

Mizan: Journal for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations

Volume 2, Issue 1 / 2017

The Evolution and Uses of the Stories of the Prophets

Edited by Michael Pregill

<http://www.mizanproject.org/journal-issue/the-evolution-and-uses-of-the-stories-of-the-prophets/>

***Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā` as Genre and Discourse:
From the Qur`ān to Elijah Muhammad***

Michael Pregill

with Marianna Klar and Roberto Tottoli

<http://www.mizanproject.org/journal-post/qisas-al-anbiya-as-genre-and-discourse/>

Abstract

The study of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā`*, 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-anbiyā`* itself. Despite the apparent contradiction, however, I would argue that the broad dissemination of *qiṣaṣ*-type material throughout different genres suggests that *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā`* 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 Qur`ān, 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 Shi`i, 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-anbiyā'*, 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 Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā': 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-anbiyā' per se* has not flourished in the last couple of decades with quite the same vigor as the study of Qur'ān 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-anbiyā'* 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-anbiyā'* proper, discussing major works carrying this title or something similar such as *mubtada'*, *bad' 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-anbiyā'* 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,

¹ Tilman Nagel, "Die Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā': Ein Beitrag zur Arabischen Literaturgeschichte" (Ph.D. diss., Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 1967).

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 *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* Works and Literature," in Raif Georges Khoury, Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala, and María Jesús Viguera Molins (eds.), *Legendaria medievalia: En honor de Concepción Castillo Castillo* (Cordoba: Ediciones El Almendro, 2011), 525–539.

³ Cf. e.g., Ján Pauliny, "Some Remarks on the *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* Works in Arabic Literature," trans. Michael Bonner, in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *The Qur'an: Formative Interpretation* (Formation of the Classical Islamic World 25; Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 1999), 313–326; W. M. Thackston (ed. and trans.), *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisā'i* (Library of Classical Arabic Literature 2; Boston: Twayne, 1978), xi–xxvi.

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 *qīṣaṣ* traditions), is noteworthy.⁴ Despite its evident shortcomings as a critical edition, Eisenberg's publication of the major *qīṣaṣ* of Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Kisāʾī (ca. 6th/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 Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and the *qīṣaṣ* collections of Kisāʾī and Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Thaʿlabī (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 Horowitz'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 *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* in numerous ways. Perhaps the most obvious and explicit contribution his work made was to draw greater attention to critical works of the *qīṣaṣ* genre such as those of Thaʿlabī and Ibn Muṭarrif 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 Prophetis, quae dicuntur, legendis arabicis* (Leipzig, 1893).

⁵ Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh al-Kisāʾī, *Vita Prophetarum auctore Muhammad ben Abdallah al-Kisa'i*, ed. Isaac Eisenberg (Leiden: Brill, 1923).

⁶ D. Sidersky, *Les Origines des Légendes Musulmanes dans le Coran et dans les vies des prophètes* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1933).

⁷ Josef Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1926); Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Koran* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1961); Abraham Geiger, "Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?" (Bonn, 1833).



publication of his thesis—examined discrete texts carrying the title of *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* or the like.⁸ 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 Qisas al-Anbiyā'](#)"), when he originally embarked upon his research on *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 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 *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* literature, but rather a deeper understanding of what is properly "Islamic" about the Islamic tales of the prophets in the first place.⁹ That there are larger implications of *qīṣaṣ* 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 Qur'ān, 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 *qīṣaṣ* as an object of study, become evident when we examine scholarship that actually investigates the portrayal of specific prophetic figures in Islamic tradition.¹⁰ Many of these figures have been subjects of significant scholarly treatments. These inquiries almost always start by examining the Qur'ānic 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., Kisā'ī's text apparently circulated as *Kitāb Bad' al-khalq* as well as *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, and *Mubtada'* 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 *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'*: On the Prophetic Stories of the Qur'ān."

¹⁰ For an indispensable overview of the tradition, see Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'ān 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 *qīṣaṣ* 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 Qur'ān in shaping Muslim understandings of the pre-Islamic prophets.¹¹ 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 Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān 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.¹²

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 Qur'ān, 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 Qur'ān overall, possibly more.

