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Prophethood and the Making of Islamic Historical Identity

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Prophethood\(^1\) and the Making of Islamic Historical Identity

As monotheistic and scriptural religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share many of the same beliefs and doctrines. Yet certain differences between these religions reflect to a great extent their religious distinctiveness and justify their moral existence.\(^2\) Islam, the last among the monotheistic religions, formed a unique religious identity as the final and, therefore, true manifestation of the divine message that began with Adam. But this distinctiveness is nowhere more evident than in the Islamic concept of prophethood (\textit{nubuwwa}).

The notion of prophethood in Islam has been the subject of a fair number of studies, which can be divided in terms of interest into three major themes. The first group of studies focuses on religious and revelatory aspects of prophethood, with an emphasis on the unique status of Muḥammad as the “seal of prophets (\textit{khātam al-nabiyyīn}),” that is, the last prophet in a successive line of prophets.\(^3\) In their treatment of prophethood in Islam, other scholars give attention to the theological and philosophical nature of this

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\(^1\) I am using the term prophethood rather than prophecy to show the uniqueness of the term in Islam.


concept. Finally, a third group of studies examines the political aspect of prophethood as a source of political legitimacy.

This article explores how the Islamic view of prophethood helped shape the religious and historical identity of Islam. It also shows how Islamic sources construct the unique status of Muhammad’s prophetic mission, in comparison with those of previous prophets. Central to this study, therefore, is the examination of the divine missions of four prophet-messengers: Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (along with Muḥammad), on whom Islamic traditions bestow the title “the unyielding and the determined ones (ulū al-‘azm).” This prophetic history reveals important conjunctions in human history, in addition to the moral lessons conveyed in these stories. First, however, a few words ought to be said about the unique concept of prophethood in Islam in comparison with Judaism and Christianity.

1. Prophethood: Genealogy and Origins

Islam’s conception of prophethood has elements in common with the earlier monotheistic religions, especially with regard to the eschatological and the messianic aspects of this term, yet there are some significant differences. As the first monotheistic

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religion, Judaism is the first setting where the term *prophecy* (*nevo’a*) appeared. The Old Testament refers often to the concept of prophecy, using the following words to designate a prophet: *hozeh* (*seer)*, *ro’eh* (*seer)*, *navi* (*prophet)* and *ish ha-Elohim* (*man of God*). The differences between these terms primarily reflect different stages in Jewish history. However, the term *navi* became the distinctive word associated with prophecy. Jewish religious texts are replete with stories of prophets who served as communicators between God and humans. Judaism gives *prophecy* two primary meanings. First, a prophet is a chosen person, such as Moses, who can transmit God’s divine message to the Jewish people. In Jewish religious texts, the term also refers to an inspired person who can locate lost things or foresee future events. The line of prophets, according to Jewish literature, ended with the construction of the Second Temple. Christianity, which acknowledges the Jewish scriptures, follows, on the whole, these two meanings of prophecy in Judaism. Yet the Christian view of prophecy emphasizes the prediction of the future, because it ties in closely with the eschatological anticipation of the messianic coming of Christ and the end of this world.

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9 II Samuel 24:11; II Kings 17:13.
8 I Samuel 9:9; II Sam. 15:27.
10 Exodus 6:28-7:2; Numbers 12:1-8; Deuteronomy 18:20-22.
Islam’s view of prophethood resembles that of previous religions, especially Judaism, but it introduces five new significant elements. Prior to the discussion of these Islamic perceptions of prophethood, one should bear in mind that a belief in previous prophets is a fundamental of the Islamic creed. First, Muḥammad’s prophetic mission is the same divine message with which God entrusted all human prophets, of whom Adam was the first and Muḥammad was the last. The second meaning of prophethood refers to the prophet’s qualifications. A prophet must be sinless, infallible, trustworthy, steadfast, and sharp-witted. Third, Muḥammad received God’s messages through Qur’ānic revelations. Muslims believe that the Qurʾān is the literal and eternal word of God as revealed to Muḥammad. These revelations, received as events unfolded, were designed to show Muḥammad and his community the true path of God and to remind them of stories of previous prophets to whom God entrusted the same mission. These divine messages came to the Prophet through different ways known as “the manners of revelations (Kayfiyyāt al-wahi).”

The fourth feature of prophethood in Islam is the distinction between a prophet-messenger (rasūl) and a prophet (nabī). The rasūl is a prophet whom God entrusts with a divine message (risāla) to convey to his people and warn them against their wrongdoings. Their divine message to certain people is in the form of a revealed book. Prophets (nabīs) are, on the other hand, divinely inspired persons, who would remind people of God’s true path; they cannot deliver God’s message. Prophet-messengers played, therefore, a major role in conveying the message of God, implementing His commandments, and fighting

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17 Ibid., 79.
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for the achievement of this sublime task. The number of prophet-messengers (rasūl) and prophets (nabī) in Islamic traditions is controversial. The number of rasūls in the Qur’ān is 25, but early Muslim scholars disagree about the identity of some of these names. Some later Islamic traditions list the number of rasūls as 315, whereas the number 1000 is given for nabīs. Still other Muslim scholars mention the total number of prophets as 224,000. The fifth and final meaning of prophethood in Islam revolves around the miraculous abilities that God grants each prophet-messenger as a way to demonstrate His divine signs to humans. Before discussing these meanings of prophethood, we should touch on the sources of Islamic prophetic narratives.

