Even the most cursory reading of the Qurʾān discloses its multiple affinities with the Bible and with biblical lore, a fact that scholars have long discussed (Geiger 1833; Horovitz 1926; Speyer 1931). In fact, one of the most immediate things one notices about the interface between the Qurʾān and the biblical tradition is the Islamic scripture’s seemingly pervasive assumption that its audience is thoroughly familiar with the stories of the biblical patriarchs and prophets, to whose words and deeds the text regularly alludes, confident of audience recognition without any need for even the most rudimentary form of introduction. What is more, in a number of places the Qurʾān says explicitly that it confirms the veracity of the scripture (al-kitāb) that came before it, the Torah, the Psalms and the Gospel in particular (e.g. Q 3:184; 5:44–8), albeit that there are also verses that suggest that Jews had distorted or altered their scriptures (Q 2:75; 4:46; 5:13, 41) and that in contrast to Christian views the Gospel is a single scripture given to Jesus (Q 3:48; 5:46). In numerous instances in which the Qurʾān calls attention to the distinctive features of the vocation of God’s previous messengers and prophets prior to Muḥammad, it regularly bids him and his followers to recall or remember (idhkur) the scriptural accounts of those whose stories are recorded in the Bible: they include Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Miriam, David, Solomon, even Job and Jonah, along with Zachariah, John the Baptist, Mary and Jesus, son of Mary, just to mention the major figures.

So biblically aware does the Qurʾān presume the members of its audience to be that it even refers to them as ‘People of Remembrance’ (ahl al-dhikr), and it expressly characterises the Bible history they remember as specifically a product of memory (dhikr) (see, e.g. Q 16:43–4) (Griffith 2013). What is more, the Qurʾān never actually quotes the Bible, albeit that seemingly as an exception to prove the rule it does, with only a slight variation, cite one phrase from Psalm 37:29: ‘We have written in the Psalms after the reminder (al-dhikr) that “My righteous servants will inherit the earth”’ (Q 21:105). For the rest, however, there are numerous allusions to and echoes of biblical passages and scriptural modes of expression in the Qurʾān, but no further quotation. Clearly then, in spite of the numerous references to scripture and to writing (al-kitāb) to be found in the Qurʾān (Madigan 2001), its interface with the Bible was nevertheless not a textual phenomenon. Rather, the vocabulary of memory that is so conspicuous a feature of scriptural recall in the Qurʾān, together with the absence of any actual quotation from any biblical or parabiblical text in the telling of biblical stories in the Islamic scripture, bespeaks oral transmission as the vehicle of their currency in the Qurʾān’s immediate ambience. In other words, in the Arabic-speaking
milieu of the first third of the seventh century, the evidence of the Qurʾān itself suggests that the recollected stories of the biblical patriarchs and prophes it recounts, amplified as they are by traditional elements also available in other current texts such as what is found in earlier and contemporary Jewish and Christian apocryphal and exegetical lore, must all have circulated only orally and not in writing (Griffith 2013).

As a matter of fact, in spite of many hypotheses to the contrary (Shahid 1989; Kashouh 2012), no convincing evidence for any part of the Bible having existed in writing in Arabic in pre-Islamic times has yet been found (Schoeler 2002; Griffith 2008). But the absence of evidence for the currency of a pre-Islamic translation of the Torah, the Gospel or a collection of Psalms written in Arabic does not entail the conclusion that the Bible text was absent in the milieu of the Qurʾān’s origins. Rather, the text of the Bible, written in the canonical languages of the historically well-attested Arab-speaking Jews and Christians of Arabia, may reasonably be supposed to have been in the possession of synagogues, churches and monasteries, and in the care of rabbis, priests and monks, both in Arabia proper and on its periphery. In all likelihood, when in the course of the synagogue or church liturgy there, as was the common practice elsewhere, the scriptures were proclaimed in their canonical Hebrew, Greek or Syriac, they would thereafter typically also be presented in translation orally in the local language, which of course would have been Arabic in the world of the Qurʾān’s origins. In most settings, liturgical practice then provided for homilies to be given in the local language, in which a preacher would expand upon the biblical texts with explanations drawn from the exegetical and creedal traditions of the several communities. Again, no Arabic texts from pre-Islamic times containing such material have ever come to light, but there is an abundance of it surviving in Aramaic, Syriac and other Jewish and Christian languages of Late Antiquity, in which scholars increasingly often find themes and even turns of phrase that elsewhere turn up in the Arabic Qurʾān (Reynolds 2010).

