Biblical Prophets in the Qur'ān and Muslim Literature

ROBERTO TOTTOLI

Routledge
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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First Published in 2002
by Routldge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN
270 Madison Ave, New York NY 10016

Transferred to Digital Printing 2009

This is a translation of:
I profeti biblici nella tradizione islamica, Paideia, Brescia 1999
Translation: Michael Robertson © 2001

Typeset in Baskerville by LaserScript Ltd, Mitcham, Surrey

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book has been requested

ISBN10: 0-7007-1394-8 (hbk)
ISBN10: 0-415-55417-9 (pbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-700-71394-3 (hbk)
ISNB13: 978-0-415-55417-6 (pbk)

Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent.

to Francesca

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PART II THE BIBLICAL PROPHETS IN MUSLIM LITERATURE

Preface

The Qur'ān and all types of Muslim religious literature often mention the names and experiences of the characters from the Old and New Testaments, from the patriarchs to Jesus and the Apostles. These characters constitute the historical context in which the community of believers must see itself and the prophet Muḥammad as bringing to a conclusion and sealing the Biblical tradition. All this is naturally presented from a specifically Islamic perspective, as set out in the Qur'ān, according to which all these characters were messengers and prophets, sent to their respective peoples, to spread the same belief that would then be preached by Muḥammad in the 7th century after Christ. For this reason the Qur'ān regards Abraham, Moses and Jesus – together with all the other characters mentioned – as prophets of the Muslim tradition, in this way claiming the one and true interpretation of the significance of their mission and, in consequence, of their story. The Old and New Testaments, as a consequence, are texts which, according to Muslim opinion, have been corrupted and which only the Qur'ānic interpretation, the word of God, can bring back to their original significance.

In this way, therefore, the Qur'ān simplifies the historical picture: all of the prophets that came before Muḥammad had more or less the same function. The monotheism they preached was the same as that preached by the Arab Prophet and their stories are simply the descriptions of the vicissitudes that they were subject to with their respective peoples. For this reason, the extra-canonical exegetical tradition could not do other than follow in this established pattern, thus leaving very little room for alternative interpretations. The prevalent exegetical tradition in

fact never viewed favourably symbolic interpretations or theological and philosophical interpretations in which the role of the prophets in relation to Muḥammad was re-interpreted, because all of this had already been established in the Qur'ān. In a sense all that the Qur'ān sought was that its divine words be explained and where necessary supplemented with missing particulars.

This book is dedicated to the stories of the Biblical prophets in the Qur'ān and in Muslim literature. The division of this book into two parts is above all intended to mark the difference in importance between the sacred text itself and the extra-canonical traditions: the Qur'ān is the word of God and, as such, binding, both in Muḥammad's time and today, and its words are true milestones around which the extra-canonical traditions turn. In the first part of this text the particularities of the stories of the Biblical prophets who are mentioned in the Qur'ān are discussed and described at length, prophet by prophet, indicating, when necessary, similarities to and differences from the Jewish and Christian traditions. This comparison is not carried out with the purpose of stressing the dependence or presumed inexactitude of the Qur'ān in relation to the Biblical tradition, but only to explain the particularities of the contents and the form of those parts of the Qur'ān dedicated to the prophets.

The same investigation of contents would have also been possible for the second part of the book in which the extra-canonical traditions on the Biblical prophets are examined. In all genres of Muslim literature a large number of every type of tradition about the prophets is reported, in which, as in the Qur'ānic passages, the same stories as those in the Bible can be recognized, or others stories which are more or less similar to the legends that can be found in the Jewish and Christian apocryphal literatures can be seen, as well as other cases where there are original narratives. A work of that kind would have transformed this book into a comparative dictionary of narrative and traditional motifs and not an enquiry into religious literary history. I have thus opted for a history of these extra-canonical traditions about the Biblical prophets, as they were when they were first spread and which genres of literature made use of them and in which ways. In this analysis therefore a history of the literature that deals principally with the beginnings (7th–9th centuries), touching on the classical medieval period only in certain aspects, is delineated; in the concluding section the analysis embraces the great

innovations that emerged in the works of the 20th century. All of the literature used derives almost exclusively from the most typical genres of the Islamic religious sciences of the Sunnī tradition, without therefore taking into consideration certain sectarian concepts or mystical or philosophical ones that, though making original contributions, have always been considered, from many points of view, marginal.

Some clarification of the terminology used is necessary. Those who throughout the book and already in this preface are referred to as "Biblical prophets" include all of the characters from the Old and New Testaments. The Qur'ān does not distinguish between the Patriarchs, the Prophets and Jesus but all of them are mentioned with the distinction, as discussed below, between prophets and messengers. Furthermore, it is opportune at this point to give an explanation of one of the terms most often used in the second part of this book that can give rise to some misunderstanding. I refer to "tradition" and use the plural form to indicate those short stories which are usually attributed to the first Muslim generations and are subsequently quoted by the authors of the following centuries. In this sense, "traditions" is synonymous with stories and, to a certain extent, legends. A separate category of these "traditions" are those which deal with the words and the acts of Muḥammad, but, to avoid any confusion these are referred to with the expression "the sayings of the prophet Muḥammad". To refer to the Arab Prophet the transcription of the Arab name Muḥammad is always used. The chapters of the Qur'ān are referred to using the Arabic word – sura – which is not italicised. As far as quotes from the Qur'ān itself are concerned the translation used is that of A.J. Arberry (*The Koran Interpreted*, 1st ed. London 1955), modified when necessary.

In conclusion, I wish I make a brief reference to the story behind this book. The first elaboration of this subject arose from research undertaken at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, during the years 1993 and 1994, for my doctorate studies programme in "Studi e Ricerche su Vicino Oriente e Maghreb" (Studies and Researches on the Near East and Maghreb) undertaken at the Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli. A grant from the Lady Davis Fellowship Trust made this period of study in Jerusalem possible. The final version of this book was however prepared at the Orient-Institut der DMG of Beirut in the summer 1998. In conclusion I wish to mention and thank the friends who have had

the patience to read the text and have offered their suggestions: Bruno Chiesa, Università di Torino, Alberto Ventura, Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli and Giovanni Canova, Università di Venezia.

Preface to the English Edition

The English edition of my *I profeti biblici nella tradizione islamica* contains various additions and changes. In the first part, the chapter titled "The 'Arabian' prophets" is completely new and was conceived to complete the treatment of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān, though these are not truly Biblical prophets. In the second part, the chapter about the Biblical prophets in the sayings of Muḥammad is a reduced version of what appears in the Italian edition; the last chapter, which is devoted to medieval and modern times, has been considerably rewritten and enlarged. Along with these changes, some other minor ones reflect a number of new Arabic sources taken into consideration, mainly modern *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* collections which have recently become available to me and the manuscripts dealing with *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* which I read in al-Asad Library in Damascus in July 1999. Also the Western literature has been updated with a few recent publications.

In conclusion, I wish to express my gratitude also to those who made this English edition possible: first of all the translator Michael Robertson whose work and patience have been invaluable and the editor of the series Andrew Rippin, who proposed this English edition, as well as the modifications and, above all, revised the final draft with useful suggestions.

PART I

THE STORIES OF THE PROPHETS IN THE QUR'ĀN

Chapter 1

The function and meaning of the stories of the prophets in the Qur'ān

A large part of the Qur'ān is dedicated to stories about the characters in the Old and New Testaments. If certain allusions to pre-Islamic Arab history are excluded, it can even be asserted that all of the references to the past that are contained in the Qur'ān are stories of the Biblical prophets. This first section concentrates on those characteristics that seem to be the most significant and original in the Qur'ānic history of the Biblical prophets. In the first place, the formal aspects and functions of these narratives within Qur'ānic revelation are discussed, while the central and most substantial part of the text is dedicated to an exposition, prophet by prophet, of their contents. Finally, those verses from the sacred text that contain the elements of an Islamic prophetology are examined in order to define the role and the function of the prophets that preceded and prefigured the mission of Muḥammad.

In the Qur'ān, the narratives of the Biblical prophets are not presented in a chronological order, nor do they use a form that is typical of many of the books of the Bible; rather, they are spread throughout various chapters. The Qur'ān is not a collection of passages on the events of the past or the deeds of Muḥammad, nor even less, an organic story of his preaching, but rather the faithful record of the word of God, according to the Islamic conception, that inspired him in the course of his life. The relationship between Muḥammad and the Qur'ān is so close that the majority of the revelation takes the form of a direct discourse from God to his Prophet, the purpose of which is to instruct and comfort him and through him to call his people to have faith in God.

1. THE STORIES OF PUNISHMENT

The Qur'ānic stories of the Biblical prophets are often introduced with expressions which demonstrate their role in the dialogue between God and his prophet Muḥammad and, above all, in Muḥammad's preaching amongst the Arabs of his time. Usually these expressions are brief recurrent phrases, which signal a brusque change of topic and introduce a more or less lengthy story. At the same time they also serve to emphasise the function of the words of God which are addressed to the prophet Muḥammad when the subject is the events of the prophets.

Many Qur'ānic narrations are thus introduced with explicit requests, not to say orders, to "remember". More or less lengthy passages begin with the imperative "and remember ..." followed by the names and experiences of various prophets.[1] It must be remembered that it is God himself who is making the request and that the interlocutor is Muḥammad. Similar formulae are repeated for other brief expressions that introduce the narrative sections in some suras. God addresses Muḥammad asking: "Have you heard the story about ...?" or "Have you not regarded ...?", before passages dealing with the prophets.[2] Clearly, none of these expressions contains a precise indication as to the reason why the events in the lives of the prophets must be remembered, but in any case they establish that their revelation is, above all, associated with Muḥammad.

The purpose of these requests made by God is clarified by the contents of numerous other verses in which it is affirmed that the prophet Muḥammad must learn from the example of the final triumph that awaited the prophets of the past, while his people has to take warning from the destiny of the ancient peoples. The stories of the prophets and of the ancients therefore assume an emblematic value for Muḥammad and for his listeners.[3] It is for this reason that God tells Muḥammad that he has already sent other prophets and tells him directly that these persons of the past were just like him, both in terms of their mission and above all for the vicissitudes they encountered during their preaching:

> Indeed, We sent messengers before thee, among the factions of the ancients, and not a single messenger came to them, but they mocked at him (...) they believe not in it, though the example of the ancients is already gone (Qur. 15:10–13).[4]

Other verses further clarify the meaning of the example and of the warning contained in the stories of the prophets: these prophets, despite denunciation and persecution, in the end prevailed while their disbelieving peoples were exterminated. God therefore invites his Prophet to remember these events and by doing so he takes sides with him. God encourages him to continue, he reminds him that matters will work out better for him, just as it did for the Biblical prophets. At the same time God admonishes the unbelievers saying that their obstinate refusal will only bring them certain defeat, because the Prophet is bearer of truth and those who reject him will face a sad end. The ultimate point of some stories of the prophets is therefore to give powerful assistance to the prophet Muḥammad to induce him to carry out his mission with patience and faith notwithstanding the setbacks and opposition he encountered and the vexations and humiliation he faced. The events of the past are not however recorded only in this function for Muḥammad: the Prophet receives the order to recite these stories of punishment to his people because from the tragic end of the others they can take good instruction.[5] Of the Arabs and all others who obstinately refuse to accept the message of Muḥammad, it is thus said that certain things will happen

> like Pharaoh's folk, and the people before him, who cried lies to the signs of their Lord, so We destroyed them because of their sins, and We drowned the folk of Pharaoh and all the evildoers (Qur. 8:54).

The impiety of the ancients, it is moreover said, is the very same impiety as that of the men who surround Muḥammad, and God addresses the request to persevere to the Prophet who has to confront this humiliating refusal, because if he is contradicted and rejected, this is the same fate that also Noah, Abraham, Lot and Moses suffered when facing their peoples.[6] Muḥammad was in fact a prophet who was rejected by the majority of the Arab pagans of Mecca and by the Jews during his first years in Medina and nothing better than the stories of the past – the Qur'ān suggests – can help him to overcome these refusals:

> Bear patiently what they say, and remember Our servant David, the man of might; he was a penitent (Qur. 38:17).
>
> And all what We relate to thee of the tidings of the messengers is that whereby We strengthen thy heart; in these

> there has come to thee the truth and an admonition, and a reminder to the believers (Qur. 11:120).

The sacred text returns to these motifs with particular insistence. Each of the prophets, whether in the passages which recount events or in the verses that contain affirmations in general terms, is described as being victorious over his reluctant population, thanks to God who gave him guidance when all seemed lost and consolidated his renown in time:

> Till, when the messengers despaired, deeming they were counted liars, Our help came to them and whosoever We willed was delivered. Our might will never be turned back from the people of the sinners (Qur. 12:110).
>
> Noah called to Us and how excellent were the answerers! (...) and left for him among later folk "Peace be upon Noah among all beings" (Qur. 37:75, 78).
>
> And We also favoured Moses and Aaron (...) and left for them among later folk "Peace be upon Moses and Aaron" (Qur. 37:114, 119).[7]

The Qur'ān insists even more about the ineluctable destiny that befell those who did not have faith. They were guilty of having rejected the prophets whom they accused of lying, and for this reason they were punished without mercy. The stories of past times, as the Qur'ān gives testimony, are nothing but stories of generations who were annihilated because of their sins.[8] The Qur'ān emphasises on several occasions the responsibility of the disbelieving populations that rejected not only the revelations but, no less gravely, also the signs and the proofs brought by the prophets during their missions.[9] The moral summoning to those that listen to the Qur'ānic message from the mouth of Muḥammad could not therefore be more explicit: not believing in his message will result in the same tragedy which fell on those who in the past rejected the prophets and the messengers of God.

Some further considerations could be added regarding those verses which have been examined up to this point. The Qur'ān records in a clear way its intended purpose by means of recurrent formulae or explicit affirmations. The stories are not revealed merely for the purpose of conserving the memory of the past itself, but to illustrate a precise teaching through a complex event or a

detail, and because Muhammad and all men draw the moral of them. To this end, as is seen, one of the principal motifs is that of the punishment that will strike those who refuse to have faith in the message of the prophets. Entire suras are composed of lengthy passages that describe, in a repetitive manner, the vicissitudes of the prophets charged with a mission undertaken among their peoples who reject them and who, for this reason, are cancelled from the face of the earth. The sura of the Heights (no. 7), for example, describe one after the other the various fruitless calls of Noah (vv. 59–64), those of the Arabian prophets Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, and Shu'ayb (vv. 65–79, 85–93), the vicissitudes of Lot (vv. 80–84) and those of Moses in his unsuccessful attempt to call to faith Pharaoh (vv. 103–141).[10] In these passages the occurrences are reproduced in a schematic way: the prophet calls for faith in God, but his people reject him outright and in the end suffer the anger of God.

One last detail needs to be emphasised. These stories of punishment were revealed when the prophet Muḥammad was at Mecca, and thus in the first phase of his prophetic mission, when his message was openly derided and rejected by the majority of his fellow citizens. The vivid description of the efforts and the fruitless proclamations of Noah, Abraham, Lot and Moses as well as of the other non-Biblical prophets mirrors the substantial lack of success of Muḥammad among the pagans of Mecca.[11]

2. MUḤAMMAD AND THE BIBLICAL TRADITION

Along with the stories of punishment one can identify another well defined thematic group of verses dedicated to the Biblical prophets. In these verses the Qur'ānic message establishes that Muḥammad is the legitimate continuator of the Biblical tradition and is the sole heir of the progeny of the Israelite prophets that through Abraham goes back to Noah and Adam. This affirmation, whose centrality in the Muslim religious conception one cannot fail to acknowledge, recurs often and in various ways in the Qur'ān. First of all, God communicates to Muḥammad and to all the believers that what is prescribed to them is not something new, but a reproduction of that which in the past the earlier prophets revealed to the Israelites:

> We have revealed to thee as We revealed to Noah, and the prophets after him, and We revealed to Abraham, Ishmael,

> Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes, Jesus and Job, Jonah and Aaron and Solomon, and We gave to David Psalms (Qur. 4:163).
>
> He has laid down for you as religion that He charged Noah with, and that We have revealed to thee, and that We charged Abraham with, Moses and Jesus (Qur. 42:13).

Using the mode and style described earlier, God addresses Muḥammad directly, to invite him to define in this way the faith that he is preaching and, therefore, to proclaim the consonance between the Qur'ānic message and earlier revelations:

> Say: "We believe in God, and that which has been sent down on us, and sent down on Abraham and Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob, and the tribes, and in that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and the prophets of their Lord" (Qur. 3:84).

The same concept is repeated where not only Muḥammad, but all of the believers are invited to proclaim their faith in God, in his prophets, and their legitimate place in the religious tradition these prophets represent:

> Say you: "Nay, but we follow the faith of Abraham (...) We believe in God, and in that which has been sent down on us and sent down on Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which was given to Moses and Jesus and the prophets of their Lord; we make no division between any of them, and to Him we surrender" (Qur. 2:135–6).

This verse contains more than one element which it is necessary to emphasise. Especially the introductory exhortations, addressed evidently to the Prophet and the believers, give a clear instruction to affirm their own identity and, as is evidenced by the context of the verses, to defend themselves from criticisms and polemical attacks. The intended recipients of the message are the Jews, to whom the sura of the Cow (no. 2) revealed at Medina dedicates many passages, not only to describe various happenings, but also to pose certain questions regarding their confrontation with the Muslims. The contents of the verse assume therefore a decisive polemical force, that is connected directly with the situation created between Muḥammad and the Jews at Medina. The Muslims, as the Qur'ānic passage affirms, believe in the prophetic inspiration that has guided the great personalities of the Biblical

tradition, claim legitimately to belong to the "religion of Abraham" and they consider themselves the ideal continuators and renewers of it, through the message brought by Muḥammad. The Jews, and naturally also the Christians, are thus invited to believe the Arab Prophet and to consider him as the continuator of their tradition.[12]

The confrontation with the Jews in particular, that emerges with force in the verses revealed at Medina, is a central theme in the Qur'ān. The difference from the revelation at Mecca is evident: the questioners and opponents of Muḥammad are no longer the pagans, but from 622 AD, the date of the flight from Mecca, are the Jewish tribes that live at Medina.[13] The picture of the polemical confrontation, with the abandonment of Mecca, is therefore changed, and God is now at the side of his prophet to demonstrate firstly to the Jews and, in the second place, to the Christians that Muḥammad is the heir of the Biblical tradition that they themselves claim to follow. Jews and Christians, it follows, must therefore believe in his mission. Further proof of this is given by an argument that the Qur'ān borrows from the Biblical tradition and naturally makes use of it in an Islamic perspective, when it states that both Jews and Christians have betrayed the pact with God of which they were the recipients, denying the favour received, and if they wish to mend their ways they must as a consequence follow Muḥammad.[14] The Arab Prophet is in fact the depository of the new pact established between God and the believers, that is a mere restoration of the ancient pact which God established with the mission of the other prophets.

> And when We made a covenant with the prophets, with thee, and with Noah, and Abraham, and Moses, and Jesus, the son of Mary; a solemn covenant We made with them (Qur. 33:7).

The affinity between the prophets and Muḥammad that constitutes a fundamental element in the stories of punishment returns in a manner which is even more accentuated in the verses that affirm the fundamental continuity between the Biblical revelations and the mission of Muḥammad. In this case the sacred text does not make any reference to the events in the lives of various prophets, but points decisively towards the figure of Abraham. God orders his Prophet:

> Then We revealed to thee: "Follow thou the faith of Abraham (*millat Ibrāhīm*), a man of pure faith and no idolater" (Qur. 16:123).

This affirmation is accompanied by precise orders such that Muḥammad proclaims this same concept to his community of believers, in such a way that they themselves are identified as those who followed the faith of Abraham:

> Say: "As for me, My Lord has guided me to a straight path, a right religion, the faith of Abraham (*millat Ibrāhīm*)" (Qur. 6:161).
>
> Say: "God has spoken the truth; therefore follow the faith of Abraham (*millat Ibrāhīm*)" (Qur. 3:95).[15]

The name of Abraham features in all of these verses through the expression *millat Ibrāhīm*, which in the Qur'ān indicates the faith and the conduct attributed to Abraham. What is being dealt with is the true religion, from which all the other communities – primarily Jews and Christians – have deviated and that Muḥammad has been called to restore and spread among mankind. The Qur'ānic message is not therefore something new but coincides perfectly with the faith of Abraham, who is defined father of the believers and, as a consequence, a kind of first Muslim to whom Muḥammad's preaching is linked.[16] This is in fact the role the Qur'ān assigns to Abraham as the founder of the holy places of the pilgrimage to Mecca and there could not be a stronger argument to demonstrate the union between Muḥammad and Abraham.[17]

More than any generic parallel between the experiences of the prophets of the past and the story of Muḥammad, the passages in which it is affirmed that Islam and the faith of Abraham are the same thing seem a conclusive affirmation of both the definition of the role of the prophetic message preached by Muḥammad, and of the polemical confrontation with the Jews and Christians who are pictured as undermining the Biblical tradition from which they have deviated. This conception fits perfectly into the general Medinan climate of the intense confrontation with the Jews, and it certainly is not by chance that the greater portion of the verses that allude to the Biblical prophets in these terms were revealed after the Hijra. However, to see an absolute dependence between

these motifs and the situation confronted by Muḥammad at Medina is to view matters too narrowly. At least two of the verses that contain the expression *millat Ibrāhīm* were probably revealed at Mecca where the polemical confrontation with the Jews certainly did not constitute the principal preoccupation of the Prophet. Thus, if it was at Medina that the topic became central, this fact provides evidence that already at Mecca the mission of Muḥammad had been conceived of as being in line with and a continuation of the Biblical prophets who had preceded it and above all with Abraham, whose religion and conduct were considered as coinciding with Islam.[18]

3. HOW THE QUR'ĀN DEFINES THE STORIES OF THE PROPHETS

Before conducting a particularised examination of the stories of the prophets contained in the Qur'ān it seems opportune to take into consideration some Qur'ānic passages that also contain an implicit definition of these narratives. The intention here is to study the terminology that is employed in the sacred text to talk about or evoke these passages and to distinguish those words from the exhortations, prescriptions and all the other genres that occur in the sacred text.

The Qur'ān, it may be observed, does not contain an unequivocal definition of the stories of the Biblical prophets and so a search for the systematic use of technical terms is decidedly fruitless. This means that, apart from its function for the mission of Muḥammad, the Qur'ān does not consider these narrative parts as a precise genre that can be distinguished from the rest of the revelations. The Qur'ān for example introduces, accompanies or concludes some passages with verses which contain the words *qaṣaṣ, naba'* or *ḥadīth* all of which mean story or account and all of which are used indifferently. A clear proof of this is the sura of Joseph (no. 12) which uses each of these terms to refer to the same story:

> We will reveal to thee the fairest of stories (*al-qaṣaṣ*) (Qur. 12:3).
>
> That is of the stories (*anbā'* pl. of *naba'*) of the Unseen that We revealed to thee (Qur. 12:102).
>
> In their stories (*qiṣaṣihim*) is surely a lesson to men possessed of minds; it is not a tale (*ḥadīth*) forged (Qur. 12:111).

At this point any other examples are superfluous. The prominence accorded to *qaṣaṣ* in both Qur'ānic exegesis and in Islamic literature to define Qur'ānic narration (*qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān*) and stories of the prophets (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*) has to be considered extraneous to the Qur'ān. In the sacred text the terms that indicate stories and accounts are used indifferently, without an apparent difference of meaning and above all without a preponderant use of one in preference to the others.[19]

Lastly, the Qur'ān contains the expression *asāṭīr al-awwalīn* that seems in certain cases to refer to the stories contained in the holy text and, even more interestingly, is always quoted in such a way that it comes from the mouth of the opponents of Muḥammad. There is thus a testimony differing from the terminology that has been considered above which, from the point of view of the Qur'ān, reflects a very precise historical situation. The expression appears in nine different passages, in which the unbelievers reject and even mock the contents of the prophetic message brought by Muḥammad and, consequently, all of the narratives that constitute an essential part of his preaching:

> And if they see any sign whatever, they do not believe in it, so that when they come to thee they dispute with thee, the unbelievers saying: "This is naught but stories of the ancients (*asāṭīr al-awwalīn*)" (Qur. 6:25).

Other passages return to the same topic and specify that the unbelievers refuse to put faith in the signs of God and claim that they themselves are able to produce something similar, since all that is being dealt with is but *asāṭīr al-awwalīn*.[20] Some small assistance towards a more precise definition is provided by some verses in which the unbelievers define the Qur'ānic message in this way when its theme is the promise of resurrection; it is stated that they do not believe and say that these promises are *asāṭīr al-awwalīn*.[21] Up to this point the expression has in any case a very vague meaning. No more assistance is forthcoming if the expression is examined separately as two distinct words. The word *al-awwalūn* indicates in this case, as in many other Qur'ānic verses, the ancients, the progenitors, that is those past generations the memory of whom must have been very clear in the minds of the people of Muḥammad's time, while *asāṭīr* is a word of non-Arabic origin, with the singular form *usṭūra* that is usually considered to be derived from an analogous Aramaic or

Syriac form, or that could have been derived from the Greek *ἱστορία*.[22]

The translation "stories of the ancients", in which the word "stories" refers to accounts transmitted orally and not through written texts, seems the most correct and the most well placed to carry the shades of meaning that emerge in the Qur'ān. In some cases the expression is in fact uttered by the enemies of Muḥammad in an evidently ironic sense, and thus spoken jokingly to the Prophet who is accused of repeating a sort of fable from time immemorial in which nobody can any longer believe. This reaction demonstrates in a significant way that the Arabs were already aware of the contents of the revelation brought by Muḥammad, at least as far as it concerns eschatological promises, and that they were not inclined to believe in these contents, which were defined as *asāṭīr al-awwalīn*.

Moreover the expression could also refer indirectly, in certain verses, to the stories of punishment which the Qur'ān contains in abundance. Among the signs brought by the Qur'ān, that are in certain passages dismissed as *asāṭīr al-awwalīn* by those opposing Muḥammad, are also the stories of the prophets. The events of the past, with the promise of the triumph of the prophets and the punishment of the unbelieving peoples, could by right be included among those signs and be rejected with disgust by those who considered them stories or fables of the ancients, handed down, known by everyone and thus reaching Muḥammad.[23] The tone of the verses in which the expression *asāṭīr al-awwalīn* appears is perfectly consistent with the attitude often attributed to the unbelievers towards the actions of the prophets contained in the Qur'ān, that were meant as a warning for the people of Muḥammad, but were constantly rejected and often ridiculed. In any case this is only a hypothesis, since *asāṭīr al-awwalīn* is never mentioned in the Qur'ān in direct connection with the lives of the Biblical prophets.[24]

NOTES

1 See Qur. 19:16, 41, 51, 54, 56; 38:17; 46:21. The formula "and when ..." – used as a foreword to the stories of the Biblical prophets in the Qur'ānic suras – also appears close in meaning; see Qur. 5:20; 6:74; 14:35; 21:76, 83, 85, 87, 89, 91; 26:10; 27:7; 29:28; 61:5; and cf. 19:2.

2 These expressions are mentioned in this order in Qur'ān: 20:9; 51:24; 79:15; 85:17; cf. Qur. 14:9; 64:5; and Qur. 2:243, 246, 258.

3 The concept is also referred to in those verses that make the prophets a model for Muhammad and for the believers. See for example Qur. 66:4: Abraham was a "good example" and Qur'ān 66:10–12: the wicked wives of Lot and Noah were examples for unbelievers, while examples for believers were the wives of Pharaoh and Mary. See also Qur. 43:56, where it is said that Pharaoh was a negative example.

4 This concept is also implicitly expressed in those verses preceded by the formula "we sent (ar. *la-qad arsalnā*)" like Qur. 7:59; 11:25; 14:5; cf. Qur. 27:45.

5 See in this sense the passages introduced by the formula "And recite to them ...": Qur. 7:175; 10:71; 26:69; cf. also Qur. 15:51: "And tell them ...". A particularly explicit verse is Qur. 14:9: "Has there not come to you the tidings of those who were before you – the people of Noah? (...) Their messengers came to them with the clear signs; but they thrust their hands into their mouths, saying, 'We certainly disbelieve in the message you have been sent with'".

6 Qur. 54:43. Qur. 22: 42–43: to the names of the prophets quoted here, the passage adds also those of the population of ʿĀd and of Thamūd to whom were sent the prophets Hūd and Ṣāliḥ. See also Qur. 57:26: for some that believed, as in the case of the few followers of Muḥammad at Mecca, and that followed the message of their Prophet, the majority were however unbelievers and refuted the message, as happened to Noah and Abraham.

7 See also Qur. 37:108, 129.

8 See for example Qur. 25:39; 43:55–56; 50:12–14 and cf. Qur. 38:12–15, where, among the others, Noah, Pharaoh and Lot are mentioned. See also all of the sura of the Heights (no. 7) in which the destruction of the people of various prophets is described. On the annihilated generations see Qur. 6:6; 20:128; and cf. also Qur. 29:40; 36:31.

9 On the signs brought by Moses, see Qur. 2:92; 3:11; 4:153; 14:5; 23:45; and in particular Qur. 11:96: "And we sent Moses with Our signs". It is said of Jesus that he was given clear proofs and Holy Spirit: Qur. 2:253. On the messengers in general, see Qur. 10:74.

10 The suras – along with the sura of Heights – dedicated principally to the stories of punishment are the sura of Hūd (no. 11), the sura of the Poets (no. 26), the sura of the Ant (no. 27), the Sura of the Ranks (no. 37) and the sura of the Moon (no. 54). According to Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 10–32, who analysed these stories of punishment (*Straflegenden*), on the basis of the order of revelation, the development of the stories in the Qur'ān follows the progressive growth in knowledge of the Biblical stories on the part of the prophet Muḥammad.

11 This point goes to the heart of various interpretations. Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 8–9, insists on the didactic nature of the narrative parts and stresses that not all of them are modelled on the personal experiences of Muḥammad. For the stories of punishment the parallel with the vicissitudes of Muḥammad is in any case incontestable. For this reason Nagel, *Der Koran*, 68–9, affirms that the events in the lives of the prophets in the Qur'ān are "islamicised".

12 See for example Qur. 5:19: "People of the Book, now there has come to you Our messenger, making things clear to you".

13 It is significant that at this point the formula "And recite to them ...", which in Meccan verses referred to the unbelievers and followers, is now used to refer to the Jews in a Medinan verse such as Qur. 5:27: "And recite thou to them [i.e. the Jews] the story of the two sons of Adam".

14 Amongst the innumerable references to the pact between the Israelites and God and to the favours that they received, see for example Qur. 2:40, 47, 63, 83, 93, 122; 3:81; 5:70 and cf. Qur. 4:155: they have violated the pact; Qur. 5:12–13: they broke the pact. The Qur'ān also refers to a pact with Adam: Qur. 20:115; and to a pact with the Christians: Qur. 5:14. A reference to a pact with people in general is in Qur. 7:102, and to a violated pact is in Qur. 8:56. The reference to the Biblical concept of a pact between the people and God is indisputable; for an in-depth analysis, see Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 8–12, and above all Jeffery, *The Qur'ān*, 32–9.

15 See also Qur. 4:125.

16 See in this sense Qur. 22:78: "And struggle for God as is His due, for He has chosen you, and has laid on you no impediment in your religion, being the faith of your father Abraham".

17 Of all the passages that refer to the rites of pilgrimage in connection with Abraham and Ishmael, one in particular, Qur. 2:130, mentions the expression *millat Ibrāhīm*, an expression that is also used in the definition Joseph gives of the faith of his fathers in Qur. 12:38.

18 Qur. 6:161; 16:123 and also 12:38 are Meccan verses. The question of when the concept of *millat Ibrāhīm* and the connection between Abraham and the places of the pilgrimage have been topics of controversial interpretation. According to C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Het Mekkaansche Feest* (Leiden 1880), according to whom the Qur'ān is a human product of Muḥammad, the relationship between Abraham and Muḥammad, and between Abraham and the places of the pilgrimage, emerged only with the transfer to Medina and were therefore directly inspired by the confrontation with the Jews. This interpretation, which evidently considers that all of the verses containing the expression *millat Ibrāhīm* were Medinan, was widely diffused, it was reaffirmed by T. Nöldeke and F. Schwally (*Geschichte des Qorans* I, 146), and taken up by A.J. Wensinck in the entry "*Ibrāhīm*" in the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden 1913–1943). In reality, as has been said, some of these verses were almost certainly revealed at Mecca and this entire interpretation, which still enjoys a certain favour, should be disregarded. Among the studies that have refuted the thesis of Snouk the most interesting is that of Beck, "Die Gestalt des Abraham am Wendepunkt der Entwicklung Muhammeds". A more detailed summary of the whole question and further bibliography are given by Bijlefeld, "Controversies Around the Qur'ānic Ibrāhīm Narrative".

19 The verses in which there are terms derived from the root *qaṣaṣa* that allude to the stories of the prophets are Qur. 3:62; 4:164; 6:130; 7:7, 35, 176; 40:78. *Naba'* is cited in Qur. 3:44; 5:27; 6:34; 7:175; 9:70; 10:71;

11:49; 14:9; 26:69; 28:3; 38:21; 54:4. That *qaṣaṣ* and *naba'* are synonyms and interchangeable is also demonstrated by other verses in which terms derived from the two roots appear next to each other, such as Qur. 11:120; 18:13; cf. 7:101; 11:100; 20:99. Another example in this respect is that offered in the twenty-eight sura with the title sura of the Story (*sūrat al-qaṣaṣ*) in which the initial verse affirms "We will recite to thee something of the story (*naba'*) of Moses and Pharaoh". *Ḥadīth* is instead quoted in Qur. 20:9; 51:24; 79:15; 85:17. As pointed out by Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 21, all three of the terms, in the formulae used, convey more the meaning of *exempla* rather than *historia*.

20 Qur. 6:25; 8:31; 16:24; 25:5; 68:15; 83:13.

21 Qur. 23:83; 27:68; 46:17.

22 The controversial meaning and the origin of *asāṭīr al-awwalīn* are discussed in particular by Nöldeke-Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, I, 16–7; Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 69–70; D. Künstlinger, "Asāṭīru-l-'awwalīna"; and Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary*, 56–7, who proposes various hypotheses. The most recent contribution to the debate is that of Radscheit, *Die koranische Herausforderung*, 56–60, which disputes the earlier ideas on the topic and affirms that the expression should be considered in connection with the eschatological promises rather than the narratives in general.

23 Within the vast range of meanings of "signs" are also included the stories of salvation of the prophets and of the punishment of their unbelieving peoples; see in this respect Watt-Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 124–5; Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 5.

24 Only in the later extra-canonical traditions is *asāṭīr al-awwalīn* used to refer explicitly to the stories of punishment, as for example in the passage translated by Radscheit, *Die koranische Herausforderung*, 59–60, that refers back to Ibn Isḥāq (d. 768 AD).

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Chapter 2

The Biblical prophets in the Qur'ān

As has already been mentioned, the passages in which the Biblical prophets are protagonists are dispersed throughout various suras in no precise order. The information contained in these narrative parts, despite repetitions, is not however always easy to comprehend or to incorporate into a reconstruction of the events which are being discussed. Without doubt this is due to the peculiarity of the Qur'ānic revelation. In the message which God directed to his prophet Muḥammad, the urgency to inspire exemplary events influences not only the style, which is elliptic and fragmentary, but also the topics which are selected for treatment and those which are ignored. The Qur'ānic stories, as a consequence, report certain episodes and, within those episodes, only those particulars which assist the objective of offering moral instruction are provided; the stories do not always provide an account in a congruent or precise manner. It therefore follows that the stories are often more evocative, rather than detailed and that the omission of particulars is amongst one of the most obvious features of this style.[1]

In the following pages the contents of the stories of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān will be examined prophet by prophet. Along with an analysis of the original characteristics of the Qur'ānic narratives, in certain cases reference will be made to the relation between the Qur'ānic version and the Jewish and Christian ones, above all to highlight similarities or differences which merit attention. Any references to borrowings or direct influences have intentionally been avoided, even if it is undeniable that some Qur'ānic versions are intimately connected with the Biblical versions and that they in some way constitute a particular

evolution of them; this must necessarily be so, given the environment and times during which the Qur'ān was revealed.[2]

In brief allusions and more extended passages, the Qur'ān returns with great frequency to the figures of the Biblical prophets. Not all the prophets receive the same treatment, given that some have a prominent role, while others are only remembered by name. The prophet who is referred to most often is Moses, but the Qur'ān also reserves a special role for Abraham and for the stories of Jesus and Mary. Together with Joseph, to whom a hundred verses contained in the sura that carries his name are dedicated, other important figures are those of Adam, Noah, Lot, David, and Solomon. Included in the list of Biblical prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān are also Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Aaron, Elisha, Jonah, Elijah, Job, Zechariah, and John the Baptist. The majority are thus characters from the Old Testament. To this list Muslim exegesis also adds Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Samuel to whom certain verses allude.[3] Before dealing separately with the verses dedicated to each prophet, it needs to be added that though the Biblical figures constitute the most substantial part, not all of the prophets mentioned in the sacred text are Biblical. Three of the names that appear most frequently in the stories of punishment are those of Hūd, Ṣāliḥ and Shuʿayb, and they belong exclusively to the Arab and Muslim tradition. The same could be said about Idrīs, a character who is referred to only twice and in later traditions is identified with Enoch. Of one last prophet, called Dhū al-Kifl, the sacred text conserves nothing but the name (which is of uncertain origin) and his identification as an Israelite prophet is due only to exegetical literature and is therefore external to the Qur'ān.

1. ADAM

Adam is the first of the Biblical prophets, even though the Qur'ān does not contain an explicit indication of this fact. Some verses seem to allude directly to the prophetic mission of Adam, but he is not directly referred to as a prophet or a messenger, nor does his name appear in those verses that contain lists of the prophets and which in practice mention all of the Biblical characters, to the exclusion, that is, of Adam.[4] The part of his life story which is returned to most often is the events which led to his expulsion from paradise. His name is mentioned on various occasions, but

never when the creation of man from the mud, earth or water is described.

As has been said, the Qur'ān reserves a particular place for the story of Adam in paradise. Many suras repeat in an almost identical form the circumstances which led to the creation of Adam and his expulsion from paradise:

> We created you, then We shaped you, then We said to the angels: "Prostrate yourselves to Adam"; so they prostrated themselves, save Iblīs, who was not of those who prostrated themselves. Said He: "What prevented thee to prostrate thyself, when I commanded thee?" Said he: "I am better than he; Thou createdst me of fire, and him Thou createdst of clay". (...) Said He: "O Adam, inherit, thou and thy wife, the Paradise, and eat of where you will, but come not nigh this tree, lest you be of the evildoers". The Satan whispered to them (Qur. 7:11–2, 19–20).[5]

By far the most interesting episode of the whole story is that of the prostration God ordered the angels and Iblīs to perform and that the latter refused to obey for reasons of personal pride. The angels, after seeking clarification from God, obey, while the devil refuses asserting his superiority, as one created from fire, over Adam, who was created from mud. The Qur'ānic narration, here as with all the passages about the prophets, opts for a dramatic tone for the confrontation between God, the angels and Iblīs; this has the function, apart from the particular nature of the episode, of underlining the centrality of the orders of God.[6]

These passages also include all of the events which lead to the expulsion from paradise. God teaches the names of all the things to Adam and then challenges the angels to tell him these names; he then orders Adam and his companion to inhabit paradise and to eat anything except the fruit of one tree which, however, as a result of the temptation of Satan, they taste. For this transgression they are sent away from paradise. In particular, the Qur'ān states, Satan managed to convince them by telling them that if they eat from that tree they will become angels, but once they disobeyed the order of God the two became aware of their nudity and covered themselves with leaves. Also the decisive injunction of God to Iblīs to leave paradise, as a result of his proud refusal to prostrate himself before Adam, is described with particular attention to detail; this includes the angry outbursts of the devil

who promises to tempt men. In these passages, as has been seen, there is also a brief mention of Eve, the companion of Adam, who is never mentioned by name in the Qur'ān, even in the part dealing with her creation; the question is retold affirming generically that God first created man and then from man woman.[7] None of these particulars differ from those in the Biblical account. That is not to say, however, that the version given by the Qur'ān does not contain original elements. The serpent, for example, is completely absent and its function as tempter is assumed by the devil, while the style makes the story develop more in terms of allusions rather than through a detailed exposition. It is for this reason that certain precise details are missing: the tree that God forbade Adam to eat from is not identified, nor, as has been mentioned above, is the name of Eve given.

The Qur'ān does not contain any other episodes from the life of Adam. Certain passages refer briefly to God's forgiveness, after Adam's expulsion from paradise which happened when Adam "received certain words from his Lord, and He turned towards him", and to the strict pact between God and Adam which he later forgot.[8] Of slight significance are those verses in which his name is repeated to identify mankind by means of the title "sons of Adam".[9]

Lastly the Qur'ān includes a passage on the story of Cain and Abel in which they are not named but only alluded to as "the sons of Adam that offer a sacrifice". God, the Qur'ān states, accepts the offering of only one of the two and Cain, annoyed by the rejection of his own offering, tells Abel of his intention to kill him. After the final attempt of Abel to convince him of the evil nature of such an act, the Qur'ān concludes the account with these words:

> Then his soul prompted him to slay his brother, and he slew him, and became one of the losers. Then God sent forth a raven, scratching into the earth, to show him how he might conceal the vile body of his brother. He said: "Woe is me! Am I unable to be as this raven, and so conceal my brother's vile body?" And he became one of the remorseful (Qur. 5:30–1).

This Qur'ānic passage, thus construed, would seem to refer to a story rather than to convey one which is accurate or complete, and, as a consequence, says nothing by way of explanation, almost as if it would be superfluous to do so. It can be added that the

story of the crow that teaches Cain how to bury his brother is not only to be found in the Qur'ān, but, slight differences apart, is widely reported in Jewish and Christian literature.[10] The dialogue style that only evokes the story and the dramatisation of the confrontation between the brothers is, in this case, as was the case of the experiences of Adam discussed earlier, the most distinctive element.

2. NOAH

Noah is the protagonist of many passages in the Qur'ān among which is an entire sura (no. 71).[11] The events of his life that are recorded in the Qur'ān follow more or less the Biblical account. In the customary style that favours the dramatisation over a description of the events, the story of Noah is introduced with the fruitless dialogue between Noah and his people:

> And We sent Noah to his people; and he said: "O my people, serve God! You have no god other than He; truly, I fear for you the chastisement of a dreadful day." Said the Council of his people, "We see thee in manifest error". Said he, "My people, there is no error in me; but I am a messenger from the Lord of all Being. I deliver to you the messages of my Lord, and I advice you sincerely; for I know from God that you know not. What, do you wonder that a reminder from your Lord should come to you by the lips of a man from among you? That he may warn you, and you be godfearing, haply to find mercy." (Qur. 7:59–63).

The ongoing discussion between Noah and his people returns to the typical motifs of the Qur'ānic punishment stories. The prophet Noah instructs his people to have faith while repeating incessant threats of the punishment that God will cast down upon them if they reject him, but the people are almost totally insensitive to his call. Every argument that Noah tries proves useless. He desperately insists that he is not asking for advantages or benefits to be believed, but his people, and in particular the leaders and nobles who are the most fierce in expressing their opposition to him, reject him and accuse him of being nothing more than a mere mortal, followed only by miserable ones, and not an angel as they would expect. The fate of the people of Noah, with their rejection of the truth brought by the prophet, is thus

sealed. The Flood wipes them all out except Noah who finds salvation in the Ark along with those who believed in him. All of these events, in terms of tone and subject matter, recall in a clear way the mission of Muḥammad of which the Qur'ān itself reports his efforts to convert his fellow citizens; it also repeats their rejection, even employing the same arguments: Muḥammad was not followed by the Meccan nobles nor by the leaders, and he was only a man, as he proclaimed, and not an angel as they evidently wanted him to be if they were going to believe in him.[12]

Having lost every opportunity to convert his people, Noah is instructed by God to build the Ark:

> And it was revealed to Noah, saying: "None of thy people shall believe but he who has already believed; so be thou not distressed by that they may doing. Make thou the Ark under Our eyes, and as We reveal; and address Me not concerning those who have done evil; they shall be drowned." So he was making the Ark (Qur. 11:36–38).[13]

A furnace that boils, recounts the Qur'ān, was the signal for the commencement of the Flood.[14] Noah then received instructions to take a pair of each animal into the Ark, as well as those who put their faith in him. The Qur'ān then contains a story that differs from the Biblical version. A passage recounts expressly that a son of Noah was among those who refused to get into the Ark and perished with the unbelievers:

> "Embark in it two of every kind, and thy family – except for him against whom the word has already been spoken (...)." And Noah called to his son, who was standing apart, "Embark with us, my son, and be thou not with the unbelievers!" He said: "I will take refuge in a mountain, that shall defend me from the water." (...) And Noah called unto his Lord, and said: "O my Lord, my son is of my family, and Thy promise is surely the truth. Thou art the justest of those that judge." Said He: "Noah, he is not of thy family." (Cor. 11:40–46).

This son was not the only disbeliever amongst Noah's family, as his wife is also cited in one verse as an example of wickedness.[15] This event recalls, in the context of the Qur'ān, a motif that is expressed many times, that the bond of faith is greater than that of blood and that an intercession on behalf of an unbeliever family member is of no value. Later traditions also give the name

of this son, but this information is completely absent from the Qur'ān which once again displays little interest in the precise and accurate identification of the characters evoked, instead preferring the particulars of the direct confrontation between firstly the son and Noah, and then Noah and God. The conclusion of the Flood and that which takes place afterwards is contained in the Qur'ān only in the indication that the Ark came to rest on the Mount al-Jūdī and that God invited his prophet to come down from the mount.[16] One last verse dealing with Noah seems to contain an indication of his age, where it is affirmed that he was sent to his people and remained amongst them for "one thousand years save fifty".[17]

The story of Noah is the story of punishment *par excellence* and for this reason it is not surprising that it recurs in the Qur'ān quite frequently. The account contained in the Bible creates a frame of reference; some differing elements modify the significance of the events a little, putting into relief the confrontation between Noah and his people who obstinately refused to believe in him and that, in so doing, became destined to suffer an ineluctable punishment. Every other narrative element forms the background for this central motif that is presented in a dramatic form.

3. ABRAHAM

Abraham is a figure of great prominence in the Qur'ān. The significance of the concept "faith of Abraham" has already been considered, and in this way his role in the origin of the pilgrimage to Mecca of which he, with the help of Ishmael, was the founder and principal author, has been touched on. These topics will also be dealt with in depth here, along with all of the other Qur'ānic passages which describe the events of his life.

