

The Story of Moses in Mamluk Cairo

Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī (906–22/1501–16),¹ the penultimate Mamluk sultan of Egypt and Syria, portrayed himself as a learned, multilingual, wise king.² His courtiers hailed him as a cyclical renewer of Islam (*mujaddid*),³ imparting a sacred aura to his reign. The present article deals with *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, or legends/stories/histories of biblical prophets,⁴ that were performed in his court in the Citadel of Cairo, particularly the story of Moses found in two unpublished Arabic texts from Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī’s “library.”⁵

My working hypothesis is that reception and transmission of these texts befitted the political discourse of the time and served to strengthen the sultan’s prestige. The performance of *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* and other literary productions in the royal court was part of the sultan’s efforts to reinforce his image and reaffirm his legitimacy.⁶ Following a condensed account of *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, I will depict the outlines of two unique manuscripts. One, preserved at the National Library of Israel, is a collection of legends and exegeses that were discussed during meetings at the sultan’s court.⁷ The second, a two-volume work titled

¹Christian Mauder, *In the Sultan’s Salon: Learning, Religion, and Rulership at the Mamlūk Court of Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 1501–1516)* (Leiden, 2021); Carl F. Petry, *The Mamlūk Sultanate: A History* (Cambridge, 2022).

²Robert Irwin, “The Political Thinking of the ‘Virtuous Ruler,’ Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (2008): 37–49.

³Ella Landau-Tasseron, “The ‘Cyclical Reform’: A Study of the Mujaddid Tradition,” *Studia Islamica* 70 (1989): 79–117; Hamid Algar, “The Centennial Renewer: Bediüzzaman Said Nursi and the Tradition of ‘Tajdid,’” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12, no. 3 (2001): 291–311; Maya Yazigi, “A Claim of Tajdid for the Sixth/Twelfth Century? al-Samʿānī, his Kitāb al-Ansāb and a Legacy Contested,” *Oriens* 39, no. 2 (2011): 174–76.

⁴This genre encompasses the stories of biblical prophets. It usually starts with the creation and ends with Muḥammad, who is the sole hero of the *sīrah*, a literary genre that is devoted exclusively to the Prophet of Islam. Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qurʾān and Muslim Literature* (London, 2002); and idem, *Studies in Islamic Traditions and Literature* (New York, 2023).

⁵Kristof D’hulster, *Browsing through the Sultan’s Bookshelves: Towards a Reconstruction of the Library of the Mamlūk Sultan Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 906–922/1501–1516)* (Göttingen, 2021).

⁶Cf. Jonathan Brack, “Theologies of Auspicious Kingship: The Islamization of Chinggisid Sacral Kingship in the Islamic World,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60, no. 4 (2018): 1143–71.

⁷Jerusalem, National Library of Israel Yahuda collection MS Arab 294. See Efraim Wust, *Catalogue of the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish Manuscripts of the Yahuda Collection of the National Library of*



“Al-‘Uqūd al-jawharīyah fī al-nawādir al-Ghawrīyah,” is preserved in the Süleymaniye Library in Istanbul.⁸ In the third part of this article, I will speculate on the role of these texts in evolving the sultan’s image.

INTRODUCTION

Islam is a biblical religion.⁹ Narratives of biblical prophets can be traced in the Quran, which serves as the foundation of a well-developed Islamic literary tradition.¹⁰ Stories (*qiṣṣah*) of the prophet Moses (*Mūsá*) are among the most popular.¹¹ His legend, which has been told in various ways by Jews,¹² Christians, and Muslims,¹³ portrayed him as a true believer who confronted idolaters¹⁴ and an intimate companion of God, who drew near him and spoke directly (*kalīm*) with him.¹⁵

Dozens of Quranic verses¹⁶ about Moses serve as the departure points for literary activities as far back as the early and middle Islamic periods (c. 750–1500).

Israel, vol. 1, ed. Raquel Ukeles with Sagit Butbul, Khader Salameh, and Yusuf al-Uzbeki (Leiden, 2016), 448–49.

⁸Istanbul, Süleymaniye Library, MSS Aya Sofya 3312 and 3313 (microfilm Arşiv no. 3991). See Christian Mauder and Christopher Markiewicz, “A New Source on the Social Gatherings (*Majālis*) of the Mamluk Sultan Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī,” *Al-‘Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* 24 (2016): 145–48.

⁹Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umarī, for example, compares the advance of the Mongols with the story of the villain-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and his conquest of Jerusalem. Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Yahyá Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umarī (700–50/1301–49), *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār*, ed. K. Jabūrī and M. al-Najm (Beirut, 2005), 27:152.

¹⁰Cf. Quran 2:87–88, 18:60–82; Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur’ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (New York, 2010).

¹¹The Mamluk period’s major collection is Ismā‘īl ibn ‘Umar Ibn Kathīr (701–74/1301–73), *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Farmāwī (Cairo, 1997). This is an anthology of stories of the prophets, even though Ibn Kathīr criticized the attractiveness of biblical stories among his fellow brethren; and see below.

¹²Samuel Krauss, “A Moses Legend,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s., 2, no. 3 (1912): 339–64.

¹³Brannon M. Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis* (London, 2002); Cornelia Schöck, “Moses,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden, 2003), 3:419–26; Vernon K. Robbins and Gordon D. Newby, “A Prolegomenon to the Relation of the Qur’ān and the Bible,” in *Bible and Qur’ān: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, ed. John C. Reeves (Leiden, 2004), 34 (they mention 137 references).

¹⁴Quran 4:164; 19:51–53; 20:80; ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar al-Bayḍawī al-Shīrāzī (685/1286?), *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-ta’wīl*, ed. M. al-Mar‘ashlī (Beirut, 1989), 4:34.

¹⁵Quran 7:143–45; cf. Julian Obermann, “Koran and Agada: The Events at Mount Sinai,” *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 58, no. 1 (1941): 23–48.

¹⁶Moses’s name is attested 136 times in the Quran. Surah 28 recites his history in detail. Cf. Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn Abū al-Faḥ Naṣr Allāh ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Athīr al-Jazarī al-Shāfi‘ī (558–637/1163–



These verses are especially prominent in the popular *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* compilations.¹⁷ Generations of Muslim scholars,¹⁸ historians, transmitters, and exegetes interpreted and disseminated these legends,¹⁹ and Mamluk authors were no exception.²⁰ Their literary production attests that Mamluk audiences were exposed to numerous, detailed legendary accounts of Moses's direct communication with God, as well as other tales.²¹

The appended translation of one of the manuscripts that I discuss²² illustrates the contents of the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* that Mamluk audiences received. It enables us to focus on two aspects of this genre: interpretation of the Bible in the late middle Islamic period and the role of biblical tales among late middle-period Muslims in Egypt and Bilād al-Shām.

BIBLICAL STORIES AND *ISRĀ'ĪLĪYĀT* UNDER THE MAMLUKS

Muslim writers gave the label *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* to stories—transmitted by chroniclers and literati—that presented legends of pre-Islamic prophets and people. How extensive the transmission of legends of prophets was can be deduced from the fact that they appear in exegeses of the Quran and hadith, chronicles, *adab* anthologies, *mirabilia* (*ʿajā'ib/gharā'ib*), and, of course, collections of *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*. From the first centuries of the Islamic era, such legends were disseminated by storytellers (*quṣṣāṣ*) and popular preachers (*wu'āz*)²³ to common people who gathered to listen to hortatory storytelling, which transmitted a rich tissue

1239), *Al-Mathal al-sā'ir fī adab al-kātib wa-al-shā'ir*, ed. Aḥmad al-Ḥūfī and Badawī Ṭabānah (Cairo, 1972), 3:131–32.

¹⁷Roberto Tottoli, *Vita di Mosè secondo le tradizioni islamiche* (Palermo, 1992), tells the story of Moses and Aaron and their deaths. He uses the accounts of Ibn Kathīr (both his *tafsīr* and *qīṣaṣ*), al-Kisā'ī (*qīṣaṣ*), Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (both his history and *tafsīr*), and al-Tha'ālibī (*qīṣaṣ*).

