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# Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān

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## Prophets and Prophethood

Those individuals who receive divine revelation and their collective vocation. In Arabic (as in Hebrew), the word for “prophet” is *nabī*, plural *nabiyyūn* and *anbiyā*’. These forms occur seventy-five times, apart from the term *nubuwwa*, “prophethood,” which occurs five times. Much more prevalent, however, is the term *rasūl* (pl. *rusul*) which denotes a “messenger” (q.v.) or “apostle” (of God). Messengers are mentioned more than 300 times. A messenger is also referred to as *mursal*, which, together with its plural form (*mursalūn*), occurs more than thirty times. The form *risāla* (pl. *risālāt*) denotes a prophetic “message” and occurs ten times, mostly in the plural form.

### *Prophets and messengers*

As in the New Testament, in which apostles seem to rank higher than prophets (e.g. 1 Cor 12:28-31; cf. Eph 3:5; 4:11), in the Qur'ān, too, *rasūl* seems to be somewhat more elevated than *nabī*. This is indicated, to begin with, by the fact that whenever both titles appear together, *rasūl* comes first, which may suggest that a messenger is more important than a prophet. Thus Q 22:52 describes Satan's (see DEVIL) attempts to lead astray (q.v.) any apostle (*rasūl*) or prophet (*nabī*) who was sent before Muḥammad. Muslim commentators say that in this verse *rasūl* stands for a prophet having a message, a book (q.v.), which must be

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delivered, whereas *nabī* has no such message or book. More specifically, al-Bayḍāwī (d. prob. 716/1316, according to van Ess; cf. Gilliot, *Textes*, 223-4) says that a *rasūl* is a prophet who establishes a new *sharīʿa* (religious law; see [LAW AND THE QURʿĀN](#)), whereas a *nabī* is one who continues an old one. This means, al-Bayḍāwī says, that *rasūl* is more distinguished than *nabī*, and therefore there were more *anbiyāʾ* (“prophets”) than *rusul* (“messengers”). Or, he adds, a *rasūl* receives revelation from an angel, whereas a prophet experiences revelation only in dreams (Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, ad Q 22:52).

*Shīʿis, Umayyads  
and prophets*  
*Qurʾānic prophets  
and modern  
scholarship*  
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The titles *rasūl* and *nabī* may also overlap and even refer to one and the same person, in which case *rasūl* again comes first. This applies to [Moses](#) (q.v.), about whom it is stated that he was “an apostle, a prophet” (*wa-kāna rasūlan nabīyyan*, Q 19:51). The same is stated about Ishmael (q.v.; Q 19:54) as well as about Muḥammad (Q 7:157). The combination of the two in one person is perhaps designed to indicate that this person belongs to the messengers among the prophets.

But not every messenger of God is also a prophet. God is said to have made the angels “messengers (*rusul*) flying (q.v.) on wings, two, and three, and four...” (Q 35:1; see [ANGEL](#)). As God's messengers, the angels bring good tidings to Abraham (q.v.) about the birth of Isaac (q.v.) and Jacob (q.v.), and they also destroy the people of [Lot](#) (q.v.; e.g. Q 11:69-81). God sends angels to guard people as well as to receive their souls (see [SOUL](#)) at the moment of death (cf. Q 6:61; 7:37). Their primary role as God's messengers is to inspect and write down the deeds of every human being (cf. Q 10:21; 43:80; see [GOOD DEEDS](#); [EVIL DEEDS](#)).

The Qurʾān is careful to draw a clear line between God's celestial and human messengers. Prophets can only be mortals, because angels, the Qurʾān says (Q 17:95), do not walk about on [earth](#) (q.v.) as do its ordinary dwellers — for which reason people cannot grasp their physical presence. Therefore God does not send down angels as his prophets.

Angels do, however, bring down prophetic revelations in their capacity as God's messengers but they do not deliver them directly to the people, only to individual human prophets (see [REVELATION AND INSPIRATION](#)). The Qurʾān mentions the “word” (*qawl*), i.e. prophetic message, of one particular “honored messenger” (*rasūl karīm*, Q 69:40; 81:19). Some exegetes have identified this “messenger” with the angel Gabriel (q.v.) whose mission was to reveal the Qurʾān to Muḥammad. But Gabriel's task as

God's messenger is not confined to prophetic revelations. He is also said to have been referred to in Q 19:19, in which God's messenger comes to Mary (q.v.) to give her a son (Jesus; q.v.). Even the *rasūl* mentioned in the story of the golden calf (Q 20:96; see CALF OF GOLD) was said to have been Gabriel. Most qur'ānic prophets/messengers are known from the Bible, but there are also some whose origin is somewhat obscure (for details about the individual prophets see Tottoli, *Biblical prophets*; see SCRIPTURE AND THE QUR'ĀN).

## *The status of the prophets*

Prophets (including the messengers among them) belong to the highest rank among various virtuous groups of human beings. These groups are listed in Q 4:69, in which their position in paradise (q.v.) is described: “And whoever obeys God and the messenger, these will be [in paradise] with the prophets and the truthful (*al-ṣiddīqūn*) and the martyrs (*al-shuhadā'*; see MARTYRS) and the righteous (*al-ṣāliḥīn*), upon whom God has bestowed favors (see GRACE; BLESSING).” As for the prophets, their presence among their respective peoples — for example, among the Children of Israel (q.v.) — is perceived as a sign of God's benefaction (*ni'ma*) unto these peoples (Q 5:20).

God started sending prophets after humankind became separated, when the initial state of righteousness was replaced by moral corruption (q.v.; see also FALL OF MAN; GOOD AND EVIL; VIRTUES AND VICES, COMMANDING AND FORBIDDING). This, at least, is how the exegetes explain Q 2:213 in which it is stated: “The people were [united in] one nation (*umma wāḥida*), then [they became divided, and] God sent the prophets to bear good tidings (see GOOD NEWS) and to warn (see WARNER)...” (see PARTIES AND FACTIONS).

The prophets emerge in succession. The Qur'ān says that they were sent “one after another” (*qaffaynā*, Q 2:87), or “one by one” (*tatrā*, Q 23:44). Moreover, the prophets belong to the same genealogical descent. Thus Q 19:58 reads: “These are the prophets on whom God bestowed favors, of the seed (*dhurriyya*) of Adam (see ADAM AND EVE), and of those whom we carried with Noah (q.v.), and of the seed of Abraham and Israel (q.v.)....” The same idea is conveyed in Q 6:84, in which it is stated about Abraham: “And we gave to him Isaac and Jacob; each did we guide, and Noah we guided before, and of his descendants (*dhurriyyatihi*) David (q.v.) and Solomon (q.v.) and Job (q.v.) and Joseph (q.v.) and Moses and Aaron (q.v.)....”

The fact that the prophets are said to have been “guided” by God means that they represent a divinely chosen pedigree, as is indicated, for example, in Q 3:33-4: “Surely God chose (*iṣṭafā*) Adam and Noah and the house (*āl*) of Abraham and the house (*āl*) of

‘Imrān (q.v.) above all beings. [They are] the offspring (*dhurriyyatan*) one of the other....” The chosen prophetic lineage begins here with Adam, which indicates that he, too, is considered a prophet. The house of ‘Imrān stands for Moses (the son of the biblical Amram), but can also refer to Jesus, whose mother Mary is considered a member of that house.