One story above all is dealt with thoroughly in a number of suras with particular attention to detail. This is the strenuous battle of Abraham against the idolatry of his father, named Āzar in the Qur'ān, and of his people. Abraham destroys their idols and this provokes a violent reaction among his people and an attempt to burn him at the stake, an attempt that was foiled by divine intervention.[18] In most cases the father is the first object of Abraham's reproaches against that which he defines as the manifest error of idolatry. Abraham urges his father without pausing to get rid of objects that do not have any power, that do

not feel, do not see, and do not help at all and he invites him to cease adoring Satan, and instead to follow him in that which he preaches. However his father will not listen to reason and threatens to have him stoned if he does not desist from his proposals. At the same time the people justify their own faith affirming that they follow it because it was given to them by their fathers, arguments that Abraham rejects with vehemence, when he declares his faith in God the creator of the heavens and of the earth and the inefficacy of the idols to which the people turn:

> "What do you serve?" They said: "We serve idols, and continue cleaving to them. "He said: "Do they hear you when you call, or do they profit you, or harm?" They said: "Nay, but we found our fathers so doing." He said: "And have you considered what you have been serving, you and your fathers, the elders? They are an enemy to me, except the Lord of all Being." (Qur. 26:70–77).

His hostility towards these idols is such that Abraham not only threatens, but he promises and then announces a plot against them, the moment he is left alone with them:

> Then he turned to their gods and said: "What do you eat? What ails you, that you speak not?" And he turned upon them smiting them with his right hand (Qur. 37:91–93).

> So he broke them into fragments, all but a great one they had, for haply they would return to it. They said: "Who has done this with our gods? Surely he is one of the evildoers." They said: "We heard a young man making mention of them, and he was called Abraham." (Qur. 21:58–60).

Abraham is called upon to clarify what has happened and in direct confrontation with those who call for an explanation he takes refuge in an ironic lie, declaring that it was the greatest of the idols who destroyed the others. He invites them to ask the idols how this had happened, since the people adore them and attribute supernatural powers to them and since they should be able to uncover the truth. Instead the people take hold of Abraham and put him on the stake but God makes the fire "cool and safe" and thereby his life is spared.

In these passages the Qur'ān establishes in unequivocal terms that Abraham's father Āzar was an impenitent idolater, but that

despite this Abraham sought to intercede in his favour with God. This attempt, which is the subject of one passage, is in any case openly censured in other verses, where it is made clear that Abraham acts in this way only on the basis of a promise made to his father; when it became clear, however, that his father was an enemy of God, Abraham felt relieved of any responsibility. The conclusion is that to intercede on behalf of an unbelieving relative is not correct behaviour and that Muslims are therefore requested not to do so. In this case, just as had happened to Noah and his son, the figure of Abraham is evoked in relation to a question that must have been particularly poignant for the Arabs who were contemporaries of Muḥammad and especially among the first converts who probably sought to intercede on behalf of their own pagan relatives.[19]

In other verses that are of great significance for the Muslim faith, Abraham appears as the one who along with Ishmael constructs the House of God (the Kaʿba at Mecca):

> And when Abraham, and Ishmael with him, raised up the foundations of the House: "Our Lord, receive this from us; Thou art the All-hearing, the All-knowing; and, our Lord, make us submissive to Thee, and of our seed a nation submissive to Thee; and show us our holy rites, and turn towards us; surely Thou turnest, and art All-compassionate" (Qur. 2:127–8).

At the invocation of Abraham, God answers and promises to give him and the believers the favours sought. God, the Qur'ān establishes, thus made the Kaʿba a refuge for men and gave orders to Abraham and Ishmael to purify it. Lastly Abraham asks the Lord to send a prophet of their own race to those who live there, the Arabs, because such a prophet will be able to lead them to faith.[20] Abraham therefore becomes not only the author of one of the fundamental rites of Islam, the pilgrimage to Mecca, and the testimony of true faith but also prefigures Muḥammad and invokes his mission amongst the Arabs.

The Qur'ān contains another definition of the role of Abraham that should be considered in close relationship with the "faith of Abraham", which was dealt with in the previous chapter. A long passage with a decisively polemical tone calls upon the Jews and Christians not to dispute about Abraham, because those who are closest to him are Muḥammad and his believers, and also because

Abraham was not a Jew nor a Christian but was instead a *ḥanīf*. About ten Qur'ānic passages where the term *ḥanīf* appears, often followed by the expression "faith of Abraham", indicate that its meaning is opposite to that of polytheist.[21] In these passages Abraham is therefore the pure monotheist, neither Jew nor Christian, and once again the ideal precursor of the pure monotheism that is Islam; *ḥanīf* indicates this faith and is, at the same time, a state of being and a religion that coincides with the message of Muḥammad. In the other verses that deal with Abraham, it is important to note that Abraham is defined as the "friend of God" and that his name, along with that of Moses, is cited in the two verses mentioning the "pages of Moses and Abraham" that without a doubt refer to sacred scriptures.[22]

Another episode which is referred to in more than one sura and that resembles substantially the Biblical account is the visit of the angels who announce to Abraham the birth of a son and the destruction of the people of Lot.[23] Abraham, unaware of who his visitors really are, invites them to eat at his table as guests, but they refuse to eat the food, thus arousing Abraham's suspicions. They then declare that they have come to announce to Abraham and Sarah the birth of Isaac. After the incredulous laugh of Sarah, since she was very old by that time, the angels announce that they are on the way to reach the people of Lot. The announcement of the happy news of the impending birth of a son, which only one of the passages expressly identifies as Isaac, also returns as a premise to the story of the sacrifice that God imposed upon Abraham in order to put his faith to the test:

> Then We gave him the good tidings of a prudent boy; and when he had reached the age of running with him, he said: "My son, I see in a dream that I shall sacrifice thee; consider, what thinkest you?" He said: "My father, do as thou art bidden; thou shalt find me, God willing, one of the steadfast." When they have surrendered, and he flung him upon his brow, We called unto him: "Abraham, thou hast confirmed the vision; even so We recompense the good-doers. This is indeed the manifest trial." And We ransomed him with a mighty sacrifice, and left for him among the later folk: "Peace be upon Abraham." (Qur. 37:101–9).

In this case, as with many of the narratives about the prophets, the Qur'ān prefers the dramatic aspects of the dialogue between

the father and the son that serve to emphasise the virtue of submission to the will of God, but avoids one question which will have large repercussions in the successive traditions, that is which was the son selected for sacrifice.[24] Apart from this story and the role of Ishmael in the construction of the Kaʿba, the figures of the two sons of Abraham are of secondary importance and, other than brief affirmations that mention their role and rank, the Qur'ān does not say anything about their lives except for an enigmatic reference that Ishmael "was sincere in his promise" as well as being messenger, prophet and devotee.[25]

Abraham is also the protagonist in other Qur'ānic passages. One of these refers to the confrontation between Abraham and the sovereign of his time, who, when called upon to believe in the Lord who is the master of life and death, answers with haughtiness that he is that very lord. In another verse Abraham asks God to demonstrate how He gives life to the dead. God then orders him to cut four birds into pieces, spread their limbs and then call to them; they, prodigiously, return to whole. One other event, of no less significance, which later traditions connect with his infancy, is that in which the Qur'ān claims that God showed Abraham the kingdom of heaven and the earth. The Qur'ān explains how, when Abraham looked at the stars, the moon and sun in sequence, he guessed that they were divinities, but immediately changed his opinion, as soon as they set.[26]

In conclusion the Qur'ān contains only a few episodes from the life of Abraham and these are repeated in various suras, without however giving an organic and complete picture. Over and above the narrative particulars, the figure of Abraham is of great prominence because the Qur'ānic message makes of him the ideal precursor of Muḥammad. This assertion takes on a polemic significance where it is established that he was neither a Jew nor a Christian and, as a consequence, that Muḥammad was Abraham's legitimate successor.

4. LOT

The Qur'ān elevates Lot to a position of far greater prominence than that which he holds in the Biblical tradition, partly as a result of the frequency with which he is mentioned and partly because of his positive role as prophet and messenger. The events in which he and his people are involved, in particular the visit of the angels

that was the prelude to the destruction, are repeated in many suras along with the other stories of punishment.[27]

Lot, in these passages, believes in the preaching of Abraham and together with him sets off in the direction of the Holy Land. His people are however profoundly wicked. After they have refused to believe other messengers, they continue to commit indecent acts and it is for this reason that God sends the angels to put an end to them. The angels, after stopping at Abraham's tent to give him news of the birth of a son, reach Lot, where they endure the concupiscent attempts of the people who want them to satisfy their carnal desires. The prophet tries to stop them and offers them his daughters in exchange. Only then do the angels announce the punishment to him, and it arrives in the morning and destroys the whole city with a destructive rain and a violent wind. The story closely resembles that in the Bible, with the customary disinterest for names and particulars: apart from that of Lot no names appear not even that of his wife nor those of his daughters, nor those of the angels nor that of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which are simply referred to in those passages alluding to the generic "subverted cities." The name of Lot's wife is not even mentioned in the verse in which she is referred to along with Noah's wife as an exemplary model for unbelievers.[28]

The theme of the futile preaching of Lot, who is comforted only by the angels, is also developed in this case with a dramatic construction that evidences the confrontation between the protagonists. The Qur'ānic version, thus, though taking up the substance of the story already reported in the Bible, becomes one of the typical stories of punishment in which the elements that directly recall the mission of Muḥammad are emphasised, and which aims to encourage him through the difficulties he encounters.

5. JOSEPH

The Qur'ān dedicates an entire sura of about one hundred verses to the story of Joseph. This is the longest and most detailed narration, given that it embraces in one long passage, without any interruptions, the most significant facts in the life of Joseph. The peculiarity of this is emphasised even more by its definition as "the fairest of stories", with which it is introduced

and which at the same time acknowledges its aesthetic aspects, most particular amongst the stories of the prophets recounted in the Qur'ān.[29]

The events of the life of Joseph start with the mention of a dream, in which the stars, sun and moon prostrate themselves before the prophet. Joseph confides his dream to his father and his father warns him not to reveal it to his brothers who, for their part, are envious because of Jacob's favour towards him which they consider censureable. The story is told favouring, as usual, the form of a dialogue and the words spoken by the protagonists. The murderous proposals of the brothers are followed by the advice of one of them who suggests instead throwing Joseph into the well. They speak to their father in order to have Joseph entrusted to their care. Jacob shows himself to be afraid for the life of his favourite son but in the end he lets him go. The brothers throw him in the well and then return to their father saying that the wolf has eaten him. From the start of the account the Qur'ānic text accompanies the dialogue and narration with the consideration that God is always present in the course of events:

> So when they went with him, and agreed to put him in the bottom of the well, and We revealed to him: "Thou shalt tell them of this their doing when they are unaware." (...) And they brought his shirt with false blood on it. He said: "No; but your spirits tempted you to do somewhat. But come, sweet patience! And God's succour is ever there to seek against that you describe." (Qur. 12:15, 18).[30]

It so happens that Joseph is rescued from the well by some travellers who buy him from his brothers for a small sum and subsequently resell him to an unnamed Egyptian, who the Biblical tradition and Qur'ānic exegesis refer to as Potiphar. One day when he has already come of age Joseph is prey to the lust of the wife of the Egyptian, but he, thanks to the intervention of an indefinite "proof of his Lord", manages to overcome the onset of temptation, to resist and take flight, notwithstanding the last attempt of the woman who tears his tunic from behind. In the Qur'ānic account the lie of the woman who blames Joseph for this is immediately discovered by a witness who proves his innocence. However the woman does not stop her attempts, but gathers the women that deride her love for a slave and prepares a banquet and invites Joseph to come before them. When the women see

him, distracted by such beauty, they cut their hands and proclaim their surprise:

> And when they saw him, they so admired him that they cut their hands, saying: "God save us! This is no mortal; he is no other but a noble angel." "So now you see" she said, "this is he you blamed for. Yes, I solicited him, but he abstained." (Qur. 12:31–32).

Joseph once again resists the schemes of the woman and asks that he be thrown in prison rather than fall into temptation.[31] In prison he meets two men who tell him their dreams. Joseph offers to interpret them, then praises the Lord in front of the prisoners and in conclusion tells them what will happen as a result of their dreams. With abrupt change of scene, the king, who is in fact Pharaoh, tells his dream of the cows and the ears of corn to his advisers without them being able to give him an explanation. The young prisoner who escaped death then remembers Joseph and he visits him in prison: Joseph explains the meaning of the sovereign's dream to him, and not, as in the Bible, directly to Pharaoh. Pharaoh, who it is understood has been informed of the interpretation, orders that Joseph be brought before him, and once his innocence in relation to the wife of the Egyptian is established, he enters into his service. And so, comments the Qur'ān, God gave authority to Joseph and he filled him with his mercy.[32]

Forced by famine, Joseph's brothers seek refuge in Egypt in search of food without recognising their brother, who gives them provisions, but on the condition that, if they want more, they must return with their youngest brother. Joseph also has their money hidden in their saddlebags. When they reach their father Jacob, the brothers ask if they can take their youngest brother Benjamin with them and once they have found their money they decide to depart again, notwithstanding the fear of Jacob. Once they reach Egypt, Joseph immediately reveals his identity to his youngest brother and reassures him before hiding the cup of the king in his bag.[33] When the brothers are searched it is Joseph himself who checks the bags and finds the cup in the bag of Benjamin and decides to keep him despite the protests of the brothers who offer to stay in his place in order to fulfil the pact with their father. Jacob, when informed of what has happened and blinded because of the affliction, lets himself fall into depression:

> "No" he said, "but your spirits tempted you to do somewhat. But come, sweet patience! Haply God will bring them all to me; He is the All-knowing, the All-wise." And he turned away from them, and said: "Ah, woe is me for Joseph!" And his eyes turned white because of sorrow that he choked within him." (Qur. 12:83–84).

Joseph reveals his true identity to the brothers when they return to Egypt for the third time and grants them his forgiveness. He then orders them to carry one of his tunics to his father and to throw it on his eyes – those are the very words of Joseph – so that he will be able to regain his vision. Finally the family gathers in the court of Pharaoh and, the Qur'ān states, the parents prostrated themselves before Joseph, thus fulfilling the dream. The events conclude with Joseph who raises praising to God who has guided him along the way through trials and tribulations.[34]

The story of Joseph in the Qur'ān, in contrast to that in the Bible, stops at this point. The tracks which have been followed are those of the book of *Genesis*, reproduced in a shorter form and with some differing particulars which are attested in Rabbinical literature. Notwithstanding this, the Qur'ānic account does not lack elements of originality associated with its customary style, comprising various scenes that follow with sharp interruptions and without any narrative picture. The continuous references to the omnipotence of God and the nature of the figure of Joseph which emerges from the account are perfectly consistent with the features of the Qur'ānic message. The aim of the story is to emphasise the nature of Joseph's mission, who was a prophet, and his final victory over the schemes of his brothers and his power over the Egyptians. It is because of these characteristics that he is to be considered a figure who was similar to Muḥammad who was also constrained to escape to Medina, but by the end of his life came to know triumph and, like Joseph, was generous with his brothers, the Meccans, who had rejected and despised him.[35]

6. MOSES

Moses is the Biblical prophet who is most often mentioned in the Qur'ān. Many of the events in his life are described in abundant details and, in some cases, repeated in more than one sura. Throughout them all, particular relevance is given to the story of

the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh, which is covered in at least ten passages and which is alluded to in an even greater number of verses with the simple mention of the wicked Pharaoh. Other episodes from Moses's life, despite being referred to less frequently, are no less important in giving a complete picture of his prophetic mission.

The life of Moses is retold from his infancy. In order to save him his mother entrusts him to the waters of the Nile and he is found by Pharaoh's family. It is the wife of the sovereign of Egypt, and not the daughter as in the Bible, who saves him. She then looks for a nurse who is able to care for him and that, as is the will of God, will be his natural mother. The first act of the maturity of Moses is the unlucky killing of an Egyptian who is arguing with a Jew, and for which Moses is forced to flee to Madyan. Once there, by a well Moses helps two women, the daughters of an old man of whom the Qur'ān does not give the name but who evidently is Jethro of the Biblical traditions, and then accepts the hand of one of the women in marriage as part of a pact with the old man to stay on for eight or ten years.[36] At the end of this period Moses sets out on a journey towards Egypt and it is then that the prodigy of the burning bush marks the beginning of his prophetic mission. Moses sees a fire on the mountain and when he gets close to it a cry orders him to throw his staff on the ground and put his hand into his bosom. Miraculously the stick is transformed into a serpent and the hand becomes white. God calms his prophet and charges him and Aaron to call Pharaoh to the faith:

> "Go to Pharaoh; he was waxed insolent; yet speak gently to him, that haply he may be mindful, or perchance fear." "O our Lord" said Moses and Aaron, "truly we fear he may exceed against us, or wax insolent." "Fear not" said He, "Surely I shall be with you, hearing and seeing. So go you both to Pharaoh, and say 'We are the messengers of thy Lord, so send forth with us the Children of Israel and chastise them not'" (Qur. 20:43–47).[37]

Moses confronts Pharaoh with arguments inspired by God, but Pharaoh challenges him to demonstrate that which he says, and confronted with the miracles of the staff and the hand he calls upon the magicians to compete with him. Moses in the end prevails and the magicians, defeated, proclaim, according to the

original Qur'ānic version, their faith in God thus arousing the ire of Pharaoh:

> And the sorcerers were cast down, prostrating themselves. They said: "We believe in the Lord of all Being, the Lord of Moses and Aaron." Said Pharaoh: "You have believed in Him before I gave you leave. Surely this is a device you have devised in the city that you may expel its people from it. Now you shall know! I shall assuredly cut off alternately your hands and feet, then I shall crucify you all together." (Qur. 7:120–4).

The moment of the flight from Egypt is thus reached. After the plagues and in the face of some resistance, Moses guides the Israelites through the parted waters of the sea which then close upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians who were following in their tracks. The story relies undoubtedly in a large part upon the Biblical account. The dialogue form is prevalent as usual over the description of events. As regards the plagues, for example, they are referred to without giving any particulars, while the tense confrontation between an Egyptian who believes in Moses and Pharaoh, which summarises all of the reasons for having faith in God, is provided with many more details.[38]

The Qur'ān goes on to record the most significant moments of the experiences of the Israelites in the desert before they enter the Holy Land. Among the stories mentioned are those of the water spouting from twelve springs in the rock struck by Moses, of the prodigious manna and quails falling from the skies at the invocation of Moses who responds in this way to the impatient protests of the Israelites, and also the story of the seventy men that together with the prophet set off for the appointment to see God and who were revived after they had lost their lives.[39] Only one passage gives a detailed description of the meeting between God and Moses. In order to go to this meeting, Moses entrusts the people to the care of Aaron and is absent for forty days. It is the express desire of Moses to be able to see God, even though he is aware of the risks and of the human impossibility of being able to cope with such a vision. Moses in fact falls overwhelmed and God revives him and enables him to take the tablets written for him.[40] In these and other Qur'ānic passages the Israelites emerge as ungrateful if not openly hostile to the wishes of their prophet and saviour and, therefore, to the orders of God. The Israelites

refuse to enter the Holy Land for fear of the giants; they even spread slander about Moses and torment him.[41]

In the experiences and the behaviour of the Israelites in the desert, as in the story of the confrontation with Pharaoh in the desert, more than one element recalls the usual motif of the dispute between the prophet and his people. One episode in the life of Moses is particularly suited to this end and, not by chance, is repeated in more than one Qur'ānic passage. The story is that of the golden calf which the Israelites made during the period of Moses's absence and that they culpably worshipped. In the Qur'ān the responsibility for this act is not attributed directly to Aaron as it is in the Bible, but to a character called *al-Sāmirī*, a name which Qur'ānic exegetes almost always take to mean "the Samaritan."

> "We have not failed in our tryst with thee" the Israelites said, "of your volition; but we were loaded with fardels, even the ornaments of the people, and we cast them, as *al-Sāmirī* also threw them, into the fire." Then he brought out for them a Calf, a mere body that lowed; and they said: "This is your god, and the god of Moses, whom he has forgotten." (Qur. 20:87–88).

Moses returns from the Mount after forty days of absence and as soon as he realizes what has happened he throws down the Tablets and becomes infuriated with Aaron, before cursing the Samaritan. The decreed punishment inspired by God establishes that the guilty will all be executed and the idol destroyed and cast into the sea.[42]

The Qur'ān contains more or less complete testimony of other episodes in the life of Moses. Of some significance, both in terms of the size of the passages and their contents, is the story of the encounter between Moses and a mysterious servant of God to whom, so it is said, God gave mercy and taught part of his secret knowledge. The mysterious character, known as al-Khiḍr or al-Khaḍir in the exegetical tradition, guides Moses through events that seem incomprehensible to him, encouraging him to have patience. The Qur'ān also contains a reference to the story of Korah, who is described as a tyrant who is so proud of his riches that he attributes it to his own merit and whom the earth swallowed up as divine punishment. In other passages Korah, together with the faithful Hāmān whom Pharaoh on another

occasion asked to build a tower that would reach the sky, is indicated as belonging to the assembly of Pharaoh and therefore as being one of the most wicked figures. On the other hand, another Qur'ānic passage describes a cow that Moses, with God's inspiration, ordered the Israelites to sacrifice to be able to ascertain who committed a murder; the assassin is discovered by striking the victim with part of the sacrificed cow.[43]

The name of Moses appears again in some verses that further clarify his role and prerogatives and emphasise the close relation he bears with the mission of Muḥammad. God announces to Moses that his mercy will reach those that follow the Arab Prophet who had already been announced in both the Torah and the Gospel, and, in another passage, Muḥammad is evoked in intimate connection with the events and the revelations of Moses, thereby establishing a precise correlation between the two prophets.[44]

In these passages Moses emerges as the prophet who prefigures Muḥammad and the one who, apart from his personal experiences which contain common elements, leads his people in the same way as Muḥammad. Among the common prerogatives, the element that is most often evoked and recalls the mission of Muḥammad is that of the book which is revealed to Moses. The Qur'ān affirms that God revealed the Torah to Moses himself to guide his people just as – it implicitly suggests – Muḥammad received his book, the Qur'ān, to lead his people to faith in God.[45]

7. DAVID AND SOLOMON

The figures of David and Solomon recur in the Qur'ān as examples of rulers who are wise in the exercise of their powers. Sovereigns and prophets, they had received from God great power over the forces of nature and they knew how to use them, even yielding in certain cases to wicked temptations, on the road to faith. Despite the references to this in various passages, the Qur'ān however only mentions certain events from their lives, by far preferring to stress the great authority that they exercised during their respective reigns, the prodigious nature of their power, and, in the case of Solomon, his efforts to convert the Queen of Sheba.

A long passage from the sura of the Cow (no. 2) introduces the events that preceded the ascension to the throne of David and states that after the death of Moses the Israelites called for a

prophet to raise up a king from amongst them. The prophet, which the Qur'ān does not give the name of, indicates Saul as the future sovereign and the Ark as the token of this reign. With a description of the contents of the Ark and of the troops of Saul, who are put to the test when they refuse to confront Goliath, one last verse finally refers to David and states that he "slew Goliath and God gave him the kingship, and wisdom, and He taught him such as He will".[46] The kingship and wisdom are mentioned in other verses according to which God was present at the judgments of David and Solomon and that he gave learning to both of them, and that to David in particular God taught the art of making coats of mail and made it so that mountains and birds raise praise to God along with him. One last prerogative of David is mentioned in the Qur'ān: he received the revelation of the *Psalms*.[47]

The Qur'ān conserves the memory of only one episode from his life. After again going over all of the powers mentioned earlier, i.e. that David was strong, wise and that the mountains and birds glorified God along with him, the passage in question tells of two litigants that bring their dispute before David. The reference to the events narrated is evidently to the story that the prophet Nathan, according to the biblical account, told to David to make him aware of his fault in having procured the death of Uriah with the aim of marrying his wife. The Qur'ānic version, as is usual, does not give full description, but evokes the events:

> Has the tiding of the dispute come to thee? When they scaled the chamber, when they entered upon David, and he took fright at them; and they said: "Fear not; two disputants we are, one of us has injured the other; so judge between us justly, and transgress not, and guide us to the right path. Behold, this my brother has ninety-nine ewes, and I have one ewe. So he said, 'Give her into my charge'; and he overcame in the argument." Said he: "Assuredly he has wronged thee in asking for thy ewe in addition to his sheep; and indeed many intermixers do injury one against the other, save those who believe, and do deeds of righteousness, and how few they are!" And David thought that We had only tried him; therefore he sought forgiveness of his Lord, and he fell down prostrate, and he repented (Qur. 38:21–4).

Following his repentance, David was forgiven and God invited him to judge the men according to the truth, and encouraged him not

to follow his passions. He made him his Vicar on the earth.[48] The definition of Vicar, elsewhere attributed to Adam (Qur. 2:30), is connected to those prerogatives listed earlier, such that David emerges as a powerful sovereign and warrior who is just in the exercise of his judgment and profoundly devout, notwithstanding the sin with which he is marked. All of these attributes will have a powerful reverberation in the exegetical literature and in the later Islamic traditions.

Solomon also possessed many of the prerogatives of David. He was his heir, possessed balanced judgment like him and, like his father, he had to repent and to ask forgiveness to the Lord.[49] The powers of Solomon were however far greater, all the better to emphasise the extent of his wisdom and the breadth of his dominion over men and animals. The Qur'ān tells how the wind was subject to Solomon so that he was able to cross immense distances in little time. His authority extended to the *jinn*, the invisible beings of Arab tradition that were able to assume any form; they followed his orders and under his direction built whatever Solomon wanted. The workforce at his orders was strengthened also by certain demons that carried out various services, among which was to dive in the sea and gather pearls. *Jinn* are also mentioned in a passage that refers to the death of Solomon: they realize that he has passed away only when an animal of the earth gnawed at his rod and he fell for want of support. His immense powers, adds the sacred text, did not however prevent him from being subject to the plots of the wicked, as one passage suggests alluding to the schemes of certain demons against the reign of Solomon, followed by the affirmation that he certainly was not an unbeliever.[50]

The Qur'ān contains only two extensive passages about the life of Solomon. In the first it refers to various mysterious episodes, such as the story of certain horses which were ranged before him, and of his substitution on the throne. According to this Qur'ānic passage, Solomon claims that he loved the horses more than anything else in the world and because of them he forgot mention of God, repented, and then he gave orders that they have their necks, legs and throats cut. The case of the substitution is also quite mysterious, given that the Qur'ān says only that God wanted to put Solomon to the test and put a "body" on his throne, until Solomon asked to be pardoned and, also, to be given a kingdom which nobody after him would ever have.[51]

Some of the themes discussed up to this point, together with other information, are mentioned in the second passage, in the sura of the Ant (no. 27). Solomon knows the language of the birds and of the animals, his ranks are made up of *jinn*, men and birds. Once he gathers his army and after the words of an ant (which Solomon understands) that invites the other ants to take refuge in their nests so as not to be trodden on, Solomon sends for the hoopoe. Once found, the bird tells him that he has reached the kingdom of Sheba and there found sun worshippers. The long Qur'ānic passage is nothing but an extensive reconstruction, rich with detail, of the relationship between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, with exchanges of messages and gifts, and the transport of the throne by one of the *jinn* and in the end the visit of the Queen to Solomon:

> So, when she came, it was said: "Is thy throne like this?" She said: "It seems the same." "And we were given the knowledge before her, and we were in surrender, but that she served, apart from God, barred her, for she was of a people of unbelievers." It was said to her: "Enter the pavillon." But when she saw it, she supposed it was a spreading water, and she bared her legs. he said: "It is a pavillon smoothed of crystal." She said: "My Lord, indeed I have wronged myself, and I surrender with Solomon to God, the Lord of all Being." (Qur. 27:42–44).

The dialogue alludes to the recognition on the part of the Queen of her own throne and of the artifice used by Solomon to make her reveal her legs. Some of the considerations which have been referred to more than once in relation to the experiences of the Biblical prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān can also be evoked for this long passage. The dialogue form is that preferred and, moreover, the narrative frame of reference is omitted even if it is implicit in the words of the protagonists. The obvious parallels with a long story contained in the *Targum Sheni* of *Esther* take nothing from the substantial originality of the Qur'ānic passage which is the story of the call to faith of the prophet Solomon to a pagan population. The events with the Queen of Sheba are emblematic: among the miracles described or only alluded to as signs of the power received from God and of his wisdom, Solomon leads the Queen of Sheba to faith in the one God, thus acting as a Muslim prophet and sovereign.[52]

8. JESUS

The Qur'ān refers quite frequently to the Christians and to Jesus in particular. Of the episodes of his life which are referred to a large amount of text deals with his family, and in particular Mary and Zechariah. As well as this, there are other verses that contain explicit polemical assertions against certain Christian conceptions of Jesus.[53]

The attributes and characteristics of Jesus are repeated with insistence. The Qur'ān states that God made him a prophet and a messenger, a servant, a messiah, a word from Him, a grace and a sign for men, with evident proofs and Holy Spirit, to call men to have faith in the one God. One verse (Qur. 2:253), which illustrates some of these properties, is immediately preceded by an affirmation that some messengers, among which it can be imagined is also Jesus himself, are superior to others. However no other passage confirms this interpretation. Though the Qur'ān does not in fact fail to record that God gave wisdom and prophesy to Jesus and sent him to confirm the Torah and taught him the Gospel, it nonetheless confirms explicitly that he was a messenger for the Israelites and that he did not differ at all from the other messengers and prophets that preceded him.[54] The repeated reference to the prerogatives of Jesus rather than being a sign of implicit superiority has a quite pronounced polemical meaning. It is thus stated that Jesus was only a messenger to establish that he was not the son of God and that, in consequence, all of his powers can only have come from God. The Qur'ān further specifies what his purpose is when it reports that Jesus was not responsible for that which the Christians believe, given that he himself proclaimed faith in God without ever claiming to be of a divine nature. These peremptory assertions are accompanied in certain verses by an anti-Trinity position, where orders are given not to speak of three, but of one unique divinity, attributing however to the Christians a kind of tritheism consisting of God, Jesus and Mary.[55]

The most substantial narratives are those connected to the nativity and above all the story of the family of the Virgin Mary. The Qur'ān goes back to the father of Mary, named 'Imrān, and tells of the vow of the mother of Mary who decides to offer to the service of God the much wanted fruit of her womb, even though she cannot know yet whether it is male or female. At the birth,

Mary is entrusted to the care of Zechariah who looks after her in the temple. Zechariah, servant of God, beseeches the Lord to have an offspring despite the advanced age of him and his wife. He receives the pleasing news that a son named John will be born. John the Baptist is noted in the Qur'ān for his wisdom and purity, given that God made him pious, docile and caring with his parents. Later, when Mary has grown up, the angels announce to her that she has been chosen by God:

> "Mary, be obedient to thy Lord, prostrating and bowing before Him." This is of the tidings of the Unseen, that We reveal to thee; for thou wast not with them, when they were casting quills which of them should have charge of Mary; thou wast not with them, when they were disputing. When the angels said: "Mary, God gives thee good tidings of a Word from Him whose name is Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary; high honoured shall he be in this world and the next, near stationed to God. He shall speak to men in the cradle, and of age, and righteous he shall be." (Qur. 3:43–46).

To the objections of Mary, who asks if she can be with child without ever having known a man, the angels respond that everything is possible because of the omnipotence of God and that she will be able to conceive, while still a virgin, thanks to divine intervention. When she is close to giving birth, Mary takes refuge in a place in the East, protected by a veil. The birth pangs arrive while she is under the trunk of a palm-tree from where flows a rivulet and from which fruit falls prodigiously thus quenching her thirst and satisfying her hunger. When Mary returns to her people with her baby, she is harshly accused of having acted shamelessly, but the baby Jesus still in the swaddling-clothes comes to her defence proclaiming his own prophetic mission.[56]

The Qur'ān recounts only certain events from the life of Jesus and those in a very particular and elusive way. The miracle of the cradle has been already mentioned above: the Qur'ānic passage includes the words spoken by Jesus, words that underline in Muslim terms his prophetic mission and his faith in God besides exculpating his mother Mary from the accusations of the people. Other miracles are recorded, in harmony with analogous episodes in the Gospel and in apocryphal Christian literature; firstly the case of the bird of clay transformed into living creature, and then

of the healing of the blind and the leprous and of the resurrection of the dead. All of these miracles – states the Qur'ān – have taken place with the permission of God, but the Israelites do not believe in them and even dismiss them as magic tricks. The allusion to the apostles is equally cursory, where it is affirmed that Jesus sought assistance in his prophetic mission and that the apostles were the ones who answered that they believed in him. It is said of the passion only that some people were intent upon undermining Jesus and that God told him that he would take him and raise him up to Him until the day of the Resurrection. The Qur'ān is, however, contradictory as regards his death. While it is implicitly admitted in some verses, the death of Jesus is denied in others; the latter verses suggest that what the Christians say is incorrect, as he was neither killed nor crucified, but that this treatment was reserved for a double. Jesus was therefore raised up, taken by God and will be a witness against the Jews and the Christians at the end of time.[57]

One last fact from the life of Jesus is preserved in the Qur'ān and described in a passage in the customary dialogue style between the protagonists. This is the story of the table which came down from heaven at the request of the apostles:

> "O Jesus son of Mary, is thy Lord able to send down on us a Table out of heaven?" He said: "Fear you God, if you are believers." They said: "We desire that we should eat of it and our hearts be at rest; and that we may know that thou hast spoken the true to us, and that we may be among its witnesses." Said Jesus son of Mary: "O God, our Lord, send down upon us a Table out of heaven, that shall be for us a festival, the first and last of us, and a sign from Thee. And provide for us; Thou art the best of providers." God said: "Verily I do send it down on you; whoso of you hereafter disbelieves, verily I shall chastise him with a chastisement wherewith I chastise no other being." (Qur. 5:112–5).

The words of the Qur'ān are anything but clear. Within the frame of reference of Qur'ānic revelation, in which the relationship between God and his prophets is favoured, the occurrence is fully justified, but if one attempts to bring this story back to certain episodes in the life of Jesus witnessed in the Christian tradition, a precise identification becomes difficult. The elements of the story lead one to believe that what is being dealt with, as the exegetes

indicate, is an allusion to the multiplication of loaves and fishes, or possibly a reference to the last supper, though both of these suggestions are entirely hypothetical.[58]

Jesus is without doubt a prophet of great prominence in Qur'ānic revelation. To the extent that he served God and was propagator of the true faith he was the ideal precursor to the prophet Muḥammad, as is explicitly affirmed in a verse in which Jesus proclaims that he has come to confirm the Torah and to bring news of the arrival of a messenger by the name of Aḥmad.[59] In this, as in certain other verses to which reference has been made, the specification of his distinctiveness, besides giving a precise definition of the person himself, also serves the function of providing a polemical response to the Christian faith or to the way in which the Qur'ān represents it.

9. JOB, JONAH, ELIJAH, ELISHA AND OTHERS

Some prophets are briefly mentioned, without giving great prominence to the details of their lives. Job, the first of these prophets, is mentioned in two Qur'ānic passages that make only indirect reference to the torments with which he was tested. One of these passages speaks of the invocation that he made to God and that God granted, removing all of his suffering and restoring his family to him, while the other contains an invocation which is followed by God's decree that restored him to the condition in which he had been prior to his affliction. God orders him to stamp with his foot on the ground and to quench his thirst with the water that flows forth, returns his family to him, and gives him orders to take in his hand a bundle of twigs and beat with it, without breaking his oath. Job is described here as a splendid servant of God, patient and often repenting to his Lord. His example must have been very fitting for Muḥammad during his vicissitudes at the beginning of his preaching at Mecca.[60]

Some particulars are also given in the Qur'ān in relation to Jonah. The Qur'ān records that he went away in anger, thinking that God had no power over him, but then he invoked God and was saved from the affliction. Elsewhere the Qur'ān clarifies the events to which it alludes: Jonah was one of the messengers, but he took flight in a ship. He was thrown into the sea, swallowed by a whale, but he continued to sing praises to God within the belly of the whale and as a result of this he was thrown out onto a deserted

beach where God caused a gourd plant to grow for him. All this took place before he became the messenger for a people that the Qur'ān estimates to be of one hundred thousand or more and who followed his preaching. One last passage specifies even more clearly that the people of Jonah were believers and that they thereby managed to avoid punishment. Also in this case the Qur'ānic data do not provide a complete reconstruction of the story of Jonah, but simply use certain references to the same events to affirm the customary calls to faith in God and to his omnipotence through the prophetic mission.[61]

The story of Elijah in the Qur'ān is modelled on the other stories of punishment that have already been examined in the earlier section of this chapter. Elijah, one of the messengers of God, incites his people to fear God and not to adore the idol Ba'l:

> "Will you not be godfearing? Do you call on Ba'l, and abandon the Best of creators? God, your Lord, and the Lord of your fathers, the ancients?" But they cried him lies; so they will be among the arraigned, except for God's sincere servants (Qur. 37:124–8).

The population rejects him and because of this are destined for destruction. The passage which succinctly describes these happenings concludes affirming that Elijah will be the object of perpetual praise in posterity.[62] The name of Elijah returns in the Qur'ān in one other verse, but on this occasion within a list of prophets and therefore without any other information on his life. The same can be said for Elisha who is only referred to in two verses, along with the names of Ishmael and Dhū al-Kifl in one case, and together with those of Ishmael, Jonah and Lot in the other, without any information of any type, apart from that he was one of the servants of God.[63]

It is necessary to deal briefly in conclusion with the two other prophets of which the Qur'ān mentions only the names. The first of these is Idrīs: the Qur'ān contains a very short description of him, as a just man, a prophet, while in another verse he is simply referred to along with other prophets. Nothing is recounted of Idrīs, identified as Enoch by the Muslim exegetes, except for the statement that he was raised to a very high place.[64] One last character is referred to: Dhū al-Kifl. The exegetical tradition, which has explained the origin of the name in various ways, considers him as a prophet who belongs to the history of the

Israelites, even if any clear reference to identifiable characters is completely missing. In any case this name appears in the Qur'ān alongside the names of other prophets, with the affirmation that he was patient and that now he is amongst the saints, without adding anything else.[65]

10. THE "UNNAMED" PROPHETS

Some further Qur'ānic passages preserve only a simple allusion of other personages or prophets without mentioning their names. For some the sacred text makes reference to a precise and known narrative picture while in other cases the facts given are so scarce as to render almost impossible a precise identification or a unequivocal exegetical reconstruction. The name of Ezra is reported in a polemical passage against those Jews who maintain that he is the son of God and those Christians who maintain that Christ is the son of God.[66] In this case Ezra is certainly not referred to as a prophet or messenger. According to certain Qur'ānic commentators the story contained in a long verse could perhaps be a reference to Ezra or perhaps even Jeremiah:

> Or such as he who passed by a city that was fallen down upon its turrets; he said: "How shall God give life to this now it is dead?" So God made him die a hundred years, then He raised him up, saying: "How long hast thou tarried?" he said: "I have tarried a day, or part of a day." Said He: "Nay; thou hast tarried a hundred years. Look at thy food and drink – it has not spoiled; and look at thy ass. So we would make thee a sign for the people. And look at the bones, how We shall set them up, and then clothe them with flesh." (Qur. 2:259).

Notwithstanding the fact that the passage is quite detailed, no precise identification is possible, though a reference to the involvement of the Israelites in the events described and the suggestion that the city of Jerusalem is the setting seem the most plausible explanations.[67] A passage which appears even more elusive is that which, according to the Qur'ānic exegetes, refers to Ezekiel's vision of the valley full of bones that are brought back to life. It is simply reported, in the customary Qur'ānic style, that thousands of people went forth from their houses, that God caused them to die and then brought them back to life, without any mention of their prophet or of any other characters.[68]

More particulars, again without names, are however reported in a Qur'ānic passage on the deeds of three messengers sent to the inhabitants of an unidentified city. The story goes through the usual motifs of the stories of punishment, with calls to faith to the inhabitants which are greeted with the usual refutations and protracted threats. Only one man, who is described as rushing in fright and fury from the far side of the city, shows that he believes and exhorts the other inhabitants to follow the messenger, but they, the Qur'ānic text leaves the reader to understand, do not follow his advice; instead, they dispose of him and in the end are exterminated. Unfortunately, none of these elements in the Qur'ān provide great assistance in determining what messenger and city is being referred to. However the Muslim exegetical tradition directly indicates a Christian reference when it affirms that the city was Antioch and that the messengers were three apostles sent by Jesus.[69] The Qur'ān also contains another explicitly Christian story, that of the seven sleepers of Ephesus, cited in a long passage as "Those of the Cave" (*aṣḥāb al-kahf*). These young people who slept for three centuries in the cave in order to escape the Roman persecution do not really have a place within this research, given that the Muslim tradition does not consider them as either prophets or messengers.[70]

11. THE "ARABIAN" PROPHETS

Along with the Biblical prophets the Qur'ān refers repeatedly to the figures of three messengers and prophets by the names of Hūd, Ṣāliḥ and Shu'ayb, who do not have express parallels in the Jewish and Christian traditions, and who, whether in terms of their names or of the events narrated, must be considered as original figures. A brief treatment is given of them in the following pages in order to conclude the study of the prophets and messengers mentioned in the Qur'ān and because their experiences – analogous to those of the Biblical prophets – are amongst the so-called stories of punishment.

The first of these messengers is Hūd, whose mission was performed among a population by the name of 'Ād.[71] The Qur'ān quotes at length the words he used to convince his people to follow his preaching: he reminds them of the benefits God has accorded them, emphasises that they must not ask for anything in return, and repeats with vehemence the inefficacy of their idols.

The ʿĀd however refute him, reject the message and accuse him of having lost the light of reason or of being a liar, without any clear proof of that which he is preaching. Discouraged by his lack of success, Hūd launches his malediction upon the reluctant people:

> "Anger and wrath from your Lord have fallen upon you. What, do you dispute with me regarding names you have named, you and your fathers, touching which God has sent down never authority? Then watch and wait; I shall be with you watching and waiting" (Qur. 7:71).

As a result of their disbelief and their refusal to believe in the prophetic message the ʿĀd were exterminated. Naturally Hūd and those who had faith in him were saved. The Qur'ān explains in various passages and with an abundance of differing details the way in which they were punished: an impetuous wind struck them; there was a cloud that was expected to bring rain but that unleashed destruction in their valley and exterminated them; a glacial wind tore the men like uprooted palms; or a howling wind was sent by God against them for an entire seven nights and eight days and left everything it touched rotten.

In spite of the numerous verses that recount these events, nothing else is said regarding Hūd, in the same way that nothing else is said about his people, the ʿĀd. A temporal collocation is for example suggested by a passage in which Hūd says to the people that God made them "the successors after the people of Noah". Even more mysterious are the references to their capacity or willingness to build something on the hillsides or to construct castles, and to the goods given to them by God: flocks and sons, gardens and fountains. One verse seems to refer to a sort of prosperity or wealth enjoyed by the ʿĀd or in any case a privilege extended to them by God, when it is stated that more was given to these people than to the people of Muḥammad.[72] Lastly, some passages explicitly affirm that the ʿĀd had rejected more than one messenger, and therefore someone other than Hūd, while elsewhere the Qur'ān seems to allude to another detail, that is the gigantic stature of the ʿĀd, that became a recurrent theme in later literature.[73]

The tone of the Qur'ānic passages refers indisputably to the recurrent theme of the clash between the prophet and his people, in which the dramatic form is preferred to every other type of narration. For this reason the many passages that refer to Hūd

and the ʿĀd contain information of little weight that renders impossible any attempt at identification with a population or a prophet that is already known. The names Hūd and ʿĀd are testified to in pre-Islamic poetry and in some inscriptions and in all probability the Qur'ānic passages actually refer to Arab traditions which predate Muḥammad.[74]

There is more than one reason for associating the names of Hūd and ʿĀd and those of one other messenger and another population: Ṣāliḥ and the Thamūd. The tone of the narration and the themes used in the Qur'ānic passages have various elements in common, and they are those which are typical of the stories of punishment; moreover, the Qur'ān itself suggests a close parallel, especially when the names of the two populations are mentioned one next to the other in a few verses.[75] Ṣāliḥ was the messenger sent to the people of the Thamūd who started calling them to faith in God:

> "O my people, serve God! You have no god other than He; there has now come to you a clear sign from your Lord, this is the She-camel of God, to be a sign for you. Leave her that she may eat in God's earth, and do not touch her with evil, lest you be seized by a painful chastisement. And remember when He appointed you successors after ʿĀd, and lodged you in the land, taking to yourselves castles of its plains, and hewing its mountains into houses. Remember God's bounties, and do not mischief in the earth, working corruption" (Qur. 7:73–74).

The invocation of Ṣāliḥ contains an explicit temporal reference, suggesting Thamūd as successors of the ʿĀd and refers to castle and homes. These references to their homes which they construct by breaking the rock, together with those references in other passages to gardens and springs, harvests and palms, seem to clearly indicate that the Thamūd were a prosperous and powerful population. However, the most interesting element is the mention of the she-camel sent as a test from God, and the order to let her graze in peace, so as not to meet with any punishment. The Qur'ān does not contain anything else that clarifies the events to which it refers, given that it only adds in some other passages that this camel had the right to drink or that the water had to be shared between her and them. The calls to faith of Ṣāliḥ, as usual, do not work except in the case of a few followers. The worthies or

the élite refuse obstinately either to believe or to abandon their idolatrous faith, and openly challenge Ṣāliḥ and his mission, accusing him of being bewitched and a man like themselves. The act that indicates in an irreversible way their refusal is the decision to hamstring the she-camel as a show of resistance and an act of rebellion, which is performed by one of them, using a knife.[76]

That malevolent act made the punishment, which took the form of an earthquake or of a thunderbolt that left them all dead in their houses, inevitable. The end is announced by Ṣāliḥ himself: when he became aware of what had been done to the she-camel he announced that the punishment would be upon them in three days. In some passages that punishment is alluded to with the expression that the Thamūd were reached by a shout sent by God. Ṣāliḥ and those who believed together with him were naturally placed in safety.[77]

The story of Ṣāliḥ provided by the Qur'ān is without doubt much better articulated and richer in detail than that of Hūd. The presence of the she-camel is decisively the most relevant element, but all this is not enough for the reconstruction of a complete and detailed account of events. The Qur'ān proceeds here more than ever with its allusive style that seems to present a story already known, rather than give a complete account, preferring to stress the dramatisation of the confrontation between the messenger and the contemptuous élite of the population. Another question is that of the identification of the population of the Thamūd. Evidence of various provenances – from inscriptions dating to the 8th century BC until the geographic works of Ptolemy and Pliny – attests the existence of a population of the pre-Islamic Arabian peninsula with this name. If the scarce and laconic documentation impedes the establishment with absolute certainty of their origins and their history remains at best sketchy, the totality of the available information – together with that offered by the Qur'ān – does not leave any doubt about the effective existence of an ancient tribe and population of that name.[78]

The last of the Arabian prophets is Shuʿayb, and he was sent to the population mentioned in the Qur'ān by the name Madyan.[79] He exhorts his people to which, it is stated, a sign was sent, to believe in God, and he also urges them not to cheat people by altering weights and measures, and not to engage in corrupt behaviour or to lurk on any road to threaten people. The Qur'ān does not clearly explain to what these exhortations are referring.