¹⁸Al-Muṭahhar ibn Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī (fl. ca. 350/960), *Al-Bad' wa-al-tārīkh* [Le livre de la création et de l'histoire; erroneously attributed to Abū Zayd Aḥmad ibn Sahl al-Balkhī], ed. Cl. Huart (Paris, 1903), 3:81; on this writer see C. Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and Hebrew Bible: from Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden, 1996), 48–50.

¹⁹Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī (387–454/997–1062), *The Stories of the Prophets*, Islamkundliche Untersuchungen Band 253, ed. Roberto Tottoli (Berlin, 2003), 131–60, composed a long chapter on Moses but does not narrate his death.

²⁰Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Walīd al-Turtūshī (451–520/1160–26), *Sirāj al-mulūk*, ed. M. F. Abū Bakr (Cairo, 1994), 1:287.

²¹Ibn Kathīr, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 379; in line with his anti-*isrā'īlīyāt* stand, rejects the Jewish interpretation of the story (*wa-ʿinda ahl al-kitāb . . . [wa-huwa] bāṭil*).

²²Jerusalem, National Library of Israel Yahuda collection MS Arab 294.

²³Jonathan Porter Berkey, *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle, 2001).



of verses from the Quran, hadith, and anecdotes (*nuktaḥ*).²⁴ That subjects of the Mamluk Sultanate were very familiar with such biblical stories²⁵ is supported by examination of contemporary literary production.

Another indication of the reputation of biblical “heroes” for Muslim audiences in Egypt and Bilād al-Shām from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries are short epistles that focus on the story of a single prophet, which supplemented the comprehensive anthologies of the prophets’ miracles. Among others, Mamluk society was exposed to texts narrating the merits of Moses. As will be shown below, Moses and his tomb often appeared in such works. The “evergreen” legends of al-Khiḍr provide a comparable demonstration.²⁶ Joseph’s story is another example that testifies to the familiarity of Mamluk society with biblical fables (*isrāʿīlīyāt*).²⁷ The diffusion and reception of his myth can be traced even through Mamluk political discourse, serving as a popular explanation for the exclusive political system of the Mamluk Sultanate.²⁸ It provided a biblical precedent to the role of newcomers in the political discourse of the Mamluk military aristocracy.²⁹

Muslim scholars often used literary “evidence” to establish the theory of *kerygma*, namely that biblical prophets “knew” about the future coming of the

²⁴ A colorful account is provided on night 757 of the *Arabian Nights*, which narrates: “there is an excellent sheikh here who takes his seat every day at about this time and tells splendid stories. . . . He found him to be an old man with a handsome face who was seated on a chair telling his stories to the people. The attendee (*mameluke*) sat down close to him to listen, until at sunset, when the storyteller had finished and the audience had dispersed.” Malcolm C. Lyons with Ursula Lyons, trans., and Robert Irwin, intro. and anno., *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1,001 Nights* (London, 2010), 3:93 (although a-historical, the story merits attention).

²⁵ Walid A. Saleh, *In Defense of the Bible: A Critical Edition and an Introduction to al-Biqāʿī’s Bible Treatise* (Leiden, 2008); Josef W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford, 2002); Awad Halabi, *Palestinian Rituals of Identity: The Prophet Moses Festival in Jerusalem, 1850–1948* (Austin, 2023), 5–9.

²⁶ Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (773–852/1372–1449), *Al-Zahr al-naḍīr fī ḥāl al-Khiḍr* (Kuwait, 2004); and see n. 92, below.

²⁷ For a popular tale, presumably from Mamluk Egypt, see R. Y. Ebied and M. J. L. Young, ed. and trans., *The Story of Joseph in Arabic Verse: The Leeds Arabic Manuscript 347* (Leiden, 1975). On a French map from the nineteenth century, the grand hall (*al-īwān al-kabīr*) of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad in the citadel on the hill is identified as *le Palais divan de Joseph*. Nasser O. Rabbat, *The Citadel of Cairo: a New Interpretation of Royal Mamlūk Architecture* (Leiden, 1995), 45; idem, “Mamlūk Throne Halls: Qubba or Iwan?,” *Ars Orientalis* 23 (1993): 201–18.

²⁸ Koby Yosef, “Mamluks and Their Relatives in the Period of the Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517),” *MSR* 16 (2012): 55–69.

²⁹ This metaphor continued to be in use centuries after the sultanate had been defeated by the Ottomans. Bernard K. Freamon, *Possessed by the Right Hand: The Problem of Slavery in Islamic Law and Muslim Cultures* (Leiden, 2013), 239.



prophet Muḥammad. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, for example, transmits Islamic exegetical traditions concerning the biblical verse “The Lord came from Sinai, and dawned from Se‘ir upon us; He shone forth from Mount Paran,”³⁰ as prophesying the missions of Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad. Sinai (Sinā; Ṭūr Sīnīn) is the mountain where God spoke with Moses.³¹

Polemical works too cast light on the popularity of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* among Mamluk audiences.³² For example, the thirteenth-century scholar al-Ṭūfī³³ states that

Muslim scholars who dealt with the story [qiṣṣah] of Moses strictly followed the narrative of the Quran. They communicated with the People of the Book and profited from their wisdom. Indeed, some among these Jewish and Christian savants converted to Islam and they confirmed the Muslims’ ideology.³⁴

Al-Ṭūfī’s text projects the author’s profound knowledge of the Bible and of early Islamic texts onto Judaism and Christianity.³⁵ Taking the verses of the Quran that narrate the story of Moses and his encounter with the daughters of Jethro (Shu‘ayb)³⁶ at the waters of Midian,³⁷ he tells of the relations between

³⁰Deuteronomy 33:2.

³¹Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah al-Dimashqī al-Ḥanbalī (691–751/1292–1350), *Hidāyat al-ḥayārā fī ajwibat al-yahūd wa-al-naṣārā*, ed. Bakr ibn ‘Abd Allāh Bū Zayd (Mecca, 2008), 123–24, 155–57; and see Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymīyah al-Ḥaranī (661–728/1263–1328), *Al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-masiḥ*, ed. ‘Alī Ḥasan Nāṣir (Riyadh, 1999), 5, 197–99.

³²This polemical approach reflects Muslims’ efforts to spread the word of Islam among the People of the Book (*al-kitābīyūn*). Lejla Demiri, “Ḥanbalite Commentary on the Bible: Analysis of Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī’s (d. 716/1316) *al-Ta‘līq*,” in *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden, 2007), 295–313.

³³Demiri, “Ḥanbalite Commentary on the Bible,” 304.

³⁴Najm al-Dīn Abū al-Rabī‘ al-Ṭūfī al-Ḥanbalī (657–716/1259–1316), *Al-Intiṣārāt al-islāmīyah fī kashf shabh al-naṣrānīyah*, ed. Sālīm ibn Muḥammad al-Qarnī (Riyad, 1999), 328–29.

³⁵Lejla Demiri, *Muslim Exegesis of the Bible in Medieval Cairo: Najm al-Din al-Tufi’s (d. 716/1316) Commentary on the Christian Scriptures—a Critical Edition and Annotated Translation with an Introduction* (Leiden, 2013).

³⁶Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymīyah al-Ḥaranī, *Jāmi‘ al-rasā’il*, ed. M. R. Sālīm (Cairo, 1969), 63, states categorically that “in the Jews’ Torah and the Christians’ Gospels he was called Yithrun, and they have no record of the prophet Shu‘ayb in the Torah”; Clifford Edmund Bosworth, “The Qur’ānic Prophet Shu‘aib and Ibn Taimiyya’s Epistle concerning him,” *Le Muséon* 88 (1974): 425–40 (reprinted in his *Medieval Arabic Culture and Administration* [London, 1982], art. V); Roberto Tottoli “Shu‘ayb,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, 4:605–6.