The Qur’ān, which is full of stories about earlier prophets, is the first source of prophetic history. The prophetic tradition (hadīth), the sayings and deeds of the prophet Muhammad, is the second source. The tafsīr tradition (Qur’ānic exegesis), which came to supplement the Qur’ān and the prophetic tradition, is another important source. When these sources proved insufficient to construct the stories of previous prophets, Muslim scholars began to search for new sources. These inquiries formed the basis for the genre known as the “stories of the prophets (qisas al-anbiyā’).” Biblical and extra-biblical narratives, later known as the isrā’īliyyāt, were the earliest materials upon which Muslim scholars relied to construct the prophetic stories. Muslims’ curiosity about the

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20 On the early authors of this genre see ‘Arā’is al-majālis fī qisas al-anbiyā’ or “Lives of the Prophets, as Recounted by Abū ‘Ishāq Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Tha’labī, trans. by William M. Brinner (Leiden: Brill, 2002), xviii-xxiv.
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stories of prophets led them to search for new materials when the abovementioned sources proved insufficient to reconstruct certain prophetic biographies.

2. The Genesis of Prophethood

Islamic traditions trace the genesis of prophethood back to the Creation, when God made a primordial covenant (*mithāq*) with mankind. In this pact, God provided humans with clear instructions about following His straight path. On their part, humans pledged to obey Him and not go astray.\(^{22}\) At certain stages of prophetic history, humans were misled and became mindless of His path. This calamitous development necessitated divine intervention, when God sent prophet-messengers to remind them of the covenant. Those who follow God’s path would be rewarded, whereas those who disobey Him would be punished.\(^{23}\) Islamic traditions consider Adam the first prophet-messenger, whom God entrusted to propagate this divine message that was concluded with Muḥammad. Hence, the term “seal of the prophets” figures prominently in Islamic traditions to emphasize finality of Muḥammad’s message as well as his unique status among other prophets.

The confrontations between sinful, misled people and the messengers sent by God to remind them of His path constitute the main driving force in prophetic history in the time between Adam and Muḥammad. God’s intervention in prophetic history always

\(^{22}\) Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, I, 133-136 (de Goeje, I, 133-137); “Mithaq,” in *Historical Dictionary of Prophets in Islam and Judaism*.

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causes clashes between Good and Evil, destined to end with the victory of the former. Recording prophetic intervals, Islamic traditions single out five prophet-messengers (rasūls), whose missions became exemplary models of prophethood, bringing about significant conjunctions in human history. These five prophets are Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad. In Islamic traditions, four main attributes distinguish these prophets from the others. First is the universality of their prophetic mission, that is, God sent them to propagate His message not only to a certain group of people, but to all mankind. Second, these prophets were sent as reminders at crucial stages when humans were shunning God’s path by committing injustices and immoral actions. Third, in implementing God’s divine message, these prophets faced great challenges and difficulties, and, consequently, God granted them the ability to perform miracles, enabling them to demonstrate God’s power and overcome their adversaries. These miracles were in line with the common supernatural forces or beliefs that dominated their societies. Finally, throughout their prophetic mission, these prophets demonstrated extraordinary endurance for dealing with great challenges and risks that no mere human could handle. The Qur’ān, therefore, bestows upon these five prophets the epitaph “the unyielding and determined ones (ulū al-‘azm).” In addition to the major events in these narratives, Islam has an interest in calculating the number of years between Muhammad and previous prophets, as I have discussed elsewhere. Our undertaking here is limited to certain events in prophetic history and their role in shaping Islamic religious and

24 Elsewhere I have examined this topic. See A. Tayyara, “Narratives of Inevitable Prophecies of Confrontation between Good and Evil,” Idā’ār, 3 (2010), 323-348.
historical identity. We launch our discussion of these conjectures in prophetic history with the story of Noah.

3. The Flood and the Second Beginning of Humanity

Islamic presentations of the story of Noah, whose name in Arabic is Nūḥ, follow, on the whole, the story in the book of Genesis,26 where it is considered a turning point in prophetic history. Since Adam’s story represents the genesis of the human race, Islamic sources give him the epitaph “father of mankind” (Abū al-bashar),27 whereas the Noah narrative signifies the second beginning of human history.28 Some Muslim historians, therefore, give Noah the epitaph “the later Adam (Adam al-akhīr).”29 At the heart of the Noah narrative is his struggle against the deluded people who instigated God’s wrath in the form of the flood. The flood episode brought about a new beginning in human history, when God intervened, destroyed the immoral people who rejected Noah’s pleas, and saved the righteous.30

The Noah narrative first appears in the Qurʾān, where five major themes figure prominently: the immorality and corruption among humans that necessitated Noah’s mission,31 Noah’s attempts to guide the people to God’s path and warn of God’s

