratives tend to privilege exegetical works over other literary sources, including works in the genre of qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ itself. Despite the apparent contradiction, however, I would argue that the broad dissemination of qiṣaṣ-type material throughout different genres suggests that qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ is better approached as a form of discourse reflecting specific ideological purposes, in particular the appropriation of the biblical tradition and positioning of Muḥammad, the Qurʾān, and Islam as the natural culmination of the Israelite prophetic legacy. As the field develops, clear desiderata remain to be addressed, such as the incorporation of Shiʿi, postclassical, and modern reflections on the prophets into the discussion, as well as the full integration of different genres and types of material, for example visual culture, into the field. All of these expressions are tied together by the common aim of shaping the portrayal of these figures in ways that reflect the diverse understandings of Islam among particular authors and communities.
Introduction: defining the field and its object of study

The study of qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ, the Islamic tales of the prophets, has a well-established pedigree in the Western academy. This issue of Mizan: Journal for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations coincides with the fiftieth anniversary of Tilman Nagel’s 1967 thesis “Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ : ein Beitrag zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte,” a groundbreaking contribution that has played a seminal role in the modern study of the subject.1 The papers we present here were originally delivered at a conference convened in Naples in fall 2015 in anticipation of this important occasion, “Islamic Stories of the Prophets: Semantics, Discourse, and Genre” (October 14–15, 2015).

Nagel’s work provided a solid foundation for future research, but it is one that subsequent scholars have built upon somewhat irregularly, and much work remains to be done. Unfortunately, the study of qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ per se has not flourished in the last couple of decades with quite the same vigor as the study of Qurʾān and tafsīr, though the study of qiṣaṣ has surely benefitted, at least indirectly, from the extremely energetic expansion of both of those fields in recent years. In this introduction, we seek to evaluate the state of the field of qiṣaṣ studies, locate the individual contributions to the issue in it, and point the way forward to possible future trajectories of development.2

Nagel’s thesis discusses the ancient roots of qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ among early traditionists, as well as highlighting important literary works in which this early (or allegedly early) material is gathered. He goes on to delineate the literary genre of qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ proper, discussing major works carrying this title or something similar such as mubtadaʾ, badʾ al-khalq, and so forth. Here he draws an interesting distinction between more scholarly representatives of the genre and texts of a more “popular” nature; this distinction has been particularly influential on many subsequent discussions of the material.3

Nagel’s thesis represents the first attempt to delineate the contours of qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ both as a genre and a broader tradition in a serious and methodical way. However, his work could not have been undertaken without that of a number of significant predecessors that helped pave the way before him.

---

2 For a survey of recent trends in the field as regards the discovery and publication of primary sources, see Roberto Tottoli, “New Sources and Recent Editions of Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ Works and Literature,” in Raif Georges Khoury, Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala, and María Jesús Viguera Molins (eds.), Legendaria medievalia: En honor de Conception Castillo Castillo (Cordoba: Ediciones El Almendro, 2011), 525–539.
enabling his more systematic approach. Lidzbarski’s pioneering thesis of 1893 has limited impact today due to being written in Latin, but exerted a significant impact on the fledgling field in its day; the emphasis here, as in many other studies of the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, is on cataloguing influences; the breadth of the sources adduced, not only in Arabic and Hebrew but also Syriac and Ethiopic (thus directing attention to medieval Christian as well as Jewish comparanda for Islamic *qiṣṣa* traditions), is noteworthy.\(^4\) Despite its evident shortcomings as a critical edition, Eisenberg’s publication of the major *qiṣṣa* of Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Kisā‘ī (ca. 6⁶th/12th c.) in 1922–1923, the subject of his doctoral dissertation of 1898, allowed this important work to gain a significant scholarly audience.\(^5\) Though its flaws are evident today, Sidersky’s study *Les Origines des Légendes Musulmanes* was noteworthy in its time for making a serious and wide-ranging attempt to untangle the densely intertwined threads of Qurʾān, midrash, and later Islamic tradition as presented not only in *tafsīr* but in the chronicle of Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and the *qiṣṣa* collections of Kisā‘ī and Abū Ishāq Ahmad b. Muḥammad al-Tha‘labī (d. 427/1035).\(^6\) This is to say nothing of the numerous works published since the time of Abraham Geiger (d. 1874) specifically focusing upon the Jewish and Christian “influences” on the Qurʾān, which of necessity contain much speculation on the background and parallels to the narratives concerning the biblical prophets in scripture. Here pride of place must certainly go to two titanically important works of German scholarship, Josef Horovitz’s *Koranische Untersuchungen* and Heinrich Speyer’s *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Koran*, arguably the most important contributions to the field inaugurated by Geiger’s 1832 Preisschrift “Was hat Mohamed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?”\(^7\)

Nagel’s thesis has shaped the contemporary study of *qiṣṣa al-anbiyā‘* in numerous ways. Perhaps the most obvious and explicit contribution his work made was to draw greater attention to critical works of the *qiṣṣa* genre such as those of Tha‘labī and Ibn Muṭarrīf al-Ṭarafī (d. 454/1062). It is important to note, however, that this focus on classic specimens of the genre was balanced by Nagel’s keen appreciation of the larger tradition that crystallized in the specific works that constituted that genre, a point we will take up again momentarily. As noted above, Nagel—and other scholars who addressed the subject soon after the

\(^4\) Mark Lidzbarski, *De Propheticis, quae dicuntur, legendis arabicis* (Leipzig, 1893).


publication of his thesis—examined discrete texts carrying the title of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* or the like. They considered such questions as how this literary genre related to others, how it coalesced out of other fields such as *ḥadīth*, exegesis, and historiography, and other issues of a literary-historical nature. Despite the decades of interest in this field that preceded Nagel, he and his contemporaries still had significant work to do of a fundamentally bibliographic and prosopographic nature, to say nothing of striving to conceptualize the field and represent this material’s true significance in Islamic culture adequately.

As Nagel explicitly notes in the address he has contributed to this journal issue ("Achieving an Islamic Interpretation of *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ*"), when he originally embarked upon his research on *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, he rapidly ascertained that what was most necessary was not a simple cataloging of traditions “borrowed” and adapted from Jewish and Christian sources and subsequently transmitted in the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* literature, but rather a deeper understanding of what is properly “Islamic” about the Islamic tales of the prophets in the first place. That there are larger implications of *qiṣaṣ* as a realm of interest to Muslim traditionists and authors, particularly of a political or ideological nature, is a point that is perhaps too easily lost. When speaking of “biblical” prophets in Islamic tradition (a subject taken up most often vis-à-vis the Qurʾān, the foundation of the tradition), the tendency to catalogue “borrowings” and discern “influences” without adopting a more nuanced understanding of processes of adaptation and reinterpretation sometimes still predominates.

The difficulties involved in approaching and characterizing this material, and for that matter defining or circumscribing *qiṣaṣ* as an object of study, become evident when we examine scholarship that actually investigates the portrayal of specific prophetic figures in Islamic tradition. Many of these figures have been subjects of significant scholarly treatments. These inquiries almost always start by examining the Qurʾānic basis of Islamic understandings of the figure or figures in question, a natural place to begin given

---

8 These terms appear to have been largely interchangeable in the early tradition, as evidenced by the fact that the titles of works in the genre were mutable; e.g., Kisāʾī’s text apparently circulated as *Kitab Badʾ al-khalq* as well as *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, and *Mubtadaʾ* was still known as a title for works or sections of works dealing with the stories of the prophets.

9 Tilman Nagel, “How to Achieve an Islamic Interpretation of the *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ*: On the Prophetic Stories of the Qurʾān.”

10 For an indispensable overview of the tradition, see Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qurʾān and Muslim Literature* (Richmond: Curzon, 2002). A representative selection of material organized sequentially according to the chronological order of the prophets (thus mimicking an actual *qiṣaṣ* work) is Brannon M. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran: An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis* (London: Continuum, 2002).
the foundational role of the Qurʾān in shaping Muslim understandings of the pre-Islamic prophets. They then typically proceed to explore biblical, Jewish, and Christian parallels, precursors, and “influences,” often laying particular emphasis on one or another body of late antique literature as a likely or possible vector through which older themes, concepts, and images were transmitted. Finally, they survey, with greater or lesser degrees of comprehensiveness, what Muslim traditionists and authors said and the narratives they transmitted about the figure in question. The precursors to the Qurʾān and the Nachleben of themes and narrative complexes in later Muslim literature may receive greater or lesser emphasis depending on the inclination of the author or the purpose of the study; understandably enough, some scholars gravitate more to the Qurʾān as the foundation of the tradition, while others orient themselves forward in looking at the development of the prophets in Islamic literature and tradition.

