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Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā in the Mongol and Mamluk Realms: Between Vizier and Magic

Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā (Hebrew: Asaph ben Berechiah) is an enigmatic figure. An obscure biblical character (also connected in the Jewish tradition to Asaph the Physician, author of an early Hebrew medical text), in Muslim lore Āṣaf appears mainly in connection to the king and prophet Sulaymān ibn Dāwūd, serving as his confidant, scribe, or vizier. While Āṣaf is not mentioned in the Quran, early commentaries (*tafsīr*) mention him on several occasions, and hence he was referred to in the various compilations of stories of the prophets (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*) and in universal histories that included the era of the pre-Islamic prophets. In the Mamluk Sultanate, Āṣaf remained a marginal political figure mentioned mainly as a scribe in commentaries and *qiṣaṣ*. Though he was also recorded in other genres—such as popular epics and occult literature—due to his connection to magic, he hardly played any role in the political sphere. In contrast, in the Mongol realm, Āṣaf became synonymous with the emblematic vizier, sometimes together with the Iranian Buzurgmihr, and chroniclers and poets compared to him contemporaneous ministers such as Masʿūd Beg (d. 1289), the administrator of Central Asia under the Mongol Great Khans and later the Chaghadaid Khanate, as well as famous Ilkhanid viziers such as Shams al-Dīn Juvaynī (d. 1284), Rashīd al-Dīn (d. 1318), and the latter’s son Ghiyāth al-Dīn (d. 1336). Āṣaf retained this position in the Timurid, Safavid, and Ottoman realms, so much so that he merited an entry in Persian dictionaries as a synonym for “a wise vizier.”¹ Moreover, the *Stories of the Prophets* by al-Rabghūzī (fl. 1311), the first Turkish work of this genre that was compiled under Mongol rule, and has remained popular ever since, gives the vizier Āṣaf a bigger role than in previous works, stressing his military leadership and his abilities to control animals and devils.

This article is dedicated to my teacher, colleague, and friend Reuven Amitai, who once gave me a few references on Asaf and who discussed this article with me quite a few times without being aware of its destination. I’m grateful also to Stefan Kamola, who provided me with manuscripts of Rashīd al-Dīn’s *Jāmiʿ al-tawārīkh*; to Jonathan Brack, who sent me a manuscript of Qāshānī’s *Zubdat al-tawārīkh*; to Guy Ron-Gilboa, who allowed me to use his pre-publication article and referred me to important references; to Or Amir, who provided a few important Mamluk references and very useful comments; to Simone Ruffini for providing me with the manuscript of *Pur-i Bahāʾ*; and to Meir Bar-Asher and Eliyahu Stern for helping me decipher some challenging Arabic paragraphs.

¹E.g., F. Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary* (repr. Delhi, 2011), 69.



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This study reviews Āṣaf's main images in the Jewish and Muslim realms and then focuses on his representation in Mamluk, Chaghadaid, and Ilkhanid sources. It argues that the Mongol period gave a major boost to Āṣaf's image as the embodiment of an ideal vizier in the Iranian-Turkish realm, and seeks to explain why he became such a prevalent political symbol in the Mongol and post-Mongol domains while never gaining similar function among the neighboring Mamluks. The discussion will hopefully bear some insights on the political culture of both realms.

ĀṢAF IN JEWISH LORE

Asaph son of Berechiah is mentioned twice in the Bible as one of the important Levites at the time of King David, a singer and a musician who was one of the Levites responsible for bringing the Ark of Covenant to Jerusalem. Later, King David appointed him a singer in the House of the Lord that contained the Ark.² Asaph probably continued this role under King Solomon, during whose reign the Ark was placed in the Holy of Holies, the most sacred part of Solomon's temple.³ His descendants continued to serve as temple singers under the Judean kings and even in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, namely after the return from Babylon and in the days of the second temple.⁴ In David's time, Asaph was described as a seer (*hōzeh*), who "prophesied under the direction of the king [David]" (*nibā 'al yedei ha-melekh*).⁵ He is also usually identified with King David's singer Asaph, mentioned several times in Psalms, who composed hymns for the Lord.⁶

In later Jewish tradition, Asaph son of Berechiah is identified with Asaph the Physician (Asaph ha-Rōphe), also referred to as Asaph the Astronomer (Yarḥōnī), author of *Sefer Asaph* (The Book of Asaph), *Midrash Refu'ot* [Midrash of remedies], or *Sefer Refu'ot* [The book of remedies], probably the oldest medical treatise in Hebrew. While the date and location of the book's compilation are still debated, both Zohar Amar and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim recently suggested that the book was penned in the eighth–ninth centuries during the Abbasid translation movement, and was probably compiled in northern Mesopotamia. Deriving from a

²1 Chron. 6:24, 15:17–19, 16:5; 25:1–6. See also Samuel Ephraim Loewenstamm, "Asaph" [in Hebrew], *Encyclopedia Biblica* (Jerusalem, 1972), 1:482–83.

³2 Chron. 5:12.

⁴2 Chron. 20:14 (under king Jehoshafat); 35:15 (under Josiah); Ezra 2:41, 3:10; Nehemiah 7:44, 11:22, 12:35, 46.

⁵2 Chron. 29:30; 1 Chron. 25:2.

⁶Psalms 50, 73–83; Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam* (Chicago, 1993), 108; idem, "The 'One Who Had Knowledge of the Book' and the 'Mightiest Name of God': Qur'ānic Exegesis and Jewish Cultural Artifacts," in *Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations I*, ed. Ronald Nettler (Oxford, 1993), 59–74.



Persian cultural milieu, and transmitted to Hebrew via Syriac, it then disseminated mainly to Europe, playing an important role in the Eurasian exchange of medical knowledge.⁷

Later Jewish midrash compilations, however, mention Asaph as the vizier (Hebrew *sar*) of King Solomon, head of the humans under Solomon's service in parallel with the heads of the jinns, birds, and beasts, but this seems to be an image influenced by Muslim lore.⁸ This is certainly true regarding his role as a demon summoner in a seventeenth-century Kabbalic text.⁹ The main Solomon-ic anecdotes that include Āṣaf in Muslim lore, however, obviously have Jewish roots (see below), although Āṣaf is not mentioned in these Jewish versions.¹⁰ The

⁷Zohar Amar, *Sefer ha-refu'ot shel Asaph ha-Rofe: ha-ma'amar 'al tekhunot ha-mezonot = Asaph's Book of Medicines: Treatise on the Properties of Foodstuffs* (Kiryat Ono, 2022), 16–44, 61; Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, "Exploring Persian Lore in the Hebrew Book of Āṣaf," *ALEPH: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 18, no. 1 (2018): 123–46; idem, *ReOrienting Histories of Medicine: Encounters along the Silk Roads* (London, 2021), 26–28.

⁸For the Hebrew tale see Adolf Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash: Sammlung kleiner Midraschim und vermischter Abhandlungen aus der ältern jüdischen Literatur* (Leipzig, 1873), 5:22–26, who noted that it has an Arabic origin. In the Midrash's digital database, this midrash is dated to "pre-1050," namely after there was already a strong Muslim tradition connecting Āṣaf to king Solomon: <https://maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il/Pages/PMain.aspx?mishibbur=695000&mm15=00000000040%2000&mismilla=25> (based on Cambridge University Library MS ADD 854, fol. 22). Moreover, Guy Ron-Gilboa, who studied this midrash and its Arabic versions, claims that this story is of a much later date (sixteenth–seventeenth centuries), and based on the Muslim tale (personal communication); see his "Demonic Narrator, Angelic Interpreter: Embedding in Two Variants of a Solomonic Legend," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 24, no. 1 (2024): 87–106. Note that the story of Āṣaf bringing the throne of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon, which is his main reference in the Muslim lore, was translated into Hebrew in the early fourteenth century as part of the translation of *Rasā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā'* (see Kalonymus ben Kalonymus, *Iggeret Ba'ale Ḥayyim* [Treatise on animals] [in Hebrew], ed. Y. Toporovski and A. M. Habermann (Jerusalem, 1948–49), 2:45; Yair Zoran, "'The Great Name' in Islam, Its Characteristics and Parallels in the Israelite Literature" [in Hebrew], *Ben Ever le-Arav* 9 (2016–17): 88, n. 117.

⁹Yuval Harari, "Demons and Dream: The Jewish Dream Magic [II] [Maa'se Shedim ve-ḥalom: Magiyat ha-ḥalom ha-yehudit (Bet)]" [in Hebrew], *Teuda* 28 (2017), 208–10.

¹⁰Zoran suggested that the story about the Queen of Sheba's throne in which Āṣaf is mentioned (below) originated in Jewish sources, now lost: Zoran, "'The Great Name,'" 88, n. 117; see also Gordon D. Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad* (Columbia, SC, 1989), 162, where the mention of Āṣaf is presented as one sign for the Jewish origin of the Queen of Sheba's story. When the Rabbinic literature mentions Solomon's vizier it is the biblical figure of Benaiah son of Jehoiada, a famous general who served both David and Solomon and helped the latter in consolidating his rule. Lassner suggested that Benaiah is analogous to Āṣaf and was perhaps the origin of his figure in the Muslim tradition (Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen*, 107; see also *ibid.*, 182, 184, where he presents a later Jewish folkloric source in which Benaiah plays Āṣaf's role in identifying that Solomon's throne was taken by a devil).



connection between the Jewish and Muslim facets of Āṣaf/Asaph are, therefore, multifaceted and deserve further study.

ĀṢAF IBN BARAKHYĀ IN MUSLIM LORE (UP TO THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY)

In Muslim lore, Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā is connected to the king and prophet Sulaymān ibn Dāwūd, and appears as his confidant, scribe, or vizier. In many sources he is also described as Solomon's relative—son of his sister or a maternal (sometimes paternal) cousin.¹¹ Āṣaf's mother is said to have had an important position among the Children of Israel.¹² Āṣaf is described as a Levite, a descendant of the Prophet Samuel, although his genealogy includes only three generations—son of Barakhyā ibn Shma'ya ibn Daniyāl (or Mikā'il /Malakiya).¹³ Āṣaf does not appear in the Quran by name, but in the earliest commentaries and stories of the prophets he is mentioned in several episodes related to the Quranic mentions of King Solomon, notably in the following two pericopes:

The first is in the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, where Āṣaf is the one who brought the queen's throne from Yemen to Solomon's palace in Jerusalem in the twinkle of an eye. The story originated in the commentary on Quran 27:38–40 (*Sūrat al-naml*, the ant):

[38]He [Solomon] said, "O Council, which one of you will bring me her [the Queen of Sheba's] throne, before they come to me in surrender?" [39] An efreet [Ifrīt] of the jinns said, "I will bring it to thee, before thou risest from thy place; I have strength for it [40] and I am trusty." **Said he who possessed knowledge of the Book, "I will bring it to thee, before ever thy glance returns to thee."** Then, when he [Solomon] saw it settled before him, he said, "This is of

¹¹E.g., 'Umārah ibn Wathīmah al-Fārisī (d. 902), *Les légendes prophétiques dans l'islam depuis le Ier jusqu'au IIIe siècle de l'Hégire = Kitāb bad' al-ḥalq wa-qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā': d'après le manuscrit d'Abū Rifā'a 'Umārah b. Waṭīma b. Mūsā b. al-Furāt al-Fārisī al-Fasawī*, ed. Raif Georges Khoury (Wiesbaden, 1978), 144; al-Ṭabarsī (d. 1153), *Majma' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Beirut, 1961), 19:225 (nephew); Ibn al-Nadīm (fl. 987), *Kitāb al-fihrist* (Leipzig, 1872), 309 (maternal cousin); for paternal cousin: al-Mas'ūdī (d. 956?), *Ithbāt al-waṣīyah lil-Imām 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib* (Beirut, 1988), 79.