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30 Al-Maqdisī, al-Badʿ, III, 15.
punishment, the people’s rejection of Noah’s message, God’s command to Noah to build the Ark, and the flood as the final punishment. A similar representation of the Noah story can be found in the prophetic tradition. Noah’s prophethood and the events associated with it exemplify God’s will in history, by which He punishes misguided people and rewards the righteous. Both the flood, which led to a second beginning in human history, and extended life spans were the miraculous signs of Noah. His prophetic mission became the symbol of forbearance and resoluteness due to the difficulties and suffering he faced throughout his time. Like other prophetic stories, Noah’s narrative serves, therefore, as a moral lesson for Muḥammad and his followers, showing how God’s intervention punishes the immoral and rewards the righteous. The following Qur’ānic verses capture these themes:

We sent Noah to his people. He said: “My people, worship God. There is no god for you other than He. Do you not fear God?” The leaders of his people who disbelieved said: “This one is only a human like you, and he wants for you to consider him better than you. If God had wanted he could have sent angels. We have not heard this from our forefathers. “He is only a man in whom is a Jinn, so be patient with him for a while.” Noah said: “My Lord, give me victory because they are rejecting me.” We revealed to him: “Build the Ark under our eyes and inspiration. When our command comes and the pits gush forth, take on board

33 Sūrat al-Anbiyā’ (21): 76-77; 23: 23-25
36 Al-Tha’labī, Qisas al-anbiyā’ al-musammā ’arāʾis al-majālis (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī), 60-61.
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pairs, two of everything, and your family, but not him against whom the word has
already been issued. Do not address me concerning those who do wrong, for they
are to be drowned. “When you and those with you are on board the Ark, say:
‘Praise God who saved us from the people who do wrong.’ “Say” ‘My Lord,
allow me to disembark in a blessed landing place. You are the best to allow us to
dismbark.””37

The presentation of the Noah story in the Qur‘an and the prophetic tradition
become the basis upon which later Islamic accounts of the story build. Uniquely, later
Muslim scholars, particularly historians, emphasize aspects of the Noah story that serve
the construction of Islamic religious identity. Since the flood represents God’s first large-
scale, devastating punishment in human history, Muslim scholars view Noah’s mission as
bringing about a new birth for mankind. In this way, Noah’s prophethood is considered a
prototype of divine justice and punishment.38 To tie Noah’s prophetic experience with
Muhammad’s, Muslim scholars underscore two main facets of the story: drawing a
parallel between the Noah story and the prophetic mission of Islam and highlighting the
significant role of Noah’s mission in the origin of nations after the flood. In both his
tafsīr and ta’rīkh, al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) offers the most detailed account, which serves as a

Qur‘an, 51.
38 Al-Kisa‘ī, Bad’ al-khalq wa qisas al-anbiyā’ ed. al-Ṭāhir bin Salmā (Tunis: Dār Nuqūsh ‘Arabiyya,
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repository of early Islamic traditions,\(^{39}\) of the Noah story and its moral lessons. A detailed examination of al-Ṭabarî's account, therefore, is relevant to our discussion.\(^{40}\)

Following the above-mentioned main themes of the Noah story in the Qur’ān, al-Ṭabarî portrays the flood story as a new beginning in mankind’s history, devoid of wicked and disobedient people. He also draws parallels between this story and the prophetic mission of Muḥammad. Al-Ṭabarî emphasizes the commonalities between the flood narrative and the rise of Islam, showing that both events represent significant conjunctions in the history of mankind. This conjunction is evident in the following hadīth, where we are told: “The example of the people of my house (ahl baytī) is similar to the Ark of Noah; whoever boarded it was rescued and whoever failed to do so (takhallafa ‘anḥā) died.”\(^{41}\) This hadith underscores the same divine message that Noah brought to mankind and represents Muḥammad as the last messenger sent by God. Like Noah’s prophethood and the new beginning initiated by the flood, Islam’s message delivers a new dawn

As in the biblical narrative,\(^{42}\) Islamic traditions emphasize the important role of the Noah narrative in the origin of nations through Noah’s three sons: Shem, Japheth, and Ham. Dealing with nations descended from Noah’s sons, Islamic sources recognize two main genealogical frameworks: prophethood and ethnicity. The prophethood rubric concerns itself with the line of prophets from Adam to Muḥammad. As for the ethnicity

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\(^{40}\) Al-Ṭabarî, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, xii, 26-56.

\(^{41}\) Al-Maqqdīsī, *al-Bad’*, III, 22.

\(^{42}\) Genesis 10.
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model, Islamic reports deal with Noah’s three sons, from whom all people descended.\(^{43}\)

Of relevance to our discussion here is that in Islamic sources, as in the biblical story, Shem enjoys a superior place among his brothers for being the forefather of prophets and the best among nations.\(^{44}\) Among the prophets descended from Shem, Muslim scholars emphasize the role of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad. We turn now to discuss Islamic presentations of the next link in the prophetic history and its significance to Islamic narratives of origins.

3. The Abrahamic Tradition

Abraham, whose Islamic name is Ibrāhīm, plays a central role in the construction of the religious origins of Judaism,\(^ {45}\) Christianity,\(^ {46}\) and Islam.\(^ {47}\) More than any other prophet, Abraham occupies a central place in the making of Islamic religious and historical identity. Islamic traditions emphasize, therefore, that Abraham, whose epitaph is *khalīl al-raḥmān* (the friend of God), is the founder of the true religion (Islam) that was restored by Muḥammad.\(^ {48}\) References to this fundamental belief can be found in many places in the Qurʾān and the prophetic tradition.