¹² See Tottoli, “New Sources,” 526–528 on the example of the new Arabic editions of *Kisā'ī*.



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 *qīṣaṣ 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 *qīṣaṣ* 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 *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ per se* has been rather overlooked. Marianna Klar's *Interpreting al-Thaʿlabī's Tales of the Prophets: Temptation, Responsibility*

¹³ Cornelia Schöck, *Adam im Islam: Ein Beitrag zur Ideengeschichte der Sunna* (Islamkundliche Untersuchungen 168; Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1993); Waltraud Bork-Qaysieh, *Die Geschichte von Kain und Abel (Hābil wa-Qābil) in der sunnitisch-islamischen Überlieferung: Untersuchungen von Beispielen aus verschiedenen Literaturwerken unter Berücksichtigung ihres Einflusses auf den Volksglauben* (Islamkundliche Untersuchungen 169; Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1993); Peter J. Awn, *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption: Iblīs in Sufi Psychology* (Studies in the History of Religion [Supplements to *Numen*] 44; Leiden: Brill, 1993); Whitney S. Bodman, *The Poetics of Iblīs: Narrative Theology in the Qur'an* (Harvard Theological Studies 62; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Shari L. Lowin, *The Making of a Forefather: Abraham in Islamic and Jewish Exegetical Narratives* (Islamic History and Civilization Studies and Texts 65; Leiden: Brill, 2006); Brannon M. Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002); Khaleel Mohammed, *David in the Muslim Tradition: The Bathsheba Affair* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015); Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Jean-Louis Déclais, *David raconté par les musulmans* (Paris: Cerf, 1999); idem, *Un récit musulman sur Isaïe* (Paris: Verf, 2001); idem, *Les premiers musulmans face à la tradition biblique: trois récits sur Job* (Paris: Harmattan, 1996); Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2009); Tarif Khalidi, *The Islamic Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

and Loss remains the only monograph-level study of Tha‘labī’s literary strategies in his *qīṣaṣ*, considering both the author’s signal concerns and comparing his material with that collected in a variety of other sources.¹⁴ While Kisā’ī’s work remains neglected in this regard, at least the production of new translations of his *qīṣaṣ*, as with those of the ‘*Arā’is*’ of Tha‘labī, may serve to enable a broader audience to access the text and delve into its riches.¹⁵

What this trend in scholarship points to is the rather anomalous nature of the *qīṣaṣ* 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 *qīṣaṣ* material—in fact, some of those most commonly cited as such sources, such as the *tafsīr* and chronicle of Ṭabarī—are not entitled *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* 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.¹⁶

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 Kisā’ī, a work collecting popular traditions on cosmology and eschatology and so related to *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*. It should be noted, however, that the editors’ highly idiosyncratic conjectures about the author and the transmission of the work (viz., that Kisā’ī 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 Kisā’ī, *Kitāb ‘Ajā’ib al-malakūt*, ed. and trans. Shmuel Tamari and Yoel Koch (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005).

¹⁵ For English and German translations of Tha‘labī, see: ‘*Arā’is al-majālis fī qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*’, or, ‘*Lives of the Prophets*’ as recounted by Abū Ishāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Tha‘labī, trans. William M. Brinner (Studies in Arabic Literature 24; Brill, 2002) and *Islamische Erzählungen von Propheten und Gottesmännern: Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’ oder ‘Arā’is al-majālis von Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm at-Ṭa‘labī*, trans. H. Busse (Diskurse der Arabistik 9; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006). Thackston’s older translation of Kisā’ī into English, as well as Ján Pauliny’s partial translation into Czech (*Abú al-Hasan al-Kisáí, Kniha o počiatku a konci a rozprávania o prorokoch, Islámske mýty a legendy* [Bratislava: Tatran, 1980]) are now complemented by that of Aviva Schussman into Hebrew: see *Sipurei ha-nevi’im me’et Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allah al-Kisa’i* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Most of the relevant *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* material from Ṭabarī’s chronicle is available in English in the first three volumes of the Bibliotheca Persica translation of the work. See *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume I: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989); *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume II: Prophets and Patriarchs*, trans. William Brinner (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987); *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume III: The Children of Israel*, trans. William Brinner (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991). Additionally, although only the first volume of the planned translation of Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* into English has ever appeared, that volume spans much of Sūrat al-Baqarah and thus contains significant material