There have been a number of exemplary studies on specific figures over the decades since Nagel’s work, though they have been few and far between. Likewise, it is worth noting that over the last twenty years many new editions of qiṣaṣ works have appeared, although they have yet to have a significant impact on scholarship.

Studies focusing on prophetic figures in Islam range from antediluvian history (Schöck on Adam, Bork-Qaysieh on Cain and Abel, and Awn and Bodman on Satan/Iblis), to the era of the patriarchs (Firestone and Lowin on Abraham), to that of the Exodus (Wheeler on Moses), the Israelite monarchy and the time of the prophets (Mohammed on David, Lassner on Solomon and Sheba, and Déclais on David, Isaiah, and

---

11 For example, it is commonly observed that Moses is the figure most frequently mentioned in the Qurʾān, referred to over a hundred times, with hundreds of verses dedicated to recounting his story and various episodes pertaining to the Exodus and the revelation of the Torah. Narratives pertaining to the pre-Islamic prophets comprise at least a quarter of the Qurʾān overall, possibly more.

Job) and finally Jesus (Lawson, Khalidi, and numerous others).¹³ These studies may focus on one episode from the life of a specific prophet or on their portrayal more broadly. Most of them draw on a range of material, though often privileging classic historical or especially exegetical sources (e.g., Ṭabarī).

Observing this broad pattern, we might note that if one wanted to write a diachronic study of narratives about a specific prophetic figure in Islam, there are at least a dozen major texts one could readily consult to get an overview of what Muslims have said, written, and thought about Adam, Noah, Moses, Jesus, and the like. Yet the core texts in which one would seek this material—at least if one were inclined to follow established scholarly precedent—are certainly not all works commonly recognized as being in the genre of qīṣāṣ al-anbiyāʾ per se; in fact, usually very few of them are. The most wide-ranging works on the biblical prophets in Islam will certainly incorporate material from classic works in the genre, though these works appear as only part of the literary corpus upon which they draw. Actual works in the genre are seldom if ever given pride of place, and scholarly treatments with a particular emphasis on exegesis may omit them from the discussion completely.

Thus, upon reflection, the selective reliance of the scholarly literature on the prophets in Islam on qīṣāṣ texts appears peculiar: there is a whole corpus of sources explicitly devoted to the tales of the prophets in Islam that scholarly investigations of prophets in Islam tend to underutilize or avoid entirely. Likewise, despite the decades since Nagel’s work, the study of the genre of qīṣāṣ al-anbiyāʾ per se has been rather overlooked. Marianna Klar’s *Interpreting al-Thaʿlabī’s Tales of the Prophets: Temptation, Responsibility*

and Loss remains the only monograph-level study of Tha‘labī’s literary strategies in his qiṣaṣ, considering both the author’s signal concerns and comparing his material with that collected in a variety of other sources. While Kisāʾī’s work remains neglected in this regard, at least the production of new translations of his qiṣaṣ, as with those of the ‘Arāʾīs of Tha‘labī, may serve to enable a broader audience to access the text and delve into its riches.

What this trend in scholarship points to is the rather anomalous nature of the qiṣaṣ genre as a whole and the ambiguous relationship it has with the larger literary evidence for Islamic understandings and portrayals of the prophets. Many important texts in the history of the genre are simply no longer extant, and even printed editions may not be widely available. Other important sources of qiṣaṣ material—in fact, some of those most commonly cited as such sources, such as the tafsīr and chronicle of Ṭabarī—are not entitled qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ or structured around the succession of prophets at all, but rather represent other literary genres in which significant amounts of such material are found, especially exegesis and history.

---

14 M. O. Klar, Interpreting al-Tha‘labī’s Tales of the Prophets: Temptation, Responsibility and Loss (London: Routledge, 2009). We might also mention the work of the Israeli scholars Tamari and Koch in editing and translating the ‘Ajā‘ ib al-malakūt attributed to Kisāʾī, a work collecting popular traditions on cosmology and eschatology and so related to qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ. It should be noted, however, that the editors’ highly idiosyncratic conjectures about the author and the transmission of the work (viz., that Kisāʾī was a convert from Judaism or a “Muslim-Jew” following a syncretic faith whose links to Judaism were suppressed in the subsequent redaction of his work) is far outside the consensus and would not be accepted by scholars in the mainstream. See the extensive (and highly opaque) comments in the introduction of Kisāʾī, Kitāb ‘Ajā‘ ib al-malakūt, ed. and trans. Shmuel Tamari and Yoel Koch (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005).


The preference given to exegetical literature in studies of this sort—which, as noted above, is often entirely explicit—is understandable given the centrality of the Qurʾān in establishing the Muslim view of various prophetic figures. It seems likely that many narratives about the prophets were generated in explanation of and expansion upon the Qurʾān’s numerous references to these characters. Further, since the time in which scholars such as Nagel, Pauliny, and Vajda first discussed this material, there has been a tendency to see the roots of qiṣaṣ as anchored in the sermons and predispositions of the quṣṣāṣ or preachers of the early Islamic milieu, with their preaching and storytelling consisting largely of elaboration upon qurʾānic stories.

As Thaʿlabī himself noted in the introduction to his qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ, the qiṣaṣ of the Qurʾān were meant as edification and admonition for Muḥammad and his followers. Not only was qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ built on the foundation of qiṣaṣ al-Qurʾān, but it is clear that qurʾānic paradigms, a parenetic approach to history, pertaining to qiṣaṣ. See The Commentary on the Qurʾān by Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, trans. Alan Cooper (London: Oxford University Press, 1987).

17 The aforementioned work of Wheeler, Prophets in the Quran, exemplifies the underlying tensions that inform scholarly approaches to this material. Despite its explicit presentation as primarily oriented towards exegetical material, Wheeler draws on an impressive breadth of sources for the traditions cited therein, at least judging from the list of works utilized in the anthology that he provides at the end of the book. However, frustratingly, the individual traditions Wheeler cites are sourced, but he arbitrarily assigns said traditions either to authors of compilations or to major authorities to whom traditions are attributed, and in the case of the latter, no indication of the actual literary source is given. The exegetical-commentary structure thus dominates the work, and the reader is given little indication of the variety of literary contexts and frameworks in which this material was actually deployed.


19 As has often been remarked, Thaʿlabī’s qiṣaṣ begins with an elaboration of the various ḥikmahs (“wisdoms”) that explain why Muslims should seek to learn and reflect on qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ; the second ḥikmah is that the earlier prophets provide a paradigm for understanding Muḥammad himself and the significance of his mission. See Thaʿlabī, Arāʾīs al-majālīs, trans. Brinner, 4; Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ al-musammā ʿArāʾīs al-majālīs (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1985), 2–3.
informed much historical reflection in the early Islamic community. Historiography as well as qiṣṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ may thus be seen as an essentially para-qurʾānic enterprise, as is plainly evident from the amount of material on the pre-Islamic prophets and their communities found in major chronicles.

The presupposition that much qiṣṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ was actually derived from taḥfīṣr explains the prominent, even predominant, tendency to turn to commentary literature as providing the main literary corpus of first resort in modern studies on biblical prophets in Islamic literature. Further, unsurprisingly, classical Sunni sources are privileged as exemplars of that literature, as they are in studies of Islamic exegesis more generally. Many other sources of importance have thus been sidelined in contemporary scholarship, particularly adab works, minor or local histories, and numerous genres of Shiʿi texts. This is to say nothing of the general neglect of a variety of post-classical works, excluded or dismissed because they are supposedly derivative, despite containing unique traditions or novel perspectives on older material.