\(^{45}\) Genesis 17:5.

\(^{46}\) The significance of Abraham in Christianity appears in the book of Matthew (1: 1-18) where he portrays Jesus as a descendant of Abraham. But it was St. Paul who established the connection between Abraham and Christianity. Galatians 3:29.


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These sources also record other aspects of the Abraham narrative. The Qur’ānic narrative consists of the following main themes: the pre-prophetic life of Abraham, his search for God’s path,⁴⁹ the confrontation between him and Nimrod, the test of Abraham and the fire,⁵⁰ the migration of Abraham,⁵¹ the establishment of Abraham’s progeny through Ismā‘īl in Mecca,⁵² and Abraham’s sacrificial son.⁵³ All these themes recur in the prophetic tradition.⁵⁴ In their construction of the Abraham narrative, later Muslim scholars incorporated new materials borrowed from biblical and extra-biblical sources.⁵⁵ These Islamic accounts portray Abraham as the prototype Muslim to whom Islamic origin is traced. To achieve this objective, Muslim scholars highlight two primary aspects of the Abraham story: the establishment of his progeny in Mecca and the unequivocal closeness and similarities between him and Muḥammad. Hence, the relation between Islam and Abraham can be characterized as both ethnic-religious and prophetic.

Islamic presentations of the Abraham story begin, as in the biblical story,⁵⁶ in Babylon, then under the reign of Nimrod, described as an arrogant tyrant and evildoer who challenged God’s will. Nimrod learned from his astrologers that on a certain date a child named Abraham would be born and challenge Nimrod’s rule and ridicule his pagan religion. Nimrod made tremendous efforts to prevent the fulfillment of this prophecy, but to no avail. When Abraham was born, his mother hid him in a cave until it was safe to

return home. Islamic traditions also refer to the corruption and sinfulness permeating the life of Abraham’s people, who believed in magic and astrology. This moral and ethical deterioration, therefore, justified a new prophetic mission.

Growing up in this environment, Abraham was troubled with his pagan society and began to search for God’s path. When Abraham found the true path, God entrusted him with the prophetic mission. Propagating God’s message, Abraham confronted his people showing them the worthlessness of their pagan belief and finally clashed with Nimrod. Enraged by Abraham’s challenges, Nimrod ordered that Abraham be thrown into a furnace, but God miraculously saved him, demonstrating the divine triumphing over evil. Abraham left his country to establish a righteous society elsewhere, where a new stage of his prophetic mission began.

Islamic traditions underscore, as previously mentioned, that Islam is the true religion, founded by Abraham. Hence, Islamic sources highlight similarities and parallels between the prophethood of Muḥammad and that of Abraham, and underline the establishment of Abraham’s progeny in Mecca. To demonstrate that Abraham was the father of Islam, the Qurʾān emphasizes that he was neither a Jew nor Christian, but Muslim. This attitude is evident in several Qurʾānic verses, among which the most important are the following:

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58 Al-Ya’qūbī, Taʾrīkh, I, 23-24; al-Masʿūdī, Murūj, I, 48-49 (sec. 75-76).
59 Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi’ al-bayān, I, 308; Taʾrīkh, I, 236-237 (de Goeje, I, 254-255); al-Tha’labī, Qisas al-anbiyā’, 74-75.
60 Al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, I, 237 (de Goeje, I, 256).
61 Al-Tha’labī, Qisas al-anbiyā’, 75-78. It is worth noting that there is no mention of the furnace scene in the Bible, but this story appears in the midrashic literature. See S. Lowin, The Making of A Forefather, 183ff.
“Oh, People of the Book! Why do you dispute about Abraham, when the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed until after him? Have you no sense? There, you have disputed in matters about which you have some knowledge! Why are you, then, debating about things in which you have no knowledge? And God knows, whereas you do not know. Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian; but he was an upright (ḥanīf) Muslim and he was not a polytheist (min al-mushrikīn). Verily, the worthiest people of Abraham are those who followed him, this prophet [Muḥammad], and those who believed [him]; and God is the protecting friend of the believers.”  

These Qur’ānic verses maintain that Abraham is the founder of Islam and that the Prophet Muḥammad and his followers are worthier than others to adhere to Abraham’s religion and to succeed him. This view constitutes the axis around which the Abraham story revolves in the prophetic tradition. For example, in his tafsīr, al-Ṭabarī cites a hadīth in which the Prophet says: “Verily, each Prophet has close associates [from other prophets] and my patron is [Abraham], my father and the Friend of my Lord.”  

Another hadīth expresses a similar view, in which the Prophet said: “I am the prayer of my father Abraham and the good tiding of Jesus.”  

Elsewhere, al-Ṭabarī emphasizes this idea, saying not only that Muslims are the true inheritors of the Abrahamic religion, but also that Islam is a universal religion surpassing both Judaism and Christianity.  

