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The Evolution and Uses of the Stories of the Prophets

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Keynote Address: Achieving an Islamic Interpretation of *Qışaş al-Anbiyā*

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Editor's note

This is a lightly edited version of the keynote address Professor Nagel originally intended to deliver at the conference "Islamic Stories of the Prophets: Semantics, Discourse, and Genre" (Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale, Naples, October 14–15, 2015). Although he was unable to attend the conference, he has graciously granted us permission to include the paper as part of this issue of *Mizan: Journal for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations*.



Preliminary remarks

Some fifty years ago, one of my teachers, Professor Otto Spies, proposed that I write a doctoral dissertation on Wahb b. Munabbih and his part in the dissemination of the so-called *isrā`īliyyāt* in early Islamic literature and thought. Professor Spies himself had published a number of papers on literary motifs of Oriental origin and their reception in European story-telling. I am afraid he had something like that in mind when he spoke about Wahb b. Munabbih. But as soon as I had collected some hundreds of quotations of Wahb's alleged contributions to the *isrā`īliyyāt*, I began to feel uneasy as I became suspicious about the core of the subject.

Of course it turned out to be quite simple to detect the origins of most of the stories that Wahb had transferred from presumably Jewish (and Christian) sources into an Arab-Islamic context. I remember very well the seven volumes of Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews*, which did not move from my desk for almost one year. Perhaps a meticulously elaborated catalogue of Wahb's statements regarding the history of the pre-Islamic prophets and a carefully compiled list of the probable or even possible sources quoted by Wahb might have met the expectations of Professor Spies. But would all this work result in a real, measurable contribution to knowledge? And if so, what could be concluded from it with respect to the history of early Islamic thought? I apprehended that the intended study would not answer these crucial questions.

From the point of view of cultural history (*Kulturgeschichte*), which was predominant in German research on Islam in those days, a catalogue of parallels between the Jewish legends and the materials handed down by Wahb to Muslim story-tellers could be considered a sufficient result of such research. Yet in this regard, a result like this would not surpass the findings of Lidzbarski in his thesis published in 1893, *De prophetis quae dicuntur legendis arabicis*.¹

In Lidzbarski's short study, the author outlines the methods of identifying the origins of the materials presented in the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā`*, and gives some examples of how these materials became amalgamated with the stories told in the Qur'ān, which in the Muslim view, of course, passed for the 'original' versions. Nevertheless, due to the inconsistency of many of these versions, a great deal of the material deriving from outside was readily assimilated to the stock of Qur'ānic stories. From this process, a specific literary genre came into being, the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā`*.

As a simple catalogue of parallels would add nothing fundamentally new to Lidzbarski's work, I decided to reorient my project: I no longer took much interest in particular stories and their presumably Jewish or

¹ Mark Lidzbarski, *De Prophetis, quae dicuntur, legendis arabicis* (Leipzig, 1893).

Christian elements, but tried to describe the development of the *qışaş al-anbiyā'* as a specific type of Arab-Islamic literature.

The Qur'ānic *qışaş al-anbiyā'* as a mirror reflecting the biography of Muḥammad

Working on the literary history of the legends of the prophets in Islam, I came across some interesting information about a manuscript preserved in Alexandria. Its title was “The Stories of the Virtuous” (*Qışaş al-akhyār*), and Wahb b. Munabbih was credited with its authorship. After a long time, I succeeded in obtaining a microfilm copy. When I started to study it, I felt it necessary to pay much more attention to the specifically Islamic religious message of the contents; otherwise it might be impossible to find a firm grounding from whence to achieve a satisfactory interpretation of the substance of these “stories of the virtuous.”

For instance, as in the Bible, there are two reports here concerning the creation of Adam and Eve. What does that mean?² According to this manuscript, the transmission of the light of prophecy and the purity of Muḥammad's descent are prominent in the legends that Wahb is alleged to have told. These are essential subjects in the Sufi literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, but I was not aware of that fact at that time.³ Seeking only the Jewish and Christian sources of Wahb's material would not do justice to the matter of the *qışaş al-anbiyā'* as a subject of cultural history, I knew for sure; however, becoming more and more involved in research on the political history of the early centuries of Islam after I had finished my doctoral thesis, I no longer worried about that.