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.¹⁷ 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 *qīṣaṣ* 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.¹⁸

As Thaʿlabī himself noted in the introduction to his *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, the *qīṣaṣ* of the Qurʾān were meant as edification and admonition for Muḥammad and his followers.¹⁹ Not only was *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* built on the foundation of *qīṣaṣ al-Qurʾān*, but it is clear that qurʾānic paradigms, a parenetic approach to history,

pertaining to *qīṣaṣ*. 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.

¹⁸ See Johann Pedersen, “The Criticism of the Islamic Preacher,” *Die Welt des Islams* 2 (1953): 215–231; Schwartz’s introductory comments in Abūʾl-Faraj ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ibn al-Jawzī’s Kitāb quṣṣāṣ waʾl-mudhakkirīn*, trans. Merlin Swartz (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1971); and Lyall Armstrong, *The Quṣṣāṣ of Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2017). There has been relatively little attempt to investigate the milieu in which this material was first generated more closely or to rethink the paradigm through which we conceptualize its origins. On the former point, see Raif Georges Khoury, “Story, Wisdom, and Spirituality: Yemen as the Hub between the Persian, Arabic and Biblical Traditions,” in Johann P. Arnason, Armando Salvatore, and Georg Stauth (eds.), *Islam in Process: Historical and Civilizational Perspectives* (Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam 7; Bielefeld: Transcript, 2006), 190–219. On the latter, see Michael Pregill, “*Isrāʾīliyyāt*, Myth, and Pseudepigraphy: Wahb b. Munabbih and the Early Islamic Versions of the Fall of Adam and Eve,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 34 (2008): 215–284.

¹⁹ As has often been remarked, Thaʿlabī’s *qīṣaṣ* begins with an elaboration of the various *ḥikmahs* (“wisdoms”) that explain why Muslims should seek to learn and reflect on *qīṣaṣ 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, *ʿArāʾis al-majālis*, trans. Brinner, 4; *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ al-musammā ʿArāʾis al-majālis* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1985), 2–3.



informed much historical reflection in the early Islamic community.²⁰ Historiography as well as *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* may thus be seen as an essentially para-qur'ānic enterprise, as is plainly evident from the amount of material on the pre-Islamic prophets and their communities found in major chronicles.²¹

The presupposition that much *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* was actually derived from *tafsīr* 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 Shi'i 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, Tha'labī and Kisā'ī are undoubtedly the representatives of the *qīṣaṣ* genre cited most often.²² Admittedly, students and scholars of *qīṣaṣ* 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 *tafsīr*, 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 *qīṣaṣ al-Qur'ān* in the twentieth century, modern works of a Salafi tendency that attempt to discard the traditional accretions (especially the so-called *isrā'īliyyāt*) 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 *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 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 Qur'ān; foremost among these is 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Najjār, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-'Ulūm, 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 Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte 30; Tel Aviv: Wallstein Verlag, 2002), 156–211. Cf. Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, 175–188 on modernist approaches to *qīṣaṣ*.

²¹ On the impact of such qur'ānic conceptions as covenant, sin and punishment, and messianic redemption on Islamic historiography, see R. Stephen Humphreys, "Qur'anic Myth and Narrative Structure in Early Islamic Historiography," in F. M. Clover and R. S. Humphreys (eds.), *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 271–292 and Tayeb El-Hibri, *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History: The Rashidun Caliphs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

²² As noted by Tottoli ("New Sources," 526–528) two new editions of Kisā'ī'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 Kisā’ī and Tha’labī.

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 Tha’labī’s *qiṣaṣ* is the more ‘orthodox’ and scholarly distillation of this material while Kisā’ī’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 Tha’labī’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-Mubtada’* 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 Muḥammad* (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-Mubtada’*—“a perhaps vexed concept in any case” (250)—at all.