The haughty elders arrogantly quarrel in answer to these calls and as a consequence reject them, in the name of the religion of their fathers, even accusing Shuʿayb of being bewitched and challenging him and his followers to renounce their faith or be thrown out. Elsewhere, in another verse, the population states that they refrain from stoning the prophet only out of respect for his family. Shuʿayb obviously rejects the injunction and invokes God to judge them and thereby establish who is on the correct path; the judgement goes in his favour, whilst those who oppose him are tragically punished:

> So the earthquake seized them, and morning found them in their habitation fallen prostrate, those who cried lies to Shuʿayb, as if never they dwelt there; those who cried lies to Shuʿayb, they were losers. So he turned his back on them, and said: "O my people, I have delivered to you the messages of my Lord, and advised you sincerely; how should I grieve for a people of unbelievers?" (Qur. 7:91–93).

According to other passages, the punishment consists of an imprecise scream or a black cloud that strikes the unbelievers within their habitations.

It is possible to establish a chronological sequence of Shuʿayb's mission on the basis of a verse that reports his invocation. He invites his people not to sin because of the hatred they feel before him, and therefore not to attract something similar to that which befell the peoples of Noah, Hūd and Ṣāliḥ, adding that "the people of Lot are not far away from you".[80] The Qurʾān does not contain any other details of great significance, with the exception of the name al-Ayka that is found at the start of a passage that tells of Shuʿayb (Qur. 26:176), identifying the population to which he was sent. This "people of al-Ayka", cited in other passages, appear to be a different group than the people of Madyan, but the expression also remained rather mysterious in the eyes of the exegetes who have proposed various explanations.[81]

None of the elements listed above permit the identification of Shuʿayb with any other personage in the Biblical traditions. Madyan on the other hand refers to Midian and to the story of Moses, and this is confirmed by the fact the name is also cited in the Qurʾān in connection with those events. The identification of Shuʿayb in later traditions with Jethro however finds no confirmation in the sacred text. The two events are decisively

separate, and therefore, in all probability, the Qur'ānic story of Shu'ayb – such as those of Hūd and Ṣāliḥ – refers to an original Arab tradition.[82]

The stories of Hūd, Ṣāliḥ and Shu'ayb have many elements in common. The structure is that of the stories of punishment, their experiences are all mentioned in the most ancient revelations and a few formal elements are common (for example the prophet is defined as "brother" of the population to which he is sent). Apart from these considerations it should be noted also that the Qur'ān uses stories, which were in all probability originally Arabian, to return to the usual themes that reflect the human experiences of Muḥammad in his confrontation with the Meccan idolaters. Together with the stories of Noah and Lot, those of the Arabian prophets Hūd and Ṣāliḥ constitute the stories of punishment *par excellence*.[83]

NOTES

1 See also Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 76–85, especially in 84: "The apostles and prophets are not, in the Qur'anic presentation, successive links in a chain of historical evolution (...) but merely repeated examples of an eternal truth, idealized models to be emulated".

2 The question of the borrowings and of the presumed dependence of the Qur'ānic stories upon Jewish or Christian traditions or other sources has been one of the favourite topics in Islamic studies. These studies, despite their value in terms of material collected and analysed, have often displayed the fault of systematically ignoring the specific characteristics of the Qur'ānic text and of taking for granted that the Qur'ān was the work of Muḥammad, thus committing a decisive blasphemy in the eyes of Muslims. Our approach seeks to emphasise above all the original aspects of the Qur'ānic revelation without however forgetting the affinity with Jewish and Christian traditions. Even those who consider the Qur'ān the word of God cannot ignore the fact that the Qur'ān was revealed in a particular historical period and had to be comprehensible to Muḥammad and his contemporaries. In this sense therefore the contents of the Qur'ān can be considered as a reflection of the traditions and stories with minor or major affinity with the homologous Jewish and Christian versions, which must have been current in Arabia at the end of the sixth century.

3 To the names of these prophets, who are only alluded to by the Qur'ān, must be added the three anonymous messengers who are described in some verses in the sura Yā-sīn (Qur. 36:13–30), and that commentators usually identify as three Christian apostles who were sent to Antioch.

4 The verses in which Adam seems to be regarded as a prophet are Qur. 19:58 (The prophets are from the offspring of Adam) and Qur. 3:33 (Adam, Moses and others were chosen by God); cf. also Qur. 20:122: "Thereafter his Lord chose him, and turned again unto him, and He guided him". The identification of Adam as a prophet is extraneous to the Biblical text, but is nevertheless attested in Jewish and, even more so, Christian literature. In the Talmud Adam is defined as a great saint while in the *Midrash Rabbah* on *Genesis* it is stated that Adam was worthy of having the Torah revealed through him; these sources are mentioned by Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes musulmanes*, 13, and Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 49–50. As stressed by L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Philadelphia 1909–38, v, 83, however, Jewish sources such as *Seder ʿOlam Rabbah* and Philo already refer to the prophesy of Adam, though it is in the Patristic literature that Adam is more often mentioned as a prophet (see above, Speyer and Ginzberg, *loc. cit.*).

5 The Qur'ānic name of the devil, Iblīs, is usually interpreted as a corruption of the Greek *διάβολος*. The Qur'ānic passages about Adam that contain references to the prostration of the angels and to the expulsion from paradise are Qur. 2:30–38; 7:11–25; 15:26–39; 17:61–63; 18:50; 20:115–124; 38:71–75.

6 It must be added that this episode has been difficult for the Muslim exegetes to account for, in the sense that it attests that an act such as the "prostration", which according to traditions should be performed only to God, was here requested before a man such as Adam. The question has been amply treated in Tottoli, "Early Muslim Attitudes Towards Prostration", 28–32. Nothing similar is mentioned in the Biblical text, but the story is testified to in apocryphal Jewish and Christian literature, where both the prostration or adoration of the angels before Adam and the refusal of Iblīs are mentioned. See for example *The Life of Adam and Eve* §§ 14–16 and *The Cave of Treasures*. Among the many studies dedicated to the question in which these sources are mentioned, see above all Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 77–8, according to which the origin of the story could only be Christian, given that the adoration of Adam by the angels would be inconceivable for Judaism. The topic is discussed widely also by Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 55–8; Zwemer, "The Worship of Adam by Angels", 115–27; and Hirschberg, "Der Sündenfall", 34; Id., *Jüdische und christliche Lehren*, 50–3. In particular Hirschberg distinguishes opportunely between the prostration of the angels to Adam, which would be attested in Jewish sources prior to the Islam, and the refusal of Iblīs that would be an exclusively Christian detail which entered only later, probably through Christian or Muslim channels, into Jewish literature; about this see Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, 63–4 and V, 84.

7 Qur. 4:1; 7:189; 39:6: "He created you of a single soul, then from it He appointed its mate".

8 See, respectively, Qur. 2:37 and 20:115. As is stressed by Mir, "Adam", 9, according to the Qur'ān and in contrast to the Biblical text, Adam then reconciled immediately with God.

9 *Banū Ādam*: Qur. 7:26, 27, 31, 35, 172; 17:70; 36:60. This expression, as also the Arabic form *Ādam*, was clearly transferred from the Hebrew, as has already been indicated by Nöldeke-Schwally, *Geschichte*, I, 242, and Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary*, 50–1.

10 Parallels in Jewish and Christian literature are indicated and listed by Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 86–7; Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes*, 18; Stillman, "The Story of Cain and Abel"; and W. Borg-Qaysieh, *Die Geschichte von Kain und Abel*, 19–22. The versions which are most similar to the Qur'ānic one are undoubtedly those in the Jewish literature and are listed by Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, 113, V, 142. The *Midrash Tanḥūmā*, for example, tells of two unspecified birds sent to Cain. The account in the *Pirqê de-Rabbi Eli'ezer*, where however it is Adam who follows the example of the crow, is the version most similar to the Qur'ānic one, but *Pirqê de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* might already have been influenced by Qur'ānic stories, as was stressed by Heller, "Récits et personnages bibliques", 116.

11 The story of Noah, in an extended form or with brief allusions, is contained in Qur. 7:59–64; 10:71–73; 11:25–49; 17:17; 21:76–77; 23:23–30; 26:105–122; 29:14–15; 37:75–82; 51:46; 53:52; 54:9–17; 71:1–28.

12 In Qur. 23:24 the people of Noah affirm that God should have sent them an angel, and in Qur. 11:31 Noah himself affirms: "I do not say 'I am an angel'", repeating the words that God used when he gave the orders to Muḥammad to declare in Qur. 6:50: "I say not to you 'I am an angel'". The Qur'ān indicates in a number of verses that one of the reasons for which the unbelievers rejected the prophesy of Muḥammad was precisely the fact that he was only a common man and not an angel: Qur. 6:8–9; 11:12; 25:7 and cf. Qur. 17:95. The affirmation of Noah that he is not an angel must therefore be viewed in close relation with the similar affirmations contained in the Qur'ān regarding Muḥammad and the other prophets. The observations of G.D. Newby, "The Drowned Son", 25–7, according to which the affirmation of Noah derived from his presumed angelic nature, as suspected by his father, according to the *Ethiopian Enoch*, therefore seem of little value; see about this, Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, 145.

13 The order to construct the Ark is naturally mentioned in other verses that indicate that what was being referred to was a construction of planks and nails: Qur. 54:13; see also Qur. 23:27. On the request to board, see Qur. 11:41.

14 The furnace is mentioned in Qur. 11:40; 23:27. This affirmation is explained in various ways by the Muslim exegetes. According to Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 86 n. 2, and following Geiger's steps Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 103, and Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes*, 27, the furnace to which the Qur'ān refers is inspired by a Talmudic particular according to which the waters of the Flood were boiling. Another description about the beginning of the Flood is given in Qur'ān 54:11–2: "Then We opened the gates of heaven unto water torrential, and made the earth to gush with fountains, and the waters met for a matter decreed".

15 The verse on the wife of Noah is Qur. 66:10. The story of this family and above all of the unbelieving son is completely absent from the Bible, which only refers to three children all of whom were saved. Muslim exegetical tradition identifies this unbelieving son with a fourth son by the name of Canaan or Yām. In the Biblical tradition Canaan was the son of Ham and was the object of the curses of Noah when Ham saw his nudity: *Gen.* 9, 22–27. As is pointed out by Newby, "The Drowned Son", 22–3, only a few passages in the apocryphal literature lead one to suspect that Canaan could be considered the son rather than the nephew of Noah, for example in the *Book of Jubilees*, 7, 10.

16 Qur. 11:44, 48. It is not clear which mountain is being referred to in the Qur'ān with the name al-Jūdī; it is identified with Mount Ararat in the exegetical tradition. According to Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 107; Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 107; and Walker, *Bible Characters*, 118 n. 8, the Qur'ān would have originally referred to a mountain in the Arabian peninsula.

17 Qur. 29:14; In this case the Qur'ān repeats what is reported in the Bible with one significant variation: in *Gen.* 9, 29 it is stated that the entire life of Noah was 950 years. The name Noah is then often recorded together with those of the other prophets: Qur. 3:33; 6:84; 9:70; 11:89; 14:9; 17:3; 50:12; 57:12; 66:10.

18 Qur. 6:74; 19:41–50; 21:51–71; 26:69–104; 29:16–25; 37:83–98; 43:26–28; 60:4; a dispute between Abraham and his people is also recorded in the Qur'ān at 6:79–83. The story, as it is told in the Qur'ānic passages, displays broad parallels especially with Jewish apocryphal literature. See for ex. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, 195–203 and the related notes. In the Qur'ānic account the name of the father of Abraham is rather interesting: Āzar. According to Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 100, this would derive from the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius, that mentions *'Αθαρ*, while for Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 85, and C.C. Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation*, 68, the name Āzar derives from Eliezer. Regarding the pyre, Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 132–44, in part. 142–4, emphasises on the other hand that the events recall a similar story in the *Quaestiones* of Jerome (a point of view that had already been referred to by Grünbaum, *Neue Beiträge*, 90).

19 Disapproval of the intercession of Abraham is expressed in Qur. 9:114 and 60:4; the invocation for his father, without further commentary, is pronounced by Abraham at Qur. 26:86. The Qur'ān, in one particular verse, makes it clear that neither believers nor the Prophet himself should intercede on behalf of unbelievers. Qur. 9:113 states: "It is not for the Prophet (Muḥammad) and the believers to ask pardon for the idolaters". The traditional extra-canonical stories explain that these verses were revealed because Muḥammad sought to intercede on behalf of his powerful uncle Abū Ṭālib who had taken him under his protection without ever becoming a Muslim. Apart from these verses the Qur'ān expresses its opposition to intercessions on behalf of idolatrous family members and in particular unbelieving parents in

various passages, despite the fact that love for one's parents is fundamental in Qur'ānic ethics; see in this respect the long passage in Qur. 46:15–8, or as regards the prophets' love for their parents: Qur. 12:100 (Joseph); 27:19 (Solomon); 71:28 (Noah).

20 See above all Qur. 2:124–132, and also Qur. 3:96–97; 14:35–41; 22:26. Some of these verses make mention of the "station of Abraham" which the Muslim tradition identifies as a stone upon which Abraham climbed to construct the Ka'ba and that carries his imprint. The story of the construction of the Ka'ba and of the pilgrimage of Abraham is described in detail and defined in successive traditions. A complete account of all of this material is given by al-Azraqī (d. 837) who wrote a book on the story of Mecca; a partial Italian translation of this work can be found in al-Azraqī, *La Ka'bah. Tempio al centro del mondo*, in particular regarding Abraham: pp. 19–38.

21 This polemical passage is at Qur. 3:65–68; the other passages in which *ḥanīf* (together with *millat Ibrāhīm*) occurs are: Qur. 2:135; 3:95; 4:125; 6:161: 16:123; further (not in connection with Abraham): Qur. 6:79; 10:105; 16:120; 30:30; the plural *ḥunafā'* is quoted at Qur. 22:31 and 98:5. The traditional Muslim stories tell that in pre-Islamic Arabia there were people who followed a religion defined as *ḥanīfiyya*, a monotheism that was separate from the other revealed religions and with many elements in common with the nascent Islam. Indirect evidence of this would seem to be contained in the *Historia ecclesiastica* of Sozomenos (IV sec.) according to which there were three religions in Arabia: Judaism, Christianity and the affiliates of the religion of Abraham. The *ḥanīfiyya* could be therefore identified with this religion of Abraham. The scarcity of Qur'ānic information and doubts about the reliability of Muslim historical traditions have however left the way open for contrasting interpretations, from those who consider *ḥanīfiyya* to be a Christian or Judaic sect, or neither a sect nor a precise form of cult, or an original Arab movement or a movement inspired by Biblical religions if not by Sabians. On all of these interpretations see the abundant bibliography quoted by N.A. Faris, "The Development of the Meaning", 1–13, to which should be added the more recent Denny, "Some Religio-Communal Terms", 26–34; Rippin, "RḤMNN and the Ḥanīfs". The term *ḥanīf* is usually considered derived from the Syriac *ḥanpe* that means "pagan" (see Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary*, 112–5). In conclusion, it must be pointed out that the ideal connection with the religion of Abraham is a motif already expressed in the New Testament (for ex. *Rom.* 4, 16) and from there in Christian literature.

22 Abraham is defined friend (*khalīl*) of God in Qur. 4:125. The epithet had already been used in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments: *2Chr.* 20, 7; *Isa.*, 41, 8; *Jack*, 2, 23. The sheets (*ṣuḥuf*) are mentioned in verses that belong to the first Meccan period (Qur. 53:36–37; 87:19).

23 See Qur. 11:69–76; 15:51–60; 29:31–322; 51:24–32. The Qur'ānic accounts faithfully follow the story as contained in *Gen.* 18, to the exclusion of the particular about the food which was rejected. The precise identification of the visitors as angels is expressly mentioned

in later Jewish traditions; see in this regard the material cited by Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, 240–5; and Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 148–50.

24 In the more ancient exegesis the interpretation is divided between Isaac and Ishmael; today the son chosen for sacrifice is usually considered to be Ishmael. According to some exegetes an allusion to the attempted sacrifice is also to be found in Qur. 2:124: "And when his Lord tested Abraham with certain words, and he fulfilled them".

25 Qur. 19:54–55. The most interesting verses that mention Isaac and Ishmael are Qur. 11:71; 14:39 and Qur. 37:112–113 on Isaac. Isaac and Ishmael are also mentioned together in Qur. 2:133, 140; 3:84; 4:163.

26 These episodes are reported, respectively, at Qur. 2:260; 2:258; 6:75–78. The first episode recalls, with substantial differences, the story contained in *Gen.* 15, 9. Qur. 2:258 is however without any doubt a reference to Nimrod, as is emphasised and demonstrated by H. Schützinger, *Ursprung and Entwicklung*, 18, despite the fact that this identification is anachronistic, given that Nimrod in *Gen.* 10, 8 is the son of Cush. All of the story of the confrontation between Abraham and Nimrod, as is taken up in the later Muslim traditions, is in any case widely testified in the Jewish literature; about this see Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, 186f. Regarding the last episode, Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 125–8, indicates parallels from Jewish and Christian apocrypha, but the Qur'ānic synthesis appears substantially original.

27 Qur. 7:80–84; 11:70, 77–83; 15:59–74; 21:71; 26:160–175; 27:54–58; 29:26, 28–35; 37:133–138; 54:33–40. According to Künstlinger, "Christliche Herkunft", 281–95, the tendency to present Lot in such a positive light derives from Christian sources, given that Haggadah portrayed him differently. The figure of Lot in the Qur'ān is in any case consonant with the images that the sacred text gives for all of the messengers in the stories of punishment.

28 The Qur'ānic term which indicates Sodom and Gomorrah as "subverted cities" is *al-mu'tafikāt* in Qur. 9:70; 69:9 and in the singular *al-mu'tafika* in Qur. 53:53. There is overall agreement on the fact that this derives from an analogous Hebrew term: see Hirschfeld, *Beiträge zur Erklarung des Korāns*, 37; Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 13–4. The verse about the wickedness of Lot's wife is Qur. 66:10. The particulars of the story of Lot follow in general terms the account in *Gen.* 19, even if the Qur'ān does not clarify the motives for which his wife was punished and indicates, in contrast to the Bible which speaks of sulphur and fire (*Gen.* 19, 24), that God destroyed them with a rain of stones of *sijjīl* (Qur. 11:82; 15:74; and cf. the term in Qur. 105:4) which probably means "clay". In Arabic lexicography *sijjīl* is a word of Persian origin; see in this respect Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary*, 164–5. As regards Lot's wife, Walker, *Bible Characters*, 77–8, through a chronological analysis of the revelations, maintains that the reference to the murdered wife appears only in the last revelations, while in the earlier ones there is either no mention of her at all or there is merely a reference to a generic "old woman".

29 All of the events that are referred to in the following section are dealt with in Qur. 12:3–101. Apart from this passage, Joseph is mentioned in only two other passages, Qur. 40:34; 6:84. In contrast, other than in the story of Joseph, Jacob is mentioned in numerous passages, but in these the Qur'ān refers only briefly to one episode in his life, that is the recommendation made by him to his sons at the point of death to persevere in the just faith: Qur. 2:132–133.

30 Also in *Genesis* Joseph excuses his brothers for their behaviour, affirming that it is the will of God which determines the turn of events, but for a more precise aim, that is keeping the family of Jacob and his people alive (*Gen.* 45, 7–8 and 50, 20). Mir, "The Qur'ānic Story of Joseph", 5–9, rightly emphasises that the image of God dominating all events and the actions of the prophets in relation to this are the principal themes in the story of Joseph.

31 Some of the details of the story of Joseph and the woman of Potiphar, as they are reported in the Qur'ān, are not found in the Bible, but can be found instead in Rabbinical literature. Such is the case of the reference to the fact that Joseph also experienced desire for the woman, but was restrained by a supernatural event, as one is left to imagine by the expression "proof of his Lord". A similar story is evidenced in both the *Midrash Rabbah* and in other sources: Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 111, 113; Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 200–3. Some traditions of this type, in which Joseph was stopped by an apparition of his mother and his father, are given in Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, II, 53–4; these same motifs were then adopted by Muslim exegetical literature. A comparison between the Bible, *Midrash*, the Qur'ān, and Muslim traditions on this subject is made by Goldman in *The Wiles of Women / The Wiles of Men*, 31–54. The story of the women that deride Potiphar's wife is also referred to in a Rabbinical text, the *Sefer ha-Yāshār*, as has already been indicated by Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 112, and Schapiro, *Die haggadischen Elemente*, 44; and also in the *Midrash Tanḥūmā*, as is indicated by de Premare, *Joseph and Muhammad*, 65–6, and Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes*, 62–3. Deducing that there is a direct dependence of the Qur'ān on these sources is however hazardous because of problems of dating. As S.D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs*, New York 1954, 194–5, writes, this Jewish literature on the story of the women would have been influenced by the Qur'ān, but the motif, according to him, would be of Persian origin.

32 The expression with which the surviving prisoner addresses Joseph calling him *al-ṣiddīq* (truthful, just) in Qur. 12:46 ("Joseph, thou true man, pronounce to us regarding seven fat kine") is identical with the epithet of Joseph in the Haggadic literature, in the Jewish liturgy, and among the Samaritans: *ha-ṣaddīq*.

33 At this point the Qur'ān contains various details that differ from those in the Bible: the order of Jacob to enter Egypt by different ways and the identity which was revealed to Benjamin, of whom the Qur'ān never gives the name, before it was revealed to all the other brothers. The order, as Qur'ānic commentators explain, would have been given

to avoid the evil eye; parallels with Jewish literature are indicated by Schapiro, *Die haggadischen Elemente*, 55, and Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 115, who refers to the *Midrash Rabbah*. Yet again Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 116, indicates that Joseph revealed his identity to Benjamin first according to *Sefer ha-Yāshār* too.

34 The detail of the blindness of the father derives, according to Walker, *Bible Characters*, 74, from a confusion that the Qur'ānic text makes with Isaac. It is worth noting the incongruence of the Qur'ān in relation to the two parents who prostrate themselves in the presence of Joseph, in the light of the Biblical tradition according to which his mother was already dead at that time. The Muslim exegetes, well aware of the incongruency, give various interpretations of these events. Both the Rabbinical and the Christian literature had already demonstrated an awareness of the fact that the fulfillment of the dream, with the death of his mother, had as a question of logic to be very problematic; in this regard refer to Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 117–8; Schapiro, *Die haggadischen Elemente*, 16–8; Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes*, 55–6.

35 In regard to these questions see Busse, *Die theologischen Beziehungen*, 94–6; Johns, "Joseph in the Qur'ān", 43–5. A re-reading of the sura of Joseph in parallel with the events in the life of Muḥammad is given by Stern, "Muhammad and Joseph", 202–4, according to which Joseph had become a sort of model for him.

36 Qur. 288:7 and cf. Qur. 20:39–40; 26:14, 18–20. The extra-canonical traditions call the old man Shuʿayb, the same name given by the Qur'ān to a prophet, see above pp. 48–50. As far as the infancy of Moses is concerned, the Qur'ān, like the Bible, mentions a sister who follows the abandoned Moses along the bank. The name Miriam which is given to this sister, is not mentioned in the Qur'ān; about this name see in particular the considerations of Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 241–4, that refers to an overlap and confusion with Mary, the mother of Jesus. As regards the events surrounding the man killed by Moses, it should be pointed out that according to the Qur'ān the second adversary encountered by the Jew helped by Moses was a person from the opposing side, and therefore an Egyptian, while according to *Exodus* he was a Jew. Other original Qur'ānic details which bear a similarity to those in the Bible are: the immediate recognition by Moses that the killing was a wrongdoing; with regard to this see Opeloye, "Confluence and Conflict", 29–30; and the fact that it was the wife of Pharaoh who found the box containing the newborn Moses and not the daughter. According to Künstlinger, "Die 'Frau Pharaos' im Koran", 132–5, the Qur'ānic version reflects a mixing up of the characters since the wife of Pharaoh in the Qur'ān and in the Muslim traditions has the same characteristics as the daughter in the Biblical tradition. Additionally, Qur. 66:11 mentions the wife of Pharaoh as an example of goodness.

37 On the whole story, from the burning bush to the dialogue with God, see Qur. 20:9–48; 27:7–14; 28:29–35; 79:15–19. The Qur'ān mentions Aaron as a minister (*wazīr*) of Moses, while in the Bible he is referred

to as prophet of Moses (*Ex.* 7, 1: "your prophet", where "your" refers to Moses). Both the Bible and the Qur'ān refer to Moses's speech defect and therefore his need for the assistance of Aaron: *Ex.* 4, 10; Qur. 20:27, 26:13. The role of Aaron in the Qur'ān is however secondary.

38 The confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh is described or referred to in Qur. 2:49–50; 7:103–138; 10:75–92; 11:96–99; 14:5–6; 17:101–104; 20:46–79; 23:45–49; 25:35–36; 26:10–68; 28:3–6, 36–42; 40:23–47; 43:46–56; 44:17–33; 51:38–40; 54:41–42; 73:15–16; 79:20–26; and cf. Qur. 21:48: "We gave Moses and Aaron the Salvation". The point is also broadly dealt with in the Haggadic literature that adds details to the Biblical account, which in some cases are similar to the Qur'ānic version. The dispute of Pharaoh with the believer, whose name is not given, but is simply referred to as a man of the family of Pharaoh, is contained in Qur. 40:28–45 and does not have parallels in Jewish literature. The Qur'ān also mentions in this passage that only one of the tribes believed in Moses, a detail in which some see a similarity with *Ex.* 32, 26: see Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 274. Of all these passages, the most notable is that in which it is affirmed that Pharaoh proclaimed his faith in the God of Moses only on the point of being swallowed up by the waters (Qur. 10:90–92). Numerous later traditions describe in great detail that declaration of faith *in extremis*; on the topic see Tottoli, "Il Faraone nelle tradizioni islamiche". As regards the plagues, the Qur'ān refers to nine signs (Qur. 27:12), but when it lists them the number is different; these discrepancies are also evident in the apocryphal Jewish and Christian literature: Speyer, *Die biblichen Erzählungen*, 279–80. According to Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 20 n. 1, on the other hand, the number of plagues is said to be accounted for by the marked Qur'ānic preference for the number nine.

39 See in particular Qur. 2:55–61; on the request of the Israelites to see God: Qur. 4:153; 7:155; on the manna and the quails: Qur. 7:160; 20:80–81.

40 Qur. 7:142–147; cf. 19:52; 20:83–84. The Decalogue is absent from the Qur'ān, but some of the rules are clearly listed in various Qur'ānic passages and presented as precepts established for the Israelites, see for example Qur. 2:83–85; 6:151–152, or Qur. 17:22–35.

41 Qur. 5:20–26: only two men obeyed the order to enter the Promised Land, the others refused arguing that it was inhabited by giants and for this refusal they were interdicted from entering into it for 40 years. The verse which refers to the slander against Moses (Qur. 33:69) is not at all clear. The invocation of Moses against his people who torment him is in Qur. 61:5. See also Qur. 14:5–8: Moses summons his people; Qur. 37:114–122: Moses and Aaron were saved along with their people.

42 Qur. 7:148–154; 20:85–98; and the references in Qur. 2:51–54; 4:153; 2:92–93 (where the episode, already referred to in the Talmud, of the mountain lifted over the Israelites is mentioned; cf. also Qur. 4:154). The meaning of *al-Sāmirī* has been the subject of various interpretations:

according to Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 131, the term derived from Samuel, a hypothesis so unlikely that it had already been forcefully rejected by Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 329–332. To this add also the considerations of Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 114–115, according to whom, the term could perhaps be intended as a reference to the Samaritans. The most notable detail from this episode is that al-Sāmirī says that he has taken a handful of earth and mud from the footprint of the messenger (Gabriel) and thrown it (onto the calf which then came alive). The event is discussed, with an analysis of the bibliography on the topic, by Yahuda, "A Contribution to Qur'ān and Hadīth", 286–9. Of some interest are also the hypotheses of Opeloye, "Confluence and Conflict", 36–7, and above all of Busse, *Die theologischen Beziehungen*, 104, according to whom the story has no parallels in Christian literature but only in Jewish literature, given the hostile tone towards the Samaritans.

43 The somewhat mysterious story of al-Khiḍr is in Qur. 18:60–82. The hypothesis of Friedlaender, *Die Chadirlegende*, that the story has a Greek origin, from where it passed, via the Syriac and the contact with Christianity, to the Arabian peninsula during the early period of Islam is still interesting and well-grounded. A different viewpoint is held by Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes*, 90–5, and de Hond, *Beiträge zur Erklärung*, according to whom the story is of a generic Jewish origin and Schwarzbaum, "Jewish and Moslem versions", 119–69, who points to a composite origin, with rich Jewish, Christian, and other parallels. The story of Korah is in Qur. 28:76–81. Korah is mentioned together with Hāmān and Pharaoh in Qur. 29:39 and 40:24. Qur. 28:38 and 40:36 deal with the tower which Pharaoh requested Hāmān to construct. The Biblical traditions do not refer to any person by the name of Hāmān in connection with Moses, but mention this same name in the book of *Esther* (3; 5–7). The hypothesis that the Qur'ānic information is the result of an imprecision is decisively rejected by Badawi, "Le problème de Hāmān", 29–33, who maintains that the name must be considered as that of the title of the great priest of Amon. The name of Hāmān however appears also to be connected to that of Korah in Jewish literature where they are brought together and referred to side by side because of their great wealth (Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 284). There are also clear Biblical parallels (*Num.* 19, 2f. and above all *Deut.* 21, 1–9) regarding the story of the cow, even though the Qur'ānic version favours the narrative structure more than the normative aspects.

44 Qur. 7:156–157; 28:44–46, 48.

45 Qur. 2:53, 87; 6:154; 11:110; 17:2; 23:49; 25:35; 28:43; 32:23; 37:117; 40:53; 41:45; 46:12, 30; and see also the verses that refer to the sheets (*ṣuḥuf*) of Moses and Abraham: Qur. 53:36–37; 87:19. To the other Qur'ānic stories add the passage Qur. 7:175–176, which is considered by almost all the commentators as an allusion to the story of Balaam.

46 The whole passage is in Qur. 2:246–251; the verse quoted is Qur. 2:251. The exegetical literature identifies in Samuel the anonymous prophet mentioned in these events. As regards the contents of the Qur'ānic

passage on the other hand, according to Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 144, they are the product of a confusion between Saul and Gedeon. The extremely positive Qur'ānic figure of Saul has, according to Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 367, parallels in Christian rather than Jewish literature. Also Busse, *Die thologischen Beziehungen*, 110, returns to this topic, when he adds that one can also recognise a parallel between the conditions of the Muslims and the story of the Israelites with Saul.

47 On all of these points see Qur. 21:78–80; 27:15; 34:10–11; on the *Psalms*, see Qur. 4:163; 17:55. The particular on the art of making coats of mail is already attested in pre-Islamic Arabic literature, as has already been emphasised and considered by Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 109.

48 The whole passage is in Qur. 38:17–26; the Biblical story is reported in *2 Sam.* 11–12. On the story of Bathsheba, see in particular the analysis of Johns, "David and Bathsheba", 229–34, which also examines the exegetical literature on the topic. Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 380, was the first to rightly point out that the Qur'ān insists upon repentance in terms which bear similarity to those in Christian literature (Speyer quotes Ephraim).

49 Qur. 21:78–79; 27:15–16; 38:34. According to Salzberger, *Die Salomo-Sage*, 27, the figure of Solomon is preeminent for Islam, in contrast to the status he is afforded in the Jewish tradition in which David is more important. This consideration is probably valid for the Qur'ānic data but is not exact according to later Muslim traditions in which David plays a role of great significance.

50 On the last detail about the schemes of the demons, cf. Qur. 2:102. What these schemes consisted of and the reason for which the Qur'ān then adds that Solomon was not an unbeliever while the demons were, is not at all clear from the Qur'ānic context, but it can be presumed that it was a response to the Biblical affirmation that Solomon, who was old and entirely dominated by foreign wives, almost moved in the direction of idolatry. (*1Kgs.* 11, 4). About his powers see Qur. 34:12–13; 38:36–38; on the submission of the wind and in particular on the demons that dive into the sea for him: Qur. 21:81–82. Qur. 38:37 refers to the demon builders and fishers of pearls. On the death of Solomon, see Qur. 34:14. The ability to speak with the birds, according to Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes*, 122, is also mentioned in an analogous account in the *Midrash Rabbah* on *Qohelet*, while the details on his powers have evident parallels in the *Testament of Solomon*, an apocryphal Christian work (Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes*, 116); see also other parallels with Jewish literature collected by Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 146–7; Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 384–5. Solomon is also described in the Qur'ān as "servant of God", an estimation that is decisively more similar to that which is contained in Christian literature than to that in Jewish literature; see in this regard Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 383. It should be emphasised that the references to the *jinn* that worked for Solomon are related in the later traditions to the construction of the

temple of Jerusalem, an episode that is however never cited in the Qur'ān.

51 Qur. 38:31–35. Parallels with the Jewish literature on the interruption of the reign of Solomon are cited by Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 400.

52 Qur. 27:15–44. Other happenings of the people of Sheba are mentioned in Qur. 34:15–16. The similarity between the story of *Targum Sheni* on the book of *Esther* is underlined by various scholars: Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 147–9; Grünbaum, *Neue Beiträge*, 211; Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes*, 124–5; and Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 390f. On the peculiar characteristics of the Qur'ānic passage see instead Watt, "The Queen of Sheba", 94–5, and Busse, *Die thologischen Beziehungen*, 116, who maintains that the whole story is a typical example of the battle against the pagans that came to be reflected in the same activity of Muḥammad at Medina with the Meccans. On this entire topic, on the comparison between the Qur'ān and the Jewish texts and for some hypotheses on the characteristics of the Qur'ānic text, refer to the more recent Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, 38–46. As regards in particular the events of the ant, it should be remembered that in *Prov.* 6, 6, there is an allusion to an ant.

53 The bibliography of Jesus and Mary in the Qur'ān and in Muslim traditions is very extensive. As regards Mary, only the most recent contribution is mentioned here: Zilio-Grandi, "La Vierge Marie", 57–103, in part. 59 n. 2 including further bibliography. As regards Jesus in the Qur'ān, the most interesting contributions are Zwemer, *The Moslem Christ*, 23–56; Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'ān*; Merad, "Le Christ selon l'Islam", 79–94; Räisänen, *Die Koranische Jesusbild*; Arnaldez, *Jésus fils de Marie*; Pirone, "La tradizione dei testi evangelici", 133–175; and Borrmans, *Jésus et les musulmans d'aujourd'hui*, 19–45, that presents the Qur'ānic passages in order of revelation and then summarises the prerogatives and characteristics of Jesus according to the Qur'ān.

54 The fact that the Qur'ān does not contain a statement about the superiority of Jesus in relation to the other prophets had already been emphasised by Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation*, 75. On the Holy Spirit, which in the Qur'ānic text is literally the "Spirit of Sanctity", see Qur. 2:87; 5:110. On all of the topics mentioned here, see in particular Qur. 2:253; 4:172; 43:59; 57:27; 19:30 (servant of God and prophet). Mary was a saintly woman and both were human beings: Qur. 5:75. Jesus and his mother were a sign: Qur. 23:50. On the Torah and the Gospel, see Qur. 3:48–50; 5:46, 110; 57:27; 61:6. An interesting passage is that in which it is asserted that Jesus is like Adam in the sight of God (Qur. 3:59) because he was created of dust. It should be added in this respect that the parallel between Adam and Jesus had already appeared in the New Testament: *Rom.* 5, 12, and *1Cor.*, 15, 45. Other Christian sources are given by Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 43 n. 2; Pirone, "La tradizione dei testi evangelici", 140–2.

55 Qur. 2:116: against the belief that God had a son; see also Qur. 5:17; 6:101; 9:30–31; 10:68; 21:26; cf. Qur. 3:61. Against the Trinity:

Qur. 4:171. See also Qur. 5:72–75; 5:116–118, and also Qur. 19:35; 43:57–59, 63–65, 81. According to Merad, "Le Christ selon l'Islam", 83, Jesus is mentioned in the Qur'ān with the name "Jesus son of Mary" precisely for the reason of arguing against the idea that God had a son. The expression appears also in the Arabic and Syriac Gospels about Jesus' infancy. The deification of Mary is attested also in connection to sects such as Colliridians and Mariamites; see Gabrieli, "Gesù Cristo nel Qorano", 46. There is no information about Christian sects with the trinitary belief mentioned in the Qur'ān.

56 On most of these topics see Qur. 3:35–48; further, for the other particulars see Qur. 19:16–34. On Zechariah and John: Qur. 19:2–15; 21:89–90. A reference to the slander against Mary is given in Qur. 4:156. On the virginity of Mary, see Qur. 21:91; 66:12. The infancy of Mary recounted in the Qur'ān has parallels in the apocryphal Gospels, and in particular in the *Protoevangelium of James*: Gabrieli, "Gesù Cristo nel Qorano", 49; Pirone, "La tradizione dei testi evangelici", 155–7. The Qur'ānic story of the trunk of the palm-tree, when Jesus is born, on the other hand seems to be based on an analogous episode contained in the *Gospel of Ps. Matthew*, see Pirone, "La tradizione dei testi evangelici",167–8. The name of the father of Mary, 'Imrān, is the same name cited for the father of Moses. One other particularity that is worth noting in this report is that the genealogy of Jesus mentioned in the Qur'ān is that of the mother, while in the Gospel, for example *Matt.* 1, 1–17, it is that of Joseph, which is completely ignored by the Qur'ān. The story of the announcement of the birth of John to Zechariah follows that of *Luke*, 1, 5–25.

57 Qur. 3:48–55; against the crucifixion of Jesus: Qur. 4:157–159. The words spoken by the newborn Jesus are in Qur. 19:30–33. On all of the miracles and the call to the apostles see also Qur. 5:110–111; 61:14. As regards the parallels with Christian literature on these events, according to Gabrieli, "Gesù Cristo nel Qorano", 52, "The area in which the influence of the apocryphal gospels on the Christology of the Qur'ān is clearest and most evident is in the miracles attributed to Christ". The parallels are evident. The miracle of the bird of clay is for example mentioned in the *Gospel of Thomas*, while the words of Christ from the cradle are attested in the *Gospel of Infancy*; see Pirone, "La tradizione dei testi evangelici", 142–51. The substitution of Jesus on the Cross and the conclusion that he therefore was not dead are not novel features of the Qur'ān, but form a belief already attested to by some Christian sects; in this regard see the considerations of Busse, *Die thologischen Beziehungen*, 136–140. According to the Muslim exegetes a reference to the return to the earth of Jesus before the end of time is contained in the verse "and he (Jesus) is knowledge of the Hour" (Qur. 43:61).

58 Another hypothesis, that the passage in question alludes to the vision of Peter according to *Acts*, 10, 9–16, was formulated by Rudolph, *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans*, 81. See also the considerations of Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes*, 149, who mentions various passages of the Gospel;

Walker, *Bible Characters*, 62; Busse, *Die theologischen Beziehungen*, 130–1. According to Norris, "*Qiṣaṣ* Elements in the Qur'ān", 255, the passage in question could be an allusion to the Eucharist.

59 Qur. 61:6. Aḥmad is another name for Muḥammad.

60 Qur. 21:83–84; 38:41–44. An analysis of the Qur'ānic data about Job is given by Legrain, "Variations musulmanes", 52–5, that emphasises how the verses that refer to Job are Meccan and constitute an invitation to Muḥammad to be patient. A detailed analysis of the exegetical literature on Job is given by Déclais, *Les premiers musulmans face à la tradition biblique.*

61 Qur. 10:98 (this sura has the title the "sura of Jonah"); 21:87–88; 37:139–148; 68:48–50. Jonah is mentioned with the epithet "He of the Whale" (*dhū al-nūn*) in Qur. 21:87, and with the epithet "He of the Fish" (*ṣāḥib al-ḥūt*) in Qur. 68:48. The Arabic form of his name, Yūnus, according to Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 155, is transferred from the Ethiopian or taken from the Christian Palestinian communities. In the opinion of Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation*, 115, however, it was derived from the Greek. Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 409, agrees that the Qur'ānic Jonah is similar to the portrait given in the Christian literature.

62 Qur. 37:123–132. Also the Arabic form of the name Elijah (Ilyās) and the Qur'ānic for Baal (Baʿl) are, according to Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 81, 101, of Christian origin. Other Christian literature also speaks of the prophesy of Elijah, as for example in Epiphanius: see Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 406. However, in Rabbinical literature Elijah had already become a character of great prominence.

63 Elijah: Qur. 6:85; Elisha: Qur. 6:86; 38:48. In these two passages, as already evidenced by Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 155, Elisha is mentioned immediately after Ishmael.

64 Qur. 19:56–57; 21:85. Various hypotheses, which are opposed to the Muslim exegetical interpretations, are proposed for the identification of this character. According to Nöldeke the name Idrīs is derived from that of Andreas, while Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation*, 72, points to its derivation from *Εσδρας*. For these and other interpretations, among which is that of Hartmann according to whom Andreas was the cook of Alexander who obtained immortality, see Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 88–9. According to Walker, *Bible Characters*, 47–8, Idrīs must be identified with Elisha. Even more articulated is the hypothesis of Finkel, "Jewish, Christian and Samaritan Influences", 154–6, who sees it as a trace of the Greek *Εὐεδώρεσχος*.

65 Qur. 21:85–86; 38:48. The Qur'ānic exegesis has formulated various hypotheses about this character and he is not always considered a prophet. Different explanations are proposed by Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 155, and Walker, *Bible Characters*, 65, according to which Dhū al-Kifl is another name for Job; or by Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation*, 72: he is Joshua.

66 Qur. 9:30. This belief attributed to the Jews is quite problematic; see in this regard Walker, *Bible Characters*, 49–50, and above all Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 51–3. Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*,

127–8, and Künstlinger, "'Uzair ist der Sohn Allāhs", 381–3, speak instead of a substantial misunderstanding of passages that derive from the Talmudic and apocryphal literature.

67 According to Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 155, the Qur'ānic text refers to the journey around the ruins of the city of Nehemiah (*Neh.* 2, 12f.) or, according to Walker, *Bible Characters*, 45, to the events of Ebedmelech. The story which most resembles that of the events narrated in the Qur'ān is that of Ḥoni in the *Talmud* (*b.Ta'anit*, 23a) as is indicated by Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 425, and more recently by Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 57. All of the literature on the topic, including the most diverse interpretations, as well as the exegetical literature, is dealt with by Schützinger, "Die arabische Jeremia-Erzählung", 9–13.

68 Qur. 2:243.

69 Qur. 36:13–29. According to Walker, *Bible Characters*, 34, the passage alludes to the story of Agabus in *Acts*, 11, 27–30.

70 Qur. 18:9–26.

71 The events are dealt with in Qur. 7:69; and Qur. 26:128–130, 133–134; some of these verses contain the detail that God sent to the ʿĀd their brother Hūd: Qur. 7:65, 11:50, 26:124, 46:21; on the punishment, in particular: Qur. 41:16, 46:24–25, 51:41–42, 54:18–20, 69:6–7. That some believed in Hūd is evidenced where it is simply affirmed that Hūd and those believing in him were saved (Qur. 7:72, 11:58). The Qur'ānic passages contain rather obscure references: Qur. 46:21 states that Hūd admonished the ʿĀd in the mysterious al-Aḥqāf, while Qur. 89:6–7 is even more difficult to explain: "Hast thou not seen how thy Lord did with ʿĀd, Iram of the pillars?".

72 On these topics see Qur. 7:69; and Qur. 26:128–130, 133–134. The last verse referred to is Qur. 46:26: "And We had established them in that wherein We have not established you".

73 On the messengers: Qur. 11:59, 26:123, 46:21. On the stature: Qur. 7:69; the Qur'ānic passage is however open to contrasting interpretations. Qur. 41:15 refers to their haughtiness.

74 Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 149–150; Bell-Watt, *Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 127. Horovitz refers to the identification of Hūd with Eber (*Gen.*, 10, 25), an identification that had already been proposed by Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 91–3, who did not fail to note how the most relevant details contained in the Qur'ān do not have parallels in the Biblical text or in the Jewish tradition.

75 The two names are always mentioned in passages or verses that also mention other peoples, in particular the "people of Noah": Qur 9:70, 14:9, 22:42, 38:12–13, 40:31, 48:31, 53:50–51; along with the mysterious people of al-Rass: Qur. 25:38, 50:12–13; see also 29:38, 41:13; 69:4–7.

76 The principal passages on Ṣāliḥ are Qur. 7:73–79, 11:61–68, 26:141–159, 54:23–31, 91:11–15; on the she-camel see also Qur. 17:59; as in the case of Hūd, the Qur'ān states that God sent to the Thamūd their brother Ṣāliḥ, see Qur. 7:73, 11:61, 26:142; Qur. 54:23 refers to more than one messenger rejected by the Thamūd; further, the Thamūd

"hollowed the rocks in the valley": Qur. 89:9. The Thamūd are also cited in Qur. 85:18.

77 Qur. 7:78, 11:65, 67: "The cry surprised them, and the evildoers were seized by the cry, and morning found them in their habitations fallen prostrate"; on the cry see also Qur. 54:31; a verse which tends in a different direction is Qur. 69:5; see also Qur. 11:66, 41:18: those who believed were saved.

78 On these questions see Bell-Watt, *Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 128; Busse, *Die theologischen Beziehungen*, 78; and above all Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 103–6 and Lo Jacono, "La cultura araba pre-islamica", 122–5, in which the question is dealt with at length and the major historical evidence is discussed. Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 93–5, attempts to advance certain hypotheses regarding the identification from Jewish sources, but in the end he is forced to admit the meagre proofs for this assertion.

79 Qur. 7:85–93, 11:84–95, 26:176–191, 29:36–37. Also in the case of Shu'ayb some verses state that God sent to the Madyan their 'brother' Shu'ayb: 7:85, 11:84, 29:36. The Madyan are also cited in Qur. 9:70, 22:44.

80 Qur. 11:89.

81 On the people of al-Ayka see in particular Qur. 15:78–79, in which it is said that they were unequal; brief mentions are contained in Qur. 38:13, 50:14. The identity between the people of al-Ayka and the people of Maydan is also sustained by Bell-Watt, *Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 128–9; in this regard see also Bosworth, "Prophet Shu'aib", 425–6, who reports that also for the majority of Muslim exegetes these are the same people.

82 The Qur'ān cites Madyan in relation to Moses in Qur. 20:40, 28:22, 23, 45. According to Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 253, Muḥammad (and therefore the Islamic tradition) identifies the well where Moses met the daughters of Jethro in Beersheba and the name Shu'ayb as being derived from the second part of the name of this locality. The name al-Ayka (al-Ayka means bush) should be connected to the tamarisk planted by Abraham (*Gen.* 21, 33). The name Shu'ayb is also discussed in depth by Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 119–120, who suggests a locale Midianite origin; Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation*, 71, who puts it in connection with *sha'b* (people); Bosworth, "Prophet Shu'aib", 427–8: the name does not appear in pre-Islamic inscriptions. The identification between the Qur'ānic Shu'ayb and Jethro is discussed at length by Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 137–42.

