Three of the world’s major monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—share a rich scriptural heritage. Similar stories are recounted and many of the same figures populate their holy texts. Noah, Abraham, Pharaoh, Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus, and Mary, to name just a few, are discussed in the Qurʾān. Moreover, they are also found in all types of literature of the Islamic tradition such as the Ḥadīth (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), tafsīr (Qurʾān commentary), and historical writings.

Before interrogating the ways in which stories and personages in the Book of Genesis are treated in the Qurʾān and in the Islamic classical exegetical tradition, several observations are in order. To begin with, Genesis qua book does not exist in the Qurʾān. The Jewish and Christian reception of Genesis assumes its canonical status, however, the Islamic tradition does not, to the extent that it is believed to have been falsified by Jews and Christians who distorted (tahrīf), and altered (tabdīl) the divine message.1 Tahrīf is the notion that the Jews and Christians who indeed received divine revelation over time corrupted God’s word.2 The Old Testament/Hebrew Bible and New Testament as they are preserved today are not the authentically revealed word of God, but rather the Qurʾān is the true word of God, sent from above to the Prophet Muhammad, the seal of prophecy.

It is therefore important that we avoid approaching Islamic sources as interpretations of the Book of Genesis, or that we assume the Qurʾān contains versions of stories found in the Bible.3 Stories about Adam and

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1 See Q. 2:42, 59, 75–79; 3:71, 78; 4:46; 5:13, 41; 6:91; 7:162. This assertion explains, inter alia, why Muhammad’s mission is not explicitly mentioned in Jewish and Christian scriptures.
2 Both Jews and Christians are given a special status as ahl al-Kitāb, “People of the Book,” a term applied to pre-Islamic religious groups possessing sacred texts. Zoroastrians, Samaritans, and Mandaeans are also included in this category. As Islam expanded east, the term also came to encompass Buddhists and Hindus who lived under Muslim rule.
Eve, Noah, Abraham, Joseph and other scriptural figures circulated widely in Arabia well before the seventh century CE by Jews and Christians, who spread not only biblical stories, but also legends about the biblical patriarchs, rabbis, monks and martyrs. And, although we possess no extent Arabic translation of parts of the Bible from pre-Islamic Arabia, in all likelihood such translations circulated among the Christians of pre-Islamic Arabia for liturgical and missionary purposes. According to Sydney Griffith, “It seems not improbable that Arabic-speaking, Christian priests, preachers, and teachers in pre-Islamic times may have had private notes or texts, even in Arabic, which would have served them as aides de memoire.” Moreover, much like the Aramaic-speaking Jews who read the Bible in Hebrew, and explained it to listeners in Aramaic, it is reasonable to assume that the Arabian Jews read the Bible in Hebrew and explained it in Arabic. Apart from Jewish and Christian stories, however, different types of narratives were also widespread and popular among the inhabitants of Arabia, and are no less part of the Qur’anic literary contexts.

To be sure, anyone somewhat acquainted with rabbinic scriptural interpretation, midrash, will observe a striking similarity and overlap between Jewish and Islamic exegesis of the medieval period in terms of style and content. The striking similarities found in Jewish and Muslim narratives and exegetical writing has led scholars of previous generations to assume erroneously that late medieval rabbinic stories are earlier than Islamic parallels. Scholars took for granted that parallels between the two traditions are de facto indicative of Islam’s reliance on Judaism, that what we find in the Islamic tradition is derivative. A new generation of scholars, however, has challenged reductionist assumptions and has presented a more nuanced

illustrates this point by demonstrating how the Joseph story is not a version of the biblical account but rather a vision of the relationship between humans and God that the Qur’án espouses.


6 Adang, Muslim Writers, 2. According to Griffith, Church in the Shadow, 50, the earliest translations of the Bible into Arabic for which there is any clear documentary evidence come from the late seventh century.