The Jewish and Christian biblical and traditional lore of Late Antiquity that accompanied the transmission of the biblical text in apocryphal, pseudepigraphal, apocalyptic, homiletic and exegetical texts of all sorts in the major languages of the period testifies to the currency in the seventh century and beyond of a wide range of conventional religious discourse in the terms of which a contemporary Arabic-speaking Jew or Christian might well be expected to think and speak of the mission of the patriarchs and prophets of the Old and New Testaments in his own language. In this context the Qurʾān readily discloses its familiarity with this lore in its own idiom, in terms of which it articulates its own different and distinctive message in Arabic. And in this sense, the Qurʾān may be seen to be participating in an ongoing exercise of scripture-related prophetic reasoning in which it has its own construal of the meaning of the biblical stories to commend in consideration of the leitmotif of its own message. So in spite of the fact that the Qurʾān frequently mentions ‘the scripture’ (al-kitāb), it is nevertheless not in conversation with the written text of the Bible or with any earlier Jewish or Christian text in particular. Rather, in terms of prophetic history, the Arabic scripture in its oral origins was engaged in an ongoing late antique conversation between Jews, Christians, Manichees and others in its milieu whose primary language was not Arabic (Q 16:103; Gilliot 1998). In terms of its interface with biblical traditions, the Qurʾān’s commission was to preach and liturgically to commend its own distinctive view of prophetic history vis-à-vis that of the other Scripture communities, whose views were increasingly coming to the attention of the Arabic-speaking peoples in the Arabian heartland in Muhammad’s lifetime.

Recollections of biblical traditions occur most frequently in the Qurʾān in connection with accounts of the experiences of the Bible’s patriarchs and prophets, who are presented as predecessors of Muḥammad in his role as God’s latest and final messenger and prophet. In the Middle Meccan period of his prophetic career, in response to the obloquy of his adversaries, the Qurʾān
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envisions Muḥammad beginning to receive assurances from God to the effect that he is in the line of God’s previous messengers and prophets, and finally in the Medinan period the Qurʾān says he is in fact the ‘seal of the prophets’ (Q 33:40), the one who not only brings the sequence of God’s messengers to its conclusion but also the one whose path most clearly discloses what the Qurʾān in God’s name calls ‘the sunna of our messengers’ (Q 17:77). It is within this context of assuring Muḥammad of the authenticity of his prophetic genealogy that the Qurʾān most frequently recalls the careers of major biblical figures such as Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Ishmael, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, and Jesus, son of Mary, the Messiah, all of whom are put forward as virtual icons of the prophetic profile in reference to which the Qurʾān assures Muḥammad of his own calling to be God’s final prophet and messenger (Griffith 2013). And the Qurʾān goes even further to ask its audience to recall that when Jesus, son of Mary, came to the Israelites, he was ‘bearing the good news of a messenger who will come after me, whose name is Ahmad’ (Q 61:6).

The Qurʾān typically summons up the memory of the stories of individual biblical patriarchs and prophets within the context of a list of prophets and nonbiblical messengers who came before Muḥammad. While such lists appear prominently in a number of sūras, both Meccan and Medinan (e.g. Q 43:26–65; 6:74–91; 7:59–93; 11:25–99; 4:153–75; 2:47–141), the pattern of recall is displayed particularly clearly in two Middle Meccan sūras: in Q 26, where the list includes both nonbiblical messengers and biblical prophets and messengers; and in Q 21, where only biblical figures are mentioned. Sūra 26, with its highly structured format and ritualistically repeated refrains, puts the basic features of prophetic recall in the Qurʾān into high relief. And the inclusion of three nonbiblical messengers, Hūd, Šāliḥ and Shuʿayb, in the list of messengers and prophets immediately calls attention to the fact that for the Qurʾān, God’s sunna of messengers and prophets is more than a biblical phenomenon. Albeit that the high profile of the recollections of biblical prophets dominates the others, the fact remains that the recollections of biblical prophets are folded into an ideal sequence that extends beyond the Bible’s reach (Griffith 2013; Zwettler 1990).