The verb *iṣṭafā*, which signifies here divine **election** (q.v.), recurs in more verses dealing with prophets, as well as with angels. Thus in Q 22:75 it is stated that God chooses (*yaṣṭafi*) messengers (*rusul*) from among the angels and from among the people. The same verb is used to describe election of individual prophets, such as Abraham (Q 2:130), Moses (Q 7:144) and Mary (Q 3:42), as well as of kings (see **KINGS AND RULERS**), namely Saul (q.v.; Ṭālūt, Q 2:247).

Another verb, *ijtabā*, also denotes divine election of prophets, such as Adam (Q 20:122), Abraham (Q 16:121), Joseph (Q 12:6) and Jonah (q.v.; Q 68:50). Less frequent is the verb *ikhtāra* that denotes the same type of divine election (Q 44:32) and describes the election of Moses (Q 20:13). The latter's election is also conveyed by the verb *iṣṭana ʾa* (Q 20:41).

The divine election of the prophets provides them with abilities not shared by ordinary humans. This pertains mainly to knowledge of the unseen (*ghayb*; see **HIDDEN AND THE HIDDEN**). Thus in Q 72:26-7 it is stated that God knows the unseen and he does not reveal his secrets to anyone, except to an apostle with whom he is well pleased (*irtaḏā*). In Q 3:179 we are told again that God does not make people acquainted with the unseen, but he “chooses (*yajtabī*) of his apostles whom he pleases.”

The guided and divinely chosen prophets possess moral virtues that render them immune to sin and misbehavior (see **IMPECCABILITY**). Thus, in Q 3:161 it is stated that it is not attributable to a prophet that he should act unfaithfully (*yaghulla*). The election of the prophets has made them belong to the righteous (*mina l- ṣāliḥīn*), a fact stated regarding several of them, e.g. Zechariah (q.v.), John (see John the baptist), Jesus, Elijah (q.v.; Q 6:85) and others. John is described in Q 3:39 as honorable (*sayyid*) and chaste (*ḥaṣūr*; see **CHASTITY**) and a prophet from among the righteous (*mina l-ṣāliḥīn*). Some of them are also described as truthful (*ṣiddīq*), as is Abraham (Q 19:41) and Idrīs (q.v.; Q 19:56). Ishmael is described in Q 19:54 as “truthful in his promise” (*ṣādiq al-wa ʿd*).

Some prophets possess unique traits that mark their singular status among the rest of the prophets. Abraham is described in Q 4:125 as one whom God took as a friend (*khalīl*; see **FRIENDS AND FRIENDSHIP**). Moses is described as pure (*mukhlaṣ*, Q 19:51)

and as one whom God brought near in communion (*wa-qarrabnāhu najiyyan*, Q 19:52) and with whom God spoke (*kallama*, Q 4:164). This is the origin of Moses' title, *kalīmu llāh*, by which he is known in Islamic tradition. Tradition also elaborates on Moses' communion (*munājāt*) with God.

Later tradition has provided Muḥammad with a title of his own, namely, *ḥabību llāh* "God's beloved," which together with the previous prophets, completes the unique group of prophets having an intimate relationship with God. In fact, Muslim tradition has elaborated on Muḥammad's honorific titles and produced long lists of them (see [NAMES OF THE PROPHET](#)).

The existence of distinguished groups among the prophets is a fact that the Qur'ān declares openly. Q 17:55 states that God has made some of the prophets to excel others and in Q 2:253 the same statement is repeated, alongside names of some of the excelling prophets:

We have made some of these apostles to excel the others, among them are they to whom God spoke (*kallama*), and some of them he exalted by [many degrees of] rank; and we gave clear arguments (*bayyināt*; see [PROOF](#)) to Jesus son of Mary, and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit (q.v.)....

In Q 33:7 some prophets are singled out as those with whom God made a special [covenant](#) (q.v.; *mīthāq*): "And when we made a covenant with the prophets and with you [Muḥammad], and with Noah and Abraham and Moses and Jesus son of Mary, and we made with them a firm covenant."

A special group of God's messengers is mentioned in Q 46:35, being called "those endowed with constancy (*ūlū l- ʿazm*).” The Qur'ān says that they have borne patiently (the hardships of their mission; see [TRIAL](#)) and Muslim exegetes are not unanimous as to who they were. Some say that they were those who established a law (*sharīʿa*) among their nations, like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, as well as Muḥammad. Others hold that they were those who suffered the hardest trials or the deepest remorse (see [REPENTANCE AND PENANCE](#)). In the latter case, they include Jacob, Joseph, Job and David, in addition to the five prophets already mentioned. But in spite of divine election, the prophets always remain God's servants (*ʿibād*; e.g. Q 37:171; see [SERVANTS](#), for which reason people are not servants to them but to God (Q 3:79).

## *Modes of prophetic revelation*

Various verbs convey the idea of prophetic revelation, the most frequent being those derived from the root *n-z-l*, namely, *nazzala* and *anzala*. They denote an act of bringing down, which means that the prophetic revelation is perceived as being sent down from heaven (see [HEAVEN AND SKY](#)). Occasionally, the revelation itself is described as descending (*nazala*, *tanazzala*), without specifying the agent that causes it to come down. A common name of the Qur'ānic revelation is *tanzīl* (e.g. Q 20:4; 26:192; 32:2, etc.), i.e. a “bringing down.” A less common name is *amr*, “affair,” which in Q 65:12 is said to have been descending (*yatanazzalu*) through the seven heavens (see [NAMES OF THE QUR'ĀN](#)). Muslim exegetes explain that the “affair” stands here for divine revelation that is being brought down from heaven to earth.

Revelation originates in God, as is indicated in verses in which God speaks in the first person: “I have sent down [the Qur'ān]” (Q 2:41), and more often: “We have sent down [the Qur'ān]” (e.g. Q 44:3; 76:23; 97:1). But revelation does not come down directly to the prophets. The intermediate agents are the angels. God sends them down with the revelations, as is implied in Q 16:2: “He sends down (*yunazzilu*) the angels with the spirit (q.v.; *al-rūḥ*) by his commandment on whom he pleases of his servants...” Muslim exegetes hold, however, that only Gabriel is meant here, the angel who was commissioned to bring down prophetic revelations, or the “spirit,” to Muḥammad. In Q 16:102 the agent bringing down (*nazzalahu*) the Qur'ānic revelation is himself called “the Holy Spirit” (*rūḥu l-quḍus*), which is again interpreted as an epithet of Gabriel. The same applies to Q 26:193, in which the revelation is brought down (*nazala bihi*) by the “faithful spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-amīn*). Similarly, the exegetes say that it is Gabriel who says to the Prophet in Q 19:64: “We do not descend [with revelations] but by the command of your lord (q.v.)”

As far as Muḥammad's own prophetic experience is concerned, the process of sending down revelations ends at the Prophet's heart (q.v.; *ʿalā qalbika*) and Gabriel is mentioned explicitly as the one who brings it down to him (Q 2:97; see [MUḤAMMAD](#)). The Qur'ān provides specific, though not entirely coherent, details of the time when the revelation began coming down to Muḥammad. This took place either on a “blessed night” (Q 44:3) or on *laylat al-qadr* (Q 97:1; see [NIGHT OF POWER](#)) or during the month of Ramaḍān (q.v.; Q 2:185). The exegetes explain that all passages refer to one and the same night, namely *laylat al-qadr* that falls in Ramaḍān.