³⁷Quran 28:22–28.



the refugee and the elderly messenger.³⁸ In another work, he narrates Moses's vision of the burning bush on the side of the mountain and reports also on God's exchange with Moses during the forty nights on Mount Sinai,³⁹ as well as on the story of the Children of Israel and the golden calf.⁴⁰ By discussing the story of Moses in the Bible and by airing critical views regarding the authenticity of the Torah version in the hands of the Jews, al-Ṭūfī assumed that the tale was advancing the ultimate victory of Islam over the other biblical religions.⁴¹

These various accounts of the lives and miraculous deeds of revered prophets had a dual significance, as they offered both entertainment and organization of the records of the past.⁴² Taken as a whole, the stories served as a powerful medium through which ideas could be projected and sacred figures idealized.⁴³ The narrators often named their sources. This literary technique indicates that the Muslim audiences who were exposed to the tales had a certain degree of knowledge, even if vague, of the biblical legends.⁴⁴ The transmission of these legendary stories was employed as a vehicle to convey social and religious messages and disseminate and inculcate Islamic ethical and cultural values in society.⁴⁵ Sufis, for example, depicted Moses as a prototype of the spiritual wayfarer.⁴⁶

Despite the popularity of these biblical stories, or indeed because of it, they were often received skeptically by highly admired Muslim scholars.⁴⁷ The ris-

³⁸Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī, *Al-Intiṣārāt al-islāmīyah*, 325–26.

³⁹Quran 2:51–54; cf. Exodus 32:19–24.

⁴⁰Demiri, *Muslim Exegesis*, 474 (Arabic)/475 (English), 478 (Arabic)/479 (English).

⁴¹Ibid., 270 (Arabic)/271 (English); and see our notes on the *isrā'īliyyāt* below.

⁴²In line with a narrative strategy that can also be identified in Mamluk sacred biographies of the Prophet Muḥammad these compilations often named their sources and earlier works. 'Abd al-Raḥīm ibn al-Ḥusayn al-'Irāqī (725–806/1325–1404), *Al-Bā'ith 'alā al-khilāṣ min ḥawādith al-quṣṣāṣ* (Beirut, 2001), 209–10 (quoting Jalāl al-Dīn Abū al-Faraj 'Abd al-Raḥman ibn 'Alī Ibn al-Jawzī [510–97/1117–1201], *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ wa-al-mudhakkirīn* [Beirut, 1988], 329).

⁴³Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, 5, 89.

⁴⁴Abū al-Faṭḥ Shihāb al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Ibshīhī (790–850/1388–1466), *Al-Mustaṭraf fī kull fann mustaṭraf*, ed. Ibrāhīm Ṣālīḥ (Beirut, 1999), 1:340 (*nuqila fī al-āthār al-isrā'īliyah*).

⁴⁵H. E. Boeschoten and J. O'Kane, eds., *Al-Rabghuzi's The Stories of the Prophets Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā': An Eastern Turkish Version* (Leiden, 2015), XIII.

⁴⁶Paul Nwyia, *Exégèse Coranique et Langage Mystique Nouvel: Essai sur le Lexique Technique des Mystiques Musulmans* (Beirut, 1970), 83, 180–81; Annabel Keeler, "Moses from a Muslim Perspective," in *Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians and Muslims in Conversation*, ed. Norman Solomon, Richard Harries, and Tim Winter (New York, 2005), 61–63; Th. Emil Homerin, "Another Prophetic Paradigm: Moses in Sufi Verse," in *A Legacy of Learning: Essays in Honor of Jacob Neusner*, ed. Alan J. Avery-Peck, Bruce Chilton, William Scott Green, and Gary G. Porton (Leiden, 2014), 360–71.

⁴⁷Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge, 1993), 23–24, 34–38; Jonathan Porter Berkey, "Storytelling, Preaching, and Power in Mamluk Cairo," *MSR* 4 (2000): 53–73; idem,



ing wave of writings directed against the circulation of extra-biblical prophetic legends provides further evidence for the popularity of the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* in Mamluk society.⁴⁸ Prominent Damascene authors, including Ibn Taymīyah⁴⁹ and Ibn Kathīr,⁵⁰ sought to delegitimize this genre.⁵¹

Ibn Kathīr, for example,⁵² repeatedly implored storytellers to stop transmitting stories that were not corroborated by the “correct” (i.e., his) interpretation of the Quran and supported by what he argued were “reliable” hadith traditions. He stressed the damaging potential of distorted (*taḥrīf*) legends disseminated by Jews and Christians. According to him, the Jews’ current version of the Torah was not identical with the scripture that was sent down to Moses.⁵³ Dealing with a tradition that explains a line in Āyat al-Kursī (Quran 2:255), for example, he dismissed the hadith that connects the Quranic verse with Moses’s personal conversation with God, bluntly stating:

This is clearly an inadequate hadith [*gharīb*, i.e., with only a single reporter at some stage of the *isnād*], and it is almost certainly an *isrāʾīliyah* [fairy tale].⁵⁴

Such anti-*isrāʾīliyat* positions actually affirm the popularity of legends of the prophets across all echelons of Mamluk society.⁵⁵ Moreover, the positive reception of “Tales of the Prophets” despite scholars’ critical views of the narrators of these stories indicates that their transmission and performance served as a link between the religious establishment and the urban masses. It is also evident that, while some Mamluk Muslim jurists loudly voiced their opposition to the

Popular Preaching, 32, 40–43.

⁴⁸For earlier voices see al-Maqdisī, *Al-Badʿ wa-al-tārīkh*, 3:82 (ll. 3–6, Arabic).

⁴⁹The story of Shuʿayb in Ibn Taymīyah, *Jāmiʿ al-rasāʾil*, 65–66.

⁵⁰Erik S. Ohlander, “Ibn Kathīr,” in *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography: 1350–1850*, ed. Roger M. A. Allen, Joseph Edmund Lowry, and Devin J. Stewart (Wiesbaden, 2009), 154.

⁵¹Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah al-Dimashqī al-Ḥanbalī, *Iʿlām al-muwaqqiʿīn ʿan rabb al-ʿālamīn*, ed. M. Al Salmān (Dammam, 2002), 2:168 (“*raʾayt fī baʿḍ al-tawārīkh al-qadīmah ʿan aḥd quḍāt al-ʿadl min banī isrāʾīl*”).

⁵²Abū al-Fidāʾ Ismāʿīl Ibn Kathīr (701–74/1301–73), *Al-Bidāyah wa-al-nihāyah*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Cairo, 1998), 2:436.

⁵³Compare with Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī in Demiri, *Muslim Exegesis*, 438 (Arabic)/439 (English); Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī, *Al-Intiṣārāt al-islāmīyah*, 300, 328.

⁵⁴Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa-al-nihāyah*, 2:162, idem, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, ed. S. M. Qamīḥah (Mecca, 1999), 2:678–79.

⁵⁵Jonathan P. Berkey, “Popular Culture under the Mamluks: A Historiographical Survey,” *MSR* 9 (2005): 140.



isrāʿīlīyāt,⁵⁶ they largely failed to win over the masses⁵⁷ or convince the authorities. The construction of shrines that carried the names of legendary icons further supports this argument. Thus, at this stage of our knowledge, we may conclude that stories of the prophets “migrated” during the Mamluk period from the religio-historical texts to a “worldlier” sphere.

MOSES’S TOMB

The reputation of pre-Islamic prophets can be traced not only in literary sources but also in the construction of shrines and other architectural relics, which cast light on biblical sacred topographies within the Mamluk realm.⁵⁸ Mamluk authors transmitted early (i.e., Abbasid period) legends about biblical prophets who addressed the pre-Islamic people of Bilād al-Shām. The sacred geography of this territory that they portrayed reflects the popular adoration of these figures and informs the pilgrimages to their shrines. In addition to Moses’s tomb, one might mention in this regard the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron,⁵⁹ the Nebi Rubin shrine south of Jaffa,⁶⁰ and sacred sites associated with his father, Jacob.⁶¹ Baybars, the de facto founder of the Mamluk sultanate, initiated the construc-

⁵⁶Jalāl al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Rahmān al-Suyūṭī (849–911/1445–1505), *Tahdhīr al-khawwāš min akāthīb al-quṣṣāš*, ed. Muḥammad L. al-Ṣabbāgh (Beirut, 1984), 209–10 (quoting Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-quṣṣāš*, 329). This technique indicates not only the reception of past tradition; it was manipulated to voice critical remarks that were not always received favorably.

