

Origins of Qur'ānic Narratives and Their Ancient Predecessors

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Introduction

Although the Qur'ān presents itself as divine revelation, many of its stories have demonstrable antecedents in older Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, and Arabian oral traditions. This document lists those narratives that appear “unique” to Islam and traces their possible mythological or literary predecessors.

1. The Tribes of ʿĀd and Thamūd

Qur'ān: Sūras 7:65–78; 11:50–68.

Summary: Two ancient Arabian tribes destroyed by a screaming wind and an earthquake for their arrogance.

Antecedents:

- South-Arabian inscriptions (Sabaeen)¹
- Akkadian myth *The Curse of Akkad*²

2. The Companions of the Cave (Aṣḥāb al-Kahf)

Qur'ān: Sūra 18:9–26.

Summary: Pious youths sleep in a cave for centuries and awaken to find the world transformed.

Predecessor:

- Christian legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus³

3. Abraham Cast into the Fire

Qur'ān: Sūra 21:51–70.

Summary: Abraham destroys idols, is thrown into a furnace, but emerges unharmed.

Predecessor:

- Jewish *Midrash Rabbah on Genesis*⁴

4. Mary and the Infant Speaking

Qur'ān: Sūra 19:16–34.

Summary: Mary gives birth alone; the newborn Jesus speaks in the cradle defending her honor.

Predecessor:

- *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and *Arabic Gospel of the Infancy*⁵

¹Inscriptions from Marib and Sirwah (1st c. BCE–3rd c. CE) refer to divine punishment of rebellious tribes. See Christian Robin, *Les Hautes-Terres du Nord-Yémen*, 1982.

²c. 2100 BCE; Enlil sends drought and wind to punish Naram-Sin. See B. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2005.

³Greek Acts, c. 250–300 CE; Syriac version by Jacob of Serugh. See B. Roggema, *The Legend of the Seven Sleepers*, 2008.

⁴3rd–5th c. CE. Nimrod throws Abraham into fire. See Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: Translation and Commentary*, 1985.

⁵2nd–5th c. CE apocrypha. See J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 1993.

5. The People of the Elephant (Sūrat al-Fīl)

Qur'ān: Sūra 105.

Summary: God destroys an army of elephants with birds pelting stones.

Possible antecedents:

- Historical Aksumite invasion of Mecca (c. 570 CE)⁶
- Ancient Near-Eastern “avian plague” omens⁷

6. The Resurrection Trumpet

Qur'ān: Sūra 36:51–53.

Summary: A trumpet blast awakens the dead for judgment.

Antecedents:

- New Testament — 1 Thessalonians 4:16⁸
- Zoroastrian *Frashokereti*⁹

7. Solomon and the Jinn

Qur'ān: Sūras 27:15–44; 34:12–14.

Summary: Solomon commands demons, wind, and animals through divine power.

Predecessor:

- *Testament of Solomon*¹⁰

8. Dhul-Qarnayn and the Wall Against Gog & Magog

Qur'ān: Sūra 18:83–98.

Summary: The “Two-Horned One” travels to the ends of the earth and builds a barrier to contain barbarian tribes.

Predecessor:

- *Alexander Romance*¹¹

9. Iblīs Refusing to Bow to Adam

Qur'ān: Sūras 2:34; 7:11–18.

Summary: Iblīs refuses to bow before Adam and is cast out.

Antecedents:

- *Life of Adam and Eve*¹²
- Zoroastrian dualism¹³

⁶Referenced in South-Arabian and Ethiopian chronicles; see Irfan Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 1995.

⁷Assyrian omen texts describing birds as bearers of divine wrath. See A. Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea*, 1989.

⁸“The trumpet of God will sound, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”

⁹Saoshyant raises the dead with a trumpet at world’s renewal. See Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 1979.

¹⁰Jewish magical text, 1st–3rd c. CE. See D. C. Duling, “Testament of Solomon,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth, 1983.

¹¹Greek original 3rd c. BCE; Syriac version 6th c. CE. See R. Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, 1991.

¹²Jewish apocryphon, 1st c. CE. See M. D. Johnson, *The Life of Adam and Eve*, 1985.

¹³Ahriman’s rebellion against Ahura Mazda’s creation; see Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, 1961.