It was during my work on the history of the Abbasids that I began investigating different passages of the Qur'ān pertaining to the *ahl al-bayt*. The meaning of this expression, and its changing in accordance with the political ambitions of the groups who would use it, led me to perceive that many stories Muḥammad tells about his predecessors do not intend to inform the audience about their lives. In fact, these stories sometimes do not speak of anything else but the experiences of Muḥammad himself. He makes use of those biblical materials just in order to draw attention to those dramatic situations in which he finds himself, in which he considers himself to be captive to a unique fate.

Let us have a look at Sūrat Nūḥ: “Indeed, We sent Noah to his people (saying), Warn your people before there comes to them a painful punishment” (vs. 1). Noah obeyed the Lord's order, but his people did not take his admonitions seriously. He complained of his failure: “My Lord, indeed I invited my people (to truth)

² Tilman Nagel, “Die Qisas al-anbiya'. Ein Beitrag zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte” (Ph.D. diss., Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 1967), 168.

³ See for instance Abdullah Bosnevi, *Le traité Abdi Efendi al-Bosnawi: Matāli al-nūr al-sunnī al-munbī' an tahārat nasab al-nabī al-arabī*, ed. Josef Dreher (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, 2013), 55–68.

night and day. But my invitation did not increase them but in flight” (vss. 5–6) “Then I invited them publicly. Then I announced to them and also (confided) to them secretly” (vs. 9) that it was necessary to be thankful to Allāh, the Creator. But they did not accept what I said to them: “Because of their sins they were drowned and then put into the Fire” (vs. 25). And Noah said, “My Lord, do not leave upon the earth an inhabitant from among the disbelievers! My Lord, forgive me and my parents and whoever enters my house as a believer... And do not increase the wrongdoers except in destruction” (vs. 26, 28).

It is obvious that this *sūrah* does not actually relate the story of Noah and how he came to escape from being drowned in the Flood. Muḥammad seems to be sure that those people who are listening to him know everything about that. Muḥammad appeals to the audience to think about his message and then to arrive at the conclusion that it is high time to give up paganism and to become converts to the true religion. As for the research on the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* this would mean that it is—at least to a great extent—futile to look for the passages in the Bible or in other Jewish and Christian sources the Qur'ān might refer to in this or in that way. One should rather concentrate on elucidating the personal background which induces Muḥammad to recount a certain legend. In the early Arabic biographies on the Prophet there are many useful references that might be taken up for tackling this subject.

For instance, it is well known that in the last years before he had to leave Mecca, Muḥammad began to consider himself the reborn Abraham. *Sūrah* 2, which was revealed one and a half year after the *hijrah*, tells us that Abraham, after having built the Ka'bah, implores Allāh,

“Our Lord, accept this from us!... Our Lord, and make us people who turn their faces to You (i.e., Muslims) and make from our descendants a Muslim nation! Show us our rites and accept our repentance... Our Lord, and send among them a messenger from themselves who will recite to them Your verses and teach them the Book and wisdom and who will purify them” (Q Baqarah 2:127–129).

In fact, it is not Abraham who is speaking here. Nevertheless, this passage of *Sūrah* 2 will be preserved and repeated in the later *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*. It remains an element of the Islamic legends about Abraham, though it is not derived from Jewish origins, but sheds light on Muḥammad's self-interpretation in a certain situation during his career. I shall return to this point later on.

The life of Moses as told in the Qur'ān is a further interesting example of Muḥammad's use of biblical material. In this case, it is less obvious that Muḥammad deviates substantially from the traditional plot in order to insert his personal distress into the original story. In Q A'raf 7:104–105, we are told that Moses is sent to Pharaoh and his people. Moses boldly addresses the tyrant with these words: “I am a messenger from the Lord of the worlds. I am obliged not to say about Allāh but the truth. I have come to you with clear evidence from your Lord, so send with me the Children of Israel!” Moses has been entitled by Allāh to

produce some convincing miraculous signs that will make the disbelievers understand that Moses speaks the truth. For instance, he throws the staff he has in his hand to the ground and immediately it turns into a serpent. Frightened by this marvel, the eminent ones among Pharaoh's entourage say, "Indeed, this is a magician, who wants to expel you from your land" (Q 7:110).