²⁴ The Bodleian manuscript of Ishāq b. Bishr is integral to two seminal articles by Kister on *qiṣaṣ* themes: M. J. Kister, “Legends in *tafsīr* and *hadīth* Literature: The Creation of Ādam and Related Stories,” in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur’an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 82–114; idem, “Ādam: A Study of Some Legends in *Tafsīr* and *Hadīth* Literature,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 13 (1993): 113–174.

²⁵ ‘Umārah b. Wathīmah al-Fārisī, *Les légendes prophétiques dans l’Islam depuis le I^{er} jusqu’au III^e siècle de l’Hégire. Kitāb bad’ al-ḥalq wa-qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*. Avec édition critique du texte, ed. R. G. Khoury

twenty years ago, the major *qışaş* 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 *qışaş* texts stand in many ways at totally opposite ends of the ideological spectrum of Sunnism. Tha‘labī’s *‘Arā’is al-majālis* is regularly reprinted and has long been a very successful and widely disseminated representative of the *qışaş* 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 *qışaş al-anbiyā’* 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 *qışaş* is an artificial text derived from the work of an author whose view of the *qışaş* tradition was very often ambivalent, if not explicitly censorious, due to its purported function as a vehicle for *isrā’īliyyāt*.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

(Codices Arabici Antiqui 3; Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1978); Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī, *The Stories of the Prophets by Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī*, ed. Roberto Tottoli (Islamkundliche Untersuchungen Band 253; Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2003).

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. Qışaş al-anbiyā’: 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 Qur’ān 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 *isrā’īliyyāt* problem, see below. The oldest printed editions of Ibn Kathīr’s *qışaş* 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 *qışaş* 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 *isrā’īliyyāt*: Ibn Kathīr, *Life and Times of the Messengers, Taken from Al-Bidāyah wan-Nihāyah* (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 *qiṣaṣ* 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 *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* 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 *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* 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 *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* itself.²⁹ This brings us full circle back to Nagel's thesis, in which—as noted before—we see a dynamic tension between *qiṣaṣ* as a genre and *qiṣaṣ* 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 *qiṣaṣ* 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 *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 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 *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*: the case of Ibn Ishāq

Ibn Ishāq's *Kitāb al-Mubtada'*, arguably the earliest text that can be called a work of *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, demonstrates the importance of a nuanced understanding of what *qīṣaṣ* is both as a genre and as a discourse right at the inception of the tradition. Ibn Ishāq did not set out to write a *qīṣaṣ* work for its own sake, out of purely literary or antiquarian interest.³¹ Rather, Ibn Ishāq 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 Ishāq 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 Ishāq's *magnum opus*, the initiation of the Prophet's mission in Mecca (the *mab'ath*) and the raids and military campaigns that established the early Islamic state under his leadership (the *maghāzī*).

Ibn Hishām's edition of Ibn Ishāq'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.³² These episodes both foreshadowed elements of Muḥammad'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.³³

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 Ishāq 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 'Abīd 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 *mab'ath* ("prophetic commission" or "sending-forth") and *maghāzī* ("raids" or "campaigns") follow.

³³ See Uri Rubin, "Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shī'a Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 1 (1979): 41–65.

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.³⁴ By prefacing the account of the mission of Muḥammad 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶ Polemic, criticism, and gestures of delegitimation are explicit in the latter, but only implicit in the former.

³⁴ John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, foreword, translations, and expanded notes by Gerald Hawting (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006 [1978]). See also Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 14; Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1998), 149–159 on the emergence of prophetic themes as a specific form of historical reflection in the emergent Muslim community.

³⁵ This conception of the supersessionist ideology that informs the *mubtada'* 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 prophetic 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, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), Ch. 4.

³⁶ Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Islamic Philosophy, Theology, and Science 22; Leiden: Brill, 1996).