Among commonly cited works in studies of this sort, Thaʿlabī and Kisāʾī are undoubtedly the representatives of the qiṣṣaṣ genre cited most often. Admittedly, students and scholars of qiṣṣaṣ do not have ready recourse to a particularly sizeable corpus of classical texts as exemplars of the genre, which serves to reinforce the predisposition to draw upon taḥfīṣr, a genre in which works are vastly more

20 Here we might note the striking phenomenon of the emergence of an actual genre of books entitled qiṣṣaṣ al-Qurʾān in the twentieth century, modern works of a Salafi tendency that attempt to discard the traditional accretions (especially the so-called isrāʾīliyyāt) in the literature on the prophets so as to present the supposedly most authoritative and authentically Islamic portrayals of their missions and exploits. This is complemented by modern works that, while retaining the title qiṣṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ, systematically and explicitly subject the traditional material on the topic to significant criticism, again in pursuit of obtaining pure and reliable accounts rooted in the Qurʾān; foremost among these is ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Najjār, Qiṣṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-ʿUlūm, 1932). On Najjār’s work in the context of Egyptian intellectuals’ attempt to reconfigure Islamic tradition for a modern, literate audience, see Israel Gershoni, “Reconstructing Tradition: Islam, Modernity, and National Identity in the Egyptian Intellectual Discourse, 1930–1952,” in Moshe Zuckermann (ed.), Ethnizität, Moderne und Enttraditionalisierung (Tel Aviv Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte 30; Tel Aviv: Wallstein Verlag, 2002), 156–211. Cf. Tottoli, Biblical Prophets, 175–188 on modernist approaches to qiṣṣaṣ.


22 As noted by Tottoli (“New Sources,” 526–528) two new editions of Kisāʾī’s work—the first printed editions from the Arab world—have appeared, one in 1998 and one in 2008. Neither of these seems as yet to have had much of an impact or supplanted scholars’ reliance on the much older and often deficient edition of Eisenberg.
abundant. Even so, there may be other contributing factors to the underemployment of other qiṣaṣ works in studies of particular prophets—or discussions of the larger genre—such as the perception that these sources are late, "popular," or contain nothing substantial that is not found in the exegetical literature or in the classic works of Kisāʾī and Thaʿlabī.

Further, and even more striking, is the lack of serious extended investigations of these canonical works, as already noted. It was long ago postulated by Nagel that Thaʿlabī’s qiṣaṣ is the more ‘orthodox’ and scholarly distillation of this material while Kisāʾī’s work—still of uncertain provenance—represents a more popular presentation of it. Whether or not this is true, the relationship of these works to their milieus, to other textual-traditional strands, and to each other (and in Thaʿlabī’s case, the relationship between his tafsīr and qiṣaṣ) are all areas of inquiry that remain ripe for exploration.

The corpus of works making up the qiṣaṣ genre often seems to be in something of a state of disarray, with important texts only partially extant or recoverable only through later quotations. The preeminent example is the Kitāb al-Mubtadaʾ of Ibn Ishāq (d. 767), which, though originally the first text in a tripartite cycle of works, was probably the first solidly dateable collection of qiṣaṣ material. A kind of English reconstruction of the text on the basis of later citations of Ibn Ishāq’s transmitted material has been available for almost thirty years in the guise of Gordon Newby’s The Making of the Last Prophet; the reception of this work has been mixed due to ambivalence about Newby’s overconfidence in recovering Ibn Ishāq’s material from later sources.23 Other important texts are unpublished, such as the early and apparently influential work of Ishāq b. Bishr, extant in only one partial manuscript and so still conspicuously underutilized because of its inaccessibility; a critical edition of this work is a clear desideratum.24 Some other works of significance have been published in scholarly editions, but are relatively inaccessible and so underemployed. This is the case with the works of Umārah b. Wathīmah (d. 902) and Ṭarafī.25 Likewise, despite being published

23 Gordon Darnell Newby, The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989). See Newby’s comments in the introduction to the work (1–25), in which his assumptions about the original shape, sequence, and purpose of the work are laid out. See also the review of Lawrence I. Conrad, “Recovering Lost Texts: Some Methodological Issues,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 113 (1993): 258–263, calling Newby’s methodology into question to such a severe degree that he expresses doubt as to whether Newby’s result could possibly resemble Ibn Ishāq’s original Kitāb al-Mubtadaʾ—"a perhaps vexed concept in any case" (250)—at all.


twenty years ago, the major qīṣṣā work of Rabghūzī (d. after 710/1331) remains known only to specialists, no doubt due to its relatively late date and its relatively obscure linguistic background, being one of few surviving witnesses to Khwarezmian Turkish.26

It is surely ironic that in the modern Islamic world, the two most widely available qīṣṣā texts stand in many ways at totally opposite ends of the ideological spectrum of Sunnism. Tha’labī’s ‘Arāʾīs al-majālis is regularly reprinted and has long been a very successful and widely disseminated representative of the qīṣṣā genre, despite the fact that the tafsīr of Tha’labī has historically been sidelined by Sunnis.27 Meanwhile, the other widely available exemplar of the genre—probably more readily available than even Tha’labī’s text, repeatedly republished as well as being translated into other languages—is, in fact, a highly problematic representative of it. This is the qīṣṣā al-anbiyāʾ of Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), which was produced during the modern period by extracting the relevant material from his world chronicle, Al-Bidāyah wa’l-nihāyah. One is struck by the fact that this popular qīṣṣā is an artificial text derived from the work of an author whose view of the qīṣṣā tradition was very often ambivalent, if not explicitly censorious, due to its purported function as a vehicle for isrāʾīliyyāt.28

What may we conclude from all this? It is obviously important that the trend towards publication of early, classical, and post-classical works in the genre should continue, and there is clearly a need for accessible editions and translations. The production of critical editions and translations is a form of scholarly activity that is perhaps less popular than it once was, likely because it seems to seldom be appreciated or rewarded adequately by academic institutions. However, advances in digital text representation and


26 That is, a rarely attested form of written Turkish that marked the transition from Karakhanid to Chagataic as one of the dominant forms of Turkish in the region in the early Mongol period. See al-Rabghūzī, The Stories of the Prophets. Qīṣṣā al-anbiyāʾ: An Eastern Turkish Version, ed. by H. E. Boeschoten and J. O’Kane (2nd ed.; 2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2015).

27 Saleh contends that Tha’labī’s marginalization was due to the perception that he was a crypto-Shi’i, though the rationale that he was an unreliable transmitter of ḥadīth is often cited in works criticizing him. See Walid Saleh, The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qurʾān Commentary of al-Tha’labī (d. 427/1035) (Leiden: Brill, 2004), e.g., 216–221 on Ibn Taymiyyah’s engineering of Tha’labī’s rejection from the orthodox Sunni fold, leading to the tenuous position he occupies today, at least among Salafi scholars of tafsīr and tradition.

28 On the isrāʾīliyyāt problem, see below. The oldest printed editions of Ibn Kathīr’s qīṣṣā seem to go back to the 1960s, but little is known of the circumstances of its production. A recent presentation of Ibn Kathīr’s material on the prophets in English appears to be a revised version of the qīṣṣā in circulation in Arabic, produced by going back to the Bidāyah and re-extracting the material so as to emphasize the most authentic ḥadīth and exclude even more isrāʾīliyyāt: Ibn Kathīr, Life and Times of the Messengers, Taken from Al-Bidayah wan-Nihayah (Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers, 1428/2007).
publication counterbalance this to some degree. Further, the translation of works in a variety of genres of Arabic and other Islamicate literatures is currently undergoing something of a renaissance in English-speaking countries at least, judging by the number of important series in which such translations are being regularly produced. At any rate, simply making more texts of the qīṣṣa genre available will greatly increase the likelihood of their being incorporated into scholarly discussions and perhaps even attract dissertation-or monograph-level attention.

There is a broader conclusion to be drawn from all this, however. The unusual nature of our canon of qīṣṣa al-anbiyāʾ works, the distribution of relevant material across genres, and the general modus operandi of major scholarship on prophetic figures demonstrates, in a salutary way, the arbitrariness of the genre itself and its blurry boundaries. That is, without a significant corpus of exempla in the genre per se, but with a corpus of ancillary works that actually seem to provide a great deal of material relevant to the historical development of traditions about the prophets in Islam, we must recognize that qīṣṣa al-anbiyāʾ is only misleadingly or imperfectly characterized as a genre at all. It might more accurately be characterized as a discourse—one that has particular characteristics and reflects certain ideological tendencies, but far surpasses the bounds of any specific literary genre in which it is manifest, including that of qīṣṣa al-anbiyāʾ itself.29 This brings us full circle back to Nagel’s thesis, in which—as noted before—we see a dynamic tension between qīṣṣa as a genre and qīṣṣa as a broader tradition.