In the Qur'ān, one comes across sufficient evidence for the Meccans' view that the messages Muḥammad announces to them consist of pure magic (e.g., Q 46:7). Furthermore, Muḥammad's Meccan enemies are said to be members of the council (*al-malā'*) of the city. In Q 7:109, it is Pharaoh's council (also *al-malā'*) that warns against the bad intentions of Moses. As is confirmed by Muslim sources and by research on the chronology of the revelations, Sūrah 7 was revealed about two years before Muḥammad's expulsion from Mecca. He had tried to find effective support in Ta'if, but these plans came to nothing. At the same time, he had succeeded in reestablishing his connections with the Medinan clan of Khazraj. His grandfather 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib (d. 578) had passed his childhood there, and Muḥammad himself had visited his Khazrajite relatives when he was a boy. Now, as is well documented in the sources, he made contacts with some Medinan pilgrims, mostly of Khazrajite origin, who promised to change their way of life according to the prescriptions Allāh stipulates in the Qur'ān. Actually Sūrah 7 has to be read in consideration of these events.

The crucial question Muḥammad confronted the Meccans with in those days was whether they were ready to compromise with him concerning a reform of the pilgrims' rites. Muḥammad demanded a fundamental change in accordance with monotheism, and the Meccans for their part could not agree to that, because it would have meant the breakdown of the complicated system of tribal relations upon which Mecca depended, for better or for worse.

In consideration of these circumstances, Pharaoh and his people were quite right in being suspicious of the intentions of Moses and of the consequences which might result from his message. Who will hold his own in Mecca? This question is the main subject in Sūrah 7. In its first part, Muḥammad relates the stories of Noah, Hūd, and Ṣāliḥ; their peoples finally had been punished for their disbelief. Then Muḥammad turns to Lot; his people proposed to expel Lot, their prophet, from the city, and a similar situation arose, when Shu'ayb summoned the inhabitants of Midian to give up their pagan rites.

Then follows the comparatively detailed report on Moses and Pharaoh, which demonstrates the same question: who will hold his own in Mecca? In Q 7:123, Muḥammad makes Pharaoh point to the sensitiveness this question has already attained in Mecca at that moment; Pharaoh reproaches his followers for sympathizing with Moses: "You believed in him, before I gave you permission. Indeed, this is a conspiracy" to expel the people from the city. The Egyptians do not rebel against Pharaoh, they even bear the punishments Allāh inflicts upon them, and finally their troops are drowned in the Red Sea. In Q 7:137, Allāh sums up what has been discussed in detail and repeats His promise: "And We caused the

people who had been oppressed, to inherit the eastern regions of the land and the western ones, which We had blessed...”

What is the result of this fugitive glance at some of the qur’ānic *qışaş al-anbiyā’*? They must not be interpreted as somewhat incomplete and clumsy repetitions of biblical legends, which were well known among the Jews and Christians of Late Antiquity. Instead of looking for the origins of the *qışaş* exclusively, one has to examine very carefully *how* Muḥammad makes use of this material. How did he refer to it in order to explain to his audience the role he felt himself authorized to play in Mecca? How did he tell the stories about Noah, Moses, Abraham, et al. to make sure that the Meccans understood the uniqueness of his mission, and might become willing to believe in Allāh and to subscribe to the fundamental political and social changes that would be concomitant to the acceptance of this belief? And last but not least, how were the legends made instrumental in instilling the fear of divine punishment to such an extent that disbelief would be abandoned? There is clear evidence in the Qur’ān showing that the Meccan pagans did not bother too much about his drastic warning. “Stories told by the forefathers,” they used to object (e.g., Q 6:25); stories that would not frighten them, because they never came true.

It is from such objections that we may infer the intentions Muḥammad must have had in mind when he appropriated the legends of his predecessors to himself. As for the research on the *qışaş al-anbiyā’* as an important part of Islamic literature, one is led to the problem of whether these special features of the qur’ānic *qışaş* are preserved in the different types of commentaries on the Qur’ān and in the books dealing with the *qışaş* that are written later on. May we not expect that these features become less obvious under the influence of the *isrā’īliyyāt*, which must need wipe out the traits that had specifically indicated Muḥammad’s personal fate?

The qur’ānic *qışaş al-anbiyā’* as reflecting a fundamental change in the religious tenets of Late Antiquity

The difference between the meaning of the legends in their Jewish or Christian contexts and their new meaning with respect to Muḥammad’s life on the one hand and the problem of the survival of this difference in the Islamic *qışaş* on the other should be considered as a subject of major interest. It does not pertain only to the *qışaş* as such, but also to the Muslim conceptions of the Prophet and his place in the cosmos, which is continuously created by Allāh. This remark leads us to a further question which touches upon the position of Islam within the religious history of Late Antiquity.