¹²Abū 'Alī Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Bal'amī (d. ca. 973), *Tārīkh-i Bal'amī*, ed. Parvīn Gunābādī and Muḥammad Taqī Bahār (Tehran, 1974), 1:574, 579–85.

¹³E.g., Muqātil ibn Sulaymān al-Balkhī (d. 767), *Kitāb tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān* (Beirut, 2002), 3:307; Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-fihrist*, 309. The Mikā'il variant fits with Āṣaf's much longer biblical genealogy.



my Lord's bounty that He may try me, whether I am thankful or ungrateful."¹⁴

Āṣaf is usually identified as the one "who possessed knowledge of the Book." This is often interpreted as the one who knew the Mighty Name of God, the name that if one called him by it, God would immediately answer and fulfill the caller's request.¹⁵ This reference, which accorded Āṣaf, a human, a knowledge or ability greater than that of the jinns, that even Solomon allegedly did not have, not only served as a trial for Solomon, but also brought Āṣaf to the realm of miracles, magic, and jinns,¹⁶ and sometimes, notably in Shi'ite circles, even elevated him to the rank of a prophet.¹⁷ More often, however, Āṣaf's miracle appears as an example of non-prophetic miracles (*karāmāt*) that God can make happen to honor a righteous person or a Sufi saint (*wālī*).¹⁸ In some versions of the queen's visit, Āṣaf is also mentioned in other, more mundane, details, e.g., as writing

¹⁴ Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York, 1955), 170; also available at <https://archive.org/details/in.gov.ignca.4296/page/n7/mode/2up>.

¹⁵ E.g., 'Umārah, *Les légendes prophétiques*, 144–45; Muqātil, *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3:307; Bal'amī, *Tārīkh-i Bal'amī*, 1:574; Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Tha'labī (d. 1035), *'Arā'is al-majālis fī qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā, or Lives of the Prophets*, trans. William M. Brinner (Leiden, 2002), 532; Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Kisā'ī (eleventh century), *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (Leiden, 1922), 290, 292; idem, *The Tales of the Prophets of Al-Kisā'ī*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (Boston, 1978), 316; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 19:255; Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Manṣūr ibn Khalaf al-Nīshābūrī (eleventh century), *Qeṣaṣ ol-Anbiyā* [sic], ed. Habib Yaghmai (Tehran, 1961), 299; Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar Zamakhsharī (d. 1044), *Al-Qur'ān: Ma'a tafsīrihi al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq al-tanzīl lil-Imām Abī al-Qāsim Jār Allāh Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī al-Khawārizmī* (Kolkata, 1856), 2:1028; Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1233), *Al-Kāmil fī al-tārīkh* (Beirut, 1965), 1:236; Ibn al-'Arabī, *Ibn al-'Arabī's Fuṣuṣ al-Ḥikam: An Annotated Translation of "The Bezels of Wisdom"*, trans. Binyamin Abrahamov (London, 2015), 117–18. On the throne and its meaning as another manifestation of God's power (a theme that does not appear in the Jewish materials): Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen*, 91–93; and see there, 104–6, for alternative identifications of the throne's bringer (e.g., Jibrīl, al-Khiḍr, Solomon himself), which are presented by most authors.

¹⁶ See also the exegesis to Quran 2:102, where the jinns write a book of their magical tricks, hide it behind Solomon's chair, and ascribe it to Āṣaf, who allegedly wrote the book for Solomon (e.g., Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān: Kitāb tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* [Mecca, n.d.], 2:107, 116).

¹⁷ Notably al-Mas'ūdī, *Ithbāt al-waṣīyah*, 76–82, where Āṣaf is described as Solomon's heir (as a prophet), his paternal cousin, and his son-in-law (77). Āṣaf passed on the prophethood to his descendants, and the last prophet among them was his eighth generation's heir, the biblical prophet Zakaria (80–82).

¹⁸ E.g., 'Alī ibn 'Uthmān al-Hujvīrī, *The Kashf al-Mahjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufiism*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (Leiden, 1911), 230. And see Ibn al-'Arabī, *Fuṣuṣ*, 117–18, where Āṣaf's action is presented as an extension of Solomon's abilities.



Solomon's letter to Bilqīs, escorting her to meet Solomon, or being involved in building a glass palace for her use.¹⁹

The second Solomonic episode in which Āṣaf is often recorded is another—and much more major—trial of Solomon, in which he ends up temporarily losing his throne to a devil or a jinn due to the idol worshipping of his wife. The story is usually brought up as a commentary on *Sūrat Ṣad* 38:34: “Certainly We tried Solomon, and We cast upon his throne a mere body; then he repented.”²⁰ This story, part of which is found as early as the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, has several versions, with different names and identification of the princess and the jinn/devil, as well as various versions of Solomon's whereabouts during his trial and the Israelites' reaction to the pretender's rule.²¹ Āṣaf is mentioned in various parts of this story, notably as the one who discovered the idolatry that was taking place in the palace and rebuked the king for it. He is often recorded also in the second part of the story, mainly as the one who suspected that the devil or jinn was not the king and confirmed this by questioning Solomon's mother or wives.²² In rarer versions of this story, Āṣaf is even the one who replaced Solomon on the throne, either as an acting ruler who wore Solomon's seal ring and covered for the king until the latter had completed his repentance²³ or as “a devil (*shayṭān*) called Āṣaf” who cunningly obtained Solomon's ring from him and ruled in his stead.²⁴

Ibn ʿAsākir (d. 1176), in his *magnum opus Tārīkh Dimashq* [History of Damascus], combined these two episodes into one story (*riwāyah*), in which the Queen of Sheba is Solomon's wife from whom the devil is taking the seal. In this version, Āṣaf, defined as a youth from among the sons of the prophets (*ghulām min abnāʾ al-anbiyāʾ*) who grew up on Solomon's lap and was adopted by him, appears as Solomon's guard, standing next to his head with a sword. He not only brings the

¹⁹E.g., al-Kisāʾī, *Tales of the Prophets*, 314; al-Nīshābūrī, *Qeṣaṣ al-anbiyā*, 293, 300.

²⁰Arberry, *Koran*, 205. Note that the Quranic text refers to another trial, connected to horses, to be discussed below.

²¹On the Talmudical origin: e.g., Joseph M. Davis, “Solomon and Ashmedai (BGittin 68a–b), King Hiram, and Procopius: Exegesis and Folklore,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 106 (2016): 577–85; Guy Ron Gilboa, “Demonic Narrator, Angelic Interpreter,” 97; on the various versions of this story in Muslim lore: M. O. Klar, “And We cast upon his throne a mere body: A Historiographical Reading of Q. 38:34,” *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2004): 103–26, which, however, hardly mentions Āṣaf; Helen Blatherwick, *Prophets, Gods and Kings in Sirat Sayf Ibn Dhi Yazan: An Intertextual Reading of an Egyptian Popular Epic* (Leiden, 2016), 121.

²²For various versions: Klar, “And We cast upon his throne,” and below.

²³Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis al-majālīs*, trans. Brinner, 542–43; al-Nīshābūrī, *Qeṣaṣ al-anbiyā*, 307.

²⁴E.g., al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 21:197; Roberto Tottoli, *The Stories of the Prophets by Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī* [d. 1062] (Berlin, 2003), 212; this version is often ascribed to Mujāhid (642–718 or 722), and is more common in *tafsīr* than in *qīṣaṣ*.



throne in a flash (by raising his hand from the sword's hilt), faster than the jinn, but also later attested that the impostor on the throne was not the king, informing the Israelites who had asked for his advice, thereby eventually leading to the impostor's escape.²⁵

The two main episodes in which Āṣaf appears highlight his close and personal connection to Solomon and his unique knowledge or abilities. Both are connected to trials Solomon had to endure that were initiated by women and involved the realm of the supernatural.²⁶ Both are related to knowledge originating in God and transferred either through a magic seal or through acquaintance with the Mighty Name. The various versions of each episode suggest that oral traditions and folk stories were among the main sources of tales about Āṣaf. In addition to these two cases, Āṣaf is sometimes mentioned in other Solomonic anecdotes (e.g., Solomon's death, the book of magic that the jinns wrote and ascribed to Āṣaf, and the building of the temple), most of which had versions with or without Āṣaf.²⁷

At a certain point, the character of Asaph the Physician (*Āṣaf al-ḥakīm*) also became known in the Muslim world and connected with Āṣaf son of Berachya, a connection probably facilitated by the relation between medicine and magic in the pre-modern world. A book called *Kitāb mujarrabāt al-buyūt fī al-ṭibb al-mathbūt* [The book of the tested remedies for home-use in the (field of) reliable medicine], ascribed to Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā al-ḥakīm, still exists today.²⁸ The healing

²⁵Alī ibn al-Ḥasan Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. 'Umar ibn Gharāmah al-'Amrawī and 'Alī Shirī (Beirut, 1995–2001), 69:73–75; hence Ibn Manẓūr, *Mukhtaṣar Tārīkh Dimashq* (Damascus, 1984–96), 5:288–90. In both cases the story appears in the biography of Bilqīs (the Queen of Sheba). In Solomon's biography, his meeting with the Queen of Sheba is not mentioned, but the loss of the seal episode appears in several more literary versions; in some of them Āṣaf "the trustworthy (*ṣiddīq*) or one of the Israelites' elite (*aḥbār*)" has a minor role (22:230–99). In most versions of the seal story, including Ibn 'Asākir's second version, Āṣaf is described not as a youth, as in Bilqīs's story, but as an old man. There, his description probably was meant to explain how Āṣaf had access to Solomon's wives.

²⁶For the gender issue and the women as representing chaos as opposed to Solomon's order: Helen Blatherwick, "Solomon Legends in *Sīrat Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan*," *Mizan: Journal for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations* 2, no. 1 (2017): 161–207.

²⁷This is also true for the two examples above, but to a much lesser extent. On the various Solomonic passages in the Quran and their appearances in the *tafsīr* and *qīṣaṣ* see Brannon M. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran: an Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis* (London, 2002), 266–79.