83 For these reasons Busse, *Die theologischen Beziehungen*, 77, labels them as pseudo-Biblical stories. Analysing in depth the various versions of the story of Shu'ayb, Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 21–5, concludes that they "exhibit little by way of historical development but ample evidence of literary elaboration" (p. 25).

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Chapter 3

Prophets and messengers according to the Qur'ān

Some verses in the Qur'ān serve to define the nature of the prophetic mission. The fundamental principle of Qur'ānic prophetology is that Muḥammad was a prophet and messenger, and that those who came before him were also called messengers and prophets, and that they too were sent by God to humanity. It therefore follows that there is no distinction in the role of the Biblical figures, whether they be the patriarchs, the prophets of the Biblical books or the characters of the New Testament. However this question, like so many others, is not dealt with in a systematic way in the sacred text, but instead the information on the role of these characters and their function in history is dispersed throughout various verses that do not always contain precise information nor uncontroversial data. The fact is that the Qur'ān does not contain a cohesive or complete conception of prophecy, but has only approximate information and a limited terminology that constitutes the essential starting points for later speculation.

The distinction between messengers and prophets to which recourse has been made more than once in the first part of this book is indicated by two precise terms that are used in the Qur'ān to refer to Muḥammad and the Biblical prophets: *rasūl* and *nabī*.[1] The first term appears in the Muslim doctrinal formula, in which the monotheistic faith is affirmed and in which it is attested that Muḥammad is the *rasūl Allāh*. Though this expression is often translated as "Muḥammad is the prophet of God", *rasūl* means "messenger" or "apostle". The word *rasūl* can in any case be applied to anyone who is sent with a message, and in some Qur'ānic passages, where the term is used more than three

hundred times, it has without any doubt the generic meaning of "messenger".[2] In most cases however *rasūl* is intended to mean a man who receives revelations from God and who has the obligation to communicate them to his people. From the point at which Muḥammad began his prophetic mission and thereafter, the term is often used in the Qur'ān in this sense as a synonym of the name Muḥammad.[3] Some verses point out various of the attributes of those who are referred as *rasūl.* Muḥammad, for example, does not differ at all from those who preceded him in terms of the task with which he is charged, apart from the fact that he is the last in a long series of messengers sent to the mankind and the one who completed the cycle of the revelations.[4] The Qu'rān makes it clear that God ordered Muḥammad to affirm:

> "I am not an innovation among the messengers, and I know not what shall be done with me or with you. I only follow what is revealed to me" (Qur. 46:9).

In this verse the term "messengers" refers to those who received the revelations before Muḥammad. The meaning of the term *rasūl* is dealt with more precisely in another Qur'ānic verse where it is stated that each of the peoples have received their own messenger and have thereby had the opportunity to be guided to faith in God.[5] The *rasūl* is therefore the representative of God among his people, with the responsibility and authority that derive from that role, and is intimately related to the people to whom he is sent, being one of them and speaking their language.[6]

An examination of the passages in which the term *rasūl* appears in explicit connection with certain characters demonstrates that, apart from Muḥammad himself, this term is only employed in direct connection with Noah, Ishmael, Moses, Lot, Jesus, and with the Arabian messengers Hūd, Ṣāliḥ and Shu'ayb.[7] That is, no other Biblical prophet is referred to as a "messenger" in the Qur'ān. This fact is without doubt significant even if the allusive nature of the Qur'ānic revelation is taken into consideration. The sacred text does not contain a clear and definitive list of those who belong to the category of the messengers. It cannot be inferred from the presence of the term side by side with a restricted number of personages that these were the only *rasūls*. Other verses indicate that the Qur'ān only refers to some of the messengers and that nothing is said of other messengers, though they did exist.[8]

The other term used in the Qur'ān to refer to Muḥammad and the Biblical prophets is *nabī*, an Arabic word of either Hebrew or Aramaic origin.[9] The term, along with its two plural forms *nabiyyūn* and *anbiyā'*, occurs seventy-five times in the Qur'ān. Its meaning is exclusively that of "prophet" and as such it is used as an epithet of Muḥammad as well as to refer to a good many of the personalities of the Biblical tradition.[10] The term *nabī* is used in the Qur'ān in connection with Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Idrīs, Job, Jonah, Zechariah, John the Baptist, Jesus, Elijah, Elisha, and Lot. This list contains three particularities that warrant attention: 1. Adam is not included; 2. all belong to the Biblical tradition; 3. and some have already been included in the list of messengers (*rasūl*). All of these names, with the exception only of Idrīs, are listed in a particularly clear passage on the prerogatives of those who held the title and function of *nabī* where it is said that the prophets were directed by God on the right path and were amongst the saints and raised higher than every other creature.

> We elected them, and guided them to a straight path. That is God's guidance; He guides by it whom He will of His servants (...). Those are they to whom We gave the Book, the Judgement, the Prophethood; so if these disbelieve in it, We have already entrusted it to a people who do not disbelieve in it. Those are they whom God has guided; so follow their guidance (Qur. 6:87–90).[11]

In this passage the rank and attributes of the prophets are identified precisely. Amongst these attributes one is of particular significance: prophecy is mentioned alongside the Book. In this passage and the others that refer to this concept, the purpose is to put beyond all doubt that the revelation of a sacred scripture constitutes one of the distinguishing marks of a prophet.[12] Further information can be identified in those passages which refer to Muḥammad in connection to the term *nabī*. For example, one in particular identifies Muḥammad with the expression the "seal of the prophets". Without any doubt this expression is intended to mean that Muḥammad was the last of the prophets.[13] One other point needs to be considered in order to evaluate correctly the use of the term *nabī* in the Qur'ān. Muḥammad was not only referred to as a prophet, but the term is used, in the same way as *rasūl*, as his epithet. Of utmost importance is the fact that

almost all of those verses in which Muḥammad is referred to as *nabī* occur in the final period of the revelation, that is, in the Medinan verses. Muḥammad is therefore identified as "prophet" predominantly in the last part of his mission and rather than at in the earlier Meccan period.[14]

Many of the later traditions make a point of discussing the respective ranks of the *rasūl* and *nabī* and the relationship between the two titles, as for example in determining which one is superior. However, it should be noted that questions such as these must be considered extraneous to the Qur'ān since concepts of this type are not referred to in it.[15] Despite the fact that the Qur'ān does not establish a precise distinction between messengers and prophets, the two terms are not synonyms, otherwise it would not be clear why they appear alongside each other in some verses. For example, both Moses and Ishmael are said to be prophets and messengers. It is also said that Muḥammad was "the messenger, the prophet".[16] Affirmations of this type lead one to think that each of the terms had a specific meaning, even if complementary and very similar to each other. Various verses suggest what the different attributes and specific characteristics of each of these terms are. For example, the obedience owed to both God and to his messengers is mentioned many times in the Qur'ān, in connection with *rasūl*, but never in relation to *nabī*. It is evident that the messenger is identified more closely with the theme of an urgent need to invoke obedience, and thereby the protection of God, as a result of the opposition and the rejection encountered while attempting to disseminate his message.[17] It is apparent that the *rasūl* does not have any particular power with which to confront the unbelievers who often sought to have miracles performed before they would consider believing in the truth of his mission:

> «What ails this messenger that he eats food, and goes in the markets? Why has an angel not been sent down to him, to be a warner with him?» (Qur. 25:7).[18]

In any case these features are not the exclusive and distinctive property of the messengers: the prophets are destined to share the fate of being menaced and assaulted, and in some cases even killed by their peoples, because they too have been assigned an enemy by God.

> So We have appointed to every prophet an enemy among the sinners (Qur. 25:31).
>
> Those who disbelieve in the signs of God and slay the prophets without right, and slay such men as bid to justice, do thou give them good tidings of a painful chastisement (Qur. 3:21).
>
> And whensoever there came to you a messenger with that your souls had not desire for, did you become arrogant, and some cry lies to, and some slay? (Qur. 2:87).[19]

Yet it is once again in relation to Muḥammad that the principal indicators for defining the two terms are found. The most important information in this respect was that Muḥammad was not yet both a *nabī* and a *rasūl* at the start of his mission. The term which was preferred in the Meccan period is *rasūl*, while in the Medinan period Muḥammad was also called *nabī*. It thus seems clear that according to the Qur'ān, the prerogative of a *nabī* was to guide his own people in the name of a sacred book which was revealed to him and this function was performed by Muḥammad only after his transfer to Medina. Of some import therefore for understanding the use of the term *nabī* are the points already raised about the verses dealing with Abraham. While not being the only motivating factor, the direct contact and confrontation with the groups and tribes of Jews at Medina determined the importance and urgency of affirming that Muḥammad was the unique legitimate heir of the patriarchs and the Biblical prophets. The list of those referred to as *nabī* which was mentioned earlier contains one quite notable characteristic: all of the names mentioned are descendants of Abraham. Muḥammad is called *nabī* when the nature of his mission at Medina as a direct descendant of Abraham and as the Arab Prophet who is heir of the sacred Jewish and Christian tradition is clarified. A completely different picture emerges regarding the use of the term *rasūl*. This term is used to refer to Muḥammad from the Meccan period, when he was a messenger who was subjected to the vexations of his pagan fellow citizens and the refutation of his message by the majority of his people. Of no less significance is the fact that many of the characters identified with this term are also mentioned in the Qur'ān in those stories which have been defined as the stories of punishment, in which a messenger is sent to his people, his

message is refuted, the signs of God are rejected and as a result they are exterminated.

The two terms that are used to depict messengers and prophets therefore recall different stages in the mission of Muḥammad. The distinction between the terms does not reflect any similar concepts in the Jewish or Christian beliefs.[20] Certain elements, such as the human nature of the messengers, their mission to warn people, and the acceptance or the rejection of their message by their own communities are in themselves quite generic themes in terms of the stories of the Biblical prophets as they are re-elaborated in relation to the role of Muḥammad. As a result of this the central role of Muḥammad emerges with even more force and is the most prominent feature: stories and characteristics, events and terminology, have to be read in close relation to his human experiences. The meaning of and the difference between the terms *rasūl* and *nabī* thus seem to be two aspects which are intimately connected and complementary to the mission of Muḥammad, the messenger who was rejected at Mecca but who went on to become the prophet and patriarch at Medina.

NOTES

1 From the ample bibliography that discusses the concept of prophecy in the Qur'ān, refer in particular to Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 44–53, where numerous parallels from Jewish and Christian traditions are provided; see also Wensinck, "Muhammed und die Propheten", 168–98, in part. 171–6; Jeffery, *The Qur'ān as Scripture*, 18–51. Bijlefeld, "A Prophet", 1–28; Watt – Bell, *Introduction*, 25–30; Bouman, *Gott und Mensch im Koran*, 16–38; Brinner, "Prophets and prophecy", 63–82; Radscheit, *Die koranische Herausforderung*, 70–79.

2 Bijlefeld, "A Prophet", 11–2: *rasūl* is mentioned 236 times in the singular and 96 times in the plural for a total of 331. Another term that is derived from the same root and that is used in some cases to refer to a prophet or messenger is *mursal* (pl. *mursalūn*). It occurs a total of 36 times in the Qur'ān, of which only two cases are in the singular. The verb *arsala*, which occurs more than one hundred times in the Qur'ān, is cited in more than 80 verses in connection with the sending of the prophets and the messengers.

3 See for example Qur. 2:143, 214; 3:32, 132, 153, 172; 4:59, 79, 136; 5:41; 9:13; 9:86; 24:62; 25:30; 48:29; 49:7; 63:1; 64:12.

4 Qur. 3:144: "Muhammad is nothing but a messenger; messengers have passed away before him". See also Qur. 13:38; 41:43; regarding the fact that the messenger is a common man, similar to all the others, see Qur. 17:93–95; 23:33.

5 Qur. 16:36: "We sent forth among every nation a messenger". Other passages repeat the same concept: Qur. 10:47; 23:44; 30:47; cf. also 17:15; 28:59.

6 A messenger from "amongst your people": Qur. 2:151; a messenger "from among yourselves": Qur. 9:128; "from among them": Qur. 2:129; 62:2; cf. Qur. 3:164; 6:130; 14:4.

7 To this list of names could be added those who are referred to as *mursalūn*, Elijah (Qur. 37:123), Jonah (Qur. 37:139), and Aaron, who is mentioned twice alongside Moses. The mysterious messengers which are referred to in the sura Yā-Sīn are also defined as *mursalūn*.

8 Qur. 40:78: "We sent messengers before thee; of some We have related to thee, and some We have not related to thee"; an argument which is also taken up in Qur. 4:164. Other terms are cited in the Qur'ān as synonyms of *rasūl* or in any case as further attributes of the messengers of God. Examples that the Qur'ān mentions quite frequently whether in relation to Muḥammad or any of the other messengers are *bashīr* "announcer" and *nadhīr* "admonisher". One Qur'ānic verse, together with that in which *nadhīr* is cited as a synonym of *rasūl*, specifies that "We do not send the envoys (*mursalūn*), except good tidings to bear, and warnings" (Qur. 6:48); cf. also Qur. 4:165; 18:56. However, the same qualities are also attributed to the prophets (*nabiyyūn*) according to Qur. 2:213: "... then God sent forth the prophets, good tidings to bear and warnings". Also Muḥammad is identified as a bearer of glad tidings and an admonisher: Qur. 2:119; 5:19; 7:188; 11:2; 34:46; 35:24; 41:4; other passages mention *nadhīr* together with *mubashshir*: Qur. 17:105; 25:56; 33:45; 48:8.

9 On this question see Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary*, 276.

10 It is used as an epithet of Muḥammad, for example in Qur. 3:68; 5:81; 8:64f.; 33:1, 50f.; 49:2; 65:1; 66:1f.

11 This passage follows Qur. 6:84–86, in which an almost complete list of the prophets is given; a similar passage, which refers however to a small number of prophets, is in Qur. 4:163. Cf. also Qur. 3:84.

12 The *nubuwwa* (prophecy) is cited together with Book and Wisdom, amongst the descendants of Abraham, in Qur. 3:79; 6:89, and in Qur. 45:16 as typical of the Israelites. The Book is also mentioned in Qur. 29:27; 57:26.

13 Qur. 33:40: *khātam al-nabiyyīn*. This expression served as a starting point for speculation on the central role and the superiority of Muḥammad in the cycle of the revelations.

14 Thirty or more Medinan verses refer to Muḥammad in connection with the term *nabī*; see on the entire question Bijlefeld, "A Prophet", 15–6; Watt – Bell, *Introduction*, 28.

15 The Qur'ān instead contains some contrasting data about another related question: are some messengers (or prophets) superior to the other messengers (or prophets)? One passage indicates that some *rasūl*s have been preferred above others: "and those messengers, some We have preferred above others; some there are to whom God spoke, and some He raised in rank" (Qur. 2:253; cf. also 17:55: some prophets preferred above other); other verses maintain a differing

position, Qur. 2:136: no distinction is made among the prophets (cf. also Qur. 3:84), nor among the messengers: Qur. 2:285, 4:152.

16 On Moses and Ishmael: Qur. 19:51, 54. Prophets and messengers are also mentioned together in Qur. 22:52. As far as Muḥammad is concerned (Qur. 7:157, 158) the definition of messenger and prophet (*al-rasūl al-nabī*) is followed by the adjective *al-ummī* which, according to Muslim exegetical tradition, signifies "illiterate" and as such would seem to act as a qualification upon the divine character of the prophetic inspiration of Muḥammad, who had received and proclaimed the Qur'ānic message without having literary notions and without knowing how to read or write. This traditional interpretation does not seem to correspond with the original meaning of the Qur'ānic passage. The term more probably means "non-Jewish" or "(Arab) national". Of the very rich and controversial bibliography on the argument, see particularly Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 52–3; Radscheit, *Die koranische Herausforderung*, 83–5.

17 The messengers are denied and rejected: Qur. 6:34; 15:11; 16:113; 34:45; 35:4; 38:14; 40:70; 50:14; 69:10; the messenger is taken for a magician or a fool: Qur. 51:52; a crazy man: Qur. 26:27. See also Qur. 40:5: "Every nation purposed against their messenger to seize him"; Qur. 23:44: "Whenever its messenger came to a nation they cried him lies". In this way Muḥammad follows the destiny of the messengers that preceded him, Qur. 6:10: "Messengers indeed were mocked at before thee (i.e. Muḥammad)"; in this regard see also Qur. 6:34; 13:32; 21:41.

18 The concept is also repeated in the same sura: Qur. 25:20. In this regard see also Qur. 23:33–34: the messenger is a man just like any other and the unbelievers affirm that to follow a man will lead them to ruin. On the human nature of the messengers see also Qur. 7:35; 14:11.

19 On the mockery and harassment of the prophets see Qur. 43:7. In addition to the verses cited, for references to the messengers who were killed, see Qur. 3:183; 5:70; and to the prophets killed, see Qur. 2:61, 91; 3:112, 181; 4:155.

20 The theory of Wensinck, "Muhammed und die Propheten", 173–4, according to which in the Muslim term *rasūl*, and in the two terms *nabī* – *rasūl* there is a reflection of New Testament concepts should be rejected; see Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 48, where the opportune specification that a *rasūl* belongs to the people to which he is sent and is not, therefore, an apostle in Christian terms is emphasised. The fact that, as Jeffery, *The Qur'ān as Scripture*, 19–20, maintains, *rasūl* corresponds linguistically to the Christian Syriac *shelīḥa* which means either a messenger or an apostle is not relevant for a study of the characteristics of the messengers described in the Qur'ān.

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PART II

THE BIBLICAL PROPHETS IN MUSLIM LITERATURE

Chapter 4

Introduction

As has been discussed, the Qur'ān returns with great regularity to the stories of the Biblical prophets, making use of them as the preferred narration for instructing Muḥammad himself as well as all of the believers. The message of the Qur'ān could not be more clear: it is from the conduct of these characters, as retold in their stories, that the Muslim community must draw inspiration and instruction as the correct way in which to conduct themselves. The tenor of the teaching is therefore above all moral. Furthermore, it is precisely for this reason that the sacred text does not contain an articulated conception of prophecy, or a definitive conclusion about the role of Muḥammad and of the prophets in the sacred history; rather, it provides only some vague pronouncements, that then constitute the essential starting point for successive speculations. It is thus in the works of exegetical literature and in the collections of the sayings of the prophet Muḥammad that the questions that relate to the prophecy and, above all, to the prophets, obtain a treatment that purports to be complete.

Research into the origins of the Muslim literature about the prophets presents, however, the same problems that affect all of the other Islamic traditions. The lack of ancient sources and the contradictions in the later ones do not permit a precise reconstruction of their history and development. Traditions and legends regarding the Biblical prophets recur, moreover, in every genre of literature; they are especially prominent in three important genres and in a fourth specific genre which is closely connected to the first three: 1. Qur'ānic exegesis; 2. collections of the sayings of Muḥammad; 3. historiography; and 4. the stories

of the prophets. All of these genres mention the extra-canonical stories and accounts of the prophets for different reasons: 1. in the Qur'ānic commentaries more or less extended reports are mentioned to complete the sacred text or to clarify obscure details; 2. in the sayings of Muḥammad the names of the Biblical prophets are often cited in an incidental way, to define the mission of Muḥammad himself or to clarify a particular of the faith; 3. in the accounts of universal history the experiences of the prophets often represent the most substantial part of the pre-Islamic history; 4. and lastly, in the genre of the stories of the prophets, material of diverse origins is referred to in a complete narrative from the Creation to Jesus.

Though these literary types are defined and distinct, a clear separation on the basis of their content is not always possible, in the sense that they often refer to the same extra-canonical traditions. For example it is not rare to find a tradition attributed to Muḥammad – that is a "saying of Muḥammad" – reported in a Qur'ānic commentary or in all of the other genres, and much material is common to works of history and the genre of stories of the prophets.

These overlaps occur as a result of the nature of the religious literature composed from the 8th century AD onwards. The commentaries, the books of history, the collections of the sayings of Muḥammad, and the stories of the prophets are for the most part works by experts in Islamic religious science. These authors limited themselves, with a measure of attentive critical selection, to gathering material handed down by preceding generations. These materials that are here defined as traditions, are small units that contain an exegetical explanation, a story or an account which is attributed to a transmitter or a religious authority who has almost never left any written works. The transmitters are often companions of Muḥammad or persons belonging to the first generations of Muslims. The main works of religious literature that will be considered here do not therefore contain narrations which have been elaborated by their authors, but instead are a reproduction of the traditions received, according to the Muslim conception, by the generations immediately following that of Muḥammad. Involved here are all the problems of reliability that one can imagine, and the consequent doubts about the possibility of a positive reconstruction of the beginnings of this process of transmission.

In the following pages the principal channels through which legends and extra-canonical stories about the prophets began to be spread throughout the Muslim world are considered. The various genres of Islamic exegesis, literature of the sayings of Muḥammad and historiography are described in relation to the traditions of the Biblical prophets that they contain while stressing their principal motifs. A more in depth discussion is therefore dedicated to those works belonging to the proper genre of the stories of the prophets, while a final chapter about the modern development of all these types of literature and the contemporary approach towards the traditional reports on the prophets brings this study to a close.

Chapter 5

Storytellers and converts

According to the Islamic tradition, from the time of Muḥammad's death there were two channels through which a growing mass of stories and legends on the creation of the world and the Biblical prophets started to circulate among Muslims: 1. the storytellers; 2. the converts to Islam from Judaism and Christianity who were considered the major experts of the Biblical stories.

1. THE ROLE OF THE STORYTELLERS (QUṢṢĀṢ)[1]

From the first decades of the Islamic era, immediately after the conquests, the storytellers (*qāṣṣ*, pl. *quṣṣāṣ*),[2] first figures of expertise on religious questions and stories, began to emerge. The function of these storytellers, whether working in the employ of a mosque or independently, was to warn against bad actions and transgressions, giving moral instruction, teaching the Qur'ān and, the activity which holds most interest for this study, telling the stories of the ancient prophets and of Muḥammad. Frequently, along with these functions, they also performed that of guiding the believers in their prayers or being assigned to reciting the Qur'ān in the mosques. Therefore what is being dealt with are people with a complete religious education, almost always with a reputation for honesty who are able to attract the attention of the people thanks to their oratorical ability. Among the first generations of Muslims the storytellers were usually people of great prestige, so much so that in certain cases it is indicated that they also carried out the function of judges.[3]

The origin of these storytellers dates back to the pre-Islamic period, when it is probable that the public or groups of people

were entertained with stories on various subjects. With the advent of Islam religious themes became predominant, but it is likely that the old narrative techniques and methods of presentation to the listeners did not undergo drastic changes. According to the Islamic tradition, the first Muslim storyteller was a companion of the prophet Muḥammad by the name of Tamīm al-Dārī (d. 660) who began this activity during the reign of the Caliph ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (634–644), but there are reports that dispute this proposition.[4] There are indications of the presence of these storytellers on the battle grounds in the first decades of Islam, evidently for the purpose of encouraging and accompanying the Muslims. Following the route of the army in the changes that brought about the first enormous conquests, the storytellers became, in the various parts of the Muslim empire, a religious point of reference not only for the Arab occupants, but soon enough also for the non-Arab converts to whom they provided the first rudiments of the new religion.[5] Their influence and importance are also confirmed by the news of their involvement in the first disputes that emerged within the Muslim community. According to some reports, the storytellers had a frontline role in the civil war that shook the Muslim world after the death of the Caliph ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān (d. 656). This statement is of great interest, because it places the figure of the storyteller at the centre of the first political contests as active participants, supporting one side or the other.[6] It should, however, be added that these testimonies, which were gathered by experts in Islamic science who were opposed to storytelling in the successive centuries, might not reflect the true situation, but may in part have been invented to discredit the activity of the storytellers.

The importance of the storytellers in the first Muslim generations in fact stands in contrast to the generally low regard, if not contempt, in which they were held by the experts of religious learning during the classical Islamic period. Leaving to one side their involvement in the controversies and the political disputes during the first Islamic century, one of the recurrent accusations with which the storytellers were charged was that of spreading false ideas and misleading the believers; they were held responsible for collecting stories and divulging them without exercising any critical judgement as to their content, and as far as the traditions regarding the prophets are concerned, for relying uncritically on legends that were full of exaggeration and of

dubious origin, if not in actual conflict with the Qur'ānic word. Thus, the criticism directed at them by the experts of religious learning reflects both the method and content of their work: a lack of discrimination in the selection of the sources that they used and therefore of those principles that emerged and were consolidated with the development of the criticism of the extra-canonical tradition; and the use of legends that relied on fantastic aspects and details to satisfy the curiosity and the taste of the people.[7]

The indulgence in exaggerated details and the willingness to cater to popular tastes is, as far as the stories of the prophets are concerned, the most frequently occurring accusation of the medieval authors. The storytellers explained Qur'ānic passages or the events contained in the Biblical stories through the medium of stories and legends which could attract the attention of people who often had only an elementary religious education, and which often sounded embarrassing to those who were well-versed in religious learning. Moreover, they propagated traditions with ascetic contents, a type of material that the traditional religious science particularly disliked, given its emphasis on genuine juridical questions.[8]

Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1200), for example, without condemning the activity of the storytellers in itself, indicates that one of the reasons for which the doctors of religious learning before him had rejected storytelling was because the stories of the ancient people and especially those regarding the experiences of the Israelites were rarely authentic.[9] There are innumerable concrete examples of this. For example, the man who came to be considered as the father of Qur'ānic exegesis, Ibn 'Abbās (d. 687), rejected the opinion of a storyteller named Nawf, calling him an "enemy of God", because he claimed that the Moses who met the mysterious al-Khiḍr was not the prophet son of 'Imrān, but a different character altogether.[10] In his *al-Bad' wa-l-ta'rīkh* ("The beginning and the history"), al-Maqdisī (x cent.) stated that storytellers were well-versed in the stories such as that of the wolf accused by the brothers of having dismembered Joseph, stories that naturally scrupulous exegetes had to be careful not to take into consideration. Information has also been passed on about storytellers who apparently knew the name of the golden calf that the Israelites worshipped in Moses's absence, or the actual name of the wolf in the story of Joseph, but these serve as examples of the search to

identify each personality, which is one of the typical expediencies of oral narration.[11]

Whatever value one places upon the activity of these storytellers, it seems evident that the stories of the Biblical prophets were one of the most popular subjects amongst the first Muslims. The presence of "exaggerations" which were censured by the official Islam did not impede either the popularity of the storytellers or the rapid and immediate diffusion of stories of the Biblical prophets extraneous to the Qur'ān.

2. THE CONVERTS; KA'B AL-AḤBĀR

A decisive role in the diffusion of the extra-canonical traditions, along with that played by the storytellers, was that of the first converts to Islam from Judaism and Christianity. They were properly considered true experts in the Biblical stories and there is evidence that among the first generations of Muslims no disapproval can be detected for their assistance in gaining a better understanding of the characters of the Biblical tradition. The prevalent opinion among the Muslims was that whatever was found in the sacred texts of the Jews and Christians was acceptable and consonant with Islam, so long as it did not contradict what was said in the Qur'ān. One of Muḥammad's sayings granted permission to transmit the stories concerning the Israelites and of their experiences in the past, even with their wonderful details, as there was nothing objectionable in that.[12]

The first converts to Islam therefore brought to the new religion knowledge and stories about matters dealt with in their scriptures that embraced a range of subject matters, ranging from the vicissitudes suffered by the Israelites to the stories and the sayings of the sages and the saints, to the legends of the prophets. The prestige and the diffusion of the stories dealing with the prophets, attributed to Jewish and Christian scriptures, were such that there is evidence of their use for various arguments, among which was the definition of the role of Muḥammad. A number of notable traditions which can be traced back to the converts affirm that the advent of Muḥammad and of the Islamic community were foreseen in the Bible, that Muḥammad was described in the Torah, or else that God revealed the advent of the Arab Prophet to Moses and that Jesus was told about the personality of Muḥammad.[13] The popular traditions of presumed Biblical origin

included, in addition, predictions about the Muslims, the Caliphs, the dynasties and the rebels, since those who had knowledge of the Jewish and Christian scriptures were considered experts in predictions about the future.

The impact of the traditions about the Biblical prophets transmitted by the converts was also of particular significance for the disputes and polemics of a sectarian nature that took place during the early Islamic period. This was especially the case in relation to Shīʿite propaganda. Stories with a clear Shīʿite tendency often referred to Jewish statements not only indicating that Muḥammad was mentioned in the Bible, but also that mention was made of the much favoured role of ʿAlī (d. 661) and of his family.[14] The historical sequence itself of the Biblical prophets was a theme that was entirely consonant with the Shīʿite interpretation of a chain of imāms as successors of ʿAlī, and the stories of the Biblical prophets were particularly suited to a more complete definition of the conception of the Divine Light, the preexistent luminous substance of Muḥammad (*nūr Muḥammadī*), shared by ʿAlī and passed on to the imāms. According to the Shīʿites the first to possess this charismatic light was Adam, and from Adam it was sent prophet by prophet, to Muḥammad and ʿAlī.[15] Amongst the first Muslim generations, references to the Bible in the disputes which took place within the community were constant and virtually guaranteed by the converts. For instance, an interesting tradition reported in one Qur'ānic commentary tells that ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb sought advice from the Jewish convert Kaʿb al-Aḥbār (d. 656 ca.) because of his knowledge of the Torah and of the prophets. He asked him who was the most knowledgeable of the Israelites after Moses. Kaʿb answered that it was Joshua, his *waṣī*.[16] This tradition clearly has the purpose of demonstrating the excellence of the *waṣī*s of the prophets, and therefore, in Shīʿite terms, that of ʿAlī – the *waṣī* of Muḥammad – with respect to all of the other men.[17] Such a tradition is of interest because it demonstrates the importance of the Biblical stories and personalities for questions of political legitimacy in the polemic between the Sunnites and the Shīʿites, and emphasises the high regard in which the Jewish convert Kaʿb was held as an expert on the traditions of the prophets.[18]

Of all the converts who played an active role in the diffusion of the traditions of Biblical subject-matter, none achieved the preeminence of Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, whether in terms of how he was

regarded for his presumed knowledge of the Bible or for the number of legends about the prophets that were attributed to him in later works.[19] It seems that Ka'b, a Jewish Yemenite, converted in 638 during the reign of the Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. Some testimony explicitly demonstrates that Ka'b was not only the originator of certain traditions but that certain books on the stories of the Bible and the prophets were circulating in his name.[20] Differing estimations of the status of this man have been preserved in the Muslim traditions: wisdom and a profound knowledge of the Jewish texts and of the Yemenite legends are attributed to him, but at the same time he is criticised for his involvement in the battle for power that followed the death of the Caliph 'Umar. Explicit criticisms of the traditions that were associated with him began to appear in Muslim literature in later centuries, where it was suggested that Ka'b was a false convert whose aim was to undermine Islam by introducing extraneous Jewish traditions.[21]

Even a cursory analysis of the very great number of traditions that are attributed to him demonstrates the high regard in which the words of the converts were held. The example of a Shī'ite tradition referring to his knowledge about a Biblical story has already been shown. His name is cited continuously in this type of tradition, with predictions about Muslim history that are connected with the stories and characters of the Bible. Alongside this material, however, there are even more numerous reports which are recorded above all in the accounts of stories of the prophets. For instance it is recorded in his name that Adam was created on Friday, and that he also entered and was expelled from paradise on this day; also attributed to his name, along with that of others, are the statements that the chosen victim of Abraham was Isaac and not Ishmael and that Satan tried in every possible way to stop Abraham from obeying God's order.[22] Accounts of various provenance which were considered generic Biblical traditions by the first Muslim generations circulated under the name of Ka'b: Bible stories, legends from Rabbinical literature and from the Christian apocrypha, and even popular legends that contained mention of Biblical figures. It is difficult to establish whether that which is attributed to him and to other converts did in fact derive from the sources specified or are later fabrications.

Storytellers and converts share many elements in common. They were the first experts on Biblical stories and they

contributed in a concrete way to the circulation of the traditions and legends of the prophets, which were more or less connected to the Qur'ān, from the first Muslim generation of the companions of Muḥammad onwards. Despite censures and cautions of various types, the traditions attributed to the storytellers and converts nevertheless found their way into all of the genres of religious literature, from exegesis to the books of history. What path this material took into Muslim literature has been a topic of some controversy. It is in any case more than plausible that a first stage of oral diffusion of the traditions took place much earlier than the first transcriptions, and that in this way exegetes and those who were learned in religious science made use of them and included them in more and more elaborate works from 8th century onwards.

NOTES

1 The term *quṣṣāṣ* (sing. *qāṣṣ*) derives from the root *qaṣaṣa* (to recount, to narrate). The title of the works of the stories of the prophets (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*) also derives from the same root. A similar figure, that of the admonisher (*wā'iẓ*), continues to be employed even today in the principal mosques.

2 Among the studies dedicated to this topic, the most interesting contributions are those of Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, II, 156–70; 'Athamina, "Al-Qasas", 53–74; Juynboll, "On the Origins of Arabic Prose", 165–7; Newby, "Tafsir Isra'iliyyat", 689–91; Pauliny, "Zur Rolle der *Quṣṣāṣ*", 125–140; Pedersen, "The Islamic Preacher", 226–50; Id., "The Criticism of the Islamic Preacher", 215–31; Shoshan, "High Culture and Popular Culture", 83–5. The most important work of Islamic literature on the topic is Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ wa-l-mudhakkirīn*.

3 Juynboll, "On the Origins of Arabic Prose", 165–7.

4 Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ*, 1088. The reliability of this tradition is discussed by 'Athamina, "Al-Qasas", 55. Tamīm al-Dārī was originally a Christian of Hebron who later converted to Islam. Other storytellers are listed by Pedersen, "The Islamic Preacher", 232–7; and Juynboll, "Early Islamic Society", 159–66.

5 In this their role was similar to that of the poets of the pre-Islamic age, as is confirmed by Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, II, 161; see also 'Athamina, "Al-Qasas", 59, 61, according to whom there is evidence of storytellers conducting their activities using the Persian language rather than in Arabic. According to Newby, "Tafsir Isra'iliyyat", 689, the role of the storytellers was particularly appealing for those Muslims of non-Arab origin and for converts from a refined cultural background.

6 The first civil war (*fitna*) arose over the designation of the new Caliph. For some factions ʿAlī was the preferred choice, while others had different opinions. The traditions demonstrate that there were storytellers who were pro-ʿAlids, that is of Khārijite or Shīʿite orientation. With regard to this, and in relation to the orientation of the storytellers up until the ʿAbbāsid period, see ʿAthamina, "Al-Qaṣaṣ", 65–71; Pedersen, "The Criticism of the Islamic Preacher", 216–7. An account of the traditions on the subject can be found in Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Muṣannaf fī l-aḥādīth wa-l-āthār*, Beirut 1989, VI, 195–8.

7 It is not by chance that the Islamic literature dedicated to the innovations introduced into Islam that were rejected also makes mention of the activity of these storytellers; for ex. see Ibn Waḍḍāḥ, *Kitāb al-bidaʿ*, ed. M.I. Fierro, Madrid 1988, 165–9; al-Ṭurṭūshī, *Kitāb al-ḥawādīth wa-l-bidaʿ*, tr. M. Fierro, Madrid 1993, 293–7. Juynboll, "On the Origins of Arabic Prose", 166, maintains that a generally positive evaluation of the storytellers continued until the start of the 8th century. According to Islamic sources it was only after this that the worst exaggerations took place; see in this regard Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, II, 166, who also describes the way that storytellers behaved in order to attract the attention of the public. The unanimous discrediting of storytelling in the traditions told by the experts of religious learning from the 9th century onwards naturally was intended to attack the great popularity of the storytellers amongst the lower echelons of the population, as is recorded by Pellat, *Le milieu baṣrien*, 112.

8 The condemnation of the storytellers was not generalised, since according to some, such as Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855), only the exaggerations were to be condemned, whereas in general the storytellers could serve a useful purpose.

9 Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ*, 96–7; following this statement Ibn al-Jawzī cites examples of stories that are not originally Islamic but derived from Jewish sources: 1. the story of David who caused the death of Uriah; 2. the story of Joseph in which he loosens his clothes in the presence of Zulaykha. Other traditions about the Biblical prophets which are attributed to storytellers are reported at pp. 135, 146, 161, 182–187.

10 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, V, 279 no. 4725. The tradition is mentioned by Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, II, 163. Regarding Ibn ʿAbbās, see below, p. 97.

11 Al-Maqdisī, *al-Badʾ wa-l-taʾrīkh*, III, 70, cf. II, 47. Other traditions of this type are indicated by Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, II, 167.

12 On the meaning of these words of Muḥammad see the comprehensive study of Kister, "*Ḥaddithū ʿan banī Isrāʾīla*", 215–39. The role of the converts is attested to also by certain traditions in which it is affirmed that Ibn ʿAbbās and other Muslim authorities of the first generation were often involved in disputes with them and that they even sought explanations of the meaning of certain Qurʾānic verses.

13 A list of the traditions of this type is given by Kister, "*Ḥaddithū ʿan banī Isrāʾīla*", 222.

14 Kister, "*Ḥaddithū ʿan banī Isrā'īla*", 222–3, 232–3. For the Shīʿites, the only legitimate successor of Muḥammad was ʿAlī, and from ʿAlī, through dynastic succession, the power should have passed to his successors in leading the community (*imām*). The various Shīʿite factions split over the number of these imāms and their role. A complete portrait of Shīʿa can be found in B. Scarcia Amoretti, *Sciiti nel mondo*, Roma 1994.

15 Rubin, "Prophets and Progenitors in Early Shīʿa", 43; Id., "Pre-Existence and Light", 78–83; Kohlberg, "Some Shīʿī Views of the Antediluvian World", 64–6. Cf. Goldziher, "Neuplatonische und gnostische Elemente", 330–6.

16 *Waṣī* ("designated heir"): according to the Shīʿite conception, each prophet has a *waṣī*.

17 Ibn Furāt al-Kūfī, *Tafsīr*, Beirut 1992, I, 183–4 no. 235; ʿUmar, in particular, was angered because Kaʿb al-Aḥbār told him that the figure of ʿAlī as Muḥammad's *wāṣī* can be supported by reference to the Torah and the books of the prophets. Concerning Kaʿb's Biblical knowledge in the Biblical context, see Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur'ān*, 77f. ʿAbdallāh b. Saba' (7th–8th cent.) stated that the relation between Moses and Joshua was like that between Muḥammad and ʿAlī: I. Friedlaender, "ʿAbdallāh b. Sabā, der Begründer der Šīʿa, und sein jüdischer Ursprung", *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, 23 (1909), 312.

18 On this topic see Rubin, "Prophets and Progenitors in Early Shīʿa", 55–6, that stresses that the idea of a line through which the authority is transmitted was already present in the Jewish and Christian literature, and mentions Josephus and the *Book of Jubilees*. It could be also hypothesised that the initial interest in that argument and the first identification between the community of believers and the history of the Israelites could have arisen from the Shīʿites (Rubin, "Prophets and Progenitors in Early Shīʿa", 55), however to construct a precise chronology between Sunnī and Shīʿite traditions, that in certain cases are almost identical, and given the limited sources available, is very difficult.

19 The date of the death of Kaʿb al-Aḥbār is uncertain, but it probably occurred between 650 and 656. About Kaʿb's role in spreading traditions of Biblical subject, see Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur'ān*, 13–23. In regard to this character see Lidzbarski, *De propheticis*, 31–40; Wolfensohn, *Kaʿb al-Aḥbār*; Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*, 96–7; as regards certain legends which are attributed to him see instead Chapira, "Légendes bibliques attribuées a Kaʿb el-Ahbar"; regarding the story of his conversion see Perlmann, "A legendary story of Kaʿb al-Aḥbār"; Id., "Another Kaʿb al-Aḥbār story". The names of other converts are cited by Wolfensohn, *Kaʿb al-Aḥbār*, 12. Apart from Kaʿb, ʿAbdallāh b. Salām is to be considered as the most important character of the first generation.

20 See for example al-Maqdisī, *al-Bad' wa-l-ta'rīkh*, II, 42, that refers to books written by Kaʿb and others; and see also the chronological list of written texts in Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 299, including various titles ascribed to Kaʿb and ʿAbdallāh. This does not necessarily

mean that Ka'b himself was the author of books, but that his fame was such that during the first centuries of Islam collections of legends and stories attributed to him were in circulation.

21 On the subject see p. 172 below.

22 In relation to these traditions see al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, I, 113, 292–4. A tradition attributed to Ka'b is discussed by Halperin – Newby, "Two Castrated Bulls".

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Chapter 6

The Biblical prophets in Qur'ānic exegesis

1. THE ORIGINS OF EXEGETICAL LITERATURE

While the storytellers entertained the believers around the mosques and the converts were consulted for their superior knowledge of the Biblical stories, the Muslims who read and studied the Qur'ān immediately felt a growing need to clarify for themselves the obscure parts and to fill in the missing elements of the sacred text. It does not seem as though the first generations of Muslims felt this need with the same intensity. The later sources refer to a certain opposition regarding Qur'ānic exegesis in the course of the first decades of Islam, but, in any case, if in fact this opposition really existed, it was limited in time and probably due to the excessive scruples of certain isolated groups. On the other hand there are many contrasting indications which attribute the first exegetical explanations to Muḥammad himself, or which mention those companions who dedicated themselves to this discipline and became, as in the case of Ibn ʿAbbās, widely respected experts and secure points of reference for generations of exegetes of the later centuries. This first exegetical activity, such as that of the storytellers and the converts, probably went through a first stage which was principally oral and only later became fixed, in different ways, in written works.[1]

This question aside, there is in any case unanimous testimony that the exegesis of the narrative parts of the Qur'ān was one of the first forms, if not the first, of approach to the sacred text. The characteristics of the Qur'ānic text to which reference has already been made, such as its allusive nature, its fragmentariness and its disregard for details, prompted recourse to extra-canonical

traditions to complete and to embellish what is said in the Qur'ān about the prophets.[2] The popularity of the traditions and of the legends regarding the Biblical prophets indirectly stimulated the first exegetes to provide answers to all the questions which were passed over by the Qur'ān in relation to this topic. For the exegetes of the first period, therefore, to provide a commentary on the sacred text meant to put forward explanations and stories that were more detailed than the words of the Qur'ān in order to reconstruct coherently the events of the pre-Islamic age.[3]

The first example of a commentary that dedicates a large section to the explanation of the Qur'ānic narratives, making use of traditions and legends of various provenances, is that of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 767), the most ancient example of exegesis which has reached us. Even if not all of the material contained in his work is a faithful reproduction of his thought – in certain cases this is the result of later editing and re-working by other hands – there can be no doubt as to its substantial originality.[4] The commentary of Muqātil seems to express, to a certain extent, a form of primitive exegesis, in which the theological questions are in some ways superseded by the need to provide stories that support the Qur'ānic words. So, there are traditions that are similar to those which must have been the topics of the sermons of the storytellers, and which were at first transmitted orally and later then put into a written form by Muqātil. One further point which further confirms these characteristics, is the substantial disinterest displayed for the chains of transmitters that later became fundamental requisites in Muslim criticism for evaluating the reliability of the extra-canonical traditions.[5]

The work of Muqātil is also the first example – which has been conserved and passed down to us – of a complete commentary, verse by verse, of the Qur'ān, thus establishing that scheme which later became the classic style in all of the texts belonging to the genre. Accompanying each quoted verse, simple glosses are reported to explain the meaning and the specific sense of every term used, along with more ample explanations. The most extended parts of the commentary, in which the text moves away from the tone of a mere paraphrase, are usually those dedicated to the prophets. Muqātil's principal aim was to construct an organic narrative around the Qur'ānic verses in which the words of God are inserted in a coherent way. Some examples permit a

clarification of his manner of proceeding. One of the questions left unresolved by the Qur'ānic text is the identity of the son who was chosen by Abraham to be sacrificed. Muqātil's text alternates Qur'ānic verses and their explanations in the following manner:[6]

> *And when he had reached the age of running with Him*, of going up onto the mountain with his father, *he said: "My son, I see in a dream* – for a vow he made during this dream – *that I shall sacrifice thee; consider, what thinkest thou?"* Isaac answered him: "*My father, do as thou art bidden*, obey your Lord". Then Isaac told Abraham, peace be with them, to carry out that which he saw in the dream, because Abraham had had this dream for three consecutive nights, while Isaac was fasting and praying before the sacrifice, and said: "*Thou shalt find me, God willing, one of the steadfast* for the sacrifice". *When they had surrendered* to the will of God and to obey Him *and Abraham flung him upon his brow* – had his son lie face down on the ground – and when he took him by his forehead to sacrifice him, God knew of their honesty (...) *and We called upon him: "Abraham! thou hast confirmed the vision* of the sacrifice of your son; take instead the ram, *even so We recompense the good-doers* – thus We will compensate whoever performs good acts". In fact in this way God, to Whom belong might and majesty, compensated him for his upright act and his obedience with this mercy for his son Isaac. God, to Whom belong might and majesty, said: "*This is indeed the manifest trial*", that is the evident mercy when he excused him from the sacrifice and gave him the ram instead of his son to sacrifice: "*And We ransomed him with a mighty sacrifice*, in Jerusalem and with a ram named Razīn that was one of the billy-goats that had been grazing in paradise for 40 years prior to the sacrifice.

The Qur'ānic verses naturally constitute the central structure upon which the exegetical considerations of Muqātil are based, without mentioning any of the authorities from the previous generations, but thus clarifying that which is not clearly specified in the sacred text. He asserts that the chosen son was Isaac, that the attempted sacrifice took place at Jerusalem, and lastly he gives a vivid description of the ram or the billy-goat that was destined to substitute for the victim. The last annotation is particularly significant because it is an example of the interest of Muqātil in

onomastics in the stories of the prophets. Muqātil reports the names of the majority of the personages evoked, behaving in this way like a storyteller, tending to identify the greatest number of personages possible, with fanciful names which are often related to their experiences, employing a technique which is typical of oral narration.[7]

Other ancient commentators are not as relevant to this topic, but they do offer a further demonstration of how the traditions on Biblical topics entered into the Islamic exegesis. Mention should be made here of the commentaries of Mujāhid ibn Jabr (d. 722) and, above all as far as the stories of the prophets are concerned, ʿAbd al-Razzāq (d. 826).[8] ʿAbd al-Razzāq did not compile a commentary verse by verse, but relied upon the interpretations of the authorities of the previous generations. He reported traditions adapted so that they offered explanations and commentary upon only some of the Qur'ānic passages. This manner of proceeding clearly indicates that the exegetical works were changing into collections of interpretations and traditions attributed to the personages of the first generations, collections which later were to become true encyclopaedic works consisting of dozens of volumes. As regards the commentary upon the verses dedicated to the attempted sacrifice of the son on the part of Abraham, ʿAbd al-Razzāq dedicates ample space.