10. Harut and Marut: Angels Teaching Magic

Qur'ān: Sūra 2:102.

Summary: Two angels in Babylon teach sorcery as a trial for humankind.

Predecessor:

- *Book of Enoch* (1 Enoch 6–7)¹⁴

11. The Throne of Bilqīs (Queen of Sheba)

Qur'ān: Sūra 27:38–44.

Summary: A jinn brings the Queen's throne instantly to Solomon's court.

Possible antecedents:

- Persian and Indian tales of wind-spirits¹⁵
- *Testament of Solomon*¹⁶

12. The Scale of Deeds

Qur'ān: Sūras 21:47; 99:6–8.

Summary: Each soul's deeds are weighed on a balance at judgment.

Antecedents:

- Egyptian *Book of the Dead*¹⁷
- Zoroastrian *Dadestan-i Denig*¹⁸

¹⁴Watchers descend, teach forbidden arts, are punished. See R. H. Charles, *The Book of Enoch*, 1912.

¹⁵Comparable to Iranian *divs* and Indian *vāta* legends. See J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *La Religion de l'Iran Ancien*, 1962.

¹⁶Demons move objects at the king's command.

¹⁷Spell 125, "Weighing of the Heart."

¹⁸Souls weighed at the Chinvat Bridge. See E. W. West, *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 18, 1880.

13. Summary Table

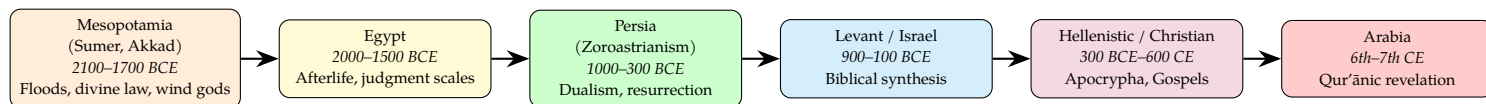
Qur'ānic Story	Closest Pre-Islamic Source	Cultural Origin	Date BCE/CE	Motif
ʿĀd & Thamūd	Curse of Akkad; Arabian lore	Mesopotamian / Sabaean	2100 BCE–3rd CE	Divine wind punishment
Companions of the Cave	Seven Sleepers of Ephesus	Greek–Syriac Christian	3rd CE	Centuries-long sleep
Abraham in the Fire	Midrash Rabbah	Rabbinic Judaism	3rd–5th CE	Prophet survives fire
Infant Jesus Speaks	Infancy Gospel of Thomas	Christian Apocrypha	2nd CE	Speaking infant miracle
People of the Elephant	Aksumite invasion legend	Arabian / Ethiopian	6th CE	Birds destroy army
Resurrection Trumpet	Zoroastrian Frashokereti	Persian / Christian	1st–6th CE	Trumpet awakens dead
Solomon & Jinn	Testament of Solomon	Jewish magical	1st–3rd CE	King commands spirits
Dhul-Qarnayn	Alexander Romance	Hellenistic / Syriac	3rd BCE–6th CE	Wall vs. Gog & Magog
Iblīs and Adam	Life of Adam and Eve	Jewish / Persian dualist	1st CE	Rebellion of angel
Harut & Marut	Book of Enoch	Jewish Apocrypha	2nd BCE	Angels teach sorcery
Throne of Bilqīs	Persian/Indian folklore	Iranian / Indic	pre-7th CE	Instant transport miracle
Scale of Deeds	Book of the Dead	Egyptian / Persian	1500 BCE+	Weighing of souls

Conclusion

The Qur'ānic corpus absorbed and reinterpreted a vast network of earlier Jewish, Christian, Persian, and Arabian traditions. While the stylistic expression in Arabic was innovative, the mythic building blocks—angelic descent, miraculous speech, weighing of souls, and cosmic walls—belong to a long continuum of Near-Eastern religious imagination.

“The ink of history and the breath of myth are often drawn from the same well.”

Cultural Transmission Timeline



*Ideas flowed across trade, empire, and scripture:
floods, creation by word, resurrection,
moral judgment, and angelic rebellion
evolved from mythic cosmology into monotheistic theology.*

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*"Through empires and tongues, myth traveled farther than armies —
and became the scripture of civilizations."*