⁵⁷ʿAbd al-Rahīm ibn Ḥusayn al-ʿIrāqī (725–806/1325–1404), *Al-Bāʿith ʿalā al-khalāš min ḥawādith al-quṣṣāš*, ed. Muḥammad Luṭfī al-Ṣabbāgh (Beirut, 2001), 70–71 (argues that storytellers should obtain permission from the rulers); al-Suyūṭī, *Tahdhīr al-khawwāš min akāthīb al-quṣṣāš*, 73–74 (who was familiar with al-ʿIrāqī’s book, calls them the common people, rabble, women and riffraff).

⁵⁸Baybars, to provide a single example here, ordered the construction of a commemoration monument at ʿAyn Jālūt, a place associated with biblical symbolism: it was said to be the location where David had killed Goliath. Exegeses of the Quran linked the location also to the battle that Gideon had fought to deliver the Israelites from Midian and his people. Denise Aigle, “Legitimizing a Low-Born, Regicide Monarch: The Case of the Mamlūk Sultan Baybars and the Ilkhans in the 13th Century,” in *Representing Power in Ancient Inner Asia: Legitimacy, Transmission and the Sacred*, ed. I. Charleux, R. Hamayon, and G. Delaplace (Bellingham, WA, 2009), 61–94; I will consider this last point in the next section.

⁵⁹Ellen Kenney, *Power and Patronage in Medieval Syria: The Architecture and Urban Works of Tankiz al-Nasiri* (Chicago, 2009), 81–153.

⁶⁰Mahmoud Yazbak, “The Muslim Festival of Nabi Rubin in Palestine: From Religious Festival to Summer Resort,” *Holy Land Studies* 10, no. 2 (2011): 169–98.

⁶¹Guy le Strange, *Palestine under the Muslims* (London, 1890), 412, 465, 482.



tion of shrines in locations linked with the biblical prophets.⁶² In the desert, not far from the Jordan River, the Dead Sea, and Jerusalem, this sultan built a large compound to commemorate Moses's grave.⁶³ Not all agreed with this imagination of the sacred topography of Bilād al-Shām, and such dissension is found in the heated debate regarding the identification of Moses's tomb.

The incompatible explanations of traditions narrating the miraculous night journey (*isrāʾ*) of the Prophet Muḥammad clearly reflect the conflicting interpretations of the geographical dimensions of Moses's story. Some medieval Muslim scholars argued that Muḥammad stopped at the tomb of Moses and visited his grave.⁶⁴ Moreover, despite the Mamluk authorities' initiative to enhance the importance of the holy shrine near Jericho, this claim was rejected by several contemporary, i.e., Mamluk, Muslim scholars,⁶⁵ who questioned the commonly perceived location of Moses's tomb and identified relics of Moses in other locations.

According to al-Harawī (d. 611/1215), for example, the eastern minaret of the Great Mosque of Damascus, which is said to be the White Minaret from which Jesus will descend, contains a piece of the rock that Moses struck and from which twelve springs gushed (Quran 7:160).⁶⁶ Abū Ishāq Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Firkāḥ al-Fazārī al-Shāfiʿī (660–729/1262–1329) portrays the clash of opinions concerning the site.⁶⁷ In a short epistle entitled “Tabyīn al-amr al-qadīm al-murwī fī taʿyīn qabr al-kalīm (Clarifying the old traditions that

⁶²Y. Frenkel, “Baybars and the Sacred Geography of *Bilad al-Sham*: A Chapter in the Islamization of Syria's Landscape,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 25 (2001): 153–70.

⁶³Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī Ibn Ṭūlūn al-Ṣāliḥī (1485–1536/880–953), “Tuḥfat al-ḥabīb fimā warad bi-al-kathif,” Leiden University Library MS Arab 2512 (copied 936/1530), fol. 5a; Moshe Sharon, *Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum Palaestinae* (Leiden, 2004), 3:102–3 (Dayr al-Qalt); Reuven Amitai, “Some Remarks on the Inscription of Baybars at Maqam Nabi Musa,” in *Mamlūks and Ottomans: Studies in Honour of Michael Winter*, ed. David J. Wasserstein and Ami Ayalon (London, 2006), 45–53; Hana Taragan, “Holy Place in the Making: Maqām al-Nabī Mūsā in the Early Mamlūk Period,” *Aram* 19 (2007): 621–39; Aigle, “Legitimizing a Low-Born, Regicide Monarch,” 6.

⁶⁴Khalīl ibn Kaykaldī al-ʿAlāʾī (694–761/1294–1359), “Dhikr kalīm Allāh Mūsá,” in his *Majmūʿ rasāʾil al-hāfiẓ al-ʿAlāʾī*, ed. Wāʾil M. B. Zahrān (Cairo, 2008), 47–49.

⁶⁵Najm al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm Ibn Jamāʿah al-Maqdisī al-Shāfiʿī (833–901/1429–96), *Al-Durr al-nazīm fī akhbār Mūsá al-kalīm*, ed. M. ʿA. M. al-ʿIlū (Beirut, 2007), 301–3.

⁶⁶J. W. Meri, *A Lonely Wayfarer's Guide to Pilgrimage* [Arabic edition and English translation of al-Harawī's *Kitāb al-ishārāt*] (Princeton, 2004), 32.

⁶⁷His booklet on Jerusalem was translated by Charles A. Matthews, *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 14 (1934): 284–93, 15 (1935): 51–87; and idem, *Palestine—Mohammedan Holy Land* (New Haven, 1949).



report on the exact location of Moses's tomb"),⁶⁸ the jurist analyzes a number of traditions regarding the death of Moses and the location of his grave, concluding that it must be located in the Qadam Mosque near Damascus:

If the seeker of truth will read this tradition and all the documentation that I collected in this booklet, he will not hesitate to conclude that the tomb of Moses is the al-Qadam Mosque in Damascus. This is based upon the belief that what was well known in the remote past is closer to the truth than later sayings. If this is his deduction he should visit the al-Qadam Mosque, be involved with it, and contribute to its maintenance. By calling at the place he comes closer to God.⁶⁹

By contrast, Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn Ṭūlūn al-Ṣāliḥī (1485–1536/880–953), in “Tuḥfat al-ḥabīb fīmā warada bi-al-kathīf,”⁷⁰ who quotes Ibn al-Firkāḥ al-Fazārī and who visited (*ziyārah*) the al-Qadam mausoleum in the 920s/1514–23, places the tomb at the Red Hill (*al-kathīb al-aḥmar*).⁷¹ Moreover, the question of the location of Moses's tomb was not settled even later during the Ottoman period.⁷² Nevertheless, these conflicting opinions did not dissuade Muslim pilgrims from visiting the remarkable shrine near Jericho, especially during the spring.⁷³ Muḥammad ibn Khidr al-Rūmī (fl. 981/1574) noted that near there visitors would find the tombs of Joshua, who had been Moses's lieutenant, and Ibrāhīm al-Rā'ī, who had served as Moses's shepherd.⁷⁴

MUNĀJĀT MŪSĀ

A significant segment of the cluster of traditions concerning Moses's mission and history focuses on the prophet's personal conversations with God (*munājāt*).⁷⁵

⁶⁸Jerusalem, National Library of Israel Yahuda collection MS Arab 809 (copied in AH 1044/1036–37).

⁶⁹Ibid., fol. 5v.