> ʿAbd al-Razzāq from Maʿmar from al-Zuhrī who, regarding the words of God '*I see in a dream that I shall sacrifice thee*', said: al-Qāsim ibn Muḥammad told me that Abū Huraya and Kaʿb (al-Aḥbār) met,[9] and while Abū Huraya told to Kaʿb that which the Prophet had told him, God bless him and grant him salvation, Kaʿb said to Abū Huraya what he had read in the books. (.....) Kaʿb said to Abū Huraya: "Perhaps the Prophet has not told you of Abraham, of when he saw in a dream that he had to sacrifice his son Isaac and Satan said: 'If I don't entice them on this occasion I won't ever entice them!' Abraham then departed with his son for the sacrifice, and in the meantime Satan went to pay a visit to Sarah and said: 'Where has Abraham gone with your son?' Sarah answered: 'To attend to some business'. Satan then told her that this wasn't true and that he had instead taken her son to sacrifice him. Sarah said: 'And why would he sacrifice him?' And Satan answered: 'He said that it was God who ordered

him to do it'. 'If that's the truth' said Sarah, 'he has done well to obey Him'".[10]

The story continues by describing the attempts of Satan to make Isaac and Abraham change their minds and their intentions to follow the will of God. 'Abd al-Razzāq adds other traditions in which it is briefly affirmed that the chosen victim of Abraham was Isaac and there is only one, in conclusion, that indicates Ishmael instead.

The first works of exegesis dedicated ample space to the stories and traditions on the Biblical prophets. In order to explain certain obscure passages or to add missing particulars, recourse is made to traditions that were rich in fantastic particulars and common among the material spread by the storytellers and converts. These characteristics however are typical of the exegesis from the early period when rigorous critical criteria upon which to select extra-canonical material had not yet been fully developed and when traditions and stories of diverse provenance were, without apparent objection, utilised to explain the Qur'ānic verses. Lastly, as far as the extra-canonical traditions concerning the Biblical prophets mentioned in this and in all of the Qur'ānic commentaries are concerned, it should be noted that in certain cases they are made up of details taken from the Biblical text while on other occasions they come from Rabbinical literature and Jewish and Christian apocrypha, while in yet others they are absolutely original versions.

2. THE COMMENTARY OF IBN JARĪR AL-ṬABARĪ

The Qur'ānic commentary of Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) closes that which can be considered as the formative period of the Qur'ānic exegesis and is, in many ways, the most representative work of this type of religious literature.[11] Starting from the second half of the ninth century, in the period of al-Ṭabarī, the doctors of religious learning had at their disposition and could rely upon a good number of works of various types including traditions of various provenance. They had already developed methods of criticism to evaluate the material and choose which ones to utilise and which to reject. The commentaries became in some cases and in particular in that of al-Ṭabarī, encyclopaedic texts in which the sacred text is analysed in all of its implications, linguistic, juridical,

theological, and naturally also narrative. The commentary of al-Ṭabarī is also extremely valuable because it has conserved a record of exegetical thoughts and material taken from works that today are lost for ever.

One of the most striking characteristics of the work of al-Ṭabarī, which is the result of the long preceding tradition and, even more, of an intentional exegetical choice, is the presence of numerous traditions, often with contrasting contents, that explain the passages dedicated to the Biblical prophets. Moreover, the same stories are often suggested in the comments upon various verses, in repetitions that enlarge considerably the dimensions of the commentary. As Claude Gilliot has correctly suggested, the profusion of variant and diverse versions is paradoxically what determined its persuasive force and its unifying power and allowed the story of salvation to take root in the collective memory of the community of believers. Furthermore it was this which determined the close link between the Qur'ān and the history of humanity through those events that constituted its founding moments: the revelations of the prophets, the orders and the sovereignty of God and, along with it but in conflict, the opposition of the people and of the unbelieving sovereigns. In this picture, the precise determination of the events themselves is a matter of secondary importance, the primacy being attached to the religious meaning of the events that have preceded and in a sense prepared the way for Islam.[12]

In the passages of uncertain meaning, therefore, al-Ṭabarī does not seek to offer a solution at all costs, but reports every possible variant. Commenting on Qur. 2:259, which contains mention of a man who passed by the ruins of a town and whom God caused to die for one hundred years and then resuscitated, al-Ṭabarī reports a long list of stories and legends that take up twenty or so pages, where the character is identified first as Ezra, then as Jeremiah and even as the mysterious al-Khiḍr:

> The exegetes have differing opinions about the one who passed by this town that was destroyed to its foundations. Some maintain that it was Ezra.
>
> Who maintained this:
>
> It has been handed down to us (...) from Nājiya ibn Ka'b about '*Or such as he who passed by a city that was fallen down upon its turrets*' (Qur. 2:259) that it was Ezra.

> It has been handed down to us (...) from Sulaymān ibn Burayda about the words of God '*Or such as he who passed by a city*' that it was Ezra.
>
> It has been handed down to us (...) about the words '*Or such as he who passed by a city*' that al-Rabīʿ, though God knows better, maintained that the one passed by that city was Ezra.
>
> Others maintain that it was Jeremiah ibn Ḥalqiyyā, while Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq maintains that it was Jeremiah, that is al-Khiḍr.
>
> It has been handed down to us (...) from Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq that, according to Wahb ibn Munabbih, and information deriving from Israelites, that the name of al-Khiḍr was in reality Jeremiah ibn Ḥalqiyyā and he belonged to the tribe of Aaron.[13]

Following on from this introductory part that lists the various interpretations without any narrative details, there are then more extended traditions.

> Wahb ibn Munabbih recounts that God inspired Jeremiah, who was in Egypt, to set out for Jerusalem, because Egypt was no longer a safe place to be. Jeremiah mounted his donkey and he reached a certain point on his route having with him a basket of grapes and figs and a new water-bag that he then filled with water. When the vision of Jerusalem appeared to him, with the villages and the temples that surrounded it and he saw the indescrivable ruin, he realised its destruction, that was like an enormous mountain, and said: "*How shall God give life to this now it is dead?*" (Qur. 2:259). The prophet continued his journey until he camped to pass the night, tying his mule with a new cord and attaching his water-bag. God then made him fall asleep and when he was sleeping took away from him the breath of life for one hundred years. When 70 of these years had passed, God sent an angel to a potent King of Persia by the name of Yūsak with the following message: "God orders you to move with your people and to go and reconstruct Jerusalem and the whole region, until it has more inhabitants than ever before". To him the King answered: "Allow me three days to prepare for this work and to equip myself with the necessary materials".

> The angel allowed these three days, during which the King nominated three hundred attendants, and to each of them he assigned a thousand workers with the necessary materials. The attendants thus set out for Jerusalem with three hundred thousands workers. When they began the work, God restored life to one eye of Jeremiah, while the rest of him remained dead, and that eye looked towards Jerusalem, with its villages, its temples, its rivers and fields surrounding it, in which (the people) were working and which was inhabited and renewed again, until it returned again to its former state over a thirty year period, thus completing one hundred years. Only then did God restore his vital breath and he looked at his food and his drink which had not decayed, he looked at his mule, which was just as it had been on the day when it had been tied up, without having eaten nor drunk anything (...).[14]

This tradition continues, along with many others that are often longer and contain more detail, that deal with the same events, but that differ in their identification of the prophet in question. In this case the accurate identification of the characters cited is of little importance to al-Ṭabarī. The reason that the traditions containing names are reported is that, no matter who the protagonist is, it provides evidence of the relationship between God and man and of the intervention of the Omnipotent in the course of events, whatever the precise moment in which it occurs.[15] The same considerations can be applied to the passages which deal with the verses dedicated to the attempted sacrifice of the son of Abraham. The diffusion and, to a certain extent, the codification of numerous contrasting traditions had to be taken into consideration by a scrupulous exegete like al-Ṭabarī who, prompted by the desire to provide a complete description on the topic, lists the authorities and opinions of the ancients on the question. It is in this way that he quotes seventeen traditions of various length that identify Isaac as the victim and as many as twenty-four, of similar form, that in contrast propose Ishmael. His preference for Isaac is explained only in the conclusion, on the basis of an exegetical analysis of the contents of the sacred text, without evaluating the various traditions listed. Once again, therefore, the traditions and the stories that are reproduced are important more for the sacred history that they enrich, despite

the contradictions, than for the questions that they may assist in the clarification of.[16]

Reference has already been made to the critical analysis to which al-Ṭabarī subjected the material cited. It should be added that in the case of linguistic and juridical questions and the various and contrasting traditions which he provides, he does not fail to emphasise his position and to exercise clear judgement; however, in the stories of the prophets this does not always happen. In fact, while he generally does not use traditions and interpretations deriving from suspect exegetes or transmitters, this principle is in part abandoned when what is being dealt with is historical information on the Arab and Biblical past.[17] This does not mean that in every case the traditions on the Biblical prophets are collected by al-Ṭabarī without distinction. For example, al-Ṭabarī does not mention in his commentary material deriving from Muqātil, and this is not only a sign that his name was already an index of unreliability, but also that his exegesis, which was strongly influenced by the storytellers and converts, was already disliked by exegetes.[18]

The commentaries subsequent to that of al-Ṭabarī followed his way in terms of form and method. The approach to the sacred text was determined in accordance with the various disciplines developed to explain every linguistic, juridical and other implications, and among these the traditions about the Biblical prophets, which complete the narrative parts, have always had a central role. This is especially the case in relation to those types of exegesis based upon the discussion of the traditions and accounts passed on by the preceding generations, in which every verse is explained word by word, often relying upon the same material, work after work. Naturally this does not take anything away from the specificity of each exegete who in his own Qur'ānic commentary, despite being carried out using the same patrimony of traditions, has the opportunity to give preference to one particular approach over others or to give credit to certain traditions instead of others.[19]

NOTES

1 The exegetes of the classic period often make use of traditions attributed to these first companions-exegetes. The case of Ibn ʿAbbās is emblematic: cousin of Muḥammad, who died in 687, his name was

associated with so many traditions and so many exegetical explanations, that he became more an ideal reference than a real exegete. Cf. Gilliot, "Portrait «mythique» d'Ibn 'Abbās"; Id., "Les débuts de l'exégèse coranique", 84–86. Differing evaluation upon this opposition to exegesis are in Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*, 55f.; Birkeland, *Old Muslim Opposition*, 9–16; Leemhuis, "Origins and Early Development", 16–19. For a description of the origin of Qur'ānic exegesis and of related questions refer to the pages of McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic Christians*, 13–36.

2 Such an exegetical necessity appears evident from a tradition which tells of a man who sought an explanation from 'Alī about the mysterious population of *aṣḥāb al-rass*, adding these words: "I can find them mentioned in the Qur'ān (25:38, 50:12), but I cannot read in it the story": al-Tha'labī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 151.

3 There are many testimonies of the close rapport between the traditions deriving from the storytellers and Qur'ānic exegesis. There is substantial unanimity in considering the exegesis of the narrative parts as the most ancient exegesis to the Qur'ān: Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*, 57; Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 121. Traditions and materials used for this first type of exegesis would have followed what was preached and told by the storytellers: Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 145–8; Leemhuis, "Origins and Early Development", 29.

4 Muqātil was of Persian origin and died in 767. He was considered a great exegete by his contemporaries, but his work was later subjected to very heavy censure consisting of a range of different accusations. The problem with evaluating his commentary derives from the fact that the sources seem to point to the existence of two editions of it during the first centuries of Islam; only the Iraqi one is still extant (*Tafsīr*, ed. 'A.M. Shiḥāta, Cairo 1979–87). A complete discussion of all the questions connected to his commentary can be found in Gilliot, "Muqātil, grand exégète".

5 On the characteristics of the text of Muqātil see Gilliot, "Les débuts de l'exégèse coranique", 90–1, and above all the stylistic analysis of Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 122–31.

6 Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, III, 615. The Qur'ānic passages, from Qur. 37:102–7, are in italics, while the exegetical part is in Roman type. Reference has already been made to the Qur'ānic passage on the sacrifice of the son of Abraham. The opinions of the exegetes on which was the chosen son are completely at odds. While for Muqātil there was no doubt, the later commentators almost always carried traditions that nominated either Isaac or Ishmael. When the more ancient exegetes are considered there seems to be a preference for Isaac, while the more recent ones tend towards Ishmael. How this change took place is the subject of various explanations: the choice of Ishmael could relate to the desire to "islamicise" the event, localising it at Mecca instead of Jerusalem, or be the result of an ethnic rivalry, between Persians and non-Arabs on one side and Arabs on the other that attributed their descendancy respectively to Isaac or to Ishmael. On the topic see

Calder, "From Midrash to Scripture"; Bashear, "Abraham's Sacrifice of His Son"; Firestone, "Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice"; and Id., *Journeys in Holy Land*, 135–151.

7 The interest in onomastics and names of characters is typical of the popular accounts; see in this regard Noth, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition*, 128.

8 ʿAbd al-Razzāq who died in 826 was a Yemenite expert in the sayings of Muḥammad. He was the author of a brief commentary: *Tafsīr*, ed. M.M. Muḥammad, Riyadh 1989. Mujāhid b. Jabr was of Meccan origin and lived until 722. The most recent edition of his commentary is that edited by M.ʿA. Abū l-Nīl, Cairo 1989. This last work is for all purposes merely a later edition of the commentary of Mujāhid; on the controversial question of later editions of his commentary and its relationship to the original, see Leemhuis, "Ms. 1075 *Tafsīr*".

9 This introduction to the actual exegetical part is an ideal example of how the Qur'ānic commentaries that make use of extra-canonical traditions are composed: a line of transmitters guarantees the passage of a tradition from Muḥammad himself or another authority of the first generations to the author. The names mentioned in these lines are all of great prominence. Maʿmar (d. 770) was the most important teacher of ʿAbd al-Razzāq; Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 742) was a personality of great prominence in the collection and diffusion of religious traditions. Abū Hurayra (d. 678 ca.) was a prolific transmitter of traditions, but one whose reputation has been called into question; on Kaʿb al-Ahbar see above, pp. 90–91.

10 ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *Tafsīr*, II, 150–1; this tradition is examined, along with many others by Fireston, "Abraham's Son", 100–1.

11 Al-Ṭabarī, who was originally from Āmul, the capital of Ṭabaristān, was born in 839 and died in 923. The numerous works written by him demonstrate the vastness of his interests, as was typical of medieval experts of religious learning: juridical, historical, exegetical and in a broad sense all of the Muslim tradition passed on by the preceding generations. A complete treatment of his life and of his works is provided by Rosenthal in *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, I. General Introduction and from the Creation to the Flood, Albany 1989, 5–134 and Gilliot, *Exégèse, langue et théologie en Islam*, 19–68.

12 Gilliot, "Mythe, récit, histoire de salut", in part. 244; Gilliot examines some parts of the Qur'ānic commentary, in particular the numerous pages dedicated to commentary on Qur. 2:258–260, that refers to two episodes in the life of Abraham and contains (Qur. 2:259) an allusion to Ezekiel or Ezra.

13 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, III, 28–9. The personages mentioned here are all transmitters of the first generations of whom al-Ṭabarī reports interpretations and traditions. The most significant names are those of Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq (see below at pp. 129–130) and Wahb ibn Munabbih (see below at pp. 138–141).

14 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, III, 34–5. See also Gilliot, "Mythe, récit, histoire de salut", 253, and in particular the discussion at n. 33, where he corrects Yūsak with the more probably correct Kūsak, that is Cyrus.

15 Gilliot, "Mythe, récit, histoire de salut", 246–54. Elsewhere narrative takes decisive advantage of the allusive character of the sacred text, but that does not mean, as has been argued by Calder, "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr", 108, that al-Ṭabarī gives preference to the narrative over the theology.

16 The pages dedicated to the topic are found in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, XXIII, 81–6. The arguments of al-Ṭabarī on the question are analysed in depth by Calder, "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr", 121–3. With regard to the other questions al-Ṭabarī shows that he is not concerned with establishing every detail precisely, as in the example of the number of dirhams which the brothers exchanged for Joseph, or the type of food that came down with the Table for Jesus and the apostles.

17 See in this regard the long passage on this argument mentioned by Rosenthal in *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, I, 110. The following point is worth noting: personages and authors that were considered unreliable in terms of their exegesis or for the transmission of the sayings of Muḥammad, might still have been used when historical accounts, that could not otherwise have been learned, are being dealt with.

18 Gilliot, *Exégèse, langue et théologie en Islam*, 132; Id., "Mythe, récit, histoire de salut", 246. The objection of al-Ṭabarī to Muqātil does not affect the fact that in certain cases al-Ṭabarī mentions traditions of the same kind and with the same particulars, even if they are attributed to others. The citation by al-Ṭabarī of traditions on the prophets about which he has doubts, is above all evident in those cases in which the text contains the final expression *Allāh aʿlam* ("God knows better").

19 A brief but effective treatment of Qur'ānic exegesis, in which even the most important exegetes are mentioned, is given in Rippin s.v. *Tafsīr*, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., IX, Leiden – London 1998, 83–88. Descriptions of the lives and works of some of the most important exegetes, including al-Ṭabarī, can be found in McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic Christians*, 38–89.

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Chapter 7

The Biblical prophets in the sayings of Muḥammad

Within Muslim religious literature a particular place is occupied by the sayings of Muḥammad (*ḥadīth*). The words of the Prophet represent a source of inspiration and a guide for Muslims, and are considered inferior only to the Qur'ān itself if not, in certain cases, on the same level. The sacred text is certainly not able to clarify all of the aspects of the lives of believers; that clarification is provided by a vast literature that collects and orders the pronouncements of Muḥammad on every question. It is not only the articles of faith and rituals that are defined with such precision, but also all of the juridical questions that the Qur'ān treats with fleeting mentions or completely ignores.

A complete evaluation of this literature and of its historical value in relation to the Qur'ānic revelation is, however, a problematic exercise. According to the Muslim conception, these traditions were transmitted orally and were passed on in an oral and a written form through chains of guarantors (*isnād*) that earlier had heard them from the mouth of Muḥammad, and then, in the same way, had passed them on to successive generations. The Muslim criticism usually proceeds by inquiring as to the reliability of these guarantors, belonging to the first generations of Muslims, and gaining from this assessment of reliability an almost complete evaluation on the veracity of the contents of the tradition. When a chain, of whatever length, is made up of characters of good repute, the tradition is considered a genuine utterance pronounced by Muḥammad in the course of his life and, as such, is binding on the believers. But the first extant works containing the sayings of Muḥammad do not date from before the end of the 8th century AD, which, it is worth noting, is a century

and a half after the death of the Prophet. This lapse of time and the contradictions that exist in the contents of some of the sayings give rise to doubts as to their reliability. This question is of central importance for an accurate evaluation of the first two centuries of Islam and has been the object of various investigations.[1]

1. THE PROPHETS AND MUḤAMMAD

A considerable number of the sayings attributed to Muḥammad refer to the Biblical prophets. It should be noted immediately that what is being dealt with are principally incidental mentions, from which all narrative intent is absent, despite the fact that some are long stories with details of great prominence. In many cases, however, the mention of Biblical figures has as its main function the definition of the role of Muḥammad in relation to the Biblical prophets.

One of the questions – also displayed in the Qur'ān – dealt with frequently in this literature is that of the rank of Muḥammad in relation to the Biblical prophets. The subject is not clarified by the Qur'ān because, as has already been said, it contains contradictory data, and the same contrasting conceptions emerge in the literature of the sayings of Muḥammad.[2] According to one of these sayings, included in the two major collections of sayings, that of al-Bukhārī (d. 870) and of Muslim (d. 875),[3] the companion of the prophet Abū Hurayra (d. 678 ca.)[4] was a witness of this episode in the life of Muḥammad:

> The Prophet, God bless him and grant him salvation, (...) said: "Do not draw distinctions between the prophets of God. When on the day of Judgement the horn will be blown, and all in the heavens and on earth will lose their senses, apart from those He wants, and the horn will then be blown a second time, I will be the first to be awoken, while Moses will be taking the Throne, but I do not know if this will be a compensation for having lost consciousness (...), or because he will be awoken before me. I, myself, never even say that anyone is better than Jonah".[5]

The pronouncement of Muḥammad on this occasion is clear and leaves no space for doubt: no-one must make a distinction between the prophets and he insists that he is not more prominent than Moses nor even than a figure of secondary

importance such as Jonah. No prophet, including Muḥammad, should be considered superior to the others and thus, as is indicated in other versions of this saying, no-one should say that the Arab Prophet is superior to Jonah. Other sayings of the Prophet that expressly mention the Biblical prophets attest to this same intent. To a man who addressed him with the epithet "best of all creation", Muḥammad responded that this was certainly Abraham. On another occasion, the Prophet confirmed that the most noble of all the men was in fact Joseph.[6] Other sayings of Muḥammad attributed to more than one transmitter repeat in different ways that there is no distinction to be made between the prophets, or that Muḥammad did not regard himself as being superior to either Abraham or Moses, nor to other prophets that preceded him.

This clear egalitarian tendency conflicts with other sayings of contrasting intent in which Muḥammad is described as the best of creatures and therefore the best of prophets. Many of these traditions are directly linked to the interpretation of the Qur'ānic expression *khātam al-nabiyyīn* ("seal of the prophets" Qur. 33:40) that is often considered as a reference to the superiority of Muḥammad and of his mission. Also in this case, the concept is further defined by the words of the Prophet himself, who in a tradition attributed to Abū Hurayra said:

> "I have been preferred over the other prophets for six things: I have been given the ability to speak in a concise way, I have been helped by the fear my adversaries had of me, I have been given permission to keep the booty, for me the earth has been made a purifying substance and a mosque in which to pray, I have been sent to all the people and the prophets have been sealed with me".[7]

A huge number of the sayings of the Prophet or of the traditions that derive from his companions or Muslims of the next generation emphasise the superiority of Muḥammad, and some of them make mention of the Biblical prophets. To the precise question of a companion the Arab Prophet in fact answered that he was the seal of the prophets when Adam was not yet a completely formed body.[8] Another episode refers to Moses: the companion and future caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb brought to Muḥammad a copy of the Torah and began to read it in front of the Prophet who, becoming more and more thoughtful, finally

said that if Moses returned to life all of the Muslims would have followed him but they would have been mistaken because Moses himself would have followed Muḥammad and confirmed his prophecy.[9] Another saying specifies lastly that Muḥammed is the "chief (*sayyid*) of the men" the first for whom the earth will be opened, the first to intercede and the first to whom intercession will be granted.[10]

It is evident from these few examples that the differences between the various traditions reflect the contrasting Qur'ānic data. The same Muslim exegetes sought in various ways to provide explanations attributing the various statements to precise dispositions of Muḥammad at different moments in his life. The devotion with regard to the figure of the Arab Prophet and the necessity to mark the superiority of Islam meant that in the course of the centuries traditions that attributed superiority to Muḥammad in comparison with all the other prophets became prevalent.

Some of the sayings of the Prophet however express the necessity to emphasise further the connection between the Biblical prophets and Muḥammad. Also in this case, some of the concepts already referred to or in any case hinted at in the Qur'ān and in certain sayings discussed above are further developed: Muḥammad is the only legitimate heir of the prophets that have preceded him. The name of Abraham is frequently referred to in this genre of traditions. A saying of the Prophet that is widely recurrent and cited in all of the collections tells that Muḥammad made Medina sacred, in the same way that Abraham made Mecca sacred.[11] Apart from placing the role and relevance of the two prophets on the same level, the tradition aims to overcome the typical rivalry between the two Muslim centres that had emerged after the first Islamic century and that left its trace in many traditions.[12] Another saying attributes the same epithet to Muḥammad as that applied to Abraham: Muḥammad states that God chose him as his sincere friend (*khalīl*) in the same way in which Abraham was taken as his sincere friend.[13] The close connection between Abraham and the Arab Prophet is emphasised even more in the tradition in which Muḥammad calls Abraham "my father", or, turning to his companions, "your father".[14] Epithets that recall the familiarity between the prophets and Muḥammad have to be considered as possessing the same tone, as in the case of the tradition in which he recites the Qur'ānic passage "My Lord, forgive me, and give me a kingdom such as may not befall anyone

after me" (Qur. 38:35), preceded by the statement that this is the invocation of "my brother" Solomon.[15] Lastly, the same concept returns in that which without any doubt is the saying cited most frequently in the works of the genre and which mentions the name of Muḥammad in close relation with that of Abraham. In this case the companions had requested Muḥammad to teach them how to pray for him and he answered them in the following way:

> Say: "Oh my God, bring down your blessing on Muḥammad, on his wives and on his descendants, as you spread the blessings on the family of Abraham. Bless Muḥammad, his wives and his descendants, as you blessed the family of Abraham".[16]

The intimate connection between Muḥammad and Abraham does not end with the ideal coincidence of the mission and the contents of the revelation, but also extends to include the physical features of the two prophets. One tradition that refers to the nocturnal journey to Jerusalem and the ascension into heaven contains the description of some prophets. It is Abū Hurayra who recorded these words of Muḥammad:

> The night of my ascension I met Moses. He was a man with a slim body, with wavy hair, similar to one of the tribe of the Shanū'a. I then met Jesus, who was a man of medium stature and a red complexion as though he had just come out of the bath. I then saw Abraham: I, of all his descendants, am the one that resembles him most.[17]

2. THE SAYINGS REGARDING THE ASCENSION INTO HEAVEN AND THE INTERCESSION

Of all the traditions attributed to Muḥammad that are included in the principal collections of his sayings and that contain explicit mentions of the Biblical prophets, two are particularly important. These are the account of the nocturnal journey and the ascension into heaven (*miʿrāj*) of Muḥammad and the tradition about intercession (*shafāʿa*). According to the Muslim tradition Muḥammad travelled miraculously by night from Mecca to Jerusalem and from there was taken up to heaven in order to meet the principal prophets. One brief, if somewhat obscure, Qur'ānic passage, is usually considered as a reference to this

miraculous event, but it is in the words of the Prophet himself that the events are clarified and described completely.[18]

> I was brought the Burāq, which is a long white animal that is bigger than a donkey but smaller than a mule, who would place his hoof at a distance equal to the range of vision. I mounted it and arrived at the Temple (Jerusalem) then I tied him to the ring used by the prophets. I entered the sacred place and said two prayers. I was then joined by Gabriel with a vessel of wine and one of milk. I chose the milk and Gabriel said: "You made the correct choice".[19] Then he took me to heaven and asked that the gate of the heaven be opened. The guard asked who was there. Gabriel announced his name, but he was asked who was accompanying him to which Gabriel answered: "Muḥammad". He was asked if I had been sent for and Gabriel answered affirmatively. And the door was opened for us and we saw Adam. He welcomed me and prayed for my well being. Then we ascended to the second heaven. Gabriel asked that the gate of the heaven be opened. He was asked who was there. Gabriel announced his name, but he was then asked who was accompanying him to which Gabriel answered: "Muḥammad". The guard asked if I had been sent for and Gabriel answered affirmatively. When I entered Jesus and John the Baptist, who were maternal cousins, peace be with them, welcomed me and prayed for me. Later I was taken to the third heaven (...) and when the gate was opened I saw Joseph, peace be with him, who had been given half of humanity's beauty. He welcomed me and prayed for me. I then ascended to the fourth heaven (...) The gate was opened and Idrīs was there. He also welcomed me and prayed for me. I ascended to the fifth heaven (...) The gate was opened and I found myself in the company of Aaron, who welcomed me and prayed for me. Then I was taken to the sixth heaven (...) The gate was opened and I found myself with Moses, who welcomed me and prayed for me. I was then taken to the seventh heaven (...) where I found Abraham reclining against the Inhabited House,[20] which was visited by seventy thousand different angels every day.[21]

The recognition of a hierarchy of the prophets that preceded Muḥammad and that those prophets attest to his prophetic

mission, along with the presence of Adam among the other prophets, are the principal elements of this long tradition. Other versions refer to the return of Muḥammad towards Moses in the seventh heaven, having received the revelation with the obligation to pray 50 times a day, and a protracted dialogue with Moses who convinces him to ask God to reduce the number of prayers to five. The figures of the Biblical prophets are not delineated at all, and neither are any Qur'ānic particulars added. The central part of the tradition is constituted by Muḥammad, and in particular the miraculous story of which he is the protagonist and his ascension, along with Gabriel, to the seventh heaven.

The names of the principal Biblical figures return in the tradition that speaks of intercession. Muḥammad, according to the account of Abū Hurayra, while eating meat, turned to his companions:

> I will be at the head of humanity on the day of the Resurrection. Do you know why? God will gather in one plain the earlier and the later on the day of the Resurrection. Then the voice of the proclaimer will be heard by all of them, and eyesight will penetrate through all of them and the sun will come near. The people will then feel anguish, anxiety and agony which they will not be able to bear. Some will say to the others: "Don't you see the trouble you are in? Don't you see what misfortune has overtaken you? Why don't you find someone who will intercede for you with your Lord?" Some will say to the others to go to Adam and so they will go to Adam and say to him: "You are Adam, the father of all creatures, God created you with his own hands and breathed his spirit into you and ordered the angels to prostrate before you. Intercede on our behalf with your Lord, don't you see what trouble we are in? Don't you see what misfortune has befallen us?" Adam will answer: "The truth is that the Lord is more infuriated than he has ever been and ever will be. He prohibited me from approaching the tree but I disobeyed Him. I am concerned with my own self. Go and ask someone else, go to Noah". So they will go to Noah and say to him: "Noah, you are the first of the messengers sent to earth and God named you 'grateful servant', please intercede on our behalf with your Lord, don't you see what trouble we are in? Don't you see what

misfortune has befallen us?" And he will answer: "The truth is that the Lord is more infuriated than he has ever been and ever will be. There had emanated a curse from me with which I cursed my people.[22] I am concerned with my own self, you go better to Abraham". And so the people will go to Abraham and say to him: "You are the messenger of God and his friend amongst all the inhabitants of the earth. Intercede on our behalf with your Lord (...)". Abraham will mention his own lies and then say: "(...) I am concerned only with myself. You better go to someone else, go to Moses". And so they will go to Moses (...) and he will say to them: "To tell the truth I murdered a person who I wasn't ordered to kill. I am concerned with myself, it is better if you go to Jesus". And so they will come to Jesus and he (...), without mentioning any sins, will say: "I am concerned with myself, it is better if you go to someone else, go to Muḥammad, God bless him and grant him salvation". And so they will come to me and say: "O Muḥammad you are the messenger of God and the last of the prophets. God has pardoned all of your sins. Intercede on our behalf with your Lord (...)".[23]

With these words Muḥammad returns to some of the usual questions on his own role. Muḥammad is expressly identified as the last of the prophets, the messenger of whom God had cancelled every sin. His intercession will be the only valid one on the day of the Resurrection, and so also salvation will be reserved for those who belong to the Muslim community. The tradition in any case deals with the question of the sins committed by the prophets. The Qur'ān specifically refers to acts of this type committed by the prophets, and this is the reason, as Muḥammad says in this tradition, for which they do not feel able to intercede with God.[24]

3. THE SAYINGS ABOUT THE BIBLICAL PROPHETS AND JESUS

The sayings attributed to Muḥammad that mention Biblical prophets are very numerous, but what is being dealt with is, in substance, different from that more popular material spread by the storytellers and the converts. It is not the legendary stories of these prophets that are of interest in this literary genre, but their

virtues, and above all their role in the definition of some of the articles of the Muslim faith.[25] These sayings which are most relevant to this study, are as follows.

The Qur'ān, though enumerating a certain number of prophets and messengers, does not only fail to clarify their attributes in a definite way, it also does not even establish how many of them there were. The question finds an answer in a saying attributed to Muḥammad that refers also to the prophecy of Adam. In this tradition, a companion of the Prophet, Abū Dharr (d. 651), asked if Adam was a prophet, and after the affirmative answer of Muḥammad, sought to clarify the exact number of the prophets sent by God. Muḥammad answered: "One hundred and twenty four thousand, of which three hundred and fifteen were messengers, an abundant number".[26] Other versions of this tradition leave the number of messengers unclear without however failing to establish in a clear way that there were less messengers than prophets.

A group of well defined traditions mentions the lives of the prophets in order to emphasise the primacy of Islam and its primogeniture in the history of the world. On the creation of Adam, for example, besides following the Qur'ānic data by stating that he was created from mud which was mixed with sand and was bad smelling, Muḥammad adds that all of this happened on a Friday, the same day as that on which he was expelled from paradise.[27] In this way the primacy of the Muslim holy day is emphasised in clear contraposition to the Jewish Saturday and the Christian Sunday. Further, when God breathed his spirit into the body of Adam and he coughed and was given life, Adam was sent to greet the angels and he turned to them addressing them in the customary Muslim way: "The peace and the mercy of God be with you".[28]

In the collection of sayings of Muḥammad by al-Bukhārī, in the chapter dedicated to the prophets, long traditions that tell of the experiences of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael, of their transfer to Mecca, of their vicissitudes and, thus, of the origin of the Meccan rituals are also included. These traditions, which are rather long and detailed, complete the minimal Qur'ānic data that unequivocally attribute the construction of the Ka'ba to Abraham and Ishmael, thus providing a coherent narrative picture. In one of these traditions, transmitted in connection with the name Ibn 'Abbās, for example, it is reported that:

When that which happened amongst the women took place, Abraham set off with Ishmael and his mother Hagar, taking with them a skin bag full of water. The mother of Ishmael started drinking the water from this skin bag in order to be able to give more milk to Ishmael. Once in Mecca Abraham left the son and his mother under a great tree, then returned to his wife. The mother of Ishmael ran behind him until Kudā' shouting: "Abraham, to whom will you leave us?" "To God", answered Abraham. Then Hagar shouted: "I accept the protection of God" and went back. Therefore she drank the water from the skin bag and she had milk in abundance for her son until there was no more water. "If I go out into the open, she said, perhaps I shall be able to find somebody". Thus she ran to the top of the hill of Ṣafā, and looked all around to see if there was anybody, but she saw no-one. She returned to the valley, and ran back up on al-Marwa. Having done this a number of times she said: "I will go and see what is happening to Ishmael". When she reached him she found him in such a state that it seemed as though he was about to draw his last breath. At the sight of this, beside herself, she said: "If I go out into the open it is possible I will see someone". She climbed up on Ṣafā, and looked around repeatedly but did not see anyone. She continued to do this until she had done it seven times. She therefore returned to see the condition of her son, and all at once she heard a voice: "Ask for help, if you did good". And then Gabriel appeared and struck the ground with his heel and water began to flow forth. Stupefied, Hagar began to dig and Muḥammad states that, if instead she had let the water run, it would have scattered over the surface. Hagar set out to drink the water and had an abundance of milk for her son. In the meantime some of the Jurhum[29] were passing through the valley when suddenly they saw a bird flying. They could not believe their eyes and exclaimed: "That bird could not be there unless there is water". They sent a messenger ahead, and having found the water he returned to them with the news. The Jurhum then went to Hagar and said: "O mother of Ishmael! do you permit us to stay with you?" When the son of Hagar reached the age of puberty, he then married a woman of Jurhum.[30]

Many elements of these accounts hark back to the Biblical tradition (*Gen.* 21, 9–21) with the addition of certain elements that intend to direct the events into an Arab framework. The running of Hagar between Ṣafā and al-Marwa offers the precedent for the analogous ritual of the pilgrimage that consists in seven courses between these two localities; the intervention of Gabriel points to the miraculous nature of the source of Zamzam at Mecca; the marriage between Ishmael and a woman of the tribe of the Jurhum, in addition to the place in which the events occur, entrenches the story and the descent of Ishmael finally reaching Muḥammad into an Arab setting.[31] The presence of this long account in the story of al-Bukhārī is in some ways quite curious. The wealth of particulars and the narrative tone recall more the typical accounts of exegesis or the traditions included in the books of history than those of the collections of the sayings of Muḥammad.

Some of the sayings contain particular aspects that are also repeated in those works of religious literature that are more concerned with narrative details. One of these is the statement of Muḥammad that Joseph possessed half of all beauty given to mankind.[32] An interesting tradition for the same reason is that in which evidence is given that Moses opposed resistance when the angel of death visited him. Moses, according to what is said by Muḥammad, responded to the angel that was making a visit to him to take his soul, that he did not want to die, thus forcing the angel to return to God. God gave further instructions to the angel, who then returned to Moses and told him to put his hand on a bull's back and to strip off some hairs: the number of the hairs stripped would equal the number of years that he would be allowed to live.[33] An incentive to pray and to perform practices of devotion are the aim of many traditions that refer to the behaviour of David. The sayings of the Prophet celebrate his profound religiosity and Muḥammad confirms that nothing is more pleasing in the eyes of God than the fasting and the prayer of David, given that he fasted every other day, prayed for a third of the night and slept for the rest of the time that remained. David was, in the words of Muḥammad, the most devoted of all humanity.[34]

Lastly, the sayings of Muḥammad with regard to Jesus deserve a separate treatment. His name is, after that of Moses, the one which recurs most frequently in this literature. The sayings of

Muḥammad confirm substantially the completely positive overall picture of Jesus in the Qur'ān. In one long tradition which provides a version of a declaration of Muslim faith, Muḥammad indicates that he who affirms that there is no other god than God, that Muḥammad is his servant and prophet, and among other things, that Jesus is the servant of God, his word placed in the bosom of Mary and the Spirit coming from him, will enter into paradise.[35] The name of Jesus appears also in one of the most significant traditions that places Muḥammad in close relation with a Biblical figure. Muḥammad, in this saying, stated that he was "the closest to Jesus" of all men and that between him and Jesus there were no other prophets.[36]

The traditions of greatest interest that mention Jesus are those that refer to his return as Messiah (*al-masīḥ*) at the end of time. There is nothing explicit in the Qur'ān which gives an indication of this sort and the diffusion of the belief and traditions on this subject are usually linked by exegesis to the explanation of a verse that states, "And he is knowledge of the Hour" (Qur. 43:61).[37] In the words of Muḥammad it is confirmed in a clear way that Jesus will return at the end of time:

> I swear by God that Jesus will descend from heaven and that he will be an equitable judge, he will destroy the cross, he will kill the pigs, he will abolish the tax to the non-Muslims, he will leave the young she-camels and no one will be interested in them; spite, mutual hatred and jealousy will disappear, and when he calls the people to accept wealth, no one will do so.[38]

The Jesus who will return to earth before the hour of Judgement is evidently a Muslim Jesus. He will descend with the aim of correcting that which he sees as opposing Islam, and in particular that which in the Christian cult, in his name, goes against the Muslim precepts. It is because of this that he gives orders to destroy the cross, to kill all the pigs, or in other traditions, to make sure that prostrations are performed only to God and not, as the Christians were doing, also before images and priests or cult ministers.[39] The sayings of Muḥammad that describe the eschatological miracles are numerous and in the most important collections entire chapters are dedicated to the riots and the disruptions (*fitan wa-malāḥim*) that will precede the end of time. Jesus is the principal protagonist, he is the one sent from heaven

to earth to restore justice, the one who inexorably punishes with no way out the unbelievers and guides the Muslims to the final triumph.

In conclusion it should be emphasised that the traditions that mention the Biblical prophets in the collections of the sayings of the Prophet are generally different from those mentioned in the Qur'ānic commentaries or in the books of universal history. Despite the fact that the precise confines cannot be delineated in absolute terms, given that the sayings of Muḥammad are quoted in every literary genre and because of the presence in the collections of the sayings attributed to the Prophet of certain narrative particulars, there can be no doubt that the mention of Biblical personages in individual genres is a response to a range of needs. The collections of the sayings of Muḥammad above all serve as a guide to the believers whether in their relation to God or in their relations with other men, embracing every aspect of human life. The Biblical prophets are therefore mentioned when they serve to clarify a point of faith or a type of behaviour to follow. Further, the fact that the importance of the sayings attributed to Muḥammad is, in the estimation of Muslims inferior to that of the Qur'ān and superior, once its authenticity has been guaranteed, to every other extra-canonical tradition, should not be undervalued. For this reason the sayings of Muḥammad about the Biblical prophets are often cited in all of the religious works that deal with these topics even in an incidental way.[40]

NOTES

1 The question was confronted for the first time in a complete form by Goldziher in the second volume of his *Muhammedanische Studien.* According to Goldziher the sayings of the Prophet reflect the rivalry and the contrasts within the Muslim community, especially as regards questions of political legitimacy, much later than the death of Muḥammad, and they are therefore not substantially authentic. Pointing in the same direction, in his examination of the juridical literature, is Schacht, *The Origin of Muhammadan Jurisprudence.* Such conclusions were vehemently rejected by Muslims; see for example Azmi, *Studies in Early* Ḥadīth. Innumerable studies have been dedicated to the topic and for a complete treatment see Motzki, *Die Anfänge,* 7–49, who demonstrates how the transmission of traditions can be considered reliable at least from the end of the seventh century AD.

2 The question is discussed by Friedmann, "The Finality of Prophethood", 178f.

3 The works of al-Bukhārī and Muslim are considered the most authoritative amongst all those collecting the sayings of Muḥammad. Their title (*al-Ṣaḥīḥ*) indicates that they only include the traditions which – in their view – are genuine. Together with these works, another four enjoy great prestige: those of Abū Dāwūd (d. 889), Ibn Māja (d. 896), al-Nasā'ī (d. 915) and al-Tirmidhī (d. 892). Other works, such as those of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855) and Mālik ibn Anas (d. 795) also enjoy prominence, because of the wealth of material cited and their antiquity.

4 In the traditions cited, only the name of the first transmitter is reported, without the chain of guarantors which usually precede the text. On Abū Huraya see above, p. 107 n. 9.

5 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 484, tradition no. 3414; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 1844–1845 no. 2374. In this case as in the others, only a limited number of references is given. It is sufficient to keep in mind that, along with the sources indicated, many of the sayings cited here are reported in an almost identical form in all of the principal works of the genre.

6 As far as Abraham is concerned, see Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 1839 no. 2369; al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ*, V, 446 no. 3352; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, IV, 217 no. 4672. The identification of Joseph as the most noble of men is reported in a tradition that can be found in all of the collections of the sayings of Muḥammad in which it is affirmed that his ancestry consisted only of prophets; see, for example, al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 457 no. 3353. Other traditions of the same type are discussed by Friedmann, "The Finality of Prophethood", 178–9.

7 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ* I, 371 no. 524. This tradition is translated, together with other references, in Friedmann, "The Finality of Prophethood", 181–2.

8 Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, VI, 84 no. 17150. VI, 87 no. 17163.

9 Al-Dārimī, *Sunan*, I, 122 no. 441.

10 Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, IV, 218 no. 4673.

11 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 465 no. 3367; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, II, 991 no. 1360. Of the same type is the saying of the Prophet in which it is affirmed that Abraham, servant, prophet and friend of God prayed to God for Mecca, just as Muḥammad, servant and prophet of God prayed to God for Medina.

12 An example of a saying of this type is for example that which puts Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem on the same plane, in which Muḥammad gave instruction to set out only for three mosques, those of the three cities. The different versions are analysed by Kister, "You shall only set out". One of the ways of demonstrating the importance or centrality of a place is by linking it to the figure of a prophet, for example by noting the presence of his tomb. See for example the controversial case of the tomb of Moses, taken into examination by Sadan, "Le tombeau de Moïse a Jéricho et a Damas". These traditions are a classic example of the literary genre dedicated to the merits (*faḍā'il*) of the cities and places. The characteristics of this genre are analysed by Gruber, *Verdienst und Rang*, 49–82. Particularly rich is the literature on the merits of Jerusalem; on this question see also Tottoli, "La santità di Gerusalemme", 351–3.

13 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, I, 377 no. 532.

14 Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, II, 1165 no. 3525; Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, I, 508 no. 2112, I, 580 no. 2434. The same definitions of Abraham also emerge in an interesting saying in which Muḥammad states that he prayed to God for his nephews al-Ḥusayn and al-Ḥasan, sons of ʿAlī and Fāṭima, in the same way in which Abraham prayed to God for his sons Ishmael and Isaac.

15 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, I, 148 no. 461, IV, 488 no. 3423; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, I, 384 no. 541; but according to *idem*, no. 542, Muḥammad would have said "our brother Solomon".

16 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 466 no. 3369; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, I, 305 no. 405.

17 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 494, no. 3437. Certain versions of this tradition indicate that Muḥammad instead said: "As far as Abraham is concerned, look at your companion (Muḥammad in person)"; see for example *idem*, no. 3355. It should lastly be indicated that another version gives the impression that perhaps it was Jesus the prophet who was most similar to Muḥammad in certain respects; for example see *idem*, no. 3394.

18 The Qur'ānic passage in question (Qur. 17:1) says only: "Glory be to Him, who carried His servant by night from the Holy Mosque (*al-masjid al-ḥarām*) to the Further Mosque (*al-masjid al-aqṣā*)". These two temples are identified respectively as being the one in Mecca and that in Jerusalem. The argument, a subject which has been interpreted in various ways, is dealt with in Tottoli, "La santità di Gerusalemme", 332–3.

19 Other versions introduce the events with the episode of the purification. For example, in Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, I, 150 no. 164: "The roof of my house was torn off while I was at Mecca and Gabriel came down and opened my heart, then he washed it with the water from the spring of Zamzam. He then took a basin of gold brimming with wisdom and faith and afterwards he had it emptied into my breast, which he then closed".

20 The celestial archetype of the temple of the Ka'ba, the Inhabited House, is mentioned in Qur. 52:4.

21 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, I, 145–6 no. 162. A complete picture of all of the sources about this event is given by Schöck in various tables in his *Adam im Islam*.

22 This is an allusion to the Qur'ānic passages in which Noah rails at the unbelieving people, for example Qur. 71:21.

23 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, I, 184–5 no. 194. Numerous versions of this tradition are attested in all of the collections of the sayings of Muḥammad. A complete picture of all of the sources in question is given by Schöck in various tables in his *Adam im Islam*. See also the considerations of Schwarzbaum, *Biblical and Extra-Biblical Legends*, 35–6, who, as far as the confession of sins is concerned, points to a parallel with the *Midrash Tanḥūmā*.

24 The contents of this tradition therefore contrast with the later conceptions that clearly affirm the impeccability not only of Muḥammad but also of all the prophets that preceded him. It is interesting to note that the ancient commentaries such as that of

Muqātil were not at all concerned with justifying these errors of the prophets; in this regard see Gilliot, "Muqātil", 70–1. The conception of the impeccability of the prophets is already attested to in one of the first theological tracts, the *Fiqh akbar* attributed to Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 767) in which it is explicitly affirmed that all of the prophets are immune from every type of sin and that theirs were only infractions and errors ('Alī l-Qārī, *Sharḥ Kitāb al-fiqh al-akbar*, 99f.; in this regard see also L. Gardet – M.-M. Anawati, *Introduction à la théologie musulmane*, Paris 1981[3], 140–143 and A.J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, London 1965[2], 114, 192, 217–218). The later exegetes sought in every possible way to justify the acts of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān. Such is for example the intent of a work like *'Iṣmat al-anbiyā'* ("The impeccability of the Prophets") of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209). This conception is decisively rejected in inter-religious polemic (by Jewish theologians) in the 10th and 11th cent.; see in this regard Zucker, "The problem of *'iṣma*". The specific case of the lies attributed to Abraham is analysed in a comprehensive way by Gilliot, "Les trois mensonges d'Abraham", who demonstrates that assertions about the impeccability of the prophets first entered into Shī'ite commentaries and later into the Sunnī ones, but not before the 9th century AD. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, 217, had already dealt with the Shī'ite influence on the Sunnī dogma of the impeccability of the prophets.