A clear parallel to this is found in late antique Christian reflection on and use of the figures of the Israelite prophets. To understand how the biblical prophets were conceived and memorialized in Christian culture in this period, we would have recourse to material from numerous genres, including—and especially—biblical commentary and hagiography. There are precursors and parallels to actual qīṣṣa works in late antique and medieval Christian culture, e.g., the Byzantine Lives of the Prophets, but to understand the larger narrative, discursive, and ideological parameters of Christian appropriation of these Israelite figures, we would have to go far beyond the bounds of texts like this one that were specifically devoted to them.30

29 The term “discourse” is often bandied about without much critical reflection upon its significance or implications. Here I invoke it to signify a mode of communication, a way of talking about things through a well-established set of symbols that reflects, evokes, and reinforces specific constructions of authority. This is essentially the conception of discourse established in Lincoln’s robust investigations of the symbolic language of religious and quasi-religious ritual; see, e.g., Bruce Lincoln, Discourse and the Construction of Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

30 The Byzantine Lives, seldom if ever considered as a forerunner to qīṣṣa al-anbiyāʾ, is available in a still-serviceable translation by Torrey: The Lives of the Prophets: Greek Text and Translation, trans. Charles Cutler Torrey (Journal of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 1; Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1946). Torrey’s approach to the text reflects the conventional belief that it is by and large a Jewish work of first-century Palestine, but the more recent evaluation of Satran is that the text as currently extant must be considered a late antique Christian document. See David Satran, Biblical Prophets in Byzantine Palestine: Reassessing the Lives of the Prophets (Leiden: Brill, 1994).
This, we would argue, is the way in which Islamic tales of the prophets should similarly be approached, conceptualized as a discourse as well as a genre or discrete corpus.

The origins and ideology of qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ: the case of Ibn Isḥāq

Ibn Isḥāq’s Kitāb al-Mubtada’, arguably the earliest text that can be called a work of qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ, demonstrates the importance of a nuanced understanding of what qiṣaṣ is both as a genre and as a discourse right at the inception of the tradition. Ibn Isḥāq did not set out to write a qiṣaṣ work for its own sake, out of purely literary or antiquarian interest. Rather, Ibn Isḥāq collected traditions on the prophets and incorporated them into a text that was part of a larger tripartite structure reflecting a complex historiographic, ideological, and religious agenda. Ibn Isḥāq is typically credited as the author of the first major biography of Muḥammad, but his intention was more ambitious. The extant version of his Al-Sīrah al-nabawiyyah, known primarily through the recension of Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833), incorporates material from two of the three parts of Ibn Isḥāq’s magnum opus, the initiation of the Prophet’s mission in Mecca (the mabʿath) and the raids and military campaigns that established the early Islamic state under his leadership (the maghāzī).

Ibn Hishām’s edition of Ibn Isḥāq’s work omits the third component of this programmatic work, the section (or possibly originally discrete work) called the mubtada’, which appears to have been a prologue to the life of Muḥammad consisting of episodes from the lives of the pre-Islamic prophets. These episodes both foreshadowed elements of Muhammad’s life and mission and established that mission as the final link in a chain of divine guidance going back to Adam, validating Islam through a vivid portrayal of the continuity of Muḥammad’s mission with Israelite precursors in particular.

By excising the mubtada’ from what became the most authoritative account of the life of the Prophet, Ibn Hishām quite arguably severed the Sīrah from the context that endowed it with its most significant meaning in the early Islamic milieu. As the work of Wansbrough demonstrates, prophetic biography was

---

31 Note that some traditionists roughly contemporary with Ibn Isḥāq do seem to have had more purely antiquarian motivations for collecting material pertaining to the prophets, typically in conjunction with a specific topos such as wisdom traditions or a particular geographical arena such as the Yemen. See, e.g., the (putatively fictitious or pseudepigraphic) Akhbār Yaman of ʿAbīd b. Sharyah: Elise W. Crosby, The History, Poetry, and Genealogy of the Yemen: The Akhbar of Abid b. Sharya Al-Jurhumi (Gorgias Dissertations 24, Arabic and Islamic Studies 1; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2007).

32 The term mubtada’ may be translated “prologue,” “foreshadowing,” or “precursor” (Newby even suggests “Genesis,”) which the mabʿath (“prophetic commission” or “sending-forth”) and maghāzī (“raids” or “campaigns”) follow.

critical in embedding the emergence of Islam in a larger hierohistorical schema or *Heilsgeschichte*, as the central event in the divinely ordained unfolding of human history. By prefacing the account of the mission of Muhammad with accounts of his prophetic precursors, particularly Israelite precursors, Ibn Ishāq was deliberately and overtly appropriating biblical history as part of the sequence of events culminating in the revelation of the Qurʾān and the emergence of the Muslim *ummah*. Augmenting the basic perspective already adumbrated in the Qurʾān itself, this approach further naturalized the idea that Islam, rather than Judaism or Christianity, was the teleological endpoint of God’s long history of interaction with humanity, particularly as anchored in and mediated through revelation.

As Newby has shown, this new hierohistorical scheme was in direct competition with those of Jews and Christians. The supersessionist gesture of appropriating previous dispensations as parts of Islam’s own history actually served to assimilate a well-established mode through which Christians approached history themselves; it also decisively reduced both Judaism and Christianity to mere prologues to the revelation of Islam. Viewed this way, the broader *qiṣaṣ* tradition is the complement to the tradition of Muslim critique of Judaism and the Bible surveyed in Adang’s magisterial study of the topic. Polemic, criticism, and gestures of delegitimation are explicit in the latter, but only implicit in the former.

---


35 This conception of the supersessionist ideology that informs the *mubtadaʾ* is most clearly articulated in Gordon D. Newby, “Text and Territory: Jewish-Muslim Relations 632–750 CE,” in Benjamin H. Hary, John L. Hayes, and Fred Astren (eds.), *Judaism and Islam: Boundaries, Communication and Interaction: Essays in Honor of William M. Brinner* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 83–95, in which he draws attention to the parallels between Ibn Ishāq’s *sīrah* and the post-Islamic midrashic work *Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer* as rival expressions of prophecy history, the latter reflecting Jewish resistance to appropriation. On the continuity of Christian habitus, especially polemical and supersessionist models of history, with the Qurʾān and early Islam, see David Nirenberg, *Ant-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), Ch. 4.

Ibn Ishāq’s students and transmitters edited his work down into a more manageable size, thus shearing the *mubtadaʾ* from its original context. However, other authors and traditionists continued the work of collecting and arranging material on this subject, keeping Ibn Ishāq’s supersessionist vision alive. For example, it is worth noting that the unpublished *Qiṣaṣ al-Qurʾān* of Abū’l-Ḥasan al-Haysam b. Muḥammad al-Būshanjī (d. 467/1075) of Nishapur presents episodes from the lives of the pre-Islamic prophets in sequence in the first part of the book and then an account of the life of Muḥammad in the second. Structurally speaking, this is the equivalent of Ibn Ishāq’s *Al-Sīrah al-nabawiyyah* in condensed form. If we recall the ideological implications of the *mubtadaʾ* not just as a work but as an historiographic concept—based fundamentally on the premise that the history of the Israelite prophets points ineluctably forward to the coming of Muḥammad and Islam—the ideological nature of the discourse on *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* becomes transparent even when the linkages between the pre-Islamic prophets and Muḥammad, the Seal of the Prophets and final messenger, remain only implicit.