²⁸On this book, whose dates of compilation and publication are unknown, see Amar, *Sefer ha-refu'ot*, 19, and Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā al-ḥakīm, *Kitāb mujarrabāt al-buyūt fī al-ṭibb al-mathbūt* (Cairo, n.d.). The book is not mentioned among those attributed to Āṣaf by Ḥājī Khalīfah that are mainly concerned with jinns. Ḥājī Khalīfah, *Kashf al-zunūn 'an asāmī al-kutub wa-al-funūn* (London, 2021), 4:5, 593–594; 5:502.



functions of the Mighty Name of God that Āṣaf allegedly knew,²⁹ or healing that involved jinn exorcism,³⁰ could have facilitated this shift. Yet I have not found any trace of Āṣaf as physician before the thirteenth century or among the Mamluk and Mongol references.

Until the thirteenth century, Āṣaf was primarily associated with the two aforementioned Solomonic episodes. He was characterized as a righteous individual, a relative of Solomon, and his scribe. Before the eleventh century, references to Āṣaf as a vizier are rare, and then and afterwards they are more common in Persian works than in Arabic ones.³¹ The themes of magic and prophecy also continued to be associated with Āṣaf throughout the medieval period.

ĀṢAF IN THE MAMLUK REALM

In the Mamluk sphere, the figure of Āṣaf was rather marginal. In Mamluk stories of the prophets and universal histories he is mentioned almost exclusively in the context of the two Quranic episodes described above, and sometimes not even there.³² Moreover, even Mamluk sources that dedicated plenty of space to the prophet Solomon usually only repeated earlier traditions and added nothing to the repertoire of Āṣaf's anecdotes. Thus, in his encyclopedic *Nihāyat al-*

²⁹On the Name's healing abilities: Zoran, "The Great Name," 83–85.

³⁰Such as *Kitāb al-mandal al-sulaymānī* (The Book of Solomon's magic formulas for dealing with jinns), an anonymous Yemeni work of exorcism, compiled in the eleventh or thirteenth century, the framework story of which is Solomon's loss of the seal. After regaining his throne, Solomon received information about the various jinn tribes, and the book includes formulas of both magic and medicinal plants for curing the jinns' potential harms. Āṣaf is only mentioned in the first part of this story, rebuking the king and later making the jinn flee by reading al-Zabūr (Psalms, a reference to the Biblical Āṣaf?). While he is not related to the recipes, the shift from his role there to practicing medicine is not huge. Anne Regourd, "Images de djinns et exorcisme dans le *Mandal al-sulaymānī*," in *Images et magie: Picatrix entre Orient et Occident*, ed. Jean-Patrice Boudet, Anna Caiozzo, and Nicolas Weill-Parot (Paris, 2011), 253–94, esp. 266, 267; for the date and medicinal plants: Anne Regourd, "Le *Kitāb al-Mandal al-sulaymānī*, un ouvrage d'exorcisme yéménite postérieur au ve/xie s., in *Démons et merveilles d'Orient*, special issue of *Res Orientales* 13 (2001): 123–38.

³¹For the Persian sources see below. For Arabic sources that define Āṣaf as Solomon's scribe, see for example 'Umārah, *Les légendes prophétiques*, 144; al-Mas'ūdī, *Ithbāt al-waṣīyah*, 77; al-Tha'labī, *Laṭāyif al-ma'ārif* (Cairo, 1960), 55; al-Tha'labī, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, trans. Brinner, 532; Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-fihrist*, 309; Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, 2:1028.

³²For example, Ibn al-Kathīr, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (Cairo, n. d.), 439, who mentions Āṣaf only in connection to Bilqīs's story; cf. his *Al-Bidāyah wa-al-nihāyah* (Beirut, 1993), 2:28 (where the identification of Āṣaf is only in the note, not in the text itself); Aḥmad ibn 'Alī al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-khabar 'an al-bashar* (Beirut, 2013), 3:37 (Bilqīs), 7:221–22 (seal); Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-durar* (Cairo, 1960–94), does not mention Āṣaf in his brief entry on Solomon (2:241–42), but mentions while discussing early scribes that Āṣaf wrote for Solomon (i.e., was Solomon's scribe) (1:391).



arab, al-Nuwayrī (d. 1333) mainly cites tales from al-Thaʿlabī and al-Kisāʿī, while Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1311) only repeats Ibn ʿAsākir’s stories.³³ In his famous dictionary *Lisān al-ʿArab*, Ibn Manẓūr identified Āṣaf as Solomon’s scribe, who called God’s Mighty Name and (as a result) Solomon saw (Bilqīs’s) throne standing next to him.³⁴ Scribe is indeed a common denomination of Āṣaf in Mamluk historical sources, in continuation of earlier Arabic usages.³⁵

Āṣaf’s role in the main body of Mamluk Quranic exegesis is also small. Apart from briefly mentioning him in the two usual episodes (one of them—the loss of the seal—is condemned by Ibn Kathīr as based on *Isrāʾīliyyāt*, tales of Jewish origin),³⁶ he is referenced mainly in connection to *Sūrat al-baqarah* (the cow) 2:102, related to the magic promoted by the devils in Solomon’s reign. The Quranic text stresses that it was not Solomon who disbelieved but the devils who taught the People of the Book an incorrect version of the Bible, thereby causing them not to acknowledge Muḥammad’s prophecy. Several interpretations of these verses suggest that the wrong Bible was actually the book of Āṣaf (*Kitāb Āṣaf*). This was not a book written by Āṣaf, but one compiled by the jinns, who ascribed it to Āṣaf, thereby leading at least ignorant Jews (as opposed to their wise men) to believe it reflected Solomon’s words. The jinns did this either after Solomon’s death or when one of them took Solomon’s throne. They either inserted their magic charm “in a line after every two lines” of a book Āṣaf had actually written to Solomon, or created their own book, sealed it with a seal similar to Solomon’s, and marked Āṣaf as its author.³⁷ Although this notion is not novel,³⁸ the emphasis it receives in Mamluk works, as opposed to the minor mentions of the other anecdotes, as well as the citation of the version in which Āṣaf is depicted as the devil who usurped Solomon’s throne in the seal story, associates Āṣaf more closely with the darker aspects of magic and diminishes the significance of the miracle he purportedly performed for Solomon.

³³ Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, vol. 14, ed. Saʿīd ʿĀshūr (Cairo, 1984), 82–141; Ibn Manẓūr, *Mukhtaṣar*, 5:288–89; 10:126–34.

³⁴ Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Cairo, 1981), 1:88.

³⁵ **Notes 32, 33, 34** above and Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī al-Qalqashandī, *Kitāb ṣubḥ al-aʿshā* (Beirut, 1987), 1:68.

³⁶ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm* (Beirut, 1998), 6:173 (Bilqīs), 7:59 (seal); Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Durr al-manthūr fī al-tafsīr al-maʿthūr* (Beirut, 1983), 6:360 (Bilqīs), 7:181, 185 (seal); Niẓām al-Dīn al-Nīshābūrī, *Gharāʾib al-Qurʾān wa-raghāʾib al-furqān* (Beirut, 1996), 5:305–6 (Bilqīs; Āṣaf is described as the vizier or scribe of Sulaymān), 595–96 (seal).

³⁷ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 1:233, 236; al-Suyūṭī, *Durr*, 1:233; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-ʿUjāb fī bayān al-asbāb* (Cairo, 1997), 1:303, 305–6, 308–9; al-Nīshābūrī, *Gharāʾib*, 1:345.

³⁸ See **note 16** above.



Aside from these expected places, Āṣaf appears in several other genres of Mamluk literature, in all of which he is connected to magic or at least the supernatural.³⁹ Interestingly, in these other genres Āṣaf is described as Solomon's vizier, not his scribe.

One example is *Kitāb al-luma' fī al-ḥawādith wa-al-bida'* [The book of brightness in novelties and innovations], by Ibn Baydakīn (fl. ca. 1300–1), a student of Ibn Taymiyah (d. 1328) who lived in Mecca, Cairo, and Jerusalem, which describes and condemns innovations in Sunni religious practices.⁴⁰ The chapter devoted to repentance and lowering of the gaze (*al-ḥayā' and ghaṣṣ al-baṣar*) includes a passage about Āṣaf that is ascribed to the exegetists (*'ulamā' al-tafsīr*) though I was unable to locate it in earlier compilations. The passage, an interpretation of *Sūrat al-kahf* (the cave) 18:17: “whomsoever God guides, he is rightly guided, and whomsoever He leads astray, thou wilt not find for him a protector to direct,”⁴¹ actually explains how Āṣaf came to know the Mighty Name of God. According to Ibn Baydakīn, Āṣaf transgressed his due bounds by entering into the realm of prophecy⁴² (*kāna musrifan 'alā nafsihi fī ḥaḍrat al-nubūwah*) until he understood that nobody can save anyone (from God's punishment). God sent Gabriel to Solomon to rebuke Āṣaf for his pretensions. When Solomon passed on the reproach, Āṣaf was humbled and frightened. He went to the city's dunghill and repented. Dismounting, crying, and putting ashes on his head, he admitted his limits, crying to God, “You are you, and I am I.” Being aware of his sin—trying to enter the realm of God without being prepared for it—he begged for God's guidance. Due to his sincere repentance, God forgave him, drew him close, and taught him the Mighty Name, which Āṣaf later used for summoning Bilqīs's throne.⁴³

Another Mamluk genre, in which the Quranic references to Āṣaf are given a slightly different twist, is popular epic: Āṣaf has a guest appearance in the *Arabian Nights*, where he is the one who brings the rebellious *'ifrit* (the kind of jinn mentioned in *Sūrat al-naml*) to Solomon, who imprisoned the former in a long-necked copper bottle (*qumqum*, an equivalent of Aladdin's lamp).⁴⁴ Āṣaf's

³⁹Given the huge amount of Mamluk writing, I probably missed quite a few other mentions of Āṣaf, and the selection below, based on references from secondary sources as well as *Al-Maktabah al-shāmilah* database, is somewhat arbitrary.

⁴⁰Adam Sabra, “Ibn Baydakīn,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed., https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_36103.

⁴¹Arberry, *Koran*, 317.

⁴²Or in the presence of [Solomon's] prophecy.

⁴³Ibn Baydakīn, *Kitāb al-luma' fī al-ḥawādith wa-al-bida'*, ed. Ṣubḥī Labīb (Cairo, 1986), 1:199–200.