25 Amongst the most important collections, only that of al-Bukhārī contains a chapter expressly dedicated to the prophets. Traditions on the topic can be found in certain other works, as is the case of Muslim, in the chapters dedicated to the *faḍā'il* ("virtues); about the matter, see Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder*, 8.

26 Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, VIII, 302 no. 22351, cf. VIII, 130 no. 21602, VIII, 132 no. 21608. All of the Muslim literature from the works of universal history to the Qur'ānic commentaries cite this saying repeatedly. The different versions are examined by Schöck, *Adam im Islam*, 156–7; see also Wensick, "Muhammad und die Propheten", 169f., who discusses this together with those traditions that contain lists of the prophets.

27 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, II, 585, no. 854; al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmi'*, II, 359 no. 488, II, 362 no. 491: Friday was the day on which God made him enter and exit from paradise. Other traditions on this same topic are discussed by Schöck, *Adam im Islam*, 63–6. This legend corresponds fully with what was said in certain Jewish traditions that, however, link all of these happenings to Saturday: *Midrash Rabbah* on *Genesis*, 12, 6; in this regard see Rosenblatt, "Rabbinic Legends in *Ḥadīth*", 239.

28 Al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmi'*, V, 453 no. 3368.

29 A pre-Islamic Arab tribe.

30 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 463–464 no. 3365.

31 On these arguments see above all Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Land*, 63–6, who stresses how some parallels in these traditions return also in the *Pirqê de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* and in other Rabbinical literature. All of the Muslim literature, besides the collections of the sayings of Muḥammad, contain numerous versions of these stories.

32 Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, IV, 570 no. 14052.

33 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* II, 407 no. 1339. In the Talmudic and Midrashic legends there is already testimony of a dramatic confrontation between Moses and the angel of death; the question is discussed by Schwarzbaum, *Biblical and Extra-Biblical Legends*, 31–2, who aptly notes the fact that that tradition appeared to be embarrassing in the eyes of Muslim theologians, in the sense that it demonstrates behaviour in open contrast with the Muslim principle of total submission to the will of God.

34 On the first tradition see al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 3419 no. 3420; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, II, 816 no. 1159 (numerous versions); the second tradition is reported by al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, V, 523 no. 3490. The particular devotion of David is an original Islamic element. Versions, with numerous variants, are reported in all of the collections of the sayings of Muḥammad and indicate that Muḥammad uttered these words when a very devoted companion, ʿAbdallāh ibn ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ (d. 685 ca.) affirmed that he wanted to fast and stay awake (praying) each night until his death. The response of the Prophet indicated that he wished to stop excesses of this type and became therefore an argument against analogous mystic behaviour.

35 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 459 no. 3359; Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, II, 1076 no. 3131. One of the other pro-Christian traditions is for example that which indicates that those who first believed in Jesus and then in Muḥammad will have double recompense in the eternal life; Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, VII, 131–2 no. 19549.

36 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 496 no. 3443; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 1837 no. 2365. The period between the two prophets (*fitra*), it is said, was of six hundred years: al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 654 no. 3948.

37 The Hour is naturally the time of Judgement; "he" refers to Jesus.

38 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, I, 136 no. 155.

39 The repulsion of Jesus for pigs, with a clear anti-Christian aim, is reported in a tradition that is not attributed to Muḥammad in Mālik ibn Anas, *Kitāb al-muwaṭṭaʾ*, 985. The question of the prostration is specifically noted by ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *al-Muṣannaf*, XI, 401 no. 20844, and alluded to in al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 497 no. 34488; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, I, 136 no. 155. According to the Islamic conception the act of prostration (*sujūd*) can be directed only to God and not, as in use among the Christians of that time, to an icon, or a representation of the Emperor or a religious authority. The defence on the part of the Christians of that custom, in response to the Muslim criticism expressed in these traditions can be found in the book of T. Abū Qurrah, *A Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons*, Engl. ed. by S.H. Griffith (Louvain 1997). The question is discussed also in Tottoli, "Muslim Traditions Against Secular Prostration".

40 Schwarzbaum, *Biblical and Extra-Biblical Legends*, 29–38, emphasises that the literature of the sayings of Muḥammad is a treasure of legendary stories and of folkloric motifs. As far as the traditions that refer to the prophets are concerned this is only partly true and within the limits pointed out in these pages. In the few pages in the first section

of the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* that are dedicated to the narrative elements of the *ḥadīth* literature, there is only a brief reference to Moses and al-Khiḍr and to the traditions of the ascension into heaven (S. el Calamawy, "Narrative elements in the *Ḥadīth* literature", 315).

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Chapter 8

The Biblical prophets in historiography

Next to exegesis and the sayings of Muḥammad, one of the literary genres destined to gather stories and legends on the Biblical prophets was that of historiography. A historical concept *in nuce* is already contained in the Qur'ān when reference is made to certain experiences of Muḥammad and above all to the stories of the prophets, or when it states that mankind was created with Adam and accepted or rejected in the past the preaching of other prophets, up to the point of the Arab Prophet. The Qur'ān does not however contain descriptions of events, but instead emblematic stories – in a certain sense parables – and the persons of the past are examples of a moral life, not figures whose experiences are fully described in terms of these past events. The realisation of a historical conception is therefore due to the extra-canonical traditions.

1. THE ORIGINS OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

The birth of the traditions and accounts of historical topics has followed the steps that marked the first exegetical attempts and, in general, the origins of all the Muslim traditions. The materials used in the first books of history derived from the usual channels: traditions of the type diffused by the storytellers on the Biblical stories and Arab antiquity, or accounts ascribed to the companions of Muḥammad. The taste for fantastic details or for popular versions was therefore the dominant trait either for the first extra-canonical traditions on the prophets or for describing the first experiences of the Muslim community. It is for this reason that there were no substantial differences between the traditions cited

in the first works of historiography and those contained in all the other genres of religious literature.[1]

A global historical vision emerged among the Muslim authors only from the 8th century and reached its height with al-Ṭabarī. This is a type of historiography that has a definite religious tendency and therefore one that is remote from the modern concept of the discipline of history. Qur'ānic data and theological concepts of the history of the world as a succession of prophetic missions were at the base of this type of historiography which collected an enormous mass of traditions and stories of every type. Because of this conception of history, the traditions of the Biblical prophets thus became essential for those works that sought to reconstruct a sacred history of the world from the creation to the advent of Islam.[2]

The first historical work which embraced the happenings of the world from Creation to the mission of Muḥammad was written by Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq (d. 768).[3] On the commission of the 'Abbāsid caliph al-Manṣūr (d. 775), Ibn Isḥāq dedicated himself to collecting (and ordering) traditions on three specific topics: the creation of the world and the pre-Islamic past (*Kitab al-mubtada'*), the life of the prophet Muḥammad and of his prophetic inspiration (*sīra*), and lastly the stories of his military expeditions (*maghāzī*). While these in fact were three distinct works, they were conceived as a unitary whole that brought together in a chronological sequence the founding moments of sacred Muslim history. The aim was therefore to reconstruct a sacred biography in which the link between Muḥammad and the Biblical prophets that had preceded the Arab Prophet, and ultimately the triumph of the community of believers, was emphasised. According to some historical reports the original work of Ibn Isḥāq was so large that it became necessary to prepare a more useful compendium that would serve the aim for which it was commissioned, that is the education of the future caliph al-Mahdī (d. 785). The original work is lost, and of this compendium unfortunately only the part dedicated to Muḥammad is extant in some later recensions, as for example that of Ibn Hishām (d. 834) which is by far the most famous; the first part, which was dedicated to the Biblical prophets, is attested in the traditions quoted in later works.[4]

The reasons that led the 'Abbāsid caliph to commission a work of this type probably included considerations of political

opportunity. In a period of ongoing political development, with the Umayyad dynasty just defeated, stabilising and isolating the experiences of Muḥammad in a sacred history that began with the origins of the world may have served to remove any religious emphasis from movements of that time that could contest the legitimacy of the ʿAbbāsid power. In any case, this work of Ibn Isḥāq, whatever its inspiration, is the first example of historiography in which the global project predominates over the simple listing of individual traditions.[5] However, despite the evident care shown in the disposition and organisation of the material, which includes traditions, sayings of the Prophet and large quotations from poems, the work of Ibn Isḥāq consistently cites accounts that would not have withstood a critical examination by the successive generations of exegetes and experts in religious learning. This suggests a general consideration on the methods of the historians: from the start they displayed a less rigid behaviour towards the extra-canonical traditions compared to either that of the exegesis or the collections of the sayings of the Prophet. It was not considered necessary for a historian to list every variant and, to some extent, some accounts can be combined to render a text more easily readable.

With regard to the Biblical stories, within the limits of the material attributed to him in later works, the taste for the miraculous and for fantastic particulars and the resort to non-Muslim sources are the most clear indications that traditions of a popular nature on this subject were particularly widespread and considered acceptable at the time when Ibn Isḥāq, who, it should be recalled, was contemporary of Muqātil, wrote. But the criticism of the successive generations that was directed against traditions of this type about Biblical topics was decisive for the destiny of the work of Ibn Isḥāq. The selection of Ibn Hishām as editor is very emblematic: all of the initial parts dedicated by Ibn Isḥāq to the Biblical stories are left out; as well, certain parts of the life of Muḥammad, which are attested in other recensions, are censured. This notwithstanding, the material collected by Ibn Isḥāq on the Biblical prophets continued to circulate amongst the exegetes. Al-Ṭabarī, for example, repeatedly mentions his name in his commentary and in his universal history; the latter especially owed much to Ibn Isḥāq in both conception and form.[6]

2. THE BIBLICAL PROPHETS IN MUSLIM HISTORIOGRAPHY

With the work of Ibn Isḥāq, Muslim historiography had a model made to trace the course of its own advent in the history of humanity: a pre-Islamic antiquity, marked by the Biblical prophets, mission and experiences of Muḥammad and history of the community of believers. Later historians followed this path, even when only one of these topics was preferred above the others. From the 9th cent. onwards in the most significant works of universal history there was a more or less significant space which was dedicated to the collections of the stories of the Biblical prophets and to the descriptions of their lives.[7]

This is the case, for example, in Ibn Qutayba (d. 889),[8] man of letters and author of works on religious topics, that dedicated himself to history in his brief book entitled *Kitāb al-maʿārif* ("Book of the News"). The initial pages of this work deal with the creation of the world and the Biblical characters, by means of traditions attributed to the experts of the preceding generations, among whom figures Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 730 ca.), together with some passages attributed to the Bible and in all probability deriving from an Arabic or Syriac translation of the Old and New Testaments.[9] These parts of Biblical history are not used with the intention of giving a complete account of the events that preceded the coming of Muḥammad, but are in fact a chronological introduction to the Muslim age in which the major interest is given to the dating of events. It is not by chance that what is dealt with in the Qurʾān is usually left aside, while the ages of the prophets are provided; a final chapter is used to summarise the ages of and the gap between one mission and the next.[10]

In other historical works of the 9th cent., even ones which display quite different tendencies, there are always introductory sections dedicated to the Biblical stories. The biographical dictionary of Ibn Saʿd (d. 844) prefaces an accurate description of the Muslim generations with some pages that contain traditions about the prophets.[11] But this is nothing more than a brief introduction: the historical construction of the pre-Islamic period introduced by Ibn Isḥāq is abandoned, and Muḥammad and the Muslim community are the central subject of the historical analysis. The Biblical prophets, and the few traditions that deal with them, are simply a genealogical introduction, dedicated for

the most part to Abraham and Ishmael, that precede and set the scene for the coming of the Arab Prophet.

Greater space is dedicated to the topic by al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 897), who wrote what can be considered as the first universal story in Muslim literature. The lives of the Biblical prophets are present in a well articulated reconstruction of what has preceded the advent of Islam and in this way al-Yaʿqūbī unites his historical and geographical competences, trying more a cultural reconstruction than a theological reading of history. Of the prophets, therefore, the genealogical and chronological aspects are defined, with little if any interest in formal critical questions, to such an extent that in the history the names of transmitters are not reported at the top of each tradition cited.[12] Also al-Dīnawarī (d. 891) dedicates a certain space in his brief book to these topics in order to introduce the story of the Muslim community, along with the Persian and pre-Islamic history. Al-Dīnawarī, like al-Yaʿqūbī before him, prefers to use a continuous narration without listing the names of the transmitters; his work, rather than being a ponderous historical treatment, is an agile manual that lacks the space to explain moot points or to clarify too many particulars, and this applies also for the part dedicated to the Biblical prophets.[13]

As with exegesis, it is once again al-Ṭabarī who closes ideally the formative period of Muslim historiography. In his *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* ("Stories of the prophets and of the Kings") al-Ṭabarī summarizes or reports accounts and materials collected from the historians of the previous generations and offers the most celebrated example of the universal history that spans from the pre-Islamic period to his own time. The recognisable model is that of Ibn Isḥāq, developed in a work of great breadth, that covers thousands of pages, ordered upon an annalistic basis.[14] In this accurate historical construction, which was destined to become a model for many successive works, hundreds of pages are dedicated to the lives of the Biblical prophets. The initial part contains traditions and the sayings of Muḥammad dedicated to the Creation. This is followed by the sequence of the prophets, beginning with Adam. The mission of Muḥammad is introduced after the section dealing with Jesus. In the structure and in the reconstruction of the biographies of the prophets this initial part is rather similar to the works belonging to the genre of the stories of the prophets, with the exception of those chapters dedicated to

pre-Islamic Persian history. The principal figures are naturally Adam, Abraham, Joseph, Moses and Jesus; Qur'ānic passages are cited if need be, along with the discussion of certain exegetical questions, but the predominant part is that of the extra-canonical traditions.[15] The reconstruction offered by al-Ṭabarī generally follows the principles, in terms of the material chosen and included in the work, used for its commentary. The stories of the prophets are reconstructed with a list of the traditions taken from the authors of the previous generations, that are thus included after a certain critical evaluation. But some examples indicate the fact, as has already been noted, that even according to a rigorous scholar like al-Ṭabarī, the limits of historiography were large and that, therefore, certain material that was rejected by the exegetes could be, with reservations and distinctions, included in the books of history.[16]

Biblical history, it should be added, did not exhaust the interest of Muslim historians in the pre-Islamic period. Along with these events, following the example of al-Ṭabarī, traditions from Persian, Greek, Chinese, and above all pre-Islamic paganism of the Arabian peninsula entered into the universal history.[17] Some authors, moreover, even went so far as to exclude the Biblical prophets from their own historical reconstruction, but it should be said that these are only sporadic cases. This choice was surely not made as a result of the desire to reject this material, given that the presence of the Biblical prophets in the Qur'ān puts aside any possible doubt in this regard. The omission was more likely to occur in works by those who, sharpening a particular method of historical criticism, felt in particular the problem of a reconstruction of a sacred history inspired by the Qur'ān and traditions that were often fantastic and remote from the experiences of the Muslim community. The manner in which Miskawayh (d. 1030) proceeded in his *Tajārib al-umam* ("The experiences of the peoples") is interesting in this regard in that it methodically leaves out that which was considered extraneous to the human experience, and therefore to history, being inspired and governed by God, like the acts of the prophets and those of Muḥammad himself.[18]

Approaches of this type are in the minority, given that the universal history of al-Ṭabarī represented the model for all medieval Muslim historians. A reconstruction of this type, tending to define in historical terms the contents of the Qur'ānic message,

therefore became the typical structure: the life of Muḥammad and the experiences of the Muslim community are preceded by the stories above all of the Biblical prophets; the materials other than the Qur'ān which were used included accounts and legends attributed to transmitters belonging to the first generations of Muslims, chosen from amongst an enormous mass of traditions that were spread during the first centuries. The materials were therefore the same as found in Qur'ānic exegesis and all religious literature. The medieval Muslim authors did not introduce anything original into the structure of their works, but marked their differences only thanks to their attitude towards the material used and through their choice of the traditions.[19]

NOTES

1 On this argument see Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 29–30; Leder, "The Literary Use of the *Khabar*", 279, 311–312; Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 154–9.

2 A sacred history so conceived already had antecedents and the Arab authors certainly had at their disposition Persian and above all Christian Syriac models; cf. Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 75–9; Cahen, "L'historiographie arabe", 141. Cf. also Radtke, *Weltgeschichte und Weltbeschreibung*, 167–8 and Id., "Das Wirklichkeitsverständnis islamischer Universalhistoriker", 62, who rightly underlines the model of the universal history which had already been spread widely by the Christians in the Latin, Syriac, Greek and therefore Arabic literatures, from the beginning of the 3rd century. According to Wansbrough, *The sectarian Milieu*, 40, the concept of salvation as a historical process is clearly of Biblical derivation; this naturally has nothing to do with the birth of historiography, and is more probably linked with the Qur'ānic conception of the prophecy and the Biblical prophets.

3 Medinan, died in 768. About his figure see Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 34–9.

4 The particulars of the compendium and of the dimensions of the original work are recorded in Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri*, I, 89. The recension of Ibn Hishām is considered by Muslim as the most important biography of Muḥammad; one of the main editions is currently that of M. al-Saqqā *et al.* (Cairo 1955). A complete English translation of this book is that edited by A. Guillaume: *The Life of Muḥammad* (Oxford 1955). Another recension that is far briefer but is significant as it demonstrates the methods and choices, is that of Yūnus ibn Bukayr (d. 815): Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq, *Kitāb al-siyar wa-l-maghāzī*, ed. S. Zakkār (Beirut 1978). The first part on the Biblical prophets is not included in any recension, but a reconstruction, translated into English, of the citations quoted in various later works, was completed by Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*.

5 The relationship between the history of Ibn Isḥāq and the caliphal court is analysed thoroughly by Sellheim, "Prophet, Chalif und Geschichte", 39–43: in the original project there must also have been a part dedicated to the history of the caliphs. See also the conclusions of Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 36–7.

6 These characteristics are the reason for the contrasting evaluations, on the part of successive Muslim historians, on the value of the work of Ibn Isḥāq, which at one point is considered historically reliable, and another bitterly criticised for his falsifying methods. On the various accusations see Idris, "Réflexions sur Ibn Isḥāq", 23–35 and Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, 22–3, who has stressed the way in which the lives of the prophets and the life of Muḥammad have been modelled to resemble each other; this is in any case a characteristic of the experiences of the Biblical prophets contained in the Qur'ān, which has been accentuated by the extra-canonical traditions.

7 According to Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 99, the elementary forms of the Muslim historiography developed quite early and did not vary substantially during the course of the centuries. One description of the literary form of these universal histories is given by Springberg-Hinsen, *Die Zeit vor dem Islam in arabischen Universalgeschichten*, 16f.

8 Ibn Qutayba, born at Kūfa, lived most of his life in Iraq; he died in 889.

9 On Wahb, see below, pp. 138–141. At what time the Muslims had at their disposition and knew the first complete Arabic version of the Bible is a rather controversial question. Some passages used by Ibn Qutayba are without any doubt taken from translations of the Biblical text. These passages have been analysed by Vajda, "Judaeo-Arabica. 1. Observations sur quelques citations bibliques", 68–80, listed by Lecomte, "Les citations de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament dans l'oeuvre d'Ibn Qutayba". It should be added that the citations from the Bible are very rare in the Muslim literature of the first centuries.

10 Ibn Qutayba, *al-Maʿārif* (ed. T. ʿUkāsha, Cairo 1960); the part dedicated to the Creation and to the prophets is at pp. 9–58; the final chapter covers in particular the pp. 57–8. The chronological order is broken in the final part of the work, where anecdotes and other curious information are found.

11 Ibn Saʿd was the student of the historian al-Wāqidī (d. 823) and wrote his work *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt* ("Book of the Classes") on the basis of material collected by his master. In another genealogical work, the *Ansāb al-ashrāf* ("The genealogies of the nobles") of al-Balādhurī (d. 892), a very brief initial section is dedicated to Noah and Abraham: al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-ashrāf*, I, Cairo 1987, 3–11.

12 Al-Yaʿqūbī, who died in 897, was a Shīʿite. The traditions on the Biblical prophets are reported in *Taʾrīkh* (Beirut n.d.), I, 5–80; this part was translated into Dutch by G. Smit: *Bjbel en Legende* (Leiden 1907). A partial translation into English, with an analysis of the probable sources, was done by Ebied – Wickham, "al-Yaʿḳūbī's Account of the Israelite Prophets and Kings"; on al-Yaʿqūbī and his use of Jewish and Christian sources, see Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim*

Historiography, 91 and Radtke, *Weltgeschichte und Weltbeschreibung*, 11–5. Concerning al-Yaʿqūbī's work, Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 115–8, emphasises his interest in astronomy and the dating of events. Khalidi states moreover that in the works of universal history of this type, the authors maintain a critical position that is more accentuated towards the traditions about pre-Islamic and Biblical history, because these topics did not have any impact upon sectarian conflicts and Muslim parties. This is not always the case, in the sense that almost every religious argument and tradition was used to determine the principles of legitimacy and therefore could prove useful in the various disputes.

13 The work of al-Dīnawarī, titled *Kitāb al-akhbār al-ṭiwāl*, was published and edited by V. Guirgass, Leiden 1888; on the prophets, see in particular 1–15. Cf. Radtke, *Weltgeschichte und Weltbeschreibung*, 9–11.

14 Al-Ṭabarī was mentioned previously when reference was made to his commentary, see above pp. 101–105. Two main editions of his universal history exist: *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. M.J. de Goeje *et al.*, Leiden 1879–1901, and ed. M.A. Ibrāhīm, Cairo 1960–67. Amongst the numerous descriptions of this work, see in particular that of Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 73–81, and above all that of Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, 16–79. Al-Ṭabarī was not in any case the first to use the annalistic form; cf. Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 71–4.

15 The first four volumes of the English translation of the entire work are dedicated to the prophets: *The History of al-Ṭabarī*: I. General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood, ed. F. Rosenthal, Albany 1989; II. Prophets and Patriarchs, ed. W.M. Brinner, Albany 1987; III. The Children of Israel, ed. W.M. Brinner, Albany 1991; IV. The Ancient Kingdoms, ed. M. Perlmann, Albany 1987.

16 It is this, for example, the case of a long tradition of cosmogonic argument, included in al-Ṭabarī's *Taʾrīkh*, ed. de Goeje, I, 62–74, but not in his commentary; this tradition is discussed by Newby – Halperin, "Two Castrated Bulls".

17 Part of this material is described by Springberg-Hinsen, *Die Zeit vor dem Islam in arabischen Universalgeschichten*, 75–92. Amongst the later historiography, successive to al-Ṭabarī, of particular interest is the work of al-Masʿūdī (d. 956), *Murūj al-dhahab wa-maʿādin al-jawhar*.

18 As is emphasised by Rosenthal, "The Influence of the Biblical Tradition", 40, Miskawayh chose this way in a clear polemic mode with the traditional Muslim historical approach. A similar conclusion is also reached by Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406).

19 The most important names amongst the medieval historians are those of Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1200), Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1232) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373). A description of all the principal works is given by Radtke, *Weltgeschichte und Weltbeschreibung*, 9–108.

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Chapter 9

The literary genre of the stories of the prophets

Alongside all of the works of religious literature that have been analysed up to this point, the traditions about the Biblical prophets have been collected since early times in books dedicated exclusively to this subject-matter. These books are usually entitled *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* ("Stories of the Prophets"). This literary genre originated following the steps of all of the others, given that the material upon which it is based did not only share a common origin with all the other religious literature, but was also of relevance to both exegetical and historiographical works. Strictly speaking, the stories of the prophets can be considered as belonging to these two types as well as being one of their own specific topics. Unfortunately the first examples of this type of literature have not been either partially or entirely conserved and it is only possible to refer to the original writings indirectly via the partial quotations in later works.[1]

1. WAHB IBN MUNABBIH

According to the Islamic traditions the first author of a book dedicated exclusively to the stories of the prophets was Wahb ibn Munabbih, a Yemenite descendant from a family of Persian origin that had followed the Persian conquest and moved to Yemen towards the end of the 6th century.[2] The biographical sources describe him, at least for one period during his life, as a Qadarite, that is an affiliate of the movement against predestination, and this, along with the material used in his works, was one of the reasons for which he was heavily criticised by some medieval authors. In general, however, he enjoyed a good reputation and

was a prolific author, despite the fact that only a small proportion of his works is extant. Wahb was in many ways one of the first Muslim historians and his vast interests covered many subjects, ranging from the Jewish antiquity to the history of the life of Muḥammad, thus demonstrating that even earlier than the work of Ibn Isḥāq Muslim history and stories of the prophets were closely related. If Ibn Isḥāq was the first to place the topics together in one book, the work of Wahb, as a whole, had a decisive influence to such a degree that was probably the principle source of Ibn Isḥāq especially for the sections of his work dealing with the prophets.

Medieval texts and sources attribute various titles to the work of Wahb dealing with the Biblical prophets, but the most probable seems to be *Kitāb al-mubtada' wa-qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* ("The book of the beginning and the stories of the prophets").[3] Another particularly interesting title which, according to some, is to be attributed to a different work, is that of *Kitāb al-isrā'īliyyāt* ("The book of Jewish traditions"). It is more probable that this title, which is attested to only in certain later works, also refers to his work dedicated to the stories of the prophets.[4] The questions surrounding the title of this work are not the only hypothetical matter, as the structure of the work itself is a matter of conjecture. An approximate reconstruction is only possible on the basis of what is said by authors of at least a century later; the presence of contradictions in the traditions ascribed to him give rise to serious doubts about all that is attributed to him. Nevertheless there is no reason to doubt that Wahb followed a strict chronological order in the presentation of his material: an initial section on Creation probably preceded the stories of Adam, of the patriarchs and the prophets, before concluding, as was usual, with the story of Jesus and Christian characters.[5]

These considerations aside, Wahb is one of the most important names as far as traditions and stories of the prophets are concerned. Wahb himself is mentioned in the sources as owner of a vast collection of around one hundred books on the prophets which he possessed and used to consult.[6] Some evidence is found first of all by the number of traditions passed on in his name, which are numerous and can be found in every genre of literature; it is sufficient to consider the frequent use that al-Ṭabarī made in his works of traditions attributed to Wahb. Those dedicated to the Creation and to Adam stand out amongst

these traditions, and for centuries Wahb was one of the most important authorities on this subject.

> Wahb hands down: When God had put Adam and his spouse in paradise, he forbade them from the tree. The branches of the tree were intertwined and bore fruit of which the angels eat to live for eternity. That was the fruit that God forbade Adam and his spouse to eat. However when the devil wanted to cause their fall he changed himself into the form of a serpent. At that time the serpent had four legs like a Bactrian camel and was one of the most beautiful animals created by God. When the serpent entered into paradise, the devil exited from the serpent and took a fruit from that tree that God had prohibited to Adam and his spouse, he took it to Eve and said: "Look at this tree! What a delicious perfume it has, what a wonderful flavour and a beautiful colour it has!" Eve took and ate it, then she took it to Adam (...) and Adam ate it and they became aware of their nakedness. Adam went towards the tree to hide himself in the bushes. His Lord called him: "Adam, where are you?" Adam answered: "I am here, my Lord". God said: "Don't you want to come out?" Adam responded: "I am ashamed before you, My Lord". Then God said: "Cursed be the earth from which you were created, by such a malediction that its fruit will mutate into spines". and to Eve he said: "Eve, you were the one who lured My servant. The pregnancy will be a difficult thing for you, and when you want to give birth to that which you have in your womb you will be in mortal danger". To the serpent he said: "It is you who has allowed to enter into your belly the cursed devil who has then lured My servant. You are cursed by such a malediction that your feet will reenter into your belly and only the earth will be your food. You will be the enemy of the sons of Adam and they will be your enemies. Whenever you encounter one of them, you will bite him on the heel and whenever one of them meets you, he will crush your head".[7]

The contents of these traditions directly recall the Biblical story and it can be said that knowledge of Jewish and Christian Scripture seems to be the characteristic feature of the cultural formation of Wahb. His fame is direct evidence that during the first century of Islam there was nothing particularly controversial

associated with people consultating Jewish and Christian texts, and that on the contrary, to have read these texts was regarded favourably and helped to boost the reputation of the student of the lives of the prophets. It is almost certain that Wahb knew Hebrew and Syriac as is indicated by certain versions of names from the book of *Genesis* attributed to him. Among the books that he possessed must have been the Old Testament and the Gospel, given that a version of the Psalms, translated into Arabic, is attributed to him.[8] In other cases, however, as with the citations attributed to him by Ibn Qutayba, Wahb provides information and details that do not coincide with the Biblical text and that perhaps are the reflections of different sources, such as *midrashim* from the Yemenite environment that are now lost. But his dependence on these sources was not absolute. In fact, in certain cases, Wahb also mentions the names of Ka'b al-Aḥbār or Ibn 'Abbās, thereby attributing his knowledge to the usual channels of the converts of the first generations and to the major exegetical tradition.[9]

The work of Wahb had a decisive influence upon the genre of the stories of the prophets. Even prior to the systematisation undertaken by Ibn Isḥāq he was able to produce a text dedicated to the topic, relying upon traditions of various provenances. The details and the stories not mentioned in the Qur'ān are identified by making recourse to the traditions of clear Jewish and Christian origin, with the addition of certain particulars that are typically Arabian or Islamicised. It was therefore with Wahb that the stories of the prophets entered fully into the religious literature through an authoritative work.

2. ISḤĀQ IBN BISHR AND 'UMĀRA IBN WATHĪMA

The first attested collection of the stories of the prophets, after that of Wahb, is that of Isḥāq ibn Bishr (d. 821).[10] Originally from Khorāsān, Isḥāq ibn Bishr was a particularly prolific author with a multiplicity of interests. He was, according to certain attestations, a Shī'ite sympathiser, but this information, along with the generic criticisms of the material included by him in his works, is doubtful. Besides the stories of the prophets he was interested in and wrote books upon the conquests and upon other events in the life of the Muslim community that were evidently at the centre of historical debate. These works did not however capture the attention of the successive generations of historians. The stories of the prophets

were the only work of Isḥāq ibn Bishr that came to know wide diffusion and that were considered authoritative. With Isḥāq ibn Bishr, who lived and wrote a century after Wahb, we are no longer at the initial point of the Islamic tradition, but at the first phase of compilation of some of the principle works of religious literature that were refining their approach to the materials passed on by the earlier generations and that, above all, were already able to rely upon written texts as sources and points of reference. Of this period, Isḥāq ibn Bishr, if not one of the principal protagonists, was certainly an author with a good reputation, to such an extent that there is information indicating the passage of his works in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, apart from Khorāsān where he passed a large part of his life.

The book of Isḥāq ibn Bishr dedicated to the prophets was entitled *Mubtada' al-dunyā wa-qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* ("The beginning of the world and the stories of the prophets"). It was thought to have been lost until only a few years ago when a manuscript was located containing the entire first section, covering the period from the Creation to the story of Abraham.[11] More than two hundred pages illustrate in an exhaustive way what the dimensions of the complete work must have been and, an even more important factor, how it was composed. A typical tract, but one was likely also a feature of the *Mubtada'* of Wahb, is the ample space dedicated to the Creation. The title of the work itself is a clear confirmation of this proposition: it starts by describing the beginning of the world, then describes the heavens, the earths, the angels, and the creatures which inhabit them, the natural elements, the form of paradise and of hell, quoting various traditions and pointing out various controversial points and contrasting variants, with clear references to the original sources. After the first forty or so folios on the Creation, the same manner of proceeding is used in relation to the creation of Adam, then the experiences of Cain and Abel, Idrīs, Noah, the Arabian prophets Hūd and Ṣāliḥ and lastly Abraham, in which the stories of Alexander and Lot are included.[12]

The method used by Isḥāq ibn Bishr and the traditions collected by him demonstrate that the stories of the prophets were a definite genre with characteristics that were in certain cases codified well before the major works of the 11th cent. which will be dealt with later. The more or less lengthy traditions, and often simple notes of an exegetical nature, are ordered into chapters

that mark the chronological sequence for every prophet, despite the fact that the Qur'ānic text remains in the background. The most significant sayings of the Prophet regarding the subject matter dealt with are not left aside, in the same way that the names of the transmitters who handed down the traditions or sayings cited are not omitted. A particularly significant example is given at the beginning of the chapter dedicated to Noah, where Isḥāq ibn Bishr first provides in rapid sequence the list of his sources:

> Ismā'īl handed down to us that Abū Ḥudhayfa (Isḥāq ibn Bishr) states: Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq from al-Zuhrī, 'Abdallāh ibn Ziyād ibn Sam'ān and Muqātil from 'Ikrima from Ibn 'Abbās, and Juwaybir from al-Ḍaḥḥāk from Ibn 'Abbās, and Sa'īd ibn Abī 'Arūba from Qatāda from al-Ḥasan have told us of the experiences of Noah and his story, each adding particulars to that of the others. In fact for some the duration of his mission and his life was, from the day of his birth to the day of his death, nine-hundred and fifty years, and he was sent in the second millennium after the creation of Adam, God bless him and grant him salvation. In fact between Noah and Adam ten centuries passed. However, according to other versions Adam did not die until after the birth of Noah at the end of the first millennium after the creation of the world.[13]

With the exclusion only of Wahb ibn Munabbih and Ka'b al-Aḥbār in this case, the principal Muslim authorities on the stories of the prophets are mentioned. The exegetical tradition dating back to Ibn 'Abbās is used through two different channels of transmission and then, besides the name of al-Ḥasan, mention is also made of Muqātil and Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq. The use of various lines of transmission for the sources utilised, along with the precious addition that each of these makes to the others, is a clear indication that Isḥāq ibn Bishr composed his work on the stories of the prophets by collecting traditions from the various exegetical, historical and other works that were at his disposition. At the same time it should be emphasised that the lists of guarantors, which indicate a more rigorous method than that used by Muqātil and, it appears, also by Wahb, do not in effect ensure that the traditions were any less censurable. Even though provided with the precise indication of the source, the stories quoted by Isḥāq ibn Bishr are full of fantastic particulars and,

above all, the role of the Qur'ānic text seems definitely secondary within the narration.[14]

Because of the wealth of material cited and the accurate disposition of the material, the stories of the prophets of Isḥāq ibn Bishr gained an enormous diffusion and became one of the most important sources for the entire literary genre. Some medieval works made significant use of it, as for example the Qur'ānic commentary of al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), the universal history of Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373) and the monumental biographical dictionary of Ibn 'Asākir (d. 1176). At the same time, the material passed on was subjected to various criticisms, the same that involved some of the sources most often used such as Muqātil and Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq: use of legends taken from storytellers and converts and of accounts of dubious Islamic origin. This view of the sources which deemed them suspect was also shared in by al-Ṭabarī who avoided the use of the work by Isḥāq ibn Bishr for the compilation of his commentary.[15]

The same considerations are called forth by another collection of stories of the prophets from a few decades after Isḥāq ibn Bishr. This is the *Kitāb al-mubtada' wa-qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* ("Book of the beginning and of the prophets") attributed to 'Umāra ibn Wathīma. Only the concluding part of this work, which goes from the conclusion of the story of Moses until that of Jesus, has been conserved.[16] The origin of these stories of the prophets is a rather complex question. The acephalous manuscripts containing the work attribute it to 'Umāra ibn Wathīma al-Fārisī (d. 902) who not only left little information about himself in the Muslim literature, but is also never mentioned as the author of a collection of the stories of the prophets. This silence does not seem particularly significant, nor would it be sufficient to generate doubts about this attribution, were it not that the father of 'Umāra, Wathīma ibn Mūsā al-Fārisī (d. 851), is often mentioned as the author of a work of this type. Wathīma, and not 'Umāra, in fact, wrote books on various topics, among which there was a book about the rebellions of the Arab tribes that followed the death of Muḥammad, quoted many times by historians of successive generations, and additionally a book about the stories of the prophets.[17] It is not hazardous to hypothesise that the text in question could date back to Wathīma and that it should be regarded as later than that of Isḥāq ibn Bishr by a few decades and therefore that the son should be attributed

with only a kind of elaboration or revision of the materials collected by his father.[18]

The part of the stories of the prophets of ʿUmāra which has been conserved extends from the conclusion of the story of Moses, that describes in particular his encounter with al-Khiḍr, up to Jesus. The characters dealt with in these pages are al-Khiḍr, Joshua, Ezekiel, Elijah, Dhū al-Kifl, Simeon, Saul, David, Solomon, Jonah, Isaiah, Daniel, Jeremiah, Ezra, Zechariah, John the Baptist, Mary and Jesus. The traditions collected are ordered into chapters that carry the names of the prophets and a brief final chapter dedicated to the coming of Muḥammad. The method used resembles closely that employed by Isḥāq ibn Bishr: transmitters, and in certain cases the chains of transmitters with more than one name, are mentioned in the text at the top of the traditions, and contrasting or conflicting details are always noted, cited and ascribed to various exegetes. The names most often cited are those of the usual authorities on the stories of the prophets: Wahb, Kaʿb, and among the exegetes, Ibn ʿAbbās, Qatāda (d. 735) and al-Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 720 ca.) above all; Ibn Isḥāq is only present in a minor way even if the mention of his students does amount to an indirect reference to him. Wahb in particular is the preferred source.[19] The care taken in pointing out the names of the exegetes and the transmitters is an indication that the author of these stories of the prophets sought to satisfy formal demands, despite various defects and imprecisions that by the 9th cent. were already considered to be necessary in the works of religious literature. Such considerations, as in the case of Isḥāq ibn Bishr, have nothing to do with the contents of the traditions cited. Passages of a rigorously exegetical nature, with contrasting interpretations and variations, alternate with longer narratives with the peculiarities frequently noted: legends with fantastic details and stories with a popular tone according to the style of the storytellers. Certain Qadarite and rationalist tendencies that can be found among some traditions about the prophets are without a doubt significant, but have to be attributed in the majority of cases to the sources used; that is, instead of being a reflection of the orientation of Wathīma and ʿUmāra, they are the fruit of the ideas of Wahb and of the other authorities cited. Particularly interesting is the presence of a long final chapter dedicated to the prophetic light sent from prophet to prophet, a topic of clear Shīʿite influence.[20]

There are many common elements between Isḥāq ibn Bishr and Wathīma: the Persian origin, the presumed sympathy for the topics of a Shīʿite origin and above all the structure of their collections of stories of the prophets, elements indicating that perhaps there was an element of dependence between the two, if not a personal relationship, of master and student, given that Isḥāq ibn Bishr lived one generation before him. Despite the silence of the stories of the prophets of ʿUmāra in this regard, it is quite probable that Wathīma used the material collected by Isḥāq ibn Bishr. It is not possible to establish the extent to which that was the case: unfortunately the parts of the two works that are preserved cover different topics and a direct comparison is not possible.[21] In any case, with the books of Isḥāq ibn Bishr and of Wathīma there is clear testimony that in the 9th century the literary genre of the stories of the prophets was already established in terms of its form and contents. The wealth of material collected is notable and the care with which transmitters and sources utilised are indicated demonstrates that already at the beginning of the 9th century those writing collections of the stories of the prophets were obliged to dedicate themselves to collecting traditions from other works on exegesis, history and on other topics, written by earlier generations. The writers of the 8th century were used therefore as sources for those in the following century that were in their turn utilised by the authors of the later centuries. The stories of the prophets of Isḥāq ibn Bishr and Wathīma indicate the beginning of a different phase, which characterised the whole classic period of Islamic religious literature, and which is marked by the collection and evaluation of traditions handed down by earlier authors and not by a direct and personal contribution of the authors.[22]

3. AL-THAʿLABĪ

The book which came to be considered as the most representative work of the genre of the stories of the prophets was written by an exegete of the 11th century by the name of Abū Isḥāq al-Thaʿlabī. Unlike the case of Isḥāq ibn Bishr or ʿUmāra and Wathīma, the time of al-Thaʿlabī is no longer that of the beginning of Islamic literature, but more than two centuries later. The principal collections of the works on the sayings of the Prophet had been already written, as had the fundamental works of al-Ṭabarī on

Qur'ānic exegesis and historiography. Al-Tha'labī was therefore able to collect traditions on the Biblical prophets having at his disposition a substantial and prestigious bibliography that had already traced a definite path in the Islamic sciences, along with numerous works of the same genre which had been written earlier.

Information about the life of al-Tha'labī is rather scarce: originally from Nīshāpūr, and thus of Persian origin, it is known that he had a relationship with famous mystics of his time, although the nature of this relationship is unclear. Other information about his teachers and his orientation can only be gleaned from his own works.[23] Of these works, the most important and that for which al-Tha'labī achieved greatest fame amongst his contemporaries and later generations, was his commentary on the Qur'ān, a work that has been conserved in many manuscripts, but which unfortunately was never published. Al-Tha'labī wrote a very substantial commentary, following the example of al-Ṭabarī, which was mostly dedicated to the narrative parts of the sacred text. It thus contained numerous traditions on the Biblical prophets, often utilising early sources that are no longer extant and that were rejected by his contemporaries. All of these characteristics are at the origin of the criticism that the works of al-Tha'labī gathered around them during the course of the centuries; not the least among these criticisms was the accusation that he was a Shī'ite sympathiser. The wealth of material cited in his commentary, and the popularity of the traditions used, nevertheless contributed to its wide diffusion and his work was cited by successive generations of exegetes, even if it did not achieve the fame of the major commentators like that of al-Ṭabarī.[24]

Al-Tha'labī was therefore essentially an exegete and there can be no doubt that his stories of the prophets are closely connected to his commentary from which he derived a good part of the traditions cited.[25] In the introduction, al-Tha'labī lists the rules that led him to write down this work; he refers to the five reasons why God revealed the stories of the prophets in the Qur'ān: 1. to provide proof of the prophecy of Muḥammad, who being illiterate, could not otherwise have known these stories; 2. to recount to Muḥammad stories that provided a useful example for him and his people; 3. to emphasise the favour in which he and his people were held compared to those in the past; 4. to reinforce

the faith of the people of Muḥammad; 5. to keep alive the memory of those prophets and their people.[26] For al-Thaʿlabī therefore the strict connection between the stories of the prophets and the exegesis of the narrative parts of the Qur'ān is the central reason for undertaking a work of this sort. The stories of the prophets, he believed, are an exegetical discipline and, while nothing original is in this conception, it is particularly significant that this is explicitly declared as a methodological premise.

The stories of the prophets of al-Thaʿlabī comprise a voluminous work, rich in traditions and accounts ordered in chapters dedicated to single prophets. Among the sources utilised, the first position belongs without any doubt to al-Ṭabarī of whom al-Thaʿlabī had at his disposition universal history and Qur'ānic commentary, which he made extensive use of, even if he did not give precise indications of the use being made of that source.[27] Alongside the name of al-Ṭabarī the most frequently recorded names are those of Wahb ibn Munabbih, of whose *Mubtada'* al-Thaʿlabī cited the recension of his nephew ʿAbd al-Munʿim ibn Idrīs (d. 843), and of Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq. Ibn ʿAbbās is also mentioned with the usual great frequency, together with the most important names of Qur'ānic exegesis of the 8th and 9th centuries. The indication of the sources contrasts with the absolute disregard, even as far as the sayings of Muḥammad are concerned, for the chains of transmitters and guarantors that were at that time the basis by which the experts of religious learning evaluated the reliability of the material being handed down. Furthermore, other sections of his work on the prophets are introduced with references to anonymous collections of stories or biographies, particularly in connection with the most fantastic legends. In this case, probably what is being dealt with are traditions that were collected orally or taken from books of popular diffusion and topics, of the type which were typically attributed to the storytellers or that were perhaps spread among groups of mystics. In this way, al-Thaʿlabī and the genre of the stories of the prophets are halfway: while belonging ideally to the exegetical discipline, the contents of the narratives on the prophets, when necessary, withstand the rigorous critical principles of Islamic learning.[28]

Besides the question of the sources utilised, the stories of the prophets of al-Thaʿlabī demonstrate a valuable literary elaboration. The division into chapters (*majlis*) and paragraphs (*bāb*) include

traditions and exegetical explanations of every type, ordered as usual in strict chronological sequence. The first paragraph, for example, cites the genealogy of the prophet dealt with, and is followed by that on his birth, and others that describe the experiences, before concluding with a final list of his peculiarities and distinctive qualities. The aim was therefore not only that of giving instruction from a religious point of view, but also that of entertaining and drawing the attention of the reader or the listener with a well structured and balanced work. For example, after dedicating three chapters to the creation of the world, al-Tha'labī subdivided the chapters dedicated to Adam into eleven paragraphs that, having given the reasons for the creation of man, include traditions that describe the main events of his life, from the moment of his creation.

> The exegetes handed down in various forms but with contents that are in agreement that, when God wanted to create Adam, He inspired to the earth: "I will create from you creatures amongst which there will be some that obey me and some that disobey me. Those that obey me I will put in paradise, those that disobey me I will send to hell". Then God sent Gabriel to the earth to collect a handful of earth for him. However when Gabriel reached the earth to get the handful, the earth said to him: "I invoke the protection of the Power of God who sent you so that nothing you take from me will later be sent to hell". Gabriel thus returned to his Lord without having got anything and said: "O Lord, the earth has invoked your protection and I was unable to do that which I was ordered to". So then God ordered Michael to go to the earth but the earth invoked the protection of God so that he could take nothing and Michael returned to his Lord empty handed. God then sent the angel of death to the earth, but again the earth sought the protection of God and would give him nothing. The angel of death said: "God prevent me from disobeying one of His orders!" and took a handful from the four corners of the earth, from the highest peak, from the mud, from the swamp, from red and black and white earth, earth from the plain and earth from the slopes. For this reason amongst the descendants of Adam there were the good, the just, the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, and because of this the forms and colours of men are different.[29]

The other paragraphs are dedicated to how God breathed his spirit into the first man created, to the creation of Eve, how Adam was put to the test, his fall, the fall of the devil, to Cain and Abel, to the death of Adam, before the last section which summarises the merits with which God gave distinction to him among men and the other prophets.