Ibn Ishāq's students and transmitters edited his work down into a more manageable size, thus shearing the *mubtada'* from its original context.³⁷ 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 *Qīṣaṣ al-Qur'ān* of Abū'l-Ḥasan al-Hayṣam 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-nabawīyyah* in condensed form.³⁸ If we recall the ideological implications of the *mubtada'* 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 *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* becomes transparent even when the linkages between the pre-Islamic prophets and Muḥammad, the Seal of the Prophets and final messenger, remain only implicit.³⁹

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>). Schöck, *Adam im Islam*, seems to have made pioneering use of both this work and that of 'Umārah b. Wathīmah in the edition by Khoury. As Hagen notes, similar to al-Hayṣam 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 *qīṣaṣ* material originally but had over time become only implicit in classical Arabic sources.

³⁹ *Qīṣaṣ/mubtada'* materials were not always cleanly stripped out of the *sīrah* and *maghāzī* traditions; see the *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* of Ma'mar 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 Muhammad. See Ma'mar 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 qur'ānic *ahl al-kaḥf* or 'People of the Cave' (166–171). Note also that El-Hibri, *Parable and Politics*, argues that qur'ānic *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* 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, *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* 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 *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* 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 *qīṣaṣ* 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 disinherit the Jews as rival claimants to that legacy.

Thus, the corpus of traditions we might label *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* 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, *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* 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 *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* 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.⁴¹ 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.

Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā' and *qīṣaṣ al-Qur'ān*

This adaptation of a critical instrument of supersession from Christianity was not initiated by early Islamic traditionists or authors like Ibn Ishāq (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 Qur'ān, 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 Qur'ān 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 Qur'ānic prophet evident, though usually implicit.

An obvious example is Sūrat al-Shu'arā' (Q 26), which presents accounts of the major events associated with the missions of Qur'ānic-biblical prophets like Moses, Noah, and Lot alongside similar events linked to the careers of messengers sent to 'Ād, 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 Qur'ānic author.

One's conception of the relationship between the schematized proto-*qīṣaṣ al-Qur'ān* and the Qur'ān's revelatory context depends upon one's perspective regarding the problem of the historical Muḥammad. For the early Orientalists, it was natural to read Qur'ānic 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 Qur'ānic stories was thus biographical: the thematic choices reflected in Qur'ānic 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.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*.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 Muḥammad as recounted in those sources as historically reliable.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 Muhammad.”⁴⁵

⁴² For a convenient overview of revisionism's implications for the study of the Qurʾān, see Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and Its Biblical Subtext* (London: Routledge, 2010), Ch. 1; for the history of the proto-Islamic period, see Andreas Görke, “Prospects and Limits in the Study of the Historical Muḥammad,” in Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort, Kees Versteegh, and Joas Wagemakers (eds.), *The Transmission and Dynamics of the Textual Sources of Islam: Essays in Honour of Harald Motzki* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 138–151.

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 *qīṣaṣ*, we see a later community actually *constructing* an older religious-political history as its predecessor.

⁴⁴ Tilman Nagel, *Mohammed: Leben und Legende* (Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2008).

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 unambivalent correlation of qur'ānic passages on the biblical prophets with episodes from Muḥammad'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'ānic recollections of the prophets in a meaningful way, permitting a coherent explanation of why these stories were recounted in the Qur'ān 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'ān 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'ān 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'ān 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.

⁴⁶ The basis of the critique, by and large, seems to have more to do with Nagel's lack of engagement with contemporary attempts to articulate a reliable form of tradition criticism (except, perhaps, to dismiss them) than with his desire to rehabilitate positivism in general. See Gregor Schoeler, *The Biography of Muḥammad: Nature and Authenticity*, trans. Uwe Vagelpohl and ed. James E. Montgomery (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 10–13 and "Grundsätzliches zu Tilman Nagels Monographie *Mohammad. Leben und Legende*," *Asiatische Studien/Études asiatiques* 65 (2011): 193–209. Nagel's more recent replies to Schoeler's criticisms have yielded a wider field of rejoinders. See Tilman Nagel, "'Authentizität' in der Leben-Mohammed-Forschung," *Arabica* 60 (2013): 516–568; Gregor Schoeler, "Tilman Nagels "'Authentizität' in der Leben-Mohammed-Forschung.' Eine Antwort," *Asiatische Studien/Études asiatiques* 68 (2014): 469–496; and Andreas Görke and Harald Motzki, "Tilman Nagels Kritik an der Isnad-cum-matn-Analyse. Eine Replik," *Asiatische Studien/Études asiatiques* 68 (2014): 497–518. Gottfried Hagen's evaluation of Nagel's work on the life of Muḥammad is rather more positive: see "The Imagined and the Historical Muḥammad," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129 (2009): 97–111.