⁴⁴*The Thousand and One Nights (Alf Layla wa-Layla) from the Earliest Known Sources*, ed. Muhsin Mahdi (Leiden, 1984), 1:90 (tenth night, the Fisherman's Story). According to *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, certain editions include the tale of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, but I did not



part is more central in *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*. This legendary epic was probably composed in the late Mamluk period (fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries).⁴⁵ It tells the story of the Yemenite king Sayf, who, after fighting the king of Ḥabash (Ethiopia), led his people to (the then unpopulated) Egypt. There he diverted the river Nile to its current course and founded a proto-Islamic kingdom, from which he went to conquer the realms of humans and jinn in the name of Islam.⁴⁶ As shown by Hellen Blatherwick, *Sīrat Sayf* abounds in inter-textual references to the stories of the prophets, and notably to Solomonic legends, which inform its own plot and thematic subtext and anchor it in Islamic salvation history.⁴⁷ Among the Solomonic legends, there are a few allusions to the loss of the seal, but Solomon's relations with the Queen of Sheba receive a central place, probably due to the epic's south Arabian context. The story of Solomon and Bilqīs is used as a metaphor for the relations between order (man) and chaos (woman), and also plays a role in the plot: part of the *Sīrah* is the quest for Bilqīs's bridal clothes, worn at her wedding with Solomon and kept in his treasury, which Sayf's jinn milk-sister ʿAqīṣah demands as her dowry.⁴⁸ The connection to the Queen of Sheba and the central part played by various jinns in the *Sīrah*'s plot, not only as Sayf's enemies but also as his relatives and helpers, partly explain Āṣaf's presence therein. Described as Solomon's vizier and son of his maternal (and once paternal) aunt, Āṣaf's main contribution to the plot is bequeathing his magic sword to Sayf. The sword, perhaps originating in Ibn ʿAsākir's story, was enchanted by Āṣaf to protect its bearer against all kinds of jinns, and can also test the sincerity of alleged converts. It is one of several magical items that help Sayf in fulfilling his major quest, diverting the Nile.⁴⁹

Aside from this, Āṣaf—and even his father—appear in a complicated story told to Sayf about an enchanted fish pond that Solomon created for Bilqīs. The story,

find it in the regular editions (Ulrich Marzolph, Richard van Leeuwen, and Hassan Wassouf, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* [Santa Barbara, 2004], 394–96). The story, combining the Queen's visit with Solomon's temporary loss of his crown (i.e., probably following Ibn al-ʿAsākir's version), was included only in Weil's translation of 1839–41 but omitted in later editions.

⁴⁵J.-P. Guillaume, "Sayf Ibn Ḍ h ī Yazan," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_6681.

⁴⁶Blatherwick, *Prophets, Gods and Kings*, passim; idem, "Solomon Legends," 161–207; on popular epic in the Mamluk Sultanate: Konrad Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands* (Edinburgh, 2012), 164–96.

⁴⁷Blatherwick, "Solomon Legends," 163–64.

⁴⁸Ibid., 163, 167; anonymous, *Sīrat al-malik Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan fāris al-Yaman* (Beirut, 1986), 2:185ff.

⁴⁹Ibid., 1:225–34, 2:256–69, and passim; Blatherwick, *Prophets, Gods and Kings*, 119–20 and passim; idem, "Solomon Legends," 164–65, 169–71.



originating in an exegesis to Quran 27:44–45,⁵⁰ is an offshoot of the popular *qiṣaṣ* story about a palace with a glass- or crystal-covered pool that Solomon built to make Bilqīs expose her feet so that he could see whether they were hairy and hooved as the jinns claimed (they were only hairy, apparently).⁵¹ In the *Sīrah*'s version, however, Solomon, with the help of jinns and God, is making for Bilqīs a pond in which metal fish swim and breed like real ones. Here too, Āṣaf functions as Solomon's close counselor, who helps the king both in dealing with jinns and in satisfying Bilqīs's whims. He is described as possessing knowledge in sciences and the magical power of books, though he had to work hard to gain it (as opposed to Solomon, whose knowledge, embedded in his seal, was endowed by God). Āṣaf also protects Sayf's future interests, convincing Solomon to imprison rather than execute the mighty jinn who coveted Bilqīs by reminding the king that Sayf would eventually need this jinn's powers to divert the Nile.⁵²

The *Sīrah*'s image of Āṣaf fits well with his representation in the *qiṣaṣ* literature but gives him a more central role in the plot. It combines his images as the king's trusted vizier and a powerful magician, portraying him as helping two sacred kings—Solomon and Sayf—in their personal and governmental missions and in bringing order to chaos.

While this image is still close to that of the *qiṣaṣ* literature, a somewhat different picture of Āṣaf appears in Mamluk occult literature. Āṣaf is mentioned six times in the famous manual of magic ascribed to al-Būnī, *Shams al-ma'ārif wa-laṭā'if al-awārif* [The sun of esoteric knowledge and the subtleties of the experts], also known as *Shams al-ma'ārif al-kubrā* [The greatest sun of knowledge]. While al-Būnī, a Sufi author of Algerian origin, allegedly died in Cairo in 1225 or 1233 and is therefore a pre-Mamluk author, recent research on the corpus of manuscripts of this work led both Gardiner and Coulon to argue that the book as it stands today is a compilation from the Mamluk period, greatly enlarging al-Būnī's original text. It was composed between 1272 and the end of the fourteenth century, with further additions inserted in the sixteenth century under the Ottomans.⁵³ Both Coulon and Gardiner ascribe the passages related to Āṣaf

⁵⁰27:44: "It was said to her, 'Enter the pavilion.' But when she saw it, she supposed it was a spreading water, and she bared her legs. He said, 'It is a pavilion smoothed of [27:45] crystal.'" (Arberry, *Koran*, 229).

⁵¹*Sīrat al-malik Sayf*, 2:405–8, 3:225–29; Blatherwick, "Solomon Legends," 168–75; for the story, see, e.g., Wheeler, *Prophets*, 280. Āṣaf is sometimes mentioned in this story either as the one suggesting the test, arranging the building, or leading the queen to her palace.

⁵²For the full, beautiful story: *Sīrat al-malik Sayf*, 3:225–29; Blatherwick, "Solomon Legends," 170–75.

⁵³Jean-Charles Coulon, "Salomon dans les traités de magie arabes médiévaux," in *Le roi Salomon au Moyen Âge: savoirs et représentations*, ed. Jean-Patrice Boudet et al. (Turnhout, 2022), 67; Jean-Charles Coulon, "Magie et politique: événements historiques et pensée politique dans le



to a post-Būnid attempt to make the book more palatable to Mamluk elite circles by ascribing some of its contents to courtly authorities like Āṣaf and (mostly) Solomon.⁵⁴ In its expanded version, the book is an encyclopedia of practical magic, specializing in letterism (*‘ilm al-ḥurūf*) and the science of Names (*‘ilm al-asmā’*) and abounding in magic squares and astrology. Āṣaf is mentioned in relation to the Mighty Name of God he used to summon Bilqīs’s throne; as Solomon’s vizier sitting on his magic carpet on which his seal was stamped together with the jinn ministers; as transmitting knowledge from Solomon about *khanfatriyāt* (from the Greek *charaktêres*, letter-like magic signs), which Būnī defines as protected knowledge (*‘ilm muṣawwan*) that was used by al-Ḥallāj (d. 922) as well as by Āṣaf, Solomon, and others; and as an authority on *jafr*, letter divination, passing information via Solomon, Alexander the Great (Dhū al-Qarnayn), the Scriptures of the Ancients (*zūbur al-awwalīyīn*), and the Book of Adam (*Sifr Ādam*) to the imam Ja‘far al-Šādiq (d. 763). Āṣaf is also an author of a book (*sifr*) of his own apparently related to the Names of God and their magical uses, again transmitting information from Adam.⁵⁵ Āṣaf’s figure combines the attributes of vizier, familiar from the Quran and *qiṣaṣ*, with that of an expert in the Names of God and letter divination. Coulon suggests that the aim of such an image, apart from anchoring magic in more “respectable” pseudo-epigraphic authorities, was to cement the functions of holy men, usually Sufi shaykhs in the Mamluk case, and scribes, as those serving the ruler by both writing for him and understanding the magic of written words.⁵⁶

While al-Būnī’s work is still related to the familiar Quranic references, a different, more practical facet of Āṣaf’s “magic” in the Mamluk occult literature

Šams al-Ma‘ārif attribué à al-Būnī (mort en 622/1225),” *Arabica* 64, nos. 3–4 (2017): 442–86; Noah D. Gardiner, “Esotericist Reading Communities and the Early Circulation of the Sufi Occultist Aḥmad al-Būnī’s Works,” *Arabica*, 64, nos. 3–4 (2017): 405–41; idem, “Forbidden Knowledge? Notes on the Production, Transmission, and Reception of the Major Works of Aḥmad al-Būnī,” *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 12 (2012): 81–143.

⁵⁴See previous note; also Noah D. Gardiner, “Esotericism in a Manuscript Culture: Aḥmad al-Būnī and his Readers through the Mamlūk Period” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2014), 30.

⁵⁵Pseudo-Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Būnī, *Shams al-ma‘ārif al-kubrā*, 3rd ed. (Beirut, 2006), 537, 223, 415, 383, 393. Āṣaf’s book is called (on 383, 393) *Kalām al-SRT*, but I was unable to decipher the meaning of this name. On *jafr*, a political-eschatological divinatory discourse originally associated with the Shi‘i imams, which, over time, became nearly synonymous with the science of letters: Noah D. Gardiner, “Jafr,” *EI3*, https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_32687; on Adam’s book (*Sifr Ādam*), which contains names of angels that are used for charms: Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, trans. Bayard Dodge (New York, 1970), 2:727; for a manuscript with a similar *isnād* attributed to Ja‘far al-Šādiq: Toufiq Fahd, *La divination arabe: études religieuses, sociologiques et folkloriques sur le milieu natif de l’Islam* (Leiden, 1966), 222.

⁵⁶Coulon, “Magie et politique,” 458–61.



appears in the work of the alchemist, letrist, and physician Sayyid Ḥusayn Akhlāṭī (d. 1397), an expert on the above-mentioned *jafr*. Akhlāṭī lived in the Mamluk realm, associated with scholars and occultists in Iran and Transoxiana, and was considered “an almost Solomonic figure,” and “the true prophet of the age.”⁵⁷ Akhlāṭī described the process of composing his book of *jafr* as using selections from the secret *jafr* attributed to Imam Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, who had perused the original copy kept in the treasury of the prophet Solomon. The knowledge in the book was transmitted to Āṣaf through Alexander, the prophetic books (*ṣuḥuf al-anbiyā’*), the Book of Adam, and Gabriel, an *isnād* quite similar to the one appearing in al-Būnī’s work.⁵⁸ In his *Risālah fī qawā‘id al-jafr* [A treatise on the principles of *jafr*], in a chapter dealing with the knowledge of the shining stars (*darārī*), he cites a book of Āṣaf described as “The Book of Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā ibn Samaw‘al, the vizier of Sulaymān ibn Dāwūd, may peace be upon both of them, known as *The Comprehensive Book of the High and Low Spiritual Sciences (Kitāb al-ḥawī lil-‘ulūm al-rūḥānīyah al-‘alawīyah wa-al-saflīyah)*.” The book had two parts, external and internal. The internal part originally had six chapters, only two of which are cited. The first addresses the application (*iltimās*) of this science (of the stars) and features a table indicating the exact times that the moon rises after sunset for each day of the month. The second deals with the positions of the stars (*al-nujūm wa-manāziluhā*) in seven Gregorian (or Hebrew? or Ottoman?) months (*Tishrīn al-awwal*, *Tishrīn al-thānī*, etc.). The other chapters’ titles deal with various astronomical issues as well as amulets and magic formulas against jinn (*mandal*).⁵⁹ This apparently practical material, devoid of the Quranic framework, brings to mind the Jewish designation of Āṣaf as an astronomer, but the connection, if any, is unclear to me at this stage.