The aptly named Middle Meccan Sūra 21, The Prophets/al-Anbiyāʾ, presents a virtual outline of the Qurʾān’s biblical prophetology. It begins with the scenario in which God addresses Muḥammad and through him the people with whom he is in controversy (verses 1–47), which is the Qurʾān’s conventional setting for prophetic recall (dhikr). One verse even carries the admonition to the audience regarding the scriptures prior to the Qurʾān, ‘Ask the People of Memory (ahl al-dhikr) if you do not know’ (Q 21:7). The centrepiece of the sūra is a list of biblical prophets and messengers that begins with Moses and Aaron and ends with a recollection of Mary and Jesus, without actually naming either one of them, as we shall see (Q 21:48–96). The conclusion of the sūra (Q 21:97–112) carries warnings of the last day and of punishment for unbelievers, along with encouragement for Muḥammad. And it is here that we find the only explicit quotation from the Bible in the whole Qurʾān. God says, ‘We have written in the Psalms after the remembrance (al-dhikr),3 “My righteous servants will inherit the earth” [cf. Ps. 37:29]. In this there is a sermon for a worshipping people. We have only sent you [Muḥammad] as a mercy to the worlds’ (Q 21:105–7).

The list of prophets and messengers in Q 21:48–96 includes: Moses and Aaron (48–50); Abraham, with a mention of Lot, Isaac and Jacob (51–73); Lot (74–75); Noah (76–77); David and Solomon (78–82); Job (83–84); Ishmael, Idrīs, Dhūl-Kifl, Dhūl-Nūn (85–88); Zachariah, John and an allusion to Mary and Jesus (89–96). The allusion is in verse 91: ‘There is also the one who guarded her chastity and We breathed of Our spirit into her and We made her and her son a sign for the worlds.’4 The fuller recollection of the story of Mary and her son, Jesus, appears in another Meccan sūra, Maryam (Q 19:2–40),5 where it is the lead entry in the recollection of a sequence of previous biblical messengers and prophets including Abraham, Moses, Ishmael, Idrīs,
those from the seed of Adam, those with Noah, the seed of Abraham and Israel (verses 41–58). With the exception of the story of the biblical patriarch Joseph, which we shall discuss later, fuller accounts of the stories of individual biblical figures in the Qurʾān are typically included within the embracing context of just such a list of messengers and prophets. Within this context, the Qurʾān then regularly bids Muhammad himself, or the attending audience, to ‘remember when’ in prophetic history a given prophet or messenger experienced the events that personify him and his mission within the larger framework of the shared biblical tradition (Griffith 2013: 57–62). And the reminiscences are recalled according to the aforementioned paradigmatic pattern of the Qurʾān’s ‘sunna of Our messengers’, very often including repeated set phrases and epithets that suggest a pattern of oral transmission suitable for ritual repetition, perhaps within a liturgical context.

The most often remembered biblical figures, whose names are mentioned and features of whose stories are recollected in the Qurʾān, include Moses (mentioned 136 times), Abraham (69 times), Mary (45 times) Noah (43 times), Jesus (29 times), Adam (25 times), Solomon (17 times) and David (16 times). Others whose names also appear include Jacob (16 times), Ishmael (12 times), Isaac (17 times), the Tribes (al-asbāʾ) 4 times), Elijah (twice), Job (4 times), Jonah (4 times), Zachariah (7 times) and John the Baptist (5 times). All the biblical figures whose names are recalled have a place in the Qurʾān’s prophetic history leading up to Muhammad. And while there is also the mention of the names of biblical books or collections of books, such as the Torah (18 times), the Gospel (12 times) and the Psalms (3 times), and numerous references to the scripture (al-kitāb) in general, including both the Qurʾān itself and scriptures previous to it (Q 9:111), notably absent from the sequence of messengers and prophets are the names and books of the Old Testament’s major and minor writing prophets.