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 *qīṣaṣ* 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 *qīṣaṣ* 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 *qīṣaṣ* 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 *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* tradition.⁴⁸

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

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 *qīṣaṣ* narratives. Regardless of their relationship to what came before, in the eyes of their Muslim authors and transmitters, *qīṣaṣ 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.

⁴⁷ On the problem of the *isrāʾīliyyāt* and contemporary attempts to reorient scholarly approaches to the phenomenon, see Norman Calder, “*Tafsīr* from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham,” in G. R. Hawting and A. A. Shareef (eds.), *Approaches to the Qurʾān* (London: Routledge, 1993), 101–140; Roberto Tottoli, “Origin and Use of the Term *Isrāʾīliyyāt* in Muslim Literature,” *Arabica* 46 (1999): 193–210; Pregill, “*Isrāʾīliyyāt*, Myth, and Pseudepigraphy”; idem, “*Isrāʾīliyyāt*,” *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009–), s.v. (2016).

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 *qīṣaṣ* 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 Shiʿi versions and uses of *qiṣaṣ* narratives. Shiʿi 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 Shiʿism 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 Shiʿi 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 Shiʿah 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 Ismaʿili 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 Shiʿism in scholarship.

⁵¹ A handful of Shiʿi *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-anbiyā'*. For example, Rubin's original article of 1979 relies extensively on material from Khargushī'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 Fuḏūlī. For Fuḏūlī, 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 Fuḏūlī'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 Imami 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

⁵² D. S. Abd Al-Rahman, "A Critical Edition of *Kitab Sharaf Al-Mustafa* by Abu Sa'd Abd al-Malik b. Abi Uthman b. Muhammad al-Kharkushi" (University of Exeter, 1986). The major manuscript witnesses are located in Istanbul, Tübingen, and London. The printed edition of 2003 (Mecca/Beirut) does not seem to be widely available, though electronic versions appear to be circulating digitally.

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'wīl* 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'ah 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'wīl*, see now David Hollenberg, *Beyond the Qur'ān: Early Ismā'īlī Ta'wīl and the Secrets of the Prophets* (Columbia, NC: University of South Carolina Press, 2016).

The development of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* 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 Qur'ān, 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-Kisā'ī”](#)) 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 Kisā'ī.

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-lettristic *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-Anbiyā'* Image in an Arabic and a Hebrew Poem of Desire”](#)), indicates not only that *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* 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 *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* as a specific genre rather than a broader discourse has perhaps limited the field, so too has the exaggerated interest in *qīṣaṣ* narratives as articulated in the exegesis of the Qur'ān to the detriment of explorations of prophetic themes and motifs as elaborated in other literary corpora. One of the most open frontiers of *qīṣaṣ* 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 *qīṣaṣ* material as primarily manifest in Qur'ān 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 Wā'iz Kāshifī, perhaps d'Herbelot's main touchstone for the Qur'ān 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 wa'l-mawā'iz* of Abū 'Ubayd al-Khuṭabī (d. 224/838), an early literary work structured around pious exhortations attributed to various prophets, in Andrew Rippin, "The Place of the Qur'an in the 'Sermons and Exhortations' of Abū 'Ubayd," in Nuha Alshaar (ed.), *The Qur'an and Adab: The Shaping of Literary Traditions in Classical Islam* (Qur'anic 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*, *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* seems to represent only one modality in which material pertaining to the prophets is articulated. Note also the deliberate eclecticism of Klar, *Interpreting al-Tha'labī's Tales of the Prophets*, which brings traditions in his work into conversation with comparanda from a wide variety of contemporary Muslim sources, including *Sīrat Sayf b. Dhī Yazan*, al-Qushayrī, al-Mas'ūdī, al-Ghazālī, and the mirror for princes *Baḥr al-favā'id*.