In sum, while remaining quite peripheral to the Mamluk political scene, Āṣaf emerges as an authority of magic among Mamluk occultists. The blending of Āṣaf’s magical and political traits in *Sīrat Sayf* is much more aligned with his depiction in the Mongol realm. While this alignment might have resulted from close interactions between Mamluk writers and their Mongol and post-Mongol counterparts from the fourteenth century onward, this hypothesis still requires further evidence.⁶⁰ It is to the Mongol realm that we now turn.

⁵⁷ İlker Evrim Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran: Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Alī Yazdī and the Islamicate Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, 2016), 139, 154, and passim.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 153–54; cf. Būnī, *Shams*, 383.

⁵⁹ Ḥasan al-Akhlāṭī, *Risālah fī qawā‘id al-jafr wa-‘ilm al-falak wa-al-zayārij wa-‘ilm al-ḥurūf* (Beirut, 2002), 107.

⁶⁰ On such contacts see, e.g., Reuven Amitai, “The Mongols and the Arab Middle East,” in *The Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire*, ed. Michal Biran and Hodong Kim (Cambridge, 2023), 818–19; Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks*, passim.



ĀṢAF IN THE MONGOL REALM

In the Mongol domains, Āṣaf became the embodiment of a good vizier. This was partly due to an existing pre-Mongol Persian tradition that gave a bigger place to Āṣaf than its Arabic counterpart and, at least from the eleventh century, highlights his role as a vizier. As early as Bal‘amī’s (d. 956) translation of the history of al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) Āṣaf was given more space than he had received in the original Arabic chapter dedicated to Solomon, although it did not define him as vizier but only as Solomon’s companion and cousin.⁶¹ Āṣaf, however, is denoted vizier in the first Persian *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, compiled by al-Tha‘labī in the eleventh century, where he appears not only in the two usual anecdotes but also as sitting on Solomon’s throne and helping the king in judgement, as the one Solomon consults about building the temple, and as the one who knows that Solomon is dead before others became aware of this.⁶² Āṣaf is mentioned in the Seljuq vizier Nizām al-Mulk’s (d. 1092) *Siyāsat-nāmah* as one of the prophets’ viziers (like Aaron was to Moses, Simon [Petrus] was to Jesus, and Abū Bakr was to Muḥammad), in one of Āṣaf’s surprisingly rare appearances in the Mirrors for Princes literature.⁶³ Moreover, Āṣaf is referred to quite often in pre-Mongol Persian poetry compiled in Iran and Central Asia from the eleventh century onward, mostly in panegyrics to various viziers. Thus, Āṣaf is mentioned, for example, in poems of Qaṭrān Tabrīzī (ca. 1009–88) and Sūzanī Samarqandī (d. 1166), where he is explicitly described as vizier.⁶⁴ Moreover, the Transoxiana-born Muḥammad ‘Awfī (ca. 1171–1242) in 1220 dedicated his *Lubāb al-albāb* [Quintessence of hearts], an anthology of poets both professional and amateur, to “the second Āṣaf,” ‘Ayn al-Mulk, the vizier of Malik Nāṣir al-Dīn Qabācha, ruler of Lahore, to whose court ‘Awfī had escaped to avoid the Mongol army.⁶⁵ The anthology included several poems by Seljuq and Ghaznavid poets, written about or by viziers, in which Āṣaf appears as a metaphor for the discussed vizier.⁶⁶ Āṣaf’s growing popularity in the Iranian realm was probably related not only to the more central role of viziers in the eastern Islamic world, but mainly to the association of Solomon with Jamshid, the mythical Iranian king who was especially connected to Fars in the

⁶¹ Bal‘amī, *Tārīkh-i Bal‘amī*, 1:574, 579–85; cf. al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-al-mulūk*, ed. M. J. De Goeje (repr. Leiden, 1964) 2:588–90; William M. Brinner, trans., *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 3, *The Children of Israel* (New York, 1991), 167–69.

⁶² Al-Nīshābūrī, *Qeṣaṣ ol-Anbiyā*, 282, 283, 299, 304–5, 307–9.

⁶³ Nizām al-Mulk, *Siyar al-mulūk (Siyāsat-nāmah)*, ed. H. Drake (Tehran, 1962), 218.

⁶⁴ Muḥammad Sūzanī Samarqandī, *Dīwān*, ed. Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh Ḥusaynī (Tehran, 1959), 64, 144; Qaṭrān Tabrīzī, *Dīwān*, ed. Muḥammad Nakhjawānī (Tehran, 1983), 167, 345; Russell Harris, “Āṣaf b. Barakhyā,” *Encyclopaedia Islamica online*, 2008, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-9831_isla_COM_0298.

⁶⁵ Muḥammad ‘Awfī, *Lubāb al-albāb*, ed. Sa‘īd Nāfisī (Tehran, 1956), 4, 141–42.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 141–42, 429, 553, 558.



Iranian collective memory. Both Jamshid and Solomon were perfect temporal rulers, sacred kings who commanded magical powers, controlled the wind, and were great builders. While the identities of the two were debated among Muslims, stories and courtiers were often interchanged between them, making *Āṣaf-i Jam* or *Āṣaf-i Jamshīd* (Āṣaf [the vizier of] Jamshid) a common poetic metaphor.⁶⁷ These features probably also contributed to Āṣaf's popularity in the Mongol realm.

Āṣaf's most detailed record in the Mongol era appears in the *Stories of the Prophets* compiled by al-Rabghūzī in 710/1310–11. This is the first Chaghadaid Turkic version of *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, penned by a certain Transoxianian judge, Naṣīr al-Dīn ibn Burhān al-Dīn al-Rabghūzī, a *nisbah* referring to (the unidentified) Ribāṭ al-Ughūz. The book was commissioned by a young Mongol commander called Toqbughā Bek, described as a devout Muslim well-versed in the Quran. DeWeese identified this figure with Amir Toqbughā, whom Ibn Baṭṭūṭah met in Nakhshab/Qarshī in 1332–33, when the former was the deputy or governor (*nā'ib*) in Ghaznah (Afghanistan) of the Chaghadaid khan, 'Alā' al-Dīn Tarmashirin (r. 1331–34), the khan who brought Islam to Transoxiana but was deposed by his kin soon after. According to Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, Amir Toqbughā, who had been a Muslim long before the khan and had built many colleges and Sufi lodges in Ghaznah, provided temporary shelter to Tarmashirin after his overthrow, before the latter continued to India.⁶⁸

The book that al-Rabghūzī compiled for the Muslim-Mongol amir included not only the stories of the Israelite prophets and kings, Jesus, and St. George, but also Alexander the Great, as well as the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, and 'Alī's sons. In this he follows Tha'labī's Persian work but differs from most *qīṣaṣ* that do not include Muslim figures (or Alexander). This choice of content, however, encapsulated everything new converts like the

⁶⁷Mahmoud Omidshar, "Jamshid," *Encyclopedia Iranica Online*, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/jamsid-ii>; Dominic P. Brookshaw, *Hafiz and His Contemporaries: Poetry, Performance and Patronage in Fourteenth Century Iran* (London, 2019), 184–86; Anna Caiozzo, "Salomon magicien, roi et prophète dans la culture visuelle du monde musulman du XIIIe au XVIe siècle," in *Le roi Salomon au Moyen Âge: savoirs et représentations*, ed. Jean-Patrice Boudet et al. (Turnhout, 2022), 236–238.

⁶⁸Devin DeWeese, "Turkic Sources," in *Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire*, 2:281; cf. Nāṣīr al-Dīn ibn Burhān al-Dīn al-Rabghūzī, *The Stories of the Prophets: Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā': An Eastern Turkish Version*, 2nd ed., ed. and trans. Hendrik E. Boeschoten and John O'Kane (Leiden, 2015), XIII–XVI; Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, *Rihla: Voyages d'Ibn Battoutah*, ed. and trans. C. Defrémery and B. R. Sanguinetti (Paris, 1874–79), 3:29; *Travels of Ibn Battuta*, trans. H. A. R. Gibb (Cambridge, 1958–2000), 3:555. On Tarmashirin: Michal Biran, "The Chaghadaids and Islam: The Conversion of Tarmashirin Khan (1331–34)," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122, no. 4 (2002): 742–52.



Mongols needed to know about Islamic salvation history.⁶⁹ Indeed, al-Rabghūzī stressed the popularity of the stories of the prophets, including their more popular versions, in his days, and such popularity is also attested by the significant place given to prophets in the work of Jamāl Qarshī (fl. 1303), the only indigenous quasi-historical work written in Mongol Central Asia, as well as by the few thirteenth-century fragments containing prophet-related Quranic commentaries, one of them dealing with Solomon, that were unearthed in Qarshī, the Chaghadaid western capital founded in Transoxiana by the khan Kebek (r. 1319–26).⁷⁰

While al-Rabghūzī's work retained its connection to the Quranic commentaries, made use of hadith and former *qīṣaṣ* works in Arabic (notably al-Thaʿlabī) and Persian (al-Nīshābūrī), and even positioned itself as a pious alternative to the “faulty and unsound” versions of the *qīṣaṣ* it condemned, it also integrated popular stories, epic themes, and poetry. This mixture contributed to its unremitting popularity,⁷¹ and also meant that some of its material was unattested elsewhere. This was true in Āṣaf's case as well.

Āṣaf is mentioned quite often in al-Rabghūzī's detailed chapter about David and Solomon. He is given a bigger role in his two usual anecdotes, which are narrated in a lively fashion with many “citations” of Āṣaf's words,⁷² as well as being mentioned in other Solomonic episodes (e.g., Solomon's death).⁷³

Yet it is in the prologue to the story of Solomon's loss of the seal, under the title “The Tale of Solomon and King ‘Ukūz,” that Āṣaf gets his most prominent role.⁷⁴ In the first part of this story, Āṣaf is placed in the famous episode of Solomon and the horses, derived from Quran 38:31–33.⁷⁵ According to al-Rabghūzī, Solomon desired a herd of flying horses from a distant island and had the demon Samdūn capture them. Āṣaf then presented 900 of the 1000 horses to Solomon, who became so engrossed that he missed the evening prayer. In horror, Solomon

⁶⁹Al-Rabghūzī, *Stories*, iv–ix and passim.