⁷⁰Leiden University Library MS Arab 2512 (copied 936/1530), fol. 5b; on it see Jan Just Witkam, *Inventory of the Oriental Manuscripts of the Library of the University of Leiden, Manuscripts Or. 2001–Or. 3000* (Leiden, 2008), 3:150.

⁷¹Ibn Ṭūlūn al-Ṣāliḥī, “Tuḥfat al-ḥabīb,” fol. 6a.

⁷²J. Sadan, “Le Tombeau de Moïse à Jéricho et à Damas,” *Review des études islamiques* 49 (1981): 59–99; Meri, *A Lonely Wayfarer's Guide to Pilgrimage*, 26, 40.

⁷³Sirāj al-Dīn Abū Ḥafs 'Umar ibn 'Alī ibn al-Mulaqqin al-Shāfi'ī (723–804/1323–1401), *Al-Tawḍīḥ li-sharḥ al-jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. Khālīd al-Rabbāṭ and Jum'ah Fathī (Beirut, 2008), 10:47.

⁷⁴*Al-Mustaḥṣā fī faḍl ziyārāt al-Masjid al-Aqṣā*, ed. Mashhūr al-Ḥabbāzī (Jerusalem, 2011), 213–16.

⁷⁵Abū Ishāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Tha'ālābī al-Nisabūrī al-Shāfi'ī (d. 427/1035), *Arā'is al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā', or, Lives of the Prophets*, trans. William M. Brinner (Leiden, 2002),



The *Munājāt Mūsá*—the legends about the communication, the murmured dialogue⁷⁶ between the prophet and God—is not a work’s title but a literary subgenre (in Arabic, Persian, and other languages)⁷⁷ popular among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim audiences.⁷⁸

In these legends, Moses is portrayed as a brave man who did not hesitate to bargain with the Almighty and with the Angel of Death (‘Izrā’īl).⁷⁹ During these deliberations he learned about the future of his people, the topography of the Holy Land, which he was barred from entering, and the date of his death. The stories about the moment of his demise clearly delineate the intimacy between God and Moses. God agreed to inform Moses as to his last moment, and is even said to modify the timeline of this event. The Angel of Death reluctantly allowed Moses to visit his family and postponed the seizure of his soul.⁸⁰ Furthermore,

410 (from Wahb ibn Munabbih); Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Nuwayrī (677–733/1278–1333), *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab* (Cairo, 1923), 1:326; “*Munājāt Mūsá* in al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Aḥmad *Kitāb Aḥwāl al-qiyyamah*,” in *Muhammedanische Eschatologie: nach der Leipziger und der Dresdner Handschrift zum ersten Male; Arabisch und Deutsch mit Anmerkungen*, ed. Moritz Wolff (Leipzig, 1872), 74 (Arabic)/132 (German).

⁷⁶The concept of intimate dialogue with the Almighty was well-accepted among Sufi circles and became popular among the masses who believed in the power of saints’ supplications to God. Omar Ali de Unzaga, “The Conversation between Moses and God in the Epistles of the Pure Brethren,” in *Al-Kitab: La sacralité du texte dans le monde de l’Islam*, ed. D. de Smet, G. de Callatay, and J. M. F. van Reeth (Brussels, 2004), 371–87; Barbara Roggema, “The Intimate Conversations of God with Moses on Mount Sinai (*Munājāt Mūsá*): An Apocryphon from Islam to Christianity to Judaism,” in *Dialogues and Disputes in Biblical Disguise from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, ed. Péter Tóth (New York, 2022), 190–213.

⁷⁷Isaac H. Hall, “The Colloquy of Moses on Mount Sinai,” *Hebraica* 7, no. 3 (1891): 161–77; Lazarus Goldschmidt, *Die abessinischen Handschriften der Stadtbibliothek zu Frankfurt am Main* (Berlin, 1897), 21–22 (no. 7); Vera Basch Moreen, “A Supplementary List of Judaeo-Persian Manuscripts,” *The British Library Electronic Journal* 21 (1995): 74; Steven Kaplan, *Les Falashas* (Brepols, 1990), 97–105; idem, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1995), 104 (*nagara mushe*); Karla R. Suomala, “The Colloquy of Moses on Mount Sinai: Where Syriac Christianity meets Islamic Spain and Africa between the 16th and 19th centuries,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 8 (2005): 27–39.

⁷⁸J. Sadan and N. Basel, “Some Fragments of Judaeo-Arabic Poetry (*Munajat Musa?*),” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 32 (2006): 213–46.

⁷⁹Quran 32:11 (*malak al-mawt*); S. R. Burge, *Angels in Islam: Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī’s al-Ḥabā’ik fī akhbār al-malā’ik* (New York, 2012), 36–37.

⁸⁰Traditions on Moses’s conversations before his death circulated in Mamluk Cairo and Damascus (Abū Zakarīyā Muḥyī al-Dīn Yaḥyá ibn Sharaf al-Dīn al-Nawawī al-Shāfi‘ī (631–76/1233–77), *Al-Minhāj fī sharḥ ṣaḥīḥ Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj* (Amman, 2000), 1450 (no. 2372); Sirāj al-Dīn Abū Ḥafs ‘Umar ibn ‘Alī Ibn al-Mulaqqin al-Shāfi‘ī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’ wa-manāqib al-qabā’il min al-Tawḥīd li-sharḥ al-jāmi’ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. Aḥmad H. M. ‘Uthmān (Mecca, 1998), 187–92 (quotes al-Tha‘ālabī); Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Fath al-bārī bi-sharḥ ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Nāṣir al-



Moses was not alone during this moment. Several traditions report that Gabriel and other angels dug his grave and accompanied him while he lay in it.⁸¹

This legendary account of Moses's death stresses his unique character and achievements: his soul left his body miraculously,⁸² at the moment of his heroic death, he handled the fruit of Eden, and even the process of his burial is extraordinary—he was laid to rest by the angels. Despite these indications of his unique rank, the Muslim narrative emphasizes his position as a regular, mortal human being. According to this worldview, all the prophets, including Muḥammad, were mortal. This was primarily a dogma employed in religious polemics against the Christian belief in Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Nevertheless, Muslim sources quite often quote the tradition that says that after forty days in the grave, prophets are resurrected.⁸³

QĀNṢŪH AL-GHAWRĪ'S SOIRÉES (MAJĀLIS)

The inhabitants of the citadel were not strangers to court assemblies (*majālis*). Chronicles and administrative manuals cast light on these events and on the duties of the sultan as “lord of the audiences.” During these *majālis*, homiletic readings and storytelling were performed,⁸⁴ and reciting aloud constituted an integral part of events. The importance of these gatherings persuaded sultans, even as early as Baybars, to invest in the construction and maintenance of a royal reception hall in the citadel of Cairo.⁸⁵

The sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī followed this royal tradition and invested considerable effort and money in building his image accordingly. Essential components in his self-representation were his linguistic skills and his wide-ranging knowledge. Chronicles written close to his time relate stories about the gatherings at his court, where his wisdom was impressively displayed, and describe

Burak (Riyadh, 2005), 8:7; Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, 55. The authenticity of the tradition about Moses and the Angel of Death is debated among contemporary Muslim scholars: Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Al-Sunnah al-nabawīyah bayna ahl al-fiqh wa-ahl al-ḥadīth* (Cairo, 1989), 34–36.

⁸¹ Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Tuḥfat al-nubalāʾ min qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, ed. ʿAbbās Ghunaym (Cairo, 1998), 373–75 (a summary of Ibn Kathīr, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*).

⁸² Rachel Havrelock, “The End of Moses,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 90 (2019): 257–70 (which includes references to the contemporary situation).

⁸³ Muqātil ibn Sulaymān al-Balkhī (80–150/700–67), *Tafsīr*, ed. A. M. Shaḥātah (Beirut, repr. 2003), 3:78 (Quran 21:33); al-ʿAlāʾī, “Dhikr kalīm Allāh Mūsá,” 36; Abū al-Bakr Aḥmad ibn Ḥusayn Bayhaqī (384–458/994–1066), *Ḥayāt al-anbiyāʾ baʿda wafātihim*, ed. Aḥmad ibn Aṭīyah al-Ghāmīdī (Medina, 1993), 70–77.