As mentioned earlier, the biblical patriarch Joseph has a high profile in the Qurʾān; an entire Late Meccan sūra (Q 12) is dedicated to recounting his story, with his own name serving as the title. And as in the Bible (Genesis 33–48), so in the Qurʾān, Joseph’s story makes up a complete narrative unit on its own; of the 27 times his name is mentioned, only twice (Q 6:84; 40:34) does it occur outside of Q 12. As in the other instances of prophetic recall in the Qurʾān, so too here there are no quotations from the Bible, and yet the text presumes a ready familiarity with Joseph’s story on the part of its audience. In the portions of the story that the Qurʾān chooses to recall, the recollection more or less closely follows the outline of the narrative as one finds it in the book of Genesis. But, as in the Qurʾān’s recollections of others of the Bible’s patriarchs and prophets, so too in Sūra Yūsuf the account includes details and narrative embellishments that are otherwise to be found in writing only in extra-biblical Jewish and Christian traditions, as many scholars have noted (de Prémare 1989; Witztum 2011). And for present purposes what is very important to notice is that in Q 12 one also finds the story of Joseph told with the same narrative selectivity characteristic of the Qurʾān’s paradigm for the recollection of other biblical messengers and prophets, including the setting in which God speaks reassuringly to Muḥammad, the attention to the sequence of previous messengers (cf. Q 12: 6, 37–40, 109) and the distinctive words and phrases that appear in the other prophetic recollections (Griffith 2013: 74–6). A unique feature of the Qurʾān’s Joseph story is the suggestion expressed at the beginning of the account that Muḥammad had hitherto been negligent in remembering this patriarch in earlier Meccan recollections of God’s messengers and prophets. God says to Muḥammad: ‘We are going to tell you one of the best stories in connection with Our inspiring you with this Qurʾān, albeit that you have been neglecting it’ (Q 12:3).

While it is in its recollections of the biblical stories of God’s patriarchs and prophets, principally Abraham, Moses and Jesus, son of Mary, the Messiah, that we find the most readily recognizable instances of the Bible’s presence in the Qurʾān (Tottoli 2002; Reynolds 2010; Schedl 1978),
there are also other ways in which the Islamic scripture discloses its debt to the language and lore of the scriptures of the Jews and Christians. The Psalms of David, for example, provide a notable case in point. In addition to reminiscences of the Psalmist’s career as king and prophet (Griffith 2013: 80–3) and the previously mentioned quotation of a portion of a verse from Ps. 36:29 in Q 21:105, scholars have also called attention to the shaping influence of the modes of expression of David’s Psalms, appearing as oral ‘sub-texts’ in portions of the Qurʾān’s own discourse, especially in earlier Meccan sūras such as Q 55, imitating Ps. 136, and Q 78:1–16, seen to be a reprise of the language of Ps. 104: 5ff. (Baumstark 1927; Neuwirth 2008, 2010).

Here and there, broadcast in the Qurʾān are echoes of and seemingly clear allusions to biblical phraseology. There is for example the phrase, ‘And God spoke directly with Moses (wa-kallama Allāh Mūsā taklīman)’ (Q 4:164), which is hauntingly close to the often repeated Hebrew phrase in the Torah, ‘And God spoke all these things to Moses, saying . . . (wayyadabber Adonay ’el Mosheh kol-haddabber šā’ēlē le’tirārī)’ (e.g. Ex. 20:1). More evidently, the confessional phrase, ‘Say, He is God, one’ (Q 112:1), seems on the face of it to echo the words of the Hebrew Shema’ (Deut. 6:4) (Neuwirth 2010), while some have long supposed that the first article of the Muslim shahāda, ‘There is no god but God’ (Q 37: 35; 47:19), echoes the opening phrase in Ps. 18:31, ‘For who is God, but the Lord?’ (Nöldeke 2013: 5). From the Gospel there is the reminiscence of Jesus’ saying, ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God’ (Mt. 19:24) in the Qurʾān’s dictum, ‘Indeed, those who have denied our revelations and rejected them arrogantly – the gates of heaven shall not be opened for them and they shall not enter paradise until the camel passes through the eye of the needle’ (7: 40). Otherwise, while there are indeed passages in the Qurʾān that are somewhat hauntingly close to passages in the Hebrew Bible or in the Gospels, in the story of the patriarch Joseph (Q 12), for example, or in the accounts of the Annunciation (Q 3 and 19), they are actually more like oral paraphrases, allusions and echoes than they are akin to quotations, and there are many more of them than can be mentioned here. Taken together, they surely disclose the Qurʾān’s purpose to speak in a scriptural idiom well known to its contemporaries.

There have also been scholarly attempts to tie passages in the Qurʾān so textually close to passages in the Bible that they can be seen to serve as virtual calques for what is proposed to be the Qurʾān’s rearticulation of them for religiously polemical purposes. The argument in one notable instance claims that the very wording of the biblical text, especially as found in the Syriac Peshitta version of the Gospel according to Matthew, can plausibly be seen to underlie the Qurʾān’s supposed Arabic rephrasing of the Syriac text in selected verses, based on the occurrence of cognate words and expressions in the two languages, Syriac and Arabic, in the selected passages (El-Badawi 2014). The problem here is that whereas there is no credible evidence for the availability of written Arabic translations of the Gospels, or of any biblical book in writing in Arabic at the time of the origins of the Qurʾān, the historically and methodologically unlikely supposition would now be that those responsible for the Qurʾān’s wording in certain passages were nevertheless prepared consciously to compose its Arabic verses as rephrases of the corresponding Gospel passages as available to them in writing, in Syriac! (Griffith 2014).