There are various terms denoting the actual revelation that is being brought down. Most often it is called “signs” (q.v.; *āyāt*), which commentators on the Qur'ān have identified with the Qur'ānic verses (q.v.; e.g. Q 57:9, etc.). Elsewhere, what God sends down is called *sūra* (q.v.; Q 9:86, etc.), a term that came to be identified with the

Qur'ānic chapters and, most obviously, the term *qur'ān*, too, stands for something which God sends down (Q 76:23). Another locution standing for a whole unit of revelations being sent down is *kitāb*, a “book, scripture” (e.g. Q 7:2; see [BOOK](#)). Specific scriptures, namely the [Torah](#) (q.v.) and the Gospel (q.v.), are also described as being sent down by God (Q 3:3-4), which implies that all monotheistic scriptures represent the same divine revelation. Metaphorical terms are also used to describe a descending revelation, one of which being the somewhat obscure title *furqān* (Q 3:4; see [CRITERION](#)). Some exegetes have explained it in the sense of a scripture distinguishing between truth and falsehood. [Light](#) (q.v.; *nūr*) is also a name for the guiding revelation that God has sent down (Q 64:8).

Another widely used verb denoting the act of providing revelation is *awḥā*, with *waḥy* as the noun denoting the revelation itself. The verb means to “prompt, inspire, suggest” but it is not confined to prophetic revelations. Occasionally it simply means to “instruct,” or “command,” as in Q 8:12 in which God instructs (*yūḥi*) the angels to support the believers. In Q 99:4-5 God instructs (*awḥā*) the earth to tell its story on the day of [resurrection](#) (q.v.), and in Q 16:68 he instructs (*awḥā*) the bee to make hives in the mountains (see [ANIMAL LIFE](#); [HONEY](#)), etc. Even when prophets are addressed, the verb *awḥā* can be a request to act rather than imparting a text for recitation (see [RECITATION OF THE QUR'ĀN](#)). Thus in Q 23:27 God instructs (*awḥaynā*) Noah to make the [ark](#) (q.v.) and in Q 7:117 God prompts (*awḥaynā*) Moses to cast his [rod](#) (q.v.). An act designated as *awḥā* can also be performed by humans. In Q 19:11, for example, Zechariah signals (*awḥā*) to his people that they should glorify God in the [morning](#) (q.v.) and [evening](#) (q.v.; see also [GLORIFICATION OF GOD](#); [DAY, TIMES OF](#)). In most cases, however, *awḥā* stands for an act performed by God himself, as in Q 41:12. Here God reveals (*awḥā*) the “affair” (*amr*) of the seven heavens, i.e. enjoins his commandment on the heavens. But what God reveals mostly as *waḥy* is the prophetic inspiration itself. This is the case in Q 42:52 in which God reveals (*awḥaynā*) a “spirit” (*rūḥan*) to his prophet. The spirit is interpreted here as standing for the Qur'ānic revelation. This accords with Q 53:4-5, in which the Qur'ān is explicitly described as a revelation (*waḥyun*) that is revealed (*yūḥā*). In Q 35:31 it is the “book” that has been revealed as *waḥy*.

The revelation (*waḥy*) can be a prolonged process, as is the case with the revelation to Muḥammad. He is advised not to make haste before the process is completed (Q 20:114). When the reception of the *waḥy* is completed the Prophet is supposed to recite it in public (Q 29:45). The same process of *waḥy* was experienced also by previous prophets, as stated in Q 4:163: “Surely we have revealed (*awḥaynā*) to you as we

revealed to Noah, and the prophets after him, and we revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes (see [TRIBES AND CLANS](#)), and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon....”

The *waḥy* does not always come directly from God to the prophets. An angel acting as God's messenger may deliver the divine *waḥy* to them. This comes out in Q 42:51, in which it is stated: “It is not for any mortal that God should speak to them, except by inspiration (*waḥyan*) or from behind a veil (q.v.; *ḥijāb*), or by sending a messenger (*rasūl*), to reveal (*fa-yūḥiya*) by his permission what he will.” As was mentioned above, the exegetes say that the messenger delivering the *waḥy* is Gabriel.

As for the contents of what is being revealed as *waḥy*, in some cases it consists of the sheer idea of monotheism (see [GOD AND HIS ATTRIBUTES; POLYTHEISM AND ATHEISM](#)). Thus in Q 21:108 it is stated: “Say: It is only revealed (*yūḥā*) to me that your God is one God.” In other cases the *waḥy* revolves around specific legal obligations (see [BOUNDARIES AND PRECEPTS](#)). God reveals (*awḥaynā*) to the previous prophets “the doing of good and the keeping up of prayer (q.v.) and the giving of alms” ( Q 21:73; see [ALMSGIVING](#)). The Qur’ān repeats several times the injunction given to the Prophet to follow (*ittabi*) what has been revealed (*yūḥā*) to him (e.g. Q 10:109; 33:2, etc.).

In Q 17:39 the content of the *waḥy* is defined as “wisdom” (q.v.; *ḥikma*), which seems to refer to moral lessons which must be derived from the history of past generations (q.v.). This is confirmed by the fact that in Q 11:49 the *waḥy* consists of “accounts of the unseen” (*anbā’ al-ghayb*), i.e. stories of the history of past generations which are now being revealed to the Prophet. The stories deal with sinful nations that God punished and destroyed because they had rejected their prophets (see [PUNISHMENT STORIES](#)).

There are also other, less frequent, terms of prophetic revelation, one of which being to “cast” (*alqā*), as in Q 40:15. Here God is said to have cast (*yulqi*) “the inspiration (*rūḥ*) by his command upon whom he pleases of his servants.” In Q 28:86 it is the book that has been cast unto the Prophet, while in Q 77:5 some unspecified persons are mentioned who are described as “casting the reminder” (*fa-l- mulqiyāti dhikran*). The exegetes say that the “reminder” signifies the prophetic inspiration and that those who cast it are the angels who deliver it to God's prophets and messengers.

“To give” (*ātā*) may also signal prophetic revelation, as is the case in Q 2:87, in which God “gives” Moses “the book.”

Another verb, *alhamā* (from *l-h-m*), also denotes divine inspiration but not specifically prophetic. Thus in Q 91:8 it is indicated that God has inspired (*fa-alhamahā*) the human soul to understand what is right and wrong for it.

Dreams (*ru'yā*) may also function as prophetic **visions** (q.v.; see also **DREAMS AND SLEEP**). Abraham found out by such a dream that he had to **sacrifice** (q.v.) his son ( Q 37:105) and Muḥammad knew from his own dream that he was about to enter Mecca (q.v.) safely (cf. Q 48:27). Another vision of the Prophet, which is mentioned in Q 17:60, was interpreted as referring to his nocturnal journey and **ascension** (q.v.; *isrā' / mi'rāj*).

The Qur'ān is also aware of false revelations that seem prophetic but come from Satan, which means that only a thin line separates genuine divine inspiration from satanic temptation. This is demonstrated in the common vocabulary that the Qur'ān uses for the divine as well as the satanic spheres. Thus satans (*shayāḥīn*), like God, can deliver *waḥy* ( Q 6:112, 121) which is deceiving in its varnished outward appearance. But the more common verb denoting satanic inspiration is *waswasa*, to “whisper” (e.g. Q 7:20; 20:120). Satan also casts (*alqā*) his own verses into genuine revelations received by every prophet “but God annuls that which Satan casts” ( Q 22:52). Moreover, the satans can be God's messengers but he sends (*arsalnā*) them against the unbelievers ( Q 19:83).

The distinction between a true prophet and other persons endowed with unique spiritual powers is also stated very clearly, in passages stressing that Muḥammad's prophetic message is not the words of a “soothsayer” (*kāhīn*), nor of a poet (see **POETRY AND POETS; SOOTHSAYERS**) nor a *majnūm*, i.e. a madman possessed by demons (cf. Q 52:29; 69:41-2; 81:22; see **INSANITY**).