⁷⁰A. Borovkov, “Iz materialov dlja istorii uzbekskogo jazyka,” *Tjurkologičeskij Sbornik* 1 (1951): 73–79; E. Fazylov, “Eine choresmtürkische Handschrift über gute und böse Taten,” *Journal of Turkish Studies* (1990): 207–21; al-Rabghūzī, *Stories*, xviii; Jamāl Qarshī, *Al-Mulḥaqāt bi-al-ṣurāḥ*, in *Istorii Kazakhstana v persidskikh istochnikakh*, vol. 1, ed. A. K. Muminov (Almaty, 2005), XC–XCIX.

⁷¹Al-Rabghūzī, *Stories*, xiii–xiv.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 2:350–74, notably 365–67 (Bilqīs); 367–69 (loss of the seal).

⁷³*Ibid.*, 2:369–70.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 2:342ff.

⁷⁵“When in the evening were presented to him the standing steeds, he said, ‘Lo, I have loved the love of good things better than the remembrance of my Lord, until the sun was hidden behind the veil. Return them to me!’ And he began to stroke their shanks and necks.” (Arberry, *Koran*, 273); for earlier stories derived from these verses that do not, however, mention Āṣaf, see, e.g., Wheeler, *Prophets*, 271.



beheaded the 900 horses and prayed for redemption. God accepted his prayers, returned the sun to its earlier position, and allowed him to pray on time. Al-Rabghūzī notes that Āṣaf concealed the remaining 100 horses, which survived and became the ancestors of contemporary thoroughbreds.⁷⁶ Āṣaf is therefore given credit for preserving these choice horses, an honor unattested in previous versions of this story that probably endeared Āṣaf to a Mongol audience.

Following a digression about Solomon's throne, on which Āṣaf is also said to have sat, Solomon is informed by the demon Samdūn about the island kingdom of King ʿUkūz and decides to conquer it. With Āṣaf by his side, Solomon travels on a magic carpet. Āṣaf then assembles a three-winged army, led by humans in the center and 100,000 demons on each wing. Despite its strength, the army is initially defeated. Solomon sends reinforcements of beasts, flying birds, and, finally, the wind, which blinds the enemy soldiers, leading to victory. Solomon gives his whip to Āṣaf and the latter leaves alive no one who was as tall as the whip. After ʿUkūz was slain by a lion, Āṣaf purifies the city by destroying its towers, talismans, and sacred animals and brings the wealth to Solomon. Solomon marries ʿUkūz's beautiful daughter, Kūna, who later worships idols and causes Solomon to lose his throne.

This story, which I have not seen elsewhere, includes several elements that might appeal to a Mongol audience. First, it highlights Āṣaf's military role as a commander of a composite army of humans and demons, aided also by animals, birds, and fairies, albeit in a hard battle. Later, Āṣaf also purified the conquered city of remnants of idolatry and brought its wealth to his lord. Second, the whip's measure (i.e., killing everyone who was higher than the whip) is obviously reminiscent of Chinggis Khan's action after the defeat of the Tatars, when he measured them against the linchpin of the cart, killing everybody who was higher than it.⁷⁷ The mere conferring of the whip upon Āṣaf attests to Solomon's trust and appreciation of his companion.

Āṣaf's military leadership is also implied in the last part of the "loss of the seal" story, where after Āṣaf made sure the demon on the throne was not Solomon, he stated "Now it's up to you [the Children of Israel] to do something!" As a result of this call, men and fairies, wild animals, and birds all went together towards the palace, leading to the demon's escape.⁷⁸ Al-Rabghūzī thus portrayed Āṣaf not only as a close, wise, and loyal vizier with a special connection to God, who can even save his lord from the latter's own mistakes (e.g. ignoring the idolatry, killing the horses), but also as a military leader, who leads human and

⁷⁶Al-Rabghūzī, *Stories*, 2:342–45, citation on 345.

⁷⁷*The Secret History of the Mongols*, trans. Igor de Rachewiltz (Leiden, 2004), 1:77 (par. 154).

⁷⁸Al-Rabghūzī, *Stories*, 2:354.



non-human troops. These specific stories were probably chosen or reworked to please al-Rabghūzī's Mongol patron and audience, with Mongol tastes in mind.

The relatively bigger place given to Āṣaf in al-Rabghūzī's work can be partially explained by his being a sort of "local hero" in Central Asia: the mausoleum of Āṣaf ibn Barachyā still exists today on the foothill of Solomon mountain near Awsh (Osh) in Kyrgyzstan, and contemporary local traditions ascribe to Solomon and Āṣaf the digging of canals and building of irrigation projects in the Fergana valley. The aforementioned Jamāl Qarshī, writing in Kashghar in the early years of the fourteenth century, attested that it was known in his days, and located near the city of Awsh in Fergana.⁷⁹ The contemporary mausoleum, currently a part of the UNESCO site of Sulaiman-Too, is dated to the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, but it is built on top of an older site, dated to the eleventh to twelfth centuries, which was probably the one mentioned by Qarshī.⁸⁰

Qarshī also refers to Āṣaf in other parts of his work: he succinctly mentioned him as Sulaymān's vizier who knew God's Mighty Name in the section devoted to the prophets and as a metaphor (*Āṣaf al-ʿahd*, the Āṣaf of the era) for Maḥmūd Yalawach (d. 1254), described as the vizier of the Mongol khans, from Chinggis Khan to Möngke (r. 1251–59), and of his son Masʿūd Beg (d. 1289), called *Āṣaf-i Jam* (Āṣaf [the vizier] of Jamshid), who headed Mongol administration in Central Asia first under the Great Khans and later under the Chaghadaids and Qaidu (r. 1270–1303).⁸¹

Āṣaf is briefly mentioned in some of the Ilkhanid universal histories. He is not recorded in the more concise ones, *Niẓām al-tawārīkh* by Bayḍāwī (d. 1286) and *Tārīkh* of Banākatī (d. 1333), that do not mention Solomon,⁸² but is succinctly

⁷⁹ Ashirbek Muminov, "Sacred Places in Central Asia: Attempts at Their Historical and Theological Interpretation," in *Muslim Saints and Mausoleums in Central Asia and Xinjiang*, ed. Shinmen Yasushi, Sawada Minoru, and Waite Edmund (Paris, 2013), 32; Qarshī, *Mulḥaqāt*, CCI. See also Juvaynī, *Genghis Khan: The History of the World Conqueror*, trans. J. A. Boyle (Manchester, 1997), 94, who describes Awsh as a place of pilgrimage.

⁸⁰ Sulaiman-Too Sacred Mountain was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2009: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1230/>.

⁸¹ Qarshī, *Mulḥaqāt*, XCV, CLXXIII, CLXXVI. On Yalawach and his son: Thomas T. Allsen, "Maḥmūd Yalavač (?–1254), Masʿūd Beg (?–1289), ʿAlī Beg (?–1280); Bujūr (fl. 1206–60)," in *In the Service of the Khan: Eminent Personalities of the Early Mongol-Yüan Period (1200–1300)*, ed. Igor De Rachewiltz, Chan Hok-lam, Hsiao Ch'i-ch'ing, and Peter W. Geier (Wiesbaden, 1993), 122–35.

⁸² ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿUmar Bayḍāwī, *Niẓām al-tawārīkh* (Tehran, 2003); in his *Tafsīr*, Āṣaf is succinctly mentioned in the usual places: in the commentary on Surah 27:40, as Solomon's vizier who brought Bilqīs's throne (Bayḍāwī, *Tafsīr al-Bayḍāwī* [Beirut, 1988], 2:177) and in Surah 38:33, in relation to the story of the loss of the seal as the one who informed Solomon of the idolatry at his house (2:312); Banākatī, *Tārīkh-i Banākatī: Rawẓ at ūlā al-albāb fī maʿrifat al-tawārīkh va al-ansāb* (Tehran, 1969).



noted in Qāshānī's *Zubdat al-tawārīkh* (Choice of histories) and in the same words in Rashīd al-Dīn's *Jāmi' al-tawārīkh* (Compendium of chronicles), in the part titled *Īrān wa Islām* (Iran and Islam). In both sources he is mentioned in connection to Bilqīs's throne as the one who had knowledge, knew God's Mighty Name, and brought the throne to Solomon.⁸³ While Āṣaf is not mentioned in the part dedicated to Jewish history that has a chapter on David and Solomon, he is referred to in two of Rashīd al-Dīn's theological works. First, in *Latā'if al-ḥaqā'iq* (Subtle truths, compiled after 1308), Āṣaf's swift bringing of Bilqīs's throne to Solomon is given as an example of the ability of certain unique souls (including Rashīd al-Dīn himself) to accomplish things much faster than others, thereby suggesting a different passage of time.⁸⁴ In his *As'ilah wa-ajwibah* (Questions and answers), the Ilkhanid vizier describes a dialogue with a Frankish physician and philosopher who, when addressing Rashīd al-Dīn, refers to him, among other praises, as "Āṣaf-i Sulaymān," meaning "[the one who has the attributes of] Āṣaf [the vizier] of Sulaymān."⁸⁵ I suspect that this does not necessarily (or not only) reflect Rashīd al-Dīn's self-image, as Yoeli-Tlalim suggested,⁸⁶ but denotes a common polite way of addressing a vizier in late Ilkhanid Iran, as other examples

⁸³ Abū al-Qāsim Qāshānī, "Zubdat al-tawārīkh," Berlin State Library MS Minutoli 237, fol. 37r; Rashīd al-Dīn, "Jāmi' al-tawārīkh," British Museum MS ADD 2628, fol. 21a; India Office MS Islamic 3524, fol. 20a. Both texts fail to mention the "loss of the seal" story. For Qāshānī's work as the source of Rashīd al-Dīn's universal history: Osamu Otsuka, "Qāshānī, the First World Historian: Research on his Uninvestigated Persian General History, *Zubdat al-Tawārīkh*," *Studia Iranica* 47, no. 1 (2018): 119–49. Note that the printed version of this part of Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmi' al-tawārīkh (Īrān wa-Islām)*, vol. 1, ed. Muḥammad Rawshan [Tehran, 1994]), where Sulaymān and Āṣaf receive a much more elaborated entry (pp. 429–52 for Sulaymān), is actually based on Ḥāfiẓ-i Ābrū's reworking of the text (Otsuka, "Qāshānī," 121). Ābrū's text bears no resemblance to this version of Qāshānī/Rashīd al-Dīn. While it is mainly based on earlier compilations, notably al-Ṭabarī/Bal'amī, al-Tha'labī, and al-Nīshābūrī, it cites a few rare stories related to Āṣaf (e.g., a tradition ascribed to Wahb ibn Munabbih [d. ca. 725] gives the content of Solomon's letter to Bilqīs, as written by Āṣaf, that began with God's Mighty Name and called upon her to embrace Islam, as she eventually did [438–40]). Ābrū even adds several details about Āṣaf that I did not find in earlier works, e.g., the presence of a lion beneath Āṣaf's chair—which was located on Solomon's throne—that could feel when a witness was lying (447). On Ābrū's *Lives of the Prophets*, see Mohamad Reza Ghiasian, *Lives of the Prophets: The Illustrations to Hafiz-i Abru's "Assembly of Chronicles"* (Leiden, 2018).