---

37 Ibn Ishāq’s supersessionist vision was probably foreshadowed by the work of previous generations of exegetes and traditionists, who at least implicitly had a similar conception of the material they collected on the theme of Muḥammad’s precursors, but Ibn Ishāq’s extended narration of prophetic history, drawing direct parallels between the Israelite prophets and Muḥammad, likely represents the first mature literary statement on this subject. Cf. Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muḥammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims, A Textual Analysis* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 5; Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1995) on elements in the biography of Muḥammad constructed to validate his mission by presenting it as a parallel to or fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

38 The main manuscript witnesses to this work are housed in collections in Berlin and Princeton; the latter is now available digitally (Princeton Digital Library of Islamic Manuscripts no. 49y, [http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/dn39x159x](http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/dn39x159x)). Schöck, *Adam im Islam*, seems to have made pioneering use of both this work and that of ʿUmārah b. Wathīmah in the edition by Khoury. As Hagen notes, similar to al-Haysam b. Muḥammad’s work, later Persian and Turkish works also present episodes from the lives of the pre-Islamic prophets and Muḥammad in the same volume, making explicit the larger hierohistorical scheme that motivated collection of *qiṣaṣ* material originally but had over time become only implicit in classical Arabic sources.

39 *Qiṣaṣ/mubtadaʾ* materials were not always cleanly stripped out of the *sīrah* and *maghāzī* traditions; see the *Kitāb al-Magḥāzī* of Maʿmar b. Rāshid (d. 153/770), which includes a narrative about Solomon building the Temple in Jerusalem by enlisting the service of demons, obviously out of place if one conceives of a collection of *maghāzī* traditions as being exclusively dedicated to the military campaigns of the early *ummah* led by Muḥammad. See Maʿmar b. Rāshid, *The Expeditions: An Early Biography of Muḥammad*, trans. Sean W. Anthony (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 172–175. Notably, this account is preceded by another about the qurʾānic *ahl al-kahf* or ‘People of the Cave’ (166–171). Note also that El-Hibri, *Parable and Politics*, argues that qurʾānic *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* provided the template for all later historiography, including the master narrative of caliphal history (grounded in what he terms “parabolic narrations”), but that this connection became blurry over time as other genres of historical writing and conceptions of the past gained currency.
At its core, *qiṣṣa al-anbiyāʾ* represents the transformation of the literary artifacts and symbols of an older culture. Once reflecting that older culture’s distinctive historical context, dispositions, and concerns, this material was subsequently appropriated, transmitted, translated, preserved, augmented, and ultimately reoriented and transformed as it was assimilated to a new culture’s historical context, dispositions, and concerns. Thus, in some sense, the place of *qiṣṣa al-anbiyāʾ* in formative Islam may be thought to be analogous to that of the Greek classics in imperial Rome.\(^40\) Just as the literary remains of classical Greek culture became a significant part of Roman culture and a fundamental part of Roman self-presentation, self-conception, and political legitimation, so too did the literary remains of the *ahl al-kitāb*, the Israelite cultural legacy as received and reinterpreted by both Jews and Christians, become a significant part of the culture of Islam and a fundamental part of Muslim self-presentation, self-conception, and political legitimation. Despite this integral dependence and thoroughgoing debt, Rome systematically demolished and absorbed many of the Greek polities in which what became the classical tradition had originally flourished; likewise, under similar circumstances, the early Islamic polity conquered, subordinated, and absorbed the Jewish and Christian communities that originally furnished Islam with many of its basic cultural components.

The Romans positioned themselves as the heirs to the Greeks both through narratives of continuity and succession (e.g., the *Aeneid*) and through direct assimilation of Greek traditions and literature, incorporating them as their own patrimony. As an imperial culture, the caliphate expressed itself as the successor to the Prophet, but also articulated literary forms like *qiṣṣa* that ultimately positioned Islam as the successor to Israel. This was accomplished in part by mimicking a similar discourse in imperial Christianity through which the legacy of Israel was selectively constructed and represented in such a way as to appropriate the patriarchs, prophets, and kings as symbolic forebears while disinheriting the Jews as rival claimants to that legacy.

Thus, the corpus of traditions we might label *qiṣṣa al-anbiyāʾ* represents the literary remains of this process of transference and assimilation, as they often consist of Arabized and Islamicized versions of *kitābī* narratives of the prophets. More to the point, however, *qiṣṣa al-anbiyāʾ* is also an enduring testimony to the central animating concept that enabled the establishment of Islamic dominion over Jews and Christians—the basis of the claim of succession that presented the caliphate as the vehicle for the new dispensation that would replace Judaism and Christianity, giving religious and cultural meaning to what would otherwise have been a mere military takeover, with one occupying elite simply exchanged for another.

---

\(^{40}\) I owe the germ of this observation to Walid Saleh, who made this point during conversation at the concluding session of the Naples conference.
It is clear that qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ is at least partially modeled upon and appropriates a Christian historical habitus with significant precursors in authors like Eusebius, who makes some of the earliest ideologically coherent statements valorizing Christian empire as inheritor of the legacy not only of Christ but of the Israelite kingdoms and prophetic tradition, building on older Christian articulations of the Old Testament as proto-Christian truth. Common to both imperial Christianity and Islam is the deliberate attempt to present the patriarchs and kings of Israel as prophets and sources of guidance (that is, imāms) while dismissing the Jews as marginal, heretical, and irrelevant.

Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ and qiṣaṣ al-Qurʾān

This adaptation of a critical instrument of supersession from Christianity was not initiated by early Islamic traditionists or authors like Ibn Iṣḥāq (although the question of his particular familiarity with Christian culture has yet to be thoroughly explored). Rather, the adaptation of this supersessionist tool occurs already in the Qurʾān, and so one might say that the attempt to appropriate the legacy of Israel and reorient the prophetic and covenantal legacy so that it culminates with a new community with roots in Arabia occurred at the time of the foundation of Islam itself. As has often been remarked, the Qurʾān most typically employs the literary technique of reducing narratives about the pre-Islamic prophets to their most basic outlines, compressing and condensing them so as to conform to a basic template that makes the parallels between their missions and that of the qurʾānic prophet evident, though usually implicit.

An obvious example is Sūrat al-Shuʿārāʾ (Q 26), which presents accounts of the major events associated with the missions of qurʾānic-biblical prophets like Moses, Noah, and Lot alongside similar events linked to the careers of messengers sent to ʿĀd, Thamūd, and the ‘forest-dwellers.’ The chapter is rigorously schematic, with many of the particularities of the prophetic narratives as known from pre-Islamic biblical tradition stripped away and the episodes boiled down to their essence. The individuality of particular prophets, the idiosyncrasies of their portrayals, are irrelevant in the larger hierohistorical scheme constructed by the qurʾānic author.

One’s conception of the relationship between the schematized proto-qiṣaṣ al-Qurʾān and the Qurʾān’s revelatory context depends upon one’s perspective regarding the problem of the historical Muḥammad. For the early Orientalists, it was natural to read qurʾānic references to the missions of the biblical prophets as admonitions to the Prophet’s opponents and messages of consolation to Muhammad and his followers. The dominant hermeneutic brought to these qurʾānic stories was thus biographical: the thematic choices reflected in qurʾānic retellings are determined by specific events in the life of the community or the Prophet himself.

41 The earliest such revision of Israel’s salvation is undoubtedly Stephen’s famous speech in Acts 7.
This approach fell out of fashion for a number of reasons, especially due to the advent of revisionism: insofar as scholars came to have serious doubts that Islamic tradition had conserved and transmitted much information that could be judged to be accurate and reliable in modern historical terms, this skepticism also called into question the appropriateness of using sīrah as an exegetical tool for explaining and contextualizing references in the Qurʾān.\footnote{42} This applies not only to actual historical events to which the Qurʾān supposedly alludes, but also the larger biographical frame that would allow one to infer the deeper significance of the particular narrative choices that inform qurʾānic retellings of episodes from the lives of the pre-Islamic prophets. That is, discerning echoes of the mission of Muḥammad in narrations of events in the lives of Abraham or Moses or Jesus becomes an uncertain enterprise if one is skeptical that the Qurʾān actually refers to events in the mission of Muḥammad as we know them from Islamic tradition.