Imposters are severely denounced. Q 6:93 states: “And who is more unjust than he who forges a **lie** (q.v.) against God, or says: It has been revealed (*ūḥīya*) to me; while nothing has been revealed to him, and he who says: I can bring down (*sa-unzilu*) the like of what God has brought down (*anzala*)?” The exegetes say that this passage refers to persons like Musaylima (q.v.) and others who pretended to receive revelations similar to those of Muḥammad.

## *Signs and miracles*

God not only provides his messengers with the prophetic inspiration but he also stays with them when they deliver his message, as is formulated in Q 72:27-8: “For surely he makes a guard to march before [his messenger] and after him, so that he may know that

they have truly delivered the messages of their lord....” The “guards” accompanying the prophets are said to be the angels and elsewhere it is asserted that God is always aware of what his apostles are doing ( Q 23:51). God's presence renders his apostles immune to dangers ( Q 27:10) and his help ( *naṣr*) is always ensured for them ( Q 12:110; cf. 40:51; see PROTECTION; VICTORY).

God also provides his prophets with concrete means designed to increase their power of persuasion. These are called *bayyināt*, i.e. clear “proofs” or “arguments.” Occasionally the exegetes interpret this term as “miracles” (see MIRACLES; MARVELS). For example, in Q 2:87 (see also Q 2:253), God provides Jesus with the *bayyināt* and strengthens him with the Holy Spirit. The exegetes say that the latter stands for Gabriel and that the *bayyināt* are miracles which Jesus performed. Such miracles are described in Q 3:49, where Jesus says to the Children of Israel:

I have come to you with a sign (*āya*) from your lord, that I create (*akhluqa*) for you out of dust like the form of a bird, then I breathe into it and it becomes a bird with God's permission, and I heal the blind and the leprous, and bring the dead (see DEATH AND THE DEAD) to life with God's permission, and I shall inform you of what you eat and what you have stored in your houses....

But miracles do not render the prophets divine, as is stressed especially with respect to Jesus. The Qur'ān insists that he is “only an apostle ( *rasūl*) of God and his word ( *kalimatuhu*) which he cast ( *alqāhā*) unto Mary, and a spirit ( *rūḥ*) from him. Believe therefore in God and his apostles, and say not: Three” ( Q 4:171; see TRINITY; WORD OF GOD; SPEECH).

Other prophets also brought such *bayyināt* to their own nations, alongside of revealed scriptures, but they were rejected ( Q 3:184; 35:25). Muḥammad, too, has brought (unspecified) *bayyināt* to his people but they have discarded them as sheer magic (q.v.; Q 61:6). The term *burhān*, “proof,” is also used to signal what Muḥammad has brought to his audience ( Q 4:174).

The listeners, however, not only reject the *bayyināt* but demand to receive a “sign” ( *āya*) of their own choice ( Q 2:118; 21:5, etc.). Often they request, for instance, to see an angel being sent down with Muḥammad ( Q 23:24; 25:7, etc.), or a treasure descending upon him ( Q 11:12), or a fountain being made to gush forth from the earth for them ( Q 17:90). The Qur'ān responds to such demands by asserting that God's messengers can only produce signs with God's permission ( Q 40:78) and that they are just mortals ( Q 14:11). They may even have wives and children ( Q 13:38; see WIVES OF THE PROPHET;

**FAMILY OF THE PROPHET; PEOPLE OF THE HOUSE**). Elsewhere it is stressed that they are merely humans (*rijāl*) receiving revelation (e.g. Q 12:109; 16:43, etc.), and that they eat food and go about in the **markets** (q.v.; Q 25:20).

But God may at times send a sign (*āya*) in response to a specific request. This was the case with the prophet Ṣāliḥ (q.v.) who was sent as a warner to Thamūd (q.v.). They asked him for a sign, and he produced a she-camel (*nāqa*). They were ordered to share their water with her at appointed intervals ( Q 26:154-5) or, according to another version ( Q 11:64), to leave her to pasture on God's earth and not harm her. But Thamūd slaughtered the she-camel ( Q 11:65), for which reason God no longer sends signs on demand ( Q 17:59).

Nevertheless, Moses, too, brought a sign (*āya*) in response to the demand of Pharaoh (q.v.; Q 7:106; 26:31). The sign was that the rod of Moses was turned into a serpent and his hand became “white to the beholders.” The audience denied the double sign as evident magic ( Q 7:107-9; 26:31-4). But these two signs were given to Moses in advance, upon his first encounter with God ( Q 20:17-23; 27:10-2; 28:31-2). They formed part of nine (not ten, as in the Hebrew Bible) signs which God gave to Moses and they are therefore not just *āyāt* but rather *āyāt bayyināt* ( Q 17:101; cf. 28:36) as well as *burhān*, “**proof**” ( Q 28:32). Elsewhere a list of all the signs, i.e. the calamities, is provided ( Q 7:130-5; see **PLAGUES**).

## *Prophets and scriptures*

The core of the prophetic revelation consists in revealed scriptures that are sometimes (e.g. Q 3:184) referred to as *zūbur* (sing. *zabūr*) or *ṣuḥuf* (sing. *ṣaḥīfa*). The latter term signifies “**scrolls**” (q.v.), as, for example, in Q 87:19, in which the scrolls (*ṣuḥuf*) of Abraham and Moses are mentioned.

The most frequent name for a revealed scripture is *kitāb*, namely, something written down, or simply a “book.” A *kitāb* is always of high solemnity. It may stand for the written list of deeds which determines the destiny of all people on the day of resurrection (e.g. Q 39:69) or the pre-existent divine book (see **HEAVENLY BOOK**) in which the pre-ordained law of God has been recorded. This is, at least, how Muslim exegetes explain the locution “book of God” in Q 33:6 (also Q 30:56), which, so they hold, is identical with the “guarded tablet” (*lawḥ maḥfūz*; see **PRESERVED TABLET**) mentioned in Q 85:22. The Qurʾān is said to have formed part of this tablet ( Q 85:21), so that this revealed book is actually a reflection of a celestial text. Another locution which is taken to refer to the original celestial version of the universal book is *umm al-*

*kitāb* mentioned in Q 43:4. Here it is stated that the Qur'ān is in the *umm al-kitāb* “with us, truly elevated, full of wisdom.” The exegetes maintain that it is another name for the tablet, the origin of all revealed books.

The divine origin of the Qur'ānic revelation comes out in the idea that no one can alter God's words as revealed to Muḥammad: “Recite (*utlu*) what has been revealed (*ūḥiya*) to you of the book of your lord; there is none who can alter his words...” (Q 18:27). God sent down the book to Muḥammad without any “crookedness” (*īwaj*, Q 18:1), so that the revealed Qur'ān has remained faithful to the original message of the divine book (see **CORRUPTION**; **FORGERY**; **REVISION AND ALTERATION**). In other words, the book was sent down to Muḥammad “with the truth (*bi-l-ḥaqq*)” (e.g. Q 39:2). It has also been sent down as a “blessed” (*mubārak*) book (e.g. Q 6:155; 38:29) and as a book “conformable” (*mutashābih*) in its various parts (Q 39:23). Not just the Qur'ān but any other revealed book is of the same divine origin, for which reason the Qur'ān recognizes the authenticity of previous revelations, saying that previous messengers (*rusul*), too, brought their peoples “clear arguments (*bayyināt*), scriptures (*zukur*) and the illuminating book” (*al-kitāb al-munīr*, Q 35:25; see also Q 3:184; 57:25).