⁵⁵ *Alcorani textus universus ex correctioribus Arabum exemplaribus summa fide* [et al.], trans. Ludovico Marracci (Padua, 1698); Abraham Geiger, *Was Hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume Aufgenommen. Eine von der Königl. Preussischen Rheinuniversität Gekrönte Preisschrift* (Bonn: F. Baaden, 1834), translated into English as *Judaism and Islām. A Prize Essay*, trans. F.M. Young (Vepery [Madras]: M.D.C.S.P.C.K. Press, 1898); Gustav Weil, *Biblische Legenden der Muselmänner. Aus Arabischen Quellen Zusammengetragen und mit Judischen Sagen Verglichen* (Frankfurt a.M.: J. Rütten, 1845), translated into English as *The Bible, the Koran, and the Talmud: Or, Biblical Legends of the Mussulmans* (Harper's New Miscellany 15; New York: Harper, 1846); Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Koran*; Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran*; Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext*.

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 Kāshifī, 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 *qışaş*. 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 *qışaş* tradition.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸

This journal issue aims to make a small contribution to advancing the field by showcasing new research in *qışaş* studies. The articles featured here demonstrate that current scholarship on *qışaş al-anbiyā'* adopts a variety of disciplinary perspectives, reflects diverse concerns, and approaches the broader *qışaş* 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](#)

Barthelmy d'Herbelot, *Bibliothèque Orientale, ou Dictionnaire Universel, contenant generalement tout ce qui regarde la connoissance des peuples de l'Orient, Lleurs histoires et traditions veritables* (Maestricht: J. E. Dufour & P. Roux, 1776 [1697]), 648.

⁵⁷ See Na'ama Brosh with Rachel Milstein, *Biblical Stories in Islamic Painting* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1991); Rachel Milstein, Karin Rührdanz, and Barbara Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qışaş al-Anbiyā'* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1999); Naama Brosh, *Kunst als Brücke: Biblische Geschichten in der Kunst des Orients* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 2004); and Rachel Milstein, *La Bible dans l'art islamique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005). A significant amount of material pertaining to *qışaş al-anbiyā'* is also in evidence in Massumeh Farhad and Serpil Bağci (eds.), *Falnama: The Book of Omens* (Washington: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2010).

⁵⁸ An analogy with the much better-studied *Shāhnāme* 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 *Shāhnāme* 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-anbiyā’* 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-anbiyā’* 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-anbiyā’*, 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.



[Marianna Klar](#) (D.Phil. University of Oxford, 2002) is Research Associate in the Centre of Islamic Studies, SOAS. Her research focuses on tales of the prophets within the Islamic tradition, on issues of genre pertaining to medieval texts, and on the Qur'an's narratives and its literary structure. Her published works include *Interpreting al-Tha'labī's Tales of the Prophets: Temptation, Responsibility and Loss* (London: Routledge, 2009) and, more recently, "Between History and Tafsīr: Notes on al-Ṭabarī's Methodological Strategies," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 18 (2016): 89–129 and "Re-examining Textual Boundaries: Towards a Form-Critical Sūrat al-Kahf, in Walid A. Saleh and Majid Daneshgar (eds.), *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 215–238.

[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 Qur'ān and Islam (*Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature* [Richmond: Curzon, 2002]; *The Stories of the Prophets by Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī* [Berlin: Klaus Schwartz Verlag, 2003]) and medieval Islamic literature. His most recent publication, coauthored with Reinhold F. Gleis, is *Ludovico Marracci at Work: The Evolution of His Latin Translation of the Qur'ān in the Light of His Newly Discovered Manuscripts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016).

This PDF is the text-only version of an article published online at www.mizanproject.org. It omits images, glosses, annotations, and other subsidiary content included in the online version. This article is authorized for reuse under the terms of a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) License.