I shall tackle this problem by quoting a short passage from the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis 2:19 one reads, “And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every fowl in the air, and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that

was the name thereof.”⁴ Let us now have a look at Sūrah 2—called Sūrat al-Baqarah, the chapter of the cow. Allāh announces, “I will make a vicegerent upon the earth” (vs. 30). This divine intention rouses the objections of the angels, who ask, “Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we declare Your praise and sanctify You?” (cont’d.) Allāh refuses to accept the angels’ fear by referring to His superior wisdom: “I know what you do not know” (cont’d.) Sūrah 2 continues,

And He taught Adam the names—all of them. Then He showed (the created beings) to the angels and said, “Inform Me of the names of these, if you are truthful!” They answered “Exalted are You; we have no knowledge except what You have taught us.” (Q Baqarah 2:31–32)

Then Adam informs the angels of the names he has just been taught by Allāh (vs. 33).

The difference between the text of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur’ān is striking. In the Bible, Adam is requested to look at the created beings and to find for each of them a suitable name without any assistance. In the Qur’ān, the angels bear witness to the belief that created beings are neither entitled nor able to carry out anything of their own account. Working on the Islamic conception of Abraham some decades ago, I came across some treatises Philo of Alexandria wrote about major subjects dealt with in the Pentateuch. Studying these treatises, one is puzzled by the discovery that Philo shares important topics with the Qur’ān, whereas the meaning of these topics seems to be quite different in both sources.

As for the creation of Adam, Philo says in *De opificio mundi* that God presented all animals to Adam, for He wanted to know how Adam would name them. Of course God did not have any doubt about this, because He knows everything. Yet He was aware of the fact that He had endowed Adam with reason, which would make man capable of independent deliberation. God had endowed man with reason because He, the Creator, did not want to be responsible for evil and mischief together with man. For this reason, God examined Adam as a teacher would do, instigating the intellectual power of his pupil.⁵

Keeping these two versions in mind, we now turn to Abraham again. Recall that Abraham became the outstanding personage in the Qur’ān during the last years of the Prophet’s stay in Mecca. In Sūrat al-An’ām, which goes back to that time, Muḥammad gives a detailed report on Allāh’s designating Abraham to be His messenger.

The story is well known; I can tell it in a few words. Abraham severely criticizes his father Azar for worshipping idols instead of the One Lord. Looking at the sky, Abraham is guided to relevant and sound

⁴ KJV.

⁵ Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Koran* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1961), 53.

arguments that would enable him to defend his monotheistic faith. Abraham observes a star and supposes it to be the Lord, but when it sets, he becomes sure that it could not be the Creator, because He does not cease to exist, but rather continues his work. Beholding the moon and thereafter the sun, Abraham knew from experience that they, too, were not identical with the Lord. In this moment he turns his face towards the One who creates everything, and he denounces paganism. He abhors associating idols with the Lord any longer, and by refusing to do so he has become a *ḥanīf*, a man who is devoted to the Creator exclusively (Q An'ām 6:74–79).

At first sight one could infer from this report that it is Abraham himself who finds his way to monotheism. But this is not true. The observation of the phenomena of created nature will not guide man to believe in the oneness to God. “If He does not guide me, I shall remain one of the disbelievers,” Abraham admits (vs. 77). Paganism is disbelief because Allāh does not authorize polytheistic rites, we learn from the discussions Abraham has with his people (vs. 81). Monotheism is the true religion, because Allāh has authorized Abraham to proclaim it. Seeing the star, the moon, and the sun set is “the evidence We granted Abraham for refuting the error of his people,” according to what Allāh says in verse 83. These words refer to Q 6:75, where He has declared, “In this way, We demonstrate to Abraham dominion over heaven and earth, and We wished that he be one of those who are certain (about that).”