Being an essential component of the prophetic message, the term *kitāb* often appears side by side with the term *nubuwwa*, “prophethood,” and both are perceived as components of a divine legacy that runs in a genealogical line of a chosen pedigree. Thus in Q 29:27, the prophethood (*nubuwwa*) and the book are said to have remained in the seed (*dhurriyya*) of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The same is said of the offspring of Noah and Abraham (Q 57:26). The book is therefore a divine legacy that God has bequeathed (*awrathnā*) to whom he chose of his servants (Q 35:32). Of the previous prophets, Moses in particular is mentioned as one to whom God gave the book (Q 2:87). His book is described as “a light and a guidance to the people” (Q 6:91).

Apart from the term *kitāb*, previous scriptures are also mentioned by their individual titles, such as the Torah (*tawrāt*) of the Israelite prophets (Q 5:44), David's **Psalms** (q.v.; *zabūr*, Q 4:163; 17:55) and Jesus' Gospel (*injīl*). About the latter it is stated that it was full of guidance and light (Q 5:46).

## *The prophets and Muḥammad*

The revelation of the book was a new experience for Muḥammad (Q 42:52) and the Arabs (q.v.), too, never had messengers sent to them before him, nor had they any revealed books (cf. Q 34:44). This means that as an Arab, Muḥammad did not have any genealogical relationship to the previous prophets. The gap between him and them was

also a chronological one, as is indicated in Q 5:19, in which it is stated that the qur'ānic Prophet emerged “after a cessation (*fatra*) of the [mission of the] apostles (*rusul*)....”

Nevertheless, the Qur'ān quite easily includes Muḥammad in the honorable group of prophets. The most straightforward way to achieve this is simply to declare Muḥammad to be “one of the apostles” (*mina l- mursalīna*, e.g. Q 2:252). This universalized perception of Muḥammad's mission leads to the conclusion that he is actually not the first of the messengers (*rusul*) on earth ( Q 46:9) and that apostles already passed away before him ( Q 3:144). This means that Muḥammad is a link in the same chain of prophets to which prophets like Jesus also belong. Before the latter other messengers had already passed away ( Q 5:75).

As for Muḥammad's own revealed book, the Qur'ān, it is indeed an Arabic scripture ( Q 12:2; 13:37) but is nevertheless perceived as closely related to previous scriptures. Time and again the Qur'ān stresses that Muḥammad's book confirms, or verifies (*muṣaddiq*), what was revealed before it. For example, in Q 3:3-4 we read: “He has sent down to you the book with truth, verifying that which is before it, and he brought down the Torah and the Gospel aforetime....” This means that all scriptures represent identical links in the same successive chain of revelations. This idea recurs in the qur'ānic description of Jesus who is said to have verified the Torah that was revealed before him (Q 5:46). Since the Qur'ān itself verifies the Torah as well as the Gospels, the Jews and the Christians alike, whom the Qur'ān addresses as the “ People of the Book” (q.v.), are commanded on their part to believe in the Qur'ān (Q 4:47; see also Q 2:41).

The equality of all scriptures as links in the same successive chain of revelations entails that true believers are only those who believe in all the revealed books, without exception (see [BELIEF AND UNBELIEF](#)). This idea, which is encountered already in the New Testament (in *Acts* 24:14 Paul believes in all things which are written in the Torah and in the books of the prophets), is stated explicitly several times. For example, Q 2:136 says:

Say: We believe in God and [in] that which had been sent down to us, and [in] that which was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and [in] that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and [in] that which was given to the prophets from their lord, we do not make any distinction between any of them, and to him do we submit.

The same is repeated in several other places in which it is stressed that true righteousness is based on belief in the previous prophets and in their books as well as in

the angels and in the last day (e.g. Q 2:177, 285; 4:136; see [ESCHATOLOGY](#); [FAITH](#)). At the **last judgment** (q.v.) people will be asked about their belief in the messengers who had come to them ( Q 28:65; 39:71). The previous revelations have remained relevant to the Muslims, as is implied in Q 3:194. Here an Islamic prayer is addressed to God, imploring him to “grant us what you have promised us by your apostles.”

The conviction that one should believe in all the revealed books means that one should also believe in Muḥammad's Qurʾān. Therefore those who only believe in some books, like the Jews who denied the Qurʾān, are not true believers and they are denounced in Q 2:85 as it is commonly understood. Moreover, the duty to believe in Muḥammad's own revelation has become the core of the religion of all prophets. This finds expression in the notion that God already commanded all the previous prophets to believe in Muḥammad. In Q 3:81 we read:

And when God made a covenant (*mīthāq*) with the prophets: Surely, the book and the wisdom that I have given you — then an apostle comes to you verifying that which is with you, you must believe in him, and you must aid him. [God] said: “Do you affirm and accept my compact in this [matter]?” The [prophets] said: “We do affirm.” [God] said: “Then bear witness, and I [too] am of the bearers of witness with you.”

The exegetes explain that the apostle in whom the prophets are commanded to believe is Muḥammad. The Arabian messenger of God has thus become the peak of the prophetic chain of revelations and this is also demonstrated in his title: “Seal (*khātam*) of the prophets” (Q 33:40).

The prophets were not only required to believe in Muḥammad, but some were also familiar with his titles, which were included in their own revealed scriptures. Thus in Q 7:157 it is stated that Muḥammad was mentioned as a “gentile” ( *ummī* [q.v.]; see also [ILLITERACY](#)) in the Torah and the Gospel. Jesus, it is said in Q 61:6, announced the appearance of an apostle who would come after him, his name being Aḥmad. This quest for universal legitimacy is found already in the New Testament (*Matt* 2:23), where prophets predict that Jesus will be called the Nazarene.

Since belief in Muḥammad has always been at the core of the religion of the previous prophets, it comes as no surprise that the Israelite prophets to whom the Torah was revealed are described as “those who were Muslims” (*alladhīna aslamū*, Q 5:44). Furthermore, the religion that was enjoined upon the prophets was the same as the one given to the Muslims, a fact stated in Q 42:13: “He has enjoined upon you (*sharaʿa*) for

religion what he prescribed to Noah and that which we have revealed to you and that which we enjoined upon Abraham and Moses and Jesus....”

The uniformity of the religion of the prophets, however, is abandoned in several passages in which Abraham's religion is set apart from the rest of the prophets and a direct line is drawn between him and Muḥammad. Such passages seem to have been designed to highlight the Arabian identity of the qur'ānic revelation and to dissociate its message from that of the Jewish and the Christian scriptures. The dissociation is achieved by insisting that Abraham was neither Jew nor Christian but rather a ḥanīf (q.v.). As a *ḥanīf* he has become a model for Muḥammad, whom God commands to follow Abraham's religion (Q 2:135; 4:125; 16:123, etc.; see also [RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND THE QUR'ĀN](#)).

## *The scope of the prophetic mission*

The prophets are sent each to his own nation (*umma*) or people (*qawm*). This notion is expressed in verses asserting that each nation has its own prophets sent to it ( Q 10:47; 16:36) and that every apostle was only sent “with the language (*lisān*) of his people” (*qawmihi*, Q 14:4; see [ARABIC LANGUAGE](#)). Thus Moses, for example, says to his people (*li-qawmihi*) that he is God's messenger to them ( Q 61:5). Moreover, some prophets are described as the “brothers” of the peoples to whom they were sent ( Q 26:106, 161, etc.; see [BROTHER AND BROTHERHOOD](#)). This is again an appropriate precedent for Muḥammad, the Arabian prophet who has brought to his nation an Arabic Qur'ān (e.g. Q 12:2). His Arabic Qur'ān was revealed to him that he may warn “the mother of cities” (*umm al-qurā*, Q 42:7; see also Q 6:92), which is Mecca, according to the exegetes.