A number of stories voicing this view revolve around encounters of Muslims with other nations’

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62 Sūrat Al-‘Imrān (3): 65-68.
63 Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi‘ al-bayān, I, 308.
64 Ibid. See also Ibn Sa‘d, al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā, ed. M. A. ‘Ata (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1997), I, 149.
65 Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi‘ al-bayān, I, 558-563.
leaders, who acknowledge the affinities between Muḥammad and Abraham. Such is the story of the Islamic delegation sent to Constantinople to meet the Roman emperor. Exchanging information with his Muslim guests, the emperor showed them a small coffer that consisted of several compartments with small doors. Each compartment contained portraits of the prophets from Adam to Muḥammad depicted on pieces of cloth.

Muhammad’s image was, according to this story, housed in the last compartment. From this story, we learn that Muḥammad’s image retains the shapes of all prophets, but his depiction most resembles Abraham.66 Another story, in which the king of China showed a group of Muslims a similar casket,67 similarly highlights the unique status of Muhammad, as well as his closeness to Abraham.

Islamic sources emphasize the role of Abraham in establishing his Islamic progeny in Mecca through his son Ismā‘īl. According to the biblical story, Abraham took Hagar, his concubine, and Ismā‘īl away and left them in the desert near Beer Sheba (at the behest of his wife, Sarah).68 Islamic sources identify this place with Mecca. This part of the Abraham story is very significant in the development of Islamic religious identity and particularly its affinity to Abraham, who is credited with the building of the Ka‘ba and the establishment of the pilgrimage rituals.69

Thus, a substantial part of the Abraham story in Islamic traditions is dedicated to the arrival in Mecca, where God had ordered him to take Hagar and Ismā‘īl to build the

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67 Al-Mas‘ūdī, Murūj, I, 168-169 (secs. 342-344).
Sacred House (*al-bayt al-ḥarām*). Once Abraham finished building the Ka’ba with his son, Ismā’il, he called upon the people to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. No wonder that the pilgrimage rituals in Islam revolve entirely around the arrival of Abraham, Hagar, and Ismā’il in Mecca. This Islamic presentation of this part of the Abraham story aims to demonstrate that Abraham is the founder of Islam and that Muḥammad is its restorer. The centrality of the Abraham story to the establishment of Islamic origin makes his prophethood unique to Islam, and, in a religious sense, disassociates Judaism and Christianity from Abrahamic traditions. To further enhance this direction, Islamic traditions include under the *ulū al-‘azm* frame, discussions of the founding fathers of the other two monotheistic religions: Moses and Jesus.

4. The “Chosen People,” Lost and Regained

In comparison with Islamic portrayals of other prophets’ stories, the Moses narrative contains the most detailed description. There are a number of reasons for this Islamic interest. First, Islamic traditions consider Moses the founding father of the first monotheistic religion—Judaism—whose scripture influenced later religions. Second, Islamic sources attribute to Moses unique prophetic qualities. For example, he is considered the first prophet to speak directly to God and, hence, has been given the epithet “the mouthpiece of God (*kalīm allah*).” Moses also is credited with performing supernatural acts and miracles. Third, Islamic traditions associate Moses with Judaism, the main religious contender with Islam. In so doing, Muslim scholars disassociate

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72 The attribute of Moses can be found in Exodus 33:11.
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Abraham from Judaism and at the same time affirm his indispensable role in founding Islam. Finally, the Qur’ān acknowledges that Jews are the “Chosen people,” but asserts that they fell from His favor after they went astray. Muslims became, therefore, the new “Chosen people” after they embraced the divine message that was restored by Muḥammad.

Islamic presentations of the Moses story, which generally follow the biblical story, have many features in common with the prophetic stories of Noah and Abraham. Such are the themes of corruption and godlessness, warning signs through prophetic mission, confrontation with evil forces, and divine intervention. From the Qur’ānic story, we learn that Moses was the messenger-prophet sent by God to Egypt to guide people to God’s path and to free the Israelites from slavery. The following main themes figure prominently in the Qur’ānic narrative: the Israelites’ misery and suffering in Egypt, Moses’ birth and growing up in Pharaoh’s house, Moses leaving Egypt after killing an Egyptian, Moses in Midian, his prophetic mission and miracles, the return to Egypt and confrontation with Pharaoh, God’s punishment of the Egyptians and the deliverance of the Israelites from their slavery, Moses parting the sea and the destruction of Pharaoh’s army, Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness, the revelation and the

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73 Most of the representations of the story of Moses in the bible can be found in the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.
75 Sūrat Ta-Ha (20): 38-41; Sūrat al-Qasas (28): 7-12; Exodus 2:1-10.
77 Sūrat al-Qasas (28): 14-21; Exodus 2: 16-22.
81 Sūrat al-Shu’arā’ (26): 52-68; Sūrat al-Dukhkhân (44): 17- 33; Sūrat Yūnus (10): 90-92.
reception of the commandments, the Israelites’ arrival in the Holy land. Similarly, the Moses story is treated in the prophetic tradition.