Despite the fact that such skepticism has now become reflexive in many quarters in the contemporary study of the Qurʾān, a hermeneutic of reading Qurʾān through the lens of prophetic biography has recently been revived. An important forerunner of this tendency is Walid Saleh’s 2006 article on the story of Saul in Q Baqarah 2:246–253, which demonstrates quite convincingly that the pericope should be read in the context of the Prophet’s need to motivate his community to take up arms after the hijrah.\footnote{43} More substantially, Tilman Nagel’s magisterial Mohammed: Leben und Legende represents a deliberate attempt to return to the sources for the life of the Prophet and, after subjecting them to particular types of critical scrutiny, employ them to recover important aspects of the mission of Muhammad as recounted in those sources as historically reliable.\footnote{44} Nagel thus proposes to rehabilitate the type of historicizing interpretation of the Qurʾān pioneered by Theodor Nöldeke over a century and a half ago. His contribution to this issue makes his approach plainly apparent (albeit in miniature), reading the qurʾānic portrayals of Abraham, Noah, Moses and so forth as—in his own words—"a mirror reflecting the biography of Muḥammad."\footnote{45}


\footnote{43} Walid A. Saleh, “What If You Refuse, When Ordered to Fight?: King Saul (Tālūt) in the Qurʾān and Post-Quranic Literature,” in Carl S. Ehrlich in association with Marsha C. White (eds.), Saul in Story and Tradition (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 261–283, 261. As Saleh succinctly puts it, the Saul pericope is “a stark instance of a nascent religious community’s subordinating to its own ideological needs the religious-political history it considers to be its predecessor”; I would add only that it is just as accurate to say that here, as elsewhere in the qiṣṣa, we see a later community actually constructing an older religious-political history as its predecessor.

\footnote{44} Tilman Nagel, Mohammed: Leben und Legende (Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2008).

\footnote{45} Idem, “On the Prophetic Stories of the Qurʾān.”
Strikingly, Nagel’s approach has in particular drawn the criticism of a number of scholars, though they themselves have sought to rehabilitate at least part of the early Islamic tradition and advocate for a more positivistic outlook, at least relative to the revisionist approach.46 Clearly not all scholars will be willing to embrace Nagel’s direct and unambiguous correlation of Qur’anic passages on the biblical prophets with episodes from Muhammad’s life as known from the sīrah tradition. However, this biographical hermeneutic has the great virtue of allowing us to construe the underlying messages of Qur’anic recollections of the prophets in a meaningful way, permitting a coherent explanation of why these stories were recounted in the Qur’an and what imperatives drove their reshaping in line with particular thematic patterns. That is, the particular narrative choices that inform the qiṣaṣ of the Qur’an often seem so idiosyncratic, so personal, that reading them as messages of consolation to the individual conveying them to his fledgling community, or perhaps as warnings to his enemies, seems not only like a plausible, but in some sense the most logical and efficient, explanation for those choices. It is perhaps easier to believe that these prophetic narratives were crafted to conform to the experience of the historical prophet who related them than that the major details of the sīrah were fabricated to conform to the literary pattern that provides a template for the condensed narratives found in Sūrah 26 and elsewhere—though both scenarios remain feasible.

The Qur’an represents a watershed moment in the larger intercommunal history of prophetic narratives. It canonizes a set of narrative presentations with complex and varying relationships to older biblical, Jewish, and Christian discourse and establishes a new foundation for interpretation of both specific details of these narratives and their overarching meaning. Pace Geiger, the base text underlying these prophetic narratives presupposed by the Qur’an is—except in very few cases—neither the canonical Bible nor a closed canon of rabbinic literature, but rather an older and rather diffuse discourse, the broader biblical-Israelite tradition as it was constituted by a variety of scriptural and parascriptural formations in a number of different languages extant during the centuries leading up to the rise of Islam.

If the Qurʾān assimilated older prophetic traditions by boiling them down to their essence, to their mere “bones,” then the most characteristic aspect of the subsequent qīṣāṣ discourse is the tendency to restore flesh to those bones again by tapping into a fascinatingly heterogeneous body of material—by swathing them in what an older generation of scholars casually, but problematically, termed isrāʾīliyyāt.47

Sometimes Muslim authors and transmitters of qīṣāṣ restored features from Jewish and Christian precursors in elaborating a skeletal Qurʾānic narrative back into a fully fleshed-out body. At other times, they constructed accounts that do not hearken back to pre-Islamic precursors at all, but rather represent something new and distinctive. In still other cases, authors of qīṣāṣ narratives did not engage with the Qurʾān directly but rather chose to sidestep the Qurʾānic account, the details of which they may have seen—however paradoxically—as unnecessary to the story they wished to tell. All of these forms must be considered as important parts of the broader qīṣāṣ al-anbiyāʾ tradition.48

‘Islamization’ and diversity: the case of Shiʿi approaches to qīṣāṣ

In all their dazzling, kaleidoscopic variety, whether they build faithfully upon the Qurʾānic presentation of a prophetic tale, are deeply engaged with (“influenced by”) older kitābī precursors, or take their narratives in wholly new directions, one thing unites all qīṣāṣ narratives. Regardless of their relationship to what came before, in the eyes of their Muslim authors and transmitters, qīṣāṣ al-anbiyāʾ are meaningfully Islamic, deliberately crafted in a meaningfully Islamic way, intended to convey what to their authors were distinctively Islamic truths. These narratives are always formed by—and viewed by their audience through the lens of—values, belief structures, literary forms, and political, social, and religious concerns inspired at their foundation by the Qurʾān, but decisively shaped by later developments in the evolution of Muslim society and community.


48 In still other cases, Jews and Christians may articulate narratives of prophetic figures that betray particular familiarity with either Qurʾānic or Islamic accounts, possibly eschewing reference to the Bible or ancillary literature in the process of assimilating the particular recastings of the dominant Islamicate culture back into their literary heritage, translating it into a new linguistic, literary, and cultural register. Such Jewish and Christian qīṣāṣ must be considered a significant part of the tradition, though it is seldom viewed this way or integrated into scholarly conversations. Among the sources cited here, Lowin, The Making of a Forefather, is the conspicuous exception to this tendency.
Later *qiṣaṣ* works often stand in the same relationship to older received materials as the Qurʾān had—reshaping those materials and subordinating them to a new framework, through a process we might call 'Islamization.' But while we must acknowledge that an Islamic veneer is always placed over these stories as they are presented in new, distinctively Muslim, contexts, there is of course not one such mode of presentation, but rather a variety. To define *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* simply as the result of 'Islamization,' a reorientation of older material on the prophets in keeping with a set of identifiably Islamic values, traits, and cultural markers, presents a pitfall, in that we may be misled into implying that there is one monolithic set of such values, traits, and markers that all Muslims would recognize and see as authoritative.

This is surely fallacious. Rather, Islamization occurs through a dialogical process in which the particular significance of a story is determined in relationship to the specific concerns and predispositions of a particular audience—which are then shaped in turn, we might infer, by that story and the values it is tailored to communicate. We learn about an author's conception of Islam by how they reframe and reshape stories, but that conception is of course not static or universal, because the priorities of every Muslim author and audience are different. We must thus keep in mind that Islamization is not a single, uniform process, but rather takes a variety of forms and aims at a variety of purposes; *qiṣaṣ* traditions thus represent and reflect the diverse Islams that give rise to them.49

This insight becomes particularly clear when we consider Shi'i versions and uses of *qiṣaṣ* narratives. Shi'i contributions to the shaping of distinctive Islamic conceptions of the biblical-Israelite prophets have historically been underappreciated. This is partially due simply to the overall neglect of Shi'ism as an integral part of the study of Islam in the West.50 But it is also due to the absence of a widely known major exemplar of the *qiṣaṣ* genre exhibiting a particularly Shi'i outlook.51 This is strange, however, since, as Rubin argued long ago in his classic discussion in “Prophets and Progenitors,” the impetus to collect and adapt stories of the pre-Islamic prophets first arose among the Shi'ah because of their interest in portraying those prophets essentially as precursors to their imāms.

It is also strange given that there are several lengthy and sophisticated works of Twelver and Isma'ili provenance that contain a significant amount of material on the prophets that have generally been

---

49 At the same time, as the recent methodological intervention of Shahab Ahmed makes clear, scholars’ recognition that there are and always have been ‘Islams in the plural’ does not mean they should capitulate entirely in the effort to define and describe what Islam has meant to Muslim subjects across time and space—for whom Islam surely means something in particular. See Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 129–152.