But unlike the previous prophets, Muḥammad appears in some other passages as a universal prophet whose mission goes beyond ethnic boundaries. In Q 4:79 he is said to have been sent “to mankind (*lil- nās*) as an apostle,” and in Q 21:107 he is sent with mercy “to the worlds (*lil- ālamīn*).” His audience includes the jinn (q.v.; Q 46:30), to whom messengers of their own kind were also sent ( Q 6:130).

## *The aims of the prophetic mission*

The purpose for which the qur'ānic prophet has been sent is to make God's religion, i.e. Islam, prevail over all religions ( Q 9:33; 48:28; 61:9). This may involve waging war (q.v.) on the infidels, as is stated about the preceding prophets in Q 3:146: “And how many a prophet has fought (*qātala*), and with them were many worshippers of the lord; so the [prophets] did not become weak-hearted on account of what befell them in God's

way (see [PATH OR WAY](#)), nor did they weaken, nor did they abase themselves; and God loves the patient.” But in other qur’ānic passages the religious campaign is based on preaching and is focused on the mere idea of monotheism and on the refutation of polytheism (*shirk*). Several times the previous prophets are described as imploring their respective peoples to “serve nothing (*allā ta budū*) but God...” (e.g. Q 41:14). God also tells Muḥammad himself that this was the main mission of the prophets who were sent before him ( Q 21:25, etc.), and he himself says to his audience: “I am only a mortal like you; it is revealed to me that your God is one God, therefore follow the right way to him and ask his forgiveness; and woe to the polytheists” (*waylun lil- mushrikīna*, Q 41:6; see also Q 18:110).

On the other hand, the mission of the prophets has also a grimmer aspect, namely, to warn stubborn unbelievers of their fate in hell (see [HELL AND HELLFIRE](#)), in case they do not repent (see [REPENTANCE AND PENANCE](#)). But the warning usually goes hand in hand with good tidings of paradise for those who believe. Thus Q 6:48, for example, asserts that God's messengers were sent as “announcers of good news and givers of warning (*mubashshirīna wa-mundhirīna*), then whoever believes and acts aright, they shall have no fear (q.v.), nor shall they grieve” (see [JOY AND MISERY](#) ; see also Q 4:165; 18:56, etc.). The same twofold message was entrusted to Muḥammad ( Q 33:45, 48:8).

The messengers are not responsible for the success or failure of their message and the Qur’ān repeatedly asserts that nothing is incumbent upon the apostles except a “plain delivery” (*al- balāgh al-mubīn*, e.g. Q 16:35). Furthermore, the apostles are not even capable of changing the fate awaiting the unbelievers: “It is not [fit] for the Prophet and those who believe that they should ask forgiveness (q.v.) for the polytheists, even though they should be near relatives (see [KINSHIP](#)), after it has become clear to them that they are inmates of the flaming fire” ( Q 9:113; cf. 9:80, 84; see [INTERCESSION](#)).

On the last judgment, believers and unbelievers will realize that the apostles had spoken the truth about their respective fate in paradise or hell ( Q 7:43, 53; 36:52). The prophets themselves will be present on the scene of judgment and will act as witnesses (*shuhadā’*, sing. *shahīd*) as to who is righteous and who is a sinner (e.g. Q 4:41; 7:6; 16:84, 89; see [WITNESSING AND TESTIFYING](#); [SIN, MAJOR AND MINOR](#)). But according to Q 5:109, the messengers will not dare testify and God himself will know what the people were doing.

But [mercy](#) (q.v.; *rahma*) is also a significant component of the prophetic message and emanates mainly from the guidance that is inherent in the revealed book. This is stated in Q 16:89: “We have revealed the book to you explaining clearly everything, and a

guidance (*hudan*) and mercy and good news for those who are Muslims.” Being the ultimate source of guidance, some prophets are occasionally described as imāms (see [IMĀM](#)) who guide the people by God's command ( Q 21:73) and their revealed book, too, is called “*imām* and mercy” ( Q 11:17; 46:12). Guidance is achieved by the actual teaching of the book and therefore Muḥammad is often described as a messenger teaching “the book and the wisdom” (e.g. Q 2:129, 151; 3:164).

A prophet is not only a spiritual guide but a judge as well, whose adjudication is based on the revealed book. This was the case among the Jews for whom the prophets judged according to the revealed Torah ( Q 5:44; 2:213) and the same is said about Muḥammad to whom God revealed the book “that you may judge between people by means of that which God has taught you” ( Q 4:105; see [JUDGMENT](#)).

## *The reception of the prophets*

The nations to whom prophets have been sent are expected to receive them with consent and [obedience](#) (q.v.). As Q 4:64 puts it: “And we did not send any apostle but that he should be obeyed (*li-yuḥāʿa*) by God's permission....” But the prophets were received with anything but obedience. They were mocked (e.g. Q 15:11; see [MOCKERY](#)) and called liars (e.g. Q 3:184; 22:42; 23:44; 35:25), and their message was denied ( Q 11:59), and denounced as “medleys of dreams” ( *aḍghāthu aḥlām*, Q 21:5). The prophets were rejected mainly on account of their being ordinary human beings (sing. *bashar*, e.g. Q 14:10; 17:94; 36:15; 64:6), and were accused of being mere poets (sing. *shāʾir*), magicians (sing. *sāḥir*) and madmen (sing. *majnūn*; e.g. Q 21:5; 51:52). Some of them were received with skeptical questions (Q 2:108), and above all, their audience expressed devotion to the tradition of the ancestors (Q 43:23).

Prophets have also suffered actual persecution, such as the threat of expulsion (e.g. Q 14:13), and also death at the hands of their own peoples, as was the fate of the Israelite prophets (e.g. Q 2:61, 91). The sufferings of the previous prophets are recounted to reassure Muḥammad that his own distress resembles that of his precursors (see [OPPOSITION TO MUḤAMMAD](#)). As stated in Q 41:43: “Nothing is said to you but what was said indeed to the apostles before you....” Not only humankind but also the satans rose as enemies to the prophets. In Q 6:112, God says: “And thus did we make for every prophet an enemy (see [ENEMIES](#)), the satans from among humans and jinn....” Satan's enmity is seen in this that he makes [rebellion](#) (q.v.) look attractive to nations to whom apostles were sent ( Q 16:63). Rejection is met with retribution (see [RETALIATION](#); [VENGEANCE](#)). Time and again the Qurʾān describes how nations that disobeyed (see [DISOBEDIENCE](#)) their prophets were punished by severe calamities, a motif recurrent

mainly in the “[punishment stories](#)” (q.v.). Rejection of messengers renders retribution inevitable, as stated in Q 7:94: “And we did not send a prophet in a town but we overtook its people with distress and affliction in order that they might humble themselves.” The divine logic that comes out here is that God is enemy to anyone who is “the enemy of God and his angels and his apostles and Gabriel and Michael” (cf. Q 2:98). Retribution is the direct result of the fact that God has promised to protect the prophets (cf. Q 14:47), and is defined as God's way (sunna, q.v.) with respect to those who persecute the prophets (Q 17:76-7). Destruction is never arbitrary or unjust, and is only inflicted on towns that have been warned in advance by their prophets (Q 17:15; 28:59). The prophets and their close entourage are always saved from the collective disaster ( Q 10:103, etc.).