⁸⁴ These terms are used and debated by Linda G. Jones, *The Power of Oratory in the Medieval Muslim World* (Cambridge, 2012), 15–20.

⁸⁵ Rabbat, “Mamlūk Throne Halls,” 201.



him as an active participant in these assemblies, adding new information and novel interpretations, contributions that were highly admired.⁸⁶ Courtiers in his service compiled books for the sultan's "library" (*bi-rasm*), and they and others presented him with beautifully written and decorated books.

The stories of the prophets comprised an important element in the books that were presented to Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī or performed during the *majālis*. This should not surprise readers of Mamluk-period texts, which often refer to biblical episodes. This is visible in the insertion of a tale of "one of God's servants" into the account about Moses.⁸⁷ For example, Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī transmits from *Al-ʿIqd al-farīd*⁸⁸ a story about a woman who accused the caliph:

Thus, as far as you are concerned, we [the family of ʿAlī] are now in the same position as the Israelites [*manzilat banī isrāʾīl*] in relation to Pharaoh's family; ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, may God have mercy upon him, has occupied after the death of our Prophet the position of Aaron in relation to Moses. Our goal is Paradise and yours is hellfire.⁸⁹

The performance of the legends of Moses in the sultanic court linked the urban common people with the royal entourage. At least two books that were donated to Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī or came to be preserved in his library contained stories about biblical prophets. The first work is kept today at the Israeli National Library in Jerusalem; the second in the Süleymaniye Library in Istanbul. The first work, "Majmūʿ ḥikāyāt wa-nawādir,"⁹⁰ is a beautifully decorated short book that contains, among other topics, the stories of the prophets Ezekiel and Moses. The second is "Al-ʿUqūd al-jawharīyah,"⁹¹ which is a two-volume work that tells the history of the prophets, starting with Adam and ending with Muḥammad,

⁸⁶Y. Frenkel, "The Mamlūks among the Nations: A Medieval Sultanate in its Global Context" in *Everything is on the Move: The Mamlūk Empire as a Node in (Trans-) Regional Networks*, Mamlūk Studies, vol.7, ed. Stephan Conermann (Bonn, 2014), 61–79.

⁸⁷Quran 18:59–60, 64–65: "And when Moses said to his page, 'I will not give up until I reach the meeting of the two seas, though I go on for many years' . . . Then they found one of Our servants unto whom We had given mercy from Us, and We had taught him knowledge proceeding from Us."

⁸⁸Abū ʿUmar Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih al-Andalusī (246–328/860–940), *Al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, ed. Mufid M. Qamiḥah (Beirut, 1983), 1:257; idem, trans. Issa J. Boullata as *The Unique Necklace* (Reading, 2006), 1:296–97.

⁸⁹Taqī al-Dīn Abū Bakr ʿAlī Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī (767–837/1366–1434), *Thamrāt al-awrāq*, ed. Muḥammad A. Ibrāhīm (Cairo, 1971; Beirut, 2005), 108.

⁹⁰Jerusalem, National Library of Israel Yahuda collection MS Arab 294.

⁹¹Istanbul, Süleymaniye Library, MSS Aya Sofya 3312 and 3313 (microfilm Arşiv no. 3991).



followed by the history of the caliphs, beginning with Abū Bakr and concluding with al-Malik al-Ashraf Abū al-Naṣr Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī.

In the texts that circulated among the Cairene elite, Moses is depicted as a devoted believer who confronted idolaters in the land of Egypt. He is said to have met an unnamed “servant of God,” who is often identified with the mysterious al-Khiḍr.⁹² The introduction of al-Khiḍr into the story is not surprising, since al-Khiḍr plays an important role in Mamluk-period Sufi discourses,⁹³ as can be deduced from al-Maqrīzī’s *Al-Khabar ‘an al-bashar*.⁹⁴ One often encounters his name in biographies—more correctly, hagiographies—of Sufi shaykhs,⁹⁵ where he is said to provide them with information about future events or to affirm particular deeds and sayings.⁹⁶ Claiming that he was following the ideal model of Moses, the sultan, who presented himself as a *mujāhid*, could use the various stories of Moses as a way to reinforce his self-representation. It established a connection between the obedient and stubborn prophet who began his career in the land of the Egyptians and the wise and devoted sultan who now ruled Egypt.

THE TEXTS

The range of topics in the “Majmū‘ ḥikāyāt wa-nawādir” illustrates the rich discourses that took place at the sultan’s *majlis*. The compilation opens with Moses’s dialog (*munājāt*). This is followed by an exegesis of a Quranic verse, the story of the prophet Ezekiel, supplications, the story of al-Biṣṭāmī, and the story of Moses’s death. It is noteworthy that the story of the death of Moses, though it is not narrated in the Quran, was not unfamiliar to Muslims, as we can find it in hadith collections, in Muslim chronicles, and in the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*. These Mus-

⁹² See John Renard, “Khaḍir/Khiḍr,” *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, 3:81b–83.

⁹³ Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Al-Zahr al-nadir*.

⁹⁴ Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Maqrīzī (766–845/1364–1441), *Al-Khabar ‘an al-bashar fī ansāb al-‘Arab wa-nasab sayyid al-bashar* (Beirut, 2013), 6:340–42. The chapter on al-Khiḍr was copied by Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar al-Aḥrab al-Ṣaḍīqī al-Bakrī (in Cairo 1043/1633) as an appendix to *‘Uqūd al-jumān*, entitled “Fā’idah fī sha’n al-Khiḍr” (Jerusalem, The National Library of Israel Yahuda collection MS Arab 313, fols. 21r–23v “copied from the author’s autograph”).

⁹⁵ Sirāj al-Dīn Abū Ḥafs ‘Umar ibn ‘Alī Ibn al-Mulaqqin al-Shāfi‘ī, *Ṭabaqāt al-awliyā’*, ed. Nūr al-Dīn Shuraybah (Cairo, 1993), 364–65 (biography of Muḥammad ibn Ḥassān al-Busrī, d. 237/851–52), 560 (a biographical note by the author); Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyá al-Tādhifī al-Ḥanbalī, *Qalā’id al-jawāhir fī manāqib al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir* (Cairo, n.d.), 19.

⁹⁶ Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥman al-Sakhāwī (831–902/1424–97), *Al-Manhal al-‘adhb al-rāwī fī tarjamat quṭb al-awliyā’ al-Nawawī*, ed. Aḥmad F. al-Mazīdī (Beirut, 2005), 40 [on this work see Samuela Pagani, “Muhyi l-Dīn al-Nawawī o degli eccessi della virtù,” in *Scritti in onore di Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti*, ed. Daniela Bredi, Wasim Dahmash, Leonardo Capezzone, and Lucia Rostagno (Rome, 2008), 3:888–89].



lim accounts provide a legendary biography of Moses and narrate a sequence of didactic episodes that make up the last chapter of his life.⁹⁷

All versions of the Moses legends aimed to emphasize his qualities. Some of them address the mystery of the biblical verses that tell of his death. In line with the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, the story of Moses's death highlights two cycles of negotiation.⁹⁸ The first tells of the communication between Moses and God;⁹⁹ the second tells of the disputation between Moses and the Angel of Death.¹⁰⁰ In both cases Moses does not hesitate to argue over the timing, location, and manner of his death.¹⁰¹ In several of these traditions and legends he is portrayed as a strong adversary to the Angel of Death and as a prophet who was buried by angels,¹⁰² as is the case with the text I examined, but the episodes narrated in this manuscript are unique. I was unable to find a similar story in Jewish or other Islamic sources. The only version that resembles this Mamluk text is a late Ethiopian one; presumably the similarity indicates a shared origin.¹⁰³

The short chapter in “Al-ʿUqūd al-jawharīyah” opens with the story of Haman's arrival at Pharaoh's court in Egypt,¹⁰⁴ a timeline that Muslim exegetes strove to elucidate.¹⁰⁵ The next episode is an account of the meeting between Moses and the “Evergreen (al-Khiḍr),” who was mentioned in the preceding passage. This is followed by a tale on Moses's intimate murmured dialogue with God. During the conversation, Moses asks God, “Do you give sleep to your eyes?”