50 Despite its virtues, the aforementioned study of Ahmed is a particularly alarming example of the casual and pervasive marginalization of Shi’ism in scholarship.

51 A handful of Shi'i *qiṣaṣ* works in Arabic have been published or are available in manuscript: see Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, 167–168; ibid., “New Sources,” 529–530.
excluded from discussions of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*. For example, Rubin’s original article of 1979 relies extensively on material from Khargushī’ī’s *Sharaf al-muṣṭafā*, an important eleventh century work on Muḥammad and the foreshadowing of his mission reflecting a distinctly Shi‘i perspective. Despite the fact that Rubin and other scholars drew some attention to this work decades ago, it has seldom been studied, as it was long available only in a handful of manuscripts and in an edition produced as a Ph.D. thesis at the University of Exeter in 1986.52

An “imāmocentric” approach to prophetic precursors thus appears to have deeply impacted the *qiṣaṣ* tradition at an early date. Arguably, the emphasis on such themes by Shi‘ah planted the seeds through which narratives about the prophets’ impeccability, or the transmission of a divine prophetic light across the generations, came to full fruition as widely disseminated motifs commonly linked to *qiṣaṣ* narratives in a variety of Muslim literatures.

The particular sectarian concerns of Shi‘i authors were writ large in recastings or recontextualizations of prophetic narratives in numerous contexts, and not only during the tradition’s formative period. Gottfried Hagen’s contribution to this issue (“Salvation and Suffering in Ottoman Stories of the Prophets”) demonstrates vividly how Ottoman authors could present radically different understandings of prophetic history, focusing in particular on the pessimistic perspective of the Shi‘i author Fuẓūlī. For Fuẓūlī, the lives of the prophets and imāms were characterized by suffering and struggle, the travails of the Alids and their faithful followers being foreshadowed by those of various prophetic precursors and their *shī‘ahs*. For all, history was inevitably a vale of tears, and in Fuẓūlī’s view, according to Hagen, salvation for the Shi‘ah represented at its core a full, existentially transformative realization and acceptance of this fact. This perspective differs sharply from that of the Qur‘ān, which uses the stories of the prophets primarily as symbolic validation of the mission of the prophet through whom it was revealed, and in which the prophets certainly face challenges and disappointments (as Muḥammad himself did, as some might argue) but are ultimately vindicated before the evildoers who resist and reject them.

Another example is discussed in the contribution of George Warner (“Buddha or Yūdhāsaf? Images of the Hidden Imām in al-Ṣadūq’s *Kamāl al-dīn*”), which demonstrates a rather different type of Shi‘i approach to prophetic history as outlined by the pioneering Twelver scholar Ibn Bābawayh, commonly known as al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq. In Ṣadūq’s work, *qiṣaṣ* accounts are deliberately framed so as to vindicate the emergent Imanī doctrine of occultation. The text is significant not only for the explicit way in which prophetic narratives are shaped for specific dogmatic purposes, but also for the variety of complementary material Ṣadūq draws into his work. As Warner argues, the material on the Hidden Imām in the text

---

interacts with and relates to that on the biblical/qur’ānic prophets in complex and intriguing ways, as well as being implicitly validated (on a narrative if not doctrinal level) through its parallels with legendary material Ṣadūq includes in his work, most conspicuously a well-known Islamicized cycle of narratives about the Buddha.

Shi‘i approaches to qiṣaṣ tend to be transparently sectarian, and so present us with prophetic accounts in which the purpose and effects of narrating qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā‘—of a particular literary use of the biblical-qur’ānic prophets—are explicit, or at least conspicuous, because of their overtly political nature. In light of their evident value to the field in making the means and ends of Islamization abundantly clear, it is striking that Shi‘i materials have long been understudied in the scholarly literature on qiṣaṣ, for example the numerous works of Isma‘ili ta‘wil that often invoke prophetic accounts as foreshadowing the lives of the imāms.53

However, it is important to recognize that all recastings and reinterpretations of qiṣaṣ, from the Qur’ān down to today, are in fact ‘sectarian’ on some level. Not only is it the case that all articulations of Islam are legitimate prima facie regardless of their acceptability to representatives of other articulations, and that no single form can be privileged as normative or ‘original’ above others; rather, more to the point, specific perspectives on questions of typically ‘sectarian’ concern such as authority, identity, and communal belonging are always present, whether they are writ large or rather tend to be explored only implicitly. Thus, any Muslim community’s reshaping of older narratives and repurposing of prophetic figures as symbols can be thought of as ‘Islamization,’ but this can only occur through aligning them with that community’s ideas and attitudes about those questions of sectarian concern, which almost inevitably differ from those of other Muslim communities in important ways.

Thus, Sunni qiṣaṣ is no less sectarian than Shi‘i qiṣaṣ in this regard, though the politico-communal implications of the former are perhaps harder to detect because we tend to naturalize the Sunni perspective as universal, essentially or typically ‘Islamic.’ The exegeses of qur’ānic narratives about the prophets by spokesmen of the Shi‘a or other ‘sectarian’ formations like the Nation of Islam are perhaps more explicitly presentist than that of other groups, or more closely attuned to specifically minoritarian issues, but all Muslim engagement with these pre-Islamic figures and the implications of their missions to Israel or other communities is on some level informed by the current concerns of the interpreter and their time. This is simply an extension of the contemporizing impulse already latent in the qur’ānic presentation of these figures.

53 On Fatimid ta‘wil, see now David Hollenberg, Beyond the Qurʾān: Early Ismā‘īlī Ta‘wil and the Secrets of the Prophets (Columbia, NC: University of South Carolina Press, 2016).
The development of qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ is thus most accurately described as the history of complex processes of Islamization of prophetic narratives, usually drawing on a variety of predecessors, but with the caveat that Islamization can mean rather different things depending upon the context in which portrayals are framed, even upon the particular outlook and idiosyncrasies of the author in question.

**Intertwined genres and the future of the field**

Returning to the question of genre, due to the rootedness of qiṣaṣ in the Qurʾān, much material was obviously generated in the course of scriptural exegesis. The development of said material often followed complex and winding paths. Thus, as Carol Bakhos’ contribution to this issue ("A Migrating Motif: Abraham and his Adversaries in Jubilees and al-Kisāʾ") shows, a significant transformation, even transference, of tropes and themes between accounts of episodes in the lives of the prophets occurred in the course of the tradition’s evolution. As part of an ongoing circulation of motifs first attested in Second Temple literature, these motifs appear in both Jewish and Islamic sources over a thousand years later, adapted to new cultural settings and sometimes transmuted so that only distant, but still discernible, echoes of the originals remain. This, Bakhos argues, is the case with the portrayal of an arch-enemy of Abraham who appears in the guise of the diabolical antagonist Mastemah in Jubilees, resonant a millennium later in the characterization of Nimrod in the qiṣaṣ of Kisāʾī.

Notably, cross-fertilization between genres appears to have continued well after the coalescence of what became the classic literary forms dominant in Islamic culture. Exegetical, historiographic, ḥadīth-based, and belle-littresic qiṣaṣ material did not remain confined to those genres but flowed freely between them. Helen Blatherwick’s contribution to this issue ("Solomon Legends in Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan") focuses on the prophetic legends in the popular epic Sīrat Sayf dhī Yazan, replete with allusions to classic themes and scenarios from qiṣaṣ accounts of the prophet-king Solomon; in the articulation of a new literary-legendary account of the exploits of this Yemenite king, this popular sīrah exploits the stock of material on Solomon that its audience likely took for granted as common knowledge to provide an evocative subtext to its own narrative.