## *Stories of prophets*

Apart from general declarations about the prophets, the Qur’ān provides stories about individual ones (see [NARRATIVES](#)). These stories always form part of the discourse between God and Muḥammad. God tells Muḥammad about them or requests Muḥammad to tell his audience about them. This literary structure (see [LITERARY STRUCTURES OF THE QUR’ĀN](#)) stems from the idea that the prophetic revelation experienced by the previous prophets is the same as that of Muḥammad and that all of them are sent to fulfil the same mission among humankind. Therefore, the allusions to the previous prophets are essentially designed to provide a legitimizing as well as an encouraging precedent for Muḥammad's own prophetic challenge. Many of the stories draw on biblical themes. Some appear in a condensed form, while others, such as those of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, are given in elaborate detail and even with subtle revisions of the biblical accounts. Elements not known from the Bible appear mainly in the punishment stories.

The Qur’ān itself is aware of the affinity between the stories about the prophets and the biblical literature, for which reason the Jews and the Christians are called upon to confirm the truth of the qur’ānic allusions to the previous prophets. This is at least how Muslim exegetes explain the meaning of Q 16:43 (see also Q 21:7) which says: “And we did not send before you any but humans to whom we sent revelation, so ask the people of the reminder if you do not know.” The exegetes say that the “people of the reminder” (*ahl al-dhikr*) are scholars (see [SCHOLAR](#)) well versed in the Torah and the Gospel, which means that they know best about the history of the prophets from their own scriptures.

“Reminder” is also the label used for the qur’ānic stories about the prophets which Muḥammad recites to his audience, as with the story of Dhū l-Qarnayn (Q 18:83; see [ALEXANDER](#)). Nevertheless, the term is also the name of the entire revelation (Q 16:44, etc.), probably because it alludes quite frequently to stories of past generations. In fact, the injunction *udhkur fī l-kitāb*, “mention in the book,” is frequently used in passages prompting the qur’ānic Prophet to remind the audience of stories about previous prophets (Q 19:16, 41, etc.).

Narrative units about prophets, which Muḥammad is expected to recite, are also called *naba’* (pl. *anbā’*), “report, tidings” (see [NEWS](#)). For example, the Prophet is instructed to recite (*utlu*) the *naba’* of the two sons of Adam (Q 5:27; see [CAIN AND ABEL](#)), the *naba’* of Noah (Q 10:71) and of Abraham (Q 26:69). These units are also being “related” (*naquṣṣu*) to him upon being revealed (Q 7:101; 11:100, 120; 18:13; 20:99). They are also referred to as *anbā’ al-ghayb*, “stories of the unseen” because they happened long ago and the Prophet did not witness them in person (Q 3:44, of Mary; Q 11:49, of Noah; Q 12:102, of Joseph). The information labeled as *naba’/anbā’* is imparted to Muḥammad “to strengthen your heart therewith” (Q 11:120) as well as to teach the audience the bitter lesson of disbelief and disobedience which already led ancient towns to destruction (Q 7:101; 9:70; see [GEOGRAPHY](#)). But the listeners are not responsive, and they discard the qur’ānic message as “tales (*asāfir*) of the ancients” (*al-awwālīna*, Q 16:24).

The list of prophets mentioned in the Qur’ān is not complete, in the sense that some of them were left out on purpose. This is stated in Q 40:78 (see also Q 4:164): “And certainly we sent apostles before you: there are some of them of whom we related (*qaṣaṣnā*) to you and there are others of whom we have not related (*lam naqṣuṣ*) to you....” The exegetes explain that the prophets were too numerous to mention, and according to some, God sent 8,000 prophets, 4,000 of whom were Israelites.

## *Prophets in extra-qur’ānic sources*

The prophets form an essential element in the Islamic perception of the past and they are treated not only in the Qur’ān but also in ḥadīth collections (see [ḤADĪTH AND THE QUR’ĀN](#)) as well as in historiographical works (see [HISTORY AND THE QUR’ĀN](#)). Compilers of ḥadīth dedicated special sections (*kitābs*) to traditions about them, one of the earliest examples being al-Bukhārī’s (d. 256/870) *Ṣaḥīḥ*, in which the *kitāb* no. 60 is called: *aḥādīth al-anbiyā’*, “Traditions about the prophets.” There are also independent collections of traditions about the prophets; perhaps the best known is al-Tha’labī’s (d. 427/1035) *’Arā’is al-majālis* or *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*.

The interest in the prophets taken by Muslims was focused on the need to define the relationship between Muḥammad and the previous prophets, which signaled the relationship between the Islamic *umma* and the non-Muslim communities (see [COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY IN THE QUR'ĀN](#)). Many of the traditions place Muḥammad over and above the rest of the prophets. For example, one tradition states that the lords of the prophets are five and Muḥammad is the lord of the five: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad. This statement was circulated as a tradition of the Companion Abū Hurayra (Ḥākim, *Mustadrak*, ii, 546; see [COMPANIONS OF THE PROPHET](#)). On the other hand, there are also traditions in which the status of the prophets is in no way inferior to that of Muḥammad (cf. Andrae, *Person*, 245 f.; Wensinck, *Muslim creed*, 113 f.). In one of these traditions, Muḥammad prohibits the believers to say that he was better than Moses (Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, iii, 158 [44:1]). Even a less prominent prophet like Jonah was not inferior to Muḥammad, as is indicated in Muḥammad's reported utterance: “No prophet is allowed to say: ‘I am better than Jonah the son of Amittai’” (Abū Dāwūd, ii, 521 [39.13]). Such traditions seem to have been designed to retain the qur'ānic idea that one should not make any distinction among God's prophets and messengers.

The historiographical sources also retain the qur'ānic idea that all the prophets represent links in a universal chain of successive revelations. But there is no agreement about where this chain begins. In some traditions, the first person ever to be sent by God to warn his people is Noah (Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḥ*, i, 183-4). Enoch, too, is described as a prophet in traditions identifying him with Idrīs, who is said to have been the first man to whom prophecy was given (Ibn Hishām, i, 3.). Alternately, Enoch/Idrīs is said to have been the first to be sent as a prophet after Adam (Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 40, 54). In another tradition, Seth is the first prophet after Adam (Ibn Qutayba, *Ma'ārif*, 26) and Adam himself, so a tradition tells us on the authority of no other than Muḥammad, was the first prophet God sent (Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 32, 54). Thus, Adam and Muḥammad became the two ends of the universal chain of prophets. This correlation between them has been noted in a tradition of the Yemenite scholar Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 110/728) on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās (d. ca. 68/686). Wahb declares that Adam was the first of God's messengers and Muḥammad the last (Ibn Qutayba, *Ma'ārif*, 26).

Islamic historiography has understood the prophets as bearers of a successive religious legacy that is being passed on from generation to generation in a hereditary line. The earliest description of the transmission of the prophetic legacy from generation to generation is found in passages quoted by al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) in his famous *History* (*Ta'riḥ al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*) from Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/768). The latter was one of the

first systematic biographers of Muḥammad (see [SĪRA AND THE QUR'ĀN](#)). Most of Ibn Ishāq's material about the prophets is derived from Jewish sources whom Ibn Ishāq often calls “people of the first book” (*ahl al-kitāb al-awwal*), i.e. the Torah (e.g. Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, i, 139-40). Ibn Ishāq describes how the various prophets, beginning with Adam, bequeathed their religious legacy and administrative authority (q.v.) to their descendants. They appointed them to be their heirs (*waṣī*) and put them in charge of their subjects. The legacy included revealed scriptures (*ṣaḥīfa*), which were handed down from generation to generation. Each bearer was considered as God's chosen leader upon earth, and defended the sacred legacy against change and corruption. Such perception of the role of the antediluvian ancestors is discernible already in Flavius' *Antiquities* (for details see Rubin, Prophets and progenitors).