⁹⁷ Ibn Kathīr, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, 532; Ibn al-Mulaqqin, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, 187–92.

⁹⁸ Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Kisāʾī (fl. tenth–early eleventh centuries?), *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* [*Vita prophetarum*], ed. Isaac Eisenberg (Leiden, 1923), 239; on al-Kisāʾī see Jean-Claude Vadet, “La création et l'investiture de l'homme dans le sunnisme ou la légende d'Adam chez al-Kisāʾī,” *Studia Islamica* 42 (1975): 6–10.

⁹⁹ Shihāb al-Dīn Abū Maḥmūd Aḥmad ibn Tamīm Ibn Hilāl al-Maqdisī (714–65/1314–64), *Muthīr al-gharām ilā ziyārat al-Quds wa-al-Shām*, ed. A. al-Khutaymī (Beirut, 1994), 374–75 (ʿan Wahb ibn Munabbih); Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Tuḥfat al-nubalāʾ*, 373–74.

¹⁰⁰ Ibn Jamāʿah, *Durr al-naẓīm*, 296 (quoting Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī); Ibn al-Mulaqqin, *Al-Tawḍīḥ li-sharḥ al-jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, 10:42–46.

¹⁰¹ Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī, *Al-Intiṣārāt al-islāmīyah*, 695–96.

¹⁰² Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (224–310/838–923), *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-al-mulūk*, ed. M. A. Ibrāhīm (Cairo, 1967), 1:433–34; Ibn Jamāʿah, *Durr al-naẓīm*, 296–97.

¹⁰³ See n. 123.

¹⁰⁴ The name Haman appears six times in the Quran, always with the pharaoh. He is the chief minister of the king of Egypt who rejected Moses. Anthony H. Johns, in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, 2:399.

¹⁰⁵ Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar al-Rāzī (543–606/1149–1210), *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr mafāṭīḥ al-ghayb* (Beirut, 1981), 27:67.



and God demonstrates to him what would happen if he did slumber.¹⁰⁶ The next scene is a dialogue between the devil and Pharaoh.

CONCLUSION

Moses's story, from his birth on the banks of the Nile to his death in the desert or in Bilād al-Shām, was told and retold in Mamluk circles. In those legends Moses was depicted as a Muslim prophet and as a messenger who was informed about the future arrival of Muḥammad, and he expressed hope that he would be included among the audience that would follow the Prophet of Islam. Moses is portrayed as a mortal link between the Almighty and mankind, between Heaven and Earth. Hence, his story was useful politically. The transmission of Moses's legends in the court empower Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī's image as a Muslim sultan who exerts great efforts to strengthen his subjects' worldview (Islam). This sultan, whose courtiers depicted him as an ideal king, also played the role of intercultural mediator, a ruler who ensured his subjects' stability and prosperity. The stories about Moses's death also engaged with a theological question: how could the soul of the individual who talked directly with the Creator be seized by the Angel of Death, and how did this transpire? The story was used to establish the creed that all humans are doomed to die, including even God's messengers. (This argumentation clearly bears an anti-Christian message.)

Popular recensions of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* are strongly attached to fundamental aspects of Islam: God, his revelation to the prophets, his omnipotence, and his angels, and are connected in Islamic eschatology. Stories about death and heaven are an indispensable part of the history of Islam and Arabic literary tradition.¹⁰⁷ They emphasize that the history of the universe is the history of God's will, which was transmitted to mankind via his messengers. The public performances of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* created a continuous and unbroken temporal link connecting early, pre-Islamic prophets with the audience of the Mamluk court. This uninterrupted timeline asserted the dominance of Islam as the only true religion and reinforced the Mamluk sultan's image as the vigilant defender of this message. In addition, some historians, in order to dramatize their accounts, even evaluated contemporary events in relation to biblical stories.

The *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* from the Mamluk court illuminate the popular transmission of biblical stories in contemporary culture and testify to the widespread familiarity of audiences with such narratives. As emphasized, the transmission of legendary stories about the mission and lives of biblical prophets was not lim-

¹⁰⁶ Cf. above our discussion of Āyat al-Kursī (Quran 2:255).

¹⁰⁷ J. Knappert, "The Qiṣaṣu'l-Anbiyā' as Moralistic Stories," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 6 (1976): 103–16.



ited to learned circles. The popularity of the tales is clearly visible in the favored reception of the “stories of the prophets” genre and the social position of the preachers who could employ the *isrāʿīliyyāt* as a platform to discuss complicated theological issues.¹⁰⁸ The culture of the *majālis* dissented from the view shared and advanced by several famous Muslim scholars that the *isrāʿīliyyāt* were falsified.¹⁰⁹ The legends were also well received by the Mamluk ruling elite.¹¹⁰

There is strong evidence that Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī envisioned himself as a divinely ordained ruler, as the renewer (*mujaddid*) of the tenth century. Members of his court endowed him with cosmic power. They circulated word that the source of his legitimacy was celestial.¹¹¹ In order to boost his image, al-Ghawrī from time to time even played the narrator’s role in the *majālis*. The sultan, in whose court these stories were performed, and who was depicted as an active participant in the interpretation of the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, was introduced as the guardian of the only true religion, which the Seal of the Prophets had established. The performance of Moses’s legends in his court served as a tool to project this self-presentation.

¹⁰⁸Roberto Tottoli, “Origin and Use of the Term *Isrāʿīliyyāt* in Muslim Literature,” *Arabica* 46, no. 2 (1999): 193–210.

¹⁰⁹Al-ʿIrāqī, *Al-Bāʿith ʿalā al-khalāṣ*, 30, emphasizes the close relations between the sultan and the *quṣṣāṣ*, and on 107–8 expresses his view about religious practices and the sultan’s role in enforcing the “correct” praxis.

¹¹⁰ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAbd al-Salām al-Ṣaffūrī al-Shāfiʿī (d. 894/1489), *Kitāb Nuzhat al-majālis wa-muntakhab al-nafāʾis* (Cairo, 1990), 2:245.

¹¹¹Mauder, *In the Sultan’s Salon*, 757–68.



APPENDIX: TRANSLATION OF JERUSALEM, NATIONAL LIBRARY OF ISRAEL YAHUDA COLLECTION MS ARAB 294

THE DEATH OF MOSES

[fol. 52r] It is narrated that Moses was on Mount Sinai [*jabal al-Ṭūr*] worshipping the Lord. On that night he raised his head, gazed at the sky, and pleaded: “O my God, my Almighty, my Creator, my Lord, fulfill my wish.” At that very moment, a caller¹¹² on behalf of Allāh, praise be to him, called and asked him: “And what are your needs? The Almighty knows everything.” Moses answered: “O my God, I want you to inform me when [52v] my death will be.” The voice from Allāh said: “I will not supply a single creature with this information.” Moses said: “O my God, my Almighty, my Creator, my Lord, I beg you illuminate me about that.” Eventually the Almighty said: “O Moses, your death will be on Friday.”

Consequently, Moses washed his clothes and every Friday night sat contemplating and waiting. One night while he was seated in his prayer niche and reading the Bible [53r] the Angel of Death advanced towards him. He said to him: “Peace be with you, O Moses,” who responded: “Peace be with you, O servant of God.” And Moses asked him: “Who are you? You have frightened me; I was shaken by you and the Bible has fallen from my hands.” “Moses, don’t you recognize me? I am the one who disperses the groups, who destroys the dwellings and the castles. I am the Angel of Death.”