⁸⁴ Rashīd al-Dīn, *Latā'if al-ḥaqā'iq* (Tehran, 2013), 13. On his concept of time: Judith Pfeiffer, "In the Folds of Time: Rashīd al-Dīn on the Theories of Historicity," *History and Theory* 57 (2019): 20–42.

⁸⁵ Rashīd al-Dīn, *As'ilah va ajwibah-i Rashīdī*, ed. R. Sha'bānī (Islamabad, 1993), 2:52–53; cited in Yoeli-Tlalim, *Reorienting Histories*, 113.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*



described below show. In any case, it attests to the popularity of *Āṣaf* as a metaphor for a good vizier.

Returning to Ilkhanid universal histories, *Āṣaf* is also mentioned in Mustawfī Qazvīnī's *Tārīkh-i guzīdah* (Selected history, compiled ca. 1330), both in the prophet section, where he is defined as Solomon's vizier and briefly mentioned in his two usual anecdotes,⁸⁷ and in the Ilkhanid part as a metaphor for the good vizier, referring to Rashīd al-Dīn, whose vizierate is compared to that of *Āṣaf* and Buzurgmīr, and his son, Ghiyāth al-Dīn, the vizier of the last Ilkhan Abū Sa'īd, whom Mustawfī compares to Solomon.⁸⁸ *Āṣaf* is also mentioned in Qazvīnī's geographical work *Nuzhat al-qulūb* (Hearts' bliss) in relation to the Barmakids, the emblematic family of Abbasid viziers who converted to Islam in the Umayyad period. According to Qazvīnī, the Umayyad caliph Sulaymān ibn 'Abd al-Malik (r. 715–17) allegedly asked, "In the post-prophecy era, does my kingdom fall short from that of Sulaymān ibn Dāwūd?" The response he got was that "even if your kingdom is wider than Sulaymān's, you do not have a vizier like *Āṣaf*." Sulaymān then searched for a competent vizier and found Ja'far al-Barmakī.⁸⁹ Interestingly, the choice of Ja'far al-Barmakī by Sulaymān ibn 'Abd al-Malik also appears in *Akhbār al-Barāmīkah* (The history of the Barmakids), ascribed to Abū Ḥafṣ 'Umar ibn al-Azraq al-Kirmānī (fl. ca. 800), and hence in Niẓām al-Mulk's *Siyāsāt nāmāh*, in both cases with Solomonic references but without mentioning *Āṣaf*.⁹⁰ The record in Qazvīnī's book can therefore reflect *Āṣaf*'s growing popularity as an emblematic vizier.

Āṣaf's use as a metaphor for a capable vizier is especially prevalent in the history of Vaṣṣāf (fl. 1328–29), where it refers to prominent Mongol and Ilkhanid viziers, notably Rashīd al-Dīn but also others such as Shams al-Dīn Juvaynī (d. 1283), Mas'ūd Beg, and Sa'd al-Dīn Sawwājī (d. 1312).⁹¹ This popularity may

⁸⁷ Ḥamd Allāh Mustawfī Qazvīnī, *The Ta'rīkh-i-guzīdah; or "Select History" of Hamdulāh Mustawfī-i-Qazvīnī, Compiled in A.H. 730 (A.D. 1330), and Now Reproduced in Fac-Simile from a Manuscript Dated A.H. 857 (A.D. 1453)*, ed. Edward G. Browne and Reynold A. Nicholson (Leiden, 1910), 54.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 602, 603, 627.

⁸⁹ Mustawfī Qazvīnī, *Nuzhat al-qulūb: matn-i kāmil*, ed. Mīr Hāshim Muḥaddis (Tehran, 2017), 1:294.

⁹⁰ [Abū Ḥafṣ 'Umar ibn al-Azraq al-Kirmānī?], *Akhbār al-Barāmīkah*, ed. Jalīl al-'Aṭīyah (Beirut, 2006), 34; in this edition the book is ascribed to "an author of the tenth century." For Abū Ḥafṣ as the author: Kevin van Bladel, "Barmakids," *EI3*, https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_24302; Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyāsāt nāmāh/siyar al-mulūk*, 219, (trans.) 179.

⁹¹ E.g., Vaṣṣāf, *Tārīkh-i Vaṣṣāf al-Ḥaẓrat* (Tehran, 2009), 4:171, 175, 196, 228, 331, 333, 343, 349, 369. Of these, pages 196 and 331–69 all refer to Rashīd al-Dīn, 171 to viziers in general, and 175 to Sa'd al-Dīn (Sawwājī?). Vaṣṣāf al-Ḥaẓrat (Vaṣṣāf al-ḥaḍrah), *Geschichte Wassaf's*, ed. and trans. Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (Vienna, 2010), 1:105, 132 (Persian), 109, 139 (German), referring to Shams al-Dīn Juvaynī and Mas'ūd Beg.



reflect not only Vaṣṣāf's conspicuous use of metaphors and poetry but also his Shirazi origin.⁹² That I did not find any reference to Āṣaf in Juvaynī's work may suggest that Āṣaf's popularity increased in the early fourteenth century, when, after the Islamization of the Mongols, references to Abrahamic figures made more sense.

In Ilkhanid poetry, Āṣaf was a popular metaphor for viziers even before Mongol Islamization, in continuation of pre-Mongol trends. The references are usually rather obvious (*Āṣaf-i Sulaymān*, *Āṣaf-i Jamshīd*, *Āṣaf al-ʿahd*), and appear in poems dedicated to renowned and less renowned viziers,⁹³ but two earlier poems referring to Shams al-Dīn Juvaynī are a bit more interesting. In the Mongol ode of Pur-i Bahāʾ (d. 1284?), the poet says of Juvaynī: "Āṣaf, who was the vizier of the Solomon of (his) time, in the time of your fortune (would be only) someone good to serve as your *kōtelchi* (the man in charge of a led horse)," implying that Juvaynī exceeds Āṣaf.⁹⁴ In another poem by Pur-i Bahāʾ, Juvaynī is again compared to Āṣaf (together with a list of other historical figures), yet Āṣaf is defined as "world conqueror and devil-binder" (*Āṣaf-i gītī gushā-yi dīv bandī*), a description that also refers to his military skills.⁹⁵ Another poet who uses Āṣaf as a popular metaphor is the notable Ḥāfiẓ (d. 1390), who dedicated many poems to various Muẓaffarid (i.e., post-Ilkhanid) viziers, and used the similarities between Solomon and Jamshid to combine Iranian and Muslim lore.⁹⁶ Thus, Ilkhanid and post-Ilkhanid poetry embraced the pre-Mongol Persian tradition of using Āṣaf as a common symbol for an exemplary vizier, particularly in praise of patron viziers.

By the late Ilkhanid and Jalayirid time this image of Āṣaf had become part and parcel of chancery formulas used while addressing viziers. Thus *Dastūr al-kātib* [The scribe's register], the administrative manual commissioned by Ghiyāth al-Dīn ibn Rashīd al-Dīn but completed only in 1360 and dedicated to the Jalayirid sultan Shaykh Uways (r. 1356–74), mentions Āṣaf as an example of the viziers of the prophets (as Niẓām al-Mulk did), but also includes *Āṣaf al-ʿahd* and *Āṣaf al-*

⁹² Brookshaw, *Hafiz*, 184–87.

⁹³ See, e.g., the examples in Maḥmūd ibn Badr al-Dīn al-Jājarmī (d. 1341), *Muʿnis al-aḥrār fī daqāʾiq al-ashʿār* [The free men's companion to the subtleties of poems], ed. Mīr Ṣāliḥ Ṭabībī (Tehran, 1971), an anthology of Ilkhanid poetry, where poems of various poets of the thirteenth century are dedicated to various viziers, notably Bahāʾ al-Dīn Juvaynī (d. 1279), son of Shams al-Dīn, and Nāṣir al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 1274). *Ibid.*, 1:105, 163 Bahāʾ al-Dīn, 327, 371; 2:427, 892 (Ṭūsī), 1215 (Bahāʾ al-Dīn). Many more examples can be added from various *diwāns*.

⁹⁴ V. Minorsky, "Pur-i Baha's 'Mongol' Ode (Mongolica, 2)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 18, no. 2 (1956): 266, 271.

⁹⁵ Pur-i Bahāʾ, British Museum MS OR 9213, fol. 18b.

⁹⁶ Brookshaw, *Hafiz*, 184–86, 264, for several examples.



zamān—both meaning the *Āṣaf* of the era—as a polite address to viziers in letters written by amirs or by other viziers.⁹⁷

Before concluding this section, we may note two other short Shiʿite references to the question of *Āṣaf*'s prophecy. Ibn Ṭāwūs (d. 1266), the Baghdadi polymath, described *Āṣaf* in his book of supplication *Muhaj al-daʿawāt wa-manhaj al-ʿibādāt* as a prophet whose supplication to God enabled him to bring Bilqīs's throne to Solomon.⁹⁸ However, the senior Shiʿite authority of the late Ilkhanate, al-ʿAllāmah al-Ḥillī (d. 1325), accepted the Ashʿarite and Sufi position, according to which *Āṣaf*'s miracle was the non-prophetic sort (*karāmah*) that can honor a righteous person and was facilitated by Solomon's prophetic miracles (*muʿjizah*).⁹⁹

Prophetic considerations notwithstanding, *Āṣaf*'s popularity as a synonym for a great vizier in the Iranian and Turkic worlds continued and even increased in the post-Ilkhanid period, notably among the Timurids, Safavids, and Ottomans, and was also expressed visually. *Āṣaf* not only merited an extended reference in the Timurid universal histories,¹⁰⁰ but the *Dastūr al-wuzarāʾ* [Register of ministers] by the late-Timurid and early-Safavid historian Khwāndamīr (d. 1534)—the only Muslim register of ministers that also includes pre-Islamic viziers—begins with a long chapter on *Āṣaf* (followed by Buzurgmihr), and uses *Āṣaf* as a metaphor for various illustrious viziers throughout the work.¹⁰¹ In the Ottoman realm, *Āṣaf* was an especially popular as the epitome of the good vizier under Sulaymān the Magnificent (r. 1520–66), who compared himself to Solomon and his eminent vizier Ibrāhīm Pasha (d. 1536) to *Āṣaf*. The grand vizier and historian Luṭfī Pasha (d. 1564), who had briefly served under Sultan Sulaymān, even named his book on the qualities of a good vizier *Āṣaf nāmāh*.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Muḥammad Nakḥjavānī, *Dastūr al-kātib fī taʿyīn al-marātib*, ed. ʿAlī Akbar Aḥmadī Dārānī (Tehran, 2017), 2:529, 1:444, 445, 447.