Ibn Ishāq describes the course of the legacy till Noah, but does not delineate an uninterrupted hereditary legacy during the generations between Noah and Abraham. The reason seems to be that Abraham is regarded as opening a new era, being a believer born to pagan ancestors who could not act as bearers of any legacy of righteousness. Al-Ṭabarī himself has recorded traditions from other sources that mention the transmission of the legacy through later generations of Israelite prophets. They describe, for example, the transition of the *waṣīyya* from Jacob to Joseph and from Joseph to Judah his brother (Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, i, 413). A detailed description of a successive authority running along the generations since Adam, and continued through the Israelites, is provided by the Shī'ī author al-Ya'qūbī (d. 283/897; see [SHĪ'ISM AND THE QUR'ĀN](#)). His *Ta'rikh* abounds with quotations from the Bible and other Jewish and Christian sources, and they form the axis around which his account of pre-Islamic history revolves. Some further traditions focus on individual links in the universal chain, for example, David and Solomon, who constituted the first links in the house of David. A tradition recorded in the *Mustadrak* by al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī (d. 405/1014) relates that God chose David to be his prophet and messenger and he gathered for him light and wisdom and revealed to him the *zabūr* (the Psalms), adding it to the scriptures already revealed to previous prophets. When David was about to die, God commanded him to bequeath the light of God (*nūr Allāh*), as well as the hidden and the revealed knowledge (see [KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING](#)), to his son Solomon, and so he did (Ḥākim, *Mustadrak*, ii, 587).

Muslims paid special attention to the relationship between the last Israelite prophet, namely Jesus, and Muḥammad. Chronologically speaking, Jesus was the closest Israelite prophet to Muḥammad and this temporal closeness was understood in Islam as a blood relationship. This is the intent of a tradition transmitted by one of the

Prophet's Companions, Abū Hurayra (d. 57/677), in which Muḥammad declares: "I am the closest person (*awlā l- nās*) to Jesus the son of Mary in this world and in the world to come." When asked how this could be, the Prophet went on, explaining: "The prophets are brothers born to fellow-wives ( *‘allāt*), i.e. their mothers are various and their religion is the same. There is no prophet between me and him" (Ibn Ḥibbān, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, xiv, no. 6194). The prophets are likened here to sons of the same father by various mothers. The father stands for the one unchanging religion of God that unites them all and this makes them brothers in the same religion. Among them Jesus and Muḥammad are the closest pair. Their various mothers, so it was explained by some Muslim scholars, represent their various types of *sharī‘a*, i.e. the distinctive religious laws which differ from one monotheistic community to the other (Ibn Ḥajar, *Fatḥ al-bārī*, vi, 354).

Just as Muḥammad was said to have been the closest person to Jesus, he was also presented as the closest one to Moses. This comes out in traditions recounting the history of the ‘Āshūrā’ day (see [FASTING](#); [ATONEMENT](#)). In some of these traditions a relationship between this day and the Jewish Day of Atonement is implied. It is related that when Muḥammad came to Medina after his emigration ( *hijra*) from Mecca, he found out that the Jews of that city used to fast on the day of ‘Āshūrā’. He asked them to tell him the reason for that and they told him that this day was a holiday because on it God delivered the Children of Israel from their enemies and therefore Moses had fasted on this day. Then Muḥammad said to the Jews: "I am more worthy of Moses than you are" (*anā aḥaqqu bi-Mūsā minkum*) and thereupon he started to fast on the day of ‘Āshūrā’ and ordered the Muslims to follow suit (e.g. Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, iii, 57 [30.69]). This means that the Islamic *umma* rather than the Jews are the most authentic bearers of the legacy of Moses.

In further traditions the concept of the unchanging divine legacy that transmigrates through the generations from Adam to Muḥammad has been combined with the idea of Muḥammad's pre-existence (for which see Rubin, Pre-existence). The successive legacy has been identified with Muḥammad's own pre-existent entity. The prophets have thus become mere vessels carrying the pre-existent Muḥammad. Traditions reflecting this notion can easily be identified by recourse to the commentaries on Q 26:219. This verse deals with the Prophet's movement ( *taqallub*) among those who prostrate themselves (*al- sājidīn*, see [BOWING AND PROSTRATION](#)). A tradition of Ibn ‘Abbās as recorded by Ibn Sa‘d (d. 230/ 845) says that the Qur’ān speaks here about the transmigration of Muḥammad "from prophet to prophet and from prophet to prophet, till God brought

him forth as a prophet” (Ibn Sa‘d, *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 25; cf. Rubin, Pre-existence, 80 with note 78).

## *Shī‘īs, Umayyads and prophets*

The notion of a universal chain of prophets bearing a successive divine legacy was adapted to the specific needs of various groups who vied for predominance in Islamic society (see [POLITICS AND THE QUR’ĀN](#)). Each group tried to gain for its leaders recognition as Muḥammad's exclusive heirs, from whom they inherited the universal legacy that had reached him from the previous prophets. Among these groups the best known are the Shī‘īs. They have developed the doctrine according to which the line of transmission was continued after Muḥammad through their own imāms. The latter were described as legatees of the prophets and as bearers of a divine light that they had inherited from the prophets. This doctrine was designed to establish the status of the Shī‘ī imāms as agents of divine inspiration and guidance (for details see Rubin, *Prophets and progenitors*).

The Umayyad caliphs (see [CALIPH](#)), too, considered themselves links in a chosen pedigree originating in the biblical prophets. Their views on this claim are revealed in a letter sent to the garrison cities on behalf of the Umayyad caliph Walīd II (r. bet. 125-6/743-4) concerning the designation of his successors (for details see Crone and Hinds, *God's caliph*, 26-8; Rubin, *Prophets and caliphs*).

## *Qur’ānic prophets and modern scholarship*

Modern scholars have tried to detect an evolution in the qur’ānic prophetology, which they reconstructed according to the assumed chronology of revelation (see [CHRONOLOGY AND THE QUR’ĀN](#); [OCCASIONS OF REVELATION](#); [POST-ENLIGHTENMENT ACADEMIC STUDY OF THE QUR’ĀN](#)). The “punishment stories,” for example, have been explained as reflecting Muḥammad's situation in Mecca, before the *hijra*, the **emigration** (q.v.) to Medina (q.v.), when he suffered rejection. The description in these stories of the rejection of previous prophets was interpreted as designed to encourage Muḥammad during this difficult period (Tottoli, *Biblical prophets*, 7). The idea of one religion common to all prophets as well as the notion of the religion of Abraham, was explained as stemming from the polemical encounter with the Jews of Medina (Tottoli, *Biblical prophets*, 8-9; see [JEWS AND JUDAISM](#)). The usage of the terms *rasūl* and *nabī* was also connected with Muḥammad's life and it was argued that Muḥammad began to use *nabī* as his own epithet only during the later Medinan period (Tottoli, *Biblical prophets*, 74-5). In view,

however, of doubts expressed by some scholars who have been of the opinion that not all parts of the scripture stem from Muḥammad's own time, the history of the link between the qur'ānic prophetology and Muḥammad's personal experience is no longer clear.

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