This story was of course not invented by Muḥammad. He might have learned about it from Christian hymns, which must have been very famous in Arabia at that time. The original texts were composed in Byzantine Greek or in Syriac. But the contents of those hymns were translated into Arabic, too, and were disseminated by orators and poets, who used to label themselves as *ḥanīfs*. Umayyah b. Abī'l-Ṣalt (d. ca. 630) was the most outstanding personage among them. Muḥammad himself probably was accused of receiving part of the Qur'ān from that milieu, a charge he rejected by pointing to the undeniable fact that the Qur'ān was a pure Arabic text (Q 16:103). During the last years he passed in Mecca he had to underline the Arabic features of the *sūrahs* revealed to him by Allāh.⁶

As for Abraham's knowledge of the Lord, we again go back to Philo of Alexandria, who exerts paramount influence on early Christian scholarship. There are two treatises Philo wrote on Abraham. One of them is quoted under the Latin title, *De migratione Abrahami*. There Philo describes Abraham's journey from the land of the Chaldaeans to Haran and afterwards from there to Canaan. This migration is interpreted by Philo as an ascent from confessing a pagan idea of God to purified monotheism. The Chaldaeans had been famous for their thorough knowledge of astrology, Philo asserts. They considered the stars to be the

⁶ The Meccans hoped to unveil his ignorance by confronting him with legends of Iranian origin. The leading clans had close relations with Ctesiphon at that time. Muḥammad answered with the stories he tells in Sūrah 18, and presumably with the story of Joseph, which he added to the Qur'ān in Medina (cf. Tilman Nagel, *Medinenische Einschübe in mekkanischen Suren* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995], 35ff.).

powers that rule the universe. There was nothing to allot good or evil to man besides the celestial bodies, they supposed.

Having left Chaldea meant that Abraham forsook that erroneous doctrine in order to search for truth. He went to Haran, a place that according to Philo led Abraham to turn the object of his reflection from the material universe into the interior of his mind. Philo argues that as a place-name Haran derives from the Hebrew word *hor*, which means cave or (figuratively) the eye-socket. Knowing God no longer depends on knowing the material world as such, but requires one to uncover good or evil as inhering in every phenomenal thing of this world and as exerting good or bad influence on every human being. In Haran, Abraham recognizes that it is man's spirituality that guides him to true monotheism and makes him disposed to depart to Canaan, the place of the final knowledge of God, which is related to the moral decisions man has to make between good and evil. In the second treatise on Abraham, *De Abrahamo*, Philo gives an abridged version of that story, but he does not leave any doubt as to the gist of it: whosoever wants to know the Lord, has to find his way out of the Chaldea of material perception, and then he has to set himself at liberty in the Haranian cave in order to reach true spiritual perception.⁷

Comparing Philo's treatises with Sūrah 6, one realizes that Muḥammad only tells us about the first part of Abraham's migration, when he leaves Chaldea. Furthermore, in the Qur'ān, it is underlined that it is Allāh who guides Abraham and that Abraham's reflections count for nothing, if their result is not authorized by Allāh. Knowledge of the Lord cannot be achieved by man's own initiative.

This causes us to look back at the report on Adam's creation in Sūrah 2. It was not Adam who wanted to specify the names of the created beings before the angels; rather, he was taught all of them when Allāh initiated the proceedings of the scene. Abraham's being guided to the true knowledge of the Creator and Adam's being taught the names of everything point to the same fundamental idea: Allāh is the single, solitary power in the universe and its only guiding force. His will and decree come true, and all human actions take place independently of any ethical intentions man might conceive.

In accordance with this conception of monotheism, Abraham has to leave Chaldea, but he does not have to continue his migration. Having realized that the celestial bodies are nothing more than created beings, Abraham turns his face to Allāh exclusively, as we are told in Q 6:79. He does so because he is a *ḥanīf*, who does not associate created beings with Allāh. In Sūrah 2, which again is entitled "The Cow," we learn that Abraham and his son build the Ka'bah, the most important sanctuary on earth, where man is summoned to repeat that ritual gesture of turning one's face exclusively to Allāh in order to testify before

⁷ For more details, see my contribution to the Festschrift for Martin Tamcke, "Juden, Christen und Muslime. Religionsgeschichtliche Betrachtungen," in Sidney H. Griffith and Sven Grebenstein (eds.), *Christsein in der islamischen Welt: Festschrift für Martin Tamcke zum 60 Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2015), 39–63.

Him that He is the only independent power in the universe—in short, to prove to be a Muslim (see Q 2:124–129; cf. Q 4:125). Jews and Christians would dispute among each other as to who might claim to be the true believers; one should tell them that the true believers are those who turn their faces to Allāh and to no one else (Q 2:112).