This structure is repeated for all of the other prophets, of whom there are no particular innovations: Idrīs precedes the stories of the two Arabian prophets Hūd and Ṣalīḥ, then comes Noah and Abraham, his two sons Isaac and Ishmael, Lot and Joseph, and the book continues in this way until Jesus and the apostles. Some short chapters are also dedicated to an explanation of Qur'ānic verses that are not particularly clear. Al-Thaʿlabī aspired to deal with these in as complete a manner as possible, to the extent that he described a number of prophets, including those belonging to the Biblical tradition, which were not mentioned in the Qur'ān. Treated especially fully are five central figures: Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses and Jesus. The greatest amount of space is given to the story of Moses; it occupies a hundred pages and takes on the appearance of an actual novel, rich in original and very curious traditions, such as that about his staff:

> The experts on the stories of the ancients tell that the staff of Moses had two points, one on the crooked part and the other, a steel point at the inferior extremity. Whenever Moses went into the desert at night, and there was no moon, the two points of the staff created a light for him that was like two tongues of fire that illuminated everything as far as Moses was able to see. If, on the other hand, he was in need of water he would lower the staff into a well and it would stretch itself to the bottom. Moses would fix a type of bucket to the end and in this way procure water. If he was hungry, Moses would strike the ground with the staff and enough food for the day would spring forth. If however he wanted fruit, he would stick it in the ground and then the branches of a tree would sprout forth which would rapidly produce fruit. (...) From one of the points on the handle he could drink honey, and from the other milk. If he was feeling tired, he could mount the staff and this would transport him wherever he wanted, without getting tired nor having to lift a finger, because it was the staff itself which led Moses along

> the road. It would combat his enemies, and if the prophet desired perfume, the staff would immediately emanate an essence such that Moses and his clothes were perfumed.[30]

This tradition illustrates perfectly the typical contents of the stories of the prophets of al-Tha'labī. Alongside exegetical considerations, al-Tha'labī collects traditions in which the most surprising motifs of the experiences of the prophets are pointed out and offered to the reader. Of less importance, from this perspective, was the source of the story, hidden within the vague initial mention of the "experts of the stories of the ancients" and behind which could be hidden collections of traditions deriving from the highly criticised circle of the storytellers.

On account of these characteristics, the stories of the prophets of al-Tha'labī were subjected to the same criticisms which were directed at those who propagated the traditions originating from the storytellers and the converts. Despite these criticisms, his stories of the prophets experienced wide success. His good fortune and the diffusion of his work in the Muslim world were always sizeable, such that al-Tha'labī's work became the collection of stories of the prophets *par excellence*. The translation into other eastern languages indicates the spread of his work throughout the Muslim world, while the structure and contents of all of the books in this genre written after his, which often make reference to his work, demonstrate his popularity and the high regard which his work always enjoyed.[31]

4. AL-KISĀ'Ī

Numerous manuscripts, spread throughout the libraries of the world, indicate that alongside that of al-Tha'labī another work dealing with the same topics enjoyed a wide diffusion in the medieval Muslim world: the stories of the prophets of al-Kisā'ī. This good fortune has not left its trace in the Muslim world today, where this book has never been printed and he is almost unknown. A European edition published in the first half of the 20th century remains the only one available.[32]

The identity of the Kisā'ī author of the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* ("Stories of the Prophets") is a puzzle that is difficult to resolve, as is also the identification of the precise date at which this work was written. The conserved manuscripts and the citations of later

authors that make reference to the work are more or less in agreement in indicating that the author of these stories of the prophets was a certain Muḥammad ibn ʿAbdallāh al-Kisāʾī. This is despite the fact that there are slight variations in the exact details of his name and the title of his book. None of the Muslim biographical sources contains any information about an author of a collection of the stories of the prophets with this name, nor can a description of the work in question be connected to works by people with other names. One other al-Kisāʾī was the famous and well-known grammarian of the 8th century, and there are those who have identified him as the author of this text, thus placing the work among the most ancient collections of the stories of the prophets that are extant. This hypothesis should however be rejected.[33] The same situation applies to the dating of the work: no biographical information or historical reference in his stories of the prophets assists in clarifying either the particulars about al-Kisāʾī nor the date at which this work was written. Certain dates can be proposed on the basis of characteristics within the work, but these are also of little help. The stories of the prophets of al-Kisāʾī contain traditions almost exclusively of the type used by the storytellers, with legendary details that cannot be found elsewhere. Even if the literary form seems distant from the first works of the genre, the materials could date back to the first centuries of the Islamic age. A plausible date could be that of the 9th century, but there is no definitive proof of this proposition. The only certainty is that derived from the manuscripts themselves: the most ancient are those dated from the beginning of the 13th century and this term *ante quem* is the only actual secure reference.[34] No assistance derives from another work attributed to the same al-Kisāʾī, *ʿAjāʾib al-malakūt* ("The prodigies of the (divine) kingdom") that collects materials on cosmological topics but that does not contain any biographical data and historical indications of any significance.[35]

The problems concerning the identification of the author have been mentioned, but it must be said that also the text itself is no less problematic. The many extant manuscripts do not present one unique text, but in many cases show a great variation in contents. There are manuscript versions of these stories of the prophets with a certain number of chapters, and other larger versions that include sections that other versions omit, thus painting a picture of great variability which gives rise to legitimate

doubts about the real existence of a definite work written by one author. The stories of the prophets of al-Kisā'ī could have been elaborated starting from a collection of traditions originating from circles of storytellers, and from then growing with successive recensions. Otherwise, a definitive work, given its popularity and the nature of its contents, would have been enriched with other parts, or would have been, depending upon the need, reduced in other cases.[36]

The contents which include typical traditions from the storyteller's domain, are the characteristic element of the stories of the prophets by al-Kisā'ī. Far from every exegetical exigency, these stories of the prophets bring together the typical legends of popular origin: identification of all of the characters and exaggerated attention to the dramatic development of the stories. There are plentiful Qur'ānic citations, but they are in most cases verses that were added and which are extraneous to the true narrative; when, however, they are followed by exegetical explanations, they are quite simple, clear and relevant to a specific aspect of the story. The taste for the prodigious and for the miraculous powers of the prophets goes side by side with typical Islamic motifs which have the function of drawing the attention of the readers or listeners to the Muslim faith of the Biblical prophets and their close link with Muḥammad.

> When Solomon wanted to ride the wind, he called the four winds. Then he unrolled his carpet, which on one side was red and on the other green. No-one except God knows how long and how large it was, but it has been said that it was perhaps six hundred by sixty cubits. Then he would sit on his throne, and be carried on high by the carpet of paradise. The learned ones rode alongside him, carried by the wind and with birds that created shade for them. Solomon held the reins of the wind in his hands, in much the same way as one would hold the reins of a horse. He would have breakfast after he had covered a distance that would otherwise have taken a month to cover and dinner after he had completed another voyage of the same distance. One day, when they were travelling through the air, he passed above Medina, the city of our Prophet Muḥammad, and he would say to those who were with him: "This is the residence, after the migration, of a prophet that will be the lord of the

> messengers. Blessed be those who will meet and believe in him". Then Solomon passed above Mecca and said: "This is the place of the birth of that prophet. The excellence of this city above all the others is like the excellence of Muḥammad when compared to all the other prophets". And Solomon did not pass above any cities or islands without them subjecting themselves to his orders.[37]

A good part of the typical motifs of the narration of al-Kisā'ī returns in this brief story: the fantastical powers of the prophets, in this case Solomon; Muḥammad is cited for demonstrating his intimacy with the Biblical prophets who preceded him and his superiority to them; and lastly, a reference to the superiority of Mecca over all the other places is included. All of these arguments are pleasing and designed to draw the attention of those who, in the mosques or on the streets, came into contact with the storytellers and were fascinated by their ability to tell surprising stories, rich in fantastic detail, and Islamic stories of devotion to Muḥammad. It is not by chance that it has been suggested that the stories of the prophets of al-Kisā'ī were nothing but an actual manual for storytellers, which grew and was transformed into a collective book that was read and recited.[38]

The names mentioned to indicate the sources to which reference is made, when they do appear, are the ones most often cited by others: Ka'b al-Aḥbār, Wahb ibn Munabbih and Ibn 'Abbās, but they are cited to a greater extent than in the stories of the prophets described earlier. Given the nature of its material contents, there are not the usual chains of transmitters as prescribed by Muslim criticism of traditions. And, even more striking, some stories are mentioned without being attributed to anyone. The structure of the work is, however, not different from all the other examples of the genre. A long section on the Creation precedes the stories of the prophets in strict chronological order. Furthermore, it should be noted that certain reports show elements of clear Shī'ite inspiration, such as the prophetical light and the references to 'Alī, but this, more than reflecting the sympathies of the author, once again demonstrates that tendencies of this type were diffuse among certain popular traditions about the prophets.[39]

With al-Tha'labī and al-Kisā'ī the stories of the prophets reach a definitive standard of elaboration. Differing procedures and aims

in their composition cannot hide the common fact within them: in the description of the experiences of the prophets it is impossible to leave out stories and accounts that are rich in fantastic details and bear much similarity to the popular religiosity. And this is the characteristic trace of the Biblical traditions in the Islamic literature: rather than theological speculations or symbolic readings of the mission of those that preceded Muḥammad, the primary interest was directed towards the events narrated. This aspect, which was only foreshadowed in the first works of the genre, became dominant in the stories of the prophets by al-Thaʿlabī and al-Kisāʾī, in which the desire to instruct the devoted as well as to please them with beautiful tales coincide.

5. AL-ṬARAFĪ

In the 11th cent. another collection of the stories of the prophets was written that did not attain the fame or diffusion of those of al-Thaʿlabī and al-Kisāʾī but is, despite that fact, an irrefutable sign of the diffusion of the genre, especially in Muslim Spain where this work was written. The author, Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī (d. 1062), was from Cordoba and was an expert in the variant readings of the Qurʾān. The biographical sources do not mention anything about his stories of the prophets, nor are echoes of it found in later works of the genre. The only information is therefore the attributions to al-Ṭarafī recorded at the beginning of the two manuscripts of the work which have been conserved.[40]

Al-Ṭarafī explains in a brief introduction at the beginning of his stories of the prophets the reasons that motivated him to write a work of this type. He states that he decided to collect the stories of the prophets mentioned in the Qurʾān. He concludes that there were 31 prophets, of whom 24 were mentioned by name and 7 were alluded to in the sacred text without having their names mentioned. The programmatic choice of al-Ṭarafī is therefore to write in the style of an exegetical work: he constructs the various biographies around the frequent Qurʾānic citations. The most problematic verses are moreover repeated alongside various exegetical solutions, while seeking at the same time to respect the chronological order of the events.

The stories of the prophets of al-Ṭarafī are divided into different chapters dedicated to individual prophets, that are in

a few cases divided into further paragraphs. The title of each chapter is followed by a brief heading that summarises the major events dealt with and introduces the first Qur'ānic citations that alternate with the traditions. Serving as conclusions are short reports on the physical characteristics of the prophets and information about their age and chronology. Traditions and stories are included with an absolute disinterest in the sources and transmitters utilised, so much so that it is frequently the case that there are no indications at all or only vague attributions to unspecified exegetes and historians. When, however, names are reported they are those of the most notable Qur'ānic exegetes of the first centuries, with Ibn ʿAbbās first of all, followed closely by Wahb and Kaʿb. The most significant citations are however those of the two most important sources used by al-Ṭarafī: the commentary of al-Ṭabarī and the stories of the prophets of Isḥāq ibn Bishr. Al-Ṭabarī is by far the most important source for al-Ṭarafī, to such an extent that certain chapters, such as that about Abraham, are nothing but a compendium of his commentary.[41]

The declared exegetical nature of this collection of the stories of the prophets did not however impede al-Ṭarafī from including traditions of diverse provenance and, to use a definition that has been quite often employed within these pages, sharing more in common with the flavour of popular narrations. Al-Ṭarafī seems to make recourse to this type of material mostly when he is dealing with onomastics and the physical description of the prophets. In this way the names of the sons of Iblīs, the wives of Cain, Abel, Noah and Lot, the daughters-in-law of Noah, the mother of Abraham, along with many others are reported, often in quite original versions.[42] Also in terms of the physical description of the prophets, the versions preserved by al-Ṭarafī are of great interest. In the middle of the chapter about Joseph, moving away from the usual structure which would put this type of tradition at the end of the chapter, it is said:

> It is handed down that the Prophet Muḥammad, God bless him and grant him salvation, said: "Two thirds of all beauty were given to Joseph and his mother, and to the rest of humanity the other third". Ibn al-Kalbī reports, regarding the pictures of the prophets which in his view are reliable, that Joseph, God bless him and grant him salvation, was a white man, with curly hair, big legs and arms, a little navel,

> large eyes and he was of uniform constitution. He was most similar to Adam and his face radiated light. His father Jacob, God bless him and grant him salvation, was handsome, with slim cheeks and a long nose protruding over his lip. Isaac, God bless him and grant him salvation, was corpulent, white, of medium stature and had very little hair.[43]

Other descriptions of the prophets given by al-Ṭarafī contain particulars that are no less interesting, and what is even more significant, that are not found in other works. To these traditions, some other similar ones can be added, such as that attributed to Isḥāq ibn Bishr in which bundles of firewood of his brothers prostrate to that of Joseph (cf. *Gen.* 37, 7) in a dream that precedes that of the stars; the story of the dialogue between Jacob and the wolf on the fate of Joseph; or that of the magicians who bewitched Moses and transformed his head into that of a lion, his body into that of a pig, and his hands into those of a monkey.[44]

Traditions of this type demonstrate that the popular traditions could not be completely omitted from the collections of the stories of the prophets, notwithstanding the declared exegetical intent. Al-Ṭarafī, in any case, along with the fundamental references to al-Ṭabarī, used the stories of the prophets of Isḥāq ibn Bishr and certain other works that were no less rich in material of this type. At the same time, with these characteristics, the stories of the prophets of al-Ṭarafī are an irrefutable sign of the diffusion of the genre in Muslim Spain.[45]

NOTES

1 The most complete study on the genre of the stories of the prophets is that by Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*. A brief account of the principal works and of their authors is given in Tottoli, "Le storie dei profeti nella tradizione arabo-islamica"; and Pauliny, "Einige Bemerkungen zu den Werken *'Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*".

2 The date of the death of Wahb ibn Munabbih is uncertain and is estimated to be between 728 and 732. His family, who were perhaps of Jewish origin, would have converted to Islam at the time of Muḥammad. Wahb is described as a particularly pious person and one who had ascetic tastes. For a certain period he also performed the function of judge, even if the sources do not indicate where this took place. About his life see especially Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, who has published two works preserved in papyri attributed to Wahb – one in particular on the story of David – and also discussed his works in depth.

3 Other titles are *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* or *Kitāb al-mubtada' wa-l-siyar* ("Book of the beginning and of the lives [of the prophets]"). It is, however, more often referred to as *Kitāb al-Mubtada'*, as for example by Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab* I, 63; Thaʿlabī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 102. For other titles, see Duri, *The Rise of Historical Writing*, 126–7; Lidzbarski, *De propheticis*, 2–3. One *Kitāb al-mubtada'* is ascribed to a nephew of Wahb, ʿAbd al-Munʿim, in the *Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadīm.

4 The origin of the term *isrā'īliyyāt* is a rather complicated question. It does not appear before the beginning of the 10th century and it would therefore seem difficult to believe that it could have been the original title of a work of Wahb. It more probably emerged during the course of the later centuries as an alternative title for the *Kitāb al-mubtada'*. Of the same opinion are also Lidzbarski, *De propheticis*, 4; Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 335 n. 2; Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, 224–7.

5 A list of the traditions ascribed to Wahb and ordered according to the prophets, taken from medieval works, is given by Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, 227–46, in which the intent is not to reconstruct the work but to indicate in brief for which topics Wahb is mentioned in later works. A summary description of his stories of the prophets is also attempted by Duri, *The Rise of Historical Writing*, 128–9.

6 See for example Ibn Qutayba, *al-Maʿārif*, 459. Other sources are indicated by Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, 217–8.

7 Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, ed. de Goeje, I, 106–107; the tradition is also reported in the commentary: *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, I, 235. This tradition follows *Gen.* 3. In certain apocryphal Jewish texts the serpent, before the fall, has feet, hands and wings: see the sources quoted by Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, V, 123f.

8 Ibn Khayr, *Fahrasa*, 295. Another question which naturally follows is whether this presumed translation of the Psalms reproduces the Biblical original or whether it is an original 'Islamicised' version. Another work that contains numerous traditions ascribed to Wahb, and in particular the names of the patriarchs and prophets derived from the Syriac, is the *Kitāb al-tījān* ("The books of the Crowns") by Ibn Hishām: in this regard see the list in Lidzbarski, *De propheticis*, 5–8, and in Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, 215–6.

9 On these topics see Duri, *The Rise of Historical Writing*, 15; Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, 210–3.

10 Abu Ḥudhayfa Isḥāq ibn Bishr lived in Bukhārā before transferring to Baghdad, called by the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 809). He died in 821. Details of his life are given by Abbott, "Wahb b. Munabbih", 103–4; Nagel, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 114. One Isḥāq ibn Bashīr, to identify without doubt with Isḥāq ibn Bishr, is mentioned among the transmitters of the story of David contained in the papyrus edited by Khoury (in his *Wahb b. Munabbih*).

11 Isḥāq ibn Bishr, *Mubtada' al-dunyā wa-qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, Oxford, Ms. Bodleian, Huntingdon 388. This manuscript was signaled by Kister, "Ādam", 113–4; the first mention of its existence goes back to 1988, in the version of this article of Kister included in *Approaches to the History*

of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān, edited by A. Rippin (Oxford 1988), 82. Brief sections are also preserved in Damascus, see in this regard F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, I, Leiden 1967, 294.

12 Isḥāq ibn Bishr, *Mubtada'*, on the creation: ff. 1b–40a; Adam: 40b–72b, 77b–81a; Cain and Abel: 72b–77b; Idrīs, 81a–95a; the angels Hārūt e Mārūt: 95a–99a; Noah: 99a–116a; Hūd: 116a–139b; Ṣāliḥ: 139b–156b; Nimrod: 156a–160a; Abraham: 160a–218a (including Alexander the Great: 170a–186a; Lot: 191a–203a). Some of the traditions about the other prophets are cited in later works such as the stories of the prophets of al-Tha'labī and al-Ṭarafī; some of these are briefly described by Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 115–8.

13 Isḥāq ibn Bishr, *Mubtada'*, 99a. Of the names cited here the most significant, along with those of Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq, Muqātil, Ibn 'Abbās and al-Zuhrī (on whom see above p. 107 n. 9) are 'Ikrima (d. 725 ca.), al-Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 720 ca.) – students and transmitters of traditions attributed to Ibn 'Abbas – Qatāda (d. 735), an expert of exegesis, and al-Ḥasan (al-Baṣrī, d. 728), a personality of prominence during the first Muslim century and an expert in religious traditions as a whole.

14 In this regard see Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 115–9.

15 The late medieval works cited are: Suyūtī, *al-Durr al-manthūr fī l-tafsīr bi-l-ma'thūr*; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*; Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rīkh madīnat Dimashq*. Also the book of the stories of the prophets of al-Ṭarafī which will be dealt with later has amongst its principal sources the *Mubtada'* of Isḥāq ibn Bishr. Even if al-Ṭabarī does not mention the name of Isḥāq ibn Bishr, this does not impede that in certain cases he cited traditions which were almost identical. One specific example of this is examined by Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 118.

16 The text preserved at the Vatican Library was published, with an ample introduction, by Khoury: *Les légendes prophétiques dans l'Islam*. The existence of another manuscript of this work held in Madrid was indicated by Llisterri, "Una versión inédita del *Kitāb bad' al-jalq wa-qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*". Also this manuscript preserves the end section from al-Khiḍr, but the variations within the text suggest that this was a different recension of the work.

17 Wathīma was of Persian origin and travelled widely throughout the Muslim world, even reaching al-Andalus before finally settling in Egypt. A description of his life, as well as that of his son, is given by Khoury, *Les légendes prophétiques dans l'Islam*, 137–50 and Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 156–7, that emphasises how it was actually in al-Andalus that the works of Wathīma achieved wide diffusion. Stories of the prophets attributed to Wathīma are for example cited in the manuscript of the stories of the prophets conserved at Alexandria and erroneously attributed to Wahb.

18 Khoury, *Les légendes prophétiques dans l'Islam*, 150–1, does not dispute the attribution to 'Umāra, but speaks of a recension of the work of his father; some later sources, mentioned by Khoury, attribute a universal history to 'Umāra, of which this work on the prophets could have been part. Levi Della Vida, "Manoscritti arabi di origine spagnola",

167, decisively attributes the work to Wathīma, but refers to a possible re-working or edition by his son. Even more certain in attributing the work to Wathima is Llisterri, "Una versión inédita del *Kitāb bad' al-jalq wa-qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*", 67–9, who mentions various passages of the work in which the name of Wathīma occurs: 50 or so of the Spanish manuscript against five in that published by Khoury, while the name of ʿUmāra appears only once.

19 A passage translated by Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 158, to illustrate the sources used by ʿUmāra, is rather similar to what we have cited from Isḥāq ibn Bishr. Having given the names of these principal sources, ʿUmāra states that (for the story in question, that of Ezra) every source adds details to the others and some contain more details than the others: Khoury, *Les légendes prophétiques dans l'Islam*, 286. Regarding the dependence on Wahb, this is testified to by the close relation between the papyrus on David attributed to Wahb (in Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*) and that which is reported about David by ʿUmāra.

20 The question of the prophetic light, with mention of numerous traditions on the Biblical prophets, is the subject of an exhaustive discussion by Rubin, "Pre-Existence and Light". According to Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 160f., this chapter could be fruit of a later interpolation. On the Qadarite tendencies and rationalism in some traditions see Khoury, *Les légendes prophétiques dans l'Islam*, 167–72.

21 The papyrus of the story of David of Wahb b. Munabbih edited by Khoury offers arguments of the same type: one of the authorities mentioned with greatest frequency is a certain Isḥāq ibn Bashīr, behind which Isḥāq ibn Bishr is probably hidden. Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, 188 and *Les légendes prophétiques dans l'Islam*, 176, 179, is in any case prudent in the identification of Isḥāq ibn Bashīr – Isḥāq ibn Bishr, and rightly emphasises that the silence of ʿUmāra on the name Isḥāq b. Bishr is rather strange (*Les légendes prophétiques dans l'Islam*, 180); see the different opinion of Abbott, "Wahb b. Munabbih", 103–5. On the question of the identity between Ibn Bashīr and Ibn Bishr cf. also Levi Della Vida, "Manoscritti arabi di origine spagnola", 154 n. 1.

22 To be decisively rejected is the affirmation of Thackson, *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisā'ī*, xvi, according to whom only from the 4th century of the Muslims age (the 10th AD) the traditions of the stories of the prophets were collected in individual works and al-Thaʿlabī was the first author. Brinner, "Prophets and prophecy", 67, correctly states that the most significant works were written between the 9th and 11th centuries, but the first stories of the prophets go back to Wahb. In any case it should not be forgotten that there is also some information about works dedicated to individual prophets, as for example a book by Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 820 ca.) dedicated to Adam and his descendants; in this regard see Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri*, I, 48.

23 Al-Thaʿlabī died in 1035; the date of his death is the only detail about him which is known with certainty. The original title of his stories of the prophets, often simply given as *Qisas al-anbiya'*, is *ʿArā'is al-majālis*

("The brides of the meetings"). Regarding his life see Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 80–2.

24 Of the commentary of al-Thaʿlabī only the introduction in which the sources used are listed has been published: Goldfeld, *Qur'anic Commentary in the Eastern Islamic Tradition*. Among the most important sources and which, according to the point of view of later exegetes, seemed embarrassing and were rejected, there was the Qur'ānic commentary of al-Kalbī (d. 763), which is today lost and was presumably of Shīʿite orientation, as well as that of Muqātil. Al-Thaʿlabī attributes to Muqātil traditions that are not contained in the published edition because he used a different recension. Regarding his presumed Shīʿite sympathies, the good reputation his stories of the prophets enjoyed amongst the Shīʿites and the extensive use of his stories by al-Maglisī in his *Biḥār al-anwār* (Beirut 1983; see vol. XI–XIV dedicated to the prophets) should not be underestimated.

25 For example, in the particular case of the staff of Moses turning into a snake, both the commentary and the stories of the prophets of al-Thaʿlabī quote the same traditions: see in this regard Tottoli, "Il bastone di Mosè mutato in serpente". In the stories of the prophets, al-Thaʿlabī makes a direct mention of his commentary: *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 386.

26 Al-Thaʿlabī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 2–3.

27 Many passages in the history of al-Ṭabarī and the stories of the prophets of al-Thaʿlabī are identical. For an accurate analysis of the relationship between the two see Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 84f., and above all Schützinger, *Ursprung und Entwicklung*, 58–60.

28 The sources of the stories of the prophets of al-Thaʿlabī are discussed by Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 83–95. The mystics were accused in some Sunnī circles, as for example by the Ḥanbalite literalists, of spreading fantastic traditions that had nothing to do with the Qur'ān or the authentic sayings of Muḥammad. It should not be overlooked that in the *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ wa-l-mudhakkirīn* of Ibn al-Jawzī (see above p. 88) many of the traditions criticised were attributed to the mystics, as well as the storytellers.

29 Al-Thaʿlabī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 26. This legend is widespread throughout all of the Muslim literature, for example in al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, ed. de Goeje, I, 87–8. Elements of this legend recall certain Jewish traditions: God sent Gabriel, but the earth offered resistance and so God himself stretched out his hand and took the earth from the four corners: Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, 54–5.

30 Al-Thaʿlabī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 176–7; translated in Tottoli, *Vita di Mosè*, 26. In these prodigious attributes and powers of the staff there are echoes of some Middle Eastern and Jewish themes, even if the story as a whole must be considered Muslim. This tradition is examined by Fodor, "The Rod of Moses", 4–6.

31 See in this regard Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 100–2; Schwarzbaum, *Biblical and Extra-Biblical legends*, 65, states that the stories of the prophets of al-Thaʿlabī are perhaps the most widely printed book in Arab countries.

32 Al-Kisā'ī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, ed. I. Eisenberg, Leiden 1922–3. An English translation of this edition is given in Thackston, *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisa'i.*

33 This hypothesis had already been proposed by Eisenberg, *Die Prophetenlegenden des Muḥammed ben 'Abdallah al-Kisâî*, v-vii. See however the considerations of Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 131–2, that justifiably refutes this hypothesis, recently restated with great caution by Schussman, *Stories of the Prophets*, Engl. summ., viii–x.

34 Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 132. A review of the various opinions about the dating of the work and the identity of the author is given by Pauliny, "Kisā'īs Werk *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*", 194–5 and, above all, on the various versions of the name and title that appear in different manuscripts, 227–32.

35 According to Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 138, from an actual analysis of the contents of these *Ajā'ib al-malakūt* it can be established that this work was written after the 12th century.

36 The edition edited by Eisenberg is inadequate from this point of view, because it includes only one part of the chapters taken from a limited number of manuscripts. The problems with this edition have already been discussed by Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 141–7, and above all Pauliny, "Kisā'īs Werk *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*", which also contains a useful list of the contents of the stories of the prophets of al-Kisā'ī drawn from other manuscripts than those used by Eisenberg.

37 Al-Kisā'ī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 285.

38 See Lidzbarski, *De propheticis*, 20–25; Schwarzbaum, *Biblical and Extra-Biblical Legends*, 65; Shoshan, "High culture", 85; Thackson, *The Tales of the Prophets*, xxiv: the text of al-Kisā'ī was written for recitation by storytellers. Schussman, *Stories of the Prophets*, Engl. summ., viii–ix, holds a completely different opinion in that according to her al-Kisā'ī was an author who actually consulted Jewish works in regard to the topics dealt with; Schussman dedicated a chapter to the presumed similarities between his stories of the prophets and the *Pirqê de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* (pp. 91–115).

39 On all these topics see Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 122–149; Schussman, *Stories of the Prophets*, 153–175; Pauliny, "Kisā'īs Werk *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*", 194–224; Id., "Literarischer Charakter des Werkes Kisā'īs", 107–125; Thackston, *The Tales of the Prophets*, xix–xxvi.

40 Al-Ṭarafī died in 1062. An edition of the Arabic text with an introduction, notes and translation can be found in Tottoli, *Le Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā' di Ṭarafī;* the translation, with an introduction, has been published: al-Ṭarafī, *Storie dei profeti*, ed. R. Tottoli (Genova 1997). For other information regarding al-Ṭarafī and his stories of the prophets the reader is referred to the introductions of these two works as well as Tottoli, "The *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī".

41 On all of these topics and for other information, refer to al-Ṭarafī, *Storie dei profeti*, 15–20; Tottoli, "The *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī", 140–51; Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 103–13.

42 A detailed discussion of these and other names is given in Tottoli, "The *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī", 145–51; these are in

many cases orthographic variations, of a type which are very common in Muslim literature.

43 Tottoli, *Le Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā' di Ṭarafī*, 237–8. Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 820 ca.), who is cited in the text, is one of the authorities on traditions dealing with historical topics. An author of a number of books, he was however the subject of some very severe criticism, but the traditions attributed to him are cited by numerous medieval authors. As far as the descriptions of the prophets given by al-Ṭarafī are concerned, see Tottoli, "The *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī", 151–6.

44 Regarding these traditions, and for others of similar tone, see Tottoli, "The *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī", 157–9.

45 In al-Andalus numerous works on this topic were in circulation. The extant manuscripts of stories of the prophets of ʿUmāra ibn Wathīma, for example, are written in Maghribi calligraphy and were very widely diffused in the Iberian peninsula. The same can be said for works such as the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of al-Ḥijrī (Ps-Wahb), Alexandria, Ms. Baladiyya B 1249, and the collection of *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* conserved by the Ms. Berlin Staatsbibliothek, or. quart. 1171, 137b–188b.

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Chapter 10

The Biblical prophets in medieval and modern literature

1. THE STORIES OF THE PROPHETS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Stories regarding the lives of the prophets were being written without interruption until the modern times, and this indicates the great diffusion of the traditions and legends on the Biblical characters. The success of the genre has been a constant feature and this is attested by the considerable number of manuscripts of the stories of the prophets, mostly by anonymous authors, spread throughout all of the libraries in the world, whether written in Arabic or in the other languages of the Muslim world. The structure was already codified, providing a definition of the types of materials which it was possible to include, ranging from the most meagre exegetical observations to the popular narrations that abounded with fantastic particulars. In this way, the major works of the earlier period constituted a model of unquestionable reference and at the same time provided the principal sources to quote and upon which to rely. That which has been described here, it must be remembered, is valid for all of medieval Muslim literature, in which references to the models of the "classic" period are always constant. If originality is not one of their principal characteristics – and it is in any case a principle that should not lead to drastic judgements – the works dedicated to the prophets from the start of the 11th century AD were numerous. Among these, and above all to the extent that it is of interest in this brief discussion, it is useful to distinguish between those written in Arabic and those in Persian and Turkish, and within the Arabic ones to distinguish further between the Sunnī

and Shīʿite works. There is lastly one other subdivision of no less importance, that between the works attributed to definite authors and those which are not: many of the medieval manuscripts that contain collections of traditions about the prophets are anonymous and often incomplete *unicums*.

Amongst the stories of the prophets written in Arabic and of which the author is known there is no shortage of works of some importance. One of the most interesting accounts is for example that of al-Hayṣam ibn Muḥammad al-Būshanjī (d. 11th sec.), entitled *Qiṣaṣ al-Qur'ān* ("Stories of the Qur'ān"), that collects traditions that complete the narrative parts of the sacred text dedicated to the Biblical prophets and the experiences of Muḥammad. In strict terms, what is being dealt with here is not a work belonging fully to the genre of the stories of the prophets even if the larger part of this work is dedicated to this topic. Within its structure there are no innovations, and it might be thought that the stories of the prophets of al-Thaʿlabī were his main source of reference – even if al-Hayṣam never mentions his name – especially since al-Hayṣam was his contemporary and like him was originally from Nīshāpūr. That said, it should however be emphasised that frequently the text of al-Hayṣam mentions interpretations that are different from those of al-Thaʿlabī, thus confirming the circulation of a notable mass of traditions at every level. The possibility existed for the exegetes or whoever was writing in the medieval period, to select from an enormous amount of source material.[1]

Another rather significant work is the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of Aḥmad ibn Abī ʿUdhayba (d. 1452), of Jerusalem, of which only one manuscript is preserved. In this case there is a clear proof of how the double model of al-Thaʿlabī and al-Kisā'ī has marked and influenced all of the stories of the prophets written in the medieval period. This is so to such an extent that these two books have become a constant point of reference and are frequently cited directly. Along with the usual authorities of the first generations, such as Ibn ʿAbbās, Wahb and Kaʿb, and along with the other stories introduced in a generic way, Ibn Abī ʿUdhayba in fact directly quotes al-Thaʿlabī and depends on his work in even more substantial ways. His book is a useful testimony from the period and from the place in which it was written.[2] Some of these considerations can also be extended to another collection of stories of the prophets, of which we have the name of the author,

but about which nothing else is known. This quite large work is conserved in an incomplete manuscript in Maghribi calligraphy in Alexandria and attributed to a certain Ibn Saʿīd al-Ḥijrī. The dating of the manuscript to the 13th cent. is the only certain element. Among the sources cited the name of Wathīma appears, while the names of al-Thaʿlabī and al-Kisāʾī are not quoted. Most notable in this book is the great amount of space dedicated to the story of Creation and to the most fantastic popular legends, as for example the story of Nimrod to whom twenty or so folios are dedicated. As a result of this these stories of the prophets resemble those of al-Kisāʾī, but unfortunately do not contain enough elements to justify attempting a plausible dating or to establish who Ibn Saʿīd al-Ḥijrī was.[3]

The importance of the real or presumed Shīʿite orientation of some traditions within the stories of the prophets has been already pointed out. It has been noted that many of the first authors were suspected of having this type of sympathy, or in any case, how many traditions with a clear Shīʿite tendency were also widely spread in the Sunnī collections. All of these factors lead one to think that Shīʿite stories of the prophets were already in circulation from the 9th cent., that is, contemporary to or not long after those that marked the commencement of this genre. Unfortunately nothing of this type is conserved, even if some lost works are quoted, such as a *Kitāb al-anbiyāʾ wa-l-awṣiyāʾ min Ādam ilā l-Mahdī* by a certain Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī and above all the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* which were attributed to Muḥammad or Aḥmad al-Barqī (second half of the 9th cent.). The dating of this work is particularly interesting, but information about it is scarce and contradictory, and thus it is not possible to learn anything about its structure or contents.[4]

To find an extant Shīʿite collection of stories of the prophets it is necessary to wait until the 12th cent. and the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* of Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rāwandī (d. 1177–8).[5] This is not a very long work, but one that collects traditions about the prophets and concludes with a chapter on the proofs (*dalāʾil*) of the prophecy of Muḥammad. As usual the work is divided into chapters that discuss the various prophets but this is done in an order that does not always coincide with that of the more important collections. The story of Moses is spread throughout various chapters that take their titles from the specific topics that are dealt with. Significantly little space is devoted to Qurʾānic citations and exegetical

questions. The work is thus formed from a sequence of traditions of Shīʿite inspiration, all of them preceded by a chain of the names of transmitters, without any comments or any apparent interest in an organic narrative reconstruction. Of all the names cited Ibn Bābawayh (d. 991) is the most prominent; he did not write a work on this topic, but he did record numerous legends about the prophets in his works, and he emerges as a constant reference point for al-Rāwandī. Of the other Shīʿite stories of the prophets written during the course of the medieval period, it is worth noting that there are some later ones which rely upon the work of al-Majlisī (d. 1699) who dedicated a substantial part of his encyclopaedic *Biḥār al-anwār* to this topic. The principal characteristic of al-Majlisī's work was that it was a comprehensive narrative reconstruction and to a certain extent quite similar to the Sunnī collections.[6]

However, the most consistent part of medieval stories of the prophets is constituted by anonymous works, often incomplete and preserved in manuscripts never studied nor published. Reconstructing an articulated and precise story of these works is almost impossible, given that they are anonymous and of uncertain dating. However, most of these works did not gain wide circulation, especially when compared to those of al-Thalabī and al-Kisāʾī. The stories of the prophets of these latter authors not only had a clear influence upon the other similar works written in the medieval period but, along with this, they conditioned their meagre success: the diffusion of the manuscripts demonstrates the great preference for re-copying the stories of the prophets of al-Thaʿlabī and al-Kisāʾī rather than the new ones.[7]

A partial analysis of these works is sufficient in order to delineate other elements which explain the evolution of this genre. A good example in this regard is the manuscript today conserved in al-Asad Library in Damascus (no. 18863), from which unfortunately the beginning and the end are missing; however the title *Tawārīkh wa-qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* (f. 2a) is mentioned within the extant text. This work was made with the intention of being a complete and articulated treatment of the topic, using the most important sources available. In the part which has been conserved – which runs from Joseph to Solomon – there is mention of the most important authors of the canonical collections of *ḥadīth*s and al-Ṭabarī, al-Thaʿlabī, and the later Ibn al-Jawzī, Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1256), al-Nuwayrī (d. 1332) and

Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), which necessitates the dating of this work from the 15th cent. onwards. The names of the transmitters are the usual ones, with a certain preference, along with the frequently cited Wahb, Kaʿb and Ibn ʿAbbās, for al-Suddī. Lastly, in accordance with the most correct exegetical devices, differing opinions are listed and enumerated regarding the most controversial questions.[8] Al-Thaʿlabī and al-Ṭabarī are the constant direct reference also for another interesting manuscript, the *Siyar al-anbiyāʾ* ("The lives of the prophets") in which there is some noteworthy material in the first extended part on the Biblical prophets, although a substantial final section is dedicated to Muḥammad.[9]

One can also see an expression of the tendency to favour traditions of popular provenance among these works. Naturally, this is nothing new, since the preferred reference point and the best example is al-Kisāʾī. Such reference sometimes takes the form of a simple and general formal affinity, as with the case cited earlier of the stories of the prophets of Ibn Saʿīd al-Ḥijrī, while in other cases it takes the form of actual re-workings which retain parts of the original. The favourite names in this kind of stories of the prophets are Wahb, Kaʿb and Ibn ʿAbbās; later works are usually ignored and Qurʾānic quotations are scanty and secondary in relation to the narrative. The interest in the miraculous aspects related to the lives of the prophets, which are often described in chapters dedicated to their miracles, leads to the inclusion of traditions that are particularly rich in fantastic details.[10]

The extent of the genre was not limited to Muslim literature in the Arabic language, but such stories of the prophets were also written in Persian and Turkish. Together with the translations and compendiums from Arabic, original works in these languages contributed to the diffusion of the stories of the prophets throughout the Muslim world. The collection of al-Haysam, for example, was translated into Persian, but more often only the part on the prophets was gathered into a translation entitled "Stories of the prophets"; this was the destiny also for the work of al-Kisāʾī. The history of the genre in Persian literature seems quite ancient. Despite the fact that the date given at the beginning of the printed edition of the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ wa-siyar al-mulūk* of Ḥuwayzī/Jurayrī indicates that the work was begun in 963 AD, in all probability this date should not be accepted. Nonetheless there is evidence of numerous other works in the immediately following

centuries. Of all of these the most significant is the stories of the prophets by Isḥāq ibn Ibrāhīm al-Nīsābūrī at the end of the 11th cent. An interesting detail is that al-Nīsābūrī lived shortly after al-Thaʿlabī and al-Hayṣam and came from the same city. However, in the course of the medieval period, many other works belonging to this genre were written in Persian, a great number of which have been conserved only in the form of anonymous manuscripts.[11]

Among the original non-Arabic language works, perhaps that most deserving of interest was written in Turkish by Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Rabghūzī in 1310. It is a collection of the stories of the prophets of substantial dimension in which popular stories and legends which are rich in details can be found. Nothing is known of the author apart from the little that can be gleaned from his text. Despite the fact that it was inspired by analogous Persian and Arabic works, the stories of the prophets by al-Rabghūzī comprise an original work, as he indicates in the introduction where he states that he collected materials and traditions that were in circulation rather than having been inspired by other written works. This would seem to be confirmed by the text which has recently been edited and translated into English. The structure and contents, and even more so the authorities mentioned as being transmitters of traditions, ḥadīths and a dozen or so exegetes, are those common to all of the medieval Arabic, Turkish and Persian works.[12]

Of all of these medieval works there are perhaps only a few that stand out for their originality, but as a whole they bear witness to the diffusion of the genre of the stories of the prophets throughout the Muslim world.

2. THE REACTION OF IBN TAYMIYYA AND IBN KATHĪR

Exegetes, historians and authors of collections of stories of the prophets from the 11th century onwards did not bring with them substantial innovations in their approach to the traditions on the Biblical prophets compared to their predecessors. Traditions of a popular type were already considered the essential and predominant sources for dealing with the biographies on the Biblical prophets and, even though there were various attitudes towards the stories, no one questioned their central role. These medieval authors thus distinguished themselves by their own particular

selections from the enormous mass of traditions and stories of every type, perhaps preferring certain sources to the detriment of others, but not by proceeding to a substantial reconsideration of the material handed down to them. However, there are two main experts in Islamic learning and authors of various works who were exceptions to this general attitude: Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and his student Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373). From their point of view, all that had been handed down, including the contributions of the characters of the first generations and the authors of the first centuries, had to be subjected to an attentive critical evaluation and, in some cases, rejected.

Ibn Taymiyya, who was a Ḥanbalite theologian, dedicated a great part of his activity and his writings to battling against that which in his opinion were innovations and deviations from the religion expressed in the Qur'ān and in the sayings of Muḥammad. One of his customs was to attack repeatedly and vehemently the cult of the tombs of the saints and the participation in actual pilgrimages; according to Ibn Taymiyya to even set out on a journey to see the tomb of Muḥammad was an act contrary to true faith, and one which should be prohibited.[13] His position whether in Qur'ānic exegesis or in the evaluation of the traditions and the sayings of Muḥammad was no less rigid: Ibn Taymiyya had no fear of attributing errors to companions of the Prophet or to transmitters who were usually held in great esteem, such as ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, or violently attacking authors, mystics or philosophers of great fame.

The same refutation is set up by Ibn Taymiyya in relation to the storytellers that he considered to be a source of material of no value which should be rejected. In an essay dealing with some of the sayings of the Prophet attributed to the storytellers, Ibn Taymiyya emphasises that what is being dealt with are false attributions, which are often taken from Jewish traditions and which lack a chain of reliable transmitters. In this way, for example, a saying of Muḥammad in which he apparently said: "He who visits me and visits my father Abraham in one year will go to heaven" is rejected, or another which claims "When Abraham the sincere friend of God is mentioned and I am mentioned, pray for him then pray for me; if however I and the other prophets are mentioned, pray for me and then pray for the others" is rejected too.[14] The reference to the sayings of Muḥammad in this case limits the extent of the criticism, but it is clear that the real object

of Ibn Taymiyya is to denounce all that was handed down in the name of the storytellers since it does not correspond with the necessary formal rules on the transmission of traditions.

Some traditions are explicitly rejected because of their contents. In this case Ibn Taymiyya wields his criticism with severity against traditions considered to be of Jewish origin (*isrā'īliyyāt*) introduced into Islam during the course of the first generations, which needed to be discarded in no uncertain terms. In the discussion, for example, in one of his essays on certain legends regarding Adam, Ibn Taymiyya states that what is being dealt with is material reported by Ibn Qutayba and in the books of history such as that of al-Ṭabarī and others, and which is attributed to those transmitters that "hand down Jewish traditions and, similarly, traditions on the ancient prophets, such as Wahb ibn Munabbih, Ka'b al-Aḥbār, Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq and others". The conclusion is that what they have handed down about the Biblical prophets must not be introduced into the Muslim religion at least if it is not confirmed by authentic traditions.[15]

Attacks against the storytellers and against those traditions which Ibn Taymiyya, rightly or wrongly, considered to be of Jewish origin, are a clear indication of the substantial rejection of that which had been handed down on the Biblical prophets. Included in the condemnation are not only the names of the converts, but also the authors of the first centuries, Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq and al-Ṭabarī, who for the first time were subject to a wholehearted criticism and considered substantially unreliable. Ibn Taymiyya however did not write either a Qur'ānic commentary or a universal history and therefore did not take the opportunity to discuss his choices in a systematically specific and clear way. His student Ibn Kathīr remedied this lack by following his master's teachings and developing further his line of thinking in his bitter criticisms of the traditions on the stories of the prophets.

Ibn Kathīr was the first to reject stories and legends of the prophets in a systematic way, by stressing both in his Qur'ānic commentary and his universal history, that the material transmitted by the earlier generations could only be accepted after an attentive critical evaluation.[16] Ibn Kathīr gives an indication of his position at the very beginning of his works, in the introductions to the commentary and the universal history, in which he points out that this is one of the principal motifs of his work:

> The stories of Jewish origin are utilised (in this commentary) as a confirmation and not as a support (to the exegesis) and are of three types: the first type is that which we know to be true on the basis of the Qur'ān; the second type are those that we know to be false on the basis of our revelation; the third type are those of which the Qur'ān does not speak and that do not belong either to one category or the other. They can be mentioned, for the reasons set out earlier, but the majority of them are of no importance to the questions of religion. The Jewish and Christian experts in religious learning hand down things that contrast greatly and it is because of this that the Muslim exegetes adopt different positions, for example as far as the names of the sleepers of Ephesus are concerned, or the colour of their dog, the number of them, from which type of tree the staff of Moses came, the names of the birds that God resuscitated for Abraham(...)[17]

In summary, the traditions on the Biblical prophets, when they are not in accord with what is contained in the Qur'ān and the authentic sayings of Muḥammad, must be treated with extreme caution, because they are fundamentally extraneous to Islam. In particular, from the examples given, it is evident that it is the stories of a popular provenance, in which often contradictory names and identifications abound, which are subjected to the criticism of Ibn Kathīr. They are thus the legends of the type attributed to the converts and the storytellers, collected in the major works about the stories of the prophets and in all of the genres of sacred literature which Ibn Kathīr dismisses as fables which originated in fantasy and from the inventions of the Israelites.[18] Dealing, for example, with the attempted sacrifice by Abraham, Ibn Kathīr passes rapidly over the question of establishing that it is beyond all doubt that the son in question was Ishmael, and states that those who say otherwise and suggest Isaac as the son, are basing their conclusion upon Jewish traditions. In his commentary, discussing the brief Qur'ānic allusion to the killing of Goliath by David, he suggests that every traditional explanation which specifies that he was killed with a slingshot originates from traditions of the same type.[19]

Ibn Kathīr did not base his criticism on one particular analysis of the traditions which gave rise to his doubts, nor did he seem

interested in a direct confrontation with the presumed Jewish and Christian sources. His opposition was directed at the way in which this material had been gathered by the first Muslim generations. In one passage of his history he gives an explanation for the circulation of these traditions. On that day of one of the first battles of conquest undertaken by the Muslim forces, a companion of the Prophet, ʿAbdallāh ibn ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ (d. 690 ca.) found two camels loaded with books of Jewish and Christian origin and it was from these books that the first Jewish traditions (*isrā'īliyyāt*) began to enter into circulation. This episode serves to justify the initial assumption of Ibn Kathīr that traditions of Jewish origin began to penetrate systematically into the Muslim community from the very beginning. Ibn Kathīr does not, therefore, ignore the role of the converts such as Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, for whom he reserves heavy criticism. To Kaʿb he attributes explicitly the responsibility for having taken from Jewish informants what he then introduced into Islam: stories and legends that for the most part are false, traditions intentionally distorted for which the people had no need and that were the source of many errors. Not even Ibn ʿAbbās escapes this type of criticism: he is directly accused of having taken a tradition from a story of Jewish origin. In the end, not even some of the most important and authoritative figures of the literature of the sayings of Muḥammad, such as al-Bukhārī and al-Bayhaqī (d. 1066), are spared the criticism of having gathered material in their books from the same censurable origin.[20]

The reservations of Ibn Kathīr are mostly directed to those channels behind which he sees Jewish and Christian influences, and in the second place against the substance of those traditions. As far as exegesis is concerned, this behaviour does not constitute a new and organic approach to the sacred text, but rather demonstrates little interest in the earlier exegetical influences or for the methods of transmitting the traditions. Ibn Kathīr evidently sought to simplify the questions and to propose coherent theological solutions. His points of reference are, like those of his master Ibn Taymiyya, the Qur'ān and the sayings of Muḥammad, because the exegetes that preceded him, he stated, were often lost arguing amongst themselves in discussions of false traditions. This lack of faith was principally directed towards the narrative material that the earlier Qur'ānic commentaries had gathered around the verses on the Biblical prophets: Ibn Kathīr

mentions some of these traditions, but does not conceal his doubts about their reliability.[21] The structure of the initial part of his universal history is also influenced by this attitude. In the biographies of the prophets, the major part is given over to the Qur'ānic verses, which is followed by the traditions that are inserted and adapted to the framework established by the Qur'ān, and always distinguished from the words of God.[22]

The critical attitude of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr therefore represents a different approach from all of the earlier exegetical tradition. Stories and legends on the Biblical prophets, if extraneous to the Qur'ān, are utilised with caution, if not with suspicion, because of their possible Jewish or Christian provenance. This behaviour did not have any particular echo in the successive centuries. The genre of the stories of the prophets, as we have seen, followed the path established by the works of al-Tha'labī and al-Kisā'ī, while exegesis and historiography did not take up the challenge of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr, but generally preferred to follow the example of al-Ṭabarī. It was only in the 20th century that their theories became popular, and were taken up and saw a diffusion that they had never enjoyed in the past.