The abovementioned themes of the Moses narrative became the basis for the portrayals of the story in later Islamic writings and later Muslim scholars incorporated new sources to provide a more coherent construction of the story. Central to these Islamic accounts is the theme that Jews were ungrateful to God’s grace bestowed upon them through Moses. Muslim scholars begin their description of the Moses story, as in the case of the Abraham story, with a prophecy foretelling his coming. The Pharaoh learned from soothsayers that a boy born among the Israelites would defy his religious authority and put an end to his rule. Attempting to prevent this prophecy, the Pharaoh ordered the killing of all Israelite male babies. Nevertheless, Moses was born, and his mother was divinely inspired to place her infant in a small ark and cast him in the Nile. The baby was found by the Pharaoh’s wife, who received her husband’s permission to raise the child. She was even inspired to assign Moses’ mother to suckle him after he did not accept nursing from other women. Moses grew up in the Pharaoh’s palace as part of the royal family.

The next stage in Moses’ life started when Moses unintentionally killed an Egyptian who was fighting with an Israelite and fled to Midian. In Midian, he met a

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83 Sūrat al-A‘rāf (7): 142-147.
85 Al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīh al-bukhārī, kitāb ahādīth al-anbiyā, 3393-3407.
86 “Moses,” in Historical Dictionary of Prophets in Islam and Judaism.
87 In the Bible it was Pharaoh’s daughter who pulled Moses from the water. Exodus 2: 5.
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prophet known in Islamic sources as Shu‘ayb⁹⁰ and married one of his daughters upon the completion of eight years of service as a shepherd. At this stage, God appeared to Moses and entrusted him with the prophetic mission. Islamic sources, as in the bible, offer detailed descriptions of the miracles which God granted Moses. Examples include the striking of his hand with light and turning his rod into a frightening snake. Now his main mission was to return to Egypt and to challenge Pharaoh, showing him God’s path, and to free the Israelites from bondage. Moses’ brother, Aaron, who was more eloquent, also went with him to Pharaoh.⁹¹

The confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh represents the climax of the story. Supported and guided by God, Moses and Aaron met with Pharaoh and tried to convince him to follow the path of God. Not only did Pharaoh refuse to believe in God, but he also challenged Moses’ divine message by conducting a competition between Moses and his magic-practicing priests. Moses had the upper hand in that contest when his snake swallowed theirs, leading Pharaoh’s magicians to defy their king and follow Moses. In Islamic tradition, Pharaoh’s wife symbolizes the upright woman who defied her husband and accepted Moses’ message.⁹² Thus, Pharaoh ordered her to be tortured and killed.⁹³ Despite the horror that affected Pharaoh as a result of Moses’ wondrous acts, he remained defiant and continued in his attempts to punish Moses and his followers.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ The name appears in the Bible as Jethro. Exodus 18. It is worth noting that this name appears in some Islamic sources. See al-Ṭabarî, Tāʾrîkh, I, 400 (de Goeje, I, 452).
⁹¹ Al-Ṭabarî, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, xxvi, 61-76; Tāʾrîkh, I, 400-403 (de Goeje, I, 463-467; al-Tha’labî, Qisas al-anbiyāʾ, 174-181.
⁹² Another part of the Moses story that is unique to Islamic sources is the description of a tower built by Pharaoh in order to challenge God. Sūrat al-Qasas (28): 38; al-Tha’labî, Qisas al-anbiyāʾ, 189-190.
⁹³ Al-Tha’labî, Qisas al-anbiyāʾ, 188-189.
⁹⁴ Al-Ṭabarî, Tāʾrîkh, I, 403-413 (de Goeje, I, 466-478); al-Tha’labî, Qisas al-anbiyāʾ, 182-187.
Pharaoh refused to let Moses and the Israelites leave Egypt and imposed even harsher penalties on them. God then smote the Egyptians with successive plagues.95 These eventually forced Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave with Moses, but he chased them to the Red Sea. Again, God saved the Israelites by inspiring Moses to strike the sea with his rod, creating twelve corridors in the sea through which Moses led the Israelites safely to Sinai. When Pharaoh and his army chased the Israelites into the sea, they were trapped and drowned in the returning water.96

The next stage of the Moses story revolves around the Israelites’ experience in the wilderness, God’s epiphany, and Moses’ reception of the Ten Commandments.97 Indeed, Islamic sources acknowledge that God selected the Israelites as His chosen people by protecting them, performing miracles on their behalf, and providing them with food. Nevertheless, the Israelites were ungrateful, rebellious, and disobedient.98 For example, when Moses returned to the Israelites with the tablets, he found most of them worshipping a golden calf. Moses was enraged, and God commanded him to have everyone that worshipped the calf be killed. God also punished the Israelites by abandoning them in the wilderness for forty years before they entered the Holy Land (al-Arḍ al-muqaddasa).99

The story of Moses and the Israelites plays an important role in the making of Islamic religious identity and historical legitimacy. Although God took the Israelites as His “Chosen people,” they remained ungrateful, despite His grace and miracles. This

95 While in the Bible the number of these plagues is 10, Islamic sources mention only nine.
96 Al-Ṭabarānī, Taʾrīkh, I, 413-421 (de Goeje, I, 478-488); al-Thaʿlabī, Qisas al-anbiyāʾ, 190-200; Ibn Kathīr, Qisas al-anbiyāʾ, 268-275.
aspect of the Moses narrative aims to demonstrate that Muslims, worthier of God’s grace and blessing, are the true “Chosen people.” This view is clearly exemplified in a hadīth on the authority of the Companion Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 680), in which the Prophet says:

When Moses was given the tablets he examined them and said: ‘O Lord, you had bestowed upon me a great blessing that you never honored anyone with before me.’ He [God] said: ‘I chose you above the best among humans through My messages and revelations, so follow what I gave you thankfully, i.e. with force, diligence, and determination; and be mindful of the great esteem to Muḥammad, may peace be upon him, before you die.’ Moses said: ‘My Lord, who is Muḥammad?’ He [God] replied: ‘He is Aḥmad whose name was fixed on My Throne two thousand years before I created Heaven and Earth, he is a prophet and the best of My creatures and the most beloved one among humans and angels.’ Then Moses said: ‘O Lord, if Muḥammad is the most beloved one among Your creatures, have You created a more dignified nation than my nation?’ God Almighty then replied: ‘The superiority of the community of Muḥammad, may peace be upon him, over other nations is comparable to My superiority over all creatures.’

To sum up, the Moses story constitutes a significant link in Islamic accounts of prophetic history in general and the ulū al-‘azm framework in particular. To construct their religious self-identity, Muslim scholars use the Moses story to contrast the grace that God bestowed upon the Jews as His “Chosen people,” with their ingratitude for His miraculous deeds. Following Muḥammad’s message, Muslims became, therefore,
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worthier of the title “Chosen people.” Moving chronologically, we come to the Jesus story and its place in the Islamic tradition of prophethood.

5. Jesus and Islamic Apocalypticism

Jesus, whose name in Arabic is ‘Īsā or al-Masīḥ, plays a prominent role in the Islamic presentations of the ulū al-‘azm narratives. The Jesus story recurs frequently in the Qur’ān; one chapter is even entitled “Mary” (Maryam). The Jesus narrative in the Qur’ān consists of the following major themes: Mary and the birth of Jesus,101 Jesus’ prophethood and miracles,102 Jesus’ disciples,103 and the nature of Jesus.104 The same topics, yet with more details, can be found in the prophetic tradition.105 The influence of the New Testament is, as we shall see, noticeable in Islamic accounts. However, one has to bear in mind two fundamental differences between Islam and Christianity, regarding the questions of the Trinity and the Crucifixion.106 These issues generated the theological polemic between Muslims and Christians in the Middle Ages. However, the examination of these differences is beyond the scope of this article.

The presentation of Jesus’ prophethood in the Qur’ān and the prophetic tradition served as a model for later Muslim scholars. However, as time passed, they sought non-Islamic materials, such as the New Testament, to provide more coherence. The plot of the

101 Sūrat Āl-Imrān (3): 42-47; Sūrat Maryam (19): 16-26
105 Al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-bukhārī, v, kitāb bad ‘al-khalq, 390-401 (ḥadīths 3071-3086)
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Jesus narrative in Islamic sources follows, on the whole, the Gospels, and particularly those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.\(^\text{107}\) As in Christian sources,\(^\text{108}\) Muslim scholars allocate a central role for Mary in the Jesus story, portrayed as one of the most upright and pious among women.\(^\text{109}\) Mary was betrothed to Joseph when she received the announcement that she would be Jesus’ mother. God sent the archangel Gabriel to Mary in the form of a human who breathed into an opening in her clothing, and from this breath Jesus was conceived. Giving birth to Jesus, Mary had to confront her people and convince them about this miraculous sign of God.\(^\text{110}\) It was Jesus who, as an infant, spoke to them, presenting himself as the messenger of God and defending his mother for giving birth to a fatherless child.\(^\text{111}\) The birth of Jesus is portrayed in Islamic traditions as a significant event in prophetic history. The day Jesus was born, all idols, therefore, toppled on their heads, and demons were terrified and confused.\(^\text{112}\) As part of the miraculous abilities that God granted Jesus, Islamic traditions portray Jesus’ ability to heal the blind and the leper and bring forth the dead.\(^\text{113}\)

Islamic traditions treat the major events and themes of Jesus’ life and refer to the geographical locations associated with his story, such as Nazareth, Bethlehem, Egypt, and Jerusalem. A central theme in Islamic accounts of the Jesus story is the Jewish opposition to his new prophetic mission. Such is the case with Herod, the governor of Judea, who attempted to kill the newborn baby, but God prevented him from achieving

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109 Surat Al-‘Imrān (3): 42. When the Angel said: “Mary, God has chosen you and purified you, and chosen you above all women of the world.”
111 Al-Ṭabarānī, Jāmi‘ al-bayān, xvi, 76-8; Ibn Kathīr, Qisas al-anbiyā‘, 479.
112 Al-Ṭabarānī, Ta’rīkh, I, 595-596 (de Goeje, I, 727-728); al-Tha‘labī, Qisas al-anbiyā‘, 384-385.
113 Al-Tha‘labī, Qisas al-anbiyā‘, 392-394; Ibn Kathīr, Qisas al-anbiyā‘, 459-461.
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that goal. Placing the Jesus story chronologically, most Muslim historians treat it as part of Roman history. According to these accounts, we learn, as in the New Testament, that Jesus was from Nazareth and born in Bethlehem during the reign of the emperor Augustus. The fact that some Muslim historians mention the 25th of December as his exact birth date shows the reliance on new sources.