As mentioned previously, communal boundaries were sometimes as porous as genre boundaries. Shari Lowin’s discussion of what appear to be complementary allusions to a specific element from the story of Joseph in two poems from al-Andalus, one Muslim and one Jewish ("The Cloak of Joseph: A Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ Image in an Arabic and a Hebrew Poem of Desire"), indicates not only that qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ could provide subtle, rich layers of meaning in a variety of literary forms, but also that these layers of meaning were the common property of, and accessible to, authors in the Islamicate milieu regardless of their specific religious identity or communal affiliation.
The Blatherwick and Lowin articles remind us that just as an overemphasis on qiṣṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ as a specific genre rather than a broader discourse has perhaps limited the field, so too has the exaggerated interest in qiṣṣaṣ narratives as articulated in the exegesis of the Qurʾān to the detriment of explorations of prophetic themes and motifs as elaborated in other literary corpora. One of the most open frontiers of qiṣṣaṣ studies is thus surely the examination of the pre-Islamic prophets and their manifold significations in philosophy and theology, adab (especially post-classical literary arts in Persian and Turkish), the visual arts, and other realms of Muslim meaning-making.⁵⁴

There is some precedent for a broader, more encompassing approach. The privileging of the exegetical over other areas colors much significant early Orientalist interest in qiṣṣaṣ material as primarily manifest in Qurʾān and tafsīr, from classic works in the field—for example Marracci, Geiger, Weil, and Speyer—all the way up to the present day—e.g., Wheeler and Reynolds.⁵⁵ But other trajectories have at times been manifest in scholarship, however. For example, in d’Herbelot’s once-influential but now generally neglected *Bibliothèque Orientale*, the presentations of biblical figures in Islamic guise are undoubtedly informed by tafsīr materials (e.g., the commentary of Ḥusayn Wāʿiẓ Kāshīfī, perhaps d’Herbelot’s main touchstone for the Qurʾān and its interpretation), but they are also at times inflected by the author’s familiarity with Persian literature and seemingly more ‘folkloric’ sources.⁵⁶

---

⁵⁴ See the treatment of the *Kitāb al-Khuṭab waʾl-mawāʾiḍ* of Abū ʿUbayd al-Khuzāʾī (d. 224/838), an early literary work structured around pious exhortations attributed to various prophets, in Andrew Rippin, “The Place of the Qurʾān in the ‘Sermons and Exhortations’ of Abū ʿUbayd,” in Nuha Alshaar (ed.), *The Qurʾān and Adab: The Shaping of Literary Traditions in Classical Islam* (Qurʾānic Studies Series 16; Oxford and London: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2017), 219–237. As Rippin notes at the beginning of the article, in this text different types of literary material that would subsequently form the basis of different genres appear together; here, under the encompassing rubric of adab, qiṣṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ seems to represent only one modality in which material pertaining to the prophets is articulated. Note also the deliberate eclecticism of Klar, *Interpreting al-Thaʿlabī’s Tales of the Prophets*, which brings traditions in his work into conversation with comparanda from a wide variety of contemporary Muslim sources, including *Ṣirāt Sayf b. Dhi Yazan*, al-Qushayrī, al-Masʿūdī, al-Ghazālī, and the mirror for princes *Bahār al-favāʾid*.


⁵⁶ E.g., note d’Herbelot’s discussion of the Golden Calf episode, in which the animate Calf is associated with Khidr, a linkage that is not only not found in Kāshīfī, but in fact is not attested in any other source.
As noted above, the gradual but steady progress in the appearance of works in new editions, mainly produced in the Islamic world and of varying quality, has as yet had only a modest impact in stimulating the growth of new approaches and focal points in research on qiṣaṣ. Clearly much remains to be done in realizing the potential gains from interdisciplinary approaches to the subject. For example, a number of publications in art history over the last twenty-five years have demonstrated that the pre-Islamic prophets were extensively depicted in the pictorial arts of Islam over a very long period of time, but this material has only just begun to be catalogued, let alone marshaled in the study of the larger qiṣaṣ tradition. These publications present valuable visual resources awaiting broader analysis and integration with literary evidence. An interdisciplinary and integrative approach that made use of both visual and literary materials would be particularly beneficial because the ideologically charged nature of visual depictions tends to be rather conspicuous, especially given their commissioning by and production for royal patrons. Visual materials pertaining to the pre-Islamic prophets thus provide us with vivid examples of a specific type of Islamization of biblical figures; the function of these figures as symbolic touchstones for religio-political legitimacy is usually rather overt.

This journal issue aims to make a small contribution to advancing the field by showcasing new research in qiṣaṣ studies. The articles featured here demonstrate that current scholarship on qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ adopts a variety of disciplinary perspectives, reflects diverse concerns, and approaches the broader qiṣaṣ tradition in all its breadth and nuance, particularly focusing on the overlooked aspects of that tradition. Many of these articles discuss material from the post-classical period, especially historically neglected material from Shi‘i literature, popular epic, and modern literary settings. As the contributions of Ayşe Polat (“The


58 An analogy with the much better-studied Shāhnāmeh tradition may be apt. The appropriation and reinterpretation of Persian tradition by various royal patrons has been subjected to trenchant critique. For example, Grabar and Blair’s classic treatment of the Great Mongol Shāhnāmeh demonstrates how the Ilkhans positioned themselves as the natural heirs to the legacy of Iranian antiquity through subtle visual strategies: see Oleg Grabar and Sheila Blair, Epic Images and Contemporary History: The Illustrations of the Great Mongol Shahnama (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). No single study comprehensively addresses Muslim identity-making through visual representation of Israelite history; the studies of Milstein and others cited above provide an indispensable starting point, though much work remains to be done.
Human Jesus: A Debate in the Ottoman Press”) and Herbert Berg (“Elijah Muhammad’s Prophets: From the White Adam to the Black Jesuses”) show, significant reflection on and uses of qiṣaṣ in the twentieth century may occur in surprising contexts, expressing the unique concerns of their eras and originating communities, and may bear little or no resemblance to the classical articulations of their subject. In fact, in both of these cases, in the late Ottoman milieu of the early twentieth century and the African American milieu some decades later, not only do the authors elaborating new forms of qiṣaṣ largely or wholly neglect classical sources pertinent to their themes, but the Qur’ān itself may be largely or entirely absent from the debate. And yet, the result of reflection on Abraham, Moses, and Jesus by Turkish modernists or the main spokesman of the American Nation of Islam is meaning-making through the prophets that is characteristically, vibrantly, indisputably Islamic, and so quintessentially part of the qiṣaṣ tradition.

The future growth of the field may lead to such a degree of diffusion of approach and subject matter as to challenge the whole presupposition that there even is a field of qiṣaṣ studies, although it is clear what all the articles in this issue at least have in common. All prioritize the question of what is distinctively Islamic in various Muslim reinterpretations of qiṣaṣ narratives over that of sources or influences; most of the articles here simply do not address the question of origins or precursors at all. In this sense, they epitomize the idea that qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ is not really about ‘biblical prophets in Islam’ or even ‘biblical-qur’ānic prophets’ but rather simply Islamic prophets—with the meaning of “Islamic” varying enormously from author to author and context to context.

In the end, this brings us back full circle to the work of Nagel we commemorate and celebrate here, in that his pioneering work on qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ as a genre originally aimed (and has continued to aim) at discerning what was or has been distinctively Islamic about the Islamic stories of the prophets. This journal issue hopefully makes clear that the question of how Muslims have articulated specifically Islamic expressions and forms of meaning through the stories of the prophets is of perennial relevance, from the Qur’ān down to the modern era, and that qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ, as genre and discourse, is of significant value for examining conceptions of Islam itself in a vast diversity of Muslim communities and traditions.

About the authors

Michael Pregill (Ph.D., Columbia University, 2007) is Interlocutor in the Institute for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations at Boston University. His primary area of expertise is early Islam, with a specific focus on the Qur’ān and its interpretive tradition (tafsīr). Much of his research concerns the reception and interpretation of biblical, Jewish, and Christian themes and motifs in tafsīr and other branches of classical Islamic literature; critical approaches to Islamic origins; and the perception and representation of Jews and Christians in Islamic culture.

Roberto Tottoli (Ph.D., Naples L’Orientale, 1996) is Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Naples L’Orientale. He has published studies on the biblical tradition in the Qurʾān and Islam (*Biblical Prophets in the Qur’an and Muslim Literature* [Richmond: Curzon, 2002]; *The Stories of the Prophets by Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafi* [Berlin: Klaus Schwartz Verlag, 2003]) and medieval Islamic literature. His most recent publication, coauthored with Reinhold F. Glei, is *Ludovico Marracci at Work: The Evolution of His Latin Translation of the Qurʾān in the Light of His Newly Discovered Manuscripts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016).