And Moses asked him: “Did you come to carry me off or [53v] are you only passing nearby?” The angel said: “I am here to take you away.” Moses pleaded: “Give me an hour; I want to wash myself and to deal with my household and children.” But the angel turned down this request saying: “God ordered me to take hold of your soul and not let you be alone.” Yet, at that very moment God, in his generosity and grace, disclosed himself to the Angel of Death and ordered him: “Delay. Allow my slave to accomplish what he wishes.” And the angel said to Moses: [54r] “Go to your home, arrange everything you need, and come back to meet me in this very place, so that I will be able to seize your soul.”

Moses went to his mother’s house. Standing in front of the gate he called to her: “Open the door.” She asked: “Who is calling?” And Moses responded: “It is I, your son.” But the mother said: “O servant of God, Moses is on the mountain worshipping his God. He usually comes to visit us every forty days; the last time he visited us was twenty-five days ago.” [54v] Moses insisted and called again: “Open the door and I will inform you what has happened.” Eventually she gave in and opened the door. As he entered the house she was shocked by his look

¹¹²Cf. Quran 50:41: “And listen thou for the day when the caller shall call from a near place” (trans. Arberry).



and cried out: “What happened to you, why has the color of your face changed so drastically?” And Moses said: “Rise up, mother, so that we can separate and go our different ways to be united only in the Resurrection.” He said his farewell and she wept as he left her.

Next he went to the house of Shu‘ayb’s [Jethro’s]¹¹³ daughter. Standing in front of the gate he called: “Open the door.” She asked: “Who is calling?” And Moses responded: “It is I, Moses.” But she said: “O servant of God, Moses [55r] is on the mountain worshiping his God. He usually comes to visit us every forty days; the last time he visited me was twenty-five days ago.” Moses insisted and called again: “Open the door and I will inform you what has happened.” Eventually she gave in and opened the door. As he entered the house she was shocked by his look. “What happened to you,” she asked him, “why has the color of your face changed so drastically?” And Moses said: “O Shu‘ayb’s daughter, I have come to take my leave.” “What happened to you?” she asked him again, and Moses [55v] told her: “The Angel of Death has come to carry away my soul.” Weeping, his wife said farewell to him. She brought their two children and he seated each of his sons on his lap.

Next he pleaded: “O God, my Lord, my Master, my Owner, my Possessor, if my soul is seized, who will care for these two boys?” Then a voice from heaven said: “O Moses, who delivered thee out of grief?¹¹⁴ Who recovered [56r] Jacob’s sight after sorrow had turned his eyes white?¹¹⁵ Who rescued Ishmael from the sacrifice?¹¹⁶ And who said: ‘O fire, be coolness and safety for Abraham!’?¹¹⁷ Who rescued Daniel from the lions’ den? Who freed Jonah from the belly of the whale?¹¹⁸ And who saved Joseph from detention and the dungeon?¹¹⁹ O Moses: take your rod and go to the sea; you shall see there a miracle that demonstrates the immeasurable power of God.”

So Moses took his rod and walked to the sea shore. As he reached it a voice from heaven ordered him: “Take the rod and strike the sea.” Moses carried out the commandment and the sea parted. The voice from heaven asked him: “O Moses, what do you see?” And Moses responded: “O my God, my Almighty, my Creator, my Lord, in the sea I observe a black mountain.” And God ordered him: “Strike this mountain.” Moses did so and struck it. [56v] The mountain parted

¹¹³Brannon Wheeler, “Arab Prophets of the Qur’an and Bible,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 8, no. 2 (2006): 36–37.

¹¹⁴Quran 20:40 (trans. Arberry).

¹¹⁵Quran 12:84.

¹¹⁶Quran 37:102–7.

¹¹⁷Quran 21:69.

¹¹⁸Quran 37:139.

¹¹⁹Quran 12:42.



and the Almighty asked him: “O Moses, what do you see?” And Moses responded: “O my God, my Almighty, my Creator, my Lord, in the black mountain I see a big rolling stone.”

From heaven a voice told him: “O Moses, [57r] strike this big rolling stone.” And Moses struck it and it parted. God asked him: “O Moses, what do you see?” And Moses responded: “O my God, my Almighty, my Creator, my Lord, in the rock I observe a red worm, holding in its mouth a green leaf, that in an eloquent voice is calling: ‘Blessed is God who watches me, hears my words, and provides me with food. The Bountiful,¹²⁰ All-Clement¹²¹ who is gentle with his servants.¹²² Never will God forget me in this location, nor in other places.’”

[57v] God turned to Moses and said to him: “O Moses, if I don’t forget this worm and this place, can you assume that I will overlook your sons? I love them and they are dearer to me, even more than the angels.”¹²³

Then Moses returned to his family and bade them farewell. Thereupon he came back to the Angel of Death, peace upon him, who was sitting and waiting for him. He asked Moses: “Have you completed all you wanted and accomplished your wishes?” [58r] And Moses said: “Yes.” So the angel ordered him: “Proceed so that I will be able to seize your spirit. This is what Allāh has ordered me [to do].” Moses asked him: “How do you want to do it, from which organ of my body?” The angel said: “From your mouth.” And Moses asked him: “How dare you take it from my mouth, the part of my body that spoke with Allāh!” So the angel said: “I will snatch it from your ears.” And Moses responded: “How dare you take it from my ears, the organ that heard the words of Allāh!” So the angel said: “I will grab it from your hands.” And Moses responded: “How dare you [58v] take it from my hands, which touched the Pentateuch!” So the angel said: “I will seize it from your feet.” And Moses responded: “How dare you take it from my feet, which carried me to Mount Sinai!”

The Angel of Death turned to the Almighty and said: “You, my God, know better than me, your slave.”¹²⁴ A voice from heaven called: “O Angel of Death,

¹²⁰ Quran 27:40.

¹²¹ Quran 22:59.

¹²² Quran 2:207.

¹²³ Cf. the Ethiopian “Death of Moses” story. See Wolf Leslau, *Falasha Anthology* (New Haven, 1951); 103–11; Edward Ullendorff, “The ‘Death of Moses’ in the Literature of the Falashas,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 24, no. 3 (1961): 419–43; Max Wurmbrand, “Remarks on the Text of the Falasha ‘Death of Moses,’” *BSOAS* 25, no. 3 (1962): 431–37.

¹²⁴ For Moses’s rejection of his call by the Angel of Death in Islamic tradition, see Muḥammad Muḥsin Khān, ed. and trans., *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Riyadh, 1997), 1:243 (no. 1339), 4:386 (no. 3407); Jamāl al-Dīn Abū al-Ḥujjāj Yūsuf al-Mizzī (654–743/1256–1341), *Tuḥfat al-ashraf bi-maʿrifat al-aṭraf*, ed. Bashshār U. Maʿrūf (Beirut, 1999), 10:270 (no. 14728).



let my slave proceed and climb the mountain.” So Moses departed and climbed up the mountain. Allāh had dispatched two angels to the place. [59r] Michael and Gabriel, in the appearance of humans, descended from heaven, and started to dig a grave.¹²⁵ Engulfed in a cloud of fire, Moses then came down. He was accompanied by the Angel of Death, who was carrying in his hand an apple taken from Paradise.¹²⁶

Moses advanced towards Michael and Gabriel, who were negotiating and disputing. While Gabriel maintained that the grave was too narrow, Michael claimed that it was too large. Moses approached them: [59v] “O men, are you not familiar with the size of a human being?” They responded: “Yes indeed, he is like you in size and height.” So Moses said to them: “I will enter the grave.” Moses entered the grave and lay down in it. The Angel of Death reached him and handed him the apple. Moses smelled the apple, and with that his soul immediately ascended to heaven.

At that very moment the angels in the seven heavens lamented and shed tears over him. Seventy thousand angels prayed at his grave.

¹²⁵For a different version of these angels’ roles see J. Rabbinowitz, trans., Deuteronomy 11:10, in *Midrash Rabbah*, trans. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (London, 1939), 7:186.

¹²⁶Compare with al-Tha‘ālabi, *Arā‘is al-majālis*, 410.