⁹⁸ Ibn Ṭāwūs, *Muhaj al-daʿawāt wa-manhaj al-ʿibādāt* (Beirut, 1987), 489. The same supplication allegedly enabled Jesus to revive the dead.

⁹⁹ Ibn al-Muṭaḥhar al-ʿAllāmah al-Ḥillī, *Kashf al-murād: sharḥ-i Tajrīd al-ʿitiqād* (Qum, 1993), 378; see also Sabine Schmidtke, *The Theology of Al-ʿAllāma Al-Hillī (d. 726/1325)* (Berlin, 1991), 159–63.

¹⁰⁰ E.g., Mīrkhwānd, *Rawḍat al-ṣafā* (Tehran, 1960), 1:375, 381 (with a different interpretation to the *jasad* verse); Ghiyāth al-Dīn Khwāndamīr, *Khulāṣat al-akḥbār fī bayān aḥwāl al-akhyār* (Tehran, 2020), 100, 103–6; for *Ābrū*, n. 83 above.

¹⁰¹ Ghiyāth al-Dīn Khwāndamīr, *Dastūr al-wuzarāʾ* (Tehran, 1938), 5, 8, 9–15, 110, 138, 140, 156, 260, 267, 315, 338, 354, 356, 383, 387, 420, 434, 438, 464; Collin Mitchell, “Exploring Patronage, Genre and Scholar-Bureaucracy: The Trans-Imperial Career of Khwandamir (d. 1534),” *Entangled Religions* 13, no. 5 (2022).

¹⁰² Serpil Baghçi, “A New Theme of the Shirazi Frontispiece Miniatures: The *Dīvān* of Solomon,” *Muqarnas* 12 (1995): 108–9. For Sulaymān the Magnificent's use of Solomon as a role model, see



In the post-Mongol era, Āṣaf also gained popularity in the visual realm. Images of Solomon and hence Āṣaf are quite rare before the fifteenth century: I am aware of only one miniature ascribed to the mid-thirteenth century (i.e., late Abbasid or early Ilkhanid), depicting Solomon on his lion-based throne holding his seal and a globe, while Āṣaf (identified by an inscription over his head) is on his right and a jinn on his left.¹⁰³ An illustrated manuscript of a Seljuq cosmography completed in 1388 in Jalayirid Baghdad includes several pictures of Solomon, one of them depicting Āṣaf bringing Bilqīs's throne to his court.¹⁰⁴ Beginning in late-fifteenth-century Shiraz and throughout the sixteenth century, under the Aqqyunlu and the Safavids, Solomon became by far the most popular painted prophet. This was not only due to his representation of the new sacred king of the post-Mongol period, but also, and especially in Shiraz, capital of Fars, as an equivalent of Jamshid. Interestingly, illustrators in Shiraz used a frontispiece depicting Solomon's court or Bilqīs's visit to Solomon as a title page for various manuscripts, regardless of their context. In these illustrations, Āṣaf is almost always depicted next to Solomon, on the throne, together with various jinns and animals.¹⁰⁵ Baghchi suggested that the artisans saw Āṣaf as their patron, based on a similar argument of the Ottoman explorer Evliya Çelebi (1611–82), who claimed that the painters of Istanbul had regarded Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā as a prophet and painter who decorated the throne of Sulaymān and Bilqīs's palace, and hence as their patron.¹⁰⁶ In the Mamluk and Mongol anecdotes I found no such aspect of Āṣaf's figure, although he is sometimes (though not frequently) mentioned in the *qīṣaṣ* traditions as consulting Solomon in building the temple or Bilqīs's palace. This (rather vague) connection to Solomon's building enterprises might also have affected Ibn Baṭṭūṭah's unique record, according to which Āṣaf built the Aya Sophia church in Constantinople.¹⁰⁷ The early connection to the future Ottoman capital might have contributed to Āṣaf's popularity

Cornell H. Fleischer; "The Lawgiver as Messiah: The Making of the Imperial Image in the Reign of Süleyman," in *Soliman le Magnifique et son temps*, ed. Gilles Veinstein (Paris, 1992), 159–77.

¹⁰³Rachel Milstein, *Le Bible dans l'art Islamique* (Paris, 2005), 102–3, and fig. 25 (Topkapı MS TMSK H 2152, fol. 97r). Milstein tentatively dates it to a pre-Mongol Arabic setting, but Caiozzo recently argued that based on its color, this is an early Ilkhanid work, perhaps even depicting Hülegü as Solomon: Caiozzo, "Salomon," 231–32.

¹⁰⁴Caiozzo, "Salomon," 239 (Paris BnF MS sup. Person 332, fol. 136v); for the text: Muḥammad al-Ṭūsī, *ʿAjāyib al-makhlūqāt* (Tehran, 1966), 12–13, 339, 447, 485 for Āṣaf. Āṣaf is not mentioned in the more famous Ilkhanid Arabic cosmography of Zakāriyā Qazwīnī (d. 1283) with the same name.

¹⁰⁵Baghchi, "A New Theme," 101–11.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 108–9.

¹⁰⁷Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, *Travels*, 2:509.



in the Ottoman realm, even before his appropriation under Sulaymān the Magnificent.

While building on an existing Iranian and Central Asian tradition, the Mongol period significantly elevated Āṣaf as the quintessential symbol of a good vizier in Persian and Turkic literature. In the early fourteenth century, Āṣaf's image transcended from the realms of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* and poetry to that of chronicles and chancery documents, solidifying his role as the ideal vizier. His popularity likely surged with the Mongols' conversion to Islam in Iran and the increasing number of Muslim Mongols in Central Asia, during which stories of the prophets, particularly those featuring local heroes, were instrumental in promoting conversion and enhancing converts' understanding of Islamic history and culture.

CONCLUSION

After examining the various representations of Āṣaf in Mongol and Mamluk literary works, it is pertinent to question what characteristics made Āṣaf an ideal vizier in the Muslim-Mongol context and why his image was marginal at best in the Mamluk sphere. After all, none of the references to Āṣaf mentioned above actually describe him dealing with mundane administrative work that was the lion's share of the vizier's job.¹⁰⁸ Instead, Āṣaf embodies the original Quranic concept of a vizier—a helper or counselor—serving as the deputy (or the alter-ego) of his ruler.¹⁰⁹ Āṣaf was celebrated for his wisdom, knowledge, and loyalty. As a close relative of the ruler, he employed his abilities to fulfill the ruler's desires while also serving as the latter's "safety rail,"¹¹⁰ protecting the ruler from his own errors, providing necessary rebuke, and aiding in overcoming poor decisions and restoring authority. Additionally, Āṣaf possessed military prowess and was revered as a holy figure capable of performing miracles, defeating devils, mastering magic, and maintaining a close connection to the Divine—attributes highly valued by the Mongols.¹¹¹ Thus, Āṣaf's profile aligns with the ideal characteristics of a Mongol khan's companion.

¹⁰⁸For the role of the vizier, see A. K. S. Lambton, *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia* (Albany, 1986), 29–68.

¹⁰⁹Muḥammad Qāsim Zamān, "Wazīr: in the Arab World," *EI2*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1346.

¹¹⁰Coulon, "Salomon," 78.

¹¹¹Peter Jackson, "The Mongols and the Faith of the Conquered," in *Mongols, Turks, and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World*, ed. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (Leiden, 2005), 275–77.



Why, then, did such a set of qualities fail to endear Āṣaf to the Mamluks? The comparison may seem a bit skewed, since the genres examined in the two realms were not the same, but while I did not find Ilkhanid or Chaghadaid epics or occult books, I did check Mamluk chronicles and chancery guides (and to a lesser extent poetry) and did not find therein mentions of Āṣaf similar to those in the Mongol realm.¹¹² Indeed, most Mamluk works do not ascribe to Āṣaf the same attributes he enjoyed under Mongol rule: most Mamluk compilations treat Āṣaf not as vizier but as a scribe, a lesser post. Moreover, both scribes and viziers played a smaller role in Mamluk administration than in the Mongol one. As a result, while viziers in the Mongol sphere were not only esteemed courtiers but also great patrons of their co-religionist scholars and poets, in the Mamluk domains they were less important as patrons, a role played mainly by the Mamluk elite. Additionally, in the Mamluk realm, interactions between the sultan and his scribes or viziers were less patrimonial and more bureaucratic, contrasting with Āṣaf's familial relationship with his ruler.¹¹³ Moreover, pre-Islamic traditions held less significance in Mamluk collective memory than Iranian traditions in the Ilkhanid realm, with the Mamluks favoring Muslim role models.¹¹⁴ Thus, paradoxically, Āṣaf was a local hero in Mongol-ruled Fars and Fergana, where biblical figures were rare and Iranian celebrities appreciated, but not in the Mamluk realm, the locus of Solomon's kingdom, where there was a great variety of biblical and early-Islamic heroes to choose from. Moreover, the appropriation of Āṣaf by the occultists, his close connection to the *Isrā'īliyyāt*, and perhaps also his nearly-prophetic status, all rendered him an unattractive political model for hardline Mamluk ulama like Ibn Kathīr or Ibn Khaldūn.¹¹⁵

Thus, while the Mongol period gave a boost to Āṣaf's position as the emblematic vizier of the Turco-Persian world, in the Mamluk domains he enjoyed political power mainly in a South Arabian epic. In compensation, he was referred to as a great magician in a few occult works, potentially influenced by Jewish materials. Āṣaf's multifaceted persona continued to evolve, gaining new dimensions in the post-Mongol and post-Mamluk periods, meriting broader investiga-

¹¹²The check was done mainly via *Al-Maktabah al-shāmilah* database.

¹¹³On Mamluk bureaucracy, see Carl F. Petry, *The Mamluk Sultanate: A History* (Cambridge, 2022), esp. 129–35.

¹¹⁴See, for example, the selection of professional figures (viziers, musicians, grammarians etc) in Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār* (Beirut, 2010), vols. 5–19, all of whom belong to the Muslim period (apart from some Jāhilī poets).

¹¹⁵Noah D. Gardiner, *Ibn Khaldūn Versus the Occultists at Barqūq's Court: The Critique of Lettrism in Al-Muqaddimah* (Berlin, 2020); Shari L. Lowin, "Isrā'īliyyāt," *EI3*, https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_32621; Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'ān and Muslim Literature* (Richmond, 2002), 170–75.



tion beyond this article. Yet, this divergent evolution in the neighboring and interconnected realms of the Mongols and Mamluks highlights distinct differences in political culture and the employment of collective memory.



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