3. THE TWENTIETH CENTURY; MUḤAMMAD 'ABDUH

The 20th century from all points of view has signalled a revival of sacred Muslim literature. In this century new works in each genre have been written. Debate and confrontation have once again emerged about all of the questions, prompted by the great historical upheavals and a more direct contact with the Western world and its critical methods. In this great literary explosion, Qur'ānic exegesis and the genre of stories of the prophets are protagonists on the front line, given the growing need to reconsider the extra-canonical traditions on the Biblical prophets collected in the earlier centuries. In this the approach and the conclusions of Ibn Kathīr became the principal point of reference.

This literary ferment, with its novelties and innovations – it may be suggested – has not harmed or conditioned the diffusion of the stories of the Biblical prophets at a popular level. Even today, where the traces of oral traditions are conserved, the lives of the Biblical prophets are amongst the favourite and most widely enjoyed subjects for Muslims. This is naturally beyond the actual

literary history and the theological debate, but demonstrates the extent to which the Biblical prophets and their stories are an essential part of the popular Muslim religious tradition. Jan Knappert has collected and translated numerous oral legends in the Muslim world, has put them in chronological order and thus obtained a real and true collection of stories of the prophets whose contents recall very closely the works of al-Thaʿlabī and al-Kisāʾī. The function of these stories remains the same now as it was then and is comparable to that which the saints are for in the Christian world: to spread examples of religious conduct through edifying stories that attract the attention of the believers. In the Muslim world that function is served by the legends of the Biblical prophets and by the story of the life of Muḥammad and his companions, who are always the favourite subjects among those that can be considered the heirs of the first storytellers and in popular religiosity.[23]

To return to the Biblical prophets in the Islamic literature of the 20th century, the work of Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905) and his student Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) is usually considered the departure point for a new approach. ʿAbduh, an Egyptian, was one of the most important figures of Islamic thought at the end of 19th century and, though he did not write a complete Qur'ānic commentary with his own hand, he trusted his teachings to his pupil Rashīd Riḍā who took over the *Tafsīr al-manār* ("Commentary of the lighthouse") from him.[24] A dominant aspect of the thoughts of Muḥammad ʿAbduh is the complete refutation in no uncertain terms of those traditions handed down by the first generations of the converts to Islam defined as *isrāʾīliyyāt.* This was certainly not a new attitude given that it intentionally imitates that of Ibn Kathīr. However, the modern refutation of these legends on the Biblical prophets spread throughout all sacred literature of the past is something different and more radical because it manages to combine liberal impulses of a different approach to the sacred text and the exigency, at the same time, to return to the letter of the Qur'ān. Those intent upon new methods of exegesis could not help but look kindly upon the abandonment of all of these traditions, while also those supporting an interpretation of the Qur'ān through the Qur'ān did not have need of such material. The position of ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍā towards these traditions on the Biblical prophets satisfied these two exigencies and the result is a decisive

rejection of all of the traditions suspected of having Jewish influence, whether in terms of contents or by being attributed to converts. In a passage of the Qur'ānic commentary, in a paragraph dedicated to the *isrā'īliyyāt* handed down about Adam, 'Adbuh concludes that none of this material is genuine, but belongs to those traditions "taken by the Jewish hypocrites who converted to Islam with the aim of undermining it, in the same way as those who did not convert". Elsewhere they are labelled as real and true infiltrators devoted to forgery, converted with the sole aim of "Judaising" the Islamic traditions and therefore, wherever their names appear, nothing should be accepted; their stories are taken directly from Jewish sacred texts that have nothing to do with the Muslim religion.[25]

The position of Muḥammad 'Abduh was destined to have great influence on all of the exegetical literature of the 20th century. It indicated firstly, from every point of view, a new approach, that broke the links with the learned tradition of the past and had the aim of explaining the Qur'ān to a broad public audience. At the same time, this signified a return to the principles of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr. Two works dedicated to the stories of the prophets and to Qur'ān narratives that were written in the thirties followed their exegetical principles. One of these, the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Najjār, was composed as an implicit polemic against the classic collections of the genre. That book gives central position to Qur'ānic passages and they are followed immediately, as the introduction explains, by some of the most important texts of exegesis, historiography and the sayings of Muḥammad. This approach attempts to be rigorously scientific, with chapters dedicated as usual to individual prophets with some introductory statistical data about their mentions in the Qur'ān, before citing the verses and comments in chronological order. In this part of the commentary some tracts taken from extra-canonical traditions are included in order to better explain the text, but they are never reported in the traditional form or reproduced in full with the names of their transmitters. At the foot of the page, translations from the Bible are sometimes quoted. The stories of the prophets of 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Najjār are from every point of view an innovative work in the history of the genre, modern in its approach and marked in a particular way by the omission of all of those traditions usually included in the stories of the prophets of the classical period.[26]

In a similar vein and using the same principles are also Jād al-Mawlā and the other authors of *Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān* ("The narration of the Qur'ān"), a work that has experienced great success in the 20th century, as is testified by the numerous reprints and the wide diffusion of the work. The introduction states that the aim of the work is to recount the lives of the prophets, inspired by the contents of the Qur'ān, and thus to demonstrate the intimate meaning of these stories. Qur'ānic passages and data derived from traditions are elaborated in a coherent, continuous and rationally organised narrative. In the story of Noah for example, the Flood is described as follows:

> Noah returned to the Ark to fix the planks and secure the various parts until the Ark became a solid construction of timber and nails. Noah set himself to await the orders of God that he was expecting would reach him. Then a divine inspiration struck him: "When our order reaches you and the signs appear, return to the Ark and take with you all those of your people and your family that believe and a couple of every species of animal until the will of God is done. Then the doors of heaven were torn open and water poured forth, the sources of the earth exploded, while the rivers reached the highest embankments and then flooded the plains and the hills. Noah escaped towards the Ark and took with him the men, animals, and plants that God had ordered him to take, and the Ark, in the name of God, took sailing between the surface of the water and the landing places, now carried on a light breeze, now buffeted by an impetuous wind. The waves opened and became tombs for the unbelievers.[27]

The result of this manner of proceeding is a radically new work that implicitly considers the traditional method of providing stories and legends inadequate. While however ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Najjār, starting from the same assumptions, centres his work on the Qur'ān, Jād al-Mawlā, though he cannot ignore the contents of the sacred text, intends to offer a rationally defensible construction for the modern Muslim reader.[28]

The reason to modernise the methods of approach to this material – for historical and apologetic necessity in direct confrontation with the West – is one of the inspirations behind sacred modern literature in general and literature dedicated to

the Biblical prophets in particular. Such a direction is often the fruit of a continuous tension between the tradition, with all of the legends and stories handed down through the centuries, and the profound sense of weakness in confrontation with modern criticism. The stories of the Biblical prophets handed down in the medieval works had to appear to the experts of Islamic learning from the beginning of the 20th century as something that was substantially indefensible and therefore, from a theological point of view, appropriate to eliminate as fundamentally extraneous to Islam. Not even the Qur'ān could escape from a first Muslim critical approach that sought to account for the repetitions and contradictions contained in the passages dedicated to the Biblical prophets. The author of this attempt, who was caught up in a violent polemical backlash, was Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafallāh, a professor of literature who entitled his doctorate thesis *al-Fann al-qaṣaṣī fī l-Qur'ān al-karīm* ("The Narrative Art in the Noble Qur'ān").[29] Khalafallāh, who wrote at the end of the forties, proposed a new approach to the stories of the prophets contained in the sacred text, seeking to give a label to the narrative style of the Qur'ān, and above all, maintaining that certain details can be contradictory and in conflict with actual historical events. But these presumed imprecisions are of no importance, given that these stories had already been known by Muḥammad and his contemporaries, and therefore a historical reconstruction of the events was not the principal aim of the revealed word. The psychological aspects connected to the events are the dominant theme, states Khalafallāh, and this particularity, he concludes, is the fruit of the literary elaboration necessary in the communication between the one who spreads the message – Muḥammad – and those who listen.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that this thesis encountered a violent opposition: the formal inimitability of the Qur'ān was put into doubt and the truth of every account and individual word of the sacred text weakened. Evidently traditional Islam was not able to arrive at this point. The demythologising work had discussed all the stories on the Biblical prophets handed down through the previous centuries and had cast doubt on the content of certain sayings of Muḥammad. To touch and relativise in this way the narratives of the Qur'ān, to respond to a new exegetical need, remained a limit not to be crossed because it cast doubt upon scripture's miraculous character. At the same

time, it was judged as an attitude that converged in an extremely suspect way with that expressed in the criticisms of Western orientalism.[30]

4. THE REJECTION OF *ISRĀ'ĪLIYYĀT* IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Muslim literature on the Biblical prophets during the last decades has been marked by Muḥammad ʿAbduh's teachings and by a growing rejection of extra-canonical traditions collected in the classical works. In modern Qur'ānic commentaries the traditions which have been reported for centuries have disappeared leaving space for a different type of evaluation. Such commentaries rely upon the principles of explaining the Qur'ān only through the Qur'ān itself or upon interpretations that are outside the line of tradition. The commentary of Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) is a work of this kind, collecting various reflexions associated with the Qur'ānic passages; the work has quite correctly been described as revolutionary. The traditional classic structure is not only passed over, but is also completely ignored. None of the typical narrative questions related to the Biblical prophets are added, because the focus of the history is upon its meaning rather than the details.[31] In general, other commentaries written in this decade, if they happen to be more interested in narrative parts of the sacred text, compared to Sayyid Quṭb, explain them without referring to the extra-canonical stories and rarely follow the traditional path by referring back to authorities of the past. The traditional legacy passed on by the first generations, with the exception of genuine *ḥadīth*s, is deliberately ignored when not vehemently rejected. It is thought that the contents of the Qur'ān are sufficient to describe the lives of the Biblical prophets, and that everything else should be considered material of questionable worth.[32] An example of this type of attitude is displayed by Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Shaʿrāwī (d. 1998) in his recent commentary, which was first put into circulation by instalments in news-stands. It was conceived as a type of commentary directed at the general public and it sought to simplify questions in a far reaching manner. Thus, in the comments on the verses that deal with the Biblical prophets, al-Shaʿrāwī always opts for the most banal explanation that is based entirely on the internal coherence of the Qur'ān, without recourse to external elements at all.[33]

These tendencies, whether in the Qur'ānic commentaries or in any other type of literature, are the product of a further advance of the critical attitude towards the extra-canonical traditions on the Biblical prophets which has become prevalent in the last 50 years. The Qur'ān and the authentic sayings of the Prophet are considered the only reliable sources, while, in most cases, everything else is systematically abandoned. This approach, it is necessary to make clear at this point, has also been marked during the course of this century by clear external influences. Exegetical developments and the question of the *isrā'īliyyāt* have in fact not only been determined on the basis of internal debate of a literary nature on the traditional material, but were directly or indirectly influenced in the second half of the 20th century by two factors: 1. orientalist literature that made use in particular of the extra-canonical traditions on the Biblical prophets to emphasise the parallels with Jewish and Christian precedents; 2. the birth of the state of Israel which has given rise to a growing suspicion towards the traditions attributed to the converts from Judaism. The necessity to confront these two challenges – as they are in fact perceived by Muslims – has left an unmistakable sign upon the literature from the start of the second post-war period and especially after the Six Day war of 1967 and the defeat suffered by the Arab world in its confrontation with Israel. More than a few books have been published containing virulent attacks against what has been characterised as the insidious intent of the first converts from Judaism, or against the long list of traditions that have been discarded precisely because they were attributed to these converts.[34] None of the principal Qur'ānic commentaries, not to mention the collections of the stories of the prophets and of historiography, escape the denunciations collected in books that sift through the traditions that are contained within them, with the aim of denouncing the *isrā'īliyyāt*. It is therefore Qur'ānic commentaries that are examined first of all and judged on the basis of the traditions they contain; the only one that has been spared in this very real indiscriminate hunt is Ibn Kathīr: his commentary and his universal history are considered as the most rigorous examples of their respective genres.

The revision of this material has been followed by violent attacks against converts. An article written in 1946 by a student of Rashīd Riḍā, Abū Rayya, carries, for example, the title "Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, the first Zionist", which makes quite plain the point of

view adopted by the author, one he also maintained in other works.[35] Alongside this approach, however, it must not be forgotten that this century has also thrown up examples of less rigid interpretations, as for example those maintaining that the conversion of Kaʿb and the good faith of Wahb cannot be rejected *a priori*, and that the two were often considered reliable transmitters. Such a defence, it should not be forgotten, is aimed at the preservation of those authors – al-Ṭabarī above all – who had made substantial use of these materials. The intent is to save them from the severe criticism which they have been otherwise subjected to in the modern period. However, this stance, it should be noted, is a distinctly minority position.

The sacred literature of the 20th century evidences a rather marked homogeneity. From many points of view the break with the medieval learned tradition is its most apparent characteristic. In the face of the challenges of modernity and scientific developments, in confrontation with the West and with the criticisms of the Orientalists, the Muslim rejection of the legends and traditions on the Biblical prophets handed down through the literature and also widespread in popular culture and imagination is almost total. That is, everything that is extraneous to the Qur'ān and to the authentic sayings of Muḥammad is not only superfluous, but is considered as something insidious for Islam. In the case of the traditions on the Biblical prophets, they even become the fruit of a deliberate assault upon the original foundations of Islam itself by the converts from Judaism of the first generation. There are many reasons at the source of these tendencies and these will determine the probable direction that will be followed in the near future. First of all is the meeting of interest between the scholars of liberal and reform tendencies and those of a more radical, even fundamentalist, orientation, given that they both consider the medieval traditions suspect and they both seek a more personal approach to the religious event centred upon the word of the Qur'ān. Nor should the apologetic necessity created by the political circumstances be ignored: the conflicts with the West and the State of Israel have pushed Muslims to seek out a religious definition that does not leave itself open to criticism and, as a result, there has been a desire to eliminate elements which might be considered borrowed or suspected of external influences. The traditions and the stories about the Biblical prophets are justifiably at the centre of these discussions. Even more than the

origin of the materials handed down, the topic itself makes them particularly suspect, and for this reason, the Qur'ān is today considered the unique essential reference point from a religious and historical point of view.

5. THE STORIES OF THE PROPHETS TODAY

The exegetical criteria and the characteristics of contemporary Muslim literature examined up to this point have also influenced the recent production of works belonging to the literary genre of the stories of the prophets. The popularity of the genre through the course of the centuries has been emphasised more than once; this is further emphasised by the fact that important and widely read books belonging to this genre have been written in the period between the two world wars. This same popularity and diffusion have been constantly renewed even in the final part of the 20th century. The sacred text is the essential reference point and modern authors prefer to offer commentary upon it without making reference to extra-canonical traditions that are not the sayings of Muḥammad and they prefer to emphasise the specificity of the Qur'ānic narration. References to and mentions of the authorities of the past are only made on sporadic occasions.

Besides the decision to exclude extra-canonical traditions that are today considered at least suspect, if not entirely false, other criteria play a part into the characterisation of the numerous works dedicated to the topic. The style of each author reflects that which is typical of modern religious literature, which are made up of personal considerations between Qur'ānic quotes and *ḥadīth*s of the Prophet. An introduction, usually quite brief, serves to emphasise the characteristics that the author wishes to focus upon and thus indirectly also those that he considers the special merits of his work. It is impossible to miss the fact that these pages serve to highlight their presumed originality in comparison with the many other works in circulation on the topic and as a methodological premise which sets out to demonstrate competence in religious learning by relying upon the ability to answer exegetical questions. What is being dealt with is above all a direct appeal to the reader, which seeks to make the product more appealing and thus is related more to publishing logic than to exegetical issues.

One of the first characteristics of the contemporary stories of the prophets is the overall prevalence of works dedicated to *qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān* and with titles preferably recalling it rather than the classical denomination *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*. This choice is the direct consequence of the use of the Qur'ānic narration as the principal and at times exclusive source of information.[36] Apart the common peculiarities certain distinctive features can be recognised in the various works. There are collections of *qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān* that, as is emphasised in their introductions, present themselves as providing and commentating upon the Qur'ānic verses and dealing with the prophets with the aim of demonstrating the indisputable historical truth of the Qur'ānic message. In the most interesting examples of this type of work, the impression is given of an intent to modernise religious discourse in a certain way. It is the historical development of the human civilisation that is put forth as having taken place through a succession of prophets, of which an accurate or "scientific" genealogy is given along with geographical references. In this type of history about the prophets the purpose is to demonstrate the historical truth of the Qur'ānic versions with a polemical tone directed against modern science and, secondly, Western relativism and certain approaches on the part of other Muslims.[37]

Other authors follow different paths. The analysis based wholly upon the internal coherence of the Qur'ānic text must take into consideration, according to these authors, the specificity of the Qur'ānic narratives and the various functions that these have in the structure of the revealed message. In this case, for example, the specifics of the stories of punishment can be cited as evidence and the peculiarities and differences between the Meccan and Medinan revelations can be emphasised, in order to favour the aims of the Qur'ānic word and the moral lesson connected to it. All of the Qur'ānic passages are included in the examination, including those that repeat the same events.[38]

There are very few characteristic attributes as one moves from the *qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān* to the proper works of *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*. On the one hand there are those which stress the historicity of the characters and of their experiences in a quasi-scientific approach, and, on the other hand, there are those which turn to the usual motifs of the stories of the prophets as moral examples for the life of all men. All this, though often clearly specified in the introductions, does not translate into drastic differences between

the works in question. The Qur'ānic passages are discussed and explained in the terms chosen by the author, even when the references are clearly to certain extra-canonical traditions which are usually not cited.[39] In contrast, more traditional is the Shī'ite approach, at least in the one case under consideration here. The element by which it is characterised is the continual reference to traditions of every type taken from the most important Shī'ite works on the topic, among which appear those of Ibn Bābawayh, al-Ṭabarsī (d. 1153) and al-Majlisī who are regularly cited in the footnotes though not within the text itself. The Qur'ān and its contents are what determines the subdivision into chapters with the last chapter being dedicated to Muḥammad.[40] *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* is also the title of some works in wide circulation throughout all the Arab world: these are the stories of the prophets written for either children or illiterate members of the community. Naturally these works are not useful in terms of the research undertaken here, but they nevertheless testify to the popularity of the topic among contemporary Muslims.[41]

The *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of the Egyptian al-Sha'rāwī deserves a separate discussion at least in terms of its breadth and popularity. First published in mass-produced instalments (as was the commentary by the same author), they are now collected into 5 volumes that make up more than 3000 pages. The popular nature of the work, which sets out to explain the truth and the concept of Islam to the common people, is the principal characteristic of the work. The first part addresses general questions about the narratives of the Qurān, their character of truth and their function. The chapters dedicated to the various prophets are each subdivided into paragraphs dedicated to specific questions. The well-documented footnotes which refer to extra-canonical traditions are not the work of al-Sha'rāwī and serve to provide precise references for certain interpretations given by the author without any other indication. In general the characteristics of his commentary are continued: al-Sha'rāwī seeks to produce an extremely simplified modern exegesis that offers a mass of information pointing in every direction, but that is in the end extremely superficial. The Qur'ānic verses remain in fact the starting point for every type of speculation, but it is a speculation which avoids clear pronouncements upon questions which are difficult to explain or open to doubt.[42]

Among the collections belonging indirectly to the genre of the stories of the prophets can also be placed certain works that, while maintaining a Qur'ānic base, have an entirely different purpose. *Anbiyā' Allāh* ("The Prophets of God") of Aḥmad Bahjat is one of these: the frequent Qur'ānic citations in the work function to structure the narrative, that is clearly artistic in design and combine it with a certain stylistic research. The book of Bahjat has experienced enormous success, but the author is remembered also for his pronouncements against a book of 'Alā' Ḥāmid, which is otherwise of little value, in which the stories of some Biblical prophets are recounted in a blasphemous way, according to Bahjat's opinions as stated in the columns of *al-Ahrām*.[43] The fertile work of Maḥmūd Shalabī, who wrote monographs on the lives of every single prophet, is directed at the same audience. These are prolix reflections that often make oblique reference to the Qur'ān and that seek to bring questions on some themes to wider public attention. The first of these is the meaning of the stories of the prophets in contemporary life.[44]

The substantial homogeneity of approach to the topic in the great majority of cases that has been briefly presented here becomes even more evident when certain specific examples are examined. As far as the contents and the real life experiences of the Biblical prophets that are narrated in these modern works are concerned, there is a clear and predictable tendency to avoid making reference to any of the legends which contain fantastic details, and even more to reject any possible orientation which is suspected of encompassing a non-Islamic influence. The dominant principle is that of rejecting all of the traditions of presumed Jewish origin, the *isrā'īliyyāt*. The son chosen by Abraham for sacrifice for example is always identified as Ishmael, without the least doubt being voiced, and with a consequent refutation of the contents of the Biblical text.[45] In the story of David the same type of opposition is mounted against all of the traditions that explain the long passage in Qur. 38:21–26 as an allusion to the events with Uriah and the repentance of David for having caused his death. In the modern stories of the prophets these traditions are not only excluded, but what usually happens is that recourse is made to the usual motif that what is being dealt with are legends with a Jewish or Christian provenance that are not confirmed either by the sacred text or by the sayings of Muḥammad and that, therefore, it is not necessary to cite them nor to consider them as

being reliable.[46] Symptomatic in this regard is the behaviour of J. Badrān, the editor of a text which is in itself of little interest. It is a compendium of the initial part of the universal history of al-Ṭabarī that was recently published with the title *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*. The excerpts are offered without any comment, except for the story of David and Uriah which is followed by a note of more than a page which reproduces Ibn Kathīr's and other exegetes' criticisms of this type of tradition with the aim of refuting that which is reported about it by al-Ṭabarī.[47]

The rejection of the greater part of the exegetical tradition is at the origin of the fact that the prophets to whom the Qur'ān dedicates few verses are only dealt with briefly, often without offering any narrative picture, and in some cases without mention being made of them at all. This is the destiny of characters like Idrīs, Dhū al-Kifl and Elisha in the majority of modern collections of the stories of the prophets or of the narratives of the Qur'ān. Equally, prophets who only appear in extra-canonical traditions, though quoted in the classic works of the genre, such as Jirjīs, are today completely ignored. In other cases, it is only the presence of clear sayings of the Prophet that prompt authors to include certain stories. This is the case, for example, of al-Khiḍr, who is dealt with in a long Qur'ānic passage but whose story is narrated in a complete form only in some *ḥadīth*s cited by al-Bukhārī that, as such, are fully acceptable.[48]

The genre, from a formal point of view, presents the typical characteristics of all contemporary Islamic literature. The style of writing, as has been indicated, is no longer made up of a list of stories and traditions, but is composed of a discussion of details, above all Qur'ānic ones, from which the preferences of the author emerge. An overall continuity with the thought of Ibn Kathīr, who is a constant point of reference for all of the sacred literature of the 20th century, can be recognized, as well as the teachings and style of Muḥammad ʿAbduh and his students. The condemnation of the *isrā'īliyyāt* is unanimous and is explicitly affirmed as a methodological choice. As has already been said, in fact, any material which carries with it a suggestion of an influence extraneous to Islam is stringently rejected and recourse is above all made to the sacred text and, in the second place, to the sayings of Muḥammad. Even with various tones and differentiated elements, the contemporary authors of the stories of the prophets therefore seem to use the same approach without elements of

particular originality, either in terms of the formal aspects or the contents.

NOTES

1 Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek or. quart. 1203; a detailed description of the contents of this manuscript is given by G. Schoeler, *Arabischen Handschriften*, II, Stuttgart 1990, 29–34. Another manuscript is conserved at Princeton (Ms. Yahuda 49). Various examples of interesting traditions cited by al-Hayṣam are not reported here, but the reader is referred to the notes of al-Ṭarafī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*. Besides the part dedicated to Muḥammad, it should be emphasised that the work of al-Hayṣam was appreciated particularly as a collection of stories of the prophets, as the Persian translation of al-Tustarī, bearing this title, testifies; see Storey, *Persian Literature*, I, 162.

2 Ms. Jerusalem Khālidiyya, 23 *Sīra*. On this work see Pauliny, "Ein unbekanntes Autograph 'Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'".

3 Ms. Alexandria, Baladiyya B 1249. On this work see the brief description of Pauliny, "Ein Werk *'Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*'"; and Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 149–54. The collections of stories of the prophets entitled *Badā'iʿ al-zuhūr fī waqā'iʿ al-duhūr* attributed to Ibn Iyās, and today widely diffused in various printed versions, can be considered as belonging to this kind of work: this is an interesting work of popular character relying largely upon al-Kisā'ī and al-Thaʿlabī.

4 On the first work see E. Kohlberg, *A Medieval Muslim Scholar at Work. Ibn Ṭāwūs & His Library*, Leiden 1992, 113: he hypothesises that Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī was the Shīʿite extremist al-Shalmaghānī (d. 934?). Regarding the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of al-Barqī, see Kohlberg, *ibid.*, 273, 308–9, who quotes a *Kitāb al-mubtada'* and a *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* attributed to Muḥammad ibn Khālid al-Barqī, two titles that do not appear amongst the works of this author. Biographical sources attribute a *Kitāb (aḥkām) al-anbiyā'* to his son Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Barqī (d. 890 ca.) as one of the lost parts of another of his works, the *Kitāb al-maḥāsin*. Ibn Khayr, *Fahrasa*, 291, brings further elements to this picture, and quotes the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* attributed to a certain Aḥmad ibn Khālid which, if it is a reference to this work, it should be correctly read as Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Khālid al-Barqī.

5 The work was published at Mashhad in 1989 and reprinted by the Mu'assasat al-Mufīd of Beirut the same year. On the author see also Kohlberg, *A Medieval Muslim Scholar*, 309, who also disputes the evidence that attributes a collection of *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* to another al-Rāwandī, Abū l-Riḍā.

6 The volumes of the works of al-Majlisī dedicated to the stories of the prophets are the XI–XIV of his *Biḥār al-anwār* according to the ed. Beirut 1983 (repr. of ed. Teheran in 105 vol.). The works relying upon al-Majlisī are al-Jazā'irī (XVII sec.), *al-Nūr al-mubīn fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā' wa-l-mursalīn*, Najaf 1964, and al-Ḥusaynī (XVIII sec.), *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā' ʿalā ra'y al-imāmiyya*, Ms. Berlin Staatsbibliothek, Petermann I 633. On this

work, that also uses materials from al-Thaʿlabī, see Schwarzbaum, *Biblical and Extra-Biblical*, 24–6, where bibliography on the topic is cited; see also Nagel, *Die Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, 119–21, who emphasises that there are no substantial differences in the contents between the Sunnī and Shīʿite traditions on the prophets. The reason is simple: the structure of the events, inspired almost always by the contents of the Qurʾān, is common and moreover, the Shīʿite orientation emerges only in some particular traditions.

7 A sign of the popularity of the works of al-Kisāʾī and of al-Thaʿlabī is, for example, the existence of a medieval manuscript that summarizes and combines them (Paris Bibl. Nat. ar. 1923).

8 Ms. of 110 ff., the chapters have title *faṣl*, and each is subdivided into various *nawʿ*s.

9 Ms London, British Library, no. 1510, 270 ff. Of the same kind are the *Tawārīkh al-anbiyāʾ* conserved in the *Kitāb al-shāmil*, Ms. London, British Lib. or. 1493, 122 ff., and, though a work of a more reduced dimension, the collection of the stories of the prophets conserved in the Ms. Paris Bibl. Nat. ar. 1924, 92 ff., where the final part is dedicated to Muḥammad.

10 Given the questions connected to the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* of al-Kisāʾī to which reference was earlier made it is at times difficult to distinguish between a larger version of the work and a reworking to be attributed to another author. This, for example, is the case of the incomplete Mss Gotha nos. A 1740 (ff. 202), A 1742 (167 ff.), A 1743 (73 ff.). Another example in this sense, but one which is much more interesting and original is that of the Ms. Damascus al-Asad no. 3473 (336 pp. and copied in 1718 AD) which has a chapter for every prophet in which the miracles attributed to him in his lifetime are collected. The incomplete manuscript Cambridge Un. Libr. Add. 3258, titled *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, seems to be of the same genre. It should moreover be noted that often in the catalogues some manuscripts are erroneously labelled as anonymous *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾs*: see for example Ms Yale L-441, *Asāṭīr al-awwalīn*, that is in reality the stories of the prophets of al-Kisāʾī; Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. ar. 1925, in reality a long section of the beginning of the *Bidāya* of Ibn Kathīr; and the Ms Leiden or. 2633 that contains the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* of al-Thaʿlabī.

11 On all of these questions see Storey, *Persian Literature*, I, 158–172. See also the list of stories of the prophets in Persian given in the bibliography by the editor of the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* of al-Rāwandī (pp. 22–25). Of the Persian translation of al-Hayṣam, Schöck, *Adam im Islam*, 34–5, also gives a brief discussion.

12 Al-Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 1. ed. H.E. Boeschoten – M. Vandamme – S. Tezcan, with H. Braam – B. Radtke. 2. Engl. tr. ed. H.E. Boeschoten – J. O'Kane – M. Vandamme, Leiden 1995; on the questions here mentioned, see the introduction, pp. xiii–xxi. On the sources of a-Rabghūzī, who cites al-Nīsābūrī, and on his literary personality, see in particular Dankoff, "Rabghuzi's *Stories of the Prophets*", 117–8. On the texts and translations of the stories of the prophets into Turkish and Persian, see also Utley, "Rabghuzi.

Fourteenth-century Turkish Folklorist", 375–6. Books of the stories of the prophets and works containing legends on the Biblical prophets entered into all Muslim literatures.

13 Ibn Taymiyya was born at Ḥarrān in 1268 and died at Damascus in 1328. On his life and works, the reader is referred to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "Ibn Taymiyya". As far as his writings against the cult of the tombs are concerned see N.H. Olesen, *Culte des saints et pèlerinages chez Ibn Taymiyya*, Paris 1991; on his behaviour regarding the question of the *isrā'īliyyāt*, see Tottoli, "Origin and use of term *isrā'īliyyāt*".

14 Ibn Taymiyya, *Aḥādīth al-quṣṣāṣ*, 61, 73.

15 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū'at al-rasā'il wa-l-masā'il*, III, 382–3. To other Jewish legends that should be rejected reference is made also in III, 451. Against the stories of Jewish origin there is also a reference in his introduction to Qur'ānic exegesis: *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*, 95 and cf. 76–7, with the mention of Ka'b al-Aḥbār and Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq.

16 Student of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathīr died in 1373. On his works see Laoust, "Ibn Kathīr, historien". On some of the peculiarities of his Qur'ānic commentary, discussed here, see also Calder, "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr", 12f., and McAuliffe, "Quranic Hermeutics: the Views of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr", 56–62; Id., *Qur'ānic Christians*, 71–6.

17 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm*, I, 8. The same premise is stated by Ibn Kathīr in the introduction of his universal history, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*, (I, 6), in which he claims to report those traditions of Jewish origin that do not contrast with the Qur'ān nor with the sayings of Muḥammad.

18 With *isrā'īliyyāt* Ibn Kathīr usually refers to a body of traditions that should be rejected; his is a theological opposition to a category of material as a whole that has very little to do with its origin. On this type of consideration see Calder, "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr", 137 n. 37. On the various uses of the term *isrā'īliyyāt* in the writings of Ibn Kathīr, Tottoli, "Origin and use of the term *isrā'īliyyāt*", 9–14.

19 With regard to Ishmael: Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-nihāya*, I, 159; in his commentary on the verses that debate the question, Ibn Kathīr states that the Jews would have interpolated the Biblical text on the question; cf. Calder, "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr", 123–4. About David and Goliath see Id., *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm*, I, 453.

20 On 'Abdallāh ibn 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ: Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*, I, 24, 190. On Ka'b: Id., *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm*, III, 164. On Ibn 'Abbās: Id., *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*, I, 21; but cf. Id., *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm*, III, 245: Ibn 'Abbās took from acceptable *isrā'īliyyat* going back to Ka'b. On al-Bukhārī and al-Bayhaqī: Id., *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*, I, 21, II, 245.

21 Also Calder, "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr", 120f., arrived at this conclusion.

22 The *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* circulating under his name which have been printed in numerous modern editions in the Arab world are taken from the parts dedicated to the prophets in his universal history.

23 Knappert, *Islamic Legends. Histories of the Heroes, Saints and Prophets of Islam*, I, 23–184.

24 Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849–1905) was a key figure in Islamic reformism; Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935), of Syrian origin, was the one who continued the *Tafsīr al-manār* (Cairo 1904–32, 12 vol.), from the name of the review in which this commentary was first published; the comment from the Qur. 4:125 to Qur. 12:107, where the commentary stops, is due to Riḍā. A complete study of the commentary was written by Jomier, *Le commentaire coranique du Manar.* The principal characteristics of the exegesis of ʿAbduh are discussed by Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran*, 18–34, while both ʿAbduh and Riḍā are discussed at length by Wielandt, *Offenbarung und Geschichte im Denken Moderner Muslime*, 49–94.

25 The citation is from Riḍā, *Tafsir al-manār*, VIII, 356; as regards the rest see I, 313, VI, 332–3, and also see the review *al-Manār* 28 (1924), 649. On the rejection of the *isrāʾīliyyāt* by Muḥammad ʿAbduh see also Jomier, *Le commentaire coranique du Manar*, 28, 61, 99, 112; Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran*, 27. As regards his position in a particular case, the legends on the staff of Moses, the reader is referred to Tottoli, "La moderna esegesi islamica", 27–8.

26 An example best illustrates this method of proceeding. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Najjār, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, 101–3, discusses the identity of the son that Abraham intended to sacrifice, stating without any doubt that it was Ishmael and introducing the Qurʾānic passage with a section which accounts for the narrative features: the dream of Abraham, the ram to be sacrificed in place of the son, etc. The Qurʾānic passages are followed by a few lines of grammatical exegetical explanations, by a note with a long quote from *Genesis* and lastly by an interesting passage in which it is stated that proof of the fact that the victim chosen was Ishmael can be found in the Bible itself (where it is said, according to ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Najjār, that the son to be sacrificed was the only son, and therefore the oldest, that is Ishmael). Concerning al-Najjār's *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, see Pauliny, "Einige Bemerkungen zu den Werken *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*", 119.

27 Jād al-Mawlā *et al.*, *Qaṣaṣ al-Qurʾān*, 19. From the same period are *Aḥsan al-qiṣaṣ* ("The most beautiful stories"), of ʿA. Fikrī and *Daʿwat al-rusul* ("The preaching of the Messengers") of M.A. al-ʿAdawī, of which the initial part is dedicated to the prophets.

28 The book of Jād al-Mawlā can be regarded as the fruit of a certain rationalism that has left its mark, in the period between the two wars, in other works of religious literature. The most obvious example of this genre is the 'scientific' Qurʾānic commentary of Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī, *al-Jawāhir fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān* (II Cairo 1922–1935), 30 vol., in which an attitude that even today is common in certain popular literature emerged: it seeks to demonstrate that there are allusions to all of the modern scientific discoveries in the Qurʾān. This is an approach which, it should be added, often leads to aberrant conclusions. A description of this commentary is given by J. Jomier, "Le Cheich Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī et son commentaire du Coran", *Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales du Caire*, 5 (1958), 115–174.

29 Khalafallāh wrote his doctorate thesis in 1947. As a result of the polemics that ensued it was published in a revised edition, with the same title, in 1950. In regard to the contents of this book and the polemic aroused in the years following its publication, the reader is referred to the article of Jomier, "Quelques positions actuelles de l'exégèse coranique".

30 The repercussions of the thesis of Khalafallāh and the production of works attacking it continues even today. The reader is in particular referred to *I'jāz al-Qur'ān* ("The inimitability of the Qur'ān", Cairo 1976) of al-Saqqā that carries the significant subtitle "Refutation of the Book 'The Narrative art in the Qur'ān'", or *al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ānī fī manṭūqihi wa-mafhūmihi* ("The Qur'ānic Narration. Form and Significance") of ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Khaṭīb. An intermediate position is prevalent today: the Qur'ānic narratives serve the purpose of warning men and not that of a historical account, but without intending that the Qur'ān contains details contrasting with history; see for ex. Sulaymān, *al-Qiṣṣa fī l-Qur'ān al-karīm.*

31 In the case, for example, of the sacrificial victim chosen by Abraham, there is not even the briefest discussion, but the topic is attacked by mentioning immediately the name of Ishmael. Sayyid Quṭb, Egyptian, was condemned to death in the prisons of Nasser and died in 1966. His teachings nevertheless live on amongst the Islamic fundamentalists and his Qur'ānic commentary – *Fī ẓilāl al-Qur'ān* ("In the shade of the Qur'ān") – is today one of the most widely diffused texts in the Muslim world. The bibliography on the life and works of Sayyid Quṭb is very sizeable. The most complete study of the themes of this commentary, with further bibliographical references, is that of O. Carré, *Mystique et politique.*

32 The attitude of the contemporary exegetes in the case of the commentary upon one particular verse is examined in Tottoli, "La moderna esegesi islamica", 33.

33 *Tafsīr*, Cairo 1991f. Al-Shaʿrāwī was a type of predicator and popularizer of great fame. An example of his exegesis is given in the commentary to the verses on the vow made by Elizabeth regarding the conception of Mary and all of the related stories: al-Shaʿrāwī makes no mention of any tradition, nor the name of any character, but he limits himself to a personal explanation with little emphasis: pp. 1442f. As a partial justification of al-Shaʿrāwī it can be said that he, explaining the subtitle of his work – *khawāṭir* ("reflections") –, states the this is not a proper commentary – despite the fact that it consists of so many volumes!; on his *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, see above, p. 185. On his figure as an exegete and in the particular on the introduction to his commentary, see Tottoli, "L'introduzione al *tafsīr* dello *šayḫ* al-Šaʿrāwī".

34 An expression which is symptomatic of this climate is the use of the term *isrā'īliyyāt* to indicate the traditions of presumed Jewish origin as well as questions related to the birth of the state of Israel and to its contraposition to the Arab world. Some works mention the term in their title in this sense: see for example Aḥmad Bahā' al-Dīn and

others indicated in Tottoli, *Origin and Use of the Term* isrā'īliyyāt, 209.

35 The article of Abū Rayya is in *Al-Risāla*, 665 (1946) 360–363. For other works of Abū Rayya of the same tone, see Juynboll, *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature*, 130f. A growing hostility in relation to Ka'b al-Aḥbār is for example evident in the modern edition commentated by A.M. Shākir (d. 1958) of the *Musnad* of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal; on this topic see the study of G.H.A. Juynboll, "Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (1892–1958) and His Edition of Ibn Ḥanbal's Musnad", *Der Islam*, 49 (1972), 239–40. Review of the *isrā'īliyyāt* contained in the Qur'ānic commentaries, ordered by topic, is the book of Abū Shuhba, *al-Isrā'īliyyāt wa-l-mawḍū'āt fī kutub al-tafsīr* (Cairo 1973). The use of the *isrā'īliyyāt* in the various commentaries is instead discussed by R. Na'nā'a, *al-Isrā'īliyyāt wa-atharuhā fī kutub al-tafsīr* (Damasco-Beirut 1970); M.Ḥ. al-Dhahabī, *al-Isrā'īliyyāt fī l-tafsīr wa-l-ḥadīth* (Cairo 1986[3]).

36 In this investigation the works written in Arabic, particularly those widespread in Egypt, have been taken into consideration. Amongst the works dedicated to the *qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān*, that in some ways are proper stories of the prophets, besides al-Khaṭīb, *al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ānī*, cited earlier, the reader is referred to 'Abbās, *al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ānī*; al-Laḥḥām, *Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān al-karīm*; Ḥāfiẓ, *al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ānī*; Ismā'īl, *Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān*; Ṭanṭāwī, *al-Qiṣṣa fī l-Qur'ān*; al-Kīlānī, *Fī mawkib al-nabiyyīn*. But works with this title do not always present the lives of the prophets, though they may discuss only the characteristics of the Qur'ānic narration without dealing with their lives in an ordered and detailed form. Of these the reader is referred to 'Abd Rabbihi, *Buḥūth fī qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān*; Sulaymān, *al-Qiṣṣa fī l-Qur'ān al-karīm*.

37 Al-Laḥḥām, *Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān*; the text to which reference is made for the major part of the considerations is al-Kīlānī, *Fī mawkib al-nabiyyīn*, that carries also in its subtitle an indication that what is being dealt with is an accurate study based on the Qur'ān and on the sayings of the Prophet; relevant is also the refutation of Darwin's evolutionary theories.

38 Ṭanṭāwī, *al-Qiṣṣa fī l-Qur'ān*, in partic. 3f.; Ismā'īl, *Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān*; 'Abbās, *al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ānī*. More in line with the tradition, with frequent citations from medieval and modern works, is Ḥāfiẓ, *al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ānī*.

39 The work *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā' wa-l-ta'rīkh*, by al-Badrāwī, is peculiar in that, as the title indicates, it attempts to be a scientific essay that demonstrates the historicity of the prophets and of the Qur'ānic data on them; see also at a lower level 'Āṭif al-Zayn, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā' fī l-Qur'ān al-karīm*. Also of the latter type is Khaṭṭāb, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*.

40 Dukhayyal, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*.

41 The *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of al-Kātib, Beirut 1983, is an example of a work of this type. It should not be forgotten the numerous works on topics relating to the prophets, but which are not stories of the prophets in the strict sense, for example Ḥ. 'Abd al-Qādir, *Mu'jizāt Allāh* (Cairo 1983); Ḥ. Dawḥ, *Ibtilā'āt al-sharr wa-l-khayr fī ḥayāt al-anbiyā' wa-in'ikāsātuhā 'alā ḥayātina* (Cairo 1995).

42 *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, Cairo 1997 (edition in volumes). Interesting, and fully in line with the medieval tradition, is the fact that al-Shaʿrāwī wrote a Qur'ānic commentary and then a collection of the stories of the prophets; on this commentary, and on his figure, see above, p. 180. Another example is that of Ṭanṭāwī, author of a Qur'ānic commentary and thus of the already cited *al-Qiṣṣa fī l-Qur'ān*. Also another famous popularizer such as ʿA. al-Ḥ. Kishk, could not do without writing on the prophets, see for example *Anbiyā' Allāh* (Cairo 1987), which is however a book of reduced interest and dimensions.

43 The denunciation of Bahjat led to the case that, in 1992, caused ʿAlā' Ḥāmid to spend some months in jail as a result of a conviction. For a deeper analysis of the topic, see Tottoli, "Islam e libertà di espressione".

44 See for example M. Shalabī, *Ḥayāt Ibrāhīm* (Beirut n.d.), 478 pp. The volumes on all of the prophets are published by Dār al-Jīl.

45 Ismāʿīl, *Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān*, 88–92, uses the same arguments as ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Najjār; ʿĀṭif al-Zayn, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 245–9; al-Najjār, *Ta'rīkh al-anbiyā'*, 109–111; Khaṭṭāb, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 57–58; al-Shaʿrāwī, *Qiṣaṣ*, 515–9; Ṭanṭāwī, *al-Qiṣṣa fī l-Qur'ān*, 171–6; al-Laḥḥām, *Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān*, 79; ʿAbbās, *al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ānī*, 151; Dukhayyal, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 155–6; al-Kīlānī, *Fī mawkib al-nabiyyīn*, 205–9; Ṭanṭāwī, *al-Qiṣṣa fī l-Qur'ān al-karīm*, 171–6; Bahjat, *Anbiyā' Allāh*, 110. The argumentation of Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn, *Manhaj al-anbiyā' fī l-daʿwa ilā Allāh*, I, 197–206 is however traditional, as is that of Ḥāfiẓ, *al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ānī*, 97–104, that naturally opts for Ishmael.

46 Ismāʿīl, *Qaṣaṣ*, 295–6; cf. also ʿĀṭif al-Zayn, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 550–4, 585–9; Khaṭṭāb, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 140; al-Laḥḥām, *Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān*, 199–200; ʿAbbās, *al-Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ānī*, 354–5; Dukhayyal, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 408–10; Ṭanṭāwī, *al-Qiṣṣa fī l-Qur'ān al-karīm*, 646; Bahjat, *Anbiyā' Allāh*, 269; al-Najjār, *Ta'rīkh al-anbiyā'*, *38–39*, *236; al-Shaʿrāwī, Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, *IV*, *2192f., ignores the question completely. Virulent criticism of the traditions that link Qur'ānic passages with the Biblical story of Uriah had for example already been formulated by M. ʿA. al-S. al-Laythī Ǐwāẓ al-Qaṣrī, al-Qawl al-mubīn fī tafsīr baʿḍ al-āyāt al-wārida fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā' wa-al-mursalīn (Cairo n.d.), 21–4.*

47 Al-Ṭabarī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, ed. J. Badrān (Cairo 1994), 354–6.

48 For example Kīlānī, *Fī mawkib al-nabiyyīn*, II, 383–4; Ṭanṭāwī, *al-Qiṣṣa fī l-Qur'ān*, 540; Ismāʿīl, *Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān*, 264, but in introducing the story, p. 244, he says that it is a surprising account. See also Dukhayyal, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 256–73, who speaks of him as a prophet.

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