Jesus’ disciples and the missionary tasks entrusted to them form another important theme in the Islamic tradition. Interestingly, in Islamic texts, the term disciples appears as the *hawāriyūn*, deriving from the root *h-w-r*, associated with whiteness. They were given this title because they were pure-hearted and their faces were radiant with light due to their deep devotion to God. Muslim scholars refer to the twelve apostles and their role in conveying the message of God to other peoples. No doubt, Islamic interest in Jesus’ apostles relates closely to the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad, who played an indispensable role in the transmission of the prophetic tradition to the following generations.

The Jesus story plays a significant role in Islamic religious legitimacy and historical identity. To achieve this objective, Islamic traditions place an emphasis on three themes of the Jesus narrative. First, Jesus is the last prophet-messenger (*rasūl*) sent to the Israelites who had gone astray, reminding them of God’s straight path. Second, his prophetic mission was also to bring good tidings of the coming of Muḥammad as the “seal of the prophets.” Finally, Jesus plays an indispensable role in Islamic apocalyptic

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literature, specifically, in his struggle against the Antichrist. A reference to the first two themes can be found in the Qur’ān, where we are told:

When Jesus, son of Mary, said: “Israelites, I am the messenger of God to you, fulfilling that which is in my hands of the Torah, good news of the messenger to come after me, his name being Ahmad.” When he came to them with signs they said: “This is clear magic.”

The theme of the coming of Muḥammad, foretold by Jesus, also recurs in a number of ḥadīths. According to one such ḥadīth, the Prophet says: “I am the prayer of my father Abraham and the good tiding of Jesus; when my mother was pregnant with me she saw as if light radiated from her and lit the palaces of Busra in Syria.” This ḥadīth stresses three significant aspects of Islamic religious identity and historical legitimacy: Abraham is the founder of Islam, Jesus announced the coming of Muhammad, and Islam is the last revealed religion.

Jesus also figures prominently in Islamic apocalyptic literature, where he plays, as we shall see, a pivotal role in the struggle against the Antichrist. Thus, according to Islamic sources, Jesus will come back to lead the Islamic community, along with the Mahdi, and defeat the Antichrist. References to the eschatological role of Jesus can be found in the prophetic tradition. Such is the case with the two following ḥadīths. In the first, the Prophet says, “How would God destroy a community that begins with me and

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118 Islamic traditions use different names to refer to the Prophet Muḥammad, such as Ahmad and Tāḥa.
121 The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories In Islamic literature, 22-29
ends with Jesus, and the Mahdi, who is from my family, in the middle!”\textsuperscript{122} In the second, the Prophet says:

All the prophets are brothers. Their mothers are different but their religion is one. I am the worthiest among all people of Jesus, son of Mary, May peace be upon them, for there was no prophet between him and me. The son of Mary is about to appear as a just judge among you living among the community as my vicegerent. When you see him, you will recognize him to be a man of medium size, with skin of red and white…. He will break the cross, kill the pigs, and abolish the tax on non-Muslims until all other religious sects, but Islam, perish. In this time, God will destroy the hypocrite Antichrist, and will establish security on earth…. He [Jesus] will remain for 40 years… then he will die, be prayed over by Muslims, and buried in Medina next to ‘Umar.\textsuperscript{123}

This hadith provides a clearer emphasis on Jesus’ role as the eschatological leader of the Islamic community, second only to Muḥammad. It demonstrates that Jesus propagates the same divine message that began with Adam and was concluded with Muḥammad’s message. He will appear again after Muḥammad to lead and protect the Islamic community against the Antichrist. Thus, Islamic traditions apply the Jesus narrative to both the past and future in Islamic religious and historical identity.

Conclusion

\textsuperscript{122} Al-Tha‘labī, \textit{Qisas al-anbiyā’}. 404.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid. 403-404.
Prophethood in Islam acquires a unique meaning that paved the way for the religious distinctiveness of Islam. This perception is based primarily on the belief in the revealed divine message that God bestows upon chosen persons referred to in Islamic traditions as prophet-messengers (rasūls). These chosen prophets serve as communicators between God and humans by conveying His message, observing His commandments, and demonstrating His miraculous signs. This understanding of prophethood is best exemplified in the stories of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, who received (along with Muḥammad) the epithet “ulū al-‘azm. At the center of the formation of Islamic religious identity and historical legitimacy stands the belief that Muḥammad is the last prophet in the long line of prophets originating with Adam. Hence, the concept of khātam al-anbiyā’ (seal of the prophets) underlines the finality of Muhammad’s prophethood.

Muhammad’s unique status among other prophets, beginning with Adam, makes him, according to Islamic belief, the most authentic representative of God’s message. Hence, Islam is deemed superior to other religions, and Muslims are the new and only chosen people. Islamic portraits of the prophetic stories of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus recount parallel tracks of the same divine message that confirms the authenticity and the finality of Muhammad’s prophethood, with an emphasis placed on the stories of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. In Islam, Moses and Jesus are considered the founding fathers of the other two competing monotheistic religions--Judaism and Christianity, respectively. However, Abraham is believed to be neither Jewish nor Christian, but rather the founding father of Islam, and Muhammad is the true and final restorer of the Abrahamic tradition. This construction of prophetic history, therefore, demonstrates the historical legitimacy of Islam and its distinctive religious identity.