In the end, one might say that the Bible is simultaneously everywhere in the Qurʾān and nowhere in the Qurʾān; nowhere because it is only once quoted and that in passing; everywhere because traces of biblical lore and language leap from almost every other page. The Qurʾān does not know of the Bible as a single book or even as a compilation of books but as a ‘scripture’ (al-kitāb), which one might encounter textually in the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospel and even in the Qurʾān itself (Q 9:111). But the Qurʾān’s evidence, as discussed earlier, indicates that its own encounters with the Bible was not a textual one. Rather, the Qurʾān’s text discloses its original speaker’s recollection for his own purposes of selected portions of Jewish and Christian, biblical
and traditional lore as it circulated orally among the members of the Arabic-speaking audience that the Qurʾān first addressed. That audience included those whom the Qurʾān calls ‘Scripture People’ (ahl al-kitāb), primarily the Jews and Christians, who seem to have orally translated Bible passages into Arabic from the canonical languages, Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek or Syriac, for liturgical and other congregational purposes. And the mention of liturgical and other congregational purposes calls attention to the fact that in addition to the Bible itself, stories of the biblical patriarchs and prophets, and of Jesus the Messiah too, also circulated among those whom the Qurʾān calls ‘Scripture People’ in the first half of the seventh century in nonbiblical, noncanonical literature, in midrashic retellings, in commentaries, in various other Jewish and Christian texts, in rabbinical works such as the Talmuds and in Christian homilies. The latter in particular, in the form of Syriac mēmrê, verse homilies, were numerous and widespread at the time of the Qurʾān’s origins, current in the very nearby late antique milieu in which the Arabic scripture first appeared. Not a few of the Qurʾān’s recollections of biblical figures are strongly reminiscent of their stories as told in these homiletic texts, which together with the Qurʾān furnish textual evidence for the currency and popularity of this prophetic lore in Arabia in the seventh century.

Notes

1 The charge that Jews and Christians distorted their scriptures textually or in terms of meaning was further developed in postqurʾānic times (Caspar 1980).
2 With the exception of Muḥammad himself, whom the Qurʾān refers to as a prophet (nabi) some dozen times, only biblical figures are accorded this title in the Qurʾān; both biblical and non-biblical figures are called ‘messengers’ (rusul); see Bijlefeld (1969).
3 Islamic tradition generally takes the phrase ‘after the remembrance’ (al-dhikr) to refer to the heavenly ‘preserved tablet’ that is said to be with God (Jalālīn 342; Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, II 372). In the light of earlier remarks in the present essay about the function of al-dhikr in connection with the recollection of stories in scriptures previous to the Qurʾān, the present writer suggests that here the term refers in general to the traditional historical books of the Old Testament that record the memories of the patriarchs and the prophets, Genesis to Chronicles (sometimes with Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther and Job interpolated), which immediately precede the Psalms in the Peshitta.
4 See this language reiterated in the later, Medinan sūra, Q 66:12.
5 See this recollection reprised, edited and expanded in the later Medinan sūra, Q 3:33–64.
6 Other figures include al-Yāsī (twice), usually thought to be the biblical Elisha; Dhū l-Kifl (twice), said by some to be Ezekiel; and Idrīs (twice), usually identified as the biblical Enoch (Noegel and Wheeler 2002).
7 The phrase al-kitāb wa-l-ḥikma appears nine times in the Qurʾān, suggesting to some that the term al-ḥikma, understood to mean ‘the Wisdom’, is a synonym for ‘scripture’ in general, or is even the name of a biblical book or collection of biblical books. It seems preferable to understand the phrase as a hendiadys, with a meaning on a par with the phrase ‘the wise scripture’ (Madigan 2001: 92–6).
8 I am indebted to Professor Meir Bar Asher, who pointed this recurring biblical phrase out to me, and to Professor Adele Berlin, who helped me find the particular instance of it at the beginning of the Torah’s recitation of the Ten Commandments in Exodus.
9 Neuwirth also mentions echoes of passages from the Nicene Creed in Q 112.

References


Further reading