Why is the *sūrah* which declares Islam to be the only valid religion entitled “The Cow”? Trying to answer this question allows us to elucidate the distinctive features of nascent Islam within the religious world of Late Antiquity. One day, Allāh ordered the Jews to sacrifice a cow. The Jews reacted reluctantly, and it was only when Allāh had repeated His order to Moses that they were ready to obey. “They had come near to refuse (the sacrifice)” (Q 2:71). The *ḥanīfs* were sure that Allāh had become angry with the Jews and the Christians and therefore had cursed them. For that reason, the *ḥanīfs* were in search of a ritual which was suitable for their monotheism—especially because their rite must include the sacrifice of animals, they used to assert.⁸ In Q Ḥajj 22:34–36, Muḥammad announces that animals adorned for being sacrificed belong to the objects (*al-sha‘ā’ir*) used in Islamic worship.

The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity, Guy Stroumsa, the distinguished specialist in religious history, called his book on belief and ritual during the first centuries of the Christian era.⁹ It is Christianity which promoted the sublimation or spiritualization of animal sacrifices. The Byzantine Emperor Constans II, who reigned from 641 to 668, prohibited public animal sacrifices. This instance must be sufficient to shed some light on the background of the qur’ānic text and on the meager, yet instructive, source material on the *ḥanīfs*. They were pagans; this is the literal meaning of the word, which is of Syriac origin, and the Christians would consider them as pagans, though the *ḥanīfs* had been under monotheistic influence for an uncertain period of time.

The *ḥanīfs* themselves wanted to preserve some pristine rites, but they were yearning for a revelation which would assure them their deity approved of the ritual. They also were convinced that faith was not a matter of confession but a matter of birth. This conception became fundamental in Islam. Everybody is Muslim by birth, because it is Allāh who makes him grow in his mother’s womb, and it is due to his parents’ bad influence that he might convert to Judaism or Christianity.¹⁰ Muslims do not *confess* that there is no God but Allāh, they *bear witness* to that fact, following a pattern initiated by Allāh, who Himself

⁸ Tilman Nagel, *Mohammed: Leben und Legende* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008), 145, 290–296, 976ff.; idem, *Mohammed: Zwanzig Kapitel über den Propheten der Muslime* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2010), 79–82, 93–95 and French translation with introduction by Jean-Marc Tétaz, *Mahomet: Histoire d’un Arabe, invention d’un Prophète* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2012), 95–98, 109–112.

⁹ Guy Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹⁰ See A. J. Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la Tradition Musulmane* (8 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1936–1988), 7.110 (s.v. *ḥawwada*).

bears witness to the one and overwhelming truth that He is the single independent power in the universe that is permanently created by Him (Q 3:18).

Conclusion

The influence this dogma and its corollaries exerted on the qur'ānic conception of the history of the prophets is of paramount importance, as has been explained concerning Adam and Abraham. Combined with Muḥammad's practice to feel his own fate expressed in the biographies of his predecessors, this dogma of God's ongoing engagement with His creation functions as the formative element of the qur'ānic *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*.

Let me give you one more example. In the Christian hymns on Joseph, for instance in that one composed by Romanos Melodos, he is praised as the hero of chastity. Due to this characteristic, he passes for one of the personages anticipating Jesus. In Sūrat Yūsuf, the framework of the story is preserved, but it is Allāh who encourages Joseph in the decisive moment to keep to his purity; if Allāh had not done so, Joseph would have been seduced (Q Yūsuf 12:24, cf. 12:52). As for the relationship of this story to Muḥammad's life, one has to regard verse 92, which implies that reconciliation with the Meccan disbelievers is possible: "You shall not be reprimanded," Joseph says to his brothers, when they have come to Egypt and confess that they had done wrong.

In my opinion, in further research on the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, both the dogma of nascent Islam and the Prophet's use of the stories should be taken into consideration. In doing so, one will be guided to a firm foundation on which the history of the Islamic *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* can be erected. I am sure that this can only be done in close relationship with an analysis of the development of the theological conceptions of Islam on the one hand and with sufficient knowledge of the changing Muslim interpretations of the message of Muḥammad on the other. To sum up, I propose to accord the history of religious thought its fair share in research on the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*. Finally, there is a question which has to be kept in mind all the time: do the specific features Muḥammad conferred on his versions of the legends survive the influx of the *isrā'īliyyāt* or are they drowned in it?



About the author

Tilman Nagel is Professor Emeritus at the University of Göttingen. He is the author of dozens of articles and books, including the recent *Mohammed: Leben und Legende* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008) and *Allahs Liebling: Ursprung und Erscheinungsformen des Mohammedglauben* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008).

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